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Father and Mother Songs

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“Vivandiere’s Pass.” *Frigg: A Magazine of Fiction and Poetry*. Volume One. (Winter 2006).

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"A Baby Anyway." *Ducts*. Issue 26. Winter 2011

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Dead Mothers

Lorrie is eight and half, in the fourth-grade. Her hair, blown from its previous neat bows, tangles into knots and houses several small twigs. Today, she walks beside the ghost of her mother Beverly. Lorrie's nails are petal-pink. The windows of the houses beside the sidewalk mirror her face. Lorrie stares at the reflection girl's small brown eyes and wild hair and marvels at the lack of reflection where her mother stands.

She places her hands to her face and stares at the little pink half-moons against her flesh. "Do you want to see a movie?" her mother Beverly asks. They are five blocks from the theater, a short walk past the houses on Turnaker.

"Yes," Lorrie says. A green paper star from school, reading "Tolerance," still sticks to her shirt. "Tolerance," she recites, "is the ability to recognize and respect the opinions, practices or beliefs of others." She steps away from the window and scowls. Her scuffed shoes tap on the sidewalk. Tap. Tap. Tap.

She peeks down at her socks, stained with mustard from the lunchtime hotdog, then glances up at her mother who is clean in a honey muslin dress, wearing her fine Italian pumps. Her mother is perfect, always looks tidy, and never spills messes on herself. Her French-Canadian grandmother, Jacquèline, on the other hand, looks like someone stole her suitcase and dressed her at the thrift-store for an emergency trip. The only things she keeps up are her nails, immaculate nails, long, dragon-sloping nails. She has a mean, pickle-eating face and her skin is old as parchment. Lorrie remembers her teacher defining the word "ancient" as "not belonging to this time." Grandmother Jacquèline is ancient; soon her skin will give out, she will dry up, and she will crumble like an old cookie.

“Shall we go to the park first?” her mother asks. Beverly has beautiful bow-shaped lips that never need gloss. She looks graceful, rifling her hand through her dark hair. At thirty, she’s slender and shapely. Men often looked at her and smiled before she died. Her mother never smiled back.

“Yes,” Lorrie replies. Abruptly, they cross the street and walk in the opposite direction. The neighbors on the Carlson’s porch gossip among themselves. Beverly gives Lorrie a worried look. Lorrie stares at the hem of the honey muslin dress, which follows the outline of her mother’s beautiful legs soundlessly. It was always her mother’s favorite dress.

Beverly looks sad today. Perhaps she remembers the way it felt to be a normal family. Or maybe she sees in retrospection, like Lorrie does, the crane pulling the family car from the river, notes the shouts from Mr. Robert, or observes again the wan faces of the Shirley sisters in their twin red parkas. Lorrie remembers those few hours in detail, especially the way it felt to rub gritty sleep from her eyes as Grandma Jacquèline drove them to the bridge where the accident happened.

“Mother, why won’t you talk to them? The others?”

“Because I picked you.”

“But it would be nice if they could hear you.”

“I told you. They can’t.”

“Grandma Jacquèline doesn’t believe me when I tell her we go places. She says, ‘I’m sure you’ll have fun with your little friend Sally. Do you need anything else? I’m on the phone.’” Lorrie crinkles her face while she speaks, trying to resemble her grandmother’s pruned face and sharp voice.

“That’s the way your father’s family is,” her mother says, ruffling Lorrie’s hair. “Honey, you’re eight. She doesn’t have the first clue what to do with you and you don’t like to play mahjongg or poker with her friends.”

“She stays upstairs a lot.”

“That’s because she’s old.”

“And I hate her wig.”

“She can’t help it if her hair is thin,” her mother says, smiling her amused smile.

“She can help it,” Lorrie argues half-heartedly, trying to out-do herself with charm to make her mother smile again. “She doesn’t need to have that big bushy mop on her head. No one should have a full head of clown-red hair at sixty-five anyway.”

“She’s French-Canadian,” her mother says, then like an afterthought or follow-up, “Showy. The whole family was showy.”

“I don’t like her,” Lorrie tells her. “She ignores me and smokes in the house. Father never smoked in the house. She smokes all the time!”

“She’s set in her ways, I know. But I don’t know what to tell you. Let’s sing a song. What do you want to try today? A lullaby? A musical?”

“Neither,” Lorrie replies.

“All right,” Beverly says, putting a silent-hushing finger to her lips then changing the subject, “let’s do cartwheels in the park.” When they arrive at the park, her mother takes off at a run and turns a series of cartwheels. When flipping onto her hands, the honey skirt falls towards her face and her underpants show. Lorrie looks at the delicate lace edging. She turns a few cartwheels herself, but hers are clumsy, not erect and flat like her mother’s. “It’s such a relief,” Beverly shouts, “never to worry if your underpants show—never to worry about underpants at

all.” She flips her dress up again, holds it up high and turns in each direction; her blue eyes stare out amusedly above the hem. “Look at my underwear!” she shouts, “Ha ha! No one but you can see them! It is great to never worry about anybody or anything—when you get older, you’ll know what I mean. I feel so free. I can step on Mrs. Day’s flowerbeds. I can say what I want. I don’t have to care about anybody but you and me—it could be you and me forever and I wouldn’t care.” Her mother looks around, grinning.

Since her mother seems gleeful, tired of waiting for the right time, Lorrie asks, “Why didn’t father come back with you after the accident, Mama?” Part of her knows the right time for this question will never exist, but she wants to ask her mother now, while she’s relaxed, while she’s happy and might answer truthfully.

“He couldn’t return here.”

“You’re lying. You came back.”

“They make promises, Lorrie, the ones who want to take you. They make it seem like it will be so fast before your loved ones will join you. But the place between here and there is dark—it’s difficult to step into. I had to choose to be here with you.”

“Dark like what?”

“Like the absence of light—like a void, or a vacuum.”

“Where do you go when you get to the other side? What does it look like? Is it heaven?”

“Shhh. What time is it?” Beverly says, placing her hands over her ears like she hears a jackhammer.

“Don’t you have a watch?”

“It doesn’t work.”

“Mine says 1:45,” Lorrie replies.

“We should go to the theater right now! If we want to catch the picture, we should go.” Her mother takes off at a run. A stiff breeze blows through the trees. Her mother’s skirt is a still shadow traveling with the outline of her legs, unaffected by weather. Lorrie’s culottes ride up around her thighs and the wind at her back is chill. “Come on, let’s go!” Beverly shouts, still running. “Or we’ll miss it for sure.”

Lorrie sprints across the park. Her shoes are flatter than her mother’s and her own legs are long, but they tie as the mock-race ends minutes later at the theater marquee. The scent of popcorn leaks from the front door. Lorrie thinks of the little hot kernels exploding to fluffy lightness and wonders if that’s the way of death and if her mother is somehow holding her strange burnt kernel together. Maybe her mother’s ghost-body is like the fine husk of the kernel without the corn, like the ones people pick from their teeth and wipe from the bottom of the bag, the ones that are brittle and shallow, holding nothing but themselves.

“One ticket please,” Lorrie says, but she picks a row with two adjacent seats. The movie is sad. Lorrie and her mother cry. Lorrie doesn’t know why her mother cries, but she cries because so many things are coming to her, like the way her mother used to tuck her in or the times she sat on her father’s thin shoulders with her mother beside them and how he toted her around for hours. She cries because the movie is conveniently sad enough to cry to. She watches her mother watch her. Maybe her mother can tell that Lorrie is so much sadder than the movie is, or maybe she’s just looking at her again. Her mother loves to look at her.

Lorrie places her fingertip on the tear falling from her mother’s right eye, on the cheek closest to her, and does so without turning her head. It is not absorbed or moved by her touch, but continues falling to honey muslin.

The movie, Lorrie discovers, is about a little girl who runs away from home and gets lost in the woods. Lorrie puts her hand on the armrest between them. She looks at her mother's watch, an old wind-up antique with rounded face and delicate sculpted band. Diamond chips are embedded at the quarter-hours. The time reads 3:23 a.m. She remembers the clock in her grandmother's car read 3:20 when they got in the car for the trip to the bridge.

She looks at the screen. In the movie, the big forest ranger has almost found the girl who is hiding in the bushes, thinking the ranger is a bear. Who cares, and what a dumb girl, Lorrie thinks? But, aha, there is a bear nearby, about to maul the girl, and the forest ranger comes up behind him and shoots a tranquilizer into his leg. Lorrie shifts to get comfortable. Poor bear, Lorrie thinks. Rangers should have tolerance for bears—especially when dumb girls leave their campsites and go deep in the woods.

"Stop fidgeting," her mother whispers.

Normally at the movies, Lorrie places her arm down first and waits for her mother to place her hand lightly on Lorrie's wrist. When she does so this time, Lorrie doesn't feel the weight of her fingers, but senses her presence.

"Was this when you died?" she asks, reaching into her mother's seat to point at the watch face. Her mother's wrist, resting gingerly in her lap, rises with a jolt.

"Don't say that."

"Is this the time of the wreck?"

"Hush, Lorrie. Tell me you love me."

"I love you, mother."

"I love you, too."

“Mother, why don’t you look like you did when drowned. Why don’t you have the mark of the dash on your forehead? The bruise on your left shoulder?

“Watch the movie.” Beverly says, and starts bawling again. It’s lucky no one but Lorrie can hear her, but it’s also terrible.

“I can’t mother. I want to know.”

“I appear how you remember me.”

Lorrie stares at her mother until the small gash appears on her forehead, the bruise appears, and her body is riddled with gooseflesh. There are actually a series of bruises that are oblong and flat like fingertips. She suddenly looks like a weak, little bird. Lorrie closes her eyes and remembers her mother’s beautiful hair, beautiful face, beautiful eyes. Her mother’s beauty returns.

When they leave, it’s 4:40 p.m. and they run the few blocks toward home. The little girl in the movie survived, of course, even though she arrogantly entered bear’s lair. Tap. Tap. Tap. Lorrie’s feet move quickly across the ground. The girl in the movie wasn’t even handicapped or scarred for life. That’s a disappointment, Lorrie thinks, like how people get shot at in the movies and never seem to get hit. Actually, good-looking people don’t get hit. Ugly people always do. They hire ugly people to get hit, she decides. And cars in the movies never seem to crash unless the bad guy is in them, who is also ugly. In the movies, people’s mothers don’t usually die either, unless they have cancer.

But her mother is dead. Not other people’s mothers. Hers. “Let’s walk and be late,” Lorrie says, slowing down. “Or let’s go to the park again”

Beverly slows and matches Lorrie’s pace. “I don’t want you to get in trouble,” she says. They walk up Jacqueline’s street amidst the fallen purple blooms of the dogwood trees. Lorrie

picks up two huge handfuls and crushes them into a tight wad as she reaches the house. The place of death is dark, she thinks, I'm sure of it.

"Lorrie? Lor-rie?" her grandmother calls from the balcony. The house smells like chicken and apple strudel.

"Coming, Grandma," Lorrie shouts.

"There's a TV dinner for you on the counter. Just heat it up again."

They enter the house. Her grandmother, wearing a fuschia sweater and a pair of navy slacks, meets them in the hallway. On her head is the poker hat she wears to play cards. She hugs Lorrie in a quick cool clutch then coughs her smoker's cough. Her grandma's friends are already over because she's wearing her dentures, which she sometimes leaves on the table when she walks around the house. "What's that you've got in your hands," she asks.

"Flowers," Lorrie says.

"Put them on the phone table, dear." Lorrie drops the crushed corpses onto the mahogany. The places where they were smashed have deep purple creases. This is the way a flower bleeds, Lorrie thinks, but the color of creased skin is never red.

"Lorrie, you destroyed them," her grandmother says. "Throw them away."

"Your father's mother sure looks like your dad," Beverly says.

"Her nose?"

"No, her eyes."

"What nose?" her grandmother asks.

"Mother says your eyes look like Chris's," Lorrie says.

The grandmother grabs Lorrie by the shoulders, as if in her sudden seizing she can trap her own emotion. “Why do you call him Chris now?” she asks, staring at Lorrie. “You call him ‘father’ if you must and, if you can help it, try not to—“

“Speak of the newly dead,” Beverly says.

“Talk on and on of the recently deceased,” Jacquèline seems to agree, speaking with heavy accents. When she’s tired or agitated her slight French-Canadian accent becomes more pronounced. Lorrie could turn on the television and her grandmother could talk to Pepe le Pieu.

“Can you hear her?” Lorrie asks Jacquèline.

“Who?”

“My mother.”

“No,” Beverly says. “She can’t.”

The phone rings in the kitchen. Lorrie and her mother follow Jacquèline there to answer it, but when her mother arrives on the tiles, Beverly sashays around, in sudden bright spirits, spiraling in turns then performing the first 10 steps of a Spanish dance, including the claps.

Then she lifts and holds her skirt up just under her eyes and looks close at Lorrie’s grandmother like she is examining a crazy person from just above a curtain. “Hello, Bijoux house, this is Jacquèline Bijoux. Hello, Ms. Perkins. Oh, yes.”

Jacquèline speaks with an unhappy tone. Beverly says, “Boo!” experimentally. No reaction.

“Yes. I know—I know she’s a bright child. She must be pretending. Mmmmhmmm, an imaginary friend.”

“I shouldn’t go to school with you again,” Beverly says, slumping into a dinette chair. “You know this is all about this.” Then she whispers confidentially, “I think you’re in trouble.”

“Pfffft,” Lorrie says.

Jacquèline nods with her chin on the phone, “That’s right. I’ll talk to her. Yes, I said I would. What do you expect? A child can’t lose her parents and have no probl—” Jacquèline shoos Lorrie from the kitchen. “Go play in your room, dear. Grandmère Jacquie needs to talk on the phone.”

“Can I go upstairs instead?”

“Yes,” Jacquèline says, pushing Lorrie along with her free hand, then continuing in a low urgent voice, “and expect her to have no problems whatsoever. I’ll talk to her tonight. A child that’s orphaned needs to believe she has a mother. Losing Bev and Christophe hasn’t been easy on any of us.”

“Bev!” her mother exclaims heatedly, picking up a dead dogwood bloom and dropping it on the floor. “I hate when she calls me ‘Bev’!” She sweeps the rest of the blooms from the table with her energy. A shower of purple colors the still air.

“Yes, so sudden. I’ll have to talk to her tonight. Yes, Ms. Perkins. I will. Thanks for the call.”

Lorrie hears the phone hang up and sprints up the stairs where Erma and Maureen, her grandma’s old-lady friends, are seated at the table glaring at each other. “Hello Erma. Maureen,” she says politely, though panting and out of breath.

“Hello, Lorrie.”

The room they sit in smells like unboxed polyester and the stale smoke of her grandmother’s Benson and Hedges. May air comes in through a crack in the window. Maureen eats nuts from the glass dishes hurriedly, filling her cheeks like a chipmunk in winter. What a pig she is, Lorrie thinks.

Erma, who always seems lost at these gatherings, gazes away from Maureen, out to the balcony. Three glasses of her grandmother's cheap red wine sit beside them, ready for the evening of chatter. Erma's is almost empty. "It was a shame about your mother," Erma tells Lorrie. "I always liked her, even when she was dating that Gallagher boy, before Chris." Erma stretches her thin arms above her head and lets her old eyes settle lightly on Lorrie's face. Her skin is flushed and her words blend together. "I remember when…she was sixteen and came in the store looking for condoms for her friend Bethany from Detroit; then later she dropped the Gallagher boy and found your father. Though truthfully, Chris never treated her that well. All that running around." Erma pauses. "I did like that girl," she says, then affirmatively, "yes, I did."

Beverly's eyes fill with tears. "Good old Erma," her mother says. "You should never have stayed here. You should have left when you had the chance. Years ago. Moved away. Now these are your only friends?"

"I probably shouldn't be saying this," Erma tells Lorrie in a wine-scented whisper.

"Don't tell her," Maureen says.

"You can come to stay at my house anytime. Okay?"

"Okay," Lorrie says.

"I mean it," Erma says urgently, trying to settle her watery glance on Lorrie's eyes securely.

"It's Christophe that we miss," Maureen interrupts, "not the girl."

"It is not," Erma says, gazing out the window.

"Yes, it is."

“Be truthful. Chris isn’t missed by many,” Erma tells the window in a tight voice, “If he wasn’t a philandering, job losing, lousy, good-for-nothing…“ Lorries mother nods along, but Lorrie turns to face the wall, hoping to block the voices.

“Don’t forget whose house you’re in, Erma,” Maureen says. “And his child is here. Heavens, have you drunk that whole glass already? Lorrie, be a dear and fill up Erma’s glass. Erma get a hold of yourself—you’re upsetting the child.”

“I think I’ve had quite enough of the games today and I’m going home.” Erma says, picking up her blue duster and placing it over her arm. She stares at the pictures along the wall and puts her thumb over Chris’s face to look at one of him and Beverly. “She was a beautiful girl,” she concludes, then looks over at Lorrie as if to gauge the resemblance. “You’re beautiful, too.” Erma shakes her head sadly and pats Lorrie on the back. “Remember what I told you.”

“*Vielle vache*!” Maureen says under her breath.

Jacquie appears at the doorway. “Erma? Where are you going?”

“Home,” Erma says, pushing past her.

“We can’t play with two. What point is there in that? You have to stay,” Jacquèline says, but Erma makes her slow progress down the stairs without responding and Maureen stuffs her face with nuts before she looks at Jacquèline with agitation, grabs another handful and stands.

“I should be going then, too,” Maureen says, waiting uncertainly for confirmation, so Jacquèline rubs her forehead with two fingers and nods.

“Erma was always the nice one,” Beverly tells Lorrie when Maureen leaves. “Maureen is just like—oh never-mind. Another French-Canadian friend.”

Jacquèline strides to Lorrie and grips her forearms. “Now you made my friends go away,” she says. “You scared them off.” Her face quivers.

“I did not. Maureen was intolerant of Erma.”

“What do you know of intolerance? What? I am being told by an eight-year-old girl of intolerance.”

“Tolerance,” Lorrie recites, “is the ability to recognize and respect the opinions, practices, or beliefs of others.”

“Very good, Lorrie,” Beverly says.

“Thank you, mother.”

“Who are you talking to?” Jacquèline demands. “Your mother is gone. Dead. Never to return. *Comprends-tu*? Who are you talking to? *Mon dieu*!” Lorrie can tell that Jacquèline would like nothing better than to launch into a long tirade in French—but Lorrie would understand very little, so Jacquèline won’t bother.

“You are a mean old woman!” Beverly shouts, suddenly looking frenzied. “Leave my daughter alone.” Beverly walks to Jacquèline haughtily, plucks the wig from her head, and drops it on the floor like a roach. Jacquèline’s mouth gapes open. The thin blond of her normal hair is like a sheer yellow bathing cap, flat and close to her head.

“*Ça va*,” Jacquèline says, near disintegrating into tears. “Your mother is here? Fine. Ask her this. What year did Philippe and I get married?”

“1942,” Beverly says, “but after you were pregnant.”

“1942,” Lorrie repeats, “after you were pregnant.”

“She told you that before she died.”

“She did not.”

“And on our wedding night,” Beverly interrupts, “tell her, Lorrie! Chris got very drunk. He broke your glass vase with the blue birds at the edge, started an argument with me, then left

in his car. The car crashed into a tree along the highway. You made sure to have the towing company tow the car before people could see it. You simply bought him another of the same model and make to avoid embarrassment."

The old woman pales. "What happened," she asks, "What happened the night Christophe died."

Beverly begins crying and shouting. "You are terrible. You are insane." Lorrie repeats her word for word. "You called me a whore, a half-spic whore and accused me of cheating on Christophe. You told him you found a man's cardigan in my car. Chris believed you because he always believed you, but you lied and he, with his implacable cold look walked me silently out to the car and spat in my face. It never mattered to you that he was the one with the infidelities, the countless infidelities—some right under my nose. In the back shed. In the sitting room."

"Ignoring men's failures is the way of my times," Grandma Jacquie sputters. "It's what we do—"

"I understand, old woman. But you didn't have to blame me—I was innocent… And you want to know what happened next? He drove me home, yelling at me and demanding I prove I didn't cheat. You kept Lorrie overnight so we could 'work it out.' I cried. I was exhausted. I told him I had no patience for his idiocy and he started to veer back and forth over the lanes on the bridge."

As Beverly speaks, Jaqueline covers her ears. "That's enough, Beverly," she says.

"Then he hit one side of the bridge and the car spun over the edge. The car went nose-down. His legs were crushed beneath the wheel. The seat had rocked forward and pinned him beneath it. There were five cracks in the windshield, like a star. I said, 'Let's get out of here,' but he couldn't budge. He began to cry like a baby, 'Don't go. Don't leave me here to die.' I

couldn't open the door because it would let the water in too quickly, so we waited as it poured through the cracks in the windshield. Water rose to our waists. I shook from nerves, but had undone my seatbelt and was going to swim for the bank. I couldn't save him. The water was freezing. I thought about Lorrie being left with you, old woman. I was desperate. I tried to push open the door but it would barely move…then Chris's hand came down on my shoulder and held me there. He gave me his calculating look. He held me there until we drowned. Is that enough for you?"

