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Floating Away from the Moon

Krista Mann

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FLOATING AWAY FROM THE MOON

By

Krista Mann

THESIS

Submitted to
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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

This thesis by Krista Mann is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Dean of Graduate Studies.

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ABSTRACT

FLOATING AWAY FROM THE MOON

By

Krista Mann

In the title story of this collection, *Floating Away from the Moon*, a young girl struggles to comprehend her first experience with loss, but by the end of the story, she comes to a new understanding of herself. The journey into self-discovery is a binding element between the stories in this collection. Although readers will encounter everything from hospitals to Disney World, the stories all explore personal understanding, specifically through imagination. As the title subtly implies, these characters are in movement, floating or drifting in a new direction, whether they are aware of it or not.

Often the characters are looking for connection, to others, or place, or self. There is an “otherness” that separates them from the world they wish for, or imagine, and part of their struggle is to bridge this gap. For example, in “Missing” the narrator creates an imaginary life for his neighbors after his girlfriend goes missing. He has never met the man or his dog, but he names them and even imagines their evening meals, creating a false sense of connection. All of these stories are linked by the characters’ endless struggles to find answers, even in the most surprising places.

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This thesis uses the guidelines provided by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

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INTRODUCTION: MY READING AND WRITING INFLUENCES

In almost every book I have read about the craft of creative writing, a section or a chapter always says in one way or another: writers must read. I tell my students this too. In her textbook, *Imaginative Writing: The Elements of Craft*, Janet Burroway writes, “You yourself need to become a reader of a writerly sort, reading greedily, not just for entertainment but also focusing on the craft, the choices” (xxiii). Heather Sellers echoes this advice in her textbook, *The Practice of Creative Writing*, when she writes, “When you make creative writing and reading a habit, a real part of your life, you increase your ability to observe, intuit, emphasize, impose structure on chaos, read closely, and understand nuance” (1).

Like most writers, I have always, or almost always, loved to read. I was the kid burning through books in the library’s summer reading program. But it wasn’t until the junior year of my undergraduate education that I actually began to think about how and why a certain story or novel could make me feel like the world around me had melted, like I was the character in the book, while others didn’t. I had not yet read Burroway or Sellers, but during my junior year I met a professor who gave me long reading list. If I wanted to write, I had to read. At first, I read like I always had, but one day he handed me Lorrie Moore. He said, “I think you’ll like this.” And I did. Moore’s *Birds of America* was the first complete short story collection that I read, and at the end I wanted to know how she did it. How did she make characters and places and ideas so real? So I read it again, and

again. I had very little idea what I was looking for, but it was the first time I had really looked at the words on the page.

The story I spent the most time on when exploring this collection was “People Like That are the Only People Here: Canonical Babbling in Peed Onk,” and it is a story I came back to during my graduate work when thinking about craft. I am drawn to this story because it contains, in thirty-eight pages, the three craft elements that I most admire in Moore’s writing: organic significant details, strong character development, and a purposeful, interesting use of point of view. From the first paragraph of the story when she writes, “But today he looks fine – so what is this thing, startling against the white diaper, like a tiny mouse heart packed in snow?” (212), I am hooked. The stunning image of blood in the baby’s diaper shown through organic detail builds tension and reveals something about how the mother sees the world.

Her details throughout the story continue to pinpoint the acute pain of the plot line, a baby with cancer, while at the same time developing the mother, who is also the narrator of the story.

“Good God,” cries the Mother. Everything inside her suddenly begins to cower and shrink, a thinning of bones. Perhaps this is a soldier’s readiness, but it has the whiff of death and defeat. It feels like a heart attack, a failure of will and courage, a power failure: a failure of everything. Her face, when she glimpses it in the mirror, is cold and bloated with shock, her eyes scarlet and shrunk. She has already started to wear sunglasses indoors, like a celebrity widow.

(219)

The other interesting part of this story is the use of point of view. The story is told in the third person, but dips into both first and second at various points throughout. Moore has the mother positioned as both the third person character and the narrator of this story. This interesting twist on point of view allows the reader a level of closeness to the character that would not exist without it. Here the mother is telling her own story, so you get the story, her story, from two perspectives, by manipulating psychic distance.

What I like about Moore as a reader, is also what I find myself interested in as a writer. I have spent much of the last three years reading and writing with a specific interest in organic detail, character development, and point of view. Reading Moore helped me see one way to work with these craft elements in a story. But to really explore these ideas as a reader and a writer, I also looked beyond what I found in Moore's writing.

Organic detail can be called many things. Robert Olen Butler in his book *From Where You Dream* talks about it as "moment-to-moment sense-based events and impressions." He is talking about making the story come alive with specifics, showing rather than telling.

Charles Baxter in his book, *Burning Down the House*, calls it rhyming action. Here Baxter is not only talking about details that further the piece but also about the idea of making details and images interconnect. He also calls this the "narrative echo effect." He compares this idea to déjà vu which he says, "is only an eerie sense of some repetition, of a time spiral, of things having come around back to themselves" (111). He continues on to say, "We *are* stepping into the same river twice" (113). He gives a wonderful example from James Joyce's "The Dead."

We hear the echo of the stones on the window that Michael Furey used to get Gretta's attention, which returns in the final scene with snow on the window that Gretta's husband, Gabriel, now hears. The story is enriched because these moments are interconnected, repeated.

Benjamin Percy writes about this same idea in his article in *Poets and Writers* "Consider the Orange: Writing Meaningful Repetition." He is talking about how an object, a setting, or a manner of speech can enrich the meaning in a story through repetition. He provides a clear image of this idea, "they're tossed into the air – and with each pass through the juggler's hands they gain in power and meaning" (27). Percy puts this idea into action in his short story "Refresh, Refresh." Here the reader sees repetition in almost every stage of the story, the first scene with the boxing ring, the hole created by the meteor, the boys turning into their fathers, physically and through their actions. The progression of these elements as they "pass through the juggler's hands" build meaning and tension that leads us to the climax of the story, the moment the boys become their fathers, the next generation of soldiers.

It is interesting to see so many writers talking about this idea in just slightly different ways, and it is a craft technique that I have worked to develop in my own fiction. In my short story "Alfred and the Monkey Dream," the opening image in the dream, Alfred's sister Elena as a monkey, repeats again and again throughout the story. As do images and connections to children, which Alfred and his wife Christy are unable to have despite their longing for them. I want the reader to feel the echo and meaning behind the images, that I hope enrich the story. I work at this again in the story, "Kaleidoscope." Under the surface, the

idea of Marya “seeing” becomes a big part of her desire to know her father, who has passed away. The kaleidoscope plays off this idea, asking the reader to continue to look through the lens as the picture that Marya sees changes and shifts during the story.

Building off this idea of detail, I was also interested in character development, particularly through direct methods. Janet Burroway talks about the use of direct characterization in her book *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*. She classifies direct characterization as dialogue, appearance, action, and thought. I like this separation because these seem to be the ways that a character can develop organically on the page. These methods allow the reader to develop a perception of the character on their own terms without being told, John is funny or Sam is mean. Sandra Cisneros uses these methods particularly well in her short story cycle *The House on Mango Street*. The narrator, Esperanza, comes to life through the way in which she sees and interacts with the world. In the story “Hairs” Esperanza describes each person in her family by what kind of hair each has. The story has no action; we are in her head, seeing the world through her eyes. Cisneros writes:

But my mother’s hair, like little rosettes, like little candy circles all curly and pretty because she pinned it in pincurls all day, sweet to put your nose into when she is holding you, holding you and you feel safe, is the warm smell of bread before you bake it, is the smell when she makes room for you on her side of the bed still warm with her skin, and you sleep near her, the rain outside falling. (6-7)

In this brief description we learn so much about Esperanza and the relationship she has with her mother. Cisneros is able to develop a strong interesting character without having to tell us who Esperanza is; we feel it as a reader.

In my own collection, I worked to develop three dimensional characters, like Cisneros, through direct characterization methods. In my story “Floating Away from the Moon” the narrator, an adolescent girl, is characterized by her action and inaction in moments of stress after the death of her teacher. She chooses to sink into an imaginary world, guided by TV, rather than face the way she feels about the death of her teacher and the moments of guilt she feels for not always liking her.

Pushing deeper into craft elements that shape a story, I am also interested in point of view and voice, which I find to be closely linked. The area I have been most interested in exploring is second person point of view. I have always admired Moore’s use of the second person, but was nervous about trying this technique myself. After rereading her short story, “How to Become a Writer,” as a graduate student I decided to try. In this story Moore is able to use point of view to develop a closeness with the reader while at the same time exploring ideas that spread across a more comprehensive stage. Second person allows the narrator a different kind of freedom when telling a story, often the chance to move at a faster pace, and an opportunity to use detail without necessarily sinking into scene. “First, try to be something, anything, else. A movie star/astronaut. A movie star/missionary. A movie star/kindergarten teacher. President of the World. Fail miserably” (222). Moore is specific in her details, but this is not a scene. This

opening section begins to set the tone and pace of the story, while also allowing us to get to know the character.

After reading Moore, I wrote my own second person story and found this voice and point of view enabled me to write about ideas without the structured plot used in other points of view. “On Being An Athlete, and Female” focuses on women in athletics, while “Nine Lives of Love” explores the idea of romantic love and the different ways it fits into our society. I found a freedom of expression in second person that I did not expect.

Voice also became an area of interest for me as a writer, particularly after reading John McNally’s *The Book of Ralph*. McNally is able to develop a strong adolescent voice that uses humor to explore heavy coming-of-age themes. I am interested in both the voice he develops and the coming-of-age themes that he works with in this short story cycle. Hank’s voice is funny and inquisitive, as you would expect from someone his age.

The idea of nothing fascinated me. I loved the idea of nothing, because it didn’t seem possible. How could there ever be nothing? There couldn’t. And so I’d throw the ball again and again, until I’d get a splitting headache trying to think of nothing but thinking about everything instead. (20)

Inspired by the way Hank’s voice moves and carries this story, I wrote “Let Me Explain Why,” a very short monologue about a guy who smacks an old lady on a plane. The story is all about the way he talks to the reader, how he tells his story. I also played with voice in “Blue,” the story of a man who leaves his dead dog on

the front lawn. Again, I wanted his voice to drive the story forward as McNally is able to do with Hank.

Coming-of-age stories have always been something I like to read, and as I embarked on this collection and read writers like McNally and Cisneros I was even more interested, particularly after reading Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*. This book is so powerful because it is able to strike a chord about the relationship and development of women, especially mothers and daughters. I remember talking with another English graduate student after reading *Annie John*, both of us surprised at the level of connection we felt with Annie, and her struggle to deal with the complexity of a mother-daughter relationship, even though this book is set in the past on an island neither of us had ever been. In the story "Somewhere, Belgium" Kincaid writes:

My unhappiness was something deep inside me, and when I closed my eyes I could even see it. It sat somewhere—maybe in my belly, maybe in my heart; I could not exactly tell— and it took the shape of a small black ball, all wrapped up in cobwebs. (85)

I wanted this power in my own writing, the way she examines emotions that cannot be explained and brings them to life, makes them relatable.

In my story "Medical Museum" a young boy is dealing with loss by trying to understand how Civil War soldiers lived with amputations, particularly from a picture of a man he sees who has no arms and no legs. He cannot explain his emotions to the reader because he does not understand them, but I want the reader to see beyond the character and feel the power of what he is trying to explore and understand as Kincaid is able to do in *Annie John*.

Beyond these specific craft ideas, I have also found reading to be an inspiration over the course of my three years here. In Burroway's book, *Imaginative Writing: The Elements of Craft* she encourages writers to play. I like this idea. She writes:

Imaginative Writing assumes that you will play before you work—dance before perform, doodle before fiddling with, fantasize before forming, anything goes before finish something. This is not an unusual idea among writers and teachers of writing. ('Indulge yourself in your first drafts,' says novelist Jonathan Lethem, 'and write against yourself in revisions.')

... most of the techniques that writers use are relevant to most forms of imaginative writing and can be learned by playing around in any form. (xxiv)

I have tried to play, writing from different perspectives and voices. I believe in imagination in writing, and I think reading Burroway and writers like Aimee Bender helped affirm this idea. Reading Bender's collection *Willful Creatures* is like receiving a demand to play, with words and language and ideas. In her story "Fruit and Words" Bender shifts our ideas of reality, as always, by presenting a fruit stand that also sells words created by the object they are. The word NUT made out of a nut, the word PILLOW made of a pillow, and in the gas room, words like SMOKE made out of tubes filled with smoke. The worlds she creates are always so realistic except for one thing, like potatoes that come to life as children or people with heads of iron. She develops a world and then twists the corner in some interesting way to make the reader think about something bigger. I love this.

In my own writing I do not slide into magic realism as Bender does, but I do ask my characters to imagine things that do not happen, to see beyond the world as it is happening in action. In my story “Skulls and Pinky Toes and Pogo Sticks” the character continuously sees the world the way he thinks it or imagines it should be, rather than what might actually be happening. He makes statements that the reader knows are not true, like saving his father’s life, which he didn’t. And he imagines a life with his mother, running an underwater pogo stick training facility that we know will not come true. I think some of my push as a writer to give characters space beyond what can really happen comes from this idea of play, which Burroway talks about and which Bender brings to life in her stories.

In the end, writers writing about craft and the short stories I have read helped me think more deeply about the parts of stories that interest me. They allowed me to push out in new directions and to be inspired to keep writing. In an article in *Poets and Writers* by Rachel Kadish, “Face the Fear: A Rally Cry for Writers,” she writes:

We are writers, ultimately, because we are—all of us—the sort of people who can’t be told, “Just don’t think about it.” We linger on the nagging questions; we linger on things that frighten or delight us. We can’t get enough of human unpredictability, of precipitous beauty, of the sheer weirdness of the world. We write to imagine our own freedom or someone else’s; to face down our fears; to so light up a situation with absurdity that the whole world has to stop

in its tracks, nod its head, and agree what a delightful thing
absurdity is. (31)

As I writer I agree with her, and I think reading other writers allows us to explore not only new ideas but new ways to think about our own interests in craft. How a change in point of view or voice can open up a story or a character in a new way. Her quote inspires me to continue to write and read and play.

WAIST DEEP IN WATER

You are having a love affair with a lake. It's not really much of an affair, but you know in your heart this is the real thing. You have never felt this way before. Often, you cannot think of anything other than the extending shoreline and endless horizon of glistening water.

This is not your first tryst with water. Your mother tells stories that you cannot remember about you as a baby loving water: in bath tubs, pools, oceans, puddles. What you remember from being a little girl is a pink plastic tea set you filled with tap water, and you spent the whole tea party pouring water from the tea pot to the tea cup and from the tea cup to the tea pot. You liked the way the water cascaded out over the thick pink plastic and tumbled in straight lines into a splash at the bottom. You liked the way it sounded, like the rush of wind in trees. Your mother says this was just a phase, nothing important, but she still has the tiny tea set carefully packed in a card board box in the attic labeled, happy days with Tina. You know that there is something soft and sweet that was tucked away in this box that does not exist anymore.

A few years later, you filled the bathtub until it over flowed and flooded the white tile floor in gushing waves, leaking in darkened spots onto the hall carpet. Your mother was not happy. You had wanted to swim in it, get swallowed up by it, erase the awkwardness of your pigeon-toed feet and over-sized front teeth. But it did not work out as you had planned. You were grounded for three weeks, and from that point on, your indoor water access was watched closely. When you took baths you sat in shallow water dreaming of water gushing out from the faucet,

filling the tub and the bathroom, floor to ceiling. You dreamed of a room filled with water. And you would open the door to the bathroom and sink seamlessly into the liquid, watching yourself swim like a seahorse in the full-length bathroom mirror, beautiful for the first time. In these dreams you disregarded the problems of gravity and realism. It was your first true crush. You were glittery-eyed and impractical.

After the indoor water restrictions were in place, you moved outdoors. Here you discovered water that was alive. A creek in a park a short bike ride from your house became your place. On Saturdays you rode there, sticky with sweat and dirt, and parked your bike on the edge of the bank. The embankments were covered in tall itchy grass and thistles that plucked at your shorts and bare legs. It was not a pretty creek, thin and muddy, and in late August it sometimes ran dry. But it was water. The creek was quick and cold, and when you reached the edge you would take off your shoes and graying socks and lay them out flat on a bare rock near the edge, and then you would walk out, sometimes sinking in the gray-brown silt-mud and sometimes stepping on small sharp rocks. You didn't care. You spent whole afternoons there, building makeshift rock dams and then toppling them, trying to catch small fish no bigger than paper clips, and sitting on a rock in the sun like a mermaid, legs submerged up to your knees in the yellow-brown water. At the creek, your real life, failing timed math tests and arguing with other girls on the playground, disappeared into a foggy memory. Here you were a warrior, an Amazon princess, in a fairytale of possibility.

You named the creek Little Sunbeam. You wrote about it in your diary. Your mom joked that you had a new boyfriend who was "wet and wild." You got

mad when she said it, balling up your thin tanned fists and yelling, “Don’t say that.” Somehow you seemed to know, even then, that it was the only place you felt real.

By junior high you had fixed your eyes on swimming pools. You loved the candy colored aquamarine blue of the water, and it became your favorite color. Deep into summer you would spend full days at the pool, every moment but rest break in the water. You trained yourself to do four summersaults in a row without breathing. You practiced hand stands and had tea parties alone at the bottom, submerged in the chill and quiet of the chlorinated water. You loved the diving boards, especially the high dive. You would try anything, cannon balls, pencil jumps, backwards dives, flips, but what you loved most was not the rush of air when you pushed off the board but the moment that you hit the water. The tussle of the entry as your hands or feet or bottom broke the smooth surface of the water, and the final pop as your whole body plunged toward the dark plus sign on the bottom. Being underwater was like landing on the moon: weightless, empty, quiet, nearly inhospitable. Freedom like you had never known. It was the only place where you could hear your own thoughts.

You loved to open your eyes underwater; the world coming into blurry focus through liquid. You swam this way, eyes wide, as you looked at legs and toes and dirt and trash that tucked into the corners and edges of the pool. By the time your mom picked you up at the end of the day your eyes burned chicken-pox red. But you didn’t care. Seeing underwater made anything seem possible.

Swimming pools held your attention for a few years, and you still cannot pass up a chance to go in one, but by late high school you had found a new

interest: the ocean. You had been to the beach before, but the year you turned sixteen it made you swoon. The water rolled in choppy white caps and six-foot waves. Some days it was too rough to go in the water. The ocean churned with power and danger, something you had never seen in it before. You wanted the violence it offered in each wave, matching your own. You could almost hear your own words echoing in the surf. I hate you, you said. I hate me, you thought. You wanted to pound your own chest with the rhythm of the waves and scream for days.

Instead you bodysurfed. The water tossed you to the surface, cresting to the top of the wave, and then plunged you to the bottom, skin skidding on sand. You bodysurfed for hours. When you dragged yourself home, to the beach house for lunch or dinner, you were salty and bruised. Your hair was gritty, and sand was tucked in layers underneath your swimsuit. You liked the washing machine feeling that you got in the middle of the ride, between the crest and the bottom, hanging in nothing, lost in space. Emptied.

At the end of the week you filled an empty plastic pop bottle with sand and sea water, twisting the cap tight so it wouldn't leak on the long drive home. You had to take it with you. You needed it. The bottle sat on your bookshelf for years.

You are still partial to the ocean. Even now driving towards it, you always roll down your car windows, waiting for the salty air that quickens your pulse. You cross your fingers and wish for big waves and high winds and empty beaches. You rush toward the water, throwing yourself at the waves, waiting for that moment after you drop but before you hit the bottom.

After the ocean you were a bit of a slut, and to some degree, you know that you will never be monogamous, strictly speaking. At that time you fell in with whatever body of water was close at hand, rivers, lakes, pools, ponds, showers. This is when you were lost. Too old to crawl back into the fluffy pink bed that was once yours at your parents' house, with the comforting milky smell of the sheets, but not sure how to manage all the things that your mother had warned you would come as you entered the real world: taxes, paying for your own groceries, getting blood stains out of cotton, plunging a toilet. So you wandered like a nomad without a sense of direction. When you were away from water for a long period of time, you dreamed about it, and tasted it, slick on your lips in the morning when you woke up.

And then you met Kitchi-gummi, your lake, the one. It was an accidental meeting, a move north from nowhere going nowhere, and suddenly you lived by a lake, the lake. Your lake is the biggest fresh water lake in the world, clear and clean, straight down to the bottom. And it's cold, legs-numb-goose-bumps-cold, even in August. It is the kind of cold that makes you gasp when you jump in. It makes you feel awake for the first time.

Cliffs frame the edges in most places, with spots of thin white sandy beaches that hug the edges of the water. Looking out you see nothing but endless water. Postcard-pretty but storms roll in fast, with high winds and waters that pull you deep. People die. Ships sink. But you like the rage, too. You like standing, dripping wet, on the beach as sand pelts your bare ankles and the waves swallow up most of what is in front of you. In that moment, you are small and powerless, and you know it. And suddenly, this is okay. You are okay.

But mostly you like the way the lake changes, with seasons and between days. Nothing is ever the same, no constants. You like the way the water slips over your head as you take a big breath and go under. You like the way it seems to hold you, fast, by the ankles when you reemerge. You are planted in the water, and when you come up, you know you are not the same person anymore. The world has shifted.

And you change. You call your mother and talk in a slow even tone without bursting into tears. You eat dinner out alone. You change your own oil. At Christmas, you travel home to your parents' house and every day you miss the lake. You want to know if it is crusting over in thin, sheets of ice. At dinner you fold and unfold your hands, feeling strange in the chair that has been yours since before you can remember. You feel too big for the house and for the way your mom still calls you Tina, a name you haven't used since ninth grade. Driving back to the lake after the holiday you speed, even though the roads are snow covered and the sun is setting in pink and orange hues like sorbet. As you crest over the final hill and see it you slow down and breathe. You are home. You are yourself again, the water like frost across the horizon.

BLUE.

They shot Blue in my front yard. Maybe out of pity, maybe not. Blue had cancer, cells attacking his stomach, his intestines. He had a tumor coming out of his nose, gooey and pink like silly putty. But I couldn't bring myself to put him down, he was my best friend, so he sat outside all day crying, like an animal that knows he is almost dead, or should be. The neighbors were not pleased. The Cherry Creek subdivision had standards. Lawns were kept closely cropped like military haircuts. Children never had pudding on their faces. And animals only pooped in designated areas. But Blue was laid out on the lawn like a deer carcass on the side of the road, his fur matted and patchy.

I would drink coffee or sometimes gin while I watched him lying out there. I even left him outside at night toward the end. I couldn't stand having him in the house. He smelled like old wet cardboard. But I also couldn't stand the idea of killing him. Blue was a present, given to me the year my mother died, by my father, two weeks before he died too. Blue was family. The vet assured me it was humane. He told me it was the best thing to do, but I didn't believe him. It would be like putting down my grandmother when she was old and couldn't remember her name or how to use the toilet. People just don't do that.

Mrs. Pillar was the first neighbor to call. She was apologetic at first. "So sorry to hear about Blue," she said. "It must be terribly hard." I had nodded over the phone. "Have you seen a vet?" she asked. "Perhaps ... perhaps it is time to let him go."

They got meaner later. They stopped apologizing and sympathizing. They started saying, “He has to go. It’s past time.” And then yesterday, Mrs. Pillar said, “You do it or we will.” And they did.

As a puppy, Blue was a lap dog. When I came home from work he would be sitting by the back door, tongue out, waiting. He didn’t jump or bark, but as soon as I sat, he was in my lap, licking my chin. Even when he got big, he didn’t give it up. By the time he weighed seventy pounds, I could only sit on the couch, so that his back paws had someplace to go. When I ate dinner, I set the tray table up at the couch, munching sloppy joes over Blue’s head, little bits of ground beef scattered across his neck and back. He just nuzzled in deeper, leaving drool spots on my pants. That was twelve years ago.

I came home from work, and I was startled by the quiet. I could hear the wind and the swish and creak of Mrs. Pillar’s front porch swing next door. And then I saw Blue. Dead. He looked much like he had for the past six months but he wasn’t crying. He was stretched out, his gray and black hind paws tucked under him and his front ones reaching out, almost like he was jumping. The bullet was right in the middle of his head. They must have walked right up to him, stood over him, and pulled the trigger. His cloudy black-gray dusty-purple eyes were still open. I left him on the lawn, went inside, heated up a can of chicken noodle soup and poured myself a cup of coffee. No one called.

I half expected to see a note taped to the door or the wall that said, “We warned you. He is better off. Get a shovel.” But I didn’t.

I refused to bury him, flies collected. I wanted Mrs. Pillar to say something, to call in her squeaky voice and tell me to give him a proper burial, but she didn't; she peeked at me through her blinds, wrinkling her nose in disgust. The mailman started leaving my mail at the corner of my driveway. The police were called. A cop car rolled up on a Saturday, a man and a lady. The man covered his nose as they got out and said, "What the fuck?" The lady cop glanced up and saw me in the window. She didn't smile. She waved for me to come out. I put on my slippers.

It did smell, but the man cop was over-reacting. He was leaning on the hood of the police car covering his nose, eyes watering. Liquid pooled around Blue's middle now and the tumor, the one in his nose, was hard and black. The lady cop glanced at me, then at the dog, then back at me.

"Sir," she said. "Sir, what's going on?"

"They shot my dog," I said. She looked back at Blue and then at me.

"Who shot your dog?"

"One of my neighbors. I don't know which one, maybe Mrs. Pillar, she's next door. But he's dead."

"I can see that."

"In the head," I said.

"What?"

"They shot him in the head."

The man cop staggered toward us like he was drunk and the lady cop rolled her eyes. She walked over toward Blue. She leaned over him, looking at his head.

“Sir, I don’t see a bullet hole.”

“You’re not looking hard enough,” I said.

“How about this, let’s make a deal. You bury the dog, and I’ll question the neighbors. How’s that?”

I told her no. I told her to make them come apologize. I wanted Blue back. I went inside. She and the man cop stood out front talking. He used his hands a lot and she stood still, her hands locked to her hips, not smiling. The man cop got on the radio. The lady cop kept looking up at me, still not smiling. Finally, she waved me back out. I shook my head no. She waved harder. I pulled the curtains and walked away from the window.

More cops came. The cul-de-sac was full of them. Lights running, red and blue. I peeked out from behind the curtains on the second floor. My home office. The phone started ringing; I didn’t answer it.

My neighbors came out. They lined up behind the cops. Stacks of thick white legs and solid colored tops, flip-flops. I scanned their faces, looking for guilt, looking for Blue’s killer.

The lady cop got a megaphone. “Sir. Mr. Winger. Come out of the house. It’s important, imperative.” She shaded her eyes with her hand scanning the front of my house, looking for me. “You must talk to us. This needs to be resolved,” she said.

No one came into my yard. And Blue. Blue was still there. Keeping them out. Blocking the way. Flies darted at his eyes and rested in dark clumps at his stomach. I missed him.

The man cop had the megaphone now. “Mr. Winger, this is the police.” As if I didn’t know this. “Come out now.” He moved to the corner of the driveway, inching forward. He was close to Blue. He held up the megaphone. “Come out now,” he yelled. He kicked the air, Karate Kid-style.

I unlocked my window and raised it up, less than halfway, curtains still pulled, and yelled, “They killed my dog. Arrest them.” Then I added, “Cocksuckers.” I wasn’t sure about that last part, why I said it, why it mattered. All of them, my neighbors and the cops, mumbled and shuffled around. They didn’t like the last part either.

A new voice, male and hoarse, said. “That’s enough, Mr. Winger. This is your last chance. You can’t have rotting animals in your front yard. It’s unacceptable. You have five minutes to come out or we’re coming in, with or without your permission.” The crowd seemed excited. My neighbors pressed in around the police cars like buzzards, shifting from foot to foot. Whispers echoed down the line like a child’s game of telephone. The previews had finally ended. I unlocked the front door and sat on the inside steps that lead to my second floor. I looked at my watch and back at the door. Thirty seconds until five minutes. Tick. Tick. Tick.

Outside they argued. The man cop didn’t want to go first. I wondered if they had looked at Blue when they walked past him. Outside the door the lady cop said, “Mr. Winger, we’re coming in.” The door opened. I started to cry. Four policemen and one police lady filled the doorway and spilled into the den and the dining room. They wiped their feet on the rug. I cried harder.

“Blue,” I said. “Poor Blue ... they shot him.”

They held my arms as they walked me outside, more like they were helping me out of a burning building or a wrecked car than taking me to the station. We stopped beside Blue, standing around him in a circle. Flies rustled and murmured in our presence. The crowd was quiet. I knelt down. Blue. Oh Blue.

I thought about the way he must have looked up at the killer with his creamy eyes and his drooping jowls. How could they have killed him?

I turned and charged the crowd, aiming at Mrs. Pillar. She was front and center in a yellow t-shirt and long white shorts. Her gray hair tucked up under a straw hat, she must have been gardening when the police came. As I got closer her eyes got wider and she stumbled back.

“You did it, you whore. I know it was you,” I yelled, swinging my fists in a windmill motion. I imagined the soft punch of her skin as I hit her, the way her face would twist as she fell to the pavement. I would stand over her, like she did to Blue, and punch her in the face, a final blow like a bullet. Bam.

A stiff dark arm swung out in front of me and dropped me to my back on the pavement, clothes-lined. I choked and tried to lift my head, tried to breathe. The male cop leaned over me, saying something about staying calm, taking deep breathes, and that I was going to be fine.

I spread my arms out and lay with the summer-hot pavement underneath me, the distant blink of red and blue to the sides of me; my neighbors and the cops shouting around me. Above me, the clouds drifted in soft melting layers of white shaped like a dog, legs kicked out, running, with a long pink tongue that I imagined smelled like tuna fish. It was Blue. Blue. Blue.

It took all four police men to get me off the ground. I twisted and wiggled in their hands. Someone in the crowd yelled, “He’s resisting arrest, lock him up for a long time. What a nuisance. Talk about a crazy neighbor.”

Once on my feet, they started pulling me towards the closest cop car. To my right Mrs. Pillar was crying, the lady cop had her arm around her shoulder. Her hat had blown off and her gray hair was matted to her head. She looked old. “Why’d you do it?” I asked over my shoulder. “Why’d you have to kill him?” I paused. “He was all I had.” The police stopped, halfway to the car, almost frozen by the words. I twisted in their hands, facing her. The first man cop on the scene pulled my arm and said, “Come on buddy, that’s enough for today.” But he spoke quietly, like he didn’t really mean it.

Mrs. Pillar looked at me now, her eyes red, puffy underneath. “I didn’t kill him,” she said. She paused, licked her lips, and steadied herself on the police lady’s arm. “I’m sorry, Bill. I really am.” Her voice cracked at the end, more tears. The crowd leaned in close, looking at me, waiting. I walked myself to the cop car and slammed the back door. Liar.

They kept me in jail overnight, in a cell alone. They asked me if I had anyone to bail me out. I didn’t. In the morning they released me, no charges. The lady cop came up and shook my hand, patted me on the back, gave me a half smile, almost sympathy. The man cop grabbed my forearm and said, “Okay, partner. Stay out of trouble,” and winked like we were old friends.

