

KAYLENE CAN'T DRIVE: STORIES

A Dissertation

presented to

the Faculty of the Graduate School
at the University of Missouri-Columbia

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

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MAY 2009

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For Nathan and Sylvie.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to my committee, in particular Trudy Lewis and Marly Swick. Thanks also to Naeem Murr, Sherod Santos, and Lynne McMahon, and to the editors of literary magazines and anthologies where some of these stories appeared, often in slightly different form.

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Introduction: East 24th Street

1.

When I lived in New York City in my youth, which is how I refer now to the period between 1998 and 2001—I arrived when I was twenty-two, left when I was twenty-five—I lived for the most part in a 225-square-foot studio apartment on East 24th Street. I described the apartment to family outside New York as smaller than a one-car garage, which it was. I owned four pieces of furniture, all from IKEA: a plastic coffee table, a two-seater bistro table, a bedside table (my only drawer), and a futon, which, when opened, just about filled the apartment. There were three plywood shelves attached to the wall that I painted white and used for books, though they filled quickly, and I stacked spillover on the floor. There was one standard-sized closet with a squeaky, accordion door that I jammed with clothes, clothes for every season, plus I was a businesswoman then, so I had work, weekend, and going-out outfits. I didn't do much cooking in my youth. I used my kitchen cabinets for sweaters.

The apartment was expensive—it's hard to find one in New York that isn't—but businesspeople are overpaid, so I had enough money to always have cut flowers. I'd buy them at corner delis and the Union Square farmer's market. Tulips and roses. Hyacinths in season. I also made a garden on the fire escape

outside one of my two windows. The apartment faced 24th Street. There was a comedy club across the street, a dive with a rusted metal awning that curved out over the sidewalk and, inexplicably, had a hole burned through the middle. I kept lots of plants in my fire escape garden, fifteen or sixteen, a real fire hazard. There were herbs, annuals, perennials. I didn't pay much attention then to names. A couple of the plants were in hanging plastic pots but for the most part I transplanted them into varying sizes of terracotta. I lived on the third floor of the building, a five-story walk-up, red. I especially loved my fire escape garden from the street, looking up.

I bring up East 24th Street and my New York City youth because it was during those years, living in that apartment, that things really changed for me. It's embarrassing to admit, but before then I hadn't spent a lot of time thinking. Thinking about the world and my position in it. At least not specifically. As an undergraduate I had a realization one day that I wanted "to teach women." Then I spent four years going to the bar.

I can identify several reasons I became more conscious in my early twenties. I was supporting myself for the first time, living alone for the first time. The über-suburban life I'd known as a child had been troubled in unexpected ways. It had imploded, really. In June 1995, my father, a businessman, had been arrested on twenty-two counts of various white-collar crimes. In December 1995, he'd gone to trial and been convicted of nineteen of the charges by a jury I can picture members of to this day, the foreman in particular, a slight white man of the sweater-vest-khakis school of dress, bald on top with a fringe of reddish-

brown hair, glasses; he reminded me of a math teacher. In May 1998, after years of failed appeals and one month before I moved to New York, my dad reported to federal prison, where he'd spend the next six years, and my mom, who deserves more admiration than my dad, though you wouldn't know it from my fiction, began her life of selling things, and having things repossessed, and scrambling to find work, and driving, forty-five minutes each way, twice a week, to visit Dad. So there was that. But there was also the fact that I was living in New York City, a place I love more than any other, a place that gives me a thrill just about every time I walk out the door because you never know what you'll hear, smell, see. The clinking of fork to plate as someone eats. Cupcakes, fresh bread, curry. A dusty basement window crammed with puppets.

New York City played a starring role in my learning to think. Really, I attribute the change in perspective to the visual arts.

2.

During my New York City youth and residency on East 24th Street, I spent Saturdays on the other side of the island, going to art galleries in Chelsea. A friend introduced me to the cluster of showrooms on those blocks abutting the Hudson—some of them twelve by twelve squares; others whole buildings; one a former garage whose top had been sliced off and raised, its clanky, steel curtain of a door replaced with an elegant brushed aluminum one, enormous, but a breeze to open—and I was hooked. I'd spend afternoons zigzagging south from West 26th Street to West 14th, entering gallery after gallery, looking always to be surprised.

Once I walked through a filmy white maze, wide enough to accommodate one, tight, therefore, when another person needed to pass. Playing in the background was a recording of a woman whispering. Another time I walked into a warehouse-like room, empty but for boxy cement sculptures arranged in neat rows and columns. Upon closer inspection I saw they were castings of the spaces beneath desks and chairs. One day I walked into a gallery, around a partition, and I was surrounded by Andreas Gursky photographs. I started to cry.

The reaction was a surprise. The photos were beautiful, certainly. Gursky makes wall-sized prints of images that draw attention to patterning. There was a shot of a rock concert taken from a bird's eye perspective, the stage and performers a mere sliver on the left, the majority of the image filled with thousands of concertgoers, the slogans on their T-shirts discernible, their arms raised and pointed towards the stage in a way eerily reminiscent of Nazis saluting Hitler. And another of a ninety-nine cent store, the top fifth of which was mirrored ceiling, the bottom four-fifths aisle after aisle of bright, almost luminous packaging, with the occasional solitary consumer reaching for a bag of Twizzlers, or scratching her head choosing Gatorade. And then squeezed between sprawling landscapes was a close-up of Van Gogh brushstrokes, presumably from one of his wheat fields, printed the same size as the others, revealing similar patterns and symmetries.

Before his death in 1998, Alfred Kazin gave a talk at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which was later published as an essay titled "The art city our fathers built" in *The American Scholar*. In the essay, Kazin describes many

pieces of art, among them *Early Sunday Morning*, an Edward Hopper painting that “haunted [him] as no other New York painting ever [had]” (Kazin). Kazin asks himself, “Why does that row of low brick houses on lower Seventh Avenue rivet me?” (Kazin) He responds: “It is because the street has entered into Hopper’s consciousness in a way that transcends realism. He has made the drab and the commonplace beautiful through the force of belonging. Every detail in the street belongs to us and we to it” (Kazin).

I felt similarly about Gursky. The photos, as I said, were beautiful, their content was thought provoking, the juxtaposition of images was exhilarating, but it wasn’t any of these things that prompted my emotional response. Rather, it was that work like this existed. That a person in the world saw the world this way, that this is how it entered his consciousness, and then he made photographs, thereby transferring specific details to me, the viewer. Standing there looking at Gursky’s photos I felt like I was in communion with the artist, getting a glimpse behind the curtain of his mind, and the feeling was astonishing.

Several things happened. I went to more galleries and museums, hoping always to see a piece of work that made me feel, suddenly, connected to the artist. And I started talking a little about art. I took friends, businesswomen like myself, to shows they had to see, promising we’d stop for lunch and maybe a little shopping afterwards. And I began to look at New York City differently. I felt like one of the characters in Jennifer Egan’s novel *Look At Me*, Charlotte, the model, who gets into a serious car accident and has to have her face reconstructed. When she returns to New York from her hometown in the Midwest, where she

spent months convalescing, her life as a model is over and she starts to see things differently. To represent this, Egan has Charlotte notice outlines of old signs painted on the sides of New York City buildings, traces of histories. Here's Charlotte describing the experience:

At the corner of Sixth Avenue and Twenty-eighth Street I stopped and turned slowly around. They were everywhere—signs and the possibility of signs, many faded to translucence, as if I'd gained some new power that allowed me, finally, to see them. "Harris Suspenders Garters Belts." "Maid-Rite Dress Co."; mementos of the gritty industrialism I'd come to New York to escape. But today the signs looked honest, legible in a way that the negligéed models I'd seen this morning in *Vogue*, prone in a parking lot surrounded by broken glass, would never be (Egan 71).

Like Egan's character, I felt like I was seeing New York with a more penetrating gaze. But, rather than signs of industry, I began noticing art works and artistic gestures folded into the city. There were large-scale projects like *Metronome*, the installation spanning the face of a building at the south end of Union Square. It includes a digital clock that tells time forward and backward and a hole that puffs steam. And there were smaller, homegrown efforts. Lampposts covered with collage, mock advertisements, slivers between buildings transformed into community gardens. When I started to look, I saw that there was evidence everywhere in New York of the individual's desire to make art and it made me feel happy, buoyed. In the words of Kazin, "When art begins in pleasure and gives us pleasure, as it has for me in New York City, we come close to loving the world as we never did before" (Kazin).

The reorientation of one's way of seeing through art is an experience Virginia Woolf describes in her novel *To the Lighthouse*. What's more, through

the character of Lily Briscoe, Woolf engages the problem of how an artist bridges the gap between seeing the world and rendering it, in Lily's case, on canvas. For much of the opening section of the novel, Lily attempts and mostly fails to accurately represent what she sees. The difficulty arises from her desire to render reality as she sees it, despite her awareness that any rendering is limited to her own individual perception, and that the very act of rendering is likely to distort the truth of her vision. Here's Woolf's description of Lily grappling with these concerns:

The jacmanna was bright violet; the wall staring white. She would not have considered it honest to tamper with the bright violet and the staring white, since she saw them like that, fashionable though it was, since Mr. Paunceforte's visit, to see everything pale, elegant, semitransparent. Then beneath the colour there was the shape. She could see it all so clearly, so commandingly, when she looked; it was when she took her brush in hand that the whole thing changed. It was in that moment's flight between the picture and her canvas that the demons set on her who often brought her to the verge of tears and made this passage from conception to work as dreadful as any down a dark passage for a child. Such she often felt herself – struggling against terrific odds to maintain her courage, to say: 'But this is what I see; this is what I see,' and so to clasp some miserable remnant of her vision to her breast, which a thousand forces did their best to pluck from her (Woolf 18-19).

This description of making art resonates with my own experience, though I turned to writing instead of painting. Perhaps the most notable difference between the visual arts and writing is that the former is concerned primarily with the visible world of texture, color, and material, whereas the latter is often primarily concerned with evoking and exploring the interior depths of consciousness. In her essay, "Modern Fiction," Woolf suggests just this, that the proper subject of fiction is not the material world, but the mind:

Life is not a series of gig lamps, symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible? (Woolf 150)

Fiction writers – and of course it is impossible to generalize about the aims of all fiction writers, but here I’m talking about writers like Woolf and myself – attempt to engage truthfully with not only what they see, but what they think, and, more obliquely, what they feel. This is further complicated by the fact that fiction often inhabits multiple points of view, so the writer is not merely exploring their own interior space, but the interior spaces of imagined characters.

The artistic and ethical implications of fiction’s attempts to represent and connect other minds is the central issue of one of Martha Nussbaum’s essays, “The Window: Knowledge of Other Minds in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*.” Nussbaum claims that *To the Lighthouse* demonstrates that:

People are sealed hives full of bees that both attract other bees and keep them off. In her complex image Lily Briscoe indicates both that knowledge of the mind of another is a profound human wish – it feels as if to have that knowledge would be to be finally at home, in one’s hive – and at the same time, that this knowledge is unattainable. The hives are sealed. Their sweetness or sharpness lures us – and then all we can do is hover around outside, haunting the hive, listening to the murmurs and stirrings that are the signs of vibrant life within (Nussbaum 730 -731).

As Nussbaum suggests, fiction allows us the illusion that this profound, impossible wish can be fulfilled, not only in the act of imagination, but, Nussbaum goes on to claim, within the bounds of human intimacy through time. In addition to the complex, layered relations Nussbaum considers, such as those between husband and wife, I believe the visual arts also make possible a similar

sense of human connection, and that prose writers can use written descriptions of art, or ekphrasis, to help connect the reader with the minds of characters. But I will discuss this at greater length in the next section.

For now, suffice it to say, the capacity of fiction to bridge the gap between individual minds is what drew me to writing. I was drawn to the complexity of the reader-writer relationship, the necessary time and commitment it takes to read books, the quiet, all of which strike me as akin to the intimacy of a personal relationship. I like that as a reader you can be in two places at one time. As a writer too, though I didn't know that back then. Anyway, the point is I started to imagine connecting with a reader through a story I created. I even imagined doing what Gursky had for me, inspiring wonder. Of course I'd yet to sit down and try to write, but the fantasy, the dream helped in my life as a businesswoman. I'd started to feel panicky in the corporate world, I hated it so much. But I could think about writing and escape the office.

Around this time a character began forming in my head, a young woman that was remarkably similar to me—dad in prison; mind-numbing corporate job; 225-square-foot studio apartment. One morning, on the walk from the subway to the office, I named her Trula Tinto, which I thought sounded like So-La-Ti-Do. When I got to my desk, I wrote the name in large letters across a post-it note topped with the company logo. I tacked it to the cubicle wall, where it stayed for the remainder of my time as a businesswoman. Colleagues, if they noticed, maybe thought Trula Tinto was someone I owed a call or report. What she was, though, was a reminder that I could try to be an artist.

I started keeping a Word file open and minimized, tucked behind the PowerPoint presentations I'd throw together and pretend took me hours to make. When no one was looking, I started writing New York stories about Trula Tinto.

3.

The stories, of course, were terrible. Far from wondrous, even (especially) to me. There was one about Trula buying a chocolate cigar from her favorite East Village bakery. The first sentence was, "Trula deserved the chocolate cigar." And another about Trula watching the cluster of men at the southeast corner of Central Park who write on grains of rice and display them in tiny, rice-grain-sized vials. It was called, "The Rice Writers." Thinking back about the work, I cringe at Trula's passivity, at the cloying sentence-by-sentence writing, at my lack of self-awareness. What can I say? They were early efforts. But a thing that does still interest me about the work is that even then, in my earliest stories, I often tried to describe art.

This remains true of my fiction. In my stories there's a lot of art. There are characters who are artists or artist-want-to-bes. In "Green Cubes," Emily, the narrator's, dating a conceptual artist, Woody, who makes sculptures out of broken car glass. The title character of "Case" is a photographer who takes pictures of the insides of people's cars. In "Hiding from the Puppet Woman," Lila, the narrator's, in a relationship with a photographer, CJ, who takes pictures of her body parts. In "Hunter's Crossing," a secondary character, Mrs. Holt, has an artistic awakening and begins painting, albeit beginner work.

There are also characters who aren't artists, but who respond to events in their lives with, as I see them, artistic gestures. In "Warden," a young woman's father, who has been missing for years, turns up finally in prison, and she fills her New York City apartment with plants. In "Sister Sister," Milly, a woman who feels guilty about her sister's rape, lashes out with damaging photographs. In "Hunter's Crossing," the entire cast takes to their roofs to make collages.

In my stories, I try to direct the reader's eye and mind to art. I do so by folding in descriptions of art pieces and having narrators comment on intentions behind projects. I don't typically write overtly about how seeing a piece of art makes a character feel, though I'm increasingly interested in doing so—more telling. Typically I try to show that the work's had an impact on a character by the way he or she describes it, by the space he or she devotes to the description, by the level of detail. In a related way, if I were writing about a character that, say, lived in a 225-square-foot studio apartment that meant a lot to her, I might allow her to open a piece with two paragraphs of description about that apartment, to really show the reader that, though it's been eight years since she lived there, the details are still fresh.

In stories that include art, I try to make the descriptions of the art, descriptions that are necessarily filtered through the characters' minds and language, do a lot of work. Here's Emily, the narrator of "Green Cubes," describing one of Woody's art projects that uses broken car glass:

Woody makes beautiful things. His latest project, for example, is truly brilliant. He sculpted tiny cars, cars that would fit in the palm of your hand, out of broken glass. In the centers, he installed

pulsing red lights. The cars are battery operated and Woody places them on New York City sidewalks, on top of mounds of broken car glass. So the effect then is this: green glass cars with beating hearts. Cars that look like they pulled themselves up and out of rubble, living. Woody hides in sunken doorways with a video camera, recording reactions.

I hope, first of all, that it's easy for the reader to picture Woody's work—bumpy, bottle green cars; flashing red lights—to imagine, maybe, holding a car in his or her hand. Hopefully it's clear, especially in the context of the story, that Emily's a little bitter as she talks about Woody and his art. He's been pretty condescending about her job as a businesswoman. Mostly, though, I hope the reader sees, by way of this description, that Emily sincerely admires the work. I wanted Emily's sincerity to come through in these two sentences:

So the effect then is this: green glass cars with beating hearts. Cars that look like they pulled themselves up and out of rubble, living.

I broke after “hearts” so the claim about the project's intent would be in two sentences. I thought it gave the description a sort of breathless, excited quality. And I ended on “living” because it's a strong word, I think, a word with positive connotations, especially paired as it is with “rubble.” It's an exciting proposition, making art that troubles the boundary between inanimate and animate, art with a life of its own. And rubble, well, it's been known to kill. “Rubble” was a word used a lot after 9/11 that stuck with me.

So the visual arts prompted me to start writing. And then, in turn, they became the stuff of much of my fiction. Which places my fiction, or elements of it anyway, in the ekphrastic tradition.

In a 2007 essay titled “Why Ekphrasis?” published in *Classical Philology*, Valentine Cunningham considers the centrality of ekphrasis in literary history:

It is hard to imagine western literature, certainly the tradition of Hellenic/Roman/Christian/post-Christian literature, without what we can call ekphrasis—that pausing, in some fashion, for thought before, and/or about, some nonverbal work of art, or craft, a *poiema* without words, some more or less aestheticized made object, or set of made objects (57).

Not surprisingly, most of the examples offered in Cunningham’s essay are poems:

W.H. Auden’s “The Shield of Achilles” and “Secondary Epic;” T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*; John Ashbery’s “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” (Cunningham 58). There’s a long, well-established line of ekphrastic poetry. All of my poet friends have written at least one ekphrastic poem; the same is true of many of poets of the twentieth century. Cunningham claims, “the poem as description of and commentary on some painting is almost a norm of western poetic production” (Cunningham 58). Lesser known, or lesser discussed anyway, are ekphrastic prose works, though Cunningham does speak about ekphrasis in prose, claiming, “novels of every sort, simply could not manage at all without the ekphrastic encounter. Wherever you go in the House of Fiction you find yourself in the presence of such meetings” (Cunningham 58).

To risk oversimplifying, it seems to me there are a couple probable reasons for ekphrasis appearing more often in poetry than prose. First, there are reader expectations and the meditative or “pausing” quality associated with much ekphrastic writing. In general, a reader approaches poetry more willing to meditate, or to give the work the time it takes to process another person’s

description of meditation. Meditation and descriptions of meditation, the pauses that come with them, are abstract things, and poetry deals more in abstraction than fiction. Stated a little differently, ekphrasis asks readers to imagine “spatial” works, making it a good fit for poetry, which often works spatially. Prose narratives, on the other hand, tend to work on the reader in a “linear” fashion. That there’s an opposition between the spatial and the linear is something Doris Lessing talked about, and it’s a distinction Cunningham points to in his essay, asking:

What are all these pausings for thought about, when the poem and the fiction and a character go into the art gallery, into some actual or invented collection of pictures, when a painting or sculpture or some such object is placed before us, and we are placed before it, when (to use Lessing’s famous and valuable opposition) the linear flow of narrative slows or even stops, to encounter some spatial form, or at least for the linearity to traverse a spatiality? (Cunningham 61).

Later in the essay, Cunningham returns to Lessing’s opposition, stating:

Lessing’s old contention that the linear and the spatial make a difficult mix is still worth thinking about, afforded, of course, by more recent modernist and postmodernist skepticisms about the aporias of art history and art criticism, the difficulties implicit in the attempt to translate the visual into the verbal, what we see into what we say... (Cunningham 67).

Despite Lessing’s claims, there are, of course, fiction writers interested in exploring the meditative, spatial forms induced by the visual arts in prose. Much of Gertrude Stein’s writing illuminates how prose might work spatially and what this might suggest about the relationship between the text and the reader. In addition to Stein’s well-known poetic portraits, verbal collages intended to mimic the experience of “seeing” cubist paintings, her prose and prose-poetry work to

destabilize and even undermine a linear reading, instead insisting on a spatial experience. William H. Gass suggests as much in his essay “Gertrude Stein and the Geography of the Sentence.” Gass says that Stein’s language emphasizes the way meaning is generated through a relational construction, rather than a purely sequential movement: “Certain themes or threads can be continuously followed, but sometimes one will be more obvious or dominant than another, so it is more accurate to describe the text as woven... the presentation of meaning is spatial, not temporal” (Gass 93). Gass focuses on Stein’s prose pieces in *Tender Buttons*, in which one encounters sentences such as: “A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing” (Stein 9). Gass claims the sentence can be best understood in a spatial organization, as follows:

A kind	in glass	and a cousin
a spectacle		and nothing strange
a single hurt color		and an arrangement
	in a system	
		to pointing (Gass 84).

Most prose works, including my own, are not as spatial as Stein’s, but as Lessing suggests, ekphrasis, through its meditative demands, impacts the reader in a similar way. By referencing a static, visual object – real or, as is often the case in my stories, imagined – the reader’s linear progression through the story is at the very least slowed, if not altogether stopped, as in *Tender Buttons*. Why a writer would wish to do this is a fair question, and one Gass addresses when he suggests that Stein’s work, far from being elitist as it may seem to some on the surface, is

in fact interested in leveling hierarchies, which he describes as a “wonderful and democratic equality of value and function” (Gass 74). Aggressively linear works conform to a system of control that a spatial relation, be it gained through works such as *Tender Buttons* or through the use of ekphrasis, undermines, thereby providing the reader a greater freedom of movement within the text. In this way, ekphrasis in prose is a strategy fiction writers can use to reorient the traditional, linear, and hierarchal relationship of language within stories and, more importantly, between the reader and the text. The meditative pauses, which generate spaces in the text, create a dynamic relationship that amplifies the intimacy within a piece of fiction.

Perhaps the most obvious difference between Stein’s work and my own is at the sentence level. My stories work primarily within the stylistic tradition of literary minimalism. This, in itself, creates a kind of tension with my interest in ekphrasis, and gets to what I see as the second reason for there being less ekphrasis in contemporary prose than poetry, that being the influence on contemporary fiction of minimalism. Much of minimalist writing suggests that it is better to write about everyday occurrences, such as towel shopping, than something as high-minded and pretentious as visiting art galleries or museums. As Frederick Barthelme says in his 1988 *New York Times* essay “On Being Wrong: Convicted Minimalist Spills Bean,” he realized at a certain point that:

...People were more interesting than words. That idea lounged on the rim of the trite bucket for a while, until it was joined by the sense that ordinary experience—almost any ordinary experience—was essentially more complex and interesting than a well-contrived encounter with big-L Language (Barthelme).

It's a short jump from "big-L Language" to big-A Art, and a jump the minimalists would take. With a few exceptions, like the feverish sketch of the cathedral in Raymond Carver's story of the same name, which could perhaps be called art, you'd be hard-pressed to find an ekphrastic passage in a minimalist story. The idea wasn't in keeping with the perceived democratic spirit of the undertaking. It was Frederick Barthelme, a former teacher of mine, who advised a workshop I was in that it's better to write about towels. He'd done it the night before, ten or so pages; he was pleased. This was in 2002, when he was working on *Elroy Nights*. I'm assuming the passage was cut before publication because I looked and there weren't ten pages of towels.

Despite this attitude, and despite the influence of minimalist style on my own stories, I remain interested in literary fiction that reflects my joy in engaging with the visual arts. In recent years there's been more of it. For starters, there's been a resurgent interest in historical fiction, and some authors have written stories and novels about the imagined lives of artists. One such writer is Tracy Chevalier, whose popular 1999 novel, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, is a speculative story of the origin of a painting with the same title by the 17th century Dutch painter, Johannes Vermeer. Chevalier's book includes descriptions of the titular work, as well as descriptions of Vermeer's attic studio and other paintings.

Of more interest to me, though, are novels that have appeared recently with made up artists and their made up artworks at the center of them. In 2007, two such books were published, both by young-ish Brooklyn writers, women,

Jami Attenberg and Kate Christensen¹. In the transcript of a conversation between the two, initiated by Attenberg and published on the literary blog *Maud Newton*, Attenberg opens with this:

I met the generous and talented Kate Christensen this summer at a book party for Emily Flake's wonderful little graphic paean to vices, *These Things Ain't Gonna Smoke Themselves*. I did not know then that her new novel was called *The Great Man* or that it was about a deceased artist and the women who loved him, and that part of the book took place in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Greenpoint, where Kate lives. Kate was soon to discover that my book, *The Kept Man*, was about an artist in a coma and the women who loved him, and that it took place in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Williamsburg, where I live.

It goes without saying that *The Great Man* is one of my favorite books of last year—you will not find this kind of sharp, funny dialogue, or female characters this robust, in many other books, and Kate writes about food with the lust of a starving young Frenchman (Attenberg).

Christensen's *The Great Man*, which would go on to win the 2008 PEN/Faulkner award, does include wonderful descriptions of food. I didn't cook much in my youth, but I do now, and I liked getting to imagine flavors, textures, recipes in passages like this:

The food, which looked bland and unprepossessing, was subtle and amazing. The couscous tasted nutty and buttery. The rich chicken stew was laced with hints of saffron, cinnamon, cayenne, lemon zest, and something else, unfamiliar and exotic, but these things announced themselves very faintly, so he had to concentrate to taste them through the perfectly cooked meat and grain (Christensen 21).

More than that, I delighted in Christensen's ekphrastic passages, of which there are many.

¹ I mention them both to suggest that there's a trend, but for the purposes of this essay, I'm only going to talk about Christensen, because I have a great deal of respect for her book. I wanted to like Attenberg's, but I don't.

The novel includes three artists, two primary characters and one secondary. One of the primary characters is the “great man” of the title, Oscar Feldman, who we find out in the first line was a painter and is now dead: “Influential Figurative Painter Oscar Feldman Dies at 78” (Christensen 3). Oscar remains dead for the entirety of the novel, none of it’s told from his point of view, but still, the reader comes away with a clear sense of who he was and what his art was like. Christensen begins this work early, telling the reader on the first page, in Oscar’s purported *New York Times* obituary, that, “throughout his artistic career, his primary, indeed only, subject was the female nude” (Christensen 3). She then structures the novel as a series of stories about Oscar told by the women who revolved around him in life: his wife, his lover, an admirer, his sister, his daughters.

The character of Oscar who emerges is a familiar type. He’s the egocentric, lustful, pampered male painter. He has two families and scores of lovers and the art world delights in all of this, trumpeting his stereotypically artistic temperament in his obituary: “He was a larger-than-life figure, by all accounts opinionated, occasionally boisterous, visceral, with insatiable appetites of many kinds” (Christensen 4-5). Given his character as created by Christensen, the art she imagines him making and then describes, so we can imagine too, seems the perfect choice. The female nude is what we expect of painters, especially “larger-than-life” male painters, and Oscar doesn’t disappoint. Christensen even gives him a characteristic way of painting women’s genitalia—

“he slightly exaggerated the labia, made the pubic hair just a little more copious than it possibly could have been”—and a theory to back it up (Christensen 214):

“Pussies are like faces,” he had once said to Maxine [his sister] when she’d asked him about this. “No two are alike. I can tell you everything about a woman by looking at her cunt. I could set myself up as a cunt reader at a carnival and make a killing. Some look like little buttocks, some are flowers, some are oysters, some are other things. They’re the focal point of every portrait whether you can tell in the end or not. I start with a woman’s cunt and work from there” (Christensen 215).

Oscar’s art is, ultimately, the least interesting art in the book, but that this is the case seems just right. Oscar’s the least interesting character, much less nuanced and compelling than any of the women who describe him. He borders on cliché and so does his art.

On the other hand, one of the more interesting women in the book is Oscar’s sister, Maxine, and she’s also the other primary character who’s an artist. Unlike Oscar, who “chose deliberately not to follow the Abstract Expressionists’ path,” Maxine is “well-known” as an “abstract painter” (Christensen 4-5). That being said, her reputation in the art world is smaller and more muted than Oscar’s, though the reader comes to see, by way of a competition that Maxine and Oscar challenged one another to years before, the results of which come to light in the present of the book, that this is undeservedly so, at least in as much as reputations in the art world have to do with skill. And so with Maxine and her art, Christensen set for herself a more difficult task. She had to imagine and describe more nuanced artworks. I think she rose to the challenge.

Working in Christensen's favor was her choice to tell the story in the third person perspective², with sections in which she dips into third person limited, with access to Maxine's thoughts, as well as sections of omniscience. By giving herself the ability to convey what it's like in Maxine's head, Christensen creates the opportunity to show the reader what Maxine's art looks like through Maxine's eyes, as she's making it. Here's one such passage:

The brush was moving on the canvas as if it had volition, liveliness, as if it were made of nerve endings and electrical impulses instead of dead wood and hair, or as if it were a dog or a badger, something instinctive, intent on prey. It leapt over the surface and left tracks, deposited a trail of feathery flakes, then a smudge as if the wind had smeared it. The tracks ended before the entire right side of the canvas. It looked as if the creature had become airborne and lifted off (Christensen 106).

The description is lyrical and metaphoric and thrilling, really. What a splendid sensation, to feel, when painting, like the brush is taking over. I think too that the description gives an idea of what Maxine's painting looks like, but to be sure the reader sees the painting the way she does, later in the same chapter Christensen uses the third person omniscient perspective to show us a conversation about the work. The conversation takes place between Maxine and her doting assistant, Katerina, a young, aspiring artist Maxine lusts after. Here's an edited version:

² Interestingly, in a guest post on *Critical Mass*, the blog of the National Book Critics Circle, Christensen says she decided to write this novel in third person "as a bracing technical challenge." She describes writing in third person as follows: "For me, writing in the first person is a zenlike floating along, breathing, organic, letting another persona take over my brain and keyboard, whereas third person is like wrestling with a big, greasy, mean, cheating bear" (Christensen). I often feel the same way about writing in the third person, though I'd not thought to call it a greasy bear.

A moment later Maxine called, "Come look at this painting, would you?"

"Okay," said Katerina, approaching the canvas with a cautiously eager expression. . . .

