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2013

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DROPS OF LIGHT IN THE DARK

by

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B.A. Rollins College, 2009

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term
2013

Major Professor: Darlin' Neal

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ABSTRACT

The short stories in this collection focus on young individuals', especially women's, experience and development as they navigate personal relationships and search for a place in the world. Both longer stories and flash fiction are included, and stories are told in past and present tense, and from first, second, and third person point of view. However, the narration of all of these stories stays close to the characters' points of view, inhabiting their visceral experience. These stories take place in a variety of settings, including a beachside motel, college campuses, bars, and offices. All of these characters, though, struggle with questions of identity, intimacy, and purpose. These conflicts are revealed through the characters' interactions with others and reactions to their environments, especially focusing on the small details of ordinary events and settings. By depicting these characters' encounters with the everyday, their sense of self and experiences are shown, and thus the particularities of women's relationships with their selves, their bodies, and their relationships are represented. In addition to this collection of short stories, the Writing Life Essay in this thesis discusses my development as a writer, my aims, and the writers, such as Dylan Landis, Joy Williams, and Mary Gaitskill, who have influenced my work. A Reading List of influential works, including fiction, non-fiction, and poetry, follows.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank the University of Central Florida MFA faculty and students for reading my work, providing feedback, and helping me grow as a writer and complete my thesis, especially my thesis adviser, Darlin' Neal. I also thank my family for their support.

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DROPS OF LIGHT IN THE DARK

Green Fog

Danielle twisted the key, listened to the click of her dorm room's door locking, and strode down the fluorescent-lit hallway, her flip-flops slapping against the linoleum floor. She turned the corner and stopped in front of Olivia's room. She knocked on the door, rapping her knuckles under the pink nametag with the name "Olivia" in silver glitter that the RA had put up.

"Come in!" Olivia's sing-song voice called.

Danielle gently opened the door. Olivia's peach-colored comforter lay crumpled on the floor next to where she crouched in front of a mirror. She was holding a chunk of her long golden brown hair in front of her face, pulling a flat iron over it, her mouth partly open and eyebrows knit together as she stared at the mirror. Danielle sat on the edge of her bed. Olivia's roommate spent most of her time in her boyfriend's dorm and her side of the room was empty.

Olivia's laptop was open on the floor, playing Simon and Garfunkel songs. Danielle tapped her foot on the floor and said to Olivia's reflection, "So when do you want to head to the party?"

Olivia slid the flat iron down over the end of her hair. She glanced at the clock. "It's still only ten. I guess in a little bit, after we get ready." She turned and surveyed Danielle. "You look so cute. You got that top when we went shopping, right?"

Danielle blushed and looked down at her lap. "Oh, thanks. Yep, I did." She'd been saving the top, a flowery tunic, for the party tonight. Andrew, a friend of Olivia's, was holding a get-together at his place, a rental house close to campus. It was Danielle's first time hanging out with Olivia's larger circle of friends and she wanted to make a good impression.

Danielle ran her hands through her hair, tapping her foot. Olivia was still slowly running the flat iron over her hair. “Change the music if you want,” she said.

“That’ll give me something to do,” Danielle said. She slid down to the floor. She scrolled through Olivia’s music and, clicking some rap songs, hit play. “To get us in the mood.”

Olivia grinned and bounced her shoulders, exaggerating the movements. “Fuck yeah. Gonna get *wasted* tonight.” They laughed.

A sharp tapping came from Olivia’s door. Danielle frowned. Olivia hadn’t said anyone else was coming over. But she said, “It must be Cameron,” and called out, “Come in!”

Cameron swung the door open. He glanced down at Danielle. He blinked, raised his eyebrows, and attempted a tight smile. Danielle folded her arms over her chest and tried to smile back. He turned to Olivia.

Olivia set down the flat iron and spun around, leaning forward on her knees. “Cam! You ready for tonight?”

He sat on the floor and took the backpack off his shoulders. “Yep. And I brought some stuff to get us started.” He pulled a bottle of Captain Morgan and shot glasses bearing the university’s logo from the bag.

“Thank you!” Olivia said. She brushed her hand through his short dark hair. “I like your haircut, by the way.” Cameron blushed and grinned.

After he’d poured rum for himself and Olivia, he turned to Danielle. “You want some, Danielle?” She nodded.

Cameron and Olivia clinked their glasses together and leaned their heads back, quickly draining their shots. Danielle took a deep breath and then shut her eyes and drank from her shot glass, trying not to scrunch her face when she finished.

Cameron turned to the laptop, still playing the rap songs, and frowned. “What’s with this music? I didn’t think you were into this, Olivia.”

Olivia had returned to the mirror and the flat iron. She shrugged. “Danielle picked it. To get us in the mood.”

Cameron tossed Danielle a blank look. “Oh.”

Danielle glanced at the clock, and then at Olivia’s window, its blinds half-open. Faint whoops and hollers floated up from the sidewalk below, and she heard a car engine rev up, its bass deeply booming. The dorm building seemed to shudder for a moment from the noise.

Olivia set the flat iron down and flipped her long hair over her shoulders. “Done.” She turned to Danielle. “Do you want to use the straightening iron, Danielle? You can use it to smooth down the front of your hair, to show your face more.”

Danielle touched the wavy strands in front of her ears. “Are you sure?”

Olivia nodded and held the iron out to her. “Go ahead.” Danielle scooted over in front of the mirror. As she ran the iron over her hair, she watched Olivia and Cameron in the mirror’s reflection. They sat together in front of the laptop, Cameron leaning toward Olivia as she scrolled through her music. He inched his face closer to hers and Danielle saw Olivia slowly move away from him. Olivia said to Danielle, “As soon as you’re ready, we can go to Andrew’s.” She grinned. “After we take more shots.”

In the mirror, Danielle could see that Cameron had leaned back, resting his weight on his hands, his eyes weary. Danielle answered, “Sounds good.” She saw Cameron frown.

*

Danielle and Olivia strode up the walkway to Andrew’s house, Cameron trailing behind. They had taken a few more shots before leaving and Danielle and Olivia had skipped through

campus, over brick sidewalks, past illuminated dorms and darkened classroom buildings, on their way to the party. They had passed a group of frat boys rallying outside their house, and had laughed and rolled their eyes when one of the boys called in a slurred voice, “Hey girls, you want to try the White Lady?” Moving on, they giggled and shrieked as they splashed their feet in the cold water of the fountain at the center of campus.

A pleasant buzz filled Danielle as she approached Andrew’s front door. A weaving rhythm beat inside her, guiding her footsteps. She hoped the friends would put on some music she could dance to, would offer some drinks so that she could loosen up more. She wondered if there would be any cute guys, imagined meeting one, his hand slowly touching hers.

When Andrew opened the door, Olivia cried out a greeting, throwing her arms around his shoulders, and then gestured at Danielle and introduced her. Andrew, who wore a T-shirt and cargo shorts like Cameron, nodded at Danielle and waved them inside.

Olivia started talking to Andrew about a class they had together. Danielle sat down in one of the chairs at the edge of the living room and took a bottle of beer from the cluttered coffee table. A guy lounging on a nearby couch strummed a guitar. Danielle reached for a bottle opener, tugged the cap off the beer, and then lifted it to her lips and took a long drink. She squeezed the cold bottle between her thighs, gripping its neck. Almost everyone at the party was unfamiliar. Danielle recognized a guy and girl from her psychology class, Derrick and Val, and raised a hand and smiled at them. But she barely spoke to them in class and remained silent as they talked to another girl. Olivia, Andrew, and Cameron had gone into the kitchen and Danielle could hear her voice echoing off the walls. The guy with the guitar and the others, a few guys and girls, seemed absorbed in a long-running conversation. Danielle drank more beer and leaned

forward, trying to focus on what the guitar strummer was saying. His earnest voice droned on. She was facing the front door. It loomed at her. She wondered if anyone else was coming.

When Danielle was almost finished with the beer, Olivia bounced to the chair next to her and draped herself over it. She patted Danielle's back and grinned. "Hey, how ya doin'?" Danielle shrugged.

A few more people did come. Everyone sat around the living room, drinking, listening to the guy pluck at his guitar, gossiping about which professors were hardest and what had gone on at the latest parties. Someone turned on the TV and flipped through the channels until they reached an action movie. Danielle, sipping another beer, watched Nicolas Cage gravely stare at a woman until he clutched her in his arms and shoved her away from a sudden explosion. The guys barked with laughter.

"You want some liquor?" Someone held out a large bottle, most of its amber liquid already gone, to Danielle. She nodded and took it. The smell of spiced rum flooded over her as she poured it into a plastic cup. She added some Coke. A queasy feeling rose in her stomach, its contents sloshing around.

She took a long sip of the syrupy drink, wrinkling her nose as she finished. Danielle looked around for Olivia. She was sitting in Andrew's lap, her arms around his neck, throwing back her head to laugh. Cameron stood nearby, his arms folded, a pained smile creasing his face. Danielle sighed, and then, she felt something rising in her throat. She got up to run to the bathroom.

A guy stood in the hallway, blocking her way. He grabbed her arm. "Hey, you okay?" He leaned toward her. His dark eyes were blank and unfocused. "I can take you outside if you want, just the two of us."

Danielle shoved his arm away and slid past him to the bathroom, slamming the door and leaning over the toilet just in time.

*

Something lumpy and hard scratched against Danielle's back, just above her hips. Her neck seemed to be bent at an odd angle. She opened her eyes, rubbing a hand over them and back through her hair. She lay on a couch in a dark, unfamiliar room. The couch was pushed under a window with blinds partly drawn, the orange light from the streetlamps outside seeping around the edges. She turned her neck, her eyes adjusting to the dark. An old TV was shoved in the corner and cardboard boxes and piles of paper cluttered the rest of the room. She didn't recognize any of it.

Danielle realized her head was throbbing — pounding. Sharp currents of pain pressed against the base of her skull. She leaned forward and reached under her back and pulled out some kind of electronic equipment. She threw it on the floor. She leaned back and adjusted the pillow under her neck. Her stomach churned and ached. She blinked and stared at the window above the couch. Now she recalled the party, sitting in the living room, the guy strumming his guitar, Olivia laughing. Her cheeks grew hot and her stomach roiled as she remembered her rush to the bathroom. She could still taste the vomit, sour and stale, in her mouth.

Danielle relaxed her head against the pillow and closed her eyes. She just wanted to rest. She wondered where Olivia was. Since she'd woken, she hadn't noticed much sound from the rest of the house. Now, straining to listen, she thought she could hear murmurs coming from past the closed door, maybe the hum of the TV. Then, she heard a louder noise, the ringing of laughter, and recognized Olivia's high-pitched laugh rising above it all. Danielle sighed. She

hoped Olivia would want to go back to the dorm soon. She wondered how much Olivia had had to drink, if she would be okay to walk back.

Footsteps pounded down the hallway and there was a loud thud, as if someone had slammed into a wall, and a roar of laughter. Danielle turned and shoved her face into the pillow, squeezing her eyes shut. As she took a deep breath, she smelled dry vomit in her nostrils.

The doorknob rattled. Danielle froze. Someone threw the door open and bright light flooded the room. The person let out an excited cry. “Oh! Someone’s in here.”

A guy’s voice said, “There is? Anyone know who it is?”

Danielle bit her lip. There was a chaos of overlapping voices. Someone said, “Hey, Olivia, isn’t that your friend?”

“Oh yeah!” The guy laughed. “The one who puked.”

Please let Olivia be there, Danielle thought, so she can shut them up. She heard Olivia’s high-pitched voice. “Yeah, that’s Danielle.” Someone said something. “No,” Olivia said. “Just leave her there.” She laughed. “Let’s go, guys. No one will miss her.”

The other person said something in a surprised tone, their words slurred. “Whatever,” Olivia said, her voice loud and sing-song. “She just likes to tag along.” She laughed. “Leave her there.”

There was another roll of voices and laughter, and then the door slammed shut, darkness returning to the room. The voices faded away. Danielle didn’t move. Her skin seemed covered in ice and the pounding in her head had become numb. Olivia’s words, her loud, high-pitched voice, remained in the dark room, traces in the air. Danielle’s stomach churned. She rolled over and lay facedown on the pillow, squeezing her eyes shut. She wanted to pass out again. She wished she hadn’t woken up. She heard the house’s front door slam shut, the faint sound of

people stepping outside. She imagined Olivia there, in the lead, the group grinning and laughing as they bounded through campus. Danielle gripped the pillow. Hot tears filled her eyes. Quickly wiping them away, she pushed her face against the couch, trying to will herself to fall back asleep.

But she was fully awake. The pounding in her head had receded, replaced by the sound of Olivia's voice, guesses as to what she could be saying now, away from Danielle. Danielle rolled over onto her back and took a deep breath. She would leave soon. She would walk back to her dorm as quickly as she could and get in her bed and try to forget any of this happened.

She closed her eyes, waiting for her stomach to settle down. Then, a bar of light cut across the floor as the door creaked open. Danielle's breath caught in her throat. She heard soft footsteps and then the room was silent, the bar of light motionless. She opened her eyes and slowly turned her head toward the door. A guy was standing just inside the room, his figure dark against the light from the hallway. She thought of the guy who'd stood in her way when she'd rushed to the bathroom, of his blank eyes — was this the same one? She wasn't sure. On the couch, her body suddenly felt too exposed: her breasts pointing upwards, her hips a welcoming cup. She took in shallow breaths and lay still, afraid that any small movement would spark something.

Danielle couldn't see the guy's face. After a few moments, he turned away. He put his arm on the doorjamb and leaned against it, as if resting, and then slipped away, pulling the door shut behind him.

Danielle tilted her head back and breathed deeply. She needed to get out of the house. She waited about ten minutes and then, she stood up, blinking and rubbing her eyes as she tried

to hold her head steady, and walked as quietly as she could out of the room. The living room was empty, the TV still blaring, as she passed through on her way to the front door.

As she went in the direction of the dorm, she thought of her and Olivia's laughter and skipping on their way to the party. Blood rushed to her face. How could she be so stupid? The high-pitched sounds of Olivia's voice and laughter seemed to follow her, a thread weaving itself through her brain.

Danielle approached the street that separated the neighborhood from campus. The house on the corner had a "For Rent" sign in its front yard and was dark and shadowy, bordered by overgrown bushes. As she started to cross the street, she heard a high, soft cry float through the dark air behind her. She turned, biting her lip. Something near the house, between the bushes, seemed to glint as if catching and reflecting the yellow light from the streetlamps. Danielle pushed her hand in her pocket and touched the plastic cover of her cell phone. She took a few steps toward the house.

A guy and a girl stood close to the side of the house, between some bushes. After a moment, Danielle recognized the girl's petite frame and long hair. It was Olivia, with Andrew. He sipped from a long glass bottle — some kind of liquor — and handed it to Olivia. She laughed and drank some. He stepped closer to her, took the bottle and placed it on the ground, and then grabbed her hands, bending his head down toward her. Olivia stood still, not moving. Andrew said something and, pulling her arms around his waist, slowly turned her so her back was against the wall of the house. He moved closer to her, and Olivia tilted her head back, her eyes closed and mouth open in a lazy smile.

Danielle looked at that smile and thought of what Olivia had said earlier. She balled her hands in fists, her cheeks burning, and turned away from the dark house. As she crossed the street to return to campus, she thought she heard Olivia's faint laugh behind her.

*

After the party, Danielle made no effort to contact Olivia. Olivia made no communication either. They'd met a few months earlier in history class. Danielle had usually gone over to Olivia's dorm a couple of times a week to study together. Their studying often turned into TV marathons or hushed gossip sessions or late-night trips to the nearby burger joint.

Now, Danielle stayed in her own dorm room or went to the library to study, plugging headphones into her ears as she opened a textbook. If she saw Olivia around the dorm or at the campus cafeteria, she quickly averted her eyes. During psychology class, Val mentioned to Danielle that she'd seen her at the party; that she would've talked with her but she'd left early. Danielle ate lunch with Val and some others a few times.

Danielle lived in a single. Sometimes, when she sat alone in her dorm room, she could hear Olivia's voice accompanying footsteps down the hallway, its sound echoing off the linoleum floor and thin walls. She thought of all the times she'd walked down that hallway to Olivia's room. As Olivia's voice disappeared beyond the walls, Danielle recalled their late night talks; how Danielle had gripped Olivia's extra pillow as she told her about the depression that filled her with bleak exhaustion and made her want to stay in bed all day, the spiky anxiety that overwhelmed her when surrounded by others; the way Olivia had stared at the floor as she spoke about her taciturn father who spent all his time at work, the times she'd found her mom passed out in the bathroom from heavy drinking. Soft music jangled as they talked and Olivia would put a pink and purple sheet over her tall floor lamp and the room would glow warmly. Danielle

would creep back to her room in the middle of the night, drowsy after watching a movie, or fall asleep on Olivia's floor and go to breakfast with her in the morning.

*

One evening, Danielle walked back to the dorm from the library. A brick courtyard with old benches was in front of the dorm. As Danielle approached the building, she saw Olivia sitting on a bench, her head down. Danielle started to turn her face away and quicken her steps. But she stopped, noticing how tangled Olivia's hair was, its part twisted and the long strands frizzy clumps shoved behind her ears. In the blue-gray dusk, a light post dully illuminated her face. There were dark streaks of mascara under her eyes.

Danielle slowly approached her. "Hey," she said. Olivia lifted her gaze and blinked, a flicker of surprise in her eyes. "You okay?" Danielle asked.

Olivia started to nod, then stopped. She shrugged. "Cameron and I got in a fight."

"You did?"

"Yeah. He called me a whore." Olivia gave a laugh that sounded more like a scoff. "He said that I get drunk and hook up with random guys too much. I said it's none of his fucking business." She brushed a hand through her hair. Her eyes were red.

"I've always thought he was an asshole," Danielle said.

Olivia laughed, the sound bitter, and shook her head. "I guess he is. I seem to hang out with those types too much." She frowned and glanced up at Danielle, then quickly turned her head away. "Then again, I can't talk. I fit in with them."

Danielle said nothing. Olivia's phone buzzed and lit up on the bench next to her. She picked it up and looked at the name of the caller and then set the phone down. The buzzing stopped. Olivia twirled a strand of hair around her fingers and stared at her other hand curled in

her lap. Her lips were crumpled. Danielle saw that her eyes had the glassy, remote look that Olivia got when she drank too much.

Danielle said, “Hey, do you want to come up to my room and watch TV?”

The tightness of Olivia’s mouth slackened. The trace of a smile surfaced there. “Sure,” she said.

*

The rich smell of cigar smoke wafted from the cabin’s porch into the living room. Danielle heard Olivia let out a loud, rapid laugh. The smoke seemed to carry the sound as it floated toward Danielle reclining on the couch. The living room was dark, illuminated on one side by the lights from the kitchen, making the wood-paneled walls an orange-brown color. Someone had lit incense. Tendrils of smoke curled through the air, patchouli mingling with the cigar smoke.

Olivia laughed again and Cameron and the others started to laugh too. Danielle sighed and cupped her hands around the soft ribs of the orange cat perched on her lap, its fur cottony between her fingers. She sat up, and despite trying to brace the cat, he darted to the floor. She reached out to the coffee table for her mug filled with whiskey and took a sip, enjoying the warmth of the liquor as it slid to her head and stomach and limbs.

She set down the mug and extended a hand toward the cat, who had settled next to the coffee table. He let her rest her hand on his head for a moment, but then, his green eyes wary, cast her a long glance before sidling away. Danielle leaned back against the couch and slid her hands through her hair. She hadn’t showered in a couple days and her hair felt greasy and limp between her fingers. Olivia had invited Danielle and some others to her family’s lakeside cabin for a long weekend celebrating the end of the semester. They’d spent the last few days hiking,

swimming, staying up late drinking around a bonfire. When Olivia had invited her, Danielle could see in her averted glance and rapid words that the invite was supposed to make up for things. But when Olivia said that she'd invited Cameron too, that she had "worked things out" with him, Danielle internally shook her head.

Danielle could smell the stale sweat that lingered on her skin, the warm, earthy smell from her armpits. She pinched her T-shirt in the front and fanned it out. She looked at the sliding door, half open, that led to the patio. An electrical lantern's yellow-white slab of light glowed from the table's center, and through the sliding door's sheer curtains, Danielle saw shadows bobbing back and forth around the light, heads nodding and laughing and talking. Val and Derrick from her psychology class had come along. Danielle was glad that some people she knew besides Olivia and Cameron were sitting around that table. She rubbed her hands over her knees and then sat up straighter. The couch was coarse against her bare skin. She picked up the mug, and taking a sip of whiskey, stood and walked to the sliding door.

The door groaned as Danielle slid it open. Olivia and Cameron and the others glanced up at the sound. They sat around the table holding their cigars.

Olivia grinned. "Danielle! You finally made it out here! I was starting to think you and the cat were bonding too much." She laughed and Cameron and a few others did too. Olivia leaned back in her seat and took a puff from the cigar. The thick brown cigar with its smoldering ash looked ridiculous between her fingers. Olivia blew out the smoke with an air of satisfaction and grinned at Cameron, who raised his eyebrows and took a lazy puff from his own cigar.

Danielle muttered something about how she'd needed to rest. Olivia smiled again. "I hope you're rested up enough. We're going to be hanging out here for a while." She waved an arm at an empty chair. "Come on, sit."

Danielle pulled the chair up to the table, setting her mug down. Olivia raised her eyebrows, her eyes wide and cheeks pink. She gave Danielle a tentative grin. Danielle willed the corners of her mouth up, hoping she was returning a nice enough smile.

Olivia flipped her hair over her shoulder and pulled up one of her legs to hug a knee to her chest. She rested her chin on her knee and glanced at Cameron. He gave a small cough and said, "Would you like a cigar, Danielle?"

She shook her head. Thick smoke filled the screened-in patio, mosquitoes buzzing at the edges. "No thanks. I'm good."

"Come on, Danielle, are you sure? They have a nice flavor," Olivia said. She took another puff, exaggerating her movements this time. "And smoking them makes you look pretty badass, too." Cameron shook his head and grinned. Olivia glanced at him. "Well, it makes *most* of us look cool, anyway." They laughed.

Danielle shook her head, but felt a smile creeping over her face. "I'll take your word for it," she said, taking another sip of whiskey.

Val said, "*I* don't need a cigar to look cool. I've taken care of that myself without having that gross shit in my mouth."

Olivia laughed and made a mock scoffing noise. Danielle flashed a smile at Val.

A guy at the other end of the table was telling a loud, animated story about a party he'd gone to a few weeks earlier. As his voice grew louder and the others laughed, Cameron and Olivia turned their attention to him. Danielle sat back, trying to look interested as he recounted how many shots he took, who had been there. Derrick rolled his eyes, saying he was sick of this story. When the guy started talking about "hot drunk chicks," Danielle drank more and turned her gaze to the patio's screen.

The yellow light from the lantern blocked her view of the outside, but she knew the lake was just past that screen, its shimmering water melting into the dark sky. The wet chill of the outside air had seeped through the screen and it brushed against Danielle's bare shoulders. Looking at the darkness in the patio's corners, she imagined the fog that must be rolling over the lake, silver-green in the light from the cabin and the moon.

The guy's story had reached some kind of peak. "And I can't believe what this girl did, she was so far gone..." His voice bounced up and down with excitement. Danielle tuned him out. She glanced at Olivia, who took one more puff from her cigar and then leaned forward to crush its remains in the ashtray.

As the guy continued, Danielle caught Olivia's eye. Olivia bit her lip and looked down at the table. Danielle sighed. The guy and Cameron and the others had started laughing and Olivia joined in. Danielle lifted the mug to her mouth and swallowed the last of the whiskey and then set it down and tried to smile.

*

Everyone had finished their cigars. Gray ash filled the tray and thick smoke lingered in the corners of the patio. Olivia said, "We should go swimming in the lake!"

Danielle frowned. "Now? It's so dark out. Who knows what's creeping around in that water at night."

"It'll be fun." She laughed. "Live a little, Danielle."

Danielle thought of the green fog coating the lake, the silver light of the moon, the soft water. She nodded. "Okay. Let's do this."

Olivia squealed. She turned to Cameron. "You coming?"

He shook his head. "No. Too cold." His mouth was a straight line.

Olivia rolled her eyes. “You’re such a party pooper. I don’t know why I invited you.” He raised his eyebrows but said nothing. Danielle stared at the patio’s wooden frame. Olivia turned to the others. “Anyone else?”

“Hell yeah, let’s get in that water,” Derrick said. Val and another girl said they would come along too.

The screen door squeaked and made a banging sound as they went outside. The cool night air was soft against Danielle’s bare arms and legs. She laughed as they skipped to the lake, and then shrieked when the cold water hit her skin. After a moment, her body became adjusted to the temperature.

Olivia, ahead of Danielle, looked back at her and smiled, her wide eyes shining in the moonlight. A breeze ruffled the pine branches bordering the lake and Olivia’s long hair drifted back over her shoulders.

A loud yelp came behind them — it was Val, who had just entered the cold water. “Fuck, Olivia, are you trying to freeze us?” She slapped her hand on the water and its smooth surface broke into flying spray. Drops of water landed on the other girl and she cried out and splashed back at Val.

Olivia had waded ahead. She called back to them, her words lost in the thick air. Danielle watched Olivia gliding through the water and wondered if she should catch up with her. Then, she felt a drizzle of water on her arm. She turned back, away from Olivia, and joined the others in splashing. They formed a loose circle of spraying and rippling. Danielle laughed as Derrick raised his palm to gently splash drops against her chest. The water streaming through the air collided with the cover of fog.

Olivia had started to wade back to them, laughing and saying she needed to join in. As she approached, Danielle pushed her hand deep into the water and then lifted it to splash Olivia. As the water struck her, Olivia squeezed her eyes shut and gasped. Danielle grinned. Olivia opened her eyes and stared at Danielle, her cheeks dripping and mouth still. She slowly glided her hand over the water and sprinkled it at Danielle.

They grew tired of splashing. The ripples faded from the water's surface until it became still and glassy. Danielle watched Olivia wade out, away from the shore again. The greenish forms of trees bordered the lake. Through the dense fog it was hard to discern the lake's edges. Danielle watched Olivia's long hair cut through the water. The others were closer to the shore. Their laughter rang out. Danielle turned back and waded through the water toward them, skimming a palm over the water's surface, its wake a shallow path following her.

Windows

Callie is sitting on her bedroom floor knitting a scarf. Dust floats above her in the light coming through the gauzy curtains. Her cat stares at her, his eyes stony yellow. Callie hears a car outside and snaps her head up. The car, its engine rumbling deeply, pulls into her driveway. She sets down the scarf of maroon yarn, the knitting needles clanking as she crosses them over the stitches.

Looking out the window, she sees Ray step out of the sleek black car. He shuts the door with a loud slam that rings across the front yard. He stands still, looking at the house, and pulls a drag from his cigarette. Through the translucent curtains, the green and pink tangles of an azalea bush block Callie's view of Ray. He is a dark figure slicing through the greenery and she wonders what he's thinking as he stands there in the driveway.

The cat rises and walks toward Callie, his tail flickering. She glances at him, at his smoky gray fur ruffling in the air conditioning, and when she looks back at the window, Ray's figure is gone. Her heart thuds for a moment and then the doorbell rings, its chiming echoing down the hallway. The cat stares at her. She picks up a knitting needle, listening. The doorbell rings again.

Callie stands. She strides down the narrow hallway. When she reaches the front door, she can see the silhouette of Ray's figure through the white curtains that cover the door's window. The door's knob sticks when she opens or locks it and she thinks of her note to herself to get a new front door, one with a peephole so that no one outside can look in. She wishes now that she'd already replaced it. Ray shuffles back and forth and it's clear that he can see her through the window, is waiting for her to open the door.

Callie turns the knob, putting strength into her wrist as she twists it. The door opens with a jolt and Ray is standing in front of her. He looks different but also the same. He wears his usual jeans and boots and worn T-shirt. His thick hair is a bit longer. He's started to grow a beard. Ray takes one last drag of his cigarette and then drops the burnt remains down beside the old welcome mat in front of the door.

His brown eyes catch hers. Callie holds them for a moment and then flicks her gaze off to the side. "What are you doing here?" she says.

"Am I not welcome?" He folds his arms and leans back. There's a hint of teasing in his voice.

She sighs. "You know that's not what I mean." She pauses, waits for him to say something. When he remains silent, Callie says, "If you're here, it must be for something important."

"It is important," Ray says. He takes a step toward the door. "Larry is back."

When Callie hears the name, she can almost smell the cheap beer and Old Spice and for a moment she feels like a thirteen-year-old burrowed under her purple comforter again. Something in her stomach drops. She swallows and says, "What? I thought he was living up north. With his new family."

"Yeah, well..." Ray says. He runs a hand through his hair, sweeping it back from his face. He flips his head forward and the hair falls over his forehead again and he sighs. "Fuck, maybe I should come in. So I can explain."

She holds his eyes for a moment and then opens the door wider. She takes a few steps back, giving Ray a wide berth, but as he passes she can feel the pulsing rhythm of his body. She looks at his slender arms and large hands and then turns away and leads him to the living room.

The cat has perched on a gray and yellow knit blanket draped over the couch. She sits beside him and Ray settles in the loveseat. He spreads his legs out, his knees sticking up, and after rubbing his hands across his jeans, folds them into his lap. He nods at Callie's hands.

"That a weapon or something?"

Callie frowns and looks at her fingers. She's still gripping the long silver knitting needle. She smiles and shakes her head. "I guess it could be used for that purpose." She twirls it around and sets it down on the coffee table. "But no, it's a knitting needle. It's become a hobby of mine." She gestures at the blanket.

Ray's face has cracked into a smile, his full lips twisting up to reveal his straight white teeth. Callie has to look away after a moment. He says, "A new habit to replace old ones."

"It's something I can do with my hands."

Ray looks around the living room, at the small flower vases and piles of books on the coffee table, and then at the cat, which is regarding him with a disinterested stare. Ray nods and squeezes his hands together. "Well, it looks like you've made a good home for yourself." Callie nods. After a pause, Ray sighs. "So I guess I should tell you about this shit with Larry."

"Yes," Callie says. Her back stiffens. She glances at the kitchen. "Oh. Do you want a drink or something?"

Ray shakes his head. Callie leans back. She folds her arms across her chest and looks at Ray, locking his brown eyes with her own. "So tell me, then," she says. She squeezes her hands into balls and presses her crossed legs into the cushions of the couch.

Ray looks down at the carpet. "Last week, Larry called and told me he was in town. Of course, I basically wanted to tell him to fuck off, but I just said something about being too busy. But you know how he is. I don't know how he found out where I live, but he showed up at my

door a couple nights later. He was already shit-faced. So he barges into my place and says that he needs to talk, that he's my father..." Ray makes a derisive snort. "And so I owe him or some bullshit. He says he's not sure how long he's going to be in town, but Susan or whatever the fuck her name is kicked him out and so he's trying to figure shit out." Ray stretches his arms and leans back, looking at the ceiling.

Callie shakes her head. "I thought we were rid of him for good." She lets out a brittle laugh. "Actually, it makes sense. I can't imagine any woman, any family, putting up with him for long. But why'd he have to come here?"

"I know," Ray says. "I don't want to deal with that bastard again." He bites his lip and looks at Callie. His eyes are still and she can't read his expression.

"What is it?" Callie says. "And where's he staying?"

Ray rubs his hands together. "I finally managed to get rid of him. He's staying at some motel, but he's calling me every day, asking for money." He pauses. "He asked about you." Callie's stomach twists. She looks at the cat, at the rippling texture of his fur. Ray continues, "He asked me what you were up to. Said he might want to pay *his stepdaughter* a visit." He rolls his eyes.

Callie takes a long, steady breath. Ray says quickly, "Don't worry, though. I told him we don't keep in touch anymore."

Callie sighs. "Thanks for not telling him anything. You should be careful."

Ray scoffs. "I'm not afraid of him." Callie leans back against the couch, blinking rapidly and biting her lip. Ray coughs. "You shouldn't be worried, Cal. I came to tell you just in case."

Callie inhales deeply and places a hand on the cat, spreading her fingers out over his soft fur. “Thanks. It’s better than being surprised, I guess.” She frowns at a pile of books on the coffee table. She’d stacked them evenly, thin books on top of thick ones, their spines a straight line of descent. She imagines knocking over that pile, the books tumbling over each other on to the floor, pages flapping. She stares at the books and tries not to think about the lamp’s orange circle of light that she would leave on when she lived with Larry. Her body coils with that urge to both escape and freeze when she thinks of that orange circle of light.

“It’ll be okay, Cal,” Ray says. “I’m just warning you. I’ll let you know if I hear from him again.” She blinks and turns away from the books. She nods.

They sit in silence for a moment, Ray rubbing his hands together and nodding, Callie with her arms folded across her chest. He coughs and rises and says he should get going. She walks with him to the door.

“Thanks, Ray,” Callie says. “Really.” She pauses. “I didn’t ask — how are things going for you?”

He shrugs. “Pretty well. I got a promotion at the restaurant. Can’t complain. You? How’s the library? Seeing anyone?”

“I like working at the library. It’s calm. And no, I’m not seeing anyone right now.”

“Oh.” Ray frowns.

She rolls her eyes. “It’s fine.”

