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## Can't Blame a Girl for Trying

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Can't Blame a Girl for Trying

A Thesis

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

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Creative Writing

by

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## Ice Cream Social

Jalisa Guerra spent the first eighteen hundred dollars of her divorce settlement on the security deposit and three months' rent (paid in advance for the ten percent discount) for a studio apartment in a clapboard development, four thirty-unit buildings each surrounding a fenced-in square of grass. She had wanted to splurge on a more lavish place, but she knew her ex-husband's current generosity could not be relied upon to last. Standing in the center of her apartment, she gazed out of the solitary window which framed eight of the twelve rusting sewage tanks outside, bearers of waste dispatched from Minneapolis before filtration and disposal into the river.

Jalisa left the studio for the first time in a week to board her dog, Sparkle, and to meet with a real estate agent, all the day before her breast reconstruction surgery. She didn't need the

surgery because of a terrible accident or an early bout of breast cancer. She needed the surgery because of the suckling of three babies over six years. The nipples pointed towards her toes and stretch marks indented the pale skin. She could compress and expand them like the bellow of an accordion. Her ex-husband readily underwrote this and other reconstructive surgeries (buttocks lift and tummy tuck) as a stipulation of the divorce. He said he wished she would have wanted them earlier, that maybe he wouldn't have had to divorce her if she had just tried a little harder. This gift, he said, would help her rebuild a new life. He hoped that for her, at least.

Jalisa got the family dog, Sparkle, in the divorce. Her husband argued that their children were better off staying with him, his house, his staff, his money. He was right. The kids were comfortable in the huge house, surrounded by all their stuff, fed by the cook, picked up by the nanny. Her ex could pay for the private school tuition, the educational trips to whichever country connected to the current textbook chapter, the concierge doctor who was just a text message away. Sparkle wasn't as needy. Even Jalisa could afford the brand-name dog food and boarding fees, for a while at least. Eventually, the kids would be able to visit.

Mighty Mutts, the boarding facility, had webcams. After she dropped off Sparkle, Jalisa logged on to watch him bark and run, and acclimate to the huge rooms, each one bigger than the last, all bigger than her studio. Satisfied that he was safe, she drove to Palatial Estates to meet Terry, the chief mortgage officer and real estate agent. The subdivision emerged from the plain on the outskirts of the city, twenty minutes east of St. Paul, a new development surrounded by farmland. Houses fertilized the barren acreage not suitable for corn and soybeans, meretricious miniature mansions cobbled together like cardboard Burger King crowns. "Palatial Estates," Jalisa whispered to herself as she passed through the small downtown, a mini-Minneapolis

recreated at the center of the subdivision, for, according to the brochure, the residents' commercial pleasures.

"Where do you live?" she'd be asked.

"Palatial Estates," she'd respond. As if she couldn't possibly live anywhere else.

Terry stood outside his office. He clipped his phone onto his belt and raised his hand up but didn't quite wave as Jalisa emerged from her Beemer (another vestige of her marriage: three years left on the lease). "Mrs. Guerra, lovely to meet you," Terry chirped. He was an older man, gray hair stained with a little leftover brown, teeth so straight they had to be false. They boarded his Escalade and drove through the subdivision. He pointed out the different models of homes, the Charlemagne, the Medici, the Bourbon.

"Did you have a chance to look at the floor plans I sent?"

"I did," Jalisa confirmed, not wanting to show too much interest.

"Is there one in particular that spoke to you?"

Jalisa paused to think, to program herself to believe that each of the models was unremarkable and, taken all together, blended into one forgettable house. She didn't want to be excited. Women didn't get houses that way. "The Romanov is the most memorable," she said, stone-faced. With a finished game-room basement and an attic for live-in help, the Romanov peaked at four stories high, its chimney hidden in a little red and yellow onion dome. Small compared to the old mansion that now contained only her husband and her children in Cathedral Hill, this model should still be sufficient for Jalisa's re-entry into life. The Escalade inched towards the house. The Romanov's rounded summit appeared fragile, made of papier-mâché. The half-moon driveway stretched to fit three cars, at least.

Terry parked and led Jalisa inside, beginning his spiel as they passed through the foyer into the family room. “Laminate wood floors, cultured marble finishes in the bathrooms and kitchen.”

“Cultured?” Jalisa caressed the walls with her fingertips as she followed the clacking footsteps of Terry’s elevated loafers. She knocked against the hollow dining room wall and imagined it collapsing like an empty cereal box.

“Travertine applied to a stone blend to replicate the natural, meandering patterns of marble.” Terry opened the French doors off the breakfast nook and proclaimed, “Also, the vistas are incredible.” He and Jalisa admired the parched grass and glaring sunshine. “Perfect place for a pool.” After enough time had passed, he closed the doors and they walked through the kitchen.

“What’s the asking price?”

“Four-ninety-nine. And we do the financing and sale – all in-house.”

They padded up the stairs. “I’m interested.” The master suite swallowed the second floor, his and hers dressing rooms and bathrooms flanking the enormous bedroom like bat wings.

“The developer soundproofed the children’s rooms,” Terry explained, “since they’re right above us, on floor three.”

They descended back to the kitchen. “Can I take you to lunch? We can look over the details of the mortgage application and our financing options?”

“Oh, I can’t eat,” Jalisa explained as she perched on a barstool. “I’m having minor surgery tomorrow. Not supposed to have anything after noon today.” She caressed the face of her Breitling, an anniversary gift from her ex.

“I hope all is okay?”

“Everything’s great.”



“After, then?”

“I’ll speak to my husband.”

As they drove down Prince Avenue, back to her car, Terry pointed out a sign on the corner. “The Ice Cream Social is the last weekend of the month, at the community pool, our final outdoor social of the summer.”

“Oh?” Maybe she could meet someone who already lived in the neighborhood, so she wouldn’t have to go through the trouble of asking her ex-husband to buy her a house.

“We often have neighborhood events, to foster community. You and your husband should come, if you’re recovered by then.”

“We’ll try.” They shook hands and said nice things and smiled and Jalisa got into her car and drove back to the studio.

She had left the family house with only two suitcases, one filled with clothes, the other with all of her jewelry and some souvenirs from her kids’ early years: finger paintings, a bird house constructed with popsicle sticks, photocopies of their birth certificates and social security cards and passports. When she first moved into the apartment, she hauled a faux-leather thrifted armchair to one of the corners opposite the window, stationed a lamp next to the chair and tied a pillow to a milk crate that she then covered in old fabric to make an ottoman. From this spot, only two of the wastewater tanks entered her line of vision when she peered out. A cornfield filled the rest of the frame. This space was her sanctuary.

She burrowed into the alcove with her bottle of wine, set the alarm on her phone for four the next morning and clicked over to open up the webcam on the small screen. Sparkle, her brown-haired mutt, ran alongside a golden retriever in the outdoor play area. They loped side-by-side until one or the other came to a tube to slip through or a small pool to play in. They would

pause, investigate, then move on to the next distraction. Jalisa flipped to the cat room for a minute, then back to find Sparkle, still in cahoots with the lab. A man strode out, someone she hadn't seen when she brought the dog in. He held a clipboard and a pen. Three employees, wearing Mighty Mutt polos and khaki cargo pants, followed him. He would pause, point, and scribble, and they would pause, turn to him, and listen. He must own the place.

Her alarm didn't wake her; the battery had died because she fell asleep with the webcam streaming. The world outside the window was still dark, punctuated only by the blinking lights shining at intervals along the rim of the tanks. She plugged her phone in and waited for it to charge. The clock on the stove had blinked 8:23 since she moved in. She hated to look directly at her watch. The phone buzzed to life. She had woken up just in time.

She showered and packed a small bag then took a taxi to the hospital. Within a few hours, the nurses had tucked her hair into a cap and covered her body with a thin paper gown that closed in the front with one small tie. The surgeon good morninged her and then opened the gown to marker his blueprint. The felt tip glided from her nipple down the underside of each breast, and then along her chest to her side, a few inches below her armpit. She hadn't come for implants, just tightening. She didn't want anything bigger, just a tasteful resculpturing.

She was under and then she was awake. Her phone was on the table next to her bed, where she'd left it, but reaching caused a stabbing burn in her chest. She was topless, her breasts wrapped in gauze and white fabric bandages. When the nurse came to check on her, she asked for pain medication. "You're on a drip," the nurse explained. "It will kick in."

Jalisa tried to take a deep breath and winced. She remembered her first delivery, the mistake of trying to go natural. Women fifty years ago did it the right way, completely sedated.

They woke up and a kid had appeared. After the first birth, she vowed never to do it like that again. She said to the nurse, “It doesn’t feel right. I feel like I’m being knifed.”

“Well, you were knifed.” The nurse examined the bag connected to Jalisa’s IV, flicking it and holding up the tube. “No wonder. The valve was closed.”

“You’re kidding.” Jalisa closed her eyes and leaned into her pillow. Her breaths were short and shallow. She felt liquid, blood or sweat, she didn’t know, roll down her side from her chest.

Eventually the morphine kicked in. Only then did she manage to get her phone. The lab was no longer with Sparkle. Her dog slept alone, near one of the fake, red fire hydrants.

The front office must not have had a webcam; she checked and checked but didn’t see that man again all day. The doctor told her she could go home on schedule, in two days’ time. The drains could come out in two weeks, the stitches in three; she would need to take sponge baths for a month or so and would have to clean the wounds daily to prevent infection. She searched and found the story of Mighty Mutt and the man with the clipboard: Mark Sandberg, philanthropist and animal rights activist, owner of a no-kill shelter in addition to the boarding facility, single and childless, as far as the web would tell. She reopened the webcam page but he still didn’t appear. Sparkle licked one of his rear legs.

Two days later, she signed her discharge papers and the nurse wheeled her to the front of the hospital. She asked the cabdriver to stop at the pharmacy so she could fill her prescriptions then bring her home where she vacillated between the armchair and her bed, always watching the webcam between bouts of dozing. She ignored a message from Terry. She knew where they’d end up. Her credit score was in the mid-four-hundreds. She’d never had a job or a loan in her name. She’d never needed one.

Two weeks after she returned home, Mark appeared in the dog run. She'd planned to board Sparkle for four weeks – she couldn't handle the tugging of his leash on walks – but decided to take a chance. She covered her chest with a billowy poncho and went to get her dog. The girl at the front desk greeted her. “Mrs. Guerra, are you here for Sparkle?” Tapping on the register screen Mark stood next to the girl, printing what looked like the morning receipts. The girl spoke into the phone. “Puppy pick-up. Sparkle. Brown-haired mix. Forty pounds.” She put the phone down. “They'll be out in a sec.”

Jalisa handed over her ex-husband's credit card. “I'll need a receipt.”

Mark looked up. “It will be just a second.” As she hoped, they would have to wait until he finished.

“Is this your place?” Jalisa felt the cuts slicing into her like a ring on a bloated finger.

“Yes, ma'am.” Dimples and one crooked canine.

“Mr. Mighty Mutt. Nice to meet you.”

“Mark Sandberg.” He held out his right hand and collected the secreting register tape with his left. He pulled the paper against the serrated teeth of the printer and said, “Good to go,” to the girl and “Nice to meet you,” to Jalisa and then disappeared behind a door marked *Office*, white carved into black plastic and slid into brass brackets. An acned teenager shepherded Sparkle to her, handed her the leather leash.

Sparkle tugged at the restraint as they bounded across the darkening street. She thought of putting the handle of the leash around her ankle so that he wouldn't rip anything up top out of place. Instead she let out enough slack so that Sparkle didn't pull. They made it to the car without incident. She sat in the driver's seat, catching her breath and fighting the drowsiness brought on by her pain medication. She leaned back against the headrest for what felt like a

minute but then was woken up by the high-pitched beep of a car disarming. Down the street Mark slipped into a silver sedan. His headlights flipped on as she turned her key in the ignition. She followed him.

She couldn't breathe too deeply. Her lungs felt like deli meat gone through the slicer. Stopped at a red light, she reached under her poncho, unhooked the cloth bandage, and rewrapped it looser before clipping it back together. She watched the car pull up to a bar. Mark emerged and headed inside. She waited ten minutes, then cracked the rear windows for Sparkle, followed Mark in, and ordered a sidecar for dinner.

Behind her, he said, "Mrs. Guerra?"

She looked back and took a moment to orient her eyes, to make the connection. "Mr. Mutt. Hi." She turned her body and smiled. "It's Miss. Well, Jalisa."

"Call me Mark." He hovered next to her as the bartender delivered her drink and took his order for a draft. "Mind if I sit here?"

"Of course not."

His beer delivered, Mark slid onto the barstool. "I love this place."

Jalisa thought she could love this place, dark wood, amber lights glowing behind the bar, red brick walls, pretending to crumble.

She dipped the orange wedge in her drink and pulled the wet pulp from the rind with her teeth. She washed it down with a sip from the tumbler. "Me too. I love their drink menu. I felt like a good cocktail tonight. This is the right place to come." She offered him a sip of her sidecar. He downed his beer and ordered them another round.

Two more drinks apiece and Mark had told her about his business, his bachelorhood, his love of animals. She didn't want to tell any of her old stories. "I've made an offer on a house, east of St. Paul. Palatial Estates."

"Sure, I know that area." He traced the veins on her hand with his index finger.

"They invited me to a little neighborhood social. A pool party. Next Saturday. Would you like to come?"

"Sure."

Jalisa made plans to pick him up from the shelter, where he spent his Saturday mornings. She couldn't let him come to the studio. He squeezed her hand. "Can I kiss you before then?" It was too easy.

"You mean now?" She reached for his lips with hers, curling her back, a seated cat's pose, so that her chest folded in, away from him. He could kiss her lips, her cheek, her neck even, as long as he stayed away from her breasts. She didn't mind the kissing but she had to leave before him. She pictured Sparkle. Mark couldn't know about the dog in the car. Please, she thought, don't try to touch my tits. She unstuck from his face. They smiled at one another.

"Is it one of these adult pool parties where no one swims?" he asked.

"I'm not sure."

"I'll bring a bathing suit just in case."

Jalisa wouldn't be able to swim anyway. "I'll see you Saturday."

Sparkle peed as soon as they got into the square of grass at the apartment complex. The sidecars plus the pills put Jalisa to sleep as soon as she landed in the armchair. Two days later, she left the house to have her stitches removed, then not again, other than bringing Sparkle to the grass, until Saturday.

On the forty-five minute drive from the shelter in downtown Minneapolis to Palatial Estates, Jalisa and Mark chatted and held hands. They passed under the subdivision sign, brick columns holding up curlicued iron. The poster board houses seemed folded together, secured with no more than scotch tape. She turned down Prince Avenue, passing the Disneyfied versions of coffee shops and restaurants that served the soccer moms and banker dads. Neighborhood families proceeded on foot towards the pool. Those coming from the farther stretches of the neighborhood alighted in Navigators and Land Rovers.

Jalisa only began to worry about running into Terry once she arrived at the check-in table and noticed he wasn't there. She realized that Terry thought she was married, but that Mark couldn't be introduced as her husband. She worried that he would ask, in front of Mark, why she had been avoiding his calls. It was too late to turn around. Manned by a brassy-haired woman with huge teeth in a vintage one-piece halter top bathing suit, the table blocked their entrance to the pool. Jalisa, with Mark at her side, took a deep breath and walked up. "Hi. I'm Jalisa Guerra. Prospective homeowner. Terry invited me."

The woman smiled. "Bea," she said, offering a hand. "Palatial Estates Homeowner's Association President. Welcome." First obstacle overcome, Jalisa led Mark into the pool area. Children splashed in the water while parents loitered under umbrellas, chatting and laughing, sipping fruity punch from clear plastic cups. She didn't see ice cream anywhere.

Bea came up behind them. "Let me introduce you." She inserted Jalisa and Mark into a conversation with a couple, the woman a pharmaceutical rep, the man a lawyer. It turned out the man and Mark served on some philanthropic council together, in name at least. Bea disappeared then returned with punch for both of them. Whatever it was, it contained whiskey. Jalisa sipped.

The man asked Mark, "What model are you two looking at?"

“She’s looking,” he responded.

“That’s always the way,” the man smirked. Thumbing in his wife’s direction, he added, “She picked the Charlemagne without even checking with me. Signed, sealed, you know. I didn’t get a vote.”

Jalisa didn’t correct him. “I’m a big fan of the Romanov.”

“My favorite,” the woman chimed in. “What he didn’t say is that he made it known quite clearly that he didn’t like the Romanov or the Medici. I knew the Charlemagne was his favorite. He acts like I made the decision.” The couple laughed with each other, stopping just short of guffaws.

“I just don’t like the Russky architecture,” the lawyer said when he stopped laughing. He brought his cigar to his lips and sucked in three quick pulls.

“Maybe you can take me on a tour of the neighborhood, babe.” Mark slid his arm around Jalisa’s waist and nuzzled her neck. Jalisa leaned into him.

“Are you all going to swim?” she asked. Mark had worn his bathing suit and Jalisa wanted to sit with her legs in the water.

“I hate swimming in these public pools.” The man puffed more on the cigar.

“The first thing we did to the Charlemagne was rip up the yard and put the pool in,” his wife explained.

“Don’t have to worry about kiddie piss that way.”

“Well I think I’ll jump in.” Mark pulled his shirt over his head.

Jalisa wanted to reach out and put her hand on his thick chest and hard stomach. She wished she could get in the pool, hug him tightly in the water, wrap her legs around him even.



She understood why the couple had put in their own pool. "I'll come dip my feet in." She leaned towards the couple. "So great to chat."

"Welcome to the neighborhood."

Jalisa sat on the wet terra cotta and watched Mark propel himself under the water, to the opposite end of the pool and back. After a few laps, he swam towards her, pulled himself up to sit next to her. "It is warm in there."

"Kiddie piss, I guess." Over his shoulder, Jalisa saw Terry, wearing a blue blazer and white cravat, walking in their direction. Even though she wore sunglasses and a wide-brimmed hat, she was afraid he would recognize her. She didn't want to hash out, in front of Mark, the conversation they would have to have eventually. He stopped to talk to the owners of the Charlemagne, in between Jalisa and the exit. Even if she could sneak them past Terry, Mark would wonder why she wanted to leave.

She stood and pulled him up, kissing his wet neck once they were both standing. "Let's go check out the pool house," she suggested, peering behind her.

"That?" Mark squinted. "It looks like the utility closet." Terry's hands waved in the air as he told a story she couldn't hear. The lawyer continued to smoke his cigar. His wife fingered her pearl earring.

"Let's just see," Jalisa said as she glided her hand down his slick arm and hooked her index finger into his. She pushed him into the small room and took one last glance at the pool. A woman in a red chevron two-piece showing off her enormous belly button bisected by a caesarean scar blocked the view for a moment, and then, Jalisa caught sight of Terry. He glanced in the direction of the utility room. She couldn't tell if he had seen her.

“It’s kind of hot in here,” Mark said, finding her waist. Daylight filtered in through the slats of the shutters. Rubber hoses wound around pumps and tanks of various sizes. The concrete ground was puddly. She turned Mark so that his back was to the wall. If Terry found them and made a scene, she’d just have to start over. There were more Marks in the world. But in the meantime, she would try to make this one work. She pressed him against the wall with the full force of her body, but it was a little too soon.