Jacquèline places her hand to her chest as though it pains her. She stares at Lorrie and sinks to her knees on the floor. "It can't be," she says. "You are a mean child trying to kill me. If your mother were here, she'd be kind enough to make your life easier by leaving you alone. She'd leave you alone because she loved you and knew she would cause you to live in madness. If she loved you, she would leave you to live as you've always lived—talking to real people."

"Mother," Lorrie says, watching Beverly's feet leave the ground. "Where are you going?" Her mother looks at Lorrie.

"She doesn't exist, Lorrie," Jacquèline says.

As she says this, Beverly opens her perfect pale arms and puts them around Lorrie. Lorrie puts her arms around Beverly's waist but Jacquèline inserts herself to interfere, overwhelms Beverly's corn-kernel-thin ghost body to displace her.

Instead of held by her mother, Lorrie feels wrapped in Jacquèline's old bones, and Jacquèline clings to Lorrie like she can't get close enough. "I just tried to be decent," she says. Lorrie can smell her stale liquor breath and it makes her sick.

"Mother," Lorrie calls, pulling away from Jacquèline. "Mother! I love you."

Lorrie closes her eyes and she can feel Beverly's essence all around her. She smiles and holds her arms aloft as though she were holding her mother's normal body or a soft wind. "Don't leave, Mother," she whispers. "Don't ever leave."

Jacquèline collapses flat on the floor.

"Call an ambulance, Lorrie," Beverly says.

Lorrie walks downstairs to the kitchen phone and dials. When she returns, her mother weeps and her grandmother's heart has stopped. "I felt her. I felt her go by me." Beverly says. "They'll be too late." She places her hands over her ears as if she hears the jackhammering again.

Lorrie leans over her grandmother's still body. She puts her fingers on her grandmother's cool neck and breathes deeply. "It's just you and me now," Lorrie says, turning toward her mother, but she pivots and her mother has also vanished. Nothing stands in the place where she stood. The room is as vast and as empty as the universe wrapping its black sky around a single, barely visible star.

A Baby Anyway

Randall Kilburn didn't allow himself to use the term love as more than a descriptive expression for warmth and camaraderie, not that he wasn't married, enmeshed in a workably open marriage, and reasonably happy. To his knowledge, considering his former history, he had never been "in love" so tended to disbelieve that his recent affliction of pain and sensory memory affiliated with a woman he'd slept with on a research trip could be such a thing.

The desert woman, the woman not his wife, "the one who caused the ache" as he referred to her, simply became an unbearable person for whom he may have used the word love, if only because this ache felt romanticized, was a constant source of worry since their break up, and it had not left him for months.

If pressed by a crony much later in his old age, he could imagine his story about the ache-girl could begin with a simple statement such as: "There was a woman I knew once who challenged me, who I hated and may have loved, if love exists"—but even his therapist got only his repetitive and practiced dismissals of love when the two discussed her, the gnashing of his teeth, and the wrinkling of his brows.

Still, after one too many of Randall's refutations, even the shrink wised up. It was the matter of Randall's stylistically accomplished and yet completely ridiculous diatribes about disengagement that the learned man caught on to, telling Randall then that he could see Randall's bland remarks and negativity for what they authentically were, which was not, his shrink stressed, Randall's true dismissal of his aforementioned lady interest, but instead Randall's own desire to dismiss anyone or anything his mind had no capability of controlling, or setting free.

On this point, Randall agreed immediately. “I want to set this free,” he said. “The ache is a terrible ache in my chest.”

“You say you want to let this go, Randall, yet you can't,” the therapist said. “Again and again, we return to her, so it might help to explore what it is about her that you can't forget.”

“Well, I can’t forget that she wants to kill herself every day,” Randall said. “I have had my own problems with depression, you know? So why would I want to know about that or even remember it? Except, each day I want to fuck her and wonder if she has done it. Maybe that is causing the ache, wondering if she's offed herself out there in the desert and is hanging from a rafter of a trailer, maybe shored up in her backyard, bled out, having decided that I wronged her somehow because I didn’t come back.”

“What makes you feel responsible?” his therapist said. “You don't control her. Remember, we discussed this?”

“She said she loved me. I couldn't love her. I don't love. I told her this before, but she was fine with that. And then she left me when I said my wife was pregnant,” he said, raking his hand through his thinning sandy blond hair. “Yes. I'm probably just wondering if she's still alive. That's it.”

Randall looked at the clock, a silver deal with glistening hands that reminded him of butter knives glued to a dial. He felt he'd made progress. “My wife is waiting for me,” Randall said. “I have to go.”

Returning home, he paid exorbitant bills and booked travel. He frantically wrote letters to friends and editors and picked up one project after the next. Still, despite endless distractions to drive her out (he did not allow himself to think her name unless by accident), she who caused the ache had taken up large residence in the back of his head, pulled up an old wingchair to get

comfortable, naked save one of his button-up shirts, and he could not (despite fine news of his child's good ultrasound, despite his agent's email to say he'd won a new award out of Newfoundland, and despite any number of successes) shake her memory loose.

Her presence was a constant, if ever muted engagement that fluttered behind his eyes or below his ribcage and also caused a low-grade schizophrenia where one moment he cast her out completely, swearing he was better off without her, and the next he longed to be near her so strongly it fairly drew his hands up from his sides, as if he could reach out to touch her, but her air was not his air. His air was rarified island air, the air people pecked in lieu of real cheeks. Swish. Swish. The air where the smog and the ocean took turns with monopolizing the breezes.

Her air was as dry as the desert she lived in. Besides, he decided, he could not extend his hand to her now, even if he wanted to, even if she screamed for his return. He should not return to her in any case, since she caused the question of why he'd meander with a damaging attraction that bordered on obsession and burned like a brush-fire grown too close. He was happily married to someone, he reminded himself. Someone perfect and nice. He had done no wrong. Their marriage had been open for years. The other woman knew this. The other women knew this.

And his wife was expecting now, he reminded himself, having passed the first trimester in her pregnancy with no troubles like the last time, so it was all that it could have been .

He had wealth. He had connections. He had everything he possibly needed. Besides, he doubted the validity of the ache she (who caused it) had caused. Could his reaction to her be more simply labeled an aggravated lust complicated by the pain of pursuing her emotional train wreck? He was determined to ride out the pain until it went away. Thus, after the last weekend's bout of tennis and sundry shopping, replying to editors and strangers, staring out at the waterfront view from his home, he knew only that instead of progress, he had backtracked,

gotten worse, tasted the blackest bile he had known since the split—since everything lately, but mainly the water before him, saddened him so severely he was nearly moved to uncustomary tears solely because she (who caused the ache) saw no similar expanse!

His separation from her was therefore more than distance tracked with miles, more like belonging to another universe that she could not see, where she stood in the sand, which was hot and dry as the bone of something that died there, and he and his wife stood in a habitable dwelling on an island with glittering promise, perusing the daily, oceanic splendor of the New York skyline.

In this place, he had an identity with a constant household. His wife was concrete. She was funny and pleasant. Yet travelling caused breaks in his realities; it always had. There was never any wife amidst the shifting dunes, only a lover who cut her wrists with dull tools and wore the scars to show this hobby was not new, a lover with pale hair and full lips, a lover with track marks that had all but faded at the insides of her elbows—for she had been an addict too.

He had given up the drugs and liquor long ago. He had landed back in his wealth and privilege, overcoming his brief bouts with self-destructive decimation in decided triumph. He was far from the place where he'd trade anything important for a bottle or a hit. Yet today, he missed the lover so much it seemed that even his gums hurt. He missed her totally and viscerally, even missed her dangerous moments when she, bleeding, shivering after an episode, clung to him and pressed her new cutter's wounds to the bare skin on his back to close them, pulling him deeper inside her, half crying, half demanding, "Get closer. Get closer," as his body obliged her. He had long, strong, capable arms. She loved how he lifted her. How they held her.

But he needed to turn to his wife now. He needed to forget that other thing, like a nightmare deferred. His wife was pregnant and needed him, which meant that although their

marriage was and had always been a party to new women or men entering their lofty world, more now was expected by way of conversation, gentle touches, and soothing reassurances. This was to be their first child. They had gotten married in order to have such a child. When the news went out, their friends rallied around them, thinking it might mean the end of the suffering for one or the other, the same suffering these friends secretly believed was caused by the couple's constant flirtations with marital disaster, and “A baby,” one good friend said. “That will show them that they need to be strong together.”

When he heard this as he walked back into his study, his blood went cold. He hated them and wanted to flee. He looked cruelly to his wife's stomach. The word baby started to give him a chill, though he had thought he wanted one. A baby was something he imagined they needed many times, obsessed by his own ancestry as he was, but he had no practical experience with childrearing.

Wanting a baby occurred to him, suddenly, like wanting a Lamborghini. It was the one of few things in his late forties that he still wanted and did not have. Yet, such a thing did not appear from mid-air. Babies were made. Sex and proximity were required. Perhaps this was part of why she-who-caused-the-ache had abruptly cancelled his trail-membership in her life. He could be imagining things, but as his wife Karen expanded, her expectations expanded too. The baby made this happen.

Now, he was to go to medical appointments with her. He was to help pick nursery décor. He was to be around and cook when the nausea overtook her, also: avoid long trips. He was to call if he were gone more than a few hours. Often, lately, for she was five and a half months along, he watched her growing belly and wondered what that tiny soul would expect when it

emerged enraged and squalling at the drafty surface of the world. Who or what would that soul be, a miracle or a disappointment?

And what if it was damaged somehow, the fetus? What if it was not what he wanted after all? He was older. The child would be a teen when he was in his sixties. It could ruin all major travel they did for some time. Karen would be affected too, he decided--was already being affected—as even her steady alternate lovers would not have her now due to her pregnancy, shallow as that may be. So what sort of effect would a constantly pressing need have on both of their lives outside of home? It, meaning the baby in this instance, could be a problem. It could change everything.

But “You have to call the baby he or she, Randall,” Karen admonished this afternoon, tossing her burnished hair behind her back and stretching on her toes to put soup cans in the cabinet. “Stop calling the baby 'it.' That bothers me.”

He walked behind her and placed his hand on the small of her back. “We don't know if it's a boy or a girl,” he said. “So I call the baby it. How can I assign a gender?”

“It's not an it,” she said.

He took another can from her hand and put it up on the shelf. He blocked her from reaching the rest. “Sit down,” he said. “The baby is what I meant every time I said it.”

She sat. Clouds gathered today outside the window. She watched them with dull eyes. She was somewhere else, the place he often saw her go when she thought of someone or something other than him. Her hair was neat, groomed as usual.

He was somewhere else, too, fighting the despair that roiled up in waves. He wanted to feel fresh sunburn on his skin, arid heat, the sand below his sandaled feet. He wanted she-who-caused-the--ache to apply aloe to his burns, smiling and mocking him as he winced, while the

sky darkened around their solitude. He wanted to walk through her house and find her somewhere, seated on a loveseat or some other perch where she would have been reading, and he wanted to make love to her wherever she was. He wanted to see a lizard appear in the shower stall or watch the light drop behind her house, with a cool drink in one hand, ice rapidly melting, and her small hand in his other.

But he had a book release/philanthropic publicity gala tonight. He had cleaned his monkey suit. He would ride a ferry to the shore then a taxi to the party. Here, the water and city lights made a sparkling urban smock of flash and humidity. Nothing was dry. Even the air from the air-conditioners had an alternate smell.

There was so much water around his house that, as he ate two soft-boiled eggs and rye toast for lunch earlier, he had decided the whole panorama of his daily view was not just symbolic but the summary. For his wife, there was an ocean in her belly and an ocean of repressed needs. There was a literal ocean around him. Glass and bronze ornaments of the sea accumulated like flotsam throughout their house and there was a clean sterile space within that house, too, albeit humid from the occasional cracked window. Even the tap water was piped in invisibly and neatly chlorinated. As he wandered around his place that day, it occurred to him as strange that he could find no dust anywhere.

This immediately led him to the connection that there was also a lack of awareness on Karen's part with any of the very sullied parts of himself he most despised. She was hydrated motion with unbroken lines—constantly moisturized, clean, flowing--in control of her own emotional wellbeing, no matter what softer unseen part of her may exist. Everything was beautiful and terrible about her unflappable spirit. She had never disparaged his past, unlike someone else. She did not demand what he said he would not, or could not give. She never had.

“I will not ask you to be in love with me,” she once said, and this was an early agreement, he remembered, that they'd always strove to keep.

“Karen,” he had said. “I'm just not emotionally accessible. I have problems with the idea of being in love. I have problems with wanting to die sometimes, too. Like when I work. But my therapist says this is not an act I'm likely to actualize.”

They got married because she was smart, pretty, and kind. He could depend on her. They'd been together a long time. She was thirty seven. Her ovaries could stop working soon. They’d tried again and again to conceive and finally got it right.

“You must use condoms with other men while we do this,” he’d told her. “We need to make sure this is our child.” She had agreed. This went on a year before the test came back positive in the new definitive way.

And during this year, halfway through it, this was right about the time when their open marriage grew complicated with his sudden desire not for babies but for blood and fire emanating from the desert. Or was it after? Was there a time and space when both desires happened concurrently, but he could assume them to be removed from each other, as if spatially delegated?

For the wife, he was expected to be respectful, kind, and decent. In contrast, for the one who caused the ache, he was expected to belong to her, heart and soul, body and mind, to never discuss the wife unless necessary, and to listen to her daily discussion about her desire to kill herself or calmly overhear the many ways in which she might go about doing so. Sometimes, this sickened him. The demands were heavy. She did not say, “Be yourself,” as Karen did.

She said clearly, in many ways, “Be who you deny being, but really are.”

“I am like her. I am like her,” he thought while regarding his tux, his hand on his chest where the bulk of her ache sat like a small anvil on his sternum. But he always felt most similar to her while sitting in the dark, pondering his own thoughts.

“Get ready, babe,” Karen then called from the living room and he turned on more lights to contemplate the suit wrapped in plastic he would soon wear. And he felt nothing like her, that desert girl, that memory, as soon as he was fully dressed for the party, wearing the false face he wore for guests and acquaintances. He was a different man. The altered man who had no doubt about his right to stand among the well-heeled people he called acquaintances.

No stranger to his own multiple masking tendencies or sudden bouts with depression, in fact, he sometimes wondered if dating that other woman were not an exercise in self-annihilation or mutilation, but instead an exercise in positive comparison, such as: “I am not that crazy because She is far more crazy. I am not that damaged because She is far more damaged.”

In his moments before sleep, he acknowledged that he appreciated her swirl of emotion since it forcibly engaged him with living like he'd lived in his doping days, but without the liquor or drugs. She ripped him free from his tendencies to minimalize or avoid self-expression. Or avoid commitment: I will marry you but I will not...A,B,C,D. To avoid even friendships that presented themselves as too binding too quickly. I will speak to you, but on my terms, with a harrowing display of both proximity and removal until I test you to be truthful. Really, he was a kind man most of the time. He always tried to be, though sometimes his kind came off as non-committal.

Or his non-committal came off as non-committal. His ache girl's rage forced his responses. His honesty. His heat and pain and passion. It was fascinating to have these things while sober. Yet now he was burned by them, part of the fire they created even in her absence, a

burn victim with seeping wounds, or the white hot licking tips of the fire itself. Before, he did not think such feelings existed for him anymore. Not anywhere. Certainly, not here on his island home where the hair from his chin fell into the sink as he shaved, only to be washed away at the turn of a knob.

Not here where plans were made suavely by a beautiful woman he committed to long ago, with perfect hair and aplomb, who more often wanted to kill him for his transgressions with timing or intimacy than in any way damage herself. Yet even his compliments to Karen were now couched in a comparison mode with the other woman. What would his shrink say to that?

Regardless, he thought. And so: There were two lives. One in mild, happy fatherland-to-be. One in hell that sometimes felt like heaven just long enough to rake a few coals through his soul.

Shawna. Okay, he thought her name. He thought her name and dreamt her face and even now, getting on the ferry with Karen on his arm, his hands ached for her body. Even later, with his hand on his wife's belly for a photo-op—when "Smile. Smile." the media man would say—Randall's mind would throb for the former. Then alone in the bathroom, hand on his cock, he would think of her, picturing how tightly he remembered having pulled her close and the feel of her dry, sun-stripped hair, her straight blond hair that smelled of leaves and sage. But he could not go to her again. Not now. Maybe not ever.

“You violated me by doing that with her!” she’d last told him, shouting hysterically about his news of making a baby with his wife.

"She is my wife!" he’d announced, a little indignantly.

"Only because you're afraid I can't stay sane long enough to have your baby," she replied. "Or, you think I'm too old? You don't love me? Or maybe you're afraid an ex-addict

would make a poor child, another aside from you? Maybe Karen's family has no history of mental illness or a better bloodline? Any of this? You are ripping out my heart Randall and feeding it back to me!"

"I don't belong to you," he replied, frightened by her intensity. "I mean, I do when I'm with you. But I can't say love. I don't say love. And I don't love you. Or I do love you but I'm not in love with you, okay. I am fucked up."

"Fucked up people say love and fall in love," she replied, furious. "And you are in love with me, so you need to say that—right fucking now. I want to hear you say it. Shawna, I am in love with you."

"Stop pressing me," he argued. "You know how much I care. So, now what? My wife is pregnant, and I'm supposed to regret my own child?"

"No," Shawna said, her voice dull. "You're supposed to regret not having that child with me because I love you and you love me and you know it. Because I want to hold you so close I can feel you breathe and kiss every inch of your body until there is not one place my mouth has not been. Because children are your future, Randall, and you're starting a new one without me, one that does not contain or involve me. Did you think I should be glad for that?"

"Do you have a future you can see?" he thought then. But he did not speak these words. He could say nothing, his mouth felt seared shut, and this is where the ache began. The ache he felt right now.

"I want to kill myself today by standing behind your car and letting you back over me," she told him then. "I want you to kill me so I can be free of this pain you insist on causing me." She sobbed, her body shaking and her face hidden. And then she said, still crying, crawling away

from him before standing to walk out her back door. "It's over, Randall. You have to go. Don't call me. Don't ever contact me again."

But that was in the sand, far away and gone. He was in the city with a shoreline and high-rises and a wife. The desert woman was his past.

His citified hand rode the small of Karen's back as he helped her off the ferry and then into a taxi. Karen smelled like linen. She smiled. Her teeth were gleaming and white. Outside, everything was clean, wet, and safe. There was ocean and there was rain.

As they exited the taxi, he held his umbrella ready and opened it for them, walking close to Karen. When they arrived, he went to the coat closet and sent Karen ahead to greet the crowd of their well-wishers and friends. There were many he hadn't seen in a while sure to be present. But in that coat room, with all those garments, it was a warm, quiet place. He hung Karen's aqua Dior coat beside a faux ermine jacket and found another hanger for his black trench, which he placed beside a sandy camel sports coat.

The brown coat looked soft. He reached to touch it, finding it similar in color to the very sand he'd considered earlier. But all was shadowed. The closet was rather dark, illuminated by just one bulb. He touched the fabric. It felt like the light blond hair on a woman's upper arms. "Did you kill yourself yet, Shawna?" he asked.

No one answered.

"I do love you," he said then, clutching that empty sleeve. "I am in love with you. I have always been in love with you and that's why I can't stay near you." He leaned into the coat and felt it moisten against his cheeks from the wetness of his tears.

Like a guilty child, he backed away from the racks and went to rejoin his glowing wife. "Oh, this rain! Oh, this rain," Karen said faintly, referring to the water cascading down all the

visible glass at the bookstore. “Sometimes, it seems it will never stop. It'll be nice to have a nice, dry day. We could use a little heat.” She rubbed her stomach again, in the way of pregnant women. It's coming, Randall thought. It is. The baby. The baby. What was a baby anyway?

The photographer approached. He said, “Smile. Smile.”

They did.

For the perfect shot, Randall put his hand beside Karen's hand on her belly, let it rest there until he felt a small insistent kicking or movement below his palm, until the camera was done clicking, until he almost forgot what he was doing in any regard and then his wife, usually so eager for his touch or affection, grew tired of the staid weight of his open palm on her body. “Your hand is making my stomach sweat,” she whispered. “It’ll leave a mark on my clothes if we’re not careful.” Randall didn’t move, nor did he have any idea what to say, so, seconds later, Karen turned lightly on her toes towards another group of ardent well-wishers, smiling, waving, and shrugged it off.

Vivandiere's Pass

"After a victory there are no enemies, only men."

