ABSTRACT

WHERE DO YOU KNOW ME FROM?

by Leslee Chan

This thesis is a collection of short stories that employ a "classic" narrative arc and explores themes of identity. The characters often feel alienated from others and, whether knowingly or not, seek acceptance from expected, but often unyielding sources. These stories examine how markers of young adulthood and major life transitions in the modern, globalized world can bring into question one’s sense of self as these boundaries are arbitrary yet firmly established. This collection is a representation of my work in the graduate fiction workshop at Miami University from fall 2009 to spring 2011.
WHERE DO YOU KNOW ME FROM?

A Thesis

Submitted to the

Faculty of Miami University

in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

Masters of Arts

Department of English

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2011

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Vacation

We split up, but Mary still sends me postcards every week. This time it’s a four-by-six rectangle of green Japanese grass, and combed white sand. Sarah snaps on her seatbelt in the passenger seat of the red pickup, singing the alphabet as she waits to be taken to school. Though I’m a fair man, I’ve never shown her the postcards. If I do, she’ll ask about Mary, why her mother is “on vacation” when she’s really just staying across town. Through the windshield, I can see Sarah’s runny nose drip, but the pickup’s heater broke yesterday.

Every Monday after the cannery whistle blows, I pause on the front porch to shake the dirt off my boots and shuffle through bills to find another postcard from Mary. They’re always the same: pictures of the cruelest desert landscapes, stark black and white photos of European cities, diagrams of extinct fish done in pale color pencil. Things she likes, places she’d like to see once she gets better again.

But unlike the other ones, this postcard of a Zen garden in Kyoto has no postmark, no stamp. Left here, slipped under the doormat, my guess, in the middle of the night. A green edge left peeking out, like a leaf blown off a nearby tree. Mary in a backless hospital gown, bare feet on the front porch, the moon unanchoring itself.

I shove it into my pocket; neighbors don’t need to see what isn’t their business. And now my breath is coming out like slow, hot bursts in the cool weather. Frost casts the front yard white, and all of Mary’s flowers died a long time ago. This past spring, her moods could sour instantly. And just like that, Mary planted row after row of scarlet begonias late one night. Right back from the bar, I leapt out of the truck and watched her stab the ground over and over again. She kneeled in the dirt, a spade in her hand, packet after packet of seed emptied every which way. When she finished, she squatted in the grass. Stilled, silenced; eyes someplace far and away, gone. I bent down next to her—the tilled earth soft against my palms—but before I could say a word Sarah ran screaming out of the house. Fire licking up the kitchen curtains, my little
girl crying, shaking. A pot of soup had boiled over and dried out, the copper bottom fused to the stove top’s glowing, orange coils.

I climb back into the pickup, and try to keep my hands steady on the wheel. Before we reach the blue school building down the block, the damn busted heater roars alive before it quits for good. Sarah keeps humming her ABC’s, stopping here and there to puff out her cheeks and blow air onto the window pane. On the foggy glass, she draws a cat before erasing it. After I drop her off, I plan on going to the law office downtown to get divorce papers drawn up. We got married five years ago, right after high school graduation, but that was way before I knew the truth about Mary. I don’t want to go see her, but maybe then she’ll stop this childishness. I’m always afraid Sarah will ask about her mother, but this morning, she doesn’t. Next week, she announces, all the first graders are going to a pumpkin patch.
Where Do You Know Me From?

In the crowded MAX train car, Nate clutched the guard rail and his suitcase. With one arm outstretched forward and the other above his head, he felt like a lawn ornament, one of those odd ceramic jockeys holding a lantern. His father kept one on the porch of his Florida ranch house, but now his father was dead.

“The Red Line takes you to the airport,” a man said. “You want that one.” The woman next to Nate nodded, folded her map of Portland.

At each stop, the car emptied and swelled with commuters returning from the downtown blocks. A few tourists carried shopping bags, kids with skateboards, and everybody in short-sleeves. They were a wave of khaki shorts because, at last, it was July, summer in a city where rain belonged the most.

Nate liked to imagine some of these strangers as they got home, the moment just prior to entry after a day of work or play, when they approached their hotel rooms or tenements, their two-story Tudors. They might loosen their ties, muss up gel-spackled hairdos, as they fumbled for keys in suit pockets or vacation tote bags. And always, no matter the details, Nate would place a hypothetical black box on those hypothetical dining room tables. Sometimes the box held a late house-warming gift like a brand new set of Japanese steak knives, or maybe it was a bomb. That was up to the recipient, or at least, how Nate believed each recipient viewed the box, the light in the trees. This game was one of the few worthwhile things left by his father.

“Sorry,” murmured the woman. The train swayed, jostling the woman so she had elbowed Nate.

Nate smiled. He wanted to ask her, “What’s inside the box?”

Eyes hooded by a Seattle Mariners cap he had just swiped from his twin brother’s closet, Nate watched the train doors open and shut like a mouth. Half way to his transfer at Pioneer Square, he watched the woman disappear into the crowded city. A severe-looking, goateed man in a classic-cut business suit entered the train, reminding Nate of his father. He suddenly felt the
weariness he had tried to ward off for the last two days since he had, biking home from campus, gotten a call from Greg. “Dad was in an accident. He drowned,” Greg had said quietly. Nate took the Amtrak from Eugene that night. Greg answered his apartment door blank-faced, phone in his hand. “Mom doesn’t give a shit,” Greg had said. “At least, she says she doesn’t.”

Their mother’s reaction wasn’t surprising. Nobody expected her to attend the funeral of the man who had left her, or even for her to drive from Eastern Oregon to Portland in order to be with them, her boys. She just wasn’t the type. Over the years, she seemed even less so. There was a rigidness to her figure whenever they had, as children, accidentally left out seashells or amusement park trinkets from their yearly visits to their dad’s in West Palm Beach. Sometimes, their mother screamed and broke things so they learned to be careful, fearful.

The train stopped again, the sign flashed “Pioneer Place.” Nate waded through the crowd and transferred to the Red Line. The train was almost empty so he took a seat. He pulled out his wallet, pressed another crease into the plane tickets. He thought he could understand his mother’s reasoning, but not why, at the last minute, Greg—the favorite son—had unpacked his luggage and punched a hole in the wall. Nate saw this violence as conventional, yet grand. Somehow, by way of flayed knuckles and shattered plaster scattered on the carpet floor, love in its hateful complexities was feebly made manifest. Bandaging his brother’s hand, Nate had seen it, so he had left his brother alone, packed up his own bags for the funeral. I want to put the dead in the ground, he thought.

Staring out the window, the landscape flush with evening sun, Nate didn’t notice the girl approaching him.

“Greg?” It was a voice he knew, one that had squealed happily during Easter egg hunts, led cheers on the high school bleachers and eventually, cried out and snickered at him in wet dreams.

He reddened, annoyed. “No—”

“Nate.” A pretty redhead was smiling at him. “It’s me.”

“Jenny Meredith.” Her name came out more as a question than an affirmation, but indeed, Jenny Meredith now stood looking at him with her elfin features and red hair. The last time Nate had seen her was a year ago, during winter break. She had been sitting on the front steps of his mom’s house, bundled up and cheeks bright red, as if she’d been out there a long time. She was waiting for Greg, and it was snowing.
She startled him by giving him a hug. They had always run in different circles. They had never been actual friends. “Where are you going?”

“Florida.”

“To see your dad?” Jenny scooted next to him.

“You could say that.” He didn’t feel like explaining. No matter the proximity—especially not as Greg’s girlfriend for three months—they had always been no more than friendly strangers, maybe. “You?”

“I’m going to Ecuador to help out a church.” Jenny beamed.

In college, some people fell in love, came out of the closet, got tattoos. Others discovered punk rock or Nietzsche. Some found God and it looked like Jenny was one of them, good for her. Half of Nate’s hometown was Catholic or Mormon, but the Merediths and his own family did not belong to a temple or church. After his parents split, his mom took Nate and Greg out of the private Catholic pre-school they had been attending. She didn’t want her sons to have the same upbringing as their father, she didn’t want them to turn out like him. By then, the school teachers hadn’t gone beyond the fact that angry people had nailed a man to a cross.

Nate smiled, because Jenny seemed happy, her cheeks pretty with color.

“A whole bunch of us from high school are going,” she continued. She held out a palm and counted silently. “Eight of us.”

He nodded, though doubted any of his friends from home would be on this or any missionary trip. Nate’s curiosity about formal religion had never gone beyond a secret visit or two to a Sunday service where he had always found himself more confused than before.

“So where’s Greg? He’s not seeing your dad?”

Nate wondered the same. He imagined his brother pacing his bedroom, or a tree-lined path in a city park. Not going to their dad’s funeral—no matter the kind of father he had been—meant some kind of self-imposed unraveling. It would create so much fodder for introspection that you’d stay up all night, wondering, did it connote resentment or love or what? Best not to deal with it, Nate had decided. Greg could do what he wanted. “Guess not.”

“Why not—he busy?”

“Yeah,” Greg lied. Then he stared at Jenny, took in a face that wasn’t worried or anxious, just polite, benign. Her placidity bothered him and made him want to make her frown. “My dad
died and I’m flying to his funeral. Greg didn’t want to come.” I am the good son, he thought, my love does not question.


Her face was sad and maybe, Nate hoped, she would give him another hug. She didn’t. Instead, Jenny began searching through her purse. “Here,” she said, pressing a piece of paper into his hand. “Just in case you need it.”

At first he thought it was a business card, but it was a small portrait of Michelangelo’s *La pieta* with a phone number and address beneath it. Nate held it in his palm, felt its feathery weight, and handed it back to Jenny. “Thanks, but no thanks.” It wasn’t that he hadn’t been curious. Once, he had even welcomed Bible thumpers into his place to talk, but he never let it go beyond that.

Jenny didn’t look mad or even sad, just a little disappointed. “Maybe I was too forward. I’m not trying to take advantage of anything. We want to help.”

Her earnestness, the sincerity of her voice irritated him; it was as if he was a charity case, pitiable. If he asked Jenny what was in the black box, would she say Jesus? “You could help in other ways. You could help people without pushing God on them.”

“We don’t do that.” She wasn’t mad, but firm. “We give people hope.”

Nate clenched his jaw, felt himself grow unreasonably angry. He was not a part of this “we,” he never was. “You give them food, running water, shelter. You give them all that, but with a look slapped on your face that says choose God, or go live in shit again. That’s not a choice.”

“Don’t you tell me what or how I believe.” Jenny’s face was red, her voice low. “Everything I love is nothing you know.”

Nate looked at his shoes, embarrassed to have snapped at her good intentions, to act like his mother. He was immediately sorry for picking on her. Jenny Meredith was just another girl whom he had never asked out for fear of rejection, another phantom from a time in his life where he wore aloofness like a shield. He wished she had picked him, not his brother.

“No,” he said, “nobody can make anybody else believe. Not truly believe.” He turned to find Jenny glaring out the window. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Jenny said. She was smiling again, but with sadness instead of joy.

The train stopped again, more faces coming and going, so many strangers.
“Sure,” Nate said. He saw, in her face, childhood. “I hate him, my dad.”


“Because,” Nate began, “because. My dad never did anything bad to us. After the divorce, we’d fly out to see him for a week and it was fun. He’d take us to the circus, baseball games—he even took us to see a giant alligator once—but then we got older and it was like he couldn’t be bothered. We went months without phone calls, and he’d even cancel our visits. He had his work, his girlfriends and their kids.”

He stopped, let himself feel the train car rocking, but Jenny was listening so he continued, “I hate him for making us need him and being just out of reach. If you said you wanted more of him, you’d just look greedy.”

Jenny scrunched her face the way she used to in school whenever a teacher called on her in class. “You didn’t ask to be born and you didn’t ask to be made to want and need.” She paused and then added, “Look, I don’t know much about you and your dad. Greg never told me that much, but what about the good times? Think of the good.”

He shook his head; he was tired. Others might see Greg’s refusal to attend the funeral as cowardly but, right now, Nate felt like the weak one. He thought the trip might bring closure in the way that seeing things through to their end might, but he had tried to avoid considering the turbulence, the jet lag. He found himself trying to dismiss it all. “Everybody knows my mom is crazy. And my dad—a fucking mystery. But hey, when have sons not wanted their fathers to die?”

Though he felt what he had said was true, here he was again, a child waving it all away with big, declarative statements. But Jenny just squeezed his arm, kept her hand there.

They were silent the rest of the way. When the train finally stopped in front of the airport, Nate helped Jenny with her bags. As they parted, she gave him a hug. “Take care of yourself and Greg,” she said and then she was walking away.

Nate watched her go, sorry he had never had the guts to ask her out, to bother to know her.

The line in front of the American Airlines ticket counter was long. A bunch of families stood waiting, their bags at their sides, ready to go somewhere together.

He thought about Jenny and how he wanted to sleep with her. He wanted to lie on the ground and feel himself and another body churn the damp, black soil. They’d tear open the earth
and watch his mother and father fall in, their eyes closed and he wouldn’t care if their faces were at rest or not. He wondered if Greg would help them, or would he be standing on the edge of the hole screaming for them to stop?

It scared Nate that even his twin was so unknowable, but he knew his brother was still good. At least, Nate knew Greg was better than him; his brother could still find the good. Greg was the one who called their mother more than once a month. He had always put a firm hand on Nate’s shoulder. He was the one who held Nate back from acting on rash anger with their mother, their father. Maybe Jenny had been right to see more lightness than dark and maybe Nate wasn’t as jaded as he felt. He took a breath. He tried to remember:

He was eight years old with his brother and father. He remembered a lean, black boy walking across the middle of a burnt out sugar cane field. Like trophies, the black boy clutched by the ears in each hand a limp brown rabbit.

They had been on their way to the wildlife reserve outside Lake Okeechobee that year and had stopped outside a destitute town near Belle Glade. This had felt strange to Nate then, because his dad wasn’t the type who hiked or liked to go bird watching.

Before the sight of the brown rabbits, Nate and Greg had both managed to have never seen anything dead beyond stuff on television. His dad explained that kids here in “the Muck” chase the wild rabbits that scramble out after field burnings. Why do they chase them, dad? To train, to get fast. If they get fast enough and can throw or catch a football, they could get scholarships to play in college and maybe even play professionally, someday. What do they do with the rabbits, dad? They eat them, he answered, because they’re poor. Nate remembered sweating in unbearable humidity. It was noon and he was a child and in awe. His father had explained that Florida was a state where people lived on its periphery, built cities along the coastline for trade and travel, but also because its wilderness was still too wild and dangerous to know. And this place, his father gestured around them, was Hell. You didn’t need Hell when it was already on Earth.