She felt the slits creep open. She closed her eyes and leaned into him. He wouldn’t be able to see it unless it soaked through her clothes, but she knew it was there. Blood or sweat or fluid, she didn’t know, but she felt it. The liquid rolled down her sides and slid under the waistband of her shorts.

## Admission

I didn't become Assistant Director of Admissions at Missouri State University-Kelly Campus by coddling the likes of Madiha Mojumdar. A kid like that with those test scores and the rich parents to send her wherever she wanted to do whatever she wanted, she didn't need my help. Sure, she was brown – I would get coveted diversity points for that – but when I saw Madiha walking towards my table, in her gold-lotus-embroidered red kurta, and her father, an Engineering professor I recognized from State, spanking a rolled up admissions magazine in the palm of his hand, I knew how little I could do to get her to pick us. I knew her profile before she said it: high test scores and APs (highly admissible), biomedical engineer and inventor dad and

stay-at-home mom (very rich). On top of that, she had this swagger, like she was walking through her sweet sixteen instead of the tri-state college fair.

This girl could go wherever she wanted and probably would. Julia, my boss, would have saved her breath and time for some rural-poor minority, someone who would actually enroll and really matter for our statistics.

As they approached my table, I noticed something about Madiha and her dad, an electric pull between them that I couldn't quite name. He walked just a finger too far away from her. I heard the rhythmic slapping of the hollow tube of magazine against his bare palm, the entitled sashay of the girl, her gold bangles striking one another like wind chimes as they tumbled down her forearm when she reached out to shake my hand. She said, "Hi, I'm Madiha," while her father stationed himself a few feet away. Her face was round, still held that pinch of baby fat where her cheeks met her jaw line. And in her braces she wore red and gold rubber bands to match, I supposed, her outfit.

She signed my roster and confirmed her stats. The numbers helped me pick out which conversation we would have. "And I got a fifteen-twenty on the SAT," she finished, "only because of Math. I got a perfect on the Verbal."

I gave my soft pitch. We were nearing the end of the fair and this girl either was or wasn't going to pick State. I wouldn't have much say in the matter. "Wow," I managed, because she really was impressive. "So, are you thinking about coming to State? We would love to have you." I picked up our own glossy magazine to give her, knowing full well that her father would just use it to smack his other hand.

She leaned forward. "I'm actually here kind of as a formality." She put her finger to her lips and, without turning, moved her eyes ever so slightly towards her father. His body faced us

but his head was turned away. “My dad. He’s an Engineering professor. He really wants me to stay local, come to State. But I’m going away. Honestly, he made me come over here and see what you had to say.”

I didn’t expect that explanation to come out of her mouth. Most parents would send their kids away if they could instead of forcing them to come to our unranked outpost. I scanned the auditorium to sneak a look at her dad and recognized her in his round face. Julia, the person who trained me to see people for who they are at these things, would have outright disagreed with Madiha’s dad and directed her to one of the real schools that this huge event manages to attract. A few years earlier, I probably would have too. I would have recounted my own story, escaping my parents and our shitty London apartment for a scholarship and a new life in America. But we were clicking close to five o’clock and her dad, stuck in Madiha’s orbit, stood just close enough to us to censor me. I kept my opinions to myself.

Instead, we went through the motions. I told her that a student like her would surely come to our school for free, housing, tuition, meal plan. She could live on campus and it would be a world away from home; she’d probably never even see her dad. Then I pulled out the last weapon I had, debt, how much she’d have to take on if she went to some expensive, private school, saying everything short of *You’re a dime a dozen to them, to us you would really count.*

She nodded, probably to show her dad how much she was paying attention. “Thank you,” she said, her chiming arm rising so that she could shake my hand again. “Remind me of your name?”

“Basil. Sorry.” I realized I hadn’t given her my card because I’d already packed them up. I dug in my purse and found one with a restaurant phone number scribbled on the back. “Just ignore that. Call me here, anytime.” I pointed to my number printed on the front of the card.

“Thank you, Basil. You’ve given me a lot to think about.”

And then, maintaining that same distance between them, she and her father walked off.

I never expected to see Madiha’s application, never thought I’d have to decide whether to offer her admission or reject her. Surely she was destined for other, greater things. I texted Bruce – *Wanna meet for happy hour?* – and finished packing up. Six years earlier, he’d convinced me to move to Kelly as part of his tenure chase. He had warned me when we first got together. The life of even a brilliant academic could be itinerant. Itinerant I could handle. I moved to the US from London at seventeen, lucky to win a full scholarship attached to a good enough university, a gleeful four thousand miles from my drunk parents. I wasn’t worried about moving, but maybe I should have been.

“Have you ever heard of a trailing spouse?” he had asked. Trailing spouse. The phrase conjured up the particles that follow a shooting star, illuminated only by the heat of the rock they shadow. I left my career – a suicide prevention job for a big non-profit, great salary and at least a moderate feeling I was doing something helpful for the world – to follow him to the Biology department in Kelly, Missouri, a nowhere town of fifty-eight thousand. Jobs were scarce. I was fortunate to be a trailing spouse.

We joked that I took the job in the admissions office to weed out the dingbats and local yokels, preventing them from making their way into his Intro to Human Bio course, but the truth? Of the three positions reserved for followers and hangers-on like me, I liked the folks in admissions the most. During the meet-and-greet – the trailing spouse nomenclature humiliated us enough; no formal interview was required – Julia joked that they wouldn’t expect me to stay too long. “All the trailers get pregnant and become stay-at-homes within their first two years.” At first, I didn’t know if I should take that statement as a compliment or act offended. I was only

twenty-six and did want kids of my own, eventually. But the joke, because it was completely off-color and probably illegal, won me over.

I've heard many like them over the years I've spent cased into the cubicles of our office, under the breath of fellow counselors in high school gyms and auditoriums across the Mid-West, and then louder, over pink, low-calorie martinis at no less than thirty different Applebee's bars. Jokes aside, I ended up being good at the job. I have a knack for remembering people's names, the names of spouses and kids, their favorite sport or restaurant. Even if they don't remember me, I remember them. I even know how to be careful, pretending not to remember anything about them if they seem like they wouldn't like it. Some people end up thinking I'm weird or stalkery when really I just pay attention.

By the time I finished rolling up my tablecloth, Bruce still hadn't responded. I knew he was on a push to finish a project in the lab. He was approaching a deadline for a new paper he was writing, but he still had to eat dinner. Didn't he? I packed up my car and sat behind the steering wheel, trying to decide if I should go grab take-out for me and him, surprise him in the lab, or just go home. The last time I tried, he wasn't even in the lab.

I skipped dinner and just went home, ending up in front of the computer, drinking a bottle of wine as I checked job boards for positions nearby in my field. Six years of this and nothing had ever really come up. My personal email inbox was empty and I stopped myself from checking my work email. Fresh out of web to surf, I refilled my wine glass and googled Madiha's dad. The first result was his picture anchoring his profile on the School of Engineering faculty website, those round cheeks, a decade or so younger. He'd studied Biomedical Engineering in India and then in California, not too far from where Bruce and I had met. While I coordinated volunteer physicians to treat the low-income and clinically depressed all over

Southern California, Dr. Bimal Mojumdar, only two hours away, designed replacement body parts out of steel and molded plastic.

No wonder he wanted to keep Madiha nearby. His specialty – fixing broken people – was complex enough to teach him that it was easier to just keep everything from falling apart. I started scrolling through his publications, reading about an innovative joint construction, a pacemaker modification, all things to improve the quality of life of people who actually wanted to feel better. I must have fallen asleep after I emptied the wine bottle, in front of the computer.

Bruce came home at some point that night. He was snoring on the sofa when I got up around sunrise for painkillers and a glass of water. I put coffee on and waited for the sky outside to lighten, slowly letting my muddled brain ease into the day. When he got up, he joined me at the kitchen table, his morning sour milk smell that I loved drifting in my direction.

“Late night?” I asked, pouring his coffee.

“I’m getting so close,” he said, slurping.

“You didn’t text me back. I was worried.” Worried had become our code word for lots of things, for lonely, for sad, for angry. “We just haven’t even had dinner together in a while.”

He took a longer sip of his coffee, delaying his retort. “You’re right,” he admitted, the path of least resistance. “Christmas break is a month away, Boz. I promise. You, me, the fireplace.”

“We don’t have a fireplace,” I muttered, but I knew what he meant and relented with a small smile. Despite the six years that had passed in Kelly, we were still young enough to really reconnect with each other, to make a family, to have kids and all that. I believed we still had a chance, if we could just really spend the time.

“Let’s just make it to December.”



I nodded. We quietly finished our coffee, showered, went through our morning motions, then he left to go hover over a microscope while I joined the cheerleading, recent-alumni that populated most of our office. The semester went on, as all semesters do. Applications started rolling in, weekly staff meetings kept us abreast of trends at UM-K – interest down, enrollment depressed – and trends across the US – student suicides a big deal among freshmen, good fit more important than ever – and Julia and I continued our weekly happy hour.

One day in early November, just before we headed out to drinks, I checked my office mailbox. In addition to the regular campus correspondence and letters of recommendation, I found a small card addressed to me, Madiha’s name and address listed on the back. I pushed the crap mail back into the box, slipped the card into my purse and shuffled out to meet Julia in the parking lot. We headed to our regular restaurant, a welcome respite from the chains we frequented on the road. The happy hour included half-off bottles of wine and heaping cheese and meat plates. Once we were settled with our full glasses of rosé, Julia took a sip and asked, “Been getting anything good?” The thing about work friends is that we always have a neutral place to start.

“One actually.” I hadn’t mentioned her to Julia before because I never thought I’d hear from Madiha again until that card came in the mail. “Although she might be a lost cause.” I scanned the menu to pick out the three cheeses we’d order just before six. We always got food and a second bottle at five ‘til, to extend happy hour as late as possible. I explained about Madiha, and her father, how she would be great for our diversity numbers and that her dad’s in our corner.

“You’re right,” Julia sighed. “She’s a lost cause.”

“Maybe,” I hedged. “Maybe she won’t come. Maybe she will. Her dad wants her to.” I poured our second glasses of wine. “I looked him up.”

“What? What do you mean, ‘looked him up?’”

Didn’t we all look them up? Wasn’t that part of our job? Research made the convincing a little easier. If we really wanted Madiha at State, I needed to know what I was working with.

“Nothing extensive. She told me he was a professor in Engineering, so I just checked him out a little.” I took a sip. “It seems like he’s busted his ass to get here. He basically redid his Master’s degree in the US after he moved from India. They seem like they finally have this steady life and she doesn’t appreciate it at all.”

“Don’t you think you’re reading into that a little bit?”

“Probably, you’re right. I don’t know, I just felt sorry for him. He just seems like he really wants the best for her.”

She shrugged her shoulders, dismissing him, dismissing Madiha, almost chiding me for having invested so much time in thinking about them when she would have known to discount them right away. “Maybe he doesn’t know what’s best for her.”

“Fair enough.” Maybe he didn’t. I certainly wouldn’t have given either of my parents the benefit of the doubt. Whatever they thought was best for me, I did the opposite and it seemed to have worked out so far.

I looked at my phone – quarter to six, no messages – and searched around for our waiter so I could order my dinner, but Julia grabbed my hand. “Boz, honey. I actually can’t stay. I have to get home.”

“Oh.” She never left happy hour early. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing’s really going on. Just dinner with the husband. We’ve been trying to make it a thing.”

“On happy hour night?”

“Well, normally it’s Mondays, but he couldn’t swing it this week. This was the only night he had free. I’m so sorry, I should have told you earlier.”

“Really, it’s no problem. I’ll probably just grab dinner with Bruce.”

“You sure?”

“Of course.” We settled up the bill and Julia left while I sat back to finish the rest of my wine, and hers. I didn’t call Bruce to see if I could bring him dinner, hang out in the lab while he worked. He said Christmas and I wanted to give him a chance to live up to his word. Instead, I drove to my favorite Chinese restaurant to order takeout. I could have called ahead, to speed things up, but I figured I could have a bit of fun, sitting in the vinyl booth by the hostess stand, watching people come in and out while I waited for my dinner. At home, I sat in front of the TV with another bottle of wine, ate directly out of the paper boxes, sweet and sour chicken, egg rolls and shrimp fried rice.

On one of my trips to the bathroom, I remembered the card in my purse. It wouldn’t have been hard for her to write to me; I gave her my business card after all. But so few students ever did. *Dear Basil, she wrote. Thank you so much for giving me the low-down on State. I really appreciate another perspective. I will definitely be applying, but I stand firm that I would like to attend somewhere else and will be seeking admission to a number of schools around the US. Because of my father, I will have a tough road ahead if I am in fact offered a spot in State’s incoming freshman class. Therefore, if you see any glitches in my application, don’t be too*

*disheartened. Feel free to issue a rejection. I hope you're well. Best wishes for the holidays.*

*Madiha.*

Maybe it was the wine or my stomachful of greasy rice, but the note made me nauseous. She was trying to use me as her pawn, to prevent her from having the hard talk with her dad, really laying it on the line to him. It was smart, enlisting a total stranger to do her dirty work. I had to give her that. But I was the one who had to break it to my parents, to tell them I was leaving and wasn't coming back. It's a hard thing to explain to people who've raised you for almost twenty years. How exactly is one supposed to say it? Thanks for everything but I can't stand you for one more minute. I get what Madiha was doing, avoiding the hard part. But life just didn't work that way. She'd find out sooner or later.

I woke up the next morning, late for work, with a combination of a sodium hangover and a regular one bubbling up in my throat. Bruce had either never come home or had come and gone already. I tried to shower away the headache but couldn't make it into my clothes. I slept that day away, tried again the next morning, and made it in, just in time to wade through some early decision applications, knowing that Madiha's would really have to fall short if she wanted to be rejected. A minority student with her numbers could send a thumbprint in place of an essay and still get in. That was just the truth. Even if I could orchestrate her rejection, I wouldn't risk my job, the administrative scrutiny her father would probably engineer. All for a fight that wasn't even mine.

I saw Madiha again, just before Thanksgiving, while she was on a campus tour. I was sitting in my favorite café in the student union, eating a bagel for lunch, dropping sesame seed crumbs onto the open book I wasn't reading. I stared out the window looking for Bruce. He so rarely answered his phone during the day anymore, claiming that it broke his concentration, that

my only real chance at seeing him was if he happened to be walking across campus around lunchtime. I was holding out for Christmas, but a cute exchange in the middle of the day wouldn't hurt anything.

Across the quad, a backwards-walking tour guide led a group of parents and their teenagers while Madiha trailed behind, her hands stuffed into her coat pockets, her ears covered by big headphones. As the flock neared the union, she looked up, scanning the building windows as though looking for someone she knew, someone she'd arranged to meet. She saw me, then stopped as the group continued forward, pulled a gloved hand from her coat to wave and, within two minutes, slipped into the seat at my table.

"Do you remember me?" she asked.

"Madiha, of course," I replied. I didn't mention her very memorable accomplishments, nor the note she'd written to me. "It's great to see you." She lifted a finger, indicating to me to pause, it seemed, and went to order a drink. Maybe she had made amends with her father and would come to State after all.

She returned to the table with an extra-large drink. "So, I wanted to ask you. Where are you from? I love your accent."

"London, actually. Although I've been in the States, jeez, for over a decade now."

"Oh my god, that's amazing." Her eyes bulged as she responded, making her round cheeks even rounder. Had she pigtails, she could have passed for eleven or twelve. "I've never been out of the country. Do you go back often?"

I lifted my eyebrows and shook my head. "I don't. I graduated from high school and went to California for college. Haven't been back since." Leaving London had been an escape. Our last year of high school, all my friends went looking for entry-level jobs as bank tellers, shop

clerks, elementary school helpers. I thought I would die. I craved an adventure. It took an ocean between me and my parents, my friends, my old, dingy life, at the minimum, for me to feel like I'd gotten away. Madiha slurped from her cup. "So how is your application coming?" I asked. "Can I help you with anything?" I wasn't going to bring up the suggestion from her card.

She blew on the caramel-colored surface of her drink. "Funny you should ask. I'm glad I ran into you here. I was actually planning to come see you today, after the tour."

That would have been a first, a student following up in person. Applying to State wasn't exactly rocket science.

But then she explained herself. "I thought about not applying. But I realized that if I don't, my dad will for me. That's why I sent you that card."

"I don't get the connection." She would have to explain exactly what she meant, exactly what she wanted and why she thought I should go out on a limb to help her get it. "It seems to me your dad is trying to help you."

"If he wanted to help me, he would let me go wherever I wanted."

I thumbed up the crumbs from my bagel. At a certain point, Madiha would have to realize that her father didn't have the power to let her go any more than he had the power to make her stay. "I can't just reject your application, Madiha."

She didn't pause to collect her thoughts. She blurted, "I'm afraid that if I get in, if I get that scholarship money you told me about, I'll be screwed. I'll be stuck here."

I wasn't exactly trying to be difficult, but there were lots of other kids, who really needed my help. I was wasting my energy on her. I slipped my book into my purse. "Even if I could reject you, I wouldn't. We want students like you. Beyond that, though, I don't have the power."

A committee reviews each application, not just me, and anyway, all rejections have to be justified.”

“Isn’t there something I could do? So that you’d have to reject me?”

Asking me to reject her – was this really her solution? I had pegged her for being too smart to really think this dumb idea would work. Couldn’t she figure it out? Draw something lewd, kid. Talk about how you want to commit mass murder. Use your imagination. “Madiha. Can I give you some advice?” She looked down at her half-empty coffee cup. “If you don’t want to come here, you should just tell your dad. Be honest with him.”

She scoffed. “That’s impossible.”

“You’ll have to do it eventually.”

“I’m telling you. It’s impossible.”

I picked up the wooden stirrer from my coffee and cracked it in half and then cracked the halves in half. I had given myself advice like this, back then. I applied to college abroad using the applications I could find online. I had no clue what I was getting into, just this deep-seated knowledge that I needed to escape. I couldn’t call it impossible because then I wouldn’t have been able to do it. Even I could figure that out. I took a deep breath. “If you don’t do it now, think about what will happen next. You’ll be scheming for the rest of your life. He’ll always want you to do something. It will just keep going and going and—”

“You think it’s that simple,” she snapped.

“I actually don’t think it’s simple at all. I know how hard it is. That doesn’t mean you don’t have to do it.”

She stood up. “I have to go,” she mumbled.

She didn’t want to work for it. She just wanted someone to give her what she wanted.

She left her half-finished coffee on the table and said, “Sorry for bothering you,” before she trudged out of the café. I smarted a bit after she was gone but I didn’t blame her for being so sour. Everything seems like the most important thing on earth at that age. Every milestone, every decision, every cup of coffee. She’d learn, soon enough, how little it matters that she pick one door to go through rather than the other.

