With or Without Him

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This thesis titled
With or Without Him

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ABSTRACT

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*With or Without Him* is a collection of short stories that emphasizes the dynamics of intimate relationships. The stories express a feminine point of view from within a masculine world, and the characters seek to make sense of male perspectives regarding love, sex, and power. They draw on the predation of the natural world and the animal id to create a parallel between nature and masculinity. The critical introduction explores the work of Melissa Bank and E. Annie Proulx and their respective audiences, and seeks to uncover the differences in their use of language, setting, and character development that work, sometimes inadvertently, to draw or repel male readers.

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INTIMATE POWER STRUGGLES: A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Literature, it seems to me, is often viewed as gender specific in the same way that clothes and hobbies are viewed as gender specific. A novel or a story can be masculine or feminine in the same way that hunting can be, depending on what it is that is being hunted. If I were to venture into the Canadian wilderness with a 30-.06 in search of an elk to take down, I would be viewed by many as an anomaly, a peculiarity in the world of women. But if I drive over to the nearest flea market and comb the stalls in search of a set of antique sorbet spoons, then I am instantly welcomed back into the realm of accepted female behavior. This process of seeking something out, stalking it until it is obtained, somehow changes with the environment. People see these activities, hunting and shopping, as polar opposites, rather than seeing them as remarkably similar.

Such is the case with literature. Vicky Greenbaum, an experienced English teacher who frequently writes about the engendering of literature and curricula, finds the responses of her students especially telling with regards to differences in what males and females find appealing in prose. In her essay, “Seeing Through the Lenses of Gender: Beyond Male/Female Polarization,” she describes an incident. “It’s OK for a girl book,’ said my brightest sophomore boy during the first week of classes in September as we began a discussion of Barbara Kingsolver’s Animal Dreams. I watched the other boys nod and explain their responses: ‘Girl books are about love…girls care about family problems…there’s never any action or adventure’” (96). Greenbaum has found that while her female students enjoy Kingsolver’s candid approach to exploring the complexities of interpersonal relationships, her male students are bored or put off by it.
They crave more “action,” more “adventure.” And Greenbaum’s experience suggests that these gender differences in preference are obvious even in adolescence, a very formative phase. She writes in an earlier essay, “Beyond the Bookroom: Modern Literature, Modern Literacy, and the Teaching of E. Annie Proulx’ ‘The Shipping News,’” that “the vitality of literacy depends on that vitality of language, metaphor, and resonance of images which allows readers to connect texts with their inner and outer experiences” (17). I have to agree with Greenbaum. Readers search for connection in the language and images of a text, and when they fail to find that connection, a disconnect is formed. Young men are shying away from Barbara Kingsolver because she emphasizes not concrete action, but interpersonal exchange, and young men are, as a result, looking elsewhere for that connection.

One of my own favorite collections of stories, The Girls’ Guide to Hunting and Fishing, by Melissa Bank, reminds me of Barbara Kingsolver in that it emphasizes the similarities between men and women and their respective desires, while simultaneously polarizing the gender-specific lenses through which we view literature. This polarization begins without even cracking open the text. The collection’s title and cover art indicate to men that this is a book they must never be caught reading in public, and this effect only intensifies with Bank’s language, themes, settings, and points of view. She never deviates from the female’s perspective. The resulting focus placed on decidedly feminine details and the exclusive use of feminine language only serves to drive away any male reader who might have made it past the cover, which features a petite figure in leggings, red wool pea coat, and hunting hat, viewed from behind so that the figure appears
anonymous and androgynous, though we can assume from the slender build that this person is indeed a woman. Set in the suburbs of the East Coast, among well-to-do families who vacation in the Berkshires, the stories focus on the dynamics of intimate relationships and the differences that arise between male and female expectations and assumptions within the context of such relationships. This is what makes the collection a favorite of mine. And because I’m a woman, it is socially acceptable for me to read from this collection in the public sphere, say in a busy coffee shop over a mug of chai latte. But imagine the tremendously emasculating effects of reading a passage such as the following in an equally public setting, were the reader male.

“Look up when you walk,” my great-aunt Rita told me, the summer I stayed with her in Manhattan. “Tilt your chin,” she said, lightly tapping her own. I was sixteen, and I listened to her because she was beautiful. She was tall for a woman, but small-boned, willowy, with long white hair she wore up in a chignon. It was my last night with her, and we were going to the theater. I was already dressed in my Indian-print halter and wraparound skirt combo, and I lurked in the doorway to the bathroom, watching her put on the shade of red lipstick she’d told me Coco Chanel had invented. (77)

Most female readers will enjoy an opening such as this and identify immediately with the scene, recognizing in it a familiar exchange between a maternal figure and a young girl coming of age. Every woman has been in the doorway of that bathroom,
watching a mother, an aunt, or an older sister as she prims. And some of a woman’s most intimate exchanges with other women will occur in a public bathroom as the two stand side by side in front of the mirror, meeting one another’s eyes in the reflection as they fluff hairstyles and reapply mascara. But male readers will be unable to identify quite as closely with Bank’s rendering of advice from one woman to another, the worldly and experienced matron-figure to the greenhorn girl, regarding how to make oneself more attractive to men. Watching a woman as she models preening behaviors for her young ward may even cause a male reader to feel as if he is intruding in the private space of the bathroom, playing the role of the voyeur against his will. As appealing as her stories are for women, Bank writes in a way that is highly gender specific. Her protagonists are females designed to please an almost exclusively female audience. Whether or not she does it intentionally, she is throwing men out of her work.

Contrast Bank against E. Annie Proulx. Proulx writes as much about the complexities of intimate relationships as Bank does, but her work is equally appealing to men as it is to women because, as J.Z. Grover points out in his review of Accordion Crimes, she is quick to shock audiences. Unlike the authors I’ve mentioned previously, she emphasizes concrete action just as much as she does interpersonal exchange. Grover writes, “And there’s the matter of minor characters dying in parenthesis. Their absurd deaths—stumbling into a hot spring at Yellowstone; grabbing a Japanese bomb as it drifts down over an Iowa cornfield; a bloody attack in a bathtub; an Amazon Indian’s arrow caught in the throat as a character squats to take a jungle dump […] almost guarantee the triviality of their lives. No one simply dies in her sleep or sitting up reading” (11).
Proulx combines intense action with the complications of interpersonal relationships. She packages the intimate power struggle in a way that makes her stories more appealing to men. Her settings and her characters are brutal. The landscapes are extreme and unforgiving, the women are just as rough-edged as their male counterparts, and the plots, though focused heavily on sexual relationships, incorporate enough aggressive, forceful language to appease masculine audiences. Even in “Brokeback Mountain,” a story that explores same-sex intimacy in the extremely hostile atmosphere of the Wyoming backcountry, she characterizes the relationship in a way that has the potential to appeal to a male audience. Her protagonist, Ennis Del Mar, and his eventual lover, Jack Twist, having been hired to work as camp tender and herder respectively, work together while otherwise completely isolated. Their relationship soon becomes physical.

“Jesus Christ, quit hammerin and get over here. Bedroll’s big enough,” said Jack in an irritable sleep-clogged voice. It was big enough, warm enough, and in a little while they deepened their intimacy considerably. Ennis ran full-throttle on all roads whether fence mending or money spending, and he wanted none of it when Jack seized his left hand and brought it to his erect cock. Ennis jerked his hand away as though he’d touched fire, got to his knees, unbuckled his belt, shoved his pants down, hauled Jack onto all fours and, with the help of the clear slick and a little spit, entered him, nothing he’d done before but no instruction manual needed. They went at it in silence except for a few sharp intakes of breath and Jack’s choked, “gun’s goin off,” then out, down, and asleep.
Ennis woke in red dawn with his pants around his knees, a top-grade headache, and Jack butted against him; without saying anything about it both knew how it would go for the rest of the summer, sheep be damned. (261-262)

A sex scene is difficult to write. A prose-writer worries about being too explicit and running the risk of offending readers as a result, but she simultaneously worries about not being explicit enough, and making the level of intimacy between characters unclear. But Proulx has written this particular scene with apparent fearlessness, shying away from nothing. The scene is action-oriented, emphasizing powerful verbs such as “seized,” “jerked,” and “hauled.” The phrase “erect cock” suggests an almost pornographic eroticism and is extremely jarring when encountered in literature as highly valued as this, even within the context of such a stark story. The highly aggressive, remarkably efficient nature of this language, and the violent nature of the sex act, combined with the likely potential for emotional intimacy makes the scene powerfully appealing to both male and female audiences in a way that Bank’s work never does. The transition from the violent sexual encounter to the beginnings of emotional attachment is virtually seamless. Proulx moves easily from Ennis’s hangover and state of partial undress, reminders of last night’s abandon, to the promise of future encounters. Stereotypically, women love the promise of future encounters. Proulx has made everyone happy. Her work is genderless. It caters to both male and female desires and thus has a universality that few other authors can claim.
This is what I hope to emulate in my own stories. I attempt to explore the intricacies of male/female power struggles, but without scaring away half of my audience. Bank is a fantastic writer, but her work is only reaching a primarily female audience. Her use of setting, when compared with Proulx’s, is a perfect example of her tendency to feminize everything she writes. If she takes a scene outside, into the natural world, we are still never free from the suburban cast she throws onto everything. Men are often looking for escape from this cast, but we never escape Bank’s idea of upper-middle class romance. This is illustrated in an excerpt from “The Worst Thing a Suburban Girl Could Imagine.”

Saturday night, we lay outside on the grass. The moon lit up the meadow and the stars were out. It must’ve been their brightness that made me remember a radio jingle from when I was growing up, and I sang it to Archie: “Everything’s brighter at Ashbourne Mall.”

He got the tune right away and sang, “Ashbourne Mall.”

After a while, he said, ‘Honey.’

‘Yes, honey,’ I said.

He put a little box in my hand. I looked at it. It was that robin’s-egg blue from Tiffany. I opened the blue box, and there was a velvet one inside, and I opened that. I looked at the ring. It was platinum with one diamond. It was just the ring I would’ve wanted, if I’d wanted a ring from him. (198)
Although the scene is set outdoors, the landscape takes on an idealized romance that is typical of many films. The result is an outdoor scene that feels like a movie set rather than Proulx’ brand of harsh, realistic portrayals of nature. There is brief mention of the meadow, the moon and the stars, but then these things fade into the background. We could be anywhere. The scene would be no different if it were set in someone’s living room, and this is what disappoints readers who were hoping for something more from the opportunity to give nature a role in this scene. Proulx is quick to seize such an opportunity, giving nature as much a role in the unfolding of a story as any of her characters. In her story, “The Bunchgrass Edge of the World,” she begins not by describing people, but by describing the world in which they move. The result is that readers find it impossible to forget the landscape and the rugged, masculine tone that it brings to the story. Her language creates a romanticized cowboy aura that both male and female readers can enjoy.

The country appeared as empty ground, big sagebrush, rabbitbrush, intricate sky, flocks of small birds like packs of cards thrown up in the air, and a faint track drifting toward the red-walled horizon. Graves were unmarked, fallen house timbers and corrals burned up in old campfires. Nothing much but weather and distance, the distance punctuated once in a while by ranch gates, and to the north the endless murmur and sun-flash of semis rolling along the interstate. (121)
Beginning the story with this description of the harsh and unforgiving landscape subtly suggests the story’s conflict. This is a story about overcoming loneliness and finding companionship. And while this may not sound like desirable reading material to most men, the opening paragraph, with its aforementioned cowboy aura, increases the likelihood of this story holding significant appeal for the male audience. The natural world plays as much a role here as any of Proulx’s human characters, and she returns to it as she would return to a human character. It is ever present. When Ottaline, the story’s focus, begins to come of age, it is within the context of the landscape. “Ottaline had gone with him down into the willows a dozen times, to the damp soil and nests of stinging nettles, where he pulled a pale condom over his small, hard penis and crawled silently onto her” (130). It is nature that gives Ottaline’s coming of age such a potent feeling of furtiveness and discomfort. This is the kind of concrete presence I want to give the natural world in my own work. I want to write so that neither gender is alienated, so that women are able to access the harshness and efficient action of the male world, while men are simultaneously able to access a woman’s world, from a woman’s point of view, by making the inner and outer connections of which Vicky Greenbaum speaks.

My own stories most often address the power struggle in which women frequently find themselves engaged with the men in their lives. I have always wanted to understand the male propensity for physical challenge and physical violence, and to empathize with his stereotypical preference for sex over emotional intimacy. Much of what I write comes from the realities of my own relationships with men, not only boyfriends and lovers, but platonic male friends and father figures. Some of it comes from the battles
I’ve seen my mother fight and the battles she probably should have fought, but never did because she was exhausted by the unending struggle for autonomy in her own intimate relationships. Some of it comes from my sister, who identifies herself as more pronouncedly feminine than I ever have. I’ve spent my entire life doing my homework for these stories. I’ve been an observer of the intimate power struggle since early childhood.

At the same time that I want to work out these complexities by writing about them, I also want to read and write stories that explore a man’s world, that teach me about the things that are considered socially acceptable for them, but not for me, and that allow me to live vicariously through the prose. This is what draws me so powerfully to Proulx’s work and to the work of male authors such as Hemingway, authors who have grounded their writing in the exotic ruggedness of Africa or the brutality of the American West. I want to be immersed in male culture, to develop an understanding of it and use it in my work so that I avoid the alienation and polarization that I see in Bank’s work, despite her brilliance. I love to let my stories revolve around the outdoors, around things that fall into the male sphere. Hunting and fishing, farm and ranch life, and animals all have places in most of my stories. Without intending it, I’ve found that animal metaphors are present in much of my work. “The Dimwitted, Vicious Wolverine” is, of course, about the senseless, destructive power of an incurable illness, but more often, my animals represent male violence, male power, male deceit, or male desires. The coyotes come to represent these qualities in “Nine on the Ten Mile Creek,” and the same can be said for the copperhead in “The Night in Question.” Ironically, this has come about
because I have a tendency to write my stories for the men in my life. I write for my father, and for my best friend, the very people whose influence on me has provided the content for some of this work. I want to write stories that will please them, stories that will never alienate them, or bore them, or throw them out. So I write stories that center on their worlds, incorporate their interests, and draw on their experiences as men. I try to make male connection possible, and to write stories that portray masculinity in a fair, realistic light, even as they portray some of the less flattering aspects of intimacy between men and women, and the clash between male and female desires. Above all, I try to avoid vilification. Their desires and their cravings are natural, instinctual. And, as I try to emphasize in my work, women have their own cravings, their own secrets and hidden agendas. They may be my protagonists and my heroines, but they are not perfect.
WORKS CITED


THE NIGHT IN QUESTION

There was a copperhead in the tack room. Its tiny yellow eyes watched you as you loaded your shotgun and checked the safety. The snake was curled around a sawhorse leg, silently coiling itself tighter in the dimness. A bare bulb dangled from the ceiling, and its light gleamed on the shotgun’s over-under barrels. You took a broom in your left hand, backed away from the snake, and handed the loaded gun off to me, your scarred knuckles making my pulse quicken when they grazed the pale and tender inside of my wrist.