Then they were in their father’s air-conditioned car, cruising across South Florida. Greg always sat in the front seat and Nate in the back—that’s just how it was. That afternoon was the first time his father played the box game with them. What’s inside the box, boys? he had asked. Greg said an airplane. Nate a popsicle, because it was hot. It could be anything, his father said. If you want something enough you could get anything.
That was not true. Nate knew that even as a child. Later, he learned what everybody would someday come to know from this riddle: what do you put in a box in order to make it lighter? That was easy: a hole. The only caveat was that the hole suggested not just emptiness but loss. The box could never be the same again.

Nate thought about this as the ticket agent waved him forward. He set his plane tickets on the counter, then turned around when he heard a child laughing and running. A young, weary-eyed woman was chasing a bare-foot child, tiny-sized tennis shoes and socks in her fists.

Then Nate asked, “It possible to change flights, to go somewhere else?”

“Where to?” the ticket agent replied.

Greenland. Helsinki, or even Antarctica if possible, he wanted to answer. Anywhere with Eskimos or tundra, and a kind of freeze so cold that your teeth shattered in your mouth, your marrow became glass. It was just getting too hot for Nate, the memory coming back so strongly that he had begun to sweat. He felt like a child again, just another sunburned kid breathing the hard, humid air.
A Better Man

Katie grinned when Sam gave her a clove cigarette. Coolly with a flick of the wrist, she stuck the cigarette behind her ear before planting herself in a chair. A small island of newspaper floated in the middle of the tile kitchen floor, the gray patch Katie’s handiwork at her big sister’s request. After tossing Sam’s clothes into the washing machine, Marie had run out to borrow hair clippers from a neighbor, leaving her alone with Sam. He was, as far as Katie could tell, a sort of occasional boyfriend for Marie, a secret kept from their parents. She watched him, thrilled by this rare nearness and close to giggles at the sight of sinewy limbs jutting out from one of her dad’s old bathrobes. He sat Indian-style on the floor, running a thumb along a freshly clean-shaved face windblown and worn ruddy by days spent squatting on sidewalks downtown and nights slept beneath overpasses. According to Marie, he was nineteen, from Coos Bay.

“Should you be smoking, Kates? How old are you? Thirteen?” Sam asked, pushing a strand of long, wet hair behind his ear.

Whenever he called her that, Katie got lightheaded. The nickname meant something, though she really wasn’t sure what. That he implied she looked older—two years older than she really was—also pleased Katie. Still, she said cautiously, “You gave it to me.”

From a bathrobe pocket Sam pulled out the silver Zippo he always carried and leaned forward, offering her a light. He smiled, eyebrows raised as if to say: I dare you.

Stammering out a thank you, Katie opened the sliding glass door hoping Sam might notice how she held the lit cigarette out with one hand extended the same way Marie would whenever it was too cold to be outside. The smoke smelled just the way Sam did before his bath; spicy like an autumn bonfire, like a mix of burnt pumpkin pie and rain. Earlier, Katie had watched black clouds of smoke roll out of Sam’s nostrils and mouth as if he were some kind of strange dragon lost in their backyard. She was alarmed to see him there, because Marie had never brought him to the house until today. Only once had they ever met before, about a month ago,
when their mom made Marie take Katie with her to the Saturday Market. Sam called her “Kates” immediately.

“Katie, kids don’t smoke.” Marie didn’t sound mad, but she snatched the lit cigarette from Katie, put it between her lips and slammed the glass door shut.

Katie glared up at her sister, annoyed.

“Don’t you know,” Marie said, taking a puff as she placed a brown grocery bag on the counter, “that cloves make your lungs bleed?” With a smile spreading wide, she turned to Sam—who was laughing—and added, “And you. You should know better.”

“I’m just messin’ with Kates,” Sam replied, stretching. “Kid has got to get a head start on these things. Isn’t that right, Kates?” He smiled, revealing two rows of perfectly straight teeth.

Katie didn’t like being called a kid, but she nodded. “Mom doesn’t like it when you smoke inside.”

Marie faced Katie, her eyes hard and one hand on her hip. “You tell and I’ll just deny it. Besides, can’t you just chill?” From the bag, she pulled out electric hair clippers, a magazine and a six pack of Heineken. She tossed Sam a bottle. “You should be glad I don’t sick the authorities on you, mister.”

“You mean your parents aren’t home.”

“Out of town—all week. Lucky for you.”

They looked at each other in a way that made Katie stare. “Where’d you get the beer?”

After asking the question Katie felt stupid; she knew Marie carried a fake ID.

“So Samson,” Marie declared loudly, lithely gliding towards him and then, with her free hand on his shoulder, guiding him gently towards the counter. She flipped open the magazine and flicked cigarette ash into the sink. Her sister loved fashion magazines and kept a huge stack next to her bed. Marie looked like the models with her long legs and pouty lips. She never ate much. “Want me to cut it like this? I think a Brad Pitt hairdo might suit you best.”

“I like Sam’s hair the way it is. He looks like a surfer,” Katie murmured, but they weren’t listening.

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On the following night, Marie said they should ride their bikes through the thunderstorm. They had returned some overdue library books and because, something was always wrong with Marie’s car, decided to ride their bikes. A lazy drizzle turned into sheets of rainfall. Katie
peddled hard, afraid she would lose sight of the figure ahead, her sister’s long brown locks like fingers taunting, daring her to follow. The gears on Katie’s hand-me-down Schwinn groaned, the frame warped like a bent spine—all souvenirs from when it had belonged to Marie years ago, before she had turned sixteen, got her license and began hanging out with a crowd their mom called “unsavory.” Their dad always laughed it off, mumbling something about rebellion and spirit.

The rain fell harder, the evening darkening. Katie shivered as she trailed her sister, an ache exploding at her side. Each thunderclap, every lightning strike nearly sent Katie tumbling forward, the pound and flash of sudden light only emphasizing the hidden path, the bare branched trees. None of this seemed to slow Marie, and Katie knew not much could stop her sister when she wanted to do something. Marie said this would be fun, but each of Katie’s breaths became more and more labored, her legs only half the length of Marie’s. They had left Sam dozing in front of the TV, one of the frozen casseroles their mom had prepared in lieu of their cruise vacation reheating in the oven.

Katie had to stop; soles against the concrete, the dull slap of dried autumn leaves. Her chest tight, she shouted, “Marie, wait up!”

Marie turned and braked abruptly. Her sister sat there, frowning, waiting. “Did you bust the bike again? I can’t take you anywhere.” She began peddling in wide, measured circles that grew in circumference, farther away and down the street.

Willing herself, Katie pressed forward, but the wheels wouldn’t budge and she looked down to see the bike chain unhinge itself again. She hopped off the seat and kneeled, jeans soaked. Though she always complained, Katie secretly loved these small damages left by her sister. Sometimes, alone in the garage, Katie examined each dent and ding the way an archeologist might handle a newly unearthed artifact, every touch cautioned and feather-light. They were clues to Marie’s secret life as a teenager. Just last night she had seen Sam, shirtless and only in boxers, emerge from the bathroom before disappearing into Marie’s room. For a moment a tall figure stood silhouetted against light that poured out from the doorway. His muscular torso was smooth save for a long scar across his stomach and a patch of dark hair that made Katie turn away, blush. A boy had tried to kiss Katie once. Only that felt long ago, before she knew what those kinds of things might mean. Katie wanted to ask Sam about the scar, but that meant admitting what she had seen and how she wasn’t already in on something that
everybody already seemed to know. Now, wet and cold, she rubbed her sticky palms blackened from grease, and began to run the bike up the road.

***

Throughout the week, Marie and Sam kept odd hours, coming and going as they pleased. When their parents called, Marie told them to enjoy Fort Lauderdale, Cozumel, because all was well and Katie reassured them of this. Katie liked being at home without a babysitter, but she hated being left behind. Peeking through the curtains, on tip toe, she’d watch them drive away. She watched Marie put her elbow out the rolled-down car window, grinning as if to say no, not a chance, kid. Around them, Katie felt a new ache someplace deep, somewhere previously unknown that only grew in their frequent absences.

Whenever she found herself alone with Sam, he always smiled at her, but never said much. Once when Katie asked him why he had run away from home he answered, “It’s hard all around” and gave a wan grin. When she told her one friend at school about Sam, the girl just chewed her fluffernutter sandwich and stared at Katie with bored eyes.

Then, late in the week, she was surprised to walk off the school bus and find Sam bent over the open hood of Marie’s car, tools spread on the ground, both of them waiting for her. Marie looked on with her arms crossed against her bony chest, the smell of car exhaust in the air. When Marie saw her sister, she shook her head methodically the way a doctor on TV might.

“We need a new distributor cap,” Marie announced, tugging Katie by the arm. “Do you remember where Turtle’s grandparents lived? They have that scrap heap out back.”

Katie remembered Turtle. When he lived down the street, he’d race bikes with her even though he was older. He always took her side over Marie’s so she was sad the day a U-Haul showed up in his parents’ driveway. “Somewhere out of town, by the farms.”

Shutting the hood, Sam said, “She’ll still run, but not for long.” He wiped his brow, smudges of grease darkening his fingers.

“The farms, huh?” Marie motioned for Katie to get in the backseat. “We’ll know it when we see it.”

Shocked to be invited, Katie dumped her backpack onto the seat and felt excitement wash over her. She would finally know what it was like to be like them.

“Don’t tell mom and dad,” Marie warned, glaring into the rearview mirror, her eyes meeting Katie’s.
Katie nodded, swelling with the task of keeping hush, of being in on something that could possibly be dangerous.

Her sister drove fast, the radio loud. Taking Highway 95 out of town, they roared along the farmlands, past meadows both muddy and green, then rows and rows of yellowing cornfields and onto dirt and gravel roads. In a deep voice, Sam sang along with the radio. Katie gazed at his reflection in the side mirror taking in his sharp profile, the Adam’s apple that bobbed up and down. In almost a week’s time he had paid more attention to her than the boys at school ever did and Katie thought he was much more handsome. When Sam’s eyes locked on hers, she flinched, caught.

“Come on, Kates. Don’t you know the words? Sing along.”

Katie only allowed herself to look at the back of his crew-cut head.

Sam turned around in his seat and winked at her. She gasped and kept her eyes focused out her window.

Slowly, the paint on the house fronts became steadily more chipped and faded as they drove on, the spaces between each property wider, the immaculate lawns replaced by ploughed farmland and cut cornfields.

They sped on until Katie pointed and said, “There, that’s it.” She was sure it was the farmhouse that belonged to Turtle’s grandparents. Her parents had left her under the watch of Turtle’s grandparents the few times they had to go out of town overnight, whenever they needed to take Marie someplace to help her “rest.” The place was as she remembered it, except older and somehow smaller now. The windows were shuttered.

Marie pulled into the driveway. Kudzu vines were woven into a tall chain-linked fence surrounding the perimeter. Despite these leafy, green scales Katie could see tires and something metallic glinting in the sunlight.

Marie got out of the car, but turned around when Katie opened her door. “No way. You stay here.”

“Why?” Katie demanded. She had been their compass; she had proven her worth.

“You’ll get in the way.”

“No, I won’t—I can help.”

“Hey, let her come,” said Sam, “it’ll be safer if we stick together.” He smiled and put his arm around Marie. “We wouldn’t want her to run into any vagrants hitchhiking and stuff.”
Katie beamed, grateful.

Marie rolled her eyes and hopped up the porch. At the door, she gave two definitive knocks. When nobody answered she said, “Guess we’ll take just have to help ourselves,” and motioned with a nod to follow her around the side of the house.

Katie surveyed the dirt yard. Gnats hovered, clouds of soft buzzing in the heat. What caught her eye, though, sat gleaming in the evening sunlight near the center of the yard. Metal scrap and car parts towered at least seven feet high, rusty and ashen like the organs of a decommissioned robot. Katie remembered sitting at a scratchy wooden bench near the junk pile, under an umbrella. Turtle’s French grandmother had once served radishes and butter. They had laughed at Katie when she coughed and sputtered after mistaking the peppery vegetable for some strange, pink fruit and taking a greedy bite. She remembered playing hide and seek with Turtle back here. How, once, he had even tried to kiss her. She had pushed him away and started to cry.

Marie began picking through a pile, while Sam, his hands in his pocket and a cigarette dangling from his mouth, watched. “Do you even know what you’re looking for?” He leaned against the fence, exhaling smoke rings.

“I can help,” Katie offered.

“You don’t, do you?” Sam added, walking away with a laugh.

Marie bit the corner of her lower lip, brows knit, an expression she usually reserved for Katie, their parents and people she regarded with little more than scowls and slammed doors. Katie had never seen her look at Sam this way. The two had always walked side-by-side, jostling one another; hip bumping into hip, fingers intertwining and unwinding only to find new ways of threading themselves together again. Her sister looked like she was about to scream, but instead, Marie murmured, “Sam,” and stalked off towards him.

The fence gave a dull rattle as Sam hopped onto it, both hands gripping the top railing like a gymnast, his feet wedged into the rings. The cigarette hung from his mouth. He peeked over the fence and, slapping his knee with one free hand, said, “I knew it!”

“What?” Katie pressed her face against the fence, fingers prying the overgrowth away, but then she immediately took a step back. A guard dog could snap at her, take off her nose.

“Pumpkins.”

“Pumpkins?”
“A whole patch.” Sam dropped back to the ground, landing easily on both feet. “Come on, free pumpkins—it’ll be fun.” He stepped on his cigarette butt. Then he waved them to come over, and bent down on one knee in order to give them a lift over the fence.

“Are you kidding?” Marie asked. “What about the party?”

He seemed not to hear her, but Katie let the word “party” echo in her mind. The fence suddenly appeared taller, the wires more jagged and broken as if goading Katie to even touch it. Now, more determined than ever, she scrambled up onto the fence, propelled by a push from Sam. Thorns clawed at her and she felt the grit of rust on her hands, but she was suddenly happy. When her feet hit the ground on the other side, she let out a cheer that Sam answered by hooting.

“Come on, you guys!” Katie hollered, thrilled. But there was only silence. She squinted, watching the two through the curtain of green, the patches where she could only make out parts of clothing and skin that, in the verdant brush, appeared like misshapened blossoms against the glare of daylight. Marie had her back to Sam, arms crossed.

