

**Thesis**

**WORK OF ART**

**A COLLECTION OF STORIES AND ESSAYS**

**Submitted by**

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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY JUDEA FRANCK ENTITLED WORK OF ART: A COLLECTION OF STORIES AND ESSAYS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS.

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## **ABSTRACT OF THESIS**

### **WORK OF ART: A COLLECTION OF STORIES AND ESSAYS**

**This collection of work, composed over a period of three years, contains stories and essays that explore the emotional struggles of people in fictional and real-life experiences. These stories and essays are concerned with the idea of resilience—how people and characters reshape their lives after fracturing events. It is a collection influenced by the idea of loss, but also by the hope of resurgence. It details the ways in which characters and people can be hurt, maimed, broken-hearted, and yet find a way to recover.**

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## **WORK OF ART: A COLLECTION OF STORIES AND ESSAYS**

|                        |     |
|------------------------|-----|
| INTRODUCTION           | 1   |
| <br><b>FICTION</b>     |     |
| WORK OF ART            | 6   |
| CALL ME WHEN IT'S OVER | 32  |
| ENOUGH                 | 55  |
| SUMMER SPARRING        | 75  |
| PLAYING HOUSE          | 90  |
| LOVE ANATOMY           | 101 |
| SHIPPING OUT           | 123 |
| <br><b>NONFICTION</b>  |     |
| WALKING SEX ACT        | 144 |
| DANCING IN AMERICA     | 158 |
| L'INDEPENDENCE         | 170 |
| AWAKE AND WATCHING     | 188 |



## INTRODUCTION

My mother and I suffer from the same disease—complete strangers confess to us their innermost secrets. This can happen anywhere, on a plane, at bus stop, in a quiet coffee shop, in a gym locker room. A stranger will engage in conversation ultimately to reveal something dire—an affair, a hidden sexual orientation, a dream to kidnap a child from an estranged spouse. Maybe it is that we share a friendly face, my mother and I, an unassuming nature, a hidden tattoo printed across our foreheads that reads, “I listen.” Regardless, it is a captivating experience to be so instantly trusted, so instantly befriended, and ultimately laden with the truths of other people’s lives. It is, no doubt, why my mother became a psychologist. It is also the reason why I have come to write both fiction and nonfiction and is the source of much of this collection.

Writers will often talk about voices that they have heard that contribute to their writing—voices from childhood, voices from the work of other writers. This is no less true for me. Those voices, which have grown from my life experiences and my literary exploration, undoubtedly sing in these pages. Yet, each of these stories also holds the

voice of a fascinating stranger whose unexpected revelation haunts me until I can weave it into my work.

To give an example, one of the voices inhabiting these pages is that of a man I met in a country-western bar in Greeley, Colorado. He was about my age, very clean-cut, looking totally out of place in the loud music, smoke, and haze, which was probably the reason we started talking in the first place. He told me that he was a soldier, just back from Afghanistan, getting ready to start classes in the fall at the university. After a while, I asked him what he thought about being back. What he thought about the war, the upcoming election. He told me that America was right to be doing what we were doing. Then he got sort of quiet, started peeling the label off his bottle. Finally, he looked up at me and said, “There were people, whole families of people, hanging in trees.” I was shocked and saddened by what that soldier said to me and this became the seeds for the story “Enough.” It was not so much the violence of what he revealed, but rather that he had this quiet, honest, almost innocent look about him—blue eyes and dimples—and his button-down shirt was tucked into his pressed jeans. I knew he had a mother and father in Yuma, that he had been raised up surrounded by wheat, and that he only joined the army because of the GI bill to eventually pay for higher education. I wondered what seeing lynched families would do to someone like that, how it might have changed him. There was also something about him that reminded me of my own older brother and I became interested in how a family might change because one of its members was irrevocably damaged by the course of life. This was enough to get me writing and then I discovered the little girl, Janey, who could tell the rest of the story with the insight, longing and innocence that only a child—a sister aching for her brother—can have. Part of me lives in

that little girl, and the other part comes from a sadness that I felt for that soldier that night in the darkened bar.

The stories of this collection have come from instances like those, moments of private revelation. Because I firmly believe that a writer must have a personal stake in her work, these stories are also bound with an element of something emotional from my own life—some primal experience or something I witnessed—an instant that I am still trying to understand, still trying to master.

I like the idea that what happens to people, what happens to characters, through the course of our lives changes us, changes our constitutions. Coming up against another person is oftentimes the force of that change. Those are the experiences I hope to capture in my fiction, the experiences I try to give my characters. All of my stories seem to be about loss, but also about recovery. I am in awe of the resilience of people. I want to understand how it is that people rebuild themselves after a fracturing experience. How we can be hurt, maimed, broken-hearted, and find it within ourselves to love and live again.

Because many of the seeds for these stories were planted by unfamiliar people telling me their stories, I tend to write in first person. I am fascinated by the power and immediacy that comes from allowing a character to tell his/her own tale. At times, it did not prove appropriate to tell the story in that way and so I employed the use of a third person narrator, but my writing process always involves starting with the voice of a character. It is the fastest and surest way I know to become intimate with the people who populate my work.

This collection also contains four nonfiction pieces. These stories, I believe, share a thematic bond with my works of fiction in that they are about struggle, loss, and a

reaffirming configuration of self. I would like to say that I write nonfiction because I'm interested in the convergence of the two crafts. This would be a wonderful and academic response, and I'm sure that this is partly the case. But really, writing nonfiction comes from a stubborn, almost child-like desire to tell my own story, one that is completely mine, my own secret revelations.

Nonfiction comes with its own particular challenges. Characters become people who are playing for keeps, who no longer have the luxury to act in the way most consistent with their natures. Writing fiction involves a certain mastery of making characters behave in ways that are most revealing to the reader. Character ultimately dictates what happens in stories; and whether or not those actions ring true seems to determine the satisfaction for the reader. This is true in life to some extent; people's natures dictate how they act. However, in life, or in my life, I would not always act the way that I can allow my characters to behave. One cannot turn away from the crisis of her own life in the same way that a character can, even if in her heart of hearts she's tempted. I rely heavily on speculation to "solve" this particular constraint of nonfiction—weaving what really did happen with my fictional imagining of what might have happened.

I would also like to say that the success of these stories and essays comes from the fact that I am not afraid of revision. For my fiction, it takes a long time for me to walk around with the voices of these strangers. They sort of bump and jostle up against each other until finally they emerge as characters who teach me something about life. This is no less true for my experience of writing nonfiction. It takes me a long time to digest the elements that go into my essays—the threads of my life that I need to connect. I write

scene after scene after scene. I throw out more than half of what I write. I try to resist the temptation of the “maybe later” pile, although, like most writers, I have one. At the very least, the process of creating this collection has taught me to be compassionate and patient—I listen first, then I write it down.

## WORK OF ART

I hold Aimee's hand in the pre-op room. She's wearing a thin, paper jonnie with tiny blue checkers and we are laughing about something stupid, about how little her wrist looks with the dangling plastic band. Only it is not funny. We both know it isn't, but I focus on her forehead and she looks at my chin, avoiding eye contact that would cease our laughter and threaten silence or worse.

Aimee says that nothing good ever begins in bed anyway, hospital or otherwise. She should know, she is the artist. A poet. Setting the world free in ambiguity. I just take pictures. Put the world in squares.

"So how do I look in paper?" Aimee asks lying out before me in the off-white hospital room, trying to keep off the subject. "Do I look like a giant tissue?" She shifts around in the bed, making her outfit crinkle.

“I don’t know. I was thinking more like napkin or paper towel. You know, the quicker picker upper—Aimee,” I sing falsetto. We giggle like I am the funniest woman in the world.

Her hand in mine is like a tiny heart beat. Still. Squeeze-squeeze. Still. Every few seconds like she is testing the fact that I am here. I watch her fingers wound in mine and something about our hands reminds me of our first date when we made the long drive down from Orono to Portland on that dark tree lined highway because in Portland it wasn’t so hokey to see two girls holding hands. It’s hokey here in Gardiner, somewhat. But we aren’t girls anymore at the Reel Theater watching a foreign film. Back then, I was a bottle-blond, buzz-cut, female phallic symbol—all to spite my father who had grown me up on Barbie dolls because he couldn’t imagine what else girls might like. Aimee was shy then, but she knew how to dress. Soft brown hair. White Daisy-dukes. That cracked brown leather jacket and vinyl purse. Wouldn’t let me put my arm around her until the lights went down even though there were only seven of us in the dim theater. The light from the screen reflected back, splashing up her neck. My hand stretched around the curve of her shoulder, rubbing the edge of that leather jacket between my sweaty fingers, willing the seams of her tank top to open and release the doves of her breasts.

I was afraid back then that Aimee might only be a tourist. Make me fall in love with her just to leave at the end of her two weeks. Maybe I was the tourist with my theater groping, always picking public places so that it wouldn’t go too far. She was the one that asked me to come home with her, to her bedroom, more room to spread out.

Only now, at forty-four, Aimee is dying. Maybe. Breast Cancer. Maybe. It is what we are here to find out.

“Michaela, they are going to take me in now.” I look up from our hands to the nurse standing in the doorway.

I wonder what would be best to say to Aimee now—Good luck, break a leg, it might be nothing? I settle for saying “I’ll be here.”

“I know,” she says as they wheel her off and I’m left standing in the tiny sunless room.

It was not always like this. It feels important for me to say that. Aimee and I were lovers then friends then lovers, now mostly just friends again for the past ten years. We were both living in Maine, forty minutes away from each other. Aimee teaching at the college. I was managing a small portrait studio business. We would meet for dinner every few weeks. But then came Aimee’s phone call. *Michaela, they’ve found a lump.* Four words and they make you rethink every single choice you’ve ever made. Even so, breast cancer is not that kind of disease. It doesn’t respond to human choices. What *if* we had stayed as a couple and we’d had children and Aimee had been in her twenties and breast fed? Aimee still might have the tumor. It seems more like an accident of birth—white, middle class, and your chances increase by forty percent. It’s the having no what ifs that kill you, makes it feel like you can never do enough.

It becomes *I need a favor, someone to drive me to the biopsy. I need. I need. I need. And without thinking, Yes. Anything. Aimee. Yes.* For a lover, an ex-lover, a friend. *Yes.*



They take only a little sample, a tiny piece, a spot no bigger than a band-aide. Afterwards, we wait for a chance with the doctor. We walk in, still holding hands, into a room like something out of *The Godfather*, huge mahogany desk, leather chairs. I didn't know that doctor's offices had rooms like this. I only ever thought of those small narrow tables where they tell you to lie back, relax, lift your feet, scoot your ass to the end of the bench. The doctor leans across her desk at us, offers us water right after we sit. She wants to schedule surgery before either of us has settled comfortably into the chairs.

"We are afraid that the tumor has metastasized to other areas of the breast." Her mouth settles into a frown around the word *metastasized*. I look around the room and wonder if her *we* is meant to include the two of us.

Aimee's films are backlit on the x-ray display behind the doctor. I can see something vaguely like a mass, like a starburst, Aimee's own captive piece of the sun. The doctor looks at the calendar spread across her desk.

"Does Thursday the twenty-ninth work for you? That's in two weeks." Her smile is small, polite, patient, as if she has just asked Aimee to make an appointment for a manicure.

"No, Thursday is no good. That's the day I start the summer workshop down at the Y."

I am proud of Aimee. I think of a long slew of Thursdays spreading out. All the different things we can fill them with.

"How about Tuesday then? Midmorning? Will that work?"

I smile and squeeze Aimee's hand. I've got you. Let this one be mine. "No, I'm sorry." I shake my head. "I've got the Brinkmen's family reunion, remember. I need

Aimee to handle the camera bags.” Although, Aimee has not helped me with a shoot in years, I think that this should suffice.

“Cancel it,” the doctor says. “We are talking mastectomy here. I’m putting you in for three weeks from now.”

The doctor slides her hands across the desk and takes both of ours. “You are lucky,” she sighs. “Husbands are usually much worse. More afraid than their wives. I’m glad that you have each other under the same roof.”

I can feel Aimee watching me. I don’t look over. Aimee and I haven’t had the “move in” conversation yet. I was waiting until we knew for sure before I asked her. It was something that she had always wanted back when we were a couple and trying to make it work. But that was such a long time ago and I wasn’t sure if either one of us wanted that now.

“Okay.” The doctor shoves back from her desk and we are released.

We leave the office with bundles of brochures in that sickly feminine pink. Chemotherapy looks like a resort spa. There is an entire catalog for headscarves—Kimoware. There is a pamphlet on support groups—So you have breast cancer. Now what?—meet thousands of women just like you. Just like us. Two dykes. No doubt.

At night, we lie out on my back deck in large Adirondack chairs. The spring is giving way to the heat of summer. Even the night air has started to feel thick. We slap at the first signs of mosquitoes and drink our beer. The loon’s call sounds like a woman humming through the mist that covers the lake.

“What are boobs good for anyway?” Aimee asks the night.

“Fat deposits,” I offer.

“Attracting unwanted male attention,” she laughs.

“Human udders.”

We pause.

“Well at least no more sports bras.”

“No bouncing at the gym.”

“Why do they put mirrors in front of the treadmill anyway? Like I want to see myself jiggle as I run.”

“No more under wire.”

“Itchy lace.”

To love a woman, must you love her body also? I have loved Aimee’s body. I have asked it into different shapes. Captured it with daylight and moonlight and everything in between. I have watched it appear on an empty white sheet of paper and fill up the blankness in shades of grays and blacks. Can I watch it disappear?

“Aimee, move in with me.” I don’t look at her when I say it. I don’t know what it is that I’m offering her here. It is issued like a challenge.

“Yes,” she whispers into the muggy night air.

Then I am kissing her. Her lips sweet with the taste of beer. Her fingers like butterflies working down my back. My hands wound into her hair, pressing her face in close so that there isn’t any room for air.

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I convert my office into a bedroom and I lead Aimee down the hall to it. I watch her out of the corner of my eye. She walks slowly, looking at all the photographs of her that I still have up on the walls.

She reaches out for one. It is a picture of Aimee's shadow on the wall. She is a perfect hour glass and her shadow is soaking up the texture of the bricks. We took it in the basement of her apartment when she was living in New York. Just a slice of her real body is exposed to the camera. Her fleshy side and the edge of her breast, a hard nipple. "I remember that," she says, reaching out. Her fingers leave any oily spot on the glass.

I walk quickly after that, stumbling with her suitcases. I don't slow down until I have turned the corner into the new bedroom space. I bite my lip, embarrassed that I have tried to fit a bed in among stacks of books and my computer desk. Aimee looks confused.

"What? What's wrong?"

"Nothing." She slips into the room and sits down on the bed. She bangs her head on the desk, reaching down to take off her shoes.

"Ouch. Shit."

"I didn't mean that you would be sleeping in here," I lie.

"Michaela, it's okay."

"No. I..." I take her arm and try to pull her off the bed. "Come on, let's settle you into my, our, room."

"Michaela, really. Thank you. It's enough."

Later, she drapes an afghan over the desk and it is enough, in away, I suppose. I peek into her room when I walk down the hall on my way to the darkroom. She has also

made use of the empty space on the bookshelf as a makeshift dresser for her clothes. I marvel at how quickly space can be enveloped, made to fit someone else.

Two weeks before surgery, in the midst of preoperative radiation, Aimee asks me to go in person to cancel her summer workshop. Of course, I cannot refuse. The classroom at the Y is typical. A large open room with a long table with ten or so folding chairs situated around it. The students—there are seven of them, three women in their sixties and the rest teenagers looking like they have just graduated from high school that spring—look alarmed when I come in and stand at the head of the table with an armload of Aimee’s books.

“I’m sorry,” I begin. Cough. Clear my throat. “Aimee can’t make it. Um. She’s had a procedure and she. Um. Needs to cancel the class.”

They look at me as if they are still waiting for Aimee to walk in, as if I have told them that the famous poet-professor will just be a few minutes late. “You will get your money back.” Still no one moves or turns to leave. The books feel heavy in my arms and I let them slide onto the table with a thump. “Here, she wants you to have these and she says that all of you are welcome to audit her class at the college in the fall.”

Finally one of them reaches for a book. “Will she be all right?” The woman asks. She’s one of the older ones and she peers up at me from behind thick lenses.

“I don’t know.” It is the first time that I have been asked this question and the first time, I realize, that I don’t have an answer for it. “I think so,” I add. “You should take her class in the fall.” As if fall will be this awesome magic season when all the surgery and

chemotherapy will be through, when Aimee will be back to her old, raw self, chastising me over the phone.

“Well, I certainly hope that she will recover. She’s such a brilliant artist. It would be a real shame. Please give her my best.”

The woman swipes three of the books and flashes me a sympathetic smile before she leaves the room. The others follow suite, wishing Aimee well, taking her books. Just as the last student picks up her book and I am almost alone in the empty room with the long table, I experience this sudden urge to run down the hall after them and take Aimee’s books back. I want to shout, *You are unworthy*, even though I’ve never read her poems on my own, only listened at Aimee’s readings, and we have a whole box of them in the garage. But I just stand there, dumbly, waiting for the last student to pass.

Outside the Y, the air feels unusually cool for June. I light a cigarette. I close my eyes and take a deep drag, letting the soft thrill of smoke sting the back of my throat.

“Hey,” someone says, and I pop open my eyes. It’s one of the young girls from Aimee’s class. I think that she wants a light and so I hold the gas station book of matches out toward her. Instead she holds out her hand. “Leah,” she says. Her voice is louder than I think it will be coming from so slight a girl with a black pixie cut and a face full of freckles. Our hands fold together, crushing the book of matches. I shrug, stick them in my pocket. “Michaela,” I say. Inhale. “Nice to meet you,” comes out in a puff of smoke.

“So. Um. Are you her sister or something?”

This part never ceases to amaze me, thinking they’ve seen the jacket cover and must know we look nothing alike. *Yeah, only she’s adopted*. But something stops me

from being mean to this girl. "I'm her partner," I say, thinking I hate that expression as well, makes us sound like we are trapped in an Eastwood western.

"Oh." Then she just stands there and stares at her feet. I need to leave, get back to the house. I let another moment pass and when she doesn't say anything else, I turn and start for the car.

"Wait," she calls. Her hand brushes the sleeve of my t-shirt.

"Listen," I say, turning toward her again. It's now that I notice that she has Aimee's book and a thick stack of paper hugged to her chest. "She signed it. You know, the book." There. That should be enough consolation. The girl stares blankly at me. I toss my cigarette into the dirt and grind it down with my heel. "I've got to go."

"Here." She holds out the stack of papers. I take them and throw them onto the front seat as I get into the car. Only then does it hit me that this is this girl's manuscript and I want to tell her look, Aimee's sick, she might even be dying, she won't have time to read your poems about being dumped by your first boyfriend. Instead, I start the car. Then the girl is tapping on the glass. I crank down the window.

"I live on the lake," she says.

"Leah, Aimee's really sick. I don't think she'll really be able to look at these." I try and hand her her poems back through the window. "No. Um." She pushes the manuscript back at me. "My number. It's on the manuscript. I was just thinking that if you needed anything, for Aimee, I mean. That you could call." She smiles. Starts to blush.

"Oh." I don't know what else to say. I am thrilled suddenly, flattered by the possibility. Her huge dark eyes blink down at me where I sit in the cramped car. Then I

realize that to her Aimee isn't a stranger, the girl probably has some sort of crush on Aimee. In love with Aimee for her poetry or some fool thing like that. Probably thinks that Aimee would give her some writing advice while she helps clean up the house. I drive off and leave her standing in the middle of the parking lot holding Aimee's book tight to her chest.

Aimee is sleeping when I get back to the house. I wobble in the doorway, but her eyes flutter.

I walk quickly into the room.

"How did it go?"

"They seemed disappointed, but they wished you well."

"Did you give them the books?"

"Yes."

"Then it's done then. I guess they will have to wait until the fall."

I am thinking that I could tell her about Leah, tease her about my new crush, maybe embellish, frame it so that I was the one Leah wanted and make Aimee jealous just a bit. Plan a dinner for the three of us.

"Jesus, I am so tired." She yawns. "Sit with me. Just until I fall back to sleep." She scoots over slowly like it takes all the strength in her body just to move half an inch, exposing a thin slice of mattress for me.

"I can't. I've got to make some prints."

I slip abruptly out of the room and head for the darkroom in my basement.



Life is easier down here under the red light. It's like being in a cave, a womb, dark and warm, smelling of chemicals. You cannot feel the day passing in the absence of outside light and for one foolish moment, I wonder if I have stopped time. I imagine that Aimee will simply sleep out an endless afternoon. We won't have to make anymore moves toward or away from the inevitable. But when I mount the stairs again, daylight has passed. A thick and silent cloudy night presses in against the windows and I know somehow that we cannot stop, that we have boarded a train that will move into darkness.

On the day of her surgery, we are driving down the interstate on the way to the hospital when Aimee turns to me and asks, "Do you want to feel it?"

"You can feel it?" I ask, alarmed.

"Yeah, I think so."

I ease the car onto the shoulder and cut the engine. The car shudders as the traffic passes and I notice that I'm holding my breath.

She takes my hand, stretching my arm across the console and puts my fingers just underneath her right breast near where her ribs are. She presses her fingers down hard on top of my fingers so that the skin stretches and I can feel something hard that refuses to give into weight. I feel like I should be feeling life—a baby's kick—only this is death underneath my fingers—still and solid—this I know.

"There. Feel that?"

I want to tell her that I don't feel anything. She takes a breath and the hardness moves with her. She drops her hand to her lap and my fingers linger on the something hard and warm.

“Well can you feel it or not?” she says, annoyed.

I take my hand back and start the car. “Yeah. I guess.”

“I thought so.”

I pull the car back onto the road and drive as fast as I can without looking at her.

Three days after surgery, after the removal of all surrounding tissues and some lymph nodes, they tell us that Aimee is ready to come home from the hospital. A nurse will show me how to do a bandage change. We scrunch behind the drawn curtain of Aimee’s shared room. The nurse stands beside a metal tray with sterile pads, betadine ointment, roll gauze. She is helping Aimee off with her nightgown. Aimee won’t look at me. She looks out the window in a passive stare.

“You don’t have to do this.” I hold my arm at the elbow, my free hand pointing down. I want her blank face to change shape, look more like the Aimee I know. I want to bring her comfort. “Aimee, you don’t have to do this. We’ll hire someone to come to the house.”

“Insurance won’t cover that sort of thing,” the nurse interrupts. “What’s the big deal? Come on. We all have the same parts.”

I expect Aimee’s face to flush with anger, but she says with a calm smile that I don’t recognize, “Come on, Michaela. It’s okay.”

Instead I glare at the nurse.

“Michaela, don’t—“

The nurse looks back and forth between Aimee and me. She's missed something here, only she doesn't know quite what. I put my hand on the nurse's shoulder. She's the first body that is not Aimee's that I've touched in what feels like months and the tender warmth underneath cotton is somewhat of a shock. "It's okay. You can leave now."

"What an ass," I say after she is gone. Treating us like sisters, like it is no big deal to be naked in front of each other when really we have only ever been nude, lovers, no sameness between us, only hunger and a bit of awe.

"Help me," Aimee says. She sits twisted on the bed. Her arms reaching to untie the strings of her hospital gown. She is not supposed to be reaching over her head like this. She will tear the sutures. Her muscles are too weak.

"What are you doing?" I rush toward her and knee up onto the bed behind her. I pull the strings from her fingers. I hold her gown together at the seams, hiding her thin back.

"We have to, Michaela." She curves her neck around to look at me. "We can't afford a nurse." She looks ready like the time I finally agreed to spend the night in her room and she took off all her clothes piece by piece with me watching her, sitting on the edge of her twin bed. Now, keeping her hands in her lap where they won't pull at the stitches, she tugs at the cloth of her hospital gown to help.

I can't. I retie the strings without looking. Her resistance isn't much. "We'll call someone."

"Michaela."

I pivot on my heel and leave the room.

When I was a little girl, I used to think that breasts were the secret way that all women communicated with each other, like ant antennae, the way ants would tickle each other upon meeting and this would signal friend or foe. I don't know why, but I thought that was what our breasts were for. Before she left us, my mother used to take me to the gym for her morning swim and I would sit on the locker room bench watching all those women peel out of their clothes, their breasts wobbling away at each other. It was the only time my mother's face didn't look pinched or strained. Confined, like the so many times I remember her in the kitchen stressing over the imperfections of her roast. The pressures of being a wife, a mother, in our Connecticut suburb seemed to dissipate as she and the other women stood in that locker room with their bathing suits stopped at their waists. They would laugh and sing at each other almost—bare breasted with the silky nylon of their bathing suits pulled over their hips. Then, just like that, in an instant they would be covered again and my mother would get quiet as one by one she and her friends slipped out of the locker room and into the public space of the pool.

I go down to the hospital cafeteria. There is a phone booth in the corner, the kind I remember in the middle of the hallway in the dorm Aimee and I eventually shared. I finger Leah's number in my wallet. I had transferred it from the manuscript to a tiny piece of scrap paper tucked between my license and a credit card.

"Hello, Leah?"

"Yeah."

“Hey, it’s Michaela. From the Y.” There is noise in the background, something like the TV and the sound of laughter.

“Hang on a sec.”

It gets quiet and then the sound of a door being closed.

“Sorry. It’s just. Well, never mind,” she says into the phone.

Oh God, her family is there. I had forgotten she was so young. I’m lucky that her mom didn’t answer the phone. I really should just hang up.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I shouldn’t have called.”

“How are you?” she asks, instead. “How’s Aimee? Is she going to be alright?”

“I don’t know really. It’s harder than I thought.” I didn’t realize it before, but yes, this is true, this is so much harder than I ever imagined. There is comfort in Leah’s voice, a place to lean, even if I don’t want to have to need a thing like that.

“We could meet or I could come down there, you know,” she offers.

*Yes, come, help me*, I think, but really this is a mistake. She sounds too excited. I know now that I shouldn’t have called. That I should definitely never call again. “No, Leah. That wouldn’t be right.”

“I didn’t mean—”

But I cut her off. “Listen, thanks. Thank you. I’ve got to go now.”

I hang up with her goodbye sounding out into the air as the phone is almost to the cradle. I think about tossing her number in the trash just outside the door, but I shove it back into the hiding place in my wallet and head back up to Aimee’s room.

When I come up from the hospital cafeteria, Aimee is lying down again. She looks small, her face peering out over the thick blankets. This is an Aimee I don't know. Soft. Frightened. An Aimee I struggle to recognize.

The human body is a work of art—a statement so clichéd it's obvious, but still it's the first thing they tell you in art class when the nude model is up on the block for the first time getting ready to disrobe. When you start to shoot it, they say, look for the shapes that occur in nature. My house is filled with these kinds of shots—Aimee my only worthy work of art—the pear of her face, the branch of her boney elbow, the raindrop that is her earlobe filling up the frame. I am littered by her landscape. I don't know what to tell her now.

Aimee moans and shifts, struggling to push the blankets down and I step into the room.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, just a dream. I guess I was getting hot.”

“Michaela.” She reaches out to me and I just stand there with my hands at my sides. “Come in here.” I take the chair that a nurse has set out by the bed because it's the only thing I know to do.

Aimee looks at me like there is something secret and special about to pass between us—a couple's moment—only I can't look her in the face. Not when she's awake at least and looking back at me.

“I'm sorry, you know, back there. I just. I wasn't ready.”

“It's okay. I know. This is hard. We'll work at it. Build up.”

Like this is something you can practice for. Like all of our intimate moments, twirling our bodies over each other in heat and sweat was just getting us ready for this.

“Aimee, do you want me to get somebody else?”

“What?”

“I can take you home to your parents or call your sister and see if she will stay with us for a while. You know. More family support.”

“You want to leave?”

“Jesus, Aimee. I’m just trying to make it right.”

“But Michaela, you are my family.”

She blinks her soft, sleepy eyes. She can’t even stay awake for a fight. I rub her arm. “It’s okay, go back to sleep.”

We leave the hospital with several sealed packages of what they call bandage change kits—little orange baggies labeled bio-waste and gloves for the removal and discard of old bandages, then more gloves in sterile packaging, gauze squares also in sterile wrapping, dressing of some sort, adhesive, new bandages.

Alone, back at the house, six days after surgery now, we sit on the bed in Aimee’s room and I help her ease off her shirt.

It is not so shocking. It is Aimee from the neck up and waist down and then heavy brown bandaging, a chest wall like an adolescent boy, thin and gaunt and flat. I hold my breath, like plunging into the water or into a room that smells bad, but it doesn’t smell bad, mostly iron-like and plasticity.

“Okay. Are you ready?” I open up the first package of gloves. “Like taking out a condom,” I joke.

A half smile blisters on her lips.

“I’m sorry, dumb.”

“No, it was funny. Ha. Ha.” She rolls her eyes and the tension is released. Her smile growing more genuine, showing her clean white teeth. I feel courageous now. A squire for my modern day Amazon.

“Okay.” I peel the bandage slowly, her skin stretching with it, the adhesive not wanting to release.

“Does it hurt?” I have one hand on her shoulder to steady her and one hand on the bandage. I barely feel the heat of her skin through the gloves.

“Jesus, Michaela, just rip it off.”

“Sorry, hmm.” I pull hard and fast and the bandage comes away in my fist, revealing the half crescent shape of her incision, a crooked pink smile going from her armpit to the middle of her chest. She pulls away from me and covers her chest with a winged elbow.

“Michaela.” She winces in pain. I try to pull her arm away from where it covers her wound.

“Don’t, you’ll infect it. What am I saying? I can’t do this.” I stand and start to peel the gloves from my hands. “We’ll just have to take you back to the doctor’s.”

“Like this?”

“Well how the hell else?”



She looks away from me, out the window toward the lake. Her stomach wrinkles in a tiny pouch as she slumps over it. I slop the gloves and the used bandages into the tiny orange waste bag and sit back down on the bed.

“I’ll try again.” We continue in silence. In the sterile gloves, I wipe the wound clean, apply new dressing. I paint the edges of her skin with adhesive and pat the bandage on, careful to cover the drain that will be removed in another few days. Then, without looking at each other, I leave the room.

In the darkroom, I pull out a negative of a cluster of little girls coming down the steps of church on their first communion. Twenty-five white dresses blur into focus in the developer. Twenty-five identical smiles in the stop bath. I float them around in the fixer, pushing my tongs into the small bodies on the sheet. One of you that lives to forty will be lucky enough to have Aimee’s disease. Die young, I tell them, that is my advice. Do not covet the body. Do not worship its perfection. Do not build monuments to it like the ones I have built of Aimee that litter the house—all those nudes of her silhouette. It will undo you. I swear. But this is just a photograph. They hold onto their dumb smiles as I drown them in the wash and hang them on the line to dry.

Three weeks after surgery. I sit in the waiting room of the doctor’s office. The doctor is removing the last of the staples, says Aimee won’t need bandages anymore. Aimee seems quiet, but happy. She says she is glad to be getting back to just us, no more playing nurse and patient even though she still has three rounds of chemo to go. When Aimee comes out of the doctor’s office, she looks content. “Ready?” I say, springing up.

“Yes.” She takes my hand and leads me toward the parking lot.

I help her into the car. I feel like we should be going for an ice cream. Isn't that what a parent does to comfort a child when they've quietly accepted a prodding at their body that they aren't old enough to understand? How old do you have to be to understand cancer? How many ice creams?

Aimee leans her head against the cool window glass and starts to sleep. She's been so tired lately, needing to sleep like a baby she tells me and then laughs. I watch the evenness of her breath. If a couple shares the number of possible sleeping hours between them maybe that is why I haven't been able to sleep. I change lanes to get on the highway. The driver behind me leans on his horn. I wave an apology. He speeds by me in the other lane and waves his middle finger. "Already been," I mumble under my breath.

Almost to the 101, Aimee says, "What if this doesn't work?"

The sound of her voice shocks me. I hadn't known that she was awake. I wonder if I should pull over the car to look at her. I keep driving.

