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It Was Almost Pretty

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It Was Almost Pretty

A Thesis

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

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theater, and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

by

Brooke Southgate

B.A. University of South Carolina, 2007

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Acknowledgments

Thank you to my family for making me get back on the horse every time I fell, and especially for all of your love and support; I could never have gotten this far without you. Thank you to Doc for listening to me rant about my stories and reminding me that I want to be a writer. Thank you to all of my friends who proofread stories and helped me with the details, and to the University of New Orleans and its instructors and students who have shown me how to turn a “what if” into a story.

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Broken

Sunlight gleamed off Hollywood's golden dun coat as the big gelding trotted along the fence in his usual paddock. Melissa watched him snort and shake his head from the kitchen window. It was feeding time, and he was clearly wondering where Dad was. Melissa used to help with the general barn chores; she loved the smell of oats and hay at feeding time and the way the horses peered over the stall doors when they heard the rattle of grain in a bucket. But that was before her fall.

Melissa turned away from the window and tried to focus on her math homework. If she finished before dinner, her parents might let her watch TV in her room instead of with them in the living room. Then she wouldn't have to listen to them talk about horses. About how well Hollywood was coming along. They weren't exactly subtle. When Melissa first came home from the hospital with the heavy plaster cast over her left wrist and bandages around her cracked ribs, Mom had told her about the time a horse stepped on her foot and broke her toe. She had been cleaning its hooves in the stable and not paying attention when it put its hoof down. Mom said she couldn't wear a boot over for five days. Melissa didn't expect her to understand. Who cared about a broken toe? No one saw. Melissa came off in the middle of the show ring in front of every rider in the region. She knew she was a better rider than that, but how could she prove it with a broken wrist? How could she show her face at a competition again?

The pitying looks as people came to ride their horses were bad enough. Mom and Dad ran a training stable, so there were always people coming and going. Some had even witnessed her embarrassment at the show, and they told her how sorry they were about the accident. How sorry could they be when it meant they wouldn't have to compete against her? She had won the regional championships last year with Shiloh, and was so sure that she and Hollywood would

win this year. She had begged her parents to let her show in the youth class. Now all she could think about was cantering that circle. The sun sparkling off her new show jacket. How Hollywood shortened his stride and leaned towards the middle, and how she corrected him with a slight pressure from her leg. Then the white fence rushing towards her and the crack of her wrist against the wood. The agony in her ribs as she struggled for a breath. The way Hollywood stood, seemingly apologetic, with his head down as if wondering why she didn't get up and let him try the circle again.

"Hey, Melissa, can you give me a hand?" Mom called from the mud room by the back door.

Melissa sighed and closed her book. How much help could she be?

"Melissa?"

"Coming," she called back. She found Mom wrestling with her new tall boots. The stiff, black leather covered her leg almost to the knee and were a pain to get on and off. The more broken in they got, the better, which was why Mom was wearing them to exercise horses.

"Grab the heel, would you?" Mom sat on the bench by the door and lifted her leg.

"Can't you use the boot jack?" She held up her cast, as if Mom didn't remember.

"I don't want to scuff them. Use your other hand."

Melissa grabbed the slick black boot in her right hand and tugged. It didn't hurt as much as she anticipated, and she helped with the other boot without a word.

"Thanks, doll. Finish your homework?" She lined her boots up next to all the others by the door.

"Not yet. Dad still in the barn?"

“He’s finishing up. Hollywood’s been restless the past couple days. Why don’t you take him out tomorrow? Some ground work would be good for him.”

Melissa shook her head and studied the chips in the old tile. “My wrist.” She massaged her left arm above where the cast held it immobile. She’d lunged horses countless times before, even Hollywood. He trotted around in a circle, the long line connected to his halter in her hands. She probably could manage it one armed, if the horse behaved. If he pulled away, if he spooked, she would be unable to stop him. Though Hollywood never pulled before, content to listen and trot around her.

“Right, right. Maybe this weekend. I’ll try to fit him in tomorrow. I need to ride him before I show him at the next competition.”

Melissa glanced up, surprised. So soon? Everyone would remember. Her first show on her new horse, and she blew it. Not just went off pattern or had a bad day, but was taken from the show grounds in an ambulance. She couldn’t face a whole show full of people whispering and staring at the championship rider in a cast. “When’s the show?”

“Two weeks. Thought I might ride Hollywood in the green horse class. See if he hasn’t settled down yet.”

“Whatever,” Melissa grumbled, turning away so Mom couldn’t see the tears that threatened to fall. Hollywood was her horse. Her parents gave him to her five months ago, for her thirteenth birthday. He was still young and still green, but Dad said he’d help her finish his training. She’d hugged both of her parents, then had thrown her arms around the golden gelding’s neck. He pressed his head against her, and she knew this was the horse. Her parents saw the blue ribbons in her future too. World champion. Hollywood was a new beginning, a new start for Melissa. The horse had the talent to go far; he only needed a bit more experience.

But now the blue ribbons would be Mom's, not Melissa's. The horse she'd rushed home from school to see waiting in his pasture would be Mom's. He had always nickered when Melissa came up the drive, trotting to the fence to greet her. He had nuzzled her pockets for the carrots she saved from lunch. She had rubbed his face and had picked any burrs out of his mane before going to drop her bags inside and change into her riding clothes.

"Dinner will be ready in about twenty minutes." Mom went to the kitchen, and Melissa could hear the sound of water running as she washed her hands. Melissa looked out the window in the back door and saw the lights shining through the barn windows. She briefly considered going out to give Dad a hand, but a twinge in her ribs made her think better of it.

The instant mashed potatoes had the taste of processed food, but Melissa didn't say anything. With the extra work her parents were doing to make up for Melissa's inability to help, Mom didn't have time to make the real thing. It wasn't that they were bad, just not as good. They still squished on the plate just fine when Melissa smushed her fork into them.

"Aren't you hungry?" Mom asked.

"Not really? Can I be excused?"

"You need to eat something. Have some salad." Mom passed the big bowl of ice berg lettuce and sliced cucumbers.

Melissa dutifully added some next to the mashed potatoes. She pushed a cucumber with her fork, watching the dressing streak along the edge of the plate.

"Have you thought about which horses you want to take to the show?" Dad asked. He didn't seem to mind the instant mashed potatoes as he shoveled another mouthful in.

"It seems like everyone wants to go. All the horses we took last time, plus Frank has that new mare he wants to school," Mom said.

“What about Hollywood?” Dad asked.

Melissa glanced up from her plate where she was trying to hide the cucumber under the mashed potatoes. “What about Hollywood?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll manage him,” Mom said. “We can take it nice and easy in the Green Horse class. No pressure to be competitive, just some good practice. Let him get used to the show pen.”

“I’ll send in the entries,” Dad said. He returned his attention to his plate.

“Melissa, what color do you wear with Hollywood? Black matches his mane and tail, but I wear it so often.”

“I wore blue,” she answered. To match the blue ribbons they were going to win.

“Oh, that’s right. Blue looked good on him. I’ll have to find something in my old show outfits. I think I’ve got a royal jacket that would be perfect with a new horse.”

New horse. Hollywood wasn’t a new horse; he was Melissa’s horse. “May I be excused now?” she asked. Not waiting for a response, she grabbed her plate and plopped it in the sink, hurrying from the room.

Melissa sat propped against the pillows on her bed, an open book on her lap. Something for English class, but she wasn’t reading it. The bedside lamp shone on the pages, turning the white to a warm yellow. It was just bright enough for the prancing model horses on the top of her dresser to cast large shadows on the wall behind them. Each one was carefully chosen because it resembled one of the horses in her parents’ stable. There was Shiloh, a black mare whose tail seemed to blow in the wind. Next to her was the big chestnut gelding, just like Dad’s old show horse, Red. He was retired years ago and now played in the big paddock out back with Shiloh.

There was the dainty, dappled gray mare, Amelia, who taught Melissa to ride. And of course a golden dun. Hollywood cantered at the front of the plastic herd. He had a white spot on his ear where the paint had rubbed off. The day she came home from the hospital she threw the model on the bed and it bounced to the floor. Melissa had regretted it immediately, snatching up the damaged model and hugging it as she cried. He was still her horse, still her chance at the championships. She had carefully placed the model back on the shelf once her tears dried.

The model stared at her with dead black eyes, but Melissa remembered Hollywood's deep brown ones. They seemed to plead for a second chance when she ran past his pasture. He neighed when he saw her approach, even after her fall and she stopped giving him carrots. But not this afternoon. Today, he raised his head and looked at the bus when it stopped, but then he dropped it again to continue grazing. Her horse.

It was Hollywood's silence that ground away at Melissa's mind. They had such a perfect partnership before, worked together so beautifully. Melissa had trusted the horse, trusted that he would perform as he did at home after their months of training, trusted that he wouldn't let her down. Despite her fear, his dark eyes that seemed to plead for a second chance burned in her memory. She bit her lower lip, uncertain, then threw the sheets aside and crawled from the bed. Her arm ached, but she ignored it as she pulled a pair of jeans on under her nightshirt and found her riding boots under the bed. Her stomach fluttered with unease, but a deep breath soothed it. The boots squeaked on the hardwood floors and the door groaned as she opened it, but no lights flicked on in the house as she made her quiet escape into the night.

A deep breath of the cool night air soothed the tightening in her belly as Melissa hurried across the grass that separated the house from the stable, the toes of her boots darkened by dew. The only sound was the swish of her steps in the grass and the buzzing of small insects that flew

about her head. The loud smack as Melissa swatted a mosquito echoed in the quiet. She wiped the smear of blood on her jeans, glancing back at the house to see if a light snapped on in her parents' bedroom. When none did, she heaved the barn door open with her good arm.

Hollywood looked out over his stall door at the sound of the door banging shut. He shook his head, his long black mane tossing from side to side. A few wisps of hay stuck out of the corners of his mouth, all that remained of the dinner Dad had given him. Part of Melissa wanted to run down the aisle and throw her arms around him just like before, but she couldn't do it. She stood beneath the window across from his stall, leaning against the rough wood, and watched. The familiar scents of the stable filled her nose: the sweet dry hay, the well-oiled leather, and the acrid tinge of horse sweat. Her parents understood that she couldn't ride with the cast, but not the shame she felt when people saw it. But maybe she could ride. Reining was done one handed. It had been too long since she smelled the barn. Even Hollywood seemed to think so as he watched her from across the aisle. He nickered softly, as if asking why she didn't come closer.

The gentle neigh was exactly as she remembered. She slid open the heavy wood door, and Hollywood thrust his head against her chest. Melissa gasped as pain shot through her barely healed ribs and grabbed his mane to keep from falling over. Oblivious, Hollywood rubbed his head against her, covering her nightshirt with fine, golden hairs. Just like that first day. Melissa ran her fingers through his thick mane and hugged the horse's big head before snapping a lead rope to his halter. She walked him out of the deep sawdust of his stall, Hollywood following docilely, a giant puppy with steel shod hooves that rang loudly on the concrete. Melissa glanced out the window, but didn't see any lights click on in the house.

“Whoa, boy,” she said softly, pressing a hand against his broad chest. Hollywood stopped, big brown eyes watching her. She cross-tied the gelding in the aisle, and he stood, hipshot, in the dim light. Melissa picked up the black, rubber curry comb and brushed vigorous circles all over his neck, back, sides, and hindquarters. Her other hand rested against him, feeling for the slightest muscle twitch so she could jump out of the way if he moved. Hollywood leaned into the brush, enjoying the horse version of a body massage. Before the fall, Melissa had spent hours grooming and talking to Hollywood. The gelding flicked his ears to follow her voice as she told him about math quizzes and the books she read for English. He listened better than her friends, never interrupted with his own problems. It had been nice to just talk, but Melissa was out of things to say to the horse. She worked in silence as she brushed the dust and shavings from Hollywood’s coat.

She picked up the light aluminum hoof pick and stared at Hollywood’s black legs. Two hands were needed to clean hooves, and Melissa would have to hold his hoof with her left to clean it with her right. She took a deep breath of loose dirt and horse hair and bent down, squeezing the chestnut on the inside of his left front leg. Hollywood picked up his leg as she asked, but when Melissa moved to catch it with her left hand, the heavy hoof banged against the cast. Shivers of pain coursed up her arm, and she dropped his hoof to clutch his shoulder and neck and try to suppress the pain. It only managed to make her ribs ache from pressing against the horse. His hoof slammed down on the concrete with a ringing peal.

“I can’t do this.” Melissa levered herself away from Hollywood. “I can’t.” Her voice cracked, and he turned his head as far as the crosstie allowed, rolling his eye backwards to see her better. She reached out her left arm and ran her fingers across his velvet muzzle. He snorted at the white cast that her fingers peeked out of.

“You don’t get it, do you?” she asked, twining the fingers of her right hand into his mane. “I trusted you. We were going to win.” The whispered words hung between them. “But you hurt me,” she said, anger making her voice loud. “You made me the laughing stock of the whole damn region. How could you?” The tears streamed down her face as she buried it in his thick mane.

Hollywood arched his neck so that his head rested near her shoulder and lipped at her brown hair. The sensation of his breath and his warmth against her back made her smile, remembering past hugs from the gelding. Before her fall. When they still could be winners. She pulled away from his neck and dried her eyes on the back of her hand. She nodded to herself as a thread of confidence returned. His hooves were probably fine anyway. “We can still do it, can’t we boy?”

The tack room was unlocked, and Melissa flicked on the light as she opened the door. The saddle posed a problem. At thirty-seven pounds, it was too heavy to lift with one hand. She stared at the basket weave stamping along the pommel, the floral carving of the big fenders, and the leather lacing along the wooden stirrups. So much weight. Bareback was out of the question; she wanted the horn just in case. She reached across the saddle, grabbed the cantle with her right arm and slid the saddle so that it rested on her right hip. She staggered the few steps from the tack room to Hollywood, who pricked his ears with interest. A deep breath, a wish for lighter saddles, and Melissa grabbed the pommel with her left hand and heaved the saddle onto Hollywood’s back.

“Sorry,” she apologized as it thumped down on his spine, her own pain pushed aside. He snorted and stamped one foot impatiently. “Take it easy, boy.” She patted his shoulder.

Melissa grabbed the black neoprene girth that dangled down from the opposite side and ran the leather strap through the buckle. Staring at the strap, she knew this was going to hurt. Grabbing the dark rough leather strap with both hands, Melissa pulled until the girth was tight against Hollywood's body. She slid the buckle into place before collapsing against his shoulder, pain shooting from her strained wrist up to her shoulder where it settled in for a dull ache. She hadn't struggled with a girth since she was seven. She couldn't imagine asking Dad for help at a show, not with something so simple.

The bridle was easier. Melissa unclipped the crossties and unbuckled the halter, letting the leather slide off his nose. Grasping the smooth, tan leather of the headstall in her right hand, she pulled it over his face and held it just in front of his ears. Her left hand held the metal curb bit; Melissa wiggled her thumb between his black lips at the corner of his mouth, and he opened it, allowing her to slide the bit onto the smooth bars of his mouth and pull the headstall over his ears and into place. It was a much practiced maneuver, one she had managed even before she could pull a girth tight. One small buckle at the throatlatch and Hollywood was ready.

Melissa held the reins firmly in her right hand as the horse followed her down the aisle. She paused to flip on the light switches for the arena. Large overhead lights snapped on and illuminated the soft, brown dirt and white-washed walls of the indoor riding ring. She hoped that they wouldn't be visible from the house. Hollywood stopped, lowering his head and snorting. Melissa wondered if he had ever been ridden at night. It was the same arena they always practiced in, nothing to be afraid of. Taking deep breaths, she tugged on the reins. "Come on, boy." The gelding took a hesitant step forward, then followed her easily to the center of the arena. No one was watching. No one would know. Hollywood stood quietly as Melissa double checked that every buckle was secure and every strap was in its place.

Finally, she stood at his left side and patted the thick muscles of his neck. “This is it,” she said softly as she slid her boot into the wood stirrup and grabbed the saddle with her hands. One hop, then pull, gasp, swing leg over, and sit up. She was in the saddle. Her body throbbed, but she was in the saddle.

“We did it, boy,” Melissa whispered. She could hardly believe it, but the pain in her arm was too real to be a dream. The gelding snorted again, and turned his head to look at her. She reached down and patted his neck. “Good boy. Let’s try a circle.” She held the reins in her right hand and asked him to walk. Hollywood leaped into a canter, kicking his heels in the air. Melissa pitched forward and reached for the horn, anything, to help keep her seat. The sharp wiry hairs of his mane cut through Melissa’s grasping fingers.

Melissa opened her eyes and blinked rapidly at the bright light above her before quickly turning her head away and closing her eyes. Pain flashed through her again at the movement, and she was thankful for the cool dirt against her face. Slowly opening her eyes again, she saw Hollywood standing a few feet away, nostrils flaring and eyes rolling. One rein trailed in the dirt. Melissa closed her eyes and hoped her parents would see the lights from the house.

Wilted Lilies

William lay among the stark white sheets, his head angled up by the mechanized bed. The TV was on, silently flashing images that cast a blue glow on William's face. He was pale, shut away from the sun for the past month, and blue and purple shadows in the dim light highlighted the sharp shape of his cheekbones, the beak of a nose. No facial hair softened the angles. It, like all of his hair, had been left scattered on his pillow in the mornings when he woke. Even his eyebrows and lashes had fallen. His closed eyes looked odd without the brush of dark lashes.

Samantha watched William sleep from the sofa across the room, still dressed in the plain black skirt suit she wore to the office. Her dark auburn hair was styled short, a display of support that drew a smile from William before he was wheeled to the first surgery three weeks ago. Her long locks had been donated to create wigs for other patients. She tried to do what she could, making late-night runs after work to water the herbs that grew in his kitchen window, escaping from the office early with promises to work at home in order to visit him. When she explained the situation to her boss, he patted her hand and told her not to worry, to do what she needed to do. William's smile when she walked in the room, even laden down with files, had been worth the sleep deprivation. She hadn't expected it to become routine, but Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday evenings found her seated restlessly on the sofa, half concentrating on files and half remembering better times with William.