At home, Blue was gone. The place in the lawn where he had been was a dead kidney-shaped brown spot, empty. There was a note stuck to my front door: Bill, it read, we buried Blue in the backyard (marked with a red Frisbee) and we

took up a collection for a nice headstone, your choice of course. Call me when you get back. No hard feelings. Greta (Mrs. Pillar). I sat on the stoop, listening for Blue, the low cries I was used to, but it was neighborhood-quiet, a few birds, a lawn mower in the distance. I was waiting for my father's blue sedan to pull in the driveway, to see a black and gray puppy sitting still in the front seat like a child, waiting to meet me. I wanted him to come put his head on my lap, lick my chin, reassuring me that everything would be okay.

Next door I heard Mrs. Pillar's front door swing open and shut, hinges creaking. On the front porch she waved to me. I nodded back. She brightened, a smile sliding across her cheeks, and hurried down her front steps across the lawn to the edge of my yard. She paused here, hesitant, as if the ghost of Blue were sitting in front of her, watching. "Come on," I said. Her shoulders relaxed, and she took a step into the lawn, but her eyes were still on the brown kidney-shaped spot, watching it as if it might move or come alive. But I could already see tiny specks of green poking through the dead grass, reclaiming the space as if it had been there all along.

MEL AND THE TOILET

Arlan was standing at the door of the bathroom yelling for Vince, her six-year-old, to come quickly, it was time for his bath. The water was warm, the time late. She called again, come now, glancing back and forth between the empty hallway and Mel, her other son, just under two. Mel was bug-eyed and ugly, fat cheeks and splotches of red that puckered his skin. Sometimes she wondered if he would ever grow out of it. Already, she dreaded the moment some woman peered into the stroller and the twist she would see on her face, the way she'd fumble with words, saying, Isn't he growing up or something like that. Lately, she had even taken to pulling a blanket over his face when they were out, despite the heat. His breath formed a little wet O where his mouth should have been. Now, he clung to the edge of the toilet teetering between one foot and the other, eyes wide.

Vince was watching the last few minutes of the latest episode on shark week. He had seen the rerun of this show already, but he could not get enough of the chum sinking into the water and the sharks circling and circling the metal diving cage. Arlan was getting impatient. Right now, she called, stepping out of the doorway into the hall. The brown carpet seeped between her toes. Now, Now, Now, she screamed. The plunk behind her sounded like stones plopping into a creek, distant and hollow. It took her several minutes to think of Mel. She spun and saw his legs sticking up in the air, bent like branches, and his head, gone beneath the lip of the toilet seat. Mel, she said. Mel, as if he could hear her, as if he could right himself, as if he were not being pulled down by the imaginary flush of the toilet water.

Arlan pulled him out by his feet and his bald head hung dripping like a melting popsicle. Mel, she cooed. My sweet Mel. Vince was in the doorway now with his hands pressed out beside him on the door frame. He still had chocolate set in the corners of his mouth from the pudding he ate after dinner. I'm sorry, he said. I was coming. He did not move. She had Mel in her arms now, righted, head up and feet down, as he coughed and sputtered. No bath tonight, she said. And she leaned over and pulled the stopper out of the drain in the tub. The water dropped slowly and silently as if it had known all along that it would leave the house, twist and turn and spin endlessly, as if being pulled down into the dark were a choice.

MISSING

On Pine Street, there is a dog that takes himself for walks. His owner, a short, thin, balding man with larger than average ears, opens the gate to their yard at 8:30AM. The dog, a Newfoundland, big and black and hairy, walks out unleashed. The man closes the gate and goes inside. The dog walks, one block, turn, one block, turn, one block, turn, back to his house. The man is in the yard again. 8:47AM. He opens the gate. The dog goes in. The man pets him. The dog's hair flops around like wide noodles. The man goes to work. The dog lies in the yard for the rest of the day, until the man comes home at 6:17PM and opens the gate for the second walk of the day. Just like that, again and again.

I have been watching the man and the dog out my window for nine and a half days. I get up at 8:00AM and eat spaghettiOs or ramen noodles and sit at the window waiting. Each morning I expect that something will change, the man will be late opening the gate, or the dog won't come back around the corner, or Sofia my girlfriend will show up. She is missing.

I have never spoken to the man or petted the dog; in fact, before Sofia went missing, I didn't even know they lived across the street from me. But now, I have named them, Phil and Egbert. I have decided that Phil is an attorney, one of those older guys who wears sport coats to work and spends most of his day doing cross-word puzzles. He has never been married and all of his family members are dead. Egbert is his family. For his part, Egbert was the runt of the litter, although now, he is massive. He is a shy dog, and when Phil showed up at the breeders, Egbert was the only puppy that sat patiently waiting, pink tongue panting, while

his brothers and sisters jumped and licked at Phil's legs and arms like needy children.

Sofia and I met at a Barnes and Noble reading; a local poet stammered and stuttered over his words. I fidgeted with a paper clip, twisting it back and forth until it snapped, stabbing me in the meaty part of my palm, a little dot of red. She handed me a Kleenex and whispered, "I'm bored too." Her soft summer-blond hair frizzed in tight curls around her face. We went for coffee afterwards.

I imagine that when Egbert is let back into the yard after his second walk at 6:34PM, he follows Phil, in plodding steps, into the house and they share a meal of spaghetti and meatballs, *Lady and the Tramp*-style, and watch the news. Before Sofia disappeared, we used to make elaborate meals together, like braised lamb with fennel. We would open a bottle of wine and put on Miles Davis and cook and kiss. She would smile these sideways-smiles with her dimples catching on her cheeks like glitter.

I have been seeing her lately, in the grocery store, at the mall, at the park near our favorite bench. She is always in the distance, and I am not sure if it is really her or if it is just some other girl who, with my glasses off, begins to take her shape, her walk. Two days ago, as I filled my cart with pudding snack packs, I swear I saw her down the cereal aisle, her arm looped lazily through the elbow of a tall, straight, stiff-looking man. "Sofia," I said, my voice cracking out in a low huff like a dog coughing. "Sofia." I tried again, but the word seemed to hit off glass and bounce back in my face, vibrating between my ears. The woman with the stiff man leaned up and kissed him on the cheek, tippy-toed. I left my cart in

the center of the aisle filled with two litter pop bottles and cheese curls and ran to my car, lungs burning.

On Saturdays, Phil and Egbert stick to the same time-table, but usually Phil walks with Egbert on these days. They walk side by side like old men, no leash, slumped shoulders, not looking at each other, instead concentrating on the cracks and bumps of the sidewalk in front of them.

But today, this Saturday, they are late. It is already 8:41AM, and they have not emerged from the house. I know they are in there. I saw them go in last night after their walk. I am at the window with an empty bowl of orange spaghettiO-liquid crusting along the edges. I tug at the blind cord, twisting so tight the tip of my finger turns blue; I poke at it before I release the pressure. I hold my breath and count to ten, twenty. The door does not open. By 9:00AM, I have the cordless phone in my hand. I turn it on and off. I punch in 9-1 and hang up. I lick my lips, feeling the cracks underneath like canyons.

I worry that perhaps in the night a gang of men with black ski masks over their faces broke into the house and kidnapped Phil and Egbert. Or that someone slipped cyanide into the spaghetti sauce they generously poured over their noodles last night leaving them on the kitchen floor. I worry they are gone.

At 10:00AM, I slip on my boots and a sweatshirt I haven't washed in over a week, and I walk across the street. I open the gate stepping over the dead spot of grass, flat and brown, where Egbert usually lies. The first porch step creaks as I lean forward, and I step back into the yard. I say quietly, "Hello, are you okay?" A light breeze flips the fabric of my pant legs back and forth. I suck-in a breath and run up the steps, banging out three loud knocks, without exhaling. Nothing. I

cough and sputter as I let the air out, hands on knees until I am breathing in a pattern again. I knock again, three light controlled knocks. I poke my head up and shade my eyes to look in the window at the top of the door. It is dark and all I can see are shades of gray, black on layers of black.

I slide along the side of the yard to the garage. I again shade my hands around my face and peer in through the long glass panels on the garage door, the blue-gray car is there. I go back into the yard, open gate, close gate, and find the spot where Egbert lies every day. I lie on the ground and curl myself into a fetus-like shape so all of my body fits in the space Egbert has trampled down with his. I half-expect to feel the heat of his body, to be inside him.

Across the street I can see my house, the porch leaning to one side, the grass long and weedy like the un-swept floor of a barber shop. The last time I saw Sofia, we were on the porch, sitting on the edge of the step, feet on the pavement. She was flipping the laces of her shoes around her fingers, weaving them in and out. I know her lips were moving, but in my memory it sounds like we are underwater, she says, wah wah, wah wah. I reached for her hand. She pulled it away, letting the laces fall like dead worms across her bright red sneakers. I know I said something here too, before she stood, shoes still untied. But the words hung silently between us like deflated balloons. Her curls crunched off her shoulders as she got into her car. I didn't call after her. Only empty air. And now, she's missing.

Just then the door opens behind me, I hear a swoosh hum of air. Egbert's tags jingle like Christmas bells. "Son," a man's voice says. "Are you okay?"

“Yes,” I say. Egbert is next to me now, sniffing at my hair, his tail hitting my back in a long, slow rhythm of thwacks. “I live across the street,” I say, like this helps explain why I am lying here in his front yard curled up like a child.

“I know,” he says. “I’ve seen you in the window.” This has never occurred to me before, that they, Phil and Egbert, could see me too. “We’re going for a walk,” he continues. “Want to come?” I roll over and sit up. Egbert sits next to me, panting and drooling in long lines of saliva. I stand. Phil pats me on the back and says, “Good man. Good man.”

We open the gate and go out. Three across is too wide for the sidewalk so Egbert plods along beside Phil in the grass. I imagine what Sofia would see if she pulled into my driveway right now, at this moment. She would see our backs for the first block, my rumbled jeans and the way my hair has grown out since she has been gone. Then we would turn and disappear around the corner and she would wait, anxious for us to come back. She would tug at the ends of her hair, twirling it, spinning it in slow circles around her fingers, her eyes fixed on the place she thinks we will reemerge, hopeful.

LET ME EXPLAIN WHY

So there I was sitting on the airplane, half ready to start saying my last prayers, bouncing up and down like someone's shaking a bottle of pop, and this woman turns to me, full head of blue-gray hair, and says, Son, please talk to me, talk about anything, tell me about your mother, and I want to say, Fuck off old lady, get a better beautician and have a breath mint, but then I think, well, if this is it I should go down, you know, doing a good thing. Then maybe God, or whoever, will give me a nod in the right direction. So I say, My mom smells like butterscotch. I have no idea why I said this to the old lady, 'cause my mom doesn't smell like butterscotch; in fact, I don't even really know what the hell butterscotch smells like, but in that moment I kinda wished my mom did smell like butterscotch. And so I keep going, Yeah, I say, and she liked to make key lime pie, extra filling, with real limes, none of the imitation crap. Oops pardon me, none of that flavorless imitation, and the blue-haired-old lady looks at me and says, Son, you're full of shit, your mamma should have taught you better than that. She must be a damn fool. I was floored, this little old lady is cussing at me as the fucking plane is bouncing around like Barney Rubble in that damn stone car, and she is talking bad about my mamma. So, get this, I smack her. I smack the old lady in the face, like in a cartoon or something, wham-bam, old lady cheeks flopping in the wind like the jowls of a dog. Her red lipstick all over me, like I am bleeding, and just then the plane dips. Mid follow-through she grabs my arm, and I hold her hand, and we scream like two kids on a roller coaster, except this mother fucker ain't on the tracks. I can almost, almost, picture the snapshot of us

in that moment. You know, like the ones they post up after a coaster ride from the big hill with everyone's hands in the air, hair on end, mouth open, like they might still be screaming. My picture would be me with this little old lady with smudged lollipop colored lipstick smeared on her face, screaming so loud that I can't hear anything. And then, fucking like the captain suddenly finished up with a blow job the plane levels out. Can you believe it? Levels out smooth as liquor spilling out across the bar. And this old lady turns to me and says, You gonna wish you died son, smacking an old lady. You gonna wish you died. I'm gonna tell everyone. And she does. Gets off the plane and starts calling people. Turns out her grandson works for one of those late night talk show things and, get this, she ends up as a guest, telling everyone I smacked her for no fucking good reason. She sits there all grandma like, wrinkled hands folded in her god-damn lap, acting like she didn't say nothin about my mamma. Well, of course my mamma gets a hold of this, and calls me up. She says, Junior, please tell me you didn't smack that sweet old lady. And I tell her, Damn it, Mamma, she was talking bad about you. But Mamma isn't listening, she's praying. I can hear her, all Oh, Jesus forgive my boy, and here all I was trying to do was to get God to give me a good nod if the plane went down. Go figure. So I say, Mamma, you better quit that, I'm all squared up with God. She stops praying, and says real loud, Junior, you ain't never gonna be squared up with God. And all I want to do is smack her. Just like that.

FLOATING AWAY FROM THE MOON

Casey lay on the wet grass desperately trying to make herself as flat as possible. As the thunder growled over her head, she knew the lightning would come, and she imagined the electric pulse of it scratching at her bones, burning lines up her freckled white skin, tensing the small muscles in her calves and thighs and arms. Pain that would be worse than anything she had experienced in the ten years of her life.

She had never been struck by lightning, but she had seen it on the Discovery Channel. She heard survivors tell about the pulse that went through them; she saw the places that the lightning had entered and exited like bullets. And now in a flat, wide, open soccer field she knew she could be next. She learned that in flat places the tallest things were struck, and on this field she was one of the tallest girls on her team.

But the referee blew his whistle; the game was canceled. Casey's coach and parents picked up water bottles and the girls' bags and ran for the parking lot a few hundred yards away. Casey didn't move. Her head was tilted to the side, her cheek pressed against the crinkled blades of grass. Her mother called her name, unable for a moment to find her lying on the ground across the field. Angie Pepperfield, the team's goalie, saw Casey and laughed.

"Freak, what're you doing?" she yelled, half at Casey and half in the direction of the other girls. "Get up, you weirdo," she yelled again. Casey didn't move and didn't answer. She quietly hoped the lightning would get Angie, strike her down for her words, like in the Bible.

Angie was a regular problem. She taunted Casey when she found out that she still watched cartoons, made fun of her headbands, and even the way her mom dressed. She whispered a quick prayer to God, “Go ahead and get her if you don’t mind.” Then amended it a little, “But you know, don’t kill her or anything. Just shake her up.” Another wave of thunder barked across the sky. “Forget it, God, just don’t get me,” she mumbled.

And then, suddenly, her mother pulled her up by the arm. “Get up. We need to go. Come on.” She said nothing about why Casey was sprawled out on the grass, just dragged her to her feet and ran with her to the minivan.

“Casey,” her mother said in the car. “What’s the deal?” Her mother shot quick glances in the rearview mirror as she peeled off her cleats, soccer socks, shin guards, and regular socks. She knew if she told her mother the truth it would result in a deep sigh followed by, “We’ve talked about this. You can’t go around afraid of everything because of what you see on TV. I told you to stop watching the Discovery Channel so much.” And then, finally another sigh, “Have you been watching it at night again?” There was no way for Casey to answer this question without getting in trouble.

A few weeks ago, she had refused to allow her mother to drive more than forty-five miles an hour because she had watched *Smashed Lab* and saw how much worse a car crash was at high speeds. She had spent almost three days leaning over her mother’s shoulder yelling, “Slow down slow down,” any time the needle neared forty-six. “Do you want us to die?” It had ended when her mother pulled over at BP and told her if she didn’t sit down and let her drive, at the legal speed limit, that Casey would never be allowed to watch the Discovery Channel

again. It was a terrifying possibility. So she quietly chanted, only loud enough that she could hear, “Under forty-five to stay alive.”

Her mother was still glancing in the rearview mirror at her waiting for an answer.

“Angie Pepperfield tripped me then pushed me down.” It sounded like a reasonable enough lie.

“What? Has she been bullying you again?”

“Yes. No.” Casey didn’t want this to turn into her mother calling Mrs. Pepperfield and yelling at her to get a handle on her daughter, or worse suggesting that Mrs. Pepperfield take Angie to church. Her mother’s solution for everything. You have a cold, go to church. You got a bad grade, go to church. You are being bullied, pray harder.

“I can handle it,” Casey said.

Casey’s mother told her and her brothers to wash their hands and come to dinner at ten to seven. All Casey wanted was for it to be eight, time for *Dirty Jobs*, her favorite show of the week. But she knew that she must maneuver carefully to be allowed to watch it.

“Yo yo yo, little amoeba,” Josh, her oldest brother said, as Casey pulled her napkin out and laid it across her lap. Josh was fifteen, and Casey was sure that he was not as cool as he pretended to be. Even with his long dark shaggy hair and bright red sneakers and funny nicknames, he must sit in the cafeteria alone at lunch like she did.

“I’m not a one-celled organism.”

“You need to watch more normal TV. No wonder Angie likes to kick your ass,” Kris, her other brother, said.

“Language,” their father said as he walked into the dining room. “Don’t let your mother hear you talking like that.” All three went quiet and Casey wondered why her father didn’t yell more. Why he always threatened them with their mother.

Her mother came into the dining room with a long dish that was hot and steaming like aerial views of lava. Lasagna. Pasta and *Dirty Jobs*. Saturdays didn’t get much better.

“It’s time for the blessing,” said her mother. “Casey, would you like to lead tonight?” Casey hated thinking up all the things she should be thankful for, and she hated even more when her mother would add in things like “You forgot to be thankful for Mrs. White’s help last week with your reading assignment, remember?” As if she did not remember being humiliated in front of the class when Mrs. White called her out into the hallway to discuss why her reading assignment only addressed the scientific facts associated with dolphins rather than the story.

“Mom, please don’t make me,” she said.

“Make you? This is not a punishment. This is your chance to lead the family.”

“I’ll do it,” said Josh, smiling at Casey. “I got your back, Abu.” Casey sighed. At least she had one good brother.

“Thanks, God, for this heap of pasta and sauce that has been most righteously cooked up for us. Thanks for getting me through that algebra test on Monday, I owe you one. And major props to you God, for being you. Amen.”

Casey was in front of the TV ready to go at five minutes to eight. She had it on the right channel, an afghan pulled up around her like an Amazon ant hill, and a glass of milk and double fudge brownie balancing on the couch cushion next to her. It was perfect. Mike Rowe, the host and star, would be coming on any minute to amaze and disgust her. The phone was ringing, but Casey didn't move for it; she didn't care who it might be.

Mike was going to become a mosquito control officer. Casey could only imagine what he was going to experience in the next sixty minutes. She imagined bug head nets draped over green or khaki colored explorer helmets and swarms of mosquitoes attacking any exposed flesh. Clouds of insects would whirl and dip around his face and his hands, like dirt kicked up by truck tires in the summer.

“Casey.” It was her mother, moving across the living room towards the TV. “We need to talk.” Her hand moved toward the off button on the bottom of the screen. Mike's smiling face was there, and then gone, empty black space. “Casey, its Mrs. White.” She should have known that her teacher would keep calling her mother until Casey either morphed into Ann Pickles, the smartest, most obedient student in her class and possibly the world, or until Casey gave up and did what Mrs. White wanted her to do.

“Casey, sweetie, Mrs. White, she, well, she ... she passed away yesterday afternoon. There was a car accident. She wasn't in pain, it was quick.” Casey

could feel the thick syrup of her mother's dark eyes moving back and forth across her face. She was waiting for something, but Casey didn't know what that something was.

"Oh," she said.

"Oh ... honey, what does that mean?" her mother asked.

"It means okay. I guess. Can I watch Mike now?"

"I think we should talk. This is a big change in your life. Okay?" Okay as a question sounded funny. She just wanted to watch *Dirty Jobs* to see swimming clouds of insects.

"Can we talk about it later?" Casey had heard her father say this before except he did not ask, he said, "We'll talk about this later," and Casey wanted to use the same authority but couldn't.

"Sure. Take a little time. Think about it. I'm here, your father's here, your brothers are here, whatever you need. Okay?" The okay question again.

Her mother got up and walked out but did not turn the TV back on. Casey watched her leaving. At the doorway her mother turned around, hands on the door frame looking back over her shoulder and smiled.

Before Casey even had a chance to turn back towards the TV, Josh came in. He appeared in the place her mother had just left, skinny and lanky and awkward compared to the thick curved image of her mother.

"Hey little home-fry, how you feeling?"

"Fine."

"You sure you're okay? You know, you can talk to me, right?"

“Yeah, I know.” Casey wondered if she would continue to get this much attention for the rest of the weekend, if this would be the time to ask for the *Blue Planet* DVD set she had been wanting from the Discovery Channel, if she should ask them to go out for ice cream tonight, if she could get two scoops instead of one.

“Well, I’ll be upstairs in my room if you need me. You know, even if you just want to hang.” Josh left the same way her mother had, and Casey wondered who would be next. She ate her brownie with the TV off, munching into the tiny chocolate chips secreted away inside the gooey middle. Mrs. White was dead.

She began to think about *Smashed Lab*, the crushing of metal on metal and the way dummies bounced and banged in every direction when cars hit the wall. She imagined Mrs. White’s hair on the dummy, streaks of dusty brown and tin foil silver, and then she added her red rectangular glasses that would slip down to the bridge of her nose when she leaned over Casey’s desk. She added her least favorite outfit, the one Mrs. White wore on Halloween. A black sweater with three big orange pumpkins, grinning toothy grins. And a long black skirt that ruffled at her ankles. The faceless crash dummy was beginning to look like Mrs. White, and when the car hit the wall her glasses flew off and the skirt whipped up above her knees and the pumpkins got punched in the face by the airbags. But it was the way that the dummy’s head snapped back and forth that scared her.

On Sunday morning she asked if she could skip church, and to her surprise her mother said yes. She had never been allowed to skip church. The world seemed to be spinning backwards. Last night she had watched back to back episodes of

Dirty Jobs and eaten three brownies. Her father and her mother and Josh had all come to tuck her in and say good-night. They pulled the covers up high and tucked the blankets so close to her face it was hard to breathe. In the dark after they left she kicked until her covers melted over the edge of the bed to the floor. She lay looking up at the plastic stars glowing on her ceiling, searching for the two bunches of stars that she had tried to form into the Big and Little Dipper, but they looked more like frying pans. She spread herself out flat, still facing up, and imagined what it would be like to float without gravity, lifting off her bed and hovering, kicking out into nothing but air. And then she saw Mrs. White. She floated out past the moon, toward the sun, arms and legs gliding as if she had been turned into water, as if she were liquid. Casey could not fall asleep.

On Sunday morning after her mother granted her permission to stay home, she waited for the sound of the garage door closing, then pulled the blue and green comforter off the bed, wrapping it around her body, mummy style, with only her bare feet shooting out the bottom. She headed downstairs to the couch. She could hear her dad in the kitchen, left behind to watch her. Casey oozed into the corner of the couch tucking her feet up underneath her, looking for the clicker. She had never watched TV at this time before. Light and sound fizzed to life, a rerun of *Myth Busters* about the *Titanic*. She had seen it, something about the likelihood of passengers being sucked down as the boat sank. She clicked off the TV, the black screen shiny and empty.

“Good morning. I didn’t hear you come down,” her father said, carrying coffee in the mug that they had gotten him last year for father’s day. It said

“Super Dad” on it and had a man wearing red underwear. A yellow cape flapped in an imaginary breeze behind him. Casey had picked it out.

Her father sat beside her now. He crossed his feet at the ankles and patted her leg in the middle of the thigh. “Did you sleep okay?”

“I guess.”

“Do you want breakfast?”

“No.”

“Do you want to watch TV?”

Casey shook her head no. She really wanted to ask him if it was cold when you died, if you would be naked on the other side, or if you were stuck wearing whatever it was that you died in.

Instead she asked, “Will I have school tomorrow?”

“Yes. Does that worry you?” Casey traced the familiar lines on his forehead, a deep set of three horizontal wrinkles. She wanted the soft rounded look of her father.

“I don’t know.”

“Maybe we should talk about it when your mother gets home.” He half smiled, his lips pulled towards his teeth.

But her father did not bring it up when the rest of the family got home from church. Instead, he patted her on the head and said, “Good chat.” Casey watched him ease across the room to kiss her mother on the cheek, his slippers smacking at his heels.

She did not take the bus on Monday morning; her mother drove her. It was the first time she had ever pulled up in front of the school with the kids whose parents drove them back and forth, and she wasn't sure exactly what to do. Her mother found a spot at the far end of the parking lot and turned the key off, hushing the engine.

“Ready?” her mother asked.

“You're coming with me?”

“Yes, just for today. All the parents are coming, or at least most. Anyone who doesn't have to work.”

“Oh,” she said. “Are we still going to have the timed math facts test? It's Monday. Usually, on Monday, that's what we do.”

“I don't think you will today, sweetie. But we might get out early. Then you and I can talk a little before everyone else gets home.” Her mother smiled and pulled on the handle of her purse, overflowing with a hair brush and an umbrella and a small bag of teddy grahams. She opened the car door and looked back at Casey. “Come on, it's time.”

Casey clutched her safari lunch box to her stomach. Her mother opened her door and pulled out her purple backpack, littered with patches and pins: a rainbow pin, a save-the-manatees patch, a safety pin decorated in yellow and green beads. She snatched the pack out of her mother's hands and walked toward the school. Her mother shut the door and hurried after her.

Her fourth grade room was crowded. Parents sat in the small chairs, knees bumping the bottoms of the desks, legs stretched out into the aisle. More parents and students stood against the walls and up and down the aisles. Casey's seat was

occupied by Mark Lyndel's father. Her principal, Mr. Cole, was up front talking to a group of parents, their children in a ring behind them. Her mother pushed her gently from behind, "It looks like there's room in the back corner." Casey weaved between backpacks and lunch boxes and purses and briefcases. Angie Pepperfield and her mother sat on the far side of the room. Casey wrinkled her nose as she glanced away, thinking about the lie she had told her mother, and the truth hidden under the surface. Beth, another girl on her soccer team, wiggled her fingers in a low wave from her lap.

Casey and her mother found a spot where they could lean their backs up against the wall, and they plopped their things down around their feet like loose stones. The final morning bell rang, but the parents kept talking. Finally, Mr. Cole waved his hands in the air. "Good Morning. Good Morning." Casey looked at his blue and white checked tie and tried to decide how the squares fit together and where exactly they crossed over from one color to another. He was short and round and soft looking.

He said something about how this had never happened at the school before. He said something about a long-term substitute. Parents broke in between his sentences and asked about testing and lunch and counseling. Casey looked out the window. The sky was clear and wide and bright. She could see half the black top and one corner of the field used for soccer. She imagined it was recess. Casey was a forward and liked dribbling in long strides up the sidelines. She was fast and could usually outrun other kids. She was an okay shot from straight-on. She loved the way the net tensed and relaxed when the ball went in, the soft snap it made on impact, the whoosh of release as the ball fell to the grass.

Last week at lunch they had played soccer. Girls versus boys. The girls had killed them, eight to zero. In the final fifteen minutes of recess Casey made a run down the side of the field and, wide open, shot hard at the goalie. She hit him in the face. He started bleeding, a stream of chunky red-black blood down the front of his face, over his lips, and onto the white of his t-shirt. "Oh my God," one girl had yelled. "Get Mrs. White." Someone else yelled, "Geez, Casey." Someone else said, "Idiot."

Mrs. White had taken her and the boy to the office. The nurse cleaned him up, and Mrs. White sat down with her in the lobby.

"Did you mean to do that?"

"No."

"Did you tell him you're sorry?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"The other kids were yelling," Casey said. "It happened so fast ... I just, I didn't." Casey was hot and still sweating from running outside, and the office felt stuffy and dusty and small. She wanted to run out of the room, out of the building, and not look back.

"Why don't you sit here a minute and think about this. When they're finished cleaning him up I think there is something you might want to say to him." Mrs. White looked down at her with big grey-green eyes. For a moment, Casey hated her.

In the classroom Mr. Cole was now answering questions and her mother had folded her arm around Casey's shoulders, tucking her into the side of her body. Casey's cheek rested on the soft pink cotton of her mother's shirt. She could smell meatloaf from last night's dinner. It was embarrassing, but she didn't pull away.

Casey noticed for the first time the empty chair at Mrs. White's desk. It was old and wooden, a faded red cushion tied on with thin strings. It was pushed out and angled towards the door, like Mrs. White had left in a hurry. On her desk there were still papers, a stack that Casey knew must be their spelling tests from Friday. Casey wondered what would happen to the three framed photographs on Mrs. White's desk, her kids, husband, and Pretzel, her dog. She had shown the class each picture on the first day of school. Casey wondered what would now happen to the people and the pictures.

Casey could not picture Mrs. White dead. She had only been to one funeral, for their neighbor, Mr. Butler. He was old when he died, a cane and a walker and a wheelchair in his house. Her mother made her go up and say good-bye. She had not wanted to see a dead body. But he looked younger dead. His skin was less wrinkled, not gross like Casey imagined with liquid oozing from his eyes. Her mother told her, "Say good-bye and a prayer." Casey had bowed her head silently thinking, Bye Mr. Butler. Hope you can walk in heaven. I'm sure you would like that. Amen.

Her mother elbowed her as they stood in the back of the classroom. "Are you listening?"

"Yes," Casey whispered back.

"Good."

Mr. Cole invited the parents to have lunch with their children in the cafeteria, or they were free to go home for lunch. There would be an optional session with the counselor in the afternoon, and school would resume as normal with a substitute on Tuesday. What would normal feel like?

Her mother gathered up her purse and Casey's lunchbox. "We'll eat at home. Get your backpack." In the parking lot Casey jerked with the pressure of her mother's foot on the brake and the gas. As the man on the radio talked about the weather, Casey thought about *Storm Chasers*. She liked the show, not because of the danger or the science but because of the swirling images of the tornado cones. The spinning clouds looked like crests of waves hovering mid-air.

"Do you want to talk now?"

Casey did not want to talk.

Her mother continued. "I agree with Mr. Cole. I think it would be a good idea if we all went to the funeral on Tuesday."

Casey did not remember that he had suggested this or that the funeral was Tuesday, but she did not want to go.

"We can all go, as a family. You and me and Josh and Dad and Kris. Maybe we can even order in pizza that night."

It was a bribe of sorts, pizza on a Tuesday.

"I have soccer practice."

"Only until four-thirty. It starts at six."

Casey watched the clouds moving in slow gray drifts. Partly cloudy.

On Tuesday Casey took the bus to school. The windows of the bus were streaked with dirt and water. She sat alone in seat six. Getting off the bus she saw Beth, and they half smiled, no teeth, at one another and walked down the hall to their room together.

The classroom lights were too bright for the gray of the day. At the front of the room was Mr. Zimmerman, the substitute. He was young and wore dark pants and a light blue shirt. His voice was runny like thin vegetable soup. The room had changed, Mrs. White's chair was pushed in and a black briefcase sat on the floor behind it.

After lunch they had science, one of Casey's favorite subjects. She loved the unit they just finished on endangered animals. She had done her project on ocelots and had traced a picture of one of these small tropical cats for the cover. She had shown it to Josh, and he told her it was the coolest report he had ever seen. When he pulled her into a soft headlock she had let him without protest. Mrs. White had not turned back these projects yet. Casey wondered what had happened to them.

Mr. Zimmerman started a new section on matter. He talked slowly and did not use visuals. Casey found herself drawing ocelots across the page, some jumping, some crouching, two playing together. They weren't good drawings. The feet were too big and the whiskers extended out like antennas, but she was good at drawing their huge liquid eyes.