“Okay. You have my number.” Callie nods. Ray extends an arm to pat her on the shoulder, and then, as if on impulse, extends his other arm to wrap her in a hug. Callie pats his waist with her hands but she stiffens and keeps her breasts from touching his body. He rubs her shoulders and then turns to the door.

After they say goodbye and Ray leaves, Callie locking the door behind him, she stands in the foyer and watches his retreating figure and listens to his engine rumbling as he drives away. The noise of the engine disappears. She stares at the blank white space of the door's window. She returns to her bedroom to continue knitting.

Callie has trouble falling asleep that night. She grips her pillow and turns away from the wall. She hugs her sheets to her body and then tosses them off, too cold and then too hot. The next morning, she gulps down coffee, savoring the hot liquid against her throat, as she gets ready for work. Callie works in a large public library. She answers patrons' questions and organizes book returns, pushes a cart of books through the tall stacks and shelves them. She's grateful for the distraction of work. For a few days she goes to bed tired, the softness of the pillow calling her, and sleeps well.

One afternoon Callie pushes a cart of books into the elevator and takes it up to the third floor. The third floor is silent and empty. The stacks extend in endless parallel rows on either side. Circular stained glass windows with art deco designs adorn both ends of the long room. The cart creaks as Callie pushes it down the central aisle. The third floor has a murky presence to it. Callie thinks of the rumors that it's haunted and shakes her head. She turns down a row to begin shelving the books. She works quickly, making sure not to linger after she finds a book's spot. She doesn't believe in ghost stories, but the yawning ceiling of the third floor chimes with silence, stares at her with its emptiness.

Callie finishes shelving the books and strides down the aisle to the elevator. Her footsteps are loud. Late afternoon sunlight is slanting through the stained glass window ahead of her. Long beams of light stretch across the floor and illuminate floating dust. The colors in the window are orange and crimson red. The floor almost looks like it's on fire. Callie stares at the

orange patterns of light on the floor, her chest aching. She looks up. The tall rows of books stretch before her to the end of the long room. They all roll forward to meet at the window, as if pulled by invisible thread, the central aisle narrowing to that orange point of light. The rows of books are a shadowy tunnel ending with the burning window. The tunnel looms at Callie. A trapped feeling descends upon her, as if that tunnel will reach out and grab her and she'll fall into the beams from the window. It's crawling on her skin. The patterns in the window stare at her. She takes a deep breath. Callie pushes the cart to the elevator and slams on the down button.

When she leaves work, Callie calls Henry to ask if he can come over tonight. He agrees. They meet at a bar for wings and beer and then go back to Callie's house. They tumble into her bed and Henry covers her neck and chest with sloppy kisses. She digs her nails into his back, arches her legs. She focuses on the warmth of Henry's skin under her fingers, the wetness of their mouths touching. She wants to become nothing but skin and sensation. She wants to concentrate on every point of contact, to savor the gentle and rough touches as if it's for the first time. As they hold each other she blinks in and out of that loss of everything but the awareness of her skin and thumping blood.

After they finish, Callie rises to use the bathroom. When she returns, Henry is lying on his back, one hand resting over the line of dark hair on his stomach. In the light shining from the bathroom, he smiles at Callie and stretches his arm out across the bed's tangled sheets. She switches off the light and curls up on the edge of the bed, facing away from him, not touching his outstretched arm. He rolls over and wraps an arm around her waist and curls his body against hers.

Callie closes her eyes and sinks her head, throbbing from exhaustion, into her pillow. Henry's arm is warm and solid around her waist. Callie starts to descend into sleep, her thoughts

floating in waves of darkness. He nuzzles his face against her neck, his stubble bristly on her skin and his breath steady. In her half-sleep, Callie sees Ray's face, his brown eyes and beard. She thinks of that first time they lay in bed together like this. She can almost smell his old bedroom, feel his sheets stretched across her bare arms. She sighs softly and leans back into the body of the man next to her. Ray's slender arms and scrubby face comfort her.

Henry turns his head and coughs. Callie blinks. He mutters, "Excuse me," and embraces her again. Ray's face drifts away. Callie's breaths are shallow. She scoots away from Henry and then sighs deeply.

"Are you okay?" Henry says. "You've been more quiet than usual."

"I'm fine," Callie says. "Just tired."

"Come on." Henry caresses her hip. "You can talk to me about anything."

Callie pulls his arm off her body. She rolls over on to her back. "Henry, we agreed that we're just friends now. We're only having fun. No discussions about feelings." His silence feels heavy. She sighs. "My stepbrother came to visit me a few days ago. We haven't seen each other in a while. I've been preoccupied with that." She rolls over again. "And no, I don't want to talk about it."

"Okay," Henry says. He tosses an arm over her, this time maintaining some space between them. Callie can feel the softness of his warm breath against her back. She listens to the steady rhythm as she falls asleep.

The next morning, Callie rushes through the kitchen, gulping down coffee to drive away the throbbing in her head. As she gathers her things into her purse, Henry raises his hand in a goodbye and says he'll call her sometime. She nods goodbye and the door slams. The red light

is blinking on her cell phone. She sees that she has several missed calls from Ray. The throbbing in her head grows heavier.

She waits to return the call until she's parked near the library and is walking down the sidewalk to the building. He answers right away. "Callie?" he says. "Jeez, I'm so glad to hear from you."

"Sorry, I was busy." She pauses. "What's going on? Is everything okay?"

"Larry visited me last night." Ray makes an aggravated sound. "Drunk again, of course. I guess he's found a place to stay. Some old friend. So he might be here for a while."

Callie looks at the sidewalk. She wishes she had a place to sit down. She walks faster. "Great," she says. "Did he say anything else?"

"Not really. Just his usual drunken ramblings." Ray sighs deeply. "He said we should all have a family reunion or something. But it was his usual bullshit. I just wanted to give you an update, Cal."

"Thanks," Callie says. She's reached the library. She sits down on a bench and tucks her free arm over her waist and crouches over. "I mean, the thought of seeing him makes me sick. But thanks for the warning." She pauses. "And thanks for dealing with his drunken bullshit. I know that must be awful."

"Well, I called a cab and managed to get him out of here. I told him I better not see him again." There's a rumbling sound in the background, like Ray has started his car. "Anyway, I'm headed to work. Feel free to call me whenever, okay, Cal?"

"Okay. I have to get to work too." They say goodbye. Callie slowly rises from the bench. She stares at Ray's name on the phone's screen for a moment and then tucks it inside her pocket and enters the library.

There are piles of books in the work room, some new ones that need labeling and some old ones that need organizing. Callie sits amid piles of old books and starts sorting through them. She examines the books' spines and flips through their pages. The door is open and she can hear the children's laughter from storytelling time. The room has high narrow windows. Yellow sunlight filters through the blinds and falls into stripes on the floor. Callie sips from her mug of coffee. She picks up another book, a thick hardcover, and looks through the yellowing pages, the paper rough on her fingers.

*

When Callie was about thirteen years old, her mother had been married to Larry for a couple years. He hadn't started hitting Callie's mom until then. The snide comments about his dissatisfaction with her cooking, the explosions when he thought she had somehow insulted him, and the usual beer after work all descended into louder and longer shouting matches and glasses of bourbon that would end up smashed on the floor and then meaty-sounding slaps and punches.

Callie had never liked Larry. She got a funny feeling when she was around him. It reminded her of when she had been a child laying in the dark and would think she saw a black shadow watching her and could almost feel its cold fingers on her skin. Their first Christmas as a family, Callie had been sitting on the couch near the tree. Its pale yellow lights glittered and Callie smiled when she looked at the ornaments' colorful shine and the small plush reindeer nestled in the tree. Larry sat next to her on the couch. Her mother was bustling between the savory smells of the kitchen and the twinkling living room. Ray had hidden himself in his bedroom. Callie had just gotten her first period, and when Larry sat, she moved toward the end of the couch. She was afraid that she smelled. The period had arrived right after her breasts and hips had started growing and Callie felt full and ripe, still unsure of the new territory her body

occupied. She was embarrassed by the bluntness of her womanhood and liked to wear baggy shirts. Larry was drinking a beer. He said something about the prettiness of the ornaments and how good her mother's cooking smelled. Callie nodded and smiled. Her lips felt tight and heavy. In the kitchen, the oven door groaned as Callie's mother opened it and there was a whooshing sound of hot air exiting. Larry put his hand on the couch and then inched it over and placed it on Callie's thigh, his fingers curling. Callie's insides burned. She glanced at Larry and then looked away. His pale eyes were glassy. Larry's hand was heavy on her leg. Callie tried not to think about it. She tried to focus on the warmth of the sweater she was wearing. Larry's hand moved further up her leg. She looked at the stitched-on smile of one of the plush reindeer on the tree. Callie heard her mother putting plates on the table and the sound of Ray's bedroom door creaking upstairs. Larry pulled his hand away. Her mother strode toward them, smiling, and announced that dinner was ready.

Ray came into the living room, shoulders hunched and hands in his pockets. He was two and a half years older than Callie. He wore a black T-shirt that had a band's gray logo. His hair was cut short, his face pale with reddish pimples on his chin. "About time the moody teenager decided to grace us with his presence," Larry said, rising from the couch and walking to the kitchen. Callie turned her gaze from the tree and toward Ray. He was silent, scowling at his father. He grabbed a biscuit from the table and took a hungry bite.

"Come on, Callie, you need to join us," her mother called. Callie darted upstairs, saying she needed to go to the bathroom.

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Late at night Callie would hear them in the kitchen. Larry's voice was loud and roaring and slurred and her mother's was sometimes high and shrill, other times teary and pleading.

There would be banging and then that awful meaty sound. Callie tried not to imagine her mother. She couldn't understand how her mother could let herself also be this pleading and shrieking woman. Imagining her mother in her nightgown, huddled in a corner of the kitchen, seemed like a scene from a movie. The fights often got going after Callie went to bed. She would curl in her bed and try to ignore the yellow light from the kitchen surrounding her door frame. That light seemed to grow brighter as the voices rose. Callie started turning on the lamp on her dresser when she went to bed. Its warm orange glow distracted her until night after night, the lamp's orange light became another emblem of Larry's anger.

One night when Callie was about thirteen, one of their worst fights started soon after she went to bed. Callie switched on her lamp, slipped under the covers, and buried her head in her pillow. Before she could begin falling asleep, a slurred yell and a bang came from the kitchen. Then her mother's and Larry's voices started to rise and fall, growing louder and more desperate, accompanied by banging cupboard doors. Callie turned over and stared at the orange circle of light across the room. She tried to imagine that the spiraling shouts were droning ambient noise, like a vacuum or a fan, and that she could push it away. Then her mother screeched and Larry roared. There was the sound of breaking glass and he roared again. Callie thought of his large bourbon bottle. She lay immobile, staring at the patterns in the popcorn ceiling, and then got up and turned on the overhead light. She switched her radio on and moved the dial from a rock station to a Top 40 station. She curled up in bed and tried to concentrate on the rhythm of the song playing. But the singer's cheerful voice and the song's bass collided with the yells and cries coming from the kitchen, forming a thunderous chaos of sound. Callie put her pillow over her face. Her room seemed to have grown smaller.

The song ended and a loud commercial for a car dealership came on. Callie sat up and switched off the radio. She picked up a book and tucked it under her arm. She turned off the room's overhead light and then swept down the hall to Ray's room.

She opened Ray's bedroom door and softly closed it. His light was still on. The air in the room had a stagnant, murky smell of marijuana mixed with the air freshener Ray sprayed to try to cover up the weed. Dirty clothes and crumpled food wrappers littered the floor. Ray liked to retreat to his bedroom and avoid coming out as much as possible. He was lying on his back on his bed, hands folded over his stomach. Large headphones covered his ears and his eyes were closed. Thick black curtains were drawn tightly across the window.

Callie approached the bed and poked Ray in the chest. He moved his head. She poked him again harder. Ray flinched and raised his hands in surprise. He opened his eyes and blinked at Callie. "Hey," he said, pulling off his headphones. They fell next to him, the still-playing music droning on. "What are you doing?" Ray had just grown several inches and still seemed unsure of how to move in his long, lanky body. He pushed himself up and rubbed his eyes. Callie noticed that hair had started growing around his lips and along his jaw.

"They're fighting again," she said. "Like, really bad."

"No shit," Ray said. He gestured at the headphones. "That's why I was using those." He reached down and turned off the CD player. The droning from the headphones stopped. Another yell came from the kitchen.

"I tried falling asleep, and listening to the radio, but I couldn't. They're so loud and crazy. I feel scared." Callie folded her arms and looked down at a stain in the carpet. "I'm sorry for bothering you. I just couldn't be alone."

The hard lines in Ray's mouth and forehead had softened. He shook his head. "No, it's fine. I hate it too." He patted the space next to him on the bed. "You can chill here."

Callie sighed. "Thank you." She crawled on to the bed and nestled against the cool wall. Ray's wrinkled cotton sheets were soft. He sat next to her, his legs folded and the headphones in his lap. She remembered that she was still clutching the book. "I'm going to try to read," she said.

Ray nodded and handed her a pillow. He put his music and headphones on again and lay back down and closed his eyes. The house was quiet for a moment. Callie stared at Ray's greasy hair and at his still face. Then some more shouts rose from the kitchen. Callie lay down, settling her head on the pillow, and opened her book, a fantasy novel, trying to concentrate on its words. Ray's headphones hummed beside her. She could hear his steady breathing. His body felt warm next to hers and its aura enveloped the space around them. Her mother's and Larry's shouts faded away into a kind of background noise and as Callie read she almost forgot about them.

Callie finished reading a chapter. She put the book down on her chest. Ray was still listening to his music, his eyes closed. She looked at the pale smoothness of his eyelids, the curl of his lashes against his cheeks, at the defined line of his chin. She took a deep breath and glanced at the clock. It was almost midnight. Larry and her mother were still shouting, but Callie felt warm and lazy, her body heavy. The overhead light shone brightly, stinging her eyes.

She nudged Ray's shoulder. He blinked at her, then groaned and turned off his music and took off his headphones. "I feel better now," she said, her voice soft. "I'm going to go back to bed now. Thanks."

Ray rubbed his eyes. “What an asshole my dad can be.” He frowned at her. “You sure you’re okay?”

She nodded and he smiled and squeezed her shoulder. “I should go to sleep too,” he said. Callie crawled to the edge of the bed. Then, a loud shout from Larry tore through the house. There was a loud bang and what sounded like a muffled cry coming from Callie’s mother. Callie heard the loud meaty sound of a hand pounding on flesh. She heard her mother cry out again. Callie tried not to think about the red spot that was on her mother’s cheek, the spot that would turn greenish-purple in the coming days. There was the sound of movement and then more yelling.

Callie had frozen. She stared at Ray’s clothes on the floor and tried to push back the hotness rising in her eyes. She swallowed. “I don’t understand how the fuck she can let him do that to her. How can she be that person.”

“He treated my mom the same way before she left. I remember hiding in my room and wishing I could fight back.” Callie swiveled toward Ray. His eyes were glazed and distant. The shouting continued. She felt edgy and exposed, like someone was tearing at her skin. She squeezed her hands into fists.

“You can stay here if you want,” Ray said.

Ray switched off the light, plunging the room into blue-black darkness. Callie curled up next to the wall again and Ray settled beside her, hands folded over his stomach. She gripped the pillow and shut her eyes and breathed in deeply, inhaling the room’s earthy smell. Ray’s breath settled into its own rhythm and Callie was glad for the warmth of his body next to hers, its aura enveloping them again. The substance of their bodies together formed a protective sphere. The shouts seemed to recede into the distance.

As she slipped closer to sleep, Callie sighed deeply and curled her legs. Ray sighed too. The bed creaked as he turned over. He extended a long arm and embraced her. She settled back into his body and he brushed his face against her neck, his lips soft and cheeks scratchy. He embraced her more tightly. Callie squeezed his hands. His long fingers wrapped around hers. Callie's breaths were longer and deeper. She and Ray became stitched together with warmth and the room grew darker.

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When Callie leaves the library, the sky is silver and the yellowish light of the setting sun looks sickly. She checks her phone. There are no calls or messages from Ray. She tucks her hands in her sweater pockets and walks quickly to her parked car. A strange tightness has gripped her stomach and everything in her vision seems tilted. She keeps thinking of Ray's voice on the phone, his name on the bright screen. She thinks of her memories of him as sapped of any meaning or feeling, as hollow and dry.

As Callie turns a street corner, a heightened awareness brushes over her back, as if something is about to seize her. She turns around. Nothing is there, just the grayish downtown street and the dull glint of parked cars. But she still feels as if she's being watched. She quickens her pace. You're just paranoid because of this shit with Larry, she scolds herself. There's nothing to worry about. When she gets to the car, she glances through the window at the backseat before opening the door. She sighs at the familiar trash and slips inside the driver's seat and slams the door shut. Callie throws her purse on the front passenger seat and hits the gas pedal. The car gives a stuttering roar. She just wants to get home and curl up with her cat, maybe do some knitting.

She sweeps back around the corner and down the street toward home. She's driving away from the setting sun and its blinding light is reflected in her rearview mirror. She squints and tilts her head down. She passes by the front of the library. Her pulse stops for a moment. A man with a scrubby beard wearing a denim jacket stands near the entrance. Larry's beaky nose and sunken light-colored eyes. His shoulders were hunched and he was leaning forward. Callie slows down and turns her head to try to look at the man again. He has turned around and is walking in the direction of her car, then white light fills her eyes. The sun is too bright. Callie hits the gas again and turns the radio on a classic rock station and twists the volume knob up. She speeds home.

She usually parks in the driveway, but now she pulls the car into the garage. She hits the garage door button and the door groans and creaks shut behind her, enclosing the small space in heavy darkness. Callie enters the kitchen and breathes deeply as she sits down at the table. After a moment, she pours herself a glass of cold water and gulps it down.

Callie takes out her cell phone and places it on the table. She puts an elbow on the table, cupping her chin with her hand, and regards the phone. She thinks of calling Henry, or one of her friends from work, but what would she say? That her former stepfather has returned to town and she's afraid of him somehow finding where she lives? Callie twirls the phone around in her hand and looks at the blue mug on the counter, at the stains of coffee that had trickled down over its lip. She knows she would sound unreasonable. None of her friends know about her past, about Larry or Ray, and she doesn't want them to. Why bring together these two distinct worlds, two incompatible layers of film?

The sky outside has thickened into dusk. A bush of knotty branches and leaves grazes the kitchen window. The blinds are partly drawn, and Callie shuts them all the way, tugging on

the cord to make sure they're shut tight. She goes around the house and checks that all the blinds are shut tightly, flicking on lights as she goes. The cat sits perched on top of the couch and follows her with his eyes. An uneasy tingling has lodged itself in Callie's skin. The living room windows face the backyard. She pulls open a blind and leans against the window. The backyard is thick with old pines. Their tall figures extend up into the twilight. There are valleys of shadows between the trunks. The trees seem to be staring at her. She tugs on the cord and the blinds snap shut with a bang.

Callie sits on the couch and stares at the blank TV screen. The cat settles next to her and she runs a hand over his fur. The house is flooded with light. It reminds Callie of some kind of institution. She thinks of how the house must look from the outside, all the windows brightly lit, obscured by blinds, but the light leaking around the edges. She thinks of the gauzy translucent curtain that covers the front door's window. The TV across the room is vaguely reflecting the living room and Callie looks away from it. She squeezes the cat's fur and he slinks away. The house seems too exposed. Too many windows like fissures opening up to the outside. Anyone who comes up to the front door can look inside. The tingling in Callie's skin has grown sharper. Her cell phone, still in her pocket, vibrates. Her heart thuds and she jumps.

When she answers, Ray says, "Callie? Can I come over? Larry was just here again. I don't want to be in this fucking apartment anymore. I figured you'd understand."

She sighs deeply. "I'm glad you called. I need someone to be in the house with me."

"Are you okay?"

Callie fingers a book on the coffee table. "I just — I thought I saw Larry when I was leaving work today. And now I have this feeling."

"You thought you saw Larry? I'll be there soon. Try to relax. Knit or something."

Callie breathes a thank you and hangs up. She regards the blank TV screen for a moment, and then reaches for the remote and switches it on. She flips through the channels, images and sounds flickering by. All of the people inhabiting the screen look alien, part of some detached world. She settles on a rerun of the old black and white Lassie show. The dog is standing on a ridge, her posture erect and chest puffed out, looking triumphant and noble with her upturned nose and long glossy fur. Someone calls her name, voice frantic, and she gallops down the ridge. Music swells. Before Lassie can save her companion, Callie, blinking rapidly, flicks off the TV. The house is silent again.

Callie thinks of what Ray said and decides it's a good idea to knit, to keep her hands busy. The hallway is long and narrow and Callie rushes quickly to her bedroom, retrieves the basket with her knitting materials, and rushes back to the living room. The cat watches her with his yellow eyes and she rubs his back as she settles on the couch with her knitting needles and yarn. She grips the needles and examines the pattern of the scarf she's working on and then pulls out more maroon yarn.

The last time Callie and Ray spent time together alone was when she visited him at his new apartment one weekend. Thinking about it now, a bubbling feeling fills Callie, both hot and cold. Callie had just broken up with Henry. She had gone to Ray's to see his new place. Ray hadn't gone to college. He worked as a manager at a restaurant. The apartment was the first place he could afford to live at on his own, and he beamed with pride and opened his arms when Callie arrived.

Their parents had divorced when Callie was in college. Callie and Ray still kept in touch. Ray represented a part of Callie's life that she mostly wanted to forget, yet she held on to that thread because it was the one smooth, uncomplicated source of warmth from that time. And she

needed to keep Ray in her life too because hearing his voice, reading his emails, drinking with him all made that pain more real. Sharing it with him, seeing it reflected in his downward glances and nervous hands, made it less of a burden. It wasn't something she had to carry on her own. It allowed her to see those years as more than just her individual nightmare, let it flood out of her beyond her solipsism and into something that existed on its own. Callie needed Ray.

Ray's apartment was calm and clean. A bamboo plant was in a turquoise vase in the living room's corner, the glistening shell of its stem spiraling upward into a burst of green leaves. Callie said she liked the place and he grinned.

Ray had taken up cooking as a hobby. He set to work making pad Thai for their dinner. He stood at the stove and stirred a pan of peanut sauce. He gestured to Callie. "Try this." He lifted the ladle to her mouth, cupping his other hand underneath. She gently pressed her lips against the ladle and let the sauce wash down her tongue. Ray raised his eyebrows at her as she swallowed. She smiled and nodded. "Ray, that's so good. Maybe a little more paprika, though?" He rolled his eyes, but then shook more paprika into the sauce.

When the meal was ready, Callie sat at the table as Ray scooped the noodles and vegetables onto their plates. The kitchen smelled of peanuts and spices. The setting sun's rays slanted through the sliding glass doors into the living room. A ceiling fan hummed overhead. Callie took a few bites. "It's a lot different eating together now that we're gone from that house, isn't it?"

Ray nodded and chewed thoughtfully. "I actually like kitchens now." He shoved his fork through the noodles on his plate. "That's what I like about the restaurant. When you're preparing meals for people you're thinking of them, not yourself."

Later that night, Callie and Ray sat in plastic chairs on the narrow screened-in patio. The sliding door was left open to let air into the apartment. They had taken a walk outside and watched TV and Callie talked about her new job at the library and books she'd been reading and Ray told her about work and his friends there. It was nice, Callie thought, to share what their lives were now, a chapter different than the old ones. Ray understood how important that was.

Midnight was approaching. Tall streetlamps and lights from other apartments punctured the darkness beyond the screen. The smoke from Ray's cigarette wafted on a breeze. Callie watched the cigarette's ash flicker orange as he sucked on it. She took a drink from her vodka cranberry. Ray considered whiskey superior and was drinking some from a tumbler.

Callie leaned back and stretched out her legs. Ray offered her a cigarette and she said yes, she liked to smoke when she drank. Ray lit the cigarette for her, his longish hair hanging over his face. He quickly pulled away and pushed his hair back. He took a sip of his drink and said, "So you haven't said anything about this breakup. Are you doing okay?"

Callie shrugged. "I'm fine. I was fooling myself thinking it was going to work."

"I never liked the guy."

Callie rolled her eyes and smiled. "Come on, you only met him a few times. And you never like the guys I date anyway." Callie drank her vodka cranberry and gazed down at the red liquid, made paler by the vodka. "But I broke up with him because I realized he wasn't for me. I was trying to pretend he was someone else. He was never as serious as I needed him to be."

She turned to Ray, who was staring at her, his dark eyes intent. He glanced down at his tumbler and said nothing. After he took a sip, Callie said, "What about you? Are you seeing anyone?"

He took a drag from his cigarette and shook his head. "Nope. I'm a single man."

“I’ve never cared for the girls you’ve been with, either.” Callie grinned. Ray laughed and shook his head.

They sat without talking, watching the smoke from their cigarettes curl in the dark air, listening to the fan beat behind them and the distant thump of music from another apartment. Callie looked at Ray’s long fingers. She thought of the nights she’d spent in his room as he cradled her in his bed, a guard against the shouts vibrating through the house. She thought of when they would go in the woods behind the high school to smoke pot and eat donuts from the grocery store and laugh at stupid jokes. A ball of warmth welled somewhere deep inside her.

Ray said, “Do you remember that one Christmas we drove around looking at Christmas lights? And we had hot chocolate at home after? That was so nice.”

Callie nodded. “I remember.” She had been fourteen or fifteen at the time. Larry had gone out to a bar and her mother had taken them driving around to Christmas light displays that had been advertised in the paper. Without Larry around, her mother had been cheerful, chatting about her own memories. There had been illuminated reindeer and candy canes and rows of red and green and gold lights, all bright blurs in the darkness. Callie remembered Ray reaching across the backseat and taking her hand in his as they passed by a lit up outline of Mary and Joseph crouching over a manger.

Ray stood, his tumbler empty in his hand. “I’m going to get more to drink. You want some more?” Callie handed him her glass and he slipped inside.

She watched Ray as he came back to the patio carrying the glasses, looked at the long gait of his legs and the way his jeans stretched across his narrow hips. She took one last drag from her cigarette and smashed it in the ashtray, slamming it down to extinguish the burning ash. She stood when he stepped on to the patio, thanking him. She took a long drink. She felt numb

to the sharpness of the vodka. Ray took a long drink too. He was standing less than a foot away from Callie. His heat seemed to pulse around her and his hands dangled near her hips and his shoulders were close to her face. The music from the other apartment beat on. “That music is loud,” she said.

Ray nodded. He set his drink down. Callie realized how heavy and cold hers was and set it down too. Then, Ray slid his arms around her waist, and she folded herself into and against him and their mouths joined together, the short hairs of his beard gently scratching her cheeks. His body was warm as always and Callie could feel the heaviness of his breath. After a few moments, Ray pulled away, gripping her hand, his eyes bright. He led her inside and to his bedroom.

The next morning Callie woke with Ray’s arms folded around her, her head resting on his chest. He smiled shyly and then kissed her cheek. He made coffee and pancakes for their breakfast. They furtively glanced at each other throughout the lazy morning.

Callie visited him once more right after Christmas. She had told herself it wouldn’t happen again, but she found herself giggling and fumbling around to unbuckle his belt on the way to the bedroom. When they were together, Ray gave Callie what she expected from him — a fierce, warm, insistent gentleness. Holding on to him, Callie felt as if her pleasure and his became almost indistinguishable.

In bed, Ray bent over Callie. He kissed her and pulled away, hovering above her. Callie opened her eyes and looked at his face. As he narrowed his eyes and smiled at her, she grew stiff. Something in his expression, in the way the bedroom’s blue shadows crossed his nose and mouth, looked too familiar. His face reminded her of Larry’s. She inhaled sharply and drew her legs together. Ray’s smile faded. She turned away and pushed her face into a pillow, telling him

she needed a moment. She breathed deeply until supple warmth returned to her body. She looked at Ray and he was Ray again, with his scruffy hair and brown eyes. She threw her arms around his neck and pulled him down.

She left his apartment early the next morning. When Ray called her a few days later, she told him that she didn't think they should see each other again. "We know what will happen, Ray. And it's too complicated." She was still at her mother's house for the holidays. She leaned against the kitchen counter and looked down at the white floor tiles.

"Come on, Cal, we could make it work. Our parents aren't married anymore. There's nothing stopping us." He paused. Callie said nothing. Ray continued, "Cal, I care about you."

"I care about you," she said. "I just can't. It brings up too many memories."

Ray's voice was soft. "I'm not my father."

"I have to go," Callie said. "It's for the best that we each move on with our own lives." She said goodbye and hung up. She wiped at her eyes. Her mother walked into the kitchen and the tears in Callie's eyes welled up. She looked away and grabbed a paper towel. Her mother started telling her gossip from relatives and Callie nodded and smiled. Ray called Callie a few more times and she ignored them and he stopped. That phone call had been the last time she had talked to Ray.

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Callie crosses her knitting needles over each other and listens to their clacking and watches the pieces of yarn intertwine. She thinks of when she saw Ray's figure at the front door, of how she'd rubbed her fingers over her knitting needles as she slipped between giddiness and fear. She glances at the translucent white square of the front door's window. The house is like a wide cavern of light and she needs another person to inhabit the space.

She hears a low rumbling outside and then a car door slamming. She sees a tall, slender figure reflected in the glass frame of a bright art print on the wall across from the front door. It's Ray. He rings the doorbell and it chimes through the silent house. She jumps up.

Opening the door, she says, "Thanks for coming. I was getting worried."

"Thank *you* for letting me come over. Let Larry continue knocking on the door of my empty apartment," Ray says. He shuts the door gently and smiles at her. He squints. "It's bright in here."

"I didn't want any darkness," Callie says. "I keep thinking of that guy I saw near the library – how much he looked like Larry." She folds her arms across her chest and shakes her head.

"I didn't mean to scare you," Ray says. "I'll stay as long as you need."

Callie smiles. They stand in the middle of the living room facing each other. She looks at the throbbing veins in Ray's neck. She looks at his hand. He closes it in a fist and opens it, then closes and opens it again. The cat leaps off the couch, landing on the carpet with a muffled thud. He rubs against Callie's leg and peers at Ray suspiciously.

Callie glances down at the cat and turns away from Ray. She remembers her yarn and knitting needles and sits on the couch. She picks up the needles and scarf. A spray of loose yarn dangles off the smooth scarf. The shining needles are cold and hard between her fingers.

"I've been working on this scarf a while. I'm making this pattern of wide and narrow stripes."

The bright light bounces off Ray's eyes when he smiles. "It looks great. I want one." Callie blushes and looks down at the needles as she clacks them together. Ray coughs. "Do you want tea? I'll make us some tea."

He goes into the kitchen and puts the teakettle on the stove and bangs the cupboard doors as Callie tells him where to find the teabags and sugar. Ray strides back into the living room and sits on the loveseat, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees and his hands folded together. He watches Callie knit. Callie looks up from the needles and their eyes lock. Her throat feels tight and heavy as if there's something she's struggling to say. But she doesn't know what it is. The words are like smudged ink.

The teakettle begins to whistle, slowly and then high and sharp. The sound is an urgent cry. Ray blinks and rushes to the kitchen. He lets the teabags steep and stirs in the sugar and then comes back carrying two mugs, steam wafting above their rims. He holds Callie's out to her and gently lets go as she wraps her hands around the hot mug.

She takes a sip and smiles at Ray. He drums his fingers against his mug and smiles back. The tea is warm with a pleasant bittersweet taste. The fear that had gripped her before has uncoiled. "Maybe we can turn off some of these lights," she says.

"Are you sure?" Ray says. She nods. "I'll take care of it," he says. Ray stands up and turns off the hallway lights. As Callie directs him, he turns off some bright overhead lights in the living room. The yellowish light from the kitchen is slanting into the living room and there are a few lamps left illuminated in the living room, all glowing yellow-orange circles. Callie inhales sharply when she looks at those orange circles. But with her knitting things, the cat, the tea – and Ray – they have a cozy effect. The windows with their tightly shut blinds no longer seem like institutional barricades. The shadows seeping around them and in the room's corners are another enclosure against the outside darkness.

Ray slurps his tea and then flops back against the loveseat. He watches Callie knit. "This is nice," she says. "Being together like this." He grins and nods. Callie stares at the

pattern forming on her scarf. She hasn't been like this with someone, contentedly doing nothing, for a long while. She realizes how much she missed it. Ray knows how to simply be there. She thinks of their nights together in his bedroom when they were teenagers. She squints at the scarf forming in her fingers.

Ray chuckles softly. Callie looks up. The cat has curled up next to him and Ray is caressing its fur. Callie grins. Before she can say anything, the chime of the doorbell rings through the house. Callie's stomach tightens. She looks at the glass frame across from the front door. A figure's reflection is there. It looks like a man. He rings the doorbell again, a few rapid times in a row. The cat leaps off the couch and stares at the front door. Then the man knocks loudly and calls out some unintelligible words. It's Larry's voice. A burning coldness spreads over Callie's skin. Blindly, she looks at the TV, at her bookcases and furniture. The room seems to have shifted, tilting in and out of focus from her familiar image.

Ray has already stood up. His cheeks are pale. "It's okay, Cal," he says. "I'll deal with him."

Callie sits upright and grips the arm of the couch. "Maybe you shouldn't answer."

