

Bistro Girls

2005

Vanessa Blakeslee
University of Central Florida

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

STARS Citation

Blakeslee, Vanessa, "Bistro Girls" (2005). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 4457.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd/4457>

This Masters Thesis (Open Access) is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact lee.dotson@ucf.edu.



BISTRO GIRLS

by

VANESSA BLAKESLEE
B.A. Rollins College, 2001

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

Fall Term
2005

© 2005 Vanessa Blakeslee

ABSTRACT

“Bistro Girls” is an interconnected collection of short stories focusing on characters whose lives intertwine in the affluent Floridian town of Bellamy Park. In “Bistro Girls of Bellamy Park,” a senior at a privileged college struggles to confront an old friend who has slipped into addiction. In “Bobby Blues,” two women’s stifling situations with live-in boyfriends give way to a small hope as Valerie casts aside her illusions and leaves to find a new apartment, temporarily freeing herself from the pattern of relying on a man.

In these stories people wrestle with flawed concepts of personal identity that create outward limitations in their interactions with those they care about most. In “Disconnect,” an eccentric millionaire struggles with spirituality and a romance spoiled by his inability to find satisfaction. In “The Coffee Shop,” the emotionally removed Don leaves Valerie in the inevitable position to find contentment through self-reliance.

Through trial and error, the obstacles of insecurity and disillusionment can at times be overcome. In “Scout’s Honor,” a young woman marries under the spell of fateful disillusionment, with tragic results. An annulment is the catalyst for her maturity, yet the road before her promises to be a long, painful one. As the characters come closer to acceptance of the imperfections and possibilities in themselves and the world around them, there is almost always some hope, no matter how difficult the means to get there.

For Bob

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to my director, Pat Rushin, and committee members Ivonne Lamazares and Lisa Roney. I owe countless thanks to my parents, Ross and Valerie Blakeslee, for their unconditional support of my pursuits over the years, literary and otherwise. I would also like to thank Lauren Blakeslee, Kristie Smeltzer, Susan Fallows and Staci Bogdan for lending their critical expertise throughout the writing and revision process.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

BISTRO GIRLS OF BELLAMY PARK.....	1
SCOUT'S HONOR.....	26
BOBBY BLUES	43
DISCONNECT	66
THE COFFEE SHOP.....	86

BISTRO GIRLS OF BELLAMY PARK

Near the piano, a tall, dark-haired girl swayed and belted out tunes into a microphone. She performed with the confident poise of having sung on stage dozens of times before and had found her place in the spotlight. Only as she delivered the last few lines did her voice falter, causing her to slur the final words. The crowd of bar regulars applauded enthusiastically, and she gave a somewhat drunken attempt at an elegant bow.

At their table off to the left, Valerie and her friend Lori clapped politely. Every Thursday night, the piano player at the Park Bistro doled out show tunes at the request of wealthy older ladies wearing too much jewelry and older men who, between sips of vodka, took delight in ogling the college girls.

“Rachel Parker’s an amazing singer.” Valerie leaned forward and gave a short nod in Rachel’s direction as she walked offstage. “She should’ve been a theatre major, but her father would’ve killed her.”

Lori snorted and took a sip of her Cosmo. “Mine sure would.”

“Well, yeah, but every time she sings, I think it’s such a shame she can’t do it professionally, don’t you think?”

“Uh huh.” Lori glanced at Rachel briefly, now ordering another drink at the bar, before her gaze turned to a group of frat boys a few stools down. In the last half hour, an attractive bevy of Bellamy Park college kids had started their takeover of the place from the locals.

Valerie reminded herself that Lori didn’t know Rachel and didn’t really care. Lori preferred the martini and wine bars in downtown Orlando, but the Bistro Valerie had always

liked best, in part because she and her best friend from freshman year, Rachel Parker, had discovered it.

Back then, there really had been no other place for the Symonds College kids to go in Bellamy Park except for Banshee's, the dank, smoky Irish pub by the train tracks. Every time Val snuck in underage, the bouncer caught her drinking and ordered her out. One night she and Rachel ate dinner at the Park Bistro (where the waiter didn't card them, an instant plus), lingered, and had the good fortune to observe the late show. A parade of Bellamy Park regulars piled in, older businessmen, first, second and third wives, crowding the tables around the piano. Some got up and sang the favorite classics, Frank Sinatra, of course, and Neil Diamond. Foreign couples sat at tables outside, smoked and talked. And Rachel, a brilliant singer, dazzled them several times during the evening with her renditions, until she put away too many drinks.

Rachel and Val kept the secret of the Bistro to themselves for awhile. Eventually, however, they came accompanied with larger groups of students from the small college. In a matter of a few weeks, designated nights at the Bistro grew packed, Symonds kids outnumbering the older crowd, parking their new BMWs next to the silver Jaguars up and down the street. Rachel didn't drink so much back then, and she and Val split bottles of Pinot Grigio.

Valerie didn't have a clue what Rachel's interests were now. They had stopped hanging out. Last fall semester, Rachel started going to more late night parties and hung out in new circles while Valerie took on an internship and concentrated on creating pieces for the Senior Art Show. Rumor had it that Rachel did her share of cocaine on a regular basis. During her first three years at Symonds, Valerie smoked pot and drank heavily until first it got old and later brought on anxiety attacks. As a senior, she viewed hard partying as self-destructive for the most part, so she chose not to be around it.

Valerie hadn't spent any significant time with Rachel since last fall, so when Rachel called and asked for Val to come hear her sing at the Bistro that evening, she said yes, hoping to find out that the rumors weren't true. Even if they were, she didn't see a reason to let the friendship go entirely. After all, they used to be close. On the phone, Rachel had sounded like she missed being friends. Perhaps Valerie could help her steer clear from the party scene. She always put on a good performance, so Valerie invited Lori to come.

"So how do you like working at Pop's so far?" Lori asked. Valerie had worked at the restaurant a little over a month, Lori for nearly a year.

"Well, it's been sort of weird, actually," said Val. "Not the employees or anything, just the fact that it's my first job since I waited tables in high school every summer. It seems like nobody besides us at this rich kid college has ever had a job, unless it's been working for daddy."

"Please." Lori eyed a trio of skinny, beautiful girls walking by, designer jewelry dangling from their wrists and necks, carrying the latest trendy handbags of the season. "Look, it's the Bellamy Park fashion show." Her voice rang with sarcasm. "They wouldn't know what to do if they had to work."

"They probably won't ever have to," Val said. "I mean, don't get me wrong. We both went to private school growing up. Your dad's a CEO, mine's a bank president. But my dad's had to work hard for everything he's ever had. And maybe if some of these Paris Hiltons had to do things the hard way, they'd appreciate what really matters. God, I can't wait to graduate this spring."

"It makes me nervous, how fake everybody is," Lori said. "I don't like it."

“I used to be really into the socializing, and then gradually I saw the whole scene for what it was,” Valerie said. “The whole see-and-be-seen bullshit. Nobody really cares, so why should I care?”

“Hard to believe that about you,” Lori said. “You have such, I don’t know, a *defined* character.”

“Yeah, well. I don’t know about that.” Valerie gazed at the students milling around the bar. “Now it all seems amusing and sad at the same time.” When she had first started hanging out with Lori last semester, it had been a relief discovering someone else who liked simple fun (ice skating at the Sportplex, going to the ballet in town) and didn’t demand they show up at the best house parties off-campus.

The two girls moved to a table on the sidewalk so that Lori could smoke Parliaments. They sat under a big heat lamp, wrapped in dark New England-esque pea coats too heavy for the forty-five degree chill that had descended over Orlando. Inside, Rachel finished another song, and the crowd applauded. Someone let out a rousing, loopy whistle. A few minutes later, Rachel approached their table, a glass of white wine sloshing in her hand. She’s had a few already, Valerie thought as she introduced the two and noticed Rachel’s glassy eyes.

“These yours?” Rachel asked, digging into the cigarette pack on the table.

Val shook her head. “I don’t smoke anymore. They’re Lori’s.”

“I don’t mind,” Lori said. She handed Rachel the lighter.

“It’s *so* cold.” Rachel hunched up her shoulders as she lit the cigarette.

“That’s because you’re from southern California,” Val said. “Try living in New England all winter. It’s why I came to school down here. Love your scarf, by the way.” She realized it

had been a year since she and Rachel went scouting for sales at the elite department stores, and she missed the fun.

“It’s new. Got it at Saks.” Rachel lifted one end and examined the turquoise fringes. She leaned back and put one foot up on the edge of the seat across from her. The waiter came over and switched out their ashtray.

“Someone wants to buy you a drink,” he said to Rachel.

“Who?” she asked.

“That gentleman over there.” He leaned in closer and pointed to a man who was probably in his fifties, slightly built, but years of vodka and cigarettes had taken their toll. He had pale, spotty skin and a saggy neck. What a lizard face, Valerie thought.

“Oh, that’s Jeff! We’ve been sitting and talking at happy hour lately.” Rachel smiled and waved to the reptilian Jeff at the bar. “Tell him a vodka martini, okay? And thanks.”

“You’ve been coming in for happy hour?” Valerie looked at Rachel, eyebrows knit in an accusing angle. “That can’t exactly be worthwhile.” Park Avenue fell short when it came to quality, young professionals, by the looks of it. “That guy is one hell of a preserved specimen.”

“Imagine going home with him,” Lori giggled.

Rachel laughed and flicked her cigarette. “I know, but we’re friends. He’s an accountant here in town and does very well, I may add.”

“So what? He’s an alcoholic geezer,” Val said. “That’s happy hour in Bellamy Park for you.” This new information worried her. If Rachel drank at happy hour and went out at night, throughout the entire week, her drinking had gotten worse than Valerie thought. Her grades must have dropped. Whether Rachel wanted to hear it or not, Valerie resolved to go to lunch

with her sometime soon and have a talk. It seemed her duty as an old friend, even though it was glaringly apparent Rachel didn't even notice their withering friendship, didn't care, or both.

"Oh, here's Alice," Rachel said. A girl wearing a white fur hat, matching white parka, and boots approached the table, absurd because even though the temperatures that week had plummeted to the thirties, the snow bunny look could never work in Florida. The bunny, Alice Berkley, and Rachel exchanged big hugs, as if they hadn't seen one another in years. Valerie had never cared to get to know her. One of the most gorgeous, popular girls at Symonds and the president of Rachel's sorority, Alice was notorious for spending money on lavish Spring Break trips and drugs. Valerie had felt sorry for her their freshman year, however, when Alice's father died in a small plane crash. People said they had been close, and she took it hard. To make matter worse, lots of ugly gossip had gone around about Alice's family after her father's death. Her parents were divorced, and there had been arguing about money.

"I want you to meet my friend Valerie, the coolest, best, most wonderful girl I know," Rachel said, grabbing Val's hand and nearly dragging her up from the table. It irked Valerie the way she said it, as if solely to impress Alice.

"I know who you are," Alice replied, pursing her lips in a polite, plastic smile. She made no attempt to introduce herself to Lori, but instead turned to Rachel and exclaimed, "I wouldn't care to be with the smartest, most beautiful people in Bellamy Park tonight, if it meant passing up the chance to hang out with such great friends."

Another song ended just as Lori piped up.

Lori raised her eyebrows. "Well, we're all smart and beautiful, but I doubt if by the end of the night we'll be great friends." She let out a little laugh. "But who knows?"

“I don’t think so.” Alice looked over at Lori, and her smile turned into an icy smirk. “Not too quick to get the joke there, are we?” She said something to Rachel under her breath, and the two headed off into the noisy bar.

Lori leaned back in her chair and stared at the table blankly, wearing a thin-lipped frown. Valerie didn’t say anything and let a few moments pass. If Alice intended on asserting her bitchy reputation to secure her social place, so be it. She’d probably showed up to get Rachel to do a bump or a line in the bathroom. Still, anger fueled by the buzz she had burned in her gut. Valerie wanted to get up and go after them, say how mean and unnecessary it was for Alice to be outwardly snotty, even if it amounted to nothing.

Lori stirred her drink and drew her knees up. Her gaze searched Valerie, now standing at the table, as if she might expect betrayal from her any minute. Then her eyes darted across the faces of surrounding patrons, afraid of further attack.

“I’ll be right back,” Val said.

She squeezed through the drunken crowd, smiling and waving at people she knew from school. Pushing through to the end of the bar, she found Rachel waiting outside the bathroom. As soon as she spotted Valerie, Rachel rushed over.

“Oh my God.” Rachel rolled her eyes and made a face. “How do you hang out with her?”

“She’s a very nice person, if you get to know her well, which I have,” Valerie said. “Not that Alice cares to know that.”

“Whatever, look, I don’t have a problem with your friend.” Rachel rummaged around in her purse. Val craned her neck to get a glimpse of Lori, hoping she hadn’t gotten upset and left the Bistro altogether. Four years ago, Rachel would have been the one Valerie defended for her

street smart attitude and rougher ways, back when they first became friends, when they started going to the pool between classes and talking about professors.

In the back of the Bistro, the spotlight shone over the pianist. He sang into the mike as he played a slow, romantic melody. It sounded rich and enchanting, as if the words and notes came out of a deep, cavernous well.

Rachel clutched her elbow. “Can you loan me fifty dollars?” Rachel’s face, even in the dim bistro lighting, had the strained, leathery appearance of a woman used by the world. “I just need a little to get me through the next song.”

“Don’t ask me to do that,” Val said, annoyed. Rachel tugging on the threadbare strings of their relationship this way made her feel dirty and manipulated, like she had no choice. Might as well give in. No big deal. Make it easy.

“Please. I promise I’ll never ask again.” Rachel swayed. A waiter brushed past her slightly and she dropped her drink, liquor spilling on the floor. “Shit. I really need it.”

“Really?” Valerie gestured to the shards of broken glass at their feet. “I find that hard to believe. And why don’t you have the money?”

“I’m just waiting for a check from my dad.” Rachel’s eyes had a desperate ache to them Valerie hadn’t seen until now, almost animalistic, like a dog pleading to come in out of the rain.

I can’t believe I’m doing this, Val thought. She reached for her purse, dug out her wallet and fingered through the cash. “Don’t ever ask me again,” she said. Inside, she felt clouded over with guilt and shame at helping Rachel slip away, coupled with the stark truth of the addiction. An awful being was taking over in the real Rachel’s place, evil gaining victory. “I mean it,” she added.

“I knew I could count on you.” Rachel grabbed the money and gave her a weak smile. “You’ll have it back by tomorrow, I swear.”

Alice emerged from the bathroom and sidled up eagerly to Rachel. “You got it?” she asked, without looking at Val.

So the little bitch didn’t intend on saying thank you. It was more than enough to push Valerie’s buttons. No one ever used her with such blatant disregard.

“I want you to know I don’t appreciate how you treated my friend,” she said. “I thought it surprising, coming from you, since you know what it’s like to be talked about, Alice.”

Alice stared, mouth open. “I wouldn’t be so quick to judge, if I were you,” she said. “Why don’t you go and ask your cute little friend what she used to do for a living?” She delivered the last line with a tone of superiority. She and Rachel exchanged knowing smirks, and Val tried to think of what Alice had possibly meant. What had Lori done?

Alice walked off with her head high, and Rachel followed behind, scarf trailing down her back, bright blue against her long brown hair, leaving Valerie standing alone in front of the bathroom door.

Across the narrow hallway, the door to the men’s room opened. The older man who stepped out looked at Valerie, eyes snapping with recognition. “Hello there,” he said, taking a step back to look her over. “Valerie from Pop’s.”

“That’s me,” she said, taking a deep breath. She really didn’t feel like talking to this guy right now, who occasionally came into the restaurant, even though they usually had an enjoyable conversation about art when she waited on him.

“How’s that Senior Art exhibition coming?” he asked.

Not a bad looking man for around forty, she thought. Kind of handsome, with a full head of thick brown hair and a few faint crinkles at the corners of his eyes when he smiled. She couldn't remember his name. Ron? Tom? Something like that, short, one syllable. "Oh, stressful." She let out a shaky laugh. "It'll be on display the second week of April. Mostly paintings."

He clicked his tongue and shook his head. "Paintings? I told you to work on more photography."

"I have." She adjusted her purse nervously and shifted her weight from one foot to the other. "Three of my photographs are on display."

"Good. Keep shooting." When he turned to walk back into the bar, Val noticed he wore cowboy boots, odd for Bellamy Park. "Get good with a camera and go to film school. With your art background, you'd make a great director. My documentary on Gulf War veterans is on PBS all spring. Take a look at it." He reached into his wallet and fished out a business card. "I'm going to lunch with some film people tomorrow. You should come."

