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Beck

We spent that summer cross-legged in the middle of my living room floor eating Oreos stolen from the Shops-A-Lot. We'd put the package between us, rows of black and white perfection in those three plastic trays, and dangle our hands in plastic cups of milk until the pads of our fingers grew pruny. Beck knew how to crack the Oreos with her pinky so the milk would soak all inside the cookie when you dunked it and make it soft just the right way.

The first time I saw Beck steal I didn't know for sure what was happening. It was early in our friendship and I was still shocked she'd chosen me. I still felt like maybe it was too good to be true, like maybe I needed to prove myself. So I just smiled, feeling like my face was stretching too tight, while she caught the eye of the pimply boy at the register. Then suddenly she bent over, looking up to make sure he was watching. He was. Her shorts were so short the white insides of the pockets were falling out below the denim.

Then she just picked up a package of Oreos and waltzed out, casual as you please. I took a little hop-step to catch up with her, frantically rummaging in my pocket for the crumpled dollar bills I knew I had somewhere.

"We should've paid for those," I said, and it sounded dumb to state the obvious.

Beck shrugged. "Maybe." She kept walking.

"So why?"

Beck wheeled in her tracks and looked at me. "It's all in fun, LeeAnn," she said. "Don't be such a baby."

I didn't answer, and Beck fell into step beside me, nudging me with her elbow, which was pointy and pressed into my skin. "Come on," she said. "That wasn't real stealing. He saw me walk out with them."

I looked at her, about to tell her off, about to prove the inaccuracy of her loophole. But then she smiled at me, eyebrows raised, as if she were waiting for me to make a decision. And the only thing I knew how to do was smile back.

"Next time, we teach you," she said.

"What?"

"Come on. It's not as fun alone." Beck linked her arm in mine. "Partners in crime."

I never found out where Beck was from because she had a different answer each time someone asked her, which only made her seem more exotic. I met her the summer after eighth grade, right after she moved in to the trailer park where I'd lived my whole life. I was sitting on my stoop, bracing myself for another long and mundane summer, when she marched up to me and stuck out her hand.

"Hi, I'm Beck."

I was so surprised with her confidence that I didn't think to be polite and introduce myself. Instead, I asked, "Beck?"

"Really Rebecca. But don't call me that."

I nodded.

She looked at me in what I felt was a deep and scrutinizing way. Suddenly I felt self-conscious and couldn't think of anything to say.

"So are you gonna show me around, or what?" Beck asked.

Just like that, and suddenly I had not only a friend, but I had Beck.

“Come with me to the drugstore,” Beck said one day. She was lying on my bed upside down, feet pressed against the wall.

“For what?”

“I need tampons. And chocolate. Definitely chocolate.”

I felt my face growing warm in spite of myself. I’d gotten my period for the first time a few months ago, and so far it hadn’t come back. But when it did I was planning to use pads. I suddenly felt a world away from Beck, womanly with her regular period and her tampons.

So we found ourselves at the drugstore, gulping in lungfuls of air conditioning and blinking as our eyes adjusted to the eerie fluorescent lighting. Beck picked up a basket, just like any normal shopper, put a box of tampons into it and then spent a long time debating between Reese’s and Twix.

When she finally settled on Reese’s, I turned toward the checkout, but she grabbed my wrist and pulled me back into the depths of the aisles. She started wandering them, too slowly, checking back over her shoulder every now and then. I’d known her long enough by now to know what that look on her face meant: wide open and innocent with her lips pursed just slightly, as if preparing to say, *who, me?*

I tried to arrange my face into a similar display of casualness as I trailed her through the aisles. I imagined that it looked like I’d just eaten a lemon. Beck turned into cosmetics, trailing her finger along the bright nail polishes arranged in rainbow order. Then she stopped at lipsticks, pulling two out of the display. I watched her, hearing the faint clunk as the tubes rolled down to replace the missing ones that were now cradled in her hands.

“Which shade do you like better for that dress I bought?” I stared at her; her voice seemed unnaturally high-pitched and loud. We both knew there was no dress, but there was no option but to play along.

“Umm...this one.” I pointed to the pale pink in her left hand.

She closed her fist as if we were playing a guess-which-hand game. “I don’t know,” she said, drawing out all her words slowly. “I like this one better. It’s more...dramatic. More fun.”

I looked at the deep maroon in her right fist. “You’ll never wear that,” I said, almost whispering now.

“That’s not the point,” she said evenly. She held it out to me. “Take it.”

“I don’t have pockets.” My voice was coming out in a hiss now, and I had to resist the urge to look behind me.

Looking me straight in the eye, Beck reached into the neck of my T-shirt and slid the tube under my bra strap. Her hand grazed the top of my breast, and I immediately looked down at the linoleum floor and pretended I hadn’t felt it. She looked at me for one second longer, her hand on my shoulder. Then she turned and headed up to the register to pay for her things.

“Why did I have to steal?” I asked on the way home, after I’d stopped checking over my shoulder for the drugstore clerk.

“Because you hadn’t before.”

“No, I mean, why didn’t you steal your stuff?”

“Oh. We only steal fun stuff. Part of the thrill.”

“Chocolate is fun.”

“Not today,” she said, in a tone that allowed no argument. “Chocolate is a necessity. Definitely a necessity.”

...

We went back to my house, even though I was a little worried about leading anyone who might have been watching straight back to where I lived. I pictured the cops knocking on the door that night, storming down the hallway toward my room. I didn't say any of this to Beck because she would say it was *juvenile*.

Beck led me into the bathroom and closed the door. She held out her hand, and I dug in my bra for the lipstick. She uncapped it and, leaning into the mirror, applied it effortlessly. When she turned to me, her mouth looked foreign and severe. "Your turn," she said.

I wrapped my fingers around the tube and leaned into the mirror. I hesitated; I felt clumsy and I didn't want to turn myself into a clown under Beck's watch.

"Here." She spun me around and took the tube back. "Do like this." She pursed her lips and leaned in so close that I closed my eyes by instinct. I felt the tube glide over my mouth. "Now open." I complied and after a couple more dabs, I opened my eyes to Beck and I, dark-mouthed, standing side by side in the mirror.

"We look so fancy," she said. "Like we should be in a movie." She raised her eyebrows in the mirror and said in a deep voice, "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."

I watched Beck, not saying anything. I felt almost as if I wasn't here, as if she were talking to her reflection instead of me.

"I'll teach you how to kiss," she said suddenly, and I felt like shrinking into myself because she just assumed that she had kissed someone and I hadn't. She was right, of course. She always was.

Beck put her palms flat on the bathroom counter, leaned slowly into the mirror. "You lean in, tilting your head just a little bit." She kissed the glass, lingering just a moment before she

drew back and admired her handiwork. “Well, damn,” she said. “I should wear lipstick more often. You try.”

I leaned in, my head next to Beck’s, but when I got to the glass it was hard and cold and I just felt like a fish gasping for water.

Beck shook her head. “No.” She put a hand on either side of my head. “It’s more like this,” she said, and she started slowly bringing my face toward hers until I was close enough to feel her breath. This time, I didn’t close my eyes. I just watched as she brought her mouth to my cheek and kissed me.

When she pulled away, I had a purplish-red ring on my cheek, and the skin underneath had turned slightly pink. “See, you needed to feel it. Did you feel it?” she asked.

I nodded, still watching myself in the mirror.

After a few stunts, I actually started to enjoy the rapid rhythm of my heart, the rush of adrenaline I felt walking out of the store, Beck’s wide smile and tight hug after I pulled something off. She taught me how to use a fingernail to unwrap the cellophane from a CD case. We went to the mall, shimmying into tiny lingerie in the dressing room before redressing and walking out. No one knew the difference.

“We need a place for the spoils,” Beck said one day as we were walking back to the neighborhood, laughing at how the lace on our lingerie was tickling us.

“We can put them under my bed,” I offered, but Beck wrinkled her nose.

“Too obvious.”

When we got to my trailer, I went to turn in my driveway, she shook her head and kept walking. We went to her trailer down the street, which confused me because I had never been

inside. But instead of going up to the front door, she dropped to her knees and pushed away a piece of plywood at the base of the trailer.

“Secret spot,” she said, grinning up at me. “We can call it the Klepto Club.”

After a bit of maneuvering, we found it was just wide enough for us to lie shoulder to shoulder. Something about the space under the trailer, the darkness or the way the noise of the outside world was muffled, seemed mystical. I lay there, lulled to a half-sleep by the cool earth against my skin and Beck’s warm breath inches from my face. “Beck? What if we get caught?”

Beck shrugged. “I dunno. Don’t think about that shit. We won’t because we’re perfect together.”

We’re perfect together. I tucked the words under my tongue like they were one of the sour War Heads the neighborhood boys dared each other to eat. Before Beck, summers had always felt long and unending. But now I had a distinct hobby, even if the hobby was something I’d never imagined doing. And the way she said *we* made time seem expansive in a different way, secret and belonging solely to us. Lying in the semi-darkness under Beck’s trailer, feeling the cool dirt against my shoulders and the backs of my knees, the moment lengthened until I couldn’t feel its end, and I willed the magic of the summer to roll on.

I was near sleep one night when I heard a soft tap on the window. I held my breath, the way I’d taught myself to do when I was little, trying to be as quiet as possible so robbers or monsters couldn’t hear or see me. But the tap came again, louder this time. I switched on my bedside lamp and got up and peeked out the window to see Beck staring back at me.

I pushed up the window, popped out the screen. She swung a leg over, climbed in as if this was the way she always entered my house. We stood looking at each other for a moment.

“What’s up?” Beck said, at the same time as I said, “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah,” Beck said, shrugging. She was wearing a giant flannel shirt and leggings even though it was a hot and sticky night. “I just thought I’d, you know, come see what was going on.”

“It’s one in the morning,” I said.

“Yeah,” her voice wavered a little. “I know.” She reached up, wiped her nose with her sleeve. She brought her arm down through a path of moonlight and I saw that the blue plaid was glistening with snot, which was somehow striking and heartbreaking in the same instant.

“You’ve been crying,” I said, then wished I had said something better.

“Just thinking,” she said. “I’ve got to get out of here. Want to get out of here with me?”

“Yeah,” I agreed immediately. For Beck, I’d do anything. “Maybe we can go to the lake for a weekend or something. It’s not that far. We can camp.”

“No, I mean for real. I’ve got to get out. For good.”

“Oh,” I said, trying to catch up. “Why?”

“Why not?”

“I mean, we’re only fourteen. We have school.”

“Don’t be a dumbass,” Beck said. “Look, forget it. I’ll just go sleep under the trailer tonight.” She started climbing back out of the window.

“Hey, wait,” I said. “Don’t sleep there. You can stay here.”

Beck hesitated. I could tell she was trying to act bored and disinterested, but she was still taking deep breaths like she was holding back sobs.

“Please,” I said, my voice softer.

Beck sighed. “All right.”

It was a bit awkward shimmying into my twin bed, down into the rustle of sheets, all gawky elbows and knees. We turned our backs toward each other, but as I stared at the wall I could still feel the warmth of her through her flannel shirt.

I don't know how much time passed. I lay wide awake, watching the moonlight morph white and pale blue across the walls and feeling the rise and fall of her breathing. It may have been minutes or hours before she spoke, her voice smaller than normal in the darkness.

"LeeAnn?"

"Hmm?"

"I'm sorry I called you a dumbass."

"Hey, don't worry about it. You were upset."

She drew in a ragged breath on my last word, and I flipped over so I could see her. She was lying on her back and staring at the ceiling, and I could just make out the shine of her eyes.

"My mom was really mad," she said after a while.

"Why?"

"Her date's wallet was missing. She couldn't pin it on me, though."

"Well, did you?"

She grinned, a welcome change after the tears had rattled me. "What do you think?"

I smiled. "Why do you need money if you steal everything anyway?"

Beck flopped over on her stomach and snuggled into the pillow. "I dunno. We'll think of something fun to do with it tomorrow."

The next morning, Beck woke me up. "Let's go to lunch."

"Where?"

“You’ll see. Get dressed.”

We ended up walking for about an hour. “Where are you taking me?” I complained.

“This is farther than the mall.”

“It’ll be worth it,” she said. “You’ll see.”

We walked into a Greek restaurant. When I sat down and saw the linen napkins and the crystal glasses of water, I sucked in my breath. “We should be dressed up,” I said, after our waitress gave us a skeptical look before walking away.

“Be cool,” Beck said from behind her menu. “We belong here.”

So I ate chicken souvlaki and cheese tortellini until I was stuffed. When the bill came, Beck calmly withdrew a 50-dollar bill from her purse, as if she did this every day. The waitress raised an eyebrow but Beck just smiled sweetly.

“Thanks for lunch,” I said, as we passed the indoor waterfall on our way out.

Beck shrugged. “Don’t mention it.”

We walked for a while, and then she gestured to a gas station. “We need to make a stop.”

I followed her to the candy aisle, where she stopped to study the array of chocolate.

“Reese’s or Twix this time?” I asked, but she ignored me and started talking.

“We’re going to get cigarettes,” she said.

“You don’t smoke.”

“Not yet. I’m curious.” She was still staring at the chocolate.

“But – that’s illegal.”

She finally made eye contact with me. Hers were narrowed and angry-looking. “So is stealing. What are you saying, LeeAnn?”

I held up my hands. “Nothing.”

“So are you in or not?”

I hesitated.

“I bought you lunch.”

“I know. Yeah. I’m in.”

She eyed the attendant, a bored-looking man in his thirties with a scraggly beard and bags under his eyes. “Okay. I’m going to distract him. And then you grab them.”

“What kind?”

“It doesn’t matter what kind. Just grab some.”

Before I could ask any more questions, Beck was gone. Then I heard a crash and a scream.

“This wine display just fell over on me. I am going to sue you so hard...” I heard Beck saying, and when I turned the corner she was lying on the floor, lifting her head up to yell at the man, who was hurrying toward her. I almost froze there, just watching the performance, but then I snapped into action, sneaking behind the counter while the man’s back was turned.

I dropped to a crouching position. Why were there so many kinds? I grabbed the most colorful box I saw, hoping Beck would like them.

“Hey! You!” The man yelled, and I straightened up so fast that I hit my head on a shelf.

“Run, LeeAnn!” I heard Beck scream, and she was out the door, me close on her heels.

He caught up to us, of course. I’m not sure why I believed that our short legs could outrun a full-grown man. He grabbed us by the wrists, his eyes nearly bulging from his face.

He got so close to me that I could smell his sweat. “I don’t need this from you kids,” he said right into my face. His voice was low and scary. “Just who do you think you are. I’m calling the cops. And your parents.”

