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Five Degrees: A Short Story

Cassia E. Hinds
University of Central Florida

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FIVE DEGREES:
A SHORT STORY

by

CASSIA-CHERON E. HINDS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in Creative Writing
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Thesis Chair: Dr. Anthony Grajeda

ABSTRACT

An interwoven fiction piece representing four perspectives and its effects on self-awareness. The most effective way to blur the line of self in this structure is to braid the minds, voices, and stories, of each perspective. With a focal point where all the voices eventually drift to being the frame of the story, there will be a unique distance between the stories. This thesis explores the effects of different types of mental and physiological illnesses through fiction, highlighting the effect of perception on fact and the perspective of the mentally ill.

DEDICATION

For those who agonize over equality and perspective.

For Anthony Grajeda, Lisa Roney, and Charles Negy, for being there when I needed them.

And especially my friends and family who kept me sane when honestly the facts say I shouldn't be.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to first thank Anthony Grajeda. He is one of the most good humored human beings in the world. Anyone you think is more good humored than this man isn't human. He has smiled and made jokes while tacking very serious and important information. I've sprung things on him, gotten confused with him, and forgotten things at his expense and he was more than happy to help me anyhow. He is the kind of person that I strive to be as a professor and a professional, calm and funny.

I thank my friends who are still friends with me after I ditched them to write. Thanks for taking me away with MotorCity, Pedro. I really needed that break.

I want to thank Jovon who took care of me the nights I got really inebriated because working full time and writing a thesis like this was not the smart thing to do. I really needed a guardian then. Lastly I would like to thank my mom and sisters for breaking my writers block. I was so behind!

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Introduction

How do we explain sight? Green trees in the distance shivering in the cold breeze, and children running around, knobby knees and sticky hands bushed with browns? According to the National Keratoconus Foundation “Light rays enter the eye through the cornea... The cornea’s refractive power bends the light rays...through the pupil...in the center of the iris.” This is the sensation of seeing like tasting, hearing, touching, and feeling are senses. “Sensation is passively receiving information through sensory inputs” (Green). Sensation isn’t what fascinates me, however. Perception is. “Perception is interpreting this information” (Green).

We all know at least one person who has said something like, “your red might be what I call red but actually looks like your green.” Even though most of us roll our eyes at things like this, the phrase said to the point of becoming nothing, it speaks about the secretiveness of our minds, the unsharable individual experience, our perception. Perception is important to us I think. Deep down inside I, at the very least, am fascinated more about our disagreements on the quality of a movie even though most of our eyes and ears work similarly. It’s the reason why so often we say things like, “What don’t you like about egg rolls? Everyone loves egg rolls. You’re weird” and “Why are you voting for him? That hair can’t run our country.” Perception is an intangible separation, palpable and arguable, between me and you. Them and us.

My thesis will be a series of interrelated short stories that attempt to better understand this separation. Before I could really even begin to tackle this topic I had to really understand how perception is studied, the difference between truth and fact, and self-awareness.

Arguments, introspection, experimental and neuroscientific methods are of the models used by Psychologist to study perception (Stufflebeam). Arguments, as Stufflebeam puts it, is “a

means of proving, explaining, persuading, convincing...” and upon studying the art of this we can learn more about each other’s perceptions and inferences. And this is our perspective, our piles of perceptions dictated by sensation.

The most fascinating part about perceptions, intrinsic in arguments, is the difference in truth and fact. “[Truth] is what a person has come to believe” (Pfeffer). Truth is the lack of intended deceit in giving information, honesty. “Facts possess internal structure being complexes of objects and properties or relations” (Honderich). Fact is the implication of usable and recyclable knowledge, something is true beyond the singular “I.” The color red is a fact because it can be agreed upon. Without expressing our minds if told to point at a red tile we will choose the same one. When we are told to raise our right hand we’ll raise the same one in relation to the rest of our body. This is the weight of fact.

Truth and fact seem very close in definition for a good reason. The perception of fact is truth. With a healthy mind and a clear understanding of concepts without obscurity then truth is fact. We, much more fallible than the above example, deal with disagreement by arguing and assuming that while they are wrong and we are very right, it is only food and politics and at some point it won’t matter. We’ll get over it and move on because the things we typically disagree upon are nuances and preferences. When perceptions are manipulated through sensation or otherwise then a person could lose touch with bigger, more substantial, fact like who they are.

Sitting in the back of my mind like an empty jungle gym in the park of a bad neighborhood is Merriam-Webster’s definition of self-awareness: “knowledge and awareness of your own personality or individuality.” Do we truly know ourselves, our personality?

I did some research on disorders, both physical and mental, that could potentially remove the knowledge of our personality and/or our individuality. Cotard's Delusion, Encephalitis Lethargica, Sleep paralysis, and Delusional Memory are all examples of dysfunction that could prove to blur or destroy the sense of self that Merriam-Webster describes. Its use to me here is to explore the effects of such disruptions on perception through fiction to see if readers find themselves in a strange position where they must sympathize with these perspectives.

Research on Dysfunction:

Delusional Memory From Dementia:

This delusion blurs the line of perception through false identity.

“Frontotemporal dementia (FTD) is the clinical manifestation of progressive nerve cell loss in the frontal and anterior temporal lobes. It represents the second most frequent form of early-onset dementia.” (Kurz)

“False memory with delusional attributed significance is delusional memory.” (Howard)

I've devised an old character, once a psychiatrist, lost in between the throws of dementia trying to put back together his life to feel safe, to feel at home. He is a finicky, orderly man who after spending most of his life with those obsessive tendencies is old and alone without work to fall back on. His previous patients have become a reservoir of details he takes into himself, their stories interwoven into his own to keep at bay the black hole of empty memory.

“Examples of the emotional impact included feelings of frustration, depression, and embarrassment and loss of one's sense of self. Cognitive and functional difficulties included completing daily tasks and activities,

forgetting names, faces, and doctor's appointment, and loss of one's independence." (Powers 1062)

"Memory falsifications are not found exclusively in schizophrenia.

Patients may confabulate to cover an amnesic disorder or just be telling lies." (Howard)

I didn't have a particular book that served as inspiration in this story, but my family has a long line of women with early onset dementia. I was drawn to this idea of "fabricating" when I talked with my grandma about a time she'd done something in her past. Halfway through her story sister said, "I did that, ma'am. Not you." The idea of not knowing if you'd done something or heard about it was such a unique disability that I worry I might share in the future, that I felt the need to explore it in fiction.

Cotard's Delusion:

This delusion blurs the perception of the living and the dead.

Cotard's syndrome is an illness that surrounds a range of "beliefs that one has lost organs, blood, or body parts to insisting that one has lost one's soul or is dead." (Ruminjo)

In my thesis, specifically in the sections about Cotard's delusion, I attempt to create a character that seems reasonable. She is a somewhat funny, eccentric woman with a loving husband and realistic goals. She's observant but obsessive. She complains about a smell and feeling in her stomach like she is truly sick with maybe an ulcer or possibly a parasite. She comes across as someone reliable because only her illness seems to be in question, not her logic, not her love for her husband. I would like her to believe she's become a ghost after her "death." At this point readers are struck with the choice of suspending their disbelief or retroactively

correcting the events of the story before. In the end, it puts a lot of strain on the reliability of the narrator.

“Ms. L, a 53-year-old Filipino woman, was admitted to the psychiatric unit when her family called 911 because the patient was complaining that she was dead, smelled like rotting flesh, and wanted to be taken to a morgue so that she could be with dead people.” (Ruminjo)

I took a great deal of form from *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* by Phillip K. Dick. In Dick’s novel there is a suspicion that Resch, an android bounty hunter, is an android. Deckard, the protagonist and an android bounty hunter, must kill him after working with him. Before delivering the test Deckard starts to reason that Resch is an android because he has no compassion for the things he’s killed. It turns out Resch isn’t an android and suddenly there is a level of uncertainty about the narrator’s ability to discern humanity from android. “Empathy, he once had decided, must be limited to herbivores or anyhow omnivores who could depart from a meat diet. Because, ultimately, the empathic gift blurred the boundaries between hunter and victim, between the successful and the defeated” (Dick). Like Dick, I wanted to explore the boundaries of the living and the dead.

Encephalitis Lethargica:

This disorder blurs the lines of perception by destroying the brain and thus the personality.

“In 1916, von Economo first described encephalitis lethargica (EL), a CNS disorder presenting with pharyngitis followed by sleep disorder, basal ganglia signs (particularly parkinsonism) and neuropsychiatric sequelae” (Russell).

The idea in this story is that contrast is key. I plan to first write a college woman who was always thought to be laid back and smart. She is a bit guarded and keeps to herself, but a sociable enough woman. The story follows her love story and her eventual marriage. Through the romance, I intend to incorporate the symptoms, allow them to take over her motor functions, and collapse her into a coma just after the marriage. After the coma she is a different person, trying to rationalize her before behavior, trying to stay her old self, but she cannot shake her apathy. When she does feel anything it is aggressive and violent. Her violent tendencies flare up and soon she hurts more than herself.

“Seventeen of 20 patients had psychiatric disturbance. Mutism occurred in ten patients. Emotional disorders were also common and included depression DSM-IV ($n = 6$), obsessive–compulsive disorder DSM-IV ($n = 3$) and anxiety ($n = 2$). Apathy and catatonia occurred in four and three patients respectively” (Russell).

“Patients may also experience abnormal eye movements, upper body weakness, muscular pains, tremors, neck rigidity, and behavioral changes including psychosis.” (NINDS)

A Clockwork Orange by Anthony Burgess influenced the nature of this story. Burgess’s violence and social mentality are the basis for the character I intend to create after the initial symptoms of Encephalitis lethargica. Alex, the protagonist of the novel, is a merciless psychopath who undergoes a special Pavlovian teaching that “corrects” humanity. He becomes a good man and attempts to kill himself because of it. I would venture to reverse Burgess’s model

for Alex while keeping the mentality of a ruthless killer intact. I would set free his pre-operation Alex onto the modern day.

Sleep paralysis:

This disorder blurs the perception of reality and dreams, warping the sensibilities.

“Sleep paralysis (SP) is characterized by a discrete period of time during which voluntary muscle movement is inhibited, yet ocular and respiratory movements are intact and ones sensorium remains clear.”

I plan to write about a depressed young man who lies on his back most nights, thinking about the events of the day, wondering if it is worth it to get up the next day. He’s actually fairly outgoing, but when he gets home it’s like the walls close in and melt the door knob. He can’t just leave, weight dragging him into the bed to sleep and sleep and sleep. When he wakes it’s like a weight is crushing him, holding him in place. He can’t move and all he sees are demons, feeling bones going over his skin.