"I just keep wondering what if we go through all of this—have my breasts lopped off—and it doesn't work. Then what?"

I want to tell her that I don't know why she is telling me this. I don't understand what she is asking for. I've never had any answers to any of her questions. I can't even manage to pretend. "I love you," I say, instead. She smiles. Rain begins to slap the windshield. I drive into it, the wipers working fiercely. She slides her hand across the seat and rests it on my thigh. It is an effort to remain still, but we ride like that, straining to touch each other, until we are home.

I stop the car in our driveway, but don't turn to face her. "It's going to be fine." I pat her shoulder, looking out beyond the windshield at our house spreading tall and full in

front of us. I get out and I sprint around to get to her side of the car to help her out. “It’s going to be fine,” I shout through the rain.

I take her hand, weaving our fingers together. We stumble into the house out of the dampness. I lead her past the office, like a sprinter, using our momentum from the rain. In the bedroom, we turn to face each other. Her eyes go soft and I push my lips into hers, pressing my tongue through the soft opening, feeling the grooves of her mouth. She gives into my weight and we sink down onto the bed, my hand instinctively pulling at the white buttons of her shirt.

Love is supposed to be the thing that overwhelms us. Love is supposed to make it possible for me to bring my lips down to the hollow of her chest and slide my tongue across the tender scars, deep and purple, crisscrossed hatch marks with less order than the straw of a bird’s nest. Love is supposed to shine a softer light so that I can find the old Aimee in the space that falls between us now. Aimee says love is the light that melts ice, even as it continues to freeze.

Instead, I hold her, eyes pinched, lips curved into a thin smile. But love lets nothing more.

Around 11:00 pm I get up and go out into the living room. Sit for a moment in the dark. It is easy to call her, easy to remember the right words. They roll like raindrops off my tongue. She will meet me in less than fifteen minutes, the time it takes to develop film.

The bar is smoky and dark. I see Leah standing near the jukebox and for an instant I want to go back home to Aimee and hold her until our last bits of breath fold out into the air. Leah spots me and waves and suddenly it is too late to turn back.

“Hey,” she shouts. It’s loud and I have to lean in close to her so that I can feel the moisture in her breath curl around my ear. “You want a beer?” She holds her bottle up to me and I nod, awkward, and move toward the bar. I bring back a beer and we stand together nodding at the music.

“Do you want to go out on the porch?” I ask, finally after my neck has started to ache.

It’s quieter out there. We find a table in the corner and sit down.

“How is Aimee?” she asks.

“Not so good,” I say letting out a shock of nervous laughter. “I don’t know what we are doing this for.” I take a healthy swig of beer and look away.

It is then that Leah reaches across the table and takes my hand. She starts to recite one of Aimee’s poems, something about being hopeful when all hope is lost, some image of a bird rising off the lake and bringing some of the water with it. Leah smiles and pats my hand when the poem is finished.

“You really love her, don’t you?” I ask. It’s an odd question coming from the woman who is supposed to love Aimee the most, but I’ve never memorized her poems, not even once. “Come on,” I say, and I pull her out of her seat.

It’s simple, familiar almost, to seduce her. To pull her out into the alleyway. I push her against the wall. She reaches for my shirt, but I block her hand with a flick of

my elbow. I bring her breasts exposed to the surface, the way a bird dives down into the water and comes up with a fish.

Back and forth, I cross the sloping curves to the slim crease in the center. I circle slowly around it with the flat of my thumb, drawing closer, bringing my lips down, my mouth as eager as the light from the streetlamp bending down through the alleyway, chasing the falling shadows across her breasts.

I undo my shirt and press our nipples together. The ant antenna of my youth. It is hard to understand the needs of a body, even when that body is your own. It feels as if my heart might explode into pieces pressed so tightly in on hers.

“Jesus, yes,” she moans.

I start to move down her stomach with my mouth, spreading away her clothing as I go. I drop to my knees and I can feel small pieces of broken glass edging through my jeans. Even pain feels good here. I move harder and faster, more furious, drop her jeans to her knees. But she giggles when I reach her soft patch of hair with my lips.

“Wow, Michaela. Wow.” Her voice is high pitched, whiney, missing urgency like it is her first time, and I don’t want the messiness of it. The whispered phone calls, *can we do it again?* I’m too tired, too old to teach anyone about her body like that.

She bucks her hips into my chin and I pull away from her. Stand up. This is not what I have imagined. This is not what I have wanted for myself.

“I have to go,” I whisper. I plant a kiss on her cheek and turn the corner back into the full light of the street.

“Michaela, wait.”

I turn and look at her struggle with her clothing, her eyes all soft and doe like, like we have made a promise to each other. “I can’t, Leah. I’ll call you.” I walk away without looking back.

The next morning, I sneak back into the bedroom to find a change of clothes. Aimee is curled in bed as the late summer sun invades our windows in tiny patches of slanting light. My hair still smells like the smoke from the bar and my clothes are rumpled from sleeping on the couch.

“Take my picture,” Aimee begs.

“I have.” I wave my hand at the newly framed print on the bedside table of her sitting on the dock with her toes in the water, a giant sweater wrapped around her newly thinned frame.

“No, like you used to. Like that.” She points up at the large print above the bed. It is her, of course, a back-lit silhouette. Aimee is turned sideways, with one knee drawn up and resting on her thigh so that it is almost like a range of mountains turned ninety degrees with the curve of her breast matching the curve of her knee. It is beautiful scenery, almost too beautiful to be a body. It is the portrait Aimee claims made her fall in love with me—because I could see her like that.

“Later,” I say.

“When?”

“I don’t know, Aimee. I don’t.”

She watches me, her head tilted like she’s waiting for the other shoe to fall.

“I’m going for a swim then,” Aimee says.

“Aimee, you can’t. What about your blood counts? You’ll catch a cold.” My words chase her out onto the deck. Her clothes fall like leaves in her path toward the dock. “Aimee, please.” I cross the lawn after her. I don’t know what I am begging her for. She stands at the end of the dock with the sun behind her, a delicate arc winding into water as she dives, a straight line made curved. She looks back at me, treading water, wet. “Michaela,” she says, “You don’t have to do this.”

But I am behind her with my clothes off. I make an awkward cannon ball, arms flailing and crash into the water. She thinks that this will save us. I am not so sure.

### CALL ME WHEN IT'S OVER

On Friday night, Howard lay in bed thumbing through the pages of a real-estate magazine, while his wife, Judith, wandered in and out of the bedroom. He could hear her in the other room badgering her kids about packing their things. Her nervous, impatient voice (Are you sure you have your toothbrush?) was followed by her kids' impatient responses (Yes, Mom. Jeez).

He noticed that the old Cushman place had gone up for sale again for twice the price he'd sold it for just a little under a year ago. It had been his first Colorado sale and he winced thinking of how foolish he had looked going to the final closing—that awful ten-gallon hat, his graying hair curling out the sides of it, and how much those cowboy boots had pinched his feet—only to find out that the whole outfit had been recommended to him as an office prank headed by his new wife. They were all waiting for him at the office, watching him teeter in like a man on stilts, trying to keep straight faces until one of them slapped him on the back and they all began to laugh at his expense. Howard sighed and tossed the magazine onto the nightstand. He could have gotten twice that price



back in St. Louis. He had practically sold half the town, but when he and Judith married they'd agreed it was better not to take her kids out of school, especially when they were both teenagers. He listened to their impatient voices down the hall and wished Judith would come to bed.

Finally, around midnight, her hands on her hips, Judith stood in her pale silk nightgown at the foot of the bed.

"What if Larry screws something up? What if he's late? Jesus, I hate this splitting the kids thing."

"Hey, Judith. Take it easy. Settle down. Things are going to be fine. Larry will show up. It's his one time a year with them. Come on, why don't you get in bed?"

She bit her lower lip and continued pacing. Howard watched her thin legs shift underneath her nightgown. He hated to admit it, but he was pleased that her anger was directed outward, that the presence of a common enemy banded them together. He also liked the opportunity it gave him to look like the good guy. He could be forgiving, sympathetic even, to Larry, let the man hang his own self.

"Come on. I promise. It'll be fine." He shifted down under the blankets and pulled the covers off of her side. Finally, after what felt like too many minutes, she turned off the light and Howard felt her small, tight body slide into bed.

Three years ago, they had met at a real estate conference in Chicago and it had become their habit to argue over who saw whom first. They liked to tell their separate versions to each other over and over again in the dark.

Howard would have liked to do this now as he lay in bed, watching the tightly wound ball that Judith's shape made underneath the covers. He would have liked to

remind her how she bent down in her navy skirt and picked her nametag off the floor when she first walked into the hotel ballroom. How he remembers her looking at him. That he couldn't resist the way she stared.

He would have liked to hear her protest. Tell him no, that she hadn't seen him then, but that she had leaned over and pointed him out to her friend as he was standing near the refreshment table. How she had leaned over and whispered, "Now that's the kind of man I wish I'd married."

It seemed unbelievable, but they both liked to call it fate, instead of just a line.

Or he could have started in on the stories of their affair—kissing in coat closets, sneaking between each other's hotel rooms, the last desperate moment in a shared airport cab. He would have liked to do anything to make her uncurl and ease her body beside his. He rolled over and kissed her throat.

"It's too hot," she said, and she twisted away.

An hour later, the phone rang.

He held still for a moment, trying to pretend the sharp trill had been part of something he had dreamt.

"Get it," Judith nudged him. "It's her."

"What if it's not? Let it ring."

"She'll keep calling. She'll wake Nate and Cora."

"Okay." He rolled over to answer the phone.

"Hello." He coughed, covering the mouthpiece, clearing the sleep from his throat.

"Hello." The dim red numbers of the alarm clock read 1:30, but Howard didn't like to

sound tired when he answered the phone. He had always considered it a sign of weakness, maybe an evolutionary throwback from the time humans spent sleeping in trees.

“It’s me,” she said, as if they were mid-conversation. Then, not quite so sure of herself, she added, “It’s Sharon.” Howard sighed, twisting his legs out from underneath the covers. Judith shifted on the mattress. He reached back, gave her hand a squeeze, and left the room.

“Sharon, it’s late. Why are you calling?” He walked down the hallway into the upstairs office and began to pace the carpeted floors.

“It’s been so long since we talked, Howard. I just wanted to find out how you were,” she said, as innocent as if she were calling at three-thirty in the afternoon. She was doing her best to sound affectionate, like a long-lost friend he hadn’t talked to in years who had suddenly discovered his number on a business card tucked behind her bedroom dresser.

“Sharon, it’s one-thirty in the morning. Couldn’t this wait?”

“Well, I was just cleaning out part of the attic and I found this old picture of you and I thought, damn, I haven’t talked to him in ages.” She paused, waiting for Howard to respond. Really, it had only been two months since her last phone call.

On the previous nights that Sharon called, Howard would sit up on his side of the bed, his back toward Judith, and cradle his face in his hands. *Was it over?* Sharon’s high-pitched voice echoed in his head. Of course, he thought, people must ask this as a way of maintaining hope, not really believing in the answer until they’ve found someone else. Howard had and Sharon hadn’t. Simple as that.

Sharon still lived in their old house, refusing to sell it after the divorce. She even borrowed money from her parents to buy Howard out of his half. He should have taken that as a sign. He could picture her creeping around the attic in her cotton pajamas, finding the photo of them, and crumpling down onto the rough floorboards to have a good cry.

When Howard didn't speak, Sharon just kept on. "I tried to drop it. Really, Howard, I did. Only I couldn't. I couldn't, you know, sleep. So I thought damn, I might as well give you a call."

"Sharon, maybe we can talk in the morning, but right now, no."

"Okay, Howard. Okay." He could hear her breathing, trying to slow down her nerves, shut the gates on what they both knew would happen next. "Just one more thing, Howard. Howard, is it really over?"

He scuffed a piece of the carpet underneath his toes. "Good-bye, Sharon." He clicked the off button on the phone, made the imaginary move to slam the earpiece down onto the large oak desk, took a deep breath, then crept back down the hall into the bedroom.

Judith turned to him as he sank back down on the mattress. She rubbed the corner of his thigh in a question mark. He hated the fact that Sharon's phone calls made him sit in the dark, quiet and contemplative, as if he was the one who was alone and still sad over the dissolution of their marriage, when really he was wondering what it would take, short of finding her a new husband, to convince Sharon that there was nothing left. He pictured the day Judith helped him move from the old house in St. Louis all the way to Loveland, Colorado. They had kissed long and slow as they finished bolting up the ramp

on the tag-along trailer. They were giddy, and Howard couldn't help feeling like a teenager finally moving out of his parents' home. He knew it was the wrong kind of feeling to have. Too Freudian for comfort. But he had it anyway.

"Do you want to talk?" Judith asked softly. He could feel the question in her voice asking if this reflected on them, as if Howard might still have feelings for Sharon and one day he would turn to Judith and tell her he wanted out. He hated it, the feeling of doubt that crept between them in the dark, all because his stupid ex-wife was lonely back in their old house in St. Louis. He wondered if this uneasiness in his new marriage came from the fact that at one point in both their lives he and Judith had said *I do* and then just as easily taken it back.

"No. I'm fine," Howard said. He wrapped his arms around Judith and began to run his fingers down the ridges of her spine. This time, she held still.

He got up early the next morning and deleted Sharon's number from the caller ID, hoping she wouldn't call again. He had coffee going and was bent over a pan of frying eggs by the time Judith came downstairs.

"Nice surprise." She swung in beside him and her lips grazed the rough edge of his cheek.

He leaned down and smelled her hair. It was moments like this that Howard valued—the way Judith wanted his physical presence. There had been times near the end when his first wife had seemed almost repulsed by him, even if she was still calling to beg him to say that their marriage hadn't failed. Howard seriously considered that it was failure his first wife abhorred, and not their actual divorce. Toward the end, when he had

tried to be intimate with Sharon, it was like she was kissing a dead fish, puckering up because she was supposed to with her body going stiff. Howard had asked Judith once if she had treated her ex-husband the same way when she knew things were over. Because she was holding him then and kissing him like she meant it, Howard felt proud when she answered yes, like he had one upped her ex-husband in some way.

Howard let his nose linger in the soft papaya sent of Judith's hair before turning his focus again on the eggs.

"Are Nate and Cora up?" he asked, shifting away from her a bit. He couldn't help but pull back, avoiding personal contact when they talked about the kids. It had been a year since they had become something of a family, and he still felt awkward about showing physical affection in front of her kids, like they would forever be a part of Judith's world that Howard should only remain on the periphery of. Judith did not seem to understand that Howard didn't think of himself as a father. Not that he hadn't wanted to be, he just wasn't. He and Sharon had tried several times but ultimately failed, and it wasn't something Howard wanted to get into with Judith. He lacked the vocabulary, the know-how of the formative years.

Judith gave Howard one of her *Why are you being so distant?* looks and he tried to lean back into her.

Judith hollered up the stairs at them. "Nate, Cora. Howard is making eggs. How would you like them?" Cora shouted down scrambled. Nate didn't respond.

Howard made enough scrambled for both Cora and Nate and over-easy for Judith, himself, and Nate, in case Nate wanted them the other way. Howard had seen him eat both.

At first, Howard had lied to himself about doing things like this. He was convinced that he could get away with just being himself—make eggs any old way—and Judith’s children would still love him. Well, maybe love was too strong a word. Maybe he was just trying to avoid their resentment. He couldn’t imagine ever paying attention to the way that kids ate eggs just to make them feel satisfied. His own father’s favorite saying was you live with your kids not for them, but his father was a father, not a stepdad, not *Howard* to a couple of teenagers.

Cora came down in time for the three of them to eat together. But Nate flew down the stairs just minutes before they would have to leave. Nate groaned when his mother insisted that he sit down and at least have something when *Howard* had been nice enough to make *them all* a hot breakfast. Howard could tell that Nate thought of Howard’s name as a four-letter word. Nate scooped out half a spatula worth of now cold scrambled eggs and Howard tried to avoid seeing the *Now are you happy?* look that Nate flashed toward them both.

At the park-and-ride in Aurora, the exchange felt somewhat like a drug deal, or at least what Howard would imagine a drug deal would feel like, given the cop shows that he and Nate watched together on Thursday nights. The last time they had done a trade like this, it was right before their honeymoon and Howard and Judith had been too absorbed with each other to realize how unnatural the exchange might feel. Today, Howard hunkered down into his jacket, trying to pretend that he wasn’t there doing what he was doing.

They pulled up in the Explorer and both Nate and Cora swung out of the rear doors before Howard had even stopped the car.

Howard jammed the car into park and scrambled out after Nate and Cora. He tried to race them to the rear gate so that he could at least grab Cora's bag and not feel completely useless. Cora rolled her eyes and walked slightly in front as they headed toward Larry's car. Nate was way in the lead. Judith lagged behind the entire procession. When they arrived at the car, Cora leapt at her father. Judith gripped Howard's arm, claiming him as the one possession Larry could not take away.

"Judith." Larry nodded.

"Larry."

"So are you guys ready for the Grand Canyon?" Larry asked, turning back to the kids. "Don't worry, Jude. I won't let them fall in." Howard knew that Nate would have busted into him if he had made a comment like that, but Nate seemed pleased as he lifted both his and Cora's bags into the rear gate.

As an afterthought, Nate and Cora gave Judith a hug before turning to get into their father's car. As they passed by Howard, their bodies swayed in an awkward motion. To save them both, Howard made the first move. He reached out and patted their shoulders as they got into the car.

"Just like him," Judith said when she and Howard were safely back inside Howard's car. "He has to take them to the Grand Canyon. Have a big old adventure of course. Throw it in their faces just the kinds of things that their mother doesn't do. He could never just be a dad and take them to the park or band practice, but he still gets all the goddamn credit." She bit at the skin beside her thumbnail and Howard tried to judge



if it was the look of longing that was passing over Judith's face now as she watched Larry's car become a speck of white on the southbound highway. Then she just went quiet and stared out the window as Howard pulled their car onto the north bound ramp.

Back at the house, they fell into their usual Saturday routines. Howard left Judith alone to read in the study or re-organize the living room furniture as she liked to do about every two months. This was Judith's way of keeping things in their marriage fresh. Before her divorce, her counselor had advised her to try this. Like Judith, Howard spent those Saturdays washing her car because the communication seminar that he and his first wife had once attended explained that this was an acceptable way for males to non-verbally communicate their love for their spouses. Howard told himself that he would have felt fresh in their marriage regardless of the sofa going from the far wall to the middle of the living room and that Judith would have known that he loved her even if he didn't scrub the brake dust off her rims. It annoyed Howard that their marriage had come to be ruled by the throwbacks from couple's therapy sessions and the long list of will-not-dos. But in their second marriage wisdom, Howard knew that they could leave nothing to chance.

By mid-afternoon, feeling restless, Howard walked back into the house to find the couch on a diagonal against the back wall. Judith stood in the center of the living room. She stared at the sofa, biting at the corner of her thumb.

"Why don't we go somewhere?" Howard asked.

Judith dropped her hand. "Where have you got in mind?" Her eyes shifted from his face to the couch.

"I don't know. Maybe Estes?"

She bit her thumb again. They should have been able to stay home, Howard thought. They both knew what it meant to want to get away.

“Okay.” She shrugged.

As they headed out Highway 34, Howard wondered at his choice to take another long and silent drive; Judith stared up at the craggy rocks that lined either side of the road.

Trying to be cheerful, spontaneous, romantic, half an hour into the drive, Howard pulled off at one of the red dirt roadside parking areas.

Judith gasped and pulled her chin off her chest when the car stopped. He hadn’t known she was asleep.

“Is something wrong?”

“No. I just... needed some air.”

Howard got out of the car. It took him a few moments to realize that Judith hadn’t gotten out of the car with him. He turned around and watched her shape against the window, the white of her T-shirt overpowering the rest of her image. She was too far away from him to read the look on her face. He walked back toward the car.

“Are you coming?” He cracked open her door.

“Oh. I didn’t know.” She bent down to scoop up her sandals and shimmied onto the dirt.

They scrambled down the weedy bank. At the water’s edge he put his arm around her shoulder, and they watched the graceful cast of the fly fisherman wading in the middle of the rushing stream.

“God, that’s really something,” Howard mused, appreciating the smooth streak of the yellow line lunging back and forth in the air and gliding down effortlessly into the water.

“Maybe this is something you could learn to do with Nate,” Judith said.

“Yeah, maybe.” Although this looked more like something Larry might do with her son. Howard was a more watch-from-the-window guy, less of a sportsman—childhood allergies, bad memories from Cub Scouts. He’d grown up in St. Louis, in the city, where the biggest outdoor risk was riding his bike down Kingshighway without holding onto the handlebars. It’s why he had picked Estes in the first place, fairly easy paths around Bear Lake, nature without getting bruised. He thought it was something Judith loved about him, the something different from Larry. Judith was forever complaining about Larry’s penchant for risk—swimming with sharks in Australia, parasailing in Cancun. He was always pretending that they were irresponsible teenagers instead of adults with kids. Howard would never abandon Judith to go hunting in Alaska like Larry would. Fishing, of course, was tame compared to Larry’s feats, but Howard felt that it fell into the same category somehow. Yet it seemed that it was what Judith wanted now, so to sound more convincing, Howard added, “I mean yes, really. if fly fishing is something that Nate might do with me.”

She took his arm as they neared the top of the bank on their way back to the car. Howard had the distinct feeling he had been forgiven, but he couldn’t for the life of him decipher for what.

Driving back along the road, Judith sighed, her slight breasts raising and falling.

“I just hate it when he does that.” It was the middle of the conversation she’d been having with herself all day.

“Does what?” Howard cautioned, not really sure if something had accidentally slipped out loud.

“I hate it that he acts all buddy-buddy with them. When we were married, he wouldn’t give any of us the time of day unless we were off on some insane trip he’d dreamed up, but even then it was always about him and what he wanted to do.” She flicked a bit of dirt out from under her fingernail and sprinkled it out the cracked window, silent again, though he could hear the tirade running through her head. *If only Larry had been a more attentive father, then maybe it would have worked. If only he had spent more time with the kids and me doing the everyday sort of stuff. If only he hadn’t made us feel like extras in the main movie of his life.* *If-onlys* were dangerous territory for them and Howard could not let Judith think about them for too long.

“It’s okay, Judith. Really, it’s okay.” He rubbed her knee, trying to draw her out of her silence.

“Why do you always say that?”

“Say what?”

“Say that things are going to be okay, when clearly they are not?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Sharon’s calling again, isn’t she?”

“She always calls. You know she’s not right. What does that have to do with anything?”

“You are talking to her again.”

“I’m not *talking* to her. She called. Why are we going over this again?”

“I thought you had told her last time that it was the last time, that she shouldn’t call anymore.”

“I did. I do, every time.”

“Well maybe you aren’t being clear. Maybe you aren’t being clear on purpose.”

“What is that supposed to mean? You talk to Larry every friggin’ day. Should I be jealous?”

“We have kids. It’s different.”

“Sure.” He clenched his teeth. It was an old conversation, one that only ended with silence and, one, Howard hoped, that with enough time, they would someday be rid of.

The cabin was nice, private, tucked back in the woods at the edge of the national park. It had a small upright fridge, a grill on the wide back porch, and a two-burner stove. The place even smelled intimate—dust and sage and the faint smell of ash from a fireplace.

They plopped their bags down on the kitchen floor.

“This is nice, huh?”

Judith walked to the front window and pulled back the thick, checkered curtain. Light and a startling view of the mountains appeared before them. Howard came up behind her and rested his hand on her shoulder.

“Judith?”

“Yeah?” she said to the almost-purple mountain shapes piercing the skyline.

“They will like you more, you know.”

“What? Who?”

“Nate and Cora. They will appreciate you more if Larry screws something up.”

“It’s not a competition, Howard.”

“But you are always saying how Larry gets the credit for being more fun. All I’m saying is that if he screws up, they won’t think that it’s so fun. Lots of things *could* go less than perfect.”

“That’s a horrible thing to hope for.”

Then she stood for a moment looking out the window—still, as if she moved too quickly something might break. Then she turned toward him and added, “It is nice. You know, I’m glad we came.”

She stretched up on her toes and they kissed, before she moved back toward their bags and started moving them into the bedroom.

“What do you want to do for dinner?” he called, still standing near the window watching the purple cliffs laced with white patches of snow. He was thinking how different it felt here, slammed up close to the mountains, as opposed to the dry open feel of the Front Range. It was like standing at the edge of the ocean. People could bind together out here in the face of all this bigness. “How about something out on the grill?”

“Yeah.” Judith stood beside him at the window again. “That would be fine.”

They drove the fifteen minutes back into town and bought provisions at the country store, laughing and grabbing at each other as they perused the narrow,

fluorescently lit aisles. Howard felt like a college student off on Spring break and he wondered at how suddenly close they had become. How she seemed to want him again.

Back at the cabin, Howard followed Judith's hectic instructions to cut and chop. They made mushroom caps in teriyaki sauce, grilled some chicken breasts, and served the whole thing over brown rice. They drank red wine. They sat together on the dusty old couch in the screened-in section of the porch. They compared the size of their feet side by side on the low wooden coffee table.

"You know, we could almost pass for an old married couple," he said.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, which was not the response that he had expected.

Judith began to move her lips against his neck. He ran his fingers against the waist of her jeans. How did so much of what they did together end up being an apology?

She put her palm against his cheek and turned his face toward her, looking him dead in the eyes the moment before they kissed. Howard liked that she did this; it was a Judith only thing, something no one had ever done before, and it always locked him completely into the fact that he was there with her, specifically, his second wife.

Howard pulled an old quilt down for them to lie on and they stretched out on the wooden floorboards. The hardness of the floor hurt his knees, but he was careful not to put too much of his weight on her as they kissed and moved against each other.

It didn't always happen, but if the sex went on long enough, he would start to see flashes of Sharon in the things that Judith did. He hated this. When would the flashes end? When would the movement of Judith's calf against the back of his leg stop making him think of his ex-wife in the same desperate sort of motion? A whole year, and these flashes still had not gone away. Really, there were some things that couldn't feel new,

Howard reasoned. But why on this night in a secret cabin where his first wife had never been did he have to think on her, when he so desperately wanted to be here only with Judith?

A long time ago, in college, Howard had read in one of his textbooks that once you have been with a person, you swap enough genetic information through colds and retroviruses that they hide forever someplace inside of you so that you can never let them go. Back then the thought had been comforting. It made him feel less alone. Now, Howard felt horrified by the memories that he couldn't seem to get out from underneath.

He shivered and shook his head and almost on instinct, Howard thought, Judith took his face in her hands again, opened her eyes, and, in relief, reminded him that he was with her, alone.

Afterward, breathless and spent, feeling the hard wooden boards under their backs, Judith asked, "Do you wonder if this will be worth it, Howard, that we did what we did," she paused. "You know, left our spouses for each other?"

Again, it was an old conversation—one that they had first had when they were lying on their backs looking up at the popcorn ceiling in the bedroom on their first night in their new house.

"I don't know," he said, shifting against the wood that hurt his back. "Do you think that it's worth it?"

"Were you happy with Sharon, Howard?"

"Why are we doing this?"

"I don't know. I guess because we have to."



She was silent again, and Howard could have just listened to the sound of her breath begin to slow and maybe even begin to even out with coming sleep, but instead he added, “Were you happy with Larry?”

“I don’t think so, but I guess there is no way to tell.”

“To tell what?”

“How things might have been if we hadn’t met.”

Howard propped himself up on his elbow so that he was looking down at her now. “We could pretend.”

“All right,” she giggled. “You be Larry.”

She seemed too excited and Howard wondered if he’d suddenly made a mistake. The hair on his arm bristled, but he would follow this through. He had to.

He did his best to assume what he thought of as a tough-guy look, the best he could conceive of this wild reckless man that he wanted Judith so desperately to be rid of. Howard puffed out his chest. “Well, Jude, it sure is a fine evening.”

“Larry wouldn’t say that.”

“Then tell me, what would he say?”

“I don’t know. He wouldn’t say that.”

She looked away, but not before Howard saw the scrunched look on her face like she might be about to cry. He heard the resigned air escaping from her chest. He lay back down to look at the porch ceiling and after a few moments of silence, he added, “Now your turn.”

“My turn what?”

“You be Sharon.”

“I can’t.”

“Come on. Try.”

She propped herself up so that she could drape her small breasts near his face.

“So tell me, Howard. Say it isn’t so. Tell me it’s not over between us,” she said in a badly botched southern accent. Then she pretended to sob.

He reached up and put one hand around the back of Judith’s neck, started to pull toward her, then stopped. Instead, he added, “She doesn’t say it like that either.” He watched Judith’s mouth move quickly into a pout and back out again.

“So how does she say it?” Judith asked.

“First she tells me that she loves me.”

“I love you,” Judith repeated in a pseudo-southern twang, moving her mouth in closer to Howard’s. “Then?” she added in her normal Judith voice.

“She says that she’s never stopped loving me.”

“I’ve never stopped loving you...Then?” Again, Judith moved closer.

“Then she—No. Come on, enough.”

“Then?” Judith asked again, still with her fake southern, still moving in on Howard’s mouth. “I love you, Howard. I’ll never stop. Then?”

He grabbed her by the waist and flipped her over and put his chin in the small gully between her breasts. “So are you happy now?” he asked instead, but he covered her answer with a kiss.

The wood floor being too hard for their backs, they had fallen asleep on the small porch sofa, cramped together on their sides, Howard’s arm slung over Judith’s shoulder

as if he were keeping her from falling off the edge. Howard awoke when Judith shifted out of his hold.

“What? What’s wrong?” he asked.

She sat bolt upright, her spine stiff as she perched on the edge of the couch. Her fists clutched the thin cushion edge as she stared out into the night through the large screen windows.

“Look at them all,” she whispered.

He shifted into sitting position and stared out, amazed to see what looked like fifty or so elk grazing in the fields before their cabin. It was a clear, bright night. He could just make out the slow movements of their mouths as they raised their heads a few inches off the ground to work on new bites of grass. The herd seemed to move in unison. He wondered how they signaled each other to do so or if it was because they’d just spent their whole lives together and no longer needed to ask. How close they all stood to one another, their forms blending into each other’s bodies, making it appear to Howard that a herd of unknown giants lurked just outside their cabin in the fields.

“They’re gorgeous, Howard. Look at them.” Judith had risen from the couch and had moved over to one of the screen windows. She pressed her fingers against the mesh as if she were trying to touch the elk from where she stood.

“Yes, I suppose they are.” Howard shuffled quickly toward her, wanting to pull her back to the safety of the couch, but fearing worse that if he stayed planted where he was that she might escape him.

“Let’s go pet them, Howard. I’m sure they’re sometimes fed by the guests that stay here. Why else would they graze so close?”

“I don’t think we should, Judith. They’re wild animals. Maybe we should just watch from in here.”

“Oh, come on, Howard. They won’t hurt us. I swear.”

“I would rather not take the chance.”

“Larry would have.” She hadn’t meant to say it. Howard knew this by the way she immediately bit her lower lip as if she could have bitten back the words.

“Howard...” she reached out to take his hand, but he pulled it away from her and turned toward the porch door.

He moved through the door and out onto the front steps of the cabin. He held the screen open for her. “Are you coming?” The cruelty in his voice surprised him. This was something Larry might have said after all.

Howard moved quickly away from the cabin with long strides. He knew Judith would almost have to run to keep up with him. He didn’t care. He could hear her frantic steps, first across the gravel of the road and now as they swished through the dew wet grass. Just into the field, Judith again tried to slip her fingers into Howard’s hand, but he simply shoved his hands down into the pockets of his slacks.

He slowed his steps as he approached the dark lumbering forms of the elk. The nearest bunch paused, their jaws suddenly still, their heads raised ever so slightly off the grass. They looked more curious than frightened and Howard acknowledged that Judith must have been right, these “wild” animals must have been hand fed.