"I tried that at my place, but he kept at it." He shakes his head. "Let me just get rid of him." He approaches the door. Callie pushes the scarf out of her lap and takes the yarn off the needles. She clutches the needles, sliding her fingers over their hard metal, and holds them against her thigh. She stares at the cat, still standing alert in front of the door, his chin held high and erect and his eyes steady yellow orbs. Callie can't look at the door.

She hears Ray open the door a few inches and speak to Larry in a hushed angry voice. Larry responds, his slurred words indistinct. There's banging and scraping and the sound of Ray grunting. Larry has entered the house.

Callie freezes. Larry saunters into the living room and then stops and peers at her. His posture is wobbly. “So I see there’s a little get-together happening here. Ray, why didn’t you invite me? You know I haven’t seen Callie for years.” He grins at her. His teeth are large. “Hi, honey, it’s nice to see you.”

Callie feels as if she’s left her body — or perhaps that she’s sunk deeper into it, back into animal consciousness, her awareness hiding in her blood and muscles. She stays on the couch. Ray steps between Larry and Callie. “Leave her alone,” he says in a low voice. “Get the fuck out of here. I told you to stay away.”

“You always wanted to protect her,” Larry says. “Trying to be a big brave boy.” Ray glances at Callie and bites his lip. Larry says, “I always knew there was something going on between you two. It’s not right.”

Ray hunches his shoulders. “*You*, of all people, want to talk to me about what’s right? It’s none of your fucking business. Go back to where you came from.” He steps closer to Larry. “I’ll call the police if you don’t leave.”

“And tell them what? I’m just a father visiting his son.” Larry steps forward and stumbles into the coffee table. Callie watches a glass candle holder shake. Larry lets out an unsteady laugh. “You don’t know what this girl is like, son. You can’t trust her.” He narrows his eyes at Callie. “She told her mom stories about me.”

Callie looks down at the carpet, at the gray cat fur that’s embedded in the nubby beige. She feels like she’s nothing but pulsing blood on fire. “Cal?” Ray says. “What is he talking about?” Callie thinks of that night in the bathroom when she was a teenager. She’s gone over it in her mind so many times now, trying to distance herself from it, that it seems like the memory of a dream or a movie. She thinks of crouching over the toilet, the shine of the bathroom’s blue

tiles, the partly open door and the sound of someone's breath in that space. She thinks of the open window in that bathroom and how the wind had blown in and banged the door.

She shakes her head. "It's nothing," she says.

Larry laughs again. "You told your mother I was some kind of pervert. You made yourself into a little victim."

Callie wishes they had left the lights on. The orange circles of the lamps burn mockingly. The blinds on the window are too blank. She thinks of snapping those blinds open and letting in the empty dark from outside. Ray says, "What? You did something to Callie? What the fuck is wrong with you?" From the corner of her eye, Callie can see that he's balled his hands into fists. "Get out."

"Okay, Ray. Say that all you want," Larry says. "I know what you and Callie would do in your bedroom together. You're not innocent."

"Get the fuck out," Ray says. Larry steps closer to him, still drunkenly grinning. Ray raises his fists and pummels Larry in the face. Larry lurches back, but then grunts in anger and shoves Ray. They go back and forth, shoving and pushing, filling the room with the sound of flesh meeting. The cat yowls, a loud, unsteady screech, and runs down the hallway.

The sounds rouse Callie and something within her rises. She jumps up. "Stop it, Ray." She backs away from them. She yells louder, "Stop."

"I'm okay, Cal," Ray shouts. Then Larry punches him hard in the shoulder and Ray staggers back, holding his shoulder. Larry stalks toward Ray, a glassy rage in his blue eyes. The metal knitting needle burns between Callie's fingers and she cries out as Larry approaches Ray and then she swings the needle at Larry's arm. It digs into his skin with a wet thump. Dark red blood spurts from the wound and soaks the sleeve of his jacket.

Callie steps back and puts her hand over her mouth. Larry gapes at her, water rising in his eyes. Ray grunts loudly and pushes Larry until he falls to the floor. Larry stumbles, trying to get back up, and Ray kicks him. Larry shouts in pain. Callie watches Larry's face pinch and writhe in pain and then his eyes close. Ray steps back, panting. He wipes a hand across his forehead and stares at Larry.

Ray slowly turns to Callie. She reaches out and grips his arm. He takes a deep breath and his muscles slacken under her fingers. He steps closer to her. They look down at Larry. His chest is rising and falling. Red blood covers his arm and his cheeks are greenish with bruises.

"Oh my God," Callie says. She turns away and rests her head on Ray's chest. He folds his long warm arms around her.

"I'm sorry, Callie," he says. She pulls away and he frowns at her. She walks to one of the windows and pulls open the blinds, revealing darkness. She switches on a bright overhead light. The cat enters the room, meowing urgently, his tail flickering back and forth. Callie's knitting needle is lying in blood that's stained the carpet. Callie picks it up and twirls it in her hand. "I don't know what to do with this," she says. She surveys the room. "I don't know what to do with any of this."

Ray slowly pulls the needle from her hand and places it on the floor again. He reaches out and grabs hold of her open fingers. Callie looks up at his face, the familiar mouth and nose, the brown eyes, and then closes her hand around his.

The Gleam of Departure

She is walking down the moving sidewalk, gliding among the swell of travelers, enclosed in a cylinder of metal and glass. Across the humming crowd and the slick white floor she recognizes his face and the quickness of his steps. He has risen from a stuttering gyre, the tumult of people around him trailing particles.

She steps off the moving sidewalk, jarred by the shift in terrain. She tugs at the lapel of her new pink trench with gold buttons. She'd hoped the color's cheer would seep from the cloth down into her, fill her stride with boldness. He approaches in black. She wants to sink into the mosaic of travelers.

The metal of the concourse arches over her, the heavy glass windows stretched into gleaming scaffolding on either side. The machinery, the structure, the smooth surfaces all merge into a surrounding jewel with facets of gray and blue. White and yellow lights glow above, make sliding reflections against the night sky, pulsing with orange and red lights and chugging planes.

Jagged Teeth

When I see that it's almost one o'clock, I stack the files on the corner of my desk, click off my email, and hastily gather my brush, pens, and keys with the plastic flower keychain in my purse. I pull on my coat and scarf, pausing to make sure the scarf's arranged smoothly over my chest. I leave my office, locking the door. On my way out, I pass a wide board displaying the faculty's names and photos, the posters and flyers announcing readings, publications that I organized and hung up. My eyes are drawn to one of the faculty photos, and I let them linger there on the slightly narrowed eyes and thoughtful, close-mouthed smile for a moment. Then I clamber down the narrow stairs, stride out to the broad walkway that curves past the humanities building, brushing past groups of students who are leaving their classes, hurrying to get to other classes on time, heading to lunch. I walk carefully — once, a skateboarder collided with me, and now, whenever I hear the grinding roll of skaters, I flinch and take careful steps.

I pull out my cell phone to check the time. It's a few minutes to one. I glance at the arched entryway to the door I've just exited, but no one's there. Simon usually comes by around this time. I know that Simon has a class that lets out at 12:50 today — on the days when I go to buy lunch, I make sure to time my trip to coincide with his walk back to his office.

The sky is a chalky gray and the January cold cuts across my cheeks. I stick my hands deep in my coat pockets, trying to pull the garment against my body. *If only I had someone to hold me, to keep me warm.*

As I round a corner to head toward the student union and its food court, I see Simon exit the campus café. My heartbeat intensifies, as if I've been shoved to the edge of a deep crevice. Prickly warmth fills my cheeks, and I take a deep breath, running my hands over my scarf and coat.

When I come within a few feet of Simon, I force my mouth up into a smile. “Hi, Simon,” I say. I hope my voice sounds nonchalant.

He jerks his head toward me and blinks and then smiles. “Heather! Hey.”

I slow down and stop. “How are you doing today?”

He stops too and shrugs. “Oh, I’m okay, I guess. I was just talking about modernism with some students at the café.” He glances at the sky. “Pretty chilly today, huh?” He’s wearing a jacket of creamy black leather, a pinstriped shirt underneath. His dark brown hair is slicked back with hair gel. I stare at the faint brush of stubble coating his jawline.

I dig my hands deeper into my pockets and scrunch up my shoulders. “It’s so cold. I had to bundle up today.” He nods. He glances down the walkway, and I say quickly, “I enjoyed our conversation the other day, by the way. It was really helpful.”

He frowns and scrunches his eyebrows together. “Conversation? Sorry, I talk to so many people — remind me again?”

I feel my face growing warm. I try to laugh. “Oh, you know, when you ran into me while I was making copies? About grad school? To study creative writing?” I can hear the notes in my voice grow higher with eager hope, and internally I kick myself.

Simon nods. “Oh, right, of course.” Before I can reply, he says, “Yeah, like I said, you should get in touch with some of the creative writing professors.” Then his smile widens as his blue eyes meet mine. “If you want, I can take a look at some of your work, too.”

“Oh — ”

“Yeah, I’ll give you some feedback. Drop that by whenever.” He starts to step away. “I have an appointment at my office. See you later.”

“See you,” I say as he walks away.

I turn, sighing, and continue to the food court. I push my face down against my scarf and lengthen my footsteps. The air's grown even colder, jabbing at my skin.

As I stand in line at the food court, I catch the faint outline of my reflection in an adjacent glass doorway. I jerk my head to look away, and then turn back. I grimace at my wide hips, at how bulky the coat makes me look, and think of Simon's tall, slender figure, his long limbs and square shoulders. I turn away from the glass, pushing my hands deeper into my pockets and squeezing them.

I get a buffalo chicken sandwich and carry it back to my office. I take large, hungry bites, slowly chewing the fleshy poultry and letting the hot sauce soak into my tongue. My office is located directly in front of the entrance to the English department, and most of the professors' offices are along a hallway around the corner. As I eat, two women professors are talking at the corner of the hallway, so I can't see them, but I can hear their voices. One of them says, "So a bunch of people from the department are going out for drinks tonight, right?"

"Yeah. We're meeting at Carmelo's around nine or ten."

The other one mutters something I can't hear, and then says more clearly, "Do you know if Simon's going to be there?" I chew more slowly, stiffening.

Her friend barks a laugh. "Oh, come on, really? Not you, too?"

"Hey, I'm just curious, that's all."

"Sure. But isn't he dating that grad assistant, anyway?" My breath grows shallow.

The other one makes a dismissive noise. "I'm not sure if *dating* is the right word for it." They both laugh. "But actually, whatever that was, I think it's over. I saw her with someone else a few days ago." I release a deep breath.

“Oh. Not too surprising. Well, I think he’s going to be there. He usually goes to these kinds of things. So you can seize your chance.”

“Yeah, I’ll get in line.” They both laugh and their footsteps echo down the hallway, their voices growing faint.

*

Shawna marches into the living room carrying a jug of iced tea and a bag of barbecue-flavored chips. “I am *so* ready for TV night,” she says. “After all the crap I had to deal with this week, I need some trashy drama.” She pours the iced tea into the glasses on the coffee table.

I grab a chip, sink it into ranch dip, and pop it in my mouth. I nod and express my agreement. TV night is our weekly Friday ritual. We both love shows about rich people with sordid problems, or about plucky young women caught up in supernatural dealings.

Shawna sits on the couch and sips her iced tea. “So did you see your man today?”

I roll my eyes but can’t help smiling. “Yeah, I ran into Simon while I was getting lunch.” Shawna raises her eyebrows in curiosity. I shrug. “He was nice, I guess. But he seemed preoccupied. It was okay.”

Shawna grins. “Oh, yeah, I’m sure *you* thought it was just *okay*. These little conversations are cute, but come on, you need to get the ball rolling.”

“Yeah, maybe. I don’t know. I think I’m making progress.”

“You better. I’m getting tired of you constantly obsessing over him.” Shawna smiles and picks up the remote to start the first show.

When Simon had joined the English faculty during the fall semester, I’d immediately reported the arrival of this gorgeous, brilliant man to Shawna. “He’s tall and thin with these *stunning* blue eyes. And he’s so smart and has this brooding sort of confidence,” I’d said. “He’s

like a fantasy come true. Like some dark stranger a girl in a book would meet on the street, who would turn out to be her protector.” Driving to work in the mornings, I’ve taken to chanting to myself *you are a strong, beautiful woman*.

Shawna and I stare at the screen, taking turns scooping up chips and dip. As the scene switches to a nighttime setting in the woods, I realize that my attention is drifting — I have little idea of the plotline or what the characters are saying. I stare at the image of a path carpeted with pine needles, a strip of dark silver-blue sky between the trees. A picture of Simon standing there surfaces before me, his slender frame a silhouette against the sky, the ice blue of his eyes faintly visible.

I blink, sip my iced tea, trying to listen to the characters’ conversation. The scene on the TV switches to a bar setting, where a group stands gathered together. One of the male characters grips a beer bottle and sidles up to one of the women, rubbing her back. He’s saying something, but I don’t catch the words. I’m thinking of the conversation I’d overheard in the office earlier.

Shawna’s living room darkens, and I realize the TV show’s ended. The end credits scroll white on the black screen, filling the room with a fuzzy blue-black glow. “Oh my god, I can’t believe that ending,” Shawna’s saying. “I was *not* expecting that. I don’t know how I’m going to wait until next week.” She clicks on a lamp in the corner.

I offer my agreement as she rambles about the show. Shawna carries the empty glasses into the kitchen. I get up and stand in the entryway between the kitchen and living room, crossing my arms. I bite my lip and then say, “Hey, I’m still feeling pretty awake. I’m kind of in the mood to do something different.” Shawna turns on the sink and I pause. She turns the water off. I say, “Do you want to go out and get a drink or something?” My voice comes out softer than I expected.

Shawna frowns at me. “Tonight? Really?”

“Yeah, sure.” I nod at the clock on her stove; it’s a little after ten. “It’s still pretty early. Come on, we’re young, we should be doing this sort of stuff. It’ll be fun.”

“I didn’t think you were into going out, Heather.” Surprise fills Shawna’s voice.

I shrug. “I don’t know. I like it once in a while.” I think of the few times I’d ventured out, after somehow overcoming my nerves, during my college years.

“I didn’t know that,” Shawna says. “But I’m too tired. Sorry. I’d rather stay at home.” She pauses and frowns. “Wait. Does this have something to do with Simon?”

I blush and look down. “Kind of. Today at work I overheard some professors talking about going out tonight.”

“Of course.” She shakes her head in amusement. “But okay, I understand now. You should go. I’m not in the mood for it, but there will be people you know. Just go by yourself.”

Knots fill my body. I shake my head. “No, no, I couldn’t do that.”

“Take a chance, Heather.”

“No, it’s okay,” I say. “It was a dumb idea, anyway. I *am* tired. I think I’ll just go home.”

Driving home, I approach the corner of the street the bar’s on. I angle my car to the right, but then stop at the red light, not turning. I imagine entering the bar, finding the professors and staff from the department sitting around a large table, Simon lounging in a dark corner. Frothy beer mugs would litter the table and loud conversation and laughter would flood the room and I would sit in a chair to the side, a tight attempt at a smile creasing my face, interjecting a few words but mostly silent and invisible, outside of the humming circle. The light turns green, and I drive straight ahead, towards my apartment.

*

I slide some papers into the copier. As I wait for the job to finish, the machine clicking and whirring, I glance around. A professor strides into the room to check her mailbox and we exchange cursory hellos. I take the copies back to my office and clip stacks together. I set the piles of copies beside a glossy poster that just arrived from the printing shop. It's announcing a book, *The Vice of Words*, that Simon has coming out about writers in the twenties — the large letters of the book's title is superimposed over a blurry black and white photo of people in twenties fashion gathered around a table, and then next to it all is a photo of Simon himself, his head tilted forward as he gazes pensively into the distance. There's a slight trace of a smile on his face, and I stare at that expression, my lips pursed. I rub the edge of the poster with my fingers, and then, hesitating, I dart my hand toward the pile of copies, take one stack, and then pull on my cardigan and tuck my wallet under my arm.

Walking down the hallway, I take a deep breath and consider going back to the rows of faculty mailboxes. But my feet ache from my new heels and I glance down at the tailored pink dress and dangling necklace I'd carefully put on today. I narrow my eyes for a moment, thinking of the knots in my stomach as I sat at that red light in the dark, too fearful to turn the corner. Heat rises over my cheeks and I sigh. I squeeze the stack of papers in my hand and, taking deliberate steps, continue to Simon's office.

His door's propped partly open. No students are visiting. He sits hunched in front of his computer. I tap on his door. He looks up, and when he sees me, his eyes sharpen. He pauses and then says, "Hey, Heather, come in." He flashes a smile.

I twist my lips in an attempt at a smile and step into the room. I love visiting the professors' offices. They're like tiny overstuffed libraries. Simon's desk is in a corner and tall

bookshelves line the walls. A mosaic of books, thick and thin, stiff and wrinkled, fill the shelves and spill over into cluttered piles. The blinds are drawn, the computer's screen bright in the dim room.

"I'm just dropping off those copies of your assignment sheets." I hold out the stack to him.

"Oh, thanks." He takes the papers, glances at them, and puts them on the desk. "You didn't need to bring them to me, though. I could've just picked them up from my mailbox."

I shrug. "I was just on my way out to get some coffee, so I figured I'd drop them off while I was passing by." I'm pleased with the way my voice sounds — soft and smooth, like I'd imagined. I clutch the doorjamb, take a half step back.

Simon leans back in his chair, clasping his hands behind his head. I stare at his outstretched torso, long and lean. He sits back up and says, "You know what, if you don't mind, I think I'll join you. I need a break from this." He spreads out his arms to indicate the office's small space.

"Oh, no, I don't mind at all," I say, trying to keep my voice calm.

As Simon follows me down the hallway, I tug at my sweater, pulling it down over my hips. My awareness of his body behind mine weighs down on me, as if his eyes are sliding against my back, his long strides rippling the space between us.

"Elevator?" Simon asks, and I nod. He presses the button. As the door opens and we step inside, another professor runs up and comes in with us.

"Hi, Rebecca," Simon says. The elevator lurches downward.

"Hey," she says, catching her breath. She smiles at me. "Hi, Heather." I smile and return the greeting.

Our bodies form a triangle in the small space, each of us keeping a polite distance from the others. Simon and Rebecca chat about grading papers. I bite my lip, annoyed by the intrusion. But as they continue talking, I lean back against the wall and exhale a deep breath, my body a few feet away from Simon's. Rebecca's voice is warm and earnest, her words interspersed with soft chuckles. Having her there as a buffer is a sort of relief — I don't have to worry about filling the silence between Simon and me, don't have to obsess over what he's thinking as his blue-gray eyes slide over my face and body.

When the elevator gets downstairs, Rebecca heads off in her own direction, giving each of us a warm good-bye. I walk beside Simon in silence, aware of my arm inches from his. He says, "So have you thought some more about those grad school applications?" We dart around a group of students.

"Kind of," I say. "I'm having second thoughts, though. I'm not sure if I'm good enough."

"Everyone thinks that," Simon says. "You have to put yourself out there." We've reached the café, and he holds the door open for me. As I brush past him, he grins.

I blush. "I guess you're right." We get in line.

"Of course I'm right," Simon says. "I have to ask, though. Why not English lit?"

"I don't know, I like reading, but *analyzing* literature can get boring. I like to just get involved in the story and not try to overthink it. I'd prefer to make my own stories instead of talking about someone else's."

"Hm," Simon says. "Maybe you just haven't had the right teacher." His tone is joking, but his mouth is a straight line and stillness has frozen his blue eyes. I twist the latch on my wallet. I realize that I've been rambling, that I should have responded with a joke.

I try to smile. “Maybe. Maybe it’s because I haven’t had a teacher like you.” My voice seems to fall flat.

Before Simon can respond, a girl’s voice says, “Professor Newkirk!”

Simon looks behind me and his face breaks into a grin. “Hi, Katie, Sarah.” I step aside to give him space to talk to the two students behind us. They’re both small girls with their hair pulled up in messy buns, attired in enormous boots and scarves wrapped thickly underneath their chins.

“Have you finished grading our papers yet? It’s been a week!”

“Almost,” Simon says. “And no, before you ask, I’m not giving you any idea of the grades so far.” He brushes a hand through his hair and leans toward the girls.

“I can’t *wait* to find out what I got. I was kind of worried, but the way you explained Eliot, it actually made sense. That was so funny when you said...”

I look up at the board displaying the drinks and prices. I try not to listen to their conversation, to Simon’s smooth murmurs and the girls’ laughs. I can feel myself drifting to the periphery, a forgotten presence. It’s familiar, this sense of drifting away like smoke; I sink into the blankness, willing my mind to empty itself, for my face to become motionless, betraying nothing.

*

“You ready?” Shawna asks as we approach the entrance to Carmelo’s. I breathe in deeply and nod, smoothing a hand over the back of my dress’s skirt.

“All right,” she says. I can see the way she scrunches her eyes and bites her lip when she looks at me. Shawna puts on a big smile and continues, “You better make sure you talk to him.”

“I will, I will,” I say. But already constriction seizes my throat and my veins seem to wobble as we open the door to the bar. One of the professors in the English department just had a book published, and so the department’s faculty and staff are holding a celebratory party. I’d called Shawna a few days earlier, convinced her that we should go to the party together instead of having TV night.

Dark gleaming wood, illuminated by soft lights, fills the room. People from the department are gathered around a large table in the back, past the bar. I stop next to the bar, staring at the group. Shawna urges me on.

“Heather, I’m so glad you came!” Rebecca says, rising from her seat. She pulls up a chair from another table for me to sit.

My breaths still shallow, I try to smile, my cheeks tight and resistant. Rebecca starts recounting a funny story from one of the other professors, and I nod along. Old seventies rock plays over the speakers and a buzz of voices and clinking glasses fills the room. I glance away from Rebecca, down the length of the table strewn with half-empty glasses. Simon is sitting near the other end. His slender frame leans over the table, his thick dark hair bobbing as he listens to someone talking. But then someone between us turns sideways, blocking my view. I sigh, squeezing the strap of the purse in my lap, and turn to Rebecca.

As I listen to Rebecca’s and other professors’ stories about their students’ ridiculous excuses for late papers, I start to feel some genuine smiles sprout across my face. I loosen my grip on the purse strap.

Rebecca and some of the others decide to play pool. At first I decline — I don’t want to put myself in the position of potential embarrassment, of possible clumsy moves, of having to worry about how I look as I lean over. But Rebecca grins at me with her large mouth and insists

that I join. I stand and follow them to the pool table. A large Tiffany-style lamp shines down brightly over the green surface.

One of the others hands me a stick — a “cue stick,” she calls it — and I hold it close to my chest, the color draining from my fingers as I grip it. Someone makes a sarcastic comment and the others laugh and I will myself to laugh too. Rebecca steps up to the table and leans over. I stare at her slender figure, the way her back arches slightly, her pert butt. When she finishes her turn, she laughs and pumps her fist, her ponytail swinging in the air.

My turn comes and I cautiously step up to the table. I blink in the lamp’s blinding light. Rebecca stands beside me and gently touches my arm as she tells me what to do. My heart is beating fast, and I breathe deeply, trying to quell my nerves. I focus on the table’s green surface as I lean over and put my cue stick into place. I can feel my body curving into position, the conspicuousness of my breasts and butt, and my elbow jabs backwards as I hit the ball with a loud *thwack*. It rolls toward a corner pocket but stops just before it can drop inside. I step away from the pool table, out of the bright light. We play a few more rounds before one of the professors, an older woman, says her back aches, and we return to the table.

I laugh as I sit beside Shawna and tell her about how one of my balls almost made it in. She grins and nods, but then the woman next to her says something, and Shawna returns to their conversation. I fall silent and stare down the length of the table. I can see Simon’s hands dart back and forth as he leans forward to speak to someone near him. Something heavy twists in my stomach as I look at his long fingers, the tuft of hair between the cuff of his shirt and his wrist. I wonder what they’re talking about, try to imagine the clever insights I would offer, but then recall my conversation with Simon about literary analysis. My stomach tightens. I think of

Shawna's living room, the glow of the TV with its familiar characters, the warm burnt-orange color of her couches.

Most of the glasses on the table have been drained empty, nothing left but beer foam or melting ice. I haven't ordered a drink yet. I glance at Shawna nodding along with her companion. I get up and stride to the bar.

"A mojito, please," I say to the bartender. I've never been much of a drinker. I need something sweet that disguises the taste of alcohol.

The bartender passes me the drink. I swirl the black straw around in the glass, watching the mint leaves tremble in the liquid. I slide one up the side of the glass and balance it on the straw and suck it into my mouth.

"Another scotch," a male voice says. I look up. Simon's leaning against the barstool next to me.

"Hey, Heather," he says. "Nice of you to come out tonight." He pulls up the corners of his mouth in a soft smile. His pale blue eyes seem to flicker.

I mutter a greeting and take a long sip of my drink.

Simon takes his drink and lifts it slowly to his mouth. "I noticed you playing pool. It looked like you were having fun." He leans toward me and says, "I'm glad. You seemed kind of dour before."

My cheeks grow hot. Has my discomfort been that obvious? But another thought tugs at me — *Simon's noticed me. He's been looking at me.* My stomach wraps around itself.

I shrug. "Yeah, I liked playing pool. I actually did pretty good." I try to laugh. "I just don't know everyone here. I'm not really a big party-type person." My cheeks are still warm.

“I understand,” Simon says. He looks away at the group’s table, narrowing his eyes, as if deep in thought. “Large groups don’t have the same kind of, you know, intimacy as smaller gatherings.”

I nod. “Exactly. You put it perfectly.”

Simon continues, “I am happy for Ed getting his book published, though. I’m going to have my own book coming out soon, actually. It’s about writers in the twenties. I’m going to do a reading from it on campus.” He turns and smiles at me.

“Wow,” I say. “I actually just got the poster announcing the publication. When I got it, I was so excited for you. You deserve it.”

“Still going on about those old dead white guys, Simon?” One of the other professors, a short round man with thick glasses and curly dark hair, has approached the bar. He laughs and pats Simon on the back, asking if he’s coming back to the table.

“Heather, come join us,” Simon says, gesturing.

I smile and nod. My heart swells as I step behind him, my limbs light as balloons.

*

About half the party’s gone home and a handful of patrons remain scattered around the bar. I feel a hand on my shoulder. Rebecca smiles down at me. “Just want to say bye before I leave,” she says. Her voice is soft and overly sweet. “I hope to see more of you sometime.”

I stiffen but attempt a smile. “Me too,” I say. “Tonight was fun.”

“We should get going soon, too,” Shawna says to me.

I’m sitting next to Simon, who’s still talking with the short professor. “Okay,” I say. “In a few minutes?”

She smirks and shakes her head. “That’s fine. But don’t linger too long. I don’t want to get to bed too late.” She turns toward the bar’s entrance. “I need to make a phone call. I’ll be waiting outside near the car.” She glances at Simon and continues to the door.

Simon’s paused in his conversation. He turns to me. “Are you leaving, Heather?”

I nod. “I think so.”

“I’ll walk with you,” he says.

My heart pounds as Simon holds the door open for me. The air outside is brisk. I dig my hands into my coat’s pockets. I glance up at him and twist my mouth into what I hope is a smile, and then look away. *What’s he going to do next?*

“So when are you going to show me your writing? For the grad school application?”

“Oh, yeah, that,” I say. “I can bring it to your office on Monday. I’d really appreciate your comments. I’m sure they would help.”

“Of course,” Simon says. “I’m looking forward to reading your work.” I nod, trying to think of something to say, but no words come. After a pause, he continues, “Who are your inspirations?”

“Inspirations? Hmm, I don’t really know,” I say. “I mean, I kind of just write what I like. I’m not trying to follow anybody.” My face grows hot.

“Ah,” Simon says. “You’re an original.”

I smile, the heat leaving my face. “Yes.”

Simon steps closer. “Listen, would you like to have dinner to discuss this more? I’d like to have more time to talk, just you and me. I’m free on Monday.”

My breath stops for a moment, and then starts again. The balloon feeling that's been with me all night expands. I nod. "Yes, yes, that'd be great. I'm free Monday too. Thank you so much."

"Of course." Simon smiles, showing his teeth this time, and I notice that a few of his front teeth are crooked and uneven, almost a gray color. The teeth look out of place on his sharp handsome face, but somehow the imperfection makes him even more beautiful. His pale blue eyes are like milky stones.

He reaches out and brushes his hand across mine and then squeezes it. Under his long, rough fingers, my hand feels small and clammy. My skin there bristles with heat. I hold his eyes. His gaze is sharp but there's something hard and steely about it, his eyes impenetrable, and after a moment, I have to turn away. He wishes me good night, and I mumble a reply before marching back to Shawna's car, my thoughts already racing toward Monday.

After switching off the TV and curling into bed, I try to replay Simon's hand squeeze again and again, wishing my memory had the accuracy of film, the moment already growing indistinct as I try to grasp on to it, the rough feel of his long fingers already slipping away. I imagine Monday night, us sitting at a table at a restaurant — *outside? No, it's winter* — I'd be wearing a black, or maybe blue, dress, the wineglasses reflecting the dim lights, Simon leaning across the table to speak, his gaze intent. I clutch my long body pillow, the images slowing down, as I fall asleep.

*

Simon holds the passenger door open and I slip inside his car. I smile at him and ask, "So where are we off to?" I smooth my skirt down over my lap, look down at my tights to make sure they're okay. The smell of the gardenia-scented perfume I'd spritzed on fills my nostrils,

and I hope Simon doesn't find it too overpowering. I rub my lips together, the heavy gloss I'd put on slick. I twist my purse strap around my fingers and take a deep breath, trying to slow down my heartbeat.

Simon flashes me a smile and then turns to look ahead at the road. "I thought we'd head back to my place. I can cook up some pasta and I have some great wine." We stop at a traffic light and he glances at me. "I hope you don't mind. I thought it'd be more intimate. Give us a chance to really talk."

"Oh," I say. I'd been looking forward to going out: being waited on, choosing from the menu, people seeing me with this man. The energy I'd had all day shrinks a little. But still, I tell myself, we *will* have more privacy. "You're sure you don't mind cooking?"

"Not at all," Simon says. "I like sharing my culinary skills with others."

Simon pulls up in the driveway of his house, a small one-story with a plain lawn. He smiles at me, his gray teeth showing, and my lungs swell. Simon steps out of the car. I take a deep breath and clutch the door's handle, but Simon has already strode over to my side and opened the door for me. I smile up at him and purse my lips, hoping that I have the same cute expression that I've seen so many other girls use. I make sure my skirt is neat around my legs as I step out. Simon leads me up the brick walkway to his front door, swings it open, and flicks on a light switch. Bright beams fill the foyer and living room.

The house is somehow different than I expected. The décor is minimal, the walls off-white, everything else shades of gray and beige. His bookshelves are meticulously arranged, all the books' spines lining up exactly, and only a few black-and-white landscape photographs decorate his walls, everything sapped of any warmth, cold with its precision.

Simon's cooking *is* good, just the right amount of garlic and spices in the sauce. The white wine has a nice fruity tang and eases my heartbeat. Simon talks about the classes he taught today, the jokes he made, about his doctoral dissertation. I nod and agree and laugh, but wonder about the writing sample I gave him — I dropped my story off at his office today, my stomach twisting as I thought of Simon reading it.

After dinner, we go into the living room with our wineglasses. We sit on a beige couch. I venture, "So, I know I just gave it to you today, but have you had a chance to look at my story yet?"

Simon shakes his head. "No, not yet. All day I've been wrapped up in other things." He squeezes my hand. "I'll get to it soon."

"I'm really looking forward to what you have to say. It's just so nerve-wracking to wait on what other people have to say about your work."

"I'm happy to do it, really," Simon says, smiling. "And don't worry." He grins wider, showing his teeth. My skin bristles with bubbly warmth. He inches closer and wraps his arm around my shoulder.

After imagining it for so long, kissing Simon is strange. His hands are warm and broad as they slide around my waist and back, his tongue soft, the skin on his face coarse, but it's all unreal, like an image staggering to life, and somehow too real, each touch and burst of warmth a moment that swells, intensifies, and then disappears. *Try to hold on to this moment*, I tell myself as I wrap my arms around his slender waist and breathe in his smell, woody cologne tinged with sweat.

Simon pulls away. I breathe deeply. "We can go to the bedroom," he says. "If you're okay with that."

I trace my hand across his. I look at his dark hair, slightly ruffled now, at the way the rough skin of his neck rises and falls as he breathes, at the arc of his long body. “Yes,” I say. “I’m okay with that.”

My skin still simmers with warmth and my heart thuds as Simon leads me to the bedroom. He turns on a dim table lamp and leans against the foot of the bed, smiling softly, his eyes sharp blue dots in his sculpted face. We embrace, and as Simon’s hands begin to crawl across my body, my stomach lurches as I think of all he’ll see when my clothes come off — the dark coarse hair that spreads around and below my belly button, the small folds of fat near my ribs, the lines of bluish veins where my skin stretches over my breasts and hips. I wish he’d turn off the light.

But he continues kissing me harder, holding me closer, and I open my mouth more. He pushes his mouth downwards on mine and squeezes my bottom lip between his. His movements are rough and quick, feverish, different than the slow, tender caresses I’d imagined. He dives, almost carnivorous, into the motions. He grabs my breasts and then places his mouth on one of them, jerking his head. His teeth clench my nipple. I gasp and utter a small cry at the unexpected sharpness, but he goes on. When he pulls away, he’s panting. He sits back on the bed, pulls off his pants, and grabs my wrists, sliding his hands up to my shoulders. He slowly draws my head down.

