WHY DON’T YOU COME HOME NOW: STORIES

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By

Tiana McKenna

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This thesis has been approved by
the Honors Tutorial College and the Department of English.

____________________________
Dr. Darrell Spencer
Professor, English
Thesis Advisor

____________________________
Dr. Carey Snyder
Honors Tutorial College, Director of Studies
English

____________________________
Jeremy Webster
Dean, Honors Tutorial College
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INTRODUCTION

My introduction to minimalist literature the winter of my junior year at Ohio University caused possibly the greatest shock to my ideas about fiction that I had experienced since I graduated to “chapter books” from picture books as a child. I was taking a course called “Form and Theory of Fiction,” taught by my advisor, Darrell Spencer. Dr. Spencer reintroduced me to thinking like a writer after three years of acclimating myself to reading as a literary critic. He insisted that a writer shouldn’t approach writing the way we were approaching reading in the course, but the course’s emphasis on form and technique prompted me to begin thinking about fiction in a way, both utilitarian and artistic, that I never would have in a literature course. This was due to both Dr. Spencer’s excellent instruction and the simple fact that I was being exposed to stories written beyond the modern era; I had barely touched post-1940s literary fiction, and never in an academic setting. Specifically, I began reading minimalist fiction—stories that felt more familiar and welcoming in language and focus than anything I’d studied before. I knew that my writing was going to change permanently. Reading Amy Hempel’s “Dog of the Marriage,” I couldn’t believe how perfectly and painfully it unfurled. Hempel’s sentences “ache,” as Rick Moody says in his introduction to Hempel’s Collected Stories (x). No piece of fiction had pummeled my heart in that way before, and it did it with such simple language. I was hooked.

The title of Father of Minimalism is almost unanimously bestowed by critics upon Raymond Carver, who came onto the scene in the late 1960s. Ann Beattie was an
early presence as well. Her first collection, Distortions, was published in 1974. Most agree that Mary Robison and Fredrick Barthelme emerged as the next big figures in the movement. (Although Barthelme’s debut collection, which I have not read, was published in 1970, the evaluations of his work that I’ve encountered have focused primarily on his 1983 collection, Moon Deluxe.) Amy Hempel’s first collection was released in 1985 and her second in 1990. Her work is definitively connected to the minimalist label in most critical analyses, though it is, regrettably, often left out. Some of Bobbie Ann Mason’s work is incorporated into several discussions of minimalism that I have come across. That completes the list of writers whose names I’ve regularly encountered in my research. Minimalist writers (whether they embrace or reject that designation) are a small gang, and though all but Carver have published in the twenty-first century, their day in the forefront of the literary world—the 1980s and early ‘90s—has passed. I have to admit from the outset, then, that my evolution as both a writer and literary scholar is still in progress. Though I have read works by writers who followed the minimalists, my research this year has been focused on minimalist writers.

Literary minimalism emerged on the heels of postmodernist fiction. Philip E. Simmons provides an excellent analysis of the connections between postmodernist and minimalist literature in a chapter titled “Minimalist Fiction as ‘Low’ Postmodernism” in his book Deep Surfaces. He describes the aims of minimalism:

Growing up in the shadow of the high postmodernists,…part of the conversion experience for the minimalist writers of [Frederick Barthelme’s] generation was the realization ‘that people were more interesting than words.’ The minimalist project, then, wants to have it
both ways, trying to rescue representation from the stifling conventions of an essentially nineteenth-century literary realism, while avoiding the perceived solipsism and ‘all over irony’ of the high postmodernists. (130)

In other words, minimalists set out to revive a stale realism using the new postmodernist understanding of the unreliability and false, mimetic nature of literary representation. This poses an obvious problem: minimalism presents itself as “a ‘return’ to plain style while remaining properly ironic about the discredited representational conventions on which plain style rests” (Simmons 129). Minimalist writers teetered on a tenuous line, but I believe that the freedom to buck narrative tradition where they saw fit opened up different modes of representation to minimalists. These innovations in form and technique seem now so inextricable from the major themes of minimalist works, as I will discuss, that it would be difficult or impossible to determine which prompted the other.

The label *minimalist* has proven to be more a curse than a blessing; critics use it derogatorily to suggest an absence of various necessary components. In his review of Carver’s *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, James Atlas uses language that suggests minimalist fiction is malnourished: readers of such fiction are “left with a hunger”; Carver’s first, less-minimalist collection is described as “robust” whereas *What We Talk About* is “thin, diminished” (97-98). Writing for *Harper’s* in April 1986, Madison Bell paints minimalism as lacking compassion or purpose, using admittedly delicious phrases such as “polite nihilism” and “casual despair” (65-66). What these critics see as fatal omissions, I and other critics view as artful suggestion at a hidden depth. Cynthia Whitnet Hallett, in the introduction to her book *Minimalism*
and the Short Story, identifies how the term “minimalist” where it is applied in fiction is somewhat misleading. In the visual arts, the label is used to describe works in which the intention is “to avoid any implications or meaning beyond the subject/object itself and to aim at a kind of phenomenological purity,” whereas minimalist writers work “to evoke within a minimal frame some larger issue” (1). Hallett notes that the label is appropriate, however, insofar as both visual and literary minimalism utilize positive and negative space: “minimalist writers appear to generate as much story (positive space) with as little text (any details omitted equate to negative space) as possible” (2). In other words, minimalist stories are characterized by an economy of detail, but those which are present produce meaning beyond their surfaces.

This is the understanding of minimalism that I will use as a jumping-off point for the following discussion of my own stories as well as more in-depth discussion of the characteristics of minimalist fiction.

“If You’re Not with Us”: Point of View and Tense in Minimalist Stories

Minimalist writers, more than any group before them, have embraced first person, present tense narration. Two of my three stories presented in this thesis, “Why Don’t You Come Home Now,” and “At the Edge of the Forest, No Wild Instinct,” are written from this point of view and tense. Bobbie Ann Mason describes my views regarding the utility of the present tense perfectly:

[Y]ou get the impression [the author] doesn’t know any more than you do about what’s happening….If the author starts out in the past tense…then you assume he has sorted events out, he has a perspective on them…[I think the uncertainty of the present tense said a lot about
what we were making of the late twentieth century, or were unable to make of it. (qtd., Simmons 125)

Here, Mason identifies the sense of uncertainty that I have found essential in my own work. The past tense not only implies perspective on the part of the writer, something that first disappeared in modern-era works and has more often than not been absent since, but on the part of a first-person narrator as well. Minimalist writers are some of the first to deal with this issue. Their characters, the narrators particularly, inhabit worlds nearly bereft of meaningful connection. Even stories driven by association and seemingly-significant images culminate in what Miriam Marty Clark describes as “a brief, barely won moment of narrative coherence” that more often than not still leaves the characters bewildered and frozen (156). Interpersonal interactions, rather than clarifying or alleviating their confusion, consistently reinforce “the futility of action and the inability of language to communicate precisely” (Hallett 10). The present tense delivers these impressions to the reader seemingly as they happen, imbuing them with a sense of immediacy and weight. Clark calls this feat “narrativity itself” (157).

Though Bobbie Ann Mason suggests that minimalist writers began employing this technique to reflect their and their characters’ weak grasp on life in the late twentieth century, I feel that it is equally appropriate for depictions of digital-age twenty-first-century life, in which we are accustomed to constant inundation with information; we see most this information but, due to its sheer volume, we must avoid attempting to connect with it or searching it for meaning.