He stopped as they surveyed him and he waited for the sound of their rhythmic munching to start again before he moved in. He could no longer hear Judith’s quick steps behind him and he wondered if she had paused with him to give the animals a chance to

settle in. He was beyond worrying about her now. The urge to touch the elk had suddenly overtaken him in a way that he did not expect.

There was a doe in front of him. He could tell by the small silhouetted shapes of her horns that were mere inch points struggling from her head. “Hey there, mama, don’t be frightened,” he cooed at her, surprised at the calmness of his own voice and how he had somehow known what to say. He held out his hand and grazed the fur on her neck. She paused again from her munching, appearing to judge the contact of Howard’s hand. Satisfied, it seemed to Howard, she went back to munching, and Howard moved his hand ever so slightly on the rough fur of her neck. He could feel the sharp edges of a bur, but he dared not pull it out and frighten the animal.

“Howard?” Judith whispered into the dark. To Howard, her voice sounded somewhat off to the left. He could just make her out between a few of the other elk. “Howard.” This time her voice was somewhat louder, but he refused to answer her, instead he kept his hand firm on the neck of the elk, who had paused again from munching, listening, as Howard did, to the sound of Judith’s frantic breath.

“Howard?” This time her voice came out loud, not a yell, but something loud enough to disturb the silence of the night. Twenty or so elk perked up their heads toward the sudden noise and when she added, “Why don’t you fucking answer me,” it was too late.

Howard felt the fur underneath his palm shudder and spin and he watched them all start to scatter in one giant motion away from them moving like one large beast prancing across the open field.

“Howard.” She was screaming now over the sound of their hooves and spinning in circles trying to see where Howard stood. It was going to be all right. The elk were headed in the opposite direction and Howard listened as their hoof beats. When the sound stopped, he knew that they must have settled again in some distant spot in the expansive openness, though he could not see them anymore.

“Is that enough, Judith?” he asked her in the dark.

“Yes, I think so.” Her voice sounded shaken. He stepped in to take her hand.

“Do you promise?” his voice was soft now, apologetic, he hoped.

“Please, take me home.”

“Okay.” He put his arm around her and hugged her in close as they moved off the field. She seemed calm now, wanting to settle in underneath the pressure of his arm.

As they neared the cabin, Howard could hear the phone ringing from inside the kitchen. It was probably the manager, asking them to be quiet after the residents of a neighboring cabin had complained of a couple shouting at each other in the field. But Howard moved quickly, never letting go of Judith’s hand as he took the phone off the wall and unplugged the cord.

## ENOUGH

In late June, a month after Paul was pulled from the river, I got stuck in the middle of our hallway. I was tapping my toe on a makeup stain just outside the bathroom when my sister, Ellen, came out of our room and caught me. It was a spot from another time of ours, when Ellen was five and I was three. The tiny vial of makeup had sprung out of both our surprised hands, and brown liquid had leaked out onto the carpet. Ellen could hear me murmuring numbers as I stabbed my toe into the stain.

“Janey, what are you doing?” she asked. I didn’t respond, just kept stabbing and counting. “Janey, give it up.” She grabbed my shoulder, and I looked up at her. My mouth curled around the word twenty-three.

“Do you think it’s safe now?” I asked.

She glared at me in the early morning darkness. We were both up getting ready for school.

“Come on, Ellen. Do you think I can get back to our room?”

“My God,” she said. “You are crazy.”

I eyed her for a second in the hallway, my toe still digging into the spot on the carpet. But knowing I’d made the count, I shrugged and walked toward our bedroom to get dressed.

“No, I’m not,” I said, turning back to Ellen, my mouth a defensive pout, but then the gleam of the door handle caught my eye and I couldn’t move myself past it. Panic rose in my throat as my foot neared the carpet seam. *Touch me*, the doorknob threatened. So I stood at the door and thumped at the knob with my fingers. Ellen rushed past me into our room and shoved at my back. I stumbled forward and my toe crossed the carpet seam. I scowled her and started my count from the top.

“You are so nuts,” she added and faded into our room.

That summer, I was always trying to find the magic number that would allow me to rule the world. I touched things, got stuck on them—opening doors, buckling seat belts, pressing buttons in an elevator—until the feeling of release washed over me and I was as light and untouchable as air. I thought that if I touched those things a certain number of times then I could stop bad things from happening, I could make the world safe for us all. It had been my plan all along for the past few years when we found out that Paul was going overseas. Just then, I had fallen in love with the number twenty-three. It was one more time than the age of our brother Paul, who was twenty-two when he drove his jeep off that bridge.



Getting ready for school took me twice as long as Ellen. I never knew what might have the power to hold me to it—a drawer in our bedroom, the vanity over the bathroom sink, I might have even been tempted to button and unbutton my pants. I had to race to slip down the stairs at the same time as Ellen.

We snuck by our mother, spread out on the couch, fully dressed, sleeping like some version of a foreign princess caught in a spell. Ellen could see that I wanted to touch her, touch the soft fabric of our corduroy couch. I could stand and count over our mother, just for luck. But she grabbed my wrist and yanked me through the front slider. Only I couldn't move through it without stopping to count. The door made a slow, dull squeak as I pulled it back and forth over the tracks.

“Come on, Jane. We're going to miss the bus.”

But I couldn't let go of the slider. I commanded my hand stop, but it wouldn't listen. Not until the count reached twenty-three. Ellen just headed off down the road without me in that hip swaying walk she suddenly woke up with on her fifteenth birthday earlier that year. I didn't make it in time for the bus. I struggled along after them, running so hard my throat burned. I watched Ellen in the rear window, her wrist dangling over some boy's shoulder. Ellen was the kind of pretty that hurt when you had to breathe the same air. I was just thirteen and no one would look at me. Like Paul, Ellen had our mother's looks while I was the one shaped like our Father's mother, squat and close to the ground with bad vision and thick framed glasses. I wanted to watch Ellen shrink, fall away from me, but the bus slowed, pulled over, stopped, and the doors opened for me to get in.

I paused, putting my foot on the first step, suddenly caught in a memory of Paul. It felt something like my first day of school all over again even though this was late June on the last day of classes. We were late and Paul had to hoist me up on his shoulders and run toward the yellow bus. I squeezed my eyes shut and clung to his head as he ran. When the bus stopped, he lowered me to the ground, and we got in. Only instead of making me sit up front with all the rest of the younger kids, he let me sit out back with all his friends. They eyed me like a dead fish, but Paul just scooted me in toward the window and glared, which forced them to forget about me.

I climbed the rest of the way into the bus and looked down the long aisle for a moment, thinking to see Paul waiting for me, his easy smile beckoning me to the seat beside his. But it was just Ellen. The clean, smooth lines of her face looking past me like I wasn't even there, like the bus had stopped to pick up someone else's little sister. She was sitting with her friends and she didn't even look up at me as I passed breathless, tapping the soft leather of each seat going by down the aisle.

Our brother Paul was beautiful, something straight out of a country love song, long and dark, someone you loved just by sight. He was the only one who made me feel calm and still. He could stop my fits—my urgent touching of objects, tapping my fork on the table, inhaling on washcloths—that started when we found out that he would be going off to Vietnam, or “Nam,” as the snotty boys in my class called it, their pimply faces pushing out the word like it was tough, like you had spit to say it. Paul was the only one that made Ellen nice. She glowed when she was around him and stopped calling me names under her breath or pretending she didn't know any of us. And for Ma, he was her

boy, the first out of her, strong enough to lean on when our father died, handsome, oldest. And it was enough; he was enough for all of us.

At school, the teachers were pretending not to be as restless as we were. My eighth grade teacher, Mrs. Hayes, pulled out her slides from her trip last year to Lima, Peru. She was so proud of her little blue skin bag. She called it *supporting the local business*. She spent extra time on pictures of the workers dyeing leather. They were right down in it—hands and feet and arms—soaking in the long, dirt vats. She thought she was so good for purchasing that bag, so understanding of other cultures. I glared at the bag and alternated between tapping the top of my desk and the bottom of my chair.

Our father had died of cancer when I was four. I don't remember much about him only that he died in the middle of the living room in a bed they brought in from the hospital. It was adjustable, and on mornings when he felt okay, he used to let Ellen and me get up there with him and play with the controls until he was upright. We would all just lie there watching cartoons. He had worked in the Rumford tannery all his life until they shut it down. We were part of a class action lawsuit, something about the company knowing that the chemicals caused cancer, but not having their workers wear gloves. We won; he died anyway. But at least we had some money to live on so that Ma only worked one job, an afternoon shift at the paper mill. I stared at the tanning leather from Lima, Peru and wondered if our teacher really knew what she was doing.

Mrs. Hayes flicked on the lights just after the bell rang. She wished us a nice summer and held her fingers in the air. "Peace," she said, but most of us just rolled our eyes. The Martin twins and Minnie Fischer glared at her because their brother and

cousins still hadn't made it home. I frowned at her extra because Paul was dead now even if he did make it back here.

Two years ago, my brother Paul had signed up for the army—a tour of duty for a college education. *He should have those kinds of things*, Ma had said, running her fingers through his dark hair as we sat on the sofa and she stood behind him looking at the papers they had sent him in the mail. *It would make your father proud*. In my head, I see his hair standing up and staying ruffled like the fur of a baby chick. Four months in and they sent him off to fight.

When Paul was shipped out, we were all so afraid that he would die in the jungle. Not afraid together—we never spoke of it. Hope, like grief, was a private matter. You could see it in my insistent groping of objects. If I could touch things the right number of times—opening and closing the toaster or stepping in and out of the car—I believed that Paul could dodge the bullet aimed at his head.

I did other things for Paul too while he was away for that year and a half. I spent long hours planning a new life for him that he could walk into when he got home. If I saw someone pretty working the counter at The Pharmacy, I'd buy a cream soda and imagine telling her about Paul and then she'd write her number on a napkin and slip it over to me. I'd pretend to run home and pass it off to Paul, and he could call her like it was nothing. They could go on long walks down by the creek, get their faces all wound up in each other near the leaning willows. I would smile at her as she handed me the soda, the same big grin I'd seen Paul use to charm people, like the time he got Gulay's Hardware to give us that ceiling fan for a third of the price just because the box had been damaged. We couldn't have afforded it any other way. I would go back to The Pharmacy on the days

that Ma would get her letters just to be sure that girl was still waiting for him, even if she didn't know it.

Ma wouldn't let anybody read the letters Paul sent. That was her grief, trying to gorge herself on his words as if that would make him come back to her somehow. At first those letters came every few days and slowly they dwindled off to once a month until the last one came announcing he would be coming home. In the living room at night, Ma coveted them like letters from a lover, sitting in the dark with a small pool of light spreading out over her lap. She'd press her hand to her heart, the small dirty scrap of paper strewn across her thighs. She didn't know that I watched her, my face squeezed between the railings of the stairs, my fingers restless on the smooth wood.

And Ellen, she was just mean. She thought that Ma and I were foolish. She was always making fun of my counting, batting my hands away from things before they released me so that I'd have to start all over again. I wanted to scream at her that it was better than doing nothing. Better than scowling out the window. Better than pretending things were normal when they weren't, having her friends and flirting with boys when Paul could be lying out flat in a field with his face down in the mud.

We weren't allowed to listen to the radio or watch T.V. either when Paul was away. We would read magazines in the living room. Sometimes we played a game of cards or Monopoly when we were hot and bored.

Not knowing was easier in a way than knowing for sure could ever be. The letters were enough even if Ma was the only one reading them. Seeing the torn envelopes in the trash was enough, that and the little things I did to control the universe.

But when Paul got back this past April, I knew we were wrong. Dead wrong. Crazy wrong about what it would be like to have him back here. We were having a four burner breakfast on the first morning he was home. Ma had eggs and bacon and pancakes going, the works. We were at the table waiting, the three of us, waiting, just taking in the fumes, ready for when Ma would place it on the table. And Ellen and I got into it. I was tapping on the table.

“Stop it, damn it.” She reached across and pinched me hard. “Ma, make her stop. She’s buggin’ the piss out of me.”

I squealed, high pitched, whiney. “Ma, tell her not to pick on me.” I squirmed in my seat and elbowed over the orange juice. It splattered into my lap. I stood up leaky wet, all dramatic and screamed, “I just can’t live in this house. Can’t live in it.”

Which was when Paul threw his glass at the kitchen cupboards. We stopped, all three of us, orange juice dripping off my dress, Ma with her hand on a plate of eggs, and Ellen with her hand poised in mid-air ready to swat at me. We stared at Paul.

“God. What’s wrong with you people?” Paul said. “Can’t you just be?” He skulked off toward his room. But none of us knew what to do, so we held there like in the play in seventh grade, waiting for someone to yell action.

Later that day Paul apologized, picked up the splinters of glass from the busted cup and told Ma that he was sorry. That he’d buy a new set when he got his first check from Johnson’s Garage. He was bent down, picking shards up off the linoleum and she took his head in her arms and pressed the side of his face into her belly. She whispered softly, “My baby, my baby, my little baby boy.”

I found Paul later that afternoon in the backyard leaning up against the big oak, throwing rocks at a can. I squirmed my way into the tire swing.

“Push me,” I begged. I smiled at him. I could be normal if that’s what he wanted. The same kid he used to underdog with. He kept tight against the tree. “Paul?” I wormed my way back out of the swing and slid toward the tree, working the deep rooted bark with my fingers. I wanted to touch him but didn’t dare.

“You see that can, Janey.” I looked to where he was pointing, shoved my glasses higher on the bridge of my nose.

“It’s a coke can, right?”

He kept on like I hadn’t said a thing. “They used to steal those from the trash and make grenades out of them. Stuff it with powder, some rocks or some kind of metal, a blasting cap and a fuse. Kaboom. Beats the fizz on Coca-Cola.” He laughed in a high pitched giggle. I giggled along with him, even brought my hand up to my waist and bent part way over. I reached out, my hand landing on his thigh.

He jumped away from my touch. “What are you laughing at?”

I bolted upright and shrank into the tree. It was like something inside me broke. “Paul?”

He glared at me, took two steps out toward the can, and ground it into the dirt.

It was late at night, three weeks after being home, when Paul drove his car toward the bridge at the end of town. He told his friend Roddy to get out. Roddy said that he didn’t think nothing of it. Paul did things like that all the time. He could be a real punk to Roddy when he got back from the war, always trying to show control. Roddy had flat

feet and never went “over there” or anywhere really. Roddy told me that he thought, *Damn, this is going to be a long walk back to town*, but he put his flat feet on the pavement anyway and shut the door. Paul looked at him, said “Good-bye,” and then gunned his car right into the guardrail. Roddy raced to the sheriff and they found his jeep only five miles down river from where Paul had gunned it in. It had snagged along a sand bar, its rear bobbing on the top of the water, an unlikely buoy in the mist.

I wasn’t allowed to see the body, but I’d seen enough drowned rabbits to get the sense of what he must have looked like, his face all bloated with river water, his cheeks puffed out, his eyelids swollen shut. I had wanted to say goodbye, but Ma insisted that we couldn’t, not a single one of us. She was trembling in the hospital waiting room, holding on to both of us—me her half grown girl and Ellen her too soon a woman. She made Paul’s doctor identify him, so that we could remember Paul just the way he was. Only we knew it was a lie the moment the words left her lips.

After Paul died, Roddy still came around the house at least once a week. Ma said she didn’t mind. She liked to see his dark hair going in and out of view from her kitchen window. Plus, she said, it was good to have a man out to check on us women living in a house alone. Roddy tinkered in the garage like he and Paul used to. He probably just moved parts around to hear the sound of metal on metal. I sat out there with him and listened. Sometimes he would tell the story of that night, and when he did I wanted to suck it right off his tongue and swallow it whole, find out the thing about my brother that we all missed.



So I was in the garage with Roddy the week after school let out on a hot almost July night, running my hands down the smooth metal of a long handled tool with a sharp end, like I knew what I was doing, like I knew what it was for, fingering it and counting so that Roddy couldn't hear.

"So, did he shoot anyone when he was over there?"

"What?" Roddy spun away from a dusty set of boxes he was riffling through.

"Did he say if he shot someone over there?" I assumed that Paul told Roddy something about the fighting because he wouldn't tell any of us.

"Yeah. He told me he shot some guys."

"Did he look them in the eye when he shot them?" I asked.

"Come on, Jane. You know better than that. Do you look a deer in the eye when you shoot it?"

Before he left for the war, Paul had taken me to the shooting range out on Billings Road. He didn't want no sister of his unable to properly defend herself or take a deer if our livelihood ever got bad. *So you can shoot the boys that come for Ellen or so you can just shoot boys*, he said, ruffling my hair like I was his pet dog. *This is the sixties, not an old western*, our mother hollered from the porch watching us back down the drive. But Paul took me anyway.

At the range, Paul got in behind me, steadying the rifle against my shoulder. *Look down the sight*. I shut my eye and leaned in close. *Don't get so close down on it. The kick will give you a black eye*. He tilted my head back upright. *Look at the target. Steady. Breathe*.

"No," I said to Roddy that night in our garage. "You look at a deer's heart."

I put the tool back down in one of the dusty boxes for the first time without being sure I had touched it the right number. I scooted off the bench and made my way back to the house.

For the most part that summer after Paul died, I tried to pretend that Ma seemed normal. She cooked meals, cleaned the house, went to work on the second shift down at the mills, but she was unpredictable. Sometimes in the evenings, she would sit on the sofa, hugging one letter to her chest like she could tease out its secrets. Sometimes she would fall asleep on the couch like that and we'd wake her up before going off to the lake or outside or whatever we did on a restless summer day, and she would slump up the stairs to go and put fresh clothes on. Her bed seemed like it was always made; I wondered if she ever slept in it.

Nearing the middle of August, a teenager came to our door selling flags for the VFW. They needed a new meeting hall because the roof collapsed last winter under the weight of snow. I had heard about their fundraising drive on the radio, how they would be stopping by all the houses.

He knocked at our door for a while and then started to peer in the windows.

"Aren't you going to get that?" Ellen asked. It was one of the rare times she was home with us that summer and I was mad that that boy had to come around knocking.

Ma turned up the radio in the kitchen. "Hmm?" she said, concentrating on the sandwiches she was making us.

"Aren't you going to get that?" Ellen shouted over the music.

I began to tap at the table. Ma didn't even look at her this time, just cranked the radio up a notch.

"I'm out of here." Ellen stomped toward the front door.

"Ellen, wait." But I couldn't move off the table. I looked to Ma to stop her, but Ma kept right on humming and moving turkey around on the plates.

Then just before leaving, Ellen turned and shouted, "Face it Janey. We're done. We're all just over." And I watched her speed around the outside of the house, buzzing by the boy with his bucket of flags and his wide open mouth.

That evening after dinner, Ma took me to The Pharmacy for milkshakes. Ellen was off with her girlfriends or at least that was what she shouted on her way through the door, but when we got to the Pharmacy she was there in the parking lot standing beside a man with long hair and a scruffy beard. She was leaning against the back of his car. One foot placed against the bumper so her skirt pulled high exposing most of her thigh. That's how she'll do it, I thought, that's how she'll get away. Ma scowled at him in a way that made me want to melt into the pavement. I bent down to tie my shoe and went tap, tap tapping on the asphalt. But then Ellen stood straight when she saw us and moved away from the car.

"I've got to go," she said smiling. She reached out her fingers and for a moment held the man's hand. Ma's face was pinched.

"How do you know him?" Ma asked as the three of us turned into the store.

"He's a friend of Darleen's. He was just giving me a ride so that I didn't have to walk all the way home. I didn't want to say no."

Ellen looked at the ground and Ma let it drop. She ordered the three of us milkshakes and we sat down. We watched Ellen's friend out the big front window. He gave Ellen a wave and got into his beat up hatchback with a tie-dye peace sign stuck to the back window. Then, suddenly Ma stood up and pounded on the glass with her fists. "You should be out there fighting," she screamed at the taillights that sped down Main Street. The car took a left turn headed for Route 4, north.

"Take it easy, Ma'am. It's not proper." Mr. Smith, who had been eyeing my unnatural attachment to the metal of the chip rack, walked out from behind the counter and took her arm, stroking it gently like Ma was a frightened cat he wanted to soothe.

"I am calm." She pulled her arm away and sat down at the counter. Smoothing out the lap of her skirt, she started to suck on her milkshake. Ellen sat frozen in her seat, her eyes burning red as she stared at Ma and me, as I pounded the counter edge so we could all hear the thud. "Come on, girls. What's wrong with you two? It's July. Those milkshakes aren't going to last forever. Let's get a move on," Ma said. I eagerly gummed my straw to please her.

Ellen drew her mouth into a thin line. "Jesus, Ma. I knew him."

"That's your fault," Ma said. "Drink your milkshake."

It was a muggy afternoon on Labor Day weekend, and Roddy was at it again in our garage. I sat out there with him. The fan in the corner whined, working as fast as it could through the thick, wet air.

"Damn, it's hot." He spat on the concrete garage floor. "Let's go down to the creek and cool off." I shrugged and hopped off the long work bench, sweat making my

shorts stick to the backs of my thighs. He waited while I flicked the light on and off until I felt reasonably safe. Then, I followed him out into the night.

At the creek, we sat on a log under the willows. Roddy pulled out a bowl and flicked his lighter at it. "You want some of this?" he asked, breathing smoke out into the air.

"Yes. Sure."

"You ever smoke before?"

"Sure," I said. "Lots of times."

"Sure," he mocked and snorted.

He held the lighter up. The orange flames licked the glass cup as I put my mouth to it. The smoke hit my lungs, and I sputtered and started like an old diesel.

"Jesus, Jane. Not like that."

I stood and started to walk up the muddy bank.

"Hold on." Roddy reached up and grabbed my wrist, and I twisted my ankle in the wet dirt. "Sit down." And I had to, if only for the pain shooting through my foot.

The lighter popped and hissed. He took a long hard pull, filling out his chest. He closed his lips and pulled me toward him, opening his mouth on mine. The smooth, smoke billowed into my lungs, tasting of alfalfa and camp fire smoke. He took another hit for himself. Gave me another. Then we just sat and listened to the water splashing the muddy bank.

"Death we could have handled," Roddy said suddenly. "But he drove off that bridge just like he didn't care. Makes all that praying to get him back here feel just useless." He flicked some mud off his toe.

“You prayed too?”

“Of course I did. He was my best friend.”

“Yeah,” I told the lapping water. I looked over at Roddy. His face kept coming at me in flashes as the cars drove by up on the road, their headlights riding briefly across the creek. I started to shiver now that the sun was gone. He looked back at me, and I didn’t know what to do, so I just stayed still and held my breath.

“You’re beautiful, Janey. Do you know that?”

I didn’t, but his mouth was on mine again, only this time it was all moisture, tongue and spit. He tasted like peach cobbler and the pink apple blossoms in the spring before they turned brown and fell off the trees making room for the apples. His hands moved like spider feet up and down my back. My skin pricked at the sudden coolness. I pushed my mouth into Roddy’s hard. Our teeth clinked, and I grabbed my hands around his shoulders, working at his t-shirt, floundering for skin. “Roddy,” I whispered. “Don’t let me get away.”

“Easy, Janey.” Roddy pulled his mouth back. He found my wrists and gently placed my hands into my lap.

“I’m sorry.” I gnawed at my lip and started to tap the log with my fingernail, counting, restless.

“Don’t.” Roddy covered my hand with his and he stared into the dark. “Janey, you know what he told me? That there were people, whole families of people, just hanging by their necks in the trees.”

Then together, we sat in silence and stared back at the water as if waiting for something to come out.

It was late when Roddy dropped me back off at our house, and I crept up the walk, knowing I was way past curfew, limping from the hurt ankle, my muddy sneakers in hand. Ma was on the couch still in the dress she'd worn that afternoon. She was sitting there staring ahead into space.

I crouched down on the porch step and peered in through the screen door, which we left open to let in the night air. Ellen came down the stairs and into the living room. "Ma, what are you doing up?" She strode across the room and stood in front of Ma. It was clear that she had been reading one of Paul's letters. She sat with it bound in her fist.

"Nothing, Ellen. Why aren't you in bed?"

"Because I can't sleep."

"Why? What's wrong with *your* conscience?"

"Nothing, Ma. Come on, I'll make you some warm milk." Her voice was soft and I could see on her face that she was trying hard to be nice. She held out her hand, and Ma stared at it like it was foreign, strange, maybe even dangerous. Ellen reached down and gave her hand a tug. Ma wouldn't budge.

"Ma?" she whispered. "Ma? You can't keep doing this."

"Stop it, Ellen. Stop chasing me off the couch." This time she batted at Ellen like a fly.

"I won't let you do this." Ellen grabbed for Ma's fist. Ma pulled away, and started to slap at Ellen's fingers with her free hand, but Ellen wouldn't let go.

There was a moment when I thought that Ma would bite her. She opened her mouth and sort of leaned forward for the back of Ellen's hand. Ma's hair was loose and

wild; pieces of it stood up straight, springing free from her curlers. She looked almost like Medusa from my eighth grade mythology book. Ellen's braid had come equally unwound. They were two wild creatures waiting in the dim living room light.

I sprung up from where I was crouched and stood in the doorway. "Ma? Ellen?"

Then the moment was broken. Ellen released Ma's hand and spun on her heel and scampered up the stairs, and I got stuck at the front door opening and closing it. I kept telling myself that it was my fault, that being with Roddy had let the house get completely out of control.

"Jesus, Jane. Cut that out," Ma growled. Only I couldn't. We both knew I couldn't. So Ma looked at the carpet, pretending not to see me until I moved into the house.

Ma and Ellen were still in a fight the next night, Labor Day, when we piled into the bench seat of the old truck. It was the first time that summer that Ellen didn't pick on me as I buckled and unbuckled my seatbelt. She was too concerned with staying perched in the center of the seat so that her legs wouldn't widen and brush against Ma's. Ellen and Ma stared out the windshield and waited with their hands in their laps. After the final click, I looked over at Ma and nodded. She started the engine and backed down the drive. We were headed out to watch the end-of-summer fireworks in Martin's field, a clearing inside the woods that relatives had bought way back before discovering that it was wetland and therefore useless. It was the second set of fireworks that summer and it seemed like the only way our town new how to celebrate.



Ma pulled over along the side of the road near the trailhead. We all got out, and both she and Ellen started down the trail a few paces apart as if they both happened to be walking down the same path and didn't start out on it together. I fingered the door handle of the truck. But somehow it felt okay to spend less time there like the truck was letting me go, and I scampered into the blackness of the trail after the flashlight bobbing away.

In the clearing we gathered some sticks and brush. Like every summer, we built a fire to kill the early September chill and wait for the fireworks to start. We sat around the fire on a tarp Ma had spread out, without acknowledging each other, just watching the flames dance.

Then the fireworks started. We could see them rising up over the tops of the pine trees in red and blue flashes of light that faded into smoke in the dark night sky, shaking in the back of our throats. Only instead of feeling like magic, it all felt flat and stupid, a trick of chemicals, a waste of light.

"I want to leave," Ellen said. Ma looked at her and nodded.

"You're right," she said. "Let's go."

The three of us got up together and Ma gathered up the tarp. Ellen and I kicked dirt at the fire until it went out. The fireworks were still exploding in the air, but the three of us turned in unison back toward the trail, which was too dark to make out but we could sense the direction. Almost near the woods, the fireworks ended, catching us in the middle of the field, in complete black and sudden silence. We froze, unable to see the direction of the trail.

"Damn," Ma whispered after a while.

"What?" Ellen answered, her voice in the dark.

“I can’t make the flashlight work.”

“How are we going to get out?” I asked, starting to panic.

Then a pop and a sharp hiss and Ma’s face emerged in the dark behind the glow of a sparkler. “We’ll use these.” She handed hers off to Ellen, lit another one for herself, and one for me.

Then we were running in flashes of legs and light on our own paths through the deep grass, each of us trailing a thin thread of light in a separate direction. I looked across the field and saw Ma go dark. Then the shadow of Ellen sprung up and out of the weeds, and just as quickly faded. I held my sparkler out toward the darkness. “Ellen?” I stepped in one direction, then spun fast the other way. “Ma?” My voice grew louder. “Ellen?”

My sparkler was almost gone. I held still and listened to the pop and crackle until the light finally fizzled out. It was nothing but black again and not even one of us bothered to call out.

## SUMMER SPARRING

Between her mother's men, they live in the crowded city in the poorer section on Munjoy Hill, across the street from the fire station, amidst the night sirens, smashed bottles, and shouts from the teenagers who cluster on the corner at midnight. The old Victorian houses are converted into tiny apartments with tall copper radiators that crank out incessant heat, regardless of the time of year.

They sit at the kitchen table—Laura in her white undershirt, her mother in a lacy bra—at the start of spring. Her mother smokes a cigarette and sways, a glass of wine in her hand.

As always, she says, “Laura, honey, we’ve got to get ourselves a man.”

To which Laura responds, “Don’t I know it, Camille. Isn’t that the truth.” They are talking their false southern, 1940s French cigarette movie talk, tapping nails on the table, while the heat busts on and on, the thermostat in another apartment. Someone shouts from down on the street.

For the most part, Laura has spent her childhood watching her mother fold herself into the men that she found. For her father, whom Laura doesn't remember except as a falling shadow across her open bedroom door, her mother was a pressed flower apron, a martini waiting in a glass when he got home at four, then eight, then midnight, then not at all. For Alex, the painter, her mother was silk scarves and dangling hoop earrings, cocktail dresses for gallery openings and glasses of Chardonnay.

Now there is Dan Garrety, the carpenter working in the nice house down the block. Her mother drops their grocery bags at his feet and gasps as he walks by. Says, *oh my*. Laura nudges the brown paper bag with her toe, deepening the tear down the middle, and sends their groceries spilling down the street. As Dan chases an orange half way down the hill, Laura's mother gives Laura a nod and they smile at each other, watching him leap after the small rolling ball always at the edge of his reach like in a Chaplin film.

It is Dan who rents them a suite in the flat-roofed buildings on Old Orchard Beach for the summer. It is Laura's thirteenth summer and she is not yet a woman. Not yet. She and her mother pack giddy with anticipation, prancing around the apartment in their underwear, pushing up the windows to let out the heat.

For Dan, Laura's mother becomes beach hats and flowered skirts, large dark sunglasses, and long necked bottles of beer. There is a constant, cool breeze blowing through mother and daughter both as they arrive at the beach house Dan has picked out. Camille is all smiles as she unpins her hat from her hair and tosses it lightly so that it floats down to the center of the flowered comforter, covering a yellow stain, on the bed where she and Dan will sleep. Laura tosses her Red Sox cap down on the lime green

couch in the tiny front room. It waffles in the air and lands with the brim buried between the cushions. Laura wishes she could be more graceful like her mother. She picks up the hat to try the toss again. The whole place smells of cigarettes and ocean rot. Camille smiles anyway and squeals as she comes to take Laura's hands and twirl her around their two tiny rooms.

"My, my look at that view." She's practically singing.

"Gorgeous." Laura drops the hat, presses her wrist to her forehead and feigns backward looking at the small square of blue between the roofline of two buildings and the spinning metallic sign for High Boys. "Simply gorgeous."

Dan crashes in behind them, banging the suitcases against the aluminum doorjamb. "Honey, I'm home," he calls. Her mother swings her hips to meet him, arms out, bracelets dangling. She draws Laura into their embrace. Laura can smell the faint musk of Dan's aftershave. "My baby and my man," her mother sings. "Your baby," Laura repeats.

It takes them all about a half a second to unpack before Dan and Laura are chasing Camille out onto the beach—slipping, sandy steps. They race over the hill to keep sight of Camille's smooth descent into the ocean. She holds her arms out, palms up to the sky as the ocean splashes up the length of her tan ankles, dampening the edges of her skirt.

"My God. This is beautiful," Camille shouts.

Laura nods, only she is looking at her mother. The scenery wouldn't matter she wants to think. She stands at the edge of the water, just watching, mesmerized, before

Dan breaks the moment by splashing into the ocean beside Camille's long graceful form and, in a mock tackle, takes her completely down into the waves. Laura holds her breath. She wants her mother to take her, pull her into the ocean with her so that they can float off like sea creatures in the surf. She wants to be enough for her mother, enough without Dan, enough for the both of them, she hopes.

