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THE END OF ALL THINGS

When I was fourteen, my mother felt certain that the world was ending. Certain in the, "Any day now, Jenny, any day now," sort of way. According to the televangelists and the Book of Revelation and the Christian novels she read and the women in her Bible study, the end times were coming, and quickly at that. As a result of my extensive Christian education, I had the ability to taunt her about this. I would ask her who, if the End Times were truly upon us, the Antichrist was supposed to be. Her answer varied: the President, the liberals, the atheists, the gays, some scientist from Europe whose name I had to sneak onto the Internet to research. No matter whom she chose, her reasoning was the same - the Destruction Of Our Nation's Moral Fiber. She would say this primly, coffee mug shoved so far underneath her nose it looked as if she were trying to inhale it.

That year, I also decided that I would run away sometime in the near future. I had no concrete plans, but it was something that I always kept in my mind, a glowing exit sign at the end of a long, torturous tunnel. I had a go bag stashed underneath my bed. Go bags were something I had seen on TV or in one of the movies that my mother forbade me from watching. Mine, a pink backpack left over from elementary school, was poorly stocked, to my chagrin.

Its contents included, in full:

- One (1) first aid kit, purchased with my allowance money
- One (1) lighter, found abandoned on a park bench
- Five (5) favorite books, rotated in and out periodically
- One (1) butter knife, slipped into my pocket after dinner
- Two (2) pairs each of underwear and socks

- Three (3) T-shirts and pairs of pants

I told no one except for my best friend, Katie. Katie lived next door and was the likely the coolest person I had ever met. She went to public school, unlike the Christian school I attended, and at the age of fourteen was already a proud atheist and the smartest person in her science class. I had recently converted to atheism because of her, though, of course, my mother did not know. The only reason she even permitted our friendship was that Katie's father was a lawyer. My mother was the receptionist at a chiropractor's office. Katie's best quality was that she didn't care about that sort of stuff the way that her parents did. She liked me because I was funny; I liked her because she liked me.

The first time I kissed a girl, I kissed Katie. It was a Tuesday. I was at her house because my mom was on a date. This happened every so often and was like a mini-vacation for me. Her parents would order us a pizza and let us choose as many toppings as we liked. I picked pepperoni and ground beef; Katie liked pineapple, only pineapple.

The night I kissed her, I didn't mean to do it. I had kissed John Henderson from school the week before, on a field trip behind the buses while no teachers were watching. I did it on a dare. When I kissed him, he stuck his hand down the front of my uniform shirt. I slapped him and told him to fuck off. I had learned that word from Katie and was excited to finally use it.

I was telling Katie about this experience as we ate our pizza, cross-legged on her bed. *Friends* played on the TV across the room. To me, that was the real indicator of wealth - a TV in your bedroom.

"Did he... touch it?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said. "Right here." I grabbed my right boob for emphasis. It was a barely-there lump on my chest, tumor-like to me, who would have been satisfied had I never grown them.

"What did it feel like?"

"I dunno." I'd slapped him before I could even register what happened.

"If anyone tried to do that to me, I would've kicked him in the nuts."

I nodded sagely, pretending to know what she meant. "Yeah, totally."

"What's kissing like, though?" Katie asked, staring me down intently.

"I don't know," I said. "It was weird. I don't know if I did it right."

"I'm sure you did fine," she said, nibbling on the end of her pizza. "My dad kisses my mom all the time. It's sorta gross when your parents do it."

I didn't know what to say, since I had never met my father, who my mother referred to as That Bastard or The Devil's Plaything or even The Antichrist. He had happened before the whole religion thing, same as me.

Something about kissing and Katie conflated in my head, into a desire to Kiss Katie. The alliteration made the words bounce back and forth in my mind. I rolled them on the back of my tongue - *kiss katie kiss katie kiss katie*.

"Do you want to know what kissing's like?" I asked, attempting to be casual.

"Huh?"

"Kissing," I said. "I could kiss you."

To my surprise, she seemed to take this in stride. "Sure, I guess. Why not?"

I knew that kissing girls was Bad, though not exactly why. Homosexuality was lumped into the same category as drugs, alcohol, and R-rated movies: things so evil that they couldn't be spoken of aloud, lest we doom the youth to a life of sin. But not that I was an atheist, I didn't have to care about these things anymore, which meant that there was nothing to keep me from kissing Katie.

And so, simple as that, I kissed her. I leaned over and pecked her lips, eyes wide open so that I wouldn't miss her mouth. She tasted faintly of pineapple and tomato sauce. She smelled like plain soap and fruity shampoo. I'd never been so happy, so sure of anything.

I pulled back instantly and tried to read the expression on her face. I couldn't. "How was that?" I asked. I couldn't look at her any more. It made me too nervous.

"Not bad."

"Yeah?" I wondered, suddenly, if she thought I was pretty. I wanted to ask if I could kiss her again, but I figured that would be rude.

Because fate is a cruel bastard, there was a knock on the door and Katie's mother opened it before either of us could say anything. "Jenny?" she said. "Your mom just called. She's home early."

This was another moment when I wanted to say *fuck*, but I knew Katie's mother would not approve. "Bye," I said instead, not looking at Katie's face because I was sure that if I did, her mother would know what we had been up to. She hugged me goodbye and I felt as if I would die, I was so excited and nervous all at once. She smelled so nice, and it was warm and comforting in her arms.

I trudged home in the dark and slid in through the back door, aiming to say hello to my mother and make a beeline for my room. She was sitting in the living room watching Fox News on mute, doing her Bible study lesson by lamplight.

"Hey, Mom," I said, hoping to escape before she could reply.

"Not so fast," she said. "Come sit."

I parked myself on the couch reluctantly, looking at anything other than her: the American flag painting on the wall, the single bookshelf full of Bibles and inspirational books,

the tiny figurines of babies and farm animals that lined the windowsills. I fiddled with the hem of my shirt, waiting for her to speak.

"My date was awful," she said without prompting. I figured she was drunk, which happened sometimes, even though she never seemed to shut up about the evils of drunkenness. It's in the Bible, Proverbs.

"Yeah?"

"He didn't even show up." She sounded sad, so I stood up and gave her an awkward hug, draping my arms around her shoulders loosely. She gripped my arm, digging her fingernails into my skin. Though I was uncomfortable, I didn't protest; I was too worried about her somehow detecting that I had kissed Katie.

Eventually, she let me go and I sat down next to her again. We watched Fox News in silence. I didn't understand what the reporter was talking about, but I did understand that my mother's muttering meant that it was Not Good and that the world was Going To Hell In A Handbasket. I wondered if *I* would be going to hell now that I was a bona fide fornicator.

"What gets you sent to Hell?" I asked.

My mother scoffed. "You know this, Jenny. Don't they teach you kids this shi- *stuff* in school? I sure pay them enough..."

"Yeah, I know you go there if you aren't a Christian," I persisted, "but what if you are? Can you go to Hell if you're a Christian too?"

She narrowed her eyes at me and my heart started pounding. I figured that she knew, right then, what I had done. She stared at me for a long time, scouring my face for any trace of wrongdoing.

"You have something on your lip," she said. I rubbed at my mouth frantically with the back of my hand. Tomato sauce. I said nothing and fled to my room.

I lay down on my bed immediately, rolled onto my side to look out the window, which lined up with the one in Katie's bedroom. Her curtains were closed but I could see the light from behind them. She was probably sitting in bed, watching *Friends* and finishing her pizza. I wondered if she ever glanced at my room; I wondered if she wondered what I was up to. I thought about how soft her lips were.

I figured that if I loved anyone, it was probably her.

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A week later, I asked Katie to be my girlfriend. To my surprise, she agreed and, since it was October, I took her on a date to the corn maze. Technically, it was an event for my church's youth group, but we "got lost" and spent several minutes kissing amongst the corn. We walked at the back of the group and held hands when no one was looking. She bought me a soda at the concession stand and presented it to me, cupped in her palms like a baby bird. I kept the can.

Katie and I went on like this, blissfully, for several weeks. Everything was new and exciting. My whole body thrummed with it; I learned about cells in science class and all I could think about was how my own cells surely must be expanding and splitting, performing mitosis and osmosis and everything else because of her. I wrote poems for her instead of paying attention in class. I compared her eyes to the sky and the blue of a robin's egg, though I'd never actually seen one. I wrote about how her freckles reminded me of the stars.

It was almost ironic, then, that my mother's love life took a turn for the worse. Since the night I kissed Katie, she had not been on another date. She spent her evenings sitting on the couch or at the kitchen table, accompanied by one of her Bibles and the blue binder where she

kept her devotional worksheets. Sometimes they would sit unopened in front of her while she talked on the phone to one of her church friends. She would complain at length about her lack of a love life, which I can imagine caused her happily married friends to murmur along before forcing out some platitude about God's timing and hanging up.

When this occurred, the duty of comforting my mother fell to me. I would lock myself in my room, doing my homework, when my mother would barge in and, without preamble, fling herself on my bed and begin speaking. It all passed by me in a blur - a series of names and long-winded epithets that I could only assume were negative. Dave this and Mark that, something about how she knew so-and-so was no good because he didn't list his age on his profile. I nodded along and wrote poems in my notebook.

"What are you writing?" she asked one night. I shrugged, but this was clearly not a good enough answer and she grabbed it. The poem I was working on was entitled "Love." It was an acrostic poem about Katie and I's first date. I planned to give it to her for our one-month anniversary.

Like a beautiful butterfly

Opens its wings

Very wide, that is how I love you

Every day.

I knew it needed some work and was worried that my mother would read it in its draft stage and pass judgment on my ability as a writer. Instead, she furrowed her brow, as if she didn't understand the words.

"Since when do you know anything about love, Jenny?" she asked. I froze. I prayed that she wouldn't get suspicious. Though I didn't believe in God, I was still convinced that the only way to prevent tragedy was to pray about it.

"I've read about it," I said. "In books."

"So, does this mean you have a boyfriend?" She smiled at me, almost conspiratorially.

"No."

"Neither do I." She laughed, a bitter, self-deprecating laugh. "Pray for me, Jenny," she said. "The Lord's going to come back for me and I'll be all alone when He does."

I thought about mentioning that *I* would most likely be there too, but in that moment I realized two things. One, that there was nothing I wanted less than to be raptured with my mother. And, two, that I absolutely had to get out of there before it inevitably happened. I didn't want to see her glaring at me as she floated up to Heaven while I was trapped on the Earth, doomed to suffer through the End Times because I enjoyed kissing my best friend.

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I presented my plan to Katie the next day. We were sitting on the swings in her backyard, in the precious hours between when I left school and my mother returned from work. I had swung so high that I got dizzy, so I now slumped against the plastic-coated chain that held the swing in place. Katie was drawing pictures in the dirt with the toe of her shoe.

"I'm going to run away," I said.

"Hmm." Katie, absorbed in her artwork, didn't look up.

"I'm serious," I said. "Dead serious. I'm finally going to do it."

She looked at me lazily, from underneath bangs and blue eyes. "Where would you go?"

I shrugged. "California." You could get married there, even if you wanted to marry another girl.

"We can't, Jenny," she said. "California's really far away."

"I looked it up on the Internet," I said. From North Carolina to California, it would take about three days. "It takes three days."

"We'll miss school," she said.

"Fuck school."

"SSHH!!!" she hissed, looking around frantically to make sure no one heard. "I'm serious," she whispered. "We're *fourteen*. We can't even drive!" I wanted to protest that technically I could, because I'd already been to Driver's Ed, but I kept this to myself.

"Why don't you want to go with me?" I asked. It hurt; I had intended this as a gesture of my love for her. In the movies, this sort of thing was always very romantic.

"I'm not like you, Jenny," she said, toeing the ground uncomfortably. "I don't want to leave my parents. I like my school and my friends. I'm going to try out for the soccer team this year."

I pinched my lips together. I couldn't figure out what was going on inside of me, whether I wanted to laugh or cry. "They have soccer in California," I said. The mulch beneath my feet started to blur together.

Katie shrugged. "I just don't want to go, alright."

"What's up?" I asked. "Are you okay?"

She didn't look at me; instead, she rubbed her hands back and forth on her thighs. "My parents read your poems."

I stopped breathing. "No," I whispered.

"Yeah." She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "I'm not allowed to be friends with you any more."

I couldn't process the words. I felt like someone - her, her parents, my mother, maybe even God - was reaching into my chest and sliding the pieces of my broken heart out, one by one, like the time I got glass stuck in my foot. It hurt like *fuck*. *Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck*.