Present tense narration pairs perfectly with minimalist themes such as the inability to cope with grief, continual failure to make sense of life, and the unraveling
of self. The point of view of the narration is also an important contributor. Though
minimalist writers employ third person often as well, the frequency with which they
choose the previously-unusual pairing of first person with the present tense is notable
and worth exploring. As mentioned above, “it is a hallmark of minimalist fiction not to
offer a narrative voice with knowledge or perspective very different from the
characters’ own” (Simmons 123). In third-person stories, even limited third-person
and especially coupled with the past tense, there is a constant presence of a narrator
beyond the main character. Though of course the writer lurks behind any first- or
third-person narrator, the first person gives the impression of being closest to the
narrator. This helps the writer avoid giving the impression that he or she is nudging
the reader to adopt the writer’s own opinions about the characters and their actions.

Madison Bell feels that the opposite is the case; he suggests that some
minimalist characters (speaking particularly of Beattie’s and Carver’s)

are united by their inability to solve, or even fully recognize, their
problems. The reader is drawn in not by identification but by a sort of
enlightened, superior sympathy: I understand the nature of your
difficulty; how is it you don’t? (Bell 67)

Although a writer cannot prevent an arrogant or presumptuous reader from thinking
such thoughts while reading a minimalist story, I expect (because it is true of me) that
minimalist writers trust the majority of their readers to understand that the stories are
commentary on the way none of us comprehend the nature of our struggles. The reader
is able to comprehend the characters’ difficulties much in the same way that we are
able to recognize the nature of our friends’ difficulties while at the same time failing to
identify our own. I think of François Camoin’s story “Miami.” I felt when I read that
story that the narrator’s determination to “save everybody from this Muzak love” was so cynical that it became unreasonable and even simplistic (13). I did not, however, feel any smugness in this realization. Rather, I experienced the pain one feels upon encountering a situation to which we all fall victim—in this case, the common and disastrous idea that obstinate cynicism will save us from suffering rather than cause it. I was not pushed in that direction by an outside perspective (save for the writer, as discussed, but his outlook is as obscured as possible). The closeness to the character provided by the first-person narration allowed me to form that opinion based solely on what he revealed about himself, and led me to recognition and identification rather than smugness.

Of my stories, only “If You’re Not with Us,” is written in the past rather than present tense. This story began in limited third person, but this narrative distance coupled with Elena’s absolute inability to comprehend her situation—the familiar minimalist failure to communicate and understand, certainly a factor, was compounded by her age and lack of experience—rendered her flat and unreadable. When I made the switch to first person, it was to relieve writers’ block in the revising process. This worked wonders. Elena’s confusion no longer obscured her, but became a palpable component of the story.

I retained, however, the past tense narration in this story throughout the writing process. Elena is by far the youngest narrator of any piece I’ve written. The confusion of a twelve-year-old added, as I mentioned above, an emotional and logical haziness even more pervasive than that of an adult. Adults narrators are stubborn in their
worldviews; Elena’s, at the time of the story’s action, is still being formed. The primary influence on the development of her worldview is her mother, until her grandmother arrives and adds another, rather forceful and appealing influence. Having Elena narrate the story from a temporal distance allowed me to make the story’s focus on her childhood confusion more clear. Grown-up Elena is choosing to reflect upon this incident precisely because of the confusion it caused her during the development of her young mind. Writing, I felt as though it was Elena who was choosing to detail the scenes that seemed significant to her looking back. The scenes, then, tell the emotional story of her experience (in which emotions accumulate and shift with each scene) rather than the chronological one (in which events progress with each scene).

“At the Edge of the Forest, No Wild Instinct”: Everyday Catastrophes

The overwhelming nature of grief and the inability to effectively communicate that appears in minimalist fiction is at the forefront of my story “At the Edge of the Forest, No Wild Instinct.” Philip E. Simmons identifies a concern found in many minimalists stories that I believe plays a role in “At the Edge”:

Minimalists have in their own way come to terms with the difficulty—perhaps impossibility—of restoring “depth” to historical consciousness under conditions in which the realm of the image seems to have engulfed reality. (135)

The stories to which Simmons refers conspicuously inhabit a consumer society driven by familiarity, a world in which everything is instantly recognizable and “visible without necessarily being intelligible” (Simmons 145). The “texture of [the lives of the characters] is rendered in myriad tiny acts of consumption, placing these characters in
a landscape of mass consumer culture” (Simmons 109). Amy Hempel presents the absurdity of this landscape most explicitly in her widely-discussed story “Celia is Back.” A man is helping his children apply for sweepstakes and contests, one of which requires hopefuls to complete the sentence “I like Jell-O pudding because------.” He begins to rattle off sentences full of marketing buzzwords:

I like Jell-O pudding because I like a good hearty meal after a brisk walk on a winter’s day—something to really warm me up….I like Jell-O pudding because it has a tough satin finish that resists chipping and peeling. No, no….I mean, I like Jell-O pudding because it has a fruitier taste. Because it’s garden fresh….Because it goes on dry to protect me from wetness longer. Oh, Jell-O pudding….I like it because it’s more absorbent than those other brands. Won’t chafe or ride up. (15)

The man recognizes the Jell-O pudding brand, but he is suddenly disconnected from what it signifies—in its pervasive visibility it has ceased to be intelligible to him, and might as well be any product.

Most of Hempel’s stories and many of Mary Robison’s are focused less on mindless acts of consumerism and the failure to make sense of everyday images and more on the struggle and failure to handle the catastrophes of everyday life. Sometimes, these catastrophes are heartbreaking in an immediate way: a woman copes with the imminent death of a friend in Hempel’s “The Cemetery Where Al Jolson is Buried”; a seventy-eight-year-old man watches his thirty-five-year-old wife die in Robison’s “Yours.” Sometimes, though, the catastrophes are tiny, and in their tininess they are both hilarious and unsettling. Hempel’s “Reference #388475848-5” is written as a letter to the New York City Parking Violations Bureau in response to a ticket the letter-writer received. In less than five pages the woman’s neurotic rambling becomes
about much more than the ticket—she obsesses over the phrase “The Empire State” on her New York license plates, which she was ticketed for covering. She goes on at length about a date at a film festival, analyzes her emotional reaction to the ticket she received, and describes a recent experience of assault in a park. By the end of the letter, the closing lines are not necessary: “My hand is shaking while I write. It’s saying what I can’t say—this is the way I say it” (341). Hempel has made it clear before those lines that the woman is writing the letter because she can identify no other way to cope with her anger.

In my story “At the Edge of the Forest, No Wild Instinct,” both the absence of meaning in a consumer society and the ability to cope with grief and anger appear in a way that to me feels more pertinent to my generation. The narrator of the story is a member of the ever-expanding group of young white college graduates who majored in the humanities and never quite found their places, but who feel an impulse to maintain the same level of middle-class, lazily-socially-conscious living that they grew up with. When Gina, the narrator, finds out that her husband, Michael, has quit his job to pursue a music career, she becomes fed up with maintaining the façade. She stops shopping at the organic grocery store they can’t afford to patronize, which becomes a sticking point in their household. But words such as Fair Trade and organic have lost their significance to Gina, who is worrying about feeding their child and fighting back against her obstinately idealistic husband. But she expresses these

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1 That is, to a certain demographic group in my generation. I would like to take the opportunity here to acknowledge that the stories included in this thesis focus on characters with regrettably similar backgrounds with regard to race, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, etc. This is a shame particularly because there is not a great deal of diversity in minimalist fiction in general.
frustrations in ineffective, petty ways, culminating in an exasperated monologue to a woman who contacts the cosmetics company call center where Gina is a supervisor—a woman who doesn’t know Gina and only wants to complain that the makeup she purchased is giving her a rash.