“Unnatural involuntary movements (e.g., levitation), autoscopy, the presence of malevolent intruders in the bedroom, and physical/sexual assaults are common SP hallucination themes” (Sharpless).

Stephen King wrote a story called the “Man in the Black Suit.” In this story there is a boy who meets the devil by a lake while fishing. King manages in a short period of time to go from a pleasant feeling, comfortable encounter, to a terrifying preemptive strike. “The mouth of the man in the black suit was like that of a shark’s mouth when it opened, only his gullet was blazing red, the same color as his awful eyes, and I felt heat bake out of it and into my face, the way you feel a sudden wave of heat come pushing out of a fireplace when a dry piece of wood catches alight”

(King 53). Sleep Paralysis is all about helplessness and King manages to highlight a fearfulness similar to that in “The Man in the Black Suit.” His sense of suspense and pacing are what I’d like to emulate in my thesis.

Rotting

The smell was coming from my stomach. I could feel it, swollen like a cyst against my ribs and spine. The rotting was swallowing tissue and tendons like plankton. And awake in the near blackness of my bedroom, heat slipping in through the tiny cracks in the house, I found myself again, staring at the purpled, spotted skin. In my dream, I had been carving out the dead bits of stomach with a boning knife.

I'd peeled back the flaps of belly to get deeper inside. The stomach walls sounded like dried pig skin, the knife digging, inching through. My mouth hung open, saliva stringing off of my bottom lip, rapt in sadistic awe of the pain. I jerked the knife out. In the space between my breasts I peered down where I expected streaks of darkened blood. Black ink, fizzy like shaken water, streaked instead. I'd have pulled out my whole spine then to stop whatever evil was growing inside me.

My hand slid back into the hole, and I drew out chunky black gelatin. In the way the dim light wobbled in the blackness, the pain spread. In a metal dish, I laid up the pieces I'd pulled out. The smell morphed in the open air, sending the flavor of old bile and fresh sewer into my nose and to the back of my throat. That smell stripped and flayed the dream and I awoke upright, head hung, drooling onto my own hands, nails dug into my stomach.

I could still smell it, the blackness, faded, diluted, and lingering. The new round rows bleeding.

#

My husband, Andy, and I were in a restaurant one night. Not just any restaurant, but *The* Restaurant. It was one of those fancy kinds of places with blankets on the windows—material

too thick to be drapes at that point. All of the waiters had “French” accents and moustaches needlepointed on, unable to make eye contact when they talked like they were slaves on a plantation. We were Madame and Monsieur in those kinds of places. It had been what my husband and I had been talking about for months, better actually. I never thought I’d love being this alienated from the staff.

I stared at Andy, my pinky finger curled into one side of my mouth. Andy was scooting his chair inch by inch on the carpet, face seconds from touching his salad plate. He was all done up for today and even rented a tuxedo for the night. White blazer on white blouse with white slacks and white shoes because my husband couldn’t bear the thought of being just another guy in another tuxedo in *The Restaurant*. The idea pained him in such a profound way that whenever he looked at alternative outfits he wouldn’t argue. He would just hold the oxford shirt or the slacks about a foot above his head and then let out a low groan. Then he’d say, “What’s wrong with what I’ve already rented, Patty?”

I let him leave the house like the abomination he was because I couldn’t tell him how stupid he’d look. He was too excited about wearing it. He’d even shaved himself and gelled his hair like some kind of douche high school kid in *Grease*. I sighed, watching him crush the suit he’d spent hours ironing as he shuffled under the table. I leaned over the thick china and the excessive silverware and unbuttoned his blazer for him.

Andy looked like he belonged in this silly restaurant when it came down to it, with the waiters running around with towels on their stiffening arms. Well maybe he would have if he’d sat there quietly, but instead he rubbed the carpet as he jerked towards the table like a real

person. How had he still not found a spot comfortable enough to stop and just sit still? Honestly this went on for at least a minute.

Watching my husband embarrass himself this way ordinarily would have made me delirious with glee, swinging my arms around like an inflatable car salesman, laughing and slapping anything to stop the pain in my stomach, but a week ago I died.

When Andy finally stopped scooting, he smiled up at me, resting his hands on the table like a man about to make a decision. Andy had one of those smiles that reminded me of when I was a child and things were so easy that smiling was all I could really manage. When I smiled back at him in my sulking black dress, in *The Restaurant*, it wasn't a real smile. I would have smiled properly if my stomach hadn't been rotting, sucking the life out of whatever was keeping this empty bag of flesh going. The smell—my smell—wafted suddenly more potently into my face. My nostrils flared. I might have looked unimpressed to the staff and my husband, the way I turned up my nose. Maybe in that moment I looked like I belonged in that cartoonish place too. But Andy knew better.

“I thought you couldn't wait to come here,” he said.

I didn't smile, but I *did* want to come there. I nodded and placed the drape-thick napkin on my lap instead. This whole thing had been my idea, originally. I'd seen the place one night while driving home, the big lights blinding the drivers as they passed. The windows were so long and the silverware looked flecked with gems and wrapped in gold. I told my husband only big money could even think about eating there and if we wanted to be big money we'd need a reservation. I loved the way Andy sat across from me at breakfast the day I told him all this,

moving around the marshmallows in his cereal. He nodded once and took a deep breath, hair uncombed yet and drooping down into his face like a black metal front man.

“I’m not sharing my savings with you just because this was your idea,” he said

“Don’t think I’ll share with you either.”

I’d gotten so into the whole nonsense about saving my half secretly that I’d roll up dollars into a sock and hide it in my baseball card box under the bed. I even made Andy stand in the hall while I hid it. I was so excited when we’d both, separately saved. The reservation was another month and we were staying away from greasy foods to keep our palates fresh. We looked like idiots I’m sure. It wasn’t until last week when the smell started that I couldn’t bear the idea of going, of having to smell what I smell inside me and eat.

I looked over the menu for a moment, trying to keep my expression neutral, fingering the embossed cardstock fancy word fancy food. Andy chewed on his upper lip like that when he didn’t want to make a scene and only didn’t want to make a scene when he was feeling like making a scene. Knowing him he hated my lack of enthusiasm and had been holding in blurting those exact words to me. I glanced up at him and he gripped at the tiny drape napkins.

“There are frog legs on the menu,” I said.

That made me laugh and the lines above Andy’s eyebrows smoothed. He had hoped and prayed that the menu had the food of big money. He’d called and asked for the menu over the phone, back when we were starving ourselves of flavor. *The* management refused to speak of food over the phone. Naturally. But the menu really mattered to Andy. He joked that he was going to be eating his boss when he saved up enough money to go to *The* Restaurant. He thought his witty joke was so good he’d tell it over and over to anyone who would listen.

His boss was this huge man, heavy, round upper torso but with these skinny long legs. You wouldn't be able to tell he had such thin legs because of the way he wore business attire constantly even on casual Fridays (Which only happened once a month).

My husband happened to be playing tennis on a Saturday and caught sight of his boss frog squatting in the changing room trying to pick up his keys. This was Andrew's favorite part. He'd say, "What kind of man picked up things like that?" He'd grin and ask the question aloud like he had never asked these same questions rhetorically before. "It was because of his bad back!" Then he'd clap his hands once and shake his head.

"As I looked down the long hallway of the changing room, stink of sweat infused in the walls and wood, I couldn't stop thinking of how my 60 year old boss looked so much like a little frog."

I caught a whiff of my stomach again and I tried not to frown. I wasn't even sure the digestive tract was still even working in there. Eating would be tricky from now on...not that I'd been hungry since I died. I looked at my husband and his nose had begun to flare. My skin goosebumped and the relief that I could explain it to him was budding.

"Can you smell it too?" I tried not to sound too excited, keeping my eyes on the menu.

"Smell what?"

I flickered my gaze from his eyes to the drape-kin on my lap. I knew I should have brought up his boss and got him to laugh instead. He didn't need to know that his wife died in her sleep a week ago, but if he smelled it I had to know. I needed to share my death with someone.

“The garbage smell in here?” I said it like a question but it wasn’t supposed to sound like that.

When he sniffed the air for a moment I suddenly felt exposed. I dug my nails into the drape-kin. When he shook his head and frowned I was relieved but then dissatisfied. “Is that why you’d been so sour?” he said.

A waiter dropped off a bowl of bread and bowed back. “Madame, Monsieur. What would you like for wine?” His lips were so tiny on his long glossy face that I was certain someone just sliced open where a mouth should go to give him something to put food into.

Andrew’s expression turned sly and cocky. He’d been reading online about wines. He tended towards the fruitier wine, but ordering a red moscato would have him laughed out of any establishment. He’d been practicing drinking one particular wine so that his face didn’t screw in when he sipped it.

“Pinot Grigio,” Andy said handing back the wine booklet without looking at the waiter. My husband probably thought he looked so cool.

“Of course, Monsieur.”

Then we were alone again. He and I and the smell. I needed to know why he’d been flaring his nose if he did not smell anything. Had he been lying about the smell to protect my feelings? Maybe he smelled it and didn’t want to tell me. Maybe he knew. I stared at him as he stared down at his menu.

“Let’s go to the bathroom together really quick,” I said.

Andy's head snapped up, grey eyes glowing. His lips curled up. His eyebrows bounced once and then he pursed his lips, tongue pushing against his cheek. He'd completely misunderstood.

"No. God! Stop it, Andrew. Just follow me," I hushed.

He looked around and nodded, putting his finger to his lips. Hand in mine, I dragged him to the large 'Femme' labeled bathroom. It was just as ridiculous as the waiter's towels and the blankets on the windows. I should have checked that no women were inside before I dragged him into the handicapped stall, but when we were in there already it didn't matter. Andy had already started to loosen his tie and unbuckle his pants when I closed the stall door. He rubbed his hands together, slow like a creepy old man about to lay hands on a newly recognized woman.

"Just smell my stomach," I said, his rolling tongue getting close to my neck.

His brows sewed together then one eyebrow went up. I lifted up my black dress up over my breasts. I beckoned him, shaking the dress in my hands. He obediently walked over and kneeled. His fingers went over the purpled bruises and he looked up at me for a moment without a word and then back to the bruises. When I smiled then I hoped he didn't look up at me. I didn't want him to think I was kidding about all of this—that this was one of my silly jokes, but I loved the way he trusted me and that was why I smiled. I curled over looking at him through my cleavage and the smell was so strong that my smile unraveled. I remembered the way I'd dreamt my stomach peeled back and how everything was so messy.

"What am I looking for down here?" he said.

“You can’t smell it?” I said. He had this look of recollection suddenly. He nodded and patted my stomach. “The worst thing I smell is sweat mixed with the bathing soap I bought for you. Just the way I wanted you,” he said.