Move-in day freshman year, she had been trying to hang a poster of Rosie the Riveter above her dorm bed when William saw her from the hall, stretched on tiptoe atop her bed.

"You need a man to do that," he joked.

Startled, Samantha spun around, lost her balance, and crumpled onto the bed, the poster floating down on top of her. She peeked, embarrassed, from under Rosie's raised arm to see

William clearly struggling to suppress laughter. Samantha regained her feet, hiding her red face by turning to the wall and once more trying to stick Rosie to it, thinking maybe if she ignored him he'd leave her to stew in her mortification. The first impression she made on the first guy she met in college was falling on her ass. Maybe he didn't live there, and she'd never have to see him again.

To her increased horror, William climbed on the bed with her and held the poster while she added the gooey, blue adhesive that was all students were allowed to use. She avoided his eyes and kept her mouth firmly closed.

William, oblivious to her acute embarrassment, smoothed the poster from the top down so that it lay flat and was firmly stuck to the wall. He jumped down and stood back to admire their handiwork. "Why Rosie?" he asked.

Samantha shrugged, struggling to find her voice again. "She represents women in the work force, women earning their place in a man's world."

"What's your major?"

"Business." She stared at the poster, some confidence returning.

"Well, that explains it." William smiled and offered his hand. "William, history. I can tell you right now, women have always run the world."

She smiled back, meeting his dark brown eyes for the first time. Crap, he was cute too.

"Have you found the cafeteria yet? My roommate said to try the grilled cheese."

"Hard to screw up a grilled cheese."

"That was my thought too. Shall we?"

He actually offered his arm, and beaming, Samantha took it.

Two weeks later, they were sitting on Samantha's bed beneath the poster when her roommate, Georgia, barged in. "Oh, sorry, didn't mean to disturb the happy couple."

William laughed. "No worries. We're studying, not dating."

Samantha looked up from her book. "Right. Studying."

"Sure," Georgia said, winking at Samantha.

That was when Samantha first realized two things. One: she liked William. Two: she had to find some way to make him see he liked her.

The first slice into his skull had not revealed the source of the problem, and a second deeper probing discovered nothing. Despite how it pulled at his stitches, William smiled and tried to be cheerful during the day, but at night the pain and struggle showed clearly on his face. It seemed like there were more tight lines by his eyes every night that the crisp white bandages couldn't hide.

Last Wednesday, the sunlight streamed through the big windows and gave a bit of life to the room. His parents visited; they came every afternoon, though usually earlier than Samantha. She preferred it that way. It was easier to cope when others weren't around, when even William slept.

His mother, Diane, embraced her warmly. "Oh dear, how are you holding up?" she asked.

Samantha forced a smile, knowing Diane was only trying to be nice. She always was. "I'm fine. Busy." Samantha held up her briefcase.

"Of course, of course. Don't let us interrupt. It's so great that you stay with him. It's so awful in this room, I can't imagine how William's managed in here so long." She gestured to the

half dozen brilliantly colored gerber daisies she brought. “I try to liven it up, but it’s just so awful.” The daisies replaced the shriveled orange lilies that dropped anthers heavy with orange pollen that she had carried in two weeks ago, back when everyone thought that this was only a temporary situation, that William would be diagnosed and treated and out of the hospital any day.

Now the lilies peeked out of the small white trash can, and the daisies stood sentry next to the TV. Samantha nodded politely. “They’re very lovely.”

“Not as lovely as you, dear. You look good with short hair.”

“Thank you,” Samantha said, unsure of what else to add. Small talk seemed to be Diane’s way of coping, but it struck Samantha as insensitive. How could she talk about hair while her son could be dying? His father, Nick, was the opposite, hardly speaking a word unless she asked him a direct question. With each visit he seemed a little older, his hair a little grayer, a little longer, a little less cared for. Some evenings he looked worse than William with his bloodshot eyes. Samantha understood his stoic quiet, though she doubted Diane did. Like Nick, Samantha simply wanted to be alone with her pain and William.

Two months before William was admitted to the hospital with dizzy spells and blackouts, Samantha had moved out. After four years of dorms and two years of renting a crappy apartment, the little duplex was a haven of suburban tranquility, the first real house she had lived in since leaving her parents’ for college. A promotion at work allowed her the funds, and Samantha realized she needed a fresh start. She had shared the familiar two bedroom apartment with William since graduation, hoping that proximity might make him open his eyes. She was

tired of being introduced to William's dates as "my old college buddy, Samantha." She didn't want to be an old college buddy.

It was supposed to be a clean break once the boxes were loaded into the rented truck, but William insisted on doing dinner the night she moved into the new house to make up for having to work during the move. She tried to tell him no, but the words wouldn't come, and he said he'd be there by seven. Samantha heard his car pull up and walked out onto the porch, not wanting to seem rude, but not wanting him to see how eager she was to be with him. Politely aloof.

"You really are out in the boonies, huh?" He smiled as he slammed the car door. Instead of the bags of Chinese food or warm pizza boxes Samantha expected, he pried a little red barbeque grill out of the backseat. There was a bow stuck on the top. "Ta-dah," he announced.

Samantha forgot her mask of aloofness and laughed. "Did you bring a fire extinguisher too?" she asked.

"I knew you wouldn't have unpacked anything, and I needed something to cook on. Consider it a house warming gift." He popped open the lid to reveal a pair of tongs and a collection of seasonings.

"What's all this?" Samantha picked up the kosher salt.

"It's so you can learn to cook now that you can't steal my food." William grinned. Seeing the protest in her eyes, he cut her off, "Don't worry, I kept it simple. Salt, pepper, steaks, and potatoes."

"Sounds great. Come on, you can put it out back."

Fireflies flashed in the tall grass beyond the small backyard and crickets chirped, filling the summer air while William cooked two T-bones on the little red grill. Baked potatoes were

almost ready to come out of the oven. Samantha reclined in her “deck chair,” a cheap nylon one from her tailgating days of college that slipped in a bag, and listened for the timer to beep in the kitchen. There was an orange splatter on the arm of the chair, face paint. The brush had tickled as William had painted a paw print on her cheek, and she had batted at the brush, causing him to drop it. They both laughed, and she could feel his breath on her face, smell the beer on his breath. She wondered if she could kiss him. A friend yelled that the burgers were burning, shattering the moment. William went to the grill, flipped the patties. Samantha went to help, standing next to him and buttering buns to be toasted.

One of William’s classmates, one she hadn’t met before that day, nudged him from the other side and said “Ask your girlfriend for the ketchup, will you?”

“Huh? Oh, Samantha’s just a friend. Sam, the ketchup?”

As if she couldn’t hear his drunken voice, the guy asked, “Mind if I have a go at her then?”

William laughed. Laughed. He stepped aside, letting the jerk flip burgers and try to flirt. Samantha mumbled some excuse about the ladies’ room and retreated back to her chair.

The rattle as William closed the lid of the barbeque startled her out of her thoughts. “How are you going to learn if you’re way up there?” he asked. He sat on the deck steps, picked up the Bud he had left sitting there and turned to face her.

“Fine, fine.” She rose and went to sit beside him. The scent of grilling meat wafted towards her, and Samantha knew they only had a moment before the steaks were ready. “Smells good.”

“Yeah. This is a great place.” William studied the label on his bottle and slipped a nail underneath, tearing and peeling it away.

“Yeah.”

“Going to get a roommate?”

“No.” Samantha answered firmly, more to remind herself than him. “I’m done with just roommates.” She emphasized the “just,” internally pleading that he’d understand.

“Makes sense. Gotta go out on your own, right?” He smiled that damn smile of his that made her knees melt.

“Are you going to get another roommate?” She didn’t really want to know if the answer was yes. The kitchen timer beeped, announcing that dinner was ready and saving from finding out if he had already replaced her.

A light sliced through the semi-darkness as a nurse in scrubs opened the door. Her mouth smiled, but her eyes remained tired and dull. It was late; Samantha looked the same way some evenings after being at the office. Since William had been hospitalized, she had noticed that her boss gave her simple cases, ones that didn’t require the late hours she pushed herself to finish. It needed that her professional life could be hampered by a personal life she didn’t even really have. Over the past few weeks, her files and notes had been scattered about, cluttering the white efficiency of William’s room. Once he fell asleep, she’d settle herself on the sofa with a Sprite and her work, eventually falling asleep herself as papers dropped to the floor. The files were safely tucked in her briefcase when the nurse walked in; tonight wasn’t going to be one of those late nights.

The nurse lifted William’s wrist and checked that his pulse was steady, that the IV still dripped unimpeded, and that the bandages were firmly attached to the side of his head and clean.

“Will you be staying?” she asked softly, nodding her head towards the thin, navy blanket folded neatly at the far end of the sofa. “I can bring you another if you’d like.”

Samantha shook her head. “No, thank you, I was just leaving.”

The nurse nodded and walked out of the room, leaving Samantha alone with William. She clicked off the TV, but the city lights glowed faintly through the curtains; it was never completely dark in the room. A deep breath did not soothe her nerves; it only carried the sharp scent of antibacterial and the faint hint of daisies and the even fainter scent of dying lilies. William slept soundly, and she was almost sorry that she wouldn’t be there when he woke and saw the Rosie poster she laid on the bedside table, but it needed to be a clean break. She leaned over him, smelling the muskiness of one confined to bed and the medicines beneath the bandages, and gently kissed his rough, dry lips.

The door closed with a soft thud behind her.

Pink Elephants

The sweat ran down the back of Carol's neck to darken the collar of her navy shirt. It was only eight in the morning, and the walk from the employee entrance across the zoo was enough to cause perspiration to drip from beneath her ball cap and cause tendrils of her chestnut pony tail to stick to her neck. It had the potential to be a miserable day, and Carol had no doubt that people would be lined up at the first aid booth from heat exhaustion. She made a mental note to check the water troughs frequently.

The chatter of lorikeets filled the air as she hurried past the exhibit, the small rainbow-colored birds recognizing the navy T-shirt and khaki shorts of a keeper. The lorikeets fluttered about the open aviary, clinging to the wire walls of the enclosure and demanding their breakfast.

Past the lorikeets, the siamangs swung from branch to branch on their island. Carol knew it was only a matter of time before they drowned every other sound in the zoo with their booming yells. Their throat sacs could inflate to the size of their heads, the sound resonating louder than one might think possible for relatively small apes.

Carol walked quickly, her sneakers slapping against the asphalt as she made her way past Ape Island, the hippo pool, and the Galapagos tortoise corral. Beyond the tortoise exhibit where the giant, shelled beasts were lumbering out of their small barn, Carol saw Rupert. He stood in the middle of the large exhibit, spraying red dirt over his back with his trunk. Visitors often asked why the elephants were pink. A little girl asked just yesterday, her own hands pink from the cotton candy she held. Carol told her that it was because of the red, Carolina dirt the elephants dusted over themselves to help protect their skin against the sun. The girl dashed back to where her school group milled around the exhibit and loudly shared the information with her friends. Carol smiled as the group of kids dashed down the path to get a closer look at the

animals, pointing and laughing as Rupert sprayed dirt over his back, turning a slightly redder color. Rupert was one big pink elephant.

One who should be in the barn.

Carol swung open the large wood door marked Employees Only and carefully shut it behind her. Already the staff was busy preparing and distributing breakfast to the animals in the African section of the zoo.

Emilio saw her approaching the elephant barn and set down the bale of hay he was carrying. “Did you see what your boy did?”

“I saw him outside. How’d he get there?” Carol asked.

Emilio grinned, his dark eyes shining with expected humor. “Wait ’til you see.” He hefted the bale up again and carried it to where “the girls”—Betty, Sasha, and Kerrie, three female Asian elephants—were waiting. Safety protocol required that a minimum of two keepers be present when in the barn, which was why Emilio was lugging hay and the girls were waiting for breakfast. Their nimble trunks snaked out between the large steel bars. Carol paused to pat each one, telling them good morning. During the off hours, they were kept separate from Rupert by a row of steel bars fifteen inches in diameter and set eight inches apart that bisected the barn. The bars were for Rupert’s safety. The three females used to gang up on the male, cornering him in the barn and denying him access to food. All four could go out on exhibit together as the enclosure offered ample room for Rupert to stay separate from the girls; they didn’t mind him around so long as he kept his distance. A gate that weighed more than Carol and Emilio combined was at one end so that the females could move into Rupert’s side of the barn, and from there they could go out a second gate to the chute connecting the barn to the outdoor exhibit. The second gate hung open.

“There’s no damage to the hinges or bars,” Carol said, more to herself than to Emilio.

Her coworker dropped the bale, cut the twine, and tossed flakes to the eagerly waiting elephants. Without turning, he said, “Nope. He didn’t force it.”

“Then how....” Carol saw the latch. The steel bar that ran across the top of the gate and bolted it closed had been hauled open. The seemingly archaic gate system was standard in hundreds of elephant barns. “His trunk?” she asked, not sure if she believed that Rupert could manipulate his trunk to grasp the bar and pull it from inside the bars.

“Only way I can figure it.” Emilio brushed wisps of hay from his shirt. “What now?”

Carol shook her head. “I don’t know. Find out if there are any new locks on the market.”

Emilio laughed. “Good luck getting Annie to approve that expense.”

Carol cringed. The animal curator was not going to like being told that a major expense was needed. Cheaper than another animal, though. Carol knew that what Rupert really needed was a companion. The girls must be acting more aggressively if he was avoiding the barn entirely. “Leave him outside at night?”

“Not if you want to clean.”

Carol knew that elephant poop could not be left in the exhibit. It was obvious to guests, both the softball-sized spores and the pungent aroma of decomposing vegetable matter. “Maybe he’ll come in to eat.” Food was always a powerful enticement.

“Worth a try. Help me haul over more bales, and we’ll see. They were all delivered to the giraffe barn, so we get to move them.”

“Of course. It’s going to be one of those days, isn’t it?”

Rupert followed his long nose into the barn for sweet potatoes and pellets. Carol sighed with relief when the big, pink animal ambled inside and Emilio locked the gate behind him. She

knew that sometimes animals were unpredictable, and there was little she could do about it. Few zoos kept African elephants, let alone males, because of their reputation for unruly and extremely dangerous behavior. The high mortality rate of elephant keepers was largely due to male Africans in musth, a period of seemingly “crazed” behavior when testosterone increase led to heightened aggression. Carol didn’t see any temporal gland fluid on Rupert’s cheeks, the standard sign of musth. The problem wasn’t sexual, then. It wasn’t much, but any symptom that could be eliminated was helpful. Something wasn’t right with the elephant, and Carol needed to find out what before he was hurt or hurt someone else.

Carol pushed the idea from her mind as she rolled the wheelbarrow across the cracked pink dirt of the exhibit. First things first: take care of the elephants. Then puzzle out what was wrong with Rupert. Emilio stood by the bars with a bunch of bananas, Rupert’s favorite treat, to distract the elephantine Houdini from escaping. First Carol needed to shovel what the animals left yesterday during zoo hours and what Rupert deposited last night, then she would roll out bales of hay and scatter them about the dirt to stimulate grazing. The zoo opened at nine, leaving barely thirty minutes to prepare the exhibit.

Hefting another shovelful of droppings in the full wheelbarrow, Carol saw her sweat drip onto the turds. Caring for elephants was dirty work, but she usually didn’t mind. She was the only person who hadn’t requested off for July Fourth. The other keepers drew straws; Emilio pulled the short one. Carol knew he would rather be home with his wife and daughters than dealing with a wily elephant. The only things waiting at home for Carol were Lean Cuisine lasagna and a National Geographic DVD about elephant social behavior. It was one of Carol’s favorites: the story of an old matriarch protecting her herd of sisters, daughters, and nieces. She always sniffled when the mother elephant wrapped her trunk around the tiny calf, guarding it

from the lion that prowled in the dim evening light. It reminded Carol of her mother, after the divorce. Her mother would have probably hated the comparison, but in Carol's mind it was the highest compliment she could offer.

She quickly finished scooping up the pile and wheeled it to the dumpsters behind the barn. She left the dirty wheelbarrow by Emilio, who was raking loose hay in the barn, and grabbed the clean feed one. The bale of hay didn't quite fit, but Carol was well practiced in the art of navigating unwieldy wheelbarrows. She deposited the fresh hay, enjoying the sweet scent after the rotten one, and exited the exhibit.

"Ready?" Emilio asked.

"All set." Carol stopped near the gate, and Rupert thrust his trunk through the bars. The two fingers on the end lightly gripped Carol's hand. She smiled, tenderly patting the dry skin of his trunk. "You're a good boy. You just like the night air, don't you?" He curled the end around her hand, holding it.

"Back up," Emilio warned before opening the gate. Rupert retracted his trunk and lumbered through the chute. Carol moved down the enclosure and opened the other gate; the girls made their way into the exhibit, eager for more hay.

"That wasn't too bad. Keep an eye on him today, see how he acts," Emilio said.

"Yeah," Carol agreed. In the years she had worked with him, Carol never saw Rupert behave like that. She worried what might happen if it was girls' behavior causing the problem. Rupert was bigger; if he retaliated, it wouldn't be pretty. Something was clearly bothering Rupert, but it might have been something minor. Carol hoped it was just a little night escapade and out of his system, but she doubted it.

The coolness enveloped Carol as she went into the small air conditioned office, calming her nerves as she collapsed in her desk chair. It squeaked as she rolled over to the book shelf and pulled the big binder marked “Rupert.” She opened the book, scanning the pages of records. His diet, medical procedures, training, and daily behavior were listed. There was a binder for each of the six years Rupert had been at the zoo. Without looking away from the page, Carol pulled a peanut butter and jelly sandwich from her lunch bag and unwrapped it, careful to prevent any crumbs from marring the records.

“Man, it feels good to get inside,” Emilio said, entering the door. A rush of hot air seemed to follow him, but he quickly closed the door. “Aren’t you going to take a break?”

“I was hoping there might be an instance in the records that I forgot.”