"Laura Ann Masey, get in here, girl," her mother calls over the rolling waves. Like a mermaid, her mother rises at the edge of the ocean, wraps her arms around Laura's waist, and pulls Laura in. Dan splashes them both as they float by him, arms linked, waffling like limp seaweed on the top of the waves. Her mother half-heartedly pushes water toward him while at the same time she squeezes Laura's hand. "This is it, girl," she whispers. "This is it." But to Laura it is as if Dan has disappeared. She and her mother look up at the sky, gaze at the white clouds shifting above them. Laura thinks that they must look like twins floating in the ocean if anyone were looking down.

A few days later, Dan brings a kite out of the trunk of his car on a windy afternoon. He wears a big, goofy aren't-I-a-hero grin. He winks at Camille as he takes Laura's hand and pulls her up off the sand.

He stands behind Laura, cupping his hands over her hands, which are wound around the white spool of string. They stretch for the kite, bones to skin, as the wind takes it and pulls them across the beach, dipping to the left and right. Laura leans into his steady, wide chest, feels safe and smiles. He tries to tell her something, but his words are carried off in the wind. She turns her head to hear him, brushing her cheek against his mouth and a strand of her hair clings to it. The shards of his whiskers bristle and shock

against her skin, but she does not lean away. This must be what her mother feels, caught and safe at the same time, like water running so hot that it feels almost cold. She wants to hold onto this longer, decide whether or not she likes how it feels, so she presses into Dan, hoping that the wind won't pull them apart. Eventually it does. The kite dips into the ocean and Dan goes after it, leaving Laura with the slacking spool of string.

Laughing, sweaty and breathless, the kite under Laura's arm, they walk back toward her mother, whose hand is clamped over her beach hat, her toes burrowed into the sand.

"My, my. Look at the two of you." She's tight lipped, but Dan just plops down into the sand, panting. He props himself up on his elbow and grins.

"Hey, Babe." He leans toward Laura's mother to give her a kiss, but she turns her cheek toward him. Laura crumples down on her towel beside her mother. She wants to act normal, pretend that she didn't feel any of what she felt with Dan out on the beach. She tries to wedge her head into her mother's lap, but just as Laura makes contact with her mother's leg, her mother springs up and rubs sand from her thighs.

"Let's leave. I want to leave." Her mother scoops up her towel, letting the wind take it, sweeping sand over Laura, which sticks to her wet skin. Dan scrambles up after Camille.

"Wait," Laura shouts into the wind, but they are gone—her mother's small steps spitting up sand in the distance, Dan almost falling over his big feet to catch up. Laura kicks the ground and hugs the kite to her chest.

"Stupid," she mutters and kicks the sand again.

When Laura walks back into the suite, she hears the bubble of her mother's laughter. She lets go of the screen, and it crashes into the side of the house. Dan's back is to her, filling up the doorway to the bedroom, the soft dusky sunlight wrapping around the slope of his waist. Her mother comes at him, the edge of her bare breast breaking the line of light. She holds Laura's eyes, wraps her arms around Dan's shoulders, and pulls him away from the door, shutting it behind them.

In the morning, Laura slips into their bedroom. Her mother sleeps on her back, one arm over her head, one hand resting on Dan's navel. Laura watches their chests rise and fall, her mother's skin tight and sunless-white around her breasts. She wants to cover them, pull the comforter up or force her mother into a nightgown like the one's she sees on all those TV moms that stumble down the stairs to give their daughters a pep talk and a midnight snack. Instead, Laura reaches between empty bottles of beer for Dan's wallet on the nightstand and slides out twenty bucks.

She tries on a black bikini at McKenzie's on the wharf. She is tempted to take a thong off the rack, but doesn't really like the idea of it between the bright white flesh of her butt. She practices her sway in the mirror of the dressing room. The poster of a lifeguard smiles out behind her reflection.

She spins toward him. She tries on her mother's pout.

"What? You want to run away to Mexico?" She glances over her shoulder, then adds, "Oh, Dan." She tests it, lets the sound of her voice settle in the air. She brings her hand up to the poster's chest and leans into the flat wall.



“Well, well. What do we have here?” Her mother whistles in a too long, too low catcall. “Dan, Dan. You’ve got to come and see this.” She presses her hand to her heart. “Look at my Laura, all grown up.”

Dan nods, scratches his hair. “You look nice,” he says, then looks away.

“Well, of course it doesn’t quite fit.” Her mother cups her hands beneath Laura’s small breasts, pushing them up, trying to make them fill the bit of loose cloth gathered at the top. “Now aren’t you a pretty young thang.” She drops her hands and the loose cloth flaps slightly with the breeze.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart. Sooner or later, you’ll fill it in. They’ll grow.” She pinches the side of Laura’s exposed hip as she slithers past her toward the bedroom. She glances back one more time before she disappears behind the door and adds, “They always do.”

Laura crosses her arms in an x over her chest and half-runs out of the suite back onto the beach.

She returns the bikini and tells a man on the corner that if he buys her a pack of cigarettes, he can keep the change.

“Those things will kill you kid,” he says, coming out of the store and handing her the pack. They are red and white not the Virginia slims her mother always smokes.

“Not soon enough,” she says, “Thanks.”

She stumbles out underneath the large wooden beams of the pier. She lights a cigarette. Inhales. Stumbles forward with a cough. Rights herself. Plants her feet into the sand. Tries again. The thick smoke burns the back of her throat, but she holds it, enjoying the sharp sting. Slowly, she lets the white smoke curl out through her nose.

Eyes closed she listens to the sound of the ocean but it is the sounds of the city that always seem to echo in her head even if they are somewhere to the north of where she stands.

Three nights go by and then Dan takes them to Palace Play Land, one woman on each arm. Her mother leads the way, pulling them through crowds. Laura bounces on the end, tossed around as if in a playground game of crack the whip.

Dan's a crack shot. He wins a life sized bear in one try at Shoot the Star. The man in the red-striped hat whistles low as he pulls the string and looks at the bullet hole directly in the center of the paper.

"Nice shot, mister. Which one do you want?" He tosses his hand along the back wall in a grand gesture at the dangling stuffed animals behind him.

"Well, ladies, what do you say?" Dan is smiling at Laura's mother, but she looks away.

"Let Laura pick. She's the one who should want a prize like that."

Laura wants to say she's sorry, sorry for the kite, for the bikini, for being thirteen. She tries to take her mother's hand.

"No, Mama. You pick."

But her mother pulls her hand away and sidles in closer to Dan. "Come on, baby girl. We haven't got all day."

The man behind the booth shifts uncomfortably and looks out at the line forming behind them. Dan points at the large pink bear.

"How about that one?"

But Laura and her mother are both turned away from the booth, so Dan takes the huge bear. He shoves it toward Laura. “Please—take it,” he says. Laura knows that her mother is watching her from the corner of her eye even though she appears to be looking at the orange lights of the Ferris wheel that spot the navy sky. Laura starts to reach for the fuzzy, pink bear and her mother’s chest falls like she’s letting out a breath. Laura won’t let her mother win that easy, not this time. So instead, she stiff-arms the bear and pushes it back on Dan.

“Fine,” her mother says.

Dan glances back and forth between the two. Finally, he hugs the bear to his chest and they move away silently into the massive crowd.

Dan takes a job building a set of cabinets for one of the new houses going up on the south end of the beach. Laura thinks it’s so he can escape the silence erected between Laura and her mother during the hours when Dan and her mother aren’t making the springs squeak. Laura feels slightly guilty that the summer has not gone as planned, that they haven’t done a better job pretending to be a family. Without Dan, Laura and her mother take turns: One of them goes out on the beach while the other naps or reads or watches the fuzzy black and white television.

“What are you watching?” Her mother slaps through the screen door two weeks into their silence. Laura is sprawled on the couch, one knee bent upward. She reaches for the knob on the TV and flicks it off with the sound of her mother’s voice. Camille settles down on the edge of the couch near Laura’s feet. Laura sinks her feet toward the crease

of the couch so that she and her mother do not touch. Laura can smell the salty sweat moving off her mother's skin from a day spent on the beach.

"It's nice here. Isn't it?" Camille sighs. She runs her hand up Laura's calf. "Aren't you having just the best time?" Then without Laura's answer, Camille adds, "What pretty skinny calves you have. We need to get you in a pair of high heels."

Laura sits up and starts to curl her feet underneath her, but her mother presses down on her calf.

"You're mine, baby girl." She smiles "I could eat you." She bends down and smacks a kiss on the goose flesh of Laura's leg, gets up and sways happy into the other room. "I'll give you a pair of my shoes for dinner tonight. Dan's taking us down to Kennebunkport," she says over shoulder before she closes the bedroom door.

Laura hates the fact that her mother can suddenly decide when it is that their fights can end. But this one has stretched on for a few weeks and Laura has had enough. She wants it to be like that first day on the beach so she will wear what ever it is that her mother wants.

Laura teeters on the cobblestone walk as they make their way toward the restaurant that looks over the water. She and her mother walk hand in hand a few strides in front of Dan. They giggle like schoolgirls. Laura watches Dan tug uncomfortably at the sweater Camille picked out for him to wear. At least everyone is talking again.

Camille orders wine and scowls at the waiter when he only brings two glasses. "Don't worry, Laura. I can give you some of mine. It's only because we forgot that damn ID."

She says this loud as the waiter heads off to another nearby table and both Laura and Dan sink into their seats as a couple from another table looks up from their food and glares.

“It’s fine,” Laura whispers, scraping her toe to her heel to flick the tight high heels loose from her feet so that they can spend dinner underneath the table.

Her mother lets it go until the check comes and she comments how nice the meal was and how much better it would have been if her daughter could have enjoyed her lobster with some white wine. Laura winces. Dan winks from across the table, nudges her foot with his toe.

Camille notices, drops her fork into her dessert plate. “What? I was only saying.”

Before heading back, the three of them stand on the porch of the restaurant leaning over the rail and looking out at the light glinting off the dark ocean that has gone flat in the night. Camille leans on Dan’s shoulder and begins to kiss him, making soft moaning noises that Laura knows are for her benefit. She moves down the rail and turns her back to them pretending she can’t hear.

When Dan and her mother pull away from each other, her mother calls to Laura in the dark. “Come on, honey.” To Dan she adds, “I hope she hasn’t gone down to play on the rocks in those shoes.” Her delicate laugh plays into the air. Laura comes out of the shadows and wobbles in front of them back down the path, wishing she were in her own pair of flat sandals so that she could run away from them and sink into the backseat cushions of the car.

“Look how she walks in those, Dan. Isn’t it the sweetest damn thing?” Laura hears what she thinks is another kiss before she reaches the door of the car and can scramble in.

The next morning, Laura asks to go with Dan to the shell of a house on the south end of the beach. She looks back toward her mother for permission. Camille smacks her lips together. “You two go ahead. Have a good time.” She holds up her book. “I’m dying for the end. Only thirty more pages.” Dan shrugs. He goes out; Laura follows behind him. He gets into the car, leans over and cracks open the passenger side door for Laura to slip in.

She wanders around the rough wooden skeleton of the house, ducking beneath beams and softly rattling sheets of hanging plastic. It’s a four-bedroom place, comfortable large rooms.

“Who’s going to live here?” Laura calls from what will be the family room to Dan crouched underneath the sink in what will be the kitchen. She imagines a white-picket-fence-2.5-children-golden-retriever family. She hugs her arms around her chest in the sudden chill.

“I don’t know,” Dan calls back, his voice bouncing into the wood of the cabinets.

At lunch, she brings them beers from the cooler in the trunk of his car. There is a Coke he’s put in for her, but she takes the two Coronas instead. Says, “Ma would like it better this way.” His eyebrows go up as she hands him the two bottles, but he pops the tops off on the counter and hands one back to her, takes a long swig of his own. She slips

her sandals off and leans against the counter, drawing one foot slowly along her calf, past her knee, and stops it high on her thigh. Dan shifts his gaze to the ground.

He puts his beer down and clears his throat and starts to move back toward his work. "Can you hand me that hammer?"

She grabs it and then puts it out of his reach.

"This hammer?"

She wants to know what it would feel like to have that sun cracked mouth on hers, to feel the brush of his whiskers again, only this time with it meaning something.

"Yeah. That's the one." He reaches for it as she pulls it away again, and he falls into her. He grabs the counter to right himself as she presses into him, only she misses and grazes the corner of his mouth with her soft, small tongue.

"Whoa, Jesus. Laura," he grabs her wrists and holds her arms to her sides. "You can't do this. It isn't right."

She feels the heat rise to her cheeks and tries to swallow past the lump in her throat. She looks past his shoulder.

"Laura, I'm sorry. You are a beautiful girl, but..." His voice drops off.

"Don't." She drops the hammer with a thud and takes a sharp breath.

"Yoo-hoo." Her mother's voice is like wind chimes as she ducks in underneath the hanging plastic. Dan and Laura jump apart.

"Well, what do we have here? Looks like I'm a little early, or am I late?" She steps in toward the counter, blocking Laura's forward escape. "Go on. Kiss her, Dan. You'll be her first. I bet you've never even kissed a boy. Have you, Laura?"

Laura looks down at her feet.

“Go ahead. I want to see where this goes. What, have you forgotten how? Need another demonstration?” She is bent low, breathing into Laura’s neck.

“Come on, Camille. She’s just a little girl.” Dan grabs Camille’s arm and tries to pull her away from Laura.

Camille stands firm and Laura watches the skin of her mother’s arm going red between Dan’s fingers. How did it come to this? Laura wonders. “Mama,” she starts to call, but Camille rips her arm out of his grasp.

“Not anymore, she’s not.” Then her mother is grabbing Laura’s wrist and twisting it. “Come on, were leaving.” Laura tries to rip her arm away from her mother’s grasp. But Camille won’t loosen her grip and she stumbles forward nearly taking the both of them down. They are kept from falling only by knocking into a framed out wall.

“Jesus, what’s wrong with you people?” Dan hoists up his tool belt and heads for the front door.

“We’re leaving.” This time Laura complies. She lets her body go limp as her mother hauls her out of the house. Dan is resting against the trunk of the car pulling long drags off a cigarette. They don’t look up as they pass him and move down the road, the gravel ripping at the souls of Laura’s bare feet.

When they turn down the drive of the suite, her mother shoves her toward the door, finally letting go of her arm. “Get your stuff,” she barks.

Laura moves into the house. She stuffs her clothes into her backpack and wipes at her face. She listens to her mother banging around in the next room, plunging things into her own suitcase and then the soft, polite sound of her flirting over the phone with the cab company to get them to send a driver out *right away*.



They sit in the backseat of the cab that rushes away from the ocean.

“Damn it, Laura. We had a good thing. Dan was a good thing.” Her mother rests her head against the window. “What now, baby? What are *we* going to do now?” She reaches to curl a stray piece of hair behind Laura’s ear. “At least I have my baby.”

Laura ducks out from underneath her mother’s touch.

Her mother seems lost in her thoughts and doesn’t seem to notice. “But no man,” her mother coos. “No man.”

“You don’t have either,” Laura says. She stares out the window at the ocean falling away from them and already she can feel the heat of the city wrap around her chest.

## **PLAYING HOUSE**

We are living in the city on Front Street in a three story brick house on the top floor. There is a grocery at the ground level and every morning at five a.m. I hear the rattle of the metal awning being lifted and rolled up.

“Open for business,” I say and place my hand on my husband’s thigh.

“What?” Jack bolts up right. We have been trying to conceive since January and he doesn’t see my humor in it.

“Nothing. Never mind.” I curl into a ball.

He gets up an hour later as if nothing has happened. He turns on the shower, coughs twice, and spits into the sink. This is his pattern, like sex near the end of every month. It has annoyed me all winter, this clinging to routine, so I have taken to making jokes about our life that Jack refuses to understand.

His side of the bed is rumpled, the sheets kinked, the comforter slanted. This also drives me crazy, the way he kicks at night as if he is doing battle with something in his

sleep. Nothing is ever still, placid, smooth, the glass surface of a lake. I get up, make the bed, press the sheets flat with the butt of my hand, and get back in. Lying on my back, I press into the bed, going flat, flat, flatter. Hipbones disappearing, thighs, legs, toes. Thankfully, I don't have a pooch stomach just yet, at least from this angle. I hold my breath. Still he finds me. He leans over to kiss me goodbye. His lips touch down on my forehead. "Do you need anything?"

"No."

He winds his hands through my hair, the tips of his fingers on the ribbon that is holding my hair to the base of my neck. "You look beautiful with your hair down." He pulls the ribbon free, drops it into his pocket, and spreads my hair out on the pillow. "More relaxed. That's what you need, Gwen, to relax. Are you going to eat today?"

"I have to clean the rug."

"But after, Gwen, are you going to eat?"

"I'd have to go out."

"The grocery is right downstairs."

"I'll try."

"You need to do it for the baby."

"What if there is no baby."

"There'll be a baby."

"I said I'll try."

He is satisfied or he is late. It doesn't matter which, he leaves.

The Persian rug was a wedding present from my mother. Green and blue rivers spread across an orange background on the kitchen floor, the whole thing too delicate to

vacuum. My mother had put up with the rug long enough and passed her legacy on to me. Every three weeks I move the kitchen table and chairs to the other side of the room, and haul the orange rug up to the roof. Jack had strung a line up there that the pigeons liked to sit on. I wanted to make them a garden with a little pool, but they shat all over the line, and then I couldn't clean the rug. I borrowed a broom from the super and tried to make a scarecrow. But it didn't work. The pigeons would just swoop down and grab pieces of straw. So I took to using the broom to beat my rug and I spread seeds out on the other side of the roof for the pigeons. We are learning to share, something that strikes me as essentially urban.

A few of the pigeons have started to nest under the eaves of the second roof. I keep cigarettes hidden near them underneath the drain pipe. I walk up close to one of their nests to get my loot. A fat gray mother bird regards me with her beady black eyes as I pull the pack out from underneath the drain.

"All right, Mama. Let's see what this is about." She hops toward the snaking spread of seeds like one of the neighborhood kids on a pogo-stick with invisible knees and picks up some yellow kernels. She toddles over to her nest, stands still moving her mouth for a moment and drops some half-crunched seeds into the open pit of hollow baby mouths. I take a long drag off my cigarette.

"So you get to chew somebody else's food. Imagine that." I exhale a puff of blue smoke. She ogles at me as if I have just told her that her first born will be hit by a subway train after diving onto the tracks to retrieve his cell phone when he turns twenty-seven before he gets a chance to do anything really productive with his life.

"It could happen," I tell her. "I heard it on the news last week."

She pecks at the birdseed again and hobbles back to her collection of young, needy mouths.

“Obviously you don’t get out much.” I billow more smoke at her and turn away.

I puff on my cigarette in between whacks at the rug. Dust flying off it, smoke billowing in, but Jack never asks about why the rug looks worse after I have beaten it. Maybe he is better at pretend. Yet really men are terrible liars. Like how they will tell you that you look good in sea-foam taffeta, *matches the color of your eyes*, just to get you to come upstairs.

I climb back down, dragging the rug behind me on the narrow staircase. I open the number five door. I like the shock of seeing things in our apartment moved around, like I have walked into someone else’s home on accident. I leave the rug on the doorstep and walk around the place like a tourist.

It is overfilled with clutter, dried roses in a basket, candles, knickknacks from absurd vacations. I pluck a picture frame off the coffee table. A couple wearing plastic crowns under a sign that reads “Arabian Nights.” They smile their faces off at me. I stick my tongue out at the frame and put it down off center. Who on earth would have a plaid green couch? I skirt around the edge of it and into the blue tiled bathroom. Bathrooms are where people show their tells. It is the room people try to keep hidden with the door always closed, but it somehow ends up the one most frequented by guests. The toothpaste and aftershave prove a disappointment. Peering into the cabinet above the sink, I finger a small brown bottle.

“Gwen?”

I jump, remembering where I am, and drop the bottle into the sink. The pills rain down the rusted drain, and I don't have the heart to plunge my fingers in after them. I put my hand up in a small wave and step out into the living room. Our neighbor Fanny is in the doorway dressed in a short skirt and high heels. She has her daughter May by the hand.

"Gwen, Jesus, you're still in your bathrobe." She picks her daughter up and rests her on her hip and then steps over the rug. "Have you been on the roof like that?"

I look down at the yellow terry cloth around my waist. "I guess I have." I am as surprised as she is.

She shrugs. "I've got an appointment with the dentist."

She goes to see him once a week.

"Can you watch May for the hour?"

The dentist gives Fanny money and keeps May in clothes to keep up with her growth. May is six and spindly, always growing. Even Fanny's husband doesn't seem to mind.

"Sure. She gives me something to strive for." May marches into our apartment on skinny stick legs.

"Thanks." Fanny sighs and turns on her heel. We listen to her clomp down the hallway.

"You can help me with the carpet." I say to May. We struggle to pull the thing in, the veins in our necks bulging like worms under the dirt as we squeeze it through the doorway. We put the kitchen back together. We stand side by side, hands on hips.

"Damn," I say. "I found my way home."

I wedge into a kitchen chair and begin writing in my black notebook. May slips into the chair beside mine.

“What are you doing?” She chirps like the birds on the roof.

“My husband Jack wants me to write down what I eat. It’s his way of caring for me under false pretenses.” I lean toward her and show her the stripped page of the book.

“It’s blank.”

“I haven’t eaten anything yet. It takes imagination.”

“You can have my crackers.” She pulls a wad of paper towel out of her pocket. The crackers are crushed, but two pieces are large enough to pick up with your fingers.

“Okay, let’s share them.” We put our cracker pieces into our mouths, and I watch her chew, her lips moving in delicious circles. I let my piece dissolve on my tongue. I write down crackers in my book. I lean over to show her. She nods.

“Okay. Now what?” I ask. She is winning me over with the way her bangs puff off her forehead when she breaths through her mouth.

“Tag, you’re it.” She slides off her chair and runs around the kitchen table. I crawl down and hide underneath it.

“Wrong game.” She peers at me from under the table, her face framed between the chair legs. “You’re supposed to chase me.”

I reach out and touch her fingertips. “Tag.”

“No fair.” She starts to laugh. She wedges herself under the table and crawls into my lap.

“I like you,” she whispers. Her fingers weave up my neck. I curl around her and inhale the scent of her hair. It smells like rose petals.

"I'm sorry," I say. "You don't know who I am."

After tag, May falls asleep on the couch. It has been twenty minutes and I can't get the cracker to come up. I am staring out the window when Fanny comes in flushed. She scoops her daughter up into her arms like she is picking up a book she has left spine down as if she were just going to the bathroom.

"Thanks. We're leaving."

I stand up, "How was it?"

She lets out a nervous giggle. "I think I'm starting to get bored." She stares out the window. "But that's the trouble with things that you start and don't have the follow through to end them." She lets her fingers wander through her daughter's yellow hair. "Sometimes I wonder why I married."

"Why did you?"

"I used to tell myself that it was because I wanted to know what it was like to register at Macy's and hope for all those gifts. But really it's just what we do, Gwen, it's just what we do."

She gives me a closed, tight smile and turns to leave.

I walk out the opened door behind them. Fanny turns around once more. "I hope this one is just like you." She pats her daughter on the head. "Good at keeping close to home or I'll have to lock her up."

"I've been locked up. Maybe it's the aftermath."

But they are already rounding the corner toward their apartment so I can't be sure that she has heard. I wonder if it would make any difference.



Fanny has kicked the newspaper to the side of my door. I bend down and pick it up. I stumble back into the apartment and leaf through the insides until I get to the “For Rent” section. Jack wants me to look for a bigger place. You know, just in case it is really happening this time, for real. I scan the pages letting my fingers go all inky black. Third column to the right: *1 bedroom Life for Rent. 66<sup>th</sup> and Madison*. I tear the ad out, leaving a hole in the paper as if someone has taken a bite out of it. I wonder if I can put it in my food diary, but I figure Jack won’t go for that. I go to put the paper in the pocket of my slacks when I realize I am still in my bathrobe.

I pull the shades down in the bedroom, but it is still too light in the room, and I can see the edges of my skin. I plaster myself against the wall to avoid the mirror hanging over the dresser. My slacks are on the chair, and I use my toe to kick them onto the floor and wiggle them over toward me. I pull them on. I keep the robe on and cross toward the closet for a sweater. I shove my head through it without turning around.

My mother calls before I can leave. “Should I start knitting the old hag sweater?” She works at Hartford Medical in the wing with the old folks. This is a change from when I was seventeen and she’d told me to *get rid of it*. But *it* turned out to be a false alarm and it was too late and Jack and I were already married. One of her patients is teaching her how to knit in preparation for being a grandmother. Ten years later and now she’s ready. I guess she needed that kind of time for the news to settle. “Well, Gwen, are you pregnant or what?”

“I don’t know, Ma. I haven’t made an appointment.”

“Well, what’s the holdup? You know, I always thought you’d be better at growing up. When you were younger, you were always running away.”

“I wanted to be a woman, Ma, not a mother, but people are always acting like it’s the same thing.”

“You figure that one out, you call me.” I can hear her cackling as she hangs up the phone.

The day is bright and cool. Spring in the city. Things feel large being on the ground with them, meaning I can make out their edges clearly, and I hate to be a part of it. Crossing Broadway I trip over the leg of a bus-stop bench bolted into the pavement and remember the little girl I was on that afternoon my mother was talking about. I was four. She caught me when I sat down for a snack. I was six blocks from home, and she came at me with curlers and a sour pinched face, pushing my sleeping brother in a stroller. She leaned down, her breath hot on my face. “Going for a long trip?”

I hurry down the ten blocks, racing my shadow until I turn a corner and it gets fat, wide, wider until I can no longer look at the ground. By that time I am in front of the building anyway. I ring the buzzer. When no one answers I stand back and look up at the window on the top floor. A woman appears at the window, naked, just staring out. She clutches her breasts, the sunlight and the pink highlights of the city splashing over her skin. A man sits behind her on the bed. His sport coat discarded. He is older than she is, middle aged, his hair running to gray. He flicks his thumb against his third finger like he is used to spinning a ring there. The top two buttons of his shirt are undone. He asks her why she insists on being naked, if she is only going to stand there with her arms crossed over her chest like a twelve-year-old standing in the corner of a communal shower.

“Would you rather we dance?” she asks, but does not turn around.

He crosses the distance of the room in three strides. With clean fingers he pulls her hands away and holds them in his. He steps back as if to waltz, draws her hands to the corners of her reach.

“You look like a little girl,” he says. “Why on earth with breasts as flat as yours did you ever bother to butcher your hair?”

Then somebody’s son finally answers the buzzer in a grunt that pounces out at me through the speaker.

“I’m here for the Life for Rent.” I stutter, although at this point I am not generally a stutterer.

He buzzes me in. He is there when I open the door in jeans and a plaid flannel. He must be the super. I climb the stairs behind him. He has a red rag hanging out of his back pocket that almost touches my face as we near the top step.

“Just a second. I know I’ve got it here.” He tries his keys. I alternate bending my knees and wobbling back and forth like a child in line at the circus. “There.” He lets the door swing wide and lets me pass in before him. “Ladies first.”

But the room is empty. Long swaths of dust float in the streaks of light coming down from the skylights. I peek around one of the corners just to make sure.

“So this is pretty much it,” he says, stepping into the room with me.

“I don’t understand.” I wrap my hands around my stomach.

“It’s a loft, lady. What’s not to understand?”

I take the ad out of my pocket. I unfold it and now there is a crease down the middle. He peers over my shoulder.

He shrugs. “Must have been a misprint.”

I follow him back down the stairs.

I stand in front of the building on the bottom step looking up at the window of the loft just one more time before I head off. The woman is there again, the man on one side of her, a baby standing in his crib, his mouth against the rail, is on the other. He bounces up and down in the crib. This time the woman is wrapped in ribbon. The man and the baby each have an end of it. They pull at it, the baby spooling the ribbon in the crib and the man spooling it beside his feet. She begins to unwind, growing smaller and smaller as she sinks into the floor. When I can't see her anymore, she puts her hand to the glass and it looks like a lone stalk of corn left in a field already mowed down. "Run," she says to me. But my legs feel like cinderblocks and I let the super hail me a cab and place me in its back seat.

It is five when I get back to the apartment and the grocery is still open. I stop in to buy dinner. We don't keep anything in the house. I make lasagna. I keep telling myself it is Jack's favorite, but really I can't be sure. When Jack comes home at six, I am sitting at the kitchen table.

"How was your day?" He swings around the table to kiss me. "The rug looks good." He sees the hole in the paper. "Did you find something, Gwen?"

I look down at his shoes. "We have it already."

He rubs my shoulder. "Don't worry. Another one will come around in time." He reaches down and puts his hand in my lap, looks at the plate of lasagna. "See. Gwen. We're going to make it. We're going to make a happy life." I stare at my hair ribbon that he has wound around his fist from this morning like some kind of bracelet.

"I know," I said. "I've seen it."

## **LOVE ANATOMY**

When I was a child, love meant Annie Fink. Every summer she would come up from her chic up-town apartment in the city to visit my parents and me at our country home in the woods near Bennington, Vermont. She and my mother would sit for hours engaged in secret conversations on the wide front porch, while I crept around the edges, squatting down near the latticework, drawing long patterns with sticks in the damp earth, just listening to the adult voices float like bird songs into the afternoon dusk. I would watch their feet bob up and down with laughter; my mother's tan house slipper tilted toward Annie's soft, naked toes.

Sometimes Annie and my mother would go on long river walks. They let me come along as long as I trotted a few paces ahead, leaping and shrinking down the jagged banks pretending to be interested in the frogs near the water. If it was warm enough, in a quiet bend in the river where a warm pool would mass against a deep curve of rock, my mother and Annie would strip down to their underwear and jump into the water,

splashing at each other. I'd sit on the rocks admiring the tiny beads of river gathering against Annie's skin. We would come back laughing, dirty, sticky from walking through the filmy layer of tiny water bugs that coasted on the path near the river.

Annie was my mother's lover, the woman my mother left my father and me for when I was eleven years old.

This of course was not the story I told my husband Jonathan when we met the summer of my first year out of college when I was working in Boston, or the story I told him when later we fell in love, married and moved to Portland, Maine. He knew that my mother had left when I was eleven, but I had told him she was a stifled housewife who ran away. Her fits of silence and restlessness melded easily with this version. What I had avoided saying was that those distant moods always came on Sundays after my mother and I stood out on the porch waving furiously as Annie backed out of our drive.

Love, to my husband Jonathan, was touching while we slept. It was a habit that started after hearing the horrible story of a man whose wife had had a seizure in the middle of the night, and when he reached over in the morning to touch her, she was cold. After that, Jonathan and I always maintained contact, waking every so often to listen to each other's breathing, and testing the pressure and warmth of a wrist or thigh.

Annie Fink's story was also not the story I told my daughter Izzy when, at twelve, she asked me why people fell in love. She was one year older than I had been when I first learned the truth about my mother and Annie, but I didn't know how to tell my daughter in her pink Hello Kitty T-shirt and heart-checkered shorts that it was something about the curving slope of a shoulder or the way someone else's skin felt brushed against yours. So

I did what any mother with a double major in biology and public relations would have done: I brought her Dr. Helen Fischer's The Anatomy of Love and each of us spent our separate hours perusing the glossy pages.

Love, according to Dr. Helen Fischer, had more to do with hormone receptors than anything else. She dedicates a whole chapter to describing how when men smell the estrogen-like compound in females, it triggers blood flow to the hypothalamus, the primal center of the brain, which then triggers a series of reactions resulting in arousal. Lavender and pumpkin pie were among the favorite smells of males, smells no doubt that would remind one curiously of childhood.

But then I met Wallace and I didn't know anymore which love story seemed to fit.