The fence shook as Sam began scaling it. Then he paused and, for a moment, his body lay against the chain link and he was an insect, a colorful moth caught and on display. “Quit being such a bitch,” he said and, with a soft thud, landed next to Katie.

Katie watched them, her eyes turning from one face to the other, as Sam and Marie stood silently staring at each other through the fence. Then he said, “You’re just talk,” and Katie couldn’t help but cringe.

“Fuck you!” Marie hissed. Then almost instantly, she was over the fence and crouched next to Katie and Sam, wiping her palms on her pant legs.

Marie glared, but Sam grinned and began walking. “Come on, it’ll be fun. And look——” He pointed across the patch where Katie could make out figures, a small white house with blue trim that glowed warmly. They crossed the field, the dark earth soft beneath Katie’s shoes. Orange globes of all sizes lay at their feet. Willows stood magnificently at the edge of the field, their hanging limbs like unruly wigs made for unseen giants. Sam hummed softly. Marie and Katie followed behind him, though Marie still looked angry. When they neared an unpaved driveway leading up to the blue-trimmed house, Sam put a hand up to motion stop. White Christmas lights smoldered like strung fireflies along the fence posts where car after car sat parked. Little kids bundled in winter jackets and tiny, wool pea coats ran about, tottering around the great fruit that eclipsed them in height and girth. Katie couldn’t help but smile; the sound of
mothers fussing, cooing; cameras flashing; children laughing. Somebody was yelling, “Marco Polo! Marco Polo!”

In a quiet voice, Sam said, “My parents used to take me and my big brother to a place like this.” This was the most Katie had ever heard Sam say about his life. She studied his face, discovered sadness softening his features.

“Now what?” Marie grumbled. “Now what the fuck are we supposed to do?”

“Well, get yourself a pumpkin. Go for a damn hayride! If you don’t act like you belong here, they’ll know you don’t.” Sam said, scratching the back of his neck. “Why not?”

“Yeah, why not?” Katie repeated. Not since first grade had she been to a pumpkin patch and it did look fun.

Eyes closed, Marie shook her head. “We need to fix the car. We need to go, or we’ll miss the party.” Her voice was low, barely above a whisper and Katie knew that meant her sister neared the point where anger was all. Marie’s temper could flash brightly, flicker like an invisible flame you couldn’t see, but always felt; a slow, steady burn.

Sam shook his head. “It’s just a stupid party.”

“No, it’s not. It’s supposed to be fun.”

“This is fun.”

“I don’t feel like stealing.”

“What, not today?” Sam said. He started to laugh, but Marie only looked away, her cheeks flushing.

“You know what your problem is?” he added, smirking.

Marie swallowed, hair whipping around her long neck. “What’s that, Sam? What can you tell me that doctors haven’t?” She sighed and, with loud, heavy footsteps, trudged towards the blue-trimmed house.

Katie couldn’t move. Should she follow her sister? Not when Marie was angry. She knew to never follow, because that was when her sister slammed doors, drove too fast and broke, with vigor, the things she claimed to love. She knew better, but when she looked at Sam she was surprised to see him grinning. “Hey Kates, you know your sister goes to a psychiatrist like a real crazy person? You know your parents pay people to listen to her bitch and moan.”

Katie didn’t want to talk about Marie anymore. She just wanted to go home so she said nothing.
“She’s all caught up in that superficial Barbie crap, some days starving herself when there’s enough hungry people out there.”

“Marie eats ‘lady-like portions’” Katie said, surprised to find herself repeating what Marie had once explained about her eating habits. “My sister wants to be a model. My sister is pretty.”

“Pretty ugly, you mean. Have you seen what she does to these ‘lady-like portions’ in the bathroom?” Katie remained silent, not sure what Sam meant. He continued. “She says one thing and then does another. She jumps from one big idea to the next and leaves a big fucking mess.” Snapping his fingers, he added, “Just like that.”

Katie’s ears felt hot and she began scanning the crowd, looking for her parents though she knew they weren’t there. “Marie likes to have fun.”

“Yeah,” Sam said, “maybe, Kates. But you gotta admit she’s a terrible sister.”

Anger rose in her and she shot back, “Shut up! Marie is a good sister.” These words sounded strange once they left her mouth.

Sam scoffed, fingering his silver Zippo. “My big brother wouldn’t have left me alone with a stranger like this.”

“But you ran away from home.”

“And your point?”

“Why didn’t he make you stay? Why did he let you go?”

“You don’t know shit.” His smirk was suddenly replaced by a rigid jaw, grit teeth.

Katie stared at Sam who towered over her. He hadn’t shaved that morning; brownish stubble dotted above his cracked lips. His voice was low. “Who brings a stranger into their house,” he said, “and leaves them all alone with their cute little baby sister?”

She took a step backward, and he took one forward.

He continued quietly, “I mean shit, son. Sam’s not even my real name.” He paused, now grinning, his perfectly straight teeth gleaming in his tan face. “Don’t worry. I’m not gonna hurt you—I’m a better man than that, okay?”

“Okay,” Katie repeated, not sure if she was merely mouthing the word or not. Her stomach tightened, but she couldn’t move. She could hear kids laughing, someone shouting “Tag, you’re it!”
Sam rubbed his chin and pulled out a pack of cloves from his back pocket. He hit the pack against his palm, smack, smack. With a cigarette dangling from his mouth, he added, “She shouldn’t let you smoke either, Kates. Don’t smoke, okay?”

“Okay.”

“It’ll kill ya, okay?”

“Okay.”

He let out a laugh and Katie flinched. He walked past her, heading towards the blue-trimmed house.

Without looking skyward, Katie knew geese were flying above, the sound of their call and response all around them. It was getting late, the day shortened by the upcoming winter that made itself known by the chill, each blade of browning grass. She wondered where Marie was, but couldn’t bring herself to yell, let alone say her sister’s name. Behind Sam, where she stood, she heard him strike his lighter; a click and then a flash. The air filled with cinnamon, cloves, smoke and fire. Katie knew it wouldn’t make a difference; Marie would not hear her. This thought seized her like a shudder, an angry and tired feeling that made her want to be under the covers, to build a tree fort in her own bed again. Only, it was as if she didn’t know how to get there anymore.

As she trailed behind Sam, she turned around to take a look back. She could still see the house that had belonged to Turtle’s grandparents, but now it was the size of a dollhouse. The figures on the field were silhouetted by the glow of artificial lights, blurs big and small that stood close but apart from one another. Katie watched as they wandered farther and farther away into the open distance.
Robbing the Kids

When Carly moved to the Midwest for graduate school, she didn’t move to Chicago, Milwaukee, or even Minneapolis. She didn’t move to any of the places where she had, at some point in her twenty-two years, envisioned herself mailing letters home to Oregon from. Least of all, Carly didn’t foresee herself, briefly and in a supermarket, playing house with one of her students, nor smitten with a visiting writer—the married West Virginian who wrote about women named Natalia. She would laugh at herself about the former and thank the latter not for what he wrote, but for what he had not said.

The writer would come in the spring to teach a workshop at Carly’s school, which sat fifty minutes north of Cincinnati. Though its campus greens were kept lushly tidy, its bus shelters made of etched glass and the little town even featured a cobble-stoned main street, it was not a place Carly could ever imagine loving much less falling in love in. For her, this college did not feel like college. Boat shoes and button downs seemed to replace a youthfulness that made one unapologetic for both lavish body hair and kind of dark and pointed idealism. When Carly looked at a map, Ohio was a shield, sometimes a fish and nothing more. “Beggars can’t be choosers,” she’d say to herself, still horrified that nobody seemed to recycle here. And then, before falling asleep alone she’d add, “Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth.”

But the English Department was good to her and her classmates were kind. Carly felt lucky to find friends almost immediately. Most were transplants from out of state, others from Cleveland, Loveland, Chagrin Falls. Together, they liked to sit in the concrete courtyard of a local bistro, order martinis, and pretend they were summering in Nice. They would commiserate and complain, speculate if a daily commute from Cincinnati would make them as sour as some of their professors could be in the mornings.

Carly liked Nina the best. A third-year literature PhD with an athlete’s body softened by pregnancy, Nina had spent a great deal of time travelling. Her husband Paul was a chemist who had worked for years abroad with the American Red Cross. Now they lived in a renovated
farmhouse on the outskirts of town where Nina kept a garden of sunflowers and heirloom vegetables. Ilya, their one year-old, would sit beneath an oak tree, pulling up the grass with his tiny hands.

By mid semester, often in the office they shared or at the only coffee shop in town, Carly was in the habit of sitting quietly with Nina and watching her knit.

Once, Carly had said, “I think I need a dog.”

“Dogs are great,” Nina replied. It was a scarf and blue this time, the leaves on trees already bronzed by autumn.

“I’m allergic.”

Nina laughed. “You’ll meet someone.”

“Sure,” Carly said. She had discovered that most of the men in her department could be categorized into three types: taken, asshole, or gay.

“And I bet,” Nina continued, “whoever he is, he’ll adore you.

Carly snorted, examining the design in her latte foam. Was it a heart or a fern?

“I bet you’re easy to love if you’d just let someone love you.”

Carly shook her head, scoffed. “Isn’t that the case with everybody?”

And Nina shook her head no, honey, not at all.

Carly admired people like Nina and Paul, though she wasn’t sure what she meant by such delineation, only that she was not like them, not bold enough in her living somehow. Though Carly knew better than to put people or time on a pedestal, they seemed to always have big news, reasons to celebrate. They made things exciting, such as the evening a week before fall finals at the bistro when Paul tapped a spoon against his water glass, cleared his throat, and grinned at Nina. The table quieted. Napkins and knives shuffling, some murmurs and chewing as everybody waited. Carly put down her glass.

Face ruddy from a few gin and tonics, Paul’s words came out a little slurred. “Are you?” he seemed to be asking his wife.

Nina smiled, brows knit. “Do I want to tell them?”

“Well?” a co-worker of Paul’s chimed playfully, “Well?”

Slowly, Paul reached across the table for a bottle of Spanish red. He took Nina’s empty glass and filled it. “Nobody notice who hasn’t been drinking tonight?”

“We know who has!”
They all laughed, and then someone gasped. “Why, you’re pregnant!”

Nina picked Ilya up out of his high chair, began bouncing him on her knee, and nodded. They were going to celebrate properly next semester, a big party sometime in the spring and not just a baby shower.

Everybody cheered, “A toast!”

Carly was honestly happy for them. A week later and home for winter break at her mother’s in Portland, she went downtown to shop for baby things.

On the MAX she thought about how a wave of friends from high school and college were getting married, having babies or someplace in between. She decided she should probably get them gifts too, and kept checking her watch. The three hour time difference between Ohio and Oregon nagged at her, made her feel perpetually late so she became nervous the stores would be shuttered when she got there.

At a little place that sold cute, frilly aprons next to earth-friendly strollers, she picked up a yellow onesie, socks shaped like two little bunnies, and a stuffed dog for Ilya. Then, with the holiday decorations glittering around her, she decided to grab a few more things for the eventual baby shower come spring. When her mother saw the boutique bags on the kitchen counter, she gaped at Carly with wide, expectant eyes.

“It’s for a friend, mom.”

Her mother breathed in heavily, eyelids still raised, a look of both relief and disappointment that Carly knew well. “Well, you are getting sort of rotund, so I just thought,” she explained and began scrubbing potatoes in the sink, under the running faucet.

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Carly liked how spring semester always coincided with the New Year. Like a greeting card tucked away but within reach, she’d think, “A fresh start, a new beginning.” It was the promise of her small life within a larger (albeit an educational) system matching up, if only by an act of scheduling and nothing more, with the universal clockwork of life and death. It prompted her to take up jogging again, made her want to make lists.

Standing in front of another batch of freshmen and with a single semester of teaching experience, Carly already felt less afraid and ready for their brilliance, their bullshit. As with her students from fall semester, a few shook her hand after class on the first day. Though Carly knew it was out of respect, it made her mouth twist into something like a smile and a grimace. Some
took to calling her “Ms. B,” an address she thought aged her, seemed to her to be said in irony as if to point out how much of an imposter she felt she was. Nina laughed at the latter complaint. Hands resting on her growing stomach, she pointed out how Carly did look very young so this was good.

Soon, while teaching or in a seminar, Carly took to looking out the classroom windows in order to muse how much damage a two or three-story fall might cause a body. By no means was she suicidal. School proved challenging enough, that wasn’t the problem. Actually, each tougher and longer literature essay not only caused Carly to seriously question her scholastic abilities but also, for the first time ever, her desire and drive. She knew she wasn’t close to Ivy League smart (though this wasn’t the Ivy League), so how far could one survive in academia with bets heavily hedged on hard work and pluck? Often, she wondered if she had stolen the place of a more deserving student.

And what crap, Carly sometimes thought while reading her classmates’ fiction and always whenever she read her own. She wondered if she had moved to say, Florida, would Spanish moss begin creeping into the margins of her fiction? She wanted to write and see amazing things like tea estates in Assam, an old monastery in Kentucky. But she began to suspect that if not Ohio or her life in Ohio, then she was boring. At any rate, maybe it was just always strange to be twenty-something when you’re twenty-something?

Carly deemed this a crisis of privilege, but she worried more about the way she occasionally allowed herself to think about Harrison. He was her favorite student, the graphic design major with the perfect posture and newsboy cap, the smart one who made her blush whenever she caught him staring at her from the corner of his eye during class. She didn’t tell anyone, not even Nina since it was a silly crush. How inappropriate, immature, and hackneyed, she thought.

By mid-semester, Carly had to hold individual conferences for each of her students. Harrison’s turn was awkward.

“What can I do for you?” she asked, feeling dumb. It didn’t help that he had arrived at the end of a long day. She fumbled with the little card Nina had left in her department mailbox.

Harrison handed her two typed pages of his persuasive essay. Not the best writer, but he always tried. As Carly scanned his paper, she peeked up to see him glancing around the office.
Despite trying not to, Carly let herself take in his beaky nose, the thin bowtie lips. Immediately, her cheeks flushed and surprisingly, so did his.

Harrison still hadn’t improved his sentence fluency; too many commas. “Looks fine,” Carly said, and quickly returned his unmarked paper, almost throwing it in his face.

