THE WAY WE SAY GOODBYE AND OTHER STORIES

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Phil and Kendall boarded their first bus in Pittsburgh. As the driver threw their luggage into the baggage compartment, Kendall rocked back and forth, crumpling her skirt in her hands, excited to meet her uncle Rick for the first time. She had insisted on wearing her best dress, a yellow taffeta and tulle princess gown from Halloween six months earlier, and Phil let her, even though he knew the trip to Amarillo was going to take nearly a day and a half. Kendall had foregone the plastic tiara only because of Phil’s insistence that it would be difficult for her to sleep with the “silver” digging into her scalp.

Phil was careful to refer to the tiara as real silver, careful to always let Kendall believe she was a real princess. In their old apartment, the one bedroom had belonged to Kendall, while he slept on the pull-out sofa in the living area. He cleaned her room for her, made her bed every day and tucked her in at night with a kiss on the nose and a “Sleep tight, princess.”

He didn’t know where the princess thing had come from, whether it was something unique to Kendall or a phase every girl went through, but he felt like it was his duty to indulge her in whatever way he could, to foster as many dreams within her as possible. He’d been born without aspirations, without ambition, and for the past four years, it had been useful to have Kendall’s happiness as a compass.
Before Kendall was born, losing his job would never have been an impetus to move; he would have stuck around Pittsburgh and taken the first minimum wage job that came his way. Now, he was embarrassed to have stayed at the warehouse as long as he had.

Still, the decision to leave hadn’t come to Phil easily. He’d mulled it over for a few days, hoping to hear about a local job, waiting for Shannon to sober up and come back home, but he knew that neither of these things was going to happen, so he made arrangements to take a Greyhound to Amarillo, Texas to stay with his older brother Rick. Rick had always been the one to fix things when they were younger, and Phil felt that this situation was no different.

It had been Rick who’d saved up for Phil to go to trade school ten years ago.

“People always need electricians,” he’d said.

“I’m sick of school, Rick. I went through it for thirteen years. I’m done learning.”

“What do you want to do with yourself then, huh?”

“I don’t know, I’ll think of something.”

“Well, until you think of something, you go to school.”

Rick wasn’t able to force Phil to attend classes, though, and Phil didn’t even make it through to his second semester. He preferred to stay out late and drink with his friends. It was his love of booze and Rick’s threats to kick him out of the house if he didn’t start paying rent soon that prompted Phil to apply for the job at the liquor distribution warehouse in the first place.
“At least I know my product,” he’d told Rick when he took the job.

“I think you know it a little too well.”

The job had been monotonous, loading and unloading trucks with a forklift, but Phil enjoyed it. He liked the precision involved in aligning the fork with the holes on the pallets, and prided himself on the fact that he’d set the branch record for fewest bottles broken. It was three years before he made a single mistake, when he neglected to lower the fork enough, sending the prongs through the box and through the bottles, red wine leaking onto the asphalt in the parking lot. The week after that, he dropped a pallet of bourbon, but that had been the last incident he’d had. He had the best record in the company, so he never really worried about job security.

The news that the warehouse was closing had come as a surprise to Phil. There had been no meeting, no warning. He’d gone in for his shift at five one Monday morning after dropping Kendall off at the babysitters and saw everyone gathered in the front office. He walked in, expecting Tom, the manager, to yell at them about the amount of product they’d ruined over the past month, but instead, Tom told them that the warehouse was closing and that they were no longer needed. The other men started yelling, but Phil left the building and walked home, hands in his pockets, sunrise behind him.

The bus driver was an elderly black man with a grizzled, graying beard and a blue vinyl jacket. “Well, hello Princess!” he said, smiling at Kendall as she climbed the stairs onto the bus. “Don’t you look pretty today?”
Kendall curtsied, then grabbed Phil's hand as he moved her down the aisle. They sat toward the middle of the bus. Phil made sure that Kendall took the window seat, so that if she got up for any reason, he would know. She had a tendency to wander off if he wasn't holding her hand, and he was worried Kendall would try to exit the bus when her boredom eventually set in. This was also why he’d planned the trip so that their drive, as much as was possible, was overnight; the more time Kendall spent sleeping, the less likely it was that she’d try to walk off. The first leg of the trip, from Pittsburgh to St. Louis, was twelve hours. He was exhausted and wanted Kendall to sleep now, but she was too excited.

“How old is Uncle Rick?”

“He’s 34.”

“Does he have a little girl?”

“No, he lives alone.” He was sure that he had answered all of these questions at least eighty times over the past few days, but Kendall kept asking them, and despite the slight annoyance he felt at the repetition, he appreciated her enthusiasm for both the move and for meeting her uncle. Mostly, he was relieved that Kendall seemed more resilient than he had previously believed children could be; in fact, she had given no indication that she was aware of any sort of upheaval in their lives whatsoever.

“Does he have toys?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Does he have a pony?”

“No.”
“Does he have a kitty?”

“No.”

After she had asked about Rick’s feelings on the color pink, Sesame Street, kitties, and The Little Mermaid, Kendall’s eyes started drooping. While Phil explained to her where Texas was, she fell asleep with her head on his waist, open-mouthed and drooling on his shirt.

Phil leaned forward slightly and pulled his backpack onto his lap, slipping the straps over his arms so that he was wearing it backwards like an infant carrier. They were traveling to Amarillo without their furniture, which Phil had sold along with most of Kendall’s toys, and everything important to them was in the backpack: peanut butter sandwiches and string cheese for snacks during the trip, the family Bible, and $1,000 in cash. Phil had stashed the money—ten crisp one hundred dollar bills—inside the Bible, which he had buried beneath the food. Phil wasn’t religious in the slightest; he had been born and raised a Southern Baptist, with a mother who took him to church for Sunday morning and evening services and youth Bible study on Wednesdays, and as a result, he spent his younger years as a firm believer in God’s power. When his mother got sick, Phil did what came naturally to him: he prayed incessantly for her recovery, realizing that she was the most important person in his life. As his mother’s body wasted away, Phil’s belief in God began to wane, and by the time she died, he had given up on church and faith. After Kendall was born, though, he started to feel as though someone had to be watching out for him. Though he hadn’t been to church since he had Kendall baptized, his daughter’s life had caused him to develop a good degree of reverence for the Bible, and he
figured he hadn’t ever needed whatever protective powers the book may still hold for him more than he did right then.

He’d thought about putting the money in Kendall’s backpack, which was full of toiletries Spot books, and crayons, but he didn’t want to risk her losing everything they owned; she was a smart kid, much smarter than he had been, but she was forgetful and messy sometimes. He’d learned through months of picking up stale pieces of peanut butter toast and stray Barbie shoes under the end tables that when Kendall was bored with something, she just left it where she was and walked off to find something new to entertain her.

Phil pulled out a sandwich and ate it, then leaned his seat back and tried to sleep. It was difficult to negotiate; the backpack was heavy and no matter how he maneuvered it, his legs ended up tingling incessantly, and he didn’t want to stir too much and wake Kendall, who was a light sleeper and always had difficulty drifting off once she’d been awakened. Phil slept fitfully, unable to rid himself of the idea the idea that the bus was swaying from side to side on the road. He always felt unstable in large vehicles; for the past ten years, the only thing he’d driven had been the forklift, and aside from Kendall’s birth, when he took a taxi to and from the hospital, he walked everywhere he needed to go. He woke up at every stop the bus made, wondering if this was where they were supposed to transfer and panicking that they’d somehow missed their station. He stared at each of the new passengers as they boarded, hoping no one sat near them out of fear that someone would be able to take the backpack from him without his noticing. Next to him, Kendall squirmed and murmured in her sleep, but managed to stay unconscious.
They had a ninety-minute stopover in St. Louis, which Phil had originally planned to use to stretch his legs, but when they arrived, all he really wanted to do was sit and wait for their next bus. Even on his back, the backpack didn’t sit right; there were strange lumps poking him in the spine and the fabric on his shirt was riding up and wrinkling, no doubt forming red creases on his skin, but he didn’t dare take it off. He dragged Kendall’s bag with him by the straps; it was too heavy for her to manage by herself for too long. As soon as they got to a station, Phil sat Kendall down on a bench and handed her a sandwich and a juice box. After they’d finished eating, Kendall started tugging on Phil’s shirt.

“I have to go potty,” she whined.

It seemed that she always had to go, and Phil wondered how it was possible that she had to go so often when it seemed that she consumed so little. He’d taken her three times on the way to St. Louis, and the last time she’d gone had been an hour earlier, but he didn’t want to risk making her wait until they got back on the Greyhound. He would rather take her later, of course. Walking Kendall to the back of the bus and standing outside the door as she went was a lot less nerve wracking than taking her to the men’s room, and he didn’t know how else to do it.

He hated guiding her past the urinals, worried that she would see something she shouldn’t be seeing, that he was exposing her to much more than a girl her age should witness. He knew, realistically, that going into the men’s room wasn’t going to leave any sort of indelible bad impression on Kendall’s life, but he was also aware that she resented him for taking her in there.
“Daddy, I’m a girl,” she would say, sticking out her lower lip and putting a hand on her hip.

It was something he was painfully aware of. There were days when he dropped Kendall off at Mrs. Alvarez’s house and the babysitter would laugh at him for how he’d put Kendall’s outfit together, but the problem was, he never knew until he dropped her off whether he’d dressed her well or not. Mrs. Alvarez was his only barometer, and it was hard to keep what was correct and what wasn’t straight. She’d laughed the morning he’d put her in a pink shirt and blue sweatpants, but she’d had the same reaction when he paired the pink shirt with matching pink pants.

“Too much,” she’d said.

He’d thought of asking her for help picking out outfits for Kendall, but the idea of asking someone else to help him dress his own child was embarrassing. At the same time, he had no idea what was appropriate and what wasn’t. They’d gone shopping for new shoes last month, before he lost his job, and all the shoes Kendall wanted had been heels. He didn’t even know that they made shoes with heels on them in children’s sizes, but Kendall insisted that they were what she wanted. He got her a pair of black patent leather mary janes with a little bit of a lift to them, but bought her a pair of canvas sneakers as well. She still hadn’t worn the sneakers, but when she showed up in the mary janes at Mrs. Alvarez’s, he was sure that the old woman was going to send him home to change Kendall into something more appropriate.

“She can’t walk in those!”
“Can you teach her? I don’t know how.”

“She’s too young, Phil.” Mrs. Alvarez shook her head. “Don’t make her grow up before it’s time.”

The problem was, Phil didn’t know what her time would be. He didn’t know about girls. He didn’t know about hair and he didn’t know about makeup. Kendall wanted him to buy her lipstick, and sometimes when he picked her up from Mrs. Alvarez’s, Kendall would run up to the door with teal eye shadow smeared across her eyelids and giant, asymmetrical blotches of magenta blush on her cheeks. Was this okay?

“We were playing dress up,” Mrs. Alvarez explained, and Phil hoped that someday, far into the future, Mrs. Alvarez would be willing to help Kendall learn to put makeup on for real, because he couldn’t imagine ever learning it for himself.

He was always worried that he would fail her, that he would raise her to be too tough, too masculine, that she would resent him for making her too unlike the other girls she knew. Last year, he’d fallen into the habit of calling her “Kenny,” and he forced himself to break it, even though he thought she should have a nickname, because he thought that maybe he was trying to make her too boyish. He didn’t want her to go into kindergarten and tell her teachers to call her by a name that would have the rest of the class making fun of her, but he realized that he didn’t know what kids made fun of each other for anymore. It was times like now, standing guard outside the door to Kendall’s stall in the men’s room, that part of him wished Shannon was still around.
It had been two years since Shannon had left, and for the most part, the only thing he regretted about her leaving was that Kendall still remembered her, still had dreams about her. Sometimes, she’d still call out “Mommy” when she woke up in the middle of the night, and even though Phil resented this—he was the one who was raising her, he was the one who always got up with her—he still mostly felt guilty that about the fact that his daughter was motherless. It had been different for him, when his father left; he’d been older and hated his father, and Rick had been there to try to take care of him. Aside from Mrs. Alvarez, Kendall didn’t have any women in her life at all. His own mother was dead, and he didn’t have any contact with Shannon or her family, if she even had a family.

Shannon had appeared in his life as a single entity. She had no friends, just a string of abusive ex-boyfriends she referred to by number instead of by name. “Number Seven,” she would say, “was the one who gave me the scar on my shoulder. Took his cigarette and just...” She made a motion like she was stubbing her imaginary cigarette out in an ashtray, and smiled up at Phil. “You’re not like that, though, Philly. You’re a good man.”

When they first started dating, Phil could never see why Shannon was attracted to him. She was one of the most beautiful women he’d ever seen, with her big green eyes and dark blonde hair. “Dishwater blonde,” she’d called it, or sometimes “dirty blonde,” but he thought those phrases it sound too dull for someone who held so much luster. She took care of herself, too; she was thin and strong, and able to outrun Phil. Phil was of the opinion that he wasn’t much to look
he was short and solidly built, and he sprouted thick, dark clumps of curly hair in
strange places all over his body. He had to shave twice a day if he wanted to avoid a
five o’clock shadow, but he was always happy to put in the extra effort it took to
maintain his appearance it meant he looked good for Shannon.

He’d met her at a bar. She’d taken a stool near his usual spot, so he sat next to
her. “Don’t even try to hit on me,” she said, giving him a fierce look that made Phil
recall a tiger he’d once seen at the zoo on a field trip when he was a kid. “Or I swear
to God, I’ll punch you in the nose.”

She looked sincere, so Phil didn’t respond. After a few drinks, though, she’d
warmed up to him, and by closing time, she was sitting on his lap. “Come home with
me,” she whispered.

“I can’t. I’ve got work in three hours.” He hated himself for turning her down,
realizing how impossible it would be for such an opportunity to present itself again.

“I’ll come home with you.” She stared up at him, eyes glazed and hair tangled,
and took his hand. He walked to his apartment, expecting her to turn around at any
moment. It wasn’t until she followed him upstairs that he knew this was really
happening.

After that night, she stayed with him. She went back to her apartment once to
get some clothes, but otherwise, what was Phil’s became hers, too. Phil found the
entire situation unbelievable, so he never questioned her when she didn’t come
home some nights, or when he didn’t find out that she’d lost her job as a barista at
the coffee house down the street until months after her dismissal. He didn’t question
how she always seemed to spend money as soon as she made it, or how she never
came home with anything material to show for their evaporating savings. He was happy to be in love and even happier to have someone to love him back. It took years of Shannon’s erratic behavior before the idea to occur to him that he trusted other people way too much.

The toilet flushed and Kendall came out of the stall. He led her over to the row of sinks and turned on the tap so she could wash her hands. The bathroom’s fluorescent light was harsh, and when he looked at her reflection in the mirror, he noticed that her hair was hanging over her face in greasy clumps. Sometimes, it was painful to Phil how much Kendall resembled her mother. Her hair color was the same dirty blonde as Shannon’s, though he knew it would continue to darken as she got older, and that one resemblance between them would fade. Her eyes were the almond shape, but Kendall’s were brown, like his. She held her wet hands up to him to dry off, and he dabbed at them with a paper towel. She started to walk away.

“Hold on Kendall. Your hair’s dirty.”

Kendall stuck her lip out, but did what she was told. Phil opened her backpack and took out her hairbrush and an elastic ponytail holder. He stuck the brush under the faucet, then pulled it through Kendall’s hair.

“Owwwwwwww.” She squirmed in his arms. “That hurts.”

“I’m almost done.” He gathered her hair into a bunch at the back of her head and looped the elastic around it. No matter how hard he tried, he was never able to make her ponytails smooth; there were always strands of hair that rose like tiny intractable hills on her scalp, but it looked better now. The only thing he’d learned
about styling girls’ hair was that if he pulled it back, it instantly looked at least a little bit cleaner.

“Beautiful,” he said, grabbing her hand and walking out of the bathroom. “You look like a princess.”

When they boarded the bus to Amarillo, Kendall wanted to sit on the aisle.

“It’s too hot by the window,” she told Phil.

He agreed, and took the seat by the window. Kendall was fidgety again, swinging her legs back and forth, kicking the empty seat in front of her.

“Why don’t you color?” Phil said, handing her a coloring book about horses and a box of crayons. “You can make a picture for Uncle Rick.”

Kendall set to work coloring in a pink horse for her uncle, and Phil surveyed the other passengers on the bus. It was even emptier than the bus from Pittsburgh had been, and Phil figured that people probably didn’t really travel by bus anymore. Most people can probably afford planes, he thought. He would have liked to take a plane—he’d never flown before in his life, and he thought Kendall would have really enjoyed being up in the air—but the $200 difference in price had decided their travel plans for them.

There was a man sitting across from them in green sweatpants and a shearling coat, even though it was almost seventy degrees outside. He twitched every so often, but was otherwise still. If it hadn’t been for these occasional full-body spasms, Phil would have thought he was dead. His skin was pale and had taken on an almost greenish tinge, and his fingernails were long and yellowed, with dirt caked beneath them. Phil had heard that your fingernails continue to grow after you
die, and he couldn't think of any excuse for this guy to have such long nails. If they had been Phil's, he would have bitten them off after maybe cleaning them first.

Four hours later, at noon, the guy was still jerking around in his seat while Kendall and Phil ate lunch. Kendall had long given up on coloring in ponies for Uncle Rick, and had moved onto enhancing the illustrations in her Spot books before Phil suggested they eat something. The sandwiches were getting stale and the string cheese, which Phil had assumed was mostly made of plastic at this point, had melted slightly in the heat. Phil couldn't wait to get to Texas to have some real food, fresh apples or berries, or fried chicken. Even Kendall seemed to be getting tired of peanut butter, and it was one of the few things he could get her to eat. She'd only finished half her sandwich before she leaned her head against Phil's belly and fell asleep.

At 2:30, the bus rolled into Joplin, and the man across the aisle turned to Phil.

"Hey man, hey." He was facing Phil's direction, but his eyes were focused out the window, fingers drumming on the headrest. "I gotta get off here, man. You have any money? I haven't eaten in... three days."

The man was sweating, and he was even paler than he had been before. His eyes were tearing up, and Phil realized that he knew this look, had seen it countless times with Shannon in the year before she left.

"Your girl, she's real pretty, I understand you need to take care of her, man. I wouldn't ask if I didn't need it. Just a few bucks. Like twenty. I need to eat."

He was looking Phil in the eye now, staring at him intently, legs bouncing up and down, waiting for an answer.
“I don’t have a twenty,” Phil said, putting his arm around Kendall. He wasn’t technically lying, but Phil knew he would give the man some money—the man had noticed Kendall, and if there was one thing Phil had learned from living with Shannon, it was that drug addicts had no limits when it came to harming other people to get what they wanted.

“A dollar, I’ll take a dollar, whatever you have.”

Phil sighed and unzipped his backpack. He took out the Bible, careful to keep it hidden behind the bag, and removed one of the bills. He handed it to the man and said, “Good luck.”

“Wow, man, cool, thanks.” His eyes were watering—Phil would have been touched if he hadn’t seen Shannon’s do the same thing when she was coming down—and he grinned down at Phil before he walked away. He yelled back as he got off the bus. “You have a blessed day!”

Had he seen the Bible, or was it just a coincidence? He didn’t seem the type who would speak that way, didn’t seem religious at all, but you never could tell who loved God and who didn’t, he supposed. Phil stuffed the Bible back in his bag and zipped it up, figuring it didn’t matter; the man was off the bus now. As long as no one else had seen, he was fine. Phil looked around, but the four other people left on the bus didn’t seem to be paying attention to him; one was sleeping, and the others were staring straight ahead, listening to their iPods.

To be safe, he moved the Bible into Kendall’s bag and put some of her coloring books into his own. He leaned back in his seat and looked out the window.
Phil didn't know how long he slept, but it was dark when he woke up, and the bus was stopped in Oklahoma. Kendall was no longer next to him. His heart rate increased and he felt like he couldn't breathe. He threw his bag to the side and ran to the front of the bus.

“Did a little blonde girl get off here?” he asked the driver, gripping the back of the seat.

“In a yellow dress? Yeah, she said she had to 'go potty.' She was behind another passenger, I thought it was her mother.”

“You let her off? That's my daughter! It's dark out and she doesn't know where she is!”

Phil didn't hear the driver's response. He ran down the bus steps and across the damp concrete and pushed the station doors open. The fluorescent lights were harsh on his eyes, which had grown accustomed to the darkness. There was an island in the middle of the station, a concrete oval filled with potting soil and green plastic plants that he couldn't see beyond. He wondered if Kendall had willingly gone with the woman the bus driver spoke about. Phil had warned her about the danger of going off with strangers, had quizzed her several times on what to do if an unknown person tried to talk to her, and Kendall had always responded correctly. He thought about what the driver had said, about believing the woman Kendall followed had been her mother, but the idea that Shannon had been on their bus seemed too ridiculous, too horrible to contemplate. He was sure he would have seen her board, and even if he hadn't noticed that, he knew Kendall would have certainly made enough noise upon seeing Shannon for the first time in a year that Phil would
have woken up. Still, Phil knew that the world functioned in ways that at times made it seem as though supernatural forces were conspiring to make his life as complicated as possible.

“Kendall!” He climbed onto the wall so he could survey the whole room. “Kendall, where are you?”

There was no response, and Phil felt as though an enormous hand was reaching down his throat, attempting to tear out his stomach. In that moment, he believed that his entire future had disappeared. He should have stayed awake; he should have made her stay by the window.

“Kendall!”

Phil moved around the island, trying to peer through the silk foliage. He was no better than Shannon, he thought. The idea crossed his mind that he was perhaps even worse. She’d abandoned her family of her own volition, she had some autonomy; he’d lost the only thing that mattered to him because of his stupidity, his negligence.

Kendall had told the bus driver that she needed to go potty, so Phil entered the men’s restroom. It seemed deserted. He dropped to the ground, crawling on the floor, checking for shoes in the stalls. No one was there, and Phil’s vision blurred as he stood. He turned to the door, bent over the trashcan, and vomited before leaving the restroom.

“Kendall.” His voice was hoarse, defeated. He had no idea if the bus was still there, but it didn’t matter. He didn’t want to leave, didn’t have anything to leave for. “Daddy.”
She was on the other side of the island.

“Daddy, I went potty in the girl's room!” She stood alone; there was no sign that there had ever been a woman with her, and Phil figured that she must have just exited the bus with a cluster of people who didn't notice she was unaccompanied. Kendall beamed at him, clearly proud of her accomplishment. The elastic had fallen out of her hair, which was sticking up at odd angles. He thought she must have helped herself to a juice box, because she had red stains around her mouth and down the front of her dress. Still, this was the most beautiful moment Phil could ever remember.

He jumped down from the wall and lifted her into his arms, squeezing her thin body close to his chest, and carried her back to the bus. They reclaimed their seats, and Phil put Kendall next to the window. As she drifted off to sleep next to him, he picked up her backpack and took out the Bible. He inhaled and flipped through it, looking for the money. Even as he rifled through its pages, though, he knew it was no use: the Bible was empty, and probably had been for some time.
COFFEE AND CIGARETTES

The sunlight entered the room in vertical lines through the spaces between the blinds and Elise turned over in bed to block it out. She stretched her back and inched her feet back behind her, searching for a cool spot between her new pink and white polka dotted cotton sheets, the first set she’d ever purchased just for herself. When she found one, which was easier now that she was no longer sharing her bed with Jackson, she stopped, even though she knew it would only be a matter of minutes before she had to start feeling for a new cool spot. She looked at the alarm clock on the end table. Two thirty. She sighed and stretched her arms above her head, swung her legs to the floor, and tiptoed across her new floral rug toward the bedroom door. She opened it a crack and peeked around it, searching the narrow hallway for signs of intruders. When she was sure she was alone, she left the confines of her bedroom and creaked across the old wooden floorboards and into the peach tiled bathroom.