When they lined up for their buses, Mr. Zimmerman handed each student a packet in a large sealed envelope. He said they were to open it with their

parents at home, not before. Beth left with the walkers and she waved. “See you tonight at practice.” Casey waved back.

By the time Casey was in her seat on the bus she had already broken the seal. Inside she smelled Mrs. White, rich and nutty. Casey found a letter to parents from the guidance counselor, times and directions and other logistics for the funeral, and the face of her ocelot. It was her report. Casey opened it and in the margins she saw the soft wide cursive of Mrs. White. On the last page Mrs. White wrote, “I can tell you will be our little scientist someday. Great Job, Casey!” The dead were talking.

Casey arrived at soccer practice, and she stood at the edge of the field. In her mind she could still hear the echoes of thunder that had rolled across the field. Mr. Ben was setting up cones, and her teammates were milling around the closest goal talking and putting on their cleats. Angie was at the center waving her arms as if telling a story about a giant bird. Casey walked over and joined at the edge of the group.

“Can you believe she died? My teacher is dead, just like that. Bam. My mom says it just goes to show you have to live every day to the fullest. We drove by the crash site this morning on the way to school. It’s still blocked off with caution tape and the grass is all torn up and two trees have all the bark ripped off. It was crazy.” Everyone was looking at Angie.

The team was made up of all the fourth-grade girls in the area who wanted to play traveling soccer. Angie, Beth, and Casey were the only girls from her school on the team; the rest of the girls had never met Mrs. White. Beth was on

the other side of the group, and she picked at the grass, pulling it up one blade at a time and tossing it out in front of her.

“Are you going to the funeral?” Carrie, one of the midfielders, asked.

“Yeah. It’s tonight. My mom says she doesn’t think there will be a body, though, because the accident was so bad. I guess it would be too messed up to show people.”

Casey tried to act busy, adjusting her socks and cleaning out the mud between her spikes. But Angie swiveled towards her. “I bet you’re going to cry, aren’t you? Big crocodile tears.”

Casey didn’t look up but mumbled, “No.”

Before Angie could respond Mr. Ben was in front of them calling practice to order with his whistle, the warm-up lap, and stretches. Casey breathed heavily as they rounded the corners of the field. She watched Angie’s thick calves flex and relax in front of her. She wanted to throw a shoe at her, spikes up, in the back of the head.

When her mother arrived to pick her up early, she was lost in the pull of her muscles, the quick cuts and sharp angled shots of an inner squad scrimmage. She had forgotten about Angie and Mrs. White. Mr. Ben blew his whistle, the girls got water, and Angie and Beth and Casey picked up their things and headed for their respective minivans.

Josh was in the van too, and he leaned out the window as Casey got closer. “A little ham-ster in the making.”

Casey smiled, knowing he referred to Mia Hamm, her only hero not on the Discovery Channel. Her mother searched in her purse, and various items spilled out onto the floor of the van, pennies and chapstick and sunglasses.

“Shoot. I can’t find my cell phone... Hurry up. You have to clean up, change, eat, and be ready in thirty minutes.” Casey wanted to stay with Mr. Ben and work on corner kicks. But she got in the van.

As her mother turned back to the wheel and shifted into drive, Casey imagined saying, “I’m not going,” but she knew her mother would turn and say, “Oh yes you are, young lady,” and then Casey’s words would spill everywhere—how she hated Mrs. White and how ocelots hunt in the dark and wanting Angie Pepperfield to get hit by lightning and vegetable soup voices and her father saying “good chat” and about wanting her, her mother, to love her when there was no reason to love her. But she didn’t. She took off her shoes, and her soccer socks, and her regular socks, and asked about pizza.

The parking lot at the church was packed. They had to park on the street. Casey sat in the far back of the van worried about the hole in the knee of her tights. It was growing; she could feel it. She caught it on the corner of the van getting in and didn’t tell her mother.

They filed in by gender, her father, her brothers, her mother, and her. Flowers were everywhere. The back of her throat itched. A dog on a red leash sat next to the front pew. Casey knew it was Pretzel.

They found seats near the back. Quiet music played and people talked in hushed tones. Across the aisle she saw Angie and her mother and father and two

older sisters. They all wore shades of black and grey and looked solemn. Casey wondered if their mother threatened them in the car to be good like her mother had.

The service began. Casey rolled and unrolled the program until the black letters were so creased and wrinkled it was hard to make out the words. Her fingertips and palms were gray from the ink. Casey tried to pray but nothing came. Her mouth was empty.

As they left the church, the line to get out was stalled. Suddenly, Casey and Angie were side by side, both right behind their mothers. Music still played in the background. Casey pictured Mrs. White humming to the music in a movie at indoor recess while thin sheets of needle-fine rain came down.

The line began to move again and Casey leaned over, right next to Angie, so close she could see the tiny blond baby hairs that covered her ear lobe, and said, "I wish it had been you."

Before she had time to see a reaction or realize what she had said out loud, the line was moving again, and Casey was pushed outside behind her mother. Rain splashed up from the puddles onto her tights leaving dark polka dots. Her mother hurried them into the van, Josh and Kris, and finally Casey. As she was getting into the van her mother held her arm and said, "What happened to your tights?"

Casey looked down, half in and half out of the van. The hole had torn and crawled from the top of her knee down to the buckle of her shoe, like a scar.

ONCE UPON A TIME...

It all starts when my wife, Mindy, and her best friend, Sam, decide the four of us should take a trip somewhere, the four of us being Mindy, Sam, me, and Arnold, Sam's brand new fiancée. Arnold is Sam's fourth fiancée since I have known her and her fifth total. There was one when she was sixteen that Mindy claims hardly counts, but she had a ring so it counts in my book. Mindy and Sam have known each other since the first grade when Sam spilled milk on my wife at lunch, on purpose, because Mindy had worn the same headband. I guess in first grade, for girls, it is something like treason. The milk spilling led to hair pulling, afterschool detention, and ultimately, somehow, a lifelong friendship. So after the most recent engagement, which Sam claims, like always, is really the "one" this time, they decide we should celebrate with a trip, a couples' long weekend. And then my wife says Disney World.

We are in the kitchen, and she hands me a beer as she says it, top already popped, like she knows she needs to ease the blow.

"It'll be fun," she says, tilting her head sideways at me with a half grin. "I'll even buy a sexy Minnie Mouse outfit. Good, right?" She is easing towards me now, sliding her hands over my shoulders and then folding them around the back of my neck. "I'll be your Minnie." She is batting her eyelashes, well aware it is cheesy, her head is tilted up at me, her chin almost resting on my chest.

"Why there? And why with Sam and what's-his-face?" I sigh. "You want to go on a trip, I'm in. How about a long weekend in San Francisco or a romantic getaway, just the two of us, to some Caribbean place? You can pick. Anywhere but

plastic-kid-land and any place with only two tickets.” While I say this I slide my hands onto the small of her back and pull her closer. I pray she will jump at the idea. I pray she will say okay and that will be the end of it.

She puts her hand on the counter and leans away from me. A bad sign. This position is Mindy’s version of finger-snapping-shoulder-wagging-pursed-lips-about-to-tell-you-where-to-shove-it, but in her polite Midwestern way. I’m screwed.

“Why can’t you just be excited about it? It’s a vacation. She loves him. Come on.”

“She loves every guy who buys her a drink,” I say. And I think how Sam should be in the boyfriend of the month club or something. Instead of collecting baseball cards she has a box with rings from guys she decides at the last minute not to marry. It’s weird. “I only get so much vacation. Is this really how we want to spend it?”

“Yes. Yes it is,” she says folding her arms across her chest. I take a long swig of my beer. I pan the kitchen looking for back-up or a distraction or an exit.

It is not that I don’t like Sam, because I actually do like hanging out with her. She is pretty hilarious in a slap-stick sort of way. She isn’t afraid to do or say anything, and her stories usually involve some kind of personal malfunction. She is almost always the punch line. But the idea of spending a long weekend with her and her new touchy-feely fiancée is too much. They are always touchy-feely. It isn’t just kissing either, it is heavy-handed groping in public, hands-on-boobs groping. Add in a destination that is targeted at individuals under twelve, and I’m not sure how I will even manage to get through telling my co-workers, let alone

the experience itself. It makes me wish Mindy had a little less power over me. Or that I had thought up the idea of a romantic vacation before she thought up Disney World.

“Are you sure? This is really what you want?” I ask, still wondering if I can get out of this by coming up with a better option. Some sort of trade-up that Mindy will buy. Something that she can say to Sam like, “Well, how could I pass up Paris?” but we can’t afford Paris. Or “How could I pass up a trip in the space shuttle?” but obviously the moon is out. “Okay,” I say. “Okay. But you better be the sexiest Minnie ever.”

Mindy runs off to call Sam with the “good news,” and I am left in the kitchen, alone, with my beer. We have never actually been on a vacation with Sam, or her men, and it seems too committed for our triangle friendship. I know, when it is the three of us, that I am the guy who opens doors and buys happy hour drinks and makes off-color comments that Mindy smiles about and Sam cracks up over. It is casual and laid back and has an end point. Bars close, cabs come. Mindy and I leave and go home.

Mindy and Sam book a package deal for the fall, just outside peak tourist season, that includes three nights, four days. They talk on the phone every day for two weeks so they can pack together. They have outfits for Magic Kingdom, outfits for shopping, pool-side clothes, and out-to-dinner clothes. I pack four polo shirts, two pairs of khaki shorts, a swimsuit, and a handful of underwear. But, I have to admit, I am getting excited for a vacation, a break from the office. I lie and tell my co-workers that we are going to a little beachside hotel in Florida. I tell them I

will be lying on the beach for the long weekend, getting a tan, and I almost have myself convinced that is actually what we are going to do. But it is not.

I met Arnold, Arnie as Sam calls him, for the first time going through security. Here we are two grown men taking off our shoes and our belts and emptying our pockets into little plastic dishes while we discuss where he grew up, Indiana, and where I grew up, Pennsylvania. What colleges we went to, Purdue and Pitt. Have we ever been to Disney World before? No and no. And as we begin putting things back on and into our pockets I ask him the question. The question my wife reminded me to ask at least once, to be polite, even though she has already heard Sam tell it a million times. I have one foot in my loafer and I grab for my laptop case when I say, “So how’d you meet Sam?”

It is all he needs. We went from having a guy’s conversation, which could have taken place over two micro-brewed beers, to pink-colored martinis before I could even get my second loafer on.

“It was at Niagara Falls, in a casino. She walked past me at the slots and I thought to myself, Arnie, this is it. Go get that girl.” He pauses and then continues. “She was wearing this dress that really showed off her legs, man has she got great calves, and I just got up and followed her. I think I would have followed her anywhere. I had it that bad.”

The girls are right behind us now as we walk towards the gate, and they are listening. Now he has a bigger audience, and he knows it. He turns around and winks at Sam every few minutes. Suddenly all I want is to have a few beers on the plane. “So I finally catch up to her,” he says, “cause she was moving, and I grab

her arm like this...” He reaches out and squeezes my arm, kinda hard, and I am thinking that maybe I ought to pull it away and take a fake punch at him, but I hold off because Mindy is behind me, smiling. “And then she turns and her eyes are knock-me-down beautiful. I say in this real pathetic voice, ‘I’m Arnie.’ And I pause like she’ll understand she is my woman. But she just looks at me, so calm. Then, I throw up on her shoes. Just like that.”

He bends over in the middle of the airport and makes barfing noises. Sam giggles and it eggs him on, so people are starting to stare at us now, like they think he might actually be barfing. Mindy rolls her eyes; at least she’s as annoyed as I am. “Can you believe it? I couldn’t. I was so embarrassed that I almost did it again. But Sam, she didn’t flinch. She says, ‘honey, let’s get you cleaned up.’ And we march off to the men’s room. We go in together and clean off my face and her shoes and then we. Well, we made it official, right there in one of the stalls.” All I can think is classy, very classy, can’t wait to tell your kids this one.

Sam punches him in the arm.

“You aren’t supposed to tell that part,” she says.

“Well, I thought you said these were the real deal, your people, your family. If they’re family, I didn’t think we had to hold back.”

“Well, they’re family,” Sam says, rolling her eyes towards us, smiling.

“You crazy kids,” I say, half-joking, half mocking. “Have you told him about the time you got so drunk you pooped your pants at the bar yet?”

“Zach,” Mindy and Sam say at the same time.

“Right, sorry. I’ll save the good Sam stories until we’re in the land of enchantment. Come on ladies, your Boeing 747, I mean, white carriage, awaits.”

And I bow. Mindy pinches my arm and smiles, the smile with the right side of her mouth a little higher than the left, and I relax. I don't even get a beer on the plane. Instead, I pretend to sleep so I don't have to watch Arnie and Sam touching each other under the airline blanket. I thought that kind of thing only happened in the movies. Apparently, I was wrong. Mindy sleeps, but I am pretty sure she is faking it too.

Sam and Arnie look like a couple. It is surprising, almost shocking, because usually I don't think anyone really fits standing next to Sam. She is tall and big boned in the way women talk about other people who are thick and curvy. She has an hour glass shape that seems cliché. She wears clothes that are tight in the right areas but they seem to flow around everything else. She has dirty blond hair that is dyed a deep chestnut red right now. In the time I have known her it has been bleached blond, black, light brown, and some kind of skunk look with dark hair and blonde highlights. She wears bright colors and get-me noticed shoes. She likes attention.

Mindy and I look like a couple too, but in a dentist office magazine ad sort of way. Mindy is petite. But her body is hard and sculpted with small muscles that grip and ripple under her clothes. Her appearance is conservative in every way with naturally dark hair cut soft at her chin, light make-up, almost invisible on her face. She always looks refined and pulled together, even in sweat pants. I like her neat orderly look and the way she always smells clean and warm, can you smell warm?

Arnie is taller than Sam but not by much and when she has on heels, like most days, they are pretty much the same size. He is thick too, in a baggy way, around the middle, but his jeans are tight and his button-up shirts are always unbuttoned a little too low. He is not fit but walks around like he is, like he has a reason to feel proud. They have the same stride, slow but as if they always know where they are going.

I am the anti-Arnie. I wear polo shirts and loafers. Mindy even irons my boxers, and secretly I like the way it makes the hems lay flat on the edges. I am thin and wiry. Mindy says I am clean cut.

On our first day we go to Epcot. We are late leaving the hotel, almost lunch, because we are all slow getting up, and Mindy and I are even slower because she rewards me with the first appearance of Minnie. It makes the whole trip seem almost worth it already. I even suggest we don't leave the room, that we order room services, and stay away from Sam and Arnie all day. She says no, and I don't fight her because I want more Minnie.

Sam and Arnie are already in the lobby, and Sam is folding and unfolding a map of the parks. Arnie is drinking coffee and chatting with a middle-age Korean man behind the front desk. He sees us coming first. "Well, good morning, skipper. Late night?" He winks. Mindy ignores him and starts talking with Sam, woman talk. I'm stuck with Arnie.

"Right'o," I say and lightly punch him in the arm. He slugs me back. I fight the urge to rub the spot where he hit me. "Getting excited?" I'm being sarcastic, but he doesn't pick up on it.

“Sammie’s been reading me some of the highlights, this one, Epcot, sounds a little high brow. The animal one sounds better.” He is serious, and I search for something to say. Then suddenly the girls start pushing us to the door and the tram.

Once we are through the gates of the park we decide to eat. We missed breakfast at the hotel and the whole point of Epcot, in my opinion, seems to be the food from all the different countries. I hone in on Germany. I can smell meat cooking, maybe bratwurst. Mindy is pointing to one of the Asian countries and Arnie seems all set to have something from the American Adventure. Sam wants German too so she and I split off together and Mindy and Arnie head in different directions. We decide to meet back, with our food, in front of the United Kingdom building at a group of benches. Sam and I are quiet when we are waiting in line, and I realize I don’t think I have ever spent more than a few minutes alone with her, ever. I don’t know what to say.

“So what do you think?” she asks, finally breaking the silence between us. I look straight ahead as she says this, at the backs of people’s heads, tall and short, little kids and a few old people, maybe grandparents. I am hoping for a glimpse of what the food looks like as people in front of us peel off with steaming foil wrapped items. I am starving.

“The hotel is nice. Good pillows. The tram stinks like melting rubber. But the food here smells good,” I say.

“No,” she says, shaking her head. “About Arnie.”

“Oh,” I say, turning to look at her. She has never asked my opinion about one of her guys before. “Arnie. He seems nice.” She has her hands on her hips and has a “give me a break” look on her face.

“More,” is all she says.

“Right. Likes my jokes. Great belt buckle. Laughs a lot. Nice guy.” I am not sure what else to say. I haven’t paid much attention to him since the story at the airport. I could take him or leave him.

“You don’t like him,” she says.

“No. No. It’s just...don’t know him very well yet.”

The line buckles and we are almost up to order. I stare at the menu like I am studying for a chemistry test, not looking at Sam.

“I’m going to ask you again and you better have something to say,” she says. I decide to never allow myself to end up in a situation where she can ask me this again.

We order. I suck down my bottle of water before I even get my food because I don’t want to talk anymore. Sam sips slowly on hers and looks out across the park. We get our food.

Near the United Kingdom I see Mindy and I hurry to her, eager, like I am heading for a life raft. She is eating mini egg rolls and has duck sauce in the corner of her mouth. We sit on the bench, and Mindy and Sam talk and eat while I just eat. Arnie is still missing.

Sam tries his cell but he doesn’t answer. She stands up on the bench, hand to her forehead to block the sun like an explorer, like she is Louis or Clark.

“Do you see him?” she asks. I don’t really look, but I start thinking about how funny it would be if we had to call him over the loud speaker like they do for lost kids. I can almost hear a loud flat voice saying Arnie, Arnie to the main entrance, your party is waiting.

“I see him,” Mindy says, she is up on the bench now too, but is shorter than Sam and I wonder how she spotted him over all the heads and balloons and in the glare of the sun.

“Where? Where?” Sam seems a little frantic. She has one hand on Mindy’s arm, a claw grip, and one still shielding her eyes, but she is bouncing, just a little at the knees. It is making me sea sick sitting on the bench.

“There.” Mindy points out, and Sam and Mindy lean their heads together following the thin pale line of Mindy’s finger. “There.”

“I see him,” says Sam. Sam is waving both arms over her head now and she nudges Mindy to do the same. They look like out-of-sync cheerleaders. Sam is waving even harder now. Arnie must not see them. I take the last swig of my water, and suddenly people around us are pointing and a mother pushing a stroller says, “My God. Put your shirt back down. There are children.”

And Mindy says, “Sam. Sam. Stop it.”

I hear a voice boom out from somewhere behind all the waists I am staring into. It is Arnie. “That’s my woman,” he says.

Sam pulls her shirt back down and Mindy’s face is bright red and a few people are waving over a security guard. But it is the little boy right in front of me that catches my attention. He is six or seven, with light curly hair, and he is staring at Sam like she is ice cream. His mother and father are struggling to load

a smaller child into a car-seat looking thing with a handle. I don't think they even realize what has just happened, what their son has just seen. He tugs on his mom's sleeve and she waves him off without turning around.

"Mom," he says. "Mom, that lady has way bigger boobs than you."

Mindy pulls my arm, dragging me to my feet, while she pushes Sam out in front of her. Sam is still laughing, and Mindy is still red in the face. We are like a little train weaving through the crowd, away from the bench, and the security guards, and the little boy. I can't even make out the yellow halo of his head any more as we move away, but I can picture him telling this story at recess, a small group of little boys huddle around him like a hero.

We leave the park, shamed out of Epcot before we can even ride the Spaceship Earth, a famous ride at the park. Sam and Arnie giggle together on the tram back to the hotel and Mindy whispers to me, "I don't even know why I put up with her sometimes."

"Cause she's your friend," I whisper back. "Did you see the little boy? The blonde one."

"No. Why?"

"Just wondering."

On day two it is Animal Kingdom. Arnie's favorite. On the tram ride to the park I ask Mindy to go on a safari date with me, just the two of us. After getting kicked out of Epcot the day before we spent the whole afternoon at the pool, and I was sick of Arnie and Sam. They drank fistfuls of long islands, and Sam repeatedly

smacked Arnie's butt every time he exited the pool. Mindy had been mortified. I was less than amused. So today, I wanted a break.

We left them near the gate, slipping into a lazy walk, holding hands. On our own it felt cooler and lighter and somehow less strange to be at Disney World. I buy her a small stuffed giraffe. She names it Geoffrey, like the Toys R Us one. We kiss, in public, which is weird for us. And I like the way it marks her as mine. We ask a mother with two older children to take our picture in front of a palm tree, and on the screen, when she hands it back, we have twin smiles. I imagine getting it framed for my office.

We only wait in line fifteen minutes to get on the safari ride. It is not too crowded and we get two seats right near the outside so we can see well. We are still holding hands. And she is twisting her ponytail between her fingers.

"You want kids right?"

"Sure. Yea, I guess. That's what we talked about." I am mumbling and side glancing at her, trying to decide where this is coming from.

"Soon?"

"I'm not sure. Why?" I have not really thought about this.

"I think I'm ready."

We are passing alligators now and a little kid in front of us screams. The gators are not moving and look like they haven't moved since they were born.

"Now?"

The kid's mom has scooped him up into her lap and is now rocking him. He has his face buried in her shirt.

"Yes."

“Like now, now.”

The kid peaks up over his mom’s shoulder and is looking at me. He has a little snot dripping out of his nose on one side.

“Yes.”

“When did this happen?”

“I’ve been thinking about it for a while.”

The kid tucks his head back into his mom’s shoulder, then peaks up again and then pops back down again. It is a game.

“Really? A while. You didn’t mention it.”

“I was thinking.”

I consider sticking my tongue out at the kid as he pops up again, but I don’t.

“And now you’ve decided.”

“Yes.”

I change my mind and stick my tongue out. The kid starts smiling.

“Are you even listening?”

“Yes.”

“Well,” she asks.

“I don’t know.”

The ride turns a corner. A fence separates the animals from another area. Then I see Arnie. He has on a Hawaiian shirt today and big gold sunglasses propped up on his head. He is facing the fence, looking straight at the giraffes, peeing. The bushes up along the fence are thin and scraggily and I am sure he is there peeing. I slap Mindy’s arm.

“Look.” I point.

“Oh my God,” she says. “Is that? It can’t be? It is?”

“Arnie,” I yell.

Mindy smacks my arm. “Don’t make a scene,” she whispers.

Arnie looks up, one hand still down at his crotch directing the flow, and uses his free hand to wave. “How you liking the animals?” he asks.

“Nice,” I yell back. “Very nice.” I smile. Who thought I would be so happy to see Arnie.

Day three is Magic Kingdom, the Mecca of Disney world. We get up early and have breakfast at the hotel before we leave. Everyone has been pretty excited to actually see “the kingdom,” but I am disappointed. The castle is small. Everything is small, and shorter and fatter than real life, like Walt sat on it himself.

Mindy and I have ignored yesterday’s conversation. I am pretending it never happened. And we had Minnie sex last night. But I am glad to have Sam and Arnie around today.

At our hotel they have been playing these little movies that show Magic Kingdom exclusively. Mindy is obsessed with the one that shows Minnie’s pink and purple house, so we are having lunch with the characters, at Minnie’s. I keep calling it the “girl den.” Arnie thinks this is hilarious so I continue and say, “Maybe we can stop off at the ‘man cave,’ Mickey’s place, for afternoon snacks. Or head over to the ‘quackery,’ Daffy’s, for a drink.” Arnie slaps me on the back, and I jerk forward a little.

“Good one, man. You have some great one-liners.” I realize that I must be even less funny than I thought if the only one laughing is Arnie. Mindy links her arm through mine, leans in close to my ear. I can smell coffee and mango gum.

“I’m glad you two are getting along so well. A little man couple at the magic kingdom, how cute.” She is being cheeky, and I like it.

“You’re jealous,” I whisper back.

While holding hands I trace the edges of her wedding band with my thumb. She squeezes back. In front of us Sam points and waves, then yells, “Hurry up.”

A group of characters are posing for pictures with little kids and families. Jasmine and the two twins from Alice in Wonderland and, I think, Pocahontas. Sam wants a picture of her and Mindy with Jasmine. I become the camera man. Arnie stands next to me while the girls wait in line. He smells like tobacco. I have never seen him smoke, so I am surprised.

“So real quick, before they get back.” He leans in closer, and I can see a speck of toast stuck between his gums and his teeth. I try to step back but he just moves in closer. “What do you think the likelihood of me actually getting her down the aisle is?”

“What?” I say, nearly knocking into a group of kids wandering in a small radius around a stroller like planets in a solar system.

“I know about the others. I saw the ring box. She told me about each of them. So, you know her. What do I have to do to get her to the finish line?”

“Get her pregnant,” I say.

Shit.

Arnie is wide-eyed and looks like he might be choking, but Mindy is calling, “Zach. Hurry up. Take the picture. There’s a line.” So I turn around and Sam and Mindy are on either side of Jasmine, smiling. The sun is hot, a glare on the camera screen. I can’t tell if I got it or not but I say okay. Later, we look at the picture and all three women have their eyes closed, and Mindy’s mouth is open a little, like she is trying to say something.

We have walked most of the park by lunch and I am hot and tired and ready to sit down. The “girl den” is smaller than I pictured, like everything else, and even hokier than I imagined. The whole place is purple and pink and white, outside and inside. Mindy keeps looking at me and wrinkling her nose. “Can we have a house like this?” she says.

“Let me get my wand.”

The doorways are short too, and I have to duck as we enter the main room and hand over our tickets. The tables are low to the ground, and I wonder if I will even fit in the small pink chairs with purple legs. Sam snaps off pictures, and Arnie picks at his teeth with a toothpick he got on our way in; I can see mints in his hands too. He must have taken his time catching up with us after he stopped to use the bathroom. He has not said a word to me since the picture. A sign in the center of the room says “Today’s Lunch will be hosted by Minnie and her friends Daffy, Goofy, and Pluto.”

We get to our table and there are rolls already there but not enough little packets of pre-sliced butter so I ask one of the pink-apron waitress for more butter. She says sure. A few minutes later Goofy shows up with a tray of butter. It

seems nice. Butter from a host, and I say, “Thanks buddy,” and reach for the butter, but Goofy suddenly pulls it back, like a tease, before putting it back within my reach. I say, “Ha-ha. Good one.” And reach for it again. Same stuff. Mindy smiles at him tight lipped, leans across me and takes the butter out of his hands. Goofy leaves.

“What a nut case,” Sam says.

“No kidding,” I say.

“Ahh he’s just playing,” says Arnie.

Then it is the backrub. Right after salads, Goofy comes back, walks right up behind me and starts rubbing my shoulders. Just like that, no reason. I turn around and say, “No thanks.” He pauses, and then when I face the table again he starts right back up. So I say, “That’s enough.” And still, no stopping. He is on some kind of creepy massage mission. So Mindy says, real nice, “Do you mind visiting another table now? He doesn’t want or need a back rub.” Goofy starts digging deeper, and it hurts. I stand up. We bump into one another, my back into his waist. He has a hard on. I can feel it right through the green Goofy pants. This dude is getting off rubbing my shoulders. I am sick. I am about to yell when he walks away.

“Freak,” I say under my breath. Mindy starts talking about going to the pool. She is touching my arm, trying to cool me down. Arnie is chuckling, like this is funny.

“What’s so funny, man?” I ask. He doesn’t answer but now he is bouncing a little in his chair and wheezing as he tries to hold it in. “Seriously...” I say. Mindy stands up, pulling my arm. She says, “Let’s get some air.” I follow her. She

is holding my wrist, tight. I can feel her finger nails digging in a little, like half moons.

We cross in front of the “Hosted by” sign when someone grabs my butt. A fistful. I turn. It’s Goofy. And it happens. I swing straight for the eyes.

I hit Goofy. I punch him right in his plastic nose. Then we roll around on the floor for a few minutes, my fists bouncing off his hard mask like frozen peas flicked at metal. Kids are screaming. Parents are covering their mouths. My wife stands in the center of the room stiff and unmoving like she has wet herself. It is Disney Armageddon.

Daffy pulls me off. Arnie runs over to Goofy. He is checking on Goofy. People are being ushered out, and the head gets pulled off the Goofy costume. Kids keep screaming as they leave because not only was Goofy getting punched, now, he is decapitated.

It’s a girl. Goofy is a thick-haired chubby-faced girl.

“Are you okay?” Arnie asks her. “I’m so sorry,” he says. “It was a joke,” he says, to me. The girl nods her head, but it is clear she was crying inside the head of Goofy. The other characters hover over her. They take off their heads, too, and they all look like martians. Little heads and big cartoon bodies.

I stand next to Mindy and the security guard and Sam, and Arnie is kneeling down next to the girl who seems okay.

“What?” I say.

“It was a joke. I paid her.” He pauses. “I was mad about the thing you said, about the, you know, so I thought I would tease you a little. I never thought...I gave her a wad of napkins...for the boner...it was all in fun...I just...”

“Oh my God. I’m so sorry.” I kneel down to get closer, and she starts scooting back away from me.

“No no no. It’s fine,” she says. “I just want to go now.” And her friends, the other characters, help her to her feet, and they go.

It takes us several hours to clear it all up. I have to go to security, and I am interviewed. And eventually, I am kicked out. No Disney World for ten years. I have been exiled.

As we ride back out of the park on the tram I watch the castle get even smaller out the side window. It looks better from far away, less plastic, no bird poop, or plastic cup lids.

Sam and Arnie are sitting a few seats up in front of us like they don’t even know us like we aren’t even friends. All I can see are the backs of their heads as they whisper. Mindy won’t look at me. I reach for her hand, and she pulls it away.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I got carried away.” I have never hit anyone before in my life.

She turns her head away from me.

“Talk to me,” I say.

“No.”

“I’m ready to start trying. You know, for kids, if that is what you want.” It is a hail-mary and I am not sure if I mean it or not, but I picture the little boy on safari ride, the snot coming out of his nose on one side.

Mindy shifts and looks at me, her body relaxing beside me. Our shoulders touch. “Well, maybe I don’t want kids with you anymore,” she says. But she doesn’t look away and I picture the little boy from Epcot, his blonde hair, his

story at recess, and I know I want to be a hero; I want to tell a story no one can turn away from. I want to watch it all.

ALFRED AND THE MONKEY DREAM

Alfred wondered if it was before or after the elephant stepped on his car that he had noticed his dead sister Elena hanging from a tree like a monkey. He was attempting to detail the events of this dream to his wife and for some reason this sequence of time seemed important.

“It was after,” he said. “Yes, right after the elephant crushed the engine of my car that I noticed Elena. She was hanging there, from a tree, like it was a game. It was disturbing, seeing her like that.”

“I’m sure it was,” Christy said, without looking up from the stove. “I can’t even imagine.” She flipped an odd-shaped pancake. “Will you live?” She finally looked over her shoulder at Alfred, one hand on her hip, the spatula flopping over the pan.

“Honey, I’m serious,” Alfred said.

“So am I. Get the plates, it’s almost ready.”

“On it. But, it’s just strange. Elena has been dead almost fifteen years.”

“Alfred, your dream included an elephant, a giant hot dog plane, two women sewn together at the feet, a skyscraper made out of lipstick, and you’re worried about seeing your sister? To me, that seems like one of the only normal aspects of your dream.”

“The lipstick skyscraper was so real.”

“Plates. Now.”

“Okay. Okay.”

