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Verve

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Verve

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing

by

Stephanie Zahareas

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Revisions

I arrived at my twin sister Jamie's place right before the snowstorm. I followed her directions from the airport to the subway stop at Stony Brook. It was in a dingier part of Jamaica Plain than the neighborhood where we had shared our first apartment for six years. My ears were still plugged from the flight, and the wind that blew my hair around sounded far away while it burned my cheeks. She had called and told me that she needed me. When I tried to get more information she said, "If you're too busy, it's fine." When I lied and said I had to talk to Max about whether we could afford it, she said, "I'm on the computer right now. I have a flight pulled up for Thursday. I'll buy it, Laura." It was Monday. I would be there in four days.

I rolled my carry-on down the block to her brick apartment building and pressed the button next to the rectangular slip of paper that said Robedeau. Nothing happened. I wondered if she had changed her mind, if this was some cruel, elaborate trick she'd created to get back at me. I questioned whether this was her apartment building at all. I

sat down on the steps of the building. The snow fell in powdery clumps then rose in glittering cyclones with each new gust of wind.

A woman in workout clothes jogged past me and unlocked the door to Jamie's apartment building. I stood to follow her inside, but she didn't hold the door for me, and it locked behind her. I sat down again and realized the air smelled both familiar and foreign, as if I'd travelled back in time but was unwelcome. I wanted to prove that I had lived here, that this was my home. I wanted to walk over to our old neighborhood and assert my intricate knowledge: go first to my favorite coffee shop, get Earl Grey and ask for the miniature, blueberry scone that regular customers got for free; walk past our apartment and wave to our elderly neighbor, careful not to say hello, get caught in conversation, and miss my train; crawl through the hidden hole in the chain-link fence that lead to Forest Hills Cemetery and walk by the ancient headstones I knew by heart.

It was 4:22 pm. If Jamie didn't show up in five minutes, I would hail a cab back to the airport. I rested my head on my knees. I was two minutes into imagining my flight when the door buzzed, and I hefted my suitcase up three flights of stairs to apartment thirty-one.

Jamie opened the door when I knocked, and for a moment, we just looked at each other. We hadn't seen each other in a year, but we'd spent the first twenty-four inseparable. She wore a heather gray T-shirt and matching sweatpants that bunched around her ankles. The ends of her wet hair reached the middle of her back. She had dyed it black, and the blonde was growing in. I couldn't tell if it was some fashion statement she was trying to make or if she'd let herself go. It surprised me because we had worn wigs regularly, but we never touched our real hair.

She'd pierced her nose on the left side with a silver hoop, and she wore red lipstick that appeared to be some kind of stain. I could see the dry cracks in her lips where it had settled. I wondered if she'd just gotten home from somewhere or if she applied it for my arrival.

Her brown eyes were layered in thick black liner that accentuated the small wrinkles I'd never noticed below her eyes. It was exactly like looking at myself but like she was trying to look bad or sad or hurt. This feeling on her face was exacerbated by the edges of her body, the jutting bones of her shoulders, and the sharp points where her clavicle hinged above her T-shirt collar.

It was an indescribable feeling to see the decisions I could have made and how they would have affected my face and my body. She smoked and drank habitually, but until that moment, I thought we were still identical, like there was another person in the world walking around with all of my exact features.

I wondered if she had the same feeling, if she thought that I was on the opposite coast with black hair and a nose ring, if we were simultaneously realizing that we were not the same person.

"How are you?" she asked. It was a dumb question that showed how little we knew each other suddenly. I wanted to take her hand, turn it over, and write M I S S E D Y O U across her open palm.

"I slept most of the way," I said, unspooling the scarf from my neck and setting my suitcase down beside the door.

Long rays of white light poured through a large picture window, illuminating the apartment. The walls of the living room were painted fire engine red but darker on one

wall, as if she'd realized how many coats it would take and had given up. The couch's cushions were upholstered in black and white gingham fabric, while the body of the couch remained forest green. A long table stood below the window, and the surface was crowded with slightly wilted plants.

"Do you like it?" Jamie asked.

"Sure," I said.

None of the furniture looked like the things we had shared, things that we'd inherited from our mother when the bank finally took the house, or things that we bought at yard sales, and thrift shops, and flea markets. Where was the leather recliner? The pink teakettle? The oak end tables? The bronze candelabras? Had Jamie slowly discarded our belongings, abandoned an item on the sidewalk every week? Or had she castoff everything at once? Truck rental, dump, gone.

I followed her into the second bedroom that she used as an office. A small desk stood in the corner next to a futon, and stacks of papers towered around a sleek silver laptop. More than the furniture, I wondered what she had done with all the framed photographs, the ones we'd cut into smaller shapes when we cut our parents out of them.

"I went back to the book," she said. "Revisions."

I didn't know she'd left it.

"I've been teaching these writing classes to kids, and I got inspired again," Jamie said, sweeping her arm over the desk.

"I have to change," I said, and she left the room. I closed the door, leaned against the frame, and slid down to the floor.

Two years earlier, Jamie told me that she planned to write a book. She said it was about a witch who slept with politicians and got them to do what she wanted by hypnotizing them in the post-coitus glow. For months we developed the plot over breakfast: tea and the pink grapefruit that we shared every morning. We often got up and acted out entire scenes so she could get the dialogue right, or we went to places that showed up in the book so she could imagine scenes. She said she'd let me read it when she finished the first draft, but one morning I needed to check the weather. I opened her laptop, and there it was on the screen, so I read the first few pages.

It was a story about us. About my mother and father. It was a book about our life. I hadn't spoken to my mother in six years, and I learned from those pages that she and Jamie emailed each other frequently. I had never kept a thing of importance from Jamie in my life.

I went to my room and sat on my bed. Jamie would be home from work any minute.

I heard her step into the apartment. She locked the deadbolt and hung her keys on the nail beside the door. She dropped her bag and heels in the entryway. She opened the cabinet above the stove. The pink teakettle whistled. She brewed her chamomile tea with a spoonful of lavender honey. She called one of the girls she was screwing and made plans for later in the week. She lay on the burgundy sofa and turned on the TV. I knew she had opened a bottle of red wine. She would drink the first glass in reckless gulps then

sip the rest of the bottle in a peaceful way. I knew her so thoroughly I could imagine her every action, but she led an entire life without me.

I waited until she went to sleep, then I called my boyfriend, Max, and woke him. He had told me months earlier about his office relocation to Seattle, and now it was only a week away. I'd dated him longer than I'd ever dated anyone because I knew when it would end. I wasn't sure exactly how he felt about me, but he often looked at me with a kind of longing.

He picked up on the second ring.

"I want to come to Seattle. I'm in love with you," I said.

I wasn't.

He said yes.

In the morning, Jamie and I were eating cereal across from each other at the kitchen table, the one we took from our mother's, where we'd been eating breakfast all our life. She sliced the grapefruit and pushed my half across the table.

"Max's transfer to Seattle," I said.

"I know. It's soon?" She reached over the table and wrote I M S O R across the top of my hand with her fingertip.

I pulled it away. "You lied to me."

"What?"

"I read your book."

"Laura—"

"Is it all true?"

She didn't saying anything.

“I’m going with him,” I said.

“What?”

“In a week.”

She lowered her mug to the table.

I looked at her face. My face. Our face.

She looked away from me, put her coat on, and left the house in pajamas, the light blue ones, patterned in silver reindeer.

I went to stay at Max’s.

The day before our flight, I left Jamie a message telling her when I would be at the apartment to get some things and say goodbye. When I showed up, she wasn’t there.

She wanted to hurt me. She wanted to change my mind. I packed my one suitcase and left.

Ten minutes had passed while I sat on the floor in Jamie’s office when she knocked.

I opened the door, and she dropped my suitcase inside the frame without mentioning that I hadn’t changed anything.

“I also work at a nightclub,” she said. “I have to get ready now, so relax, get comfortable.” She handed me a key that I assumed worked on the apartment, but she didn’t say. “The storm’s supposed to be pretty wicked. I wouldn’t go anywhere unless it’s an emergency.”

She walked into the bathroom across the hall, and the blow dryer started. I shut the office door again and called Max.

“How is it?” he asked.

“Her surgery is in the morning,” I said. I’d told him that Jamie was having her appendix removed.

“She’s lucky,” he said. “Usually it’s a rupture. An emergency.”

I knew he wasn’t questioning me, only stating a fact.

When Max and I had been in Seattle for three days, we were sitting across from each other at the rectangular table in our corporately furnished apartment. He had made ravioli and Bolognese, a beautiful, celebratory meal, our new home, a recipe handed down through his family.

“Did your mother cook when you were growing up?” he asked.

I had told myself I would stop lying the second the plane landed. I finished chewing and placed my fork on the table. What could I tell him? Where would I start? My lips wouldn’t move, and the silence grew like a balloon inflating between us.

“I’m sorry I brought it up,” Max said, and the moment passed.

Our interaction then began to feel hollow and pointless to me, like my real life was waiting for me somewhere, and Seattle was just another story that Jamie and I were playing out.

“Will you call me tomorrow and tell me how everything turns out?” Max asked.

“I will,” I said.

It was three hours earlier in Seattle. He was still at the office. He told me what the rest of his day looked like, but I already knew.

He left the apartment at eight a.m. He worked until noon when he took a ninety-minute lunch where he often met clients. When he had nothing scheduled, he'd grab a sandwich and use his lunch break for the gym. Then he went back to the office. At four thirty he'd have a small Scotch before getting in his car and driving home through afternoon traffic. He called on the way and asked me what I felt like for dinner. He would pick something up on the way home, or I'd have something started that we would finish cooking together.

The blow dryer stopped, and I told Max that I had to hang up.

I walked out of the room, and Jamie was piling things onto her coffee table. There were books and an array of candles in different colors and shapes and sizes. She lit the cylindrical red one, and its cinnamon scent filled the air. She went to the kitchen and came back with some potato chips, those sour, candy straws, a bottle of red wine and a bag of marshmallows. I had no idea what she was doing. It felt like she was preparing to take six-year-old versions of us camping.

"If the power goes out," she said. "I'll be at work until three or four. Sometimes it's difficult to catch a cab from downtown."

Like I didn't know. She was already in a puffy, ankle-length coat, a long scarf, and tall black heels. She had teased her hair so it looked dead.

Why had she asked me to come? The words hung in my mouth, but when I opened my mouth to speak all I said was, "OK."

Then she left.

I went into her office to find the manuscript. I wanted information about everything now. There was an outline directly on top of the laptop labeled, *NEW DRAFT/END: When we meet our father.*

On our eighteenth birthday, we'd just moved to the neighborhood, and some kids invited Jamie to a Pond party. We spent all afternoon preparing. For me, she chose a powder pink wig and a green kimono veined in golden shells. She dressed like a 1950s pin-up girl. She poofed her hair and wrapped it in a polka dotted bandanna. Her black leather dress was so tight and high-wasted, she had to suck in her ribs and lie flat on her bed for me to zip her.

Jamie linked her arm in mine as we descended the hill to Jamaica Pond. No one knew us. I felt a kind of anonymous power by her side. I followed her through the party while she told extravagant stories about us on the spot, made up entire lives. We'd grown up in Amsterdam with expat parents who worked for the Consulate. We were from northern California, raised on a marijuana farm. At one point she described our life in the desert so elaborately, I wondered if she'd seen it in dreams.

We sat beside the pond at the end of the evening with our legs dipped in the water. Jamie was whispering to a girl, and I sensed something romantic between them, so I stopped paying attention. I tapped the water's surface with my toes, creating small wakes that blurred the moon's reflection.

"They're dead," I heard Jamie say.

“I’m sorry,” the girl said, reaching around Jamie’s back and giving her shoulder a squeeze.

I reached over and wrote S T O P along Jamie’s forearm, but she ignored me.

“They were on their way home from dance class. They were always trying new things together,” Jamie said.

I reached out again. P L E A S E, I wrote, but she went on. I held my breath as she described the December evening, the subzero temperature, the black ice, the guardrail, the eighteen-wheeler that flattened the sedan on the interstate.

Dead parents elicited sympathy and consolation. We had neighbors that made us casseroles regularly, an old man who took us to dinner once a month, financed a fake semester in college, a vacation to Naples, a used Honda. At first the fabrications were just easier than the bizarre truth, and then it became ordinary. I told different names to baristas. I took vacation time to backpack around Europe and didn’t leave the apartment.

I thought I might pass out, and then the lights flickered and went out in Jamie’s apartment. I gripped the small stack of papers in one hand and followed the walls with my other palm back to the living room. The cinnamon candle cast everything in the room in shadows. I opened the bottle of wine and chugged a third of it. I lit a few more candles so I could read the rest of the outline.

-Our father proposed to our mother when she became pregnant with us. She was twenty, and he was twenty-five. They grew up in the same small town in New

Hampshire, and the accident (us) happened while our father was on leave from the Marines. They were married at City Hall when our mother was eight months along. She wore a sweeping dress like a purple sheet, and our father wore a light blue suit with a crooked bowtie.

-Our father suffered a debilitating back injury in the field that caused nerve damage on the left side of his body (he played with us when we were young, would drag that bum leg around the house pretending to be a zombie). He was discharged, and they bought the house in New Hampshire.

-They never hugged or kissed. We didn't know they were unhappy (didn't know the difference between happiness and unhappiness between them, we had only ever known the two parents and the same thing). Retrospectively, sure, they had the kind of suburban routine that left them tired, slightly overweight, and without liquid assets. But they seemed like everyone else's parents. We lived in a beautiful, medium-sized, New England Cape, red paneling, cream shutters, with a neatly manicured lawn, reseeded every summer. No joy between them, just this quiet resentment (I think) for everything they never got to do, and that apathy infected Laura and me in the form of their absenteeism. They never attended our school functions or sports events. They never fussed over our homework, As or Fs. They never tucked us in. They never kissed us goodnight.

-Our fort in the woods where we spent all of our time, where we kept snacks and books and stuffed animals along shelves constructed from branches and plywood. We practiced writing secret messages along each other's skin. We played out intricate stories that went on for months (sister witches who mixed elaborate

potions: toothpaste; ground-up raccoon bones; rusty beer cans; a dead, sawed-off squirrel foot; endangered Lady Slippers; snow; salamander tails; pinecones; eyelashes).

-Our father disappeared when we were thirteen. More like a death than a leaving: his wool coat on the porch; his aluminum coffee-to-go mug beside the kitchen sink; his dingy white socks drooped over his work boots at the foot of the recliner. We looked for him for weeks, couldn't believe he was gone until our mother started throwing his things into industrial-sized trash bags.

-Our mother began working on Caribbean cruise ships, leaving Laura and me alone erratically. Each time she left, she gave us a new credit card in our father's name so we could get cash from the ATM. "This is my one life," she said. "You'll understand someday."

-We'd just finished high school when the bank foreclosed on the house. We moved to the apartment in Jamaica Plain, cut up the credit cards, and deemed ourselves parentless.

-Laura met Max. Laura left.

-Lunches with Mom.

-Our father followed me onto the subway.

I dropped the papers on the floor and drank the rest of the wine. I wrapped myself in a quilt and counted the weird light spots behind my eyelids until I fell asleep.