I didn’t smile. I rubbed at the bare skin. I didn’t believe him. The knees of his white slacks were pressing into the dirty floors of a woman’s bathroom stall to lie to me. I stared him down; he sighed, sniffed again, and shook his head. I don’t know what came over me but I grabbed his face and pressed it against my stomach. His hair felt soft in my hands.

“Patty, I’ll stay here and smell you all day, but believe me I don’t smell anything strange,” he said. Seeing him smile up at me, kneeling on the ground broke my heart. He knew what the smell meant.

I ran my fingers over his face. His smile died and then he kissed my stomach. It took so much out of me not to gag when he did. I let him go and backed up in the stall. Andy stood and his fingers wrapped around my hips. The pain from the purple bruises rippled. He gave me a small peck then another.

“So does that mean I should buckle my pants or what?”

If he could still kiss and smile at me the way he did then I couldn’t really be dead enough yet.

#

It was the middle of summer in Arizona and even the house was sweating. It was three days after *The* restaurant, and moisture slid off of the plastic plaster coating. The air conditioner broke last night and Andy and I were too busy to remember to call someone to fix it.

I was sitting upright when I woke up this time. My eyes sizzled in my head like expired yolks on a sidewalk. The smell was stronger now, making me suck in my cheeks like I'd bit into a lemon. The smell consumed the room and my husband with it. Andy lay face down, hair slick to the right side with sweat. Out of the corner of my eye I watched him move his lips slowly and hum to himself far off in his own dreams.

Gnats flew around my bedroom clinging to the furniture and hissing around my husband's head. The more I smelled my stomach the more it reminded me of the two day old road kill I'd driven over yesterday morning. Its body was baking in the sun like something a caveman had forgotten to eat. I cried, thick smelly drops from dried up dehydrated craters in my face. The liquid stunk, but it felt so nice on my skin that I couldn't stop. When I sobbed I was hoarse and each cry sounded like an older and older version of myself. I sounded like I'd already rotted away.

I was afraid to look back at the heavy, bloated image of myself sitting in the bed. Afraid to catch a glimpse of a dark and discolored splotch sinking in and tearing a way into the rotting chasm below. The bed groaned and I stepped out of it.

"Honey." Andy's voice sounded tired and delusional. "Sleep some."

I wanted to. I wanted to lie down next to him, but when the maggots cut through the flesh and spilled into the bed he'd look at me with such horrible eyes. He'd hold me tight and say something cliché like I had no right to leave him alone like this.

The sound of liquids in my stomach sloshed as I walked. There was hardly stomach anymore. I imagined death had broken down the lining and spilled into the rest of me. My whole body sounding like a frog sludge diet coke. I thought it would hurt. That dying was painful, acid

burning through the enamel of my bones, splitting, mixing into the marrow. It wasn't like that. It was slow and numbing.

I was standing on the front lawn, the dry breeze rising off of the hills. It felt like a good place to lie down and not really die, but rot. When the stomach burst I could fertilize the earth. It was one of the last comforting thoughts I had. I lay down on the cool morning dewed grass and closed my eyes.

#

I felt cold first, on my back. In his arms, cradled, I felt like a new born child. He was crying so loudly, forehead on my chest, pausing every so often to put his ear down to my chest.

“Patty, please. Wake up, please.” His voice was so soft, so close, his lips and nose cold against my skin.

When he breathed in, I jerked awake, out of his arms. The smell, the guts, they'd get to him and he'd give me the look. His eyes were blurring and the lighting was low. I could hear sirens coming from down the road. The smell of my body wandered up into my nose, warped, tarter, and stranger than ever. I'd woken up much too early. I looked over at my husband, tall and wet with the dew, who was crunching the grass in between his toes as he moved towards me. It was also somehow too late. He'd smelled it. He'd seen it, all of it, all of me. And decided. He knew what was rotting deep inside, and he called the people who were going to take me away.

I looked down into the soil, grass frayed open. I began to pull the rubbery strands out of the ground with my hands. My nails felt numb, blackness swallowing up my nerves. I was afraid the rotting inside of me would grow so large that I'd tear open right in front of Andrew and spill out. When I eyed him I couldn't linger long, his looks set with grief and disgust. How dare I do

this to him? Andrew's hands were on my shoulder, a tear sliding down my nose. He was sobbing too, trying to grip me. I couldn't stop digging. Maybe if I could make a hole here, in front of the cobbled steps of my home, they'd let me stay here, let me rest.

"Patty, what—what are you doing?" he said.

I pulled the roots and tossed them around, the grass and soil were moist. I'd make such a good addition, I thought. The sirens were deafeningly close now. I didn't want to go somewhere cold. I just wanted to stay here. I wanted to stay by my husband. I wanted to stay by his side.

"I just want to be buried here. Tell them to go. Tell them to go." I said, getting wrist deep in the soil. When the police got close Andrew stood up. I could hear him telling them *that I was forgetting who I was*.

I lied to the woman who changes my bedding, first thing in the morning. She was a nurse, I'm sure, humming and smiling when she came in to pull the urine stained sheets from under me. When she saw it, a balloon shaped stain, she never looked me in the eye. She just smiled and hummed like this had been what she'd wanted at the start of her day. I was grateful for that. I had a spare gown in my room and I'd already changed, slipping the thin spotted dress over my head and down. To imagine if I'd still been wearing the stained gown when she arrived, dripping with my own shame. To imagine if I'd have to turn my bare back to her, ask her to tie me up.

Her hands were cold, though, like she was hardened snow, startling at first and moist at the end. She'd ask "Are my hands alright, Pat?" when she looked over the back of the gown, anyhow, tightening already tight enough strings, like I was the infant she'd forgotten to take care of. That's when I'd lie to her, abrupt and mechanical like I'd been saying over and over in my head. I'd lie because she'd pulled the sheets off of my bed, hair perfectly tied up. Because she had dark hair, deeply locked curls packed onto the top of her head like flowerbeds. I'd lie and look there, into the thicket of hair, when I did, her eyes being too intimate to watch. She might have known in her shrewd nose, sniffing past urine down to the lies, what I thought about her icy fingers, but she never said anything. Gowns and blankets rolled up in plastic in her arms, she'd turn back, darkness from beyond the door sucking the color out of her; smile; and wish me a blessed day.

The Change

I loved the woman sitting on the chair beside me. Her hair gelled up with natural oil, skin greasy and glistening. She looked like a glass doll, shining next to me, eyes puffier than they should be. This was Andrea. Those were the facts. Her puffy slotted eyes glared down at me from her chair. The look she had now, sniffing and gripping at the sheets next to me, had been the look I'd fallen in love with. Back in that cramped Massachusetts college dorm, her big brown eyes swollen up like Ping-Pong balls because she'd been throwing back whiskey since ten p.m.

The bass was thumping so loudly from the room across from mine that both their door and mine rattled on their hinges. I was surprised, thinking back on it, that I even opened the door when she knocked. Standing in that hallway, smelling whiskey on this tall, beautiful woman, when whiskey was designed for older men to drown their ugliness in, transfixed me. She towered over me at 6'4" without her heels, but she loved to wear thick white pumps to events. She had these kid's bunny barrettes in her hair that somehow stood out more than her tight hips and small waist. The Marlboro reds on her knocked the heavy smell of Whiskey into place, the butt of the cigarette crushed against the concrete in front of my door. She was so cartoonish, like Jessica Rabbit, and so out of place.

I don't know how long I stood there, eyes running over her, trying to find the right thing to say, alcohol rolling around in my own skull. Vodka and orange juice was such a girly thing to drink, compared to this sultry woman, who reeked of excessive masculinity. I looked away suddenly down to the butts on the ground, ashamed.

It should have been easy to put together that she'd accidentally knocked on my door after going out for a smoke, but she'd gotten my mind fizzy with a thousand other thoughts.

Thousands of thoughts keeping me from thinking about all the sex swimming in my stomach. My neighbors kept having these loud parties and drunk people kept knocking on my door. Always girls loosened up by liquor and sugar and strawberries, losing control of their clothes, asking to use my toilet. And all I could think then was all the sex I wasn't having in all of the parties I wasn't going to. What a fucking creep I was.

Andrea gripped the frame of my door the way her short white dress stuck to her. Small darkened spots formed under her arms and on her waist. And under her breasts. I tried to look away, up to her white and blue bunny barrettes, reminding myself of the words I'd said to all the women after they'd stumbled out of my bathroom, breasts budding against the lining of their bras. The barrettes had blue bows on the rabbit's ears and even when I wanted to touch her, my drunk gaze locked on those barrettes.

I pointed at the door across from mine, finding the words, and said, "That way." She looked at me for a long moment not saying anything. Her big eyes going all over my body, made me warm. She looked around the hall suddenly, snapping to action, turning her whole body. When she circled back to me she just pushed her way past me, long fingers slipping in between my breasts to shove into my apartment.

"Where's the bathroom?" she said.

#

She sat on the couch like a mother might after taking the kid's soccer team to Steak n' Shake. There weren't Steak n' Shakes in Massachusetts and Andrea didn't look like a mother I'd ever seen. She just breathed there for a few minutes, head hung back, neck long and damp, probably pooling all of her sweat into her back. I felt awkward and uncomfortable just leaning up

against the couch, staring at the folds of her body. I didn't want her to leave—absolutely not—but I didn't want to make her feel like she couldn't if she wanted to.

I had been watching Netflix unsociably and vindictively before she knocked. I was embarrassed by it when her head slowly straightened to stare at the screen in front of her. I can't even remember what I had been watching, but it made Andrea snort—the way I imagined she laughed down at things. She grabbed the laptop off the table and slid her fingers over the trackpad. I wanted to see if she was looking through my list for what other garbage I intended to watch. I wanted to slide in next to her and see, without crowding her. My throat had been a bit sore, tightening from all of the anxiety. Walking over to the kitchen cabinet, I pulled out a tiny bottle of tequila I'd been saving. I poured a few shots worth into a cup and threw it back. I've never really recovered from that first experience with tequila. Whenever I see a bottle I immediately oscillate from nauseated to aroused remembering that night.

I shook my head, disgusted by the burn of blue agave in my chest, and when I looked up Andrea had craned herself around in the chair, smirking over at me. She didn't say anything for a long moment and my eyes wandered to her lips and then I was staring into my cup again.

She wanted to watch *Horton Hears a Who* she said, and before I could respond she'd turned back around and pressed play. She patted the seat next to her and I twisted over to that spot. My couch sank lower than it had ever done, two people in it for the first time since orientation with my parents. I watched her tug at her heels, the backs of her feet bruised and reddened. She didn't seem bothered by it when she tucked her feet under her like a mother goose, her chest and shoulders and head leaning towards me.