--Napoleon Bonaparte in 1812

There is a pass in Russia where prostitutes lick their wounds, retreat into trees, and lie across the snow till the cold claims their bodies—such pure white drifts falling all around, chilling their marrow and dulling their hearts. This pass is not mapped, just the easiest route to suicide in a long war. In fact, it might be any patch of snow where the landscape hides a woman's leaving.

That's what Sucette said, before she found the place, and Margot believed her so began to dream of this place, even while wakeful: A welcoming pillow of white under a copse of trees, yellow sunlight streaming through, and an almost painless, almost pleasurable death, like an orgasm that ejects the soul from the body for several moments before the skin calls it back.

She dreamt of scarecrows stripped and faded like the one she made with her brother in France—scarecrows that had lost their ability to scare after much of the original material had fallen from their branches. She had faded too, a woman to sticks, bones without padding, her bright eyes tarnished by unforgiving sights. After Kovno, Vilna, Vitebsk, and Smolensk, after Viasma, Gzatsk and Borodino—after Moscow lay burnt in the middle of the Russian winter, and the army's retreat from the south-westerly route was deemed necessary. Everyone starved, and the army dwindled.

How many days, she wondered, rubbing her eyes, slapping her cheeks to rid them of the faint violet tinge, would she live in privation, servicing the needs of men? She had heard their

confessions—yes, they missed their mothers, the taste of fresh-baked baguettes, and the scent of the countryside in spring; they longed for the sound of native French civilians, and the sight of peaceful farmers. They had seen death by war, by cold, and by hunger—so had she. But this death had stolen their hatred for the Russians who looked, in dying poses, like long-lost uncles or friends. They felt guilt and admiration as they marveled at Russia's flaming destruction of her own cities. They torched their museums and elaborate halls, all to keep the French from claiming them.

From each fight, less of Napoleon's men returned, and though they had emerged victorious from Moscow, there was no plunder from the burnt city or thereafter. Two ruinous battles had been fought while the rag-tag boys, specked about the ears and lips with the homeland's blue, lost faith in their leader and spent themselves in whores.

Napoleon was decried an idiot, privately, as they mounted the vivandieres. Though in the camps, they seemed sturdy and non-plussed, their tricolors just a bit less jaunty on their heads, the vivandieres: Margot, Elise, Sucette, Chantelle, (many more she did not know)—best knew the sorrows they worked free in the moist reaches of female bodies, the anger expunged into bleeding cunts and left hanging there.

They had asked after Moscow, "Why not remain until spring and avoid the march?" but Napoleon did not relent. He could not be out of touch with his empire for six, long months, so dictated the march through the bowels of the frozen tundra.

Despite their melancholy, or because of it, the soldiers plied the whores as if their bodies could be conquered where Russia could not. Margot had traveled with them for twenty-three months, servicing as many as forty soldiers a day, until she was kept by Fortinot. Now, she was ready to leave. She had lost three babies, loved three men, and seen Napoleon three times,

walking through the camp like a sleepwalker with a lantern that splashed fiery reflections on the snow, though she had never touched his ivory cuffs or made an effort to converse. He was an odd man, deathly quiet or ebulliently charming. There was no in-between.

He was often heard outside, whispering to Josephine, breathing fervent prayers into the ice as if she might hear him all the way from France, but no one could speak to him when he did; the blind-eye they turned was thorough. Men had been killed for less.

Napoleon cared only for his huge, white stallion and consulting his maps, but often stared at the ragged assembly of men with a squint expression as if to make them multiply. He was handsome, if short. Months earlier, Margot would have been happy to be protected by him, but he let no women into his tent and bedded no whores, so she'd finally accepted Fortinot, and the arrangement had been fine for a while, but after Moscow, when victories were not victories, Fortinot lost his mind. His hands twitched, and his moods shifted, set off by anything, even a blink.

In response, she hid behind her eyes until absolutely sure of him. He reminded her of her father's dementia, long ago, when he'd spoken of the French Revolution, the rolling heads and political unrest, and like her father, Fortinot was often lost in reveries. Many days, her neck tight in his grasp, she felt her spine tingle as if it might crack as he shouted commands. Her bruises renewed without fading, becoming their own sapphire, and ruby jewelry without facets. He liked to see marks on her body

His penis was a weasel's head in a mountain of flesh, but he insisted she cry out as he loomed above her, so this was his favorite game: She was to pretend he was a wild, pleasing lover—or a fearful conqueror—and in return, he pretended she meant enough to feed. Meeting his needs was better than accepting the repeated plowing before him, but his skin disgusted her.

Fat like bread dough, like a stuffed pheasant, he would not be the first to starve in this cold, and his breasts were larger than the spread length of her fingers, and beneath their sweaty folds, he scratched his unbathed sores. Her own breasts were so tiny they jutted out independently, with no place to gather moisture, so it was strange to find herself in a relationship where her body was that of a young boy compared to her lover.

They reached an encampment just outside Maloyaroslavets when Fortinot, stinking, unwilling to use heated snow, began to consult his old victory maps again and exclaim over them. Possibly, he had sampled the opiates circulating among the troops, but when he approached her, his eyes did not see a woman. He did not note the fine bones of the face he'd once called elfin; he saw something else, which made him furious.

She crouched away and tried to sleep, but he resembled a rutting boar above her, a red-faced instrument bent on disturbing her; he kicked her awake, his boot in her stomach, as she fought nausea. Then he gripped her throat and swung her side to side, shouting, “Whore, I burn because of you.”

His sunken eyes searched hers, and his cheeks bulged. When he tightened his hold, she thought: I will die here in this tent. Right here. Right now. I will lose my will.

“Didn’t I tell you wait?” he shouted. “I said no one else was to have you. Only me.”

“Yes,” she said. “But you had not brought food for days.” She saw the reason for his anger; she’d left his tent the evening before. At the spit, where two rabbits had roasted to feed twenty men, along with the weak soup in a half-full tureen, his men had stopped her, begging for favors. She planned on resisting them, saying no and hoping only for some meat, but they held her down and took her again and again on a rough blanket. Twelve of them. She did not eat. “I

was hungry," she repeated, weak with fever. "You hadn't been home. I didn't know what to do." The walls already started to heave in her vision.

"I would have brought food."

"When?"

He slapped her. "Whenever I wanted to. You'll starve if you don't eat from my hands. You understand?" He pulled a strip of meat from his pocket, encrusted with lint; he threw it at her. "They killed my horse," he said, distracted for a moment. "My mount is gone, but never the emperor's. That horse is worth his weight in gold, so the emperor rides as we walk through snow. I'd like to break his bones and hear them crunch between my teeth. Eat the meat I gave you."

It did not shock her that horses had no safety from soup pots and brutality. She'd even seen soldiers boil their shoes and belts to flavor meatless soup. Because this was not France; it was war, in a Russian winter. She ate, but wanted to vomit so stared at the tent flap as Fortinot wrenched up her chin with his greasy fingers. "Look at me when I speak to you," he said. "Pay attention." He glared as she chewed, but tossed her down when she finished, saying, "You belong to me. I'll show you." He pulled his dagger from his belt, slicing her face, asking, "Remember what this says?" He trapped her under his thighs and dragged his knife more heavily across her cheek, seeming to relish his act, but put away the blade before she blacked out.

When she awoke, he was gone, and the chill on her wound made her face burn. She pressed it closed. Disfigured, there was only one thing to do. The walk would require discipline; but she decided she must try, must walk past thousands as if on an important errand, and must not fail. She pulled on her coat and thought of the sort of dying where fingers and extremities froze first, but nothing could change her resolve; the memory of Fortinot compelled her.

She opened the flap and watched him walk by, so ducked in, touching the fox fur of the coat he gave her so long ago, the coat discarded by a rich Russian woman, probably looted, then laced her dresses tighter around her. Because she had no gloves, she stole a pair from his table then stole his maps, the ones he most enjoyed looking at, and several matches. Wrapping her head in wool so only her eyes showed, she stepped outside.

On her feet were a dead soldier's boots, which made her legs look shrunken but would keep her toes from freezing. Wrapped with scarves, her feet felt like mice in large boxes, but she'd already decided never to be barefoot, having once watched the French army snap the toes from Russian corpses like cracking carrots for stew; the memory did not leave her. She'd seen many frozen dead men, from both sides, throughout the campaign.

As she stepped out, the crisp, cold smell of ice made her ill, the stench freezing her nostrils. Talk of the weather bored her. A burning filled her stomach with each step, and reminded her of what she had eaten last. Hunger—now, that could be discussed until the lips went blue, until the very thought of food was a haven, and the seas froze like icicles or burned like visions. It was a wonder the locals did not have layers of fur under their skin to protect them from the flurries.

Twenty minutes into her walk, she wanted to turn back, but, instead considered Colleen, Anais, Olga, Colette—so many women found near the previous camps, remembered only briefly before the army moved on. When she was beyond the boundaries of tents, ditches, and artillery, her hands and face were numb, so she found a distant tree and sat beside it. The bark soothed her, rough-hewn but strong, so she fell asleep dreaming of bayonets piercing Fortinot's gut, or perhaps Napoleon's Borodino pistols shooting him repeatedly, but she did not notice when she faded out in the snow, which was a blessing.

She had reached the pass quickly and with a minimum of effort. She wanted to stay there. When she opened her eyes, she thought she saw a golden light, a void, or even a smothering pit of darkness lit by flames, but the walls of a wood cabin were an unexpected sight. A series of slaps woke her, and a young boy stared down with a worried frown. He had wrapped her in rags. A small fire blazed in his hearth. As he stoked the fire, alarm stole through her. “Put it out,” she shrieked. “They’ll see the smoke.

“Not in the dark," he said. "The smoke and the dark blend. I’m Dimitri. I found you in the snow.” He spoke Russian, which she did not understand, so switched to heavily-accented French. “You are sick, so must stay here.” He had stitched shut her face, and it burned as she looked at him.

When sensation returned to her limbs, she rolled toward the wall, and closed her eyes, but he brought a plate, whispering, “I shot a rabbit. Seasoned with herbs. Try some.”

She shook, so could hardly eat. “C-cold,” she murmured, “on fire.” Spasms rocketed through her legs, and she realized, as the blanket fell away, that he had stripped her upper body and her breasts were exposed. He only wore pants, so they must have curled together, half-nude, for hours. She asked, “How long have I been here?”

“Almost a day.” His voice was calm. Thinking back, she vaguely recalled hands stroking her body, anonymous hands on her hips, on her breasts—and she saw the hunger in his eyes and scoffed. All men were the same. Saving her life to take her body. Every move she made his eyes followed, but he was so young—a whelp in men's britches—so she looked away. “Have the French moved out?” she asked.

“No. They caught several bears, so remained to cook them. They seem to be deciding where to go.”

“Are you alone?”

“Not since you came. Good thing I was hunting, but the dogs get the credit. They found you when you must have just passed out. My parents are dead. I picked you up, having missed the company.”

“You saved me for company?”

“Aren’t there worse reasons?”

He cut up potatoes and fried them, but his hands took no more liberties. “I hope to travel with the spring thaws and wait out the winter,” he said. “How far is the camp, and are the maps you had correct?” He hoped the French would pass here, so he could breathe easily. “They take so long to leave,” he complained. “I took a risk to bring you here, but the snow fell as I came home and our tracks were covered by drifts… Lucky miracle. Saved by the snow.” He laughed, his Adam's apple bobbing.

He talked about his childhood and the resistance efforts he aided, and when it seemed he would never stop talking, he leaned his head into the curve of her shoulder, caressed her arms, and said, “The French will kill me if they find me. I don’t want to die a virgin. Will you help?” She looked at his finely-boned face, his eager, green eyes, fresh, like the brother she’d left behind in France, like a half-ripe apple. He wore the fuzz of a first beard.

“I’m a whore,” she stated. “Save yourself.”

“I don’t care.”

“I’m ten years older.”

“I think you’re very pretty,” he said.

He waited so patiently then, she finally reached in his pants and resolved it, taking him as a boy ought to be taken, slowly and with care. Still, boy or not, he was a man through his lower

parts, and he was right: If the French found him, they would kill him and steal his stores. He would not have a wedding.

She moved with his thrusts, thinking: If the troops see this cabin, we'll both be dead—so made love to him as if he were someone she liked, maybe loved, in another life.

Afterwards, he said, "Stay with me."

"No."

"Why not? We can make a life together."

"You're just a boy," she said. "You'll find better opportunities."

"I may not. Tell me your name—I won't ask again."

"Margot Plein. I'm French," she tried again, weary he could not understand. Just a boy, went through her head, a sapling, a stem. She said, "Your countrymen will never accept me. Let's get through this, and see what we can do."

"I don't care if you're French. It doesn't bother me." He pulled her dress back over her head and laced the bodice. As he did, his tenderness was holy, as if he saw her as his discovery, his treasure unearthed from the cold wind; his eyes were on fire. "I learned French," he said. "So, you can learn Russian. We can say you were forced by those dogs. No one will hold nationality against you."

"No."

"Think on it," he said. "But either way, you'll need several nights to be well enough to travel." She fingered her cheek, feeling his tight, even stitches. "Your injury is healing better than I thought," he said. "It's not nearly as badly as it might--well, the scar will be small."

"I got this at the camp," she said, picturing Fortinot's belly as a vast white hill on the landscape, his belly-button a bullet hole that accidentally discharged, "and so I left." She said

nothing more, and that night, he clung to her, but she could not relax. She dreamt of swinging by her neck in a meaty fist, and found herself clinging to the boy, trembling, but not from the cold. How nice it was to tremble without shivering. Had it been so long? She'd lost all conception of time. An hour could be a year.

As morning approached, she touched the fine hair on his arms and at the center of his chest. He coughed, and she realized, he was awake, watching her.

His eyes looked bruised. They made love again in the silence. At dawn, the dogs barked, and Dimitri called them, tying their snouts with hemp. Almost as soon as he'd yanked them into the cabin, the noise of creaking wagon wheels followed. "They're coming," she said.

Dousing the fire, he crammed her into the pantry, dragging the dogs with them. He shut the door as the dogs whimpered and turned in the small space, but he patted their heads as if to show he meant no harm, whispering, "Shhh," and saying, with a gentle voice, "my father would not let you die, and neither will I."

Margot could not explain the tenderness she felt watching him with those beasts, but alarm instantly replaced her musings. The army sounded closer every minute, and the grunts of laboring men cleaved the air as she shivered in the absence of heat from the hearth. She thought of her mother, shivering as she'd nursed her young sister, on the day she had left to join the army as a whore. At least, the pantry quarters were so close that the warmth of his body made it bearable, and the dogs were quiet, happy to be near the boy. "Thank you," Dimitri whispered as the tromp of boots continued, "thank you for being here, even this short while."

Her legs felt encircled by fur. Her hands felt warm, encircled by his. Tied snouts pointed upwards, the dogs begged for pats, wet noses glancing her wrists, and for a moment, she did not want to leave the dark, warm womb of the cabinet.

“Should we go out now?” he asked when the noise abated.

“Another few minutes.”

He hugged her tighter, and the dogs whimpered. She thought briefly of staying, of making a family with him, of being cherished, but longed for France so deeply her breath clotted in her throat, and she wished his French were less guttural. She wished he were not a boy, or that she had never made this trip. She, the eldest of three, could have earned food in other ways.

He stepped out, and she dressed fully, saying, “I’ll check that they're gone. You stay and hide.”

“And if they aren't?”

“I’ll tell them I got lost.” She laced her boots.

“Will you reveal me?” His face lost all control, twitched as his shoulders slumped. She touched his skin, his soft beard, the dark half-moons beneath his eyes, and gave him a long kiss, then gathered her coat and braced herself. Smaller gloves, a gift, a pair of his mother's, warmed her fingers. “No,” she said. "I won’t tell them about you."

He wore the ones she’d stolen from Fortinot. “But, you will be back?”

“No. This is goodbye.”

He hovered in the doorway and finally said, “I'll go. We'll take the sled and the dogs. I'll gather provisions, then help you travel to France, or, better yet, you could stay until spring, and we'll make the trip with less danger. That would be more prudent.”

Watching the snow, a gentle drift that had not yet covered the tracks of the army, she knew he was right. If alone, she might again find herself blanketed by a storm, and she suddenly knew that she wanted to find her way home, at all costs, so said, “Don’t expect me to love you.”

“Fine,” he said, hitching the dogs, and they followed the tracks in reverse, stopping at rattles in the trees and progressing through the woods.

He gaped when they reached the encampment. The French had left several dying soldiers in the snow, arranged by the fires. He said, “They don’t even bury them; how grotesque,” whistling under his breath and poking a carcass with his walking stick. She noticed, for the first time, a limp in his left leg. It was so slight it did not surprise her that she had missed it.

“They have no energy to do so,” she replied.

He went to scavenge weapons from the dying, noting the left artillery with awe. She walked deeper in until he'd fallen away, and she went a good mile before she commented, to no one, “There, was Napoleon’s tent. There was the patch of snow he spoke to. There—“ she started but did not finish, was the place of the animal who cut me.

At first, she thought the body was a hallucination of her willing mind—but as she neared Fortinot's tent, he laid there, sprawled in the snow, light flakes covering his body, blood staining his chemise. His blue coat hung open, flecked with snow, an old map deep in his pocket. He had been stabbed. Blood no longer spilled from his wounds, but she wondered who had taken his life. She didn’t really care; even anonymous death was fitting.

She hurtled herself toward him, snow flying on either side of her boots and crunching beneath her feet, hurrying as if to greet a long-lost friend, but leaping to kick him sharply in the side. At the sound of a rib cracking, Fortinot's brown eyes popped open.

She stood over his chest. Looking closer, she noted the stabs were glancing, but his hands had been tied above his head. He blinked as she stepped back. Through blue lips, quaking features, and almost frozen limbs, he tried to speak. Frost hung from his lashes. The embers of a fire pit glowed beside him.

“Fortinot,” she said in rapid French. “They seem to have done you in.” She could not be sure, but his lips seemed to tighten. His eyes rolled. “You have your map, your dagger," she said, "but they took your medals and your musket. That must plague you.”

She felt pleasure to say this, but when he glared, she whipped his dagger from his belt, saying, “They forgot this though. How foolish.” Her breath frosted the air, and she waved her gloved hands before his eyes, asking, "Did I crack the Grand Marshal’s rib with my foot? What a pity."

His side lurched, but he could not lift his arms. “Your blood is cold,” she said. “No one will save you. Soon, your body will be frozen as that horse, but not now. Now, you live.” She wanted to stab him repeatedly, pummeling his body from spite, but handled his dagger, tossing it from hand to hand, and read the inscription she'd heard so many times: To Have is to Conquer. *I own you, he’d said.*

How she hated him. His eyes ceased to focus on her lips and settled on her cheek. A ghost of a smile played on his features. "I could cut you from groin to throat," she said. "And am happy to do so."

“Margot,” Dimitri said, stepping up beside her, “We should go. What if they double-back?”

“No.”

“It’s too cold to stay, and a storm is coming. The tracks might disappear.”

“I won't leave,” she said, unwilling to look away from Fortinot, “until he’s dead.”

Dimitri stared at her and said, “I’ll check on the dogs,” but she wondered if she appeared a witch to him then, a malevolent ghost, until Fortinot drew her back to him with a groan and spoke, though his words were muddled.

“Quoi?” she asked. “*Encore un fois, Marshal*.”

“*Putain!*” Fortinot said, forcing the words out. “Scarred bitch.”

She took his dagger and sliced his chin, shouting hysterically, “Who killed you? Was it Napoleon?” She continued to cut at his cheeks. “Was he bent on destroying the Marshal who’d served him so long but never succeeded to please him? Did he want to destroy the insane Marshal who let his rage fall only on women, who he never wrote into his books? You're no Murat." She spit in his blood then, and fueled by the glimmer she’d caused, went on. "He saw something brilliant in you, yes, but discovered he was wrong; you're better off dead in the snow, and he knew it—left to die without honor, a sad end to your illustrious career.”

She slapped him to keep him focused, but he said nothing as she watched his blood congeal, so she crouched on the snow beside him until his eyes focused on something beyond her head. She did not shut them though his lashes were thick with snow. They could stare at a heavens where he would not go.

She pulled off her gloves and touched his blood with her fingers, smearing it in circles, but did not cease to check his glance in case it altered. When Dimitri came to collect her, she was lost in a reverie of warm French fields, and had begun to dip her hands in the snowdrift like soil, her mind entrenched in the Marshal’s brown eyes. Dimitri stopped her and lured her from the body. It took him some time to draw her away, but she did not cry. She laughed, a high hysterical laugh and sang, "*Na-pol-eon, avec cinq cent soldats, Nap-ol-eon, avec cinq cent soldats...*"

Dimitri called the dogs. In her periphery, she watched them pant and run. When she looked at her hands, her fingerprints held rusty maps. Sepia had dried into their crevices, and her way home was written in elegant, circular transcripts, smelling of salt, ratified by blood. “So, I return, father,” she said. “I’ll be there soon.”