"Then we have to run away! We have to!" I slid out of my swing and dropped to my knees in front of her. "You'll love California! We can get married, not now but later, when we're older! We can live at the beach. You can teach me to surf!" I paused. "But we don't have to go there. We can go anywhere you want."

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, Jenny." She stood and walked inside. I heard her greet her parents faintly, through the door. I sniffled quietly. She didn't even look back at me. She didn't even look back.

--

That night, I packed my go bag. I told my mom that I had a lot of homework and asked if I could eat in my room. For once, my mother had a date, and she was so preoccupied with preparing for it that she barely noticed. Tonight's meal was fast food hamburgers. I took one, plus an apple from the kitchen, up to my room. I stuffed the food in the front pocket of the backpack. I took out two of my books and replaced them with my notebook and the contents of my coin bank, which I poured into a sock. I had \$35 in total.

As I was zipping my bag, the door flew open and my body seized up in fear. My mother, done up with layers of makeup and big hair and a red dress, stood in the doorway, backlit by light from the hall.

"Going on a trip?" she asked, staring at the bag.

"Uh..."

"I'm going out. Katie's parents said you can't come over, so you're on your own. I'll be back around midnight." I let myself breathe just a little. She was already drunk, I could tell.

I watched her stomp down the stairs and out of sight. I could hear her downstairs as she prepared to leave. I fell back on the bed and laid with my legs dangling over the edge. I counted my breaths like they taught us in P.E: in through the nose, out through the mouth. I heard the door slam behind her and I sat upright. I watched from the window as she got into an unfamiliar car and sped away. By accident, my eye was drawn to Katie's window. There was a light on and I wondered if she was sitting on her own bed, looking out her own window. I wanted to cry again. I wondered if her parents let her keep the poems.

I shook myself out of it. I had to get to the train station before nine. The train to St. Louis, where I could catch a train to California, left at nine-thirty. I had done this research surreptitiously on the shared computer before my mother arrived home. I'd stolen \$100 from my mother's nightstand to pay for the ticket. I slung my bag on my shoulder and looked around the room. It was devoid of decoration, as always. I thought about grabbing a jacket, but I figured that I wouldn't need one. It was warm in California.

Though the house was empty, I still tiptoed down the stairs, poking around every corner to make sure that no one on heaven or Earth still watched me. I thought about leaving a note, but decided not to. Katie could tell her where I went. The thought made me want to cry.

I set out walking until I reached the end of my neighborhood. I paused at an intersection, waiting to cross. A car drove up to the stop sign and waited. A high school-aged girl sat at the wheel. As she pulled away, I saw a Christian fish sticker on her car, like the one my mom had.

There was a sudden flash of light, a loud crash, a force that pushed me backward onto the sidewalk. I skidded on my hands, tearing the skin. I screamed in pain. I wondered how much I was bleeding, if the girl in the car was still around, if she could help me. As I stood, I saw that her car had crashed into a tree. The hood was peeled back and the engine was still smoking.

The night sky had changed to a fiery red, like a sunset but darker, deeper, meaner. I felt my heart rate increase. I knew what this was. My mother read about it constantly, dog-eared this page in her Bible. In church, I would read the Book of Revelation cover to cover to avoid listening to the sermon. I felt a tremor deep in my chest. This was it, the moment my mother had been waiting for. *The Rapture*. I could barely breathe. Was it over? Was it really, truly over?

Panicked, I ran over to the car. But the driver's seat was not empty. The windshield was shattered in multiple places, the driver's side door was bent out of place, and as I peered through the broken window I saw the girl, head lolling to the side, lifeless, covered in blood. I started shaking and felt like I was going to vomit.

For a moment, I thought about it. I thought about turning around, running home, jumping into my bed before anyone knew I had gone. I thought about calling my mother to see if she was still here, if any of this was real. I thought about pounding on Katie's door until she answered, telling her that she had to come with me, *now*. That I knew she was scared but I would keep her safe. Somehow, I knew she wouldn't answer.

In another lifetime maybe I did, but not in this one. Rapture or no, I had a train to catch.

red-eye

Five years later, I went on vacation to Miami with some friends - it sounds like a flimsy excuse for doing something stupid, but I danced and drank the week away, all the same. After the trip ended, my friends all went home and I had to decide if I was really going to go through with it, this thing that I had decided to do the moment I knew I was going to Florida.

I drove my rental car to Fort Lauderdale and put his new address into the GPS. I arrived in the late afternoon; the air was humid as fuck. Made me realize that moving to LA had been the right decision after all. I couldn't stand this shit, when the air clung to you like the world's worst blanket.

I parked the car on his street, in a neighborhood of new-construction townhomes, built for people like him who didn't have families and were trying to convince themselves they'd get out of Florida before starting one. I stepped out of the car and looked around. The place was deserted. I heard a child yelling in the distance.

I knocked, fingering my keys in my pocket. I was sure that he did want to see me, but I didn't know if it was in the same way he had wanted to before. I heard a dog barking inside and footsteps on the floor and the door peeled back -- there he was, all six foot one and dark hair, cut differently than I remembered.

"You came," he said.

"No shit," I said. "I did call and tell you, after all." We stared at each other until we both started laughing.

"Come in."

He still kept his house clean, almost obsessively so. His cat was sitting on top of the sofa and she came over to nudge my leg. I patted her. He stood in his small kitchen, holding the refrigerator door open.

"Want anything?" he asked.

I joined him next to the fridge and looked at the array of beer and sodas and not much else. "Can I have a beer?"

"Sure." We each took one and went to sit on his back patio to drink. It was tiny, barely ten feet across or so. It looked out across a short grassy space stopped abruptly by a thick tangle of trees. I pulled out a cigarette and glanced at him from the corner of my eye. He didn't move.

"Did you quit?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"Oh. Will it bother you?"

"Nah, go ahead." At this, I lit my cigarette and took a drag, but after that I let it dangle from my fingers, forgotten. I stared intently toward the trees in the fading light.

"So, to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

I didn't know what to say. I didn't want to tell the truth, that I wanted him back. I figured he knew that, anyway. "Can't I just visit an old friend?"

He laughed. "Friends... Sure, we're friends."

We sat in silence for a long time.

"What have you been up to these past few years?" he asked, softly.

I told him about the band and the movies and the time I did so many drugs on New Years Eve that I almost drowned myself in the Pacific. He told me about his office job at the car dealership and his thoughts of going to graduate school.

"You should go to UCLA," I said. "I'm sure they have a good psychology program."

"I doubt I'd get in."

"Come on! You should at least try! It would be fun!" I was drunk by then, and speaking all in exclamations.

"We'll see," he said.

I stared intently at his face, a dark profile in the fading light. He stood up to switch on the porch light. I watched his movements, unwittingly graceful despite his long limbs. I couldn't believe that there was ever a time when I hadn't been in love with him.

"Hey," I said. I couldn't get my voice above a whisper. He turned around, still standing. I felt my legs straighten and my hands push me upward out of my seat. I moved, half-aware, to stand next to him, so close we could've breathed the same air.

"What do you want?" he whisper, not entirely malicious.

"I figured it was obvious," I said. "Why the fuck else would I come all the way out here?"

He sighed. When he didn't answer, I reached out and cupped one cheek in my hand. Slowly, I leaned over and kissed the other one. Again, he sighed.

"I didn't want to tell you this, but I've just started seeing someone," he said. My mouth dropped open and my heart started racing. He didn't even notice. "I need to go take a shower," he said, like nothing had happened. "Help yourself to another beer, if you want." I watched, wordless, as he disappeared into the house. I went back inside, too, and sat on his couch while his cat rubbed her face against my leg. I'd missed her and how she liked to sit in your lap and the way she purred in her sleep. I missed him, too, clearly. I missed this life so much that I could feel my heart crack in two. And now, it was someone else's.

He came downstairs after a while. He waited thirty minutes to even turn on the water. He said nothing to me, but grabbed another beer and went back outside. I remembered this, the sullen silences in lieu of fighting. As I had always done, I simply followed his example.

"Can we talk about what happened?" I asked, sitting in the same chair as earlier.

"No."

"Can we at least talk about *something*? Can it be serious?"

"Sure," he said. "Can I bum a cigarette?"

"Sure," I said. I pulled one out of my pack and gave it to him. We sat in silence for a moment as I tried to think of the right question to ask.

"I don't get why you did it," I said, finally. "Why you didn't want to come with me to LA." It was nighttime now. I couldn't see the little row of trees; all of the shadows ran together.

"I mean, logically, sure. But I can't feel it, you know, in my heart. I don't get it. I don't understand."

He inhaled on the cigarette he'd bummed off me. I'd missed the way his cheeks hollowed out when he took in his breath. I'd missed the way the smoke curled and twisted, wrapped around his face. "I was tired of being broke, I think. My grandfather had this job for me down here and I had no prospects out there, and I guess I just had to make the right decision for me."

"Weren't you in love with me?"

"Sometimes it's not about that."

I felt something catch in my throat. I'd thought I was over it, thought I'd grown my skin thick enough that it wouldn't hurt me when he talked about it or when he said shit like that. I'd also thought that he was still in love, too.

Why wasn't I enough, is what I wanted to say, but I knew I couldn't say that. It wasn't mature and it wasn't nice and it was probably selfish. And it was most definitely stupid to still be this upset, this many years later. I wondered about this Florida girl, if she was crazy like me.

"When are you heading home?" he said.

"Tomorrow."

"Do you have somewhere to stay tonight? You're more than welcome to crash on my couch."

I thought about it and almost said *yes* just to be near him, like I would have done long ago. But then I thought about sleeping a floor below him instead of right beside, and I knew I'd stay awake so long that I might as well have taken the red-eye.

"Thanks, but I have a red-eye flight," I said. "I'll just head to the airport early."

"Are you sure?" he asked, but I was sure.

I finished my beer and put it in his recycling bin. I gave his cat one more stroke and a kiss on her forehead. I gave him a slow hug; I didn't want to let go, but I knew that the relief would be overwhelming when I did. It almost made me mad.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"It's fine," I said. He waved goodbye from his front step as I got back into the rental car. It was eleven-thirty. I went to a bar and then, once that closed, a 24-hour diner.

I called him at around three-thirty. I had a half-eaten plate of eggs and hash browns. I was drunk, of course. I felt, in my heart and in my brain and underneath my skin, that there was something else I needed to say. I almost vomited from nerves as I dialed his number. He picked up on the first ring.

"Hey," I said. "It's me."

"I know."

"Can't sleep?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said.

"Some things never change."

"Yeah," he said. "I thought you would be on a plane by now."

I tried to think of an excuse but couldn't, so I took a deep breath and said, "Remember the time we went to your dad's wedding and we danced all night on the beach?"

"What?"

"You hated dancing."

"Seriously? Why would you call me at three in the goddamn morning to talk about *that*?"

I halfway wanted to cry, but I choked it down. "Just... I was thinking about Florida. About the beach. Just answer the question."

I heard him sigh on the other end. "Okay. Fine. I remember. But we didn't do that much dancing."

"We danced a *lot*!" I couldn't tell if I was annoyed or some sort of overjoyed.

"Girl, what we *actually* did was steal the wine and sit on the beach and drink."

"Yeah." I couldn't help smiling, a small one, only for myself. I wished that he were here, that I had had the guts to say this in person. "And we danced some, too."

He waited so long that I feared he'd hung up the phone. When he spoke, it was quiet enough to have been a mistake. "Sure," he said, gently, "we danced some, too."

I almost didn't say the next thing, but I was drunk and on a roll and I had only a few things left to say, things I'd saved up over years and years of getting over it. I took a deep breath. "And then two years later I left Virginia and went to LA," I said, "and you didn't come with me."

"Why aren't you focusing on the happy part? We had a nice time that night. Our breakup was so long ago, I don't know why you're still bitter."

"I wish you hadn't left."

"Yeah? Why did you try to kiss me?" he said -- not angry, not accusatory, but not kindly either. Like he'd dug up the coffin and found absolutely nothing inside. It should've killed me, but it didn't. It just felt like nothing.

"Goodnight," he said.

He hung up before I could say anything else.

At six, I left the diner and went to the airport. I checked my bags and caught a nap in a secluded corner near my gate. I bought a muffin and ate almost half. I sat in the airport bar until noon, so long that I almost missed my flight.

ASSORTED CONVERSATIONS
(REGARDING OUR AFFAIR)

David waits for me while I paint my toenails. I know he knows that I think painted toenails are stupid, that they serve no real purpose unless it's the summertime and even then they're useless if you're like me and refuse to wear anything but boots year-round. All that to say David is waiting for me while I paint my toenails, and he's remarkably quiet. Probably because he knows that I'm doing it to annoy him.

