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## Trade Secrets

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TRADE SECRETS

by

RACHEL KOLMAN  
B.A. Florida State University, 2008

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
in the Department of English  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
at the University of Central Florida  
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## ABSTRACT

*Trade Secrets* is a collection of fourteen short stories that explores characters falling in and out of relationships and coping in unusual and even comedic ways. These characters are often obsessive and do not trust one another. They think life is funny, and discover that love is funny, and yeah, sex can be funny too. They don't feel the right things when they're supposed to. They find love, and lose love. They find hope, and lose hope. They escape sometimes, but more often are unable to go anywhere.

These stories consider relationships through the disconnection between reality and fantasy, exploring how the lines between illusion and actuality can become blurred. A young boy fantasizes about running on the wind; teenagers pretend to be werewolves; twenty-somethings obsess about potential love affairs, dreams, and the possibility of escape. There is a driving curiosity behind these characters, a desire to figure one another out—a desire to learn the other's secret. Trade secrets are insider information after all, and must be earned. These characters are all earning the right to hold their own trade secrets and, when the time is right, sharing that information with whomever is willing to listen.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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My family who supports my writing desire and its strangeness to them. To my mother who wants me to make it big one day. To everyone that has sparked an idea in my head, given me a basis for a character, given me that *thing* that a story needed. Especially Amanda, who tirelessly reads everything and has thoughtful suggestions. To those who were willing to take writing outside of the workshop environment, I feel fortunate to call you my peers. To all of you that have read some version of a story in this collection: your comments and suggestions mean more than you realize.

And all of the other people and things that influenced the creation and editing of this collection: both green and black shirts, purple banditos, long afternoons at Boston Coffee, wikispaces, “Cheers, Governor!,” moldy squashes, midnight talks and inside jokes. I treasure all of these.

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## SCALE MODEL

Kelsey first noticed the man on the beach because he was building a miniature Taj Mahal out of sand. She was fascinated by the smoothness of the rounded dome top, the flawless blend of the tan grains. She lowered the clipboard in her hand, no longer thinking about all the dead fish washing ashore. Instead she watched this man scoop up clumps of sand, watched him pat the wet grains into tiny towers.

Kelsey wandered away from the cold water splashing her ankles and towards the man on the beach. His khaki shorts were frayed at the knees, and there were no tan lines across his neck or arms. He had brown hair that fell to his shoulders. He blended into the beach, with all his various shades of brownness.

Coming even closer, Kelsey saw the intricacies of the arched doorway and little sculpted windows. He was smoothing out the thin pillars surrounding the building, trying to keep them from crumbling under their own weight.

“Why don’t you make those wider?” Kelsey asked from a few yards away, a comfortable enough distance. She didn’t mean to question his work, but she wanted an excuse to make conversation.

He looked at her. His hair was tucked behind his ears, strands still sticking to his forehead. She wanted to offer him a hair tie. “Wider? Won’t that throw off the balance of the building?” He stood up and regarded his work, hands on his hips.

“No, I don’t think so.” Kelsey walked to the front of the sculpture, standing close to the man’s shadow. She was awestruck by the incredible detail of the little designs inside the

spandrels. “If you keep them shorter too, they won’t distract from the main building,” she said, trying to keep her tone light and friendly. He didn’t say anything else, so she added, “It’s marvelous, though.”

Now he smiled at her. She thought he might have been waiting for her praise. “Thank you.” He looked her up and down, and Kelsey pulled her clipboard over her chest. “What’s that for?” he asked, pointing at the board.

She lowered the clipboard. “Charts. There’s been a lot of dead marine life washing up on this beach. I’m watching it, graphing it.”

“So you’re a biologist or something?”

“No, I work in the tourism industry. No one’s going to want to come to a beach with dead animals everywhere.”

“Sure they will. It’s interesting.”

She narrowed her eyes. “No, actually it’s quite disturbing. I found a baby shark over there.” She thumbed over her shoulder.

“Really?” His eyes widened and he turned to where she was pointing. “Where?”

Already he was walking away, searching for the dead fish. Kelsey followed slowly behind him, curious that he would leave his sculpture. She could have just kicked it down.

He found the shark and bent down, resting his elbows on his thighs. He poked the shark’s head with his finger.

“Don’t do that,” she said, too quietly, because he didn’t stop. Kelsey saw the ribcage peeking through the shark’s body where the grey cartilage had ripped away.

The man opened its mouth with his finger, showing the remaining pointed teeth. “What do you do with these animals?” he asked, still viewing the shark.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“I’m only charting them. That’s my job,” Kelsey told him, though she wished there were something she could do. She wished she were in charge of having to clean up the gulf instead of only watching it.

“Let’s bury it, then.” He stood back up with an air of resolution and authority. It didn’t match with his stringy long hair and boyish face, Kelsey thought.

“Here, in the sand?”

“Yes. I want to make a grave.”

“What about your other thing? The Taj Mahal?”

“I need a break from that. No one will touch it. No one ever does. And there’s like, ten people on this beach.”

It was true. The beach area surrounding Fort De Soto hadn’t been getting many visitors that summer. The fort was undergoing renovations, hoping to open again by the end of July. The company she worked for was currently tracking the tourism trends at Fort De Soto, and thought the decline had less to do with the fort and more with the increase in dead fish on the beaches. Kelsey, only an assistant field researcher, didn’t get to decide if this beach was worth investing money in. She could only watch as the fish washed up.

“You’ll help me bury it?” he asked. Kelsey hadn’t expected the question and she paused, maybe for too long, because he said, “You don’t have to.”

“No, I will,” she said. It was an oddly sentimental gesture from the same man who had looked her up and down. “I’m Kelsey, by the way.”

“Adam. Where should we build the grave? I don’t want it to wash away.”

He carried the small body a few yards away from the shore, in the direction of the Taj Mahal. Kelsey couldn’t stare directly at the dead animal, at the rows of small bones. Adam sat on his knees, feet tucked under him. “Help me dig some sand up. I’ve got an idea.”

Kelsey knelt on the other side of the shark and started scooping. This close to the water, the sand felt cool and damp, easy to mold.

As they worked, he said, “So there’s this annual sand building competition tomorrow, on the beach right in front of the fort. There are twenty of us, and we all have to build a scale model of the fort in its heyday. We’ve each got a little roped-off section over there so no one will touch our sand. Anyway, you should come by and see it tomorrow, if you can. I think it’s starting at noon.” Adam smoothed out the grave with his fingers, a perfect bowl to fit the shark’s body.

Kelsey would still be working at this beach tomorrow. “Okay,” she said. She wondered if he asked because he was interested in her or interested in promoting his work. She couldn’t tell by his noncommittal tone.

Adam cupped his hands around the body and fit the shark inside the hole. “Let’s fill it up, and then I’ve got to make the sculpture, a tribute to our shark friend.”

They shoveled sand in over the body. Kelsey was glad once the ripped carcass was covered. She imagined if a little boy had found the shark instead, if he would have buried it like this. She sat on her feet as Adam formed a mound over the grave. In a few minutes he created the body of a miniature shark, its tail pointing up and fins out to the side. He flipped open a folded

knife from his pocket and filled in more detail in the shape of the dorsal fin, in the happy, smiling shark face. The small sharp blade sliced off the rough layers of sand. She wondered if he carried that knife with him everywhere.

Adam stood when he was finished. “Fare thee well, shark friend,” Adam said, looking down at his work. “What do you think?” he asked, offering a hand to help Kelsey up. She took it and he pulled her quickly, playfully.

She let out a little laugh, surprised at his odd behavior. “It’s fantastic. You’re pretty good at this.”

“Pretty good?” He laughed, hands back on his sides. “I’ve won awards, you know. Been featured in magazines and stuff.”

She was sure he wanted more praise, but she only said, “Mmm,” and nodded. Kelsey stood next to his side and took in the shark sculpture, at the way Adam was able to turn death into something marvelous, at the thin row of teeth in its little mouth, at the way the shark’s teeth curved into a perpetual smile, happy to be forever swimming in sand.

Kelsey arrived at the Fourth Annual Fort De Soto Sand Art Competition the next day at ten past twelve. After spending the morning walking the four miles along the coast and charting the number of dead fish she’d seen, she wandered over to the competition, to the small groups huddled on the sidelines, watching the artists.

She saw Adam right away, working to build the parameter of his fort. He wore the same shorts as yesterday, his back bare and bronze. The crowd was mostly parents with their children, the moms and dads holding the kids up high so they could see the adults playing in the sand. A

bay area news team was covering the event, the cameraman resting his gear on his shoulder and sweating in the midday heat. Kelsey knew that ultimately the competition would be a fluff story for the local news. Her company would have never sponsored an event like this. Tourists didn't travel to see local beach art.

Kelsey wondered if she was allowed to approach Adam, let him know she was here. He had returned to his work on the Taj Mahal after they built the shark grave, but he reminded her to come say hello the next day. He'd been stern about it, staring at her intensely until Kelsey said, "Okay yeah, I'll come say hi." She would have come anyway, her own curiosity driving her, wondering how spectacular his sand model would be.

She walked around the crowd, over to Adam's square of sand in the top left corner of the roped-off area. The contestants were in a grid of four by five rows, each with at least six feet of sand to themselves. No one was allowed to walk between the rows, so she was glad he was on the end, close to the audience. He was probably enjoying being able to put on a show.

For a minute, she watched as he used a trowel to create the smooth fort walls. She glanced back to the real fort a dozen yards behind them, imagining its faded, rough stone as fresh and smooth, as smooth as sand. "Hey," she said, lifting her voice so he would hear. When he didn't answer, she said, "Adam."

He lifted his head. He smiled quickly and then focused back to his sculpture. "Oh hey," he said, continuing his work. "You made it."

"Yeah," she said, stepping a little closer, up to the edge of his sand. "Looks good so far."

"These guys don't stand a chance," he said, laughing. "I was thinking about the design all last night. Just wait."

“How long do you all have?” Kelsey asked, because twenty minutes had already passed and many of the contestants were moving painstakingly slow, putting in the small details as they went. One even knocked down what he had and started from scratch.

“Four hours. Winner’s announced at five. I built the Taj yesterday in only two, so I’m not worried.”

“Impressive.” She knew he didn’t need the encouragement, but she wasn’t sure what else to say.

“Are you going to stay around?”

“For four hours?”

“I want you to see me win.”

“I’ll come back,” she said. “I have to finish some other things for work first.”

“Okay. See you at five.” Adam didn’t glance up at her as he moved on to constructing the lookout tower behind the fort, his fingers molding the sand into something much more vulnerable than the old building standing tall and solid behind them.

Kelsey arrived back at the beach and saw Adam being interviewed with a news team, his face beaming as he talked to the reporters. It was only a few minutes past five, but Kelsey assumed the winner must have been clear and there was most likely no real judging. Adam was covered in sand, his hair in clumps tucked behind his ears, a small trophy clutched in his hand. Kelsey overheard words like “masterpiece” and “phenomenal,” although she couldn’t distinguish if the praise was coming out of the reporter’s mouth or Adam’s.

She sat in the sand next to his winning model and waited for his boasting. It was indeed spectacular, a solid replica, reminding her of an old photo from a history book. It seemed to be made from something else, something not as permeable as sand, and she wanted to poke a finger into one of the smooth walls to see if it would even make a mark.

Kelsey wondered why she had driven back. She had gone to the office first to turn in her paperwork from the day, feeling that her work this week had been useless, that her company wouldn't fund a clean-up crew for a beach that wouldn't attract enough revenue, anyway. Feeling sort of restless from the helpless state of the beach, she went home to shower off the morning's sun and found herself thinking about Adam, wondering if he really would win the competition, or if his bragging would go unjustified. She wondered so much about him—if he lived off his sand art or if it was a hobby, if he was a local or had traveled here for the competition, why he had wanted to bury a shark with her yesterday, why he had insisted that she stop by today.

Adam walked over to Kelsey a few minutes after his interview, a big grin still on his face. "So, you like it?" he asked, plopping down next to her in the sand. "Good, yeah?"

"Yeah, it's incredible." She again took in the careful crafting of the stone building, the lookout tower, the two cannons that still sat in the courtyard of the fort, the little rolled balls of sand next to the cannons, piled perfectly.

"It's my third competition win this month," he said, leaning back on his elbows in the sand. They were quiet for a moment until he said, "Ugh, I'm filthy. I'm going to jump in the water really quick." He hopped up and headed to the beach, diving under when he was deep enough. He surfaced and slicked back his hair, his shoulder muscles flexing. She couldn't

imagine how he had this much energy after spending four hours building in the sun. She wondered if he would ask her to dinner. If she would sleep with him later. The thought thrilled and terrified her. She had never slept with a guy she'd just met.

He came back to the beach, his khaki shorts dark and heavy and low on his hips. "Hey, I want to show you the parts of the fort that I was thinking of when I was building. I was in there for two hours last night. It was sort of eerie." He smiled. "Come on." He offered his hand and pulled her up quickly like he had the day before.

She began following him, then stopped. "The fort's being renovated though, it's closed to the public."

"That doesn't mean anything. I got over the fence no problem yesterday."

Even though Kelsey had been a Florida resident all her life, she had never been inside this fort. She heard there wasn't much to it, except for maybe some plaques on the walls about how the fort was used in the Civil War and later, the Spanish-American War. She didn't find it too terribly interesting, but still, she was breaking in to see it with Adam, a man who buried dead things and created sand models of places that also held dead things. The thought made her heart kick faster in her chest.

Adam reached the fence first. There was a padlock over the short wire gates and a clear sign that warned against trespassing. They were far enough from the beach and the few lingering spectators that hopping a fence wouldn't be noticeable. "Up and over," he said, hopping the barrier in a swift jump. "Your turn." His grin was wide and boyish. He pushed his hair out of his face, then offered his hand to her. Kelsey paused for a moment, knowing that this wasn't very

smart, but she wanted to be a little reckless, to let her curiosity drive her, and she climbed over the fence with Adam's help. She smiled, her cheeks hot, and Adam took her hand.

"You've got to come check this view out." He led her up the stone staircase on the side of the fort, the one clearly rebuilt for tourists, and said, "Take a look at this."

Kelsey stood still and took in the way the beach curved around the front of the fort, a soft edge, and she imagined men storming this beach here a hundred and fifty years ago. The soldiers who stood where she was and watched the gulf for ships. The men loading the cannons, the loud booms deafening everything, the quietness that would linger afterwards, the smell of smoke and gunpowder still fresh in the air. She wondered why tourists would avoid this beach solely because of dead fish when they could be viewing history.

And then Adam pulled her away, saying, "I want to show you the inside."

The interior chambers faced the courtyard where the cannons sat, empty black hallways and open windows with steel bars on them. "They're like cells," she said.

"Yeah, with little stone beds. Think about sleeping on those."

"I'm pretty sure nobody was doing much sleeping."

Adam wandered through the open, dark hallway, and Kelsey followed, her hands tensing into tight little balls. The hall in front of her stretched into blackness.

"I don't really like this," she said, checking behind her and seeing the remains of sunlight quickly fading.

"Come on, it's cool. Hey, you wanna play a game?"

"No, not really."

“Hide and seek. Once you go around this corner though it gets so dark, you’ll have to use your hands to feel around.”

She wished she hadn’t had left her phone in her car. “Hide and seek? Are we twelve?”

“Don’t be like that. I was only suggesting it.”

“I don’t want to play.” She wanted to coax Adam out of the dark hallway, but couldn’t think of a good enough reason.

“Hey, come here.” He reached out for her, grabbed her hand. He smelled of sun and salt. “I’m trying to have some fun. Here, we’re going to go around the corner. I won’t let go of your hand, promise.”

He led her into an open room that she couldn’t gauge the size of. It was cold and smelled of dirt and stone.

“Pretty cool,” he whispered. His fingers were on her face, feeling for her lips, and then he was kissing her. She felt like they were two teenagers sneaking away from a tour group to make out somewhere. He didn’t have to drag her away like this, into the darkness.

Kelsey ended the kiss quickly. “Hey, how about we go somewhere else, huh? Maybe get some dinner at the pier?” She stepped back to gain some distance. She was starting to regret jumping the fence with a man she barely knew. She leaned against the wall behind her, pressing her palms on the cold stone.

“I like it in here, though. I’ve been in the sun all day, I need something without light and sand.” He walked around the empty space, the noise echoing on the walls. “Helloooo,” he called out, to hear his own voice. “Hey, come on, close your eyes and I’m going to hide. It’ll be fun. Count to ten, and come find me.”

“This is ridiculous,” she said. She stayed pressed against the stone instead of wandering around the empty space, like Adam was.

“I know, babe. Let’s be ridiculous.”

She used her hands to follow the edge of the wall, to guide her back to the hallway.

“Okay,” she said, changing her tone to something lighter, to sound like she was playing along with his game. “I’ll count to ten. Go hide.”

“Close your eyes.”

A fleeting moment of fear went through her, that the instant her eyes shut something would happen. She thought of the knife still folded in his pocket, imagined the fingers that were on her lips on her neck instead, holding tight, draining everything. She imagined him burying her in the sand, too. Building a monument.

But she closed her eyes anyway, fingertips digging into the wall, and started counting out loud. She couldn’t hear his footsteps, and she thought that he was probably being extra sneaky, trying to really get her. She opened her eyes and was greeted with blackness. “Okay, I’m coming to find you,” she called out, and felt her way around the corner, back into the hallway with the fading sunlight. She looked around quickly to make sure he wasn’t hiding near her, but she thought he was probably in the farthest, darkest corner, ready to pop out and scare her if she got close.

Kelsey stepped carefully from the dim hallway and into the fading sun and the fresh, salty air and took deep breaths. The sky was already darker than she thought it would be. She walked quickly across the courtyard and back to the gate. She paused and searched behind her, but she didn’t see his khaki shorts and tan skin anywhere. Kelsey tried to remember what it was she

found exciting about him yesterday, when they were burying the shark, but she could only think of escape. She struggled to jump the fence by herself, adrenaline pumping, and hurried across the beach to the parking lot on the opposite side, kicking sand up around her, her heart thudding heavy and alive.

As Kelsey reached the safety of her car, she wondered how long he would wait for her inside the fort, if he would call out her name in a few minutes. If he would walk around the fort in circles, if he would be upset that he didn't get her phone number. She wondered if he would still be on the beach tomorrow, making more graves for more dead animals. Or perhaps he would move on to replicas of the White House, or Cinderella's castle, or whatever would look most impressive to the locals—never tourists. Just scale models of a real thing, just sand and water.

## TRADING CANDY

Greg's hand still throbs when he pushes open the front door and walks onto the porch. There's a woman sitting on the top step, her slim shoulders curving inward. He fits his hands into his sweatshirt pockets and exhales, imagines Alexis icing Eric's cheek in the kitchen.

There's plenty of movement on the street to distract him: the fast chatter of preteens in costumes as they sling their half-full pillowcases around, the hum of bass speakers as cars crawl down the road. He turns his attention to his white t-shirt, stained with a bright splash of red punch that trickles into a single line reaching the hem. He shakes the corner of his shirt a few times, creating some movement in the fabric, a rippling effect in attempts to dry his shirt faster.

He should probably leave, but maybe Alexis will come talk to him. Maybe he can save this. Maybe he didn't punch Alexis's boyfriend because he was tired of being in love with her, tired of the constant ache, tired of seeing them together.

He glances back at the woman on the porch steps. She's already watching him.

"Am I bothering you?" she asks, waving her cigarette between her two fingers. A wispy smoke cloud floats above her head. Her yellowish hair hangs in heavy clumps down her back, slick with oil or hair gel, he can't tell.

He shakes his head, fighting to keep his expression casual, like that of someone looking to get out of the cramped house for a few minutes. His sweater pocket lights up and a thrumming bass line hits the air. Mark's name is on his phone's screen. Mark is going to want to talk about what happened. He thumbs the red button and slips the phone back into his pocket.

"Ignoring someone?"

The girl on the steps is smiling, resting her elbow on her knee, her right ear against her palm. Her cigarette, smoked down to the filter, hangs limp from her left hand.

“Yeah.” He laughs a little. He doesn’t know why, maybe her pointing it out warrants a light-hearted chuckle. The laugh puffs out of him as a visible cloud in the cold air.

She sucks on the last bit of her cigarette and flicks it on the front lawn, still in her limp position. A song leaks from the window behind him, something he remembers hearing on the radio the other day, some rapper with “Lil” in his name, he can never remember which one is which.

“You seem like you’re thinking deep over there.”

She’s still watching him. He doesn’t want to admit he’s concentrating on which rap song this is so he can think about anything other than the way his fist felt when it connected with Eric’s chin. The way Alexis glared at him before her drink splashed him square in the chest.

Greg had never really punched someone. His brothers, maybe, and there might have been a few playground fights in third or fourth grade, but not like this. He didn’t realize how much the punch would hurt his own hand. The pain still pulsed in his knuckles from where Greg hit the jawbone.

He came to the party that night prepared to wallow in unrequited love, content in it even, in the consistency of his unhappiness. He knew the steps. He knew how to act around Alexis by now, he knew the easy, friendly topics they could discuss, he knew how many times he could steal glances at her without her realizing what he was doing. He wishes now, standing in the cold on the porch, that he hadn’t acted out. He should have kept being unresponsive. He knew how to

do that. But it had built up, the unresponsiveness, and left him putting all of that energy into violence: a year's worth of frustration channeled through the kinetic motion of his fist.

Finally he says to the girl on the steps, "Just trying to avoid certain people."

"Well, lucky you came to a *party*, which is the place to avoid people."

He smiles. She's wearing an army vest over a white tank top, red cutoff shorts and combat boots. He can't decide if it's a costume or her regular clothes.

"So, are you supposed to be dressed up like someone?" he asks, taking a few sliding steps towards her.

"Yeah, Tank Girl."

He immediately wants to tell her how badass that is, but coolly he says, "You don't have the shaved hair, though. Or an Army helmet."

"How about I am because I say I am?" She grins, a light tone to her voice. "And are you anyone?" She's not leaning against her elbow anymore. She's sitting up, shoulders not as curved, knees tilted towards him.

"Well, clearly you can see this awesome red stain on my shirt. I'm going with it and saying I'm a stab victim. Krueger got the best of me, or something like that," Greg says.

"Looks more like the Hunch Punch got the best of you," Tank Girl says.

"Or I can admit that a girl ripped out my heart and left a Hunch Punch stain in her wake, but I don't know how to make it sound clever and charming."

"I think you just did, Hunch Punch."

"So that's my name?"

"It's better than Stab Victim, or Ripped-Out Heart and Punch Stain in Wake."

“That can be my Native American name.”

She laughs, leaning over her knees. He chuckles, seeing her reaction to his joke. It’s enough of a boost in confidence to make him say, “Or you can call me Greg.” A few more shuffling steps towards her.

She puts a finger to her lips. “Hmm, no, I like Hunch Punch better.”

“And you’re Tank Girl?”

“Through and through.”

They smile and fall into a silence. He’s about to end their small exchange with *it was nice to meet you, Tank Girl*, when she says first, “So you’re out here avoiding whoever threw that drink on you.”

“Uh, something like that.” He flips his phone over and over in his pocket. He doesn’t want to talk about Alexis with Tank Girl. It’s hard to talk about Alexis with *anyone*. “Are you, um, avoiding someone too?” He wishes he said something better. He’s not good at this, like Tank Girl.

“No, I was having a smoke,” she says.

“Yeah, right, the—the cigarette.”