Katerina said slowly, after a moment, "Mostly negative space. A quiet painting, a little bleak."

"Bleak," repeated Maxine.

...

"There is just bare white on the right side," Katerina went on. "And very small black marks on the left side... it feels unfinished."

"Yes," said Maxine. "Anything else?"

"Well..." Katerina took a deep breath. It made her feel as if she were being drowned? Dragged by horses? Dismembered and eaten alive by a polar bear?

The cell phone in her hand chirped (Christensen 110-111).

If the painting wasn't visually clear to the reader before, it certainly is after Katerina's description: "bare white on the right side;" "very small black marks on the left side" (Christensen 111). What's more, as the reader of this third person narrated story, we can join the two descriptions and come away from the painting seeing "small black marks" that felt, when being made, like "badger" tracks, "a trail of feathery flakes" (Christensen 111; 106; 106). As readers, we subconsciously collate the two perspectives on the painting, and Maxine rises in our estimation as a character and artist.

The third and final artist I'll talk about from *The Great Man* is a secondary character, Paula Jabar, a rising star in the art world. She first appears in the book when she and Maxine are guests at the same dinner party, a dinner party, I'll add, that's rife with hilarious food descriptions. A few courses into the meal, Maxine deduces that "whoever was masterminding this dinner was attempting nothing less than the recreation of the history of evolution of life on earth, from primordial

soup to water babies to land babies” (Christensen 104). The outlandish foods, as they’re brought out, are described from Maxine’s perspective—“the chickpeas looked like round infant heads with cowlicks”—as, of course, is the reading of the dinner party as an edible representation of evolution (Christensen 104). Similarly, the ekphrastic passages about Paula Jabar’s work are colored by Maxine’s opinions. Paula is a conceptual artist, and Maxine doesn’t have much respect for conceptual art, which I think becomes clear towards the end of this description:

Paula had made a career out of making small dioramas, the shoebox worlds children made in grade school, or rather, used to make, back when children did such things. Her best-known one was “Beautiful Day in the Hood,” which showed a woman in a project apartment cowering with her daughters on a couch as gang-warfare gunfire raged outside; the gunfire was represented by “pow!” and “ak-ak-ak-ak-ak!” coming out of the windows in a dialogue bubble rimmed with fiery orange and red. And so forth. Paula Jabar was about as famous as you could get in the art world these days. Four of her “ghetto boxes” had been shown in the previous year’s Whitney Biennial; she had even made an appearance on “Oprah” (Christensen 100).

I particularly like the standalone sentence, “And so forth,” which reads to me like Maxine sighing, thinking, What else need I say (Christensen 100). I also like, “Paula Jabar was about as famous as you could get in the art world these days,” as you don’t need to know much about the art world in the U.S. to know that’s not very famous at all (Christensen 100). And I appreciate the quotation marks around “ghetto boxes,” which, based on the lack of capitalization, does not appear to be the formal title of the series, but, rather, what they’re called informally by insiders. That Maxine knows about the work, refers to it by its insider name, and yet sums it up so briefly, ending with the tidbit about “Oprah”—Paula surely risks

losing credibility in the New York art world by appearing on “Oprah”—well, it strikes me as very dismissive.

And yet before Maxine’s dismissal of Paula Jabar’s work, Christensen makes sure her reader can see it. She does so by writing succinct, clear ekphrasis. And though Paula Jabar’s a made up artist (as are Oscar and Maxine Feldman), her (their) work as Christensen conceives of it is believable. Paula’s “ghetto boxes” sound like conceptual art being made, work that draws on theories of identity and forms of predecessors, Joseph Cornell and his boxes. In *The Great Man*, Oscar, Maxine, and Paula all make work that I, as a reader, can imagine seeing at the Met, MoMA, or 303 Gallery, though this, of course, is impossible. The artworks of Christensen’s book exist only in as much as they exist in her head, and, subsequently, her readers’ heads, and, perhaps if she’s like me, in sketch form in her journal.

It’s an exciting opportunity, I think, the use of ekphrasis in fiction. As writers we can make imaginary additions to the visual arts. For me anyway it’s a nice fit.

4.

Before last summer, I didn’t call the years between 1998 and 2001 my New York City youth. They were just the years I lived in New York. But then something wonderful happened. My husband and I, both academics who were prepared to move just about anywhere we could find jobs (I had a hunch it would be Indiana), got work in the New York City area. So I got to move back here,

which, cliché as it may be, was a dream come true. What's more, I got to move to New York with my family—my husband, daughter, dog—and we have a whole 600-square-feet for the four of us.

Though the things I do in New York these days are a little different—I don't, for example, go to eight o'clock dinners followed by drinks; I do go to playgrounds all over town—New York City is just as inspiring, exhilarating, thrilling as I remembered. I still get a kick of pleasure just about every time I walk down the street. Today it happened walking up Broadway through the Village. I had my coat unbuttoned because it's almost spring and I was headed to Union Square, to buy a baguette for my family's lunch and get on the subway, when I looked up and there was the Empire State Building. Years ago when I spotted the Empire State Building I'd blow it kisses, two. I did so again today.

And so New York of 1998 to 2001 became the New York of my youth, and today's New York became the New York of my youngish years. This is perhaps being generous—I am thirty-three—but I'm sticking with it, "youngish." I won't budge.

A thing I do still do in the city as a youngish person is go see the visual arts. Not every weekend but often enough. Strollers, we've found, work well in museums and galleries. There was even a recent Pipilotti Rist installation at the MoMA, *Pour Your Body Out*, that became, in the words of *New York* magazine, "New York's most ludicrous daycare": "toddlers who might have been watching Nickelodeon in some benighted suburb were instead mesmerized by huge images of rotting apples, snorting pigs, bobbing naked breasts, and what appeared to be

menstrual blood” (Hill). We took our daughter four or five times and let her run around.

At the beginning of March, my husband, daughter, and I went to the 2009 Armory Show, or International Fair of New Art, housed on two Hudson River piers. My husband and I had been before on a visit to New York so we knew what to expect: a conference-like setup with row upon row of cordoned off spaces; each space filled or not filled (deliberately of course) by a gallery with representative pieces from their stable of artists; packs of stylishly dressed, coifed, bespectacled men and women mingling, dashing, glancing, studying, holding forth. It’s like the AWP book fair but cooler. At the AWP book fair there’s never a sangria stand. Still, despite all the posturing and in-your-face shows of wealth—it is, after all, a place collectors go to buy—at the Armory Show there’s also always incredible art. Without going into detail, because I’m sure I’ve gone into too much detail already, I’ll say I was happy to see small Kara Walker cutouts in person, and I loved the El Anatsui wall hangings, enormous vibrant tapestries made of stitched together aluminum peeled off liquor bottles.

The main reason I bring up the Armory Show though is because this year, attending for the first time since returning to New York from graduate school in English, I realized what the show on the piers was named for. The 1913 Armory Show, of course. That red-letter date and event in American Modernism when, as Kazin says, “the New York art scene was shaken up... where Marcel Duchamp’s nude descended the staircase in cubes” (Kazin). And then I realized that when I lived in New York in my youth, in that tiny apartment on East 24th Street, I was

two blocks from an armory at Lexington and 25th. And, sure enough, a quick trip to Wikipedia confirmed that the armory I'd lived so close to and walked by so many times—brick and castle-like; with dark windows and a thick concrete arch over a sunken, arched door—was *the* armory! The very same armory where Duchamps and Van Goghs and Cézannes and Picassos and Matisse hung for a month in 1913. Where experts estimate there were “87,620” attendees, “people who came once to gape, artists who came often to study or deride, and celebrities who came as much to be seen as to see” (Brown 118; 143). Where American art changed.

It's New York City of course. Many blocks, buildings, spaces have secret, scintillating histories. Still, I love now knowing that I spent important years down the street from the Armory Show armory. The discovery led me to read Milton Brown, an art scholar and enthusiast's, account of the event, *The Story of the Armory Show*.

Brown wrote the book as part of a 1963 commemorative celebration, and he filled it with letters, ledgers, meeting minutes, reviews, program notes—the sort of details that make it possible to imagine what went on inside the castle-like brick walls, to imagine being there. The large, open space was divided into “octagonal-shaped” galleries arranged like a beehive; they were divided from one another by “burlap-covered panels;” the partitions were “festooned with greenery;” there were “pine trees” and “flags” and “bunting” and “yellow-hued streamers that formed a tentlike cap to the exhibition space” (Brown 41-42). And then there was this. On the night the exhibition closed:

...there was a jubilant celebration with members and guests, guards, ticket sellers, guides, and members of the 69th Regiment, who had come to the closing, all participating. An impromptu snake dance led by the regimental fife-and-drum corps got under way with D. Putnam Brinley, his lanky height topped by a bearskin hat, acting as drum major; and, as it swept through each of the galleries in turn amid songs, shouts, and buoyant laughter, the participants saluted the artists past and present who had made it all possible (Brown 188).

The detail I like most though is one about the outside of the armory, the approach to the show, that's included in a letter written by one of the event's principal organizers, Walt Kuhn, to a friend who missed it. Kuhn wrote, "You haven't any idea how this confounded thing has developed; every afternoon Lexington Avenue and the side streets are jammed with private automobiles, old-fashioned horse equipages, taxi cabs and whatnot" (Brown 110).

Eighty-five years later I lived on one of those side streets, I had a fire escape garden. I like thinking of crowds beneath the window I looked out, a jam caused by art. I like imagining the swell.

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Green Cubes

Nadia, my boss, slept with my dad. I'm sure of it. They used to work together, it's how I got the job, and Nadia's married, has been, but it doesn't matter. They slept together.

Mom, when she came to visit me in New York, didn't act like she suspected a thing. "Nadia sure is pretty," she said. "Is she married?"

This woman's nails scratched Dad's naked back. They *did it* under fluorescent office lighting.

Dad has been in prison two years now. He's there on fraud charges. He had a company; there was a contract for services he provided. Then the people he had the contract with said, "Don't worry about the contract. Do this thing not on the contract." So he did. But the people he had the contract with got in trouble, and this thing they told him to do was no longer good, and they came around then pointing fingers. The federal government got involved and this is fraud. A real recipe for fraud. Don't do this.

Nadia likes mentioning my dad's trouble in business meetings. It was in all the papers. It's not like she's spilling the beans. Here's what she does though. She says, "Emily's dad's a real genius. He revolutionized patient access." Then

she pauses. “Before,” she says, and looks meaningfully around the conference table, “he got in trouble.”

I hate her for the fucking pause. I hate her more though for sleeping with my dad.

Woody, my boyfriend, asked why I thought they’d slept together.

“It doesn’t take long in business,” I said, “to figure these things out. Sales meetings and conferences are like college spring break, except the company picks up the tab for the alcohol, and it’s not a problem, finding a room to go back to.”

“Un-fucking-believable,” Woody said.

Woody’s a conceptual artist. It’s easy to convince him corporate America’s pure evil.

•

When I was a kid, Mom used to call Dad and me “two peas in a pod.” She’s full of dumb expressions but it’s true our interests are the same. We used to take special trips together, me and Dad, to the Civil War Museum and Monticello. I’m the one Dad gave a nickname. He calls me Bug.

Once we went to Jamestown, Virginia. I was nine. We took our bikes and rode along cement paths, over wood plank bridges. As we circled a field full of building foundations Dad said, “Look Bug. A deer.” I had a plastic kid’s version of a camera. The deer ran away; I took a picture. I said, “Wow, Dad, that’s going to be pretty.” I said, “You can hang it in your office, Dad,” and he laughed. When I got the photo back, it was nothing but a white dot in a swirl of green.

Maybe I'll be an artist. Woody has me thinking these sorts of things. He's amazing, really. I'm really in love with him.

Woody's not like people I've dated before. The last boyfriend considered himself a deviant for wearing a bowtie to his job as an investment banker. Woody works with broken car glass he finds on New York City streets. He keeps a garbage bag full of it in his kitchen. When I'm there I like to sink my hand in. Car glass, when it's smashed in accidents and break-ins, isn't sharp. It collapses into tiny green cubes. "Careful," Woody says, "there are all sorts of things mixed in there." Dirt and hair, dried blood. I like the texture of the glass though. The way it swallows my hand and the chill.

•

Here, I'll describe Nadia. She's forty-two years old and wears suits like she's twenty: short skirts, tiny jackets, filmy blouses with scarves billowing around her neck. Her perfume cloud is nauseating and she must spend half her day reapplying lipstick.

I tried this look for a while. I admit it, I was enamored. The first time I went to visit Dad I was wearing my favorite gray suit. It has a jacket that cuts in at the waist and shows off curves.

"I hope the guard doesn't give us any trouble for your skirt," Mom said. "They can just be so picky, and skirts are supposed to be past your knees, and it would just be such a shame if they sent you out because they found a problem with your skirt."

Mom was wearing a blue jean jumper like the kindergarten teacher she is. I got a charge out of this, maybe being too sexy for prison.

At Petersburg, which is what we call where Dad is, he lives in a minimum-security camp. It's a three-story tan building with thin windows running from the ground to the roof and no fence. It looks like an office you might see outside a city, on a newly paved road by the mall.

"He has a bottom bunk in a room like a cubicle," Mom said. "His window faces the parking lot."

I imagined Dad behind a strip of glass, watching cars come and go, and not being able to leave a place. I'd want razor wire fences.

The visiting room is a trailer with rows of coffee tables, each with four plastic chairs tucked close. Along one wall are vending machines. Covering another is an oil painting of a mountain and waterfall scene. Mom and I were at a table in the middle when Dad came in, winked. I stood and watched as he talked to the guard.

"He looks OK, right?" Mom said. She was beside me.

The clothes the inmates wear are solid green, like steamed artichokes. The color made Dad seem older.

"Yes," I said. "The same."

When he got over to us Dad said, "Look at my little Bug," and hugged me. He held on for a while, and I could feel his fingers clasp onto the back of my suit jacket as he squeezed. This was fine with me. As a girl I'd been the one to not

want to let go, like those monkeys with Velcro hands and feet, me on Daddy's side, against him, warm.

That visit Dad and I talked business. "I'll sit over here," Mom said from the far side of the table, "so you two can hear each other." I used phrases like Post Merger Integration and Revenue Cycle. Dad chuckled and nodded. I told him a story about a company with two Directors of Accounting.

"Their titles are different," I said, "but they're doing the same thing."

Dad said, "It's crazy, isn't it? The things you see."

I loved all this. The shared vocabulary, getting what Dad did, his listening now to me.

•

I blame Nadia. I've seen her at work on other men. She used to take me to meetings with her to push buttons and forward her PowerPoint presentations, the PowerPoint presentations I made, my thoughts, my ideas. It's nauseating, watching her touch male arms, guffaw and talk sports. It's not so hard, Nadia, to like the Yankees. News flash, Nadia: they win, the Yankees. Harder is liking the Atlanta Braves because Dad does and not really giving a fuck about sports.

•

Woody and I met at Barnes and Noble. Isn't that funny? Woody, who's so against corporate America, at the corporate American bookseller. He explained, "Frank McCourt's here." He held out a copy of *'Tis*. "My mom, she's Irish."

I was sipping a café crème in the Starbuck's café.

“We do what we must,” I said in a judgmental way.

What did that even mean? I too was at Barnes and Noble.

I liked the way Woody looked. He was tall and angular, and his hair, which he cuts himself, was lop-sided and perfectly messy. He was wearing skinny jeans and a tight long-sleeved T-shirt and his toes, I noticed and liked, curled up at the end of flip-flops and were very dirty. I asked him to sit with me.

Woody has been, over these past six months, a welcome addition to my life. On our first date he asked what artists I like.

I said, “Van Gogh and Picasso.”

He said, “But anyone living?”

He introduced me to art galleries in Chelsea, flea markets on Sixth Avenue, sidewalk booth vendors around the city.

One day we were talking about Robert Smithson and I commented on what he accomplishes in a day. The photograph we were looking at was of white rocks arranged in rust red earth.

“It seems much more important than what I do,” I said. “Placing rocks.”

Woody hugged me. He said, “I love how you just put that.”

With Woody I feel like someone learning.

•

My job is this: boring. I’m a Senior Consultant. I make PowerPoint presentations. I also build customer service databases, write press releases, balance checkbooks, make messes in the ladies’ room, steal salad dressing. And

for this I get \$1,800 every two weeks, which is a lot of money. I'd say more than I know what to do with but come now.

I expected, when I started, a lot out of business. Dad always spoke so highly of it. I'd done a lot of things the same as Dad. I went to the same college, majored in math. For four years I walked around campus thinking, Dad was here and here and here.

I called him once my senior year. It was after midnight. I was drunk as a skunk. I got my ability to drink from Dad too. I said, "Dad, which Beatles record do you like best? *Sergeant Pepper* or *Revolver*?" I said, "It's important, Dad. I need to know."

He said, "Are you all right, Bug? Do you want me to come up there?"

"Fine," I said. "Of course not, Dad. No."

Now Dad calls me, twice a week, Wednesday and Saturday mornings. The calls open with a beep and then a mechanical voice: *This call is from a federal prison. We have fifteen recorded minutes.*

We used to talk business. I'd tell him about meetings; he'd ask me to research companies. I've tried to get away from this though. I say, "Work is fine. Dad, I did this interesting thing last weekend." I ask, "What are you reading? Do you have friends there that play bridge?" Our conversations sputter and stall more now than they used to, but they're getting there. I make Dad laugh. Still, he asks each time, "How's Nadia?"

•

I've thought about how Mom and Dad get along. With Mom it's incessant chatter. I think she's afraid of silence. Dad, he's a stoic. He can manage to look interested in all the kindergarten, Charlie-did-this-to-Paul-today crap. Most of the time, though, her monologues hinge on worries. "What are we going to do about the lawyers?" "Are we in danger of being foreclosed upon?" Here Dad's like a fireman squelching fires.

I take after Dad in relationships. More nights than I can count I've gotten to Woody's apartment to find him curled up under his sheet, rocking and in a panic about art. I know he needs me to lie behind him, wrap my arms around him, and say, "It's going to be all right. You're fine. It's important and scary, what you're doing." In this way I give back.

I do, you should know, recognize that Woody can be an asshole. Like with this whole work thing. I do; he doesn't. Sometimes he makes fun of my suits, which I stopped wanting to wear months ago.

He says, "Good God, Emily. Look at you."

"This," I say, "is not nice."

It's not like I like myself in blue pinstripes and milky white hose. It's not like I have a fucking trust fund, Woody.

But I'm glad Woody does. Woody makes beautiful things. His latest project, for example, is truly brilliant. He sculpted tiny cars, cars that would fit in the palm of your hand, out of broken glass. In the centers, he installed pulsing red lights. The cars are battery operated and Woody places them on New York City sidewalks, on top of mounds of broken car glass. So the effect then is this: green

glass cars with beating hearts. Cars that look like they pulled themselves up and out of rubble, living. Woody hides in sunken doorways with a video camera, recording reactions.

I have a cardboard box of things I made when I was a kid. I've been going through it lately. There was this:

Run and play outside today.

Blow all your troubles away.

And when you come in again,

Do your best in every way.

I sang it over the elementary school announcements but can't now remember the tune.

There was a poem I wrote about me and Dad in the woods with silly squirrels, and though I wish it were more than it is, I said, "You see. I can do more than math."

•

I figured out Nadia and Dad slept together when I was in Vegas a year ago with Nadia. We were our company's representatives at the e-Healthcare Conference. Plexiglas arches topped with company logos divided the conference space, a ballroom. Magicians worked to lure doctors and healthcare administrators into areas marked off by company-colored carpet.

I was the steady at our consulting company's table.

Nadia would leave and come back with men, bubble-blowing pens dangling around their necks, her hand wedged in the crook of their arms.

I'd give private PowerPoint presentations. Tapping through slides, I'd say, "We make using online information easy."

Men in golf shirts and khakis would leave business cards in my fishbowl.

Nights at conferences the plan's this: find another exhibitor to take you to dinner. Nadia taught me well. In Vegas the two of us went for sushi at the Bellagio with a pair of sales reps from Merck, Andy and the shorter version. We ordered three rolls and three pieces each and Andy said, "No way that's enough."

His friend laughed and patted his pocket: "Company card."

Over dinner Nadia told stories about hospital work she'd done with my dad without mentioning my dad. She fanned her face and said, "I always overdo it with the wasabi."

Andy's friend made a show of passing her his water.

Nadia reached across the table, covered his hand, smiled.

I thought, She's yours, short guy.

Andy said, "Emily, right? What do you do for fun in New York?"

We were sitting across from each other. He was older than I was, bald, with one silver tooth in the back that practically winked at me when he smiled.

I talked about restaurants and bars. "The Hudson," I said, "makes a great martini."

Andy said, "I'm a vodka connoisseur! I'll have to check it out sometime. I'm in New York a lot, on business."

Nadia and Andy's friend were laughing. He pulled out his wallet and I thought, Here we go. Now the two of them will slip back to his room where

she'll climb on top of him, go down on him. I'd always suspected as much, what with all the touching.

Andy put his hand on my knee under the table and I thought of my dad. I pushed Andy's hand away. Don't mistake me for Nadia.

The waiter walked by and Andy ordered another round of sake bombs.

Outside the restaurant a slot machine's sirens sounded. Lights flashed and quarters spilled out. A big man in a cowboy hat stood there looking smug as his little wife jumped around, shrieking.

"Not for me," Nadia said as she thumbed through school pictures of kids. Andy had one too. She was nine. "Very cute," Nadia said, as she handed the short guy his wallet. "Listen, gang, I've got to run. I'm expecting a call from my husband. Emily," she said, "can you get home all right?"

Nadia's married to a Colonel. He's been stationed this past year in Afghanistan, a regular American hero. I told Andy all about him. About the picture Nadia keeps of him on her desk. It's a cliché, really. He's in uniform, behind the wheel of a Jeep. The picture frame's made of camouflage, for Christ's sake, and Nadia, Nadia likes to make a show of kissing it, her husband's smiling face. Of wiping lipstick from the glass.

Andy said, "Aren't you something?"

Andy snored with his mouth wide open, I could see that silver tooth, it was green in the hotel room's ambient light, but I'm not going there. It's irrelevant.

I know Nadia slept with my dad. It's what happens.

•

Mom came up to visit once. She shared my bed and went into the office with me. “Oh, Emily,” she said, “your cube is very nice. Your view is very nice. Your file cabinets are very nice. It’s nice that you sit next to the copy machine and there’s a plant there. Plants are nice.”

•

I’m working with Woody now on an art project. Me! In art! Again, it’s with the glass. This time the idea’s transformation.

It’s night. We’re on 10th Street by Tompkins Square Park. Woody’s used orange cones to mark off seven feet of the right lane. There’s a streetlamp. East Village hipsters are checking us out, slowing down in the crosswalk, or lingering on the sidewalk as they walk their dogs. Woody had me wear a suit. He hands me goggles and says, “OK, Emily. Here we go.”

I step off the sidewalk and lower myself onto the street. I’m lying on the asphalt.

We don’t have long. Taxis are honking and swerving past and Woody’s convinced the cops will be here any second. He begins pouring shattered car glass around me. It’s heavier hitting my skin than I imagined. Pieces get lodged between my lips and *ping* as they bounce off my goggles. I feel the outline of my body grow, it’s this chilly glass thing, and I smile, resisting the temptation to make the car glass equivalent of snow angels.

The pelting stops and Woody says, “Here, I’ll help you up.”

I open my eyes to a slightly green, distorted version of him by my feet.

Then we're on the sidewalk and I'm looking at this shape in the street that's me. In the streetlight it's a sparkling version of the lines drawn at murder scenes, around corpses. Woody collects the orange cones and jogs back to his camera, which is recording on a tripod beside me.

Cabs full of drunk men and women, pouring out now of Alphabet City bars, are tearing over me. It's about one car after another turning this green glass shape into dust and as I watch I want this: to be standing in the parking lot at Petersburg, where Dad can see me but I'm just out of reach.

Warden

In New York it's easy to operate from home. I used my laptop to order groceries, movies, deodorant, and Harris, a delivery guy with freckled arms and an orange messenger bag, carried them up. Harris was substantial, like the giant on cans of peas, but it still amazed me how many bags he could manage. I'd open the door to him hugging white grocery sacks, yellow hardware store bags dangling from his elbows. I'd skim *The New York Times* online while I was waiting. It was there that I read about Dad who, according to the site's N.Y./Region section, embezzled 3.7 million dollars from a New Jersey retirement community. They'd let him manage their Medicare payments. There he was on the Internet, his curly hair shorter than I remembered but still a real mess, and, you know what, I felt proud. Mom used to complain that Dad couldn't keep a job for more than two weeks. All these years I'd imagined him tending bar at a ski lodge in Colorado, working a lobster boat in Maine. I always figured he'd end up in New York, though, hanging with a bohemian crowd. I figured I'd run into him. There was a whole apology scene, him saying, "Look at what you've made of yourself," me curtsying. Turns out that all this time he was just across the Hudson, one town over from Mom and Richard, slow dancing with arthritic meal tickets.

So here's a fact: according to the Bureau of Prisons manual, an inmate in a federal facility must have thirty-two square feet of personal space. This works out to a six-foot by three-foot bed with one foot of floor space along the side and two at the end. I figured plants would be fine in squares one-foot wide by one-foot long. I did some math. I thought I'd need to leave my futon and two walkways uncovered, also the kitchen and bathroom. My 250 square foot studio apartment worked out to 142 squares. Harris with the orange messenger bag delivered a yardstick and I masking-taped off little cells. Harris brought me stencils and I painted white numbers on black plastic pots from 0-0-0-1 to 0-1-4-2. Room to expand. Then I took down my paintings—"hair works," I call them, because I use the hair on my head as a paintbrush—and on the large blank wall I painted a schematic of the floor plan and cells. "Warden central," I said as black paint dripped onto my futon. "Lights out!" I yelled and flipped the switch.

Dad couldn't support my mom and me and the three of us ended up living with my grandmother in Ocean City, Maryland. I have a memory of an afternoon with my parents at Frontier Town, a Western-themed amusement park inland from the beach, at the end of a gravel drive lined with cornfields and campsites. It was my seventh birthday. I was in a pink cowgirl hat and bandana. We were there to see the ostriches and llamas but the thing that sticks with me most from that day was a train ride around the perimeter of the park. I was on the plastic bench seat between Mom and Dad, facing forward, snapping a cap gun, when a gang of bandits came galloping up alongside the train. They were waving pistols and demanding that the conductor stop. Then they climbed aboard and started

hollering: “This is a hold up, people!” “Give us all your money!” One of them, a greasy teenager with an eye patch, got right in my face and said, “Hey little girl, is that a bag of gold you got there?” He pointed to a suede sack of nuggets in my lap. I looked from Mom, who was grinning, to Dad, who was deep into a yawn, and I screamed. The bandit flipped up his eye patch. He said, “It’s OK, sweetie. You can keep the gold. I was just kidding, see?” He stepped off the train and the people around me started laughing. Mom hugged me, laughing. And Dad leaned in close, natty brown curls tucked behind his ears, teeth so white they looked blue, and said, “I’d have gotten that gold back for you, Squirt. That’s what daddies do.” He moved out before I turned eight.

The Bureau of Prisons requires three meals a day served at times designated appropriate by the warden. Plants, I knew, would drown on that schedule, so I designed different feeding plans. There were the once-a-weekers, watered on Monday, the Tuesday-Saturday crew, and the Wednesday-Friday-Sunday bunch. I painted red ones, twos, and threes under inmate numbers on the schematic. Mealtime was always eleven A.M. and as long as a plant hadn’t misbehaved, hadn’t, say, bent into another plant’s space or let personal appearance slip, I poured approximately half a cup of water around its base. I really loved the hiss that soil so dry it was pulled away from the side of the pot made, the damp mulchy smell that filled my apartment. I lay on my futon and felt healthy.

After two weeks of seeing me in my white shirt and gray slacks, Harris with the orange messenger bag asked if I was a scientist, the schematic my chart

of elements. I laughed and said, “No, I’m a warden. It’s important to keep things straight.”

“Handing out trophies?” Harris said. “As in *awardin*?”

When I didn’t respond Harris just stood there, filling up my doorway.

My mom yelled that Richard, my stepfather-to-be, was the best thing that could have happened to us. I was ten. We were in our old station wagon, waiting to drive off the ferry that had carried us to Richard’s home state, scenic New Jersey. I was in the far back, behind a pink blanket partition I’d pinned to the roof. “Honey, you need to take that down,” Mom said. “I need to be able to see out of the rearview mirror.” She’d sold Richard taffy on the boardwalk but to hear her describe it you’d think he’d bent over the Candy Kitchen counter and lifted her right out of apron and gloves. I crossed my eyes and stuck out my tongue at the old man in the Volkswagen behind us. “Honey, you don’t want me to have an accident,” Mom said as we started to move forward but I ignored her. I pressed my imaginary accelerator, revved my imaginary engine, steered us back to Grammy’s.

The Bureau of Prisons mandates inmate counts five times a day. I walked the two rows calling out from 1 to 142 at seven A.M., noon, four P.M., ten P.M., and two A.M. Harris with the orange messenger bag came one afternoon with aluminum foil and when I opened the door he said, “What? Counting the days left till Christmas?”

“I believe in procedure,” I said.

He handed me a magnet and some cookies.

“We get these for free,” he said.

I thanked him.

“You’ve got really nice hair,” he said. “It looks like it’s got *bounce*.”

He raised his freckled hand like he was going to touch my head, or say something else, but I interrupted.

“How much will that be?” I asked. Then I paid him from the petty cash box, including a one-dollar tip.

I was fifteen when Richard found me in my thinking nook behind the bed. I spent afternoons there, stretched out on a ratty old afghan reading. I kept books and magazines in a box under the bed. One was my dad’s guide to English usage, a mint green pamphlet from high school or his one year of college. On the cover he’d drawn a cartoon version of himself with Popeye muscles and an enormous head, an arrow right through it. Richard told me he’d signed me up for the boarding school in town but not to worry, I was going to be a day student, still home at night to watch Mom lash around the glossy white kitchen preparing his dinner. “Honey, you know how your father feels about hair in your eyes,” she’d say, scooping mashed potatoes out of the pot into a crystal serving dish. But Richard wasn’t my father and I didn’t care. It was around then I started using my hair, brown and curly like my dad’s, to make paintings.