David's wife Just Turned Forty-Three - yesterday, in fact - and she went and got a pedicure to celebrate (according to him). This is my way of reminding him that instead of being, I don't know, a good husband, he's spending the day after his wife's birthday in my apartment, waiting for me to finish painting my toenails so we can go out. We're not fucking each other, though. Let me make that perfectly clear.

"It's January, no one's even going to see them," he says, staring out the window. It's a nervous habit he has. He's got a lot of them. We both do.

"If I stop now, I'll have three-quarters of a foot unfinished," I say, "and I know you'll tease me about it." I'm concentrating very hard, since I haven't painted my toenails more than ten times in my whole life and I'm terrible at it.

"I hate the color anyway," he says. He's still staring out the window.

"It's pink," I say.

"*You* hate the color." He finally turns to look at me. I grin at him from the floor.

"Yeah?"

"I know you," he says. He crouches down to my level, face next to mine. "And you hate that color." I narrow my eyes involuntarily, but then I remember that tonight is supposed to be *fun*, so I give him a nudge. "Careful," he says, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

Ignoring him, I splash some polish on my final toe and stand up, brushing imaginary dirt off my jeans. I set the nail polish down and grab a bag of weed from a drawer. "Here." I toss it to David, who's still crouched on the floor. "Roll this. I've gotta pee."

I don't wait for his reaction. I shut the bathroom door too forcefully and I turn the fan on so I can't hear him. I think about how much I want to fuck him. I think about how not fucking him is far dirtier than actually fucking him. And somehow that fact is upsetting rather than reassuring. Once we fuck, it's all over. At that point, this ceases to be some nebulous mess of feelings with the label "friends" tacked on, and becomes an Affair, and we agreed to never have one. He loves his son too much to leave his wife and I refuse to torture myself with the hope that he will.

I sit in there with my head in my hands until I smell weed from the other room. I stand, flush the toilet, and wash my hands. Then, I emerge from the bathroom and take the joint from him. I don't usually smoke joints, but David claims that smoking from anything made of glass makes him feel like he's in college, like *in a bad way*. When he said that, I laughed at him and called him old.

"Are you ready to go?" David asks as he takes the joint back from me.

"Yeah. They just need to dry." I gesture to my toenails.

"How long does that take?"

I reach down and poke at one of my nails. It's tacky, almost dry, but my finger leaves little ridges in the polish. "Soon," I say. "They'll be dry by the time we leave."

David isn't listening, having already taken the joint from me again and wandered over to the bag he brought, pulling out a different shirt and a pair of socks. He sits down on my bed and pulls the socks on slowly. I like to watch him *do* things. Usually, he moves erratically, full of energy, *frenetic*. But it's different when he does something methodical, like getting dressed or setting up a camera or packing equipment. He's the producer for my upcoming documentary, and I would spend hours on set watching him from the corner of my eye as he concentrated on the task at hand. It's calming, somehow. Measured. Meticulous.

He stands to take his shirt off. I watch his fingers trip down button after button and I watch as the fabric falls away in the wake of it and I think about how his skin looks like honey sometimes, which is kind of gross, how we compare people to food when we want to fuck them, but that's what I think of when I see him. And then I think about how he has a wife who just turned forty-three, and a child, a son. And I think about how if I fuck him, I'll be a terrible person, if I'm not already.

"Hey. What are you thinking about?" David has changed his shirt by now. I blink at him. "You hit that?" he asks.

I shake my head slowly. "You can have it. We should leave soon." I turn away from him and go put my shoes on. I pull on my socks and boots, put on my coat, grab my bag. David puts the joint out in the ashtray. He puts his coat on and we leave my apartment together, in silence.

We don't worry about his wife knowing because no one knows about us. There's no *us* to know about. We can get in a taxi downtown, right in front of my apartment, and not worry about someone seeing. We're friends. All his friends know me and love me. I'm a young director, he's an older director. He's producing my first feature-length documentary, which is premiering next

weekend; therefore, we're working all of this weekend. That's our excuse. It isn't a lie, but it's not the truth, either.

I light up a cigarette as soon as we get in the car. "What did you tell your wife?" I say. I don't even realize that I'm saying it, like a reflex.

"What?" David looks over at me. *Aghast* would be the proper word.

"Like, you're going to be gone all night - maybe all weekend - and your wife's just cool with it?" Sometimes I can't help myself when I'm high. I ramble. "Do you tell her that you like to get stoned out of your mind while hanging out with a girl fifteen years younger than you?"

"She knows I smoke," he says lightly. When I don't respond, I feel him tense beside me. "Fine. I tell her the truth, Ruby," he says, measured, like he's counting every word, like he spent a lot of time in therapy. "I go out drinking with friends." At my incredulous look, he says, "It's true, we *do* go out with friends." He pauses and takes a deep breath. "And you and I are friends, too. Then I tell her that I don't want to drive drunk, so I'm sleeping at a friend's place."

I drag on my cigarette as hard as I can. I stifle the cough when it comes. "Sorry," I say. I figure it's not worth it to press him.

"It's fine," David says. He pushes his glasses up with his free hand. "Can I have a cigarette?"

We wake up the next morning in bed together. It's weird, I know. We're both clothed, we just like to sleep side by side. David is still asleep. He says that he sleeps in because he never gets any with a seven year-old in the house. I wake up early, even on the weekends, around nine. I get out of bed and make coffee, smoke a cigarette while the coffee brews. I eat breakfast alone.

When David wakes up, I'm back in bed, smoking another joint. He's sleepy as he takes it and hits it. All of a sudden, a wave of revulsion washes over me and I hate him, goddamn smiling smugly as he smokes pot in my bed, almost forty-five and fucking someone not even thirty? Well, not fucking. Almost-fucking. Close-to-fucking. I think about the wife and kid. Et cetera.

"What do you want to do today?" I ask. "I thought we could just stay in. Watch TV. Get high."

David sighs. "I can't stay long. My son has soccer and I promised that I'd go."

I feel the jealousy start to appear. *We had plans*, I want to protest. I push it away and try to summon some empathy instead. "Yeah," I manage. "How long can you stay?"

"Maybe an hour," he says. I'm still disappointed, and then I get an idea. Sex is the last card I have left, and I like to get dangerously close to playing it. I lean over and graze my teeth against his ear; he jumps, nearly dropping the joint. He stares at me, one of those stares that makes the air heavy, a stare that means something.

"Kiss me," I say. I let my lips brush his ear again. I hope it's actually as sexy as I think.

He turns his head to face me; our lips almost touching. We've kissed before -- we kissed the night that we met -- but every time, something about it feels like a challenge. "Ruby," he says softly, "We have an agreement."

"Yes," I say.

"We agreed that we weren't going to fuck each other," he says, brushing his fingers through my hair and along the side of my face. "You remember why?"

"Don't be a dick," I say. I bite his earlobe again, harder. He barely catches himself before a noise can escape.

"It's because," he says, bringing his lips even closer to mine, "if we fuck, then this becomes something we can't control." His other hand drops down and strokes my hip underneath the blanket. "People get hurt." All of his earlier hesitation is gone and, suddenly, he's the David I know, the David who enchanted me over a borrowed cigarette at a film festival last spring.

"Problem is," I say, "I don't think we're in control right now." I lean in and kiss him, *finally*. If he doesn't fuck me after this performance, I don't know what else I can do.

But, of course, he pulls back after a moment. He glances at the forgotten joint in his hand. "Huh." I try to keep my sigh to myself, but I'm sure that he hears it. "Don't do this, Ruby," he says, more gently this time. "You know we can't."

"I know," I say. I'm starting to think that I shouldn't keep tempting myself, but something draws me to David that I can't explain, and I don't want to give it up. Not yet.

I don't want to give it up, but I let him leave an hour later. I spend the rest of my Sunday in my bed, getting high, watching TV, what I was supposed to do with David. I jerk off once. I order a pizza and watch a movie. Around midnight, I go outside to smoke and I call David, like I do every night, and we talk, for an hour or two, mindlessly, wandering, about everything and about nothing at all.

A few nights later, we revisit our conversation. I'm sitting in bed, smoking. I can't sense time, only the way my eyelids make shapes swirl on the ceiling. I dial David's number. I hear the phone click and then, "Ruby?"

"Hey." I unfold my legs in order to pick at my toenail polish. "What's up?"

"Not much. Smoking. What're you doing?"

"Sitting." I take a hit from my bowl. "Smoking."

I hear him laugh, and imagine him rolling his eyes in accompaniment. "That all?"

"Watching TV. Fucking with my toenails." I imagine him sitting across from me on the bed. Our toes are almost touching. Mine still pink from the other night.

"I thought you would've taken that shit off by now," he says.

"Yeah. I've been meaning to. I hate the fucking color."

"Aw, don't," he says. "I like it."

I can only laugh at this, more fake laugh than anything. "David," I say. "I need to ask you something."

"Sure," he says. I hit the bowl again. "What's up?"

I take a deep breath before saying, "Where is this going?"

This catches his attention. I take another hit. Nerves.

"What do you want me to say?" He runs a hand through his hair.

"Say whatever you think."

He laughs uncomfortably. "I think I'm too high for this."

"David, I'm serious," I say. "I'm not sure what we're doing right now, but we can't keep it up." I try to look at him but it's hard. "I mean, are we just going to keep doing... *this* forever and ever? Maybe we aren't technically having an affair, but we can't keep pretending we're just friends. How long can we keep this up?"

"Not forever," he says. He doesn't say anything after that.

"David..." I run my hands across the blanket on my bed. "Are you gonna leave her?"

Maybe it's because he's high, but he doesn't react violently, vehemently like I expect. He takes his time -- hits his joint, I presume. I wait, silent.

Finally: "I don't know." It's underwhelming, to say the least.

"You don't know?"

"I have a kid, Ruby," he says. I feel myself stiffen in response.

"I'm not saying you have to. Just asking if you will."

Silence, again. "I don't know." Again.

I try, "Can we fuck, at least? Like, just go all the way?"

And he says, "I don't know."

We leave it there. I smoke in silence, listening to him on the other end. I wish I could see his face. I stare down at my toes, and imagine his again, how they'd touch, almost intertwining, how my toenails are pink, same color as his wife's.

I feel the beginning of a realization coming on when I start to wonder what it would be like to be in his wife's place, but without the cheating. I would paint my toenails pink every day if it would make him happy. I imagine rolling over in bed to chat, instead of calling him on the phone. I don't say any of it.

He hangs up around four in the morning. We still haven't talked about it. I'm not sure if we ever will.

On the night of the premiere, my crew meets me at the theater door. David is the only one who's not there. I wonder where he is, if he's with his wife and son. Someone from the theater comes outside and grabs me by the arm; she says something about how they need the director inside and drags me into the lobby, positions me at the entrance to the theater, near the snack bar. I stand there awkwardly, alone, until the woman brings one of the editors over to stand with me.

The room is poorly lit, surfaces gleaming with the false bronze finish on the lights and the edges of the snack bar. I prod at the carpet fibers with my boot. I'm not consciously in my

body; the sounds of the room are a static blur. I can't tell how many people are here. I look down at the carpet disturbed by my foot. I hear myself breathe.

The editor catches my attention as the first person approaches. I smile and shake hands, I say, *Thanks for coming!* A small line forms, but David is still missing.

When he does appear, I don't even notice until the person shaking my hand moves away. And then David, standing next to a short woman, holding the hand of a small boy in an orange shirt. The bile catches in my throat and I feel a consuming desire to run and run and never stop running. But I stay, shaking. I don't hear myself greet them over the roaring and rushing in my ears. Up close, David's wife is, well, A Wife, dressed in a modest white blouse and black cardigan, boot-cut jeans and sneakers.

"And you're Ruby, right?" I don't even notice her addressing me until the end of her sentence. I manage a nod; she smiles and it almost blinds me. I don't meet her eyes. "You're the director?"

"Yeah," I say. I force a smile. I want to look at David -- he knows what to do, right? -- but I can't. I can't. She says something else and I smile, smile, smile. Eventually, they move away. David's arm slides around his wife's waist. He doesn't look back.

I see the woman from earlier ushering my crew and some lingering audience members into the theater. Someone else grabs my arm and says something, *This way*, and I'm being pulled past a STAFF ONLY sign, down a narrow hallway that ends in a doorway on the left-hand wall, dark save for the grey light of the screen in the adjacent theater. Illuminated in the faint light, of course, is David. He leans against the doorframe, arms crossed. He doesn't move when we approach.