“Why Don’t You Come Home Now”: Plot and Focus

Another common feature of minimalist stories is the tendency to introduce a major event—a death, a divorce, an accident—and focus not on the event, but on the ripples the event causes in lives of those it affects. The combination of what Clark calls “the breakdown of narrative and the narration of breakdown,” the postmodern disregard for telling a story in chronological order combined with minimalist themes of grief come together quite well: “past and future, time and space, are drawn into a multiple, disorienting, and overwhelming present” (Clark 155). Telling a story out of order allows the writer to place an emphasis on emotional and thematic connection rather than concerning him or herself with when each event happened. As I discussed previously, these emotional connections propel my story “If You’re Not with Us.” The events that set the story in motion, Elena’s grandfather’s infidelity and her grandmother’s subsequent arrival, are not the story. They are the forces that allow the emotional story beneath to surface. This technique also appears in my favorite of Amy Hempel’s stories, “The Uninvited.” The story opens on a fifty-year-old woman taking a pregnancy test. She was raped and has now missed her period. The rape is not directly discussed until fifteen pages later, and the reader never learns the results of the
test. Instead, at the forefront is the narrator’s emotional experience of the situation, the
connections she makes between this event and other parts of her life—her past
experiences with abortion, a movie called *The Uninvited*, and psychology experiments
she has been participating in for extra credit for a class.

My story “Why Don’t You Come Home Now” works in a similar manner,
particularly at the end. Although a reader might expect the death of the Miranda’s
mother to be the primary focus of the story, the ending finds her faced with the past,
present, and the future. She is reflecting on past interactions with her mother and
younger brother when she sees her brother approaching in a truck, and in that moment
is confronted with decision either to keep her brother out of her life or to take the
opportunity she has to allow him back in as she can no longer do with her mother. It is
in that “overwhelming present” that the story closes. This technique suited my
purposes well; I was not interested in Miranda’s final decision, but instead in how she
arrived mentally at the moment in which she must make the choice.

The stories in the following pages could not have been written without the
innovations of the writers I have discussed here. Particularly in the areas of focus and
perspective, the example of minimalist fiction has enabled me to produce work that
feels genuine and weighty, and have even informed my ideas about storytelling and
plot. I imagine that as I mature as a writer, my voice and technique will diverge more
and more from those of the minimalists I admire. I am certain, though, that my work
will always owe a great deal to their advancements.
Works Cited


IF YOU’RE NOT WITH US

“Where is he now?” my mother asked her mother, Lydia. She had not said hello first.

Grandma Lydia looked at her and she looked away. “You would ask. And not even your real father, either.”

“Can’t I wonder?”

“Oh, Lord, Melanie, it isn’t the time. Why in front of Elena?” She paused to give me a kiss with lips puckered like disapproval. Her lipstick had a blunt scent like the pith of an orange—the white stuff when you peel away the rind, which I always picked off before I’d put a slice of the fruit in my mouth.

“She knows what’s going on,” my mother said.

I didn’t know what was going on. Or I did, but only in the vague way that I perceived the things adults considered important. Grandpa had been with another woman. With was a word that I understood went from very inconsequential to very significant as people got older. I didn’t want to think about it anymore, but now it was in our apartment, living with us. It would be in the kitchen at breakfast and in the living room while we were sitting around at night watching black-and-white movies.

I went to the window and made up stories about the people on the street below our building. That businessman in a suit walking with that lady in the long gauzy skirt—he raised dogs for show and liked Milky Way bars. She had never had the flu, but had also never seen the ocean. My mother and grandmother talked:
“Your Aunt Lizzy is quitting her job to work on her spiritual life. I think she’s moving to Nevada or Colorado or someplace ridiculous,” Grandma said. Before my mother could protest, Grandma lit a cigarette.

“Please don’t smoke in here, Mom,” my mother said, opening a window in the kitchen.

“A good girl. You can’t really be mine.”

“You’d know better than me,” Mom said.

“I’ll take Elena shopping tomorrow,” Grandma said. “Work going well?”

“Elena has school tomorrow.”

“Is that cute accountant still there? Steve?” Grandma Lydia asked.

“Sam. Yeah, he’s there.” Then, “What?”

“Hmm. Well, write the teacher a note. Tell her I’m dead or something,” Grandma said.

This talk was fine with me. I tuned out.

Later, we retired to bed. I was displaced from my room by my grandmother, who didn’t want to take the big bed in Mom’s room. It’ll overwhelm me. So I slept on the big bed. My mother pulled some musty blankets from the closet and her alarm clock from the wall and went to sleep on the couch, which didn’t fold out into a bed.
So now my grandmother was in the apartment. Tiny, interesting pots of things appeared in the medicine cabinet and unfamiliar bottles of things accumulated on the kitchen counter.

“Don’t touch those,” Mom said, standing at the stove making chili. I knew what the bottles were. I was twelve and in middle school.

Mornings, I watched my grandmother put on her makeup. She used the magnifying side of her circular standing mirror and in it I could see her huge and distorted mouth hanging open slightly, lips tense. Foundation that looked like yogurt. Liner, shadow, mascara. Ruthless pink blush applied to the apples of her cheeks, fading into her temples.

I watched as she extracted any offensive blond hairs from around her brows until they were two thin, nearly-invisible arcs that looked like an afterthought on her face. Then she slipped the tweezers back into the makeup bag, exchanging them for a dark pencil almost the color of her hair, and made quick but deliberate strokes with the pencil over the sad, limp blond eyebrows—and beyond.

“You do this every day,” I said.

“Yes, of course. It must be done. It’s like breakfast to me, anymore.”

“Mom doesn’t.” My mother wouldn’t even let me shave my legs and armpits yet, one of the signs of my lack of domain over my adolescent body that wouldn’t occur to me until I got older. I didn’t know any other girls in my class whose mothers wouldn’t let them shave.
“Your mother is an oddity. She directs her anger at things that can’t respond to it—institutions, facts of life. It’s silly to resist the fact that your presentation matters. The idea exhausts me. You probably will, someday. Do this, I mean.”

There was nothing my mother, dressed in scratchy suits and wearing the same brand of perfume she’d put on every day for as long as I could remember (since high school, Grandma said), could do about what happened after she left for work at seven each morning. Grandma would call the attendance secretary and tell her things like: “The poor girl’s terribly ill. Thank goodness I’m in town and can take care of her.”

While Grandma was visiting I went to school maybe three-quarters of the time.

Usually she took me to the mall. It was just down the street and failing. My grandmother waved her hand at the skylights one day and said, “It’s bearable. You know, if you don’t look eye-level.” I tried to walk around with my eyes trained above the eager bright signs of the few shops hanging around like unwanted, hungry animals.

At a JC Penney’s, Grandma Lydia held up a bold floral dress for my approval. It was shorter than any skirt I owned, with a low scoop neck. I said it was pretty, adding it to the pile of things in my mind that created a picture of my grandmother—what she liked and didn’t like, how she moved and spoke. She never picked through the racks herself. Instead, she would tell a salesgirl my size and have her retrieve a selection of dresses that might be appropriate for the occasion. Satin was juvenile and tacky, she instructed, and would make me look too eager; I should aim instead for chiffon or silk.
“Do you know what’s going on with your grandfather and me?” she asked, still holding the flowered dress in the air.