You asked if I remembered how it fired, and I said that I did.

“’I’ll chase him out. You wait outside and shoot him when you’ve got a clear shot,” you said. “And don’t forget to switch off your safety.”

“Why can’t we just chase him out and forget about the gun?” I asked you.

You paused. You tilted your head and studied my face, my dark eyes for just a moment. Then you said, "He'd come back. He could bite one of the horses." You took a step closer to me, touched my bare collarbone between the spaghetti strap of my tank top and the notch at the base of my throat. "Are you scared? Because you don't have to help me if you're scared. You can wait for me in the house."

But I shook my head. I said, "I'll shoot it."

I went out into the cool glare of the May sun, took a few paces from the stable doors, switched off the safety, and waited. There were scuffing sounds inside, your boot soles on the plank floor, and the whisper of broom straw. I tensed. Around the corner, a
horse snuffled and shifted, its shod hooves clomping against the packed earth of the stalls. I put the stock to my shoulder and touched my forefinger against the first trigger. There were a lot of quick footsteps, and I could picture you sidestepping, herding the snake through the tack room door and out into the aisle that ran the length of the stable, past all the stalls and out into the patchy yard.

I heard you mutter, “Son of a whore,” and your voice was close, just beyond the threshold. “He’s coming fast,” you called to me.

And then the copperhead burst out into the sun and the mud, headed for the shade under your blue pickup truck with its National Guard bumper sticker and its fire department decals. The undulations of the snake’s rust orange body propelled it across the dirt and crabgrass. Uncoiled, it looked about three feet long. I swung the gun barrels ahead of it, matching its speed, and pulled the first trigger. The snake jerked and went still. I slid my finger to the second trigger, wanting to be sure, but you’d stepped out of the stable in time to see me do it and you said, “Don't. You almost severed his head. He’s toast.”

I looked and it was true. The snake’s head rested at an acute angle to its body, attached only by a shred of its coppery skin.

You approached the snake. You poked it with the broom. This must have been like an electric jolt to the snake’s flickering nervous system, because it snapped and writhed and you screamed and tripped over a deep rut in the mud as you tried to back away. I wanted to pull the second trigger, but you were in the line of fire, so I just watched as you flung aside the broom and scrambled to me. You wrenched the gun out
of my hands, aimed, and unloaded on the dead snake, shrieking, “Motherfucker.” Then you dropped the gun and went into the stable and took a long-handled ax down from the wall. You strode back out into the yard, chopped through that shred of skin and watched the copperhead’s blood seeping out onto the earth. The body continued to writhe, its muscles working in the same coordinated, fluid way I had seen them work in life. The jaws of the severed head opened and closed. The tiny yellow eyes watched you as you stood there holding the bloodied ax in your hands.

I reached over and touched your arm, and you jerked a little. I asked you what we should do with it.

You swung your gaze around to me and blinked. “Let’s leave it until we come back,” you said. “I should calm the horses down. The shots will have them spooked.” You put an arm around my shoulders and pulled me closer to you. You smiled at me, a big, toothy grin. "Want to help me? I think they like you."

I followed you into the stable. The copperhead’s body was still writhing when I looked back at it over my shoulder. It coiled and curled back on itself.

***

The saddles were heavy in our arms. They trailed the scent of oiled leather as we carried them out from the tack room. We had the horses hobbled single file between the rows of stalls, a stallion and a mare, Maverick and Fiona. I muscled a saddle onto the
mare’s powerful shoulders and tightened down her girth. She stamped a hoof and snorted. I took down her bridle from its hook on the wall. She flared her nostrils and glowered at me with one soft brown eye. I tried to work the bit into her mouth, but she tossed her head, and when I tried to force it, she bared her big yellow teeth and clamped them down on my fingers. I shrieked and stuck the fingers into my own mouth, sucked at them to soothe the hurt.

Your head popped up over the stallion’s flank. You saw the fingers in my mouth, and then you saw the bridle in my other hand. You said nothing, only came around Maverick’s rear end, humming softly and running a hand across the stallion’s haunches as you moved around it. You took the bridle from me and stuck a thumb into the side of the mare’s jaw, into the two-inch gap between her front and back sets of teeth. She reflexively opened her mouth for you, and you slipped in the bit and smoothed the bridle over her ears in one fluid motion. You kissed her warm satin nose, then took my fingers from my mouth and kissed those, too.

“There,” you said. “Both my girls are happy.” You looked me in the eyes and smiled, and you were waiting for something from me, but I didn’t know what.

So I said, “Not Danielle.”

You were still holding my fingers, but you let them go when I said that. You turned away and gave Fiona’s girth a tug. “Danielle’s happy,” you said as you yanked the girth a notch tighter. “I’ve never seen her happier. She loves all this picking shit out. Bridesmaid dresses. Flowers.”
I leaned into the mare, traced the whorl of her hair just behind her foreleg. “You still haven’t told her we’re still friends.” I glared at you as I said this, but you wouldn’t look at me, so it was wasted. “When are you going to tell her?” I asked.

“Does it matter if I don’t?”

I watched the muscles working in your back as you bent down and lifted one of the mare’s hooves to check it for stones. I thought about what I wanted to say. “You don’t want to stay friends,” I said.

You sighed and stood up straight and faced me. “We can’t. How’s that going to look to her? She knows I used to have a thing for you.”

“What did you do? Tell her?”

“She’s seen pictures of us.”

There was a pause while I looked away and raked my fingers through Fiona’s knotted mane.

“Which pictures has she seen?” I asked.

“The ones from our backpacking trip.”

We looked at each other. I thought about the pictures you were referring to. The one of us standing on the edge of the Red River Gorge with our arms around each other and your lips pressed against my cheek when the self-timer on your digital camera went off. The shot you took on the riverbank when you came crashing through the brush with the intention of sounding like a bear and capturing a photo of me looking terrified, only to find me washing my hair in the shallows, looking not only terrified but topless and
cold.

“So just like that, I’m out a friend?” I said.

“It has to be this way. She isn't stupid.” You hooked your hand through a stirrup and turned it around, watched the light playing on the stainless steel.

“This isn’t fair, D,” I said. And it wasn’t. I wanted none of the things that belonged to Danielle.

But still, you said, “It isn’t fair to her that I still hang around with you.”

You stroked Fiona’s long face and went back to humming. The rumble of your voice every time you hit a low note made my breath come ragged. I reached up and touched your hair. It was dark, almost black, and very short. I trailed my fingers down to the nape of your neck and kissed you there. You whirled on me and pushed me away, hard enough to knock me into the nearest stall door. The planks rattled, and the horses both shied from the sudden motion.

“This,” you hissed, “has never been fair to me.”

You came at me with your dark, hardened eyes and your big hands, and you pinned me there, against the stall door. You gripped my shoulders and kissed my mouth with a ferocity that scared me and floored me.

When you pulled back, breathless, I said, “I’m not getting an invitation to your wedding, am I?”

“No,” you said, and I knew you really meant it.
That night, our last night, I watched you shooting animated bucks on the video screen with your National Guard buddies. They were all too drunk to kill anything, but not you. Every buck you aimed at fell down bleeding. You put the end of the gun’s orange plastic barrel to your lips and blew over it. A cowboy gesture that matched the muddy boots you hadn’t changed out of since we unsaddled the horses and threw both pieces of the copperhead into the woods.

After you finished your game and handed the gun off to someone else, you looked at me hard and smiled. You sidled up to me and wrapped an arm around my waist.

You asked was I having fun, and I nodded big and grinned. You put your hand against the back of my head and pulled my face in close to yours. You pressed your forehead against mine and kissed the end of my nose. You bought another round of Jack Daniels for everyone but yourself, and you watched me drain my glass.

We shot a game of pool. I let you break, because you were always good at it. I loved to watch you throw your weight behind the cue, the way the movement started at your hip. The balls always scattered for you like minnows scatter for me when I wade into their shallows. Colors darted across the dark green felt, and a stripe vanished into one of the corner pockets. You beat me soundly as you always have, but I didn’t mind. I never minded. You brought me another shot of Jack.
After I drank it, I went out onto the sidewalk for some air. I didn’t know what time it was. There was a low wall that bordered the flowerbeds in front of the office building across the street, so I walked over and sat down there. I watched cars and bicycles pass, watched other drunk college students staggering by. Girls got their stilettos caught in the cracks between the bricks, and I smirked.

I don’t know how long I sat there, but it didn’t feel like very long before you came out of the bar and looked up and down the street. You took a lighter and a pack of cigarettes out of your hip pocket. You’d already lit up and taken a drag before you spotted me. You sauntered across the street and sat down next to me on the wall.

“Here you are,” you said. “You shouldn’t just disappear like that. It gets me worried.” You turned your head away from me to blow smoke out your nostrils.

“You’ve got Marlboro man appeal, you know it?” I said.

You flashed me that mischievous little grin of yours that would make me fucking sick when I remembered it later, and you told me I had sex appeal.

I called you an asshole and told you they were the same thing.

You offered your cigarette to me, even though you knew I’d never smoked anything in my whole life. I took a little drag from it anyway and tried not to cough, but I did and you smiled and stubbed it out.

You told me I was a good girl.

***
We shot pool and threw darts until two o’clock. When Zippy turned on the overhead lights and shut off the music, you put your hand on the small of my back and guided me out the door. You led me to your truck and kept an arm wrapped around my waist to correct my stumbles. You opened the passenger door for me and helped me into the cab. I sat slumped with my arm hanging out the open window while your truck lurched over the brick streets. I watched your broad hand working the shifter. Your knuckles were knobby, the scars white against your tan, and when you noticed me looking at them, you reached across the seat and gave my knee a quick squeeze.

“You going to make it?” you asked.

I rolled my head around to look into your face.

“Yep,” I said.

You parked in my driveway and turned off the engine. You cut the headlights.

“Will I ever see you again?” I asked.

You told me maybe.

“Maybe always means no,” I said. It was too dark to see the expression on your face.

“No, maybe means maybe,” you said.

“Maybe if you ever divorce her and move back here.”

I closed my eyes. I wanted to fall asleep. I felt your hand against the side of my
face, caressing my cheek. I shook you away.

“Since this is it, I’m glad we were friends,” I said.

You said you were sorry that’s all we were.

“Have a nice life that doesn’t involve me,” I said as I groped for the door handle.

But instead of staying in the truck and watching until I disappeared into my second floor apartment, you said you’d better help me up the stairs to my door. You stayed behind me on the way up. You kept one hand on the small of my back, right where my jeans started. At the top of the stairs, I fumbled my key into the lock. It took a lot of tries. You kept that hand right there the entire time, balancing me from behind, waiting patiently, and when I finally got the door open, you slipped in right behind me.

“I’d better make sure you get to bed okay,” is what you told me.

You knelt and took off my shoes, one at a time, while I stood in the middle of my living room with my hands on your shoulders for balance. You peeled the jeans and tank top from my loose-jointed, rag-doll body. You pressed your mouth against mine and I knew that it was supposed to be a kiss, because it felt the same as it did in the stable, with the horses nickering and the air redolent with the scent of leather.

“What about Danielle?” I said.

But Danielle was a thousand miles away in New Orleans, waiting for you to marry her and move in with her. So instead of answering me, you scooped me up into your firefighter arms, your National Guard arms. You carried me into my bedroom. Your hands were warm against my bare back and thighs. You had taken me home a
hundred times, and it’s true that some of those times, before Danielle, you would kiss me, caress me, carry me like this to my bed and sleep in it with me, wake me in the surreal hours of the early morning with your hard-on poking me in the back, the hip. None of this is new. But this time, when you lay me out on the quilt and run those warm, calloused palms over my naked ribs and belly, my stomach flutters, because this time you’re engaged, and I know that whatever we do in this bed tonight, you will still leave me tomorrow.

You unzip your fly. “Kiss it,” you whisper.

I don’t want to kiss it, but I do. I kiss it. Then I sigh and flop back and say, “No, D, I don’t want to. I’m too drunk. Way too drunk.”

“Please,” you say, but it isn’t a request.

“No, I can’t,” I say. I cover my face with my hands.

“Do it, please?” you beg. “Haven’t you ever loved me?”

The room spins around me. The bed tilts beneath me. I feel nauseated. I’ve got to throw up all that whiskey. I want to be alone. I want to fall asleep. I can’t keep my eyes open, so I shut them.

In the darkness behind my closed eyelids, I feel your rough hands again, dragging my panties down my thighs. I try to slap your hands away, but you keep going. It’s easy for you to pin my wrists over my head, against the pillow. I’m strong when I’m sober, but that’s not now. Now, I’m ready to go under.

“Stop, Darren,” I say.
You force my thighs apart. I can’t look at you. Uncertain whether my eyes are open or closed anymore, I am consumed by the pain of the tendons in my wrists being ground against bone in your grip.

“Stop,” I say, or maybe I only whisper it. If you hear me, you ignore me. I try hard to free my arms, to push you away, but you only pin them harder, until it feels like you will cut off the blood flow to my hands.

“I love you,” you say.

I beg you to stop. I say, “Please, don’t do this.” I focus my eyes, but I do not look at your face as I say it. Instead, I look at the shotgun you gave to me. You said a woman should never live alone without a gun. It leans against the dresser. It’s a single-barreled pump-action 12-gauge. It holds six slugs. I love the way the empty shells pop out as I fire and pump, fire and pump. I look at the patch of ceiling over your right shoulder. You are still wearing your red fire department t-shirt, the one covered in firefighting terms that sound dirty, but aren’t. “Hot entrance,” and I don’t remember what else because I’m wondering if you even bothered to take off your jeans and your muddy boots. I can’t remember seeing you take them off. I think probably they are still on you, the jeans bunched down around your knees.

“Don’t do this,” I say again.