Val looked at the card. Don Reilly, Flying Shark Productions. Something about him struck her as compelling, even though the Bistro made her wary of older men claiming to be "helpful" to college girls. His interest in her artwork and future felt genuine. But she felt reluctant to follow up, maybe was even a little scared of taking the chance at such a real opportunity.

"Sure. Thanks," she said, putting it in her purse.

As Don stepped out of the hall, Lori appeared. She glanced back as he joined a group sitting near the piano. "What's taking you so long? Do you know that guy?"

“It’s the Hollywood guy who comes into Pop’s.” Valerie peered through the crowd just in time to see him disappear into a wall of blazers and cashmere sweaters. “He freaks me out when I talk to him. It’s hard to explain. I guess he could be totally bullshitting me, but I think he might be the real thing.”

“He’s probably not important anyway.” Lori examined her reflection in the hallway mirror, fussing with a strand of hair. “Hey, let’s go to Banshee’s, okay? I don’t like this place.”

Driving home later that night, the incident with Alice’s overall rudeness bothered Valerie just as much as Rachel asking for drug money. She wanted to let Lori know how much she resented such cutting snobbery while leaving out the details of Rachel’s personal problems. It seemed best to be honest about the evening’s drama because it might be important to their friendship. Seeing Rachel as a complete mess hurt more than she had been willing to admit, but she would have to deal with that later.

“Rachel never used to be like this,” Valerie said. “When I first met her, she made fun of girls like Alice Berkley for being country club princess-types, let alone be friends.”

“They’re bitches.” Lori shook her head. “If we see them again, I’m walking away.”

“They were even worse when I went and confronted them outside the bathroom.” Val sighed. “Be glad you weren’t there.”

An awkward pause ensued. Heat blasted out of the dashboard vents, and she shivered, hands still cold as they clutched the wheel. Bow Wow Wow drummed out “I Want Candy” from the sound system, but it only made the serious turn of the conversation more obvious.

“What did Alice say about me?” Lori finally asked. “Just tell me.”

“Nothing specific. It sounded silly, actually, like they disapproved of a place you once worked or something.” Valerie tried to sound as nonchalant as possible. “I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about.”

“I know what they’re saying,” Lori said. When they stopped at a signal, Valerie looked over and saw Lori crying. “God, I’m so embarrassed. At least you’re not like the other people at that school.”

“What is it?” Feeling slightly foggy from drinking, she immediately regretted sounding so direct and hoped Lori didn’t sense it in her voice. Dread stirred in her chest.

“You have to promise not to say anything, ever.” Lori heaved a few sobs. “But I was a stripper when I first came to Orlando. My dad and I got into a fight and I didn’t know what to do for money.”

Valerie didn’t know what to say. She hadn’t met anyone who worked as a stripper at any point, but felt pretty certain that no matter how badly off she ended up, she would do just about anything else (scrub toilets, pick up trash, and what was wrong with waiting tables?) rather than take off her clothes for money. Lori was already upset, and she didn’t want to make her feel any worse, so she said, “I can think of a lot of worse things to have done than working as a stripper, temporarily.”

“I guess you’re right.” Sniffling through tears, Lori hung her head, arms held tight across her chest. “And I regret it now. Sometimes guys come up to me downtown and say, ‘Don’t I know you from somewhere?’ You’ve seen them.”

Valerie nodded, although up to this point she hadn’t read any more into their approaches. After all, Lori was a beautiful, tall blonde and got hit on constantly. Then another bundle of

thoughts colored the picture painted by the confession. Strippers dabbled in prostitution and drugs.

“How bad was it?” Val reached over and turned the radio off. “I mean, how much were you into the lifestyle?”

“The usual drugs,” Lori said. “Cocaine, ecstasy. It’s why I stay away from the party scene here. I learned my lessons the hard way.”

An unsettled feeling stirred inside Valerie. Lori’s confession made the friendship hard to grasp. Valerie suddenly felt a burden she wasn’t sure she wanted to bear, but had unknowingly taken on in the moment she agreed to listen to Lori’s secret.

“Well, there’s nothing you can do to change what you did now.” Valerie gripped the wheel more firmly. “You’re doing the right thing by moving on with your life.” She wished she could fend off her disappointment in Lori. The only safe way she could possibly stay friends with Lori was if she kept her at a distance.

“Thanks.” Lori wiped the tears off her face. “At least you understand now why I didn’t go out for such a long time. Until recently, I was scared to death of running into people, you know? But it’s been a few years now.”

So Lori had left her sordid past, or so she said. Val could hardly trust her not to go back into it. Then she’d have to lose a best friend all over again.

Later that week, she found herself avoiding not only Rachel, but many of her old friends on campus she had, over time, come to recognize as a bad influence. She ducked out of computer labs and went to the cafeteria at the end of the lunch rush, because people she used to

care about made her want to hide like a rabbit scurrying into its hidden den. The more she really got to know them, they would only disappoint her.

One afternoon Valerie went to pay for her lunch and found Don's card stuck between the bills in her wallet. Oh well, she thought, trying to shrug off the nagging feeling that she had missed her chance. Just forget about it.

But finding the card reminded Val that she ought to call Rachel and see if they could meet for lunch. Only she had more work in the studio to do than anticipated, so she put it off. All week, as she tried to focus on her brushstrokes and examine which negatives to print, conflicting thoughts about Rachel wouldn't leave her mind. She felt bad for giving Rachel the money (which she didn't get back as Rachel had promised), but more than that, she needed time to think how to approach the subject to her friend about getting help. Rachel had changed so much that Valerie nearly felt repulsed by her. She couldn't allow an addicted, artificial acquaintance to allow her to lose focus, and her work, as she discovered as she toiled further on her Senior Art projects, meant a great deal to her life. She would allow herself one chance at talking to Rachel. If it required more effort, she doubted she would be willing to jeopardize her own commitments in order to rescue Rachel from the perils of too many parties late into the night.

A week after the Bistro incident, a junior named Rocco had his twenty-first birthday party at the Zinc Bar downtown. Rocco's parents were rich. He rented a house off-campus on Lake Virginia, drove a Porsche convertible and a Land Rover. Said to be a thirty-thousand dollar affair, open bar, with a reggae band flown in from New York, the party was the event of the year. Sorority girls bought dresses for the occasion as if it were a spring formal. Valerie knew Rocco. She had written papers for him last spring and made a thousand dollars or so off the deal. Rocco

had invited Rachel to sing at the party, but Valerie planned on avoiding her until they could get together in a sober setting.

That night, Valerie and Lori sat in a leopard print booth, drinking flavored martinis and talking with the Van Hopper brothers, Nate and Scott, whose family owned a golf course empire.

“I’m sending my daughters to the best private school in town,” said Nate, the younger one. “But my sons will go to the best boarding school I can find. Boarding school made me grow up.”

Valerie saw Rachel with Alice and some of her sorority friends. When she tried to slide into the seat of the booth, Rachel misjudged the edge by about six inches and landed on the ground. When one of the Phi Delt guys tried to help her up and suggested taking her home, she started arguing with him.

“God, Rachel is a total mess,” Scott said. “No one but Alice will go out with her now, she gets so wasted.”

“Really?” Valerie said. The sinking feeling in her chest intensified as she watched Rachel ignite a scene.

“Well, you’re not friends with her anymore, are you?” Nate asked. “I never see you out together.”

“Nope,” she said, looking down at her drink and shaking her head.

A few minutes later, the band finished an upbeat mambo number and the lights on the stage at the back of the bar dimmed to create a soft, sexy spotlight. The lead singer spoke low into the microphone, as if he intended on sharing a secret with the cocktail party guests.

“And now, for a very, very special rendition of a song you all know and love, is the lovely and very talented, Rachel Parker.”

Everyone applauded, and Rocco's group of friends cheered. An extra few seconds of awkward waiting passed before Rachel hastily stepped out of the shadow to the right of the stage and grabbed the mike.

"They shouldn't have let her on like that," Val overheard a girl say in the next booth.

Lori leaned in close to Val and said, "I can't wait to hear this."

Rachel began in a distinct imitation of the famous Marilyn Monroe "Happy Birthday, Mr. President" performance for John F. Kennedy. "Happy birthday to you." She delivered it slowly, fumbling over the melody. "Happy birthday. To. You." Drawling out the lines, her foot tapped a strung-out staccato. She gripped the microphone stand with both hands and paused. Guests rustled in their seats, whispering.

"What the hell is she doing?" Lori said to Val, who only shook her head.

"Happy birthday, dear Rocco." It sounded horribly strained, not breathy like Marilyn at all, as if Rachel had to place all her efforts just to deliver them aloud. At last she blurted the rest. When she departed the stage to a scattering of applause, someone had to help her in the right direction. She grabbed the mike again. "Thank you. Thank you very much!" she gushed, as if she had just received a standing ovation. Whether she didn't realize her blunder in the botched delivery, Valerie couldn't tell, but one thing everyone talked about for the rest of the night was that Rachel Parker must have done an awful lot of drugs to have barely gotten through a song any five-year-old on the planet could sing.

The party cleared out of the bar just after two o'clock. Lori left with Scott. Valerie ran into Rachel outside on the sidewalk, trying to dial on her phone.

"Valerie, have you seen Alice? We rode together." Rachel looked around idly at passersby. Alice was nowhere in sight. She clutched her keys in one hand.

Valerie wasn't about to let her drive back to campus. "I'll take you home. Leave your car and let's go."

They climbed in Val's SUV. Rachel immediately grabbed the CD case and rifled through it. "Oh, remember this one? We listened to this so much last year." She popped it in the stereo. Fleetwood Mac blasted out of the speakers. Window down, she sang along. Her dark hair blew in her face and fingers drummed on the dashboard.

Valerie sighed and concentrated on driving. No point in saying anything with Rachel off in her own hazy reality.

Parking in front of the sorority house, she turned off the engine. Light streamed from every window in the building, radios blasted and the melodies clashed in the air: seventies disco with current pop and rap. The doors to the stairwells banged, students laughed, shouted, swore. Rachel hesitated before getting out of the car, as if unsure of what to say. It occurred to Valerie that this quiet, brief moment was the only decent chance she might get.

"Do you need help?" Valerie asked, facing the passenger seat. "Because I'd like to help you."

"What do you mean?" Rachel turned her back and reached for the door handle.

"Everyone was talking about how messed up you and Alice got tonight. I've been worried about you. Maybe you should crash at my place."

"Well, I don't want to hear it," Rachel said. "Come up if you want, but not if you're going to give me some speech." She opened the door.

Valerie grabbed her shoulder. "I wish you'd listen. We used to be better friends."

Rachel shot her a cold stare in return, bloodshot eyes squinting. “There’s one thing that’s always frustrated the hell out of me whenever I hang out with you. Your holier-than-thou mentality.” She stepped out and reached for her purse, yanking it after her.

“What, because I see your life going to hell and I actually give a damn?” Rachel’s cigarette pack rested on the center console, and Val tossed it after her, the pack bouncing into the lawn, strewing its contents loose, but she didn’t care. “Sorry, but it’s not that hard to put two and two together, your habits and your behavior. If that’s being judgmental, then oh well.”

Rachel slammed the door. Valerie watched her strut angrily away and up the steps, dropping her purse as she fumbled at the front entrance with her swipe card. It took her several times to swipe it before the censor allowed the door to swing open. For a fleeting moment, she felt the urge to go after her. Then she thought better of it. After making an honest attempt, she wasn’t going to chase after anyone in order to try and force words onto deaf ears.

Shortly after four a.m., Valerie’s cell phone rang twice before she awoke enough to answer. On the other end, a frantic Rachel begged for her to come to the sorority house. “There’s been a sort of accident,” Rachel said. “There’s no one else I can call who’s not fucked up.”

A few minutes later, Valerie pulled up to the sorority house. Bleary-eyed and trembling, Rachel met her at the door, and they hurried upstairs.

Rachel told the story in fragments on the way. “All we meant was for it to be a pledge activity,” she said. “But God, it turned into a mess.”

At the landing, Valerie had a hard time digesting the chaos before them in the hallway. Upper class students clustered around two petite girls in the middle of the hall. Anxious chatter

filled the air. The first pledge, a brunette, was held up by two sorority sisters as she dry heaved into a paper bag. At least she was conscious, however, because it was apparent that the other hazing victim hadn't been so lucky. The little strawberry-blonde pledge lay sprawled out on the floor. Alice Berkley and a frat guy knelt on either side, trying unsuccessfully to get her to drink from a bottle of water.

"She keeps passing out," Alice said, exasperated. She looked up at the frat guy across from her.

"I don't know what to tell you," he answered. "This isn't working. You need to get them out of here."

"What did you have them do?" Valerie asked Rachel. She peered into the doorway of the first room on the right. Eight other freshman girls, in various states of drunkenness, stumbled around the room. One girl held another's head over the trash can as she threw up. Two others sat on the floor, weeping and hugging each other. On a desk perched two empty handles of whiskey.

"We thought they'd be fine." Rachel grabbed her arm. Panic clung on every word. "I swear, Val. I mean, wouldn't you? It seemed like ten girls could drink two jugs of whiskey in forty-five minutes. The rest are fine."

"You must be crazy." Val shoved her off. "They need to go to the hospital right away. Get the guys to carry them downstairs."

"No way." Alice Berkley stood up and walked over, hands on hips. "Do you know how much trouble we'll be in?" She turned to Rachel. "I don't know why you called her over."

"Hey, Alice." The frat guy next to the blonde tugged at the girl's limp arm. "She's really fucked up. I think she might be in a coma or dying or something."

Rachel waved her hand at him as if he didn't know what he was talking about. "Oh, come on. I'm sure they just need some more time."

Valerie stared, holding back the urge to tear into Rachel and Alice.

One of the sorority sisters with her arm around the more coherent girl looked up. "But she's throwing up blood," she said. Tears welled in her eyes. The noise in the hallway had died down to a quiet, fearful lull.

"Who's good enough to drive?" the frat boy called out. The students hummed amongst themselves, glancing from the girls to one another. Alice and Rachel ducked into an adjoining room. They exchanged biting whispers.

Valerie stuck her head in the open doorway after them. "This is your responsibility," she hissed. "I don't care how fucked up you are right now. Get the hell out here."

Silent and strung out, Alice and Rachel wore the looks of mad, innocent children.

She stepped back into the hall and dug in her purse for her keys. "I'll take them, but I need some help." The frat boy and a few sisters volunteered. "Let's go," she said. The words hung heavy in her mouth, and she said a few prayers under her breath for the fading girls on the way down the stairs.

Valerie spent the early morning hours at the Bellamy Park hospital. The doctors thought one of the girls might not make it. Her heart had stopped in the emergency room. If either of them survived, both were likely to suffer brain damage from alcohol poisoning. "This is the worst we've ever seen," one doctor said, face flooded with disbelief and sorrow.

By noon, the parents had flown in. The sorority's national organization had pulled the Symonds College charter. Valerie and several others served as witnesses in the reports of the

incident, testimonies which immediately got Rachel Parker and Alice Berkley expelled, with criminal charges pending.

The student body rippled with the news. Valerie managed to make her way to the cafeteria at noon. All the tables overlooking the lake on the verandah had filled up, since overnight the weather had turned a balmy seventy degrees. Nate Van Hopper called her name and waved her over to a table.

“There’s talk already of the families pressing charges,” Nate said. “The college already expelled them, which sucks. I mean, two months before graduation? And the other sorority girls who had nothing to do with it are pissed, since now there’s no spring formal.” He typed a hurried text-message into his cell phone as he spoke.

“I still can’t believe they’d let something get so out of control,” Valerie said, shaking her head. Any compassion and pity she had remaining for Rachel evaporated.

That night, most of the college went to Banshee’s Pub, packing in around the Irish band that played traditional drinking tunes every weekend and clustering in the side room to play darts. Valerie had worked at Pop’s across the street all evening. Finished with her shift, she came by for a drink before going home. She joined Lori, already seated at the bar with a Guinness.

“No way.” Lori nudged Val. “Turn around. I can’t believe they have the guts to be here.”

Alice and Rachel walked in, arm in arm, a pair of Siamese twins in their crime. By the looks of it, both had gone shopping and wore new designer skirts and tops, shoes and accessories. The students at the bar reacted in a blatantly polarized fashion. Half of them stared

in disbelief, muttered a few critical remarks and turned around, ignoring them. Others, mostly girls, greeted the two misfit celebrities with hugs and exclams of sympathy for the unfortunate turn of events, simply a hazing activity gone wrong.