We were supposed to watch it, but we didn't. Her eyes were closed in that drunk way that had her eyes rolling around in the lids. She laughed loud and sluggish at the jokes in the movie like she could see and follow them. I watched her, tequila weighing down my lids and grabbing at my movements. Her brown hair was slipping out of her bun and in the back these thin strands curled back into her. Every so often she'd swat at her neck and I suspected that was why.

"You're a really pretty girl," she said to me, sinking towards me as the movie came to the halfway point.

I laughed nervously, sweat in my hand turning from scatter showers to hurricane levels of water. I'd been told that by men before and drunk girls leaning too close and giving me a kiss for the bathroom. Somehow, Andrea said it in the right drunk voice at the right time in my life where I had the right amount of tequila in my body to finally listen. I poked the strands that were against her neck into her bun.

She had these big, clear eyes then, looking up at me as Horton rolled on the screen. I knew right there and then that I wanted to marry Andrea, only the flashing colors of the screen defining her. I was drunk, but not out of my mind. Andrea would be this defying and difficult person in the morning. Maybe I wouldn't have the same commitment that I had sitting on that couch watching Jim Carrey as a talking elephant, but still I had to know. Not exactly and not in so many words, but something about the wickedness in her lips and desperation in her eyes made me fall so hard that I had to know that there would be no one else after that, no one close.

Her lips were rough, dried out, but her kiss was ginger, scared. Her hand pressed me back as if to stop me. I pulled away and she bowed her head for a moment, forehead bumping my cheek. Suddenly I felt scared too. It seemed strange to think about it now. I'd never thought

about being with another woman before her. I'd thought about sleeping with them, touching them, but when Andrea looked up at me I was scared that I'd want more from her. Again she came, grabbing the collar of my shirt, her lips rubbing themselves down on mine. Her hand rested on my breast, fingers wrapping and rubbing. We were going to tear each other apart.

#

The next morning, my head throbbing and throat sore, I sat at the island of my kitchen as Andrea accused me of rape. She was pacing barefoot on the living room carpet hand visor-ing her eye from all the sunlight coming from the windows. She probably had a hangover but she wasn't taking the water and pain killers I was trying to give her. She was too caught up saying that this was my fault for seducing her and that she didn't want what happened last night. She was just drunk, she said.

I was angry. I wanted to grab hold of her and shake her up, but I just sat there, watching her go past me over and over, trying to avoid looking at me. My hands felt lame and heavy and then I felt lame and heavy.

"You weren't the only one drunk," I accidentally said.

"You only drank after I came in," she responded.

"I never invited you in. I showed you the bathroom and you set up shop."

She stopped pacing and glared at me. Her eyes settled on mine for the first time since we woke up tangled up together, wet with sweat under my comforter. She only held her gaze for a moment before looking away again.

"I was seduced. I'm not just some lesbian," she mumbled.

My thoughts were flitting to the way she bit into my neck, gently at first but then hard and harder. The way she pushed me into the bed with these red hot hands and how she giggled a lot when she was drunk. The way she pulled her dress over her head and mumbled, “My name is Andrea just in case,” getting the dress stuck in one of her barrettes, straddling me. Me sitting up to help her tug it off. Her smiling at me, wrapping her fingers around my ears, “I have a thing with con-min-mint. Don’t make fun of me,” she said. The way I could run my fingers all over her skin and see her curl and bite her lip was unknowable. The idea of someone else knowing that drove me up a wall. How could I be so defensive over someone I’d only just met? Then I flitted to the college seminars about rape and alcohol.

Andrea was red in the face again running all over the room yelling at the top of her lungs now, eyes puffy from crying. I let her scream until she was tired and sitting down, breathing heavily like she’d done when she was drunk. She hadn’t put on the rest of her clothes yet. She just wore a pair of her underwear and no bra, just there sprawled out. She couldn’t understand what seeing her like that did to me. Seeing her so open and budding. I swallowed myself. Andrea wasn’t bashful, but she did believe she was wronged.

“Why would you do this to me?” She was flattened into the couch, glaring at me through thinned slits.

I thought about all the cheesy things I could say to her right then. All of the ideas layering like papier-mâché into a horrible wet mess like made-for-tv dramas. I scratched my head and got up. I pulled the blinds to darken the room. I turned on the burner in the kitchen.

“Have you seen *Horton Hears a Who* before?” I asked.

She groaned and covered her face, breasts lolling around in the free air. She held that position, occasionally kicking up her feet. I fried a couple of eggs and she took the pain killers. The eggs looked like Andrea's breasts, sunny side up, wobbling when I scooped them into to the plate. That was when I felt her press up behind me, bare breast on bare shoulders.

"What's my name?" she said.

Her lips were against my ear. She was still so tall in the kitchen, bent over barefoot. She stunk of cigarettes and alcohol, but knitted in there was the smell of sex and just her.

"Andrea."

I handed her the plate with two eggs. She didn't take it. She rested her chin on my head.

"Over easy," she said.

"What?"

"I only like them over easy." I put the two eggs back into the pan. She stood there for a long time before she said anything. "You've been with other women before?" Andrea's accent filled in for a moment, speaking of some southern heritage. I'd not noticed that the night before, maybe because of the booze.

"Why?" Her hands wrapped around my abdomen. I wanted to shrug her off, not knowing how to reconcile her thinking I raped her, her tone about lesbians, and how badly I wanted to ignore that and let her do whatever she wanted. But I didn't reconcile. I just let her. "Was I your first?" She never answered that question. She just kissed my neck. "Wasn't I rapist a second ago?" I flattened my tone as to keep from sounding angry, because the more she kissed me the angrier I got.

“But you’re doing it again. Making me feel like you’ll let me go if I let go.” I turned around, and she backed up. Her eyes were still puffy, but she looked terrified. I reached over and touched her stomach softly, feeling fingers against her skin distracted me. I didn’t even know why I was touching her and not just yelling at her. “Why did you watch the movie?”

“It’s a good movie.” Then she leaned down, hands around my jaw and gave a slow, small kiss. It was tender and honest and so intimate that all the kisses we’d slipped in while we grabbed and prodded at each other the night before felt fake and empty. Then she apologized in one word and got dressed. And she was out of the door, heels in her hands. I tried to stop her, clarify what that kiss meant and what she thought I was doing, but she didn’t even look back. I was alone with two overcooked eggs and unforgettable sex on my skin. My throat ached. I started coughing more often after that.

#

I’d never cried so much over a person, sleeping longer and longer, losing time staring at the wall for hours, but after a week I had to stop. The crying at least. She was just some girl I’d barely known. We had sex and now she was gone. There were mixed feelings, but there wasn’t anyone to sort them out so I had to let them go. I removed all the sad romantic dramas from my Netflix list. I tried to spend most of my time busy with essays and books. I went out for walks regularly. I started drinking screwdrivers—what I’d recently learned vodka+orange juice is called—in my living room again. The coughing had gotten worse, though, coming in fits in the middle of the day. I was told it was the flu, but yet it loomed, clinging to my lungs, while I sat around catching smells of her in the bed. I couldn’t have really caught smells; she didn’t stay here that long, but I kept feeling like I did.

Maybe it was the bottle, I got to thinking. The small bottle of tequila would annoy me from the corner of the room, someday. So, I gave it to the people across the hall. The two were at the door when it was opened, a thin girl, holding the door, with stringy black hair in a braid on her shoulder, bags under her eyes and blue eye shadow above it and a somehow thinner man, leaning against the inside wall next to the door, with dark brown skin, platinum blond hair, wearing extra dark eyeliner. They looked like such dramatic people to me. They thanked me for the tiny bottle, but I could tell by the weird looks they gave me that they didn't trust it. They stared at it for a long time before awkwardly sharing a look with each other. That was fine though, because the bottle was gone and I was feeling better. It had been three weeks since I'd met Andrea and some days I didn't even think about her.

It was such a cliché that it was raining. Sometimes when I told this story I'd say that it wasn't raining and Andrea would get upset, tapping her foot and mentioning it over my shoulder whenever she could get a word in. She loved the drama of it all and sometimes I wondered if that was the only reason she showed up on my step drunk with a plastic bag of beers in one hand and a half burned cigarette snubbed out by the rain in her fingers.

She looked angry when I opened the door. My stomach turned. I was furious because when I saw her I wanted to climb out of this shell I'd made for myself and just start kissing her, but I couldn't. I should have slammed the door in her face, but I just gripped the knob until my hand hurt. She breathed heavily, hair soaked to the scalp. Across the hall I heard the music start up. I opened my mouth to yell something at her, but I just ground my teeth instead. She was wearing a black long-sleeved dress this time, closer to her knees than the white one, and black flats.

“Trish,” She said, “just give me a second.”

Then she turned around. The back of her dress clung to her back, heavy and pregnant looking. Streaks of water trickled down her legs and arms. I watched the water travel from her neck and collar bone. She walked to the door across from mine and banged on it for a moment, hanging her head to wait before banging again. Her rings clacked so loudly on the metal that it jolted me awake. I should have taken that moment to go back inside and lock the door, but she looked over her shoulder at me, anger still in her brow, and showed me her index finger. Her lips mouthed “wait.” My head throbbed. She knew my name, my mind went over again and again. She sighed and dropped the plastic bag on the door step. It was filled with Busch beer.

“Fuck em” she said. Then she was back in front of me, shivering and staring at me. “Move already. I’m freezing.” I didn’t move. “I said—”

“Why are you back?” I said. She shrugged. I frowned and then stepped back into my room. I closed the door in her face. I stood there hand still on the knob, hearing her breathing outside the door, but she didn’t say anything or clap on the metal. If I cried then she’d know I was a crazy person in love with her after just one night. I couldn’t be so mad at her; she’d know. I shouldn’t, I mean. I kept on thinking, mind warping from the ache, but she stayed outside the door breathing, calmly waiting.

I opened it again. Not knowing where to look at her, I just kept my eyes on the crook where the door opened. “I shoulda led off with I’m sorry and I haven’t been drinking, but I have smoked a whole pack trying to get my ass into this hall to talk to you,” she said. I didn’t believe she was sober. I remember smelling a ton booze on her breath. Andrea swears to this day that she wasn’t drunk when she was on my step in the cold, but I remember what I smelled.

“That’s not a real thing people do, Andrea.” I adjusted myself in the doorway, cold air sliding past my ankles, “People don’t just show up after smoking a pack in the rain.”