But you tell me it’s too late, and it’s over. I keep staring at that patch of ceiling because I can’t look you in the face. “Sorry it didn’t last longer,” you say and kiss my forehead.
“I’m sorry,” you say again, and then your weight is no longer on top of me. The heat of you is gone. I have my arms back. My fingers tingle. I can breathe. I feel you pull the sheet up over my naked body, cool against my burning skin, and then you disappear. The lights go out. I hear you close the apartment door behind you. You have stained my favorite bedspread.

***

The sun is warm in my windows when I wake. I’m still naked. My groan is hoarse. I tie back my hair, put on last night’s jeans and a clean t-shirt, get into the car, and drive myself to the hospital for plan B contraception.

I explain the situation to the nurse. I feel irresponsible, as if some kind of explanation is necessary, but explaining only embarrasses me further. Her hair is gray with a few wiry white strands that escape from the chignon at the back of her head, and her pearl earrings are small enough to suggest that they are real. I try to hide the backs of my hands from her, the stamps from last night’s bars.

She cocks her head and narrows her eyes at me while I tell her what happened between you and me. She presses her thin lips together and makes a few notes on the legal pad in her lap. When I finish, she puts down her pen and says, “You know, what you’re describing to me is rape.”

I look down into my lap. I grip the edge of the examination table.
“If you wanted to, you could press charges. Did he leave any marks on you? Any bruises?”

“I don’t want to press charges,” I say. “We’re friends. We’ve done all of this before. I’m only upset because he didn’t bother to use a condom, and now it’s up to me to clean up the mess.” With difficulty, I meet the nurse’s eyes.

“You should be upset about more than that,” she says. “You told him no, but he did it anyway. You were drunk and he wasn’t. It sounds to me like he knew what he was doing when he took you home from the bar.” She leans back in her chair, crosses her legs and waits for me to respond.

I shake my head. “It’s not like that,” I say. I tell her that you care about me.

There is a pause, and then I see her eyes turn soft before she says, “That’s not what it sounds like to me.”

I won’t tell anyone your name. I do not press charges, because I don’t want anything bad to happen to you. It would ruin everything. I want to go back to the way it was in the Red River Gorge. We could go right back to that. You love me. You said it.

I swallow the morning-after pill, but I refuse to do a rape kit, refuse to file a police report.

When I get home in the afternoon, there’s a note taped to my door, waiting for me, and it says,

I’m sorry that we can’t ever see each other again. I hope you know how much I care for you. You’re beautiful, and we have fun together, but I can’t behave myself when
I’m with you. Take care, hun.

-D

We can’t go back. I tremble. You took what you wanted, and now you’re gone.

The morning-after pill nauseates me. I lie in bed and wish for sleep that won’t come. I write you back.

Thanks for locking the door on your way out. That was very considerate of you. Darren the Protector. God knows we wouldn’t want some guy to walk into my apartment, strip my clothes off me, and have his way with me while I’m fall-down-drunk. That would have been terrible.

You don’t write back. You don’t call, and I want to shoot you with the 12-gauge that used to be yours, to swagger into your house and lay you wide open. I remember how that gun works.

I drive over to your house and pull into the yard. I leave the 12-gauge at home. I just want to talk, to see you. But it’s too late. Your truck is gone. The windows of the house are empty, and there’s a For Sale sign out by the roadside. I get out of the car and walk over to the stables, but the doors are padlocked. I don’t know what I wanted to say to you anyhow.
I consider calling Danielle and telling her everything, but I don’t. I know she wouldn’t believe me anyway. She would say that I was only trying to come between you two. She would call me a bitch, a cunt. I stay quiet. She’ll figure you out on her own someday. She’ll see what it took me too long to notice.

I think I see you everywhere. Every blue Toyota Tacoma is yours, until it passes me by and I see that the rear window has no fire department sticker.

I move out of the old apartment and into a new one. I leave behind the room where I found my clothes flung across the couch in a puddle of morning sun, and the room with the patch of ceiling that held my gaze. I hang my favorite bedspread on a clothesline that I string up at the rifle range, and I unload all six slugs on it. The empty shells pop out as I fire and pump, fire and pump, but it isn’t enough. When I take the torn quilt down off the line, I sink onto the grass and gather it all up into my arms, bury my face in it, and inhale, hoping for traces of your scent.
A STANDARD TRANSMISSION

My hand absorbs the vibrations of the gearshift as my foot eases off the clutch, and my husband, who thought that this “relaxing weekend get-away” would do me some good, watches with a furrowed brow. Rain pelts our windshield and the wipers fling it away. Everything in front of us appears to melt. The woods, the gravel lane, the open field that serves as Middle Bass Island’s airport. There is no runway, only grass. Along the edges, small biplanes are parked, their wings dripping rivulets onto the already sodden ground. They wait for the island’s wealthiest weekend warriors to fire them up and fly them home.

Ivan and I do not fly. We always take the ferry across the South Passage on Friday afternoons, and again on Sunday evenings, just as we will tomorrow, a Sunday evening that will surely be the same as all the others before it. We will rock side by side with the pitching of the ferry while Lake Erie’s whitecaps soak the deck. I will throw stale chocolate chip cookies at the gulls that follow in the boat’s wake. I will watch the gulls catch the cookies in midair, and Ivan will complain about the stench of diesel fumes until I agree to move nearer the bow, where the air is fresher.

“More gas, more gas!” Ivan prompts.

The truck has begun to shimmy, the gearshift jerking under my hand. I do as he says, but not the way he wants it done. I stomp on the gas and let the rest of the clutch out too fast. We surge forward and Ivan crashes into the dashboard when we stall. I’m always telling him to give the damn seatbelt a try. I don’t miss the opportunity to tell him again.
“Give the damn seatbelt a try.”

“Learn how to drive a stick and I won’t need it,” he says.

I pound my fist on the steering wheel, turn to him, and say “Fuck you,” through my clenched teeth. “I am trying. ‘Learn how to drive a stick,’ you said. ‘Only pussies don’t know how to drive a stick,’ you said. Well, fuck you! I am a pussy. I drive an automatic.” A long wet lock of hair falls across my face. I avert my eyes and brush it away. I start the truck back up.

The island is an ideal place to learn how to drive a standard, if a person must learn. The land is flat like Ivan’s stomach, and on a day as rainy as this, it seems completely deserted.

He sighs. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I know you’re trying.” In the dim, watery light of this soggy afternoon, his eyes are more gray than blue.

I grip the shifter and try again, and this time, I peel out. Clods of rain-soaked earth fly. We leave a curved scar of mud on the perfect runway grass.

***

When the rain stops, Ivan suggests we take the bikes out for a ride. He makes it sound as if they are alive, like they are dogs that need to be walked.

We wheel the beach cruisers out of the shed, past the truck, which I am angry with because it is a finicky old bitch I will never be able to appease. Her outlandish paint job, orange with yellow flames across the hood, gleams from the rain, except for the
quarter panels, which are plastered with mud. I give one of the tires a half-hearted kick as I pass. The rubber gives a dull thud.

“Where do you want to go?” asks Ivan. He is walking ahead of me, the muscles in his broad back flexing under his threadbare t-shirt as he hoists his beach cruiser onto his shoulder and carries it across the quagmire that is our driveway.

“You know,” I say as I swing one leg up and over my bicycle’s frame.

“Won’t you ever want to go somewhere new?” He perches his backside on the seat of his beach cruiser and looks at me, eyebrows raised.

“Maybe later,” I say. “But for now, my favorite place.”

He leads the way. The gravel road passes through the woods. This is where the locals live. Hardy, fanatical people with ice shanties in their yards, undeterred by winters too lonely and harsh for rational people. There are rocks and potholes full of murky rainwater to be avoided as we pedal through the gloom, so I keep my eyes on the ground, swerving as necessary. Ivan speeds ahead, his rear tire throwing a stripe of mud up his back.

He slows when we reach the eastern end of the island where the gravel road loops back on itself to form a cul-de-sac. Three ancient parking meters stand rusting in the grassy center of the circle, tentative sunlight playing across their “Expired” faces. They are remnants from the mansion’s Prohibition heyday.

The mansion stretches long and low across a neglected expanse of lawn, its stone walls damp, but quickly drying where the sun hits them. The roof is blanketed with
moss. Rose of Sharon grows along the foundations. The windows are dark, but unbroken.

“I can just see big black Model-Ts pulling up to these parking meters,” Ivan says.

“Guys loading up bootleg liquor off a boat from Canada.”

He says exactly this every time we come here. The place spooks him, so he has to be goaded, but once here, he’s as fascinated as me.

“Ever wonder if there’s bodies off the shore here?” I ask.

“You mean guys they killed?” He hops off his beach cruiser and props it on its kickstand.

“Yeah. Gangsters probably kill people on remote islands,” I say.

“Maybe, but they would have taken the bodies out to the middle of the lake to dump,” he says as he watches a pair of squirrels chasing each other across the low pitch of the mossy roof. “Maybe across the border. It’s less than a mile to Canadian water.”

“I know,” I say.

I drop my bike in the stones and walk towards the abandoned house. Ernie Hisey, the island’s only real estate agent, mows the grass and keeps the place presentable for showing to potential buyers. The place has been on the market for nearly five years. I wish I could be a potential buyer. I’m dying to see the dark, damp innards, to walk through the musty passageways.

Ivan stays behind, apparently unwilling to leave the cul-de-sac. When I look back at him, he is watching me and shifting from one foot to the other, arms crossed over his barrel chest. I know he wants to stop me, but I also know that he won’t.
I disappear from his view, around the corner of the mansion. It amuses me to make him squirm like this. I let him think I’m up to more than I am. I walk the length of the far side, observing what appears to be a covered patio on the roof. I imagine mobster parties up there, the booze flowing, the island unpatrolled by police, its residents and guests immune to Prohibition. I think of boats drawing up to the docks, direct from Pelee, the Canadian island that lies just over a mile to the northeast. I turn and walk away from the house, across the shaggy lawn to the tangle of cottonwoods at the shoreline. Beyond the trees, Lake Erie glitters at me.

I wish I had the two million dollars that Ernie wants for it.

Ivan is still waiting for me when I come back around the corner. He is sitting in the grass beside a parking meter and stripping the bark from a hickory twig.

“Happy now?” he asks when I come to stand over him.

He looks up into my face, and I nod once.

“Then let’s leave. Place creeps me out. I want to go to the state marina and look at boats.”

***

The boats bob in the marina, tethered to their docks. Ivan and I watch an elderly woman spraying a snake den with reptile repellant. Before now, I never imagined that such a product existed. It smells potent and tangy, like vinegar. I’ve seen the snakes that
live in the den. They are black Lake Erie water snakes, harmless and shy. On cool days, they come out to sun themselves on the cement.

“Aren’t Lake Erie water snakes federally protected?” I ask Ivan.

“Yep,” he says without turning to look at me.

“Think that lady knows what she’s doing?” I toss a pebble into the water and listen to the tiny blip it makes.

“Absolutely not,” he says.

The old woman notices us watching her. She explains, “These snakes get into my boat during the night. They have a nest here.”

Ivan and I nod.

“I don’t like that she’s fucking with the snakes,” I whisper to Ivan without moving my lips.

“Me neither.” He still doesn’t look at me. He’s looking at a Danzi with a sunbathing couple entangled on the bow. I glance toward the ranger station at the end of the marina.

“We could tattle,” I say.

“Why?” Now he finally turns and looks at me.

“To see a throwdown,” I say.

There is a pause. Then he says, “Do you think that would be fun? To see a little old lady get slapped with a fine for fucking with the snakes?” He looks disgusted with me while he waits for my reply.
“Is that a real question?” I ask. “She’s messing with their habitat. She deserves it.”

He shakes his head and looks away again.

“You don’t think that sounds fun?” I ask, incredulous.

Ivan doesn’t respond. He gazes up into the intense, clean blue of the sky. The old lady limps off on her arthritic, varicose-veined legs with her spray bottle of snake repellent, which I am now certain is nothing more than vinegar, marketed as something other than salad dressing or glass cleaner.

“You should be ashamed of yourself,” Ivan says.

And just like that, I am.

*

When we get back to our cottage on the North Shore, I go to the water’s edge. The angle of the sun sends shards of light shooting up into my eyes, and the gulls are pecking at the discarded skins of Ivan’s catch from early this morning. Milky pale remnants of perch litter our sliver of the shoreline. It is against The Rules to dump them in the water like this, or to bury them in the woods, but it is also against The Rules to put them in the trash cans for Waste Management. I have often wondered how one can legally dispose of a pile of fish guts.

Looking at the meatless little skeletons makes me think of the only fish of any significant size that I’ve ever caught. It was a crusty old sheephead with tumors growing
on it, but it was the biggest sheephead Ivan had ever seen. He had insisted that it was a record and begged me to pose with it. But when I tried to take it out of the net and hold it up for the camera, it was too heavy. In the end, he set the timer on his camera, balanced it on the helm, and picked up the fish with one hand. He put his other hand on the small of my back, and in the instant before the camera flash, he plucked the strings on my bikini top and it came undone. Sometimes, he still jokes that he’s going to send that picture to *Outdoor Ohio* for their Catch of the Month feature.

“What do you think about perch for dinner?” Ivan asks. He has crept up on me, having finished putting the beach cruisers away in the shed. “You could fry it up like you do, the way I like.”

I shake my head. “All those little tiny bones,” I say.

“Okay, then let’s go to Hazard’s. We’ll order burgers and watch the Tigers game and I’ll keep bringing you voodoo juice until you tell me to stop,” he offers.

I sigh. I say, “Might as well, I guess. No reason not to drink until I fall off my barstool.”

I haven’t taken my eyes away from the glare of the sun on the water. I am afraid to turn around and look at him. It doesn’t matter. He always knows when I will cry, and right now, he knows. He must have stripped off his shirt after the bike ride, because now I feel him press his bare torso against my back. His arms snake their way around my waist until his hands cover my belly, just above my bikini bottoms.
“It’s okay,” he says, and I can feel his lips moving against the nape of my neck as he speaks. His breath tickles. “We’ll drink our faces off tonight, and when we come back here, we’ll try again.”

“How many times will we try?”

“Tonight?”

“No, all the nights. How many times am I going to fail before we accept that I can’t?” He doesn’t answer me for a few moments, and in the pause, I start to tremble. “Six times is too many, Ivan. I can’t do it six more. I don’t want to do it even once more. I’m tired. My body is tired.”