“But you know everything about that big guy.” Emilio smiled, grabbing his lunch off his desk. “Maybe we should call the vets out. They could dart him and—”

“No, not yet,” Carol cut him off. Seeing the surprise on Emilio’s face, she quickly explained, “He’s eating on exhibit and isn’t showing any signs of physical discomfort. You know how dangerous it can be to knock out an elephant. It’s probably something environmental. Have you noticed anything new going on?”

“No, not lately,” Emilio said, taking a bite of his sandwich. “The hay went to Giraffe, so there wasn’t anything going on in Elephant. Did you talk to Annie? She may have ideas.”

Carol shook her head. Annie was the curator, but she specialized in carnivores. Carol had been insisting that the zoo needed to address Rupert’s loner status since Sasha and Kerrie arrived at the zoo and he was shoved out of the group. In the wild, females bonded in herds—the girls were quite content with each other—but males were kept on the outskirts. Guests were often amused when Betty threatened the much larger Rupert, fanning her ears and chasing him

away, but it could prove dangerous. And it wasn't healthy for Rupert. Males still craved social interaction and in the wild grouped into bachelor herds. Rupert didn't have any other bachelors, and Annie simply said that there hadn't been any problems and it was fine. If Carol could figure out the problem, maybe Annie would look into obtaining another elephant. It was a long shot, but if there was enough proof, it had possibility. She turned back to the records, scanning the pages for any hints.

July fifth began much the same as the fourth had for Carol. She was more tired, having been kept up most of the night listening as the neighbors celebrated the country's independence with the typical explosions, but otherwise the sweat on her neck and the sounds of the birds and siamangs were the same. She hoped that at least some things might be different, but as she rounded the corner from the tortoise exhibit, there stood Rupert in his giant, pink glory. Her heart sank at the sight. She still didn't have proof that the girls were or were not picking on him, and it ate at her.

Carol tried the same ploy again, carefully placing breakfast within view inside the barn, but Rupert refused to come in. Not even fresh fruit could tempt the elephant.

"What do you want to do?" Emilio asked. He leaned against the boards, a bright yellow banana still clutched in one hand.

"Hope none of the visitors ask why the exhibit is dirty," Carol said.

Emilio watched Rupert spray water from the trough into his mouth. "Something's not right. Do you think he's sick?"

“Doesn’t seem like it. He’s drinking, and he ate some of the hay on exhibit, but it’s not like him to ignore food.” She waved the banana again, then sighed. “Might as well give the fruit to the girls. Maybe he’ll realize there are treats and come in.”

While the three females gently plucked the fruit from their keepers’ hands and tossed the bite-sized morsels into their mouths, the big male turned and walked to the farthest corner of the exhibit and sprayed more dirt over his back. Emilio opened the gate and let the other three elephants out, then he and Carol did their best to toss flakes of hay over the walls and into the exhibit. One flake hit Sasha, the smallest of the females, and dusted her with hay. Carol laughed as the other two elephants picked bits off of Sasha’s back to eat. They were the very model of a content herd, and Carol was happy to see that at least some of the elephants were doing well. She went to help Emilio clean the barn, hoping that Rupert too would soon have a companion to eat hay with.

That evening, Rupert refused to come inside. Carol and Emilio tried every type of food available—bananas, sweet potatoes, carrots, watermelon, even buckets of grain—but the big elephant ignored them.

“Did you talk to Annie yet?” Emilio asked.

Carol tucked the watermelon under one arm. She glimpsed someone with a blonde pony tail that might have been Annie that morning, but she hurried to the elephant exhibit. She wanted to see how Rupert was before talking to her. “Not yet. Maybe she’s on vacation.”

“Vacation sure sounds nice.” He wiped at the sweat dripping out from under his ball cap.

“Didn’t do anything with the family yesterday?” Carol asked, grateful for the change in subject.

“Of course, which is why I’m tired today.” Emilio grinned. “I was on fire safety patrol most of the night. You should have seen Jessie and Izzy running around with those sparklers. Thought they were going to light each other’s hair on fire.” He shook his head but still smiled. “What about you?”

“Went through a couple more years of files. Rupert was a model elephant until yesterday. I just can’t figure out what’s going on in that big, square head of his.”

“Maybe you need to take a break. You know how ideas sneak up on people. Why don’t you come have dinner with us tonight? Nothing fancy, mostly leftovers from yesterday.”

The invitation caught her by surprise. Carol had met Emilio’s family a couple times when they came to the zoo. The twin girls had clapped when Kerrie fetched a ball thrown in the exhibit. It was a new behavior that Carol and Emilio had been training with her. If she could retrieve items dropped in the exhibit—and there were always items dropped over the rail—then they wouldn’t have to move the elephants into the barn, go out themselves to fetch it, and then let the animals out again. Jessie and Izzy just thought it was a fun game to play. But that was at the zoo.

Carol wondered if he had elephant throw pillows on his sofa like she did. He might be right that not thinking about it could give her an idea. It could be nice to have dinner facing a person instead of the TV. But then she remembered the pile of binders still waiting for her at home. “Thanks, but I have three more years of files to go.” She hefted the watermelon so that it rested on her other hip.

“Of course. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Emilio paused at the big wooden door, waved, and said, “If you change your mind, just give me a call.”

Carol smiled and waved back awkwardly, not sure what to say, before walking to the barn door. She could see the girls clustered by the gate, eyeing the watermelon. Not permitted to go inside alone, she crouched down and rolled it from the door so that it passed between two bars. Betty stepped on it with one forefoot, and Sasha and Kerri grabbed splintered bits of melon off the ground. Betty picked up a large piece with her trunk and placed it in her mouth. Carol rested in her crouched position as the animals ate. The girls seemed perfectly content in their barn with their fruit. It was quiet aside from the munching elephants, the clean scent of hay mixing with that of the watermelon. Whatever was affecting Rupert didn't bother the girls in the least, but Carol was fairly sure it was because they had each other, a herd.

When the food was gone, Carol stood and dusted at the dirt that clung to her khakis. "Good night, girls," she said and turned out the lights.

In the fading sunlight, she saw Rupert near the small pond splashing water over his back with his trunk. It turned the pink dust to a darker red mud that dripped down his sides. "What's up with you?" she asked softly.

Even with his large Africa-shaped ears, he couldn't have heard her quiet words, yet Rupert turned towards her. He was the perfect image of an elephant, dark against the setting sun. It was like one of the post cards sold in the gift shop.

Carol held her breath as she gazed at the big animal. He was all grays and dark pinks, the ground beneath his feet almost black. She let her breath out slowly, wondering why anyone would rush home when he could see what she had just seen. "Good night, Rupert," Carol called before closing the big wooden door.

Carol knew it wasn't going to be a good day when she realized that all of her khaki shorts were in the dirty laundry pile. The hours spent searching through old records had proved fruitless and had prevented her from throwing a load in the washing machine. Long pants might look more professional, but when one's profession consisted of scrubbing buckets and shoveling elephant poop, pants were nothing but hot and sticky. As she walked past the siamangs, Carol optimistically hoped that Rupert might offer a hint as to why he was acting strangely. Maybe he'd even go in the barn. Something had to go right.

Rupert was on the far side of the enclosure as Carol walked up, but that wasn't surprising as he'd been locked outside all night. Carol opened the gate to the barn, hoping Rupert might wander in if he smelled fresh vegetables. Emilio hadn't arrived yet, and she could imagine the look on his face if Rupert was in the barn when he got there. Maybe then he'd stop talking about darting. Sometimes animals just needed a little time and the issues resolved themselves. Not allowed to go into the barn alone, Carol prepared diets for all four animals in the department kitchen and placed the buckets of food near the doors. Rupert was closer and seemed to be looking at the barn, but that was all. "Come on, boy. Breakfast is served," Carol called out. "I need you to come inside, boy. Come on. I've got bananas." She waved a banana through the bars.

Rupert lifted his trunk, snaking it up against his forehead like an elephant in a circus parade. Carol jumped, banging her wrist against the bar in surprise as Rupert trumpeted. She could feel the sound in her jaw, and it resonated deep within her. She had never heard him trumpet before, or any of the elephants. He used to purr like a diesel engine when she arrived in the mornings and snorted at the girls now and then, but never trumpeted. Her mind frantically considered the possible causes for a male elephant to trumpet. Anxious. Threatened.

Threatening. Carol scanned the exhibit but saw no obvious threats. If others in the zoo heard him trumpeting, they'd want to know why he was acting out.

Carol bit her lip. She was running out of time, but maybe she could stall. One more day to work with Rupert, then she'd talk to Annie. Trumpeting might earn a new lock for the barn gate, at least. But not what he really needed. Rupert needed someone he could trust. A friend. Carol took a deep breath to settle her nerves and smelled the breeze wafting from the exhibit; it really was beginning to stink as the decomposing plant matter warmed in the sun. What if she went out into the exhibit? He might follow her back to the barn. She could prove it was a social issue. It was a small glimmer of hope, but Carol raced towards it. Inhaling the mix of feces and dust, she hurried towards the barn. Emilio still had not arrived. The other keepers were busy caring for their own animals, and it was oddly quiet in the barn. The girls excitedly moved towards her, looking for breakfast, but Carol quickly moved past them to the other side of the barn. She hesitated just a moment before throwing back the bar that held the gate to the chute closed, wondering what would happen to Rupert if she was fired for violating protocol. She listed the broken rules in her head. Entered barn alone. Left the gate open. Entered exhibit with animal.

Her breath came quickly as she walked through the chute and into the exhibit. She looked over her shoulder to see if Emilio had arrived but saw no sign of him. Carol was relieved that Rupert stood quietly and expressed an easy alertness as he watched her from across the dusty red exhibit. He turned and followed her motions as Carol approached. Part of her was glad he kept his distance, but another wished he'd come over, reach out his trunk to hold her hand, allow her to caress his mammoth shoulder. She wanted to reassure him that everything would be okay, the way a mother calmed a child who had a nightmare.

She moved closer with each careful step, as slow and calm as she could manage with her pulse racing. The big elephant fanned his ears, but that was all. She was about twenty yards away and could see the long eyelashes that shaded his big eyes. “That’s right. Nothing to worry about,” she said softly, slowly reaching out one hand.

He trumpeted, and Carol felt her heart pounding in her ears. Something was really wrong. She turned slowly away, not wanting to startle him further. The whole zoo must have heard, and she needed to get out of the exhibit before anyone saw her. Her khaki pants were plastered against her calves, dark brown where she sweated through them. They seemed to cling to her legs and restrict her movements as Carol hurried back towards the chute.

Carol felt the ground vibrate beneath her shoes, and she turned, confused. She saw Rupert’s broad flat head hurtling towards her. His ears fanned wide, causing him to appear even larger. Carol’s breath seemed stuck in her throat as she watched him come closer. It was like a postcard photograph: bright blue sky and thundering pink elephant.

Monkey Mind

I close my eyes, the dim afternoon light red against my eyelids, and take a deep breath. You can do this, Tracy. It's good for you. It's only twenty minutes.

I uncross and re-cross my legs, my bare left foot tucked tight under my right thigh. Sitting Indian style, I remember when it wasn't politically incorrect to call it such. It's not the stereotypical zazen meditation pose, but I'm not a stereotypical Buddhist monk. I'm not a monk. Or Buddhist. Not really, though some of the things Shunrey Suzuki wrote made sense. In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities; in the expert's mind there are few. I am now a beginner at Buddhism, allegedly full of possibilities. I need to know what those possibilities are. Candice said that Buddhism was a philosophy more than it was a religion and that it would help me. God knows I need help after that last disaster of a job, but is Candice really one to give advice? Well, she gives it, but should I take it? What does she know about focusing my life when she's changed majors five times in the last four years? I remember when we met, both idealistic freshman lugging boxes, when we discovered that we were headed to the same dorm room. She too was an English major then, though she switched to history before the end of the semester because of a fascination with the Black Death. Later, it was a passion for mathematics, then philosophy. With credits spread throughout different departments, she isn't graduating in four years, that's for sure. But I will. Three months and I'll be cast out of university. I have no idea what I'll do.

My right foot tingles, sharp spurs stabbing into the sole of my foot, so I uncross my legs. I press my soles together, knees bent and lying against the floor: the Burmese position. I don't know where the name came from, I assume Burma, but it reminds me of snakes. There was a large garter snake that frequented Mom's garden when I was a child. It blended in, black against

the black soil, but its scales gleamed in the sun and gave away its position. Its size intimidated me, and I never tried to catch it, but I liked to watch it. One day it ate the toad that slept in my shoes on the porch. The toad screamed like a cat does when someone steps on its tail. The snake was just doing what snakes do, but the sight of its gleaming scales the next day didn't make me smile like they did before.

Perhaps the position's name comes from the snake. My bent legs are like a giant Burmese Python—thick, slow. Pythons are constrictors; they suffocate their prey. Maybe that's the problem: I'm being suffocated. There are so many possibilities, I can't breathe. Mom is pushing for law school. She wants her daughter to be successful, which seems to translate to a career that pays well. I was always encouraged to pursue math and science with the idea that I could be a pharmacist or accountant. It was never my thing. I was drawn to the written word like I never was to calculus. There was no imagination in accounting, at least not legally. Mom tried to understand; she often asked about my classes and even read a couple of books I recommended. Now she's trying to find something "successful" I can be with a degree in liberal arts. I'm good at school, so the obvious answer is more school. Law school. It's too late to apply anywhere for this fall. My own fault; I didn't want to apply and kept putting it off. Law school seems so... stuffy. I don't want to have an office and files. It's easier to list what I don't want to do than it is to think of what I do want. I don't want to be a lawyer. I don't want to be a teacher. What else can I do with an English degree?

Candice's better off, assuming she sticks with biology. She wants to work with park services to save the Hellbender salamander. We spent more than twenty minutes trying to find the damned thing in a zoo exhibit, so I can see why there are problems observing the wild ones. It was under a rock and its big, for a salamander, cartoony dinosaur head was looking around the

tank. It was only when it moved that we realized the “rock” was the Hellbender. Candice excitedly told me her newest goal as we walked around the reptile house. Her eyes lit up while she talked, and I smiled and agreed that yes, she could make a difference. She can, too, if she keeps at it. Candice is still a beginner, full of possibilities. She always is. As I watched the alligator lazily rise to the surface of its pond for a breath, she told me about zazen, Buddhist sitting meditation, and how it helped her to discover her true focus. She described herself as having a monkey mind, one that leaps from idea to idea like a monkey from tree to tree. Zazen helped calm her mind and allowed her to realize that her true calling was biology. She recommended that I try it. Zazen, not biology.

Maybe I should have tried biology, or physics, or even math. The monkeys may be right that jumping around is best. I could have swung through the departments of the university collecting the fruits of each and discovering which was sweetest on my palate. I might have settled on a hard science and found the passion for salamanders that Candice seems to have. Mom might have liked that, too. But I like English. I’d like to think I’m even good at it. But I’m not sure what being good at English really even means. That I can quote Shakespeare? That I can recognize a comma splice? Where does one put that on a resume? The possibilities are few.

I probably should have started zazen then, months before I had to make a choice. But I always procrastinate, always let the assignment sit on my desk for three weeks and then write my paper the weekend before it is due. For a little while I was convinced that I did my best thinking when the pressure of a deadline forced me to concentrate, but that’s obviously not true; the pressure is on now to decide on a post-collegiate life, and I have no ideas. Can I get paid to sit under a magnolia tree and page through a book?

The muscles in the back of my neck tighten, and I reach my right hand up to rub the pain away. How long has it been? Candice said to start with twenty minutes and to work up to an hour. She also said that I needed a zafu. She showed me her fat, round, black pillow. Supposedly, sitting on it makes the positions more comfortable. Candice boasted that she could do an hour in the full lotus position with her zafu. With a sixty-dollar butt pillow, I could do it too. Pass. I did accept the book Candice lent me, *The Three Pillars of Zen*. It seemed more authentic, and more helpful, than a pillow. The matte cover stared up from my nightstand for a few months, but eventually I cracked it open. According to the book, I could sit in any position to meditate. The part that mattered was the mind set.

Damn. The mind set. I need to put my thoughts aside and focus on nothing. No wonder this takes lifetimes to achieve. How does one focus on nothing? The theory that focusing on nothing will help me focus on my life seems iffy, but I can try. I have been trying. This is far more complicated than Candice led me to believe.

Not that anything has been easy lately. Well, quitting was easy. I applied for the job to appease my mother. Secretary at a law firm. When I first took the position, the idea of venturing into the “real world” was exciting. I was finally doing something productive. That lasted until I spent my first day stuck behind a desk. It wasn’t the stack of files to be put in the system or when all four phone lines lit up at once that drove me crazy; it was the smiling. Even when answering the phone, I plastered on a fake smile. I forced the cheerfulness into my voice and silently cursed each client until five o’clock. It was my first taste of the real world, and I felt obligated to make the best of it, but not even I could make that dreary office bright. I hated that prison, but I stayed for an entire month.

Mom was disappointed when I quit, as I'm sure she was planning on a letter of recommendation for law school. She read once that English majors often do well in law school, and I'm sure she saw it as a practical use for my degree. Go to Harvard or Yale so I can have an even bigger desk. I tried to tell her that it was a waste of my talents, but we both knew I was grasping at straws. What talents?

Painting. I used to paint. There's a pad of thick, creamy paper stashed away with tubes of watercolor paints. Candice needed art supplies to make posters for some event—homecoming?—and I tagged along to Hobby Lobby. The soft, sable brushes were delightfully familiar when I ran my fingers along the bristles, trying to choose just the right one for the project I hadn't thought of yet. The brush I choose had white, plastic bristles, cheap, but soft and flexible to the touch. The versatile round brush was more than adequate to achieve the few techniques that I knew. Watercolor was precise. Difficult. With a little pressure, the bristles fanned out and gave the orange spots of the koi fish I painted soft edges, almost as if the fish had fur. Perhaps I was getting into the Zen thing even before I realized it. Candice's book mentioned painting. There were illustrations of beautiful watercolors; nothing like the one I did. I must not have been in the moment. I was probably thinking about the future.