Dimitri put her fingers in the dogs' warm fur and held them close to the canines, rubbing and prodding until they burned, then put her gloves back on and placed her in the sled. "In the spring," he said. "You'll see a different side of Russia. You'll like it then."

She did not reply. She thought of the army returning home, but was lost in the memory of Marseille, Paris, Lyons, a long-ago place where the sun warmed her face and her mother churned butter in a cabin as they spoke of fleur de lis—where her father came home after toppling a forest, smelling of sap and wind.

The same type of cabin soon loomed before her, looking almost familiar, except it was covered with pale, white dust, and the dust kept falling, blown into unending chaos while a boy who looked like Jean carried her inside. Her parents were nowhere. The boy whispered in Russian, "Come in," and she followed, stumbling with him into gentler times as if to find them in his arms, as if to be somewhere, anywhere, other than the breast of the growing storm, innocuous like the girl she once was again, precious, without qualms.

The Talk Adults Talk

If she isn't lying to me again, her apartment has been cleansed of the half-empty liquor bottles and couch junkies. All of her clothes are in neat stacks on the antique armoire, like they were before her drug use, and her drugstore perfumes are lined at the sink. This is the way her apartment was when she first moved in: immaculate.

She called me this morning, voice bright, tapping out an urgent message. "Daddy, I have to see you."

"Elaine? Why? What, baby? What's wrong? Where are you?"

"I have an announcement!" she said. I was afraid to ask. I had visions of a Vegas wedding, the invisible jaws of HIV, or a proposed hitchhiking trip through East LA. "I have finally cleaned up," she said—then told me, with a twenty-four-year-old's fragile pride, what she'd been doing. "Lets have dinner. Same time. Same place. Gotta go now, Daddy. Gotta get ready for the interviews."

Years ago, I helped her heft the heavy furniture up that staircase, to the second floor, where bay-windows revealed a wide expanse of the lesser city and a tiny sliver of bay. The apartment was fine, but she lived in the flight path, so the rent was cheaper. A roar of airplanes constantly thundered overhead.

If Elaine isn't lying, she has bathed within the last twenty-four hours, has inventoried her life and watered her plants, those dying ferns and cacti on the window ledge. Also, she has lined up interviews. Her kitchen has real food, not just condiments and the occasional rotting take-out. I will know when I see her this evening. We'll meet at the restaurant, where we always celebrate her renewed sobriety—three times in the last five years.

It’s Sunday. On Sunday, I spend my mornings reading the paper, smoking too many cigarettes and sipping coffee as I go through bills. On Sunday afternoons, I trek down to the used bookstores and, in the evenings, treat myself to a fabulous, solitary dinner. Her call puts my pattern on pause. I find myself staring at the table, watching the smoke undulate from a butt in the ashtray, and thinking.

I am afraid, I drank through her childhood, we lived in a three-bedroom apartment, and her mother was a cold woman. Elaine was our only child. We did not have central heating, or vacation in the Bahamas. We had bologna, a crippled dog named Seth, and occasionally, a warm family dinner where none of us spoke.

Elaine was always observant. I remember one day, after the horrible fight that sent her mother packing, after leaving work early, after everything that mattered to me was lost or set adrift—I had collapsed on the living room floor and my feet hung out from under a blanket. I have horrible feet.

She noticed them sticking out, bluish and hairy—clodhopper feet. She brought me a blanket from her room and draped it over them. She was ten at the time. I looked up at her and saw a perfect human being. I didn’t stop drinking, but I remembered that small kindness and the pleasure on her face when I leaned up, out of my stupor, to thank her before passing out. When she was fifteen, she ran away.

Not long after, I found myself in detox and worked my way through it, like a slow ride through a car wash. My break with the liquor was slow. I often revisit those times. If I had only… If I had not… There are certain things an adult must not do. Examining an irretrievable past is one of them. I still imagine waking up one day to find that my life is thrillingly different.

The empty space of my bed is filled with someone warm and wonderful. I am not an accountant. I am a political pundit writer, or a surgeon or a businessman—someone with power. My daughter is away at a private school, or a flight academy, or a cheery yellow house with a husband that knows her birthday and her age.

But she is not. Now, she learns to type at an evening class and stay inside the box of regular employment, whereas before, she flaunted her beautiful, thin-teen's body to a bunch of older men who would never love her. I do not know if she prostituted herself. It's possible.

We began speaking again six years ago, five years after she'd vanished, omitting the dialogues that might have transpired years earlier and going right for the talk adults talk. There was no, "Daddy, today I learned how to paint my picture." There was only, "Daddy, today I'm in jail and you'll have to bail me out. I don't have anyone else's number."

I made the trip to the jail, after years of no contact, to discover her. She twitched beside me. I said, "Don't miss your court date!"

"I won't," she replied, running off. I watched her maneuver through traffic, sifting through cars speeding across the main drag, like a deer on spindly legs. She had been arrested for robbery. There would be many lies and half-truths in the coming years.

If she is not lying, today, she has finally made progress. I remember a conversation two years ago, over the phone, where she said: "I am definitely cleaning up my act. I've got a good job and I don't need anything. You don't have to keep coming by, Daddy. Everything's fine here!" I imagined her reformed, with her old, straight-arrow friends beside her, a happy glow on her face. I imagined her living like her mother always wanted her to, clean and savvy with a million social appointments.

I had believed her, and to surprise her, brought a bunch of Chinese take-out and a bouquet of Gerber daisies. I found her naked in her apartment, passed out, fresh track-marks on her arms, and a sleeping guy, passed out beside her. She had sold every appliance I had bought her.

Her body was beautiful, if not emaciated. She always had a delicate look about her. I stared. I had never seen her pubic hair before and was rather surprised to note it. In a father's mind, a daughter never grows pubic hair—just stays in that innocent zone of daughter-land forever.

I stared at her xylophone ribs. She had her mother's white, Irish skin. Her lips fell open and I watched her breathe, in and out, in and out. She was naked and beautiful on the couch I had given her on her twenty-first birthday. Cigarette burns had devastated the couch. Her hair was dyed platinum. Naturally it was reddish-brown. I did not wake her. I drove to the nearest bridge and looked into the San Francisco Bay. Of course, the railing had been safeguarded against jumps. Later that evening, I called her mother.

"Lis, we need to talk."

"Who is this?"

"Daniel."

"Oh. What did you want to talk about today, Daniel?" She sounded chilly, as she always did when I called to interrupt her new, happy life.

"Elaine."

"What about Elaine?"

"She's doing drugs again."

"Daniel, I tried. I tried with her so many times. The last time she was here she stole a bunch of Eugene's silverware. I've had it with her. Sorry."

"What do you mean, sorry? —She's your damn daughter."

"She's more a part of you than she ever was of me."

"Well, it's a fine time to be mentioning that. I seem to recall that you were the one who walked out. You were the one—"

Lis's line cut me off. Dial tone. There was nothing more. I imagined her applying that waxy lipstick in a full vanity mirror, magnifying her pores to assert her need for the latest cosmetic miracle—plastic kewpie doll. I imagined our daughter, cold as death, naked on a couch I had given her.

Today, in preparation, I tuck a dress shirt over my ever-expanding middle. I put on some Aspen cologne. I brush back my hair, graying at the temples. I say a prayer to the anonymous god who has guided me. I scratch my chest. If that god has a face, Elaine will meet me at the restaurant at the corner of 4th and Elm. She will be wearing her greeting smile. She will have her arms open to embrace me because I am not perfect, but I am not "sorry" like her mother.

I get in my Volkswagen, flower-power, bug. The engine sputters. I arrive at the restaurant at exactly six p.m. She is not there.

I wait. All of my life feels like this same wait—stretched out over years and thickened at times like these to a dull throbbing of my head. My feet are cold. The restaurant has been air conditioned to an arctic temperature.

I feel ridiculous seated there, waiting with an expectant, pregnant look for a woman who is my daughter to saunter through the door. I watch many women who are not she, because, in one respect or another, they look like her. Some are made up. Some are too short, or too fat.

Some have a man on their arms, and laugh, softly, at an intimate joke. They sigh in womanly ways.

The door whooshes open and shut, bells tinkling. The restaurant heats up from the crush of bodies, rapidly filling the tables. I look up, and Elaine appears as if out of nowhere, like she always has. She has gained some weight, not a lot, enough to make her look human, and her hair is now purple, almost burgundy-auburn. She wears no cosmetics.

"Hi, Daddy," she says. She wears a red, short-sleeve dress with white dots. I can see her arms plainly. The tracks now appear to be tiny, dark freckles. "How's Seth?"

"On his last legs. How else? He's been that way for years." I notice her pupils are normal.

"You look like shit," she says, glancing at the menu.

I want to tell her that it has been a long day, that a long day of hope is longer than the longest day of reality. I want to tell her, as she sits there, looking healthier than normal, that my feet are getting warmer and warmer. I want to tell her all kinds of things, including how I hate her mother, but instead— I wait to hear her say more, then say, "Did you get a job today?"

She says, "Yes." She leans over and hugs my old body. Her embrace is a warm blanket in the coldness of my stooped posture. I hug her. I tighten my grip, as if loosening my hold will allow her to fly away. "I missed you," she says, through crushed lungs. "But, Daddy? Daddy, you have to let go sometime. You're choking the air out of me."

From another table, I am sure we look like some old guy and his too young girlfriend—or some old guy and his beautiful, perfect daughter—or maybe, just some old guy who is sappily hugging a young girl in a delicate red dress like there will be no end to his greeting because it has been such a long time since he's seen her and she was gone to some nowhere-land on the far end of the continent, thought never to return.

I release her and she is still there, across from me, casually reading the menu, as if she has always come back to this moment, to me, battling through her life to meet me in mine. We continue to talk, omitting the hungry insecurities and the mention of what has come before. We wear the truth of our lives like scars on our different, but similar faces—scars that only we can see, stretching from the temple all the way around the head.

I don't care. I am the older man hugging the young girl. She is the young girl, unaware of what this means.

"You need a girlfriend, Dad," she says. "You'd get out more."

"I've got you," I say. "What more do I need? You ashamed to be seen with your old man? I must not be handsome enough."

"Whatever," she says. "I just think you've been lonely lately. I mean, I'm fun and all—but…"

"You're my little girl," I say. "That's enough."

We are talking the talk adults talk: empty and frivolous at times. Beneath the guarded armor of our faces, a whole other conversation begins. Elaine smiles, twirling a striped straw between her fingers. Our waitress arrives, outside pedestrians pull their coats tighter to shield them from the stinging wind, and I exhale.

A & P, Come Again

Languid like the summer heat, Annalise, Mitzi, and Lacy strolled past the sand of the beach and into the parking lot. They'd already decided Anna was to drive because it was Anna's mother's car, so she took the proffered keys from Lacy's fat fingers and unlocked the Lexus, hopping from foot to foot on the simmering cement.

Outwardly she smiled, but inwardly cringed, remembering her mother's careless remark that morning: "You'll never drive my car, Anna, because you'd crash. When you turn sixteen, I'll buy something more suitable. A tank, maybe? Clumsy, girl."

She had looked at Laurence then, her mother's young boyfriend, who stared away and sighed, so she felt humiliated, calling to Mitzi and whispering, "Catch me if I stumble; I feel weak."

But that was hours ago. Now, she, Mitzi, and Lacy would steal her mother's car, and Anna laughed a cold, dry laugh, as Lacy, Lizbeth Dryden's frequent key-holder, said, "Don't you get me in trouble, Annalise Dryden. I'll tell her this was your idea if she asks."

"Oh, shut up," Annalise said, the tender pads of her toes crisping with each step on the torrid ground. Already, the bottoms of her feet were black with the asphalt, and in the heat of the afternoon, even the leather interior looked fit to bake a potato. "Shit! Shee-it," Annalise said, taking a in lungful of Sahara air. "My feet are toasting!"

"We should have brought our flip-flops," Mitzi said, but getting in the car, Anna stretched her feet on the driver's carpet, cool after the asphalt, and told Mitzi to do the same. "It's cooler in here."

Her mind zipped ahead. If only they could get to that little store without trouble-—and what was that place, the A & P? Some suburby shack with insular people popping in and out, heads down, faces plump, in fashions too ridiculous for words? The phrase “the wrong side of the tracks” popped into her head, but just as quickly, she submerged it, cranking open her window and draping her arm out.

Half a second later, she yanked it back, squealing, “Ouch! Oh damn! That thing just burned my arm!” Lacy and Mitzi gaped as she held up her arm to show them, a hot pink diagonal from the door’s metal frame seared across her skin, and “It’s true,” Mitzi said, sighing, “it’s steamy here and not getting any cooler.”

Mitzi looked calm and collected, like she always did, with her turquoise, cat-eye sunglasses dipping half-way over her sultry eyes, wearing her creamy two-piece, and displaying that half-pretty poise. She let her expansive look take in the Thursday afternoon lot, and, “Hot, hot, hot,” she said then, looking at Anna. “So, let’s hurry.”

“Ditto,” Lacy said, holding her springy hair off her shoulders with a polish-specked hand. Trying for cool, she looked more unhinged.

Annalise rolled her eyes, said, “Shut up, Lacy. If I wanted your opinion, I’d ask,” but Lacy just gave Anna that dumb-cow look she had so mastered, the one that came right before pitiful tears, so Anna felt a tinge of guilt, but Lacy promptly ruined the nascent guilt by shaking her head and saying, “You’re the one who thought of leaving our stuff on the beach, Annalise. It was your idea.”

“Be quiet, you fat brick,” Mitzi replied, saving Anna the trouble. The two then exchanged a simultaneous-best-friend thought: they should have left Lacy on the beach. The trouble was, the alternatives to taking her were not compelling, and their “enemies close” philosophy had

served them well over the last five summers with the girl, and besides, Lacy would never have dispelled Lizbeth Dryden's fears, only enflamed them to a shore-wide search if left alone, which they hoped to avoid.

Still, just thinking about Lacy's blabbing made Anna feel constipated, as if she didn't have enough trouble already, and a wallop of pain/fear/gas hit her stomach when she reflected on how the second secret Lacy was about to learn could prove equally damaging.

Lacy would need her lips stitched shut if she found out, kind of like what they did for corpses, to stay quiet. Normally, it had been Annalise, who kept Lacy tolerable, but under the weather as she was, Mitzi had picked up her slack this morning, so Annalise mouthed thank you to her best friend, who winked in reply and touched her arm.

"You two are touchy feely today," Lacy said, leaning up from the backseat. Her breath stank like tuna, and she said, "You know, this is illegal what we're doing. But I think we should just relax. Hey girls, what would Lisbeth think if she saw us here now? Three girls having a good time!?" Lacy opened her mouth wider to launch another stream of idiotic banter, but—oh Lisbeth, oh her mother, Anna thought, screening out the babble, her mother was the queen of Antarctica, mountain-peak-snow-hag extraordinaire, and how Lizbeth would lay on thick the icy talk of personal responsibility if she knew any of this...

She would apply the subtle shaming she was famous for, having perfected it for ten long years on Anna's father, and no wonder he took off and no wonder Anna had this problem now, because Lisbeth Dryden, A.K.A. Evil, Unrelenting Mother, would be fuming to the tips of her cool turquoise nails if she knew anything about what Anna'd done the last two months, and would be fuming like a chimney if she had any inking her own posh keys had just slid into the Lexus starter, keychains chiming, so that Ms.Annalise Dryden, her fourteen year old, sex-fiend

deviant of the Boston Drydens, could drive out of the tiny lot without even her permit. “So I think we should get ice cream after this,” Lacy said. “Maybe get a bite to eat. What do you girls think?”

Driving out of the lot, despite her fear, this thought gave Annalise a jolt of amusement, so she stared at the dials and knobs on the dash then started the car. When the engine purred to life, for a blissful second, it drowned out the noise of Lacy’s continuous voice, so Anna decided she liked the view from the driver’s seat. The power. Mitzi, because she was the closer friend, sat close to Anna on the passenger side, but Lacy had taken the backseat.

Annalise stared at Mitzi then, adoring her all the more because she was not Lacy, and Lacy was forever getting things wrong, basic things like talking on and on when someone was stressed and casting blame after a deed was done, and trying to push her nose into other people’s confidences.

Mitzi had tact, but Lacy was the girl who shouted, “Hey! You got a tampon?” in a crowded restroom (as if the other person was perfectly happy to have their menstruation announced). Yes, Lacy was a fact-stealing, motherly-suck-up, who should either leave them alone or die a miserable death, but they were never that lucky, which Anna and Mitz had often discussed.

In a way, Annalise pitied her intolerable cousin, but at the same time, Lacy’s green, two-piece looked horrible, made for a girl thirty pounds smaller, so Anna felt embarrassed, again, to be seen with her and glad for her own looks, coupled with Mitzi’s semi-cool pizzazz, which protected them from unfavorable associations.

Still, as she drove, she stared at Lacy’s dumb face—-Lacy, who, even then twisted her nappified hair around her index finger, sucking it like a baby--and how gross, Anna thought then,

so said without thinking, “Knock it off, Lacy, would you? That’s disgusting,” then riveted her attention to the light in front of her.

“What am I doing now?” Lacy asked, her tone whining and high like the build-up of emergency sirens.

“Just be quiet,” Anna snapped, “I’m driving.” She had a brief fantasy of the car wrapped around a tree, but “What am I doing now?” Lacy bleated, insistently louder this time.

“Breathing,” said Mitzi. “So cut it out, loser.”

Mitzi and Anna fell into giggles and clutched their sides with hilarity, but Lacy turned red, furious in the backseat, shouting, “That’s not funny! That’s mean. You two are mean.”

“I’m sorry, Lace,” Anna said without meaning it, but then she forgot about Lacy and asked, “Can you believe it? I’m driving my mom’s car! We are out in my mom’s car!” She pounded the dash, blaring the radio locked on the oldies station as Mitzi shouted, “You’re right, Anna! This is too cool,” but Lacy just stared out the window, planning a late and ineffectual comeback that would invariably not affect them.

And so what? Annalise thought. So frigging what? She applied pressure to the gas and cruised through several green lights. Overall, this trip had started well, and how easily everything had fallen into place—one second she tanned on the beach in coconut oil, and the next drove down the road in her mother’s car while her mother and Asshole Laurence played in the waves (or, on second thought, who knew what they did in the waves—but it didn’t bear speculating), and Laurence, as Annalise well knew, should drown in his own handsome vomit, ending his life with the sludge he came up with.

Still, even that would be too good because at this moment, there were few people she hated more. Her only consolation was that that her mother had explained it all to her before

leaving for a party one afternoon when Lisbeth Dryden had said, in a rare outburst of maternal affection, “Honey, Laurence is a fling. Your father was the one I wanted, but he left, you understand? And Laurence hasn’t a dime, so you think I’d marry him? It a matter of why buy the cow, and so on... You understand don’t you, babe? Soon it’ll be just us, you’ll see, so let me have a little fun, won’t you? He is, you understand,” Lizbeth Dryden had said, with her eyebrow tweezers pointed at Anna’s chest, “beneath us. Beneath you. Beneath me, for that matter, and nothing.”

Then, Lisbeth Dryden had laughed, spiritually bankrupt as Anna’s father used to say, and, often, reflecting on her mother’s cruelty, Annalise wondered if she would be the same. Besides, “The rich don’t need God,” her mother always said. “Except those Kennedies. They need all the help they can get.”

Sometimes, Anna hated her mother so much, she found it impossible love her at all. In the car, she stretched her arms above her head then replaced them on the wheel, hoping to find the store quickly. She felt calmer when Frank Sinatra came through the speakers, so turned up the radio and whispered to Mitz, “Do you think everything will be okay?”

Mitzi’s sunburn, a red swath under her eyes, looked funny when she squinted, but Mitz said in her smooth, no-trouble voice, “It’ll be fine.”

“What?” Lacy boomed from between them. “What’ll be fine?”

“Mind your own business,” they said at once, then Mitzi flicked Lacy’s nose, and Annalise kept driving.

The silence felt heavy as she pulled to the turning lane. She thought of the day in that pool two months ago, the taste of the chlorine, and way he had forgotten her name. She wanted to kill him for causing her this worry, for the days boxed off with the simple N.P. on her

calendar, but “Do you think he noticed me?” Mitzi asked distractingly, referring to the lifeguard on duty at the beach when they left.

"What?" Anna asked.

”The lifeguard.” Mitzi's intense look absorbed the side of Annalise’s face, but Anna did not answer until Mitzi repeated, “Hey, Anna, did he?” to which she said only, “I don’t know. I really don’t know.”

“Duh,” said Lacy, piping up. “Totally!” and her outburst, in this instance, was welcome. Mitzi looked at Anna, then redirected her stare at Lacy.

“I know he noticed me, but do you think he really noticed me?”

“Yeah, um, I think so," Lacy said, uncertain since Mitzi’s laser eyes had pinned her.