When I woke up, the apartment had become cold, and I was covered in several blankets. Candles brightened every corner of the room. Jamie was sitting across from me on the couch. She'd washed the makeup from her face so her eyes looked their regular brown, and her cheekbones had shrunken to my size. Her knees were pulled into her chest under a purple, sateen nightgown, and she held a glass of red wine against her shoulder.

"Were you watching me sleep? What time is it?" I said.

"How's Max?" she asked.

"Fine."

"Is it that bad?"

"It's not. What do you want? He misses me. He wants me to come home. I thought about leaving while you were at work. I called the airport, but there were no flights."

She took a sip of her wine but didn't respond. I hated that she knew I was lying.

"You're seeing Mom now?" I asked.

"I wanted a family again."

"She left. She's not family."

"Then neither are you," Jamie said.

"Did you really find Dad?"

"Not yet. That's why you're here," she said.

"I thought you were in some kind of trouble."

"A man's been following me for a month."

“Call the police.”

“I think it’s him.”

It took me a moment to understand what she meant, and then it hurt for some reason—that my father would find Jamie and not me.

As if she’d read my thoughts, she said, “I lead a more interesting life than you.” She pulled a cigarette from a pack on the coffee table.

I was about to ask her not to smoke inside when I remembered that this wasn’t our house. This wasn’t my life. I could just leave.

“Why would he be following you?” We hadn’t seen or heard from him in eleven years.

“Let’s find out,” she said.

“Why do you think it’s him?”

“You don’t think I’d recognize my own father?”

“I don’t think I’d recognize our own father.”

“I’ve never seen him up close, but he has the limp.”

It was true. I might not know his face, but I would recognize his gait anywhere. I took a cigarette from the pack.

“Is that a yes?” She struck the lighter, and the flame created a long oval of brightness through her face.

I cupped the flame and leaned into it with the cigarette’s end.

The plan was Jamie would go to work the following afternoon like normal. She walked to the same coffee shop every day for espresso and a sandwich. This is where the man began trailing her, then she took a side street directly to Stony Brook T stop. When Jamie exited the coffee shop, I would follow him, following her. When she got to the subway entrance, just a few blocks away, she would turn around, I would keep walking, and we would corner the man who might be our father.

We woke up and spent the morning sitting across from each other on the couch, keeping warm under shared blankets. Jamie opened all the curtains, so there was enough light to read by. The storm had died down, but the wind still howled through the brick walls of the building. We drank mint tea and ate the marshmallows, then started on the wine in the afternoon. Everything was just as it had been.

Max called on his lunch break and again before he drove home. I ignored both calls, turned my phone off, and put it away. I showered in the darkened bathroom. When I came out, the power was back, and Jamie had turned on every light in the apartment.

She had laid out an outfit for me: black wool sweater dress, thick winter tights, black wig. I went to the bathroom and used her cosmetics and perfume. I shaded my eyelids with her black liner. I dabbed my lips with her red stain. I combined her lemongrass and bergamot oils then smoothed the mixture behind my ears and along my wrists. I sat on the couch and waited while she got ready in her own room. She came out and said we would leave shortly, but she had to finish something work related. She went into the office for a few minutes, and then we left.

The storm had created enormous snowdrifts that invaded the sidewalk, so we had to walk in the street. Jamie linked her arm in mine, and we strode without speaking until we reached the block before the coffee shop, then we parted. She walked in through the swinging glass door. I crossed the street, sat on a cement bench, and waited for her to leave. I drew figure eights in my palms and chipped ice from the side of the bench with my boots until she repapered. She carried her sandwich in one hand and a Styrofoam cup in the other. There was no one following her. I wondered if the man would cut through the alley, but he didn't. We hadn't considered this, so I stayed a block behind her like we'd planned.

When Jamie got to the subway entrance, she didn't turn around to meet me. She stepped through the door without looking back, so I started to run. I ran across the street, through the entrance, and down the stairs to the platform. The black wig fell off, but I didn't pause to retrieve it. Throngs of people were stepping onto and off of the train, but I couldn't see Jamie anywhere. The alarm sounded, the doors shut, and the train blew out of the station.

I walked back up to the street. Maybe I missed her in the crowd. She was probably on the street waiting for me. I stood on the corner for a long time. I imagined Jamie reappearing in the subway entrance and coming back to me, explaining that she had gotten off at the next stop and turned around. I imagined us walking together to her apartment. I imagined admitting that I didn't want to go back to Seattle. I imagined setting up in the spare room.

I kept telling myself I would leave if Jamie didn't come back in one minute, then I let another minute pass then another. Maybe the outbound train was delayed. Maybe she

decided to walk instead. When my hands had become numb, I walked toward our old neighborhood. I stopped at my coffee shop and ordered tea. When I asked about the blueberry scone, the young woman behind the counter scrunched up her nose and said, “We don’t have scones.”

I walked up the hill, and I saw our elderly neighbor on his front porch. When I waved, he acted as if he didn’t see me, so I yelled, “Hello,” and he got up and walked into the house.

I didn’t go to the fence. I knew that the hole would be patched up and gone, so I hailed a cab back to Jamie’s apartment. I asked the driver to wait outside while I collected my things.

I went into the office and there was a small note on top of my suitcase.

In the book he shows up, and we meet him. The same collared shirt, denim, and work boots. Gray and black stubble along his jaw. Deeper wrinkles around his eyes. Deeper crows feet. He hugs us at the same time, each with one arm.

I went back out to the cab and asked the driver to take me to the airport. As we pulled onto the Tobin Bridge, I turned around and looked at the entire city, the shape of the skyline I knew perfectly. G O O D B Y E, I wrote in the fog that covered the back window.

I walked through the airport until I found a short line. The woman behind the checkout counter waved me forward. “Where you headed ma’am?”

“Chicago,” I said. “I don’t have a ticket.”

“We have a flight in less than an hour. You from there?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“I went to college there, miss it—”

I interrupted her. “I’m sorry. I’m not. I’m not from there. I’m from here, but I’m moving to Chicago.”

How to Live for Emma

1. Read The Autopsy

Wait until the afternoon when your mother, a dental hygienist, and your father, a bank teller, will be at work. Try your key in the front door. Changed.¹ Check the storm window that drops into the basement. Fixed. Go to the shed behind your mother's herb garden. Shuffle around in the musty dark. Walk through a spider web that sticks to your face, tickles your neck and shoulder.² Swat it away. Run your fingers along the cool cement wall until you find the light switch. See that your father, that fucking creep, still has the Time-out Chairs.³

¹ You and Emma left home six months ago, and you haven't been home since.

²When you were kids, Emma strummed spider webs like guitar strings, brushing her fingers against their checkered octagons. You were never gentle enough, but she held your wrist and patiently guided your hand over the ripples. "See," she said.

³When you or Emma "misbehaved" (i.e. getting a snack without permission or not coming directly home from the bus stop), your father placed these red metal folding chairs on either side of his study facing each other. He led you to one and Emma to the other, pushed you down by your shoulders—though you knew the routine, would have sat on your own—and secured your wrists to the chair backs with zip ties. He set the tape recorder in the middle of the floor and pressed record. "No speaking." He returned after an hour, sat at his desk, and played the tape before he released you. His institution of dual punishment was meant to

Retrieve the garden spade. Stomp a basil bush upon exiting the shed. Smash the basement window. Brush the broken glass from the sill with your sneaker. Reach through frame and release the latch. Get down on all fours and slip into the window feet first. Feel a sharp sting as you slide your torso along its base, and dangle your feet down to the floor. Once inside, lift your T-shirt. Examine the source of the pain, and see that you cut yourself on an overlooked shard of glass. Notice that the wound is not deep but long, beginning half an inch above your right hipbone and running into your breast.

Walk through the house, up two flights of stairs to the master bedroom. See that chronological school photos of you and Emma that once climbed the walls along either side of the staircase have been removed. See that your parents' bedroom has undergone major renovations, reeks of fresh paint. The walls, an eggshell blue, the curtains, floral, the carpet, beige. Wonder what other renovations will take the place of a memorial service, a headstone, an urn.⁴

Rifle through the medicine cabinet. Find nothing of interest except your mother's prescription Xanax. Three, point five-milligram pills remain. Turn on the faucet. Position your mouth below the tap. Swallow the pills. Try to remember the last time you drank water.

stop Emma from covering for you, to cause hatred, resentment. You and Emma learned to speak with your eyes.

⁴ Your father refused a funeral because he "couldn't bear to look at Emma's dirty hooligan friends." Father Ed held a Sunday service in her name that you attended with Dylan. You snuck in the back and looked on from balcony above the pews until you asked Dylan to lie on the floor with you. You lay side by side. He pressed your palms with his thumbs and traced your lifelines with his slightly overgrown nails. You focused on sunlight that shone through the stained glass ceiling: red, green, yellow splashes on white walls, while Father Ed read from, Psalm 23:4. "Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me." You listened until he began Emma's eulogy, presumably concocted by your mother. When he called Emma a shy child, you thought, not shy, scared, got up and left.

Plug the tub. Turn on the shower. Weigh yourself on the digital scale. Recall Muffin Mondays⁵ with overwhelming clarity. Open your mother's cosmetic bag of assorted nail polish. Read the names. Take your time selecting a color. Choose the brightest called, "Caught Red Handed." Drizzle it across the beige carpet and along the hardwood floor down the stairs to your father's study. Grow nauseous upon entering. Open the silver filing cabinet on the right side of his monstrous, lacquered, oak desk. Extract the grey folder labeled, "Offspring." Flip through the pages that begin with Emma's birth certificate⁶ and end with Medical Certificate of Cause of Death.⁷

Points of interest:

1. Approximate time of death: 2:19 a.m.
2. Injected intravenously.
3. Blood test revealed 150 milligrams present.

Upon your departure, check the green, ceramic jar above the refrigerator where your parents keep cash for ordering in, school lunches, etc. Find sixty dollars. Try to remember the last time you ate. Take a half-gallon of whole milk and two bananas.

Exit the front door. Prop it open with an ornamental stone that borders the brick path leading up to the entryway.

2. Conduct the Research

⁵Around your fourteenth birthday, your mother instituted Muffin Mondays: Every Monday, she weighed you and Emma before ballet class. If you remained the same weight from week to week, you got a muffin. When Emma got a muffin and you didn't, Emma refused to eat, which resulted in Time-out Chairs sans breakfast. This ceased to be an issue when you and Emma discovered bulimia. It is your belief that your mother knew this.

⁶Emma Rose Baker, born in Portland, Maine at Mercy Hospital on June 3rd, 1997. Seven point two pounds. Nineteen point four inches. An inked imprint of her wrinkled baby feet.

⁷"Drug overdose and heart failure from crystalline methamphetamine."

Board the Number Five to Portland Public Library. Avoid any unwanted (which is all) human interaction. Wear sunglasses. Lift your hood. Pretend to read an abandoned newspaper. Drink from the half-gallon of milk. Eat a banana. Find swallowing a challenge.

Locate a computer on the first floor, tucked away behind the stacks. Visit twenty websites, and conclude that two hundred milligrams administered intravenously will leave no room for error. Continue reading. Discover that overdoses from methamphetamine are rarely fatal if treated quickly. Warning signs include: Aggressiveness; Changes in heart rhythm; Coma; Confusion; Fast breathing; Fever; Hallucinations; High blood pressure or low blood pressure; Hyperactivity; Muscle pains; Nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea; Seizures; Shakiness.⁸ Stop reading.

Call Vinny.⁹ Order one gram of Crystal at forty dollars a gram. Walk over to his building on High Street. Ring the buzzer. Hesitate upon entering the stairwell due to overwhelming stench of piss and hot dogs. Climb the stairs. Enter his apartment. Try not to look at his pointed, brown teeth and pocked, bloated skin. Pay him with your parents' cash. Ask to use the digital scale on the coffee table. Measure out two hundred milligrams. Thank him. Try to give him the banana. Shudder at his open-mouthed laughter. Leave. Step into the sun. Head for the pier.

⁸You and Emma got ready at Dylan's. Drum and bass pumped through the stereo. You snorted small bumps of Crystal off the coffee table between applying eye shadow and a scoreless game of Gin Rummy. Dylan followed you into the bathroom where you fucked on the counter. You and Emma split a cigarette on the fire escape. She wet her thumb and rubbed displaced mascara from your eyelid. She blended the foundation along your jaw. You left. Emma held one of your hands and Dylan, the other. You got to the club and bought another bag from Marcus. Andres showed you his new golden tooth. Dylan gave you Ecstasy. Emma handed you a bottle of water. You've spent hours, afternoons, entire nights, searching for one additional detail. But there's nothing.

⁹The local dealer from whom you can get almost anything at any time. Dylan or Emma always went because you abhor Vinny's apartment, and the package is never ready, so you have to wait inside. His stuff is solid, though, and some wax cut bag from the club could leave you a vegetable, destined to a lifetime of spoon feedings from your mother.

3. Date with Dylan

Offer the homeless man outside the corner store five dollars and the banana to purchase you a fifth of whiskey. Walk to the pier early. Pass Rhonda and Marcus in Monument Square. Daps. What's up, girl? How you doing? See the graffiti up on Deering? Going to the show later? See you tomorrow then. Stay up.

Sit at the end of the pier on your favorite bench¹⁰. Watch the sun fall against the pink horizon. Inhale the rotten fish smell that rolls out with the tide. See: Lobster boats unload after the day. A cruise ship drifts by. Tourists lean over its deck, snapping photos of the city. Wonder if you'll show up in any of the photos, a blurry silhouette, a grey smudge. Wonder if they can decipher any of your features, if you look just like Emma from their distance?¹¹

Feel warm fingers against your neck. Slide over and make room for Dylan beside you. Ease into an arm he drops over your shoulder. Relax as he breathes against your ear and then kisses you quietly along your jaw until he meets your lips. Curl into him. Bury your face in his neck. Smell: tobacco, beer, dank bready musk from the heat of the day. Trade him your fifth for his bag of blow and the snipped plastic straw.

Follow him back to his building on Congress. Open your backpack. Carefully unfold the silver tulle you cut into the shape of a halter-top and unpack the blue sequins.

¹⁰ You and Emma lay across the seat, so the tops of your heads aligned, and your legs dangled to the ground on either side of the bench. You listened to the waves lap against the pier, the seagulls careening over the water. You didn't speak for long stretches of time, and in your memory, Emma knew what you were thinking.

¹¹ With only thirteen months between you, fifteen and sixteen, Emma older, people mistook you for her often. Identical pale blue eyes, smudgy freckled nose, angular jaw, single, cavernous dimple on left cheek. Distinguishing characteristics: The white scar the length of your chin from the ice skating accident that required thirty-two stitches and resulted in three hours in Time-out Chairs. The red dots that speckled Emma's face when she began to pick at it unconsciously, incessantly.

Press several sequins against your palm and thread them individually with the sewing needle. Fasten them along the tulle in swirled paisley patterns.¹²

Feel Dylan's fingers on the base of your T-shirt. Raise your arms so he can lift it over your head. Purse the sewing needle between your lips as he pulls you toward the mattress. Lie next to him and stab him lightly with the needle, making inflamed red tattoos on his skin.