The person who escorted me steps out into the theater, in front of the crowd, starts to say something about the film or me, and David and I are alone. I want to say something, but I can't decide between, *Don't you look cool*, and, *Your wife seems... nice*. I don't feel up to sarcasm, though, so I stare ahead into the theater, trying to focus on the film and my opening remarks.

I sense the woman wrapping up, which means that David is next. I take a deep breath and try to focus again, but I feel something warm encase my hand. It's his hand; I look up and he's staring straight ahead.

"Hey," he says, so quiet I could have thought it. "Just want you to know that I'm proud of you. You're an amazing director."

"Thanks," I say, breathless, barely containing myself.

"Ruby..." In one fluid breath, he squeezes my hand, releases, and he's gone, taking the mic from the woman and waving at the crowd.

Afterward, I'm standing in a hallway, waiting for the single-stall bathroom to empty when my worst nightmare comes true. I'm the only one waiting, and David's wife materializes out of nowhere. She stands directly behind me. I hallucinate the feeling of her breath on my neck. I can't stop myself from shuddering. I think, involuntarily, about David's dick, and then the pink toenails inside of her sneakers. *Our* pink toenails. I debate whether or not to just dip the fuck out, but the door opens and it's my turn. I retreat, relieved, into the bathroom. I take a piss, wash my hands, and open the door halfway. That's as far as I get, because David's wife has sandwiched herself between the frame and the door, holding it open with her body.

"Can we talk?" David's wife asks. I can only blink, eyes wide. "In there." She doesn't wait for an answer and forces her way inside. She shuts the door, keeps her hand on the knob.

"What... what's going on?" I ask. I'm a little drunk, I'm terrified, and all I want is to be back in the dark, warm hallway with my hand in David's, but instead, I'm standing in a horribly lit movie theater bathroom with his goddamn, motherfucking wife.

She wastes no time at all. "Are you sleeping with him?" she asks. My insides get cold as my cheeks flare up, I can feel the sweat starting and I'm cursing my stupid, anxious body.

"No," I say, and at least it isn't a lie, technically.

She doesn't believe me, of course, and her eyebrows scrunch up. For some reason, I thought that I would be able to detect something familiar about her, but she's a foreign object to me. Nothing close to the acidic warmth of her husband.

"Then where does he go on the weekends? Hmm?" She crosses her arms over her chest.

I force myself to breathe. "I'm sorry," I say. I smile uncomfortably, hoping it at least reads as apologetic. "I really don't know if he's cheating or not. Whenever we go out, uh... Whenever we've gone out *drinking*, it's with a group. Friends or work people. Other than that, I don't really know." My stomach twists just as her expression does. "Sorry."

"It's fine," she says, flatly. I expect her to either make a move to leave or say something else, but she stands frozen there, moving only her eyes, across my face and along my body. I pray for the first time in years. I pray that I look calmer than I feel.

"Look," I say, because the guilt is starting to churn in my stomach and gnaw at me and if I'm going to let myself fuck the husband I might as well say something nice to the wife. "I wish I could help you out. David clearly cares about you a lot."

Her gaze doesn't lower. If anything, it gets colder. "So why do you call him?" she asks. I try to reply but she cuts me off. "Every night. You call him, every night. It sure seems like an affair to me."

I have nothing to say. I swallow, slowly. "I don't know where you got that idea," I say, "but those were about the film. I'm sorry."

Still, her expression remains unchanged. "So after tonight, no more phone calls?"

"Yes," I say. "No more. We're done."

"Good." She swings the door open and gestures for me to walk out. A line has formed and I can feel the eyes on me. "Sorry about that, Ruby. Have a good night." It's the coldest thing I've ever heard.

I walk outside in a daze. I don't stop to say goodbye to anyone. I drive home on autopilot, chain-smoking the whole time. When I get home, I strip to my underwear and lay on my bed and let the small noises of my home settle in around me. My body is still coming down from the adrenaline high of the bathroom. I think about taking out my phone, seeing if David has tried to get in touch with me. I wonder what he will have to say.

I lay there on my back for a long time. I am contemplating whether or not to get up and roll a joint when I hear a knock on my door.

It's him, of course it is, still in his clothes from earlier, looking more disheveled and drunker and sadder and older. "We need to talk," he says.

"Yeah."

He comes in and sits down on my couch. "Here." He pulls a joint from his pocket and holds it up.

"You read my mind." I don't laugh.

"I need to be stoned for this," he says.

"Yeah?" I say. I try to sound casual. I probably fail.

David takes his time lighting and hitting the joint. "So my wife talked to you?"

"Yeah." I take my hit. "She accosted me in the bathroom." I take another, just because I can. "Does she... know?"

"No," he says. "There's nothing to know." Part of me is relieved, part of me knows that nothing has changed.

I can't say that I didn't see it coming, but it still stings like hell. I want to scream at him, but then I have a better idea. The small, pernicious part of me grows larger, stronger, and I don't fight it. I brush my fingertips against his knee and slowly slide them up his thigh.

"David," I say softly, "let's do it. I want you. I've wanted you since the night we met."

"So have I," he says, "but you missed your chance there." I stare at him, watch the way his face changes as he thinks. He's either too fucked up or too preoccupied to conceal his thoughts as he usually does. "We can't," he says. "I mean, we can still do what we used to, but... nothing's changed."

"No," I say. I don't let my gaze fall. "It's my big night, and I *want* you. I want you to have sex with me."

"You want me to *make love* to you?" he says, almost playful.

"Stop being corny."

We stare at each other and the time stretches and folds in on itself around us. And then I hear, *Yes*, and then David leans over and kisses me, and I kiss him with everything I have, and somehow we make it into my bedroom, and yes, we fuck. We *make love* all goddamn night.

--

That night, I lay awake and I think about the whole story, the beginning of it:

I met him in January, at a film festival, which is where I meet most people these days. I've never met a director who I didn't despise instantly. We tend to have these sorts of reactions

to each other. It's like how you can't stick the matching ends of two magnets together. I meet people who are like me and I scrunch my face up while I'm smiling through the pleasantries.

I was high. Literally and metaphorically. I had just come from the premiere of my first short film. It was the most prestigious thing to ever happen to me, someone who slept and smoked through college instead of participating in *extracurricular activities* and gathering awards like some sort of frenzied collector. I had even been invited to a *reception*. So I was high and stuffing myself with red wine and tiny appetizers and the conversation of complete strangers and I needed a goddamn cigarette.

I stepped onto a concrete slab in an alleyway behind the building, with steps leading down to the street. I saw him in the hazy light of a distant streetlight. He stood on the street below me, leaned up against the wall, smoking. We recognized each other instantly.

"You're quite the triple threat, aren't you?"

I looked down at him. I knew who he was, and I was curious. "How so?" I lit my own cigarette and leaned over the railing to speak with him.

"Well, you had the best film of the night." He held up a finger. "You're the sexiest woman in the room." Two. "*And* you're a smoker." Three. "May I ask you something else?"

"Sure."

"Do you smoke pot?"

I laughed. "What do you think?"

"God, a woman after my own fucking heart." He grinned at me again. I narrowed my eyes. I knew about his wife and kid. It wasn't so much a moral issue as it was a practical one.

I walked down the steps, carefully in my heels. I could sense him staring at me. I stood within a few feet of him, close enough to whisper. "Are you flirting with me?" I asked.

He laughed. "Of course I am."

"In that case..." I swapped my cigarette from my right to left hand. "Ruby. It's a pleasure to officially meet." I shook his hand.

"David. Likewise."

I considered him there, in the low, yellow light, the air hazy with cigarette smoke and time rolling on, lethargically, because of the wine and the weed. I visualized it through a camera, the way I'd seen the world ever since college, I thought about how I would frame his face up close, the way his lips closed around the cigarette. He was older than me by at least a decade, perhaps closer to two. I knew, instinctively, how fucked up and cruel and fundamentally anti-feminist this whole thing was, but -- well, I wanted it, and that's the best I can do to justify it. All of it.

"What are you doing later?" he asked, grinning at me.

"Um, well, there's one problem..." I wasn't sure how to say it. I wasn't even sure what I wanted, other than him.

"Oh?"

"I'm not going to sleep with you tonight."

This seemed to confuse him. "And why is that?"

"It's no fun," I said. "Also, you're married. And I'm not about to have a one-night stand."

"Of course," he murmured. "But why not?"

"I think I want to see you again. You seem like a good person to know. And if I fuck you, that'll be it. I'll never see you again."

"How can you be sure?" He tossed his cigarette out on the pavement and it rolled beneath the grate of a storm drain. "Because I'll tell you right now, I'm not about to have an affair either."

"I'm not sure."

He said nothing for a moment. I felt him watching as I smoked. It took everything I had not to reach out and touch him. "What are you doing tonight?" he repeated.

"I think that's none of your business," I said lightly.

"Fair enough." He reached out to shake my hand again; this time I paid attention to the size of his hand, of the difference in our skin tone, of the dry warmth of his palm against mine.

"It was nice meeting you, Ruby."

"Wait," I said. "Can I give you my number?"

"Whatever am I supposed to do with that?"

"Call me."

He considered this. "I'll make you a deal." He pulled out a program from the day's screenings and a pen. He scribbled something and handed it to me - a phone number. "If you change your mind." I was so absorbed in the paper that I didn't notice him approach me.

"Goodbye, Ruby. It's a pleasure." He leaned down and pecked me on the lips.

I called that night at 3 AM. He picked up. I told him that I still didn't want to *just* fuck him. He laughed and told me that he didn't want to have an affair.

"What a pair we make," he said, voice scratchy on the other end of the line. "I think I'm going to enjoy knowing you, Ruby."

And that was it. That was the first time.

--

The morning after we fuck, David says, *Never again*, and I dull the pain by getting high as he leaves. I should be angry, but I'm not. I don't know what I am. This is the last time, I tell myself, it has to be. I can't see him again. I can't sleep with him again. I want to call, but I don't.

I restrain myself all day, until the sun sets over the skyline as I'm smoking a cigarette and it's goddamn beautiful, and it's stupid but I can't help but dial his number. The phone rings, rings, rings. I let it. My heart has already fallen out, broken. It's done, it's over. And I think I might love him a little, or something close to it.

Against all odds, on the final ring like a goddamn miracle, I hear David's voice on the other end.

"Hey," I whisper. "It's me. I just wanted to let you know that the sunset is beautiful tonight."

"Yeah?" he says.

"The sky's pink. Like my toenails."

He laughs, softly. "Like your toenails." A long, long silence, and then, "How are you?"

I told myself I wouldn't but I do, I swore I won't but I am, I knew I shouldn't but I will; I sink into the sound of his voice and light up a joint. And David, across town, does the same.

*THE DANGLE,
OR
A PARTICULAR CASE OF NOSE-HAIR IN MILK*

The morning that it all started, the *moment* that it all started, I was sitting at brunch, at the little place downtown that thinks it's French, you know. I sat there, waiting patiently for my mimosa and eggs Benedict to arrive, thinking about it. "It" being my fiancé's nose hair.

Not *nose hair* plural, as in multiple hairs, but singular, as in one long, goddamn hair, extending past the edge of the cartilage, dangling boldly out into empty space. He, my perfect man, had always suffered from this particular problem and though it had, of course, bothered me, I never let myself think too much of it until this morning. Because, you see, I had already asked *very nicely* on multiple occasions, that he rid himself of this particular hair. And yet there it was, still protruding precipitously, ever so slightly breaching the boundary between interior and exterior. *Dangling*.

I was out at brunch with some people from the marketing firm where I work, having an awful time, which became decidedly worse once I began to ruminate on the nose hair. The man speaking to my left became unintelligible and my vision grew blurry and I was left with the memory of that nose hair, vibrating as my fiancé breathed. A centimeter or so long, I could see it up close, the tip of it, how it quivered, how it dangled.

I couldn't get away from it. When our drinks came, I sipped the mimosa in silence, fuming. Our wedding was barely a month away, and he wouldn't pluck his damn nose hair. Clearly, I had agreed to marry some sort of animal.

From across the table, a coworker asked me about wedding planning. I smiled, tacitly, and sipped my mimosa before replying. "It's going well," I said. "I do have trouble convincing my fiancé to participate, though."

She and the others nodded along, smiling politely. Momentarily, I worried that they were mocking me. "I remember planning my wedding," said one. "My husband only cared about the food." Everyone *tittered*. I pressed my nails into my palm. I was convinced they were mocking me; I was nervous.