I didn’t bother texting Bruce about happy hour. Back in the office, I invited Julia, even though it wasn’t our normal day, but she begged off, gave me an excuse about having to be up early the next day for a meeting. I’d had my fair share of drunken seven o’clock bedtimes after raucous happy hours, so the excuse didn’t hold too much water for me, but I let it go. Instead, we sat in my cubicle so I could tell her what happened with Madiha. I expected her to slap me on the thigh and congratulate me since it seemed like I’d have one more minority freshman to count but she didn’t do that, or anything at all. She barely raised her eyebrows and seemed to wait for me to finish telling the story.

“Is everything okay?” I asked because it really seemed like it wasn’t.

She smiled and tilted her head, like she had a secret and was deciding whether or not to tell me. Then, she came out with it. “I’m pregnant.”

It wasn’t a bad thing. Julia was married. We weren’t teenagers, worried about getting knocked up, having to lie in bed at night banging on our stomachs, willing our periods to come. Julia was going to be a mother. It was fantastic news.

We hugged and celebrated and I forgot about Madiha, too, because with news like that, who cares about some seventeen-year-old stranger’s anxiety about her overprotective dad? The girl had to grow up. Don’t we all? Julia asked me to keep her secret – she was only five weeks along – and as my phone buzzed, she squeezed my hand and said, “I’ll let you get back to it.”



I found a text message from Bruce. *Dinner? Bailey Club at 8?*

We hadn't been on a date in months. He had finally realized Christmas would be too long to wait. I went home and showered, shaved my legs, straightened my hair. I pulled on my Spanx and the tight, red, sweetheart-necklined dress that he bought me for my twenty-fifth birthday, right before we moved to Kelly. I got to the restaurant at five after eight, wanting to make sure he would already be seated, to make sure he saw me walking to the table. But he wasn't there when I arrived and didn't show up for another ten minutes, and when he did, he didn't order a drink, just looked around, saw my flute of sparkling rosé and said, "This was a mistake."

I didn't know what he meant exactly but then he sat down and clued me in. "We shouldn't have come to a restaurant." He wanted to sit down with me to tell me that he was sleeping with his research advisor, that they were also in love, that she was leaving her husband, and he was leaving me, his wife, and they were moving back to California at the end of the semester. What about his precious research? The tenure he sought like a ground-breaking cure to a rare disease?

Before I could ask, the waitress came by to take his drink order and he surprised me because he did order a drink, a draft beer, a pale ale craft brew from southern Missouri. I suppose he wanted to get one while he could, before he moved away from the brewery.

He fed me lines like, I hope you'll be okay, and this has nothing to do with you, it's me, and she shares my interests, and some other bullshit that sounded like it could have come from a glossy women's magazine article, *How to Break Up with Someone without Hurting Them* although I don't think the article would have included, "Tell them about your affair," in its list of advice.

And then we ate dinner.

I remember much more about the food than anything else we said while we were eating. I ordered the crab cake appetizer and a steak and au gratin potatoes for my entrée and after a few bites of the crab cake, I went to the bathroom and took my Spanx off and threw them in the garbage. Bruce was still sitting at the table when I returned. I know I ordered a bottle of Pinot Noir without asking if he wanted any. And I ended up at home, alone, passed out on the sofa, where I woke up the next morning, still in the dress.

I'd like to be able to say that things changed for me after Bruce left, but in reality, they were mostly the same. We had already stopped talking about anything substantial, anything other than logistics, rent, water bills, getting the car fixed. We hadn't had sex since it was hot outside, long enough ago that it should have worried me. Those things felt the same once he was gone. The big difference was that I stopped waiting for him, stopped expecting to see him across the quad to have a cute little exchange, stopped wondering if he would surprise me by showing up at the house with a bottle of wine and sweet and sour chicken.

Julia invited me over for Thanksgiving and then I decided to book a one-way flight to London for the summer, to see the place I'd grown up over a decade after I left. I started to think that maybe enough time had passed that I could go back there, make a life for myself instead of just running away from the one that had been made for me.

At some point, Madiha's application made it to the office. A different admissions counselor reviewed it and accepted her. They must have, because her name appeared on the roster listing the incoming freshman class. One afternoon in the spring, after my replacement and I met with a very fat Julia to go over departmental procedures, I decided to take a walk around campus. Snow still covered the ground but the air was warm and leaves were starting to poke out

from tree branches. An orientation group walked across the quad and, at the very back, I saw Madiha.

She wore a T-shirt and ratty leggings, looking nothing like the carefully groomed Madiha of the winter. She'd lost weight and, with it, that over-conditioned glisten. I walked up to the group and tapped her on the shoulder. "Hey, long time no see."

"Hey," she mumbled.

"Can I buy you a coffee?" She ditched her group, and we ordered tea for her and coffee for me. She pouted as we sat across from one another. "So, I take it you'll be starting here in August?"

She shrugged and nodded.

"Madiha, you'll be fine. You're going to do great things, no matter what. It doesn't matter where you end up going to college." Couldn't this girl look on the bright side?

"I have to make it through these four years first."

"Did you try to talk to your father?"

"As much as anyone can try."

"What about applications to other schools. Did you apply anywhere else?"

She nodded again. Her eyes narrowed. "You really don't get it. I got all of these scholarships and he refuses to let me take any of them."

I looked at Madiha stewing over her tea. I could have told her that everyone has their own version of her dad, whether real or made-up, breathing down their neck or completely absent. She wasn't going to have to make it through four years of him. He wasn't ever going to go away. "Maybe you should just accept one of the scholarships anyway," I tried.

"He's a dictator. It's impossible."

I finished my coffee, she finished her tea and then we walked back to her orientation group in silence. I was impressed by her effort to work around him, to get me to reject her. But when I turned her down, she should have forged ahead anyway. She needed to grow up, take the reins, and start making decisions for herself. She couldn't avoid every conflict all her life. Most problems she'd have to face head-on. I only hoped that she'd figure that out sooner rather than later.

## My Best Worst Advice

We did what people in love do. We got married. We had a lot of sex, and then less sex. We cuddled and binge-watched television shows. We fantasized about the house we would buy, the furniture we would get and the dinner parties we would host. We ate ice cream in bed. We both worked a lot – he in a big building downtown at an energy firm, I at home as a newspaper advice columnist.

Throughout the week, my editor sent me a curated selection of emails. She weeded out the old people asking about diabetes, the precocious kids asking about how to become President, anything that a letter writer could find the answer to on the internet.

My husband and I would lie in our bed. He would tell me about oil acquisitions and burning fields in the desert, and I would tell him about my letters. He'd listen and comment. He said he cared about the people who wrote the letters. He understood the struggles they faced. He

never ventured to tell me what to write and he never asked for my advice. Maybe he thought he didn't need it. Maybe he wanted to make up his own mind about things.

To the unmarried thirty-eight-year-old PhD student, I wrote:

It's all about shifting your perspective. You think you have all this stuff to get done before you get married and start having kids, but the reality is that you just have all this stuff to do before you die.

He said I was being too bleak, that in this market, she just needed to focus more on her research and her dissertation so that she could get a good job.

To the brow-beaten husband who suspected his wife was having an affair, I wrote:

You're lucky. You're a man. Women love that about you. Get out of your awful marriage, get onto a dating website and find your next Mrs. Right.

He clucked his tongue at that one. Men don't have it as easy as you think. He then suggested couples therapy.

To the woman who woke up one day a few months into her marriage and realized she'd let her mother pick all of her wedding decorations, let her fiancé plan the reception playlist, let her maid-of-honor have the final say on the bridal gown, and didn't it all add up to something? Didn't it mean she was living someone else's life?

The dishwasher throbbed downstairs. We moved the folded laundry off our bed and put the empty ice cream bowls on the nightstand to be taken to the kitchen in the morning. We ripped each other's clothes off and tried to erase each other's thoughts like we had the night of our first date. We didn't read any more letters. The next morning, he unloaded the dishwasher and I began to pack my bags.

## The Girl in the Picture

Sophie brought Mia to the old high school building, a beautifully decrepit Victorian that still languished at the back of campus. The former-house-turned-school-turned-stoner-hangout had not yet been torn down even though its replacement, a collection of hermetically sealed prisons where they now attended class, had opened a few years before. Sophie had already rooted around the clunky machines and archaic tools that filled the abandoned basement of the old school. She wanted to photograph Mia juxtaposed against the rusty, out-of-use industrial washing machine and rows of open gym lockers. When Sophie explained her vision for the shoot, Mia shrugged. She was up for anything.

That late October afternoon, they walked across campus after class. Sophie floated over the grass, her step ballerina-light. Next to her, Mia clomped through the field in her busted Mary

Janes and her black stockings crisscrossed with rips, weighed down by her drooping purple backpack. They could see some kids smoking and laughing on the old porch. “I’ve never been in here,” Mia said.

“No way, Mimi. Not even with Robbie?” Robbie was Mia’s most-of-the-time boyfriend and sometime pot dealer.

“I just never had a reason to come, I guess. It always seemed kind of creepy over here.”

“Creepy isn’t right, exactly. It’s more, like, rustic. And almost beautiful. Like, so terrible and busted that it’s almost beautiful.” Sophie responded. She had transferred to the high school in Kingston, Rhode Island the previous summer, right before her junior year. Before his arrest, her dad had taken her to explore all of old Beaumont, photographing its blighted one-screen movie theater and the abandoned barns along Highway 90. With her dad in jail, a twenty-year sentence for fraud and embezzlement, basically stealing money instead of earning it, the bank had taken their house in Texas. Her mother was incapable of working. Newly broke, they fled to Sophie’s grandparents, so they could hide, or at least start fresh.

“Some shit is just busted, Soph.” Mia laughed.

The porch floorboards sagged beneath them like wet sand. Mia nodded to some kids she knew and then she and Sophie descended to the basement. The windows, up near the ceiling, let in a sepia stream of dusty light. Sophie pulled out a one-gallon plastic bag from her purse, filled with washers and nails and metal bits to add detail to the photography experiment. Rusty points broke through the plastic. The entire thing looked like a medieval weapon, something to clobber an enemy with.



“What are you going to do with that, crazy?” Mia adjusted her fraying jean skirt so the ripped fabric revealed the back of her dimpled upper thigh. She pulled her half-smoked cigarette from her skirt pocket and worked to salvage it.

Sophie snapped her first photo and, hearing the click, Mia looked up.

“What are you taking pictures of?”

“I’m just advancing the film. The first stretch is already exposed from when I loaded it in.”

Mia tried to light her cigarette. “So, really. What’s with the bag of shit?”

Sophie propped the bag on the ground. “Just in case it wasn’t scary enough down here.” They surveyed the basement. Half-open panels revealed the dusty intestines of the washer. Unmoored from walls, the open-doored lockers faced in every direction. Half of the overhead lights were burnt out. “It’s so dark in here,” Mia observed.

“We can just try to expose for longer.”

“I can’t stay that still.” Mia had a jittery affect, a voice that always shook if she read aloud in class, a hand that trembled if the rest of her was still.

Sophie pulled the camera strap over her head. “I can try.”

She squatted in front of the washing machine and peeked her head inside. Mia had finally lit her cigarette. “What am I looking for?” Mia asked.

“Anything interesting. Anything that would look interesting in a photograph.”

Mia paced between the washer and the lockers and Sophie pulled out some of the widgets and metal pieces from the plastic bag and staged them on the floor. “You really know what you’re doing, huh? Oh wait, this is composition, right?”

Sophie placed a four-inch screw on top of the machine and a handful of bolts right in front. “The way my dad explained it, sometimes you have to add the thing that’s missing. Sometimes the way you find things isn’t enough. For a good picture, at least.” She kept scattering the bits around as Mia finished her cigarette and added the butt to Sophie’s pile. “Thoughts?” Sophie asked.

Mia shrugged. “Do your thing, girl.”

Sophie started by snapping close-ups of the mouth of the washing machine, and then focused on the screws and nails with the machine in the background. She shot from the left, from the right, head on.

Mia wandered around the room, poking through piles of discarded gym uniforms. She had taken off her sweater and tied it around her waist. “Check this out.” She held up one of the gym shirts. “The logo is so retro.”

“Take some.”

Mia snorted. “School spirit.” She threw the shirt back into the pile.

“Want to learn how to switch the film?” Sophie handed Mia the camera and showed her how to wind the current roll and replace it with a new one. “You sure don’t want to take any?” Sophie started moving around the room a bit more, shooting close-ups of the vents of the locker doors and the dusty rays of light that shone in from the high windows.

Mia shook her head. “You’re the expert.”

She continued exploring the darker corners of the basement as Sophie shot through the second roll quickly. Once she’d finished, the girls started to leave. Mia asked, “Need a ride?”

Sophie declined. “I’m good. I have to grab some stuff from my locker anyway,” she answered, then went back into the new school building. She’d figured out that the building wasn’t locked until late, after the custodians had finished.

Even if she’d asked, Mia wouldn’t come to help develop the negatives. Sophie knew that much already, so she had no need to worry about hiding the photos she’d taken of Mia. In the darkroom Sophie clipped out the negative images of Mia and separated them from the ones she’d share. In one of the negatives, Mia crouched down to adjust a pile of screws. Through a rip in her stockings, the fold where her thigh met her calf protruded from her bent leg like a plump thumb. Three moles dotted the fatty outside of her mid-thigh.

In another, Mia squeezed the nape of her neck while looking towards their tableau. The absence of light had darkened her face so that Sophie’s photo only caught the outline of Mia’s jaw and the shadow it cast over her neck. In her hand, she clutched a smattering of nails. In the third photo, Mia had removed her leather jacket and black sweater. Underneath, she wore a white cotton camisole with small flowers dotting the top. It looked like a little girl’s undershirt, the last thing Sophie expected to see. Mia had bent forward to look at the gym uniforms and Sophie had snapped.

Mia wasn’t beautiful. Her goat-like nose, an upside-down-triangle with smashed nostrils, along with her spread-too-far-apart eyes, repulsed Sophie. But she’d decided to make friends when, during her second week at the new school, she overheard Mia talking with the guidance counselor. Despite the promises of privacy and safe spaces, Sophie could hear every bit of their conversation. Mia’s dad was in jail, too, but unlike Sophie, Mia’s meetings with the counselor seemed to be mandatory, every week. Sophie just wanted to talk about other extracurricular options since the cheerleading squad was full. The girls didn’t speak when Mia left the office

that day, but Sophie introduced herself later, during Algebra class. She needed someone to help her with her photography portfolio. Would Mia mind taking her around? Showing her some of the more interesting places around Kingston? Sophie saw some nasty edge in Mia she wanted to either capture or transform.

A few days later, the girls sat in the school courtyard during lunch. Mia flipped through the portfolio from the basement. “You really are good. I barely even recognize this stuff. It looks so different.”

“I’m going to call it *Mechanics*. The series, I mean. If I ever do anything with them.”

“Your big photo exhibit. Famous Sophie. I’ll be able to say I knew you when.”

“You should take the lead next time,” she replied. “Maybe you’ll learn something.”

“You don’t want me ruining your style.”

Sophie had never had a friend like Mia, one who wasn’t trying to get good grades, who wasn’t trying to be popular or a teacher’s favorite. Mia truly didn’t seem to care about any of that. Sophie had spent her whole life caring about it, along with her old best friend Bethany and all the other girls from cheerleading and student government and Key Club. All of Sophie’s old friends. Her whole old life.

The girls decided to meet at Mia’s apartment over the weekend, the first time they’d be hanging out on a Saturday instead of right after class. After school, Sophie stayed behind. She pulled out the negatives that she’d clipped and tucked away, filled the small pans with chemicals and started developing the rest of the photos. Mia made a great subject, with her porcelain skin and clothes pierced by safety pins. Sophie didn’t need to change anything.

After they dried, Sophie tucked the photos into her folder. Her father had never trusted digital photos. Prints were less threatening than photos on a screen, less dangerous. They couldn't easily be sent or shared. They were more private.

The Saturday of their meeting, she showed up at the address Mia had given her, camera in tow. They hadn't made any specific plans, but Sophie always felt better having her camera on her. The house was a four-plex with foil curtains on the bottom floor windows and two old men smoking cigars on the porch. Sophie stepped onto the first splintered step. "Mia here?"

One of the men, his tufts of wiry gray hair corralled by a newsboy cap, grunted and nodded towards the house. Sophie tried the doorknob. The slightest turn swung the door open. The entrance hall of the house had been divided and rearranged to accommodate apartments downstairs, and probably upstairs too. Before Sophie could look around and find out, she heard Mia. "Hey. Sophie. That you?" Her head popped out of the open doorway at the back of the hall. "Down here."

It wasn't Mia's apartment. If she had parents, they couldn't live in this place. Dark purple curtains shrouded the one-room studio in gloom, even though the sun shone outside. Crowded ashtrays, a small green pipe, open cans of energy drinks, matchbooks and lighters – the tables were littered. "Hey girl." Mia walked over to the tiny kitchen in the corner of the studio. She stirred something on the stovetop.

"Hey." Sophie pulled the camera out of its bag and, in the kitchen, nervously checked the film. "I brought this just in case." The room was empty but for the two girls. Sophie readjusted the camera bag, moved the strap from her shoulder to cross her body like a seat belt. She didn't see where she could sit down. Every surface was crowded or dirty. "Is this where you live?" Sophie asked.

“No way. This is Robbie’s place,” Mia explained. “I’m just making him lunch.”

“Oh.” Sophie couldn’t imagine that any high school girl could live there. “You always make him lunch?”

Mia shrugged. “Sometimes.” She stirred the contents of the pot. “If we’re together around this time.”

Sophie’s Saturday hangouts in Beaumont had been mostly she and Bethany, plucking their eyebrows, straightening their hair. Sophie coveted Bethany’s cascading blond locks, the kind of white blond that would never darken into brown, the kind of blond that would stay. As they got older, Bethany’s waist stayed tiny, but she filled out everywhere else, everywhere she should, even that little spot where her hip curved into her thigh. And she was built. Sophie had watched her at cheerleading practice, her thigh muscle hardening, the line that formed, ran up her leg to under her skirt, differentiating the firm muscle from the thin, quiet layer of fat underneath. Meanwhile, Sophie maintained her short twiggy, her back barely distinguishable from her front. If Mia cared about any of it, the little bit of fat that piled over her belt, the acne scars on her chin, Sophie couldn’t tell.

The door slammed as Mia lifted the pot from the stove and scraped blue-box macaroni and cheese into a bowl on the counter.

“Hey, babe.” A black jacket swept past Sophie, smelling of stale weed and aftershave. A man, Robbie, growlingly kissed Mia on the neck.

“Hey, babe,” she answered, still holding the pot in one hand and in the other, the wooden spoon, orange sludge congealing on the curved end. “Sophie,” Mia said, pointing the spoon.

“Hi.” She started to put her hand forward for a shake but thought better of it. His wasn’t the kind of hand you shook. He was already clinging to Mia, stroking from her bare bellybutton down to a spot just below her waistband, his face turned towards the macaroni.

He nodded his head at Sophie and looked back at Mia. “Lunch ready?” He spread his arm to click a speaker button and some classic rock that Sophie faintly recognized blasted into the small room. His pants were unevenly ripped at the bottoms, his hair standing straight up with either gel or just the sweat and oil of his unwashed scalp.