“Yeah well,” and then she never finished that sentence. “I wanna kiss you. Can I?” When she asked I looked up at her. Her brown eyes glimmered with desire and I could feel it ember-ing in my hands and in my face. I picked at the paint on the door, thumb nail digging into the grooves.

“How’d you know my name?” I felt like every question I asked was delayed, trying to answer an earlier thought. Andrea rolled her eyes and shivered.

“Jesus Almighty, Patricia. One, you have it written on all the stuff in your room and two, I live across the goddamn hall.” Her breaths were making white billows in front of her now, the temperature changing outside or inside her. I looked over at the door and realized that all along I hadn’t thought that maybe she’d lived there. Women and guys came spilling in and crashing out of there so often that I’d never thought about the occupants. I’d never seen her before. “Can I please just you—you know—already?”

I could feel myself thinking yes so loudly that she could hear me, but I just bowed my head, opened the door, and backed in. She paced straight for the bathroom. She didn’t lock the door behind her when she started peeling off her clothes. The wet sound of them curling on the tile. I watched her check the water with her hand to see if it had warmed up. The soft cooing of her voice in the shower bounced through my living room.

“So I’ve been thinking,” she said. Then she peeked from behind the curtain, her long neck damp with water, “I’m thinking that I want you to be my girlfriend.” My chest tightened. She didn’t smile. She’d said it so matter-of-factly that it sounded nearly as normal as saying

you'd pick up a new sponge at the store on your way home from work because the old one is falling apart and it's on the way.

Then she showered in silence for half an hour. Those minutes seemed to stretch like most things did when you needed time to just relax. I sat on the couch, trying to wrap my mind around the idea for even one second, but then the rubber band thought snapped back and began to stretch again without a moment's hesitation. Andrea stepped out of the bathroom stark naked, drying her hair. The rubber band broke. She was grinning down at me.

“You said that it was my fault that you are this way.”

Andrea stopped grinning, but she didn't frown, as if she was thinking about her own words like she'd never said them. She wrapped the towel around herself. “I need to borrow some clothes or I could always walk back to my place like this.” Then she headed to the door. Some part of me was relieved she was leaving, but I jumped up and pressed against the door. I'd never meant to keep her there, thinking back to the college seminars and the booze breath she'd had, but I couldn't just let her leave. It was freezing out there, I told myself.

“Wait wait. Explain what you meant because it's getting hard to um understand,” I said, trying to keep my eyes anywhere but on her body. She walked closer to me, looming. Her hair spilling over her shoulder, brushed my hair behind my ear, gripping my earlobe. I pulled back from her when she touched it. She grinned and leaned in, “I don't want to play, Andrea. I don't want this to be confusing and stupid. I just want to know what the hell I let you in for.”

She paused, shutting her eyes and sighing. She didn't want to talk about it. She just wanted to have sex and kiss and touch and then not think about it, not let it mean things that it

should and did mean. I didn't want that, her warm body inches from me. I need to touch her and know that I always could.

"I ran away because I was being lame, alright. I came back because I like you. Simple enough?" Then she leaned over and gave me a soft kiss. Her lips were smoothed out and wet from the shower. She drew up my chin and my head hit the door. I grunted, but her tongue slid into my mouth and then I was lost in there. For minutes, desperate for the seconds in between and the moments together. I felt stupid and used and most of all stupid. She was using me and playing around and I was already too scared to stop.

#

It started happening after our marriage, waking up the middle of the night. It wasn't anything as dramatic as Andrea thought. I wasn't screaming or crying about some tv show season drawn out grizzly past, I was just awake. Very awake when the sun hadn't thought about coming out, and the air is in-between heating up after having been cooled down. I had been sweating, which is one of the things Andrea mentioned, spooning peanut butter in her mouth a few nights ago.

"You're prolly scared of something," she slurred, in between smacks of creamy peanut butter, "You'll sweat, and scream, and cry all night if it's like that though." She dug the spoon and looked up at me through her lids, like she did when she wanted to talk about something I didn't want to talk about. "You scared?" I cracked eggs into the skillet, clear bubbling to white too quickly, instead of looking back into her eyes. She slid up behind me, fingertips rubbing on the lines of bones in my hips and chest, and then her ear was suctioned onto my back. I kept pressing the eggs around the pan, the glistening yolks flattening. I was terrified of her, the way I

was terrified of the dark at ten, curling back against my blanket, staring blindly into it, waiting for it to hurt me like I knew it could. Her making me warm and happy seemed like the eye of the hurricane, but that wasn't why I was awake. It was the coughing.

I kept feeling like if I let the coughing go, let it tighten and scrape for as long as it needed to then it'd eventually stop, but flecks of spit wheezed and hitched, and my lungs tightened and tightened. That night though, it'd only lasted long enough to wake me up. The hot air slipped into the cracks of the house, heating up the room. My throat was killing me and my head was pretending to be a pin cushion, pricking from every direction. The buds of sweat made me feel extra cold, goosebumps puckering on my arms. This was starting to feel like the flu, the sweat and all, maybe a fever. I glanced over at her face, smeared on the pillow. Maybe it was because Andrea would not let me turn down the thermostat.

The darkness of the room was warped, twisting up shadows into demons with six eyes, and children with claws. Andrea's breasts were splayed out like a deck of two perky cards, and she was snoring like a champion of sleep. My coughing rarely woke her, but when it did, she stroked and smiled and hushed me to sleep.

Her ring was smothered by the darkness, barely glinting in the light, but right where I'd left it, on her long finger. Her hair looked like a flowerbed, dark and matted, twisted up for her to sleep in. I touched her lips, chapped flecks of skin ridged against the grooves of my finger. Maybe I was making sure she was real, making sure she was mine. I dragged my feet to the bathroom door, hitting my foot on the wooden leg of our bed. The thermostat was beside it. Seventy seemed like an improvement on the eighty-five degree room.

I climbed back into bed, hitting my foot on the wooden leg again, and bundled up Andrea. She mumbled something about hating communism in her sleep before cuddling up next to me. I smiled and kissed her ear. It took a full year of living together to get her to agree to the marriage. She thought all the liberalism was crappy and that marriage was excessive, but there she was lying there, married to me. She'd let her smile rise over her gums when she laughed too hard, like an ape, ever since we were married. When I said it to her once she threw five utensils and one appliance at me, the toaster luckily. Now I quietly enjoy the ape smile when she doesn't know I'm watching. She still didn't strike me as a mother, even when I thought about children of our own, when I'd caught her smiling at a kid's tv show, when she'd stare at the children's aisle at the grocery store for moments too long. She was the type of mother who forgot why she'd gone to the grocery store, or brought home stubbed out cigarettes instead of candy on Halloween, but still I wanted to see myself inside her, some of me and her in something else, something that couldn't just run away. Maybe our child would have a smirk like the woman who smoked cigarettes on the balcony, breasts perking to the cold.

The room was dark save the reflection of the window on the wall, drawn out panes, stains of rain from days ago touching the back wall. I watched it waiting for the sleep to sink into the back of my head, throat aching, skin freezing, head burning. I watched the colors of the wall redden and then sleep caught me by the ankles and dragged me in.

That was exactly how I'd describe the last time I felt a single feeling for her, in such vivid, envious detail. Being inside of my memories of her and then returning, suddenly and abruptly, was what I imagined being born was like. From warm and dark to cramped and wet. Her eyes are what I saw first, big and red and looking down at me. Those were the facts. When I

opened my eyes, the joy I usually felt didn't come. Or maybe, to more frank, it was like a thought that stretched and elongated like it does when you smoke a ton of pot, gone but still somehow here, in the past but still happening right now. Even as I sat there, looking across the room at her, thinking about it, I felt almost like it was real, like the weird parts of me that felt for her were inside me but in a different language, warm on my skin like her eyes on now but indecipherable.

I don't know how long I stood there, staring over at her, trying to work out which words and feelings I understood. Her eyes had cleared up, red still raccooned around the edges. She was sitting across from me, our bed stretched in between us, watching me. That's how the hospital had been, the drive home, the walk to the house: agonizingly empty. She poured herself a cup of whiskey the second she walked in the door, bottle sitting lonely on the island, waiting for her. For a moment my mind remembered the motions, the concern and worry, the way it whelmed up and I tried not to let it spill out of my mouth. I knew what finding me not breathing in the bed sounded like, her voice rising into franticness. I knew what it felt like, her lips on mine and her never letting go of my hand. If I'd had such confirmation of her love for me when we'd started I never would have worried that she'd grow tired, give me a look one day that emptied me out. I didn't feel any of that though, I only remembered it. In that moment, there with her, I felt antsy, like my skin had bugs burrowed inside. I started feeling it lightly behind my eyes and I was rapidly growing angry.

"Looks like you'll take any excuse to drink." The words felt natural, filling up all the space in the apartment. The ants in my eyes seemed to stop crawling. She paused, the bottle of Blue Velvet big in her hands. She didn't look up and me, but she frowned and poured the glass.

She didn't drink it. She went to fridge for a bottle of water, "Take the medicine." She put it down next to her cup. Her stocky, once sultry steps, looked exaggerated and awkward to me. It made my eyes itch. "It'll help." She was watching me when I took the water. I pulled the pill bottle out of her purse, pressing and unscrewing the cap, "Maybe five minutes in the house before the absentee wife starts getting self-righteous, maybe?" she sipped, her eyes on the pills being gulped down. I was against her so immediately that I terrified myself, manic suddenly, heart thumping. I gripped her drink, hand over the mouth it.

"You smelled like this when I woke up. Maybe try to make it to bed without it." I said. She stared at me for such a long time, her long body so close to mine. I found myself refocusing in moments like that, when I knew I should have wanted to close the distance between us, feel her on my hands and in my mouth, but didn't. I'd focus on the world almost like I'd casually forgotten I was in it, like a bystander watching a car crash he caused from the sidelines. Looking her up and down as the apathy for her rolled out, made the ants in my head scatter and the medicine wasn't making it stop.

"The doctor said you'd get like this," she said. She whispered it, but we were so close and the house was so quiet. Her eyes had begun to gloss over, tears too proud to just fall out of her eyes. I refocused. I was going to hurt her, jab my thumbs into her cheeks and knock her down. The hot warm moisture of her mouth almost on my hands already. I didn't particularly want to hurt her. I just wanted to hurt something to make the ants just stop—and she was here. She was next to me, watching me, loving me. Seemed easy enough to do. I didn't say anything.