Anna stared at the road sign and yanked her mother’s sunglasses from the rearview. “Look," she said loudly. "Do these make me look older?” A state trooper had rolled up beside them on the right, and she felt a pulse of fear as she saw his grim face, then asked the girls in a whisper, “Are you guys wearing seatbelts?”

“No,” said Mitzi. "I forgot."

“No," said Lacy, "didn’t even think of it,” and her hand snaked down to grab the belt, but “Stop, you idiot!” Mitzi said then. “You’ll make him notice us!”

"He's cute," Lacy said. "I hope so."

”Cute or not, he wouldn’t go for you,” Mitzi said. She glanced toward Annalise then back to Lacy. The light took forever to change, but finally the trooper sped ahead and Mitzi tapped Anna’s thigh softly, saying, “Go, babe. Anna. Green light.” Then Mitzi adjusted the straps of her bikini top and said, “We need to relax. We got through that, didn’t we? We’ll get through everything else,” but worry was plain on her face, and this didn’t help because Mitzi never

worried. She had not worried when Anna had totaled Mitzi's mother's car, nor when Anna dyed her hair orange right before the Carlton Club dance, nor in any variety of nerve-wracking situations, but now, Mitzi's mouth made a grim line which sent a legion of butterflies jittering down to mambo in Anna's stomach-- and that was worrisome.

Then Lacy blurted, “Why didn’t you tell us we should put on our seatbelts when we first got in? I would have done it if you told me too!”

“Why don’t you grow a brain and come back?” Mitzi said, and, “Hey Lace, did you know your village idiot is missing?”

“I don’t have to be here,” Lacy said. “I could be back at the beach relaxing. You two told me you wanted me to come, and then you act mean. Well, I don’t have to take it.”

“Good, get on a bus.”

“I really don’t have to deal with this,” Lacy whined again.

“What are you going to do about it, Petula Pig?” Mitzi asked. “Walk off? Go ahead, walk back to the beach. You could use the exercise. Am I right, Anna?”

Annalise turned pale and felt her stomach flip-flop but commandeered all skills of haughty disregard to say, “Exactly, Mitz.”

“Why’d you even ask me here if you didn’t want me to come?” Lacy asked. “And why all your secret talk today. I don’t even know why everyone’s so nervy. I thought we were here for chips and soda.”

“Shows what you know,” Mitzi said, but “Please don’t fight,” Anna murmured then, pulling into the lot of the A & P and examining a blackhead in the rearview before saying sharply, “We’re here. Do we know what to do? Let’s review the plan.”

She owed it to them to keep herself together, she thought, so stared at herself again in the mirror, looking into her own eyes and questioning her decisions. At least, they'd parked, and she hadn't hit anyone. That was good.

“Lacy can’t speak. Rule one,” Mitzi said.

“Agreed.” Annalise said by rote, but thought only of herself. All day, she’d been fighting this drowning sensation, and now it claimed her, a rude, thought stealing void where everything came together and fell apart, so as Mitzi and Lacy duked it out beside her, insults piling up, she heard them argue, but only remotely. What she was listening to was the sound of water splashing against a tile in the pool when a head was under water—like the murmur in a seashell.

She was thinking of another N.P. and tracing back the days until that day, less than a month ago, which involved a man with golden hair exiting her pool, water dripping from his body; he was smiling. He gave her his eyes, and then they talked, just like adults do, while her mother was out at the club sucking down another Amaretto Sour, and Anna remembered him as beautiful then, the man, his body, the tailored joints of his muscles and bones, with his tan complexion and bright emerald shorts--beautiful down to the loose fit of his trunks, which revealed a honey colored-trail of hair beneath his belly.

She had wanted to kiss him there, kiss him then, with a hunger that surprised her, but he’d again looked away from her and sat down on the patio set, drinking his Smirnoffs, so she was angry. How could he talk to her so well, then abruptly turn her off? She walked over and plopped herself in front of him, her chin in her hands, saying, “Hey!”

“What you doin,’ little girl?” he finally replied, glancing up to notice her--and whoever knew that “What you doin’?” would be a prelude to what would happen next.

It became a taunt in her head, then and later, but now, walking up to the store, thinking of it, she felt cold in her pink nubby one-piece, her arms riddled with goosebumps despite the heat of the day. Vaguely, she recalled that Mitzi had already told Lacy what to do, somewhere in the periphery of her awareness, so they all walked in, entering the dim of florescent lighting of the market as she stopped to take a glance around.

People stared at them—-the checkers, the baggers, everyone—so "Walk normal," she told Mitz. "Slow. Slower."

A flush rose to her cheeks, which she tried to ignore, as a housewife in curlers wheeled past, glaring at them. "Put some clothes on," was what the woman said. Then a little boy came up, a paper towel wrapped around his fist, and said, pumping his hand like a puppet, "Hi. My name is Malcolm."

"Oh!" Lacy said, "That's so cute! Look at that little boy!" laughing with her huge way, so Anna examined her cousin again, thinking: Can she know? Can I trust her? She looked at Lacy's fillings, apparent from her open mouth, ten too many from the metric tons of candy Lacy consumed as a child, but did not respond to Lacy or the boy. She watched him travel the aisles, saying the same thing to everyone.

It was dizzying. She looked down and the tiles were spinning, so, "Stay near me, Mitz," she said, clutching her best friend and pausing to stare at the racks, wondering: Where is it? Where is that package in this lousy place?

She was not aware that she'd said this out loud until Lacy said, "What? What are you looking for, Anna? Tell me!"

"We're here for cookies," Mitzi offered then, giving Lacy her saccharin grin. "So go look for them, okay?"

Lacy's face lit up until she realized the joke. She pushed in closer and said, "Why did we come here? Really, Anna? Tell me. I'm your cousin. I won't tell."

Anna didn't respond. The straps of her pinky one-piece had fallen, and she did not push them up. She had just begun to notice that one pimple-faced checker was watching them intensely—no, two—no, three checkers—as if they were shoplifters, so she drew her posture high, imitating her mother's regal walk, and said, "Shut up, Lacy," making her eyes cool.

Still the first checker would not take his eyes off her, so she wanted a wool sweater then, even in the heat, because he kept staring and would not stop. How she hated that! "Haven't you ever seen girls before?" she wanted to shout. "What are you? Some kind of freak?"

The green and cream tiles felt smooth under her feet as Mitzi whispered, "There it is, on aisle three. I see it," and pushed Anna forward.

Lacy had not budged from their sides, but then stated, "I will go look at the cookies, but only because I want to, and I'm sick of you both."

"Good then," said Mitzi, "Go," and dizzily, Annalise wove down the third aisle, taking in the sundries. Certain things amazed her like how they could have so many unrelated things on the same aisle. She'd even forgotten she had company until "What if the strip's pink?" Mitzi whispered. "What will you do then?"

Anna looked down at her flat stomach, then looked up. "It's not going to be."

"But, if it is?"

They regarded Lacy, visible near the cookies aisle, picking up one package then the next—Peanut Fingers, Oreos, Mint Milanos—-and Annalise said, "My mother knows someone. He can fix this, and I—"

Lacy sped up with a vengeance. “Oh my God, you guys. You’ve made me so paranoid. Now I don’t even know what cookies to get, so fine! Fine. I won’t buy any. You want me to get thin, right? If I did that, would you like me more? Probably not—-but anyway, I don’t want to be touchy or anything, but—hey, what’s with the silent treatment? Earth to Anna!”

Lacy had come up so quickly, they stood quietly, not knowing what to say. Shoppers rushed past, and the noise of the registers echoed loudly. “Go look again,” Mitzi said, Lacy didn’t move, and the checker boy kept staring, so Annalise wanted to fade into the tile as an electronic voice, which was attached to the store exit, kept muttering, "Ding Dong. Thank you. Come again," when a customer left.

And where the fuck was she anyway? Anna wondered. Why was she here? Oh. Yes. She returned to the pool in her mind, the way he’d used her, straddling her body on the concrete, tearing her insides, and then she remembered how he said, not long afterwards, “Lisbeth, hmmmm, that was—Oh god, Annalise! It’s y—. What did—you can’t—” and stopped in his tracks as if waking from a short and particular daydream. He walked away from her into her house and made coffee for himself, very strong coffee, as she trailed him like a puppy, then he finalized their conversation with, “This can’t happen again. I am sorry, Anna. You’re a big girl. Let’s just forget it, okay?”

She did not say, "Okay." She didn't say anything, and half an hour later, she heard him call out from the shower, “What is this?” then, “Oh God! Blood? I swear I didn’t—-I couldn't," and "Oh, God. Oh, Jesus,” but he said nothing more to her. Then her mother came home, staggering in the door, laughing to herself: “Hello, darling! Hello!”

“Anna,” Mitzi said, shaking her shoulders. “Hello, Anna! Are we going to stand here all day? Get that thing. We have to get back before she looks for her car.”

“Get what?” Lacy said as Anna realized her hand was out, wavering like a scale dial in a half moon radius of the desired item, but she looked again at the checker boy who was still staring, who was Laurence’s young brother in another life perhaps, and she hated him then for watching her so closely—-and hated Lacy, too, for her big bulgy eyes and free-wheeling tongue.

Her hand dropped toward the shelf and seized. Like a crane, it brought something back to her. Herring snacks? What in the hell was she doing with herring snacks? And Mitzi was beside her then, so why couldn’t Mitzi grab the damn thing, get rid of Lacy, do something? Do. Fucking. Something. What was a best friend for?

“Okay,” Mitzi said then, in her ear, in a dulcet tone, “you’re right,” as if Annalise had just made a stunningly correct decision. “We’ll come back later.” Mitzi looked at Lacy and announced, “This was what we wanted, Dumdum. Herring snacks. Satisfied?”

Annalise walked to the register, and they followed, but the only open checker was the boy whose eyes had glued themselves to her: to her body, to her breasts, to the place where her swimsuit dipped from the looseness of her straps.

She placed her purchase on the counter and said nothing. She thought for half a second that he looked at her sort of sweetly with his wide-gazing eyes—-and what if he was the real kind of boy she should have lost “it” too, she briefly wondered, the right age, the right size, like Laurence but not like him—would he have been more tender? He watched as her fingers reached into the breast area of her suit, pulling out bills she’d hidden there, which were skin temperature, and looking up.

For an instant, Anna thought it was as if this was a private act between them, in a hotel room, far away. She saw lust in his eyes, and longing. For a moment, she felt it too. Not that she would have married him, no, never that, but she would have screwed him at a party. Definitely.

Mitzi's arm felt warm and comforting at her side. She looked away from the boy and the herring snacks, which were almost hers, as a manager came up to the register and stared them down—-some middle-class prig with talk of their beachy outfits. He gave lip-service to store policy, and Annalise wanted to shout, "Leave me alone. Stop it, you bastard!" but she could not. Ribbons of nerves like tight wire had constricted her throat. She blushed, and the boy seemed to empathize.

The manager looked down at her then, like a blazing tower, all prim and tight-assed, so she did the only thing she knew how to do, the only thing she did well, which was imitate her mother. She pulled up her posture, took the snacks regally, and walked to the exit like royalty. Mitzi and Lacy followed.

They heard the checker and his boss argue, but again, only dimly as the electric door whooshed open, "Ding Dong. Thank you. Come Again." The exterior glare then played havoc on her eyes as she heard the checker boy suddenly mutter, "I quit," though she had no idea why. This was the last of his words she could hear, and maybe it had nothing to do with her, maybe he and the manager had been long at odds, struggling over wages or stocking duties, but still, she could pretend.

Maybe, she thought, he was at that young age when a man cared enough to stick up for a girl rather than saying let's just forget this, let's ignore what happened, okay? But, maybe not. Maybe she just wanted this to be true. Walking out to the car, the asphalt again burned her feet, so she and the girls got back in and drove away. Inserting the keys in the ignition, Annalise then

handed the herrings to Lacy and said, “You can eat one now, but please roll down the window. The smell makes me ill,” and her stomach heaved again as Mitzi’s hand clutched hers.

They zoomed into traffic, free, but the nauseating scent filled the car and the nasty smacking of Lacy's lips filled Anna’s ears, regardless of the traffic noise. Still, she vowed to ignore it. They got back to the beach without a single mishap, even lucky enough to get the same parking spot twice.

It would be an invisible trip, Anna thought then, and when they sat on their towels in the sun, all three flipped open magazines as if they’d never left.

Mitzi didn’t talk much, but Lacy kept saying, “Those herring snacks were so good, Annalise. It was so nice of you to give them to me, really. I knew we’d have a good trip this year,” as if she’d just won some dumb sweepstakes.

Anna nodded. Mitzi stared out to the horizon, watching for the return of Lizbeth. Her lifeguard had changed shifts with some new girl, so “Did you eat them all?” Mitzi asked then, referring to the snacks.

“Yes,” said Lacy, "and I threw away the jar."

Mitzi sighed, saying, “Of course, you did. Pig.” She stared at Annalise, then said, “Let’s walk to the water and wash our feet. Mine are dirty. Are yours?”

“Yes,” Anna said. “Lets go.”

“Can I come?” Lacy asked. “I want to come,” but they walked off without her. Still, she pushed in, waddling behind them. When they got to the shore, whitewash breaking on their feet, Lacy spotted the swimmers they sought. “Look,” she said, “they’re coming. We made it just in time.”

Annalise stepped forward. “There they are,” she breathed. “Look.” Laurence was so beautiful in that moment, so golden emerging from the surf, but he and her mother laughed privately, draped over each other like wet towels, both dripping with eyes only for each other.

Salt mist clung to their skin. They did not even see the girls until they were right on top of them, and then they laughed and kissed each other with their whole bodies pressed close.

“How R-rated,” Mitzi said.

“They need a room,” Lacy hissed, but, “N.P.” was all Annalise stated, directly at Laurence, who heard her, who looked at her, briefly, then looked away. He and Lizbeth were almost at the blanket when she heard her mother ask, “What is N.P.? I never do know what those girls are talking about,” and Laurence replied, “I have no idea,” kissing Lizbeth Dryden’s bony, high shoulders and returning his attention to the perfect half-moons of breasts above her suit.

He stared at Anna’s mother as if she had carried the sun into the high atmosphere, and Lacy said, “He is so in love with her, and what a shame for us,” as Anna started running to the water and Mitzi followed. Then Anna stopped, locked down to the shore in her watcher’s position, listening to the waves. They roared and crashed.

Laurence could care less. He did not see her. She was not there for him. She felt another sort of void then as the waves beat against her feet and stole the sand from beneath them, hundreds of grains pulling out from between her toes, which left her stance unsteady. Everything felt unsteady as the water rinsed the asphalt away, scouring it gone, and then she turned to the sparkling sea and dove, but this was not a dive one would make into a pool, clean and neat, with her hands in an arrow above the head and a smooth, steady sluice into clear water, no, not so close to shore; it was the kind of dive that is actually half a run, half a crumple, where the spirit

dives first as the body struggles to enter the water, and then both are walloped by a wall of ever-moving deep-end.

Morally bankrupt, she thought, echoing her father's murmur about her mother, but Anna shivered. She shook. She made a few, strong strokes, and then got out. Her mother and Laurence were nowhere in sight, but then there was Mitzi, handing her a towel. It's weave was rough, smelling of bleach. She looked up again at her mother's blanket and saw that she and Laurence were there, in it, after all, but writhing beneath the fabric like snakes. Watching them, the sand slipped from beneath her toes again, and she fell to the ground in a mass of seaweed until something scratched her face, sand fleas flew over her vision, and the cloudless sky spun counter-clockwise.

The next thing she saw was her mother's face, her mother's hands, with blue flashy nails, slapping her awake. "Oh, baby! I didn't see you looking ill. It must be the heat," Lizbeth Dryden said. "I think we should take her to the hospital."

Anna smiled wanly, both hoping and dreading the surprise, which may come to pass--and hoping it would come to all of them then, or simply fade past her awareness like his body had when he'd washed her blood away in his shower. saying: Oh. Blood. Oh, God. Oh, Jesus. Oh, God.

Laurence carried her to the car, but would soon plop her down in the backseat where she would disappear, like the trip to that dowdy little store had, so instantly, ten seconds after Lacy had eaten the last of those herrings.

Visible only by rear-view, Anna's mother had barely noticed her at all, talking of what they might do the next day and the next, and Laurence did not even look back once, as if his

livelihood depended on keeping his stare forward to the glowing, sunlike radiance of her mother's open palm, beckoning, beckoning...

And this, too, was her legacy, this control, Anna thought, but Mitzi's legs twisted beneath her, making Anna's stomach turn and her skin stick to both of the girls flesh as Lacy opened her mouth but did not speak. Anna heaved, but did not puke. Then Mitzi pieced it together. She said, coolly, calmly, in her plain, all-weather voice, "So, Laurence, I hear you like young girls. How about it? Young girls like Anna? Then you forget them?"

After Mitzi’s announcement, the car was so quiet, a whisper could have been heard as Lizbeth Dryden pulled to the side of the road, turning her head to stare at the tangled girls. She looked confused.

The hospital glared brightly up ahead, and Laurence dropped his eyes between his feet, appeared to be making a prayer, but Lizbeth Dryden had a moment of understanding as she glared at Mitzi, who then glanced down at Anna.

Mitzi stroked her best friend's hand and murmured, "Shh," as Anna began to wail, but as Anna cried, Lizbeth Dryden slowly lifted her gaze to the passenger seat and said to Laurence, "Get out of my car, cabana boy," and so he did, still beautiful, still tanned, but walking away slow like a moving picture of a postcard.

Partly, Anna wanted to get out, to follow him, to call out, “Wait,” but at the same time, she hated him so much she was glad for his comeuppance. Still, it pained her to watch him go as Lizbeth Dryden restarted the car and extended the blue talons of her right hand into the backseat and made a clutching motion for Anna's hand, looking back only once, with the faintest glimmer of moisture in her turquoise eyes. But it was the glare, Anna thought. Lizbeth did not cry. Oh no, her mother never cried, except about her father.

It was a vivid day, going on two p.m., and lighter and brighter than hell, so Lizbeth pulled out her cell phone and had a brief conversation as Annalise looked out her window and Lacy said, “What’s going on here? Why is Laurence leaving? Why won’t anybody tell me what’s going on?”

The trees lining the road flew past. “Shut up, Lacy,” Lizbeth Dryden said, hanging up, then searched the front seat for her missing sunglasses, breathing jaggedly. A few streets down, Laurence receded to a dot on the afternoon sky, and when they next got out, more than an hour and a half later, they were miles away, but not a trace of dismay could be seen on Lizbeth’s face. Not a word had been said in the car.

Then Lizbeth opened the driver's side door with a set face and said, "We don't need a record of this, Annalise. I know someone here. Do you understand? If this is true, we need to take care of it, right now. If it's not, we go back to the beach, but Lacy will wait here, won’t you honey? Someone has to watch the car."

“I want to go,” Lacy said. “The car’s hot.”

Lizbeth rolled her eyes. “Can’t you do something for me, dear? I take you here every summer, Goodman or not, all right? Lord knows your family can’t afford it.” She looked closer at Lacy until Lacy turned to the window. “I knew you would help like this,” Lizbeth said. “Just watch the car, okay?” then “Come on, girls. Let’s go.”

When they were out of earshot, Lizbeth told Anna. “I made you an appointment, Anna. It wouldn’t do for this to go on and on. Did you have a good time with him, baby? Good. Hold your head up. Walk straight. That’s my girl.”

Annalise walked on her trembling legs like a new gazelle, following her mother and matching pace with Mitzi while Lacy fumbled with the keys inside the car and turned on the

radio. Then Lacy increased the volume as “Big Girls Don’t Cry” blared from the tuner, and Anna looked back just once to see Lacy bopping her head and singing wild, fist-mike karaoke. Then Annalise lost glimpse of the outdoors and absorbed the powder-blue walls with faux art, wishing like hell she were back in the car or walking down the boardwalk, maybe even with the young boy from the store, or anyone in fact, even her father, though he was estranged, maybe even with Lacy, who she would be nicer too from now on, if only to get out of this.

Yes, even walking with Lacy would be better than this, but this would not go away until her mother was satisfied, so Anna looked at Mitzi then, standing so coolly beside Lizbeth, and then she looked at Lizbeth, too, having a quiet conversation with a middle-aged man in a white coat.

Her mother's gold rings flew through the still air, explaining, and Annalise felt the urge to run. So, she ran, but why she couldn't exactly explain. It was not tenderness for the possible baby but a larger-scale rejection of her mother. She had to be free of her, and the sky was blue and cloudless, a relief after those faded clean walls.

She gasped for breath as the hot air flooded her lungs, but in a half a moment, she was at the car’s window, beating on it, shouting, “Let me in, Lacy. Let me in right now!”

Lacy stared at her and unlocked the door. “Where were you guys? Did you come to wait with me?”