Elena had died at forty-five in a kitchen fire at the fine dining restaurant she and her husband Mark owned. Alfred had never been close with Elena, but after her death he felt he had missed out on something important. She was his only sibling, which he regretted deeply, particularly after reading the book *Cheaper by the Dozen*, a story set around a family of fourteen. He longed for bunches of brothers and sisters. In his youth he started a rock family on the window ledge of his room, fourteen total. The mother and father were large dark gray rocks, named Sue and Emanuel after his own parents. The twelve children were speckled pebbles, ranging in size from half dollars to dimes depending on hypothetical age. He named one rock, quarter size, a middle child, after himself, but he did not name any of his rock-sisters Elena. The rock family sat down to dinner at a table that stretched the full length of the house, six children on each side, mother and father at each end, their dog Rusty crawling under the table looking for scraps. Dinners were loud. One or more of the children would tell jokes or stories from school. Alfred, one of the funniest children, was always asked to do impressions of a teacher or family friend. He would puff out his chest, point his nose to the air, and say in a high voice, "Children are dirty little creatures, aren't they?" mimicking Mrs. Learner their next door neighbor. He imagined the rock family doubling over in their seats with laughter.

At dinners in his childhood home they did not tell jokes. They ate every evening at five-thirty, exactly thirty minutes after his father arrived home from work. They said grace and no one could start eating until his father took a sip of water and lifted his fork or spoon to eat. And the conversation would go something like this:

“The meatloaf is very good, Sue.”

“Thank you. I am glad you are enjoying it. Alfred, eat your corn.”

“Yes, mother.”

And then silence.

Alfred longed for rock family dinners.

In his own kitchen, now, Christy had dished up three disfigured pancakes each, and she was smothering hers in syrup.

“You don’t find it the least bit odd that Elena was in my dream?”

“No,” said Christy. “Not really.” She glanced up at him squinting a little.

“Why is it bothering you so much?”

“No reason. It’s all just a little silly, I suppose. Hot dog planes. God, that would be great.”

Christy laughed now, her lips slick and shiny from syrup. He felt lucky. She was more than he had ever hoped for.

They had met in college under a blinking sign that said Beer Guns Cigarettes. It happened on a Monday night when he had been walking home from the university library. She was riding her bicycle, weaving a bit, a little drunk as she came up next to him, a left hand pass, and somehow lost control and the bike was pulled by gravity to the ground, on top of Alfred.

Christy had laughed high squeaky bubbles of laughter. “Oh my God,” she said, still lying on top of him, the bike too. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s quite all right,” he said. “But do you mind standing up and lifting your bike off me?”

“Oh...of course of course.” She fumbled to find her footing and got her shoe stuck in the spokes of the bike and fell back down on top of him.

“Ouch,” he yelled, more shocked than hurt.

From her new position their faces were almost nose to nose. “I’m so sorry. Really. Goodness,” she said. But she did not try to stand. Instead she leaned forward and kissed him. It was a soft kiss, a moment Alfred would play over and over in his head for months afterwards.

As Christy slowly pulled away from his mouth she said, “You have beautiful lips, really. They’re quite stunning.” And the two lay on the sidewalk a tangle of legs and arms and handle bars and bike tires. Christy’s soft blonde curls blew around her face like a halo. Even though the cold grains of concrete prickled under his back, he wished for the moment to never end. He wanted to feel the weight of this woman and her bike forever.

Christy was now plopping the dishes into the sink, sticky plates and forks and left over bits of half-eaten pancakes. “I’ve got to run,” she said. “I’ll get the dishes when I get home. Love you bunches.” She kissed him on the top of his head, on his nose, and finally on his lips.

“One more,” he said. And she turned back, smiling, and gave him a long, messy kiss on the lips. “Your teeth, did you brush them?” he asked.

“Fiddlesticks,” she said. Leaving the back door open, she ran up the stairs, the pounding of her snow boots echoing. Cold gusts of wind crept up the legs of Alfred’s pants. As she rounded the bend back into the kitchen she tossed her tooth brush into her purse. “I’ll get to it at work,” she said smiling.

When they were first married Alfred had been horrified when she had done things like that, tossing a tooth brush into her purse with pens and wallets and stray hairs, but now he just shook his head and said, “Love you too.” And she was out the door, off to teach pottery at the Arts Center. Christy had been there for the last ten years, ever since she closed her retail pottery studio. Teaching allowed her to do what she loved without having to manage the books and think about inventory.

As Alfred moved to the sink to do the dishes, he knew Christy would let them sit for days if he let her, his thoughts returned to Elena. What had been so strange about the dream was seeing her swinging from the tree, playing. Alfred was not sure he ever remembered Elena playing, or for that matter smiling, but in his dream her mouth was open and pulled back in the way people look when they laugh. It just didn't fit. Her tastes, even as a child, had been sophisticated and stuffy. She liked tea, preferred classic literature, and thin button up sweaters. She understood the importance of coasters when Alfred was still in diapers.

As an adult Elena and her husband's home had been a wash of light browns and neutral colors. They had cats, no children, and kept the lights on dim, even in the evening. At meals there was only enough food for one helping, and dessert was always dry.

Alfred brought Christy, his then girlfriend, home for the first time at Thanksgiving. She had seemed too big for the room, the house, the world. She had worn a bright pink sweater and tight jeans and huge purple and green peacock feather earrings. She brought Elena a set of four pottery mugs, as a thank

you. The mugs were oversized and textured with sharp geometric lines and glazed in a pattern of light blue and white.

“Well, thank you, Christy. That was very thoughtful,” she said, setting the box on the kitchen counter, the mug handles peeking out from under the tissue paper like bright Easter eggs. “Very nice,” she said, patting Christy on the arm and turning a side-long glance at Alfred.

Later, in the kitchen while Christy and Mark talked in the living room, Elena said to Alfred, “What have you gotten yourself into?”

Alfred shrugged his shoulders, already sure that she was the woman he would marry.

He hurried now to stack the pancake plates and grab his briefcase; he was cutting it close. He liked to arrive at the library a few minutes early, before the doors opened to students, when the reference section was his and his alone.

He had been a librarian at the university since he graduated thirty years ago, and he still looked forward to the swell of student requests during finals. He had grown accustomed to the pursed lips of students, lost in the rows of call numbers. When he appeared from behind a stack they would say, “Can you tell me,” or “Thank God you’re here,” his favorite. Often they were close, within a few rows or stacks, but sometimes, they were so bewildered that they did not even know where to begin. He liked to work with those kids. He would draw them over to a table and help them develop a plan, a rough outline of resources, questions to consider, and journals to find online. Sometimes at the start of a new semester one students would come back, rush to the desk, and proclaim they had gotten A’s or passed, and say they could not have done it without him. And as they

walked away he imagined they were his children. His son, his daughter. He could see himself posting their grade cards on the fridge, answering their panicked phone calls about how to do laundry or make grilled cheese. But then they would tuck behind the doorway of the stairs or the elevator and be gone.

The roads were worse than he had guessed, and he had a hard time finding a spot in the library parking lot. Snow was heaped up along the sidewalks. His toes were damp and chilled by the time he reached his office. The student worker had already left a post-it note on his door, Call Mark. His brother-in-law had never called him at the office before. Alfred thought of the dream. He wondered if Elena had come to haunt them, if she was trying to send some kind of message from the grave. But that would have been too out of character for Elena. She would have said, "That is so impolite. If you're dead, you're dead. The living have matters to attend to."

At his desk Alfred called Mark, but no one answered.

Alfred packed up his briefcase and headed for the car at lunch time. On Fridays Alfred and Christy met for lunch at a local deli. He was excited to tell her about a new grant that had just been approved. He would be able to expand the library's archives on local history, a project he had been working on for two years.

When he arrived Christy was already at their table, and she had ordered for both of them. Alfred kissed his wife on the cheek and sat across from her on the scuffed wooden chair.

"How was your morning?" he started.

"You won't believe it. Zane finally did it! He got the clay to stick in center on the first throw. It was incredible." She was glowing, her cheeks and nose still

red from the cold, her hair frizzed and curled around her face, softening the edges of her jaw.

Zane was a student in the special needs class she ran on Friday mornings, her favorite. She taught the class in the fall, winter, and summer, and in every class there was a Zane, some boy or girl that Christy would fall for, knee-deep-in-mud kind of love. Alfred had met him once. He had stopped by to drop off Christy's lunch, and she was at the wheel curled around the back of a young boy with dark hair and mint green eyes, guiding his hands around the slick wet surface of the clay. He was thin and pale and almost never talked. Christy said that he would stand next to her at the end of class when she was making announcements and slowly, without looking at her, link his clay covered fingers with hers.

Alfred and Christy had wanted children, desperately. They dreamed in double bunk beds and bulk diapers and piles of brightly colored sneakers by the back door. But it had not gone as planned. It started out with miscarriages. Four. And then nothing. Weeks and months and years of trying and her peeing on tiny plastic wands that kept saying no. They tried doctors and special positions and unique diets and injections, but nothing worked.

The food arrived. Two half sandwiches and two soups.

"It's winter. I figured soup," said Christy.

"Good choice," said Alfred. He told her about the grant. He outlined things he would buy, how they would be stored and catalogued and used. She slurped soup and watched his hands wisp out in front of him.

"What do you think?" he asked.

“You’re amazing,” she said. He looked back at her puzzled. “No really,” she said. “You are. Look at you. Getting all hot under the collar about books and teaching and learning.” She wrinkled her nose at him in a fuzzy-bunny sort of way. “Anyway,” she continued. “I think I figured out the dream.”

“Really?” He was surprised she had even continued to think about it.

“Yes.” A bit of soup lingered in the corner of her mouth.

“Well?”

“It’s her birthday.”

“What?”

“Tomorrow is Elena’s birthday. You’re always so good about remembering the day she died, but you know we haven’t thought about her birthday in years. And, it’s tomorrow.”

“How could I have forgotten?” he said.

“Time. Life. Your adorable wife.”

He smiled again. “Mark called today.”

“Really? What did he want?” Christy asked.

“Not sure. I called back. No answer.”

“Strange.”

“I know, right?”

“Maybe it is a sign,” Christy said, sliding her boot under the table and nudging his foot.

“Come on. Be realistic.”

“I’m just saying,” she said, leaning back in her chair putting her arms behind her head, like she was getting ready for a nap. “Just think about it.”

Back at the office there was another post-it note stuck to the door. Mark called, again. Still in his winter coat and hat Alfred dialed Mark back. On the second ring he picked up.

“Hello.”

“Mark?”

“Yes, this is he.”

“It’s Alfred.”

“Alfred. Great to hear from you. Sorry to call twice in one day, it’s just, well. I wanted to talk. I’ve been meaning to call. But you know things get busy.”

Here it comes, thought Alfred. He has had a dream, too. Elena has come back to haunt us. Alfred drummed his fingers along the edge of the desk, waiting.

“Well, there isn’t any way to say it so I’m just going to say it. I’m getting married. Remarried that is.”

The line was silent. Alfred stopped drumming his fingers and sat down in the chair behind him.

“Remarried. Really? When?”

“End of the month.”

“Wow. So soon,” Alfred said.

“Carol, her name is Carol. We’ve been dating two years, and been engaged for the last eight months. I meant to call sooner. I just, well, didn’t.”

Alfred fumbled with the zipper of his coat, pulling his gloves from his pocket and stacking them up in front of him on the desk. “Congratulations. Of course. How rude of me. This is wonderful,” Alfred said.

“Carol and I are trying to live in the now. Really start a new life together. So we decided not to invite anyone, from, well, Elena’s side. You understand, right? We want a clean slate.”

“Of course,” Alfred said. He wasn’t hurt. In fact he would have felt more awkward if Mark had invited him. “Wonderful news. Congratulations again.”

Alfred sat, like a child, half in and half out of his winter clothes, warm and disheveled. It should not have been a surprise that Mark was moving on. It had been fifteen years. Most people, these days, moved on much sooner than that, but it still seemed strange, like the past had been unearthed and set in motion when the elephant stepped on the car.

Alfred was late getting home and the kitchen light was already on. Christy’s boot tracks made a zigzag line from the garage to the mailbox to the back door. In the kitchen the oven was on. He could smell the heavy scent of sugar and eggs.

“What are you making?” he asked, the cold wind smacking the pictures hung on the fridge before he shut the outside door.

“A cake,” Christy said, flour splattered on her yellow shirt and a streak wiped across her forehead. “For the party.”

“What party?” Alfred asked.

“The birthday party. For Elena. I invited the kids from my Friday morning pottery class. I told them it was a birthday party for a monkey named Elena that liked to swing from the trees.” She winked. “They’re thrilled.”

Alfred sat down at the table, still wearing his boots and his hat and his gloves. “Mark’s getting remarried.”

“What? Really?” said Christy.

“That’s why he called. To tell me, us. End of the month.”

“So soon.”

“They’ve been dating two years. Carol. Engaged eight months.”

“Oh,” said Christy. She walked over to Alfred now, squatting down, below his face, looking up at him. She put both hands on his cheeks, still smudged in flour. “It’s time.”

“I know.”

“And tomorrow we will celebrate her. Happy thoughts. Kids. Cake. Candles. I promised Zane he could help blow them out.”

Alfred smiled and playfully licked Christy’s lips. “You taste like flour.”

“You devil,” she said, pushing him gently in the chest. “We’re having hotdogs,” she said.

The kids arrived at eleven with glossy smiles. Four of them, Zane, a young girl, and two other boys. They wrapped and unwrapped themselves around Christy as if to link and unlink a chain. Christy decorated the family room with leftovers from other parties that had been stored in the basement. Blue and yellow and green streamers and red and pink balloons and a few black, over-the-hill balloons. The first activity was a dance party. She put on oldies, and they danced around the sofa and the chairs and the balloons. Alfred spun a little girl in so many circle that he stopped, worried she might be sick, but she just giggled, long strands of hiccup-giggles. Christy taught Zane and the other boys the swimmer dance. They held their noses and wiggled down, shaking like they were

being tickled. Christy smiled over the heads of the kids and mouthed, I love you. Alfred bounced to the beats and thought about how much Elena would have hated this kind of birthday party, the colors and the noise and the kids. She would have hated it all.

After the dance party they had homemade macaroni and cheese. The cheese stuck to the roof of Alfred's mouth. He jumped up between bites to pour more milk and get extra napkins. Zane sat next to him tapping out imaginary beats on the edge of the table. Alfred patted his head. Christy moved around the kitchen table, checking on each child. Her ponytail was loose. Thin strands had fallen out and down the back of her neck. Her shirt was stretched and baggy from the hands that had been grabbing at it all day. Near the back door there were a pile of bright Velcro shoes, stacked haphazardly, and mixed up. Alfred remembered the way he and Christy used to talk in the dark at night, even after the first miscarriage, about what books their kids would read. He had argued for the classics. Fairytales and legends. Christy said those stories were too boxed in, too traditional. She wanted their kids to dream and imagine. In the heat of the darkness she had leaned close, poked him in the side, just above the hip and said, "I want our kids to fly."

Before they had even fully cleared the table Christy was carrying in dessert. It was shaped like a monkey. The kids' oooed and ahhed. A monkey cake, it was something. She placed it in front of Zane and Alfred. Zane was staring up at her and reached for her hand. They interlaced. The candles burned and everyone began to sing. "Happy Birthday, dear Elena," and one of the kids shouted, "the monkey!"

“Make a wish, Zane,” Alfred said. And as Zane sucked in a thick breath of air Alfred wished for Christy, to hold her forever, as he always did, every birthday since their first kiss. And then he thought of Elena. He had called her right after the first miscarriage, wanting something, needing something. He was crying, soft quiet tears, trying not to wake Christy, who had finally fallen asleep on the couch in the family room after they returned from the hospital. His parents were both dead; she was his only family. He told her in quick bursts. Words and phrases linked together, a hopscotch of emotion and fact. He could hear her breathing deeply on the other side of the phone. After he finished the silence mounted. Finally, Elena said, “Maybe it’s for the best.” Alfred hung up.

In front of Zane and Alfred the candles smoked, thin wisps floating in the air, and the other children clapped and reached for plates and forks, eager for a piece of cake. Christy hunched over Alfred’s shoulder with a knife, ready to cut into the monkey, but before she could, he stuffed his whole hand into the cake, pulling out icing and chunks of chocolate, and smashed it to her mouth, smearing it across her nose and left cheek. The children on either side pulled their hands into their laps, dropping the plates and forks to the table, their eyes widened, quiet. The monkey was mutilated. Its belly ripped open with a spray of crumbs across the face. But before Alfred had time to consider what he had done, Christy ran her finger tips across the chocolate icing and reached for his face. He licked his tongue out at her fingers like a baby. She squealed, pulling her hand back, laughing, and the kids unclenched their folded hands, clapping and shrieking as mushy chunks of cake flopped from Christy’s face to his lap.

Alfred leaned in close to her ear frosting still streaked across her face like paint, and said, “I know what the dream meant.” He could feel the heat from her body beside him. “It meant old dogs can learn new tricks.” Christy smirked, a pressed lipped smile, and said, “You’re full of it.” And Alfred thought, for a brief moment, that maybe Elena had been right. Perhaps, it had been for the best after all.

Christy kissed his neck and reached with her frosting covered hand for his, linking their fingers together, about to squeeze, but Alfred beat her to it. He tugged her palm towards his own, chunks of frosting oozing out around their hands like marshmallow, linking them finger tip to knuckle, skin to skin, like they were sewn together.

TOUR JETÉ

The ballet store was sandwiched between a dry cleaners and a pawn shop, its front glass windows rippling with pink tutus, too bright and happy and childish to be where Maggie was walking from her car. She was beginning to regret this idea. She was beginning to regret the whole thing.

Inside, a teenage girl stood behind the counter and looked as though she were ready to slip out of her pink pointe shoe T-shirt and her black stretch pants and move directly into a ballet practice room. Her brown hair was pulled back into a thick bun, and her eyes were slanted out at the corners from the intensity of the tug that held her hair in place. Her body made Maggie want to vomit.

“Hi, I’m looking for some tights, a leotard or two, and a new pair of ballet shoes,” Maggie said.

“Sure, of course. Adult sizes are this way,” the girl said as she slipped from behind the counter. The girl zigzagged her narrow hips between the rows of pink and black and other splashes of bright, tiny clothing while Maggie plodded behind, her elbow bumping into a rack and sending up a clattering sound, like the plastic-on-plastic of silverware at cheap restaurants. They stopped in the back of the store where there was a small white sign that read “adult sizes” and three sparse racks of seemingly jumbo-sized examples of what they had just passed through.

“Here we are,” the girl said with a clean, straight smile. “Do you want to try some things on and then I can help you with shoes?”

“Right,” Maggie said, forcing a smile of her own. “Thanks.”

Maggie was not fat, but she was not thin in the way she used to be. And she had reached the point in her life when she looked strikingly better with her clothes on than off. Bikinis were not on her shopping list, and skinny jeans had not even been a consideration when they began appearing at the mall in the fall.

Now alone in the back of the store, she helplessly looked through the racks and pulled off one wide strapped black leotard and one with capped sleeves, and finally, one that came down to her elbows. The tights were in packets, and she pulled down two different sizes, unsure which would fit best. She cradled them in her arms, hesitant, as if they were breakable. Before entering the dressing room, she noticed a small rack of wrap skirts and grabbed two, one light pink and the other with a bold mix of green and blue splashed across it. They were the kind of skirts she had once begged her mother for in hopes of looking like the older dancers and to feel sheer fabric gently twisting with her body as she moved. As a girl, she had a purple one with gracefully rippling edges and a black satin ribbon that tied at her hip bone. It was a gift on her eighth birthday, and she had spent days *pirouetting* around the house with it on. She would slip it on over her jeans when she got home from school and twist in slick motions across the living room, into the kitchen, and out the back door as her mother yelled at her to get her homework done first. She would spin, breathless, for hours.

Maggie had signed up for adult ballet classes twice a week, Tuesday and Thursday, for an hour and a half with Ms. Bev Hillman. It had been a New Year's resolution, made hours into martinis and cheap champagne, in a dress that she was sure made her thighs look huge, but it had been bought, and therefore, would be worn. In that dress she declared that she was once a ballerina, and provoked

by her friends, she asserted that she could still dance and would prove it, fat thighs and all.

The statement had been a protest of sorts, a way of saying without saying that she could still do or be anything she wanted. A fist shake at her friend, who said, “You won’t do it,” while laughing. It had taken her two and a half months to make time to go to the Arts Center, where, upon seeing a woman she knew from work with her small daughter dressed in thin pink tights and a stretching black leotard, she had instantly turned and left without signing up. Three weeks after this attempt she went back, filled out the forms, signed on the line, and paid with a check.

Now, in the poorly lit dressing room, Maggie slipped off her tall black-heeled boots and the gray dress pants she had worn to work, revealing her soft blue underwear and unshaved bikini line. She pulled the lightweight red turtleneck over her head, and her hair stuck out with static as she folded her clothes on the tiny corner seat of the dressing room. Looking in the full length mirror, she shivered and began opening the packaged tights, goose bumps running down her arms. Scrunching the tights into a bunch, she slid one leg of the tights over her toes and up to her knee, then did the same with the other leg. As she pulled she traced a light blue vein up her left leg, almost hoping to feel the blood pulsing within, but she didn’t. She continued to stretch the tights up over her thighs and her underwear and finally to her belly button. They fit. Without looking up, she pulled the thick-strapped leotard on, one foot, then the next, and finally she tucked both arms through the openings and stood up, dressed for class. It was not as bad as she had expected.

She turned slightly to check out her butt and realized it wasn't too bad either. The leotard had full coverage in both the butt area and in her bust, and the tightness of both pieces of clothing seemed to suck in the flesh that they covered. She looked shapely and curved, like old paintings of full-figured women. She smiled. Bolstered by this thought, she stepped out from behind the curtain into the main part of the store to see herself in better lighting. As she stepped out, the girl rounded the corner.

“Looks nice,” she said casually, hardly glancing up. Nice, Maggie thought, nice? She quickly stepped back behind the protective curtain and began pulling off the outfit, struggling to get her own back on, quickly. Enraged and embarrassed, she thought how “nice” was what you said to a co-worker with a bad hair cut that you would later make fun of. “Nice” was what you said to your boyfriend or husband when you really hated what he had on. A casual “looks nice” was what you said to your sister when she tried something on that made her look fat, really fat.

Maggie imagined what it would be like to charge out of the dressing room and pile-drive the thin brat who did not need to glance at adult sizes and ate ice cream without worry and who men would soon, or already did, fantasize about undressing. Maggie had at least sixty pounds on the girl, and she could only imagine the surprise and shock on the police officers' faces when they arrived to find the young protégé ballet clerk pancaked to the floor with Maggie face down on top of her, laughing.

Instead, she emerged with the three leotards, one pair of tights, and the two skirts, most of which she hadn't tried on.

“I’ll take all of this and one more pair of tights, just like these.” As she spoke Maggie held out the half-open package for the girl, her arm stiff, without a smile.

“Sure. I’ll put these at the counter and meet you in the shoes.” The girl was un-phased, without knowledge of the vision Maggie wished to enact on her.

Maggie walked into the shoe section, where the faintly familiar smell of new ballet shoes, heavy with the aroma of leather, curled the edges of her lips up. As a child she had loved this smell. She had loved the clean pink look, still stiff from the box, and she would hold the new shoes to her nose, taking deep breaths. It had annoyed her mother how all the way home in the car she would cradle the shoes close to her nose without talking, the only sound her deep rhythmic breathing.

Her mother was not a “girly-girl” and had at first resisted Maggie’s pleas to take ballet. It started in kindergarten, when her class, along with the rest of the school, had watched wide-eyed as a local dance company presented a short excerpt of the Nutcracker on the small school stage to encourage them to watch the actual production taking place at the theater later that month. The ease and the grace of the dancers’ limbs had entranced Maggie. The way men lifted elegantly tutued women into the air and the way they danced on the tips of their toes had all seemed magical, like an alien world made of puffy white cotton balls, sugar-coated finger tips, and singing green frogs.

Maggie had begged for months. She would stand behind her mother in the kitchen twirling and saying, “Look at me, look at me, I’m a dancer” for hours. And finally, in first grade her mother agreed, and Maggie took her first class, creative

movement. She had been so small her tights hung loose at her knees and her arms seemed only able to bend stiffly, like a plastic Barbie doll, but she was in love. She loved the rhythmic count of exercises at the bar where they did *pliés* and *relevés*, and at home she dutifully practiced first, second, third, fourth, and fifth position. She was not a star by any means, ever. But in this first class, despite her sometimes faulty technique, on the last day, when parents came to watch, Maggie was sure that most could not help but notice the thin, pale, dark-haired girl in the back left corner who moved ungracefully and sometimes awkwardly. Even with her fumbled positions and not quite straight legs and arms she seemed to float, as if lifted by the armpits. Maggie was swept along with the other dancers, and there was something about this that she was sure was tragically appealing.

In the store Maggie tried on several styles of ballet slippers before finally deciding on a pair, remarkably similar to the last she had owned when she quit dance in eighth grade. The canvas shoes were light pink, almost-white and split soled. Maggie had forgotten how tight ballet shoes felt at first, and how much she liked the way the tightness bound her feet inside.

After she checked out, Maggie wandered back to the shoe section to quickly run her fingers over the glossy pointe shoes. She was more relaxed now that her items had been purchased and felt almost childish for her earlier thoughts about the girl who was a naïve teenager and nothing more.

She lingered, touching and holding a creamy peach pair of pointe shoes. She remembered the curling pain of rising onto her toes for the first time, and the exhilaration when she had finally broken in her first pair of shoes enough to roll

over onto the very tips of her toes. How she had stood as a young girl on her toes looking into the mirror at the beautiful arch her own feet had made, the same one she had fallen in love with the first time she saw ballet on that small school stage. She stood, wasting minutes, smelling the thick leather. Now Maggie held the peach shoe in her hand and rose into the balls of her feet, heels slightly touching, like she was practicing a *relevé* for the first time in her life. She stood looking in the mirror, raised on the balls of her feet, enjoying the rush of pressure that streaked down each bone of her toes. *Relevé. Relevé.*

Maggie had quit in eighth grade because she realized, startlingly, that she was not going to be able to be a ballet dancer for the rest of her life. It was her mother's fault.

She had been practicing for the upcoming production of *Hansel and Gretel* for about six weeks when it happened. She was sitting on the floor of the kitchen, mending her bleeding toes, bent from hours in pointe shoes, while her mother cooked dinner.

"Maggie, please go into the bathroom to do that. I'm preparing food. We don't need feet and blood in the mix here," her mother said with her back to Maggie as she stirred soup on the stove, steam rising and wafting in the air around her head.

Maggie was removing, cleaning, and replacing band aids on eight of her ten toes. "Just a minute," she replied.

"No minute, now."

"Hold on, geez."

“Maggie Elizabeth Rickles, when I ask you to do something, you do it. No questions, no griping. Go.” Her mother had turned now to face Maggie with her hands on her hips, her graying brown hair curling at the edges from the heat and moisture of the steam. The words came out gruff and almost in a bark. Orders. Maggie glanced up and rolled her eyes, not moving. Her mother leaned down now, closer to Maggie’s face and bloody toes. “It’s gross, Maggie. And it’s such a waste of good feet. You know they’re ruined, don’t you? You know you’ll be embarrassed to wear sandals some day. You know it’s childish, don’t you, to hold onto something like this? Do you think you’re going to be a dancer, a professional? Don’t kid yourself.” Her words stung, sharp and steady, like someone slowly placing rocks on her bleeding toes.

“I hate you,” Maggie yelled, running from the kitchen to her bedroom, drops of blood smeared sporadically, without pattern, between where her mother still stood and the closed wall of her own door.

“Maggie,” her mother called. “Maggie, don’t overreact, someone needs to be realistic with you. Come out here. There’s blood. Maggie.”

Maggie skipped dinner, and *Hansel and Gretel* was the last show she ever danced in.

Maggie was dressed and ready to go half an hour before her first ballet class even started. At home she put her hair in a bun, took it out, and redid it four times. She had not used hair pins, the dancer’s supped-up bobby pin, in years, and they felt thin, flexible, and awkward in her fingers. Her first bun was too loose, hair kept slipping down, wisps sweeping in front of her eyes. The second

time it was too tight. The pins pinched her scalp, and she could feel a headache brewing. Try three was again too tight and her eyes watered. On the fourth try, she turned away from the mirror and let her hands and wandering fingers pull and twist blindly, smoothly tucking the ponytail into a ball, circling and circling like a dog finding just the right position to sleep.

Before she left the house, she pulled soft blue sweat pants over her tights and zipped a gray hoodie on over her black leotard, capped sleeves, modest but still showing her elbows. She took a small gym bag, water, her purse, and the almost-white ballet shoes. In the car she listened to hard rap, which oddly calmed her, harsh lines about hot women and popping beats that she tapped out on the steering wheel. She only listened to rap with the windows up, alone. It was like people that secretly watched and loved Montel and Jerry Springer, quietly in hiding.

She parked in the back of the Art Center and took the stairs to the third floor. She could already hear people talking inside the room, and the lights were on, bright and stark against the white walls and gray, scuffed floor. She walked in and set her bag along the wall with several others. Even before glancing around, she pulled off the extra clothes, slipped out of her street shoes and slid on her ballet shoes. Ready for class, she turned to face the room. Two of the walls had bars, and two had floor-to-ceiling mirrors, much like classrooms of her youth. At a stereo in the corner stood a medium height woman in a full sleeve leotard, her course black hair, streaked with white. Maggie was sure she must be Ms. Bev Hillman. At the bar already were two other women, both older than Maggie, with bodies rumped and rolling, like milky cottage cheese. Maggie smiled at them,

they smiled back, and she moved to a position closest to Ms. Hillman at the bar. Two more women arrived together, chatting, clearly friends, older than Maggie but not by much. She guessed they were mothers from the way they jingled so many sets of keys and talked wildly with their hands and seemed relaxed in a way that meant they had just left a wilder world and this, this was their time away.

Ms. Hillman turned and faced the room. “Welcome. Welcome. I’m Bev. I’ll be your instructor Tuesday and Thursday for the next eight weeks. I look forward to sweating and laughing and dancing with all of you. I prefer to keep it casual for these types of classes, so feel free to ask questions or interject at any time.” She paused and then continued. “We’ll start with bar exercises and move to the floor for the end of the class period. Let’s do a quick introduction and then get started, shall we, ladies?”

The room hummed with their voices, and Maggie sized up each woman by her body. Ms. Hillman had the walk of a dancer. She was lean. The muscles in her calves still rippled as she walked, and her posture was perfect. Back straight, toes out. A dancer. She had soft wrinkles on her face and moved with grace and ease, but Maggie also noticed that her movements were a little slow, a bit stiff, and deliberate; they reminded her of her mother’s arthritis, and the way her mother now moved through the garden, missing the brisk steps that had once propelled her across the yard from her rhododendrons to the weeping cherry.

The women who entered together were indeed friends and mothers, three each. They had lean legs but bulged in the middle, thickened layers like appetizers wrapped in bacon, and their arms jiggled when they talked with their hands, which was often. The older women, Bea and Evelyn, did not know each

other, but both had been taking classes at the center for a few years. Bea talked quietly and her wedding ring sparkled when she covered her mouth to yawn. Maggie kept thinking cottage cheese, cottage cheese. Evelyn was loud and bright eyed, with wide thighs, a thick waist, and sprawling breasts. Maggie was sure she had not seen anything in the adult sizes that would have stretched across Evelyn.

