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## Augustine and Other Stories

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Augustine and Other Stories

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

Film, Theatre, and Communication Arts

Creative Writing

by

Amanda Pederson

B.A., Rollins College, 2003

December 2009

## Dedication

This collection of stories is dedicated to my parents, Nancy and Donny Pederson, and to my fiancé, Shawn Mitzel.

## Acknowledgements

The completion of this work would not have been possible without the loving support and encouragement of my family, friends, and colleagues. I am in debt to the Creative Writing Workshop, both professors and fellow students, for their inspiration and generosity.

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## Augustine

My daughter Augustine and I draw starfish on butcher paper, which I will later frame and hang in the upstairs hallway, beneath last week's soldiers and kings. She is nine, with long, honey-blond hair and wears an electric blue dress I've decorated with denim patches. As she draws the starfish's bumps in purple and yellow, I think about things she's not aware of yet. Easter Island, the price of gold, the fall of the Berlin Wall.

"I like yours," she says, pointing to my cluster of three next to a clownfish.

"Thank you," I say with a wink. "Yours is better, though."

Augustine has always been steadily sure of herself, curious, inventive. One day we found seed pods in high grass with what looked like gauze inside. Something to do with pollination, or maybe just a symptom of rotting on the lawn. Augustine's fist had circled like a conch shell, binding her specimen as she studied it. She proposed that the pods were eggs and that the mothers had designed blankets for the babies within the shells.

I loved that image: a warm, cotton blanket inside a paper-thin globe. When I asked what kind of babies she supposed lived there, under the miniature comforters, Augustine gave me a patient, studied glance, and asked, "What does it matter?" Not with attitude or exasperated, just calm, though apparently bemused that her mother did not, perhaps could not, understand the simple philosophy of things.

She watches *The Parent Trap* and *The Trouble with Angels* and then sits in front of the mirror, trying to perfect Hayley Mills' animated expressions. The tongue poking around her cheek, the accent, the exclamation of "I've got the most scathingly brilliant idea!" Her other quirks include calling El Camino cars "Palominos;" Neapolitan ice cream has become

“Napoleon.” She knows better, but still. I watch her daily, closely, trying to grasp how she came to be the person that she is.

"Can they really grow their arms back if one falls off?" She has drawn a black line across her paper, rendering the purple and yellow starfish an amputee, right near the body.

“Yes. Just like that,” I say.

I tell Augustine a story about what I remember most about the year I was her age: my first trip to Marineland, a sort of prototype Sea World off of Highway A1A on the Florida coast. We went in a Winnebago and stayed in the campground next to the park.

Inside, the walkways were white sand, and the buildings were all shaped like what I’d later learn were called grottoes. There was a diving show, with a tiny pool and sky high ladder, rusted anchors lying everywhere, and an electric eel in a tank built into a stucco wall. Near his exhibit you could push a button and a light bulb would flicker on. He was the first animal on display, and I think he was meant to impress visitors with the magic of his latent power.

“Why couldn’t he live with the other eels?”

“I guess because he was special.”

The closest attraction to the entrance was a 3-D projection show. The audience became the hang glider pilot as he soared over oceans and other now-vague, majestic land and seascapes. The theme song was John Denver's "Fly Away," and that dreamy song, coupled with the entirety of it all, made me never want to leave that theater, though I knew what treasures awaited outside. When you walked out, the air tasted like kosher salt.

“Is that like regular salt?”

I laugh. “Yes. It tastes like the ocean.”

There was a huge tank, a circle tank that held something like four hundred thousand gallons and sat like a huge silo next to the otters and penguins. You'd climb up and peer over the ledge to see sharks, sea turtles, and all kinds of big fish, with coral and anemones dotting the bottom like splashes of paint. It bothered me to see them all living together like that; I worried that the sharks could turn at any time, snacking on a turtle before their afternoon nap.

"They don't do that, Mom. They're friends."

I don't tell Augustine because it would sound silly, but it wasn't the sharks that scared me most, the morays, the threat of falling in. It was the darkness of the water, the darkest blue. It seemed cast with shadows even in full daylight.

I tell her about the stairs that led down, stairs that were tight, rusty, and time-old, like those in a ship, to get to the observation windows below. It seemed safer somehow down there. You'd walk around, looking through not huge panels of glass, but portholes. The thickest glass, clouded within its layers.

Quick as that, however, and I've lost Augustine's attention, though later she'll ask me to tell her more about the eels and tanks, and if there were lionfish. But now she's asking about her father.

"When do I have to go, Mom?"

"In the morning, babe. But not for long."

I try to read her expression but cannot. She's drawing a mermaid with steel gray wings.

An elderly friend of my mother's told me once, with scotch on her breath, that our names made us sound like we were a family of immigrants. There is me, Magdalene, which I suppose conjures the benevolent nun, the sun-hot mission, the pair of hands sticky with stigmata. Then,

Augustine: fleeting pictures of chapels, rosettes, and river picnics; royal but benign. And our cat, Alexander: his name suggesting wool coats over turtleneck sweaters, slimline pistols; only better if it were Aleksei, because then you'd so easily picture the Kremlin, all brassy in the rise of dawn.

James, the only one of us with an ordinary name, was the one to migrate away. We divorced seven months ago, my husband fading away more and more until one day I discovered he was no longer mine.

Yesterday I turned thirty-eight, and James sent me a yellow vase from 1-800-Flowers with a mix of yellow gerbera daisies, yellow roses, and yellow verbenas.

I was the recipient of several gifts. The first was a present to myself: a pair of red shoes from a place called Sass on North Cherry Lane. Size nine, narrow, with laces that wrap up my legs like a ballerina's ribbons. Augustine made me a macaroni picture frame, and my boss from Reedman & Reedman, Mr. Leif Reedman, tied a silver bow around a bottle of '98 Shiraz.

I've hung the starfish drawings and put Augustine to bed when I sit down on the sofa in the living room with a glass tumbler and my Reedman wine, wearing my new shoes. I'm picking out the roses and verbenas so all that's left is a vase of gerbera daisies, the only flowers I like, when I take the first sip. I hold it under my tongue, tasting a musky kind of sweet, with the tiniest hint of a large brown nut that's been buried in a dark, deep forest.

James will be over soon, to talk, he says, which is why I've started on the wine. One glass to relax me. He makes me edgy, makes me feel disjointed. I don't have as much money as he does for a lawyer, for court, for her. Last time he was over we had an argument that teetered in and out of being a fight. He made veiled non-threats, observations with potential. About the unlocked liquor cabinet, the emails he'd found of mine implicating that I'd had two different male

visitors over to the house in the span of one week, about my complete lack of Christian values. In my head I addressed all these concerns calmly while he rambled on, but when I got the chance to speak I shouted out my rebuttals like pellets in a toy gun. I couldn't keep in check that I'd found emails of his as well, namely a string of them from a prostitute named Harmony who dressed in purple lingerie and for their first "visit" hid behind the hotel door room shyly when James walked in. He was astounded I'd found out, like only he had the power, the know-how, to unearth secrets. And amazingly, James explained with hardly a pause that his indiscretion wasn't that bad, as it was kept away from Augustine. He was smart about it, he said. And, by the way, they're dating now. Her real name is Rachel.

I was so shocked I apologized in a way I'm not sure he bought as sincere and reminded myself to behave for the sake of my daughter.

It was all too much, though. The fact that they're together now seems somehow larger than life, and I can't help but picture him as some mad interventionist, all hugs and rehabilitative quips for the poor, childlike nymph who just couldn't help herself, couldn't pull herself away from all that delicious, pulsing, neon sin. I wonder where I was, if I was home with Augustine, while he was busy pulling her gently from behind the hotel door, her lace shoulder strap perhaps perfectly-accidentally giving way to reveal a nipple as buttercream soft and smooth as any virgin's the world round.

But now, suddenly, sweet Rachel has become my only ammunition. If I hadn't found those emails, I'd have nothing. His degrees, his summer working with disabled children, would kill my paltry years as an exceedingly competent, ready-and-willing-to-die-for-her-daughter mom.

The doorbell rings and all of a sudden he's back. My ex-husband, former love and more recent stranger. When I open the door, he's too close to the threshold, as if he's been peering in the peephole. He plays it off well, though, like he does with everything.

"Maggie. You look good."

I'm tempted to duck behind the door, push a strap off my shoulder, use a Bacall voice and ask just how good. But I stay put.

"Thank you." I refrain from a matching compliment, though he looks fantastic. Dark brown hair combed straight back, a glacier blue shirt that looks devastating against his skin. Instead, I keep mum.

He stands in the center of the room with his hands on his hips, looking altogether interested in the ceiling fan. "Shall we have a drink?"

"Is this a test?" It's supposed to be a joke, but there's truth in it.

He smiles modestly, as if to challenge my doubt. He looks with scientific eyes at the wine glasses, my book on Cuban cigars, the blue light bulb in the corner lamp. All things that were here while he was still here, but seen now through new eyes.

"Just relax, Maggie."

"Magdalene. And I'm fine." I shoot him a glance, quick and venomous, then wonder with a heart skip why I'm not acting angelic, all words laced with honey. He has the power to take her away.

"Really, it's okay. Just relax." And there's that look again, that therapist's expression of everything-under-control, genuine concern and empathy, as if he's a master of solemnity. That look I fear will sink my battleship in front of any judge.

I try to play along, and hold up the Shiraz. "This okay?"

"Always was."

I pour with a remarkably steady hand, relaxing further when I spot some dirt under one of his fingernails, an imperfection I'll have to cling to, as it's the only one being offered to me.

Aside from Rachel.

I find myself wondering, untriggered, what she'd done when she first noticed his Tree of Life tattoo. I could almost see her sidling up to him and running her fingers over each branch, down to the roots, around the trunk, over the shadow of leaves.

"Oh," he says. "Happy Birthday."

My cat Alexander and I lie on the bed in the cool, cool bedroom, under the waffle-weave blanket the color of chrome, sunlight dappling through as if we're inside a thatch-roof hut. The fan overhead looks like a swarm of bees, arranged in a perfect circle, hovering silently, respecting our quiet. Alexander's nose is the color of salmon steak, and he watches a thread dangling down toward us as if it's the plumpest, sweetest bird.

It's late morning on Saturday, and James has her for the weekend. I thought maybe he'd want to wake her up and take her last night, but he only stayed for two glasses of wine. We talked a little bit about work, a little bit about Augustine, and then a little bit about Rachel. Between the Rachel talk and his not-so-subtle inquiries about my dating status, I got irritated, though I didn't bite like last time.

There was something sad about James last night. He looked weary, tired of arguing, but more tired perhaps as a result of this entire process.

Now I'm wondering if he's ever had a dream of losing her.

I woke briefly before seven this morning, then fell back asleep and dreamed she fell in. Into the big circle tank. I heard the splash, small, like a diver's moderated entry. When I looked down, all I saw was fish and that dark, dark water. The railing got higher then, and instead of trying to scale it, I turned and ran down the stairs to the observation level below. From window to window I scuttled, pounding on the fogged-over panes with the palms of my hands in hopes of the more damaged glass giving way. The last porthole was set low but was clear, and I ran over and sat on the floor, that cold, damp concrete, to look inside.

And there she was: my daughter, Augustine and her beautiful wheat-colored hair flowing up like a proud daughter of Triton. I watched as bubbles rose from her mouth and realized she was okay; she could breathe! I thought to myself, *Something I didn't know about her*, like breathing underwater was akin to having a talent for chess or being really good at math. Perhaps it is.

The next thing I noticed was who was lying next to her, as calm as a bedridden grandmother. A nurse shark, in her blankets of sand and shell. Overhead, a lone tuna fish, floating along steadily as if proud of its shine. Augustine was looking around her, her eyes following an eel like watching cursive being written. And then she spotted me, peering in, an infant trying to understand the world.

She smiled, so gently, and then leaned over to kiss the nurse shark, her nurse shark, on the top of its head, then offering a stroke with the back of her porcelain hand along the shark's side. I looked around after that, immediately fearful of what else lurked in that water, not worrying until just then, hypnotized by my daughter's marine spell.

I watched her swim over to a large porthole I'd missed before. And, this being a dream, she opened one pane of glass, slipped inside, and waited for the water to drain before stepping out on my side of things, her hair wet and her eyes so bright.

Nothing seemed necessary then, no tight embrace, for she hadn't truly been in harm's way. No string of questions, for everything seemed right, just as it should be: a nurse shark, a halo of fish, bubbles from her perfect little mouth.

I call in the evening like I often do on weekends, under the transparent guise of asking a question or issuing a reminder, when really all I want is to hear her voice, to hear she's happy. I can always tell, innately, whether or not she's smiling, and I count those smiles like beads on a rosary.

"Hello! McKendrick residence."

In the time it takes me to inhale my next breath, I know it's Rachel. But before I can think it over, I've got to say something, anything, so I spit out, "Hi. Is James there?"

"No, sorry, he's out. Want me to have him call you back?" Her voice doesn't sound particularly alluring, though perhaps I'm the wrong person to ask. She sounds younger than I'd imagined, which is disturbing because I'd figured she was in her twenties.

"You don't have to. I can try—"

"It's no problem." And then, a little too forced-casual, "Who is this?"

I pause for what must be a second too long because she's asking in that same, pretend-calm way, "Is this Magdalena?"

I count to three, then, "Magdalene, yes."

Silence, though I think I hear her start to say something then stop. A sigh. Then she speaks up again before I have a chance to hurry off the phone, run to my bedroom with my face burning red.

“She’s great, you know. Augustine? She’s just great.”

I try to think what this claim is supposed to convey but write it off as pure filler.

“Yep. She is.”

“I mean, I know you know that.” The briefest of pauses, and then, “So, you know about me, right?”

“Know about you?” I pray she’s not asking about her line of work, worry I’m being led down a path I can’t turn back from.

“About me and James, being together.” And, in a much smaller voice, “I’m Rachel.”

I almost feel sorry for her. She sounds ridiculously young. “Yes,” I say and stop myself just in time before tagging on “dear” or “hon” at the end. I feel ancient. “Rachel, I was just calling to check on Augustine.”

“She’s fine. She’s out with James, at the grocery store.”

“Okay. Well, thank you.” I’m momentarily positive I’m seconds away from hanging up when she speaks again.

“You know, I’m glad he talked to you last night. He was nervous. That you’d take it the wrong way.”

Bracing myself, I pause ever so briefly to think, to make myself sound calm. The side of my neck starts to hurt in a way I know promises a headache for later. “Well, yeah. Me too.”

She doesn’t say anything. I try, “But we talked about several things last night. Do you mean –” I’m hoping she’ll take the bait, fill in the blanks.

“About Augustine,” she says. “He said he talked to you about the whole custody thing.” She’s all of a sudden doubtful, stressed. “Did he?”

I have to answer now, before I lose the nerve. “Oh, yeah, that. Yeah, he told me.” I’m instantly torn, violently, between worrying what this means and feeling violated that he’s told this girl about everything. Everything about my daughter and maybe even myself.

She’s audibly relieved, her words spilling out now like water. “Okay, good. He was worried you’d think he was giving up on her or something like that. When, you know, like he told you, it’s nothing like that. He just needs time, you know? We both do. He’s really helping me get back on my feet.”

Still piecing things together, I say, “That’s great.”

“Yeah, James is awesome. And so is Augustine! But, you know, we get her over here and all she talks about is you. I mean, not every last word, but it’s obvious she misses you. And I agree with James about a kid needing a place to call home and not go switching back and forth every few days.”

I don’t say anything, just wonder when this revelation occurred, when he decided that two days out of the week would be detrimental to Augustine, to them all. I recall that the only thing to stand out in our conversation last night was James asking who Hayley Mills was.

And then I can’t pretend anymore, because what is there to say? I care far more now about getting details, far less about continuing this charade with reform school Rachel.

“Wait.” And in my voice she must hear that at least some of this, maybe all of this, is new to me. She must hear the bite. She hangs up.

\*

It's about an hour before I get a call from the same number. It's James. His voice sounds gravelly and, like last night, exhausted. He starts by telling me they got a frozen pizza, but five minutes later he's into the logistics of it all, how things would be better if I take Augustine full-time for awhile. At some point, interwoven with it all, in the same drone he's using for everything else, he mentions that Rachel is pregnant. I can tell he thinks she divulged this secret with everything else earlier.

“You know, that's the one thing she didn't get around to telling me. The only little detail.”

The longest pause, then, almost inaudibly, “Goddamn.”

When I open the door on Sunday morning, after the second hollow knock, Augustine is standing there, in braids. James drives off, eyes on the road ahead of him, so obviously avoiding my stare.

And just like magic I have her back, and a day early at that. For the moment, though, I focus on the braids. James doesn't know how to braid, so it must've been Rachel's handiwork. I picture her hands in my daughter's hair, hiding faceless behind a hotel room door while Augustine sits Indian-style on the worn, paisley carpet. A single-serve bottle of vodka in front of her, which she knows not to touch because she's got such a good role model in her father.

In front of me now, Augustine says, “Hi, Mom. Did you bring *Pollyanna* back to Blockbuster yet?” and pushes into the living room. As I turn then, mouth open as if to say some undecided words, to watch her go, she says, “Oh,” and hands me a letter-size envelope, the kind with the security scrambling inside.

It's a note from James, of course. Saying he'll call, saying he's sorry, all sealed up like those words were things Augustine shouldn't see.

I walk into her bedroom and see she's found the video I left on her bed. The opening credits start to play.

"Can we have Napoleon ice cream?"

I smile. She takes it as my misunderstanding the question.

"You know, Napoleon. The kind with the strawberry stripe in the middle."

I think about what "Napoleon" ice cream would look like, so much more interesting than Neapolitan. A white ice cream with little chocolate pieces inside, all shaped like a man on horseback.

"Of course."

I'm amazed at my luck, though clueless about how I'm going to explain this to her, how I'm going to explain a new brother or sister that belongs in a way to her but doesn't belong to me, has nothing to do with me, clueless also that what will stay with me past midnight for the next several nights while I try to sleep, back in the cool quiet with Alexander, is that teenager's voice saying, "Hello! McKendrick residence." Words I'd once said myself.