He turned to Beck. “And you – ” He launched into another tirade, but Beck didn’t look at him. She stared over his shoulder, glowering at me.

“This is all your fault,” she said as we were sitting in chairs, waiting for the cops to show up.

“My fault? This was your idea.”

“My ideas have always worked before,” she said, as though this was simple logic. “You froze.”

I opened my mouth, but I didn’t know what to say. It wasn’t that I was scared to talk back to her. She looked less powerful this way, slumped in her chair like a petulant child. But I was disappointed, sad that she could throw away her partner in crime just like that. “I thought you said we were perfect together,” I said, and she just looked at me and rolled her eyes.

My mom ended up not coming to get me because she couldn’t get away from her shift at Waffle House. Beck’s mom, who I’d never seen before, did come and started screaming at her right away. Beck just sat in the chair, not moving, as though she’d turned to stone. The cops asked Beck’s mom to drive me home and she refused. Beck didn’t say anything to stand up for me, so I ended up riding home in the police car. The officer was nice and let me sit up front instead of in the back like I’d seen criminals do in cop shows.

“You seem like a smart kid,” the officer said.

I didn’t answer. I wondered if this was a speech he gave all juvenile delinquents.

“We’re going to go easy on you. Only community service. But you need to make the right choices. Watch who you hang out with.”

“She’s my best friend,” I said, but as I watched the world slide by outside the passenger window, my voice sounded very small.

When I got home I went to my room and lay on my bed, waiting for Beck to call, or for my mom to get home and lecture me, or whatever came next.

What came next was that our friendship underwent an extended dissolution, as these things often do. We were both assigned community service hours, but we weren't allowed to do them together. I wasn't allowed to go outside otherwise, so I didn't see Beck around. But when our community service was over and school schedules came in the mail, I found myself missing her more than ever. I wanted to talk to her, see if she had any of the same classes as me. I wanted to pretend that things could go on as normal.

When I knocked on the door, her mom answered. She looked like she had just woken up.

"Is Beck here?" I asked.

"Beck?" She rubbed her eye with a fist. Her voice sounded like she was speaking of something forgotten. I waited.

"Rebecca went to live with her aunt in Massachusetts," she said. "Didn't she tell you?"

I wanted to grab her by the shoulders and shake her awake, ask her when Beck would have gotten a chance to tell me. The fact that Beck was no longer here seemed cruel, like our friendship had been broken off suddenly; in my anger, I couldn't see that it had actually ended weeks ago, that day at the gas station.

But I couldn't shake Beck's mom and I knew it. So instead I said, "Okay. Thanks." I turned around and went down the stairs and pushed the plywood aside. I don't know what I was expecting, but it was no longer the Klepto Club. It was just a patch of dirt. Our hoard of lingerie and CDs and nail polish was gone. I lay in the dirt, but the space felt way too big without the

heat of Beck's skin next to mine. I already knew that when I passed the trailer on my way to school the next day, I would pretend it was empty.

Small Encounter

I don't know how I missed her walking through the doors. But here she is, standing in my line waiting for her to ring me up. She's already been walking down the aisles I stocked, breathing the same air as me, for probably half an hour at least.

She's not just beautiful; she's a work of art. She's tattooed; she's got dozens of them. I watch the tentacles curling around her arm, holding on with their individual suction cups as she sets her basket down on the counter.

"I like your tattoos," I say, simultaneously deviating from the droning *Did you find everything okay?* Arts-a-Lot employee script and kicking myself because I'm not able to think of anything cleverer.

"Thanks," she says, fishing in her purse. "They're a real conversation starter." As she ducks her head to look in her purse, I see a leafy vine snaking its way up her neck, disappearing into her hairline. I find myself wanting to gather her hair in my hands, to check behind her ear to see what secrets grow there.

"Who did your work?" I ask, pretending like I know something about tattoos, pretending I'm not just some broke-ass art student stuck in a dead-end high school job who knows only about painting canvas and nothing about painting skin.

"Tommy McKee over on 75th," she says. "I designed them myself, though."

"Wow, that's amazing. You're very beautiful."

A beat of silence, just a second that feels like forever. "Your work, I mean. The detail is wonderful."

She shrugs, and in the movement her tank top gaps a little, revealing the hint of a ringed planet peeking out from under the strap of her sports bra. There is a constellation spreading across her clavicles, and I wonder if beneath her tank top, there is an entire solar system or perhaps an entire galaxy spilled across her ribcage, one that I could wrap my hands around and marvel at how large and powerful I felt.

“Thanks,” she says, and when I make a grab for her wire basket, it overturns and about twenty permanent markers go skittering across the counter. I’m glad that she hasn’t chosen one of the prepackaged deals where you get all the primary colors and no imagination. Her collection of individual markers includes pale peaches and neon greens, like she spent a long time in the aisle thoughtfully picking them out, uncapping them and testing the shades by doodling on notepads.

She reaches out to keep them from rolling away, ends up touching my hand. I look down at her hand, which she leaves on top of mine long enough for me to make out one cresting wave that is tattooed across all four knuckles. In her cool fingertips, I feel the pulse of possibility I always get when faced with a blank canvas.

A preteen buying her weight in rhinestones skips up to the counter, dollar bills crumpled in her fist. But her mom sees our marker fiasco and steers her toward Cindy at Register 4.

“So how long have you been drawing?” I ask, relieved that I don’t have to wrap up the transaction quite yet.

“Forever,” she says, instinctively, the same way I answer the question when people ask it of me.

“Me too,” I say. “I go to RISD.”

“Oh, really?” She actually really looks at me for the first time and smiles. Her eyes crinkle up when she does. “I’ve been dying to apply.”

“You’ve got to. God, this could be your portfolio.” I wave a hand toward her.

She smirks. “I wear my portfolio on my sleeve.”

“Are you applying for next year?”

“I don’t know.” As I ring up her markers, she takes them one by one and deposits them in a waitress apron tied around her waist. “Gotta save up first.”

As she puts in markers, she pulls out dollar bills, smoothing them on the counter and counting them carefully. I reach out and push them back toward her. “Well, start saving.”

She points to the screen. “\$5.50, right?”

I wave her off. “Employee discount.”

She opens her mouth to say something, but then just smiles again. “Well, thank you,” she says, then looks at my nametag. “Tyler.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“Well.” She rocks back on her heels. “This is pretty much my favorite store in the world, so I guess I’ll be seeing you around.”

“Yep. See you at RISD.”

She kind of flutters her fingers, and then she turns and walks out the door. I stand still after she’s gone, just watching the place where she last was.

Cindy snickers over at Register Four. She’s a 40-something-year-old divorcee, always nosy like she’s my mom or something. I don’t mind, though. “You’re all moony-eyed. Did you get her number?”

I shake my head, and Cindy shakes hers. She's chalking this up to just another chance meeting, just one of those small encounters where a person thinks he could develop the tiniest crush in five seconds.

And maybe that's all it is. But when I walk out to my car there is a Post-it shoved under my windshield wiper. *Saw the RISD sticker and took a chance. Hope this is you. Maybe we can draw sometime.* —Andi. I stare at the numbers, the perfectly round 8 and the stick-straight 4, written in new permanent marker. I'm tempted to turn around and go back inside, wave the note in Cindy's face. But it's more satisfying to keep it to myself, to wonder if this is the moment in my life when something will change, something permanent and indelible.

That Summer

The summer I turned eighteen was abnormally hot for an Iowan summer, but still I chose to spend more time outside than in. Somehow, I could deal with the heat pressing down on my tongue and the sweat trickling down my neck better than I could handle Mama's silence. There were days when, even though I knew Mama was upstairs, looking out the window like always, I felt I was rattling around the house alone, like a lone penny in a piggy bank.

I spent long days out in the fields, sprawled on my belly against the ground trying to hide from the glaring sun in the little shade provided by the ever-withering corn. I painted a lot out there, not from memory but from my mind's eye. I painted the blue-green ocean, caps of purple mountains. I painted places I'd never been but wanted to see. I never painted corn or dirt.

It was one of those days that I decided to paint a rainbow, something I'd seen before but wanted desperately to see again. We hadn't had any rain for months, and already in May the world was parched. I was so intent on mixing the exact right shade of indigo that I didn't hear the footsteps crunching through the dry corn.

"Oh!" a voice said behind me. Slowly, I reached up to fix my shirt, which I'd pulled up over my chest to feel the warm earth against my skin. Then I sat up, smoothing my shirt and trying to retain any dignity I had left.

"Hi," I said. "I'm sorry. Am I in your way?"

"No, ma'am," he said. "I just wasn't expecting to see anyone out here."

"I could say the same." I looked at him; he was still standing ten feet away and looking nervous. He was probably a few years older than me, and he was still wiry like a boy but had the

thick shoulders of a man. He had blond hair and was holding a baseball cap he kept twisting over and over in his hands. "I'm Rachel," I said, standing up and offering my hand.

"Rachel? Your momma just hired me, then," he said. "I'm Liam. Pleased to meet you."

"You say my *mother* hired you?"

"Yes, ma'am. She had an ad in the paper."

"You don't have to call me ma'am. Where are you from, anyway?"

"All around. Texas last."

"Listen, I don't mean to be rude, but I'm not really sure why my mother hired you."

"She said you needed help around here."

"I'm sure that's true, but —" I sighed, not wanting to bring this stranger into our familial problems. "Yes. I'm sure we could use the help. I hope she wasn't...strange to you or anything."

"No, ma'am," Liam said. "I mean – sorry." He smiled, and I smiled back. At least he wasn't the type to ask questions.

"I met the man you hired today," I said to Mama's back later that night.

She didn't move.

I went around and sat on the windowsill, trying to squeeze myself between her chair and the window. It was already dark, and still Mama sat here, staring out the window. I wondered if it made her sad every night when she could no longer see anything outside, when the lights behind her left her with only her blurry reflection on the glass, when there was no evidence that a world beyond the pane even existed.

Not that she would know much about the world out there, or about anything outside this room. She hadn't left it much since Papa died here about a year ago. When it had become clear

he wasn't long for this world, Mama had made me help her move him and had redressed the bed in the rosebud sheets that were normally reserved for visitors. "Don't worry about it, Mama, he's weak," I said as I helped her lift him, feeling my father's arms like chicken bones in my palms.

"He's going to go out in dignity," Mama said, lifting her chin as she snapped a sheet. I remember the smell of that moment, how the fresh smell of sheets temporarily overwhelmed the stale smells of sickness and grief. I wish I could remember how Mama looked in that moment, the last time I'd seen her show resolve about anything.

I bent down to look into Mama's face but it looked like the world outside, empty and like someone had turned out the lights. "Mama," I said. I'd taken over the finances when Papa died, but I hadn't mentioned much to Mama. I kept thinking I'd just wait until she pulled out of it, until I woke up one morning to the faint hiss of pancakes on the griddle, but still she sat and looked out the window.

"We can't really afford any help around here," I said. "If we don't get any rain, we're not going to sell enough crops." I felt like I was explaining things to a child, speaking in simple sentences, cause and effect. "It might be time to start thinking about selling some of this."

Suddenly, Mama's eyes snapped to my face, narrowing as if I'd slapped her. "I will not," she said, and her voice came out whispery from days, maybe weeks, of disuse. "You honor your father, Rachel."

"I do," I said, but she had already lapsed back into herself. I wanted to shake her and scream at her, tell her that I missed him too. Instead, I got up to make dinner.

When I came back later with her soup, Mama was sitting up in bed. She looked at me with her head hung low. "I'm sorry," she said. "I just can't think about that. We're not paying him much. I told him room and board."

“Mama, all we eat anymore is soup.”

“I’m sure he’s not fussy. I showed him the guest house and he acted like those cobwebs were the best thing since sliced bread.”

I didn’t say anything, winced as the hot soup slid over my tongue and down my throat.

“Just give him a chance,” Mama said. “Maybe all we need is a little help.”

After I tucked Mama into bed, I found myself holding a thermos of soup in my left hand and raising my right hand to knock.

I heard Liam banging around inside but he didn’t come to the door for a long time, as if he had a mansion to travel through instead of a one-room cottage. When he swung open the door, he smiled.

“I don’t think we got off on the best foot earlier,” I said. “I was just surprised. And I hear this is how we’re paying you, so.” I held out the thermos.

He took it from me with both hands. “Thanks,” he said. “And don’t worry about it. Do you want to come in?”

I hesitated, but he jerked his head to beckon me inside. “C’mon, I’ll show you my humble abode.”

His twangy voice saying *humble abode* made me smile, so I stepped over the threshold. It’d been years since I’d been out there; there was no electricity and everything was gray and covered in cobwebs. “Sorry it’s not much,” I said automatically.

“Hey, hey.” He pretended to be injured. “I think I’m the one who’s supposed to apologize about my own house. ‘Scuse the mess.”

“Papa always meant to get around to it, but.” I stopped there, not sure what I was trying to say after the *but*.

Liam nodded, not sympathetically but matter-of-factly. “Your mom said he died recently. Must be tough.”

“It is,” I said right away, relieved to finally be able to voice it out loud instead of constantly acting like I was able to keep my head above water. I looked at Liam, wondering who this stranger was who could make my mother speak and how much she had told him. He looked right back at me, then slid down the wall onto the floor, patting the space next to him.

“Sorry, no furniture,” he said. “I was planning on fixing the place up, though, if you don’t mind.”

“With what?” I said, settling down next to him.

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe build a more sturdy door, give the place a coat of paint.”

“I paint,” I said.

“I know.” For a moment I was confused until I remembered how he met me: painting with my shirt half off.

“Yeah...sorry about that.”

He shrugged. “No harm, no foul. Maybe you can paint in here. That would make the place homey.”

“Are you looking for a home?”

“What do you mean?”

I ran my finger against the baseboard, brought it away covered in a layer of dust. “You just said you travel a lot. I didn’t know how long you were planning to stay.”

“Trying to get rid of me so quickly, huh?”

“No!” I looked out the window. I’d forgotten to leave a light on for myself, but I knew my house was out there somewhere, looming dark and silent in the blackness. “You can stay as long as you like.”

I started bringing Liam lunches out in the fields. We’d go out in the rows of corn and eat there in the shade. I never invited him back to the house, and he never asked why. He seemed content to sit cross-legged eating peanut butter sandwiches and chasing them down with lemonade.

“Let’s not talk about work today,” I said, tired of hearing the same old, Liam’s hopeful *the corn isn’t doing well but here’s what I’m thinking*. I hadn’t picked up enough from Pa to follow Liam’s plans, and everything he said just reminded me of the plummeting number that I kept circled on a legal pad next to my bed.