“You’d think no one would talk to them,” Val said. “How ridiculous.”

“Are you going to say anything to her?” Lori asked. “I would if I were you.”

“I’d rather not have anything more to do with it.”

A few minutes later someone gripped her arm.

When she glanced over, Rachel managed a small, hopeful smile. “Hey,” she said. “Can I talk to you?”

“Sure,” Valerie replied tersely. She got up out of her bar stool and noticed she was clenching a cocktail napkin so hard it had become a twisted piece of paper rope. “Let’s go over here.” She led the way into the side dining area, away from the traffic of the bar and the loud band. Even though the room had plenty of open tables, she stood up to show Rachel she meant the conversation to be entirely serious.

“I want you to know it really was just an accident,” Rachel said. “I mean, we were so wasted.”

“That’s your excuse?” Valerie countered. “Is that what you told those girls’ parents?” She waited for Rachel to thank her for saving them.

“Of course not. They said today she’s going to pull through.” Up close, Valerie saw Rachel’s eyes, thickly laden with shadow and mascara, were reddened from crying. “Just listen. I doubt I’d go to jail, my father’s a lawyer, but I’m still scared.” She looked unhealthy, skin dry and sallow, hair limp.

“Did you want pity?” Valerie said. “Because it seems like that’s all you want, and I don’t feel bad for either of you. You caused all this. And I don’t want to hear how it’s hard to cope with the rumors because both of you seem to be handling it quite well.”

“Will you just come in the ladies’ room with me for a second?” Rachel reached for Valerie’s hand. “Please.” Her eyes had the begging, desperate look again they had outside the bathroom at the Bistro.

“And what are we going to do in there?” Valerie let out a disbelieving laugh. “Some of your fantastic blow? You’ve obviously been so busy fucking up lives that you forgot you owe me money.”

“I wanted to talk in private.” Rachel’s face clouded with a look of pure resentment. “Of course, I was going to give you the money. Oh, wait, I guess now I’m a thief, too.”

“I didn’t say that.” Rage bloomed quickly into sorrow. She wanted to curl up and cry, not for Rachel, but for the people whose lives had nearly been ruined, even taken away, without a care.

“You don’t even trust me to go to the bathroom. I don’t get you anymore. Just because this all happened, which wasn’t even my fault, now I have to hang my head in shame and can’t go out or have fun anymore? Well, fuck that.” Rachel looked over Valerie’s shoulder, scanning the bar, most likely, to find Alice, and brushed past as she abruptly left.

Valerie stood in the empty dining room for a minute before heading back to the bar, stung by Rachel’s lack of remorse. Only a handful of students knew that Valerie had taken the girls to the hospital, and for that she felt relieved. She didn’t feel like dealing with a barrage of questions from anybody. The hours spent giving her testimony had been plenty. The last thing she felt was heroic. Of all people, she had blatantly seen this coming and avoided any

intervention until the last possible minute. Then she had acted only because other people were directly harmed. At least she could have tried to do more, sooner, for Rachel, even if the friendship had already fallen completely apart. Guilt lodged firmly in her chest. She hoped she could shake it off with time.

On her way back to the bar, she bumped into the Hollywood guy again.

“Hey, you,” he said. Tonight he wore a tuxedo jacket and cuff links, as if he had come from an important event, reminding Valerie of some old movie star, Gregory Peck maybe, or Cary Grant. “What happened to lunch the other day? You missed meeting my new art director.”

“Sorry.” Valerie smiled and shrugged. “I’m working on not missing opportunities from now on, actually.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll get another chance,” Don replied. He reached over, squeezed her arm and grinned warmly. “And whatever it is, you’ll do better next time. I’ve traveled the world, and people like you are rare, believe me. You’re the real deal.”

“Thanks,” she said. It seemed like a nice compliment. Then he asked if he could buy her a beer, and she shook her head. “Maybe some other time.”

He wandered off, and Valerie took her seat again next to Lori.

“So how’d it go?” Lori asked. “Pretty bad?”

“Yeah.” Valerie sighed. “Too little, too late.”

“Don’t beat yourself up about it.” Lori looked over and shrugged. “You did what you could for a friend, and it’s her loss, not yours.”

Valerie put her arm around Lori. She felt overwhelmingly glad that she was there. Lori had been out in the world and understood people with hang ups, something Valerie had

overlooked until now. She needed to start noticing the values of others more, not focus on just their shortcomings. Lori was the one who deserved a chance, not Rachel.

On Monday, Valerie eavesdropped on some sorority girls while typing her art history paper in the computer lab. Sometime over the weekend, Rachel had suffered a breakdown and called her father to come and take her back to California, said she needed to leave Florida, get rehab somewhere, or else she thought one of these days, sunny and beautiful, she would die.

SCOUT'S HONOR

Her parents had named her Scout because, as her mother put it, “That girl stole the movie from Gregory Peck. Your dad and I liked her spunk.” Growing up, Scout never failed her namesake, either. She loved to entertain her big brother and sister with dreamed up skits and cast them as characters, and even though she was the baby of three, one boy and two girls, most of the time she played the boss.

The boss role faded as she grew up. By fifteen, she had a boyfriend (but no sex, the O'Regan's were strict Catholics), smoked cigarettes and went to parties at friends' farms after football games in the warm nights on the Florida panhandle. Scout stayed within the parameters of feistiness, never crossing over into full-fledged bad girl behavior, earning a fair share of groundings, which she skirted around enough to make her family smile. She looked good compared to the errors of her siblings. Connie, the oldest O'Regan sibling, had abandoned a promising future in professional golf after years of time and money spent honing her skills to become an elementary school teacher, still a topic of dissension between Scout's parents and a decision her sister now regretted. A few years later, Andy had invested nearly all the profits from his fledgling construction business in dot-com stocks, and the loss of those investments first sent him to their parents for money to bail out his business debts, then to move back home following his bankruptcy. “Scout can never do wrong,” her older brother Andy said that Easter, “while the rest of us fall flat on our faces.”

“What are you talking about? Look at you.” Scout breathed the last line in comedy show style, imitating as best she could the exaggerated Long Island accent of an old Jewish woman.

“You’re a real estate king, for Gawd’s sake.” She waved her lit cigarette around for added emphasis. “You should come down to Boca.”

“Orlando, you mean.”

“Well, yeah, Orlando.” Scout giggled and gave the accent up.

“You should think about real estate.”

“Listen to you.” She resumed the heavy accent and snuffed out the cigarette. “You’re like seven savage Jews wrapped in a Catholic body.”

Andy laughed, which made Scout feel good because he laughed with his whole body, shoulders quaking, knees jiggling.

He was right. Scout had never gotten into serious trouble, but she’d also played it safe and without direction. She had taken community college classes here and there, but nothing ever amounted to a degree. Last year she’d finished a massage school, a fifteen-week program, but never followed up. Rubbing strangers’ backs for a living didn’t excite her after all. So she kept bartending five nights a week at Pop’s, a Key West-style dive bar in Bellamy Park which paid the bills. And the problem of Harry wouldn’t go away.

Scout and Harry had dated for four years, and she’d finally broken up with him two days ago, right before coming home for Easter. Things had been sweet but boring between them. She foresaw no promising future. He was thirty, five years older than she, a bartender downtown with no aspirations except to play in his band and perhaps one day own a bar of his own.

She had come home from work at midnight exhausted, with a torturous headache twisting open the crown of her head like a jar, to find his band practicing in the garage when he said earlier they had definitely moved practices to Saturdays. First she blew up at him, the band scattering off into the night. Then she broke up with him, listing her reasons plainly, her

headache preventing extensive discussion. Confused at the suddenness, Harry had paced around, picking up the beer bottles and fast food wrappers strewn on the porch as if in last-ditch effort to please her somehow.

“I don’t see how you can be this critical when you’re a bartender, too,” he said.

“I am *bartending*, but there’re things I want to do.”

“You keep saying you want me to do things, and you’re going to do things, but what are they?” He worriedly stroked his short beard. “You don’t know. It’s like you want me to etch out my plans on a rock for you and say, ‘Here’s my future, like it?’”

“I’m not saying I’m being fair. But I can’t help how I think, and it’s not fair to keep you around while I figure out what I want to do, Harry.” Her voice rose in frustration. She felt broken and didn’t want to dissect their problems all night long. They’d been over this so many times before.

“Isn’t it better if we try to work things out together? To motivate one another?”

“In four years, that hasn’t happened.” Scout sighed. “You know what my brother Andy said on the phone last night? ‘Judge people by what they do, Scout, not what they say.’ I’m basing this decision on the facts, and the facts are you love playing in a band and smoking pot and staying up until 4 a.m. I don’t. It makes you happy, but it doesn’t make me happy.”

By now Harry’s chest heaved and he broke out in sobs. Scout felt a mixture of guilt and repulsion. The following morning, she was supposed to leave and drive up to the panhandle for Easter with her family. She went in the bathroom, popped two Excedrin, tossed toiletries and some clothes in a duffel bag, and grabbed her keys.

“I have to go,” she said, left, and drove all night. The headache subsided and was replaced with an endless highway of thoughts.

Was this God punishing her for slipping off the foundation of her upbringing? Moving away from home to live in another city where she worked at a bar, surrounded by drunks, drank a lot herself due to proximity, landed herself a live-in boyfriend who she drank, smoked pot and had sex with, living like the whores her mother had warned she and her sister about as teens? When she pictured Harry, she knew on the one hand he had been the love of her life and always would be, gentle and creative, a musician. But too often lately, eating dinner or stopping in for a drink while Harry bartended, she imagined an invisible Godly presence whispering in her ear, *Not the one.*

Scout believed in holy miracles, performed by angels or the saints. But thus far in life she had experienced little in the way of miraculous changes made by men, and lacked faith in Harry.

Easter night around ten o'clock, the entire family watched the annual showing of "The Ten Commandments" on cable, when there was a knock on the door. Connie answered it.

"It's Harry," she said from the doorway into the living room. "He's waiting out on the porch."

"Oh, God." Scout jumped up from her seat on the carpet and hurried to her sister. "I feel sick."

"What are you going to do?" Connie asked, arms crossed. She taught middle school and liked answers.

"We can't talk here with the family. It's too awkward." Scout started up the stairway. "I'll get a sweatshirt."

She and Harry went for a drive a few miles along the coast, ominously striking her as overly romantic. The Gulf shimmered in the moonlight, and the sand looked white and silky, like frosting on a cake.

As he drove, Harry strummed his fingers along the top of the steering wheel and ignored his cell phone when it rang during their conversation. She traced her fingers across the smooth skin of his upper arm, the griffin tattoo grinning back, green and gold, poking out from beneath his sleeve and laughing at her. He talked about how he was going to take some business classes that summer and work on his degree. “Business would be smart, since then I can manage the band,” he said. “And I’m even talking to Eric about becoming partners at the bar.”

“No kidding,” she said.

“Yeah, I figured regardless what happens, you’re absolutely right. I want to do this. I have to get my life together. Be a man, as Dad would say.”

The careful placement of Harry’s speech gave the moment a rehearsed, burdensome feel, as if Harry had accumulated luggage for a journey and asked Scout to come, carry some of the bags with him to wherever he was suddenly going. But Scout felt happy for him, and as the seconds passed, his band playing faintly on the stereo, it seemed as if an aura of comfort and bright optimism anchored her to Harry. Instead of driving with one hand on the wheel, looking out the window, hitting playback on the band tape incessantly as he usually did, Harry sat upright, both hands on the wheel, glancing over at her.

“I love you. I want to make you happy. Let’s do it right.”

Suddenly something else beside the waves and water glimmered before her.

Oh, God, a ring.

Later she would explain to her girlfriends in Orlando that when a man tells you he loves you and has a ring, you say yes. Her girlfriends exchanged glances and nodded in agreement, murmuring like a nest of cooing doves, “Of course, of course. You say yes.”

Scout let Harry spend the night in a guest bedroom, and he drove back to Orlando the next day. She and Andy argued.

“One minute you dump the guy, next you want to marry him?” Andy said. “I like Harry, but he’s a flip-flopper. Like John Kerry before the election. And it’s even more obvious you need to break away from the guy because he’s turning you into a flipper, too.”

“Don’t say that,” she pleaded.

“Did you even stop to think what you were doing, accepting the ring?”

“It deserves some more thought, I know,” she said. “But it’s only an engagement. It’s early, I can always back out. Please, Andy, I really want to give this a chance.”

“There’s not much time.” Andy looked her square in the eye. “Bad habits are hard to break. And you and Harry are a bad habit. Of course, all this is entirely up to you, and I could be totally wrong about the situation. I’m only saying this because I’m purely looking out for your best interest, and that’s how you should look at it, too. But you need to be away from him for awhile to really figure out what you think.”

Andy left the room, and Scout lay down on the bed and drew the pillow up between her knees. Coming home felt so nice and familiar. She supposed that’s what compelled her to want life to work with Harry. How much danger lurked in the comforts of love and security? She heard her mother calling to her sister to find the electric blanket for Daddy, his back hurt, and would she please put the cat out on the porch? She knew she had said yes to Harry because she

wanted to. The moment had just seemed right. The world had shifted inside her, and it was as if she stepped outside of herself and whispered, “You’re getting older.” Not a sinister comment, but it struck clear and true as a dart. She could make a home with Harry, be a wife. Numb that irritating thorn that kept poking her in the side all these years to achieve more, when love was what really mattered. The poking hadn’t done anything to arouse a dormant passion or light a fire. Oh, she’d do something. She’d start by quitting smoking and changing jobs.

They set a date for the end of November that year and began planning right away. There was much to organize. Both the O’Regan and Conner families were huge, and Scout insisted on a Catholic service. The guest list topped two-fifty, counting all the friends between them.

For two months after they announced the engagement, Harry and Scout slid into a pre-honeymoon. They made love twice a day and gazed into each other’s eyes for long periods of time. Scout stopped smoking. Harry stopped smoking pot. He got up at seven a.m. to attend business classes. He got health insurance, something Scout had bugged him about for years. They looked at houses.

They also started pre-marriage counseling with Father Tom at St. Margaret Mary.

After three meetings, he said, “My advice to you is not to rush into this. In my view, and I’m tempted to put this lightly, but my experience begs me to do just the opposite, I must stress that your relationship needs work before you enter the marriage union.”

“What do you mean?” Scout demanded.

“I think we’re doing quite well, actually,” said Harry. “How do you mean, Father?”

“Simply put, you’re not ready. Yes, you might feel in love, but spiritually, you’re on completely different pages, and that can break a relationship.”

“Can’t it be worked on as we go through the counseling?” Scout asked.

“Maybe, maybe not. We’ll see. You have plenty of time if marriage is truly intended for the both of you.”

In the car, Scout nearly exploded. “What did he mean, ‘spiritually on different pages’?” She rummaged around the car looking for an old cigarette hiding somewhere, but didn’t find any. She popped a stale cough drop in her mouth instead. “What the hell did you say to him when he talked to you in private?”

Harry shrugged. “I didn’t grow up like you. I don’t know if I believe in God, is one thing. All this Catholicism stuff is such doctrine-this and tradition-that bullshit.”

“It’s really important to me,” Scout said. She looked out the window. They hadn’t talked about any issues lately, other than the wedding and Harry’s becoming a partner at the bar. They really hadn’t talked about children, either, but Scout knew they both wanted some. Unless Harry had changed his mind about that, too, and not told her.

“I thought you believed in God, at least,” she said. “You know how important my faith is to me.”

“Is it?” he asked. The honesty in his voice shocked her. “Scout, I really never realized. The whole four years we’ve dated, you’ve never gone to church once. We have sex all the time and you take the pill. Isn’t the church against that?”

“Yeah,” she said. She let out a sorrowful laugh. “Call me a bad Catholic. It’s who I am now, but in the future, I want to raise my kids the right way. Send them to Catholic school.”

“Now we’re talking money.” Harry threw one hand in the air and drove with the other. “Great. I’m glad you’re letting me in on this, finally. Before you know it, I’ll have a crazy religious nut as a wife, going to mass every day.”

“Please respect my beliefs,” Scout retorted shortly.

“Well, when you start ‘respecting your beliefs’ yourself, maybe I will.”

“My faith is a private thing.”

“Pretty fucking private.” Harry grabbed his CD book from the back seat, steering with one hand, and flipped through it on his lap. He popped a disc in the player. Music from his band bellowed out, and he cranked the volume up at the first guitar notes.