Just after Maggie had introduced herself, a tall, thin, white-faced, pale-blond girl walked in. “Sorry I’m late, Bev, I got stuck in construction on Park Street,” she said, boldly. Her lips were narrow and her legs seemed almost invisibly thin to Maggie. She had no hips and no breasts and her spaghetti-strapped leotard seemed to cling desperately to her collar bone. Ms. Hillman turned to the rest of the women. “This is Jasmine. She’s in the company at the Art Center and one of our leading young dancers. She wanted some extra time to practice in the evening so she signed up for this class as well as her regular classes. I assured her you all wouldn’t mind.” Maggie minded. She minded very much. Jasmine, what kind of name was that? Was she a spice? A Disney movie character?

Ms. Hillman demonstrated the first series of *pliés* they would be doing at the bar in first position, heels clicked together, like soldiers, and arms moving from front to the side to over their heads. It was simple and basic. Maggie pulled her own heels together as the music started, struggling as she always had to keep them turned out, like a duck. Her teachers as a youth had always told her to turn out from the hips, rotate the muscles there to achieve the ideal first position, but tonight all Maggie could do was attempt to push her ankles forward and cling to

the bar, gripping it with tight sweaty fingers so she did not fall forward with the pressure of her own force.

Maggie could see Jasmine in the mirror. Jasmine's turnout was perfect, heels touching with ease, deep bending *pliés*, yet her heels did not lift off of the ground, perfect form. Her arms moved smoothly with the flow of the music and the count of the *pliés*. Maggie was disgusted.

Throughout the bar exercises Maggie followed Jasmine's movements in the mirror. Occasionally she would glimpse the flopping arms of the mothers or the low hanging legs of Bea and Evelyn, but mostly she watched Jasmine. Maggie would, occasionally, glance at her own body, arms moving in time but with wrists held too tight, making the movements look stiffer than they felt. And her legs held mostly straight, but not as straight as Jasmine's. From the side Maggie's body was upright, with shoulders back, a soft bump of a butt and breasts that did not hang, in which Maggie took solace.

At a break half way through class, the women and Jasmine sipped water and small talked. The mothers crowded around Jasmine.

"You're wonderful. Oh, to have a body like yours again."

"You said it. I'd kill for that kind of body again."

"Kids. Kids do you in."

"Sure do, but you, you're just lovely."

Jasmine smiled politely and blushed a little when one of the mothers tapped her on the tush and said, "God, that's firm. Like steak." And the mothers laughed and waved their arms and smiled at each other. Jasmine moved slowly towards Maggie. "Have you danced before?" she asked, looking right at her.

“Yeah, as a kid.”

“I can tell,” said Jasmine. “You have good form.”

“Thanks.” Maggie felt awkward, like being complimented on something you knew you weren’t that good at by someone who did it for a living.

“Did you dance here?”

“No, in Columbus. A small studio. I was on pointe though. Partner danced a few times too.” Maggie had the urge to brag. “Everyone said I was good. I could have made a career out of it, but you know, life happens, you get realistic.”

Jasmine squirmed a little at the last part, and Maggie almost wanted to take it back, but didn’t.

“Cool.” Jasmine said. “I take a partner class on Mondays. You should stop by sometime. Show off the old moves.” Jasmine’s tone had not changed, and Maggie wasn’t sure if “old moves” was a joke or an insult. She felt her body gripping at the air, ready to pounce on nothing.

“Definitely.”

When class moved to the floor, Ms. Hillman had Jasmine demonstrate everything, and Maggie resented watching her feet staccato perfectly to the music while doing a *pas de bourrée* and how Jasmine’s legs swung out like clicking hinges for leaps, spreading into a long clean line.

By the end of class, Maggie was wet and tired and knew she was going to be sore the next day. Her muscles were already twitching and tingling, taut from stretching in ways that they had not for so long. The mothers were leaning on one another saying, “Damn, Bev, what a workout.”

“I swear if this doesn’t tighten up my ass, nothing will.”

Bea was sweating mostly above her lip, like a sweat mustache, and smiled as the mothers moaned when bending over to put on their street shoes. Evelyn had her arm around Ms. Hillman's waist and was talking about her bridge club. And Jasmine looked untouched. Her hair was still softly swept back in a bun and her long limbs seemed to glide across the floor to the corner where her bag was. In street shoes, tennis shoes, she looked funny. She was too graceful for shoes that weighed so much. Maggie thanked Ms. Hillman and walked down the stairs and out to her car without looking back at the women and Jasmine still getting ready to go out into the now-darkened night.

Jasmine made Maggie angry. She had even thought about ways to get her out of the class. Like looking up the term "adult" and presenting a complaint to the Art Center because Jasmine broke the terms of the title of the class. Or she would start a rumor that Jasmine had said that Evelyn was fat, and that she should be in aqua-size classes instead of slowing down true dancers. Or Maggie would tell the mothers that Jasmine had insulted all six of their kids in the same sentence. But she didn't do any of these things. Instead she stretched until she hurt in class, and worked to turn out her feet from her hips, and shot quick glances through the mirror at Jasmine's perfect form, and sometimes, she caught Jasmine looking back.

Maggie was sure Jasmine made fun of her to the other girls in the company. She imagined all the young dancers lined up at the bar and Jasmine whispering, "There is this one woman, kind of fat but not really fat, who thinks she is a dancer. She has got to be well over thirty, maybe forty, and she acts like she has still got it. Can you believe it? If I get to be that old and still think I am

allowed to be called a *dancer* take me out back and shoot me, like they do to dried-up race horses.” And then Maggie would picture them laughing. High giggles like ribbons buckling out endlessly into the sky. Maggie was sure that Jasmine said these things.

Tour jeté. Maggie wished after each class that Ms. Hillman would have them practice this move, but she didn't. A *tour jeté*, or thrown turn, was Maggie's favorite dance move. It was taught during floor exercises, and it was what Maggie was best at as a young dancer. It was the first and only time she had been asked to demonstrate for the class.

In the move the dancer begins in an *arabesque*, one leg fully extended behind, with the opposite arm stretched out in front. The dancer then takes two skipping steps backwards, jumps into the air, scissor kicking the legs in a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree turn, then lands facing in the same direction as the starting position. The turn, to be elegant, requires a high springing jump, perfectly straight arms and legs that show extending lines as they twist, and a light landing, soft, as if the move took no effort at all. And Maggie could do it.

After the first day in class as a child when she learned it, Maggie did *tour jetés* everywhere. They could be done in series, one after another after another, and Maggie would jump and spin, two step, and jump and spin again, over and over, in long lines from the car into the mall, down the sidewalk to a friend's, at recess, in her front yard, anywhere with enough space for her to lift off the ground and stretch her legs and arms into extended lines of art. Twirling and twirling, the world whizzing by in muted colors and blurring images.

After weeks of going back and forth Maggie decided to attend the partner class. To show Jasmine or herself or those girls that she imagined laughing at the bar along with Jasmine; to show them something. She wasn't sure what, but something.

So on Monday night she arrived at the Art Center for Jasmine's partnering class. She parked in the back, went up two flights of stairs, stopped in the hallway beside the row of classrooms and listened. Girls talking and men's voices, lots of them. The girls sounded squeaky and far away, like mice crisscrossing on the floor, tiny feet scratching the wood, noses wiggling in place, tails sweeping out behind them. There were fewer men, maybe two or three, and they spoke sparingly, mostly to each other, almost grunting, like cave men. Maggie was frozen there, hovering, just hidden, with her bag over her shoulder and the thick-strapped leotard covered in the gray zip up. Suddenly, Jasmine appeared, walking towards the drinking fountain with her water bottle. Maggie let a breath slip out and Jasmine turned. "Maggie. What a surprise. Cool." She stood out in front of Maggie. "Well, come on in." Maggie followed Jasmine like a child, head down, gripping the strap of her bag. Jasmine sauntered into the group of girls and the men briefly looked up between grunts.

"Everyone, this is Maggie. She used to dance. And she will be joining us tonight."

"Hi," was all Maggie could eke out.

The class started shortly afterwards. First on the bar, warm up. Maggie felt large and stiff in her body so close to all the thin, pale girls, but she knew the

exercises and fell in with the soft counting of the instructor. Next, they warmed up on the floor, the girls moving in spooky unison like they had been sewn together, finger tip to finger tip, toe to toe. Maggie was clearly an outsider, but she seemed to glide across the floor, almost stealing attention from the swarm that moved either one step in front or behind her. Maggie was sure she was actually floating, her almost-white shoes only grazing the top of the tacky floor. She even forgot about Jasmine and was consumed by the music and the steps and the curl of her own toes stretched out at the end of a leap, like the talons of an eagle, sharp and glimmering.

Then they lined up to practice partner work, three lines of girls set-up to the side of each man. Maggie was in the far line closest to the door, and Jasmine was at the top line closest to the windows. The first exercise was a simple straight lift. The girl would bend her knees, pop into a *relevé*, and the man would lift her so her waist was in front of his face. Three girls went before Maggie, bending and popping into the air like wet sponges. Maggie stepped up in front of the man, who was thick armed and clad in black, tight stretch pants, spandex. The instructor counted, and the two other girls, Maggie, and the three men bent and popped. Maggie barely left the ground. It was not so much a pop as a plop. She got back in line. Maggie thought to herself, bend more. You need to jump more. Better timing. You can do this.

She moved slowly up and back in the line, taking her place in front of the spandex man, bending, jumping, and counting. Her movements with the man became more fluid, but it felt strange not seeing his face as she jumped, only his

heavy breathing and the tight grip of his fingers catching on the edges of her ribs. Maggie did not look at Jasmine.

With only fifteen minutes left in class the instructor explained they would be doing a shoulder sit, where the man would lift the girl to his shoulder. Straightforward, but it would be the highest move that they had attempted that night. Maggie watched as the girls in front of her transcended gravity and moved from the floor to the resting spot on the shoulder of the man, like a child being lifted to the shoulders of her father, with ease.

Finally, Maggie stood in front of the man, sweating, wet palmed, and jumped for his shoulder, picturing herself floating, being lightly lifted by the armpits. She did not float. The man groaned, not a soft grunt, but a full blown back-breaking-moan. Maggie panicked. She kicked her feet out, reaching for the floor mid-lift. The man stumbled backwards and Maggie splattered into the mirror, her hands and arms smudging grease and sweat across it, like butter on a baking pan. She looked up into her own face. Her hair was frizzing out in a halo around her. She had red splotches on her cheeks and forehead from heat, and her eyes looked as if someone was threatening her, soft molten layers of fear.

Then Maggie saw Jasmine over her left shoulder. Jasmine's lips were partly open, soft and loose, and her eyes were wide, eyebrows up. Maggie ran, grabbing her bag, still in her ballet shoes, down the front steps, no pants, no coat, and bare arms.

Down the steps and out the front door she kept running, cutting her strides towards the back of the building. She didn't even hear anyone behind her

until she was only yards from her car, then a voice. Jasmine. “Wait. Are you okay?”

Maggie thought about getting into her car and trying to run her over, maybe backing up over her, and then making it look like some kind of terrible accident. She thought about saying nothing and just driving away, leaving it all behind. But instead, she turned.

“What?”

Jasmine was close now, almost within a few feet of Maggie, and she slowed from a run to a walk when Maggie turned. Jasmine was also still in her practice clothes, right down to her pink ballet slippers.

“Are you okay? I mean you just ran.”

“Why’d you follow me? To gloat?”

“Gloat? No. Why would you...? No.”

“You know, it isn’t bad enough that you think you’re perfect. Now you have to try and rub it in. But really someone should be realistic with you. Someone should tell you that you aren’t going to be a professional dancer. Don’t kid yourself.” Maggie spat out the last three words: don’t kid yourself. Jasmine looked surprised, but not angry like Maggie had imagined she would. Maggie had been practicing saying these words to Jasmine since the very first class. But she had never expected to actually say it to her. After each class, Maggie would stand under the drops of water in the shower, wet and angry and tired, and say, “Don’t kid yourself” to the empty bathroom like an authoritative teacher or politician or mother. And now she had said it. But Maggie did not experience the rush of pleasure she had expected. Her words sounded hollow and thin and mean.

KALEIDOSCOPE

Marya had heard the story a million times, God took six days to make the world and on the seventh day he rested, blah blah blah. She thought it was crap. He was God; why did he need to rest? When she said this to her mother after Sunday school, her mother slammed on the brake, seat belt to throat hard, choking her, as cars honked behind them. And then her mother did a left-hand turn into the other lane. Marya was secretly exhilarated, but that wore off as her mother marched her back into the church.

The church was quiet and empty, somehow more ordinary now without the people and candles and choir and minister. Marya watched the tiny specks of dust hang loose in the light streaming in the tall side windows. It reminded her of a kaleidoscope, like the one her friend brought to school right after summer break. One little turn could break the picture and make it new again.

Her mother grabbed her by the arm, jerking her out of the haze of kaleidoscopes and planets of dust. “Don’t move. Don’t blink. And only breathe when you have to,” her mother said as she directed Marya into the middle pew. “Stay,” she said.

Stay. Sit. Beg. This is crap, Marya thought. Then she said it under her breath, her words louder than she had expected in the empty church. She turned over her shoulder, nervous, but her mother was already gone. “Total crap,” she said a little louder.

Up in front Jesus was hanging on a wooden cross. He looked tired and sad, not at all happy to be pinned up like a frog dissection in order to save people. He

had long hair, like in all pictures of Jesus. Her mother would never let her older brother have hair like that. It looked un-kept. She made a mental note to tell Justin this later, to tell him to use the, “Well, Jesus did it,” excuse.

Marya glanced down at her feet. Tennis shoes. At the start of the summer, Marya put on her dress sandals for the first time; they didn’t fit. She had walked into the kitchen Sunday morning with her feet oozing out over the front like gooey marshmallows and said, “Mom, I don’t think these fit anymore.” Her mother had been at the sink, washing breakfast dishes. The dishwasher was broken and had been for months.

“Not now, Marya. Go brush your teeth. We’re going to be late,” her mother said.

“But Mom, my feet. I can’t even buckle them.”

Marya’s mother turned around with her hands on both hips and a sprig of wet hair hanging loose over one eye. “Shit. Oh, sorry, honey. Jiminy Crickets. Take them off. What else have you got?”

“Tennis shoes and boots.”

“Tennis shoes.”

“To church?”

“Just do it.”

Marya had been wearing skirts and dresses and semi-white tennis shoes every Sunday since. It was more than embarrassing.

“Marya,” Minister Samuel’s voice boomed from the back of the church. “Your mother mentioned you might want to talk. I told her to wait in the office.

It's air conditioned. She liked that." He winked at Marya as he slid into the pew next to her. Marya stared at her shoes.

Minister Samuel was nice in a way that made Marya nervous. He patted too many heads and smiled too much. As an adult he always seemed too interested in what kids, like her, had to say. He actually looked at her when she spoke; it was weird. He also did a lot of winking. Her mother said it was because he was filled with the spirit of God. Justin said it was because he was a pervert, a word Marya had to look up in the dictionary for clarification. Pervert: to lead somebody or something away from what is considered good, normal, moral, or proper. Marya was still unsure exactly what her brother was saying, but she leaned toward his answer rather than her mother's. No one was that nice.

Minister Samuel leaned in close to her now, and Marya could smell thick waves of burnt coffee, like her mother drank.

"Do you feel God's love, Marya?" he asked.

Marya wasn't sure. In Sunday school they talked about God's love as something big and warm and all encompassing, but how would that feel? Like a blanket, her mother's hugs, or Justin letting her pick the TV show she wanted to watch? But the thing about love like this was that it wasn't there all the time. Sometimes her mother yelled at her or made her go to her room. And sometimes Justin smacked her on the back or put her in a head lock. Her mother would even said things like, "I'm only doing this because I love you." But sitting alone in her room didn't feel much like love.

"Marya." Minister Samuel nudged her arm. "Do you?" he asked again.

"I don't know," Marya said.

“Do you know that God loves you?”

“I guess,” she said.

“I’d like to tell you a story,” Minister Samuel said.

Not the Jesus on the cross story again, Marya thought. Please.

“Do you know how much God loves you? So much that he sent his only son to earth, to be here, with us.”

Here we go, thought Marya.

Minister Samuel had a voice like syrup, thick and sweet. Marya decided she liked listening to it even when she didn’t really listen to the words. The rhythm and weight were enough. He did not seem like a pervert when he talked, just when he winked. And he talked a lot.

As he spoke about the disciples and Mary and the cross and the tomb, Marya traced the lines of the church. Her eyes followed the thick wooden railings on the balcony up to the beams arching to the center of the ceiling, a maze of angles and lines. She imagined the kaleidoscope again, the colors and shapes of the church shifting before her eyes. She saw Jesus breaking apart and melting into a wall of stained glass, his armless fingers stretching into nothing but colored light. She tried to picture her father, but the only image she could see were the parts of Jesus’ body floating out into waves of blue and green and red.

She could not remember anything about her father. Not his face or his hands or his smell. Justin remembered things, bits and pieces, like the plaid flannel shirt their father used to wear in the winter. Justin said he could still remember how it felt against his cheek. Marya lived on these memories. At night she would sneak across the hall into Justin’s room. She didn’t knock; instead, she

slipped in, announced only by the creak of the door, and she curled up at the foot of his bed, her head tucked on his feet like a pillow. He never said hello or go away. He waited for her to speak first. "Tell me," she would say. "Everything." And he would. In blurring images and smells and moments he would trace out the pictures in his mind. He told her about her parents dancing in the living room while water boiled over on the stove. Justin made her first birthday seem so real that sometimes Marya was sure she remembered it, the Care Bear cake, and her father holding her up at the zoo so she could see the monkeys.

Her mother never talked about him. Her father was a ghost. When she was really little she used to invite him to tea parties in her room. She would sit in the little plastic yellow chairs, filling the tiny pink tea cups with imaginary steaming liquid and ask the imaginary stranger, "Daddy, would you like sugar?"

She had never been to his grave. Her mother went once a month, but Justin and Marya were never allowed to go. Instead they stayed home and watched *Aladdin*, the only movie they owned. They would quote lines from it while they ate dinner and brushed their teeth and when they said good-bye in the morning on the school bus. "One jump ahead of the lawman..." Marya would say. "Riffraff. Street Rat..." Justin would say. It was like a game of tag.

For awhile, when they first started watching the movie, Marya would look for magic lamps everywhere, and she would rub things, anything, refrigerator door handles, salad bowls, water bottles; she saw genie potential in everything. Three wishes, that was all she wanted.

She gave it up on her birthday over a ballerina cake with eight candles. On that day she stopped wishing altogether. She had a fight with her mother that

morning about her outfit. She wanted to wear layers, it was in; she was sure. Marya picked out hot pink leggings, a black and red bathing suit top, a light blue zip-up jacket, shin guards, and a skirt that twirled out when she spun. It was perfect.

“Marya, we’re going to be taking pictures. Your grandparents are coming,” her mother had said. “Not today. Come on. How about this nice summer dress, it’s pink.”

“It’s my birthday,” Marya said.

“I know. Wear the dress.”

Marya crossed her arms, sat on the floor, and shook her head.

They argued until the door bell rang, her grandparents. Her mother threw the dress onto the bed and said, “Do not come out of this room until you have that dress on. Do you understand?” She shut the door, hard, and the pictures lined up in a neat row on Marya’s desk rocked back and forth like they were sea sick.

Marya waited fifteen minutes and couldn’t stand it any longer. There were presents down there, and cake, and her grandparents. She put on the dress, slipped the leggings underneath, pulled the shin guards on, and zipped on the jacket. A compromise, she thought, like they taught her at school.

At the bottom of the stairs she heard her grandmother and her mother in the kitchen. Marya sat on the stairs, pulling at her toes, listening. “Sometimes I’m just not sure I can keep it up. You know, I wanted to smack her today. Smack her. God. All she wanted was to wear this crazy outfit, and I almost lost it. My baby.” Marya couldn’t see her mother as she said these words, but she could picture her,

bent over the counter, towel tossed over her shoulder, sleeves pushed up to the elbows.

“Relax. You’ve got a lot on your plate. You’re a good mother. Don’t be so hard on yourself. Kids are tough. What’s important is that you didn’t lose it, hold onto that,” her grandmother said. On the stairs Marya pulled off the shin guards and the jacket and the leggings and left them in a heap of bright colors as she walked head down into the kitchen.

Minister Samuel was looking at her again; his head tilted to the side waiting for her to answer something.

“I’m sorry, what?” she said.

“Does that help you understand?” he asked.

For a minute Marya resented the bubbly baby talk way he said it. He was a lot of crap too, she thought. “No,” she said. “I wanted to know why God needed to rest. He’s all powerful. Why does he need a break after throwing together a world?”

Minister Samuel pulled back, his face twisted and wrinkled like Marya had never seen it before. “Well, he wanted a day to take it all in. It was a big job,” he said, his voice itchy now.

“It shouldn’t be a big job for someone like him,” she said. “He’s God.”

Minister Samuel leaned away from Marya and moved his hands together and folded them, like he was going to pray, but he didn’t put his head down, instead he just looked at her, right in the eyes. Marya waited. This was the moment. She waited for a pew to start burning or for her insides to explode in a

gooey mess all over his face. But nothing happened. They sat, staring at each other, unblinking. The church seemed hallow, and Marya willed herself not to talk and not to look away; she would outlast him.

Her mother burst through the back door of the church sending out long loud squeals from the hinges of the door that echoed off the walls. Minister Samuel's eyes fluttered towards her mother for a moment. It was broken. Marya looked away.

"Did you set her straight?" her mother asked. "Has this mess been cleared up? Because I'm up to my eyeballs and this is the last thing I can deal with right now."

"Well, um, actually," Minister Samuel paused, looked down at Marya and then back at her mother. "I think it might be good if we setup a little more time to talk. A few sessions perhaps? A half an hour or so? Marya, what do you think?"

Marya looked at him and thought, you're on. You, me, and God. Bring it. "Sure, fine," she said.

"Wow," said her mother. "Okay, we can do that. Thank you. How's Tuesday, after school?"

"Great," said Minister Samuel. "See you then, Marya." He reached out and shook her hand like they had just made a business arrangement, and Marya felt, for a moment, like an adult. We'll see, she thought, we'll see. Her mother pushed her towards the exit with a hand between her shoulder blades and as the doors were about to swing shut behind them, Marya glanced back for one last look. The noon sun shone through the stained glass windows, dust dancing in the streaks of

light; in front, Jesus was still pinned to the wall looking sad and lonely. She swung her head back and followed her mother to the van.

Marya was nervous all day on Tuesday. In the morning she bombed her timed math test, and at lunch she spit on her best friend, Audrey, for not picking her first for kick ball. Almost as soon as she woke up that day, Marya imagined what a half an hour with Minister Samuel might be like. At first, before math and recess, she pictured them sitting in the sanctuary again, with his syrupy voice, all smiles and winks. But after recess, when Audrey was no longer talking to her, she imagined that he might be mad. She remembered clearly the way she spit out her words and the twisted look on his face before the silence and before her mother returned. He would of course be mad, really mad. She thought about what happened to people in the Bible when they were bad: stoning, blinding, banishment. The possibilities seemed endless.

But her mother was not there at the end of school, and for a brief moment Marya thought she might have found a way out of it, but ten minutes later her mother whirled into the parking lot, brakes squeaking, and slid to a stop in front of her. "Get in," she yelled through the open window. "We're late." Marya was doomed.

They did not meet in the sanctuary this time. Her mother took her straight to Minister Samuel's office in the back of the church where the ceilings were low and the serpent green carpet arched and twisted down squirrely hallways. His office was at the end of the hall, squared off next to a cement wall. The door was open and inside he was sitting at his desk, eyes lowered, reading. The bible, Marya thought, but it was the newspaper, and when he looked up his eyes were a

liquid brown like weak chocolate milk. Maybe he had amnesia and had forgotten the whole business.

“Sit,” he said, smiling, pointing to a large wooden chair positioned in front of his desk. It was one of those curved chairs, where the arm rests wrapped in an arch around the person sitting.

Behind her, Marya’s mother was rummaging in her purse and talking to herself about the grocery list. “Minister Samuel,” she said. “I’m going to scoot off to the store and be back to pick her up in a half an hour, right?”

“See you then,” he said waving as if she were already gone. Marya moved towards the chair softly, looking for warning signs of the impending doom she still might face. But Minister Samuel’s face was smooth and lax, his fingers idly on the top of the newspaper, the office cool and dark. The shades were pulled over the windows and all around him full bookcases lined the walls. Her mother pressed her mouth to the top of Marya’s head and murmured, “Be good, see you soon.” She could feel the rush of air as her mother left the office.

“Just you and me now, kid,” said Minister Samuel. He leaned back in his chair and it squeaked under his weight. He put his hands behind his head, fingers interlaced, like he was about to lie back for a nap. Marya hovered just at the edge of the chair, bent in half, not quite sitting but not quite standing either. “So,” he said. “What do you want to talk about?”

This was not going the way Marya had imagined; his voice was not syrup but it wasn’t itchy either. “I don’t know,” she said. He leaned forward, his upper body stretching across the desk towards her. “I think you do,” he said. And then leaned back, his lips pulled together in a thin line.

Marya sat in the chair, her bottom plunking into the seat. “I want to know why I don’t feel anything when I think about God,” she said. “I want to,” she continued. “I want to feel the warm feeling that they talk about, but I don’t.”

Minister Samuel stood up and walked around the desk and sat in the chair next to Marya, an exact match to the one she sat in. Now their knees were so close that if she moved they would bump together. “I don’t think that’s it,” he said.

But Marya was sure it had to be. There was nothing else. He was a man of God, and she felt empty inside. She was missing the God part. “But there is nothing else,” she said.

Before he could answer, the room erupted in bleating beeps. The fire alarm. It echoed behind Marya and pounded deep in her chest like the rattle of a bass drum.

“I’m sure it is just a false alarm,” he said. “But we better go outside just to be on the safe side.”

But it wasn’t false. Out on the front lawn, Marya saw orange flames winking and bobbing behind the back first floor window. Like a dream, the church kitchen was on fire.

“Shit,” Minister Samuel said under his breath. “Shit, shit, shit.”

The small office staff stood on the front lawn watching as the flames grew inside the building. The only place they were visible was through the small window, just above the kitchen sink, and Marya thought it looked more like a bad fake fireplace than something real. Fire trucks had already been called and they howled in the distance, coming closer. Marya walked towards the burning window. Minister Samuel didn’t notice. He was too busy talking about how this

was impossible; no one had even been in the kitchen since yesterday evenings Bible study group.

A few feet from the window Marya felt the heat, like opening the back door in July with the cool air conditioning pushing out behind you and the humidity pressing in on your chest, heavy and hot. God was trying to send her a message. Her burning bush. She saw the flames clearly now, not like the blurred image from across the yard, but the thin shades of orange and red and blue and white licking out in random bursts. Suddenly, the window glass cracked, the sound like ice snapping, the kitchen fragmented into pieces of color, strands of light, almost holy. Marya thought of the kaleidoscope, and her father.

“Marya,” her mother called running across the yard, arms out, screaming her name. When her mother reached her she swung one arm around Marya’s waist and pulled her backwards, bending Marya in half like a doll. At the sidewalk, forty feet from the building her mother stopped, panting. “What were you doing?” she asked, pulling Marya’s face together so her cheeks squished out like jelly.

“It’s beautiful,” said Marya.

“You could have been hurt. Haven’t we talked about fire safety?”

“Yes. But ...”

“But nothing. The building is on fire.” Her mother’s face was pink, the wrinkles around her eyes pulled taut.

“I think I saw God.”

“What?”

“In the building, in the flames, I saw something.”

“Oh my God, is there a person in there?” Her mother turned to start screaming for the firemen who were now pulling hoses off the truck and moving like ants across the lawn.

“No.” Marya grabbed her arm. “Not a person.”

“Marya, that’s enough. We’re going home. You’re in shock. Your face . . .” Her mother put the back of her hand to Marya’s forehead. “It’s hot. Are you okay?” Not waiting for an answer, Marya’s mother grabbed her hand and pulled her towards the van, weaving through the firemen and other people who had poured out onto the sidewalk to watch. Across the lawn, near the fire truck, Minister Samuel sat on the curb. And in the sky over his head puffs of black smoke lingered in wispy strands. Marya closed her eyes and made a wish.

The fire, as it turned out, was contained to the kitchen and the rest of the church was mostly okay. Some smoke damage, but nothing too serious. Everyone from the church kept calling Marya’s mother because she had been there when it happened. They wanted a first-hand account. So for three days Marya’s mother did everything, laundry, sweeping, dishes, with the phone tucked between her chin and her shoulder and said over and over, “It was wild. And thank God, Marya got out right away. I can’t even think about what could have happened. The smoke was everywhere. You could see it for blocks.” And then she would pause while the other person said something like, “Oh, my. Is Marya okay?” and her mother would continue, “She was shaken up, but she’s okay now.” And Marya would roll her eyes in the background as her mother repeated the lines.

But what Marya couldn't get out of her head was the way the colors looked the moment right after the window cracked. She was sure, or almost sure, she had seen the outlines of a face. Not a person, just the silhouette, of a man. It reminded her of all the crazy people she saw on TV who talked about seeing Mary in their toast or something like that. It was crazy. But for three days she doodled the outline of a man's face on anything she had in front of her, napkins, school notebooks, in soap on the walls of the shower; she could even see it in the dark, and with her eyes she traced it over and over again on the ceiling over her bed, like seeing the outline of clouds as they moved across the sky.

On Sunday, one week after the fire, they went to church. Justin was excused because he had been out late the night before for a junior high dance, so it was just Marya and her mother. The church was still battered. The back end was covered in plastic and several hallways inside were sealed up and blocked off. The sanctuary smelled like a fireplace, gritty and dry. But Minister Samuel seemed to be back to himself, his voice sugary syrup during the sermon. After church Marya's mother found him in the crowd. He squeezed Marya's shoulder, winked, and said, "How's my girl?" as if their conversation and the fire had never happened.

He chatted with her mother, smiling, not looking back at Marya. But just before they left he leaned down and whispered in Marya's ear, "It's okay to miss your father."

Marya's mother stopped at home to go to the bathroom and to drop her off before she went to the cemetery. Justin was still asleep and when the bathroom

door closed Marya shouted to her mother, “I’m going to take a nap.” Then she ran to her room stuffed her pillows under the comforter and walked as quietly as possible back to the van. She hid in the trunk, under an old wool blanket that made her arms and legs itch. She tucked herself into an egg-like ball and waited.

Her mother drove slowly, and in the dark of the blanket Marya could not be sure how long they had driven or in what direction they had gone. She rocked back and forth on the turns and listened to her mother hum along with the radio. She pretended she was a stow-away on a ship bound for some new world, so she didn’t think about the cemetery.

When the van stopped Marya held her breath. Her mother slammed the door shut and for a moment, Marya could hear her feet crunching on gravel, and then it was quiet. She counted to fifty. At fifty she pulled the blanket off her head and blinked until she could see in the bright light. She tucked her feet underneath herself and slowly eased up until her nose touched the glass of the back window. In every direction the lawn was lined with mismatched tombstones and only two scrawny trees poking up towards the sky. A few rows from the road her mother bent over, her back to the van. Marya could not see the stone her mother was kneeling in front of, but she knew it was her father’s.

After the fire Marya had wished to see him. She had crossed her fingers and her toes and wished with all her might to see his face, just once. She had asked God for this miracle.