When Harrison turned the hallway corner, Carly locked the office door behind her. She took the back stairwell to the small patio dwarfed by the bushes, where the smokers puffed away in secrecy. The air smelled like dampness, rampant plant life. April showers in early March. Leaning against the railing, she tried to weed desperation from truth, because, she bet, these feelings for Harrison served as distraction—the result of loneliness, the need for the balm of fantasy. He was just some kid who she thought was cute, and she just wanted to be a good teacher.

Carly kicked at the cigarette butts on the soaked ground and then walked back to the office. On her desk sat a stack of ungraded essays, a tragicomedy (one that was turning out pretty good) authored by an obscure writer who would be visiting her school next week, and the card from Nina. The latter was a formal invite to a party this Saturday, the not-baby-shower party Paul and Nina had promised last semester. That was something to look forward to.

***

An hour into the party, Carly arrived at the crowded little farmhouse to find people spilling out onto the porch, the roof. They were dancing, laughing, and someone was playing the old, chipped piano Nina and Paul had discovered in the attic when they moved in.

She found Nina in the corner of the kitchen speaking to Paul in a low voice. Before Carly could get her attention, Nina walked off, seemingly in a rush, but a red-faced Paul waved her over. “Drink?” he asked, offering her his Red Stripe.

“I brought some too,” Carly said, pulling a bottle of Riesling out of the gift bag that also held the baby clothes she had bought over winter break.

“Perfect—it’s what we need!” His words tumbled out of his mouth falling into one another, and he teetered forward and backward, from heel to toe. “Don’t you agree? We all just need a drink.” He motioned her to follow him and they waded through the crowd towards the refrigerator from which he pulled out two more beers. “Tada!”

Carly nodded, put her gift on the counter. She had never seen Paul so wasted, his eyes dulled. “Thanks.”
“We’re running low though.” He swirled the beer in his can and seemed to stare at the people in his kitchen. “So how’s our young novelist doing?”

“Good.” She blushed; she loved to read and talk about writing as long as none of it included her own. “No, it sucks.”

“Isn’t some big name writer coming soon, or something?”

Carly nodded. The writer would arrive from West Virginia on Monday to teach a workshop and she suspected, after finishing his novel, he’d tell them how tenure meant security and death, having kids represented a continuation and an end. Carly had been late tonight, because she couldn’t stop reading the tragicomedy. Mid-sentence and alone in her apartment, Carly had to put his book down and said aloud, “I am also someone split in two.”

“See the world, write a prize-winner, steal a silver spoon so you can die with it in your mouth,” Paul said. He seemed distracted, angry. Then he tapped his finger against a photo taped on the refrigerator door. “There,” Paul said, “we’re in Sierra Leone. Freetown.”

Carly knew the photo: Nina and Paul, younger and thinner, stand in front of buildings painted mustard yellow and turquoise blue, street signs lettered in red. A woman balancing an enormous wash tub on her head passes by in the background, a motorbike taxi another blur. Paul wears a borrowed, embroidered *boubou* and cap because, Nina had once explained, he is about to attend his first prayer service at a mosque. Nina wears a long skirt and tank top, her arms tanned and muscular. Both of them are smiling.

“We drank palm wine and watched a bunch of local rappers perform. They all sang songs about hope and political reform—they’re really into that stuff,” Paul said. He took another swig of beer, and then continued, “There were beggars everywhere, people missing limbs chopped off from the civil war.”

“You guys went to do aid work.” Carly offered, unsure where he was going with this.

“Did Nina ever tell you,” he said, “that street vendors there don’t push food carts? They fill coolers and put them in baby strollers.” Then he added, “Better that than another mouth in the world, another mistake.”

The way Paul leaned against the kitchen counter, his body limp and mouth slack made Carly want to say that most babies weren’t planned and then slug him and ask, What do you know? What the hell do you know? But the sudden clarity of his eyes, as if he were daring her to speak, compelled her to gulp her drink and offer to make a beer run instead.
As Carly drove to Kroger, she contemplated just calling it a night. Had it been the alcohol talking and did she really want to know?

She bought a six-pack anyway. Walking to her car, grocery bag in tow, Carly still didn’t know if she’d return to Nina’s, but then she heard a familiar voice calling her name, a gangly figure approach her under the lamplight.

“Harrison?”

“Hey Ms. B.,” said Harrison, waving with one hand, the other wrapped around the palm of a little girl about five or six. She looked like she had just been woken up or crying.

This wasn’t what she needed and suddenly she felt annoyed. “Who’s your friend? Are you Harrison’s little sister?” Carly asked, shifting the bag on her arm to hide the alcohol. She grinned at the little girl who promptly bursts into tears. “I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s okay,” Harrison said to the little girl. “This is Ms. B. She’s a friend and she can help us.”

The word “friend” confused Carly. What did he mean by such an unexpected and frankly, false title—what did he want?

“This is Gracie. We need to find her mom.”

“What?”

“I was waiting for the bus,” he almost whispered, “and she came by asking about her mom. She said they were shopping, but got separated. She came out here to look for her.”

“All right,” Carly said, closing her eyes. She made sure her voice was calm, gentle. “Let’s—let’s go back inside.”

They had an employee send a page over the intercom and waited. Carly looked at the shopping lines, checked her cell phone, watched the automatic doors by the customer service desk open and shut. She didn’t know what to do with her hands. So Harrison, she wanted to say, but so what? Maybe it was inappropriate to chitchat when this little girl—Gracie—was lost. Or rather, Gracie’s mom was missing. There is a difference, Carly thought, when one is “missing” versus “lost.” Such a designation, of course, seemed to rely on people other than yourself—granted that you were the lost—or missing—one.

“Oh shut up,” Carly mumbled to herself and suddenly felt aware of Gracie and her red-rimmed eyes. She just didn’t know what, if anything, to say so she watched her own fingers drum the counter like slow, unsteady soldiers. She was useless again.
“Did you say something?” Harrison was looking at her.

“No,” she lied. I was thinking, she thought, I’m always thinking too much.

“Gracie!”

They turned towards the shouting, the exasperated voice. A tired-looking redhead with dark hollows beneath her eyes came running, with arms outstretched, towards Gracie. The little girl yanked herself away from Harrison and hugged the woman who kept repeating, “Where did you go, where did you go, my baby, my baby. I’m sorry, I’m sorry I’m a terrible mother.”

For a moment, the woman stared at Carly and Harrison with an expression resembling gratitude. But then the woman raised her eyebrows, her dilated pupils scanning up and down like she was giving the two a look over. Without a word, she took Gracie’s hand and led her away, her bottom lip stiff as if stuck out in a sneer, what appeared to be pride. The woman and the child were gone, leaving Carly and Harrison smiling at each other as if it had all been some kind of joke neither thought was funny.

***

Carly kept driving after she dropped Harrison off at his apartment. She drove down Locust, turned on Chestnut and avoided the main strip where the bar flies and night revelers would be basking under the streetlamps, in the late hour.

The ride was innocent; Harrison was cheerful, polite. He told Carly about ROTC training at dawn, and his girlfriend. His girlfriend, he had said, didn’t like that he couldn’t often stay out late. Clearing her throat, she had just only said, “Oh, that’s a shame” as the stoplights blinked go, stop, go.

Across town, she drove slowly through the streets of a student neighborhood just like the one where Harrison lived, a place like the one she had once called home. Shabby buildings, abandoned furniture, and trashcans overturned on the cracked sidewalks. Carly remembered what a friend had once said, that you could tell when residential neighborhoods became student housing, that the basketball hoop above the garage was a tell-tale sign that a “real” family lived there.

Carly thought about Nina and Paul and the music, shouting, and laughter floating against the eave’s of their farmhouse and up through the roof to the barren moon. The party probably was still going on, but she didn’t want to go back.
Carly and Harrison hadn’t said much about Gracie or that woman, except when walking to the parking lot, Harrison shook his head and said, “Some people.”

“Yeah, some people.” Carly had agreed, though she didn’t ask him to complete the sentence. Some people shouldn’t have kids? Some people didn’t ask to be born? Carly tried to imagine Gracie’s mother smiling, reading a colorful picture book to her daughter as the little girl lay in bed, but she couldn’t.

Deserving, Carly thought, some people—like Gracie, all children, in fact—deserved love. Adults were on their own, whether it be a case of romantic, familial, or platonic love. Carly knew that. Harrison had sat in the passenger seat, his newsboy cap on his lap. He had rolled down the window just enough for him to put one hand out, fingers fanned out to catch the wind. Nothing happened and she didn’t want it to, but she did want something. She wanted so much. Certainly she was no more deserving than anyone else of anything, but since when did deserving love get you love? It didn’t matter and neither did loneliness, desperation. It never did, so Carly turned the car around, drove back to her apartment, and put the six-pack in her refrigerator before reading herself to sleep.

***

After he returned to West Virginia, Carly’s classmates would describe this particular visiting writer as “the one with the excellent bone structure.” They’d giggle and so would she, but then she’d be silent and, for a short time, think about him in a way that didn’t involve romance so much as wonderment. He had read samples of their work, would give one-on-one feedback in the cluttered office of a professor on leave. His writing was funny, witty, and recently featured a character who—based on the many biographical coincides—seemed much like who Carly thought the writer might be and who she might be too: an unhappy person who felt guilty for being unhappy.

On Monday, Carly sat in front of the writer in his borrowed office. She stared at him blankly; she was tired. Nothing about Saturday night had made sense so she spent Sunday doing homework alone. The events had been strange and upsetting enough for Carly to actively avoid obsessing over it all, what was said and what was potentially lost.

“So, how do you like the weather?” The writer was smiling at her.
He wasn’t at a lack for conversation—it had been a strange morning. Heavy snowfall for two hours and now sunshine and high winds in seventy-degree heat. “Fun,” Carly said. “Maybe we’ll get a tornado.” Sometimes the tornado sirens went off, and that was something.

The writer nodded. He seemed to be studying her face. “Something on your mind?”

Carly was thinking about how, when there was a tornado warning, she spent them sitting in her bathtub reading, impatiently waiting for it to end. If she were more of a fun person, she’d prop up pillows and pretend to be Dorothy from The Wizard of Oz, but she knew she was the type who came up with this stuff only to never execute it. The sound of wind, wailing, that’s what she couldn’t stop thinking about and she couldn’t help but frown. “Just feeling sorry for myself.”

“Sometimes you have to,” he said. “I mean, when I was young, I used to have this ridiculous thought. I used to think ‘I’m so young and stupid.’ And now I’m just stupid.” He laughed. “But you know what I mean.”

“I guess.” Carly suspected she got it, but was also repelled by the concept. So none of this, she thought, will ever get easier.

“How do you like it here, Carly?”

This morning, she had seen an exhausted looking Nina in the hallway and immediately, for a moment, thought the world Nina and Paul had built must already be in ruins. Carly didn’t know how to feel about running into Harrison on Saturday either. Seeing him outside of the classroom only reinforced an invisible line that kept Carly out, away.

She tried to smile. “It’s school.”

He picked up her manuscript, and then put it back down. He asked, “How are you?”

Though Carly had no idea what she was about to say, her mouth began to form words right as the sound of a baby crying came down the hallway and through the open office door. Carly and the writer both turned towards the wailing child they could not see. The baby kept crying and crying—it did not stop—and Carly thought of little Ilya. He liked to give people high-five after high-five, smashing his little fist into the large, encompassing palms offered by his mother and father, by strangers. For a moment, she wanted to get up, find Paul and Gracie’s mother and Harrison and Nina and make them all stop, just pause with her to hear what she heard. But mostly, imagining Ilya now—his sleepy eyes, the soft spot at the crown of his head—
made Carly feel so sad, just so incredibly sad. She could barely stand it, but she tried and turned around in her chair again.

Carly found the writer silent and still. He didn’t say anything. He didn’t nod or look expectant. She was grateful, because he didn’t return her gaze with skepticism or pity. For a long moment, his face reflected hers and looked as if he were truly trying to understand.
My Grocery List

1. *Hell money and lotus seeds.*

   Because you grow up to confuse a funeral with a wedding.

   When your grandfather’s body fails, you create an island for yourself in a hospital with a name you have never bothered to know. Your father doesn’t smoke cigarettes, but your uncles do before entering the funeral procession. The women in your family wear black shrouds and feign tears, because it’s what’s expected, that’s tradition.

   These are the same women who turn into brides. You remember your older cousins who were, at one time, reedy like ballerinas. On a night from long ago, they sat on porch steps cracking lotus seeds between their teeth. One seed escaped the gastronomic tract, caught hold and took root. Your cousin’s belly grew ripe and round so it swelled beneath her wedding cheongsam. The hand your cousin held belonged to the man she married, but she was already his brother’s legal wife (he needed the Green Card, she needed the money and love intervened here). Then, like now, a banquet, men sour with brilliant sorrow and too much cognac, every face red and smiling.

   Your grandfather takes a seat, a ghost who eats nothing and doesn’t see you. You pout and pout, because you cannot help it; you think there’s no difference, none. Your cousin’s wedding feels the same as your grandfather’s funeral. You do not laugh or cry at either and so you sit, wondering how brittle your bones must already be.

2. *Cigarettes.*

   Because you fall in love with a cowboy, a wannabe John Wayne type who smokes Marlboros or whatever is cheap.

   The night is overcast, and you’ve done what you said you’d never do; these little promises to ward off vice, that pledge made in the fifth grade to wear angel wings forever and a day smashed. And you don’t mind it, a mouth full of blood and sweat, alcohol and ash. He tastes
good to you, this boy who will never see you in your summer clothes (even though you still look like your winter self), but who will know, only to forget, your nakedness. This boy is your first and, at eighteen, your everything.

The first time you saw him you were doing laundry, loading the washers and dryers, certain he would never know your name. Later, after all the fumbling, after every moonlit cigarette has been dropped below the bleachers of Hayward Field (you think you’re so cool, you think you’re so hot for desecrating sacred ground), and each moment of injury reflected over bad coffee by yourself, silence will be left as the knot in your womb.

Though right now, before you know all this, before he transfers back home and trades you in for a girl with an elfin face and long legs, you stand atop the campus volcanology building in the middle of November. Hand over hand, he led you here. With each step, each rung on the fire escape ladder, you remember.

When he opened a Chinese textbook, this pretty white boy—and not you—read about “electric shadows,” things you might have known in a past life. It’s never been a problem, but a funny matter actually. He didn’t tease or ridicule what knowledge you lacked that time.