I need poise, I need strength, but find them as unattainable as the touch of that cool, dark water. I feel that just for the moment, however, it's enough to have Augustine back, and I know she's safe as I look across the room at her again, those braids like arms of coral.

She's perched on her blue blanket like she's riding waves.

## Fissure

Nelson Beasley, the glassblower, sits now in his kitchen, legs crossed neatly beneath the dinette. Sunlight turns the dirt on the floor to gold dust, and the hum of the fridge is constant, like a heartbeat. Outside the air is heavy with Pacific humidity, a stifling summer blanket.

He is working on a mosaic, a recycling of scraps, and his materials lie on the table before him. There are strips of goldleaf, flattened pieces of tin, broken pottery, hammered copper, all of which he's morphing together to make a basin, a resting place for one of his glassworks.

Nelson sits in his Seattle apartment and bows his head over his work.

At about two-thirty in the afternoon he picks up a sliver of mirror and looks into it, studying his face, keeping the reflection to just below his eyebrows so he doesn't have to look at his red hair. In Nelson's perfect world he would have nut-colored hair – chestnut brown, he'd call it – dark and reminiscent of autumn, perfect for Dilah or Annie to run their hands through.

Dilah and Annie are the waitresses from across the street. Nelson often sits alone and stares at them through the filmy windows that front the Marvin Henry Berkshire Diner. They move slowly, even when the place is full. Their stockings seem tight and uncomfortable, their hair constantly falling into their eyes, and they press the smalls of their backs with a sad regularity. He wants to make them happy, for their eyes to not look like thunderstorms. He'd like to show them a world of mangroves, cool water, and rainbowed glass.

Nelson thinks quite frequently how nice it would be to have a visitor. Instead of spending his nights alone, casting stooped shadows onto the hardwood floors, he could talk to Annie or Dilah, tell them about his art, ask them about the diner.

He supposes.

He imagines their conversations from start to end. Perfect words, no stumbling, no trip-hammering heart. He imagines that if the hour were to grow late, and if they agreed, he could take them upstairs. In Nelson's mind, Annie or Dilah would stand before him in the sepia light of the bedroom – hair loose, stockings off, posture straight. He would untie their apron strings so carefully, with the delicacy reserved for his glass. They would let out broken sighs to be touched so gently.

Nelson knows how unlikely this is and hates himself for the spider of self pity that crawls down his back.

He thought he had a girlfriend once. Her name was Christina Darby, and she had kissed him at a school dance, seventh grade. He was sure she liked him, but it all turned out to be a joke, a ruse, an amusement. One day he found the three roses he'd brought to school for her – one violet, her favorite color; one red, the color of the apple on her necklace; and one yellow, the color of her hair – torn and in the trash outside of the science lab. The smell of formaldehyde hitting him like ocean on shore. A glimpse of Christina and her friends giggling behind twisted girl fingers.

A perfect replica of those roses hangs now in his gallery downstairs: three glass roses with milky green stems and hand-painted petals. Unbroken. Lifeless, but intact.

Nelson will look back at this night and not remember what he said to get Annie to come up to his apartment with him. Whatever the reason, here she is.

He had gone into the diner around 7:30 and sat at the counter, near the left wall. She stood across from him, shifting her weight from foot to foot. There was nothing difficult about it

at all, as previewed on the stage of Nelson's mind. They talked about a new convenience store, the big whale sculpture at City Park, the news. She was surprised and seemingly delighted to learn that Nelson lived and worked across the street. She told him she always admired the glassworks on display in the window ("Especially the yellow one," she said, though Nelson could think of no yellow piece in the window box).

And then, yes, somehow, she ended up walking across the street with him after her shift ended, after Nelson had had four and a quarter cups of coffee. Something about not having many friends, something about not having a place to stay where she felt safe enough to sleep the whole night through. They walked across the street and beneath the fluorescent lamps, her eyes shining like malachite.

And yes, she's here now, sitting across the dinette from him, picking up the mosaic pieces and running her fingers over their edges. Copper, tin, china white porcelain. He envisions her in a stained glass piece set into the stone walls of a musty church – time rich, all religious apocalypse and bleeding hands.

"You said you've been doing this for how long?" Her eyes are dark, her hair so honey blond it's almost gold.

He swallows, gently. "About fifteen years."

"Wow. It's all so beautiful." She spreads her hands out and wide as if including the rooms themselves in her compliment and not just the multicolored pieces that satellite around her. Her hands look as warm as the petals of hothouse flowers.

He's amazed at the look of interest on her face. He waits for her to laugh at him, to go downstairs to the gallery they sit above and crush the glass roses on the wall, throw them in the trash and giggle behind slender fingers.

“Thank you.” Nodding, “Thank you, Annie.”

She smiles, a smile that both relaxes and intoxicates him. He feels out of his element but for once doesn't care. He finds himself speaking unrehearsed words, with a rough tempo, but also with force. Out of thin, prescient air.

“You're so beautiful. I can't believe you're here.” Eyes lowering instinctively, “I, I've watched you, you know.”

He stops when he sees her eyes blink rapidly – his heart stops as well – but then he notices that the smile hasn't left her face. It's just been lowered. He continues.

“You move so gracefully, like ... like glass melting. Like flowing liquid, really.”

She meets his eyes again, her hair a flaxen curtain.

“Liquid fire.”

He doesn't know where these words have come from, this awkward poetry. She doesn't seem to mind, though. He thinks he can detect that she both admires and is flattered by his words – but probably nothing more.

And then, somehow, somehow, as if in a dream, Nelson finds himself telling her the story of Rebecca Lee Owen. In the back of his mind, he knows that it's not sympathy he's after. There just happens to be someone here who'll listen. Conversation through words rather than glass.

He tells Annie what he can remember. It comes back in parts, like a glass work rescued off the ground, glued together again but still out of order and missing pieces.

She had looked so nice that day, Rebecca Lee, in a red corduroy dress with snaps in front. She was proud, proud of the denim chest pocket and solemnly assured Nelson that she could keep something in there for him – “anything” – if he didn't want to carry it around school. In it

she was already safehousing a small pewter cat charm, a present from Nelson from the Christmas before. He'd given it to her so that when they were apart, she would have something to hold.

Cats were her favorite. She had shrieked with delight when he'd given her the charm, then chased her own cat, Captain Bumblebee, around the room with it, shouting at the top of her lungs, "Two cats for Becca Lee!" as Captain hightailed it under the sofa.

They were best friends, mainly out of default: neither one of them had anyone else.

He remembered small things about the day – what she was wearing, the purple barrettes in her hair, the cat charm in her chest pocket. And the way the two of them had picked up fruit balls from the sweet gum trees and made indentations in their hands with the prickles. Becca held her palms up to Nelson and said they looked like Swiss cheese.

They'd been walking home from Belkin Elementary, after one of their last days of fifth grade, and had just stopped to pick up a dancing worm off the four-o'clock-hot sidewalk when they heard an older boy's voice. Nelson was scared at first to see the high school-age boy walking toward them. But then he recognized him: Jeff O'Donohue, a boy whose sister, Carly, was in fifth grade like them.

Jeff stopped that day to tell them that Carly was having a pizza party and Rebecca Lee was invited. Nelson thought that was strange, since Carly never talked to Becca, and he wondered why he wasn't invited, since everyone knew Nelson and Becca went most places as a team. But then Jeff pulled him aside and told him in a conspiratorial, solemn, adult whisper that his mom thought it would be nice to include Rebecca Lee more, what with her "not having friends and all." He'd offered an awkward smile then, Jeff seeing perhaps that he'd just discredited Nelson altogether. But because nonetheless Nelson did agree that this was a good

idea and because he felt badly that he'd doubted Becca's ability to get invited to a party, and also because he had piano practice in half an hour, he let her go with Jeff.

Just that easily.

Jeff said he'd be happy to take her to the house. It was only two blocks away, and Nelson was headed in the opposite direction. Becca clapped, cheered, sang a little to herself, the smile on her face wide and unabashed. He watched her skip alongside Jeff before he rushed the other way, intent on making it to Mrs. Gianelli's on time.

Jeff said later that he hadn't meant to hurt her. For the next four years, five years, ten, Nelson played the day out in his mind. The scenario wasn't always the same. Sometimes he would focus on the excuse he'd given for not going along: piano practice. Piano practice with Mrs. Gianelli. There had been a recital within the month, and his mother was paying Mrs. Gianelli something like twenty-five dollars a week.

And sometimes he would get stuck in imagining what exactly had happened in the woods that day. He knew there'd been a confession – vague – and had heard whispers of it in high school and from behind closed-to doors. Jeff had been with her for hours.

What he knew was that the barrettes had stayed in her hair. That fact was passed around town from house to house, parent to parent, from room to room. He also knew that in the police station, sitting with Sheriff Eglin, Jeff had said the words *Yes, she cried*. And during that interrogation Jeff had been picking at the scratches Becca had cast like paint strokes on his arm, keeping them open. Alive. Nelson thought he knew her face had been pushed up against the bark of a tree, but he couldn't recall how he knew this, and sees now he probably made it up.

What Nelson didn't know was why, just as Becca and Jeff turned the corner, from Dogwood St. to Stanton Rd., her dress straps had seemed to be pulled so tautly. That image stayed with him, like words lasered into glass. On some level that day, that moment, he must have thought she was tugging at her dress with excitement. He thinks now Jeff had grabbed the dress and was just beginning to pull her around the corner so she wouldn't, couldn't, turn back. He wonders what would have happened, what would have been, had he simply called out her name.

He thinks now *Hands pushed down into dirt. Into worms. Into the green of the woods.* The first time these images came to him, the morning after her death, his belly felt carved hollow, carved thin. Stretched tight and flat. Striations inside like white cotton candy, frozen. He kept thinking about her hands, where they were exactly when she died. On the ground, against a tree, on Jeff's face or body. How many other girls had Jeff touched like that, so intimately. The last warmth she'd felt was his hands on her, putting her out like a torch turned to low then off. That point of glass when it's pulled so tight, so hot, it breaks, like pulling apart caramel.

Nelson had asked, begged, asked again for the cat charm he knew, knew they'd found in the woods. But no matter how much he pleaded with his mother, she refused to ask Becca's parents. She seemed scared, embarrassed, both at the idea of asking, and that her son would be so bold as to think of such a thing.

What had haunted Nelson the most was a merging of the two – the humility of his piano practice excuse and the undocumented hours Becca had spent in the woods. For a year or so Nelson would come home from school and go straight to his room. He'd sit alone there until called down for dinner, staring at the gray planked walls, trying to imagine the synchronization of the day. He often thought, felt, sensed that it was during the bars of *Au Clair de la Lune* that

Jeff had cut the side of her neck, just below the ear. Or maybe when Mrs. Gianelli let Nelson stop for a break, and he'd eaten a tea cookie and drank a glass of lukewarm milk.

"I'm so sorry." The sound of Annie's voice bringing him back to the present.

He realizes he's been staring out the window at the neon light of the diner, searing his sight with the vision. When he looks back at her, yellow spots dot her face, reminding him once again of her image in stained glass, a lemon-colored representation of skin. He regards her calmly. He is surprised at how calm he is.

Shaking his head, "Sorry. I don't really know why I told you all of that."

"Don't be sorry. You okay?"

He isn't, not completely, but feels it would be futile to make Annie feel badly, to feel unhelpful. "Yeah."

Besides, the gentleness of her voice soothes him, fooling him into thinking that maybe everything is in fact okay.

"So. Nelson. This is kind of out of nowhere, but..."

And within a few minutes her words and grammar become nothing more than beats and dizzying syncopation. She's wanting to stay the night, to stay sometime next week, to get just a little bit of money that she'll pay back to him next Tuesday.

He shuts down and doesn't want to talk, at least not about all of this. It doesn't feel right. She's looking past him, through him. He feels naked, out on too much open land, but is still grateful to her, listening like she did. He means what he said earlier. She is beautiful.

And later Nelson has the same thought as he watches Annie sleep. She had taken off her apron – by herself – and is lying now on Nelson’s blue sofa, arms clasped in a way that seems somehow benevolent.

He sits and watches her, eyes moving over her perfect form. She is a monument, a statue. He pictures doves perched on her hips, a dress of stone. After a while he walks away, quietly, moving down his stairwell with slow, mouse-light steps.

In the far corner of his gallery there’s a round display table, which he walks over to and crouches down so that the tabletop is above eye level. He flips on the display light; the piece is illuminated from above.

Sitting there in the near dark, he looks up at the piece that took the longest to complete. It is a glass cat, painted the color of marbled pewter. It’s his smallest piece, about the size of a plum. Perfect for slipping into a pocket for safekeeping or for reassurance.

Nelson sits still, his eyes tracing the contours of his work, the pointed tail and needle-thin whiskers, the curved back and pearl-sized paws, the gunmetal eyes and round, silk-smooth belly, all aglow and sheltered safe under the cream-colored light from above.

## Lenora

When I found her she was sitting in the closet, naked and streaked with dried blood, a mosaic of bruises on her right hip. She was crying and covered her face with her hands when she saw me, fingers trembling as they drifted upward. I took several slow, deep breaths before collapsing next to her, my ankles twisting beneath me. When I started to cry, too – silently – she fell into my arms, her face pressing into my green jacket and the little shamrock sewn above my heart.

I could feel the adrenaline rising, swirling in haphazard circles at the nape of my neck. I found I couldn't do anything, though, but walk in to the bathroom and get a washcloth, light blue with one yellow stripe down the side, holding it beneath a stream of cool tap water before coming back to the bedroom. I washed the blood off of Lenora after dabbing at her eyes.

“Just sit with me for a little bit.” She mumbled the words. Grasping at my jeans, “Just sit with me, Eve.”

That voice, so small. I moved close beside her, took her hands in mine and lifted them up as I rose again. Looking down at her feet, she followed me to the bed. We lay on the quilted bedspread together while she slept that Sunday afternoon, my arms encircling a tiny shell of a woman. Her hair lay across the creased yellow pillowcase, half-tucked into the shirt I'd put on her. A steady breeze came in through the open window, carrying with it the syrupy sweet smell of ripe magnolia blossoms. The white-flowered tree grew next to Lenora's apartment, and its waxy leaves tapped the windowsill like fingers.

\*

Lenora had met Carl before she met me, at the restaurant where she started working when she first got to the city. He was the cook and flirted with her almost non-stop from the very beginning. He'd gone to our school, dropped out after two years; their first official date was a walk around campus. She didn't realize Carl was interested in being more than friends until he kissed her one afternoon. From there everything moved quickly. He was her boyfriend within the week.

I first met Carl soon after then, and the second time was a couple months later, on a day I went to visit Lenora, hoping I could talk her into a movie. I'd known that was out of the question as soon as I heard the shouting. Walking past the trimmed hedges that bordered the front of the complex, I heard Carl's raised voice. Lenora's apartment was on the second floor, and the noise was coming from the open bedroom window on the left side of the building. I glanced around and, not seeing anyone, crept close to the wall to listen. Up to this point, I thought Carl was an okay guy, though it seemed strange to me that I didn't see him more.

I felt the color drain from my face that day as I heard Carl's resonating "Goddamnit!" His voice was followed by a loud thump, which I assumed was his fist hitting the wall. Then Lenora started to cry. I reeled, almost falling to the ground before I could steady myself. All I could manage was an attempt at the word "Stop," oddly distorted by the tremble in my voice.

Once that word came out, though, I felt a flash of energy and ran up those cement stairs, not sure what I was planning to do. By the time I got to the second story platform, there he was, right outside their door. Brown hair spiked on top with gel, fitted shirt that accented the body only he thought was admirable, veins in his arms grotesquely pushing to the surface of his skin. I saw all of his rage in his eyes, the way they seared through me as I pressed my back into the stucco wall of the stairwell. He was breathing heavily out of his nostrils and from the neck up he

was bright red. I didn't know what he'd do, if he'd say anything to me, but all of a sudden he was halfway down the stairs, turning back only to shout, "Got your fucking friends spying on me!" before walking out into the light of day.

I found her in the apartment, curled up on the bed, crying but with no marks on her. She said she'd done something stupid, had lied to him, and he'd lost his temper. She said he hadn't touched her, had never touched her, and that this was the first time he'd ever really yelled at her. I believed her.

My next botched opportunity to save her had been recently. We were at the restaurant *Mexicali*, sipping mojitos, talking about what made habanero peppers so hot. We were being silly, drawing on the napkins, dancing in our seats to the music, trying to enjoy what little time together we had left. Her dark brown hair, freshly washed, was tied in a ridiculous knot on top of her head. We talked about how we'd met two years before, at school. She was the grad assistant for the Physics department and trained me and showed me around on my first day of work-study in Mathematics. We used to have lunch together every day on the second-floor lobby of the Sciences building. That first day we talked about our families – my brother in the air force, her mother who died of lymphatic cancer – and school.

We were reminiscing about our one o'clock lunches, our tongues burning from the enchiladas, when she pulled her hair down and raked her fingers slowly through it. As she did, her sleeves slid down to her elbows, and I noticed a deep red-purple cut on her left forearm, a horizontal tear in her skin that nearly went all the way around. Almost before my eyes rose up from her arm she saw me staring and shook her sleeves down with one quick shrug of the

shoulders. She folded her arms at her chest and leaned them on the table, smiling at me as if nothing was wrong.

“Lenora...” I waited for her to help me find the right words, but nothing. “Your arm.”

Quickly, “Nothing. It’s nothing. I did it by accident earlier. No big deal.”

She looked around the room for our waiter, shaking the ice cubes in her half-empty water glass.

“It looks pretty bad.” I was conscious of my eyebrows lowering and furrowing together.

“Don’t worry about it. Honestly.” She turned back and looked at me then, rolled her eyes at my worried expression. “Christ.” Nervous laughter. A sip of mojito. Then, when she saw my look of concern again, “Don’t. Worry. About. It.”

Just like that, like I was a little kid, pestering her mother about something that was none of my business. Lenora had been dramatic before, and at that moment, my head electric-pulsing with alcohol, I started thinking that maybe she’d cut herself to scare me, to get my attention. She didn’t like a new group of girls I was hanging out with, and she’d told me once that she used to cut herself in middle school, in her bedroom, sitting on a black towel, carving shallow designs into her thighs. But before I could call her on it, before I could decide if this was a big deal or just an accident, she gave me a big smile.