She’s staring down at her nails, picking at the bits of nail polish stuck to them. He rubs his nose, the coldness creeping in. He wants to keep talking with her. He likes that he’s not achingly thinking of Alexis right now.

“Are you cold? Want my jacket?” he asks.

“No, I’m fine. But thank you.” She turns her head to look at him. “Sit down, will you? You’re creeping me out, standing behind me.”

“Sorry.” He takes four steps to cross the distance and eases next to her, keeping five or six inches between them. A girl in a blonde wig clutching a plastic microphone runs up the driveway across the street, a younger boy following her. He immediately recognizes the costume as Hannah Montana, and then hates the fact that he knows that. He should mention that to Tank Girl, jokingly. No—he should not mention that he could spot a Hannah Montana costume anywhere.

Instead, she starts talking again with, “Do you remember filling your pillowcase with so much candy on Halloween and then gorging for hours back at home? And then you bring your stash to school the next day to trade with your friends, but all they have are Sugar Daddies and Tootsie Rolls and all you want are some damn Skittles?”

“Ha, yeah.” He can’t think of anything else to say. Greg realizes he hasn’t dressed up for Halloween in almost ten years, that his Halloweens are now spent throwing punches and talking to strangers on porches instead, and he wonders when the shift into being an adult happened. Maybe it’s in this moment here, with Tank Girl reminding him of all the innocence and sweetness of childhood, things that seem now out of reach.

She’s visibly shivering now, so Greg unzips his hoodie. “Here, take it, please.” Before she can refuse, he slips the worn cotton over her shoulders. He brushes the skin behind her neck. It feels like the cool plastic interior of the refrigerator door.

“Thanks.” She flips the hood over her hair, but doesn’t slide her arms into the sleeves.

“The Monster Mash” starts behind them. Voices cheer and holler, sing along.

“Sounds like a fun party,” Tank Girl says.

“Want to head in?” Mark and Eric and Alexis don’t seem as terrifying with Tank Girl next to him. Tank Girl probably knows how to throw a punch, too.

“Nah, I’m fine.” She knocks her knees back and forth. He watches the rhythm of them bumping each other, keeping with the beat of the music. “Why don’t you go talk to this heart-ripping girl?”

“She threw her drink at me. She doesn’t want to talk.”

“That’s only one con. Now tell me a pro. Like, you’re a gentlemen that always offers a lady his jacket.”

“I punched her boyfriend.”

“Pro: you stood up for her.”

“But she’s not my girlfriend. Not even close.”

“Pro: you’re passionate.”

“Her boyfriend used to be one of my best friends.”

“Pro: you...you wear your Hunch Punch well.”

He laughs. “See, it’s complicated.”

His sweater pocket lights up and the same ringtone starts playing. Tank Girl lifts her eyebrows and fishes into the pocket hanging over her right knee, away from him. She shoos away his hands and reads the text out loud. “From Mark: yo where’d you go? Alexis is pissed. She’s still talking about it.”

Immediately, she starts thumbing out a reply message. “What’re you writing?” He reaches again for his phone but she wiggles away, her body hunched over. She slides the phone closed and hands it back to him, grinning.

He doesn't want her to see how upset he really is. "Oh man, what did you do?" he says, trying to keep his tone lighthearted, and goes through his sent messages and sees her reply:

*Pro—at least she's thinking about me now.*

"Huh? Right?" She jabs his side with her elbow.

He can't stop his lips from curling in a smile. "Yeah, I guess." He puts his phone on silent and slips it into his left jean pocket. He doesn't want to be bothered by that now. He doesn't know how much longer he has with Tank Girl on this porch, before he has to go inside and deal with the consequences. He wants to think that this can lead somewhere, that it can be more than strangers at a party. He thinks of all the pros: she initiated their conversation. She invited him to sit. *She's still here.*

"So tell me what makes this chick worth throwing a punch for," Tank Girl says.

Greg's sure that mentioning Alexis will steer the conversation towards the *con* column. He dismisses the situation by saying, "She's only a friend. I was more pissed at her boyfriend, really, it wasn't about her."

"But you're avoiding them both now."

"I only wanted some fresh air. And to let my shirt dry."

The corner of her mouth tilts up. "You're a horrible liar. There's something about you I want to figure out." Pro.

"About *me*? You won't even tell me your first name." Con.

"For your own good. You're a nice guy."

A nice guy. Greg wants to ask her what that means, what the hell a nice guy even is. Nice guys don't go around throwing punches, nice guys don't harbor feelings for girls they can't have,

they don't hope for a terrible breakup. But the fact that Tank Girl, so bold and charming and *sexy* next to him, the fact that she thinks he's a nice guy must be a good sign. *Pro.*

The plus column wins. He closes the distance between them, until their thighs touch. She doesn't seem to pay it any attention. She smells of something sweet underneath the lingering smoke, and already he's thinking of the way her smell will be in his hoodie for days after.

"Does Tank Girl like nice guys?" Greg asks. It sounds creepy as fuck and borderline perverted and he's hoping that maybe she'll laugh or kiss him or something, anything.

She looks at him, her eyes slightly wide, and he smells the traces of smoke on her breath but it isn't as bad as he thought it would be. He wants to taste what else is hiding, where that sweetness comes from. His lips hover over hers.

"Greg." She presses her hand against his shoulder, a firm move that stops him. He searches her eyes, trying to figure out the gesture. Then she says, "I'm still trying to find some damn Skittles."

It takes him a second, but then he feels the heavy weight drop in his gut. This isn't what she's looking for. *Con, con, con.* "And what, I'm a Sugar Daddy?"

She giggles, and it's the wrong thing for her to do in that moment. The sound echoes in his ear, hits his gut. He hangs his head down, closing his eyes. "I mean—you referenced the candy earlier, and I was just—"

"I know what you were doing," she says.

"Something like that."

"It's Lacey, by the way." She stands up and slips the hoodie from her shoulders, lets it fall on the step behind her.

“Are you going in?” he asks. He hates how desperate his voice sounds.

“Oh, I wasn’t invited to this party.” She pauses and gives him a curling smile. “Go talk to that girl,” she says as she bounces down the steps, crosses the lawn to the sidewalk. She calls out, “See ya, Hunch Punch,” before she takes out a new cigarette and walks down the sidewalk.

Greg wants to follow her, wants to ask where she’s going. Maybe she has more parties to sit out in front of and have a smoke, or maybe she’s off to kick ass ‘cause *it’s fucking Tank Girl*. She doesn’t look back as she turns down the street, walking somewhere. Greg knows he should take her advice and head inside to face Alexis, thinking it might be time to confess everything to her, while he has nothing to lose. He can’t get up yet, so he thinks about pros and cons. Thinks about how long it’s been since he carried around his own pillowcase of candy, trading pieces with his friends. Thinks about going to a comic book store tomorrow to buy old issues of *Tank Girl*. He stays on the porch until there’s nothing left of the smoke cloud she left behind, the final wisps blending completely into the cold night air. Then he stands, picks up his hoodie, hesitates at the front door with his hand on the knob, willing himself to turn it, and, thinking of Tank Girl and Alexis all at once, opens the door and walks inside.

## THE OTHER SIDE

Jimmy's neighbors didn't move when the sprinklers turned on. He watched them through the slits in his blinds as they sat in their lawn chairs, sipping something white and frozen out of clear plastic cups. The staccato rhythm of the sprinklers remained constant as the water splashed against his neighbors' thighs. It didn't seem to bother them—this was their routine, leaning back in their sinking chairs and letting the wet grass blades cling to their calves, even though it was nearing eight o' clock.

Jimmy's date, Angela, was sitting on his couch with her legs crossed, staring down at her phone. The night had not been going well. Their dinner had been short, painfully short, and Jimmy invited her over to watch a movie, selling it by saying he'd just hooked up his "killer surround-sound." She had said yes, which Jimmy thought would be the hard part. It should have all come easy now that she was here. But his armpits would not stop sweating and he didn't know what to say next, so he stood slouched in the corner of the room, sipping a beer and peering through the gaps in his blinds at his neighbors. She rejected the beer he'd offered her, saying she had to drive home later. No, this night was not going well at all.

Jimmy had been renting the house for six months—he could finally afford to live without roommates since he'd been promoted to head manager of the Lakeford Mall Bed, Bath & Beyond. He now strutted through the store in a black polo shirt and shiny new nametag that read *Manager* and asked the women who hovered in the aisle, in his most-self important voice, "What can I help you with today?" He met Angela as she was picking out curtains for her new apartment. He stroked the front pattern of the curtain too many times and gave her a ten-percent

discount and handed her a business card with his number. And now she was in his house and all he could do was watch the neighbors and chuckle to himself.

“What are you looking at?” Angela asked.

Jimmy thought of a quick lie, then decided to tell her the truth. “My neighbors. This middle-aged couple that sit outside all the time. See for yourself.” He waved her over and Angela put down her phone and uncrossed her legs and walked to him.

The neighbors had a stereo with them that night. Jimmy couldn’t make out the song, only a low drum beat and bass thrum. A small white dog bounced at their feet, letting out little yelps.

“So they just sit out here all day?” she asked.

Jimmy was glad she seemed intrigued instead of passive. “Pretty much. I don’t know what they do for jobs. Maybe they’re retired already.”

“They seem too young for that. Maybe a disability?” she asked, moving closer to the window, up against Jimmy’s side. He smelled her pear shampoo.

“Maybe. Although their garden is really tidy, so they must be active. I imagine they work on it during the day.”

“Or they murdered the people who really live there and took over their identities,” Angela said, an excited edge to her voice.

Jimmy laughed. He liked that they were making up personas. “Although if they were wanted felons, I don’t think they’d sit outside all of the time.”

“You never know.” Her gaze was fixated on the couple that Jimmy had already looked in on so many times. The woman always had her hair tied in a bright blonde knot and the man wore khaki shorts and a faded t-shirt.

Jimmy turned to Angela instead, noticing the peek of skin under the short hem of her top. He set his beer on the window ledge and slid his hands against the flat planes of her hipbones. He felt like they were voyeurs giving in to a dirty habit. He imagined it being the other way around, that someone was watching him and Angela right now, watching as his hands slid up her sides and under her shirt. He brushed his lips against Angela's neck and turned his eyes back to the neighbors, to the woman, the small swell of her breasts that he could see from the side of her chair, the way her feet tapped to the rhythm of the music, the punctuating barks of the dog, the heat of Angela's skin underneath his palms, the frantic thrill of yearning in his chest.

"You didn't have to walk me all the way to the car," Angela said as Jimmy shuffled her down the driveway the next morning, the sun bleaching the asphalt.

"I wanted to see you all the way out," he said. He turned to the yard on the right. The chairs were set up side by side, their backs to him. She wore a sun hat today, big and round and red.

Angela got in her car and Jimmy leaned in the window, resting on his elbows as she started the car. "I don't even think they went inside last night."

"Oh, I'm sure they must have. She has that hat now. Are you going to go say hello?"

"No, this is more fun."

She rolled her eyes, but smiled. "See you."

Jimmy waved as she pulled out of the driveway, and he gazed again at the backs of the lawn chairs. He wondered what would happen if he were to walk over and introduce himself. If

he were to admit that watching them last night as he felt up Angela by the window had turned him on, that the thought of someone peeking on them made him aroused.

Jimmy was scooping coffee grinds into a filter when he heard the barking. He knew it was that little white dog and ignored it, filling the pot with tap water and getting out a filter and dumping a pile of coffee in. But the barking was persistent, like hiccups. He hoped it would stop, but every few seconds another shrill yelp pierced the air.

“Jesus,” he muttered, crossing into the living room while the coffee brewed. He peeled back the blinds and looked at his neighbors’ yard.

They weren’t out there anymore. Jimmy left the window and opened his front door, sticking his head out. It had been only an hour since Angela left—almost noon on a Sunday, and the sun was high and the sprinklers were *ch-ch-ching* away, but there were no more plastic chairs. Only the dog was outside, right at the edge between Jimmy’s overgrown lawn and their lush green one, staring at Jimmy and barking.

Jimmy was only going to ring their doorbell and walk away. Let them come out and see that the thing was loose and that would be it. Jimmy walked down the front steps and crossed over to their yard. The grass crunched thick and green under his bare feet. The dog ran at his side, leaping at Jimmy’s ankles and barking quickly. Jimmy had to time his steps in between the sprinkler’s rotations. He passed by three full blooming rose bushes against the side of the house. They were impossibly red and he had an urge to pick one, give it to Angela, or maybe place it in a vase on his table as a memento of sorts, a stolen symbol.

Their front path was lined with colorful flowers whose names he didn't know, and there was a faint odor of dog shit. A fountain sat tucked in the corner with one of those stone naked baby statues spitting out water. A sign, stuck into the grass directly in front of their porch, said, "Welcome to our home," and underneath, "The Percival's," a misprinted apostrophe that took him a long second to catch.

Jimmy pressed the doorbell and waited a moment, a fleeting thrill of curiosity running through him. The thought of seeing face-to-face the couple that he had watched so many times made him uncomfortable. He waited six or seven seconds longer, turned on his heels, and heard the door open.

"Hello?"

Jimmy turned back around. It was the woman, Mrs. Percival he assumed, standing in a bright yellow sundress with her yellow-blonde hair in a high bun. She was too bright, too yellow, but she had sharp angular cheekbones and skin freckled from the sun, and he couldn't look away.

"Hi," Jimmy said, giving a small wave and bouncing his foot on the concrete. "Your um, your dog was out in the yard," he said, thumbing behind him. "I don't know if he's allowed to be out on his own, but he was barking a lot, and I wanted to bring him back."

"Oh no, Gypsy loves being outside, don't you, baby?" She walked past Jimmy and scooped the small white dog into her arms. There was *no thank you for bringing him back*, or even a *sorry he bothered you*, just Mrs. Percival walking up the sidewalk and opening the front door with her free arm, saying, "You can come in if you'd like."

She left the front door open wide, but didn't wait for his reply. Jimmy stood still for a few long moments. He peered through the open doorway into a hallway lined with paintings of

flowers and a bookcase filled with colorful, chunky books. He was curious to see what kind of books they were, if his neighbors were into literature or if the books were encyclopedias or self-help. He took a few steps closer to the threshold, smelled cool air conditioning mixed with a faint musky odor. He walked inside.

Mr. Percival was practicing ballroom steps in the middle of the living room. A tiny cassette player produced a tinny version of classical music. He slowed his feet when Jimmy walked in but didn't immediately stop. "Hello," he said, his voice smooth and baritone. "Honey?" he called out, turning to the left, towards the entrance to the kitchen.

"Did he come in?" she called back. She entered the room a moment later, Gypsy still in her arms. "Oh good," she said, looking Jimmy up and down. "Have a drink?"

Jimmy remembered the coffee machine on next door. "I really should get back home," he said.

"One drink?"

Mrs. Percival smiled gently and her eyes seemed hopeful, so he said, "Okay, a drink sounds fine."

"Wonderful." She grinned, her mouth full of small teeth and large gums. She was much prettier with her mouth closed. "Should we sit in the kitchen?" she asked her husband, who had turned off the tape player.

Jimmy followed the couple, taking in the way Mr. Percival's large hand settled on the small of her back. He wondered briefly what their sex life was like. Maybe they did it in the shower, after a long afternoon of sitting in the sun, the smell of sweat and grass rinsing off their skin.

Jimmy rocked on his heels in the kitchen as Mrs. Percival rummaged through a bottom cabinet and pulled out a half-full bottle of whiskey. Jimmy hadn't even eaten breakfast yet, but he didn't object when she poured him a glass of whiskey over ice.

He followed the couple to the table, watching their movements, trying to gauge their personality. He wanted to ask why they spent so much time outside, but decided to see if he could figure it out for himself. A spiral notebook was spread open on the wooden table. As he took a small sip, Jimmy read the first paragraph on the page: *Venus is with you this month; stay alert. Someone will bring good luck into your life around the 27<sup>th</sup>. You will lose a friend but gain another. You will be successful in your love life if you trust your instincts.*

"Did you write this?" Jimmy asked Mrs. Percival.

Her eyes fell to the notebook. "I've been trying to become a freelance astrologer. I can't work in an office. I need to be with the sun and air and nature."

"Do you...make these up?" he asked.

"I base them on the movements of the planets and the sun and the stars," she said. "They tell me what to write."

A skinny strand of blond hair fell over her forehead and Jimmy wanted to brush it back. He imagined her in front of her bookshelf with volumes on the history of the solar system and diagrams of constellations. Meditating in her lawn chair on what the universe was telling her that day.

"Let's sit and drink, shall we?" She sat and closed the notebook and stuck it underneath her arm. Jimmy wondered briefly if he had embarrassed her. He knew he'd seen something that he wasn't meant to.

The three of them were quiet for a while, sipping their drinks. Jimmy wasn't used to drinking whiskey straight on ice and winced. Mr. Percival chuckled and took a long sip, something that Jimmy thought he did to assert dominance. Jimmy wished that only Mrs. Percival had been at home, only him and her drinking together—she was much warmer than her husband.

They finished the bottle in twenty minutes. They kept drinking and drinking, and Jimmy didn't say anything except to comment on the sharp, distinct taste of the whiskey and to mention that they had a nice home. Mr. Percival nodded and swirled the ice around in his glass. There were no framed photos of children or even of grandchildren in sight. Jimmy thought a number of things, that they couldn't have children or that they simply didn't have photos, or that maybe something tragic had happened.

Sip after sip, Jimmy thought, *I'll tell them I've been watching them. I'll ask why we've never said hello.* But he didn't. Instead, he thought more about astrology wondered if the stars and planets and the moon could have predicted that he would be here, sitting at this table and drinking with his neighbors at noon on Sunday.

*You will return something that was lost,* his horoscope could have begun.

“I think I've had enough,” Jimmy managed to say as Mr. Percival topped off his glass with the last of the bottle. “I haven't eaten anything today.”

“Oh, well, we have muffins on the counter. Help yourself.” Mrs. Percival gestured behind her and almost fell out of her chair. She righted herself quickly and let out a laugh that sounded rich and warm in the thick air of the kitchen. Out of the three of them, she had drunk the most.

“I think I’m going to change out of this,” she said, smoothing her hands on her hips. She stood and Jimmy took in the length of her body, a soft bit of round belly underneath her dress. She moved from the kitchen to the hallway where Jimmy assumed their bedroom was.

Only Jimmy and Mr. Percival sat in the kitchen now, so Jimmy stood and grabbed a muffin on the counter. It was bran, dry and heavy in his mouth, and he thought combining it with the whiskey might make him sick. He wandered around the kitchen as he chewed, taking in the black knife handles sticking out of a wooden block and the knitted oven mitts covered with dancing pigs.

*When the sun is at its highest point in the sky, you will be stumbling drunk in your neighbors’ kitchen.*

Jimmy ran his hand down the length of the counter as he walked, feeling like he was eight, touching everything in the store even though his mother had told him not to. When he glanced back at the table, Mr. Percival was staring at him. Jimmy immediately turned away. He pretended to be interested in a rose-patterned porcelain cookie jar, running his fingers down the side of the container. He wondered if Mr. Percival saw the way Jimmy had watched his wife when she stood. Jimmy wasn’t sure what the stare meant—if Mr. Percival wanted him to leave the house or to stop pacing and sit down.

Mr. Percival passed Jimmy and poured out the rest of Jimmy’s drink and placed the three glasses in the sink. He moved into the front hallway and opened a door that Jimmy assumed led to the garage.

Jimmy stood still in the kitchen, his fingers falling from the cookie jar. He should have been walking home, but instead he left the kitchen and wandered into the living room. The

musky smell was stronger in here, most likely from the worn sofa with the faded fabric. He almost stepped on Gypsy who was curled on the floor asleep. Gypsy let out a yelp when Jimmy's foot nudged him.

"Dear, are you out there?" Mrs. Percival's voice called from the hallway.

Jimmy headed closer to the source of her voice. He wandered down the hallway, towards the cracked door.

"Would you come in here, give me a hand with this zipper?"

Jimmy ran his hand over the wood grains in the door, feeling the grooves. His head was swimming and all he wanted to do was lie down. Maybe he could lie down.

"Jimmy?"

He hadn't remembered giving her his name. He opened the door anyway.

*You will learn to let go. Do not worry, Venus and the stars and the moon and the bright, yellow sun are with you. All you have to do is let go.*

## LYCANTHROPY

The first thing Billie says to Mark is, “You’re a fucking weirdo.”

Mark leans forward on his elbows on the lunchroom table, not put off by her remark.

“No, I just know another werewolf when I see one. It’s cool, we can start our own pack. What do you say?”

Billie focuses back on her laptop screen, moving her fingers quickly over the keyboard. Students are only allowed to be on laptops during their lunch, and Billie will not miss out on these forty minutes to write to her blog. She hasn’t posted since yesterday morning; she went to bed trying to think of something funny and cool and by lunch that day she was genuinely concerned that she already had written about everything interesting in her seventeen years.

And then Mark Tucker made brief eye contact with her from across the lunchroom and walked up to her table and told Billie that he was a werewolf and he was pretty sure she was one too. And then he tilted back his head and howled, right in the middle of rows of white tables filled with the juniors and seniors who stayed in for lunch. And then Billie called him a fucking weirdo.

“Sorry, I don’t have time for weirdoes,” she says, eyes locked on her screen.

“What are you doing on there anyway?” Mark leans over the table to see her screen, but she closes the lid quickly.

“What do you want?” she asks, tapping her fingers on her computer. She has only ten minutes of lunch left.

Mark shrugs. “You sit by yourself at lunch. Lone wolf, like me. I thought you might have a secret. Or that we might share the same secret. Why do you think I’m not in school around the full moon?”

“I’ve never noticed.”

“No one ever does, I’m good at keeping secrets.” He winks, like winking is a trait of a trustworthy individual. This is the longest Billie has ever looked directly at Mark, at his shortly cropped blonde hair, at the acne scarring across his cheeks.

“I don’t have any secrets to tell you, so you can go.” As she says it, she thinks about her empty stomach, the fatigue pulling at her muscles, the perpetual headache.

“Let’s go on a date,” he says, standing. He offers his hand out to her. “Let me take you on a romantic stroll to your next class. We can leave early and share our deepest secrets.”

“I’d rather be left alone,” she says, but Mark doesn’t move; he stands in front of her and holds out his hand, waiting for a response.

The girls at the table next to Billie stare at them and laugh. She almost feels sorry for him, standing there with his hand extended, not backing down. Billie looks back up at Mark, at the desperation in his eyes. She tells herself that she’s only doing this because it’ll make for an interesting blog post later. She can write about how bizarre Mark is and tie it in with something about the pop-culture status of werewolves these days.

Billie slides her laptop into her bag and stands. “I have math next, it’s at the end of the hall. But we’re not holding hands.”

Mark drops his hand but smiles. “Well, I can hold your bag for you.”

“Sure.” She is grateful to drop the burden of her bookbag for five minutes. Every girl at the next table laughs audibly as she and Mark walk past.

“I bet they all have really nasty secrets, too,” Mark says once they’re outside the cafeteria and in the safety of the hallway. “I bet those girls are all vampires; that’s why they’re our natural enemies.”

Billie smirks but keeps her head down so Mark doesn’t see he’s actually *amusing* her. “The girls at this school are gross,” she adds, thinking of how she has to pretend to not notice their glances and whispers. It’s nice to actually say that aloud to someone else. She even thinks about adding a comment about the food here being gross, too, but instead she folds her arms and counts the tiles in the floor as she and Mark walk side by side down the hall.