Nine months into their eighteen-month lease, after a prolonged discussion, Jackson had taken up residence what had once been their office, the apartment’s extra bedroom. Bringing up his moving had been the most difficult moment of Elise’s life, not because she was worried about hurting Jackson, but because she
knew she had no rational reason to make the request. For months, she had been feeling that their relationship was becoming stagnant. There was nothing in particular that brought on the conversation. Jackson had no glaring flaws and was, generally speaking, a good boyfriend, but each day, Elise began to think more and more that he was a good boyfriend for someone else, not for her. She had acquired a terminal sense of ennui with the relationship, and she and Jackson had fallen into what she began to see as an increasingly alarming reliance on routine.

“Do you ever get bored?” she had asked Jackson one night while folding her laundry.

“With what?” he asked, carefully folding a pair of his dress socks into a neat rectangle and setting it aside. Elise had given up folding Jackson’s clothes early into the relationship; no matter how carefully she tried to align the bottoms of his pantlegs and the sleeves of his t-shirts, the seams never matched up correctly and the finished product was always left looking so misshapen that Jackson would redo her work when he thought she wasn’t looking. She eventually caught on and refused to participate in what she saw as a wasted venture. As time wore on, she began to hate him for the precise manner in which he folded his clothes, and she didn’t know why it bothered her so much.

“I don’t know. Anything. Never going out, staying in the apartment all the time. Don’t you get sick of me?” She took a pair of her own socks and balled them together, pulling the top of one sock so that it covered its mate. She tossed the ball toward the white plastic laundry basket. It grazed the corner and landed on the carpet behind the basket.
“You missed,” he said. Elise looked away from him and rolled her eyes, wondering why he had felt the need to point out something so obvious. “You know I don’t get bored,” he added, biting his lip in a display of concern. “Why? What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know,” she said, scooping up a pile of her unfolded underwear and dropping it into the laundry basket. She wondered, for a moment, if she was creating problems where none existed, if this was the way all relationships eventually became. She had never spent enough time with anyone to know if this was a deeper stage of love, one she hadn’t anticipated, or if there really was cause for concern. “Do you know that in the three years we’ve been together, we’ve never had a fight?”

“Do you see that as a problem?” His mouth tightened further and his eyes were narrowed in confusion. “I always thought that meant we were compatible.”

Elise did see it as a problem, but she recognized how crazy she would have sounded if she had told him that she found fighting to be an essential part of a relationship, a test of the strength of their bond. Previously, she had vowed never to marry anyone without first fighting with him, and she realized that in an unspoken way, she and Jackson were headed toward marriage: he had never broken up with anyone he had dated, and she was too scared to admit that she was reconsidering their relationship. “I just mean that we don’t do anything anymore,” she said. “We don’t go out.”

“We never did, and it never seemed to bother you before.”

It was true; she had been at the very least satisfied for the majority of their relationship, and she only had vague ideas as to why she had a small but constantly
growing sense of dread every time she had to come home from class and see
Jackson. During the course of their relationship, Elise had lost touch with all her old
friends, and when she and Jackson moved for law school, she had neglected to make
new ones. Jackson himself admitted that he had never in his post-high school life
had a social circle outside of whomever he happened to be dating at the time; he
preferred to spend his time at home reading and finding flawed logic in John
Grisham novels or watching the box set of M*A*S*H DVDs his mother had bought him
for his seventeenth birthday. He had few interests or hobbies; he had always said
that keeping up with music was too exhausting, sporting events were too expensive
to attend and sports themselves too tough to follow, and he had neither the eye nor
the patience for appreciating or creating visual art. While this lifestyle had initially
satisfied Elise—in the initial months of their relationship, and again for the first year
they lived together, she couldn’t get enough of him, and living for nothing but one
another had originally seemed to her to be downright romantic—she was becoming
increasingly aware that she wanted a dramatic change in her life, something to make
her feel as excited as the once-consumptive nature of their relationship had done.

They discussed the merits and detriments of their relationship for hours and
never come to any sort of a conclusion. Elise thought that Jackson was dispassionate,
while Jackson thought that their relationship was perfect and that Elise was trying to
create problems where none existed. Even when she got red-faced and loud, trying
to make him see how important that it was to her that they broke free of their
breakfast-dinner-sit-on-the-couch routine, he remained calm, convinced that it was
a phase, something they could move past. Two weeks later, when nothing had
changed and Elise decided to start sleeping on the couch, Jackson offered to let her keep the bedroom, and within the hour, they had moved his clothes and some extra furniture into his office. They spent the next day scouring the internet for deals on secondhand bed frames, and after Elise helped him pick up a queen frame and its corresponding mattress from opposite ends of town, they had essentially stopped speaking to one another. There was no declaration that their relationship was over, no confirmation that either one of them was free to enter into anything else, but it was obvious that they were broken up, that the relationship was unsalvageable, and Elise tried to see the ordeal as a test of her independence instead of focusing on the fact that, for the first time in her life, she was alone and growing lonely.

That had all been three months earlier; now, Jackson was getting ready to move out of their apartment and in with his new girlfriend, Laura, and Elise was trying to stay out of his way. She didn’t want to see the boxes that now contained half of the mementos of their life together and didn’t want to think about how easily she had been replaced, even though the demise of their relationship had been at least fifty percent her fault. She had yet to meet Laura, and she didn’t want to have to; as soon as Elise had lost Jackson for good to someone else, she had begun to miss him acutely and to idealize their relationship, remembering how he’d bring her coffee in bed every morning with the perfect ratio of cream and sugar and how when they cuddled on the couch, her head seemed to fit perfectly into the spot where his shoulders met his neck. It didn’t help that he was being impossibly good to her when it came to dealing with the issue of their lease: he had agreed to pay his share of the rent until Elise was able to find a suitable roommate. She hadn’t yet begun to look.
Elise shuffled into the slowly emptying kitchen, maneuvering herself around boxes. Some were sealed; some were still in the process of being packed. The bottom of Elise’s feet were collecting the dust and grime that had accumulated on the hardwood floors during the past several days, and she realized that she had never mopped the floor before. She wondered whether Jackson’s move was for the best, if it would somehow make her become more grown-up or if she was already grown up and it was normal to not know how to perform certain chores. Elise dumped out the stale coffee Jackson had made that morning and left on the burner and she started brewing her own. As she waited for the pot to finish, Elise thought she may as well run the dishwasher, but when she opened it, she found it had already been run and unloaded. She turned one of the high kitchen chairs away from the island and dragged it toward coffee maker, resting her elbows on the counter and staring into the glass coffeepot, watching the black-brown liquid dribble into the vessel and willing it to fill more quickly.

While she sat absorbed in her effort to communicate telepathically with the Mr. Coffee, she failed to hear the jangle of the keys against the door, or the clicking as it unlocked. The door opened and Elise whipped her head around. In walked Jackson with a tall, thin blond girl, who Elise assumed had to be Laura.

“Oh, oops!” she heard Jackson say. “We thought you’d be gone by now.”

Elise shrugged. “Sorry to disappoint.” She turned her attention back toward the counter, deciding that if she ignored them, they would realize that she wanted them to leave her alone.
The coffeepot made one last gurgle and the final drops filtered through the paper. Elise stood up, pushed the chair back and grabbed a mug from the cabinet.

“Oh, cool, you made coffee,” Jackson said, moving to Elise’s side of the island.

“Laura, do you want some coffee?”

“Sure.” The girl made her way into the kitchen. Elise turned and looked at her, curious despite her desire to be ignored. Laura could have passed for Albino, with alabaster skin and white-blonde hair, while Elise had darker features: wide-set brown eyes and thick dark hair. Laura had a good four inches on Elise height-wise, but didn’t seem to be any wider; if Elise was slim, Laura was frail. In spite of these differences, Elise felt as though she were looking into a mirror. Had Elise not been wearing pajamas, she would have been dressed nearly identical to Laura, who wore the same tight black pants and long slim-cut white t-shirt that had been Elise’s uniform for the past several years. There were differences, of course: Laura was wearing green flats while Elise preferred red pumps, but overall, the similarities in their style of dress were jarring to Elise, who was still not fully awake enough to consider the fact—which later occurred to her—that the outfit was basic and countless other girls dressed the same way every day. Instead she was both unnerved offended that Jackson had tried and succeeded in finding a more attractive carbon copy of herself, and Elise wondered if she should be worried that he wasn’t yet over their relationship, or worse, worried that Laura was somehow trying to be like her in an attempt to keep Jackson’s attention. Elise shook off the thought, reached into the cabinet, and brought down a mug for Laura, who smiled politely and thanked her.
Jackson came into the kitchen and got the creamer from the refrigerator. Elise put two teaspoons of sugar into her mug then waited for Laura to finish with the creamer.

“I usually put three spoons of sugar in yours,” Jackson said.

Elise rolled her eyes. “No wonder it’s too sweet then.”

Jackson shrugged and turned to attend to Laura, who seemed to have absolutely no problem at all making her own cup of coffee, and as soon as Elise was sure Jackson couldn’t see her, she added an extra spoonful of sugar into her mug. She poured in the coffee, then grabbed the creamer from the island and added it until the concoction in the mug looked to be the right color. She took a sip, and struggled to maintain her composure. It was simultaneously too sweet and too bitter. The only way she knew to remedy the mistake would be to add more creamer, and perhaps even more coffee, but she wasn’t sure which option—if either—was correct. Elise realized that at this point, Jackson would never make coffee for her again, and she wished that he would do it just one more time, a ceremonial last coffee, but she wasn’t going to ask him to do it. At that moment, the loss of enjoyable coffee seemed to Elise to be the saddest part about the demise of her relationship with Jackson. She choked the coffee down quickly in big long gulps, hoping to finish the entire mug without tasting any of its contents again. She kept it close to her mouth, figuring that if she was so obviously absorbed in drinking her coffee, no one would try to engage her in conversation.

“So,” Laura began, her watery blue eyes focused somewhere on the cabinet above Elise’s head.
“Yes?” Elise said. The coffee mug was now empty, but she held onto it, contemplating whether or not she could convincingly pretend there was still coffee in it. She had never been very good at lying or, but she wondered if her desperation to leave the situation would—by some magical force—propel her into a nuanced performance. Even as she wondered how long she could maintain the façade, she knew that she was about to be pulled into a conversation and she wouldn’t do anything to stop it.

“What do you do?” Laura’s face betrayed no emotion whatsoever, but Elise could hear her foot tapping rapidly against the front of the island.

“I’m in school,” Elise said.

“Oh, yeah, me too,” Laura said. “But what do you do?” Her foot was moving faster, and there was a part of Elise that wanted to go to the other side of the Island and break Laura’s leg.

“I’m in law school.” Elise said, wondering if maybe she hadn’t been clear enough the first time.

“Oh.” She wrinkled her nose. “What are you going to do with that?”

“I suppose I’ll become a lawyer,” Elise said, turning away from Laura to put her mug in the sink. The truth was that Elise didn’t know what she wanted to do after she got her J.D., but during her senior year of college, she’d found herself panicked about what she was going to do with her philosophy degree. Law school had seemed like a smart option and a logical progression, but Elise found herself increasingly unhappy with her decision as the semesters wore on. She was in the beginning of her third year and had no interest in finding a job with a law firm post-
graduation, but was already so in debt from paying for school that it seemed pointless not to finish.

“What kind of lawyer, though?” Laura stared at the coffee pot as she asked, a serene, bland smile on her face.

“I don’t know,” Elise said, turning the water on. She tried to remember the last time she’d washed a dish by hand and couldn’t remember doing it after her sophomore year of college, the last time she’d lived in a dorm. “What do you do?”

“Art,” Laura said, tapping her fingers on the formica countertop. “Do you want help with the dishes?”

“No, it’s just this one,” Elise said, pouring what she soon realized was too much dish soap into the mug. “So, do you draw or paint or what?”

“No, I do sculpture.”

Elise tried to imagine the wiry girl sitting across from her working with metals, hauling scraps across a studio and welding them together, and found it inconceivable. She wondered if Jackson had seen her work, and what he’d said to her about it. The one time Elise had managed to drag him to an art museum, he’d gone through without absorbing anything. When she tried to speak with him about it afterward, the only part of the exhibit he could remember was a large nude painting of an exceedingly fat woman, and the only thing he had to say about it was that it was “kind of gross.”

When Elise failed to respond, Laura took out a pack of American Spirits and started tapping it on the countertop. She took one out and absently rolled it between her thumb and her forefinger.
“Oh, no, honey, don’t smoke in the apartment!” Jackson looked horrified.

Elise’s heart started beating harder at the sound of the word “honey,” at first believing that it had been intended for her and feeling torn about it; she wasn’t sure whether she wanted him to be referring to her that way or not. When she realized that he was referring to Laura, she felt an unexpected wave of disappointment and a pull in her chest that was, to her, unwarranted; after all, she had been the one to call for the dissolution of their relationship in the first place. She wasn’t sure that he had the right to reuse his pet name for her, but realized it would be uncouth to bring it up.

“What?” Laura looked at Jackson, startled. It was as though she had never before been told that smoking was, on occasion, inappropriate.

“It’s just... Elise is allergic to cigarette smoke!” Jackson grabbed Elise’s arm as he said this, pulling her in front of him, as though he planned to use her to deflect any objects that Laura may have seen fit to throw his way.

It wasn’t true. Elise wasn’t allergic to smoke, didn’t mind being around smoke, and had, once upon a time, as a teenager, even been a part one of those rare breeds of people who were social smokers. She didn’t have a habit in the least, but she liked the way that having a beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other made her feel like she was in the prime of her youth, like she was eschewing the rules of social propriety and embodying a cliché of young rebellion, and she liked the fact that she had always seemed to take to smoking naturally. She had never coughed or thrown up while smoking, as some of her friends had done, but instead, she savored the feel of the smoke as she took it into her lungs. She would often imagine she was
playing a role in a teen movie, and years later, she wondered if the fact that she had once imagined her life as part of a movie had kept her from fully experiencing her youth.

“I’m fine,” Elise said, smiling at Jackson. “When we met, I was smoking,” she said to Laura. “He just doesn’t seem to remember that part.” It was true; they had met outside before a meeting for their school’s moot court team during their senior year of college. Elise, who was unsure about joining moot court, had shown up to the meeting after four vodka tonics and decided to smoke a cigarette she bummed from a friend to calm her nerves and help her sober up before she entered the building. Jackson, as he walked by, had touched her on the shoulder and said, “You know those will kill you, right?” At the time, she had thought that he was being funny and, as a result, began to flirt with him. Later, she realized that he had been sincere; he had repeated the exact same phrase to countless smokers during the course of their relationship, and Elise had always wondered whether it was because he was concerned or because he liked to remind people of his superiority.

“You really don’t mind?” As Laura said this, the color began to drain from Jackson’s face. Elise knew he hated being around smokers and saw people who had the habit as being psychologically weak. She hadn’t realized that once he was gone, she’d be allowed to flout the rules once again, and the prospect of this excited her.

“I thought you were trying to quit,” Jackson said, his jaw set and his eyes hard.

“I bought you those patches. And that gum!”

Laura shrugged. “I’m a little tense, that’s all.”
Elise grabbed a yellow soup bowl from the cupboard. “You can drop your ashes in here.”

Laura smiled and grabbed the bowl from Elise.

Elise sat down next to Laura and jerked her head toward the pack, looking Jackson in the eye. “Do you mind if I—“

“Oh, yeah, sure,” Laura said, holding the open pack toward Elise.

Elise took out a cigarette, lit it, and grinned and waved at Jackson, who was turning red. She willed herself not to cough as she inhaled, and tried not to notice how much more difficult it was for her to enjoy smoking without the aid of alcohol. She tried unsuccessfully to blow a smoke ring, and watched as the plume rose in front of her and disappeared into the oven fan, which Jackson had turned on in what Elise knew was an effort to maintain his unfaltering composure. The three of them sat in silence for a few moments, Laura and Elise smoking and not looking at one another. Jackson disappeared down the hall, and Elise wondered whether it would be appropriate to leave the apartment or if it was her duty to play hostess to Laura, since Jackson didn’t seem interested in keeping her entertained during their visit. Laura started kicking against the island again, and Elise knew she’d missed her chance to escape.

“So you like Bob Dylan?” Laura gestured to the old t-shirt Elise used as a nightgown.

Elise nodded. “Yeah, but this was my dad’s shirt. I mostly wear it because it’s comfortable, but I like Dylan.”
“Oh, cool. Yeah, I like music. Mostly newer stuff, though. I go to a lot of shows.” She flicked her ashes into the bowl. “Well, I did, but Jax won't go with me, and it’s pretty lame to go alone. I'm trying to convert him.” She smiled over at Jackson.

Elise stifled a smirk at the shortening of Jackson’s name. When they first began dating, Elise tried to call Jackson “Jack,” but he told her that he hated nicknames of any description and that he had been given his first name for a reason, though he failed to elaborate on what that reason was. “Good luck,” Elise said. “If it’s not Creedence Clearwater Revival, Jackson’s generally not interested.” Laura seemed impossibly young all of a sudden. Elise remembered when she was twenty-two and she’d thought she could alter Jackson's taste in music and movies. She had never been successful, and after she stopped trying, she had to resign herself to being forever outside the pop culture bubble within which she had once resided so happily. She wondered if she would have to get back into it, or if she was too old to start trying.

“You seem pretty cool,” Laura said. “If he broke up with you, I don't know how I stand a chance. He’s so smart, and he always wants to talk about lawyery things and I never know what to say to him.”

“You know he’s not a lawyer yet, right?” Elise was surprised that at that moment, she felt almost protective of Laura, given the situation.

“Yeah, but ‘yet’ is the key word there,” Laura said as Jackson returned to the room. She looked back at and gave him a tiny smile.
“Are you talking about me?” Jackson asked, coming up behind Laura at the island.

“Only good things,” Laura said. She was beaming at him now, and Jackson put his hand on her head and ruffled her hair, like a doting dog-owner would do when his poodle has done something particularly precious.

Elise stubbed her cigarette into the bowl and stood up. “Yeah, well. I need more coffee. Would you like some?”

“No, I’m jittery.”

“We’d better go, anyway. If you want to grab some boxes, Laur, we’ll take them down to the car.”

Elise breathed a barely audible sigh of relief. By the end of the week, he would be gone and she would finally be alone. She could handle a few more days of coffee and stifled conversation, but she knew that from now on she would wait for the coffee to brew in her room and avoid making any sort of overture to hospitality.

“It was nice meeting you,” Laura said, sticking her hand out.

“Yeah,” Elise said.

“Maybe we could go to a show sometime,” she said as they shook hands. “I mean it.” She smiled. Elise just nodded, trying to remain noncommittal and knowing it would never happen even if she wanted it to, that as soon as Jackson was gone, Laura would be trapped in the same love nest that Elise had spent the last few years enduring. She waved as they walked out, and exhaled forcefully as the door clicked shut.
After they left, Elise prepared her coffee. She put in two spoons of sugar this time, and covered the bottom of the mug with creamer before pouring the coffee in, in case that made any difference in the flavor. It didn’t. It still tasted terrible, and she thought she’d just have to get used to drinking terrible coffee from now on.
“You're not wearing the jeans I bought you. Did you outgrow them? You don’t look any bigger.” I winced at the last bit. It was possible that my mother couldn’t tell, but I knew that over the past two weeks, I had gained precisely three pounds and twelve ounces of what I assumed was fat, since they didn't allow exercise at Hopesong, and I felt every ounce of it adhering more strongly to my frame as she studied me.

“You're coming to lunch with me, right?” I looked away as I said this, hoping she would forget about the pants.

“Yeah. Where are your jeans? I want to see them on.”

I felt my face get hot. “We’re not supposed to wear jeans in the cafeteria.”

“That doesn’t make any sense at all.”

“Well, you know... pockets.”

She stood, silent for a moment. I knew she was considering what I had said, and trying to discern what I meant. I couldn’t bring myself to say outright that the staff was afraid we would rather shove what passed for food here into our pants pockets than actually consume it. I didn’t want to say it, because even as I contemplated the scenario and recognized that objectively, it seemed ridiculous, I also saw that course of action as a distinct possibility, a favorable option, really. It
wouldn’t have been the first time I’d attempted to get rid of the food on my plate by stashing it somewhere unconventional; I had, at one point, kept a large purse with me at all times for discreet disposal. I tried to give her what I thought would be a meaningful look.

“Have you painted me any more pictures?”

“Yeah, some.” I wasn’t sure if she’d been able to figure out the reason I was banned from wearing jeans, but I was too relieved that she had dropped the subject to ask.

“Anything interesting?”

“I finished a femur and a patella yesterday.”

“So you’re still on this bones kick?”

“I suppose I am.”

This was true; I had a thing for bones. It started two years ago with a movement, a glimpse of flesh in the mirror. I was rummaging through the medicine cabinet, searching for some aspirin when the reflection caught my attention: a hint of bone trying to slice through the flesh in my lower abdomen while I reached upwards. As I relaxed my position, it receded, escaped beneath the blubber that accumulated around my midsection. Later that evening, in my bra and underwear, I stood in front of the full length mirror in my room, pulling my skin taut, moving my legs from side to side, trying to recreate the same graceful movement of cooperating parts I had witnessed earlier, but it was never as intoxicating as it had been when the exposure happened spontaneously.
The next day, I checked an anatomy book out of the library and spent my spare hours poring over its contents. Muscles and organs didn’t attract me—they were too red, too soft, too prone to rupturing and pulling and bruising—but I was enamored with the sturdiness and cleanliness of bones. They seemed, in some ways, more functional than organs, and though I knew rationally this was untrue, there was something fascinating and reassuring about the fact that bones remain long after the body decomposes. I learned them all by name, became acquainted with the roles and junctions of each. In the bus on the way to school, I would sit, touching my face, my arms, my legs and back, calling each bone by name internally or under my breath, digging my fingers into my skin in an attempt to touch them all. I wanted to know each one better, see them all more clearly. The ilium was still my favorite, my first love, but it was flighty, and only showed itself when I manipulated my body to see it. The clavicle was easier, the tart of the group, an exhibitionist. It was like a one night stand: fun at the time, but ultimately unfulfilling. I spent hours consumed by the desire to see more, so I did what seemed most logical: I went on a diet.

Mom didn’t understand that the bones were really the root of the matter, the reason why she had started finding whole pork chops wrapped in napkins in the garbage can after dinner; what she knew was that since I started at Hopesong, I occasionally sent her paintings, and that they were always done in the same vein: black background, white bone. I generally gave them titles that I thought would please the art therapists, things like “My Secret Pain” or “My Ultimate Goal Weight,” but in reality I didn’t find any sense of release in painting them. At this point, they
were the only tangible thing I knew how to depict, and I didn't see any point in painting something if I couldn't do it well.

At home, Mom had a collection of my paintings. We were supposed to keep them with us, to reflect on them and be able to see our progress toward healthy and balanced lives, but I managed to steal nearly half of mine away. The art therapists never noticed, because they were largely unaware of the complexities of the human form and therefore unable to tell my paintings apart; to most people, one bone suspended in space looks like another; to the untrained eye, a humerus, looks exactly like a femur when neither is given context; rib one looks like rib seven; and aside from the atlas and axis, vertebrae are difficult to tell apart. I didn’t feel guilty about my covert operations, because Mom needed the pictures more than I did. She had a subterfuge to maintain, whereas I had nothing but an indefinite amount of time to create more paintings that were of no use to me. A few weeks after I was forced to come here, my mother told everyone I was going to SCAD, I suppose because it's easier to tell people that your daughter is in art school than to tell them, “My daughter deferred from Wesleyan for a year to spend some quality time in an eating disorder clinic.” I didn’t want to make things even more difficult on her than they already were, so I sent her my paintings, she showed them to people who seemed interested in what I was doing with my life, and as far as I know, no one was suspicious.