Here’s something: the Bureau of Prisons recommends keeping movement in the facility to a minimum. If inmates must change location give them five minutes on the hour. I carried plants to the kitchen or bathroom, where I set them

on the light blue countertop, or in the corner of the shower stall. If I forgot to return them to their cells after sixty minutes I made them wait.

I opened the door one day to the top of Harris's strawberry-blond head. He was bent over, his hands on his thighs.

"Sorry," he said and straightened up. "Just catching my breath."

I offered water.

As Harris drank from the red plastic cup he craned his neck to look into my apartment. He asked how I functioned among all those shrubs. I told him I'd grown accustomed to plants around my feet, spitting up dirt as I bathed.

"If you ever need help with any of it," he said, "just let me know."

"Everything's squared away," I said, "but thanks."

I closed the door and watched through the peephole as Harris finished the water. Then he placed the cup on the mat and turned to go. Harris, I thought, was awfully sweet.

Richard didn't object to my living in New York. He said he'd give me four years to dip my head in buckets of paint and sell something. Mom cried a little and said she had dreams. I thought about the Thanksgiving she was washing dishes and I asked her what it had been like with my dad. She'd had a few glasses of wine and Richard was asleep on the overstuffed sofa. "We called each other Bozo and rode a motorcycle named Clyde," she said. They'd met at a restaurant where she was a waitress, a diner with good fries, and had figured out quickly that they both liked black-and-white cookies, *James Bond* movies, Levi's. Once they went to a Robert Frost poetry reading and snuck out after fifteen minutes.

Another time they fell asleep on a floating dock in a lake and woke up burned to a crisp. Their first apartment had cinder block walls, green shag carpet, a view of a landing strip. All their furniture cost nothing, was from the Salvation Army, but it was the sturdiest, heaviest stuff. “They don’t make it like that anymore,” Mom said. “Grammy still has some of it.”

When I called and asked Mom about the article in the paper she said she’d seen it and she wasn’t surprised.

“Can you believe he was so close?” I said. “In New Jersey, this whole time.”

She said, “Of course, honey. I used to see him at the drugstore.”

The Bureau of Prisons permits an inmate to select their hairstyle of choice. I decided the plants needed trimmings. I don’t know what happened. I felt edgy that day. I couldn’t get things perfect enough. I started by removing brown leaves and wilted buds. Then I cut green leaves into intricate, uncomfortable patterns. I sliced away new growth and stems. The floor was covered in plant parts and soil and the buzzer sounded. I looked at myself in the mirror. There were purple circles under my eyes and my hair, my shoulder-length brown curls disgusted me. They were dirty, collapsed, crestfallen.

I opened the door and took Harris’s hand. It was damp. I don’t know what I’d ordered.

“Everything’s under control,” I said. “I’m a warden.”

I sat Harris on the futon, raised the scissors to my head, and started cutting. Just then Harris reminded me of a statue I’d seen once in a garden, a

small Buddha with a pink lei around its neck and an empty Maker's Mark bottle beside it. The difference was this time, instead of me, sitting there racking my brain staring at some statue, it was Harris, the statue, doing the looking. It was lovely. So I cut off all my hair, every last strand.

Kaylene Can't Drive

1.

Kaylene didn't realize her parents didn't have the money to send her to Cancun. She was a senior in college; Barb and Sara were her best friends; it was their last spring break. Mom and Dad said, "We'll make it work."

That was a year before Dad would go to prison. Wire fraud. They'd lost the trial; he was out-pending-appeal; all the money had been spent on lawyers. But the family was sure it would clear itself up, Dad's situation.

Thinking back now, Kaylene can picture her parents at the kitchen table staring at the checkbook, as if looking would change things. She can imagine her mom saying, "Let's make this work for Kaylene, Charles. It's important."

On the flight to Cancun, Sara held Kaylene's hand. Sara was afraid of flying. Kaylene asked Barb the time and Barb replied, "No, Kaylene. You should buy a watch." Kaylene leaned forward and asked the man across the aisle from Barb. To Barb she said, "You don't own the time."

In Cancun, the girls stayed at the Holiday Inn Downtown. It looked like a Spanish villa. It was nowhere near the water. But in the center was a pool with an in-pool bar. The day they got there, Kaylene and Sara went for margaritas. They sat on stools, up to their necks in water.

“Shit,” Sara said after they’d finished their first round. “We can’t have ice.”

“What about those?” Kaylene said and pointed to drink machines behind the bar. They were tossing pink and yellow frozen concoctions.

“Those are ice too, dipshit,” Sara said and laughed loud so the vein in the center of her forehead bulged.

In Cancun, Barb spent a lot of time in the room on the phone with her parents.

In Cancun, Kaylene and Sara wore things they’d bought at Rave, a cheap clothing store at the mall. They’d decided beforehand that Cancun called for cheese. Tight tank tops, short skirts, chunky heels, face glitter.

At a club in Cancun, Barb climbed on a mechanical bull. Kaylene and Sara stood by the blue mat laughing. They snapped pictures with their disposables. Barb on the bull smiling, back arched, arm up. Barb on the mat crying, on her side, fetal.

In Cancun, Kaylene thought she had a urinary tract infection. There were three days still till they flew home. The persistent need to pee had set in. Kaylene feared sharp pain was next. She was in the shower and started crying. She got out, wrapped in a towel, and lay on one of the beds.

“Are you OK?” Barb said.

“I’ve got a urinary tract infection.”

“It happened to me in Denmark,” Sara said. “You’ll make it.”

“It’s bad,” Kaylene said. “I need medicine.”

“Get a hold of yourself,” Sara said.

“Give me the phone,” Kaylene said.

Kaylene asked her dad to call the pediatrician. She said, “Please, Dad, have him overnight me pills. I’m in terrible pain.”

Kaylene’s dad said, “Kaylene, that won’t work. You’re in Mexico. It’s illegal.” He said, “Have the girls call the front desk. There’s sure to be a hotel doctor.”

So they did and he came and in the hallway the man said, “It will be fifty dollars.” Barb said, “OK,” and he walked into the room.

He was tall, wearing a yellow golf shirt; he had a mustache. When she saw him Kaylene thought, Wait. What am I doing? This man could hurt me. Sara and Barb were on the other bed watching.

The man said, “Tell me how you’re feeling,” as he pressed on Kaylene’s stomach. Then he wrote a word on a blank sheet of paper and said, “Take this to the *farmacia* down the street, blue and green cross, you’ll see it.”

In Cancun, Barb, Sara, and Kaylene sat at a wrought iron table smoking cigarettes and drinking Negra Modelos. At the table next to them a man thumbed through a Spanish dictionary counting out loud to ten. He said, “You do it now kids.” His pretty blonde wife filed her nails; blonde twin boys colored. Kaylene worried about those fair-haired kids. Were they safe down there in all that sun?

Barb said, “Fucking-a, we’ve had a good time.”

The trip then was over.

2.

The girls flew into Newark because Sara's parents lived in Princeton, New Jersey and they'd left Sara's car there. School was in upstate New York, a four-hour drive. Mr. Epstein was waiting at the gate.

"There they are," he said, "the spring breakers. Has Mom got a spread for you. Sara, how'd you do on the flight?"

"Fine," Sara said. "No problem."

When they pulled into the Epsteins' driveway, Sara's mom opened the back door and Silky, the toy poodle, came yapping out.

"Say!" Sara's mom said, which is what she calls Sara to this day. "Say, you're back!" Mrs. Epstein's hands were by her poofed and styled hair.

"I was gone a week," Sara said and hugged her mom loosely.

Mrs. Epstein air-kissed Sara's cheeks.

On a glass-topped table in the Florida room was a basket of bagels, a plate of lox, cream cheeses, assorted fruits, potato salad, white fish salad, herring, olives, coffee, cake.

"Right on," Barb said.

"Say, I want to hear all about your trip. You girls are tan. Ooo, I've got a surprise!" Mrs. Epstein trotted off to the kitchen. Silky the dog followed.

Sara said, "Dad, can't you *do* something about her?"

Mr. Epstein said, “She’s excited to see you. Girls, are you looking forward to the last leg of school?”

Barb and Kaylene had filled plates and were sitting beside each other on a wicker sofa.

Barb said, “I’m looking forward to not living on the east coast anymore.” She was heading back to Portland, Oregon, her family, and a job she’d held the past three summers at Intel.

Kaylene said, “Not really.”

Mr. Epstein said, “Kaylene, how’s your dad?”

Mr. Epstein was a lawyer. Kaylene’s dad had called him once, when he was still calling lawyers, when he was still seeking advice.

From the kitchen Mrs. Epstein yelled, “Say, you’re going to love this!” They could hear her rooting through a silverware drawer.

“He’s OK,” Kaylene said and smiled. “We’re waiting for word on the appeal.”

Barb turned and looked at Kaylene. She said, “When’s the trial?”

Kaylene was still looking at Mr. Epstein. He had long curly hair, kind of like her dad’s, but longer. Kaylene said, “He lost the trial. That was a year ago December. We filed an appeal and are waiting now to hear.”

“I knew he lost,” Barb said. “I meant, when’s the *appeal* trial?”

“There isn’t one,” Kaylene said. She looked at Barb. “The court makes a decision and we get a fax.” She turned back to Mr. Epstein. “We all feel very positive about Dad’s chances.”

Sara said, “Kaylene’s moving home to Baltimore in May.”

“Terrific,” Mr. Epstein said. “What will you do there?”

Kaylene said, “Think about applying to law school.” She laughed.

Mrs. Epstein came in from the kitchen. She said, “Say, close your eyes.”

She had something behind her back. Silky jumped onto the couch between Kaylene and Barb.

“Mom, don’t be stupid,” Sara said.

“Oh, come on, Say,” Mrs. Epstein said and pouted.

Kaylene got up for more coffee. It was very strong coffee.

Sara laughed so the vein in the center of her forehead bulged. She held out her hands.

“Your favorite,” Mrs. Epstein said and presented a tin. “Caviar.”

She said, “Girls, take a spoon.” She fanned thin silver handles. Each had a stone at the end of it, bright, held there by twisted silver.

3.

The girls left the Epsteins’ house a little after nine. It was Sara’s Saab, and Sara had driven down, so Kaylene and Barb were splitting driving time back up.

Kaylene was in the backseat during Barb’s shift, the first two hours. “You know, I don’t really like driving,” she yelled, but the music was loud, the windows were open. Sara and Barb were smoking cigarettes and hollering some

conversation back and forth. Kaylene could make out Sara saying, over and over, “I mean, is she for real?”

When it was time for Kaylene to drive, Barb pulled off at a gas station. They were in Pennsylvania.

“You know, if you want to keep driving...” Kaylene said.

Barb said, “It’s your turn, Kaylene. You never drive, Kaylene.”

Sara curled up in the back right. She used her fleece as a blanket. Barb put in the girls’ senior year mix tape, lit a cigarette, and looked out the window. Kaylene merged onto the highway.

Right away it was steady trucks, speeding, thrumming. Right away the night seemed too dark, the car’s headlights seemed not bright enough—Kaylene couldn’t see far enough—but the glow off white reflector squares stung her eyes and she squinted.

“Barb,” she said, “can you hand me my water?”

Kaylene didn’t like driving but it had never been like this. Things sped up, Kaylene’s heart sped up, and her mouth dried, though she drank the whole bottle of water.

Kaylene asked Barb if Sara was asleep.

“Yep,” Barb said. She was holding her cigarette like it was a joint.

“Can you hand me her ginger ale?” Kaylene said. “I’m just incredibly thirsty.”

Kaylene’s tongue was huge, stuck to the roof of her mouth. She wiped her palms on her jeans one at a time. She did it again. But taking a hand off the

wheel scared her. The car swerved. Trucks thundered past. Kaylene gripped tighter.

What was going through Kaylene's head was this: I'm jacked up on caffeine. I'm having an allergic reaction to the medicine, to the lox. I'm an epileptic. I'm maybe just a hypochondriac. But something's wrong. Something terrible.

Barb fell asleep. Her head drooped forward.

Kaylene turned up the volume; it was "Rocky Raccoon;" she tried singing but she couldn't breathe fully. Her foot started slipping. She had no hold on the pedals. Barefoot, she knew, there'd be friction. But she was going sixty-five; she had on double-knotted sneakers. With her accelerator foot she tapped the floor mat once. She tapped the brake. Kaylene thought, I can get to the brake; you can get to the brake. She put her foot higher up on the accelerator.

Outside it was pitch black, the sky and ground like new blacktop. They were an hour from school, passing Exit 3 then Exit 2 in Pennsylvania, when Kaylene started to see their Saab smashing into overpasses and medians. Kaylene knew they'd fly off the road. That she'd kill people she loved.

Sara and Barb woke up. They said, "Kaylene, you OK?" One put a hand on Kaylene's shoulder.

Kaylene thought of her parents getting the call—your daughter is dead—then of Dad, going to prison.

In the car the girls rocketed through night. Kaylene's legs were shaking.

A Professor's Wife

I run at night with my dog, Emma. It's when we get a chance to go, after dinner, and it's cooler then. Steetlights atop telephone poles light up small patches of grass and asphalt, patches that don't quite touch. Houses are swallowed by shadows.

My husband said once, "Look out for cars."

He had a student, a freshman, who was hit four times running. She's OK, though. Lucky.

We only go three miles, Emma and I. The same loop each night, which starts with our tree-lined street and takes us past the town's smaller places, rental properties filled with college students my husband might teach. I like looking in these windows when I can. I went to this college. But Emma's a real locomotive. She squats low to the ground on already short legs and drags me down memory lane.

The top of our run's the town park. It has two tennis courts and a stilted gazebo. During the day retirees sit on the steps and watch other retirees lob balls back and forth. Beyond that's a wood plank bridge, a serpentine black track, and the new playground, which has all the usual playground stuff—monkey bars, sand pits, bouncy bridges—as well as a bank of insect rides, castings of insects atop

springs. There's a ladybug, a bumblebee, a spider, none of which are even the least bit scuffed. They all sparkle they're so new.

At night the park's usually quiet, empty, though last night and tonight there was a car there, a boxy brown Buick. It was by the playground, headlights illuminating the playground, with its windows open, radio playing softly. Oldies. Inside was a fat woman who looked Hispanic. Tonight she was studying her nails.

On the playground, in the car's light, was a short man, also Hispanic. Both nights he's had on jeans that grip his thighs and bunch at the bottom. Long plaid shirts. Yesterday he stood between the swings and the slide, looking at the ground. Tonight he tottered, arms out, on the balance beam. Tonight the radio played "My Boyfriend's Back" and Emma stopped, blocked my path so I nearly tripped, but they didn't notice, this couple. They didn't look over.

My husband said once he doesn't like our running at night, called it "unnecessarily dangerous."

I took it for love. The route home takes Emma and I on a street parallel to the park, the only street with traffic, where we're in danger.

On this street cars pass too close, their headlights zooming in too fast, and it makes me nervous. I normally pull Emma down the first alley, back to a quieter block. Tonight I thought, What's the story with those people? Why this playground ritual? I imagined the balance beam man reliving nights on playgrounds with his high school sweetheart, in Mexico, though my husband says it's Salvadorans moving in. I remembered when pop music seemed profound,

when saying, “I love you” was something. I thought, She does this for him, facilitates nostalgia. She sits in that car, big as she is, and watches her husband play with younger women in his head.

I was running fast, Emma too. She pulled hard ahead of me, dragged us down that white line. Cars passed, lights stung my eyes, and I thought more of their life in this small town, a town with few outsiders. Why here? There’s so little. It’s wrong of me to do this, but I placed him at La Cocina Mexicana, where’s he’s a cook, and her keeping house, bored. She’d cook him dinner, she’d like to, but he brings home Styrofoam containers of leftovers—crisp traces of refried beans, greasy cold cheese—that she eats all of. She’s depressed. He messes around.

My husband would call this “projection.” A cliché.

Emma and I were on our block and I wanted to turn, to go back and tell her to *leave*. Pull out and leave this man who’s stuck in a teen fantasy because he’s married now to you.

But Emma was to our sidewalk, trotting, panting. The lights were out, our carport empty. Maybe he drove past. Emma needed water. She turned to see that I was with her.

I said, “All right, baby. Yes. Let’s see if Daddy left a note.”

Sister Sister

John Tyler Community College, where I teach Web site design, is a new brick building in the middle of an asphalt parking lot. It sits back from Virginia state route 220 on land just cleared of trees, so the border is chalky orange dirt, skinny oaks, and pines. My computer's at the front of the classroom, connected to an LCD projector on the ceiling. When class is in session I have Jared Simpson, a student tall and wide enough to cover me in shadow, pull down the flap of white screen so things I do on my machine, like indent lines of code or set up tables, are visible to the twelve students whose twelve monitors I look at the back of.

At 1:40 this afternoon the classroom was quiet. Sun cutting through Venetian blinds illuminated dust hanging in the air, and I thought the room smelled like I remember school smelling. As a student at the university across town I'd attend the first couple weeks of classes, excited by syllabi and the prospect of programs I'd write. But by week three I'd be slinking in late, to sit in back, a baseball cap pulled low to hide my eyes. I'd meet Brynn, my little sister, for coffee on her break from the lab. She'd tell me about her fruit flies reproducing, their astounding DNA. Then she'd ask about me. Brynn would

shake her ponytail from side to side, say, “I don’t know how you do it, Milly. Go out all the time and still manage to pass. I need to take lessons.”

I’m two years older than Brynn. I think of myself as the condensed version. While she’s tall and big-boned, I’m tiny. Her red hair is straight with streaks of blonde, and mine is russet and curly. At family gatherings Brynn tells jokes to the table and fills the room with laughter. I make sarcastic comments to the cousin sitting beside me.

Now Brynn’s a vet in Denver, married to David, a doctor. She breathes life into beloved pets, tells children not to worry. I teach people how to build Fluffy.com, add a gif image and barking.

Before class starts I always do the same things: put my purse in the desk drawer and walk the three rows of four stations, turning on computers. While virus checks are running I draw the blinds. Today I stood and watched the parking lot fill up. I watched people pull backpacks from backseats and shuffle into the building. I wondered how Brynn was doing, what David had to say. She called this morning at 11:00. I was in pajamas, drinking coffee and checking email. Brynn was on the way home from her Ob-Gyn, where she’d gone for some standard tests, just to make sure everything was OK. Brynn and David have been trying for a year to get pregnant but they expected this, that it would take time.

As Brynn spoke I could hear driving noises, horns and mumble from the radio; I could tell she was crying. She said the doctor found something on her cervix that looked suspicious. “We can’t know anything,” she said, “until I have a biopsy,” which she’d need to do, as soon as possible. As Brynn spoke I

watched my screensaver, which consists of picture after picture of me, taken with the camera ball on top of my computer. Pictures would flicker or slide onto the screen and then thirty seconds later fizzle away and be replaced.

I said, “What does ‘something on the cervix’ mean? What did the doctor say?”

Brynn said, “Sure,” and sniffed loudly. “It’s probably nothing, just an abnormal Pap but, you know, it worries me.” She said, “Of course I think right away cervical cancer,” then she sounded like she was hyperventilating.

I pushed back my chair and stood up. My desk shook. The picture on the computer of me, smiling with my chin cut off, disappeared. I needed to pace.

I said, “Brynn, are you almost home?”

I pictured her small blue Toyota on a four-lane highway, swerving and being passed by sixteen wheelers and speeding SUVs, all driven by teenagers. I thought, Why isn’t David with her? But he couldn’t have known. They were just standard tests. I could only hear crying so I said loud, kind of frantic, “Brynn, are you all right?” and Brynn said, “Yes. I gotta go. I’m home now, in our neighborhood. I’ll call you later, OK Milly?” She said, “Love you,” then hung up. I went out on my balcony to smoke.

Of course I’d realized as soon as Brynn had said “something on my cervix” what she was thinking. I was too, I am now. Brynn was raped her sophomore year of college by a man named Kent. She met him in the library, called him a “soft-spoken business major.” Kent took my sister to a fraternity formal, slipped Valium and Librium in her rum and coke to then walk her home.

To rip off her hose, shove his fingers and penis inside her while Brynn lay there, unable to move her legs, her arms. Kent tore Brynn's vagina. He gave her HPV, warts that all through college she had to have treated. Having HPV, the university doctor told us, makes one more susceptible to cervical cancer.

And then afterwards, after the rape, Brynn did everything she was supposed to. She went to the police, worked with the DA. Brynn testified in front of our mother and father that Kent's penis and fingers were in her, scraping. She cried on the stand explaining the pain, I cried listening, but Kent got off. The judge said, "She never said no." Brynn was pumped full of drugs we couldn't prove Kent had given her, he just had. The case got dismissed.

Kent lives in Chicago. He works in commodities exchange.

•

My classroom door clicked open. "Gorgeous," Jim said, taking long strides towards me. "I've missed you." He ran his hands from the sides of my breasts to my butt. Jim was the man I fucked on occasion.

"Nice tie," I said, letting blue silk with slanted yellow words slide through my fingers as I stepped away.

Jim said, "Frost. 'The Road Not Taken.' When can I see you?"

"You're seeing my now, right?" I spread my arms.

"Mill," Jim said, imploringly, but I wasn't interested. I was thinking of Brynn. Of weeks after the rape when she'd told me, in a calm voice, how she lay there thinking, *You are being raped—Remember this—You are being raped—Remember....* Over and over again. On repeat.

The door opened. It was Terence, my rhyming student. He saw Jim and started across the room. “Mr. D, Mr. D, English man. Make me a poem as fast as you can.”

Terence laughed and Jim patted him on the shoulder: “Good to see you, Terence.” I walked to the chalkboard.

More students came in, talking to one another. The chalk shook a little as I tried to write directory information. Each student’s building his or her own Web page, accessible to the world at JohnTylerCC.edu, and today I was teaching them how to add images. I’d saved a folder of samples—hot air balloons, bulb gardens, rivers in canyons—to each computer’s hard drive. Jim stopped and leaned over my desk before leaving.

“Mill,” he said, “I’ll call you.”

Then Jared Simpson was behind me, saying in a near whisper, “Ms. Spence, do you need me to get the screen?”

I turned from the muted green chalkboard to Jared’s wide, square face. I said, “Not just yet.” I inadvertently squeezed his arm, then blushed and looked away.

Jared is nineteen years old and almost always in Washington Redskins colors: red and mustard. He keeps his dull blond hair shaved close to the scalp so it’s easy to see bumps, and that he has a pink scar an inch up from the hairline. It’s shaped like a seven. And Jared’s big. He fills the aisle as he walks, head down, to where he sits in the back.

I faced my class, said, “Hello there. Today we’ll add images to your Web sites.”

Terence, at the end of the first row, started bobbing his head, keeping beat with *puh* sounds. Larry, a retired physician two stations down, leaned forward and gave Terence the look of a disgusted parent. The eighteen-year-old girls in row two covered their mouths and giggled. Jared Simpson, in the back left corner, watched me.

“There’s a folder on your computers,” I said and knocked on the chalkboard.

Terence cleared his throat.

“In it you’ll find sample...”

Terence stood up. He said, “Picture me pixel-y, Image me do. Make me a Web site...”

“Terence,” I said, pointing at him, my arm shaking. “Please. Shut the fuck up.”

•

Running the YMCA track later, I saw Jared. He was in the grassy center and, as always, surrounded by kids. I guessed the biggest might be nine years old, maybe ten, though even he wasn’t much. Jared was twice the size of any of them. I ran past and kids were lying on their backs, their arms straight up. Some were kicking dirt. One girl with half her hair in a ponytail, the other half loose, tugged on Jared’s hand. He made a show of bending way over, as if her tug were all-powerful, she the strongest kid in the world. When I ran past again Jared waved.

At the beginning of the semester, Jim was surprised I wasn't upset Jared was in my class. We were in bed. A streetlight shone through my window accentuating depressions in Jim's pale arms and chest.

He said, "Are we talking about the same Jared Simpson here? Jared, the sexual predator?"

"Yes," I said and got up to get dressed. "Nancy filed late. Nothing happened."

Jared had taken Nancy Somer's Mastering Math class in the spring, and when she'd given him his grade (a C-), he'd unzipped baggy brown pants and pulled out his penis. Nancy told a group of us about it over beers at the Fox and Hound. "I've never been so afraid," she said and put her head down on pillowy white arms. Gene Cox, a restaurant management professor, patted Nancy's back. Jim slid his hand up my skirt under the table.

Jared doesn't speak much in class though we make eye contact often. I see him every afternoon at the Y and I wonder about the kids, their relationship.

Running the track today my sneakers started to spray black gravel and my pumping arms began to feel heavy. Again I was thinking of Brynn. Then of me. How I might have HPV that's solidifying into cancer. I thought, It should be me, I deserve it, and I started to feel a burning. My spandex shorts cut up, adding to the irritation. I pushed harder and pictured my legs as blurry wheels in motion. I ran faster so I couldn't feel my bottom half.

I passed Jared Simpson with the girl with the ponytail on his shoulders. She was wearing a dress that was hiked up. Her bare legs were like a scarf around

Jared's neck. He wrapped his hands around her thighs, crouched down a little, and started spinning. The girl threw back her head, opened her mouth wide. Her skirt snapped like a flag in the wind and when they crashed onto the grass both she and Jared were laughing.

•

Stony Point condominiums, where I live, are stained charcoal gray. Buildings A through M are set at different angles around three manmade lakes, which are home to imported geese, whose shit covers the property. A thin pine tree buffer separates the complex from Interstate 64.

I got home around 5:30, took a shower, and put on my favorite light blue men's pajamas. I drank a glass of water before I poured myself a glass of red wine. Then I tried to call Brynn, but I got their answering machine. I listened as David gave instructions, the dogs barked in the background. I pictured their two mutts, Mandy and Tundra, both rescues Brynn brought home from the clinic, sleeping on Brynn and David's worn sofa. I visited them once in Denver. Their house is old, part of a neighborhood of bungalows. Brynn joked that if I dropped anything I should check along the walls. She said, "The floors are uneven. Everything rolls." I found their place, their whole life charming. Broken in and comfortable and Brynn seemed so happy. I guessed that David had taken her out to dinner, a movie. I left a message then went into my office.

The futon, desk, and director's chair were blanketed in green streetlight. I thought about how I'd need to apologize to Terence, who slunk down in his seat and spent the rest of class fiddling with his keyboard. I tried to think of words

that rhymed with his name, to make a joke of it, but I got stuck on, “I should not have said fuck, that’s the end of my luck.” I drank some wine and pulled up the community college home page, to check student sites.

Terence has created an online chapbook called *Poems to Go* by Terence. The background is basic red, the font Arial 36-point. At the bottom of verses like “Midlo-Yo-Yo” and “The James not the Thames” are links—*Hit Me*—that take the reader to more rhymes.

I clicked back to the main page and Jared Simpson’s name was there. I highlighted it with my mouse, so it was white font against black, and I imagined Jared at the track. The kids scattered, pretending to be airplanes, leaving Jared alone in the middle of the kelly green field. He turned as I ran to always be facing me, and I ran circles around him, like a horse on a rope. I thought of Jared and what would happen if I tripped. I pictured trying to catch myself and skinning both wrists. Rolling over onto my back, black gravel in my arms, crying. I closed my eyes and Jared sauntered across expansive grass towards me. I took my hand off the computer mouse and traced circles on my breast.

The computer clicked and black rolled over the list of student names as the screen saver launched. A picture I took up at my face—dark nostrils, nose with freckles, hazel eyes—skidded to a stop in the center. In the next shot I was on the phone, stretching my face into what a smile might look like if my hair was being pulled from behind.

With green streetlight on me I took off my pajamas. I removed the camera ball from its perch atop the monitor and held it at arm’s length, like a rock that might

be of value. I began taking pictures. On the screen were my collarbone, small breasts, flat stomach. A triangle of rust red pubic hair and the perfect pink folds of my vagina.

•

After Brynn was raped Mom and Dad came and got her. They took her to our childhood home an hour from here, but she was back, in class Monday morning. And after charges were pressed, the trial lost, she became this spokesperson for feminist causes on campus.

It's hard to remember what I did with the rest of my senior year besides drink. I keep a box of pictures at the top of my closet. They're mostly of me, puffy with beer weight, clinging to men in fleece jackets. Some are of groups of us, girls like me with plastic cups and stains on our ribbed T-shirts. Then there's my graduation photo, which I keep framed on my mantel. In it I'm wearing sunglasses; Brynn's making a face like she's straining to hold me up. She's always been the responsible one.

It was probably 9:00 when Jim got here. I was sitting in the white plastic chair on my balcony, naked, drinking wine and smoking cigarettes. I'd left the sliding glass door open and was thinking of cars speeding by that I could see through the trees, whose diffused light touched me from blocks away. "Come in," I said when I heard Jim knock. I flicked my cigarette over the railing.

"Mill," Jim said as he walked through my living room. "I was so glad to hear from you. It's been so.... Oh my God, baby. You're naked."

Jim was beside me. He had on wind pants, a red T-shirt, and a barn jacket. Just a thin gray barrier separates my patio from my neighbor's.

I said, "Do you think they can see us? The cars, I mean. If they really look."

Jim said, "Mill, you're wild!"

He shook his arm free from his jacket, then he lifted me, frantic. We started kissing. He put me down on the patio's wool carpet and we fucked. I ended up with burns on my back, my knees.

When the phone rang I left Jim lying there, his clothes in bands over his chest and penis. I answered the portable in my office. It was Brynn.

"Milly," she said. "Did I catch you at a bad time?"

I said, "No, not at all. I was hoping to hear from you. How are you?" I walked to the kitchen.