As they drove home, Scout let the bitterness of his attitude permeate the air between them until she could nearly taste it on her tongue. She swallowed hard. It’s the truth, she thought. You’d better learn to live with it.

Scout switched jobs in October, a month before the nuptials, to bartending at Houston’s, an upscale restaurant overlooking a lake in Bellamy Park. She wore sleek black pants and a white cuffed shirt to work, but to her surprise more men hit on her here than at her previous job. Wealthy, good-looking men. She had hardly spoken to Andy since the argument at Easter and even then the conversations consisted of surface topics and minute family business, so Andy had left it alone, waiting for her to pick up the phone if she wanted to talk in depth. But several regulars who came to the bar mentioned careers in real estate a number of times. She considered signing up for the sales associate course and bought a few books, but still found herself caught up in the wedding. Backing out would be difficult and probably costly now: three hundred guests, band, and hotel rented for the reception. Her beautiful dress had gone through the final fitting. Her friends at Pop’s threw her a shower, and there was the family shower as well. Gifts piled up from Pier One, Target, Burdines.

Harry and Scout attended their final pre-marriage counseling session with Father Tom, who again proclaimed his hesitations about marrying the couple. When Harry went to get the car, Scout found herself alone with the priest.

“Father,” she said. “Tell me again the time frame for getting an annulment.”

He reached out and gripped her shoulder firmly. “Do the honorable thing, my dear, if you’re having such feelings. Going ahead with it under such pretense is false.”

Washing glasses in the sink with the barmaid one night at work, Scout felt a sharp pain and tore her hand from the water. Suds and blood. A piece of broken glass had given her a deep cut at the joint right above the engagement ring. The manager whisked her into the backroom, brought out the first aid kit, and after ten minutes of putting pressure on the cut, the bleeding stopped.

The following morning, Scout awoke and couldn’t feel her finger above the cut. She had slept with it aired out, no bandage, but it felt cut off from circulation, like waking up to feel a dead arm in the middle of the night. When she moved it, tapped it with her other finger, she felt a few tingles, then nothing. She called the restaurant, and the manager sent her to a clinic under workman’s comp.

“It’s not that deep and probably didn’t need stitches,” the doctor told her. “What you’re feeling is some superficial nerve damage. It should come back, just give it time.” He bandaged it up and told her to keep it dry.

The knobby bandage made a strange contrast to the diamond ring below on the finger. After a week, the cut had healed, yet the numbness remained. The thickness of the cut made it impossible for her to take off her ring as she usually did to clean house or work. The simple annoyance of a numb finger surprised Scout and bothered her more as the days passed. The

finger couldn't feel anything: wine glasses, the scarves she bought as bridesmaids' gifts, lingerie given as a gift from Harry. As best she could, she put the finger out of her mind.

Three weeks before the wedding, Harry told her he hadn't signed up for school in the spring. He wasn't going. The band wanted to go on the road and travel Florida playing gigs.

Scout started setting aside money from work in an envelope marked "Real Estate" just in case Harry found it.

One week before the wedding, Scout found out Harry hadn't paid his health insurance premiums the past two months.

They spent the night before the wedding at her parents', each in separate bedrooms on opposite sides of the house. Her mother had just put up the Christmas decorations early due to all the relatives coming into town for the wedding. Strands of cranberries and evergreen sprigs crept along the banister and fireplace. She had found her old Bible, a gift from her parents for high school commencement, and stayed up, paging through it in a last-minute attempt to squelch jumpy nerves. Harry came to her room, barefoot, and climbed into bed next to her. For a few minutes he lay back, staring up at the ceiling, while she sat upright, pretending to read.

"I don't know if we should be doing this," he said. He turned over on his side so that he faced her as he spoke, keeping his voice low. "I know you haven't been feeling right. I don't feel right, either."

"Maybe we can just postpone it somehow," Scout said. "Give ourselves until Christmas or something." Even as she said it, backing out seemed foolish and impossible with everything paid for. Her stomach in knots, she let out a deep, shaky breath.

“Well, if you don’t want to, I’ll back you up. I know I love you, that hasn’t changed at all, just that maybe Father Tom was right. We rushed it.”

She lay on her side in bed, paralyzed with fear. “Do you think that’s all it is?” she asked.

“Oh, I do. Once it’s all over, the family thing’s done with, we’ll be fine. Too much pressure, you know?” Harry rubbed the top of her head. “It’s my fault for rushing into it. I’m sorry for that. And backing out now would be foolish.”

Scout had never before known a numbness so gripping as that which she felt the following day, not in her finger, but in her core. It made her recall the plastic ice packs her mother used to put in her school lunch box next to the thermos to keep it cold. Just go through with it, she said to herself as her father held her arm before going down the aisle.

The calm numbness inside Scout remained with her all through the ceremony and reception, and into the night. Only afterward did Scout feel it breaking up, melting and releasing fluid panic in its wake. During their honeymoon in St. Augustine, she couldn’t relax. Harry so turned her off that she forced herself to make love to him and felt sick to her stomach afterward because it was a lie. She couldn’t wait to get back to the comfortable routine of Orlando, even though they were supposed to look at houses before Christmas and she dreaded the upheaval of a further settling endeavor. Nothing excited her and everything seemed dull and lifeless.

Five days before Christmas, Harry and Scout had still not decided on their holiday plans. Harry wanted Scout to join his family for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, and thought they could drive up to spend New Year’s with her family. They argued because Scout didn’t want to, said she couldn’t face his extended family of relatives this soon after the big wedding. When he walked in the door from doing errands, Harry wore an expression that said his own unhappiness

in the marriage might have finally set in. Not moving from the couch where her gaze remained on the TV, Scout waited for him to speak.

“What do you want to do?” asked Harry, slumping down heavily on the couch near her socked feet. “We can go to your parents, if you want. Whatever will make you happy.”

“I don’t know what’s going to make me happy, Harry.” The seconds following those words seemed to drag. “Maybe it’s just me. Maybe I need more time with my family.” Her sister and mother might be able to help her understand these feelings if she spoke to them, and wasn’t it an adjustment to the huge decision they had made?

“I hope that’s all it is, because something with us definitely isn’t right.”

“I’m so sorry, Harry.” Scout wished for tears to spring, but they wouldn’t come, even though she felt deeply sad right then.

“What are you apologizing for? I’m not blaming you for anything,” said Harry. He took her hand in his and stroked the top of the wedding ring, as if searching for a magical genie capable of making difficulty disappear.

“What I want right now,” said Scout, “is to go home and spend Christmas with my family by myself. I think it’s the best thing to do.”

“Probably the only thing, right now. Maybe after the holidays we should talk to Father Tom,” Harry said. He looked at the far wall as if searching for something in the distance. “For more counseling.”

Scout nodded. “We should do that.” But all she thought of was an annulment. The word sounded elegant and ceremonial when it rolled off her tongue to her girlfriends on the phone, the first ones to learn of her shameful feelings. Annulment, the graceful funeral of a marriage, a miscarriage of events, so less terrible in sound and meaning compared to divorce. It spoke of a

mishandling of judgments, misguided minds, utterly void of sin, and Scout yearned for a smoothing over of the trouble she had allowed herself to fall into, at the expense of Harry and their families. Quiet. Quick. Done.

“Hurry up if you’re going to do it,” Andy said on the phone late that night.

The decision weighed heavily on her mind over the next two days. She could either accept Harry or change the situation, which meant facing the pain of dissolution and hurting Harry more than she had ever thought she would. On Christmas Eve, she got up before dawn and packed a suitcase to go home. With the busyness of the wedding festivities and honeymoon, neither of them had bothered to so much as put a wreath on the front door or hang multi-colored lights. Harry would leave to spend Christmas with his parents after seeing Scout off.

She tried to be quiet and had almost finished, standing in the master bathroom and putting the last of her toiletries in big Ziploc baggies, when Harry rolled over and lifted his head, squinting in the glare of the lamplight.

“Hey,” he said. “You’re almost ready.”

“Yeah.” She walked over to the side of the bed and leaned over him. “I guess I’ll head out in about ten minutes,” she said, then added, “I know this is going to feel strange for me to say like this, but I really want you to have a great Christmas.”

“Doesn’t feel much like Christmas with you and me, does it?” Harry looked up and then buried his face in his pillow.

More like a bad dream, Scout thought. Scout looked down at the engagement ring on her hand, partnered now with the wedding band, and even though her finger remained numb, the rings felt constricting, like a belt pulled too tight.

“I should have realized we weren’t ready before making this into a huge, screwed up mess. I’m so, so sorry,” she said.

“You’re beating yourself up over it,” he said. “We both made an honest mistake.”

She shook her head. “We didn’t even have any Christmas music to play this year.” Scout forced a smile and sat up straight. “It’s all packed up with the decorations. Hey, imagine if your band made a Christmas album? I’d love to hear that. Danny and you singing: ‘You better watch out, you better not cry.’” A sinking feeling suddenly gripped her inside. She desperately wanted to make Harry laugh, anything but hurt him, and she always did a great impression of Danny, with his bewitching David Bowie-like singing voice. “Santa Claus is coming to town,” she drawled, then laughed, hoping for a light-hearted response.

Harry rolled over and looked up at her. “Don’t go.”

“I’ve got to go, honey,” she said. She looked back at him, smoothing the bedspread on his chest. Taking a few deep breaths, she hoped to curb the sickness mounting in her gut but to no avail. “And I know it’s no Christmas present, but I want to ask for an annulment as soon as I get back. I thought about it even before we got married, and didn’t tell you.” There, she had said it.

Scout grabbed both rings and pulled them off, turning them over to rest in the palm of her hand. Then she picked up the engagement ring and placed it on the nightstand. “I want to give this back to you,” she said.

Harry covered his face with his hands. “It’s yours. Who am I going to give it to?”

“Then keep it,” she said, rising up. She reached for her coat and scarf, putting them on quickly, and zipped shut her suitcase. When she walked across the hardwood floor, her boots

made a too-loud clacking sound, heightening the silence filling the space around them. “I’ll call you when I get home,” she said in the doorway.

For almost the entire six-hour drive, she imagined Harry’s cries of angst. Something’s still not hitting me right, she thought. Damn it, why won’t it come? She wanted the torrents of tears, the wracking sobs. The ice pack had frozen again inside and refused to thaw out. Her finger had regained more feeling, but for the most part stayed numb, like a joke.

On a similar day in late January when the annulment went through, Scout got in her car already packed with her essentials. Her girlfriends had agreed to mail her other things later, and she didn’t have much after spending days returning all the wedding gifts. She drove home to Tallahassee to move back in with her parents until she got on her feet. Driving, she smoked cigarettes and listened to old music she hadn’t put on in years, since before she met Harry. Enya and the Indigo Girls and all the sentimental soul-searchy stuff. Approaching her hometown, however, Scout felt the first sense of lightness from within. She wasn’t going to burden herself with the guilt. Letting go of Harry, of the whole marriage, remained the better thing to do. In time, he would be okay and happier for it. Inching her hand alongside the steering wheel, she thought she felt a slight tingling sensation in her finger, indicating the numbness, perhaps, abating, although she felt grateful that it had stayed numb for giving back the ring to Harry. If she could only give herself permission, let go of the guilt and regret, she might move on easily.

The following day in Tallahassee, Scout went to the real estate school to sign up for the sales associate course. The secretary led her to a stand in the corner to complete the fingerprinting for the state background check. When the woman pressed her deadened ring finger to the inkpad, Scout winced, and then sucked in her breath as pain shot up her finger, through her hand and up her arm. She put her head down so her hair fell in front of her face

slightly and hid the tears, but the woman was busy finishing the process with her other hand and didn't notice. The finger throbbed and ached, alive.

BOBBY BLUES

Lori, a terrifically tall and lanky twenty-two year old, had recently chopped her thin blonde hair because, as she had just finished telling Valerie, she didn't know what to do about her boyfriend. She slurped a wild grape-ola smoothie, and her mouth and tongue turned dark and animal-like, so that she looked frighteningly alluring, like a bride of Dracula. Val envied the striking blondness of girls like Lori and had attempted to mimic it throughout her senior year at Symonds College, but keeping the roots at bay became a too-expensive commitment, so she gave in and went the opposite extreme, to dark brown, true to her Italian heritage. Both girls had moved in with their boyfriends after college and didn't know what to do with either their relationships or their degrees (Lori had majored in anthropology, Val in art). Their parents wanted something done.

The two sat underneath the awning of the sidewalk at the Capricorn Café in Bellamy Park, a New Age eatery that sold meditation candles, homemade multi-grain cereal bars and, on weekends, brought a lady in from Cassadaga, the spiritualist community a half-hour north of Orlando, to read tarot cards in the back.

“My dad says you have to make things happen,” Valerie said. “The thing is I don't have a clue what I want to do. He doesn't get it.”

“My dad hates having to tell his friends that his daughter's still in Orlando, slinging nachos and beer.” Lori leaned on the table, arms crossed in front of her. “All my life this outside force of fate has always seemed to pull me through, and now all of a sudden, it isn't there.”

“Mine has been parents,” Valerie said. “And money.” She sat up in her chair and leaned forward into the sunlight partly shining on her end of the table. Overhead, the palm trees at the end of the block rustled with an unusually strong breeze for central Florida, where the air stayed still unless a summer storm or hurricane kicked up fury in the skies. But the day was beautiful, gusty and sunny.

“Not me. My dad hasn’t been there for me like yours has. At least we’re supporting ourselves. The guys aren’t doing anything serious. Jay’s parents don’t care.”

“Neither do Nishan’s.”

“So why are our parents all over us? Because we’re girls, that’s why. We’re expected to be the responsible ones, no matter what.” Lori raised her paper smoothie cup in the air above her head in a regal gesture.

Valerie’s chin crinkled up in worry. “I don’t know what to do about Nishan. I’m happy he’s gone this week. It’s nice. And that’s bad.”

Lori sat back and set her cup down. “Are you going to move out?”

“I’m thinking about it. I’m going home for Thanksgiving and then I’ll see. But I’m keeping an eye out for places.”

“You could live with me and Jay.”

“Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind.” No way, Valerie thought. What is she thinking? Nishan and Jay had been friends growing up. They attended Bellamy Park Day School and went on to college together. If she lived with Jay and Lori, Nishan would come over all the time.

Lori didn’t answer. Her eyes moved past Val and she smiled.

“Bobby Curtis just walked in. He’s coming over here.”

Bobby Curtis and Valerie Nicolosi had a brief fling their sophomore year when both students stayed in town taking summer classes. They had started out as friends and kept it that way for two months. He was a stockbroker's son from south Florida who had given up a chance to ride the professional wakeboard circuit for college, a decision which had immediately attracted Val since Bobby Curtis did what few boys his age would have the maturity to do—give up the frivolous for the intellectually demanding. And he was intelligent and worldly. They talked about history, travel and literature, mostly philosophic novels by Ayn Rand and Milan Kundera. Both had gone on family trips to Europe before college, Bobby with his grandparents to the beaches of Normandy and Valerie to southern Italy where her family had emigrated from. What she hadn't felt good about was sleeping with Bobby on repeated occasions when both had gotten very drunk at bars and went back to his place to smoke pot, all of which resulted in awkwardness and the dissolution of their friendship upon the return of his girlfriend a week later. Val hadn't been able to talk to him since, because every time they ran into one another, either Val or Bobby had been accompanied by other people.

Now Bobby smiled as he approached. His once shaggy, chin-length hair was cropped short. Standing next to the small bistro table, he shifted his weight from one foot to the other and tugged on the end of his t-shirt nervously.

“Hey,” he said softly to both girls, but looked directly at Val.

“I didn't know you were still in town,” Val said. She tried not to gush. Her mind went blank all of a sudden, as if she had amnesia and couldn't remember one interesting thing to say to save her life.

“I'm staying on for my MBA,” Bobby said. He pulled over a chair. “Two more years.”

Val nodded, realizing his newly-oriented career goals explained the change in hairstyle.

“You know, I’ve thought of that,” said Lori. “Haven’t you, Val?”

Val wanted to kick her underneath the table. Lori’s major flaw that kept Valerie from fully taking her into her confidence was her flippant nature. She talked about a new scheme every week and changed her mind the next. A couple weeks ago, she and Valerie had made smoothies in Nishan’s blender. They made a mess of the sink and got stains on their shorts, but a few different concoctions turned out pretty tasty. Then Lori announced it might be a good idea to open a smoothie shop, and what the heck, Val could get involved, too. Valerie spent the next few days avoiding Lori and thinking of the right way to refuse the offer of smoothie-shop partner without hurting Lori’s feelings. But no matter, Lori forgot it anyway.