“What's for lunch?”

“Today? It’s pizza day.” One of the strange things about being in Hopesong was that everyone had the weekly menu memorized the day it came out. Aside from
the compulsive overeaters, no one wanted to do so much as look at the food, but our lives still stayed focused on our meals. For us, it was imperative that we knew our enemies.

“That doesn’t sound very healthy.” She looked disappointed.

“No. It’s not.” I don’t know when she decided that our meals were supposed to be healthy; most of us were here in order to gain enough weight to be told that we were free to go home, at which point we would immediately start dieting again. We took classes during which we ostensibly learned about proper nutrition, but the cafeteria didn’t seem particularly invested in using fat, salt, or sugar sparingly.

“I thought you were supposed to be learning balance here.”

“I suppose they’ll balance it with other things. Fruit, vegetables.”

“I don’t really like pizza.”

“You’re Italian.”

“So are you, and you don’t even like to eat.”

“Touche.” This wasn’t really true, of course. The problem was that I loved eating too much and as a result, I needed to curb my habit. This had led, not to a hatred of eating, but to what I had at first deemed a healthy fear of it. Over time, I managed to convince myself that it was a disgusting process: stick something in your mouth, grind it up and mix it with enzymes, push it through a tube into your stomach, where it’s churned with acid, and the rest is even worse. The more disturbed I became by my theory on consumption, the less I put it into practice. Once I started seeing results, it became easier; my rib cage and sternum poked out more readily, and I no longer had to dig my finger through bruised flesh to find my
hipbone. If I gently prodded at it, it confirmed its presence. This was what got me through most days: the recognition that I was inching ever closer to perfection. It wasn't an ideal of thinness for me, but an intense desire to become what I loved most, what I found interesting. I never experienced the same heady, elated rush the other girls described when they were finally able to fit into smaller jeans, but I lived for those spare moments in front of the mirror when I could compare myself to the anatomical models I'd studied so voraciously. There were rare, triumphant moments when I looked down at my forearm and I could have sworn I saw the distinction between the radius and the ulna, and thought that I could see the physical separation in spite of my flesh and muscles made me happier than any pant size ever could.

I led Mom down the corridor to the cafeteria. Her high heels made a rhythmic clop-clop, clop-clop on the linoleum, and I felt slovenly in my pink polyester slippers and yoga pants. Even in the harsh fluorescent light, her makeup was flawless. It had been days since I'd bothered to even contemplate washing my face; next to her, I looked like an oily, anemic plucked bird. New hair had slowly started to infiltrate my scalp, but there were still vast patches of my head that resembled the Arctic tundra. It was one of the physical effects I hadn't anticipated, losing the hair on my head, seeing it grow in previously bare stretches of skin on my back, stomach and arms. I tugged at the sleeves of my cardigan to make sure they covered my wrists, hoping my mother hadn't noticed any stray hairs on my exposed skin.
“Here we are.” I ushered her through the open double doors and she followed me to the front of the cafeteria.

The cafeteria at Hopesong was set up to look like a buffet, but patrons were only allowed on one side. The other was occupied by the servers, who doled out sizable helpings to every patient. Like a buffet, there were options, but they were limited, and all our meals had to meet certain criteria, the most stringently observed being that we all had to have every food group represented on each of our trays before we were allowed to sit down. We were only allowed one napkin per meal, another precaution against concealing our uneaten refuse. When I checked in, I had told the nutritionists that I was a vegetarian because I thought the meals would be lighter, but I soon realized that they found a way to sneak calories in. Today, for instance, to compensate for the absence of pepperoni and sausage, the vegetarian pizza was laden with at least twice as much cheese as the meat pizza.

We sat down at a round chipboard table in the back corner next to Cara, who had been at Hopesong for five weeks and fascinated me. In group therapy, she told us that before she checked into the clinic, she had been surviving on black coffee and a serving spoon full of mashed potatoes a day. Every morning, after she woke up, she would fill the serving spoon with prepared instant mashed potatoes, and if she felt like she needed to eat, she would take one of her two year old son’s silver baby spoons and eat a single leveled spoonful, then leave the kitchen until her hunger became unbearable again. Cara said that she’d began eating this way after her son was born, which led the therapists to conclude that she was suffering from post-partum depression. They had advised anti-depressants, but Cara said that she would
refuse to trust anyone who implied that her son was causing her pain and that really, all of this was because she happened to dislike chewing, and she didn’t like the implication that she was depressed simply because her preferences happened to be different from everyone else’s. I tended to agree more with the therapists, but there was something about Cara that made me want to know her, because her reasons for not wanting to eat—like mine—seemed to be different from most of the others. The other reason I was interested in her chewing aversion was that I felt like it fit in with my view of eating as a disgusting process and I hoped that we would be able to discuss it one day and perhaps form a friendship based on our respective theories of starvation and consumption. Perhaps because she was new, Cara still found it difficult to eat anything that wasn’t pureed, and kept her utensils limited to a spoon and a knife only when absolutely necessary.

“Cara, this is my mom. Mom, this is Cara. She’s in therapy with me, and she has a two-year-old son named Charlie.” I felt that it was important to mention Cara’s son, even though she rarely spoke about him outside therapy; I wanted her to know that I listened to what she said.

“Hi, Cara.” My mom smiled and sat between the two of us.

“I hate pizza.” Cara had tears in her eyes.

“So do I.” My mom stared down at her plate and appeared to be willing the pizza to vanish. I took a bite of my apple and chewed, imagining my teeth crushing all the calories out of it. I told myself that the more vigorously I chewed, the more energy I was burning.
“But you don't have to eat yours, Mrs. Martin.” There was a slight vibrato to Cara's voice. “Lane, do you know how many calories are in a piece of pizza?”

“Are you asking me, or are you trying to tell me?” Anorexia tends to be an arithmetical divertissement, so number talk was strictly prohibited anywhere on the Hopesong campus. I had a good idea what the answer was, but I wasn't going to tell her; if I had, the entire meal would have swiftly devolved into a game of comparing weight and average caloric intake. There was always a calculated one-upmanship included in such an exchange, and as a result I had learned never to trust an anorectic to tell the truth about anything. Cara could have told me that the slice of pizza contained five thousand calories and I would have believed her even though I knew it wasn't true, because for how much I dreaded eating it, the pizza may as well have been made of lard.

“I'm seriously asking you. I don't know, and it's freaking me out.”

“About two hundred fifty.” My mom had removed the cheese from her piece of pizza and placed it on her napkin, far removed from the rest of the food on her tray, but she still hadn't taken a bite.

“You shouldn't have said that.” Not only was she mistaken in her assessment—Mom had significantly underestimated—but she had also succeeded in scaring Cara further. To the average person, two hundred fifty calories is not significant, but to Cara, and to me for that matter, it was downright horrifying. I looked down at my plate for the first time and saw the pools of oil that had accumulated in the indentations between the shreds of cheese and I could see that same fat congealing inside me, the cells congregating around my midsection,
forming a gelatinous layer between my skin and my bones. I tried to spear two peas with my fork, and they instantly disintegrated, forming tiny particles that sank to the bottom of the liquid they were cooked in. “Cara, the peas are soft; you might like them.”

“I don’t like the color.”

“They look like they were canned.” Mom wrinkled her nose. She had a vendetta against all tinned vegetables; she said that the radiation used to preserve them gave them unnatural colors and they always tasted musty and probably caused cancer. I had never tried canned vegetables before I came to Hopesong, but they served them in myriad combinations here, and all were difficult to get accustomed to: the texture was inevitably too slippery, and without seeing what I was eating, the flavors of each variety were too subtle for me to be able to comfortably distinguish between them. I often believed that all I was tasting when I ate them was sodium and oil, with a hint of radioactivity.

“The peas taste all right.” It was a lie. I was never adept at encouraging the other patients to finish their food, but the more excited you seemed about eating, the more likely you were to be moved to a lower care level and thus receive less direct supervision. I was one level away from being allowed to finish my meals without having my tray combed for unfinished food, and I hoped that if I was able to convince Cara, who was a particularly difficult case, to eat, that I would be promoted right away.

“You haven’t even tried them.” Cara was biting her lip whimpering, looking down at the peas as though they were plotting to injure her.
“I did, see? My fork is in the bowl.”

“I don’t like peas.” She began to cry properly at this point.

“No one does, but if you crush them with your spoon, it will be just like eating mashed potatoes. They’re really soft, I promise.” I smashed the backside of my spoon onto my peas to demonstrate how malleable they were.

“It’s not the same, Lane, they’re green, and mashed potatoes are not green.”

“What about your applesauce? That looks good.” It looked horrifying, but I had never liked any applesauce that wasn’t homemade.

“It's too cold. And I can tell they added sugar.”

I didn’t dispute this; I was certain she was right, and that was the main reason I always asked for whole pieces of fruit: I knew that they could not have been tampered with in any way. There was a rumor that the vegetables were cooked in meat drippings, so I was always wary of them. Even though I was registered as a vegetarian, I didn’t trust the staff to adhere strictly to the rules; three weeks earlier, I had found what was certainly a piece of chicken in my black bean chili at dinner. When I pointed it out to a server, she tried to convince me it was tofu. On the days salad was available, I always opted for that instead, but even then I could never assuage myself of my obsessive fear that the lettuce had been sprayed with oil prior to serving.

“What happens if she doesn’t finish her meal?” Mom’s voice was hushed as she leaned over and asked this. She had now eaten half her orange, but her peas were pushed to the back of the tray alongside the unwanted cheese she had detached from her slice of pizza, which still sat whole on the plate.
“They won't allow her to leave the table until she eats it all.”

“Poor girl. No wonder she wants to starve herself. I can’t eat this either.”

“I don’t think that’s helping her.”

“I was trying to sympathize.”

“Don’t.” I nibbled at the corner of my pizza. It had gone cold, and the cheese was hard and rubbery in my mouth. I swallowed as much as I could without chewing, telling myself that the larger the pieces were, the less I would absorb from them, but even as I thought this, I swore I could see stomach expanding ever so slightly with each morsel I choked down. I worried for my ribcage, which had been visible without effort for so long, and my sternum, which was still apt to disappear on occasion. I didn’t want to lose it indefinitely.

Cara put her head on the table, her frail body heaving with sobs. I could see the delicate slope of her vertebra prominens protruding through her t-shirt, and I wanted to touch it, to run my finger along her spine like it was a keyboard and count her vertebrae, compare her slender back to mine, which seemed disappointingly sturdy. My mother had more developed reflexes and started rubbing Cara’s back before I’d even finished the thought. Instead, I took a bite of pizza crust and tried to imagine that I was eating celery instead, chewing it one hundred times before I swallowed and wondering if it would be harder to digest if I chewed it less. I wondered which burned more calories, chewing or digesting, and I was distraught that I didn’t know the answer and had no means of finding out. I took another, smaller bite and tried to swallow it whole.
“Shh, Cara. It’s okay. You’re okay, you’re beautiful.” Mom was leaning over Cara, running her hand from the top of Cara’s head down her back with her right arm and holding Cara close with her left, and I wondered why I had never received that level of sympathy. I picked the last bit of cheese off my pizza and tried to slide it down my throat.

“I just…don’t…want to eat it!” Cara’s words came out in hiccups.

“I know, sweetie, I know. But as soon as you finish it, you can leave. Won’t that be nice?” Mom leaned her face close to Cara’s. “Don’t you want to get up from the table?” In my childhood, there had been rules and rewards like this, and it had always been incentive enough for me to bolt down what was left on my plate. There were two things that my mother didn’t understand: first, she didn’t see that Cara would be more than willing to sit at the table until dinnertime with that same plate of food as long as she could get away with not eating it; and second, Cara wasn’t going to eat anything more than my mother already had. It was a competition to see who could eat the least, and Mom was unwittingly contributing to Cara’s determination to succeed by refusing to eat her own meal. I shoved the remains of my pizza into my mouth and chewed hastily, trying to leave it in as many large pieces as possible, my eyes watering with the effort it took to force the bulk down my esophagus.

Cara turned to Mom, eyes red and watery, black mascara smeared down her cheeks. “Help me.” It was barely a whisper. Across the table, I couldn’t hear her, but I could read her lips.

“I don’t know what I can do, sweetheart.”
“Please don’t make me eat it. Take it, please. Please take it. You can throw it out. Please.”

“Take what?”

“The pizza. All of it. Please take it.”

Mom looked at me and I shook my head. If I had to eat mine, Cara had to finish hers. I lowered my voice so that Cara couldn’t hear. “You need to eat. She won’t do it if you don’t.”

“Lane, I’m on a diet, I can’t.”

“Why can’t you just eat less later on? Cara needs to see you eat.”

“It’s not my responsibility to make sure she gets better. You, however, are my responsibility, and you ate.”

“I thought when you came here to eat lunch with me, you would eat lunch with me.”

“And I had every intention of doing just that, but I didn’t know what was on the menu when we made the arrangements.”

“I wasn’t aware that your wanting to visit me had conditions.” I knew I was being unfair, intentionally reading too much into what she was saying, but at the moment, I also didn’t care. A significant part of me wanted to hurt her, both for sending me here and for not caring enough about me or even Cara to eat one piece of pizza in solidarity; it had taken every bit of focus I had to finish mine, and she couldn’t eat hers even when she had the option of not eating anything for the rest of the day to balance it out.
“At least I come to see you. When was the last time you heard from your dad?”

I didn’t have an answer, but then, even if she had asked three years earlier, I wouldn’t have had an answer. He was a nonissue at this point, and I didn’t see the purpose of even broaching the subject. I looked across the table at Cara, who had stopped sobbing and was now staring intently at her lunch tray. She grabbed the sleeve of my mother’s jacket, twisting the extra fabric in her bony fingers. I tried to stop myself from looking down at my own hands, but the comparison had to be drawn. Her fingers were smaller, her phalanges more delicate.

“Please, Mrs. Martin. I can’t eat this. You understand. I’ll eat my dinner, but I just can’t eat this for lunch.”

My mother gave me one last determined look, then turned to Cara. “What do you want me to do, sweetie?”

“Can you throw my pizza away for me? I’ll eat my applesauce.”

“What about your peas? Will you eat your peas?” I was fairly certain that she and I had had this exact conversation countless times 13 years ago, but when I was six, I had been trying to convince her to let me have ice cream for dinner. More recently, she had used ice cream as an unsuccessful last resort to get me to eat anything at all, and I had done exactly what Cara was doing. I refused to eat it because she wouldn’t.

Cara hesitated. “Half the peas? And I can put the other half in your bowl.”

“Half the peas, then.” Mom smiled, reached over and moved Cara’s pizza onto her own tray, then picked up Cara’s bowl of peas and tilted it slightly toward her.
own, using a spoon to help transfer them into her bowl. "I want a good report from Lane later. I’m going to be checking up on you, making sure you eat those peas!" She stood, bent at the waist, and gave Cara a kiss on the forehead. “Take care, sweetie.” She rubbed the top of my head. “I have to go pick up some fish for dinner. Bye Lane. Love you.”

“That’s all? You’re going?” I wasn’t sure whether I wanted her to stay or not, but I wanted to be the one to tell her when it was time for her to leave.

“I told you, I have to go pick up some fish for dinner. I’ll be by next week.” She shrugged, waved, and turned on her heel and left.

Cara smiled up at her as she walked away, but I held my breath and stared straight ahead, raising my t-shirt slightly and running my fingers over my rib cage and my hips, making sure that they were buried no deeper under excess flesh than they had been before. I could feel the pizza sitting like a boulder in my stomach, but the bones were still there, still accessible. I exhaled and closed my eyes. I had infinite time here.
THE DATE

It takes the waitress seventeen minutes to come to our table, which means I've spent seventeen minutes of near silence with my thighs sticking to the red vinyl booth in the diner, scrutinizing the menu in an attempt to determine the choice least likely to make me look unattractive while I consume it. This is the truth: there are no meals I'm aware of that will actually make me look in any way pleasing while I eat them, especially not at diners. The filling falls out of omelets and onto my lap or shirt, pizza leaves behind strings of cheese that hang awkwardly out of my mouth and stick to my chin, and eating a burger requires opening my mouth so wide that I'm certain my jaw must appear unhinged to my companions and any other observers.

This is embarrassing enough when I'm alone or with my mother, but when I'm on a date, it's torture. Especially when I have a date whose online profile claims he likes “a girl who has an appetite,” because I can't just order salad. Or, I can, and then I spend the entire date feeling like I'm being scrutinized because I happen to like lettuce and carrots.

I'm not a fan of disposable plastic faux gingham tablecloths, but I think about complimenting the restaurant's décor as a means of defusing this very early, very strange tension that has fallen over the table, but I decide that it would seem at least
as disingenuous as it would actually be, so I decide that silence is the best course of action to keep this date on a successful trajectory.

I haven’t been on a date in four years. Longer than that, really. I haven’t dated anyone in four years, and my last relationship extended well beyond the phase in which we took each other out and actually enjoyed one another’s company, by which I mean he stopped enjoying my company, because loss of affection has never happened in the reverse for me. And now, here I am with this man from the internet, and he is sitting across from me, and all I can think about is whether or not the fact that this is a first date is obvious and whether or not our respective physiques are compatible.

We’ve exchanged pleasantries, introductions, everything that’s supposed to happen on a first date. He told me he thought my name was unusual, and I decided from that point that for him, this is a routine. Lane, while not the most common name in the world, is certainly not unusual. It must be something he says—to use a cliché—to all the girls. I don’t mind clichés per se, but it seems premature to be using that sort of material, so it seems that this is already going poorly.

He’s big. Not fat, really, but broad-shouldered and presumably well-muscled. I do know that I would not be surprised in the slightest to learn that he spends his spare time as a lumberjack. It doesn’t help that his name is Paul, and I keep thinking “Bunyan,” which makes me want to ask him where his blue ox is, but that would probably be impolite. His hair is black, and he has the beginnings of a beard. I don’t know if it’s because he hasn’t shaved or if it’s some sort of a fashion statement, if men make those. He isn’t unattractive, but he has at least a foot and I’m willing to
wager about a hundred and twenty-five pounds on me. I cannot for the life of me recall what it actually is he does for a living, because the word “lumberjack” keeps presenting itself in my mind. This turns into “flapjack,” and I think about ordering pancakes, but I know I’ll just end up becoming the victim of some sort of imitation maple syrup-induced disaster, so I reconsider.

“Could I please have grilled cheese with a cup of tomato soup?” I say. It may or may not be a safe option; I can’t tell.

“French fries or onion rings?” the waitress asks. She’s monotone, as though she’s on autopilot, which I assume she probably is.

“Fries,” I say. Fries are easy if they don’t have toppings.

“And for you?”

“A reuben, onion rings, and can I get a chocolate shake?” He smiles at the waitress, who scribbles furiously on her blue notepad, then turns back toward the kitchen. I watch her as she leaves. One of her white stockings has fallen, leaving her knee and half her calf exposed. I wonder if I should tell her, or if she is already aware.

“It took you a pretty long time to just decide on grilled cheese and tomato soup,” he says, raising an eyebrow slightly. His eyebrows are thick, like wooly bear caterpillars.

“There was a lot that sounded good,” I say. “I changed my mind a few times, but I figure you can never go wrong with grilled cheese.” I wonder if this is even good date conversation. We’ve barely spoken since we got here—separately, as I insisted—and all I can do is give bland commentary on a decision that he sees as
lacking imagination. It's been too long. I've rendered myself completely undateable, and I should probably just adopt some cats and complete my transition into reclusive spinsterhood before I make an even bigger fool of myself.

“I don't know, I've had some pretty bad grilled cheese,” he says. I want to say, “Well hooray for you,” but I refrain, because part of me wants this to work.

“What do you do for a living?” I realize it’s a complete non-sequitur, but on a date, where I will be eating food shortly, the last thing I want to do is discuss failures to execute the meal I am about to be eating and supposedly enjoying. If we delve further into this topic, I will only be able to concentrate on what may have gone awry in the preparation of my dinner, what the cooks and waitresses are hiding about—or even in—my sandwich. Or my fries, or my soup. This is better. Plus, I need to stop associating him with axe-wielding, flannel-clad American folk heroes.

“Oh, I thought it said on my profile. I’m a middle school math teacher. And I coach the football team.”

“The middle school football team?”

“Yeah, the eighth grade team,” he says. “Go Panthers!” He punches his fist in the air lightly, and I can't tell if it’s meant to be facetious, or if he is genuinely excited about the team and/or his coaching of it.

“I never really participated in any sports or extracurricular activities.”

“None at all? I mean, I can see the no sports stuff, you don't seem really sporty, but you didn't debate or anything?”
“I don’t think my school had a debate team.” Under the table, I start tearing my napkin into pieces. First in half, then in quarters, then eighths, then haphazard shapes.

“But you went to one of those smart colleges, right? A selective one, I mean. They like activities.”

“I went to art school.” I can’t let the napkin remnants flutter to the floor. I can’t make a mess for the staff to clean up. I start rolling them into little paper balls and put them into my purse, one at a time.

“Oh. I thought you went to Harvard or something.”

“No.”

“That must have been someone else.” He moves his lips to the side in a way that I assume means he’s thinking, trying to figure out who it is he knows who went to Harvard or something. Some other woman, I’m sure. Maybe someone he’s going on a date with tomorrow. I wonder how many women he’s dated.

“It must have been.” My ex went to Princeton, which I assume would fit into Paul’s definition of a “smart college,” but I also know that this is completely taboo to mention during a first date.

“So you’re a graphic designer, right?” he asks. “What’s that like?”

“It’s a living.” The truth is, it’s barely that, but I enjoy it as more than I enjoy anything else, and it keeps me busy.

“You don’t sound too happy about it.” He cocks his head to the side as he says this, like he’s a therapist. He looks genuinely concerned, as though somehow in the twenty-six minutes we’ve known each other, he has already found himself genuinely
caring about me. So he must do this a lot. He convinces his conquests that he cares then lures them back to his lumberjack cabin.

“I am. It’s just not much to talk about. Sometimes I work in my office, sometimes I stay at home in my pajamas and draw and paint. That’s really all there is to it.”

The waitress comes and sets Paul’s milkshake on the table. Her sock is still in disarray. Paul doesn’t thank her, but pulls the milkshake toward himself and takes a sip. Not through the straw, but straight from the glass. He leaves the straw in the glass, and it nudges his forehead as he drinks. I have never before seen anyone drink a milkshake like this, and part of me hopes that the straw leaves a tiny pink half moon on his forehead. It doesn’t, and I find this more disappointing than I would have expected.

“Well, what do you design for?” he says, wiping the milkshake from his upper lip.

“I’ve done a lot of anatomy textbooks,” I say. “I’ve lost count of how many skeletons I’ve drawn over the years.”

“Oh. And that interests you?”

I cannot explain this to him. If I tell him that I spent three years of my life thinking about little else, that bones were once the most important thing in my life, he will think I am unhinged, which will confirm my suspicions that I am in fact, not sane, and everything will be ruined. “I find it fascinating, yes.” So fascinating that I spent a year studying biology and anatomy and physiology after I graduated from Pratt so that I would be qualified to draw bones, specifically.
“Different strokes, I guess.”