The future. Candice said I'd figure it out. That something would come to me, like the answer to a koan. What is the sound of one hand clapping? The seemingly answerless questions are a tool for focus. I'm no closer to answering why one would kill the Buddha upon meeting than I am to knowing what to do in the next three months. I only have three months.

A soft beep causes me to glance at the timer by my side. Twenty minutes closer to graduation.

Imprints on Denim

It never occurred to me that anything could be wrong. Not with Jeremy. I was the screw up. I was the one who dropped out of college for a year to work, then the next year was fired because I refused to attend inventory counts during finals week. Bed Bath and Beyond was a bullshit job anyway. How many different types of pillows could anyone possibly need?

Jeremy covered my half of rent that June. He helped me find a slightly less soul-sucking job as a waiter at Outback. I paid back Jeremy in steaks. Not that he couldn't afford them himself. He had a good gig at the local florist and no tuition to cover. He loved his job, but he was the artsy type. He often brought home exotic flowers and leaves and used them as stencils and imprints to decorate his denim jeans. He usually used a dark blue fabric paint to create a resist pattern. It stank up the whole damn apartment. Sometimes he used silver and gold glitter, the floral patterns sparkling as they crept up his legs. There was no doubt in anyone's mind when he wore those glittery, flowery, ass-hugging jeans that Jeremy was flaming gay. And proud of it. I laughed when he offered to add ferns to my pants. I wasn't as open about my sexuality as he was.

I tried to imagine our living room without petals and leaves strewn across the dining room table and piled on the carpet and failed. There was always some project or another. Even last Wednesday when I opened the apartment door after class and saw Jeremy sitting on the sofa, there was a pile of fronds next to the door. "You promised not to leave this shit lying around," I said for what had to be the fifteenth time that week. I nudged the pile with my toe, not even sure what the plants were. It wasn't until I looked at his flushed red face and blank eyes that I realized something had happened. My messenger bag thumped to the floor. My books crushed the dry leaves.

“Jeremy, what is it?” I sat next to him and hesitantly put one arm around his shoulders. They were quivering.

He leaned into me, shifting so that his head was against my chest. The residue of tears glistened in trails down his cheek. “Jake called,” he said softly, his voice raw.

My mind raced, frantic to remember who the hell Jake was. Family? A friend? A blurry image of a guy in torn black jeans under the glaring lights of a club connected to the name. An ex? A hook-up?

I hugged Jeremy and took his hand. It was clammy, but I didn’t wipe the sweat off right away. “What did he say?”

“Jake,” Jeremy’s voice cracked, “Jake has AIDS.” His tears soaked navy spots on my chambray shirt.

Fuck. “Did you...?” My voice trailed off. The shock seemed to shut down my brain, and I struggled to sort through the implications.

Jeremy nodded, rubbing his head against me. I couldn’t see the tears but felt the shuddering breaths that he took between sobs. I hugged him tighter, trying to ease his trembling through sheer strength. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. I held him, let him cry, and desperately tried to think. How could he have let this happen? He knew better. Hell, everyone knew better. The student health center had condoms sitting in a bowl for the taking. He fucking reminded me to grab some the other day when I was on campus. Not that I used them. I wasn’t ready for that. I’d never even had a boyfriend. Hooking up at gay bars every Friday night wasn’t my thing. I didn’t think it was Jeremy’s either. I saw him as that blend of stereotype and individual, the confident moderate. What I wanted to be. I wanted to shake him, throw plants, throw condoms, scream the importance of safe sex. I gritted my teeth instead.

Jeremy sat up, wiping the tears away with both hands. “Thanks,” he whispered. His eyes were ringed in red, but I could see the fear in their blue depths. Still not knowing what to say, I hugged him again.

The air conditioning was the only genuinely soothing element of the waiting room, refreshingly cool after the South Carolina heat. The doctor’s office was the same as every other one I’d seen: small with clean, white walls hung with “comforting” prints of landscapes above rows of chairs and a TV in the corner turned to a talk show. The mundane appearance of the room did nothing for my nerves, but I plastered a smile on for Jeremy.

I could feel the tension in him before the doctor called his name. He sat next to me, staring at his hands and methodically pushing his cuticles back. He wore his good jeans, the ones without paint splatters. I almost asked why he didn’t wear the flowery ones, but I didn’t. We hadn’t spoken much since last week; I couldn’t think of anything to say. When he asked me to drive him to the doctor’s, I just said, “Sure.”

A painting of blowing winds propelling a tiny sailboat across the sunlit waters on the opposite wall stood out in the bland, white room. I imagined the two of us on its decks, pale dabs of paint, and wondered if Jeremy had ever been sailing. Maybe we could go together. We could rent a boat and be the pirates of the Cooper River for a day. I pictured Jeremy, his button-down shirt darkened by spray, his jeans rolled up to his knees, laughing as we blundered along. I used to sail with my father. That was years ago, a little Sunfish boat that transported us from Georgetown to the gray waves of the Atlantic. My father encouraged me to fish, seemed to like that it was something we could do together. Not that I ever caught much. I almost turned to ask

Jeremy if he'd like to rent a boat but stopped myself, my smile fading. It would be better to ask later. After.

When the doctor called his name, Jeremy squeezed my knee just a little before he stood and walked through the white door. It shut with a thump, leaving me to wait. It shouldn't take long. The swab test was a quick wiping of the mouth, and results were available in a mere thirty minutes. I Googled it after Jeremy asked me to take him to the doctor. It was not as accurate as a blood test but much faster. If the swab was inconclusive, or, God forbid, positive, a blood test would be done. Please, let it be half an hour.

The painting caught my eye again, but this time it seemed darker. I imagined the shadows were sharks circling just beneath the foamed surface. A dorsal fin sliced through the waves, the same shape as the big white sail. A man eater. It drifted beside the boat, waiting for the gust of wind that would knock the unseen sailors into its jaws. The trademark menacing music played in my mind. Dunnha. Dunnha.

Fuck this. I switched to another plastic chair, one that faced the TV. Dr. Phil was drawling that relationships were based on communication. Ha. Like when Dad "communicated" that no son of his could be gay. I didn't come out until college. That was when I met Jeremy, someone who flaunted who he was. It's not like we hooked up or anything. We've always been just friends. Best friends. He showed me that I didn't have to hide anymore. That was when the shit really hit the fan. Dad sold the Sunfish that fall, said he couldn't bear to see it anymore because it reminded him of the son he didn't have. He clearly communicated that I should not bother coming home for Christmas; he said nobody wanted me there. The homophobic bastard.

I wondered what Dr. Phil had to say about that. Surely more than Mom did. She came to see me at New Year's, apologized for "not being available" at Christmas. Didn't say a word

about Dad, but she did give me three hundred dollars, said it was to help with tuition. Dad wouldn't be paying it anymore. That was the semester I dropped out. I couldn't deal with family and school and my sexuality and Bed Bath and Beyond. Jeremy said I needed to know who I was, to accept myself. Then I could get my shit together and maybe even find someone else to love.

Or maybe Dr. Phil had some tips for communicating that you have an incurable, lethal STD. I couldn't imagine picking up the phone to make that call, punching the number to recite the memorized and rehearsed words that held the potential to destroy someone's life. Did Dr. Phil even consider that a possibility in his world of one-hour solutions?

Jeremy eventually collected himself enough to tell me what happened. He and Jake went out for a couple weeks after meeting at a club. Fucking typical. They blew each other, no condoms. Jake found out at his annual sports physical—asshole played soccer—but didn't know when in the past year he caught it. There had been guys before and after Jake. It was HIV, not full AIDS, but the fucker put Jeremy and all those other guys at risk. And all of the guys they've been with. Jesus H. Christ.

The big white door opened, and Jeremy walked out. His head was high, and his eyes were bright, but I couldn't tell if it was the light or tears. I stood, afraid to ask, but aching to know.

Flying

Bethany's sister, Katelyn, always did it better. It didn't help that Katelyn was older, so she always got to do it first too. It was up to Bethany to surpass her sister, but she never seemed able to. Her parents reminded her of this, asking, "Why can't you be more like your sister?" Katelyn was smart, with almost straight A's in school, and a star basketball player on the middle school team. "Why can't you play a sport like your sister?" her parents asked.

Bethany tried. She practiced shooting free throws in the driveway every night the June before her sixth grade year, hoping she might make the middle school team in the fall, just like Katelyn did. She wiped the sweat from her face on the sleeve of her shirt to keep it out of her eyes, so she could focus on the hoop. Her old grade school shorts clung to her damp legs. Katelyn must have heard the pa-thud pa-thud of dribbling because she stuck her head out the kitchen door. Bethany did her best to ignore the scrutinizing eyes of her sister and put the ball up. It bounced high off the rim with a rattling clang and disappeared into the hedge.

"Bend your knees more," Katelyn called out. "I'll show you."

"No, I can do it," Bethany insisted. She found the ball in the dirt by the petunias and dribbled it back towards the hoop. At the free throw line she stopped and held the ball a moment, then bounced it twice. She eyed the hoop, bent her knees, and shot. The ball rattled around the hoop before dropping through the net.

Bethany threw up her arms and cheered. "Did you see that?" She turned towards the door, but Katelyn had already gone inside.

Bethany hated attending her sister's games. Her parents insisted that the family support each other, and why can't she be more like Katelyn? Bethany sat in the back seat and stared out the

window, silently cursing every car that passed with a Fillmore Basketball bumper sticker.

Within the subdivisions of identical houses, one building stood out along the drive. The white stable looked like it belonged on an old painting like the ones Bethany saw at the museum, not the middle of town. It even had a horse weathervane on top. In the evenings when Bethany and her parents went past, there were usually four or five people on horses in a large pen. Sometimes they went over jumps. The horses were beautiful as they flew over the fences, and Bethany would have liked to stop and watch, but they passed by like everything else on the way to the game. Bethany wondered if she could learn to fly, too. Not even Katelyn could fly.

“Mom, can I take riding lessons?” she blurted in the car on the way to the last game of the semester. It was December, and the riders were bundled in coats, but still riding.

Her mother turned in the passenger seat to look at Bethany, her eyebrows nearly meeting in the middle in her confusion. She must have spotted the stable out the window, because the wrinkles in her brow eased. “Are you sure? I always thought you’d play a real sport, like your sister. How hard can horseback riding be? You just sit there.”

Bethany bit her lower lip. That wasn’t a no, but it would be if she didn’t choose her words carefully. “Starting easy isn’t a bad thing. Maybe it will inspire me to try out for something harder in the spring.”

“Really? Soccer, maybe?” Her mother’s voice went up, and Bethany knew what she was hoping.

She received her first riding lesson as a Christmas present, and excitedly pulled on the leather jodphur boots as her mother drove her to the stable. The wheels crunched on the gravel, and Bethany flung open the door and slammed it shut before realizing the engine was still running. Her mother waved a gloved hand and backed the car out the drive. She wasn’t going to

watch. She wasn't even going to stay. Bethany took a deep breath of crisp air that only faintly smelled of manure and turned to go into the stable; she wasn't going to let her mother ruin this. Not this.

A woman in a green jacket with the stable name on the front greeted Bethany with a smile when she walked in. "You must be the new student. I'm Sue, the instructor." She offered a gloved hand after wiping it on her pants.

They shook, and Bethany introduced herself, making a mental note to get a pair of leather gloves.

"You'll be riding Tiny today. Don't worry, I'll help you get her ready, but you will be expected to groom and tack your own mount for lessons once you learn how." She stopped in front of a big wooden sliding door with metal bars along the top third. "This is Tiny."

Bethany looked into the stall and knew her eyes widened. The mammoth of a horse looked back through black eyes edged in long lashes. It snorted, and Bethany jumped.

"It's okay. Tiny's a good girl." Sue opened the door and clipped a lead to the mare's halter. "Stand back. I'm bringing her out."

Bethany scurried to the other side of the aisle and watched as the giant black horse clopped out of the stall and towards the rear of the barn. She stayed close to the wall and well back from the swishing tail, but followed.

Sue quickly walked her through grooming once Tiny was secured in the grooming stall near the tack room. Standing in the crossties, Tiny didn't seem quite so big. Bethany ran one hand across the mare's coat while using the coarse bristle brush, a dandy brush according to Sue. Tiny was softer than Bethany imagined, like a sleek dog. The saddle was heavy and the girth difficult to tighten—Sue warned her that Tiny held her breath so it would be loose—but Bethany

managed to do almost everything she was told without Sue's help. She even kept her feet out from under the dark hooves that threatened to break her toes.

Bethany gathered the reins in her left hand like Sue told her to and placed her knee in Sue's clasped hands for a leg up.

"One," Sue counted.

Bethany took a deep breath, her muscles tense.

"Two."

Bethany clutched at the saddle.

"Three."

She swung her right leg over the mare's hindquarters and sat up, feeling the cold seep through her jeans from the saddle. She did it. Bethany didn't realize she was grinning until she glanced down at Sue, who stood next to the horse's shoulder, and she smiled back.

Bethany quickly found out that there was more to riding than sitting there. She struggled to post on the correct diagonal, rising from the saddle when the mare's outside leg reached forward and sitting again on the next stride. Her thighs burned after three times around the ring. Sue was quick to correct the slightest mistake, but was also quick to praise the moments when everything finally clicked. For a few seconds Bethany moved seamlessly with Tiny, and she believed that she could learn to fly. It rarely lasted more than a stride or two before Sue called out that Bethany needed to keep her hands together and her heels down and look UP.

Sue called for a stop once Bethany managed to maintain the correct diagonal half way around the ring. "Always end on a high note," she said. "That was a good first lesson. You've got light hands, which is rare in a new rider."

Bethany grinned. She leaned forward and patted Tiny on the neck, unaware of how cold her hand was until she felt the horse's warmth. From the moment she sat in the saddle, not once did Bethany think about the temperature, or school, or Katelyn.

Two months later, Bethany tore the birthday wrapping paper off the large box to reveal a big, plastic, black mare with a little bobbed tail tied up with a blue ribbon. Bethany recognized it as a Percheron, a large draft horse. Sue had a big book of horse breeds in her office that she let Bethany read when her mom was late picking her up after lessons. She had been reading as much as she could to learn about riding. "Thank you," she said.

Katelyn looked at her hands. "It's supposed to be Tiny."

"It looks a little like her." The model was black.

"All you talk about is that horse. She must be something special."

The words surprised Bethany. She didn't think anyone paid attention to her riding, let alone Katelyn with her practices and teammates and "real sports." She met her sister's eyes and smiled before opening the box. The smooth plastic felt cool under her hand as she unwound the plastic ties that held the model in place. Once the model was free, Bethany turned it over slowly, admiring the big hooves and the glossy eye. It looked nothing like Tiny but had its own beauty.

"A toy?" her mother asked, walking into the living room where the two sisters sat.

"What are you going to do with a toy horse?"

"It's not a toy," Bethany said. "It's a model." She held it up for her mother to see, but her mother didn't even glance at it.

"It's bad enough you waste so much time with the real ones, now you're going to play with toy ones?" She shook her head and left the room.

Bethany lowered the model, holding it close to her. “I love it,” she said to Katelyn. “I have the perfect spot on my bookshelf for her.”

Her sister smiled. “Whatever makes you happy.”

“Do you want to come to the schooling show Saturday?” Bethany blurted out. She hadn’t told her parents, only saying that she needed to go to the barn that day. She didn’t want to hear them say they weren’t coming, that she should stop wasting her time and practice for soccer tryouts. But maybe Katelyn would come. “It’s nothing major. Just the other students at the barn. It’s supposed to be practice before everyone goes off to the big shows this summer.”

Katelyn shrugged. “Sure, I guess.”

Bethany stood, still clutching the model horse in her hands. “Wait until you meet Tiny.” For the first time that Bethany could recall, she was excited about a sporting event.

Bethany could feel the butterflies flitting in her stomach. The show was scheduled to start at nine, and her class was first. Beginner Equitation. She was glad she had ignored her mother when she had said to eat breakfast. The fresh air helped settle her stomach as she searched the rows of cars in the parking lot, but she didn’t see her mother’s blue Chevy. Katelyn said she was coming. She had asked to meet Tiny. Bethany wanted to show her the trick she had taught the horse. If Bethany put a carrot in one hand and held both out, Tiny would nudge the one with the carrot. Her whiskers tickled, but her nose was velvety soft. Maybe Katelyn would even try. Where was she? The practice ring was filling quickly, and Bethany needed to hurry to have enough time to warm up with Tiny. Surely Katelyn would know to go to the ring when she arrived. She’d come. She promised.

Bethany managed to duck into the busy bathroom and caught a quick look in the mirror. Her hair was pulled up neatly, and there were no shavings or bits of hay stuck to her polo or jodphurs. She gave her boots a last quick polish with a rag. Bethany took a deep breath and snapped her helmet on. The chin strap fit snug under her chin. All set. This was it.

Tiny seemed unaffected by the people rushing around her as Bethany tacked her up. She flicked her ears, listening to Bethany talk as she tightened the girth. “You need to be extra good today,” she told the horse. “Katelyn is coming. She gave me the model, remember? It’s not as pretty as you, don’t worry.” Bethany petted the mare’s neck. “Maybe Mom and Dad will come watch too. Do you think they will?”

Tiny bobbed her head, following the carrot that Bethany held out.

“You’re right, of course they will.” She held her hand flat, and Tiny lipped the carrot from her fingers.

“Are you two ready?”

Bethany looked up and saw Sue standing by the stall door.

“You should be warming up. I want you to really focus on your diagonals. The judge might ask for an extended trot. You remember how to ask for an extended trot?”

Bethany nodded. “Squeeze with both legs.”

“That’s right.” Sue smiled. “Take deep breaths. You’re going to be fine.”

“Have you seen my parents?” she asked.

“Not yet, but there’s still time for them to get here. But you’re running out of time to practice. Let’s go.” Sue slid the door open.