"My fiancé's been great," I said. "It's just that, uh... He refuses to pluck his nose hair."

Every head whipped around to fixate on me. I felt the corners of my mouth extend, swing into a curve, stretch, stop. Smile. I felt my chest heave and realized it was meant to be a laugh. Short and heavy, like dying or gasping for air. No one else making a damn sound.

A coworker smiled unevenly, as if she were trying to avoid directing it at me. "That's frustrating." I heard her as if through glass.

Another said, "My husband made damn sure I shaved my legs for our wedding!"

I tried to laugh, again. "Yeah," I said. "It *is* frustrating." Smile. Yes. Perfect.

I took another large sip of my mimosa and let the conversation drift far from me and my future husband's nose hair. But could I marry a man with hair like that? Had I sentenced myself to put up with *dangling* for the rest of my days? Would the last thing I see at the end of my days be a goddamn nose hair, as I'm closing my eyes to expire? I scratched a long, pink line down my thigh with a fingernail. I couldn't live like this, even now. I pressed harder, tried to focus on the specificity of the pain instead of the hair and its protruding tip. I remembered how I woke up this morning with my face pressed to my fiancé's shoulder and how I was forced to watch the hair quiver as he breathed.

"Hey, Camille!" Someone else, giggling. "Camille! Hell-oo!"

"Thinking about that nose hair?" They all laughed. Of course.

I smiled, trying to think of something graceful to say, but the food arrived just then. I had never wanted eggs Benedict more than in that moment. I haven't eaten them since.

I left brunch as soon as I could, though I dreaded going home, afraid that I would say something to my fiancé regarding the hair situation before I figured out the proper way to address it. I knew that I had to keep my feelings in check while still impressing upon him the urgency of the situation. This would require a delicate hand. It was a Sunday, so I knew he was still at the apartment, still in bed. I pondered it for as long as I could, but I could think of no other place to go. Reluctantly, I headed back home.

"Hey," I called out as I walked through the apartment, "I'm back." I heard a faint *hey* in response. I stopped in the doorway to our room, looked across at him. In the process of sitting up slowly, rubbing his eyes, shirtless: my love. A half-smoked bowl on the bedside table. A rolled-up bag of potato chips on top of a copy of *Fight Club* - the novel. The TV remote, buried underneath wadded-up tissues.

"Did you have fun while I was gone?" I adjusted the strap of my bag on my shoulder. I didn't want to watch as he turned around to face me, didn't want to risk catching another glimpse of the hair.

"Yeah," he said. He stood up and embraced me. I held my breath. "How was brunch?"

"Fine," I said. I paused a second and considered how much information I wanted to share. "I hate those people. They make me nervous."

"I'm sorry, baby," he said, squeezing me again.

"Thanks," I said. I kissed him in lieu of having to express more than that. "I love you."

We spent a while in bed after that. It went well, despite some fears about hair-related matters. I feared that my paranoia about seeing it dangle above me while we kissed could cause me to actually see it, the worst sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. But it wasn't until after sex, lying in bed while he took a shower, that the anxious feeling began again. It pooled in the tips of my fingers: shaking, tingling, scratching. It spread up my arms and across my chest, clawed at my heart and consumed my lungs. I felt like my life depended on moving but I still couldn't. I shook wordlessly, unable to cry out. The nerves below the surface of my skin fucking *undulated*. The panic gave way to an image - thin, wiry, only long enough to be noticeable up close, but with a presence that made it unforgettable. *Dangling*.

"Hey, Camille." I flinched. My fiancé stood in the doorway, towel around his waist. He was beautiful, so much that it made the nose hair almost forgivable. I loved the long lines of his body and the way he kissed me, but-- I'm sure you know where this goes.

"Hey," I managed. "How was your shower?"

"Great." He walked over and kissed my forehead. I smiled at him. I forced myself not to search for the nose hair, but I could sense it, hovering somewhere above my head. "I'm going to have breakfast."

"Okay. I just ate, but I'll be there in a minute," I said as he walked off into the kitchen. I thought about getting up to follow, but I couldn't. I looked to my right, at the table with all of his stuff. I curled my fingers in the blankets. I wanted to go back to sleep. Maybe when I woke up, this wouldn't bother me any more.

I sat up and put my shirt back on. By the time I got to the kitchen, my fiancé was nearly halfway through a bowl of cereal. He had also put a pot of coffee on to brew. I grabbed two

mugs and poured some for us both. I sat next to him and stared into my coffee as I waited for it to cool. He would drink his coffee no matter how hot. The habit came from years of working retail, he said. We both prefer it black.

"What did you have for breakfast?" he asked.

"Eggs Benedict." I sipped my coffee as slowly as I could. "This is so hot."

"Then wait a little bit." He sipped his coffee and took a bite of cereal, all in one motion. I opened my mouth to say something about how I *knew* that, how he didn't have to mother me, or anything like that. But I saw his spoon approach his mouth and I froze, mid-word. His face came to meet it and his nose plunged downward, dangerously close to the milk cradled in the spoon. I watched, horrified, as the tip of his nose hair brushed the milk and dipped down, skimming the surface.

It took me far too long to realize that I had imagined this, disgusted and breathless, while my fiancé finished his cereal in peace. "You okay, Camille?" I heard him ask.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I said. I sipped my coffee in small, frantic motions, in the vain hope that it would maintain my grip on reality. The shaking in my fingers had grown stronger, and I knew that I had to try *something*, whatever I could. "Hey, um," I started, "Did you ever get around to, uh..."

He turned to look at me, eyes bright. He had no fucking clue. "Get around to what?"

"Plucking that, um... that nose hair."

I watched his face go through its own seven stages. Confusion, realization, confusion again, annoyance, anger, and feigned indifference. "*That?* That was days ago. What brought this on, Camille?"

I shrugged, trying to appear calm. "Nothing. I was just thinking about it."

"I forgot, okay." His expression tightened and drew together. "Is it really that big of a deal?"

I wanted to answer the question, but I couldn't figure out whether it was best to tell the truth. It *was* a big fucking deal and he *needed* to pluck the hair immediately - or who knew what could happen - but I knew that I couldn't say this.

"No," I said. "Just do it soon, please. Or I can do it for you."

His expression twisted again, but this time I could not even begin to parse the different varieties of self-righteous irritation layered atop his face. "Oh my god, Camille, stop being weird. I'll do it myself. I just don't see why you have a problem with it."

He *knew* why - the reason was obvious. He would be just as upset if he'd seen the things that I had. I was sure of it. I remained at the table under the pretense of drinking coffee while he put away some dishes. I clenched my fingers underneath the table, trying to keep myself from scratching.

"My brother called while you were out," my fiancé said. "He wants to hang out today."

I said nothing.

"You don't have to come."

"Okay," I said.

I tried not to express my relief. I was annoyed with him, which was enough reason to want him out of the house. And though his presence alone didn't cause me to think about the nose hair, being around him made me paranoid, the paranoia made me anxious, and anxiety made me think more about the hair. Yet another vicious, self-defeating cycle.

He strode off without a word, presumably to get ready. I got up and poured more coffee. I had sobered up from earlier and the stress gave me a headache. I stood there, sipping my coffee

in silence. My fiancé came to kiss me on his way out, tight-lipped. After he left, I continued to stand and sip, almost Zen-like, sipping, sipping, sipping.

I had to do something about this nose hair situation, that much had become clear. I attempted to focus my coffee-sipping Zen into a productive solution. There was no guarantee that he would remember - he was notoriously forgetful. Perhaps the most mature method was to just move on, but this was not at all acceptable. That left me with two choices: either manipulating him to do it of his own volition, or, more drastic, just dealing with it myself.

You might guess - and you would be correct - that I leaned toward the latter. The former made me nervous; I feared my fiancé lacked the capacity to care about a dangling nose hair, and I doubted my own ability to manipulate him into doing so.

I decided, then, that the more reasonable and actionable solution was to take care of the hair on my own. This plan, though, still had its flaws. Namely, that it was disgusting, and that the easiest route (plucking) would cause my fiancé to notice almost immediately. If I could get him to sleep, I reasoned, then I could perhaps use some tweezers and pull it out.

While I realized this was incredibly odd, it needed doing. It made me nervous regardless. The plan left little room for error and would likely cause my fiancé to wake up after the first attempt, whether or not I succeeded.

I went into the bathroom and dug through the medicine cabinet and drawers until I found an old pair of tweezers, crusty in places with what I hoped was rust. It was then, as I held the tiny, metal object in my palm, that I almost gave in. I half-convinced myself to turn around, put the tweezers back - and then I thought about how my skin crawled at memories of that hair, how the bile clawed and surged its way up my throat at the thought of that wiry tip dangling into milk. I began to taste the coffee resurfacing in my throat. I forced it down; I had to. I couldn't go on

like this. This, or leave him. It sounded dramatic, *crazy*, even to me, but I knew it was the only solution.

I put the tweezers in my pocket.

"Camille!" my fiancé called. "It's me!"

I had spent the afternoon in bed, watching TV on low volume. I was no longer angry from our conversation earlier, and I hoped he wouldn't mention it. He peeked his head around the doorframe. It all came rushing back, and I wanted to vomit again. I thought about the nose hair, the air above his upturned lip. It was awful. I couldn't stand it.

"I don't feel well, baby," I said. "I think I'm just going to lay in here."

"You okay?" Any trace of anger suddenly morphed into concern.

"Yeah. My stomach hurts, that's all." I tried to smile at him until he let me be and went into the living room. I turned the light off and laid there in the darkness, curling and uncurling my fist. I tried to regulate my breathing, that whole yoga thing, but it did nothing to help. I tried to draw blood from my palm but my nails weren't sharp enough.

After a while, my fiancé came to lie in bed next to me. I faced away from him, on my side, my whole body paralyzed, shaking. The prospect of following through with the plan terrified me just as much as a life lived alongside that nose hair. So I lay there, blinking at the wall, waiting.

I waited as long as I could stand, trying to determine when he had fallen asleep. Finally, I glanced over my shoulder and saw that, yes, he had. I took a deep breath, swallowed hard. I wanted to vomit again. I forced myself to funnel the anxiety into focus. I pulled the tweezers out of my pocket. They were warm.

Ever so slowly, I sat up on my elbows and rolled so that I loomed over his torso. I was close to his nose, but not close enough to see *it*. I took one more deep breath and slid upwards jerkily, on my elbows, closer to his head. I leaned over once more, as close as I could get. I could feel his breath against my face, the gentle in-out of sleep, punctuated by snores. I swallowed my shaking and my panic and my dread, but it continuously came back. I tried not to think about how easily he could wake up, how difficult this would be to explain. I tried to prepare an excuse, but I couldn't formulate coherent thoughts.

I leaned harder on my elbow and brought my head in closer. For a moment, I stared at his face; it was so soft and peaceful that I thought about kissing him instead. I loved him so much. But then I turned my eyes upward and--

Right in front of my eyes, thin and wiry and bent in the middle, curving upward at the tip, bobbing *up* and *down* with his breath. It *quivered*, it *dangled*. I gulped to get the bile down. I took the shakiest of breaths, I raised the tweezers, I couldn't bring myself to look. I reached in, took a deep breath; squeezed and pulled.

My fiancé made a grunting noise and I felt the tweezers go taut in a split-second of tension before I flung myself onto to my side and threw the tweezers onto the floor. "Goddamn it!" he yelled. "What the fuck was that?"

I felt like I was going to hyperventilate. I stared at the wall. My ears rang, rang, rang. "W-what?" I managed. "What's going on?"

"Something--" He grabbed the edges of his nose and held it in his hand. "It felt like something was... in my nose." He winced as he pressed against the edge of his nostril.

"That's weird," I said. My eardrums still throbbed, encased in hollow space, fixated on a distant, high-pitched drone. The ringing persisted, a tinny sound pinging around in my skull. I could only think of-- could only wonder if I had gotten that hair. "Are you okay?"

"Ugh." He used the camera on his cell phone to look at the inside of his nose. "Well, I'm not bleeding... I guess it's all right. Wonder what happened, though."

"That's good. You okay?"

"I'll be fine," he said. "How about you? You still feeling sick?"

I didn't know what to say. Still, I thought about the hair. I was still a little angry. I didn't want him to be this nice; I wanted to scratch my fucking eyes out. I thought about the way it had felt, the resistance when I pulled, the way he *screamed*.