The dress had a ruffle at the bottom like icing piped onto a cake. The Spring Dance was coming up at school, and I imagined myself wearing it there, tried to picture me and the dress having a good time on the dance floor, or next to the punch and cookies—my image of a middle school dance.

I nodded at my grandmother’s question.

“Smart girl. But really—it’s just a pothole. You encounter those, you know, particularly after twenty-eight years of marriage. Once I move past this and get it together, I’ll be out of your hair.”

She grabbed my chin and smiled. I took the dress with both hands and placed it in the cart. We shopped until it was time for dinner, amassing armfuls of whatever pleased us because that seemed like the reasonable thing to do.

“Don’t be such a wimp, Melanie,” my grandmother said to my mother.

“I’ve had a long day at work, I have a tension headache, and I don’t see how it’d kill you to keep the fu--” (she paused, swallowed, and dropped a hand that had been poised in the air) “to keep the lights on.”

The only time all three of us were in the same room was during meals and when Mom turned on Turner Classic Movies in the evening. When it was just the two of us, Mom wouldn’t let me turn off all the lights and pull the dusty, warped vinyl
blinds shut to make the living room a movie theater like they did at my friend Maura’s house. It strained her eyes.

“I’ll make popcorn,” Grandma said.

“Please, Mom?”

“Oh geez,” said Mom, “fine.”

I preferred the movies with happy endings. My mother had explained how such expectations would make my life the sort of wreck that ends with the car wrapped around a telephone pole.

That wasn’t the point.

The feature presentation was *Adam’s Rib*. A woman had shot her husband; it was a comedy. Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn played a lawyer couple on opposite sides of the criminal case. The dialogue was like a game of pool, strategic and quick and riding on the calculated reactions of each collision. It didn’t make sense to me but I didn’t say anything; instead I left the living room a quarter of the way through the film to do my math homework at the kitchen table. The worksheet covered squares up to 144, which I hated, but there was nothing better to do.

The voices from the living room grew louder. A few moments passed before I realized that the volume on the television hadn’t been turned up.

“No. No! She can go if she wants to, but not in that. What does she even have to fill it with?”
“I don’t know if you’ve noticed lately—your daughter does have tits. You can ignore your own as you please, but you may not be able to deny she’s growing up much longer, Melanie.”

“Having standards has nothing to do with denial,” my mother said.

“Standards? For what?”

“For the way my daughter presents herself? For her pride and respect for herself as a thinking human being?”

“So her choice is between a goddamn dress and her dignity?” Grandma said. “I don’t understand.”

“You wouldn’t.”

A door slammed. Grandma had gone to bed.

When I peeked into the living room, I could not read my mother’s face.

For a few days, my mother and grandmother barely spoke to one another.

The apartment felt like this: moving around, I had to push aside uncomfortable feelings hanging in the air like ludicrous party decorations to get even from my bedroom to the couch.

My grandmother was waiting in the living room when I got up one morning. My mother came in from the bathroom, ready for work, not long afterward.

“She loves to make an impact,” Mom said. She didn’t look at Grandma.

“Never fails.”
Grandma Lydia was surrounded by suitcases and bags at her feet like loyal dogs. Her daughter was ignored. She spoke at me instead and I felt as though I’d been shoved. I was still in that fuzzy area between asleep and awake.

Grandma Lydia repeated herself, looking at me: “If you could drive, dear, where do you suppose you’d go?”

“Are you going back to Edward?” My mother again—again, ignored. My drowsy mind was barely capable of making the effort to connect the man’s name with my grandfather.

My grandmother said, “Not somewhere stupid like Disney World, but I mean if you were a little older and had the whole goddamn world in front of you.”

“You’re not fooling anyone. I know where you’re going,” my mother said.

“Where would you go?” Grandma, again to me.

I said nothing.

“Would you even go anywhere?” Her insistent eyes made me anxious. I felt a tightening in my stomach. I could see she wanted an answer, but I didn’t understand what she was asking of me.

“He asked you to go back to him, didn’t he? How can you be so gullible?” my mother said to my grandmother.

Grandma addressed her, but didn’t look at her. “What would you know about it?” she said. The silver bracelets around her wrist clinked as she fluffed her hair.

Mom grabbed her briefcase from the couch and went out, leaving the door open behind her.
I never answered my grandmother’s question. She didn’t leave.

The balcony collected cigarette butts. I tried to count them as Grandma Lydia talked to me, but kept losing track of which I had and hadn’t counted.

“I’ve always known that boundaries aren’t strict. I mean. For instance. If I wanted to paint something and then glue a shoe onto the canvas, I could. I saw that once, actually. But you know, that sort of thing. I can take one part of reality and insert it into another, and that’s okay. Maybe you’ve realized this?”

I shrugged. I could hear in her voice that this was important to my grandmother. I listened because I wasn’t sure what might impel her to pack her things again and leave the sheets at the foot of the bed, neatly folded and ready for the washing machine.

“Your mother thinks she’s got it. She didn’t end up like me, she thinks. But look at where she is,” she said. Tears slid down her face. “She fell short. I fell short. I did try. I pushed her.

“But it’s so much easier not to mess up people’s ideas of what something is. A painting—it’s paint. Not shoes.”
AT THE EDGE OF THE FOREST, NO WILD INSTINCT

I don’t know how it happened—Michael’s banjo is wrecked.

I left Loralie in the bedroom for a few minutes and when I came back, the banjo was on the ground, the plastic head cracked and caving in. I picked up Loralie, who was laughing, and looked away, leaving the mutilated instrument where it lay.

Loralie is red-in-the-face crying when Michael meets me at our apartment at seven thirty. I tell him I don’t know what she’s upset about, she had her afternoon nap and dinner and she’s dry and I don’t think she’s sick. He gives me a look—Are you really going to leave me here with a screaming child. I don’t know what else to do. I have to get to work. Marta called me a few hours ago to see if I could come in early but there was no one to watch my kid. I leave without mentioning the banjo.

I drive to work, the 24-hour call center of a large cosmetics company. The company operates out of California, but we do the nastiest work for them up here in Seattle. There is a drizzle falling from the dark sky. It rains here, but not as much as you’ve heard. Not enough to make living difficult, but enough that my hometown in Utah feels dehydrated and bleached out. The grey days, you know, they make the colors pop; the greens of the trees don’t have to compete with a brilliant blue sky.

I was an art history major, but it doesn’t bother me anymore to work a job that has nothing to do with my studies. I hated art by graduation. It felt irrelevant. The work I did was for no one but myself and for nothing but a grade. This job, though not everyone would see it the way I do, gives me some sense of accountability. If I don’t show up to work, the reps, the people under me, have no one to transfer customers to
when they ask to talk to a supervisor. This position pays more but it also means I get
the most tiresome calls, the people threatening to sue or the ones who feel that their
representative wasn’t showing enough respect. Once I had to take a call from a guy—
his name was Arlen, I remember—who was complaining that the pump on his lotion
bottle was stuck. I got the impression that I was the only person he had spoken with all
day, maybe all week.

I don’t check my cell phone while I drive, prolonging the inevitable. And
yes—my first call of the evening is Michael.

“My banjo. What the hell?”

“I don’t know,” I say.

“The head is fucked.”

“Those can be replaced. Right?”

“Gina, this is about respect,” he says, “for my things. For me.”

“Well, you didn’t mention that.”

He hangs up and doesn’t call back. This can somehow still bother me after
seven years. It is my role. I am the one who can’t stand an angry silence.