Brynn said, "I'm OK. David and I just spent two hours at the hospital library, reading about abnormal cells on the cervix, which David thinks this is. In women my age it's common. Usually abnormal cells turn normal again, and it'll just be something I have to watch."

I slid down so I was sitting cross-legged on the kitchen floor, the cool linoleum. I said, "Has David seen something like this?" and Brynn laughed: "Of course not. He does ears, nose, and throat, silly. But according to the books it's really very common."

My eyes had adjusted to the lack of light in the kitchen so I could see the freckles on my legs. As a young girl, when I was wearing a bathing suit or sitting

on the toilet, I'd imagine the light brown freckles on my right thigh as a connect-the-dot. I'd use my nail to scratch lines between them. They'd make the Eiffel Tower. I used to try to do the same with the freckles on my left thigh, but no matter what order I connected them in, they never made a thing.

Brynn said, "The fact that I haven't had an outbreak of HPV in years makes David and me feel like this is probably not directly related."

Brynn hasn't had an outbreak in years. I knew this. She attributes it to being happy. But I thought back to outbreaks when she was in college. When I'd take her to the student clinic, sit beside her so she could squeeze my hand as the nurse practitioner used a long cotton swab to dab liquid nitrogen, to burn warts. Each time the nurse clicked open the container, which looked like a chrome thermos, nitrogen steam poured out. Brynn shook and cried. The pain, she said, made her want to vomit. And then leaving the clinic Brynn would need help walking, so she'd lean on me. I'd take her home, get her comfortable on the sofa. I'd fill a bowl with candy corn, her favorite.

I heard mumbling and Brynn say, "What?" Then she laughed: "David wants me to tell you he just opened a Fat Tire, to ask if you're jealous."

Fat Tire's a beer you can't get east of the Mississippi. I liked it a lot the time I visited Brynn and David in Denver.

I forced a laugh. "Yeah. Pass one through the phone, will you?"

I looked down at my leg, which I'd been scratching without noticing. There was a dark pink patch starting to puff up.

I said, "Listen, I better run. I've got a friend here. You sure you're OK?" and Brynn said, "Yes. David's been great. Thanks for putting up with me crying earlier. I hope I didn't worry you much."

I said, "It's fine, really. Anytime." Then I said, "Love you and miss you."

Brynn said, "Love you too," and hung up.

•

Before going back onto the patio, I dressed again in my blue pajamas and poured myself the rest of the wine. I could hear Jim calling in a singsong voice: "Mill-y... I have something to sh-ow you..." I know Jim's sweet, that I'm not doing him justice. The students at John Tyler love him. He teaches English Composition and Introduction to Literature. He volunteered to organize a student newspaper and serve as the faculty advisor. Jim asked me out once on a real date. He wanted me to go with him to church then a brunch buffet at a Mexican restaurant, La Siesta. I said, "I'd prefer we skip straight to the margaritas." It was me that licked salsa off my lips to then lean into Jim at the La Siesta bar. It was our first time together off campus and I bit his earlobe, said, "Let's go to your place." I charted the path of our relationship and even if I wanted more than sex now, months have gone by. It's too late.

When I got outside Jim was still naked, uncovered. His clothes were in a heap on his right. To his left was my original wine glass, which I'd nearly emptied. I pushed the white plastic chair over a little because I wanted to sit in it, and I wanted space. Jim propped himself up on his elbows. He was giggling, tucking his chin to his chest. He said, "Hey gorgeous. Notice anything?"

I'd just put a cigarette between my lips that I lit before looking down at Jim. I noticed that his curly brown hair was greasy, it needed washing. That the artificial outdoor lights were making Jim's skin glow blue. Then I noticed, or rather it registered for the first time, that Jim only has a small patch of hair on his stomach, a cluster right around his belly button, and that his chest is completely hairless. His light brown nipples, which I'd sucked often, really stand out.

I said, "No, Jim. What's up?"

Jim giggled more. "Damn," he said, "it stings."

I shook my head at Jim, raised my eyebrows, and he said, "I know how you like your wine. So..." then he covered his mouth, to stop the laughing. He said, "So I wiped some of it on, you know, my part. My penis. I thought..."

"Yes," I said. "I know what you thought," then I looked at Jim's "part," which was limp, lying, it seemed, in the shape of a *J*, not pinker than usual. I took a drag on my cigarette and looked Jim in the eyes. I barely knew this man I'd spent six months fucking. He sure as hell didn't know me.

I said, "Jim, you know what really stings? HPV. That's genital warts. I contracted it my sophomore year of college when I was raped by this man named Kent. He'd drugged me, it wasn't my fault, and I went to the police afterwards, did everything a girl's supposed to do, but Kent got off. The judge just dismissed the case like *poof* there was no rape. It was hard to deal with, really, but I got involved in the feminist community on campus. You'd have been proud of me. I was a real inspiration. I remember one Take Back the Night. You know what Take Back the Night is, yes? Community support for victims of violence.

Anyway, I was on this makeshift stage, on the steps of the student union, telling my story to hundreds of people standing in front of me with candles. I said ‘The night I was raped,’ then I paused, looked out over the crowd, all those heads in wool caps, and there was my sister. She was in the back, leaning against the school store. I could see her crying so hard. She was crying so hard she had to bend over and vomit.”

I stopped there because Jim was standing in front of me, making a *T*, the time out sign, with his hands. He said, “Milly, slow down. I can’t believe this, sweetie. I’m sorry. What are you talking about?”

I said, “Let’s see, Jim. I have HPV and you probably do too.” I took a drag on my cigarette.

Jim was still naked, standing in front of me. He took a step closer, said, “I’m a little overwhelmed here, Milly. You need to go slower. Tell me again what happened. Please.”

Then he stepped even closer, spread his arms to maybe wrap them around me, so I raised my cigarette and held it like a sword, its angry orange tip inches from Jim’s penis. I told Jim to leave before I burned him. I said he better leave right away.

The night Brynn was raped was the night I wasn’t. She called me. I lived in an apartment three blocks from hers. It was 3:42 AM and Brynn was gasping for air, whispering that she needed me, that she’d been raped, but I didn’t hear. I was there, beside the answering machine and Brynn’s voice, passed out.

I got Brynn's message when I woke up that afternoon. Brynn had already been carried off by Mom and Dad; I had a raging hangover. I listened to that message over and over. It happened to Brynn, not me. I can't get past it.

•

It's late now and I'm in my office. I finished the first bottle of wine and opened a second. I've been sitting in my director's chair, watching the shots I took earlier be folded into the screen saver: hipbone, ass, me smiling and waving. I don't feel bad about lying to Jim, I don't feel a thing. I've been listening to cars pass on Interstate 64. They sound, I think, like at the beach. Waves rolling onto shore then retreating.

A little while ago, maybe an hour, I thought of the time I visited Brynn and David in Denver, when they took me hiking. Their two dogs and the three of us crisscrossed a path up a mountain, but I couldn't make it. I stopped and sat on a boulder. I said, "Go on. I'll catch you on the way down. This altitude, I'm winded." For the first few levels of their zigzag ascent I could still see parts of them: Brynn's ponytail, David's green wool jacket. Wrangler jeans and matching gray hiking boots. For a short time I heard leaves and twigs cracking, dogs panting, but then it was quiet and I got scared, being all alone. I folded my arms on my knees and leaned over to rest my head there. I started to shiver, then cry. I sat that way a long time, waiting for Brynn to turn back and find me, but Brynn was still on the way up. By the time the four of them got back I'd pulled it together. I just felt like a big stupid baby.

I was here, in front of my computer, when I thought of this. I was shaking. I opened my Web site design application to a new page and started pasting pictures of my body. I made a table to stack the images, to put them in rows. Then I previewed the page. It looked like one of those plastic puzzles handed out at children's birthday parties. The kind with one square missing, so you can scoot pieces of the picture around, try to straighten them out, but in this case the picture was of me. I went online and accessed Jared's site.

Jared has selected burgundy as his background color and mustard for his font. Jared, the sexual predator's, Web page is dedicated to the Washington Redskins. He has links to statistics, scores, schedules, news articles. On the Team Roster page he included player mug shots.

I logged onto the community college server, where my students' pages are housed, and I went to Jared's folder. I found a page he'd named TeamRoster.htm and I downloaded it to my design application. Then I replaced Jared's pictures with my own. Instead of smiling images of Sam Shade and Bryan Barker there are pictures now of me. My lips, throat, anus, cunt. I gave myself to Jared and the world. I can't feel a thing.

Cutting

To cut the cold bagel with the knife pointed away she props it up like a tire, sticks the dangerously sharp knife into the top, rotates.

She remembers her mom telling her about Granddad's problem. She was a junior in high school and she'd been busted again for drinking. Her mom cried in the family room—"It was terrible growing up. I hate the sound of ice cubes hitting glass."—but she was just a sixteen year old smartass who sat there straight-faced, hating her mom, planning to be permissive as a parent.

Now, as a twenty-seven year old, she has acid stomach on account of last night's wine, which she drank more than a bottle of, with a friend, who had one glass. She turns the bagel and crumbs fall onto the plate. Her grip hand knocks off outer ingredients, poppy seeds and onion flakes.

She thinks of Granddad, whose hands shook so hard he had to bear down when writing to make letters be letters. Of Granddad's sour smell. Times his slicked down gray hair looked disheveled. Of Granddad sitting on a pillow on the coffee table, watching cartoons, nodding to sleep.

The knife steers off course, cutting thin on one side of the bagel, so she stops, backtracks, leaves a connected slice of bagel flesh she knows will cook crispy.

She thinks of Granddad again but now she sees her mom, visiting. They're at the Italian restaurant down the street and Mom says, "I think Granddad cheated. It's inevitable." She sees the crazy faces Granddad used to make and growl, the arm trick he frustrated her with when she was little: "Before the war I could raise my arm above my head, like this. Now it just goes this far."

She remembers the rest of the night of Mom's visit. She dropped Mom at her apartment to go to sleep in the bed they'd share and she went back out. To a bar, for beer, cigarettes.

She bears down hard on the knife's handle and the blade slides back, non-serrated side leading through the space already cut, and the point hits her hand, grip hand, palm, so she lifts up quick, drops the bagel and knife: clatter. She rubs her thumb on her palm. She's not cut.

She looks at the bagel on its side, nearly divided, knife still in it, and thinks of Granddad, who's been dead now eight years. He taught her to cut. At the island in Mom's kitchen. With a long knife he pointed at a baguette—she was just a girl on a stool—and he told her to saw. He said, "Don't push with knives. It takes a bread's air out."

Thirty Seconds

Ms. Rollins has taught fifth grade for thirty-two years. Her students are ten-year-olds. Ten years ago she could have been married. She could have. Things, Ms. Rollins thinks, don't go as expected.

Along three walls of the classroom are computers. Ms. Rollins is old, fifty-four, to know so much technology. She knows more than fresh-faced young teachers fresh from undergrad programs. She caught wind of computers twenty years ago, learned them then.

Screensavers blink at Ms. Rollins and her students, who are in the middle of the classroom.

The desks, small rectangles, are arranged in a rectangle—side touching side until the corner, where one side touches a front. Ms. Rollins's desk is in the circuit too, though it's wider and taller, front and center. It's where she is now, Ms. Rollins, where she feels like a storyteller with a band of rapt listeners around her crossed feet.

“Hello, class,” she says. “I assume you're well. You're no doubt wondering about the tray.”

In the middle of the rectangle's a tray. It's Ms. Rollins's TV tray and it's covered with a purple blanket, lumpy from covering something else.

“This might,” Ms. Rollins says, “be our most important day. I hope you’re paying attention. I expect notes.”

A squirming boy raises his hand.

“It can wait, Curtis,” Ms. Rollins says. She sits on her desk. “Duck, Rosie,” she says, “and I’ll swing my legs over.”

Ms. Rollins walks the interior of the rectangular space like an animal in a cage.

“Here’s what I want you to do,” she says. “It’s simple. I’ll lift the blanket and there are items there. Fifteen of them. You’ll have thirty seconds to look before they’re covered again. Then you’ll write them down, in your notebooks, once they’re covered. All fifteen. In ballpoint pen.” She stops and looks back and forth between a boy and a girl. “This is very important.”

She lifts the blanket then with a *swoosh*, like a waiter she had once uncovered an expensive bottle of wine. Students push their chairs back and stand to see. They point and talk to neighbors.

“Questions?” Ms. Rollins asks, raising her wrinkled, age-spotted hands.

One boy says, “What’s that? In the center?”

“That,” Ms. Rollins says, picking up a slab of marble the size and shape of soap, “is the only trophy I ever won. They gave them to everyone on the T-ball team. Even the boy in centerfield who’d wave at me in right, making sure he had my attention before he’d strut off into the woods to piss, the little asshole.”

“And the yellow mushroom top?” a girl says and points.

“That,” Ms. Rollins says, “is my diaphragm. God knows how many penises have rammed into it.”

Curtis says, “Teacher, teacher! I have to go to the bathroom!”

Ms. Rollins says, “Do you know, Curtis, what’s in the candy jar? Can you tell me, Curtis, who attached this hose to his tailpipe then ran it in the back right window of the car?”

Ms. Rollins begins lifting items. She says, “This, class, is an earring I stole from my sister. This is the bowl I eat out of at night. The love of my life wrote an article in this freebie paper. Mom died and left me with a stack of bills and a goddamn button collection. Radishes,” she says and swings a dusty cluster, “are all I can grow. Captain Morgan’s and Coke is my drink of choice. Earl,” she says and picks a goldfish off the top of a bowl, letting him dangle there, like a tea bag lifted from a cup, “was my pet until last week. He too disappointed.”

Gillian, the quiet girl, raises her hand.

“Yes, Gillian, what is it?”

“Is that,” she says and hesitates, “a stuffed teddy bear?”

“Of course, Gillian,” Ms. Rollins says. “It’s just what it looks like. Class,” she says, “you’re eating up your thirty seconds here with questions.”

Behind students leaning over desks trying to see, trying to get closer, are Ms. Rollins’s computers and their incessant screensavers. In one we’re zipping through space, stars careening past. In another there’s a scrolling red marquee:

Mrs. Rollins is the best!!!

Ice Breaker

When I got to the classroom door I wasn't nervous. I made controlled eye contact with students who turned their heads to watch as I walked down the aisle. At the front of the room was my desk, which I placed my bag on top of. From behind the desk I smiled.

"We'll wait a couple minutes," I said, "for stragglers."

On the blackboard I wrote the course name, my name, office number, office hours. The chalk squeaked but didn't leave much of a line.

"Can you see that?" I asked, turning to look at the students.

The white boy in the back right corner slid farther down in his chair. Another white boy three rows closer shook his head.

I tried again, I pressed harder, but the letters didn't get thicker.

"Oh well," I said. "No matter. It's on your syllabus."

I dropped the chalk and checked my watch.

"Welcome," I said. "My name is Cleo," I said. "I'll be your teacher. Enough about me. I want to learn more about you."

As I walked down the aisle handing out small stacks of index cards, I felt my red skirt swish against my thighs and the perspiration damp under my arms.

“Put your name, address, and email on the front,” I said. “On the back of the card, tell me something interesting about you.”

I counted heads then of students bent over writing. I lost track and started again. Twenty-eight eighteen-year-olds began to look up, finished.

“OK,” I said, “a few more minutes.”

A chubby white boy with a goatee and glasses, with dark brown hair that had white patches, said, “There’s nothing interesting about me.”

He was in the desk closest to me.

I said, “I’m sure that’s not true. Do you have a favorite TV show?”

The black girl three seats down said, “*The Real World*.”

“Great,” I said. “That’s the ticket. All right,” I said to the class, “let’s get started. We’ll begin in the back.” I pointed to the back right corner. “Tell us your name and interesting thing, then the person beside you does the same.”

It worked this way, names and things from student to student, snaking their way to the front of the classroom, to me. One girl said she dreamed of owning a truck to go mud racing in. She was from Yazoo City. A boy’s initials were V.S.P., in his estimation, “Very Special Person.” My Latina student said, “People pronounce my name wrong,” and the class practiced rolling their Rs. A girl with glitter eye shadow said, “My mom called today to tell me Dad’s in solitary confinement. He argued with another inmate, about a chair. He’s been in prison for four years. My mom said he didn’t call last night, his friend Charles’s wife called. Denise. She said Dad has a bed, a sink, and a toilet.” A boy named Bill said, “My name’s Bill. I’m the oldest of six.” When it was the goateed boy’s

turn he pushed up his T-shirt sleeve. “My arm,” he said, “is in a medical book. The pigment’s different colors.” He turned in his chair to show the rest of the class. “It’s like a freckle,” he said, “that keeps growing.”

“OK,” I said. “Thanks.”

The boy, his sleeve still up, looked at me. He said, “What about you, teacher? Will you tell us your interesting thing?”

“I might,” I said. “If you like. If you’re good.”

I looked out the classroom window. I saw the branches of a tree. I heard someone mowing grass.

Pheobe

The teacher's mom called to tell her that the cat she'd been given as a birthday present when she turned twelve (now she was twenty-six) was suffering from kidney failure. And while she didn't live at home with the cat anymore, hadn't for eight years, she felt sad. She remembered the cat sleeping curled up next to her and sticking its chilly little nose under her hand to have its cheekbones scratched. When her mom said tearfully that she kept thinking she saw the cat, which wasn't there anymore, but at the vet's, hooked up to liquids, the teacher said, "I'm sorry."

That afternoon she went to work. She taught writing lessons to a GED class in a rural Mississippi town. It was twenty minutes up the road from the small university town where she lived. Her class was held in a junior college extension office, a narrow brick building beside a defunct athletic shoe factory on the main street, a street with angled parking spots on the sides, sixteen wheelers speeding down the middle. The classroom was dim and paneled. There were maps tacked to the walls and a square table in the middle. When she walked in she counted three regulars—Pam, Amanda, and Samuel—and three new people.

Amanda and Pam, regulars the teacher thought the writing lessons were helping, and one new person, a black man with speckled white pigment on his

fingers, started the assignment as soon as the teacher handed them the prompt. They were supposed to write a letter to a day. Samuel and the other two new people, white women, didn't.

Samuel was young, just a teenager. He had a few wispy blonde whiskers on his chin like he was maybe trying to grow a goatee. The first thing the teacher had noticed about Samuel when she'd met him a few weeks before was that he had the start of several tattoos on both arms, tattoos of the unprofessional variety, like he'd carved into himself with a straightened paperclip dipped in ink. The most prominent was a woman's name with an incomplete last letter: *Lizzi faint e*.

The new white women had hair dyed cartoonish shades of red, one closer to orange, the other closer to purple. The one with orangish hair also had orange-tinted legs, like she'd rubbed in fake tanning cream, but only there. She had on short-shorts. She was very skinny. Her name was Jenaya.

The other woman, Lisa, was heavy. Her purple-red hair was long and she wore it hanging like drapes on either side of her face. She had on a high school class ring and was, it was announced, the youngest student at the GED center. Seventeen. "No kids yet," Lisa said, "but once married and divorced."

Jenaya said, "You wait. Soon." She laughed. "I have two babies and no marriage, but a separation. Because he cheated, the bastard. With that thirty-eight year old," she covered her mouth, "*whore*." Jenaya talked fast, choppy.

Samuel said, "You know why," and Jenaya said, "Hell yeah. Cause she always carries an eighth of dope." She punched Samuel's arm playfully. "Hey, I'm moving to New Mexico soon. Pop's gonna help me get my babies back. It's

beautiful there. Mountains out behind the house.” She pointed to Lisa, her friend.
“She’s coming with me.”

The teacher knew conversation was part of class. She usually enjoyed it, participated. In past classes she’d talked about growing up in Virginia, where her family still lived. Students had told her about Mississippi towns smaller than the one this GED center was in. They’d told her how deer age and size are talked about in “points,” the number of antler tines. But that day, as the class went on, she couldn’t break into the conversation between Samuel and the new women.
“Why don’t you all work on your letters to days?” she said. In front of all three of them were the prompts, blank sheets of paper, pencils. “Are you having trouble starting?” None of them, clustered at a corner of the table, acknowledged that the teacher had spoken.

Jenaya, the skinny woman, said, “Hey, what’d you do with that ring I sold you? Pop asked about it. I told him I sold it to you for seventy dollars.”

Samuel pulled a ring out of his jeans pocket.

“Hey,” she said, “can I see that?”

He said, “You better not try and keep it.”

She said, “Give me that.”

She moved the shiny silver ring from finger to finger, trying to find a fit. When it was on her curled back thumb she held it close to her face.

“Wow,” she said, “it’s pretty. Where’d you get this one?” She laughed.
“I’m *not* giving it back.” She turned to Lisa. “Can you imagine what he’d say if he saw this on my finger.”

Lisa smiled, pulled her purplish hair over one shoulder. She said, sweetly, “He wouldn’t care. He’s with someone else now, over you.”

Jenaya turned back to Samuel and started talking about two more people not in class, some woman she thought shouldn’t put up with some man’s drug using and cheating. Samuel pretended to shoot up and Jenaya said, “Look at you. I never thought *you’d* turn out to be a thug.”

The teacher was walking around the table, trying to look over the shoulders of the three students who were working. But she couldn’t stop listening.

Jenaya said, “She needs to leave his ass.”

Lisa said, “You’re one to talk. You’d go back if he called today.”

Jenaya said, “But I *love* him.”

Samuel said, “Don’t go talking shit about cuz,” and Jenaya rubbed the tattoo on his arm, the one the teacher had noticed weeks before: *Lizzi faint e*. She said, “What’s with her?”

The teacher took a seat beside the new male student with the speckled fingers, Boogie. He didn’t look up from writing.

Samuel said, “I broke it off after the incident.”

Jenaya said, “Why were you even with her? Why’d you scratch her name in your arm? That doesn’t even look good.” To Lisa she said, “You think that looks good?”

Lisa said, “You know there was something wrong with those babies before they even died. All three of them weighed thirty pounds and they were different ages. One, two, and three.”

Jenaya lowered an eyebrow. “No thirty pound baby can turn water on, I’m sorry.”

Lisa turned then to the teacher. She looked right at her. “Did you hear about this?”

The teacher called on, put on the spot, felt surprised to have to speak. She said, “Me? No. What?”

Lisa said, “The woman that left her babies to go to the store on the corner and when she got back she found two of them dead. Drowned. Said the three year old filled up the tub then put them in there. But you ask me, she murdered them. No three year old can fill a tub.”

Jenaya said, “Plus then she pulled them out, laid them on the bed, filled a bag with clothes and walked out of the house. Went back to the store. Said, ‘Someone better call an ambulance.’ Don’t tell *me* that’s not murder.”

Samuel had his arms crossed, his head down. He was leaning back in the chair.

All six students, the talkers and the writers, were looking at the teacher. Someone outside the classroom was saying *uh-huh* over and over. A sixteen wheeler roared past.

The teacher said, “I didn’t hear about this. I mean, I didn’t know. I mean, she lives near here?”

Jenaya, with the orange hair and orange legs, pointed, said, “It’s the name carved in his arm.” As if the teacher hadn’t been listening, hadn’t been in the room.

Samuel said, “We were engaged,” and Jenaya laughed, snorted: “Engaged! What a joke.” She started talking about how someone should have taken that woman’s kids away before this happened, that she didn’t even bathe those kids, ever. They stunk. But instead the law came and took *her* babies. But she was getting them back. Wait. See.

The teacher cut in: “OK. I’m going to collect the essays that are complete. Those of you that didn’t do it, maybe work on the assignment at home, bring it to me next time.”

She read out loud the three papers that the three writers had completed. Boogie wrote a letter to Monday, asking it to come just once a month. Pam wrote a list of days she liked: *I like Thursday. I like Christmas.* Amanda wrote about how God was with her everyday, and when the teacher finished reading her piece, Amanda said, “My baby died of SIDS. She was in bed with me. When I turned over, saw her there, blue, I was hysterical. That woman wasn’t even sad when her babies died. There’s something wrong there.”

On the car ride back to the college town the teacher felt drained but not sad. Deflated. Normally she spent the time thinking about her students, pitying them their problems, the bits she could surmise. That day she felt overwhelmed, like she’d been unloaded on in a wave and these were lives she couldn’t imagine, not really. This was information she didn’t have a place for, a space that made

sense. She didn't know what to do but something. Something needed to be done because the world keeps fucking over these people with dead babies and lost babies and names carved in their arms and how's it ever going to stop?

At home her mom called to tell her she'd had to put the cat to sleep. "The systems were shutting down," her mom said. "The vet said there was pain."

The teacher remembered getting the cat on her twelfth birthday. How she'd been on the couch, watching TV, when her mom and dad walked into the family room, her mom with her arms folded in front of her holding something fuzzy—the kitten she'd wanted!—and then her mom placed the kitten on her lap. It scurried up over her shoulder. It was so little, black with brown stripes, wild. She named her Phoebe, after her grandmother, but she misspelled it that first day, inverted the vowels, so they left it that way forever: Pheobe the cat. Now Pheobe was dead, and though the teacher knew there'd be more pets in her life, dogs and maybe a cat with a manner similar to Pheobe's, there would never again be a cat just like Pheobe, and she cried and was crying still, sniffing really by that evening when she started retyping what her students had written, fixing grammar and spelling, so the next day she could go back there, hand out warm photocopies, all the words lined up evenly in black type on the white page.

Weather

They were in Montana for the last week of their three-week vacation, a spur of the moment decision. Sara and Ian both taught high school English in Virginia, and they'd agreed to teach summer school, but that had been months ago, February, when three weeks of break sounded sufficient. They needed the money. Neither of them, both first-year teachers, had counted on the end of the school year feeling so hectic, jammed with standardized tests, report cards, graduation. And then the week school let out Sara had had an abortion. She was fine with it, really. So was Ian. And then it wouldn't stop raining. It had been the wettest summer in recent Virginia history, their small yard saturated so it couldn't absorb more water; it ran along the side of the street. And it was only late June, the season barely started. After two weeks of being stuck inside, watching, as far as Ian was concerned, worthless crap on TV, he went online and bought them tickets. They'd visit his mother.

It was hotter in Montana than Sara had expected.

Ian had his elbow jutting out the open window as he drove them up the Rimrock, on a road cut out of the Rimrock, the fifty-foot cliff the town of Billings runs into. It's like one stair hitting the next. Hot air blew on Ian's face. It made the pieces of Sara's hair that had come loose from her ponytail flutter. They'd

turn right when they got to the top. It was what his mom had said to do, to get to the man-made lake, new since Ian lived here.

Sara had suggested swimming.

A shiny black bird flew in front of them. It was flapping then it turned, wings perpendicular to the ground, into a glide. Sara noticed bright red patches on its shoulders, red like tulips, then it was flat again, out of sight.

“I think it was a red-winged blackbird,” she said.

Ian asked what.

“The bird,” Sara said.

Ian’s mom, an avid birder, had been identifying species in her backyard.

“There, a catbird,” Mrs. Anderson would say, pointing to a massive pine with branches that dipped low to the ground. It looked like they were holding something heavy.

Sara, sitting on the deck, would look up from her book, the one she’d started before summer break, the one she couldn’t get through. It was about a husband and wife who had too many children; they hated each other. Sara would scan branches of dusty green looking for movement, saying, regardless of whether she spotted birds or not, “Oh yeah. Neat.”

Now Ian and Sara were driving along the top of the Rimrock. Sara thought, If it were evening, our car would be part of the town’s skyline. Then she pictured this, the silhouetted car like a swell pushing across an otherwise flat horizon. Ian looked down at Billings and then farther, seventy miles to the gently sloping Prior Mountain Range, ninety to the sharper Bear Teeth. At a stoplight,

he turned left onto a commercial street, then right into a neighborhood. He noticed how much poorer it was here than where his mom lived. Sara liked the trailers they passed that had shrubs, steps decorated with potted plants, stakes holding hanging baskets.

They were not yet married, Sara and Ian, though they both knew they would be. They used to talk about it. Sara told people she got a feeling when she first saw Ian. It was at a grad school orientation. I'm going to marry that man, she thought. Ian had a running joke with Sara about stealing from his coin jar. He said she better not, that he was saving for a sparkly little something. Sara joked back: "Little?"

They both wanted children. They used to talk names. Sara liked Finn for a boy, which Ian said no to: "It's too weird. Do you want him made fun of?"

It had been about timing, the abortion. Ian and Sara had just moved in together, had just started teaching. Their life as adults, as a couple, was barely under way. Still, when after less than a minute the test came back positive, those two blue lines, and Sara, who was sitting on the covered toilet rocking, her head in her hands, was thinking, No, Ian said, "We can do this, Sara." (He'd picked up the pregnancy test, was clutching it tightly.) "We're working now, making money." (They were squeezed in the powder room off the living room at the center of their first house together, where they'd go if there was bad weather.) "And we have a house with an extra room." (That they'd painted red, Sara's favorite color.) "And Ben and Celia just had a baby." (His married brother.)

“We can probably borrow their crib, and stuff. Everything’s going to be OK, sweetie. OK?” Sara was rocking.

They were out of the trailer park. Sara could see the lake. It was kidney-shaped with a yellow sand beach in the curve, marsh at the top. Beside the beach was an asphalt parking lot. It was bigger than the beach and crowded with cars.

They were driving along the bottom of the lake. Ian noticed a line of pickup trucks backed up so their beds ended at the lake’s rocky edge. Then a teenaged boy in cutoff jeans hurled himself, arms and legs flailing, off one of the trucks. He landed with a splash in a pack of bobbing heads. Teenaged friends treading water. There were squeals and chastisements: “Rodney, you’re an asshole!” “Get away from me.” “Don’t.” Ian remembered playing like this in high school, flirting. He smiled, thinking of himself as a lanky daredevil teen. Then he thought of his students. How much older he was. Sara thought, How stupid.

At the lake they had to pay two dollars for parking. Ian was reaching for his back pocket when Sara said, “I’ve got it,” and handed him crumpled bills. They parked; Ian popped the trunk; Sara and Ian each grabbed their bag, a towel. Sara had on sunglasses and a blue-flowered sundress over top of a red bikini. Ian was wearing orange bathing trunks and a Hawaiian shirt. Both had on flip-flops so as they walked across the asphalt, which was radiating heat, their feet went slap slap slap.