"Camille? You okay?" he said, again. I felt his hands on my shoulders, rubbing back and forth in a circular motion.

"Yes, baby," I said. I took a long, shaky breath. Suddenly, I felt energized, alive. I felt good. I felt *real*. "I'll be fine." I rolled onto my other side and stared into his blue, blue eyes.

"Baby?"

"Yes?"

I smiled at him, warm and open. "I can't wait to marry you."

cat house

It's easy to make a cat house. You can find the steps online. All you'll need is a cardboard box, some old blankets, and something soft for the cats to lay on. My dad always taught me to be kind to animals, so you might think that this is a story about that. But, really, this is just about how to build a cat house.

My boyfriend's brother's girlfriend -- now that's a mouthful -- saw a cat outside their house one day. She called my boyfriend, said the cat looked sick and, since we were animal lovers, asked if we could catch it. I had never taken care of a cat, much less caught one. But my boyfriend's coworker had done it before, which made him confident that we could.

We drove all the way out there after work, half an hour out into the country. I was going solely as moral support, as I had no experience with cats and no other skills that could be useful in catching one.

When we arrived, Christie was outside, smoking. She had been dating my boyfriend's older brother for seven years or something like that. They had a one year-old child, a girl. Christie had always been cold to me for one reason or another. Today, it was the same. She gave me a dirty look as she greeted my boyfriend.

She showed us the other side of the house, pointed off into the wooded area where she'd seen the cat. She pulled up the siding on the trailer to show us where they thought a cat might be getting underneath it to sleep when the weather was cold. My boyfriend crouched down to shine a flashlight underneath. Christie flicked her cigarette out and went inside. My boyfriend and I were left staring at each other, squatting next to the trailer.

We brought a cat crate and set it up underneath the edge of the house, with a blanket inside. Christie and her boyfriend had set out two bowls, one with food and one with water. They were just ordinary cereal bowls. We put them near the entrance of the crate. "Hopefully, the cat will come sleep inside here," my boyfriend said.

We brought some cat treats, so we walked around the yard shaking them. Christie's yard was contained by a chain-link fence, with a thick patch of trees off to the back. We walked all around the yard, clicking our tongues and shaking the bag. I kept thinking that I heard a cat. I would stop to listen, straining my ears so hard that it was almost inevitable that I would hear a soft meow in the distance. I crouched down, pulled a few treats into my hand, and kept clicking my tongue. No cats appeared. I wondered if it was all a hoax, designed to humiliate me. I pictured Christie inside, laughing, or at least smiling smugly to herself.

She came back outside after a while. I avoided talking to her by pretending I was still looking for the cat. I orbited the outside of the yard while my boyfriend talked to her. I heard Christie tell him that the house next door was abandoned, that we should try looking there for the cat. It was getting dark and the trees were a dark blotch against the cloudy sky. I shivered. I wasn't sure how I felt about trespassing.

Still, I followed my boyfriend out to the street and down the neighbor's driveway. It was overgrown and narrow, with thick hedges on either side. I found it unsettling, to say the least, not even considering the law-breaking. I followed my boyfriend closely as we ducked between a storage shed and the side of the house in order to get into the backyard.

Pine trees bordered the neighbor's house on all sides, scraping against the darkening sky. My boyfriend clicked his tongue again and shook the bag of treats. I scanned the edge of the

woods for any sign of a cat. I scanned the windows of the abandoned house for any signs of murderers or ghosts.

"Hey!" I heard my boyfriend whisper. "Look!" He pointed toward a spot in the bushes. There, hidden behind several layers of leaves, was a tawny brown spot that could be nothing other than a cat. My boyfriend was busy crouching down and tapping treats out into his palm. "Can you run back to the house?" he asked me. "I need you to tell Christie that we found the cat. Also, grab the crate."

I set off running as fast as I could. The trip back felt longer than it had the first time. I forced myself not to look to either side, into the encroaching bushes. I ran up to the house and knocked on the door. Christie opened it, scowling. "What?" she asked.

"We found the cat," I said. "It's in the bushes at your neighbor's house. We're going to try and get it to go in the crate."

Christie stared at me for several long seconds. "Okay," she said. She stared at me for a long second. From inside, I could hear the sound of some children's show on TV. "Come here for a second."

I wanted to protest that we didn't have much time, but she pulled me by my elbow into the house. "Uh, Christie, I..."

"I know what you're up to," she hissed.

"What?" I looked around frantically. I wasn't entirely sure what I had been "up to," that could be remotely offensive to her.

"You're a fucking ungrateful bitch, you know that?"

"What?" I blinked at her, still not comprehending what she meant.

Her eyebrows pressed in closer to her eyes, causing her eyelids to wrinkle unpleasantly. "I see the way you act with your boyfriend," she said. "You just want to take advantage of our family."

I stared wordlessly at her again. "What do you mean?"

She rolled her eyes. "Oh my god, you're fucking stupid, too." She crossed her arms over her chest. "You're a using bitch. I don't want you around my kid."

I had no idea how to convince her that I was innocent, that I had no plans to use anyone. "I'm sorry," I said. "Where did you hear this?"

She scowled. "You just let his grandparents treat you to things, and you walk around like you're the life of the fucking party, like you're *so* special. You didn't even bother to thank us for buying you lunch, you bitch!"

I strained to keep my expression neutral, though I wanted to cry. "I don't know what you're talking about." I had more pressing business; I had to get back to the cat.

I turned and walked away as quickly as I could. I chose to ignore the fact that she closed the door in my face and went to grab the crate. With it securely in my hand, I ran back to where my boyfriend was. By the time I got there, he had moved to a different spot in the yard. I wondered whether or not to tell him about my conversation with Christie.

"He got away," he said, taking the crate from me. "But I got him to eat a treat."

"Shit," I said, "I'm sorry. Christie, uh..."

"It's fine," he said. "I'm just worried because it's getting dark."

I turned away, dejected. Why didn't he want to hear what I had to say? I looked around; the light between the trees had gotten lower. It was November, and all I could think of was the

cat, lost outside this abandoned house, likely going to freeze. "What if we can't find the cat?" I asked.

"I don't know, baby. I guess we'll just have to give up."

"We can make a cat house," I said.

"We should get back soon."

But we didn't get back. We walked farther in to the yard, closer to the border of trees. My boyfriend waded in to the brambles, still clicking his tongue, still shaking the bag of treats. I stood at a distance, not knowing how to help. I thought about how useless I was, how my boyfriend was at least able to get the cat to eat a treat, how he was at least ankle-deep in assorted leaves and sticks, and I was the one relegated to carrying the crate. I thought about how Christie hated me, for some strange, unidentifiable reason. Maybe she was right, maybe I was a *using bitch* after all.

I watched as the sky grew darker. Shadowy corners formed around the edges of the branches. A streetlight in the distance flicked on and then off. The air grew cold, too, wrapping around us. We didn't see the cat again.

We trudged back to Christie's house. My boyfriend's brother still was not home. I was glad that he wasn't; I wasn't prepared for whatever scene Christie might concoct. My boyfriend told Christie that we failed while I stood in the yard, hoping to avoid her. From inside, I heard the kid's show again, as well as a baby wailing.

"One more thing," I heard my boyfriend say. "We need to make a cat house."

"What?" Christie asked. She gave me another dirty glance from the porch.

"A cat house," he said. "Some place for the cat to sleep."

"It's easy to make," I interjected from across the yard. "All we need is a cardboard box."

Christie rolled her eyes, but managed to find us a suitable box. We set it underneath the house and put the blanket from the crate inside of it. We put the food and water bowls next to the box, and my boyfriend cut a round hole in the side with his pocketknife.

"Do you think the cat will use it?" I asked. My boyfriend shrugged.

I went and sat in the car while my boyfriend said goodbye to Christie. I thought about the cat and how cold it was outside. I wondered if he would be okay tonight, if he would keep warm. I stared into the distant woods, now just a dark splotch against the encroaching darkness of the night. I wished that there was something I could do.

My boyfriend got into the car and started it without saying anything. I continued to stare at the wooded area as we pulled out of the driveway and onto the street.

"I hope the cat is okay," I said. "I hope he doesn't get too cold tonight."

"That cat will be fine," he said, already distracted by the radio. "He's got food. Besides, he lives outside. He knows how to keep warm."

"What if he belonged to the person who lived in that house?" I said. "What if he's lonely out there?"

"He'll be fine, baby. Besides, we made him that cat house."

I leaned my head against the window. I didn't want to push the matter any more, didn't want it to become about how I'm too sensitive and things like that. But I could see myself sitting there, legs crossed in the short, November grass. Waiting, eternally. Staring off into the grey twilight, hoping to catch a glimpse of orange-brown in the bushes. I imagined holding the cat in my lap, running my fingers through its fur. I imagined going to sleep with it by my side, bathed in warm light.

I didn't bring up the cat house again. Next time we saw Christie, she said that they hadn't seen the cat again. Said the cat house looked untouched the next morning. I adopted a cat from the shelter two months later. I love him to pieces. I guess there's nothing you can do about that.

*REVELATION***6:45 AM, Monday**

The force of his orgasm woke him up. It rocketed and ricocheted through his body, propelling him into the cold, grey morning. Christina lay on her side, turned away from him, red hair spilled across the pillow. He was breathing hard and it required an inhuman effort to prop himself up on his elbows.

It wasn't that he was proud of himself, *per se*. In fact, Geoffrey found his reaction regrettable, of the flesh, even. However, he could not in good conscience completely disregard the dream, in light of the *revelation*. A revelation from God Himself.

He slid out of bed and plodded to the bathroom in the grey light. He splashed water on his face and took a piss. He pulled on a dress shirt and slacks, and went to check on the kids. They were still asleep, so he went to sit in the kitchen with his Bible, lesson plan, and a cup of coffee. For once, he couldn't focus. He thought about Emily's long legs and soft hips projected across his subconscious; he thought about her eyes and highlighter-yellow hair and soft moans. He thought and thought until Christina came down, blurry-eyed in her bathrobe, kids swarming around them. He sat there, unmoved, still turning it over and over in his head - he and Emily, he and his revelation from the Lord.

7:00 AM, Monday

As soon as the kids were buckled in to their car seats and she had given Geoff a kiss on the cheek, Christina returned to bed. It was her way of getting back at God for the sleep he had stolen from her while the kids were young. Geoff had wanted to homeschool them, said it would give Christina something to do and make her feel useful, but she put her foot down after Oliver's

first year. She couldn't imagine doing the same thing the next year, with both children, and then again and again. The kids could either go to Morrison Grove or - God forbid - public school, but they would not be staying home.

The same argument happened after Lily was born, when she tried to get on the pill. Geoff, in his anger, had threatened to leave, and she had snapped, *Fine!* After that, he gave in. She knew he wouldn't ever do it, though; divorce scared him like birth control did. After all, what would people say?

She didn't care about that sort of thing, not anymore. She was tired, mostly. When she married Geoff, she hadn't anticipated that he would make her tired. She'd believed that he would make her happy. She was a shy girl who liked studying dead languages; he was one of the first people she'd ever met who understood that.

Christina usually read a book in bed, but today she took out Geoff's laptop. She wanted to do some writing, but she was afraid that Geoff might read it. She would have to go to the library later on. She thought about chatting online with her sister, but her sister was at work. She sighed. Sometimes, it felt as if she were the only person in the world, and everyone else just faded into white noise around her. And other times, it felt as if she were the only person *not* in the world, that Geoff and her kids and her sister and everyone else she knew and everyone she didn't, all those people decided to hold the most wonderful party, and she didn't get an invitation. She didn't even know there was a party until it had ended.

Sometimes she thought about things like that. Other times, she went back to sleep.

7:30 AM, Monday

Geoff pulled into the parking lot of Morrison Grove Christian Academy early, the sun barely risen above the football field. Oliver and Lily sat in the backseat, chattering to each other. He ushered them out of the car and saw them safely to their classrooms in the elementary wing before going upstairs. His heart throbbed in his chest and in his pants as he climbed the staircase. There, in the atrium between the middle and high school wings, in the cluster of administrative offices and the desks outside them, he saw her. Slouched in her seat outside of the Athletic Director's office -- *Emily*. She was, in his mind, exquisite.

"Good morning, Emily," he said as he passed by.

His voice must have startled her, because she sat up abruptly, brushing wild strands of hair out of her face. "Good morning, Mr. Card," she said with polite eagerness.