Wake up on your back. Dylan spooned around you, your torso wedged between his thighs. Move gently so as not to wake him. Drink three glasses of water and then yesterday's coffee from the French press. Finish the halter. Pack up your things. Back out of his apartment, and close the door slowly to get a long look at him lying there in sleep.

4. Go Home

Lie in bed¹³ for the remainder of the afternoon. Hug yourself. Pretend that your arms are Emma's arms.¹⁴

5. Go to the Club

Arrive at two a.m. Feel all the bodies like static heat as you push through the crowd.

Don't stop when Johnny, Marcus, Andres, Sarah, try to dance with you. Raise one finger

¹² She wore a midriff, sparkling, blue halter and a red satin mini. When the music cut out and the lights went up, she wasn't in the corner of the stage: your meet-up spot. Dylan found her on the floor against the wall, obscured by an amp. He screamed in a long unending way, like falling into a tunnel. You ran to him. You saw her. Vomit in her lap. Mouth smeared with foam. Strange gray tone to her face. Eyes not opened but not closed. You knew her skin would be cold, her pulse would be absent. Even then, you leaned down and reached for her, but Dylan grabbed you, hugged you from behind, and dragged you away through the crowd.

¹³ Your bed, two twin mattresses pushed together on the floor, dumped from an adjacent apartment building, sits against the wall in the corner of the studio beneath a canopy of multicolored tulle, a kind of rainbow mosquito netting, created by Emma.

¹⁴ Though you and Emma were forced into separate bedrooms in elementary school, you still crawled into bed with her most nights.

and nod to assure them you'll be right back. Imagine Emma dancing in the middle of the room.¹⁵ Head for the side door.

See Dylan up against the stage, weaving his arms through the air with purple glow sticks. Watch the way he moves his hands in a figure eight, like a liquid prism, a continuous current. Follow the pattern with your eyes. Try not to go to him, but feel as though some outside, physical force is pulling you toward him, guiding your steps.

Wrap your arms around his waist. Rest your face against his face. Warm, sweaty, unshaven. Where you been, girl? Grind your hips against his hips until you are moving in the exact same rhythm, so you are two bodies, and then one body, and then no body, and only music. Follow his arm as he spins you. Fall into him. Press your ear against his chest so you can feel his heart in your face.

Let go. Shake it off. Back away. Watch him until his face disappears in the darkness and the purple lights blur into all the neon lights in the room.

6. Go To The Alley

Sit on the ground cross-legged, concealed by the dumpster. Carefully unload your backpack. Remove the rig, the water bottle, the Crystal, and a lighter. Close your eyes. Conjure Emma¹⁶.

Crush the Crystal into a fine powder with the bottom edge of your lighter. Remove the plastic cap from the water bottle. Dry it with your halter. Dump the powder

¹⁵ You can picture her perfectly. Neck arched. Head back. Hair swinging like she was looking up at something no one else could see.

¹⁶ She sits along the pier. Her arms are crossed over the metal railing. The breeze blows her hair around her face, so some pieces fall over her eyes, while others seem suspended in the air. The sun casts an orange glow on everything, and she smiles in that way where she bit her bottom lip and scrunched her nose before her face opened up into laughter.

into the cap. Suction water into the rig and dilute the Crystal with small drops until it becomes a cloudy mixture. Empty the rig of remaining water. Siphon the liquid Crystal. Remove your belt and wrap it around your bicep. Tighten it by pulling with your teeth until the largest blue vein in the crook of your elbow starts with small trembles and then throbs like it will burst from your arm.

Hold the needle there. Say your prayers¹⁷. Prick the skin. Hit the vein. Plunge.

¹⁷ “Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me.”

Greetings from Boston

Daniel and I step up to the ticket counter, and the woman's mouth moves to ask us a question, but I am distracted by her heart-shaped lips, their ruby glow. I cannot remember the last time that I wore lipstick. I wish I had some for Anna's wedding, and I picture the makeup bag in my suitcase. Is there an ancient stick floating around in there? Light pink for the afternoons and burgundy for the evenings. An artifact of a time when I thought about my face and how it looked to people other than Daniel. I liked the moist and smearable kind, but he complained about the feel of it on his face, the film it left around his mouth when we kissed. It wasn't a demand but one of the small things we've done for each other without recognizing the slight ripple that becomes permanent change.

"Sorry," I say, hoping my face forms a question.

"Your boarding passes and IDs." Her eyes shift to me, and then Daniel, and then the long line behind us.

Daniel places his boarding pass and ID on the counter with one hand and brushes my low back with the other. I hand her my documents and notice her plastic nametag.

Kelly, a sweet name, the kind you wonder about as people grow old, the existence of an eighty-year-old Katy or Molly.

Kelly looks at my ID. “Elle, do you mind taking off your sunglasses?”

I slide the large black frames down my nose.

Kelly is efficient, smiling all the time, pressing keys on her computer, scribbling numbers and letters along our boarding passes, sweeping our suitcases up onto the scale. I wonder if I could do her job, if I’d take comfort in this constant, surface-level interaction. Where are you headed? Have a nice trip? Come again. But no, my face can ache from smiling, and I like spending my afternoons alone at the computer in my cubicle. I love my work as senior copy editor. I make sentences concise and pristine.

Kelly gives us our luggage receipts, and I put our boarding passes and IDs in the front pocket of my shirt. Daniel’s always tearing through the apartment ten minutes before an appointment. *Do you have the light rail pass? Did I leave my library card in the car? Have you seen my keys?*

Kelly directs us toward security on the south side of the airport by our gate. I nod and thank her like she is giving us essential information, but I know everything because I have lived here in Oregon for ten years, and I have brand loyalty. I only fly one airline because I like knowing what to expect: the bendable headrests on the plane, the way the attendants offer me chips and soda for free. If I get bored with my book I can watch the television station of my choice on the seat in front of me instead of having to look at the middle of a movie on small screens that hover throughout the cabin.

We walk back outside through the sliding, glass doors. Daniel weaves his fingers through mine and rubs his thumb along the middle of my palm. We’ve got plenty of time

because I like to be early, can't bear to be rushed. I manage unnecessary stress this way. Earlier, I stood by the open door of our apartment while Daniel zipped his suit into the garment bag.

“Did you pack toothpaste?” he asked.

“The cab is waiting,” I said.

“It only takes fifteen minutes to get to the airport.”

“How many minutes did you think I meant when I told you the cab would be here in ten minutes?”

And he followed me downstairs.

We sit on a cool metal bench by the entrance to the airport. Daniel puts his headphones on and opens his book in his lap, *Epistemological Levelism and Dynamical Complex Systems*.

I take the worn, leather pouch from my tote bag and spread the tobacco and rolling papers onto my thighs, a habit I developed and perfected as a teenager. The honeyed smell soothes me, and I imagine that I am at home on our second-story balcony. Usually I get up after Daniel leaves to teach his eight a.m. class. I play an album that I love, take my black coffee outside, and smoke two cigarettes in the sun.

A blue SUV pulls up against the curb. A woman steps out from either side. A tall, blonde woman wearing a black suit embraces a shorter woman in a wool coat and green headscarf. Tall Blonde reaches all the way around Headscarf and rubs her back with both hands. Headscarf rests her face against Blonde's chest. They stay that way, like they are the only people at the airport, and then they have a soft kiss and a squeezing hug before

Headscarf lets go, walks through the double doors, and into the airport. Where is Headscarf going? Why is Blonde staying back?

My phone vibrates in my pocket. It's my sister, Anna. She is checking to make sure that I am here. She is calling to tell me to get on the plane.

"Anna," I say. "I just woke up from a nap. I have to go. I'm packing."

"Don't mess with me right now."

"I'll be at your next wedding," I say.

"I'll help you avoid Mom."

"Let me go and finish."

"We'll give her a sedative. Crush it up in her box of wine. We'll kick her out. We'll tie her up and lock the door somewhere."

I laugh then. "Anna, I'm hanging up. I'll see you tomorrow."

I am good at compartmentalizing my emotions, so in the month since Daniel suggested we move to Boston, I've taken on more contracts and slept a lot. I've exercised and sewn. I decreased my mile time by two seconds. I read four books. I completed three puzzles. I planted an herb garden that died and planted another.

We sat together on the balcony. A Sunday spread lined the table: cheap pinot grigio, white cheddar cheese, lightly shriveled green grapes. The sun disappeared along the horizon. The spring breeze was cool, and my feet were bare, so I had an afghan draped over my shoulders. The wind carried garlic cooking in a neighboring apartment, and

something light and bluesy, something of Daniel's, turned on the record player and drifted out our window. He had just received a call for an interview in Boston. He'd been an adjunct professor for five years, applied for full-time positions in Oregon constantly, published eight papers, and still nothing. An old mentor called him, the head of the Philosophy Department at Boston University, and Daniel thought he had a good chance. He delivered all of this information in a perfunctory manner, and we were sitting in silence.

"I really want this job, Elle. It's specialized Epistemology. I'd have complete pedagogical freedom. A chance at tenure—"

"Boston?"

"You spend more time in the apartment than you do out of it. It wouldn't be so different."

"I love it here."

"You can run anywhere. You barely see your friends, and your sister would be just half an hour away. This is what my career looks like. I have to go where the jobs are."

"Why are we talking about this now? You don't have the job, yet," I said.

"I want to know before the interview, and there won't be time. Teaching assignments begin in three months."

"You already have an interview?"

"I scheduled it while we're in town for the wedding."

"But we're only there for one day. The red-eye." I had told both Anna and Daniel that I couldn't get more time off of work. We would get on the plane Friday night, arrive in Boston Saturday morning, attend the wedding, go to sleep, then leave Sunday

afternoon. Neither of them believed me, but Daniel knew not to question me about home, and Anna was only grateful I'd agreed to come.

"It's early. We'll go right to the college from the airport," he said.

"My life makes sense here. I'm happy."

"Am I that incidental?"

"Jesus, Daniel."

"Location is arbitrary."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"I don't understand," he said, resting a hand on my knee. "You love the east coast. You talk about it like it's the only place."

"Nostalgia can be more powerful than reality."

"Don't do that thing. Don't get abstract."

"OK." I sat up and looked at him, but I didn't know where to start.

"What's the deal? Talk to me."

"I feel terrible there. I feel like the fuck up that couldn't get out of her own way. Boston reminds me. Every corner. Every subway stop. And my mother, still treating me that way. I turned everything around, and she doesn't acknowledge that, hasn't ever."

I didn't tell him that I knew why. Why she let me do that. Why she didn't look for me, stop me, find me, anything. I knew she never had hopes for me.

"Elle, that's all over. Come on, you're incredible. The smartest person I know."

"And what about work, Daniel? What will I do? Leave my job in the next three months and find another one in a city where I haven't lived since I was a teenager?"

"It's a lot of money if I get the position. I could support us both for a while."

“OK,” I said. “I want this for you. We’ll figure it out.” I drank half of my glass in one gulp. I put my head back on the chair and took a long breath.

He would go for the interview. We would go to the wedding. He would see, and I wanted my mother to see. To see me. To see him. To see us. To know that I didn’t need her hopes.

There’s still an hour before our plane boards. We could just leave. We could get up and walk out and go home. The taxi line across the street, the unending row of green and yellow cabs, is begging me to get up and go anywhere but Boston.

I run my fingers over the ridges in the bench. I look at Daniel’s face, and I wonder if love is a lifetime of doing things that you don’t want to do, and if that’s true, can I do it?

A small girl wanders over. Her auburn hair is matted against her forehead, and something crusted and green forms a ring around her tiny mouth. She crawls up next to me, so I cup my cigarette and move it away from her. I nudge Daniel, and he takes off his headphones.

“Who’s this?” he asks.

I scan the curb for a person looking for this child, and Daniel stands when an older girl runs up to us. She sweeps the child into her arms and jogs through the sliding glass doors as the child lets out a long wail.

I finish my cigarette, and we head toward the security checkpoint. When we get in line, Daniel begins emptying his pockets, searching for his boarding pass and ID. I take them out of my shirt pocket. He kisses my shoulder, and we settle into the slow moving line.

There used to be something about airports and train stations that made me feel infinitely free.

I wake up to a foreign rumbling all around me. I don't understand where I am and then the plane, the red-eye, Boston. I reach for Daniel, and he rubs my knee.

I wake up and open my eyes, and he is there. The flight attendant stands over us and hands him what I know is ginger ale with no ice.

I wake up, and I don't open my eyes because I can smell him, his nerves, his sweat radiating from his cotton shirt.

I wake up, and the plane is descending. He is finally asleep, and his book lies open on the floor. I don't want to wake him, so I don't move. He often says that he has a hard time sleeping and falling asleep, but he is always passing out in this way where he must be fighting it. He is stressed about the interview. He usually tells me more than I need to understand, but he's been quiet and withdrawn.

His chin bumps my head as the plane lands, and I let out a small yelp.

"Oh, Elle," he says, holding my face in his hands and kissing my forehead.

We get off the plane and retrieve our luggage from the conveyor. We stand by the door on the subway and grasp a metal railing with our suitcases between our knees because there are only a few stops between the airport and Boston University. We find our way over to the college recreational center, and Daniel pays ten dollars to use the locker room and clean up.

“You,” I say, looking directly in his eyes, “are the smartest person I know.” We hold each other, and then I push him into the locker room. I walk back out to the street, trying to be a better person than I am, trying not to hope that Daniel bombs the interview and that nothing will change.

It is seven a.m. Hordes of people charge into the city on the way to their lives. I sit on a brick wall by the subway entrance where the sun can reach my face, but thick white clouds move overhead, and I’m cloaked in shade. I begin rolling a cigarette.

A young man approaches me and asks for my lighter, “Beautiful day,” he says.

I nod in agreement.

I finish smoking and walk into a crowded coffee shop to order an espresso. All the tables are occupied. I scan the room for someone to sit with. No infants or men. No one with food. No one who smiles as I pass. Someone reading? Someone young?

I sit across from a teenage girl. She wears ripped denim and weathered, black leather boots that reach her knees. She has short, lilac hair, and she’s thin in a way that could be youth or it could be drugs, a familiar paleness that comes from lack of sleep and stress on the body. She closes her eyes and rests her head on a balled-up sweatshirt

against the table. I wonder about her friends, her mother, if there is anyone looking out for her. If anyone knows that she is alone and sleeping in a coffee shop right now.

After Daniel's interview, we rent the car. He is pleased and unfazed by the traffic. He turns up the stereo, rolls down the windows, and taps the steering wheel with the music.

Once we are through the tunnel and heading north out of the city, something smells so different and so familiar about the air. This place where I grew up. We would drive south and go to parties all night, and we'd be driving back early in the morning as the sun was about to rise, and that is it. The smell I am smelling is the sun reaching the middle of the sky as we drive through Pines and Sweet Maples and Sugar Birches, and I keep looking over at Daniel and feeling his hand on my thigh and thinking I love this place and I love this man and I could stay in this car with him forever with this feeling of buoyancy and lightness.

"Pull over," I say.

"Why?" he asks.

"Right here."

There is a small clearing on the side of the highway. Daniel pulls onto the shoulder and leaves the engine running. I open the door and run into the field. I stop and close my eyes and inhale deeply through my nose trying to get the feeling all the way inside of me, trying to hold it there.

When I open my eyes, Daniel is leaning against the car looking at me. I wave him over.