The next day, Mark is eating his lunch at her table. She doesn’t say anything to him; she sits four chairs away and opens her computer. She watches him out of the corner of her eye as he shovels in ketchup-soaked French fries. The tangy sweet smell of the ketchup is almost enough to make Billie gag; she takes shallow breaths and reads the comments she’s received on her blog that morning.

She makes a face when he licks his fingers clean of the lingering ketchup and salt. He dries them on a canvas messenger bag that’s covered with patches of anime characters, Magneto’s helmet, and even one of TARDIS, the time-traveling police box from Doctor Who. She doesn’t know anyone else in her school that watches Doctor Who.

He sees her then, like he just noticed her sitting there. “Hiya Billie,” he says, grabbing his soda.

“You’re sitting at my table,” she says.

“Of course. We’re in the same pack now. We look out for our own.” The way he speaks makes it seem as if it is the only reasonable, logical answer in the world. She doesn’t say anything else and turns back to her computer, deciding that Mark hovering around the edge of her table is a small thing she can adjust to.

Mark spends the rest of the week talking about werewolf lore and walking her to math class and holding her bookbag before he says, “You know, you should really give me your phone number.”

“Why?” she asks.

“In case of emergencies. Or something like that, I dunno, you just should.”

So she scrawls it out for him and can’t figure out exactly why she does, but later she writes a post about how stupid and silly it was and promises her online friends that she will transcribe any of her and Mark’s phone conversations.

He calls on Sunday night and the first thing he says is, “Answer this question: in croquet, the wooden mallets tap wooden balls through what non-wooden hoops? I’m taking this online quiz right now to see how well I’d do if I was ever a contestant on *Cash Cab*. I’ve decided you’re my mobile shout-out. You only have ten more seconds to answer.”

“I didn’t know they were called anything other than hoops.”

“Err. Time’s up. They’re called *wickets*, the quiz says. I’m sorry, I’m going to have to bump you from my shout-out list. Dad it is. But I’ll store your number, in case I need it for something else.”

Billie sits cross-legged on her bed. “And when do you ever think you’d be a contestant on *Cash Cab?*”

“When I move to New York, after I graduate. Seems a good place for a werewolf, yeah? And think of all the superheroes that are based out of the Big Apple—Marvel Universe, of course. I can be one of those werewolves who’s good despite his curse. Fight the evil inside me, you know.”

“Are you really going to move there?” she asks, vaguely curious about his after-graduation plans.

“I’m trying to get into this school in the city for digital design, I’ve been working on my application essay for months. They have a good scholarship program too. Where do you want to go to school?”

Billie tenses for a moment, then says, “I don’t really know. I can’t really talk now, Mark. I’ll see you in school tomorrow.”

She hangs up before he can respond. She sits back on her bed and sets her laptop on her thighs, forcing out thoughts of feeling trapped and weak and instead focuses on making a really funny blog entry about how completely strange and annoying Mark is.

After two weeks of Mark sitting with Billie at lunch, all Billie wants is for people to stop assuming they are a *thing*. That if they only see each other in school and talk on the phone at night, that they are not really dating, that this is not really a relationship. So she finds things to do on her laptop to distract her, but instead of watching her blog traffic, she googles words like *lycan* and *werewolf mythology* and even *Marvel Universe Superheroes*.

“I know you say the food here is gross,” Mark says one day at lunch, holding up his square of pizza with his fingertips, “but you don’t even bring your own food from home. Aren’t you hungry in the middle of the day?”

She watches his face as he chews and she tries to think of a good enough answer. He eats slowly, waiting for her response. Despite his pizza intake, his acne is clearing. “Actually, I was about to buy a pretzel,” she says, grabbing her wallet from her bookbag. “I’ll be right back.”

As Billie goes into the lunch line for the first time, seeing all the food sitting out, she thinks about having to tell her mother how she won’t be hungry for dinner. She comes back with an unsalted pretzel, taking a bite to seem convincing, and sees Mark standing over her computer. She recognizes her blog page and he’s reading it, reading it all, his pizza still poised on his fingertips. He’s stopped chewing.

Billie dashes back to the table, taking her laptop back. “Hey, you can’t read that.”

He doesn’t say anything for a moment. He finishes chewing, swallows, and then says, “So this is your secret.”

She taps her foot, sits back down. “This doesn’t mean anything.”

“You’re sort of a bitch on there. You called me a pathetic loser in desperate need of friends. You made fun of my *Cash Cab* question.”

“It’s meant to be funny. It’s not real.”

“So what is real about you, then?”

She can’t look at him. The smell of his pizza makes her sick. Her mouth fills with saliva and when she is almost sure she is going to throw up, she shoves her laptop into her bag and runs from the cafeteria and makes it right inside the girl’s bathroom before she heaves in the sink.

\*

She expects to see a dozen missed calls from Mark by the next morning, but instead there's only one text message waiting for her: *sorry, but I found your blog again last night and read it. youre not a bitch. I just didnt know you were hiding all of those secrets.*

He's waiting by her locker when she gets to school and starts apologizing again. "You had written about me. It was killing me, I had to read it. And it was really easy to find. You're kind of popular on the internet."

"Yeah, I know." She opens her locker and puts inside her laptop until she can take it out before lunch.

"Can we talk about what else I read on there?" he asks, his voice sounding softer and more concerned that she's heard it before. "The stuff you wrote about yourself, about not eating?"

"No." She makes sure her tone is firm, unwavering.

"Honestly, I didn't know, I thought you really didn't like cafeteria food. I won't make fun of you for it."

Billie tells him it's fine and grabs her first-period notebook and says *see ya later* and leaves Mark leaning against the lockers.

Billie skips lunch the rest of the week and Mark doesn't ask any questions, even though she can tell he's dying to talk to her about it and soon, he stops texting, stops waiting by her locker for her, stops seeing her.

By the end of that week everything feels like a blur. She hasn't posted to her blog in days and her head has a constant pounding. She thinks of ways to apologize to Mark as she walks through the hallway before school on Friday, always counting the tiles on the floor, the even pace of her steps over the cracks, until her head spins so much that she falls down in the hallway, a rush of bodies circling around her.

Someone takes her to the school nurse and Billie's forced to talk about not eating until Billie's mother shows up to take her home. Her mother threatens to send her to a clinic and says this is why she can't leave home and go to school in the fall, that she's too weak and it's very the last thing Billie wants to hear. She tries to write seriously about her feelings on her body, on Mark, but it takes too much effort and she deletes everything before she hits save.

That night, Mark shows up at her house, walking into her room with bright pink flowers in his hand, his bookbag still slung over one shoulder even though it's almost ten o'clock at night.

"Hey there," he says. "Your mom is sort of mad I came over so late, but I think she's glad you have a friend." He sets the flowers on her nightstand. "People at school have been talking all about it, thought you should know."

"Yeah?" She laughs dryly. "And what have you been telling them?"

"Nothing. I told you I'm good at keeping secrets."

In a small voice, the only voice she can muster, she says, "Thank you."

"But I was right about you, you know," Mark says, walking closer to her bed. "I mean, when I phase into wolf form, I don't eat either. So you must always have your wolf mask on." He opens his bookbag and pulls out a rubbery mask with eyeholes and grey fur covering its face.

“You got me a wolf mask?” Billie can’t help the small smile that curves her lips.

“Yes, but on one condition. You have to prove it. It’s a full moon tonight. You have to phase.” He holds out his hand, and suddenly she thinks of that kid three weeks ago who was holding out his hand to her at the lunch table. She slips her palm into his.

“We have to be quiet,” Billie says as they tiptoe past her mother’s door. They slip out the front and head across the street, to the lot of dense trees, stopping at a small clearing in the middle. Mark sets his bag on the ground and hands her the wolf mask and takes out his own. His is bigger and covered with thick patches of fake fur and rubber fangs hanging over the mouth opening. He fits his mask over his head so Billie does too, pulling the edges until her eyes and mouth line up with the openings. Through the slits she glances over at Mark. He looks absurd. She realizes how much she’s missed seeing him everyday.

“I bought yours the first day I walked you to math, I was waiting for the full moon. I knew it was only a matter of time before your true identity came out.”

The moon, full and bright, illuminates the small clearing. Mark lets out a long, high-pitched howl, bending his body back.

“You’ll wake up everyone,” Billie says.

“Don’t care. It’s your turn.”

Billie joins in quietly at first, a small *oooooh* to make him happy.

“Not good enough. You need to own it, come on.” He takes her hand and squeezes it.

“Are you a werewolf or not?”

So Billie tilts back her throat and closes her eyes and gives the loudest, most convincing wolf howl she can muster. She thinks her mother can probably hear them, that she’ll come out

and see her out of bed and with a wolf mask on and yelling, and that she'll definitely want to send her off somewhere now, but Billie doesn't care.

“That's it! Perfect!” Mark is so enthused that he picks her up in a hug. Then he gives her a kiss, finding her lips through the wolf mask. Their rubbery faces and long wolf snouts and fake teeth smash together. Mark lets out a little laugh and keeps holding her.

They howl again, for as long as they can, until Billie's throat hurts and her howls turn into laughter and they're both laughing and laughing until her sides ache, the pull in her cheeks and in her throat and in her gut feeling more real and more genuine than anything Billie could have imagined.

## MADDER RED

The first night Gabe spent in his grandfather's house, he moved all of the old furniture against the walls and drank whiskey on the floor with Amy and Rae. His grandfather had died sitting in one of the chairs—Gabe didn't know which one, so he didn't want to touch any of them. He wouldn't have wanted to sit on any of it, anyway. The place smelled like an old man who'd spent the last twenty years in a house twice his age.

There was thought of sleeping upstairs, in his grandfather's bed later, but Gabe had changed the sheets and pillows and took off the old quilt and figured he'd probably be drunk and sleeping with either Amy or Rae that night (he didn't very much have a preference, it would be whoever was too drunk to drive), so it didn't really matter.

It was unusually cold in Florida that night. St. Augustine was right on the Atlantic Ocean and the cool wind dropped the temperature to almost freezing. Gabe didn't know how to work the heater in the corner, so he sat on the floor in his jeans and sweater and drank whiskey to warm himself until Cole showed up and figured out the heater. The girls danced to a song Amy picked from her laptop, which rested on the mantle above the useless fireplace. The small speakers spit out something classical that Amy and Rae waltzed to, arms around backs, feet tangling, girls giggling. They were both short and thin and had long brown hair and it took Gabe almost a week to remember who was who. But he liked watching them, liked seeing their cheeks get warm from the liquor and their quick dance moves. He wished they'd both stay. He wondered if they would, if they were all drunk enough later.

Cole knocked on the door as the girls danced, a motion that shook the door in its frame.

“Come in,” Gabe said, still sitting because he thought that standing up might make the room spin even more.

“Hey,” Cole said, his face red and hair disheveled. He must have come right from work, because he still smelled of horses. Cole steered around those old horse-led carriages that were priced for the tourists. He was a glorified taxi driver, but one who got to stand and pet the horses and smoke while he waited for that young couple with enough disposable money to spend on such a novelty.

“Cole, look at this fucking place,” Gabe said, as if Cole had never been to the house before. Cole and Gabe lived in tiny apartments on the other side of town, away from the restored cobblestone streets and quaint bed and breakfasts. All the good bars were on this side of town, though, and if they were both too drunk to drive, his grandfather would let them sleep on his pullout sofa bed. Gabe had always felt a strange pull of guilt at this; he could tell his grandfather only wanted to not be alone and Gabe only wanted a place to sleep off the booze. The last time he and Cole had done that was six months ago. The last time he’d seen his grandfather.

“I know, man,” Cole said back, grinning, because even though he’d seen the place before he knew what Gabe meant—as in, *look at my new fucking house*.

“A drink?” Gabe asked, holding up the bottle.

“Sure.” Cole hugged both of the girls, who lingered and swayed with him in attempts to get him to dance, too. Rae paused a moment longer, nuzzling against his neck.

“Rae, a drink too?” Gabe asked, watching her. It wasn’t that Gabe wanted to try to take her from Cole, to get in between anything that might be there. But it was more like in elementary

school when someone tried playing with your toy and you had to snatch it back before the other kid got it dirty with his grubby hands.

“Yes, please.” They sat down crossed legged on the wood floor, forming a semi-circle. Amy made a whining noise because the dancing had stopped but she paused her music anyway and joined them.

Eventually, Cole got the heater to work and they emptied the bottle of whiskey and the lights were off and the house hardly smelled old anymore and the small laptop speakers played the new Friendly Fires album and they danced around the large, empty space. They spun in circles and pretended that the furniture was lava and they couldn't touch it and guessed which chair he had died in. Rae made a joke about his grandfather probably pissing his pants before he died so it was most likely a chair with a stain and Gabe felt a sudden resentment, a burn that had nothing to do with the whiskey. He wanted to fuck her especially now, but on the hard floor after everyone left, not on the bed, not on *his* bed. This tinge of respect to his grandfather surprised him. Gabe wasn't close to anyone in his family, despite the generations of his ancestors that'd lived in St. Augustine. Maybe it was too much family here, too much history, that swallowed Gabe whole, suffocating him, forcing him to act out to survive.

His rebellion was mainly fueled by his job working as a Revolutionary War re-enactor, some days in the Fort and some days in the town square, taking photos with tourists and talking with a stuffy accent. He was sort of terrible at it, but the job was another thing that his grandfather had set up for him, largely due to a role his grandfather played in some preservation society, and it meant Gabe had job security. He hadn't been back to work since his grandfather

died last week, but he hoped he still had that security. He was too tired and apathetic to search for another job.

It was almost two in the morning when the dancing and drinking had caught up to everyone. Cole stood and said he'd escort Amy and Rae home, back to their apartment near the college campus, only a handful of blocks from Gabe's house. It would be strange to be living on this part of town now, near the undergrads and the good bars. The girls stood, but Gabe pulled on Rae's ankle and she fell back down into his lap, all giggling and warm.

Gabe pulled her close and said to her, "Stay."

"Okay," she said back, barely above a whisper. Gabe tried to not grin wide at how easy it was. He turned to Cole and they shared a smirk so Cole set his arm around Amy's shoulders and led her outside.

"This house is awesommee," Rae slurred, falling back against the length of his body. He hadn't realized she was still drunk but he didn't care either way. Soon the room definitely didn't smell old and like his grandfather, but instead like whiskey and hot breath and tongues and sweat, and Gabe closed his eyes and imagined whether his grandfather had ever done this, fifty or sixty years ago, right here on the wood floor of his house, feeling young and knowing his entire life was ahead of him. Gabe wondered how his grandfather survived so long in this town, but maybe if he'd had nights like this, life here couldn't have been too terrible.

The Annual British Night Watch Parade was scheduled to start that Saturday night at eight o'clock. The re-enactors were discouraged from smoking or eating in their costumes, but Gabe and Cole shared a quick cigarette in the parking lot of the fort, which was the start of the

designated parade route. Gabe thought they were ridiculous in their long red coats and pointed hats, faux-worn uniforms. The British called the color of the uniforms “madder red” after the root that was used to dye the fabric; Gabe had always remembered that odd fact, perhaps because he liked the word “madder” and liked to think the British meant it to mean deranged and crazy instead of the name of a root.

The parade marked the period when St. Augustine was under British rule; during that time the guards would march down the lantern-lit streets and lock the gates at nightfall. On special occasions the entire town would come out with their own candles and sing carols. From the parking lot, Gabe could see the people lined up on the avenue and holding their candles—a few enthusiasts even held lanterns and dressed in 17<sup>th</sup>-century costumes. He could faintly hear “Frosty The Snowman” being sung.

“I’m glad the closing ceremonies are close to the bar,” Gabe said, thinking of the two-story place by the water that would no doubt be packed tonight with tourists and locals alike. But the bartender always offered him the happy hour price, so it was worth the cramped space and lack of seating.

“Don’t you have to stick around till like, midnight though? You said you were getting paid for four hours,” Cole said.

Gabe sighed. “Yeah, I guess.” He wished Cole would encourage him to goof off and drink on the job instead.

“Talk to Rae lately?” Cole asked.

The question surprised him, and Gabe turned to Cole, seeing his straight mouth and arched brow. It was hard to take Cole seriously in his costume, and Gabe let out a small, nervous laugh.

“Nah, not really.” It had been almost a week since he’d slept with her. He hadn’t talked to anyone, for the most part. He worked a few day shifts and then spent the rest of his time in the house, going through his grandfather’s things, mixing in his own few furnishings with the pieces he was keeping. Most of the antiques had been removed and donated to some museum or other. Gabe’s mom sold a few items to local inns too—lamps, old quilts, teapots, a chair or two. The profit would go towards paying the inheritance tax on the property. The tax pissed Gabe off, the fact that things couldn’t just be gifts anymore. His mom asked him a dozen times if he really wanted to live there or if he’d prefer to sell the house and pay off the taxes, but Gabe couldn’t do it. It was the first real thing he’d owned in his life.

“She’s a good girl,” Cole said next, and Gabe had forgotten what they were talking about. Rae. Right.

“Yeah, yeah she is.” Gabe gazed back to the fort behind him, to the solid stone walls. He felt he’d offended Cole in some way—maybe Cole wanted Rae. Regardless, he didn’t want to talk about it anymore.

“Let’s go with the group, we should be starting soon,” Gabe said, drifting away. Cole followed behind, but Gabe didn’t turn back. They were handed their fake muskets from Gabe’s boss, who glared at him when he smelled the cigarette smoke, but checked his name off the list and told him to line up. He and Cole stood in formation, backs and guns straight. Instead of thinking of Rae and Cole and his grandfather and everything else, Gabe imagined life as a British

soldier. Maybe he would have had a wife waiting at home for him, sitting patiently for her husband to return from securing the town for the night. She would be soft and smell of cinnamon and they would sit by the fire and lean into one another and be content. The thought warmed Gabe, and his lips curved and he stood up taller as he thought of his pseudo-wife at home, not of the big empty place that was waiting for him.

Maybe he would buy a dog.

Gabe woke early on Sunday morning and spent an hour in the kitchen making breakfast. His grandfather had old appliances he didn't know how to use—a coffeemaker that only worked on the stovetop—so Gabe took his time figuring them all out, feeling accomplished when he had a decent plate of French toast and bacon to show for his efforts. He liked to place the bacon between two slices of French toast and eat it like a sandwich, the way he did when he was younger, when his mother cooked him breakfast. The last few years Gabe's mother also came over to his grandfather's house on Sunday mornings to cook breakfast, too, while Gabe would be still passed out from the night before. Gabe wondered what sort of things his grandfather had liked for breakfast, what his grandfather and Gabe's mother would talk about while she cooked.

After breakfast Gabe wandered up to the attic, where the bulk of his grandfather's old things had been moved—worn shoes, VHS tapes, faded books, items that weren't in any shape to be sold or donated. And he didn't want to throw them away. Instead, Gabe sat in the middle of a pile of the things that had filled his grandfather's life and felt a heavy anchor in his chest, a feeling that one day his life too could be reduced to clutter in an attic.

Someone moved up the ladder; it was Cole, his head popping through the opening. “Hey, I’ve been knocking,” he said, not coming all the way inside but resting his elbows on the floor, appearing as half a torso of a man. “You disappeared last night, after the parade. Thought you’d want to get a drink.”

“Yeah, I was tired,” Gabe said, viewing the spines of old books, mostly encyclopedias and history books. His grandfather had been fascinated with the South, always collecting things that he thought had been from their ancestors. Gabe wondered what it was like to have that much passion about anything.

“The girls wanna do something today. Interested?” Cole asked.

“Yeah. Lemme get dressed.”

They met Amy and Rae at a coffee shop close to campus, one that was full of students in sweatshirts boasting their school name. Almost everyone had a laptop open on their table next to their coffee. He assumed that it was probably finals week. Gabe had considered college before, but he had no idea what he wanted to major in. His “year off to figure it out” had somehow turned into six.

The girls talked hurriedly of their classes and final projects and something one of their professors did last week and Gabe nodded along, catching Rae’s eyes every so often. She wouldn’t meet his gaze. Cole had probably said something to her. Gabe decided to drop it and let Cole have her, if he wanted.

They spent the afternoon browsing shops, the same ones they’d been in a dozen times. They visited friends who were sitting bored behind cash registers, waiting to ring up whatever overpriced gimmicks they were selling. They went to their favorite bar as soon as happy hour

started, and Gabe started telling them about all the stuff he'd been finding in the house, and they all seemed interested and even Rae smiled at him, once. It felt good to talk with his friends and have a drink and he started to order another round, but the girls said they had to head back because they had class in the morning. Cole even headed out too, something about a late dinner with his mom.

Gabe stopped at the liquor store on his walk back home and felt sort of ashamed to be walking through the streets with a brown paper bag like a homeless person, and he jangled the keys in his pocket to prove he had a place to go. When he was close enough to his house, Gabe opened the bottle and started drinking from it, keeping it concealed in the bag. He was thankful to live on such a quiet road. He wondered how well his neighbors had known his grandfather and decided he would ask them tomorrow, wondering if the neighbors even knew that the man that had lived there had a grandson.

When he went upstairs, Gabe saw his Revolutionary War costume on the floor and he laughed and slipped the coat on, thinking that sitting at home in his red coat and drinking would be hilarious. Gabe only fastened two of the buttons, enough to keep the coat from sliding off, and stood straight and looked at himself in the mirror. He felt like a little boy playing pretend in someone else's life. These were not his clothes. This was not his house. Suddenly the house felt stifling and it was hard to breathe, so he went up to the attic and climbed out the window and onto the pitched roof.

He felt the pull of the wind right away, a strong cold breeze blowing from the water. Then he took in the incredible, glowing view, the houses and restaurants lit up, the water rippling and the boats swaying in the port. The lighthouse, with its black and white stripes, shone on the

horizon. He was glad for the thick coat and pulled it around himself and continued drinking from his bottle.

Gabe viewed his small backyard, the soft thick grass that his grandfather somehow maintained. He wondered how it would feel to fall through the wind right now, slip off the roof and onto the grass. It seemed that easy too, that he would just slip and it wouldn't hurt at all, that he would bounce like a cat and roll in the grass and spill none of his drink. He could probably do it.

And now he was daring himself, and even though no one was around, he felt compelled. Two stories was a long way to fall, he knew, but he had no idea what the rush of the fall would actually feel like. Maybe it was the coat, maybe the madder red was rubbing off on his skin, the madness seeping in, but suddenly he wanted to know. He *had* to know.

His heart was pounding now, but he relished it. It pumped adrenaline through him, he felt crazed, but he was feeling *something* and it was wondrous, the exhilaration. He took a long, final sip from his bottle, enough to make him wince and push on his gag reflexes, but the alcohol stayed down. He perched on the edge of the roof, toes dangling off the side. On the count of three. He was going to do it. He rocked himself.

One. He thought of Rae and Cole and wondered if Cole had lied about dinner and if he was really going to Rae's tonight instead.

Two. He thought of the wind behind his back and how it would feel to slice right through it, like a cannon blast from the mortars on top of the fort.

On three he thought of his grandfather, of how sorry he was he never made an effort in their relationship, how sorry he was that he was now jumping off his grandfather's roof, of how

sorry he was that he was wearing his uniform and drinking, two more things he shouldn't be doing.

And then he didn't think of anything because he was falling, the thrilling and terrifying feeling of nothingness. He closed his eyes and smiled wide and waited for the impact.