“I’m sorry. It’s just really nothing. I love you and don’t want you to worry about me, ever.” She shook her head, tilted it to the side. “You’re the best, you know? I love you.”

She winked then and I decided everything was fine.

Finding Lenora at the bottom of her closet informed me of a different truth. The reverberation of worry after seeing her look up at me from the hardwood floor, amidst her shoes and dirty clothes.

The loss of composure and hope when I found out what had been going on, not just recently but since she and Carl had been together, before I'd even known her.

She confessed everything after she woke up, held onto me and broke down, telling me all she could manage to get out. I had made fruit salad, and she ate the pieces one by one as she talked. Pineapple, strawberry, pear, mango.

Carl had been cutting her every day, on body parts of his choosing. The gash I'd seen at *Mexicali* was just one of his works – deeper than usual, apparently. Nearly a year into their dating, he started pushing her around, slapping her across her arms and cheeks, making as if to punch her but holding back. Over the past six months, it had gotten much worse. Lenora said there was a brief time when he'd stopped, and she thought he'd actually changed. But then he started up again, locking her in her closet all day if she cried too much.

I'll never forget how empty I felt then, how completely lost. How blind I'd been to something so close to me. It was too much to take in all at once, and I couldn't get my mind around the fact that she was telling the truth. Something had to be done, but what?

She left for work that night, but I stayed at her apartment, trying to think of what to do. By the time she returned I was sure and sat her down to tell her everything I'd come up with. We'd get the hell out of town, in my car since it ran better, and we'd stay near the Texas border, about ten hours away. I had racked my brain with what would happen next but knew what was important was to get Lenora away as fast as possible. We could worry about work for her, about money, some other time. I'd come back and get everything settled as soon as I knew she was safe.

And yet instead of taking care of everything then and there, I left her there that day, her eyes wide and hopeful. She insisted we needed more time. She talked me into it, saying that if

we screwed this up, there'd be no way she could ever leave. And somehow she convinced me not to call the cops, agreeing to call them herself once we got away. She told me Carl was out of town for a few days. I was relieved we were leaving, but before I left I had to sit down because of how much I was reeling. The events that occurred without me realizing... Something broke inside me then, and all I could manage to do was lie on the sofa with Lenora. That time it was she who lay behind me, stroking my hair, trying to still my body from the shaking of tears.

And yet once again I left her. She promised we'd be okay; she promised we'd leave in the morning. For good. She promised.

In retrospect I recall something in her expression that day that tells me I should have known not to leave her. Again. Something in the way she kissed my cheek and held on to my shoulders before letting me go. Something in the twitch under her eye that she seemed not to notice. Something in the way she told me everything would be perfect if we left the next day, because it was a special day. She insisted we'd be okay since the following day was my birthday.

I spent the rest of that afternoon getting stuff together for Lenora, packing my own clothes for her because she assured me she'd get some sleep. I'd been swept under her spell of assurance and told myself all we had to do was make it out of town. On my birthday we'd be out of harm's way, and I could make up for all the times she'd struggled silently while I'd done nothing to help.

The next morning I woke up to what I thought was my alarm clock. After trying unsuccessfully to turn it off, though, I realized that what I was hearing was the doorbell. I looked back down at the bedside table, double-checking the time. It was 6:35 a.m. and I panicked. Icy needles pricked the sides of my neck, a cold sweat beading across my lower back. I was sure it was Lenora – but

why was she here? Had she run away? I was steeling myself for a fast getaway if need be when I swung open the door to find Mr. Decameron, Lenora's downstairs neighbor, looking down at my welcome mat.

My muscles tensed, and I took an involuntary step backward when I saw his expression, his red-rimmed eyes, his disheveled appearance in the predawn light.

"Miss, please."

"Mr. Decameron?" I couldn't get him to look up at me, to keep his eyes lifted. "Sir?"

"She killed him, Miss. She shot him last night and they took him away."

He told me, slowly and with many pauses, that Lenora had murdered Carl shortly after midnight. He'd heard a knock on his door, and opened it to find her, heaving and covered in blood. He said that all she would say was that it was Eve's birthday, April twenty-first. Eve's birthday, April twenty-first. And how important that was. Then she'd left and gone downstairs; Mr. Decameron had called the police.

He reached down and picked up a Tupperware container I hadn't noticed at first. He handed it to me, made as if to say something else, then turned away. I stared at him walking away, wondering if he had more to say. But he got into his car and drove off.

I stumbled into my house and closed the door, walked right over to the kitchen and set the container on the countertop. Then I went into the bathroom and got in the shower, turned on the cold water and sat down. I stayed there, hugging my knees in the dark, my pajamas sagging with the weight of the water, all morning. I vaguely remember turning off the water, and the way the light streamed in through the frosted window. I took off my clothes in front of the mirror, noticing how unbroken, how healthy my body was. No bruises or tears, no scars.

I wrung out my hair with my fingers and walked back into the kitchen. I saw that on top of the Tupperware was an index card that had been taped down. As I came closer I noticed that it had my address written on the bottom, below a note that said “Please take this to Eve Denton. It’s her birthday.” In Lenora’s handwriting.

I didn’t break down when I opened the container and saw the cake, didn’t break down when I saw “Happy Birthday, Eve!” written in yellow icing on the top. I was okay when I read the little card tucked to the inside of the container, which said “Have a piece for me too, pretty girl. I love you.” But when I started to think about what I had let happen, I dug my fingers into that cake, wanting to get rid of my name, to throw it against the kitchen wall. And it was then that I saw what kind of cake she’d make me – white cake, with the candy pieces inside. Only once had I mentioned to her that that was my favorite kind, on a day when we went grocery shopping and passed the cake and brownie mixes. She’d told me her favorite, too – angel food.

I sat down on my kitchen floor with the cake in my hands, crying until the linoleum floor’s colors swirled together, a soup of blue and green diamonds.

## Vodka & Pepsi

Shay had seen a story on the news about a mom who put poison in her baby's bottle. He'd died from the inside, he said. He died from the poison, I said.

We didn't know what kind she'd used but figured it had to be something from her house. That stuff that makes the toilet water turn blue. The stuff parents spray on roses. The stuff in the squeeze bottle that dads squirted on grills. The stuff that smelled like gas stations and forest fires and the rainbow puddles in the grocery store parking lot.

We thought it was more likely that she had used a poison from the house because it was just too scary to think that she'd made an extra special trip to get an extra special poison. We pictured her in her basement with a Bunsen burner and a beaker and Petri dish – three things that were foreign to us, though Shay's brother had pointed them out to us once on his science lab worksheet.

Shay and I have been friends for about two years, since we were in third grade, Mr. Dante's class. A lot of kids said we were boyfriend and girlfriend and that Shay "did it to me" in the butt (whatever that meant – I knew at least that you didn't do "it" in the butt). They called me Dana Dixon, which is Shay's last name. But we were just friends. And we liked to talk about all kinds of stuff, like poison and rivers and dogs and secret clubs.

We also spent a lot of time talking about Dylan Charles, like the day Shay told me about the baby's bottle. It made us think of Dylan.

That was the afternoon Shay told me about his idea to have Dylan drink something that would make him sick. It was kind of funny, like a play we were writing together. Or maybe a

movie, one you could watch while eating popcorn and Red Straws. The lights would go down and then the show would begin.

Last month someone killed the Oliver's Akita, Pepsi, and he died in the driveway in a summer storm. My parents told me that it had been antifreeze. It tastes sweet, and Pepsi probably thought it was some kind of treat. At school Dylan told some boys in the bathroom that he'd done it, and no one would ever find out. He mixed the antifreeze with canned gravy, and Pepsi kept eating and eating. No one suspected anything more than a tragic accident brought on by a thirsty dog, and even Shay, who was listening from one of the stalls and peeking out, thought Dylan was lying. But then Dylan had taken something out of his pocket there in the bathroom, something he showed to the two other boys, and as they talked about it, turning it over in their hands like prize money, Shay felt woozy and sick and helpless. He waited until the boys were out in the hallway and then back in the classroom before leaving the stall.

It was about an hour before the bell rang to go home when Shay raised his hand. But when Mrs. Lanier called on him he said nothing, until everyone in class turned to look at him. I remember that he was wearing his Florida State Seminoles shirt. "Nothing," he said, shaking his head slowly and quietly. He told me about what he heard in the bathroom later, in a whisper and behind his cupped hand.

It would have been unheard of, grand treason in a way, had Shay told on Dylan. That day after school when we were walking home I thought Shay had lost his mind; he was holding back tears and angry and kept kicking the trunks of trees. But then I recognized it for what it was: simply a reaction to how awful Dylan was, to all the times Dylan had done mean things to him, to me, to everyone, and no one had said a word. And now this on top of it all.

Back at my house Shay told me that what he had seen that day in the crack of the bathroom stall: Pepsi's collar tag, passed between the hands of the boys like a gold coin or a baseball card.

“He's the meanest kid in the whole school, and I bet he's meaner than even some high school kids.”

I think about this, about whether or not this is just our opinion. We're in my living room, on the green sofa, a bag of corn chips between us. My mom is still in bed, sleeping off her night shift, so we have the TV on low.

What comes to mind is the time Dylan cornered me in the hallway the morning after parents' night. He'd put one hand on either side of my head, leaned down to look into my eyes, and asked if it ever bothered me that my mother was so fat. My face flushed red, and I felt chills pulse down my arms and back. I knew there was no way to react, to set a boy like this straight. I thought a thousand thoughts in an instant while he stood there grinning at me, waiting for me to respond. I thought about my mom's voice when she sings along to “The Mary Tyler Moore Show,” her fried plantains, the way she holds my hand at the mall only after asking if it's okay. He would never know someone as good as her, as kind. Or maybe he would, but I don't want him to. And I stood there then, looking up at him, at his wide set green eyes and blond eyebrows, and breathed in and out a few times before ducking beneath his arms and running away.

I nod. “Yeah. He's the meanest.”

We are sitting Indian-style on the sofa, and Shay shifts around to face me then, clapping his hands once loudly as if to announce the importance of what he's about to say.

“We should do something about it then.” He is scratching at his knees, restless.

“What do you mean?” Any thought of payback against Dylan was nice to think about, but I couldn’t imagine doing anything in real life.

“We could get back at him, Dana. For everything.”

“How?” I can think of no good way, nothing that would work, nothing that we could actually pull off.

“We can do it just like he did to Pepsi, like that Mom did to her baby.”

My mind races with thoughts of Shay mixing liquids in a lab, of Dylan puking blood and guts, of him lying against a cartoon background with X’s in place of his eyes. I worry about Shay all of a sudden, about what he thinks he is capable of. I think of Dylan lying on the Oliver’s driveway, his tongue and eyes baked dry in the heat of day after the storm passed and took him with it.

My voice is small as I ask, “What?”

“Put something in his drink.”

Louder now, “Like what?”

He looks at me with an expression I can’t quite read, though it looks tough. “Like,” he begins, then pauses for several seconds, rubbing his chin in pretend thought.

“Like what?!” I nearly scream.

“Like Ex-Lax.”

I stare at him wordlessly.

“Just enough to make him sick, you know.”

We look at each other for a few seconds before bursting into hysterical laughter, our voices like firecrackers in the air.

\*

The next day at school in the cafeteria Shay tells Dylan that his brother has vodka and asks if he's ever tasted it.

"Of course, Dipshit," he says, but his eyes say something else. "It tastes like mint," he ventures.

"No it doesn't. Dipshit," Shay replies, nearly knocking me off my chair. "It tastes like nothing. It doesn't really taste like anything."

"Oh. Well, I must've had a different kind, then."

"Yeah, that's it."

In a flash as quick as lightning Shay is older and braver, and I'm even prouder to be his friend. I'm starting to believe now that maybe Dylan really will come over, that Shay will be able to convince him it's worth his while. Then Dylan turns to look at me, with disgust, perhaps realizing that I'm part of this too.

"What can you get?" he asks.

Shay is next to me, as still as stone.

I shrug, not even sure I can name more than two or three different kinds of liquor, much less get my hands on any. Then I think of coughing, of my mother's cough.

"I can get cigarettes," I say, sure I could sneak a pack or two from the three open cartons in the cabinet under the junk drawer.

Dylan shrugs, as if he shouldn't have expected more out of me than stupid cigarettes.

Out of the corner of my eye I see Shay look up at the big clock on the wall above the doors and know he wants to invite Dylan over before the bell rings.

"Come over to Dana's tonight, and we can drink as much as you want. Her mom'll be at work." He sounded so cool.

Dylan looks at Shay, over to me, then back at Shay, sizing us up. I can almost see him deciding between his reputation and his curiosity.

“Yeah, I’ll come over,” he says before getting up and walking away, leaving his lunch tray for Shay and me to pick up.

Dylan shows up at eight-thirty with a bottle of red wine tucked into his denim jacket and even a fancy corkscrew with handles like wings that rise to the ceiling when you get close to popping the cork.

“I want to see who gets drunk first,” he says before even sitting down.

We’re all in the living room, and Dylan changes the channel when he sees the stand-up comic I’ve chosen. He puts on music videos, stretches, then sits on the arm of the sofa. I wonder if he’s gotten drunk before. I wonder if Shay’s right that Dylan doesn’t have many friends, that he’s partly like us. I didn’t believe it until he asked why else Dylan would’ve said he’d hang out with us tonight. I couldn’t think of any reason except the liquor we promised. Maybe Shay is right.

Shay shrugs and says, “Let’s bet on it.” He’s holding plastic cups, and I suddenly worry that vodka might have a smell my mom could notice. I hope the cigarettes we smoke will blend in with hers.

I don’t even really know what it means to be drunk. “How will we know…” My voice trails off as I’m still trying to picture it.

Dylan rolls his eyes. “Whoever can’t stand on one foot.” As if that’s something that everybody knows.

Shay pours us all cups of wine, and then he and I sit awkwardly on the sofa; I'm too close to him because I want to be as far from Dylan as possible. The wine tastes bitter and gross, and I wonder if I can just pretend to finish it. I think of rotting grapes and nearly gag.

Dylan tells us about a game where you have to take some of your clothes off if you lose a game of cards. Then he says that if I get drunk first I have to take my shirt off; if Shay loses he has to make out with me. I don't know what to say, but then it's already our turn to pick out what Dylan will have to do if he loses. Shay and I look at each other, and I almost giggle, wanting to shout, "You can't use the bathroom!" I wonder how fast the Ex-Lax works, and if I'll have to clean Dylan's poop off the floor. One time I threw up purple-colored corn and cleaned it up myself, but surely this will be worse.

Then Shay does it again, surprising me in a way that leaves me reeling.

"You have to tell the Olivers."

Dylan's face kind of settles and gets serious, like the guys on the TV poker championships my Dad used to watch. I have a feeling like falling. But Dylan doesn't say a word. He stares at the TV for a long time, at a music video about a matador.

Then, finally, "Who's first?"

Without a word, Shay leaves the room to mix the drinks. Vodka, Coca-Cola, Ex-Lax for Dylan. Coca-Cola for Shay and me. I'm terrified to be alone with Dylan and wonder if he'll figure us out, if he'll taste the poison.

But there turns out to be nothing to worry about. At some point that night Dylan realizes he's losing and dares me to take a shot of vodka. He dares Shay to drink a whole glass of wine. Shay knows we're winning and says "Bring it on" in a way I think will buy him a punch in the nose.

Dylan fills a quarter of a plastic cup with vodka for me and fills one up with wine for Shay. As soon as he hands the wine over, Shay drinks it all down in four or five gulps. Dylan and I are both impressed. I have no way to know what this will do to Shay, if it will make him sick or high or angry. I look down at the clear liquid in my red cup and swirl it around, not happy that it seems thicker than water. But Shay said it tasted like nothing, and all I've had is soda so far, not even cigarettes because the boys don't want any, so I take some into my mouth and hate that it's warm and hate that it's thick and swallow down a mouthful that feels like it's going to come right back up.

I pour Coke into the cup right away to hide the fact that most of the vodka is still at the bottom. Dylan doesn't notice, and tells Shay and me to stand on one foot, "Just to check."

I stand up and put my foot to my knee like yoga without any problem, but I see that Shay has to concentrate on keeping his balance. I don't know if it's for show or if it's the wine.

We kept waiting and waiting for Dylan to clutch his stomach and run to the bathroom, poop running down the back of his jeans. But when he finally asked where the bathroom was, he seemed calm, and was only in there for a few minutes. After that, nothing. We looked at each other and shrugged, figuring Shay hadn't put enough of the magic ingredient in his drink. It was disappointing, but the fact that Dylan was getting drunk made up for it. He kept squinting his eyes, smiling at us and saying entire sentences we couldn't make sense of.

Shay, who at some point starting drinking too, told me at about eleven that he was seeing flowers on the wall and two televisions, but it was Dylan who lost the game. He passed out on my couch at eleven-thirty, mouth open like a baby taking a nap.

I was scared at the thought of making Dylan follow through on his promise. Shay started to drift to sleep while we talked about how to bring it up to him. He smiled and said, "He's going

to be afraid of us now, Dana,” before dropping his head back on the sofa and falling fast asleep. I felt older than Shay then, at that moment. We had fun, saw Dylan in a different light, but would anything really change? Pepsi was still gone, and he’d been taken away by a little boy. That was really all there was too it. We hadn’t made anything better.

I sat there looking at the two of them, wondering how I’d get Dylan out of my house, wondering if he’d wake up before my mom got back or if I’d have to shake him awake. He looked calm, even nice, lying there with his arm tucked under his head. I thought of my mom, and how she often slept on the sofa, falling asleep while watching infomercials. Before I left for school I’d put my comforter over her and switch off the TV.

Dylan was dressed that night in a white t-shirt and tan corduroy pants. I noticed that his right hand was resting near his pocket, and all of a sudden I knew for sure that the dog tag was there, that he carried it around day after day. I wondered if Shay was going to tell on him, or get Mrs. Lanier to check his pockets, if Dylan wouldn’t tell the Olivers on his own. I thought for a moment about reaching into his pocket right then, while a commercial played for discount airfare. But for some reason I wanted to take care of him, because maybe no one else had.