“What’s going on with you, Elle?” He laughs, and I reach for him.

Back in the car, we’re only a few miles from the suburb where I grew up, where my mother and Anna live. We’re stopped in traffic. A cargo train passes us along the highway. Graffiti covers the boxcars in an uncoordinated arrangement of words and numbers and images: RICKSHAW; Wanted; 207; Sage; Rockets Now; October 143; Sangir; Vacation Land; a cartoon man; a turtle? Friends from my youth whose names I haven’t thought of in years return to me: Tubsie, Tre, Zaphrin, Kendrik, Amelia. And the beautiful murals on the side of the club, Asylum, painted over and over again, a new image each time I returned home. I always walked there from the bus station or wherever someone dropped me off downtown to see the wall and what the new images might mean.

I take out my phone and call Anna. She answers on the first ring without saying hello.

“I thought you wouldn’t be here for another hour, and I was going to be fifteen minutes late already. I’m sorry there’s just so much to do, and Sam’s dealing with the flowers, and I have to pay the band and the caterer.”

“Forget breakfast. Take your time. There’s traffic anyway.”

“Where are you? Is traffic that bad? I’m never driving in from the city at this hour.”

“Just call or come over when you finish.”

“I’ll just take a break. I don’t know how we forgot to pay them. This is crazy. Simple wedding! I am prioritizing you, Elle.”

“What can we do?” I ask.

“I wanted to be there when you showed up.”

“I have Daniel. Mom will probably ignore me.”

Daniel pipes up, “We’re so excited!”

“Hi, Daniel!” Anna says. “OK, OK. I’ll see you soon.”

Daniel turns the music back up. Within minutes the traffic has broken, and I direct him off the highway.

We pull up to the small house where I grew up. Daniel gets our suitcases from the trunk, and I wait for him, so we can approach the front door together. In the four years since I’ve been home, the brown house has been painted light yellow, and flower patches that look newly planted spring up where long, curling weeds used to furl into the driveway. Circular tables draped in peach tablecloths stand all over the yard. My cousin Mona is standing over one, arranging flowers.

“Hi, Elle,” Mona hollers.

Soon aunts and cousins will fill the backyard, happy to be put to work.

I wave, and we walk into the house. It smells like bacon, and coffee, and something cinnamon.

My mother is bent over the oven, and when the door closes, she snaps up. “Hello!” She brushes past me and looks Daniel over. “Anna called and said breakfast was cancelled, so I threw some things together.” My mother never cooks.

“Daniel,” she says, “I’ve heard so much about you, but no one told me how handsome you are.” She puts her arm around me, “You reek of cigarettes,” she says under her breath.

“Thank you,” Daniel says.

“How do you take your coffee?” she asks him.

“Just cream, please.”

“I knew Elle would find someone special eventually. There’s someone for everyone. Someone who will accept all our finickyness and neurosis, you know. I told her that. I told her not to worry.”

Daniel sits down at the kitchen table.

“I need to lie down,” I say. I pick up our suitcases and head upstairs to Anna’s old bedroom. I get under the blanket. I wait for Daniel, but he doesn’t come, and I fall asleep.

Daniel wakes me because lunch is in an hour. There will be a small ceremony at the courthouse after lunch, then the reception, a party in my mother’s backyard. Daniel doesn’t have to change. He’s still in his suit from the interview.

I go into the bathroom that Anna and I shared as girls. The mirror is clean, gleaming, absent of toothpaste specks. The shower is empty of toiletries, fruity soaps, disposable razors, three different kinds of shampoo and conditioner. It is like being in a place that once belonged to us, but someone disinfected it and put us away somewhere.

I look at my face in the mirror. Grey circles puff out below my eyes, and my hair is matted and greasy from travel, so I get in the shower. Daniel comes in the bathroom moments later.

“I’m going to clean up my beard a little,” he says. “How are you?”

“Tired,” I tell him.

“This isn’t so bad, right?”

I don’t say anything.

He leaves and comes back. The shower curtain rustles, and he places a cup of black coffee on the edge of the bathtub.

“Thank you,” I say. I sit down in the tub and close my eyes, so the water pours directly onto my head and over my shoulders.

My mind wanders through our time in Oregon together: one year dating and another living together in my apartment. The evening walks we take toward the bridge where we stop and sit on the railing with our legs dangling over the water while the sun sets against the river, splattered in oranges, and reds, and yellows. Eating dinner on the couch facing each other, our legs bent, my toes resting on his toes, our plates of spaghetti balanced above our knees. Waltzing around the living room before bed, loose and warm from wine. The almost inaudible moan he makes moments before falling into real sleep, the way he pinches the bridge of his nose after a long day.

I finish getting ready and meet Daniel and my mother in the kitchen. They’re still sitting at the table, but my mother has changed into a sequined, red dress more fitting for a casino cruise than a wedding.

“Black, Elle?” she says, eyeing my suit.

“What time is lunch?” I ask.

“We should leave in just a few minutes,” my mother says. “Daniel, will you drive? I love it when men drive.”

“I’ll drive,” I say.

Lunch is only four miles away, but my mother gets us turned around going in the wrong direction twice, even though she insists that she knows exactly where the restaurant is. Finally, I ask Daniel to look at the maps on his cell phone.

When we arrive at the restaurant, Anna and Sam stand outside with Sam's parents, Laurie and Sam Senior. Sam is an only child, so it will be just the seven of us at lunch and at the courthouse.

Elle runs up to the car, and she's hugging me even as I squeeze out of the door.

"Thank you," she whispers into my shoulder.

"Congratulations," I whisper back. I make her step back so I can see her in her white, silk dress. Her hair is pulled back but falls around her face in thin wisps. Tiny pearls sparkle in her ears, and a larger, single pearl dangles below her clavicle from a silver chain. She looks elegant, like an adult version of my sister.

"Oh, Anna," my mother says, her voice wavering. "You look stunning. Perfect."

We go into the restaurant. Daniel sits next to me, which leaves me sandwiched between him and Anna with my mother just inches away in my line of vision. When Sam's mother asks what my life is like, why we've never met, where I live and work, my mother answers for me.

"Oh, Elle ran off when she was just eighteen to live on the west coast, but Daniel just interviewed for a professorship at Boston University, so they'll be back soon. The head of the department called him. He's a shoo in." The conversation shifts to Daniel's interview: how soon we'll be back if he gets the position, what his class load will be like, where we'll live. My mother says how nice it will be to have the family together again.

Together. Again? I do not say that I paid my college tuition in cash from cocktail waitressing at a strip club. That I got my first copy-editing gig one month after receiving my degree. That I have received five promotions in ten years. That I pay two thirds of the rent and Daniel one third because my income triples his. I say nothing. I turn toward Anna. I nod my head like I understand and am part of Anna and Sam Senior's conversation. I try to tune out the discussion happening in my right ear: how beautiful Boston is, how lucky we will be to live here. How lucky I am.

The ceremony is short. Sam and Anna hold hands and say their short vows in front of the judge, each of them finishing with, "Forever." I wonder if they know what they are saying. If they've thought about what can happen inside of that one word.

At the party, relatives show up from both families, along with Anna and Sam's friends I've never met. I drink wine quickly. I dance and chat and introduce people to Daniel. Anna finds us on the edge of the yard and steals me away. We twirl each other through the crowd. We sneak into the backyard and crawl up onto our whale rock. In my memory, it is an enormous boulder, but now it barely contains the two of us. I take out my pouch and begin rolling us each a cigarette.

"Married," I say.

"Married," she says. "Boston?" she asks.

"You heard that?"

"She won't shut up about it. I'm so sorry, Elle."

“He’s worked so hard for this.”

“So have you,” she says.

We lie back on the rock, and Anna plays with my hair while we smoke.

“We should go back,” I say.

“I like it here,” she says. “I needed a break.” We watch the sun set through the smoke from our cigarettes and go back to the party. I find Daniel and tell him that I have to rest for a moment. I go back upstairs to Anna’s room. I lie down to sleep, but I leave my dress and my makeup on, so it looks like an accident.

We return the rental car at an outlet by my mother’s house, and she drives us to the commuter train that will take us into the city. When we get out of the car at the station, she gives me a patting hug and then embraces Daniel with both arms. I tell them that I have to go inside to buy our tickets. I watch from the window, and they look toward the door, waiting for me to come back outside. I lean through the doorway and wave Daniel in, suggesting we were in some rush.

He jogs inside and asks, “Did we misread the schedule?”

“I want to find our seats,” I say.

We sit across from each other on the way south into the city. I watch as familiar towns and trees and waterways flash by the window. Daniel reads his book and puts on his headphones.

I direct him through the turnstiles from the train platform onto the subway, and he follows with little expression or eye contact. Only when we are finished getting to the airport, sitting inside our gate, waiting to board our plane, do I notice how little he's spoken. When I try to slip my arm around his elbow, he stiffens and lifts his arm without looking at me.

"What is it?" I ask.

"Your behavior was unacceptable," he says.

"What?"

"You were completely miserable. Incapable of gratitude."

"It was an act," I say. "For you. For everyone. Mother of the year."

"Come on, Elle. I know you don't have the best relationship, but she's trying. Could you have tried, even a little, to go outside of your routine for two days?" He looks away from me, reaches into his bag, and opens his book in his lap.

We're home from the wedding for a week when Daniel gets the call from BU. He has the job. He'll move three weeks before the assignment begins. And I will join him when I find work. This is not negotiable. I tell him that I am willing to move if I get a comparable job, a senior position, and equivalent pay. I tell him that I am unwilling to float around Boston until something comes up. If I haven't figured something out by the time his fall break arrives, he will fly back to Oregon, and we will spend it together.

I'm not looking for work, and I don't know whether or not he believes me until the night before he leaves, when we have sex without shifting from the missionary position, when he holds me tighter than he ever has, when I can feel him looking right at my face even though it's pitch dark. We fall asleep without showering or brushing our teeth, soaked with sweat in each other's arms.

I was supposed to drive him to the airport at five a.m., but he wakes me and tells me that he called a cab. We kiss, and he is gone.

I get out of bed around noon. I rearrange things. I fill the spots on the shelves that held Daniel's belongings. I throw away his toothbrush and the postcard we bought at a gas station that reads, "Greetings from Boston." I empty his creamer in the sink. I make my coffee. I put on a record. I go out to the balcony and roll my cigarettes in the sun.

The Biological Basis of Love

Vic and me lost in the fucking desert all day. The sun's been up three hours. Once it reaches peak sky, my watch'll read a hundred degrees again. Heat will slow us down. Pebbles and dirt stick to my calves, already drenched with sweat. Tiny red bugs crawl over my legs, chewing my shins and ankles. I'd give anything for a shower, a macchiato, a tall glass of water tinkling with ice. Before we got moving this morning, trail still nowhere in sight, I prayed. Let us find the tent, God. I'll call my mother. I'll adopt a puppy. I'll treat Vic like the angel she is.

“Hey,” I call up to Vic. I sit down in the trail and wrench the shoe from my foot, shake out the pebbles.

She looks back at me, flips the long, white-blond tassels of her dreads over a shoulder. “Yeah,” she says and keeps walking.

“I need a break,” I say, digging at the welted bites.

“Should have worn better shoes, David.”

I rub the newly worn leather on my black high-tops. Three hundred dollars. Junk now. “My bad, Vic, I forgot while I was buying a tent. And sleeping bags. And groceries. And every other fucking thing.”

Vic ignores me, stretches her arms above her head. She’s a big ball of energy. Says she’s out of drugs, but I can tell by that grin she keeps on, she’s got some deep in a pocket or under the sole in her hiking boot. Only known her three months, but she’s a liar. Thinks I don’t know when she’s doing it. Thinks I’m dumb. Her against the whole goddamn world.

Asked her earlier when I saw pupils filling in her pallid, blue irises, “Is everything gone?”

“What I had on me,” she said, and then she traced a slow line in her palm like reading her own fortune.

Vic extends one leg and drops her knee for a yoga pose. She twists the backpack around her chest and extracts the water canteen, takes a long swig, then taps the bottom with her palm. The last few drops fall onto her dry lips, cracked in pale stripes.

We parked the car seven miles outside Tucson. Got fucked up on molly and mushrooms last night, danced off the trail and into the desert, following stars with our eyes. The drugs, combined with the way Vic seemed like she loved me for the first time in weeks, made my mind wash out. She took off her shirt and tossed me her backpack, twirled through the dark like some creature of another world. I would have followed her anywhere. We walked for what felt like hours before she stopped.

“Isn’t it amazing,” she said, pulling down my pants, pushing me up against a pointed boulder, sloshing her warm mouth over my cock. I could feel the tiny bumps on

her tongue. She dug her nails into the backs of my thighs. That perfect balance of pain plus ecstasy. My head fell back against the boulder. Stars plunged in swirling patterns toward my face.

We fucked after that, no rubber. Now I probably have AIDS. Wouldn't go near her without a condom at first. The traveling kids are good for an affair, will do almost anything if you offer them a bed, a line of blow, a sandwich. One time, an emaciated girl, barely twenty, let me tie her to a chair and cover her in clothespins. I twisted one around her nipple while I finger fucked her, cunt wrenched around my hand, begging for more. She tried to get in my bed after. I made her wait while I zipped a plastic cover over the mattress, kicked her out at six a.m. when she flopped a bony arm onto my chest and woke me. I couldn't stand the crinkling of the cover or the way she smelled: Gruyère and onions and yeast. I packed her shit up before I woke her to avoid the way she'd feign confused exhaustion, hesitate to collect her belongings, reach for my nonexistent heartstrings. Naomi, I think.

Vic and I went for what felt like hours and passed out there beside the boulder. She let me hold her like she hadn't since those first nights. Woke up naked and scorched, had no fucking idea how to get back to the trail, our stuff, the Range Rover, my toiletries.

Skin prickles from the sunburn, and all Vic has is hippie-stink tea tree oil. Lucky Vic had her backpack. Now I have to ask her for everything. A sip of water, a swig of whiskey, toilet paper to wipe my ass. Gives me four strips like it's the Great fucking Depression out here. Vic the gatekeeper, worst luck I've had. My asshole chafes while she guzzles water like the faucet's in the other room. Keep telling her we need to

conserve it. When she tries to hand me the second canteen, I refuse. Throat's so swollen I can barely swallow, no saliva, brown stink piss, but I make my point.

It was her idea to come out here, and *I followed her* off the trail and into the endless saguaros, though the way she looks at me, *all my fault*.

Wednesday morning, we were sipping espresso with fresh lemon zest when Vic started pacing around the apartment.

"I've had it up to here with the city," she said. "If we don't get out of here, I'm hitting the rails again. I didn't fuck up my life for this, David." She walked onto the balcony, shut the sliding glass door, turned away from me, and pressed her shoulder blades against the glass. She has a way of threatening me, so it's always kind of hovering around us. This aura she has. Don't. Need. You.

I tapped on the door with the knuckle of my index finger. She didn't move but that felt like enough to let her know I'd slide it open. She scooted over the glass and stared into the orange mountains on the west edge of the city.

"You want to go out there?" I asked, slipping an arm around her waist.

"Anywhere," she said, still not looking at me.

"Friday," I said, "I'll take you." And she coiled into my arms.