After, I lay next to him, arching my body against his, my arm across his chest. I try to deepen my breathing. Being beside him, like this, is what I’d imagined for so long. He lies on his back, his arms stretched over his head. I glance up at him and attempt a smile. His eyes flicker down and meet mine, a smile passing over his face.

“I have an early class tomorrow,” he says, looking up at the ceiling. “And then I have meetings all afternoon.” He brushes his arm over my shoulder.

“I’m pretty busy, too. Lots of errands to run,” I say. I close my eyes. I don’t want to think of tomorrow yet.

“I’m sure you do. The office couldn’t run without you.” Simon turns his eyes on me. “I’m sorry, Heather, but I think it’d probably be best if you went home so I can get enough sleep. So we can both get sleep.”

“Oh,” I say. A stinging pain washes across my face, as if I’d been splashed with cold water. I pull my arm away from him. “I guess that makes sense,” I say slowly.

I stand up and start pulling on my clothes. Simon remains on the bed, an arm tucked behind his head. As I look at his lean figure and long limbs, the dark fuzz of hair coating his legs, a chill passes through my body, a weird kind of blankness.

Simon says, “If you don’t mind, Heather, I have something to ask you.” I bite my lip. He continues, “Could you please not tell anyone about this? I’d prefer that it remain between us.”

“Why?” I blink. “I’ll be professional, of course — ”

“I just don’t want gossip floating around.” He gives me a wide grin.

I stare at my tights as I pull them up. The cold blankness has settled in my stomach, a heavy block of ice. “Sure,” I say. “I won’t tell anyone.”

The heavy cold in my stomach expands as I drive home, the streets I pass appearing dark and empty in the windshield. Thinking of Simon’s hands on me, his mouth on mine, brings small bursts of warmth, but all the images from the night are surrounded by that still, distant cold. Months had led up to those moments, and then, they had become nothing more than a

string of small instances full of Simon's hasty longing. He'd initiated and pushed along everything with such speed, cut it off with such finality. Everything outside my car — the dark streets, the intermittent lights, the familiar quiet houses — looks muted, slow, their monotony already erasing what happened.

*

I'm sitting at my desk when Simon comes into work the next morning. I look up and try to smile. His eyes slide over me, his mouth a straight line. He continues to his office without a word and as I watch his back, my whole body sinks, my throat constricting. All day, I sit tense at my desk, the coil tight in my stomach, glancing up every few minutes to look for Simon. But the day goes by without him passing again.

For lunch, I eat a sandwich at my desk. I replay over and over how his eyes slid over me, like pebbles skimming across glass. As I chew on my sandwich, I notice the corner of the poster for his book sticking out from under a few papers. I pull out the poster; I need to hang it up sometime this week. I narrow my eyes as I examine the photo of Simon, the slight smile and distant gaze. It seemed mysterious and inviting before, but now, the vague expression fills me with prickly irritation. I turn the poster upside down and heap files on top of it.

The next day is the same: no Simon. But when I check my mailbox before leaving I see a stapled stack of papers there. It's the copy of my story I'd given him to look over. I'd almost forgotten about it. I grab the papers, my stomach lurching. When I get to my car and settle in the driver's seat, I take a deep breath and flip through the pages, reading Simon's comments. They're what I'd expected: complimenting my description, pointing out some confusing metaphors. When I reach his end comments and read them, I start to blink rapidly, my face growing hot. He says that my story is clichéd, the characters flat, the plot too sentimentally

romantic and too neatly wrapped up. He says that, in his opinion, it needs major reworking before I apply to grad school, or that I should perhaps use something different.

I toss the papers in the backseat. I wipe at my eyes and start the car. It's just what I'd been afraid of: my story is nothing more than romantic trash. I should have expected it. I had been stupid. I take a deep breath and grip the steering wheel.

I don't go to work the next day. I lay in bed, snacking on peanut butter, and watch repeats of my favorite TV shows on my laptop. A numb emptiness overwhelms me. The characters are like friends I know but don't have to talk to. The stories are familiar and the endings neat. I sink into their tidy structures.

*

I walk to the café to get a coffee. It's Friday afternoon, and so the campus is quiet, many students having already departed to their dorms or elsewhere to start celebrating the weekend. After getting my coffee, I go to the service counter to put milk and sugar into my cup. Some students are sitting nearby, two boys and a girl. They look young, like freshmen. The girl's eyes are circled with heavy black eyeliner and she's wearing a T-shirt with a picture of some kind of cartoon character. She leans forward across the table, squeezing her hands together, and an intense kind of hunger fills her eyes. "Are you guys going to the party tonight?"

I pour milk into my coffee. Both boys lean back, their arms folded. One of them shrugs. "Maybe. I have to see what my bros are doing." He looks down at the smartphone in his hands. The other one glances at him and they exchange a knowing kind of smirk.

"I *so* want to go," the girl says. "I'm trying to make my friends go with me. You guys should come! I really want to see you there!" Her voice rises to a higher pitch near the end of her sentence. She raises her eyebrows. Her eyes look doleful, almost wet, beneath the heavy

makeup. The boys say nothing. I swirl the wooden stirring stick around in my cup. She starts to laugh, but it sounds weak, more like a stutter.

The boys stand up. One of them, the taller one, says to the girl, "I'll see you around." She breaks into a hopeful grin and repeats that she hopes to see him at the party. I toss the wooden stirring stick into the trash and push the lid down on the cup, making sure it's fastened on tight. The girl is still watching the boys walk away. Her face is crumpled, her lips twisted together. I grip my cup. A thudding fills my body as I look at the girl. She brushes a hand through her hair and looks down at the table. I sigh and turn to the door.

As I walk back to the humanities building, my cell phone buzzes. It's Shawna. "You're still on for TV night?"

"Yes," I say. "Definitely." I think of reclining on her cushiony sofa, eating snacks, bathed in the soft light of the TV.

"Good," she says. "We have some episodes to catch up on. Oh, and you need to tell me what happened when you had dinner with Simon. I'm surprised you haven't said anything yet!"

I suppress a sigh. "Nothing happened. There's really nothing to tell."

Shawna starts to say something. I can hear the question in her voice, and I quickly say, "I need to take care of some things before the weekend. I'll see you later."

As I pass under the arched entryway into the humanities building and climb up the stairs, the familiar pinched anticipation returns to my stomach. I take a deep breath and stare down at the white lid of my coffee cup and quickly stride to my office.

I notice a post-it note on my desk reminding myself to hang up the posters announcing the upcoming readings. I rub my forehead and stare at the ceiling. I know I've been putting it off. I press my hand down on the stack of files on top of Simon's poster and slowly pull it out.

I prop the poster up in front of my computer monitor and narrow my eyes at the bold letters of Simon's book title, *The Vice of Words*, and at his photo. I realize how cold his blue eyes are, how he holds his mouth shut with that small smile so that his crooked teeth are hidden. I reach for pushpins, but then stop. Instead, I pick up the poster and stride over to the paper shredder next to my desk.

I push the on button and raise the poster above the shredder, the photo of Simon facing me. The machine hums and I lower the poster toward it.

"Heather?" A young woman's voice says. "What are you doing?"

Still holding the poster aloft, I slowly turn. One of the graduate students is leaning against the doorjamb, her eyebrows knit together. I blink at her and she says, "Sorry — I, um, was dropping by to give you some paperwork about my assistantship."

She glances behind her, and I realize that Simon is approaching. She grins at him and touches his arm. "I just need to take care of something before we go to lunch," she says.

"Sure, no problem," he says. He's tilting his head down toward her, making sure not to look at me.

I feel frozen in place, and as I stare at Simon's averted eyes, the length of his body in his pinstriped shirt and slim pants, the grad student's hand near the hair on his wrists and her wide-eyed expression, something starts to burn inside my arms and chest, something that feels like it's going to burst through my throat.

"Nice to see you, Simon," I say. He glances at me. "Hello — " he frowns as he notices how I'm holding the poster above the shredder. "Heather?"

I shove the poster into the paper shredder, and the machine screeches and grinds as the glossy material goes through. The shredder's light blinks to signal that it's done. I can feel the

grad student and Simon watching me as I pull the long tray out. I pick up the poster's shreds, long, narrow pieces, and curl them into a ball and throw it in the trash.

I glance up at the grad student and Simon. Their faces are twisted in confusion. Simon's eyes start to harden with stony anger, and as he opens his mouth, I will my lips into a smile and quickly say, "Don't worry. I just needed to get rid of some insignificant things I had laying around." I wave my hand at the grad student and gesture at the desk. "Come here, let me take care of that paperwork for you."

Empty Rooms

I've always hated summer. The ceaseless beating of the heat, the sunlight, the humidity becomes oppressive. The light overexposes everything, bleaching the sky and the concrete. The humidity pounds down like a heavy invisible fog, as if it wants my body to surrender and sweat out its secret desires. It all makes me wish I could go up north, escape to winter and wrap myself in a cocoon of blankets, hidden by white powder.

Too bad I live and work at a beach motel in Florida. It's on a key in the Gulf Coast, near a small town populated by the elderly. The Sea Wanderer's Inn, owned and operated by my mom and stepdad, isn't like one of those high-rises with indoor hallways and their own restaurants and bars. Laid-back charm, according to my mom, is our motel's selling point. Most of our patrons are lone adults visiting parents cooped up in nearby nursing homes or noisy families on a budget.

That morning in July summer was reaching its tipping point and I was already drowning in its languid slowness. Sweat crawled down my back as I walked downstairs from our family's apartment to prepare breakfast for our guests. The longest day of the year was coming up. Soon summer would be over. This was the first time it would make no difference to me. In the spring, I'd dropped out of college, my sophomore year. Snapping back into the ordinary cycle of things no longer loomed ahead of me. Now the slow descent of the long days indicated something else, a creeping emptiness.

Our motel's units, along with our apartment and lobby, enclosed a small courtyard where Mom had created a tropical jungle. A lattice fence, choked by ferns and bouganvillea, separated the garden from the parking lot, the rest engulfed by green leaves and palms and cluttered by flowerpots. It was kind of shabby-looking, but the web of leaves provided a shady escape from the sun. Each morning we set out breakfast in the middle of the garden beside a few tables and

chairs.

I carried trays of eggs, sausage, and hash browns out to the hot plates in the garden. I thought Mom was ridiculous for serving this hot food in the summer, but she insisted that guests liked the homemade touch. As I returned with a stack of paper plates and plastic cutlery, the sausages' rich aroma wafted in the air, and I reached out to grab one.

"Joanna!" Mom said as she strode by. I shoved the rest of the sausage in my mouth and chewed quickly. "I've told you, don't touch the food with your dirty fingers. It's for the guests."

I turned my back and rolled my eyes. "All right. Sorry." I stacked the coffee creamers and shoved the sweeteners together.

"After you help with cleaning this morning, can you watch the front desk for me? And maybe this afternoon? Me and Rick are going into town."

The prospect of having some space away from Mom cooled the sweat on my skin. I shrugged. "Sure. What are you guys up to?"

"We're having a meeting with Phyllis." Phyllis was our accountant.

"Oh." The sweat grew sticky again. "Is the motel okay?" I tried to keep my voice neutral.

"That's what we're going to talk to Phyllis about."

"We haven't been as busy this year. Not even during the summer so far. I was looking at the records."

Mom waved her hand. "Joanna, you always worry too much. Don't fret. That's why we're talking to Phyllis." Her expression was guarded. "We might have to cut some corners, that's all."

I poured coffee into a paper cup and stirred in cream and sugar. I turned around to face Mom. "We could start by cutting back on this spread." I took a sip of coffee and gestured

toward the breakfast. “Come on, Mom, do we really need to serve this hot food when it’s already burning up outside?”

She shook her head. “Stop your harping about that. I’m not changing it.”

“Thanks for taking my suggestions seriously. I’m glad to see my service is so valued around here.”

Mom’s face inflated, like she was gearing herself up, and I started to cringe, expecting another lecture about my future. But after a moment, she deflated and turned to the office with a sigh, as if it wasn’t worth it.

*

Before taking over the desk for Mom, I helped our maid, Gloria, clean out the rooms that guests had recently departed. It was just two rooms. Now only one family remained. Those families, along with a couple of lone travelers at the beginning of the month, had been our sole guests in the last few weeks. In previous years, we’d been packed at this point in the summer.

Gloria was middle-aged and had worked at the motel since I was a young teenager. “How’s it going, Joanna?” she grunted as she pulled sheets off a bed and stuffed them into the hamper.

I wandered the room, picking up trash. I shrugged. “Nothing new. This the first time, for as long as I can remember, that I won’t be going back to school in the fall. It’s weird.”

“I bet,” Gloria said. “So does that make you want to return? Or are you sick of working here yet? Any plans for the future?”

“Please,” I rolled my eyes. “I already get enough of that from Mom.”

Gloria grinned. “Sorry. I guess I’m trying to live vicariously through a young person like you.”

“You should find another young person to live through, then. You know that working at the Sea Wanderer’s Inn doesn’t exactly promise a life full of excitement and adventure.” Her question about the future tugged at me, made my veins rigid. “It doesn’t make any difference one way or the other what I do. It’s pointless either way.”

“Jesus. I didn’t mean to upset you.” Gloria frowned. “What you need is to do something fun. Loosen up. Go out and enjoy some of your freedom.”

I picked up a bottle of Windex. “Maybe I’ll see if Holly wants to hang out tonight.”

Gloria went off to do the laundry. I walked along the row of rooms on the second floor. I knew that each one I passed was unoccupied, hollow. I went to the room at the corner, closest to the beach, and entered. The room was completely still. A block of sunlight yellowed a chunk of beige wall between the beds. Everything — the musty beds, the cheap furniture, the shitty ocean paintings — looked frozen, as if severed from time’s passing. I sat on the edge of one of the beds, sliding my hands across the seafoam green bedspread. Any imprints that guests might have left on the bed were long gone. The cheap material felt smooth and slippery against my skin. The emptiness of the room suggested traces of the people who had once been there. Now that emptiness was heavy with waiting for something to fill it; yet the stillness was so absolute that it was hard to imagine anything disrupting it.

I exited the room and walked down the balcony to the office, now even more aware of our motel’s overwhelming vacancy. Usually, it wouldn’t have bothered me so much. I would have gone back to school in the fall, leaving the motel for Mom and Rick to worry about. But now the summer no longer revolved downward to fall and its changes. I was faced with an endless succession of days at this mostly barren place. All I could see was a creeping repetition of those empty rooms and their dusty bed covers and blank TV screens.

*

I settled back in the front desk chair. A few guests were actually scheduled to arrive that day. I examined the list: a couple and a family. Now that Mom had left, I felt flushed with guilt for giving her a hard time. Mom had put up a calm front, but I knew that she was hiding her worry. Working here, I felt like I was maintaining a strange balancing act. I provided Mom with assistance, she gave me employment and lodging, but the trade still seemed uneven for both of us. I knew Mom was disappointed in me, that she thought I worked here out of some sense of obligation. But I had made my choice. I'd been tired of trying to bullshit my way through college. The Sea Wanderer's Inn was familiar, easy, at least.

Our front office had a shelf of musty romance and mystery paperbacks for our guests' beach reading. I pulled out a romance, leafing through it to find steamy passages. I could hear small kids splashing and whooping in our pool as I adjusted the blinds to shield myself from the inundation of sunlight.

An hour crawled by. The expected couple arrived. I went through the check-in procedures, putting up a cool front of professional disinterest, but I glanced up to examine them as I rustled through paperwork. They were in their thirties and stood close together. The man was tall and blandly handsome, like an athlete, and the woman was short and plump. She carried herself in a sexy way, emphasizing her curves as she moved, waving her hair as she laughed at the man's soft comments.

They were already prepared for the beach, the man in cargo shorts and sandals and the woman in a loose brown dress. Usually I would have found them unremarkable, just another husband and wife visiting a set of elderly parents. But as I looked at the man's fingers on the woman's back, her hand on his waist, I noticed that they wore no wedding bands. They were

acting like teenagers: leaning in toward each other to whisper, breaking into fits of giggles, the woman pressing her chest against the man's torso. They kept eagerly glancing at each other and then averting their eyes. As I watched them leave for their room, holding hands, I imagined that they were having an affair and this was their secret getaway. Maybe the romance book had gotten to me, but there was something thrilling in the idea of our little motel being used to hide forbidden lusts. My dad had cheated on my mom and I knew I shouldn't be romanticizing such a thing. But the flicker between the man and woman was almost visible, and somehow, it seemed hard to view them as just another married couple. Or maybe I was just bored.

The sky had become silvery as the afternoon wore on. A summer storm was approaching. I texted Holly, asking if she wanted to hang out. She was working at her waitress job and replied that she'd be down to hang out after her shift. *Do you want to smoke?* I said. Holly said *definitely* and that Eric, her boyfriend, knew someone who had a good supply.

When Mom and Rick returned in mid-afternoon, they entered the office with stony expressions. "How'd it go?" I asked Mom.

"Fine," she said shortly. "How's the office? Any problems?"

"Just boredom. It's been slow like always. I checked in one of the expected arrivals."

"Boredom won't kill you." Her eyes glazed, Mom began rearranging items on the desk.

A couple hours later, I crossed the bridge from our key to the mainland, headed for Holly's restaurant. The sky had thickened to a darker gray. The faded sign that proclaimed THE SEA WANDERER'S INN creaked in the wind. The sedate, almost motionless waters of our Gulf beach looked completely unfit for any wandering. I curved down the winding main road, past quiet mansions, the overhanging green leaves and palms like a tunnel directing me toward an exit.

*

Holly worked at a seafood place that catered to tourists, emphasizing its Florida flavor. When I arrived, wrinkly heads crowned with feathery white hair hunched in the booths, some accompanied by strained-looking younger parents whose worried eyes flickered between their children and elders. Tacky drawings of beach chairs facing the sea and of fish littered the walls and a buzzing fluorescent pink palm tree greeted your sight upon entering.

Holly had just gotten off her shift. She leaned against the bar, talking to Eric. Eric was her on-again, off-again boyfriend, or maybe her fuck buddy; on any given day I couldn't be sure.

"Hey, guys." I slid on to a barstool.

"How's the old inn?" Holly said.

"Oh, you know. A bunch of important guests all clamoring for rooms. It was so busy I could hardly get away."

She passed me a brown beer bottle. "Then you need this." She sipped her beer. "So Eric's friend who has the stuff said he's cool with hanging out."

"Awesome," I said. I turned to Eric. "Do you know him from school?"

He nodded. "Yeah. He's pretty chill. I think you guys will like him."

Holly grinned at me. "Especially you, Joanna. It's not often we get new guys around here."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah. You know I've had enough of the old men and the tourists. I could use some young blood." Holly and Eric laughed.

We finished our drinks and headed to Eric's friend's place. I had been friends with Holly since middle school, but we had grown apart in high school when she'd become part of the stoners' group and I was shuffled into the advanced classes. Holly had never been motivated to

go to college, and so when I dropped out, she was the only person I knew around here, and we'd started hanging out more. Holly knew what it was like to search for ways to scrape through the endless hours. And she didn't take things too seriously.

As we drove, the expected storm didn't appear. Only lazy drops of rain drizzled down. When we arrived, the friend lay sprawled on the couch, a reality show blaring on the TV. The curtains on the sliding glass door that led to the balcony were drawn. A floor lamp in the corner provided pallid light. The white walls were bare and the lone couch looked worn. The tiny kitchenette near the entrance was filled with scrubby dishes and empty beer cans and liquor bottles.

Seeing us, the guy sat up and leaned back against the couch. "Hey man," he said to Eric.

"Yo," Eric said. He gestured toward us. "This is Holly and her friend Joanna. Guys, this is my friend Nathan."

We smiled and greeted each other as Nathan surveyed me and Holly with glittering eyes. I knew that look and examined him myself. He was tall and lanky, with a shaggy, disheveled appearance. His face seemed to have a perpetually amused expression.

Nathan retrieved a few PBRs from the fridge and we sat on the floor around the living room, the TV buzzing in the background. Nathan sipped his beer and grinned. "So are you girls enjoying the summer off?"

"Oh, we don't go to school," Holly said. "I'm a waitress. Summer isn't really a break for me."

"Yeah, I work at a hotel. Summer annoys me. Too fucking hot."

Nathan shrugged. "That's what cold beer is for." He took a sip. "You're not missing much, not going to college. It's just a bunch of bullshit. Trying to pretend you give enough of a

fuck to get your degree and admission to the so-called real world. My main thing is my band. I play drums. School's just backup." He glanced at Eric. "And to please the parents." They laughed.

"So is this band any good?" I said.

"They've played a few bars near campus," Eric said.

Since I had dropped out in the spring, talking about college made me feel self-conscious. I knew others probably saw me as some kind of failure. But Nathan's statement was exactly why I had dropped out — when I'd gone away to school, I hopped between majors, switching from English to psychology to communications, anything that seemed vaguely interesting and promising. When I sat down to do the work, though, I couldn't bring myself to do it. Each class and each assignment carried the pressure to succeed, to move relentlessly forward to more titles, more hours of pointless work. Drinking, smoking, sleeping, all became more interesting. The idea that those four years, that arbitrary major, would determine the rest of my life became unbearable. It wasn't worth it. All it would lead to was a steady accumulation of days of work, each stacked upon the other. As I imagined the endless repetition of those stacks of days, their importance began to seep away. After college, I would just wind up in a pointless, monotonous job. That's what I had now, minus the debt. But still, I'd been in the advanced classes in high school and was pushed along the current toward college and the supposedly fulfilling career it would provide. Talk of college still gave me sharp pangs; it was a reminder that I hadn't lived up to expectations. Then again, people like Eric and Nathan proved that attending college wasn't exactly an indicator of intellectual depth. I envied Holly in some ways. No one had expected her to go away to school. She was able to go through her days free of the heaviness of those expectations.

Eric rifled around in his pocket and pulled out a marble-blue pipe. We went out to the balcony, a screened-in porch overlooking the parking lot. We passed around the pipe and inhaled.

Holly glanced down at the parking lot and then at Nathan. “You sure no one will be able to smell this?”

He shook his head. “No, it’s cool. With all this humidity, the air isn’t moving. This place is dead most of the time. A bunch of old people live here. I don’t think they’re aware of much.”

“Maybe they could use some weed to help with their old people pains,” I said. “They’ll smell it and get stoned and won’t bother us.” Nathan laughed, a loud yelping sound, and brushed his hand against my shoulder. Holly inhaled from the pipe and giggled as wisps of smoke flowed from her mouth.

She passed the pipe to me. I breathed in the fine smoke, let it sting my lungs, and then released it, surrendering to the lightness filling my head, like a balloon drifting upward. Eric and Nathan were joking around, both rambling about some nature documentary they’d watched on TV, and Holly giggled. I tried to pay attention, throwing in the occasional laugh. But mostly, I let the stillness of the drug fill me, a stillness unlike the empty motel rooms; instead of frozen in place, overcome by the oppressive sunlight, I felt myself released, as if floating inside that light, now a part of it.

We finished the bowl and went inside to eat leftover pizza Nathan had and to drink some more as we watched the shit on TV. After a while, Holly and Eric went into an empty bedroom, leaving me and Nathan alone together. We slouched on the floor against the couch. I regarded him. He threw his arm back on the couch, near my shoulders. “So where was it you said you worked?”

“At a hotel.”

“You get busy there?”

“Oh yeah, we have a ton of guests, there’s a lot to take care of. We run a good business.” I wasn’t sure why I lied. I had intended sarcasm but wound up falsely boastful.

“Cool,” he nodded. “You have a pool?”

“Yeah. And a hot tub.”

“Nice,” he said, drawing the word. A goofy stoned grin plastered his face. “You ever swim naked there?”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m not sure how the guests would feel about that.”

“Maybe they’d like it. Allow naked swimming. For everyone. It’d be a big attraction.”

He laughed at his own joke. I attempted a clenched smile.

He got up to retrieve a laptop that was plugged into a corner of the room. He pulled it open. “Want to hear my band?”

“Um, sure.”

Nathan clicked around until he reached the band’s web page, covered with photos of vacant-looking drunk dudes, some of them slinging their arms around girls who smiled stiffly, their glossy hair sweeping down across their chests. He played a song: typical indie rock, full of angular guitars and pounding drums. It was good background music, I supposed, but not anything I’d choose to listen to. He grinned. “You like it?”

I smiled and nodded. “Yeah. Definitely. It’s great.”

He looked at the pictures. “I’ve had some good times with those guys. Crazy times. One of our guitarists left last year, though. He said we were doing too many drugs and shit, that he wanted to settle down with his girlfriend. He got married a few months ago.” He shook his

head. Then he shrugged. “We have someone new, though, so it’s cool.”

He closed the laptop, then turned to me and smiled, his eyes shining with amusement. I smiled back, my mouth tight, as he stroked my hair. When he kissed me, I almost pulled away — he was a horrible kisser, his tongue lolling in my mouth like a heavy, lazy animal, his lips barely moving. But then his arms settled around my waist and I reached up to grasp his shoulders, sinking into the kiss, enjoying the warmth of his closeness. Nathan clumsily groped at my chest and I felt my legs spread apart. I scrambled to pull off my shirt and Nathan took off his. His dark body hair formed spiky ridges against his pale skin, and despite his lankiness, his arms and waist were pudgy. I pressed closer against him as he moved his hands down to my thighs. The stiff beating of my pulse slackened as I gave in.

*

Driving home the next morning, I barely noticed the stippled light and shadow of the curving green tunnel of trees. I replayed scenes from the night before, relishing the jolts of warmth the memories provided. A warm, nebulous mass filled my body, as if I had been remolded from clay.

That afternoon, I leaned against the side of the motel building with Gloria as she took her cigarette break. “So did you have fun last night?” she asked.

“What?”

“I said, did you have fun last night?” She smiled. “You’re out of it. I guess you did get to loosen up.”

I shrugged. “Yeah, I did have some fun,” I said in a coy tone.

“Oh? Did you meet anyone?”

“Well, there was a guy,” I said. “But I don’t know, it was no big deal. It was just fun.”

“Come on, Joanna,” Gloria teased. “You’re just saying that.”

“No, really. I’m not looking for anything. Just because you have fun together doesn’t mean there has to be anything more.”

A few days later, though, I was on front desk duty, and as I stared out the window at the faded concrete of the parking lot, I kept circling back to the night with Nathan. I couldn’t help it. That night had erased the long stack of days that beat down upon me. Being with another person, feeling the warmth of his skin as it pressed against mine, his body becoming a piece of my own — ceding myself as part of the whole — was a kind of release. And there was something appealing about Nathan, the way he didn’t try to hide his intentions or make false attempts at smooth talk. He wasn’t afraid to show his eager hungriness.

I texted Nathan a *hey*. About ten minutes later, he responded with his own. *I had fun the other night*, I texted. I checked in a family and organized some files before he replied. He said *Yeah it was fun*. I tucked the cell phone in my pocket and decided not to text him back, at least not today.

Mom came in. “How’s it going in here?”

I shrugged. “The usual.”

Mom sat down next to me, her arms and legs folded. “Listen, Joanna, I need to tell you about some changes.”

“Is this because of your talk with Phyllis?”

She nodded. “Yes, of course it is.” She looked tired. “Rick and I have decided we need to cut back because...” She gestured at the three vehicles in the parking lot, our sole patrons for the time being. “Well, you know why.”

“Okay. So what are we going to do?” I thought of the breakfast, of the hot tub that I found

unnecessary in summer.

She sighed. "I'm letting Gloria go," she said.

"What? Mom, why don't you cut back on some other expense instead of firing someone?"

"Joanna, we need something other than low prices to attract guests. They like those extra touches. We need to distinguish ourselves."

I scoffed. "Well, Gloria needs that job. She's worked here forever. How can you be so heartless?"

Mom stood up. "Save your protests. It's already decided. I'm calling her tonight."

I shook my head. "Unbelievable. I thought you'd have more compassion than that."

"Running a business isn't about compassion, Joanna. If you think me and Rick are doing such a horrible job, then go and start your own business or work somewhere else." She stormed into the back office.

I stared down at the desk, biting my lip. I flipped through the pages of the romance novel I'd been skimming, my pulse thumping. The blinding white sunlight bleached the shabby room. I got up and closed the blinds.

*

The next day, I sat on the deck of our pool, protected by the shade of an umbrella, facing the beach with its blocks of pale color: white sand, sparkling greenish water, throbbing blue sky, all frozen in the pounding humidity. In a far-off corner of the sky, dark gray clouds converged, distant streaks on the blue rim. There was little work to do. Being around the office and empty rooms made me flushed with anger about Mom firing Gloria. I cradled my cell phone in my hand, debating. Then I quickly shot off a text to Nathan, another *hey*.

After a little while, he texted back *what's up*. I waited for time to pass, and then

responded, *you should come over to check out my hotel's hot tub*. Mom didn't like it when I invited people to come hang out at the motel. But I figured that if I got distracted from work, that was Mom's fault for not being willing to pay enough employees. My gaze drifted to the hot tub. The couple from a few days before, the adulterers, cuddled in the bubbling water, their heads tucked together. They looked like one unit. The woman's laugh rang in the heavy air.

I listened to the rhythm of the waves as I waited for Nathan to answer. Sticky sweat coated my skin. It was hard to breathe in the dense humidity. After some time crawled by, Nathan replied: *Ok. Sounds fun. I can be there in an hour*. I gave him directions and clicked the phone off, pleased. As I imagined my skin against Nathan's in the hot water, the hazy warmth from the other night began to melt back into my veins.

I went inside to change into a bathing suit, sliding a sheer cover-up over it. I waited for Nathan in the parking lot. The concrete reflected the blazing heat, sending it drifting upwards to cling to my body. A faint breeze wafted through the air, ruffling the palm trees. The distant gray clouds had drifted closer.

"Hey, Joanna," he said. His arms circled my shoulders in an awkward hug. In my mind I'd looped moments from our night together again and again, but in the harsh daylight, he looked different than he had in the dim apartment. He was lankier than I'd remembered. In the sunlight, his pale skin glowed and his eyes glimmered.

"So where's this hot tub?" he grinned.

"This way." I led him through the garden to the pool area.

"I thought you said this place got really busy," he said.

"Oh," I said. "I maybe exaggerated a bit."

"A bit? This place looks dead."

We exited the garden into the sunlight. “It’s not dead. It’s just slow today,” I said.

He shrugged and put his hand on my back. “Whatever. It doesn’t make much difference to me.” He turned to look at the garden. “It’s a cute-looking place, I guess.”

“Okay,” I said. I took his hand as I led him to the pool deck. “I think you’ll like this part, at least.”

The pool was an electric blue square against the shimmering sky and ocean. It was empty except for a few bright swim noodles floating on its surface. The lovers had left the hot tub. “Sick,” Nathan said. Usually I didn’t like going in the hot tub in the heat of summer, but the wafting breeze had grown steadier, breaking through the humidity, and the sky was slowly darkening with gray clouds.

I smiled at him and took off my cover-up. Nathan had already stripped off his shirt and slid into the bubbling white foam. “I thought you were going to wear less,” he said as I dipped my body into the water.

I rolled my eyes. “Ha ha. Sorry to disappoint you.”

He turned toward me, his face close to mine. “Come on. No one’s around. Are you sure?”

I turned my face away. “Yes, I’m sure.”

“All right,” he said with an exaggerated sigh. But he grinned and glided his hands over my waist and hips. I touched his broad shoulders and slid my hands down, feeling his body grow narrower as my hands traveled downward. Nathan rubbed my thighs and kissed me. I had forgotten what an awful kisser he was. I moved my mouth around, trying to make him follow, but his tongue still lolled there heavily.

The sky grew grayer. Engulfed in the hot water with Nathan’s legs against mine, a

humming pleasure returned to my body. But I was growing tired of his annoying jokes. I couldn't stop noticing the pale glow of his skin and his faint musty smell. The overcast sky, clouds slowly shifting, hovered just beyond us. I stared at the motel building with its empty rooms.

"Joanna?" I stiffened. I was sitting with my back against Nathan, his arms around me. When I heard my mother's voice, I pulled away.

"Oh, hey, Mom."

She stood with her arms folded, her lips pursed. "What are you doing? Who's this?"

"This is my, uh, friend, Nathan. I met him a few nights ago." Nathan raised his hand in an awkward wave.

Mom ignored him. "I thought you were working, Joanna. But now I see you're slacking off with some guy. Great."

I bit my lip. "It was just slow." Mom frowned. "I mean," I continued, "he's going to leave soon."

"Good," Mom said. "I have some things for you to do, Joanna."

I doubted that. She strode away.

I looked down at the bubbling water, my face hot with embarrassment. Nathan chuckled. I wished he would shut up. "So you work for your mom?" he said.

"Yeah. She owns the place."

"You didn't tell me that."

"I know."

"Man, that was awkward. I thought you were taking it easy not going to school. But I'm not sure it's much better working for your parents." He laughed.

“I know,” I said again. “But I don’t know what else I would do.”

Nathan shrugged. “I guess it doesn’t matter much. I just want to spend my time playing with my band.” He threaded his fingers through my hair. “It’s kind of cute, that you work for your mom,” he said.

I pulled away. “You better get going.”