All I did was sit and watch him sleep, thinking of what Shay had told me about the boys that day in the bathroom. What they’d said, what Shay had seen. The tag was small, probably too small for an Akita. It was shiny and shaped like a little heart.

It said “Pepsi Oliver,” as if the dog had been a child.

## My Personal Relationship with Jesus

Jesus touched me for the first time on Sunday. Under the shirt, over the bra. We were both at church, though neither of us wanted to be. His dad, Mr. Lee, is the minister, a hippie-turned-preacher who had been bold enough to name his son after the actual Son, and my mother had been looking at him with funny eyes ever since Mr. Capshaw, the dentist, left her the day after Halloween. She had taken to wearing her shirtdresses with three buttons undone instead of just one. I sometimes caught her in church doing what had almost become a nervous tic: looking down at her boobs, pushing them together with her upper arms, then folding out and smoothing the material left undone by the buttons with her long, salmon pink nails. She'd look back down a few seconds later, as if to check they were still there, still inviting, still in plain sight.

Jesus and I had been skipping out on services, but that particular Sunday would have been the third one we'd missed, so I said we should go. Reverend Lee was talking about acceptance of others. Something Jesus and I knew about, understood, already. It wasn't that we didn't like church - or at least that was true for me - but Jesus and I usually had more fun if we were elsewhere, alone. The river, the underground house, the race track.

He'd just cut his hair short, which I didn't care for as much as the way it had been before. He used to have long, wavy, shoulder-length hair, but said he wanted change. It now was longish in the middle, short on the sides, and he pushed up the center with shellac. He thought maybe it would look good dyed a darker brown, though I liked the lighter shade of the present. He was in this rebel phase - lip piercing, books about the Cold War, going shoeless - which is what I think

led him to feel me up at church. We'd only ever done that in the stables, at the movies, in my bed.

"Hey. I'm going to touch you now," he told me that day. I was sitting right behind my mother. He had the grin of the devil on him, his whisper coming out of bluesy lips. He leaned in and fingered the curl tucked behind my left ear. I silently prayed that sweat hadn't trickled down to that wisp of hair, that it still smelled like Brazil nut shampoo.

"What? Like hell you are." I tried to hide my smile, tried to make as if I was concentrating on Mr. Lee's words. We should treat others kindly, with respect and dignity. Just the sort of thing that often prompted Jesus to later say - "Yeah, we fucking know." I felt like it was something I already knew too, but there was nothing like hearing one of Reverend Lee's sermons, hearing those righteous words spill out of him like music.

Jesus kept inching his hand behind my back, tickling his fingers up under my white shirt, the one with the cap sleeves. I pushed back hard, ramming his hand into the pew. He trumpeted air from his lips, badly muffling a breathy "fuck." The three in front of us - Mr. Mackee, Mr. and Mrs. Appleton - almost imperceptibly shook their heads but didn't turn around. Mr. Appleton forced a cough. A woman had told me once that everyone knew Jesus and I were going to end up together, that it was so obvious, and, in more or less words, that they looked to me to turn him into a more upstanding member of the church, the community. So many of them closed their eyes in embarrassment when Jesus would question his father during sermons, lifting that muscled arm mid-sentence. I loved Reverend Lee but couldn't turn down Jesus when he asked me to stay home with him, even if all we did was make cookies and play Yahtzee. I felt like the perfect schedule was to come to service only once or twice a month. Then when I did go it was all the more sweet, the Reverend's words all the more moving.

But here we were. I closed my eyes, pushing back harder still when I felt his hand crawl farther up my back, towards my sports-style bra. Would he think it was weird that I didn't have a regular clasp, like the women in the movies we watch? Lace cups, black satin, impossible curves. I knew that I needed to stall for just a minute; his father would call for the congregation to stand soon.

"Rise please." We all stood at our seats, even Jesus, who slapped me on the ass.

"Come forward." That voice. God, how beautifully it bounced off the cedar beams. Holy reverberation.

The congregation formed a straight line in the aisle, one person after another from either side. It was time for us to walk up to Reverend Lee, which we did after every sermon. Nothing was required of us when we approached. You could smile at the Reverend, thank him for a good sermon, invite him to a picnic lunch, or simply wave goodbye. On the other hand, I'd also seen men weep, touched so by the power of his words. I usually just smiled, sometimes clasping his hand briefly. Something happened in that touch, like warm sun on your arms and back. A general feeling of goodness.

It was soon my turn in front of him. Up close his skin was smooth, the color of cinnamon sticks, his eyes green as pot buds. His dreadlocks were tied back with a red rubber band, and he smelled of honey and incense. This time with him I felt drunk, three shots in, and chose to kneel down. I faltered a bit as he smiled down at me, then reached for his hand. The motion came so easily. When we touched I felt as if we were flying up high, through clouds. Not the dense ones, but the ones pulled thin, like cotton candy at the end of its paper stick. Did he feel any of this? I bring his hand to my cheek, reverently, and he cups my face. I turn and kiss his palm, my eyes watering of their own accord. I stand, and he bends down and kisses me in return, on my brow. I

walk away, feeling close to floating as I always do, and turn to the back to walk out. As soon as I reach the glass door and take that first step out, my body inching into the pre-noonday sun, he pulls me back in. Jesus, that is.

He was talking with a couple of new parishioners and grabbed for my belt without ever skipping a beat. He tugged me to his side, still talking to the young, red-haired couple, holding on to me as if he needed to remind me of something and didn't want to interrupt the couple's conversation. I knew better.

We ended up in the coatroom. I wanted to be there but felt like I shouldn't want to, like I should be telling myself not to be in there. I stayed.

Jesus had always snuck into my fantasies toward the middle of them, changing the face of whomever the fantasy started out with. I often thought of a man on horseback who carries me off to a cave, complete with the sound of echoing water drops. He'd start off as a craggy Scot, with a broad, warrior's chest, big arms and legs, and hair of soot curls. Lately, though, his face had been changing as he pressed me against the dripping rock. When I looked up into the stalactites, it's that newly shorn hair I stared past. The cool silver of a lip ring. That of the boy who dragged me into the church coatroom, his father just outside. From the quiet I could tell that the last parishioners were leaving, and Reverend Lee would soon retreat to his basement office, to make calls and to meditate. Jesus had me all alone.

He teased me. Leaning in for a kiss, instead he told me that we should go on vacation together. Except he didn't say it like that; he said, "Let's take a holiday," like he's heard it on the BBC.

Going along with him for the moment, stalling perhaps, I said, "And where would we go?"

"We'd just go."

I put my hand on my hip. "Where?"

"Does it matter?"

I say nothing, just look at him and waited. The room is dark, lit only by the light coming through the cracks in the door.

"All right." He thinks for a moment, a fluttering of fingers searching the air. "New York. Pasadena. Morocco."

"My choice?"

"Of course. Then if it's shit, it's all your fault." I can feel, not quite see, his grin.

Rolling my eyes, I push against his chest with both hands. He makes a sound as if I've hit him too hard, like he's out of breath. As I pull back he catches my hands on their descent. This makes me take an unplanned step in retreat - just a small one - a raising of the heel, a shift in reverse, almost imperceptible. But he notices, and looks down, as if he'd heard the scrape I narrowly avoided making.

"You going somewhere?" He leans down to look in the direction of my eyes, close.

I shut them to break that stare, shaking my head no, swinging his hands back and forth, playfully, to show - or pretend - that I am calm. I feel like someone's just broken a large warm egg over my head, and the yolky insides are cooling as they ooze down the back of my neck. I open my eyes and in the low light become suddenly aware of how perfect his lips are, like that of angels. I revel cautiously.

It's me who pulls him in. I grab the hair on top of his head and angle his face the way I want it. He smiles as I step toward him and press my lips to his. We kiss for just a few moments before he pushes me back against the wall, his hand slipping under the hem of my shirt. He pulls

away for a moment, asking with his pause for permission. As I lean in to give him my answer, his hand finds its way.

The other day Jesus and I were in his den, watching TV, a sleeve of saltines between us on the couch. I wanted to watch *Bob Newhart*; he wanted to watch *Columbo*; and we finally agreed on *Harold and Maude*. It was during Harold's first visit to Maude's flora-heavy mobile home that he told me about his dad, his dad's plan to get the girl, which Reverend Lee had for some reason shared with his only living son.

It seems our beloved minister had taken a fancy to Natalia, a parishioner of our church, a tiny woman, about thirty-three years old, who dressed everyday in black. Her hair is also black, with one pink feathered strand, as are her fingernails and fishnet tights. She has a snake tattooed around her ankle like laces on a pointe shoe. Natalia is also, undeniably, one of the kindest people I know. Apparently Reverend Lee thinks highly of her, too. A few days earlier he confided to Jesus that he had fallen for Natalia, though the two of them had never spent much time together - only at church socials and rehearsals for the Christmas cantata. All of a sudden he'd conjured up a plan of action. He'd decided to have a serious talk with Natalia's boyfriend of the past year. Reverend Lee told Jesus that he'd struggled with his decision to do this, knowing it to be quite reprehensible. But, still, he wanted Natalia, and figured getting David out of the picture would be one way to get her, or at least a first step. It was aggressive to the extreme, and I was shocked that he had ever even entertained the idea of doing such a thing, especially with the target being a member of his own church.

What surprises me most was how disappointed Jesus is, how insistent he is that he thought he knew his father better. How can he do this?, he asks me, why won't he come to his senses? I tell him I don't know. I tell him to calm down.

Jesus shakes his head, runs his hands distractedly up and down the thighs of his jeans.

I know he doesn't have an answer, but still I ask, "What are you going to do?"

"What can I do?"

I regret having opened my mouth. He looks at me like I've just thrown salt onto bleeding hands.

"No, nothing. I just -"

"What?"

"What did you say to him when he told you?"

He sighs, scratches his wrist. "Not much. Not enough." Hanging his head, he looks down at the carpet, the pattern of red-and-yellow-leaved vines. "I can't seem to get through."

Jesus seems so mature then, so wise. I felt something that day, something that, if I wasn't too scared to do so, I'd have recognized as love. He puts his hand on the back of my neck and starts to rub the tension away. "I'm sorry. It's just frustrating."

"I know," is all I say, all I feel I can say. I lean over and kiss his cheek, his nose, his temple.

A week after Jesus tells me about all of this, Reverend Lee sends David away, without much ceremony at all. He sends him away on a mission, saying that his faith would best flourish elsewhere for two reasons:

1. His skills of diplomacy are needed in specific areas of sub-Saharan Africa, and

2. His engagement in premarital sex with Natalia threatens to bring a veil of shame over the congregation if it goes on any longer.

I think back to his sermons, of all the ways Reverend Lee could have gone about this without scaring the shit out of David, without sending him out of the country. I think of how upset Jesus was that day in his house, more upset than I think he should have been.

To make things all the more troubling, as soon as David is gone we discover that Natalia has no interest in Reverend Lee. She announces that she'd love to move to Africa, has always wanted to, is planning on doing so within weeks. Over punch and cucumber sandwiches at her farewell party, she excitedly tells a small group of us about the different species of cobras that are native in her new surroundings. She thanks Reverend Lee for the opportunity and his support, and leaves to join David in his mission work.

Jesus and I are sitting outside, me threading daisies for him to wear as a crown in his hair. He's lying on a patch of clover, his dark jeans rolled up to his calves. He's telling me about the change that's come over his father. It's been three weeks since Natalia has left and we haven't had a church service since.

"He sits in bed and won't eat anything but turkey sandwiches."

"Turkey?"

He nods.

"Does he say anything about coming back to preach?"

"Nope. He doesn't think he has anything good left to say."

The wind picks up then and runs its fingers through the tree branches above us. I think nothing is better than the sound of rustling leaves, and Jesus knows it. He pulls me down next to him so that I'm lying on the grass, looking up with him at the shimmering green of the elm.

"We've got to cheer him up somehow, huh?" I can't imagine not having Reverend Lee around.

Jesus closes his eyes and says slowly, sadly, "I don't know."

"What do you mean?" I turn to him, breathing in the sandalwood scent of his neck, the skin so smooth. I find myself wondering if, just below his ear, he tastes of salt.

He turns to me then, locking his eyes with mine. "I think I have to leave you."

The air cools then, it seems; the sky seems to fall a bit. I feel myself sink back into place - I'd been floating somewhere in the air just then, intoxicated by the smell of him, by the nearness of him. Now I feel heavy, weighted to the ground by my solid bones, the water mass of my body. I'm not burdened by even an ounce of good faith.

"You ..." The words just won't come.

He reaches up and smooths my hair down. I worry that it has been tangled by the wind, that he can smell chocolate on my breath, that he might be leaving me because of the thickness of my hips.

He smiles again, though, a move I can't decipher. "It's okay."

"It is?" I don't believe him.

"I have to go with him," he says, nodding to add extra assurance.

Jesus tells me that he's planned a trip with his dad, a pilgrimage. They're flying to Istanbul, then going from there. "Going where?" I ask. He doesn't know yet. He says that

Reverend Lee has always wanted to visit small churches, to talk with people around the world. Jesus is going to follow him, to walk behind him until he comes around.

"And how long is that going to take?" I hear my voice shake. I'm trying to come up with something to say to change his mind, though deep down I know he needs to go. Deep down I'm proud of him for making this decision.

He pulls me to him, his way of saying he doesn't know.

"What about when you come back?"

"What about it?" He reaches behind his back and grabs the entwined daisies, placing the crown crookedly on his head. A single flower falls to the grass between us, and he picks it up to put behind my ear.

"Will you take me on a pilgrimage then?"

He bites down on his smile, his teeth touching the ring of silver. "Well, where do you need to go?"

I shrug. "Oh, anywhere really. New York, Pasadena, Morocco. Whatever."

He raises his eyebrows. "My choice?"

"Of course."

He grins at me then, holds me tighter with those hands that I think might one day perform miracles.

## Sympatico

She pushes the knife into him, near the fleshy part of his lower belly.

"Do you like it like that?"

As he winces and lets out high-pitched cries instead of answering her, she prods, "Baby?"

His eyes are open wide, all glassy white and creamy, blueberry center. She can see the red veins beneath his lower lid, nearly purple. She thinks back, trying to remember if her eyes were this wide when he had her pinned down. That was nearly four months ago, but she's sure her eyes were shut most if not the entire time. That had made his words all the more crisp to her ears, which she'd had no choice but to leave wide open. He'd spoken slowly, strangely clearly, as if recording lines for a radio play. He'd sounded as loud as a whistle with a lungful of air moving through its cool, metal belly.

She's only slicing now, poking, but soon she will be cutting. She can taste the whiskey on her lips, at the back of her throat, and wonders if she'll have the strength to give him a cracked rib like he gave her or the steadiness of hand to brand him in a way he'll recognize later. Violent, bodily graffiti.

He's moaning. "Don't you do this, Cam." Starting to cry, he struggles hard to maintain authority in his wavering, watery voice. "Goddamnit," all drawn out.

She pauses her shallow carving. "Yeah," she nods. "Goddamnit. It is a gaddamn shame. I *hate* to think you won't be raping any more women. That's downright devastating."

"Fuck," he sputters, letting out a mist of tears and spit. "Fuck you. Fuck you, Cam."

"Yeah, you did that, didn't you?"

He squeezes his eyes shut, tight tight tight. "You wanted me to, don't you fucking lie."

She manages a laugh - hollow, derisive, and entirely unconvincing. "Oh, that's perfect. So original. And you're right. What am I thinking? I remember now how much I wanted it when you slapped me. Remember? I fell down and hit my head on the edge of the dresser?" Shaking her head, her face burns with the stress of tempering words, strikes, tears. She feels seasick. "The taste of blood in my mouth does it every time."

"You can't get away with this."

"Sort of like you not getting away with what you did, huh?"

"Fuck you." And, under his ragged breath, "Whore."

"Oh, I'm a whore? Now, Jay, you aren't seriously trying to get me angry are you?" She cuts a vertical line down his stomach, then a horizontal. A cross. It's uneven because her hands are shaking, like a lowercase t written in cursive. He swallows hard and makes a choking sound at the back of his throat.

"Would you die for your sins, Jay?"

And as she says this, he for the first time looks really scared. She takes another pull on the warm bottle of liquor, enjoying this moment. Earlier he looked pissed, which turned into *shit, she's going to hurt me, but I'll fuck her up after it's done*. She thinks he might be starting to understand now. There's blood on her hands, on the shirt balled up by his right hip, but not enough -- not yet.

"So, anyway, you were a real talker. You know, when we -- what did you call it? -- oh, yeah -- 'fucked'. I think I'm still going to refer to it as 'rape,' though, considering I was bleeding from my mouth and the top of my head, and my rib was cracked. Did you know you did that? And I just happened to -- remember this? -- be screaming at the top of my lungs for you to stop."

She tries to recreate the scream, but it's different this time. Pain and blind animal fear have given way to spitting rage and shape-shifting guilt-shame-psychosis. She keeps her eyes on his and continues. "I think I also recall trying to push you off of me. Until you tied my hands behind my back with that leather belt of yours, that is." The buckle had been digging into her wrist while he raped her not once, but twice, all her weight plus his pushing it deeper and deeper into her flesh. Her words are slurring slightly, but she wants, needs, for him to hear this, to remember.

She looks at him closely, almost scientifically. "Any of this ringing a bell? I think that's how it happened. In fact, I'm pretty sure of it."

He closes his eyes and breathes hard out of his nose. Snot bubbles out, mixing with the saline of his tears.

"So, anyway. The talking. You really got me going with that dirty talk of yours." He looks at her as if she'd just grinned to reveal fangs of razor sharpness. "And I'm not one to be unfair. "

He's caught by surprise, as she wanted. The first real stab is shallow, in his barely-muscled upper arm. He screams, mostly out of shock – nothing like her screams had been, though – and opens his eyes wider than before.

"You like that?" she whispers, running her hand through his sweat-streaked hair. "I bet you do." She leers at him, up and down, as he searches her face frantically. "You look so good."

The second stab is shallow as well, in fairly well-toned calf. "Oh, yeah. That's nice. But I know you like it deep, don't you? Just like me, remember?" And then the third stab is back in the belly, right above the trail of hair he had made her lick, though her tongue had been bone dry from all the screaming. He'd poured warm beer on her face to try and make her mouth wet,

though it only made her choke. All she has with her now is the whiskey, and she's keeping it to herself.