“I’m looking at graduate schools,” she stammered. “I’m just not sure what I want to pursue yet.”

“That’s cool. Hey, you still work at Pop’s? I’ve gotta go in there sometime.” Bobby rested his hand close to Val’s on the table, toying with the end of a napkin.

“We both do,” Lori said. “You should come in.” She eyed his hand on the table and glanced at Val with a knowing look.

“You still dating that surfer?” Bobby asked Val. He shifted positions, angling his body to face her.

“Actually, I am. He’s away right now, though. Costa Rica.”

Bobby nodded. “Well, I gotta go. Nice to see you girls. Oh, and Val, I really like your hair. It looks nice like that.”

The two girls sat in silence as Bobby walked off to the other end of the cafe and ordered at the lunch counter. Lori jumped up. “Let’s go.”

“Oh my God,” said Val. “I know I’m reacting like a ridiculous high school girl, but can you believe that?”

“I can. It’s fate.” Lori swung her purse out in front of her as they headed down the sidewalk to the avenue. “He was obviously disappointed that you still were dating someone, by his reaction. He likes you. He likes your *hair*.”

“Are you sure?”

“Honey, it was like I wasn’t even there. Major sparks between you two.” Lori looked left and right when they reached the end of the sidewalk. “Let’s go get an ice cream.”

“I shouldn’t be acting this way,” said Valerie. Getting excited over Bobby is so pointless, she thought. I’m living at Nishan’s house.

“And if anything, wasn’t this a great test?” Lori grinned. “I love when things just happen, without me having to do anything.”

Lori made decisions without thinking them through, then tried to back track and spin them as well-thought out plans. That afternoon, they stopped in the bookstore. Lori bought *The Little Spell Book*. “It looks fun and might help direct things with Jay and me,” she chatted, rubbing its purple velour cover. Feeling the allure of Bobby’s decision, Valerie grabbed the yearly edition of *Guide to U.S. Graduate Programs*. Intellectual spells, she thought. That’s the kind I’m going after.

The next day, Valerie did two things: she stopped by the Alumni and Graduate Studies offices of Symonds College, then drove around with Lori before work looking at apartments and duplexes between Bellamy Park and downtown. She would have preferred College Park, but

Nishan's parents lived there and she didn't want the awkwardness of running into them at the Walgreen's or the pizza place they frequented.

Valerie had taken the night off from Pop's because Nishan's flight was coming in and she had to pick him and his friends up at the airport. After Lori left for work, Valerie had the house to herself. She sat in the living room and spread her graduate school materials out in front of her, enjoying the weight of the thick, glossy brochures as she opened them up to read the bold type. Degree selections: Master's degrees offered in Communications, Journalism, Counseling, Education and Business. She could look into the Master's in Film Studies offered at UCF, on the east side of Orlando, and state-school tuition would be more affordable, even though Bellamy Park was so much nicer and more convenient. Her parents highly valued education, so she knew they would help her pay for it. And if they made her pay for it entirely, she could get loans. Either way, she felt determined to earn her right to stay here for at least another two years with a definite back-to-school plan. Already she imagined the smiles on her parents' faces when she told them her decision. She'd be back on top, their golden child of accomplishments, showered with love and support, and not the misfit waitress she'd felt like lately. Truly she missed school, the structure of credit hours and due dates, the park-like Symonds campus overlooking the lake.

Only a few hours until Nishan returned. She foresaw the homecoming already: Nishan loading the board bags into her SUV like a tanned prince, on a glowing high about the trip. He wouldn't have a clue anything was bothering her, because he never did. Then when he got home, he'd find something to complain about to Val. She had left the dirty breakfast dishes in the sink, forgotten to fold the clean laundry and hadn't straightened up the living room. According to Nishan, Valerie never did anything right and didn't seem to try. His mother and sisters were excellent housewives, the types who made the decorations for the kids' birthday

parties from scratch, using bow-tie macaroni and paper dyed from assorted herbal teabags.

Lately he criticized her more and more, and every time she felt he loved her a little bit less.

Running into Bobby Curtis served as an apt reminder that twenty-one was far too young to feel like a failed housewife.

Valerie stopped at Pop's to get her schedule before heading out to the airport. When she walked in, the smell of sizzling fajitas hit her as always, although she should be used to it by now. Past the hostess stand, sitting with friends at the first table near the front door, was Bobby Curtis. She managed a wave and walked briskly past him to the kitchen.

Lori stood placing her orders at the touch-screen computer. "Did you see who's in Scout's section?"

"What is he doing here? I've got to leave to get Nishan in an hour." Val made a fist and covered her mouth. "I'm a nervous wreck."

"Have a shot of Cuervo," Lori said, heading off to pick up food at the window. "And then go talk to him."

Valerie decided to take Lori's advice, even though she only drank beer and wine and hated liquor. Nishan labeled Lori and Jay as boozers. "They're in with that whole trendy downtown law office scene," Nishan said. She downed the tequila, felt somewhat better, and would have liked another one but checked herself. Driving all the way to the south end of Orlando on two shots of tequila probably wasn't too wise. Most likely it would make her even more nervous and upset to see Nishan. She had to keep it together.

"Not working tonight?" Bobby asked when she approached the table. His eyes looked glazed, as if he'd just woken up from a nap or, as Valerie recalled, smoked pot, but she dismissed the thought. She had dropped out of the bar scene since dating Nishan and only drank if she

went out to dinner. Most likely Bobby didn't drink or smoke pot much either anymore, now that he'd enrolled in grad school. An MBA seemed like a serious endeavor. Both of them certainly had to have grown up quite a bit since they'd known each other last. She wanted to know how he had changed after college, since most of the times Val recalled of their hanging out involved under-the-influence conversation.

"Have a seat and I'll get you a beer." Bobby patted the seat across from him. "We need to catch up." He signaled to the waitress, a petite, brown-haired girl named Scout. She would be getting married in a month or so and Val had envied her a little until recently. In the last couple weeks, Scout seemed more preoccupied and less like an excited bride-to-be.

"What can I get for you, hon?" Scout flashed Val a big knowing smile and raised her eyebrows. Lori must have clued her in on the Bobby situation. Regardless, Val was glad to see Scout in a good mood.

"We'll take two Negra Modelos," Bobby answered.

He remembered what kind of beer she liked. Valerie felt more at ease. Everything was going the right way. As the hour wore on, Bobby's friends headed out, one by one, until only he and Valerie sat facing each other at the table. By this time, the subject of dating had come up. Bobby wasn't seeing anyone.

"My parents said never to live with anyone until I'm married," said Bobby. "It's funny—just about the one thing I've stuck to out of all their advice."

"Well, they're totally right. I wish I could say otherwise." A dozen yards from the side of the restaurant, a freight train thundered past on the tracks, causing the building to vibrate. At the surrounding tables, patrons belted out boisterous cheers and whistles for the train's arrival as the waitresses came by and offered drink specials.

“Why do you say that?” Bobby raised his voice and leaned in closer to be heard above the noise. Their heads nearly touched. Bobby smelled clean, like soap or shampoo.

Val raised her voice to answer him. “When things are good, living together is great, but when they aren’t, as time goes on, it’s like there’s this undercurrent of ambiguity to everything. I keep asking myself, where is this going? Am I going to marry this guy? There was even a point six months ago where we talking about breaking up, but since we live together, everything’s more complicated. We decided to stick it out longer.”

“You sound like you’re single already,” said Bobby. Behind him, Lori glanced up at Val while collecting dirty plates and smiled a sly grin, hurrying past on her way to the kitchen.

“Well, I’m not.” Valerie sighed. “Nishan is a great guy, but he doesn’t read books or appreciate the same things I do.”

“Really?” Bobby sounded surprised. “I can’t picture you dating a guy who doesn’t read.”

“He’s into other stuff, though, so I can’t really complain. There’s the traveling, which he does mainly by himself. Sometimes I get to go. Last summer, I went with him to his surf contests in Spain and Portugal.”

“Wow. What did you think of the museums?” Bobby edged his chair around the end of the table, so close that his knees brushed along her thigh. “I don’t really care for what’s in the Prado, but the Reina Sofia’s got great work. So much Picasso.”

Valerie looked down. “We didn’t go.”

“You’re kidding me. I can’t believe he wouldn’t go, just to, well, *go*.”

“Yeah,” she said softly. “Neither can I.” Valerie looked at her watch. “Oh, I’ve got to get out of here. I’m late.” She stood. He got up also, reached over and touched her elbow, and she gave him a quick hug. “Nice to see you, Bobby.”

“See you around,” he said. “And go check out those books I told you about by C.S. Lewis.”

“I will,” she said.

Pulling out of the lot, Valerie tried to calm herself down. Turn on the radio, she thought. Her favorite song on the charts happened to be playing, an exotic dance melody in which a woman sang about her lover in a sultry, bewitching voice. “Oh, God,” Val said aloud. Through the windshield, Fairbanks Avenue blurred as the tears kept coming. What was happening to her? She couldn’t believe she was on her way to pick up Nishan after this second, serendipitous running into Bobby Curtis. What was also startlingly obvious to Valerie was how miserable her life had become. She thought she’d done a pretty good job of fooling herself about the real status of her faux-marriage, but having to verbally summarize the relationship to Bobby made its shortcomings tangible, as if she could physically walk through it and observe each fault, each obtuse personality difference.

Two years ago, not long after the summer romance with Bobby, Valerie had met Nishan at a local bar. He was the first guy after Bobby to seem really interested, and he showered Val with attention in the beginning. Four years older, he had dropped out of college to surf professionally, a decision his parents voiced their unhappiness about on a continual basis. Nishan didn’t party heavily like some of the guys on the circuit, behavior Valerie was thankful for, but in two years, his ranking never rose above the mediocre. He made enough in sponsorships to buy a cute two-bedroom house near Baldwin Park, and they went out whenever

they liked for dinner and drinks, but lately living with Nishan made Val feel adrift at sea, bobbing along with a broken compass. Three months ago, he'd started picking up shifts managing a local surf shop. When Nishan's mother stopped by one day to drop off plants for the house, she said to Valerie, "It's such a relief to George and me that Nishan's found someone like you. We worry a lot less about his future, just knowing you've graduated and got it together. George said, 'Now Valerie, that girl will have a solid career. How did my son get so lucky?'"

At first it felt glamorous to date Nishan, the equivalent of a local celebrity who'd "made it" off the Volusia County beaches, gotten sponsored and sent off touring for a week or two at a time to Mexico and Brazil. She thought he'd enjoy his pro status for a few years, but eventually go back to school since he wouldn't be able to surf forever. Instead he came home from trips and spent days on the couch, watching surf videos and playing video games. His parents had money, and he knew one day it would be his to fall back on, which made life with Nishan and his family comfortable, but Val hated his laziness. Nishan never talked with Valerie about what she'd like to do with her life. The parental pressure had increased on Valerie so much since graduation that she felt like a teakettle ready to boil over, and she couldn't talk to Nishan about how his parents made her feel responsible for his future. She'd just better keep it together.

Valerie pulled into the terminal, too bright and busy for ten o'clock at night. Wiping the tears from her face, she checked herself in the rearview mirror while waiting at the curb. Someone tapped at the passenger window. She rolled it down.

"How about unlocking the car?" Nishan called, barely looking in.

"Oh, right. Sorry," she said. Surfboards thumped on the roof, bags were tossed in the back, and he and his two friends piled in.

"You're late. Where were you?"

“I stopped in Pop’s and must have forgotten the time. Were you waiting long?”

“Pay better attention next time. You knew you had to pick us up, sweetheart. We waited an extra fifteen minutes.”

“I’m sorry, really.”

“Well, anyway, hello!” Nishan still sounded slightly annoyed, but as Valerie predicted, the jovial mood dominated and he ceased picking a fight in front of his friends. “The waves were great, man. Wish we had surf like that at New Smyrna every day. Beautiful sets.”

He reached over and patted her knee. She gave him a weak smile.

“What’s wrong with you?” Nishan shook his head. He looked her over warily, and she felt him taking in her unkempt state, streaked eye makeup, messy hair.

“Nothing,” she said. “I just want to go home.”

That night as she drove them back from the airport, she wished for the first time that her family lived nearby and not in Connecticut. Never had she felt so alone.

Valerie sent off the admissions materials for graduate school, including some programs elsewhere in the state, at UF, FSU, University of Miami, even though she couldn’t see herself moving down there. Nishan hadn’t said much about her plans, and she hoped getting accepted somewhere might serve as an easy foundation for a break-up, legitimate and safe. Meanwhile, she delayed searching for her own place, wanting to wait and see if she got admitted to a graduate program, even though she didn’t know if she could wait that long.

The last week in October, Jay and Lori moved into a townhouse Jay’s father bought him in Bellamy Park. When Valerie came over to help Lori upholster some chairs, Lori appeared angry about something. Lori knelt on the carpet, brandishing a staple gun she used to attach the

new fabric to the chair bottoms. As she spoke, she punched the material (a peculiar display of tiny monkeys swinging from little green palm trees) to the cardboard backing with fervor.

“He’s going on a trip.” She motioned upstairs, where Valerie heard the thumping and sliding noises characteristic of moving furniture. “This house is a mess. He doesn’t appreciate it. Three hundred thousand dollars, his dad paid for it, and now he’s getting a belated graduation trip to the Caymans to go diving! Oh well. I just have to deal with it, I guess.”

“I guess,” said Valerie. The house smelled like a combination of dust and the evergreen scented Glade air fresheners Lori had plugged in the outlets everywhere. “Have you made any plans?”

“Oh, I have to tell you. I want to open a yoga place. I went to my mom’s classes the whole time I was down there, and it’s so incredible. You can’t believe it. I’d have to get my certification as an instructor, but my dad said if I do it, he’ll finance it and help me open my own place.”

“That’s certainly different.” Valerie blinked and yawned in the stuffy house that needed the heat turned down. She no longer felt like mustering up enthusiastic support for Lori’s whims. Why should she acknowledge ideas that went nowhere? Half the time, Lori just wanted someone to be there. She made doing little things fun, like cooking dinner and making Halloween costumes, so Val kept her company.

“I figured it’s a good wifely-type occupation. Run a little yoga place of my own.”

“You just turned twenty-three.”

Lori sighed. “I just want to be married. I’m so,” she paused thoughtfully, “*ready*.”

Jay bounded down the stairs, dressed in a Polo shirt, khaki shorts and loafers. He looked the younger image of his father, whose office he worked at downtown, having the luxury of a “come-and-go” job, as Lori put it. “What’s this?” He lifted up one of the scraps of fabric.

“They’re monkeys.” Lori beamed hopefully. “You said you didn’t care what I wanted for the dining room.”

“Well, I didn’t think you’d pick little monkeys hanging from trees. That’s kind of gay.” He tossed the fabric to the floor, walked to the fridge and poured himself a Coke.

“You don’t think they’re cute? Val, what do you think?”

“They’re cute,” Val said. “A little odd, but that’s okay.” She really didn’t like them.

“I sort of hoped you’d be at your dad’s today,” Jay replied. He finished his drink in one big gulp and left the glass on the counter. “Working on that business plan. I guess I should have known better.”

“You don’t think I take anything seriously,” Lori retorted, sounding close to tears.

“I just wish you’d make a decision, instead of screw around with useless projects around here.” Jay lingered for a moment in the hallway, hands on hips. “Go and get your master’s or a real job. Something.”

“You just don’t want to be excited for me!” Lori called after him as he headed upstairs. “I just need some time to figure it out.”

“Forget it!” he called back. “All you do is dream, anyway.”

Lori shook her head. She stared blankly at the carefully cut out seat covers strewn in front of her, the disassembled chairs and screwdrivers.

Val sat down across from her on the carpet. “Want me to make you some tea?” she suggested. Lori pouted and didn’t look up. How did she stand him dictating to her like that, in

front of a friend, no less? Of course Lori should be focusing on her career, but at least he could try to be supportive, even if he had to pretend. Regardless of Jay's rude outburst, she wished Nishan would show half the interest in her own plans as Jay did in Lori's future. Yesterday Nishan had refused to let her hang up a print from her Senior Art Show, a cruel jab that spurred her to tears, and she stormed off, spending the rest of the day at a local bookstore café.

Lori took the backing she had just reupholstered and ripped it off with both hands. "I think I should come and look at apartments with you," she answered.