Only, a little later on, he did because he knows you’ll always come back. He pressed Rimbaud into your hands, livid. He explained, “These are the rules,” even though you told him you don’t know French. Poetry offered no guidance, only the façade of romance, so many pretty words like soft lips pressed against your ear. You only knew seasickness in the strange waiting room cleaved out by the space between languages. So you took this cruelty, this newfound illiteracy and turned it into silence—no emails, no texts, no messages ferried by friends, not a word. You liked how it strangled him until he came back, begging for the phone to ring on a lonely Friday night.

This is all before he leaves, because he will and he does and who ever really stays with their first love? After all this—especially this night when you stand on a rooftop in the threat of rainfall—you will send him postcards from Oregon. They will be about the sun, and how it makes your stomach sick on your pathetic morning runs, but also, how it sleeps with you in the grass at noon. They will be about how much of a ghost you become, because you want to be just like him (you even check the weather forecast in Cheyenne). Your letters will be cryptic and short (maybe because he never sends anything back). Only, he won’t let you go either, until the
day he does. And because he does, you will have to tell him, struggle and whisper over long
distance on the phone, “But that’s not even her real hair color,” defeated and your mouth dry.

So now, after the first spark and before the final catharsis, everything lies wrecked and
ruined. The careless ways that you two insist on manipulating each other’s feelings and learned
weaknesses, it disgusts you. Worse, these abuses are crippling now that you don’t know any
other way, now that you want to be honest.

This memory will not be as romantic as you will later wish it to be. Standing on the
rooftop of the volcanology building, he does not touch you. As two freshmen, you are both
young and stupid. You think your words deserve the privacy your tiny box-sized dorms don’t
allow, even though you might’ve already said them with the intimacy of your bodies. Yet, it feels
like it could be all right. A foggy sky and puddles of day old rain. It could almost be okay as long
as you can find a compromise in the tangles, this mess of truth and lies.

But you are still thinking too much, thinking about before this. You recall Halloween and
how you found a little kimono and carried a plastic sword (becoming an ambiguous embodiment
of the every Asian, maybe). His friends teased you, and he called you “a little geisha, my little
whore,” as he pulled your body towards his. You imagined the delight he could’ve found if he
suffered from Yellow Fever, mixing up who you are with what you have never been.
Nevertheless, the bottom line remains that he liked it. He unraveled you, the sash of your robes
coming loose, your identity parting. And you liked it too, that you could translate into something
worth sex and thus, love.

He is your first kiss. You will turn twenty, and he will still be the only boy (that British
stranger doesn’t count) that you have ever kissed. At future parties (because that is the hope—
that there are always a few more) your gaze will arrest those drunken, red-faced boys, and cry
out the mountains of unsaid words interpreted through a “come-hither, come love me” look. By
then, you know that power, the hidden strength of the eyes. Your psychology professor deems it
“the copulatory gaze,” or that extra five seconds, an inappropriate suspension of two faces where
a reaction—approach or retreat—something for Christ’s sake, must be done if not said first.
Those nights, when you feel so full and so empty, you will pull at a bra strap, cross and uncross
your legs and hope for boys to see the signs.

This happens accidentally, too. You will be caught in many more shallow moments, and
the teaching assistant will be startled to find you staring at him so intently in lecture. He will be a
classics graduate student, so when the professor (a fervent, dumpling of a woman) lectures about Romanesque cathedrals and blah-blah-blah, you imagine yourself in bed next to this unsuspecting man. You won’t know anything about him other than what you can read from his appearance—older, smarter, handsome and clean cut. He knows Latin—the dead language of Popes and conquistadors, the roots for the Spanish you studied in high school—so you’re intrigued, enraptured, and can’t help but imagine what it’d be like. If he whispered Latin into your ear, green vines would slowly push out of your mouth and eyes as if they were the languages of a new world.

All in all, you hope they will understand that though you’re sincere, you’re also cheap like any other girl who’s willing and, yes, looking for a good time. Sometimes, those good times come, but only so far. They’ll smile and you’ll know, but nobody ever takes you home. You’re pure; you’re good, but also lonely. Next Halloween, you will dress up as Ophelia.

When you are twenty, when you are much older than you were on that November night, you will still wonder. In those moments, between sleep and dream, between waking and breathing, it will rise. Because of the luxury of hindsight and the truth that you will only sometimes admit to (that you’re dying, dying, almost dead), your mouth fills with regret. It comes in bits, possibilities of light and color, all the things you might have said standing on that rainy rooftop when that boy was still a tangible part of you. You will look back, and remember.

But at this moment, you are eighteen and you do not know these facts. Right now, you are just cold and scared. You have always been afraid of heights, and while the building isn’t very tall, falling is still a real possibility. You look at this boy. He stares eye level at you now that he sits and you stand. His blue-green eyes are all that you see as he pushes you when he says with a sneer, “After the first night, you weren’t supposed to come back.” But then he holds you tight in his arms as if afraid you might actually jump.

The sky is a gentle shade of black and the stars look on, cautious and soft. Rain drips off branches and leaves, puddles forming at your feet. This city boy from Wyoming is less John Wayne and more James Dean, maybe? He smells like cigarettes and the cold of winter, his neck against your damp cheek. You keep each other from the cold; the winds gathering like a hug nobody asked for. Over his shoulder, you look all around you, hushed and thinking. You wonder, what would happen if you just said it, those little words sitting in your mouth, those words that
may or may not mean anything. You remain silent and think how, hand over hand, you two climbed up the ladder into what fire, you will never know.

3. *Fishes and loaves.*

Because you are hungry.

When you grow up, you will want to believe in God, but you won’t believe in anything. Your religion is flexible; an ever-changing philosophy built on Power Rangers, flu shots and the occasional burst of piety tinged by inexplicable, overwhelming sadness. You’re so spiritually ambiguous that during one Christmas, your clever friend gave you *Buddhism for Dummies* attached to a match and a note that said, “Just in case you’re offended, haha!” In a history book, (because you always decline invitations to Bible studies) you encountered Pontius Pilate and flippantly mused (since you were feeling extra pudgy that day) how one of his workout videos could do you some good. You walk the path half way, half-hearted, half-assed.

When you were fifteen, you believed happiness came from slender thighs and a tiny waist. You gorged yourself on whatever lined the shelves of your family’s pantry. You ate and ate, only to find that it wasn’t enough. So you vomited, waiting for a true baptismal. Only, this is just like when you were thirteen and made your body cringe, convulse. You felt yourself shrink smaller and smaller during a ten day fast. When you are older, you will try to move to the beat of something grand, something greater than yourself. You will take up jogging in a college town where track gods and Olympians walk the earth. They, gilded with medals and crowns of brotherhood, defy the same rules of gravity that keep you bound as a mediocre athlete. Each street, every crack in the concrete pounded by your weakling’s pace, each hard-earned mile rings out like a drumbeat to a song that you have never been able to hear.

Before all of this, you were a little girl who attended a Lutheran pre-school. The tiny classroom where your mother dropped you off every morning (even though she burned joss paper, lit incense and wondered which, rabbits or a woman, made the shadows on the moon?) came attached to an even smaller room with pews and an altar. They taught you both fire safety and the creation story in this chapel. You were fonder of the fireman with the shiny helmet and sleepy Dalmatian than of the teachers concerned with the salvation of your immortal soul. For the longest time, you never understood the crucifixion of Christ.
When you are twenty, you will meet a saint in a Laundromat. Next to a salsa poster and a handwritten advertisement for a busted mattress, you believe you found Jesus. During your Sunday ritual of spin cycles and fabric softeners, you discover a small image of a bearded man in robes tacked to the bulletin board at Mr. Clean Jeans on 17th and Pearl. This image will be the size of a baseball card. You hold it in your hand, turning it over to find out that it is not Jesus, but someone better, someone you’ve always believed in. “Hey Jude, don’t make it bad/ Take a sad song and make it better” you sing, reciting the prayer for this patron saint, having always already known the words written on the back.

Now, with the photo of St. Jude next to a wooden likeness of Buddha rescued from a thrift store at your bedside, you cannot sleep. At night, whether in the season of light or rains, you lie awake in an insomniac’s grip while your stomach churns. Outside your window, you hear the sound of glass shattering as empty beer bottles hit the pavement. Another college night on the town, and you listen to irate boys shouting, their voices vague and distant. You imagine them rose-faced from the cold, drink and anger. They slam their fists into each other as they shout, “I want to die! I want to die, until the morning comes when I want to live like you again.” You know this feeling, but you have never thrown a punch in your life.

And then, as if you have had too much wine yourself, you run to the bathroom and fall to your knees. Since last year, you have always had stomach problems, random moments of minor inconvenience rendering you aware of the poor mechanics of your body. Even so, you cook elaborate dinners for your roommates while secretly dreaming of even grander meals: imported wine and cheese made from organic goat’s milk and apricots. You’d find a Turkish samovar and serve tea in tiny, glass cups. Every week, you’d taste a different country: saganaki and baklava, the hottest Indian curries, thousand-year-old egg, tangy chimichurri sauces, loaves of braided challah as thick as a body builder’s arm. You have always had the privilege of either eating too much, too little or the wrong things. There is always enough food.

One of your roommates fed you spoonfuls of caraway seeds, a remedy her grandmother whole-heartedly recommended. Still, your stomachaches are not so bad that over-the-counter drugs don’t alleviate them. Sometimes though, you wish a doctor could diagnosis you. You imagine this doctor taking off her glasses and wiping the lenses on the hem of her white coat. She would tell you the bad news: “It has physically manifested; it’s an ulcer.” Her voice stolid,
her hands neatly folded as if paper birds finally at rest. At least then, there would be a reason, there would be proof.

Nonetheless, here you are. In this darkness, this midnight, you remember how you do not understand. When you were a little girl, you thought they nailed Jesus to the cross by sliding nails between his fingers, not through his palms. You remember holding your hand up to the sunlight, fingers spread like the skeletal wing of an extinct bird. You had no idea what it really means to suffer, and still do not. You know the word “atheist” terrifies you, because you cannot stand the idea of a life in which even suffering has no meaning; it is life spent so accidentally and alone, forever like this. So your body empties. You walk to the sink and splash water on your face. You wait for the morning to come, because even though it’s not enough to want to believe, you hope that someday you will.
After Carrie was born, I took Harper to the coast. The birth hadn’t been easy, and Harper wore a three-inch souvenir on her newly slackened belly. She stood in front of the motel mirror, her green swimming suit pulled down to reveal swollen breasts, running a finger across the length of the smiling scar.

I lay on the bed, working into a six-pack swiped from my dad’s for the trip. The TV was on mute so the man on the Travel Channel looked like a mime. I needed a cigarette real bad like I always did, but looking at Harper made me think of our daughter. I promised myself to quit the day after Harper found out she was pregnant. Giving up cigarettes made me want to gnaw things with my teeth, run around parking lots. Nicotine patches and gum weren’t really doing it. Nothing I did could shake the feeling, but giving up things is what people with kids do so it just felt right.

Harper sat on the bed and patted me on the knee. “Get dressed. I’m starving.” She grabbed my beer and took a long drink before stepping into the shower.

We had reservations at Le Bouchon, a restaurant on the pier where we’d had our wedding reception. The place was French and pricey, but Harper looked like she needed to get away. We were both midway through college and working part-time so it was hard but, of course, the pregnancy didn’t have that same kind of calamity it might have had if we were younger. Our parents helped us out with money and babysitting too. I can honestly say we were doing more than all right at the time.

When Harper stepped out of the shower, I was fixing my tie and the man on the TV was zooming across India in a rickshaw, waving. Naked and dripping wet, Harper leaned over the sink. Staring into the mirror, her gaze met mine. I liked knowing I was the only man she’d ever be around nude. I smiled and hugged her at the waist, but Harper gently nudged me off, looking serious.
She had been moody for a while. Not necessarily depressed, but quick to anger. No wonder with a four-month-old wailing all night, our baby girl with strong, healthy lungs. Sometimes I’d catch Harper with an open textbook held out in front of her face like a shield. Even with the baby wailing, her eyes would be distant and somewhere I couldn’t ever be. She felt tired all the time too, though the doctors couldn’t really tell us why. They had said postpartum depression, and my mother had agreed immediately. Not uncommon, I told my mother on the phone after the diagnosis. That’s it, she reassured me, that’s got to be it.

I wondered if Harper was thinking about Carrie as I sat on the motel bed. By now, Grandma had most likely sung her goodnight. I watched her watching the TV in the mirror’s reflection and wondered if Harper could read the travel host’s lips and his pantomiming. I didn’t ask though. I just watched as she twisted her long brown mane, the water dripping down her back. For a moment, she craned her neck away from me, wet spots on the carpet shaped like her feet.

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At Le Bouchon, I stared at the menu as if somehow, squinting might will the French words to make sense. I was pretty sure I had eaten most of the dishes at the wedding since Harper’s parents insisted on footing the bill, but all of it had, above all else, tasted like money.

Ordering wasn’t really a problem, because Harper spoke French. She majored in International Relations and French and had even lived in Lyon for a year. I just took English classes, because that gave me an excuse to read books. I’d planned on traveling too, but then I met Harper and decided to stay my junior year. Sometimes I thought maybe we’d go abroad after graduation and when Carrie got older, but saying things like that always made me feel like my parents.

I think the waiter was impressed by Harper’s accent when she ordered for both of us. His severe expression began to resemble a smile. He even suggested some type of wine called a Muscadet. I had only ever drunk the Rieslings and Merlots my dad kept in the kitchen cabinet. Harper couldn’t drink the champagne at our wedding, her stomach a small mound that peaked up beneath the folds of her wedding dress. But at the party where Harper and I first met, I remember how she drank shot after shot of Johnny Walker Blue, hooting and laughing. She danced all night and I watched her. Her face luminous, the long skirt she wore twirling and fanning around her slender body. She commanded the room the way planets pulled satellites into their orbit.
Once the waiter left, Harper started giggling. “He didn’t even card us. Do we look old?”
I took her hand and kissed it the way Rhett Butler might, hamming it up. “Oh yeah, so old.” She was wearing that blue number with the big ruffles that landed on her soft thighs; the one she knew drove me wild. I loved those long legs. I loved those green eyes.

Harper smiled, traced figure eights across my palm and then raised her glass of water to her lips. She chewed a piece of ice, started laughing loudly. “Yeah, we must be big kids now,” she said.