When her eyes slipped back into the glass she had on the table, that was when I stepped in between her legs and shoved the back of her head into the fridge handle. One of the doors

knocked open, the warm yellow light of it spilling cold onto my legs. She'd scrunched her eyes up, expecting it I think. She was so large, so much bigger than me, but her arms were so weak, pressing against my throat, pressing and pressing me, but not away. I could barely feel her fighting back, but all of that was snuffed out. All there was were my thoughts, my breaths, my hands. Wet and harsh, blood cold on my nails, I pressed into her, watching the slivers of her lip separate from the pressing, her tongue rolling back as she cried. I couldn't even tell you what it sounded like. My thumbs dug a millimeter into her cheeks when the sedative took effect. Sound yanked itself into my ears so fast that I thought I was tossed out of a jet. Then I was falling and falling, ripping through clouds, getting wet, but not cold but warm instead and then I was on the ground, looking up at her. She was standing there, looking down at me. She looked like she'd made up her mind, her image smudging. Sometimes I think I would have hoped she didn't cry, but most times I don't think about her.

I couldn't understand why she'd get like this some days. Sitting across from me in a plastic chair, she'd bite her cheek, trying to start it up again.

"What were their names again, Pat?" she'd say, lips curled into a smile, but eyes sunken in and tired. Her hair looked like the day had already ended, matted, but the sun was climbing up through the windows, turning the walls yellow. I didn't like answering these questions, but they were usually over quickly enough.

"Emily, Margo, and Sam," I said. She smiled weakly, walking over to smooth out the wrinkles on the bed, "I treat them every week. One's Cotard's delusion, encephalitis lethargica, and the boy I think is sleep paralysis." It crinkled with paper, and hard plastic when I sat up to look at her. She frowned when I did this. She knew that the argument was coming.

"Where do you think you are—"

I folded my lips into my mouth for a second, angry to all hell, but afraid to lash out. Her brown eyes looked so sad, faded now looking at them, more faded than I remembered. I reached over and tucked the bit of hair sticking the stray strands of her hair into her bun. She smiled, hand wrapping around mine. I suddenly heard voices on the other side of the office door. A patient, early.

"Drea," My throat felt a bit dry, "I know where I am. Stop with this. What's more important is where is um..." The word slipped my mind suddenly. The image of my daughter, rolling like dough in my head, spreading out, flattening, disappearing. Then back into a ball again and there she was, "Suzanne." Tall and athletic. Then she started to cry, Drea did. It was soft and slow and then she was face down in my lap, crying.

“Just be careful with your IV,” she said kissing my forehead. Her lips were saggy and wet with lip gloss. She turned, purse on her shoulder as she walked out of the room. She wouldn’t tell me why she asked and why she cried, but she always asked and always cried.

The person who walked in wasn’t my patient, but he was quick towards me, grabbing hold of my wrists. I pulled back against him, calling for a security officer from the hall, but no one came. New patients could get violent, this I had experience with, but I wasn’t scheduled for a new patient. I called and called security, but the patient had crushed me down. I tried to kick him, but he’d pinned me, strength eons above my own. His arms felt like a blanket of steel. Then another man stuck a needle into an IV bag, and I felt strangled, like two fat hands hand gotten around me and smothered the life out of me. I was asleep.

The Man in the Night

Staring at the wall keeps me from falling asleep most days. The spots and smears make faces. I felt the sleep in my eyes, though, sinking into the back of my head like a sling shot's rubber band. It wasn't enough that day, the aged ketchup marks and sweaty feet stains mixing into a vague image of maybe Jimmy Carter—I don't know. I haven't slept in two days.

I walked down the stairs to my living room, walls elbowing me for extra space. My feet cracked against the cement under the carpet, and my hands, curling and uncurling, felt clammy and awkward. Awkward wasn't the word, but there it was. Isolated, sleek, and hard to make out in the dark, my refrigerator churned. I was going to walk through the darkness, hitting my foot on every stupid thing my mom forgot to put away because I didn't want to go to sleep. Her heavily buckled purse, curled up next to the couch, caught my pinky toe first, buckle slipping in between the last two toes to strangle one. There is a unique cruelty to the world that resides in the way people always hit their small toe on objects. So then it hit the couch and the wooden leg, curling inwards, nail shattered. Then it caught the edge of the kitchen island. Then my hip caught the edge of the kitchen counter, tugging at my gaping pocket.

Then the handle was in my clammy hands and the cold feeling spilled out onto my bare legs, flapping back through my robe. For a moment I couldn't imagine wanting to sleep, the warmth of it deep in the back of my head. I felt cold and awake and I realized that my mom hadn't bought groceries in a while, the white back of the refrigerator glaring at me. There were two bottles of apple juice and a lonely Budweiser huddled in together around a few slices of bologna. No mayo, no cheese, and no bread.

Mom never remembered to bring all of the parts in a set. She once bought two gallons of milk and no cereal because milk was on sale. Another time she bought a whole case full of pasta sauce and no pasta. She lines the pantry with the cans now. She says it looks decadent. Mom was always so embarrassed when she realized her mistake, coming in from work in a pants suit, hair half pulled out of her elastic band. She'd cover her face in the doorway with the keys still in her hand, like it dawned on her only when she saw me sitting in the kitchen. She'd stand there for a while and then come up with something silly to say. "There are a lot of strays in the area. I'm sure they have babies," she said, pushing the gallons of milk in the refrigerator.

I never had the heart to tell her that kittens shouldn't be drinking our kinds of milk because of the hormones and stuff, but I doubt she would have listened to me. She was always too busy, rushing out the door after the words, "I love you" before I could ask her how work had been. Ages before asking how my classes were going or how I was adjusting, you know cliché stuff.

When she had a day off, though, she was great. She slept half of it away and the other half she drank through. When I stop to think about it, Mom really only drank and went to work, but it wasn't like she was an alcoholic. She never beat me or anything. She mostly curled up on the couch and turned on sappy movies, biting her nails and crying until she fell asleep. When she was drunk, she looked at me a lot more, like she really wanted to talk to me. Sometimes if she was completely drunk she'd talk about Dad. She'd get this slow smile going on her face, thinking really hard about which words she wanted to use. She'd think forever about something like "He was a delicate man," when she talked about him. It never lasted longer than a sentence or two, but she'd cover her face with her brown hair like a child, like she was embarrassed or something.

Then I'd hear that really thick snuffle and she'd turn the volume up on the movie. It was worth it, though, staying up late with her each night, catching the moment when she looked happy before she was gone again.

I dug a nail into the package of bologna, the freezer burn raising on the edge of the container. I'd forgotten to remind her to pick up ziplock bags. I should've texted it to her, but I didn't. The sacks of sleep in my eyes were filling up again, weighing down my lids. I should check the mail, I said to myself. I hated having these little conversations in my head. It made me feel antisocial. Not that I wasn't antisocial, but it was excessive to feel antisocial while talking to yourself.

Barefoot and outside, I walked across the bulky gravel, watching my feet. I made sure to lock the door and tuck the key in my pocket. The last thing I needed was to get caught by my mom. The automatic locks were her way of keeping me safe, she said. If she forgot to lock the door, as she often did, no one could climb into the house to kill me. She spent a lot on it and it needed a key and a code. One night she got drunk and I got locked out. I had to wait until 8 am the next day, when she was unfurling from her liquor cocoon, to be found. I'd been huddled there all night. The way she looked at me then, seeing me rush past her into the warm home, was confusing. She grabbed me and brought me to the bathroom for towels and blankets. She watched me warm up, fingers curled into her mouth for her to chew on the nails. She sat me in the couch and in silence made me breakfast that day. She was very late to work.

If she'd caught me then, she probably wouldn't have called me irresponsible. She'd take a breath, look over the door, and tell me she was sorry. Stuff like that always made me feel worse. Sometimes I wish she was an alcoholic, punching and slapping the parts of me that reminded her

of him. Then I could be mad at her or something, want to rebel and act out and hate her. Instead I just feel guilty when I make her stop.

A shower might be too relaxing to do after the mail, I thought again. I needed to keep my mind busy. I stared at the ground. It looked inky, rain still slick on the gravel. Moist and sharp under my feet. I worried for a moment about glass bottles broken at the last party on the street. I started to remember my mom hobbling back in the middle of the night, having left to tell the neighbors to keep all that noise down because she had work in the morning, but instead returned red in the face, giddy, and with some guy. Obsessive for a moment, I stopped walking. They'd broken so much glass around there. The sound of the pop pop of the bottles sounded like fireworks. Then the sleep yanked hard on my lids. I kept walking.

It was halfway when I looked up. I might not have been able to see him, at least not so clearly, if it hadn't been raining. The damp gravel reflected the light into his face. I could see him, broad shoulders knitted, trembling. He seemed like he was keeping his voice low, but his face was twisted up and drawn long. I thought about turning back for a moment, but I was so close already. He'd probably seen me, I thought at first, but when he kept on crying I knew he hadn't, but I got closer and closer anyway. Then I was standing above him and I could see him up close. He was so much larger than me that he had to be in his thirties. He was tanned and had these big eyes, raccooned eye sockets, and a stubbly chin. Maybe it was the lighting that made him look so bizarre.

I wanted to say something, but I didn't know what people said in those situations. I didn't want to presume or get in the way, but I didn't want to just stand here, staring. Should I put a

hand on his shoulder? I didn't know this guy. He'd sock me in the mouth for sure, I thought. I felt sick all of a sudden and he looked up at me.

“The fuck do you want, kid?”

I opened my mouth like the words would come easily, like I knew what to say, but the mouth just hung like that. I felt my back get sweaty, and my eyes started to burn a little. “What?” he yelled again. I turned around and started walking for my house. I didn't know what else to do. “Hey!” his voice called from behind me, “The hell is wrong with you?”

I didn't stop walking until I'd closed my door behind me. My heart was thumping and twanging and twisting. I went to the refrigerator, knocking my foot on the couch again. I would've sworn, but I could hear her, my mom, lightly snoring. She must have come in while I was outside. She'd driven past and didn't see me. I stared into the refrigerator now and hoped for the adrenaline to stop, for my hands to stop shaking and for me to...relax. Mom's snores got louder, spilling in past the groan of the refrigerator. The clamminess made my hands slick on the handle, like oil on plastic. I felt so cold there that my breath almost made billows alone in the darkness.

I grabbed the apple juice and the beer and walked back outside. I still wasn't sure what I was going to say to the man, but I was going to give him something to drink. This time I slipped my feet into my mom's sandals. They were cartoonishly big on my feet. I pushed out of the front door again, careful not to slam it behind me. For a moment I was worried he wasn't there, as I shuffled across the gravel, lighting throwing shadows over the mail box, making it seem vacant. But the closer I got the more light reflected on him. His skin looked smoothed out with a whetstone, his wiry beard outlined in the street light. This time he spotted me right away, the

sound of my mom's bright yellow sandals dragging on the gravel. He didn't say anything though. He just looked up and then down again.