Three months into my affair and thirteen years into my marriage, I woke up beside my husband Jonathan, realizing that I still saw him as handsome, his strong square jaw and broad shoulders, lying with his face smashed into the pillow. I watched him for a moment, shift in bed beside me. His hand on the point of my elbow. Dr. Fischer could explain away my thoughts as instincts—a well-formed face sparking some impulse for my genes to naturally want to fold with his. Yet she had said nothing about morning stubble creeping across his spring tanned skin that was more of an attraction that fit in with my mother and Annie Fink.

Jonathan turned a deep brown in summer, especially during the long weekends when we rented a cottage and took Izzy down to Old Orchard Beach. I loved watching them play together in the ocean, stretched up on the dry beach, digging my toes into the sand where they hung off the towel.

The truth was we had grown closer over the past few months since I had taken up with Wallace. At least on the surface of things. I'd gone through the whole rolodex of Jonathan's favorites—I made his favorite meals, rented his favorite movies, we even got to a few of the pre-season baseball games. In return, Jonathan started doing things he hadn't done since college, bringing home flowers and having the DJs at his station play our wedding song on my afternoon commute. What I did out of guilt, he did out of love. It killed. And on that morning, something needed to give.

The alarm clock buzzed and I rolled onto my side and tapped the snooze button. Jonathan cocked his head up off the pillow and blinked at me, rubbing my hipbone with the tips of his fingers.

"Hey, what's up? What are you thinking about, Dorie?" he asked, his blond hair lopsided and pushed into the side of his face.

"Jonathan, I want to take a road trip. Get out of New England. See some of the country." I'd seen some magazines in the grocery store aisle, all those perfect happy families. It didn't matter that those magazines were laced with advertisements for mobile home dealers, it struck me that there was no better way to bond with your family then to set off cross country in a Winnebago.

Jonathan didn't respond right away, just seemed to look at me with mild curiosity. So I went on, "I know it sounds wild, but we've never done anything like this and I think it's time." I was falling in love with the idea, a huge smile stretched across my face, and I couldn't stop talking. "Imagine it, take two weeks off and see the country. We can drive for a day before even looking at a map. Go like gypsies. Feed ourselves on peanut butter and jelly; collect postcards at roadside stands to send back to our friends. I can see your



mother's face now when she gets a 'Wish You Were Here' from Washington State." I laughed and flopped my head onto the pillow, spreading my hair out in webs above my head. It took a few minutes of silence for me to notice that Jonathan hadn't said a thing.

"Well?" I sat up to look at him, impatient that he wasn't jumping on my traveling bandwagon. "Don't you want to see the world?"

"Dorie, be serious."

"Why? Jonathan, what's wrong with that plan? We could afford this. We've never been anywhere."

"Izzy is supposed to get braces next fall. We need to remember that."

"Izzy," I called, knocking on the wall behind me. Jonathan grabbed my wrist before a second thud.

"You've got to be kidding."

"I want to ask Izzy if she wants to take a trip and postpone her braces for a year."

"Dorie."

"Yes," I said, annoyed.

"Dorie, this isn't like you. What is this about?"

"Nothing," I said and twisted out of our bed sheets. "Everything," I mumbled under my breath.

Downstairs, our dog Max's tags jingled as he lifted his long, dark body off his dog bed. "Come on, Max. Come on." I grabbed my coat and dropped my cell phone quietly into my pocket. Then I reached for Max and clipped the leash to his collar. The front door sucked shut behind us. Every morning, I would walk three blocks before calling Wallace.

“Hey, you,” I whispered into the mouthpiece of the phone. The weight of Max’s pull against the leash kept me moving forward, so I was free to disconnect and coast into the small tight space that Wallace and I inhabited together.

“Hey, how are you this morning?”

It was never, *How did you sleep? How was your night?* It was always, *How are you right now?* Trying to scrape out a timelessness where only the two of us existed.

“Good,” I said, “and you?”

“Good,” he answered. “But I’ll only stay good if you say you can come this afternoon.” I could picture him perfectly propped up on one elbow, his legs stretched out long, winding the phone cord between his fingers the way he tangled them into my hair. The image of him made me quiver, my knees going soft, and I glanced around the street relieved that it was still early morning, and no one was there to witness this desperate display, a woman in her mid-thirties experiencing a flood.

“I wouldn’t miss it. I could probably sneak away for a couple hours at two. Will that fit into your schedule?” I laughed.

“I’ll see you then.”

Still smiling at the sound of his voice, I let Max float me home.

When I returned, I knew that Izzy and Jonathan would be downstairs—Jonathan carefully setting out Izzy’s cereal, pouring her juice and setting up a place at the table for me. We’d done this since college, Jonathan making breakfast as I walked our dog. Even after jobs and Izzy, he insisted on keeping our routine. His day just went better, he said, if we started out together.

I swallowed hard and wiped my face before turning the handle of the front door.

“How was your walk?” Jonathan pecked me on the cheek and then knelt down to tousle Max’s head. Looking down at the soft features of his face, I wondered how on earth I could be doing this. Knees cracking, he stood up, and something in my face must have made him reach for me, arms wide, palms up. I inched forward and let him take me in his arms.

Dr. Fischer would explain affairs as a simple matter of evolution, a trick designed by our chromosomes to help them survive. Men strayed when they thought that their women weren’t fertile anymore, no longer ample and lusty. And women? Women strayed when they felt that their mate wouldn’t be able to provide support and protection for their offspring. Only for us, this didn’t apply—Jonathan was steady and responsible, the part that gave me a solid place to lean as I was leaning now into the hug he was giving me in the center of our kitchen with our daughter looking on. I loved Jonathan for this as much as I loved Wallace for his recklessness.

As I stood there with Jonathan’s breath in the crease of my neck, I tried to find the thing that was lacking in him that had made me stray and couldn’t. The truth was that I loved him as much as I had at any other moment in our life together; I had just started loving someone else on top of that.

I looked behind him at Izzy, who at twelve was twisting uncomfortably in front of her Cheerios at the too-intimate gesture of her parents. When I was her age, I used to believe that my mother loving Annie came from some ineptitude of my father, some essential gap. Mostly, I think that is why I harbored so much anger about them when their secret came out. I hated the way it made me see my father as incomplete—that

somewhere in his broad silent shoulders lay the place to assign blame. Would Izzy see Jonathan this way if she ever found out?

“God, guys, get a room,” Izzy groaned, forcing us away from each other.

“Alright Iz, kid.” Jonathan laughed, laying a kiss on my cheek before we pulled apart. I hung back and held his eyes. “Are you okay?” he asked. He reached to brush a piece of my hair off my forehead, which had rubbed loose from me leaning on him.

I turned my head sideways and looked to the sharp blue sky through the squares of our kitchen window, pressed my back into the cool surface of the counter and nodded. He patted my shoulder, and I offered up a small tight smile.

“I guess I should be off, then.” He lingered for a moment rubbing his foot against his ankle, watching me with his head tilted in a way that reminded me of a child.

“Okay,” I said, letting go of my breath.

He grabbed his coat and briefcase, his shoes squeaking on the tile floor as he turned away from me and towards the door. “See you tonight.” He smiled back at us, cruising out into the daylight.

“You almost ready there, Iz? I’m going to run up and change. I’ll be back down in a minute, and then we’ll go,” I said, hoping my voice hadn’t sounded too tight.

In the bathroom, I filled the sink with warm water and tied my hair back. Tucking the stray strands behind my ears reminded me of the way Jonathan would do this as we sat on the couch watching a movie. Twirling and binding the back of my auburn hair reminded me of twisting away from Wallace as he tried to pull my hair loose again when I skirted around his apartment picking up clothes, preparing myself to walk back into the life I was supposed to be leading. I wondered how I could think of them so completely in

unison, how some touch of each of theirs related to my every moment. Did my mother think of Annie and my father simultaneously as she swept around the house picking up dishes from Annie's visits? I stared at my reflection in the mirror. According to Dr. Fischer, people with symmetrical features are more than twice as likely to cheat than people with offset facial traits. I pulled my hand up to my face and held it vertical against my nose, closing one eye then the other, trying to judge the evenness of my oval green eyes and if my high cheekbones were in line. Standing like this, evenly divided, or so it seemed, I wished that I could be like a flat worm in the hands-on exhibit at the museum: you could slice them in half right down the middle and they would regenerate eventually, making two of the same whole so that I could go on with both Jonathan and Wallace feeling more honest and complete.

In the car on the way to Izzy's school, I watched her out of the corner of my eye. She sat confident and calm, her books poised carefully in her lap, her hair combed back and tied with a red scrunchie. When she was younger, she had been such a fragile looking kid. Her glasses perched unsteady on the bridge of her nose always threatening to slip off. When she first started school, we were worried about her not fitting in. She was unathletic. She preferred books. From a parental standpoint, we were happy about this, but we worried about her being picked on by the other kids. There wasn't a trace of any of that now. She had made friends, her own group of girls that she invited over to the house for sleepovers. Too much ice cream and chocolate cookies, parties that she would wedge me out of when ever I peeked into her room at them.

"Do you want to have the girls over this weekend?" I asked.

“No, mom.” She rolled her eyes. “The party is at Trisha’s house on Friday. She’s turning thirteen, remember.”

“Oh, right. Maybe Saturday then? We can get ice cream and set up a tent in the living room for you guys.”

“Mom. She’s turning thirteen. We don’t do tents anymore, God.”

“Okay, well maybe we can do something is all I’m saying.” When had we fallen so out of sync? Thirteen, was that the cut off for us? I had no idea. This was past the age when my mother and I had each other to fight about.

“Yeah, maybe.” Izzy stared out the window the rest of the way to school.

When we pulled up in front of the squat brick building, I leaned over and gave her a short, quick hug before she could squirm out of the car. “Bye, Izzy. I’ll see you tonight.” She closed the door and raced away from me in the sunshine and front lawn that was filled with other kids.

At first, I tried to tell myself that things between Wallace and me had started off innocently enough, and even as I thought it, I knew that all people who have affairs must say this to themselves at one time or another. But things were never really innocent. One day, I noticed Wallace skirting at the edge of one of my tour groups, looking like a passerby who had stepped into the Museum of Science to avoid the sudden onslaught of spring rain. He wore a dark leather coat, tiny particles of water curling on the surface of it. He tossed his head, shaking his dark hair out, perfect dimples creasing his cheeks as he caught my eye and noticed that I was laughing at him. I had already taken the tickets of the fifteen or so visitors who had opted for a guided tour of the museum. Usually my

groups consisted of the elderly and parents with small children who, for an extra fifteen dollars, believed the voice of a stranger repeating “and moving along to our next exhibit” would entice their children to behave.

We both knew he didn’t pay, but I began walking down the hallway before anyone noticed we had an intruder on the tour. He hung in the periphery of my vision throughout each of the prepared speeches I gave. I blushed each time we made eye contact, heat rising to my cheeks. At the end, like always, I guided the tour into the planetarium, holding the solid metal door as each of the visitors passed through. Suddenly wrapped in post-tour depression, I headed to the front of the museum to take my break.

“Hey,” he called. I could hear the paddle of his shoes on the smooth marble as he rushed after me. “Wait up.”

I knew in that moment that I should have kept walking, that our meeting had felt too much like the start of a romance in one of those made for TV movies my daughter had fallen into the habit of making me watch. But just like in the TV movie, I was stupid enough to stop and turn around.

“Wallace,” he said, reaching out a hand for me to take.

“Dorie,” I replied, feeling my cheeks go pink, thinking that according to evolutionary scientists this indicated my health and robustness to the male waiting to dispense his seed.

“Don’t you ever watch the show?” he asked, pointing his thumb back at the planetarium. “I hear it’s better than the real thing. Well, not exactly better than the real

thing, but better than what you can see so close to the city with so many lights and all.”

He held out his hand to me.

I shrugged and took it, catching the scent of leather and the musky smell of his skin as he pulled open the door to the planetarium and let me slide by his chest. I could hear Dr. Fischer now: *Hypothalamus notifies the pituitary gland which rushes hormones to sex glands. Sex glands react by producing estrogen, progesterone and testosterone. Heart pounds, muscles tense, ahhhh the tingle of sexual arousal.* By the end of the show, stars shooting across the imaginary dome-like horizon, I had convinced myself we were mostly carbon, molecules floating down from explosions in the sky. So what did it matter if I let him run his finger around the smooth curve of my shoulder until I leaned toward him and rested my head against him? He spread his legs and our knees brushed, making me blush, but I held.

When the lights went up, I stared straight ahead, my mind reeling with the confused sensation of a half-dream, not really knowing if the things I thought had happened had really gone on between us in the dark. Then a shred of paper slipped easily into my palm.

“Call me,” he said. “We should have a coffee sometime.”

“I’m married,” I blurted.

“Married women don’t drink coffee?” he said, eyebrows flexed with an easy, careless smile.

Not this married woman, I thought. I’d never taken risks, always thought in small boxes, the four-year plan, the fifteen-year mortgage. Was I being melodramatic? So he



had touched my shoulder and our knees had brushed. This was only coffee, as Wallace had said.

“Okay,” I said and tucked the scrap of paper into my blue museum blazer.

So Wallace started meeting me for coffee at the museum almost every afternoon. He’d stand on the long cement steps, waiting for me to step down next to him and touch his shoulder. We would smile at each other and head for the Java House two blocks down on State Street. I didn’t mind if my co-workers saw this; they were mostly young interns who wouldn’t ask about my business. But at that point, I could still tell myself that Wallace and I were just friends.

On these frequent afternoons, sitting across from each other at a wooden table, his long legs stretched out underneath, just barely brushing the side of my foot and resting there, subtle gestures passed between us that in my mind I could still pretend to ignore. Of course part of getting to know someone new is also getting to know yourself all over again. Getting to repackage the details of your life, rename things.

Wallace had been to practically every state in the Union and seven different countries. He drove as often as he could, insisting that he liked to watch the way the sun shifted on the road. He was an architect; here because he had designed the new bridge that would connect the Cape to the city on the north end of the bay and he was supervising its construction. It was unusual for an architect to visit all his projects, but Wallace had said that he liked to have a personal relationship with his art and he always went to see his pieces being built.

What was my childhood like? What had I wanted when I was younger? Wallace wanted to know. These were things Jonathan and I never talked about, both of us

knowing the small, silly stories about each other, not recognizing that even the details of memory change with age, the way the light shifts to uncover something different about ourselves.

“So what were your parents like?” he asked one time.

I told him the story of Annie Fink—the white of my mother’s and Annie’s t-shirts glowing almost iridescent in the pale moonlight, my eyes adjusting to the waning darkness to focus on my mother and Annie, their lips pressed against one another, my mother’s hand cupped around the side of Annie’s face, pulling her closer. I could hear them whispering lightly over the sound of the crickets that thumped away into the night.

I started to cry and Wallace took my hand and rubbed the soft indent between my forefinger and thumb with his own thumb. We were sitting slightly to the side of the table, only the space of our legs between us, and he pulled my chair toward him, wrapped his arms around my back and I leaned into his chest, his lips brushing the edge of my forehead.

I let him weave his fingers into mine and lead me out to the street.

After that, things were easy, simple as if we were following a script set down for us and acted out over and over by people generations before. People did this kind of thing all the time in hotels, in dark offbeat restaurants; now I wondered if they brought me along as a witness, to pretend that the furtive glances that passed between them had nothing to do with heat.

Walking visitors through tours at the museum hopelessly reminded me of Wallace, so that by the time 11:45 rolled around, I was practically in a fit to bust out of

the museum to see him. By pairing my two twenty-minute breaks and my hour for lunch together, I could get away for a whole hour and forty minutes sometime in the middle of my day. I grabbed my keys and coat and headed out of the Museum to Wallace's one room apartment in one of the renovated Victorian homes on Winter Street.

I drew my arm up the length of the doorframe when he opened it for me. "So, what's the surprise?" I asked. I folded my arm, leaning against the wood with my elbow and played around with my hair, my shirt rising to expose the flat of my stomach.

"Get in here." He smiled, wrapping his arms around my waist and pulling me out of the hallway.

"So what is it?" I said and flicked my teeth over my lower lip, hungry for the taste of him.

"Close your eyes." He pulled me into the bedroom and into a long deep kiss.

Afterward, I got up and crawled over to where Wallace was sitting at his drafting board working on drawing another bridge of some sort. This one looked like it would be in some kind of a public park. I put my chin in the crease of his shoulder and watched him draw faint lines. This was the imaginatory sketch, he called it. One that he used to show the non-engineers what the finished product would look like. He was drawing a couple holding hands and looking out over a garden beneath them.

"Is that us?"

"It could be."

"Here, let me see." I grabbed the pencil from him. "I think you are much better looking than this jerk you've put in here." I erased the man entirely and made Wallace pose in front of the drafting board.

“Look like you’re in love.” I said. He winked and pouted his lips at me.

“Can I look now?” He asked after several minutes. “Hey that’s pretty good.” Now it was his turn to lean over my shoulder.

“What did you think, I would draw a stick figure or something? I used to study art, you know.”

“Why did you stop?”

I shrugged. “Not lucrative.”

“Now you pose.”

I stood like he did. “There are things you don’t know about me, Wallace. I can be very mysterious.” I let my bangs fall over one eye and peek-a-booped out at him.

“Sure, Dorie. Sure you are.”

“I can.” I protested, but then I just let him draw.

When he was finished, I walked over to look at our drawings of one another standing on Wallace’s imagined bridge. “It’s our own little never land. We’ll have to visit it sometime.”

He just turned around and kissed me and that was all.

As I was just reaching the museum, my cell phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Hey.” It was Jonathan.

“Oh. Hey.”

“Oh. Hey? Can’t a man call his wife? How are you Dorie? How’s your day?”

“Sorry. The day’s been sort of a hassle. Some poor kid threw up in front of the molds exhibit. It turned out that he was allergic to the smell or something but I think he was just grossed out by the slime molds.”

“Yikes. Well, do you want to meet me for a late lunch?”

“Uh. I don’t know I was just going to grab a bite with some of the girls.”

“Oh. Okay. Sure.” He sounded disappointed.

“I’m sorry. Maybe another time?”

“You feeling okay? I could bring you something.”

“No. It’s all right.”

Then to fill the silence, I added, “Are you happy, Jonathan? I mean really deliriously happy? Like if you died tomorrow, would it be all right?”

“Dorie, what are you saying? Are you sure you don’t want me to come over there? You don’t sound right. Were you really serious this morning about that trip?”

“I’m late, Jonathan. I’m leaving,” I blurted. I didn’t have it in me to add the *you* before I hung up.

I remembered my mother packing in the too bright sunshine of midmorning, after that night I saw her and Annie together through the glass sliding doors that led out onto the porch. My mother’s usually meticulous manner, her creasing and folding of shirts and pants, dissipated into a hurricane of wrinkled cloth.

“Where are you going, Mom?” I squinted up at her as she tried to brush by me where I stood in the doorway. She paused and kneeled down taking both my shoulders in her hands.

“I have tasted the apple, Dorie,” she said as if that were enough. What an odd and horrible thing I remember thinking, but I didn’t have the chance to tell her that. Standing, she rushed on, her heels clicking on the hardwood floors, tapping like raindrops down the stairs, the front door sliding shut, the shrillness of her shrieking somewhere between a scream and a laugh. I ran to the window of her bedroom and pressed my hand against the cool glass, watching my mother steal out of my life in Annie’s black BMW, her words echoing in my mind, words I had never expected.

What would I have told Izzy, if I had heard her voice rising from the kitchen calling out to me, her weight squeaking across the floorboards of our house? What would I have told her when finally she pushed through the door and saw me standing in our bedroom, suitcase in hand? That I’d met a man more virile than her father? But this had never been about something so scientific. Not really. Nor was it for my mother and Annie. Should I tell her the truth? About how I’d filled her with partial pictures in letting her believe that there was an easy simple science of love? That I, like my mother, was broken in some way, defective, deformed? Supposed to be biologically designed with a greater capacity to love, to care for her children, but really my mother and I were not.

The thing to do now was to drive to Wallace’s apartment and tell him that I had left Jonathan and that I was ready to start that mysterious, reckless life. It was dark out already, but driving toward downtown, I decided instead to pull into Fort Williams Park. I pulled over on the side of the road and walked through the tall field grass to the gated entrance.

Jonathan and I used to take Izzy here when she was younger to swing on the swing set or climb around the foundations of the old fort. Hands held tight, the three of us would crouch down into the darkened bunker. I liked to trace the serrated edges of the cracks in the walls with my free fingertips. Jonathan and Izzy started a game: on the count of three, we would all drop hands and stand in the black silence to see who could hold there the longest, alone, without grabbing on to each other or creeping back out into the light. I would hold my breath, waiting on Izzy, knowing that I should have been old enough to stand alone in the dark. Yet I was always the one to grab Jonathan's loose fingers and claim that I had thought I'd felt Izzy's hand against mine.

I walked along the sloping gravel path between the fort and the lighthouse, pausing at the edge of one of the cliffs. I watched the white spray of the ocean climb up the jagged coastline and wondered how far over the edge a person could go before they were forced down by gravity.

For the past few months, I had been driven toward Wallace down a path that I felt, in many ways, destined for. The restlessness, the rush of redefining myself into the person that Wallace knew, the whispered secrets of my childhood all tangled in my head.

I tried to picture what Jonathan was doing now. It was past five o'clock. Washing dishes, cleaning up, sitting down in front of the TV? I wondered if Izzy had asked where I was, and if Jonathan had looked past her with vacant, sad eyes, forced to admit that he didn't know. Would he tuck her in at night, brush his lips against her forehead and wince against her hair that smelled and looked like mine?

I spread my arms out against the wind, letting the scent of the ocean swirl around my nose; the salt-sweet tasted something like Wallace. I could almost feel him behind

me, his stubble in the crease of my neck as it had been that afternoon. I leaned back and my foot slipped, sending tiny pebbled bits of gravel skidding down the rocks. I let my breath go and slowly turned away from the edge.

I was shocked to find that no one was home when I got there. Maybe Jonathan had taken Izzy out for ice cream. Maybe he hadn't even gone into the bedroom and found my ring. I went into all the rooms, turning on lights and calling for them. I tried Jonathan's cell phone but only got the message. It must have been turned off.

Maybe I had walked into someone else's house. Maybe none of this had ever been mine and I had been imagining it all. I picked up a picture taken last year of us up in Vermont with my father. The four of us were posed on some rocks down by the river. I tried to remember what I'd been like last year, but I couldn't. My life hadn't felt like it had really started until I'd meet Wallace this past spring.

"Dorie. Thank God. Where have you been?" Jonathan came through the front door carrying a sleeping Izzy in his arms.

"I tried to call you, but your phone was off."

"Yeah. I've been at Izzy's dance. Remember, the radio station agreed to DJ and we were supposed to chaperone. We waited the whole time for you to show up. I'd thought that you'd gotten in an accident."

Izzy, too big and too old to be in her father's arms for long, slithered down to the kitchen floor "It's okay, Iz. You can go to bed." He kissed the top of her head. She padded by me without looking up.

"I'm sorry."



“It’s fine. Let’s just go to bed.” I wondered what he sensed, what he didn’t want to talk about, what he knew might come out better in the morning light. I listened to him walk into each of the rooms and turn out the lights. He flicked off the one in the living room before he realized that I was still standing in there.

“Dorie?”

In love, timing is everything. Our bodies know this. Perhaps that is why we couple young and sort the rest out afterward.

“How was the dance?” I kept my eyes on our front yard, the gray fencing, our polite mailbox, the perfect replica of the house in its yellow and blue color scheme. My suitcase was still beside one of the chairs.

“Izzy liked it, bopped around with her friends. Got asked to dance once by the boy I think she has a crush on during a slow song. They don’t play *Stairway to Heaven* anymore.” His voice sounded falsely exited, like this was the only thing we needed to talk about.

I turned to face him in the dark, but I couldn’t make out his features. I could only sense his silhouette. “Did you know that I wanted to be an artist, Jonathan? When I was in high school, that’s all I ever wanted to be. I wanted to go the Paris and paint people’s portraits on Montpernase. You know that they do that there. It’s a whole city block of artists who just sit there and paint. I saw it on PBS.”

“So be an artist, Dorie. What’s stopping you?”

I picked up my suitcase from behind the chair. I wasn’t sure that he could see what I was doing in the dark. “I’m glad you were there with her tonight. You can handle all this so well. What do you need me for?”

Then Jonathan moved toward me with slow deliberate steps, stopping only inches away. I thought that I could feel his breath as he grazed his finger against the top of the suitcase hanging in my limp arms.

“Coming or going?” he asked.

“Coming,” I whispered and let Jonathan take the suitcase out of my hand.

## SHIPPING OUT

On Rosh Hashanah, Ezra and his wife, Diane, shuffle into the foyer of the synagogue, their seven-year-old son, Joshua, between them, holding each of them by the hand. They can hear the rabbi's voice leaking out of the main room through the small propped open oak door, booming out over the heads of the already-seated congregation. Ezra glances in and he can see that their necks are already arched over their siddurs, their mouths working in somber prayer. As usual, Ezra and his small family are late.

They pause in the brick foyer. Ezra watches his wife slowly unzip the blue and white embroidered tallit bag. Joshua stands like a polite little soldier, arms stiffly at his sides, as Diane places the kippah squarely on the center of his head. She slides the folded tallit out from its bag and Joshua reaches his stubby fingers high into the air. She shakes it by the ends and the large rectangle flutters, falling like a curtain, for a second, hiding Joshua's whole body from Ezra's view and a tiny unobservable shiver moves down Ezra's spine.

Ezra pulls out his own tallit and shows Joshua how to pull the shawl over each of his shoulders so the smooth, silk embroidered words encircle his neck and so the thick blue string—the tzitzit— falls near his finger tips. Joshua's own tallit is too big for him and drags on the ground, so Diane whisks it off his shoulders, folds it in two and places it back down to cover his shoulders. Ezra shows him, by example, how to fold the hanging portion in the creases of his elbows.

Ezra can tell by the squint of concentration on Joshua's face that his son is trying, although he is too young to really appreciate the ceremony in all of this and for a moment Ezra wonders if they are doing the right thing by having him participate in the high holidays. By all rights Joshua should not be wearing a tallit until six years from now when he turns thirteen and, according to Jewish law, is ready to become a man. But no matter. On this Saturday morning, Ezra has been asked to read the Torah portion during the service and, because he has received orders that he will be going overseas, Diane wants their son to come to the bimah with him, which Joshua cannot do without wearing a tallit.

Ezra feels sorry that his son must remember his first time in a tallit as so unceremonious, that there will be no large party, that Joshua won't even be tall enough to see the printed characters of the torah scroll, that the tallit will be taken away from Joshua and stored in a closet until he turns thirteen, a transition which Ezra may or may not be there to see. The tallit is somewhat of a farce, a show for the congregation; his son looks more like a boy in a costume masquerading as a Jewish man. Ezra does not know what else to do to make this moment stand out for Joshua. Plus, it is what his wife thinks that

they should do. Regardless of whether or not this Roshashana will be a memory for any of them, on the first of November, Ezra is shipping out.

Services have not been the most important thing to Ezra; he and Diane are typical high-holiday Jews in their small community in Southern Maine. They come to pray at the temple on the New Year, but hardly ever light the candles on Shabbat. Yet ever since Ezra received his orders, everything has taken on more significance. High Holidays might as well be the thing to focus on, forging the last bits of family memories before Ezra goes overseas.

The rabbi asks the congregation to rise and Ezra leads his family in to take their seats. They sit in the third row from the back, the assigned area for the Levy family.

Diane waves across the aisle at their neighbors, Doug and Angie Rothchild. They have long been friends with the Rothchilds since Doug and Ezra had joined the Guard—both members of the 94<sup>th</sup> Military Police. Angie smiles and points at Joshua's tallit and gives him the thumbs up. They do not have children and Joshua has become something of a nephew to them.

Joshua shrinks in toward Ezra's knee. Ezra wants Joshua to be too old to be clinging like this in public, so he gives Joshua a gentle shove with his knee. Only he knows that his son is not beyond this kind of shyness. He feels guilty, so a few moments later he reaches forward, hands Joshua one of the prayer books, and indicates the page.

At the end of the prayer, the congregation erupts in song. Diane has a beautiful voice and Ezra leans in close to her as she sings. His favorite memory of her is when Joshua was a baby and Diane sang to him at night. Ezra used to turn the baby monitor on high whenever Diane would leave their room in the middle of the night to quiet Joshua—

the soft cooing noises accompanying her low, soulful moan. Ezra senses somehow that she would put her hand to his lips if he tried to tell her about that now.

He begins to look around the room. He sees Mr. Epstein, his pharmacist, and notes that the little boy about Joshua's age must be Mr. Epstein's grandson. He sees a few other people he recognizes from company picnics, one of them he thinks works in design. If he were in a friendlier mood, he thinks he would be happy to see them, but these people are not his friends. He can hardly name half of the congregation and he wonders at the choice to spend a weekend in the company of strangers, a weekend that is one of his last. He notices that Joshua has begun to squirm in his chair and has come uncomfortably close to kicking the seat in front of him. When Joshua finally does, an old man—what is his name? Geller?—turns around and glares. Ezra mouths *I'm sorry* and he puts his hand on Joshua's knee. Why *are* they here? Ezra wonders. Suddenly, he knows that he would rather be at home in their comfortable Saturday rituals—sharing the weekend paper or watching cartoons with Josh. He squeezes Diane's elbow. *Let's go*, he mouths to her and motions that she should follow him out of their aisle. She gives him a confused smile, warm but not comprehending what it is that Ezra wants.

Then it is too late, Mr. Goldstein, president of the congregation, who is in charge of directing the service and assigning prayer readings to the members of the congregation, nods at Ezra and motions for him to come up to the bimah. Ezra takes a deep breath and pushes Joshua along as they squeeze down their aisle toward the front. Joshua steps carefully up the stairs looking almost like he did last year on Halloween, dragging home tired, with his ghost costume pulled half off, the guest bedroom sheets dangling off his shoulders.

Joshua stumbles and Ezra reaches out to steady him, Ezra's hand at Joshua's back for the last few steps. Ezra thinks Joshua should not be up here with him at the bimah as he holds the Torah scrolls up in the air while the rabbi and the congregation chant the blessings. It feels too serious and forlorn. Joshua should be in the small trailer behind the temple at the children's service coloring with fat Crayola crayons, the story of Abraham binding Isaac on the pyre and God sparing them both by providing the lamb. He should not have to stand so somber and silent, pretending to understand.

"He is plenty old enough, Ezra," Diane had said this morning as she hitched up her dark stockings underneath her black skirt and Ezra looked at her reflection in the mirror. He wondered at this strange and beautiful being that was his wife, how she was suddenly so calm and steady, knew all the right things to say. "It's a reform temple. No one is going to care." It was Diane who ordered Joshua's tallit, so that their son could stand beside Ezra now.

"Shana Tova," the rabbi says to them after the service, grabbing Ezra's arm and halting them as they try to wade through the crowd toward the door. As before, Ezra feels in a rush to get home. "You read very nicely."

"Thank you," Ezra says.

"Will you be joining us for Tashlikh this afternoon?"

Normally Ezra and Diane only come to morning services on the High Holidays, thinking they've done enough for their parents and for Josh, so they skip the rest of the New Year's festivities.

Diane steps up to save him.

“Shana Tova, Rabbi. That was an excellent sermon.” She flashes him her easy smile. Ezra sighs.

“How are you all?” the rabbi asks her. Ezra sees by the way the Rabbi has rested his hand on Diane’s arm that they are settling in for a long talk—one that will try and encourage Diane to be in the choir and try to convince her that Joshua is not too young to begin his Hebrew studies. Ezra rolls his eyes and kneels down to Josh, asking him if he sees any of his friends. Joshua shakes his head.

“Well let’s go and find some.” He takes Joshua’s hand and leads him toward a crowd of children leaving Diane and the Rabbi to talk. Ezra fights with himself not to flash an annoyed look back at Diane.

Almost to the crowd of children, Ezra asks, “Do you see anyone from your class? Why don’t you go play with them?” Ezra needs to take a trip to the men’s room to clear his head. He can feel the anger mount inside of him and he needs a moment to wrest control. He doesn’t want to fight with Diane. He only wants to take his family home.