“Okay,” Liam agreed, his mouth full of peanut butter.

“Let’s talk about you,” I said. “What’s your story?”

He nodded, waiting to swallow before he spoke. “I never knew my father,” she said. “My mother was depressed. Or something. She was never quite right. I left when I finished high school. I sent money back when I could until I heard she died.” Liam took another bite. That’s how things were with him, simple. He was willing to reveal his darkest secrets to anyone because they were the truth.

I felt a little guilty for my story, my father who had died after a long time of me knowing him and my resentment toward my mother who used to be bright-eyed and cheerful. But I’d been glad when Liam hadn’t pitied me, so I just nodded.

“My mom’s been depressed too. Ever since.”

He nodded. “Yeah. I figured.”

“You must have been good to get her to talk to you. Sometimes I don’t even know how to do that.”

“I think you’re doing okay,” Liam said, and even though there was no way he could know, it felt good to hear him sound so confident about it.

After that we were quiet. I listened to the absolute stillness of the air, trying to recreate the gentle breeze of summers past. If I focused hard enough, I imagined I could hear the faint sizzle of our corn burning to a crisp.

“It’s okay to want more, you know,” Liam said.

I didn’t say anything.

“I mean, don’t get me wrong. I think you’re great for staying here with her. Much better than me. I wanted more, so I left.”

I turned to him. “There are places I want to see.”

“Of course there are,” he said. “And you should.”

“I should.”

He leaned forward. “Tell me where you want to go,” he said, and he looked so serious and earnest in that moment that I kissed him.

My weeks passed, marked with Liam. I brought him dinner after he cleaned up from work, and we sat against his wall, talking until the darkness faded from the sky and the light began to seep in. Liam lit his place with candles, and often the wick would burn down all the way before he walked me back home. It wasn’t until I had someone with me that I realized how lonely I’d been.

One night, he opened the door grinning from ear to ear. “Sit down,” he said. “I have a surprise.”

Obediently, I sat in the middle of the floor.

“Cover your eyes,” he instructed. I did, but I cheated and kept my eyes open against my palms. I heard a click, and suddenly my palms changed from muted gray to orangey peach. I pulled my hands away from my eyes.

“How?” I asked.

He shrugged, trying to play it cool, but I could tell from the way he was dancing from foot to foot that he could barely contain his excitement. “I did some electrical work for Mr. Martin down at the general store. He gave me the parts.”

“I didn’t know you knew electrical.”

“I’m a jack of all trades.” He smiled.

I rose to my feet, went to him and put my arms around his waist. “You’re my jack of all trades,” I said into his shoulder.

We stayed there for a minute, just standing there in each other’s arms under the newly installed light. “I don’t know,” I said. “I might miss the romantic candle lighting.”

“Oh, we can still have romantic candle lighting,” he said seriously. He kissed me, reaching to flip off the switch. I reached my hands up under his shirt, and he pulled back and looked at me. I nodded. When he laid me down gently on the ground, I watched his chest and the muscles in his arms, turned a muted purple-gray from the half-light of dusk falling outside. Normally I liked to sit outside at dusk, watching the light drain from the sky and disappear, but for tonight I just watched Liam, watched him rise and fall above me.

...

When I woke up in the morning, Liam had already gone out to the fields. He left a note:
You are amazing. See you at lunch. L.

I ran all the way home. We jumped at the same time: her because I let the screen door slam shut behind me, and me because I was surprised to see her sitting there.

“Hi, Mama,” I said.

“Hi, dear,” she said, folding her hands on the kitchen table. “You didn’t come home last night.” It wasn’t a question or an accusation, just a calm statement.

“Sit down,” she said. “I’m making tea.”

We sat there in silence until the kettle began to whistle. She got up to pour it and I watched her move around the kitchen for the first time in weeks.

“Do you love him?” She was facing the stove and I couldn’t see her face.

“What?”

“I’m not blind, girl. Do you love that hired boy?”

I thought of Liam’s cautious hands last night, of his note this morning. *You are amazing.*
L. “Yeah. Yeah, I think I do.”

When Mama came back to the table, she really looked at me for the first time in a long time. For a moment her face was blank, open and round like a full moon. Then her eyes filled with tears.

“Mama! What’s wrong?”

“You’re getting so grown up. I was about your age when I met your father.”

I held my breath. I was scared to ask, scared to hurt her, but I really wanted to know.
“How did you know for sure?”

. “I knew. He made me feel warm right here, all the time.” She pats her chest.

I closed my eyes, trying to feel it. It was hard to tell in the unrelenting heat of our kitchen, but I thought I could feel something, something that felt just like roasting marshmallows over the stove.

Mother smiled. “You feel it. I can tell.” She took another sip, reached over to put her hand on mine. “When it’s real, the warm never goes away.”

When I met Liam that day, the warm spot still burning in my chest, he opened his arms and I walked right into them. “I did some more work for Mr. Martin. He traded me some new brushes,” he said, pulling a plastic package out of his back pocket.

“Wow, that was really nice.”

He smiled. “Now you can paint even more places you’ll get to someday.”

“Thanks,” I said, kissing him.

He took both my hands. “Let’s sit,” he said. “I need to tell you something.”

“There’s something I need to tell you, too,” I said, feeling slightly giddy.

“Okay. You go first.”

“No, you go. I interrupted you.”

“Okay.” He took a deep breath. “This is kind of big.”

I squeezed his hand.

“Mr. Martin has this friend who’s starting a store in Galena,” he said. “He needs some wiring done.”

“That’s great! How long will you be gone?”

“That’s the thing. He said he could help me start my own electrician business over there.”

I closed my mouth, opened it. I hoped I was still smiling.

“But I wanted to talk to you first. I don’t want to if – ”

“No!” I interrupted. “No. Of course you should go. That’s an amazing opportunity.”

Liam put his finger to my lips. “I was going to say if you won’t come with me.”

“Liam, I – ”

Now it was his turn to interrupt me. “I know it’s crazy,” he said. “I know it’s not the ocean yet. But it’s an adventure. I promise I’ll get you to the ocean eventually.”

“I don’t know. My mom. The land.”

He nodded. “I know. It’s a big decision. Just take a night to sleep on it.”

We sat outside until it was dark, sometimes talking and sometimes just leaning into each other and breathing in sync. We lay down and I closed my eyes, feeling the heat of the earth absorbing through my skin.

“I forgot. What did you want to tell me?” Liam’s voice was thick with heat and sleep.

I opened my eyes. “What?”

“You wanted to tell me something.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” I said. In the distance, I saw a brief flash. “Look!” I said, pointing to the sky.

“Do you think it smells like rain?” Liam asked, eager.

I sniffed. “I don’t know. Not quite, I don’t think. Pa used to say it smelled like hope.”

We lay there a long time, watching the intermittent purple flashes play across the sky. I listened for thunder, and I imagined I could hear a faint and distant humming, the earth waiting expectantly to be paid its due. Even though I knew the rain probably wasn’t going to come, each flash seemed to make the world seem different, like maybe it could be possible.

...

Liam had told me to sleep on it, but I didn't think I'd ever sleep. I lay awake for hours, tempted to go even while telling myself I couldn't. I must have dozed off eventually, though, because I was distinctly aware of waking up.

It was raining. Just softly, but the sound was foreign enough by now that it woke me up. I listened to it come down in big splotches, each drop hissing against the hot tin of the roof.

I got out of bed to look out the window. Liam was outside, arms outstretched, laughing up at my window. Barefoot, I ran downstairs and out to him. The rain was coming harder now and making the dust cake into mud between my toes.

"It's raining!" Liam yelled, as if I couldn't hear him over the rain.

"I know." We just stood there grinning at each other. Then he picked me up and spun me around.

"This is great. Maybe your corn can still make it," he said when he put me back down.

I froze. *My corn*. This rain was for my land.

I tilted my head back, opened my mouth and let the rain fall down my throat.

"Liam."

He looked at me.

"What I wanted to tell you earlier. I love you."

He smiled, responded instantly. "I love you, too."

"But I can't come with you."

His face froze, but he nodded.

"But I'm not going to let you pass this up."

He nodded again, more slowly. When he leaned down to kiss me, it tasted fresh and wet, like rain, but also a bit bitter, like sadness.

I kept painting. As the years passed, I even got to see the things I painted, both the ocean and the mountains. I steered away from painting rain or clouds. Somehow, they always reminded me of him.

But one day, the rumbling thunder made me feel like I had to paint it. It was like Liam was in the base of my fingers, itching to get out. I pulled a chair up to the window, peering out at the sky much like Mama used to. I was so focused on my work that I didn't hear my husband come in behind me.

He put his hands on my shoulders and peered at the painting. "Kind of sad, but new at the same time," he said. "I like it."

I looked at my painting. There was definitely a darker element in it, the bitterness I'd tasted on Liam's lips that night. "I think I like it, too," I said, listening as the first droplets of rain broke free from the clouds and pattered against the tin roof.

Millennium

In 1999, my senior year of high school, I knew a boy named Dennis who sounded like he smoked a lot of pot. His voice was thick and lazy, and he was constantly saying stupid things. But he actually only smoked every other Saturday – he said self-control was a virtue – and when he did, he sounded his most eloquent and intelligent.

Only a month into school, we were sick of it and ready to be done for good. We toed the line by doing things like bringing peach schnapps to school in empty water bottles. But I was never able to completely abandon my responsibilities. One day, I was making a valiant attempt to finish an essay about T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" as Frida wore earphones, mouthing the words to some Elvis song. Neither of us were paying any attention to Dennis, but he wasn't deterred from being his normal strange Dennis self.

"So did you guys hear the world is going to end?" he asked between bites of chicken tender.

I ignored him, used to him saying crazy things. Third in a line of Dennis Charleses, Dennis hated the pompous suburban connotation of his name and did everything he could to distance himself from it. Brought up Presbyterian, he had quit organized religion and adopted what he called "a sexualized spirituality."

Frida pulled out one earphone. "What'd you say?"

"That the world is going to end. On New Year's."

Frida widened her eyes. "Oh, yeah. I actually did hear that. On the news. All the computers are gonna explode or something."

I rolled my eyes and scrubbed my paper with my eraser. Frida, named after Frida Kahlo, never had a fighting chance at being normal. As far as she was concerned, the world had ended 22 years prior when Elvis Presley died. Every August 16th, she wore a black veil regardless of how hot and sticky it was. “He died a noble death,” she would say, and when someone pointed out that he died on the toilet, she’d just nod and sigh.

“They say that,” Dennis said, nodding. “But I think that’s just a government cover-up. I think they’re just going to shut down the world. No more goods or services, no more power. Everyone in the dark.”

I snorted. “And then what?”

“Well, I hope that’s the point we get raptured,” he said. “Everyone flying up to the sky, all just summoned at once. Boom, no matter what you’re doing. Except we’re all going to be naked and it’s going to feel like the best ever-loving orgasm you ever had. They don’t call it the rapture for nothing.” He looked over my shoulder. “Eliot. Ironic.”

“Why?”

“This is the way the world ends. This is the way the world ends. This is the way the world ends. Not with a bang but a whimper.”

Frida and I stared at him for a moment. Sometimes Dennis surprised us with things like that. He was actually pretty smart for a boy who could sound so stupid. Maybe we would have asked him more, drawn in by his poetry, but just then Jenna Helsel threw an entire sweet tea on Libby Wilson because everyone knew Libby had been sleeping with Jenna’s boyfriend. The ensuing uproar in the cafeteria broke the spell.

“Come over,” I said into the phone. “I need to get drunk tonight.”

“I don’t know,” Frida hedged. I could hear “Hound Dog” playing in the background.

“You can bring Elvis,” I said, impatient. “Just get over here.”

The three of us always met at my house because my mom worked the night shift as a receptionist in the emergency room. Dennis poured shots of whiskey he’d gotten from one of his college buddies.

“Shall we toast?” he asked, holding one up.

“To not giving a fuck,” I said.

“Why this time?” Frida asked.

“Mrs. Simmons pulled me aside yesterday and told me that handwritten piece of shit I turned in showed promise. She pressured me about college, all judge-y and stuff.”

Frida groaned. “That’s the worst.”

Dennis shook his head solemnly. “Well, none of that’s going to matter anyway,” he said. He held up his shot. “To the world ending!”

“To the world ending,” Frida and I chorused, and as the warmth spread through my stomach, I decided I liked the sound of it. Suddenly, the end of the world seemed appealing in a way that was almost mystical.

Later, Dennis brought out the pot. “You have to go outside,” I said. “No skunky smell in the house.”

Dennis shrugged and crossed the room to the back door, and I lay down in the empty spot on the couch. Frida and I were quiet, listening to Elvis croon through Frida’s boombox.

*Be mine tonight
Tomorrow will be too late,
It’s now or never,
My love won’t wait.*

I was already pretty drunk. The lights seemed too bright, and the room was wobbling slightly. I squeezed my eyes shut to make it stop. But there was another feeling there too, one I couldn't quite put words to.

"What do you think this song is about?" I asked.

"A man trying to woo a woman," Frida said. "Elvis trying to woo me."

"But now or never. Do you ever feel like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like *carpe fucking diem*, you know? Like there's something you should be doing that won't wait until tomorrow?"

"No. I just – if Dennis is right and the world ends – I feel like I haven't *done* anything yet."

"Or haven't done *anyone* yet." Frida raised an eyebrow.

"Neither have you."

"I'm saving myself. For the man of all men." She caressed her boombox.

"I don't think that's what I need to do, though," I said.

Frida didn't say anything. In the silence, Elvis seemed to be getting louder and louder. "I need some air," I said, and went out the back door.

Dennis was standing on the porch, still smoking. He nodded at me, and I reached for his blunt.

He looked at me. "I thought no skunky smell."

"I dunno. There must be something to it, right?"

Dennis grinned hugely, exhaled smoke through his nose. Through the hazy cloud, he suddenly looked splendid and mysterious. "Oh, there is," he said. "You'll love it."

I reached for it, and Dennis drew back. “Wait!” he said, his voice serious. “It’s the gateway drug, you know.”

“Oh, shut up,” I said, slugging him on the shoulder. “I don’t see you snorting lines of coke.” I took the blunt from him. “Besides,” I said, and tried to take a drag between words. I ended up coughing like an asthmatic, and Dennis pounded me on the back.

“World’s ending soon, right?” I said when I could breathe again. Dennis nodded, leaving his hand on the small of my back. I drew closer, and we stood that way for a while, looking out at the dark night and passing the blunt between us.