In goes the knife, through the hair of his upper thigh. The same as before, but she pushes a little deeper this time. There are those red veins in his eyes again - rose red, a shade lighter than the color of cranberries. It must really hurt. "Feels good, doesn't it, Jay?"

She continues to poke at him with the knife, never very deep, but continuously. He cries and even starts begging, but eventually he grows quiet, quiet. Cam plays the rape over and over in her mind, pictures that grow more and more rich in sight and sound as all the alcohol of the afternoon and evening catch up with her. She thinks of how they must look there together, like performance art, complete with red syrup and the bottled-up angst all true theatre majors harbor.

At one point she wakes up without ever realizing she'd passed out. Time is lost. Her head is lying on the concrete of the basement, cold and grainy. Jay wears a grimace and redredred body paint, but he looks to be sleeping peacefully. Something she hasn't been able to do and doesn't expect to ever do again. She's still mad, still wants to hurt him more, to serve him justice, but it's okay; it's enough now that he's out cold.

And in the end, after passing out and lolling awake twice more, she finds she can't even manage to crack his rib. When she snaps awake once more before morning light, she is at home, somehow, in her own bed. She tries to remember if she cut the rope she'd bound him with, so that he could get out, get help, but can't recall. Her head hurts like hell already, and she falls back into a buzzed semi-sleep.

She dreams of the night four months ago when he'd spread her legs and pushed his cold fingers inside before really starting to hurt her, before she felt his stale-breath tongue on her face.

It had been their fifth date. This meant that their dating history read: Olive Garden, Battle of the Bands, a matinee, Jen Lovejoy's engagement party, and the rape. To be fair, it had been more than the rape: they'd gotten some food at a taco stand and were sharing a soda when they decided to stop in at a bar.

Jay suggested The Door bar, and they walked there hand in hand (a first), to the spot on Verbena St. where pink and blue neon spilled onto cigarette-littered sidewalk. Cam figured the liquor would help. They seemed to be at the point where they liked each other, but still weren't sure how to easily fill an entire evening with conversation.

And the liquor did help. It helped Jay get Cam back into his truck, and later, it helped dull Cam's struggle when Jay pulled off her jeans and underwear. The next day, as if the soreness and shame weren't enough, she had a hangover that felt like a knife cutting right into her temples.

She dreams of this, a slideshow of the events of that evening. Of how the hurt in her head the next day battled to be the victor of worse pain in her body. The dry, pounding, cutting hurt between her legs won out, though. She had spent the day with her hands there, scared someone else, something else, would try to hurt her.

She wakes up to her mother sitting next to her on the bed, looking in the direction of the closet. Cam's head feels like it's in a vice, and she looks down to *see* vomit in, and around, the trash can by her bed. The house is quiet, and the first thing she hears is the sound of car doors slamming outside. She shifts a little, pulling her right arm under her so she can rest on it. This small motion sets free a wave of nausea, and her head pounds pounds pounds. She groans, and her mother turns her head to look at her. Cam sees she's been crying. She's been crying, and through gritted teeth, in low tones, her mother says, "Why did you come back here?"

Cam shakes her head, trying to understand the question while also trying to piece together the events of the night before. Images and ill-defined emotions headline a late night picture show in her mind. Blood, warmer than she'd expected. Jay, continuing to whimper even when she screamed at him to stop. A doorknob slippery with the water she'd washed her hands with. Dry heaving onto asphalt next to a puddle of oil.

"I had to call them."

"Call them? Call who?" Cam doesn't feel like she's even half awake yet.

And all of a sudden her mother slaps her, so quickly across the face that all she feels is the sting of it and one of her mother's fingers brushing past her left eye.

"Mom--"

"Shut up," her mother says through still-gritted teeth, in still-low tones. "How stupid can you be?"

"Mom..." This isn't making sense, isn't how things are supposed to be today. She wanted to wake up and feel free of her pain, her worry, her shame, which was supposed to be accomplished by making Jay hurt, *cry*, scream out, be ashamed for what he did. She knew it was nothing equal to what he'd done to her -- that was impossible -- but it was the closest she could get.

She just needs to be alone so that she can piece together this puzzle. She is furious with herself for drinking, for not remembering if he'd apologized or not. For not remembering that last look on his face before she left.

Why is her mother calling her stupid? Why are people coming through her front door? There are voices in the hallway now. She feels like she might throw up again, and as she leans over the side of her bed and starts heaving, someone knocks on her bedroom door.

"Just give me a minute," her mother cries out, her voice breaking, sounding sad for the first time.

What does she know?

As Cam is throwing up, her mother leans in and speaks into her ear, past the hair that must still have some of Jay's blood on it.

"I understand why you did it, why you'd feel that strongly. Jesus, Cam, I wanted him torn to fucking shreds when I found out what he did to you."

Cam swallows hard, her stomach quelled for the time being, and sits up to look her mother in the face. She can see her mother is mad, but she's shaking now, about to start crying again, it appears. She can't remember the last time she saw her mother cry, but feels certain that she'll never forget this day, this time.

"Did you have to leave your name, though? And the goddamned knife? It's like you were asking for it. What the hell were you thinking, Cam? What were you thinking?"

Cam shakes her head, wondering when Jay got out, who he brought the knife to, who he told. She knew she'd get in trouble, but it was just a few cuts, a few slices. Worth it more than she could say. Yes, she could've gotten someone else to do it for her, maybe, but she'd wanted to be the one to do the cutting, to do the talking, to watch him be in pain.

"I don't understand. Who's here?"

Her mother shakes her head, tears falling freely now. "You don't remember, do you?"

Cam is crying now, too, upset that her mother can't see why she wanted, needed, to hurt Jay. "I just wanted him to be scared, Mom." What a coward he was to have told on her, to have had to get help for a few shallow cuts.

"Cameron, Jay is dead. He's dead."

Her first reaction isn't to question it, to deny it, to fight it. She remembers now, suddenly, how she carved her name into his chest, just as he'd carved his into her upper thigh. And when she looks back at the scene, of how she was using the knife to form each letter, slowly, she sees how many other cuts she'd made. How many other stabs, some deep. How much blood there was. How many times she must have blacked out while stabbing, only to wake up and start again.

When she starts recalling using the knife on his face -- nose, lips, the tongue that had once pushed its way into her screaming mouth -- she realizes he was never asleep. He wasn't struggling when she branded him for a reason. The very same reason why now there are more knocks on the bedroom door.

Her mother starts to sob and collapses onto the floor by the bed. She's muttering something under her breath, repeatedly, and Cam thinks what she's saying is, "Bye, baby, bye." When the two officers walk in, one helps her mother off of the floor and guides her out, having to hold her up by the waist so she doesn't fall. The other officer walks toward Cam, his face twitching when he gets closer to the smell of the trash can. His face appears to be flirting with an expression of consolation, though she imagines it's just to prevent her from putting up a fight.

She doesn't know what else to do, so she starts to unzip her jeans. Jay's blood is on them -- all over the sheets, too, she realizes now. Her head is knifesharpthrobbing again, but she manages to pull down the denim far enough so that she can free her left leg of the fabric. She bends it at the knee and pushes back the sheets so that the officer can see her thigh. The skin is hot, red, scabbed over, in the early stages of forming a permanent scar. He looks down, then looks away quickly, obviously uncomfortable with looking at her in this way, alone as they are.

She says, "Look, please look," in a voice that is small and far away.

"We need to go now, Cameron. You're going to be okay."

"But please look first." She points to the wound, and starts tracing the letters --- J-A-Y.

So hot to the touch. "Just look. That's what he did to me. That's what he did."

## Clear

“I love their underbellies. Their soft white underbellies.”

When Mary Kate says these words, a fragile little memorial, her voice catches slightly on ‘soft,’ giving the impression that she is close to tears. I know better, though. She won’t cry, not full out, though she is just as shaken as I am about the three dead squirrels we’d passed on the last mile stretch of highway. So flat, like they were ironed to the hot pavement. I am uncomfortable with this sudden connection to Mary Kate, this convergence of feeling. It isn’t right.

“Yeah,” I answer, just to say something. Then I say it again, this time with a nod, as if adding depth or authenticity to my agreement.

“I just can’t believe how many get killed, not just squirrels. Dara, think about it: how scared they must be.” A pause. “When it happens, you know?”

I do think about it, and again I agree with her, but I keep quiet this time.

Mary Kate and I are driving up Highway 77 on our way to Charlotte. In Columbia we stopped and ate at IHOP, where we drank coffee out of nearly identical white ceramic mugs. Hers had a green circle around the top; mine had blue. We laughed—the first time we had ever laughed together—due to the fact that this particular color scheme matched our eyes as well. I’m not sure why I found this amusing, but I had. Then I spent a while sitting there thinking about our unique situation, and how not many people get the chance to take a road trip with the women their fathers are sleeping with.

To anyone passing us on the road, I'm sure we look like two college girls, on their way to some family home to spend a cozy, hot chocolate-y Christmas with pine needle scent and all. Mary Kate is only five years older than me—twenty-six years of age, to be exact. It makes me wonder if my father ever had a thing for my friends in high school or the girls I'd met in college and brought home on weekends to visit. My mother said probably so.

In the restaurant that afternoon, over German crepes and homestyle originals, Mary Kate and I discussed the Leonard Cohen song, "Famous Blue Raincoat," and came up with our own theories behind the lyrics. So far that was the only kind of thing we talked about—trivial, random bits of information that keep us at bay from more important issues. The difference between us is, whereas I can sense this avoidance, always looming above me, Mary Kate is, I am convinced, completely unaware of this underlying tension. She is caught up in her own world, which has no room for unnecessary guilt or tiresome worry. The thing is, I don't think she's a bad person. She's just a completely different person than me.

So here we are, about forty minutes past our afternoon breakfast, when our previous conversation comes to me again, and I decide to revive it, to get us off the topic of small murdered mammals, and to somehow meet this woman (girl? lady?) at her level.

"So," I begin, "you said you think 'Lili Marlene' is this guy's ex-girlfriend?"

She looks over at me from behind the wheel, curly blond hair tucked under a powder blue baseball cap. The only makeup she wears is cherry Chapstick. She's beautiful; I can't deny it.

"Well, yeah, kind of. You know how he says, 'You came home alone without Lili Marlene?'" She looks over again and watches for me to nod before continuing.

I nod.

“Okay, well, here’s what it is, or what I think it is: This guy’s pissed that this other guy stole his girl out from under him, and, to top it all off, now they’re not even together anymore.”

A pause. “Get it?”

“Well, yeah, sort of, but then who’s Jane?”

She thinks for a moment, then recites the lyrics, as if hearing them again might trigger elucidation for one or both of us: “ ‘Jane came by with a lock of your hair. She said that you gave it to her, that night that you planned to go clear.’ ”

I add, “And there’s that other part with Jane, where he says, ‘I see Jane’s awake now.’ ”

“Yeah, yeah!” Mary Kate’s pretty into this. “I think Jane’s with this guy now; he can see that she’s awake—she’s in his bed. And she came back, or by or whatever, with a lock of this other guy’s hair, like some primal, sacrificial offering that proves she was with this other guy, too—this one Lili Marlene’s with now—but ended up deciding to leave him for the guy singing the song.”

She looks pretty proud of herself, but she’s lost to me, and I tell her so. She says that’s okay, but next time I shouldn’t bring things up if I don’t want to discuss them.

I nod again, not sure what to do. I don’t know if she sees me or not, because I’m looking out of my window now. I lean my forehead against the cool glass and watch the wildflowers go by at warp speed until I feel sick. I tilt my head back a little and stare at my partial reflection, broken into pieces by the sunlight. My dark, brown hair decided to be wavy today, something beyond my control, and I let it hang loose. I’m wearing an old blue turtleneck sweater and faux pearl earrings. I can’t help but think how much older I look, and feel, than Mary Kate. Or at least my impression of Mary Kate.

I figure Mary Kate is kind of like my stepmother now. Kind of, but not really. My parents are still married, and I guess my dad didn't technically start this little affair until after he moved into his new apartment, which reminds me so much of a bachelor's pad, with its liquor cabinet and art deco entertainment center, that I feel sad for him. As the daughter, I am expected to be distraught about this whole situation; my mother informed me of this duty. I'm actually not that upset—not yet, that is. I'm waiting for something to validate the feelings of anger I've been told I should have. Mary Kate is somehow not what I pictured, not what I expected.

“It has to do with Scientology.”

Her voice breaks into my reflection. “Huh? What does?”

“You know, in ‘Famous Blue’: ‘Did you ever go clear?’”

I think about this for a moment. “I'm sorry, but what does that have to do with Scientology?”

“Well, I looked it up a while ago, and ‘going clear’ means to, like, achieve a state of clear thought without, I guess, baggage and everything else that builds up over the course of someone's life. Memories, stuff like that.”

I think about this for a minute. “So, you mean, it's a good thing?”

“Yeah, it's like the goal, or one of the goals, of the religion. Wait—Scientology's a religion, right?”

It seems like she's posing this question to herself, but I answer anyway. “I think so.” And then, “So...”

“So...” She helps me out, and explains: “When he asks, ‘Did you ever go clear?’ he means did she ever achieve that state of non-worry, of free thought.”

I have to admit, I'm impressed. "Jesus Christ, Mary Kate. You're like a—a philosophy professor or something."

She takes it the wrong way, takes my tone the wrong way, like I've said something mean, like I'm making fun of her. Her smile disappears. I laugh a little, to show her I was just joking. She looks like she's disappointed she ever tried with me. And I'm disappointed that I upset her. I imagine my mother in the car, shaking her head in the backseat. She'd tell Mary Kate to lighten up, then call her names under her breath, but in a murmur that was loud enough to be heard.

"Well, I'm sorry, Dara, but I was just trying to explain about the song."

"I know. And it's interesting. No problem. There's no problem." I'm upset with myself for saying the wrong thing, but it really isn't my fault. Instead of trying to convince her of this, I keep it simple. I feel compelled to keep everything simple, sane, and non-confrontational, at least until Charlotte. Besides, I don't feel like driving with someone who's pissed at me.

"I'm sorry," I say, and she doesn't respond.

Normally I'm not one for idle conversation, especially with someone I don't know all that well. Especially with someone who is sleeping with my father. Still, I never expected, even on this trip, to ride in a car with a person for an entire hour without speaking. I don't think Mary Kate is upset with me the whole time, but she makes no attempt to talk to me. She changes the radio station four times during this hour—from a talk show to a Top 40 countdown, to country, to cabaret, and back to a talk show (a different one this time, all about the psychic connection between the dead and places where these people kicked the bucket). I'm getting slightly annoyed until an elderly woman comes on and starts talking about feeling her husband's presence in their parlor. In a wavering voice she speaks of how she believes their deceased dog, Jericho, comes back to visit, too. Sometimes she feels his tail wagging against her skirt. Just as I am getting into

her story, simultaneously pitying and feeling affection for the old woman, Mary Kate snaps the radio dial to the left, shutting off the only distraction.

And then, after an hour, this is what she says to me: “What do *you* believe in, Dara?”

I have to guess that she’s been thinking about this for quite some time, since it relates to our earlier discussion of Scientology. I’m slightly embarrassed. She’s been sitting over there meditating on theological issues while I’ve been rotating these three thoughts in my head: putting red highlights in my hair, a short story I’d read by Annie Proulx, and what it would be like to kiss *Real Genius*-era Val Kilmer.

I just look at her, waiting for some direction of how to answer. I don’t want to blow it this time. For some reason, I like this girl, and it’s my first glimpse of this. Well, I don’t like her exactly, not like someone you think you could be great friends with, but I don’t *not* like her. I can worry about my mother later.

“You know,” she says. “God and all that. Do you believe in it?”

I concentrate and try to think back to what I know of religion. What *do* I believe in? All I can come up with is one image: the white stucco church where I attended Sunday school from the ages of six to nine. I remember how the walls were copper-colored at the bottom because of the rust in the well and the way the front entryway always had the smell of what someone told me was honeysuckle. Above the altar there were stained glass loaves and fishes. I used to go with my parents and sit between them. After service my mother would attend a ladies-only Sunday school class and my father would take me to the park. It was near a small lake with a pair of black swans, and my dad would smoke a pipe while I climbed up the monkey bars and jungle gym. My mother was always in a rush, and he was always calm. We were quiet by the lake, peaceful, and looking back, that was far more spiritual than even the services.

I can't say these things to Mary Kate, though; they only make sense to me. So I answer her as honestly as I can, though I really have no idea what to say.

"Well, I guess I believe in...in an afterlife."

She nods. She must think that I'm just getting started, that the afterlife bit is the first in a long list of religious beliefs.

"And what else?"

"Oh. Um, I guess I believe that we are rewarded for, for doing good..." I sound young and faraway.

"Uh huh."

There is a pause—her waiting, me contemplating. She has to push me along. Suddenly I feel very out of control, silly even, ridiculous. I'm being schooled in religion by a girl who broke up my parents' marriage. But, now that I think of it, did she? Could it just be that she's the easiest person to blame?

"So, you think the afterlife is the typical representation of heaven that we see all the time, with angels and haloes and big puffy clouds? All that jazz?"

"I don't know." I really didn't know.

"Do you believe in reincarnation?"

"Good question."

She looks over and must see how uncomfortable I am, how unprepared to answer these questions. Her brows relax, and I think I catch her winking at me.

"Hey, Dara, I'm sorry. I was just trying to make conversation." She reaches over and pats my hand, which is resting on the cup holders situated between us. It is a nice gesture, and I relax.

“No, it’s okay. I just—I’ve just never really thought about all that stuff—not enough to come up with good answers, at least.” I roll my eyes. “Apparently.”

“You’ve got time.” She delivers this with a smile, awkward but sweet. I nod, then lock my eyes on the low hills rising before us. Two huge clouds are blocking us from seeing the palette of sunset colors I know are there.

About five miles later—five miles into another period of silence—we drive by a raccoon that is lying still by the edge of the road. She is curled up in on herself, as if she tried to roll away from harm. Her paws are held up to her face, tiny hands shielding her eyes.

“Do those animals go clear before they die?”