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Joelle had just set her blanket and the diaper bag on the sand and was massaging her arms, sore from bearing all that weight. She'd walked them over from where they lived in Shady Grove, the trailer park. It was just half a mile, but it took an hour with the baby and his things. Steve, the baby's father, had their only car at summer school, where he was taking English 12 to finish early. It was Thursday of the summer session's last week.

The baby was beside Joelle, strapped in his stroller, twisting, trying to slide out. He whined, and though it was just a quiet whine, Joelle knew it as on its way to a scream. She leaned over and undid the stroller buckle. The baby couldn't get out, his legs were still through the holes, but he didn't know this, and it would buy Joelle enough time to spread the blanket.

The baby, looser, started rocking left to right. Building momentum.

When she was pregnant, no one told Joelle to expect screaming. In the class she'd taken at the alternative high school, where they sent girls in her situation, they'd talked about babies crying and how they should expect to be woken several times a night. Joelle knew about crying. She'd been a very popular babysitter. Kids and parents loved her. She'd show up for babysitting gigs with a big yellow sack she'd stuffed with games and prizes. When babies fussed, she knew she could pick them up, or rub their backs. Offer them a bottle. She had a whole skill set when it came to crying. But with her baby it was different. He was like a teapot, but broken. Day and night he'd let out the most piercing, penetrating, high-pitched screams. Joelle's heart would race, she'd feel tremendous panic, and so she'd race to him, see if there was something she could

do. Often there was. His pacifier would be on the ground outside the playpen. Or his blanket would be twisted around a leg. She could often fix the problem, plug him up, straighten his cover, and the baby would stop. He'd take several deep breaths and try to settle back down. But even then Joelle would feel guilty. She'd look at him, her baby with his bright red face, and think she might get sick.

Secretly she thought her child had been born angry, that he was full of rage still. And he was already eleven months old. It had been almost a year.

Joelle was bent over, smoothing the far side of the blanket, when she heard the thud. The stroller was on its side. The baby's legs were still through the holes, pointed up. The side of his head was on the sand. His neck was bent, his body twisted. As it occurred to the baby what had happened, his face turned red and he covered his eyes with his arms.

Joelle bound across the blanket, righted the stroller. The baby had come loose a little from the top. He sagged off the right side. Then, he started to screaming.

Joelle said, "It's OK, sweetie. You're OK, sweetie," as she took the baby under the arms and tried lifting him from the stroller. But it stuck around his legs. The blue nylon seat came with him. The baby, who was coated in sand, kept his arms over his eyes, as though hugging his head. With his legs he started kicking.

Joelle was bent over, holding him under the arms. Just the front stroller wheels were off the ground. But with the baby kicking like this, Joelle couldn't shake the stroller seat loose, which is what she needed to do, to shake the baby free, being at the lake alone, with only two hands. She pulled her screaming child

close, said, “Shhh. You’re OK. Be still and Mommy will get you free.” And then Joelle started crying. She looked up and around.

The small sandy beach was crowded with families with children. They all seemed to be laughing and running in circles. There was a wooden lifeguard stand that was empty. A sign propped against it said *Swim at Your Own Risk*. There was an old man in a folding chair at the edge of the water. He was wearing a faded camping hat that reminded Joelle of one her dad used to have. It had a rusty fishing hook sewn onto it, a pretty stupid decoration. Joelle looked back down at her baby, still stuck and screaming. Nobody seemed to notice. Then she looked up again and saw a woman twenty feet away, propping herself up, staring.

The woman was older than Joelle. Twenty-three? Twenty-four? She had brown hair pulled back in a ponytail and was wearing a red string bikini. There were sunglasses dangling from her lips, like she’d just taken them off to get a better look at Joelle, who she seemed to know, or be scrutinizing. Something. Joelle was sure she’d never seen the woman before. There was a man lying on his stomach beside her. Maybe she knew him, but she didn’t think so.

Joelle’s back and arms were getting sore, bent over the way she was, holding the baby. She wished the staring woman would come over and help instead of just looking at her like that. What’s wrong with people? Doesn’t she see I’m crying? Just then the stroller fell off. Her screaming baby was free. Both he and Joelle were so startled that she stayed bent over; he stopped screaming. But that was just for a moment. Then she carried him down to the water to wash off the sand.

When Joelle and the baby got back to the blanket, she set him down to take off her wet shorts and T-shirt. He was gurgling, sucking on an oyster shell that Joelle had plucked from the lake. She knew it was dirty, in a minute she'd take it away, but for the time being she thought it was fine. The water delighted the baby; the oyster shell delighted the baby; he was happy, not screaming. Joelle glanced back at the woman in red to see if she was noticing this, but the woman was lying on her back, holding a heavy book over her face, reading. Joelle fished through her yellow sack, the diaper bag, for sunscreen and the tube of Neosporin. The baby had scraped the top of his right arm in the sand. She'd make sure he didn't get infected.

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Sara realized she'd been on but not reading the same page for several minutes. Her arms started to ache, holding the book up like that, so she put it down. She lay on her back staring at the sun through her sunglasses. Everything was burnt orange.

The girl on the blanket with the baby looked like Annie. That it could be Annie was of course impossible. Annie was in Virginia; they were visiting Ian's mom in Montana. Annie didn't have a child.

Annie was one of Sara's students last year in Honors English 11. Ian knew her too from managing the student paper. Annie was the editor. Like this girl, Annie had light brown hair she wore in a ponytail on top of her head. It looked like a fountain, Sara thought. Around her face were curls. Also like this girl, Annie had large breasts. When she walked she pushed them forward. She

pushed her ass back. She was knock-kneed and her bottom jaw was underdeveloped, causing Annie to have an overbite. Ian said once, at the beginning of the school year, “It looks like Annie has the chin of an old lady,” and Sara knew what he meant. Annie’s chin looked like it was already buckling.

Sara remembered seeing Annie on the day she and Ian went to Planned Parenthood for the abortion. Annie was in the waiting room too. What a surprise. She’d gotten there before them. She was sitting with her mom in the corner. She spotted Sara and Ian before they noticed her. There was a magazine in her hands, but she was staring now at them. Sara looked at Ian and they both looked at Annie. All three of them waved.

Annie was called before they were. She disappeared into the back of the office. There were no words. When the door shut behind her, Sara put her face in her hands and started to cry. This made Ian angry.

“What are you doing?” he whispered, his face close to Sara’s. “Do you not want to do this?”

Sara shook her head. That wasn’t it. She did want to do this. They had to do this. But seeing Annie in the waiting room had caught her off-guard. It had thrown her. She worried about what Annie would think. She’d surely know. Why else would they be at Planned Parenthood together? Unless they were trying to get pregnant. Sara kept crying.

Ian shook Sara’s arm. He said, “Talk to me. You need to make a decision. We can’t go back on this so you have to say right now if that is what you want, Sara. This abortion.”

Sara said, “I do. I’m just nervous.”

Ian let go of Sara’s arm. He put his face in his hands and said, “I’m nervous too.”

Thinking back about it now, Sara wondered if there’d been hope on Ian’s part. After the conversation in the bathroom, when they’d tested positive and Ian had said, “We can do this, Sara,” meaning have the baby while she was thinking about, Sara had explained to Ian why she wasn’t ready. They’d moved from the bathroom to their unmade bed. The ceiling fan above them clicked as it spun. She started with, “We’re young, just getting started,” but moved quickly to, “I do want to have children with you, eventually. I’m just not ready right this minute. There are things I want us to do.”

Ian said, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

What Sara figured out about herself in explaining to Ian why she wanted an abortion was that she had a specific order in mind. First they’d live together. Then they’d get married. Then they’d have a baby. Then maybe more babies. She figured out that the order was important to her. What she’d wondered since was if doing things in the right order was the only reason.

But that day on the bed, when she finished speaking Ian hugged her. He rubbed the back of her head. He said, “We can do whatever you want. Let’s call right now, make an appointment.” In the days leading up to the abortion, he acted relieved that Sara had made this tough decision for them, coming up behind her at the bathroom sink when she was brushing her teeth, kissing the side of her neck, whispering in her ear, “You were right, you know? We’re not ready.”

But maybe when he saw Sara crying in the waiting room, when he saw her shake her head, he'd forgotten. Maybe he truly wanted the baby. Maybe he wanted Sara to want it too, so the two of them—three, counting the fetus—could walk right out of Planned Parenthood. Be a family. Sara didn't know, and since the abortion she and Ian hadn't talked about it.

All of a sudden it seemed darker. Sara, aware again of the lake and beach, surveyed the wide Montana sky. She was surprised to see several heavy white clouds. It had been relentlessly hot since they'd arrived. On the deck that first morning, between Sara trying unsuccessfully to read and Ian's mom pointing out birds, they'd talked about their summer weather. Sara said it was depressing in Virginia, day after day of rain. Ian's mom said that Montana had been experiencing a drought. She said, "The wildflowers really weren't able to do much this year, the ground's so dry." She said she missed seeing clouds. "They're nice every once in awhile. You get tired of blue skies."

Now Sara thought, It would be our luck to bring the rain with us. Ian rolled onto his back and groaned. He'd been asleep on his stomach.

"Hey," Sara said and ran a hand over Ian's head, which he kept shaved. On his scalp there were tan freckles. "Did you have a nice nap?"

Ian sat up. "Sure. Did we bring water?"

Sara said there was some in her bag. She sat up to reach for her straw sack, by her foot on the red and white striped towel. When she held out the warm bottle Ian didn't notice. He was staring at the girl with the baby on the blanket in front of them, the one Sara thought looked like Annie. With one hand she was

holding something behind her back that the baby obviously wanted. He was reaching for it, bending forward to push himself up, to walk over there and get it. With her other hand she was waving a blue shovel in the baby's face, making baby faces.

Sara imagined the girl was trying to sell the baby on the toy. She thought, Show him how to use it. Dig a hole or something. But the baby was up, waddling in that slow baby way towards his mom, his arms in front of him like a zombie, going for whatever was behind her back, so she chucked it. Something white. A shell? It flew over the baby's head and landed in a patch of open sand a few feet away. The baby, stunned, turned to look over his shoulder, lost his balance, and fell onto his side. Sara could see his face start to turn red, then he opened his mouth. What came out was much louder and stronger than she expected. He sounded like an adult, screaming. Then his mom seemed to swoop in. Before Sara knew it the girl was jogging towards the water with her baby in her arms. She looked like an EMT on a life-saving mission.

Sara nudged Ian with the bottle. "Here."

Ian didn't look at Sara. He said, "How old do you think that baby is?"

Sara put the water on the sand between them. "I don't know. It was standing and walking. I think that happens around a year."

Ian made a sound like *Hm* and lay down, closed his eyes. The cloud had moved from in front of the sun and Sara was hot.

She said, "Are you thinking of swimming?"

Ian said, "Not right now."

She looked at the lake. There were people floating on mats, doing freestyle laps, splashing. Sara focused on the girl. She was in to just above her knees, holding the baby under the arms, bending over to submerge his small body. Then she'd straighten up, lift the baby up over her head. He'd spread his arms, arch his neck. He looked like a gymnast who'd pulled off a tough tumbling feat. Even from a distance you could see he was pleased.

Sara said low, almost under her breath, "She's like Annie."

Ian said, "What? Speak up. I hate when you mumble."

"The girl," Sara said. "She looks like Annie."

Ian, still on his back, opened his eyes. "Which girl?"

"The one that was sitting in front of us, with the baby. She's got the hair and the jaw. She even walks a little like her."

Sara looked at Ian. A muscle twitched in his cheek.

"Forget it," she said. "It's not important."

Ian breathed hard out of his nose. He had his arms and legs tensed.

He said, "You're really amazing, Sara. Of all the fucking people on this beach you pick the one with the baby? And call her Annie? Because we know Annie's real interested in kids, right? We can only assume she was at Planned Parenthood with her mom to, what? Test her fertility?"

Ian stood up. He said, "Look, I've got to walk. I'll be back in, I don't know, awhile."

He started towards the marsh. He was walking fast, taking long strides. Sara watched his white back move farther and farther away until he was

scrambling over rocks that formed the border between the parking lot and the lake. It was a sharp slope; he was using both hands and feet. Then he faltered, lost his balance, or maybe the rocks were just hot. Anyway he turned towards the water and dove. There was no splash.

Sara stood, started running towards where Ian had been—she thought she might scream—when she saw him. He was fine, swimming breaststroke. Up, down. Up, down. Sara stopped, breathed. She thought she might collapse. She looked from Ian to the girl in the lake, still dipping and raising her baby. Then she looked at the sky. She saw the bottom of a flock of birds flying low to the ground, away. She didn't know what kind they were, medium-sized, gray. The clouds had multiplied.

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When Joelle got back to the blanket she thought her arms and back might break, but the baby was happy, gurgling. She fished through the diaper bag for a bottle of juice. It was warm but the baby took it, started sucking. He looked like a little man sitting there, having a drink, admiring the water. Joelle sat beside him and put her hand on his back. He was clammy from being wet. She liked to feel his heart beating. Then she lay down beside him, closed her eyes for a second, and felt nice. The sun felt so good on her skin. She imagined the tensions in her body draining into the sand beneath her, a game she used to play when she'd lie on the beach with friends. But what tensions were there then? Whether Steve would still be grounded. If Doodie, their beer connection, would come through. Joelle knew she wasn't being fair. There were real worries, like whether she'd

arrive home to her mom sobbing into her pillow. But from this distance, listening to her baby suck juice, Joelle thought, Life used to be a lot easier.

The night before Steve had threatened to leave. He was at the trailer's built-in dinette with notes spread in front of him, his English text opened to *King Lear*, studying for his English 12 final. Joelle was washing the supper dishes. The baby was in his walker, a plastic table with wheels that the baby hung through the middle of, so his feet touched the ground, and he could push himself around, table included. Steve's mother had given it to them. Joelle thought it was the stupidest gift ever. They lived in a trailer with one narrow hallway that the walker barely fit through. If the baby wasn't in the walker, wedged somewhere, stuck, Joelle was tripping over the walker as she moved from the futon to the crib. Joelle thought there was malice in Steve's mom's present selection, as if she were saying, I live in a house big enough for walkers, one per floor, and my Steve should too. It was Joelle's trailer. She'd bought it and rented the slip with the money her mom had given her access to early, the money her dad had left her in a trust before he'd pulled out of town and abandoned them.

Steve's parents hadn't helped except with gifts—the walker, the playpen—that the baby liked all of. So Joelle used them. The night before he'd tried rolling in his walker through the bathroom door. It was too narrow. He got stuck. He started screaming.

Joelle left the dishwasher running to go to the baby, lift him out of the walker. He was screaming in her ear, that unbelievable pitch. He had his arms in

the air, hands balled in fists. Then he reached for her hair, his latest trick. He'd pulled out hunks.

Joelle tried to free the walker from the doorframe with her foot. She could hear the dishwasher coming out strong, ricocheting down the drain. She could hear Steve flipping pages. The walker wouldn't come loose. Joelle set the baby back in the walker's plastic seat, said, "Mommy'll be right back," and jogged to the sink. She'd turn off the water then go back to the walker, use two hands to pull it loose. When she passed Steve at the dinette he had his head in his hands, his elbows on the table.

In a low voice, he said, "I can't do this Joelle." The baby's scream filled their trailer.

Joelle, back at the walker, said, "I'm sorry. I know you have to study. I'm trying to get this stupid thing loose and then he'll be fine. He'll stop. Maybe I could quiz you. Would that help? Me quizzing you?"

She pulled on the walker, jostling her baby, but it wouldn't come out. How could he get this stuck? The baby screamed.

Steve slammed the book shut. He stood. This time he spoke loud, he was practically shouting. He said, "I could give a shit about the test, Joelle. It's not what I mean. I mean, I can't do this."

Steve, who was big, a tight end, waved his arms to indicate all of it, the trailer, Joelle, his bright red angry son. He put on a shirt and left, no books.

When he got home and climbed into bed with Joelle, she looked at the clock. 3:21. His breath had that sweet-sour smell that Joelle's mom had always

told her was impossible to miss. He'd been drinking. In the morning his watch alarm, which was quiet enough to not wake the baby, beeped at 6:45. Steve was on his way to school by 7:00. When Joelle and the baby got up half an hour later, there was a note taped to the refrigerator: *This afternoon we need to talk.*

The baby was still sitting there, sucking on his bottle. Joelle opened her eyes because she noticed the sun wasn't on her. There was a cloud covering it. There were other clouds too, cottony white, hovering low over the lake. Beyond the lake the sky was clear blue. Then there was a face in Joelle's line of vision.

"Joelle. Is that you?"

It was a very tan, very blonde girl. She was wearing a bikini made of blue bandanas. The baby turned to look at her. Joelle sat up.

Joelle said, "Hey, Mindy. How are you?"

Mindy said, "Oh my gosh, Joelle. Is that the baby?" Mindy dropped to her knees and with both hands started waving. "He is so cute. Hi there. Hi cutie."

The baby tossed his nearly empty bottle aside, made a sound like *Argh*, and rocked himself forward to stand up.

Joelle said, "What's going on? Are you having a nice summer?"

Mindy said, "Yeah. I'm here with some people." She pointed over her shoulder. "We were by the side of the lake, jumping off the back of Rodney's truck. You know. It gets old."

Joelle said, "Yeah."

Mindy said, “So then Heather and Sammy and Jim and me wanted to lay out. So a group of us came here. We were over there, and I thought this was you, but they didn’t believe me.”

Joelle looked over Mindy’s shoulder at her former classmates and friends. Jim Sommer waved.

Mindy said, “You should come over and say hi.”

The baby had waddled over to Mindy. With one finger, he poked her in the belly button. He said, “Goo.”

Mindy said, “Hi there, little guy.” She poked his belly.

“I think he likes your belly button ring,” Joelle said and Mindy looked down.

On her tan, flat stomach there was a bright silver star. From inside her belly button came three short silver chains, a bead at the bottom of each. Red, white, and blue.

“You like?” Mindy said. With a French manicured nail she tapped the patriotic beads from side to side.

Joelle put a hand on her own bathing suit covered stomach. She had stretch marks radiating out from her belly button. Her bikini days were over.

Mindy said, “Oh, Joelle. He’s too cute. I keep telling Steve to carry a picture, that I want to see the little guy, but I guess he doesn’t have one. Or he forgets.” Mindy stroked the baby’s light brown hair. “Is it OK if I pick him up? He looks a lot like Steve, doesn’t he? What’s his name again?”

Joelle was thinking of Steve. That maybe she'd say something about this, his not carrying a picture, Mindy knowing, that afternoon during their "conversation." Then she glanced right and noticed a bald man. He was dripping wet, wearing an orange suit. He was about ten feet away, just standing there, staring. Joelle held up a hand to wave and the bald man, surprised, walked past, on up the beach.

Joelle turned back to Mindy. She was holding the baby and the baby looked happy. He was reaching for Mindy's nose, gurgling. Joelle looked past Mindy, to the high school kids she used to be one of. They were tossing a wad of key chains over one girl, Heather's, head. There was a hot pink rabbit's foot, a yellow bottle opener. Of course Joelle had seen these people when she walked the baby from the trailer park over. Rodney's truck had been parked near their place. When Joelle noticed it she crossed the street to avoid them. What was there to say? Looking at them now she just felt old, tired.

"Mindy," Joelle said, "would you mind watching the baby for a little?"

She knew this question probably caught Mindy off-guard, that Mindy didn't want this responsibility. Joelle pushed.

"He's easy, really. He loves swimming. I take him in and hold him, like you've got him there, under the arms. And then I bend over, dip his body in the lake, and stand up again. I raise him up out of the water, above my head."

As Joelle said this she demonstrated. When she finished, her arms were pointed towards the sky, which was thick with clouds.

The baby was tugging on Mindy's ear, speaking sentences in baby language.

Mindy laughed: "OK."

Joelle said, "Thanks. I really appreciate it. Bring him back whenever you guys need. I'm just incredibly tired. I can't tell you how much I appreciate this, a chance to rest."

She lay down and Mindy stood. When she'd taken a couple steps with the baby, Mindy turned around. "I still don't know his name."

Joelle, who was lying on the blanket now, eyes closed, said, "Finn. We named him Finn. We just liked the sound of it."

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Ian stood beside Sara, who was lying on her red and white striped towel, sunglasses on. He extended his arms over her and shook. Water sprinkled her stomach. She ignored him.

Ian sat in the sand. "Sara, I'm sorry."

She didn't say anything.

"I didn't mean to get upset."

He pulled a white oyster shell out of the sand. He started turning it over in his hand.

He said, "The bottom of the lake's oyster shells. Weird, huh? Here we are in Montana, about as far as we can be from oceans, and they make a lake bottom out of shells."

Sara said, "I think there are oysters in other bodies of water."

Ian leaned over so his mouth was by her ear. “Speak up, sweetcakes. I can’t hear what you’re saying.”

Sara pushed Ian’s head away. Then she sat up and took off her sunglasses. Her eyes were bloodshot, eyelids swollen. It’s what happens when she cries even a little.

She said, “Ian, we need to talk.”

Ian, seeing her, got on his knees and hugged Sara. He said, “I’m sorry, baby. I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

Sara’s body pulled close felt limp. Without loosening his grip, Ian arched his neck and kissed Sara’s eyes. It tickled.

Sara put her hands on Ian’s chest. She pushed him away. She said, “I don’t know if it was the right decision.”

Ian covered Sara’s hands with his own. He said, “It was.”

Sara said, “Will we be OK?”

Ian said, “Yes.”

It didn’t matter if this was true or not. It was enough right then. Right then they were fine.

Fifteen minutes passed. They were sitting on their towels. Sara was watching an old man in a camping hat and chair by the edge of the lake. He had his feet in the lake and was starting to slump a little, head lolling as he drifted to sleep. Ian was surprised by the meekness of an obese woman’s voice. She was trying to round up her kids for lunch. They were running races. He heard, “... to stop now... fried chicken.” He picked up the water Sara had left on the sand to

take a sip, but it was disgusting, and he had to spit it out. Sara called him a fountain and laughed.

Ian said, "You know you were right, Sara."

Sara said, "I don't want to talk about it."

Ian said, "No, I meant the girl. She looks just like Annie."

Sara looked at him—"She does, doesn't she?"—then they both looked at Joelle, who was curled on her side, asleep in the center of the blanket. She sucked her thumb.

Sara said, "Where's the baby?"

Ian told Sara he'd seen a younger girl, a blonde, carry the baby off. They scanned the beach for her and spotted her finally in the lake. She was in the water up to her waist. There were other teenagers too. They were passing the baby, dipping him like his mother had, only deeper. All the way under. But he was fine. They raised him up quickly, way over their heads. Even from this distance it was easy to see the baby was thrilled.

Sara watched for a while, then she looked up, at the dense white clouds stacking up over the lake. They went farther even, south of the Rimrock, where Ian's mom lived.

Pointing she said, "Your mom must be happy. She said she's missed clouds."

Then there was lightning. A nearly straight bolt from the cloud to the ground. It was white against the blue sky. It was in the distance, where Sara was pointing.

“Shit,” she said. “Did you see that?”

Ian asked what.

Sara said, “Lightning.” There was another bolt.

Ian said, “It’s heat lightning. We get it in Montana sometimes. But usually around sunset.”

Sara saw another bolt, white, cut through the sky. She said, “We have heat lightning in Virginia, Ian. It’s vague and fuzzy, between clouds. That’s not what this is.”

Sara remembered swimming at the community pool in Richmond when she was a kid, how when lifeguards heard thunder they ordered everyone out of the water. They didn’t even need to see lightning. She looked for a lifeguard here, at the lake. There was only a stand. She looked at all the people in the water. There were people swimming laps, people floating on mats. There were kids doing dolphin dives and handstands. There was that old man with his feet in the water, his head on his chest, asleep. There was the baby. He was still being passed from teenager to teenager, dipped and raised. In the distance there was lightning.

Sara said, “These people need to get out of the water. It’s not safe.”

Ian said, “I’m sure it’s fine. The lightning’s miles away.”

For the most part distance does work like this in Montana. The sky’s so open, land’s so flat that you can see hundreds of miles to mountain ranges. The Priors. The Bear Teeth. Their peaks form the horizon. But this lightning wasn’t hundreds of miles away. It was ten.

Sara said she wanted to leave, she didn't like it, so they stood up and were pulling on their cover-ups. Her blue-flowered sundress; his Hawaiian shirt. That's when it happened. There was a zap and a low-pitched scream. The surface of the water was jumbled as swimmers scrambled to get to shore. People on the beach started screaming, yelling names, running towards the water.

Ian said, "The kids. The baby." He took off for the water.

Sara tried to grab his sleeve but missed. She said, "Ian, the lightning." Then she was on her knees in the sand.

Ian pushed through the border of people at the water's edge to run splashing, throwing his knees up, arms making wide circles, to the spot where the teenagers had been. Where they'd been dipping the baby. They were there still, crying. The lightning had touched the water. Did he see it? It had shocked them a little. It was the scariest fucking thing they'd ever seen, man, but Ian wasn't listening. He wanted the stupid fucking teenagers to shut the fuck up. He was looking for the baby. And when he saw him, on a red headed boy's shoulders, sucking his fist, Ian took him away. He lifted him right off. Then he started yelling, "You're fine. I got you. I'm right here, you're fine, I'm right here. I got you, I got you, I got you!" And it was this, finally, that woke Joelle, who was feeling much better, rested.

The Rachel Stories

1. You Are Loved

Rachel noticed for the first time that Gus, the dog, liked to keep a paw on you. Even in sleep, as he was now, Gus would stretch out a long skinny black leg, pat around on the sofa till he found a human arm or a thigh, then relax, leaving his white-socked foot there. She thought it probably had to do with not wanting people to be off without him playing catch or chasing squirrels. Whatever it is dogs do. Rachel didn't trick herself into thinking it had to do with her. Gus surely would have preferred being stretched out sleeping beside Katrina, or Dan, his owners, or, as Katrina called them, much to Rachel's distaste, "his mommy" and "his daddy." ("Mommy loves you, Gus." "Take your toy to Daddy.") Though she'd only seen them together a few times, Rachel could picture her best friend Katrina leaning over this dog, kissing and then nuzzling his head, her long blonde hair cloaking Gus's face and floppy ears. Katrina had always been a little crazy about the dog.

The doorbell rang. Gus shot out of sleep, raising his head and looking briefly at Rachel before his cheeks puffed with air and he let out one low husky bark. He jumped off the couch and trotted to the door, tail wagging, toenails clicking across the wooden floor. She slid her feet into the black mules she'd

kicked off under the coffee table, then stood and tugged at the bottom of her black dress. It had bunched around her thighs. She yelled, “Coming.”

By the time she got to the door Gus was scratching it. He was whining, then he looked over his shoulder at Rachel and she felt sick. She thought, He probably expects Dan, this poor dog, with no way of knowing. She patted Gus’s head and took hold of his green collar; but when she opened the door and it was clearly not Dan, rather it appeared to be a flower delivery person, the top half of whom was obscured by a gigantic red carnation arrangement in the shape of a heart—running from the bottom left to the top right was a white carnation sash that had black plastic letters pressed in, spelling, *YOU ARE LOVED*—Gus didn’t seem the least bit phased. He was as excited as she’d ever seen him, crouching low to the ground to then lunge forward. If she hadn’t been holding his collar he surely would have knocked over this person, a kid, who’d looked out from behind the arrangement. He had short wavy blond hair and wire-rimmed glasses.

She tried to push Gus into a sit, but he was large—part lab, they thought—and strong and she couldn’t lower him: his front paws were in the air, batting. She thought, Stupid dog, then she looked up again at the delivery boy, who was probably seventeen, eighteen. Realizing she was giving him a view down the front of her dress, she used her free hand to try to cover her cleavage.

The delivery boy smiled, it was really more of a smirk. He said, “Ms. Katrina Chandra?”

“No,” Rachel said. “Here, come in.”

She straightened and pulled Gus backwards, which, in turn, helped Gus stand straighter. His head reached her shoulder. Then she pointed to a doorway at the back of the living room.

“Would you mind putting those in there? That’s the kitchen.”

With his sneaker, the delivery boy kicked closed the front door, saying, “You can let him go. I’m not afraid of dogs.” He walked over to the glass-topped coffee table in front of Dan’s black leather sofa, which Katrina had described once as from his “bachelor pad days.”

The delivery boy cleared room, pushing aside neat stacks of *Outside Magazines* and *Vanity Fairs*. He set the big red heart there, in the middle of the living room. *YOU ARE LOVED*. Then he looked at Rachel and Gus, who were standing beside one another, watching his every move. Still smirking he said, “I’m serious. You can let him go. Dogs, they love me.”

She felt a surge of anger, her face got suddenly hot; she thought, Fine. I hope he bites you; she let go of Gus’s collar.

Gus bound across the room to the delivery boy who had his arms spread, as though expecting a hug. He was wearing a short-sleeved white shirt with blue pinstripes and a name patch that said *Dwight*. When Gus reached him he stuck his nose between the boy’s legs and jerked back his head. The “crotch bump,” Rachel had heard Katrina call it, usually laughing and apologizing to guests. She’d say, “It’s so embarrassing, but we don’t know how to stop him. He thinks it’s a handshake.”

Rachel considered reciting this explanation, but the idea of using the word “crotch” with this boy who she’d already practically flashed was too embarrassing. Plus, now that she was thinking about it, the whole idea seemed dumb. How did Katrina know this was Gus’s handshake? He was a dog, for Christ’s sake, interested in smelling crotches.

The delivery boy squatted so his face was even with Gus’s. He put a hand on each of the dog’s ears and began jostling his head.

“Um, Dwight,” she said, “do I need to sign or something? For the flowers?”

He looked at her, scrunching up his eyes behind his glasses: “Dwight? Oh, the shirt.” He stood. “You really thought my name was Dwight? That’s so funny.”