“Then we won’t,” he says. His warm hands make slow circles on my belly. I know he means for this to be comforting, but I want to jerk away from him, to push away his hands.

“Will you leave me for a woman who can?”

“That’s enough, Jo. You know I won’t ever leave.” He kisses the top of my head and inhales the scent of my hair.

My trembling slowly eases and my face goes slack. I am exhausted. He moves his hands to my shoulders and begins to turn me towards him, to hold my head against his chest, but then he says, "Let's just get a dog," and at this, I wrench myself out of his arms and drop onto the rocks, chest heaving, vision swimming. I sense him crouching down next to me, and then he is gathering me up. I don’t want a dog. He doesn’t want to adopt. There is nowhere to go from here. There will never be anything more than what we have right now. He carries me across the yard to our cottage door, is careful not to hit
my head on the doorframe as he passes through it, and settles onto the couch with me. I cry until saltwater drips down his chest and the sun no longer beams through our windows.

Later, while I’m soaking in the tub, he steps into the bathroom, holds out my red boardskirt and cork heels and says, “Put these on. You’re driving us to Hazard’s.”

The truck already has cobwebs woven across the hood. Such is the fate of anything that holds still for even an hour on the island. Mosquitoes descend on us as I struggle to unlock the doors in the darkness. Ivan has showered and changed into clean cargo shorts, a polo shirt. It’s so dark I can’t see him, but I can smell him, his cologne permeating the air over the truck.

When we get in, I sigh before I put the key in the ignition. It isn’t important for me to learn. It’s just another thing to be conquered, another thing I didn’t know how to do before, another skill that Ivan seems to have possessed since birth. It isn’t important, but I want to. I want to have skills. Ivan has taught me a lot of things. I have learned the rules of football and the finer points of baseball, how to bow hunt, how to play poker, how to shoot clays. He is a patient teacher. Even now, I feel him watching me from the passenger side, waiting patiently for me to be ready.

I start the truck. It’s even harder to get the feel of the clutch in my high heels, so I kick them off and throw them through the sliding rear window into the bed. He reaches across the bench seat and lays a hand on my thigh.

“Hey,” he says. “I’d rather see you peel out a hundred times than stall once. If you’re not sure what to do, the answer is always more gas.”
I tell him, “Buckle your seatbelt.”

Clods of earth fly. We leave a curved scar of mud on our own little piece of perfect grass.
Connor’s white-blond hair is tousled, but in a way that tells everyone he spent a great deal of time on it, and it is this need of his for control that will ultimately be our undoing tonight. It isn’t just his hair, but also the purposeful day-old stubble along his jaw, contrasted against his flawless skin, which is otherwise as smooth as an infant’s silky cheek. He has teeth that are perfectly even and blindingly white, and carefully trimmed nails, which he occasionally paints with a coat of clear polish. He is driving northwest towards Columbus, and I am studying him from the passenger seat. The sunset illuminates him. I squint.

He senses my eyes on him and glances sideways at me. “We’ll make it by eight, I promise,” he says. He gives the car a little more gas and resets the cruise control.

“They’ll be happy to order another round at the bar if we’re running late,” I say. I look ahead at the ribbon of asphalt that unravels beneath our wheels. “They usually spend more on the martinis than on the food anyway.”

We are meeting my father and his partner, Shane, at their favorite restaurant, an Italian place on High Street that boasts over a dozen different kinds of martini, their drink of choice. Connor veers onto the Lancaster bypass at eighty miles an hour. He reaches across the center console to touch my knee, and I am reminded of being twelve years old, of sitting in the backseat of Dad’s Jeep Wrangler, watching him as he steered with his left hand and squeezed Shane’s thigh with his right. Shane, who had only very recently come into our lives. I remember the great relief I felt at seeing proof of his affection for someone, proof that he was capable of tenderness, something that I had never before seen
in him.

Connor moves his hand slowly up my thigh until his pinkie finger slides under the fringe along the hem of my black cocktail dress. This night out was all Connor’s idea. I tell all men on the first date that I have two dads, and that it doesn’t work quite like a sitcom. It has never stopped anyone from calling and asking for a second date, but no one has ever been as eager as Connor was to meet them. And certainly no one else has ever suggested meeting up with the dads for a double dinner date. It might have been a triple dinner date had Jenny, my sister, and her boyfriend, Brad, not had tickets to see Cirque du Soleil for tonight. It will feel strange, to be orbiting the same city, so close to each other, without seeking one another out, and while I watch Lancaster’s hills flatten into the farmland that surrounds Columbus, I wish for her to be there, bleached blonde and grinding her cigarette out on the sidewalk with the toe of her shoe before she walks into the restaurant.

***

The restaurant is just across the street from the Civic Center. Night has descended, and as we approach, we can see all the patrons through the plate glass windows, seated at small, intimate tables, their faces glowing in the flickering candlelight. Already I can spot Dad and Shane. They are enjoying a round of martinis, Absolut with an anchovy-stuffed olive for Dad and a Cosmopolitan for Shane. A cube of dry ice at the bottom of Shane’s glass gives off mist like the steam from a witch’s
Connor opens the door for me. I step past him. I’m taller than him when I go barefoot, and tonight I’m wearing strappy black stilettos that allow me to study the top of his head if I so choose. He puts a hand against the small of my back and steers me around the bar with its recessed lighting and ample glossy mahogany surfaces. Dad spots us first and waves, and then Shane turns, his blue eyes roaming until he finds us emerging from the crowd at the bar.

They stand up to greet us. They are both tall and slender, with long legs and the same stylish stubble that Connor likes to sport. I peck them on the lips, first Dad and then Shane. I wrap my arms around their necks and inhale their spicy cologne. I love them equally. How could I not? Shane has been a part of our lives for thirteen years, and the years we lived without him were lies. Dad was angry, frustrated with his own charade, and hostile towards Mom, Jenny, and me. Jenny and I were ghost children who hardly spoke and laughed only in his absence. We tiptoed through the house, always careful to avoid the rooms where he hunched over his typewriter, or sat watching the News Hour with Jim Lehrer.

Angelic Shane smiles big and pulls out a chair for me. He makes a small bow and says “My lady.” His curly hair is a sandy shade of brown, and glossy in the candlelight. He winks a blue eye at me.

The waiter brings drinks for Connor and me, and we all sip while we catch up with each other. The four of us haven’t been together since Christmas, and it’s now May. Dad is recovering from his back surgery and has even been puttering in the garden.
Shane still hates his job and continues to search for another. Connor’s father has offered him a position with the family company, which he has accepted. He starts in a month, after he graduates. He will design the computer programs that the company uses to manufacture auto parts. I’ve landed a summer job as the head counselor for an art camp that caters to under-privileged, urban youth.

The conversation stops when our waiter returns to take our order. While I’m asking for the tuna, Connor reaches for me under the table. He slips his hand up under the hem of my dress again and tickles my inner thigh until I squirm. I struggle to maintain my composure until the waiter has moved away. I bite my lip and kick at the place where I estimate Connor’s legs to be, but my stiletto glances off his shin. I turn to glare at him. He grins a shit-eating grin.

Then he turns and says to Dad and Shane, “Gina and I start looking at houses in Canton next weekend.”

He has it all planned out, Connor does. It’s simultaneously attractive and repulsive. He’s offering me security and everything else he thinks women desire. Season tickets for the Canton Symphony Orchestra. Health and dental. A honeymoon in Hawaii. But he won’t listen when I tell him what I really want. A teaching job in a state where nobody ever has to shovel snow.

Dad says, “That’s fantastic,” and sips his vodka. He appears bored and apathetic, and I don’t blame him. I probably appear bored and apathetic myself, as I’ve never been good at hiding the way I feel.

Connor is spinning his wine glass on the tablecloth, watching it intently. Shane is
changing the subject.

“We stopped at Babies R Us while we were shopping earlier. I got the cutest little
tuxedo for Harrison,” he says.

“Who’s Harrison?” Connor asks, and Shane raises his eyebrows in mock surprise.

He says, “Gina, why haven’t you told him that you’ve got a baby brother now?”

I close my eyes. I shake my head, but I can hear Shane continuing anyway.

“We’re the proud parents of a baby boy. I can’t believe she hasn’t told you yet.”

I look at Connor to gauge his response. He turns to me and his eyes are wide.

“Gina, how did this slip your mind?” He looks back to Dad and Shane. “You adopted
then?”

I roll my eyes. “It’s a doll,” I say. No one is listening to me.

“We adopted,” Shane says, and then claps his hands and laughs. I listen to his
laughing the way an outsider would. I remember the first time I ever heard that laugh,
the first time I ever met Shane. That laugh like the braying of a donkey. That laugh
made me love him, made me want his blood flowing in my veins.

Shane goes on. “We found him in an orphanage in Wapak.”

“And by orphanage, he means flea market,” I say, my face expressionless. I am
suddenly tired, exhausted.

Shane reaches across the table and touches Connor’s arm. “She’s just jealous that
she isn’t the baby anymore,” he says in a conspiratorial tone. He whispers, “The staff at
the orphanage told us she might react this way.”

I say, “It’s a fucking doll.”
Connor looks bewildered. He glances at my father for an explanation, but Dad is quiet, so Connor looks to me instead.

“An antique doll,” I elaborate.

“He was born in 1922,” Shane says. “I already set up a Facebook profile for him. There’s pictures. Just type in Harrison Buckley. That’s his name.”

Silence blankets the table. Around us, the murmur of other conversations and the clink of silverware, the clicking of high heels on the tile floor. But we at this table are trapped in a force field of quiet. I am tempted to spread my arms, to break the bubble.

Connor at last ends the silence with a small, tense laugh, then reaches for his wine glass.

Our server appears beside me with my tuna and I attack it with my knife, slicing through it to reveal the cool, raw center.

***

We are quiet until we’ve finished our entrees. Our server comes back after the plates have been cleared from the table, armed with dessert menus for everyone. He tells us that tonight’s specials are the seven layer dark chocolate torte and the ginger brulee with raspberry sauce. Connor and I order one of each. Dad and Shane ask for coffee. As soon as the server has disappeared again, Connor excuses himself and weaves through the crowd at the bar, trying to find a clear route to the men’s room.

Dad drains his Absolut and picks up the swizzle stick that pierces his anchovy
stuffed green olive. He puts the olive between his teeth and slides it off the stick, narrows his eyes with pleasure as he chews it, swallows.

“House hunting?” he says to me as he twirls the swizzle stick between his thumb and forefinger. “Sounds like he’s thinking of marrying you.”

“I know he is,” I say. “It’s already been discussed.”

“And what was decided?” Dad returns the swizzle stick to his empty glass, motions for our server to bring him another.

“I told him I wasn’t sure and I’d have to think about it,” I say.

“Why do you need to think about it?” Dad asks. “He has a company to inherit when his father retires.”

I look from Dad to Shane. They are both watching my face, waiting. Shane raises his eyebrows, prompting me to get on with my explanation. I can tell they want me to hurry, before Connor gets back from the restroom. I sigh.

“You aren’t exactly doing what everyone expected of you,” I say to Dad. I fold my arms across my chest, realize how defensive this must make me look, and unfold them again. I lean my elbows on the table. “You don’t marry people just because they have money.”

“Sure you do,” Shane says. He drains his Cosmo.

I say, “I don’t,” and will Connor to come back, to rescue me from this conversation.

“You would, if there wasn’t something else bothering you,” Shane says. He eyes me, waiting, and when I say nothing, he grows impatient and starts a sentence for me.
“Does he strike you as a little…”

I let the pause hang there over the table, over the empty wine glasses and tumblers. I know where he wants me to go.

“As a little gay?” I finish. “No. It takes more than good fashion sense and meticulous grooming habits to make a man gay.”

“Then how about my opinion?” Dad asks. He half-smiles, without showing his teeth. It’s just the corners of his mouth turning up, wry and condescending.

I say, “I don’t want it.”

The desserts come. Our server puts the seven layer dark chocolate torte in front of me. It has been garnished with a sprig of mint. I pick up my fork and carve off a sliver. I roll my tongue around it and feel the texture of it without actually tasting it. Then I say, “You’re making assumptions based on the same stereotypes that everyone lumps you into.”

And then Connor is settling back into his chair, smelling fresh like hand soap, snapping his napkin and spreading it back over his lap.

***

In our hotel room, we brush our teeth standing side by side at the bathroom sink. I have taken off my stilettos, but I still have an inch or two on Connor. I look at him in the mirror, at the thick, curly blonde hair that covers his chest and stomach. He catches me looking and smiles around a mouthful of foamy toothpaste.
Our beds have been turned down, a Godiva chocolate on each pillow. His father pays the credit card bills. I stand by the bed while I strip down to my panties. Conrad whistles from the bathroom doorway. I don’t acknowledge this, just slide under the covers while he changes into his plaid pajama pants.

I watch him tying the drawstring, and I say, “I don’t want to live in Canton my whole life.”

He finishes tying before he looks at me. His brow is creased. I know he won’t understand why I don’t want to, but still he asks, “Why not?”

“We’ve been over this,” I say. “I already told you, but you didn’t listen.”

“I did,” he says. “But I thought we came to an agreement on this. We agreed that you could pick all the vacation destinations.” He takes the chocolate from his pillow, unwraps it, puts it in his mouth. I listen to the sucking sounds of his tongue moving around it, and I feel myself burning under the covers, feel my face turning hot.

“I want to live out there and you think I’ll be happy if we go there two weeks a year. You’re not listening,” I say. I throw the covers off. I rise to my knees on the bed.

“I don’t know what you want from me, babe” he says. “The company is in Canton. We can’t just go live in California, or New Mexico, or wherever your little heart desires. I’ll take you on any vacation you want. Maui, Italy, fucking Beijing. Done, done, and done. You said you were okay with that.” He’s still sucking on the chocolate, his mouth working around it as he talks. I want very much to draw my hand back, to slap him quick and hard across the face.

“I want real compromise from you,” I say low and calm. “I want to be equal
here.”

He just looks me in the eyes for a moment, then shakes his head. He laughs a little. He fucking chuckles. “I’m the one with the job,” he says, and after a pause, “I call the shots.”

I don’t breathe for a moment. My pulse is alive and separate from me, another entity throbbing in my ears and my chest. I jump from the bed and unzip my suitcase. My hands move, dumping the contents out onto the floor, snatching up the jeans, the tank top I packed for tomorrow.

“My Dad is right,” I say. “You may not be gay, but he sees himself in you, and it’s true.” My jeans are wadded up in a ball and I snap them out. “You have to be in control of everything. All the time.”