After that night, Dennis and I were unofficially dating, which pretty much just meant that we sometimes hung out without Frida. I asked him once whether he was my boyfriend, and he said he could be if I wanted, although he guessed titles wouldn’t matter that much when the world was ending. And so I forgave his overall wiriness and the blistering white acne on his neck, remembering how beautiful he’d looked exhaling smoke, and he became my boyfriend.

Now that I’d accepted the end of the world, it was fun to flout the future. It seemed as if I knew a secret the majority of the world didn’t. I skipped career day and fell asleep during an applications essay workshop. I shrugged without shame when someone asked me what my plans for the future were.

One Saturday night, Dennis and I sat outside smoking. He tried to teach me how to blow smoke through my nose, but I didn’t feel as elegant as he looked when he did it.

He nodded in approval. “You’re getting better.”

“I’m cold,” I said, standing up and offering him a hand. “Let’s go inside.”

We ended up lying on my bed, close but not quite touching. He turned to me. “Han, listen to that.”

“What?” All I could hear were crickets.

“You don’t hear it? It’s the energy, man. It’s just buzzing.”

“What energy?”

“They’re getting ready for the end of the world.” His voice sounded reverent.

I laughed. It sounded eerily unlike my laugh. “You’re high as fuck.”

He didn’t answer, and I didn’t say anything else. I had none of Dennis’ “sexualized spirituality.” Although the idea of the end of the world excited me, I assumed it would look more like a mass blackout followed by anarchy. But Dennis was such a gentle boy and I didn’t want to ruin his beautiful if somewhat skewed views of the world, so I just lay there with my hands in the air making shadow puppets on the ceiling. My hands looked larger than life, like I had the power to change things, but then when I turned them at a certain angle or closed one eye, they looked small and vulnerable, like baby hands. I suddenly felt itchy and restless, just as I had the night when Elvis tried to convince me I should be out doing something, not necessarily something important, but something other than this. But as quickly as the notion came to me it was gone, because I was always trying to convince myself that nothing meant anything.

I tried to ask Frida again the next week at school. “I feel like we should be doing something. Something fun before the world ends.”

“I dunno,” Frida said. “Maybe Dennis is just crazy.”

“But you said you saw it on the news.”

“Yeah. Y2K. Where all the computers break for probably like, a couple days. Dennis is on some next-level shit.”

“But what if it was worse? What would you do?”

“Hannah. I haven’t really thought about it.”

“Well, think! We could buy that \$300 leather jacket you saw last weekend. We could get a kitten even though both our moms are allergic. We could ditch school and drive cross-country tomorrow. I’ll let you stop at Graceland. We won’t even have to worry about how much gas is costing us. Let’s just *do* something.”

Frida smiled. “Sure, you go do all those things. And after, you can come over and listen to Elvis records.”

Christmas came and went and Dennis and I agreed not to get each other anything, as things of this earth were only temporal and we didn’t need any material goods to use only for six more days. I ended up buying a dimebag for him anyway, though.

He protested when I gave it to him, launching in on his speech about the fleeting nature of the world, but I held up my hand.

“Look,” I said. “We can smoke it tonight, all right?”

He couldn’t argue with that. It wasn’t even a Saturday but since it was a gift and because we had a limited amount of time we were allowed to make exceptions.

“Do you have plans for New Year’s?” I asked him as we smoked.

He looked at me strangely. “There isn’t going to be any new year.”

“Fine, then. Do you have plans for the end of the world?”

“Plans?”

“Yes, dipshit.”

Dennis shrugged. “No plans. You can come over if you want.”

“Okay. But what should we do? Before the world ends?”

“It doesn’t matter.” His voice was somber. “We’ll all be judged the same, naked as babes and flying through the air.”

“Okay,” I said, giving up. “I’ll come over.”

On New Year’s Eve, we ended up sitting on Dennis’ couch, listening to Dick Clark asking us to reflect over the past year and wonder what we had in store for the next. Dennis laughed. “Dick Clark,” he said. “What a dick. He can’t tell the truth because it would induce mass hysteria.”

He looked at me, waiting for a reaction, but I kissed him instead. I leaned in too fast and felt suddenly woozy, but I went on kissing him. He seemed surprised but recovered quickly, and when I opened my mouth he put his tongue in. I put his hands on my waist, but when they didn’t wander quickly enough I peeled off my shirt and reached for his.

As Dennis worked over me, I tried to assess whether I felt any different, whether this was the thing I’d been waiting for. The digital clock over his shoulder read 11:55. Time passed and I tried to be in the moment. I traced my hands down Dennis’ back and was disgusted to find the acne on his neck appeared there as well. I looked up at him, but his eyes were closed. As the people on screen counted down in a tinny but celebratory way, I closed mine, too, wondering what was about to happen to me, to us. In an instant, I realized this wasn’t how I’d wanted the world to end. I should have been doing something else instead. I should have been driving down the highway and off a cliff; I should have been walking into the ocean until it was over my head

but still not turn around. I should have been doing something that would have dire consequences, something that allowed me to laugh when nothing bad happened. At the very least, I should have been sitting straight up on Dennis' couch, eyes flicking back and forth between all the portraits of all the Dennis Charleses, trying to detect some infinitesimal change.

There was a loud noise and I opened my eyes, expecting glory, but all I saw was the colors of confetti on screen. I looked past Dennis' shoulder out the window, held my breath to listen. But other than the faint thudding of distant fireworks, there was nothing. I looked up at Dennis, still striving above me. He hadn't even realized that it was midnight and nothing had happened. The least he could have done was finish.

I stared at him, willing him to open his eyes and realize the world has gone on around us, that everything remained the same. But he just kept on going, and so I turned my head away and waited for it all to be over.

Pantyhose

“Look at her,” I say. I’d waited until our mother walked away to thank the guests for coming, hoping to get Shelby on my side. “She looks overly dramatic.”

Shelby rolls her eyes. “Jesus Christ, Leah. It’s respectful.”

I narrow my eyes at her black dress, her elbow-length gloves and wide hat to match. “Back in the twentieth century. People don’t do that anymore.” I gesture to my gray pantsuit, Shelby’s dark brown knit pants.

“*You’re* being overly dramatic,” Shelby says.

“At least I’m showing some sort of emotion.” I watch as Anita kneels in front of my brother’s casket, her wildly curly hair falling in front of her face. I imagine it touching Cody’s still hands clasped over his chest and wish she had tied it back.

“Look at that tiny dress though. It’s like...a cocktail dress.”

Shelby doesn’t say anything, just makes some sort of exasperated hushing noise through her teeth.

“I wonder if she ever wore it out to dinner with him.”

Shelby half-laughs, but it comes out sounding like a bark. “God, morbid.”

“I’m morbid? She was the last to see him.”

“Quit acting like it was foul play or something.”

I’m quiet. I tap my fingers on the pew in front of me, increasing in tempo until Shelby reaches over to stop me. “Look, if you want to talk to her so bad, you should just do it.”

“I don’t. What makes you think I do?”

Shelby gives me a look that she has perfected from years of watching Mom. “You’re getting old,” I say.

“So are you. Which is why you should give it up and stop acting childish.”

“I have nothing to say to her,” I insist.

Silence again.

“Don’t you want to even know what happened?” I ask.

“I know what happened. Cody was drunk. And stupid.”

It feels like that time she pushed me off the monkey bars when I was in kindergarten – like my chest has caved in and all the air is rushing from my body no matter how hard I try to suck it in. “Whose side are you on?” I ask when I’m finally able to speak again.

“There aren’t sides.” That’s my sister; infuriatingly matter-of-fact.

“There are sides. You know they were having problems.”

“So what exactly do you think happened?” Shelby sounds angry and when she turns to me her eyes are shining. “That she paid the tree off so he’d wrap his car around it?”

“She’s the one who moved him out there. He hated it.”

“That’s what you do for love, Leah. You sacrifice for people. Maybe you’ll figure that out someday.”

“This isn’t about me.”

“It’s not about her, either.”

“Here’s how I see it. They had a fight. She probably bitched him out for not putting his work boots away or something. She’s so the type. Then he went out to a –”

“Stop,” Shelby’s voice is firm, gets that scary low quality Mom’s used to get whenever we acted up in the grocery store or the public library. “I am done listening to this.” She hoists herself up and crosses the room to where Mom is still fielding hugs with a frozen smile.

I sit alone, on my knees like I am praying, feeling the cheap crisscross pattern of the carpet digging into my knees through my pants. I cup my chin in my hands and watch Anita. Her shoulders are shaking, but I don’t want to think about her crying. I focus on the way her black pantyhose pull tight against the backs of her legs, letting the creamy white of her calves show through. Somehow it seems disrespectful to me, like she couldn’t even be bothered to buy a new pair for her husband’s funeral. She might as well have worn fishnets.

The Dog

It's only 7:00, but the sky is already black. Steven blows on his hands, feeling the moisture from his breath condense on his skin, warming it for approximately five seconds. The temperature had dropped immediately in November, as soon as Daylight Savings hit, as if there was some higher power who knew that when the world was dark by dinnertime, it must also be cold and bleak. Steven was supposed to get off at 5:00, but he'd called Jess, asking if she could pick him up late again. They were in the middle of a very important analysis of the Japanese beetle hatching cycle, and he couldn't just leave in the middle of that.

Jess pulls up to the curb and Steven gets in.

"Hey," Steven says. She doesn't look over at him. "Sorry I'm late again." He reaches for his seatbelt.

Jess still doesn't say anything. "Did you get some writing done today?" he asks. Jess was an aspiring writer who wrote many different things: articles for the advice column she hated, manuscripts that ultimately came back rejected, posts for a blog that were unpaid and, for the most part, unread.

Jess sits very still, her head bowed. Both her hands are on the wheel, but she makes no move to put the car in drive.

Steven reaches for her, puts a hand on one of her thin shoulders, which begins to shake at his touch. "Hey. What's wrong?"

As if his touch has released something inside her, Jess throws herself across the console and presses her face into his chest. Turned at an awkward angle, Steven tries to hold her,

smoothing her hair. He can't help but panic, wondering if something is wrong with one of their parents. It can't be another rejection letter – she already had a whole stack of them at home and Steven had never seen her react like this, as if someone was dying.

“I killed a dog,” she says.

“What?”

“A dog, Steven. On the way here. With the car.”

“Oh, Jess. I'm so sorry.” He pulls her back into his chest, but she tenses up and pulls away.

She reaches for the door handle. “You can drive.”

Steven pulls away from the lab building and onto the main road. The silence is punctuated only by Jess' sniffles. When he signals to make the left turn that will take them home, he feels Jess stiffen next to him.

She draws a ragged breath. “Not here. Take the long way home.”

“Do you think we should –?” Steven asks, not quite sure how he's going to finish his sentence.

“No. I don't want to.”

When they get home, Steven opens the refrigerator door. One of Jess' notes flutters to the ground. She leaves them everywhere, scattering brightly colored Post-Its and wrinkled receipts around their cramped apartment like she's Johnny Fucking Appleseed. She leaves them for Steven: *Please clean coffee grounds out of filter, thanks* or *Writing til 3, be down soon, love you*, as well as for herself: *Bread on sale 2/\$5* and *You've got this, kick some ass today*. Steven picks this one up off the ground. *Need spaghetti sauce and milk*, it says. Steven bends down and peers

into the fridge. The contents are dismal – a half-jar of Miracle Whip, a stick of butter, a container of greasy Chinese leftovers. The fridge light seems brighter against the emptiness, making Steven squint.

Steven had asked Jess to find a place with him four months ago. They'd been dating since senior year of college, and two years after graduation, it seemed like it was time. It's not like he expected her to have dinner waiting on the table every night, but he'd thought it would be romantic, the story of two young lovers flirting with the poverty line, eating Ramen and, on pay days, shitty Chinese takeout that produced endless leftovers, leaving hard greasy coils of noodles in their stomachs.

The process of looking for a place had been exciting. They'd compared their options. She'd wanted a cute little bungalow with a birdfeeder out front, and he'd liked the ultra-sleek condos they'd seen. But sitting late up into the night comparing prices and doing calculations led them to decide to tough it out, to go with this less desirable fifth-floor apartment and save a little – or a lot. “It's only temporary,” Jess had said with a careless toss of her hair, and Steven had loved her even more, knowing that she usually wore her heart on her sleeve, that really she must have been much more crestfallen about the apartment's lack of birdfeeders than she was letting on. “Really, it'll be an adventure,” Jess had added when she saw him looking at her.

But he hadn't yet felt the novel sense of adventure he'd been expecting. It had just been endless bickering. Jess yanking another sweater on and glaring at him as he notched up the heat with a careful finger, Jess wincing when he pushed her into the threadbare place in the mattress where the springs popped out when he got too overeager during sex.

“Well, I guess it's leftovers tonight,” Steven says, getting out plates and dishing out some lo mein with a fork.

Jess only picks at her food. “I’m not really hungry,” she says finally. “I’ll be in my office.” She pushes her chair away from the table and leaves, and even though she hadn’t been talking, the silence is somehow thicker in her absence.

Steven wonders if Jess remembers the night they moved in. If she remembers that when she picked up the phone to order takeout, he’d come up behind her and brushed the sweaty hair away from her cheek and kissed her on the neck. How, after she pushed him off and hung the curtains, they’d made love up against the wall right there in the kitchen. How they’d eaten lo mein by candlelight, how he’d fallen asleep to her lilting voice reading Wordsworth. He wonders if she remembers that they’d been happy.

After Steven washes the plates and puts them away, he goes down the hall to Jess’ office and knocks softly. She doesn’t answer, so Steven turns the knob. Her office isn’t really an office; when they moved in and she saw the peeling wallpaper and the cracked tile in the kitchen, the shower with no bathtub, the room just big enough for a mattress, she had insisted that she needed an office, claimed the only other room as her own. Since then, it had become a place for ringed coffee cups to accumulate, and of course the Post-It notes, looking like a pathetic flock of gaudy and slightly crumpled birds.

Jess is lying in her armchair, staring at the ceiling. Steven crosses the room, perches on the arm of the chair. He reaches out to touch her, but Jess says, “I just can’t stop thinking.”

“About what?” Steven asks, glad she’s finally talking.

She looks straight at him. “If you hadn’t called – if you hadn’t made me pick you up at later, it wouldn’t have been dark – maybe it wouldn’t even have been outside – the dog, I mean –”

Steven watches her beautiful but chapped lips form a litany of accusations, listening to the resounding chorus: *If only, if only, if only.*

Steven leaves Jess in her office and gets in bed even though it's only 9:30. He lies there staring at the red glow of the clock's display, trying to convince himself not to focus on the numbers. He's waiting for Jess to come in and apologize, to get into bed and curl her warm body around his. He's waiting for her to come in and tell him about the batshit crazy lady who wrote in asking for advice today, how she wants to break up her son and his fiancé but doesn't know a "polite" way to do it. He's waiting to hear the nasal high-pitched voice Jess will use to imitate the lady, for her to make him laugh until his sides hurt.