She said, “Whatever your name is, thank you for the flowers. If I don’t need to sign or anything I guess you can go.” Then she walked to the door and put her hand on the knob.

The boy started towards her. He said, “Luke.”

Suddenly she was nervous: her heartbeat became audible, sounding like liquid, blood, sloshing around her head as it dawned on her that she was alone in the house with a stranger, a kid, but still he was bigger than she was. In New York she would never have let someone like this in. She always left the apartment door chained, to look out first and see that it was in fact the Chinese food delivery person, holding before him, as if in explanation, a grease-spotted brown paper bag, to then unlatch the door, open it just enough to swap food for

money. But here she was in Connecticut, the suburbs, in her friend's condo with a stranger, out of sight.

She cracked the door and Gus jogged over to stand beside her, which made her happy: she pet his head: she could see why a person would own a dog.

The boy stopped a few feet from them, not ready it seemed to leave.

He said, "My name's Luke."

She nodded. "OK."

"Can I ask you something?" He was smiling, like someone who'd been told he was handsome hundreds of times by women in his life. He said, "Let me guess, you're the sister."

Still stroking Gus's head she said, "No." She felt in control again of the situation: he was just a cocky high school kid: she said, "Thanks Luke," and gripped Gus's collar to pull open the door.

Luke slid his hands into his pockets. "I'm sorry. I heard she was blonde, and pretty. Like you. Anyway, I wanted to ask if they knew anything else, about the shooting. In the paper this morning it said there was a suspect and..."

She cut him off. "If you read the paper this morning you know more than I do."

Luke pulled his hands from his pockets and held them out, as though cupping a ball. He had long, delicate fingers. "Damn, I'm sorry. I always do that, put my foot in my mouth. So, yeah, anyway. I guess I should be going."

Luke stepped onto a rectangle of light, cast by the sun through the door, and he seemed to glow. He was directly in front of her, close. She could smell

bubblegum on his breath and judge how much taller he was: five or six inches.

Luke leaned over then to pet Gus, saying, “See ya, buddy.” When he straightened up again he looked her in the eyes.

He said, “You’ve got a lash. Here, I’ll get it.”

Before she could respond Luke’s fingers were on her cheek, then his bent pointer finger was by her mouth, her lost eyelash a comma on its pink pad.

He said, “Make a wish and blow.”

2. In the Back Pages

The article about Dan was near the back. When she turned to the page her eyes landed on his picture. He was wearing a tiny Santa hat that didn’t fit. She couldn’t stop looking. It was like he was staring at her, then his face was swelling up out of the paper, coming towards her, but in this version of the fantasy Dan was stiff. He was frozen in his snapshot pose—smiling, hands on hips, hat—and not at all what she typically imagined him like, a moving image. Rachel closed her eyes to try to bring a stop to this. When she opened them again Dan’s face had sunk back to the page, which looked blurry. Her hands were shaking. She spread the paper on the table and took a sip of wine. With her left hand she covered Dan’s face. She leaned up to read the article, the title of which was, “Suspect Apprehended in Strip Club Shooting.” Her left palm was heating up.

The article was short, five paragraphs, and contained little new information. A male suspect had been picked up in Chinatown. His name wasn’t being released, but he was being held for questioning. The rest was summary

Rachel skimmed—drive by, Friday night, strip club, Scores—but on the last sentence she paused. It said the shooting had left four dead, one more than she remembered reading about. There was Dan, and then there were two former Army guys. The initial article said they'd been recently discharged for use of illegal substances. As she tried to think of who the fourth victim was, her eyes drifted to the headline below: "Hat Maker Left in Critical Condition After Friday's Shooting Dies." To the right of the article was a picture of a pretty black woman with a short Afro. The caption identified her as Teresa Hancock. She was the woman who'd been in line with Dan.

Suddenly it felt like there was a shortage of air in the room. Rachel took tiny swallows. She leaned in close to the photo.

Teresa's eyebrows were thin. The one over her right eye was arched and she was smiling suggestively. The picture cut off just below her neck but you could see her collarbone, which jutted out—she was skinny—and that she was wearing a boat necked black shirt. She had her left hand beside her face, like she was resting her head on it, or wanted to look like she was.

Rachel tried this pose, in the process uncovering Dan's picture. She decided Teresa's hands must have been huge as the one she was looking at stretched the height of her head and Rachel's barely made it to the top of her ear. Then she looked closer and saw a wedding band. They were both married.

Rachel felt like she might cry, so she sat up straight, closed her eyes, and concentrated on taking deep breaths. When she opened her eyes again she thought her mind was playing tricks on her. The pictures, Santa-Claus-Dan and

Teresa-the-slut, seemed to be inching closer to one another, and she hated them. She wanted it to stop. So she turned the page.

At first in the cab, when Katrina told her Dan hadn't been alone, she couldn't believe it. She thought the whole thing was a horrible joke. Punishment for her wish of the night before that she and Dan would go together to Scores. But she quickly realized this was ridiculous. Katrina was clearly not kidding; no one could have known about that wish.

Then she thought, Of all places, why Scores? Scores was something they shared: they were going there together: had Dan called her? She'd turned off her cell phone for the hours she was at the play, but then there wasn't a message, he rarely left them. She could have been the one shot and in critical condition, maybe it should have been her. But thinking this made Rachel shiver and get angry: what the fuck was she doing? Dan was dead. She wouldn't see him again, hear him again. She felt herself buckling in the middle like she might be sick, and she turned to look at Katrina, who was staring out the front window. In her lap was the brown paper bag that contained Dan's belongings. She was rolling and unrolling the top of it. Rachel had yet to see her cry.

She was thinking again of the picture, wondering if Teresa's man hands had touched Dan. She thought they probably had. Who was she kidding? Then she remembered the headline. Was Teresa really a hat maker, or did "hat maker" mean something Rachel wasn't aware of? Like that she was from a small town in Middle America, a place with a white sign on the side of the road announcing that

you'd arrived in "Nowhereville – Home of the Hat Makers – Population 146." Or maybe "hat maker" was a euphemism for prostitute. She flipped back a page.

She tried to tell herself Teresa wasn't pretty but she knew she was. She looked willowy, like she might have been a dancer, which made Rachel feel, suddenly, fat. Her sleeveless dress pinched where her arms came out; it was tight across the chest. She tried to loosen the dress by rolling her shoulders, then she put her hands up by her eyes like blinders to help her focus on the article.

Teresa Hancock was thirty-two, four years older than Dan. She owned a shop, The Murray Hill Milliner. Had Dan wandered in one day, maybe searching for a present for Katrina? She imagined him pushing open a glass door, the shop bell tinkling and Teresa—who she'd placed behind the counter, working a ribbon through a straw hat—turning to see who was there. She pictured the back of Dan as he made his way across the shop, through racks of hats.

3. Sporty Saturdays

When Rachel and Katrina lived together, Katrina organized several, as she liked to call them, "Sporty Saturdays." Dan came over and he and Rachel sat together in the living room—Dan on the sofa, Rachel on the papazan—watching whichever of Dan's teams, the Knicks or the Yankees, was in season. (Rachel secretly preferred the Red Sox, how could you not? They had such a devoted fan base, and the payroll of the Yankees was so disproportionate to the rest of baseball.) While Dan and Rachel talked defensive moves and bad calls, Katrina worked in the kitchen. Rachel could hear her singing along with the Beatles, her

voice much deeper than Rachel had expected. Every once in awhile she came in with a plate of stuffed mushrooms or brownies, two fresh beers. She said, “Are we winning?” and Dan, who’d been slumped on the sofa, sat up straight. He said, “Goddamn I love this woman,” reaching for Katrina’s arm or thigh to pull her onto his lap.

Once, when they were twenty-three and Katrina was in Las Vegas at a friend from high school’s bachelorette party, Rachel met Dan at Blondie’s, a sports bar in her neighborhood. He was with friends from work, watching college basketball’s national championship game, and he’d called Rachel on his cell phone suggesting she meet them. She was in bed at the time, in pajamas and reading, but she said, “Sure, that sounds great,” thinking it was early; she was being lame. Plus maybe one of Dan’s friends was cute. So she got up and got dressed, putting on jeans, boots, and one of her “going out” shirts, which meant black and sleeveless, or black and V-necked.

The bar was narrow with brick walls and TVs mounted to the ceiling. Standing just inside the door it took her a minute to spot Dan. The place was jammed with men in khaki pants and blue checked shirts. That’s what Dan and his friends were wearing too. There were four of them, Dan and three white guys with brown hair, one with rectangular black glasses. They were sitting on stools around a table covered with Corona bottles that were empty, except used lemon slices.

When Rachel made it over, having squeezed her way through the crowd, Dan stood and spread his arms. He said, “Hey there. Glad you made it,” then he

clutched her shoulders, leaned in, and brushed his lips against her cheek. She remembered being surprised at how rough his face was, like he hadn't shaved, but there didn't seem to be whiskers, at least not black ones like his hair. He turned to the table behind theirs and, without asking, pulled one of their empty stools over to beside his: "Sit."

Rachel lifted herself onto the seat as Dan was saying, "Guys, this is Rachel. Rachel, these are the guys."

She held up a hand and smiled: "Hello."

The one with the glasses, who was sitting between the other two, said, "You know, Dan, we do have names." He arched his arm over the bottles and offered Rachel his hand, saying, "Nice to meet you. I'm Oliver."

Then a waitress was beside the table. She had long black hair with white highlights, was tanned the color of toffee, and was wearing a pink Playboy bunny outfit: cottontail affixed to her ass, headband with ears holding back her hair. Her breasts, of course, were pushed up, bulging out the top for everyone in the bar to ogle. Seeing them, their round fleshiness, made Rachel look down at her own chest, which was secure in a support bra, covered completely by a black shirt. This made her feel sorry for the waitress, though she knew what she was doing was her own choice.

The waitress said, "How are you fellas? Do we need another round?"

Dan said, "Do we."

She said, "All right. Four more Coronas coming up. Let me just clear some of these empties."

She turned sideways and squeezed herself between Oliver and the guy who was wearing a silver necklace, visible where his blue collar was unbuttoned. She pressed up against him as she stretched across the table and picked off bottles, three at a time, catching the lips between her fingers.

“Sorry to reach,” she said, though the necklace guy was rocking on his stool, obviously pleased.

Oliver, meanwhile, leaned back to get a fuller view of the waitress’s ass. His eyebrows curved over the black frames of his glasses, and he grinned at Dan, giving two thumbs up.

Necklace, who wasn’t even trying to hide the fact that he was staring at, practically drooling all over this woman’s breasts, said, “All right, all right.”

Dan shook his head and laughed. He said, “I’m so sorry about my friends. It’s just, they have a hard time controlling themselves in the presence of pretty ladies.” He turned to Rachel. Smiling he said, “Rach, what are you drinking?”

The waitress froze, arm still extended over the table, three bottles hanging like icicles from between her fingers. She looked at Rachel. Her lips curled, eyes squinted. It was a smile, Rachel guessed, but a smile that seemed fake, which of course it was, but also beyond fake. It was condescending.

The waitress said, “Sorry sweetie. I didn’t see you,” and suddenly Dan’s friends turned to look at Rachel too, as if they too were just seeing her.

For a second there was silence. Then the bar erupted into applause and gruff “Yeahs!” A Utah player had stolen the ball from Kentucky and was streaming down the court towards the basket. He jumped, he scored. Stool legs

screached against wooden floorboards as men stood to cheer. On every TV the player dangled from the hoop by one arm.

Rachel said, "I'll have a glass of white wine," though no one noticed.

The waitress had turned, leaving Rachel with a view of the back of her—black and white hair hanging in a striped sheet to just above her cottontailed ass; cellulite free legs visible through fishnet stockings; spiked heels—and suddenly Rachel had an urge to stand on the bottom rung of her stool, to reach across the table and yank the waitress's stupid fucking bunny ears off. Instead she tried again, louder.

"A glass of white wine," she said. When the waitress still didn't acknowledge her, she shouted, "And a shot of tequila!"

It got the table's attention. Dan's eyes were sparkling as he smiled at Rachel and said, "Look at you." Then he turned to the waitress, who was walking away, being careful not to upset her tray of empties. He yelled, "Make that five shots of tequila." Then, shaking his head, he said, "What a fucking great idea."

In the ten minutes or so it took the waitress to get their drinks, Rachel felt like there was a spotlight shining down on top of her head, casting her in a flattering light. Dan and his friends went back and forth between watching the game and asking Rachel questions about what she did, where she grew up, the other sports she followed. At one point a trivia question appeared on the screen, *What year was the first NCAA basketball tournament played?*, and Rachel said, "1939." Adding, "It was the University of Oregon Ducks." A second later, when the question fizzled away to be replaced by the answer, Oliver leaned up on the

table and, smiling, said to Dan, “I might just have to marry this woman.” Rachel was on top of her game.

So when the waitress came back and began distributing the shots, the beers, and the glass of white wine, which was only half full, much of it having sloshed onto the tray—Rachel saw the puddle—and Dan, having licked the skin connecting his thumb to his forefinger and sprinkled it with salt, passed the salt shaker and napkin of lemon slices to Rachel, saying, “What should we toast to?” something possessed Rachel to say, “Titties.” Dan, his friends, the waitress looked at her, and she felt more confident than ever. Sitting up straight and raising her beveled shot glass, she said, “Let’s toast to titties. Because they’re wonderful, aren’t they?” Smiling at the waitress she said, “I hope you don’t mind me saying this, but you have a very nice set.” Then she tilted her head back and downed the shot.

She’d never done anything like this. Really. The thought hadn’t even occurred to her. She was not in the least interested in other women’s “titties.” She didn’t even like her own. The nipples were too dark and wide. The right one drooped more than the left. But saying the word, commenting on the waitress’s, which were out there for everyone in the bar to see, gave Rachel a charge. She felt something she thought must be pleasure rising up in her, making her want to giggle.

Dan leaned over and whispered, his breath hot in her ear, “I didn’t know about this side of you.”

Rachel grinned and shrugged. Then she looked around the table and saw that Dan's friends' shot glasses were in front of them on napkins, still full. She and Dan had been the only two to take their shots. She watched as Oliver extracted two twenties and a five from his wallet, handed the money to the waitress, and shook his head: "No change." Then Rachel looked at her.

The waitress wasn't smiling anymore, nor was she frowning. Her face was wiped of expression. Rachel could see that she had clusters of shallow wrinkles, fine scratches, really, in the corners of her eyes, and deeper wrinkles like parentheses on either side of her mouth. She was older than Rachel originally thought, probably in her late twenties, early thirties. She seemed to be looking in Rachel's direction but through her, as if reading a sign on the wall behind Rachel's head. Rachel thought maybe she shouldn't have said what she did, that she should perhaps apologize, but then the waitress turned and was gone. A blonde bunny picked up their table, and though Rachel looked, she didn't see the waitress again that night.

She did, however, see her a couple years later, on the subway to Astoria. Rachel was on her way to meet a blind date at a Greek restaurant at Broadway and 33rd when she noticed the woman across from her, also in a seat by the door. She recognized her long black hair with white streaks. It was pulled away from her face in a ponytail, the end draped over her shoulder. She was wearing tight, stonewashed jeans and what looked like a men's Members Only jacket. It was khaki and reached to below her butt, the sleeves were rolled. In front of her was a small boy with stick straight black hair, cut in a pageboy, bangs in his eyes, and

an adult-sized orange backpack. When Rachel realized this was the waitress from Blondie's, the sports bar, she blushed. She looked back and forth between the woman and boy who had to be her son he looked so much like her.

He was probably five or six and was standing with his feet wide apart, both hands wrapped around the pole. As the train rocked and lurched he swung with its motions, smiling; his arms straightened and bent. But when they screeched to a stop at Queensboro Plaza and the doors opened, a crowd pushed in, the woman took hold of the handle at the top of the boy's backpack and pulled him away from the pole to between her knees. He scrunched up his forehead and yelled, "Mom!" then leaned forward, as if trying to fall away from her.

Rachel watched as the woman put her head beside the boy's, said, "That's enough, Romeo," and kissed his cheek. When she sat back into her seat she made eye contact with Rachel, who blushed, then smiled. She raised her hand to say *Hi*, thinking, *Do you remember me?*, but the woman looked away, quick. At the next stop she stood and, with one hand clutching the top of a striped cotton bag and the other on the boy's shoulder, got off the train.

The truth was the woman probably had no idea who Rachel was. She probably thought she'd mistaken her for someone else, or, worse, that she was some crazy lady who rode the subway in an attempt to find people to talk to about the weather. Rachel glanced around at some of the other passengers—a middle-aged black man in a trench coat and khaki hat; a teenaged Latino couple holding hands, both wearing bright sneakers—to see if anyone was watching, if anyone maybe saw the unreturned wave, but nobody's eyes were on Rachel. And even if

they had been, what would there have been to see, or think? Nothing. Rachel folded her arms over her chest and looked down. She was flattering herself, she knew, to think that people on the train had even registered her existence. Or that the waitress, who'd been memorable and important to Rachel, had given her sad little wave a second's thought. Two stops later Rachel got off.

4. Rose Beads

Rachel took hold of Gus's collar and opened the door just wide enough to fit her foot in the crack, and her face. She saw that it was a middle-aged woman wearing blue jean shorts and a white tank top. She was white with what looked like curly brown hair that had been brushed hard, so it formed stiff triangles on either side of her face, and a line of bangs across her forehead that, on one end, curled. She had thin lips and was smiling, showing most of her teeth, which were little, and yellow.

Rachel said, "Hi. Can I help you?"

The woman didn't do anything for a few seconds. Then, as if there were a delay and Rachel's question had just reached her, she blurted, "Yes."

Rachel was holding Gus so he couldn't see around the door; he started to whine.

The woman raised pencil thin eyebrows. She said, "Is that Gussy?" loud and quick, as if a burst of air were pushing the words from her, trying to land them yards away. Before Rachel could answer, the woman had leaned in towards the door, staring at it like she could see through. She started shaking her head,

saying in that same rushed way, “Well, hello, Gussy-Wussy. Hello there, Mr. Gus.” Her hands were behind her back.

Rachel said, “Is there something I can help you with?”

The woman stood up straight and opened her eyes wide, as if surprised.

She said, “I’m Katrina’s neighbor. I live just over there.”

She pointed with a rolled up magazine to a little white house across the street. It had a front porch and rockers, dark green shutters, and, beneath big old windows divided into frames, window boxes that had yet to be planted. There was a row of coffee cup sized terracotta pots on the front railing with one pink flower in each. This woman’s house looked older than the other buildings on the block, which had the appearance of being built in the 70s. Katrina and Dan’s condo, for example, was one side of a cube-shaped structure. Its exterior was wood stained reddish brown, a combination of vertical boards and shingles. On the front there were just four windows, two per condo, the kind you cranked open. Rachel had always found the outside of their building hideous, and though the inside was OK—spacious and recently renovated—it wasn’t to her taste. But this woman’s house was the kind of place she could see leaving the city for. She imagined opening the front door and smelling just baked bread.

The woman said, “I was so sorry to hear about Dan. I mean, the whole neighborhood was.”

As she spoke she started to unroll and flatten her magazine. Rachel thought, She can’t be here to sell something. Not now. Gus, who was still behind the door, stepped on her foot.

The woman said, "I thought it'd be really nice to make Katrina these. See, they're Victorian rose beads. I wanted to ask if it'd be all right to cut some of Katrina's roses."

She was pointing to a picture of a jewelry box, its lid upright. Curling out of the box was a long strand of dusty pink beads.

She said, "It takes one rose per bead." Then she leaned in a little and said in a loud whisper, "They hold the smell of the roses."

Rachel said, "Pretty," though she didn't think they were. Then she added, "But I'm not sure I can give permission to cut Katrina's flowers."

The woman didn't move. She just stood there, leaning slightly, holding out her magazine and smiling so Rachel could see all those little yellow teeth.

Rachel said, "It's just that I'm a friend. Dog sitting. Katrina's at the service."

There was no response.

Rachel began to feel panicked: she couldn't get through to this woman: she said, "I don't even know what flowers you're talking about," in a voice that came out more high-pitched than usual, almost squeaky, but it must have worked. It was like the woman had been shaken.

She said, "Those," pointing to a scraggly bush on the right hand side of the property.

The bush was small, just three or four stalks, but Rachel was surprised she hadn't noticed it before. It was growing out of a tree trunk and covered with perfect, coral colored roses. The flowers were densely packed, but still, there

couldn't have been more than fifteen or twenty, surely not enough for a strand of beads.

The woman said, "I just love that bush. I'm in their..." Her voice got louder, "*Katrina's* yard all the time. You know, smelling it."

Rachel was still staring at the flowers. The combination of tree trunk and thin limbs bending out was perfect, so sweet. Then she looked up past the roses, across the street, and saw that there was a man there, leaning against a navy minivan. He had his arms crossed on his chest, one knee bent, his foot pressed against the side of the car. He was obviously staring at them, Rachel and the woman, smiling. Then she recognized the short-sleeved white shirt with blue pinstripes and a name patch. It was Luke, the delivery boy.

The woman said, "I'd only take the ones that were wilted."

Rachel could feel herself blushing, knowing Luke was just across the way. She focused on the woman's cheeks. One seemed pinker than the other and puffy, something Rachel hadn't noticed before. She wondered if the woman had slapped herself, though she would have heard that. Perhaps it was allergies. Either way the woman made Rachel feel bad—everything she did was awkward—so Rachel smiled at her and nodded, said, "OK."

Gus, who Rachel was still holding by the collar, began jerking his head around, trying to get loose. Then he let out one low, husky bark.

The woman scrunched up her eyebrows. She said, "Poor Gus. He must miss Dan so much."

Rachel said, "Yes."

With her magazine the woman waved in the direction of her house. She said, “I’ve got to run home and get my shears.” She turned and started down the steps.

At the bottom she stopped and looked at Rachel. There were tears in her eyes. She said, “I really love that dog.” Then she tucked her chin to her chest and walked quickly down the sidewalk.

5. Minx

Though Rachel wasn’t in a relationship, she did go on dates. Work friends set her up. For a month she listed herself on a Jewish singles site, which yielded free lunches and dinners. One guy, a lawyer who’d recently quit a firm job to be the legal department at Minx, a teen apparel Web site, came to pick her up bearing gifts: a company T-shirt (light blue with red lettering; sized to fit a minx without Rachel’s chest) and a fluorescent pink bike helmet. She’d seen a picture of him before arranging the date, and while he was as cute as his photo made him seem—dark curly hair and dimples—in person he was shorter than she’d expected, maybe an inch taller than her, and everything about him—head, hands, legs—was surprisingly small.

Thinking about the Minx attorney now she couldn’t remember his name. But their afternoon together came back crystal clear.

In Rachel’s living room he’d handed her the T-shirt and helmet. He’d told her that in law school he was a bike messenger, that there was no better way to see the city, and so he’d rented her a bike; they were going to take a ride up the

Hudson. She changed into shorts and a tank top. And though the street part was terrifying—pedaling with taxicabs zooming up behind her then passing; wobbling between lanes of stopped cars—when they at last crossed over the West Side Highway and were on the bike path, started up and, it felt like, away from the city, the sensation was remarkable. It was like Rachel had been packing away air for years, unconsciously storing oxygen, and someone had hit the release valve, and air rushed from her. She slumped a little, feeling looser.

The Minx attorney didn't call again but that was fine. She didn't call him either. Really she wasn't interested. The point was she had options and experiences. She went on dates her married friends liked hearing about.

At their “girls' night out” dinners Katrina would request stories. She'd say, “It's your job, you know, providing color to the lives of the suburbanites.” Smiling, she'd lean back in her chair. She'd sip from a glass of white wine she held by the stem, waiting for Rachel to perform. Rachel wouldn't disappoint. She'd tell Katrina about her dates as if she were a character on a TV show, focusing on awkward conversations (“We were at a table in the middle of Bluewater Seafood and he told me to take off my shoe, to put my foot in his lap and he'd massage it. But I was wearing a footsie. I didn't want to reach under the table and take it off.”) and oddball character traits (“He had to swing himself around every third tree and parking meter we passed. I felt like I was stuck in some screwed up version of *Singing in the Rain*.”)

Of the bicycle date, she didn't describe the feeling she got riding up along the edge of Manhattan. Rather, she focused on the Minx attorney's tiny ass: “For

two hours it was all there was to look at, moving back and forth, back and forth. And he had on special bike shorts with built-in cushions. It was like, I don't know, he'd sliced a mango in half and shoved the pieces down there, which, I might add, effectively doubled the size of his ass."

She held out cupped hands to demonstrate and Katrina shook her head and laughed. Her eyes were sparkling as she smiled at Rachel and said, "You're bad."

6. A Ladies' Toast

Katrina and Dan had hosted a Super Bowl party, which was, come to think of it, the last time she was in their condo.

The party was nothing like Katrina's "Sporty Saturdays" of the past. Dan and two male friends sat on the sofa. Four others sat on high-backed dining room chairs they'd pulled over to either side of the couch. Rachel, who spent most of the evening in the kitchen with Katrina and her posse of thin, beautiful teacher friends (together they looked like the all-female cast of a nighttime soap), heard the occasional shout from the other room, "Go, go, go!" or "Suck on that, Buccaneers!" She assumed these exclamations were coming from the guy who'd showed up wearing a too-tight Oakland Raiders sweatshirt that his wife, who was petite with ivory skin and long, brown hair, had apologized for immediately.

"I tried to stop Steve from wearing this ratty old sweatshirt," she'd said, pinching a faded black sleeve, "but he thinks he has to. For the team."

Steve spread his arms. Smiling, he said, "It's lucky. I've had it since college," while his wife, smiling, handed Katrina a bottle of wine.

Rachel noticed that you could see through her light gray pants; she was wearing a black thong.

In the kitchen this woman (Joan) was talking about how she and a friend, someone who wasn't there, had recently started knitting. Rachel, alone at Katrina and Dan's two-seater kitchen table (the one she moved the *YOU ARE LOVED* flower arrangement to) was drinking a glass of white wine and watching as seven or eight women, one for each football-watching man, swarmed around this black-thonged knitter. They were all reaching out, rubbing and exclaiming over a hot pink scarf she had twisted around her neck. It was hanging like streamers down the front of her tight black sweater.

She said, "It's so easy ladies, really. I could show you, and then we could start our own little stitch-and-bitch."

Several women said, "Oh I'd love that," and, "Let's."

Rachel noticed that all these ladies—teachers, she had to keep reminding herself, as they weren't at all like teachers she'd grown up around—were wearing the same pair of boots: black, pointy-toed, with a two and a half inch heel. Then, as she was taking a sip of wine, someone covered the hand she'd balled into a fist on the table. Katrina had slipped away and was sitting across from her.

"Hey sweetie," she said. "I hope you're not having a terrible time."

She looked beautiful, as always. She was wearing a bulky turtleneck sweater in shades of red with specks of gold. It ended at the top of dark blue jeans that accentuated how long and thin her legs were. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail and she had pieces that had fallen out tucked behind her ears. In her

ears, or, rather, her earlobes, were diamond studs Rachel hadn't seen before. They were huge, each as big as Katrina's engagement ring, which was over a karat.

"I'm fine," Rachel said and smiled. "Thanks for having me."

Katrina squeezed Rachel's fist with her small, cool hand and then released. "Some of Dan's single friends were invited too. He told me they were coming."

Rachel shook her head. "It's fine. Really. It's nice. It had been awhile. The last time I was here I think Gus was practically a puppy."

Katrina smiled. "Is that right?"

Scanning the room Rachel said, "And the place looks great."

Katrina said, "Thanks. I just painted the walls in here, so I'm still getting used to the yellow."

Rachel touched the wall the table was against, which was hardly what she'd call yellow. It was more like the color of popcorn without butter.

"God," Katrina said, "listen to me. How fucking boring!" She laughed airily.

On the other side of the room, near the sink, there was a sort of commotion. Women were opening and closing cabinets. Joan, or, as Rachel preferred to think of her, the black-thonged knitter said, "Kat, honey, where's your grenadine?"

Katrina pointed: "In the cabinet beside the refrigerator. No, on the bottom." She stood. "Here, I'll get it."

Joan raised her hands and cocked her right hip, striking what Rachel guessed was her party-girl pose. She said, “Sue brought the bubbly so we’re making champagne cocktails.”

Rachel noticed the woman behind Joan. She had her head turned, eyes closed. She was jiggling the cork in a bottle of champagne. Sue, despite being dressed in a black shirt and slimming black slacks, had noticeably thick thighs. In the other room someone yelled, “Say it ain’t so!” The champagne popped.

Katrina was in profile, on her tiptoes, reaching for the top shelf in the glasses cabinet. Her sweater pulled up a little revealing a slice of flat, white stomach. She said, “This is very exciting. We never get to use our champagne flutes.” Handing glasses down to a woman with curly, chin-length blonde hair she asked, “How many do we need?”

Joan said, “All the girls will have one.” Then, pointing at Rachel, she said, “You’ll have one too, right? It’s going to be fun.”

Katrina looked over her shoulder, smiled, and winked. She said, “One need not ask if my dear friend Rachel will have a drink. She could drink all us married ladies under the table.”

In response, as if making a toast, Rachel held up her almost empty glass of white wine and said, “Thanks, Katrina, but I don’t know that that’s true. Or, if it is, anything to be proud of.”

Joan tilted her head back and laughed.

Katrina, who’d already returned to pulling down champagne flutes, said, “Nonsense.”

Light caught in the diamond in her ear causing it to sparkle. For a second her earring appeared to pulse. Rachel thought of three years before. Of the Sunday night Katrina, just back from a weekend away with Dan (he'd surprised her with a trip to their old college town), had burst into their apartment in the city, holding out her left hand, shouting, "Rachel, where are you?" Then, before she even saw her (though she'd run right past), she yelled, "He asked! We're engaged!" Katrina, in her excitement to show Rachel her ring, had accidentally left her suitcase in the elevator; it had ended up somehow in the hallway of the floor above theirs.