“Yes, I did," Annalise said. "I’m sure their business will be over soon.” As she said this, Lizbeth Dryden and Mitzi scuttled from the entranceway. She saw her mother was furious, her arms swinging, her feet rushing over the pavement, and Lizbeth spoke to Mitzi as if she were her close friend.

Mitzi kept a flat expression and used the one moment Lizbeth looked away to run her finger over her throat like “You’re dead, Anna.”

Annalise made the sign for blabbering, four fingers closing on her thumb very quickly like lips, then pointed to herself and then Lacy.

“Did I tell you I had sex last month, Lace,” she asked. “With a boy?”

“No way? You did?”

“Yes. And he was Laurence. That's why he got out of the car. That’s why he left.”

“Ohmygod, Anna. Your mother will be mad.”

“She already is,” Anna said. “But I don’t care.” She was thinking of contacting Laurence, holding him again, maybe kissing and touching him—if her mother had let him go.

“Annalise Dryden!” her mother called. “I hope you’re happy with yourself! You need to march back in there right now. Right now! Dr. Killomanjo is waiting.”

"And now Lacy," Anna said in a loud whisper, "my mother wants me to go back in that building to kill the little baby in my womb and send it away because, you see, I'm probably pregnant, but I don't want to go in there."

"Oh god, oh, ohmygod," Lacy said, clenching and releasing her palms.

Lizbeth mirrored her startled look. "So that's the secret you wanted to know at the store, and now you know it all,” Anna said. “Happy?"

Lacy looked ready to pass out, shaking, and her mouth hung open as Lizbeth's face turned red as the swath of sunburn beneath Mitzi's eyes. Lizbeth tapped her foot then walked back into the building, and Mitzi gaped, her perfect teeth neatly exposed in the summer air. "You really pissed her off now, Anna," she said.

"I do what I please," Anna replied.

"I won't tell anyone what you told me," Lacy said then. "I swear. I'll never tell a living soul."

"No," said Anna, "tell everyone, please. And tell my mother you plan on doing that if you really want to help." Then Anna put her arm around Lacy's shoulder because Lacy was blubbering and said one last thing, "Please, Lace. For me. Tell everyone. I mean it," and Lacy said, "I will. You're my cousin, and I love you. I swear," and then the three girl stood together for the first time ever, for the first time that summer but not the last, all three, waiting for Lizbeth Dryden's furious return.

"You know," Mitzi said then, "I could help you lose weight if you want to, Lace. We could even do your hair when we get back."

"And I could show you how to crimp it," Anna said. "We could have a sleepover. You want to?"

"Yes," Lacy said, and then they squinted in the glare, hands to their foreheads, as Lizbeth Dryden marched back. To their surprise, taupe eyeliner smeared a light, muddied path down her cheek, almost hidden beneath a newly applied layer of foundation.

To Lizbeth's right, a little boy and his mother rushed out, and Annalise watched the boy, obviously punished for something, his head down, his bottom lip hanging, as his mother's finger wagged and the sharp tone of her voice flew past. The boy had blue eyes and looked sad, so Anna wanted to raise her fist to make a talking head, say, maybe like a ventriloquist: "Hello, my name is Anna," but she did not. She watched her mother who breezed up, gesturing for her keys, with the white sarong she'd worn flapping around her black suit as her wooden beach clogs slapped the pavement, and "Get in the car, girls," Lizbeth said then, not looking at any of them. "Let's go."

It was then that Anna felt her action was foolish. All actions. Any action. She felt the unbearable shame of letting her family down, shame in her stomach, in her bones, in her blood—a queasy feeling, and she thought, really thought, about bringing a life into this world that half-belonged to Laurence. But there was nothing more to be done. They'd left the clinic with her belly full and her mother hating her.

The road ahead of them was hot and hard—it would be separate from thereafter.

Sweet Scented Boys

I've worked at this house as a maid for twenty years. It is a large house, with many entrances. The people who live here did a background check long ago to employ me; they had the previous maid call my references, and since I had never stolen from anyone or committed any crime on record, I was hired.

They are rich, but they are cheap, which is a function of the rich. Cars worth more than a decade of my service sit in multiple garages. The man has specialty auto insurance. The woman who lives here, Haley, smells of apples, peaches, and high-end lotion.

I collect but do not do her laundry; another service person, once a week, comes to cart it away. I do not grocery shop. That's the assistant to the cook. We're all paid a standard rate, with bonuses at Christmas time, but nothing extravagant. We have time to watch them, but not too much.

The man who lives here is never here; he is handsome, smart, well-meaning, but absent. Often as I scrub the floors or pull back draperies, I see his wife floating about as if she has no plan that requires her hurry because her husband is never home, and her outings with her friends, where she is perfectly scented and coiffed, are her only repetitive pleasure or activity.

When the man and the woman come together, they appear to have met by accident. There is strangeness in their rapport, like that of those who met and fell in love once, never fell out of love, but somehow have forgotten each other's scents and preferences. They speak more of each other than to each other, but their boy, now a man, is spoken to by both.

"College," they tell him. "Not art. Medical school. Make whatever else you do your hobby. You could be a lawyer. Sean, you must go to the DeLancy party. Sean, you should meet Eleanor. You need to marry eventually to produce an heir."

Sean rarely replies in more than half sentences. Their boy excels in evasion, having been trained by masters—but I am invisible to him, too, most of the time, though he half-raises a hand in greeting when I enter his room, kindly old woman, dressed in my uniform, picking up the debris of what he's dropped—magazines, receipts, shopping bags—and replacing fresh flowers near his bedside. The boy is good-looking in his way, but he is the odd combination of two stunningly attractive people whose traits did not blend, so he turned out average, with a large nose, ears that are a bit small, and eyes that are blue, but widely spaced—their own imperfect cupid.

I sweep through their house three times a week. I clean the granite tubs, which are already nearly spotless. Sometimes I clean them and then clean them again though no one has even used them. I dust the porcelain and sculpture collection. I gather, but do not clean, bathroom linen laundry, which can be transported easily in big canvas bags, less than a quarter full each, from the hampers.

I often pretend, as I go through this house, that it is inhabited by warm-blooded people who laugh and jostle each other as these people do not. For twenty years it has seemed cold and old. If there is music, it is classical, pouring from wired-in speakers around the house. This, or the television news, is the only sound through the rooms. The exception is when they host a party.

For these, deejays spins modern music, the family drinks, and the family and guests have a flushed and jovial look that is a by-product of too much caviar and champagne. The boy has

snuck liquor since he was ten. I have watched him grow. I remember him at nine, hiding in the gazebos. Now, he's nineteen. When I find him today, he's nineteen.

He wears a Polo shirt and beige slacks. He's always been as fastidious as his father about clothing if not emotion. The father's arrogant look, he has almost mastered, but his perfect calm façade is too permeable. Once, I saw him engage in an argument with his friend. It was a male friend. "You can't," is what he said. "I won't let you tell my parents." His face turned unpleasant, red and crinkled like an infant's. Tears rolled down his cheeks. His eyes were bloodshot.

"They should know about you," the friend said.

The boy did not reply.

But whatever Sean had done was dealt with secretly. An hour after the confrontation, like his mother's, Sean' face went blank. Up went his perfectly manicured hand as I entered: Hello, servant. But he does know my name. He used it once at twelve. "Therese," he said then, "I'm scared of my father."

"If your grades aren't better soon," I'd heard his father say, in a muted tone, "You'll go off to boarding school, and if you fail there to improve there, I'll cut you off immediately."

The boy's grades went up with a hired tutor, who worked with him night and day. The tutor was a crisp-scented college boy from Oxford. This was a long time ago. One day I saw the boy embrace his tutor with a hug that verged on worship. The next week, the tutor had been fired.

Now, endless in my tours, I pass through a house that smells of peaches and perfume. I clean bidets with bleach and brush blazers for invisible lint. The cloying odor of fresh blooms, like lilies, and hyacinth and peach blossoms, is everywhere. The family, so far in my travels through the house, has been nowhere.

I realize today that I have never smelled the base functions of these people or heard them shout and therefore they are somewhat unreal to me, like automatons wandering through their own castle of synthetic motor oil, tamarind, spun sugar, and illusion. Their things hardly acquire use. The hairbrushes in their rooms scantly gather hair. Air fresheners and conditioners abound in the bathrooms. There is scent, everywhere—house cleaners, fine leather, new car, floral perfume, fresh leaves and spray, tropical fruit, silver polish, poultry or lamb simmering in elegant sauces. Perhaps this is why, as I walk into the boy's room today, carrying the scent of his mother's peaches and freesia to put in the vase by his bed, carrying the scent of strong bleach and glass windows rubbed with Windex—I do not recognize the boy.

I do not recognize him by his normal smell, which is Perry Ellis cologne, fresh air, sport, and pine trees. I do not smell this because he has hung himself, and on the table, three feet away from where he hangs—his feet four inches above ground, toes pointed down, body dangling—there is a note.

His window is open and his face rests in a terrible contortion, but in this house, this house of only beautiful and clean scents, the smell of his released bowels and strong urine is enough to conquer the beauty of all else. It is shocking, a strong and living smell, resultant of death.

It does not belong here. Where is my sweet scented boy, destined to be a lawyer or a doctor? Where is the boy who is not devastatingly handsome, but wears his father's hauteur like a stunning cloak? Gone. In the dead teen I see who's hung himself, I realize a different boy who struggles and suffers intensively.

Yet, he seems so still. I walk closer and give his hip a push to encourage motion, any motion. He swings from the rope. I walk to the table where he has left a note, which I think about

reading, but I don't. I stare at him, Sean, only son of a chilly, floating marriage—dangling in brisk air. He escaped this place by flying, a pendulum barely above ground with a narrow swing. As I regard him, especially his face, he now seems an angry child again, illustrating with fervor his distaste for his entire caged, cultivated existence.

And I feel for him suddenly. Fly away, my fine boy, I think: Fly. Make art. Make love. Love other men. Do what you can. But I cannot read his note. The envelope is sealed, though I suddenly am curious as to what he said.

What I'd guess is this: Dear parents, I am a human being. I longed for what I couldn't have, and, sometimes, I failed to be what you needed, so I'm leaving. Let the smell of your flown-in peaches flutter through this house, Mother… Father, let your new cars continue to arrive. Everything stinks. I leave here since I hate life and I can choose. What will your friends think of me now? Let the real world tell you. You expected too much. Goodbye. Farewell. Your Sean, &c.

Yes, I imagine him writing something like this; yet I know the boy, and can also guess this is not what he'd say. He'd have written something sparse like: I had to do this. Goodbye. Or maybe just: I love you. Goodbye.

He was taught not to verbalize ugly thoughts. I've never heard him yell—or either of them for that matter. For the moment, I stop him from swinging, since the movement now strikes me as macabre. And then, staring at their boy who dangles in the breezy air of this February morning—I, Therese, the maid whose name they knew but almost never use, consider cleaning this boy for his mother before she gets home.

This is my job, isn't it? Making everything smell sweet. And I call the lady, who is shopping. "You must come home," I tell her. "There's something wrong with Sean. I called

911." I don't tell her he has died, for this would cause a flurry of her own drama, right there at the store, and she needs to get back quickly. And then I call the police. Them, I tell he's dead. I look at Sean.

I wonder: Can I pull off his clothes and wash them in that large granite bathtub adjacent to his room before his mother returns—or throw them away and redress him for the police, so she won't be embarrassed, just after dropping the black plastic trash bag at my side to collect his soiled garments and holding my roll of paper towel and Windex for approaching his body to sanitize, depressing a spray lever to squirt clean the cold skin of his legs like dousing a plate of bumpy and strangely shaped glass? Just after that, before I dress him anew, can I also clean his soiled genitals, purify them with mountain-fresh scent—or alter the horrible expression on his face to make him resemble one of theirs, even in death, by using my fingertips on the skin of his cheeks and forcing a limpid smile?

In a strange way, I cannot imagine how Haley will take in the sight of the way he is now.

No matter. I should not touch him. He is a crime scene that doesn't belong here. The police will come. Someone will take him away.

I can touch nothing here but the wood on the tables around him. I feel constrained. Because of this, I dearly want to release him from the rope that cinches his neck, or approach him again and stand on a chair to touch his face, right here, right now, to hug him and kiss his cold, dead face, stroke his curling blond hair—and dream for him that this house was warmer somehow, some time long ago.

No. I won't touch him, but, "You were a good boy," I tell him, as if he can hear me. "I am sorry you needed this." And, thinking about him then, knowing him as someone who

communicated with extreme concision, I realize that this strangulation really is his last statement, more so than his note. In his action alone, there is his everything.

The note is actually surplus information. But, here, very neatly, it remains.

What does it say? I'm tempted to rip it open. I am tempted to steal it and burn it. But I leave his room and shut the door. After I give my report to the police, I leave his house and shut my heart. My shift is over.

Later, many times, I wonder exactly what he wrote to them, the them who made him hate himself so much, but I am just the maid who found him aloft in his room one day, before he was removed, the hired help in his and his parents' world of classical music and near silences, so I will never know.

I do know this: In this home, later, his parents continue to drift past each other, but occasionally, more often than before, they can be seen huddled together in sorrow. I do not get too close. I will not watch.

The peaches continue to arrive. They smell beautiful and rancid. I pick up the couple's things in their relative absentia. I didn't get through to their son. I could never have done so. I did exactly what I was supposed to do, so I continue, and I still have my job.

Searching for Drunk Drivers

It had been a fool's errand to visit her mother's glistening hole of a house.

Charn fought the urge to sleep like she fought the urge to veer off the road. Rain pelted her car with torrents. Tyler, her three year old, sat in the car seat, and it was three a.m.. They'd been driving for hours, or rather, she'd been driving for hours, but preferred to think of herself as accompanied at the wheel.

She turned on the radio and thought of pulling to the emergency lane. Home, in Burbank, was hours away. On Monday, there would be her work, and between the scuffle of down-and-out Methadone users, there would be lunch. Lunch was two hard-boiled eggs, one packet of saltine crackers and a diet container of tasteless soup. Her knee twitched. Her fingers ached. A blue Honda skittered by.

In the dark, the faces in the cars were foreign, almost invisible. This man turned on his overhead light and perused a map. Tyler slept peacefully, impervious. The man was sixty or seventy, stooped in posture, and navigated with obvious difficulty. Charn sped to cruise beside him. With her yellow Child-In-Car triangle, she doubted he'd consider her a threat—unlike the gangster cars driving lightless for drivebys, or drunks veering from lane to lane. The rain was merciless; it tapped a staccato on the roof.

There was construction ahead. She felt the unconscious pull toward the bright lights of the arrows. She'd read somewhere that highway workers were targets in the dark night, that motorists often veered towards the shoulder, pursuing the light.

Her toes ached. She felt the heaviness of her body and the mental pain of Martin's rejection. When he fathered Tyler, he had not anticipated her fulfillment of the pregnancy. Both

of her legs twitched. If I veered off the overpass, she thought, I could die instantly. She thought of the spider-veins taking ownership of her legs, of the bimbo she'd seen him with, and how Martin never found her attractive, though always convenient. What now, Martin, she thought? The storm battered the windows like water slapping a plate.

Mentally, she returned to her mother's house—the silk geraniums, the scrapbooks of Gracie's accomplishments. Charn was uniquely lacking. Never glamorous, she sulked from pictures and didn't succeed at school. She won no competitions and had done nothing, of note, to make anyone love her except exist. She heard her mother say, "What about a permanent? That would give your hair some body. What about a facial?" Neither would work. When had she tried a permanent, her mother said, "The girl must have kinked you too tight."

For her mother, everyone who worked at a salon was "the girl" and everyone who worked at a mechanic shop was "the man." Her mother had great faith in salespeople, and felt uniquely cheated if she returned to a store and “Jilly,” or “Carla,” no longer worked there—as if that person, at $5.75 an hour, should have remembered her and stayed.

At her mother's house, if this feeling were possible, Charn felt plainer than at home. Her mother's pictures of Grace were everywhere. Grace smiling in the park with her Great Dane. Grace with handsome boyfriend #53. Grace looking astonished at a party. Grace with her huge toothy grin, smiling for the camera.

"Being photographed" made Charn look old or unhappy, as if every other time she was much more ebullient, just never caught that way on film. She'd had few boyfriends in college. She was quiet. Morbidly quiet. She recalled one man she’d lived with who was a vegetarian. He ate tofu incessantly. He was thin and gawky.

"Your house smells like butt," Grace said one afternoon, on her annual visit. He was too clean, anal retentive, and every time Charn looked at him afterwards, she had one thought: the house does smell like butt. Soon enough, she left him.

She went into social work. Sometimes, when an addict came in for their drugs, they looked at her like she was an angel, but no counseling, no replacement drug, would get them off the street. Her work was a place of repeat business. Like the Hotel California. Besides, what is one person, she thought? One smear, more or less. One less working horse to plow the trail. This was the heart of the question. If she killed herself, would the world be one iota different?

She considered dropping Tyler off in the exit lane, draping her parka over him, and then causing a crash. What if he might get a better parent? She found herself thinking of Janis Joplin: Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose. How right you are Janis, she decided. Tyler stirred, turned on his side.

His brown hair was mussed from the carseat. "Be still, Tyler," she said. “We're almost home.” It was not Grace's fault everyone loved her. People gravitated towards beauty, wanted to see the pretty doll say "Ma Ma" in that smooth synthetic voice. People wanted beauty--and paid a lot when they saw it start to fade. Charn had never been beautiful.

At the clinic, there were lots of hookers. Their faces were lined with drug-use, too much sun, the hard living of cigarettes between highs. Their skin was pitted and their teeth rotten. Sometimes, she'd imagine them like somebody's kid in pigtails running down a street, the end of a jump-rope dragging on the pavement. But what about the girls who had never been pretty? What about herself? Charn watched the rain smother the windshield.

And what real hope did Tyler have? A deserted, practically fatherless urchin, he’d live on her small salary until he was old enough to decide that crime was easier—then might find his

way into a cell block. He needed glasses, but she couldn't afford them; perhaps he would go blind. Even with insurance, there was always an extra fifty dollars to be paid and then what? Fixing his already bottle-rotted teeth with braces? Other people lived their pretty little lives in the houses five minutes away, while she struggled to bring home bread and milk.

It was useless to keep struggling. She wouldn't win the lottery or have the nerve to knock over an armored car. She'd just keep living and accruing debt, then look around and ten years would be gone, fifteen, twenty. Today was December 12, the perfect day to find a car on the freeway and hit it. The wipers weren't working as the rain got heavier. It will appear an accident, she thought. She'd like to hit a drunk-driver—go schmacko into a car with a drunk driver at the wheel. They didn't stop driving drunk and they killed people, not unhappy people, but shining people, whole families of smiling people singing camp songs.

Charn knew junkies with multiple DUIs. They didn't stop. Why would they? Another DUI? More fines they wouldn't pay? A jail stay? If she hit a drunk driver, she reasoned, she'd save someone's life. She'd be sure to make the wreck clean, knocking both cars to the shoulder rather than meting out a head on collision. She thought about Martin with his face between her legs, Martin sneaking through her window and kissing her at two in the morning—and Martin reaching over the counter as she gave him the methadone and he left in search of real H. On the mornings when he'd stayed all night, he used her shower and crept off into daylight with his dark sunglasses and a dangerous smile.

It was not that she loved him, but that he was all she ever had.

He often played with Tyler; they were sweet to watch. But he would not miss her. Besides, after a swank funeral when people would talk like she was better than she was, her mother would feel a huge earth-shattering guilt. Charn hoped she'd perhaps create a small shrine

in one of the rooms—then Grace would just be the sister of the dead girl. Charn wouldn't have to deal with her cantankerous car or the rent or the bills. All would be perfect.

A car swerved ahead of her. She monitored it. These thoughts are crazy, she thought. If anyone knew, they'd take Tyler away from me and lock me up—but everyone has crazy thoughts. Take the average little old lady. Who knew how close she might come to taking that knitting needle and jabbing herself? Ineffectually, perhaps, but still a possibility. The car swerved again. Charn drove behind it. Rain splattered the windshield as the car accelerated. Dying this way would be easy. It is a delicate line of sanity the living walk, she thought.

She sped up. The car ahead of her teetered from lane to lane. I will wait, she thought, until I know if there's a puddle ahead. Seconds later she reached the spot where he swerved. It was smooth as a silk sheet. She watched his inability to hug the lane. She put her foot to the floor, speeding up. She imagined sparks and the shattering glass, her head through the windshield. Then Tyler opened his eyes. He whimpered. Her foot retracted instinctively, and the thought of his life awed her. She slowed and concentrated. Finally, she was home. She pulled into her parking place and walked to her studio.

Martin's car sat in the back lot. On Monday, there would be her job and, between the scuffle, there would be her lunch hour. Lunch: two hard-boiled eggs, one packet of crackers, and a diet container of tasteless soup. Tyler's weight was heavy and squirming as she hefted him up the staircase. She nuzzled his skin, so new, so young. He put a fist in her hair and pulled it tight, so she exhaustedly extricated his fingers. It's for you, she thought. It's all for you.