Robbie settled back near Mia, mashed his other fingers between her waistband and her stomach and pulled her close to him. Sophie turned around, looking for a place to hide in the small room and, finding nowhere, walked over to the sofa and started fiddling with the camera. She heard loud smacking, the kissing kind, and then heard Robbie hoarsely whisper, “What’s she doing here?” He didn’t seem to be able to say anything quietly.

Sophie started to watch just as Mia pulled away. “I told you we were gonna hang out,” she said. Robbie turned Mia so that they faced away from Sophie, and they continued to whisper, to push and to kiss.

Almost without thinking, Sophie focused the lens in their direction and started clicking, pushing down on the button so slowly that the click wouldn’t be audible. She captured the places where Mia and Robbie’s bodies met, his hand wrapped around her arm, their hips, even their feet which shuffled back and forth, touching sometimes, each pair always pointing in the direction of the other. Then Robbie started to pull away and took the cheesy spoon from Mia’s hand. At first, he looked like he was teasing, or just very hungry and wanting to eat the clumpy noodles that had stuck to the wood. Sophie continued to click, catching the two lovers move from sweet to quarrel and back to sweet again.

But then, Robbie used the spoon to smack Mia across the face.

Immediately, Sophie ran towards Mia to drag her out of the apartment. Mia resisted, pulled back out of Sophie's grip. They only got as far as the porch.

Mia stopped Sophie, looked into the vestibule and turned back. "What the fuck?"

"I know," Sophie replied, still clutching the camera. "What the fuck?"

"No, you idiot." Mia wiped a glob of macaroni off her cheek. The cool fall air had already started to harden it. "Why'd you do that?"

Sophie stammered a bit, trying to answer. Finally, she managed to whisper, "He hit you with a spoon, Mia."

"So?"

"What do you mean, so?"

Mia leaned against the door. "He barely hit me. And that's just Robbie. I deal with it now or I deal with it later."

Sophie couldn't understand, and didn't try to. Why would Mia have to deal with it later? How could it have possibly been easier for her to deal with it in the moment? He had hit her in the face with a cheese-and-macaroni-covered wooden spoon. She could have gotten a splinter, for God's sake. "Why don't we just hang out and then we can figure out Robbie later?" If Mia could see what Sophie saw, the tender creases of her limbs, the quiet spot where her neck caved and met her chest, surely Mia would have higher standards. Surely she wouldn't let some cretin like Robbie smack her across the face with a spoon.

Mia scoffed. "First of all, we won't be figuring out Robbie at all. I have Robbie under control. And second, I can't hang out now. I need to go back and deal with him." Mia looked



around, like someone looking for their purse at a party she's desperately trying to leave. "I need a cigarette."

"You're right, I shouldn't have freaked out, I guess." Sophie still held the camera.

"Fuck right." Mia looked at Sophie sideways. "Look. I know you were just trying to protect me."

Sophie focused on the camera, checking how many photos she had left to take on this roll. She didn't want to say the wrong thing to Mia. She had thought that dragging her out of the apartment would make her happy, somehow make her feel cared for, even a little indebted.

"It's just. Robbie and I have our own thing. It works." Mia caressed the leftover cheese off her cheek. "He's, like, my person. I can rely on him."

"Fair enough," Sophie said, realizing she had no idea why Mia's dad was in jail, if her mom was even around. Weren't those the people she was supposed to rely on? "I'll leave you to it from now on." She dared to risk referencing the future, but she didn't want to jinx there being a from now on.

Mia stood. "I'm going to go clean this mess up," she declared, then stalked away.

On her solitary walk home, Sophie imagined Mia making amends with Robbie. Would she yell at him like Sophie's own mom had yelled at her dad before the police came, trying to understand something that was impossible to comprehend? Or would Mia go inside and literally clean up, scrape the remnants of dried cheese off her face and the floor and out of what was probably Robbie's only pot? Which type of cleaning up would she do, could she do, in the wake of all of that?

The roll of film had six more exposures left. When she got through her front door and saw her mom sitting with a cup of coffee at the kitchen table, she asked if she could snap some

shots. The photos of Mia and Robbie, portraits of her mother. Sophie decided to call the series *Relations*. A parent is the very definition of a relation, ground zero of the term. They are the first relation out of all relations.

During the school week, Sophie developed the photos, tucked the ones of Mia and Robbie away and then barely looked at the images of her mom. Sophie had only seen them in the darkroom, until she and Mia met up at lunch. They hadn't hung out since the weekend at Robbie's, only seen each other in the halls and chatted at lunchtime. Mia sat next to her and pulled the pictures out of the folder. "What the fuck is wrong with your mom?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Jesus, Soph, does she have cancer or something?"

Sophie's mom did not have cancer, or any other disease. She was just the wife of a man who had gone to jail and left her alone and destitute with a teenage daughter. Sophie looked at the picture, looked at her mom for what felt like the first time in forever, certainly since they'd moved up north. She saw the ashy skin, the hollow eyes, the dark spots where her sallow skin seemed to sag. She could say, "Yes, my mom has cancer," and it would have been the easy explanation. But instead, Sophie said, "No. She's just tired, I guess."

"Tired," Mia laughed. "She looks like she was run over by a fucking eighteen wheeler. Holy shit."

Is this who her mom was? Sophie slid the photos back into the sleeve and the girls didn't discuss them again.

"Look," Mia said after Sophie had retaken possession of the pictures. "I've got an idea. Let's meet up after school on the old school porch."

That afternoon, Sophie walked towards the old building, watching Mia pace on the porch. “Hey girl,” Mia giggled, slapping Sophie on the back when she finally arrived. She smelled sweet and lush, like newly turned Earth.

“Hey.”

Mia was completely stoned. “I thought you didn’t come over here,” Sophie half-asked, half-accused. She knew Mia occasionally smoked with Robbie, but if she started going to smoke with the stoners on the porch, it would no doubt leave less time for them to hang out.

“What can I say?” Mia mused. “You’ve opened my eyes to the whole thing.”

Sophie decided to go with it, to giggle alongside her friend. If she resisted or voiced her worry, she might lose Mia completely.

“Okay, so I have the best idea. For our photography. I’m calling it *The Wild*. It just came to me,” Mia laughed. Sophie hadn’t seen Mia so excited.

The idea was ridiculous. She wanted to take modern Thanksgiving foods, like a frozen turkey, cans of cranberry sauce, boxes of instant mashed potatoes, and put them in places where their natural counterparts would have been. “We’ll put them in the wild,” Mia exclaimed, doubling over. The frozen turkey clucking around a field. The can of cranberry sauce hanging from a branch. The box of mashed potatoes being pulled out of a hole in the dirt.

The idea was classic pot-head. Sophie didn’t find it to be so funny, partially because she herself wasn’t stoned and partially because the whole concept seemed actually sad. But couldn’t that be the point? To take something pathetic and transform it into something meaningful?

The girls made plans to meet up over the weekend. Sophie offered to get the groceries, and stole twenty dollars from her mom’s purse in order to come through. They met in the little bit of forest at the edge of the school campus with a small, frozen chicken – the turkey was too

expensive – two cans of cranberry sauce and a box of instant potatoes. Mia brought a shovel, some twine and a can opener. The girls set to work, neither of them pointing out to the other how ridiculous it might be to dig a hole in the correct shape to fit a cardboard box of potatoes, or to figure out how to loop twine around a can so that it would stay hung up in a tree.

They took the project seriously, but still giggled each time the can slid from the rope or when the chicken started to thaw and slip out of their hands. Even if Mia was stoned when she had the idea, she wasn't stoned when they started to work on the project. The girls fell into their respective roles. Mia was in charge of prepping the camera, and she would take staging directions from Sophie. Sophie would say, "The can needs to be on a lower branch," or, "More of the box needs to be visible," and Mia would follow her instructions.

Sophie took the photos of the processed foods out in the wild, and she took photos of Mia, too. Mia reaching up to hang the can, revealing her stomach, the same space where Robbie shoved his hand to pull her close to him. Mia holding the frozen chicken close to her, arms wrapped protectively around it. Mia's perplexed face as she held the shovel and peered down into the hole she'd dug, maybe wondering if it was deep enough, if it was the right shape, if it would work.

At the end of the shoot, Mia hooked her arm around Sophie's shoulders. Together, the girls surveyed the little clearing peppered with holes, the dented cans of cranberry sauce, the mush of chicken inside the plastic bag. Mia squeezed Sophie towards her. "I think we did it. This was our best one yet."

Sophie smiled, a small one, a little secret for herself. She'd caught Mia looking as she'd never looked in real life. She wasn't just wasting time, following Sophie around because she

didn't have anything better to do. She had an idea and needed Sophie to see it through. "Should we go celebrate?"

"What do you have in mind?"

"Why don't you come over to my place? I have frozen pizza." Sophie hadn't had a friend over since they'd moved. Even though Bethany had practically lived with them in Beaumont, Sophie hadn't been sure if her mom could handle it now in Kingston. She still wasn't exactly sure. Hopefully her mom would just be asleep when they arrived.

"Sure. Robbie's being a dick anyway. Sometimes he's so exhausting."

"Why don't you dump him then?"

Mia squinted her eyes at Sophie. "It doesn't work like that."

"It doesn't seem to work the way it is, either."

"Stick to photography, Soph. Trust me on that."

Sophie didn't say anything else about it. She hadn't seen Robbie since the macaroni-and-cheese day and didn't want to push her luck with Mia. She knew she'd overstepped some boundary, once, and she stopped herself before she did it again.

At Sophie's apartment, the girls found her mom sitting at the kitchen table, smoking cigarettes. She had never smoked before, she had never left her hair uncombed before, had never left her face plain and un-made-up before.

"Hey Mom," Sophie said as soon as they both made it into the kitchen. "This is Mia. She's a friend from school."

Sophie kissed her mom on the cheek and Mia held out a hand for her to shake. Sophie's mom slowly turned her head towards Mia, offered the hand that held the cigarette between her

index and middle fingers. Mia put her palm against Sophie's mom's palm and said, "Nice to meet you."

Sophie preheated the oven. "We're going to eat dinner and study."

Her mom stood up. She hadn't taken a drag of the cigarette since the girls walked in. "I'll leave you to it," she mumbled, then disappeared into her bedroom.

Sophie pulled the pizza out of the freezer, cut off the plastic and slipped it onto a pan as she waited for the oven to preheat. "I thought she had cancer," Mia said. "Why is she smoking?"

"I told you she doesn't have cancer."

"What the fuck is wrong with her then?"

Sophie looked at Mia. Even though she'd captured her body in image after image after image, she couldn't figure out how those images added up to the girl standing before her. Mia was almost ugly, her bottle-dyed black hair, her crooked teeth, her persistent sneer. In the photos, Sophie had succeeded in making Mia into something else, something that could be beautiful, something that could be appreciated. How could that girl, from the pictures, be so crass about Sophie's mother?

"It's a long story," Sophie said, then slid the pizza into the oven and changed the subject. "Wanna watch TV?" Even if she couldn't explain anything to Mia, at least she could have someone to sit next to, just for a little while.

Mia shrugged. "Sure. Where's your bathroom?"

Sophie directed Mia down the hall and grabbed the remote. "I'll find something good."

"Nothing cheesy," Mia cautioned as she disappeared towards the bathroom. "Something racy."

Sophie sat on the couch, flipping through the channels. She and Bethany always used to watch bad reality shows. Mia might think those shows were cheesy, or might enjoy making fun of the airheads and their fledgling hook-ups and impossible faux-love stories. She settled on reruns of a reality show set somewhere in Australia, and waited for Mia to come back from the bathroom. But an entire segment of the show passed, from commercial break to commercial break, and then the oven timer beeped. The pizza was ready to go in. Sophie got up and slipped the pan into the oven and then walked towards the bathroom. The door was slightly ajar, the bathroom empty. “Mia,” she called out, and then noticed the light from her bedroom had been turned on. She pushed open the door to her room and asked again, “Mia?”

She found her friend hovering over the desk, clutching the stack of photos. “I thought it was weird you always had your camera with you.”

It had been so long since she’d had friends over, she hadn’t even thought about what could stay out in the open and what might need to be hidden. “What are you talking about?”

“What the fuck is this?” Mia slammed the photos down on the desk.

“They’re just pictures.” And they were just pictures. Sophie hadn’t taken shots of anything wrong, or bad, or dirty. They were just Mia, doing normal Mia things.

“You’re a fucking freak. Was this whole thing a ploy to get me to come over here? What, were you going to take pictures of me while I was asleep?”

Sophie sat down on her bed calmly while Mia clutched the photos. She couldn’t find the words to explain to Mia why she had taken them. She would have to say that she thought Mia had been hard to look at, that she wanted to transform Mia into something beautiful. She wanted to capture something real and lasting and pure. Her father told her once that taking photographs

can completely change a static object, make it into something dynamic, something different, something better. Isn't that what she and her father used to do?

Watching Mia stand there, holding the pictures, Sophie understood why she was upset. Her privacy had been violated. Someone had been watching her without her knowing, creating something permanent that she was never supposed to know about. Sophie had done that to her. But she'd also done it for her. The pictures were beautiful, and Mia looked beautiful in them. Sophie had made that temporary moment of beauty a permanent thing. "You just, when I was taking the pictures, you just looked...so...I don't know. Something just looked so...I just thought there was something important to capture. I just wanted to make it last."

Mia pulled her out her lighter and, holding the photos at a top corner, lit them on fire from the bottom. "You are disgusting. I can't believe I've spent so much time with you."

Sophie watched the photos catch and curl, burning away. "I thought we were friends. I didn't think it was a big deal." Mia would rather spend her time with someone who treated her like garbage, who refused to see what could be spectacular about her.

Once the photos had burnt halfway, Mia said, "We were never friends." She dropped them on the ground and stormed out. Sophie stomped to put out the fire and heard the door slam. No one came to see what had happened, to question the smell of smoke. Only her mother was there to come and Sophie knew that she wouldn't. She opened her desk drawer. The little file of negatives were where she'd left them. The camera was still in her bag, filled with the film from their shoot in the wild. The seeds of the photos were all still in her possession, even if her friend was gone and never coming back.

She walked across the hall to the bathroom to splash some water on her face. She'd just have to start over, she thought. She could make a new friend. She looked at herself in the mirror,



above the bathroom sink. Her cheeks were rosy and plump, her hair curly, her eyes dark. She hadn't been in any of the photos. She'd never been made in an image. She'd only been in window reflections and mirrors and the memories of other people, temporary places. She'd never been fixed in time and space, the way a photo can fix a person, can make them permanent in a way that all of these other places cannot. She'd never been the girl in the picture.

## Never Be Cold Again

Tracy stomped over the crunchy snow between her front door and the driveway. Winter had come early to Cleveland, barely into October. She had been trying to get John to go somewhere warm with her. A decade into their marriage, he never took her on vacation anymore. They used to go all over the world and had a nice enough time. But Tracy had always wanted to relive their honeymoon, an island hop where they lolled on white-sand beaches and floated in salty water for eight full days. She had tried before to get him to take her somewhere, by threatening to book a resort package for only herself. “I’ve reserved it all, John. I’m going without you,” she would bluff. She had figured out how to get other things this way, picking the restaurant by claiming she would starve if they went anywhere else, refusing to give up the lease on her apartment from

before they got married if they didn't buy a house in a very particular neighborhood. The only times the technique hadn't worked: negotiating the terms of their prenuptial agreement and now. After years of trying to explain it to him, waiting for him to change back, to be the romantic man she'd married, she stopped waiting to be whisked away, even for only for a week.

She arrived at work and found her assistant waiting for her in the vestibule outside her office. They walked in together and he said, "Tracy, I have some bad news."

"Are you alright?" She definitely didn't want to have to train a new assistant. She sorted through the messages he'd handed her.

"I'm alright." He sat on the loveseat. Normally, he would have waited until Tracy offered.

"Damnit. You're quitting, aren't you?"

He'd been her right hand for over five years. "I'm not quitting. I like to think of it as seeking out new adventures." His mother was sick; he was moving to Miami to be with her. "I hate to leave but I can give you some time, to help train my replacement."

Tracy collapsed into her chair and spun to face the window. "Can I come with you?"

Her assistant snorted. "Trust me, you don't want to. Retirement community living? Not the best."

Snow was still falling. "At least you'll never be cold again."

"You're right about that."

Tracy changed her to-do list for him. "I'll promote your assistant. For now, your only priority is replacing her."

"Got it," he said, and buzzed out.

As soon as she was alone, she called John. “I really need to get away from work. Let’s go out of town. Somewhere warm. Just me and you and a beach and massages and fruity drinks.” She pictured the tiny earpiece, shackled to his ear, that she knew she was talking into. “It could be good for us, give us a chance to re—”

“I can’t leave.”

“I’m not suggesting we leave forever. Just a trip. A short one.”

“Tracy. I’m in the middle of a merger. I can’t just drop everything to go on a fantasy trip. What’s wrong with you?”

Before she could answer, her assistant’s assistant walked into her office. Tracy held her hand up then swiveled around to face the wall. “I’m just asking for a long weekend, John.”

“What part of, ‘I have to work,’ don’t you get?”

Tracy bit the flesh inside her cheek and said, “Fine. Got it.”

She kept the phone by her ear for a beat, even after John had clicked off, and then creaked back around. She gave the girl her morning to-do list, then added one last thing, “A reservation in the Caribbean, I don’t care where.” She listed what mattered. “Beaches, pool, food, sunshine, spa.” The assistant’s assistant made the reservations: first-class plane ticket, transportation to the resort, suite with Jacuzzi tub. Her staff left Tracy to focus preparing for the relaxation: manicure, pedicure, massage, plenty of strong hands to bring her back to life.

Tracy arrived home after work to an empty house. The assistant’s assistant had come by at lunch to pack her suitcase and left it by the front door. Tracy slid it into the trunk of her car. She fell asleep before John got home and left for the airport before he woke up the next morning. She had left the house in a pair of boots from two seasons before and an old pea coat. From the

airport lounge, she texted him. *Decided to go out of town by myself. Need the break. Home in five days.* Let him get upset. Knowing him, he wouldn't even notice.

She stowed her phone and changed into beachier attire – Bermuda shorts, a tank top, a light cotton scarf, sandals – and added a cardigan, just in case. She waited for boarding in one of the luxe lounge chairs and pictured blue skies and bottomless fruity beverages. Never be cold again, indeed.

She arrived before noon, exhausted from the travel. A man in a yellow polo shirt, torn a tiny bit on one sleeve, held a sign with her last name – her husband's name – on it. When she walked up to him, he simply asked if she was his charge by saying the name, but as a question. She nodded at the man and he took her suitcase and led her to the car. He smelled like sweat and the coconut oil her stylist massaged into her scalp once a month.

As they pulled off the airport road, the driver rolled down his window. Tracy pushed her hair back with her sunglasses. "You know where you're taking me," she commanded although she wasn't quite sure herself. She had left all the details to the assistant's assistant.

"Yes, ma'am," he replied.