And now she had twice that weight in diamonds in her ears and Rachel hadn't heard a thing. And though this omission in knowledge, in sharing, could probably be attributed to any number of reasonable explanations, like the fact that society insisted on gushing over the intricacies of engagement rings—"What's its setting, cut, metal, size..."—or that Dan was making more money now, which was clearly the case, maybe diamond purchases were no big deal, but as Rachel watched Katrina swipe dust from the insides of glasses to then pass them to Sue, who Joan had assigned the task of pouring a thumbnail's worth of grenadine in each, Joan having reserved the final, key task of doling out "the bubbly" for herself; as she watched this major production—ladies swirled, exclaimed, pointed out glasses whose heads had settled: "Here! This one needs more!"—Rachel felt like not knowing about Katrina's massive diamond earrings was not at all reasonable. Rather, it was sad. And as she thought this she swallowed her last sip of wine.

The glass Katrina set in front of her clinked against the table. It was tall and slender with concentrated red grenadine in the bottom, spreading slowly into the champagne like a cloud of pink gas. Katrina, who'd sat back across from Rachel, took a sip of hers, scrunched her nose, and said, "Yuck. I really can't stand champagne. All the bubbles." She put it down by the wall, next to a glass of ice water Rachel hadn't before noticed—the glass's condensation had shed into a puddle at its base—that Katrina then picked up. She took a swallow. Smiling she said, "That's better."

Rachel tried to smile back, to look as happy, but she felt, unreasonable though it may have been, hurt. Like at any second tears were going to pour from her eyes. She said, "Thanks for the drink." Then, she could hear her voice start wavering, "those are pretty earrings. Are they new?"

Before Katrina could answer, Joan was tapping her glass with a knife, saying, "A toast, ladies, a toast..."

Katrina put both elbows on the table and leaned in close to Rachel. She whispered, "There's something I'm dying to tell you," and her eyes sparkled. Then she sat back in her chair.

Joan held up a uniformly pink cocktail she must have stirred. Rachel's still had red puddled at the bottom. She said, "Let's see, what should we toast to?"

One woman said, "Super Bowl Sunday." Another said, "Sales at Barney's." Katrina said, "To more days off school for snow."

Joan, excited, said, “Yes! That’s it! Here’s to our host, first of all, the always perfect, so much so that we hate her, Katrina. And here’s to more snow days. May they not keep us from sales at Barney’s.”

Across the kitchen women laughed and clinked glasses. Rachel raised her champagne cocktail to Katrina, who touched it with her water glass, whispering, as she did so, “Dan and I are trying. You know, to have a baby.” She bit her bottom lip and her eyes got glassy, like she was about to cry.

This time it was Rachel who touched Katrina. She set her still unsipped drink on the table to wrap both hands around one of hers. She said, “Oh Katrina... oh my god... I don’t know what to say, this is such exciting news.” And then: “You’re going to make such a great mom,” at which point she too was teary.

Katrina laughed and said, “Look at us. Imagine what we’ll be like when it actually happens,” and for the next fifteen minutes or so they sat that way, leaned in close to one another, Katrina’s hand wrapped in Rachel’s, whispering about basal body temperatures, preconception counseling, folic acid, where they’d put a basinet. It felt to Rachel like everything outside the periphery of she and Katrina at the table was a blur, as though all the other party noises had melded into one solid background buzz and they could be anywhere, at college again, or in their apartment in the city. She saw that the two of them were the same as they’d ever been, best friends, connected in some deep, fundamental way. It was like they were the only ones with access to a whole different level of understanding, where jumps in logic could be made without words: “He was” followed by a raised

eyebrow sufficed. In her head Rachel likened it to Katrina and herself having exclusive access to the second floor of Bloomingdale's, where she worked. While they were free to run from shoes to Tahari to BCBG to bathing suits, Joan and the other ladies, the rest of the world for that matter was stuck on the first floor shopping makeup. There, at the table with Katrina, Rachel felt so filled with joy she couldn't help but giggle. Then, after fifteen minutes, Joan came over.

She said, "Are you two OK in terms of drinks? What am I talking about. You haven't even touched your cocktails."

Katrina smiled at her. She said, "I know, I'm sorry. I have such trouble drinking champagne. The bubbles tickle my throat."

She held her drink out to Joan. There were, Rachel noted, only five or six still active streams of bubbles.

Katrina said, "Do you want it?"

Joan snatched Katrina's glass. She said, "No. Thanks. I'll put it on the counter." She looked at Rachel. "Should I get rid of yours too?"

Rachel smiled and said, "You know, I'd completely forgotten about this." She picked up the glass, took a sip, pursed her lips. "Delicious," she said. "I'm fine, thanks." She excused herself to go to the bathroom.

In the living room men were sitting on the edge of their seats, leaning towards the TV. Players in silver and black uniforms, the Raiders, were in formation at the twenty-one yard line, with second down. They were behind 21-34. Steve, Joan's husband in the too tight sweatshirt, was on the floor on one knee. He had his arms wrapped around Gus's neck; Gus was standing still as a

statue beside him. Rachel could see the blue and yellow striped band of Steve's underwear, white briefs, sticking up out of the back of his jeans. Then the Raiders snapped to Gannon, their quarterback, who backed up to pass but was sacked by Tampa Bay's Warren Sapp, losing the Raiders eight yards. Steve moaned and put his face against Gus. He said, "I can't watch."

Rachel leaned against the wall at the back of the room and banged a picture with her head. She turned to straighten it. The photo was black and white, of flat dirt earth meeting a cloudless sky with just two, evenly spaced things disrupting the horizon: a thick leafless tree and a dilapidated wood building, the faded words Coca-Cola painted on its side. She took a sip of her champagne cocktail, altogether too sweet, just as several men shouted. A Tampa Bay player, in rust orange and white, was sprinting down the left sideline, chest pressed forward, no Raider defense in sight. All the men stood and blocked her view of the TV, then there was a loud, throaty "No!" followed by the sound of a body collapsing.

Gus darted out of the pack, tail between his legs. He stopped and looked up at Rachel. She said, "Hello," and he walked, haunches swaying, to the kitchen. Then Dan looked at her. He smiled and held his hand up. His teeth were very white.

Rachel waved back, thinking of what Katrina had just told her: that they were trying to have a baby. She bit her bottom lip to stop from giggling, or grinning too big. The idea of Katrina and Dan as parents made her so happy. For some reason when she thought of it she imagined Katrina wearing a bright,

multicolored sling, and Dan with one of those baby carriers that looked like a backpack strapped to his chest. And though she didn't see a baby in either carrying device, she knew that when they had one it would be beautiful. How could it not?

Most of the men had sat back down leaving Rachel with a view of Steve, in fetal position on the floor. His sweatshirt was pulled over his head so she could see his stomach, which was flabby and thick with black hair. Dan, who was still standing facing Rachel, made crazy circles by the side of his head and pointed at Steve. She widened her eyes and nodded. Then she waved goodbye and stepped into the powder room.

7. A Safe Day

What she wished for then was what she always wished for: a safe day. Often she'd wish this for others, designating who she wanted to receive safety, which she thought of as not getting into a car accident, or being mugged. The night Dan was shot, at what she'd learn later was the time he was shot, she was alone in a cab, tearing through midtown on her way home from a play about Ty Cobb, and the cabdriver kept speeding through yellow lights. These were all opportunities for wishes. With each yellow she'd kiss her fingertips and touch the blue vinyl seatback in front of her, wishing her mom a safe day, her dad a safe day, her sister a safe day, her roommate a safe day, Katrina a safe day, and then she thought of Dan. Of their most recent phone conversation, a few days before,

when she'd told him about the time she went with co-workers to Scores, a strip club, and the men kept buying her lap dances.

Dan was still at work, in his office with the door closed. Rachel could tell he had her on speakerphone. He said, in a gravelly voice, "That's my girl. I bet you liked it, didn't you? All that pussy rubbing up against yours."

Dan was groaning a little, humming. She knew he had his penis out and was stroking it, but when she closed her eyes and tried to picture this she had trouble. She wondered about the color. Whether Dan's was brown, a darker version of his caramel-colored skin, or pink, like the few penises she'd seen, all hanging from white men. She doubted she'd ever know. What got her off though was not imagining the specifics; rather, she liked closing her eyes and seeing scenes. They usually involved the college-aged Dan showing up at her apartment, the same apartment she'd shared with Katrina but now he was there to see her. She'd pull him inside, to her bedroom, where she was during these calls. She'd shut the door, would hear it click, and Dan would lean in to kiss her. She usually came touching herself, picturing Dan getting closer and closer, his face filling her mind. But she knew Dan needed more, he liked a different kind of scene.

She whispered, in a voice she'd spent months practicing and thought of as sultry, "I did like being straddled. But what really got me wet were her tits. They were bare, except sequin pasties. And she rubbed them on my face."

Dan said, "Yeah," his voice low, husky. "And what'd you do? Did you kiss them?"

“Mm hm,” she said, and slid her hand under the waistband of her pajamas. But she stopped there. She was tired. It had been a long day at work and she just didn’t feel like it, though she played along, breathing heavy like she usually did. When she could hear Dan’s pitch rising—when he came he squealed—she took the phone from her ear and pounded it on the bed. She’d done it once before and Dan had said he liked it, the thumping; that he could really imagine her in the throes of passion. So she thumped the phone for a minute, listening, in the meantime, to her roommate, a woman she’d found through an ad, banging pots in the kitchen and singing “La Cucaracha.”

Rachel brought the phone back to her ear. There was silence. She was afraid Dan had hung up and so she said quickly, a little too loud, “Dan?”

Dan sounded much farther away, like he’d moved to the opposite end of the office from the speakerphone. He said, “That was great, sweetheart. Thank you.”

Hiding from the Puppet Woman

Lila's on the couch, back against the armrest, feet tucked under the far pillow. She's got a direct view of the door at the opposite end of the rectangular apartment.

"You got here quickly," CJ says from the kitchen.

The kitchen's down there too, though "kitchen" is a bit of a stretch. It's just a stove, fridge, sink line-up, your typical New York City "galley."

Lila listens as CJ slices. "Good subway luck," she says. "What kind of chicken are you making?"

"Jamaican something," he says.

Without turning around he holds up a Ziploc baggie of what looks like ash.

•

The apartment doesn't have a peephole. It used to, but somewhere along the line the peephole was removed, the hole caulked and painted. Now the way to see out into the hall is to kneel down and peer through a gap between the door and the doorframe. A mouse could fit through there no problem, Lila thinks, though she's never seen one. People in the hall could look in too, if they wanted. They could watch Lila and CJ moving around CJ's austere space. CJ cares about

maintaining sparseness. He talks a lot about “space.” Lila has taken to imagining the across-the-hall neighbor out there, the woman whose apartment puts off the smell of kitty litter. Lila believes she’s a puppeteer at the Puppet Works down the street. Some puppet-related piece of mail landed once in CJ’s box. Lila would like to impress her.

Maybe, Lila thinks, if the neighbor’s out there right now, her head tilted just so, she sees the Ziploc baggie CJ’s holding up. Maybe she recognizes it as Jamaican ash. Maybe she too belongs to CJ’s grocery co-op and has taken to gushing about the joys of “shared ownership” and “workslots.” Maybe she buys organic juices for less than two dollars a piece and brags about it to the puppets: “You can’t buy organic for less than two bucks in Manhattan.” And the puppets nod and say: “Whatever makes you feel OK about moving to Brooklyn.”

•

“Something smells good,” Lila says, as she walks across the room. “Want more wine?”

“Sure. My glass is right there,” CJ says. He points with his chin, but Lila’s already bent over, confirming an equal pour.

With her wine glass raised above her head, Lila sashays across the wooden floor. At CJ’s desk, she lowers herself into the chair. A little show. She was going for graceful.

“What kind of salad dressing do you want?” CJ says.

Lila’s looking at her arm, at her elbow, making little adjustments in an effort to match her real-life elbow to the photograph of her elbow on the wall.

“I have ranch,” CJ says.

•

Lila would like for the puppet woman to know that every night before he moved to Brooklyn, CJ and Lila would order food and eat dinner together. There was no need then for cooking. There was no need to even order from the same restaurant. In Manhattan, you don't eat Greek mezethes or sushi if you don't one-hundred-percent want to.

•

“The chicken's tasty,” Lila says.

“I think it's bland,” CJ says.

“Well I like it,” Lila says. “The rice is pretty good too. Raisins.”

“Are you excited for the shoot tonight?” CJ says.

“I'm tired,” Lila says.

“That's OK. It's not like I'm making a photograph of your face,” CJ says.

They're never of her face, but anyone looking in could see that.

“OK *except* I'm tired,” Lila says.

CJ starts to clear dishes.

•

The day Lila helped CJ move in, she got upstairs once with a load and CJ's door was locked. She sat on the stairs to wait. That's when she first noticed the straw welcome mat across the hall with a paw print border, the smell of kitty litter. She noticed that the neighbor's door had a peephole, and she was sure suddenly that someone was on the other side, looking out.

“Tell me again why you left Manhattan,” Lila said, loud.

She could hear CJ’s sneakers squeaking on the floor below, but mostly the question was for the woman. Lila knew already it was a woman in there, on tiptoe, probably holding a cat. Already she wanted to give her something.

“For space,” CJ said.

He’d arrived on the landing and was trying to figure out where best to set a large framed photo of her kneecap. CJ worried a lot about art.

•

CJ turns from rinsing the dishes to tell Lila the shoot won’t take more than an hour, that he wants to do it outside, and to ask about the red dress.

She’ll like me in the red dress, Lila thinks. “I’ve got it,” she says. She pours herself more wine before setting up again on the couch. “We need to talk about Thanksgiving, CJ.”

“What about it?” he says, drying.

“I need you to work with me on Thanksgiving.”

Say the puppet woman was keeping a tally of holidays beside her cat calendar, on the bottom half of the page with *Nights at CJ’s vs. Nights at Lila’s* on top. Then she’d see that Lila has gone home with CJ for three somethings, and CJ home with Lila for four. And she’d probably shake her head, pull back her lips and suck air, because she’d see her girl was headed for trouble. What’s fair is fair, Lila.

“I want to spend Thanksgiving with my sister,” Lila says.

There! It's done. The inevitable discussion ensues about numbers, rights, expectations. CJ pulls cigarettes from the bookshelf beside the photograph of Lila's earlobe. He sits on a stool by the window and smokes.

"Can we just go do the shoot?" he says.

"No," she says.

He tells her to leave, just go home. He stubs out his cigarette.

Lila has her bag and is at the door. CJ stands.

"Wait," he says. "Sit down. You'll feel better."

He's beside her now, his hand on her messenger bag.

"I will not feel better," Lila says and she starts to cry.

Not again, the puppet woman tuts.

CJ laughs and compliments her breathing. "It's sweet," he says. "The way you rub your eyebrows."

•

If only the puppet woman had known them before the move to Brooklyn, had seen them on the fire escape. Lila, on the third floor, sat out there reading magazines. CJ, on the fifth, went out to smoke. They met on Memorial Day. Lila felt the metal grate shudder and looked up. She saw CJ. "Don't ash on me," she said and he invited her up.

Then there was a year of just thirty stairs between them. Of wearing socks to each other's apartments and taking turns making deli runs and sex on futons. And she did gross things for him. She shaved the hair off his neck! And he for her. Well, once he dealt with a mouse on a glue trap, but only after it screamed

all night. Lila wanted the puppet woman to know that she and CJ had only broken up three or four times back then because it was easier in Manhattan. They could keep track of things. They could leave notes on doormats. It was simple to commit.

•

When Lila steps out of the bathroom in the red dress CJ's waiting.

Lila says, "I really don't want to do this, CJ. I don't feel well."

CJ says, "Do you have thirty dollars to waste on lighting?"

A car honks in the street.

Lila puts her jacket on over the dress, picks up her messenger bag. She thinks, it's only fair, you know. I know you see.

CJ says, "You can leave your bag here."

Lila says, "I'm not coming back."

CJ says, "Fine. Bring it. We'll talk about it later." He touches her swollen red eyes. "This could really make for some interesting shots, Lila. This might be amazing." CJ hands Lila a reflector.

Lila takes the circular foil shield and looks for the last time around the apartment, at all of her parts. She hopes CJ won't hang the photograph where the neighbor, her puppet woman, will see. She doesn't like the picture as a whole.

On the whole she knows it's pathetic.

Case

Until a month before Allie moved away, she'd come with me, sometimes, at night when I photographed cars. We'd make a circle from our apartment on 24th Street around the East Village and back. Allie would talk about a press release she'd written for the Hospital Association, or book club gossip, until she was convinced I wasn't listening. Then she'd stop, spread her arms, and say, "You see, World. He doesn't pay attention to me."

I'd turn to hug and call her my baby without really taking my eyes off the insides of the cars. When I found intriguing setups—unidentifiable green liquid on the dash, Smurf figurines hanging from mirrors—Allie would stand beside me and point a flashlight so I could take a picture.

The day she left, I went to work for Mr. Wolff, her dad. He owns a line of home stores and used to hire me for occasional freelance work, photographing throw rugs and drapes. The pictures would appear in catalogues and as backgrounds on sale signs.

"Your dad's sending me to the Eastern end of Long Island," I said. I was standing at the end of the bed. "I should be done around seven."

Allie propped herself up on one elbow, long brown hair pulled back in a braid, diamond chip in the side of her nose, and nodded. When I got home she

was gone. Dustless squares marked the spaces on the dresser that her jewelry box and perfume bottle used to fill. Empty hangers clinked against one another when I opened the closet door.

I first happened upon the Subaru Legacy station wagon, wheat-colored from Colorado, a week later. It was parked on 22nd and Lex. The next day it was by 2nd Avenue on 18th Street. I grew up in Colorado. On New York sidewalks I'm drawn to those plates, the white and green, the mountain background. And I recognized the Legacy's football-shaped decal from the John Elway dealership in Denver, near Bergen Peak, where my dad had taken me hiking.

I was thirteen and had jogged to keep up on a trail that zigzagged up the mountain. At the top, I ate dust white snow while Dad, facing away from me, admired the skyline.

"Case," he said, and then he said something about this place. I was too tired, then, or too young to listen, and my dad's words swept past me down the mountain.

Dad died of a bee sting that summer. Neither my mom nor I knew he had allergies. We found him collapsed in thigh-high grass between the creek, where he'd been fly-fishing, and his car. Dad's body was so swollen we had to cut off his waders. After that Mom liked to keep me close. She took me to an allergist to be tested, and when none of the pinpricks produced bumps on my back, she asked the doctor to repeat the procedure.

I began making photos of the Colorado Legacy. At first, finding the station wagon on a given night was just coincidence and fun. Then not finding it

became suspect, like I hadn't looked hard enough, or was missing a street. I began paying close attention to what the Legacy owner left showing. A tube of lipstick convinced me it was a girl. There were almost always signs of a dog: lick marks on windows, a pink leash in a seatback pocket. The owner ran, read fiction, and was not especially neat. While she slept in an apartment near me, I made photographs of her car.

•

Allie and I met two years ago at K&M Camera. I was at the counter, studying a proof sheet, and she was dropping off film.

“Do you have one hour developing?” she asked.

I looked up to say, “I don't work here,” but when I saw her I thought, I've never met a person I want so much to be close to.

I said, “No. I can take you somewhere that does, though.”

We went to Ess-A-Bagel for coffee. Dell, a mousy employee in a green apron and baseball cap, stood on tiptoe behind a display case full of smoked fish and mounds of spreads.

“Large coffee, black,” he yelled over his shoulder and nodded at me. I was a regular.

“I'll have hazelnut,” Allie said.

Dell looked back and forth between us. “Case,” he said, “who's your friend?”

“Allie,” she said and waved.

“I like you,” Dell said, winking. He gave her an everything bagel wrapped in wax paper, *Your Beautiful, Elly* written in oil pencil across the top.

At the marble slab table in the corner, Allie told me about writing for the Hospital Association and growing up on Long Island. She nodded as I told her about the car series I’d started as an MFA student in photography. Dell, behind her, gave me a thumbs up.

“It sounds amazing,” Allie said and leaned towards me. “Being in school for art.”

She smelled fresh, like lemons.

“How’s your coffee?” I asked.

She offered me a sip.

“I can’t have hazelnuts,” I said. “I’m allergic.”

Allie pursed her thin lips, and the diamond chip in the side of her nose folded into its crevice.

•

I have two favorite shots of the Legacy. The first was taken through the front passenger window and includes the driver’s seat and consul. There’s a taupe-colored cassette sticking out of the stereo and the head of a dog toy, maybe a stuffed flea, in the cup holder. What I like is that the shot, taken in the dark, came out inexplicably light and cheerful. In the second, there’s a sky blue towel that might have been used to dry off after swimming draped across the backseat. On either end there are indentations, as if the passengers just climbed out of the car, laughing.

•

Recently I found a strand of Allie’s hair in the kitchen sink, which I held up to the light—long and bent—then threw away. Five months and her residue remains. The apartment, rented as a one-bedroom, is really just a studio with a loft that’s accessible by ladder. Still, it was big enough.

After Allie and I signed the lease and paid the deposit, we ate across the street at a pizza-by-the-slice restaurant. That was a year ago, a year after meeting each other, seven months before Allie moved away.

Allie said, “It’ll fit the two of us, Case. We’ll put a mattress in the loft and I’ll use the coat closet.”

We fed each other pepperoni looking at our squat red building, a zipper of fire escapes up the front.

The day we moved in, Mr. Wolff, Allie’s dad, brought blue sheets and a blanket. Then he sat, sprawled across the futon, watching golf.

He said, “Allie, if you need anything else from the store just make a list.”

“Thanks, Dad,” Allie said. She was unpacking dishes.

We’d been talking about my car pictures before her dad arrived. Allie didn’t want them hanging in the apartment.

“It’s creepy, Case,” she said loudly, as though trying to bring her dad into the conversation. “Kind of perverted.” She was wearing the torn Levis I loved and her *Ithaca is Gorges* T-shirt.

“Bring the list with you Tuesday,” Mr. Wolff said, waving in our direction. Mr. Wolff and Allie had a weekly dinner.

“Oh, Dad,” Allie said, “Tuesday’s no good. I start class.”

I held out my box of prints. I said, “Allie, people leave their cars for anybody to look into.”

She said, “That’s why you got chased by the waiter, right?” referring to the man in an apron who burst out of the Afghan Kebab House. He was captured as a window reflection in my photo. “Because he was OK with your nosing around his car?” Allie turned to look at me. She was holding a stack of red plastic cups.

“Holy shit!” Mr. Wolff yelled at the TV. “On the green in two!”

Allie tacked up Renoir ballerinas and Toulouse-Lautrec prostitutes instead.

After Allie had been gone a month, I started hanging 11 x 14 prints of the Legacy on the walls. I thought, to someone who doesn’t know me, it’s going to look like I’m conducting a police investigation, scoping a joint. But viewed together the series is complex. And the Legacy, shot with flash and without, through every window and as a reflection in the mirrors, looks like fourteen different cars.

•

When I was thirteen, I learned to adjust the frequency of our garage door opener so I could go into neighbors’ houses. The Coles kept a refrigerator stocked with Clearly Canadians and Cokes. Nights they weren’t home, I’d let myself in for drinks. Behind them, the Ledlies had a pinball machine and couch.

The couch was covered in a scratchy, plaid material, but I didn't mind. After Dad died I'd sneak through the woods to sleep in their garage.

One time the overhead light clicked off and I opened my eyes and there was Mom, her face, in one of the garage door windows. She looked like a ghost, or a vision. Her white skin glowed and she was wearing a ruffled white nightgown. Then she raised her arms and began pounding the glass.

•

I took Allie home to Denver with me once, at the beginning of living together. We went to a restaurant Mom liked on account of the rabbits, which were boxed in with shrubs outside the windows.

Allie talked about the green market at the end of our street in New York, and the Italian ice stand around the corner.

She said, "We're not far from Washington Square Park, Ms. Powers. Where Edith Wharton books are set."

Mom had been ignoring Allie all weekend. She tapped on the glass behind her and said, "Ooo, look at that one! I love those floppy ears."

When I ordered roast chicken, Mom clicked back into the conversation. She glared at the waiter.

She said, "That's not cooked with peanut oil is it? My son's allergic."

"New York!" I said and hit the table. "We're talking about New York, Mom."

Allie squeezed my knee under the table. She said, “Ms. Powers, how’d you find out about Case’s allergies? I mean, I’ve never seen him have an allergic reaction.”

I knew Allie was thinking about the list I’d taped to our refrigerator in the city: *Foods Case Cannot Have*. Mimeographed copies had been with me my whole life. The Boy Scout leader, teachers, and college RAs knew not to give me eggs, fish, milk, peanuts, sesame, shellfish, or soy.

“Allie,” my mom said, and leaned across the empty place setting. “You’ve got to anticipate.”

•

The right rear door of the Legacy was unlocked one night, two months after Allie left. A little stack of books—*Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*, *The Shawl*, and *Lonely Planet: New Orleans*—was within swiping distance on the back seat. Thieves, I thought, hadn’t noticed, and I held the palm of my hand an inch or so from the car’s surface while I considered breathing Legacy girl’s air, touching her things. I could have entered my pictures and this is what stopped me: the fear of losing interest. I opened the door enough to slide in my hand, push down the lock.

The next afternoon Mr. Wolff stopped by with a box of things from his store.

“I thought you might be able to use these,” he said, handing me bathmats and cutting boards. “Whew! There are more stairs than I remember.”

He was clutching his chest. I invited him in.

“You understand, son, that I had nothing to do with this,” he said and took a sip of water.

“Yes, Mr. Wolff.”

“And that she’s my little girl and comes first,” he said, water droplets collecting in his beard.

“Yes, Mr. Wolff.”

“But that doesn’t mean I’m not going to look out for you, Case.” Mr. Wolff slammed down the red plastic cup and slapped me on the back. “You be at the Holbrook store on Monday,” he said. “We got in a whole new line of faucets.”

On his way out of the apartment, Mr. Wolff stopped in front of a Legacy trunk shot. There were light blue ValuPak coupons strewn about. He turned toward me, big as a bear, and said, “Just don’t ask me about Allie, Case. Just pretend I don’t know.”

•

“There’s a terrific story in this month’s *Harper’s*,” Allie said. We were beside a black Volkswagen Golf in the Village. It was the last shoot she went with me on, a month before she left. I cupped my hands around my eyes and pressed up against the window.

“It’s about this girl who visits her brother in the hospital,” Allie said, leaning against the car beside me.

The ashtray was slightly ajar. Inside you could see a camouflage lighter.

“What?” I said and Allie poked me.

“Reading, Case,” she said. “I’m talking about stories. Do you even look at the magazines we get? You call yourself an artist, but it’s just this!”

She smacked the windshield. I looked at her.

I said, “Allie, you wouldn’t understand.”

She clicked on the flashlight and shined it at me, right in my eyes.

“Cut it out, Allie,” I said and squinted to see her.

“Explain, Case,” she said, moving the flashlight beam all over my body.

“Explain. I’m dying to hear this.”

•

When Allie and I first moved in together, I’d come home from shooting to some dinner I wasn’t allergic to in the microwave, notes signed *Your Allie* taped to the door. I’d climb the ladder and get in bed to match my body to her bends. Allie, asleep, would draw my hand from her hip to her chest, where she’d hug my forearm as if it were a teddy bear.

Towards the end, though, Allie started leaving the laundry basket or a chair just inside the door. I’d trip walking into our apartment.

•

I found myself looking around the neighborhood for the Legacy girl. I sat in Ess-A-Bagel, glancing up over my newspaper and coffee when I heard Dell flirting: “Emy, I love you, Emy!” “Sara, you make my day.” I looked for runners with dogs and I had ideas about her. That she was blonde, for example, and tall. She liked coffee better than tea, studied French but didn’t remember it, and

hiccupped three times after eating. I thought about waiting at her car to see, but I liked the not knowing. Then she was anybody.

•

Last night in the Legacy, there was kibble dog food scattered across the floor mats and a rectangular sunflower tin on the backseat. Cookies, I thought. I stood on the right side, the edge of my camera lens touching the rear window, and shot at an angle. The streetlight was perfect, illuminating the baked goods while cloaking the kibble and empty driver's seat with shadows.

Today I was at Mr. Wolff's Great Neck store, at the back, behind the pillow section. I was shooting a simulated kid's bathroom. It was decorated with a marine life theme. The shower curtain was all smiling sharks and seahorses. In the middle was diver, a clear plastic oval for a mask. I was arranging a ceramic fish soap dish and toothbrush holder when Mr. Wolff came up behind me.

"How have you been?" he said and slapped my back.

"Fine, Mr. Wolff."

"Still poking around cars?" he said.

"Still making photos," I said and thought of the apartment. The walls are pretty much covered now with the Legacy. Parts have taken on its color, dusky wheat. Behind the ladder is a column of approach shots, mostly sidewalk. I tried to imagine what Allie would think if she saw the place.

"How have you been?" I asked.

"Fine. Busy. We just moved Allie up to Ithaca."

I must have looked confused. Mr. Wolff leaned in, clutched my shoulder.

He said, “She’s starting grad school, Case. For writing.”

On the way back to the apartment there were things I remembered about Allie. Book club gossip. Allie on the futon, reading. Some class on Tuesday nights. Washington Square Park as setting. I thought about how easy it was losing someone. I thought about not knowing.

•

There was a parking garage on one side of the block and an orange church on the other. I found the Legacy where it was last night. I thought, She’s here, in the city. I placed my cheek against the cool window. I was tired.

I looked around the sidewalk for a rock, but it’s New York. I wasn’t going to find one. So I covered my hand with my sweatshirt sleeve and used the butt of my flashlight to break the back window.

I curled up in the backseat. The upholstery’s stiff, like denim, and it smells like coconut in here, like a sports car.