## THE GODDESS OF DAWN

There had been three major discoveries in Anna's life so far. The first was at twelve, when she first discovered what Aurora Borealis was, leading to her obsession with the northern lights and her decision to choose astrophysics as her major. The second: discovering sexuality by losing her virginity to Cory Vaughn, her best friend Morgan's brother, just last year.

The third discovery was ten minutes ago, when she opened her phone to find a full-frontal shot of Cory's dick in her inbox.

The first was discovered in a sixth grade science textbook. *The Northern Lights, as seen over Alaska*, the caption under the photo read. Anna spent the rest of the class period with the book open to the page and stared at the picture, wondering how such a thing could exist and how she could have not known about it before. She spent her free time in the computer lab, searching the words "The Northern Lights." She scrolled through dozen of pictures of the ribbons of green, yellow and orange. Glowing, dancing curtains. She learned that Aurora only appeared over the geomagnetic poles, when the air particles were charged with electricity. She learned that the whole thing lasts ten minutes, and only when the sky was a cloudless, clean surface.

Anna had started her own "Aurora Fund," a tall glass jar for collecting change, in hopes that she could see the lights in person one day. Aurora was always a fleeting thing, backing out when the temperature in the air wasn't right or if the turn of the axis was off. Only showing up on its own terms. Never settling. Never staying in one place. Anna didn't know what she was

going to do with an astrophysics degree, but she knew she wanted to keep finding out what else was out there.

The second discovery happened spring break of her senior year of high school, at Morgan's family's beach house. Cory was Morgan's older brother, a lanky dude with a small beer gut who went to an out-of-state college, who always wore his "Nintendo World Championships 1990" t-shirt and snuck a bottle of Jack Daniels in the condo. He only stayed for the first night, before he met up with his college buddies at some spring break beach a few hours away. When Morgan's parents went to bed for the night, Cory talked Anna into her first shot of whiskey. They picked out music from each other's iPod to play. Talked about their favorite Nintendo 64 games (hers was Banjo-Kazooie, his was StarFox).

And after Morgan went in her bedroom, Cory helped Anna pull out the couch sofa and asked if he could share it with her, instead of having to curl up on the loveseat or the floor. Cory felt warm and trusting and he made her laugh and was sort of cute, so she said, "Yeah, sure." When his hand snaked around her body and slid underneath her shirt, she didn't stop him. Then it fell lower, sliding into her panties. Then, when she was certain it was going to happen, she whispered, "I'm a virgin."

He said things like "I won't hurt you," and "I'll make it feel good for you," and then it happened before she could *think* about it happening. This was it; this was the moment. She thought about what she had imagined it would feel like, about everything she heard about sex. She became lost in preoccupation, in making herself realize the grandness of the moment, wondering what it was going to *mean* when he pulled out and came on the sheets.

Anna wrote it off as a one-time thing. Of course it was only a one-time thing—he lived in another state, and it was her *friend's brother*.

His first text came a month later, as *hey sexy*. A pattern started—every few weeks, whenever he was in the mood, she'd get a text. Then a month or two would pass with nothing. The lack of frequency made them easy to ignore. Anna constantly wondered what Morgan would think if she told her she'd slept with Cory, that he'd been texting her on and off for the past year. Morgan was her closest friend, even though they had met sophomore year and now went to different colleges. Anna didn't have too many friends, really. School and her job in the university science lab kept her busy, but she valued that she had a default person to talk to when things happened. It was disappointing though that she couldn't share the fact that she'd lost her virginity. She always thought sex was something adults talked about freely, but Anna couldn't think of a single person that she could talk to about Cory. He was this *thing* that she couldn't get rid of. Grit under nails, the tint of coffee staining the pot. Maybe everyone had some baggage attached to the person they lost their virginity to. Most likely not in the form of constant sexual advances via text messages, but something.

Anna had gotten the text while she was watching TV on the couch with her sister, Erin. Cory's face was cropped out of the photo, and the subject of the message was simply *me5*. This made her think there had been four other takes. Underneath the photo, a semicolon and parenthesis: a wink.

Immediately she flipped her phone over on her lap, hiding the screen against her thigh. She glanced at her sister Erin, whose face was still focused on the television screen, probably

thinking of the dreamy lead character and thinking innocently of boys, of kisses and hand holding and lingering hugs. Not of nude pictures from guys she barely knew.

Anna left her phone against her thigh until the show ended, until the hunky lead guy and the quirky lead girl admitted their feelings for each other and ended the episode in a kiss. Erin clapped. “They’re finally going to be together!”

Anna smiled and slid her phone into her pocket as she stood from the couch. She said goodnight and headed down the hall to her own bedroom. She wished she could afford to move out and live closer to the college campus, a daily forty-minute commute. She could only pay for college through grant money and her work-study job.

Even if Anna had the money there was still her mother, who spent all of the time that she wasn’t at work curled up in bed or on her recliner in front of the television. Anna stepped quietly into her mother’s room first and found her mother lying still, her eyes half-open. She kissed her cheek and shut off her TV. Her mom mumbled something quietly as Anna closed the door behind her. Anna knew she couldn’t leave Erin and her mother alone.

Her phone had vibrated in her pocket three more times. She couldn’t even think of looking at it until she was in her bedroom with the door locked. The messages went like this:

*Hopefully this will get you talking to me again.*

*Please tell me you’re going to look at this and think of me tonight.*

*Are you there?*

She went back to the photo. It wasn’t so much of a close up, it was more torso than anything, but still it was there, held loosely in one hand while the other held the phone.

A long time passed before Anna could think of something to respond with. And she knew she *had* to respond now, after all of the ignored texts, even if it wasn't in the way he wanted her to. You can't get a dick in your inbox and not react.

But Anna only wrote: *I can't talk about this tonight*. She tucked the phone next to her side on the bed and stared at the yellowish tint of her ceiling, trying for the rest of the night to not think about this latest discovery.

Anna found herself wanting to see the photo again in odd moments the next day, to be sure it had really happened. She felt this odd pleasure in having it, carrying around this intimate part of someone else.

She also really, really wanted to talk about it. She finally felt like she had something substantial and tangible to share, a so-called "sex life" to talk about. It was going to explode out of her if she didn't tell someone.

By the end of day, Anna decided to confide in Matthew, another work-study student who had a job in the physics lab with her. She decided a guy would be less judgmental, and Matthew was always open to her about his sex life, about the men he met online and took out on dates and hooked up with in the back of nightclubs. She decided that Matthew was someone who had probably sent and received naked photos before.

After she told him, Matthew asked, "Can I see the picture?" She handed him the phone and he smirked and said, "Sexy."

"Yeah, I don't know what to do about it." Anna said, flipping her phone shut.

“What do you mean, you don’t know what to do? You talk dirty, you send a photo back! Is this your first time sexting?”

Sexting. It was horrific that it had actually become a *thing*, a thing that people could do so easily. She wondered how many people were carrying dirty pictures on their phone at that moment, sending sexual texts in the middle of the day. Now that she was aware of it, she couldn’t stop thinking about it.

She even casually approached Morgan about it later that night, after Morgan had invited her over to watch a movie. They tried to make plans a few times a month, though it had been three weeks since they’d last seen each other. Morgan was going to the local community college, so it wasn’t a problem of distance. Anna felt guilty about not being able to tell her about her brother, mostly likely a factor when Anna made excuses about not being able to hang out.

So Anna asked Morgan if she’d ever *sexted*, saying it quietly like it was a dirty word.

“I do it when I have to do it.” Morgan said, sitting cross-legged on the couch, spooning out peanut butter from the jar.

“Why would you *have* to do it?” Anna’s mind now filled with disturbing thoughts of her friend in deviant situations, thoughts she could barely process because the thoughts were too overwhelming.

“If the guy I like is into it, and I want to keep seeing him, I just do it. Wait, did you get a photo from a guy?” Morgan grinned, pointing her spoon at Anna in accusation.

“No, no someone I work with did. Made me curious if people did it a lot, is all.” Anna hoped her shrug seemed natural.

“Yeah. It’s not really a big deal. I mean, why not?”

*Why not?* The question stuck in Anna's brain the rest of the night, making the movie hard to focus on. Why not? Why. Not. She was eighteen now, a certified "adult." Even though she'd had a boyfriend in high school, she never went further than second base, simply because she didn't want to be considered a slut. Now it seemed silly; she had no mental reservations against pursuing a sexual relationship. Her only hang-up was her own cowardice.

On her way home that night, Anna went over the messages Cory had sent that day. After her *I can't talk about this* from last night, he'd written back, *tell me when you're ready, baby. I like knowing you have it.* And then: *I really want to talk to you soon. I think about that night all the time.*

Anna took a deep breath, sat up tall and wrote back: *let's talk tomorrow night.*

Anna was fourteen when the change in her mother became apparent. Her parents had divorced when Anna was five, not long after Erin was born, but her mother had still been a strong woman who worked overtime to provide for her daughters and went out with her friends and smelled of flowers and hairspray. Over time, she would leave them frozen dinners to cook instead of preparing anything, the dirty laundry would gather in foul corners. She slept until late afternoon on her days off. She didn't dress up anymore.

Now her mother spent most of her day flipping between the Lifetime channel and old movies on TCM. Anna used to try to engage her, to give her some hobbies. Once, her mother was watching the original *Hamlet*, so Anna went out and bought her an anthology of Shakespeare plays. She bought her crossword and Sudoku books. She lent her one of her books on Aurora, telling her how magnificent it was, and adding, "Can you believe it Mom, that there's

phenomenon like this out there?” The books sat piled in the corner, their spines never cracked, so Anna finally stopped trying.

Erin was already used to setting her own alarm, making her own lunch, and walking down the block to the bus stop at exactly 7:20 every morning. Anna felt guilty that her mother had been around more for her than Erin. Anna tried to fill that spot by taking her shopping and checking over her homework, even though Erin was much more self-sufficient at fourteen than Anna, who had hung up posters of outer space in her bedroom and read sci-fi novels and talked endlessly about her one-day trip to see the Northern Lights. She had lived in a sort of fantasy world while Erin was much more rooted in reality.

That next night, as Anna checked over Erin’s biology homework, she found a *Cosmopolitan* stuck in between the stack of Erin’s textbooks. She pulled out the bright pink cover, her eyes immediately zooming in on *50 Ways To Make Him Moan* in white block letters.

“Erin, where did you get this?” she asked, turning towards the couch and flashing her the cover.

“My friend at school let me borrow it.”

“Did you read all of it?” Anna turned back to the front cover, with *What Your Vagina Isn’t Telling You* in the bottom left corner.

“Not really. Mandy and I read the Confessions section together at lunch, and I like looking at the clothes.”

Anna was sure she was lying. She assumed she’d read all the dirty stuff but didn’t want to tell Anna. She wondered how much Erin already knew about sex. Looking over, Anna saw she

was wearing a padded pink bra and low V cut shirt, showing a slight swell of cleavage. “Does Mom know you wore that today?”

Flipping through TV channels, Erin said, “Why does it matter if Mom knows? It’s not like she’s gonna stop me.”

Anna felt a strange heaviness in her chest, a hefty guilt for not being a good enough big sister. Anna told her that they would have a girl’s day that weekend and go out shopping and out to lunch and everything. She would have to dip into her Aurora Fund for the extra cash, but she wanted to be the Big Sister that she thought she was supposed to be. She realized then she wasn’t living up to any of the roles in her life—as a daughter, a sister, a friend. She thought of Cory, and of his expectations for her. It wasn’t the most ideal relationship, but she secretly liked the private bond they shared. She liked that he wanted to talk to her and send her photos and think about her.

Anna’s phone buzzed in her pocket, a sudden shock that stopped her thoughts.

*Are you home?*

Her stomach filling with nerves, Anna excused herself and went right to her bedroom and closed the door. She sat on her bed and wrote: *yes. what’s up?* As if she didn’t know why Cory was messaging her, as if she didn’t know what she was about to do. She scowled at her own pathetic conversation starter, but she didn’t know how to do this. Anna knew she needed to stop over thinking it. She sat crossed-legged on her bed and stared down at her phone, waiting for what he’d write back.

He immediately asked her for a picture. She didn’t think she could do it, and hesitated for a few minutes. But this was another sort of discovery, discovery four, or more like 3.5 or whatever—self-discovery, in what she thought she could and couldn’t handle, sexually. Before

she could talk herself out of it, she snapped a quick, blurry, bright frontal shot that barely even resembled boobs, but it would have to be good enough. Anna thought of her mother down the hall, Erin on the couch. Her heart pounded with the thrill of possibly being discovered.

He asked her to touch herself while they talked. She was timid, unresponsive at first, and she needed to put something in her head to help her out. Cory started mentioning moments from that night, but thinking back on it didn't do much for her, since she had been so lost in her own preoccupations. So she thought of only him. His lanky frame and goofy demeanor. Not that incredibly sexy, but then she thought of his lips. How soft they were when he kissed her, she remembered that. His velvet tongue when he went down on her.

Her phone buzzed, twice. One is: *this is hot. Keep thinking of me baby.*

The other: *are you close yet?*

Almost, almost, she wanted to say aloud, to no one in particular. Right as she thought she was there, Anna thought of Aurora.

Aurora must know what it was like for everything to get real warm all of a sudden, full of charged electrons, and to appear for a few fleeting moments before dawn. Aurora must know something about the way it only lasted moments, but how people spent their lives chasing it. She must know what it's like to feel pent up, waiting, and then when everything is just right, leaping with yellows, reds, and illuminating, vibrant greens.

## THE MURDER OF MISTY DELACOUR

The crammed VFW hall smelled of garlic bread and mushroom spaghetti sauce. Linda and I were led to a long table on the left of the modest room; it appeared that we were the last to arrive before dinner. We were in the corner seats, ones close to the kitchen, next to an older couple most likely in their fifties. The Fredericks, they had introduced themselves as, with a firm handshake from him and a smile and a nod from her.

“Could be actors,” Linda whispered to me, placing her hand on my forearm. I was glad she seemed enthusiastic, since she had been so hesitant when I surprised her with the tickets the other day. We had decided to do something new once a month.

“I don’t think so,” I whispered back, after Fredericks and his wife turned their attention back to their neighbors to the left. “Yeah, they’re friendly, but see the gap between their seats? Distance that only comes after years and years of *real* marriage. You can’t act that, it’s impulsive.”

“So that’s us after a few decades?”

I cupped her chin. “It’s inevitable, love.”

Linda rolled her eyes and reached for the water cup on the table. She had to know I was kidding. After five years, she *should* know when I was kidding. The cup left a tiny ring on the white disposable tablecloth. She placed her glass directly back in the stain’s circumference.

Dinner began almost immediately and was short and uneventful, the room full of small chatter and clinging silverware. Linda said something about the soupy nature of the sauce, and

when I said hers at home wasn't much different, she didn't say anything else to me. She seemed bored. I was hoping the main action would start soon.

And it did, a few minutes after waiters cleared our pasta plates. The lights went out and a woman screamed, my wife grabbed my forearm again, the lights flickered on, and a young beautiful brunette was sprawled out in front of the tables, limbs askew, a knife jutting from her chest.

Immediately, a lead actor came forward and examined the scene. No one was told to remain seated, but we all did anyway. After some dramatic examination of the body, the man pronounced poor Misty Delacour dead. He stood and addressed the audience. "You are all now free to search for clues. From this point on, everyone in this room is a suspect. Trust no one. We will meet in one hour with our theories."

If I hadn't seen the goddamn butler creep past in the low-lighting from the kitchen, the gleam of the knife from a short man in a blazer and cummerbund, perhaps it would have been more interesting. And then I heard a whisper from across the table, "Did everyone else see the guy with the knife?" And I knew there was a reason these tickets were only \$39.95. I turned to Linda—her expression was considerably more sour since the night started. And I'd had such hope. Linda and I needed this. Neither of us was ready to admit something had gone dull between us.

Five minutes after hovering around our own tables, a poor attempt at sleuthing from the collective group, we heard another shout. This time it came from behind us, from the hallway between the bathrooms and the kitchen. And then, the night wasn't about the thinly veiled

masking of a murder anymore. Then, it was about Mr. Fredericks, finding his wife of twelve years necking with a waiter in that little alleyway by the kitchen.

“They’re *necking*,” I said the word to Linda as we watched Fredericks confront his wife.

She huffed and said, “Dear God, Sam, say they’re making out, or something.”

“Sorry, Linda. Kissing. Frenching. Getting to First Base. Right there, right by the bathrooms,” I whispered to her.

The waiter had run back to the kitchen but Mrs. Fredericks stood there, smoothing out her dress, doe-eyed and feigning innocence.

“Guess they weren’t actors, unless this is a really committed performance,” I said, and Linda elbowed me to stop talking. The moment was too uncomfortable, with all of us standing there, watching Mr. Fredericks let the wife have it, hands flailing, spit flying from his mouth. It was hard *not* to watch, hard to pretend a murder had happened and we were supposed to be suspects when a real scandal was unfolding.

That poor woman had to lie still with a fake knife in her chest for an hour.

There was one last harsh *bitch* thrown out before Mr. Fredericks headed towards the door, pulling a set of keys from his pants pocket. The same lead actor stopped him, pushing both his hands on Fredericks’ chest.

“Where are you going?” he asked in a rushed voice, sounding like someone desperately trying to not be upstaged. “No one can leave. This is a murder scene. You could be out there stashing evidence. How can we trust you?”

“I’m not playing this game anymore. Get out of my damn way.” Fredericks brushed past the man and forced his way outside.

The actor looked around at the hesitant crowd, sweat forming on his brow. “Add him to the list of suspects, people. We only have fifty minutes left! Remember, the winner gets two gift certificates!”

Mrs. Fredericks was chuckling in her little corner, amused by the whole thing. “Well, I’m having a grand time,” she said, sliding her hands over her still-slender hips, walking to the cash bar for a drink. The bartender stood from behind the counter, a big bright smile on his face that was clearly for show.

“What do we do now?” I asked Linda. I didn’t see how we could keep playing this game.

“Let’s win those gift certificates,” she said.

I didn’t want to tell her I saw the butler with the knife. I wondered if she’d seen it too, and convinced herself she saw otherwise. Like finding out the ending to a movie you’ve been looking forward to—you can still hope things will turn out differently. Maybe we won’t be Mr. and Mrs. Fredericks after twenty years.

But it was a hard thing now, to keep this game up. No one was talking to Mrs. Fredericks, who was ordering pink-colored drinks and laughing it up with the bartender.

Instead, everyone was gossiping in hushed tones:

“Can you believe she did that?”

“Where did that waiter go?”

“Is her husband still outside? Is he going to leave her here?”

“Do you think it’s over?”

After ten minutes of listening on the outskirts of a dozen conversations, I decided to change my tactic. I began approaching small huddled groups and asking, “Are you the killer?”

They all laughed, furrowed their eyebrows and said no. And then I'd say seriously, "Well someone is lying here and I'm going to get to the bottom of this!" and raise my fist.

Then I saw the butler across the room, so I marched over and cornered him. He was holding his head high and readying the tables for dessert. I said in my best theatrical voice, "I know you're the killer, butler!"

I could have hugged him when he started playing along. "I don't know what you are talking about sir," he said in a horrid British accent.

I wondered about the audition process for dinner theatre.

"I've been in the kitchen, arranging dessert plates. I am terribly sorry for what has happened here tonight to our young victim." He gestured down to the dead brunette. Since her murder, her knees had shifted to face the opposite direction. "But you are gravely mistaken sir. Ask any of the cooks, I was with them!" And with that stellar performance, our butler stormed back off to the kitchen. I wanted to applaud.

The lead actor came up to me and clapped me on the back. "I like your approach, young man. What's your name?" He stuck out his hand.

"Sam." I shook his hand. "Samuel Evans," I said again, getting louder. I could do dinner theatre on the weekends.

"And who is this lovely gem on your arm?" The man took my wife's hand and kissed it.

"Linda Evans," she said. "And my husband's going to get to the bottom of this, you'll see." She shook her finger at him. I grinned and put my arm around her.

“Mrs. Evans, what if I told you I have good proof that your husband may be the one who stabbed our poor, tragic victim?” He said this part in a loud, booming voice, getting the attention of the room. He locked eyes with my wife, waiting for her reaction.

It was a low blow, trying to shake up the game like that. I wondered what Linda would say. She narrowed her eyes, a playful look on her face.

“You have every right to accuse my husband, Mr.—what was your name again?”

“Er, Callahan. Bruce Callahan.” A stage name, undoubtedly. Now I wished I’d given one.

“Mr. Callahan, it’s true that my husband is a suspect, like you are, like Mr. Fredericks is, and the butler, and so on. What are any of us certain of in this room? Did anyone think Mrs. Fredericks would have cheated on her husband tonight? Can we ever really know another person, what they’re capable of?”

“*Reel it in,*” I turned and whispered to her, hiding the words and my grin in her shoulder.

“But no, it’s not Sam,” she said shortly, turning from Callahan. I grabbed her arm and pulled her away.

“Getting carried away there?” I asked, a tone of amusement in my voice.

“He’s not going to get away with fake accusing you to save his show,” she said, but I was glad to see the smile on her face.

Now even Mrs. Fredericks was watching from the bar. She was staring at Linda, her eyes squinted. Then she cocked an eyebrow and turned back to her half-empty cosmopolitan, seeming like she was above the entire evening. I didn’t know why she wouldn’t leave, go find her husband, or call herself a cab. I wondered if she was waiting around for that waiter guy.

Thirty minutes left.

Now that I was a prime suspect, I told Linda we should split up, because I didn't want her to get roped in with me. Linda approached the women and asked them to empty their purses. Only a few of them played along. One or two men actually went up and examined the body, but I think it was because our brunette victim's blouse had shifted considerably lower. I wanted someone to go up and fix it for her. Everyone else was hovering around their own tables, ignoring my vigilant clue-searching and loud ramblings.

Linda came back up to me when we had fifteen minutes left. "That bitch," Linda said, frowning.

"Who?"

"Mrs. Fredericks. I ran into her in the bathroom."

I didn't even see her leave the bar. Her stool was empty. Michael was gone, too.

"What happened?"

"She asked if I was having a good time, and I said yeah, sure, we're playing along. She tsked and told me to not seem so desperate, it's *unbecoming*. Then she offered me some lipstick, saying if I cared more about my appearance, I wouldn't have to try so hard."

I ignored the obvious insults from Mrs. Fredericks and said, "I like that you don't wear makeup."

"I know you do, that's why I don't bother with it."

"Well where did she go, Mrs. Fredericks?"

"She's still in there. I think she spilled a drink on her dress. She smelled like vodka and White Diamonds," Linda said, wrinkling her nose. "Let's just go, Sam. I don't care about dessert or the gift certificates. I'm tired."

“Don’t let her get to you. Let’s stay and see this through.” I was so deep into the role now, I didn’t want to back out. I paused, thinking for a moment, and said, “What if we could convince the entire room Mrs. Fredericks is the killer?”

“But everyone knows it’s the butler.”

Ah, so she had seen. She’d only been playing, too.

“Then we’ll have to make a really convincing case.”

“There’s only fifteen minutes until ten.”

“Are you going to let her steal the night? We paid \$39.95 for a dinner show, damn it, so let’s have a show.”

Linda stared at me for a long, questioning moment, and then asked, “How are you going to do it?”

At two minutes to ten, I was starting to sweat more than Callahan, who was now standing at the front of the room, hands clasped behind his back. We were all asked to take our seats. Mrs. Fredericks was at the bar again.