Val stood up. "Let's get out of here." She brushed snippets of thread and lint off her tank top. "I think we should go get the kayak."

One of Nishan's sisters, cleaning out for a move, had given him a two person kayak that he and his friends never used but Lori and Valerie liked to take out on nearby lakes. For a late October afternoon, the weather was unusually warm, nearly eighty degrees. Paddling out onto Lake Sue, they left the busyness of the neighborhoods on shore, and except for the occasional ski boat passing by, the lake remained quiet. While they paddled, they talked about the properties they passed, and distant topics came up easily, awkward childhood memories, relationships with old boyfriends long gone, cities where they'd like to live someday.

"A great place to live would be in one of these little guesthouses, you know?" Valerie pointed with the paddle to a mansion on the shore, a Tudor, beautiful but out of place for its lush surroundings. "Lots of these homes have guest apartments above the garages for rent. Only thing is, it's hard to get those deals."

"You have to know someone to refer you," Lori said.

"Bobby might still live in his. He might know if one's available."

"Call him."

“No way. Besides, I don’t have his number anymore.” Near the dock of the mansion, a family of ducks swam together, bobbing their heads in and out of the water. Taking a deep breath, she remembered the sexual tension that had arisen between her and Bobby. Organizing a meeting with just the two of them was too much like cheating. The idea alone gave her a strange, daring thrill that filled her with fear of what could happen next. She wasn’t ready for the possibility of a new relationship yet, before this one with Nishan was even over.

“Look it up,” Lori suggested.

“He’ll think I’m a stalker or something.” The paddles made a lapping sound as they dipped in the water, first Lori’s, then Val’s, like a clock counting the seconds as she pondered her thoughts.

“No, he won’t,” Lori countered. “You’ll never know if you don’t do it.”

“You call then.”

“We can kayak past his house,” Lori sang in a taunting tone. Valerie stopped paddling and tapped Lori on the back.

When Lori turned around, Val said, “Forget it.” But when they made for the shoreline ahead, Val smiled. Maybe she would look up his number, because after all, she had a real reason to call.

Two days later, returning home rejuvenated from a power yoga session she and Lori attended in College Park, Valerie felt convinced that this is what the spiky-haired limber female instructor meant when she announced, “I hope you’re ready, because yoga will transform your life!” The empty house as she pulled up signaled her good fortune, for if there was any time to call Bobby Curtis out of the blue, that time was now. An autumn storm drizzled outside, a light,

cool rain unlike the tropical deluges that fell in the summer months, and a dank, earthy scent rose from the ground as she stooped to take off her muddy sneakers in the garage. Once inside, she flipped open the phone book and scanned for Curtis, Robert. Lake Sue Drive, must be it. Feeling guilty about calling another boy from inside her boyfriend's house, she went onto the front porch, paced for a minute, then dialed the number and left a message, giving out her cell phone number only, although wouldn't it be something if Bobby called the house? Part of me wants Nishan to know, she thought. And that's terrible of me.

Her phone rang fifteen minutes later. Bobby had plans that evening, but he'd be happy to find out from some neighbors over the next few days about available guesthouses, and maybe she could come over and they could do something another night. She said yes, it sounded great.

"An old friend of mine from school says he'll help me go through all my applications for those graduate programs," Valerie told Nishan a few nights later while they were watching TV.

"A guy?" Nishan asked. "Who?"

"Oh, Bobby. You know him. He came over and said hi at graduation. So anyway, I'm going over there tomorrow night."

Nishan looked at Val as if he was staring right through her. I'm an awful liar, Valerie thought. Just terrible. It's like I'm asking permission to go cheat on him.

"Hope you two have fun," he sneered. He belted out an exaggerated snoring noise before adding, "Looking at grad programs sounds *bor-ing*."

"Please don't act like a jerk. It's not a big deal." Val hated hearing herself plead with him. Stop it, she thought. I'm going to do this whether he agrees or not.

Nishan shrugged. He picked up a bar of board wax lying on the coffee table and walked to the back door. He waxed his boards in the garage. “You’re right,” he called out, just before the door slammed shut behind him. “It’s not.”

Valerie felt excited when she pulled up in the driveway below Bobby’s guesthouse apartment the following night. Nishan had conveniently picked up a managing shift at the surf shop, so she dressed how she liked: a casual but cute dark jean skirt coupled with a flowery tank top, slightly sexy but not too much, and matching beaded flip-flops. When the door opened, she was surprised to see other people there. When she’d spoken to him yesterday, he’d made it sound like it would be just the two of them. She thought they would go and get reacquainted over appetizers and drinks on Park Avenue.

“Hey,” he said. “Come on in. Help yourself to a beer.” He pointed to a mini-fridge in the corner. “This is Adam and Sean.” She shook their hands, which seemed silly, since they recognized her.

“You’re the waitress from Pop’s,” Adam, the tall, dark-haired one said. “You’ve worked there a long time.”

“I have,” she said, taking a seat in a tired looking bean-bag chair. Bobby’s place hadn’t changed much from his frat boy days. Bob Marley crooned from the speakers in the entertainment center. She picked up a CD off the floor. Some kind of obscure punk rock group. Taking a long drink of his Grolsch beer, Bobby took the seat next to Val.

The guys asked her the usual questions. Did she like working at Pop’s? Wasn’t it such a cool bar, what a great atmosphere? Did she make good money? Then they switched entirely to talking about investments, which she couldn’t participate in at all.

“Orlando’s so cheap, compared to other cities,” Sean said. “It’s like a joke.”

“Bellamy Park is expensive,” said Val. “So is downtown. Prices are skyrocketing.”

“Not really,” said Adam. “Even in the center of town, rents are relatively low.” Bobby nodded in agreement but said nothing. Feeling out of place in the conversation, Val wanted the guys to leave, and after about an hour, they finally did.

Not even a minute after his guests left, Bobby’s cell phone rang and he answered. “Oh, really?” He glanced at Valerie. “I have a friend with me. Uh-huh. We’ll be over.” He hung up. “This girl Kate’s having people over at her house. It’s just down the road. It’s not really a party or anything like that.”

“Okay. Sure,” Val said. So far the evening wasn’t what she had in mind, but maybe it would be like old times. She should give it a try and just have fun for a change. Besides, Adam and Sean were friends from the MBA program, and this girl Kate was probably a grad student, too.

A few people turned out to be fifteen or twenty college underclassmen, hanging out around a sad-looking pool littered with leaves and debris. Kate, a slightly overweight but pretty girl, sat in an armchair, taking in her guests with a bored, careless gaze. Shifting forward from her cushioned perch, she took a deep breath, summoning the required energy for a minimum amount of polite interest, and shook Valerie’s hand.

“So you guys graduated together?” Kate said. She wore big, skinny hoop earrings that dangled when she tilted her head.

“Last May,” said Val. She eyed Bobby as someone handed him a pipe and a lighter.

“I’m supposed to graduate next year, but I’m not in any rush,” Kate shrugged. “Why not take my time?”

Bobby exhaled and handed the pipe to Val, who passed it to someone else.

When he looked at her in surprise, she shook her head. "I don't smoke pot anymore." She hated having more than a few drinks now, and the thought that she had ever gotten high, that she had been just another one of the kids in the room, seemed foreign to her. This must be what it's like to get older. The pot smoke made her eyes water and the air hard to breathe. She wanted to leave but didn't know the street they were on, so she'd have to go home with Bobby, who had driven and was now stoned. The real reason Bobby showed up became apparent when a dreadlocked kid motioned him into the corner and gave him a plastic bag of weed.

As soon as Bobby and Val went back to his apartment, he shut the door behind them, grabbed her hand, pulled her close, and kissed her. Val couldn't close her eyes; she couldn't relax. The stale reek of weed and beer filled her nose and mouth as they kissed. She tensed up and drew back.

"Just relax," he said. "Sit down." He led her over to the bean bag chair.

"So, what did you find out about the apartments?" She wanted to talk about anything that would restore a sense of normalcy to being with him, and not this strangeness, like going back in time, stepping back into a girl she once was, the girl Bobby still *thought* she was. It dawned on her that they had both misjudged one another, she assuming Bobby had changed, matured by changing circumstance, as she had done, while he assumed she hadn't changed from the party girl he once knew.

Bobby's eyes remained half-closed. "I got the names of two people you can call. There's one open a few streets over, and the lady is looking for a girl tenant. It's the first address." He got up and picked up a tablet on the counter near his phone, ripped off the top sheet, and handed it to Val. "Here. Why are you so worried? Relax, Val. You didn't use to be like this."

Val took the piece of paper, folded it up, and tucked it away in her purse next to the chair. “I just didn’t think we’d do this tonight. I thought we would just talk, you know. Get reacquainted.”

“It’s my fault.” When he spoke, the words came out slow and flat, and she couldn’t read whether he meant to be serious or not. “Let’s start again. I promise I’ll be good. So, how are you, Val?” He slid next to her on the beanbag chair, which really didn’t have room for two people. “Looks like you need another beer.”

“Yeah,” she said. Maybe she felt weird because she wasn’t used to getting a buzz. She hoped it was the reason.

He handed her a beer from the mini-fridge. “I mean, really, how are you?” He put his arm behind her on the chair, his hand resting on her shoulder. He started kissing her again, harder, his right hand sliding underneath the strap of her tank top, pulling it down eagerly. All week she had tried to imagine him just kissing her, how it used to feel when he touched her this way a few years ago, and suddenly the desire had evaporated as quickly as his hunger for a fling with her had arisen. His mouth and fingers felt indifferent to her: warm, malleable, but lifeless as sculpting clay. She felt as if she were making out with a guy for the very first time, it seemed so strange. Just allowing him to kiss her this way made her feel violated, wanted only for sex.

“Why is it like this with you?” she asked. She pulled away. “Enough.”

“I can’t help wanting you so badly, Val,” he said. “You know I’ve always thought you were so hot. Let’s go in my bedroom.”

She pried Bobby’s roving hands from her body and stood up. They weren’t supposed to be sitting here, on an old bean bag chair, listening to Bob Marley and drinking beer. All she had intended for the visit was perhaps a walk up Park Avenue, where they might have split a bottle of

red wine at a café and then, before saying good-bye at her car, Val might have allowed him to kiss her if things had gone really well. Instead, she had let Bobby take too much control of the situation, and she felt as if he had backed her into a corner. Now she had cheated on Nishan with a make-out session, something she never intended on doing and wasn't even enjoying. The promising enchantment of Bobby was replaced with brewing disappointment and disgust.

"I've gotta go," she said. "This isn't what I expected." Nishan hadn't entered her thoughts at any point during the night, even while kissing Bobby. So it was over.

"Don't go," he purred, putting his arm around her back again. "I promise I'll be nice."

"I'm sure I'll see you around." Valerie grabbed her purse off the floor, digging for her keys. "Thanks for getting the referrals for me." She gave him a quick, empty hug and took off down the steps to her car.

"Hope it works out. Hey, I'll call you."

Valerie backed out and sped down the drive. She wasn't in any hurry to go right home and deal with Nishan. On either side of the street, the big houses looked like fairy tale dwellings, lit up with spotlights in the shrubbery and up the brick walks. How could one be so completely immersed in another world, and then by simply changing scenery, step out of it? Imagination is a type of scenery, she thought. Lori imagined herself happy with Jay. She thought she only had to reupholster chairs to make things cheery. And it never worked, no matter how hard she tried. Lori probably wouldn't understand what went wrong if she tried to explain, so Valerie decided that she wasn't going to say anything about this evening with Bobby.

When she pulled up to the stop sign where she had to go either left or right along the lake, she paused. To think the rest of her life she would have remembered Bobby in a romantic light, had she not gone over for those few hours tonight. She had a big smile on her face when she

turned left at the bottom of the lake instead of right, driving in the direction of the first guest cottage on Bobby's list. Time to check out some new scenery.

DISCONNECT

After the loss of his mother to cancer that spring, Don stayed out of the house as much as possible. During the week, he worked long hours as a developer. On weekends, he sought refuge at the coffee shop off Park Avenue in Bellamy Park and studied his flight manuals for his commercial pilot's license. When he tried to study in the house, he kept expecting to hear his mother's voice calling from the little corner bedroom that had been turned into a hospice wing during her final days. He couldn't even walk down to the far end of the hallway, knowing if he opened the door, the hospital bed now rested on the floor and the dresser drawers, cleaned out by his sisters, no longer contained her nightgowns and personal items, her rosary beads and photos of his father, who had died two years before of heart failure.

Lorenzo's coffee shop afforded the option to engage socially or scuttle away to a corner and do work. Today he noticed a girl sitting three tables away, pencil moving furiously across a sketchpad. He knew her right away from Pop's, the noisy dive over by the train tracks. Valerie was her name. She'd worked there for almost two years now.

"Hey," he said. "You're drawing."

"Hi, Don." She looked up and smiled, stopped drawing mid-stroke. "I started it finally. A sketchbook."

"Ah, finally. Why don't you come and sit over here?" He hoped she wouldn't pick up on the acute solitude he wore lately like a weighty suit of armor. His loneliness had worsened since his mother's death. It bothered him that other people might sense it, like an invisible but ever-present ghost.

She sat down hesitantly and tucked the sketchpad in a canvas bag at her feet, as if she wasn't yet certain that her scribbling had the basic qualities of real art.

"What are you studying?" she asked, peering underneath his arm for the title of the book.

"I'm flying again. Finally bought my own twin engine," he answered. He folded the book closed and let it sit between his knees.

"Well, that's nice." She said it nonchalantly, as if he had just told her he bought a new puppy instead of a plane. Then again, private aircraft wasn't unheard of in Bellamy Park. All he had ever wanted to be was a fighter pilot, but he was trapped in this carcass, his bad eyesight having kept him out of the military. God had cheated him of it like a bad joke. No matter how successful he was, he couldn't be there to serve. So instead he utilized his financial talents to make as much money as possible with the goal of giving most of it away, mostly through charities or the Church, and loved doing it.

Valerie made him nervous. He had liked her whenever she waited on him at Pop's and they talked about her pursuing art, but he doubted she would ever reciprocate his interest in her. He was still forty-two years old no matter how many mornings he went to his personal trainer. His own work, mostly oils and a few acrylics, cluttered his garage, and dried-up supplies lay around the sun porch where he used to like to paint. This girl had studied art, but he could tell at their first meeting she had abandoned pursuing it in a serious way. Last time they ran into one another, he told her to just do it. Build a sketchbook where she could start some ideas.

"So what's keeping you from picking up your paintbrush again?" she asked.

"Oh, I want to paint," he said, leaning back in his chair and folding his hands behind his head. "I just have so much going on in my life. We're building seventy town homes in

downtown Orlando that are behind in construction. As soon as that project sells out I'm starting my charter airline. And three weeks ago," he let out a deep breath, "my mother passed away."

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said, hand over her lips. "That must be so hard."

"Saying that it's been tough would be an understatement," Don said. "But I'll get back to it someday. Just not now. Life is all about timing and choices. Mostly choices, actually."

"Okay, okay." Valerie backed her chair up a bit. He had intimidated her, but he thought she needed to hear it.

Nothing drove him crazier than people with potential who didn't go after the prizes God had for them waiting down the road, like the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, if they just had the guts to get over their fears and go for it. Growing up he was given poor and loving parents, so he worked and financed his own college education and brokerage. Now look. Within the last two years, professional success had come to fruition. He bought a sports car, a plane and a hired pilot, gave fifty thousand dollars to the church, blew money on thousand dollar dinners and bar tabs like a drunken sailor.

Still, he had no wife and family to share it with. A devoted Catholic, he had always believed God intended for him to marry sometime down the road, but recently his remaining hopes had been replaced by doubts. His last relationship, with a twenty-seven year old writer named Tess, ended last summer with him finding her in bed with her old boyfriend. So he spent and indulged even more. But he couldn't shake the unspoken yearning he had picked up on from his mother in the last days of her life, that more than anything else, she wanted him to have someone and thought he would have gotten married at some point by now. Yet at the time of her leaving this world, it was the one thing he didn't have. His two sisters had married, but he, the youngest, remained alone.

He enjoyed talking with Valerie. She worked hard at everything she did, at the restaurant and school, had an unspoiled quality about her as if she had been raised on a remote island nation and not in the suburbia of the United States. He told her he would be at Lorenzo's next Saturday, if she wanted to meet up.