On the back window glass of the van Marya traced the silhouette again, mindlessly, watching her mother, her finger running in circles as if chasing her own tail. When her mother finally stood and turned, Marya had not been ready.

She did not duck down as she had planned. Her mother saw her, moved slowly to the van, and opened the trunk. “Marya,” she said as if her name were a sigh.

“What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to see.”

“There is nothing to see. He’s not here.”

Her mother sat down beside her, her legs dangling off the back of the trunk barely scrapping the ground, Marya still tucked in her egg-like ball. They did not look at each other, but instead gazed out at the rows of tombstones as if counting. Her mother reached across and pulled Marya’s hand onto her leg and began to trace the outside edge, tucking up and around each finger across her wrist and back around the fingers again.

“You have his eyes,” she began, her index finger dipping into the valley next to Marya’s thumb. “And Justin laughs just like him.” Her mother bounced her finger off the tip of Marya’s ring finger, tap, tap, tap, like water dripping out of the faucet. “He had three deep lines across his forehead. He said he had one for each of us. He called them his love lines.” She looked at Marya, her eyes flickering from her face to her hand and back again. “Do you miss him?”

Marya pulled her hand away from her mother and jumped out of the van, running towards the tombstones. She couldn’t find him. There were so many names. She spun in circles, sick to her stomach like the first time she rode on a boat. He was missing; he had never existed. Marya sat down, crossed her legs, and began pulling out handfuls of grass and throwing them into the air. The blades caught in the breeze for a moment, gliding a few feet before they dropped to the ground. She liked the way they drifted, almost hovered, and then fell

without apology and disappeared. She lay down, her face half in the grass, level with the rows of headstones. The lines and shapes stretched out forever. When she rolled onto her back, the world shifted, broke, and reappeared, blue sky and no clouds, empty.

She touched her eyes, tracing them, feeling for her father. She imagined him rising up next to her laughing, like Justin, pulling her into a hug, his chest warm and soft with flannel, and she would say, “Daddy.” And before he melted back into nothing she imagined his face, her eyes, three wrinkles across his forehead. She squeezed her eyes tighter and pressed them with her fingers, but all she could see was a silhouette, faceless.

But before she opened her eyes again, she felt her mother’s hands slide over her own, warm and soft. “Keep your eyes closed,” she whispered. In the distance birds chirped in a muffled staccato. Her mother’s voice mixed in between the birds, slow, in gentle beats like rain. As her mother’s words hummed across the black space behind her eyes, telling her about her father, Marya saw him, not as she had expected to see, not like a picture, no nose or ears or jaw line, instead a swirl of moments and memories and sounds, mixing and spinning. Each time her mother spoke the picture shifted and changed. The wheel of her kaleidoscope spun, breaking and creating something new in each moment. Her father did not have a face, but she could see him in blinding color, red and green and blue.

BUTTER-SOFT LOVE

Justine has never been to the cemetery before and seems surprised when I ask her if she wants to sit there for an hour before her flight back to South Bend. We leave early, worried about reports that construction just beyond the tunnels is slowing traffic heading north out of town, but we move through onto the open highway easily. Justine agrees to the cemetery but seems reluctant. She eyes me like this is another one of my weird quirks. Quirks that she has never come to understand, even as my oldest friend. Still, she doesn't ask why or how I know there is a cemetery so close to the airport. It is my favorite cemetery.

I've known Justine since first grade when we used to play together every day after school. When my mom or her mom would come to pick one of us up, we would pretend to be glued together at the hip or the elbow or the hand. We would make a fuss for several minutes before we allowed ourselves to be separated and sent home to our own beds. Our friendship somehow lasted through boyfriends and other friends and the drama of high school, and we ended up in the same city for college even though we attended two different institutions. After college she got married and moved to Indiana for work. I stayed in Pittsburgh and have been through several jobs and boyfriends and apartments since then. And now she is here because of my latest break up, sure I sounded worse than usual on the phone. She seemed sure that she still had the ability to hear in my words the tone that said what I could not say, even though she was so far away.

The road to the cemetery is curved and has loose gravel on the sides. It seems far away from the gleam of the highway we just left with rows of shining

car dealerships and boxy hotels. The five-minute drive takes us into dry fields and wire fences, places that remind me of crumbling barns and skinny cows. The fields face the cemetery. The backside of the cemetery is tucked up against a patch of woods, trees that don't look very old and rambling bushes and patches of thorns. I pull into the drive, which is flanked by two bending walls of stone that are topped with lights on each end. Justine looks over at me. "What now?" she asks.

"I usually park down the hill to the left, near the pond. You can see the planes taking off from there."

"How many times have you been here?" she asks.

"A few."

I drive the car half-way around the loop and pull to the shoulder; there is only one other car in the cemetery. We get out and sit close to the pond on a blanket I have in my trunk. Justine sits as far from the rows of headstones as possible. She keeps glancing over at the graves, then at me, then back at the graves.

"You're freaked out," I say, half smiling.

"Yes," she pauses, "of course. It's a cemetery." She is facing me now, and we are both cross-legged on the blanket like grade-schoolers waiting for story hour. She leans forward. "Are you sure I shouldn't stay a few more days? I can, you know. I can just call work and Ryan and move my flight back."

"Justine. I'm fine. I was fine when you came."

"It was good to be here, to see you. It had been too long."

“You missed the ‘burgh. And French fries on salads. And Steelers jerseys on people in church.”

She is laughing now, and I relax a little.

“Exactly.”

Justine arrived in Pittsburgh on Friday, took a cab straight to my house, and let herself in with the key I had left with my neighbor. I got home a few hours later, unsure what it would be like to see her after a year and a half. She hugged me too hard and smiled too wide in the first few minutes. She was giggly and cheerful, like we were nineteen again. She acted like we still lived in the South Side of Pittsburgh, a few blocks from one another and got blitzed together on the weekends, when in reality, I had moved to the Shadyside area years ago and spent my Saturday nights at yoga or on dates with men who actually knew what the bottles of wine on the wine list were supposed to taste like.

We spent the weekend going to places we had been together years ago: Zenith, a vegan restaurant on 22nd Street, The Mattress Factory, a contemporary art museum, the zoo, our bar Saint James Place. Everything seemed smaller and dirtier than I remembered, but Justine kept saying it was exactly how she remembered it. I wondered if I had forgotten or if I was simply a different person now. And a part of me wished I still saw it all as Justine did.

I kept us moving all weekend. The itinerary was tight and full with one activity after another. We visited the few people left in the city that we both still knew, but I didn't invite any of my new friends, friends she did not know. It somehow would have felt like betrayal.

Now, as we sit in the cemetery, Justine grabs my arm. “Look,” she says. Over her finger a Boeing 747 eases into the sky. I always marveled at the way planes looked from a distance, like they were moving so slowly, like they did not have jet fuel or engines or speed, rather like they were rising on a soft steady breath and hanging delicately in the air.

“Yeah, cool, right.” I answered.

Justine looks older this trip. She has lost that part of her that made men turn and watch her walk away, something that always made me jealous when we were younger. Her hair is cut short and stylishly, but it doesn’t have the natural effortless look it used to have. She and Ryan have been married for almost seven years now, and she doesn’t talk about him with the same glitter and wide-eyed excitement that she used to. Now she speaks about him as she would her childhood dog or about her first pair of real pearls, butter-soft love.

I broke up with my last boyfriend right after sex. We were still naked and a little sweaty. We were lying face up staring at the ceiling, not touching. I looked up at the puckered white paint like veins running across the ceiling, and said, “It’s over.”

The fact that he wasn’t surprised and didn’t argue or ask for a deeper explanation was what hurt, not losing him. He got up, put on his clothes, and walked out, like I was still asleep or dead. We have not talked since that moment. I didn’t tell Justine we had been broken up for weeks, maybe almost a month, because I could not stand to hear the sympathy in her voice. She would always say something like, “You are too good for him anyways.” Or, “I know the right guy is still out there.”

The fact is I didn't mind my own break-ups as much as others did. I liked the few days after a break-up before I actually told anyone we had broken up. During those days, I regained a freedom, one that I had not even realized I had lost. It was a sense of quietness that I only felt when I was alone, really alone. And then, I would be forced to tell people, Justine, my mom, my friends at work, and everyone would start making me feel sad about something I wasn't really sad about to begin with. It was as if people, even my friends, wouldn't let me just walk away from it. They had to keep it alive even after it was already dead, like a ghost that they attached to my heels.

Looking out at the cemetery pond, Justine says, "It's pretty here. I can't believe I'm saying that, but it is." The soft willow trees hang low over the water, and there are lily pads close to the edge where we are sitting. The grass is dry and scratchy now; it is August, but the crispness of the yellow-brown grass and the dark blue-black folds of the water at the edges remind me of paintings, thick oil colors. It is late afternoon, and a soft wind is moving across the graves towards the pond and us, blowing warm air like damp breath under a blanket. The plane is smaller now, plastic-toy-plane size.

"I like it here," I say.

"Sam," Justine is facing me again, "why'd you really break up with him?" She asked me this question between each activity all weekend. In the cab, as I locked my car, over breakfast, over lunch, in a whisper at the museum, near the otters at the zoo. I was sick of it. Suddenly, all I want is for her to shut up. I wish I could melt into the landscape of the graves with a thick stone that says, Samantha Lee Hunter, Beloved. Nothing else, just Beloved. But instead she is still looking at

me, wanting to know answers for questions that I am not sure I know how to answer.

My second favorite cemetery is in Paris. It is at the top of a hill right next to an art museum and several busy streets. It has a high wall around it, and inside there are more graves than I have ever seen in one place. The bodies must be stacked one on top of another and there is no grass, only narrow stone paths between darkening limestone and spots of mold or fungus painting edges and corners pale green. There are whole generations of people packed into a single plot, and I imagine that underneath the casket-size stones it must be a jigsaw puzzle of bodies. Most of the stones are older than whole cities in the United States, and tourists like me browse the graves like window shoppers.

There is a cemetery that runs through a whole neighborhood in my hometown in Ohio. The gravestones edge over into backyards and butt up against the little league baseball field. As a kid I liked it. I liked the way the dead and the living seemed to have mixed above and below the ground. I babysat for a family who lived on the edge of the cemetery, and the kids' plastic toys were littered among the granite headstones like bright eggs during Easter. The kids called the headstones by name. Henry and James and Catherine were closest to the house, and each child had a favorite, like old aunts and uncles. My mother was horrified by this, but secretly, I had a favorite too. Beth Elizabeth Mason, 1944-1967. She was only twenty-three, and as a thirteen-year-old this seemed both impossibly old and young. Her grave seemed tall, up to my waist. I always wondered who had loved her in life. Strangely, at the time, I rarely worried about how she died.

I am fidgeting with the grass along the edge of the blanket, stalling. “It just happened. You know, like I told you, sometimes things just don’t work,” I say. She looks at me like she still doesn’t believe me. I don’t want to try and explain it to her, to him, or really even to myself. Something about freedom and butter-soft love and reading books curled up in the sun on top of a grave. And maybe even something about planes taking off into the sky with me attached by a string like a ghost or a cloud. It all made me feel unglued and wonderful and empty.

“Sam.” She says my name like we can still play dress up or touch our elbows and feel the elastic pull of rubber cement holding us together, but I feel nothing. “Really?”

“Yeah, really.” I look at her and try to make this lie on my face look true.

“Ok,” she says. “Ok.” It is a giving-up ok, and I wasn’t expecting it. I was expecting her to ask me again and again until she boarded the plane and then to have her call me when she landed and ask again. But instead, Justine has turned away from me and the pond and the planes and is facing the rows of stone with names of people we do not know. Now I turn too and look at the way the graves curve in unison up and then down over the other side of the hill. The way they spread out like open hands stretching towards something. The spikes of grass inch up around the base of the stones, and the engravings are impossible to read from where I am sitting: mother, father, sister, brother, wife, husband, child, loved, missed, prayers, promises.

I think Justine and I originally became friends because of proximity. She lived close. She liked to play outside. She had some cool toys. They were little kid reasons for wanting to be together every minute. Simple reasons. As we grew up

she became the wilder one, with handsome boyfriends and instant invites to cool parties. I was level-headed and had an irony that some people found funny. She took me to her parties and I told her when to break-up with her boyfriend of the moment for a new one. We seemed to balance one another out, in high school and even college. We fell into this routine where she would lead, push out in front, make a path, and I would follow, but I would also pull her back if she got too close to the edge, ground her again in reality. Marrying Ryan young had been out of character, conventional, against my prediction. Indiana, the land of lawn gnomes and three different time zones, had seemed even stranger to me. We promised undying friendship. I was her maid of honor. She expected someday to be mine.

Justine is still facing the gravestones. “We should go. I don’t want to be late.”

“Ok,” I say and we stand up. I shake the blanket, but the little pieces of grass hold fast. We fold it up together, each taking two edges and then bringing it together in the middle. Then we repeat it, each taking two more edges and bringing it together again until it is folded into a small bundle. We get into the car silently.

Within a few minutes we are at the end of the cemetery and I pull out to the edge of the drive, ready to turn back onto the road that will lead us to the highway. My car faces the dry fields now and out in front of us another plane is taking off in the haze of the setting sun. The sun is not low enough to be a true sunset yet, but the colors have started to spread out in yellow and orange hues defused by the mix of thin clouds. “Look,” I say, pointing to my right in the distance. I turn out onto the road even though my eyes are still trained on the

sun's colors rather than where I am going. Justine looks too, but I can't see her face, only the far edge of her jaw and the glint of her gold hoop earring.

The car lurches suddenly with a thud. We both swing our heads forward, and I slam on the brakes. I wasn't going fast, but my body still rocks sharply forward and backward with the tension of the seatbelt across my chest. I hit something. I am too startled to scream, and Justine doesn't either. We sit silently with the car engine humming; I shift into park. Justine gets out first without looking at me, so I unbuckle my seat belt too and follow her. As soon as I open my door, I see two wild turkeys next to my front headlight, their brown tail feathers straight and scrawny.

"Oh my God," says Justine. She is around front now, and the turkeys near the headlight begin to move across the road in a scurry as if startled more by our presence than the car. Their heads bob forward and backward like turkeys in cartoons. "You hit one," she says, still not looking over at me. "It's still alive." I move around to the front of the car and she leans over the turkey. It is moving but not getting up, its body partially under the car and partially out. One leg claws at the air and the other lies flat on the ground. It is bobbing its head forward and backward like the other turkeys but more slowly. I have no idea what to do. I look across the road to where the other turkeys are going, and I can see glimpses of their tail feathers flicking between and around the headstones as they disappear down the hill. The turkey at my feet is shaking now, and Justine is crouched on her heels closer to its head than I want to be. She looks up at me and, without thinking, I say, "We should hit it again."

"What?" Justine says.

“It’s hurt. We can’t leave it like this. We need to run it over.”

“What? You can’t be serious.”

“I am.”

“You can’t. That’s... you can’t.”

“Move,” I say and step over the turkey towards the driver’s side, bumping into her as I go, not looking back. I get into the driver’s side door, pulling it closed behind me. I shift into reverse knowing the reverse lights click on, hot coal red, and then I inch the car back. I stop and I know the rear lights click off. I drive forward without slowing and the first set of wheels roll over the bird’s body, but it makes no noise. I expected to hear crunching or screaming but it just bounces the car slightly like a speed bump. I lean out the car window. “Is it dead?”

Justine is frozen.

“Justine. Is it dead?”

I look up and the sun’s melting colors are blazing in the background behind her head and she says. “I don’t know.”

“Well, check.” I don’t know if she can see my expression or not, but I continue, “Just do it.” So she does. She walks over and I can see through my side mirror that the bird is flatter in the middle now and it isn’t moving. There isn’t really any blood that I can see but it looks gross anyways. Like a pile of feathers and wet clay.

“Dead,” she says. “It’s dead.”

“Good.” I put the car in park, get out, and begin moving around the back towards her.

“We can’t just leave it,” she says.

“What?”

“We can’t leave it.”

“What do you want to do? Bury it?” I say, sensing that my voice is high and tight. “You have to catch your flight.”

“I know. I just... I know.” But she isn’t moving away from the turkey that is spread out in front of her. Road kill. My road kill. I move around the car towards her. And suddenly we are standing side by side over the dead bird. I look at her and then grab her wrist and begin to pull her towards the car like a child. The driver’s door is still open, and I push her into the seat. She doesn’t resist. I lean in, two hands on her knees, and say, “It’s ok. It’s all ok.” Not sure what I even mean. And suddenly she is crying and I am standing there and there is a dead bird behind my rear wheel and the sun is going down and she is missing her flight and the reflections of light dance and glimmer off the shining faces of the gravestones like shattered glass scattered loose in the gravel.

BEYOND THE MILKY WAY

In Terra's basement behind the washer and dryer we found a box of *Playboy* magazines. We were twelve. It was the first pictures of naked women I had ever seen. Terra, too. I could not get over the size and shape of the breasts, but mostly we were fascinated by the nipples. We made a long list of nipple characteristics and charted the women in the March issue: saucer, mocha brown, ripples, pucker marks, pig pink, nickel size. I stuffed the list into my back pocket before we emerged from the basement. We pinky swore to keep it between us.

It seems strange now, but it wasn't sexual. I'm not a lesbian. That summer nipples just seemed to be something more.

But my mother found the list. She was emptying my pockets for the laundry.

"Molly Sue," she yelled into the backyard. Middle names meant trouble. My brother glanced at me and slowly backed away, like whatever I had done might be catching.

"Yes," I said.

"Kitchen. Now."

She left the back sliding glass door open, and I walked slowly toward it

"What is this?" She slapped the table. I glanced at her puckered lips and then down to the wooden table, fading gray in the light. The list wrinkled and bent and smudged.

"I don't know," I tried.

She pointed to a chair at the table. "Sit."

I sat, fixating on the wallpaper, little ducks with bonnets scattered less than a hand's width apart. I traced the diagonal lines from pale yellow duckbill to duckbill. I counted seconds clicking from the old fashion clock on the counter behind me. It belonged to my Aunt Jane, who had died three months ago.

“Don't lie to me, young lady.”

I gripped my hands together, like for prayer or maybe for mercy. “It's a list,” I said. She leaned in, both hands palming the table, her breath hot damp pepper. Nicotine gum again.

“Of what?” she asked.

I was sure the moment she saw the headers – shape, size, color, distinctive markings – that she would know. We had numbered the girls, no names, but still, my mother usually knew everything.

When I was twelve, I was just beginning to understand that adults, particularly my parents, were not Gods or superheroes. She was ice cream, melting in my hands.

“Rocks,” I said. Then bolder, “We were classifying rocks.”

“Rocks?” She paused. “You look guilty.”

“I'm supposed to empty my pockets for the laundry. I know. I'm sorry.”

She slid the list towards me and tapped it with her pointer finger. “Don't let it happen again,” she said. The kitchen brightened, just for a moment, as clouds moved away from the sun, but then gray light returned. My dead aunt's clock clicked in steady rhythm behind me like a stopwatch counting down to something. My mother turned and left the room.

I sat at the table, quiet, imagining a long line of multi-colored nipples stretching out across the kitchen like garland. I thought rocks. But I only saw nipples.

I couldn't let it go. I called Terra the next day. "Tomorrow. Again," I said.

"What? You're crazy, Molly," she said.

"The magazines," I said pressing my fingers against the side glass of the front door, leaving smudgy prints. Outside cars swung around the bend, driving recklessly fast.

"I don't know. What if we get in trouble?"

I decided not to tell her about the close call with my mom. "Tomorrow," I said and hung up.

The next morning Terra answered the door on the second knock, but she didn't look happy. She leaned on the door jam, one hand in her pocket. "I have to babysit," she said. Her father had remarried three summers ago and now she had a new little sister who was one, going on more-annoying-than-I-could-have-imagined. I used to think babies were cute.

"Let me in," I said.

"Fine. But we can't go in the basement. I can't take her down there. She'll mess something up or get messed up, and then my dad will officially kill me."

This made sense. I followed her in. Think. I said to myself. Think. But all I could imagine was a bathtub full of nipples. Soft pink nipples. Dipping and bobbing like rubber duckies.

"What if I just get one magazine and bring it up?" I asked.

“No,” she said. “Let’s just watch TV or something.” She had her hands stuffed deep into the pockets of her cut off jean shorts, her lips spread thin across her teeth.

“Okay,” I said. “Okay.”

She pulled Beth, the baby, off the floor and we went into the den, a small room, crowded with furniture. It smelled like damp cardboard. The leather couch had thick scratches all along the bottom from their cat. In the summer, it was cool and slick from the air conditioning. I slid into the far corner, and Terra put Beth on the floor in front of us with a box full of toys. Terra clicked on the TV.

“What do your nipples look like?” I asked, almost surprising myself, as if I had not up until this moment thought about the fact that women, and girls, all around me had nipples, not just the ladies in the magazines. It was a nipple zoo out there. In fact, I had nipples on my chest at that exact moment.

Terra cocked her head sideways at me, like a confused dog. “What?” she asked.

Later, as an adult I would think back on this moment during breast exams, the gynecologist’s plastic smile as he kneaded my breasts looking for lumps, and I would picture Terra’s face, eyes cartoon-wide, as if she had just seen a naked man doing somersaults through her living room. My gynecologist always thought I was ticklish.

“Your nipples,” I said again. “What do they look like?” Terra did not respond right away. Instead she watched Beth swinging a naked Barbie from her mouth. Barbie dangled upside down, blonde hair matted, frizzy, with thick lines of drool seeping down her legs. She hung by one foot from Beth’s gummy mouth.

“Not like the magazines,” said Terra. “Smaller. Pinker. Soft.” She still didn’t look at me as she said this, just kept watching Beth, who was now holding Barbie upside down by the waist and chewing on both of her feet like a hot dog. “What about you?” Terra asked.

“About the same, I guess,” I said. “Maybe, a little bumpy.” Beth squealed and threw the wet chewed Barbie at us as we slouched on the couch. Barbie’s head bent as it bounced off the floor and then she was still. Beth killed Barbie.

“Beth’s are even tinier,” said Terra. “Wanna see?” She smiled, full teeth showing.

I had seen Beth’s nipples before, but today, the way Terra said it, I thought we might see something more. Even so, I was pretty sure this was a bad idea. In fact, I was pretty sure I had been walking on thin ice, as my mother said, since the moment we unearthed the nudie pictures from behind the washer and dryer. But at that moment, I didn’t care.

Instead I pictured my aunt’s funeral. After it was over, my mom and I held my grandmother’s hands, and she leaned in like she was about to reveal a secret. She told my mother, “If you don’t quit smoking I’ll break all your fingers off. I can’t lose another daughter.”

I didn’t know my Aunt Jane very well. She was fourteen years younger than my mother, unmarried, wore tight clothes, and lived in New York City. She was like someone out of a magazine or a movie. She would breeze in for a long weekend, kiss everyone on the cheek, twice, like she was French, drink martinis, which my mother never made unless Jane was coming, and she would bring my brother and me gifts. When I was eight, she bought me a pair of gold strappy high

heels, three inches high. I sprained my ankle trying to walk upstairs after she insisted that I try them on. I had to lie on the couch and listen to my mother and my aunt in the kitchen drinking martinis and laughing like prom queens. My mother sounded like a stranger. And Jane just kept saying, “You’re going to have to teach her to walk in heels if she’s going to be a woman. Teach her right,” she said. When Jane died, I wasn’t even sad.

At the funeral my mom cried like she and Jane talked on the phone every day. But really, every time Jane came to town my mom smoked more, my parents both smiled less, and the food in our house got really spicy. It was like she couldn’t get enough heat when Jane was around.

My grandmother cried and cussed at the funeral. She kept telling my uncle, my mom and Aunt Jane’s brother, that it was, “a god damn shame.” And my uncle kept patting her arm, like this would make things better. He was going to pat the sadness right out of her.

I had these moments all summer, when I would think of Jane or the funeral or my mother out of the blue, like I had stepped on a landmine. Suddenly, I would just see them. After each explosion of memory, the image of my family would begin to fade gray, only to be replaced by nipples. And mostly, I preferred to think about nipples.

I told Terra, straight faced, that I absolutely wanted to see Beth’s nipples. We laid Beth down on the kitchen table. I held her feet. Terra had her arms. Beth blew bubbles on her tongue and as they broke her face looked like a slip and slide. Terra raised her eyebrows at me. I nodded. Ready.

Terra pulled up Beth's shirt, all the way over her head until all we could see were her chunky thighs and pudgy belly and two pink bull's-eyes. We let her hands and her legs go, and Beth batted at her head trying to uncover her eyes.

"That's it," I said.

"That's it," Terra said. "So lame."

"Totally."

Then Beth started kicking and wiggling and almost pushed herself off the hard table onto the harder floor. I caught her at the last moment, by one leg and one arm. "Shit," Terra yelled. "Damn, that was close." She looked up, one eyebrow rose. "Screw it," she said. "My dad's an ass. Let's decorate her nipples." Things were heading south fast. I was not this kind of kid, and really, neither was Terra, but I wanted to make art out of nipples.

Aunt Jane died in an elevator, thirteen floors up, when a bee stung her. She was severely allergic but never carried an epipen. By the time they got her to the first floor, and the paramedics arrived, she was dead. At the funeral my grandfather kept saying, "A bee sting in New York, I never would have thought ... of all places." At home, after the funeral, when I was brushing my teeth, I heard my mom say to my dad, "She should have been more prepared. This could have been prevented."

The next day my mother started chewing copious amounts of nicotine gum. She didn't smoke a single cigarette after the moment Grandma threatened her, but she chewed her weight in nicotine gum. The day wavered between her chewing and chomping, and a wad of slippery gum tucked against her teeth or

cheek or gums, waiting until she could not take it any longer, and the cycle would begin again.

My brother Parker and I tried it one afternoon. We slipped it out of her purse and hurried into the backyard behind the garage. I took one long chomp and spit it out. It tasted like burnt pepper. Parker chewed it longer, but he choked and spit as he chewed. We both ended up laughing and running to the house for milk. But I tasted it all night, even after I brushed my teeth and lay down to go to sleep, as thin lines of light slipped through the pleats of the blinds. I could taste it. Aunt Jane. She clung to my mother's gums and tongue and cheeks. Every time she breathed, I could smell her.

We decided on glitter pens for Beth's nipple art. Pink and green and blue and purple. We took off her shirt, and she wiggled on the table. Her nipples were tiny and firm under my finger. She grabbed at my hair, pulling it towards her wet mouth. We started out drawing glittery stars. When we stepped back, Beth had the Milky Way across her chest. She clapped her hands and bubbles oozed out of her mouth. The stars swirled in a tight circle around each nipple, and spread over the ripples of her ribs.

"You're the nipple star princess," cooed Terra at her half-sister, as Beth batted at the air with her marshmallow hands. "Too bad it isn't a tattoo. My dad would *love* that." Beth stood up, wobbly, on the table, and I grabbed both of her hands to help her balance as she paraded, chest out, from one edge of the black wooden table to the other, tiny bare feet leaving warm invisible prints across the surface. "She loves it," said Terra. "Look at her."

As I looked at Beth lunge and wobble on her unsteady legs across the table, clutching at my hands, her life support, I thought about what my mother would say if she walked into the kitchen at that moment. I imagined the heavy swing of Terra's back door banging against the wood frame, the screen punctured with small holes too big to keep bugs out, and my mother calling out to us, "Girls, girls." She would see all three of us, circled around the table, Beth in the middle like a stripper parading around, topless, with glitter pen across her chest. "Molly Sue," she would yell, dropping anything that she might have been carrying in her hands. She would run toward us, her thick hips swaying, and grab Beth from the table, tucking the little girl to her chest, shielding her, sheltering her, from us.

"What have you done?" she would say. "She's a child. You know better." Terra would cry now, right out, big fake tears, planning how to spin it, how to explain to her dad that it was all my idea. My mother would ignore her, quiet, unmoving, looking only at me. "Molly Sue," she would say again. "I'm so disappointed in you."

I would see the soft wrinkles in the corners of her blue eyes and I would wish, as I always wished, that my eyes looked more like hers. I wouldn't answer. I wouldn't fight like I normally did or begin thinking of some elaborate lie to tell her. Instead I would, quietly watch her watch me as she cooed and rocked Beth like her own daughter. And then she would say, "What do you have to say for yourself?" And I would say nothing. I wanted her to know without my having to tell her, like she used to. For her to tell me why I had done it before I even knew, to see into the future and make things okay again. As I imagined this moment, I wanted her to be the mother she was before Jane died, before I could lie to her

and get away with it, before she could look past me without really seeing me. I wanted her to be invincible and all knowing like she had been when I was a child.

Terra was talking again, waving her hand in front of my face. “Earth to Molly,” she said.

“Yeah, yeah,” I said. “We better clean up the evidence.”

“First,” Terra said. “Let’s take pictures. A memento and tribute to nipples.” She smiled, a full-toothed grin, her braces glimmering like the glitter from the gel pens. She held Beth up in the air with both hands under her armpits, Beth’s legs kicking wildly as they hung suspended in the air.

We took two pictures on Terra’s cell phone, one with Beth spreading her arms out like she was about to hug someone, her chest glinting like shards of glass. And in the other, Terra and I took a close up of our faces squashed right next to Beth’s chest. In the image you could only see the square edge of Terra’s jaw, one of Beth’s nipples with blue and purple stars arching toward my eye and the bridge of my nose. It looked like a Picasso painting, a mash of body parts that did not belong together.

Parker and I were in the kitchen trying to see who could eat the most leftover horseradish without crying. I was ahead; the lids of his eyeballs were getting watery. And the white of his eyes had turned a soft pink, like thick walls of insulation. We were going spoonful for spoonful.

My grandmother usually made the horseradish, an old Polish family recipe, that we only had at holidays or on special occasions, but my mother had been in a nostalgic mood since Jane died and had been making Polish food non-

stop. Perogies and sweet bread and the mushroom soup from Christmas Eve and animal parts, like brain, which Parker and I refused to eat based on the origins alone. When my grandmother came over earlier in the week she had shouted upstairs to my mother, “It smells like the god damn old country in here. Make your family some Kraft macaroni and cheese and at least pretend to be an American.” Parker had laughed and my grandmother told him to zip it. But then she pulled him into a big hug and rubbed his head almost like a noogie, except she didn’t know what that was.

Now, we were facing off, sister versus brother, with a slight Polish ancestry to back us up. We had played this game before, but normally our dad played too and he always won; he would chat with family while he spooned it into his mouth, laughing between bites while Parker and I hunched around the kitchen table forcing the spoon to our mouths. One year Parker even vomited all over the back porch afterwards. But today, it was just the two of us.

“You’re cracking, I can see it,” Parker said.

“Your eyes are about to over flow like Niagara Falls,” I answered.

“No way.”

“Yes way.”

We didn’t realize Mom was home until she was standing in the doorway of the kitchen, her blonde hair smoothed back with hair spray in a tight ponytail. She carried a grocery bag under each arm, like robot Barbie, her elbows bent and stiff.

“What’re you doing?” she asked.

“Face off,” Parker said.

“To the death,” I said.

“Put it away,” Mom said.

“Mom, she’s about to break.”

“His tears are about to explode.”

“Now,” she said. “There are groceries in the car.”

“It’s your turn, one more bite,” I whispered.

Parker glanced at Mom, then shoved the whole spoonful into his mouth and swallowed. He smiled, squinting one eye like he did when he was trying to be funny, but then he started coughing, like a cat with a hairball. Mom stayed in the doorway her lips pressed together. Parker was doubled over with his hand on the chair.