Michael comes home from work the next day bearing, with the most vigilant,
tender fingers, a brand-new banjo. Five-string resonator with an imitation calfskin
head. All five of your senses tell you that this instrument is of a certain quality. And,
on top of this:

He says he’s quit his job. Both of those things without asking me?
“How much did that thing cost?”

“I had to take action, Gina,” he says. “If I’d talked to you I’d still have a shit banjo and a shit job. I feel good now!” And I can see that he does. The ways he cradles the banjo—is he trying to make me jealous?

Fortitude. That is what my father told me a relationship, any kind of worthwhile and lasting relationship, takes to thrive. Fortitude is not part of the value system of my and Michael’s friends. When we were in college they thought, *I haven’t experienced enough, how can I know now’s the right time to settle down?* and, *There could be better, I should hold out.* What I thought and what I’m sure Michael thought also, was—there is in the world any number of people I could be with, but I found this person and they’ll work fine. I would be tempted at this point, you’d think, to admit my friends were right, but it’s still too early in our lives to deliver that verdict. I think if at age forty my friends are still holding out for better, you won’t be able to say I’m worse off than they are. My way of thinking could still win out, even if it didn’t get me where I wanted to go. In this case.

Michael is talking to me about his band. He quit his job at Barnes & Noble to focus on his music. His broken banjo, felled by our two-year-old, seemed to him a sign. Not the one I’d have taken from it. He says, I’d appreciate your support. He says, me and the guys—who jam about once a month as of now—we think we have something good going, I want to see this through.

Something seems wrong with his eyebrows. It seems as though he should fall over from the weight of them at the top of his lanky body. And now that I’ve noticed
this I can’t stop looking at them. “Well,” I say, “now I can see about getting moved to the day shift.” Working nights, which I’ve been doing since Loralie was born, was not my first choice. We could have applied for discounted child care from the state but Michael refused to take anything that looked like a handout. I don’t know where he had room left for that pride. Maybe his vacant pockets. Can he tell that I can’t stop looking at his overgrown eyebrows?

“If you keep working nights, we could spend days together,” he says.

“I’d rather not. What’ll you do with Loralie when you go to practice? I’m assuming Matty and Gilman and Fritz are still employed,” I say. “And anyway, it’d be nice to start sleeping more than five hours.”

“I could get up with Loralie.”

I glance at him. “Days will be better. We’ll see each other nights and maybe I’ll be able to go to all the shows the band’s going to have in no time.”

“Damn, Gina. I’m really trying here.”

I know how I’m coming off, but I keep going. “I’m sorry,” I say, running my fingers over the strings of the new banjo. “I’ll try to think about higher callings than making rent.”

I trip on the sheets getting out of bed at ten the next morning. I am surprised that my body did not rouse itself, accustomed to rising with Loralie at eight, and that the noise of beginning the day didn’t pull me out of sleep. With a grasping mind I enter the living room. No one is home.
I don’t know whether Michael took Loralie out, or if he took her and left altogether. But right away I notice that most of his stuff is still around; I go into the bedroom and see that his clothes are still in the closet. The only thing apparently missing is the new banjo.

Without Loralie here I am a free agent. What do I do now? What did I ever do? I fall onto the couch and consider my next move. Strewn around the empty living room are segments of my life with Michael. We can see anything this way if we’re feeling theatrical enough. The objects feel weighty: for instance, the teacup Michael bought me when he was studying abroad in Germany our sophomore year, the first gift I received from him, which cracked in the move to Seattle and is alone on an ignorable little built-in shelf. He thought I collected them, but he had been thinking of someone else. Loralie’s toys on the ground—I feel a lurch in my chest. It’s strange to be home without her. And now there is the mutilated banjo.

I call Marta, my boss. She likes me, and agrees right away to switch me to the day shift.

I throw my hair into a ponytail and throw on some jeans to go to the organic grocery that we can’t afford to shop at, a few blocks away. All I can think to pick up is coffee and peanut butter—I just made a trip to the store last Thursday. The brand of coffee we usually buy is on special this week and they’ve put up a big display. The copper-colored tins are arranged in neat pyramids in front of a backdrop featuring a smiling South American farmer and a pair of hands filled with deep brown coffee beans. *Fair Trade!* is fake-stamped next to the farmer’s head. One of my friends told
me that even with Fair Trade products you can’t know the workers are being treated fairly. It barely means anything. I think of Organic and even Premium and Gourmet. I buy a cheaper brand of coffee this time and go home.

It is nearly one and I’ve been finding unimportant tasks around the apartment to urge time along when Michael and Loralie come home.

“Where have you been?” I say.

“Oh, visiting the guys. I wanted to show them my banjo, and I hadn’t brought Loralie around in a while. What’s the problem?”

“Problem? No, it’d just be nice if you’d left a note or something.”

“Call next time?”

“I did,” I say.

He pulls his phone from his jeans pocket and shuffles. “Ah, sorry. Well hey! What’d you do with your free morning?”

“Jesus, Michael,” I say, picking up our daughter. “I need to feed Loralie. Go play your banjo.”

He follows me into the kitchen. “This isn’t our brand,” he says, picking up the tin of strange coffee on the counter.

“What does it matter, it’s coffee.”

“Well, get our brand next time,” he says. “This one isn’t even labeled Fair Trade.”

I lob an empty Greek yogurt container at his head. He lets out a short laugh, but then frowns and lopes long-limbedly into the living room, a slouchy kid. Random
banjo notes, sharp and dissonant like bee stings, float into the kitchen. Headed right for me. I nearly raise a hand to shoo them away.

The woman across from me at lunch on my first day working day shift is wearing an unwrinkled button-up and turning her fork over and over in her fingers. She is saying, “South Beach is bullshit but I hear that a lot of people are taking Adderall and it really works. You’re just never hungry is the thing. Friend of a friend sells them for seven bucks a pop, which you’re not going to get anywhere else. In a million years. I can get you in on it, if you’re interested.” There are six of us at the table. I’m not sure who she’s talking to.

We ate on night shift, but never together. There is something about socializing at one or two in the morning without the aid of alcohol that feels too intimate. Our kinship was strengthened even, maybe, as we all slumped alone at our desks, taking bites of microwaved frozen burritos while callers whined and grumbled in our ears. It was a play. We were Night Shift People. Not people who worked the night shift. What I mean is—who expects to end up there?

The crisp woman says, “What about you, Gina? Want in?”

“No. I’m not trying to lose weight, but thank you for thinking of me,” I say.

“I’m telling you, they’re little miracles in easy-to-swallow capsule form.”

To my left an older woman, plum-lipsticked and turkey-wattled, chuckles.

“You got some baby weight on you, hon.” Her eyes are on my middle. “Bet you don’t look like you did when he met you.”
“Hasn’t been a problem yet,” I say.

“Just because it’s not a problem doesn’t mean you shouldn’t fix it,” the turkey woman says. I nudge my pasta primavera around in its plastic microwave-safe packaging.

The first woman asks me what my husband does. I pull an elastic band from my wrist and tie my hair into a ponytail. I tell her that he is a musician.

“Oh! Then you’d be better watch yourself. Especially if he’s a guitarist. Or a drummer.”

I manage a small grunt of acknowledgment. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Well women love musicians. I’m sure you know all about that. Friend of mine dated a guy, a guitar player I think. They were together for two years. She was paying three-quarters of the rent so he could make his art. Comes home one day and he’s got a nineteen-year-old in their bed. And probably not the first. The way she tells the story, she locked him and the girl out of the apartment straight away, naked and still sweating. And she claims she slapped his ass as he was hustling out the door, but I don’t know about that.”