Bethany followed her instructor to the warm-up ring, leading the big mare behind her. She stopped by the gate, eyes wide as other riders trotted and cantered past. They looked

awfully good. The butterflies beat wildly in Bethany's stomach, and she took a deep breath. She could do this. Tiny would see her through. If only Katelyn were there.

Bethany mounted, feeling the warmth of the big mare against her legs. She steered her out on to the rail and walked slowly around the ring. Heels down, she thought to herself. Eyes up. Hands together. Three small jumps stood along one side, set up for the advanced classes to practice over before they competed. Flying. Bethany wasn't far enough along in her lessons to jump yet, but she loved to watch the other riders. They made it look so easy. Bethany urged Tiny into a trot.

"Extend," Sue said as Bethany and Tiny passed her along the rail.

Bethany squeezed with her legs, and the mare sped up, her legs stretching to cover more ground with each stride. Bethany tried to keep up with her posting but missed a stride, feeling the jarring bump up her back as the mare kept trotting. She sped up, rising with Tiny's outside leg.

"Heels down," Sue said as they rode past again.

Right. Bethany glanced down at her leg.

"Look up."

Bethany stretched her leg, pushing her heels down as far as she could, and watched where Tiny was going.

"Halt."

The command caught Bethany off guard, but she quickly sat in the saddle and pulled back on the reins. It took a couple strides for the big mare to come to a stop, but she did.

Sue walked along the fence until she was next to Tiny's shoulder. "Don't lose your focus. You can do this."

Bethany nodded. She took a deep breath. The loudspeakers crackled to life and announced that the first class was ready to start. “Beginner Equitation, please enter the ring.”

Bethany turned Tiny in a small circle and walked towards the ring. Three riders were already there. Their heels were down. Bethany sat up tall and guided Tiny through the gate.

“Trot your horses, please,” the announcer said.

Bethany squeezed with her legs. She waited a beat as Tiny trotted, then rose with the correct leg. She had her diagonal. One of the other girls was struggling to get her horse going, and Bethany steered Tiny off the rail and towards the other side to give the pair room. She felt herself losing the beat, and chanted in her mind, up, down, up, down. As Bethany turned the corner, she saw Katelyn standing next to the fence, smiling broadly. She didn’t see her parents, but she pushed it from her mind. Katelyn came.

Katelyn met her at the gate as Bethany left the ring, a blue ribbon fluttering from Tiny’s bridle. “That was amazing,” she told her sister. “Sorry I was late, but I saw you go in the ring. You looked really good out there.”

“I was afraid you weren’t going to make it.”

“And miss seeing you ride? Wouldn’t think of it.” She looked at the big black mare. “Can I pet her?”

“Of course. Here, let me get off and I’ll show you the trick I taught her.”

Her sister shrugged. “Sure. I’m here to do whatever you want.”

Sue walked over and stood next to Katelyn. “Congratulations. You did well,” she said to Bethany once she dismounted. “Maybe next week we can start going over poles.”

“Jumping?” Bethany gripped the reins tightly in her excitement.

Sue laughed. “Start small, remember. Ground poles first.”

“But eventually?”

“Eventually. Now go take care of Tiny. Make sure to give her an extra carrot for that blue ribbon.”

“Yes, Sue.” Bethany grinned, wondering how the day could possibly get better. Katelyn came to watch. And she was going to learn to fly.

Fragments

Finding a dinosaur had sounded incredible when Dr. Reider described the Montana hills over the phone. For a substantial donation, I could join the expedition next summer. It was an opportunity to spend a couple weeks in those glorious hills he talked about. In the back of my mind I knew he was only after my money, but I liked to support the sciences, making yearly donations through the company. That's how he got my number in the first place. He talked about uncovering the mysteries of ages past, the thrill of discovery. Childhood memories of digging on the beach for tin toys flooded back to me, drowning the rational part of my mind that said I couldn't possibly go on a dinosaur hunt at my age. I remembered the Christmas we spent in Mexico; Mom buried toys for me to "discover," carefully smoothing the hot, white sand over them while I faced a coconut tree. When she said ready, I searched the span of beach with my blue shovel, tossing sand in the air and getting it down my shorts as I dug. I was seven. Almost sixty years had passed when my office phone rang, and Dr. Reider offered what he assured me was a chance in a lifetime. The memory of playing dinosaur hunter burned so brightly that I couldn't ignore it. I put a check in the mail that afternoon.

He never mentioned the heat. As the Montana sun beat down on me, the desire to find a dinosaur withered. Or rather, it was replaced by the desire for a beer. I glanced at the watch the outdoor specialty store salesman insisted that every true camper needed. I remembered the pitch: "Robert, an adventurer requires specific tools. This one lightweight watch has them all!" Dad insisted that the gold Omega watch he gave me when I graduated with my MBA was perfect for any occasion. It certainly lasted—class of '71—but would have been impractical in the field. I don't think he imagined I'd be in the field; he was thinking about management meetings or dinners with clients when he handed me the box. And it had been perfect for all of those

occasions, a watch that said here was a man who knew how to make money. My new one said that I was standing twelve degrees east of true north and that it was 112 degrees Fahrenheit. It also said 10:00am. Two hours in and an hour too early for a beer break. I poured lukewarm water from my canteen into my mouth—"guaranteed to keep beverages icy cold in the worst heat!"—allowing some to drip down my chin and cool my chest. Shit, it was hot.

One of the grad students, Luke, walked slowly past, eyes intent on his grid of dirt. There were dark stains under his arms and a T across the back of his shirt, the bright blue of his college turning navy. I was the only donor on the trip, which should have been a red flag the moment I arrived, but at least I wasn't the only one suffering in the heat. There were about a dozen grad students, though I still confused their names and schools. They were nice enough to humor the old man, which I suppose was the best I could ask for.

The first night in the field, the students gathered what wood they could find and built a tiny camp fire. It glowed brightly in the still darkness as I walked to the latrine. The students saw me walking back to my tent and waved me over. Luke handed me a barbeque fork with a marshmallow on the end. Tim, another student from I didn't know which school, bragged that he'd find the first dinosaur. Luke laughed, insisting that he'd find the first. Soon they were all placing bets, arguing over who had better eyesight or "mad skills."

Dr. Reider must have overheard, because he walked over and simply said, "Twenty bucks on Robert."

"Me? I'd put my money on you."

"Beginner's luck," Dr. Reider said. "Mine's all used up, but you've got luck on your side."

I grinned like an idiot, I'm sure.

Before returning to his tent, Dr. Reider said to keep an eye out for more than just bones. Tracks and coprolites could be just as important.

I waited until he was out of earshot. “What’s a coprolite?”

Tim smiled. “Dinosaur shit.”

Dinosaur shit. I paid thousands of dollars to comb the Montana hills for shit. The hope I’d felt at Dr. Reider’s words deflated.

Despite my momentary disappointment, I woke early the next morning after a sleepless night lying on my top-of-the-line “guaranteed for the adventurer” sleeping bag. There had to be more than shit in the hills.

After a quick breakfast, Dr. Reider explained the grid system. In order to be certain that every bit of dirt was thoroughly searched, a pattern was made on the ground, and everyone walked next to each other in straight lines scouring the dirt for any sign of fossils. He showed me a couple bone fragments from last season so I would know what to look for. One was deep maroon and the other speckled dark and light gray, something about the permineralization that caused the color variation. They were each about two inches long and rough in my hand. Dr. Reider said to expect smaller pieces to have weathered out of the hillside. I wondered how anyone found the tiny bits, sometimes the size of pennies, in all the rock. It was a daunting task, but I lined up and began my search, hoping that Dr. Reider had been right and that I would find a fragment.

I focused on the square of dirt before me and resumed my slow walk. Dirt. Dirt. A pale pebble. Dirt. Dr. Reider warned me that it could take days to find a fossil, let alone one worth excavating, but it wasn’t until after that first day staring at dirt that I began to realize he might be

right. He said to expect hadrosaurids, the duckbills, but they were so common they weren't worth the effort of digging up and preparing. That didn't make sense to me at first. I'd be thrilled to find a hadrosaurid.

As the day continued, I quickly discovered that I didn't know nearly as much as I thought I did about dinosaurs. The pictures in the books Mom used to read to me before bed as a kid showed pale skeletons lying on the ground, waiting to be picked up. I curled next to her, could smell her magnolia lotion, as she read about ferocious meat eaters and giant plant eaters. My favorite was *Brontosaurus*, always depicted half submerged in a lake munching dark green water plants. Tim laughed when I told him about the picture. He explained that there's no such thing as *Brontosaurus*; its real name is *Apatosaurus*. Something about the wrong skull caused a scientist to claim the fossil was a different species, but it was later proven to be the same. My questions increased as I realized that most of what I remembered was wrong.

Luckily, the scientists obliged, sometimes running on about how improbable it was that *Apatosaurus* lived with its body submerged because based on comparisons with modern animal abilities, the water pressure would have made it impossible to take a breath. The current theory was that sauropods had trunks, and that's why they had nostril cavities above their eye sockets like elephants. I didn't always follow what the scientists said, but I listened and tried to replace decades of thinking. They were patient, especially Dr. Reider, and I tried not to think that it was only because of the donations.

One didn't pursue paleontology for the fortune, that was for sure. But they had a passion that I never saw in the office. It reminded me of my ex-wife, Rebecca. Even as a college freshman, she knew exactly what she wanted. It was that spark that attracted me, and I somehow found the courage to sit next to her in geology lab. She introduced herself, a bio major, and

when I told her I was studying business, she laughed and said not to worry, she'd help me. At first we met once a week at the library, and she'd read over my papers. She said it was chilly in the old building and always wore a green sweater. It matched her eyes. I would purposely make mistakes just so she'd keep meeting me, and I knew from the way she smiled that she knew. She never said anything, though, and was always at the library Monday afternoon. I didn't find the courage to ask for a real date until after finals. She ordered a strawberry milkshake. I could taste it when we kissed on the front steps of her dorm.

Rebecca never really understood why I continued studying business. She caught me reading ahead in our geology text book, saw the A's on my exams, and even listened as I identified different types of stone used in the buildings we walked past on campus. Dad would never have understood why I wanted to look at rocks when he worked so hard to build the dream for us. I followed the path set before me: business degree, MBA, corner office, working for Dad. I thought I could do anything, so long as I had her. We could be weekend geologists. Take trips when I wasn't needed at the office. But that was years ago.

She asked me to go with her. Observe African Wild Dogs in Tanzania. I could see the disappointment in her eyes even before she asked. Dad had just retired, leaving me president. I couldn't up and leave. Not then, not on the brink of securing a merger with our competitor. Standing in the great hall before she left for Africa, she asked, "When can you come?"

"Rebecca, I can't..." I struggled for a reason, but none came. This wasn't in the plan.

She took both my hands in hers and pressed her wedding ring into my palm. The gold was still warm from the finger it had encircled for eleven years. "It will only interfere with my work," she said softly. Her skin smelled faintly of dirt. A quick kiss and she was gone.

I didn't blame Rebecca. Her passion was what I loved about her. Her current project, Orangutan International Foundation, opened a new building in Borneo last fall to raise orphaned apes. She emailed when she saw the donation records. That was when I told her about the dig. First she asked if I was crazy, then wrote "better late than never." I hoped she was right. We never did go to the Smokey Mountains to look for geodes. She saw Mount Kilimanjaro, but I never did. I fulfilled my father's dream, but the boy who played with plastic dinosaurs was lost among the papers stacked on my desk, and I didn't know where to find him. Montana, maybe.

A museum might have been a better place to look at my age. More fitting. I briefly regretted not paying to have a dinosaur named after me. *Hadrosaurus Robertus*. But it was possible, even probable, that no new species would be found. And it required a bigger check. Not that I minded too much, giving them more money, but it defeated the whole purpose of going out in the field. I didn't want to be an armchair dinosaur hunter; I wanted the real experience. Even if it meant sunburns. At least, that's what I thought last fall.

Staring at the red dirt, feeling the rays scorching the back of my neck, buying a name seemed like a good deal. Dirt. Dirt. Dirt. Dr. Reider said that when fossils weathered out of the hillside, bits fell on the ground and left a trail leading right up to the bone. I was trying to find the beginning of a trail that would lead me to a dinosaur, any dinosaur. There didn't seem to be any bone fragments in the whole damn valley. Tons of fossils had been excavated from the area, from the largest and most complete *Tyrannosaurus rex* to tiny *Maiasaura* hatchlings. Just not this week.

The sweat dripped out from under my hat and down the back of my neck where it stung my sunburn. Sunburned, and only three days in the field. I might not have cared as much if there had been a discovery in those three days. But there hadn't been. Not even the tiniest sliver

of a fossil. I should have brought more sun block. And more beer. I took another drink from my canteen. Looking out at the valley, all I saw were tired scientists and dirt. Lots of dirt that needed to be carefully searched. By me. Maybe, just maybe, there would be a tiny maroon fragment in my grid. I glanced at my watch again. Shit, it was hot.

A Day at the Faire

Puffs of dust drifted up to cover my white sneakers as I tramped through the brown grass that served as a parking lot. A gentle breeze caused the dust to swirl but did little to cool the Wisconsin summer sun. I shook my head, thinking to myself. How, exactly, did Vickie talk me into this? She begged me to come in, just for a few hours. It was her first year managing the box office, and she was frantic about being short-staffed for Labor Day weekend. Most of the college students who worked there in the summer had already taken off for their various campuses. But as Vickie was quick to point out, the fair was a short drive from Carthage College, and I didn't have class on Monday.

What Vickie did not take into consideration was that the homework had already piled up in the week and a half since classes began. I desperately needed the weekend to decrease the size of the stack of books leaning at a dangerous angle beside my desk. I couldn't afford to fall behind this early in the semester. But I couldn't let Vickie down either. She was my roommate; I'd never hear the end of it. It was bad enough that she was always asking me to go to the bars with her. Last Saturday she burst into my room, said that I needed to get my nose out of a book, and tossed a bright pink shirt on my bed. "Put it on. We're going out."

"I have a quiz on Monday. So do you." We were in the same philosophy class.

"So? With her hands on her hips and her head tilted slightly, Vickie looked exactly like my mother did when she used ask me if I'd finished my homework before going out to play.

"There's plenty of time to study. After we go to the concert."

"You have fun." I knew it was useless to argue the importance of studying with Vickie. She would read the chapter the morning before class and get a C and be content; it's what she always did. But I wasn't happy with anything less than perfect—my own fault, I know, but it

was drilled into me at a young age by my parents—and I needed the time to review my flash cards. I made them for the vocab words, a different color index card for each chapter.

“I won’t have fun if you don’t come,” she insisted. “I’ll even pay for drinks. You know you want to.”

“It’s okay, really.”

“Nathan’s going.”

I looked up from my book. Nathan was the hottie in our philosophy class. He was a sophomore, but his comments in class were always on point. He was the only other student who had read Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” before it was assigned in class. “We’ll be home by one?”

“Two.” Vickie drew an X over her heart.

I wore the pink shirt. Even put on lipstick. Vickie pushed and shoved her way to the front, jumping and screaming along with the band. The crush of people pushed me forward too, and I couldn’t count the number of elbows that hit me as I stood next to Vickie. I motioned that I was thirsty, anything to escape that crowd, and she waved in the general direction of the bar.

I retreated to the back, away from the flashing strobes and thumping speakers, and ordered a shot of vodka. Maybe it would make this more bearable. I threw back the shot and handed the glass to the bartender when I saw Nathan. He smiled and made his way through the crowd to stand next to me. He leaned down and yelled in my ear. “How do you like the band?”

I shrugged. “Loud.”

“What?” His breath was hot and moist on my ear.

I shook my head and gestured towards the two bottles of water he held.

“It’s for my boyfriend.”

Of course it was.

That lost night of studying is one of the reasons the stack of books waiting to be read was so high. But I wasn't sitting on my bed studying yellow cards this morning. I had listened to Vickie once again. Maybe it was the lure of a paycheck. Maybe it was Vickie's insistence that the renaissance fair was "educational." There was a glass blower, she said, who gave presentations, and an arms demonstration with pikes and swords and flails. Because learning how to properly swing a morningstar would benefit my education. It might make me feel better to whack a target with the ball and chain, but I wasn't sure how to include it in a philosophy paper. Still, something must have piqued my curiosity, because I went.

The front gate stood on a slight rise and was designed to look like the stone and wood of an old English home, one that was elongated into a box office with little arched windows and a counter. I could imagine it on the stage of a Shakespeare play, but that was the idea. The costumed people already milling around outside the building waiting to buy tickets added to the feeling. There were jugglers in motley tossing balls in the air, knights with broad swords—actual broad swords—strapped to their backs, ladies with big feather fans, and pirates with tall leather boots and cocked hats. It was a daunting sight, and I took a hesitant step backwards. I could tell her I had to go to the library to research a paper. I did have a paper coming up in October.

"Oh good, Ella, you're here." Vickie's voice carried her excitement over the small crowd of people separating us. She honestly looked thrilled to see me, but I couldn't say the same. No way to escape now. Hearing her call, several people turned to look at me, raising their eyebrows or frowning before returning to their conversations. I felt self conscious about my choice of a

plain black T-shirt and blue jeans. Leave it to Vickie to cause me to be the odd one out at a renaissance festival. I looked at my sneakers and wondered what Vickie had talked me into.

As Vickie approached, I could clearly see her costume. She was cinched tightly into a maroon bodice that did things for her body that no other article of clothing ever could. It took her thin athletic figure and gave her curves, cleavage even. The light blue, billowy shirt she wore beneath the bodice did nothing to cover her chest, though it did hide her elbows modestly as she made her way through the crowd.

“Vickie, you look,” I paused, searching for the right word, “authentic.”

She beamed and fiddled with the woven hair net that bound her strawberry blonde curls. “Thanks. The skirts are new.” The ankle-length navy and maroon skirts puffed out around her like a prom dress as she spun. She must have seen the unease on my face, because she grabbed my hand and tried to reassure me. “Don’t worry, we’ll find you something more appropriate.”