“That isn’t true,” he protests. He reaches for the pants in my hand and I jerk them away. “You get to call the shots sometimes.”

“Not when it really matters,” I say. “Not when we’re deciding where to live for the rest of our lives. Not when I’m deciding who to marry.”

“What are you talking about?” He throws his hands up. “You’re talking gibberish,” he says.

“I’m making perfect sense,” I say. “Whenever it really matters, there’s a man who thinks he knows what’s best for me.” I start wriggling into my jeans.

While I put them on, Connor is talking, saying, “What are you doing? Where are you going? It’s after midnight.”

And all I can say is, “I’m leaving,” because I have no idea where I’ll go, or how
I’ll get there. Dad and Shane have already left town, have already begun the two hour trip northwest to Findlay.

“Gina, we’re not in Athens right now,” he says. “You can’t just walk down the street alone in the middle of the night.” I start working my feet into my sneakers and he makes a move towards me, as if to stop me, but I stare him down. He takes a step back, his hands held in front of him, palms facing me and fingers spread, as if I’m a wild animal. I tie my laces without taking my eyes from him.

“Don’t wait up,” I say as I grab my purse from the dresser. I walk out the door, leaving him standing bare-chested by the rumpled bed.

I dig my cell phone out of my purse as I walk down the hall to the elevators. I listen for Connor’s footsteps behind me, but he isn’t following, so I call Jenny and ask her to come and pick me up at Nationwide Arena, which is just three blocks west of the hotel.

“Something is wrong,” she says over the phone. “You’ve never called me this late. What’s the matter?”

“I’m mad at Connor and I don’t think I can sleep in the same bed with him tonight,” I tell her. I punch the button for the elevator, then turn and watch the door to Connor’s room. If he comes out into the hall, my plan is to make a run for the stairs.

“What happened?”

I ask her if we can just talk about it when she gets to the Arena District, and she says she can be there in twenty minutes.

Outside, I walk the three blocks to the spot we agreed on and sit on a concrete
bench to wait. I face east, watching for Connor’s small frame, worried that he might come looking for me, intent on making a scene, but he doesn’t do this, and I’m surprised to find myself feeling a little disappointed. I suppose I wanted to shout and to throw things. But when Jenny’s car pulls up to the curb, I am still alone, a young woman with dark, shoulder-length hair and tight jeans.

I get into Jenny’s car, lean across the armrest, and plant a kiss on her cheekbone.

She smiles briefly, a small, tense smile, and then looks away, at the road. She drifts back into traffic, and asks, “So what’s the deal?”

“We fought. He told me that since he has the job, he calls the shots,” I tell her. “It has to be over, right?” I watch her face, waiting to see sympathy materialize in it. I fully expect to see anger for me and my insulted independence. Instead, she laughs. Her big white teeth flash in the glare of oncoming headlights. People say we look nothing alike, but we’ve got the same big teeth. She turns to look at me, briefly.

“I don’t see what makes you mad about this,” she says. “It’s true.” She signals a turn, spins the wheel. She says, “If you were making the money, then you’d expect to call the shots. You wouldn’t let him wear the pants.”

I watch a man with saggy jeans loping across the street half a block ahead of us, hitching his pants up when he reaches the safety of the sidewalk. I say, “It’s supposed to be a partnership. I’m not marrying anybody if it means I’ll always be subordinate to someone, just because he has a higher paying job.” I watch the traffic lights as they disappear over the roof of Jenny’s car. She makes another turn and I realize that I have no idea where we’re going. I’m not even sure where she lives. She’s moved in with
Brad since I saw her last.

“But it isn’t just that he has a higher paying job,” she says. “You have no job at all.”

“I will,” I say, indignant. “But if I landed a teaching job in California, he would never move there with me. The company is in Canton. I’ll be stuck there.” She glances at me, and now I do see sympathy in her face, but she looks away again.

After a pause, she asks, “Don’t you want to be taken care of?”

“I want to take care of myself,” I say. “To be dependent on myself. You let someone take care of you and you’re not a person. You’re a pet.” I look at the veins in the backs of my hands, think about the blood moving through them, and how it’s mine. My hands look just like my mother’s hands, my mother who was a slave to my father’s impulses, affected for over a decade by every decision he ever made.

“You’re thinking about this too much,” Jenny says as she pulls into a parking lot between two brick buildings. She shuts off the engine. “You’re letting feminism get in the way of what’s good for you. You’re basically telling me right now that you won’t marry Connor because he’s going to make a lot of money, and he wants to use it to treat you like a princess on the one condition that you stay in Ohio. That’s ludicrous. You’re an idiot.”

“You’re not listening,” I say. “Nobody listens. He wants to use that money to control what I do.”

“He can buy you whatever you want,” she argues. “You’d be set for life.” She takes the keys from the ignition and slips them into her purse. “Let’s get a drink,” she
says.

“It’s one o’clock in the morning,” I protest. “That’s too late to get started.”

She raises an eyebrow and tilts her head. She says the one thing that she knows will make me get out of this car and walk into that bar. She asks, “How old are you?” She eyes me for a moment, then says, “Run a brush through that hair. You look crazy.” She opens her door and slides out into the lot, her long bare legs disappearing into the darkness beyond the reach of the dome light.

***

Jared, a perfect stranger, stands next to me at the bar, well over six feet tall. He orders two more shots of Southern Comfort and lime, hands one to me, and clinks his own glass against mine. Maybe three sentences have passed between us. We know each other’s names and nothing more. Jenny has disappeared, to where, I haven’t a clue. I feel no apprehension over this, and I know that I really should. I am alone at an unfamiliar bar in a big, strange city, and Jared, so tall and dark and handsome, who has been buying my drinks since Jenny and I arrived, is now sweeping my hair back and bending down to kiss my neck. I look up at him and think about what it would be like to wrap my legs around his lean frame, to let him take me home with him. While I think about this, he cups my chin in his hand and tilts my face up to meet his. He kisses me on the mouth, softly. With my eyes closed, I set my tumbler down on the bar and lean into him, run my hands across his broad shoulders, feel the softness of his polo shirt under my
He smiles down at me when he pulls away, and I put one hand on the bar to steady myself. The crowd is thinning as two o’clock approaches, and the bartender shouts for last call. I think of Jenny and sweep my eyes around the room, searching for her. I try to remember what she was wearing. Jean shorts and a black halter top. I don’t see her. Jared notices me looking and says, “I think she might have left.”

“No,” I say. “She wouldn’t have left me here.” I disentangle myself from his arms. “I’ll be right back,” I tell him.

I find the ladies’ room and stand swaying in the doorway. There are three women who look a little older than I standing at the row of sinks, studying their reflections in the mirror and running their hands through their hair. I check the feet in the stalls. None of them are wearing Jenny’s red peep-toe pumps. I call her name, and one of the women at the sinks turns to glance at me, but then looks back to the mirror. I turn away and stumble past the pool tables to the front door. I go out into the parking lot, expecting to find her laughing with a man, a cigarette between her fingers, but she isn’t there. Her car sits empty and silent across the lot. I dig my cell phone out of my purse and call her, but she doesn’t answer, and suddenly, I don’t feel drunk anymore. I go back into the bar and squint at the booths and tables, thinking she has to be here and I’m just not seeing her. I walk a lap around the room, searching, and then I feel a warm hand on my back, and I turn around thinking that it must be her, but instead I look up into Jared’s dark eyes and he’s telling me that I should share a cab with him.

“No,” I say. “Jenny’s here somewhere. I have to find her.” I turn a slow circle,
my eyes probing the dark corners of the bar, but she really isn’t here.

“The blonde in the black top, right? I saw her leave with a guy,” he tells me, his big hands cupping my shoulders. “She left you.” He produces a cell phone from his hip pocket and starts punching numbers. “Just share a cab with me,” he says. “You can come back to my place if you want, and if not, then I’ll make sure you get home all right.” He puts the phone to his left ear and covers his right with his free hand.

We wait for the cab in the parking lot, both of us quiet. I call Jenny twice more while we lean against the bar’s brick façade, but she still doesn’t answer, and part of me wants to just crawl into her backseat and fall asleep waiting for her.

“Are you coming home with me?” Jared asks. His hands are deep in the pockets of his jeans, and his legs are crossed at the ankles. I can smell his cologne, and the liquor on his breath.

“I really shouldn’t,” I say. I run a nervous hand through my hair and stare at the buildings across the street. I wish I could have just stayed in the room with Connor instead of getting huffy and walking out.

“Why not? You got a boyfriend?”

I look down at the asphalt under my feet. I don’t know how to answer. So I say, “We’re breaking up,” and just like that I know we are. We have to.

***

Jared’s apartment is dark. When he switches on a light in the kitchen, I see that
most of the counter space is occupied by whey protein canisters. He pours water from a
filter pitcher into two glasses and hands one to me, then leads me down the hallway to his
room, where he undresses first me and then himself. I am still too drunk to be shy, and I
hold still for him while his gaze shifts from my legs to my breasts, but as he reaches for
me, my phone rings, and I scramble to dig my purse out from underneath the pile of
discarded clothes. I see that it’s Jenny, and I feel myself turning angry. I wouldn’t be
naked in this apartment with a strange man, lost in Columbus while my boyfriend sleeps
alone in our hotel room if Jenny hadn’t left me behind.

“Where the hell are you?” I say when I answer.

“In the parking lot. Where the fuck are you?” she snaps.

“I looked everywhere for you. Didn’t you leave with a guy?” I glance at Jared,
who is now stretched out nude on his bed. The covers are rumpled under him, white
sheets and blankets that set off his tan.

“No. I’m in the backseat of the car.”

“Screwing someone?”

Jared raises an eyebrow at this. He says something to me, something about it
taking a really kinky pair of sisters to call each other when they’re getting laid, but it’s
hard to listen to both him and Jenny at once, so I try to tune him out.

“Don’t I wish,” Jenny is saying. “No, I didn’t feel good. I came out here to lie
down because I didn’t want to make you leave yet. I thought you might get lucky with
that guy. Is that where you are? At his place?”

I hold up one finger to Jared and back out of his room before I whisper, “Yes,
because I thought you left me.”

“I’m sorry. I thought a smart girl like you would think to check the car before you went home drunk with a stranger.”

“This is not funny,” I hiss. “I have no idea where I am.”

“Calm down. If you don’t want to be there, just call a cab,” she says. “It isn’t my fault you did something stupid.”

I hang up on her. I sit down naked on Jared’s hallway carpet, too tired to care that I look ridiculous.

The bedroom door swings open and Jared’s face appears in the semi-darkness. We can see each other only because he left the light on in the kitchen.

“Is everything okay?” he asks me.

I look up at him and sigh. I hold up my phone and I say, “I need to call a cab. It’s time to go home.”

***

Connor is sleeping when I let myself back into the room, his spiky blonde hair flat on one side. The air smells of sleep, that close odor of soft, warm parts, and breath. When I slide into bed beside him, he half awakens and rolls toward me. He drapes one arm across my waist, and I shove it away, suddenly disgusted by the smell of him, by the staleness of his breath, and the traces of raw onion that I detect on it from the wedge salad he ate at Martini’s. I turn my back to him and sleep. In the morning, I will tell him
what I’ve done, and what I will do.
THE DIMWITTED, VICIOUS WOLVERINE

An earthquake jolts the sidewalk beneath my feet. The crumbling concrete shifts with infuriating unpredictability, and the houses with their warped porches and whopper jawed steps tilt toward me like they have secrets to divulge. My legs buckle and I collapse into an untidy heap in the weeds.

“Jesus, Kay. You could barely walk in those things on the way to the bar.”

My boyfriend, Mitch, is referring to my wedge heels. They have polka-dotted straps that tie around my ankles. And they are very high. With stupid fingers, I struggle to untie the polka-dotted straps, but I double-knotted the bows before we walked out our apartment door, and I can’t just now remember the mechanics that went into the construction of the knots.

“What are you doing?” he asks me.

I’d say “Isn’t it obvious,” but it’s so obvious, I feel that such a response is unnecessary. Instead, I say, “I had fun with you tonight.” I start to tip over and grab his leg to steady myself.

“You didn’t have fun with me. You had fun with everybody else. Did you know that guy?”

“What guy?”

“The one whose ass you grabbed on the way out.”

“I didn’t grab anybody’s ass.” I am indignant. I would never grab a random ass.
“Yes, you did. And if you honestly don’t remember doing it, then I really have to wonder what else you’ve done while drunk that you don’t remember. Any blow jobs you’ve forgotten about?”

“Why are you being mean to me?”

“Why are you grabbing any ass other than mine? You can grab mine anytime you want.”

“And I do,” I add. I am grinning like a fool.

“Yes, even at wedding ceremonies. So you’re telling me that for all that inappropriate grab-assing you do with me, you can’t keep your hands to yourself where total strangers are concerned?”

“I do! I do.”

He looks away from me. It’s too dark to see his face, but I can see his profile silhouetted against the porch lights of the house across the street. His Cro-Magnon brow and Roman nose. He is devastatingly handsome at night.

“Stop trying to take your shoes off. There’s broken glass all over the place,” he mutters.

“That’s because of the earthquake,” I say. I am a mess. Maybe I did grab an ass. I think hard. I know that we just walked out of the bar a few minutes ago, but I can’t remember anything that happened just before that. I don’t even remember whether it was Mitch or I who wanted to leave. Or maybe it was closing time. Did I have that moment when they turn on the lights and shut off the tunes and I know I’m still young because I didn’t leave until they made me go? My face crumples and I burst into tears. I begin to
blubber. “I don’t think I grabbed anybody’s ass, but if I did, I’m very sorry, and it was
probably just an accident, like when an obese person backs up into you in a crowded
place.”

“Wow, can’t say that’s ever happened to me.”

“Then you’ve never been to a county fair,” I say.

***

Mitch takes the key from me and unlocks the apartment door to avoid having to
watch me stab repeatedly at the knob until sheer luck connects key with hole. He grabs
my elbow as I step over the threshold, anticipating my stumble. He makes me drink a
whole glass of water. He makes me stand next to him at the bathroom sink and he
watches me brush my teeth and wash my face. He makes me keep standing, slumped
against the doorframe, even though I want nothing more than to lie down, while he peels
off my clothes.

When I finally fall onto our mattress, he covers me up and then turns away to
sleep with his face to the wall.

I close my eyes, but this only makes it feel as if I am a record spinning on a
turntable. I open them again.