She doesn't come in until around 11:00, but Steven knows that she can tell he's awake, can feel the energy buzzing off him. He watches her in the darkness as she trades her blouse for one of his big sweatshirts. All of her movements are small and careful, as if she's not quite sure of herself.

Jess gets into bed but doesn't touch him. Normally he would roll over to spoon her, but he's afraid to reach out, to break through the way she seems to be containing herself.

He scoots over just close enough to feel the heat radiating off her. Everything is quiet except for the sound of their breathing and the faint *plink* of the leaky faucet in the bathroom.

"Don't you even want to know what kind it was?" Jess says into the darkness, as if they've been having a conversation.

"What?" Steven says. His voice sounds hollow; it bounces off the low ceiling with the crack running through it. When they first moved into this apartment, he and Jess used to make up

stories about how the crack got there, use it as a Rorschach test in a competition of who could be crazier, split the night open with their laughter.

“It was a mutt,” Jess says. “Black with brown ears. So black I didn’t even see ‘til it was too late. I picked it up and went to the only house that was around, I don’t know if I was hoping it was the owner or what, but no one answered the door.”

She picked it up? Steven tries to picture Jess, the woman who wrinkled her nose over his beetle eggs, cradling a piece of road kill. “Well, that’s good,” he says, because he doesn’t know what else to say.

“That’s good? I never got to tell anyone I hit it. It’s just dead.”

Steven wants to point out that the dog would still be dead even if she had received the opportunity to tell someone after the fact, but he just continues staring at the crack in the ceiling.

After a long silence, Steven says, “It’s okay, you know. I mean, the dog probably ran out into the street.”

“Jesus Christ,” Jess says. “I can’t believe you’re acting like it’s the dog’s fault.”

Steven waits, listening to both of them breathe and wishing hers would become deep and even. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see her profile but not her face. He wants to hold her, to put his face between her shoulder blades and blow raspberries until she squeals and squirms to get away. He wants to bring her back to here, with him, back to a time when she wasn’t so serious about everything. He wants to remind her she’s a cat person.

At midnight, Jess sits up. “I can’t sleep,” she says. “I have to go find him.”

Steven notices the pronoun switch, that the dog has suddenly become a *him* rather than an *it*, but he sits up, too. “Come on, Jess,” he says. “I thought you said you didn’t want to.”

“Well, now I do.”

“It’s dark. I have to work tomorrow.”

Jess looks over at him. “You don’t have to come.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he says, throwing back the sheets.

They get in the car. Steven drives without her asking him to.

“If it makes you feel any better, I killed my goldfish when I was seven,” Steven says.

“It doesn’t.”

Steven listens to the slight rumble of the engine, the sound of himself swallowing. “We all make mistakes.”

Jess turns toward her window. “This isn’t about your damn goldfish.”

They approach a 24-hour convenience store, its light flickering in the night. “Turn in here,” she says.

When they enter the store, the greasy-looking man behind the counter eyes them distrustfully. The fluorescent light makes Jess’s skin look purplish and almost otherworldly. She turns from Steven and walks straight to the pet care aisle, picks out a box of dog treats.

“Do you think this is a good kind?” she asks. “I’ve never had a dog before.”

Steven reads the label: bacon and cheese. He shrugs. “Sounds appetizing to me.”

Jess stops near the register at a refrigerated display of flowers; she examines her options, reaching out and touching the cellophane wrappers of the bouquets with one finger. Steven watches her, wondering why the woman in front of him looks so different from the one he loves, why she looks like a vaguely familiar stranger who is wearing his sweatshirt.

Jess eventually selects the bouquet that is the least sad and wilted and pays. Steven follows her out into the night, blinking as his pupils dilate.

Steven turns onto the road that he hadn't been allowed to take earlier on the way home. It's heavily wooded and poorly lit. He finds himself driving slower and looking from side to side, as if he expects another dog to dart into the street.

"It's here," Jess says. Steven cuts the engine and she opens her door.

"Look," she says softly, and Steven does. He's surprised at how peaceful it looks, as though it's sleeping, and he half expects its legs to start twitching as it runs through its dog-dreams. He didn't know what he'd expected – matted fur, perhaps, and certainly blood. He wonders about cause of death, what happened to the dog after Jess hit it – internal bleeding? A heart attack?

Jess is standing next to the dog's head. She's crossed her arms against the cold but looks like she's trying to hold herself together. She is engulfed by his sweatshirt, and all of her hair is piled on top of her head. Even in the eerie darkness, she is beautiful.

Jess kneels next to the dog and puts the box of dog treats next to it. Steven wonders why she even bought them, guesses that the writer in her likes the symbolism. He remembers vaguely from some liberal arts class he took that ancient Egyptians left food with their dead, believing their souls needed to feast in the afterlife.

Jess withdraws the flowers from the bouquet one by one and arranges them around the dog. "We should say a few words," she says.

Steven shuffles his feet. Neither of them is religious. He's only been to one funeral in his life, for his great-aunt when he was ten. What did people do at funerals?

"We should bury it," Steven says.

Jess looks up at him. "What? No!"

"Why not? Isn't that what's bothering you? That you need closure?"

Jess shakes her head slowly. "You can't just bury what's bothering you, Steven. Besides, his owners might come looking for him."

Steven doesn't know what to say. He puts his hands in his pockets, wondering what Jess is planning to do next.

"Maybe we should take photos. Put up flyers so the owners will see it and know what happened," she suggests.

"I don't know. Isn't that kind of incriminating yourself?"

"Well, we have to do something," Jess says. They fall back into silence.

"Aren't all dogs microchipped now, anyway?" Steven asks.

Jess shakes her head. "This one doesn't even have tags."

"Well, maybe owners have a sixth sense or something. Or maybe a little boy comes running up and says, 'Help, Lassie's in the ditch!'" He's joking, trying to revert to old times, when the corners of Jess' mouth would twitch, when she would laugh in spite of herself. He's trying to remind Jess that she's lighthearted, that she has a sense of humor.

"You're not helping. Look, I don't even know why you came," she says, still looking at the dog.

"Like you were in any state to drive here alone." Steven is surprised that his voice comes out sounding angry.

"I don't need you," Jess says, as she snaps her head up and glares at him. They stare at each other, listening to the challenge in her voice that seems to hang in the air between them. Steven hears a faint whirring, so he breaks the spell and looks away from her, looks away from her eyes shining in the darkness. A car is approaching; right now it's only two pinpricks of light in the distance. Part of him hopes the car will stop to see what they're doing, remove him from

this twisted ceremony. But instead it just drives on, illuminating them in its headlights, making the entire world seem to hang in midair for a second, like a moment captured in a flashbulb. Steven wonders where the driver is coming from, where he's headed. He wonders what the driver thinks when he sees, on the side of the road, a man standing stiffly with his hands in his pockets, looking down at a woman on her knees in the cold, wet grass.

In A Dream

“I dreamed we broke up,” she says that morning. No *good morning* or *how did you sleep*. Maybe she supposes that salutations would be wasted in a situation like this.

She’s dreamt about things that scare her before. Dreams of losing me off the brink of a dangerous precipice or in a rolling riptide. She is the type that is plagued by dreams, that puts stock in them. Before we moved in together, she would sometimes call me at three in the morning if she felt I was in danger. Maybe some would find this strange, but I knew it was just one of the ways she loved me. The dreams always made her hold me tighter as the daylight dispelled the vivid realities of the night into the dust motes floating past the window. But this time, she turns away.

“Hey,” I say, rolling toward her. The absence of her heat has finally made me open my eyes. “I’m right here.”

Usually she was the first to say this, relieved. “You’re here, you’re here,” she’d whisper, kissing between my shoulder blades and down my jaw line while I skipped along the boundary between sleep and wakefulness, wondering where else I would be.

But today is different. She’s gone rigid, doesn’t melt against my body like she normally does.

Perhaps there’s a question on my tongue, but the day is impending, insistent. So we get up and I shower while she brushes her teeth. It is our routine. Normally she talks to me, mouth full of toothpaste, and I’m able to discern everything she says even though my ears are full of shampoo. That’s what love is. But today, all is silent except for the water hitting my back.

I stand in the shower trying to consider what could have made her have a dream like that, if there was any grounding for it in our real actual lives. Had it been the time last week, when the woman at the grocery store asked me to get the rice Chex from the top shelf? Had it been when I'd forgotten to text her back to tell her what time I'd be home for dinner?

I am about to ask her, but when I turn off the water and open the curtain, the steam clears to reveal she's already gone. As I towel myself dry, I decide that's all Freudian bullshit anyway.

During the day, I forget. The ringing of telephones and the beeps of pagers are much more solid and real than whatever it was that haunted her in the night. During my lunch break, I walk home and she fixes me a turkey and brie sandwich. In the moment that she puts my plate down in front of me, I half-remember, just a small sense that something might be wrong. I study her face, looking for clues, but nothing looks different. She turns away before she smiles at me, but that could be chalked up to anything.

At dinner, I complain about work and she tells me about the rude bagger at the grocery store. A percentage of every relationship is just pleasant formalities, just polite listening while the other lets off steam.

It is not until we get into bed that I remember. "Want to talk about it?" I say, but it's too late. You cannot capture a dream when it has had all day to take root and solidify; it is now immortal, one of those dreams the dreamer can never forget. That is why, when we wake, we normally tell our dreams right away, anxious to have them tumble off our tongues, dissipate into thin air so that we can go about our lives. But I never asked, or she never told. Surely, someone is at fault.

I watch the shadows become clear, defined objects as my pupils dilate and the room seems like it's no longer dark at all. Her breathing has become deep and even. No part of her

body touches mine, even though we're normally one of those couples who can sleep entwined, like the ones you see on mattress commercials on TV. "I don't want to break up," I say quietly, but it doesn't change anything. The fact remains that, in some parallel universe, I may have left her feeling unappreciated; I may have even committed some larger monstrosity. As I slept, I somehow hurt her, and when we woke, everything seemed different.

Reasons She Left

I. You work too late

Derek walks to his car, slightly comforted by the sudden darkness that erases the glowing computer screen from the backs of his eyelids. He knows that soon he will be in the lights again, that they will egg on the migraine that's constantly lurking in the back of his neck. He will sit in traffic, and the constant on-off of taillights will blink at him, embers in the dark. The fluorescent lights will peer into his windows, intruding on his solitude.

As he unlocks his car, he thinks about what Maya would've said. "You worked late again." Always accusing, almost always in a slightly tipsy slur. He doesn't know why it mattered to her, anyway. She was never waiting around when he got home.

She was never the type to wait.

II. You drive a piece of shit

Derek sticks the key into his 1993 Honda Civic. Maya was always dismayed that he drove such an old car, and as far as she was concerned, it stuck out like a sore thumb on the bumper-to-bumper traffic on the strip. She always drove something much flashier; she probably had three or four different cars during the time they were together.

While they were together, Maya was so ashamed of his car that she never let him drive when they went out. Derek didn't mind much; he usually didn't want to go anywhere anyway. Maya liked to be constantly on the go, but he would have preferred to stay at home, wrapped around each other in the dark like a familiar blanket.

She always asked him why he held on to his Honda. He shrugged and said, *because it still works*, which exasperated her to no end. As an accountant, Derek could have afforded better. What Maya didn't understand is that Derek wasn't in it for the money. He was in the business because he was a calculator. But when Maya walked out the door, he was left with strange and fragmented calculations: he had calculated on forever with Maya and two years didn't equal forever. Instead, she had left a list of ten reasons of why she didn't want to be with him anymore, which meant that for every year she spent with him, Maya came up with five reasons why she didn't want to be with him at all.

Derek pulls the list out of his car visor, with "Reasons I'm Leaving" scrawled across the top in Maya's loopy handwriting. Maybe it's masochistic to keep inflicting this pain on himself, but his thoughts always catch up with him as he sits in traffic. The sheet of paper is already becoming softer where it's been creased. It's been two months since Maya left, roughly one twelfth of the total time they spent together. Derek wonders if it will stop hurting when as many months have passed as there are reasons.

When Derek first saw the list, he couldn't really believe it. He couldn't really believe that she'd left a list, each reason seemingly more petty than the last. He was briefly angry until he flipped the list over and saw a note on the back, written in typical Maya fashion: *Now, Derek, you know I didn't write this to be mean. It's all about self-help, and these are things you could change. If you wanted to better yourself, that is.* Leave it to Maya to use the words "self-help" and "better yourself" as final breakup words; leave it to Maya to determine what "better" even meant. Maybe that was his luck, Derek thought, that when he thought he could help improve someone's life, she ended up wanting to change everything about him.

III. You don't like the Strip

Derek fiddles with the radio. Every station is either blasting the loud bass emanating from the other cars on the strip or yelling obnoxious advertisements. He flips the radio off and sinks down in his seat, closes his eyes. No matter how tight he squeezes them, he can still see the insistent neon, the pinkgreenyellow that, even after all these years, is as startling as an obscenity in church. The city is roaring with honking, engines idling, people laughing.

“If you hate the strip so much, why do you stay?” Maya had asked him once.

And he couldn't say *Because of you*, because that wasn't entirely true. He had recently been transferred by his accounting firm when he met her. The first few weeks he hated it, hated the noise and the traffic and not knowing anyone for miles around, and he began to plot ways out of Vegas as soon as possible. But Maya, she gave him a reason to stay.

If he had told her that, she would have dubbed it senseless or maybe even creepy. She wasn't really a romantic that way. But it wasn't Derek's fault that, one night while he was sitting at a bar by himself, feeling depressed because he was new in town, approaching forty and still alone, she had slid up onto the bar stool next to him. Slid because she was like liquid gold: short blond hair that somehow shone even in the low light of the bar and a shiny top that made his eyes burn.

“Hey there,” she said, looking him straight in the eye, and somehow, unbelievably, Derek found himself saying, “Can I buy you a drink?”

Traffic inches forward and a car changes lanes without signaling, nearly clipping Derek's left headlight. Derek curses under his breath but doesn't press his horn. He refuses to add to the din that is the traffic of the Strip. Maya was right, he still hates it here, even more so now that she's left him alone in it.

Derek presses his thumbs to his eyelids, and when he opens his eyes again he feels like he's just swallowed his own heart. There is a girl standing on the corner, and although Derek knows she is probably no different than the girls he sees on corners every week, this girl makes him feel something. Not in the way that Maya made him feel, when every time he was even near her all his skin felt too tight and he became aware of his own breathing, but in the way he feels when he sees a particularly pathetic piece of road kill, or those commercials with the starving African children with sad big eyes asking Americans to donate money.