Appropriate wasn’t quite the word I’d have used to describe the clothes that Vickie found. A stuffy back room held a treasure trove of costume bits and pieces, including a puffy, natural linen shirt, a long, forest green skirt, and a matching floral swirled bodice. Vickie shook the skirts, and I pretended not to notice the dust that danced in the dim light. “Put these on,” she instructed.

“You’re joking, right? You can’t expect me to wear layers in this heat.”

“Ella, please. You need to be in costume to work the gate. And it will look good on you. Just try it on.”

Checking that the door was closed, I reluctantly complied. At least I wouldn’t stand out as much. Maybe people would stare less if I wore the costume, though probably not if it made me look like Vickie. The shirt was loose and surprisingly light despite the sleeves that hung to

my wrist. The skirt was also comfortable and much cooler than its ankle length suggested. Not too bad. Girly, but not bad. I pulled the bodice on over my head and it hung past my waist, eliminating the comfortable elements of the loose skirt and shirt. It reminded me of the Victorian novels I read for class last year. “No wonder women had fainting couches.”

“Just wait until it’s laced. Take a deep breath.” Vickie held the brown leather strings that went down the side of the bodice from arm pit to hip.

I felt the bodice tighten around me as she pulled the back and front panels together. The heavy fabric hugged my light frame, pushing and smushing parts to places I didn’t know they could go.

“Can you breathe?” Vickie asked as she tied the laces into a bow.

“No.”

She grinned. “Good, that means I got it tight enough.”

I glared at her, and she smiled. Oh, she owed me for this one.

“Hey, you may not be able to breathe, but your boobs have never looked better.”

“You’re sure all this is necessary?”

“Yes. You need to look at least somewhat authentic. Don’t worry about your shoes, no one can see those. But the boobs need to be on display.”

I folded my jeans and T-shirt and balanced them on top of a rack full of various colored pantaloons, carefully taking shallow breaths. A glance at a mirror that hung on the opposite wall revealed that Vickie was right. The forest and cream combination complemented my dark hair and pale skin, especially the pale skin spilling out of the top of the bodice. I could even pass for pretty, maybe. If someone thought English Renaissance ladies were pretty. “Is that it?”

“One more thing.” Vickie pulled out of a box a cream woven hair net like the one she wore. “Proper ladies always cover their hair. Snoods aren’t quite proper, but it’s good enough for a maiden.”

“Maiden?”

“Yes, well, we all get to play pretend sometimes. I made sure not to give you anything that was pink. Don’t worry, you’ll always be a wench to me.”

“Why should pink matter?” I shoved my hair into the net, trying to mimic the angle of Vickie’s snood.

“Pink was the sign of a prostitute. It’s not a big deal if you’re going to a costume party or whatever, but around here people know. The number of ass grabs increases.”

Oh hell. I could be mistaken for a prostitute? And have strange men in weird costumes grab my ass? So much for feeling pretty. “Vickie, you didn’t mention that last night.”

“Don’t worry. You’ll be safe in the box office with me.” She took my appropriately costumed arm. “Come on, it’s ten lashes if you’re late.”

I was given one of the cash-only windows and told not to worry about the little man in the box who ran the printing press for the Master of Card and the Lady Visa. It took me a moment to figure out what I’d been told. Right. “Do you really say that to visitors?” I asked Vickie.

“Sure. They think it’s cute.”

I raised my eyebrows but didn’t say anything further as I picked up the cash box and the rolls of tickets, none of which were historically accurate.

“Be sure to count your change,” Vickie said, taking the stool next to mine. She wanted to be close in case anything came up that I couldn’t figure out on my own. I couldn’t think of what

that would be, but then, I never expected to spend a day displaying my breasts for everyone to see either. At least I wasn't wearing pink, I reminded myself. I counted the singles and fives, relieved that the number matched the expected, and cracked the roll of quarters so that they spilled into the container. At least that much was going right.

"It's almost opening time. Here." Vickie pulled a five-dollar bill from her leather belt purse, folded it, and stuck it between my breasts.

"You said I wasn't a whore. I'm not giving you a lap dance."

"It's a tip, stupid. Just be careful of the ones that try to grab. Why do you think we wear bodices?"

"People tip the ticket seller?" I tried to remember a single time I'd tipped a person for handing me a ticket and came up blank.

"Not many, but you'll get some. Especially if you smile and lean forward." A trumpet blew overhead, startling me until I remembered the balcony. The fanfare heralded the opening of the gates. Vickie reached to open her window. "Ready?" she asked in an audibly fake British accent.

No. Not at all. Accents? But I nodded and pulled open the big wooden shutters. I came face to face with a bearded man in a little plaid hat. "May I help you?" I asked in a completely normal Mid-western voice.

"Ay, lassie, admittance for three."

I glanced down at his clothing and realized that the voice matched the costume. Authentic Scottish. I had never seen anyone wear a kilt outside of *Braveheart*, but I had heard rumors. My curiosity got the best of me. "Is it true about Scotsmen and kilts?"

“Ay!” The man took a couple steps backwards so that I could see his full outfit and lifted the green and navy plaid kilt.

I blinked my eyes furiously and looked at the pile of quarters in my cash box, not quite sure what had just happened, as the man laughed loudly. What the hell? All I wanted was a yes or no. Vickie was laughing too, as was everyone who could see what men don’t wear beneath their kilts. I could feel the heat on my face and knew that it was flaming my embarrassment. Why, oh why, did I agree to do this? “Um, three tickets, right?” I mumbled, wishing I could close the window and start over. Or hide.

“Sorry, I should have warned you,” Vickie said quietly between giggles.

Damn straight she should have.

“I didn’t think you had the balls to ask.”

Why did she have to say balls?

Still laughing, the man handed me the money. He seemed completely comfortable with the scene he had caused, which only made it worse. I could feel the heat in my face and knew my cheeks flushed an even darker red when he folded an extra ten and placed it next to the five from Vickie. “Just think, lassie, the day can only get better.” He winked as he took his tickets from my outstretched hand.

Thankfully, the young couple waiting in line next wore regular street clothes. Not that I would have dared ask them anything if they weren’t. Having witnessed my embarrassment, the woman smiled apologetically and told me to keep the change. I could imagine what she’d tell her friends. Some idiot at the fair asked a guy about his kilt. Her face turned tomato red. It was hilarious.

The next few people also lacked costumes but smiled that knowing smile when they handed me their money. They had seen the kilt fiasco. I kept my head down most of the time, carefully counting money. Then came some pirates, a couple of wenches, and a lord and his lady. The lavishly dressed lord had on tights with puffy, velvet shorts. “A beautiful day, no? Perfect for a fair,” he said.

“Perfect,” I mumbled. He looked at me oddly, and I realized that he wasn’t being sarcastic. He hadn’t seen what the man in kilt had done. I smiled, handing him his tickets. “Enjoy your day.”

“And you, m’lady.”

I warmed to the job after that, the kilt retreating in my memory. The cash box and tickets were simple enough. I could handle this. Yes, I was in a crazy costume and Vickie was trying to teach me to speak with a British accent, but sales were sales. The enthusiasm that radiated off the guests was infectious when they weren’t flashing me, and I found myself delivering lines in a painfully terrible accent. I couldn’t recall a time I went out with Vickie when I smiled as much.

A little girl with fairy wings handed me a daisy she must have picked in the parking lot. “It matches your shirt,” she said.

“So it does. Thank you.” I tucked it behind my ear, and the girl smiled as her parents took her hands and led her to the entrance. This wasn’t too bad. Maybe not all of Vickie’s ideas were terrible.

Then the belly dancers arrived. Metal rings were intricately linked to create chain mail bikini-like tops and short skirts. Crystals sparkled here and there and tiny silver bells rang when they walked. Seeing the slender tan women approaching my window, Vickie leaned over and whispered, “Make sure there’s something underneath the mail. No visible nipples allowed.”

I smiled and greeted the four women, trying not to noticeably stare at their chests. Nipples were not part of the job description. Luckily, they all had vivid fabric lining the cups of their bra tops and matching flowing skirts. A quick glance at the first woman's bright pink bra was enough to make sure that it wasn't sheer. She was as well covered as any of the girls who wandered around the dorm in cotton shorts and tank tops. The second's flame orange lining was also adequate, but I saw in a glance that the third's yellow fabric revealed a little too much of her dark skin.

"Miss, I'm sorry, but you can't go in like that."

Her bright golden eyes flashed as she glared at me. "Excuse me?"

My mouth went dry. Did she really *want* to spend the day with her nipples poking out? "It's a family place," I managed weakly.

"You didn't say anything to them," she accused, pointing to her friends who waited nearby.

"Miss, they are fully covered."

"This is absurd! Why can they wear chain but I can't?" Her voice rose in pitch as well as volume, and people in neighboring lines glanced over or openly stared. There was plenty to stare at.

"It's not the mail, it's the fabric," I tried to explain, but she obviously wasn't listening.

"It's because I'm Latina, isn't it? You don't want any 'spics in your damn English fair, is that it?"

My jaw dropped, and I floundered for what to say. I could feel the heat of another blush threatening. What the hell was I supposed to do?

I was saved by the fourth woman grabbing her friend's arm and saying, "Rosita, we told you that the yellow was see-through. Just go back to the car and put your tank on and it will be fine." She gave Rosita a slight push out of the line and towards the parking lot.

Rosita shot me a parting glare before stomping off.

"Don't worry about her." The fourth friend smiled and handed me her money. "You were just doing your job."

I flashed a grateful smile and reached to hand her the three dollars in change, but she waved them away.

"Keep it. Buy yourself a beer later." She took the ticket and went to stand with the other women and wait for Rosita to cover her nipples.

A beer certainly sounded good.

"Wow," Vickie said softly once the women were a safe distance away. "At least she's going to change. Usually women just move to a different window and try to get in again." She handed me an earthenware mug of water.

The cool water helped ease my tongue-tied state. Not as well as a beer might, but it was something. The clock on the back wall, its modern technology safely out of sight from customers, declared that the fair had been open for three hours. That would explain my thirst and why the lines had all but vanished.

Vickie leaned out of her window, scanning the immediate area for visitors hiking from the parking field. Seeing no one, she closed the big shutters on her window and motioned for me to do the same. "So how was your first day as a wench?"

"Maiden," I corrected. "You said with the string-thingy I was a maiden." I handed her the mug and closed my window. "Is that it?"

“Yup. A couple will stay open for the latecomers, but there’s no reason for all of us to be once the big rush is over. You did well for your first day.” Vickie grinned. “How did you like it?”

I tried to weigh being called racist and flashed a man’s dick with the general good humor of the people who passed through my line. I pulled the small white flower from my hair. “It was okay,” I said.

Vickie laughed. “I was afraid that you would walk out after the first guy. You should have seen the look on your face.”

I didn’t tell her I considered it. “And have all those people stuck in your line looking at you? I couldn’t do that. There were innocent children; your boobs could have scarred them for life.”

“So you’ll come back tomorrow and help out?”

I thought about the flash cards waiting on my desk and the leaning tower of books by my bed. I twirled the flower between my fingers. “No kilts?”

“Probably kilts, just don’t ask about them.”

“Let me see how much studying I get done tonight.”

Vickie smiled. “Right. Come on, I’ll show you how to count out and then you can go see the arms presentation.

“Do we get to fight?” I tucked the flower behind my ear again. Taking a swing at Vickie sounded pretty damn good.

“Maybe if you come back tomorrow.”

Freak

I've never believed that I'm Napoleon Bonaparte or Queen Elizabeth. I've never donned eight winter coats and pushed a shopping cart down the street in July. There are no voices in my head telling me to slit my wrists. Those are the "severe" types of schizophrenia. Mine, I'm told, is a "manageable" type. Dr. Schapiro says that I can recognize what's real and what isn't. At least, I think I can, and the shrink agrees.

Dr. Schapiro wants to begin medication. He believes that it's all a physical imbalance and a magical cocktail exists that will reduce or prevent my hallucinations. Mind-altering drugs. For most patients, it's probably the obvious choice. No more startled gasps. No more spastic jerking at sounds only I hear. But it's not that simple. If I don't see the figures floating in the air, will I still be able to picture the colors of a gaze in my mind? Shrinky-dink said that I should be able to maintain my artistic talent, that many artists do. But that implies that some don't. Is it a risk I'm willing to take?

He gave me this notebook to help me "sort through my feelings," to help me come to a decision. It's a standard black marble composition notebook, and I'm not sure how my pen scratching across the neatly lined paper will help, but Shrinky-dink insisted. He asked if he could read it, to see what's going on in my head and maybe even identify specific issues. That means I need to write something. We have a session in three hours; he wants to start me on some drug or other and wants to see what I've written since last session.

What is there to say that I haven't already told him? I'm sitting in my room. The bed is soft. I'm scared and confused and don't care if Dr. Schapiro finds out I call him Shrinky-dink. I want to go on a date. Not today, but someday. Someday when I don't have to worry about being

called a freak. Shrinky-dink said not to use that word, but I prefer it to mentally ill. Mentally ill just sounds sick. Freaks are at least interesting.

It's been a long time, but I remember going out with friends when I didn't worry about being mentally ill. I didn't always have episodes. That's the word Shrinky-dink used the other day. Episode. My roommate never even noticed my episodes, or at least didn't say anything. Shelia was never around, double majoring in English and Theater and active in campus productions. We've been roommates since freshman year, though we rarely spend time together. She wasn't home to see me twitch or gasp and slam the door because I saw arrows hurtling towards me from the bathroom. She doesn't know that I'm a freak. She even invited me to watch her productions, to cast parties, but I didn't accept. I didn't think I could control the episodes in a crowded theater, and I didn't want whispers getting back to her that her roommate was acting weird. Shelia is the closest I have to a friend, if one can have a friendship based on not seeing one another, and I can't afford to lose her.

I can't make it on my own, not after graduating. That's why I went to see Dr. Schipiro in the first place. I need to get a job. There aren't too many career paths for a sculptor or potter. One teacher recommended receptionist or designer at an art gallery, even gave me local names to contact. I can see myself enjoying that, but I can also see myself fired after a week. How long can I last when they see me pick up the phone and say "hello?" when it didn't ring? I can't imagine what an employer would think if she found me pressed against the wall, trying to breathe deeply with my eyes tightly shut as visions only I can perceive attack me. It hasn't been terrible in class; I hide in the back of the lecture hall, and even if my professors notice, they don't comment. In art workshops I'm eccentric, not a freak. But my days of hiding in studios at school are quickly coming to an end.

I made up something about stress and asked Shelia if the university offered anything for it. She assured me that there was nothing wrong with asking for help and told me about the free counseling services. She offered to go with me for moral support, but I said I'd be fine. I didn't think she could find out why I really went but didn't want to take any chances. I didn't even know what was really wrong, only that something was and I wanted it fixed.

Shrinky-dink said that medication can help me "cope" as I fit the profile for schizophrenia perfectly: young, Caucasian, and female. It's not what I had in mind when I wanted to fit in. I never fit in as a student, though high school was worse than college. Isn't it for everyone? But even college ends. Now I hope to "calm my mind" before leaving school for the real world, or at least the real world as others experience it. He's optimistic. When the tests finally end, and the medication is sorted out, he thinks I can be normal. Normal. Do I even know what that is anymore?

I haven't been "normal" since high school. Junior year. At first I thought it was a problem with my ears. I heard bells. Not the deep, sonorous tones of church bells or the jingle of sleigh bells, but the slightly buzzing tones of technology ringing. At home, I often sat at the kitchen table after the dinner dishes had been cleared, solving math problems or reading science books. Some nights, bells shattered my concentration, and I dashed to the phone only to hear the drone of the dial tone. It wasn't too often, and Mom never saw me slide on the hardwood floors in my socks when I rounded the corner to the phone, but it was enough to plant the inkling in my mind that something wasn't right with my ears.

The bigger problem was when I went out. I hated cell phones. It seemed that they were always ringing when my friends and I—when I still had friends—went to Pop's Pizza. The kids from school who didn't hang out there on Friday nights were usually working there. There were

tables of families talking and children alternating between laughing and screaming, but mostly it was high schoolers too old for the movie theater—that's where the middle school kids hung out—and too young for the bars. It was the cool place. Megan and Brittany, my best friends since fourth grade, giggled about the cute waiter who was in our Spanish class and who just delivered a medium pepperoni with extra cheese to our table. Homecoming was only a couple of weeks away, and Megan hoped he would ask her. I was about to tell her to ask him herself when buzzing bells sounded loudly in my ears. I turned to Brittany and asked, "Aren't you going to get that?"

My question was answered with wrinkled brows and confused looks; my friends clearly thought I was crazy (apparently, they were right). "Get what?" Megan asked.

All I could say was, "I thought I heard something" and dab at the grease on my slice of pizza. It was the first time that the bells sounded in public, and I tried not to let my friends see how shaken I really was. What was wrong with me? Brittany smiled like one does for school pictures—forced, wishing you were anywhere else—and took a bite of pizza.

Megan didn't seem fazed by the interruption and asked, "Where should I look for a dress?"

"There's a new place in the mall. My mom mentioned it when I told her I might be going to the dance," Brittany answered.

"Oh, maybe we can go together. Double date. Whitney, are you going?"

"I don't think so." How could I even consider a date when I couldn't eat pizza without my best friends staring at me?

"Maybe the next dance. Winter Formal. Brittany, where are you getting your hair done?"

I listened to them make plans and wondered if maybe I could figure out what was wrong by Winter Formal. Maybe I had a clog in my ear. The second time I heard the ringing, I glanced up, started at the noise, but knew better than to ask. Brittany stared at me for a moment, clearly confused by my behavior. I concentrated on being as invisible as possible. When Megan asked me to come shopping with them, I shook my head and said I couldn't.

That's probably when I started being a loner, as they call it. Eventually I stopped looking around every time I heard something, but the little startled jumps and twitches were involuntary, and I couldn't control them. All I wanted was to go out with friends and be a normal teenager; instead, I got to be the freak. The excuse "I thought I heard something" wore out quickly, even to me. The abandonment of my friends hurt at first—I tutored Megan in geometry freshman year after she freaked out about her first D, and I cheered for Brittany at tennis matches every fall. It was what best friends did. They didn't cancel plans or avoid you in the hallway. I was ashamed by the small part of me that knew I would have done the same in their shoes.