“I suppose.” At this moment, I want the grilled cheese to materialize in front of me, for somebody to drop a tray, for a waitress to accidentally pour hot coffee into a patron’s lap. Anything to end this conversation.

“Tell me about your family,” he says, leaning forward.

“I have a mother.”

“Is that it?” There’s milkshake in his beard, and I’m not sure if I’m supposed to tell him or not. I elect not to, because it means that there is the potential that neither of us will end up embarrassed. If I mention it, I know for a fact that I will get flustered, and I run the risk of making him feel the same. If I pretend not to notice and he really doesn’t notice, it’s better for everybody.

“Yes.”

“Well, are you close?” The way he puts emphasis on the word “close” nearly makes me wince. He seems to indicate that this follow-up question should not exist, that I should just volunteer this intimate information.

“Very. She’s my best friend.” I put my hair behind my ears, little chunks at a time, because my sandwich isn’t here yet, and I don’t know what else to do with my hands. I can’t tell him that my mother is very nearly my only friend, and that’s only because she inserts herself into every possible facet of my life in spite of the fact that she currently lives over two hundred miles away.

“That’s good to hear,” he says, and I notice his body recline ever so slightly. I can’t tell if he’s relaxed or trying to distance himself from me, and I’m not really sure which I’d prefer.
If he knew me better, he wouldn't think this was good news, not in the slightest. Part of me wants to tell him right now, “If this ends up progressing into a relationship, she will never leave you alone. She will call you every day, at least once a day, to check up on me, and she will expect you to have ready at all times a list of everything I’ve eaten during the day.” It's happened before.

It's a thought process, a memory of a sequence of events I've been trying to avoid all evening, but it's inescapable now, like I knew it would be eventually. Dan and my mom. The ending of the future I believed would exist, the suddenness of being alone.

It was mid-October, and Dan, as a surprise, had decided to prepare dinner that evening. “Think of it as a belated birthday gift,” he said when he called me. “Plus, your mother thinks you eat too much cereal.”

I considered the comment, and thought that she was probably right. It was a phase, of sorts. I’d been eating oatmeal mixed with Raisin Bran and peanut butter every day for six months. “You did tell her about the peanut butter though, right? That’s important.”

“Of course.” His sigh was audible, even with the weak reception my phone had at the office. “She still thinks it’s not enough.”

“I know, but it’s what I like eating.” And it was soft, so I didn’t worry that it would cut my stomach from the inside, but I didn’t add that, because I knew how it would sound. I hadn’t always been like that about the texture of my food, but it
developed in college, over a year after the counselors at Hope had declared me officially recovered.

“Well, we'll have something else tonight, and that will keep her satisfied for a few days. Then you can go back to having absolutely no variety in your life whatsoever.” This was something we had gone through every three weeks or so for the past year. Every time, he would make me dinner, and every time, I would refuse to eat what was put in front of me and go about making whatever felt safest.

“I certainly hope so.”

This was, in brief, what I loved so much about Dan. He was willing to let me hold on so steadfastly to my routines, and in some ways, he probably enabled them to a dangerous degree. He put up with my mother calling him way too often and willingly acted as my personal food diary when she asked him to, because she didn’t trust me to tell her the truth about what I was or wasn’t eating, not after the two relapses she knew about and the countless stretches of food avoidance that she hadn’t discovered. It was a wise decision on her part, but one I resented in spite of the fact it was justified.

When I got back to our apartment, there was a familiar, unwelcome smell. Meat. Steak, specifically. I hadn’t eaten meat since high school. I wasn’t a vegetarian for moral reasons, exactly, but I explained it to people as a health choice. I was worried about cholesterol. Or colon cancer. Or hormones. And for the most part, people accepted the decision, but Dan often argued with me, explaining that if I'd had legitimate reasons behind my unwillingness to eat meat, he would accept it. Because I could offer no reasons as to why I didn’t want to do it, it became a strange
source of tension in our relationship, one that to this day I cannot fully explain because I’m unable to grasp his position on the subject. If I had been a sanctimonious vegetarian, I would have understood his eagerness to convert me, but I was inoffensive; I ate soft foods and never imposed my own food rules on those around me.

“What are you doing?” I said, feeling my palms get sweaty and my stomach knot from tension and nausea.

“Oh, hey babe,” he said. “I’m making you dinner.” The scene would have been complete if he had been wearing an apron. He was standing at the stove smashing red-skin potatoes in a large steel pot. I watched as he cut off a chunk of butter and dropped it into the pan. I imagined it soaking into the potatoes, covering them with cholesterol, and I wanted to leave.

“What are you making?”

“I found some really nice porterhouse steaks, and I thought I’d make those mashed red skins you like.”

“Any vegetables?”

“I said I was making potatoes.” He smiled at me. I couldn’t believe he was doing this.

“Those don’t count,” I said. “They’re not nutrient-dense. And I don’t eat steak. You know that.”

“Don’t.” His smile disappeared, his face set. He looked defiant, ready for an argument. It occurred to me that this confrontation was premeditated on his part. I
shouldn’t have been surprised, considering I had refused to eat every other meal he had prepared for me in the past. He was bound to become combative eventually.

“Don’t what, exactly?” My face was hot, and I had a sense of foreboding, a desire to flee. Both are still, for the most part, inexplicable.

“Don’t try to get out of eating this. I made it for you, and you are going to eat it.”

“No.” I folded my arms, and I’m sure I must have looked like an insolent child, but at the moment, I felt as though I was making an important stand. I was insulted that he had even considered that he would be allowed to dictate what I did or did not put into my body.

“Lane.” He started spooning the potatoes onto two plates. He didn’t stop until the pot was empty. “It’s one night. It’s one meal. You can do this for one stupid meal.”

I thought I could see an almost imperceptible stream of butter in the potatoes, pooling in the canyons created by the spoon forcing them onto the plate.

“No.”

He picked up the steaks, one by one, with a fork and dropped them next to the potatoes. “This is ridiculous. You know that, right? It’s absolutely fucking ridiculous.”

I stared at him.

“I have to talk to your mom every day and tell her that you’re healthy, even though you and I both know you’re not.” I started to interrupt him, but he pointed at me, and I stopped. “I’m not saying you’re anorexic again. I know you’re not, but it’s
just weird that you never eat anything that isn't on your list of approved food. I have
to tell your mom exact amounts of what you've eaten. I have to guess whether or not
you've eaten lunch that day and how much you've finished. It's just—it's not normal,
Lane. It's not.”

I inhaled, looking at the steaks seeping oily red juices onto the plate. “I wasn't
aware you were striving for normalcy.”

“I'm not, but something that's not completely dysfunctional might be
preferable to this.” He nudged me to the side and set the plates on the kitchen table.
He pulled out a chair and pointed to it, indicating that I should sit. Normally, I would
have chastised him, as I found this sort of directive impolite, but I sat, knowing that
whether I ate the meal or not, I had already been defeated. He took the chair across
from me.

“I'm not eating this,” I said. “I'll eat the potatoes. But not the steak. I don't like
the texture.”

“You haven't even tried it.”

“I remember what meat is like, Dan.” Chewy. Stringy. That's how I
remembered it.

He set his fork on the table, calm. “You're going to eat it, or I'm going to leave.
I can't deal with this. You're absolutely insane.”

I felt a tremor in my chin, a familiar burning behind my eyes. I looked directly
at him. “You're really going to break up with me over a steak?”

He stared back, took in a sharp breath, and said, “Yes. I suppose I am.”
The next week, I went to a steakhouse by myself, ordered a sixteen ounce porterhouse, and devoured it. I thought about calling Dan, who had been stealthily removing his belongings from our apartment while I was at work, and telling him about my accomplishment. Instead, I went into the bathroom and threw up the whole thing, which meant that the consumption of the steak didn’t really count. I realized that even if I had digested it and informed him of my accomplishment, whatever had been between us was too fractured to ever mend itself.

The food arrives, finally. I realize I’ve forgotten to ask Paul about his family, but I also don’t want to hear about how important he thinks family is. He is one of those men. He wants children, if his online profile is to be believed, and those are the type who always see family as important. The truth is, I don’t really care about his family, because this encounter, our interactions in general, are not going to progress past dinner, maybe dessert if he insists. He is nice, he is friendly, and I am not capable of functioning in the presence of other human beings. I had falsely assumed that my loneliness would trump my inability to connect with others if I met someone sufficiently stable and patient, but Paul, who seems to be both physically and emotionally sturdy, is helping to reveal the fact that I should have resigned myself to being a hermit years ago. It’s not his fault, but I still resent that I have to sit through the rest of the date with this knowledge, while he is completely unaware that we are both wasting our time.

Still, I want to remain attractive while I eat. I tear my sandwich into bite-size pieces so the cheese doesn’t ooze onto my clothes or face as I eat it, I resist the urge
to dunk the sandwich morsels into my soup before I eat them. I plan to avoid the soup in general, actually—I think that tomato soup has a distinct, bloody aftertaste when it’s eaten alone—but I felt obliged to order it, as it seems a necessary accompaniment to grilled cheese.

Paul doesn’t even seem to notice that the conversation has halted. He is biting into his sandwich with an enthusiasm that can only be described as ravenous; he has coleslaw under his nose and his lips are shiny with grease from his sandwich. The milkshake has dried in his beard, and I’m wondering why it is that I told myself he was attractive earlier. He sticks two onion rings in his mouth at a time. I haven’t had an onion ring since high school, and despite being put off by his inability to eat like a civilized person, I’m impressed that he not only feels comfortable eating them, but that the consumption of onion rings seems to be such a regular occurrence to him that he doesn’t even take the time to savor them.

I decide to focus on the fries, which look acceptable. They are: hot and crispy and golden on the outside, soft in the middle—perfectly cooked.

“Don’t you want ketchup?” Paul’s voice is thick, his mouth full.

“Oh, no. I don’t really like it.” I eat the fries bite by bite. Little bites, three per fry, and I believe that if it doesn’t appear attractive, then it is at least satisfactory.

“Don’t you think fries without ketchup are boring?” he says, finally bothering to swallow his food at the close of the statement. “I don’t know how you can eat that.” He seems genuinely mystified as he looks at my plate.

“I guess I’m pretty boring.” I hope he believes me.
“I wouldn't say that, but your food might be.” He brings his sandwich back toward his mouth. I can't watch him take a bite.

“You have no idea.” This constant scrutiny of my eating habits is never going to vanish, I’m beginning to realize. I’m fine now, I eat out every Tuesday night and even enjoy it, but this type of encounter is, for whatever reason, unavoidable. I've taken to eating whole French fries at a time now.

“What’s your favorite food?” He finally moves his napkin toward his mouth, which takes care of some of the grease and the coleslaw, but the milkshake has dried in his beard, left it matted.

“Blueberry yogurt. And bananas.” The incident with Dan made me give up on ever eating Raisin Bran or oatmeal again. I tried grits for a while, but it was too similar, too heartbreaking.

“So you’re a health nut?” He has a single onion ring left, but he isn’t touching it. I wonder if he’s one of those people who needs to need a remnant of food on his plate in order to feel as though he isn't gorging himself, and I feel like we may have a chance to connect in that way; I still have half my sandwich and three fries, plus the soup.

“I take interest in my well-being, I suppose.” Perhaps to contradict this last statement, I put all three fries into my mouth and chew. They’ve cooled, but anything that gets me closer to the end of the evening is worth the textural issues I have with lukewarm potatoes. I’m not sure if I’m anxious for the conclusion of this date because Paul is such a horrible fit for me or because I feel like I could, given a
few more minutes, decide that I might find him an acceptable companion. Either way, I need to escape.

I lean into the booth, hoping to signify the end of the date. Normally, I would put my napkin on my plate as an indicator, but I don't see the point of pulling a clean napkin from the dispenser just to passive aggressively tell both my waitperson and my companion that I am finished.

“Are you going to eat the rest of your sandwich?”

“No, I’m actually pretty full,” I say. I start putting my hair behind my ears again, section by section.

“Do you want a box?”

“Oh, no. I don’t think it would heat up very well. Grilled cheese is kind of a one shot deal.”

“Oh, yeah, you’re right, totally.” He smiles, and waves his hand in the air. The waitress comes over, her sock finally back where it should be. “We’ll take a check,” he tells her.

She reaches down and grabs our plates, and I catch the distinct smell of fryer grease. “Is that together or separate?”

“Separate,” I say, as Paul tells her, “Together.”

“I’m sorry?” She looks at the two of us, the hint of a smirk on her face. I wonder how often this happens, how many strange first dates she encounters. I wonder if the success of the date lies in whether or not the couple in question manages to, without any sort of conspiracy, come to the same conclusion about who settles the bill.
“Separate, I guess,” Paul says, shrugging, and half-smiling in a way that suggests he is either amused or disappointed. Perhaps a combination.

We sit in silence waiting for the checks to come, and I wonder if I should apologize. It's too late to tell him that he can pay for my meal, but I feel a burgeoning sense of guilt, one that I know will turn into regret over the next few days. It sits in my stomach, and I wonder if I'm ever going to reach a point where I can really participate. Maybe I do want normalcy after all.

Paul already has his wallet out when the waitress places the checks on the table, and he places a wrinkled twenty dollar bill on top of his bill. I follow suit and stand, figuring there is no reason to wait for change. I doubt I will ever come back here, and if my date is remembered by the staff at all, at least they will have the recollection that I was an excellent tipper in spite of my awkwardness.

Paul stands. “Lane,” he says. “I had a good time tonight.”

I nod. I feel miniscule next to him, something I haven't experienced in years. It feels good to feel so small, to recognize that in spite of the hundreds of calories sitting in my stomach at this moment, I am still slight, at least in comparison to the hulking man standing next to me.

“Would you like me to walk you to your car?” He bends slightly to ask the question.

“Okay,” I say, because I don't know how to decline that sort of an offer. He puts his hand on my shoulder, and I'm baffled by his enormity, the way his hand encompasses the entire convergence of bones: the scapula, the clavicle, the humerus. It feels nearly safe, almost nostalgic. For one brief moment, as his hand
makes contact with my shoulder, I am nineteen again, watching my flesh stretch across my bones in the mirror. I am close to what I always wanted to be.

“Paul.”

He looks down at me.

“What do you do in your spare time?”

“I could tell you, but then I’d have to kill you.”

I decide to ignore his response. “Really, I want to know.”

“I build model airplanes, the kind that actually fly.”

“Why?”

“No. You’ll think I’m crazy,” he says.

“I promise you, whatever it is, I’ve probably got you beat in that department. I really want to know.”

“Sometimes, other people are too much for me to handle. So I build airplanes, and when I send them into the air, sometimes I pretend that I’m on board, by myself.”

“That’s one of the least crazy things I’ve ever heard,” I say, slowing my pace. Maybe he understands.

As we make our way to the parking lot, I catch a glimpse in the window. A tall, broad-shouldered man in a green Oxford. A slender brunette in a yellow top.
THE RESIGNATION

The note arrived at Alan's desk around noon along with the rest of his mail. His name was scrawled on the outside of the folded paper in Brian’s handwriting. Alan unfolded the note: “I'll be in to see you at three.”

Brian was the managing editor of the nightly news at the local Arlington, Kansas ABC affiliate where Alan worked as a news writer. When Alan had come to the station fresh out of undergrad as an intern, ten years earlier, Brian had worked as his mentor, creating a close friendship between the two of them. Last year, when Alan had his breakdown, Brian kept Alan's job on hold during the three months he was unable to come into work, even taking on most of Alan's responsibilities himself. Ever since Alan had come back to work, they held powwows in Brian's office every Friday, usually after the 5:00 news aired, just to make sure that things were still running smoothly. It was unusual to meet on a Wednesday, it was unusual to meet at three, when Alan was supposed to be hard at work on his stories, and it was unusual for them to meet in his own office. But in spite of the peculiarities surrounding the milieu of their meeting, Alan wasn't worried. The 60 milligrams of Prozac he took each day had rendered that particular emotional foible impossible.

The medication had also had an effect on his work performance. Before, he had written in furious fits and spurts, pounding away at his keyboard, barely finding
it necessary to even check his notes; the facts stuck in his memory like tiny islands among the constant stream of ideas he received about how to present a story. Now, the stream was gone. He sat in the incandescent blue glow of the computer screen, clinging to his notes for inspiration and trying to ignore the ennui that had settled over both his professional and personal life.

He never wrote for Alicia anymore. Before the breakdown, before his divorce, he had written almost exclusively for Alicia Page, his muse, a goddess among newscasters. Alicia had come to the station with a five year plan: she wanted to move into network news before she turned thirty. Alan had once written for her with this plan in mind, making sure that in each story, he allowed her to display her full range of emotions. Alicia had initially been hired as a writer, like Alan, but won her position on camera handily when a female producer had walked in on Alicia while she practiced reading a news story in front of the scummy mirror in the ladies restroom. Alicia had the uncanny ability to convey every possible human emotion without once letting a smile leave her face; no matter what the story—an abandoned dog finding a home, or an F-1 tornado ripping through an orphanage and leaving dozens of children maimed and killed—Alicia had an appropriate, corresponding smile that somehow never managed to seem fake or in bad taste.

Now his stories mostly went to Todd Jenkins, a man who’d been been at the station for over thirty years, a man whose smile was just as plastic as the rest of his eerily youthful countenance. Todd had a propensity toward improvisation, particularly in the form of bad puns, not that Alan had ever heard a pun he considered good. While Alan felt that the producers were doing him a disservice by giving his stories to a man whose intellectual
growth had clearly been stunted at an early age, he couldn’t really blame them. He had lost his touch, and he knew it. The apathy his medication perpetuated prevented him from feeling passionate enough to do anything to change his situation. The stories he wrote were decent; they did, after all, still make it onto the evening news, and right now, that was enough to keep him satisfied. He’d work on his return to excellence later.

Alan pulled open his top desk drawer and took out the now soggy smoked turkey on rye he had made himself and brought in for lunch. He had recently taken to eating at his desk because he found that he needed the extra time to get stories finished, and the isolation prevented him from making awkward conversation with his coworkers, to whom he felt he could no longer relate. Plus, he felt that his sense of humor was gone, and he didn’t want them to notice that he now existed as a casing around the blank space that had once been his personality. He had already been stripped of his dignity in hearing Todd read his stories each night with the stage lights shining on his bulbous veneers; even medicated, he wasn’t sure he could handle much more humiliation.

As he settled in to write about the fire that had, just hours earlier, consumed a local grease spoon diner--no injuries, and no foul play suspected; a news writer’s worst nightmare--there was a knock at the door. “Come in!” he said, his voice cracking but thick, his mouth still full of a half-chewed bite of his sandwich. It was Brian. He swallowed.

“Alan. How are you?” Brian’s voice was soft and he looked genuinely concerned; his eyes were wide and his mouth curved into a sympathetic half smile. He seemed sorrier than usual, and instead of making Alan feel comforted, as was undoubtedly his intention, the look seemed to Alan to be patronizing.
“Fine, fine, working on the diner fire story.”

“I wouldn’t waste my energy on that; it’ll be a blurb at most. We sent a reporter down to cover it.”

“Oh.” Of course they’d want someone at the scene. Whatever he wrote would be relegated to the ranks of a pre-interview voiceover if it was used at all.

“Alan, we need to talk. Are you sure everything’s okay?”

“Yeah, why wouldn’t it be?”

“Well, you had such a rough time when Lily left you. You don’t seem to be enjoying yourself since you came back, and, well, I doubt I need to even verbalize this, but your work has been... less than stellar since you returned, to say the least. I’ve tried to cover it the best I can, but Jack’s starting to notice.”

Jack, the station manager, was notorious for being picky about how his shows were run. He had been a television and film critic for his college newspaper, and genuinely believed that it was reasonable to expect his news broadcasts to border on high art. On a good night, he believed the nightly news rivaled Twin Peaks; on a bad night, he accused his staff of trying to recreate the series finale of Seinfeld, which it was apparent to everyone still stood out in his mind as a failed ending to what he considered to be a generally brilliant piece of television history. Disappointing Jack was never good for one’s career.

“Have you considered that it’s because you’ve been giving all my pieces to Todd? His puns would make Shakespeare seem pedestrian.”
“You know I hate the puns as much as you do, but viewers love him; he’s been at the station forever. At this point, I think he’s the only thing keeping our ratings from dropping behind Fox.”

“We’re behind NBC, then?”

“Have been for six months.”

“And Jack hasn’t had a conniption?”

“He has, but only over you.”

“Damn.”

“He didn’t want to bring you back, he’s been looking at this whole thing as probation, and because of the ratings, you’re essentially violating the terms he set for you. I’ve been fighting for you as long as I can, but I need you to try harder. If the ratings keep falling... he’s going to make some cuts.” Brian put his hand on Alan’s arm. “You need to try harder. I don’t think I’ll be able to handle Todd’s ad libbing if you’re not here.”

Alan tried to imagine the show functioning without him, and couldn’t picture it. His job would be safe, he just needed to start writing for Alicia again. That was his problem. He was sure that if his words had been coming from the golden-haired Polyhymnia of the KAKE nightly news, they would have been infinitely more enchanting. He sat for a moment, imagining the diner fire as a feature read by Alicia, her smile sympathetic and solemn, leading the audience into mourning over the loss of an area establishment, an Arlington icon.

“I’ll try harder,” he told Brian. “Give me a chance with this diner story; I think I can make something good out of it.”
“I really wouldn't waste my energy on that story,” Brian said. “It’s not going to be a big feature. Maybe work some more on the Fairfield district looking for a new superintendent. I feel like there’s something creepy about the guy who’s leaving.”

“Sure,” Alan said. “Good talk.”

Brian left and Alan turned his attention back to his computer. He picked up the phone and called his intern.

“Pam, I need you to find more information about the diner fire uptown. I think it’s going to be a big story tonight.”

Alan set to work, typing slowly, deliberately choosing each word, reading it over in his mind, imagining the story being broadcast by Alicia. He looked up the history of the diner, which had opened in the 1950s, in online newspaper archives. It was still owned by the same family, the MacPhersons, who had moved from New York City to Kansas amid financial ruin. He never heard back from Pam, so he concentrated on the sentimental aspects of the story, highlighting the tragedy of the situation while throwing in a bit of a lesson on fire safety for good measure. He imagined Alicia as she pled with people to be safe while cooking, and to remember to never try to extinguish a grease fire with water. She would furrow her brow with worry and smile without showing her teeth. The studio lights would create a halo above her blonde curls, and the audience would see her as she was: a guardian angel sent straight from heaven to watch over the entire KAKE viewing area, or at least, those who still received their local news from ABC.

The story was three pages long when he finished it. It would be short, but effective, especially when spliced with footage from the scene. He hoped they’d managed to snag an
interview with the family, but because Brian had told him not to focus on the story, he hadn't been able to ask. He sent the article to Brian, sure that it would find its way into the final lineup for the show. He considered making a surprise appearance at the run-down meeting so he could actually see the diner piece be given to Alicia, but remembered that he had been banned from attending shortly after his return to work because of his inability to refrain from rolling his eyes whenever Todd spoke, which would make Todd agitated and red-faced before airtime. Instead, he sat in his office, alternately playing Solitaire and daydreaming of Alicia while he waited for 5:00 and the beginning of the broadcast, which he would watch with the producers. He hadn't stayed for a taping in months.

At 4:58, Alan entered the production booth and sat beside Carol, the executive producer.

“Alan,” she said, “I’m surprised! I haven’t seen you at a taping in forever!”

Alan just smiled and nodded.

First there was a story about an adopt-a-thon for a local animal shelter, complete with footage of a three-legged blind dog, then Alicia did a nice human interest piece about a local woman who donated her kidney to a teenager in Oklahoma. She signaled over to Todd.