Joshua puts his finger in his mouth and stares up at Ezra. Ezra tugs Joshua’s finger out, perhaps a bit too hard. “Come on, buddy. Just for a minute. Go.” Joshua takes a few steps toward the group of kids who haven’t noticed him yet. Feeling satisfied, Ezra turns his back and begins to weave through the crowd. He’s a few families deep, when he hears Joshua shout, “Dad, wait. Dad.” Ezra turns to see Joshua struggling toward him, pushing through the dark sea of legs. His tallit has shifted and in his frantic rush, Joshua steps on a corner of the fabric that snags and sends him to the ground. Ezra rushes back toward him, but his son is already in tears. Ezra scoops him up and hurries through the crowd toward Diane, who is still talking with the rabbi.



“I’m sorry, Dad,” Joshua whispers.

“Let’s go,” Ezra says to Diane. He doesn’t care anymore that he is being rude.

Diane notices Joshua’s red face and she pulls away from the rabbi.

“Shana Tova. We’ll see you this afternoon.”

Ezra hurries on toward the car with Joshua in his arms without asking Diane what she means by telling the rabbi that they would see him that afternoon. He figures that there will be time to worry about that later. He hears Diane’s heels on the pavement rushing to keep up, but he doesn’t slow down.

At home, while they are gathered in the kitchen, Diane gets Ezra’s mother on the phone. Diane wishes her a happy New Year and hands Joshua the phone. Ezra stalks around the kitchen looking for something to eat. He doesn’t want to hear his mother’s recriminations, her thinking that they’ve gone overboard on making Josh come up to the bimah with him. But he refuses to tell his son to lie, to rob his son of the joy in telling his grandma what it was like to stand up in front of all those people. He listens expectantly and waits for the phone.

Joshua goes into a long, excited explanation of standing on the bimah with his father. How fun it was to finally get to look out at the crowd.

“It was like being on stage, Grandma, like in the school play. I think I even saw a guy up front picking his nose.”

When Joshua’s elated smile vanishes and he hands Ezra the phone, Ezra prepares himself to head off his mother’s criticism.

“We just wanted Ezra to be up there while I read the Torah portion. That’s all. Plus, who knows when I’ll be coming back. What if I miss services next year?” Ezra glances at Diane and heads through the sliding glass doors out onto their porch. Even though it’s not really High Holiday services that Ezra will be missing the most, it’s the easiest thing to say right now to make his mother understand. He knows that he is more worried about missing soccer games, Diane’s choral performances, family dinners, his son’s shifting impatient getting-too-big-body curled on his lap while they watch TV or the sound of his wife’s breath as she sleeps. But these are small things, things Ezra has no conscious words for, things he cannot make his mother understand, things he barely understands himself.

“Ezra, you’re being ridiculous. Do you know you are scaring your son with all of this?”

Ezra notices the paint beginning to peel off the porch railing, notes that he will need to fix that before he leaves, before winter can work at the wood. He will also need to get up on the roof, see if he can fix the leak that’s been seeping into their upstairs bathroom. His mother continues her tirade. He wonders if she knows that it is already too late for that.

“I’m not going to hear anymore of this, Ezra. You’ll be back before Passover.”

“Okay, Ma. Would you like to talk to Diane? Wish her Happy New Year?”

Suddenly Ezra feels worn and tired, sick of trying to explain his life. He creeps into the kitchen while his mother’s angry voice still leaks from the phone, he hands it to Diane and escapes to the couch in the living room.

“Can we watch a *Star Wars* video, Dad?” Joshua holds onto Ezra’s knee, the fold in the fabric of Ezra’s khakis.

“Because I did good today? Right, Dad? Didn’t I?”

Ezra swipes his fingers through Joshua’s hair.

“Sure.”

Joshua starts the video and settles down onto the couch next to Ezra. Suddenly, Ezra has the urge to pull Joshua into his lap, settle his chin on the top of his son’s head. But it feels wrong to Ezra, too needy. Joshua might sense something is wrong and ask Ezra to answer questions he’s not ready to. Instead, he says, “You are all right with what happened today right, Josh? You had a good time up there?”

“Yeah, it was cool, Dad.”

“Real cool,” Ezra says. He reaches out and covers his son’s hand with his own. Joshua looks over at Ezra and Ezra finds that he is holding his breath, but Joshua does not pull away, and the two of them settle into watching the film. It is a video that they’ve watched before on a countless number of rainy Saturday afternoons, only this time it strikes Ezra as hitting too close to home—bombs go off every few seconds, pieces of ships carrying soldiers being blown to bits across the screen. Skywalker, just a boy, who has lost his father. The metaphors are too much for Ezra who switches the channel to “This Old House” once Joshua has snuggled into his shoulder and fallen asleep. This is what Ezra wants to remember—the sound of his wife clattering in the kitchen, the feel of his son pressed into his shoulder—the second before he too drifts off to sleep.

At four, Diane stands in front of the TV and turns it off. Both Ezra and Joshua wake with the sudden stop of sound.

“Come on, guys. We should get ready for Tashlikh.”

“We’re going to Tashlikh?” Ezra asks, yawning. “Why?”

“Because I think we should.” Her tone is light, but she presses her lips together in her *don’t fight with me in front of our son* look.

“Why are we all of a sudden going to Tashlikh? We haven’t been for three years.”

“Joshua, why don’t you go put your sneakers on,” Diane directs.

Ezra knows that he should nudge Joshua off the couch. Diane has always been of the breeding that parents should present as a united front. Although Ezra agrees, he wonders how much they’ve been shielding Josh from, how much they won’t be able to shield him from later. “No,” Ezra says shifting so that Josh would have to climb over his out-stretched legs to get by Ezra and up the stairs. “I think Josh should have a vote here. What do you want to do?”

Joshua stands still, suddenly stunned that both his parents’ eyes have been directed toward him. He can sense that they are watching him, waiting for some sort of answer that he doesn’t have in his brain. Suddenly, he shouts, “I don’t care.” He stumbles over Ezra’s legs trying to rush toward the stairs.

Diane intercepts him. She kneels down so that her face is at his eye level and takes him by the shoulders to steady him. “Hey, Josh,” she says. “Go put on your sneakers and if we don’t end up going to tashlik, then we can go take a walk in the park. I’ll come up and get you once we decide.”

Ezra's back is toward them, but he can hear what sounds like Josh wiping his nose against the back of his hand and his feet slapping up the stairs toward his room. They wait until they can hear the sound of Josh's bedroom door shut.

"You are not going to do this, I won't let you," Diane says. Her tone is even and her calm is what is the most threatening to Ezra. Normally when they disagree, she is somewhat hysterical, the more sensitive of the two, ends up needing Ezra to comfort her, take her in his arms and reassure her that they will find a way out of their conflicts. But not now. She is cool. "You are not going to do this," she says again. "I think we should go because I want to and I think it's important for Joshua."

"Why? We've never done any of this in the past. Joshua was a wreck this morning. We've all had enough. Let's just stay home."

"Ezra, you're not being fair." She looks away from him, out their front window, across the street toward their neighbor's house.

Ezra stares at her, watching for tears to come to the corners of her eyes. But they don't. The floodgates have been closed somehow. How can she be so strong, he wonders, when he feels himself ready to break at any moment? He wants it to be over. He adds, "I'm sorry. I just don't want everything to feel so much like a last time."

"It's not, Ezra. Let's say it's the first time and we will do it this way every year from now on. We'll go to Tashlikh and Yom Kippur services and maybe after that we'll build a sukkah to celebrate the harvest with Joshua. So he can have that and Halloween."

She does not say so that Joshua can have that instead of Halloween. They both know that this Halloween the family will be on the road, taking Ezra to his unit, and staying in some crappy motel to say good-bye.

“Okay.” Ezra nods.

At sunset, the three of them walk through the already dampening grass toward the edge of the brook behind the temple to stand with rest of the congregation and throw breadcrumbs into the water in a symbolic representation of casting off their sins. Tashlikh is supposed to be conducted at the edge of a fast moving river so that the sins will wash away quickly. The stream at the back of their synagogue is so slow, however, that usually the bread hovers on the surface and then sinks in spongy clumps of dough. Four years ago Joshua had tried to retrieve his breadcrumbs and put them into his mouth, so they had stopped going.

Now, they stand close to one another. Ezra rolls his piece of bread between his fingers, shedding crumbs among the few leaves already scattered on the ground. He wishes that he could cast off the oath he took when he joined the Guard. He wishes that he wasn't like his father, another man stupid enough to volunteer. His father flew Med Evac in Vietnam, but was lucky enough to come home with a bullet in his leg and die in his bed three years ago at sixty-two.

“Your father would be proud.” That was the first thing his mother said when he called to tell her that he would be going overseas and it echoes in Ezra's mind as he stands at the edge of the water. He does not think about the rest of their conversation, how they talked about the difference between the wars—the technological advancements, that he wouldn't be fighting in a jungle, that in the desert it seemed easier to see an enemy approach. He stifled himself from saying it also makes him an easier target. He tries not to think about that now.

The Rabbi calls Ezra back into the moment, stops praying in Hebrew and says in English, “Let these bread crumbs represent the sins each of us have committed over the past year and let them be a reminder that we will learn from our pasts and not repeat these actions in the future.”

Ezra hurls his bread into the stream. It feels silly to Ezra to watch his regrets sink into doughy clumps at the muddy bottom of the water—times he hadn’t been attentive enough to Diane, had turned away from her in a fight, when he had gone to bed mad with his back toward her small, soft form in their bed. What was the point of thinking on them, if he couldn’t watch them wash away? This year it was even worse—how could the slow moving river make his regret at having to leave his family dissipate? He watches Diane and Joshua toss their breadcrumbs in beside his. He knows that neither of them needs forgiveness, and he stares at his muddying clump of bread, knowing that it won’t disappear.

On Yom Kippur, Diane not only wants them to go to services, but she also wants them to fast. Joshua insists he will fast as well, but Ezra watches Diane pack Fun Fruits and crackers into her purse. Joshua is cranky when they arrive at temple and so Diane lets him go to children’s services in the trailer behind the temple. Ezra is stiff and somewhat cold to her. She tries to take his hand, but he pulls it out of her reach. Ezra fumes for most of the service and he can tell that Diane is watching him. On their way out toward the parking lot, Diane grabs Ezra’s arm and says, “Why are you ruining this, Ezra?” He will not respond, only scans the crowd for Joshua’s brown-blond head. “Why are you being so mean?” She stops her forward motion and rocks back on her heel. Ezra stops too and

looks back at her, wondering if now will be the moment that it will all pour out of her. The fact that she is sick with worry and doesn't know if she will survive without him, the fact that she is angry with him that he is leaving her. He wants it to come, wants to hear words taking up the silent space that has crept in between them, the space she is trying to fill with all of these traditions instead of words.

Then Joshua runs up with a small brown clump of clay in his hands. He holds it up toward Ezra and Ezra recognizes something that looks like a face.

"What's this?" Ezra asks.

"It's a golem, Dad. Mrs. Goldbloom says that if you write words on a scrap of paper like *Adonai* or *Sh'ma* or even *I love you* then the golem will come to life and fight off everything bad. I made it for you, Dad. For when you go away. It will protect you from, you know, monsters and stuff."

Diane comes in behind Joshua and wraps her arm around her son's front, pulling him in so that his back is touching her. Ezra is a few feet in front of them holding the tiny clay creature out on his palm. "That's very nice, Josh," she says, but she is glaring at Ezra.

Immediately, Ezra is sorry. "This is great," he says to Josh. "Isn't this great?" He steps in close to Diane to allow her to inspect the golem, but really it is because he wants to touch her, say he is sorry, force the tension between them to flow out. If he were a different sort of man, he might find comfort in this thing, this spiritual gift, that his son has given him. Only he doesn't feel any comfort now. He only sees a chance here to help his family to get through this and come out whole on the other side.



Diane takes the clay piece from him and Ezra puts his now free hand in the center of her back. He is relieved that she stands there letting him feel the heat from her body. “What do you say we go for lunch?” He takes Diane in one hand and Josh in the other. No one bothers to mention that they were supposed to fast.

Two weeks later, on a Sunday, Doug comes over to help Ezra build the sukkah where the two families will share dinner during Sukkot. Later, Ezra and Diane and Joshua will camp inside this small wooden shelter for the weekend, which really means staying underneath the sukkah until the dew begins to wet their sleeping mats. The small wooden enclosure represents the temporary shelters where the Israelites were forced to live during their forty years of wandering in the desert. The roof must have enough holes to let in the rain to replicate the struggling of the Israelites in the desert and allow the family to see the stars, but still provide shade during the heat of the day. Ezra tries not to let his thoughts wander to thinking about the places where he will have to sleep the following year or if he will be able to sleep at all in the sandy heat of daylight or in the frigid night air, the sound of gunfire a constant drum beat in the background, something regular but something that never quite changes into the white noise of a furnace thumping in the basement. He wonders also what it will be like to sleep with so many other men. He’s gotten used to his wife’s easy rhythmic breath lulling him to sleep and now he will be surrounded by other bodies, rigid and tense like his, pretending to be alert in a way that you can never truly be in sleep.

He and Doug drive down to the Home Depot and buy what seems like enough lumber to build a house. Ezra doesn't want to upset the uneasy truce that has been struck between him and Diane.

"It's ironic," Ezra says, as both he and Doug watch the long sheets of plywood and two by fours being loaded up into the back of Ezra's truck. "You know. I'm going to keep those guys fed, clothed, and armed out there. Patrol the roadways. Make sure the lines of communication stay intact. Probably get the goddamn mail through."

Ezra spits and rubs his toe against the tar. He looks away from Doug. They're not supposed to say these kinds of things. It breaks code. "But I can't even do that for my family. I mean, hell, Diane won't even talk about this. All she wants me to do is celebrate the holidays, build sukkahs instead of fixing the house. Worse, all she says is *It's fine. It's going to be okay*. I'm leaving my wife alone with my seven-year-old to play man of the house. What the hell is that?"

They stand silent, listening to the thud of wood against wood. Ezra glances at Doug and watches Doug's jaws work. He's sorry now that he's said anything at all.

"You're all set, Mister," a teenager in an orange apron says, lifting the tailgate with one arm.

"Thanks," Ezra mumbles and he and Doug get in on opposite sides of the truck both thankful that the moment has passed without Doug having to say to Ezra that there is nothing either of them can do now.

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By three in the afternoon, Ezra and Doug have got the whole thing framed out. They are nailing up sheets of plywood while Joshua is going around and just putting nails into the lower parts of the boards.

“There are things you *could* do, you know,” Doug says. He stops and faces Ezra.

Ezra can see the outline of the knee brace through Doug’s jeans. The skiing accident last season up at Sunday River had left Doug with a torn ACL. Ezra had felt bad for Doug then because of the early end to his ski season, but now Doug won’t be going to Fort Drum, won’t be continuing on overseas.

“Like what?”

“You know.” Doug carelessly swings his hammer making a swooping noise through the air. They’ve never talked about it, never actually put it into words, more like dropped off sentences over garage-shared beers, but they both know that Doug is sorry that he can’t go and that Ezra has to go on his own. Ezra knows that it makes Doug feel like less of a man and Doug wants someone from the unit to stay behind with him and watch the war from the living room. Why not Ezra? They are both the oldest men there, pushing thirty-five.

“Accidents happen,” Doug says.

Ezra watches the hammer swing, cutting a circle through the cool afternoon air.

“Oow,” Joshua yells. Suddenly he appears before them, hopping up and down, his thumb in his mouth and a hammer at his feet.

“Let’s see it.” Ezra kneels down and wraps his arms around his son to still his body. He gently pulls the thumb out of Joshua’s mouth. It is purple and throbbing, a little blood oozing from underneath the nail.

“It’s okay, buddy. Let’s get some ice for this.”

He takes Joshua by his unhurt hand and leads him in through the sliding porch door. From the corner of his eye, Ezra sees Doug throw his hammer down and kick the dirt.

“Let’s make tomorrow just about us,” Ezra suggests to Diane. He is sitting in their bed watching Diane at the sink.

Diane is facing the mirror brushing her teeth. She looks high from the dinner that she’s hosted for sukkut with Doug and Angie, still glowing over how entertained they all had been by Joshua’s wonder at being allowed to sit on the ground and eat his dinner from his lap. It had begun to drizzle which was the only reason they weren’t all camping out there now. Ezra watches her reflection, the smoothness of her face. She leans down so he can’t see her and he hears her spit into the sink. She turns around to face him and folds her hands across her chest, making her nightgown billow with the sudden fullness of her breasts. The light over the sink is too bright behind her so that Ezra can’t quite make out her face.

“We could ask Doug and Angie. Let Josh go over to their house for the night.”

“But what about the sukkah? We promised Josh we’d camp tomorrow night.” She turns back around and reaches for a cup to fill with water at the sink.

“I just wanted some time for us, Diane.”

“This isn’t just about *us*, Ezra. This is about Joshua too, about our *family*.”

He looks at her wearily and shifts himself underneath the sheets.

“When are we going to talk about this Diane? All this charade is just plain nuts.”

“What do you want from me, Ezra? I’m doing the best I can.”

“I want you to say that things aren’t fine. I want you to say that it hurts. I want you to stop all of these major family events and let us just be us again until I leave.” He has moved off the bed and toward her as he is saying this. His face flushed red. He is moving too fast.

“Stop it, Ezra. You’re scaring me.” She holds her hand up to his chest.

Then Joshua comes tumbling through their door.

“I can’t sleep,” he says. His glance moves between his parents, looking confused.

“Will someone check for monsters?”

This has always been Ezra’s job; usually he gets the flashlight from his nightstand table and makes a big fuss. He turns back toward it, but Diane scoots around him, grabs the flashlight, and hurries down the hall. Ezra stands open palmed staring after them. This is exactly the kind of thing he wants to do the most.

When he hears Joshua’s door whine, he creeps down the hallway toward his son’s room, slowly so as not to make a sound. He watches through the long slight opening—his son and wife kneeled at the side of the bed—their heads craned awkwardly staring for monsters in the piles of backpacks, a discarded shirt, a spare tennis sneaker that Josh has out grown.

“Do you think it’s safe now, Josh?” she sings, her voice in that pulled upward motherly tone.

She goes to hand him the flashlight so he can search out the corners for himself. His small body tops out just above Diane’s kneeled down frame. He pushes the flashlight back toward her. “I can’t do this, Mom. Don’t make me.”

Diane's face falls and she looks around the room as if she is waiting for someone else to answer.

Then Ezra charges into the room. He doesn't know what he is going to say and both Diane and Josh look somewhat frightened by his sudden presence as if he has magically appeared by rising from the carpet. He takes the flashlight from Josh's hands and kneels down beside his wife.

"Nope," he says too loud and too cheery. "Nothing scary in here."

It is the deep part of nighttime—dark and still, when the rest of the world is clearly asleep. Even the street sounds have vanished, only the tall street lamps cast thin yellow streams of light into their bedroom window. "Please," Ezra whispers into Diane's ear, "come with me." He slips his hand into Diane's and pulls her gently out of bed. He guides her down the hall toward Joshua's room. Joshua is wound around an afghan and Ezra scoops him out of bed blanket and all.

The rain has stopped and Ezra leads his family across their small backyard, through the wet grass and into the sukkah. He has set up their sleeping bags three in a row and he has put a few candles down that cast a surreal like glow across the enclosure. Joshua squirms out of Ezra's arms, suddenly awake and suddenly excited at the prospect of sleeping outside.

"Ezra?" Diane says, stepping into the center of the sukkah. She spins around, taking it all in. She smiles and then begins to wipe small tears from her face. Joshua stands next to her and tugs at her nightgown.

"What's wrong, Mom?"

“Nothing, sweetie. It’s okay.” She kneels down and wraps her arms around his shoulders.

Ezra stands for a moment, watching his family look around the tiny room. His fingers go white clinging to the plywood doorframe. Finally, he sighs and steps in beside them. He places his hand on his wife’s shoulder and blows out the few candles.

“You can see the stars,” he says. “Look.” And they do.

## **WALKING SEX ACT**

On the third week of January, 2001 President George Bush, as one of his first official acts as president of the United States, cuts funding for International Planned Parenthood, objecting to the organization's practical support of a woman's right to choose. I watch the president announcing his decision on TV in my south Florida apartment. He smiles in his red tie and waves as the cameras flash and I worry about when he will be able to pass the same measures here in the US.

Then, on Wednesday of that very same week, I am sitting on a bench outside one of the coffee shops in City Place Mall in West Palm Beach, Florida the state where President Bush's brother serves as governor. City Place is an outdoor mall designed to make you feel as if you have been suddenly transported out of the neon heat of Florida and into a quaint European town like those in Southern France or Northern Italy. I am sitting outside in the half-shade of one of the buildings, reading a newspaper article about



a thirteen-year-old girl who gave birth to a baby boy in her parents' home, promptly placed her son in a trash bag, and threw him over the fence into a neighbor's yard.

I am sitting in the heat, feeling goose bumps rise on my skin as I finish reading the article about this young girl who really might be charged with murder.

It is during this same week that at, age nineteen, I come to think that I am pregnant.

I am not married, not even close. I am living on a horse farm in Loxahatchee for the winter season, a small town twenty miles west of Palm Beach, working as stall help, training, braiding, clipping horses, picking up whatever kinds of work I can find so that I can make enough money to support my horse and myself. My period is two weeks overdue and it has become my habit to get off my horse when I feel sweat dripping sweetly down the backs of my thighs and race to the bathroom to see if my period has started. No one around me knows what these frantic rushes to the restroom are about. I have a story about a UTI all prepared should anyone think to ask. I am learning how to keep secrets.

Most everyone else intimate with my life is one thousand miles away, up north in New England, hunkering down near wood stoves to block out the winter that rages outside. I don't want to be a burden to them so far away. But more honestly, I am ashamed. I cannot admit to my mother that I have been careless, and I cannot call my father long-distance and tell him I've been having sex. It's not a conversation anyone would really like to have with a parent, ever at any moment in their lives, let alone at a time that threatens to change the shape of it.

My boyfriend and I have only been dating three months. He, too, is in New Hampshire. I don't know how he will react and again this isn't exactly something I want to handle over the phone. (*Hi sweatie, crackle crackle, did I mention I think I'm pregnant?* Dead air on the line.) I don't want to make him worry before I am even sure, even though I am driving myself crazy keeping all of this trapped inside. But most importantly, I don't think that I want to have this baby, and who knows what kind of ownership he might feel?

Some six months ago, when discussing abortion laws in a college women's studies class, I had raised my hand and asked why a potential father didn't share more in the legal decision to terminate a pregnancy. At the time I remember thinking that by making abortion solely the mother's choice, we were sending a mixed message about fatherhood and responsibility. Pregnancy has always been a woman's problem because, lets face it, it is her body that starts to show the signs, making it her fault, her fault alone, when clearly this is not possible. But the father is hardly held responsible, so seldom publicly berated, and he is never the one to be sent away to some secret convent in the woods, some relatives in Arkansas, "gotten in trouble" and then hidden from view. *How can we make pregnancy a man's problem?* I thought, perhaps foolishly then. Of course, then it wasn't really my body either.

Now on the Sunday of this third week of January, I sneak out of bed, glance over at my roommate. I watch her breathe in the bed beside mine in the dim morning light. *I should wake her.* I think it twice, pause, stand in the hot, heavy air of our room, and still can't.

So because I read about that young girl earlier in the week, and since then I have seen her face on the news—the tired-sorry-sad brown eyes, sunken in, exhausted—I drive to the emergency room in the slightly larger neighboring town of Wellington.

I know that I could take a home pregnancy test, but I want to be sure. I also don't want anyone to know what I am doing, what I am afraid of. I am terrified that if I find out on my own that I am pregnant in some public rest room or the green port-a-can on the show grounds, which reeks of fake cherry scent to cover over the odor of human excrement, I think I will not be able to stand. I worry that I will drive into a palm tree or drink a bottle of Clorox or use a blunt object on myself or engage in some other violent act. Health Stat? I just want to know what my options are. I just want someone there to hold my hand, even if it's the hand of a stranger.

I sit in the ER waiting room of the Wellington Medical Center, watching the sleepy Sunday news programs flicker on the TV in the corner of the room, waiting for my turn in triage so that I can get blood drawn for a pregnancy test. I sit with my legs crossed, trying to pretend that I have not been bawling all morning and unable to sleep for the week. To the side of me, I watch a couple holding hands, wrapped in some private grief over their daughter-son-cousin-mother-uncle-friend who is behind closed doors being cared for by professionals. The woman bites her nails and stares at the opaque light of the mini-blinds. The man rubs his foot against his ankle. They are looking away from each other but they are holding hands, their seclusion, their sad solitude broken by their joined fingers resting against the wooden chair arms. I fold my arms in front of me in a mock hug because I've got nothing better to do with my empty hands.

There is irony here. The fact that I have come to an emergency room—the urgency in my need to discover and the urgency that surrounds what has become public debate—a matter of life and death. There is bitter fighting on both sides at any protest. Those giant posters of baby parts—a tiny arm next to a quarter—supposedly pictures of waste from an abortion clinic. The people who carry them saying things like “God knows you are wrong, but I will pray for you.” The angry response from across the street—“Keep your religion off my vagina.” Where does this moment in the quiet ER stand in any of this?

I shake my head and try to concentrate on the man across from me. His white t-shirt is smeared with blood and he anxiously glances back and forth between the room where his bleeding friend is being treated and the softly glowing exit sign above the glass entrance doors. His problems are bigger than mine.

I lean back against the soft, green leather and close my eyes. There is something remotely comforting about the air-conditioning as opposed to the sweltering heat outside and my small, cramped apartment, which smells like rotten eggs from the sulfur in the water and pig shit from the potbelly pig that lives in the poolroom adjacent to mine. I stare at the tiled ceiling, thinking that I already know the results, and these scenes play out over and over again in my head, my options as I know them.

I am laid out on my back with my legs splayed in a small, dark room of some clinic on a side street in downtown West Palm Beach. The cold metal of the stirrups against my heels, the quick cool splash of antiseptic as I stare up at the paneled ceiling. A tube no larger than the speculum they insert during an annual pap exam. What will the motor sound like when the doctor flips the switch? Will it be the loud whirl of a house

vacuum like the one I used to ride on the front of as my mother cleaned our carpets in the old house? Or will it be a soft whir, something almost silent, something closer to what I imagine as the solitary sound of a different kind of life passing by?

Or I fill a prescription at a drug store. I drive home with my pills in a little brown bag, sitting on the seat of my car beside me. I fill a glass of water from my own sink. I watch the water drip from the faucet and swirl down into the drain, maybe I turn on the garbage disposal for the desired sound-effect. I tip my head back and swirl the pills around in the back of my throat, swallowing hard. Then I sit in the comfort of my living room with a heating pad on my stomach, watching *Casablanca* and the life I could have had slowly slips out onto the Maxi-pad lining my underwear.

I tell no one. No matter what. It is a secret that will always play on my lips.

I wonder what kinds of uncomfortable, tight spaces the thirteen-year-old girl in the paper found herself in. What other secrets she didn't tell. How she must have hid her pregnancy from strict, angry parents with baggy T-shirts, the seams of her jeans pressing taut to bursting. How her peers at school taunted her. *Fat bitch. Stupid whore.* And how many times did she wish that she would stumble to the ground and fall on her stomach as the mocking group of girls shoved her while she walked past them out onto the playground tar? Did she stand in front during dodge ball, facing the firing squad—the line of eager, smirking boys ready to kick red rubber balls at her full force—praying, hoping they wouldn't miss? Did she walk slope shouldered, trying to hide her new breasts in the hallways from creeping, groping fingers? Who knows—she was thirteen. How well do you know your body, yourself, at thirteen? I was an awkward, gawky teenager running to my mother's room in the middle of the night afraid I'd come down

with breast cancer when my breasts finally started to show. Maybe she never even had her period. Maybe she never even knew what to watch for until it was too late. Maybe she didn't even know she was pregnant until the small, sticky body slipped from her insides and she put it in the trash bag and chucked it over the fence because what else do you do when you don't know and there is no one to help you decide?

The nurse calls my name and I step into her small office. I am thankful that it is a solid room with a large oak door and not a small cubicle with a thin, almost transparent curtain. She takes my blood pressure, heart rate, temperature. "What's wrong?" she asks. Her voice is a soft, southern drawl. "What brings you here?"

"I want to know if I'm pregnant." I start to cry again, the tears rolling down my cheeks in big, heavy drops, and I look at the floor, embarrassed to be crying in front of a stranger.

"Oh, honey." She grabs my hand across the desk and gives it a tight squeeze. I feel grateful that I have found her or been given her, this nurse who happened to be available when my name was at the top of the list.

"Do you know who the father might be? I mean, if you are pregnant?"

"Yes," I nod. "He's my boyfriend," I explain. "A steady relationship," I find myself justifying. "But he's up in New Hampshire and I'm here for the next four months. I can't tell him over the phone."

"So you have no family here?"

"Not that I can count on."

"It's okay" she says. "We can deal with this. But a blood test will cost you \$300. You can buy a pregnancy test over the counter. They are very accurate, you know."

"I can't. I can't do this alone. It's why I came here."

"I understand," she says. "You want options."

I nod.

"Here's what we'll do. Go to the drugstore and buy a test and come back and take it here." I like that she is taking charge, giving me instructions. It feels safe to no longer have to plot my movements on my own.

Before I leave, she bends down and slips her purse out from underneath the table and slides a business card out from her wallet. She writes a seven-digit number on a white sticky label and, above it, a doctor's name.

"He was good," she says. "You know, just in case."

Instinctively, I find my eyes drifting to her gold wedding band. But you're married, I want to say, but I know this will sound full of judgment.

"We just weren't ready, at the time, to have them. We have them now."

I stand up and hug her, relieved to find an older-maybe version of myself to help me through all of this. I walk across the parking lot and crawl back up into my truck to drive the two blocks to the nearest drugstore.

The statistic I know states that approximately two women, ages 15-44, out of every hundred have had an abortion. I don't know if I know one hundred women, but I do have two close friends who have had abortions. One of them shrugs, says she did not want kids, didn't think she would be a good mother, and doesn't regret the decision. The other, unmarried at the time, says she dreams of her red-headed children every night. The girl from the newspaper, at thirteen, is not included in this statistic.

I do my best to hide my left hand as I pass the small blue box over the counter to the cashier in the drugstore. This could be a good thing, right? Having a child? How does the world know I'm an unwed woman in my third year of college? This could be the happiest day of my life, for all this curly brown haired woman knows in her red smock and Wallgreens nametag. One thing she does know for certain is that I am having sex. After all, pregnancy is a walking sex act.

I think of all the mixed messages that I've gotten about sex from childhood until now.

The pornographic magazines I found under my father's bed when I was five—a woman wearing nothing but a red telephone cord (*Mommy, why does Daddy have these pictures that make fun of women?*). Sex Ed in grammar school, sitting boy-girl-boy-girl with Mr. Agello pinching the fat fleshy part of his forearm and saying that was what the vulva felt like. My sister and our best friend camping out in the living room on the leather couches, giggling in the night glow moonlight, wondering what it felt like to be touched. The wonder being shattered when my sister, my almost twin, was forced into sex at fourteen. *I was drunk* she said. *He was quick* she said. *It hurt like hell*. No laughter. My own sordid first attempt at sixteen with a boyfriend on an old mattress with John Mellencamp playing in the background to block out the sound. And the most recent, the stuff that felt good, great even, in love on the bathroom floor, the cool tile biting at the skin of my back.

I think of Laura Bush standing beside her husband and her two children, staring out at a crowd of cameras in her knee-length blue suit-skirt, and I wonder what it took to conceive those two kids. I picture a young George and Laura in a top-down convertible



parking at a roadside look-out with a view of the bright lights of Dallas, crickets chirping on a hot, dry, Texas night. I imagine them leaning into a desperate kiss. Then George pulls back and says, "Now Laura, all we are really doing here is a selfless, religious act in the name of God to proliferate his creation. This isn't because I love you and this has nothing at all to do with the heat." Isn't that what he'd like us to believe? Every sex act intended? Every pregnancy wanted, possible, planned?