For six weeks, they met at the coffee shop every Saturday, but it didn't go any further. One Thursday, downtown at Happy Hour with his lawyer pals Dwayne and Barry and "the band of merry men," as he liked to call his drunken professional friends, he phoned Valerie. "Come down here," he said. "Stat. I better see you before I count one, two, six." She laughed, hung up, and walked in the bar twenty minutes later.

They drank, ate some sushi, went to the wine bar on Lake Eola and drank some more. Valerie snatched the Air Force sunglasses out from Don's shirt pocket and wore them around all night in the bar, pretending she was a movie star. She fluffed her hair out and puckered her lips, mouthing, "Oh, honey," in gushy tones to Don, and he laughed.

"I can tell when a woman's decided to date me," he said, feeling drunk and emboldened by the wine.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I can tell right now by the way you're standing, facing me," he told her. She lifted up the oversized military shades and glanced down at her body's positioning. "I've got you and you know it." It was smart of him to talk to her directly. Young, independent women like Valerie responded to strength, even arrogance. To them it represented a future of security and attention.

They ended up at his house that night. Valerie loved it, the Impressionist paintings on the walls, the library, and the old Floridian bungalow-style. "It's an artist's house," he said. He still

couldn't believe he had her when she snuggled up to him on the couch. She's so nice, he thought. Not many people were simply that nice.

Don and Valerie dated for a month before the first hurricane of the season hit. The meteorologist plotted the storm's latest path to hit ground near Tampa at nightfall, but by mid-afternoon, the roads in Orlando became parking lots as Floridians hurried to stores to brace for the storm. "Barry and those nut job friends of mine are having a hurricane party," Don told Valerie over the phone, "but we'll stay at my house and cook steaks. Have a little hurricane party of our own."

By six the rain bands picked up.

"Hopefully it'll be a good one," Don said, opening a bottle of wine. The wind already slammed and rattled the French doors on the south side of the house leading out to the pool, and Valerie paced nervously. She hung on him, sought his approval too eagerly when making decisions about work and school. This worried him. Some weeks, he flew to out-of-state project sites several days a week. If she couldn't keep up with the demanding lifestyle of owning several businesses, she most likely would resent it later on if he couldn't always physically be there in times of need.

But he pushed it out of his thoughts on purpose, wanting to make the evening as fun as possible. "A four or a five and this'll show you what Florida is really all about. This pansy-ass notion that Florida's become with tourism, the sunshine state, that's all out the door tonight, honey." He laughed at himself. "Have a drink. The steaks are almost done. What movie did you bring?"

"*Doctor Zhivago*," Valerie said. She took a gulp of wine.

“David Lean, good choice. In that case, I’ll be right back.” Don disappeared and came back a moment later in a tuxedo shirt and boxers. “We must dress for dinner. Here, put this on.” He tossed a peasant-looking dress and kerchief at Valerie. At least he could loosen up the mood a bit.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. You’re hilarious.” She laughed. “Okay, I get it. You are the capitalist and I’ll be the Bolshevik.”

Halfway into the movie, the power went out on Omar Shariff with an abrupt pop. Darkness and wind enveloped the house. “One of these oaks is bound to go,” Don noted. “Probably the one on the north end.”

Two minutes later, a crash shattered across the roof.

“Oh my God.” Valerie danced back and forth. The roof overhead creaked. “Do you hear it? Where should I be standing?” Don shined the flashlight on the ceiling, where a crack trailed through the plaster. A green-leafed limb about the thickness of his forearm pierced the roof above the stove and a stream of water trickled down.

“Yep, just like I said.” Don nodded. He pulled a bucket out of the closet and stuck it under the leak. “Let’s go in the hallway.”

For the rest of the night, they drank wine and played Monopoly. In forty-five minutes, Don had hotels on all his properties while Valerie mortgaged hers, grimacing at every microburst of wind. He put champagne on ice, but they went to bed early instead.

The house took on a complete darkness with the power out. He couldn’t keep his hands off her as they kissed in bed, until she broke away from him.

“Don’t you want to do it?” Her voice contained the same anxiousness as earlier, when the first gusts of hard wind railed against the house. “I do,” she added, running her fingertips lightly across the band of his boxers.

He slid his hand along the side of her slender body to her hip, gave her a gentle, reassuring squeeze. “Of course,” he said. “But I think we should wait, do things right. Ideally, I’ve always wanted the first time with my wife to be on our wedding night.”

She let out a shaky breath. “Wow. Okay then.” Putting her arms around him, she rested her head against his chest. “Are you sure?”

“Oh, I have a good feeling about this,” he said. “I really do.” Unless something happened, he didn’t foresee his feelings changing, at least not in the near future. They could have a short engagement and be married as soon as next summer.

“I’m fine with waiting,” she said. “I have a good feeling, too.”

“Was it bothering you?” He stroked her hair in the dark, liked feeling its softness, dampened by the humidity in the air.

“I was just wondering if something was wrong, but that’s silly of me.”

He hugged her tightly to him and kissed the top of her head. “I love you,” he said. Other girlfriends had never seemed to completely understand him, but not Valerie. Her willingness to see things from his perspective made her even more attractive. A woman like this was worth waiting for, and he felt good that he had made his feelings known, even if it was early. He owed it to them both to be completely honest about it.

The following day, Don and Valerie drove all over town in Val’s Jeep to view the carnage. He had eleven messages on his phone and called Barry first.

“Those guys are so nuts,” he told Val. “They were all drunk. They went outside during the hurricane to fly a homemade kite like Ben Franklin. I wish I could have seen it.” Don got excited just picturing it, Dwayne and Barry like a bunch of frat guys. “They put a *key* on the *tail* of the kite.”

“Well, did you tell them the fun we had? That we dressed like Doctor Zhivago and a tree fell on the house?” Valerie looked at him encouragingly. “Hard to top that.”

“Yeah,” Don replied. Just the same, he felt slightly disappointed, like he missed out on a memorable stunt. In the last few weeks, spending almost every night with Valerie naturally meant he had to cut down on meeting his friends for dinner and drinks, and more than anything, he loved entertaining a crowd. The work hard, play hard routine had stopped with her around, even though he knew making the sacrifice was the right thing to do. He checked himself. We had a good time. Everything’s fine.

Don had no complaints about Valerie. He found her a witty and intelligent companion, certainly beautiful and possessing integrity. “This one’s different,” he said to Barry, after a charity foundation meeting and a few martinis one night. “She’s the one for me. And it’s about time I settle down and have some Donnie juniors.”

“She’s great,” said Barry. “Before you know it, you’ll have joined the club like all the rest of us.”

For Valerie’s twenty-third birthday, Don flew her to Mexico for the weekend. On the way back, his pilot let her sit in the captain’s seat. Valerie’s dark eyes glowed with wonder as she took in all the little knobs and switches on the control panel, the GPS screen and radar, how

they could see the thunderheads to avoid coming up ahead. Don sat back, relaxed, the plane making its way ahead on autopilot. He marveled at Valerie's reaction.

"How fast are we going?" she asked.

"About two-sixty," he told her.

"It's like I've stepped out of my old life," she said, looking over at him. "Like I'm one of those kids entering Willie Wonka's chocolate world."

"You've been in planes before."

"Do you realize how few people get to ride in a cockpit? This is special."

"I guess you're right." He hadn't thought of that. He'd been flying for so many years.

"How did you like your little birthday trip?"

"I like this," she said, leaning back and looking through the glass above. Don reached over and took her hand in his. This is better than I could have possibly dreamed, he thought. As he explained the different instruments in the cockpit, she listened, completely enthralled. Perhaps God really had a plan for him to have a true companion, and he could shed the nights of drinking and carousing.

A few nights after they returned from Cancun, Don stayed out past Happy Hour with his friends and called Valerie at midnight. Dwayne had the guys practically rolling on the floor half the night, telling stories from his days in the Marines, and after a few hours all Don could remember was that Valerie's place was on the way to his and she said she'd leave the door unlocked if he decided to stay there.

Her door was locked. Maybe he wasn't turning it hard enough. He tried again. Damn it, she'd locked it after all. He took a deep breath, stepped back, and kicked in the window. Big

chards of glass fell and splintered on the sidewalk. He stuck his head in the jagged hole and called her name.

“I’m coming through, outta the way,” he bellowed. In the living room, Valerie shrieked in disbelief and forced laughter. “Now you know what will happen next time, if you don’t leave it unlocked. I’ll bring my own key.” He somersaulted over the couch, landed on the floor amongst broken bits of glass, and hit his head on the coffee table.

“You’re stinking drunk,” Val said, her voice anxiously high-pitched. She stood above him, arms crossed. “You’re going to cut yourself. I can’t believe you did this.” Even in his wasted state, he sensed her desperately trying to mask her fear of what he had just done by joking about it. He’d found a nice girl only to upset, disappoint, and even worse, frighten her with his reckless behavior.

He let her help him up and felt her tiny, cold hand on his arm as she led him down the hallway. Fumbling, he pulled off his clothes. He stopped in the doorway of her bedroom, bare-chested. His head spun from the whiskey and waters he had all night, so many he couldn’t remember, and everything was a blur in the low bedroom light. Where was he? Angry, fragmented thoughts surfaced. His dinky twin-engine plane, even if he bought a jet after the next developing deal went through, it wouldn’t make a difference. “It’s all meaningless,” he said to Val, who tried to calm him, running her hands through his hair. “You don’t understand. I was meant to be a fighter pilot, God damn it. This worthless, stupid body”—he might have broken down if there hadn’t been a knock at the door.

Neighbors had heard the breaking glass. They called the police who brought a lunging German Shepard. The cops grilled him and tried to act like big shots, but he smart-assed them

back, Valerie sitting in her leather chair, arms folded. The officers left disappointed that they couldn't make an arrest to liven up their boring night of duty in Maitland.

"That was something," Valerie said. She let out a feeble laugh, climbing into bed. "I think you're the drunkest person I've ever seen. And I work in a bar."

"Cops just wanted some action," Don mumbled. He flopped down next to her, not bothering to get underneath the sheets. "All over a broken window." Valerie stayed quiet.

The next morning, he woke up to a terrific headache and an empty bed. Val had an orientation that morning for her graduate program. They had made plans the day before to meet for lunch afterward, and he wondered if she'd even show up. Discontent wavered in the back of his mind as he pulled into a parking spot in front of Lorenzo's.

Don sat down next to Valerie, finishing a conversation on her cell phone at the counter, and she didn't greet him. After hanging up, she glanced at him quickly.

"It was my neighbors, three doors down." She folded and unfolded a napkin in front of her. "They were worried that I was being attacked. I just told them it was an accident."

"I don't do anything by accident." Don grinned. "I may get into trouble quickly, but I know how to get out even faster."

"Did you call a window repairman?" She spoke in the fed up tone his mother had used when reprimanding him as a child.

He shifted in his seat, bristling with discomfort. "The guy was there and replaced it in an hour. I always clean up my messes." Sensing her disbelief, he added, "I promise you won't even know it happened."

Valerie nodded. He felt swept downstream, sucked somewhere dark and deep. In what he considered one of the most important tasks in life, treating the woman he loved right, he had

just demonstrated to Valerie utter failure. Right then he knew he didn't want to go through the circumstances of failing her again.

When their food arrived, they ate without saying much else, watching yellow pinwheels move across a map of the Caribbean on the TV monitor. "Africa's hurling them at us one after another," said Don. "She's spitting out hurricanes like fireballs from an oven."

Don flew his airplane out the day before the hurricane was supposed to hit the east coastline of Florida. Lots of planes had been damaged during the previous hurricane at the executive airport, and he didn't want to take a chance with this one. Valerie's work gave her a hard time about covering her shifts, even though it looked like they'd be shutting down for a few days anyway. They went to Chicago, stayed at the Westin. He took Valerie everywhere: a Cubs game, out for pizza in Lincoln Park, to see the famous work by Seurat at the Art Institute, which she loved. But nothing felt right.

Don desperately wanted his feelings to change. All his life, he'd wanted marriage and kids with the right person. Now it dawned on him that he had waited too long; his carefree bachelor ways were ingrained. The looks Valerie gave him now amounted to a mixture of slight annoyance and overwhelmed awe, and his heart sank. She would never approve of his flamboyant acts, how he liked to blow with the wind, and oops, break a window or two, no harm done. Picturing the future, he saw the light he so loved disappear from her eyes, only to be replaced with sheer disappointment. Things would get ugly between them. Certainly it was only a matter of time.

If Valerie noticed Don distancing himself from her, she didn't let on. He suspected that she might be co-dependent, her need for security overriding any instinct that might be telling her

to break up with him. For a few more days he hoped she'd realize his misery and do the job for him. She didn't, however, and he felt even worse knowing that she had no idea of his changed emotions.

The next night, he ended it.

Four days after the break up, Valerie called and insisted on coming over to speak with him. She looked ill, as if she had lost weight, and her throat sounded raspy from crying. Since the break-up, he'd let the voicemail pick up when she called, and he went out drinking every night. Now she laid into him. He was a mess, an alcoholic, he had misled her, and she felt pure anger and betrayal. "Your drinking just feeds your ego, and your ego is out of control," she said. "I hate to see you destroy yourself like this. Why don't you go to a therapist if something's wrong?" He'd gone to one for years. She was asking him to fix something he couldn't, become a different person. He let her rail into him, cut him up in shreds, not saying a word because he deserved every word of it. Then she laid her head on his chest and cried. He cried a little bit. Then she left.

She sent Don an email a week later, begging him to change his mind, but he wouldn't. "My feelings have not changed," he typed. "You're trying to leverage your position, and it won't work. I'm sorry." He had never felt so terrible about hurting someone, and he hated the word, *sorry*, as empty as a jarful of air, in the same despised category he held the word *concern*. "Mr. Reilly, we're very *concerned* about the appraisal for this project coming in six million short," they had said in October about his town square shopping center project. He spat when he heard *concerned*, the cowardly term bankers delighted in hiding behind. And they usually followed up with a practiced, "We're sorry."

Valerie emailed him a few weeks later, saying she had something to talk about with him in person and could they please meet up. He agreed. Truthfully, he missed talking to her, sharing the companionship of someone who cared. The stress of this latest financing not going through caused him to drink even more, never on nights when he came home and ate alone, but when he had late meetings or dinner out. He fooled around with some girls but didn't like any of them enough to sleep with them. Emptiness weighed inside him, as if he could feel the life getting sucked out by an invisible drain. It didn't matter if he lost it all, money didn't mean anything, and he wanted rid of it. The wait staffs fought over who would get his table because he tipped them hundreds, sometimes thousands. Phony hangers-on descended like flocks of seagulls to get in on the action as he ordered bottles of Cristal for the entire wine bar on Friday nights. They could have it. All of it.

She joined him at a cocktail party already in progress, and he felt happy for a moment at the sight of her. All of Orlando knew Valerie from working at Pop's, one of the city's most famous come-as-you-are-and-drink kinds of places, and she carried on conversation well in a professional crowd. Waiting tables gave her the graceful ability to get along with all types of people. He couldn't help but feel proud of her. She looked elegant, too, in a black skirt and light pink heels.

"Now what is it you wanted my help with?" he asked an hour or so later, when the two of them left to have a drink in Thorton Park.

"Well," Valerie began. "I think I need to lighten up. I've been so serious, and it's not really me. I should go out, have a good time, date colorful characters, live an artistic life, you know, like Frida."

“Listen to me,” Don said. He leaned forward, bumping his Bacardi and diet. “This won’t work. You don’t need to change. I can’t change who I am, and trust me, I’m not the person you want me to be. We’d both be miserable.”

Valerie jumped off her stool and walked around to stand and face Don in his chair. Her pink sweater slid partway off her shoulder, showing her pale skin in the dim restaurant lighting. She looked sexy and vulnerable.

“You’re not happy,” she said.

“No kidding. I’m miserable on this planet.” He felt the beginnings of a drunken, enraged rant starting, and once it did, he couldn’t stop. “I want to die getting shot down by some guerillas in Africa, flying grain to the natives. No, wait, I want to die having sex with a Botswana girl hooker with my dick in one hand and a bottle of Scotch in the other. Ha! See?” She had no idea of the consuming anger he had with God, who had the power to make everything right in the world but obviously refused to intervene. “You don’t want this. I’d die first rather than marry you and do that to you.” He jabbed his finger on his chest, took a sip of his drink and pushed it away.

“Stop.” Valerie looked at him and shook her head. “I want to always be there for you, if you need me. I wish to God I didn’t, but I love you.”

Even though the drinks clouded his head, he concentrated on just sitting for a moment while she stood close to him, unblinking with lips parted in the soft light, waiting for him to say something. He knew she meant every word and all he could think was that he loved her, too.