“Right,” he said. He clambered out of the hot tub. Over the ocean hung charcoal gray clouds. Above the motel, they dissolved into glassy silver and receded into the bleached sky on the opposite horizon.

Nathan told me about a party he was having in a few days and said I was welcome to come. I told him I would think about it. Even before Mom had interrupted us, I’d been disappointed by his visit. My hours had seemed to rise toward it. But that excitement had declined, seeped away. When I was stoned in the dim apartment, I’d been satisfied with Nathan. But here, the bright glare of the sunlight exposed him. He couldn’t provide what I’d imagined I wanted.

*

As I ate my dinner, a tuna sandwich, Mom sat next to me, her fingers locked together. I looked down at my plate. “That was a nice trick you played today, Joanna.”

I bit into my sandwich, chewed, and swallowed. “What do you mean?”

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t start with your crap. I know you’re still upset about Gloria. But I’m not going to put up with you slacking on your work and having strange guys over.”

“What work? I didn’t have much to do so I thought I might as well invite someone over.” I stood up and put my plate in the sink.

“That’s exactly why I had to let Gloria go. I’m not going to pay someone to laze around and do nothing.”

“Oh my god,” I said, sighing. I leaned against the counter.

“And that includes you, Joanna. I expect you to work, not stage little rebellions.” Mom stood up, her arms folded.

“I told you, Mom, it wasn’t a rebellion. My whole life isn’t focused on you.”

“Well, you do depend on me. When I agreed to let you live and work here, I wasn’t expecting this.”

“It was just one guy, Mom.” I shook my head. “It’s my life.”

“Your life? It doesn’t look like you’re doing much with it.”

“Please, drop it. I’m the one who makes decisions about my life.”

“Yes, and I’m the one who runs this motel, the one you work for. If you don’t like how I handle things, move somewhere else or get another job. I’m not stopping you.” She paused.

“You have potential, Joanna. If you just *tried* more, you could do something with yourself.”

She put her hands on her hips. “I knew I shouldn’t have let you drop out of school.”

“*Let* me? That kind of thinking is exactly your problem.” I walked out of the kitchen to the living room, toward the door. “Maybe I *will* leave.” My pulse became a metallic thump. “I just need some time to figure things out.”

“That’s what you said months ago,” Mom said. I threw my hands up in frustration, but Mom was already striding to her bedroom.

I went to my room and slumped on the bed and squeezed a pillow, closing my eyes, trying to take deep breaths. I sat up and texted Holly to ask if she wanted to hang out. She replied that she couldn’t tonight. She was busy at the restaurant and had plans with Eric later. I threw the cell phone on the floor. All of these months, I’d thought that I was somehow better than Holly, that because I’d been pushed by expectations, I was above her. But now I knew we were alike:

not willing to give enough of a shit to go through the motions. My imaginary future didn't matter.

Mom and Rick were, as usual, watching one of their crime TV shows in the bedroom. I pulled one of Rick's beers from the fridge and carried the green bottle with me as I exited the apartment. Passing the motel units, I noticed a pool of light on the second-floor balcony. The lovers were sitting in plastic chairs, their arms wrapped around each other. The breeze carried their quiet murmurs.

I walked down the wooden steps leading to the beach. The sky had settled into a deep blue. Some humidity lingered, but the sun's absence had freed the air. The white sand faintly glowed from the streetlights and I could discern the shimmering glint of the waves as they lapped against the shore.

I sat on the stairs, sipping my beer, my bare feet sinking into the powdery sand. The air was gentle, refreshing. The moon was a quarter-full. The dark ocean and sky dimly glinted in its light, darkening into formless black the further I gazed into the distance.

I watched the waves as they splashed against the shore, withdrew, splashed again, back and forth in a steady rhythm. I stood and walked down the stairs and across the sand to the water. But I stopped when I reached its edge. The water lapped against my legs, embracing them for an instant before releasing them again. I stayed there, my feet sinking into the cool, wet sand.

A Temporary Trip

Nicolete meets him at a restaurant with red vinyl booths and shining napkin dispensers. It's off a highway overwhelmed with billboards and filled with the never-ending drone of travelers. She's already ordered her coffee. He walks in. She grips the white mug and takes a long sip. He sits down across from her and she smiles and says hi. The waitress comes and takes their orders. The sky dims outside, drivers turn on their headlights, yellow streetlights flicker on. He orders a stack of pancakes with bacon and she orders eggs with hash browns and sausage.

The waitress leaves. He leans across the table. His hands rest near the white mug, and her eyes fall on the long fingers and the dark curling hair that starts at his wrists. She tries not to look at the pale stripe on his ring finger, the slight dent in the skin. She doesn't want to ask why he's free. She knows that his wife is somewhere out there, maybe at home, maybe visiting friends.

Nicolete takes a packet of sweetener, shakes the yellow bag, and pours it into her coffee. She sips the sweet black drink. He strokes her hand, his fingers lingering. He asks her how she's doing, if she's having any luck with auditions. She tells him she has some prospects, but that she's glad for her day job. His mouth settles into a soft smile. His eyes are intent, filled with a sharp light, pale razors burning into hers.

Their food arrives. He pours a tide of syrup over his pancakes. The flaky ball of butter melts into the syrup. As Nicolete chews on her eggs, she watches the way he holds his crispy, blackened bacon between his fingers.

It's dark outside now, the restaurant's sign a glowing blue circle in the black frame of the window. An elderly couple walks past the window to the entrance. The woman's fluff of white

hair and the man's bald head shine in the lights. She walks slowly with a cane, and the man puts his hand on her back and opens the door. She swats her cane at his leg. He drops his hand. As the door swings shut behind them, Nicolete catches her face in the window's reflection. Dark shadows fill the hollows of her neck and cheekbones. She turns away and looks at the ooze of syrup left on his plate. Her face looks so much different in mirrors than in the glossy headshots she brings to auditions.

When they enter the hotel room, he rushes to the bed and Nicolete settles next to him. Everything in the room is beige and brown — the carpet, the walls, the dressers, the desert landscape hanging above the bed. The bed is a wide expanse covered with a shiny tan bedspread that makes a scratching sound when they move. When she takes off her shirt, she stands, and he runs his fingers down her back, sighing heavily when he reaches her jeans. She's dyed her hair red. It tumbles down her back and he pulls at it. She inhales sharply at the pressure of the pull and asks him to do it again.

He doesn't like to kiss her too much when they're together. His movements are deliberate but hurried, his fingers skittering across her skin. His fingers are so long and thin. They irritate her sometimes, their delicacy, his hands feel too flimsy. At one point, his arms tighten around her waist. The bottom of her belly melts. She pushes her lips against his neck and travels upward and gnaws at his mouth and kisses. He kisses back for a moment and then pulls away, takes her hands, turns her around. After, she can feel his eyes. He looks at her face and his eyes are blank walls. The bright light from the bathroom shines on the bed and his breathing sounds loud. He can be anybody.

They rise early because he has to get home. Nicolete takes a cab back to her apartment, passing flat dry land and then towering palms. She showers, does her hair, and puts on makeup,

opening her mouth as she brushes on black mascara. She wears a blue cardigan to the audition and plays a Midwestern girl named Penelope who's fallen hopelessly in love. She pouts and widens her eyes at the actor playing her lover and kisses him softly on the lips as the scene ends.

Looking Through the Screen

There was something about the morning that was bright and clear, lucid. Ethan rose with the dawn, the blue-gray sky outside giving way to white sunlight. The sunlight illuminated the dust on his curtains and slowly overtook the shadows on his mattress and rumpled comforter. The light gave everything the grainy quality of film. Ethan had the sense he was in the presence of someone else's recording.

A sluggish wave of drunkenness remained with him from the night before. His roommate, Adrian, was a bartender and Ethan had visited him while he was working. Ethan had worked his way through a half-dozen beers, watching Adrian sling drinks and entertain the customers by telling dirty jokes, tossing and catching glasses, singing along to music, a show to guarantee himself some hefty tips. Adrian had used his sharp green eyes to charm some women customers and Ethan had shared that glow before their final lurch home and collapse.

Still rising from sleep, Ethan tugged a black t-shirt over his head. He thought of Adrian asleep in the next room, his mess of dark hair shoved against the pillow. Ethan looked in his smudged mirror and ran a hand through his own greasy hair, trying to smooth down the dishevelment, and then figured he was ready. Before leaving, he glanced around his bedroom, thinking of his brother who was coming to visit in a few days. Heaps of books, many of their spines still smooth and uncracked, cluttered the bookshelf and floor. The large computer monitor shoved into a corner across from the bed. A few artsy photos of models formed a small constellation on one of the walls. Ethan took a deep breath as he tried to imagine Justin standing in this room.

When he arrived at the coffee shop's glassy exterior, crisp sunlight filled the air, sharpening every edge. The store's brown leather couches and geometric chairs were still

unoccupied but business types had already formed a line. Ethan grabbed an apron from the back and tied it around his waist. He used to love the bitter smell of coffee. After working here for the last couple of years, though, the overwhelming aroma now filled him with weariness.

Ethan was assigned to cashier today. He settled into his position behind the cash register and placed his fingers against its buttons, his arms dangling idly. Customers could be annoying but he preferred the repetition to the hurry of making espresso beverages. Women in monochromatic blouses and skirts and men in crisp shirts and ties passed through the queue, ordering their drinks with efficiency, enthusiasm, resigned indifference.

Ethan liked being part of this cycle, serving his place in the shifting gears of society. Despite waking early, being dragged up from empty, invisible sludge to become part of the visible world, he enjoyed the morning hours too. Every rushed action and movement held purpose. A woman ordered an iced caramel latte from him. As he put in the order she typed furiously on her smartphone, her brow furrowed. She was overweight, her broad face with its high forehead plain, but her dark hair was smoothly pulled back and her clothes had the blank cleanliness of professionalism. As Ethan handed back her credit card and she shoved it into her leather wallet before turning back to the phone, his action became concrete, made his slumping over the cash register functional.

“Have a good day,” he said, twisting his mouth up in a half smile. She muttered a “thanks” as she rushed to the pick up counter.

A guy wearing a shiny royal blue tie sidled up. Ethan slid his fingers over the cell phone in his pocket. The guy’s hair gel glimmered, his facial stubble looked raw, his white teeth plastic gems. He ordered his iced Americano gruffly, gazing off to the side, not meeting Ethan’s eyes. He kept his gaze on that distant point as he paid.

Ethan saw dozens of these kinds of guys every day he worked. Usually, they didn't bother him — they were just examples of preening arrogance, youthful self-importance, another segment of the overall milieu. When a break in the line came, Ethan pulled out his phone and looked at his text messages. He pulled up the previous day's messages from Justin, who had sent him the time when he'd be visiting in a couple days. He was visiting town for a business convention and had told Ethan he would stop by his house to "touch base" and because he needed to discuss, in his words, "some personal matters." Ethan stared at the *look forward to seeing you* text from Justin and then glanced up at another group of guys in button-up shirts and dark slacks, their belt buckles and shoes gleaming in the white sunlight. He shoved the phone back in his pocket. The store's acoustic music hummed away, the gnashing whir of the espresso machine spinning over it. Justin would belong in that group. Ethan imagined one of them raising his face to grin at him, his arms open for a brotherly hug.

"Bunch of sheep," his co-worker, a college-age girl, said as she shoved a jug of milk into the fridge.

Ethan glanced at her.

His co-worker nodded toward the group of men, who were chuckling with one another. "They're just a bunch of corporate drones. They're all the same. Those guys annoy me so much." She swept her hair, which she wore in a severe side part, out of her eyes. Ethan watched her small fingers clasp a rag and her back arch as she bent over to wipe the counter.

"I guess," Ethan said. "All the customers blend together after a while."

She took a sip from a drink she'd prepared for herself. "They're definitely the worst. Some of the regulars here are cool. I like talking about music and art and stuff with them."

She went to the back to get more cups. Ethan saw a customer approaching and he straightened his posture, willing himself to smile. He worked through the line, taking down orders, sliding credit cards, counting change. Once again he became another link in their chain of moments, a small piece of the mold that would shape who they were for that day. As the customers passed through the line, though, they all stepped away from the counter with their beverages and back into the clear sunlight of day, striding on, while he remained standing there in his beige apron, wondering where they would drink that coffee and if their days were really as important as their brisk strides made them appear.

*

It was almost four o'clock, when Ethan's shift ended. Customers came in intermittently and he shuffled back and forth behind the counter. Students with laptops were scattered around the small tables.

His co-worker sat near the service counter. Her shift had finished a few hours before, and after getting off, she'd settled at a table and pulled books from her bag to study. Ethan stared at her dark hair, thick with bangs and layers. She wore a skirt and black tights. He looked at the way the tights' fabric stretched across her thighs, how the softness of her thighs settled and spread across the chair. She stood up to get a cup of water, the sheerness of the tights shifting across her legs with the movement. As she sat back down and sipped the water, she brushed her hair away from her face, and then frowned at her book, lips pursed.

Ethan had been outside smoking when she'd gotten off work. He picked up a rag and walked over to the service counter and pretended to wipe it. She glanced up and smiled at him.

"Hey," he said. "Having your usual chai?"

She sipped her drink. “I’m having a latte. I decided to mix it up a bit. I need some extra caffeine.”

“Wow,” Ethan said. “You’re so unpredictable.”

She shrugged. “I can be.”

Ethan leaned against the counter on one arm. “Oh really? What’s your name again? Rachel?”

She rolled her eyes and shook her head. “It’s *Renee*. Come on, you should know that. I’m disappointed.”

“I’m sorry. It’s so busy here, it’s hard to keep up. I almost got it right.”

“Okay. You better get it completely right next time, though.” She turned to her book.

“What are you studying?”

“The anthropology of religion. My major is religious studies.”

“Oh? I didn’t take you for that type.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m not religious, at least not in that way. I just find it interesting – analyzing the different beliefs and all that.”

Ethan nodded. “I was just teasing.” He made his voice mockingly dramatic. “You’re *looking for God*.”

She shook her head, a smile inching near the corners of her lips. “Something like that.” She twirled a strand of hair. “Please, don’t tell me it’s useless.”

He smiled. “Wasn’t going to. I’m all for useless pursuits, to be honest. Makes life more interesting.”

After Ethan pulled off his apron and clocked out, he strode by Renee on his way to the door. He reached for his pocket. “You want to take a study break and come smoke with me?” She smiled shyly and agreed.

Outside, Ethan pulled a long drag from his cigarette, the brittle smoke brushing over his mouth. Breathing out carried with it the usual sense of release, of tension building up inside his lungs and then surging out in a tide of smoke. He’d been limiting himself to one cigarette a day for a while, but now, that release was a feeling he wanted to return to again and again. He watched Renee’s lips close around her cigarette. She wore a cardigan, but he could see the sweep of skin under her collarbones, how it rose with her breasts. He took another long drag and tried to listen to what she was saying. Something about school, a test she had tomorrow.

“Do you have any plans after this test?”

“I don’t know. I’m just going to collapse.”

“You can come hang out at my place. Me and my roommate are having a little get-together.”

Renee blew out smoke and smiled. She glanced down at the ground and then raised her eyes to him. “Okay. I’d like that.”

They exchanged numbers. Ethan watched Renee as she went back into the coffee shop, how her skirt bounced with each step. He took another drag from his cigarette and threw it on the ground, grinding it with his foot. The clear whiteness of the earlier sunlight had disappeared; now the sunlight drifted down heavy and bronze, competing with dense blue-gray shadows. An elderly couple with a pair of drowsy beagles sat at one of the outdoor tables, chatting over their daily afternoon coffee. A tree’s branches ruffled in the breeze, its shadows quivering on the sidewalk. Ethan walked to his car to go home.

*

Adrian was reclining on the living room couch watching TV. “Hey bro,” he said.

“Ready for your brother tomorrow?”

Ethan shook his head. “I told you. He’s coming the day *after* tomorrow.”

Adrian sat up. “More time to prepare.”

Ethan went to the kitchen. “Sure, whatever.”

“We should bring him to the bar.”

Ethan slapped baloney and cheese slices between bread and carried the sandwich to the living room. “Eh, I don’t know if he’d like that.”

Adrian smirked at Ethan. His hair was wet and slicked back away from his face. His sharp jawline and high cheekbones gave him a feline appearance. “You mean he doesn’t like me. You know he thinks I stole you away from your family. That I’m the bad influence.”

Ethan sighed. “It’s been years. We should be over this. *I* don’t really care anymore.” Adrian started to say something but Ethan quickly said, “Anyway, I’m looking forward to this party we’re having tomorrow.” He paused. “I invited a girl from work. She’s pretty hot.”

Adrian raised his eyebrows. “Nice. I thought you were seeing that other girl, though?”

“Oh, her,” Ethan said. “I don’t know. She was pretty boring.” He bit into the baloney sandwich and chewed, finishing it.

“Ah,” Adrian said. “Well, you and this hot coffee shop girl need to play with each other tomorrow. That’ll make your brother’s visit more tolerable.”

“Sure, if you say so.” Ethan stood and yawned. “Time for my nap.”

“Okay,” Adrian said, rising. As he passed Ethan, he squeezed his shoulder and grinned. His green eyes pierced Ethan’s and for a moment the same slippery, heady feeling that had

washed over Ethan when he'd first met Adrian returned. He blinked. "Have a good rest," Adrian said. "Get ready to party tomorrow." His voice was sardonic but had a faint note of sincerity.

The bathroom was next to Ethan's bedroom, and on his way to bed he saw that Adrian had just taken a shower. Warm steam covered the mirror and tiles and the clean aqua scent of his soap wafted out into the hallway. Ethan collapsed into bed, laying facedown and pulling the flannel cover over his shoulders. The softness of the steam remained on Ethan's cheeks and he dug his nose against his pillow, inhaling the soap's fresh smell. As the day deepened into dusk, a blue-gray square of its remaining light glowed around the window's curtains. The steady *whoosh* of cars on the highway hummed somewhere out there, a never-ceasing pulse, a reminder of the world that marched on beyond the walls. As he closed his eyes, Ethan could almost see the glow of the passing headlights, the signs of restaurants and bars alighting in the darkness, red and green traffic lights drops of bright color in the thick black. All of it swirled in rhythm, shapes shifting to merge into a surrounding pattern, creating a blank space for him.

Ethan rolled over on to his back. He wasn't as tired as he'd thought. Blinking against the grainy light, he studied the items cluttering his bookshelf. Taped to one end of the bookshelf was a small, tattered flyer embellished with a jagged logo: *Grayson-Williams Books and Art*. Adrian Grayson and Ethan Williams. Their pipe dream that Ethan's friends and family had warned him against and that had failed miserably. Together they had dropped out of school, deciding they didn't need it. They'd envisioned opening a store that sold rare and used books and that housed an upstairs studio that would be a gathering place for writers and artists. Instead, the only place they could afford was a small shop in a strip mall in a declining part of town. Its mustard-yellow walls and sparse collection of books was far from the softly lit space of brick

walls and warm olive-colored armchairs they'd imagined. It had been difficult to get artists to display their work there or to attract customers. After a few months, they closed the bookstore, their savings disappearing with it.

Ethan flung his sheets off his body and rubbed his forehead. He'd have to throw away that flyer before Justin came over.

*

Bottles of liquor and beer, their amber liquid dully gleaming, littered Ethan and Adrian's kitchen counters. Music thumped from speakers in the living room. Adrian stood huddled with a friend from work and two women Ethan hadn't seen before. Both women laughed as they listened to Adrian. He waved his arms in an animated gesture and glanced between the women, his eyes sparkling and the hint of a smirk behind his smile. One of the women brushed her hand against his shoulder as she whispered something and then the other one touched his arm. Adrian's grin deepened, his eyes narrowing.

Ethan turned away and sat on the arm of the couch. Some other people sat on the couches and stood around the house in clusters. He pulled out his cell phone. Renee had said she'd be there soon. Ethan tapped his foot against the couch. He glanced up at Adrian, who was still laughing with his group. Adrian always knew how to make himself the center of attention. The way he smirked was both mocking and inviting, as if he were laughing at something only he knew about, tempting you to come closer, to get in on the secret joke.

Ethan glanced at the door and then went to the kitchen. He poured himself a rum and Coke. Adrian disengaged from the women. "Your girl still coming?" He brushed his hand against Ethan's arm.

Ethan nodded. "As far as I know."

“Good,” Adrian said. “You need to get laid tonight. Get your mind off your brother. I can tell you’ve been worried all day.”

Ethan had spent most of the day cleaning: dusting, vacuuming, doing dishes. He had realized too late that, due to the party, it was a futile task, but then figured it was at least a start. He’d been aware of Adrian watching him, and Ethan knew how foolish the cleaning was — who was he trying to impress? They lived in a rickety one-story rental filled with used furniture and cleaning wasn’t going to disguise that. Still, the impulse to clean, to wipe away dust and scrub down dishes, had been overwhelming. Justin’s face had been hanging around him like a gaudy balloon and all that scrubbing and wiping helped clear it away.

Ethan sipped his drink. “Whatever, I’m not worried. It’s just my brother.”

Adrian looked pointedly down at him, raising his eyebrows. “Okay. Just try to relax tonight.”

The doorbell rang. Renee stood there, wearing a low-cut dress and black tights. Ethan bit his lip, gripped his cup tighter as he looked at the pull of the fabric across her hips and breasts, at the concave of smooth skin below her neck.

“Hey,” he said. “Glad you made it. How’d your test go?”

“I think I did okay. I’m exhausted. I was up half the night before studying. I’m so glad it’s over...” She chatted on as Ethan led her to the kitchen to get a drink.

“Is that your roommate?” Renee asked after she took a sip, nodding toward Adrian. He was talking to another group of people now. He threw his head back to laugh.

“Yeah. He works as a bartender. He knows how to charm the ladies,” Ethan said, trying to keep his tone light. Another woman was standing beside Adrian, her attention rapt as he told some story. Ethan knew the effect Adrian had on women — he was certainly better-looking,

with his thick dark hair, green eyes, and tall build, than Ethan himself. And Adrian was well aware of his good looks, knew how to use them. A part of Ethan was always wary whenever he brought girls over or introduced them to Adrian, afraid they'd become trapped by his jade gaze, captivated by his feline attitude. Adrian had always reminded Ethan of a wild cat, like a panther: slinking around, slowly encircling and seducing his audience, showing off his beauty in lazy repose.

“Oh, I can tell,” Renee said. She turned to Ethan and smiled, her dark eyes glowing. Ethan held her eyes for a moment, and then pulled his away. She continued talking about her test.

*

The night progressed toward midnight. Ethan asked Renee if she wanted to go into the backyard to smoke and get some privacy and she agreed. The darkness in the backyard was black and thick. A few moths hovered around the bare light bulb that illuminated the back patio. Ethan took Renee's hand and led her away from the bright lights of the patio and windows. Loud laughter rang from the house and hip-hop music thumped persistently. Overhead, dark tree branches sliced through the moon. Ethan lit himself a cigarette, and then lit Renee's, her cheeks brushing against his hands.

As Renee lifted the cigarette to her mouth, he noticed something on the bare skin of her arm. He'd seen it before, at the coffee shop. He took her wrist and stretched out her arm to examine it. “Is this a tattoo? I've wondered what it was.”

Her skin was soft and the delicate bones of her forearm felt fragile under his fingers. Her hand curled at his touch. “Yeah, it's a tattoo,” she said. Ethan saw now that the small mark was

an infinity symbol, carved in thick curving lines near the crook of her elbow. “It’s clichéd, I know,” she said.

“No, it’s not. It’s clear, understated. It suits you.” Ethan outlined the tattoo with his forefinger. He could almost feel her breath against his face. “What does it mean?”

“*Mean?* Can we ever really answer that question about anything?” Renee laughed and shook her hair. Then her voice softened. “I don’t know. Like my whole interest in religion — it represents my beliefs. I’m not sure about God, but the idea of infinity, it’s something that’s beyond the everyday, you know?”

She bit her lip and stared at the empty space in front of her. She lifted the cigarette to her lips and took a drag. As she blew the smoke out, it rose up in front of her vision, and she glanced at Ethan. He slowly nodded.

She smiled and shook her head, dropping her arm from his hand. “I feel like I’ve been talking about myself all night. All my ideas about God and illusions and mysticism. Don’t know how I’m going to make money from studying this stuff.” She smiled at Ethan. “What about you? Are you going to school for anything?”

Ethan shook his head. “Nope. I went for a little while, but the structure wasn’t for me.” He squeezed her hand. “And I don’t think your ideas are silly. Don’t worry about money. We’re all going to die in the end, anyway, might as well enjoy it while it lasts.” He took a drag of his cigarette.

She laughed. “That’s optimistic.” She blew out some smoke. “But you have to have some kind of silly interest too. I mean, just working at a coffee shop...”

“What’s wrong with that?” He laughed, restraining a defensive note from his voice. He shrugged. “Me and Adrian did try to open up our own bookstore a few years back. More like a

bookstore, art collective thing. But we didn't know what we were getting ourselves into. We aimed too high and it failed." He forced out another laugh. "And here we are."

"Oh." Renee frowned.

"That's not to discourage you, though," Ethan said. "I'm fine with where I am now. The worst part was that my family — especially my brother — were so convinced it wouldn't work out. I hated proving them right." He finished his cigarette and tossed the butt on a dirty plastic chair.

"Well, maybe someday you *will* prove them wrong," Renee said softly. She took one last puff of her cigarette and inched closer to him. The rise and fall of her breath brushed against his neck. He looked down at her eyes — in the faint light from the house, their tawny brown color seemed to smolder, and beneath that, veiled something else, something he couldn't quite name.

Ethan grabbed her around the waist and leaned down to kiss her, and she curled her arms around his shoulders, opening her mouth to return the kiss. They kissed like that for what seemed a long time, their mouths growing more insistent. He ran his hands down her back to her hips, feeling the way her body narrowed and then widened and softened. The hunger that had been building up in his nerves grew suspended, restlessly hanging over an edge. He leaned into her and moved his hand down, below her buttocks, and started to dig his fingers into the space back there between her legs. Her body slackened for a moment, but then tensed up. Renee stepped away.

"The fuck?" Ethan muttered, trying to return his breath to normal. The edge he'd been approaching became a wall.

Renee didn't look at him. "I'm sorry — I didn't mean to —" She shook her head. "I didn't think I'd react like that. But I just got out of a — thing — with someone. I guess I'm not ready."

Ethan ran a hand through his hair and sighed. "It's all right," he muttered. "I was just taken by surprise."

The music beat on behind them. After a moment, Renee said, "I should get going. I have class in the morning." She frowned at Ethan apprehensively. "I'll see you at work?" Her dark eyes shone in the light from the house and her hair fell over her shoulders in soft tangles.

Ethan nodded. "Yeah. See you."

She said she had a friend who could pick her up to go back to the college a couple of blocks away. She walked through the yard around the house. After she left, Ethan pulled out another cigarette. He inhaled deeply. He'd had an idea in his mind of being in his bed with Renee, his nose buried in her dark hair, her body cupped by his and his arms clasping her waist as she breathed softly. Now that image seemed so flimsy. He dug his foot into the ground and kicked some dirt. He closed his eyes for a moment, taking a deep drag of his cigarette, and then opened them and glanced toward the house. Through the window, he caught a glimpse of Adrian's face, his cheeks reddened and his eyes cracking into an unsteady grin. Then the forms of others passed over him, weaving and bouncing, their bodies and faces interchangeable. The party was reaching its winding-down stage, slowly deteriorating as people wore themselves out from drinking or retreated to corners to make out. Some guests had already left and Ethan knew the rest would soon drift off.

Ethan slipped away to bed. Justin had said he'd be visiting in the afternoon the next day. Ethan tried to imagine his brother in his slick shirt and tie standing on their shabby front porch.

Somehow it seemed ridiculous. Ethan turned over, away from the light shining around his closed door. He'd seen Adrian slinking off to his bedroom with one of the women he'd been talking to. Justin had never liked Adrian. He'd called him a con, said he was luring Ethan away from "making more sensible choices." Justin had always presumed, with their parents' backing, to know what was best for his little brother.

Now Ethan knew Justin had been right about the bookstore. And he understood why he was suspicious about Adrian. Adrian's charm was blinding. His eyes and smile had the pull of gravity. Ethan had been drawn by that, eager to be let in on the secret. Adrian had opened a new space that Ethan had been glad to inhabit.

As Ethan drifted off to sleep, he thought of Adrian in his bedroom with the woman. His lips parted, his broad shoulders hunched over her, the sweep of dark hair on his chest and torso. Ethan recalled something from years before: Adrian's long fingers brushing over Ethan's arm, his eyes close to his own, the coarseness of his skin and hair. They had been drunk that night and the memory was faint. But as Ethan sank into sleep, he could see the softness of Adrian's lashes, his smile sincere as he reassured him.

*

In the bright morning sunlight, Ethan scrubbed dishes at the kitchen sink. The smell of coffee filled the room. He'd already taken the bottles from the previous night to the recycling bin at the side of the house. He still had to clean up the cups and trash from the living room.

As the water gushed over the dishes, Adrian strode into the kitchen, yawning. He wore nothing but boxers. He scratched the line of hair on his stomach. "Shit. You really are serious about that cleaning."

Ethan turned off the faucet and stacked the dishes into the drainer. “Justin’s supposed to be here this afternoon.” He surveyed Adrian. “You better make sure you’re dressed before then.”

Adrian poured himself a cup of coffee. “Of course I will. Calm down. You’re acting like the fucking president is coming or something.” He opened the fridge to get milk. “I thought you didn’t care what Justin thought, anyway.”

“I don’t.” Ethan picked up some papers that were scattered over the kitchen table. “I just haven’t seen him in a while. And there’s nothing wrong with wanting to make a good impression.”

Adrian sat at the table and took a long sip of coffee. “Okay,” he said, looking at Ethan pointedly. Ethan held his gaze.

“Anyway,” Ethan said. “He’s going to lecture me about how I need *direction* in my life. I don’t need him to lecture me on housekeeping too.” Ethan rolled his eyes. “He said he wants to talk to me about a *personal matter*. I can’t imagine what that is, but I’m sure that since it’s Justin, it’s of *great* importance.” He moved into the living room and started picking up plastic cups.

“Don’t let his bullshit affect you.” Adrian came into the living room and retrieved some cups, stacking them next to Ethan’s pile. “Good thing you got away from him, huh?” Adrian grinned at Ethan.

“Yeah,” Ethan said. He sat down on the couch and rubbed his forehead. His head throbbed as if a small weight had lodged itself against his skull. The light through the windows was incessantly, insistently bright.

“Hey,” Adrian said. “Anything happen with that girl last night?”

Ethan thought of Renee pulling away from him. He shrugged. “Kind of.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I might see her again.” Ethan didn’t know if that was true. He didn’t really know what he wanted from her. He thought of the way she had looked at him in the dark, her eyes like embers. Something warm swam in his stomach.

“You should see her again,” Adrian said. Ethan looked over at him — he’d expected a smirk, but Adrian’s expression was earnest. “She was cute. She seemed into you.”

Ethan scoffed. “You’re just being nice because Justin’s coming.”

“I try,” Adrian said.

*

When the doorbell rang, Ethan muttered, “Finally.” He’d put on a dark polo shirt and his nicest pair of jeans, had combed his hair back to try to hide the grease. As he’d brushed his teeth and shaved, he pictured the young businessmen from work, their scrubbed faces and pressed white shirts.

“Ethan!” Justin exclaimed.

For a long moment, Ethan said nothing. Another man was standing beside Justin — someone Ethan hadn’t seen in years. Nick had been his best friend in high school. He had changed. In high school, he’d run track and had been slim and boyish-looking with an easy smile. Now, he was heavier, his stomach and cheeks soft and flabby. He’d grown a beard, and in his tie and button-up shirt, he had an adult, resigned appearance. Ethan blinked as he peered at him. Justin was grinning with blind enthusiasm. Nick looked at Ethan cautiously, his smile almost sheepish.

Justin pulled Ethan into an embrace. Ethan, his feet still planted in the same spot, lightly patted his back. After he pulled away, Ethan said, “Justin — it’s good to see you.” He nodded at Nick. “I didn’t know — ”

“Yeah, I wasn’t planning on bringing him along — sorry, buddy, I would’ve warned ya.” Justin laughed. “We ran into each other at the convention, would you believe it?” He slapped Nick on the shoulder. “I told Nick I was visiting you and that he *had* to come. It’s like our own little reunion.” He beamed.

“I guess so,” Ethan said slowly. He turned to Nick. He felt tentative, shy. He was suddenly very aware of his greasy hair, of the dead leaves and ashtrays full of cigarette butts littering the front porch. “Nice to see you again, man,” Ethan said.

Nick extended his arm and they shook hands. “You too, Ethan. It’s been too long. I’ve wondered about you.” Seeing his former best friend like this, so different than his memory, made Ethan queasy. Ethan’s vision seemed to have become slanted, as if the objects surrounding him were shifting. But Nick smiled at him warmly.

Ethan invited them inside. They settled on the couches. Ethan offered them soda, and as he carried the glasses to the living room, Adrian strode in from the hallway. He wore a T-shirt and jeans, the tingly scent of his soap drifting in with him.

“Hey. Finally the big guest has arrived.” He stopped when he saw Nick. “Oh — I thought only Justin was coming.”

Nick rose to shake Adrian’s hand. “I’m Nick. Adrian, right?”

Adrian nodded. “Right, of course.” He fastened on a bright smile. “I didn’t recognize you.”