A couple of guys at another table are arguing about communal fridge rules and etiquette. I miss the night shift solitude. I say to the woman across from me, “Not to be rude, but it sounds like your friend could’ve seen it coming.”

“Geez, Gina. He was a freeloading prick. She was just a sweet fool. But don’t worry. She’s like the rest of us now.”
Lunch room philosophy. From a woman who looks like she’s been bleaching her hair since infancy. I get up and dump the rest of my lunch in the trash can.

I order a Tanqueray on the rocks and the a guy at the bar gives me an approving look but what he doesn’t know is that I’ve been ordering the same drink since I turned twenty-one because I never got the hang of anything else. I don’t deserve the respect. I know what the words mean now—neat, rocks, straight, and isn’t that about it?—and then there are your basic mixers, but I became acquainted to the drink the way a painter’s thumbs form calluses from rubbing acrylics away. Above the bar the name of the place, Elevator’s, is painted in clumsy letters. After four weeks, as many practice sessions, and a lot of strumming on the banjo in front of the TV, Michael pulled a show out of almost nowhere. It was a friend-of-a-friend situation, someone knows the guy who owns this place in Capitol Hill. Freshly dubbed Atop the Evergreens, Michael and the guys are playing on the cramped stage in the back of the room. I am the only person I can see watching them. The bar-chatter is not quite drowning out their earnest indie bluegrass, but it is making a good effort.

I count five times the guy next to me has glanced at me. I ask him, “What do you think of the band?”

“There’s a band?”

I am in a mood to let myself fall for his smile, which is easy and bored, one corner lagging behind the other.

“Fair enough,” I say.
“What do you think of the band?”

“I think my husband’s hours of practicing on his banjo have paid off, but it’s hard to tell.”

“Ah-ha.” He shifts a little but isn’t actually embarrassed. He keeps going. “I’m good at guessing what people do. May I try you? You have piercings and at least one tattoo that I can see, so straight off I’m putting you in the humanities. But you don’t have a trendy haircut, and your clothes aren’t conspicuous—not an artist. And you’re not giving this charming guy sitting next to you hoping he can buy you a drink even an inch. I’m going to guess you studied sociology.”

I shake my head. “Swing and a miss. Art history.”


“Funny compliment,” I say, trying to force down the upturned corners of my lips.

“It works for you.”

We don’t say anything for a couple of songs, and I know the set won’t be too long so I forget about it. But then he says, “My name’s Len. I’d like to see you again,” and slides his card toward me on the mahogany bar. He works at a big-name graphic design company—I don’t like the sterile, obstinately fashionable card but I’m glad for the opportunity to slide it into my pocket.

“Gina,” I say. “And you will.”
“I’m sorry, ma’am, what exactly is the problem?” I say. The woman on the other end of the line is speaking too quickly and too loudly for me to understand. Strike me down—someone, anyone—if I ever get this angry about a cosmetic.

“This Shimmering Diamonds nail polish,” she says, “is streaky and thin. I have to apply five coats before it’s anywhere near opaque.”

“I’m very sorry to hear that you’ve had a bad experience with our product, ma’am. If you’ll give me your information as well as the name and color of the product you’re dissatisfied with, we will refund the entire cost of your purchase.” On my computer in the “Notes” section of the call log, I type and delete asshole asshole asshole asshole asshole. I settle instead on Caller is impolite and shallow.

“I don’t need a fucking refund,” the caller says. “I want you to promise me that your company will discontinue this terrible product. You’re swindling people!”

“Ma’am, I can let them know you were dissatisfied, but I have no influence over product development and distribution. You’d have to contact our headquarters in Los Angeles.”

“Well do something! Don’t you have any dedication to your company?” she says. I hadn’t considered that question before. “You’re cheating people, tricking them into buying low-quality crap!”

“You know what? No, I don’t.”

“Excuse me?”

“I have no personal investment in the quality of this company’s product, except insofar as my job depends on the company’s success. And I guess I wish they’d make
better stuff so people wouldn’t yell at me on the phone about nail polish I don’t make. I mean, if you want a refund, I can process that for you. If you want to know what to do because you got nail polish in your kid’s eye, I can help you. But no, it doesn’t bother me that they make subpar stuff, because they move a lot of that shitty nail polish. They had revenue of upwards of a billion last year. I’m sorry your fellow Americans keep buying it, giving the company the green light to continue churning it out. That’s hardly my problem. What I can do is get you a refund for your five-dollar nail polish purchase so we can end this conversation and never speak to one another again.”

During the silence that follows, I wipe my monitor clean and straighten the Post-its that ring the screen to remind me to put my sister-in-law’s baby shower on my calendar and to go to the supply closet for more paper clips. I want to tell the woman, Look, I use Post-its and paper clips, too. I am a person, a person with feelings and a family and wrath you can incur.

“Fifteen dollars, not five. I bought three bottles.”

“Well, gosh. I am sorry about that,” I say. “Let me get you set up for a refund.”

I walk to the convenience store across the street from my building and buy a pint of cheap ice cream to congratulate myself on my small act of call-center justice. *That one goes out to call center reps everywhere!* I’d like to scream. But I don’t know my day-shift coworkers. On top of that, no one will ever read the note in my call log or listen to the recording. A computer somewhere is printing the forms; that woman will get her fifteen dollars and forget about the nail polish and the phone call. The next
caller will be another asshole. The plastic spoon I’m eating my ice cream with is carving bitter little cuts in the corners of my lips with each bite.

I call Len four days after Michael’s show. We agree to meet at his place during my lunch break. When I get there, he’s drinking a beer and offers me one. I take it and wander around the living room. The sway of my hips as I walk—too much or too little? Don’t think about it, you look like an idiot. Len is not as chatty as he was when we met. There are two framed prints on the walls, a late Miró and a Kandinsky. Ambiguous choices. Even if I thought I could draw conclusions from his taste in art, for all I know the prints were a gift. He sits on the couch. I like that he leans forward and rests his elbows on his knees while he talks to me, much better than the bored leaning-back-legs-open pose of most self-assured men. I amble into the other rooms. A nice knife set in the kitchen, beat-up pans hanging on the wall. He drinks expensive coffee (with a Fair Trade-less label) but there are boxes of Kraft macaroni and cheese on the counter. The bedroom is done in slate gray and black with orange accents.

“If you could go anywhere in the world, where would you go?” I say.

“Greece, if we’re talking places I haven’t already been.”

“Do you have goals?”

“Yes,” he says.

“Tell me one,” I say. “Only one.”

A long pause. “I’d like someone to pay me to spend all my time reading and writing philosophy. That’d be the ultimate.”
I ask, “More a dream than a goal, but all right. Which branch?” My voice comes out a little high.

“Oh, anything. I’m most interested in the philosophy of punishment,” he says.

I lose interest in this question game.

It’s clear that Len’s apartment houses only one person, but in his bathroom there are a couple of clues indicating the regular presence of the same woman: a spare toothbrush, travel-size bottles of facial cleanser, mascara. When I see this, I call into the living room, *Girlfriend?* and he says, yes, they’ve been together about five months.

“And already it’s getting so dull that you’re looking elsewhere?”

“It’s not like that. Not everyone’s exclusive,” he says.