“Yes,” he said. “Thank you.” He reached around her waist, let his hand slide down to her ass, giving it a squeeze. “We’re leaving and getting a room at the Westin tonight. I want to make love to you all night long.”

“Okay,” Valerie said weakly. She took his hand.

“Don’t let this be more than it is,” he said, getting dressed the next morning.

She shoved her bare foot into one of the pink, skinny heels. “You know you can break my window anytime.”

Before Thanksgiving, he blew up at one of the bartender’s at Banshee’s, the Irish pub in Bellamy Park, for ignoring him even though he kept waving twenties in the guy’s face every time he came down to that end of the bar. On the way home, he called Valerie. “I’m stopping by to break one of your windows, unless you meet me at my door,” he said.

She did. It began several months of sleeping together between them on a casual basis. A sort of half-relationship developed. They didn’t go to dinner but met only for lunch or breakfast, once a week. An unofficial affair was all Don could offer her without feeling trapped with guilt. As a mistress, Valerie couldn’t make any demands on him. He liked being with her, but it still didn’t feel right, emotionally or morally. He knew she could either take their brief, impromptu time together or leave it. Because she loved him, he knew she’d take it for as long as circumstances permitted, no matter what the cost. So he watched her sink deeper, slowly at first.

Loneliness resurfaced around Christmastime, Don’s first without both parents. Valerie had left for two weeks to spend the holiday with her family, and he missed having her there. He had finally moved the hospital bed out of his mother’s room, cleaned out her things. On Christmas Eve, Tess called up and meant to be kind, asking if she might stop by. She apologized for the bad way things had ended between them. It had been over a year ago, and so he forgave her. He had never intended for anything to happen besides mere company, but after a bottle of

wine, they slept together. The next morning, Tess left, and Don spent the day with his sisters' families, the house loud with kids unwrapping presents.

After Christmas, they started meeting again, and Valerie spoke often of being depressed. It almost always fell about a week after they'd gone home with each other and made love. She didn't care about her art classes or graduate work. She cried all the time. And she had nightmares.

"In this one, I had left town for some time," she said one morning, sitting up straight and picking at her scrambled eggs with her fork. "I came back, and they told me you had died. I was grief-stricken. Someone had a letter from you to me, and I opened it. You had written it, saying you had cancer but you hadn't wanted to tell me, because you knew I would want to come home, and you didn't want me to be unhappy. I think I was somewhere painting, maybe on that program I want to go to in Florence that I told you about. I can't afford to go this summer. Anyway, you had left everything to me. Millions of dollars was sitting in an account in my name. And in the dream, I screamed. It seemed so real." She stared him straight in the eye, and he saw she trembled even talking about it now, her fingers reaching for the napkin. "It felt like you were really dead, just gone. And I ripped it all up, this letter, screaming, saying how I didn't care about the money. I didn't want any of it, if I couldn't have you."

"It means," said Don, "that's how you really feel, of course." He shook his head. "If I wanted to be with you, I would." He turned the lukewarm eggs over in his mouth, finding it hard to swallow. "There's no point in us dating again. I tried. It didn't work."

Valerie sat back and crossed her arms in front of her chest. "Have you slept with anyone else besides me, since we've been sleeping together?"

Don cleared his throat. He ripped an Equal packet over the top of his coffee, letting the granules rain down before giving it a little shake. He hated talking about this. “Yes,” he said. “Only once, an isolated incident.”

“Tell me who.”

“My ex-girlfriend, the one before you. It wasn’t planned. She called me up a few weeks ago.” Don paused. “It was only that one time.” He added, “I wouldn’t have told you, but you asked.”

“You’re right,” Valerie said, forming her words carefully and deliberately. “I wanted to know.”

Don checked his watch. Ten o’clock. He had a meeting downtown in thirty minutes and had to go. He didn’t want to leave her sitting there, still and listless in the sun like the images he’d seen of mental ward patients taken for outings on hospital grounds. The conversation and extra shot of espresso he drank gave him a sweaty, desperate feeling, and all of a sudden, he felt relieved to have a legitimate reason to go. He couldn’t deal with Valerie’s intensity any longer. As much as he cared, her behavior repulsed him. If things went on much longer, she would want more, he would keep offering less, and it already had taken a destructive toll on her. He could think of only one way to be free of her and show how precious she really was to him at the same time.

Even though it was gorgeous and warm and he had taken his silver Aston-Martin out for the day, Don left the top up. He backed out of the parking lot behind the coffee shop and made his way in morning traffic to Orange Avenue, heading downtown. He turned the radio on, and George Harrison was strumming and singing, “My Sweet Lord.”

Don’s lip quivered. “Oh, Jesus,” he said. The Aston was in a line of cars at the light.

He rolled the windows up, hoping no one could see him. He took off his sunglasses and wiped his eyes. Then he cleared his throat a couple of times, but it didn't help him stop crying. "I still know there's a nice girl out there for you," his mother had said, her dry fingers entwined in his, nearing the delirium of morphine and the worst pain a few days before dying. He had to find another way to reconcile the emptiness inside himself or else drink his life away. *Lord, why have you so forsaken me* was his only thought, and it looped around in his head as the distractions of the outside world died down, and all he had awareness of were the lyrics of the song as they spoke to him.

When it ended he cleared his throat one more time and turned off the radio. The traffic moved again, and he was again part of the swiftly gliding motion of the physical world. Picking up his phone, he dialed his secretary. He gave her instructions to send a check to a local fellowship foundation that distributed charitable donations anonymously.

"The amount of the check, do you want it to go to a specific person?" she asked.

Don tasted the saltiness in the corners of his mouth. "I do. Make it out in the amount of five thousand dollars to Valerie Nicolosi." He spelled it out. "You'll find her card in the top drawer of my desk. Make sure she's not to know it's from me."

The secretary repeated his instructions, and he hung up.

The e-mails and calls from Valerie dropped off just a few days after he issued the gift. However, instead of making it easier for him to forget the relationship, it gathered extra weight on his mind. Perhaps he had done the wrong thing. At mass he knelt, closed his eyes and prayed fervently about it, hoping for his feelings to change, that he might step outside the church and know he really was in love with her. Searching for a realization or answer seemed like it would elude him forever, were it not for the pale green card he received in the mail a month later. He

sat on the couch and opened it. It began, “Dear Generous Benefactor” and ended, “May God bless you with his abundance for your continual kindness, generosity and love.”

The phrase tolled repeatedly in his head like heavy bells. He read it over again, quickly, and even before he finished, the reality of his decision rang out. Unable to take his eyes off the words scripted in her elegant handwriting, it dawned upon him that after all the emotional ebb and flow she might take the gift as a cruel insult: money in the place of himself, or worse, money for sex. Of course, she knew him well enough to match the identity to the gesture, anonymity aside. He must have faith that she also had read his intent. She must know he truly cared for her and only wanted to help her out in a real way.

As quickly as blowing out a lamp, he sensed she was over him. He was filled with longing and regret. The more he read the first lines he saw the emptiness in their forced, troubled delivery. Perhaps he had just made things worse, and the charity would cause her to pity herself even more. This ignited a small panic inside because he wanted more than anything for her to lift out of her depression so that they might be able to stay in touch. He hoped she was okay. Reaching for the phone, he started to scroll through to find her number, but then thought better of disturbing what might finally be laid to rest.

He didn't want to face the pain if, seeing his number, she didn't answer the phone.

THE COFFEE SHOP

A dark-haired young woman sat at the coffee shop, legs crossed, with one foot moving anxiously in a circular motion. She checked her watch repeatedly. The mid-morning Floridian sunlight illuminated the outdoor patio crowded with middle-aged professionals. The south end of the Avenue bustled during this time of day as various money-makers talked eagerly over breakfast meetings in Bellamy Park. The young woman leaned forward in her chair, paged around in the open book in front of her, and pretended to skim a few lines until a new sports car pulled up. She glanced over as yet another businessman java junkie emerged. She then sat back disappointed, stared straight ahead, and took a sip of her coffee.

Dry, acrid smoke wafted across the patio as the coffee shop regulars—mostly older, wealthy bachelors and divorced men, stockbrokers, real estate agents and bankers—lit up their cigars from the fine tobacco shop next door. They sat together in the Adirondack chairs in the shaded breezeway along the side of the shop, sharing with one another their lives, wives, ex-wives, investments. A man of about fifty in a grey, faded sweat suit with a round, kind face and bald head stood up and started practicing tai-chi moves in an empty parking spot, between a silver Porsche and Land Rover.

Over the bend of his *Orlando Sentinel*, one of his friends called after him, making fun. “You’re taking up a parking space during the breakfast rush, for God sakes, Leroy.”

Leroy replied, “Come try it. I’ll show you some moves. It’s relaxing” and kept on going.

The young woman checked her cell phone and played with the tiny spoon resting in her porcelain cup. When she glanced up again, a businessman approached the table and a smile of recognition broke across her face.

“Don!” She jumped up immediately and embraced him. The man had to be twenty years her senior, one of those born-and-raised Florida natives with skin that’s spent too many years out golfing and drinking in the sun. He took the seat directly opposite her.

“Don’t you look lovely today,” he said. “A *Roman Holiday*-esque Val.”

“Thanks.” Now that he had arrived, she appeared alert, eager for approval. “I’m wearing the skirt you bought for me in Mexico, remember?” She turned in her chair, angling her legs toward him so he could get a better view and smoothed the fabric across her thighs.

“I see.” Don flashed a brief smile then turned his attention to listening to messages on his phone. “We’re doing a big charity golf tournament tomorrow. I’ve got the City Commissioner of Miami flying in. Last year it was a huge success. We even have a tiki hole set up with girls in bikinis and grass skirts making slushy drinks.”

“I remember you talking about it last year.” She nodded. “It sounded like a blast.”

“Well, I rented a couple rooms at the Westin. If you want to, you can come.”

“I have to work at the restaurant.” Val took a deep breath. “I guess I could give a shift away. I’ll have to see.”

Neither said anything for a moment. Don’s cell phone buzzed on the table, and he ignored it. One of the college boys who worked the shop brought two identical plates of eggs and bacon to their table.

“I called ahead and ordered ours the same,” Don said. “I hope you don’t mind. It’s the Atkins gut-bomb.” The plates consisted of greasy sausage omelets topped with three bacon slices each.

“That’s fine,” she said. Don dove into his breakfast. She took a few bites, but then scooted her plate aside. “You know, I’m feeling better. Look how far I’ve gotten into the book.”

The book lay between them on the table, *The Road Less Traveled* by M. Scott Peck. She thrust it toward him proudly.

Don glanced up only briefly. “Uh-huh. And what do you think?” The phone hummed another round on the table between them.

“It’s incredible. I’m really rethinking Catholicism.” She spoke quickly, a nervous edge to her voice, causing the speech to sound like an oral report which she expected him to judge. “I mean, I’m seriously thinking about sending my kids to Catholic school one day, or a really good Christian school.”

Don stopped eating, forkful raised halfway in the air.

“Are you pregnant?”

“Are you kidding me? No. If I was late I would have called you right away.” She drank some of her coffee. “And if I were, it would be yours. It couldn’t be anyone else’s.”

“Right,” he said. “We probably shouldn’t see each other anymore like this. It’s not helping. At least maybe until you’re able to handle things better.”

“Oh, no,” she said, shaking her head. “I don’t think it makes any difference. Please, don’t.” She choked back a tiny sob and reached her hand across the table toward him, but he just sat there.

“This will pass, I promise you,” he replied. “Give it time.”

They ate in silence.

The sun grew stronger as the time approached late morning, almost ten o’clock. On the patio the big umbrellas hadn’t been opened yet by the staff, so both Don and the young woman spoke to each other behind the guise of dark sunglasses. Outlines of sweat circled Don’s collar, and two large shadowy spots formed across the front of his shirt.

“You’re soaked,” she told him. She reached over to touch his shirt but stopped short.

“I just left the gym, remember?”

“I’m still having dreams about you.” Val leaned forward and rested her forehead in the palm of her hand, gazing down blankly at the table. She blinked.

Don forked up the last of his eggs, not looking up from his plate.

“The other night I dreamed that I called, and a girl answered your phone. She said you were in the shower. And there was that other one, where you married the woman with the babies. It was awful.”

“That would have to be my wife,” he said. “Even though I’ve never been married. I would never just live with a woman.”

“I know. I don’t understand why I dreamed you were married. In the dreams, you’re always with these women.”

“I *am* always with other women.” Don crumpled his paper napkin, leaned back, and tossed it on top of his plate. “I have tons of female friends.”

“You know what I mean.” She waited for an answer.

Don flipped open his phone, glanced at the screen, and set it down. “Are you done? You’re not going to finish these?”

Val shook her head at the pile of remaining eggs, poked at the embedded sausage with the fork. “You eat it.” She slid the plate toward him.

After the couple’s plates had been cleared away, Don sat on the edge of his seat and leaned over the table. “You have to let go. You’re still not doing it. No one has any control over their future, whether they get married or not, have kids or not. Until you accept that, you’re going to remain this way. *You’re still not completely accepting it.*” As he lectured, she slumped

back in her chair, hands clasped in her lap. The pained expression on her face hardened as she listened.

“I’m not,” she said. She gazed past him, over his shoulder, to the spot where Leroy swayed, shifting his weight from one side to another, like some sort of misplaced mime in plainclothes. Leroy noticed her watching and smiled. One hand stopped in the air and waved. He pointed to the space next to him.

Val shook her head, still watching. “I’ve been accepted as part of the little breakfast club,” she said. “All those guys here every morning and me, the bachelorette. We’re an odd bunch of misfits, that’s for sure.”

Don got up to leave, took his cell phone and car keys. “I’ve got to run. We’re a month behind at the project, haven’t closed on a single condo yet.” He bent down and gave Val a quick kiss. “I’ll see you later.”

She turned around in her seat and called after him. “If I decide about the tournament, I’ll let you know later today.”

“MetroWest Country Club, eleven-thirty tomorrow,” he answered. He turned the corner, disappearing from sight, but her gaze stayed fixed in his direction.

For a moment she sat by herself. Two of the coffee shop boys, one on either end of the patio, put up one red umbrella and then the next. Breakfast was long over, only she and the group of men remained. The fresh-faced young employees delivered dainty salads with tuna and olives and thin pressed panini sandwiches with prosciutto to ladies chatting nearby. A boy put up the umbrella next to her table, and she stood up as if on cue, grabbed her purse and the book, and walked over to the group of men.

“Valerie, come over here,” Leroy called. He had stopped the tai-chi and stood straight, swinging his arms at his sides.

Dropping her purse and book on a chair, she paused for a moment.

“I said come over here. No one’s watching.”

She walked over to the parking spot and faced him. “Now what?” Bushes separated the lot from the patio, and the lot took up the back of the shop, off a side street of the Avenue.

“Just listen to me. Close your eyes.” He tapped her forehead three times. “Now take three deep breaths. One, good. Two. Yes, and another one. How do you feel?”

“I just drank a cup of coffee. I don’t feel very relaxed.” As she answered she kept her eyes closed.

“Well, this is a relaxation activity. Move your arms, anywhere you feel like. Allow your body to go where it wants to go.” Leroy, in his faded grey suit, had a playful look on his face and immediately eased into a slow, rhythmless dance, arms circling his body inch by inch.

At first, Val’s arms seemed weighed down, as if she held two marionettes out in front of her but remained uncertain of how to work the strings. She moved her arms and opened her eyes to look over at the men sitting at the corner of the shop.

“No one’s looking,” Leroy told her. One of the tubbier fifty-year-olds had set his paper on his lap, watching with an obvious twinkle in his eye as he puffed on his cigar. “Go back to your paper, Tom.”

She kept her eyes open as she moved her arms, wider and wider, until finally her legs bent and moved underneath her, too. Her lips parted slightly after a few more deep breaths. The sunlight washed over her face and body, and finally her eyes closed. No longer concentrating, she stopped squinting and the tight, worried lines gave way. The stiffness of her motions

disappeared as well. Leroy opened his eyes and Valerie moved, silently, allowing the calming of the tai-chi to work its magic. The nearby men attempted to forget the two of them, but as the minutes stretched on, one or another paused time and again to look over from his prop of newspaper or cigar. They had learned to let go years ago, only perhaps they had accepted too easily, too often, and not given in enough to their hearts.

Valerie opened her eyes. “Come and join us,” she beckoned to them. “A little movement does more good than none at all.”