And what about the other kinds of sex? The polar opposites. Maybe the girl in the paper was raped by her parent. Maybe she bore her father's child and who wouldn't want that memory thrown away? Wouldn't it have been infinitely better to stop the thing before it really started? When it was a tiny mass of cells replicating? Not a baby sucking its last bits of air through a plastic bag? Thirty-six states have laws requiring minors to either obtain parental consent and/or proof of parental notification before they can choose to have an abortion. Florida is one of them.

I shuttle the test kit back to the ER and I find my nurse, whose fingers feel warm woven through mine as she takes me by the hand and she leads me into the back and toward the bathroom. She curls her free arm around the doorframe and reaches for the switch just inside the door. She flicks on the yellow light and motions me gently forward. She says she will stand right outside. I think she is the one who closes the door behind me.

I squat over the stick and let my urine run all over the edges of my fingertips, making sure I've soaked the cotton tip of the test stick. I place the test flat on the back of the toilet and in the two minutes it takes for the symbols to come up, I list the reasons I'm not ready to have a child yet.

One, I have no means to support this life in this world. (In 2001, eighty-eight percent of women who have abortions list this as the main factor in their decision).

Two, I want to bring up my children in a loving, supportive home with a loving supportive father. I am not married, so how can this be possible?

Three, I want to graduate college. I'm not ready for the responsibility. I want to travel. I want to be skinny. I want to be athletic. I want to go places with my horseback riding. I want to look nice in a wedding dress. I want a successful career. I want the sky to be the limit. I don't want this to be the shape of my life. The ratty apartment, the forgotten and impossible dreams squashed. Squeezed into parenthood. Angry. Resentful

These reasons feel hopelessly selfish and stubborn. Inexcusable. No less true. I add another reason to the list to feel righteous, more like a woman, a mother, maybe.

Four, I want to give my child a fighting chance at happiness. I am not the thirteen year old girl, helpless, but how with my limited means, my lack of support, can I do that now?

Still, if two blue lines come up instead of one, despite my nightmarish visions of single motherhood, I'm not sure if I will be able to call that doctor. If I won't dream of the children I choose not to have. If someday I won't regret this.

Then, I find myself thinking about the feel of a child, the little brown haired girl I used to baby-sit. The daughter of the woman who took care of me as a little girl. I remember the feel of her small, needy fingers grabbing up into the air. *Pick me up. Pick me up.* She reached for me and I bent and pulled her into my arms and sat her down with me in a rocking chair while her mother was in the back bedroom busy with her father who was dying of brain cancer. *It hurts* and she pointed to her belly only I thought she

meant something else and I ran my hands over the small bones of her shoulder blades. Her fingers felt like moth breath as she wrapped then around my neck and then she vomited into my hair and I didn't recoil. It felt like the most natural thing in the world for her to vomit right into my hair. The soft dependency she had on me, the need of another body, that kind of trust that only I could offer to her in that moment. *It's ok, baby. It's ok.* I kept rubbing my fingers down her back as we rocked.

I've never really gotten it before this moment in the bathroom in sweaty south Florida—a woman's right to choose. Despite all the NARAL meetings I've been to, the banners I've held up, the Democrats I've had to support because the other options threaten to take my choices away. All of these things were abstract. We use war metaphors in the abortion debate. We say we are fighting on the frontlines for Women's Rights. But here I am on the real frontline and all of those war metaphors—those large, loud groups—don't seem to make any sense. It's a small, private, internal battle. Even battle is the wrong word. It's quieter than that, softer, and more sacred. The nurse told me that one way to know if you are pregnant is that your resting heart rate elevates a bit. I put my fingers to my wrist and try to count out my pulse. This is my body, my body. my body we are talking about.

Later that afternoon, I'm sitting at City Place again at one of the outdoor tables watching the fountain with its automatic water show that goes off every thirty minutes or so. I watch the little children edge close to the fountain as streams of water hop like living things between each of the separate little cement ponds. I see a little girl with blonde-brown hair and hazel eyes just like mine spring into the air each time the water does. I

can't take my eyes off her. She walks by my table when the water show stops and she pauses with her finger in her mouth and looks up at me.

"Why is she crying, Daddy? Why is that woman crying?" She looks up at the tall man standing behind her.

"I don't know, honey." He reaches for her hand. "Why don't we leave her alone?" And he pulls his little girl away.

We search for reason in the things that happen to us. We search so hard that it seems as if nothing ever comes as chance.

I pick up my cell phone and dial my boyfriend.

"What's wrong?" he asks, in an almost-panic because he can hear me crying.

I start with the most abstract. "Did you hear," I say through sobbing gasps, "that President Bush cut funding for International Planned Parenthood and soon he will try to take our right to choose away?"

"And that's why you're crying?"

He knows that I am slightly neurotic, over-passionate about things like my mother. He seems to love me anyway.

"No. I've spent the last week afraid that I was pregnant. But thankfully, I'm not." I pause and let out a slow long breath, the one I feel like I've been holding in for the past week. Then, I relay my whole long, messy day, even the part about the too-young-mother and her trash bag.

"Why didn't you tell me? I could have helped you. It would have been *our* problem."

Right then and there, I know that I love him, that he would not have vanished, that he believes in what he says. I feel slightly guilty that I've not let him in on something that he *has* been a part of.

"I know. I'm sorry. I just didn't want to tell you over the phone."

"I love you," he adds, "You wouldn't have been alone in all this."

"Okay," I say because right then and there I don't have the heart to tell him that he is wrong.

### DANCING IN AMERICA

On a Friday night my friend Lindsay and I head out to *Suite 152*, the local dance club in old town Fort Collins, Colorado to laugh, enjoy the music, meet a few new people, and stumble home with a lip numbing buzz. Since the war in Iraq, I've made a conscious decision to worry about Saddam and our failing attempts to stabilize Baghdad mostly on weekdays during the small, enraged conversations that I have with my peers, debating the merits of American foreign policy. But tonight, as part of a unique, perhaps regrettable, American luxury, I flash my ID at the door, put my right hand out to be stamped, and skip down the steps into the loud music and smoky air.

The mood is unsurprisingly jubilant; already intoxicated patrons swing to the thumping bass in the middle of the fairly crowded dance floor. There is a good swarm around the bar, figures leaning over the dark countertop, bending forward with anticipation, pointing toward the shiny bottles that line the back wall. My friend and I shoulder gently up to the bar, purposefully next to a group of five or so single guys,

dressed in the typical outfit for a Friday night—tailored looking jeans, tight shirts, all tanned skinned, all with gelled dark hair. The nearest one to us, dressed in a white mesh-like sweater, turns to me and asks if I’m having a good time. I smile, respond yes, and say that I’d be having an even better time if he would order us some drinks. He smiles back and replies that he would be honored to. Meanwhile, Lindsay works her way past me to speak to another one of the guys in this group. The man next to me drops his head down to curl his voice around my ear so that we can talk over the thump of the music while we wait for our drinks.

“What’s you’re name?” I ask.

“Simud,” he answers and adds, “Yours?”

“Judea,” I reply, without thinking because living here, in America, I have never had to.

Simud raises his eyebrows, looks away for an instant as if contemplating what I have just said, then he looks back again, nods and smiles.

Being named after the southern part of Biblical Israel, I have always felt that my name is clearly Jewish. When I was born, my uncle wrote a check made out to “West Bank Franck” and the bank actually cashed it. Given the present state of the world, it now seems like an insensitive, especially considering the conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis; yet, my father still tells this story with a good belly laugh.

To my own mild astonishment, for most of my life, most people have been surprised to learn that I am Jewish. (You’re Jewish?! Quiet amazed gasps anytime September rolls around and I mention that I am attending services.) Maybe my Jewishness goes incognito because I am blond-haired and hazel-eyed, and I retain most of

my mother's Puritan, Scottish/English features. My Judaism comes to me from my father's side. In fact, the orthodox tradition would not consider me Jewish at all. My family has also been completely absorbed in American tradition and we celebrate all of the holidays that Hallmark advertises. However, given my name, I have often felt that I might as well be wearing a blue Star of David on my sleeve or one of the various identifying markers that Jews have been forced to wear throughout the centuries. But here, in America, I've never felt that vulnerable; my Jewishness has often been treated as a novelty—the clever outsider with mixed knowledge of Old Testament traditions sprinkled with the New.

When I was growing up, my well rounded knowledge of the bible, my ability to read Hebrew, knowing the Sh'ma, getting to miss a few days of school in the fall to attend temple with my family, and celebrating Passover alongside Easter baskets pretty much described the extent of my active Judaism. I am still undecided on the God question—*is there a God? One God? Many Gods? God? God? God?*—and the role he/she/it will play in my life. I have had a bat mitzvah of sorts, one that was conducted at home and overseen by my grandmother. Because my family descends from a long line of rabbis and my grandmother studied at various acclaimed Hebrew Universities, we decided, as a family, that this *counts*. I did not have the large gaudy party afterward.

In college, I became the “token Jew.” In classes that were mostly filled with white Protestants, I explained as best I could a “Jewish identity” in response to cultural issues as if I, a half Jew, all American, could speak for the Jewish masses. I didn't mind this, I was proud to know something more, something different than my classmates, and proud to display the heritage that had passed to me most intimately through my grandmother.



Yet here, in graduate school, standing inches apart from, by the sound of his name, someone quite possibly Arab, sharing breath and air, my shot of tequila and his Red Bull and Vodka, I wonder how much my Jewish name matters now in this Post September 11<sup>th</sup> world.

“Where are you from?” I ask.

“Where do you think?” he answers, being coy or trying to judge me by my answer given his Post September 11<sup>th</sup> realities, I can’t quite tell.

“I don’t know,” I shout, refusing to bite, I would rather he tell me. I wasn’t brought up to make assumptions.

“Near Beirut,” he says.

I nod. Just then his friend and my friend re-join us. Lindsay points to me and says, “Symur, this is my friend Judea.”

“What is it?” he leans toward me with a shout, his dark hair falling over his eyes. “Shaydianna?” or something like that. The music is loud and I can’t quite hear him.

Lindsay starts to say, “No, it’s...” only I shake my head and she lets her voice fade out. For the first time, I’m not correcting someone on my name. She scrunches her eyebrows, tilts her head, and squints her eyes at me. I lean into her and whisper, “Don’t, they’re Arab. Let him think it’s something else.” Simud, of course, already knows. So I let Symur rename me and he pulls Lindsay off onto the dance floor.

When September 11<sup>th</sup> first happened, my first fear came for America and my first hurt for the families with scared and disconcerted faces desperately searching the walls of posted missing signs looking for notes from their vanished loved ones, and for my friends attending college at the heart of the financial district who had to watch or worse hear

bodies crashing to the ground. Then my hurt and worry directed itself to the Muslim American community as many of them were unfairly targeted as terrorists. Each of the Muslim families living in the little town in New Hampshire where I was living at the time hung extra large American flags from the windows of their homes and businesses in a futile attempt to dissuade a growing hatred. I talked to my dear friend Ruth on the telephone. She converted to Islam years ago and her husband immigrated here from Pakistan. She told me the horrible things her daughter would come home saying—people’s naive assumptions about a religion and cultural identity that, by default, had just hit the front page. *Is it true, Mom, that Muslim women have to obey men?* I was sad for Ruth, that her daughter had suddenly become the “token-Muslim.” Ruth, thankfully, started a Muslim awareness and education program through her local PTA.

Then a slow trickle of rumors began to surface accusing Israel of plotting the terrorist acts of September 11<sup>th</sup> simply to blame Muslims, and my concerns began to focus inward in a way I never expected. A French publisher printed a book that supported these claims and in Europe it ran in mass circulation. More than once I heard people ask in whispers—*Why had so many Jews stayed home from work that day?*—ignoring the fortunate fact that many *Americans*, by luck alone, had not been in the Trade Center where they should have been that day in September. And as violence escalated in Israel and in what, I sincerely believe, will someday *officially* be Palestine, I watched President Bush in the rose garden warn Israel about being too harsh when defending itself from terrorists. I shuttered. What would happen if America no longer allied itself with Israel—no, not in the global sense—what would happen to me?

Most people think that my name is beautiful and ask where it comes from. From the age of precociousness, probably in my case twelve, I have crafted a neatly packaged story that I always recite. I tell people that I am my parents' last attempt at redemption. They are both atheists, and although they thumb the existence of an afterlife, who really wants to take that kind of a chance? In recognition of this, they bestowed the most religious name possible—my first name, Judea, the promised land, the root of the word Judaism; Dominique, my middle name, the Latin for of or pertaining to God—upon their only daughter as a last ditch effort to appease the Deity just in case he really exists. Chalking my name up to forgiveness for my parents always makes people laugh. A slight chill wanders down my back as I wonder if someday I will have to forgive my parents for my name.

There is, of course, a truer story behind my name, one laden with the history of my family. My father is intensely proud of his heritage, even if he no longer believes in God. My family (on my father's side) descends from a long generational line of Rabbis. In fact, my family was saved from the Holocaust because my great grandfather was a Rabbi and a temple over here in America sponsored his family to come to the States shortly before Hitler's army invaded Poland. Despite his lack of belief in God, my father is not alone in retaining a sense of pride for his Jewish heritage. There were numerous Jews in my congregation growing up nicknamed High Holiday Hitters because they only came to temple twice a year (myself being one of them). Most of the Jews I know have never kept kosher and a good half of them find reason to celebrate Christmas, if only by going over to the houses of one of their Christian friends. Yet when asked, they consider themselves completely Jewish. The Prime Minister of Israel, Ariel Sharon, is, in fact, a

secular Jew. What then does it mean to be Jewish, if not denoting a certain religious belief?

Throughout history, Jews have been persecuted for their “beliefs.” The Romans tortured us; the Babylonians destroyed our temples. During the Spanish Inquisition, Jews were killed or expelled from Spain for not being Catholics. (One of the first explorers to set foot on the Americas was a Jewish man named Louis de Torres. History has it that he too was seeking a religious refuge in the New World.) Yet, in all of those instances Jews were allowed to make a choice about their identities, convert and they would be spared. Throw off the cloaks of the Torah, accept new religious beliefs, and they could go on with their lives, most often studying the Torah in secret—Jews in hiding. When I was young and my grandmother would tell these stories to me stretched out in the sunshine on our back porch in Syracuse, New York, what I most often pictured were people huddled in small darkened caves, crouched over the long, stiff sheets of the Torah, illuminated by candlelight.

If my conception of history serves me well, Hitler changed all of that. As he systematically segregated and slaughtered the Jews throughout Europe, he began to label us with an identity that extended far beyond religious belief. Hitler went so far as to measure the size and shape of people’s facial features in order to expose what he considered a biological indication of their Jewishness. In middle school, I remember studying Nazi propaganda—drawings of people with rat shaped faces—branded Jews. I sat in the small wooden desk and pressed my face close to the black and white reproduced images on the page of my eighth grade history text, trying to soak up the mock depiction of those who had been taken away. In the bathroom, later that same day,

I stared at my profile in the mirror, the yellow of the bathroom tile reflected behind me, surrounding my image in a halo of sunshine like color. *Thank God*, I thought, *I have my mother's nose. If someone like Hitler comes, he will not know I am a Jew.* For Hitler, there was nothing we could promise that would save us, no compromise to be struck. Accepting Jesus, agreeing to dye our hair blond and wear blue contacts (I know there were no contacts back then, but if there had been, I'm sure it would have been part of the proposed bargain) or bearing the image of the cross against our breasts would not have prevented even one of us from being burned in the crematoriums. Judaism was no longer in the mind; it was part of the body.

If we were to hide, we would have to hide our physical selves. I remember reading in Lawrence Langer's Art from the Ashes: A Holocaust Anthology the story of a woman who climbed down into the receptacle of an outhouse and hid with her sister, chest deep in a pool of murky, brown water, the thick sludge of excrement sliding around their legs, to escape from Nazi murderers. If it was in our skin, our blood, our eyes, the shapes of our faces, where else was there left to hide but in the dark, uninhabitable places?

I will never experience that kind of fear in America. Holocaust remembrance is about that—*never again*. Yet with the current violence of the world, with genocide still happening, I wonder about the act of being labeled with a political identity that feels impossible to hide.

Hiding is a habit hard to break. My father tells a story of his trip across Europe. He was in his mid-twenties, a bulging-eyed, skinny kid from Queens, floating around the museums of Italy. He met a man on the steps of the Pantheon, a burly, Italian looking

gentleman, who turned to him and asked in Yiddish, “Are you a Landzman? Are you one of my countrymen?”

My father smiled at the nostalgic sounds of the old language that rattled around his house as a young child. He reached out to take the man’s hand, the man of his country, who promptly spun a large gold ring around on his finger to reveal the Star of David engraved in what was supposed to be the top of the ring, but which the man choose to keep carefully clasped against his palm—1970 something and still a Jew in hiding. They chatted for a while, reminisced perhaps, until the sun faded, casting long low shadows against the stone. I imagine that as they moved away from each other, the man grabbed his hand to his stomach and twisted the face of his ring safely back around.

To this day, my father does not understand how the man in the café knew he was Jewish. When he told me this story over the phone, I sighed. “Well, you look Jewish, Dad.” And I too have bought it—the presence of Judaism perceptible on the skin.

The fear of being marked, being labeled as Jewish, has been passed on to me, a generation twice removed from the horror of the 1930s and 40s. I remember an afternoon when I was five climbing underneath a chair in the living room and curling up in a ball to hide from my grandmother. I watched her feet pace frantically back and forth across the hardwood floor as she called my name. Hours later when she found me, my hair stuck to the side of my face from falling asleep, she held me by my shoulders, shaking me back and forth, crying, “Why were you hiding? We have Israel now.”

Despite my ability to hide in my blond hair and far from classic Jewish features (as Hitler would have conceived of them), I am exposed the minute I reveal my name. Ironically, because my Jewish heritage comes to me from my father’s side, those with

orthodox beliefs do not consider me truly Jewish. Yet to the rest of the world, for better or for worse, I am a Jew. I am also an American. I have long understood these implications, the swirling of my identities. At five, I said to my grandmother, slightly shocked and horrified, *if America goes to war with Israel, then we would be fighting ourselves*. On Rosh Hashanah, we say the Prayer for Our Country first for America and then for Israel. Both an American and an Israeli flag hang over the B'ima—the altar—in the temple in my hometown.

I have never really thought that either of these pieces of me would be at odds. In my most rational mind, I still believe this. I don't think that America will ever go to war with Israel, nor do I think that there will again be an unfettered extermination of the Jews, even though there are still countries in the world, Saudi Arabia being one of them, that as a Jew I cannot travel to despite my American passport. Yet given the recent rise of anti-Semitic sentiment rampant in democratic European countries like France as well as the polar nature of the current conflict in Iraq (the belief that this war is America and its ally Israel vs. the Muslim world), I find myself feeling afraid in a way I have never been before.

Somewhere in Europe, I do not remember where the story comes to me from, a crowd gathers and an elderly Jewish couple endures a spray of stones.

In Paris, armed guards sit in a van outside the synagogue to prevent violence against practicing Jews. I know because I saw them there this summer as I passed by on the way to my hotel. Thankfully, official policy toward the Jews who are French nationals has not changed, yet the possible presence of hatred in the community is a scary

and threatening thought. One of the guards nods at me, and my gaze locks with his ice blue eyes.

In San Francisco, a friend of mine buys a pro-Palestinian pamphlet and we spend a good deal of time debating the validity of the information within. I know that being pro-Palestinian does not necessarily translate as anti-Israeli. I consider myself pro-Palestinian in the sense that I believe that Palestinians deserve to live in their own, officially recognized state with a democratically elected government, and I do not feel at odds with this assertion. However, I lack the space and distance for these matters to be merely political debate and my bedrock feels shaken at having to so vehemently defend Israel to him in this time and place.

Friday evening at the dance club, I do not correct Symur. And yet, I have been perfectly candid with Simud. Licking stray salt from my wrist, Simud smiles back at me and we move out onto the dance floor. He's a good dancer, moving with almost Latin hips in a salsa like beat, and we sway together to the binding music. Out here on the smooth wooden floor, the bass pounding in a rhythm like a heartbeat through my eardrums, I feel a glimmer of hope for the world and for my country. Despite the anti-American sentiment welling up as a result of our foreign policy in Iraq, where else in this whole wide world could a Muslim and a Jew get down on a dance floor? I know; it's a far cry from an international breakout of peace and understanding, not even a blip on the radar screen. Even so, for the moment, it is nice to imagine the implications.



“My God, you are beautiful,” Simud says, his dark eyes wide against his tan skin, as the beat shifts and we pause for a moment, both wiping at the drops of sweat curling across our foreheads.

“Thank you,” I blush, reaching up to tuck a stray strand of my blond hair behind my ear, still partially wondering if he really has guessed at my Jewishness as he seemed to earlier.

The beat picks up again, too loud for conversation, and we begin to sway to the pulsing music—on this night, just two people dancing.

## **L'INDEPENDENCE**

Two years ago, my mother turned fifty-five while at the same time turning French. Everything became about learning French. She had French club, French class, a French tutor. She drove across town to my apartment to watch the French channel (her side of town only got *Spanish TV*). I would come home from work or classes and find her camped out on my sofa, legs crossed, a glass of water comfortably within reach, mesmerized by the TV screen. There were moments I would have sworn she even laughed in French at the cheeky jokes of the game show host, yammering away. You would have thought God had blessed her with his presence when she discovered language tracks on DVDs and could now watch almost all American movies in French. My fiancé, Joe, won a special place in her heart when he showed her how to access Radio Paris via the Internet.

And of course, we laughed. The way most people find it easy to laugh at a woman who should really be entering her more sedate years, joining her husband in

midlife splendor, but instead finds herself on a personal crusade. My mother is a small woman, five foot one, but she has survived two marriages and is in the midst of surviving her third. She holds several degrees: a Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Connecticut when the school admitted only a handful of women to the program, almost an MBA, and a license to buy and sell real estate in two different states. Growing up, I always knew that my mother could do anything including mastering the French language in her fifties.

Despite our laughter, her husband, John, was fairly supportive. He took her up to Canada, the border being only a few hours from their weekend house at a ski resort in northern Maine. He stood patiently behind her as she ordered their food in French—one arm crossed over his chest supporting the elbow of his other arm, hand against his mouth as he gnawed at the inside of his palm—and she tried to remember the French word for “ketchup.” She came up with the circumlocuted translation “red sauce.”

The woman behind the counter turned. “Oui. Ketchup,” she said to my mother.

This story became fodder for family dinners. My stepfather’s eyes lit up as he told those tales to Joe and me, adding that every time he got into my mother’s car French tapes blasted on the radio and he could no longer get her on the phone because she was listening to her French on the internet. He reached across the table and playfully grabbed at her elbow, but she slapped his hand away.

“Stop it,” she said, the lilt of kidding in her voice, but I could hear the hint of something more serious lurking on the corners of it.

“Oh, Brenda,” my stepfather replied and the moment passed.

Then, in late December of 2003, she decided that she wanted to go to France. Her French teacher took a group of students over to Paris every summer and my mother decided that this was the best way for her to go and practice her French, a way for her to get around the city without the stress of getting lost. In a moment of mother-daughter bonding, she asked me to come along. The plan was to spend some time with the organized group, orient ourselves in Paris, and spend a few days perusing the city off on our own. Despite the fact that my mother gets intimidated by the produce section of the grocery store and would spend all day there if I didn't take her by the hand and lead her past all of the colorful fruit, I was thrilled to spend two weeks with her, my best friend, in a foreign country, watching her live out her midlife dream. She'd been so dedicated to learning French; I couldn't help but feel an almost parental pride for her getting to do something that she'd always wanted to do. I eagerly agreed to go. She contacted her French teacher to add me to the list.

Then, during the start of the following February, the phone calls began.

Four o'clock on a Sunday afternoon, her voice came blasting through the phone.

"Jesus, Judea. I could kill that man. If I was married to him, I would do just that. I would kill him."

I cannot count how many times my mother has put my name next to Jesus', but I knew what would be coming next. My father had called her and, despite the fact that they have been divorced ten years, force of habit can still get him underneath her skin. I braced myself, settled in for the long haul, shifted away from my computer desk, and curled my legs up underneath me on the black futon in my office.

"What's he up to now?"

“Christ, he’s such an idiot.”

“I know, Ma, but just tell me what’s happened.”

I like this about our relationship—how I can pretend that I am one of the coconspirators in her war against evil in the men of this world, most often emanating from my father. I think that I must have been eleven when this small secret alliance between us formed. I remember drinking Earl Grey tea from our hand-painted pottery mugs, curled on the bumpy fabric of our couch in the living room of our house in Maine, staring out at the gray afternoon. We were playing hooky from work and school, and plotting our revenge because we had just been dumped by our first boyfriends—mine, my real first, and my mother’s, her first after nineteen years of marriage.

“I just got off the phone with the damn fool and he’s saying he doesn’t want us to go to France. He thinks it’s too dangerous with what’s going on in Iraq.”

“And?”

“And what?” she said, all heated and uncontained.

“And what do you think about it?”

“I think I want to tell him to blow it out his nose.” Then her voice started to go out in long pauses, interrupted by the call waiting on the line. My father was calling. I ignored it.

“Well, yes, you can do that. But what do you think about what he has to say? Do you think going to France will be dangerous?” I could not, after all, unconditionally take her side. Despite the fact that I am the youngest in the family—the youngest in my original family of my mother, father, and brother, who is six years my senior, and the youngest in my blended families in which there are six additional siblings in all—I have

always been the peacemaker, the one to listen to all parties invested and make diplomatic attempts to solve the situation or at least ream out the person that I deem in the wrong. I'm not really sure how I got started in this role, but family habits die hard.

My question gave her pause, and I could hear her breathing on the other side of the line. I could imagine her green eyes squinting in fierce concentration.

"I don't know, Judea. But I think that the point is that I don't care. I'm willing to risk it."

Then my cell phone rang. I could hear it buzzing from my desktop, threatening to rattle itself off onto the floor. This was the perfect representation of how I knew my father must have felt right then—anxious for me to pick up, angry that my mother had gotten her call through first.

"Hold on a second," I told her.

"Hello," I answered him.

"Is that *your mother* on the line?" He said with the clear animosity that they no longer had a relationship—she was *my* mother, not *his* former wife.

"Yes," and with phones pressed to both ears, I thought, *what a beautiful metaphor for my childhood*. I could not resist, I said it to both of them, into both of their phones, laughing because I had the luxury of ten years to find the humor in the whole thing and the early adult wisdom of knowing I had gotten out.

My father snorted; my mother was silent.

"Good, so you know," he said. "I need her address."

I put the phone with my mother on it against my leg, and I spoke her address into my cell phone.

“Call me when she’s through.”

“Okay, Dad,” I said, even though when he would call me back in a day or so I would have to forge some excuse about needing to go out and study or buy dog food instead of calling him back that afternoon. “I love you,” I added, but he hung up abruptly, not saying it back and I made sure to turn the power off on my cell phone.

“What did he want?”

“To fight with you,” I said, “but apparently you hung up on him mid-conversation. So, go on.” This, after all, is her favorite part of her divorce, the idea that she can just click the off button on the phone instead of having to deal with him. There is a story she tells about their early marriage, how in the middle of a fight, my father kept her up for twelve hours straight one night and she had an exam the following day. When she tells it, I imagine the tired horror in her eyes, and I know the silent triumph she feels in being able to disconnect the phone line and watch his anger dissipate into the dead air. When she calls and he calls, I can guess that she has exercised this power.

“You’re damn right I hung up on him. Anyway, I just don’t know. Most of me thinks that he is being ridiculous. This is France we are going to, not the Middle East. What does he really think is going to happen to us?”

“What did he say?” Now I was curious. For all the battles I have fought with him, won and lost, my father has always had the best intentions at heart. Since September 11<sup>th</sup>, I had not been comfortable with the idea of my loved ones flying overseas, even if it was just to Europe. In November of 2001, Joe’s company sent him to Britain for four days and I don’t think that I slept at all that week. I even plotted my lawsuit against them should anything happen to Joe. The American with bombs in his shoes was on an

international flight coming out of Paris. But it's different, you know, when you're the one on the plane, you don't have to deal with the aftermath. More recently, on my crackling television with reception so bad it is more like listening to an old fashioned radio show than actually watching images on a screen, I had watched/listened to Colin Powell give his presentations to the United Nations and watched France's ambassador come back at him two-fold. I worried with the rest of the world about what the fallout might look like if we unilaterally attacked Saddam and the United Nations dissolved. Might there really be a danger in my mother and me going to France?

"He thinks that we will feel unwelcome there as Americans. He thinks that there will be some added danger in you being Jewish."

Because of my obviously Jewish name, since September 11<sup>th</sup> and the recently elevated tensions in the Middle East, my father worried about the sorts of discrimination I might more readily experience because of my "give away" name.

We discussed this for a while as I watched a squirrel trot back and forth on the top of the fence in my backyard and the sun's pale, yellow winter glow started to fade into gray. We both agreed that danger was not likely; we both agreed that France and America have long since been friends; we both agreed that France has one of the largest populations of Jews in Europe; we both agreed that we were going to Europe for *Christ's Sake*, though I had never been there and my mother had not been for years.

"In the end," she said, "If there is a risk, I don't care. I would rather live my life the way I want to live it and die going to France. I'm fifty-seven. This might be my last chance to go."



We hung up and I sat still for a moment, watching as the squirrel made his last tight-wire dance across the fence line, carrying a half-rotted acorn to his home.

France would not be the first time that my mother has risked her life for something that she wanted (Although it was hard to say what kind of risk traveling to France would prove to be at this point, the willingness to risk was certainly a part of her mindset.) She almost died when I was born. Her water broke three months early, but I didn't have any lungs. They stopped the labor, but there was a big risk of infection. The doctor asked my mother if she wanted to keep me. He told her that we both could die. She said she would wait and see what might come. I am living proof that my mother means what she says.

I admire my mother's courage, her willingness to quite literally risk her life for her dreams and truly I am in awe of her. I always have been. She has spent her life running from the example of her own 1950s housewife mother, who, my mother claims, lived her whole life in fear. My grandmother raised three kids, went to church on Sundays in a somber, navy, flower-print dress, wearing a plastic wrap over her head on the days that it rained, and she helped set out punch and sugar cookies in the basement for the Sunday school kids. But, in my mother's recollection, her mother hardly ever left the house. My grandmother decided that when my mother was three, my mother could talk and carry money and was quite capable of going to the market by herself. Seerings Market was only three doors down from the family's up and down two family house in a residential neighborhood in Connecticut. My mother remembers walking down the sidewalk taking those exaggerated steps that children take to avoid the cracks in the

concrete. But one time, when she got to the store, she had forgotten what her mother had wanted and she could only stand there sobbing, holding her hand out to Mr. Seering, a large round man with a bald head fringed with grey in a cotton shirt with sleeves rolled up to the elbows and a dirty white apron. My mother was too embarrassed to go home and did not make it there until long after dark when night and dampness had begun to settle in. She was in trouble when she got home, first for forgetting the items that her mother needed and second for taking so long, but my mother doesn't remember the particular aftermath, if her mother had been racked with fear or only annoyed that she couldn't get supper ready.

Really, I think that what my mother resented most as a girl, and what she later in life began to pity about her mother, was that my mother believed that my grandmother suffered from a lack of dreams. My grandmother was too afraid of being embarrassed in a public sense and seemed to prefer seclusion than risk being publicly humiliated. She lived quietly, kept a neat house, and never expected anything out of life except to raise a family. In my mother's own words, she cowered from her husband and let him make the large decisions about their lives. She never imagined anything different for her daughters and, when the time came, suggested they become secretaries or teachers to pass the time between their childhood and their married lives.