By the end of the semester, I spent my weekends alone. Mom voiced concern now and then that I was always home on Saturday nights, but I told her I had to study. I did well in my classes despite the hallucinatory distractions, so Mom didn't question it. She was probably relieved not to have to worry about her teenage daughter dating. I should have told her, but hiding was easier. Mittens, our Maine Coon cat, offered plenty of excuses for why I "heard" noises around the house; his favorite game was to knock items, particularly clanky keys, off counters and tables. If I jumped in my chair while watching *The Daily Show* with Mom, I could say, "Mittens must be up to something." It had the benefit of usually being true, but I hated lying. I would have happily gobbled Shrinky-dink's drugs if I had thought they could make me normal. But there was nothing I could do about it then.

That spring I took the school-required Fine Art elective. The class focused on watercolors because they were unforgiving and required that an artist learn a deft hand, though I had long suspected that it was because the paints and the paper were cheaper than other supplies. The teacher, Mrs. Pearson, said we could paint anything we wanted. She put books of examples next to the stacks of paper and told us to look through them for inspiration. I liked the abstract designs, colors blending and bleeding through one another, and spent the first couple of weeks just playing with color. After the fifth such painting, Mrs. Pearson asked me to try something else. A flower. I paged through the book and found myself drawn to the way the light seemed to shine through the soft petals. I could do a flower. I pictured the flower in my mind as I sketched it, but when I looked at the page, it didn't resemble any flower I knew. A hibiscus, maybe. Or an orchid. I hesitantly dipped my brush in the paint and attempted to give color to the fantasy flower when a ringing caused me to quickly glance over my shoulder. My hand followed the movement, jerking to the right. Instead of soft curving petals, there was a ragged red brush stroke bleeding across the page. I blotted at the paint with a towel, but the thick paper had already absorbed the pigment. The flower was ruined. Mrs. Pearson walked over to my desk, no doubt because of my frantic actions, and peered critically at my painting. "Have you ever tried acrylic paints?" she asked. When I shook my head, she led me to the supply closet and handed me a small stretched canvas—left over from a previous course, she said—and a box filled with tubes of paint.

I was hesitant at first, mixing the thick white and red paint to create a soft pink. I watered it down until it was the consistency of watercolors, and tentatively dabbed at the canvas. The response was similar to what I was used to, and I started over on the flower. Its delicate petals

emerged on the canvas, not quite the same as the original, but with a bit of hardness that wasn't present in the soft edges of watercolors.

It wasn't until the next day that I discovered why Mrs. Pearson had recommended acrylics. The pigment dried hard, the plastic in the paint coating the canvas. It was easily painted over. I laughed as I touched the canvas, dragging my finger over the hard, glossy paint. I had a safety net. Mrs. Pearson smiled when I met her eyes. Somehow, she understood like my friends never did. For the first time in a long time, I felt like it was going to be okay.

The occasional twitch did cause momentary disasters to slash across the canvas, but after a few minutes the paint dried, and I corrected the erring stroke with new ones. The streaks were easily hidden under layers of acrylic paint. When I brought home the first few paintings, Mom didn't question the source of my creativity, only encouraged me to pursue something I obviously had a passion for. She even agreed to pay for art school. Maybe I couldn't be normal, but I could be happy.

The canvas with that first acrylic flower is propped up on my dresser where I see it every morning when I grab a T-shirt out of the drawer. The paint is a bit thick, bumpy to the touch, and painfully amateurish. The colors lack the luminescence of watercolors, the brilliance only achieved by the glow of white paper through delicate pigment. The large pink petals seem almost stiff. Shelia asked what kind of flower it was when she saw me put it up in the dorm, and I told her I didn't know, I made it up. "You've got some imagination," she said. "I can't do anything like that." Yeah, some imagination.

The visual hallucinations kicked in freshman year, not long after Shelia commented on my painting. The visual ones were both better and worse in that they stood out as clearly beyond normal reality. At least, I think so. The first one I recognized as a hallucination occurred in the

locker room after yoga class. I started yoga at the university fitness center thinking it might stop the bells, or at least control my responses. When I opened the metal door of my locker, a small school of gleaming fish swam through the air towards me. They were brightly colored with long flowing fins that twisted and shimmered as they moved. I slammed the door shut, closed my eyes tightly, and tried to breathe deeply and evenly. It's not real, I repeated in my mind before opening my eyes. The fish were gone. I tentatively opened the locker again, but all I saw were my clothes and purse hanging from the little hooks. I must have spent too much time in downward facing dog. The blood rushed to my head or something. I tried to rationalize what I saw, but nothing really made sense. Crazy didn't occur to me, though in retrospect it probably should have.

It got worse after that. Shadows dance before my eyes, tribal masks lean against walls where they have no business being, bats streak out of the night towards my head, but worst of all are the ghosts. I don't know what else to call them. Whispery, white figures that float in the air. They don't make any noise; none of the visual hallucinations do. They just follow me. Usually I can close my eyes and count to ten and they'll be gone, my eyes adjusting to reality like when someone turns a light on in a dark room. But not always. Last Tuesday one followed me, hovering just within my peripheral vision, all the way from my apartment to art history. I sat in the back of the room, trying to concentrate on the professor, and it floated in the aisle, waiting for me. Those are the days I'm frightened.

I discovered pottery shortly after the fish appeared. The instructor gave students free rein with the large vats of clay in the studio, and I could create anything I could imagine. The problem was all of the things I could imagine. The slimy, red-brown clay in my hands was a tangible reality that I clung to when my other senses lied. At first I loved hand building as it

offered more control. Winding the snakes of clay on top of one another until they formed a ropey vase was more forgiving than carefully growing one on the wheel. If I heard something and jerked to look over my shoulder, the vase wasn't ruined; I simply had to realign the coil, perhaps add a bit more slip to stick it together, and keep going. If I did the same movement with a vase on the pottery wheel, my project collapsed into a shiny wet pile of clay. Despite the multitude of lost creations, the wheel called to me. I loved the whirl as it spun and the feel of the clay sliding under my hands as I applied gentle pressure to transform a ball of mud into an elegant shape of my design. I was drawn to the abstract, like I was when I started painting. Shapes and forms, not figures. Not even flowers. Sculpture that could be anything.

There was a gallery opening the second week of classes, and I grabbed the opportunity to use the wheel alone in the studio while everyone else drank champagne and pretended to know what the artist intended at the gallery. I set my first six pieces on the work table to double check final details before they were bisque fired. It wasn't until I saw all of them together that I realized they were in the shape of the wispy figures that plagued my vision. The twirling fish fins. The reaching fingers. Tears stinging my eyes, I swept my arm across the table, and the dry clay pieces crumbled on the floor of the workroom. I stomped on the larger shards until they were nothing but dust, imagining each one a hallucination that cost me a friend or a date. So many parts of my life, smashed to pieces by the sounds and sights I couldn't control. The tears blurred my vision, and I collapsed onto a stool and leaned my head on the table, gasping and sobbing and cursing the damn bells. Three years of frustration vented that evening, and I was grateful no one saw, no one wondered what the freak was doing. When the tears dried, I swept the floor and tossed the dust into the clay bin to be incorporated when the next batch was mixed. The bits of my visions would be stirred into the other scraps of unused clay and added into the

large machine, a blender on steroids, until it was all one mess of goo, ready to be used again. Staring at the big vat, I wondered how to start again. Every image that came to me reminded me of the hallucinations. I wrapped my arms around myself, stopping the shudders. What if I did give them form? Would they stop? It seemed too simplistic of an answer, but I was willing to try. Carefully seated at the wheel, I began to recreate versions of the pieces I had crushed.

College was an opportunity to start over, but I didn't grasp the social aspects like I did the artistic ones. I did some oil paintings my sophomore year of college, a required course, that offered some of the glow with a bit of the forgiveness I required in a paint. One of the larger ones hangs in the living room, a standard still life of a cobalt glass bowl holding Granny Smith apples. I can faintly see where the yellow that shaded one apple streaks through the blue of the bowl, but I know where to look. My instructor only saw accurately depicted apples, and Shelia something fun to put on the wall. She insisted on hanging it in the living room, said I should be proud of my work and show it off. It was actually a relief to be told that my still life was good and that it resembled reality. I still knew what reality was.

It gave me a little confidence to grab coffee a couple times with acquaintances from classes after a late studio session, but that was it. Avoiding people is what I do best, and I've had plenty of practice. In college I focused on my art and ignored the keggers and football games. My teachers applauded my dedication, never knowing why I spent so many hours in the studio. It was only partially because of the multitude of projects I screwed up and had to replace; those without hallucinations completed their work quickly and left the studio. I lost countless creations to my twitches but also created some beautiful ones in the silence. Shrinky-dink asked to see one. I'm sure there's some "issue" that will be recognized, some element of my illness in the sculpture, but just maybe he'll see the art. I decided on my most recent project: a huge, for a

hand-thrown piece, urn that I raku fired. The glaze and wood firing turned the urn into an opal of gleaming whites, pale greens, and fiery oranges and pinks. I mixed and painted the glaze, but the specific colors are the result of chance. I knew when I painted the glaze on how the colors would turn out; I could picture them in my mind. They were the colors of the shadows that plagued me when I walked to class. I had succeeded in melding the vision with the art.

Will the drugs rob me of that? Will I lose my art? Will my urn be the last great piece that I complete if I take the little innocent-looking pills? If I don't, will the line between hallucination and reality blur further? Will I sculpt fantastic forms and believe they are realistic? Would it matter? I don't want to lose the colors, the shapes, but I can't make it alone. I want my raku urn, but I also want to smile and meet people's eyes without wondering if they think I'm a freak. I need to see the world as others do. Perhaps there will still be art in it. Watercolors, even.

More Time for Herself

Joshua said it would make her life easier when he handed the box to his wife, Marjorie, before dinner. “It will help with the cleaning. The Thompsons just hired a maid, and Bob said that Rachel has so much more time now.”

Marjorie tore open the box, eager to see what could be better than a maid. The cardboard flaps opened to reveal the round, apple-red, plastic cover of a Roomba. The Thompsons didn’t have a robot, did they? She ran her hands across the smooth surface, marveling at the sleek lines of the robotic vacuum, so different from the old canister one in the hall closet. It had been a wedding present. Five years ago, it had been pretty and shiny too but was nothing compared to the Roomba. It was only twelve inches in diameter, so small and light. There was no cord to move from outlet to outlet so that she could reach every corner. Not even a handle to push.

“Let me show you.” Her husband pried the Roomba from its Styrofoam protectors, punched the sleek, black button, and placed the round robot on the floor. It purred softly, like a kitten, and rolled across the carpet.

Marjorie watched, her delight growing as the red Frisbee-looking thing sucked up the dirt and dust from the hall rug. “How wonderful! So much more efficient than a maid. And it will never steal my jewelry.”

Joshua laughed. “It’s quieter, too. A maid would still have to use the old vacuum to clean.”

“It’s perfect. Wait until you tell the Thompsons.” She kissed her husband in appreciation of the gift, the baking casserole forgotten.

The power button felt strange under her fingers as Marjorie turned on the Roomba. It was as different from the large blocky one on her old vacuum as a button could be. Futuristic. Exciting. She set the robot on the carpet, and it motored off on its way to clean the floors. She watched it a moment, amazed by its easy efficiency, then chided herself for wasting time. There were other chores to finish. Leaving the Roomba to the living room, Marjorie went to the kitchen.

She loaded the dishwasher with the breakfast dishes and was scrubbing the cutting board when she heard an odd beep. Startled, Marjorie dropped the board into the sink, water and soap suds splashing onto the floor. She quickly wiped up the mess, then looked around to see what could have made such a sound. The dishwasher rumbled contentedly, no sign of distress. The oven was off, the microwave dark. Drying her hands with a towel, she peered around the door into the living room and saw that the TV was off. She turned to check the den when she glimpsed the red light on the top of the Roomba. It beeped again. Of course. Such a streamlined design couldn't store nearly as much dirt as the old canister vacuum. She emptied the small container, pressed the sleek black button again, placed the machine on the carpet, and returned to the kitchen to finish with the cutting board.

Marjorie admired the gleaming surfaces of her kitchen. The counter tops appeared to be black marble, but that was the veneer over the slabs of concrete. Marjorie thought they were even prettier than the real, gray marble ones in Rachel Thompson's kitchen. She ran her hand along the edge, then quickly wiped away the streaks her fingerprints left. Everything was put away in its spot, the kitchen a home-magazine spread of perfection. There was nothing left for her to do. Normally Marjorie would vacuum the living room in the afternoon, but the Roomba was buzzing its way along the wall. What else needed to be done? She usually dusted on Thursdays, but a day early wouldn't hurt a thing. She removed the cloths from the hall closet

and the lemon Pledge—she liked the smell of lemon—and went to work on the big bookshelf. It had belonged to her grandmother, who insisted that it be dusted twice a week and oiled every other week. Marjorie had done as the old woman asked, and the wood shone as if it were new. As she stretched to reach the top shelf, something banged into her bare foot. She jumped, then saw the little red Roomba disappear under the shelf. Standing on one leg, she shook her stinging foot. The sleek, round design hurt on impact. As she finished dusting, she listened for the robot's purr, quickly sidestepping to avoid another incident.

Once the bookshelf and mantle were spotless, Marjorie realized she was out of items to clean. She looked around the room, Pledge and cloths in hand, as if it might offer suggestions. Maybe there was something else she could do. Read a book, maybe? Yes, of course. She scanned the tomes on the clean bookshelf, breathing in the scent of lemons, but didn't recognize any of the titles. Most seemed to be her husband's texts from law school. Big and thick and impressive. Ah, squished to one side, *Pride and Prejudice*. When was the last time she read that?

She plumped the sofa pillow and squirmed until she was comfortable on the big cushions. She pulled one of the neatly folded Afghans down so that it covered her feet. The bright yellows and blues of the blanket didn't really go with the sofa, but it was that perfect weight, warm but not too warm. As she folded the cover to the back to better hold the book one handed, a demanding beep came from the floor. The little red robot sat in the middle of the carpet, light flashing. Marjorie put down her book to empty the Roomba again.

She managed to finish two full chapters before the Roomba interrupted. It banged against the sofa leg, jostling it just enough for the book to shake and become momentarily illegible. Marjorie sighed, reached down to move the machine, but her fingers touched only the

deep pile of carpet. It had already automatically altered its direction and purred under the sofa. Good. It had been months since Joshua helped her move the sofa to vacuum under it. She had asked him last week, but he said it was his day off and surely she could manage. She knew he didn't like to be bothered, but if he wanted the house to look nice, she needed his help. Maybe that was why he bought the Roomba that so easily slid under the sofa.

Joshua remarked how nice the living room looked when he came home that night. Nicer than the Thompsons' house. Marjorie cooked one of his favorites, grilled chicken with basil pesto linguini. Between bites, he asked how the Roomba worked.

"Fine."

"Did you take some time for yourself?"

"I started reading *Pride and*—"

"Good, good. I told you you'd like it."

Marjorie didn't tell him about the red mark on her foot from where it had hit her.

After Joshua left for the office, Marjorie carried the Roomba upstairs. She placed it on the hall floor and turned it on. It purred to life and motored along the wall, leaving a slight imprint in the carpet where it passed. Marjorie returned downstairs, excited to pick up her book where she had left it the day before. Time for herself. Finally.

The beep wasn't as loud coming through the ceiling, but Marjorie dutifully put down her book and climbed upstairs when she heard it. The small compartment emptied, she opened the door to the bedroom and allowed the machine to creep inside. It disappeared under the bed. Marjorie didn't want to leave the Roomba alone in the bedroom, but couldn't explain why. It was simple and trustworthy. That was why Joshua bought it in the first place. Better than a

maid. Still, Marjorie didn't feel right with it zipping along under the dresser where her panties were stored. She hurried downstairs, not wanting to leave it alone for long, and fetched the polishing cloth from the closet and set to work on the wood in the bedroom. It was dusting day, after all. The smell of lemon filled the room as Marjorie polished the antique four-poster bed. It was a large, heavy bed, too large for the room, if truth be told, but the carvings were too beautiful to put in a guest room where they would only sometimes be admired. Besides, Joshua's great-grandfather had brought it from Europe. Not even the Thompsons had a European bed. Marjorie carefully ran the cloth along every crevasse so that the wood seemed to glow in the afternoon light.

Focused on the tiny carvings, she forgot about the Roomba until it banged into her ankle. She cried out, then rubbed the spot as the vacuum registered an obstacle and motored along in the opposite direction. Marjorie climbed onto the bed to finish polishing, wrinkling the comforter, but promising herself to straighten it when she finished.

That evening, she told Joshua about the mark on her ankle as she served him the red snapper.

He laughed. "Be more careful."

"I'll try."

"I'm meeting Bob and David for golf in the morning. Don't worry about making lunch."

"Of course."

Marjorie did not turn on the Roomba the next day. The carpets were still fairly clean. She put up the dishes and fetched the brush and bucket from the closet. Scrubbing the kitchen tile took longer than vacuuming but was quieter. Joshua never complained if she had to scrub in the

evenings, only if she had to vacuum. The noise prevented him from concentrating, he said. He needed to concentrate on the ball game. The Roomba's soft purr wouldn't be too much of a disturbance, Marjorie thought. Maybe that was why Joshua bought it.

She pulled off the bright yellow rubber gloves and laid them over the edge of the empty bucket to dry. The tiles shown in the light, just like they should. She would have to be careful cooking dinner so as not to get anything on them before Joshua came home.

"Did you do anything today, dear?" he asked while spooning the rosemary roasted potatoes on to his plate.

"I started on the tiles. Would you mind helping me move the washing machine tonight so I can clean the laundry room tomorrow?"