Huge and verdant palmettos and banana trees crowded the street. Plastic bags floated along, blown about by the wind. Men lined the curbs, waiting to get picked up, presumably for odd jobs, just like at home. Swarming groups of dark-skinned people in brightly colored clothing massed around water spigots, tables of produce, taxi cabs. As the driver slowed to turn onto a smaller gravel road, two children in raggedy clothes ran alongside the car, dragging behind them a homemade kite, some newspaper, it looked like, taped to twigs. Rather than string, they'd used fishing twine. Just behind the shallow ditch that lined the road in the shade of the banana leaves,

a woman squatted behind a bowl of tropical fruit, mangoes, papayas and other, unrecognizable items.

Tracy leaned back against the car seat. The warm, salty air streaming in from the driver's window was exactly what she had wanted. But she realized on the plane, reading the country profile in the in-flight magazine, that she probably should have gotten some vaccinations before she came. Afraid of mosquitoes and who knew what else, she pulled her cardigan tight over her chest, put down her sunglasses and tried to fall into a nap.

Her cell phone beeped, waking her. She hoped it was John, texting to tell her to have a safe trip. But the text was from her assistant. *Don't know what the office will do without you!* followed by an emoticon sticking its tongue out.

*Live it up*, she replied, then sent a second message. *Stay in touch, direct client calls to my cell*. There were no work emergencies yet. But they cropped up all the time. If she could handle them from the beach, then surely John could have. She could prove it would have worked.

At the hotel, she gave her passport and credit card to the driver while a bellhop brought her and her luggage up to her room. She opened the two French doors that led to her private balcony. The hotel stood perched many stories above the beach. The drumming of waves beating against the sand filled the room, a trance-inducing rhythm.

She had a few needs to attend to and a few choices. She was tired, she could nap. She would be hungry soon, she could order room service. Her neck was tight, she could go to the spa. The beach was sun-kissed by the early afternoon light. She would multi-task, take care of all three at once. She slipped into her bathing suit, packed her sunscreen and her cell phone in her beach bag. She found a chair near the shore, ordered a massage, a chimichanga and a frozen red drink, the one pictured on the front of the menu, from the beach waiter. She fell asleep at some

point after the food but during the kneading and then woke up, her skin a little toasty, but her stomach full and her shoulders relaxed.

The sun had lowered, the beach covered in the hotel's shadow. Almost alone on the sand, Tracy walked along the shore, passing by a couple murmuring in some European-sounding language. Rotund husbands and wives clustered in pairs up and down the beach, retirees wearing oversized woven hats, colorful caftans, sunglasses secured by bungee cords. She smiled at the ones who turned their heads in her direction. No one could make eye contact through sunglasses, but a head nod or grin fostered enough of a connection. The breeze was warm. The sand was warm. Her skin was already crisp. Five days in this heat would be enough. For dinner, she ordered room service: a grilled cheese sandwich and a bottle of wine.

The next day, Tracy went down to the breakfast buffet and snacked on Greek yogurt, manufactured in Ohio, sourdough bread from Connecticut, individual butter packets from Western Canada. Off her normal diet, Tracy wanted her clothes to feel a little snug, to develop that pinch of skin rolling over her waistband, a tightness in the armpit of a t-shirt. She wanted to bring home proof of a successful vacation.

After her morning massage, she ordered her lunch. She timed it so that the plates would be delivered as soon as she returned to her lounge chair after her second beach walk. She went just up to the rocks that marked the boundary of the resort property, on the other side of which the sand became littered with water bottles and condom wrappers. In the distance, she saw a single goat tethered to two different stalks of sugar cane with two different ropes. She walked past the rocks towards the tethered goat. As she neared the little bleating creature, she saw that he wasn't alone. A shirtless man, crouching among the stalks of cane, had built a fire and was using a machete to sharpen a piece of wood into a pointed stake. At first, Tracy didn't register

that he was speaking to her. She stared at him for a moment, until the goat's bleat snapped her out of it. She heard the man, but couldn't understand what he was saying. He stood up out of the crouch, machete in one hand, stake in the other, and seemed like he wanted to walk towards her, to really make her understand whatever it was he was trying to say.

Tracy felt frozen in place, but she knew she had to flee. She unstuck herself and scooted away, turning around only once to see that the man hadn't moved to follow her but had just returned to his crouch. He must not have wanted to be bothered. She wouldn't bother him, then. She should really stay within the marked boundaries of the resort.

As she walked back towards the hotel, a man that she hadn't noticed before came towards her. His skin was red, like hers. He was tall and lanky, with shaggy blond hair. She was going to walk right by him, but he stopped and, nodding towards the direction she'd come, said, "Watch out for the goat man."

Tracy almost tripped over a piece of driftwood when she realized he'd spoken to her. His accent was foreign, Australian or Scottish. "Excuse me?"

"Goat man down there. Watch out for him."

Tracy's eyes widened. "I know. He had a machete."

"No kidding."

She put her hand on her cheek. "Yep. Poor goat." She looked towards the resort. The sun had started to set, leaving the breeze to cool the air. The beach had emptied. "I'm Tracy," she said, offering her hand. "Are you staying at the resort?"

"Frank. And yes. I am."

Tracy looked back towards the goat but the man must have retreated back into the sugar cane. "Well, I'm going to walk back."



“See you around,” Frank said and waved.

Back at the hotel, she squeezed in a mani-pedi just before the spa closed. As her toenails were being filed, she imagined the goat-man’s sharpened stake. His face became a splintery point, his teeth spikes, everything about him morphed into something piercing and pointed. When she ordered dinner, instead of wine, she requested a pitcher of fruity red drink, to take the edge off. She ate on her balcony then moved to her bed to finish the rest of the pitcher and pass out.

The next morning she woke up hungover. The waves, which had lulled her to sleep the first night now sounded like a brass-knuckled punch to her temples. She had left the balcony doors open overnight; the wind felt stronger than the day before. She rummaged through her carry-on. The assistant’s assistant neglected to include the prescription painkillers she kept for hangovers and cramps. She couldn’t find her preferred over-the-counter brand in the hotel gift shop, either. Sunglassed and struggling, she walked up to the counter to ask for them by name, and the young woman at the register said, “Yes, ma’am. Just one second,” and came back with the bottle of off-brand headache reliever that Tracy had found herself and dismissed.

She started to protest, but then realized that it would be futile. “Get me a bottle of water, too,” she said, opening the pills and popping four of them onto her tongue. The girl returned with the water and Tracy chugged it all down, told the girl her room number, and slogged away. Back in bed, she ordered the greasiest hangover breakfast she could think of, waffles and eggs and bacon and sausage, and then considered checking online, to see how quickly she could have her preferred painkillers delivered. Her phone had enough juice to show Tracy that she had a number of unread texts and emails, but when she went to check them, it shut off, out of power. She pulled the charger out and plugged it in. She hadn’t seen if some of the messages had been from

John. She tried to remember the last time they'd gone forty-eight hours without exchanging a text about dinner, the time they'd be coming home after work or leaving in the morning, the balance due to the grass-cutter, the car-washer, the house-cleaner.

Room service knocked on her door. She wolfed down her breakfast and left her phone plugged in across the room. Let John try to text her. Let him sweat it out. She got into bed and slept through the entire day, something she hadn't done since she was a teenager.

When she woke the next morning, she found a note slipped underneath her door. Her daily massage had been cancelled. Just as well, she figured. Her skin was brittle and stiff; it stung at the slightest touch. She packed her beach bag, gingerly covered herself in sunscreen and went down early, to find a chair with a lot of shade. But hotel guests rushed back and forth through the lobby, from the check-out counter to the taxi stand. Suitcases piled up in every corner. She went outside to find her shady beach chair but none of the chairs were out. The wind had really picked up, whipping her linen cover-up against her sunburnt skin. The surf was pretty rough. She looked down the shoreline, wondered if the goat was still tied to the cane, but she ruled out traipsing down there to see.

She went right back into the lobby and found Frank sitting in front of a TV.

"Hey stranger," he said. "I looked for you on the beach yesterday."

"I stayed inside," she replied, sitting next to him on the tiny sofa.

"A vacation day during a vacation. I like it."

The crowd of guests buzzed around them. "What's going on?"

Frank pointed to the TV. "A category one. People are freaking out."

The weatherman explained that a storm was coming, churning right off the coast, its outer bands not thirty miles from the resort. The rain would start any minute. "A hurricane?" Tracy

knew about Katrina and Sandy from what she saw on the news, but she'd never been in one herself.

“It’s barely a hurricane,” Frank scoffed. “I think these old folks just don’t know how to handle the tropics.”

“So should we leave?”

“According to the news, nope. And honestly, I think it’s too late to leave anyway. Don’t worry, though. This happens all the time.”

On the television, the thing looked massive. But even the weatherman said it was a category one. Aren’t hurricanes rated on a scale of one to five? How bad could a category one be? “I’m going to go make a call. Will you be down here for a while?”

Frank put down the remote. “Want me to just come with you?”

The chaos around them worried Tracy. If she separated from Frank now, would she be able to find him again? “Sure.”

They went back to her room and she opened all the windows. Heavy gray clouds massed in the distance, matching the color of the once-blue water. The breeze provided some relief from the heat. “I’ve never been this close to the ocean during a storm like this,” she explained. Frank moved the armchair away from the open windows and sat. They listened to the rain trickling down just like she used to in her old apartment, before she ever even met John. She picked up her phone to call him but the cell signal had gone out. She wasn’t sure if she could trust Frank’s attitude about the hurricane.

“Try the landline,” he said. She picked up the receiver and found a dial tone. She called John at home, then called his cell. He didn’t answer. She called his office and spoke with his secretary. “John’s at a lunch,” the secretary recited.

“I’m stuck in a hurricane,” she told the woman. “Can you give John this number? The hotel number. My cell isn’t working.”

“My husband,” she explained to Frank after she’d hung up. She scrolled through her cell phone, looking at the messages and emails that had come in before service had gone out. Her assistant. Her assistant’s assistant. A few clients.

“He didn’t come with you?” Frank asked.

She shook her head without looking up. “Work.” She plugged her phone back into the charger. “So you really think this will all blow over?”

Frank chuckled. “Yes. It will definitely blow over.”

He must have spent months in the sun every year. His skin was brown and leathery, like a purse Tracy had seen in a store window and coveted for weeks. She had told John about it, waited for Valentine’s Day to come and go and then just bought the thing for herself. “Can we go for a walk?” she asked. “I’m getting kind of stir-crazy.”

“Outside? It’s starting to storm.”

“Just in the hotel.” They walked up and down the inner hallways, took the stairs down two flights to the lobby, walked around the sofas, the tables in the dining room, the area near check-in. Most of the tourists who’d been clamoring to check out had disappeared, either to retreat to their own rooms or to leave town on the last flights or even to just go inland somewhere. Tracy and Frank went to the dining room to order dinner but couldn’t flag down a waiter. At the front desk, they told her that it would be serve-yourself-style until the storm passed. All the meals she’d been eating were deconstructed, displayed as their constituent parts: sliced American cheese still in its packaging, huge tubs of yogurt, raspberries and blueberries and blackberries in plastic containers, eggs, hard-boiled then tucked back into their cardboard

crates. She didn't see any meat so she took two eggs. "You should take a few more for later, just in case."

"What, just in case it gets worse than this?" Tracy couldn't imagine it would get worse than this.

"Just in case," Frank assured her. "They may run out."

"Real luxury," she joked.

"Right? We'll have some war stories at least."

After they'd collected their meals, Frank tried to follow Tracy. But she wanted to just go up to her room, listen to the waves beating the sand and try to sleep through the storm. "I think I'm going to go eat in my room and take a nap."

"You don't want company?" Frank held his two eggs up like some prize he'd won in an arcade.

"I think I just need to lie down," she explained. "I'm sure I'll see you tomorrow. Once this blows over."

"Well, call my room if you need anything," he said and took an old receipt out of his pocket. He wrote his room number on the back.

Up in her room, the air was heavy and the floor near the windows wet from the rain blown in sideways. She toweled up the puddles then pushed her bed against the far wall, as far from the windows as it could go. The rain was thin, the sky purple and bright. Even though she knew it was the afternoon, the sky was the color of night. She tried John again. His secretary would have left for the day so Tracy dialed their house and his cell three times each. If he had come with her, he would be complaining about the lack of wi-fi, the shitty lunch and dinner. If

he had come, they would have probably left already. With nothing else to do, she fell asleep and woke up in the middle of the night when she heard a knock on the door.

The light didn't come on when she flipped the switch. A porter informed her that the power was out and the storm was kicking into high gear. "We'd like all the guests to gather in one of our central ballrooms," he explained. "Just until the danger passes."

Tracy didn't resist. She followed the porter and his candle up to a higher floor, to a windowless room. Emergency lights brightened up the space. The room was not only filled with other hotel guests, like she thought it would be, but locals as well. The place looked like the communal water faucets, the market, the transport hubs they'd passed on the ride in from the airport. White-faced couples here and there peeped out at her, the tourists, she'd supposed, who couldn't get on a plane in time. She didn't see Frank. The porter found an empty spot against a wall for her and made up a bed, just sheets and a pillow on the floor. He pointed to the other side of the room and said, "Bathrooms are there. They are still working." And then he was gone.

Maybe Frank had been wrong. Maybe she should have at least attempted to leave. She tried to fall asleep but couldn't. Everyone around her murmured through the night, telling stories, maybe, soothing their children, speculating about the damage from the storm. She couldn't tell exactly, couldn't understand their language, but still, the chattering kept her awake. She checked her watch. At about four in the morning, she'd decided that she'd rather be upstairs, alone in her suite, than in this conference room with a bunch of strangers. She snuck out and, creeping along the walls of the dark hallway, found the door to the stairs by sheer touch. Just as she made it through the door, she felt a hand on her shoulder and screamed.

"Shhh, it's just me."

"Frank?"

“I saw you getting up. Are you okay?”

She held her hand to her chest and tried to catch her breath. “I’m fine. I’m just...I’m a little freaked out. I’m going back to my room.”

They trudged up the stairs and counted off the floors until they navigated to the right hallway. She unlocked her door and illuminated her room with the flashlight on her phone. Water and glass had sprayed over everything. The windows of her French doors had shattered from beating back and forth against the wall and the rain had blown in all the way across the room. The only dry spot was in the windowless bathroom. “Shit,” she said to Frank.

“The storm will pass,” he reasoned. “Are you always this worried?” He slid his hand around her waist. “Why don’t we go to my room? I didn’t leave my windows open. My room is dry.”

She nodded and followed him, holding his hand as he navigated through the dark hall, up two flights of stairs and to his suite.

Frank pulled Tracy towards him and moved his face around her neck and chest, sniffing her. “I still smell the beach on you.”

Tracy hadn’t been touched by another man, not like this, in over a decade. His grip handcuffed her entire body. She didn’t have anything to say to him. She just waited until he started kissing her ear, her neck, her lips. She kissed him back, let him lay her on his bed and undress her.

When she woke, the sky was gray and heavy but the rain had slackened. Tracy pulled herself out of Frank’s bed and slipped into the hall. Things might be complicated for the next few days, but she would manage to get home. She made her way back to her room. It wasn’t as destroyed as she’d surmised during the night. Under the wet comforter, her sheets were mostly

dry. She used some towels to push the glass to a corner and soak up the water from the floor and then she put on tennis shoes to protect her feet from the broken glass and went out to the balcony. The rain had become a drizzle, but the sea was still choppy and rough, covering the beach she had paced back and forth on. She pulled two of the hard-boiled eggs from her suitcase, threw the shells off the balcony so they wouldn't stink up the room and ate breakfast. The room clean, breakfast eaten, she tried to think of what to do next. Her cell phone still had no service. The hotel still had no power. But the hurricane was passing. It was basically over. She tried John from the landline one more time. If he picked up, she would tell him what she'd done. She'd slept with someone else. Their marriage was over. The prenup guaranteed that he would get their house, their cars, most of their money. She'd have to move into some apartment and start saving all over again. She had her job. It would take a while, but eventually, she'd be fine. Not as good as she was now, but good enough.

She sat in the armchair that Frank had moved to the corner of the room. All she had to do was wait. She almost fell asleep sitting upright. Eventually, she went for a walk throughout the resort to kill some time. But the hotel had become a madhouse. Local families everywhere, crouching in corners, mauling the food that should have been reserved for the paying guests, covering themselves in blankets from guest rooms. She was glad to have taken those hard-boiled eggs. She didn't even go into the dining room to see what hadn't been completely picked over. On the lobby sofas, she sat next to an older couple whose sunglasses she'd recognized from the beach. With no power, the TV was off. "May I ask," she started. "Do you know what's going on with the storm?"



The man handed his unopened yogurt cup to his wife, almost for safekeeping, it seemed, and turned towards Tracy. “Total meltdown in this godforsaken place is what. We should have left when we had the chance.”

“What do you mean?”

“They’ve no plan to get us out. The hotel has no evacuation plans for guests. We’re just waiting for our insurance company to call back.”

“Well things don’t seem all bad,” Tracy said. “I mean, it was only a category one.”

“Why do you think all these people have flocked here?” the man asked, nodding his head forward, although he could have nodded in any direction. “All these godforsaken people from this godforsaken island. You’d think every stinking masseuse in this place has brought their forty-five closest family members here, the way they’re taking over. They’re everywhere. It’s a complete shitstorm out there.”

Tracy looked around for Frank. She didn’t want to marry the guy, but she could use his advice. She saw him walking through the front doors of the hotel and said his name. But the crowd in the lobby was too loud. “Excuse me,” she said to the older couple and scooted away. She followed Frank out of the hotel. Outside, the sun had started to emerge, shooting rays onto the leaves of the banana trees in between the bulbous clouds that still filled the skies. “Frank,” she said again, but he didn’t turn around.

The air was humid and breezy, just like the air on her balcony. Nothing caved in on her. Nothing exploded. She began walking after him, down the uneven gravel road, accidentally dipping her toes into a dark, still puddle. Leaves littered the gravel and nothing was dry, but otherwise, everything looked like it had on the ride in. He turned right a few hundred feet ahead of her. She scurried until she reached the same right turn.

The clouds had really dissipated and the sun beat down steadily on her burnt skin, but the breeze still softened its power. The paved road was covered with debris. Tracy skipped over branches every so often. But otherwise, nothing looked abnormal. The air smelled alive, thick and fragrant with the odor of mud, manure, animals. If anything, the fecund scent, the puddles and drops of water all over everything, reminded her of Cleveland after a heavy summer storm, soaked through and nourished. She always felt that way herself after a demanding workout, when she took that first gulp of cold water and it spread throughout her dehydrated body. She had no idea where Frank was going.

They had passed a market, overturned tables and stalls, butcher stands with rusted hooks hanging down from wooden posts, twisted wire chicken pens, covered with wet straw and mud. No one tried to sell their wares or barter a chicken for a pound of tomatoes. No one was in the market, at the spigot, surrounding cab stands, queuing on the side of the road to be picked up for work.

She finally caught up to Frank when he stopped near a small group of locals, two women and a man. “Frank,” she called out. He turned to her and lifted his hand, telling her to stay away. She wanted him to escort her back to the hotel, so they could go back to sitting tight, instead of being out here, baking in the sun. “What are you doing out here?”

“I came out for a walk. Stay back.” The locals, dressed in bright fabric muddied near their ankles, didn’t look at her.