Ethan put the sodas on the coffee table. He leaned against the wall opposite Justin and Nick. Adrian had sprawled into an easy chair, and as the silence in the room grew heavier, Ethan glanced between him and their guests.

Justin drank his soda and leaned forward, rubbing his hands together. “Ethan, I wanted to mention to you, a new internship has opened up at work, and I thought you — ”

Ethan held up his hands. “Please, Justin, I don’t need your suggestions. I’m *fine* with where I am now.”

“Are you sure? I just want you to be aware of what else is out there.”

Adrian leaned forward in his seat, hunching his shoulders. “Come on, man, he said he’s fine. Lay off.”

Ethan narrowed his eyes at Adrian. He turned to his brother. “I thought you said you were visiting because of a *personal* matter.”

Justin had settled back in his seat, but his eyes lit up as he answered. “Right. I have a favor to ask you.” Ethan frowned and glanced at Nick, but his face was carefully neutral. Justin continued, “Do you want to go out for dinner and talk about it there? I’m starving.”

Ethan rolled his eyes. “Sure.”

“I’ll come along,” Adrian said, standing. He turned to Ethan. “If you don’t mind.”

Ethan, biting his lip, glanced between Adrian and Justin. But as he thought of Adrian sitting beside him as they ate, a steady calm washed over him. “Of course.” He started down the hallway to his bedroom. “First let me smoke a cigarette, though.” He’d already had a cigarette in the morning, but his head felt taut and bristly with the urge to smoke.

Justin followed him, telling Ethan that he needed to quit, that it was a danger to his health and a waste of money, and then jumped back to talking about the internship at his workplace, an

insurance company. Ethan responded with silence. He pushed aside a pile of dirty T-shirts and sweatshirts on his desk, internally scolding himself for not cleaning them up, and retrieved his cigarettes and lighter. Justin had fallen silent and was surveying Ethan's room. Ethan flicked his lighter as he watched Justin examine his black comforter, his stacks of books, the pictures on his walls.

Justin strode over to the bookshelf. Ethan's stomach tightened as he realized that he'd forgotten to take down the old paper with the Grayson-Williams Books logo. He sighed deeply and raised his face to look at the blank white of the ceiling. Then he turned back to Justin. Justin made a scoffing sound and flicked at the paper with his forefinger. The paper fluttered and shook. He smirked at Ethan and shook his head. "I guess some things don't work out," Justin said. "You gave up on that idea pretty quickly, huh?"

Ethan closed his hand in a fist around the lighter until its plastic surface dug into his palm. "We can leave after I smoke."

The old wooden frame of the screen door rattled as Ethan stepped onto the front porch. He pulled the door shut and secured its latch. He inhaled on a cigarette and then blew the smoke out slowly. The afternoon's golden light filtered through the blue-gray gauze of the porch's screen. Through the screen, the forms of the trees and neighboring houses were blurry and indistinct.

*

The coffee shop where Ethan worked was located nearby. They decided to eat there. Justin said he wanted to see where Ethan worked, and as they swung the glass door open, Ethan took a long, deep breath. They ordered at the counter and Ethan introduced his visitors to his co-workers, trying to keep his tone and laughter light. Justin smiled politely in response.

They sat down at a table near the gleaming front window, a conical lamp hanging above. The stand displaying their order number clanked against the table as Ethan set it down. A group of students sitting nearby burst into loud laughter and the serious voices of some business types rose from another table. The grind of the espresso machine screeched.

Ethan rubbed his forehead. Pressure was contracting against his throbbing head; he had drunk too much last night, like he always did. He watched Justin peer at the workers behind the cash register, at their beige aprons, at the stacks of paper and plastic cups and the glass case displaying sandwiches and pastries, at the tip jar set out where customers ordered. The sharp edges of his chair were hard against Ethan's back.

Justin nodded. "This is a nice place, Ethan. Good atmosphere." His voice sounded careful, diplomatic.

Ethan dropped his hand from his forehead and willed a faint smile in return. "Yeah. It's all right."

A worker with reddish hair slickly pulled up in a bun walked past carrying plates. She turned and nodded at Ethan and then slowly moved her gaze toward Nick.

Nick said, "Now, that turkey sandwich you recommended better be good, or I might have to make things difficult for you." He stroked his beard in mock seriousness and started laughing. She laughed too and grinned and shook her head as she walked away. "Don't worry, you can count on me," she said over her shoulder.

Ethan tapped his fingers on the table. "You haven't lost your touch, Nick."

"She's just being nice because it's her job." Nick shrugged.

"That *is* something you need to be careful about in service work," Ethan said.

“Anyway,” Justin said, “Nick is seeing someone.” He turned to Nick. “Come on, buddy, what would Ashley think of this flirting?”

Nick leaned back in his seat and took a long drink of his iced tea. His eyes still had that boyish gleam, and when he spoke, his face flashed with an easy playfulness. The beard and the weight highlighted those qualities, Ethan realized, gave them a dimension of maturity. He put his glass back on the table and raised his eyebrows. Ethan could see why his co-worker had coyly grinned at Nick.

“I’ve told you, Justin. Ashley and I have an agreement.” He glanced at Ethan and Adrian. “I’ve been with Ashley a while. We’re polyamorous. We’re committed but both free to be intimate with other people.”

Justin scoffed. “*Polyamorous*. Some made-up word. That kind of thing can’t last. I don’t understand it.”

“You don’t have to understand it. But not having those traditional limits about friendships and relationships and hookups, and really talking about it with each other, has made our relationship stronger.”

Ethan furrowed his brow, not sure what to say. Nick caught his eye. Ethan realized he’d been staring and turned away. He took a long drink of his water. Nick had surprised him — when he’d arrived at the front door with Justin, Ethan had assumed that he’d settled for the same familiar path. He had always seen Nick as the easygoing track star, gregarious and unwilling to churn the tide. But now he shrugged at Justin’s disapproval. Ethan’s image of Nick’s gray existence started to evaporate, flooded with an array of colors, suffused by jewel-toned shadows. This new Nick made Ethan uncomfortable. His throat tightened.

He reached for his cold glass of water and took several long sips through the straw. He always craved water after getting drunk and now he couldn't get enough. Compared to the tightness pressing down on his head, the water was soft and pliant, washing over his tongue and down his throat. When he swallowed, the clear icy water invaded and cleansed his brain's tired vessels, and Ethan closed his eyes for a moment, imagining floating in a clear blue substance with no boundaries. He took another sip and, seeing that only blocks of melting ice remained, set it down.

Adrian said, "I say go for it, Nick, if it works for you and your lady. I've always been curious about that kind of thing."

"Of course *you* would like the idea," Justin said.

Ethan narrowed his eyes at his brother, but then their food arrived. They busied themselves with digging in. Ethan sprinkled salt and pepper and hot sauce over his potato chips.

Adrian said, "So, Justin, you're holding us in suspense. Are you going to tell us about this personal matter or what?"

Justin put his fork down and wiped at his mouth. He straightened in his seat and, drumming his fingers, said, "Of course, of course." He paused, and then, lowering his voice to a grave tone, said, "I'm getting married. I proposed to my girlfriend — or I should say fiancé now — Samantha last week." He turned to Ethan. The way he widened his eyes and raised his chin reminded Ethan of a dog, a serious one like a German shepherd. "Little brother, I want you to be one of my groomsmen."

Ethan blinked. He picked up a chip covered in hot sauce and slowly chewed. He hadn't been in touch with Justin in years, except for some holiday and birthday greetings, and had known nothing about his romantic life. The idea of him proposing with a ring and walking down

the aisle with some woman was unsurprising, almost inevitable. But Ethan couldn't see himself there, in a suit accompanying a bridesmaid. He swallowed. "Are you sure? I don't even know the woman — Samantha." He stared at the ice melting in his glass. "I didn't think you'd want me there."

Justin coughed. Ethan looked up and saw Nick giving him a long glance. He said, "I know we haven't been close. But maybe we need to make the past, the past. Mom and Dad really want you there, too. And Samantha said that I shouldn't be so hard on you." He folded his arms across his chest and cast his face down. His voice had been soft, and now he seemed embarrassed. Ethan could feel his own cheeks growing hot.

Nick gave Justin a playful nudge. "She's a good influence on him. Obviously."

"Well, yeah, I'll be your groomsman, Justin." Their mother would be happy, Ethan knew. He imagined her sitting in the front pew of the church they'd attended as children, her eyes watering. "Thanks for asking." The feeling of embarrassment swelled inside him again. He wiped his hands on his napkin, rubbing his thumb over its edges.

Adrian glanced between Ethan and Justin. He was pursing his lips, pulling his eyebrows together as if puzzled. He sipped his coffee. "Congratulations, Justin," he said. "You're a kind guy for asking your brother." Ethan frowned. Adrian's voice was flat and Ethan couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic.

Justin nodded at him in acknowledgment. "Oh," he said. "And Ethan, you're welcome to bring a date too, of course. Are you seeing anyone?"

"No," Ethan said. He bit into his chicken sandwich.

“He has prospects, though,” Adrian said. Ethan rolled his eyes and shook his head at Adrian in a “shut up” gesture. Adrian smirked but stayed quiet, his lashes falling over his eyes as he looked down at his plate.

As they ate, Justin pulled out his smartphone and slid through photos of himself and Samantha. She was a slim, brown-haired woman with a wide mouth. Ethan nodded along as Justin showed him photos of them at a beach, in hiking gear outdoors, holding glasses of wine at a lakeside restaurant. There was one photo of them standing beside Nick and Ashley at a party. Justin started talking about their wedding plans, about the church ceremony and caterers. Ethan dipped the last of his chips in hot sauce as Justin droned on. He already had an idea of how the ceremony would go, about how Justin and Samantha would look standing in front of a priest and holding court at their reception table. At the thought, his lungs grew rigid, and he wished he could put his head in his hands. He wondered if he had somehow surrendered by agreeing. He looked across the table at Adrian, who was smiling politely, his eyes narrowed, and raised his water to his mouth, Adrian’s face obscured by the glass and ice. Not agreeing seemed like surrender too. Those choices were on either side of a stark fence and Ethan wished he could stay balanced on that fence instead of jumping off into the void at either side, trying to fit into its crooked apertures. But he knew if he balanced for too long his feet would slip.

They finished eating. Silence fell over the table as they regarded their plates, empty except for ragged crusts and streaks of sauce. Justin started to push his chair out.

As he stood, a man’s loud voice barked from the shop’s order counter. “Goddammit, can’t you get anything right?” Justin swung his head toward the counter. A tall middle-aged man gripped his wallet and waved it at the worker behind the register. Ethan saw that it was the

redhead. The man said, his voice slow as if speaking to a child, "I know how much my drink is *supposed* to cost. You screwed up and charged me extra." Nick frowned.

The redhead pursed her lips. She blinked hard and, folding her arms across her chest, said, "You can speak to my manager."

"That's right, I'll speak to your manager, I'll tell him exactly what I think." The redhead turned her back to him and strode away.

"Customers can be such a pain in the ass," Adrian said.

Justin raised his eyebrows. "Jeez."

Ethan looked out the window, at the evening shadows eclipsing the remaining daylight. "You get used to it," he said. He knew the redhead and the manager were rolling their eyes as they talked about the customer.

They all paused. "Well," Justin said. "I guess this is it, huh?"

Adrian raised his hands. "Wait, wait. This is a special visit." He glanced around at their faces and then continued, "I don't know if you two have any plans tonight. But if you don't, why don't we go to the bar where I work? Hang out and drink?"

Ethan opened his mouth to say that he'd already been drinking enough the last few days and wasn't in the mood, but then, thinking of the lecture Justin would give him, closed it.

"Sure, that sounds cool," Nick said.

"We can't stay out too late," Justin said. "We have presentations to attend tomorrow morning."

"Come on," Adrian said. "You're going to be a married man soon. Might as well celebrate, right?"

Ethan added, “Yeah, Justin. If I’m going to be your groomsman, we need to drink together.” He realized the pressure weighing down on his head had disappeared. He had a sudden urge to see Justin drunk, his hair ruffled and shirt untucked.

“Okay, okay. If you guys want this bar outing so badly, I can’t say no. Especially to my little brother.” Justin nodded at Ethan, his teeth gleaming. Ethan’s cheeks tingled with unease as he returned the smile. Adrian, grinning in satisfaction, led them out of the coffee shop to walk the few blocks to the bar.

*

Ethan, sitting at the end of the bar, ordered another screwdriver.

“Another drink that’s vodka mixed with fruit juice? Come on, man, don’t you want something more *manly*? Sure you don’t want a whiskey?” James, the bartender, said.

Ethan pushed aside the empty glass he’d already finished and shook his head. Justin said, “Yes, thank you. Exactly what I was thinking. Afraid of the hard stuff?” He nudged Ethan and drank from his beer.

Adrian leaned over the back of a tall bar chair. “Leave the guy alone, James. We can’t all be bearded mountain men chopping wood and drinking whiskey to repress our feelings.” He turned to Justin. “And you should talk. It’s not like you’ve been chugging down the beers.”

James laughed and pulled out another glass. Justin waved his arm in mock protest and said, “Hey now, I have responsibilities. I can’t forget that.”

“Don’t we all,” Adrian said. “Maybe we should forget sometimes, huh?”

James pushed the screwdriver toward Ethan and he took a drink. He glanced at Adrian, his mouth twisting in an easy smile. Adrian smiled back and folded his arms across his chest. Then he turned and resumed talking to the girl who’d been flipping her long straight hair at him

since they'd arrived. He leaned in close to her and nodded vigorously as she giggled. Nick was quietly talking with her friend, occasionally running his fingers over her arm. Ethan drank more. He regarded the bottles of vodka lined on a shelf behind the counter. Justin was telling a story about a party at his workplace and Ethan nodded along, half-listening. The vodka bottles were different flavors, an orange label beside a red for cherry, then a blue for blueberry and white for vanilla. Light glinted off their curving surfaces. The bar had a vague Irish theme and was decorated with warm wood hues and advertisements for Guinness and Jameson. Ethan swayed to an Eagles song that was blaring over the speakers. As he took another sip, he looked down at his glass, surprised that the drink was almost gone already.

A girl's laugh rang from the bar's entrance. Ethan lazily tilted his head in its direction. A group of college-age kids were entering. As they approached the bar, Ethan saw that Renee was with them. He breathed deeply and turned back to Justin. He leaned his head down toward the bar, running a hand through his hair. He finished his drink and rapped on the bar to tell James that he wanted another. Renee and the group were settling around a table near the bar.

*

"You okay, man?" Justin said. "Come on, tell me what you think. Was that guy crazy or what?"

Ethan shook his head. "Sorry. I was distracted. Tell me again."

Justin rolled his eyes but then quickly started retelling his story. As Ethan tried to listen, he cast a few glances at Renee. She was listening intently to a guy and a girl and it seemed she hadn't noticed him. Ethan took another drink. He knew he should approach her. But his body clenched with embarrassment when he thought of the way she'd stepped away from him, the

burning stillness in her eyes — a kind of sorrow and resignation — before she'd walked away. He wasn't sure what to say to her, what he wanted from her.

“Ethan. Ethan.” Adrian was gesturing. Ethan stepped off his chair. Adrian lowered his head and said softly near his ear, “Isn't that girl Renee? Sitting with those people over there?”

Ethan nodded. “You need to talk to her!” Adrian said. “Make a move! Everything was okay at the party, right?”

Ethan shrugged. “Well, it didn't work out exactly how I wanted. But it was okay, I guess.”

Adrian knit his eyebrows together and peered at him questioningly. “All right. If it was *okay*, then, you need to go over there and say hi.” He gripped his shoulder.

Justin said, “What's going on? What are you guys plotting?” Nick had strode over too.

Adrian nodded toward the group and softly told them that Ethan had brought one of the girls to a party recently. Justin punched Ethan's arm. “Ethan! And you said you weren't seeing anyone!” He shook his head. “Now go say hi. You're not a teenager anymore.”

Ethan sighed and turned around. But Renee was already leaning against the bar near where he'd been sitting. He took slow steps toward her and placed his glass on the bar. She was ordering from James.

She finished, turning to glance at her friends, and then blinked, startled, when she saw Ethan. “Ethan!” she said. “I didn't see you.”

“I was just about to say hi,” he said. “Fancy meeting you here, huh?”

She smiled and nodded. She bit her lip and folded her arms across her chest. “I guess you weren't too hungover from the party last night,” Ethan said. “I mean, now that you're

getting your drink on again.” He needed to keep talking. He tried not to stare at the way her hair fell over her collarbones, the taut skin there barely exposed by her top.

She gave a small laugh. “Well, you know. College. Work hard, play hard.”

James placed two beers in front of her. As she picked them up, Ethan said, “Listen, I really liked talking with you the other night.”

“Hey.” Adrian had come over and stood beside Ethan. He extended his hand. “I’m not sure if we’ve met. I’m Adrian, Ethan’s roommate.”

Renee set the beers down. She shook his hand. “I saw you at the party last night.”

Adrian smiled, tilting his face down toward her. “I hope you had a good time. Although I’m *sure* that with Ethan you did. He’s the kind of guy you can count on for that.” He patted Ethan’s back.

Ethan scoffed and rolled his eyes. “Please. Don’t listen to him. He likes to bullshit.”

Adrian raised a hand to his chest in mock indignation. Ethan tried to resist, but he cracked into a grin.

Renee laughed. “Yeah, yeah.” She slid her gaze to her friends’ table, not meeting Ethan’s eyes. “It was fun. A nice way to spend the night after all my studying yesterday.” She picked up the beers again. “Anyway, I have to get back to my friends.”

“It was nice meeting you,” Adrian said.

“You too,” Renee said. She paused, drawing her brows together pensively. Then she gave Ethan a quick smile and went back to the table.

Ethan watched her sit next to a guy and hand him one of the beers. He turned and took a long sip of his drink. Renee’s folded arms and averted eyes filled him with a stinging chill. He thought of the way she’d talked with him at the party, how her body had buckled against his in

the dark of the backyard, that brief warmth before she pulled away. From the table, her voice floated toward him. “Oh, he’s someone from work.” Ethan slid his fingers over the cold moisture covering his glass.

“She was kind of cold, wasn’t she?” Adrian said.

“Whatever.” Ethan shrugged. He avoided looking at him or Justin or Nick.

Nick said, “Don’t worry. There are plenty of other girls.”

“There will be lots of single ladies at the wedding,” Justin said.

“Really, it’s no big deal,” Ethan said. “I’ve had years of practice at handling rejection.”

Justin raised his eyebrows. “*Anyway*,” he said. “I was talking to Adrian earlier about your old bookstore idea. He was telling me some more details about what you guys had in mind.” Ethan groaned. “Now, hear me out,” Justin said. “Maybe I was too harsh on you about that. Maybe you guys should try it again. I’d be willing to invest.” Nick, stroking his beard, raised his eyebrows in surprise.

Ethan narrowed his eyes at Justin. “What? I think I’ve been drinking too much. Or you have. Did I really just hear you say you want to invest in the bookstore?”

“The bookstore is a good idea. I know how much you cared about the idea. You shouldn’t give up on it and just spend your days working at that coffee shop. Now, it’ll be a lot of work, but I think you can do it. I have some money saved up.”

“No, there has to be some kind of catch. You’ll want to do it *your* way. And the idea is a bookstore that’s also a literary and art collective.” He glanced at Adrian. His mouth was in a straight line. “What do *you* think?”

Adrian shrugged. “It is — a surprising offer. But generous. Maybe it could help us get started again.” Justin flashed him a grateful smile.

“Justin, this is something you need to really think about,” Nick said. “I’m not sure if it’s such a good idea. You’re getting married soon.”

Ethan glanced at Nick, chilled by his serious tone and the clenched set of his jaw. Then he shook his head. “I don’t need *help* from my brother. I don’t know where this is coming from.” He started for the door. “I need to smoke.”

The music from the bar filtered outside, muted. Traffic lights and the headlights of passing cars illuminated the night, power lines and the letters of signs segmenting the darkness. Ethan groaned when he saw that there were only a couple cigarettes left in his pack. The door to the bar was open and beyond pillars and chairs he could see Justin, Adrian, and Nick standing together. Adrian was telling them something and Justin laughed, his face bright pink. Ethan flared his nostrils to breathe in the cigarette smoke. Justin’s offer seemed like another effort at control. Ethan thought of their vision of the bookstore, the warm brick walls and rugs and couches and rows of books, the upstairs studio. He turned and focused on the red circle of a traffic light. The way Justin had said *shouldn’t give up on it* echoed across Ethan’s vision. He watched Adrian give Justin a smacking pat on the back. He dropped the remains of his cigarette and stamped it out.

*

When Ethan walked back inside, Renee was standing between the table and the bar with a few others from her group. He carefully sidled past and stood against the bar near Justin. Renee was leaning against a guy. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders. She giggled loudly and moved closer to him. He slid a hand down to her hips. She glanced around the room and her eyes widened when she saw Ethan. He turned away, hot embarrassment coiling in his stomach.

“I need to introduce you to my friend Ethan!” she said to the guy. She was clearly drunk. She approached Ethan, the guy still hanging on to her. “Ethan, this is my *friend* Matt.” She said the word friend slowly. “Matt, this is the guy from work.” She caught Ethan’s eyes, and for a moment a more serious light crossed her face. It reminded him of last night in the backyard, but there was something more yearning in it now, as if her gaze was directed at something far away. She turned and patted Matt’s chest. Ethan turned to him too.

Ethan and Matt touched fingers in a brief handshake and exchanged *hey mans*. Matt had a stocky figure and wore a baseball cap. Looking at him, Ethan felt his insides shrinking. That image he’d had of being in bed with Renee, holding her, returned, and a burning sensation flared over his arms and cheeks. Matt’s face looked so young, his skin smooth and eyes bright. For a moment Ethan thought of running to the bathroom to inspect his own face in the mirror, to see how far it had really progressed past that youthful bloom. Instead he finished his drink.

Renee tapped Adrian’s back. He was facing the bar, talking to James, and she tapped him again. He turned around and, when he saw Renee, smiled. He glanced at Ethan. She said to Matt, “And this is Ethan’s roommate! He’s a *really* nice guy.”

“Hey,” Adrian said. His smile dwindled as he looked at Matt.

Renee didn’t seem to notice. “You are *so* cute, too,” she said, staring up at Adrian’s face. She turned to Ethan. “Isn’t he? Don’t you think he’s really cute?” Matt laughed and shook his head.

Ethan looked up at Adrian too, at his shoulders and dark hair. He glanced down at his drink. “Sure, he’s cute.” He took a sip.

“Oh, Ethan definitely knows that I’m cute,” Adrian said, smirking. “Though I’m not sure about the word *cute*.” Ethan laughed.

“It’s a compliment,” Renee said.

“Renee!” A high voice called. She sloppily waved her arm in a goodbye, and then, grinning, bounded over to a guy who was standing in front of the bar’s computerized jukebox. He was thin and wore black-framed glasses and a fitted shirt with a bright pattern. “Help me pick out a song.” He spoke in a mannered cadence, emphasizing his syllables.

She threw her arms around his shoulders and then tapped the screen to scroll through songs. When their song blasted over the speakers, they cheered and squeezed hands. Renee bounced her shoulders to the rapper’s chant of *Bottoms up, bottoms up* as the guy in the bright shirt swayed his hips with exaggeration. Matt put his hand on her back. Ethan turned away.

“Fucking college kids,” James said as he wiped a cloth over a glass. He rolled his eyes.

Adrian smirked. “She wasn’t like this at our party.”

Ethan shook his head. “No fucking kidding.” He said to James, “Hey, I’ll have a double-shot of whiskey.”

“I knew you wanted the harder stuff deep down!” Justin said. “Sure you can handle some liquor without any juice to sweeten it up?” His tie was loose and his eyes had a bleary tint.

“I have nothing to prove,” Ethan said. “I just want something different.” He took a sip of the whiskey. Usually the taste of hard liquor made him wince, but he’d already drunk enough that it went down smoothly. He drank some more. “So does this mean I have a big dick now or something?”

Adrian laughed and Justin joined in and punched Ethan’s shoulder. Nick leaned toward Justin and said, “Maybe you should take it easy. You’ve had a lot tonight.” Justin waved his hand dismissively.

Nick shook his head. He said to Ethan, “Seems that girl likes to lead guys on.” Ethan turned and saw Renee swaying closely beside Matt, pumping and waving her arms near his waist. Matt leaned closer to her and her face brightened. When he turned away to respond to something one of his friends said, though, her smile slid away and she stared at the back of the bar. A cool detachment settled over Ethan as he watched her.

Ethan shrugged. “Not exactly. She was honest with me.” He noticed a small hole near the bottom of her skirt, the way the dark nail polish on her fingers was chipped. “She’s just young.” She glanced at Ethan, pursing her lips. She gave a small shrug and turned back to Matt.

“Just don’t let yourself get screwed over” Nick said. Ethan nodded.

“Jesus, man,” Justin said. “You should consider yourself lucky. So this is how you spend your time, huh, getting drunk at bars and hanging out with girls? I love Samantha, of course. And she’s right. I need to stop looking at you as some kind of screw-up. You’re not, really, Ethan, you’re not. Just now, you’ve been so understanding. I always said you were an inconsiderate little fucker, but I think I was wrong. You didn’t leave things. You just didn’t do what mommy and daddy wanted. That’s all I’ve done — who am I kidding? But you *go* to things, Ethan, you go to them. Your no was a yes.” He took a long drink of beer. “And you *do* have potential. I’ve never doubted it. That bookstore thing, fuck, I want you to live up to that potential, you know?” He turned to Adrian. “And this is a good guy. He knows how to listen. I’m sorry I doubted you.” He swiveled back to Ethan. “And *you*.”

Adrian was staring wide-eyed at Justin and biting his lip hard. Ethan blinked. Justin was leaning against the bar drunkenly. He looked at Ethan and again he was reminded of a German shepherd. He didn’t know what to say. He could say that he had never meant to reject Justin and their family, but that was a lie. He had wanted to leave them, to leave behind their small,

mundane world and the encroaching weight he felt when Justin announced his accomplishments. And to cut off the twisting cord of warmth that lit up inside when Justin or his mother or father smiled or hugged or congratulated him. How could he love what didn't fit? But now that cord twisted in his stomach and lit up within him again, despite himself.

“Justin — this is the most I've heard you talk about your feelings, ever. I didn't know all *that* was bottled up,” he said. “I just wanted to find my own way, you know? Maybe it's some bullshit.” He touched Justin's hand. “I *do* care about you.”

“Thanks,” Justin said. He slid his hand away. “Let's not get all touchy-feely, though.”

Nick glanced between Ethan and Justin. He rubbed his beard as he looked at Ethan, and then smiled and patted him on the back. As Ethan's cheeks grew warm he looked back at the row of vodka bottles behind the bar and studied their neat division of colors. Nick tapped Justin on the shoulder.

“We should wind down,” Nick said. “We have a lot to do tomorrow.”

Justin rubbed his eyes. He started telling Nick about some presentations he wanted to attend the next day. They went over to the jukebox and searched for a song to play.

Adrian was bent over his drink. Ethan raised his eyebrows at him. “You feeling all right? That was some heavy shit your brother dropped,” Adrian said softly.

Ethan shook his head. “I don't know. It's been a weird day. And I might be too drunk to handle it.” He laughed and sipped his whiskey. “Or maybe not drunk enough.”

James tapped on the bar and told Adrian that he was going outside to smoke. Adrian followed him out. “Feel free to join us,” he said. Ethan noticed that the girl he'd been talking to had left. Renee and her group were standing near the bar's entrance, Renee still close to Matt.

Ethan nodded but remained in his seat. Behind him, Justin yelled, “Yeah baby!” Apparently the song he’d chosen from the jukebox had come on. Ethan closed his eyes and listened to the guitar chords. It was a song he recognized from their high school years but he couldn’t remember the artist’s name. He opened his eyes as a smoky voice started singing about broken car headlights and drinking cheap wine. Ethan read the words on a framed sign above the bar: in dark green script it said *May you be in heaven half an hour before the devil knows you’re dead*. Ethan stood, raising his glass to his mouth to drink the last of his whiskey. Justin was swinging his arms to the music and mouthing along to the words.

*

As Ethan opened the back door cool air washed over his face. He blinked at the darkness. A few cars were parked behind the bar and there was a high wooden fence with bushes swelling over it. The fence enclosed the space in a hollow of blackness that was interrupted by only the city’s vague light at the edges of the sky.

Adrian nodded at Ethan. “Hey man,” James said. “I better get back inside. Later.”

Adrian raised his cigarette to his lips and exhaled slowly and tilted his lips in that half-smile that hinted at something concealed. He handed Ethan a cigarette. He raised his lighter to the cigarette, stepping closer to Adrian. They smoked in silence. Ethan rubbed his arms against the cold and said, “I’ve been smoking too much the last few days.”

“I can understand why.” Adrian smirked. Then he leaned against the wall and his expression grew more serious. He took a drag. “Being with someone from your past makes everything seem upside down. Stirs shit up. But you just have to continue.”

“You make it look so easy.”

“It’s all that I can do.” Adrian stamped his cigarette out. “And I couldn’t have done it without the people I’ve met along the way. Like you.”

Ethan stared up at the sky. A feeling of warmth hummed and swam inside his abdomen. The distant light seeped and faded into the shapeless black of the sky. He thought of the bright morning sunlight shining on the windows of the coffee shop and cringed. He focused his gaze on the surrounding darkness. “I like being out in the night like this,” Ethan said. “It’s like the darkness has none of the geometry of light. Everything is free floating. Nothing to scrutinize you or pin you down. Instead the black form is all there is.”

Adrian took a step closer to him. His eyes glowed golden-green, their lashes gauzy veils. Ethan took the last drag of his cigarette and blew the smoke out at Adrian’s face. It swept across Adrian’s cheeks and he waved his hand. “You asshole,” he said, grinning.

Ethan dropped his cigarette. As he looked up at Adrian a piercing light filled his lungs. He raised his hands to Adrian’s shoulders and rubbed his fingers over the hard bones and muscle. Adrian said nothing. Ethan stepped closer and kissed him. Adrian was still for a moment but then he returned the kiss, pressing his hands on his back. Adrian’s chest rose and fell quickly against Ethan’s. He stepped away, the burn of Adrian’s stubble still on his mouth. The light cut through his chest and he took a deep breath.

Adrian touched Ethan’s cheek. Shadows fell over his face. Adrian took a few steps toward the door to go back inside. Ethan could still smell Adrian, the clean scent of his soap and the smell of cigarettes. The feel of his long fingers echoed on his skin. “Wait,” Ethan said.

He knew that Adrian would step inside and that they would pretend nothing had happened, would wake up the next morning and say nothing about it. The thought of the morning’s sharp light, signaling the returning rhythm of the world, and of rising from his bed

alone, made Ethan ache. The night was a shapeless black shroud, a multitude of possibilities within its folds. He didn't want to lose that.

"Ethan," Adrian said. His voice was questioning, almost apologetic.

Ethan grabbed his forearm. "I don't know how to *define* myself," he said. "But I know that my feelings for you are real." He looked at the ground. He slid his hand down to Adrian's and enclosed it. Adrian wrapped his fingers around his.

"I care about you too," Adrian said. Ethan looked up at him. Adrian's mouth and eyes were still, and sincerity washed over his face. Ethan took a deep breath.

"I don't want to pretend those feelings aren't there," Ethan said. "I mean, I know it'll be weird, but we have to try to make it something, or at least I want to —"

Adrian squeezed his hand. "I know. We'll figure it out." He pulled away.

They went inside. Justin said, "We need to get back to the hotel. Long day tomorrow."

He coughed and stepped closer to Ethan. He glanced at Nick, who gave him a small nod. "Listen, Ethan," Justin said softly. "What I said about investing in the bookstore — I won't be able to do it. I'm getting married, you know? Have to prepare for that." He patted Ethan's shoulder. "Sorry. I still think it's a good idea."

Ethan blinked. His stomach felt like it was bottoming out. Justin's mouth was set in a straight line, his eyes averted. Ethan thought of their vision of the bookstore and the art studio, and then thought of the actual store they'd opened, the ugly mustard-yellow walls and then the black and orange CLOSED sign. He took a deep breath. "Oh," he said. "Well, thanks for telling me, I guess. It *was* a generous offer, Justin."

"Jeez, Justin," Adrian said. Ethan raised his hand to silence him. He squeezed his mouth shut and took a step back.

“It’s for the best, Ethan,” Nick said. “Justin has to be realistic.”

Ethan ran a hand through his hair. “Right,” he said.

Justin clapped Ethan on the back. “We need to get going. I called a cab,” he said. “I’ll let you know more about the wedding as it gets closer.” He smiled, flashing his teeth. They said goodbye. Ethan watched Justin and Nick striding away, the door swinging shut behind them.

*

Ethan and Adrian, once again in the cool night air, walked down the sidewalk beside the bar. Adrian rubbed Ethan’s shoulder. “Sorry about your brother.”

They turned a corner. Ethan stopped. “I should have expected it.” He shook his head. “I don’t want my life wrapped up in Justin’s.”

“I know,” Adrian said. He stepped closer to Ethan. He spread his fingers over his shoulder. “Let’s go home, okay?” His voice was clear, honest, almost urgent. Ethan started to smile. He nodded.