Vic looks up the trail now and shields her face with her hand like she knows exactly where she's going, like she's got something to be impatient about. Vic the pirate.

"Can we go now?" she asks, walking ahead without waiting for my response. I get up and follow her down the trail. We could be walking farther and farther from the city. What's the fucking rush, Vic?

The problem with me and Vic is that she rolled into town straight from home, straight from her bullshit into my arms. I was hanging at Flattop Johnny's on free pool night when she walked in with Jax, an old friend of mine. I couldn't get over how beautiful she was. Her hair's so blonde, it's silver, and her face is covered in almost imperceptible bronze freckles that darken up in the sun. And her lips, her goddamn lips are pale pink and full like new Botox. She has this way of looking at you from under her mile-long, white eyelashes, and she was doing it to me that first night. I got an erection. From a girl *looking* at me. Hadn't happened since high school. I had to pass off my shots at pool to cover my crotch in the dim light around the tables.

Once I'd had a few hits of weed in the bathroom, some whiskey from the bar, and was feeling out of body, I walked up to her and asked if she wanted to go home with me. I told her I lived in an apartment down the block, and I had food and beer and blow and a king-sized bed, did she want to come, and she said, "What about Jax?" And I said, "No Jax," because I wanted her to know what I had in mind. I could just imagine her tiny, pink nipples and her pubic hair two shades darker than the hair on her head. She bit her bottom lip and nodded, and I knew she'd murder me.

We fucked for hours that night. Our bodies fused in ways I didn't know were possible. I thought she was in love with me. I couldn't find a single other explanation, the way she held me like the world was shaking, like she'd fall off if she let go. But now I'm pretty sure it was just residual love for her old fiancé.

The next morning she lay in my bed and wouldn't move. I went out to get us lunch, and when I got back, I could tell she'd been sobbing. The skin around her eyes had swelled up so she looked like a blonde Asian. I did what I could: made her poached eggs

and cheese plates, fresh orange and vegetable juices, poured her my best Cabernet, froze washcloths and steeped tea bags for her eyes. By the end of the week, she perked up. Drank her espresso out on the balcony, read one of the books she carries around, took a shower, set up her easel, started fucking me again.

We shared a lavender scented bath one afternoon in those first weeks. I bent and spread my knees, so she could fit between them. She let her head fall back on my chest and closed her eyes. I brushed back the wispy, curled hairs that stuck to her forehead from steam. It struck me that I didn't know a goddamn thing about her. She hadn't offered me a bit of information, wasn't trying to win me over with her sad, broken life.

“Where'd you grow up?” I asked.

“Upton, Wyoming. I always wanted to travel, but I thought I'd end up there in the end. Now I'm up for anything,” she said.

“Why?”

“You won't get it.”

“Come on.”

“I was in love, supposed to be married,” she said. “I could see our whole life together. A big house his father built. Horses. Babies. The same, the same and the same. I asked him to come with me, to get out before we settled into forever, and he told me to get lost. Five years, and that's what he says, get lost. And then he's fucking my sister two months later. My sister. Five years.”

I didn't know what to say to that, but it made me wonder about Vic's sister. Older or younger? Same white-blond hair and maple skin? How beautiful must Sister be if this guy picked Sister over Vic?

“How old is your sister?” I asked.

“What the fuck David? What does that matter?”

“Vic—”

“Forget it. I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

“I’m sorry.” I wanted to say something to fix it, but I couldn’t think of a single thing. My thoughts were racing all over the place, and I got turned on thinking about Vic’s sister and fucking two Vics at once, so I started kissing her neck. It worked, and she turned around and mounted me right there in the tub.

I thought about Sister a lot after that, what a stunner she must be. And in my head Sister was sweeter than Vic. Calm, outgoing, and predictable.

Vic drops her backpack, extracts the toilet paper. “Have to shit,” she says.

“Adorable.”

She walks five feet off the trail and drops her pants. Perfect example of what Vic gets away with.

I wake up in the morning, and my chest fucking flutters at the shape of Vic’s shoulders, the deep slope of her back. Nothing about her appearance bothers me. The patch of fuzzy, white hairs beneath her navel is cute. Her skin is always wafting with scented oils (says anti-perspirant causes cancer), and her other body odor, fine. Dreadlocks used to remind me of spiders, but when Vic’s hair falls against me in bed, it just reminds me she is there.

I ordered a documentary called, “The Biological Basis of Love,” to see what the deal might be. Science Guy explained it from several angles in a Godlike voice:

I. Neurotransmitters, Adrenaline, Dopamine, Serotonin: Increased secretion of these brain chemicals causes obsessive-compulsive symptoms: I get out of bed before Vic. Won't leave the house till she's up. *What are your plans for the afternoon? I could come? Come with me?* Got her a cell phone, me all day: *Vic, where are you?; When will you be home?; I miss you.* I shoot to the mall to get my cologne and leave with a bag full of shit for her. I go to the store for dinner, text Vic, *feel like filets?* She says, *I'd prefer fish.* Salmon it is.

II. Oxytocin released after orgasm: I could fuck her again and again and again and again, *still*. Newness triggers attraction. Sure, this has happened before. I like a girl for a few weeks, am compelled to be around her, but those feelings dissipate. One day girl's all I can think about. Then girl says something sophomoric, leaves her crusty panties on my white linoleum, fails to rinse her coffee cup, so mucky, dried ring cakes the bottom. Switch goes off. I'm done. No switch for Vic. Gets worse every day. Leaves all the cups, no matter. Doesn't make the bed, who cares. I fuck her slow and serious. She gets bored. I turn her jaw and make her look at me. She closes her eyes. I whisper, Victoria. She says, "Don't call me that." I beg her, "Say my name." She says, "Get behind me."

III. Maternal similarities: Bullshit. Vic fixed the dishwasher. She's seen the country from the back of a freight. She scoops spiders with a sheet of paper and liberates (her word) them on the balcony. She reads pre-twentieth century novels. She paints sunsets more beautiful than the real thing. Couldn't be less like Anne Marie, whose Valium champagne nightcap kicked in around eight p.m. on weeknights. Monthly conversations with Anne Marie: "Why won't you come

home? What more could I have given you?” she slurs, referring to the apartment, the Range Rover, the endless bank account. I say, “A mother,” and drop the call. Every month or so a plane ticket shows up in my email, round trip to Boston. I email back, *Stop wasting Dad’s money. He’s turning over in his grave.*

IV. The limbic system in love: Attachment and social bonding. Science guy says our nervous systems are not self-contained but attuned to those we are closest to. The importance of physical contact and affection in social and cognitive development. Am I socially and cognitively developing right now? Anne Marie was never affectionate, less so after Dad died when the nannies showed up, but I want Vic as close to me as I can get her. Even if we’re not touching, I want her in the room.

Vic walks up behind me, brushes the small of my back with her palm, and I’m warm for her again. Then she kneels down to stare at a stick, a fucking stick, and she’s not tripping? It’s just the most interesting stick she’s ever seen.

“Look at it, David,” she says, twirling it around with one hand against her other palm. “It’s beautiful.”

If we find the tent without me punching her in the head it will be a goddamn miracle. “Can we keep moving? I mean do you have to pick up every stick you see?”

She ignores me and keeps walking.

If she didn’t have the water I’d go my own way, let her get noshed up by a javelina, bit by a spider, stung by a rattler, picked off by vultures. I can see it in my head like a cartoon. The desert transforms with rainbows, and bubbles, and a Polka soundtrack. Vic picks up a scorpion, pets it like a five-year-old’s birthday kitten. Scorpion snaps the

back of her thumb, leaves two tiny red dots. She stumbles around delirious while the poison spreads. Saliva pours from her mouth. Color drains from her face. She collapses, smacks her head in a cactus. Thin spines poke through her dreads and into her neck. The music stops, the colors evaporate, and black vultures pick at her eyes until they're hollowed-out holes in her magnificent face. It makes me smile then feel sick.

Vic sits down up ahead. "Lunch time," she says. She pulls a loaf of bread and a jar of peanut butter from her backpack.

"That's what you fucking have to eat?" I ask. I bought us ten-dollar granola bars, entire meal replacements.

"Sorry, no protein shakes."

"*Sorry*, I can't live off Saltine crackers and malt liquor."

"Of course not. You can't live without your organic moisturizer, espresso, pedicures, satellite TV, your Dutch fucking massages or whatever. I knew this was a bad idea."

"You hate all my shit now? My drugs, and my apartment, and my money?" I say.

"Get the fuck over yourself, David. It's not like you work for Mommy and Daddy's money."

"You nasty bitch. No wonder he fucking left you for Sister."

Vic's body goes rigid. Her shoulders reach up, and her jaw muscle quakes. She stares at me. "If you say one more word to me, I'm going to run away from you and your blistered ass feet, and you can die out here. Do not. Open. Your mouth. Again. I fucking mean it, David." She throws the food in my lap and turns away from me. She opens her backpack, takes out an actual tape player (freak), and puts on her headphones. I smear the

peanut butter with my finger because she doesn't offer the utility knife attached to her cargo pants, and we're walking again a few minutes later.

We spend the rest of the afternoon hiking along in silence except for Vic's annoying and incessant humming. I begrudgingly drink from the canteen when she hands it back to me. She stops sporadically to do her sun salutations.

I consider the unbelievable fact that I am in love with someone who I also hate. I wish she would disappear while I choke at the thought of her leaving. I know by the time we get back to my apartment, she'll have a plan. She'll grab her bag and head over to the depot, wait for the yard dogs to pull a train around, never look back.

Dusk sets in, and Vic veers off the trail into a small clearing between saguaros. She unpacks and begins collecting bramble for a fire. I follow her lead. We eat another peanut butter sandwich. She sits on her empty pack with bare feet against the fire.

I am stretching out on the ground when my stomach turns several times in a terrifying way. "I need toilet paper," I tell her. Vic reaches for the roll and tears off a couple sheets. More stomach gyrations. Bad. Very bad. I snatch the roll from her hands. I cross the trail at a slow run until I can only see smoke drifting up from the fire, turn around, brace my arms against a boulder. I sit there for a few minutes while my stomach empties out. I'm not done, but I have to walk farther out, can't stand the smell. Squat again. I see the tip of something red down the hill. And could it, is it, I can't fucking believe my luck, there's the tent. I rip up my pants and run back to the fire.

Vic's lying on a small blanket, using her pack as a pillow. I curl around her warm body, bury my face in her hair. She purrs in sleep, sinks into my arms. I kiss the back of

her neck, am about to whisper, I've found the tent, saved the day, we'll get out of here, but she startles.

“Get the fuck off of me, David,” she says, pushing my hips back with her palms. “You smell like bologna.”

I get up. Take one last look at Vic. Let her fucking die out here.

I reach the tent and chug half a gallon of water in one stretch. I change my socks and brush my teeth until my gums burn. I eat two granola bars, but they won't stay down.

I take apart the tent. I open a cold beer from the cooler, but I can't find the opener, and Vic's not here to pop it off with her lighter.

Am I too delirious to drive? Will I miss the road and fall off a cliff?

I start the car. I imagine my bed, its soft, down layers and cotton sheets, but there's Vic's tiny waist and bowed hip under my hand. I turn up the radio so I might fall asleep, but Vic's mix CD blares through the speakers, and I picture her singing out the open window on our way here. The triangle of freckles below her right ear. The ballpoints of her collar bones. The way she throws her head back when she really laughs and her dreadlocks swing against the top of her ass.

I walk back to Vic, the fire making a quiet glow on her gorgeous face. I kneel down and shake her shoulder. She wrinkles her forehead, but her eyes won't fully open. She mumbles, “David,” reaching up with both arms, “I'm sorry.”

Fucking bitch had downers, too. I slide one arm under her knees and the other around her back.

“I got you,” I say, whether I like it or not.

Verve

A girl was riding her bike down Summer Street. She looked kind of messy, maybe hung-over like me. Her hair was wrapped up like a brown nest above a black bandanna that circled her head and drooped into her eyes. She rode one of those bikes with the skinny frames and skinny tires. I noticed her because she yelled, "They are going to murder you," and then she fell. Her torso dipped the way a bird swoops toward the earth, her head slapped the ground, and the bike fell on top of her. I bolted across the street, and car horns rang out behind me.

I dropped down on my knees and yelled, "Are you OK?" White slivers flashed through her cracked eyelids.

I tossed the bike out of the way then cupped her armpits and tugged her out of the street and up onto the curb. When I eased her down, a clear, slippery liquid covered my hands, the consistency of spit or hair gel. "Are you OK?" I asked, holding her face and feeling her heat fill my hands.

I ran back up the block and rang the intercom, “Yo, Layla.” Sweat had pooled in the crooks of my elbows. My ears felt full of water.

We only had one key, and Layla had it because we’d planned to meet before work. She slept right through her hangovers, but I spent the morning on the toilet or went straight for fresh air.

I jammed the intercom over and over then held it until she answered.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Ali. What?”

“There’s this girl. She’s really hurt. Will you call somebody?”

“Call who? What girl? Come up,” she said. The door buzzed, and I ran up the six flights with this throbbing in my head and my stomach. Layla answered the door naked and crusty-eyed, handing me the cell phone.

I gave the dispatcher woman the girl’s location and rinsed the slippery stuff from my hands. Layla went back to sleep. I could see the street from the back window, so I soaked a T-shirt with water and scrubbed a circle in the dirt film that covered the glass. I could see the girl laid out on the sidewalk. I waited for the ambulance to show, and once they got her on the gurney, I woke Layla for work.

We stopped at the bistro, ordered black coffees, and sat at a braided-metal table against the street.

“I may have seen that girl die today,” I told her.

“For real? You think?”

“She was riding one of those bikes, the kind without brakes all the messengers ride.”

“Did a car hit her? I would never ride a bike. I’ve seen that shit too many times. Bikes are always getting clipped by car doors, bumped by a cab or some shit.”

“No. She fell.”

“How?”

“Don’t know. She was covered in this goo, screaming like some crazy, but she looked just like you or me. The top of her body kind of fell away from the rest of it. It reminded me of a bird.”

“So did she die?”

“I only called for the emergency.”

“I thought you went back out there.”

I shook my head and realized that I should have gone back. What was wrong with me? I shouldn’t have left her there alone.

“Do you feel different?” Layla asked.

“Why?”

“I saw my first dead person when I was thirteen. I was working at the Thai joint in Rosi. Some guy jumped in front of a commuter train, and we all ran out to see him. It was sick. The pilot plow sliced him right open, flaps of skin and a blue flannel shirt. God, I wish I never saw it. I felt weird for days.”

“No, I don’t even know if she died.” But then I needed to know. I wondered what color her eyes were. I started picturing her hair all wrapped up and the web of freckles on her face, so I walked over to the pay phone and looked up New England Medical. I figured she’d be there because it was the closest hospital. I had to bring Mom there when she overdosed.

All of the options asked for information I didn't have, so I pressed zero to speak to an operator. He wouldn't give me any information because I wasn't family.

"You find Dead Bird?" Layla asked when I got back to the table.