My grandmother constantly discouraged my mother from any act that might cause embarrassment, or what in her mind amounted to public shame. At my mother's only flute recital in high school, she couldn't play past the first few notes and the teacher had to stand up and play beside her through the rest of the piece. Of course, my mother was mortified. But what made matters far worse was the fact that after the recital, instead of

consoling her daughter, my grandmother greeted her and said, “We can’t stay for refreshments. I could barely sit through the rest of the performances after what you did, I was so embarrassed.” My mother never performed solo again.

But my mother was not altogether crushed by her mother’s derision. From roughly the age of ten, angry and restless, my mother spent her summers in the wilds of northern Maine, learning from her aunts about the bravery of women and plotting her escape. These were tough women with muscular, sinewy arms and suntanned faces. They were all fiercely independent and never seemed too weary to get things done around the farm. Following her aunts’ examples, my mother made her own money under the hot sun, thrusting a blueberry rake into the small, rugged bushes, elbowing her way toward the prize crop between men twice her size. With her small salary, she ordered material and dress patterns from catalogues so that she could sew clothes that she wanted to wear and not the ones picked out by her mother. I wouldn’t doubt that she dreamed about spending some of those pennies she earned on college.

My grandmother never forgave my mother for her independence. She did not attend her graduation ceremony when my mother received her Ph.D., and my mother in turn never forgave her mother for her fear and her lack of dreams. My mother did this mainly by keeping me from my grandmother. I hardly ever visited her and my memories of her are dim at best.

I suspect that there is a more even-handed version of the story of my mother’s childhood, one that paints my grandmother in a less timid and shriveled light. My grandmother moved from East Machias, Maine, away from the small blueberry holdings of her family to New Haven, Connecticut, to care for her husband and raise her children

alone. She had reasons to be afraid of life, and longed to live small and sheltered. As a young girl, my grandmother watched her father and two siblings die of tuberculosis. I imagine that later in life, my grandmother hid behind her children because she was slowly sinking into deafness.

It is also true that my grandmother never pursued her talent as a writer. A few months after my grandmother's death, during the winter of my first year of college, my mother and I sat in her minivan in the parking lot of a bagel shop across the street from my dorm. We shivered as I leaned across the center console to read my grandmother's essay about holidays and family traditions. My mother had just returned from Connecticut after sorting through my grandmother's things—snatches of paper, knickknacks, and pictures, the things people save to look at sometime but rarely ever do—that were stored in the attic space of my Aunt Victoria's house. They had moved my grandmother's things there only a few years before, after my grandmother's stroke and the decision to place her in a nursing home. My grandmother's essay was good—funny, honest—a kind of self-assured voice that I'd never heard her use in my own life time. This was a grandmother I only wish that I could have known. I snuck private glances at my mother, the laugh lines that formed in the creases of her cheeks, and I wondered why I never knew that my writing came from a family tradition, which silently and unknowingly my grandmother had passed on. But, my mother was not ready to see those things about her own mother; at fifty-seven she was still trying to overcome.

Nearing the end of February, at seven o'clock in the morning, I stumbled out of bed to answer the phone. This time, my mother told me that if John didn't let her go to

France, then she was getting a divorce. She would rather live her life as her life than be married to that fool of a man.

John's position was that he felt our going to France was un-American. This was during the height of the anti-France campaign when there was a rash of people featured on the news dumping French wine down the drain. French fries became freedom fries and French restaurants called their cuisine Northern Italian. It was our generation's rendition of World War II when hamburger became Salisbury steak.

Once again I talked my mother down, told her that her husband was being foolish, and going to France was not un-American. We didn't agree with everything our government did and we wouldn't like to be judged solely by the actions of our president, so we concluded that the French probably felt a similar way.

*But Jesus, Ma. Why does everything have to be so either or? Why do you always have to jump to the most extreme? Nobody is stopping you from living your life.* I wanted to say this to her, but couldn't because the situation felt too fragile. If I said the wrong thing, I might push her over the edge, back into the divorcee mother of my childhood. In those years, my mother was thin and angry. She ran three miles a day to get even with something I didn't yet know about. We moved from house to apartment to a small room in my mother's friend's house. We shared a bed when I was thirteen, starting my period, fighting for my own female identity, and not wanting to be able to hear my mother sleep. Everything about it was stupid—that stupid mug from the Single's Network, those stupid men that sent her flowers but didn't appreciate her brain or her daughter. We argued, raged, until our voices were raw. I blamed her for my helplessness, my femaleness, my age, for the fact that there was no one to defend me in my father's

house filled with strange women. *Not again, Mama, not for us again, that awful loneliness. Not now. When you are fifty and happy and he grabs at your ticklish knees even when you've been married almost nine years.* Only if I said this to her, I knew it would make things worse.

All through March, she called to tell me the progress of the trip. She bought her suitcase, finalized the plane reservations, and updated her passport. She went to TJ MAXX and bought new clothes. She sent me pictures of herself in her new outfits. She didn't mention her husband.

To some degree, I suppose that marriage can be at odds with the self. You are agreeing to live your life together with someone and that, in and of itself, requires compromise. I'm trying to understand my mother; her dedication to her dreams and her willingness to threaten to jump out of her relationships if she feels the slightest bit pressured. I have always felt that my mother and others like her with their 1970s feminism have the luxury to do this. Theirs was a revolution. They were making up all the rules as they went along. They had the latitude to be uncompromising, to stop wearing bras, stop shaving their legs, demand better education and equal pay, march for the Equal Rights Amendment, and then, in their late thirties, decide to wear bras and shave their legs again, and begin to raise families, this time on their own terms. My mother's friend Penny started a mini-commune and lived out in the woods. (Now, she's a lawyer). My mother's friend Alida took her baby on their cross-country trip. They were allowed two divorces; no one batted an eye. Of course what they did was not easy; it was, in fact, impossible. I am simply blinded by the powerful ease with which my mother and others like her seemed to act. But I wonder about my generation. Will we, their

daughters, feel pressure to make good on what our mothers began? And how can we plot our mutiny against them, as most generations tend to do? Will we revert to Tupperware parties and petticoats?

Also in March, my mother sent me a care package with French language tapes, Celine Dion's *The French Album* and a tour book of Paris. The pictures made the city look beautiful. I imagined my mother and me looking out at the Seine from the top of Notre Dame Chapel, eating pastries in quaint cafés with broad burgundy awnings, walking underneath the huge arches of the Eiffel tower, getting our portraits painted in the square at Montmartre. I listened to the language tapes in my car. I watched my face in the rearview mirror at stoplights trying to twist around the words. *Oui. Bonjour. Parlez-vous francais?* I wondered about my mother's attraction as I pushed the words out from my unnaturally pouting lips.

At the time, the terror alert level was yo-yoing between yellow and orange. I never felt really afraid in the sense that the thought of getting on that plane made my stomach turn, but I began to wonder if my dad and stepfather might not have a point. Would I come back as an angry little ghost if I died on my way to a country that seemed, at the time, to hate Americans? Then I would shake my head. We weren't going to Kabul. This was my mother's dream and that was important. I wondered how to say *fuck you* in French, though I doubt that the language with all its *vous* had anything that sounded as angry.

I have always thought of myself as the bridge between the two generations, allowed to go back and fix what each one was missing —my mother too hard and

uncompromising, and my grandmother too soft, taking too few risks in her life. Maybe I expect to do too much. For many of us, we spend our childhood wanting to be our mothers and our adulthood trying to get out from underneath the way we were brought up. I for one could not survive my mother's life. I think that I would have shriveled up and sat alone in a dark room for a very long time at the prospect of two divorces, I barely survived hers. But it isn't just a strength issue, I don't want to be divorced, I don't want to start and restart my life. Do dreams always come at such a price?

Later, when the news came on, I switched it off and cranked my new cd as loud as it would go. *Tournez mon couer* Celine belted out. *Turn my heart*. I called my mom and thanked her for the package.

Sometime in the beginning of April, three months and counting till my mother and I planned to lift off for France, I sat on the couch talking to Joe on the telephone. I watched our dog stretch his long black body across the floor in the living room and ran my fingers back and forth across the dog's belly.

"Does it scare you," I asked, "that I admire my mother and she's been divorced as many times as she has?" It was a quiet afternoon and since my mother's stewing, I had been building up to ask Joe this. I hated that it was a conversation we had to have over the phone.

"I've been scared of you since we met, but that doesn't stop me from loving you, from wanting you to be my wife."

I felt relieved, but I got up anyway and paced behind the couch.

"It's not that I want her life. I just admire her independence," I continued.



“What do you mean *her* independence? I’ve always thought of you as independent too. You moved out to Colorado all on your own without knowing anyone. That’s something I could have never done.”

He was right. I had moved out to Colorado for graduate school that previous fall and left Joe back at his job in New Hampshire. It was a temporary separation for us that had been very hard and very painful. I had been very afraid to leave our life in New Hampshire and it had been my mother who had encouraged me the most to go. I remember the afternoon before I left for Colorado. She took me out to the Good N Plenty diner and I sat there crying over my chicken salad sandwich, knowing that I would be making that two thousand mile journey alone. The plans for Joe to come had gone to mulch and he needed to keep his current job.

*How did this happen?* I bit my lip and moaned.

*You’ve always been independent,* my mother replied.

*Me?*

*Yes, you. When you were a little girl you used to refuse to go skiing with me. I’d give you your lunch money and you’d go off by yourself all over the mountain and I wouldn’t see you for the rest of the day. I’ll never forget that. You were such a little girl, good at being alone.*

So later that day, I found myself going through the motions, backing up the truck while she stood near the hitch pointing left and right. Feeling metal nudge metal, hopping out and cranking down the hitch, watching the truck bed lower against the weight. I watched her from the rearview mirror as she waved like mad from the end of my old driveway.

“And that doesn’t scare you?” I asked Joe over the phone on that cool day in April. “That I’m like her?”

“No,” he said. “Not in the least.”

I sighed. “Does it bother you that we are going to France?” This was the first time I had thought to ask him, even though I had kept him up on all the emotional currents that were passing between my mother and her husbands.

He laughed. “No, not that either.”

Late in April, two months before we were to leave for France, my mother came to visit me in Colorado for the first time. The world seemed on the brink of another era. My mother’s husband had quieted down about the whole France thing. Ignoring his gripes with the idea had proved the best medicine and my mother had stopped threatening divorce. Joe had recently agreed to move out west for my remaining time in graduate school, despite a pay-cut. Our soldiers had started their long march to Baghdad and in another week or so I would watch Saddam’s statue fall on the crackling screen of my TV; the United Nations did not dissolve.

My mother and I sat on my couch with a bottle of white wine and a FedExed letter from my father, which arrived on my mother’s doorstep in New Hampshire a week prior but which she did not have the courage to open alone. It was a five-page document begging, pleading with us to reconsider our trip to France, complete with footnotes and photocopied attachments from the *Wall Street Journal* about the dangers of Americans going overseas at a time like this.

We passed the pages back and forth to each other between sips of wine.

“What are we going to do? What am I going to say to him?” my mother asked.

“Nothing,” I said and I tossed the letter down onto the coffee table, the pages landing with a thud, the top two sliding off the table and scattering onto the floor so that my dog jumped up off the carpet.

That summer, we went to France.

### **AWAKE AND WATCHING**

My husband, Joe, a diabetic, likes to take ten-minute naps in the mornings. In our old apartment in Barrington, New Hampshire, on Route 4, the sun slants in through the windows, and cracked lines of light spray across his forehead. I listen to the buzzing sound of Mack trucks busting by, my chin on his chest, my head rising with his breath.

Something about lying like this reminds me of being a child. As a kid, I remember going into my parents' bedroom when I couldn't sleep, crawling up to the foot of the bed and wedging my chin into the small gully between their feet. I would sit for hours, listening to the soft rhythms of their breath, wishing for a moment of sleep like that, for someone to hold me, breathe in time with me, make me feel less alone.

Joe's arm rests across my back and I will my eyes closed, heavy, eyelash to eyelash. Feel my neck turn, my ear sink down into his chest, his hair tickling my neck. Breath on breath, and we should be sleeping.

Only I cannot. People are always dying in their sleep. You hear this all the time about the elderly, and it is supposed to be some sort of comfort. Only this is exactly what I am afraid of for Joe. Because Joe is diabetic, sleep is one of the most precarious moments for his body—a body that cannot regulate itself.

I learned this on our third date. It was the first late night we spent together—after he cooked us dinner and I chatted endlessly and nervously over my glass of wine, allowing too much about myself because I wasn't ready for silence, endlessly more difficult to read. We sat on his bed together, looking at picture albums in that dance of getting to know each other. I laughed at the pictures of him in Halloween costumes. He was Michael Jackson in one, wearing a sparkling eighties jacket with spiked-up, punk-rock hair. I remember lying down together because it was late and we were both tired, but this was not about sex, not yet. It was more about not wanting to go home, not wanting to let go of the evening. I remember thinking that he was funny. Better yet, he seemed to think that I was funny, and an ease came over the way that we were with each other. So we fell asleep, his hand against my arm, making my skin tingle in that delicious sort of way, electric. We were supposed to stay like this until morning—wake up misty eyed and smiling when the sun started to melt in through the blinds, feeling like this first soft night of sleep may be the start of something.

Only this was not what happened. Part way through the night, maybe one thirty or so, I woke up with a start. Joe's breathing sounded funny, like a soft bubble of spit had collected in the back of his throat, and it wouldn't go down. I called his name, shook him a little, and called his name again. When he didn't respond, I sat up, panicking a little, panicking a little even more over my own panic. *What if this is normal?* I thought. *What*

*if he's just a deep sleeper, and he'll wake up in a little while thinking that I'm some sort of neurotic freak, and he won't ever want to see me again?* I called his name again, got right down into his face that was resting sideways on the blue pillowcase. Still no response—he just laid there, his chest rising up and down in slow cagey movements.

I stood up and went out into the living room where I started to pace over the tan carpet and wondered what I should do. He had told me at some point earlier that evening that he was diabetic. He had said, “If I ever start to act funny—tell me to eat something.” I wondered if this was one of those times.

I marched over to his desk and started flipping through his Rolodex wondering who to call. It was one thirty, and in this unsure state of not really knowing Joe yet, I tried to pretend that this was not an emergency. I dialed the friend who set us up in the first place. No answer. So I went back into his room. He was resting so peacefully against the pillow that for a moment I thought of lying back down, and in the morning he would just wake up and smile at me. Some day, years from now, this could be some sort of story we would tell to each other to commemorate our third date or just some story I would tell to my roommates when I got home. But something in me told me that this was not the case.

I went back into the living room and started flipping through the Yellow Pages. I still didn't really know who I was going to call. I scanned down the pages, my thumb going black from the ink, until I stumbled upon a nurse emergency hotline number. I started trying to explain the situation. *Uh... so I'm spending the night at this guy's house who I hardly know, and well I can't wake him up. He's diabetic.* When I thought of how this sounded to a stranger, I knew they would think that we were having sex, and I knew

that now was not the time to worry about appearances but for some reason it felt important to explain that this falling asleep thing was all in innocence.

She asked me if I knew how to test his blood sugar. I balked. *Test his blood sugar?* I thought. *I'm an English major for Christ sake; I wouldn't even know where to begin.*

"Ok," she said. "He is probably hypoglycemic, but I can't be sure."

I racked my brains trying to remember ninth grade biology, whether hypo means too much or too little.

"But without knowing for sure, you should probably call an ambulance," she continued.

My panic was really rising now, and I hung up with her and dialed 911. At this point, I was scared out of my mind. I had never been in the presence of an unconscious person, and I was raving mad at myself because I had thought for a split second of lying back down and pretending that things would be fine.

By this time a half hour had passed, Joe's breathing had started to get really ragged, and the 911 dispatch operator on the phone told me that I needed to get Joe to sit up so that he wouldn't choke. Suddenly, I felt weak. I tried my hardest to wedge myself in behind him, wiggle my hands underneath his armpits and push my back against the wall to get him into sitting position while wedging the phone in the crook of my shoulder because the dispatch operator had become my lifeline. I felt like as long as she kept talking to me then the paramedics would get here on time, and Joe would be okay. The only snag in the deal was that he is extremely ticklish and, even in his unconscious state,

the sensation of my hands against his armpits made him squirm. I would get him to sit up for a second, then he would melt back down, twisting out of my grasp.

“Is he sitting up?” the 911 dispatch asked.

At this point, desperate and starting to sweat, all courtesy went out the window.

“No, I cannot fucking get him to sit up and when the fuck are the paramedics going to get here?” I started to rant into the phone. I felt guilty that I was swearing at this poor woman who was only trying to help, but I needed to release the surge of panic that had been steadily climbing in my throat. Joe was still asleep and, for a moment, his face was so beautiful and serene—the light from the lamp catching his profile—that I wondered what was really happening. Then, he shifted and struggled to cough and I knew that he was losing his ability to breath.

“Calm down,” the operator warned me. “They will be there, it has started to snow and they are just trying to get there safely.”

For some reason a sentence from Driver’s Ed flashed through my brain, and I started to think about how the roads are slickest when it first starts to precipitate, the grease and oil loosening on the road. An image of the boxy white ambulance splayed against a telephone poll played in my head, and I found myself going faint. What if they do not arrive? What then?

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I muttered into the phone, pulling at Joe’s arms, his T-shirt, trying not to make contact with his skin when a few hours ago it had been all I’d been focused on.

Finally the apartment intercom buzzed. I slipped out from behind Joe and rushed toward the door, only to look behind me and see him, amazingly, stumble after me.



Thankfully the paramedics were burly firefighter types, and one of them stepped through the door in time to catch Joe and drag him back to the sofa before he collapsed. I watched in awe as they went to work. They whipped out a small, white meter and little plastic strips, grabbed the tip of Joe's finger and pierced it with a lancet. His finger oozed blood; I wondered briefly if it would drip on the carpet. But one of the medics directed the blood to drip exactly in the right spot of the testing strip so that the meter dinged. A little dot on the face of it started to swirl. I paced the living room floor, trying to memorize their movements, all the while thinking I could never do any of this on my own. Then a number appeared, 37. I didn't know what that meant.

"Is this bad," I asked.

"Well, he's supposed to be more like 100." I must have gone pale. "Don't worry, we'll get him back up there," he added.

"Can I help?"

He gave me the IV bag and I held it up in the air above Joe's head to ensure that the pull of gravity would increase the drip, remembering my own trips to the emergency room as a child with chronic asthma.

After a few minutes, Joe's face began to relax and he looked at us with more knowing eyes. He sighed deeply and shook his head.

"There you go, buddy," the paramedic said to Joe. Then to me, "He's starting to come around."

After about ten minutes they took out the IV and had Joe test his blood again before they left. They told him to make sure to eat something with more substance as the glucose in the IV would have only a short lasting effect. He nodded and thanked them,

walked with them to the door, holding a large gauze pad against his arm where the IV needle had made him bleed.

After the paramedics left, we sat on the couch together. His face looked crumpled, somewhere between a cry and a laugh. I wanted the latter.

“You were so cute,” I said. “You are ticklish, and I couldn’t get you to sit up.”

“Really?” He sort of half-smiled and I took the moment to sneak underneath his arm. “Thanks. Thank you,” he added. I snuggled in deeper and we watched the flakes gather into soft piles outside his living room window as the yellow tinted street light faded into the paler light of the morning sun.

Until that moment, struggling to sit Joe up so that he could breathe, I hadn’t known that he was ticklish. We had yet to play those sorts of games with each other, games that we play mostly on Sunday mornings now in our married life when we are vying over who will get out of bed to let our dog out. His was a stranger’s body in that moment, during that third date—a body that remains strange even to Joe, himself.

Lows are an inevitable part of diabetes, impossible to avoid outright, but something that we strive to minimize. He says that he cannot remember the lows—the way his body writhes, his muscles flexing, his fists clenching and pushing downward, his toes pointing sharply, pushing down some unknowable, unmemorable pain, his skin hot, his weak and uncomfortable coughing when he lacks the strength to swallow—and we don’t talk about it, not really, even now after four years of dating and almost one year of marriage. We talk about meals and management, how his numbers have been.

Sometimes, I go to his doctor’s appointments with him. But we do not talk about the

dangers, about my fear that this disease will someday claim him, that a low might end in hospitalization, coma, death.

In truth, or at least how I see things, Joe is a healthy looking twenty-eight-year-old male. He has a medium frame—that of a lacrosse player in a speed position, able to dart and spin. He has dark hair and eyes that we argue over the color of. We have this argument most often in the shower, water splashing down our faces like warm, spring raindrops. *You're eyes are green*, I tell him. He insists that they are blue, even threatens to show me the BL on his license. I just smirk. Joe, unrelated to his diabetes, is colorblind, so what does he know?

In other words, Joe is just like everyone else. When you meet him, you don't say to yourself, *now there's a diabetic*. There are no outward signs of his disease, and for that I am grateful. He has a beautiful body, and so I cannot bring myself to say that he even has a disease. His strength seems to contradict it, as does our mutual will to refuse to acknowledge the difficulty of diabetes. We would prefer to be left outside of definition, outside of the strict boundaries of calling diabetes a disease, willingly coating ourselves in silence.

Before I met Joe, in some part of my brain I knew that a few million Americans suffered from the disease, but I had never really thought about it before. I vaguely understood that diabetics, Type I at least, which Joe is, are missing a hormone called insulin. A month or so after Joe's low, I decided to read everything I could about diabetes. I borrowed books from his parent's library. Some were huge monoliths, as big and long as Homer's *Odyssey*. They housed glossy pictures of blackened gangrene toes,

whole chapters on erectile dysfunction. I cradled those heavy books in my lap, turned a few pages and closed them. Instead, I started with a small pamphlet with the title “Insulin Deficiency.”

Normally, cells in the pancreas called islets of Beta cells produce insulin, which is a hormone that allows glucose circulating in the bloodstream to enter into cells. Having glucose circulating in your bloodstream allows cells to oxidize glucose for energy. Your body cannot function without glucose. For a normal person, your own body will regulate your circulating blood sugar to be roughly around 90 to 120, which allows cells enough access to glucose to perform their normal functions. As your blood sugar rises due to the consumption of carbohydrates, your body will produce the corresponding amount of insulin to allow glucose to pass out of the bloodstream and into your cells, which in turn use or store this energy building block. (Glucose is also stored in the liver as glycogen, which can be broken down again into glucose between meals when blood sugar levels dip too low.) When the blood glucose level drops to the sufficient number (80-120) the pancreas will stop producing insulin, maintaining a low-level of circulating glucose for consistent access by cells.

For Joe, glucose is a double-edged sword—he cannot have too much or too little in his bloodstream. Insulin is the key that unlocks the door of your cell membranes to allow glucose into your cells so that the body has energy to function. For diabetics, an autoimmune response, not completely understood by science, has destroyed his islets of Beta cells so that Joe’s body no longer produces insulin. He has become dependent upon insulin injections, manually dictating the amounts of glucose allowed into his cells. Yet too much insulin and not enough carbohydrates in a diet produces a low level of

circulating glucose in the bloodstream. Without circulating glucose, cells cannot function. This means that Joe's muscles no longer work so that basic functions such as swallowing, the flexing of muscles in the throat, cannot occur and Joe can choke on his own spit.

The Seventh Edition Diabetes Mellitus Practical Handbook makes it sound simple enough—maintain a diet that is in balance with the amount of insulin you are taking, exercise regularly (this is important to make your cells more adept and receptive to insulin. Exercise, especially of an anaerobic nature, encourages the cells to become more sensitive to insulin allowing a diabetic to reduce the amount of insulin injected.) and monitor your blood sugar. Spelled out like this, shouldn't this have been easy for us? Easy for Joe? Yet diabetes is not an exact science; stress, hormone release, increased activity alter the way that the body uses the insulin, so that even with meticulous monitoring, lows can and do happen.

Joe and I have talked about getting him an insulin pump. But we have only gone as far as getting a videotape from his doctor. It sits in the wrapper on our bookshelf and stares at me every so often. Joe is resistant to the idea that he will have something external attached to his body in a permanent sort of way. Snowboarding is his obsession. *What if I fall on the pump coming off a rail or a jump*, he will ask. *That will be the end of that*. Or he will say that it takes too much time, that he will have to take several days off from work so that they can insert the tubes and monitor his resting blood sugar in the hospital to get a beat on the doses. *What about when we have sex?* he might add. *Then you detach the meter*, I might snip. I am too tired to win this fight and most of the time I let him convince me that these concerns are justified. It is his body, after all, not mine.

Yet, for the most part, I think, he is right. The pump is only a more convenient insulin delivery system. It does not monitor blood glucose directly. That still has to be done by checking his blood via lancet and his glucose meter. It is not a closed-loop system so to speak. The body, even with the addition of the pump, still cannot monitor itself. So why go through the time, pain, embarrassment of an external device when it cannot really fix the lows?

I have never told Joe that I listen to his breath while we sleep. I have never told him that I have perused the pages of handbooks, exploring how experts have inadequately and perfunctorily described our lives. I wake up every couple of hours to see what position he is sleeping in. He will be crumpled in an uncomfortable looking ball if he is low, the sheets twisted around his legs, the way people sleep when feverish. Another great indicator if he is dropping numbers is that he will roll over, arms flailing and whack me on the side of the head. I try to sleep as close as I can, knowing that a quick thump will jolt me out of a doze and into action. I have begun to catch it early now, and I give myself little pats on the back if I can wake him in the morning when I suspect something, hovering over him like Betty Crocker with a nice tall glass of orange juice.

*Sweetie, would you like some juice?*

He will open his eyes slowly, blink, can't quite focus. When he is low, he acts probably the way most people do if they are awakened in the middle of a dream. Some conditionally trained part of him, more the muscle groups than the brain, reaches out to take the glass that I help him move toward his mouth. Or if he doesn't open his eyes at all, only tosses fitfully on the mattress, I spread layer after layer of glucose paste across

his lips in the hopes that reflexes will encourage his tongue to work over the sticky mass until he regains enough composure to drink the glass of orange juice. A few swallows and a few minutes later, he smiles in recognition of me. I feel like a hero, disaster averted, and we start out again on our normal day.

When I feel the calluses on his fingertips brush against mine or when I watch him moving out of the shower and I catch a glimpse of the deep purple bruises of the injection sites winking at me from the edge of the towel around his waist, those are the times that I wish I could take away his diabetes, let it be in me so that I could do hand to hand combat with his disease. Once or twice I have had Joe test my blood sugar so that I know what it feels like when the sharp, short, plastic blue lancet needle pierces the skin.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” He smiles and laughs. I can tell by the creases in his eyes that he thinks that this is cute.

“Yes,” I say, but I make him hold the lancet to my finger and press the tiny trigger that pushes the needle into my skin. I wince, it feels about as painful as a mid-summer horsefly bite, but I try not to pull away so that he can guide my finger. My blood flows into the small clear channel of the testing strip sticking out from the side of the meter. The meter beeps, indicating that there is enough blood for it to test. We lean over it, watching the dot swirl until a number appears. I have only done this once or twice. Joe does this five times a day followed, of course, by insulin. In the mornings he does two injections, one of Lantis, the insulin which is supposed to maintain the base level of circulating insulin and the other of Humalog, which is supposed to act like the pancreas as it normally responds to food intake. (He does humalog injections with every meal and

also sometimes during the day if his numbers are reading high and he needs to lower his blood sugar.) He unbuckles his belt and reaches for the soft tissue above the back or side of his hip. He pinches a good two inches in the palm of his hand, pulling tissue away from bone, and he pierces the flesh with the small, sharp needle. He tries not to wince for my benefit, but I know there are times when he does, when I hear a sharp pull of air between his teeth or his brow flexes. Three times a day—a needle is still a needle.

In another book, I read that scientists theorize that the onset of diabetes occurs in tandem with a traumatic event—a serious illness, injury, accident. Joe was diagnosed with diabetes at age thirteen, a month or so after being hit by a car while riding his bike. It was in an intersection across from a church. He pointed it out to me the first time he took me home to meet his parents. It was Christmas. I glared at the nativity scene, cursed the distracted driver who drove her van into Joe and simultaneously cursed us with his disease. Ironically, being hit by a car while riding a bike was the first thing Joe and I discovered we had in common.

It never ceases to amaze me how much of our lives is permeated by diabetes. Sex without getting up to snack afterward can definitely cause problems. One time I fought with the EMTs just to keep my damn sheet wrapped around him on the way to the hospital. *It doesn't bug me if you lose it; it would bug me worse if you saw him naked.* Imagine even that—the most intimate moment between two people, spent and breathless, and I have to roll over, kick him out of bed, make sure he's getting up to get a snack.

Joe having the stomach flu sends me into a wild panic. Illness is supposed to make blood sugar levels run higher than normal, yet I am desperate to get sugar into Joe



when he can't eat and can't even stomach a glass of regular Ginger-ale. When Joe is conscious and he hits a low, he acts as if he were drunk. Laughing and giddy, stumbling around. Three years ago, in the middle of the stomach flu, Joe tossed an entire glass of Ginger-ale into my face and folded back on the bed, laughing and pointing while the sticky soda slid down my nose.

One Christmas, after trying to get Joe to swallow a tube of glucose paste which he promptly threw across the room, I watched him get out of bed, walk down the stairs and march into a wooden door. All I could think was, well at least it wasn't the glass slider. Where in the tidy little diabetes manual does it talk about all this?

I try and remind myself to breathe when these lows happen. In the midst of rising panic, I coach myself to remember each and every time that I have revived him. That all he needs is a snack and he will be Joe again—my loving, laughing husband, the one who usually takes care of me. In our wedding vows, he promised to always be there for me and added to fold my clothes and clean my truck. After all, I am the dreamer in the relationship, struggling to be a writer. Joe is the more practical one, he is the reason our house is clean and that we both have clothes to wear to work.

It's a horrible thing, having to be so afraid all the time that I am going to lose him. I didn't know that diabetes was like this. *We*, meaning Joe and his parents when he was first diagnosed at thirteen and now Joe and I in our marriage, had no idea.

So I give him a snack, which is easy when sitting in the living room or when we are lying in bed. But when we are a mile from home in the woods with our dog or driving on the highway, then it is another story. This has *happened* and I thought that we were both going to die. It was on Pena Blvd leaving Denver International Airport and there

was nowhere to pull over, no store with orange juice, and the snacks were in his backpack in the back of the car. The worst part was that he was angry and crazy and I couldn't get him to admit that he was low, that we needed to pull over, that he needed a snack, and he wouldn't stop driving. He would speed up and slow down and swerve and I remember that we almost went into a navy blue Buick. I remember seeing the driver as my side of the car swerved toward him. He was an old man with a face like a bulldog, drooping cheeks. Somebody's grandfather. I thought that this was it, that his face was the last thing I was going to see. Only Joe swerved again. I kept talking, trying to sound calm, "Come on, sweetie. Just pull over. It's okay. Come on." But he was so angry, he was so low, and he wouldn't. I just repeated myself until finally he did pull over. We ended up in a Holiday Inn parking lot in Arvada. I grabbed the keys out of the ignition and held them in my lap until he ate a whole box of snoopy fun fruits. When he was Joe again, when his blood sugars were back up and he could function again, he cried. He was so angry with himself that he let it happen. This is a curious phrase which Joe uses often—that he can let lows *happen*. But he's *diabetic*—meaning his body is out of control, meaning it is a daily battle for us to control it. Only we have to hang onto the idea of control because there is no viable scientific advancement which out and out prevents these lows from happening. How else are we supposed to live our lives? What else is out there?

Lying in bed, ready for sleep, I run my fingers over a soft patch of skin near Joe's waist. It is slightly yellow, the tinge of an old bruise, the site of an injection. I reach up and palm his fingertips that are stretched above his head as he lies on his back, his eyes to

the ceiling. I curl my hand back down and tuck it under my chin that is resting on the edge of his chest.

“Good night,” he whispers and folds his neck down to kiss the top of my head, resting just below the crease of his armpit.

“Goodnight,” I crane my neck to smile up at him. His eyelids flutter and I listen as his breathing flattens out into the long rhythms I remember from my childhood. I close my eyes, but only lightly.