They walked back home along the empty streets, passing yellow dots of streetlamps, brushing against spiky bushes that crawled onto the sidewalk. When Adrian swung the creaking screen door shut behind them, they settled, exhausted, on the patio’s wooden floor, among dead leaves and cigarette butts. Enclosed by the opaque screen, the houses and lights outside swam before Ethan’s eyes in filmy shapes, and he inhaled Adrian’s smell of soap and cigarettes as he touched his hand.

Dancing Bodies

“Do it,” you say to yourself. “It makes you feel happy. It helps you forget.”

So you order another drink with the last of your money and this time tilt your head back and chug it. You can barely taste the vodka anymore. Mixed with the taste of grape juice its medicinal taste has become sweet and familiar, like something your mother would have given you for a throat ache as a child.

As you step on to the dance floor, all blurring lights and silhouettes interrupting the swooping landscapes on the video screen, you think of a picture you saw on the internet, a gray wall on an urban street graffitied with black capital letters: *Do what makes you feel good*. That’s your mantra now. For too long you turned away. For too long you cast your eyes down when people smiled at you. When you dance now, your body becomes something else, an object that you move without fear, that becomes all motion.

You take his hand and rotate your body against his. You can barely see his face but it doesn’t matter. He’s someone you kind of know from school, someone who tagged along. But now the music is loud and your body is sweating and so is his, and they’re like batteries, static rubbing against each other in a mutual charge. Your arms overlap and you’re kissing him. When you pull away your breath has swelled up in your stomach and your lips feel raw. The song ends and another begins, and you close your eyes for a moment. When you open them again, the room tilts and sways, the lights and sounds hazy.

The line from the past is rubbed away and all you can see of the future is that moment in the night. You tell him you want to go on the patio to smoke, and his palm is sweaty against yours as you get another drink. You don’t look at his face. The lights on the dance floor flash, long shafts of blue and green. When you turn to go outside, the way a stranger is leaning against

a wall, how the shadows hide his face as he crouches forward, reminds you of something, someone else. Someone whose breath was hot and panting in the shade of a tree in your old neighborhood, whose eyes were greedy as you revealed your body to him, when you were too young to understand what you were doing, but that filled you with hot shame later. You whip your gaze away, back to the lights on the dance floor. You pull the vinyl hot pink of a childhood wallet over that memory, until your mind is rubbery warm pink.

Outside he hands you a cigarette and you feel powerful and strong as you lift it to your lips and blow smoke out, like those guys in leather jackets in black and white photos, or women with long red nails and withering eyes. You're pretending now. You exhale smoke like an ancient dragon. You're doing this to show how indestructible you are, that you're not afraid of danger, you are fearless. He's talking to you but you're not really listening. You're hungry for him now and feel too cold out here in the night air. You want his skin again and to feel warm again. You move closer and he puts his arms around your waist. With them around you, with him touching you, you become something. You're being held and it's like an anchor that pulls in those tangled lines of memories and the warm pink that you use as a cover. You kiss him. He says that you're an aggressive kisser. You smile. You want to bite his lips and eat his neck. You drink some more and everything bounces around and the music is a throbbing pulse. You want to show him your body, to strip everything else away and let him enjoy the bones of your hips and the soft swell of your breasts until none of it is yours anymore.

Contour Drawing

As Alice sat at her desk flipping through the small community newspaper she'd picked up at the grocery store, her salad and can of diet Coke in front of her computer, she noticed an advertisement for a local art school. In large print, it announced the kids' day camp that would be offered during the coming summer months, a photo of a small blond boy, cheeks streaked with blue paint, under the heading. Alice stared at the picture of the boy for a moment. Then she looked at the smaller print, under the art school's logo: they also offered weekend classes, in various mediums, for older children and adults.

Alice had wanted to become an artist. When she was a kid she'd flipped through her dad's old art history textbook from college and had imagined growing up to spend her days drawing and painting. Now, she worked as an administrative assistant for a realty office, sorting files and inputting data in a back office.

Alice folded the newspaper to keep it on the page with the art school advertisement and shoved it in her personal drawer. She flexed her shoulders to prepare for inputting more data about the last month's home sales. The phone rang.

"Morgan-Lawrence Realty. This is Alice speaking, how may I help you?"

"Hi, I made an appointment for my husband and I to come in to meet with Carol Morgan, but I need to change the time," a woman said briskly. Alice furrowed a brow. The voice sounded familiar, like a ghost unwinding itself off the telephone line.

Alice pulled up the schedule on the computer and started scrolling through it. "I can take care of that. What's the name?"

"Torrance. Liz Torrance. Our appointment's at four but we need to make it earlier. If that's possible."

Alice's hand froze on the computer mouse. The woman said, "My husband and I already looked at a house with Carol. We need to discuss a few things."

Alice took a breath and coughed. "And what's your husband's name?"

"Kevin Torrance." Cold pinpricks rose on Alice's arms. The air conditioning blasted down from the ceiling on to her. She stared at the computer screen. "Hello?" the woman said. "Are you there?"

Alice cleared her throat. "I'm here." She blinked and clicked around on the schedule and found the names. "We do have some appointments available earlier that day," Alice said, assuming her flat professional tone. She scheduled a new meeting for the woman.

Alice hung up the phone. She leaned forward and placed her elbows on the desk and head in her hands. She looked up at the names: *Kevin and Liz Torrance*, the letters dark symbols against the buzzing white glow of the screen. She pressed on the red "X" in the corner. Kevin was Alice's ex-husband. They'd divorced about two years ago. She'd heard that he'd remarried but didn't know that he was moving. She thought of the woman's brisk voice, the way she'd emphasized the word *husband* — she imagined the woman's shiny lacquered fingernails as she carefully held the phone, her smile when she mentioned Kevin. Alice took a long sip of her diet Coke.

A tap came on the half-open door. "Hi, Alice," Carol said. She was carrying a stack of manila folders. "Can you help me out by filing these?"

"Sure." Alice took the folders and placed them on her desk. "By the way, a client just called to reschedule a meeting. Liz Torrance. She and her husband will be meeting with you earlier in the day."

Carol frowned thoughtfully, then grinned. "Oh, right, I know who you're talking about.

Thanks for giving me the heads-up.” She stepped toward the door. “They’re a sweet couple. Said they want a bigger home because they want to start a family. They love the area.”

Alice muttered a “that’s nice” as she thumbed through the folders. After Carol left, Alice glanced at the office’s flyers, tacked to a bulletin board, advertising available homes. The realty office was located near several wealthy neighborhoods. The homes advertised were sprawling Mediterranean style or sturdy Victorians, all with long driveways, ample space, backyard pools. Alice had lived in a similar house with Kevin. That house was a couple of hours away from where she lived now, in a two-bedroom rental in a modest subdivision that was a short drive from the realty office. Kevin and Liz must have been drawn by the allure of the prestige of these neighborhoods with their brick-lined streets and top-rated schools.

Ferns and vines were clustered outside of Alice’s office window, providing a film of soft green light. She regarded the small cafes and shops beyond. She had begun to think of this area as hers, distinct from her old life. She imagined Kevin and his new wife walking down that street, hand in hand, towing a wagon with a giggling toddler, heading to the farmers’ market. She turned away from the window. She alphabetized the folders, reciting “A-B-C” in her head. For the rest of the afternoon, she focused on alphabetizing, filing, typing in names and addresses.

*

As Alice waded through work over the next few days, the picture of the paint-specked boy leapt out at her whenever she opened her drawer. During one of her lunch breaks Alice visited the art school’s website. It informed her that the adult spring classes would start in a couple weeks.

That evening, finishing her dinner, Alice decided to sign up for a drawing course. She’d ordered Chinese takeout again. As she surveyed the white cartons full of fried rice, greasy

chicken, and egg rolls spread out on the coffee table in front of the TV blaring the evening news, she thought of how clichéd she'd become — the typical single woman eating takeout alone in front of the TV before settling in to pass the time before bed watching more TV or reading. Just like she did every night. Alice slid her chopsticks along the inside of the almost empty carton in her hand. She'd become the kind of woman that, a couple of years ago, she would have mocked with Kevin. All she needed was some cats. She set the carton down and sat back on the couch and gazed at the news anchor as he arched his eyebrows to deliver some distressing news.

The white carton was next to a toy she'd bought at a shop down the street from the realty office. She lowered her eyes from an image of a smashed car on the TV and picked up the toy. It was a transparent tube filled with bright blue liquid and floating glitter. She turned it over and over, watching the particles drift from side to side, the liquid gently undulate. She set it back on the coffee table. The TV's image filtered through the toy's liquid and became distorted.

Alice sighed and got up to carry leftover food into the kitchen. She thought of the book she was reading. She would finish it that night, curled in bed as lavender candles burned in their jars on her dresser. This is what you wanted, she reminded herself. She shoved the remaining cartons in the fridge, her stomach curling as she thought of the paint-specked boy, of the classes listed on the art school's website. She thought of a clean white pad of paper, its textured surface, her dark pencil cutting across it, of a room full of other people absorbed in their drawings. Washing her hands at the sink, Alice bit her lip and paused. After wiping her hands, she went to her desk, opened her laptop, and pulled up the art school's website. She registered for a drawing class.

*

That first class on a Saturday morning in early March, the Florida day already beat with

warm sunshine. Alice gripped the steering wheel as she pulled into the parking lot. She thought of the blank sheets of paper that awaited her inside the classroom and tried to imagine sitting down and throwing herself into sketching — she wondered about the other students, if they would plunge into their artistic tasks with vigor or sit there, unmoving. The last time she could remember drawing was when she'd been a preteen. Then, she had occupied herself with depicting lounging puppies and fluffy kittens, beached mermaids, the faces of cute rock stars, all of their contours edged with the stuttering, deliberate lines of a child, textures hastily scribbled. Alice hadn't thought of those childish images in years. Thinking of them now unsettled her, as if the memories had been inscribed on long-faded pages that belonged to somebody else. Before the first class, Alice had attempted a few practice drawings, but after looking at her half-formed figures and abstract webs of lines, she had crumpled up the papers and thrown them away. She didn't really know what to draw anyway. She hoped the instructor would tell them what to draw.

The art school was a complex of stucco buildings, courtyards, and gardens, lined with brick paths. For their first sessions, the class worked outside, charcoaling the knotted, mazy textures of leaves and bark and grasses.

Most of her classmates were amateurs like herself. There were some older people — men with goatees, women in loose peasant blouses — and a few other students around Alice's age, in their late twenties or thirties. Some of them talked about the weather or traffic or chuckled as they remarked on the difficulties of getting the lines of a palm tree or building just right. Alice greeted them all with what she hoped was a polite smile. She wasn't really here to make friends. She noticed one of the older men, a short bald guy who was always trying to make a joke, peering at her, but she ignored it.

As they sat outside during the second week, drawing a cluster of intertwining trees, vines,

and bushes, the thick black charcoal smudged Alice's forearms. She brushed at it, annoyed.

"That stuff gets all over the place, doesn't it?" The woman next to her said.

"I know." Alice blew at the dust on her sketchpad. "I can't wait until we move on to more substantial drawing."

The woman shrugged. "I like it. It's fun to let loose with the charcoal — I feel like a kid with chalk."

Alice looked up from the lemon tree she was trying to draw, curving globes of fruit and smattered lines of leaves. The woman had caught her attention a few times before — Alice remembered her name, Leigh, from the first day of introductions. She looked a few years younger than Alice and conducted herself with an icy kind of elegance. She always wore plain shirts and jeans in neutral colors, and she was tall and thin, with short black hair and an angular face. She would have reminded Alice of a deer, except she had none of its bashfulness. Instead she moved with the bored self-assurance of a cat.

Leigh cast her dark eyes toward Alice. Alice blinked and realized she was waiting for a response. "I guess it's nice to let loose," she said, trying to muster some agreement in her voice. "It gives us some good practice." Leigh smiled and nodded and turned back to her sketchpad.

Alice looked down at her sketchpad too, held her charcoal above the disarray of dark lines that she hoped looked like the leaves of the lemon tree. She really couldn't wait to get this so-called practice over with. The thick charcoal disintegrated, forming a sheen of dust over the paper, and they were encouraged to draw in quick, brash movements. Alice drew fuzzy and half-formed products, unyielding in their refusal to form anything sharp or substantial.

At the end of class, she examined the tangles of dark lines and the clusters of shapes, the chalky marks blurry and dissolving into each other. She squeezed her charcoal drawing piece,

bit her lip, and quickly flipped the sketchpad shut.

When she was a kid, examining the old art history book, she'd been enamored of Impressionism: the gauzy, half-formed figures, the broad strokes and melting shapes. Lately, though, Alice's preference had tilted toward modern minimalist art. Clean, purposeful lines, deep colors — she didn't care that it didn't represent anything tangible. It was all control and clarity, everything in the composition only there by necessity, but not purporting to be anything in particular. What you saw was up to you.

Still, Alice liked the class, liked that it forced her to do something for at least a couple of hours each week. As she walked to her car after class, past a tinkling fountain of weathered blue tiles, the sun shone against the smooth beige surface of the stucco buildings. A thicket of tropical plants swelled around it all, green rippling ferns and jagged palms, the shock of bright azaleas and bougainvillea, all tangling in and around each other, their lines and surfaces cut and divided by sunlight and shadows. Alice felt swallowed up by it all, as if she were entering a private retreat, a small pool of clarity.

*

Alice tried to take walks in the evenings after work at least a couple of times a week. Sitting at a desk all day made her sluggish. When she arrived home, her body was stiff and she often collapsed on to the couch and sunk into the cushions as she flicked on the TV. She would lounge there, barely moving, for hours, and when she looked in the mirror on her way to bed, her heavy eyelids, her pale cheeks and dry lips, unsettled her. It was almost as if she were disappearing, those still hours eroding her substance.

Alice's new neighborhood was much different than the gated community where she'd lived with Kevin. Here, one-story houses, almost identical, were planted in small plots of yellowish

grass along the curving streets. Alice knew what Kevin and their old friends would say about her new residence. Her parents too, for that matter. She imagined their smug smiles, their drizzle of words about the importance of living in a “nice neighborhood.” Alice sighed and stared at the moss draping an oak tree in a yard she was passing, at the house’s gray brick façade. She pictured sliding a screen between herself and those imagined criticisms, the drizzle of words hitting the clear pane of glass and falling away.

Walking along the narrow sidewalk, Alice liked to kick acorns and sticks and burrs. She liked the concreteness of her foot’s force against the objects, the predictable cause and effect. She watched an acorn skitter away, its stilted motion slowing until it stopped.

Alice’s usual route passed an empty retention pond at the edge of the neighborhood, carpeted with scrubby brownish grass and bordered by a chain-link fence. As she walked by, she studied the group of kids who had gathered in the sunken bowl. They were in middle school or high school freshmen, she guessed. The boys scampered about in the middle, playing a football game, sometimes pausing to confer, shoving against each other. In the corner, a few girls sat on an abandoned hunk of machinery, leaning back to stick out their chests and swing their hair, whispering.

As she walked past them, Alice slowed her pace, taking long, pausing steps. She stuck her hands in her pockets, tilted her head toward the kids. The boys had formed a loose circle near the girls, who had stood up and were leaning together, as if discussing their next move. One of the boys’ voices drifted toward Alice. She couldn’t understand the words, but they rang with dry sarcasm, the kind of self-conscious tone that adolescents use to show they don’t care too much. A boy had walked over to the girls. His posture was erect, his shoulders thrown back as he tossed the football between his hands. One of the girls ran her fingers through her hair and threw

back her head to laugh, a high, barking sound. Alice heard a faint rustling. She looked down and saw an empty chip bag drifting in the wind across the grass. A long silver canister with a scratched Bud Light label lay buried in the dirt nearby. She started to step down the slope to pick up the litter, but stopped, thinking of the dirt and germs, of having to carry the trash all the way home.

She stepped away from the retention pond, casting one last glance at the kids still standing in their oblivious, sloppy circle. The kids' figures looked like stains against the whitish-gray sky, their rising and falling voices heavy in the empty air.

Alice walked along the street curving away from the sunken expanse of dry grass. Behind her, the hum of an engine grew louder and then stopped. "Kayley!" A woman's voice called. "You were supposed to be home an hour ago!"

Alice looked back at the kids. Some of the boys guffawed as a girl with long dark hair folded her arms and rolled her eyes. The girl glanced down at the glowing screen of the smartphone, covered in a bejeweled case, in her hand before answering the woman.

"Okay, Mom," she said in a voice of studied nonchalance. "Jeez, calm down. I'm not a baby."

Alice glanced toward the sound of the woman's voice. A white minivan had pulled up to the curb and a woman with short frizzy hair hung her head out the window. The woman's eyes were drooping and tired and her mouth was pinched. The woman said, "Please, Kayley, don't start with me. Get in the car."

"I'm coming," the girl said, her voice softer. She muttered something to the girl next to her, and then brushed her hand against a boy's arm and flashed him a smile. She walked up the retention pond's slope, swaying her hips. She slammed the door as she climbed into the

minivan. The woman sped away, the minivan's engine groaning. Alice quickened her pace. As the minivan passed, the girl's round face looked out at her, her pink lips in a rebellious pout and her dark eyes hard and cold. Against the frame of the minivan's window, the girl's face looked like a frozen, fleeting portrait, beautiful and distant. The minivan sped by and disappeared around a corner. The ringing laughs of the remaining kids faded behind Alice as she walked on.

Kevin had wanted children. They had divorced after Alice had a miscarriage and realized that she hadn't wanted kids anyway — at least, not with Kevin. As she walked, she noticed some flowerpots, the blossoms bright pink and dazzling white, clustered together on a front porch. She remembered the evening when she'd found out she was pregnant. It had been early summer and she and Kevin had gone out to sit on the porch swing on their backyard deck. The sky was shimmering dark blue and the yellowish orange windows of other houses glowed in the distance. Kevin was a big man. He was six feet tall and what he called "husky." Alice liked to nuzzle up against him, his big arms around her. Sitting on the porch swing, he had wrapped an arm around her and she had draped her legs across his lap, her head resting on his shoulder. She could feel his warm breath. The scruff of his beard scratched against her forehead. He caressed her stomach, the fingers of his large hand spreading over her abdomen like a spider.

"A little pup of our own," he said. "When I told Mom, she was so excited. She can't wait to spoil the baby."

Alice smiled as Kevin stroked her hair. She patted her stomach, her small fingers brushing against his. "I hope it's a girl," she said.

"Really?" Kevin said. "Girls are so...prissy. I'm surprised, Al. I'll love the kid, of course, but I'm hoping for a boy. Someone who can get messy, who I can toss a ball with. A boy who'll take after his dad."

Alice dropped her hand away from her stomach and settled it on the swing's smooth wood. She slowly pulled her leg away from Kevin's lap.

Later, Alice experienced bleeding, and a visit to the doctor confirmed that she had miscarried. For days, Kevin was unable to talk or look at her. One morning after he'd gone to work, Alice slipped into the room they'd been planning to use for the baby. She sat in the old chair in the corner and stared at the plain gray walls. She tried to imagine the kind of child Kevin must have expected. A quiet little girl that he would pat like a delicate doll and watch, from a distance, as Alice took her shopping and dressed her up in lace and encircled her with pink and plastic perfume bottles. Or a little boy who would romp in the yard with Kevin, streaked with dirt and tossing a ball, as Alice smiled from the patio and offered them lemonade. Alice ground her teeth. Queasiness stirred her stomach. She rested a hand on her abdomen. Outside the window, leaves trembled in the breeze. The blankness of the gray walls — their lack of expectation — seemed peaceful. Focusing her gaze on the walls, she breathed slowly, more deeply.

That night, as Alice made steak and potatoes, Kevin's favorite, for dinner, he crept up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. His body felt warm and solid against her back. Alice craned her neck to smile at him as she emptied a bag of frozen broccoli into a saucepan.

"I'm sorry I've been distant lately," he said. "It's just been hard — losing the baby." He caressed her hips.

Alice nodded. "I understand," she said. "It was a disappointment." She detached herself from his embrace and bent over to throw away the empty broccoli bag.

"But we can try again," Kevin said.

Alice looked at the steam rising from the pot of mashed potatoes, at the stove light's harsh yellow glare reflecting off the pans. She bit her lip. "Really?" she said. "I was thinking. Maybe we should – wait a bit. Make sure we have the same expectations."

Kevin was pulling a bottle of beer from the fridge. He closed the fridge door and turned to her, frowning, his eyes a question mark. Before he could say anything, Alice said, "I just want to make sure — when we have a baby — if we do — that we're on the same page." She felt like she wasn't explaining herself adequately. She fingered a dishtowel. "I mean, I don't want to burden our kid with childhood bullshit. This whole thing made me realize — having a kid is a big deal." She looked down at the dishtowel and stared at its pattern of palm trees. "Kids, I mean, they take our marriage to a whole new level."

Kevin had set the beer down on the counter. He stared at her for a moment, his eyebrows creased, and then opened a drawer and pulled out a bottle opener. The cap bounced off with a hiss. He took a swig from the bottle and said, "I'm not sure if I get what you're saying."

Alice shook her head. More steam was rising from the potatoes, the boiling water bubbling. She adjusted a knob to lower the temperature. "I don't know what I'm saying, either. But having a kid is a big responsibility. I'm afraid — of fucking it up."

Kevin stared at the granite countertop. "Allie. I've told you before, you need to stop being such a pessimist. I feel like you're saying I'd be a shitty father."

Alice coughed. "That's not what I mean. I wish you'd at least *try* to understand me."

Alice hadn't reacted how she should have to losing the possibility of a baby — the weightless clarity she'd felt had exceeded any grief. And it was as if some layer had uncovered Kevin, made her unable to see him the same way she had before. His arms grew heavy. The thick hair on his chest and his piney scent became overbearing. It made Alice recoil.

Alice would sit on the bare mattress in the empty baby's room during the long afternoon hours. She stared at those gray walls. The lines of sunlight from the window slowly blurred and shifted on the flat surface. The room was like a yawning cavern that reflected the emptying, the draining away, that Alice had experienced when she'd lost the pregnancy. She knew that she had lost more than the baby — that the bleeding out, her body's expulsion, had also carried away with it the thread that she had thought bound her with Kevin. But now she knew that thread had only been a pretense. After the blood had washed away, she saw every movement and every word with Kevin in an exposed light — that woman falling into his embrace and laughing at his jokes was someone unfamiliar. They had been like actors in a stage play, their bond no more real than the flat sets behind them. In that gray room, its simplicity and lack of adornment so different than the rest of the house, she fingered a loose thread on the mattress. She couldn't be that woman anymore.

Walking to her own home, Alice looked down at the narrow sidewalk, its drab gray color reminding her of that room. She wondered who was there now. She passed by a house with an open front door — through the opaque screen door, she could see the bluish glare of a TV on a cable news channel and the figures of an elderly couple sitting on a couch together. Alice sighed. Evening was approaching. The sky had settled into a milky gray blue. Tall pines were silhouetted against the sky, their clean black lines contrasting sharply with the pale background. A nearby power line cut across the trees. Alice gazed up at the black contours. The visual would make a good drawing. Looking at the image, the trees and power line became almost unrecognizable, their names becoming useless. The contrast between light and dark was all that was necessary for her understanding.

*

The next week in art class, their teacher announced that they were moving on to contour drawing. Alice leaned forward in her seat. She rested her chin on her palm and tapped the fingers of her other hand against the smooth white surface of her open sketchpad. Their teacher said they would use ink for their drawings, focusing on the lines that shaped the whole. Alice gripped an ink pen and smiled at the blank paper. She imagined the black lines she would create, stark against the white. Something solid and tangible.

The classroom had a collection of old objects piled in the corner. The teacher instructed them to choose a few to work from. The students gathered around the table to pick at the objects. Alice stood at the periphery, waiting for the crowd to break up. When her turn came, she picked out a blue ceramic teapot, a plastic bunch of grapes, and something that looked like an old lamp stand.

As she reached for her items, a pale hand with long fingers brushed against hers. “Excuse me.” Alice looked up at the voice. Leigh smiled at her and brushed some dark hair away from her eyes and tucked it behind her ear. Alice gathered her items against her chest and smiled back. Her cheeks felt warm. Leigh’s fingers lightly brushed over the curves of a vase. She picked it up. “I bet you’re glad we’re moving on from charcoal drawing,” Leigh said, grinning.

Alice went to her table. She glanced back at Leigh and bit her lip. “Hah. I *am* excited.”

Alice sat down and started drawing the teapot. She glanced up a few times to look at Leigh, who was sitting a few seats away, adjacent to her. Surreptitiously, Alice watched her as she drew. Alice wondered if she should say anything. Leigh was bent over her sketchpad, absorbed. Alice turned back to her own sketchpad and remained silent.

Their teacher paced the room, watching them work. “Remember, everyone,” she called. “You want to concentrate on the lines only. Don’t think about what it is you’re drawing, because

then you'll start to draw your idea of the object, not the object itself. Forget its name. Just use what you see."

After finishing the teapot, Alice moved on to the lamp stand, a curving metal thing that might have once been brass but was now a burnished green-gold. She crouched over the sketchpad, her shoulders hunched, and narrowed her eyes as she concentrated on getting the exact sequence of angles and curves right. The movement of her hand and the formation of the lines on the page melted into one organic motion.

The class took a short break. Alice pulled out her granola bar. Some of the older students mingled and chatted, but most of the younger ones kept to themselves. Leigh had gone outside. Alice leaned over to examine her sketchpad. Somehow, Alice could see that these drawings, with their delicate lines and sharp angles, were Leigh's.

"What do you think?" Alice looked up at Leigh's voice. She blushed.

"I don't mind you looking. That's what we're here for, right?" Leigh smiled her cat's smile.

"Right."

"So what do you think?"

"I like it," Alice said. "It's interesting. We're all drawing in the same way but we each have our own style. I can see that that drawing is you. Different than mine."

Leigh looked at Alice's drawing. "We draw it the way we perceive it. And that's different for each of us."

"Exactly."

When the class departed, Alice found herself walking near Leigh. "So why are you taking this class?" she ventured.

“I’m a photographer. I figured this class would help with my skills. And for fun. What about you?”

“Not for any particular reason like that. I guess for fun. I just moved here and needed something to do.”

“Oh, a move. That can be tough. Good idea to take the class. It is a good way to meet people.” She grinned. “Especially when we’re all hunched over our sketchpads, deep in concentration. Or pretending to be, anyway.”

Alice laughed. “I used to do art when I was younger. I thought I’d try getting back into it. Meeting people wasn’t really a big factor. Since I’ve moved, I’ve been adjusting to being on my own. I’ve been glad to have some alone time, to be honest.”

“Hm. That’s important too.” Leigh turned toward Alice. For a second, her nonchalance seemed to break. She started to say something, then stopped. Alice noticed that Leigh had a strong jawline and her sharp cheekbones made her brown eyes seem to glow with warmth. The pulse in Alice’s lips started to beat faster. She turned away and focused on the parking lot’s gray concrete.

Alice waved her hand to the left. “My car’s this way.” Leigh fell into step next to her.

“Mine too,” Leigh said. They walked in silence. Alice glanced down at Leigh’s long fingers. She bunched her own hand into a fist and looked away.

They had reached Alice’s car. “Here I am,” she said. She leaned against the driver’s door. Leigh stood in front of her, hands in her pockets. “See you next week, I guess,” Alice said.

Leigh nodded and smiled. Alice opened her purse and pushed her hand around in it, searching for her keys. She opened the door and sat in the driver’s seat. The door still open, Leigh put her arm on the frame and leaned down. She smiled at Alice. “It was nice talking to

you,” Leigh said.

Alice fingered the steering wheel. “You too.” Leigh ran a hand through her short dark hair and strode away.

Alice watched Leigh walking to her car, the smoothness of her movements. Leigh’s hips protruded just slightly, rising and falling with her steps. Alice put her key in the ignition and tapped the gas pedal. The car’s radio thudded with a pop song full of girlish vocals and rhythmic guitars as she drove away.

When she got home and threw her keys on top of a pile of magazines on the kitchen table, Alice stared down at the items, at the jagged outline of the keys, the blunt lines of the magazines, at the way the shapes overlapped. She imagined rendering those outlines in black, all of those overlapping shapes forming a new pattern. She quickly tossed her purse on the kitchen counter and kicked off her shoes.

Alice strode down the hallway to the spare bedroom where she was storing some items she’d taken with her when she’d moved out of Kevin’s house. She sat on the floor and pulled a cardboard box from one of the piles lining the room. Wiping away dust, she opened the box and rifled through ceramic knickknacks and empty picture frames wrapped in old newspapers until she reached the larger items at the bottom. She pulled out a large flat item and carefully unwrapped the hard, yellowing newspaper. It was an ornate mirror that one of Kevin’s relatives had given them as a wedding gift. Kevin had always said that he found it ugly — too “frilly” — but Alice found the excess of its decoration charming. She peeled off the newspapers and brushed a hand across the mirror’s glassy surface. The mirror was oval-shaped, large enough for one to regard a reflection of the face and shoulders, and framed by an ornamental design, faux silver leaves and tassels twisting and braiding upon each other. Alice ran a fingertip over the

sharp edges of the frame. Their drawing teacher had instructed them to bring in an object next week. This would be perfect. Alice bit her lip and looked at her reflection in the mirror's surface. She swept some hair away from her face. Maybe it wasn't a good idea to use the mirror. It was a relic from her marriage; perhaps it would be bad luck, would dredge up too many memories, to use it. As Alice stared at her reflection, she recalled a moment right after she had married Kevin. They had stood in front of the mirror, his large, bearded face pushed down against her temple, and regarded their reflection together. The image swam in front of Alice. Then she shut her eyes and shook her head. She opened them and looked again at the reflection. It was just her, her face at the mirror's center, surrounded by the whitish afternoon light streaming through the window. After a moment, she pushed her chin forward and, licking her lips, gave a slow smile. She looked at the way her cheeks glowed and her lips glistened. She stood, picked up the mirror, and shook it to get rid of any remaining dust. Alice carried it to her bedroom and leaned it against a wall. She would keep it there until she took it to next week's class.

*

Alice shuffled into the realty office, the previous night's sleep filling her eyes. She sat at her desk and flipped through the papers Carol had placed there. She turned on her computer, leaning back to yawn as the monitor flickered and the hard drive hummed.

Carol swept into the room. She gave Alice a dazzling smile and offered a chipper "good morning." Alice nodded and murmured a greeting. Carol stood with one hand on her hip and took a sip from her coffee cup. "Alice, can you remind me if I have any meetings with clients today?"

Alice opened up a spreadsheet on the computer and scrolled through the grid of black on

electric white. She read through the list of times and names. Her stomach lurched and she looked away from the computer, down at the dark wood of her desk, blinking rapidly. Then she felt Carol's eyes on her. Alice looked back at the computer, clearing her throat. She brushed some stray hairs away from her forehead and rubbed her skin.

“You have several client meetings today. The first is with Kevin and Liz Torrance at eleven.” She read off the rest of the names. The black marks on the computer screen and her own droning voice were hovering in a separate realm.

Carol thanked her and left the room. Alice listened to her heels click down the hallway. She stared at the computer screen, at the name “Torrance,” and narrowed her eyes. She clicked away from the schedule. She stood and quickly walked to the bathroom. Alice twisted the hot water knob on the sink and opened her palms beneath the piercing water and watched as its warmth turned her skin pink. She got some soap and scrubbed her hands. After she dried them, she looked at her reflection in the mirror. She had always hated fluorescent lighting — it emphasized every flaw, every red mark and stray hair on her face. Alice took a deep breath and pursed her lips. As she regarded her reflection, she realized she wasn't as anxious as she'd expected. Some dread swarmed within her at the thought of seeing Kevin with his happy new wife, but mostly, a kind of resignation tinged with anger throbbed beneath her skin. She wasn't sure to whom the anger was directed, Kevin or herself. Alice ran a finger over the line of small buttons on her blouse, looked at the way her breasts pushed against the fabric, and turned to go back to her office.

Alice busied herself with alphabetizing papers, organizing them into neat piles on her desk to prepare for filing. As she worked her way through the stack, she glanced at the clock above her doorway. When the minute hand crept past ten-thirty, she leaned back in her chair and stared

at the papers in front of her. She went and got a cup of water from the water cooler near the bathroom. She quickly swallowed the cool water and poured herself another cup. She returned to her office and placed the paper cup, crinkling under her grip, on her desk. She sighed and ran her hands through her hair. As Kevin and his wife's appointment came closer and closer, the thought of him striding through that door holding her hand filled Alice with a deflated sickness. She glanced at the clock again: twenty minutes. In ten minutes, Alice decided, she would leave the office to go down the street for some coffee.

When the minute hand hit ten till eleven, Alice slung her purse over her shoulder. She gently shut her door and walked down the hallway to the front entrance. The floor to ceiling glass windows at the front let in a flood of blazing yellow sunshine that illuminated the gray and white marble floor. Alice turned her face downwards to avoid the bright light. Then a dark shadow crossed her line of vision, blocking the sunlight. She heard the click of heels. Alice looked up and saw Carol, a couple yards away, striding across the small lobby in front. Carol flashed a smile at Alice and then turned back to speak to someone in the lobby.