"Be still, Tyler," she said. "This time, mama brought you home."

Inventory

While it is complicated to explain why my parents divorced just after my brother and I finished college, there are two main reasons I can think of. The first is that my father's affair with his secretary suddenly became brazenly visible, and the second is that my mother had never truly loved my father due to a previous infatuation with her childhood love Leroy Sentinel.

Sitting in her apartment, a luxury I was not been permitted after she moved here from the Grove Street house, I wander around like a lost adult in an abandoned daycare. It is winter in Boston. My mother is now dead. My mother is now gone.

Do you know what it feels like to lose your mother? Let me help: it's a netherworld.

I am neither here nor there now. As she was.

And I am supposed to be mourning her passing, but all I can think about now is that her couch, the beige and rose Victorian affair forbade me all these years, is currently available. As I sit in it, I sit heavy. I lean way back, make myself at home.

This gives some relief, but I wish my brother were here. George would know how to encounter these objects. He would know how to grieve her right.

Me, I flounder.

My mother's things are her embodiment. These I will touch today and sort—these will become half mine if not destined for prompt sale to strangers. I can keep hardly any of it. I don't know how to decide. The couch I sit on is certainly too big to fit in my garage. I punch the cushion because I can, because I will lose it too—so soon after receiving the right to have it. My fist bounces up, rosy cushion impervious.

I wander to her mantle and look at mother's pictures. In her youth, she had always flaunted a beauty she'd worn like a badge that distinguished her from other people's drowsy soccer moms and matriarchs in matronly skirts. She had copper hair and green eyes. She was slim and long, without being tall. I can never remember her being sullied. The part of her that made noticeable mistakes, that reacted badly, vanished long before we grew up. I remember she was almost painfully quiet most of the time, except when she told a story, and then, like noticing a sparkling roach rolled in glitter and leaping from a plate set before you, everything seemed vivid and surreal. She came alive with children's stories, having told me fairy tales when I was a child that I've never read the same way anywhere else.

The rare book buying she continued all the way up to her death allowed for many tales recounted on our monthly meetings for coffee at cafés—these and true stories of her friends' debacles. She used to talk about Leroy some, but this stopped in the last few years. What I know about her and Leroy is sparse. I see she still has his picture on the mantle, too.

It's the oldest photograph there, next to the photo of her mother. There are no pictures of my dad. There are pictures of me and George.

But Leroy died in 1966. My mother and Leroy fell in love in the bloom of puberty; they had both been good dancers and great lookers. This, my father told me. When Leroy enlisted into the Vietnam war, my mother promised to wait for him and marry him upon his return; they were to have had numerous beautiful children and she would be the manager of perfume and cosmetic ad campaigns while he would head up sales at some large, glossy company.

At the news of his death, she put away the trousseau that had already gathered much momentum in her old cedar chest and proclaimed herself heart-broken. She would not leave her

room for more than a year. She faded daily, as her own mother, my Nana, often said, to next to nothing.

This is where my father came in. He lived next door to her family and had been ineligible to enlist due to partial deafness. My father was happy she was newly single, so he said. He adored her; he wooed her so lengthily and so diligently it was as though she were his prize, in the end, when she agreed, and so, in a small church, with few witnesses, she married him in 1968, but notably took off her wedding dress within an hour of the wedding's conclusion, before all the portraits had been taken.

According to my father, no wedding portraits had caused quite a row with her mother, who was never loathe to point out this fact as albums were unearthed, rankled as she was that she'd have expected more than two small pages of my mother's wedding as her grandchildren's heritage. "If only you hadn't taken off that damn dress and mussed your make-up," Nana would say. "If only you hadn't let down your hair! The photographer was aghast. I was aghast!"

"They were so aghast!" George and I often said between ourselves, when we thought this expression was funny. This joke kept going for twenty years.

Ran out of milk—aghast. Got a flat tire—aghast. General existential angst—more same.

Now, the portraits that are missing do give me a rather nauseated feeling. When I look at the pictures of my childhood, so few, so sparse, the story of my mother's non-involvement then lays itself at my feet like an ugly truth.

Mother, in holiday shots, though encircling us in her arms like we were precious, was always tilted just a little bit away. Her red velvet Christmas dresses gave only the facsimile of warmth, and her drowsy eyes never placed her in our midst. Through the years, better and better, I understood my father's need for affairs.

How do you hold onto a mystery that doesn't solve? You don't. After a while you stop trying.

Back then, he'd told me later, her glances only traced his outline as if she would remove him from the frame of her view without a second thought (were it possible) and be happy just staring at whatever loomed behind the unfortunate weight and heft of his body.

To me, my father deserved his affairs, for whatever joy they brought him—he has always been a sorry little man, dwarfed by her lack of love for him and nearly devoured by it. Despite this, he tried for to impress her for years. Humiliating scenarios of unaffordable gifts, birthday cakes glazed and decorated to perfection, flowers every Friday, and vacations to places she said she longed to go were all offered and taken, but her response was more a benign acceptance, similar to a stranger taking mail from a postman, than the joy of an appreciative wife.

"I would like to take you to Venice," my father said one year.

"All right," she replied, washing the greens for the salad.

"It will happen. I've bought the tickets. We go next month."

She cut the tips off the celery. "And the children?" With deft fingers, she cut the heart from the tomatoes. "To stay with Nana?"

"Aghast," my brother whispered to me.

"Aghast," I replied.

"They can stay with your mother," he said. "It's all arranged."

"Oh, that's nice," she said. "Let's go. Don't forget to pack your slicker, Ron."

But I did not hear her talk excitedly on the phone to friends afterward. I did not see the packing. They were there, my father and she, in the house, then they were not, and then they

returned. My mother, before leaving had placed one quick kiss on my and my brother's cheeks. "Be good," she said, "though I know you will, dears… We'll be back very soon."

My Nana's arms replaced the hugs we wanted from hers. "Don't worry, little doves. We'll have ourselves good times."

Our mother was not demonstrative. My brother and I did receive her genuine attention and affection on other dates, but this was always after we had done something egregiously wrong, offered at the wrong time as any child training book would have said, when discipline was more needed. It should have made us act out, one would think, we have discussed before, to know that when we did wrong we could bask in the light of her full attention, but something in us had always been afraid of her full focus.

We wanted it and yet we did not want it. Mother was whimsical. Mother was remote. There was something otherly about her, and it was more exceedingly terrible to have her sweet gaze, her forgiveness, and her love, than to dwell in anonymity as we did most of the time. As a result, by no independent virtue of her own, by neglect, she had raised two model children who were never incarcerated, never addicted to vice, and had both achieved training by way of degrees to bode lives of comfortable success.

And yet, I am terrified here, in this place where she never invited me. I received no permission. I had to arrive against my will, which is really reinforcing that feeling I keep having that my brother is an asshole for not being here today.

So, she has died. I have no partner in the world who will walk with me amidst her things and she is gone in her sleep and far too early. I shout, "How could you? How could you leave us

so soon, mother," and yet I cry for the selfish, small person inside of myself who wants her back. God, how I hate that needy part of me.

Maybe she created it. She never said a foul word, never punished, and never did a bad deed, but she created an impossible standard by which to live. One that floated. One that sang. One that drifted through these walls. One shouldn't be so unremarkably good, so without palpable sin.

I look at her wall of collector's plates. Everything glitters here. Everything hums. Aghast, mother, aghast, I think.

I call George. "George," I say when he picks up his cell. "My daughter has kindergarten commencement this week. I need to get out of here. Maybe you can do this if I leave now?"

"Just be patient, Susan," he says. "Take care of things. I know it's hard."

"I need you here," I say. "It's too cold, freezing. And it's too clean, and I can't stand being in her things. And I need you."

"I'm in Texas on business, monkey," he replies, "You have to designate what happens with her stuff so we can sell the place..." He pauses before reminding me, as if in indictment, "After all, I did handle the funeral."

"Yes, yes, you did." I say. "A nice job. Exemplary funeral, George! Everyone cried."

He pauses. "I handled the lawyer talks."

"I know you did, George." My voice breaks.

"Please just do this for us, babe," he says. "Grit your teeth. Get through it. Have your husband come over."

"Okay," I tell him. "I'll do that." Of course my shit husband is out screwing his own secretary, something I've been aware of for months but haven't tried to stop. Sometimes, I'm

glad for it. Sometimes, I call him deliberately during his lunch hour and keep up twenty minutes of conversation, just to make sure he's not doing her—but I'm fine if he leaves me. If he loved me more, I would be the happiest woman in the world—but I can't control that he doesn't. "I'll do what I need to do," I tell George. "I always have."

"Okay, I love you, Suze," my brother says and hangs up.

He's the only one who calls me monkey and the only one who calls me Suze. I take another walk around mother's house.

It is immaculate. I take a tape recorder out of my pocket to dictate: "Bureau to her sister Elle. Jewelry boxes to me. Vases and crystal to be sold. Clothes sent to goodwill. Appliances, with exception of the new refrigerator, which George will take, to be donated to her church's bazaar. Any and all large furniture to be sold at auction. Her books to the local library except the old books collection, which I'll keep."

I lift the box of expensive volumes she collected and note that the boxes below it host ordinary books. It is the only marked box. Several expensive books must be missing, I think—not that I've ever seen her collection, but she loved to talk about her purchases at our "keep-acquainted," cappuccino or tea shop meetings. "Oh, Susan," she'd say, "I just acquired the most exquisitely inked volume of Children's Verse," or "Oh, Susan, I realize I now have all known versions of that Greek book I've been buying," and then she commenced to detail what each book entailed. There should have been many boxes of these fine books, but I trace my eyes over the same group of books in the same box again and again, only to count thirty.

Where are the rest? I realize, furious, that I have been wanting to look through this collection for years, just to touch and see the books or slowly reread each volume before it left for other buyers. Mother had told me she'd collected hundreds, her first four from my father.

My eyes sting, glaring at the single box like it is at fault. Inside it, I see an envelope. On the front of this envelope, she has written my name.

There is no envelope for George. This makes me feel oddly special.

As if some strange directive in an Alice and Wonderland story, the envelope says: Open me. Read me. When I cut the flap, the florid scent of her lavender perfume spills free. The letter has the heft and weight of twenty pages of vellum and on the back of the last page there is a small note that reads, “continued in the box below.” The first thing the letter says is, “Please, Susan, do not ever think that I did not love you.”

“I didn’t say that,” I respond aloud, but feel peevish as I keep reading since what she writes next is: “You don’t believe me, but let me explain myself. You see, I have for years, been enmeshed in a love affair you could not see.

“By the time you will see these letters, I will be free. Please read every word. And then, do not share these letters. Georgie wouldn’t understand. This revelation is for you alone. Sit down.”

Jesus, mother, I think. But I cannot help myself. I sit and do as she says, like I've always done, listening to the light constant lilt of her voice which is shining through her prose. In the commas, I can even hear her soft Southern pauses. “I want to tell you more about Leroy. Leroy,” she says, “died on a hot afternoon while walking in the Khannouan Province. He stepped on a landmine and shrapnel pierced his lung and his heart. His leg was blown off. I knew he had passed even before his mother told me because his spirit came to visit me the very same day, when he sat on my bed looking pale and uncertain.

“He told me he was dead and asked me if I wanted him to leave. Of course, I said no. I could see him just as plainly as you could see me. Why are you telling me this, I bet you wonder. Because I need you to know why you haven’t been able to come here.

"His spirit could touch me like a human hand, but no one else could see or hear him. I spent the majority of that next year in my room on Grove Street—remember the Grove Street house? With him. But no one understood. To us, we had never ceased being lovers. I could have spent the rest of my days in that room.

“My mother thought I was mad. In an act of desperation, she invited your father to visit me. 'Go,' she said. 'Daphne is so distraught she won’t talk to children her age. Please,' Nana begged. 'Visit.'

"He had had a crush on me for years, so was easy to persuade. When your father came to me, promising outings and trips for fresh air, Leroy railed against the intrusion. He slammed windows and lifted things above your father’s head as if to drop them. He did not want to share me and he did not want to leave, but as he saw that I could not be with him and live normally; as he saw me thin and grow less animate, as he saw me begin to lose my mind, he told me he was worried. He would go away. ‘When you die,’ he said. ‘I’ll be with you. Live your life, do what you can, and come back. I can’t stay here and cause what I’m causing.’

"Suffice it to say he vanished and I began to grieve him—but he did not ever truly go away. Many a time, I’d feel a warm hand at my elbow, a cool breeze in the heat, or a warm body in the bed that had been empty save for me. Leroy had visually vanished but was still unpredictably lingering. I could not tell you children or your father, whom I did try to love. Don’t get me wrong. Your father was very decent, Susan… But love cannot be forced, love cannot be pushed onto the nearest body, especially if someone else has caused the only intense

passion you've ever known. I tried to wait this out. But I divorced your father, in the end, because I could not love him, because he deserved more.

"This didn't happen for many years because I was afraid for you children. My thoughts of Leroy had grown as the time passed, rather than diminished. I was obsessed. I had begun to feel insane, but I didn't want the life we had so carefully cultivated for you children to turn into arguments. As a result, I encouraged your father's affairs. If he found love somewhere else, I thought, he might understand my removal, might see, for once, how it felt to not belong in your own scheduled life, how it seemed to be unable to own it. Remember that party at the Carrault's?"

Her letters went on and on.

My stomach turned and began to pain me. She detailed each year of my growing up with stories of me, my father, and George, stories of what Leroy had done or how he had communicated with her. I read more and more letters from beneath the top books and wanted to call my brother George half way through, but I did not. I would, I determined, read to the end and then tell him everything—or tell him nothing.

It was fascinating how thorough she was about the times I had all but forgotten. "I never let you get too close to me," she said at one junction, "because I feared you'd think I was insane, that you might grow insane, that you might put me away in an asylum—or worse, never value a thing that I said. I was afraid of everything then. It has been a curse to live in two worlds. His ghost has been my partner, Leroy's, all these years. Every time I felt Leroy near, I would feel my skin on fire, and yet, to preserve me, he'd stay hidden, until I moved to this apartment. It has been a game of hide and seek where it would be impermissible to be caught and yet is impossible to be found. It has been a life I'd never wish for you and yet one I could not stop living myself.

“You may wonder sometimes why I ceased to invite you to my house, why, after the divorce, I had no one over. I will tell you now. I had come to a point where I could not live feeling Leroy’s presence, and not seeing him. One afternoon, as twilight hit the open windows, I sat alone at the kitchen table. I was making rolls. I looked up to where I felt his energy at my shoulder. ‘I want to see you again,’ I said. ‘I want to hear you. Come back as you were when you first died.’ In the flour on the table where I had the rolling pin, his ghost drew the words: *I can no longer be seen, but you can feel me*.

“I want to see you,” I replied. We talked with our fingertips until we had agreed what must be in place in order for his return: my house was to be ours alone, a refuge from the ever-encroaching present. Susan, I wanted you and George to come over, but Leroy filled the very corners. It was you here, or him. In my home, he made me feel, every second of my last years, like an everlasting seduction had taken over my life. I was giddy. I felt him touch me and sit near me. Each day, just as I entered, he kissed me hello. 'I won't pretend I don't exist now,' he told me. 'Don't ask me to do that.'

There was more to this letter but I began to watch the words swim in my tears. It took them falling for me to keep reading. “So you traded your children for an imagined lover?” I said aloud. “This is your lifelong secret? You gave us up for him?”

As if in reply, she went on in the last paragraph, "I had two lives—one inside, and one out. We made love again and again. I was a woman lifted in mid-air and embraced. I felt his callused hands work their way up my spine; I felt his warm breath on my neck and the brush of his hair on my cheek. He seduced me every night. No! I could not give that up.

"It was as though once I had invited him in, he intended to make up for his years on the sidelines. Do you think it strange that your mother spent her last ten years living with her first

love? Do you think it sad she would disinvite her children to feel more normal in the one place her lover could dwell, the lover who made her feel young and privileged by fate? Do you hate me, Susan? I could never ask you these questions before.

Yes, I hate you, I thought. As I sat and read on, I realized all the stories she had told me from the rare books were like road maps to her past. In her own cloaked way, she had been telling me her life with Leroy all along.

In one story about a Chinese courtesan who'd lost a lover, she told me a tale of a woman so consumed with love that within three months of his death, to be with him, she had willed herself to die in her sleep. "It is possible to choose to stop living," the courtesan had said. "If you want it badly enough." She sipped a potion made from her own blood and tears each night until eventually, she willed her spirit from her body and found herself in a rice field of ghosts, looking for him, until they were reunited.

There were other stories too, stories of Tibetan women estranged from their children due to the histories of their villages. Animal parables about the weak and ill suited. Stories about sacrifice and perseverance—hundreds of myths; my mother loved myths. The balance and equations of the myths were nearly always about giving one thing up to have another.

I walked out of her apartment and around the block before returning, asking myself, "Was mother mad? Was this a real experience with a ghost?" I would not receive the answer.

She had written a few more letters addressed to me, but they contained no more of her enigmatic creations. Most of them held her observations about my life, the ones that, in life, she had felt her own flaws to marked to criticize, but in death she could be blunt. There were other things too, mentions of things she had enjoyed, what she hoped to have happen when she died, how wonderful she thought it would be when she and Leroy would both be the same medium,

and how sorry she was that she had kept this all from me so long. How sorry she was to have begun the entire spool of my life with a promise she could not keep to my father.

"My father deserved better," I said.

"I did not know what to do," she said. "When you were an adult, I was scared that by embracing you, I would lose Leroy—that he would leave again, or that by embracing him, never venturing out, I would lose you. And that's why I met you at the coffee house several times a year. That's why I met Georgie at his apartment. Dear heaven," she said, "I am a bad mother and may be crazy too, but I did what I had to do to survive, as you will discover that we all do, Susan. My time grows near. By the way, I have explained all this to your father, and he has forgiven me. I hope you will too. One day. Watch out for little Georgie for me. I've got to fly. Love, Mother."

Seated in her apartment after this last letter, I finish reading and look around at her home. The inventory is not complete. It distracts me. It consumes me. "All bedding and blankets, to the Goodwill," I say to the recorder, just trying to will the rest of it out of my mind. "All family photos packed into boxes for me and George. The antique fixtures for George. The old cameras, the old trains."

I want to call him Georgie, too; I want to call George back and ask him what he thinks of this bizarre turn of events with our absentee mother after I read all her letters two, then three, times. But she said he couldn't handle it and maybe she's right.

Still, one part of me agrees that she did seem happier near the last part of her life. Another part wants to burn the all letters and pretend I never read them since they displace decades of my own understanding of my life. But I am the archive of her most eclectic stories, real and imagined. If I burnt the letters, their echoes would stay hauntingly in my head like the

rare books mother had invented. I'd fear I'd made them up entirely, dreamt them, or changed some essential part.

Uncertainty had always been her legacy, so I could not destroy them. I would keep them as a tangible record that this was her explanation, in the end—that an everlasting love affair could be wished into existence just by the strength of her volition.

Oh, who knows why I'd keep them?

I suppose for the same reason I had always kept her stories close to heart: Because they created their own seductions. Because I needed to be seduced by flirtations with truths. Because, like the last page of a mystery novel that threatens to keep me tossing and turning late into the night, I can never, on purpose, put them down. She created me and creates me still. Imagination. Mythology. Mother. Mild mercy.

In my mind, in the story she did not tell, she walks with her shining copper hair through a tropical jungle, strolling along a path where her weightless feet cannot trip any wires or mines. She wears silver high-heel slippers and the white chiffon dress bought for her prom. She never had me. My father never occurs to her. George doesn't exist.

She is seventeen, the weight of the world behind her. If she has not found him already, she seeks out Leroy. He looks for her, too. Each scene of smoke and war, blood and medics, clashes with the decorations of wedding parties and yellow and rose streamers hanging in the naked air. She is not the only girl walking down this road. There are hundreds. They march forward, searching for dead soldiers. In a distant clearing, a celebration of ghosts begins.

Two by two, the unbound connect. When she finds Leroy here, he takes her hand and adorns it with a red carnation. She smiles. She curtseys, inhaling and smiling as if having awoken from a nightmare that went on far too long. Her real life was the nightmare.

“Why, hello,” she tells him, as if having realized the best of the night is still before her. Without another word, he leads her to dance. She kisses him. He kisses her. They’re both held close. She takes his hand that feels, at long last, exactly like her own.

My mother never belonged to me. She lived in this dream. I can give her this.

And my mother is now gone. Do you know what that feels like, losing a beautiful mother? Let me help you: it’s a netherworld.

You are neither present nor absent, as I am. “Aghast,” I mutter. “Aghast.” I press the record button to document what to do with yet more of her things and don’t listen to any of it until a month later, while seated with George, we go over the final details. It’s then that I realize there is a prolonged segment of sobbing on that tape I made in her apartment, one I must have been privy to because it is mine.