“In other news,” he began, “Things got heated at a local diner today.”

Alan felt all the blood drain from his face. They gave the story to Todd. Todd! And he’d made a pun! In the first sentence! He stood up. “Excuse me,” he said to Carol, and he slid out of the production booth. As soon as the door closed behind him and he was safely alone in the hall, he started running. He indiscriminately pushed papers off desks as he ran,
not caring whose papers or whose desks they were. Brian had betrayed him. He was 
humiliated; his story had been given to Todd, who made puns, and his career was over. He 
stormed into his own office, unsure of why he was even there. He kicked the tower of his 
computer, pretending it was Todd’s face, Lily’s face, Brian’s face, Carol’s face. He kicked it 
and the CD drive opened. He brought his foot down onto the tray hard, listening to the 
satisfying crack as the flimsy black plastic tray broke free. He threw his stapler at the 
opposite wall. Somewhere in his mind, he knew he was behaving like a child, but he didn’t 
care. It had been almost a year since he’d felt anything more aggressive than annoyance, 
and part of him was enjoying his anger. He grabbed the computer monitor and yanked the 
cord from the back of the tower. He carried it over to the glass-top table that sat in his 
office. He lifted the monitor above his head and stared down at himself, translucent and 
reflected in the glass. He inhaled sharply, closed his eyes, and let go.
THE BATTLE OF WHO COULD CARE LESS

Taryn stood in front of him. Max didn't know why she was here, why she had ended her six month long self-imposed exile out of nowhere, but no explanation seemed forthcoming. He could see her mouth moving, hear crickets chirping around him, but he couldn't hear her speaking.

“What did you say?” he asked, wondering if her words had somehow gotten lost in the humidity of the August night, absorbed by the thick clouds that covered the sky, making everything seem a bit stifled.

“I didn't say anything,” Taryn said.

“Oh.” She stared at him. He took a sip of his beer and ignored the look she was giving him, concentrating instead on her sleek, flat-ironed copper hair against the negative space of the starless night sky. It was so different than it had been six months earlier, the last time he had seen her. He wondered how she had tamed the tousled brown mop he was so used to. He let his eyes rest briefly on her face, the green eye-shadow smeared across her eyelids and the sticky gloss shining on her slack lips in the porch light. He didn't like the reminder that she now had a life in which he no longer played a part, so he settled on fixing his gaze firmly on an unmoving cloud above her head.

“So,” she said.
“Yes?” He jumped at the sound of her voice, wondering if she’d noticed that he wasn’t paying attention.

“Are we going to go inside?”

“Okay.” He dashed across the porch in three steps, opening the back door and ushering her into the dilapidated grey split-level with a deep, exaggerated bow.

“After you.”

Taryn walked into the dark, musty mudroom and Max followed closely behind her. He was, for the first time in months, aware of the smell of the house they had once shared, the musty odor of a place that hasn’t been cleaned recently, mingling with the putrid smell of old beer, stale cigarette smoke and a full litterbox. He flipped the light on and lightly nudged Taryn into the minuscule kitchen and offered her a seat at one of the two wooden stools at the tiny island. She hesitated, then sat, pushing aside old newspapers and a dirty plate to clear a space in front of her.

“I see you haven’t done much to fix up the house,” she said.

“Don’t really see the point.”

“I thought you were going to fix it up and sell it.” She looked across the island at the stovetop, which had been sitting on the counter, disconnected, since before she moved out. Max had learned to ignore any disarray that didn’t inconvenience him, and since he did all his cooking by grill or microwave, he was never bothered by the stove’s inaccessibility.

“No. It’s much nicer living here these days.” Originally, Max had bought the house as a money-making venture, but he and Taryn had moved into it together
when their relationship became serious. Now, he was comfortable being there and liked not having a landlord.

“So, you’ve given up on that, too.” She sighed and shook her head. “I shouldn’t be surprised.”

“Do you want a beer?” He was eager to change the subject.

She shook her head. She looked even more alien to him in the light. It wasn’t just the makeup; her whole demeanor seemed different. She was more poised, more aware of herself somehow, but without being self-conscious. In six months, she’d gone from someone who had walked with a wide, masculine swagger and sat hunched over to a woman who could easily walk balancing books on her head. She looked thinner, too, and Max wondered if that was somehow symbolic of Taryn cutting him out of her life. The term “dead weight” hung in his mind. He grabbed another can for himself and sat next to her at the island.

“Where’s Jasper?” she asked.

“Around. I don’t know. He never really liked me much. You know that.”

This was true. The first time the cat had ever showed him the slightest bit of affection had been the night she left. It was one of the few concrete details about that night that Max could recall clearly. Nearly everything else had been emotion, inaction, the distinct feeling that there should have been an explosion, but instead there was only a gas leak: silent and anticlimactic, but potent all the same. He couldn’t even remember the exact reason that they broke up, but he could remember feeling that it all unfolded much more slowly than it should have. Her tires should have been squealing, he should have been yelling at her for leaving or
begging her to stay. He should have been punching the pine in their yard, hitting it repeatedly until the dark stain of his blood on the tree became indistinguishable from the sticky tar oozing from the cracks in the bark. His face should have been burning red, angry, but instead it had been drained and pale. He should have been defiant, but instead he stood by watching as Taryn’s car inched over the snow-covered driveway toward the empty street beyond. And then there was Jasper, rubbing up against his legs, purring, all because he hadn’t yet been fed. He’d let Max pick him up and bring him back into the house that night, something that had never happened before or since.

“I can’t take him back yet,” she said. “My new place doesn’t allow cats. You haven’t let him outside, have you?”

Max felt his face get warm. He turned away from her. “Is that what you came back for? To check up on the cat?” He had, in fact, let Jasper outside. As an attempt to win Jasper over, Max had asked a friend of his to help him install a cat door on the side of the house. The project had taken most of a week, and Max remembered feeling a pang of uncertainty as they sawed into the building, wondering whether or not he had rendered the house unsellable for a cat who—he was sure—would never appreciate his efforts. Once that was accomplished, Max constructed a small rectangular pen of wood and chicken-wire, creating for Jasper his very own screened-in patio. The work had been tedious and somewhat dangerous for Max, who wasn’t used to working with his hands; early on, he lost his left thumbnail due to improperly holding a nail while hammering two one-by-two boards together to make one of the corners. He received countless small scratches and abrasions on his
hands and arms when he later applied the chicken-wire, and by the time it was done, Max was sure he would hate Jasper if the cat didn’t seem anything less than eternally grateful for his present. However, Max had been right in his initial prediction of Jasper’s reaction: the cat-yard hadn’t succeeded in making the cat any more amenable to him. All the construction had done was make Max more likely to find dead voles inside the house and Jasper more likely to try to escape through the back door whenever Max left for work. Max found himself surprised at how disappointed he ultimately felt that Jasper hadn’t yet warmed to him, given his efforts to win the cat over.

“I need stuff, Max. I’m not living with my parents anymore. I don’t have forks or spoons or a blender. I don’t even have a fucking bed!”

“Oh.” He took a pack of Camels out of his shirt pocket and tapped it absently on the countertop. He wanted to know where she had moved, and whether or not she was living with someone else, and if she was, was the other person male, and if so, he wanted to know whether or not that had been a factor in the demise of their relationship. “If I would have known...”

“What?”

“Well, I could have gotten some stuff together for you, I guess.” Even as he said it, he knew it wasn’t true. Taryn could have given him a month’s notice and he wouldn’t have done a thing, wouldn’t have even found a box for her to pack her own stuff. In Max's mind, this situation was in some way unavoidable, given the fact that he still had her cat, but that didn’t lessen the surprise he felt at it finally coming into
fruition. He took out a cigarette and put it in his mouth, then searched his pockets for a lighter.

“It doesn’t matter, I'll be quick.” She looked over at Max, fumbling to light his cigarette, and said, “I wish you didn’t smoke in the house. Everything here smells like smoke and I’ll probably never get it out.”

Max shrugged and hopped off the stool, anxious to get her out of the kitchen. “Take what you need.” He wondered how it would be divided. He briefly imagined Taryn, with a chainsaw, trying to divide the dressers and queen-sized bed in half, trying to make things as precise and even as possible. The initial break-up had come as a shock to him, but when Taryn had left without taking anything more than two suitcases full of her clothes, he hoped that he would be left everything else, excluding Jasper. It made sense to him; she was the one who forfeited their relationship, so in a sense, he was the winner. What was left should have been his anyway.

Taryn slid off the stool and walked across the creaky floorboards to the landing. “I'm just going to go upstairs and grab some things,” she said.

Max waved her off then wandered into the dark living room. He didn't want to see her in their old bedroom, dividing the things that used to be theirs. He lay on the couch, propping his head on the armrest and manually searching the coffee table for an ashtray. He dumped its contents into a coffee-cup half full of flat Coca-Cola and set the ashtray down on his chest. He could hear Taryn shuffling around upstairs as he blew smoke rings toward the ceiling, watching them drift away from him and break apart. It was useless for him to try to comprehend her timing, her
inability to just purchase new items. She was vindictive, always had been. Once, after she saw him say hello to a female coworker at the grocery store, she accused him of having an affair and left the house for three days. Max found out later that she had been staying with an ex-boyfriend during that time. When he confronted her about her whereabouts, she swore to him that nothing had happened and that she just didn’t know where else to go, even though her parents lived nearby. He’d managed to forgive her for the ordeal by reasoning that she was much younger than he was and hadn’t yet learned how to be in an adult relationship. Besides, she put up with him better than any woman he had been with before: Max recognized that he was messy and that his job managing the produce department at the grocery store didn’t make him look like an attractive option to most women. Taryn, in spite of her complaints about Max’s supposed lack of direction in life and her numerous loud attempts to convince him to go to college in order to—as she put it—secure a better future for their family, had seemed to love him: she had cooked him dinner every night and packed him lunches most mornings before work, she cleaned the house, and she went with him to visit his parents and tried to be nice to them even though she was aware of the fact that they weren’t fond of her. It wasn’t until their relationship ended that Max realized how much pressure he had felt to be something different while they were together, and he was certain that this visit was a ploy by Taryn to make him realize he missed her, but Max was trying his best not to care either way. His life was better now. The house was messier and it had took him longer to find his keys in the morning now, but he had no one to answer to.
He finished two cigarettes before Taryn descended the stairs with a red jersey sheet flung over her shoulder and its two matching pillowcases in hand, one overstuffed with whatever toiletries and bedroom knick-knacks she was pilfering from him, the other empty, presumably reserved for the aforementioned cutlery. He took one last drag on his third cigarette and stubbed it out in the ashtray, which he then placed on the floor beside the sofa along with his cigarettes, and followed Taryn into the kitchen to oversee her raid on his drawers.

“I took the electric toothbrush,” she said. “I noticed you have a regular one in the bathroom, so I didn't think you'd mind. It's just that the electric one was mine, anyway.”

“Okay.” It was true he didn't use the “his and her” style electric toothbrush with the interchangeable color-coded heads Taryn's parents had gotten her—he'd never been able to get used to the noise, but the idea that he’d never see it in the bathroom again, that he’d never have the chance to use it if he changed his mind, disturbed him in a far greater way than he would have ever anticipated. He knew he’d never buy one for himself, so now that Taryn's was gone, he felt a distinct lack, a regret that he’d never gotten to know it better.

“Why are you so quiet?” Her question was punctuated by the clanking of metal as she started dropping silverware into the pillowcase. “You had to have known this was going to happen sometime, and I don't understand why you're treating me like you don’t even know me.”

“You changed your hair.”

“A very astute observation, Max.”
“I don’t know what you want me to say, Taryn.”

“Never mind.” She sighed. “Can I have a beer now?”

He ducked into the mudroom and brought two cans of Budweiser out of the mini refrigerator left over from his misspent college days, and slid a beer across the island for her before opening the other for himself. Taryn popped hers open, took a long swig and looked at him.

“Do you want to keep the waffle iron? It’s just that I’ve never seen you make anything that didn’t come from a box or a can, and... well, I’m going to leave you some pots and pans of course, but I don’t think you’d ever use the waffle iron.”

He shrugged. “Take what you want. Honestly. I don’t care. Take the whole goddamn house, just stop making a big deal out of everything. I don’t give a shit about the waffle iron or the dish-rack or the bread knife. Take what you need and leave.”

He kept drinking his beer and stared at her, wondering if she was going to cry. Their eyes remained locked for what felt like several minutes, and it became obvious to him that she wasn’t going to burst into tears any time soon, at least not in front of him.

“Sorry. Sorry. You just—this whole evening has caught me off-guard. Sorry.”

“God, Max,” she said. “I’ve never seen anyone get so worked up over a damn waffle iron before.” She smiled, and for a moment, she seemed like her old self. The transformation confused him; it drew him in a bit more than he felt comfortable with.
“You know. I just really like waffles.” He tried to return her smile, but couldn’t help feeling that his delivery had fallen a little flat. The entire statement had come out a bit too self-conscious and had ended up sounding more like a question than the witty reply he had been hoping for.

She chuckled and tossed a crumpled fragment of yesterday’s front page at him. “Shut up,” she said. “You do not.”

“You’re making a mess,” Max said. He wasn’t being playful now, he just wanted her to leave. As he was about to walk out of the kitchen, a flapping noise came from the living room.

“What was that?” Her eyes were wide and she had backed away from the island.

The grey tabby slunk around the corner into the kitchen and jumped onto the island, his tail flicking back and forth ominously. His eyes glowed green and yellow as he glared at Max, mewing.

“Jasper!” Taryn turned around and, before the cat had a chance to move, she scooped it into her arms and began cooing at it as though it were an infant. “I've missed you baby! Has Daddy been taking good care of you?” She smirked.

Max once again became aware of her copper hair and her ridiculous makeup and felt ill. It was as though he’d realized the woman he’d brought home from the bar was a well made-up, well-disguised drag queen. “Daddy.” She’d referred to him as the cat’s father, something she had never done when they were together. There was, in his mind, no reason for her to be here other than the fact that she wanted to
ruin his evening, if not his life. And as long as he had the cat, Max would never be fully rid of her. It had to be a plan.

“I'll leave you two alone,” he said, and returned to the living room. He turned on the television and found a Reds game. After a few minutes, the clanking in the kitchen resumed, interspersed with Taryn’s incoherent babbling to Jasper. After ten minutes, even Jasper tired of listening to her and darted across the living room and through the cat door. Taryn tried to follow Jasper, but lost him in the darkness.

“Where did Jasper go?”

“What?”

“My cat. He came in here, and I don’t see him. So where is he?”

“I have no idea, but I wouldn’t mind asking him how he managed to get rid of you. I could use some pointers.” Max leaned back into the sofa and put his feet up on the coffee table, something Taryn had always yelled at him for doing when she had lived there.

“You're an asshole.”

“Yes, right. I’m the asshole in this situation.” Max crumpled his Budweiser can in his fist and dropped it onto the carpet.

“You’re disgusting, you know. This place is a mess. I wouldn’t be surprised if he was hiding underneath all this junk.” Taryn got down on her hands and knees and crawled across the floor. “Jasper. Jasper. Here, Jasper.” She was cooing. Max turned up the volume on the television, hoping it would entice her to leave the room and give up her search for Jasper before she discovered the cat door.
“Max.” The sharpness in her voice informed him that he would have no such luck. “What the hell is that in the wall?”

“What the hell is what?”

“Is that a dog door?”

Max removed his feet from the coffee table and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Don’t be an idiot. I don’t have a dog.”

“What is it, then?”

“Technically,” he said, “it’s a cat door.”

“A what?” Her voice was getting louder each time she spoke.

“A cat door. For the cat. The one you left here.”

Taryn stood and faced Max, arms folded across her chest, eyes narrowed.

“You are so irresponsible. You always have been.”

Max ran his hand over his head, tugging lightly at his hair as he tried to think of a way to defend himself.

“I mean, he isn’t even your cat, Max. That wasn’t your decision to make. What if Jasper gets hurt out there? What if he gets run over by a car? What if a dog gets him? Do you ever think of anyone but yourself? You don’t want to deal with him, so you just put him outside? No wonder he hates you.”

“He isn’t my cat, but you left him here, so I think I’m allowed to make decisions about how he lives now. He’s impossible to deal with if he doesn’t go outside, and I don’t want to have to put up with his constant meowing. If you don’t like it, you can take him.” Max considered telling her about the pen he had built, letting her know that Jasper was never in danger when he went out the cat door, but
he didn’t want Taryn to think that he’d lent that much consideration to her cat’s wellbeing.

“I can’t,” she said, growing quiet. “You know that.”

“You can lie. It’s not like you haven’t lied about owning pets before.” He thought back to the apartment Taryn had lived in when they had first started dating three years ago. She had brought Jasper home after passing a pet store during a shopping trip one day, blatantly disregarding her building’s strict policy against all pets. In her excitement, she had forgotten to purchase a litterbox, litter, and food, all of which Max had to remind her to get.

“I can’t take Jasper because my roommate is allergic to cats.”

“Oh. Right.” Max found himself once again wondering whether or not Taryn was living with another guy, but he tried to push the thought aside as soon as it manifested. He reminded himself that it was none of his business who she spent her time with anymore. Still, when she’d bought Jasper, she had never asked him about any aversions he may have had to cats, and he was retroactively annoyed at her lack of courtesy. Sure, they hadn’t lived together at the time, but he had been spending most of his nights at her apartment while he worked on the renovations he’d never ended up completing on the house he now lived in.

“I know you never liked Jasper, and I suppose that in some way it was a bit unfair of me to leave him with you, but I couldn’t give him away. You don’t do that to your pets.” Her arms were down at her sides now and her head was cocked to the side. It was what she used to do when she wanted to get her way from Max. He knew that it was only a matter of minutes before she would stick out her lower lip and
look up at him, eyes wide as she could make them. Max wanted to avoid that experience.

“Look,” he said, rolling his eyes as he got to his feet. “If you go outside, you will see that Jasper is penned in. I built a fence for him out of chicken wire. He can’t get out, he can’t hurt himself, and he seems a lot happier now that he can get out of the house when he wants to. I’m fine. He’s fine. We’re both fine.”

“Oh.” Taryn looked over at the cat door. “Well, I wish you would have asked me before you went ahead and did that, because you probably haven’t kept him up to date on his shots” she said, before turning around and reentering the kitchen, which was soon filled with the sound of metal utensils clanging together.

The noise in the kitchen went on for two and a half more innings, during which Max tried to figure out why she insisted on doing this to him. He knew she could have Jasper in an apartment that didn’t allow cats, because she had done it before. Her roommate’s allergies didn’t seem like enough of a reason for her to leave the cat behind; when they’d been together, Taryn had spent months using laundry detergent that she knew made Max break out into hives simply because she liked the way it smelled. Max considered that stealth was in Taryn’s nature; she’d snuck up on him that evening, after all. No, he was sure that this was completely motivated by her desire to make sure that she had come out of the break up better than she had, and the cat was being used as some sort of monitoring device. He considered letting Jasper just run away.

“Max?” He didn’t know what she could possibly want. “I think I’m going to leave, Max. I think I have pretty much everything.”
He stood up and stretched, anxious to see the damage she'd done to the kitchen. When he entered, he saw two boxes, one filled with plates, cups and bowls. The other contained pots, a frying pan, a saucepan and the waffle iron. The blender sat, unplugged, on the center of the island, along with the other red pillowcase, now stuffed with silverware and cooking utensils. A slotted spoon and a metal spatula protruded from the top.

“Do you mind helping me out with this stuff? Just... the boxes are pretty heavy.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Sure.” He bent down and lifted the pots and pans and headed toward the back of the house. “Open the door for me, will you?”

Taryn threw the sheet over her shoulder once again, picked up the pillowcases, and let Max outside, following closely behind him. She fished her keys out of her pocket and hit the button on her keychain to pop the trunk. She lifted the hatch and gestured for Max to put the box down. He slid it in and, without saying a word to her, returned to the house to grab the dishes and the blender. As he left the house once more, he neglected to close the door and noticed that Taryn was leaning against the car, waiting for him. He placed the box next to the pots and pans and stood beside her, reaching into his pocket to find his cigarettes, forgetting he'd left them in the house.

“Jasper looks well,” she said. “I mean, I'm surprised, you never took care of him when I was here.”

“I didn’t really have much of a choice in that matter.” He turned his head to look at her. “It's just been the two of us, you know? What else was I going to do?”
“Yeah, I guess. Listen, about before, inside...”

“It’s nothing.” He was getting agitated; she needed to leave.

“Right, okay. Whatever you want.” She looked injured, and Max at once felt both satisfied that he’d succeeded in getting to her and defeated by the fact that it had taken so long to achieve. Every little dig by her made him feel something; it had seemed unfair that, up until now, she’d seemed unaffected by anything he did.

“Sorry,” he said, shrugging.

“Look, I really have to go. Thanks for letting me in; I know I should have called, but I thought you’d hang up on me or something. Just... thanks for not hating me, I guess.”

At this, he felt a surge of guilt. Maybe, he thought, all she had wanted was to come in and get her things, collect the last few remains she was missing from their life together. It was probably a sad occasion for her. He felt a closeness to Taryn that he hadn’t experienced since he had lived with her. As she turned to get into the car, he grabbed her, pulled her into a hug, and kissed her hard. When she kissed him back, he let go and pulled away. She climbed into the front seat and, before closing the door, said quietly, “Bye Max.”

He stood and watched her leave, trying not to recall the similarities between this moment and the moment six months earlier, when she’d last backed down that winding driveway. He put out some food for Jasper, who he was sure had escaped through the open back door, then walked across the porch and sat at the top of the steps, watching the fireflies flicker signals to each other from in between the trees and listening to the crickets sing from under the deck, the only signs of life in an
otherwise dark and still night. He stared at the step down to the yard and noticed one of the wooden planks slanting skyward, detached from its foundation, and he wondered how long it had been broken without his seeing it.
WAITING FOR THE FLOOD

Jeremy is on the deck, banging on the back door. There’s no light outside other than the flickering lamp on the back porch; the moon is only a faint glow behind the clouds. It’s raining hard, but I can’t let him in.

“Mom!” He’s yelling. It’s drawn way out, more like a dog’s howl than an actual yell. He sounds like he’s in pain and I wonder how long it will take for the neighbors to call the cops. I can’t bring myself to do it, but I hope that someone does soon. I can’t stand the thought of him out in the rain, getting sick from wet and cold. That, and if this keeps up, he’s going to wake the babies, and I want to sleep tonight.

We haven’t always been this dysfunctional. If someone had told me a year ago I’d be kicking my firstborn out of the house in the middle of November, I would have thought they were crazy. A year ago, there wouldn’t have been reasons, a year ago, Jeremy was in art school, a year ago, he wasn’t doing cocaine, or, if he was, Rob and I didn't know about it.

Kids experiment. I know that. But this was more. Jeremy came home from school last summer with the information that he wasn’t going back.

“I got behind,” he said. “I couldn’t catch up. I don’t think school is for me. Not now, anyway.”
I remember watching him as he spoke, wondering what was making him so nervous. He wouldn’t sit down at the kitchen table with me. Instead, he buzzed around the room, his hands shaking, his clothes hanging loosely on his body. At that point, I thought it was all stress, that his eyes were so glassy because he was on the verge of tears, that he was worried about disappointing me and probably terrified of disappointing Rob, who had always been so hard on him. I told him that it didn’t matter, he could always go back to school when he was ready, that I couldn’t judge him because I never even went to school in the first place. He didn’t stop shaking. That whole summer, he shook, and it took me months to figure out why.