I laugh. I can’t help it; I am struck by the pure absurdity of the question, the way it sounds. I’m positive she means it to be a joke, her kind of toying with what we talked about earlier. I am wrong.

Mary Kate shakes her head, like an old woman would do if disappointed by an immature child. I feel the part. I can’t believe I’ve hurt her feelings again. I can’t believe how much I care.

“You know, I wasn’t trying to be funny.”

“I’m sorry.” And it just so happens that I am. I’m laughing at this girl sitting beside me and have been laughing at her, inside my head, all day. What do I know about her? Besides everything having to do with my forty-two year-old father, that is.

Mary Kate. Mary Kate Strombold. She had gone to NYU and studied film history. She’s a fan of Roman Polanski and Indian food. She grew up in Portland, Maine. She played basketball for her high school.

I try to picture what she was like back then and envision the same blond hair, the same tan arms that are so obviously moisturized as part of a daily ritual (I can tell by the soft-looking,

shiny elbows). This younger Mary Kate is standing on a pier with her father, who I imagine to be a fisherman. They are chatting about lobsters and looking out at the stormy sea. Soon her father gets on his boat and sails away, waving at his daughter from beneath his massive yellow plastic parka.

Mary Kate turns and walks back up the pebble-strewn shore to a small clapboard building that only I know to be a church. Inside there is a stained glass window with a lamb and a little golden baby Jesus. The walls of the church are smoky green with mildew. The inner rooms smell of lavender, maybe due to the litter of votive candles lighting the shadowed hallway.

Back in the present, thirty miles from Charlotte, Mary Kate continues, in a soft, soft voice.

“It’s a serious question. Really, it is. Do they ever go clear? Could they ever go clear?” She sneaks a glance at me. “I mean, do you think so?”

I see her trying. I realize that none of this is her fault. I let everything go.

I don’t say a word but I smile.

## White Figs from Marseilles

I heard a whisper as I walked down the street today, a group of words strung together by breath momentarily untouched by the cold air. A woman dressed in red wool was pushing back a curl of hair with her black-mittened fingers, blocking me from the words her lips were forming prior to my approach. She looked like the type of woman you might see at an art gallery opening or a business holiday party, the type of woman you sense is self-conscious, although her flute of champagne is held with utter nonchalance and her hips have been angled into a posture of boredom. If I had to speculate, I would say that this woman today had dressed in her best clothes, applied makeup with deferential ease, and stepped out of her brownstone apartment for no other purpose than to do something other than spend the day alone. I can understand this.

I wasn't comfortable lingering there, but something compelled me about this woman, her eyes and hair so dark, nearly charcoal, against the bright red of her coat. I could have hung around, could have pretended to drop something, or stopped to buy a newspaper on the corner, eyes carefully glancing back every now and then. I could have heard the other things she said, if I had chosen to do so, and if in fact she had continued to speak after I passed.

Of course the romance of the mystery would have been lost then. Something would have been taken away from my leaden-sky morning, of hearing *white figs from Marseilles* under the breath of a woman on the street, wearing mittens that masked all other words, all other clues to her context. Those mittens, I thought, those mittens take me back. A smaller version of me pressing snow into a near-perfect sphere, feeling the hardness of the once-soft snowflakes as they

turned to wet crystals in my hand. My teeth pressing into that snow, little threads of my own mittens pasted to my tongue.

Now that I think of it, here in this sconce-lit coffee shop, I'd most likely passed an everyday, ordinary conversation on the sidewalk, the kind that I might have with a friend if chance allowed. This woman had been with someone, a vague shadow form of a female. They'd probably been chatting about a recipe or a cooking tour or something equally mundane. Lord knows why I'm making such a big deal about this. Well, maybe He knows, and I'm just starting to catch up, to figure out the reason why I can't get this off my mind.

White figs from Marseilles. What do they look like?

I close my eyes and focus my attention on my right hand, which is resting on the button of my jeans, my thumb lightly touching the soft inch of skin visible beneath the hem of my navy blue T-shirt. I squeeze my hand into a fist and imagine a white fig pressed in the lined warmth of my palm, just that big. It is covered in wrinkles and is cool to the touch. If I unfurl my fingers, will the white come off? Maybe it's just powder, a sweet coating of sugar.

A child cries out and my vision is lost, jerking me back to the here and now. In the back of my mind, though, I start to formulate an idea. Circuitry fueled by foreign fruit. On my walk over I'd thought about the time I'd had to choose a partner for the fifth grade field trip to the museum, someone to help me fill out a worksheet on the dinosaur exhibit. I decided that day to look up at the sky. I told myself that if I saw a bird there, or even a dragonfly, I would choose Marla Thompson as my field trip workshop buddy. If I didn't see anything, I'd go with John Sadler.

There had been nothing in the sky. Just clouds, billowing into what looked like chimney smoke and wisps of cotton. I had chosen John, just that easy. He had gone back to playing kickball, as if it didn't even matter to him. Marla sulked all day.

It was so simple, so easy, making that decision, as I'd handed it over to chance to do it for me. I'm thinking I should try that again.

I look down and see that there's a coffee ring on the job application that sits before me. Lovely. At least the café'll know I'm a customer as well as a potential employee. I secretly think the coffee is too strong, too earthy, too heavy for my tastes, and am glad that at least some of it has ended up on the paper in front of me. If hired, though, I will serve the coffee with a smile, all negative thoughts locked away.

Under "Name of Applicant," Shannon Finn looks so uninspiring. I don't like the way it looks—too Irish, too playful, too concise. And I'm not any of those things.

"You still need a minute?"

The manager's voice breaks my train of thought. Now I start a new line of thinking—trying to remember this guy's name. Mike? Steve? Josh? Apparently I didn't catch it the first time. He's looking at me like I'd better hurry up, like this is the first test of my work capability. As if the speed of my filling out the application is directly proportional to the length of time it will take me to make a latté with hazelnut syrup and extra foam.

I'm too slow. I can tell by his shifty eyes that he's thinking this, that he is not interested in me. As he begins to preach to me his philosophies of work ethics—no doubt leading up to a polite and noncommittal "Thanks for coming in; we'll give you a call when we've got an opening"—I walk out. I simply push my chair back, place both feet on the ground, and walk

away. I walk away from Mike/Steve/Josh, the coffee ring, and the annoying look of my name on the lined, photocopied white paper.

I need time to think, more time to think on my phrase du jour and the idea that is still hatching in the back of my mind, a warm little creature pecking its way through a thin wet shell. I decide that walking, just walking and letting my thoughts drift, might bring me closer to temporary enlightenment.

It feels good to leave.

The doctor looks tired, as if he hasn't rested in weeks. I am disappointed in him, in the choices he has made in his life. I want to ask him if his parents pushed him into medicine, what he dreamed of doing as a child, if he was ever happy. But that would be taking it too far. And I have my own problems to deal with. So instead I fix my eyes on him and keep quiet.

His head reminds me of a toad, especially the way his lips lie flat and disconcertingly wide, as if he's just waiting for that fly on the window to get near enough. His white coat is turned up at the collar, and he rests his pushed-up sleeves on the desk while he speaks to me.

"Now, Shannon, I want you to know that you can ask me anything you want about this procedure." Such a small voice for such a large man. He raises his eyelids and leans slightly forward when he talks to me, as if he is affording me special privileges unavailable to his other patients and is letting it be our little secret. I hope for a gold star.

"What else would I need to know?" I keep the tone of my voice steady, leaving him to wonder whether or not I am being sarcastic. I myself do not know.

"Well, this is a big decision. I think I've gone over everything, and now it's up to you to decide. I can't do it for you."

“Of course you can’t.” Again, the masked emotion. I am good at this.

“I think what’s best is for you to go home and think about it for a couple of days. Then you can come back and we’ll talk about it some more. You might think of some questions for me.”

“I don’t think I will,” I say, “but, yeah, I’m gonna go now.”

“All right, Shannon. You just take your time with this. Call if you need anything. My nurse is always available.” He tilts his head to the side, a show of overly-produced sincerity.

“Great.”

I walk out of the doctor’s office like I did from the coffee shop. My back is held straight. My eyes look ahead but are not focused.

Sitting on a park bench by an unraveled cigar and a broken purple hairbrush, my plan comes together. It comes to me easily, so easily and naturally that I figure it must be the right thing to do. As the idea starts thickening with details, I simply accept it.

The doctor said I have a decision to make, which is true. What is also true is that I’ve been obsessing over the woman on the street today. Her and her white figs. I don’t want to think about anything else. If I think about the doctor too much, or my reason for seeing him, I might break down, and I can’t let that happen.

Maybe my plan is simply one that’s already been laid out for me, and I am just now stumbling upon it, blindly labeling it as my own. Whatever the case may be, I know what I have to do. It’s simple, really. I feel my arms getting warm from the heat of the sun and know somehow that things will work out just fine.

\*

And this is the way I feel three days later when I walk into the Halliday Street Bar to carry out my plan. It is two in the afternoon, and the only other patron is an older man sitting at a table in the center of the room, as if he wants, or needs, to see everyone who enters. He looks like he's in the mood for company, a face to sit before him, a target for his war stories, imagined and real. I walk directly to the bar. I feel the older man's eyes on me, and am sure he would have spoken to me, gestured for me to come over even, if I had looked just a bit more in his direction. But I did not. He doesn't fit into my plan. I came here to talk to the person behind the bar, like I decided in the park.

The bartender finishes wiping shot glasses dry while I wait, the edge of one tautly-covered barstool pressing into my abdomen.

“Yes?”

He is perhaps late-twenties, a few years younger than me. Blond hair, light-colored eyes, handsome. He doesn't make that much of an impression on me.

“I'll have a seltzer.” I don't even like seltzer.

As he places the glass before me, I know I have to start the conversation or he will walk away, making himself busy elsewhere.

“Hey.”

He looks up at my words.

“What's your name?”

In the end he reacted. For some reason, I hadn't expected him to. I'd tried not to think about it too much, not make any speculation, lay any bets, but I couldn't help it. I'd almost gotten used to what I thought would be his non-reaction, and what this in turn meant for me and my decision.

I said those words, *white figs from Marseilles*, as if releasing them, a child loosening their grip on a fish they've caught with the help of their father, watching it swim disoriented back into the water. When I said that phrase, and he at first raised his eyes, then brought his eyebrows that were not quite wide enough together in concentration, I felt my voice falter as I tried to continue my predefined speech.

"Wait...what?" He actually started to grin when he stopped me. He has no idea, was all I could think. Of course he didn't, but it seemed to be too much to handle right then, and I couldn't get over that he was actually grinning at me. Grinning. He has no idea.

I stopped talking, and, with the slightest of voices, asked, "What is it?"

"You gotta give me that again. Did you just say 'white figs from Marseilles?' God, that's – well, besides being strange – it's kind of beautiful, isn't it?"

I nodded my yes.

It had been chance to choose a writer, a poet maybe, a struggling artist, someone else who had some inherent tendency to be struck by the elegance of those words.

I made up something then, talking to him more about the words and then, eventually, completely random things. I have no memory of what was said.

I've just woken up. I'm not where I want to be. I'd like to be anywhere but here: a too-bright hospital room, thanks to the light from the casement window and the unforgiving white of the walls.

A minute passes, an hour. I realize I've dozed off to sleep, and now the doctor is standing above me, his pudgy hand resting on my forearm.

Somehow I know that it has been done, and this makes the skin at the back of my neck pulse with blood. My body, this room, quickly become much too hot for me to bear without starting to writhe on the tight, uncomfortable sheets. A look of concern passes over the doctor's face. This man I worried about a week ago – his life's work, his lost potential.

“What did you do?”

He skips over the question and calmly tries to talk me through it, gently, assuming, I suppose, that I'm simply woozy from all the drugs. He doesn't know that I am all too conscious, all too aware of what is going on. I just need to hear him say it. Hear him vocalize what I chose to have done

He doesn't know about *white figs from Marseilles* or how they formed the basis of my plan. The bartender reacted and the choice was made just that easily. It didn't matter what my little game was being played for, what the stakes were, just like it hadn't mattered that Marla Thompson's feelings were hurt. It was just the way things had worked out.

My hand rests on the lightly pulsing skin beneath the elastic band of my white hospital underwear. It doesn't even feel like anything is missing. Of course, to me it hadn't really felt like there was anything inside before.

I find that it is more difficult to think about than I'd expected, so I try to move my thoughts instead to other things. I lift my hand and place it by my side, forcing myself to breathe more slowly.

The doctor walks out and my eyes move from the back of his head to the sterile walls before me. The palms of my hands are still warm, but they are empty.

## Please Use Me

I, Leila, was a professional ballerina for two years, masquerading as an anorexic, coming home every night with bleeding and blistered toes. When I went down on my boyfriend, I hummed to the tune of Swan Lake. I was cut from the company with everyone else when a new director came in and wanted a “fresh” look. I still wear my purple leotard with green-and-black-striped legwarmers, jeans pulled over them on rainy days. I teach kids at the Y now, Thursday nights, supervising the pliés of girls in little pink tutus and jewel-encrusted scrunchies. I’m broke. I owe three months’ rent and have a backlog of overdue bills that have my phone ringing off the hook with threats from collection agencies. My electricity is being turned off in a day or so. I’m used to all of this; it’s this sick cycle I’m very good at getting myself into. I’m tired of it now, finally tired enough to do something about it. About two weeks ago I auditioned for a cruise cabaret show, but even if I get it, it won’t get me the money I need now in enough time. On top of all this, I’m too proud to ask for any help.

Riding the escalator up to the top floor of a bookstore with my friend Hayden, I decide to tell him what I’ve decided. We’re there to get another copy of *The Shining*, my favorite movie, which went missing a few weeks ago. Hayden says he’ll get it for me with his gift card, which he’s had for months, and I’m very careful not to tell him that I need the money much more for food than for Kubrick. He says that a girl who named her cat after a character in a movie should have the movie at home. The name part’s true: My cat’s name is Mr. Halloran, and I sometimes talk to him using the same antique drawl that Scatman Crothers uses in the film.

After a moment or two of silence, I force myself to say something, to get this started.

“It’s really no big deal,” I say.

He's looking down at the Local section, smiling at a kid who's just knocked over a few books that had been resting on a cardboard display shelf. "Huh? What is?"

"Just this thing I'm thinking of doing." I'm looking away from Hayden, out the ceiling-high windows at the rain and the slowly-darkening gray asphalt square of a newly-freed parking space.

"What are you talking about?" He jumps up on the step above us, putting both arms out, leaning in to stare, playfully, as if there's no way he's letting me off the escalator until I fess up.

We're at the top. "Watch out."

Hayden jumps backward without tripping or losing his balance, landing on solid ground. He takes my hand and pulls me to the side, stepping out of the way of the woman who is just behind us.

"Wait. So what's up?"

I can tell, as he sinks down into a nearby chair and pulls me into the one beside him, that he isn't going to let this go. This attention is what I wanted, or so I thought. For the first time I'm having second thoughts about telling him. He's a great friend, my only remaining comrade from the ballet company. But still. All this boils down to a get-it-off-your-chest situation. I'm going to regret telling him, I know, but, God, I have to tell someone.

"It's just this thing."

He waits for more, crossing his arms over his chest in mock solemnity, not taking his eyes off me even when two little boys run past us, shrieking, a mother trailing after them hissing *hush, hush*.

"Just this thing." I finally center my eyes on his. "I'm broke, you know."

He sighs and looks down at his lap. “Yeah, I know.” He glances away for a second, and I know I need to explain myself as soon as I can. We’ve each gone through money issues before – the both of us losing all of our savings from our company years – and Hayden feels guilty that he can’t help me more, though I expect absolutely nothing from him. I certainly have never been able to help him out. I need to clear up this confusion before he thinks I’m asking for something from him, again.

So I tell him.

It all started when I found a website that offered a specific breed of personals. Sex only. Dirty sex. Sex in groups. Meet-me-on-the-fifth-floor-of-the-Wyndham-at-nine-with-a-skirt-minus-the-panties-and-fuck-me-behind-the-artificial-hibiscus-in-the-hall sex. That sort of thing. Very specific stuff. And I’d noticed, throughout my perusal, that a few of the ads were non-aggressive, subdued even. Guys not wanting anything too raunchy, just sex. They were lonely and willing to pay. I decided to see what would happen if I sent out a few emails.

I planned everything out. It wasn’t something I was longing to do, but yes, I was curious. And though I desperately needed a lot of money, I figured that I’d only need to meet up with these guys a few times. I knew exactly what each would pay, what each wanted to do – exactly – and how long this would take. In two weeks I’d be done. June would be a brand new month.

I tell Hayden all of this, making sure to stress that I’m going to meet up with all the guys beforehand in a safe place. I had decided this was necessary, as I could cancel if I got a bad vibe.

Hayden starts crying, right there. Then before I can move in to say something comforting, whatever that would be, he gets up, sprints down the escalator, and walks out of the store. After I chase him down in the parking lot, he sinks to the ground, landing Indian-style on the still-wet asphalt. He’s still crying, and I plead with him to calm down, to please calm down. After a few

minutes he quietly admits to me that he'd once met up with a guy for money – when we were still dancing – for fifty dollars. Drug money, quick cash. He begs me not to go through with it, saying that he'll help me scrape together the money.

I lie and tell him okay. I'm not sure why I do it, but I know this is something I'm going to have to take care of by myself. And I was right; I regretted telling him.

Walking home that day, past the houses and driveways, I think about growing up, and what has led me to this point. Before things got bad at home, so bad I'm not welcome anymore, there were things that were good, so good. My mom making apple pancakes for me and Charlie, our trip to Bear Mountain in Georgia, the way Dad sang "O Sole Mio" at the top of his lungs. My middle school field trip to the beach, when I got to kayak for the first time. Eating rock candy with my parents outside a Florida shell museum.

But then things changed. And then they were like this:

Thomas

He looks the same as he did when I met him for coffee, the same gray suit and gray hair. We did what we'd planned, what he'd written on a notecard and slipped over to me at the café.  
*Oral sex. No hands, please, just mouth.*

Terrance

Black pants, black tank top. He leans me over the dresser and tells me to hold onto the television, which is bolted to the ground. He fucks me from behind, shouting out the name I'd told him was mine. *Andrea.*

Frank

He gives me so much attention I almost lose myself in the moment, and might have, had I been with someone I was attracted to, or someone who wasn't paying me money to go down on me. I time it right and cry out, adding a *God, yes* for the hell of it. We have sex then, me on top, which is what he'd asked for specifically.