I don’t remember having spent my time that way. I don’t remember having wept. But I wait for my brother to notice there’s been a stop to the litany of arrangements I remarked upon, to comment or ask why, but he is too busy enfolding me in his arms from the second he hears me start to cry on the tape, which now plays like a djinn of my horror.

“I needed you,” is all I say as he strokes my back, as we think of her together.

“I’m sorry,” he says, but that’s all he says for a good half hour, until the recorded weeping subsides. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there.”

Beach-ball, Kentucky

So, this is a story about a guy named Frederick P. Danes. He ages gently in his home in Erlanger, Kentucky with his beloved wife Carla, and before she dies, he seeks to cherish her, aging war vet that he is, but if there is one trouble, it's that he uses a walker and she's getting older now, too, so from their upstairs condo, taking the trash out isn't easy. This, aside from the humiliation that it's a man's job he knows he can no longer can do. Literally. Cannot. There's no elevator. His walker doesn't do stairs. They have to actually load garbage into their shared car and drive it to the dumpster.

Well, what happens next at your pleasant condo, if you're Frederick P. Danes, is this: Carla takes the trash downstairs to your garage and puts it in your Buick LaSabre. She opens the garage door. She hasn't gotten in, but she isn't paying much attention that day as she fumbles with the task, so knocks the car in reverse somehow—jostles the gearshift maybe, and while she's getting out to grab one last thing outside the car before driving the car begins to roll back and she hasn't moved far away enough to avoid getting her sweater hooked on a car door. This rips apart as she is dragged, and killed below the vehicle as the car rolls free from the garage.

If you're Frederick in this moment, you are watching from that balcony and start to scream your addled head off as soon as you see her being dragged. Maybe you just think you scream, and you might have screamed, but what you really do is clutch at your chest, black dots spanning each eyeball, your mouth frozen in fear, your voice leaking out but not with the volume you'd hoped, and your heart, aside from breaking inside as you long to help Carla and can't, has truly began to give out. During your own heart-attack, you want to help her but you still cannot go downstairs due to your pre-existing infirmity, and anyway, Carla has been run over. You see a

speckling of blood on her cheek. Her legs are trapped below the wheels. You are only, you know before you even feel paramedics touching your head and scanning your eyes and checking your pulse, watching her die. It won't be like in WW2 when you saved your shrapnel fragged buddy and he could go home. It won't be like the nightmares you have when Carla is gone, because those you woke up from. It won't be like that beach-ball you lost one year at a beach in Florida that you and Carla just happened to go back for a few hours later and relocate only a mile down-shore, the red and purple and blue one. The one packed and brought here. The one now in your bedroom closet where the door hangs widely open like a mouth.

And later, after you get out of the hospital where you've been recovering, after your close thirty-something friend Glen comes over and lifts you back up to your place, after he stocks your fridge and hires a company to send caretakers, after he does not neglect to hug you and show you some warmth each time he comes, you realize you are one of the few older people these caretakers ever encounter who is not senile, who is not unable to tend to his bowels, who is not truly on the verge of dying—so maybe, you realize, Glen feels this caretaker hiring necessary for more than groceries and company, more so to force you out of your bedroom that you often refuse to leave.

You don't know why he's so attached to you, but you suspect it's because his own father ran off and he never knew him. You took an interest in him a few years ago, wanted to help him to be more manly. Maybe you had never had a son and wanted one, so the match worked both ways. When he got married, you gave him the talk about keeping a woman happy. When his wife left him for another man, you had many beers. "She's wasn't the right one for you, Glen," you'd told him. "It's not about you. Look at Carla, see the way she looks at me? That's the kind of

woman you need. Like her eyes are the softness in the sky when they look at you. Find a woman who loves you for more than your paycheck."

So Glen found him a good woman, and maybe since then he listened a little closer when you spoke, worried about losing you more. And now you fear he knows you've internalized that you are afraid of the living room and the dining room; this you decide because you confessed it to him once, right after Carla's accident and your heart attack. Because you can't spend thirty years with someone and still not see her, you'd admitted.

You remember this, each time you walk out to the balcony—where you once lay prone to watch her die—that you must silently damn that gray car. You think about wanting to sell it and sporadically entertain thoughts of driving it straight into the graveyard where she's buried, through the fence and over other headstones, so you might wash the blood dried from the wheels right into her grave with some kind of watering pot.

But you cannot drive the car, even if you could get down there. You cannot sell that car. You can't leave your condo. Glen will have to handle that. He will have to carry you out any time you want to go anywhere.

When he takes you in his arms down the stairs, during the rare outings you must make to visit doctors, you feel helpless, like a baby old man, a strange presence who is trapped in a condo tower most of the time and is losing his identity. You don't talk to Glen about this. You pretend a field injury as he carries you. But you talk to the caretakers who come about Hawaii and the life you knew as a younger man. You talk about Florida. You talk about here. And you talk about Carla, sometimes tell them how you can't stand to leave your bedroom because you still keep seeing her.

If they are sympathetic, maybe, one by one, you tell some of them about that day she died and they hear your story, in horror. Then, you tell them about how the beach ball, to your shame, is the only thing you feel you have left of her that you can see well from the view from that stuffed yellow chair in your bedroom where you always sit by the open window watching traffic when you aren't staring in the closet, but that the rest of the house is too full of her.

You tell them how she blew it up fairly recently when she spoke of a new desired vacation, inflated it early for the next trip, but you never deflated it. You know, when they seem to pity you as you tell them these things, the caretakers, that they realize as you finally did, some sooner than others, that this job, the job of you, has been easy for a reason. It's not a sick old incapable man job, as Glen told the agency. No, Glen lied. He pays them to watch you. He doesn't want you to go.

Could they instead be hired, you know they wonder after a time, for a suicide watch, a desired intervention? Because Glen could bring groceries and leave it at that if all he wanted was to help. You can cook. You can open the fridge. You don't need people around all the time just to watch you sit idly in your room and occasionally wander into the kitchen.

But from a new loose-lipped caretaker, you hear, "Watch the beach ball," was Glen's recent directive, as if he thought you might paint it with symbols or put your predetermined death date on it, which is why you tell this caretaker the whole conflated, deflated story of recovering the beach ball. To this story, she says, standing in your bedroom doorway. "I'll be your regular now. I'll be helping with your rooms." She does not mention Carla, which pains you, since you still like to hear Carla's name on people's lips.

You tell her, "Look at this beach ball. Can you believe it still holds air? It's been months since Carla blew it up. Almost a year."

She smiles, but her face hasn’t committed to the solace.

You make nice. You make nice. You curse Glen. You miss Carla. You hate the car. You don't want to leave your room, even two weeks later, though this new girl entices you with fresh bread and a show. You wonder how you'd off yourself at this junction, if you really wanted to--and whether Glen or a caretaker could even stop you if you planned it well—because you are a crafty old man and they can't control you.

Glen doesn’t even know he’s your sole beneficiary. And they come, keep coming, so you let them coddle and hug you. You tell them what you think they want to know while the grief sifts inside you like an ax in a bag, say things like—“The trees in Hawaii were beautiful! There was a lovely path if you went right at the lanai nearest the...”

But, what you don't say, what you want to say is: This beach ball is important to me, folks, though you don't know why, and Glen wants you to watch it because I look at it so much, but I look at it so much because it's the last place Carla put her living breath, the last place that stored it, and when I see her here in the other rooms but she's nowhere, old buddy—when I think I see her shadow and she's gone, sometimes I like to take a good nip off of that receptacle, suck out some of that carbon dioxide she put in—only a little at a time. Cause her lips were there too. And I reclaim her breath. And if I wanted to off myself, compadre, let's just say I'd just suck this beach ball dry until I had let her CO2 take me away with her forever.

But your biggest worry is that, between now and then—because you do nip at her exhaled air here and there, or quite often you admit—on the day that comes when you are ready to make that leap into gone, you will have depleted your own stash of death fumes in the closet, you will not have her back, you will have taken every bit of her air left in this place, sucked it in hard and pushed it back out from your lungs, which will burn, burn, burn, and there will be nothing left.

Already, the newest caretaker has begun a subtle effort to reconfigure the space. As if moving furniture around will make the living room okay again. As if changing the shelves that dishes go on will make the kitchen dinette less hard to sit in and drink a cup of coffee. As if anything can take Carla out from this place but your leaving here, too. So you're careful later that week as you imbibe in that breath. Within weeks, you stop imbibing at all, just press your lips to the out-thrust inflation device nozzle without opening it and suck. The caretaker comes in to find you this way this afternoon, the beach ball up-ended on your face, half-inflated, as you walk to the living room on your walker in an instant of bravery, and then sit on the couch with the soft plastic sides touching your lips and cheeks. "You want me to blow that up?" she asks, reaching for the ball.

"Don't touch it! Don't ever touch it!" you shout, though you do not tell her why. You put it back in your room. You stare at it on your closet floor like you and it have escaped a close call. You close the closet door to protect it. You walk back out and apologize to the woman.

Later that day, Glen comes over. "You're doing good, pops," he tells you, though you've done nothing outstanding. "Doing real good." You smile at him since he wants you to be happy, but you decide to tell him nothing about your day—nothing about your trip to the living room or about how you took Carla with you, via her breath ball, so nothing catastrophic might happen—though you were immeasurably sad and then angry for hours, with or without her presence. No, you don't tell Glen anything that will pass the echo of your pain to his eyes, because you don't want to see him hurting.

He's like a son, after all. And you're like his dad. So, "Can you sell that car for me when you get a chance, sonny?" you ask.

You ask, and he agrees.

Sight

I have long wished my daughter were born ugly. Walking across the kitchen this morning, she radiates sex and youth in the sunrise light skirting through her window. Her lilac skirt flirts with her legs. The cream blouse I bought her weeks before contrasts with her pale skin. Dark hair slicked back, the oval of her face etched with pallor except for the remnants of bruises on her left cheekbone. Blind, she walks past the table in her apartment quickly, like a seeing person, because she is home where everything is immaculately placed. She seems just another young woman, preparing for her day, except that she is not, except that she was raped last week.

When I stand behind her at the stove where she makes oatmeal, I cannot see her face and everything seems status quo except that she has not gone to work since the event, except that she seems listless and checks her Braille calendar with light fingers. “Six days,” she says. “It’s been six days since he came.”

She looks virginal in cream silk, but all her blouses are white or cream. Thirty to forty line her closet. She is my pale angel. It is a system, white blouses, that we devised to let her dress independently because nothing will not match.

“I got a call from the police this morning,” I say. “They don’t need you for the line-up.”

She nods.

“That’s good, right?” I say.

“I wonder if it’s him,” she says. “It might not be.”

“The evidence doesn’t lie,” I say. “They think they know.”

She sighs. Her hand caresses the bruised cheek, but for her, because she cannot see, I am sure it is not how it looks because she cannot understand the color changes of such things, but the feeling of it—warm and swollen, painful, different. She is thirty and seems seventeen or six as she touches it.

She's had seeing boyfriends before, but they were nothing like this. They've taken from her, too, and hurt her, but in different ways—mostly by accepting her blindness only initially. And maybe this is what gives her more edge, the coldness she can display sometimes, without meaning to. Beneath her sleepy face, there is a sense that she remains separate, a disbelief that anyone truly wants her, despite that the beauty she possesses continues to call them to her side. There is such a thing, I think, as too pretty. With her fragility and luminous eyes, they always want a sample. After they get that, the novelty ends when cannot find their features handsome, when she cannot recognize their sons or mothers or friends as other girlfriends have by sight alone.

"Mama," she says, "I should go to the office today. The kids need me." Tears slide down her cheeks. She wipes them away and stirs the cooking oatmeal. I watch her. "Maybe in a little bit, I'll go," she goes on. "Or maybe tomorrow."

"You already missed the morning bus today," I say. Her audible clock agrees in its tinny, mechanical voice, "It is now Six thirty a.m."

"Yes, but you'll take me," she says. "And then you'll pick me up, right?" Tilting her face just so, it almost seems like she stares me directly in the face. Her senses heightened, agitated and itchy, she hears my every move in her wooden dining chair, gauging even my posture as the wood creaks.

To me, today, she looks as if she's been starving herself: So thin. So wan. The irony: she loves to cook. The questions I want to ask her sit only in my head: *So he came for dinner, I want to say. You invited him against all good advice. And what happened at the start of the evening? How did you not hear him get angry? You should have made him meet your seeing friends, I think, made him meet me. A name and an address would have been good. Why didn't you do this, Chloe?*

I say nothing.

Her face turns up, cocked like a cheerleader asking an eager question. "If I want to go, you'll do that right? Take me to work today? Pick me up?" She spoons her oatmeal into a bowl, adds raisins.

"Yes, but I can't spend the night here again," I say. "Todd wants me home."

"Todd," she says, scoffing. "He doesn't need you."

"You don't need me either, Chloe. You never have."

"I do," she says bitterly. "I always need you. Look what happens when I ignore your advice. Look at what happened to me." She begins, despite her will, to sob.

There was a time I would have paid her to say this. Now, I would pay to hear the opposite. "You can come home with me and stay for a while."

She hesitates, dumping sugar in her bowl. "No."

Since highschool graduation, she has worked at the Wootherby School for the Blind as a guidance counselor. She had a proud glow when she first was offered the job and insisted on having her own place. I rented her this cottage then, so she could take the bus with the kids.

The school was only a short walk to the stop.

For the first few months when she left my house, each morning, I'd drop by to help her get ready. Each morning she'd open her window and smell the air, deciding on the weather. She'd dress accordingly. She seemed so independent. Thus, I stopped coming. She had begun her life as a functioning adult. She liked that.

"I don't want to go home," she says now, reluctant to give up again any freedom. "But I don't want to go out. He could be anywhere. Are they sure it's him in jail?"

"I think so," I say. "Yes."

I picture her walking, as she would weeks ago, through the tall grass beside the country road, eyes shut, face tilted to the sun, cars whizzing past. Sometimes, I've walked with her to the stop and heard truckers whistle as they approach. They look over her pert figure. And then they see her cane. Their heads re-enter their cabs. They look away. There is guilt.

This was where she met the rapist, walking down this same road, though I'm sure he had no such guilt. Maybe he watched her far longer than I know. Not that she's given details, but she's told me he strolled with her for more than a week, stomping along beside her like a friendly woodsman, holding her hand. "He was so nice," she's said. He had a soft voice lisped with Castellan Spanish.

She invited him to dinner. He never ate. He did only the bad things he did. "Can I get you a drink?" he asked. Then he went behind her chair, knocked her down, beat her, and he took her. She has not yet been back to work, so cries about missing the kids almost daily, but she does not cry about him.

I wonder about this. From the police, I've heard she was not the only blind girl he victimized, but I will not tell her this. Right now, she eats her oatmeal and busies herself with that.

“It would be nice if you met a blind boy you could live with in a blind community,” I say. “Someone like Jeb Whitters across the street from me. Maybe home for a while would be—”

“I don’t want to go back home,” she says. “Not even for a day. I’ll wait this out.”

“You won’t make me feel guilty, Chloe,” I tell her. “You won’t make me stay here again and every night. I can’t. I have to go home sometimes.”

“Yes, of course,” she says, stirring more butter into her bowl. “Of course.”

When she called me after the incident, she said only, “Come now, Mama. I’m hurt. Someone hurt me.” She said this calmly. It was one o’clock in the morning. She was not weeping.

As I drove, I wished we’d bought her a big mean dog. “We need to call the police,” I told her. “Let them come.”

“No. Why?” she said. “He didn’t disturb anything. I don’t want them in my stuff. They’ll move it. It’ll take forever to rearrange. No, I don’t want that. No one else can come here.”

“Then we have to go to them,” I said.

So we went. There was blood on her face we tried to clean before we left. On her wrists, bruises had already added bracelets of fingerprints. The technicians did their tests, extracted his semen. Despite that I told them she was blind, the detectives kept asking questions like “Can you give us a physical description? What did he look like?”

“He was about six foot tall,” she said, attempting game. “He had short hair.”

“What color?” someone asked before others could stop him.

“Black,” she said, and laughed hysterically. “Just like yours. You all have black hair—all four of you. I’m fucking blind, or didn’t you get that, officer?”

“And what did he do to you?” another detective asked.

“He threw me to the ground. He pulled off my clothes and raped me, beating me about the chest and face. He pinned my arms above my head. He kept slapping me. He put his thing inside me and it hurt. Is that enough for you? Take down my statement, damn it.”

She is my daughter, but she is foreign to me sometimes. I can’t know what it is to never see. Her humor is bitter because being blind doesn’t amuse her. When she was five, I moved to my neighborhood to accommodate her learning, to make her feel comfortable. On my street, there have never been many cars. Daily, I watch people and their harnessed dogs make the hike to a bus stop or stand on their curbs for pick up.

I often wonder how it must be to live in the dark and how Chloe must mark people in her head. Is one person known for their clover breath, another their dry skin? Can a shampoo become someone? What if they changed it? How does she define handsome? A sweet dulcet voice?

Seeing boys always thought they could get used to her inability to “see” them when they wanted her in the past. It’s like they thought that by standing beside her a while, their eyes would give hers sight, like she’d get it through the plain osmosis of their thick desire and suddenly understand their favorite album cover or share their favorite sights—because they always wanted her to be their secret science project, transformed with an elixir of their love, but invariably, their complaint was, “We’re too different. You don’t understand me. I can’t do this.” Each time, she closed of another part of her heart to emotion.

There is another universe of the blind. Books are longer—made up of no images and more paper. Memories are sensory, not about the sight. At least, she was not a virgin when the rape happened. There were good sensual times to fall back on in memory, perhaps, despite this history of abandonment. She finishes her oatmeal, one spoon after the next, until her bowl is empty. “I’ll take you to school right now,” I tell her. “Are you ready?”

Flustered, she drops her spoon and stands. “Ready.”

I remember the first time she asked me to buy her condoms because there is no braille on those packages. I remember how often I’ve replaced them and how amazed I’ve been at her quantity of lovers. I suddenly wonder how much or how little they have pleased her. She seems to write them off without regrets. Maybe she felt powerful in her ability to seduce and abandon, to do things without expectations—until this openness became the prelude for violence, for the bruise on her cheek, for her newly fragile air. Do I imagine this, or do her hands tremble now? Suddenly, my daughter looks alone, like the only person in the world. “The kids will be glad to see me today,” she says.

She walks to her living room and grabs her coat. She stands at the door, waiting for me with a patient, impatient look like she did when she was six, after her cane was stolen by girls from a neighboring elementary, after having stood outside the playground for four long hours wondering what to do.

She plants her feet heavily on the floor, standing sideways so I can get past her, awaiting my hand to touch hers or open the door. There seems doubt on her face that I’ll ever arrive.

“You can go home tonight,” she says. “I’ll be okay.” She says this while biting her lip, without really meaning it—though she wants to mean it.

“Todd doesn’t need me tonight,” I tell her, placing my hand on her shoulder, “I think I’ll stay. Let’s take you to work now, okay? We can only do one thing at a time. ”

“Mama,” she says, “Don’t come back. Hear me. I’ll be okay now. I’ll be okay.” Her hand goes up to her bruise, tears pour down her face, and she turns her body fully toward the door as if I cannot see her when she doesn’t regard me. She puts her hand on the knob and turns it.

“I know you’ll be okay, Chloe,” I say, placing my hand gently on her shoulder and digging in my purse for my keys.

My voice is bright, as if I do not see her tears, which I pretend I don’t because she does not want me to see them. Sight. Blindness. Mixing.

Funny, how I pretend now to be blind for her as she walks out into the morning sunlight, which I perceive as glare—as she walks forward without squinting, pretending, too, to be so brave for me.

Vita

Heather Fowler is a poet, fiction writer, playwright, essayist, and novelist. Her novel *Beautiful Ape Girl Baby* is due for release in early 2016. She is also the author of the story collections *Suspended Heart* (2009), *People with Holes* (2012), *This Time, While We're Awake* (2013), and *Elegantly Naked In My Sexy Mental Illness* (2014). Fowler's *People with Holes* was named a 2012 finalist for Foreword Reviews Book of the Year Award in Short Fiction. Her fictive work has been made into fine art in several instances and her collaborative poetry collection, *Bare Bulbs Swinging*, written with Meg Tuite and Michelle Reale, was the winner of the 2013 *Twin Antlers Prize for Collaborative Poetry* and released in December of 2014. Fowler has published stories and poems online and in print in the U.S., England, Australia, and India. Her work has appeared in such venues as *PANK, Night Train, storyglossia, Surreal South, Feminist Studies*, and others, as well as having been nominated for the storySouth Million Writers Award, Sundress Publications Best of the Net, and multiple Pushcart Prizes. She is Poetry Editor at *Corium Magazine*. Please visit her website here.