“Mitch?”

“What.”

“I love you to pieces.”
“I love you, too. Go to sleep.”

“Can I have a goodnight kiss?”

He sighs, but I hear him roll over to face me. It’s inky black in our room, and I can’t even make out the vague shape of him under the covers, so I pucker up and make kissy noises until he locates my mouth in the dark. He presses his lips to mine, a passionless smashing together of soft flesh, and then he disappears back into the void. Nothing more is said.

***

At five o’clock in the morning, I awaken. I have to get up because I have to pee. The kitchen beyond our bedroom doorway is awash in moonlight, and I stagger towards it, dragging my feet across the carpet in case I’ve left any of my clothes rumpled in my path. My right hand and foot are numb and tingly. I’ve slept on them funny. And it feels like I’ve drooled all over my chin. I want to throw up. I don't know how Mitch has ever been attracted to me.

The linoleum floor in the bathroom is still wet with all the water I sloshed out of the sink while I was washing my face earlier. My toes are the kind of aching cold that makes them burn if I try to take a hot shower, as if they’re being welded together with a blowtorch. After I pee, I stand in front of the mirror and check for drool on my face. I can’t tell if there’s any, because my eyes are blurry. I blink a few times and rub at them, but it doesn’t help. Then I realize that the right side of my face is just as numb and tingly
as my right hand and foot. I can feel only a vague sensation of pressure as my fingers massage my eye socket. They’re doing a clumsy job, because I have only a vague sensation of pressure in my fingers as well. It’s something like poking at a corpse with the end of a broomstick. You get a feeling for the resistance of cold, bloated flesh against the wood, but neither the corpse nor the broom notices what’s going on.

This is most peculiar. I’ve never slept on my face wrong. Hands and feet, yes, but this is a new trick. I start slapping myself across the cheek. Nothing. My blurred reflection in the mirror is the face of a handcuffed, beer-bellied wife-beater on “Cops,” obscured to avoid identification. And then something occurs to me. I close my right eye and keep the left one open. And there I am, clear as day, my skin ashen and my forehead lined with worry. I close the left and open the right. The handcuffed, beer-bellied wife-beater returns. I talk to myself.

“Just go back to sleep. You’ll go back to sleep and you won’t wake Mitch. You drank too much and you need more sleep. At ten, you’ll wake up again and you’ll feel and you’ll see and you’ll be hungover, but Mitch will love you anyway because everybody gets hungover now and then.”

Mitch’s face appears next to mine in the mirror. Actually, it’s another delinquent on “Cops,” until I close my right eye and confirm that, yes, this is Mitch’s Roman nose, and these are Mitch’s frighteningly blue eyes, intense, even in this wash of garish fluorescent light.

“Is everything okay? What’s the matter with your eye?”
“I’m winking at you,” I say. I open the eye again, because everybody knows a wink only lasts a moment. He shakes his head at me.

“You’re still drunk. Get back in bed,” he says. I turn to go and he gives my bottom a gentle slap on my way out, and this is tremendously comforting, because I know that he isn’t cross with me anymore. When he joins me in bed, I lay my numb and tingly hand across his flat belly, and fall asleep waiting to be able to feel the tiny mole that I know is just three inches to the left of his navel.

***

It’s only eight o’clock now, and I wish that I could sleep more, but I can’t, because all the parts that were numb when I drifted off are still just as they were before. Mitch’s breath whooshes in and out, slow and even, and this makes me want to cry because my own is coming in ragged gasps as I struggle to hold back my panic. He was right. I went too far. I got too drunk. Now I’ve killed the brain cells that interpret messages from the right side of my body. Can I keep this a secret? Never tell him that I made a swap with the Captain, nerve function for rum? He would say he told me so.

Just wait a few days, I tell myself. It’ll go away. You’ll get it all back. And you’ll never drink again.

***
On Tuesday, we walk uptown for ice-cream at the Lollipop. We take turns licking at the scoop of mint-chocolate chip while we stroll over to the grassy amphitheater that faces Scripps Hall. The hillside has been terraced, and on sunny days like this, students spread out their blankets and beach towels and open their textbooks. They are perfect campus brochure pictures.

The leaves of the surrounding oaks are beginning to brown. Acorns drop when the wind kicks up, and fat-cheeked squirrels stuff their faces full and scamper away to hoard it all for later. Mitch sits in the shade of one such oak tree, and I flop down next to him. This is the third day, and my panic has only continued to grow. I don’t think I can hide it much longer. Already, Mitch is asking what’s the matter, is something bothering me, and I keep saying everything is fine, I just have a term paper to write this week, and a presentation coming up next Monday, and I’m a little stressed out about it all, so won’t he please stop asking?

He holds the cone out for me to lick. In the wake of my tongue, new chocolate chips are revealed, and I pinch one between my teeth and roll it around in my mouth. I’d like to stuff my cheeks with them, to hoard them all for later.

“"You look deep in thought,” he says.

“"I want to hoard whole mouthfuls of chocolate chips in a tree trunk,” I say.

He guffaws. “I swear, only you can think of these things,” he says when he has finished laughing. But it isn’t true. He’s the special one, and I’m no better than his best friend, Howdy, who got so belligerently drunk he dove into a hedgerow and put out his own eyeball by spearing it on a jagged branch. Howdy still gets drunk often, but he’s no
longer very successful with the ladies, as his glass eye makes him look retarded. It
doesn’t help that he will, at any moment, pop the glass eye out of the socket and proudly
show it to anyone sitting on the barstool next to his. He will ask just anybody to put out a
hand and hold it. It isn’t a perfect sphere, as I’d always suspected glass eyes are. Instead,
it’s a convex disc with tapered edges, creamy white except for the iris, which doesn’t
quite match the shade of brown in Howdy’s real eye. I have held it before. He’s a freak,
and now so am I, maimed by alcohol, and it’s my own stupid fault. It’s my fault I didn’t
listen when Mitch saw my gaze turn as glassy as Howdy’s, when he said, “Take it easy,
baby.”

“You’re not eating this fast enough,” he says now, as mint ice-cream drips onto
the web of skin between his thumb and forefinger. I stretch out my tongue and swipe
away the drip.

When the ice-cream is gone and we’ve crunched away the cone that held it, I
stand up and stretch my legs. While my back is to him, I discreetly pat the numb side of
my face to make sure I haven’t gotten anything on it in the midst of all that licking.
When I turn to face him again, he is still sitting in the grass, just as before, with his knees
bent and his feet planted wide apart. There, at his crotch, the holes in his jeans and his
boxer briefs have lined up perfectly, allowing for an unobstructed view of an entire
testicle. I think about saying something to him about it, but I don’t. He wouldn’t care
anyway. I have tried to buy him new jeans and new boxer briefs for his birthday, but he
just returns them, saying that he doesn’t feel motivated enough to break them in, saying
that he *likes* all the holes. His sense of modesty is about as developed as that of my three-
year-old twin nephews who will, when they see my truck pull up to the curb outside their house, climb up onto the window ledge, press their faces to the glass, and wave frantically at me, shrieking, “Kay-truck, Kay-truck!” They will do this even when fresh from the bath and still naked, their tiny twin penises jiggling at the window as they flail their arms. This indecent exposure of Mitch’s seems equally innocent. He simply has no idea. When I smile, he smiles back and says, “That’s what I like to see.”

“Oh me too,” I say.

I offer him my wrist, which he grasps in his big, sticky fist, and I haul him to his feet. He brushes grass off the back of his pants, and we start the walk home. I can’t keep the secret even a minute longer.

“Something weird is going on with me,” I tell him.

He says nothing, only casts a quizzical sideways glance at me and waits for me to continue.

“For the last three days, my right hand and foot have been numb. The right side of my face, too. And my right eye is blurry. What do you think is wrong?”

“Three days? Three days and you’re just now mentioning it to me?”

“I figured it was nothing. I’ve been waiting for it to go away by itself.”

“But it hasn’t,” he says.

“Nope. And I’m getting a little worried.” This is an outright lie. I’ve been sick with worry since Sunday morning.

“Can you feel anything at all in those places?”
“Yeah, I can feel pressure. And I’ve got this constant pins and needles sensation.”

“Pins and needles for three days?”

“Yeah.”

We walk in silence for a minute or two. He is watching the bricks in the sidewalk as they pass under our feet, but I can tell that he doesn’t see them any more than a trucker sees the highway as it unfolds in front of his wheels.

“This started on Sunday?”

Great. The gears have turned a few times and he’s arrived at the very conclusion I’d hoped he wouldn’t. That it’s my own stupid fault and didn’t he tell me so?

“Yeah,” I say.

“Do you suppose this is somehow a result of your half dozen Captain and Cokes?”

“I don’t know.”

“I think you should go to the doctor tomorrow.”

I nod, and he doesn’t see it because he’s looking up at the crimson leaves of a sugar maple.

***

I am lying on a table so narrow that my arms want to fall off the edges. I am wondering how an obese person gets an MRI if I, at a hundred and twenty pounds, am
overflowing the boundaries of my rolling tray, on which I will soon be slid into the machine like a loaf of bread into the oven. That’s about how long I’ll be in there. As long as it takes to bake a loaf of bread. Fifty to sixty minutes, give or take a few. The nurse rolls the tray with me on it into the machine and I am swallowed up until only my bare feet stick out into the cold, sterile room. A tiny mirror in front of my face has been angled so that I can see my toes sticking out into the fluorescent light, the red paint on my toenails badly chipped. It is like looking at a picture of someone else’s feet. The nurse told me that it sometimes makes claustrophobic people feel better to be able to see out the end of the tube. I told her that what would make me feel better is a jacuzzi and a glass of cabernet sauvignon. She chuckled at that and said, “Me too, baby girl.” And then she clamped my head in place and told me not to move it, as if the choice were mine.

They are checking my brain. Nothing strikes fear into one’s heart quite like hearing, “To be on the safe side, we’d better get an MRI of your brain, just to rule out multiple sclerosis.” I am twenty-four years old. My blood tests all came back perfectly normal. I’ve never really been sick. The flu, and some colds, sure. Never anything like Mitch. Mitch nearly died of pancreatitis at age nineteen. But me, I have the immune system of a wolverine.

I know only two things about multiple sclerosis. It gets progressively worse, and there’s no way to fix it. If this is what’s broken, it’s broken forever.

The nurse rolls me back out into the light. She doesn’t take my head out of the clamp, but instead wraps a bungee cord around my bicep and asks me to make a fist. I feel the needle stick, and then a nasty burning sensation. She has missed my vein, the
incompetent bitch. I have veins and sinews that are clearly visible at twenty paces. A blind child with no hands could have found one of the fat blue pipes that run just under the skin of my inner elbow. By licking if by no other means.

There is a second jab and the incompetent nurse succeeds this time in injecting the dye into my bloodstream. I have been told this dye will light up any “problem areas” in my brain like the white lights on a Christmas tree. I spend the last ten minutes of my MRI begging my brain to stay dark.

When I get home, there are blueberry pancakes and peeled orange segments waiting for me on the kitchen table. Mitch is standing at the stove with his back to me, a bowl of batter in one hand and a wooden spoon in the other. When he turns to look at me, there’s a grin on his face that’s broad enough to make his timid dimples show themselves.

“Look at you,” I say. “What a nice surprise. I thought you’d still be in bed.”

“Nope. I’m up. How did it go?” He drops another big spoonful of batter into the frying pan.

“It went fine, I guess. I won’t know anything about the results until next week.”

“There’s nothing wrong with your brain,” he says. He puts down the batter bowl and crosses the kitchen to hook an arm around the small of my back. He holds up the gloppy spoon for me to lick. “You’ve got the most perfect brain I’ve ever seen.”

“You’ve never seen it. That was the point of me getting up at seven to go let some doctors look at it.”
“It was completely unnecessary. I know your brain better than anybody else, and I know there’s not a damn thing wrong with it.” He goes back to the stove and trades the spoon for a spatula. Flips the pancakes.

“Then why am I still numb and half blind?”

My voice is nearly drowned out by the sizzling of the batter. Mitch comes back to me and wraps both arms around me. He kisses me on the mouth. Goop from the spatula drips into my hair. I start to cry mid-kiss and he pulls away to find tears already tracing down my cheeks.

“Hey,” he says. “It’s okay. There’s nothing you can do in the meantime, so just don’t worry about it. It’s a gorgeous day. I thought we could take a hike somewhere. We’ll go anywhere you want. And we’ll take the motorcycle. Get some wind in all that pretty hair. You’ll feel better. I promise.” He points to the orange segments. “I even peeled your orange for you.” He knows I hate peeling oranges, the way the rind gets stuck under my fingernails. But I love to eat them.

I wash my hair and let the wind whip it dry for thirty miles, all the way to Airplane Rock.

***

It’s Tuesday night and I’m in class. It’s one of those endless four-hour long classes that only meets once a week, and when you sign up, you think it’ll be great getting all four hours over with in one go, but then when you sit still for three hours and it’s way past dinnertime and you’re ready to eat your own shirt, that last hour could only
be more unpleasant if you had to spend it kneeling on grains of uncooked rice. The professor gives us a few minutes for a break. I meander out into the hallway and check my cell phone. I have four voice mails. They are all from my mother. My blood slows, crystallizing until it freezes solid in my arteries. It’s only been four days since my MRI. Either the results are in early and they’re not good, or somebody’s dead. Maybe it’s me. Maybe they’ve found an inoperable brain tumor and my days are numbered. I don’t listen to the messages. I dial Mom’s number.

“Hi, Kay.” Her voice is quiet. I picture her on the other end of the line. Long dark hair like mine, green eyes like mine, big teeth like mine.

“I didn’t listen to your messages yet. What’s wrong?”

“Have you heard from the doctor yet?”

“No. They called you first?”

“Yeah.”

Oh, Jesus. Why would they call her first? Why wouldn’t they tell me whatever the fuck they have to say? Everybody knows mothers are spazzoids. Everybody knows mothers shouldn’t ever have to do this kind of dirty work, breaking horrible medical news to their baby girls. I am not breathing.

“What did they find?”

There is a significant pause while she draws in a shuddering breath, and then she says, “It's MS.” I can hear her sniffling. She’s already crying. Once, when I was little, I came downstairs to the kitchen for a snack and I discovered her standing at the counter, sobbing while she mixed up a bowl of tuna salad. I had never seen her cry before. I was
terrified. As if a switch had been flipped, my own eyes began leaking tears. Hearing my muffled whimpers, she whirled around and saw me looking at her, my crumpled mouth a perfect reflection of her own. The same thing happens now.