"Nah." I took a sip of my coffee. It had turned some sour temperature in between warm and cold, and I thought I might throw up, so Layla and I started the walk to work early. I hoped a change of scenery would lift the feeling out of my stomach and then maybe I could forget about Dead Bird. She reminded me of someone I knew back in grade school before I dropped out, started working, and left Mom on the street. Earlier that week, I had seen my mom outside St. Francis House in Chinatown. Her face was pink and swollen. Her hair formed matted clumps around her head, and a black stain smeared her gray T-shirt. She crouched against the building and held a Dixie cup over the sidewalk, so people had to step into the street to get around her. I thought she didn't see me, or she was so far gone, I was just another creature on the street, somebody she could scrape a quarter from. Then she looked up, and it was like a magnet connected our eyes. I took two steps toward her, and she looked away.

Layla and I stopped by the corner store, grabbed a forty, poured it into our Styrofoam coffee cups, and went over to the diner where we worked. It was a small Lebanese spot, mostly regular customers, people who knew the neighborhood because it's tucked away on K Street, and Southie isn't exactly where you look for The Middle East.

We got in and set up the dining room for the lunch rush. I didn't bother wiping down the tables because no amount of scrubbing could clean the place up. Chipped sea foam green wallpaper curled down the walls. Fruit bowl paintings hung crookedly all

over the place, and none of the chairs matched. The owner was this slimy asshole that asked us to sit on his lap while he counted our wages out in cash and skimmed us three dollars that we took from the register later.

Sometimes I felt a little bad drinking on the job. I wondered if customers could smell malt liquor on my breath falling onto their food. Layla didn't care, though. She'd been working for men like our boss her whole life: small business owners, immigrants who flew the coop with all their dirty American money when things got hot.

My mom had been a waitress, and I swore I'd never do it. She'd always come home drunk, smelling like liquor and food. I put myself to bed most nights. I'd get up later, find her on the couch, take off her shoes, and cover her with a blanket. When I saw her outside the shelter, I pictured me as her. I saw my face on her mangled, little body.

She wasn't always like that, though. We were OK when I was younger. She wasn't home much, but there was always food and new shoes, and she let me do my thing. One year ago, three days after my fifteenth birthday, I found a sticky glass pipe on the back of the toilet in our apartment. Soon after, a pink slip showed up on the front door. I left school and worked at the diner, scraped up the rent for a month.

At first she wouldn't work, wouldn't get out of bed unless it was to score. Then she snapped: tried to hit me, threw stuff at my face. She started cursing my father for fucking her whole life up. She said we were exactly the same, twins in every way, sucked the life right out of her. It was the first time she'd ever mentioned him. She had me when she was sixteen, and I never met him, barely even wondered.

I knew I had to get out, but I didn't know how. I was afraid she'd kill me because of her eyes. They'd been green, just like mine, but then they'd turned to this dull grey.

Layla caught a bruise on my cheek one day and said, “Fuck this. You’re out.” She walked me home from work and made me pack whatever I could fit in a duffle bag, held my hand the whole way. She slept in the warehouse space in Fort Point where her brother’s band practiced—her mom had something like eight kids—so I started staying with her. Sometimes we got high and fucked around on her brother’s drum set. Most of the time drank forties, played chess and Texas Hold Em’, and passed out on a pile of sleeping bags.

Halfway through my shift, I started thinking about Dead Bird again. I asked Layla if she’d walk down to New England Medical with me after work and try to find her. Layla said she was down, and I thought about it the rest of the day.

It almost looked like she was killing herself, the way she let her body slip down to the cement so weightlessly, like she’d planned it. I wondered what would make somebody do that. My life wasn’t perfect, and I was missing some cards, but I still wanted to wake up most of the time, and I never wanted to die.

Layla and I left before the night girls had time to check our closing duties. I was itching to go find Dead Bird, and Layla hated the smell of the food. Sometimes she went to the bathroom during a shift and splashed her face with cold water from the faucet. She couldn’t stand the way the shawarma cooked so slow, big meat hunks stinking the place up all day.

We walked out onto the trash-covered street, and Layla reached up with both arms taking a long, deep breath through her nose. The humidity hadn’t let up, and the air was thick with ocean.

We got another forty and walked down to the subway at South Station, smoking a joint and weaving through the suits on the street. We cupped the joint and pressed through the people down the stairs to the Red Line. Layla tapped her pass, and we smooshed our bodies through the turnstile and paid for one fare. It was close enough to walk, less than fifteen minutes, but I avoided Chinatown like the plague, and Layla liked to check the T for musicians. She never said so, but she loved the gospel singers, old, black men shaking cups full of change, with voices prettier than you hear on the radio. When someone was singing, we'd sit down on a bench, and Layla closed her eyes. When the train came, if the singer didn't get on, she'd say, "Let's wait for the next one."

The inbound train blew by, bringing dirt-musty air from the subway tunnels into our faces. We shuffled in through the double doors, swerving around the people getting off so we could sit. An old lady stepped on after us and hovered next to the doors. She looked like she could have been beautiful once, and Layla said, "You can have my seat," getting up into the aisle.

"I prefer to stand," the lady said.

"Whatever," and Layla sat down again.

I always felt like people were staring at me on the subway. There wasn't anything else to do, but I hated the way their eyes burned into my head when I ducked it down into my lap. Maybe they knew something about me just by looking. A secret. Maybe they knew my mother was a crackhead. I slept on a cement floor. Nobody loved me.

I rubbed my eyes with the heels of my palms. Everything had a little glow around it like after opening my eyes in chlorine water.

We got off at Downtown Crossing and walked through the rainbow tunnel to the Orange Line. There was an outbound train to Forest Hills waiting for us and only two stops until New England Medical. We stepped on just as the alarm sounded, the doors shut, and the train hummed down the track.

“Next stop Chinatown.”

I tried to remember my mother’s face before her teeth got gray and holed, when she still dyed her hair blond, and it fell in waves around her face.

On my tenth birthday she took me for ice cream downtown. I picked scoops of banana and bubble-gum on a sugar cone, and she chose mint chocolate-chip in a cup. We walked back on Summer Street Bridge. When we reached the middle, she hoisted me up on the railing, stood behind me with her arms encircling my waist, and we looked out at Fort Point Channel. I closed my eyes, and her hair blew around my face. “Ten years,” she whispered in my ear. “Ten years!” I yelled out at the water.

“New England Medical,” the train announced.

Layla got up, and I followed her onto the platform. She relit the joint, and we walked up the stairs quietly, like something big was about to happen.

Layla stubbed out the joint when we saw the hospital’s Emergency entrance. We went in through the double doors, and everything was white, and the lights were so bright, it was hard to see. There were tons of people all over the room we walked into, sitting in chairs, standing against the walls. Babies were crying, and it smelled like plastic, so much plastic I could taste it in my mouth. The receptionist glanced up at us, opened the glass window that she sat behind, and looked back at her computer. She was older, caked in makeup, with bouncy, brown hair.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

“Our friend fell off her bike earlier,” Layla said. “We need to see her.”

“What’s her name?” the receptionist asked.

“They picked her up this morning on Summer Street, one block north of the bridge,” I said.

“You don’t know your friend’s name?” the woman asked.

“She’s young. About our age,” I said.

“I can’t release that information,” she said, and then she closed the glass window.

“Fuck,” Layla murmured, and we walked back out to the street.

“What now?” I asked. It hadn’t occurred to me that we couldn’t wander around the hospital asking for Dead Bird.

“I’ll take care of it,” Layla said, cruising right up to this old guy in a wheel chair. He wore one of those papery, white gowns, the kind my mom wore when she checked into Detox. She said she liked the way the air flowed between her legs, and it was the only time she felt OK without underwear. I wondered if she was wearing any right then and how long she’d gone without changing them.

“Hey, Mister.” The guy ignored Layla and continued staring out at the street. She tapped him on the shoulder.

“What?” His wrinkles puckered where he used to have cheekbones instead of valleys. It was the kind of scowl a guy made when he was about to pop another guy. I would have been protective of Layla if he wasn’t skinnier than us and sitting in a wheelchair.

“We need your help,” she said.

“Get out of here.”

“We need to get in there,” she said, pointing at the doors.

“Walk in,” he said. He started to wheel himself away, and Layla grabbed the handle of his chair.

“Wait,” she said, leaning down to whisper something in his ear. He got quiet then, almost happy looking, the way I expected guys like him to look, old shriveled guys in wheel chairs.

Layla told him that we needed another way, that we couldn't go back in the Emergency entrance, so he showed us around the other side of the building. We walked in the lobby entrance, past a new receptionist.

“Mr. Peterson. Visitors?”

“They're my grandkids,” he said, and his grin filled the room.

She opened her mouth to reply and then returned the smile instead. I thought he might blow our cover with his new demeanor, but she looked down again and everything was cool.

“What floor, Pops?” Layla asked.

“Five.”

She rolled him onto the elevator, and I trailed on behind them. I looked up and wondered why there were always mirrors or something silvery on the ceiling in elevators, even in shitty parking lots. It hurt my neck to look up at it.

We got out at the fifth floor, and he pointed to room 522. Layla wheeled him in, and I thought she'd just drop him off, but the door clicked shut behind her. White coats

shuffled around the halls. They all had places to be, but I felt them watching me. I was looking for somewhere to wait on the sly when Layla came back out.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“I told him I’d show him my boobs if he helped us out, and I’m not a liar,” she said.

Layla had brass balls. One time she flashed the food-cart guy in Dewey Square for a cheeseburger.

We started traipsing down the ward. Halfway down the hall, we peeked in a room. A bed stood just inches from the door, and a bandaged foot oozing green liquid stuck out from under a blanket. The guy attached to the foot was moaning.

“Nasty,” Layla said.

“I got to get out of here,” I said. My face had become hot, and my tongue was sweating.

“You want to dip now? Now that I showed that old prick my tits?”

“I think I’m going to be sick.”

“We’re in the right place then,” Layla laughed.

“No, for real, let’s go.”

“Whatever. This was your deal,” she said.

We walked back to the elevator, and the way it moved my body, like a boat dipping over waves, made me throw up right there on the floor. Layla held my hair while bile burned my throat. The elevator stopped, and I knelt there, head spinning. People stood in front of the elevator doors watching us. I could see their feet splayed in front of me.

A lady got close to my face. “Do you need some help?” she asked, and I recognized her as the lady from earlier. “What are you doing in here?” she asked. Then she got up and said something about security.

Layla got my arm over her shoulder, and we jogged toward the exit, almost into the sliding glass doors. I dropped down to my knees just in time to heave air behind a bush. Layla stood over me and kept an eye on the door. When my stomach stopped shaking, I looked up, and there was Dead Bird sitting on a brick bench twenty feet away with the same black bandanna and messy hair.

I pointed her out to Layla, “That’s her.” I wiped my mouth with the sleeve of my hoodie and walked over. “Yo.” I stuck out my hand, and Dead Bird just looked at it, so I put it behind my back.

“Name’s Ali,” I said.

“OK?” she said.

“I saw you fall off your bike before. I called the ambulance and watched them scoop you. You OK?”

“Six stitches and a concussion. What are you doing here?” she asked.

“We came to find you,” I said, immediately wishing I hadn’t.

“That’s weird, man.”

“I thought you were dead. I needed to know, I guess. I shouldn’t have left you there like that.” I thought she might tell me to screw, but she kept talking.

“No. Thanks, you know. How’d you know I’d be here?”

“We stay up the block from where you fell. I just figured, this being the closest hospital. What happened?” I asked. “You almost fell in slow motion.”

“My old man and me were fighting, and I up and left. He threw some eggs at me out the window. I was covered in them, and my ass just slipped, and the bike got a hold of me.”

The goo. I wanted to give her a hug, touch her, something. “Shit. Well, I’m glad you’re not dead,” I said. I didn’t know what to say next, so I turned to Layla, who stood back at the entrance to the T, smoking and watching. “You want to go?” I holler at Layla.

“I’m not waiting here on security,” she said and flicked the end of her smoke into the street.

I looked back at Dead Bird. “You waiting for somebody to pick you up?” She looked like she was about to cry the way she kept squeezing her lips together and blinking.

“I’m cool.”

Her eyes were blue, this clear shade of blue that reminded me of water and clean.

Layla and I walked down to the subway. I looked back just before Dead Bird disappeared behind the stairs, and she stared out at nothing.

“Hold up,” I said to Layla and jogged back to Dead Bird.

“Hey, you want to come with us? We’ll probably just go down to Castle Island and get high. Maybe grab a bite and a forty.”

She looked at my face, and I hoped she saw mine and not my mother’s. Just then two security guards came out of the hospital entrance, and I looked at Dead Bird like, *we have to go now*. She got me, and we ran back to Layla together.

In the Absence of Longitude

I arrived home after nine hours of driving. I had left Philadelphia at five a.m. to beat the early evening traffic. I'd known the drive back and fourth from Boston would be arduous, but I didn't have a choice. My regional manager understood my fear of flying, but I couldn't miss a company-wide meeting.

I felt my whole body unwind the moment I stepped out of the car and into our yard. I hadn't spent a night without Henry in the six months since we'd been married. He didn't need a lot of attention, and neither did I, but we liked to be near each other in a calm way. He liked when I did a puzzle at the kitchen table while he painted. I liked it when he shaved while I took a shower. When we went to a party, we didn't huddle together with our plastic plates of food. We walked around and talked and maybe met up in the middle of the yard for a hand squeeze or a small hug.

I lumbered up the stairs, opened the door to our apartment, and saw my plants on their shelf in the front hallway. My three-year-old *Miltonia* orchid, a patch of Thai basil, and the African violets had all become brown and wilted in just five days.

When I turned the corner that opened into the living room, Henry was sitting on the couch staring at a blank canvas.

What are you doing? I asked.

Working, he said.

What happened to my plants?

What happened to them?

Did you water them at all?

I forgot, he said.

But the list, I said.

We split our responsibilities around the house. I shopped. He cooked. He kept up with the cleaning. I took care of the yard. I'd left him a very small list of my errands and household chores.

I'm sorry, he said.

Our dog Angelica jumped up on me and pounded my waist with her paws. She had often done this when she was a puppy, when she wanted food or she needed to go out. I pushed her down to the floor, and she squirmed beneath my hands.

Has she eaten? I asked.

No, I'm sorry, Amy, I'm just—

What the hell, Henry? I said.

I went to the kitchen and fed Angelica. Then I stormed into the bedroom. A few minutes later, I heard Henry go outside. I showered then lay in bed while he hammered around in the backyard all afternoon. He often took breaks from painting and worked on

bikes, so I didn't think much of it. We had never argued before, and some people are like that. They get in a fight, and they get introverted and do something physical.

I read some of my novel and fell asleep. When I woke up an hour later, I took Angelica for a long walk in the arboretum down the road. It was the beginning of summer, and the lilacs had bloomed in my absence. I clipped a short branch from a light pink bush and took it for the vase on the kitchen table. Its rosy vanilla scent relaxed me some, and I told myself I could be more understanding.

Henry was stressed about his work. I could tell when I called him from Philadelphia. He'd received a huge grant for this next series of paintings, and he wasn't used to working with deadlines and contracts and publicity. He'd avoided corporate galleries throughout his career, but we wanted a family, and we needed more money.

I'd let go of all my anger by the time I got home, but Henry wasn't there. It got later and later, and when I called his cell phone it rang on the kitchen table.