“I have been following you since you left the hotel. I’m sorry I left this morning. I had to think things—”

“Tracy,” he interrupted, trying to keep her away. But she approached and looked down at the ground. Everyone was staring at a man lying face-down in a puddle.

She turned away and threw up the hard boiled eggs. She looked up at Frank and then ran back the way she'd come. She plowed through puddles and didn't stop when one of her sandals flew off. She kicked off the other one and kept running in her bare feet. She might as well have been running on glass. She had to stop, to throw up once more. Her legs were weak. She paused for a moment, crouched on the side of the road, under the leaves of a banana tree. She fell forward on her knees, dry heaving, then tried to catch her breath. She would just wait for the sun to hide just a bit, for the power to return to her limbs, for just as long as it took for her to be able to stand again and keep walking.

As soon as she made it back to the hotel, she would call John. He would have to answer eventually. She wanted to tell him she was sorry. She wanted to tell him she was coming home.

## Can't Blame a Girl for Trying

Every year, Dede's high school French teacher, Madame, brought a group of students to Toulouse, France for two weeks over the summer. Throughout her freshman year, Dede had never considered the possibility that she would be able to go. She knew that the students were expected to pay for the flight, housing and food. But the summer before sophomore year, when she got an under-the-table job at the discount grocery – all dented cans and expired everything – and she started squirreling away a few dollars, she began to think that, maybe, just maybe, she could make it happen. She would never ask her parents for the money. They had none. Dede had to rely on second-hand bras and donated maxi-pads from their church from the time she was eleven until she started earning her own money and could buy her own bras and tampons at

Walmart. Her best friend Raelynn tried to talk her out of even thinking about going. The summer trip to France was for the other kids.

But with nine hundred in cash by Easter of sophomore year, Dede figured it wouldn't hurt to raise her hand when Madame asked the class if anyone else was interested.

Nine hundred was barely a drop in the bucket, it turned out.

Madame knew Dede needed help and didn't discourage her. Maybe it wouldn't happen after sophomore year, but keep working, Madame said, and we can try to get a grant for you to go. Apparently, once every four or five years, some wealthy Rotarian got it up his ass to sponsor a poor local teenager to do something, go to France, get special test tutoring, pay college application fees. Madame seemed to think junior year could be Dede's year.

Dede's first thought was that she wouldn't even tell her mom. She wouldn't give Dede trouble but she wouldn't exactly understand why Dede would want to spend her money on a trip to France. She had to tell her, though. She was necessary for Dede to even get a passport. When Dede's mom saw the price of the official passport photos from the drugstore – \$9.99 for two – she was speechless. Dede didn't share the price of the actual passport; she left her mom in the car when she went in to get the money order. As long as the paperwork was signed, Dede tried not to discuss any of the details. On the way home from getting her passport, Dede treated them both to Burger King croissan'wiches, a sad approximation of what Dede would eventually get to taste.

The weekend after she'd applied for her passport, Dede told Raelynn her plan. Raelynn had dropped French after sophomore year. "I don't get why you like it so much. Madame has such a stick up her butt."

"I'm good at it, I guess. Speaking French comes naturally to me."

“Yeah, but you’re stuck in class with those bozos.” Raelynn was referring to Charlotte and Dave and Annette, the kids who all took the school bus that went to west, to the side of town with the big houses and cul-de-sacs and the regular grocery store, while Dede and Raelynn took the bus east, to the side of town with no sidewalks and old sofas on porches. Growing up, Raelynn always told Dede her daydreams about Charlotte being hurt in a car crash or a lightning strike, some freak accident that would make her less perfect.

“I just love it when they call me Mademoiselle Dede.”

Focused on polishing her fingernails, Raelynn said, “Well, I’m never gonna call you Mademoiselle anything.”

“Jamais?” Dede asked, the French word for *Never*.

“Jamais, girl.” Raelynn responded.

It didn’t matter what Raelynn thought about Dede’s plan. She had to go to France, she’d decided. She just had to. She loved to have conversations in class, using the vocabulary of whatever chapter they were studying. Certain stuff about Dede’s life didn’t quite come out when they were partnered up during vocab drills to ask, “As-tu des frères ou des soeurs?” and answer, “Je n’ai pas des soeurs mais j’ai deux frères,” and other similar exchanges about family members and school supplies and different forms of transportation. A car was always just *une voiture*, never *un Lexus* or *un Escalade*. A shirt was just *une chemise*; they didn’t yet know the French words for silk or wool or poly-blend.

Dede just wanted to extend those three hundred minutes per week, even if it could only last for a half of a month. It would be full time for those fourteen days at least.

Passport in hand, Dede filed her application just before the start of class one January day her junior year. Red-lipped, Madame explained, “Mademoiselle Dede. Bonnes nouvelles. En

anglais pour comprendre bien.” She’d switch to English so Dede would understand everything. “We were able to secure the grant for you.” They had just returned to school from Christmas break. “In the meantime, here is packing list and orientation booklet. For preparing. Ca va?”

“Oui, Madame. Ca va. Et merci.” Dede was thankful for everything Madame was doing to help her go but didn’t know exactly what was called for to adequately demonstrate her thanks.

Dede slid into her chair to wait for class to start. Charlotte leaned over. “You’re going this summer?”

“I’m going to try.”

“What do you mean try?”

Dede had to decide. Should she spill it, let Charlotte, and consequently everyone else in the class, know that she couldn’t afford the trip? That she would have to rely on the generosity of some stranger that for all she knew could be Charlotte’s father, and hope that this stroke of good luck didn’t fall through? “My parents are so strict,” she lied. “They barely let me out of the house. I’m working on them.”

Charlotte flipped her straight blond hair off her shoulder. “Can’t blame a girl for trying, I guess.”

Dede smiled, as though she and Charlotte were bound by sharing a good secret, then turned her attention to the packing list. Some of the items on the list were obvious. Of course she would pack her toothbrush. She would have to buy her own tube of toothpaste, her own shampoo and conditioner and soap to bring with her. That wouldn’t be too hard, or expensive. But the rest of the list was different. Four pairs of pants or shorts, ten shirts, one fancy blouse, nice slacks or a skirt, one pair of sandals, one pair of tennis shoes and one pair of comfortable walking shoes. Dede had worn a uniform to school her whole life, the same plaid jumper, overbleached white

button-up shirt and run-down saddle oxfords for the past three years. She didn't have four pairs of pants or shorts, ten shirts or three pairs of shoes.

After class, Dede met up with Raelynn in the hall. "Comment-allez vous?" Raelynn asked in a heavy American accent.

"Je vais bien," Dede joked back, using bad French. "I actually have some news."

"Let me guess. Charlotte is pregnant?" Raelynn ventured.

"It's got nothing to do with Charlotte."

"Well, what then, madameweasel?"

They stopped at Dede's locker. "I got the grant. I might actually get to go to this summer."

Raelynn leaned against the wall, hidden by Dede's open locker door. "Well, merde. Awesome."

"I can't believe it."

The first bell rang. "Shit, girl. I gotta run. Let's talk after school."

By the time Dede closed her locker door, Raelynn was already scooting down the hallway. "A plus," she said to her friend, too quiet for anyone to hear. *See you later.*

By early March, Dede's savings had increased by another two hundred dollars. The grant covered her homestay and food, all of the excursions they'd go on. Everything but the flight and spending money. Dede almost had enough to give Madame for the plane ticket. She'd hung the packing list on her bulletin board. She'd dug in the back of her mom's closet for a few old shirts and hoped to keep some of the clothes Raelynn had absentmindedly left in Dede's room after years of sleepovers. She was reasonably sure that she could splurge to buy a new pair of comfortable walking shoes. She didn't ask Madame for any more details about the grant, if it



could be taken away for any reason. She just dutifully showed up to class, participated as much as she could, completed all her homework in a timely manner and otherwise tried to be the ideal student. At the end of the quarter, she had to stand in front of the class and tell a five-minute story using the vocabulary in the most recent chapter: clothes.

Dede had been looking forward to giving the presentation, in which she would use the vocabulary for gloves, hat, pants, and demonstrate her mastery of simple past tense. She relished the opportunity to tell the story in French, to modify the austerity out of it that came with the English version. In junior high, she went with her mom to the high school to pick up her brother during the coldest February of her entire life. She had on her black leggings – an easy word in French, *les leggings* – because she thought they made her look chic and ordinary, all at the same time. They were completely inappropriate for the temperature, though, so she'd covered herself with whatever she could find in the back seat of the car, three old T-shirts and a towel, to keep warm. They rode in her dad's beloved old Mustang, with plywood floorboards and hand-crank windows that wouldn't roll all the way up.

She only translated the one detail about the Mustang into French that the class needed to understand the story: “Le chauffeur n'a pas marché.” *The heater didn't work.*

On the ride to the high school, Dede's mom noticed her stuffing her hands under her armpits to keep them warm. She didn't have the vocabulary to say that her overactive sweat glands jumped into high gear, turning her sweater wet and her hands clammy, making her even colder. She just said, “J'ai mis les mains sous les bras, sous les jambes, sous la derrière,” while pantomiming, *under my arms, under my legs, under my butt*, getting a laugh out of her audience. Charlotte even giggled.

And then, she described her mother slipping her shoes off while she drove – “elle a continué à conduire pendant qu’elle a enlevé les chaussures” – and handing her socks over. *Put these on*, her mother said. In front of the class, Dede explained, “Elle m’a dit à porter des chaussettes comme des gants” – *She told me to wear her socks like gloves* – simple past tense, two vocabulary words in one sentence.

And then she hoped that she impressed Madame by using the imperfect tense, to indicate an ongoing condition in the past. “Et je les ai porté parce que je faisais froid.” *I wore them because I was cold*. Everyone laughed at her story. She loved being funny Mademoiselle Dede.

Before the end of class, Madame passed out homestay packets to the students going on the trip. The first sheet contained a list of rules and regulations about how to behave with the host family, including French customs and norms. The second sheet contained a list of gift ideas for host family members, items they might like from America, like a pennant from wherever Dede planned to go to college or a favorite indulgence from Georgia, like fresh pecans or peach marmalade. The list included a few shops that specialized in gift boxes that could even be sent to France ahead of time.

The bell rang before Dede looked through the rest of the packet. She held onto it until the bus ride home and pulled it out next to Raelynn. They examined the next sheet, which introduced Dede to her host mother. Stapled to the corner of the sheet was a photo of the woman, bright red hair and purple lipstick. She had to be twice as old as Dede’s mother. “Host grandma,” Raelynn snorted. “What does all of this say?”

“I know you can read French.”

“Come on. Just tell me.”

“Her name is Delphine,” Dede translated off the page. “It says here she’s a widow with three grown children who live in Toulouse, but not with her. She doesn’t have grandkids yet, although she’s hoping she will soon. She first became a host mom when her son did a high school exchange twenty years ago.”

“Shit, she must be really old.”

“She sounds sweet.” The bus was nearing their stop, a yield sign on the corner of two country roads.

“Are you sure you want to do this, Deeds? I mean, you can just come over and hang out with my grandma if you want to be around old people.”

Dede slid the papers back into the envelope.

“Although, maybe you will hook up with some hot French guy.”

“You know that’s not the point, Raelynn.”

“Well then, what is the point?”

Dede bit her lip and looked out the window. The bus stopped to let the girls out. At the intersection, Dede said, “It just makes me feel good, talking in French. I don’t know. It takes me somewhere else, I guess. It’s hard to explain.”

Raelynn pulled on the straps of her backpack.

“It’s like I get to go somewhere in my mind, just by speaking it.”

“Cool. Well. I gotta go to work.” Raelynn turned around and started walking down the road.

“A demain?” Dede called out. *See you tomorrow?*

Raelynn raised her arm up and waved it without turning around.

Two months later, the bottom hadn't fallen out. The grant hadn't been revoked. Dede's mom drove her to the airport and dropped her off. "You sure you don't want me to come in?" her mother asked.

"It's fine. You have to get to work anyway." Dede pulled her brother's duffel bag out of the trunk and hugged her mom goodbye. "It's only two weeks."

"Just be safe, Dede. Listen to your teacher."

Dede nodded.

Inside, she met her classmates in the terminal and asked Charlotte if she wanted to sit together on the plane.

"It's not open seating," Charlotte explained.

They compared boarding passes. They had already been assigned seats apart from one another. Dede didn't sit by anyone she knew. So she just melted into her middle seat. She willed herself to fall asleep, then woke up in the morning, frozen in the same position she'd passed out in, upright with her hands on her lap and her legs crossed at the ankles. The stewardess passed out breakfast which Dede greedily accepted, water, coffee, juice, and the warm package within which she found a cheese and ham croissant that reminded her a lot of the croissant-wiches from home.

She ate then slipped up to go to the bathroom. She was sweating everywhere, under her arms, her back, the creases where her thighs met her pelvis, the backs of her knees. As she scooted down the center aisle, she saw Dave and Charlotte, fast asleep and pristine, like porcelain dolls tucked into a bassinet. She pushed into the cramped bathroom and, once inside, she discovered another source of dampness. She'd gotten her period at some point in the night.

“Shit,” she said to herself, realizing that she’d forgotten something in her backpack. But her first two days were light, she reasoned, and she was wearing her old black leggings, so she should be fine until she got her checked luggage. She stuffed a wad of toilet paper in her underwear and tied her sweater around her waist. “It will be fine,” she said to her reflection, almost forgetting to breathe as she scrubbed her hands. “Ca va, ca va, ca va.”

But as she walked back to her seat, she tried to picture the box of tampons in her suitcase. She’d been so proud of her packing. She’d scoured stores and closets and her own dresser drawers for the right clothing based on the list from Madame and had managed to fit everything into her brother’s small duffel. The list made her feel informed, like a seasoned traveler almost. She felt ridiculous now, having left out the most important thing.

At baggage claim, she pulled her bag off the carousel and opened it up, but as she feared, she had forgotten to pack the tampons. She pushed everything back down into her bag and zipped it shut. If she hadn’t packed them, then they were sitting out somewhere in her room. Anyone who happened to walk in, her mother, her brother, her little cousins, would see them. She pulled her bag to a bathroom to replace the tissue from the plane. She wadded up some to use right then and stuffed a few more handfuls in her purse, just in case. As she dragged the duffel out of the terminal and joined her group, she couldn’t get any of the girls alone and, even if she could, she didn’t know who she would try to ask. If Raelynn had been with her, she wouldn’t even need to ask. She would have been able to dig in her purse to find what she needed.

She boarded the bus. Maybe if Charlotte or some other girl from class, sat right next to her, she could quietly ask if they had anything. But no one sat next to her for the seven-hour ride down to Toulouse. The kids who rode the bus at home together stuck together on this bus. Dede was one of the loners. She sat by herself, listening as Charlotte and two of her friends from

second-year spoke to one another in French. Dede had hoped that once they were all in France together, they would speak in French to each other as well, unlike those minutes before and after class. But the girls' accents covered the words like peanut butter in the rooves of their mouths. They sounded ridiculous.

Dede pulled her sweatshirt out from under her to check for dampness. The bus pulled out of the airport and she made sure no one was looking and quickly touched the fabric between her legs. Dry and dry. She put the sweatshirt back beneath her, just in case, and let the lull of the speeding bus rock her to sleep.

She woke up to Madame, speaking in English. The world outside the windows was dark, even though she'd arrived in Paris in the early afternoon. "Today has already been so long for you." Madame walked down the aisle passing out bottles of water and little packets of shortbread cookies covered in chocolate. "We pulling up to the town center very soon, where you can meeting your homestay families. They bring you to your new house, you have dinner with them tonight. We meet again tomorrow in the morning. Des questions?"

Dede screamed in her head, "Can we go buy tampons please?"

She worried that Delphine was too old to have tampons, or worse, too old to even remember what it was like to need them. After months of daydreaming about coming to France, speaking French with real French people, Dede couldn't imagine what the next hour would be like when she met Delphine. As the bus pulled into what Madame called the town center, which seemed like a small plaza with a café and city hall, Dede scanned the buildings for a store. A group of families stood, waiting for the bus to arrive. When she was thinking about what this year would be like, Dede had expected this moment to be one of the most uncomfortable,

meeting a perfect stranger and expecting them to welcome her into their home, to replace her own mother.

The reality felt different. Dede felt the urgency to speak with her host mother, alone. Once she and her bag were offloaded from the bus, she found the woman she'd seen a photo of, with bright red hair, obviously dyed, and that same purple lipstick. She looked older in person than she did in the photo, like a real grandma, which caused Dede to worry that she wouldn't have anything in her house, that Dede would have to figure out how to get something on her own.

She felt grimy, her teeth filmy, her eyes dry. She needed a shower. She needed to make a good impression on her host mother. Dede pulled her suitcase towards the woman and waved hello, holding her hand close to her body. "Salut," she tried. "I'm Dede."

"Salut, ma belle. Enchantée. Je m'appelle Delphine Vuillez, mais tu peux m'appeler Delphine. Mme. Vuillez ne marche pas avec moi." She leaned back and belly laughed. "Tu as faim?"

Yes, Dede was hungry. But her tampon situation clouded her mind. Luckily, Delphine did not intend to take her to a café or restaurant for her first meal in France.

"J'ai préparé un grand repas chez nous," she exclaimed.

Hearing French from a real French person in France, Dede struggled to slow down Delphine's words as they entered her mind, to understand. She got that Delphine had prepared a meal, that they were going to her house – no, *our* house – to eat. "Fantastique," Dede managed and they piled into Delphine's tiny car and drove home.

Luckily, on the ride, Delphine inquired about Dede's condition. "Tu es fatiguée?" she asked.

“Oui,” Dede responded. Very tired, she thought.

She tried to remember how to say period in French. She was almost positive that it wasn't just “la période,” that it was something else. But in French class, she'd never had the need to say it. She knew the word for eraser, duck, computer. But not period. When they arrived at Delphine's little cottage, as soon as they walked into the foyer, Dede began to cry.

Less than an hour after their meeting, Delphine pulled Dede into her arms. “Ma biche, qu'est-ce que c'est?” Dede barely hugged her own mother, but smothered by Delphine's sagging folds, Dede couldn't have felt more relieved.

Once she composed herself, she pulled away and murmured, “Ma période,” but Delphine didn't react. She didn't seem to understand. So Dede separated herself completely and managed to say the only relevant word she could come up with, “Le sang, le sang,” *blood, blood*, while pointing to her groin.

For a second, Delphine didn't say anything. She just looked at Dede, her face frozen, her eyebrows clenched into furry mounds. “Le sang?” Delphine whispered, as though trying to solve a riddle. “Le sang?” Then finally, she understood. “Les règles! Ah, les règles. La pauvre, tu as les règles? C'est pas un problème.” And she became a tornado of activity. “A bath,” she ventured in English. “Une douche. Tea, et après quelque chose très, très petit to eat.”