Rob hadn’t wanted Jeremy. We’d only been together three months when I found out I was pregnant. I was nineteen and working nights at Rex’s Diner and Rob was thirty-two and had already been married; he already had a child he had to pay for but didn’t ever see. We broke up after I told him I was having a baby and I was keeping it, and he didn’t come back around the diner after that. I kept working, even though my tips got smaller and smaller as my belly got bigger and bigger under my blue checked apron. I had once been the most attractive waitress at Rex’s—not that there was much competition—but I was fat and had swollen ankles, I took too many bathroom breaks, and everyone knew I wasn’t married.

“Damaged goods.” I heard nearly every night in the way the diners spoke to me as I bumbled around between tables, trying not to hit anyone in the back of the head with my stomach. But I didn’t care, because I loved Jeremy. He wasn’t Jeremy yet—I didn’t even find out he was a boy until he was born—but I knew that I would
always love him better than anything or anyone. If nothing else, it kept a smile on my face.

Rob came back to Rex’s when I was halfway through my seventh month.

“Can I take your order?” I felt a fluttering in my stomach, one that I was sure had nothing to do with Jeremy kicking.

“Lyss.” He looked up at me without smiling. He smelled like beer and cigarettes, and I felt like I was going to vomit.

“What?”

“I can’t stand this.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. I turned to check on the next table over, see if they needed coffee refills, when Rob took hold of my wrist.

“I love you,” he said.

“I think you need to leave,” I told him.

“No,” he said. “I need to make this right. I want to be there for you. I want to be in my child’s life.”

“We can talk about that later. I’m working.”

He stood and went into the parking lot, where he sat in his Toyota Tercel in the snow for the next two hours until my shift ended. When I left the diner, he got out of the car and walked over to me. He put his hands on my cheeks, and I winced at how cold his fingers were.

“I made a mistake,” he said.

“I know.”

“I want to fix it. I want you.”
He pulled me closer and I rested my head on his shoulder, wondering if smelling the smoke on his shirt was as harmful to the baby as being around cigarettes.

“It just threw me for a loop,” he said. “I wasn’t expecting it. It was a lot, and soon, but if you want to, if you’ll let me, I think I can be ready. If not, then—well, I’ll help you the best I can, financially.”

“Do you mean that? The first part.” I pulled back to look at him.

“Yes,” he said. “I want this to work.”

“Okay.” I leaned back in and we stood bundled together in the parking lot, completely unaware of the snow spiraling around us.

“Mom, please! Please.” His voice is starting to get hoarse, but he’s still loud and he hasn’t stopped punching the door.

I had the locks changed three days ago, a day after I searched his room and found two plastic bags—one full of pills and one with a dusting of powder—nestled in his sock drawer. It’s taken him this long to try and come home. I don’t know where he goes, but I can guess. There’s no pattern to when he comes back to the house, though. At least not one that I can discern, although I’m sure there’s a reason behind it.

Part of me hoped he wouldn’t come back, that I could use the suspense of his whereabouts to tell myself that he was okay, that he was being taken care of, that he was getting the help I couldn’t give him. Instead, he’s hellbent on getting back into the house and making himself a public nuisance in the process.
When the doctor set Jeremy, screaming and flailing onto my chest, into my arms, it felt like an ending. I knew in that moment that I would never love anyone as much as I loved Jeremy and I would never have any more children. There was a physical ache holding him that I still cannot describe, an ache I’ve carried with me since he was born.

I was right about not loving anyone as much. I’ve had two children since Jeremy was born, two children in the past three years, and I cannot feel the same way about them. I try, but there’s a disconnect, as if whatever it was that made me a mother in the first place disappeared. I look at Leah and Anna, and all I can think about is the fact that I’m going to be in my sixties when they finish college, if they finish. If they go. They’re constant reminders of my own mortality, the fact that my youth is slipping away. It’s not that I don’t love them. I do. I just can’t feel the right way about them. Something broke after Jeremy, and I don’t know how to fix it. I think I’m a good parent, but I’m parenting them on autopilot. Still, that’s not going to keep me from protecting them, even if it means losing the thing I love the most.

Rob could never understand it, but I couldn’t leave Jeremy alone. When we brought him home from the hospital, he slept in a white wicker bassinet in our bedroom, and even that felt like too much distance to me. I wanted him in the bed between us, where he would be warmer and safer, but Rob refused. “Besides,” he said, pressing his index finger into the tip of my nose, “You could roll over and crush him, which would completely defeat the purpose of having him near you, Mama Bear.”
On weekday mornings after Rob left for work, though, I’d pick Jeremy up and put him in the middle of the bed, between Rob’s pillows and mine, and watch him as he slept, his little red mouth opening in perfect O’s as he breathed, his bluey-pink eyelids twitching when I shifted, arms raised above his head, pink fists clutching the satin pillowcases. I didn’t let myself go back to sleep, couldn’t, because the thought that Rob was right kept me vigilant. We would spend hours laying there, and I was always surprised that I didn’t get tired of it, that there was never a reduction in the awe I felt that I had played a role in creating the tiny person dribbling on my expensive bed sheets.

Rob thinks this is where I went wrong, and he could be right. All along he’s told me that I’ve been too soft, too willing to believe only the good things about Jeremy and I completely overlook the bad. He’s wrong there, because I’ve always known that Jeremy has had flaws, but that never stopped me from believing he was a good person. It still hasn’t at that, but I’m tired and I’m getting old, and I can’t handle another child right now. I can’t handle sending him on another trip to rehab, and I can’t have him break my heart again.

I guess the problem for me is that it’s impossible to separate the man he’s become from the baby he once was and the boy he used to be. I look at the girls, and they’re alien to me, the way they act. They shriek and scream at disturbances I can’t even hear, and it takes them hours to fall back to sleep; once Leah starts fussing, Anna feels the need to join in, and soon, the only thing keeping them awake is each other. Leah screams, Anna screams, then Leah screams because Anna is screaming,
and Anna keeps screaming because Leah keeps screaming, and I’ve never understood those women who drown their children in the bathtub more than I do now that I have to deal with more than one at a time. I would never do that, but there are moments when I’m alone and they won’t shut up where I empathize, nanoseconds when it seems like the most logical thing to do.

Jeremy was as close to a perfect baby as anyone will find. He started sleeping through the night almost right away, and he rarely ever cried. He’d just lie next to me, his big blue eyes watching all around him. He rarely seemed to want anything I couldn’t give him; I felt like I could interpret what each of his cries meant based on their sounds and the way he scrunched his face as he did it. We communicated on a level Rob has never understood and will never understand.

Rob has noticed that I haven’t taken to the babies the way I did to Jeremy. He points out that I let them cry a few seconds longer than I should, that I’ve given up on breastfeeding and bonding with them, but I don’t have the time or the focus to do it all on my own. He came home one day to find me giving Leah a piece of frozen French bread pizza and feeding Anna store-brand chicken and peas baby food straight from a jar, and I think that’s when he really began to notice that things were different. I wasn’t making my own baby food, I wasn’t insisting on homemade lunches, I didn’t care about what food groups the girls were eating too much or too little of. What Rob doesn’t know is that the jarred baby food goes all the way back to when Leah was an infant, but in those days, I made sure to hide the jars in the bottom of the trash can so he wouldn’t find out. I suppose the worst part is that I
find it hard to feel ashamed of any of this, even when compared to how I was with Jeremy. They just don’t seem to have any personality, at least not yet.

I keep thinking that this might be my fault. I never talked to Jeremy about drugs. I never thought that he would do them, not in a serious way. Rob never talked to him about much of anything, as far as I know; they’ve always inhabited a world filled with nods and grunts, a type of male communication I thought only existed in stereotypes and sitcoms, but became very real as Jeremy grew up. I tried to push them together, tried to make Rob see how Jeremy was the best thing that ever happened to him, to us, but Rob had wanted a daughter, a little girl to spoil, so Jeremy had been all wrong to him from the beginning. I think Rob resented how close we were, but I spent all my time alone in this house with no one but the baby to listen to me. We had all that time to talk, and I never told him the things he should have known. And now he’s outside, alone, scared, and I’ve abandoned him because I can’t deal with the fact that I’ve inadvertently failed him, that I’m willingly failing the other two, that I never should have been a mother even though I spent years thinking it was what I was born to do. He’s given up yelling now, but he still pounds at the door. Not as furiously as before, not as consistent, but in little spurts, just to let me know he’s still there, waiting for me to change my mind, I suppose. I’ve never not been on the verge of wavering. I want to wrap him in a towel, to hold him and tell him that we’ll work through this and that he will get better, but I know it won’t work. I can’t bring him in, and I can’t let him expose the babies to his habits. I don’t know what else to do anymore, so I pick up the phone.
“Grandview Police, what’s your emergency?” The woman on the other end of the phone sounds warm but rushed, like she’s speeding toward the end of her shift. I feel bad for putting her out, but this needs to be taken care of.

“Hi,” I say, and I instantly wonder if that’s the wrong way to start a nine-one-one call. “There’s a man trying to get into my house.”

“Where are you located?”

“I’m at twenty-seven Piper Lane,” I say, and I can feel my stomach tighten, my heart rate go up, my palms start sweating. I need to hang up. Instead, I add, “He’s trying to get in through the back door.”

“Do you know this man?”

“No. Well, yes. He’s my son, but I don’t think I know him anymore.”

Overshare.

“Is he trying to hurt you?”

“No” Not physically, anyway. “He can’t get in. He’s been out there for three hours, but he’s becoming a nuisance.”

“And what is your name, ma’am?”

“Alyssa Jacobs.” As I cradle the phone in my left shoulder, I realize that I’ve never called the police before.

“And your son’s name?”

“Jeremy. Jeremy Jacobs.” I glance out the window and see at him on the porch one floor below me, jeans soaked, knees under his chin, back against the door. This was never supposed to happen.

“Can you give me a physical description, please?”
“He’s nineteen. Brown hair, green eyes, about five foot ten. He’s wearing jeans and a red windbreaker.”

“Is he still out there?”

“Yes,” I tell her. “He’s sitting on the back porch.”

“He’s not trying to get in anymore?”

“No, not right now. He stops and starts. But he’s not supposed to be here.”

“Okay ma’am. Someone should be there in ten to fifteen minutes. Twenty-seven Piper Lane, is that correct?”

“Yes. Thank you.” I don’t know what I’m thanking her for.

“Goodbye ma’am.”

I hit the end button and put the phone back in its cradle. I want to open the window, to stick my head out and tell him to run, or to go downstairs and leave with him, but I can’t. So I wait, listening to the rain hit the roof and imagining that all those drops are falling on Jeremy. I still don’t know if I’ve done the right thing. I watch him through the window, watch him shiver, draw the hood of his jacket tighter around his head, and I can’t help but admire his tenacity, can’t help but think that he’s drawn to me like I am to him, that this craziness can’t undo the unseeable threads that seem to bind us together, but I know that it’s too much to hope for.
We’ve come untied, and I should focus my energies on Leah and Anna.

I don’t hear the cop car pull up and I can’t see the lights flashing from the back of the house. I see the shadows of the policemen moving toward Jeremy before I see the men themselves, but Jeremy doesn’t seem to notice. I realize that this is my
last chance to stop them from taking him, to explain that the whole ordeal was nothing more than a misunderstanding. But Leah and Anna are, by some miracle, still sleeping, and I don't want to jeopardize the rare calm that has found its way into the house.

The men approach Jeremy and he looks up. I can’t see his face, but I’m sure he looks resigned to his own capture from the way he stands up and puts his hands up as he hangs his head. He’s completely passive as one officer pushes Jeremy’s arms behind his back and clamps the silver cuffs around his wrists. I can feel my chin shaking, and I know that as soon as they walk him out of the yard, I will be a wet, sobbing, snotty mess, but right now, I feel like this is the right ending. They step off the porch and into the yard, then become a singular large black shadow. I put my hand up, wave through the window. I know he isn’t watching, but I want to say goodbye. I put my head against the cool glass until the shadow disappears, and I wait for the flood.
TRUE LOVE WAITS

Prince Charming’s parents had decided a year ago that he needed to get married, and soon. They were getting on in years, and wanted him to have someone with whom he could share their modest kingdom when they were gone. They became obsessed with the idea of marrying him off to someone, anyone, provided she had royal blood or, at the very least, a wealthy family.

That’s why they held the balls. For three nights in a row, women of fine breeding from all over the continent came and danced and mingled with him, hoping for a connection. And he had found one, but much to his parents’ chagrin, the woman he chose had not even been invited to the ball, but had crashed the gates; he fell in love with a dancing scullery maid in clear plastic shoes.

After announcing his intentions to marry Cinderella, Charming’s parents did all they could to get rid of her. Eventually, of course, they succeeded; they always did. He didn’t know what happened to Cindy, only that she had been there one day, and the next she was gone. Charming’s father declared his innocence, but his mother simply told him that the little tramp wasn’t coming back, ever, and that no bleach blonde hussy would ever be queen as long as she had anything to do with it.

Some months later, to assuage his grief, he adopted a dog, a butter yellow long-haired mongrel with a ratty tail and big paws. Princess was ugly but faithful, and somehow
helped to fill the void Cindy's absence had left. The two of them would pass their
days together going for walks in the palace gardens or playing fetch with his father's
royal scepter, and Charming was, for the most part, happy. He missed Cinderella, but
as the months went by, he slowly released the last remnants of hope he retained of
ever seeing her again. He let the lock of hair she'd given him fly in the wind,
imagineing it to be a deep and symbolic gesture of his readiness to move on with his
life: he was giving the only thing he had of hers to the birds and it was free to soar
away as she had. Unfortunately, as the wind carried the lock from his hand, Princess
jumped up and devoured it in one long and labored gulp, and Charming doubted
that he would ever have Cinderella completely gone from his life.

It was around this time that his parents started nagging him about getting
married again. "You're not going to have us around forever," his mother said, "and
we just want someone to be there to take care of you when we're gone."

"I'll do it in my own time," he said, repeating the mantra his therapist had
once made him chant on a weekly basis.

"We'll see," his mother said with a smile.

In bed that night, with Princess curled up by his side, Charming began to
worry about what his mother had said. "I still love Cindy," he told her. Princess
licked his hand and he scratched her ear. He thought for a moment. "If I could just
marry you, I would," he said. "But it isn't legal. Even so, you understand me better
than anyone else, and you never leave the bathroom a mess. You don't care about
money or jewelry, and I don't think you'll ever leave me. You're the best dog a prince
could ask for.” Princess whined and nuzzled closer to him, and Charming put his arm around her and fell asleep.

The next morning, Charming’s mother knocked on the door.

“My darling boy.” She was grinning.

“What is it, your majesty?”

“Your father and I have a young lady coming for you today, a lovely young heiress from Bulgaria. You must get ready! Your facial begins in one hour, and then you have a mani-pedi at one. Finally, we want you to have a detoxifying body wrap before she arrives. I think it will make you less irritable. She is very special, son; I do hope you will make a good impression on her. Oh, and keep that mongrel in your room while she’s here.”

Charming dismissed his mother. “What a witch.”

Princess growled in agreement.

Seven hours later, the preparations for Mila’s arrival from Sophia were complete, and Charming stood in the foyer waiting for her white stretch Hummer to cross the moat. He was wearing a tuxedo, a burgundy velvet cloak and his crown, which he hadn’t worn since his parents had arranged for MTV to host his sixteenth birthday party three years earlier.

The Hummer drove through the front entrance. Charming opened the door for Mila and bowed to her lightly. She was slight, dark and beautiful, with long, chocolate colored hair, deep brown eyes and long lashes. She brushed by him with a quiet “Thank you,” and stood in the center of the foyer, the broken colored light that
filtered through the stained glass window shining on her. She smelled like gardenias and he instantly hated her.

“I’m Charming,” he said, in case she hadn’t noticed his crown.

“I know. Mila.”

He led her into the main dining room, where his parents were waiting.

"Mila,” his mother said, rising from her seat and kissing the girl on each cheek. “We are delighted to see you.”

Mila smiled and curtsied, and took a seat at the table.

“Tell us a little about yourself dear,” said the queen.

“I’m an only child and my father owns a mine. I grew up in Bulgaria, but I went to school in France. I speak four languages fluently, and I have my own chateau in Switzerland. I’m a world class ballerina.”

“Oh how fascinating!” his mother said.

The rest of the dinner went on in a similar way. Charming learned that Mila could play both the piano and the violin, that she wanted to be an actress some day, and that her favorite drink was Cristal. She didn’t want to have children, but instead to adopt, and if she and Charming were to marry, they would own twenty three houses in nineteen countries between the two of them to start. Throughout this, Charming was elated to learn that he need not speak at all. He simply sat at the table, nodded when Mila spoke and drank beer after beer, waiting for the meal to end.

As the servants cleared dessert, there was a large crash in the kitchen. Amid the sound of crystal goblets and the good silver tumbling to the ground, there was a long, low growl. The door to the dining room burst open and in bounded Princess,
the chain that kept her tied in the menagerie broken. She snarled at Charming’s parents and bared her teeth at Mila, who slowly backed away, clutching her champagne flute.

“I told you to keep that mutt under control, Charming!” his mother said. “It’s scaring your guest!”

Charming stumbled to his feet and reached for Princess’ chain. The dog calmed down immediately and began to rub up against Charming’s leg, more like a kitten than the 120 pound oaf that she was. “That’s my girl,” he whispered, patting her head. She looked up at him, and from the sudden comfort reflected in the dog’s eyes, he saw something, something his parents would not have wanted him to see.

A flash of recognition. That’s all it was, one brief millisecond, and he knew. This wasn’t a real dog; it couldn’t be. The look in her eyes was too human, too understanding. And was her fur not the same color as Cindy’s hair? The dog’s coat was shinier, but Princess’ fur had never experienced the damaging effects of peroxide bleach that Cinderella’s hair had. No wonder the dog was so loyal, so faithful to him, no wonder she loved him and detested everyone else. He’d always thought it was the hint of pitt bull in her, but no. She hated the others because she knew they were trying to make him forget her. He fell to his knees.

“Cindy, Cindy! I can’t believe it’s you Cinderella!” he threw his arms around the dog’s neck and she licked his face.

“Charming, what are you doing?” His mother looked genuinely concerned. She frowned at him and crossed her arms. “Are you feeling okay?”
“No! You turned my girlfriend into a dog! I loved her then and I love her now. Change her back!”

"I don’t know what you’re talking about, dear. Why don’t you go up to bed and we can talk about this later...”

“No. I want you to change her back. Now. Please,” he added.

“You’re crazy,” Mila said.

“No, he’s drunk. Mila, how about I have the king escort you back to your car?”

Mila nodded and the king pulled her away quickly.

His mother tried to pull him up, but Charming could no longer stand. He was unable to do anything but hold onto Princess’ neck and laugh.

“Maybe if I kiss her, it will break the spell.” He leaned in and kissed Princess squarely on the mouth, but when he pulled away, nothing happened. The dog licked his face and whined. His mother left the room.

“You must think I’m an idiot for not noticing before,” he said between fits.

“But if you won’t change her back, I want to marry her like this, now.”

He reached into his pocket for his cell phone and called information. “Yes I would like to speak with Fred Wednesday,” he said, giving the name of the local television station’s investigative reporter. “It’s very important.”

His call was transferred, and after two rings, Fred Wednesday picked up.

“Fred Wednesday, Channel Five News.”

“Fred, Fred, hi, this is Prince Charming and I need you to uncover some dirt on my parents.”

“Have you been drinking?”
“No. Well, only a little. Look, my mom is a witch and she turned my girlfriend into a dog and I really need you to expose her as the horrible person she is, and also get my girlfriend turned back into a human so I can legally marry her, or find out how to make it okay for humans to marry dogs, or--”

“Son, son. You want to marry your dog?”

“Yes, but she’s actually my girlfriend and she had a horrible spell cast on her.”

"And what is your dog’s name?"

“Well, she was named Princess, but now her name is Cindy, because I know her secret identity."

“I see. Well, it certainly sounds like an interesting story, Prince Charming. I'll see what I can do for you.” There was a click, and the call was over.

“Thanks,” Charming said into the dead phone line. “I really do appreciate it.”

The next morning, Charming awoke on the dining room floor curled up with Princess. He had a massive headache.

“Good morning, beautiful,” he said. She yawned and stretched. “I’m going to get you some breakfast and see if we can’t figure this thing out. There’s got to be a way to turn you back.”

He went into the kitchen, wincing at the fluorescent lights above him. He grabbed some microwaved bacon, a bagel and the disheveled newspaper, and headed back into the dining room. He fed Princess the bacon, piece by piece, as he struggled to put the paper back together. On the front page, he saw a fuzzy picture of himself from last night, trying to kiss Princess.
Royal Heir Wants to Marry Mutt, the headline read. Underneath was an eyewitness account by some of the kitchen staff, stating that the prince had gone crazy last night, eschewing a beautiful maiden in favor of his mangy rescue dog. “We’ve always known he was a bit strange,” the head cook was quoted as saying, “but I never thought he would resort to bestiality. His parents are so nice and normal, and I’m pretty sure that bitch must have fleas.”

This is only the latest in a string of strange behavior from our future ruler. Last fall, he tried to marry a poor scullery maid. Channel Five investigative reporter Fred Wednesday says he believes that the prince suffers from a classic case of “White Knight syndrome,” the desire to rescue any woman he perceives as being in trouble. “I will of course go more in-depth in my hour-long special Wednesday night at eleven o’clock, but I believe that the Prince truly thinks that the only way he can adequately save this dog is by marrying it. I hope to prod as deeply as possible into his psyche, showing the imbalance that awaits us as a society if he is allowed to rule in the future.

"That bastard,” Charming said. “I trusted him. So much for an unbiased media!”

The article continued on, and while everyone had his own theories about the prince, there was one consensus opinion. All the interviewees seemed to believe that Charming was dangerous, at the very least to himself, but more than likely to the people as well.

And then, just as suddenly as he’d known that Princess was actually Cinderella, Prince Charming knew what he had to do to save face. He called a press
conference for later that evening. He had some very important news to share with the kingdom.

“My friends,” Charming began, “I will be brief. I will not take any questions; I would simply like to tell my side of the story. Almost a year ago, I fell in love with a wonderful woman, Cinderella. She was a scullery maid, but she was a good person and a fantastic dancer. My parents, as you may know, did not approve of her, so it shouldn’t have come as a surprise to me that she disappeared one day, and despite my best efforts, I was never able to track her down. I was distraught. The only comfort I found was in my dog, Princess. This is where things, admittedly, get a bit strange. I have reason--serious reason--to believe that this dog is none other than my beloved Cinderella, put under a spell by my mother, whom I believe is not a royal, but a witch.”

The crowd booed.

“As such, I can no longer in good conscience continue living life as I have with my family. I do not trust them, nor do I condone the actions that I believe they perpetrated. Consequently, I feel that I must give up my birthright. I shall no longer be your prince. I wish only for a normal life with my dog, who I love with all my heart. I am formally handing over my claim to the throne to my dear uncle, Prince Obsequious, effective immediately. I shall leave the castle under the cover of night, and I would like to live out the rest of my days in anonymity. Please respect my wishes.”