"What do you want, kid?" he asked. I reached out the apple juice and the beer and waited. He didn't look up for a while and when he did he seemed shocked. I was imagining all the crazy things I looked like right then, handing him the bottle. Psychopathic juice fanatic was the one I seemed to fixate on, the words twirling in between each second we shared in silence. His eyes slid over me and my hands like he wasn't sure what I was offering. He reach over and grabbed the apple juice. "I must have looked pathetic." He mumbled, cracking the seal off of the bottle.

I was surprised he didn't take the beer, but more surprised that he seemed calmer than when I'd left. Confused as to whether to be honest or polite in this situation, I just chewed on my tongue. Then he was looking up at me with his big watery eyes. When they reflected yellow in the lights my stomach turned over. I cracked open the beer.

"How old are you?" his voice was amused, gentler. I looked over at the beer and I felt like I had something to prove. It suddenly seemed like a challenge, the casual way he smiled and sighed, like I was nobody. I'd always liked the taste of my mom's beers, but I'd never let her know that. Sometimes I'd hope she'd throw a fit so big that she'd quit her job and attempt to re-raise me from scratch. That wouldn't have been such a bad thing, I thought. I hated thinking that. I gulped up a lot more of the beer. I'd never really finished a tall boy by myself before. The most I've had is half of the regular ones my mom usually drank. The fizz burned and I coughed a little when I stopped for air. The strains of saliva, caught behind my hand embarrassed me. The man's yellow eyes locked with mine then.

“Alright, enough. Give it here,” and he reached out a big arm towards me. I chewed my tongue, wanting to throw the can as far away as I could with my tiny arms, but I handed the can to him. “Sit down,” he said. The beer lapped as it spilled into his mouth, almost as if he didn’t notice how bitter it was. He wiped his mouth and handed it back to me. Surprised, I nearly knocked it out of his hand when I took it. I turned the can to my head, chugging along, trying to drink as long as he had, and my eyes were burning when I stopped. I handed the can back to him and he a smiled a little bit. I looked away. My face felt warm, and pulsed in my head.

“I’m sorry,” I said after a moment. I was wringing the other bottle of apple juice, my hands barely curling around the base. I was sorry he was sad and that I interrupted and that I didn’t know how to talk right and that I couldn’t help him or cheer him up or make him laugh. We sat there for a little while, drinking and passing, until he stopped taking it from me. He just started shaking his head. I kept on drinking again and again by myself. Then the can was done and sitting in between my legs on the ground. I moved it with my foot, inching it further and further way with my toes, trying to keep it from tipping over. The whole time I’d forgotten to look at the crying man. He was quiet, sitting in the dark, shaking his head when he didn’t want to drink anymore.

“Why are you up and about at three in the morning? Don’t you have school?” he finally said. His words came bunched up. I did have school tomorrow, but I didn’t want to go. I didn’t know how to explain why I didn’t want to go to school. I scratched my head and suddenly my body felt loose, like the strings that held me together were falling apart. I shrugged at him. He sniffled and it sounded like how my mom sniffled. He wiped his eyes with his thumb.

“Why are you out here?” I asked. The words were sort of tumbling out, redirecting questions the way my mother did when she drank. When I looked over at him I could see the whites of his eyes were pink from crying. Then he muttered under his breath and stood up. He kicked the can as he walked off, hands in his pockets, back of his t-shirt wet. I sank deeper into myself.

My eyes rolled around as he stood there, a yard out from me, hands on his hips then. He kicked his sneakers into the dirt and folded his arms.

“Just get back home, safe. Okay, kid?” Then he finally walked away. Down the road to one of the doors at the end of the street. I felt my face twitch and settle. I wanted to cry too. I got up and carried the apple juice back to my house.

#

It’s always in the middle of a thought that I find I’m waking up. The ceiling is familiar and I know I’m in my bedroom, but the blankets are made of steel and I’m tucked in. I can move my eyes around, heart pulsing behind them, but they feel tired and dry. It’s hard to breathe now with the blood rushing to my face. I just want to open my mouth and take a breath, but I’m wired shut. I can hear the Velcro of flesh parting as I try to open my lips. That is when he appears, blackened and heavy on my chest. His shape is confusing, but distinctly watching me in the dark. His tongue is long and wet when it slips out of the rows of teeth. It drags along the length of me, first over my legs then my stomach and then it slides over my lips. There, the feeling of terror switches to hot discomfort as he hovers inches from me. Then he will press into me, kissing me. From ginger to violent his teeth make my lips feel like tearing open and the harder he presses the

more of his face I can feel against me. He feels like a skull with thin skin pulled taut over it, and then he nuzzles it into the crook of my neck.

“I’m scared,” he says. His teeth don’t clack when he speaks and I don’t understand how he forms the M without any lips, but each time I let the sleep spill in he is there, talking. The blood is overflowing in my head, heartbeat like constant punch in my head. My sight is muddled and I’m ready to pop, brain gushing from every part of me, when the Velcro tears open and the scream rakes its way out of me. Up and awake I am alone, sweating, elbows propping me up in my bed, lung squeezing every bit of scream out of me. I hear my mom getting up and walking to my room in my mind. Then she’s crawling under the sheet, robe barely around her naked body, shushing me. Her breath stinks of whiskey, but her eyes are alert and soft. She holds me while I breathe her in. “I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry,” she says again and again, her words slurring, her hand sliding over my slicked hair. Her voice murmurs and murmurs next to my ear until my mind is blank, and I don’t feel my lungs anymore. I just feel her, hear her.

#

The next time I saw the yellow-eyed man was about a week later. I was holding onto the knob of my front door, and I could see him slotted in between the blinds on the window. Saturday’s sun sunk into his face and at first he looked like a stranger. The raccooned eyes were lighter and his yellow eyes were browned. I nearly woke my mom up, thinking he’d been some man she’d forgotten to call back, but I hesitated. Mainly because I hadn’t slept the night before and things got slow when I didn’t sleep. Especially me, but that was why I noticed a case of beer in one of his hand and a huge jug of apple juice in the other. I smiled. It reminded me of the time

my mom brought home a dog when I joked about wanting a baby brother. We didn't keep the dog, but I was so happy she had been listening.

Yellow-eyes turned around and took steps from the door. I gripped the knob to turn it, but I thought of how I must have looked to him that day by the mailbox. Thin and pale and quiet and drunk. The burn of embarrassment crept up my skin, first in the backs of my hands, moistening the knob. I must have seemed like such a kid.

Yellow-eyes stopped walking, the sound of my heart beat in my throat, watching him. He pressed the doorbell, shoulders rising as if scared by the sound of it. Then like that I felt noticed. My chest tightened and my cheeks ached, but I couldn't get myself to open the goddamn door. Why, my thoughts flooded in, why did he want to talk to me again? I found myself looking over my shoulder at the tight, angular figure of my mom, passed out on the couch, hair tickling the edges of her high cheekbones, a straight-to-tv-romance movie rolling across the screen. He must have seen her. He must have wanted an excuse. My hand slid off of the knob. That was so dirty of me to think, to be jealous. Despicable. My eyes burned a little, seeing the slight reflection of myself in the window. Opening the door probably would have woken Mom up. She'd had a rough day and needed her sleep. Even though she'd been too drunk to change into her robe and wasn't exposing herself on the couch like usual, she was indecent for company. Even though the doorbell kept going off and she didn't even hitch a breath, I couldn't risk him wanting to wake her.

If I just left him out there he would eventually leave, I supposed. I couldn't leave the door though, let it go. I stood there, just like he did, shifting from leg to leg, waiting, hoping. Him not knowing that I was watching was refreshing. He had such a grumpy face, frown lines all over. I

couldn't tell if he had smile lines, though. I'd never seen him smile in the light, and watching him from the cracks in the blinds made me hope that I could come to know what that looked like. He sniffled, wiped his nose with the back of one of his hands, apple juice wobbling in his grip. The bottoms of his eyes looked so much redder than I'd noticed before. My stomach felt watery and heavy. I was so selfish.

He stepped away from the door after a few minutes, looking around and kicking gravel as he went. Then somehow I had opened the door, stepped outside, and closed it behind me. I was still in my pajamas, against the door, looking over at him as he kept on walking. I nearly went back inside, but the door had been locked. Damn the locks to hell. I was stuck, the air crisp and sharp on my nose and fingertips, robe flapping around me, my hand firmly gripping the knob. I didn't know what I wanted from him.

Maybe I wanted to apologize.

"I'm sorry about—" I murmured the words. He didn't stop walking. My stomach sloshed as I went through the glassy gravel towards him. His back was so much larger than mine when I was nearly toe to toe with him. "I'm sorry about the other day," I said. He stopped walking. I stopped too. I was close enough to grab him, hold him. I supposed he was listening. "And today," I said, "My mom." He looked uncomfortable, drinks hitting against his leg. "She's asleep on the couch. I didn't want to..." I'd said too much already. I bit down on my tongue.

He didn't say anything at first. I could just hear him breathing. "I panicked a little. It's fine. Your-You didn't do anything wrong. I—" he said. I felt the air thicken, like somehow there was a violinist pushing the highest note on her instrument so far away that I could just barely hear the stress of it. He turned around, but his eyes were up in the reddening clouds instead of on

me, “This is to thank you for um whatever, but beer wasn’t—isn’t appropriate.” Then he laughed and swore under his breath. I didn’t know if I should laugh too so I didn’t, “Of course you have parents. What am I thinking?” he groaned. He reached to cover his face, but the apple juice was in his hands, and he swore again. I wanted to smile then, but I didn’t.

The silence stretched between us again like the string of a bow, tightening and tighter still. He thrust the apple juice into me, hard before I could think about anything to say and then promptly not say it. The plastic hit my stomach. He was such an awkward man, struggling to be nice, I think. I took it, and he nodded. Thinking of my mom, I reached over and took hold of the handle of the case of beer. She probably wouldn’t worry about where I’d gotten it until she saw the bottom of the box. He let me curl my fingers beside his and for an odd moment we were touching. It had been, strangely enough, the first time I’d touched someone and it’d felt important, but then he let go, the box of beer swinging heavily down to my side. I felt at the cusp of the conversation ending and I gave the apple juice back to him. I just wanted the moment, whatever it was, to be longer. He smiled, and he took it. The lines were soft, just beside his lips. They were redder than they looked the night we’d met, his lips. They were thin on the top like a worm, and thick on the bottom. They didn’t look chapped.

“Thank you.” I snapped back, his brown eyes on me now.