Dede hesitated, but had to ask. “Je n'ai pas...” she stumbled. “Je n'ai pas...” Was the French word for tampon just *le tampon*? “Je n'ai rien,” she finally managed to say. *I have nothing*. “As-tu quel-que chose?” she finally asked. *Do you have something?*

Delphine laughed. “Ah, ma pauvre. C'est pas un problème.” She led Dede into the bathroom and opened the cabinet, revealing a box-shaped bag of maxi-pads, a brand Dede recognized from home. Dede hated to use maxi-pads, hadn't used them in years, but they were



better than toilet paper, she figured. She didn't have any other choice. She hadn't seen a store while in the town or on the ride to Delphine's. If maxi-pads were going to be the most disastrous thing about her first night in France, she'd manage. She certainly saved enough spending money to be able to buy some tampons, even if the exchange rate wasn't the most favorable.

“Et demain,” Dede began. “Pouvons-nous aller au magasin?” *Tomorrow, will you take me to the store?* she asked in perfect French.

## The Mentor

The new prisoner I'm supposed to be tutoring is in here. I give him an independent assignment and try to grade practice tests students are taking to prepare for their upcoming GED exams. As soon as this tutoring session ends, the guard will take me to the auditor in the warden's office. They want to talk about what happened between Herman and Silver. I can't look around the library without expecting to see the two of them, but day after day since it happened, I look up and don't recognize the beady-eyed, tooth-sucking men who sit in their seats. I'll tell the auditor that I didn't have anything to do with what happened.

I advised Herman to stay away from Silver, more than once. I knew Silver was a thug from the moment we first met him, a total brute. Decaying yellow teeth, a belly unrestrained by his shirt buttons, *fuck* every other word out of his mouth. He was someone who could change the temperature of a room, who would plant in people a strong desire to flee along with an inability

to move. Herman must have thought he could help Silver, help him pass the GED and get a better job in the prison, maybe, or help him really learn something about our world or about himself. In the end, Herman did what Herman wanted to do. He didn't listen to my warnings. In the end, I can't do much more than try to help. I can't control anybody else. Just me.

Back when I was waiting for my sentence come down, I saw a doctor for a few weeks who taught me a trick. When something is burning me up or I'm waiting and waiting for something I don't want to come but I know will come no matter what, he advised me to think about the things I've accomplished, I write them down if I can. That doctor called them affirmations.

I'm sitting here, waiting for the guard, and I try to scribble down my accomplishments but my fingertips feel like cotton swabs. I can't write. I just think them over and over in my head, try to etch them in my brain so I can lean on them later. "I added five pounds on the bench press. I smoked no cigarettes. I helped two people learn to read." I wait and I repeat these affirmations, "I help people learn to read, I help people learn to read." If I'm feeling really low, writing them makes them feel more permanent. I pocket them so that, later, maybe during a blue moment in the middle of the night, I can read them and be reminded of all that I'd accomplished. But just saying them over in my head helps too. "I teach people how to read."

I've helped many people learn to read, actually. I built the prison library into what it is today, my space, the only place I can control. When I first got here, the room had two shelves, twelve books and one three-legged table propped up on the fourth side by a stack of old GED test booklets. No chairs, no pens or pencils. Only one of the three lightbulbs even worked.

Over the ten years I've been in here, I've slowly managed to get money allocated towards it, all because I argued and argued that the library can help, can rehabilitate. We live in a world

where we all wish to change something that can't be changed, and the library felt like the place where we could, if not change the past, change the future that seemed so determined, so set in stone. All this time, we've done it my way, picking students we thought we could reach, the ones that didn't seem too far gone. Students would come in whenever they could, collect a blunt-ended pencil nub and blank sheets of scratch paper to work in the booklets that are now on a shelf, or just to read one of the almost four thousand paperback books that we've managed to collect. The pressure started building, though, when the new mandate to increase GED pass rates came down. It's how Silver first came our way. We'd had one or two Silvers over the years, all tough and loud and easy to explode. We thought we could handle it. Silvers are all over the place.

But in all this time, I've only had one Herman. Herman, so unlike the other men, slight and short-torsoed, hair buzzed to just above his ears, the remaining black mane neatly trimmed and slicked down with grease. So unlike the shaved heads, everywhere, bobbing in lines to get to the mess, the rec room, the yard. Herman, who wanted to talk about the books that he'd read, the plays he'd seen. He even once suggested forming a theater troupe in the prison. Herman was my best friend.

Two guards knock on the frame where a different library would have a door. One motions for the kid I wasn't tutoring, the other for me. My guard, a new one I don't recognize, leads me down the hall even though I'm walking a pace or two in front of him. He points to a chair across from the auditor's desk and I'm glad to sit. I'm still feeling woozy. I've been nervous about this meeting, waiting to find out what happened between Herman and Silver.

I'd never met with this guy before although I'm pretty sure he's read my letters, that he's the guy I wrote and wrote and wrote to get funding for the library. He clears his throat but

doesn't introduce himself or ask me my name. He just nods at the guard who moves from breathing down my neck to the corner of the office about five feet away from us. Then, the auditor recites the first question without so much as looking up at me.

“How did Marvin Silver and Herman Gonzalez meet?”

“I believe they met in the library, sir.” I knew they met in the library. I introduced them. Herman and I had been working together for what felt like so long I couldn't remember the time before. In the beginning, we were almost able to pick and choose who needed to use the library. Herman and I would talk to select people about how to come spend their time either teaching, depending on what they did on the outside, or studying, if they needed to. But, state budget cuts meant increased scrutiny over our programs. The governor needed proof that we were making a difference, so we had to take on students that we hadn't really wanted, the ones like Silver, and ensure they earned GEDs. We didn't have a choice. It wasn't a question we could say yes or no to. Failure to get them to pass would jeopardize the future of the library, and our being in it. Once the Silvers found out they would get a two-cent raise and priority consideration for the cushier jobs that could be found, they wanted to pass just as much as the governor wanted them to. When I told Herman we would be having some new, possibly more difficult students, he was unfazed.

“I can handle it,” he promised, his dove-small body leaning forward over the desk.

“We'll be fine,” he assured me.

I had wanted to put my hand on his shoulder, squeeze it maybe, but I held back. He picked up the papers he'd been working on, jostled the bottom edges against the table to align them then placed them down.

“We can handle it,” he said.

“How would you describe their relationship?” The auditor still just reads off his sheet, looking down, fingertips poised over the keyboard, ready to type.

“Teacher and student, I suppose. Herman was helping Silver prepare for the GED. We were all working hard to increase our pass rates.”

“When did Gonzalez start coming to the library?”

Herman and I met in the yard one day. I could see him, all diminutive and nervous, so I wandered over to him and started talking. I got this feeling, that he and I would have stuff to talk about. I asked him which concert he’d last seen, and sure enough, he named one. I didn’t recognize the band, but just that he did go to concerts, that he could remember them, made me think he might remember other things too, like books and movies and maybe even plays. Turns out he did.

I remember holding onto the rusting chain link of the fence he leaned against. He didn’t ask me anything, only meekly responded to my questions. His body spare and slight, he seemed to want to take up as little space as he could. He even squinted his eyes into slits. His quiet came from his shaky English.

“I run the library here,” I told him. “You should come.”

“What would I do there?” he asked, all monosyllables.

I told the auditor, “He must have come to the library, I don’t know, within a few months of getting here. His English wasn’t great, it was okay but not great. So, that’s why he made a request. We worked that out quick, and then he stayed around, to help out, shelve books and what-not. And then because of the testing pressure, I trained him to help me teach.”

“Do you regularly allow students to teach each other?” He stops typing and deepens his hunch over his desk. When we were first directed to expand our services to anyone who was

interested, I thought we could handle it. I had been determined to prepare Herman well. But sitting across from the auditor, I realize that I may have made a mistake. He might want to conclude that the library was the source of Herman and Silver's altercation. And if it was, then, maybe, after years and years of building the thing into a place where we could come, read, write, learn, a place where I could teach again, this stupid fight or whatever between these guys could be the end of everything I built. All of a sudden, I go from peripheral party to eyewitness and accessory. I'm the kid in the principal's office, being accused of letting someone else cheat off my test, about to have my reputation permanently tarnished, my few pleasures taken away forever.

I choose my words carefully. "He's not really a student anymore. He works in the library, more like."

I had made it a point to select Herman when I was able to pick an assistant after two years of badgering. The position came with privileges, or at least the absence of undesirable responsibilities. No more carrying ten-gallon cans of tomato paste from the shed to the kitchen or hiding inside a plastic apron and oversized latex gloves. I wanted to do that for him, get him out of hauling heavy or dirty things. I wanted to give him a place to keep studying whatever he wanted, to keep learning as long as he wanted. Maybe even to help him learn how to teach others. I thought about all the people we could help, together. I just had to build the way how.

"And what about Silver?"

I knew they had fought, really fought, out in the yard a few days before. I hadn't seen it, but I heard enough about it to know that Silver attacked Herman, that any damage done to Silver must have been caused by Herman acting in self-defense. I didn't know if they had been sent to the hospital or to solitary. They could have both been dead. I couldn't imagine Herman doing

any damage to anyone. I tried to wrap my mind around it, tried to picture him hitting or kicking or stabbing, and I just couldn't.

“Silver came to the library as part of that program, the rehab program we added. He ended up being very smart, brushed up on his reading skills real quick, so much that he was going to test.”

“To test what?”

He knows. He had to know. He seems like he just wants me to say it, like I'm admitting something bad, something nefarious. “The GED. That's the whole point of the program, to increase the GED pass rate. We really have been under a lot of pressure to prepare them for the exam for the high school diploma. That's what Gonzalez was helping Silver study for.”

I know what he is thinking, even though he just pecks away at his keyboard, never looking my way. He's thinking what everyone on the other side of the desk is thinking, whether they say it or not. I know he's thinking, and *then what?* All of them think these rehabilitation programs were a joke. They were pawns just as much as we were, carrying out orders that came from above. But I don't care so much about the *then what*. I will do whatever I have to if it means keeping the library. I knew that the closer Herman and Silver got to the exam date, the more difficult the assignments became. Maybe that's what started the fight. Silver having to write essays no one would read, essays he had to evaluate himself. He hated it if no one was going to read them and tell him how good he was at writing.

The auditor motions for the guard to remove me, but before I can bite my tongue, it comes out of my mouth. “Can Gonzalez have visitors?”

Finally, he looks at me. “Not Silver?”

I know I shouldn't have asked. “Either of them. Both of them.”



“No visitors.”

I get up and let the guard lead me from behind. At least I know now that they're alive, wherever they are.

I see Silver two weeks later, during rec. He's in the yard playing basketball, banging the ball against the chain net every chance he got. I'm sitting in my normal spot on the bench, in the shade of the tall southern wall. I have heard bits of what happened, that Herman knocked Silver on the back of the head with some object, hard enough to make him bleed. Just because we don't have guns in here doesn't mean there isn't a lot of danger. It's amazing what a man can accomplish through sheer force of will, if he wants it badly enough. Weapons are everywhere: cracked cafeteria trays, pencils, bedsheets, sauted pieces of chain link, even a sheet of paper could do some damage. A man can find whatever he needs as long as he's looking.

Once Silver turned around, Herman was easily overpowered. Silver jabbed him and cut him and punched him until a guard eventually came and put a stop to it. I can picture Herman, pinned under Silver's heavy body, being pressed against the ground, smushed like beaten veal. Herman's in the medical ward, I've found out. He's conscious, he'll recover. But he's there and Silver's here in the sunshine. From where I'm sitting, I can't even see a scratch on him. Herman won't be out for almost a month.

Rec is just about over, and I decide I don't want to watch Silver playing basketball without knowing exactly how Herman is. But I can feel eyes on me as I make my way inside to watch a bit of television before dinner. They burn into me, like a piece of smoldering ash dropping into the pit of my stomach. Silver and I had never had a problem and I didn't know he'd had a problem with Herman either. But I guess twenty-four hours is all it takes to make an enemy or become one. I let him stare. It's the only choice I feel like I've got.

Not a week later, Silver makes his way to me in the library. He has a greasy brown beard, starting to be flecked with gray, and almost spits, “What’s up, Teach?” He towers over my table, sucking on an empty candy bar wrapper.

I knew he’d come. He knows as well as I do that I need him to pass. I’ve been waiting for him.

“Silver.” I fight to keep my face from tensing.

He pulls the chair out, scraping its metal legs against the concrete floor, and sits across from me. This close up, I can see that he is injured. A yellow bruise, the color of pus, pulses on his temple. Under his chin, black stitches protrude like whiskers from a scabby gash. I’ve spent years trying not to take sides, trying to just help anyone who needed it, no matter what. But when I look at those stitches, I see Herman clawing to save himself and I can’t think of a single way that this whole thing isn’t Silver’s fault.

“I’m supposed to take the GED next month. Get my little raise as soon as I pass. And from what I hear, it’ll help you out, too. I’m still good?” Each time he breathes, his belly heaves toward the table. Even sitting in the chair, he towers over me.

I put on my glasses and look up at him, hitting the eraser of my pencil against my notebook in time with the beating of my heart. If I ask him what happened, will he tell me? Or will he just slam me against the wall, squeeze my neck with his bare hands until my head shoots straight off? I flip through my calendar and sure enough, written on a date three weeks from now, small and slanted in Herman’s perfect hand: *Silver Test, 9 AM*. I have no choice but to help him even if I never want him to take the GED. Silver belongs in the steaming kitchen or laundry room, with wet sheets thumping in the dryer like the beating of some uncivilized tribal drum.

“Come back tomorrow at one,” I tell him.

He does come back and I sit next to his rotting stink and try to teach solving for  $x$  even though I'm sure Herman has gone over it a million times. I explain, "If you subtract four from one side of the equation, you have to subtract it from the other side, too. Do you understand?"

And he grunts, a statement I'd learned from months before that meant, "Probably, yeah." I know that Silver is not stupid. He grasps the rudimentary skills required to pass the math section of the GED. He knows the difference between the topic sentence of an essay and the introductory sentence of a paragraph. I have read proof that he can come up with a thesis statement, in words, written on paper. I know he can pass the test, even if I believe he belongs out on the asphalt court, playing basketball with the bulky, dirty men that are his people. I wouldn't call their play graceful, exactly, although they do keep making baskets, stealing balls, dribbling, passing the ball in and out of their legs. They do it with very little skill, though. Just force, it seems, as though any one of them might pop the ball they grip it so hard. I don't know how many of them would pass the GED, but I do know that Silver could.

A few days later, Herman finally finds his way back to the library, limping. I can see that I've failed him. It doesn't matter who started the fight. I should have been there to protect him, to try and pull the brute off him. He had always seemed so capable, though, once his English became strong and he took on more responsibility in the library. I remember how, two afternoons a week, I would watch him and Silver sit side by side, going over graphs and charts and excerpts from the great books. They had never had a problem, or if they had, they never asked for my help. Wouldn't I have noticed that some tornado was gaining strength between them? How could I have missed it?

He drags himself to the table and sits across from me. The hair on the normally shaved swath of his head has started to grow out and his face is sallow and sunken. When he looks me in

the eyes, I have to look away. That's when I see his wounds, some uncovered and some bandaged. The uncovered ones weren't cuts or gashes. Brown wormholes, little craters, ringed red, like he'd been stabbed by a straw or a thick splinter, dot his arms. I count more than ten of them and then remember to breathe. He cringes. "I can't even hold a pencil," he says as he lifts his casted arm.

"I missed you," I tell him.

He doesn't talk about the fight or about his time in the medical ward. I haven't read any books lately and if he has, he doesn't say. We sit quietly with one another and I feel as though we don't need to speak, that maybe if I feel this blanket of calm just because he's here, that maybe he feels the same way.

Finally, though, I ask a question that is so ridiculous, I don't think he will even attempt to answer it. "Why didn't you try to get help? Or at least ask me?" I ask it even though I know the answer. Even if Herman had tried to get help, what would it have looked like? In here, if you're getting hit in the front, help would just come in the form of getting hit in the back too.

Herman forgives me for asking by smiling, just a little. He's back to trying to shrink into the smallest amount of space he can. I go to the shelf to pull the book he was reading before this all happened. He opens it and looks like he's trying to read it although it must be hard for him to concentrate, and I realize I have to help my friend, now, after the fact. I can't let him be mauled and stand idly by.

I won't let Silver have the thing he wants, the thing he knows I need to make sure he gets. I won't let him pass the test. I'm the one who gives the materials to the men in the office who score the Scantrons and when I deliver his, I will just give them the wrong answer key so that, no matter how many questions he got right, he'll have gotten them wrong.

Every day for those three weeks, Silver comes into the library and we sit together, learning and reviewing strategies for solving word problems, reading paragraphs about terrariums and bank tellers, finding correct answers to multiple choice questions. I give him a timed practice test so he will know what it's like to be under that kind of pressure. While he concentrates on bubbling in his answers, I look around the library, at the pointy edges of the tables, the sharpened pencils, the jagged metal casing of the light fixtures.

When the day of the test finally comes, I arrive at the library to prepare. I pull out his test booklet and a blank Scantron and sharpen one pencil for him and another six for myself. I sit at the table and open the test, reading the questions and answering them, one by one. If the answer is B, I fill in the C bubble. Every fifth question I answer correctly. I finish the test and put the sheet in a folder, then wait for Silver to arrive. Others come to the room, to read books and study for their own tests but I am waiting for Silver. I wonder if he will be nervous, but when he finally comes, he explodes into the room, disrupting everyone. "Ready for me, Teach?" he almost yells.

I sit next to him during his three allotted hours, as he flips through the first section of the book, the math, then moves onto reading comprehension. He uses the eraser of his pencil to follow the sentence he's reading then flips it over to scribble on his scratch sheet or fill in his answer. My pencils sit in my pocket. I feel the sharp tips prick my thigh. I imagine slamming his head into the pointed edge of the table. He flips the page to begin science and works through the graphs and charts and then finally passes the completed Scantron over to me and starts writing his essay. No matter what he composes, he needs the scores from the Scantron to pass.

His final thirty minutes are almost up. "You have one minute to finish," I tell him.

He doesn't respond. He finishes the sentence and scans the essay before sliding it over to me. He sighs and a gust of stale breath wafts in my direction. "I think I did okay," he says.

“We’ll know in a few weeks. Come by next month.” I collect his booklet, his scratch paper, his answer sheet and his essay.

He pushes back from the table and starts to walk out of the library. “Thanks for everything, Teach,” he calls to me from the doorway.

He shouldn’t have been thanking me. I wasn’t the one to help him. I nod anyway and as soon as he’s gone, I swap his Scantron with mine, place his test packet in the outgoing pile. A guard will come collect it soon.

I fold up his answer sheet and slip it into my pocket.

## An Act of Consolation

Tilda helped her granddaughter, Maryam, search for a book to read from Haley's old bookshelf. She steadied Maryam as the toddler wedged her chubby fingers between a fat, blue-spined paperback and a tall, thin Little Golden. Both fell to the ground: *Rough Guide Ukraine* and *Mother Goose*. "*Mother Goose* seems more appropriate, don't you think?" Tilda gathered her granddaughter, propped the book open and began to read out loud.

Just as they finished, the doorbell rang, one buzz followed by a cackling witch, an audible Halloween decoration from four years before that her ex-husband Todd never dismantled. Tilda straightened her freshly dry-cleaned silk shirt, her white slacks, and carried Maryam to the front door. Expecting the government social worker to be a dour woman in a fraying black pant suit, she found instead a girl no older than Haley would be, all expertly curled hair and recently applied lip gloss, extending a hand. "Mrs. Nobles?"