“Milk,” I shouted, running for the fridge. “Milk,” I yelled again. I banged into a chair at the kitchen table on the way to the fridge and it toppled backwards onto the floor as if it had been pushed out in anger. I stepped over it and fixed my eyes on the fridge door handle, a yellow cream color with a fake wood panel running down the center. It looked like an old fashion station wagon. I raced back to my brother. He stood up, grabbed the jug and tilted it back, milk seeping down the corners of his mouth in dribbles onto his shirt, then splashing to the floor. He coughed a few times afterwards, and then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He was okay. Behind us Mom shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “Are you okay?” she finally asked. Parker nodded. “Get this cleaned up. You both know better.” She put the bags on the table and turned back to the garage for more. The milk jug hung weightlessly from Parker’s hand. He dropped his head, chin to chest, and just stood there. I looked to the empty place in the doorway

where our mother had been, half expecting her to come racing back in to hug us or scream at us to clean up the milk spilled on the floor.

I had not thought about nipples for at least a week but standing in the kitchen I began to wonder what my Aunt Jane's nipples looked like. I imagined that she would have nipples like the ladies in the magazine. She was thin and busty, as my mother said, and she knew how to smile on command. I imagined her nipples in plastic.

When we were younger, six and nine, our mother was still in the habit of pulling us onto her lap anytime we were within arm's length. And at Parker's birthday party that year, just after cake, she looped an arm around her son and pulled him onto her lap like a puppy. His friends giggled. At nine, his legs were getting long, and they draped across our mother like she was Michelangelo's Pieta. Parker squirmed. "Mom," he said. "Mom, let me down." She pulled him in closer, squeezing at his middle, her face pressed close to his. "No," he yelled. "Let me go." She dropped him between her legs to the floor. His bottom hit the concrete with a blunt thud. He looked up from between her legs, everyone staring at them. "Why did you do that?" he asked. "Because you told me to," she said. In our teen years he would retell this story when we stood behind the garage smoking, saying he still couldn't believe she would do that to him. He always recalled the embarrassment of it all and the small purple bruise on his butt afterwards.

But as adults and parents, much later, we would laugh about the story, poking each other in the ribs, saying how we were such a pain in the ass as kids,

but as we joked, I also felt a pang of hurt for Mom. I pictured how she must have felt as her son screamed no, as he pulled away in front of everyone. Only a few days after his birthday, he had a nightmare, and she sat at the edge of his bed singing to him and rubbing his back. He does not remember this, but I do. I sat outside his door, humming along with my mother as she made the shadows of the night melt into nothing.

By week three I was sure that Terra and I would not get caught. And I was beginning to believe that I could get away with just about anything. Terra and I had talked off and on since then, and hung out at her house again a couple of times, but neither of us had mentioned nipples or Beth's star exhibit. It was like the moment had not even occurred between the two of us. But I was still analyzing nipples, on everyone. I would size up each person I saw by what I imagined their nipples might look like.

At the grocery store with my mother, I saw a woman with such large breasts that I was sure her nipples must be at least the size of coasters. Coasters. I could hardly imagine looking in the mirror at something like that. The enormity was almost too much to believe.

When I came home from the pool, still damp from the aquamarine water, my mother was sitting at the kitchen table with her head down, her hair frizzy and wet on the ends. She wore her bathrobe, fresh from the shower. Under the table I could see her bare feet and the pale white of her legs just below the knee. She didn't look up when I came in the kitchen.

“Molly,” she said, her head still tucked down so I could not see her face. “What did you do to Beth?” Her words were soft and muffled. I slid my front foot backwards towards the doorway behind me. “Stop,” she said. I held my breath like I was frozen in freeze tag, my muscles tingling as they tightened and strained not to move. “Talk,” she said.

“Well,” I said. “She wanted to play dress up.”

“That’s not what Terra’s father said.”

I fixed my eyes on Aunt Jane’s clock, clicking with its ghostly white face and over-shined chrome. “It was just glitter pens,” I said, letting the words hiss off my tongue.

Her head snapped up like it was pulled by a puppet master. “Glitter pens,” she said, her voice rising. “Glitter pens,” she said again.

“Yeah and Beth liked it. She strutted around showing off the stars.”

“Stars. Did you say stars?” asked my mother rising to her feet, the robe rippling under her moving limbs like the hide of a bear as it stands to full height.

“Yeah,” I stammered.

She was in front of me now, her breath hot and peppery on my face.

“Terra’s dad finally got around to calling about a bruise on Beth’s arm from a few weeks ago. Terra said you grabbed her when she was falling, but her dad wasn’t so sure. Where did you write with glitter pens?”

I was standing just below my mother, my eyes at the tip of her nose. “We drew stars on her chest, around her nipples,” I said. I could no longer see my aunt’s clock but I could still hear it.

“What,” my mother yelled, her spit spraying across my forehead and my eyebrows. “How could you,” she continued. “And why there, on her chest, near her nipples, for Christ sake.”

“Nipples are interesting,” I said. We were still so close I could feel the heat coming off her body and smell waves of lavender from her shampoo.

Before I could move or step back or breathe she pulled open her robe revealing her naked body and said in thick syllables, “What is so interesting about nipples?”

Her nipples were the color of dry clay with thin lines running around the outside like the spokes of a bicycle. They were hard in the middle but sagged a little near the bottom. My mother had sad nipples.

I was staring, inches from her chest, with my mouth open like I was waiting for a lick of someone’s ice cream. “Well,” she said.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Really, I have no idea why we did it.” I stepped back. She closed her robe, slowly looping the two ends together into a thick bow.

“Well, I know why,” she said. I looked up, snapping to attention like a soldier ready for orders. “That Terra Ravenstall is a bad influence. It was all her idea, wasn’t it?” My head dropped bobbing slightly.

“I’m sorry, Mom,” I said.

“You should be,” she said. “You’re grounded. And no more hanging out with Terra.”

“Okay,” I said. “Okay.” And I watched her face flex and shift into a smile, a crooked edged smile with one side of her mouth a little higher than the other. She pulled me into a soft hug against the damp surface of her robe. And over her

shoulder I watched the big hand of Aunt Jane's clock tick towards the twelve. I wanted to push her off, run to the clock, lift it over my head and smash it down on the linoleum floor and listen to the twinkling sound of the gears breaking apart and see the fragmented relics of the glass face and chrome body scattered across the floor. I wanted to be sure it was dead. But I didn't. I hugged my mother, and took deep breaths so I would not have to smell the thick waves of pepper on her tongue, and promised myself I would never think of nipples again, ever.

But when my mother died, almost fifty years later, after the funeral I stood topless before the mirror in the bathroom of my childhood home looking at my own nipples. Downstairs I could hear my brother and his wife and their two children, and I knew that in the backyard my children and my husband and our father were playing with the new puppy we had gotten for the kids only three weeks before. Over the years, the house had faded to a blue-gray, and the upstairs was dusty and empty, since my parents had lived for the last ten years on only the first floor. The mirror was spotty and made my body look out of focus, but I could still trace the outline of my nipples reflected in the glass. When my father called to tell me she was dead, I froze in place at the kitchen table, like I was twelve years old again, hardly able to breathe. It seemed impossible that I would not feel the weight of her wrapped around me as I moved. And that night I had a dream that would recur for three days, about nipples spinning across a wide open plain into nothing, like tumbleweed. In the bathroom, as a chill swept across my chest rising mountains of goose bumps, I closed my eyes and began to hum the songs from my childhood, trying to bring back my mother.

SKULLS AND PINKY TOES AND POGO STICKS

All I wanted for my birthday was an underwater pogo stick. This did not seem unreasonable. I read about it on a plane. The caption below the blue shiny pogo stick read, "This is the only pogo stick designed for use in swimming pools that allows you to perform a variety of waterborne stunts as you bounce off walls and bottoms." I knew I was born to perform waterborne stunts. This was it. Only \$59.95. I had to have it.

On the phone when I told my mom what I wanted, she choked on the water she must have been drinking, a gasp-slurp kind of sound. After she resumed breathing, she said, "James, you're forty-one, and you don't even live near a pool." Although I wasn't sure what my age had to do with it, the picture simply said nine and up, the pool issue was something I hadn't thought of. Silly really. I lived in a row of chopped-up apartments on a hill overlooking Pittsburgh, PA. I had concrete, not water.

"There's a pool down in the flats," I replied, undaunted. The flats were four miles below my house.

"A public pool, overrun with unaccompanied minors. It's not the place to take some crazy water toy. Jesus, James."

"It's my birthday," I said.

"You know, I was just telling your father that I thought you had finally gotten a handle on things, and now this. How am I supposed to tell him you want a pogo stick? Let alone a water pogo stick? Where do you come up with these things? I swear ... just think of something else, anything else."

She did not really mean anything. She meant an iPod or a watch or tickets to some kind of sporting event, something more like what my brother Merlin would pick. Marvelous Merlin.

When I was seven, I asked for the skull of a dog for my birthday. My dad threatened to take off his belt, not good. And I got a GI Joe. When I was sixteen, I asked to have my pinky toe amputated and preserved in a jar. I wanted to put it on my desk. I didn't really need it on my foot anyways, and it was going to be my inspiration for greatness. But my parents ignored me. I got a few polo shirts instead.

After that, I thought a pogo stick was mild. It was even a recreational activity. I could get my exercise while I tried out new waterborne stunts.

I was turning forty-two in three weeks. Three weeks to persuade her. Merlin never asked what I wanted; he just bought me some hokey socks or a new tie that I would never wear. And no one else bought me big ticket items so it had to be Mom. Underwater pogo stick or bust.

At work I made a checklist to reach my goal:

1. Research (find other great men who had odd side habits, hopefully there is a pogo stick user out there who won a noble prize or something)
2. Documentation (hard copy proof to verify findings)
3. Set up meeting (invite yourself over for dinner. Arrive early so you can talk to Mom alone)
4. Compliments (make a list, beforehand - butter her up)
5. Bring her to your side (this will ensure next step)
6. Have her tell Dad (no need to be around for this, take dessert to go if needed)

7. Pogo your heart out

Later at work, while I was bored, I started the sub-list of mom compliments. The list read:

1. Great pot roast (always nice and heavy)
2. Nice finger nails (always clean and well trimmed)
3. Good taste in movies (Goonies for life)
4. ...

I needed more brainstorming time. I was stuck on her hair spray, and I decided it wasn't a compliment that actually said much. I needed a break.

On my way home from work, Merlin called. I didn't answer. He called again. I still didn't answer. He called six times before I answered. Sometimes I make him wait eight.

"James Parker Madison," I said.

"It's me."

"Me who?"

"James, come on."

"Speaking."

"Fine. It's your brother, Merlin Markus Madison."

"Well, hello, triple M. Why didn't you just say so?"

"Funny, I'm laughing so hard." Pause. "It's Dad ... He's going in for surgery on Saturday you know."

Silence.

"I know you know. Mom said you weren't going?"

Silence.

“You need to go. Mom needs you to be supportive. He’s your dad.” Pause.
“Cindy and I will pick you up.”

“I have prior engagements on Saturday,” I said.

“No, you don’t. We’ll pick you up.” Merlin emphasized the we’ll, and the letters sounded like melting wax.

“I do, too.”

“You do not.”

“Do, too.”

“God. Stop being such a pain in the ass.”

“Is your ass hurting currently? Because that couldn’t possibly be me, not over the phone anyway.”

“Huh ... Mom said you want some pogo stick for your birthday.”

“Yes, the Generation One Underwater Pogo Stick.”

“If you come, I’ll tell Mom to get it for you.”

“Pick me up at ten.”

I hung up before he could say anything else. I needed to go home and update my checklist. Triple M’s support would vastly speed up the process. Pogo, pogo, pogo.

They were late on Saturday. Four minutes to be exact, and I was sitting on the front porch when they pulled up. I didn’t get up when Merlin put the car in park, brake lights gleaming Twizzler red.

He rolled down the window and yelled, “Let’s go.”

“You’re late,” I said.

“Sorry,” he said. “Will you get in?”

“I need you to open the car door. It’s dirty. I just washed my hands.” I knew this would send him over the edge.

“God Damn it. Get in the car.” He pounded his hand on the side of the door, a metallic thud like a clanging dumpster.

I didn’t move.

“Hi, James,” Cindy said. “I’ll get your door, come on.” She swung open the passenger side door, and Merlin grabbed at her arm.

“Don’t get his door, Christ, he’s an adult.”

“Thank you ever so much, Cindy, you’re a doll.”

I was waiting for Merlin to drop the F-bomb. It was one of my goals, to get him to say it within the first fifteen minutes every time we saw each other.

Cindy swung the back car door open, and I bowed to her as I got it. “Good Morning, sir,” I said to Merlin as I hooked my seat belt.

“Fuck you, James.”

Check.

Last night I updated my checklists. Right now, I had twenty. I usually hovered somewhere between ten and twenty-five. Thirty-two was my all time record, and five my lowest. I put them on the side of my refrigerator, lined up alphabetically by title, held up with two magnets, top and bottom, one red and one orange.

I found checklists helpful and cathartic. I liked to check things off. I liked the feeling of being *done* with something. It also helped me monitor my goals. Getting Merlin to say the F-bomb was added three weeks ago, with a final goal of

getting him to do it for two months straight. It was easier than I thought it might be.

The car ride to the hospital was silent, no small talk, how I preferred to ride in a car. Merlin knew this, so did Cindy. She was a nice enough woman, too bad she married Triple M. A pity, really. Mom always said I ought to find a woman like Cindy. So once at Christmas I asked Cindy if she had any female relatives who were unmarried, attractive, and interested in an arranged marriage. She blushed so pink I thought maybe she was choking and got up to give her the Heimlich Maneuver, but just as I was about to wrap my arms around her, Merlin pelted me with a slipper. It was hard soled and hurt. When I was drying dishes for Mom in the kitchen that night she said, “James, that is not what I meant. You know that.” And then she turned her head away and said to herself, although I could still hear. “I should just stop trying.”

We parked in visitor parking on the fourth floor. Dad was supposed to be on the sixth floor according to Cindy. He was also supposed to be getting prepped for surgery now. He was having a pacemaker put in. They told Mom it was routine stuff, in and out, no big deal.

I liked hospitals, the clean white halls and the order and the tension.

When I was in second grade, and Merlin was in fourth, I broke my arm falling off the jungle gym at school. The truth was I didn't really fall; I jumped, with no intention of landing on my feet; I wanted to break a bone. I had been reading about bones in a book I got from the library, and I wanted to see how mine did under pressure. It turns out, I have weak bones; that is what the doctor said. He asked if I drank milk. My mother was mortified and assured him I had it

every night at dinner, but really, I usually drank soda. Anyways, as a result of the jump/fall I broke my arm, just above the wrist. At the hospital they had to set the bone. Merlin was standing next to me eating a hot dog (we had missed lunch), and they put my fingers in this reverse glove looking thing and pulled. It sounded like popcorn popping. Merlin passed out on the spot, a cold thud to the floor. It was great. I ate the rest of his hot dog.

On the sixth floor we couldn't find them. The nurse kept assuring us she would find out where we needed to be, but I started shouting anyways. "They lost Dad. He's gone."

Merlin turned and said under his breath, "You better shut up."

Cindy grabbed my forearm and started pulling me away from the nurses' station.

"Dad," I said. "Dad." I started coughing, and an elderly woman sitting outside one of the rooms got up, came over, and put her arms around me.

"There, there," she said. "He's with God now."

"Thank you," I said. "That means so much."

Merlin was ready to punch me. I could feel it, but I didn't look at him. And Cindy told the woman thank you and dragged me into the hallway near the elevators.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," she said.

Silence. We waited for Merlin.

By the time we found the right floor and the right room, he was already in surgery. Mom was sitting alone, in a hard back chair looking out the window in the friends and family waiting room. She gave us a weak smile.

“Mom, I’m sorry,” said Merlin. “How was he? Was he nervous?”

“Oh, not your father. He was fine. He kept reassuring me. You know Dad.”

Cindy sat down next to Mom and reached over to hold her hand. They half smiled at one another. If it had been a movie it would have been a heart-warming moment.

“They said it would take two to five hours,” Mom continued. “Now we just wait.”

Merlin sat down on the other side of her, and it looked like some kind of quirky family sandwich: a boxy middle-age man with a receding hairline in a yellow warm-up outfit on one side and a thin blonde woman, also middle-age, with dark oval glasses and a cardigan, on the other; Mom in the middle. For the first time, Mom looked old. Not just you’re-my-mom-of-course-you-look-old old, but Mrs. Claus-old.

I just stood there.

Then, for a minute, I imagined making a break for it. Picking Mom up and running for the door. Mrs. Claus scooped up in my arms like an injured kid with her feet flopping over my forearms. We would leave it all behind, Dad and Merlin and Cindy and Pittsburgh and boring jobs and nothing great. We would hit the open highway and drive for twenty-four hours straight only stopping at BP and Sonic all the way to the west coast. It would be epic. And in California I would open a school for amateur underwater pogo stick artists. Mom would run the front desk in a hot pink visor, and I would manage the lessons and the pools out back. It would be waterborne stunts everyday all day. I would be the in-house pogo stick pro.

But Mom was not looking at me. She was holding Cindy's hand and talking quietly to Merlin and thinking about Dad, strapped down, half awake, in some room in this hospital getting a little machine put into his chest to keep things regular. To keep things normal.

When I was twelve I thought I had been touched by God. Literally. I found this odd-shaped bruise on the back of my calf, couldn't remember anything that would have happened to make it, and then realized it looked a lot like the face of Jesus. God had bruised me. I was someone special.

I told Mom while she was making dinner. I said, "Mom. Mom. Look." And pointed like a lunatic to my calf, almost falling over as I twisted and pointed on the slick linoleum floor.

"What?" she had said, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand. "What did you do to yourself?"

"It's Jesus," I had said. "Jesus, on my leg. Isn't it great? What a sign."

Then she had turned her full attention on me. She bent down and pulled my leg up close to her face. I could smell the sticky heat of boiling potatoes coming from her hair. She looked up at me and said, "You know, you might be right. I can see a little bit of his jaw right here." She smiled and stood up and ran her hands over my head twisting through my curls. "You are a special boy," she said.

I was ecstatic. Touched by God. I spent days in front of the full-length mirror in the bathroom contorting into new positions in order to see it better, in order to trace the lines of Jesus' face on my pale almost-hairless calf. And I

waited, patiently, for God to tell me what to do, but nothing came. The bruise faded. God was silent. I was not special.

I offered to get everyone coffee from the hospital cafeteria downstairs. Merlin and Mom look surprised, and Cindy asked for decaf. Two regulars, one decaf. As I took the elevator down I thought about this week's check list.

1. Operation B-day Pogo stick (top priority)
2. Buy more black beans
3. Tape ER on Thursday
4. Get stamps at the post office
5. Read newest Smithsonian Magazine.

I had not listed Dad's surgery on purpose. I didn't really want to think about it. Dad was just Dad, and I figured that wasn't going to change. If I had to make a list to explain him it would look like this:

1. Hard (literally and figuratively)
2. Pot Belly
3. Likes pork and beans, a lot
4. Loves football and pee-wee baseball
5. Has big feet
6. Always wears a belt and threatens to take it off (but never does)
7. Likes old cars and loud engines
8. Thinks reading is for sissies and nerds
9. Loves Mom
10. Smiles at Merlin, often

I decided to go sit in the ER for awhile, to check out what oddities were available for viewing. Two people were bleeding, one guy looked like he had had too much to drink, and a few people seemed to have stomach aches or back pain or diarrhea or one of those other sicknesses that make you look, in general, okay on the outside but not so okay on the inside. I had been hoping for someone with a wooden spike sticking out of their arm, not life threatening but interesting. I sat in a cold chair with a split in the vinyl seat cushion next to the guy who looked like he had been drinking too much; he also smelled bad, dog-poo bad, and I watched the sliding doors swoosh open and closed. Each swoosh ushered in a burst of mild air and the sound of cars grinding along the highway outside.

The people in the waiting room didn't seem as distressed as you might imagine from doctor shows, mostly just bored and tired. Some had crumpled magazines on their laps, half open, but most stared off into space at nothing. No one really talked, a word here or there. And no one regarded my presence as odd or unwelcome. We were all just waiting for something to happen. We were waiting for what was next, whatever that meant.

It took me awhile but eventually I made it to the cafeteria and carried back coffee, lukewarm and murky as I placed it in a traveling container.

I was alone on the elevator until the third floor, when the doors cracked open and two people in white coats rolled in a bed with an old man on it. The man was attached to a pole of fluids with several tubes coming out of him at different locations, his eyes glazed, empty like a zombie. I turned to the doctor or nurse or whoever this hospital person was and said, quietly right into his ear, "Is he dead?"

The hospital guy was young with straggly brown hair and deep wrinkles etched across his broad forehead, “No,” he said, not even trying to be quiet. “He’s sick.”

“Is he going to die?” I asked, still quiet, fascinated about being so close to someone who might croak right in front of me. One for the books, I thought.

“What’s wrong with you, man? Have a little compassion,” he said, narrowing his eyes and spitting a little as he said it.

“Well, is he?” I asked again.

“Damn, some people,” he said, turning away from me.

The other guy, older with a thick waist and thick glasses, said nothing as he stood across from us and stared straight ahead at the doors. Suddenly, things started beeping on the monitor that the older hospital guy held, and the old glazed-eyed man jerked in the bed.

“Shit,” said the young guy. And he pushed the pole with the bags toward me. “Hold this,” he said. And he climbed up onto the bed and started doing things to the old guy. Some kind of life-saving maneuver, I assumed. It was wild. The old man’s arm, on my side, jerked out towards me and smacked lightly against my leg. It was cool and white and wrinkled with dark spots circling like leopard print across the top of his hand. And then just as quickly as it started, he went limp; his fingers dangling next to me. I gripped the pole. I was helping, I realized. I was assisting, trying to save this man’s life. I was a hero.

The young guy crawled off the bed and stood next to me. He reached over and jerked the pole back from my hand.

“Is he okay?” I whispered.

“He’s fine,” said the older hospital guy, who throughout had only glanced sideways at the old man, not moving.

“So, so I helped save him?” I asked.

“Sure, whatever,” said the young guy.

I was a life saver. I held poles of liquid. I was part of the team.

All this happened between the third and the sixth floor. And then suddenly the elevator binged, and it was my stop.

“Call me if you need help later,” I said as I side-stepped past the young man and the old man in his bed. “I’m available.”

The young guy gave me a side smirk that might have been a smile. “Right,” he said.

As I walked into the friends and family waiting room Merlin said, “What took you so long? Where’s the coffee?”

They were still seated in the family sandwich, and I handed out the coffee.

“Thanks,” Mom said weakly.

“On my way up,” I said. “I helped save a man’s life in the elevator.” I smiled, ready to respond to their questions, to give details, to paint a vivid picture of my close encounter with death and the important aid I had provided.

“That’s nice, dear,” said Mom.

“Uh huh,” said Cindy.

“Good coffee,” said Merlin.

“I also saw a dancing purple unicorn eating cotton candy in the cafeteria,” I said. They nodded; no eye contact.

I went to the nurses' station. Empty. I went to the bathroom, didn't go, and went back to the nurses' station. A fat brown-haired woman was on the phone. She had on light pink scrubs and wore too much eye shadow.

"Excuse me," I said. She waved her finger in the air at me like she was trying to say one minute without saying it. I waited. She hung up, and said, "Now, how can I help you?"

"My Dad," I said. "He's getting a pacemaker put in. Do you know how it's going? Harry Madison."

"Umm, Madison."

"Yes."

"No notes, so that's good. Looks like they should be finishing up soon, and so far so good." She smiled. She had an ugly gap between her teeth.

I walked back in again. Merlin looked up, and said, "I saw you talking to a nurse. What did she say?"

"He's dead," I said. Cindy dropped her coffee, the thin liquid spilling out like leaking oil around her. The words came out before I knew what I was saying. Almost like a wish I couldn't take back.

In fourth grade my pet rat died. It was little and white and lived in a hamster cage beside my bed. I woke up one morning before school and Beaker was laid out like a cat in the sun in the middle of the cage. I tapped the plastic wall that separated us. He didn't move. I lifted the lid and poked him with my pointer finger. He didn't move. I lifted him up by the tail, dangling over the cage. He didn't even squirm. I knew he was dead, but it just didn't seem quite real. He

was still there, shaped the same, smelled the same. Like he was conked out or something, not dead.

Mom came in because she thought I had tried to go back to sleep, and I was still standing next to the cage dangling Beaker by his tail. “James,” she yelled. I dropped Beaker, and his head slammed off the corner of the plastic walls of the cage, and he bounced to the ground. He landed back down, and his legs splayed out exposing his thin white belly. Now, he looked dead.

Mom let me stay home from school and offered to help me bury him in the backyard, but I told her I would rather do it alone. I put him in a paper sack and carried him out behind the oak tree. I dug deep. The hole was almost two feet and bits of root and rock stuck out on the side walls. Half a worm had been chopped off on the bottom by the shovel. I couldn’t put him in the hole. I sat out there all afternoon watching the ants march up and around the dirt pile next to the paper bag that held the dead body of Beaker.

At dinner time Dad came out. He patted my head. Said a few words about when he lost his first pet, a dog named Milk. Then he lifted the bag turned it upside down and dumped the rat body into the hole. It hit off a side wall loosening dirt that tumbled in on top of it. Beaker was face down in the hole. His butt and thin legs sticking up; his tail bent down around him like a wreath. Dad used his foot to push the dirt back into the hole, burying Beaker. Once it was full, he stomped it down with his foot a few times so the raw dirt was pressed in the outline of his work boot. “Time for dinner,” he had said pulling me up by the arm and leading me inside for spaghetti.

Now, in the waiting room, my family was frozen and silent staring at me thinking he was dead like Beaker.

“Just kidding,” I mumbled squinting my eyes a little, trying to push out a half smile. “Ha ha,” I said.

Mom threw the rest of her coffee at me. It wasn’t particularly hot, but it was still a little warm, and it was shocking, like the first dive into the pool at the beginning of summer. The liquid splashed at my waist and then my feet, staining me tea-colored brown.

“You son of a bitch,” said Merlin.

Cindy said nothing.

“It was a joke,” I said. “Trying to lighten the mood.”

I was looking at Mom, waiting for her to speak, begging her with my eyes to pick me, to make it okay, like she always did. She said nothing, the empty Styrofoam cup hanging loose in her hands.

“James, it’s not funny,” said Cindy. She stood up now and held out a few napkins. She was trying to make peace, to bridge gaps. I took the napkins but didn’t use them.

“Just go away,” said Merlin. He was pulling closer to Mom now, and he tucked his arm around her shoulder and pulled her in like a doll or a child.

“Mom,” he said softly.

I wanted to rip her away from him.

She finally spoke, soft and light, like we were talking about a beach trip or Sunday brunch. “He’s your father,” she said. “No matter what, he is your father.”

And me, didn't you think about me." She didn't look at me, and I was hungry like I had never been hungry before. I regretted it, all of it.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled, low and hard to hear.

"You should be," said Merlin, pulling Mom closer. "That was cruel."

"Shut up, Merlin, just shut up," I said, my voice rising and curling out from my lips. Cindy was frozen halfway between us, and Mom was studying the lines of the carpet, the outlines of the two coffee spills etched like continents over the standard geometric pattern.

"Mom," I said. "Mom, please."

She looked up, finally. "No," she said and let the empty cup fall to the floor. "No."

I sat in the far corner, as far as possible from Mom and Merlin and Cindy, like I was in time out, for the next two hours until the nurse came in and said Dad was out of surgery and that we could see him. She said things went well and that the doctor would be coming to talk with us soon. Mom hugged Cindy and Merlin and then Cindy again. She grabbed Cindy's hand, and they followed behind the nurse with their fingers interlaced. No one asked me to come, or even looked back to see if I was following them down the hallway towards Dad. On the floor the coffee stains had started to dry in places so the carpet was a patch work of dark and light spots, pimped and ugly. I kept a few paces between us, trailing behind like a wayward dog. But as we walked I decided that this was the exact situation I had been waiting for. Now, when their expectations were the lowest I would surprise them all, shock them, with my rise to greatness. Today was the

day I would prove that I was special. I was going to save our father. I wasn't sure how or when, but I was sure it would happen. My finger tips began to tingle and I picked up my pace, closing the gap quickly until I was right behind Merlin. I could see the wrinkled lines on the shoulders of his warm-up suit and the thin prickles of hair growing back on the base of his neck. They would never see it coming.

Dad's room was small. So small that we could hardly fit on his half without touching, so we stood shoulder to shoulder in a line at the foot of his bed like soldiers. Mom moved up closest, reaching for his hand, but he didn't reach back. He was hopped up on all kinds of medication, and his normally bright eyes were cloudy and droopy. His speech was slurred and when he talked he hardly sounded like the man who would grab at his belt buckle and shout, "Don't make me take this off. You'll regret it" as Merlin and I ran for our rooms as children. He looked like the man I had seen earlier in the elevator, glazed eyes, old. But I needed to focus. This wasn't about Dad. It was about greatness. I had to get closer to the pole and the machines at the side of his bed; that was where I had first-hand experience in emergencies.

Mom was standing in the spot I needed. She was bent in half stroking his face with her hands, talking baby talk. Her face was drawn in a fake smile that she used when she was worried. She wasn't used to seeing Dad like this, vulnerable.

The doctor came in; he was young, pink faced, and thin. "Everything went fine," he said.

"Then why is he so out of it?" Mom asked.

"It will take some time for the anesthesia to wear off," he said.

Mom did not look convinced, her forehead wrinkled into three deep lines. “But he can’t even talk,” she said.

“That’s normal,” he said. “I have other patients to check in on, do you have any other questions?”

“I guess not,” she said. Before the doctor was even out of the room I sprung to action.

“Let me have a look,” I said, moving past Merlin and Cindy, sucking in my stomach so I would sneak past. I was next to Mom now, her warm skin brushing my arm as I moved up close to the instruments that blinked and flashed and beeped. I studied them. “Everything looks good,” I said.

“You don’t know anything,” said Merlin, his voice rising. “Get away from that stuff, you idiot. You might break something.”

“Merlin,” Mom said her voice tight. I beamed, she was back. I flashed Merlin a you’re-a-sucker smile. I tapped on the heart beat monitor, the green line wiggled across the screen.

“It’ll be okay, Mom,” I said, reaching for her hand; she squeezed back. With my free hand I patted Dad on the arm, his skin shaking and twisting with my touch. He rolled over. A monitor behind me started beep, loud, screaming peals of sound that seemed to say, emergency, emergency. Cindy started crying. Merlin yelled, “Nurse, nurse!” And Mom looked at me and said, “Do something.” So I did. I climbed up on Dad’s bed, rolled him over and started CPR. I should have checked for a pulse or breathing, but I didn’t. Instead, I pumped his chest up and down with the palms of my hands until he yelled, “God damn it, get off me” clear as day as he grabbed at my arms and face, maybe trying to hit me. It

was a miracle. I brought Dad back to life. Before I could climb off, the nurses surrounded us. I still sat on top of Dad like I was riding a donkey and one of them said. “Nothing to worry about, it looks like he just accidentally pulled out his oxygen when he rolled over and it dipped a little. Everything is fine.” She turned to me, “Sir, would you mind getting off the patient. He is still very weak from surgery.”