There was this silence between us again louder than all of the glass bottles crashing into the gravel, and the sound of my mom having sex when she thinks I’m asleep. Loud like the screams in my head when I’m trying to wake up. I didn’t know what to say to fix it. I just stood there and stared and stared. I wanted something to connect us, something to hold onto to make us friends, but I couldn’t find it.

He nodded, smiling down at me for a minute, turned around, and walked away. Then it was really over. I'd go back to my room and stare at the stains to keep myself from sleeping, and he'd go back to crying when he thought no one was watching. I didn't even know why he was thanking me. I didn't know why he was crying. I didn't know why I wanted to know about him so badly. I was saying, "Wait," before I could think it. I just wanted him to stay.

I rushed back to my house, not even looking to see if he had stopped, and I put the case of beer next to my front door. I tried not to look up as I crossed back through the glass gravel, afraid to see that he was already gone, but when I eventually did he was standing in front of me. The sun had begun to set and his eyes had begun to look like honey, hooded by his brow. That was the moment I realized I was attracted to him, this big older man. The wires of desire spinning themselves into the joints and flesh of my body, making them warm and damp, and inappropriate. I felt ashamed, sweat forming on the back of my neck. I should have run then, but I just let my heart tumble out of my mouth. I stared up at him, clenching and unclenching my hand. "I just—" I said and he started walking away. I waited there for a moment, confused. I couldn't figure what we'd understood between us when I said wait, but I followed him. A giddy excitement in the way he didn't explain himself and had waited was burping inside of me. I tried to control myself.

I tried to catch up to walk side by side with him, but he'd look over at me, honey eyes heavy, and walk faster. At his door I was panting and tired and confused. I wanted to ask him, but I didn't want the answer. I didn't want to know that I was annoying him, that he knew what dirty thoughts were in my head. I panted longer than I needed too, keeping my eyes closed to avoid his gaze.

“What, um, what did you want...” he started. Listening to him struggle with his words made me feel confident. He sounded so forthright and assertive on the road and now in the light he looked tall and meek. I swallowed some spit and looked up at him. He was staring up at the sky again, now red with the end of the day.

“Sorry. I just.” I searched for the right words, fumbled, and then kicked the ball into the arms of the other team, “I wanted to know why you were crying.” He sighed, nodding up at the sky. “But you don’t have to tell me or anything.”

I could see his eyes pinking again, when he glanced back at me. He sniffled. I didn’t know where to look when his watery eyes fell on me. I watched my hands, curl and uncurl around each other. He was nothing like the enormous man that yelled at me in the parking lot, I thought. He wouldn’t have and probably will not sock me. I looked at the door in front of us. I couldn’t understand then why I wanted to be asked into that place. I just looked it over, paint peeling, begging myself not to want it.

“I wasted three years of life is all.” He wiped his nose. I wanted to comfort him, touch him or something. I chewed my tongue, “You should head home, kid” he said pink and yellow eyes digging into my chest.

“Patrick.” I said. I didn’t want it to end. I was acting like a brat, I knew that.

“What?”

“My name is Patrick. I forgot to tell you.” I wanted to ask him his name, but I felt uncomfortable asking so late in the conversation. I reached out my sweaty palm, hoping for an excuse to touch his hand. He ran his hand over his hair, stopping to hold onto his head.

“Kid—Patrick. Look, just go home.” I let my hand drop and nodded. The wires inside of me were rolling up, and water in my stomach returned. I thought about Mom back at home. I’d probably just sit outside and drink a little bit. “It is getting late. I’m sure—I shouldn’t have. I have school in the morning,” he continued. I was too upset to really listen to what he said. I was worried about what face I should make. I should have smiled when I nodded so he didn’t have to work so hard, but I’ve never been good at faking.

He turned to his door, and I took a step back out of his way.

“Andy,” his voice was low when he said it. “I’m Andy.”

He didn’t look back at me, but he was opening his front door. It dawned on me that that conversation had been one of the longest I’d had in a long time. I had to go back to that wall again; it was really over this time. Fighting, frowning, and throwing a fit wouldn’t change anything. I went home and sat down in front of my front door. I turned around and he was still standing in front of his door. It felt like an invitation. I didn’t wave. He was too nice, that man. I didn’t feel like drinking after that.

#

Another night in the darkness, I found myself gripped with metal arms into an embrace that turned my blood blue. The usual shadows that looked confusing that watched from the folds of the night, were gone. I can just hear my breaths, struggling to get out. It feels like an hour before I notice the hands around my throat. The warmth of those hands had been so familiar that as they tightened around me, slowly, it was only when the fingers pressed bones that I noticed them.

As if it knew I'd noticed the grip sharpened, nails digging into my neck. That's when I saw it, so exactly like the darkness I was used to, a face emerging, trembling, stringy wired roots dangling around it. The less air I could suck in, the more the darkness rattled, and then the more color I could see on its lovely body. The waist tight and attractive. The air cut off.

"I'm sorry," it said, voice like a well with no bottom.

I am gasping now, eyes dry from the exposure, somewhere else. Somewhere that wasn't how I'd been gripped. This was nothing like the usual paralysis. I was lying in my bed, I'd found, staring at the wall instead of on my back. I didn't want to move, confusion spilling into me like urine down my leg. If I moved then something might change, might crush me again. And then I was crying, or had been all long, hot liquid running down my nose and mouth. My chest was lowering and rising with each whimper I didn't dare let myself hear.

I walked down the stairs, wanting her to hush me, rub my head. I could hear her breathing—actually snoring—and I wanted to wake her. She looked sober, sleeping off the stress of work, and I couldn't do it, shake her awake for me. Sitting at the edge of the couch on the floor, I tried to hold her hand. She was snoring so loudly, nostrils turning the air sounds into science fiction movie effects, but she held back, a vague smile running across her face.

Sitting there holding her hand made me feel safe. Her palms were so warm, and dry. The crying suddenly convulsed in my mouth again, twitching my jaw and lips, trying to find its way out. I never wanted to sleep again. I never wanted to wake up screaming, or wonder after I'm awake if I truly was. My eyes had been open. I was awake; I'm sure of it, I thought. I gripped tighter onto my mom, tears forcing their shameful way out. Mom opened her lips slowly. "I'm sorry," she said, her voice dropping five octaves lower, her mouth tearing larger to say the

words. I dropped my hands and I'm on my back, paralyzed, Velcro-ed lips tearing open. I scream longer and louder than I've ever screamed, voice a wheezing toy now. I didn't even notice my mom's arms around me until I was deflated in her arms. I hadn't heard her trying so hard to calm me down, humming and rocking me in her arms, fingers wrapped around my scalp, shushing me, kissing me. I feel her crying.

“Was he even real?” I mumbled.

The vague images of Andy smeared against reality like a fake, gobbling up all of my loneliness and making a man who I wanted to feel something—anything for. I was shaking now, rumbling from deep down and soon out of control. I tried to climb out of her arms, but she wouldn't let me. She was gripping me, whispering that I was okay, telling me that she was sorry. It sounded so different when it was real, something that you could only notice after you'd known you'd been asleep. The franticness dropped almost immediately, like bubbles on the sea falling after the crash of the wave, and then the silence. I was looking at my mom and she was scared.

“I need to see the fridge. Mom. Please. Let me—”

She gripped tighter, “Are you hungry? Huh?” Her voice was confused, sleepy. I put my hand on her head, trying to calm her. She had begun to shiver. I was touching her face, her leery eyes finding it hard to just look at me. I kissed and hushed, knowing that I needed her like this, needing me. “Yes. Yes.” I said. Her shoulder came down from her ears, relaxing. I had to lie to her. Her hair was a mess, scattered around her, bunching up in the sweaty part where we touched. I nodded to her.

She let me go, sitting open armed like a manikin as I went to the refrigerator. She wanted me back in her arms when I'd gotten something to eat, and if that would let her go back to sleep I

would eat whatever. When I turned to fridge, I was terrified. I clenched one hand, sweat dripping off like oil, thick. I pulled the handle, and it was like I was at the beginning again, before I'd met Andy, opening the refrigerator to just delay the sleep. There was a jug of apple juice, chilling in the fridge next to a jar of mayonnaise. This is what it was like before I noticed I was alone.

Then I was lying on my back, fresh sheets under me, I wondered briefly how'd I'd manage to arrive at a place where I knew who'd change my sheets. Thoughts were uncomfortable during those times, twisted up and tied. The end and the beginning are hard to notice and the middle, the jelly of a thought, buried under noose knots. I didn't know what I was going to say when someone asked me how things were going, how the week has been. Not that I even knew someone would ask, but I knew at least that I wouldn't know.

To the man who takes me out for walks, thick muscled arm jutted under my armpit, I find myself trying to find the right words to answer him. I'd made a mistake. Trying to find the way to steer questions away from myself, I'd asked him how his week had gone.

"Do you remember the names of your patients, Mr. Pat, cause your old lady wanted me to ask you." His glossy lips were moving and the words seemed honest, "She's a nice lady, you got. Always around here, doing stuff for you." I nodded and told him my wife has always been strong. I wasn't sure that she was, but if she came every day she was at least dedicated.

"When is she passing by?" I mumbled. His face flashed with sadness before he smiled, "She was changing your sheets this morning." He doesn't like that he had to tell me that. I can tell. He hurried down the walkway back to my chair. The seat was sunken in and uncomfortable, but I chewed my tongue. He put a hand on my shoulder, but he was gripping too hard. I didn't know what to say to make him stop so I put my hand on his. He left me there alone after that.

#

The light is sudden on and then I'm aware that I am somewhere. That's where the confusion starts. I'm walking and I don't know who is with me. They make a lot of eye contact, and they are touching me, so I feel like I should pretend I know them. We lie with our actions

first, if you didn't know. We lie with our words afterwards. She's here again. I know it's again because she's looking at me, rubbing her pruny fingers into my shirt, shaking her head.

"Hi there, Pat." She says, the red of her lips now greyed, blood rushed out of her body with age.

I suppose we've met before and that's how she knew my name. It was because she looked so sad when I didn't pretend to recognize her, I think. Maybe I should pretend? Well...even now I'm not too sure if she was my wife or my husband. It's all muddled in my head. I feel like I've closed my eyes on my back on a lake. It's rocking me, and flowing under me. The sun is burning the color out of my eyes through my lids and I'm drifting and drifting. I don't know how far I've drifted from the edge of the beach, if I have at all, and when I look around someone is holding me, and I'm surprised.

He's holding one of my hands, eyes on his own wedding ring. It has a band of rubies around the white gold. He is rolling it and knocking it against me. The more he does it the more confused I feel. I put my hand on his and smile. He doesn't smile back. He just eyes me like I have more to say, but he speaks before I do.

"Finish the one where I'm the man who took the apple juice."

That though, I kind of remember.

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