“Friends,” Callahan began, his voice filling the room. “It has been one hour since the murder of Misty Delacour. The hour has been filled with mystery, intrigue, and sleuthing as you all questioned your peers, trusting no one, for the killer must be one of us.” This was a rehearsed line, for sure, because there had been none of the above. “Who among us will be the first to place an accusation?”

I knew I would be the only person to stand. They should have waited until after the mystery was solved to put dessert in front of us. I wanted their complete attention. “Mr. Callahan, I know with absolute certainty that Mrs. Fredericks is the murderer.” Dessert or no

dessert, there were still several murmurs and gasps. I didn't turn back to the bar. I was sure she was standing from her stool, ready to fend off the allegation.

There was a twitch at the corner of Callahan's mouth, a hint of a smile. "Please present your case," he said, gesturing that I had the floor.

"Tonight, at approximately nine o' clock, Misty was stabbed in the chest with a knife. At 9:05, Mr. Fredericks found his wife making out with a waiter by the kitchen. This was only a cover, because the waiter, in the end, was her accomplice. He had supplied her with the knife from the kitchen that killed Misty."

I looked around the room. I now had complete attention. "She was motivated by jealousy, of course," I went on. "Mrs. Fredericks saw the way her husband looked at Misty, and she knew no man would look at her that way again. She needed to create a bigger scandal, something that would take the attention off Misty's perfect bosom." I gestured down to where Misty was on the ground. I would apologize to the actress after this thing was over. "So she convinced the waiter to slip the knife in her purse, promising to leave her husband and run away with him later tonight." I remained standing, a confident smirk on my face, pleased with my performance.

"But, Mr. Evans, the waiter is gone. He left forty minutes ago, and Mrs. Fredericks is still here." Callahan had his hands folded across his chest.

"I confronted the waiter in the kitchen myself. He was ashamed of helping Mrs. Fredericks, so I told him to make a run for it." I had not thought about this part, and I hoped I was still sounding convincing. "

Callahan's mouth turned into a scowl. I could see this was not going the way he planned. I should have formulated a version where Callahan and Mrs. Fredericks worked together. "Since

our waiter *is* now gone, the testimony holds no substance. I'm sorry Mr. Evans, but you're wrong. You can take your seat."

Then, in a move that surprised everyone, the bartender said across the room, "What he is saying is true, Bruce."

I finally turned back to the bar. As predicted, Mrs. Fredericks was standing there fuming, her eyes little slits of anger. Now, she turned back to the bartender and said, "Michael!"

"She confessed everything to me. Came clean about the whole thing," he said. I grinned at Michael. He met my eyes, but kept his face calm. "Mrs. Fredericks is the killer," he said with resolute authority.

Now I stared back at Callahan, who had his head down and was rubbing his temples. "Any other theories?" The room was silent. "Anyone? Don't be shy."

A middle-aged man across the room raised his hand and said, "It was the butler?"

"Thank God." Callahan handed the gift certificates over to the man who answered. "Congratulations, sir. Everyone else, thank you for coming, we hope to see you at a future show."

I sat back down. "Oh well," I said to Linda.

"I believed you." She offered a sympathetic smile and rubbed my hand. It was the most affectionate gesture I've felt in a while, and something stirred inside of me.

"Ready to get out of here?" I asked, and she nodded.

I noticed a few lingering stares as Linda and I crossed the room. I glanced one more time at the bar, but Mrs. Fredericks was busy confronting Michael, slapping his arm with her purse.

He seemed unapologetic, not reacting to her swats. I nodded at him, a silent thank you for his help in my case.

As we went through the door, Linda asked, “Do you think Mr. and Mrs. Fredericks are through?”

“You kind of have to hope so.”

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

“Not when two people are wrong for each other.”

“Like us in twenty years, right?” Her voice had a deprecating tone, but with sarcasm underneath.

I chuckled. I wanted to thank her for playing along tonight. I wanted to ask her if she agreed with Mrs. Fredericks, if she thought we were trying too hard. But then I thought it was okay to try, because we hadn’t given up hope yet. We had something worth trying for. We were still figuring this out. This was still the beginning for us. Act one of the play.

“No. Nothing like us.”

## LUCIDITY

Beth waited outside the coffee shop for Andrew that morning, leaning against the brick exterior, her hands jammed in her coat and her eyes fixed on the sidewalk. Andrew and Beth had been meeting here at the Uptown Cafe for the past two weeks, after Andrew hired Beth as his new intern at the Palatine Press. “Let’s make it our new morning routine,” Beth had said when she ran into Andrew there during her first week of work. She was eager to get to know him, to impress him with her knowledge of comics, to show him she’d be a damn good intern.

Andrew arrived a few minutes later, right after eight-thirty. “Morning, Beth,” Andrew said, opening the door to head inside, then stopping when he noticed her downward gaze, her lack of energy. “Everything okay?”

She rubbed her shoe against a stain of dried gum on the sidewalk, reluctant to confide in her new boss. She felt childish—Andrew was thirty, nine years older than her, and probably not genuinely concerned with Beth’s preoccupations. “Yeah I just...had a nightmare last night,” she said.

“A nightmare, really?”

“I used to get them pretty bad when I was a kid. But I had one where Barbie dolls came to life and they ripped off their plastic heads but then they weren’t Barbies anymore, they were zombies and then they were cornering me, trying to rip *my* head off.”

“Jeez,” Andrew said. “Well, what about trying to control the nightmare? My uncle had bad nightmares and his doctor told him to attempt a lucid dream. Tell yourself you’re in a dream, tell yourself to wake up. Stop the nightmare before it happens.”

“Stopping the dream,” Beth said, mulling over the idea. “I can try, but once the dream hits it feels so real, I don’t realize I’m dreaming until I wake up sweating and my heart pounding.”

She gazed up at Andrew, who appeared genuinely concerned for her, a scowl on his face. She was glad she told him about the nightmare, and that he seemed sympathetic. “Well, read up on lucid dreaming and let me know if it helps any. I need you more alive than this for work. Let me buy you a coffee, too, get some caffeine pumping through those veins.”

Beth smiled at him, already feeling more at ease. “You’re my savior,” Beth said as they entered the café.

When Beth thought about it, she had a hard time pinning down what she enjoyed about Andrew. From what she’d seen of him so far, he was often unpleasant, moody, and seemed altogether unhappy to be still working for the local weekly. She decided that it wasn’t physical attraction either: he was sort of flabby and had the awkwardness of a teenager, like a boy who looked too big for his own body. And his hair had a boyish unkemptness about it, maybe an attempt to appear more attractive, but Beth wanted to comb it back for him.

She attributed her affection for Andrew to his approval of her work and his encouragement in her success at the paper. Beth hadn’t meant to open up to Andrew about her nightmare, but she had been obsessing over it, when usually she never let herself think about her problem with nightmares. They’d started when she was eight, when her parents were going through their divorce, a big messy affair with screaming matches that carried over from reality into Beth’s subconscious. Dreams of running down long hallways, shouting for her father. Of

screaming giants who tried to squash her with enormous feet. Beth had never told anyone about them, certainly not her mother, because she didn't want her mother to feel guilty that she was suffering.

Beth focused on school and filling her sketchbook to keep her mind busy, and the nightmares had seemed to subside by the time she got to high school. She occasionally had the naked-in-class sort of dreams, a few of the world ending, but they weren't about the terror she remembered from her childhood. The horrific images, the gory, messy ordeals seemed to be gone, and Beth felt a new sense of control, that she was free to live her life without fear. It wasn't really the terrifying images that preoccupied Beth, it was the idea that something so powerful could take over her consciousness and that she would be helpless.

That night after work, Beth was eager to try Andrew's suggestion and spent two hours reading about lucid dreaming on websites like *Lucid Dreaming for Beginners* and *How Lucidity Works*. She taped a note card with the word LUCID over her digital clock. One website said constantly reminding yourself of the word could trigger it.

Beth printed out the directions from an article called *Controlling Your Life, In and Out Of Consciousness*, and read them before she turned off her bedroom lights:

Repeat to yourself: I will remember my dream. When you wake up lie perfectly still, concentrating on any dream you may have had, thinking over and over again of a having fully aware state of mind. Guaranteed, when you fall back asleep, your next dream will be lucid. You will have a longer REM cycle and full and complete control of your brain's activity.

\*

Beth sat still in a cold, white room. She couldn't make out any distinct features to the room; it was all bleach white. A man in a long white coat entered the room. "So Beth, you're here for your checkup. Anything you need to tell me about before we start the exam?"

"Physically I'm fine, but mentally, I've been feeling drained. Nightmares again."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that." She watched as the doctor pulled on a pair of gloves. His fingers wiggled like long skinny limbs on branches. Something about them seemed unnatural.

"Yeah. My boss told me to try lucid dreaming," she said. "It's supposed to help control nightmares. I can tell myself I'm dreaming and open my eyes."

"Fascinating." The doctor stood in front of a steel table with six knives lined up, some larger than others, the largest one covered in bright red. "Or instead, I can cut your eyes out," the doctor said, picking up the biggest knife, the vivid red dripping down the blade. "Then you won't ever have to see again."

*No. No. No.* She repeated it over and over in her head. She was stuck to the bench, unable to get up. *Please don't take my eyes out.* She squeezed shut her eyes shut. The doctor gripped her face, the blade against her cheek. She felt the cool wetness of the blood smearing on her face. "Open up. I'm trying to make it all better. I don't want you to suffer anymore. I'm a doctor, it's okay."

*Open your eyes. Wake up. Open your eyes.* But she couldn't. If she opened her eyes, he would cut them out. She couldn't open them. She couldn't escape this time.

*Change. Change into something else. Please. Don't take my eyes out.*

Then, she felt a pair of arms around her. Not the doctor's. These were comforting.

“Hey, I’m here now, you can open your eyes. Everything’s okay. Look at me.” Andrew was sitting next to her on the examining table, holding her tight. “It’s okay. I’m here.”

Beth peered around the examining room. “Where’s the doctor?”

“He’s gone. I’m here now. He won’t take your eyes out.”

“Stay here with me.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” His face was close to hers, his eyes warm. “You can open your eyes now, the nightmare is over. Open them.”

Beth did. She stared up at her bedroom’s ceiling, the light patterns from the streetlamps peeking through the blinds. She stayed awake until her heartbeat returned to normal and thought of Andrew. He had helped her out of the dream—he was her lucid moment, the trigger that told her she was dreaming and helped her control it. And he was kind and soft and she felt a rise in her chest when she thought back to the way he held her in the dream, those warm eyes.

“You slept better last night, didn’t you?” Andrew asked Beth the next morning as he handed the cashier an exact \$1.21 for his black coffee. “You look better.”

“Are you saying I looked bad yesterday?” Beth asked.

“No, not bad, but probably more zombie than human. And your tights are polka-dotted today, that’s new.”

“I was in a good mood this morning.” She stirred in sugar and milk while Andrew sipped from his steaming cup. “I had a lucid dream last night.”

“Oh, already? Well, I guess I’m not surprised you mastered it so quickly. You seem to pick things up easily.”

Beth beamed. “Yeah, I started to have a nightmare, but I was able to stop it, and I slept great after that.” She thought back to Andrew’s arms around her at the doctor’s office, the comforting feeling at the end of the dream. It was a different Andrew than the one that stood next to her now, some quality that she couldn’t pin down. Something that was more exciting about him in the dream that was missing now. Something that she wanted to experience again.

“Good, because I wanted to ask you something, but if you were too exhausted from these dreams then I wouldn’t want to keep you up all night,” he said.

Beth turned her head quickly. “No, I’m fine. What is it?”

“Some of us from the paper are going to Chicago this weekend, and I wanted to invite you.”

Beth tried to keep her grin down to a coy smile. “Really, you want me to come?”

“Yeah. You’re a part of this office now. I feel you’re so tightly wound sometimes, Beth, thought you’d like the chance to let loose.”

There was a hint of excitement in the way he said it, and Beth felt a small thrill at the possibilities that the phrase *let loose* seemed to imply. “I’d love to go.”

\*

“Lucky Charms, really? You’re twenty-one, Beth. And you’re dreaming about grocery shopping, how boring are you?”

Beth lifted her eyes from her cereal box cover. Andrew was leaning against the display of cereals, grinning at her. “Excuse me, but Lucky Charms are delicious. And it must be something from my childhood, that’s why it’s reoccurring now.” She put the box in her cart. “And why are you in my dream again?”

Andrew shrugged. "Beats me. But you're lucid right now, aren't you? You know that you're dreaming?"

She did. She couldn't remember driving to the store, she was just there.

"Did I stop a bad guy from coming around the corner? A cereal-aisle murderer?" He grinned devilishly. His dirty-blond hair and shadowed eyes were unusually attractive. "Or what if I was supposed to be the killer this time?"

"No, you're never the killer. You help me change the dreams."

"Good to know." He knocked the cereal boxes off the aisles, creating a mess across the floor.

"What are you doing?"

He shrugged. "You tell me. You're controlling it, dollface." Andrew climbed the shelves and sat on the top row. "Come on up." He reached out his hand and in one swift movement pulled her up. "Look at this."

The supermarket stretched out forever, farther than she could see, curving around like the edge of the horizon. "Who ever knew groceries could be so beautiful?" she said, gazing over the endless rows.

"You want to jump across the tops, don't you? You're thinking about it."

And then, they were doing it. Linked hands, they leapt from aisle to aisle, barely touching down on the tops of cans and boxes before they were in the air and jumping to the next. Leaping forever, toward a horizon of never-ending groceries.

Then, the dream changed and Beth and Andrew were getting high in a hotel room, shotgunning the smoke, and she thought of how *bad* she was being, but it felt okay and safe because

she was with Andrew. He pressed his lips to hers and she inhaled, sucking the smoke into her lungs. Then his tongue entered her mouth, her head swimming as he kissed her deeply. She was aware that they were naked, holding each other on the hotel bed, her head dizzy and her chest aching with a deep throbbing pull and she whispered in his ear *I want to have sex with you* and he said back, “I’ve been waiting for you to think of that.”

“Hey.” Andrew walked up to Beth’s cubicle, leaning against the wall. Beth jumped at the sound of his voice, immediately turning around.

“Hey,” she said back, grinning.

“Did I scare you?”

“No! Never.”

“So tonight we’re going to Bar Louie downtown, ever been there?” Andrew asked. Beth shook her head. “I’ll text you directions later today then. It’s about an hour drive and everyone’s planning to meet there at nine, okay?”

“Okay yeah, nine, I’ll see you then,” Beth did a little wave thing, and Andrew gave a small tight smile as he walked away. She felt like a teenager with a crush. It was hard to separate dream Andrew from the real Andrew, when the dream last night had been so intense, so consuming. She knew she had been giggly at coffee that morning too, excited to tell Andrew once again that she had no nightmares. She wondered how tonight would go—he seemed excited about the idea of seeing her outside of work, in a place where they could have a drink and get to know each other better. She was excited too, excited to spend more time with Andrew, whether it be the real version of him or her mind’s fantasy.

\*

Bar Louie was a cramped, dumpy little place, and Beth thought they could have found a better bar in Palatine and saved an hour's worth of gas. Beth felt out of place in a black dress covered in roses with hot pink tights underneath. These women wore miniskirts and heels and their breasts pushed against their tight tops. They were nothing like the women in Palatine.

Beth spotted Andrew at the bar, talking with a leggy blonde. Beth kept her face hidden in a downwards glance and went to the opposite side of the bar, to a spot where she was sure she wouldn't be seen, and waited for the bartender to notice her so she could order an apple martini. She watched the guys from the office flirt with these women that she could never compete with and wondered if she should make the drive back. But when her drink came she finished it in three sips and immediately ordered another.

Beth was able to go undiscovered for quite some time, drawing on her cocktail napkin, until a guy pulled up a stool next to her. Beth ignored him until he leaned in and asked, "What are you drawing?"

She turned to her left and it was Andrew, smiling and holding the neck of a fresh Yuengling. He appeared more handsome than he did at the office, and she wondered what he had done differently. Maybe it was a haircut and some aftershave. She was surprised to see him and pleased that he'd actually come over to her. "I'm drawing you," she said.

"Lemme see." He tried yanking the napkin from her, but she pulled it back.

"It's not done yet."

"Can I buy you a drink?"

"Where's the blonde?" she asked, keeping her focus on her napkin.

“She left with her friends.”

“No thanks, I’m fine. Done,” Beth said, holding up her napkin. It was Andrew in standard superhero form, hands on his hips and a cape billowing behind him, the word EDITOR across his chest. There was a squiggly smirk line across his face, and his eyes were deep with shadow, his hair in a stylish coif.

“That’s brilliant.” He took the napkin and examined it. Then he leaned in close to whisper in Beth’s ear. “I can’t stop thinking about the other night.”

Beth pulled back and looked Andrew in the eyes. “What other night?”

“The night we fucked. Can’t believe it took us so long.” He rubbed his fingers up and down her arm.

She pulled back her arm, feeling slightly disgusted at the smile on his face and his vulgarity. “We haven’t had sex. We did in –”

Beth stopped herself. She observed the bar and tried to perceive her reality. She was in a strange place, in a city she’d surprisingly didn’t visit often, and Andrew was here, talking about sex. Everything was a bit fuzzy and blurry, but that was because she’d had three apple martinis. Right?

“Are we going back to the hotel room?” he asked.

“What hotel room?”

“You know what I’m talking about.”

There was a room, right outside, across from the bar. She suddenly knew this.

“Yeah, okay,” she said, getting off the stool. She reached into her purse and found a hotel key.

Andrew took his beer out of the bar with him and drank sloppily, the liquid sliding down his chin. He threw an arm around Beth and put most of his weight against her as they stumbled across the street. They entered the hotel's elevator and as soon as it lifted, Andrew hit the emergency stop button.

"Why wait till we get to the room?" The elevator lurched before stopping with a resounding thud.

"What are you doing?" Beth asked, trying to keep the terror out of her voice. She'd never seen Andrew like this. His eyes weren't warm—they were bloodshot and wide, no longer shadowed and seductive.

"I'm buying us some time." Andrew reached for her but Beth pushed him away. She stepped back until her shoulders hit the elevator wall, the thud jolting the car back to life.

"Shouldn't have done that, dollface. Now we're really in for it." His grin stretched wide, wider than she thought was possible and the car dropped. The lights went out and they were falling, zooming down the shaft, her body light and her stomach in her throat. She closed her eyes and kept screaming until there was nothing but the terror of the sinking blackness.

"You're awake."

Beth lifted her head off her arm. The office was deserted, the lights dimmed. She thought back to the elevator and the sickly wide grin, and her heart pounded.

Andrew stopped a few yards away from her. "Ready to go? You fell asleep at your desk. Everyone's leaving soon to head downtown."

Her contacts were dry in her eyes and she blinked a few times to try to wet them. She vaguely remembered dozing off sometime that afternoon, a quick shutting of her eyes while she waited for a file to download. She stood up from the desk chair, smoothing out her skirt. She walked up to Andrew, close enough to smell his drugstore cologne. His hair was too greasy and his eyes too wide set to have the sexy, smoldering look from her nightmare. Andrew had been there, and it had still become a nightmare. He wasn't her lucid moment, the acknowledgment that she knew she was in a dream that she could control. She wanted to know what had changed, why she couldn't command her consciousness anymore. Maybe she wasn't supposed to. Maybe everything didn't have to be perfectly manipulated. Whatever it was, she wanted to feel *real* again. She lifted her palm and placed it on his chest.

Andrew flinched but didn't stop her. "Beth, what are you –"

"I'll explain. Give me a second."

His chest was warm and soft under her hand. It wasn't hard and defined, but sort of flabby. But she spread her fingers wide and there it was: *thump-thump-thump*. Beth took a deep breath and closed her eyes for a moment. She relished the feeling of his heartbeat, in the knowledge of reality. She knew it was going to be difficult to sort out her dream version of Andrew from the real Andrew, but she finally wanted to.

"If you don't mind, I'd like us to drive together," Beth said, lowering her hand but immediately missing the feeling of his warmth. "I have so much I want to tell you."

## CLOUD HOPPERS

(1)

We go up in the balloon on the first date.

This is how they work, you say to me. The lifting envelope (often called the “gas bag”) opens at the throat. The burner injects its propane-fueled flame, heating the air inside the envelope. As the hot air rises, the gondola (or the “wicker basket”) lifts from the ground.

They call these small ones cloud-hoppers. You explain it all to me, that first night. As the propane blends with air the mixture ignites, and the exhaust fumes shoot down the balloon throat. The pilot works the burner by opening and closing its mouth (or the “blast valve”).

Gas bag, wicker basket, blast valve. This balloon has a whisper burner too, you tell me. It releases the propane slowly and evenly, quietly. It also generates a yellow flame, giving the balloon its glow. Useful for night flights.

How high are we going to go? I ask.

Depends on the temperature inside the balloon compared to the temperature outside the balloon. Hot air rises, my dear. And it’s chilly out, isn’t it?

The sun’s setting, I say. We keep lifting.

As the outside temperature drops, the higher we’ll go. You drape your arm over my shoulders and ask if I’m cold. I nod.

Below us, the entire town unfolds. We watch the traffic as businessmen rush home to their families after work, singles head home to empty apartments, students go to night classes, couples head to dinner reservations. And we are in a hot air balloon.

(1.5)

When we sleep together I get on top, so I feel like I can control *something*. Your hands hold my waist and guide me. Your eyes are lit like the propane flame and your growls rumble like exhaust fumes. Our skin and hair still smell like gasoline and the cold air.

The tips of your fingers have burn marks on them, rough calluses that rub my hips, dragging on my skin. We move together in an easy rhythm, and I close my eyes and think of balloon mouths and igniting flames and hot air and guttural growls. I think of weightlessness, of sparks. Of pilot lights. Of propane burners. Of burning. And burning.

(7)

The balloons are made out of a nylon, fire resistant fabric called Nomex. Nomex is also the name of the company you work for, you tell me, as a fire-resistance tester. Some of your tests are easy, quick, while others are endurance tests, for days at a time. I don't like to think of how you're essentially a crash test dummy.

And what happens if the product doesn't work? If the material burns up? I ask you the second time we see each other. You waited two days to call me.

Exactly what you think would happen. You say it so casually, easily, like a terrifying fall to death was dinner conversation.

While I'm still thinking of worst-case scenarios, you describe your ambitions: To set the record for the shortest time around the world, which is currently 320 hours, almost two weeks. Or, for highest altitude, currently 69,000 ft, which is higher than the atmospheric layer so you'd have to wear an oxygen mask.

You tell me your favorite place to view by balloon—Australia, specifically the Gold Coast. The company’s headquarters are in Australia, so you’re in the sky there a lot.

Then, you ask me what my ambitions in life are.

I play with my hands underneath the table. You know from the first date that I work the pharmacy counter at Super Mart—not as a pharmacist, but as an unqualified, low-paid assistant. Even though we’re both in the prime of our twenties, you have a bachelor’s degree and work with hot air balloons and I stayed here after high school, taking care of a dying grandmother and working part-time.

I want to own my own restaurant. I tell you this quietly, but nothing can follow wanting to set a world record for balloon flight. You’re focused on me, not responding, so I go on.

I have this huge recipe book at home that was my grandmothers, all handwritten pages bound by ribbon, and I have this idea of opening a restaurant based only on her recipes, in homage. Keeping her alive through her food. Cooking was her passion in life, too.

You’re quiet for a long moment, staring at me—without blinking, and as I think that you must need to blink soon, you say to me: that’s the greatest ambition that I’ve ever heard.

(590)

I wait in the open field across from our house and watch for your balloon.