The man and woman rising from the couch in front of the reception desk were Kevin and his new wife. Liz. Alice paused in mid-stride, her pulse stiffening. She took a step back, and for a moment, considered rushing back to her office. But Carol had already acknowledged her — turning back would just draw more attention. Alice took a deep breath, tucked some hair behind her ears. She resumed her walk to the front door, taking slow steps. Kevin's back was turned to her, but she recognized his tall, bulky frame, the beefy shoulders underneath the button-up shirt. His hair was shorter now, closely trimmed, and Alice noted a few new specks of gray. The woman next to him was facing Carol. Her eyes were wide and bright and she spoke in a chiming, lively voice. Her white teeth glistened against her pink lipstick. Her hair was pulled up

in a tight bun, the strands so neatly in place that they resembled a helmet. She wore a pressed floral dress. She was a petite woman and she stood close to Kevin, her shoulder brushing against his arm. As Alice drew closer, she saw Kevin wrap an arm around the woman's back and sweep his hand down to stroke her hip.

The bright sunlight from the windows was growing warmer on Alice's cheeks. "Hello, Alice," Carol said. She had turned to smile at her.

"I'm stepping out to get some coffee," Alice said. She offered a ginger smile back at Carol and paused in her step. She peered at Kevin and Liz. Liz had given Alice a fleeting glance, but Kevin's face had wheeled in her direction when Carol greeted her. His eyes widened and his mouth settled in a straight line as he looked at her. He had the stunned, curious expression of someone who runs across a famous celebrity on the street — or, Alice thought, who encounters a person they thought was dead or missing. And she felt the same way looking back at him. The face was familiar but jarring; the face she saw now didn't quite match the image of Kevin she'd carried in her memories, the man who'd embraced her on the back patio. The real Kevin here in the realty office was like a reflection on water, wavering and dreamlike.

Liz, noticing Kevin's expression, frowned at him. Alice's stomach clenched. She hoped Kevin wouldn't say anything. He opened his mouth to say something, but before he could, Carol said in a chirping voice, "This is our administrative assistant, Alice. Once we get further along in the process, she'll be handling some paperwork for you."

Liz held out her hand and grinned at Alice. "Nice to meet you." Alice shook. Liz's small hand was cool and soft and her bracelets softly jangled. Alice hoped her own palm wasn't sweaty. Still smiling, Liz gestured at Carol. "Carol has been so great. We love the neighborhoods here and the schools have such an excellent reputation." She patted Kevin's

shoulder and beamed. “We’re newlyweds, actually.”

“Honey, please,” Kevin said. “She doesn’t need to hear our life story.” He glanced at Alice and quickly looked away.

“Oh, I’m sure she hears it all the time,” Liz said, playfully swatting Kevin’s arm. “I’m just so excited about making a home with you.”

The clenched feeling in Alice’s stomach had turned into a kind of hollowness. She regarded Kevin with his arm around Liz, both of them listening to Carol as she talked about the great schools in the area. Alice had the sensation that she wasn’t quite there, that she was watching the scene from a distance. She looked again at Liz’s manicured hand stroking Kevin’s arm. She realized she felt nothing, as if she was in that empty room in her old house again, the soft blankness of the gray walls filling her.

The heat of the sunlight from the windows grew more intense upon Alice’s face. She remembered her coffee excuse. She cleared her throat. “Congratulations,” she said, smiling at Liz. “Now, I’m off to get some coffee. It was nice meeting you. My best wishes for you two.”

Liz thanked her. Kevin’s eyes flickered up at Alice, and she could see the slight question in them. Alice pursed her lips and gave him a small smile, narrowing her eyes sharply at him before swinging the office door open and stepping out into the bright sunlight. The door closed with a sharp thud behind her.

The sun’s warmth on Alice’s face and arms felt pleasant after the office’s chilly air conditioning. As she walked down the block to the coffee shop the brick street and the green leaves of the trees lining the sidewalk blurred in her vision. Her blood had been pounding as the minutes had crept closer to Kevin and Liz’s arrival. Now, though, her whole body felt calm, like the placid waters of a river after a crashing waterfall. Alice watched the sunlight glint off a

Range Rover as it passed by. She had felt nothing when she looked at Kevin. Memories had tugged at her, but the emotions they'd once held were now fossilized, old remnants that she could pick up and examine with disinterest. The attractive, well-groomed couple standing in that office were now their own unit. As Alice imagined the new life they were building together, a large house and lawn, children and soccer games and bake sales, she could see them retreating in the distance behind her. Kevin can have that life, she thought. A child's squeal rang in the air. Alice squinted at the smooth green grass of the park across the street. A small boy romped across the grass as he watched, mouth open, the red balloon he was holding bob in the air above him. A man crouched down a few feet away and laughed and opened his arms toward the boy. The boy squealed again and ran to the man. As the boy reached for the man, he let go of the balloon. The man embraced him and the boy pointed up at the balloon. Alice watched the balloon, sharp against the blue sky, float up to the clouds.

She passed by a planter full of bright flowers and then turned and entered the coffee shop. The shop was filled with smooth dark wood and small tables covered in red and white checkered cloths. Alice breathed in the rich smell. She ordered an iced coffee. As she poured the white half-and-half into the dark coffee, she watched its creamy swirls slowly permeate the liquid. The white clouds bubbled out, a sharp line against the dark brown, and then tiny streams trickled through and the colors began to leak into each other, the lines disappearing as Alice watched. Some parts remained darker or lighter, but as the half-and-half and coffee began to flow into each other, the membrane dissolved and their contrast became indistinct until they were one solid light brown. Alice stirred the drink with her straw, jostling the final particles together.

As she reached for sweetener, she heard the door to the coffee shop swing open behind her, a flash of sunlight sweeping across the dark floor. Alice poured the sweetener into her coffee

and stirred, listening to the ice cubes clink against each other. “Alice?” a voice said. She turned.

Leigh was standing at the order counter, slipping a credit card into her wallet. She beamed at Alice. She wore dark narrow slacks and a white button-up shirt. The clothes revealed the sharp lines of her limbs and the sloping angles of her small breasts and hips. The barista placed Leigh’s coffee cup on the counter and she picked it up. She sauntered over to Alice, her hips gently swaying.

“Hey,” Alice said. She licked her lips and smiled. “I wasn’t expecting to see you here.” As Leigh stepped closer, pinpricks rippled over Alice’s arms. She hoped her nerves didn’t show on her face.

Leigh poured cream into her coffee. “I’m in the area to interview for some freelance work. What about you?”

“Ah,” Alice said. “I actually work around here. At a realty office. Administrative assistant.” She took a long sip from her coffee.

Leigh smiled, put the lid back on her cup, and took a sip. “It’s a beautiful area. Great flowers in the park.” Alice nodded. “I’d like to take some photos here sometime,” Leigh said.

They had wandered over to stand near one of the tables. “That’d be great. Sometimes when I look at the flowers, I think what amazing photos they’d make. The way the petals grow in different patterns and the folds of the blossoms. How they have delicate kinds of veins.” Alice paused. “If you do, I’d love to see them.”

“Of course.” Leigh placed her hand on the back of a chair and leaned against it. Alice put her coffee down on the table, staring at it as she shook the cup to stir the contents together. The crash of the ice cubes sounded loud. Alice looked up at Leigh. “So have you decided what you’re bringing to the next drawing class?”

“Not yet. Probably a pot or a vase with interesting lines or curves.”

“I already picked something,” Alice said, giving a small laugh. “An old mirror.” She paused. “It’s funny, because it’s something I didn’t think I’d use again. It brings up old memories. But I thought it’d be good to use it for something new. Especially, you know, with the contour drawing thing. Trying to look at it for just what it is.” Alice brushed her hair behind her ears. Leigh’s eyes held hers. Alice caught her still brown gaze, and then after a moment, blinked and looked away. “Sorry,” she said. “I was rambling.”

“Don’t apologize.” Leigh grinned. Alice noticed how her eyes glowed when she smiled. Leigh’s expression softened and became more solemn. “I understand what you’re saying. A way to move on.”

“Yes, exactly.” Alice glanced at her watch and sighed. “I was here for a quick coffee break. I should head back to the office.”

Leigh nodded. “I have a few errands to run.” Alice followed her outside, back into the bright sunlight. Leigh pivoted around to face Alice. “It was a nice surprise running into you.”

Alice scraped her foot against a leaf on the ground. She put her free hand on her hip and took a step closer to Leigh. “You too.” She paused. “See you on Saturday.”

“Yeah,” Leigh said. “Or maybe sometime we could get together for coffee. At a slower pace.”

“I’d like that,” Alice said. They exchanged phone numbers and said their goodbyes. Leigh was heading in the opposite direction and, for a moment, Alice watched her walk away. She took a deep breath and started back for the realty office. Talking to Leigh, a warm, fluttering excitement, part nerves and part pleasure, had filled her. As she walked, she thought of the still glow of Leigh’s eyes, and her breath deepened.

Alice stepped into the cool, bright hallway of the real estate office. She paused for a moment, listening, and then heard Liz's voice echoing from the direction of Carol's office. She imagined Kevin sitting there next to her, his large, meaty hand cradling her delicate fingers. Alice had almost forgotten about their visit. Now, thinking of them in the office together, they seemed like any other new couple looking for a home in an affluent neighborhood.

Alice thought of Leigh's hands, the long white fingers. Her stomach curled a bit. She imagined Leigh crouching in the park, carefully holding her camera as she photographed flowers, and Alice hoped that she would take those photos, and then spread them out for Alice to examine, Leigh's hands close as she leaned over. Alice entered her office and sat at her desk. She set down her iced coffee. The coffee with its creamer was now a solid tawny brown, a bit lightened by the slowly dissolving ice cubes, the lines further disappearing and melting into each other. She ran her index finger over the cup's plastic surface, brushing it against the thin veneer of icy liquid that had coated it. She took her finger away, the spot of wetness a small, cold boundary on her warm skin. She raised it to her mouth and licked it away, grazing her finger across her lips. Then she settled back in her chair and patted the mouse on her computer, the monitor flickering back on. She looked at the black marks on the glowing white screen and blinked to remind herself what they indicated. Alice clicked around on the screen and got back to work.

WRITING LIFE ESSAY

The Canvas of Experience

When I was a child I wanted to be an artist, a painter. Looking through an old Gardner's *Art Through the Ages*, my gaze was drawn to the careful renderings of line, color, texture, shape, the images of bucolic villages, trees shading a river, sunlit fields, Madonna holding Christ, Apollo chasing Daphne, Saturn eating his children, Bosch's dizzying garden of earthly delights. While my preoccupation with becoming an artist waned as I became aware of my technical mediocrity, this concern with the visual, with the power of the imagistic, its ability to convey and distill a moment, an experience, an idea, has remained with me and is clear in my approach to writing and the writing itself. Another childhood preoccupation of mine was the paranormal: ghosts, the afterlife, unidentified flying objects, which grew into a fascination with psychology and the attempt to find motives, the question of the innateness of identity and the source of difference. This litany of childhood aspirations is not intended to represent a straight line from my early fascinations to my position as a writer today — however, as I consider my growth as a writer, my aims as a writer, and my influences, these concerns keep cropping up. These alternate fascinations with the visual and the interior have shaped my writing and directed my literary taste.

As a writer, the only tool I have is words; but when choosing and crafting my words, I draw upon a well of image, experience, and observation, all of which drive me to focus on certain themes, to craft my words deliberately. According to Mary Gaitskill, "Writing is... being able to take something whole and fiercely alive that exists inside you in some unknowable combination of thought, feeling, physicality, and spirit, and to then store it like a genie in tense, tiny black symbols on a calm white page" ("Inside a Writer's Mind"). To convey characters'

inner experiences and life, to make unique perceptions tangible, the fiction writer must somehow cobble together words in a way that makes these experiences real, even meaningful, for the reader. Reading and considering the examples of other writers who share common concerns and aesthetics has provided me with examples of how to use these tools, illuminated the possibilities of language. These writers have shown me how to navigate the unique form of writing that is fiction, the crafting of a world and characters that are separate from our world but still belong to it, the careful ordering and selection of images, actions, spoken words that form a kind of bridge of narrative, the distillation of the sloping and searching that strings together events.

I read young-adult fiction when I was a teenager, though I've forgotten most of the titles of the books I picked up at the public library. Around this time, I was also powerfully affected by *The Stranger* by Albert Camus and *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse, both of which I was assigned in school; Camus' and Hesse's portrayals of the search for meaning in a seemingly absurd world resonated with me, and also showed that literature can do more than just depict the external conflicts of society and relationships.

But of the authors I read in my free time, two writers do stand out in my memory and have shaped my approach to fiction: Francesca Lia Block and Alice Hoffman. Both writers are romantic and feminine but don't shy away from suffering and darkness. They both employ an overwhelming use of language and description to create worlds that are rich and beautiful and that reflect and build upon their characters' experiences. This piling on of detail creates an immersive world for the reader; however, I only realized later in my writing career that it is not the onslaught of adjectives itself that creates this effect, but rather the way in which the authors choose, collect, and organize these details into a larger coherency, a lesson that's been crucial to my education as a writer. I was especially drawn to Block's depiction of Los Angeles as a

glittering dreamland with lurking subterranean darkness — it reminded me of a more glamorous, more dangerous, version of my hometown of Orlando. In her novel *I Was a Teenage Fairy*, Block’s vivid description of Los Angeles and its surrounding suburbs creates a rich sensory experience, and perhaps more importantly, lays the foundation for her characters’ world, their stories and concerns:

“If Los Angeles is a woman reclining billboard model with collagen-puffed lips and silicone-inflated breasts, a woman in a magenta convertible with heart-shaped sunglasses and cotton-candy hair; if Los Angeles is this woman, then the San Fernando Valley is her teenybopper sister. The teenybopper sister snaps big stretchy pink bubbles over her tongue and checks her lip gloss in the rearview mirror, causing Sis to scream. Teeny plays the radio too loud and bites her nails, wondering if the glitter polish will poison her.” (3)

This description of Los Angeles is beautiful and richly detailed, and Block uses it to show us where she is going, what world this story takes place in and why it matters; we’re already invited to ride along with the teenybopper and her curiosity, already aware of the concerns with feminine beauty. This significance of setting — and how language is used to convey that setting — is central to my goals as a writer.

Setting can transport the reader into another world, create the surrounding structure for the story that will occur. And other writers have shown me that setting does not need to be fantastic in order to achieve this otherworldly sense. Reading works by writers such as Joy Williams, Jane Bowles, Mary Gaitskill, Dylan Landis, Marilynne Robinson, and others have shown that the fantastic and the strange reside in our own ostensible “real” world, that magic and transport can occur in a seemingly ordinary moment, and that these beautiful oddities of

perception can reveal something new about the characters and the reader herself. Portraying the familiar as strange represents the actuality of sensory experience, but it also makes the familiar new and extraordinary for the reader, and so in fiction, “strangeness rises from the familiar, the foreign from the domestic, like smoke” (Noel 111). The writer invites the reader to look at the familiar world anew, which thus further brings the reader into the character’s experience.

This focus on character is often called the distinguishing trait of literary fiction, and as a writer I’ve had to grapple with how to bring this experience front and center while still portraying the characters’ arc in an organic fashion — how to mine the depths and motives of character without making this aim apparent, to craft it into art. For me, this has meant adjusting my process from strict organization and direction to trusting the material to grow on its own, to start with an image, a feeling, or a perception, and to let it go from there. When I attempted to write stories as an undergraduate and beginning graduate student, I tried to take my personal journal scribblings and organize them into carefully planned stories. I had the images from the story swirling around in my head, the order of events swimming around in front of me, and so I carefully planned and organized the stories before I began writing. But these efforts fell flat, as I soon learned in my first graduate-level workshops. The characters and situations felt artificial because I had left no room for growth: everything was carefully laid out and ordered, but there was no breathing room. I had treated the characters like dolls, and consequently they suffocated in situations devoid of air. Charles Baxter addresses the dangers of this over-planning, arguing, “When all the details fit perfectly, there is probably something wrong with the story. It is too meaningful too fast. Its meaning is overdetermined ... The writer has decided what her story is about too early” (35). Robert Boswell also discusses this process of discovery through writing, saying, “I have grown to understand narrative as a form of contemplation ... I come to know my

stories by writing myself into them” (4). When I let myself start to write with just the seed of an idea or a few floating images, and then follow the characters, I was finally able to let the stories grow into what they could be, to approach the story as a process of contemplation and find unexpected directions. This makes revision much easier, too: it provides material that’s much more flexible to work with and that I can continue to knead and mold until the characters and stories take shape.

During my work in the MFA program, I’ve asked myself why I focus on fiction. While I enjoy reading nonfiction, writing it generally seems unappealing to me. I know that part of it is due to my natural shyness and desire for privacy. Parts of myself and my own experience certainly come alive in my fiction stories, and perhaps one could argue that fiction allows an easy disguise for my self. But I think it’s more complicated than that — after all, I *do* place myself in my fiction, however muted or obscured it may be. I think my focus on fiction goes back to my early desire to be an artist. An artist creates something new, a fantasy world or some representation of the world on paper or canvas, and chooses her materials and details. My artistic task as a writer is to create my own representative world on the page, to use the paint of words, and the choice of details and setting, to convey my experiences and to examine them through the fresh eyes of my characters. Fiction also gives me the opportunity to try to place myself in others’ points of view, to imagine and then convey the experience of characters who occupy a different position than my own; by drawing on my capacity for empathy, I widen my storytelling opportunities. I think of the nonfiction writer as an oral storyteller, crafting her story into a narrative for a captive audience, and the fiction writer as a painter, choosing from the collage of her perceptions and experiences and composing them into a totally new image or narrative. The pieces from my life are there, but to achieve the artistry that I personally aim for

as a writer, I need to craft them into something else, give them a new sequence, new characters to contend with, a new place to occur. In her essay about the inadequacies of narrative and the illogic of actual experience, “The White Album,” Joan Didion says, “We interpret what we see, select the most workable of the multiple choices. We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images” (47). For me as a writer, my actual life provides the opportunities and potential for my fiction, and my fiction provides the freedom and creativity to craft a new arc.

Earlier, I discussed how I’ve had to learn to overcome the tendency to overdetermine my stories. Part of this tendency came from my difficulty with creating “plots” for my fiction early on. I’d have an idea for a character, a moment, a perception, but nothing really seemed to “happen” in my stories. For example, one story was simply about a young woman driving from the beach to home. These stories were incomplete, impressions and encounters stuck together. And this is difficult especially when it comes to writing character-driven fiction. But I’ve learned from reading writers that a plot can be a series of small moments building upon each other, can be found in the tension between characters, or in the tension between a character and himself or his surroundings. Mining this tension is where the “plot” is found. As a writer, I’ve learned to trust the tension inherent in experience. I’ve learned that writing is an art, and that my concern with visual images, with exploring the motives of characters, need to function in service of the characters themselves. Inhabiting these characters’ perspectives and conveying this sensory experience is the focus of character-driven fiction, allowing the writer to explore the tensions of everyday life. Susan Griffin says, “In fiction the whole life of the body, of sensuality, is opened to view. The form of the novel or the short story ... allows the reader to enter imagined experience as if within a body. Pain, pleasure, color, taste, sound, smells are evoked. The literary

devices of fiction are meant to admit this material world” (305). By inhabiting and portraying that experience, the writer succeeds in making it real for the reader, in conveying the tension that drives the character and narrative.

Several writers demonstrate the tension that can be found in small moments and ordinary sensual experience, and how this can represent the tensions of the larger narrative arc. In Dylan Landis’ “Hate,” Leah inhales nitrous oxide with her friend’s boyfriend while her mother Helen is out of town; however, the story’s tension and danger are not located in the drug itself. The nitrous oxide tank falls and cracks a glass coffee table, and “Bloodless, unseen, the crack slivered under Leah’s nails. It laddered up her spine, spidered into the sinus below her left eye. Then it bored slowly into bone – one of Helen’s migraines, maybe. Shrapnel from something Leah had not known could explode” (111). Landis focuses on Leah’s reaction to the coffee table’s crack and conveys it from her particular point of view and bodily experience. Through Leah’s reaction to this event, the reader more deeply understands her apprehension of her orderly mother and Leah’s own desire for order, her aversion to messes and destruction. Earlier in the story, Leah prepares for sleep “by calibration of self into the exact mathematical center of the bed” (108). By focusing on Leah’s experience of this mundane task, we can see her need for control, how she attempts to combat confusion with this attention to numbers and order. Landis finds the tension and particularity in these small moments so that she can use them to illuminate her narrative arc, which focuses on Leah’s relationship with her mother and her need for control.

In reading Joy Williams’ stories, meanwhile, articulating the exact tension that drives the narrative can be difficult — Williams writes strange stories filled with odd events, often about sad, lonely, or lost young women. Tension clearly trembles and throbs beneath the surface of the story, but Williams maintains mystery. The tension can be located in the characters’ conflicts

with others, themselves, or the environment, but Williams keeps us guessing. This mystery itself adds to the tension that drives these stories. Boswell says that “many stories have the suggestion of two worlds existing at once” (111) and “that the shimmer that permits the character entry [to this alternate universe] needs to have some kind of concrete embodiment” (112). In her stories, Williams suggests at a strange world existing alongside the recognizable, and uses her characters’ perceptions of specific details to create this impression.

For example, her story “Woods” concerns Lola, who moves into a trailer in the north Florida woods with her husband. Lola is clearly fearful and anxious and ill-suited to her surroundings. Yet the exact source of her conflict is only hinted at; instead, Williams focuses on setting and small details, using them to manifest Lola’s dread and unease. Williams includes strange events, such as a trailer that starts to burn as Lola and her husband drive by (57-58), without offering any explanation, thus building up this sense of inexplicable dread. Williams’ description of the woods, though, provides a setting that feeds upon Lola’s anxiety. She carefully uses details to create a world that hums with, and reflects, Lola’s point of view,

“She sometimes sat on the trailer’s deck and looked through the thinning trees. The woods had become lean and haunted; only the magnolia trees stayed green and waxy like something into and past death. Fishermen drifted past on the river ... They waved to Lola. She moved the pages of a book hastily and went inside.” (Williams 58-59)

Lola’s impression of the woods as “haunted,” of the magnolia trees as “into ... death,” and her reaction to the fishermen clearly reveal her dark, anxious state of mind. Williams thus demonstrates how setting can be used to reflect a character’s inner experience and create an overall emotional experience for the reader. While some strange events occur in this story, it does not end with a definite climax. Instead, Williams stays close to Lola’s perspective and uses

her reaction to ordinary objects to reveal her final tension with herself and her environment. In the story's final paragraph, Lola lays on the trailer's deck and peers in between its slats, where "she saw a cigarette lighter and a pencil. She saw a spoon down there, dully twinkling, offering to her the blurred, quite unrecognizable image of her face" (65). These seem like small details, but Williams hones in on them and, through Lola's particular point of view, makes them deep with significance — the scattered items and Lola's reflection in the spoon reveal her uncertainty about herself. In "Woods," therefore, Williams puts together inexplicable events, a strongly evoked setting, and a focus on ordinary details and uses them to craft an overall narrative arc of mysterious dread, one that reflects the character's experience.

In my stories, then, I aim to convey the particularity of characters' perceptions and experiences by focusing on the small tensions and realizations that can occur in seemingly ordinary moments. It's likely clear by now, too, that I want to represent and convey women's experiences. Indeed, most of my stories center on the experiences of young women as they attempt to navigate, and make sense of, their positions in the world and in their relationships, as well as their search for identity and purpose. In writing these stories, I've clearly drawn upon my own experiences. But I also believe that it's important to represent women's voices in literature, to represent the perspective of a young woman and place it in the larger context of our society.

However, I'm also aware that my own experience cannot speak for all women's, and that indeed, it's impossible to write a story that somehow encapsulates and represents the total experience of women. Instead, I aim to focus on the particular stories of women with which I, based on my own perceptions (and imagination), am familiar. Through this particularity, perhaps some wider truths can be found. Eudora Welty argues that "on fiction's pages,

generalities clank when wielded, and hit with equal force at the little and the big ... They make too much noise for us to hear what people might be trying to say” (148). If a fiction writer overgeneralizes, meaning is lost; the vision becomes too sweeping and shallow to reveal anything new. This goes back to the importance of probing the particularities of ordinary events because, as Welty says, “great fiction ... abounds in what makes for confusion” (149). The importance of representing and sharing women’s experiences does not mean drawing stark generalizations or offering pat explanations. Instead, it means offering what one, as a writer, knows, and trusting the reader to find the meaning in that experience.

The particularities of women’s experience can also be fruitful for fiction, since women’s experience is often centered in the private, so-called emotional sphere, or revolves around seemingly mundane domestic tasks and settings; however, as stated before, a story’s truths are found in these small details. Griffin says that “secrets within the private life are like obscurities within an obscurity” and so “the secret alcoholism or indiscretion or sexual abuse within a family history is, being an obscurity inside an essentially obscure world, seemingly less real than the rest of private life, and has more the flavor of fiction” (305). Of course, it’s important to acknowledge that these experiences may not be true for all women, and that this experience may depend on factors such as class or race. However, what is typically considered the realm of women provides fodder for fiction, and indeed fiction writers can, through their stories, reveal the significance of these settings and experiences. The worlds of women, however various they may be, provide ripe opportunities for storytelling. These stories, to reveal new truths about identity, intimacy, and relationships, need to be told.

Writers as diverse as Gaitskill, Williams, Landis, Robinson, and Bowles have all shown me how fiction can powerfully convey women’s experience and the variety of ways this

experience can be represented. Bowles' novel *Two Serious Ladies* centers on the high-strung Mrs. Copperfield and the eccentric Miss Goering. Bowles treats these characters and their seeming weaknesses or oddities as worthy of storytelling; their unique perspectives and desires, and their conflict with other characters and the external world, drive the narrative.

In Robinson's novel *Housekeeping*, meanwhile, she uses precise, evocative details to describe woman-driven household activities and excursions in the Idaho wilderness, stretching out time and focusing on the seemingly mundane to create a sense of otherworldly wonder. When the narrator, Ruth's, unconventional aunt Sylvie arrives to take care of her and her sister, Robinson describes Sylvie's unique approach to their domestic life, shown by instances such as "Sylvie liked to eat supper in the dark" (86). This private, obscure world becomes laden with mystery, as Ruth narrates, "Long after we knew we were too old for dolls, we played out intricate, urgent dramas of entrapment and miraculous escape ... Then we would take our dolls inside and play on the floor in the circle of chairs and couches, by the refracted, lunar light of the vacant sky" (86). Robinson uses this beautiful imagery to describe this house, this domain of women, and evoke it for the reader; traditionally feminine details like "dolls" take on new meaning and reveal internal tensions, such as the long for "escape" they enact. By focusing on the particulars of the (traditionally) feminine domestic setting, Robinson reveals that stories exist here, and conveys the wonder and tension of this story through her narrator's unique perceptions.

Women writers, therefore, reveal the truths of women's experience by telling stories about particular characters and events. These writers show that these characters and spaces have stories worth telling. In my own stories, I focus on small events that may seem insignificant. However, they are indeed significant to the characters' personal development and have profound implications for their lives. The decisions to take a drawing class, to forgive a friend, to have a

drink at a bar, or to confront a family figure all carry their own tensions and matter to these characters. As I worked on the stories in my collection, I found that common themes kept recurring: the search for identity and purpose; the confusions of desire, intimacy and sexuality. Again, these are all issues that have been central to my own experience as I've grown, and that I believe are uniquely significant to a young woman in our larger cultural context, since so much of a woman's value, and the way others respond to her (and thus the way she responds to herself) is tied to her body.

Each of the writers I've mentioned has their own approach to these issues. Gaitskill, especially, reveals the conflicts inherent in women's relationships with their bodies and sexuality, and how this manifests in their relationships with others. Her story "Trying to Be" is about an aspiring writer, Stephanie, who becomes a prostitute to make money. Gaitskill uses this potentially sensationalistic subject matter to explore how sexual interactions involve assumed identities and affect a woman's self-perception. A client, Bernard, is drawn to Stephanie, and Gaitskill narrates,

"Of course, she realized what he liked about her. He loved the idea of kooky, arty girls who lived 'bohemian' lives and broke all the rules ... She liked this vicarious view of herself; it excited and reassured her. She wasn't a directionless girl adrift in a monstrous city ... She was a bohemian, experimenting." (115-116)

Here, Gaitskill shows how this man's sexual attraction is a result of his projection of a fantasy, but also that this fantasy provides a space for Stephanie to find some self-definition, even an odd kind of reassurance about her search for purpose. In her collection *Bad Behavior*, Gaitskill writes about what may be considered extreme situations, such as prostitution or sadomasochism;

however, she uses the extremity of these situations to draw attention to the tensions inherent in sexual intimacy and to reveal how this intimacy is often closely related to one's sense of self.

In my own stories, these issues of sexuality and self-identity are often closely related. This is due to the way our relationships with others and the world at large calls our self-definition into question: when interacting with others, whether family members, friends, or lovers, we assume different identities, and all of these identities may differ from the secret, private self. Indeed, these struggles of identity and intimacy provide the central conflicts that drive most of my stories. Characters struggle with the tension between their private self and the self that interacts with others, between the desire for intimacy and its disappointments, between their own dreams and others' expectations. I tell these stories from the point of view of women's (and queer individuals') experience, aiming to focus on the particularities of their experience. In a way, all stories are about this search for identity, about this conflict between different selves or, like Meursault's and Siddhartha's, the quest for answers to the questions of self and purpose.

This conflict is especially apparent in the stories of young people coming of age, struggling to find a place and to make themselves distinct from their parents. In Landis' collection of linked short stories, *Normal People Don't Live Like This*, Leah searches for her sense of self as she comes of age, coming into conflict with her mother's values. Landis tells some stories from Leah's point of view, some from Helen's, and so shows this conflict from both the inside and outside (though of course Helen is invested in Leah's search). In the title story, Helen visits the apartment of Leah's friends and discovers how this provides an opportunity for Leah to rebel and experiment with other identities. Observing Leah trying to deny her smoking, Helen thinks, "She was lost and she was not lost. She stole fishnet windowpanes but she peeled them off. She was Helen's and she was not Helen's, this redheaded stalk" (78). Landis uses the

details of the cigarettes and the stockings to show Leah's search for a self separate from Helen's influence, and through Helen's eyes, we see Leah flitting between different identities. The search for identity is certainly tied to our relationships with our parents and family, an issue that Landis and others address, and that I approach in my own stories. However, the writers I've discussed also reveal how this issue of identity — and its connection to the questions of woman's positions in the world — surfaces in sexual intimacy, and in the character's relationship to the environment itself.

Finally, while I've discussed the importance of focusing on the specific to reveal the world anew, and my concerns when it comes to portraying characters and their experiences, I think it's also important to discuss style; particularly, the economy of words. Just as I had to learn not to over-plan my stories, I've also had to learn not to overwhelm them with words. Some of my earlier stories have what some might call "purple prose" — I thought an abundance of adjectives meant I was painting a vivid picture for the reader. However, as I read more, I realized that it was not so much the words themselves that writers use, but how they choose and arrange them, that lends fiction its vivacity. As I said, I'm strongly drawn to the visual, and part of my goal while writing is to share my inner vision with the reader; and again, this allows the reader to share the character's vision. But less words can be stronger than an excess. Rather than overloading the reader with details, focusing in on a few particulars, and choosing one's verbs and nouns precisely, paints a much clearer picture.

Reading Hemingway's work, though more spare and minimal than I aim for, has been a refreshing jolt in showing the strength of minimal words and details in communicating a story and experience. In "Big Two-Hearted River, Part II," for example, Hemingway narrates, "He sat on the logs, smoking, drying in the sun, the sun warm on his back, the river shallow ahead

entering the woods, curving into the woods, shallows, light glittering, big water-smooth rocks” (177). Here, Hemingway focuses in on a few precise details, which creates an overall, general impression that allows the reader to fill in the blanks. He also avoids too many adjectives, and instead uses verbs like “curving” and “glittering,” which convey a sense of action and life. A few sentences later, he says that for his character, Nick, “It was all right now” (177).

Hemingway’s description of the calm environment prepares the reader for Nick’s emotional state, and so, again, sensory experience reveals inner experience.

I cannot pinpoint the exact moment when I decided I wanted to become a writer. It instead seems as if it was a gradual realization, an accumulation of my interests, perceptions, and skills. The most compelling aspect of writing, though, the thing that had the heaviest pull, was the prospect of sharing my inner visions, of taking what I could only see in my mind and using words to craft it into something visible to others. Along with this, writing has allowed me to focus in on my perceptions of the world — what I see, what that makes me feel and react, what occurs between and within individuals — and take those muddled, swimming images and feelings and craft them into something more tangible. In this way, writing is a form of therapy: it allows me to sort through and finally expel my emotions. But to approach writing as an art form, we of course need to view it as more than therapy; it may start out that way, but ultimately the writer’s task is to mold those impressions into something that has resonance for others. My stories are a part of my life, and something distinct — my words may be my paints and brush, but they are also separate, images taking on their own life as they form on the canvas. But my own experience has guided my brush, compelled me to represent women’s experience, to explore the boundaries and conflicts of intimacy and identity. To do this, I have learned to approach my writing organically, to trust my characters and their experiences; I aim to convey their

perceptions, inhabit their experiences, and focus on the particular. I have witnessed writers who inhabit experience and thus make the strange unfamiliar and recognizable at once. Writers use the particularities of experience to show the conflicts swimming beneath the surface of ordinary lives, to commune with the reader.

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