“Oh,” I say. I know that’s true. I have read about it; the *New York Times* probably published a trend piece on open relationships. *Not Your Parents’ Sex Life*. But I guessed that meant there were three hipsters in Brooklyn trying out transcending social norms while the rest of us went on like normal people. Len could be lying.

“Does she know I’m here?”

“Nah, we don’t talk about our other things.”

I can hear that he has gotten up and is coming to me. He takes the beer from my hand and presses me up against the wall. The towel rack digs into my upper back. We move into the bedroom and do what I came there for. I’m surprised that he’s a little clumsy, changing position jerkily, by small increments. But the goal here is not grace—it is being with an unfamiliar body, with its familiar yet entirely novel smell,
its recognizable male silhouette but its own particulars. So, I accomplish something today.

After, I slip under the sheets and Len lies on top of them. I look at him and notice for the first time that he has Michael’s overpowering eyebrows.

He rolls over onto his stomach. “So what’s your excuse? I’m not committed. You—you’re married.” A dirty word in his mouth.

“Together seven years, married five.”

“And a kid, yeah?”

“Yes. Loralie. She’s two.”

“Five years. That isn’t so long,” he says. “Nowhere near what you had planned when you started. So?”

I consider this. “I love him,” I say, “and before I had our daughter, the sex was fabulous. Movie-sex fabulous. We were really caught up in being this special couple, you know? Manufactured passion. It was exactly like the real thing. As far as I know anything about it.”

“Why ‘manufactured’?”

“All of our friends saw us as the ones who’d make it. Maybe that put extra pressure on us, or maybe it made us see ourselves that way, too. That’s gone. I do still love him.” I play with the hair on the back of Len’s neck, not thinking anything much, just enjoying the prickliness. I don’t know why I’m being so frank. It feels like the thing to do. Part of the encounter, as anticipated as the sex. Maybe. I don’t know, this is the first one.
“So why are you doing this?”

I pull my hand away. “Oh-ho. We can stop if your conscience is getting at you.”

“Hell no. I’m just curious.”

“I don’t know. Boredom. And now this thing with the band—it’s so. So ingenuous. Like a little kid.”

“Oh, five-dollar word,” Len says. “Isn’t there something in marriage vows about supporting your spouse, even when he quits his job to become a penniless banjo player? Now there’s an idea for a song.”

“All men think they could’ve been something.” I sit up. “But they either made it happen or they didn’t, and if they didn’t, well who can they blame. Only themselves. Sorry, but you guys get plenty of chances. Michael could’ve done it once but he didn’t and now there are bills. And another person to feed, for fuck’s sake.”

A low whistle. “Man. True or not….”

“What is this? You’re Michael’s new best friend, huh? What is wrong with you guys? Women do not have this kinship problem. Strictly hair-pulling and deceit.”

“Sounds nice, I’ll give it a try.”

“No, really. This sort of thing,” I say, gesturing at us in bed, “would be simpler.”

Len shifts to his side to look at me. “Well, it’s no problem at all when you can compartmentalize. I feel bad for Mike, but I’m not responsible for your relationship.”
The way I see it, the whats and whys and—what do I know—maybe hows had been taken care of. You’d have stepped out regardless. I only answered who and where.”

I get up to leave. I put my half-damp dirty underwear back on, the worst part. Naked, Len escorts me to the door. There are no stock phrases for this kind of situation. No equivalent of *Dinner was lovely, thank you* or *Congratulations! When is the baby due?* or *I’m sorry for your loss.* Len comes up with, “I’ll call you.” That one I know, but I don’t think it is relevant here. We may call one another. It doesn’t matter, but someone said something, so I can slip out and skip lightly down five flights of stairs and out into the air.

I feel bad for Michael—wandering around our apartment, running a Brillo Pad over a filthy pot, clipping his nails over the living room wastebasket in front of the TV. He doesn’t know a thing about me and Len, never met him at the show. Just a sweet fool, like the woman with the guitarist. I put some corn and cut-up chicken breast on a plate for Loralie.

Michael looks over. “What kind of chicken?”

“Just lemon-herb,” I say.

“Where did it come from?”

I pick up a sponge to wipe down the counter, squeezing it so that it pulses in my hand. “I don’t know? The frozen section at QFC, I guess.”

“Since when do we shop at QF-freaking-C, Gina?”

“What? Are you too good for QFC? They have organic stuff too.”
“I’m sure that this bullshit chicken is the farthest thing from organic.”

“Bullshit chicken?” I laugh. “You don’t have to eat it, but I’ll feed my daughter whatever I feel like buying for her. And this is plain chicken from a plain box, priced just right for a one-income family.”

“Okay, well, all right,” he says. “But—chicken doesn’t come from a box. You think about the crippled chickens at those industrial farms when you put that in the oven. Shit! Gina, you used to have a heart.”

“What the fuck does organic even mean, Michael? Or what about natural, fresh, cruelty-free?”

His idiotic gaping face follows me around the kitchen. I’m attacking the floor with a broom now, possibly finding dust that was here when we moved in. He says, “I could sit you down at the computer and give you a reeducation on the food industry. Or you could get a goddamn grip.”

“Did you ever stop to think you might not know so much after all?”

“Right now I’m wondering when you decided you knew better than me.”

“Words! They’re just there to catch your eye, like bright colors. They don’t mean redemption. You put your faith in words on a label and I’m somehow in the wrong?”

The look Michael is giving me. I have no idea. “So you figure it’s better to give up trying to be a good person altogether?” he says.

“There are a million ways to be. It’d take all of your life to figure out whether or not you picked a good one.”
“Now we’re bringing in Cat Stevens?”

“I’m not doing anything,” I say, and go to the bedroom.

I sit and squint against the sunlight coming in on my left through my office window. A rep transfers a call to me five minutes into my shift and I flinch. I haven’t even gotten my coffee yet.

“Hello? Good morning, Mrs. Baxter. Jerome tells me you’re having an issue with our Fresh Face Anti-Aging Foundation? I’m very sorry to hear that. What would you like us to do for you today? Could you describe the nature of the problem in more detail for me?”

The woman says, “Whoa, hold on now! Are you going to ask me how I’m doing?” Her voice suggests she is in her mid-fifties or so and Southern. “Well? You still on the line?”

“Excuse me! How are you today, Mrs. Baxter?”

“Ms. Baxter, please. You know, I’ve been better.” I do not feel prepared for another Arlen this early in the morning. I try to cut in, but she continues, “My dog—he was a Bichon—passed on yesterday. And now I’ve got this red rash on my cheeks and I’m wondering if your company’s face makeup is the problem. But before we get to that—how are you, sweetheart?”

I start to tell her I’m fine and continue with my scripted questions, but what comes out instead is, “Actually, Ms. Baxter, I’m thinking of leaving my husband. I don’t want to be divorced at twenty-seven but I may as well be for all I’m getting out
of the marriage. And god, you know—for all he’s getting out of it, too. Sometimes I
wake up mornings and I see—I think I see, I think I see so clearly the world ending
around me and no one else can tell yet.” I let out a laugh with nothing in it.
“Especially not him. He thinks we can have our dreams and believe in things and eat
and pay the rent all at once. I don’t want to drag him down with me. But I can’t smile
in the faces of the people at work and the towers of cans at the grocery store and the
cars on the highway and pretend like it’s all going to turn out fine. We can’t have it
both ways. We can’t have our ideals and at the same time get ourselves up every day
and do what we need to do to keep going. And Michael is proof! He can live his all-
natural bluegrass-playing life now, but what if I leave? Then where’s his organic
peanut butter going to come from? I almost want to do it just to show him what
happens when all you have is principles and a stupid banjo. But then there’s our
daughter. I can’t save her from this. I can’t let her loose at the edge of the forest and
hope her wild instincts kick in. God—and she’s more doomed than we are.” I stop and
I see that my fingers are trembling as I rest them on my keyboard.