"Did you know there's a robot for that too? A Scooba or something. You wouldn't have to do anything with two robots cleaning up the house."

Marjorie stabbed a potato with her fork. "Of course, dear."

The following morning, Marjorie tentatively placed the Roomba on the living room floor. It rumbled to life and immediately ran over her foot. Marjorie felt the cutting pain and the hot tears on her face as she jerked her foot away. She balanced her foot on the edge of the coffee table so she could better see it. Blood dripped along the side of her little pinkie toe, the nail broken so that it half stood upright, a thick right angle. She wrapped a tissue around it, but it quickly bled through. She winced as she wrapped more tissue tightly around, then hobbled quickly to the bathroom, flexing her sore ankle so her toe didn't drip blood on the clean carpet.

The peroxide burned as she poured it over her toe and fizzed around the bathtub drain. Marjorie clipped the torn nail and squeezed Neosporine onto the open flesh. She placed the soft,

white pad of a Band-Aid where the nail used to be and stuck it firmly around her toe. The Roomba beeped from the living room.

Once the bleeding from her toe eased, Marjorie carefully repackaged the Roomba in its box, laying the instruction booklet on top, and placed it by the door. She wondered if she'd have time to finish *Pride and Prejudice* without the time-saving device. Time for herself. The image of the cheery red machine on the box reminded her of the blood that welled out of her foot. It had to go.

When Joshua came home, he asked why she hadn't put it away in the hall closet.

"Please return it."

"It's a gift. I thought you liked it."

"It doesn't work."

"Why not?"

Marjorie showed him the Band-Aid.

"Don't be so clumsy," he said.

The quiet sound of the Roomba woke Marjorie in the morning. How did it get out of its box?

She curled in the bed, tucking her legs closer to her body and out of the machine's reach.

Joshua. Joshua must have started it, trying to prove his point. She wondered what would happen if she just stayed in the bed. Read her book. But she needed to cook breakfast. She could hear the sound of the morning news on the TV downstairs, and Joshua would be wondering why she wasn't in the kitchen yet.

Marjorie tentatively touched one foot to the carpet. She couldn't see the Roomba and quickly put down the other, pulled on a deluxe spa robe. She would pan fry pork chops and boil

eggs and insist that he return the robot. She tied the robe tightly around her, the plush fabric soothing as it hugged her. As she fluffed her hair, a sharp pain went up the back of Marjorie's leg as the Roomba hit her heel, like when a distracted shopper pushed a cart into the back of your ankle. No apology came from the Roomba as it scuttled back under the bed.

Marjorie took a deep breath and marched towards the door. She felt the cool plastic under her left foot, darting forward and forcing her backwards. "Joshua," she called out before crumpling onto the thick carpet.

The Roomba nudged her calf, trying to navigate around the new obstacle while she wiped at the tears on her face with the back of her hand.

"Dear?" His voice carried up the stairs. "I started the robot. Try to be careful this time."

It Was Almost Pretty

A sudden surge rolled the boat, and I spun around to see what caused my equipment to lean to the right. Through the dingy glass windows, I saw it shoot out of the water, foam streaming down its scarred white belly. Thabo reached out his hand, dark brown against the silver gray, and stroked the shark's nose. The remains of a camera hung from its jaws.

I held my breath as I stared at the display, biting back a scream and the urge to duck under my make-shift desk. A small part of my mind logically considered the risks and reminded me that the shark couldn't lunge at a hand when it was half out of the water; its momentum was spent. Why would it want to when it had a seal cam in its mouth? So long as Thabo petted from the nose back, he wouldn't be cut by the denticles on its skin. While seemingly brave, Thabo was in no danger from the Great White shark. I let out a loud sigh and turned back to the monitor that displayed the last moments of the seal-disguised camera, my stomach slowly unknotting.

"What the hell are you doing?" Daniel asked.

I glanced up from the screen and saw Thabo turn and meet the livid face of the head of the research expedition as he approached the rail. Thabo's eyes focused on the deck, and there were no signs of the grin that spread over his face moments ago.

"I ordered you to drop the cams a minimum of fifty feet out. Fifty feet. What the hell is a fifteen footer doing shooting up on my port side, rocking the damn boat? I am not risking my boat for you to do idiotic stunts. If you want to touch a fucking shark, go to the aquarium."

"Seventeen footer," I corrected quietly. The two-foot difference didn't matter when reprimanding a grad student but could prove important in my work. The longer the shark, the older it probably was, though an exact age was difficult to determine. Sharks grew continuously,

which some believed contributed to why they were immune to cancer—they already had rapid cell growth. At seventeen feet, the shark was probably of breeding age, too old for my study. I needed data regarding juvenile development, and there simply weren't any juvenile Great Whites to be found. At least not with seal cams.

There was not a clear image of the underbelly in the footage, but the shark didn't appear to have claspers. Female, or a bad shot of a male. I squinted at the monitor, my face a couple of inches from the still image, as if that might verify the absence of small fin-like claspers. I absently pressed my thumb against the sharp edge of the Great White tooth that I wore on a stainless steel chain about my neck, feeling the tiny serrations prick my flesh. I had worn the tooth every day for the past four years and found its shape oddly soothing. Wearing a shark tooth was supposed to protect against attacks, though it was more the familiarity of the wire wrapping, the feel of the still sharp edges, that aided my focus.

"Emma, did you get the footage?" asked Daniel, still standing threateningly near Thabo.

Startled, I dropped the tooth, and it thumped gently against my chest. "Yeah, I got it," I called back. "Want a look?"

With a parting glare at the young researcher, Daniel walked over to my setup. The computer equipment resided in the pilothouse of the boat, sheltered from spray and seagull droppings, but still allowing me a view of what happened on deck. I insisted upon the location when Daniel offered me the position of videographer on the expedition; I liked having walls between me and the sharks. He agreed because of my reputation, I was certain. An oddity in research circles, I was an award-winning videographer who never went into the ocean.

"The interns get more and more reckless every year." Daniel shook his head. "They've seen the sharks their whole lives, played in these waters, and don't respect them."

I nodded. I grew up around sharks too, though not in the open ocean. The sharks that dominated my childhood were safely held behind walls of plexiglass. Every afternoon I was dropped off at the Shedd Aquarium after school until Dad finished his shift at Soldier Field. If I had homework to finish, I'd sit at the top of the dolphin stadium where sunlight flooded in through the wall of windows beyond the tank. The dolphins didn't do much between shows, only dashing across the surface for a breath now and then. The crowds quickly passed by in favor of other more visible entertainment and left me to read under the artificial trees while bird recordings played.

When I was finished, I'd find a bench around the darker, windowless room where the huge Caribbean Reef tank stood. It was in the middle of the room, and visitors could walk all the way around, see every angle of the creatures inside. The nurse sharks usually lay on the bottom, only occasionally shifting position. Their stillness was boring to most, but I appreciated the opportunity to observe the slowly moving gill slits, the long vertical tail fins, even the little knob nostrils. The small bonnethead sharks resembled mini hammerheads and were more active, swimming along the top of the tank. Sometimes a diver would go in and talk about the different animals, feeding the sea turtle and other fish, or cleaning the glass. Amy. After the dives, she would stand beside the tank and answer questions or simply talk about the animals. She told me that sharks couldn't get cancer. She said it in passing, like it was just another random trivia fact, but it resonated in my young mind.

When Dad picked me up, he took my hand like he always did as we walked to the bus stop and asked what I learned that afternoon. I didn't tell him about the cancer; I told him, "I'm going to study sharks when I grow up."

He probably didn't think I was serious then, and I wondered if he realized I was serious when I told him I was going to South Africa. Going back out on the water.

"So what did you get?" Daniel looked over my shoulder at the monitor.

I clicked the replay icon, and the screen turned blurry as it depicted the seemingly endless cobalt waters. A silver torpedo shot through the blue, monstrous jaws closing around the camera, and the film stopped. It was a familiar image, and I turned away when the sharp white teeth came into focus.

Daniel whistled. "Can you do anything with that?" he asked.

"The seal cams catch impressive footage of the attacks, which is useful for your breaching work. I should be able to get at least approximate sizes and ages. It's a start. In my lab, I may be able to get more with higher-tech equipment."

"It showed a nice angle, how the shark propels itself from the bottom and up out of the water. Not that that helps you."

"It might. The more sharks, the better chance that some will be young."

"Pups aren't going to go after a cam. What you need is someone in the water."

A sheen of sweat turned my skin clammy. In the water. I clutched the tooth around my neck, the point digging into my palm as my knuckles turned white.

Concern creased Daniel's face, and then recognition flashed in his hazel eyes. "Right. Sorry." He squeezed my shoulder. "Keep doing what you're doing. I need to make sure the students don't fuck up again."

As he walked away, I closed my eyes and counted to ten, trying to calm the rapid thudding of my heart. When I opened them, I saw Thabo's questioning glance flicker from Daniel to me and then back. At first I thought he was asking if he had screwed up and cost the

trip a couple hundred dollars in equipment—the cameras were not cheap—but then he jerked his hand towards me and pointed at his chest. Damn. I braced myself for the questions that often came but was saved by Daniel, whose booming voice carried across the deck. “What the hell is it to you? Get back to work if you ever want to set foot on a research vessel again.”

Grateful to be forgotten and left to my computer, I sorted through the slew of information the seal cams had collected that morning. The five cams that were placed seemed to have captured eleven sharks on film. I jotted notes, guessing at sizes and recording distinguishing marks as the blurry footage passed slowly on the screen. The boat rocked gently as the waves pushed it one way and then the other, but I quickly became absorbed in the films. The sharks lunged at the cameras, and the memory bubbled up in my mind, unbidden, unwanted.

It was December, and the elephant seals were congregating on the beaches of California. Females birthed pups; males fought for harems. The mammoth seals crashed into one another, slicing at the others’ necks with their tusks. The winners, usually the older, larger seals, remained on the beach with the females. The losers fled into the ocean to find another beach, spilling blood into the water. Great Whites frequented the area, drawn by the blood and easy meals of seal pups.

The bellows of the male seals resonating through their “trunks” filled the air as the small fishing boat took me out into the kelp forests. The ocean glittered in the sunlight, a typical bright California day, and I applied ample amounts of sunscreen. There was a time when I hated the slimy feel of the lotion, but years of studying cancer reinforced the necessity. I needed the protection, especially surrounded by reflective water

Two dives in, I saw several curious otters that were drawn by the spray of bubbles that drifted upwards from my regulator, but no Great Whites had appeared. My fins resting on the sandy ocean floor, I scanned the surrounding waters, camera ready. A leopard shark snaked through the kelp, its lithe, spotted body weaving between the long strands. I lowered my camera, disheartened. The leopard would avoid anywhere with larger predators nearby; Great Whites tended to eat smaller sharks. According to my pressure gauge, there was an hour's worth of air left in my tank, but I kicked my fins and headed towards the surface. Each unsuccessful dive increased my doubts, still I forced myself to remain optimistic. It was only the first day. I might try again later, a night dive. Maybe they'd come around in the still darkness, but there was no reason to stay down that afternoon. My fins kicked up sand that swirled into the water, erasing any evidence that I was ever there.

Half way to the surface, I paused in my ascent to pressurize. Hovering in the water, I slowly spun around for a final look. A slivery blur in the distance caught my eye as I turned. My heart pounded in my ears. I consciously slowed my excited breathing so as not to waste air. Camera raised, I watched the blur take shape. The sleek form of a Great White appeared in the viewfinder. I trained the camera on it, mentally calculating size compared to the towering kelp. Twelve feet? An adult. Not the juvenile I hoped for, but any footage could be useful. As I filmed, a second blur took form. Two? I tried to steady my shaking hand. I was on the verge of what could be a breakthrough in Great White interaction. With so little data available, any new footage was valuable to a multitude of research missions. As I watched, the second savagely bit the first behind the head, a mating hold, and I gripped my regulator between my teeth to keep from crying. I could be one of the first people ever to record Great Whites mating. But the shark quickly released the other and circled around, out of my view finder. The other moved slowly,

bleeding into the water. I attempted to locate the second animal, but soon both were masked by the dark blood, black to my eye but red with the camera's filter. Staring straight ahead, I cursed the obscuring blood and prayed the sharks would emerge from behind the crimson screen.

It angled in from the right. The distended jaws clamped around my side and propelled me upwards, carrying me to the surface like I was a slim seal. I screamed, I know I did, but my regulator only emitted a low distorted cry and a stream of bubbles. The shark's teeth screeched against my chain mail body suit. It didn't prevent the teeth from penetrating but did slow them enough that they didn't slice clean through soft flesh.

I remembered being pulled onto the boat, the captain's frantic cries over the radio to the Coast Guard, and clinging tightly to my camera. Later, I woke under the white glare of hospital lights to see Dad. He repeated my name over and over as he hugged me, tears wetting his cheeks for the first time I could recall since Mom. I could only imagine what he was thinking. Did he remember when Mom was in the hospital? Did he say her name as she died?

He was holding my hand when the surgeon came into the room and handed me a two-inch-long tooth that had been removed from my abdomen. As the doctor explained my injuries, that I essentially had dozens of stab wounds along with extensive bruising, Dad's face grew paler and paler. Bed rest until the punctures healed, and change the bandages every three hours. No heavy lifting, including camera equipment, until the bruises were gone. Not just faded, gone. The doctor gave Dad the prescriptions for pain meds and told him not to let me overdo it.

When I asked Dad for a length of stainless steel wire to wrap the tooth, he refused at first. What did I need a talisman against shark attacks for? Surely I was giving it up. Eventually, he relented. Lying against the crisp hospital sheets, I wrapped the tooth with wire and hung it from a stainless steel chain. The bright white gleamed against my bruised flesh.

Dad stayed with me for a week, insisting on cooking dinner and doing my laundry. It was the first time we'd spent much time together since I started college. I remembered what it was like being his little girl. I also remembered Mom. Holding her chemo-puffy hand when I was nine. Sitting on her hospital bed so I could see the pictures while she read *Where the Wild Things Are* out loud. I remembered how lost Dad seemed afterwards when he shuttled me off to the aquarium. He never realized that he was laying the groundwork for my research.

Two weeks after the stitches came out, and after the reporter interviews about the freak attack, and Dad's flight back to Chicago, I watched the film. The first half has been widely used as an example of mating interaction between two Great Whites, just as I knew it would be. My reputation for videography was built by that film. The second half has only been viewed by me, alone in the dark of my lab. It was almost pretty: the flat black eye surrounded by my blood and the shiny bits of severed chain mail floating away against the green kelp.

I forced my attention to return to the footage at hand. With limited machinery, there was only so much I could do with the raw data, but it was valuable to Daniel's work and could prove useful to mine. When Daniel first approached me, I could scarcely believe that he was offering a fully-funded trip to South Africa's Shark Alley in exchange for analyzing and composing footage. And going out on the boat. Any other researcher would have leaped at the opportunity, but I warred with the decision. My passion to find a connection between sharks and cancer never wavered, but the fear of a second attack, of knowing what it could do to Dad, had prevented me from venturing off shore. I had become adept at using the raw data from other research expeditions and labs in order to pursue my quest. I had clung to the coattails of other scientists, but few were willing to share their limited funding. All of the money was in breaching

behavior—the spectacular shots of sharks leaping from the water captured the public’s attention—so when Daniel approached me about joining the expedition, I eventually agreed. Another impressive film with my name attached, and I might be able to get funding for my own research.

The film rolled slowly as I scrutinized each frame. The scarring around the sharks’ heads allowed me to differentiate between individuals to come up with a rough count of how many different animals approached the cameras. The marks could have any number of sources, including breeding behavior. Male sharks were not gentle lovers, and females often bore bite scars from being held. I looked closely for claspers to record gender, the film moving slowly, frame by frame. I didn’t see any.

Scanning the deck, I saw Daniel helping Thabo ready another camera. I waved, trying to catch their attention. I didn’t want to leave my sanctuary of walls and computers, but they didn’t see my gesture. Boat shoes squeaking on the deck, I hesitatingly stepped outside the pilot house.

The noise must have caused Daniel to glance up. “What is it?” he asked.

My excitement nearly bubbled past my reservations as I exclaimed, “They’re all female.”

“So?” Thabo clearly didn’t understand.

“There may be pups. This many females must mean something. The surplus of prey creates an ideal birthing ground.”

“Pups? You really think so?” Daniel asked. He appeared to consider it, a line appearing across his weathered forehead. “It’s possible. Someone needs to go down to check.”

“I’ll do it,” Thabo said.

His quick volunteer should have been expected, but still surprised me. The eagerness in his voice to subject himself to the risk. I met his eyes and held them a moment, seeing the bright excitement in his gaze that once shown in mine.

“Wait just a minute.” Daniel’s gaze rested heavily on me, and I knew a fraction of how Thabo must have felt facing those green eyes earlier. “Eleven sharks isn’t a lot to base this theory on. It’s not enough to risk time and equipment on either.”

He was right. I knew he was. But I needed the film. “Conditions are perfect to go down, and the cage would protect—“

“Are you volunteering?”

I stared at Daniel, mouth open. “Me?” I asked softly. Pain shot through my right side and settled as a queasy knot in my stomach. I heard the gentle lapping of the waves against the side and felt the deck sway beneath my feet. The raspy cries of gulls were loud in my ears, almost loud enough to drown the thumping of my heart. I grabbed the rail and breathed the salty spray in deeply, the tooth weighing heavily against my chest. I glanced over my shoulder and saw Thabo and Daniel watching me, clearly wondering what I was going to do. “I’ll need to borrow a wet suit,” I said.

Vita

Brooke Southgate hails from the small town of Antioch, Illinois, where her parents, older sister, and retired competition horse still live. In 2007 she received her Bachelor of Arts from the University of South Carolina. She double majored in Religious Studies and English Language and Literature after a brief flirtation with Marine Science. Currently she tutors students in English and volunteers at the Audubon Zoo with the sea lion department while finishing her studies at the University of New Orleans. She will graduate from the University of New Orleans with a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing in May, 2010, and has vast hopes for the future.