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When we left the restaurant, the sun, sky, and clouds looked like a Monet painting with their blurry edges, the strokes visible. I thought it’d be romantic, like in the movies, if we took a seaside stroll. Green fingers urged on the arrival of night, the grasses impervious to salt waving from the slopes of the dunes. The ocean brushed itself against the sand. With Harper’s shoes in my hand, I led her down the stretch of beach. She had been quiet throughout dinner, not even bothering to scoff out of boredom or annoyance when I lamely made a gagging face at the sight of the escargot. Harper was in one of her moods again.

That was the risk of this vacation, that traveling might make her body betray her. And Harper always got cranky when she was tired. Even before the baby, she’d stay up cramming before tests no matter how immaculate and thorough her notes, or be out at a party even when I wanted to stay in. I knew never to bother her the next morning. I’d wait by the phone for her to call, because when she was ready she would and always did.

“Are you tired?”
“No.”
“Wanna check in on Carrie?”

Harper shook her head, sighed and leaned against me as she shuffled her bare feet through the sand. I wanted to head back; I was tired.

We kept walking, the waves like static from a TV. We approached what turned out to be a bonfire, our faces meeting strange light in the distance. People emerged, perched on driftwood tossed out from the sea. A figure played guitar in the firelight. Strangers waved at us. “Hey there!” one of them shouted, waving more enthusiastically than the others. When we got closer, I could see the kid’s blood shot eyes, how he was obviously stoned.

There were maybe six or seven kids. I could tell they were still in high school. Their
smiles were still bright, their faces marked by roundness, acne and flashes of skepticism. Some of them were smoking cigarettes and it looked funny on them, like an oversized coat. It was also the way they sat, boys and girls with arms entangled in a manner suggesting a kind of vague rebellion and infinite possibility, their audacity apparent in their doggedness on having what looked like a good time in spite of the world. One of them even wore a letterman’s jacket. A few of them glanced at us almost bashfully, but some faces appeared welcoming. I didn’t remember being so friendly at their age.

I whispered to Harper, “I think they want us to buy them beer,” and politely smiled back at the bunch. “Joke’s on them.”

The one with the guitar stood up, held out his hand and slurred, “Do we know you, man? We must know you, that’s why you’re here.”

They invited us to stay and eat hot dogs, even roast marshmallows. Harper raised an eyebrow, looked at me, shrugged and sat down. We weren’t really that much older. They were mildly amusing like those flashy tourist trap billboards along the interstate, the ones that promised impossible things like “caves of youth” and “fish with hands” but only ever brought disappointment. Their cooler was full of Cokes and Dr. Peppers, but somebody pulled out a piece and we passed it around like Indians at a powwow.

After I took a hit, I thought of Carrie. I quit smoking cigarettes for her, so did this count? I didn’t think Harper smoked anything, because she was breast feeding and you’re not supposed to do that. But my gut churned when I pictured our baby girl’s green eyes, and I waited for Harper to berate me, only she didn’t. She was too busy talking to some girl like they were old friends reunited. The girl listened rapt and eyes wide, as Harper told her about her travels abroad, nostalgia constructing cathedrals and Baroque churches out of thin air, ancient French cities rising skyward from the campfire smoke around us. “Nantes, Cherbourg, Pierrelatte,” she said.

Then some towheaded guy held out a joint.

This time, I declined.

With smoke billowing out his nostrils, the towhead asked, “She your girlfriend?” He pointed to Harper who was still jabbering on.

“Not quite.” I raised my left hand, the gold band glimmering.

“Damn!” The towhead seemed genuinely impressed, but I don’t know by what. He laughed, his white, matted hair in the fire and moonlight, the bones of his face made jagged by
the shadows. “Damn,” he kept saying, “damn. You’re married already? Ball and chain. Ball and chain.” Something about this guy made me uneasy. I couldn’t figure out his deal, why it was so funny. I was glad when he left me alone.

The guitar player started strumming loudly. Someone began singing and then others joined like a scene out of a summer camp movie and I suddenly felt old. I wanted to return to the motel and call my mom, ask if Carrie had had a good day with Grandma. Harper didn’t budge when I squeezed her shoulder and motioned to leave, let’s go. Instead, she started singing at the top of her lungs and her shadow, elongated by the firelight, joined theirs.

Then everybody started taking off their clothes—jeans dropped, bras unsnapped. Harper had her blue dress around her waist, and I ran up and touched her on the arm. “What the hell? Let’s go back, come on.”

She smiled, wrestled out of my hold and continued stripping. “We’re just skinny-dipping. Get over it.”

“You don’t even know them.”

“So it matters even less since they’re strangers. Come on, it’ll be fun.” Harper pulled off her panties and pressed her bare form against my clothed one.

It felt cheap, this trick of her body over mine. “This isn’t like you, Harper.” I said, but this was how she got sometimes.

“You don’t know the first thing.”

I tried to put my arms around her, but she pushed me hard. I stared. She looked so small underneath all this sky. She was just the terrified girl who I had once found, in the middle of the night, mute and in tears standing over Carrie’s crib, our daughter newborn and pink.

“You’re being selfish.” I whispered.

Her eyes pierced me and then they were leaving, heading towards that place she sometimes went and would never let me follow. But I couldn’t let it go. I asked, “What about Carrie?”

“Carrie isn’t here.”

“She’s our daughter.”

“I didn’t forget that.”

“You act like you want to.” I couldn’t stop myself, the things I had wanted to say—her illness or not—rolling out. “You liked it better before, don’t you? You don’t want to be a
mother.” I had gone too far, but I had to know for sure. “You like it when she’s not around. Tell me that’s not true.”

Harper was silent, and the scars from her pregnancy were still red, mean-looking in the starlight. Mouth clenched, a flush spread across her face as if I had slapped her. She was angry, embarrassed, and, for a moment, I was sorry. Then, legs firm and steps resolute, she turned away from me and headed towards the sea.

I stood there, listening to shrieks and seawater, the surf running a million fingers across the land and pausing, the tide slack as if, for a moment, the cosmos stood still. The moon was like blown glass—fragile, suspended in the sky. “You do,” I said, but Harper didn’t hear me. She was running, jumping into the freezing water screaming, laughing. I watched them. How they looked like children, their features pale, but aglow.

I waited, among the discarded clothes, socks and shoes, for my wife to come back. I kneeled in the sand, picking up the blue dress she had shed and set it down again. Then I walked back to the hotel.
You Can’t Build Old Houses

Only once before, standing shoulder to shoulder, had husband and wife addressed to each other the existence of the strange creature in their new house:

“Maybe we should put up posters,” Elliott suggested.
“Let’s,” said Jane. “’Found: lost elephant.’”
“Lost _pet_ elephant. In case it’s someone’s pet.”
“You’ll need to mention circus—is there a circus in town?”
“The big top’s missing their main attraction.”
“The lions will be happy; the chimpanzees despondent.”
“How did it get here?”

They shrugged, but they both knew. The elephant must have been a stowaway in the U-Haul, tucked behind a box of silverware, or inside a vanity drawer. Actually, the elephant had appeared even before their move and the first miscarriage. Like a shadow, it began tailing them sometime right after they were engaged to be wed. Both of them knew this, too. At first, it was the size of a field mouse. Now the animal nearly took up half the room, its fleshy, gray body steadily growing bigger and bigger. And like a good elephant in the room, it never made a sound. With throw pillows gathered underneath its chin, the elephant lounged in a regal repose as if holding court at an Indian holy temple, its massive hindquarters enthroned across the sofa, waiting.

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After the last miscarriage, Jane started biting her nails and smoking cigarettes in bed again. Every morning, Elliott left for work and she sat, knees tucked underneath her chin, staring out the big, open window and across their three-acre parcel of land. The familiar sputter of a car engine grew faint as he drove away, and Jane felt good to be alone again. She imagined the tired red truck—the one they had driven cross country only a summer ago—disappearing down the unpaved road, gravel popping under patched tires.
They had meant to buy a new car, had spent a few heated afternoons haggling with salesmen at used car lots, and even joked about replanting the garden to match whatever color minivan they bought. Now Jane’s gardening catalogues and magazines lay in a pile next to unused paint cans abandoned on the wraparound porch, the pages dimpled from late spring rains. The mailman still brought monthly issues of Almost Eden and Better Homes and Gardens, but she didn’t read them anymore and neglected to renew her bulb-of-the-month club membership. They were doing well; Elliott recently got a promotion at the ad agency and Jane supplemented her grade school teacher’s salary by working at the farmer’s market on weekends. They still postponed any new purchases, citing financial reasons to the few family and friends who asked about their sudden change of plans. After all, they said as if trying to convince themselves, they had just bought their first house.

After a final drag, Jane flushed the cigarette butt down the toilet. She pulled off her pajamas and, though her skin felt sticky from sweating in her sleep, she only sat on the edge of the claw-foot tub and pulled on an off-white cotton sundress.

Leaning over the banister, Jane stared down at the elephant asleep in the living room. Open boxes filled with some of their belongings littered the room. An unusually heavy rainfall during the past autumn had flooded their home up to the baseboards and they hadn’t bothered to unpack. The elephant slept in the middle of this like a Minotaur in a poor man’s labyrinth.

It was best not to wake the elephant.

Jane walked into the kitchen and plugged in the Mr. Coffee. Elliott had brought in the morning paper, but hadn’t read it. The red rubber band hugging the newsprint cylinder reminded Jane of the little tissue box guitars she used to play. As a child, she’d watch her grandmother’s fingers stretch five or six rubber bands across the long opening of an empty, rectangular tissue box. Sometimes they even glued the cardboard tube from a roll of paper towels to the top of the box. Each different color made a different note. Sometimes the guitar was a harp, a ukulele. It might be a fun project for her second graders come fall. Her kids might’ve liked the makeshift instrument too, but now there would be no kids. Neither of them said it, but it had been decided.

She took a great, burning gulp of coffee. A taste like stale cigarettes on her tongue; it was a strong, bitter brew. The coffee was horrible. Gripping the mug tightly with both hands, she studied the stillness, the unsettling absence of motion or, more precisely, the absence of life in the house. The friendships they began here only months ago were cut short; they were
embarrassed about the elephant. Alone, they talked less and less. In bed, Elliott would rub the small of her back, press his mouth against her collar bone, but she’d keep her eyes closed and sleep. Sleep was all she wanted these past few months, not sex or love-making, none of that.

Now Elliott seemed disinterested, too. Jane counted the days since he had last tried and she needed every finger on both her small hands. Maybe Elliott didn’t need her anymore the same way she didn’t seem to need him? This was not a new idea. It didn’t make her wring her hands or dream of fleeing dramatically, first to the airport and then to some unknown South American country. Spurned women in movies and books always wept alone in hotel rooms, in some secluded cliff-side villa overlooking a beach, any bucolic hamlet that happened to be covered in mist. But taxi cabs were expensive and Jane didn’t blink; there would be no crying. Standing in the kitchen, coffee mug in hand she didn’t shed any tears, but felt lightheaded, unsteady.

In the living room, she opened the large bay window. An oversized terra cotta pot sat on the porch, purposely beneath the window. In the fall, she had envisioned herself mixing the collected coffee grounds with crushed eggshells into her flower beds, gently applying handfuls of the compost to the base of tomato plants in order to deter cutworms and slugs just as her own mother had. Now, nearly a year later, it was summer, and the garden overrun with weeds, the lush flowers and vegetable vines existing only as potential, dreams enclosed within the shells of their seed. Jane emptied her mug, pulled a face. Elliott probably had a mistress, because that’s what men did. She walked back into the kitchen, poured the rest of the pot full of coffee into the kitchen sink. It swirled and gurgled down the drain. Opening the trash bin, she dropped the coffee filter and grounds in. There was no evidence of an affair. Her husband had always come home to her each night and Elliott was a good man. If she checked his credit card statements, the phone bill for strange numbers, she knew she’d find nothing. Jane didn’t know why she thought Elliott had another woman, but she still hoped he did.

***

Downtown, Elliott sat on a park bench, a Styrofoam container in his lap, staring at the city traffic. A few homeless men played cards, dog-walkers huffed past. Other men and women also on lunch break sat on the edge of a large stone fountain eating dirty-water hot dogs or brown bag lunches made by their husbands, their wives. It was noon, overcast, and he had just purchased glass noodles from his favorite street vendor, but he wasn’t hungry. In fact, he had not
had an appetite for a long time and his tailor-made suits had begun to appear as if stolen from a larger, taller man. Jane did not look well either; he heard her stomach rumble at night, felt the thin bands of her ribcage as she slept.

In the mornings before Jane awoke, or late after work, he would stand alone in the kitchen and watch the sunrise or sunset peek through the drapes and dully refract off the copper pots and pans hanging above the stove. He’d drag a finger across the bottom of a frying pan, lifting the layer of fine dust covering their cookery into the air. The cookbooks that Jane had collected and received as gifts over the years sat neatly on their bookshelves. No more dinner parties, because he noticed how she couldn’t help it, his touch made her flinch even with guests and flute after flute of chardonnay. For a while, before Elliott suspected they had both given up, he would take Jane out to eat. They’d go to five-star joints, hole-in-the-walls, Chinese restaurants that kept bubbling tanks of live eels and colorful fish in the front lobby. There had never been the need to impress and occupy, to parse conversation out of chocolate brioche, or fifty-dollar plates of fideos smothered in octopus ink. It hadn’t been like this before. He had never needed a kind of forgiveness that she now refused to give.

He jabbed at his food with a plastic fork. The girl at the noodle cart always gave him chopsticks, but today she seemed distracted, looked like she was about to cry even as she smiled away his concern. People were mysteries, but these people were usually strangers, not his wife. Summer meant Jane was free to read, write her fiction, and garden, but he suspected she didn’t do much of anything. Elliott never asked Jane what she did during the day, but every night, her skin carried the scent of wild deer, the musk of a secret forest. Elliott closed the Styrofoam box. A car alarm went off and somebody was strumming a guitar in the distance. All this hesitation and guardedness, that damn elephant crashing into their home, fat on resentment and anger, was his fault. He wanted to scream every night.

Months ago, Jane had smashed a full glass of wine against the wall during one of the last times they had sat down for a home cooked meal. He had made her favorite dish, saffron chicken, and she baked an apple tart for dessert. Snow fell in a fine powder, covering the acres they owned in an unbroken field of white. He remembered how he had pushed away his plate, looked her in the eye, and told her he didn’t want a baby right now. She was stunned, and avoided his sorry and expectant gazes, his hand brushing against her skin. Then she said it was okay. After all the hours spent picking out the right infant car seat and looking at paint swatches
for a nursery, Elliott believed they were not ready. They were too young, he had thought, as he cleaned the red spill dripping down the wall. He was too scared and that was horrible and selfish and, above all, true.