The sunflower tin was beneath my thighs, jabbing, so I pulled it out. Inside were chocolate chip cookies in honeycomb formation, layers separated by wax paper. I thought I saw nuts, pecans. I wanted my Legacy girl to find me.

“Allie, come home,” I said.

I imagined her hands on my cheeks. I was crying.

“It’s enough now,” I said. “I’m not scared anymore.”

I put a cookie in my mouth and here I am, pecans pumping through me, eyes shut tight, waiting.

Hunter's Crossing

The neighborhood, Hunter's Crossing, is just a half-circle of twelve houses that used to be identical except color and even that was standardized, the choices being light blue, light green, beige, and yellow. The houses are small though designed to look ranch-like. They have nearly flat roofs that extend beyond their facades. Where the roofs end they're supported by beams, making front porches, which most of us have rocking chairs on. There are two windows downstairs, the door's in the center, and one short three-paned window that looks like it pushed up out of the roof, like one of those car headlights that rises from the vehicle's hood. In our house it's the window in my office, the only room upstairs, small and cave-like. My name's Brad; my wife's Wendy. We live at 212, second on the right, blue.

The roof collages started with the Simmons's house across the street. It was a perfect January day in the fifties, why Wendy and I decided to live in the South, and Jeff Simmons was on their roof nailing regular gray tiles that had come loose back in place. I was at the computer in my office, watching through my window's filmy curtain. I saw Jen Simmons step into the front yard in pink spandex. Jen was always in workout gear. It was rumored she was sleeping with someone at the gym. Then she stood there, hands on her hips, surveying her

husband's work. I watched her point, like, *You missed one there, dear*, then Jeff turn to respond. I was across the street, window closed, but I could tell they got into a fight. Jen made wide arm gestures; Jeff squatted on the roof as though to pounce. Wendy yelled from the bottom of the stairs that it was lunchtime and I told her to come up, see. Things escalated. Jen lifted her tank top and flashed her husband; Jeff tore off a tile, flung it at his wife. I could hear Wendy's slow steps but by the time she'd made it to my office she'd missed it. Jen Simmons had sped off in her red Honda Civic. Jeff stayed squatting, staring, on the roof. I put my arm around Wendy's middle, told her what had happened. Wendy pushed the curtain aside to look at Jeff. His bald head shone with sweat and light.

Wendy said, "How sad for the Simmonses."

At the time Wendy was five months pregnant.

After lunch I went back up to work. I'm a self-employed financial planner. I checked on the Simmonses. Jen's car was still missing; Jeff was nailing again, hard. Instead of tiles, though, he was using Jen's underwear, pair after pair, sides touching like the hands of paper dolls. About three quarters of the way up he switched to bras that ranged from sexy black (one looked like it had holes where Jen's nipples would be) to the boxy athletic kind. By the end of the afternoon Jeff had covered their roof, up and over the office window hump, with undergarments made of navy cotton, pink and purple lace, red satin. There were small snatches of animal prints I thought might be thongs.

Jen Simmons returned just before sunset, jumped out of her car, and ran to the front door. But she didn't go in. Instead she walked to the center of their

yard, where the sidewalk running the arc of Hunter's Crossing and the one leading to the Simmons's front door meet, and she sat. She looked up at Jeff's work. She stayed that way, cross-legged, until it was dark, streetlights clicked on, and Wendy called me down to dinner. The front room was lit in the Simmons's house, the one we made our living room, and I could see Jeff Simmons standing there, his outline. He was behind a curtain.

The next day Jen's undergarments weren't down, Jeff and Jen were away, and Hunter's Crossing people began noticing. I saw Allie Burke run Pepper their terrier by, Steve Fuller walk past with a newspaper, June Anderson and the baby carriage. Each stopped, looked up then around, as if someone might be filming their startled reaction, then went on their way. The weather was perfect. The sun spotlighted Jen's bras and underpants in a way that made it look like their yellow house was offering them up, its nearly flat roof a tray, to the sky.

That afternoon I met with Mrs. Holt. She lived with her daughter Sharon's family at the end of the street though I didn't get why. She was relatively young, in her late fifties like my mom, who I often thought of as having more of a life than me, with her tours of the Middle East and intramural tennis tournaments, but to hear Mrs. Holt you'd think she might keel over any day. I managed her portfolio. We were in my office, talking gift-able amounts, and she asked if I knew what happened.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

She pointed at my covered window and her sleeve slid up to her elbow, revealing a porcelain white arm. I remember being surprised that Mrs. Holt didn't

have freckles as she has this reddish hair. Maybe it was burnt orange once but had lightened. It looked like someone had powdered it.

She said, “Do you know what happened there, Brad? Across the street.”

I told her I’d seen Jeff nailing things up but I didn’t get into neighborhood gossip, Jen screwing around, because Mrs. Holt felt like someone I had to watch what I said around. Wendy used to tell me I was terrible at reading people.

Wendy came upstairs then carrying a tray. There were three glasses and a pitcher of sun tea, which Wendy makes by leaving cold water with tea bags dangling in it by a window in the kitchen. She set the tray on the table in front of Mrs. Holt. Ice cubes tinkled, lemon slices sank. Wendy complimented Mrs. Holt’s tan jumper. Mrs. Holt got up from the sofa and tried to hug Wendy, but she couldn’t get her arms around.

She said, “Look at you, dear. You’re enormous. You two must be so excited.”

Wendy was enormous. She’d gained sixty-five pounds, just over halfway to term, which was why she’d stopped work early. Wendy’s the illustrator for a press in town. She did the drawings for a children’s book, *Herbert and His Wife, Hattie*, about a train conductor and his wife’s search for the ideal home. Like us they settled in the South. She drew a cat with a chef’s hat stirring Brunswick stew and using a juice glass to cut biscuits for a civic group’s *Country Cat Cookbook*. I should have assumed, I guess, that Wendy had started sketching what she wanted our baby’s nursery to look like. The due date was May 18th, a Wednesday. We thought she’d work until the beginning of May but Wendy was

tired. The weight made it hard to sit at a desk. Our doctors said everything looked fine in the ultrasounds and tests so not to worry, sometimes this happened.

Wendy asked Mrs. Holt about her health and Mrs. Holt said the new blood pressure medicine gave her hives, so she was off it, worried about “the silent killer.” When Mrs. Holt left, Wendy and I talked about her husband that purportedly left her for a younger woman.

I said, “Mrs. Holt’s not old, and she’s attractive. But it’s like she’s thrown in the towel. I don’t get it.”

Wendy said, “He was probably her life, Brad, and he left her. Alone. Game over. It makes me sad.”

For the next couple weeks things in Hunter’s Crossing seemed about normal. The neighborhood had its regular pulse. Allie Burke ran around and around the block with Pepper the terrier. Steve Fuller walked past a dozen times collecting newspapers. June Anderson was always out with the baby carriage. Jen Simmons’s underwear stayed on the roof. Jeff and Jen didn’t split. Rather, Jen still went out in workout gear; Jeff worked on the yard.

One afternoon I came home from grocery shopping to find Wendy and Jen sitting together in our living room, on our sofa. On the table in front of them was the china tea set I remembered Wendy adding to our wedding registry, though, before that day, I’d never actually seen it in use. I had a flash of Wendy in the department store china section. She’d giggled like a young girl, she’d *looked* like a young girl as she’d lifted the thin white cup to her lips. I remembered watching

her that day, thinking she was sweet and wonderful and beautiful and marrying me. It gave me chills.

The afternoon Jen Simmons was over I'd stopped, brown grocery sack in my arms, to say hello and also because I was a little surprised. I'd seen Wendy and Jen together at the neighborhood potluck but that was it. Moreover it seemed weird, having Jen in our house. It was like a character from a favorite TV show had walked off the set into our world.

At first Jen didn't look at me, she had her head tilted forward. Then she did and I could see she was crying. Her long brown hair, normally pulled back in a ponytail, was stuck to her cheeks. She was wearing a shiny blue jacket and pants, white stripes down the sides.

Wendy said, "Brad, I'll help you put that stuff away." Then she covered Jen's hand with her own. "I'll be right back."

In the kitchen Wendy sat in one of our table's side chairs. It didn't have the arms that made it impossible for her to fit in the chairs at the end. She told me that Jen had just showed up, knocked on the door, and when she'd opened it she'd found Jen there, sobbing. Wendy told me things were bad across the street. Jeff and Jen weren't speaking, Jen was sleeping in the guest room, Jen thought Jeff was cheating.

Wendy said, "I don't think she has family or anyone to talk to, Brad. I feel sorry for her."

Later, after Jen left, I asked Wendy if she'd said anything about the roof. I'd noticed more cars passing through Hunter's Crossing, slowing down in front

of the Simmonses, like theirs was the house with the overblown Christmas decorations people drive across town to gawk at. I asked what she was doing in terms of underwear—“Did she buy all new?”—which Wendy said was completely inappropriate. The roof subject hadn’t come up. It was the beginning of February, weather perfect.

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Wendy and I didn’t have kids. It was our first we were expecting. But there was big stuff happening with the town’s Board of Education. A proposal had been forwarded that would contractually obligate teachers to work forty hours a week, year-round. This in response to criticism about the teaching schedule, calling seven-hour days, ten months a year lax. Teachers were up in arms. The local paper was filled with letters to the editor about unquantifiable time spent making lesson plans and grading. Dissatisfied parents rebutted with detailed accounts of how teachers had failed their children and complaints about the lack of educational standards.

It was Monday. The proposal was being voted on in referendum Friday. Sara Fuller down the street teaches third grade. I was driving Wendy to her six-month checkup when we noticed three posters on the Fullers’ roof: *Vote No! Education is Not Hours. Respect Teaching.* They were professionally made, red with white text, sized to cover the space. When we returned two hours later there was a banner running the length of the Andersons’ roof, directly across from the Fullers. In hot pink paint that was still dripping it said, *Vote YES! Teachers Need*

Grading! June and Neil Anderson have four kids, three in school, one still a baby. June often talks of home-schooling.

Wendy and I spent the rest of that day working on the nursery, the small room next to ours on the back of the house, because we were running out of time. Wendy had gained fifteen more pounds, bringing the total up to eighty. The doctor had recommended bed rest until delivery because Wendy's body, her bones and organs, they're tiny. We didn't talk much then, just about things I could make us to eat, logistics. I told her I'd give her sponge baths, walk her to the toilet, leave a bell by the bed so she could call me. Wendy was teary. I moved quickly on that room, assembling the crib and changing table, hanging the yellow curtains with circus animals on them that we'd picked out three and a half months before, when it was safe to tell people we were pregnant.

In the month that followed I'd go back to those curtains, to how much Wendy loves the circus. According to her sketch, though, which I did eventually find, in the nightstand on her side of the bed, it was just going to be one of the room's themes.

That evening we got Wendy set up in our bedroom and I went upstairs to check on things. When I looked out my window I saw we'd missed a flurry of activity. All down the street, roof after roof had something on it, but it was getting dark, and I couldn't tell what. I went outside to see.

The Fullers and the Andersons had continued their roof debate. Handmade signs fluttered from the bottom of the Fullers' professionally-made red ones; the Andersons had hung more banners done in pink paint. On the Fullers' it

said: *You try teaching!* On the Andersons': *Are You Afraid of Clocks?* On the Fullers': *I'm afraid of getting YOUR kids.* Both houses were lit like lanterns and I imagined my neighbors in there, around kitchen tables, planning what next.

But that wasn't it. David Wilson, the openly gay resident of Hunter's Crossing, lives beside the Fullers in one of the green houses. On David's roof was a sign for a judge running for reelection in November. Rita Noon, the widow, lives to the left of us. She'd tacked up a yellow and white quilt with a *For Sale* sign in the middle. Allie Burke and her boyfriend, Gregor, both graduate students and owners of Pepper the terrier, live in the tan house across the street. On their roof was a blown-up photo of a droopy-eyed basset hound with a phone number to call, suggesting we adopt homeless puppies. To the Burkes' left are the Temples, Tammy and Jon. He's a botanist; she's president of the garden club. Their roof looked like the start of a parade float, half-covered with red, white, and blue flowers. On the second half, the part left to be finished, there was what looked like clear netting. I learned later it was a watering system. Finally, on the Simmons's roof, there were, of course, Jen's undergarments, but there were also two new signs. They were simple: black marker on neon poster board. To the left of the office window was a yellow piece that said *YES*; to the right, an orange piece that said *NO*.

I walked the half-circle twice, taking it all in, wondering at the planning. The sun had set, streetlights clicked on, and I noticed Mrs. Holt at the end of the block, leaning against her daughter's mailbox. I walked down to join her.

Mrs. Holt said, "Evening, Bradley. I assume you watched this unfold?"

I told her I hadn't been in my office all day to see it.

She said she'd pulled a lawn chair to the sidewalk. She explained how the Fuller-Anderson fight went down: "June Anderson had her kids out there, reading the Fuller signs then running inside, reporting. Steve Fuller walked away around noon, paper tucked under his arm. I haven't seen him come back." She told me the Temples were like a machine, assembling their parade float roof: "Jon rolled wheelbarrows full of plants from the greenhouse out back to the front, then stood on a ladder and Tammy handed him pots." Mrs. Holt said Jen Simmons went on their roof around three with the yellow *YES*; she saw Jeff up there around four-thirty with the orange *NO*.

As she went on and on I thought I'd never seen Mrs. Holt so energetic. She gestured wildly with her arms, laughed: "I've never experienced anything like this." Her red hair, which looked darker than usual, was pinned back off her forehead with a pink glitter clip I guessed might be her granddaughter's, it was that youthful. We stood in a puddle of streetlight.

I said, "You look great, Mrs. Holt. How are you feeling?"

She smiled and said, "Never better. Bradley, I've been painting."

I said that was great, and that I needed to get home to Wendy, who Mrs. Holt asked about.

I said, "She's fine," but I wanted to tell her everything. About the weight and the doctor and the bed rest and was this going to be OK, Mrs. Holt? I was terrified. I thought if I just told her she might do something, like hug me, or say, "It's just a matter of changing her diet," and that somehow the weight gain would

stop. Wendy would be fine. The baby would be fine. I don't know what made me think this.

Mrs. Holt was smiling, watching as one of the Anderson boys leaned half his body out of the front door, looked left and right.

I said, "Mrs. Holt, can I ask you something?"

Mrs. Holt looked at me. She said, "Of course, Bradley."

I said, "When you were pregnant, did you put on much weight?"

Mrs. Holt squeezed my arm. She laughed a little and said, "Oh Bradley, yes. Most women do. But don't worry. Wendy will lose that weight, quick. Breastfeeding helps. She's breastfeeding, yes? Oh she'll be fine, Bradley. Back in her cute clothes in no time. And then the two of you will have a little one and there won't be time to worry about weight. You'll be worried about not sleeping."

I tried to smile, to laugh. I said, "I'm not worried. Wendy's always been the good looking one." I reached over and raised the red flag on Mrs. Holt's daughter's mailbox. Then Mrs. Holt and I stood there for a few minutes, watching as the Anderson boy climbed through their top window onto the roof. He was tiny, I thought, half the size of me. He scuttled on hands and knees to near the top, to the corner where there was not yet an anti-teacher banner. Under his arm was rolled up paper. In his mouth, a child-sized hammer. June Anderson was leaning out of the window, waving a bare arm. I thought I heard her say, "Over more, Ethan. That's it."

When I got home I tried to explain to Wendy what had happened out there, to Hunter's Crossing, but her mind was elsewhere, clearly. She looked right through me.

I climbed in bed with her, lay my arm over her chest, and said, "We're going to be all right. I know it. Everything will be OK."

Wendy stayed still. She was holding her breath and then she exhaled, long and choppy.

The next day Hunter's Crossing was on the local news. I was in the bedroom with Wendy, watching Allie Burke in a blue Humane Society T-shirt being interviewed. Behind her Gregor was on the roof, straightening what looked like an African tapestry. Pepper the terrier ran in and out of frame. Our doorbell rang. I stood up to answer it, thinking why would reporters try to talk to us.

Wendy whispered, "I don't want to see anyone."

It was Jen Simmons on our front porch. Sobbing so her shoulders were shaking and she could hardly speak: "Jeff... cheating... inside... please...."

I said come in, but Jen didn't hear me. It was suddenly loud because a news chopper had dropped low in the sky and was tracing the arc of the street. I put my hand on Jen's arm to pull her inside but she must have thought I was going to hug her because she ended up with her face on my chest, then she clasped her arms around me and was shivering, there in our hallway, squeezing. I didn't know what to do. I closed the door. I patted Jen's back. Jen's hair smelled musky. I wondered if Jeff was behind his filmy curtain, or on his front porch, watching. I thought of Wendy.

“Wendy’s not feeling well,” I said. “She’s not really available.”

Jen didn’t let go. Rather her grip seemed to tighten. Her arms are thin but all muscle.

I stood in the hallway patting Jen’s back, listening to her sobs, which, with time, became less insistent. The churning of the helicopter was gone, our clock chimed briefly because it was a quarter after the hour, and then it was silent. Jen let go, stepped back, and looked at me.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I just had to get out of there. I didn’t know where to go.”

She put fingers in the corners of her eyes like she was trying to plug the tear ducts.

I picked up the duffel bag Jen had dropped by her feet. I said, “Why don’t you sit in the living room. You’ll be more comfortable.” I led her to the sofa, then brought her a box of Kleenex, a glass of water. I went to check on Wendy.

The TV in the bedroom was still on but it was showing a commercial for a local car dealer. I stood in the doorway and looked at Wendy whose eyes were closed. The sun shone in through the window beside the bed, backlighting her body, which looked like someone had inflated it. I thought, Why is this happening?

Wendy opened her eyes and I could see that they were slick, that she was crying. I went to Wendy and knelt, put my head on the bed beside her.

Wendy whispered, “I’m worried about doing anything. Moving, swallowing. I think I’m going to lose him. I’m so scared.”

I took Wendy's hand and kissed her palm again and again. Jesus Christ I was scared. Why was this happening? When we met Wendy was a freshman in college and I was a sophomore. We were in science class together, Natural Resources, and I'd noticed her, had started trying to sit behind her. I was so nervous when I asked her out because she was beautiful, long blond hair, out of my league, but Wendy said *yes*. I made us a picnic that we ended up having to eat on my dorm floor because it was raining. That Valentine's Day I gave her a heart-shaped rock I'd found as a kid. As an eight-year-old I'd thought to save that rock for the woman I'd marry. I knew right away it was Wendy.

She'd been sad before, of course. Her dad had died. A friend had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's. But we'd survived; I'd helped. I had taken care of Wendy, I *take* care of Wendy, and I didn't know what to do. I said, "I'll get you water," then rushed off to the kitchen. I was useless.

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Jen Simmons moved in. The day she showed up on our doorstep she told me she'd come home from the gym, where she works as a kickboxing instructor, to find all the framed pictures of Jeff and her hidden in the drawer under the TV. There were two wineglasses in the sink, one with lipstick marks. I told Jen she could spend the night in my office if she needed a place. Then she just kind of stayed.

That first night I sat up there with her awhile. She was cross-legged on the sofa with a fleece blanket Wendy had made spread across her knees. I was at my desk.

“We weren’t speaking,” she said. “But we hadn’t agreed to end things, to see other people.”

I suggested that Jeff had planted the glasses to make her suspicious, which started Jen on a giggling fit, picturing Jeff applying her lipstick, trying to figure out if his male lip marks looked female enough. She buried her face in a pillow. I told Jen about my cross-gender experience. One Halloween Wendy and I went as a dentist-hygienist team. I was a female hygienist; Wendy, a male dentist.

I said, “I wore pantyhose and everything.”

Jen nodded. “Itchy, aren’t they?”

From a desk drawer I pulled a picture of me in a white dress, standing profile beside Wendy, showing off balloon breasts. Wendy was wearing a white lab coat, holding up a pair of greasy pliers. I told Jen other stories. About the dance classes Jen and I had taken to get ready for our wedding, and Wendy’s crazy cross-eyed boss.

“He checks Wendy’s drawings like this,” I said, rubbing a client’s W-4 over my face.

Jen bit the pillow she was laughing so hard.

Over the course of the next month, the roofs in Hunter’s Crossing continued to develop. Someone attached a sub-sign to the Hunter’s Crossing sign at the entrance of the neighborhood. It read, *Home of the Roof Collages*. Cars passed through constantly. I walked the half-circle evenings, checking out that day’s additions.

Some were conscientious of space, like the O'Tooles, who didn't let their blown-up family portrait—all four of them in Redskins sweatshirts, right arms raised, hands fisted—overlap with the family tree they'd painted on a white tablecloth. Others put item on top of item in a seemingly haphazard manner, namely Jeff Simmons. You could hardly see Jen's undergarments through the sweaters and jeans, pink beanbag, pink towels, flowered bedspread and other items. It was obvious Jeff was moving Jen's things out as he found them, though Jen didn't talk about it, and I never definitely saw her looking.

One night, from the street, I thought I saw her silhouette through my office curtain. I looked at the Simmons's place and thought I saw Jeff's outline in the living room window. But when I looked at our house again all the lights were out.

I spent most of my time downstairs, near Wendy. When Jen wasn't working she'd be down there too, but she chose to sit in the bedroom, to read to Wendy. They were getting caught up on classics. They'd gotten through *Huck Finn* and were started on *Ethan Frome*. I knew Wendy appreciated the company. She'd stopped talking but I could see it in her eyes. I appreciated Jen because she was upbeat, pacing and sometimes dancing around Wendy in bed, waving her arms and doing Huck and Jim's accents. She made a lot of noise, which was nice, because the house could get pretty quiet.

As for me, I became obsessed with the nursery. I thought of it as my roof collage, inside. I combed all our town's stores for anything circus-related. When I found blankets with clowns on them and a lampshade with a man being shot

from a cannon, I bought them and brought them home to show Wendy and Jen, then carefully arranged them in the nursery. I thought Wendy's hearing me hammer and move around in there might help. I reported on progress, like when I attached a wire caddy corner across the top of the room that a stuffed bear on a unicycle peddled across. I told Wendy our baby would dream of bears, and Jen ran to the nursery to see. When she came back into the bedroom I was in the rocking chair, rocking and going on about my nursery plans.

Jen said, "It's so cool in there! It's like under the big top."

I got the idea to paint the ceiling. I spent one day on a ladder marking foot-wide bands. The next day I painted them red.

Mrs. Holt showed up in the middle of this project, a surprise, as I hadn't seen her since our talk by the mailbox. When I opened the door and saw her there, on our front porch, I thought she looked amazing, younger. Her hair was dark red, almost auburn, and pulled up loosely with pieces falling out like it wasn't going to stay. I noticed that the pins had things attached to them: dice, a button, a green and black rock. I commented on these hair decorations and she said she'd made them, roof collages had inspired her, and now she was "walking art." Then she laughed this lovely light laugh. It felt carefree.

We went together to see Wendy, who, at seeing Mrs. Holt, tried to smile. Mrs. Holt didn't seem at all surprised about Jen Simmons being there, or about Wendy's size. I guessed she'd heard about the bed rest and the Simmonses. She said, "Hello, dear" to Jen as she breezed past.

Then she was beside Wendy. I stood in the doorway and watched Mrs. Holt stroke Wendy's face, which was so big now she seemed to almost not have features. She'd kept gaining. I don't know how much. Mrs. Holt talked about her pregnancies, how she'd just wished those babies out.

She said, "Think of this summer, dear. The three of you, on the beach."

I looked at Jen who was grinning, nodding. There was a tear on Wendy's cheek.

Afterwards I showed Mrs. Holt the nursery. I was proud of that room. In addition to the high wire bear, I'd found a tumbling acrobat border and a series of Barnum & Bailey posters. I'd wired stuffed elephants around the top of the crib, leaving a space in front for us to lift out the baby. And there were clown nightlights, dolls, puzzles. A rocking horse that, instead of a horse, was a circus giraffe, with a pointy red hat and a red satin bow around its neck. There was also, of course, the half-finished ceiling.

Mrs. Holt said, "You've really done some work, Bradley. I hope your baby's not like me, though. Afraid of clowns." She laughed.

We went upstairs to my office, which, though Jen folded the sheets and blankets each day, stacking them neatly in the closet, still smelled like her, musky. Mrs. Holt sat in the chair beside my desk. We talked a little about Hunter's Crossing people. Tammy and Jon Temple had won the garden club's March prize for their spring-themed roof, a hyacinth rendition of Easter eggs. Mrs. Holt thought the award specious: "She *is* the club's president." She told me Allie and Gregor had taken a roommate, Ginger, who'd added candles to the roof

that she lights each night, then sits on the lawn, watching burn. I said that must happen later than my nightly walks, and Mrs. Holt said, “She does it around midnight. It’s pretty, but a real fire hazard.” She asked if I’d heard about the Fullers, which I hadn’t. They’re divorcing.

Mrs. Holt said, “It happened the week of the Board of Education vote. Steve Fuller walked away in the middle of the Anderson-Fuller fight, newspaper under his arm, and he just never came back. Poof! Goodbye Sara and life and Hunter’s Crossing. She got divorce papers the other day, poor girl. He’s giving her everything, which is nice. Says he doesn’t want it. But what timing. The teachers lose the vote and Sara loses Steve. Same week.”

I said how sad it was, and that I’d expected it of the Simmonses, not the Fullers. As I was saying this I thought of the tattered pro-teacher banners Sara Fuller hadn’t bothered to take down. I’d assumed she’d left them up there as a gesture, a “you won but I’m right,” like people with Gore-Lieberman bumper stickers still on their cars. I leaned close to Mrs. Holt and said, “Every day, as Jeff nails Jen’s personal effects up there, I expect something. Some reaction. Jen running over there and screaming at Jeff. Or sneaking over when he’s away and taking down her stuff. Or for Jen to call a lawyer. Or for Jeff to.”

Mrs. Holt said, “The Simmonses are solid, Bradley.” She leaned close, so I could smell her breath, which was sweet, like jam. “You do know this isn’t the first time Jen’s moved on the street? Last year she spent two months with Allie and Gregor.”

I hadn't noticed before that Mrs. Holt has grass green eyes. Maybe they're contacts. She was scanning my face. I'm sure I looked surprised.

"Bradley, rumor has it they sort of get off on this. Ginger says she sees them, when she's sitting in the yard, watching her candles. She says they get naked and stand in their windows, that they look across the street at one another."

I was shaking my head.

Mrs. Holt said, "Of course it's more elaborate this time. It was the same window thing when Jen stayed at Allie and Gregor's. But then the roof collages came along. They changed our patterns."

How did Mrs. Holt know?

Mrs. Holt said, "We all think it's terrible that they're doing this now, and here. We heard about Wendy, and..."

And I cut her off. I put my hands on her cheeks, which felt crisp, like tissue paper.

I said, "Stop. Please. It's enough."

Mrs. Holt apologized. She said she didn't mean to upset me.

I told her I wasn't upset, that I didn't know what I was. I don't still.

Whatever Jen's reasons for being in our house, in my window, she'd spent time with Wendy, and it's that I come back to.

Jen moved home the following week. She said goodbye and thank you.

Mrs. Holt left for New York. It's what she'd dropped by to tell me. She called it "the city." She said, "I've been painting and reading and learning so much, but I need more. The immediate. And it's there, I know it." She cashed in her

retirement account, waving away the early withdrawal fee. Two days later she was gone.

Mrs. Holt left behind art, on the roof. A large canvas divided into different sized rectangles. In one, there were three free-floating faces, children, two girls and a boy. In another, rows of gray tulips covered with jam jars. In a third, in shades of yellow, a casket. In a fourth, butterflies. And in the largest rectangle, the one on the bottom right, there was what was undoubtedly female genitalia: soft pink folds topped with auburn pubic hair. Young legs opened wide like arms, like wings.

Sharon, Mrs. Holt's daughter, had the canvas down early the next day. No matter, I won't forget it.

It feels like everything's screaming to an end and I've yet to mention Wendy's box of souvenirs from the circus. As a girl she'd gone every year with her parents. And they'd bought her things: a flashlight with a plastic brush at the end; a necklace that used to glow green; a long red horn that sounds, when blown, like an elephant. Just after we'd gotten married, when we were in the process of moving in together, Wendy was standing on a chair in the closet in our bedroom and I was handing her things. Boxes to be put up top. There was one marked *Purses* and another marked *Belts*. When I got to the box marked *Circus* I made fun of Wendy. I said, "I had no idea I married such a packrat."

I wasn't wrong, thinking to make the nursery the way I did. It didn't matter though. Nothing mattered. Our baby died early in the eighth month. The doctor was coming by weekly to check on Wendy and that day he traced all over

her belly with the portable ultrasound. He traced faster, he pushed harder, but there was nothing, no heartbeat. He called an ambulance but it was too late. They had to perform a C-section to remove our son, who they advised us against seeing. Apparently he'd begun to rot.

Wendy's healthy. With her mother. She can't stand being here; I can't hardly either. It was that nursery, its vibrant circus. A person shouldn't have to live with that kind of reminder in the house, so I took it all to the roof, piece by piece. I started with the ringleader announcement sign, a law decoration I planned to put up there. I did intend a roof collage. The ringleader's on an upside down tub, holding a bullhorn, and there's a space to write the baby's name, gender, weight. It's blank, of course, pointed towards the disassembled crib. The curtains are up there too. The mobile, blankets, diapers, tiny outfits. It's all up there, cooking in the sun, and I've peeled off the border, tried painting over the red stripes, but they just keep bleeding through.

Curriculum Vitae

Amy Day Wilkinson earned a B.A. in Sociology and Women's Studies from Cornell University, an M.P.A. from Cornell University, and an M.A. in English and Creative Writing from the University of Southern Mississippi before attending the University of Missouri, where she was a Creative Writing Fellow. Her fiction has appeared in the *Minnesota Review*, *Literal Latte*, *3rd bed*, *Pindeldyboz*, and other literary journals, and the anthology *Falling Backwards: Stories of Fathers and Daughters*. She teaches writing at New York University and Hunter College and lives in Brooklyn, New York with her husband, Nathan Oates, and their daughter, Sylvie.