“I’d be happy to,” I said, waiting for her or Merlin or Cindy or Mom to thank me for saving Dad. Behind me Dad was talking now, full sentences, less slurred, about wanting water and food and slippers. He sounded more like Dad, stern and on the edge of being mean.

“Oh, Honey,” Mom said, hugging me. “You were very brave. Right into action.” She squeezed my shoulder.

“Mom, you have to be joking, he could have killed Dad, when nothing was even wrong,” said Merlin.

“Merlin, you zip it. He wanted to save your father, that’s enough,” she said, moving away from the boys towards her husband who was still harassing the nurses for a list of things he wanted.

“You’re an idiot,” said Merlin.

“No, I’m not,” I said, standing up straighter, pulling my shoulders back. “I’m a hero. And wait until you see me on my new underwater pogo stick, it’s going to blow your mind.”

Merlin dropped his shoulders, his head bobbing up and down over his chest. And I began to imagine my new pogo stick, shimmering blue, and I could see myself launching off the side of pool into some kind of back-flip-spin that

would revolutionize pogo-sticking, and on the side of the pool Mom would be standing in a pink visor clapping, cheering for her son.

ON BEING AN ATHLETE, AND FEMALE

At first you do not even realize there is a difference. You wear tube shin guards and carry a green water bottle just like everyone else. You, along with the other players, marvel at the older boys who help coach, as they juggle soccer balls from foot to knee to head and back like there are invisible strings connecting all these parts. You want to be first in line and love to shoot as much as Tom, your neighbor from three doors down. Your pigtails are no more noticeable than some boy's lime green cleats. You just want to play soccer, and so do they.

By fourth grade it is clear there is a line. Now there are boys' teams and girls' teams exclusively. You are divided, pink and blue. A wall of cooties and biology has been constructed. At recess you play basketball, girls versus boys, and your team wins, easily. Cherish this victory; it is the last time you will be able to walk away simply as winners and losers, no side comments.

For a long time you do a little of everything. You play sports, whatever is in season, but you also take ballet, and piano, and pottery. You play outside with your brother and his friends and are in the middle of the pack during group races and don't get picked last for games. You can keep up and they know it. But by junior high the sides of your life are beginning to pull at you. They each want it all. You fight it at first, running from soccer to ballet, changing from cleats to soft pink slippers in the minivan while you scarf down a peanut butter and honey sandwich. But by eighth grade it is too much, and you must pick. It is easy when it comes down to it. Sports. It has always really been sports.

Your freshman year you make varsity. One of two freshman. You can't stop smiling. The older girls carry you around the high school like a tiny dog in a purse; they show you off, squeeze your shoulders, and you love it. This makes you important. You have a label, an identity, the freshman girl who plays varsity soccer. At games the stands are mostly empty, just parents, boyfriends, and a handful of friends bribed to come and cheer on the team. You don't even care. You become obsessed with stealing the ball. You play defense now and have a knack for slide tackling. You can take down girls twice your size, pop up and race off with the ball before the opponent has even returned to her feet. There is power in this, in stealing.

During study hall you sit with boys, athletes too. One day they start talking about how bad girls' sports teams are, how slow the pace is, how the players lack skills. You are quiet. One turns to you and says, Not you, Kit, you're an exception. You can play, not like those other girls. You don't know if you should be excited or ashamed in this moment, but later that night in bed, with the lights out, all you feel is anger. It sits thick in your mouth, a plastic after-taste lingering for weeks, months.

Your senior year you become the first girl at your school to get recruited to go division one in college soccer. They put your picture in the paper. You are voted best female athlete in the school; you get a plaque. The plaque is wooden with a cheap gold plate on it, a size smaller than the boy's version. You put it under your bed when you get home. In college, you tell yourself, things will be different.

Division one sports are different. You learn this your first week of school. This is your job, seven days a week, 365 days a year; you even train in the summer. During the school year you train twice a day. You wear sweat pants to class straight from practice, still sweating. All your sweats and t-shirts and warm-up clothes have your school's name on them. Everything you wear says "athlete."

You learn about your body that first semester. At conditioning you watch girls throw up, pee their pants, and keep running. There are trash cans at the corners of the field for this purpose. You must make up any laps you miss while puking. You avoid both these disasters, but one day after running, you have to sit down in the middle of the sidewalk on your way to class because there are so many black spots jumping in front of your eyes you cannot see. People walk by and stare. You are late for class. But this is not the only thing you learn. You begin to enjoy the hot tingling pain of exhaustion, lactic acids coursing through your legs. You learn that even when you think that you cannot go on you can; you have a second wind and a third and a fourth. Everything can be recycled and pushed beyond breaking. The body is a lesson in power.

Stairs take on a whole new meaning at school. The dining hall is on the second floor, and at lunch you stand at the bottom of the stairway, bracing yourself for the pain. You take deep breaths, close your eyes and step up. It's like getting Indian rug burn from your brother up and down your legs, the raw twisting of muscles. You hold your breath until you get to the top.

On Christmas day, at your grandparents' house, the first time you have seen your extended family since leaving for college that first year, you sit at dinner beside your older cousin, Jake. He is in college too, and he asks how

things are going. He asks, So are there lots of lesbians on your soccer team? You look at him over a pile of mashed potatoes and say, No. Why? You are confused. He says, Well, you know, a lot of *those girls* are pretty butch, and I figured you get a lot of lesbians that way. You wonder what else he means when he says, *those girls*.

The girls on your team are pretty. Off the field they wear high heels and short skirts and make-up and have athletic boyfriends. Like the Hulk, each of you transforms the moment you step off the field. In a pink dress and heels, at a bar or a party, something is locked behind the walls of your rib cage, rattling at your bones, until you step back on the field and let it out. When the game whistle blows, the thing bursts out through the space between each bone of your ribs and forms a slick coating of anger and aggression and pain. It ripples like waves across water with each step that you take. The thing allows you to hurtle yourself in front of a soccer ball that hits with enough force to brand the ball's maker, Adidas, across your thigh. You spit and bleed and curse. You are free. After the game the thing rocks around inside of you, racing away from the sucking pull of the rib cage prison. Once you are in the shower it is too late, the thing has been caged, but your bones buck against your skin in pulsing beats as you smear on bright red lipstick that blinks back at you in the mirror like a warning.

You meet a cute boy in your freshman English class. You always smile at him as you slip into your seat, straight from practice, with two bags, one for school and one for soccer. You have to work in partners one day. He is yours. You blush. He asks what sport you play. He seems interested. Then he begins joking about how you could probably beat him up. How you must be some kind of beast.

You pull your toes in under your desk and round your shoulders forward. You stop smiling. He doesn't ask you out.

During games things melt out of focus. Blurred bits of color mark the world beyond the hard white lines, the boundaries. You forget you are a woman. You forget that you exist at all.

You are always in charge of marking the opponent's leading scorer. You push and bump, piss her off between plays. On a break down the sidelines you slide across her, the black pebbles of turf spraying out in front of you like rain, knocking the ball out of bounds. She falls, hard. You do not apologize. You have burning red turf marks on your thighs that eat through your sliding shorts and tug at your skin. You will have scars. During the game you feel nothing. You are empty. Off the field you long for this feeling like a hunger.

In college you think sports, athletics, are your world, soft shapes that define you, create you. You are surprised when people outside this world do not know about women's soccer. Even more surprised when they look at you blankly when you mention Mia Hamm. You are horrified when the only thing people seem to know about women in sports relates to their bodies. Brandi Chastain's abs are more famous than her penalty kick and the US World Cup victory she was celebrating. *Playboy* features Olympic athletes. Bodies as sex. You want to tell them about your muscles, the blur of the game, the grit, the truth. But you cannot find the words, so you run harder.

On alumni day you meet women who played on the first team established at your university, formed right after Title IX and ushered in as one of the first women's programs in the NCAA. This was before a women's National Team,

Olympic Team, or World Cup. They are telling you about the pre-history of your sport, and of women in it. You try to picture these women practicing a minimal three days a week, in hard, uncomfortable cleats, slogging after the ball on mud soaked fields before turf, and you wonder if they felt it, the thing, the blur, the peace. They must have.

Your senior year you receive recognition after recognition, labeled athlete again and again. You are an All-American and the Defensive Player of the Year. You are captain and voted your team's MVP. In your last game you score a header off a corner kick. The net punches out and sucks in with the force of the ball, and you are encircled by your teammates. You seem to glow, and your pulse beats in steady waves, go, go, go. When the game ends your lungs heave with hot pain, and your legs are liquid beneath you. It's over. What's next?

You mourn. You are caught up in nothing.

Your mother tells you that it is just the blues, that it will pass. You aren't so sure. You itch in the night, and the thing locked behind your ribs is pounding; your bones are cracking from the inside. You try running, jogging as they say, but it isn't enough. You cannot empty the world or yourself by just running. At the bar with your friends, you have the urge to punch a stranger, anyone, straight in the face, and you have no idea why. You fidget at work. You get angry at the TV when men's professional sports come on. You talk on the phone with a female friend, an ex-college athlete like you, and you talk about longing. You have trouble picking out clothes and shoes and food. You are not sure how you fit into the world without your sweat pants. Sometimes on the weekend you put on your old warm-up outfit, and your shin guards, and your soccer socks, and your cleats,

and you curl up on the couch, close your eyes, and imagine the start whistle blowing. You hear the dimpled bounce of the ball across the field, and you see yourself sliding. You go for the steal.

One year later in a new town at a new job you still have the urge to tell people, for no reason, that you were a college athlete. It seems like something they should ask and know, like how many siblings you have and where your parents live. But you hold yourself back, most of the time. You push it down. Your boyfriend says you are still an athlete, but you know you're not. It is gone, forever.

You volunteer to coach little kid's soccer. On the first day they line up, a jumble of boys and girls and cleats and tennis shoes. You give them bright green jerseys and clean white soccer balls. They hold the balls in their hands when you first pass them out. At your feet, you say. Soccer is played with your feet. They giggle and place the balls in front of the tips of their toes. You tell them that the first thing they will be learning today is how to pass. You ask if anyone can come forward and show the group, on your foot, the correct part to use when passing. A little girl with mud-colored hair jumps up and down in the front waving her hand. You pick her. She comes forward and points to the arch of your foot. Correct, you say. She skips back to her place, her ponytail bouncing on the back of her neck, her toes turned in a little as she moves, and you want to pull her back and whisper in her ear, go, go, go.

GROW UP

Eliza has a pet dragon. Ed is purple and has a long pink tongue that is bumpy. When he's in a good mood, he lets her slide down it, and on each bump she is popped into the air, and just for a moment she hangs there, caught holding onto nothing. This is her favorite part about Ed, the bumps on his tongue and her free fall.

Eliza is seven, and her mother is horrified she believes in dragons. Every morning at breakfast, over cold toast and generic cheerios, her mother tells her, "Dragons are not real." And Eliza pushes the cheerios around in the milk until they get so soggy they sink. Then she says, "Right, except for Ed. He's special." One morning, her mother cannot take it any longer and slams her hand down on the peeling wooden table. The cereal bowls jump. "Grow up," she says. "Just grow up." Eliza leaves the table, her toast uneaten, her cereal still sloshing from side to side in the bowl like dirty dish water.

Eliza never talks to Ed at school anymore. And for the most part, she tries not to think about him. She has learned from past mistakes. Kids aren't nice when you tell them you have your own private purple dragon who lets you slide down his two story tall tongue. Ed doesn't like the other kids either, so he's okay with being patient until after school. He waits in his cave, which is not dark or scary, but has a skylight and a disco ball. Ed is very hip.

Usually, Eliza goes straight home after school. This is what she and her mother have agreed on. But on the day her mother tells her to grow up, Eliza goes to the park. Just a quick swing or two. The park is small and has mostly baby

equipment, swings with buckles, slides that are so short Eliza can see over the top, sand box stuff. But one set of swings is big, bigger than all the sets at her school, so tall that even if you pump as hard as possible you can never quite get as high as you think you should be able to. It is the Everest of swing sets.

The park is empty today. The grass under the big swing set has been worn away leaving behind dust bowls under each seat. Eliza invites Ed to swing with her, but he's not in the mood; he's reading Beverly Cleary again. She's alone.

By her sixth pump she is high. She can see the tops of the roofs across the street and make out the wisps of clouds on the far horizon. As she swings forward the wind pushes in her face, splashing her hair from behind. She tries not to think of Ed, who she is sure is enjoying himself, giggling over Ramona's childhood antics as he eats skittles, his favorite, and sneaks long fizzy drinks of the orange pop they've been saving for a special occasion.

She knows her mother will be mad. But she doesn't care; she pumps harder. Eliza realizes she has reached the peak of the swing set when at the height of her arch up the swing buckles a little bit before it can begin the decent down. She has reached the top. Victory.

And then, without thinking, she jumps. It is bigger than popping off any of Ed's tongue bumps. She hangs mid-air. A cloud moves in front of the sun, shadows stretch out under trees like talons, and for a moment she sees the world just as her mother wants her to see it. The world is gray, shades of charcoal and dust. Eliza kicks out, trying to fly, flapping her arms, closing her eyes. She's falling. And then Ed throws her a polka-dot pink sheet from his king-size bed,

and she pulls it over her head into a canopy. She floats. Soft-wafting pink across the sky.

IN THE WARD

One afternoon in fourth grade my next door neighbor, Mrs. Clockright, let my brother and me watch the movie *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* with her. Mark and I were spellbound. People all locked up together going crazy. My Mom was pretty upset about the whole situation and had almost, but not quite, banned us from going to Mrs. Clockright's house. But free babysitting on weekends was too good.

Mark and I became obsessed. We converted our unfinished basement into a ward. To make it look more authentic we took white sheets from the guest bedroom and hung them on the walls as high as we could reach from a chair. We also made small cells, sheets hung over the backs of the folding chairs Mom used at family gatherings when dinner guests swelled over five. Each cell contained a pillow for a bed and a steel mixing bowl that served as both the sink and the toilet. And we had pills, lots of pills. Luckily it was around Easter so we pilfered the candy jars for jelly beans. Red was for screaming fits. Yellow was for shaking on the floor. Pink was for general confusion and strange nonsensical talking. Orange was for everything else.

It was a freak show in our basement. Mark and I dressed in our all-white waffle-patterned long underwear and walked around in a daze with our hands out in front of us, more zombie than anything. Sometimes, we would sit on the floor and talk baby talk to one another. We would have convulsions. We screamed. At one point, we set an old box on a chair and pretended that it was showing a baseball game, like in the movie. We narrated the imaginary events. "And it's a

home run,” screamed my brother. He turned to me and said, “Start shaking, we scored.” So I did. I lay on my back, kicking my legs over my head, shaking my arms at my sides, like I was in some kind of over-excited workout class for nut-jobs. It made my muscles feel like bags of flour, jiggling on the bone. It felt wildly freeing to throw your body around for no reason, to have no rules for how to act or feel. Crazy was fun. My mother was not happy about the sheets or the jelly beans, but she was especially mad about the noise.

“Jennifer Mitchell, get up here this minute,” Mom yelled, her voice breaking into our staged world from the top of the stairs.

But, at the moment, I was mid-show down with Anton, the evil head doctor in our make-believe ward, a large brown and white stuffed monkey Mark had won at the fair two summers ago.

“I mean it,” she yelled.

Mark snickered in the corner. He was one year older than me and somehow always managed, despite my best efforts, to avoid the consequences of our actions.

But I couldn't stop, I was letting Anton, the monkey doctor, have it with my words and my fists. I kicked him in the gut, my foot bouncing off the soft stuffing, and screamed, “I hate you. I hate this place. Let me out of here,” as I imagined every crazy person would if forced to live in bed sheet cells and take pink jelly bean pills. Then, for added emphasis, I spit at him. It was a last-minute addition that I had not planned and the thick wad of saliva hit his furry face just as my mother grabbed my arm.

“Please tell me I didn’t just see you spit at a stuffed animal?” she said. She gripped my arm tighter, pasta sauce on her shirt, a big glob of it.

“She’s crazy,” my brother said quietly.

“What?” my mother said swinging her head in the direction of his cell. Only his left foot was visible.

“Crazy, she’s crazy,” he muttered again.

I imagine it must have been a funny scene, my brother’s fetus-like shadow in his cell, the tips of his bare toes sticking out. Jelly beans scattered across the basement carpet like freckles. The wreckage of my cell was behind me, chair flipped over, sheet tangled and lumped in a pile from my fight with Anton. In the haze of this image, for whatever reason, I decided maybe I should just be crazy, real crazy, for a moment.

“For the ward,” I screamed and suddenly lunged away from my mom. Her grasp on my arm slipped, and I was free. I stumbled over the pile of my sheet, and it twisted around my ankles, propelling me forward onto Mark’s cell. His sheet pulled off, leaving him exposed to the air and my mother. I was submerged in white, the sheets on top of me and under me and over me. My breath was hot and moist against the thin cotton.

“Jennifer,” my mother began. I didn’t move; I wanted to stay lost in the sheets that smelled like oatmeal and fresh cut grass.

“Told you. She’s crazy,” said Mark.

At that I kicked wildly, but I could not untangle myself from the sheets. I was twisted and wrapped and cocooned in a straight jacket, and my mother began to laugh.

“You look like a crazy person,” she said through hoarse chuckles. Mark laughed, too. But I was beginning to panic. The harder I tried to untangle myself the more intense the hot air of my own breath felt. My legs and arms like long cold tubes of sausage, unmovable. I screamed. It was not a I-want-to-be-crazy-cause-its-fun-and-weird scream anymore, but a I-am-scared-I-might-be-swallowed-by-the-sheets-and-the-earth-and-never-see-my-mother-or-my-brother again scream. They did nothing. The laughter stopped but I felt no hands reaching for me, no one pulling the sheets off.

Then, suddenly I was sure the world was spinning, and I had been swallowed. I assumed this was revenge for pretending to be crazy, for taking sugary pills and sticking them up my nose to make Mark laugh. I felt myself moving across the floor and the sheets tightened. I couldn't decide if they would keep tightening, if soon I would not be able to breathe. I was not screaming anymore, and I was afraid it was because I couldn't, my voice, my world, gone.

And then the room was bright. My mom stood over me, the sheets in her hand. And behind Mark and Mom was Anton, smiling a quirky monkey smile, the hair next to his left eye matted and sticky where my spit had hit him. He had won after all.

MEDICAL MUSEUM

As the school bus turned onto the brick road, Kenny, alone in his seat, could see the museum at the far corner of the main street. It had glass windows in front and the lights inside were low and soft. It did not look scary or horrifying or shocking from outside, more like a lawyer's office or a place that sells used items. But it was in fact a medical museum, focused on Civil War medicine, which was all of the things that healing should not be.

The first picture in the museum Kenny looked at, really looked at, like a child seeing pictures of nude women or men, was one of a stack of arms and legs. The stack was as tall as the second floor of the barn it stood next to. Amputations. Doctors stood near the pile in white aprons tie-dyed with blood, holding knives like butchers.

Kenny knew that Buck, his best friend, would have loved this place. Buck had a plastic tub in his closet stuffed full of fake blood and plastic toy guns and an arrow on a headband that made it look like it had gone straight through your skull. Buck loved gore.

Two weeks ago, Buck ran head first into a tree during his annual family ski trip to Aspen, broke his neck, and died.

Kenny was more interested in this museum than he had ever been in any school field trip or project before. This was real, real blood and limbs and knives. In one room there was a display of the instruments that doctors used during the Civil War. They were old and rusted but Kenny could tell, even through the rust, that they were not like anything he had ever seen at the doctor's before. They

were too big and rough to be something that should touch your skin, let alone your brain or bones.

After Buck died, Kevin's mother hovered, tucking the corners of the afghan in around him, refilling his water cup, turning the volume of the TV up and down. She made his favorite foods, meatballs and pudding and twice-baked potatoes.

In another room at the museum, he read that during the civil war the soldiers in the South did not get gangrene as often because they did not have enough supplies to continuously bandage wounds, so maggots lived in the wounds. The maggots ate the gangrene. Kenny could not imagine wounds filled with maggots any more than he could imagine what an earthquake would feel like. The bone rattling shake of the earth rocking under him was too far away and big for him to understand.

Kenny did not stay with the class and Mrs. Black, his fifth grade teacher, did not notice. His classmates stumbled and bumped out in front of him, gawking and gazing at the pictures and glass cases that surrounded them. A few kids, mostly girls, buried their eyes behind their hands and arms. Silent mouths hung loose and open.

Right before Buck left for vacation, they had spent the night at Kenny's house. They watched *Jaws*, again, and rewind and re-watched all the parts where someone got eaten. Buck said, "Bam, look at the blood" as red sprayed like a sprinkler across the screen. "Suckers, never even saw it coming."

Kenny fell behind in the room that showed black and white pictures of the men who had survived with half arms and legs and missing parts of their faces. He could not understand why they would smile in the pictures that now hung on

the walls of the museum. How they managed to live was one thing, but smiling, after all that, seemed unnatural. He touched the place on himself that each man was missing. Left leg above the knee cap. Right arm up to the shoulder. Lots of ears. A guy could still get along without an ear. And Kenny thought, if they turned to the other side, they still looked normal. Passable.

At the funeral, Buck's mom burst into tears every time she saw Kenny, as if he were a mirrored reflection of her dead son. People patted him on the head and said things like, "He's in a better place" or "It will get easier."

It was the picture of a man with no arms and no legs that stopped Kenny's slow progression. He was a stump. Kenny stood in the low light looking at the man. He wore a hat, Union blue, pulled down low almost covering his eyes and his face. The arms and legs of his uniform were pinned up, tucked in places where other things had once been. Empty.

Kenny touched the photo. He knew he wasn't allowed; it was against the rules. Mrs. Black had said this, the guide in his khaki pants and polo shirt had said this, and the signs posted in each room said this, but Kenny did it anyway. He needed to touch the man, to reach deep into the photo and feel the places that had been cut off. He wanted to know what it felt like to run his fingers along the seams of skin that were flopped over the man's stumps. Scars.

Kenny sat on the floor. He tucked his arms and legs in as close and tight to his body as he could. He faced the picture of the man on the wall in front of him. Kenny lifted his feet off the ground squeezing and pulling all his body parts to his chest. He couldn't balance, and he swayed and wobbled and rolled backwards

onto the floor like a turtle on his shelled back. He could feel the floating pain, the hunger of what was missing; the empty weight of nothing.

THE NINE LIVES OF LOVE

When you were nineteen you were so in love you were blurry eyed. Honestly, it's lucky you didn't get hit by a car or fall off a porch. You would have followed that boy anywhere. In hindsight, he was nothing special, a tall lanky Indiana boy with a crooked smile and the biggest feet you had ever seen. He wore baseball hats all the time, even when you kissed. You met him in World History 101; he asked to borrow a pen. You never went on a date, not once during all eight months. Instead you met to eat dinner in the dining hall, watched movies and kissed during the credits, went to keg parties where he drank too much beer and you walked him home. He was the first boy who ever said you were sexy, the words muffled into the side of your neck and wisps of hair while you were sitting on the floor of his dorm room. You pulled his face up to yours, nose to nose, hands pressing on his cheeks, turning his smile into a fish face. "Really?" you asked.

He tilted his head to the side squishing and flattening his cheeks between your hands. "Of course, Jenny," he said.

You didn't feel sexy. You were wearing pink and white pajama pants with white clouds and an oversized t-shirt you had gotten free from the university. Your hair was unwashed, and you had on glasses.

He reached up the back of your shirt for the hook of your bra.

"What about me is sexy?" you asked still holding his cheeks.

He leaned in trying to kiss you and unhook you at the same time.

"Everything," he said fluttering his eyelashes a little.

You leaned away from his kiss and moved so he could not reach your bra.
“Be specific,” you said.

“God, are you serious?” He twisted his face and upper body forward, away from you.

“Just elaborate a little,” you said reaching for him.

He pushed your hand. “You know, I’ve got homework,” he said. “I’ll call you.”

Boys are like that. I’ll call, they say. You’re beautiful, they say. I love you, they say. And after you close your eyes and ask them what color your eyes are, they are silent. You ask them your middle name. They say Elizabeth, right? No no, they say, I remember now, it’s Lynne. You walk away. Your middle name is Sue.

At five your mother says she knew you were going to be a handful. When she turned her back, at the stove or in the laundry room, you would sneak into her bedroom and open all the drawers in her dresser. You liked her underwear best. You would take out silky panties and pull them up over your tiny jeans. You belted layers of white and cream and pink underpants in place with long trouser socks. The layers of underwear sagged in the back, loose and empty, against your small frame. You would put underwear on your head too, low across your forehead, the waist band resting just above your eyebrows, a hat of sorts. You don’t remember this, but your mother likes to tell the story.

The first time you brought your future husband home, she told this story over a meal of pot roast and corn bread and red wine. The wine in her glass

sloshed in slow circles as she smiled and described the image of you dressed to the nines in panties. Josh laughed and squeezed your leg under the table. “It’s cute,” he whispered later. “You wanted to be a mini-prostitute. A nickel a kiss.” You almost snot red wine out your nose trying to hold in laughter.

You swear thongs have been invented to torture you. Your friends explain they are important, necessary. No panty lines. Sexy. Your mother says that thongs are like floss. You laugh. But as you pull on your new thong getting ready to go out with your friends all you can think about is butt floss. The thin pink line of string you have put between your own two cheeks.

The first time you saw a boy naked, fully naked, you were scared. You both undressed yourselves, separately, a few feet apart. You had been dating for months, but up until that point you had mostly just kissed and fumbled around outside or underneath your clothes. That night, you went to dinner first, a real date. You ordered more food than you could eat. You crossed and uncrossed your legs under the table. You went to the bathroom too much, checking your make up and touching your hair and tugging at your dress. He just smiled a lot. “Jenny,” he said, as the waiter slipped him the check. “You’re beautiful.” You smiled back, licking at your lip gloss, tasting the tart cherry that was guaranteed to give you long-lasting color. In your lap, you folded and unfolded your hands, twirling the ring on your finger, back and forth, like prayer beads.

You kept the lights off and it was a little hard to see him even when your eyes began to adjust. You could see the dark shape of his shoulders and his legs

and the lighter space of open air beyond his body. You were cold and you crossed your arms over your body trying to warm yourself up and hold yourself in. You do not recall much of the rest of the evening. You did not have sex, and afterwards you did not date for much longer. But even now as you begin to undress or the moment just before you step into the shower, you remember the fuzzy lines of his body as you stood apart looking at each other.

You hate the idea of being naked, all the way naked, any longer than necessary. After sex you brainstorm ways to quickly cover up, sheets, pillows, his shirt, yours. You pretend to be cold.

In first grade you made a bet with your best friend that you would take flowers to the boy you had a crush on. Erik Kingston. You were smitten. He had dark curly hair and he reminded you of Prince Erik from *The Little Mermaid*. You and your friend passed notes back and forth about him, drawing hearts around his name. You were at her house when you made the bet. "I'll do it," you said, pulling grass up in handfuls and tossing it out in front of you to catch in the wind as you sat cross-legged in her backyard.

"You will not," she said. She pulled up a handful of grass and tossed it at your face. You turned your head at the last moment, and you could feel the grass caught in your hair. You pulled the pieces out, one green blade at a time.

"It's already done," you said.

On your way to school on Monday, you pulled three daffodils out of Mrs. Henry's yard. They were going limp even before you picked them, the yellow of

the petals like dark urine. You clutched at the stems, and practiced under your breath: “Erik, these are for you.” “Erik, please accept these flower from me.” and “Pretty day, right? I saw these and thought of you.” In the end you did not say any of these things. Instead, on the playground during morning recess, you walked up to him, and said “You’re cute” and threw the flowers in his general direction and ran for the swing set, not looking back. At the swing set you bent over, hands on knees, to catch your breath. Then, your best friend was beside you, bending over too. “Did he pick them up?”

“No,” she said. “He didn’t.”

He avoided you all day, in the classroom, at lunch, at recess, during gym. But at the end of the day as you lined up to go home, he stood behind you. You could feel his breath on the back of your neck and you smelled pizza, the lunch special. He put his mouth up close to your ear and said, “Thanks. They were pretty. I think you’re cute too.” In that moment, you were sure you would marry him and that you would move to a castle on the ocean and have a daughter named Ariel. Happily Ever After.

You have begun to dread holidays, especially Valentine’s Day, not because you don’t have a sweetheart, you do, but because you hate the obligatory roses. Like clock-work you get them, red or white or yellow or pink, and you scowl at them over dinner and when he is not home you move them behind the couch so you do not have to look at them. They say nothing you want to hear. If you look at the loose petals too long you are sure you can hear the roses talking, saying, “I’m over-priced. He waited in line to get me, behind all the other men rushing not to

forget a day that someone else said was special.” You long to come home on a rainy Tuesday and find a big bouquet of wild flowers on the counter with a note that says, “Just because.” Or “You’re beautiful when you sleep.” And when this happens you will curl up next to him and whisper in his ear and you will know you have found prince charming.

On the day you got married you were sure it had to be a dream. You wore a soft white dress, short, with capped sleeves, and bright blue shoes. You got married in your parent’s back yard on the patio where you learned to walk. He never stopped smiling. Until you met him you never knew that someone could love all the crazy things about you, the way you sometimes slept the wrong way on the bed, with your head at the end and your feet at the top, and in his vows he said, “I love you because you still like to go down slides at the park, and you own a pair of rubber boots just so you can splash in puddles when you feel like it. I love you when you get a cold and are so stuffed up you carry around a box of Kleenex like a purse. I love that you refuse to iron cloths, saying wrinkles add character, and I love that you drink the milk out of your cereal bowl and don’t ask if it’s impolite.” His vows were long and detailed and intimate. Your vows were short. “I love you,” you said. “Because you are the man that I did not think existed, but you do, you are real, and you see me like no one else ever has.” He cried. You kissed. And you did not wake up from your dream.

When you were twelve you stayed at your grandparent’s house for a week. They took you to the zoo and the pool and let you put chocolate chips in your pancakes.

Every moment focused on you. But one morning, you got up early, hair matted and little flakes still stuck in the corners of your eyes. Outside the kitchen door you stopped, still in the shadows of the hallway, your grandmother and grandfather at the table on the other side, soft in the morning light. They weren't talking, spoons clinking on cereal bowls, glancing out the window at the birds or the low fog or the passing car. Occasionally, they glanced at each other, smiling no-teeth smiles. They weren't reading the paper or listening to music, just sitting, quiet. As a kid you didn't understand what it was you were seeing but you stayed in the hallway, holding your breath, knowing you were watching something worth watching, like when a music box first opens and the tiny dancer begins to twirl just a moment before the music catches up.

As an adult you always try to remember what happened next, but the memory just seems to fade into shades of gray leaving your younger self barefoot in the hallway. It bothers you sometimes, that you can't see yourself finally breaking into the room, your grandmother jumping up to offer you apple juice and waffles, your grandfather pulling you into a deep hug so close you can smell the nutty warmth of his breath. But you can't. Instead you have to wonder again and again what that kind of love is like. What it means to sit at the table, just the two of you, without talking, watching the world. You know that in this moment they are well past the point of sex on the kitchen floor and long talks about what might happen in ten years.

Sometimes when Josh finishes your sentence or hands you the thing you have been looking for without telling him what it is, you catch yourself holding your breath and you can almost feel the smooth hardwood floor of your

grandparents' hallway underneath your bare feet. And you picture yourself as a tiny dancer in a music box taking your first spin in perfect silence as you smile and smile into the quiet of the world.

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