The conversation quickly becomes unintelligible. Neither of us can do anything but blubber, and neither of us is understanding the other. I finally manage to communicate to her that I will call back later when I’ve pulled myself together. I hang up. Finishing class is out of the question. I run until I find an empty room, and once inside with the door closed and the lights out, I sink onto the floor and wail the way we only allow ourselves to do when we know that no one can hear us.

I walk home in the dark, silent tears still sliding down my cheeks, thankful that no one can see them. It’s one mile back to the apartment. When I get there, Mitch is sitting on the steps to our door, sweaty, bare-chested, chugging water from a bottle. He’s wearing running shoes, and he’s still breathing hard.

“You’re home early,” he says. The porch light is out and all he can see of me is my silhouette.

I draw a deep breath and prepare to tell him the news, but before it’s even out of my mouth, I break into sobs again and all I can do is bury my face in his chest hair. And all I can think is that he isn’t going to stick around, because who wants a woman who could someday be debilitated? That’s great fun. A woman you have to push in a wheelchair down all the handicap-accessible trails at the state park. That’ll be fucking hot. Can you even have sex with a woman like that? Or do you go elsewhere to get your rocks off? Put a movie in the DVD player for her, tuck the blanket around her useless,
atrophied legs, kiss her forehead, and say, “Enjoy Steel Magnolias, honey! I’ll be back as soon as I’ve had a fuck!” It’s only a matter of time.

Six years ago, at high school football games, I was the mascot. I had a halftime dance that I performed to Jock Jams. I turned aerials and back flips for a screaming, cheering student body while dressed in the uniform of a Spartan soldier, complete with chest armor and helmet. The members of the cheerleading squad would scowl, their thunder stolen, and for the grand finale, one of them would have to begrudgingly hand me my bow, and an arrow which I would set aflame and shoot into a straw-stuffed dummy dressed in our opponents’ school colors. Mitch was enthralled with all of this when I told him about it years ago. He even made a bet with me. If he could find the song that the moves were set to, I had to show him my halftime dance. He found it.

All that energy. It takes skill to shoot a flaming arrow, dammit. But still, it comes to this.

“Did you hear from the hospital?” he asks now that I’ve calmed down a little.

I nod.

Nothing else is said. He isn’t stupid.

***

Airplane Rock is the place Mitch and I went on our first date. Half a gallon of gas in the motorcycle will get us there in forty minutes. When the asphalt runs out, Mitch is
careful on the gravel. Our heads are so close together, every time he shifts gears, my
helmet clunks against his.

We park the bike in the dusty clearing at the trailhead, and we start out hand in
hand. It has been six months since my diagnosis.

I’m not going to die.

I do indeed have the immune system of a wolverine, but it is a dimwitted, vicious
wolverine. It attacks things that are not foreign, things that I need to function, like my
optic nerves, for example. The dimwitted, vicious wolverine is more likely to attack the
things it’s supposed to protect when it’s thrown into overdrive by outside stressors, like
viruses, or the ingestion of toxic substances, such as alcohol. It isn’t the rum’s fault that
the wolverine exists. It was already there in the cage, waiting to be unleashed. All the
rum did was poke at it with a stick and make it cranky.

I have stopped expecting Mitch to leave me. Instead of running, he’s been talking
about buying a house together as soon as I graduate. We’ve even looked at a few.

It’s spring, and unseasonably warm. The sun beats down through the budding
branches overhead and green shoots poke up out of last fall’s decayed leaves. It’s a very
gradual two mile climb to the Rock, and on the way, we pass a half dozen horses and
riders headed back down to the trailhead. The riders are all men, and they tip their hats
and grunt hellos to us. The horses smell like sweat and dusty leather. Mud splatters coat
their legs all the way up to their knobby knees. I tell Mitch we should ride horses
sometime, and he says he’d like that.
There’s no one else at the Rock. It juts out high over the treetops, offering a spectacular view of the Hocking Hills. Everything out there is so new and fresh, it all glows chartreuse and neon green. We sit on the Rock’s airplane nose, Mitch’s index finger hooked through my back belt loop. He gets pretty edgy when I’m near cliff edges or other big drop-offs. He gets edgy when I mow our yard, and when I light our gas grill.

“You know,” I say, “if you and I were ever to have children, you’d just be an absolute wreck.”

“What do you mean?”

“Little kids climb stuff, and wreck their bikes, and do dangerous things. You’ll be a mess.”

“Only if we have girls. Girls are different,” he says.

“How so?”

He doesn’t seem to know how to respond, so he doesn’t. I’m not looking at him, but from the corner of my eye, I see him shrug. After a few minutes, he finally says, “Do you think we’ll have kids?”

“I don’t know. Do you want some?”

“I want a whole baseball team,” he says.

“Just nine, or do you want a pitching staff, too?”

“I guess I’d be happy enough if we could just have a pitcher, a catcher, a shortstop, and a center fielder. That’s the important stuff.”

I think about this while a tiny green caterpillar inches its way up my forearm. I’m not sure where it came from.
He keeps talking. “Our kids are going to be super athletes. With your brains and bone structure, and my strength and speed, they’ll be Major Leaguers for sure.”

I study the lichens between my hiking boots. “They might get all that stuff,” I say. “Or they might get something considerably less desirable.”

“Like what? My brain instead of yours?”

“You’re just as smart as me, so stop that. I’m tired of you saying you’re stupid all the time. I’ve dated engineering students who weren’t as smart as you.”

“Yeah, like Mr. Have You Ever Eaten a Prune That Wasn’t Dried?”

“Exactly like him.”

He scrapes at a patch of moss with his fingernail. “What do you mean, then?”

“MS is hereditary. If you want Big Leaguer sons, you might want to consider mating with someone who doesn’t have it.”

His hand traces my spine all the way up to the nape of my neck. He kisses my earlobe. “I only want to mate with you,” he says.

And what a fucking relief that is.

***

It's June, and Mitch and I are riding our tandem bicycle over a hundred miles from Maumee to Port Clinton for the annual “Bike to the Bay” race. It’s a fund raiser. Mitch and I have raised funds every year since 2008. In the last decade, we’ve come up
with over ten grand to help find a cure for MS, but we still don’t have one. And all the
time, the dimwitted, vicious wolverine is hungry. It continues to feed.

This is the first year that I’m riding the race blind. Mitch and I talked about it a
lot in the winter months, whether we should stick with tradition even though I could no
longer see. MS slowly ate away the myelin sheaths on my optic nerves, rendering them
incapable of sending input from my eyes to my brain. Each attack blurred my vision a
little more, stole a little more of it away from me.

On the bright side, I’ve had plenty of time to get used to being blind. The
transition was so gradual that I had time to train with the occupational therapists, learn to
get through the day without the advantages afforded by sight. They taught me to read
Braille, I got used to listening to books on tape, and I memorized the floor plans of
buildings I visit often. They trained a golden retriever to be my seeing-eye dog, and the
heat of her doggie breath on the back of my hand is now a greater source of comfort than
anything else in the world. Her name is Princess. I know. I hated it, too, but they
managed to convince me that changing it would cause some kind of canine identity crisis
for her. But if I could change it, I’d make it Spartacus.

I practiced being blind. I practiced cooking dinner with my eyes closed, which is
tricky, because one can’t just go feeling around for things with bare hands when one is
working with open flames and boiling liquids and knives. I practiced hiking through the
woods with my eyes closed. I paid attention to the textures under my feet. Gravel or
dust, soft soil or knobby root systems, grass or bare rock. Bare rock is always a red light,
as it usually indicates some kind of cliff or sudden drop-off ideal for suicides. I will get
down on hands and knees and let my fingers do the probing, checking for an absence of solid ground ahead.

Mitch and I always said we’d never get into tandem bicycles, or two-person kayaks, or other cutesy toys that accommodate sickeningly affectionate couples. We rode our first nine “Bike to the Bay” races on individual road bikes. But obviously, my lone riding days are over. We reluctantly bought the tandem, telling ourselves it was a necessary evil, and we were absolutely not getting soft. Now, Mitch pedals up front, seeing the road for me and steering, while I do nothing more than help supply the leg power. As we ride, he describes the countryside that slips by us. He tells me about the big red barns and the mysteriously dented grain silo that stands off to our right. He says the dent in the silo is up high, near the top, and large enough that it had to have been created by either a small airplane, or Godzilla. He describes the ripples in the wheat fields that look like the waves on the Carribean that we watched from the hotel balcony on our honeymoon. Tonight, when the ferry takes us across Lake Erie's South Passage to Put-in-Bay, our real destination, he will hold my hand and guide me along the sidewalks, warning me about curbs and low-hanging tree branches, and he will describe the festive strings of lights at the sidewalk cafes, and the states of undress in which the drunks parade down the middle of the street. It will be eerily similar to those trust-building exercises that well-meaning, touchy-feely-type teachers always made us do in junior high, but without the blindfold.

Riding this race was Mitch’s idea back in 2008, our first year. He said he’d always wanted to ride in a race, and it only made sense to ride in a race that would raise
money to help find a cure for MS, so would I please ride with him and show him the ropes, since I’d raced before? I was moved to tears. He wanted to save me. He was my heavily-muscled, shotgun wielding, knife-throwing protector. But MS did not fear bulging biceps, or buckshot. His arsenal was useless in defending his distressed damsel. The dim-witted wolverine only gnawed on another of my neurons and smirked at him. He wanted to slice open my skull with his gutting knife, the same way he slices open the bellies of the deer he shoots for our freezer. He wanted to tear the illness out of my brain the same way his skilled and careful fingers tear the livers and intestines from the bared bellies of his kills, to fling it all into an open field and leave it behind for the coyotes that come in the night. He needed to stop this thing from eating me alive, and expose it to be eaten by others. It was all he knew to do. But he could not do it. So he wanted to do this instead, and how could I ever tell him anything but yes?
Hank could hear the coyotes twenty feet below him, pacing, rattling the dry leaves that carpeted the ground. They had come slowly, some of them alone and some in pairs. He had thought it odd. He had considered shooting the first to come circling the trunk of the sycamore that he had chosen to climb, but because he was safe up in the tree and had wanted to save his arrows for whitetails, he had held his fire. And then there came two more, trotting down from near the top of the ridge. And then two more after that, and soon there were nine.

He sat perched on a fold-down seat the size of a dinner plate, his boots resting on the narrow platform of his tree stand. He leaned his head against the trunk of the sycamore, feeling the comforting heft of his bow in his arms and watching the play of shadows across his closed eyelids. He wondered if Andi might think to borrow a phone when he wasn’t back in time for dinner.

His back ached from sitting slumped in the tree stand too many hours. He arched it, pressing his shoulder blades against the rough hide of the sycamore. His eyes burned gritty. The coyotes circled twenty feet below, and although they didn’t snarl or foam as rabid animals would, they were waiting with an eerie, cunning patience that scared him even more. Whenever he dared to lean out over the edge of the tree stand for a glimpse of them, he could see the watchful intelligence in their yellow eyes, and a stone of panic would form in his throat.

Hank’s best friend, Quinn, had been hunting since early childhood, and had told him stories of having been followed out of the woods late at night. Quinn said he could
see the reflection of their eyes in the beam of his spotlight, like Cheshire cats grinning through the cover of the underbrush. Quinn said that they were unafraid in numbers like this, and smart.

The sun had at last sunk below the ridgeline. Nine coyotes, four arrows, and the last of the light had nearly seeped away. The day’s warmth was quickly dissipating as well, and Hank wondered if he could make it to morning without developing hypothermia. He had not worn his gloves or his heavy coat because they restricted his movement, and the weather had been pleasant enough to make them unnecessary when he’d left the house that afternoon. He lay down the arrow he had been holding in his hand, careful not to let it fall from the tree stand, and plunged his bare and stiffening fingers into his jacket pocket. They closed around his cell phone, but he already knew it was useless in this ravine. He would need to get to the top of the ridge to make a call.

He said, “Shit. God damn it, fuck.” Below, eighteen ears pricked. It felt good to utter all those angry syllables in a chain, to spit them out like ugly links. He did it again.

“Shit, God damn it, fuck.”

***

Standing at the kitchen window, Andi could see beyond the spent garden that ran the width of the backyard. In the weakening light, neat rows of clattering cornstalk marked the property line, and beyond that, Bill Loar’s land rolled away, sloping gently up to the next ridgeline. Bill lived next door in a crumbling brick farmhouse with boarded
windows and a tarpaper roof. He was alone and cranky, his wife having divorced him, and his children having grown up and moved away. He was nice enough to Andi, but he had once caught Hank hunting the woods out back without permission, and had shot him with a salt gun, no questions asked. Hank had come limping back to their doublewide, bleeding from his right thigh and gritting his teeth against the burn of salt under his broken skin. Andi had told him it was his own damn fault and Hank hadn’t spoken to her for days afterward. They had eaten dinners in silence, had gone to sleep without finding each other in the dark.

Hank generally stuck to public land after that incident, which was where he’d told her he’d be today. That probably meant Ryerson Station, along the Ten Mile Creek. She suspected that he still occasionally crept around with Quinn on whatever land he pleased, but he had gone out alone today, so she doubted he’d lied.

She turned away from the window and took the venison roast out of the oven. She put a lid on the roasting pan and padded barefoot into the bedroom where she let herself down easy on their bedspread. She settled on her side, her arms wrapped around the great curve of her pregnant belly. The arches of her feet ached incessantly, as did the small of her back. She wished Hank would come home and work his sturdy thumbs into her. From where she lay on the bed, she could see through the open doorway to the kitchen where the kitty clock hung on the wall over the stove. Its eyes and tail flicked back and forth in perfect unison. It was after 8:00.
She woke on the wrong side of the bed, and it didn’t feel right. Hank should have been there for her to slide up against. He had never come home. Gradually, these things dawned on her. It was still dark, and Hank was not here, so he must still be hunting, and what time was it? The digital alarm clock on the dresser glowed 4:52.

Thinking he might have fallen asleep on the couch, she moved through the kitchen to the living room, but he was not there. The battered leather hand-me-down sofa stretched long and empty. Her brow creased.