I opened a can of tuna and emptied it over a bowl of lettuce and balsamic vinegar. I was sipping a glass of red wine on the back porch when Henry whispered my name from the tree and scared me half to death.

What the hell are you doing up there? I asked.

Taking a break, he said.

What do you mean? I asked.

I'll come down soon, he said.

I went inside and called his mother. She explained where it all began and said, Jesus that was so long ago.

One afternoon during the monsoons, a thirteen-year-old Henry practiced kick flips and ollies and rode up the sidewalls of a wash in his neighborhood in Tucson, Arizona. He knew it would rain, but he wasn't worried, even with the flash flood warnings, even though the washes filled up with rain in seconds flat. And that's exactly what happened, so he scrambled up into a Mesquite tree. He straddled a wide branch among squirrels and spiders and snakes, and they rested together, quietly. Eventually a few of the neighbors saw him napping on the limb, and he was air lifted by a helicopter. It showed all over the news: *Boy stuck in a tree*. The other part was, he didn't want to come down. He liked it up there. There was less happening.

I asked her if it was a thing after that. Did he go in trees all time?

She said no, but she wouldn't give me more information.

When I called my mother, who was building irrigation systems in Ghana, she said, Oh, you'll learn all sorts of funny things now that you're married. Embrace it, take it all in. Someone is showing himself to you. And Amy, honestly, I wouldn't mind a bit if after a fight your father crawled up into a tree for a few hours. You should see these children. They have nothing, and they're so full of joy.

The first time it lasted only that afternoon and evening. The following morning Henry got into bed with me and apologized for the plants. I asked him about the tree thing, if it was going to happen all the time, and he said he didn't think so. He admitted that he was worried about the deadline.

I thought it was the fight, I said.

It wasn't you, Amy. It was building up all week.

He wrapped his arms around me, and we had gentle sex. When he started to shake and pull away from me, I held him there. Stay, I said. Stay inside of me.

I roll over on the couch to the bleating of the alarm clock. I wiggle my toes in Angelica's fur. She's been sleeping out here with me since Henry went up in the tree twenty-five days ago, and our big bed reminds me of him all night. I have found new ways to feel surrounded at night, smooshing myself into the straight back of the couch, squeezing my toes in the cracks where the cushions meet, even lining one side of my body with a body sized pillow.

I go to the kitchen to start the coffee. I fill the glass kettle and pour a cup of whole beans in the hand-crank mill. It's a laborious task, grinding the coffee this way, but I'm afraid Henry could taste the difference if I used the electric grinder. He says the crank-mill produces a more uniform grind and therefore, a smoother cup. I pour the light roast grounds, Henry's favorite, into the French press and scan the kitchen. I take his sailboat mug from its hook above the stove.

I miss the ocean. I miss the cool breeze that rolled off the water, igniting my arms with goose bumps when Henry and I sat along the Harbor walk with our coffee and doughnuts. I go back to the couch, open my book, and wait for the water to boil.

I get up when the teakettle whistles and pour the boiling water into the French press. I do not mix the grinds after I pour the water because Henry never mixes the bloom, and that would affect the flavor. I ignite the stove to fry Henry's eggs. I burn the first two

when I go to the bathroom, break the third's yoke, then beat the fourth and fifth with a whisk and watch them rise like a pregnant belly in the microwave.

I go downstairs and grab *The New York Times* from the front porch. I rest the newspaper in the blue bucket with the eggs and the coffee. I walk to the backyard and attach the blue bucket to the rope pulley at the bottom of the tree. I pull the rope very slowly, so the coffee won't spill on the newspaper as the bucket rises. Henry waves to me and takes the bucket onto the tree's platform.

I water the Wild Anemone and Merrybells along the edges of the yard.

When Henry finishes eating, he lowers the blue bucket, and I raise the red bucket, so he can go to the bathroom. I busy myself with the weeds and wait for Henry's humiliation to descend.

How are you? I ask.

I miss you, he says.

You could come down, I say.

You could come up.

I have errands this afternoon. Do you want another canvas now? I ask.

I still need a few days with this one, he says.

Ordinarily, Henry starts a new painting every few days. He hasn't asked for a new canvas all week.

Four Sundays ago, Henry and I lay on the couch with our moist limbs intertwined while

we sipped iced-tea through neon-colored straws.

This is new, he'd said, when I made tea instead of coffee.

It was a regular domestic picture. Me reading a novel. Him reading the newspaper. Angelica, sleeping under the coffee table, lightly panting. Henry took breaks from economic desolation and another death in Afghanistan just to gaze at me. When he finished the paper, he made us breakfast, fiddlehead chèvre omelets and strawberry shortcake.

After our meal, we walked Angelica in the Forest Hills Cemetery. We took our time and strolled through the aisles of headstones and mausoleums. I tried the grave names on our unborn child, Eudora Florence, Esther Arrah, Lucian Oscar, Harland Josiah. I ran my fingers over the inscriptions, searching for smoothness. I'd know when I felt it.

We spread an afghan across the grass beside the pond in the middle of the cemetery. We lay on our sides with arms bent, faces resting in our palms, knees touching. White geese in harmonious packs coasted across the water and disturbed its stillness.

The next day, Henry went in the tree for the second time, and he hasn't come down since.

He said he was painting, and he needed peace. But I found his brushes in the house last week, so I am unsure if he's working at all.

Here's a conversation Henry and I had, two months before we were married:

I hate flying. I won't do it, I said.

That's OK. I like to walk, and we have our bikes, he said, chopping herbs for dinner. He turned to me and said, I want to live in the mountains. Way above sea level.

Montana, I said. Deep in the forest.

Sure, Henry said and got back to the chopping.

Here's a conversation Henry and I didn't have:

What are you afraid of?

I would have said heights. Acrophobia. Paralyzing acrophobia. Diagnosed, debilitating, acute acrophobia for twenty-four years. So much so, I only saw my parents for three months every year for the duration of my childhood. Their chosen, shared profession requires they travel, and I cannot step foot on an airplane. When I was five years old they carried me onto an outbound flight from Boston to Orlando for a "Make a Wish Foundation" soiree, and I took a life-changing glance out the window at our distance from the ground, the safe, solid ground. I shrieked for an hour until I fell asleep from exhaustion. My father went to the event, they cut the trip short, and we drove the two thousand miles home.

So here's the universe's joke: I can't go up and Henry won't come down. And it's just like life to give you exactly what you always wanted and then take it away.

I met Henry on a Sunday one year ago. There was a bike festival where I raised three hundred dollars for bikes for children in third world countries. My parents guilted me into

it. My parents, who dropped me off at a great aunt's house every year, while they lobbied for disenfranchised children all over the world. I signed up for the twenty-five-mile ride as their anniversary gift. At the fourteen-mile mark, right in front of the mechanic's tent, I slowed to refill my water bottle when my pedal came loose, and I almost fell. My foot slipped, and for a moment I thought I was suspended in the air. Flying. I didn't notice that someone had grabbed onto my waist to stop me from falling. But it was Henry. Henry caught me.

He released me in a tender way. His fingers slipped across my ribs so slowly, and he went around the bike and held the handlebars as I swung off the seat. Without a word, he flipped the frame, opened his toolbox, and fastened my pedal with an Allen wrench. Instead of getting back on my bike and finishing the ride, I stayed at the mechanics' tent with him. I didn't say that I was going to stay, and he didn't ask. We just started working on the bikes together. People stopped, and we adjusted their seat posts. We tightened chains that came loose or fell off. We reattached spokes and patched tires. When there was a lull in work, we sat on the ground, leaning back on our arms, the edges of our palms touching.

We dated for six months when Henry asked me to marry him.

I've been alone all my life, he said. You're the only person I want to work beside. Please marry me.

I said yes, and we went to City Hall that weekend. We invited our parents, but mine were in India working on "Operation Smile," and Henry's had the harvest coming, so we streamed it over the Internet, and they whooped and cried when we kissed unabashedly. I thought I'd never be alone again.

My parents made a ten thousand dollar donation to “Feed the Children” on our behalf. Henry wrote them a thank you card that I promised to mail but threw away. Henry’s mother wrote me a long letter in beautiful calligraphy, inviting me into the family. She gave me a pearl necklace that belonged to her mother, some old postcards from Henry’s father, and a white envelope stuffed with Polaroids from Henry’s childhood.

She said that between the ages of twelve and seventeen, Henry did nothing but ride his BMX bike and skateboard. She worried about him. He didn’t want to do school or girls or anything. He just wanted to “thrash.” Even in the oppressive desert heat that kept everyone inside in August, he was skating the washes or building ramps in the backyard. In the photographs, he has that perfect, golden skin. His hair looks like it’s always in need of a cut, and he wears ripped denim and band T-shirts. I would have fallen for him then too.

Two days ago, with my right foot trembling, I stepped up onto the first two-by-four nailed to the tree’s trunk. A choking heat rolled through me, and I lifted my left foot onto the man-made step. The yard swayed, and I reached around the trunk, cutting my fingertips grasping for a hold in the bark, unable to trust my own balance, unable to bring my feet to the ground, swallowing sobs, so Henry wouldn’t hear. I closed my eyes and counted to one hundred. Four times I reached ninety and started over. On my fifth try I rushed through ninety-nine, let my feet slip, and crawled on all fours up the stairs to the

apartment. When I got inside I called work. Sick, I said and lay on the couch wrapped in a quilt for the rest of the morning, frozen.

After the first time Henry went up there, I'd get home from work in the afternoon or from running errands in the evening, and if Henry wasn't lounging on the couch or at his desk, I'd run out to the back porch and shine a flashlight on the tree. If I hung over the porch railing without looking down, I reached an angle where I could see the platform on its second level of branches.

I woke up most nights at least once and reached for him in the dark. Here, he'd say. Right here.

I had nightmares about our unborn child. Would Lucian be agoraphobic? Refuse to leave the apartment? Would Esther fear animals and hate Angelica? Would Harland build a dugout in the backyard?

One day I came home and, dashing onto the porch, almost tore the screen door off. Henry sat on a striped lawn chair that we keep out there. He was sewing the top button back onto his grey-blue shirt that I like to throw on when I get out of the shower for its soft cotton and the way it's covered in his smell.

Are you worried? he asked.

Yes, I said.

I can tell. You're jumpy, and you've been looking at me a lot.

I hadn't wanted him to know how much time I spent thinking about the tree stuff and what it meant, but of course he felt me hovering around him. He felt me getting closer.

I'm sorry, he said, and then he looked down and continued sewing.

Could you just leave a note or something? I asked. I think I could calm down a bit if you could promise me that.

He looked at me not quite understanding, holding the needle there.

Could you leave a note if you're going to go up in the tree again? I said.

I'm not, he said.

But if you do. If you do, promise you'll leave a note on a memo pad or something. It could just say TREE if you want.

Okay, he said. Promise.

Thank you.

I sat down on his lap, and he dropped the sewing needle. The thread slipped out of the shirt, floated onto the wooden planks of the porch, and we kissed. This was our first negotiation as a married couple. I should have used it more wisely. I should have said: Promise you'll never go back up there. I should have ripped the wooden two-by-fours right off.

I bring the red bucket inside and empty it in the toilet, then I go back to the couch with my book.

On my fiftieth birthday when someone asks, what is your re-do? It won't have anything to do with my inability to leave the ground, my refusing the scholarship from the University of Hawaii, staying in the city, the almost-bike-accident, or the abortion. I would cut down that damn tree. I would cut down every goddamn tree on earth.

Crescent Beach

I don't know if Misha knew how to swim. The weather reports said that on February fifth the water's temperature off the coast of Portland, Maine dropped below thirty-three degrees Fahrenheit. If the boat tipped and threw Misha overboard, fully submerged, he could have stayed afloat for an hour. Then he would actively drown from hypothermia.

His body could not replenish the heat that was being lost to the ocean. He shivered violently. His skin went from white to gray to blue. He became confused and unable to call out. His heartbeat slowed. His respiration slowed. His blood pressure decreased. His muscles weakened. His eyes glossed over. His arms and legs spasmed in one final burst, and he sank.

Misha and I met at A Squat in the city. It's a six-story, crumbling brick building that sits

on the corner of A Street and Everett, downtown. Stray kids inhabit the first and second floors. Mom had long-term, mandatory rehab, and even though we got to keep the apartment while she was in—the government check went straight to the landlady—I couldn't go back there. I hated my mom sometimes for getting locked up, but I loved her, too, and I wanted her to have a place to go when she got out. If the landlady found me like she did the one time—scattered needles, sticky pipes, leftover trash, forties and roaches—she said she'd have me arrested, and Mom and I'd be out on the street. I knew that would happen eventually anyway, but I didn't want it to be on account of me.

I traded most of our food stamps for booze and kept the squat stocked with soup and soda. I passed out on one of the couches in the first-floor living room or fucked one of the permanents for a bed upstairs.

Misha came to the squat a month after me. It was late at night, and I was wasted, drifting in and out of sleep. I didn't know what time it was or how long I'd been out. I opened my eyes, and he knelt on the floor, fussing with the TV antenna, just his profile, all angles and bones. His eyes were this clear shade of blue-green, and the way his cheeks sank and his nose pointed, he reminded me of some foreign, beautiful bird.

I thought that I dreamed Misha up, but he was still there in the morning. He lingered but barely spoke, and he hung around with Dottie. Dottie and I avoided each other because I had sex with her boyfriend the week I showed up. It's hard to tell who's with who if you just arrived, and I didn't know Mattie was with Dottie. They had the kind of long-time thing where they didn't hang on each other like in the beginning, and they had separate spots upstairs. Mattie tried to get at me my first night, but I blew him off for a week because some loose anger shined beneath his eyes.

I couldn't get used to the front door opening and closing all night, waking me with gusts of frozen air. If I wasn't drunk, I'd lie awake shivering and listening for familiar voices. I lay there one night with a scarf wrapped around my head, shielding my face from the light and the cold, when Mattie came at me, gripped my shoulder and whispered my name, "Lucy." He asked me if I'd come upstairs, and I went against my instincts because if we got a regular thing going, I could keep my pack up there instead of using it as a pillow, and I might get a full night's sleep. Mattie led me up the stairs to the tarped-off area where he kept his blankets and duffel bags beside a bare, gray mattress that reeked of wet cigarettes and onions. I woke in the morning sore and naked, uncovered and alone.

Dottie heard about it, and she didn't care that I didn't know, didn't even ask. She marched up to me the following afternoon and cracked me square in the face. "Fucking clown," she said and smeared her bloodied knuckle across her thigh. I covered my mouth with a shaky palm, felt the gash in my lip and the jagged edge where she chipped my left, front tooth. I was more careful after that, asked questions and paid attention to who slept where and how often.

So with Misha and Dottie hanging around each other, I wouldn't go near him, but I always caught him watching me. I'd be looking at something on TV or boiling water at the stove, and there was Misha, leaned up against the wall behind me. He never shied off, either. He stared me down until I looked away. "Fucking eerie, that guy," a girl said once.

No, I thought, but I didn't know why.

Maybe Misha accidentally inhaled a small amount of water at first. Laryngospasm.

The fall landed him on his side in the middle of the boat. An enormous storm wave spilled into his open mouth. His throat muscles reacted by sealing off his lungs. Nothing got in. Not oxygen. Not water. He couldn't yell. After eighty seconds his lungs screamed for air, those muscles relaxed, and the ocean filled them up.