“Just call me Tilda. Hope the drive wasn’t too much.”

“Not at all,” the woman responded, clutching her briefcase in one hand and tickling the little girl with the other. She spoke to Tilda but didn’t move her eyes away from little Maryam. “Much easier than this one’s fantastic voyage. I’m Violet Schramm. I haven’t seen her in weeks.”

“You’ve met before?” Tilda led Violet to the kitchen and turned on the kettle. “Please.” She gestured towards the attached formal dining room. “I’ve set us up in there.” Unopened mail and overstuffed manila folders covered all but two of the dining chairs. Empty boxes of colorful playsets and plastic dolls of all sizes were stationed in front of the fireplace. The official condolence letter, printed on Oval Office card stock and signed by the President, perched in a frame on the mantel, alongside Haley's graduation photo. Fixings for tea and coffee sat on the table along with shortbread cookies, two different types of jam, chocolate truffles and fruit salad. “It’s past lunch but not quite dinner,” Tilda explained. “I thought we’d snack.”

“Sounds good to me. May I?” Violet held her arms towards Maryam, taking her from Tilda's silken embrace. She hadn’t yet made a sound.

“So you’ve met before? You were saying?”

“Yes. They didn’t tell you? I was her social worker from the start. I met her on the base in Germany, I accompanied her to Fort Duke, to all her doctor’s appointments. I even took her shopping.”

“I had no idea. I thought they just sent you to check on the state of the house, to make sure everything was in order. What did they say? Suitable?”

“Suitable and fit for a young child,” Violet answered, stroking Maryam's hair as she slobbered on the three fingers she’d stuck into her mouth.



“No, Violet, I had no idea. I suppose we owe you a huge debt.” The kettle steamed. Tilda made a pot of French press and brought it along with the rest of the hot water for tea. “I can’t believe she’s been here for three whole weeks.”

“I see the bruises have faded quite well,” Violet said to Tilda, still looking at Maryam.

“Do you know how she got them?”

“It could have been anything. Those men are used to carrying a hundred pounds of food, clothes, weapons. They are incapable of handling anything lightly. And she traveled on a tanker for over forty miles...those don’t exactly come with car seats. When we met in Berlin, she was pretty beat up. Bruises, some scrapes and brush-burns. Diaper rash, too.”

“We’ve already worked on the potty,” Tilda interrupted. Maryam would turn, or had turned, three after all. They guessed she was born in the early winter, at some point during November or December. No matter when her birthday fell, she would still be expected to use the toilet eventually.

“She’s really filling in.” Violet caressed her head, smoothing down the black hair to the curls at the bottom. “Have you been calling her Maryam?”

Tilda poured tea. “No, I haven’t brought myself to do that quite yet.”

Maryam removed her hand from her mouth and watched with her deep, black eyes as her spit webbed from her lips to her fingers.

“Will you give her a different name?”

“I think so. I think that’s the plan.” Tilda glided her fingertips over the freshly pressed tablecloth. “It’s like adopting a dog, though. You always feel so bad changing its name because that’s how he knows himself. But if you don’t change it, all those years of whatever came before, well, they never quite go away.” Tilda wondered what she could ever name this girl. She

couldn't call her by her given name, the name on all her documents and certificates, a name that had probably once been on her father's lips. Could she dare name the girl Haley? "I've been calling her Honey."

Violet nodded. "That's what we called her, the whole time we were processing her."

"Private Brigby told me. It's a nice nickname. In the meantime, anyway, it will do."

Honey. It was a non-name, a nickname for a new lover, a cute puppy, a soldier's favorite gun. For Tilda's only granddaughter, it didn't quite fit. Not for this child. Not for Haley's daughter.

"I guess we should get down to it, then." Violet stood and brought Maryam to Tilda. They left the coffee and tea and sweets untouched. "May I look around?"

Tilda stood up and again smoothed her slacks. Maryam lingered by her side, grasping her grandmother's dangling pinky and ring fingers. "Of course. Is there anything in particular you need to see?"

"Just, you know. Where she sleeps, plays, eats. Got to make sure there aren't any exposed electrical outlets. On my own, if possible. If you don't mind. Protocol," she shrugged, as if it explained everything.

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From the downstairs half-bathroom, Tilda heard Violet rooting around the house, opening drawers and shutting them gently, moving chairs and curtains to check various walls and surfaces. Tilda had retreated to this bathroom almost two years earlier when she and Todd first received the news about Haley. They knew it was coming, had to have known. They had been

swabbed and sampled, little bits of them reunited with the bits of Haley that had made it to some lab in Washington. About that, Todd knew all the details. Tilda refused to know them.

The day the two officers delivered the results confirming that their Haley was gone, Todd banged through the house, slamming the back door shut so fiercely that its window pane cracked. Tilda had hid in a closet.

From the bathroom, Tilda heard a muffled *Fuck* and a bit of loud stomping. Violet must have tripped. Maryam sat on the toilet. Tilda waited for her to go, watching from the mirror, while checking her own silky hair for strands of gray or silver. Disappearing from the edges inward because of moisture and window cleaner, the sticker of Brandenburg Gate they'd brought back from Berlin still lingered on the bathroom mirror.

After two years in Dobrotvir, a small Ukrainian village, Haley hadn't wanted to come home, and Todd encouraged her to explore, told her that her youth was the time for adventure. She found poorly-paid work in Berlin, assisting immigrants with asylum applications, job coaching and finding basics like toiletries and beds for the night. When she hesitated to come home for Christmas, Todd planned a family trip to Germany. They toured Tiergarten, as long as the cold would allow, the Holocaust Museum, Checkpoint Charlie, the Berlin Wall. They traveled by train to Sachsenhausen-Oranienburg since they didn't have enough time to go further away, to Dachau or Auschwitz. Haley saw these sights for the first time with her parents, despite having been in Berlin for almost a year.

The family never made it to see the refugee center, where Haley worked, an hour outside of the city in Fürstenwalde.

It had been over twenty years since Tilda had potty-trained Haley. Maryam finally went a little. Tilda wiped the baby and washed her hands then took her out of the bathroom, running into Violet at the foot of the stairs.

“Just want to make sure I know where I’m going.” The social worker had removed her jacket. Underneath it, she wore a white V-neck shell and, Tilda could see, a black bra. “Where have you made up Maryam’s room?”

At the top of the stairs, Haley’s door was shut. Years before, as a girl, she taped a sign, a star cut out of yellow construction paper, her name written in red. Tilda tried to remove it but the tape peeled off the paint. She would get rid of it as soon as she found time to repaint the whole door. “Haley’s old room, right at the top of the stairs.”

Violet held her clipboard close to her chest. “Will I know—”

Tilda nodded. “Her name is on the door.”

Violet hesitated from the third step and looked back at Tilda and Maryam. The little girl didn’t squirm, just insistently sucked on her fingers and thumb. “When did she last live here? If you don’t mind me asking?”

From the start of high school, Tilda tried to help Haley find direction. She loved languages, and was good at them. Fluent in French and Spanish by the end of her freshman year of college, she thought about translation. “You could work for the government,” Tilda suggested without specifying which branch, which office, might need her.

“Who would I be translating for?” Haley’s courses always focused on France and Spain, Europeans who spoke English as well as their native tongue.

“We’ll figure it out,” Tilda assured her, not certain of an answer. Definitely, the government would find a place for Haley. And her parents would keep a place for her, too, in case it didn’t work out. Haley abandoned translation after she failed a medieval French course.

“Before the Peace Corps,” Tilda answered. “She actually hadn’t been home since then. She went from the village to Kiev to Berlin.”

“How long ago was Berlin?”

“Oh, she got there...” Tilda looked at Maryam, as though her three years were the foundation on which Tilda now made calculations about Haley. “More than four years ago, I guess. Five.”

“And you kept her room all this time?”

Violet, Tilda thought, did not have children. Must not. Haley, her only child, was always welcome back in their family home. Would always have a place. “We never had anything else to do with the room,” she answered, gesturing around her large, empty house.

Nodding, Violet padded up the stairs. Tilda took Maryam out to the front stoop.

One year after the family’s visit to Germany, Haley disappeared. No one ever learned the exact circumstances of her going away, although Tilda imagines she was kidnapped, that some man or men, maybe ones Haley knew, put a burlap sack over her head, something porous rather than a plastic bag. Tilda always pictures dust and dried twigs shaking loose from the itchy, woven fabric, sticking themselves in Haley’s hair while they traveled east. She forces herself to believe that Haley breathed deeply through that musty cloth, that she fell asleep at some point on the voyage, and that she dreamt of the day they’d walked under the Brandenburg Gate and into the park, shivering and sipping hot chocolate.

From the State Department report, Tilda learned that the day after she disappeared, her co-workers noticed that she wasn't at work. The day after that, her boss went to her apartment and knocked but Haley didn't answer. Two days after that, he unearthed her file from Human Resources and found Todd and Tilda's contact information. By telephone, he notified them about the situation. For two months, they didn't know what happened, just that Haley was gone. Time, stubborn and slow, stopped moving forward. Tilda filled her days up to try to make them speed by: she showered whenever she had a moment; she dusted the baseboards every morning; she scrubbed the kitchen counter so much that a small canyon had started to form. And then, two months after Haley was taken, an officer called Todd and Tilda to give them the news: Haley was still alive. She had been kidnapped.

Their life filled up like a balloon attached to a helium tank. Vigils. Prayers. Photos. Teddy bears. Candles. American flags. Ribbons tied around the metal of chain link fences. Tilda saw Haley, a schoolchild in a plaid jumper, tying yellow ribbons to those same metal links to remind passers-by of soldiers overseas, to remind civilians to think of them, to keep them afloat in their thoughts. Todd wanted to visit the site in Berlin where she'd been kidnapped. Tilda insisted he stay home, to help the volunteers. Endless calls. A meal train. Phone banks. Cash rewards.

Tilda had to find an appropriate photo of Haley to mount on the buttons they would pass out at the grocery store and the shopping mall. The buttons would raise awareness of the efforts to bring Haley back. Tilda unearthed her favorite picture of Haley, from her fourteenth birthday party, a picture Haley had hidden because of the spray of acne on her chin. To Tilda, the acne, along with the toothy smile and wide-open eyes, all showed Haley at her happiest. Haley at

fourteen. Haley without a care in the world. Todd had to tell Tilda that the photo wouldn't work. It wasn't current enough.

Four-hundred and seventy-eight days after Tilda and Todd heard that their daughter had been taken prisoner, their contact with the State Department asked them to go to a lab and give blood. Another eighty-four days passed. Finally, the soldiers came. They brought notification, an official letter on richly embossed paper. Haley had been found; she was an American casualty.

Now, Violet the social worker, tore through their house as another day with Maryam closed in and the chilly dusk crept downward. This had been Haley's favorite time of day. When she was younger, she said she never knew the best way to enjoy it. Was it while sitting on the porch, actively using every sense to soak up the fading light, the cooling air, the spirits of all those creatures that stay hidden during the day but creep out at night? Or was it better to be caught up in a soccer game or going for a jog, actively oblivious yet almost participating in the closure of the day?

No one was on the street. The front of the house faced east, so Tilda couldn't watch the sunset from there. The sky darkened down onto her and Maryam, who sat on the cold lawn, pulling out small handfuls of grass and dirt and weeds.

Tilda and Todd had been on this lawn, chatting with their neighbors last August when officers, different officers, came again. Tilda hadn't realized they were military at first because they drove up in an unmarked, white car. But two men in uniform, just like the messengers who had come before, walked up to give them more news.

Even as they approached, the lightness of summer lingered. The small happinesses she'd managed to find after two years of Haley being missing and one year of Haley being dead

burrowed in now and anchored in a way Tilda hadn't thought would be possible again, deeply enough so that just the sight of these officers didn't unmoor them.

Haley was already gone, she knew. What else could it possibly be?

One officer introduced himself as Brigby; the other stood silently by, nodding periodically but never speaking. "Your daughter had a child," Brigby said.

The neighbors faded away, retreating across the lawn like shadows diminished by the setting sun.

Tilda smiled, almost laughing. "That's impossible. Our daughter is dead. Don't you know that?"

"Yes ma'am, we know."

"Our daughter is dead. That can't possibly be true." Tilda had begun to laugh but her eyes sharpened and her lips tightened and curled.

"You can't know that. You can't know what you're saying you know." Todd shook his head, no, no, no.

"We know."

"How can you possibly know?" Todd spat.

Officer Brigby's eyes narrowed and trained on Todd. A neighborhood tabby wended its way against Todd's calf, massaging its purr into the temporary quiet. "A DNA test, sir."

Todd moaned. The cat slunk to his other calf. "Why are you telling us this?"

Military officers had happened upon the orphaned child during a classified operation. Local informants had explained her origins. The government had taken possession, hoped to situate her custody with Haley's next of kin. The officers held another letter, this one printed on plain paper and folded into an envelope, which offered the baby girl to Todd and Tilda.



“The U.S. Government would like to offer this as an act of consolation for your family, to help you find some peace, to get back some small part of your daughter.”

She wanted to remember that Officer Brigby had said it. “They did her a favor when they killed her. They put her out of her misery. Better death than to go on living like that.” But despite a lot of the other lapses that came to her so easily, forgetting to pluck her right eyebrow after plucking her left, letting days pass between toothbrushings, leaving the empty oven on for hours at a time, she couldn’t forget it. She couldn't lapse it. She couldn't misremember that Todd had said it.

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Back then, Tilda found a way to not hate Haley even though her indecision led her to wander, to insist on the Peace Corps, to insist on the internship in Berlin, to insist on staying and working in exchange for barely enough to live on when refugees started to overrun borders by the thousands. Haley insisted on being there, in a place where of course she would get kidnapped and tortured and killed, all facts for which Tilda managed to not hate Haley.

But this news, this grandchild, a product of...of what? Tilda didn’t want to know. Todd had to hold Tilda down most of the night. Neither of them slept. Not long after, they stopped speaking. They didn’t know what to say. And soon after that, he left.

Violet stuck her head outside. “I’m ready for you, Tilda.” Maryam had fallen asleep in the grass. Tilda scooped her up, and brought her inside, to the sofa. On the dining room table, Violet had pushed aside the platters of snacks and chocolates and replaced them with two legal-sized

sheets of paper on which she'd hand-drawn a blueprint of the house. "Have a seat," she said. "All of the dangers in the house are marked with a red X."

Tilda peered at the drawings. X's covered them, like an outbreak of chicken pox. She looked up at Violet then back down at the paper. Her tears landed on the drawings until Violet slid the sheets away. "Tilda. Don't worry. Really, don't worry. This is for guidance. To help." She pulled a chair next to her and waited for her to stop crying. "Tilda, we'll fix these things. Really. Don't worry." Violet sat still while Tilda tried to slow her heaving.

Finally, Tilda said, "It's just been so long since I've had to worry about any of this."

"Let's go over the list and make a plan." Violet tucked stray hairs behind her ear and began with the first floor, mostly covering electrical outlets, dismantling locks on bathroom doors, securing cabinets and softening sharp edges. "The window pane, back in the kitchen. That is a huge hazard. It could crack and fall at any moment." All things Tilda knew.

Violet's gaze and pen then traveled to the second floor, pointing out more of the same infractions along with blocking access to the fireplace in the master bedroom. "And she needs a crib."

"A crib?" Tilda tried to picture a crib in Haley's room, Maryam's room. "Isn't she a bit old for a crib?"

"She's a bit old, yes. Sure." Violet began to fold up the drawings. "But she's small and because she's in a new, unfamiliar place, she probably gets disoriented easily if she's tired or cranky. You could get one of those cribs that transition to a bed. They can last until a kid is six or seven, depending on how they grow. I can show you which to get. She definitely needs one, at least until she is more comfortable, expressing herself in English, asking you for help. It's dangerous when they try to do things on their own."

“A crib.” Tilda still had Haley’s crib in the attic somewhere.

Violet covered Tilda’s hand with hers. “You’re doing a lot right, Tilda. The night-light, for example. Great addition, and very important. Especially for someone like Maryam, who’s been through so much trauma.”

“The night-light,” Tilda laughed. “She hates that thing. I have to turn it on after she’s fallen asleep.”

“Does she cry?”

“Believe it or not, the night-light makes her cry.”

The women sat quietly. Violet craned her head towards the living room, as though she was trying to hear Maryam cry, or even breathe, from her makeshift bed on the sofa.

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Violet long gone, Maryam lay upstairs in bed, whimpering every few breaths, sobbing through her dreams. Tilda left the bed and picked up the blue-spined book from where it had fallen earlier in the day. Haley insisted on sending her books back from the Ukraine, even though it would have been cheaper to simply replace them all with new copies. “They’re filled with my memories,” she’d said. Always whimsical, never practical, Tilda had thought, still thought.

She sunk next to the night-light, just her upper back slouched against the wall so her face could be as near to the dim light as possible. She held the book close to her face, paging through, reading Haley’s notes about restaurants – *Gregor, 5/22, fav varenyky so far* written by one and by another, *stopped on way through Kiev, diarrhea for three days* – and highlighted cities, the

places that she had been able to or had wanted to visit. On the blank back of a chapter title page, Haley had written a brief dispatch from the plane on the way to Kiev.

*Already, this trip has taken forever. Eighteen months from the time I applied to when I got my placement. Six months of vaccinations. Two months more to wait for my departure date. Orientation for a week. And now this never-ending trip, flight after flight after flight. And a bus after all this. Over two years! And I'm supposed to spend over two years in the village! Dobrotvir. Feels like a lifetime! But it's still pretty exciting. Like I finally have focus. Like I'm doing something. I was looking out the window, somewhere over Europe. It's crazy to think how nutso they were at customs, boarding the plane, but how from the air, it just looks like one big country, one borderless mass.*

Tilda closed the book and slid it back onto the shelf. If she moved Haley's bed to the attic, a crib could go in here. She might as well move the books and the dresser, too. Violet's idea wasn't so bad. If Tilda didn't pay attention, Maryam could go wandering, could end up escaping her room and the house. Maybe not now, but soon, once she got her bearings and a little bit more time had passed. If Maryam hurt herself or wandered away, Tilda would be in trouble. The crib that became a bed was a good thought, but Tilda would just use Haley's old crib, a normal crib, for as long as Maryam would fit. Even if she resisted, Tilda would keep her there as long as she could hold out.

## VITA

Emily Capdeville completed her B.A. in French and Sociology at Loyola University of New Orleans. She earned a Master of Arts in International Studies from the University of Oregon. An excerpt from her novel, *Required Permitted Forbidden*, won first place in the 2015 William Faulkner Wisdom Competition Novel-in-Progress Category and was short-listed in the same contest's Novel Category in the 2016 Competition. Her fiction is forthcoming in *Crab Orchard Review* and her non-fiction has been published in *Sugar & Rice* and *Louisiana Health & Fitness Magazine*. She is a Marketing and Communications Specialist in the Study Abroad Office of Tulane University, where she also serves as an adjunct instructor of Intercultural Communication.