The wind began to pick up, sending leaves and bits of trash swirling into the air. Pigeons roosting took flight. A summer storm approached: humid, the sky crackling, something about to break. Elliott checked his watch. Twelve-thirty and back to the office now, dinner with a client later this evening. He walked over to the trash can, but then he saw one of the homeless men staring at him, the box in his hands. The man’s many thanks made Elliott blush, embarrassed by such sincere gratitude. He crossed the street, hurriedly ducked into the agency elevator like a criminal. He wasn’t a saint, and he loved his wife. He just didn’t want everything to go to waste.

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In the afternoon, Jane left the two-story house without bothering to lock the doors. She walked across the pasture leftover from the period when their property had been a modest farm. A rickety fence still leaned across the land like a row of busted, gray teeth. She imagined cows grazing, chewing their cud as horses and their foals galloped across the grassy meadow that lay in the horizon. The woods seemed to be the only thing left untouched, as if each tree were a pillar of something everlasting. Birds called out to each other and, among the branches, even the seeming stillness was somehow alive. An early afternoon thunderstorm had left the earth soft, the smells of moss and decay strong, but the sun was out now. Jane stripped off her dress and underwear and swam naked in the little creek. She caught tadpoles and napped under the shade of a giant willow in the nude. She spent most of her days sun-drunk, counting the rings of an ancient sycamore, climbing the gnarled branches of a towering tree.

It felt good to get away from the house and their things, all those boxes stacked on top of each other in the living room. Jane had tried to sit down and read, to feel the same calm a quiet summer day could cast onto her racing mind. An old restlessness seized her when lethargy did not. She flipped through back issues piled on the kitchen counter, picked up her old, beloved books from the cardboard boxes that sat there, making it appear as if they were people about to move in or move out, who knows. It was best to get away from the walls, the possibility of their indecipherable daytime mumblings. It didn’t matter to her whether the elephant was asleep or not as long she could escape its presence, but they never truly could.
As Jane sat on the creek bank, a lone bee landed on her hand and stung her. After she picked out the stinger, she stared at the wound that began to throb. The skin around the wounded area was cracked, chapped and the tawny color of leather left to bleach in the sun. Her nails were dirty and bitten down, the cuticles ragged and bloody. They didn’t look like her hands. As she sucked the swelling between her thumb and pointer finger, Jane closed her eyes, felt the throb. She wondered how she had become who she was at this moment, among the trees, a kind of person who knowingly masked the boredom and disappointment of life with borrowed romance. In college, she had a roommate, an ex-ballerina, who hosted tea parties on their patio, serving buttered scones, clotted cream, and jam with a fake English accent. There was no shame in making things more festive, in enjoying laundry lines cast high above cobble-stoned walkways, imagined or not. Only, the ex-ballerina vomited the teacakes into the toilet when she thought nobody was looking. What an old story, Jane thought, worn and wretched and now, with her body slack in the wooded shade, she was playing out her own version.

The last time she had shown Elliott the positive pregnancy test strip, her hands shook. He silently squeezed her palm and smiled. This was after he surprised her, at dinner on a wintry night, with the revelation that he didn’t want children yet. Elliott hadn’t said much to her then, and said even less, a few weeks later, when she woke him up in the middle of the night, her hands rigid like claws as she pulled back the sheets to reveal the rose red stain spreading between her legs. He only held her as she wept silently and they waited in the emergency room. This had been the fourth and, as far as Jane was concerned, final miscarriage in two years. And here, in the woods, Jane promised to talk to Elliott tonight and give him her blessing. She would free him from his obligations to her.

***

Elliott sat with the janitor in the stairwell of his office building. He thought about the dinner he had just fled. The restaurant was modern American, the food familiar yet decadently reinvented, and they had uncorked bottle after bottle of wine. His boss had instructed everyone to dress business casual, to appear both experienced and youthfully energetic and, above all, to sell yourself without trying. Usually, Elliott liked these affairs and it was all going so well—buttering up the parachute tycoon, his colleagues’ jokes, but tonight he couldn’t sit any longer and he just wasn’t hungry. He feigned an excuse about a home emergency and left. On the darkening street, Elliott felt unsteady on his feet, unwilling to drive back to their house. And that fucking elephant.
He stopped outside a bar with neon lights and an Irish name, heard the music and voices, but kept walking until he found himself back at work.

Now, Elliott watched the janitor slow dance with a broom. The old man was a part-time ballroom dance instructor and maybe, he suggested to Elliott, the foxtrot or two-step would be enough magic, the jumpstart needed to wow Jane back into his arms. Besides, according to the old man, Elliott and Jane were much too young to already have a marriage on the rocks, if that be the case.

Elliott smiled and nodded, but he only thought of Jane. He could no longer envision her dancing; she was not who she used to be anymore. They had taken a walk together a few weeks ago after finding themselves both briefly staring at the elephant. In silence, they walked miles down the gravel road that curved away from their property, kicking up pebbles with each step. Though it was summer, a yellow school bus rolled by, children like birds chattering inside. Most likely returning from a field trip, the bus was headed off to the elementary school down the way, the one where Jane taught second grade during the school year. Jane had told him she might want to teach summer classes, but by spring, she would return home from work looking exhausted and sleep—she slept so much. Elliott wondered now, as he did on that walk, what Jane had seen when the bus drove by and a child’s voice had shouted “Ms. Jane!” From the back window, glimpses of a small hand waving and a little, grinning face with missing teeth. That child was one of her favorite students, she had told him. Precocious, someone she envisioned spending adolescence as a bookish loner only to grow up to be an astronaut, or a world-renowned physicist. Jane smiled. Then that joy was seized by a shudder in her body, and a serious look she wore whenever she wouldn’t talk to him for days, whenever things were truly wrong. What had she thought of then? Had she allowed herself to imagine the worst: a crash, smoke fuming from beneath the hood of the bus, wheels upturned in the air—the possibility that soccer practices, science fairs, prom—none of that growing-up to do, how everything could suddenly be lost?

When Elliott asked Jane, she couldn’t say why she wanted children so badly. But he was afraid that she needed a baby to love, because he had not given her enough love, or worse, he was not someone who could be loved. And again, the latter thought proved him selfish, thinking about himself and his own fears instead of ways to fix the damage he had done.

A rattling sound overhead—the janitor with two paper cup and a flask. Elliott took a cup and watched the janitor unscrew the flask. He hadn’t noticed him leave or return. Smiling, the
old man held up his cup as if to give a toast, but his face told Elliott to go home, time to go home.

***

They stood under the porch light, the dark all around them. Jane had heard the red truck sputtering up the driveway and ran outside to the porch. Elliott found her there, waiting for him. For a moment neither spoke and then Jane crouched down in the garden. The metronomic chirp of crickets buzzed like electricity in the air. She pulled at a weed, ran her fingers through the soil.

“Rabbits,” she said.
“What?”
“We were supposed to put up a fence to keep the rabbits out,” she said, dusting off her hands.

Elliott followed her into the house, but he stopped short of the stairs. Jane turned around to find him walking towards the sleeping elephant.

He told her, “You smell like smoke.” Then he added, “We need to do something about this.”

She now stood next to him. “You’re right. We brought it into the world.”

Light streamed in through the window, a clear night. Elliott loosened his tie, glanced at his feet

Jane began quietly. “Are you seeing someone else?”
“Is that what you think?”
She met his gaze. “No.”
“Well, I’m not.”
“I didn’t think so.”

Elliott put a hand on her arm, but she shrugged it off and took a step back. “What,” he said, “about me makes you do that? You’re angry, so talk to me.”

“I am mad. I’m so mad I can’t stand looking at you.”
“Tell me then.” He was pleading. “This is about the baby, right? The ones we’ll have someday. Can’t you wait? I said someday, just not right now.”

When Jane laughed, tears in her eyes, the elephant awoke. Its hard, black pupils glittered. Elliott clenched his fists. “This isn’t a joke.”
“Actually, it is—it’s the biggest fucking joke ever.” She let out a whimper, then a sound between laughter and choking. “Husband and wife agree to start family. Then wife has miscarriage after miscarriage. Turns out husband never wanted a baby. Problem solved.” She stared at the wood floor.

“You think I was happy about that? How can you think that?” He was yelling now.

“No,” Jane conceded. Her voice was low, steady. “But did you want it to? Did a part of you—the most honest part of you—want it to happen?”

Jane didn’t make a sound when Elliott turned and, with both hands, grabbed her by the shoulders. His grip was firm, but she didn’t try to move or make a sound. “I was,” he said, “I was relieved. A part of me, a deep dark part I’m ashamed of, was relieved.” Then he let her go. “But that’s only a small piece—not everything. And I was sad. I was and I am so sad. That was my baby too.”

He covered his eyes and she took a step back again. “Jane, I didn’t want to lie to you, but I was afraid. I had to save myself, too.”

Now she sounded as if deflated of air. “The last time it happened, I remember how you comforted me, how you were so thoughtful and kind. But, in my mind, I kept asking you, ‘Are you happy now? Are you happy now?’ I couldn’t stop wanting to ask you. I couldn’t help it.”

Elliott kneeled, looked as if about to fall over, but then sat on a box. Jane approached him, but stopped. Then they were silent once more. The house, the woods, the whole world was silent for them, their dreams, their wagers and losses, it had to be.

And then, without warning, it happened just like that. The elephant stood on all four legs and Elliott and Jane gaped at the creature. They watched, wide-eyed, and she took his outstretched hand. They huddled in a corner as the elephant made its way across the room. It moved slowly, but it knocked over boxes, books, tables without a sound. It pulled up the rug. Its weight collapsed floorboards. It shook the whole foundation of the old farm house, it barely made it out the doorway, and then it was gone. Disappeared, like a magic trick.

Now, left alone—the door flung open, the house ripped wide—Jane and Elliott carefully stepped around the debris, watching each footfall as they made their way over bent furniture, broken glass, all this wreckage. At the door, on opposite sides, they stood peeking out into the night.
They did not comfort one another with promises that the elephant was gone for good, because how could they know this? They did not jump for joy or cry out in pain, though they looked as if they needed to.

“What now?” one of them asked.

“I don’t know.”

Jane and Elliott turned to face one another. Here, with their separate bodies, their ventricles full of blood, each self-contained. They stood, side by side, waiting. Above their heads, a gibbous moon. It spilled shafts of light onto the earth and into their home, became puddles of silver at their feet.
Life Drawing

This morning I hear the landlord’s voice from the vacant apartment above mine. A bellow, it floats in through my bedroom window and I’m up again. The clock says it’s already 9:30. Or maybe, if you’re like my old roommate Ned, it’s only 9:30. Before Ned moved in with his boyfriend, I used to find him sitting at the kitchenette, sullen with blood-shot eyes and a mug of hot tea.

“Christine,” I imagine him saying as I make breakfast, “do you know what hour it is?” The steam from Ned’s tea would fog his glasses, a thing he liked for its dramatic effect.

“9:30.”

“Oh my God!”

“You opened today, right?” I would reply. We work at Floyd’s on Willamette, making coffee part-time. That’s how we met and became roommates. During those mornings, he would’ve been up since before five am.

Ned always claimed exhaustion, how a policy of the customer is always right meant brain-dead Ned. “It’s all that damn smiling,” he’d explain.

We still see each other a lot outside of work but, of course, romantic partners take precedence. Luckily, Ned still pays half the rent and I just found a one-bedroom that I’ll be moving into next month. This place is a steal for what it is, but it’s better this way, because the couple in the unit next door still fight like badgers. When the guy yells, I swear I can hear his veins bulging. The first times, I’d lower my paint brush, Ned his textbook. Twice, we had to call the cops and for a while, they were quiet. I even heard the girl laughing once, but they’ve been at it again.

Today, all I hear is the landlord clomping around as I rinse my cereal bowl. When I brush my teeth and get dressed, I can hear more footsteps above me as if they’re shadowing my path from a floor up.
I never like staying in during the day so I put on my backpack, hop on my bike, and head into work. It’s not even noon, but the summer heat makes me sweat as I zoom away from the apartment building.

Behind the café counter, Ned steams milk for lattes. He scrunches his lips at the sight of me, a sign that I’m going to get a hard time for showing up on my day off. On his break, Ned—like a good friend—keeps this promise and takes the seat across from mine. Gently and without a word, he lowers my sketch pad, and lets his head spring back and forth, disapproving. I don’t mind it though. I like being in a familiar place among strangers.

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“Look,” Ned whispers. We’re both on closing shift and it’s been a crush of people hour after hour. Now Ned is pointing without pointing, pleased and giddy for me.

The handsome man in the three-piece suit is here again. He stands in line, a briefcase under one arm and a newspaper in the other. We get lots of businessmen and students from the offices and university around the block, but he’s our best dressed and, not-so-secretly, my favorite customer. My hands get tingly and it’s either a stroke or something much healthier. I feel ridiculous and it’s a feeling I haven’t felt in a long time.

The man studies the menu board, but I know what he’ll order.

“A scone and—”

“An espresso?” I find myself saying. The rush has made me sloppy and I’m a little horrified, but I can feel Ned grinning at me.

“Yeah,” the man says, pulling out a five. Even smiling he seems kind of gruff, or at least, his gravelly voice and the forcefulness of his mannerisms—as if every movement of each limb was meant to emphasize or punctuate his meaning—contrasts with his trim hair cut and smooth jaw. I once told Ned I bet the man’s rough in the sack and, after he stopped laughing, he looked thoughtful and agreed.

When I reach into the bakery display case, I catch the man studying me and I bet I’m still red-faced even after he takes a corner booth.

Ned nudges me, but I roll my eyes. I can’t help peeking at the man. He keeps checking his watch, looking at the door. We’ve only ever seen him here by himself, but then the bell on the door jingles and I look up to see a woman holding the hand of a small blonde boy standing at his table. The boy clutches a Spiderman action figure in one hand. The man outstretches his arms
and the little boy stares a few seconds before taking a seat in his lap. The woman wears a lot of jewelry, but it’s tasteful, minimal and real-looking silver. When they leave after half an hour, I see rings on both her hands, on fingers that include the engagement and marriage ones.

Ned doesn’t trust married men who don’t wear rings. I don’t either but, as we carry in the wrought iron bistro chairs from the outdoor patio, Ned also insists that she’s not his wife. “I bet they were his sister and nephew.”