Derek tries to pinpoint what is different about this girl. Maybe it's the way she's right under a streetlight, lit up all silvery and somehow distanced from all the ostentatious neon. The girl takes a wobbly step forward and Derek realizes the twinge in his heart is probably because of the way she walks, knock-kneed like a baby giraffe.

Before he even really realizes what he's doing, Derek is pulling up to the curb, reaching over to roll down the crank window. The girl leans down, begins reciting her prices by rote. Derek isn't interested in that, but he is interested in her. And somehow, unbelievably, he finds himself saying, "Can I buy you dinner?"

IV. You're too nice

The girl raises an eyebrow. "What is this, a date?"

"Please. I'm hungry. Are you?"

"And then you'll fuck me after?"

Derek clears his throat; he hasn't planned for this contingency. "Uh, no," he says, and when the girl still looks unimpressed, he adds, "Not unless you want to, that is."

The girl almost smirks then, and Derek sees how young she really is. He knows that he could never go through with sex with her, even if he did want to, because he is old enough to be her father. He thinks about all the other men old enough to be her father who could have picked her up tonight.

Perhaps it is this empathy, this worry for other people's potential mishaps, that drove him to fall in love with Maya. When Derek woke that morning to her warm body next to him, he knew he couldn't let her leave him, couldn't let this be just a one-night stand. He curled his arm around her waist, and in half-sleep she snuggled closer to him. With her eyes closed, she looked so peaceful, so vulnerable, so unlike the woman who bar-hopped and went home with random men who bought her three drinks. Derek knew there were other men, but he hoped he was different. He could help her be different, too. If she wanted, she could be his.

At first, Maya seemed confused by the way their relationship progressed. This was not the way she normally did things. She was used to putting on her smile in the dim fluorescent lighting of her bathroom in her dingy apartment and then wandering bars, sleeping on various couches and beds, doing anything so she wouldn't have to return home that night. But as her fast-paced lifestyle eventually slowed down into many nights with Derek, she seemed to relax into it. She seemed to like the fact that he was nice. "I've never had this before," she said, looking somewhat puzzled, the first morning Derek brought her breakfast in bed, including cinnamon toast with the crusts cut off the way she liked it.

And because Derek loved her right away, because he had known it the morning he woke up with her next to him, he waited for her to say it first. One night they'd stayed in and watched a movie instead of going out. As Derek held Maya under his arm and with his free hand brushed her fingers in the popcorn bowl, she'd looked up at him. "I love you," she'd said, as simply as if

she'd said "Can you turn up the air?" or "We need eggs." That couldn't be a mistake, that the first time she'd loved him had been a quiet evening in, where Derek liked to be best. But since then, Maya had insisted on spending too many nights in clubs, unable to hear each other even though they were dancing close enough to taste each other's sweat.

Maybe she'd kept him around because she liked to have him there just to fill a void, just to have someone to hold by the fingers and drag through the neon sea behind her. Sometimes he thought things like that. But he had to shake it away, tell himself it wasn't true. It wasn't on the list of reasons Maya had left, and wouldn't *I was just using you* be an important one to mention?

No, Derek had to remember that she had her nice moments, too. He had to remember the way she'd taken care of him the time he'd had the flu and a 102 degree fever. The way she'd stayed in sweatpants all day and applied a cold washcloth to his forehead, her brown eyes full of concern.

V. You don't like good cuisine

"Is there anything you're in the mood for?" Derek asks the girl, surprised at how casual his voice sounds, as if he's just going on a lunch break with a friend.

She doesn't answer right away. When Derek glances over at her, she is staring at him with black-rimmed eyes. "So you really just want to eat?"

Derek shrugs, nods. He can tell she doesn't trust him.

"You still have to pay, you know. By the hour, since you're not getting any extra bells and whistles."

Flustered, Derek nods again.

The girl falls into silence, and Derek exits the main drag, pulling into a diner lit by one weakly flickering OPEN sign. It's exactly the opposite of the places Maya liked to drag him to, the ones with snobby drinks and \$30 entrees.

"This looks good to me," Derek says, but the girl doesn't answer.

VI. You wouldn't even consider changing your name

Maya's real name was Mary, but she thought Maya was more exotic.

One time, Derek tried to slip it in casually. "Mary, dinner's ready," or "Mary, do we need milk?" Something innocuous like that. He can't remember the exact circumstances now.

Maya had stiffened. "It's Maya," she said. "Maya. I changed it. Legally. And that's how I introduced myself to you, so that's what you'll call me."

She turned away, looked back over her shoulder. "And Devon would suit you better. Or even a trendier spelling, like D-E-R-R-I-C-K."

Derek had fallen in love with Maya, Maya who liked to swim in the bright lights, but he sometimes wondered what Mary would have been like. If she would've liked to stay home with him in the dark corners of their room, wrapped around him like a blanket.

"What's your name?" Derek asks the girl sitting rigidly in the booth across from him.

"None of your fucking business," she says.

Names are subjective anyway, Derek guesses.

VII. You're overly sentimental

The girl is staring at her menu but not reading it. Her hand flaps on the table next to the menu and it reminds Derek of a butterfly, actually *she* reminds Derek of a caterpillar trying to

become a butterfly before its time. He guesses the metaphor isn't quite sound, since butterflies are beautiful and this isn't the concept of beauty or success that most women aspire to, but still, she reminds him of a caterpillar he once saved.

When he had stooped to let the caterpillar crawl into his hand and deposited it into the safety of a nearby tree, Maya had groaned and rolled her eyes. "Gross. You're so goddamned sentimental."

Now he is staring at the girl. There is something magnetic that pulled him to her tonight, but it's not sexual and it's not even attraction. It's just a vague feeling that somehow, he needs to try to save her too.

When Maya had told him she was leaving, he had held it together nicely, at first. An hour and a half later, Maya had knocked on the bathroom door and said, "I need my hairspray. Are you *crying*? Jesus Christ, Derek, sometimes I think you're more feminine than me."

VIII. Sorry – you're too old. For me, that is.

After the waitress comes and takes their order (the girl finally orders a cheeseburger and even upgrades her side to a cup of soup), Derek drums his fingers on the table. He realizes he does not know how to talk to a girl this age.

Derek thought that this reason on Maya's list was unfair because it was something he had no control over, so it didn't really match up to her supposed motive of helping him on the path toward "self-betterment."

In breaking it off with him, she had said, "I'm thirty. That's pretty old but not as old as you yet. I just can't live with you forever." As if she had woken up that morning to find the age gap between them had somehow magically increased.

“It’s only ten years difference,” Derek pointed out. “People do that all the time.”

“Exactly!” Maya said, swinging her arm manically like she did when she felt strongly about something. “And you should know by now that I am *not* people.”

Derek looks at the girl, who is looking at the greasy table. “Sorry, I’m old,” he blurts out. He doesn’t know why he says it.

The girl raises an eyebrow, which is nearly black and doesn’t match the peroxide-blond of her hair. “I’ve had older than you before.”

“Oh, no. I’m not like them,” he tries to explain, but she cuts him off.

“That’s what they all say.”

Derek doesn’t know what to say to that, how to defend himself against the numerous and faceless *they*, so he is silent.

The girl sets her water glass on the table so suddenly it makes Derek jump. “So! Is this what gets you off or something?”

Derek searches for words but can’t find any.

“You know, you’re supposed to be fucking me for an exorbitant amount of money right now.”

She seems to be waiting for an answer, so Derek swallows and asks, “Is that what you want?”

She considers. “I don’t care either way. But what do *you* want?”

It’s a good question, Derek realizes.

IX. You ask too many questions

As their relationship neared its end, Maya became more and more impatient with the way Derek acted around her friends.

“What was that tonight?” a tipsy Maya had demanded on the way home one night. “You were like, crawling down Lila’s throat tonight with all those questions.”

“It’s called taking an interest in someone,” Derek had replied, without adding the *besides yourself* he was thinking.

“It’s called being a creep,” Maya said.

Derek watches the girl wolf down her food. In his defense, he does think about it first. He thinks about how he should probably be delicate and not offend this girl who he doesn’t even know. But he can’t help but wonder when her last hot meal was, and the question slips out before he can suppress it.

“It’s hard out there, isn’t it?”

The girl stops eating, narrows her eyes. “What, you want to hear about the time I was gang raped? How I’m practically dying for my next shoot up?”

Derek shakes his head. He certainly does not want to hear about that.

“Good. Because I’m not into any of that shit, you know.” She resumes shoveling soup into her mouth, the steam curling around her bright red lips.

“Why do you do it?” He just can’t keep his damned mouth shut.

“I’m the same as anyone else.” The girl actually smiles, leans in conspiratorially. “We all have to market our skills.”

Derek guesses this is true. He is an accountant because he is a human calculator. Maya is a socialite because she is a people person. This girl must also have skills she is proud of.

“You believe that, don’t you?” the girl asks. “That we all have to market our skills?”

Derek nods. "I'm sure you have other skills, though," he says. "I could help you, if you want." There it is: tumbling from his mouth and lying on the table between them, vulnerable, an open wound. An offer of help to a stranger.

"I don't need any help," the girl says, and Derek is silent.

She finishes her soup and lets the spoon clatter in the bowl. "Why me, anyway?"

"I don't know," Derek says, but suddenly a realization comes to him. "I guess you just remind me of someone I used to know." The past tense is hard. He doesn't usually think in it, and he definitely hasn't said it out loud yet.

The girl watches him for a long moment, sits back in the booth and crosses her arms. "Well, you're shit out of luck."

Derek nods again. He supposes he is.

X. You think too much

They get in the car and Derek wants to ask her something else, or maybe he wants something from her, some kind of confirmation that eventually she will head in the right direction, change her ways. He can't figure out how to word any of this, so instead he just drives back to the place where he picked her up, even though it will put him back in the worst of traffic. When he pulls up to the silver splash of streetlight where he first found her, his heart is beating strangely. It's almost a feeling of panic, exacerbated by the fact that he can't pinpoint its source.

"You're sure?" he asks her, but even he isn't sure what he's asking about.

The girl kind of smiles, but it's not the taunting, flirtatious smile of before. It's almost a sympathetic smile. "What's your deal, anyway?"

Derek knows that he should just take the bills from his wallet, put them into her hand and send her on her way. But he finds himself reaching up into the visor, putting what's there into the girl's hand instead.

The girl unfolds the paper, lets out a low whistle. "Well, shit."

Derek kind of laughs. "Yeah." He feels a sense of deflated relief, like air being let out of a balloon, at telling someone. It's almost strangely comical now that he's able to take a step back from it, see it through an outsider's eyes. For the past two months, he's just been hoarding it, reading it over and over and tucking it back into his visor, afraid to tell anyone. Who would he tell? Jim, in the cubicle next to him at work? *Yeah, my girlfriend left me...and she left me a list of reasons of why she did it.* His mother, over the phone? *You know how you always said I was crazy for taking in some random woman from the bar? Well, guess what she did...*

The girl looks up at him. "So when did this happen?"

"Two months."

"How are you feeling?"

"I'm not really sure," Derek says.

The girl reaches over and puts her hand on top of his. It is the first time she has touched him all night. The warmth from her hand floods through Derek's skin and into his blood.

"You're going to be okay," she says. "If you want to change, do it for you. But you've got to stop reading this shit."

"I don't –"

"We both know you do."

She reaches for the door handle and Derek reaches for his wallet, but she waves him away. "It's on me," she says. "No bells and whistles, right?"

She gets out of the car, leans back in. Half her face is illuminated by the dome light.

“What’s your name, anyway?”

“Derek,” he says.

“Derek,” she repeats. “That’s a nice name. Why’d she want you to change that?”

It must be a rhetorical question, because she gently shuts the car door before he can answer. Even though she has turned away and isn’t looking back, Derek watches her retreat into the darkness. He thought he would feel sad, thought he would feel like he was watching a caterpillar inch away, crawling toward its imminent death on the hot Nevada concrete. But somehow, he feels okay. He wonders how he would have answered her question. Why does anyone feel the need to change anyone, to mold and shape them until finally they resemble someone they can see themselves loving? Derek looks back down at the list in his hand, up into the darkness where the girl has just stepped into the pool of the streetlight again. Seeing her all lit up in silver makes him think of the liquid gold of Maya the first night he met her. Suddenly, he realizes the mental image is becoming more shadowy, less clear and painful. He cannot quite call to mind just how her lips curled up in a faint smile, which feels like both a loss and a victory.

Long Absence

My husband returned home today from a long absence, and I didn't even think to ask him where he'd been. By now, I can't even remember the circumstances of his leaving. I think he said he was going to buy a loaf of bread. Perhaps I assumed he had to travel to the Midwest to thresh the wheat, or overseas in search of a special type of grain.

Maybe I should have been more concerned about his absence, but things like this happened sometimes – rather infrequently, but all the same. And he'd left his cell phone on the kitchen counter, so really there was no way I could contact him. This time he was gone so long that I couldn't quite remember small details about him, like whether or not he got a five o' clock shadow after he shaved. I could more readily call up other faces than I could his: my next-door neighbor in high school, that boy I made out with at that party junior year of college.

But when we are ready to get into bed on the night he comes home, my husband changes in the bathroom as though we are strangers. He comes out wearing out one of the matching silk pajama sets we used to wear. I had almost forgotten. My husband looks at me. I am wearing a ratty T-shirt. I've taken to not wearing pants, I say, which I mean as an explanation but it comes out sounding strangely like an apology. My husband nods, and when we get into bed he does not try to take my panties off or even touch them.

When we get up the next morning my husband heads out to tend the garden. He takes out his foam kneeler and his gloves with the polka dots on them. I have an exact match lying around somewhere because we used to tend the garden together. As he rolls up his sleeves and surveys the area, he seems a little dismayed, like he doesn't know where to begin.

I stand barefoot a distance away and watch him, feeling between my toes the thick vines that have sprung up everywhere, that have taken control of our garden. I want to tell him that this is what happens when people take long absences: things grow.

The Bonus Room

Judy smells turkey. She knows she should have been the one to dress it and put it in the oven. It's her job; it's always been her job. But she hasn't been able to pull herself together for the day yet. As she was putting on her lipstick after her shower, her face crumpled in the mirror, and somehow she found herself here, sitting in the bonus room, wearing only her pink terrycloth robe.

Suddenly Callie is standing in the doorway. "Mom, you have to get up."

Judy doesn't answer right away; she is searching for a voice that won't crack and betray her.