The week after this third meeting I walk into the Y to a flurry of girls jumping around. They are all talking at once.

"Ms. Akers, when are you leaving? Before the recital? You can't leave before the recital."

I shake my head. "No, no, I won't know if I'm going for a long time. Not until—" I stop to estimate. A month? Five weeks? Rehearsals didn't even start until July.

"But Ms. Lisa said—"

And in she walks. Lisa Demarre, owner of the studio, a fifty-eight year-old kid. She is dancing in circles, holding a bottle of sparkling cider, repeatedly crooning, "Oh yeah. Oh yeah." The girls erupt into giggles, shrieking. I stare, my mouth open, though not as surprised as someone who didn't know her would be.

She dances, twirling, in my direction. The "Oh yeahs" meld into a repeated chorus of "Oh yeah. She's cruisin. Oh yeah. She's cruisin." The girls are by now jumping up and down, clapping their hands together, elated at the sight of their Ms. Lisa acting so silly. Acting like them.

It turns out that I had an in. Lisa. Not only had she been the one to tip me off about the auditions; but she'd also pulled a few strings and found out early who had gotten chosen.

Considering one of those people was me, and that she was able to get such insider information, made me wonder about the validity of all this. But, still, they wouldn't pick a bad dancer to perform on their ship, and who cares that Lisa knew a few of the people in charge.

I was in.

Mitch

My fourth appointment was with a Mr. Mitch Spencer, two days after I found out that I'd be dancing aboard the *Silver Sea* that summer. The last guy I'd have to meet with.

Mitch's emails had stood out to me because the text was italicized and sky blue. He said that his wife had passed away a couple years ago, and he would "very much like the company of a lady." He'd like specific things done to him but didn't feel comfortable saying what. I wrote back, asking if he wanted to talk money, saying that I needed specifics if he wanted this to go any farther. I didn't get a response until the next morning. It was very short, just "Could I buy you a cup of coffee or tea?" He seemed innocent, the type that I could handle mid-morning in a public place. So we planned to meet that Monday at Sophie's, 11 a.m.

I put a purple flower behind my right ear – what I told Mitch to look for. I get there about fifteen minutes early, planning to have my first cup before he came in. But as soon as I step in I spot him in the corner. He is wearing a red flannel shirt, as promised, which is just a bit too much against his bright red hair, the color of barbeque potato chips. The word uncomfortable doesn't touch the surface of how this man looks. He is moving around in his seat, rubbing his hand compulsively over his mouth and beard, and looking intently out of the window at his left as if I couldn't possibly be coming from the other direction.

There are bells hanging from the top of the front door, and his head snaps to attention at the sound of me entering. He looks as if he would burrow himself away if he could, if only there were something, a mousehole even, behind him that he could force his way through, to escape. I'm nervous, too, but default with an air of confidence. I stroll over to his table, his eyes growing wider with every step I take, finally nodding before taking the seat across from him. He just stares. I lace my fingers together and look back.

After a minute, "Andrea?"

"Purple flower, right?" I tap the petals with my fingers.

"Right." A pause, some fumbling. "Coffee? Do you want coffee? I can get you some coffee."

"No. I'm fine. Let's just talk, okay?"

"Oh, yeah. Yeah, of course." Hands over his mouth and beard. "Of course. Of course, Andrea."

We talk and decide to meet that very night.

When I get there I knock and hear Mr. Spencer clear his throat and ask loudly, "Andrea?" It then sounds like he knocks something over.

"Yep."

He opens the door a few seconds later, guiding me into the room with his hand lightly touching my elbow. He directs my attention to the table and chairs to the right of the door, where the ice bucket and a couple of plastic cups are sitting.

"I hope you like Coke. There's ... there's Sprite, too, I think."

I am glancing down at his hands, which he's wringing, when the door slams shut behind me. I scream with the realization that there is someone else in the room. Turning around, I expect the worst – a gun or knife in my face, my last breath to be taken. Finally, a comeuppance to all my immoral behavior. Instead, I see Hayden.

“It's okay, Lei. It's okay.” His hands are out, and he's moving toward me.

Then, Mr. Spencer, moving at me from behind, “Leila, come sit down.”

I scream again but am then drowned out by the sound of shrieking coming from the other side of the room. A woman lying on the floor on the other side of the bed. As thoughts lightning-flash through my head – rape, murder, Hayden?, cops – I hear a voice as familiar to me as apple pancakes in a kitchen of white and blue.

“Baby, I'm so sorry. Oh, Jesus, I'm sorry.”

I'd come to this hotel in order to have sex with a man for money. Now I'm standing with a man with the alias Mitch Spencer, my friend Hayden, and my mother.

I'm outside running. Running away from the Holiday Inn, from the pleas of three people who know more about me than I want anyone to know. I don't know how Hayden found out what I was doing, but I obviously wasn't careful enough. While the three of them were struggling to keep me in the room, I heard bits and pieces of what they were trying to tell me. Something about my mom being there, and how it wasn't all about what I was doing. She wanted to be back in my life – imagine that – and she'd forgive me for whatever I'd done. Mr. Spencer saying he just wanted to help out Aida – my mother – which makes me wonder if they're together. Was the guy in the red flannel my mother's lover? What had he said about me after that first meeting? Had my mom written those ice blue emails, or had Hayden?

When the pain in my calves is too much to take, I sit down on the curb, finally looking around to see where I am. There are cigarette butts near my shoes, next to a rainbow-oil puddle to my right. Across the street is a pawn shop, with neon yellow lights that spell out *Cash*. A convenience store is behind me, and as the door opens I hear a man shout “Motherfucker! One off!” as he apparently narrowly misses winning big in the lottery. And there’s something about that, the shout so loud and the neon sign such a stark reminder of what I’ve been reduced to. I see things like they are, in an instant, and am reeling over the fact that I can’t go back and start over again.

I realize then that I can tell them about the *Silver Sea*, about how I’m getting away. Maybe my mom can keep Mr. Halloran until I get back. Maybe they’ll forgive me.

It’s getting cold and, without hesitating, I stand up and start walking back to where I came from.

## Were You Lying When You Said You Loved the Moon?

### 1.

When we met you told me you were from Baltimore. You said that you'd seen me around town and that each time my hair seemed to shimmer like a mermaid in a lagoon. I worked at the factory then, hemming dresses and skirts, my fingers warm and quick. I took buses and streetcars to work, lining up with the other women outside the pretentious girth of our Greek Revival building, coffee in our hands, in dark garments and standing in a procession like soldiers, like it was 1919. It was, you might recall, 1985, me stuck in a job you said was something I should, I could, rise above. I didn't take much notice of you, not really, one way or another, until you walked me home the night we watched the parades. It started to rain, and we sat in the dog park under the tin-roof shelter. You kissed my hand, the inside of my elbow, my forehead. We looked up at the sky, and you asked wouldn't it be something to be a king of infinite space.

### 2.

Your mother died on a Sunday, and that was eight months after we got married. She was wary of me at first – the tattoo on my shoulder, my unfinished degree, my son. And Elijah loved her. He loved the way her house smelled of oranges – do you remember that? – and the bug collection she gave him, all wings and pins. Elijah drew a picture of me that time you and I were in Memphis. He drew me with a yellow dress and a sunflower in my hand. And then later, when he asked to get out the paper and pencils again, she was surprised that he drew another picture of me, this time in a red coat by the sea. After that she said that she figured there must be something

about me, which I took to reference your attention as well. She painted me not long before she died, after she'd come around to me. It was one of her last portraits. She made my red hair even more unruly, wilder in a way, though undoubtedly more beautiful than in real life. My brown eyes the color of dark wood, my skin with more pink and less freckles. She'd listened when I told her about the first time you and I met, and she had painted me in green water, the outline of a mermaid's tail just visible under the waves.

When she died she left you money, enough money for us to buy a house outright, on a street lined with maples. And when we lost the baby you said it would be okay. You gave me a necklace with a tiny pink pearl and said that was her, the girl we would have named Natasha. I could keep her with me in this house forever. Natasha was your mother's name, and that year you lost her twice.

### 3.

We lived for a long time very happily, it seemed to me. Did it seem that way to you? I worked for six years at Elijah's first school. Milt Danvers Elementary, Roosevelt Road. I was an assistant for a pre-K class and worked just two corridors down from Elijah's fourth and fifth grade classrooms. We had lunch at the same time, and sometimes I'd take him outside and eat with him on a picnic bench, me with a TV dinner and Elijah with his Hulk Hogan lunchbox, always handled with such satisfaction and care. His dark hair would shine under the sunlight filtering through the oaks, with those freckles just like mine dotting across his face like constellations.

At home I thought you loved him as much as I did, that you were happy to call him your son. I was with him more than you, but you worked so much, were at the gallery from sunup to sundown, putting fresh coats of paint on the walls and installing different lighting for each new

artist. He missed you when you were gone, would ask about you in your absence like he never had nor ever did ask about his real father. I was proud of him, of you, grateful for the family you both provided.

I tell you this now, these details, because I don't know what you remember, what you choose to recall. Your memory, you said, seemed to start to slip away. You were always vague about it, so I never really understood, never felt sure about how bad it was or what had shuttled you into this new phase of life, this era of living in the moment because the moments were all you had, like a goldfish or a small bird.

4.

Looking back to try and make sense of this, what I remember with the most clarity was the time I realized we had moved, swiftly and officially, into this new age. I came home late one night, when Elijah was in the ninth grade, and noticed within minutes that the necklace was gone. Not hanging on the pewter picture frame on the right side of my dresser like it had for years, not fallen and kicked accidentally under the bed, but gone. You were confused by my confusion, with how upset I got.

Why is this a big deal, you asked, with some sort of calm in your words.

It didn't occur to me that you might not know what I was talking about, so I said, with daggers in my eyes, You've got to be kidding me. Where is it?

And then, steady like water before tide, you said, What necklace? And, shaking your head: I'm sorry.

It seemed then you didn't have a firm notion of what you were apologizing for. You said you were sorry in the voice of a small child, looking around the room as if racking your brain – and coming up short – for the memory of anything of value in there.

Natasha's necklace, I said. The necklace you got me for Natasha.

My mother's?

We were standing there by the window unit I'd insisted on keeping because I liked the sound of it, though perhaps you'd forgotten why it was there. Perhaps you wondered why we had it along with the ceiling fan and central AC. It was running strong and loud as you said something about gathering things for a raffle. But I wasn't listening to it, not all of it. I was studying your face, rocked back on my heels and short of breath.

## 5.

After that you continued falling steadily backwards and away from me, in ways I couldn't interpret. We went to doctors, but the doctors never found anything wrong, and they looked at me with something like pity in their eyes. You were the picture of perfect health, and you removed yourself from me, from Elijah, so that we only saw you at random times, never planned. Gone were your beautiful words, the kind things you used to say to me in the early hours of morning.

Gone was the time before I started losing you.

Just as I had pictured you entering a new era of existence, of forgetfulness, I found myself in a new time and place as well. It was my friend, Tabitha, who first suggested, with a crease in her brow, and slow, therapeutic voice, that you might've been exaggerating the memory loss, the need to work ridiculous hours all along, merely distancing yourself from me. I

felt young then, wide-eyed, fresh. It shifted something within me, stirred something that started moving in logical motion inside, but I shut my eyes tight at the possibility. I blocked out the sound of it, turned off my senses so I didn't have the capacity to think you might already be gone, that you might have manufactured the descent.

6.

We moved through time from one point to the next, unfocused and linear, until October 3, 2002. Elijah drove home from school for the weekend, pale and dark-eyed and distracted. He'd been having headaches, he said, but hadn't mentioned them to us because he thought they'd go away. We hadn't seen him for months, only talked to him on the cordless telephone I'd bought for his dorm room. He stayed in his room at home Friday night and all of Saturday, only coming down to eat a few spoonfuls of vanilla pudding. You weren't nice to him, telling him to stop pretending to be sick, which shocked me and him both. You were sitting on that cedar stool at the kitchen countertop, hunched over and looking at sketches and printouts like a mad professor. He didn't have the energy to fight back, and I didn't stand up for him like I should've. You two had drifted apart over the years, yes, but I felt that distance like never before that Sunday morning at four a.m. when I drove him to the emergency room by myself. You hadn't wanted to go, hadn't thought there was anything wrong except a low tolerance for pain. This son that I brought to you as a boy, trusted you with over the years. This boy that loved you, you and your mother both, even though he had to fight for it. I wrote your callousness off to carelessness, impatience, but you remained still and quiet and passive as stone, even when the CAT scan showed that he wasn't okay, that it wasn't just a low threshold for pain. He was twenty-two then, and didn't make it past the next summer. Somehow, in the end, you treated it like my necklace, all boxed up

and shipped away, no longer a worry, no longer worth an effort to talk about since it was so far gone.

7.

Yesterday morning I called and told you I wanted to come to Gallery 17, your gallery, after all this time away, for a showing of paintings last night by a young man named Sven Jones. It's been six years since Elijah died and six years since I left you. I'm sure you remember this, at the very least.

I had imagined you would be cordial on the phone, but you surprised me with how pleased you sounded to hear from me.

It's all right, then? I asked, just because it sounded like something people would say.

Yes, of course, Susan. I'd love to see you.

Okay.

You went on then about this Sven Jones, this young protégé. You slipped back into your old self a few times, the man you became after years of only self-love, talking over me and only asking at the tail end of the conversation how I'd been.

Fine, I told you.

And upon arrival you embraced me warmly and walked me into the familiar air of the gallery. You'd put up white round globe lights, like the ones used on vanity mirrors, right in the center of each room, in a circle like a chandelier. It looked nice.

And you looked nice as well in your gray suit and gray fedora. But then you ruined all this nice by putting your hand on your cheek, tilting your head to the side, and informing me that

you didn't care for my dress, saying of all things that it would clash with Sven's work. You laughed about it though I knew you didn't mean it as a joke

For one series he used only deep pink, Kelly green, burnt orange and something he called Aztec gold. I stayed in that room for a long time, against those walls, standing close to the chunky, raised paint as I paced, wanting that proximity, to prove that the colors could work.

You were the star of the show last night, walking around with Sven, smiling and showing him off. I moved through the rooms for almost two hours, taking a good look at each painting and at your handiwork, remembering the days when no one knew or cared about this place except for us. Last night was full, wasn't it, with men and women of impeccable face and fashion waltzing through like animatronic perfection. They drank their champagne from glass flutes; they touched their hands to their cheeks and to each others' arms in awe of Sven's work; they inquired about prices and availability. You were basking in the glow of it all.

They seemed to not notice me – the woman dressed in the clashing coral gown – slip out the back door and then back through minutes later with a painting I'd stowed in my car. It was right there, Dean, right there next to us in the parking lot when you hugged me and laughed at my dress. Right there for me to grab and carry up the stairs like a torch, like an offering.

When I came back inside, though, people noticed. They noticed me and made way for me so that I could walk easily across the main room, under those pristine white lights, and prop the painting your mother had done of Elijah up against one of Sven's. It was a large scale copy of the photograph you once claimed was your favorite of him.

Everyone saw our son last night, Dean, dressed up for Halloween in a costume I'd sewn for him in the fourth grade. He went as the moon that year, and Natasha had painted his smile more realistically than even the photograph. His arms were out, taking in his orbit and all his

stars. And under the hot gallery lights everyone saw our king of infinite space. They stared, they whispered and postulated. But I brought him there for you; I brought him there so you could remember.

## Frontier

*Mounted on my favorite horse, my...  
lariat near my hand, and my trusty  
guns in my belt...I felt I could  
defy the world.*

*--Nat Love, *The Life and  
Adventures of Nat Love*, 1907*

John Samson hadn't meant to kill that girl. It just happened.

They were at the cross of Fifth and Washington, in a drafty, dirty apartment he and his men had been staking out for six weeks. Playing the part of the Wild West sheriff that day had been Samson, while the Bad Guy had been portrayed by one Jeff Simcourt. They'd pointed guns at each other like men in Westerns aimed shiny, antique pistols across newly-silent rooms while dusty, dancehall doors shook and creaked behind them. Instead of picking up a jug of whiskey to swig from pompously, Jeff Simcourt had swept his daughter Stephanie into his arms. He used his left arm, the non-shootin' southpaw, which was scarred not with gashes from Dodge City knife fights, but from the little, bruised bites of heroin needles.

The shouts of Samson's back-up forces, five men in all, echoed the thoughts inside his own mind: "Back down, back down!" and "Easy, Samson. Jesus Christ." But every thought ceased to exist as soon as Simcourt started smiling that devil's grin. He'd stepped back with his left foot, moving Stephanie out of a direct line of fire, and raised his gun to meet the eyes of John Samson. He could sense his men aiming their weapons as quickly as humanly possible at Simcourt's temples and frontal lobe, while still judging for signs of movement, any hint that he'd bring that foot forward again.

Directly in front of Simcourt, Samson felt he had the shot, more assuredly than anyone else in the room. In that instant there was no doubt in his mind that he'd take care of this problem, and cleanly and safely. There was something of the desperado in him, the bounty hunter, that drew him forward into action. And so in that one moment when Simcourt flicked his eyes to the right to check the goings-on beyond Samson's shoulder, Samson lifted, aimed, and fired. It had been quiet, quiet as a saloon when the bottles stopped breaking, the men stopped shouting, and the upright piano stopped plinking its tinny plink. And somewhere in that silence, between aiming and firing—closer to aiming, no doubt—Simcourt, reflexes as sharp as a desert rattler though his intentions were dubious, turned in such a way that Samson's bullet, meant to hit the Bad Guy's shoulder, the shoulder of his gun arm, and then spiral into the waxed wooden floor, pierced instead through Simcourt's thin, pale chest before entering the heart of his hostaged daughter.

What Stephanie got was a white, lacquered coffin, pretty like things you'd find in a dollhouse, and a nice plot under the pines, while John was given early retirement and firm, eyes-diverted suggestions to 'keep out of the way for awhile.' And so he did. He left Denver, that little star on the map of the Centennial State. He headed north, migrating like a bird, back to his cabin in Silver City, Montana that had been up to that point only a place to stay, to relax, for a week or two out of the year.