He smiled at her warmly and walked into the high school wing, down to his classroom. He unlocked the door and sat at his desk, not bothering to turn the fluorescents on. He liked the way the low light made the rows of mismatched desks look; he liked the shadows that formed on the posters of the Apostles and the artistic rendering of the temple in Jerusalem, circa 30 AD. He liked how he couldn't read the titles of the books on his shelves, how they blurred together. Christina had forced him to remove a good chunk of his library from their home. Said it made her too sad.

He unpacked his satchel, laying his laptop and papers and two books on the Gnostics in a row on his desk. This week, they were covering heretic groups. It was one of his favorite units, since he was able to incorporate his extensive knowledge of theology into the usually dry subject of Church History. He remembered Emily, five or six years ago, falling asleep on the back row during this same lecture on Gnosticism. He had called her out during class and made some joke;

she had told her mother, who told the principal, who told him to, "Rein it in, Geoffrey." Emily sat in the back of his class for the rest of the year and refused to participate. On the final day of class, she wordlessly turned in the best term paper he had ever read. It was, of course, on Gnosticism.

He hadn't been attracted to her back then. He thought little of his students; he joked around and debated theology with some of them during lunch, but for the most part, they were identical people pressed into identical uniforms, identical in their formless brains and youthful ignorance. He thought the least of his female students. Most were stupid, and the smart ones thought themselves smarter than they actually were. He had hated Emily particularly, and had wanted to fail her on multiple occasions. Don, the principal, had stopped him. She was making decent grades, so he had no choice. Plus, her mother was a third-grade teacher at the school and the girl was, to put it kindly, Disturbed.

She hadn't even made it through college. Dropped out. Don had taken pity on her and hired her as an administrative assistant, as a favor to her mother. Don believed in God's grace above all; Geoffrey was more of a Calvinist about the whole thing and made sure that everyone knew it. "I'm sorry, Geoff, but you're going to have to live with it," Don had said, on multiple occasions. "The girl needs help, and it's the least we can do."

He was startled out of his recollections by a knock. He jolted upright and saw Don himself through the rectangle of glass in the door. Don was a tall man, something like six foot five, and had to duck to get through the doorway.

"Geoff," he said as he pulled a chair up to the desk. It made a horrible scraping sound against the vinyl flooring.

"Don." Geoff's face was pinched. He could never tell whether Don would choose to be friendly or condescending. He'd been the theology teacher for almost ten years before his promotion to principal.

"I wanted to ask you something. Has Christina ever thought about coming back to work?"

Geoff managed to laugh uncomfortably. "You know Christina. She hated second grade."

"Well, that's the thing," Don said. "We have plenty of elementary school teachers." Geoff felt his heart drop through the floor. If Don dared, if he fucking dared to say the word *theology*-
"Latin."

"Excuse me?" Geoff realized that he hadn't been listening.

"She speaks Latin, correct?"

"Sure. Yeah. She studied Classics in college."

"Right." Don rubbed his hand across his jaw. "I'm looking to expand the Latin program. Sixth grade all the way through high school. I want our graduates translating the *Aeneid*. I think Christina would be a great fit for the sixth and seventh graders."

Geoff paused for long enough to feel his stomach churning. All he'd eaten this morning was an orange. The pieces burned as they dissolved into bile. "Well, I don't know. I'd have to talk to her about it. The kids are still so young, I don't know if she'd want to go back to work yet."

"All I ask is that you talk to her," Don said, still jovial and unaware of Geoff's stomach troubles. "Tell her to shoot me an email if she's interested." He pressed his hands to his knees and stood, pulling the chair back into its place. The screech was deafening.

"Sure." He didn't feel present in his body. "Hey, Don? How's the new girl doing? Emily?"

"She's adjusting," Don said. "You be nice to her. I know she wasn't the best student, but she's a good kid who needs a little help."

"Of course," he said. "Maybe I'll invite her for lunch some time."

"Do that. Make her feel welcome."

The door clicked behind him. "*Make her feel welcome!*" Geoff mimicked, spitting.

There was a picture on his desk of Christina and the kids in matching white shirts and blue jeans. The photographer had retouched the picture so that Christina's face was free of laugh lines and wrinkles and freckles and sunspots, so that the mascara on her lashes really popped and her eyes looked green for the first time in years. She wasn't looking into the camera, but into the distance, as if she weren't really there at all.

Christina hated that picture. She had given him the frame for their anniversary last year, painted it herself. He'd put the picture in it to spite her. Now, he regretted it. He hated the way her empty eyes seemed to stare right at him. He slid it behind another photo, taken when he graduated with his master's of theology. He was young, he was happy, the world open with possibility.

Dear Lord, he prayed, it sounds crude, but if it be Your will, this time, Lord, let me get what I want.

10 AM, Monday

When she woke again, around ten, Christina threw some clothes in the wash and took a shower. She sat on the tile and masturbated with the warm water cascading around her. Afterward, she stepped out of the shower, changing into jeans and a T-shirt. She wrapped her wet hair into a bun. Geoff preferred that she wore it down, but it made her feel conspicuous. She liked the symmetry of her face when her hair was up; it highlighted the angles of her cheekbones and the way her nose pointed upward.

Shortly after, she packed a bag and drove to the library. She couldn't get anything done in that house. Geoff had purchased it after the wedding; four bedrooms, fifteen minutes outside of town, meant to be filled with redheaded children named for Biblical figures and philosophers. It was Geoff's house, the kids' house, but not hers. Only one house had ever been hers - the apartment she shared with her sister in the year between college and marriage. She watched home improvement shows and imagined that she was the one remodeling a kitchen in Los Angeles or master bathroom in Cape Cod.

She pulled into the back of the library parking lot, away from all of the cars, and sat on the curb. It was almost noon, and everyone who was awake was anywhere other than the library. She reached into her bag and pulled out a cigarette. She was ashamed of it, but smoking was her single vice. The thought of Geoff finding out terrified her, and so she only allowed herself to smoke one cigarette at a time, only one per day, and only in the back of the library parking lot. She sat there for several minutes, until she saw another car pull in to the other end of the parking lot. She put the cigarette out and went inside.

The cool quiet of the library washed over her; that and the residual nicotine high made her feel at peace for the first time since Geoff and the kids had arrived home on Friday afternoon. The library was *her* place. She loved the texture of the entrance tiles, she loved the bedraggled green-blue-purple carpeting, and she loved the bizarre literary murals on the walls.

She walked to the rows of computers along the back wall and sat down at the most isolated one. She plugged in a flash drive, which contained her latest project, a novel. Geoff didn't know. She had until three o'clock before she had to go home, before she had to take the laundry out of the dryer and put dinner in the oven, so that when Geoff came home with the kids, the house smelled like food and good things and there was room on the table to spread out

homework. Geoff could grade papers in his study, and she could sit on the back porch with her coffee, pretending she was anywhere else.

She liked her husband, of course, but sometimes she needed her own space. It was like she was in high school again. She felt trapped at times, like her mind was accelerating at a faster pace than her body and she was being torn apart because of it. It was almost enough to make her think the Catholics were right and Purgatory was real. Or maybe the Greeks were right and she was trapped in Hades; her sadness was her boulder, and this place was her hill.

12:35 PM, Wednesday

Everything, for Geoff, came back to Emily. It didn't help that he had to pass by her desk multiple times a day. He made a point to wave, to smile, to occasionally say, "Hi, Emily." She would smile back, politely, letting her eyes dart to his for a split second before they fixated, again, on the surface of her desk.

Today, though, Geoff chose boldness. He had just met with Don, who asked again about Christina and the Latin job. It caught Geoff off guard and forced him to stammer something like, "She's still thinking about it." But the meeting was over, finally, and he had about fifteen minutes left in his lunch break. He scanned the area for any sign of Emily, but she wasn't at her desk.

He found her in the teachers' lounge -- really, just the room with the copier -- standing next to the coffee machine. Geoff swallowed hard and steeled himself. The Lord didn't appear to him in a dream so that Geoff's life would just stay the same.

"Need some help?" he said, stepping forward and clearing his throat.

She turned around, startled. "Oh, Mr. Card," she said. "You scared me."

"Sorry about that," he said. "Do you need some help with that?" She glanced at the coffee maker, but said nothing. "Here, let me." He went over and opened the lid; she had gotten as far as putting in coffee and a filter. He took the pot and filled it with water, dumping it in to the machine. "There wasn't enough water, that's all." He pressed a button and the coffee maker started gurgling.

Emily still said nothing and crossed her arms over her chest, staring down at the floor. Geoff gritted his teeth. It was clear that she intended wait for her coffee in silence.

"So, how are you liking Morrison Grove?" Geoff asked, making sure to smile.

"Better, now that they pay me to be here," she said, before realizing what she'd said and turning bright pink. "Oh God--*gosh*, I didn't mean that!"

Geoff smiled; her self-consciousness was cute. "It's all right. I won't tell anyone."

Finally, *finally* she smiled back at him. It was small and very conscious of the fact that it was there on her face, but it made her eyes light up and once again Geoff was plunged back into that dream space, that vision where he first saw her body, spread out naked for him. He wanted to make that girl smile, sure, but most of all he just wanted to make her scream.

"Is it strange, now that you're no longer a student?"

"Yeah," she said. "The rules are different, but still the same, if you know what I mean."

He didn't, but he smiled regardless. "Sure," he said. "It'll get easier, trust me." This, at least, was true. His first weeks had been full of excitement and big dreams that were eventually abandoned. The disappointment came more softly, easier, now.

"You're a lot nicer now that I'm not in your class." She wouldn't look at him, but stared out the window, blankly.

"You're right," he said. It had been foolish of him to think that she wouldn't remember. "I have to apologize, Emily. There are excuses I could give, but I suppose they don't matter." He glanced at her; she was smiling to herself, ever so slightly. "It was unfair. I'm truly sorry."

"Thanks, Mr. Card. I appreciate that."

"Geoff."

"Huh?" She finally looked his way; her head was cocked to the side, her eyes were bright, her body seemed to thrum with energy, she was on full alert. It was enticing. He thought about her nipples, hidden underneath her shirt.

"We're coworkers now. Call me Geoff." The *Mr.'s* and *Sirs* could wait until later.

"Uh... Sure. Geoff." She laughed, awkwardly.

He loved the way she said his name. He hadn't anticipated this, but it was real and it made him want her all the more. "You wrote the best student paper I've ever read, you know," he said, softly, making it sound as if the words escaped unintentionally.

She laughed, clear and high and sweet. "I know, *Geoff*," she said. "That was the point."

She was a bit like Christina -- *of course* she was. Like when Christina was a freshman in college and her ability to read Greek and Latin had turned him the hell on. Emily, too, was smart, aware of it, and wary of him. The Holy Trinity.

"Have lunch with me."

"Excuse me?" The coffee pot finished groaning. *Excuse me* -- like an accusation.

"Have lunch with me."

She didn't trust him, he could see it in her face. "What do you want from me?" she said.

"I want to have lunch with you." He stared into her eyes. She stared back, waiting.

"Fine."

Geoff rejoiced internally. He had to stop himself from cheering. "Tomorrow?" She nodded. "I'll see you then." He turned to leave; best to escape now and leave her to her coffee.

"Hey!" Her voice stopped him midway to the door. She was just as beautiful from a distance. She held the coffee pot in one hand and a mug in the other. "Didn't you want coffee?"

"No, thank you," he said, grinning. "I'll be all right."

12:45 PM, Thursday

On that fateful tomorrow, Geoff arrived at work early, half-dreading the events of the afternoon. He was excited sure, aroused, even, but he couldn't shake the feeling that leaving this up to his frail human self was a bad idea. He tried to focus on the positives: they were going to have lunch, and he might even get to see her nude.

Geoff took a deep breath before approaching her desk. He tugged his sweater vest down and straightened the hem of his khakis. "Hello, Emily." He grinned down at her.

"Hey," she said. She tugged at the sleeves of her cardigan, staring at the floor.

"Ready to go?"

She said nothing, but gathered her things nonetheless, and Geoff led her to his car. He craned his neck in order to stare at her legs as she climbed in.

"Where would you like to go?" he asked as he started the car.

"Oh, God," Emily said. "I don't know." He watched as she fiddled with her fingernails. *Dear Lord, he prayed, please help this girl become comfortable in my presence, and please, if it is Your will, let her understand how much love I feel for her. Amen.*

"You alright with sandwiches?" he asked as he turned out of the parking lot. "There's a decent place not far from here."

"Sure." Somehow, she looked even more sullen than she had before. Geoff pinched his lips in frustration and focused on driving.