Callie crosses the room and holds out a deep goblet filled with pale yellow liquid. "Sparkling cider," she says when Judy hesitates.

Judy takes it with both hands and takes a sip. The fizziness hits her nose, helping her find the bright voice she needs right now. "I was just going through some memories. Seeing what I'm thankful for and all that. Want to help?"

Callie shakes her head. "I'm cooking. Do *you* want to help?"

"It's smelling wonderful, honey," Judy says. "And they're not coming til noon. Just appease your dear old mom for a minute."

Callie sighs but eases down next to her, cross-legged. Since August, she's done nothing but appease her dear old mom, and they both know it. When they dropped her off for her freshman year, Callie had shed a few heartfelt tears before good-naturedly peeling off her

sobbing mess of a mother and handing her over to William. On their way home, she and William stopped at a restaurant for dinner, and Judy ordered a scotch on the rocks.

“To celebrate,” she said when William gave her a pointed look, even though she didn’t feel like there was anything to be celebrating.

After William left, Callie patiently spent too many nights on the phone with Judy. Judy knew she shouldn’t call her, should let her live her life and make friends, but after a couple drinks the numbers seemed to dial themselves. When Callie had called Judy at the beginning of November to tell her that she’d be home for Thanksgiving, Judy thought she’d won.

“How’d William take it?” she asked, trying to hide her glee by sounding mostly disinterested and a little concerned.

Callie paused. “Dad’s going to be away on business,” she said. “I’m going there this weekend so we can celebrate early.”

“Oh.” Judy was silent for a moment, then a terrible thought struck her. “Where will you be going for Christmas?”

Callie huffed. “Honestly, Mom. I get like a month off. I’m sure we can work something out.”

“But *Christmas* itself.”

“Don’t make this any harder than it already is,” Callie said, an unspoken ultimatum in her voice.

“Of course.” Judy tried to smooth things over, asked about classes and midterms. She tried not to be terrified when Callie said she had to go and hung up the phone.

Judy hauls a photo album onto her lap but doesn't open it. She isn't sure if she wants to see shots of Callie through the years, William grinning next to her. "Maybe we should have just done Thanksgiving alone this year," she says.

"Don't be ridiculous," Callie says. "It's always a family thing."

But what is family? Judy wants to ask. What does a word mean when it loses its meaning, when the man who loved you and helped raise your only daughter walks out the door?

"I don't know," Judy says. "She's just going to come with her two perfect, precocious little brats and her —" She stops herself before she says husband, feeling slightly guilty for being catty toward her younger sister.

Callie pretends to pout. "Hey, I can be perfect and precocious, too." She takes the photo album from Judy's hands, opens it. "See?" She points to a photo of her dressed up in a clown costume, sticking her tongue out. Judy is relieved that William isn't in the photo, William with his full head of black hair before he began graying prematurely.

He'd been upset when he first began to go gray. "I look like an old man," he groaned one day, peering into the mirror.

"I think you look dignified," Judy said, coming up behind him and wrapping her arms around his waist. He wrinkled his nose. "Sexy, even," Judy said, and William raised an eyebrow and turned to her.

Callie begins flipping through the pages and Judy settles back on her hands, looking away before he appears.

"Maybe I should redecorate in here," she says, looking around the room.

Callie doesn't look up. "Why?"

“I don’t know. I mean, these sheets are still from when I decorated your playroom.” She looks at the Disney princesses, staring back at her with white slices of smiles. She doesn’t mention the time that William came home from work to find Callie lying on those sheets with her high school boyfriend’s hand down her pants, the way William stormed into their bedroom to find Judy reading a book with a glass of wine.

“You were supposed to be supervising,” he ground out later that night through gritted teeth, after he had driven Callie’s boyfriend home in what Judy imagined as the tensest car ride ever. Judy tried to reach out to William, to apologize, but he got into bed and turned his broad back to her, an impassive wall.

Callie rubs a finger over a Snow White and shrugs. “I think it’s fine as it is. No one comes in here, anyway.”

She stands and picks up a robe slung over the arm of the futon. It’s beautiful, silk and cream-colored. “Why don’t you ever wear this one instead of your old ratty one?” she asks, gesturing to Judy’s terrycloth.

Judy hesitates. “That’s the one your father got me the Christmas I came home from rehab.”

“Oh.”

“You probably don’t remember.”

“I kind of do.”

Judy remembers. She remembers putting the robe on that night – Christmas Eve, because they always opened one gift early. William came up behind her and put his lips against her neck. “I missed you,” he said into her skin.

And Judy wanted to be angry, wanted to turn to him in rage and defiance, but instead she stepped into his arms. “Don’t ever make me leave again,” she said, and maybe he nodded but he was already pulling open the strings of her robe, and they made love like familiar strangers.

Callie strokes the robe with her fingertips. “Maybe we should think about clearing some of this stuff out sometime,” she suggests.

Judy feels her spine stiffen. She doesn’t say anything.

“I mean, some of this stuff is really nice, but you probably don’t really use it anymore,” Callie says, backpedaling. She glances toward the corner, where a giant framed wedding photo in a heavy oak frame stands facing the wall. She was nice enough not to say anything about the empty spot in the living room.

“I don’t know if that’s necessary yet. It’s only been a few months.”

“Mom. He’s not coming back.”

“How do you know? Did he say something?” Suddenly Judy feels like standing, clutching the front of Callie’s sweater and shaking William’s words out of her. Suddenly she feels as desperate as a middle school girl.

“No.”

“Then what? You think he’s just out there somewhere, starting a new life? A new family?”

Callie’s face is open and pleading. “Don’t make me say anything against him. And you know that’s not true.”

“Then what did you mean?”

Callie makes a face, fumbles over her next words. “I just mean – I don’t want you holding out false hope. When you think you can make it work – you don’t leave.”

“He made it work for a lot of years.”

“I know he did, Mom.”

“He put up with a lot of shit from me.”

Callie doesn’t say anything. She’s old enough by now to know when to stay quiet.

“Your father was – is – a great man.”

“I know, Mom.” Callie sounds tired.

Judy slumps against the futon. “I’m sorry,” she whispers, but Callie hears it anyway.

“I know,” she says, and it’s not *it’s okay* or *I forgive you*, but it’s simple and honest and somehow it makes Judy love Callie even more.

“Get up,” Callie says. “We’re going to mash potatoes.” She is issuing directives like Judy used to when she got Callie up for school, before she became completely unreliable and William had to take over that job.

Judy peels potatoes in silence while Callie checks on the turkey. “Looking gorgeous, if I do say so myself,” Callie reports.

“I’m proud of you.”

Callie crosses the kitchen, begins to rustle through the cupboards. “Hey, Mom?”

“Hmm?”

“I’m proud of you, too. I mean, I’m not proud of everything you’ve done. But I’m proud of you for handling it. For understanding why I can’t take sides.”

Judy’s hand slips and she winces. She has done this for over thirty years without nicking herself, but now there’s blood welling up in a small cut on her finger. She holds it over the sink, away from the pale potatoes.

Callie is at her side, holding her wrist. “Here, rinse.” She turns on the water and gently turns Judy’s finger from side to side. “Looks kinda deep, Mom,” she says, putting pressure on it with a paper towel.

Judy looks at Callie inspecting her finger and thinks of all the times she assessed the damages: a splinter, bloody knees post-training wheels, a burn from the stove. But now Callie is all grown up.

The doorbell rings and the two women look up at each other: Callie, her brow furrowed in concentration and her hair pulled up in a messy bun, and Judy, bleeding from the finger, fully made up but still in her pink terrycloth robe. For a moment, no one makes a move to answer the door. Then the doorbell rings again, and they begin to laugh for no reason at all.

The Ice Cream Stand

“That’ll be \$3.23.” Tim waits, but the old man doesn’t go reaching around for his wallet. He just stands there.

“It’s such a nice day. July 23rd. I don’t know why it’s always such a nice day.”

Tim doesn’t know if this is standard old man conversation. His grandfathers both died when he was younger, and his own father is still too young to be an old man. So he just nods in agreement, waiting for the old man to pay without reaching his hand out, because that would be impatient and rude.

“What are you waiting for?” the old man asks.

Tim shifts from foot to foot. “Well, you need to pay me, sir.”

The old man waves him off and reaches in his back pocket for his wallet. “My apologies,” he says, extracting crumpled dollar bills. “Not what I meant, though. I meant what are you *waiting* for?”

Tim thinks. He supposes there are a lot of things he’s waiting for, both in the short term (his shift to be over) and in the long term (his acne to clear up, his driver’s test, Angela to notice him). He shrugs. “I don’t know.”

“You’re a young man. Young men are always waiting for something.” He chuckles. “I suppose old men are, too.”

Tim opens the container and begins to scoop the pistachio ice cream the old man has ordered.

“Ah, don’t do that yet,” the old man says. “I’m not even sure I want the ice cream anymore.”

“Sir, you just ordered – ”

“I know what I did, son. And don’t call me sir. It’s Gary.”

Gary has extended a hand across the counter, so Tim takes it and says, “I’m Tim.” Gary’s skin feels thin and fragile, but he gives a surprisingly strong handshake, the kind Tim’s dad told Tim to give when applying to be an ice cream scooper at the stand in the park, before he’d figured out just how boring of a job that could be.

“Have you worked here many summers?”

“No. It’s my first.”

“This stand has been here many, many summers,” Gary says. “Do you like it here?”

Tim hesitates and Gary laughs. “No one likes their job when they’re that young,” Gary says. “I started out at a car wash. How old are you, Tim?”

“Sixteen.”

“To be sixteen again!” Gary has a far-away look in his eyes. “I came here when I was sixteen.”

“Wow.”

Gary looks at Tim. “I guess I’ll take that ice cream now.”

Tim nods and scoops it up. He hands it to Gary but Gary doesn’t take it. “What time do you finish up here?”

Tim checks his watch, a somewhat unnecessary movement since he’s been checking it every five minutes for the last three hours. “In half an hour.”

“I’ll be right over there,” Gary says, squinting his eyes and pointing to a bench. “In the meantime, you think about what you’re waiting for.” Then he turns and walks away, seemingly satisfied that he’s convinced Tim to meet him after his shift.

Tim smiles in spite of himself. He tries to think about what Bobby or Mike or anyone from school would say if they knew he was considering hanging out with an old man. They’d probably howl laughing, falling back against their lockers to get that clang of metal for dramatic effect. But Mike is at his mom’s in Minnesota for the summer and Bobby is taking a fancy trip abroad for two months, and he hasn’t seen anyone he knows in the park all summer. Plus the old man seems lonely, and Tim tries to be nice to people generally. He used to be a Boy Scout.

In the next half hour, Tim scoops two more cones for a couple who are both rising seniors at his school. They don’t recognize him, or really even look at him. They saunter away, the guy skillfully balancing his ice cream in one hand while tucking his other hand in the back pocket of the girl’s denim shorts. Tim sighs, wiping his counters with a towel in preparation to close up shop.

Tim locks up and puts out the closed sign. He shoves his hands in his pockets, half-tempted to just go home and lie on his bed and listen to angry rap until his mom calls him for dinner. But Gary makes eye contact with him as soon as he exits the ice cream stand. He is about twenty feet away, just sitting there peacefully with his hands folded in his lap, not reading the paper or doing anything that Tim would have thought that old men do.

Tim walks up to Gary, scuffs the toe of his tennis shoe in the dirt. “Hi.”

“Hello again,” Gary says, smiling up at him. He gestures to the bench. “Please. Sit.”

“How was the ice cream?”

“Good. I always told Eileen to give pistachio a chance.”

“Your wife?”

“My wife,” Gary repeats. “She’s dead now.”

Tim isn’t used to this blatant matter-of-fact speech. “I’m sorry.”

“It is what it is,” Gary says. “It’s been five years now. They say it gets easier, I think.”

Tim is quiet. He hasn’t really experienced death. His grandfather died when he was five, but he only remembers moments, and even these may be imagined from photographs.

“But sometimes I wish the good Lord hadn’t chosen July 23rd. She always loved the summer. And it was sunny that day. She told me she was sorry. Said she wanted to die when it was overcast so I’d have a sky it was okay to cry under.”

Tim watches a mother round up her children, plucking one shrieking, wiggling one from the jungle gym. Dusk is falling, and families are trickling out of the park, heading home to eat late dinners after spoiling their appetites with ice cream.

“I’m sorry, son,” he said. “That was somber. Summer’s still my favorite, really.”

Tim shrugs. “I don’t know. It’s not all it’s cracked up to be.”

“Ah! You *are* waiting.”

Tim shrugs again.

Gary closes his eyes as if he’s a mind reader. “There’s a girl,” he predicts.

“Not really. I mean, I don’t have a girlfriend.”

Gary winks. “At your age, there’s always a girl. I’m not too old to not remember.”

“I mean, I guess. She doesn’t really notice me, though.”

“They never do,” Gary says. “That’s why you have nothing to lose.”

Tim tries to think of a polite way to tell Gary he’s wrong. He has everything to lose.

“What you need to do is think up a good first date,” Gary says. “If you have a good enough idea, she won’t say no.”

Tim leans back against the bench, stretching his legs out in front of him.

“You think I’m crazy,” Gary says. It’s more of an observation than an accusation. “But trust me. Eileen didn’t know I existed either.”

“How old were you when you met her?”

“Sixteen.” Tim raises his eyebrows, and Gary smiles. “See, I remember sixteen.” He pauses. “I always redo our first date on July 23rd. Do you think that’s weird, to celebrate on a day that’s supposed to be sad?”

“Probably not any weirder than anything anyone else does,” Tim says.

Gary laughs. “I suppose that’s true.”

“What did you do for your first date?”

“We made lasagna at Eileen’s house – one of her favorites. Mine too, the way the oregano smells and when the cheese bubbles up just perfect.”

Tim is impressed. “I don’t know how to cook.”

“Oh, I didn’t either!” Gary laughs. “But she taught me.” He leans forward and meets Tim’s eye. “She taught me a lot of things. How to match colors, how to cook, how to win over her father. How to please a woman.”

Tim feels himself blushing and Gary winks again. “I think her mother kind of wanted to check me out, make sure I was on the straight and narrow, you know.”

“Were you?”

“Oh, yes. I was so nervous. I could barely speak to her, let alone touch her.”

Tim laughs. “So then what?”

“I must have made a good enough impression. Her mother said we could go to the park afterward.”

“Wow.”

“Yes. That’s important, always remember. Get the parents to like you.” Gary closes his eyes, lost in the memory. “We went to your ice cream stand. I wasn’t hungry, but I got the biggest one they had just so I could spend a little more time with her. And she insisted she didn’t want any ice cream. But she ended up taking little licks of mine, even though she wrinkled her nose over my pistachio. And here I am, about to die, you know, this girl I’d been admiring for so long taking licks off my ice cream cone.”