They know him in town, they know of him. The owners of the tourist stores, the pharmacist, the waitresses, the veterinarian he had to take his ten-year-old Blue Heeler, Jesse James, to that time he was bitten by a wood spider. But they don't know why he's back for good now. They don't know about Stephanie or that the people in Denver watched as he walked out of the station that

last time, holding the uniform he was wearing when it happened. The blood has gotten darker as time has passed so that the right sleeve seems to have nothing more sinister on it than wine. He keeps it in a JCPenney gift box and has written “Private” on the bottom of it, like his grandmother used to put the names of gift recipients on their boxes, in pencil.

Samson drives into town on October 28, one year to the day after he watched Stephanie die on the floor of that filthy apartment, the white of her face and the blood on her lips giving her the appearance of a painted lady.

He lives about a mile away from the heart of Silver City, the focus only because it’s where the tourists flock to the general store, the blacksmith shop, the outfitters’, and the Old West Emporium. As he drives, the dirt road speckled with gravel steadily descends, so that the creek to the left, which is level with the town and about five hundred feet below his cabin, gets closer and closer to the road. His black ’96 Bronco navigates the ride easily, though he’ll have to use his ATV once the dirt turns to snow. The mountains above and around him stay white nearly year-round, and at night the temperature has been dropping into the thirties, though the snow has only reached John’s cabin in soft, delicate handfuls.

At the bottom of the hill, he takes a left at the restaurant where the Russians work in the summer and coasts his way over to the Trigger Finger Inn, a diner and small motel. Walking in, he’s pleased to see Carol, a waitress he can remember working there since he first started renovating the cabin in 1984. She’s tall, with dark hair and gray like thread weaving its way through her ponytail. As soon as she sees Samson she waves and comes over after bringing a man seated near the side window a fresh pot of coffee.

“John! Nice to see you.” She puts her hands on her hips, looking him over. “I just put two and two together and realized you were back to stay for good. Is that right?”

Samson smiles, nods. "Yeah, seems like it."

"So how come I don't get to see you more often?"

She asks this playfully, but Samson can't think of a good response. He spends most of his time alone, coming down only for food and necessities, though he doesn't know how to explain that need for solitude to someone like Carol. Every time Samson comes to town he stops in to see Carol, to get coffee and talk for a few minutes, but they really know very little about each other. Still, he knows more about her than he does about anyone else in town. He wonders what she thinks of his beard, or if she notices he's lost some weight, some muscle. He doesn't know if she would even care.

She tells him to sit wherever he'd like. "You want coffee, right?"

"And a slice of pie, please, ma'am." As he walks over to a seat at the counter, he thinks how genuinely happy he is to see a familiar, friendly face.

After Carol plates his slice of blueberry, she winks at him, then goes over to take care of a family of five that's sitting at one of the center tables. They're talking animatedly about this-and-that in Yellowstone. Buffalo in the road, geysers, mountain goats. Before they leave, they even take a picture of her, holding up a plate of pie in her hand like a medal, perhaps to illustrate to folks at home some of the charm of this quaint mountain town.

She comes back over and sits down next to Samson.

"Late for tourists, isn't it?" he asks.

"Yeah, but until that first big snow..." she says, meaning they'll keep coming til they can't come anymore.

She looks tired, and John sees in the mirror behind the counter another group, this one of three, about to come in. He's already eaten his pie and decides to leave before she gets busy and

he starts getting in her hair, reminding himself he needs to pick up a few things before heading back home. He never stays long anywhere in town and knows she's used to this. But just as he's turning in his seat to get up and excuse himself, Carol asks if he's heard about the little boy.

“The little boy?”

She nods. “Sandy Lynch. Lives over by where Phil Stone keeps the mules.”

Samson says no. Up in the cabin he doesn't keep up with much of anything. He's got a CB radio in the Bronco, just for emergencies.

Carol shakes her head, smooths her apron. “Gone missing. Six years old, the poor thing. Out for a hike with his two older brothers, and they let the kid wander off. He's been out there since yesterday afternoon.”

The bell on the door rings as the three men walk inside. In the mirror, he sees one, in a camouflage long-sleeved shirt, lift his hand in greeting to Carol, though she doesn't see. They take a table in the corner.

He says no again, says he hadn't heard, says it's a shame. At the thought of a child in danger, his pulse starts to quicken.

Carol, a little late, turns to the men. “Hey fellas.” Nodding, “Charlie, Mitch. Be right with you.”

Either Charlie or Mitch says, “Take your time, Carol; we're just glad it's warm in here.”

The men laugh at their meager, tired quip, but Carol takes no notice. After turning back to Samson and wading through a beat or two of silence, she does as he thought she might: she brings up the fact that he was a cop. “Do you think you could...” Her voice trails off, as she's apparently not sure what she's asking of him exactly.

*I'm retired, just not under the circumstances you might think. You don't want my help,* he considers saying but keeps his mouth shut instead. He sits there quietly—out of respect, he supposes—for a moment before getting up and putting a ten-dollar bill on the counter and, like usual, kissing Carol's cheek. She looks a little surprised he's leaving but breaks her stare when Charlie-or-Mitch calls out for some coffee. And by then Samson is walking out the door and headed across the street to The Highwayman for a drink.

The bar is dark, lit only by the neon signs that spell out *Rolling Rock, Jim Beam, Wild Turkey*, and one that says *Cocktails* with, of all things, a palm tree in pink and green. He sits at the bar, across from the cooler covered in bumper stickers, and is served by a young guy named Smith, who is wearing a *Willie Nelson for President* t-shirt. Smith serves him first a beer and then a scotch. Samson drinks slowly and reads the stickers one by one, from top left to bottom right. He thinks of things past, things present. He thinks of Stephanie's hair, the rubber band around her ponytail.

"You doin' okay, Mr. Samson?"

"Yeah, bud, I'm just fine." He stays quiet, and Smith leaves him alone. After reading the final bumper sticker—*Where the hell is EASY STREET?*—Samson goes back outside. The clouds have gathered close overhead and are casting the day in shades of silver and gray.

Samson buys some batteries, a few jugs of water, a new skillet, a bottle of kerosene, and some groceries. Then he heads over to the pharmacist, Gordon Chan, and picks up refills on the two daily prescriptions that are meant to keep his headaches manageable and his heart kicking. He drives back up to the cabin around four o'clock and, stepping out of the Bronco, feels a chill to the air that wasn't present that morning. He thinks about the boy, about what he's doing to stay warm.

After bringing in the paper bags from The Annex General Store, Samson does as he planned as he drank his scotch in town, the decision having come to him somewhat easily. He goes into his bedroom, steps over Jesse James, then reaches under the bed for the Private box. He pulls it out, walks outside and proceeds to burn it, along with his badge and all the old police paperwork he'd brought from Denver in a little plastic tub.

The smoke is dark and has a sharp, black smell to it. As his things burn, Samson sits in a wooden chair with his head in his hands. The cabin is built into a clearing, and the forest looms high around him. Out back, with the fire, he feels the weight of his solitude. If he closes his eyes, he could be anywhere, even on the stark, white surface of the moon. He drifts off, sinking back into the Adirondack chair, sinking down into his slate gray parka. His last thought is of Stephanie's face, her skinny arms, her eyes wide in the arms of her father.

At about five-thirty he wakes up, cold and hungry, and feeling a little achy out there in all that mountain air. When he goes back inside he notices two things: One, Jesse James has gone from taking his nap in the bedroom to taking his nap on the rug in the kitchen. He's even draped a paw over his eyes. And two, there is a little boy sitting on the sofa, wrapped in Samson's wolf-and-dreamcatcher felt blanket, eating white cheddar popcorn out of the bag.

He doesn't notice Samson right away, and Samson watches as he reaches over and turns on the CD player, striking up Johnny Cash's "I'm Going to Memphis." Under the blanket, he can see the boy is wearing a heavy coat, but his pants and small boots are dirty and torn. He looks like he's about six, and Samson realizes this is Sandy Lynch, sitting right here in his cabin.

Johnny Cash is talking about building levees with elbow grease when the boy looks up at him.

“Hi,” he says, like they’ve just met on the street.

Samson walks over and sits at the edge of the sofa, checking him over for signs of hypothermia. Surprisingly, he looks okay. He’s got a few leaves in his hair, but his color is good, and his green eyes track Samson with no problem.

“Hi, son.”

The boy gets to the bottom of the bag of popcorn, then asks Samson for a drink. He even says please.

Samson, in a daze, goes to the kitchen and sidesteps the dog to get to the cups. He wonders if Jesse James woke up when the boy came inside, how exactly that had happened.

After bringing the boy some water and turning the kettle on for hot chocolate, Samson asks him if his name is Sandy Lynch.

The boy nods, then says, “Did my parents tell you?”

“Your parents?”

“Do they miss me?”

“Of course they do, bud. They’re looking high and low for you. We’re going to get you back home ASAP.”

“What’s that?”

Samson explained he’d be going home as soon as Samson could get him there. The boy smiles at that, though his attention seems unfocused. He’s worn out, Samson supposes. He tells Sandy he is going to go call for help and walks out the front door, the very door Sandy must’ve used to sneak in as Samson burned his past out back, his thoughts as far away as the surface of the moon.

It's cold, getting colder. Samson tries to picture the little boy in the dark, in the blue dawn light, after walking through the trees all night like a ghost. There's something not connecting in his head, something about the simplicity of saving Sandy, something wrong with the fact that he was passive in it all. He didn't do anything but the boy is here, and he is okay. He hadn't even tried.

He leans inside the Bronco and finds that he can't get a clear frequency on the CB. He also can't remember when he last used, or checked, the radio. He fiddles with it, coaxing it to no avail. When he lifts his head up he sees, noting with a gasp, that snow is not only coming down, but is coming down in drifts.

He turns his head at the sight of bright green amidst all that white and sees Sandy Lynch and Jesse James standing in the cabin's front door frame, both watching him patiently.

"It's snowing!" Sandy lifts his palms to the sky, and Samson sees he's wearing mittens now, black and white checkered, that he must've taken off when he ate the bagged popcorn. The snow hits and sticks on his red hair like confetti. He is fascinated by the snow, and Samson can't believe the boy's not crying, not passed out from exhaustion, not talking about anything else but going home.

But then he does. Pointing to the break in the trees where the dirt road starts, he says, "Is that how we get back down? JJ and Deanie are in big trouble, I bet."

"Those your brothers?"

"Yeah. We were playing, and then I got lost. I got lost, but then I came here and you found me, huh?"

"Sure did. You warm enough?"

Sandy nods, but after they go back inside, Samson kicks the space heater up a notch. It's getting cold enough to build a fire, too. The snow is piling up on the windowsills, and the green of the grass had turned into the white of the moon. Johnny Cash is on to "Banks of the Ohio," singing about his love floating down, as Samson looks out at the lean-to, where his Snowcat sits in darkness, snow drifted high against the wheels.

Within twenty minutes, he feels like a fool for buying those useless supplies at The Annex today. For not only is the CB shot to hell, but the Snowcat only coughs and sputters when he goes out and tries to turn it over.

Back inside, as the minutes pass, Samson thinks of all the people in town worried about Sandy. He knows he should be able to figure something out, but the dark and the snow are both falling fast. That, and the scotch has given him a dull headache, a pressure behind his ears and at the base of his neck. He feels light-headed, unsteady, and starts to build a fire before he feels worse, realizing when he sees the bag of popcorn that Sandy needs a real meal.

"You ever seen *Comanche Station*?" he asks the boy.

"What's that?" He's wrapped in the felt blanket again, the wolf howling across his knees.

"A Western. One of my favorites. Want me to put it on for you?"

Sandy shrugs. "Okay, Mr. Sam-sons."

He heats up some Brunswick stew, butters a couple of pieces of white bread, and pours Sandy a glass of milk. The time passes slowly but steadily. They watch the movie, they eat, then they roast marshmallows in Samson's small fireplace. Before Sandy can even ask about home again, he's fast asleep, right next to Jesse James, who's licking the marshmallow goo off the metal stick the little boy poked into the flames.

Samson looks at the fire for awhile, entertains a brief thought of snowshoeing down to Silver City and firing a gun into the night sky. He'd let the town gather around him and announce to the huddled, fearful masses that Sandy was safe and sound. They'd be proud of him, they'd praise him. It would be something close to salvation.

But then Samson starts to feel the weight of the day pressing down onto him. His head is still buzzing and feels tight, so he gets up and takes a few sips of whiskey before sitting back down by the fire. He stays awake long enough to set the alarm on his watch for daybreak, when he figures he can either try the CB again or start shoeing downhill, but falls asleep minutes after, his head resting against a pillow with shadows of buffalo sewn on the front.

The night is quiet, perfectly silent as the snow falls and builds up around the cabin, until the rumble of the search party revs uphill. There are five snowmobiles, painted the black of official business, that Samson finds himself standing up and looking at out the front window before he even realizes he's awake. It's also a moment or two before he feels the migraine his headache has turned into overnight, how much the dizzy, disoriented feeling has intensified, how much the medicine wasn't helping. He needs to lie down again, to take another pill.

It's not dawn yet, but it's close, and the men have come to a stop near the Bronco. Samson recognizes one as Eric Danvers, a cop he'd met once at the post office in town. They'd shaken hands and looked knowingly and respectfully at each other like men in American Legions do. Samson grabs his coat off the back of a chair near the door and opens the door. He'd slept in his boots. Looking over his shoulder, he sees that Sandy is still sleeping soundly, head resting on the arm of the sofa. Samson wonders if he's dreaming about Comanches.

The men—Eric Danvers, and the others, who seem to be cops as well—are off their snowmobiles by the time Samson walks outside, and are shining flashlights into the trees. Eric turns when he sees Samson and starts walking toward him.

“Hey John, sorry to wake you. We’re looking for the Lynch boy. His brothers pointed us in the direction they thought he might’ve gone.” He shrugs his shoulders, shakes his head. “Doesn’t look good, though.”

Samson, just a couple of paces away from Eric now, squinting from the pain in his head, tries his best to smile, and says, “That’s where you’re wrong.” Gesturing behind himself, “He’s right in there.”

At that point one of the other cops turns and points the flashlight almost directly in Samson’s eyes. Eric runs right past Samson, nearly knocking him off his feet. Seconds later, it seems like, he is running back out with the little boy in his arms, still wrapped in his blanket, still half asleep. He keeps a wide berth of Samson this time, and Samson’s heart catches in his chest as he realizes one of the other men has pulled, and is aiming, a .357 at his chest.

“Just stay there, John. We’re gonna take Sandy here back down, okay? Just take it easy.”

Samson doesn’t understand the way Eric is talking to him. Like he’s trying to keep him calm.

“My men are gonna stay with you for a little while, til I make it back up.” Over his shoulder, he says, “Dwight, you’re in charge.” And then he pauses, changes his mind, and hands the boy over to Dwight, telling him to take him straight back home. “I’ll stay.”

And then, with his head burning and stinging, Samson catches up, sees they suspect him of something evil, sees that these are men that need, or at least would like, there to always be a Bad Guy. He remembers liking Eric from the first time they met but also noting something

guarded in him at first. He remembers fearing that he knew why they'd asked Samson to leave Denver. He considers now how he must seem to people in town, a fifty-seven year-old recluse who comes to town only to buy booze and pick up drugs at the pharmacy. He must look haggard, must look a little wild-eyed from all that time alone, must seem skittish from that undeniable wariness he has around people.

And then Sandy's waking up as Dwight starts his snowmobile. It scares him, and he starts to cry, kick, and jerk his head back and forth before turning to look at something behind Samson. Samson hears Jesse in the doorway, growling and whining, upset at the sound of the boy crying.

"Jester James!" Sandy cries out.

Samson doesn't blame the kid for being upset. The men have pulled him out of the warmth of the cabin, the warmth of his sleep, with no soothing words, no explanation. "He doesn't know what's going on, Eric." All of a sudden his ears feel like there's cotton inside, and he can barely hear himself. He thinks of how Stephanie didn't have a chance to cry because she died so swiftly.

Eric talks over him. "Why didn't you bring him down? Why didn't you call us?"

He's shouting, but it's only a whisper to Samson, and the snowmobile's engine sounds far away. Samson ignores Eric to watch the other cop wrap Sandy in his blanket like a papoose and drive away, the little boy disappearing into the night. Then it's just Samson in front of four cops, two of which have their weapons out. And he can't help but think of Jeff Simcourt; he can't help but think of Stephanie rushing to his side. How the white of the snow is like the white of her coffin. He knows he has a simple explanation, he knows they'll understand, but right now his head is searing and he feels like he can't stand up straight anymore. He barely senses that he's falling to his knees, that Eric's waving at the men to put their weapons away, to come over

and help. Samson closes his eyes and sees as much white as when they were open. He hears the men talking, in mumbled undertones and sighs, and he can tell Eric is close to him. He asks Samson if he's okay.

“John, you're not in trouble.”

He hears himself explaining what happened, though his sentences are fragmented. *CB was static*, he says, *Head hurting*, and *Snowcat couldn't work*. Then one or two of the snowmobiles are being driven away quickly, and he opens his eyes to more white, and then Eric's face comes into focus, telling him to breathe, just breathe. And he tries, but he can't breathe like he should. The snow seems to be falling harder and he seems to be falling along with it. His head and his chest feel tight, and as the alarm on his watch goes off, all he can see are Comanches and buffalo and geysers shooting to the sky. And Eric's hand is underneath his head, his neck, and he's saying he's sorry, that they didn't understand, that it was okay. And he thinks the man sounds worried, but Sandy's okay, so why should he be worried? There's another cop still there, maybe one or two, and they say something about needing to move him now. But when they try to move Samson, his head hurts so bad that he loses his vision, and his left arm feels like there's electricity coursing through it. He hears himself asking to let him stay there, let him rest, because it's comfortable there, and it feels warm, and he can hear Jesse James whining still, but out there in all that quiet, that silent white, it sounds beautiful. It sounds like a wolf howling at the moon.

## Vita

Amanda Pederson was born in Orlando, Florida and received her B.A. from Rollins College.  
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