Camera bulbs flashed and the crowd cheered. Charming quickly left the stage, ignoring photographers’ requests for him to hug the dog for their cameras.
That night, he and the dog climbed into a black Buick LeSabre his parents had procured for him, and they left the kingdom forever. Charming and Princess moved into a small cottage in the Scottish highlands, where he made his living as a fortune teller and Princess served as his protection against intruders. They lived a happy life together for the next several years; Princess grew fat on haggis and blood pudding, and Charming felt the sort of freedom he’d never had as prince. He was a doting lover, and when Princess finally died of old age, he started a lost dogs home on his property. Somehow, every few years, a dog was born that possessed the exact characteristics of the woman he once loved, and Charming knew that Cindy was always with him. Although he now realized the spell could never be broken, he still kept hope that someday he would wake up to find the beautiful bottle blonde with the clear plastic shoes lying next to him instead of a yellow dog, if for nothing else then to get rid of the fleas that had become a permanent fixture in his bed.
THE WAY WE SAY GOODBYE

My father’s body looked like it was made of wax. His face was shiny from the preservatives they had pumped into his body, and that, combined with the rosiness of his cheeks from the makeup made me believe he’d been turned into a doll. Even the mahogany casket vaguely recalled the doll-sized cribs I had in my room at home, albeit more upscale. I wondered if his midsection had transformed into white muslin since I’d last seen him, three days earlier, but I had no opportunity to check.

My mother held me above the casket and told me it was the last time I’d see my dad before the funeral the next day. I didn’t know what a funeral was, didn’t understand what she meant when she said it was the last time I’d see him, but I noticed an eyelash resting on his cheek, and at that moment, all I wanted to do was pick it up and blow it away and make a wish on it the way my mother had taught me to do. At six, I had a strong belief in the power of eyelash wishes; every single one I’d ever made, except the wish I’d made for a green pony after watching The Wizard of Oz, had come true, and I still had faith that the pony was coming. My room was full of toys I’d received after blowing my own eyelashes away, and surely my father, who was older and stronger and smarter than I was, would have even better eyelashes for wishing.
I reached down to remove the stray lash, but my mother caught my arm before I had a chance to make contact. "Just look, Annie," she said. "Don’t touch. You don’t want to disturb your daddy."

I’m sure she just wanted to avoid the risks associated with having a young child touch an already shoddily made up dead body—I could have smeared his makeup, could have gotten dirt on his cheek or his tuxedo, could have felt the cold coming off his body—but I remember resenting the fact, years later, that she wouldn’t let me touch my father to say goodbye. Never mind that, at the time, I couldn’t comprehend that my father was lost forever, or that I thought we were merely attending some sort of grown-up cookie and punch party, or that I spent a majority of the afternoon focused on the fact that no one seemed to notice there was a perfectly good eyelash curled upward on my father’s cheek, waiting for someone to pick it up and blow it away.

This is what I remember about my father’s diagnosis: the hospital room was bright, the fluorescent lights harsh, and the grey and white speckled linoleum tiles dirtier than such a sterile environment should have allowed. I sat next to my mother in a vinyl chair with a Disney coloring book and Crayola magic markers, the first set I’d ever owned. My parents bought them for me on the way to the hospital, and they were a special treat, something I’d never been allowed before. I viewed them as objects both grown-up and forbidden. I was excited to use them, but ultimately disappointed in the way they bled through the tiny fibers in the paper and ruined
the pictures on the other side. The room was cold, and the doctor stood before us, eyes focused on the wall behind us, mouth set in a frown.

“Doctor Anderson,” the doctor said. “I am so sorry. The scans show that the cancer has spread to your liver.”

“What does that mean?” my mom asked.

“It’s stage IV, which means that while there are a lot of treatment options, there is basically no hope, short of a miracle, of curing the disease.” He turned to look at a spot above my father’s head, and said, “The best prognosis I can give you is four to six months, with chemotherapy.”

“What about surgery?” my mother asked, her voice quivering.

“You can do it, of course, but there’s no way to get rid of all of it. It would be a lot of pain and extra money with no real benefit.”

My mother sat beside me holding a disintegrating tissue between her folded hands, silent as she heaved with sobs. Each time her body jerked, she jostled my elbow, and my markers would stray outside the lines, adding to my annoyance with their inferiority.

It wasn’t that I was unaware of the fact that my mother was upset, or that I didn’t care, per se, but she cried so often in those days that, aside from the markers, the vinyl chairs, fluorescent lighting and linoleum floors, this situation seemed almost normal. Instead of greeting me when I got off the school bus like other parents I saw, my mother waited for me in the fetal position on the living room sofa under an oatmeal-colored afghan, mascara running down her face and crumpled tissues littering the carpet. I had given up trying to cheer her up with pictures and
making faces, and accepted her tears as part of a daily routine. In reality, her depression had only lasted a few weeks at this point—ever since my father’s initial cancer diagnosis, before it became apparent that the outlook was so grim—but I was both adaptable and oblivious to the situation and therefore on my way to becoming immune to her emotional outbursts.

When it was time to leave, my father, without saying a word, lifted me from my chair and carried me to the car, a feat he would soon be unable to accomplish because I was growing and he was being consumed from the inside. I swung my legs back and forth and watched the pavement sparkle beneath his feet in the late afternoon sun. It was only when he slid me into the backseat and kissed me on the forehead that I noticed he was crying too.

As my mother put the keys in the ignition, my father turned in his seat and faced me. “Annie,” he said. “Do you know what it means when somebody is dead?”

I shook my head. He patted my leg. We drove home.

I stood in the corner nearest my father, wanting to rock the coffin like I did with my dolls’ cradles. People filed by the casket, but I didn’t recognize them and stood with my arms firmly at my sides when, on occasion, they leaned down to hug me. My mother shook hands with them all, kissed their cheeks, hugged them, gestured to me in the corner. She had taught the second grade before I was born, but quit to stay home with me when she learned she was pregnant. After my father’s death, she would become an administrative secretary in the same school district, ostensibly as a means of avoiding continuing education meetings and the enforced
retirement age, but I think that she just couldn’t handle going back to her life as it was before my father died. Despite knowing many people from her years of teaching, most of the visitors seemed to be people my mother barely knew or had never met; I heard more than one caller say, “Hi, you must be Susan. I’m so sorry for your loss. Dr. Anderson was an incredible man.” I stared at the visitors as they filed past, not saying a word when they hugged me, until I saw someone I recognized.

“Uncle George!” I ran toward him and launched myself into his arms. He caught me, stumbled backward.

“Tell any good stories lately?” Uncle George asked me.

Sometime during preschool, I started lying about everything I could. Initially, it was a way to keep myself out of trouble; I would tell my teacher that I didn’t know who had broken the orange crayon or who had taken all the pink sheets of construction paper. Later, it developed into a game; I wanted to see what I was capable of making people believe. By the time I was in kindergarten, I had a fictitious younger brother and poodle, both of whom were held responsible for any perceived shortcomings I had. My parents remained unaware until my kindergarten teacher contacted them after I blamed my failure to bring in a permission slip for a field trip to the zoo on my mother’s preoccupation with my baby brother. Following that incident, my mother took me to a child psychologist who, she told me years later, said that my behavior was not abnormal and was perhaps indicative of advanced intelligence on my part, that studies show children who lie often have higher IQs than those who do not. This did not comfort my mother, however; it was not until I entered high school and found all acts of dishonesty and insincerity
impossible to perform that she was willing to accept I had been going through a phase when I was younger.

“Don’t encourage her, George.” My mother grabbed Uncle George’s arm and pulled him close, so that I was sandwiched between the two of them. She leaned in to kiss him on the cheek. “George, you need to leave. You smell like a gin mill.” My mother had always been a reserved person, someone who considered her family as her only friends and anyone else as an acquaintance. Her own parents had been killed in a car accident before I was born, so after my father’s passing, Uncle George and I were her sole pillars of support. It took years before I was able to help her in any tangible way, so immediately following my father’s death, Uncle George was the only person upon whom she could depend. She would never have suggested that he leave had she not felt it was in his best interest.

“I’m here to pay respects to my brother, Susan.”

“He’s not your brother, George. Please put my daughter down.”

“He may as well have been. He’s the closest I’ve ever had to a brother, and I deserve to say goodbye to him.” Uncle George’s grip on my waist intensified for a moment, then he relented, kissing me on the cheek before he set me on the floor.

Uncle George was not, in fact, my father’s brother; he was my mother’s brother, but while my mother and Uncle George had never been close, my father and Uncle George had become instant friends, something my mother was never able to understand. For a long time, I thought it was because she was in some way jealous, that she believed they were closer to one another than they were to her.
I heard the story so many times from various relatives that I began to think
I’d been present for the event, in spite of the fact that it happened years before my
birth. My mother, quite taken with my father and already invested in their
бургонг关系, decided to bring him home to meet the family over
Thanksgiving break her senior year of college. My father was, understandably, quite
erveous over the whole endeavor, but agreed to the proposition both because he
was eager to please my mother and because he figured that if things went poorly, he
would only be wasting one long weekend. My uncle George and my father were both
twenty-five, and it was George who greeted my mother and father at the door when
they got to my grandparents’ house, holding an open bottle of Rolling Rock. “I
assume you’ll want one of these,” George said to my father, handing him the
 lukewarm beer and standing aside to let my mother and father enter the house.
“Everyone else has a head start.”

My father took the beer, greeted my grandparents, and followed Uncle
George to the worn floral sofa in the living room, where the two of them spent the
rest of the evening watching the first two Godfather films on Betamax and finishing
off a case and a half of beer. My mother had to ask my father to come to bed three
times before he actually left my Uncle George on the couch to join her. They’d been
best friends ever since.

“I swear, he can’t come to any event without trying to make a scene,” my
mother said under her breath as she watched Uncle George make his way toward
the exit, bobbing and weaving, but still managing to remain upright.
“He’s funny,” I said, plopping to the floor and folding my legs Indian-style under my dress. I leaned back slightly against an arrangement of daffodils, expecting them to smell sweet, but finding instead that they had a dark, almost rubbery odor. I put my elbows on my knees and my chin in my hands, looking ahead, and wondered how many more times I would be hugged, how many more times a caller would tell my mother, “Annie is handling things so well. You’ve done a marvelous job with her, Susan.” I wonder how many times she wanted to tell them, “Actually, my daughter has no idea what’s happening, which is quite the opposite of handling things well.” Instead, she gave all the guests who weren’t family the same hard, set smile, touched them lightly on the arms, and blinking rapidly, said, “Thank you. Thank you for coming,” regardless of what they said to her.

I plucked a long, grass-like leaf from the daffodil arrangement and began squeezing it, believing it would turn my fingers and palms green as a sort of makeshift fingerpaint—I had memories of my mother teaching me how to dye my fingers and the backs of my hands yellow by rubbing them with dandelions over the summer—but my efforts failed, and the leaf sat crumpled but intact in my clean hand. I was used to being surrounded by crayons and paper, dolls, and plush animals. I didn’t know how to express my boredom, and I was annoyed with my mother for forcing Uncle George to leave.

My mother bent down so her face was level with mine, kissed the top of my head, and caressed my cheek. “Annie,” she said. “Don’t pick at the flowers, honey. You’ll hurt them.”
I turned and tucked leaf back into the arrangement so it was hidden by the other flowers and foliage and returned to staring at the low-pile carpet, with its burgundy diamonds outlined in gold. It was worn, and there were distinct black spots where people had dropped their gum and forgotten about it, left it to be pounded into dark, smooth, tar-like patches by the endless strings of mourners and visitors who came through to pay their respects to the deceased. I watched shoes shuffle their way across the floor, not caring who they belonged to, because I knew no one. I had no cousins; my father didn’t have any siblings of his own, and Uncle George—still a bachelor in his forties—had only a German Shepherd named Sadie to call his own.

I was an only child born late in life to a couple who believed that having a family was something impossible for them. It wasn’t that I was unwanted; it was simply that I was a surprise. When they’d first married, my mother and father intended to have several children. When a decade passed and it still hadn’t happened, they resigned themselves to a child-free existence, both agreeing that while adoption was a good alternative for some people, it would never be an option for them; both wanted a child they could call theirs without reservation or qualification, and neither believed in resorting to surgery to make it happen. As months passed and my mother finally settled into the idea that what she had long believed was her calling would never come into fruition, she began to feel ill when she got up in the mornings, and even thinking of certain foods that she once loved—cheddar cheese, French fries, apples—suddenly sickened her. She brushed it off as
her body pulling a psychosomatic prank on her. As the symptoms continued, hope presented itself in the form of two pink lines on a test she had intended to throw away, but couldn’t bring herself to go through with the gesture, as it had seemed too final, too hopeless.

In spite of their desire to have children and the difficulties they faced in conceiving me, my father entered into his impending parenthood reluctantly, aware of the dangers that mid-life pregnancies posed, both to the mother and the baby. My mother had just turned forty when I was conceived, and my father read study after study that warned him that the pregnancy was a bad idea: trisomy 18 for me, an increased risk of delivery complications for my mother. His love for her outweighed his desire to have a baby, and he told her on multiple occasions that if she decided she couldn’t go through with it, he would support her. When the ultrasounds and amniocentesis revealed that I was, as far as anyone could tell, perfectly healthy, he allowed himself to become excited for my arrival, and his apprehension began to disappear. His initial lack of enthusiasm about me never entered into the way he parented, as far as I can remember. I was indulged and spoiled, as only children often are, with elaborate wooden swingsets built to resemble a castle and a pirate ship, respectively, and trips to Disney World as Easter presents.

Standing at the casket was probably equal parts my mother’s way of making sure none of the visitors tried to engage her in long conversations and staying as close to my father as possible for as long as possible before she had to put him in the ground. She had dressed me in pink, presumably as a means of detracting attention
from herself as the grieving widow. In black, she blended in with the dark suits who came to pay their respects, while I was bright and stood out, ignorantly luring people toward my station in the corner.

“Shit,” my mother said under her breath.

“Mommy, shh. That’s a bad word.” Even though I corrected her, I took a secret delight in hearing my mother—or anyone else, for that matter—swear. I had recently discovered that I could mimic other people’s bad habits without much repercussion, as long as I pointed out that I had heard or seen someone else do it first.

She didn’t pay attention to my scolding, and instead fixed her eyes on the door, through which Uncle George was returning. His face was red and sweaty, and he had changed from his dark grey suit into a pair of threadbare jeans, so worn that they were nearly white, with slight hints of a hole at each knee, and a yellow flannel shirt. He approached the casket once more, and leaned in to hug my mother, more heavily than before.

“George,” she said, in a register only slightly above a whisper. “What are you doing? You need to go. Take some coffee, and then I need you to leave.” She pushed him away, and scanned the room with her eyes, probably in an attempt to make sure no one was staring at them.

“I’m just...” Uncle George closed his eyes for a few moments and leaned his head backward, the same motion my mother always used when she tried to prevent herself from crying. “I’m so sad. So sad. I can’t... he’s gone.” Uncle George leaned into my mother once more, resting his head on her shoulder, and began to shake. I was
impressed with how quiet he was able to remain as he sobbed; every time I cried, it seemed as though I drew the attention of anyone within fifty feet of me. I had never seen a man so broken down before; even when my father cried after we received his prognosis, it had been a calm, reserved sort of crying, invisible to anyone who wasn’t faced with him. Uncle George was silent but forceful, and in that moment, all I wanted to do was make him feel better. I stood and joined my mother in consoling him by wrapping my arms around his legs and leaning my head against his right hip.

He stood straight and looked down at me, making what I’m sure was the closest approximation of a smile he could muster at that point.

“Hey kiddo,” he said, his mouth still half-cocked as he spoke, as though he thought relaxing it even for a moment would cause him to collapse onto the floor. He rubbed the top of my head, mussing the curls that my mother had taken pains to perfect two hours earlier. “Thanks. Your uncle George really appreciates it.”

As I hugged him more tightly, my mother stepped away and walked toward the refreshment table. She grabbed a Styrofoam cup and filled it to the lip with coffee, then returned, grabbing my shoulder and gently tugging me away from Uncle George.

“Drink this,” she said, handing him the cup.

He squeezed the cup too hard as he took it from her, and coffee sloshed over its sides and onto his hands. “Good thing it’s cold, I guess,” he said, still smiling as though his mouth was holding him upright. He brought the cup to his mouth and drank the rest of its contents in one long gulp. “But it’s bad.” He paused a bit too long between each word, whether for emphasis or from drunkenness, I don’t know.
“I love you George, I do. And I know this is difficult for you. But I mean it. You need to leave.”

I watched the Styrofoam collapse and fold in on itself as he clenched his fist. Outside the generally comical overexcitement he displayed when watching poorly played—or poorly refereed—Green Bay Packers games, I had never seen any indication that my uncle George could become angry. “I have every right to say goodbye to him. He’s just as much my family as he is yours, and I’ll miss him just as much as you will. Just let me say goodbye. Please.”

My mother closed her eyes and exhaled heavily, bringing her fingertips to her temples. “Fine,” she said, eyes still closed. “Tell him goodbye, drink some water, and go home. I need you to be okay tomorrow.” Her voice wavered. “Annie, sweetheart?” I looked up. “Please go get your uncle George some cookies from the table.”

“How many?” I asked. I had learned to count some time ago, but I was well-aware that there were still occasions when people were unduly impressed by the fact that I possessed this ability. I hadn’t had the opportunity to demonstrate my mastery over numbers to Uncle George for some time, so I sensed that there was a distinct possibility that I would be lavished with a considerable amount of attention if I performed a more exacting task.

“Three,” my mother said without hesitation.

I ambled over to the table and grabbed three oatmeal raisin cookies, my least favorite. Raisins, at the time, seemed like a more adult food, something that people older than I was appreciated for reasons I had yet to understand. Giving Uncle George three oatmeal raisin cookies had the additional benefit of leaving more
chocolate chip cookies on the table, and I believed that if I behaved at the party, I
would be rewarded with a doll version of my father and the remainder of the
chocolate chip cookies. I turned and looked at my mother, wondering if she was
watching me. It was the furthest I’d been from her all day and the first time I’d been
to the refreshment table. My mother was standing with Uncle George at the casket,
rubbing his back as he held his head in his hands and sobbed. I reached toward the
table once more, grabbed the nearest chocolate chip cookie, and shoved half of it
into my mouth. It was dry and stale and tasted vaguely of incense, but if I didn’t
finish it, my mother would know I had disobeyed her. I swallowed, feeling the
crumbs scrape down my esophagus, and considered the possibility that the
unpleasant texture was penance for my bad behavior. I looked around and,
confident that no one was watching, placed the uneaten half of the cookie back on
the platter.

I returned to the casket, cookies in hand. I knew that delivery was important;
I wanted to cheer Uncle George up and also receive the appropriate accolades for
having completed my task as assigned. I tugged on the back of his flannel shirt. He
turned and looked down at me, his face splotchy, his brown irises surrounded by
blooms of red, nose dripping into his greying mustache.

“I brought you three cookies!” I said a little too loudly, and—because he
didn’t seem quite as impressed as he should have been given that I’d demonstrated
such proficiency at counting—I finished the gesture with a deep curtsy.

Uncle George’s tense smile returned as he bent over me and took the cookies.
“Thank you,” he said, biting into two at once. They appeared to be softer than the
chocolate chip cookies, and I was indignant. “Thank you so much.” He rubbed the top of my head and stood, finishing the first two cookies together, then eating the last one, unaware of the crumbs gathering on the front of his shirt and scattering onto the floor. I looked down at my own front, wondering if I had made a mess that would give away my indiscretion. I was clean. Safe.

My mother put her hand on the small of his back. “Come on, George,” she said. “It’s time for you to go.” She walked with him toward the door, hand still fixed on his back, and I noticed for the first time that day that the hem on the back of her black dress was uneven. She had never learned how to sew but had run out of time to have a seamstress alter the dress for her, so my mother had fixed the hem herself with tape the night before. I felt inexplicably sad as I fixated on the slight rightward downslope of her skirt. I wanted to run to her and tell her about it, but somewhere in me, I knew that it was the wrong thing to do, that somehow drawing attention to that small flaw would be a point that could cause her entire frayed day to unravel. I was aware enough to know that she was upset with Uncle George, and I didn’t want to bring any of her bad feelings onto myself.

I watched her walk out with him, and my mind wandered back to the fact that there may still be a rogue eyelash on my father’s cheek, waiting to be plucked and blown away. I turned toward the casket and tried to see in, but it was set too high. I got onto my toes and grabbed the side of the coffin for support, hoping I could pull myself up and get in with him, possibly look for more stray lashes, but my arms were too weak. Had I been much larger, I’m sure I would have posed a threat to the balance of the coffin, but the casket stood firm and I was frail. Still, I can’t imagine
the level of panic my mother must have felt when she returned and saw me pulling on its side. If she was alarmed, though, she never showed it. She appeared behind me silently, resting her fingers gently on my flexed shoulder. I jumped backward, knocked into her knees, but she remained upright.

“Annie,” she said, moving her hand over my shoulder and holding me close to her. “Sweetheart. It’s okay. He’s okay.” I don’t know what she thought was going through my mind, but as she held me there, my stomach knotted. I considered the possibility that she wanted the eyelash for herself, and if that were the case, I was willing to let her take it. I didn’t understand why she was mad at Uncle George and why she kept making him leave the party, but I understood that her skirt was uneven and she was having a bad day, and I wanted her to have it and any of the wishes that came along with it. I could wait for a purple bicycle, even though I didn’t want to.

I turned to face my mother and wrapped my arms around her waist. I wanted to make her feel better, and even though I knew through experience that hugs never quite worked the way I hoped they would, they did seem to produce a momentary calm.

She stroked my hair. “It’s okay,” she repeated. “Daddy’s okay.”

“I ate a cookie,” I told her, feeling suddenly off-balance and yearning to make things okay.

“That’s okay, too,” she said. “You can have another one if you’d like.”

“No. They’re yucky. They taste like church.”
“Well, your uncle George didn’t seem to mind them, at least. I’m not sure he could taste them, though.” She chuckled. I let go, satisfied that I’d done my duty, and returned to my spot in front of the daffodils. I sat, trying to find pictures in the carpet. Sometimes, at the right angle, I could configure the diamonds into a series of squares, but when I blinked, they disappeared. When I ceased to see the squares, I would start searching again, leaning my head further and further to the side until the diamonds once again aligned themselves into tiny patterns within a larger pattern. I hated that the room was so populated, that there were so many ankles to break the lines. I turned and sniffed the daffodils once more, hoping had been some change, but they were still acrid. I wondered if they were waiting for something, if there was some point at which they would reveal themselves to be as beautiful as they looked, but that moment never arrived. I fingered the petals.

“Be nice to the flowers, Annie,” my mother said. She had been standing alone in front of the coffin for what must have been at least fifteen minutes; the callers seemed to have forgotten the departed’s family. I counted the clusters of loafers and pumps. Seven groups. I tried to determine which voices belonged to which pair of shoes, but it was an impossible feat; I could distinguish between male and female voices and make predictions based on distance and volume, but I refused to look up and confirm whether or not I was correct, convinced it would be cheating. What I ended up with was strings of words in different voices, many of which I didn’t understand. I tried to make note of those words to ask my mother about later: sanctimonious, endoscopy, quartet, despicable, inappropriate, chardonnay.
I was absorbed in this challenge when I heard a faint rhythmic jingling in the distance, like the sound of coins and keys clanking together in a loose pocket. It persisted and got louder, but the feet remained clumped together at a distance, orbiting slowly around some invisible center, but never coming any nearer to me.

I glanced toward the door, wondering if we had more guests. The noise seemed to be coming from the hallway, but I the source was still out of reach. I leaned forward, straining to achieve an angle that would allow me a better vantage point from which to view the hallway. And then I saw it. No one else seemed to notice, but there was a large dog running at top speed down the hallway. The dog passed by the door to our room and continued on its journey, flanked by my uncle George, face redder than ever, still wearing his yellow flannel shirt. He was breathing heavily.

“Mommy,” I said. She jumped.

“Yes, dear?” She had been staring straight in front of her, and I wondered if she had been playing her own versions of the games I had devised to keep myself occupied.

“Sadie is here.”