It’s been eight months. Eight months of shorter and shorter phone calls and sloppy, quick emails and long sighs and *I’m tireds*. Eight months of thick, heavy distance; eight months out of the first year of a marriage.

When you land there's no happy reunion yet; there's pulling down the balloon and rolling up the material and taking apart the burner and the basket and then locking the pieces in the shed in the backyard.

When we're inside we embrace, kissing slowly and evenly, and I touch your cheeks where they're still cold from the wind. Your irises seem duller; they're not propane-lit anymore. Your job became virtually nonexistent and to keep your position, you work eight months out of the year in Australia, where there are new developments with the Nomex and a fire-safety tester is actually in need. I never know how long you'll be home, when I'll wake to the sound of the balloon filling and that will be it.

But now, I can smell the fumes on your skin, and I kiss you again, breathing in through my nose, the odor swirling in my head. I even get on top again, like that first night, and you have no complaints. You still grip me the same, fingers even more calloused. I lean into the crook of your neck and breathe as deeply as I can, enough to make my yoga instructor proud, and release every ounce of air from my lungs. The smell is the same, and at least that is comforting, normal.

(596)

I think I hear you taking off one morning, but it's only the cold-air fan that puffs up the balloon. The empty lot across from the house is covered in reds, in blues, in yellows, in fire-resistant nylon sprawled over the grass. You walk around the slowly inflating balloon, checking for rips.

I approach you, still in my robe.

Just performing routine maintenance, you say, answering my unspoken question. I think I might give it a test run, too.

Is there anything you need me to do?

No, you go on back to bed.

Before I think it though I ask, Can I go up with you?

You stare at me, and I can tell you think it's a bad idea. I'm really only going up for a few minutes. I'll be back quick, I promise.

I smile back, but the disappointment is heavy in my gut. Okay. I'll make us some breakfast for when you get back.

But you're focused on the balloon again, circling it. I walk back inside.

My grandmother's cookbook is the first thing I see when I walk into the kitchen. The faded, worn paper stands out against the starch-white of the modern cookbooks surrounding it, the ones with low-fat diets and meals under 30 minutes. It's glaring, a reminder. I know all of the pages by heart from years of leafing through it, dreaming. I haven't opened it in months.

(20)

The second time we go up, my stomach still lurches at the first initial sway of the basket. I grab the thick woven edge and try not to think of us tipping over. You're laughing at me, holding me again with your free arm, telling me it's going to be okay. And I believe you. Because you say it, I believe it. Instead of the swaying of the basket I think of your palm curved around my hip. Instead of the gusts of wind I think of your warm body next to me. Instead of the heavy thrum of shooting flames above our heads, I think of the fact that there is a second time, and that I must have done something right, because we're up here again.

It's not a sensation I can get used to.

(599)

The balloon is easier to get upright by myself than I expect.

I've helped assemble the balloon dozens of times, so I replicate your moves. The burner and basket are already attached, tilted and resting on their side in the open field. The long reins that fasten the balloon are easy enough to attach to the metal hooks that lock the ropes in place. The hard part is controlling the fan - a small tube of concentrated air that initially fills the balloon. I hold it tightly as the force threatens to knock me off my feet.

When the balloon is full and fat I climb into the turned basket and locate the pilot light easily. The moves come to me naturally, as if I was meant to do this all along. The burner is easy to light, and quickly—the flame shoots up. I pull on the burner, keeping the blast valve open, keeping the flames alive. The balloon tilts upright, and so does the basket, straightening. I keep my grip on the burner lever tight. Then, the balloon rises.

I glance up to make sure it's a clear shot. There are only a few clouds in the sky this morning, and I want to hop to each of them. I welcome the fluttering in my stomach now, the uneasy sensation.

The balloon steadies once I release the burner lever. I'm not too high yet, hovering a few stories over our house, our driveway. And then there you are, running out on that driveway. I'm surprised how long it takes you.

You stop in the middle of the yard and you don't say anything because I'm too high now to hear. Instead we stare at one other, me down at you, you up at me, and the balloon starts drifting farther, down the block.

Then I pull on the lever, and the flames shoot the balloon, shoots me, away.

## RUNNING

It was the summer after fifth grade when Brendan first thought he could fly.

He and Kyle were playing kickball in the park, racing home to beat the streetlights.

Brendan learned to listen for the whining buzz of the lamps kicking on. He knew it took almost three minutes for the lights to go from their dim glow to fully lit; he had those three minutes to run from the park to his house.

And really, the park was only two blocks away, not even a quarter of a mile, but it was fun to race Kyle, who would be trailing after him, puffing heavily. He was running down the block, his lungs burning, his feet pounding into the dirt and his arms pumping him faster, faster, until his legs felt light. And then he looked down.

His feet were hovering over the street. Gliding, from step to step. His legs spread wide, he was running inches off the ground, mimicking the movements he had been making on the ground. He laughed, excited, flowing through the air, his house now visible in the distance, Kyle much farther behind and calling out to him with words he couldn't hear over the wind in his ears.

Then, yards in front of his house, he tripped on his own feet as his momentum slowed, the side of his face hitting the pavement. That night, his mother washed his wounds and told him not to run so fast next time. She, of course, did not see that he had not been on the ground, that he'd fallen because it was his first time and he had not gotten the rhythm down yet.

Kyle, his best friend since their parents had become neighbors in first grade, saw exactly what had happened. He knew the second Brendan was no longer on the ground. The next

afternoon, back at the park where they spent most of their summer vacation, he asked Brendan about it.

Brendan shrugged it off and asked, “That’s never happened to you?”

Kyle shook his head. “How’d you do it?”

“I don’t know, I just started running and you know when you get so fast, that you *think* you’re going to get airborne, but then I really did.”

“Do it again.” There was an inflection of envy behind his words.

And he tried, he tried for the rest of the afternoon, until his cheeks were warm and red and the back of his neck was slick, but he did not take off. There was an invisible hand holding him down this time—gravity was watching and was showing him who was boss. Or maybe Brendan was thinking about it too much, trying too hard, leaping like a hurdle-jumper, forcing that initial start that would propel him into the air.

Kyle tried, too. He did it the way Brendan had described to him, puffing so hard he might vomit. Unsuccessful, both boys collapsed on the highest point of the grassy field, catching their breath. Brendan watched the clouds, heavy and lined with dark gray, and said, “Maybe it’s because of the weather. It seems like it’s about to rain. I bet the air is too thick.”

“Yeah, I bet you’re right,” Kyle agreed, and they did not try again for a long time.

For the rest of that summer, Brendan thought back on the night he’d moved so fast that he lifted off the ground, and longed to run again, away from his house. Away from his parents arguing and away from the nights alone in his bedroom, staring outside his window and imagining running through the air. If he could only take off again he could go anywhere, running

forever and ever, never having to settle down, running on the wind to escape from it all.

On the other side of the park, away from Brendan and Kyle running and running, was Carla, practicing her ballet point while she wondered what would happen if she were to flip over the swing set one day.

Carla, with her fine pale hair and pale skin, so pale that people often thought she was sick. Carla, who could go an entire day without seeing her parents depending on how much work they had brought home with them, whose greatest joy was the hour of ballet after school, and the hour she would spend at the park afterwards, on the swings.

During that hour she would imagine herself taking off from her swing, going over the bar and around and launching into the sky, flying. She thought about in school, when she was doodling birds and puffy clouds in her notebook. She thought about it when she was at home, standing on her tiptoes and holding the edge of the table, extending her arm in the most elegant way possible. She thought about what would happen if she were to jump off right as the swing was coming around again, if it would launch her into the sky and then she would be off, weightless, free.

On the first day of middle school, when Brendan was leaving the house before anyone was awake, he was surprised to walk past his father sleeping on the couch. Brendan hadn't been up before eight all summer, so he wondered how long his father had been down here, waking before Brendan to go off to work, packing up the couch and leaving no traces. He wondered how long his dad would be sleeping down here, if he would see him every morning now, if his dad

even knew today was the first day of school. If his father stopped sleeping down here, would that mean things were better, or worse? Brendan didn't want to think of an answer.

Brendan first noticed Carla when she was the only one still coming to the park after the weather turned cold.

The ground was slick with ice and the wind made everything numb, but Brendan was there, and Carla was there. Kyle had stopped coming with him weeks ago, but Brendan would not let the cold prevent him from trying to run again—in fact, he saw the wind as an added bonus, and he spent most of the afternoon trying new ways to become airborne again.

After Brendan's cheeks became ruby and his breath curled in steady puffs, he stopped and sat on a bench, everyone gone except for this one pale girl who would swing and swing, her legs pumping her in a sort of delicate, graceful way, with her toes pointed in a beautifully curved arch at the top of her swing. He liked to watch her swing.

For Carla, swinging let her practice her arch through her foot, her point through her toes, working her leg muscles. She would extend her feet towards the sky, in front of her face, trying to curl her body around to reach the top bar. She could almost do it. And if she did do it, she would rush home excited and tell her parents, and they'd listen to her and hug her and be interested in her.

Maybe it was the extra wind that especially made her want to take off from her swing, thinking if any day was a good day, it was today. She pumped her legs with extra force, getting so high that she suspended at the top of her swing before falling back to earth, the black rubber seat bouncing and the chains shaking with the force of her push. Then again, so high and her toes

her reaching, stretching, so high that her body was more upside down than not, and she had that moment of suspension again, until the chains shook violently, and she slipped off the seat and fell towards the ground.

She had a fleeting moment of weightlessness as she fell, but mostly the terror of the fall was what she felt before she landed heavily on her back, the wind knocked out of her.

He was over to her in a second. She had blinked, tried taking a breath, and he was there. “Are you okay?”

It was the boy who ran in the field, the only other person she had seen here in the last two weeks. She tried to nod, but her head hurt, a dull throbbing that made everything fuzzy.

“Can you sit up?” He lifted her behind her shoulders, sitting her upright. Her breath was back, but her heart still thudded frantically, wildly. “What happened?”

“I..I got too high. The swing fell, and knocked me off.”

“Why were you trying to go so high?”

Carla couldn't explain it to him, so she shrugged. “I think I'm done swinging for now.” It was quiet for a moment, and her curiosity got the best of her so she asked, “Why do you run here everyday?”

He hesitated, and then simply said, “I like to run.”

“You're fast. I can see you when I swing; it seems like you're barely touching the ground.”

Brendon beamed, as if he'd been given the greatest compliment in the world. He sat down next to her, in the icy mulch that surrounded the swings. “If I tell you something, will you promise not to tell anyone?”

In her notebooks, next to the birds and the clouds, Carla would draw floating stick figures, she and Brendan hand in hand and flying through the sky. She would beg him to explain every detail to her, what it felt like to be running off the ground. She would ask why he couldn't do it anymore; she would encourage him to try again. Now, she looked forward to her hour at the park to spend with him, when she and Brendan sat on top of the monkey bars (he'd help her up, and they'd feel like they owned the park, *their* park, sitting on top of the world and viewing their kingdom).

But always, she kept his secret, so it was only Brendan and Kyle and Carla that knew. And while Kyle always felt jealous, and now refused invitations to run with him at the park, Carla was awestruck.

It was two days before Christmas when Brendan stopped seeing his father on the couch.

Her mom explained it briefly to him, saying that things were going to be better now, and that there'd be no more fights. She explained that Brendan could visit his father, stay with him on weekends, and Brendan wondered why they couldn't get through one last Christmas together.

He spent most of Christmas Eve in his bedroom, not wanting to go to the park (he was sure Carla wouldn't be there, anyway). He called Kyle, but Kyle was having family over for the holidays and couldn't leave. It was only Brendan and his mom in the house all day, and it was too quiet without the yelling.

When it was time for dinner, his mom knocked on the door. "Brendan, sweetie, come eat."

“Not hungry,” he said. He sat on the edge of his bed and stared at the snow-trimmed trees that lined the edge of his yard.

“You can’t stay in there all night. You have five minutes, Brendan.”

But he wasn’t coming down for dinner. He thought, as he opened his window, the cold wind sweeping in, that maybe he would never come down again. He put on his heaviest coat, zipping it up to his chin, slid on his worn sneakers, and went back to the window ledge.

His house wasn’t very big, but it was tall, feeling like two squares stacked on top of one another. He stuck his head outside the window, closing his eyes as the wind surrounded his face, instantly numbing him. He knew the jump from the window to the small yard below would be painful upon landing, and he braced himself for impact as he lifted his knees and perched on the ledge, like a frog on a lily pad, waiting to spring.

He took a deep breath and jumped, the wind cheering in his ear. And then, as he waited to fall to the ground, the ground never came. The wind carried him along and Brendan soared over his yard. He spread his arms wide to catch the wind. He felt like a diver off a high board, falling slowly through the air, the butterflies back in his stomach, his heart racing.

He wasn’t sure how long this would last but he never got the chance to find out; the trees lining his yard stopped his forward movement. He latched onto a jutting, thin branch, and grabbed fistfuls of evergreen thistles in attempts to hold on. The branches were icy from the thin snow and Brendan slid down the fat bottom of the tree. As he dropped a few short feet to the ground, he only thought about telling Carla.

All he could do was wait until she showed up at the park again.

It wasn't until January, when school had begun again and she had resumed her ballet classes. When Brendan arrived at the park that afternoon, she was already on the swings.

When Carla saw him, she put her feet down on the mulch to stop her momentum and quickly jumped off. Then, she rushed forward and hugged him. "I missed seeing you," she said, releasing the hug quickly.

"Me too," Brendan said, smiling, his body still warm with the lingering feel of her hug. "I have to tell you something."

It felt natural to reach down and take her hand, to guide her back to the monkey bars, to climb up first and then offer his hand again to pull her up. They were a few kids in the park, since school had resumed again, but no one paid them any attention.

As Brendon told her of his jump on Christmas Eve, the back of his mind took in how pretty she was, as if he had never realized it before. Her long, fine blonde hair was out of its knot and flowing gently down her back; her pale skin was tinted by her pink cheeks, her eyes smiling as she listened eagerly to his story.

And then, he felt inclined to tell her the reasons behind the jump, about his parents and how they'd never have a Christmas together again and how it was so quiet in the house now. And she listened then, too, and offered up her own story of her parents, how they'd never once been to a ballet practice to watch her.

After she was finished, Brendan gazed up at her. "I've never seen you dance, either."

"Well, you're different."

"Can I, though?"

She stared at him for a long moment, and then said softly, "Sure."

They dropped back to the ground and Carla unzipped her jacket and took it off, revealing the leotard underneath.

“Are you cold?” Brendan asked.

Carla shrugged. “I feel fine. I can’t dance in that jacket.” And with that, she did a graceful little hop across the grass, her arms extended, her long legs stretched out. She moved delicately through the air, with poise and a practiced restraint, beautiful long movements. She did a fancy spin with her leg kicked out, then walked over to Brendan and took his hand and made him dance with her. He laughed and played along, spinning her and holding her waist as she did a split in the air. The two of them improvised choreography, with spins and dips until she backed up and ran towards him, leaping and he caught her, and she wrapped her legs around his waist, arms around his neck.

She spoke quietly, softly, because he was so near her. “Can I run with you?”

He hesitated, not because he didn’t want her to, but because he didn’t want to get her hopes up. “Okay. Hold my hand.”

He was hoping that his lengthy explanations over the weeks would help her in the run. “If I feel like I’m about to take off, I’m going to squeeze your hand, and then I want you to do one of those fancy ballet leaps to get a head start and maybe together, we can both lift off.”

“Okay.” She was grinning wildly, breathing fast.

They took off together, Carla having no problem keeping up. She had long dancer legs, after all, and all that swinging strength. Their strides were long and there were little in-between moments that almost felt like flying. Carla laughed, her long golden hair behind her in a shimmering ribbon, and Brendan felt confident that this for sure would work. When he felt the

sensation in his stomach, he shouted, “now!” and squeezed her hand tight.

She leapt then, and was up with him for a moment, a wonderful moment where they were suspended in the air, where it was only him and Carla and they could do anything. She gasped at first, her breath taken in surprise. Then, as her momentum behind the leap fell so did she, dropping to the ground, taking Brendan with her.

They hit the field hard, a solid thud that knocked the wind out of them both and they were left coughing for air. They lay side by side in the grass, not moving for a few silent moments.

“I’m sorry. I wanted it to happen,” Brendan said.

Carla turned on her side to face him, her leotard wet from the grass. “We tried, and we sort of did for a moment, but you *let* me try.” She took him by surprise by placing a firm kiss on his lips, the first time anyone ever had done that. “We’ll figure a way out.” She lay on her back again, and he took her hand and held it, her fingers icy from the wind, and he floated away with her.

## TWO TRUTHS & ONE LIE

I first notice him because he's sitting at the table in front of me at the coffee shop and he won't stop playing with this one long strand of hair that's resting on his neck. As his index finger smoothes his hairline, at that one small imperfection, I think he must have a pretty shitty barber. Or maybe it was his girlfriend, using his clippers, and she wasn't any good. Or maybe he and the lady were fighting and she purposely left this one, long strand to piss him off, a strand that would itch his neck and nag him throughout the day. Throughout coffee breaks, business lunches, and subway commutes, this damn strand would itch that soft spot at the back of his neck and he'd think, *that bitch*.

I imagine myself clipping the strand off and sip my now lukewarm decaf coffee and go through my past boyfriends in my mind and make a list: Lazy Eye. Bad Tattoo. Crooked Teeth. I crave these imperfections in men. I don't want Mr. Perfect. I want a guy who can tell me a really convincing lie about himself.

Finally, Mr. One Long Strand folds his newspaper and gets up from his table at the coffee shop and I get up too, realizing I had nothing else keeping me there. I have to be at work in fifteen minutes, anyway. I follow Long Strand outside and he goes right on the sidewalk but I turn left, to the office park two blocks down. The coffee shop is an equal distance between my office to the left and the closest metro stop, to the right. I have to fight the urge to turn right and follow Long Strand wherever he is headed, to see what other imperfections I can pick out about him, but I faithfully, begrudgingly continue left.

\*

Her name is Mandy Williams, and I am slowly destroying her.

She doesn't call herself Amanda, like a 27-year-old self-respecting woman should call herself, but Mandy, like Candy, or Randy. Never mind the men at the office eat it up.

Eight out of ten college graduates never work in the field they majored in. I'm not sure where I heard that, but I'm sure it's true. But Mandy and I, we're the twenty percent. We both actually went to the community college and earned our AA in Clerical Studies and landed jobs directly in our field. We should be sticking together.

Instead, for six months she's ignored all of my witty post-it notes and attempts to have lunch together. Instead, she wears the same miniskirt every day and has the bigger cubicle next to the window. Instead, the boss assigns her the project with the big client and she's the one who gets the bonus at the end of the year. *That bitch.*

So I work with the clients that are assigned to me, ones I'm overqualified for. At least it leaves extra time for me to work on the website I started two months ago, [ihatemandywilliams.com](http://ihatemandywilliams.com). I make all postings anonymously, and I delete my web history every day. It's step one in the destruction, currently open for membership.

Yesterday, I wrote:

*It's 1:15pm, and she's back late from lunch. There's a smear of ranch dressing on her blouse. Or, what seems like ranch. We all know what Mandy rhymes with (see this post [here](#) for an implicitly derogatory list of said rhymes). You know, I've always wondered how she got that big cubicle. I bet if I put that blouse under a black light I'd find more than ranch.*

I'm not sure if this blog is going places, but I'm sure writing it makes me feel like someone powerful.

\*

Mr. One Long Strand's name is Dan, I finally learn after seeing him three more times at the coffee shop. I plan my pick-up strategy in my head: to ask to borrow the sports section of his paper to seem like a cool chick who'd be into that stuff, and he would ask me to join him at his table. I stand by the counter with all the napkins and bins of milk and half-and-half, scoping out his table with my peripherals. And then I spill creamer all over the counter, but he sees me and is over to me in a second and mopping up the mess with a wad of brown napkins. I fumble and say something about the loose tops on these creamer containers. I guess it was still charming enough, because next he's inviting me to sit anyway.

I ask him first about that long piece of hair. He laughs, his fingers immediately reaching for it. There's no bitch of a girlfriend that hacked up the hairline on his neck, only a friend who had a pair of shoddy clippers, but also three beers before the two of them decided that this was a good idea. He tells me the story with a curled smile, and I do what can only be described as *swoon*.

By our fifth run-in he knows my coffee order. It's not hard—a tall decaf with two sugars.

By the seventh he finally, *finally*, asks me to dinner.

We go on a first date at a Thai restaurant downtown, one where we sit on the floor with our legs crossed in front of a short table full of food I can't pronounce. We play get-to-know-you games, and I say, "Tell me two things true about yourself, and then one thing that's a lie, and I have to guess the lie."

“I...what?” His smile is perfect. Straight teeth.

“You had braces, huh?”

“Should I answer that truthfully?”

“Yes. That’s not a part of the game.”

“Okay, then yes. I had braces.”

“Okay. Now tell me three things, and one has to be a lie. It’s an ice breaker.”

I watch him closely, looking for his tell: a tiny change in his face that would indicate the lie. I wanted to see how good he was.

He says, “I went through a phase when I was convinced I’d be a professional surfer, I’ve read all of the *Harry Potter* novels, and I’ve been engaged twice.”

I study his face. He’s calm, his eyes searching mine, no change. He’s a good liar. I smile and tell him I need some time to think about these, and I’ll get back to him.

Three months ago, before I started the website, I enrolled in a comedy-writing class at the community college. I mainly wanted to be able to say all those funny little things that people in offices are always saying, to have a joke ready in the break room, a funny retort for something Mandy would say to me. And then when I realized I generally despised everyone in the office, with Mandy at the head of the list, I used my comedy-writing knowledge to start the website. I want to take Mandy down with my witty deprecating humor, and at the same time gain followers who will appreciate that same witty deprecating humor. And it gives me something tangible to focus my energy on, instead of sitting at home in front of a small television with a folder full of take-out menus and a fat gray cat.

In this class, *COM 3013: Writing for Comedy*, we learn about the “concept” of humor, of joke-crafting, improvisation, and the like. We learn that when listing things, the one that is peculiar comes last to emphasize comedic effect. *I like walks at sunset, old books, and the smell of my farts*, as an example. We learn which words will get a laugh regardless of context. Coccyx. Hullabaloo. Also, *p, b, t, d*, and *g* are the funniest sounding letters in the English language. We study shm-reduplication, where the first syllable of a word is replaced with the shm- prefix, indicating derision or skepticism. We learn how it originated with Yiddish speaking Jews. Baby-schmaby. Gravity-schmavity. Pope-schmope.

We learn how some numbers are funnier than others. Forty-three pounds of coffee are funnier than ten. Generally, if the two numbers add up to an odd number, it’s a funny number. Twenty-five is a funny number of years to be.

*#1: I went through a phase when I was convinced I’d be a professional surfer.*

Dan owns two surfboards; they both lean against the back wall of his closet. One is sleek and red with sharply pointed arches; the other has a tribal pattern and seems less expensive—a starter board. He tells me about it after our third date, after I spend all of dinner playing with the necklace that fell in my cleavage, after he finally picks up on my hints and takes me to his apartment, after I find the sweet spot in the middle of his bed.

I spot the boards immediately. He tells me about the year he took off between high school and college, when he surfed every day with his two best friends and smoked pot and worked a part-time job to pay for the pot. And when he auditioned in the local surf open contest, he

fractured his leg and stopped surfing, and that led to him moving into DC and to his Georgetown business degree.