I picture the woman’s face again. She’s pretty and she’s not smiling. “Right,” I say, more annoyed that Ned is trying to make me feel better than about the facts themselves.

Ned just shrugs and offers me a lift home. I tell him I rode my bike, but after locking up the store I remember that I hadn’t today. Ned’s beater of a car approaches and slows down after I make it half a block down.

When I get in, he clucks his tongue. “Come on, Christine,” he says, “he’s just some guy.”

I only smile and stare out at the traffic, all the cars and bicyclists. They go by slowly enough so I can make out faces behind glass and the sunset’s glare. Ned knows I’m used to this feeling. I don’t have to tell him that I wasn’t aiming for what could be disappointing, for anything like this, but nonetheless.

***

A few days pass and I try not to think of the handsome man, or his wife and kid. He hasn’t come into Floyd’s again for a while either. Ned tries to look indifferent, but I think he can sense my anxiety.

When I’m in studio I find that I can’t paint without looking distracted, or at least that’s what my professors keep saying. “Christine,” they’d say, “where is your head?”

Each time I’m surprised by their voices and what they’re demanding of me: my focus, my attention. I try to snap out of it, but I keep falling into what I realize are misguided reveries, wondering about the handsome man and where he hangs up his expensive suits, what he wears when he’s out of them.

Then, after work one day, I’m walking my bike through the apartment parking lot and the handsome man is there, getting out of a black Mercedes. From his trunk, he pulls out two big, cardboard boxes. When he walks into the apartment stairwell, I follow and keep my distance like a spy, an intruder. But he must have seen me, because all of a sudden he turns around. He is looking directly at me. “Aren’t you that girl who works at the coffee shop? At Floyd’s?”
I nod, pleased he remembers me even if I’m just “that girl.” I’m not sure what to say.
“Are you moving in? I live on this floor.” I stupidly point for his convenience.

We introduce ourselves and he is Max with a handshake firmer than my dad’s. He nods and I feel my face burn as he stares.

“Do you need help? With your stuff?” I’m thrilled to be so forward, but also wary that I’ve cast off any notions that he could be a killer of children as far as anybody knows.

“It’s nothing.” Max shakes his head. “This,” he says, gesturing towards the boxes, “is what happens when your girlfriend throws you out.” For a moment, Max seems to be mulling things over, wearing an expression that I’ve seen on people in churches and in hospitals. It’s a look that might be described as pensive or grave, and he’s elsewhere. Then he smiles. “Nice to meet you. Maybe I’ll see you around.”

“Sure,” I say and watch him walk up the stairs. I’m too floored to be disappointed, and listen for his footfalls in vacant apartment right above mine. Right then, I refuse to consider that he’s still a stranger and can only awe at how he miraculously appeared in my apartment building, in my boring life. Even if he might be a decade older, Max already seems to possess a rare kind of self-assuredness, the ability to move as gracefully as his suits fit him. His voice is sharp, edged with demand. The way he speaks convinces me he’s not the type who has ever been stood up, or been mistaken for someone else. He’s brash, mellifluous and he knows what he wants; he’s nothing like me.

When I call Ned, he answers sleepily and I can hear the dull voices of the TV set, the gunshots of a Western or action flick. Michael murmurs in the background.

“Ned,” I say, “you won’t believe it.”

“Have the psychos next door finally done the world a favor and broken up?”

“No.”

“What’s up then?”

I hear the sound of water rushing above me, a toilet flush and pipes. For a second, I put the phone receiver down and look up at the ceiling before cradling it back to my ear. “Guess,” I dare him, “Guess.”

***
For the first few nights that Max is my new neighbor, I find myself pressing my ear to walls, my face against cold plaster and paint straining to hear. Only, soon I can hear things I don’t want to hear without trying: the bed creaking, a woman’s escalating moans.

Ned might be more curious than me, coming over to our old apartment with a bag of microwave popcorn and Twizzlers. He peeks through the keyhole, trying to catch sight of the woman if we hear Max’s front door open but we only ever see their backs, their red, brown, or yellow hair. She’s never the woman with the rings from Floyd’s.

It’s not so bad when Ned’s around making faces to the shrill aria of sex, of fucking. He’s as curious as I am, but he knows I feel, for whatever reason, let down.

Whenever Max comes into Floyd’s, he’s business as usual, brusque yet polite. He never asks me beyond niceties like what I’m studying, or if I like the weather. A red rash still creeps up my neck no matter what I do, no matter what I think I know.

One time, Max comes in with the little blonde boy when Ned’s on the register. “Is he your nephew?”

“Son,” says Max. “He’s my son, August.”

After Max and August have paid, Ned comes over to the espresso machine where I’m making their drinks. He says in a low voice, “Don’t do it—kids are involved. It’s messy,” and I’m suddenly annoyed.

“I never seriously thought I had a chance,” I whisper, and that’s both the truth and a lie. Ned looks sheepish, but when I make a little foam heart in the kid’s hot chocolate—like I do for every customer—he clucks at me the way he does. “You don’t want to be Augusts’ new stepmom.”

“I never said I did.” I don’t know why I’m getting so mad.

“Forget him,” Ned says with a wink.

When I shoot him a glare, he looks genuinely surprised. “I was just playing around.”

“It’s not funny,” I say. Through the storefront window I see the black Mercedes pull away.

Ned scrunches up his mouth. “It should be—funny, I mean. You shouldn’t be so torn over him.”

“I wasn’t.”

“I was getting a little worried you were.”
“I’m moving next week, anyway.”

“Like that’ll stop you from pining away whenever he’s here. Or when he’s not here.”

I’m cleaning the espresso machine and the steam wands hiss. “Can you blame me, Ned? This from a girl who spent Valentine’s Day playing Scrabble with two gay men.” I bite my tongue too late; my words insult the wrong person.

My friend looks pissed and then he starts scrubbing the shining countertop.

“Sorry, Ned,” I say. “I didn’t mean it that way.”

He doesn’t look at me, but then he says with a great heave of his chest, “Well, I’m wounded by your honesty, your truth and your candor. It’s like you’ve kicked me in the groin. But I guess I can move a few boxes and chairs.”

I’m grateful for Ned, I truly am. Sometimes we have the stupidest arguments (“I don’t think you’re a snob because you shop at Whole Foods. I just think you’re a snob”), but he forgives me all the time.

On my break, Ned finds me on the empty patio and starts flipping through the sketchbook I have in my lap. He’s the only person that gets away with that.

“Who’s this hot stuff?” Ned studies the pages: some half-formed homage to Marvel and DC, the interrupted portraits of strangers who never knew I was drawing them. He stops on a recent life drawing of a male model with a slender, muscular build. “Forget Max! How can you stand to look at such a beautiful body for so long?”

I glance over the drawing. The model is new and I can’t remember his name.

Then I try to explain life drawing. It can initially be strange to see someone so naked. Only, then you start focusing on the lines, the trajectory of your own pen strokes, of your hand. You try to see the proportions of someone else’s body—each sinew and wrinkle. What you sometimes find, if you’re lucky, is something beyond corporeality and it’s whole, complete.

Ned nods, thinking it over. “I think you just described falling in love?”

“I don’t think that was the question?”

He shrugs. Before I follow Ned back into the cafe, I think of Max again. I wish I didn’t have to go home. It’s a given that only perverts and sadomasochists enjoy hearing Max and one of his women thrash around on top of each other. I admit it bothers me. I also admit that sometimes I won’t immediately go camp out in the living room, to lie on the sofa, the floor. This refusal isn’t based on principal, on a sad private protest against his invasion of my space. Instead,
I lie there and listen, because I’m waiting for them to stop. I’m imagining them after they pull themselves off one another and before one of them gets up to leave, or to use the bathroom. I’m imagining them as they, whoever they are, lay side by side on the bed, not touching.

***

The apartment Ned and I shared for two years sparkles, countertops and my finger tips smelling like lemon cleaner. Tonight, I’ll be sleeping in my new place.

I sprawl out on the carpet and try to ignore the miserable noise of the goddamn neighbors arguing next door. My back muscles ache. It’s always so strange to see how many things you accumulate even as one person. Sometimes it’s a relief when you find a place to put them. I guess I’m glad that I’ll have my own place without an extra, empty bedroom. And if I had been a braver person, I might’ve told Max to knock it off with the ladies, but I didn’t. Maybe he would’ve tipped then.

My phone rings. It’s Ned. I’m treating Michael and him to a movie tonight as thanks for helping me move out. I shower, and then lock up. I realize this is one of the last times I’ll be leaving this apartment, but I don’t get far this time. A small blonde boy is sitting on the stairs in the hall. He’s the person who I suspect it is, but can’t imagine it actually being.

“He,” I say loudly, because the neighbors are still fighting. “August?”

He points a small, pink face up from the comic book fanned out before him. A golden-haired version of Max squints at me, already serious and brooding at age eight or nine. For a kid, he doesn’t seem to be startled by the racket coming from down the hall, all the shouting.

“I work at Floyd’s, the café where your dad takes you. I live over there.” I point to my apartment so he knows I’m not a creep. He must have seen or heard me come out.

“My dad?” He sounds bored. “I’m waiting for him.”

“Is he here?” I’m not sure if I’m asking for his or my sake.

August doesn’t say anything, but finally shakes his head. “I’m not stupid though—I’m not going anywhere with anybody.”

I laugh. He’s got an attitude for an elementary school kid. “I’m not trying to bug you, but does your dad know you’re waiting here?” If Max was home I was too lost in a fog of scrubbing and vacuuming to notice.

Now August is quiet, seemingly concentrating very hard. “He’ll be back soon.”
Though I suspect August will be fine, I don’t want to leave him by himself. Maybe it’s on account of the neighbors fighting next door, the sound of cursing and things occasionally getting thrown, I don’t know. I confess I would like to see Max again, but it’s not like I expect anything from him.

“What are you reading?”

“*Justice League Unlimited,*” August says matter-of-factly, flipping the pages.

“I like superheroes, too,” I say. I pull out my sketchbook. I show him some drawings of Daredevil, Batman, and Jesse Chambers, and he’s smiling.

“Can you draw Superman punching out some bad guys? On my arm?” August rolls up his shirt sleeve and points at his tiny bicep.

“Like a tattoo?”

“Like a tattoo!”

I’m worried that Ned and Michael might be getting impatient, but I pull a pen out from my bag. “Hold still,” I tell August.

The little boy straightens his posture and I glide the pen lightly across his delicate skin. He’s so still it’s almost as if he’s afraid to breathe. The fighting neighbors, as if to honor Augusts’ newly Zen status, have also quieted.

“There,” I say. August is admiring my handiwork with oo’s and ahhs, but I’m really starting to wonder where his dad is. “Hey August, where’s your dad anyway?” He starts flexing his skinny arm. “I don’t know.”

“What? Shouldn’t you call him, or your mom?” Now I’m actually worried, but right then, we hear a door open.

We turn to see the fighting neighbors emerge. They shuffle by us without a glance. This is the first time I’ve seen them up close and I’m surprised at how old they are, how middle-aged. The way they argue about being allowed to do this or that, or daring to even look at anybody else made me think they were much younger, maybe even younger than I am.

August whispers to me, “Were they the ones fighting?”

I nod and watch the door to the apartment complex swing shut behind them.

“They are,” August says in a way that reminds me of his dad. “Then I hate them—I hate them. I hope they kill each other.”
I look at Augusts’ face, how his mouth twists like he tastes something sour. He leans back against the stair railing and begins poking at his tattoo again.

“Do your parents fight?” I begin slowly. They must, the way that woman looked at Max when they were at Floyd’s.

He takes a moment before answering. “Sometimes.”

“I think all parents fight sometimes,” I say and I believe it.

“They didn’t until mom found out about dad’s girlfriends,” says August, sullen once more.

I shouldn’t be all that surprised by this news, but I am. I don’t say anything.

Then August thrusts his bottom lip out, and lets out a breath. “I liked it better before.”

“I’m sorry,” I say and I am.

“Whatever.” He takes the pen from me and starts coloring in Superman’s cape.

I watch him for a few minutes. Then I think I’m more relieved than surprised when Max walks through the front door, a grocery bag under one arm. He nearly drops it when he sees us.

“August?”

“Hey,” August says without looking up.

“What are you doing here? You’re supposed to be with mom. Does she know you’re here?” Max speaks fast, urgently.

The little boy only frowns and shrugs, but Max grabs him firmly by the forearms and the pen rolls onto the ground. “We told you never to do this again. Do you understand? Never do this again. Never.”

August stares at the ground. His voice is small. “Okay.”

I try looking away. I probably shouldn’t be watching.

Max marches his son up the stairs, the grocery bag and comic book left on the ground. Then he’s back and staring at me. “Thanks,” he says, “for watching him.”

“No problem,” I say, because I wasn’t completely aware there was a problem at first. He’s wearing khakis and a crisp polo shirt. I’ve never seen him out of a suit.

“Christine, right?”

“Yeah.” I pick up the comic book and hand it back to him.

“Thanks again,” Max says, tucking it into the bag of groceries. He looks tired. “Would you like to have dinner with us?”
I’m nearly gawking. Then I decide this is out of courtesy and nothing more. I decide I’m okay with that, too. “Thanks, but I was heading out.”

“Another time then, maybe. You could come over,” he says and starts walking up the stairs. He stops and turns towards me again, silent this time.

I look at Max’s handsome face, an expression of anxiety and fear I’ve never seen on it before. I nod and, because I know it won’t matter, I don’t tell him I’ve just moved out. I hear his heavy footsteps climbing up the stairs as I let the apartment doors shut behind me.

I don’t tell Ned or Michael about any of this when they ask me why I’m late, why we’ll miss the coming attractions. I pick them up and drive to the Cineplex as if nothing out of the ordinary has happened to me today. When the theatre lights go down, I sit back and eat my popcorn. I try not to think about Max, and then I’m not.

It’s dark out when we walk out of the Cineplex. The streetlamps begin to turn on one by one as we walk across the parking lot. I trail behind Ned and Michael and watch them, two people happily in sync with one another.

As I pull into traffic, I think of the “tattoo” I gave August. He’ll probably forget about it until bath time. Max will probably scrub it away with soap and a wash cloth, maybe even rubbing his son’s soft skin pink and raw. But before that August might show Max and maybe he’ll even start flexing. “Dad,” he’ll say, “Look, dad.”