Outside, the yard shone silver. The moon had fallen low and it cut a sliver against the cloud-patched sky, just above Bill Loar’s ridgeline. Goosebumps came to attention on her arms and legs as she descended the steps to the grass. There was an eerie quiet that contrasted the crickets and bullfrogs of summer. On feet aching with cold, she walked across the frosted grass to the garage that Hank had built off to the side of the doublewide. She peeked inside and found only their old Honda Nighthawk perched on its center stand, its deep maroon gas tank dented and rusting. His old pick-up truck was still gone. She turned and moved off toward the shed in their backyard. The door stood ajar. Inside, a sturdy beam ran the width of the ceiling, and it was from this that Hank would have hung his deer to bleed out. Beneath the beam, the dirt was stained a deep maroon and coated with a layer of sawdust to soak up the old fluids, but there was nothing fresh. Hank had not been here.

She tried to remember if he had said anything about camping for the night, or going over to Quinn’s place, but she could recall nothing like this. Shivering and
clutching at her own arms, she hustled back to the house.

Inside, she put on her bathrobe, which no longer closed completely over the globe of her stomach. She tied her loose auburn waves into a ponytail and made tea, which she sipped at the cluttered kitchen table, waiting for daylight. Bills for the electricity and the gas sat opened, unpaid, and stained with coffee rings where Hank had used them for coasters. It depressed her to look at them.

She struggled up from the chair and cracked eggs into a skillet, careful not to break the yolks.

The kitty clock glanced at her, then turned its eyes away, glanced at her, turned away. Its tail wagged and its hands crept.

She ate and then went about wriggling into a pair of Hank’s old camouflage pants and a roomy hooded sweatshirt that would have accommodated her and a twin six months ago. She worked her feet into a pair of boots, but couldn’t reach the laces, so she left them untied.

On Bill Loar’s whopper-jawed porch steps, a skeletal black cat mewled at her. Smelling fried eggs and butter on her, it skittered up to her feet and rubbed its patchy head against her boots, crying. She reached down and stroked its knobby skull. Its gritty tongue licked at her fingers, and its mewling instantly became the steady thrumming of a purr.

She straightened up and went to the front door, a chipped and weathered mess, to knock. A few moments later, she watched the approach of Bill Loar’s orange trucker hat through the foggy sidelights. He wore that hat everyday.
He said nothing when he opened the door, just waited for her to speak. His face was as weathered as his front door, craggy and rough.

“Sorry to bother you so early, Bill.” She put a hand to the doorframe and fingered the splintery wood, but was careful to keep her eyes trained on his.

“I was up anyway,” he said. He looked down and watched the cat that was now weaving through her legs, purring. “What do you need?”

“Hank went out hunting yesterday, and I was expecting him home late for dinner, but he never did come back last night.”

He scratched at his chest through the flannel of his shirt. “Do you want to use the phone?”

“If you don’t mind.”

He stepped back and held the door open for her. “Come on back, sweetheart.”

She forced a smile and thanked him as she crossed the threshold. Harmless old man, harmless old man, she told herself. Harmless. She followed him into the shadowed interior of the house.

Of the farmhouse’s many windows, only the sidelights and a small pane of glass over the kitchen sink remained unboarded. The resulting gloom hid most of the clutter that filled the space under the staircase and overflowed the closets. Hammers, hatchets, shotgun shells, tire irons, all were barely visible in the musty dark. Andi glanced through an open doorway off the parlor and saw that what had once been a living room now accommodated a dusty tank of heating oil, roughly the size of a heifer. Couches upholstered in faded brocade surrounded it. Soot ringed the vents in the high ceiling.
Bill’s bulky silhouette moved away down the hall, and she turned her eyes forward to follow the glow of his orange hat.

“Does he have a phone on him?” he asked over his shoulder.

“Yeah, I’ll try that first, and if I don’t get an answer I’ll try his buddy, Quinn.”

Bill crossed the kitchen, took the receiver off the hook and handed it to her. It was a dialer, something she only vaguely remembered using in her childhood. The curly cord was full of kinks. Bill smiled as she took the receiver from his hand, his craggy face illuminated by the weak morning light that passed through the sole windowpane. She realized for the first time that he had dimples, and that his teeth were straight and even. In the dimness, he wasn’t hideous.

“I’ll be in the other room,” he said and jerked his chin toward the doorway. The room beyond was black but for the flickering blue of a t.v. screen, and he disappeared into it, looking back at her just before he rounded the corner.

She dialed, listening to the clicking of the plastic ring as it rotated on the handset. Hank’s phone wasn’t even on. She had no luck with Quinn either.

She said, “Shit,” as she hung up.

“Everything okay in there, Andi?”

“No one’s answering.”

There was the creak of springs as Bill presumably got up out of an easy chair. He appeared in the rectangle of blue glow, framed by scarred woodwork. “That isn’t any good. Got anybody else to try?”

She made a grim line out of her mouth and shook her head. “Not that I can think
“He’s a good outdoorsman. He knows what he’s doing. I bet you see him walk through your front door anytime now.”

She half smiled and nodded.

“Thanks for letting me use it,” she said to him, flicking her eyes back at the phone. “I’ll get out of your hair.”

Bill had come to stand in her path to the hallway. He shoved his hands down into the pockets of his jeans. He made no move to get out of her way.

He asked, “When’s the baby due? Pretty soon, right?”

She reached out and pressed her palm against the edge of his kitchen countertop. She felt grit under her fingers, but she didn’t withdraw her hand. She needed something to touch. “Yeah, real soon. Two more weeks,” she said.

“I didn’t think a skinny little thing like you could get so big, but I was wrong.” He cocked his head and studied the dome under her sweatshirt for a moment. Then he smiled, looked up into her face, and put both hands on the ladder back of a chair. He leaned on it until its legs creaked.

She said, “I guess so,” and blinked, struggling to hold his gaze without squirming.

There was a pause before he asked, “Where was it Hank was supposed to be hunting?”

“I think Ryerson Station.”

“That’s not far. Want to take a ride out there with me? See what we can see?”

She would rather have hitchhiked there.
“That’s alright, Bill. Thanks anyway. I bet you’re right. He’ll be home anytime now.”

“You sure, sweetheart? I wouldn’t mind firing up the truck for you. Wouldn’t take us more than an hour.”

“Really, that’s ok, Bill. If he doesn’t come home by lunch, I might take you up on it, but no sense in worrying yet.”

He knit his eyebrows together and nodded once at her. He walked her to the front door and held it open for her. The black cat watched her go.

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Lunchtime came and went. Grilled cheese cooked in the egg pan from that morning.

He wouldn’t be lost. He had grown up setting crayfish traps on the Ten Mile Creek. This was something else. He wouldn’t have left her to wonder all night and half the day if he could help it. Somewhere, he was stuck, and probably hurt.

She stacked her dirty dishes in the sink and then went to open his sock drawer. She rooted through all the threadbare white cotton until she found the switchblade and the shells. She slipped the knife into one cargo pocket and a fistful of the shells into the other, then moved on to the gun rack. There were three long guns; two rifles and a single-barreled 12-gauge. Without hesitation, she took the shotgun and slung it across her back.
It would be smartest to ask Bill for that ride, she knew. But pregnant women still rode motorcycles. In the house where she had grown up, there was a framed photograph of her own mother straddling a Honda Magna, her rounded belly testing the limits of her maternity halter top. Into August, Andi had still been riding along with Hank, her back against the sissy bar, her arms around his waist, and just enough space between the two of them for their unborn child.

Inside the garage that Hank had built off to the side of the doublewide, she pulled the choke on their old Nighthawk and cocked the throttle. It roared on the first try. While it warmed, she eyed the tools that hung in precise rows on the pegboard, considering which of them might be useful if she were to find him pinned beneath a fallen tree limb, or a rockslide. She grabbed Hank’s hatchet and hooked it through one of her belt loops.

The rumble of the motorcycle’s engine changed pitch. Heavy with gun, hatchet and child, she hefted a leg over the Honda and eased it forward off the center stand. She squeezed the clutch, toed the shift lever down into first gear, and let it roll to the end of the gravel drive.

The Nighthawk growled down the road, past Bill Loar’s, and about a mile later, past a smattering of somewhat lesser decayed farmhouses and cattle barns. She leaned into the curves cautiously, her body tense though the tar and chip was dry. Ryerson Station was eight miles west by highway 12, a road that slithered between hayfields and cow pastures. She met little traffic, and saw virtually no one but for a few busy figures in Carrhart bibs and jackets.
From highway 12, she turned onto a strip of dried mud and sunken gravel. Washboard ruts made the motorcycle buck under her, and her teeth clattered together.

Ryerson Station ran far and narrow along the Ten Mile Creek. Hank had a secret honey hole just up and over the ridge from the hiking trail that followed the water. He had pointed the tree out to her before, several times. He liked to show her the places he favored, and though she often had to feign interest, she was glad now for all the showing and telling.

She pulled the bike into a hardened dirt lot, dark from the shade of a cluster of tulip poplars, still partially cloaked in their foliage. Hank’s blue F-150 sat parked there, its tailgate long gone and its passenger side door mangled, rusting. She parked the bike beside it, carefully turned her hips in the saddle, and dismounted. The cold had numbed her fingers. They felt thick and stupid as she reached into one of her cargo pockets and pulled out her fistful of shotgun shells. She doubted they would be necessary. She knew that black bears were common, but shy, and that wolves made themselves scarce, too. But she had heard men in the bars talk over pints of catching both of these along the fringes of their peripheral vision. She had to suppose that an attack or a stalking was possible, even if not probable.

So she took the 12 gauge sling from her shoulder. The gun was nothing special, but it held six shots, and it felt natural in her hands. She loaded it full.

On the trail, her unlaced boots shuffled the leaves. The Ten Mile Creek gurgled low on her right, rushing back the way she’d come. Where it riffled over the pebbly bottom, it caught the sun and glittered, a ribbon of diamonds. The trail was studded with
rocks, and narrowed where floodwaters had nibbled it away. Her breath came in raw and left in clouds. Her pulse quickened. Sweat beaded on her brow and dampened the lank hair that fell across her forehead. She saw no one. Several times she called for Hank and then stood quiet, waiting for his voice. Each call was met with cold stillness, the steady rush of her labored breathing, the manic cackle of a bluejay.

She knew the place when she came to it. In the center of the creek, a Volkswagen-sized boulder plowed against the rush of water. A sapling sprouted from a crevice in the mossy rock. She stopped and strained to listen over the burble of the creek, but it overwhelmed all other sound. She held her breath. The baby squirmed in her belly, disturbed by the surge of adrenaline that coursed in her blood and electrified her nerve endings.

When it calmed, she began to climb the ridge. She no longer called for Hank. She needed all her breath for climbing. The gun was heavy on her back. As she neared the top of the ridge, she slowed her ascent, exhausted and wanting to gather herself before Hank’s sycamore fell into view. She dropped quietly to her knees and crawled to the crest. She saw the knobby skeletal fingers first, jags of white against the sapphire blue of the sky. Then she saw Hank.

He slumped south with the sun bathing the side of his face. She couldn’t see to tell if his eyes were open or closed. Her pulse surged again at the sight of him. His bow hung from the tree stand, strung onto a cord. And below him, nine coyotes still lay in wait at the base of the sycamore, thirty yards downhill from her. They napped in the shifting shade, occasionally flicking a tail or an ear. Two of them had lifted their heads
and were watching her with yellow eyes, mildly curious, but unconcerned. She panicked over how she would kill nine with only six shots. Then she noticed the fluorescent orange fletching of Hank’s arrows protruding from the bodies of four of them, and she calmed. These four were sleeping the forever sleep, and the last five she could manage.

She switched off the safety. She set her knees wide in the leaf debris, raised the gun, and butted the smooth-worn stock up against her shoulder. The two coyotes that had raised their heads to look at her were now on their feet. They were creeping closer, one cutting right, the other left, and now the remaining three were stirring. Blood thumped in her ears as she leveled the sights, exhaled, and pulled the trigger.

The noise startled Hank. His body jerked involuntarily and he fell from the tree stand, arms flailing as his body turned over in the air. Andi watched, helpless, as he landed on his side, the coyotes darting away from him, running for the cover of the ravine, spooked by the echoing volley of the gun. One lay dead and bleeding in the leaves.

Andi dropped the shotgun and ran for the base of the sycamore, her arms wrapped tight around her belly. Hank lay groaning. She dropped down to her knees beside him and started to touch him, but then withdrew her hand. He was gasping. His eyes were squeezed shut.

She asked him, "What hurts?"

He was still on his side, one arm pinned beneath him. He gritted his teeth, and with his free hand, pointed to that arm.

"Okay." She took a shaky breath. “Anything more important? Like your back?”
He shook his head. Leaves stuck in his shaggy hair.

He said, “You came alone?” His voice quavered. His lips were cracked, and it occurred to her that he must be thirsty, but she didn't have any water for him.

She said, “Yes,” and put a hand on his hip. “Should we get you on your back?”

He put his own hand over hers to stop her. “Did you borrow Loar’s pick-up?”

“I’d rather have walked. I brought the bike.”

He gaped at her. “Andi, that’s crazy,” he said. “Why didn’t you just call the cops?”

"I knew where to find you. We didn’t need them.” She brushed his hair off his forehead and kissed him there, just above his left eyebrow.

“You needed them,” he said. “In your condition, you needed them.” He was getting angry now. There were bluish rings under his eyes, and stubble along his jaw. “That was pretty fucking reckless, Andi.”

"I was careful,” she snapped. “I rode with you all summer. Nothing was different this time except that I was the driver and not the bitch on the back. And don’t talk to me about reckless. Where’s your goddamn safety harness?”

He bit his lip and squeezed his eyes shut again. He was shivering so hard the dead leaves around him rustled. Andi rubbed his good arm. He whimpered. "Why didn't you just bring Loar’s truck?"

She shrugged. “Because he wanted to come along.”

“So what?” He was looking at her hard.

She didn't know how to explain this to him. Bill's dimples, and his even, white
teeth in the shadowy kitchen. His half-hidden, lumpy face. His hardened, calloused hand grazing hers as he handed her the receiver. His heavy frame blocking her path, and his friendly questions. His offers.

"So what?" Hank asked again.

She looked past him, down into the ravine. A pair of yellow eyes watched her from the underbrush. A long, gray muzzle and pointy ears in the patchy shade of a young, half-naked oak. She remembered the gun, cast off near the top of the ridge, some thirty yards behind her. She felt the emptiness in her arms where she would have liked to hold it, and she felt the heaviness of her body, its slowness and its gracelessness, and she knew that this feeling she felt now was the same as the one from that morning, and she knew that she could never accurately describe it to him, could never really explain herself.