Most days Misha lay on a couch for the whole afternoon reading a book, even though he had his own spot upstairs. I stayed near him and watched the way his thumb slid down the page before he turned it. I liked the careful way he rested the open book on his chest when he took a sip of beer. He was so close to me, I could hear him breathing. I could have reached out and touched his face.

One day, about a month after Misha showed up, I went out and got half a pint of whiskey. I sat on the pier and drank it down, watching the waves. When I felt warm and loose, when the world had become quiet, when the sun dipped behind the water and the dark was coming in, I walked back to A Street, thinking I'd have an easy time passing out.

When I walked in, Misha was sitting on the couch next to my pack. He had a plastic bottle of rum by his feet, and he poured some into a coffee mug then held it out to me. I brought it up to my mouth and smelled spiced apple cider. Next he took a deck of cards from his back pocket and asked me if I could play Forty-fives.

I sat with my back against the couch, and he sat across from me. We played a couple games, each won once, and he got up to use the bathroom. When he came back, he sat down next to me. He put his arm around my shoulder, and when he leaned in to kiss me, I stopped him. “What about Dottie?” I asked.

“It’s not like that,” he said. “She’s not my girl.” And we went upstairs.

Misha unzipped his sleeping bag and spread it out across the floor. When we lay down, I started to take off my shirt. He stopped me, and then he held my hand until I fell asleep.

Drowning begins when water inhalation starts, and oxygen stops reaching the brain. After three minutes of oxygen deprivation, the brain dies.

I woke up, and Misha was curled around me with his warm hand cupped over my hipbone and his face in that small place between my shoulders. Light shone through the sheets that hung around the mattress, so I knew it was at least mid-morning. I turned onto my back and edged out from under his arm. When I got up and crept out to the floor, there was Dottie staring right at me.

“Oh, hell no,” she said. She lunged at me and cuffed my ear with her fist. We both fell, but I got away from her. I was running down the stairs when I heard Misha yelling, “Calm down, D.”

I shoved everything I could into my pack and threw on my boots without lacing them. Fucking idiot, Lucy. I said it over and over again as I charged down the sidewalk. I was two blocks down Everett when someone grabbed me from behind, and I ducked, thinking I was about to take another hit, but it was Misha, barefoot in a T-shirt and boxer shorts. “Wait for me at Monument Square,” he said. “Ten minutes.”

I jerked my shoulder from his grasp and turned away from him.

“Please, Lucy,” he yelled at my back.

I stopped a few blocks later. I made sure I had my wallet and the cash I kept under the insole of my right boot. I put on my gloves and my hat. The adrenaline was wearing off, and my head had begun to throb. I didn’t think Misha was coming, but I didn’t have anywhere else to go, so I walked over to Monument Square.

I waited for what felt like ten minutes. Then I walked across the street to the payphone. A girl I knew still lived in the neighborhood, and I thought she might let me crash while I figured something out. Then Misha was there, tapping on the phone booth.

He opened the door, pulled me out by my waist, and wrapped both of his arms around me. I tried to push him away, but he wouldn’t budge, and I gave in. No one had ever held me on the street like that, like we belonged to each other.

“What now?” I asked.

He let go and led me back across the street to the bus stop. He said he knew a place where we could go.

Misha paid my fare, and we sat in the back against the window. He poured sunflower seeds into his hand, motioned for me to open my palm, and shared half of what he held. I watched out the window as we headed west over the bridge toward Cape Elizabeth. A few blocks out of town, Misha pulled the lever above our heads, and we got off.

He walked ahead of me like he knew where he was going.

“Most of the houses are empty all winter. You can tell which ones because the windows are boarded up or covered in canvas to keep the weather and the sand out. I’ve stayed in this one before.” He pointed to a peach clapboard cottage set back from the street. We walked through patches of long, dead grass up onto the gray, weatherworn porch.

“Watch out here,” he said. “I’m going through a side window.”

It only took a minute, and Misha unlocked the front door. I walked into the tiny kitchen, wallpapered and tiled eggshell blue. I poked my head into the powder pink bathroom, just a stand-up shower for one, a sink, and a toilet. The bedroom was painted light yellow. It held a double bed under a patchwork quilt, a scratched, oak dresser and a nightstand. Dark wood paneling covered the walls in the middle room. A long rectangular table stood in the center beneath a plastic, red and white gingham tablecloth that stuck to our arms. Behind the table there was a mantle above a boarded-up fireplace. The mint green room in the front of the house looked out at the water through an enormous storm window. Pink and white shells lay in neat piles across its sill.

We walked out to the front yard, and a woman in long wool coat and a straw hat was raking her yard next door. She stopped and looked at us.

“You renting the place?” she called.

“We are,” Misha said. “For a month or so, until we find a place downtown.”

“Really?”

“I’m Misha, and this is Lucy,” he said

“Mrs. A,” she said, and then we walked back in the house.

“Think she knows?” I asked.

“We’ll find out,” he said.

An instinctive drowning response can happen in which voluntary movement becomes impossible.

Misha bobbed there on the water. His legs did not kick. His arms did not move. His eyes did not open. He went under.

When I asked Misha about Dottie, he said that they’d done the same thing for years, shacked up when they didn’t have anything else going on, that she’d come around when she was over it and not to worry because they’d been friends since they were kids, were raised on the same street, and their moms grew up together, too. He opened his wallet and revealed an old, soft, photograph of him and Dottie in diapers. They stood calf-deep in a

blue plastic swimming pool. They held dripping, half-eaten popsicles, and grass stuck to their skin.

One of the articles says simply: Drowning is most often quick and unspectacular.

We stood beside each other chopping vegetables or demystifying some recipe in a cookbook. Misha pointed at the bump where his right collarbone jugged out, “Skateboarding when I was ten.”

“I took a cooking class in high school, but I can’t remember much,” I told him. We burned whole steaks, so they were barely chewable. We watched a cake fail to rise because we didn’t know the difference between baking soda and baking powder. We got fish guts everywhere deboning Winter Flounder. We knocked on Mrs. A’s door to ask what tarragon and coriander were. She dropped off bags full of spices from the second hand store. She gave us pots and mixing bowls she didn’t use anymore.

“I have an older brother. He lives in Washington. Works on computers,” Misha said. He sliced off a piece of his finger with a butcher knife. I burnt the inside of my forearm on the oven rack. We cooked an entire turkey dinner, brought some over to Mrs. A, and ate the leftovers for a week—mooshy vegetables and over-salted gravy, but ours.

“I’m an only child,” I told him. “Just me and my mom.” We separated our laundry. We flossed our teeth, took turns spitting our pink saliva in the sink.

Misha played with my new belly fat where it swelled over my jeans. He noticed things about me I’d never noticed about myself. “I like that triangle of freckles on your knee.”

We picked trash out of the fence and combed beer caps and candy wrappers from the sand. We fixed the rain gutters. “The records are my mom’s. She loved music,” he said when I asked what was playing.

We checked out books from the library. “I don’t read fiction. I want to know about real life,” Misha said.

“I like fantasy,” I said. “I like to be in imaginary worlds.”

We went to the movies. We drank hot chocolate. I got a job.

In the evening, we bundled up out front with a six-pack, and Misha played his harmonica.

Movies and books suggest that a dying person’s brain plays memories like a film reel before a bright light sweeps them away.

What was Misha’s final show? Dottie and him splashing in the blue, plastic pool on a Sunday afternoon? Me and him sitting on the striped, plastic beach chairs? He plays a long, old tune. I wrap my arm around his thigh, rest my head on his knee, and close my eyes.

We made the front room our bedroom. There's so much beach in the carpet you know that here's where the previous family came in and shook off their wet bathing suits and sandy feet. Our bed is pushed up against the storm-scratched window where Misha wanted it so we could hear the ocean at night, and I keep it here because it makes me imagine that he's not gone, that he came back from fishing, that he's going to wake me up by breathing some soft word in my ear, always working his arm up under my T-shirt and placing his hand on the square of skin in the middle of my chest like he wanted to hold my heart.

I reach for him in the morning. "Hi," I often whisper to his side of the bed. It's been ninety-three days, and I still do it, stretch out for him and find nothing but air. My arms spring back. A reaction to the emptiness, as if I can take it back, take back his missing body, take back the cold mattress in its place.

I take Misha's harmonica from the nightstand and press the cold metal against the same spot on my chest. I hold it there until I have to get up for work.

I pass the framed photograph of Misha and his mom on the mantle as I walk through the living room.

Misha is maybe five or six years old. She kneels with her knees bent at her chest. She wears a pink, hooded sweatshirt and khaki shorts. She hugs Misha's hips, and buries her nose in in his shoulder and armpit, so all you can see of her face is a sharp cheekbone,

same as Misha's, where the wind blows her hair away. He stares into the camera, beaming.

I asked him about it, once.

"My ma," he said.

"Where's she at?"

"Passed. Years ago."

I wish I knew how. I wish I knew when. There are a million questions I never asked.

Maybe Misha didn't drown at all. Exsanguination: bleeding out.

An enormous wave tipped the aluminum fishing boat and he lost his footing, slipped, smashed his head, and became unconscious. Thirty minutes passed, and thick blood pooled around his temples, tinting the shallow water in the boat a murky red. His breath grew short and gravelly, until it stopped.

I clean rooms at the No-Tell Motel. I strip the beds, find strange pieces of people's lives, and build stories about them. It's something that helps me not think about Misha during the day. Today it's a red plastic flip-flop. Stale smoke. Maple syrup. I imagine a young

couple that came for a long weekend, left their kids at home, pretended they were having a forbidden affair, lay in bed smoking and eating blueberry pancakes.

A skinny pair of black lace underwear. Perfumed pillows. Actual adultery. Skin slicked, wet and sparkling. A bloodstained sheet stirs me out of my imaginings.

Misha's blood all over the kitchen counter. A paper towel around his finger all night, rewrapping it, and rewrapping it. The gray circles around his eyes no matter how much sleep we got. His long, beautiful nose. The tiny bulb on its bridge from being broken and reset. Those cheek bones. The deep angle of his jaw. Him looking at me and not looking away and looking at me.

After two weeks in water, skin will blister and turn greenish black. Though flies and other insects are largely absent in the ocean, crabs and small fish may feed on the soft parts of the face like the eyes and lips.

Maybe they never found Misha's body because it's at the bottom of the ocean. Stone crabs gnaw on his cheeks, uncovering shiny, ivory bones.

Misha was in Mrs. A's aluminum fishing boat when the storm hit. She had given him a copy of the keys because she was only up on weekends, and Misha liked to fish for our dinners, had better luck catching something out on the water than sitting on the jetty.

When she handed Misha the keys, she said, “Check the weather and wear the life jacket.” *Why didn’t he check the weather? Did he wear the life jacket?* Search and Rescue found the boat dented and upside down, washed up on the shore, three miles down the beach.

I left for work, and he was still reading in bed. I brought him a cup of coffee and sat on the edge of the mattress. I rubbed my thumb across the soft skin beneath his chin. I kissed him in that easy way where only half our lips touched. I left. The sun shone warm on my shoulders. I started on room eighteen. The afternoon turned grey and then black. Thick clouds rolled toward the water. I pushed a cart to the laundry when the rain started. I felt small drops on my face. I didn’t think of him. I ran through the parking lot to get under an awning. I dried my face with a clean towel. I finished up. I grabbed sunflower seeds and a couple scratchers at the corner store on my walk home. The rain had slowed to a softly shifting dew. The front door was locked. The lights were out. I crawled in the side window. No note. A cookbook lay open on the counter. A recipe for pecan-crust ed winter flounder. I walked to the closet where Misha kept his fishing gear. I raised my hand to the knob. I turned to the window. The ocean smashed into the shore. My hand found my chest. I sat down on the floor. I knew.

A study on drowned humans found one body partially skeletonized after thirty-four days and a second body to be completely skeletonized after three months.

It’s likely that Misha is only bones now.

When I get home, I grab a beer and drape an afghan over my shoulders to sit in front of the house and listen to the ocean. Mrs. A combs her beachfront with a long metal rake and waves me over. I shake my head, and she nods. Sometimes I sit with her in the evenings, and we drink raspberry tea or her homemade margaritas. Other times she joins me over here, and we watch the waves. She cleaned when I wouldn't get out of bed, drops off groceries and twelve packs.

A few days after Misha died, she came by, and I'd packed everything up.

"Where you going?" she asked.

"I don't know, but I have to get out of here," I told her. "We didn't rent the place. We're squatting."

"I know," she said. "I own it." She told me there was nothing worth stealing. Plus, we were cleaning the place up, and she liked having us around, so she thought she'd let us stay until season. Now I pay the utility bills, and she tells me we'll figure something out.

"A lady came by when you were at work," she hollers.

I know that she finds ways to talk to me, to get me to speak, to make sure there's still a voice in here.

"Told her Miss Lucy was at work, usually home around seven, could I give her a message, but the girl said no and went on her way."

I salute her and look back at the water. The ocean is calm. Sailboats rock against the waves, coasting toward the marina before dark.

There's a gentle rapping on the front door that echoes into the yard. I get up, cup my hands over my eyes, and peer through the window. The blurry silhouette of a girl. A denim jacket. Long, dark hair.

I walk through the house, and she steps back as I reach the door.

It's Dottie.

Her face is creased in places I don't remember. She looks sideways, runs her fingers through her bangs, and pulls on a handful of hair. She looks at my face and opens her mouth like she'll say something. Then she closes it and looks away again.

"Come on in," I say, pushing the door and stepping back to make room for her.

She follows me into the kitchen. I get a can of beer from the fridge, pull back the tab, and hand it to her. "Do you want to come sit out front?" I ask.

She nods.

As we walk through the middle room, she pauses in front of the mantle. "Crescent Beach," she says, "Misha's ma used to bring us there when we were kids."

I copied the picture and keep it folded twice in my pocket. It doesn't always work, but when I feel like I've got nothing to lose, when I see Misha's voided face in the dark, moments before the water took him—floating face down, twisting his neck, searching for the breath to scream, lying in the boat of his blood, just bones at the bottom of the ocean—I open the picture and imagine what happened seconds after. A five year-old Misha breaks free of his mother's arms. It's low tide. The sun's in that perfect place on

the horizon, mid-setting. The waves curl up around his legs. He dances into the water, and she goes after him.

I live in a peach, clapboard cottage on the Atlantic Ocean. My beach is not the clean strip you imagine a woman walking along in bare feet and a flowing cotton shirt. It's the public side where kids leave their crinkled-up condoms and smashed forties from the night before. When the sun's warm and the tide's low, I walk down the shore in the mornings. I lie down so the water pours up over my shoulders. It's May, and it's freezing, but I like the shock of it, the pull of the waves. When my landlady, Mrs. A's around, she watches me, and it makes her nervous. She pulls me up by my elbows and tangles me into a breathless, one-sided hug. She holds my face in her warm palms and says, "You're OK," over and over.

When the tide's up in the morning, I lie beneath the pier and listen to feet tap across the wooden planks where couples lean their elbows against the railing and gaze out at where the sky melts the water. They'll get close and rub the raised hairs on each other's arms. I know the way the long horizon and chilled wind make them feel newly born.

VITA

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