He bought the second board as a gift to himself for finishing his bachelor's—he still wanted to be an entrepreneur and open his own surf shop—but after his bones healed, he wasn't as steady on the board and eventually, it became something that sat in that back of a closet and became a truth about himself in a game on a first date.

*#2: I've read all of the Harry Potter novels.*

Yeah, well who the hell hasn't? I trick him on Date Four by asking: “What were all of Voldemort's horcruxes again? I can never keep them straight.” When he lists them off, I grin and say *thanks*. I know his lie.

*Monday morning, 9:08am. She's late. Of course, no one will blink an eye, except for Steve and Carl who always offer undeserved flattery in attempts that one day she'll sleep with them. Oh, here she comes now. Wait...she's looking at me. She's walking to my desk. More on this as it develops.*

“Sarah.”

She's talking to me.

“I know what you write in your blog, Sarah. Stop it.”

I tap the x on the window and close the browser. “What are you talking about?”

“Your website. You left it open on Friday when you went to the restroom. All you do is gossip about me. Stop, it's childish.”

“Must be mistaken. I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I can’t look her in the eye. Instead I look down at her same miniskirt, the black material stretched over her thighs.

“Sarah, I know it’s you. You’re a horrible liar.”

I can feel how hot my face is. Everyone in the office is staring at me, even Steve and Carl. She’s standing with her hands on her hips and glaring down at me like my mother. I wonder if my anger is palpable, if it’s soaking into the atmosphere and everyone around the office can feel it. A transferal of my vehemence through osmosis.

I think of all the things I want to say to her: *You deserve it. You didn’t work for anything you have and this is my method of revenge, don’t take this from me. It’s a free country, I can publish what I want about you on the internet. Yeah well, you only wear that miniskirt because of the male attention.*

I can’t voice any of these. They’re all stuck on the roof of my mouth, and all I can say, in a small voice, is “Sorry.”

Mandy stares at me for a moment, then rolls her eyes and trots off to her window view. People are still watching me, but I cower in my chair and close my browser and wish I could have told Mandy a really good, even funny, lie.

*#3: I’ve been engaged twice.*

Dan could have made up anything, like *I was once a sous-chef*, or *I’ve won a hog wrestling championship*, but instead he pretended to be engaged twice. The idea of it was completely fascinating and completely terrifying.

I confront him about it on our fifth date, after I reveal I know it's his lie. He seems surprised at first, and I have to remind him about the game we played weeks ago. "The whole point was to create a lie about something you're relatively knowledgeable about, because it has to be believable. People don't create fake engagements on the spot," I say. "Do you *want* to be engaged, is that why you said it?"

Dan raises his eyebrows. "Is that what this is about? You wanted me to trick you?"

"I wanted you to tell me a really good lie."

Dan pushes his chair away from the table, throws his cloth napkin on his plate. "What does that even mean? Why are you bringing this up now? I don't know what you're playing at, but I don't want to be a part of some twisted game."

Dan leaves me in the middle of our date, in the middle of the night, the middle of a crowd of watchful eyes and I stir my spoon around in my soup and think about Mandy hating me, Dan hating me, and wonder when I got like this.

Dan agrees to meet me at the coffee shop the next morning. I try apologizing, explaining how I'm sorry for accusing him of wanting a fake engagement and maybe I am a little fucked up but I'm trying here, honestly. He reaches over and takes my hand and doesn't say anything, but it's okay. I don't mind the silence.

Then, I break the silence by saying, "I run a website about one of my coworkers, I'm taking a comedy writing class at the local college, and I am a dog-walker on the weekends."

Dan stares at me for five or six long seconds, and I'm careful to not change anything in my face, any sign of the lie. Then I realize we both said the lie last in the list and I bite my lip and shit, he knows. He smiles and tilts his head and says, "I bet you hate dogs."

I say, "I could like dogs."

"No, because you told me about that website last week and you're weird enough that you'd actually take a comedy writing class, but you'd hate yourself if you had to walk dogs on the weekends. Plus, I know that you come to this coffee shop every Saturday morning and order the tall decaf with two sugars. We can't play this game once we've gotten to know each other."

I say, "Yeah, you're right. Doesn't work the same. It's supposed to be an ice breaker, and I guess we've broken said ice."

"We're a total slushy at this point."

I tried not thinking about how those turn into messy puddles.

Instead, he says, "So tell me more about this comedy class."

On date seven, Dan introduces me to his friends. He tells me he wanted to sooner, but he also wanted to wait until the one weekend out of the month where he and his two best friends from high school, the ones he surfed and smoked pot with, go to the beach to hear the waves and reminisce about their lost surfing careers.

They sit at the same beach bar every time, one that plays Jimmy Buffet and hangs cheap Margaritaville signs on the walls, with white whicker tables and mahi-mahi sandwiches with too much seasoned salt.

He tells them, “She’s taking this class on comedy writing. Tell them something funny you’ve learned, Sarah.”

Improv is not my strongest suit. I’m better when I have time to plan my jokes out. But, wanting to impress, I sit up tall and say, “Okay.” I think of a joke from one of my handbooks, a play-on-words one. “A patient says to a psychiatrist, ‘I keep wanting to cover myself in gold paint.’ And the psychiatrist says, ‘Sounds like you have a guilt complex’.”

I sit there with a big smile for a few blank seconds, and Dan gives me a curious look. “It’s ah...g-i-l-t, it means a thin layer of gold....” I turn to Dan for help. He forces a small laugh.

“That’s a good one, Sarah.”

And we turn back to our beers and sandwiches. I realize I’m not very good at this humor thing, like I’m not good at this lying thing. Or this making-friends thing, or this being-a-girlfriend thing. There, in my wicker seat with Jimmy Buffet playing, I can’t think of one thing I’m good at.

I tell Dan I need to go to the restroom but instead I walk outside and through the parking lot to reach the beach access. I kick off my sandals and walk through the sand, the grains sticking in my toes, and decide then to delete the website and go back to the witticisms on the post-its. I don’t want it to be a truth about myself anymore. Maybe if I’m funny in my notes and witty in my banter, I can get a group of friends like Dan’s that will sit at the same beach bar and talk about the surf shop they plan to open, with boards imported from Fiji, from Australia. I can sit with Dan and tell his friends a good joke, and I can have him not lie about being engaged.

I walk to the edge of the water, curling my toes when the cold current rushes in. But it feels nice, rushing around my ankles, and I wonder how long I’ve been out here, if

Dan and his friends are worried about me in the restroom. I'm not ready to head back inside yet. I want this moment to be a new one, a better one. One I wouldn't have to lie about if someone asked how my weekend with Dan was. But I don't want to have to lie. Instead I think—standing at the edge of the water, balancing between sand and ocean—I want to have truths so good that it won't matter that I can't tell a convincing lie.

## CHRISTMAS IN JULY

“This year’s party is going to be the best,” June says as she wraps a strand of white lights around her palm, checking for knots and broken bulbs. It looks sort of like a festive barbed wire, David thinks, as it twirls over and over. “Everyone will be so impressed.”

“We certainly are planning big,” David says, sorting through the boxes. He’s searching for the good stockings, the deep red ones with the white trim June likes. June hums a Christmas tune as she continues her untangling process. Beads of sweat gather at her hairline, and he thinks she probably should take off her red sweater with the sewn-on silver bell, but it puts her in the spirit, so he doesn’t suggest it. Their outdated A/C unit fights hard against the onslaught of electrical lights and cookies baking in the oven and the natural July heat, even though it’s almost two in the morning. They’ve been home for three hours, June’s birthday barely over, but for the past five years they hurried home after her birthday dinner to take out the boxes and start decorating the house.

June’s motto was that all the best things should happen in the summer, Christmas included. It was a tradition that David indulged at first, finding it charming. But he found everything about June charming then, including her brown pixie hair and five foot frame.

They don’t stop until the tree is up and the boxes are empty and the first dozen cookies are cooled, usually after four in the morning, and they’re sweaty and aching but June is grinning and she peels off their clothes and climbs on top of him. It’s the only part David finds charming anymore.

\*

They met at a party in college; David was drinking Heineken's in the corner with his roommate, Paul, and watching June move around the room. She wore a dress that sat high on her waist and tapered out to a wide bell shape; all David could think about was what she looked like underneath that dress.

"You're cute," he said in a small mumble as June passed by him to get to the kitchen.

"What?" June stopped and met his eye. "Did you say something to me?"

David's pulse jumped and he shook his head and sucked down the last of his beer, hoping the moment was over, but Paul came up then and threw an arm around her and sang, "*Heyyyy June,*" replacing Jude with June and singing in a way that sounded nothing like Paul McCartney and she smiled, not at Paul but at David, and he thought that maybe she'd heard what he mumbled so he stuck out his hand and said, "I'm David."

"June?" David calls out as he sets his keys in the little bowl on the front table and slips his shoes off. His socked feet step silently over the wooden floor.

"In here," she says, her voice lingering from the spare bedroom, or the room that houses their decorations ten months out of the year. He hears the stitch of tape being stretched out, the sounds of paper being cut.

"What are you wrapping?" he asks, leaning against the doorframe. He watches as she folds green paper over a box, holding it precisely.

"Your mom's gift."

"Thought we were going to pick that out together," he says, shifting onto his other foot.

“I had some extra time today, I went ahead and got it. Remember, she told us she needed that slow cooker?” June keeps her focus on the gift-wrapping. Her folds are flawless, masterful.

“What about Dad’s? Can we get that Saturday?”

“Sure.” She smooths her hands over the box, her fingertips gliding over the evenness of her work.

David slips away from the door, crossing the hallway to their bedroom. He unbuttons his white button-up and sheds his undershirt and wants to sit in his boxers and watch TV with a beer. But June told him that morning that it was movie night, that they were going to watch *Miracle On 34<sup>th</sup> Street* and drink cider. So he lets out a deep breath and puts on the red pajama pants that June likes, the ones with little elves all over them. He takes off everything else and falls on the bed, listening to the sounds of slicing scissors and ripping tape, lying motionless for as long as he can.

Their very first Christmas in July party was modest but successful. It was eight months after they moved in together; their December holiday season had passed in such a blur, June needed to feel the cheer and atmosphere that they’d missed. Paul came over early in a striped sweater and a Santa hat and a pitcher of cider; he fully appreciated the kitsch value in the summer holiday. David tried to not think about the way Paul smiled and lingered around June, laughing at her bad jokes. He was thankful June had invited some of the teachers from the preschool where she taught—it gave Paul a distraction and David could sneak behind June, smell the cinnamon lotion on her skin. He thought he probably drunkenly mumbled, “You smell like

Christmas” to her at some point that night, but it must have worked because June could barely wait until the guests left to tackle him onto the couch.

The party was such a success that June talked about it for days after, about how fun it was to get in the spirit in the middle of the year. It was sort of fun, David guessed, but he knew it made June happy so he told himself it made him happy.

David drinks four cups of apple cider during *Miracle On 34<sup>th</sup> Street* after spiking it with some leftover rum in the cabinet. He’s pretty tipsy and June is curled against his side and the room is goddamn hot, too hot to breathe. The tree lights are set on a blinking pattern and they dart and glare across the screen. David tries not to care and keeps his hand on the small of June’s back, her skin hot and damp. He wishes they could take their clothes off right now, with the movie playing. He wishes she would go for that, a little recliner sex. He lets his hand snake around her back and slides it up her side, brushes his thumb on the curve of her bra. She doesn’t seem to notice. He drops his head lazily on the back of the chair, closes his eyes and wraps his hand firmly over the cup of her bra.

“Dave,” she breathes, easing his hand off. She refused the rum when he asked her. Instead she drinks her hot cider in her hot sweater in the hottest month of the year and Jesus, if she were only paying the entire electricity bill.

“Do you remember our first Christmas here?” she asks then, turning her position to face him, his hand slipping away. “We had just moved in and had no furniture and we sat on the patio in the freezing cold and drank hot chocolate and made a fire and talked for hours?”

“Yeah, I remember,” he says.

“I want it to feel like that all of the time. Like this.” She rests her head against his chest, her thick heat trapping them.

“Hey, you should take off your sweater, it’s getting pretty warm in here.”

“Feels nice, though,” she says and David drops his hands, succumbing, closing his eyes and letting the heat take him over.

June spends the next week planning the annual party, letting her preschoolers in summer care make these little red invites for their friends and family. June thinks they’re a nice touch because they look like letters to Santa; all David can think about is how hot the house will be with all those bodies in it. They finish buying their gifts and June wraps them all and David stays out of her way.

The afternoon of the party, June goes out to pick up last minute items—red and green napkins from a party store and more ice and some flavored coffee creamers—and she leaves a to-do list for David. Light the candles, check that everyone attending has something small waiting under the tree, wipe down the wine glasses, and so on. She leaves a Christmas mix on loop on the stereo but David mutes it after she leaves, putting on a TV show. He grips a beer as he moves around the house. He uses a long stem lighter for the candles that smell like evergreen, like cinnamon, like peppermint. June buys them in bulk in January, when they’re marked down after the holiday season. She complains that in July all they sell is coconut lime and tropical sunset. They should have bought those air fresheners that mist the room, instead of something that produces more heat.

June calls when she's on her way home and asks him to preheat the oven so she can warm the casseroles and pies. The house quickly becomes a sauna and David strips down to his boxers, flings his t-shirt across the room and stands on the back porch to finish his beer. He doesn't want to think about the sweater waiting for him, the matching ones June found for them at a thrift store for two bucks. Instead he thinks about buying another six-pack for the night, about the cool A/C in the walk-in beer cooler at the corner gas station.

When he heads back in, the house feels even warmer, almost burning. It must be something stuck on the bottom of the oven, then he turns into the living and sees it.

The evergreen, the cinnamon, the peppermint, knocked on the floor next to his flung t-shirt, knocked onto the floor next to the impossibly green Christmas tree. The flames lick at the paper wrapping, at June's smooth folds, and spread to the cloth sheet draped around the base of the tree. It's almost comical how fast it all goes up, the branches and leaves popping.

David can't do anything for a long moment, frozen and watching. And then he thinks a million things at once. He knows June will be home soon, that she will see this and yell and probably cry. Then he can't help thinking about how he *knew* they shouldn't have candles, how if only he didn't fling his shirt like that, of how the heat consumed everything in this house. He chuckles a little because maybe he's sort of tipsy but it is sort of funny. He should be getting a pot of water to throw on the tree to save what's left. He shouldn't be standing there laughing to himself and tipping back the rest of the beer and thinking about throwing the bottle onto the flames. He knows he has to stop it, eventually, but he can't turn away from the tree being slowly taken over by the flames.

He's about to move into the kitchen to get water when he hears June's car pull into the driveway. He thinks of her walking in and seeing him standing in his boxers with an empty beer bottle and watching the tree burn. He laughs, a little louder this time, because he really can't believe it. Nothing has made him genuinely laugh like this in a long time, and his sides ache and eyes tear up. He's even wearing his reindeer boxers, oh god, and the whole thing gets funnier, and the smoke alarm is going off and the oven timer is beeping and the doorknob is turning and he laughs and laughs.

## PERCENT DAILY VALUES

Growing up, your mother constantly told you that you had no imagination. While the other kids were pretending to be wizards or cowboys or princesses, you put together 1000-piece puzzles and wrote out anagrams.

Now you know things like the amount of saturated fat in a box of glazed donuts or the order of ingredients on a cereal box. Facts. You check facts, all day long at the graphics company that hired you after college. Every time a food company makes a low-fat option or something with half the calories, they think they're helping fight obesity in America, but really they're just giving you more work to do.

Because your lack of imagination hovers over you even when you are well into your twenties, your husband of three years, Marty, buys you a book of Mad Libs one day.

"Imagination is a muscle you need to flex," he says. The Mad Libs are a thin flipbook with a half-peeled sticker reading \$1.99. "Don't try to guess what the right words will be," he says, like you've never heard of a Mad Lib before. "Try to be creative."

This is how you fill it in: Yesterday I went to the MALL to BUY SHOES. At the MALL I saw MARTY, who was there to BUY PANTS. Together we WALKED HAPPILY until we reached the EXIT and we said to each other, "SEE YOU LATER."

Marty frowns as he reads over your page. You tell him to do one, then. His chooses words like HEMORRHOIDS, VODKA, POOP.

"What decent adult would think of the word poop?" you ask.

"I teach eighteen-year-olds," he says. "I'm surrounded by conversations full of poop."

Sometimes you think Marty stays in his teaching job so he can relive the glory days of college. He leaves early in the morning so he can grab a coffee on campus and read the free university newspaper, watching the students and overhearing their stories of last night's parties. It doesn't bother you that much; you think it is a phase he will grow out of, because nothing would be sadder than a middle-aged man who thinks he can sink that island shot in beer pong.

Meet Marty at a party when you are twenty-one. You are about to start an editing internship and he plays drinking games and reads comic books. But the way he looks at you when you first meet leaves you flustered, all warm cheeks. Pick out a mid-priced restaurant close to campus for your first date. Tell Marty over a glass of wine that you worry you are fact-filled and too rational. He says he likes that about you. Don't tell him you count the seconds when you brush your teeth, the steps in between cracks in the sidewalk, the tiles on your bathroom floor. Always thinking, always moving.

Distract yourself by noticing the sweat stains under his shirt. Assume that he's nervous because he's trying hard to impress you, trying to think of clever bits of conversation that would make him seem interesting. His jokes are too forced; he probably read somewhere that there's nothing better than a guy that can make a girl laugh. Stare at the tiny dots of dried blood on his chin and cheeks and guess that there were little pieces of toilet paper stuck to them before he left his house to come pick you up. He would look better with stubble anyway, but he must have read somewhere that he should be clean-shaven on a first date, like he read somewhere that he should tell a lot of jokes. Think of his effort as flattering, his lack of refinement as unusually charming.

Think of him as the perfect way to balance your own self—a rational, logically good match for you.

At work, you have nearly fifty saved Nutritional Facts templates on your computer. Vertical standard, two columns, linear, bilingual, for children (the font is four times bigger on a nutrition label for children), and so on. Your least favorite labels used to be the ones for vitamin bottles, simply because of the sheer amount of spell checking. But now, you can spell words like Thiamine and Pyridoxine in your sleep.

You've never once made a typo. You don't daydream at work—you check facts, you write labels, you look at ingredient lists. Fiber. Sugar. Protein. Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet. Your daily values may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs.

You know Marty is only trying to help when he sticks the Mad Libs in your purse the next day. You're annoyed at first, but you glance at the booklet sticking out of your purse on your lunch break and take it out, read over his one with the hemorrhoids and the vodka. You try one more, something to take your mind off chemicals and numbers. You are never allowed to write FART or PENIS and get away with it. They're childish and you're a grown woman, but by the time you go to bed that night, you've finished the entire book. It is the first creative piece of work you've ever finished; you want to stick on a gold star and pin the best one to the fridge.

You pick up another book of Mad Libs on your lunch break later that week—you found a good deal at the local bookstore where they sell a five-pack for \$6.99.

You sit in bed at night in your favorite grey sweatpants and reading glasses and work on a book of holiday-themed mad libs. You have a small stack of finished booklets on the nightstand—the way Marty smiles when he flips through them satisfies you.

“They’re getting better,” he says, and adds that he feels like Frankenstein and you are his monster. His smile is still lingering when he climbs into bed next to you and says, “I’m going on a trip next week, you know. Somewhere new. To the moon.”

Marty’s life is a walking Mad Lib book. “You are, are you?” You don’t lift your head from your page. One verb left to fill in. You write JUMP, but then erase it and write PLOP instead.

“Are you going to miss me?” Marty asks, cozying up to your side. He looks over your shoulder at the words you’re choosing. You wish he wouldn’t; you’re not done yet.

“There’s no oxygen on the moon,” you say. You read over your choices one final time. You’re satisfied. You read it through.

“Aren’t you going to ask me how I’m going to get there?”

He wants you to play along and say something like *scooter* or *double decker bus* or *jetpack*. “How are you going to get there?” you ask instead.

His silence prompts you to gaze over at him. He’s got that frown on his face again, the one he gives you when you don’t indulge him. Sometimes you wonder if it is not a phase, if Marty will forever be stuck as twenty-one.

“You’re no fun sometimes,” he says. Marty scoots back over on the bed and grabs the television remote, the sound of a late night talk show filling the room.

\*

Marty plans his moon trip all week, when you are tired from work and his games have worn on you. “What should I wear to meet them?” Marty asks, standing in front of the closet, hands on his hips.

“Who?”

“The moon people.”

“Oh, I don’t know, wear a jacket, I guess.”

“What if there are moon babes though?”

“It’s awfully cold in outer space.”

“I bet there are moon babes.”

“You should pack a scarf.”

“What if I brought a moon babe back to Earth? Where do you think I should take her to dinner?”

“Oh har, har.”

“No really. You write the labels for the products. You tell me the place. Where can I buy her a meal with less than 15 grams of fat? I bet moon babes watch their figures.”

“Piss off.”

After your third date with Marty, go back to his apartment. Understand what “going to his apartment” means. Take a long, careful shower before, going methodically slow in shaving. Wonder what sex with him will be like. Spray perfume in the crook of your neck, in your cleavage, right below your belly button.

Think of how you like Marty more than you have ever liked another guy before. Marty, with his love of prehistoric civilizations and his bad jokes and his fanciful ideas. Imagine a future together with him, and be glad in the fact that you're imagining *something*, and that he stirs that within you.

By the following week he's on to Mars.

"The moon was nice," he says, his tone light and thoughtful. "But it wasn't exotic enough. Those moon babes were all tourists. No one settles down there. I want locals."

"Okay," you say. This is annoying. He is annoying.

"I mean, what is Mars culture like? What are their customs? This is an anthropological trip. This is a work trip. It's not for fun."

"I wouldn't imagine Mars to be much fun, anyway."

You have grown tired of these games.

"I'm going to be gone for like, a year and a half, you know. It takes an awfully long time to get there."

"Then I hope you find what you're looking for."

Marty texts you when you are halfway through your set of cereal box labels for the day. The double-beep notification on your phone echoes in your tiny office, the only noise next to your clicks on the keyboard.

You ignore it, because Marty texts a lot as he's got plenty of breaks in his day, but your phone goes off again, three times in a row and now you're compelled to know what he's sending you.

*I wont be home right after work.*

*found some moon rocks, need to study them.*

*ps you were right about mars. canceling the trip. It wouldn't have been fun.*

You tuck your phone in your purse and go back to work, frustrated only at the interruption and not at Marty's excuses for not coming home. The fact that you will be eating dinner alone while watching Frasier reruns isn't as lonely sounding as it should be. The house will be quiet and you can work on Mad Libs without interruption, without Marty telling you what words you *should* have chosen, as he's started to do.

Meet Marty's friends at a party after you've been dating one month. There are more people in that tiny house than is allowed by the fire department, but this is the night you understand who Marty is, past the blood dots on his chin and the sweaty armpits and bad jokes. Learn the nicknames Marty has for every one of his friends. Learn that he used to write his own comics when he was younger. Learn that he wants to make an anthropological discovery one day that will make a significant contribution to society.

And when Marty sneaks you into the restroom of this party and locks the door and sits on the closed toilet seat and undoes his belt, know what you are about to do. It is spontaneous and a little risky and someone is knocking on the bathroom door but you kneel and use too much

tongue and worry about your teeth. Wonder why he kisses you afterwards. But if someone did that for you in the bathroom of a party, you'd kiss them after, too.