“Who’s Sadie?” she looked genuinely puzzled for a moment, but before I had a chance to respond, she pieced it together. “Annie, Sadie can’t be here,” she said. “This isn’t a place for dogs.” Even as she said it, I was pretty sure she didn’t believe it; the tone of her voice was similar to the tone she used when she spoke of Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, entities I’d given up on a year ago, but whom I still feigned belief in for my parents’ benefit, because any sign that I was getting older
was inevitably met with my mother holding back tears and my father biting his lip and furrowing his brow.

“She is, too. She brought Uncle George.” It was a joke in my family, as in many families with unruly canines, that the dog walks the human. It didn't occur to me that what I was saying wasn’t technically correct, because it seemed to be the case, regardless of mechanics.

“She... what?” My mother put her hand on her forehead and looked at the carpet.

“They were playing in the hallway. Can I go, too? Please?”

“I can’t believe this is happening.” She was speaking in hushed tones, her hand still covering her face, so her words were nearly indistinguishable. “Come on,” she said, grabbing my arm. “Let’s go find your uncle.”

Before we had a chance to leave, though, Sadie bounded into the room, brown leather leash trailing on the floor behind her. Uncle George entered soon after the dog, clutching his side and wheezing. In his struggle to keep control of the dog, the left leg of Uncle George’s jeans had given way, leaving his knee exposed.

There was no way for my mother to save face now; the callers had noticed the dog. Sadie seemed oblivious to both general manners and the fact that she didn’t belong in the funeral home. She went, tail wagging, from a group of four people—two men and two women—clustered nearest to the door, making sure to sniff each one, to the refreshment table near the casket. Sadie stood in front of the table for a moment, her butt wiggling back and forth, then jumped, resting her muddy paws on top of the white table linen. She angled her head downward and to the side, toward
the cookie tray. As she struggled to reach the remaining cookies with her jaw, the table wobbled. The movement was almost imperceptible at first, but as her tail wagged more fiercely and her head bobbed more forcefully, the table began to shake. It shook, and it seemed everyone knew it was bound to collapse, that it would be impossible to get there in time to stop Sadie from making a mess.

My mother stood watching as it happened, mouth drawn, face so hollow that I knew she had to be biting the inside of her cheeks. She gripped Uncle George’s arm in a way that suggested he was holding her upright, and it took me years to realize that, given his condition at the time, he was supporting more weight than he should have been asked to carry.

When the crash came, it seemed like more than seconds had passed since Sadie lunged at the table, though no one had moved in the interim. The table fell to the floor, sending punch and cookies flying at the wall. The red-pink liquid washed over Sadie, whose tail was still rocking back and forth with the regularity of a metronome. The table landed first on its side, then it turned over completely as Sadie kept pushing forward, refusing to let the barrier keep her from her snack. She lay sprawled on top of the overturned table, licking furiously at the floor.

My mother gripped my hand hard. She stood silent near the doorway, watching as Sadie licked the floor and wagged her tail, which swept back and forth across the top of underside of the table, her long black and tan fur lightly grazing the surface. It brought to mind the feather duster my mother used to clean the living room furniture, and I thought, briefly, that at least Sadie was helping to clean up the mess she had created.
As my fingers turned from pink to white, my mother cleared her throat. She was by nature a quiet person, so the gesture was only loud enough that those in her immediate vicinity—my Uncle George and I—could hear it. “Calling hours are over,” she said.

The visitors turned their attention from Sadie—who was now on her back, rolling from side to side in the spilled punch, her front paws tucked neatly against her shoulders, her mouth open, pink tongue flopping onto the right side of her face as she wiggled, her tail still moving incessantly back and forth—to my mother, who grabbed Uncle George’s arm with her free hand.

“You heard me,” she said. “Calling hours are over. You can all go home.” She let go of my hand and pointed toward the door behind her. Though the words made it sound like she was scolding the callers, her voice was even and warm, and her mouth was set somewhere between a smile and a smirk, though I could tell that she was trying hard to look firm. “Thank you all for coming,” she added, letting her mouth give way into a half smile. “We really appreciate it. More than you will ever know.”

The guests stood in their clusters for a moment, staring at my mother, who stared back, finger still pointed at the door. I thought that her arm must have been getting tired, and I wondered if she was going to yell if they didn’t listen to her. I had only heard my mother yell once in my life, when I had taken a bottle of Dawn dish soap from the kitchen and used the whole container run myself a bubble bath that managed to cover the entire floor of my tiny ensuite bathroom with stiff peaks of white suds. Even then, she hadn’t been yelling at me; she just loudly lamented the
fact that she would have to find someway to clean it up. I had tried to point out to her that the room was already clean—after all, it was filled with soap—but that didn't help matters; if anything, it seemed to make her even more upset. I'd spent the following months pondering this discrepancy in our beliefs about cleanliness and trying to ensure that I never heard her yell again, and to this point, I’d been successful in my endeavor. The idea that my mission could be ruined by a group of strangers was simultaneously exciting and nerve-wracking; I held my breath and waited, sure that at any moment, my mother would raise her voice, red-faced, and tell them to leave her alone, and I would find it delightful because this time, I was not to blame.

It never came to that, though; my mother was much too composed to ever let herself lose her temper in public, and I think everyone else could sense that she was exhausted, that she probably had been for some time. The guests began to file past her, silent. They looked downward or straight ahead; no one seemed interested in seeing what Sadie was doing or how my mother would react when everyone was gone. Nobody said goodbye or thanked her, and no one offered final condolences. They were there, and then they were gone. When the last guest, a woman in a navy blue pantsuit and black pumps, exited the room, my mother shut the door and turned toward Uncle George.

“What, exactly, did you think you were doing, bringing Sadie here? This is a funeral home. They do not allow dogs. This is a place for people, this is an event for people. This is not for dogs.” Her hands were at her sides, and she was clutching her
skirt in her fists. Her eyes were wide, and she leaned toward him slightly, looking more curious than angry.

“Well,” Uncle George said, looking back at Sadie, refusing to return my mother’s stare. “Annie is here, isn’t she?”

“Yes,” my mother said. “Annie is a human. Annie is Jeff’s daughter. She’s supposed to be here. I don’t see how that explains a dog showing up at my husband’s calling hours.”

“Sadie is my daughter,” Uncle George said. It was the most coherent I’d heard him sound all day. “That makes Jeff her uncle, and I think she has every right to be here and say goodbye to him.”

“George,” my mother said. She bit her lip, glanced at the ceiling, and continued, “You know it’s different, right?”

“Because Annie happens to have been born a human?” His face was getting redder, his eyes wetter. “I can’t help that. Sadie is mine. She’s my daughter, and I wanted to share today with my family. This is the last time we will all be together.”

His voice caught, and he once again began sobbing silently.

My mother watched him for a moment, then walked across the room toward Sadie, who was chewing on the pink-stained tablecloth. She bent at the waist and grabbed Sadie’s leash, tugging gently. “Come on, Sadie,” she said, her voice low and soft. “Let’s go say goodbye to your uncle Jeff.”

Sadie trotted alongside her, looking around the room as they approached the casket. It took me years to realize that a well-trained dog follows its owner with its eyes focused straight ahead; I had always related to Sadie’s propensity to look all
around her, because it seemed to mirror my own desires, but she never got into trouble for staring like I did.

“Sit,” my mother said. Sadie stood and looked at the casket, tail wagging. “I said sit.” My mother reached down and pushed lightly on Sadie’s hindquarters. The dog crouched, but refused to remain fully seated. “Close enough,” my mother said.

Uncle George wiped his eyes and nose on his sleeve, which I imagined had to have been pretty wet by this point, then joined my mother at the casket, Sadie nestled between them. He took the leash from my mother. “Thank you,” he said. “Thank you, Susan. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I just... I don’t know how... this is fucking hard.”

“Shh,” I said. “Don’t say that in front of Sadie.”

Uncle George laughed. “Right,” he said. “I’m sorry, Sadie.”

“George,” my mother said. “I would like you—and Sadie—to stay with us tonight. I don’t think any of us should be alone.”

“Are you sure?” He smiled, and I knew that even if my mother had only been asking from politeness, he was going to come home with us.

“Absolutely,” she said. “Annie, do you want to have a sleepover with Sadie?”

“Yes, please,” I said. I started to pet Sadie on the back, but stopped because she smelled like a wet dog crossed with imitation cherry and pineapple flavoring, and her fur stuck to my hand.

“Okay,” my mother said. “It’s settled. I’m driving, though. You can pick your car up tomorrow.”
When we left the funeral home, I was surprised to see that the sun was just beginning to set; it seemed like much more time had passed. My mother lifted me into the backseat of her Dodge Caravan, then pushed Sadie in behind me. Sadie jumped onto the seat and rested her head on my lap, panting. I rubbed her ears, where her fur was softest.

My mother helped Uncle George into the passenger’s seat, putting her arm under his right elbow and holding him steady as he climbed into the van. She grabbed the long ribbon of seatbelt and forced it into his hand.

“I’m okay, Susan, really. We’re not going far. I’m just going to sit here.”

“I think you could use some help holding yourself steady.”

“I’ll be fine, I promise. I never wear them.”

“I’m not going anywhere until you put it on, George. I’m fine just sitting in the parking lot.”

“Fine, Mom.” He put an emphasis on the word “mom” that led me to believe he was rolling his eyes in the front seat, but all I could see was his shaggy hair curling outward from underneath the gap between the headrest and the body of the seat. I liked the way the thin strips of silver stood out from the rest of his dark hair and reflected the fading sunlight. I reached forward, hoping to touch it, but I was too short, and Sadie’s head impeded my reach.

When the seatbelt made an audible click, my mother circled around the front of the van and climbed into the driver’s seat. She turned the key in the ignition and, despite the daylight, turned her headlights on. She never drove with them off.

“Make sure you hold onto Sadie, Annie,” she said. “You have to keep her safe.”
“I will,” I said, bending down and putting my arms around Sadie’s neck. Her fur was still sticky. “She’s dirty,” I said.

My mother looked back at us through the rearview mirror. “Just hold onto her collar,” she said. She readjusted the mirror, then put the van into drive, leaving the parking lot a little too quickly. She pulled into a grocery store down the street.

“I just have to pick up a few things,” she told us. “You guys stay right here.” She put the van in park, undid her seatbelt, and got out of the car. She left the engine running. “Lock the car,” she said. “And don’t go anywhere.” She closed her door and jogged into the supermarket, nearly running into the automatic doors, which were slow to react.

Uncle George didn’t lock the doors, but instead took his seatbelt off. “I’ll be right back, kiddo,” he said.

“We’re not allowed to leave,” I told him. “You need to lock the doors. Mommy said.”

“I heard her,” he said, pulling on the handle and cracking his door. “But nature calls. I’ll be right back. I promise. I’m just going around the corner.”

“No. You can’t,” I said, even though I knew stopping him was impossible. I pushed down on the lock on my own door. I knew it was my greatest defense against what I was sure would be my mother’s inevitable impending rage; I could always insist that I had followed the rules, even if he hadn’t. My previous hope that I may once again witness my mother yelling at someone returned, though I felt a bit guilty that Uncle George would be the victim; the idea had been much more appealing when her hypothetical anger was directed at a room full of strangers.
Uncle George slid out of the van and shut the door a little too hard. Sadie lifted her head and her ears pricked up. I rubbed the top of her head again. “It’s okay,” I told her as I watched Uncle George wander around to the other side of the building and disappear as he turned the corner. When he left my line of vision, I began to panic, unsure of where I should focus my attention. I didn’t know whether to look left and wait for my mother to come back, so I could explain to her that none of this was my fault, or to look right and make sure that Uncle George found his way back to the car safely, remembering everything my mother had said about him being unsteady and thinking about the wavering trajectory he had taken as he left the car. In my uncertainty, I stared straight ahead, at the back of the blue velour passenger seat, internally enumerating the reasons that I was not to blame in case my mother came back before Uncle George did.

When the passenger door opened, I inhaled sharply, felt my heart rate spike. Sadie’s tail started wagging, and Uncle George got back into the van.

“Lock the door,” I said, looking out the driver’s side window to make sure my mother wasn’t approaching the vehicle. “Please,” I added.

Uncle George reclined his seat and put his feet up on the dashboard. He was barefoot, and I couldn’t remember whether or not he had been wearing shoes when he left the van. I wondered, if he had indeed left his shoes in the car, what kind of germs his feet had been exposed to and if they could infect me from the front of the vehicle. I lifted Sadie’s head and brought my legs up onto the seat, trying to get as far away from Uncle George’s feet as possible. I had a pathological fear of vomiting, and
throwing up was inseparable from my concept of germs; in my mind, there was no other sort of illness.

My mother returned to the van, cradling two small, thin paper bags in her arms. There were thin frosted bottlenecks sticking out of the top of each bag, and I knew, without asking, that my mother had bought something fancy. I hoped for sparkling white grape juice, something I’d only had once, on the previous New Year’s Eve, but I coveted and even begged for it whenever my mother took me on shopping trips. She never bought it, insisting it was a beverage reserved for special occasions. I believed, though, that since we had attended a party and Sadie was sleeping over, that night could potentially qualify as an appropriate time.

She shifted the bags into her left arm and opened the door, not even bothering to wait and see if Uncle George made a motion to unlock the van, as though she knew all along that her instructions wouldn’t be followed. She handed the bottles to Uncle George and got into the driver’s seat.

“Seatbelt,” she said.

“What have you got here, sis?” Uncle George turned to her, his left eyebrow raised as he made the inquiry.

“Put your seatbelt on, George.” He obliged.

“Sparkling grape juice!” I said, certain that it had to be in at least one of the bottles. I imagined an evening playing Chutes and Ladders or Candyland in front of the gas fireplace in the living room, drinking sparkling white grape juice from real glasses instead of the plastic, lidded cups my parents insisted I use.
“Sorry, Annie,” my mother said as she put the car into reverse. “Not tonight. You know you’re not allowed to have juice unless you drink all your milk.” The rule, instituted years earlier, had essentially ruined mealtimes in my home. I wasn’t allowed to drink juice unless I finished drinking my milk, which I hated. On the rare occasions that I actually choked down the milk, I found myself too full to contemplate drinking juice.

I started pouting, hoping my mother would somehow see me, feel pity, turn the car around, and return to the grocery store to pick up a bottle of sparkling grape juice to keep me placated, but her eyes were focused on the intersection while she waited for an opportunity to turn left.

“Grey Goose?” Uncle George said. I heard the rustle of paper in the front seat, and though I couldn’t see him, I knew he was looking into the bags. “You’re going all out,” he said.

“Well,” she said, as she turned onto our street, “you’ve already got a head start, so I figure this is my best chance to catch up.”

“We’ve got a funeral tomorrow, you know,” Uncle George said, tapping his foot against the glove compartment. “You probably don’t want to be hungover for that.”

My mother gripped the steering wheel tighter, her knuckles whitening as she pulled into our horseshoe driveway and parked the van in front of the entrance. She normally parked in the garage, but she probably didn’t want to see my father’s car sitting there, waiting. “I can’t possibly feel any worse than I already do,” she said. The car idled and she pulled the keys from the ignition. Uncle George hopped out,
opened my door, and clumsily unbuckled my seatbelt, though I was capable of accomplishing that particular feat on my own. He lifted me from the van with his right arm and, with his left, grabbed Sadie’s leash. He carried me through the front door and set me down in the foyer. I didn’t know then that it would be the last time anyone would pick me up.

My mother set the bottles on the coffee table in the living room and went into the kitchen. She returned with two tall glasses filled with ice and a red sippy cup clutched against her chest and a half-gallon of Minute Maid orange juice in her left hand. She set the orange juice and the glasses next to the bottles of Grey Goose and handed me the sippy cup. I hoped for orange juice, but I knew she had given me milk.

“Annie, it’s time for you to have dinner,” she said.

“Can I have a cheeseburger?” I asked.

“I’m warming you up some Spaghetti-O’s,” she said, turning back toward the kitchen.

I wrinkled my nose and followed her as she left the living room. “I had those last night.”

“And tonight, you’re having leftovers. Maybe if you’re good tomorrow, I’ll take you to McDonald’s,” she said, taking the pink plastic bowl out of the microwave and stirring it before returning it to cook for one more minute.

“Spaghetti-O’s taste like blood,” I said. I automatically disliked anything that had a slightly metallic taste; Spaghetti-O’s were bad, but canned tomato soup was the worst offender. I rarely ate packaged foods as a child, and never managed to
acquire a taste for them as I grew up. Until my father's diagnosis, Spaghetti-O’s were a rare occurrence, and after his death, they only popped into my life on the rare occasions when my mother was going through some sort of personal strife and felt unable to cook; when I got older, I was always able to tell when she was undergoing some sort of romantic turmoil or when work became particularly stressful, because she always started to buy canned goods.

The microwave beeped and my mother pulled the bowl out, stirring it one last time. There was steam rising from the top, and I instantly began worrying about burning my mouth.

“We’re going to eat in the living room tonight,” she said. She grabbed a plastic placemat with the ABC’s on it from the drawer next to the sink as she left the kitchen. When we got into the living room, she put down the placemat in front of the television and set my bowl of Spaghetti-O’s on top of it. “Be careful,” she said. “It’s still hot.”

As I ate my dinner, Uncle George and my mother began working their way through the vodka. My mother mixed hers with orange juice, but Uncle George drank his plain. Sadie slept in front of the unlit fireplace.

“Let’s watch home videos,” Uncle George said, pulling out the box of videocassetes my parents kept at the bottom of the oak entertainment center my father made when he and my mother were first married.

“Oh, no, I don’t know,” my mother said. She was speaking much faster but much sloppier than usual; I had never seen her drunk before. “I think it might make me sad. Sadder.”
“But we can celebrate Jeff,” Uncle George said. “What do you say, Annie? Do you want to see videos of your daddy?”

“Okay,” I said. I was beginning to feel sleepy, but I didn’t want to be left out of the party, and I figured the best way to remain included was to agree to what Uncle George wanted.

“She needs to go to bed,” my mother said, ruffling my hair. I ducked, but she kept rubbing my head. “We have to get up early in the morning. Come on,” she said.

“What time is the funeral?” Uncle George said.

“Nine,” my mother said, taking a big gulp of her spiked orange juice. “But we have to get you a suit so you don’t look like a hobo.”

“Shit,” he said. “Sorry,” he added, before I could scold him.

“Let’s go, sleepyhead,” my mother said, grabbing my arm a little more forcefully than usual. She led me up the stairs to my bedroom and tucked me into bed, not bothering to make me change into pajamas.

“Goodnight, pumpkin. I love you. And your daddy loves you, too. Don’t ever forget that, okay?”

“Okay,” I said, fighting back a yawn.

She motioned to a yellow dress hanging on the doorknob. It was the same color as the daffodils at the funeral home. “You can wear that pretty dress tomorrow,” she said.

“Okay.”

She leaned forward and kissed me on the forehead, then pulled the lavender and pink quilt up to my chin. She left the lamp on my nightstand lit; at six, I was still
afraid of the dark, and had only recently agreed to start sleeping in my own bed at night. She exited, weaving slightly. “Let me know if you need anything,” she said.

I listened to her uneven steps as she walked down the stairs, and wondered if she had gotten her chance to take my father’s eyelash and blow it, to make her own wish. I wondered what she had wished for and if she would get it, or if it would be futile, like my own wishes for a green pony that had never come into fruition. It would be years before I realized that my mother had given up on superstition and wishes when we received my father’s death sentence, and it would be years before I adopted that same worldview.

I woke to sunlight streaming across my bedspread in slanted lines. I lifted my arms and stretched, surprised at how hungry I felt; I usually had to be forced to eat cereal in the morning before school, and on weekends, my parents let me skip the meal altogether. I got out of bed and traded the pink dress from the previous day for the daffodil yellow, and went downstairs into the living room. My mother was stretched out on the couch, snoring loudly, still wearing her dress from the day before. Uncle George was in the recliner, also snoring, Sadie curled up on the floor next to his chair. The television screen glowed blue, and there was an empty Grey Goose bottle on the floor between the couch and the recliner. The orange juice carton still sat on the coffee table, uncapped. I lifted it, hoping to sneak some before everyone else awoke, but it was empty.

“Mommy,” I said, tugging on my mother’s arm. She stirred. “I’m dressed,” I said.
She put her arm over her eyes. “That’s good,” she said. She began to turn away from me, then sat straight up. “Annie,” she said, seeming suddenly alert.

“Yes?”

“Honey, go look at the microwave and tell Mommy what time it is.”

“Okay,” I said, happy to be given a task that seemed important. I ran into the kitchen, feeling speed was essential. “It’s ten-oh-six,” I said upon my return.

“Oh, no,” she said, putting her hands over her eyes. “No, no, no. No.”

“It is,” I said. “I can show you.” Had it been an analog clock, I wouldn’t have been confident in my time-telling abilities and I would have understood her doubt, but under the circumstances, I was confused.

“Oh, God,” she said, rising. She started pacing in front of the coffee table.

“Well, it’s too late, now, it’s definitely too late, they’ll have gone on without me. Oh boy.” She pulled at her hair as she walked back and forth across the carpet. “George,” she said. Uncle George continued to snore. She walked over to the recliner and shook him at the shoulders. “George,” she said again.

“What?” he said. “I’m sleeping.”

“We missed the funeral, George.” She brought her left hand to her mouth and started chewing on the tip of her index finger

“What,” he said again, but this time, it came out flat, like a statement.

“I can’t believe this,” she said, tears forming in her eyes. Her chin was shaking, and I knew that there were only moments before she started sobbing. I rushed toward her and hugged her around the waist, hoping I could stop her from crying, but my attempts were futile. “George, I’m so terrible. I’m the worst wife. Jeff
didn’t deserve me. I can’t believe I’ve done this.” Her body heaved, and I tightened my grip.

“Susan,” Uncle George said, shifting his weight in the recliner. “This sucks. It does. But I promise you, it’s not the end of the world, and it doesn’t make you a terrible person. Yes, you were lucky to have Jeff, but Jeff was just as lucky. You both had more than I’ll ever have,” he said. He wiped his nose.

“But this was his day. It’s his day, and I’m not there, because I’m fucking stupid.” Her entire body was shaking, so I let go and sat on the floor, hugging my knees to my chest. I knew better than to point out her language usage.

“Yesterday was his day, Susan. Funerals aren’t shit. They’re sad, they’re stuffy, and they’re generic. Walk into any random funeral, and it could be Jeff’s. Yesterday was about Jeff. Today is about tradition.”

“And tradition dictates I should be there.”

“Fuck that,” he said. “You’re having, what, a minister there? When was the last time Jeff even went to church? It’s stupid. It’s just a way to make everyone else feel better. I’m having my own fucking funeral for Jeff, and I’m having it in this living room right now. And it will be the right way.”

“And how are you going to do that?”

“We’re going to finish watching these home videos—you’ll like them Annie; you’re in these,” he said, standing and looking down at me, “—and we’re going to remember Jeff for who he was, not for who some stranger says he was.” Uncle George moved across the living room and crouched in front of the television. He popped a masking tape-labeled videocassette into the VCR and hit play.
Uncle George took my mother’s arm and pulled her to the couch. “Come here, Annie,” he said. I stood and took a spot on the couch, nestled between them, and watched the screen. As my father appeared on the screen, laughing at his own unsuccessful attempts to feed my infant self strained peas, my mother and Uncle George each grabbed one of my hands and squeezed.

“This is the way we say goodbye,” Uncle George said.

I didn’t know what he was talking about, but as I watched my father try to ease a tiny spoon into my mouth, I felt a pang I couldn’t place. I smiled at the television and waved.