Tim smiles.

“But enough about me,” Gary says. “Tell me about this girl.”

“Her name is Angela. She has brown hair and wears these cool shoes she drew on herself. She was in my geometry class last semester. She chews her pencil when she’s thinking about a problem.” Tim feels lost, swimming in a pool of random facts about this girl he has never talked to aside from discussing the Pythagorean Theorem. “I don’t know. There’s just something about her.”

Gary nods. “That’s how it always is.”

Tim jumps as his phone vibrates with a text from his mom. *Home for dinner?*

Not tonight, he types back. *Met up with a friend.*

Ok ☺. His mom has been pestering him to get out and do something, stop moping around the house with his angry rap. “I work every day, Mom,” he always argues.

“I mean something fun,” his mom would always say. “Text one of your friends or something.” And Tim would sigh, sick of explaining that his friends were all away having actual fun summers, leaving him here to rot.

“Anyway, I would ask,” Gary says. “Next year is a new year. You have nothing to lose,” he repeats.

“I’ll think about it.”

“It’s time,” Gary says. “Stay here. I’ll be right back.”

Tim watches as Gary walks away. It’s getting darker and maybe he should be uneasy about being in the park alone with a stranger, but he took half a year of tae kwon do and thinks he could take him if it was necessary. Soon, Gary reappears with a blanket and a wide smile.

“This is always my favorite part,” he says. “Eileen loved looking at the stars.” He shakes the blanket out and spreads it carefully across the ground. He lies down and looks up at Tim. “Do you know the constellations?”

Tim shakes his head.

“You better get down here, then,” Gary says, in his unruffled way that makes even the oddest requests seem normal. As Tim eases himself down onto the blanket, he thinks about what the guys would say now, if they could see him lying on a blanket with an old man in the middle of the summer.

“How many weeks until school starts?” Gary asks.

“Probably three or four.” Tim stopped counting when he realized that the way the summer was dragging on endlessly was depressing him.

“And then what?”

“Um...I don’t know. What?”

“You’re going to ask her, of course!” Gary says. “I can feel it.”

Tim is quiet. He feels a bit dizzy as he looks up at the wide sky, feeling his pupils dilate as he picks out first one, then many, tiny pinpricks of light.

“The stars look a lot closer than they really are,” Gary says. “I mean, obviously they’re miles and miles away. But did you know some of them are even burned out by now?”

“I think I remember reading that somewhere.”

“Yeah. But we can still see them because that’s how long the light takes to get here. Isn’t the world fascinating sometimes?”

Tim closes his eyes, imagining a younger Gary and the lovely Eileen lying on a blanket, picking out the stars with outstretched hands. Tim opens one eye and points upward to the sky, lands on the first glimmering star he sees. Feeling silly but determined, he recites the grade school rhyme, making a wish so vivid that he becomes the younger Gary on the blanket, and the face of Eileen transforms into Angela’s. Tim listens to Gary talk about constellations and traces his finger through the endless expanse of sky. Lying here, Tim feels unbelievably small, and he thinks for a moment that Gary may be right, that he may have nothing to lose.

Living

She comes in at 4:30, almost closing time. She keeps looking around like she doesn't quite know where she is. I can sympathize; I know she's had to get past Mrs. Richards with her syrupy sweetness at the front desk. Mrs. Richards thought she was helpful, thought her singsong chatter was getting people through their grief, but I'd seen too many people look at me like someone drowning, searching for something to hold on to.

I try to apologize to this woman with my actions: gently shutting the door to my sterile office, sitting softly in my chair so the wheels don't make an offensive scuffling noise on the hardwood floor. "So," I say, and then clear my throat. "I'm just going to show you a photo, and you can confirm –"

"No." She speaks surprisingly loudly for such a small woman. I look up from my paperwork; she's thrust her shoulders back, chin up. "I'd like to see him."

"That's really not necessary; the death was natural so there will be no impending investigation –"

"I haven't seen him in years. He was just my great uncle. I can take it."

There's no rule against it; people usually just don't want to. I lead her down the hall, turn the key in the lock. A blast of cold, antiseptic air greets us, and she immediately crosses her arms over her chest and hunches back into herself.

"Ah, yeah, sorry, it's cold." I scan the room, but the only thing to give her is an extra lab coat on the hook by the door. "You can use this if you want," I offer.

She shrugs into the coat, scooping her hair out of the neck and turning up the sleeves neatly. I lead her to her deceased, pull back the sheet and stand quietly as she walks around the body, picking up the toe tag between two fingers and letting it fall again.

“You’re acting like we’re in some sort of museum,” she says finally.

“I’m sorry?”

“All quiet and stuff. You can talk, you know.”

“Oh. Okay.” But I still don’t know what to say, so I don’t speak.

“I don’t even know why I’m here,” she says, shrugging slightly as if she’s making a confession. “My mom just called me, told me to come. It had to be a family member and I moved out to Seattle last year. I’m the only one for miles. He didn’t have kids or anything.”

I put my hands in the pockets of my lab coat and take them back out.

“I’d only ever seen him a few times. But he looks exactly the same as he used to at family reunions,” she says. “That was, god, how long ago?” She looks up at me. “How old are you?”

“Thirty-one,” I say automatically, only realizing that it’s an odd question after I answer.

“Yeah, I’m twenty-six,” she says. She seems lost deep in thought. “Isn’t it strange how old people don’t age, though? Like once you get to a certain age, you just level out. Do you ever think about how you’re going to look for the rest of your life?”

“Um...I don’t know.”

“Sorry, I think about these things a lot. Just curious. It might sound kind of morbid.”

She’s looking me straight in the face and for some reason my tongue feels heavy in my mouth, like even if I tried to speak the words would come out all wrong.

“You’re probably used to morbid, though,” she says. “What do you do here?”

“I prepare bodies for wakes.”

She rolls her eyes. "I know the textbook definition," she says. "Can you show me?"

Now it is my turn to look at the girl. She's leaning back against one of the silver tables, casual. She reaches up to move her long brown hair out of her face. But there's something in the strain of her neck and the look in her eyes that seems to say *don't send me away just yet*.

I wait one second too long, and suddenly the girl flushes and begins shrugging off the lab coat. "Of course," she says. "It's almost closing time. You must have places to be."

I think about my apartment, where the only things waiting for me are a can of soup and my beta fish, Charlie. I need to finish a body tonight, anyway.

"No," I say. "Actually, I need to stay late." My voice sounds far away as I watch her smile a small smile.

"I have a body to work on," I continue, snapping on a pair of rubber gloves. "It's not for the faint of heart."

"Good thing I'm not the faint of heart."

I shrug and cross the room, where an unfinished body lies waiting under a sheet. Glancing up at her, I pull the sheet and let it drop to the ground, revealing a rather plump 73-year-old woman.

She takes one small sharp breath, but all the same she takes a step forward. "She looks a lot different than he did. He looked more...real."

"Yeah, I was already finished with him. This one's going to start decaying if I don't finish her tonight."

"They say the dead look like they're sleeping. But I guess that's not true. Not until you fix them up, anyway."

“I guess so.” Beginning at the shoulders of the corpse, I start kneading my fingers into skin.

“I don’t know your name,” she says, as if it has suddenly dawned on her.

“Matthew,” I say.

“I’m Anna,” she says. “Which was boring to me until I learned about palindromes in grade school.”

I nod and continue gripping down the arms.

“Why do you have to massage her?” Anna asks, and immediately I am glad she has referred to the corpse as a *her* rather than an *it*. I brought my ex-girlfriend here just once during the three years we dated. I thought it was cute when Jen told me she hadn’t been able to dissect a sheep’s eyeball in high school anatomy, but I winced as she asked questions about my work, addressing the corpses as *it* through a permanent purse in her lips. I wanted to ask her, how depressing would my work be if always I was surrounded by *its* and no people? How depressing is it to live an entire life only to become a nonentity once you take your last breath?

“To counteract any rigor mortis that has set in,” I explain.

She takes another small step forward, standing on tiptoe to peer over my shoulder at the flesh beneath my fingers. “What does it feel like?”

“Kind of like Play-Doh.”

She laughs once, then stops herself. “That probably shouldn’t be funny.”

“No, it’s okay. Want to feel?”

She thinks. “Can I?”

I gesture to the box of rubber gloves on the counter, and she crosses the room to go get them.

When her hand makes contact with the skin, she doesn't squeal or flinch, just kind of nods as though she's accepting the state of the world.

"There's probably some sort of privacy law against this," she says.

I've considered it, but something about seeing a woman in my lab coat is like the beginning to a dream, one in which I have someone to talk to instead of singing power ballads all night as I work.

"I won't tell if you won't," I say, and I see her smile before a curtain of hair swings in front of her face.

I finish massaging and take a razor from my work table. I go to work on the woman's face, and Anna says, "I didn't know you had to shave the women."

"Did you know a lot about mortuary before?" I joke, then say, "It helps the makeup stick better."

"Oh." After a moment, she asks, "So what made you want to be a mortician?"

"Well, I wanted to perform autopsies first. Too many episodes of NCIS and CSI, I guess. It just looked so glamorous, solving a new murder mystery every week."

"So why didn't you?"

"Passed out on the first day of cadaver lab," I say. "Realized I was more of an artist than a scientist."

She grins, showing all her teeth. It's different from the small, closed-lipped smiles up until this point. It gives something warm and real to this room filled with fluorescent lighting and the dead.

"Do you like it?"

I consider. “Most days. Some days it’s hard. At first I used to be disappointed it was mostly old people. No excitement like on CSI. But then I had to prepare a little boy.” I stop.

She doesn’t prompt me with questions. She just waits.

“He got hit by a car,” I say. “It made me think. Death can be so natural but so unnatural.”

“That makes sense.”

I am aware of a dark cloud that has settled over us; I have just fulfilled every depressing mortician stereotype there is. “But other than that it’s just normal job complaints,” I say, wanting to bring her smile back. “Strange hours – I get woken up during the night to go get bodies a lot. Long days. Working with people who aren’t the best conversationalists.”

She laughs. “At least you don’t have to worry about awkward workplace dating.”

I don’t have to worry about any dating, really. It took Jen and me three years to discover we couldn’t imagine a life together when we were so different. And it turns out that “I work with dead people” usually isn’t the best pickup line. But I don’t say any of this. Instead I joke, “Yeah, necrophilia isn’t really my thing.”

“I’m not really happy in my work, either,” she says. “Real estate. I thought it’d be exciting to show people their new homes. I pictured newlyweds, people pregnant with their first kid. Checking out the fenced-in yard so their puppy could run around. But really it’s just a lot of nitpicky women asking inane questions and looking for cracks in the baseboards so they can talk me down.”

“That sounds like it would get old quickly.”

“Yeah. The worst part is that I moved here from Arizona. The housing market was failing. I thought a big city would help.”

She looks at me. “I miss the sun,” she says. “How long does it take to adjust, you think?”

“I’m not sure,” I say, which sounds dumb but honest.

She rocks back and forth on her heels. For a moment she looks like she’s been transported back to Arizona. Then she snaps out of it and claps her hands together. “So what’s next?”

“This is where it starts getting kind of gross,” I say. “She already has her eyes closed, see? But sometimes I have to close them.” As I’m talking, I carefully pull back the eyelids and place an eye cap on each eye. “This is so the eyes don’t sink,” I explain.

Anna flinches. “I’m sorry,” she says. “I’ve never even been able to do eye drops.”

I pick up a tube and make a thin line of glue on the bottom lip, securing it to the upper lip.

“Interesting,” Anna says. “Imagine having your mouth closed forever.” When I look up at her, she is moving her mouth into different shapes, a pursed circle into a thin, flat line. Moments pass before I realize I’m standing there just looking at her lips.

“Okay,” I say, anxious to fill the silence. “Here comes the fun.” I hook the body up and the embalming fluid begins to travel down the tube into the arteries while blood flows out of the body into a wide, flat basin.

I expect Anna to step away, but she comes closer. “I don’t get it. How can you do this if you passed out in cadaver lab?”

“I don’t know. I think this is more passive. Like, just watching the blood flow out of the body seems more natural than digging in there myself with a scalpel. There’s something about the feeling of skin.”

“Not quite like Play-Doh anymore, huh?”

I shake my head and we stand quietly for a moment. “This normally takes a while,” I say. “Feel free to make yourself at home, look around if you want. Want anything to drink?”

Anna takes a look at the blood pouring into the basin and laughs. “I think I’ll pass.” She turns and starts opening cabinets, inspecting all the tools and extra supplies. She doesn’t ask many questions, just takes it all in, nodding every time she opens a cabinet or a drawer as if she’s found exactly what she was expecting to. I watch her as she stoops to look in the bottom compartments and admire the way her hair swings across her back when she stands on her tiptoes to reach the top ones.

“So are you always this quiet?” she asks without turning around.

“Oh. Sorry. What do you want to talk about?”

“No. Silence is okay. I just meant even when you do talk. You’re quiet. Like you don’t want to disturb them or something.”

“Well.” I hesitate. “Normally I sing power ballads.” I nod to the radio on the counter.

“Really.” She’s turned to face me. Her voice sounds amused, but her face is serious.

“I know, I know. You can quit trying to hide your smirk.”

“Well, you’re in luck, sir. I, for one, love power ballads.” She reaches over and flips the radio on. “Actually, I don’t know who doesn’t love them. Just not everyone admits it.” She listens for a moment. “I don’t know this one, though.” She frowns.

I do; I know every song this station plays. But I’m not about to sing in front of her.

The next song starts off slow and she tilts her head. “I don’t think I know this one either.”

“What other kinds of music do you like?” I ask.

“Wait! Wait a minute. Yes I do.”

I smile.

“Well, are you going to sing with me?” She seems a little shy suddenly, different from the woman who exuded confidence and looked in all my cabinets.

She starts singing, quietly and off-key. Then she comes over and takes my hands. “More than a feeling... Wait, I’m not interrupting anything here, am I?”

I check over my shoulder. “Blood’s still draining.”

“Good,” she says. “Now sing!”

I watch her; she’s closed her eyes to begin singing again, but she’s still gripping my hands. I join in; we both sing softly at first. Soon our voices join together, grow louder, and I keep my eyes open so I can watch her. The fluorescent lights that make the skin of the dead look pale and translucent reflect on her hair. I hold her hands, her warm hands that hold mine back, and sing along. I can feel the faint pressure of the blood pulsing through the veins in her palms; I can hear her voice, higher than mine. And for the first time in a while, I remember what it’s like to feel alive.