You realize what the moon is a week later, when you are doing laundry and the hotel key card slips from a back pocket. This is where the moon rocks are that need studying. The late nights and early mornings. You feel blindsided, all of the oxygen in your body knocked from you. Marty, the walking mad lib, who has been dropping hints to you all month, his own guilty conscience setting him up to be found out, if you could have only imagined it, if you could have only played along.

You wonder now if he's with one of the eighteen-year-olds he teaches. You wonder if she looks at nutrition fact labels, if she cares about percent daily values, if she plays Marty's games, if she knows he's married. If she has an imagination. If she does dirty things, dirty things you've stopped doing. The one time he kissed you after in that bathroom at that party—the one time you have not cared.

You can only channel your anger into a Mad Lib, and pin this one on the fridge for Marty to find.

The MOON is a CHEATING place at THE MARRIOT DOWNTOWN. You meet MARTY there and MARTY says ANOTHER LIE ABOUT THE MOON and the two of you FIGHT and I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO ANYMORE.

You wait for Marty to find the Mad Lib, wait for the repercussion, and you think now, for the first time, that Marty has been afraid of your lack of imagination because he is afraid he did not marry the right person.

## TEENAGE FOLKLORE

On Frank's birthday, Colbie bakes him a cake that's one layer red velvet, one layer carrot cake, with a yellow lemon frosting. "It's all we had in my house," she explains, presenting it to him in front of his locker before first period. "But I ate some of the batter, and it doesn't taste so bad."

"What do you expect me to do with this, Colbie? Carry it around all day?"

She's still holding it out for him, and Frank takes it slowly. It's a double-decker, slightly slanted and covered in waves of yellow and threatening to spill off Colbie's mother's white china plate.

Colbie shrugs and licks the frosting on her fingers. "I guess. You better not throw it away. I made my mom drive me to school today and everything."

"This is great, Colbes, really, but why would you bring me a cake to school?"

She stares at him with an arched eyebrow. "Because it's your birthday, silly."

Frank has Symphonic Band first in the morning, so he leaves the cake on a small table in the back of the band room, then grabs his trumpet case and sits in his first-chair trumpet seat. No one really notices the cake except second-chair trumpet Derek Collins, and he says something to the band teacher, and the class plays the birthday song while Frank's face flushes.

English is next, and Mr. K. tells him the cake has to go under his desk. Frank sits cross-legged so he doesn't accidentally sink a foot into the frosting and draws music bars across the back of the grammar worksheet he's supposed to be doing. He doesn't compose anything; he just

likes the way his hand curves as he draws treble clefs on the stanza.

Frank keeps Colbie's cake on his desk in Spanish class because they're watching a movie about the history of Cinco de Mayo, and Derek from band class sits next to him and keeps swiping bits of frosting every few minutes. Frank uses his index finger to write his name in the yellow, and by now he's used to the tangy sweet smell of the icing.

Frank sits behind Kelly Taylor in his fourth period Algebra II because of their alphabetically-proximate last names. Kelly has only talked to Frank on days they get their tests back, and it goes like this:

Kelly: How did you do?

Frank: Okay, I got an 80.

Kelly: Oh. I got an 88. *Flashes bright smug smile and turns back in her seat.*

Today, December 11<sup>th</sup>, is not a test-returning day, but Kelly turns in her seat and asks, "Why are you walking around with a cake?"

Frank gazes down at the cake with *Frankito* in the frosting and says, "It's my birthday."

"Oh." She looks down at the cake, flashes her smile, and turns back around.

In the hallways, Frank lightly bumps two people with the cake, just smearing edges of the frosting, but he doesn't stop to apologize. He keeps walking because he doesn't want to be around when the person finds out they have yellow frosting on their sleeve.

Frank finally sees Colbie again at lunch, and she and second-chair trumpet Derek help Frank eat the cake. But it smells like brass instruments and most of the frosting is smudged or licked away, and there's some of Kelly Taylor's blonde hair stuck to the frosting, so they only eat a few bites of it and then smash the rest and add their own ingredients: mashed potatoes,

mustard packets, the juice from a plastic dish holding pineapples, et cetera. It looks like vomit when they're done, but Colbie thinks it's a masterpiece, and she sculpts it back into a cake form on her mother's china dish and sticks shoestring French fries on top.

"What are you doing?" Frank watches as she gathers more fries and pushes them in until they're secure and poking in odd angles.

"Candles. You didn't get a wish." She ends up six fries shy of seventeen and frowns. "Damn. Can you settle for eleven?"

"Sure, that was a good year for me." Frank grins at the cake. "It's beautiful, Colbie."

"Blow out your candles and make your wish."

Frank chuckles. "Come on, they're French fries."

"We're only eleven; we're too young to play with fire."

Frank glances at Derek sitting across the table, bouncing his leg and waiting for Frank to play along. Frank looks at Colbie next to him and she's grinning, and only Colbie could get Frank to blow at shoestring fries sticking out of a mess of red velvet carrot cake with lemon frosting and mashed potatoes and mustard and pineapple juice.

He closes his eyes and blows, and can only think that *shit*, this is when he knows he loves Colbie.

Frank gets a note in his locker at the end of the day. It's undeniably from Colbie, because anyone else would text, but Colbie still scrawls him notes on bright sheets of construction paper, or letterhead from the front office (he doesn't even bother asking her how she gets her hands on it) and slips them in his locker, usually between her art class (easily accessible materials) and

Chemistry.

It reads *Happy Birthday Frankie* on orange construction paper, but it has a stick-figure of Frank rocking out on a black electric guitar with flames shooting out the backside. Frank smiles and uses the construction paper as a bookmark for his Algebra II book.

Frank's known Colbie for twelve years, since she asked him to play Pirates and Indians during recess in first grade. Colbie was a tan little girl with a thick braid down her back, while Frank stayed the same pasty white, interrupted by the occasional freckle and topped with black hair, like his DNA played a game of dice with his genes. Frank tries to remember as much as he can about when he met Colbie when he walks home from school that day, and really, he probably fell in love when he had to save the captive Indian princess Colbie from the pirates underneath the jungle gym.

That night Colbie shows up on his doorstep in a party dress and pink lipstick, and Frank can see the outline of her bra through the thin cotton. "Hey, Colbie."

Frank has been sort of hoping he would see her tonight; she's six houses down from Frank's quiet house in a small Albuquerque subdivision, where it's only him and his mom and dad, unlike Colbie and her four sisters and their whirlwind of chaos and PMS.

"Hey. I'm here to take you out." Colbie grabs his arm.

"I didn't know we were going out for my birthday."

"Duh. If you knew, it wouldn't have been a surprise."

After twenty minutes of refusing to give details, Colbie pulls her mom's station wagon up to a small white house with a dozen cars parked across the lawn, a Jay-Z song blasting from

inside. “Where’s this?” Frank asks.

“My sister’s boyfriend’s house. You’re seventeen, so we’re going to a real live house party.” She grins at him and turns off the ignition. Frank’s not so sure of this, hesitating in his seat, and she adds, “Don’t worry, Josh already said he’ll drive us home.”

What Frank remembered from that night was this:

Shots with blonde college girls that he could never date in real life, but because it was his birthday they wrapped their arms around him in birthday hugs and held bottles of vodka or rum or tequila to his lips. Frank tried not to shudder as it slid down and somewhere in the corner he saw Colbie dancing and twirling, her tan arms stretched out and her dress swirling around her in a blur of colors.

Then he remembered Colbie sitting on his lap and his palm smoothing over her thigh, the thigh exposed from the dress. He was kissing her neck, and she tasted like perfume, something his mother wore. He closed his eyes and pressed more kisses into the curve of her neck, the fine line of hair tickling his nose, his lips sliding across her skin.

He remembered more sloppy kisses in the back of Colbie’s mother’s car—he couldn’t remember who was driving them but he was happy and in love and drunk and it was his birthday and Colbie was straddling him and sticking her tongue in his mouth, so nothing else mattered.

Frank doesn’t know what to say to Colbie the next day in school, but after waiting an extra five minutes by his locker, he realizes she isn’t showing. Frank only makes it through four bleary periods himself until he decides to go home before lunch.

The next day starts exam week, that week right before Christmas break, and Frank catches Colbie only once, in the hallway. He stares at his notes and pretends he never saw her, but she still says, “Hey Frank.”

He can't see his best friend without thinking about tequila and kisses and French fry candles, so instead he stares down at her neon green flip-flops and hell, even her toes are pretty. He kind of mumbles *hey* and hurries inside to take an exam on parabolas and linear equations that's still less painful than this moment.

Over break, when Colbie's family goes to Colorado for a week, Frank is stuck in the house with his mom all day while his dad is at the office. She makes Frank decorate the house with tacky wreaths and Santa statues from Spain, and she plays “It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas” until Frank loses his mind.

Three days before Christmas, Frank's going crazy hanging out every day with his mom. He knows Colbie gets back from Colorado today, but he still has that same feeling in his stomach when he thinks of her. He wishes he had the nerve to call her, he wishes she would call first. He wishes he never blew on those cold shoestring fries.

Colbie calls on Christmas Eve and Frank thinks it's probably only to say Merry Christmas, but instead Colbie says: “My fish died.”

“What? Your fish? Gargie? Gargie died?”

“Can you come over?”

Gargie is the Red Devil Cichlid fish that the Hunters had for three years; it lived in a 60-

gallon tank in front of the bay window in Colbie's living room. Her dad brought it home on the first day of the summer before high school, and Colbie called it a "gargantuan-sized fish," so they named it Gargie. By the end of that summer her dad had left, but the fish was still there. Almost as if the house wasn't big enough for the both of them.

Every year Mrs. Hunter puts the Christmas tree up to the left of the tank, all pretty and gleaming with red bows and silver ornaments. Mrs. Hunter's in the kitchen making cookies and humming and ignoring the dead fish; her sisters are watching a Christmas movie in the den. Frank stands in the front hallway of Colbie's house and there's a gargantuan fish dead and floating at the top of a 60-gallon tank next to a gloriously lit Christmas tree full of shiny wrapped gifts with pretty bows.

Frank says, "Shit."

Colbie nods. "My grandmother didn't feed him when we were gone. You have to help me bury him."

Colbie sits still next to Frank as he drives his mom's '93 Camry out past the Albuquerque city limits. The brightly lit houses lower in quantity and soon, they're twenty miles east down I-40 towards the Sandia Mountains. Colbie has a cardboard box on her lap, a dead gargantuan fish in a plastic bag inside. Her left hand clutches a small garden shovel she found in a rusted toolbox in her garage.

Frank merges onto Route 66, and then there's nothing but desert. The drooping sun casts a red glow on the cliffs and mesas. Out here, it could be Christmas or the Fourth of July, you'd never know the difference.

Colbie speaks for the first time, saying, "There. Stop there." She points toward a small sloping cliff to the right. Frank pulls off the side of the road and they begin walking towards the ledge. The orange dirt kicks up behind them and covers their shoes and pants. It's a warm Christmas Eve, the setting sun heating the back of their necks and arms.

As they walk, Colbie begins talking. "You know that my grandmother is a Sandia Pueblo? They used to live in this area. They believe everything has two souls: one that dies when the body dies, and one that wanders on forever."

Frank doesn't say anything back, and they keep walking.

"Do you remember those Pueblo folk-tales they made us read in school?" she asks a few moments later.

"Sure, we've read them all."

"There's this one that my grandmother used to tell me, about the Coyote and the Crow."

Frank kicks a red rock in front of him and nods, remembering the tale.

"The Coyote heard the Crows singing and dancing in a tree, and he came up to watch them. Each Crow had a large bag on its back. The coyote asked, 'Crow-friends, what are you doing?' 'Oh, we are dancing with our mothers,' said the Crows. The coyote asked to dance too, and the Crow said to go put his mother in a bag and come back to the dance."

They stop in the shadow of the low cliff, and Colbie passes the box to Frank so she can dig. The dirt is stiff, rough, but in between digs Colbie continues the story. "So the Coyote went running home; his old mother was sitting in the corner of the fireplace. The Coyote picked up a stick and struck her on the head and put her in a bag, and hurried with her back to the dance. The Coyote joined the dance, with the bag on his back, but the Crows burst out laughing, and said,

‘What did you bring in your bag?’ ‘My mother, as you said,’ replied the Coyote, showing them.”

Colbie pauses to wipe her forehead and Frank stands over her, holding the box with the dead fish, and Colbie keeps digging. “Then the Crows emptied their bags, which were filled with nothing but sand, and flew up into the tree, laughing. The Coyote saw that they had played a trick on him, and he ran home, crying. He took his mother from the bag and tried to set her up in the chimney corner, asking, ‘Why don't you sit up like before?’ But she couldn't, because she was dead. So he vowed to follow the Crows and eat them the rest of his life, seeking revenge.”

By the end, Colbie's done digging a shallow hole in the tough soil. When she stands again her knees are stained with orange dirt and clay, and she reaches for the box. Frank hands it off and Colbie sets it inside the hole and covers the grave with more orange dirt.

They stand side-by-side and stare down at the mound. Finally, Frank speaks. “Do you want to say a few words?”

Colbie's sweating, and she wipes sticky brown hair off her forehead. “The Pueblo buried their dead quickly. They purified themselves and left so they could escape the ghosts of the dead.”

“Okay,” Frank says. “Well, we can't purify ourselves out here, but let's go on the cliff to escape the ghost.”

They climb the sloping rock and ten minutes later, they're three stories up and sitting at the edge of the cliff, feet dangling and overlooking the lights of the town in the valley below.

"Thank you for taking me out here," Colbie says, watching the hues of the sky change from burnt orange to dusty pink. “I didn't want my younger sisters to wake up on Christmas morning and see a dead fish floating next to the Christmas tree. I had to bury him tonight. It's

been three years with that fish.” She pauses. “He’s really gone.”

"You can get another one, Colbie."

"I don't mean the fish."

Frank doesn't know how to answer, but he knows how he feels and he thinks that should be enough, so he listens.

“I just buried the last part of my father. Now he’s out here in the desert, with the rest of the wandering souls of our Pueblo ancestors.”

They watch the colors of the sky fade into deep blue. It gets colder.

Frank says, “Let’s get out of here.”

The desert blends into the background as the world comes alive again with red and green lights. Frank stops the car at the curb in front of Colbie’s house.

Colbie doesn't make a move to get out; instead she smiles over at him. “You’re a good friend, Frank. Thanks.”

“Yeah it’s...it’s no problem.” He can’t look at her. He stares at his hands, gripping the wheel at a perfect ten and two.

“Tell your family Merry Christmas for me.”

“Yeah, same to you.”

“I’m sorry I don’t have a gift for you.”

“No, it’s fine. We never got each other gifts, Colbie.”

“I know, but I wanted to.”

Frank’s quiet for a moment. “Go on inside,” he says. “Don’t want your mom to worry.”

He won't look up from his grip on the wheel. Frank figures out then exactly what he's going to do, and he doesn't want to risk looking at her and losing his nerve. Once he hears the slam of the door and her footsteps on the concrete, Frank drives off.

Colbie's throwing torn wrapping paper in the bin at the curb when she sees the photo, taped to her front door on Christmas morning. She lifts it off and smiles, seeing it's actually an Albuquerque postcard, showing the sunset from a cliff in the desert, with the city lights glowing below the blue and orange clouds, almost the way it was last night. She flips the card over, and it says *merry christmas, love Frank*. Simple enough, but she thinks she knows what the gesture means.

Before she can react, Colbie hears footsteps behind her. She knows it's him but doesn't turn to face him yet, she just grins and smooths her fingers over the pen ink.

He says softly, "Hey."

She turns and he's in a horrible green and red sweater with a reindeer sewn on front, something his mom made him wear, something he did only to make her happy, cause that's who Frank was. The type of guy that would carry around a cake that she made him all day, and would take Colbie to bury her fish on Christmas Eve, and would tape a postcard on her door saying *merry christmas*. She smiles at him, waving the postcard as a silent hello. They don't need to say anything.

## **APPENDIX A: WRITING LIFE**

When I started writing stories, they were romantic tales of young girls finding their Prince Charming, characters vaguely modeled after pop singers and movie stars and characters I read in other novels. I (ashamedly) read a lot of fanfiction. I had a fascination with taking another person's character and creating my own tale for them. I filled notebooks of my own projected tales. At one point there was an epic love story spanning 700 pages, roughly three spiral notebooks.

Nothing brilliant came out of those stories, except for a realization of my love of writing. These stories were also supplemented by a heavy reading of romance novels, trashy ones that a sixteen-year-old girl should not be reading, but I devoured them. I should have been spending more time on serious literature, and the books I read for school I loved and still consider my first important influences—*The Joy Luck Club*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *The Giver*, to name a few.

True, I had been writing what I considered short stories ever since twelve, but I wasn't aware of the literary short story until undergraduate school, where I was an eager creative writing major at Florida State University. The first book on writing I was ever assigned was *Making Shapely Fiction* by Jerome Stern and suddenly, all these things that I had been doing in those spiral notebook—dialogue, exposition, point of view—had names. More importantly, had *guidelines*. I learned about limited point of view versus omniscient, about character-driven stories over plot-driven, about clichés.

I heavily read anthologies while at Florida State, becoming familiar with writers that would influence me more later on like Lorrie Moore, Margaret Atwood, and Donald Barthelme. I loved the brevity in their writing, the humor, the complexities, the strangeness. I finally felt like a full-fledged writer after I wrote my first draft of "Teenage Folklore," which is the earliest story

in this collection. It centers on a high school boy, Frank, and his friend Colbie, and how his complex feelings for her turn from friendship into possibly love. Frank carries around Colbie's cake all day, a gesture that makes him aware of his deeper feelings for her, which become fully realized later when he helps her bury a fish in the desert.

There was a strange quality to this story that really excited me—birthday cakes and dead fish? I felt like I was learning something important about my writing, a quality that still holds true: I have affection for the unusual, the slightly off, the weird little things that happen to people. The obsessions people carry around with them and the secrets they hold on to, and the ways they cope with these secrets and obsessions.

In graduate school I challenged my fiction aesthetic again, feeling bored with what I identified as the “traditional short story” that I had spent so much time studying and analyzing. I was tired of the standard, dramatic arc of most workshop stories, of the same sort of realizations coming out in the end. I read Lorrie Moore's collection *Self-Help* during this time, which was my biggest influence. *Self-Help* is Moore's first published collection, and almost all of the stories in that collection came from her graduate school thesis work, so I saw it as directly comparable to the work I was doing and wanted the same things for myself. I wanted stories in second person and opening with dialogue and in list form. I wanted to challenge the ideas of the short story that I had learned about, showing that I had mastered the concept by trying to make an unconventional story still matter. Can a story have a strange point of view and still work, can it be told nonlinearly, and can it be sort of magical? I wanted to do it all. In this phase I wrote “Percent Daily Values,” which is probably the most unconventional story due to the second person point of view, and still needs focus, mainly because I wanted to make it work in the

format I presented it in; I didn't want to bend. Then I realized I was being unreasonable, and that forcing out experimentation was sort of silly. I thought, if I have a story to tell I need to tell it in the way that works best for the story, in the way that best represents the issue at hand, and not for the sake of experimentation.

I still desired to show characters through their weird hobbies and hang-ups; I just wrote more straightforwardly. I wrote "Scale Model" last spring, and everything clicked. That was the type of fiction I wanted to, and should, write. Kelsey's desire to figure out Adam was compelling to me, as was her eagerness for their relationship to turn into something that ultimately she wasn't ready for. It reminded me more of "Teenage Folklore," in figuring out characters through the trials they go through. After that I wrote "The Other Side," "Lycanthropy," and "Christmas in July," all rather quickly. These stories, in my mind, have a similar feel to them—driven by character curiosities and a return to a more straightforward narrative.

I think I knew too after "Scale Model" the type of short story collection I would have. My first year of graduate school was spent exploring varied forms and story concepts, but there wasn't a lot of unifying theme and focus, collectively. I wanted every story to be a little strange, a little different. Subject matter was ultimately my biggest concern—I wanted them to be *cool*. I wanted to throw characters in the deep end and watch them react rather than letting them stand still and be who they were on the page. In return, character complexities took the backburner. I knew how I saw them in my head, but showing their interiorities on the page was lacking. I assumed the reader could figure out the characters by their reactions to events in the story, in the ways they coped, but the subtlety of their characterization wasn't as realized as I thought it was.

Attention to characterization developed in the revision process. I understood there was more to these stories than the cool unique situations I was putting in. I am still working on giving depth and dramatic complexities to make these situations matter more. Most of these stories hover between eight to twelve pages, when they could possibly be fourteen to sixteen. I feel these stories are shorter because I am forever concerned about pacing. The way a scene lingers tends to nag at me; I prefer stories that seem quick. I am so drawn to writers that can reveal character and still control brevity, and in the larger literary sense, I would love to create fiction that worked on this level, too. But I needed to write these stories to figure out how I wanted to view myself as a writer.

The idea of the “trade secret” sort of came out of nowhere—I was doing research for another class and I came across a category of books called “trade books.” They were focused on helping certain areas of the business world get ahead. The idea of creating a fictional trade book was interesting to me. What sorts of trade secrets exist for fiction writers? What are the clues to making characters work? And what if *characters* carried personal trade secrets, their own information and set of skills that made them unique and gave them the advantage?

When I started searching for overall themes in my fiction, one of the first things my director Susan Hubbard noted is that they center on trust issues. Over the course of writing my thesis, my characters became more mysterious, more interested in figuring each other out. Kelsey’s intrigue in “Scale Model” leads her into an empty fort with a man she barely knows. Jimmy’s persisting curiosity with his neighbors in “The Other Side” leads him to drinking whiskey in their kitchen on a Sunday morning. Another theme that came alive is fantasy versus reality, which I found fascinating. Once I noticed it, I saw it everywhere. In “Running,” a boy

runs on the wind, and then desperately wishes to do it again. In “Madder Red,” Gabe fantasizes about British Soldiers, about his grandfather, about girls, about falling through the wind, as ways to cope with his reality. In “Trading Candy,” Lacey is mysteriously clouded as Tank Girl, playing a fantasy role that Greg completely falls for, ignoring the harsh reality waiting for him inside the house. In “Lucidity,” Beth finds herself caught between living in reality and in the fantasy world of her lucid dreams. These characters use their fantasies as an escape from some element in their lives they can’t quite face just yet.

In addition to these things, I’ve always really admired and like to write funny stories. I read a lot of Steve Martin, Ron Carlson, and Donald Barthelme during mostly the last year of graduate school. I had first read “Keith” by Ron Carlson in undergraduate school and still regard it as one of the best examples of really funny yet poignant fiction. When I reread the story in graduate school, it inspired “Lycanthropy,” where two high schoolers come together and rely on one another through a shared loneliness, but still see the world in a funny way. I see elements of humor in almost every story in this collection, with “The Murder of Misty Delacour” being the most obviously comical.

I’m also drawn to fiction featuring young adult protagonists, which a few of the stories in this collection contain. Works like *The Giver* and *The Hunger Games*, where young adults live in alternate universe but are still very real and universally relatable, inspire my own magical realism tendencies, especially in the story “Running.”

The same feelings I’ve always had for writing, the same thrill of discovering a new character and writing about something unusual, have never failed me. It is almost that same teenager scrawling in spiral notebooks. Characters still search for love, still get nervous, still

chase after their desires. The desire and drive will continue even after graduate school and the completion of this thesis. From here I am only more excited about fiction, more ready for the next thing, and more confident in my abilities as a person who likes to tell stories.

## **APPENDIX B: READING LIST**

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