They rode in silence, only interrupted by the sound of Geoff's phone ringing. He ignored it. Emily stared out the window and Geoff stared at her, listening to the faint sound of the Christian radio station winding through the car. They eventually pulled into the mostly-empty parking lot of a strip mall, far from the other cars. Geoff felt the anxiety building, clustering in his stomach and the base of his throat.

"We're here," Geoff didn't get out of the car. Emily was staring at him. This was his big chance. He only had thirty minutes for lunch and he intended to make the most of it.

"Why are you staring at me?" she asked softly. She tilted her head; let her hair fall across her cheek. He swallowed hard under her gaze. Her eyes were the most beautiful shade of blue. Geoff felt his heart speed up. This is what he had dreamed; this was what the Lord had shown him. There was no way this wasn't right, wasn't true and good, no way this wasn't pre-ordained. He was going to fuck the shit out of that girl, all because God loved him.

He adjusted his vest, turning to face her as best he could. "Emily, uh..."

"Yes, Geoff?" she said. She was smiling, at *him*, no less; this was permission enough.

"There's something I need to tell you," he said, "and I don't know how to say it."

"What?" she asked.

"Well..." He sighed again. "I don't feel good about it, but... I had a dream the other night."

He saw her smile again, and Geoff inflated with hope. "Yeah?"

"It was about you." He gripped the steering wheel so hard that his fingers began to ache.

"You were-- *we* were, uh..."

"We were what?" she asked. She stared at him until he returned her gaze, then she looked away. Geoff felt a mixture of sheepishness and abject hope.

"Fucking." The word slipped out unchecked. "We were fucking." He said it with the same forcefulness he used in class. Emily's face was unreadable now. He didn't bother to look at her.

He leaned over and put his mouth on hers. He felt his beard scratch her lips and he rejoiced as she opened them. He grabbed her shirt by the collar and tugged her closer. She tasted like stale coffee and her thigh was warm against the palm of his hand. Slowly, his fingers inched upward, toward the hem of her dress.

He felt her hands against his chest for a brief second, then a sudden force as she shoved him backward. Her expression was a mixture of solemnity and rage. Geoff gulped.

"I..." was all he could say. His chest heaved. He knew that she was staring as he hunched over in his seat. He considered how she was likely mocking him -- for his appearance, for his attraction to her. Mocking him for the fact that he was a lowly Church History teacher. The anger churned in his stomach.

"Take me back. I'm not hungry any more," she said, so quietly he almost missed it.

"Emily, I-"

"Take me back." Louder. Angrier. "Or I'm reporting you."

Geoff wanted to vomit. How had everything gone so wrong? This hadn't been part of the vision. In the dream, he had slowly, gently peeled back Emily's cardigan, kissed her collarbones and down to her breasts, pushing back the soft cup of her bra to brush her nipple with a finger. She would open like a book or like a flower, kiss him sweetly and it would taste like honey. The world would be bathed in the soft light of morning. Thus saith the Lord.

12:55 PM, Thursday

Christina was annoyed, and, as usual, Geoff was the reason. The man had forgotten his lunch at home. Again. In fact, he hadn't even bothered to pack anything. The lunchbox she'd left out for him sat empty on the counter, untouched. She had thrown a sandwich together as passive-aggressively as she could muster, even though she was alone in the house. Geoff was going to get an earful for interrupting her day. The floors weren't going to clean themselves. Plus, she knew that if she didn't bring him something to eat, he would berate her all evening and she would never hear the end of it.

Once at Morrison Grove, Christina went straight to Geoff's classroom, ignoring stares from the students. However, the light was off and the door locked. Christina frowned. This was odd. She walked around the corner to the area with the offices, hoping someone would know where Geoff had gone. Of course, the entire space was empty, save for a blonde girl sitting at the desk in front of the athletic director's office. Sighing, she approached her.

"Hi," the girl said. "Can I help you?" She seemed distracted, for whatever reason.

"Sure," Christina said. "I'm Mr. Card's wife. He forgot his lunch at home and didn't answer his phone, so I figured I'd bring it to him, but he wasn't in his classroom. Do you know where he is?"

At this, the girl seemed even more on edge. "Uh, I don't know. Sorry about that. I can... uh, let him know you stopped by."

Christina sighed again. "That's alright. I'll just-"

"Christina!" Don popped his head out of his office, startling both women. "Did you make a decision yet? No pressure, I promise!"

"Excuse me?" Christina turned to face him, entirely unsure of what he meant.

"Did you decide? About the Latin class?" Don asked. Christina felt her heart rate increase, though she wasn't quite sure why. She looked from side to side, nervous. Don's expression grew solemn. "Christina, if you don't mind, could we talk in my office?"

"Sure." She tried to compose herself. She straightened her purse on her shoulder and gripped Geoff's lunchbox more tightly. "Thanks for your help," she said to the girl.

The girl smiled uncomfortably. "Of course."

"What's your name? I completely forgot to ask."

"That's alright. Emily Manchester."

"Christina Card." She smiled, extending a hand to shake. "Nice to meet you."

Christina went into the office and sat down across from Don, drumming her fingers on her knee. She had a feeling that this couldn't be good. Geoff was involved, she was sure. He was always involved.

"Well, this is a bit awkward for me," Don said. "I apologize if I'm out of line, but I feel like Geoff may have kept something from you."

"That seems unlike him," she said, feigning politeness, because that sounded *exactly* like Geoffrey.

"Oh, I'm sure it's nothing," he said.

"Okay."

"A few weeks ago I was talking with Geoff about the possibility of expanding our Latin program." Unsure if she was supposed to be aware of this, she nodded along. "Sixth grade through senior year." She nodded again. "And I want you to teach the intro classes. Sixth and seventh grade."

Despite her best efforts, Christina couldn't contain her surprise. "Really? *Me*?"

Don laughed. "Really! Did Geoff not tell you?"

Shit! Her happiness quickly deflated. She couldn't let Don know that she didn't know.

Geoff would be so angry if Don found out that he didn't tell her. "Oh, he told me! I thought there were other candidates," she said. "Am I really the only one?"

Don nodded. "The job is yours if you want it."

She could feel her heart pounding. This could be *It*, her big break. Teach Latin to some kids for a few years, convince the school to let her get a Master's degree, write a book, maybe--

Geoff. She couldn't teach at the same school as Geoff, couldn't accept a job that she was certain he had hidden from her, likely on purpose. She felt the anger coming on and she had to push that away, too. First, though, she had to give Don an answer.

"Well, I just have to say, thank you so much for thinking of me!" She plastered on her most gracious smile. "I'll have to think about it."

"Fair enough," Don said. "Just get back to me soon. We'd love to have you, Christina."

"Thank you," she said. She shook Don's hand, still smiling like a maniac. "I really appreciate it. No matter what, I appreciate it."

"No problem at all."

Christina got out as fast as she could, before Don's kindness made her vomit. The blonde girl, Emily, looked like she was going to be sick too. Christina thought about going over to see if the girl was okay, but she had more pressing business.

She checked Geoff's classroom again; the door was closed and the lights were off, but she could see his head pressed against the desk. She tried the door, but it was locked. Geoff sat up, looking terrified. *Good*. Very slowly, he opened the door. Christina said nothing until it closed. Geoff no longer seemed agitated, but she could feel the nerves radiating off of him.

"I know what you did," she said. At this, his face went white. Christina couldn't help but feel vindicated.

"Christina," he whispered. His facade slipped and he seemed utterly terrified. "I'm so sorry, honey. Nothing even happened, really, I promise! She said no; nothing happened!"

It was her turn to freeze and lose the color from her face. All of a sudden, she felt cold. "What the *fuck* are you talking about, Geoffrey?"

"No, Christina," he said, "what the fuck are *you* talking about?" His eyebrows bunched together and she saw his lack of expression morph into anger.

"I just talked to Don," she said, watching him carefully. "He told me about that Latin class."

"Oh," he said softly. "That."

"Yeah, *that*." She sighed. "From what I've gathered, Don approached you about it a few weeks ago, said that he wanted to give the job to me, and you never bothered to tell me about it."

"I'm sorry, honey," he said. "I was going to."

Christina felt her insides turn cold. "Yeah?"

"I was," Geoff insisted. "It slipped my mind."

"So, your wife gets offered the job of her dreams and you *forget* to tell her?" Christina refused to break eye contact with him; she knew it made him nervous. "That's crap, Geoff."

Geoff rubbed his forehead. "Look, I understand why you're upset. Just calm down and we'll talk about this like adults, okay?"

"You can stop," she said. How had it taken her this long to realize how angry he made her? "Let me tell you what I think happened. You were jealous, or you were afraid I would

realize that I don't need you, or something else equally fucked up and idiotic. You kept it from me on purpose."

"Christina, honey, you're being irrational."

"Am I? Because I really don't think so, Geoff!" She could feel the anger electrifying her. It felt good; she felt powerful. She wondered if this was how Geoff felt all the time. "And what was that about '*her*' and 'nothing happening,' huh? Don't think I didn't hear that!"

"I already told you, honey. *Nothing happened*. It's not for you to worry about, Christina."

She stared hard at the expression on his face -- part smug, part superior. There was something about it that twisted her stomach and made her ill. She thought about everything that had happened in her life and how much of a goddamn tragedy it was that, somehow, she ended up here, in this stinking town, married to Geoffrey Card, a liar and cheater. Somehow, she felt that she should have known all along.

"You're a pig, Geoffrey," she said. "You are the worst person I have ever met, and you ruined my goddamn life."

"Christina! I--"

"Shut up!" she spat. "Shut the *fuck* up!" She turned around, because she didn't know if she could bear to look at him any longer. "I'm going home."

6:45 AM, Friday

The incident with Emily had shaken him. He didn't deal well with rejection, and her disdain stung. Still, things could always be worse. Christina was angry, sure, but she would get over it. She always did.

He let her have her space that evening, content with secluding himself in his study, where he was free to lesson plan, read, write, or masturbate. He engaged in all four before the night was over. As always, he thought about Emily. She kissed like a whore and he loved it.

Christina was already in bed. She was either asleep or faking it, Geoff could never tell which. Either way, it didn't matter. She would be fine in the morning. Before he fell asleep, he prayed and asked the Lord for forgiveness, as well as for Emily and Christina to be gracious and forgive him also. It was a long shot, but it never hurt to ask.

He woke up to light streaming through the blinds and no Christina, no red hair strewn across the pillow. Maybe she had finally decided to start running, like he had suggested, or maybe she was downstairs making breakfast. Geoff got hard at the thought of a home-cooked breakfast. Could this mean that she had forgiven him? Geoff didn't want to count on it, but through God anything was possible.

He made his way downstairs, mentally rehearsing what he would say to Christina, debating whether he would be cold or loving, smug or gracious. To his surprise, the kitchen was dark, the house quiet. He made a lap of the first floor to no avail. A creeping sense of dread began gnawing at him. He climbed the stairs two at a time and peeked into every room upstairs, but there was no sign of Christina or the kids. *The kids!* Oh God, the kids! He started panicking. Where the hell were the kids?

He ran downstairs, back to the kitchen. His hand fumbled in his pocket for his phone. He had to call Christina, had to demand an explanation. She was behind it, that much he knew. In his hurry, he ran straight into the dining table. He dropped his phone, because on the table...

He picked up the envelope. It was a letter, of course, from Christina.

Geoffrey,

As I hope you have figured out, the children and I are gone. Yes, I am leaving you, and no, that does not make me a coward or a sinner or whatever horrible thing you decide to call me.

You can expect to receive divorce papers soon. Do not try to fight me. I have thought about it and I am doing what is best for myself and my children. Again, do not try to stop me.

Yes, this is because of the cheating, but it is also because of the job, and because of who you are. It's that simple. You're a pig, Geoffrey, like I said. You ruined my life. You made me feel like shit about myself and kept me from succeeding. I married you because I was twenty-two and thought you were the only person who was as smart as me, who could understand me. But I was wrong, and I have paid for it.

I hope that you will reconsider your choices and become a kinder, more gracious person, but I'm not hopeful. I doubt you will even miss me that much. I won't miss you, either.

Please sign the documents as soon as you receive them.

Christina

Geoff was in shock. He felt numb, confused. That bitch. *She* was the thief; she was the one who stole! She stole his pride and his freedom, and now his children! Good riddance! She had always hated him anyway. He began to think about all the women he could marry, women who would fawn over him and love him and have as many children as he desired.

He thought about his dream, his sign from God, his Emily laid bare before him. He smiled to himself. He liked how quiet the house was. He put a piece of bread in the toaster and stroked his cock until the timer rang.