“Well good Lord, girl, I didn’t care to hear all that,” the woman says.

the rash on your cheeks for me? It’s likely that it’s not our foundation that’s causing it.
It could be any number of products in your daily regimen, or a combination of
products. It could be anything, really.”
WHY DON’T YOU COME HOME NOW

In the women’s section at Target I make my tipsy way through racks of tops, looking for something demure and black. Quick glance at a tag and I know if I’ll skip it—I try to avoid buying clothes with numbered sizes. Small, Medium, Large, and Extra Large feel like confirmation, verifying the space that I take up in the world. 0, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, and beyond - those numbers feel like grades. Here’s a sweater set that’s thirty percent off and Rick says he likes it okay. Out of season, though. I take a Medium to try on. In the mirror at the end of the hall Rick and I sway, looking yellowed at the edges like the once-white doors of the fitting rooms. There’s no attendant and no other customers around. He follows me into the last room and starts to tug at my zipper with skilled whiskey-filled fingers, but I don’t feel like fucking so he watches me fumble into the shell, then the cardigan. He snorts. “You look like someone’s mom.”

I am someone’s mom.

Rick’s chest is soft when I fall in to it and move back and forth, my words muffled in his shirt. I don’t want to go, I tell him. He says I’m getting makeup all over his polo. I slide my head down until the crown of it is on his belly and I look at my feet, toes pointed in. My footwear is also not appropriate for the occasion. Rick takes a small step back in the cramped changing room and pulls the flask from a pocket of his loose slacks, offers it. I’m glad that my son, Sam, is not with us. Sam is beautiful, has skin that tans the color of the powdery dirt at the Little League fields, and he never knew his grandmother. I have pictures.
I look down at the sweater set again, pull it off. I’ll take it. “We’re not going to go to the wake, though,” I say.

“Oh, that’s fine. We’ll go back to the motel and watch that HBO. You need some fun, babe; you don’t need to deal with your relatives. Sensitive time. You don’t need none of their judgment.” The flask appears in front of my face again. Rick. His monogram etched in the stainless steel.

I say, “What would I do without you?”

This is not a real question, but I wouldn’t call it hypothetical. I don’t know who I’ve ever needed but I can tell you I don’t need Rick. My brother Ike hates him. Ike is protective of me. He calls Rick an enabler, says that Rick wants to keep me addicted so that I depend on him. I like to have someone around I can’t hurt—that’s it. The setup seems to work for Rick, too, so I don’t care or question. My ex and I, it seems our motivations didn’t harmonize so well. There was pain in that, and I’m no sadist. I let him go without much trouble, just wanted some money for Sam.

At the check-out counter Rick stares at the breasts and exposed stomach of the girl scanning the sweater set’s bar code. Her eyeliner and highlights are heavy, overwhelming lines and she is probably a few years older than my son. Her name tag says Kaylie. I’m glad I don’t have a daughter. I’m glad I don’t live around here; this town is not my town anymore, though it hasn’t changed much. The mall is dying, and to compensate they’ve peppered the area around it, where there were trees, with futile big-box stores. But it feels the same: haggard and wary. You don’t talk to your neighbors. You go to PTA meetings to complain and eat the free refreshments.
Rick won’t dance with me when we get to parking lot. I throw open the doors of his Explorer, start it, and turn up the song on the stereo—something by Led Zeppelin. He yells at my swaying body, “Get in the damn car, you’re calling attention to yourself.” He can get in the car if he wants, but I’m going to finish out the song. He gets in and slams his door and tugs the passenger door closed, too. When he starts to back out, I knock on the window and pout. He stops to let me in.

Rick starts to turn right onto 57 but I tell him go left instead, we’re going to the wake. This decision wasn’t made out of a feeling of familial obligation. I just don’t feel like watching HBO in the Sunshine Motel with Rick, despite the delicious seediness of it and the fact that when I was a kid I used to look at it from the backseat of my mom’s Volvo station wagon and wonder what kind of people stayed there. Now I have an answer: I am the kind of person who stays there. The motel is another reason I’m glad Sam is still in Detroit, pitching for his baseball team while my ex-husband watches from the bleachers.

“You want to go?” Rick says. It’s why we’re here, so I know he doesn’t mind much.

“Yeah, why not. I should.” I pull off my t-shirt and grab the sweater set from the bag.

The left arrow turns green and Rick punches the gas, because it’s twenty minutes until the wake and we’re about that far away.
We are at the threshold of the Merritt-Eckhart Funeral Home within fifteen minutes, approaching sober and wilting. Rick runs a hand through his waxy graying hair, adjusts his belt. This place, Greenfield, is my real hometown, but it can’t stand on its own. It is next to Benton, the city with the mall and urban-sprawl weariness, and is three-fifths farmland, one-fifth developments, and one-fifth business that are not useful to the people who live here. People travel here from the city next door for antique furniture, high school senior portraits, guitar lessons. People in Greenfield travel to Benton for groceries and clothing and appliances.

Inside, my high school best friend is the first person to notice me. “Miranda,” she says, putting her hands on my arms and bringing me closer in a distant embrace. “I don’t know what to say. Your mother was a beautiful woman.” Over her shoulder, I can see the backs of the heads of my two brothers, sisters-in-law, father, and aunt. They are sitting in a row of chairs before the coffin, unmoving. If they heard Jennifer greet me, they don’t show it. I imagine them with no faces. When I go to the front to say goodbye to my mother, I think, I will turn and see their bare, unbroken skin contemplating the body voicelessly, expressionlessly—vigilant. But my brother Ike, the youngest of the three of us, leans over to Aunt Ruth and both glance back towards Rick and me. Jennifer pulls away and looks a little too closely at me with a loaded expression I can’t unpack.

I introduce Rick to Jennifer and leave them to chat, two people who have little reason to be here but who at least have me in common. I don’t know what Jennifer does these days; she became a sorority whore in college and that was the last I heard.
I go to the front of the room and sit next to my father. He is wearing a cheap suit that I remember from the eighties, something he came home in from his job at the small-town insurance agency where he worked until he wasn’t fit to work anymore. With the thumb of one hand, he rubs the palm of the other. He says nothing, but lets me put my arm around him. He is slighter than the sturdy Irishman in my memory, his shoulders jutting forward protectively like the wings of a sick hawk. I look toward the coffin. In the corner of my eye I see Ike, sitting on the other side of my father, lean forward and look in my direction.

“Miranda,” he says, “we didn’t know whether or not you were in town.”

I cannot see my mother’s body from this angle. I don’t care to see it. The coffin is simply cut in a deep red cherry wood that reminds me of blood. Kind of tasteless for the victim of a car accident though Ike told me that the doctor said there wasn’t a lot of damage to the body, which I guess is why we can have an open casket. It was a blow to her head that did it. Exactly the right speed and in exactly the right spot. A witness says she appeared to have been looking in the mirror when she ran the red light. Probably checking her lipstick. Red. “Here I am,” I say to my family. They could have chosen a black coffin, or even ivory, elegant and not full of dread.

“Why the red casket?” I say. “It’s disturbing.”

At the end of the row I see Allen and his wife Helena, a dark-haired woman who seems to be made up of corners and who I never got to know well. They both sit forward and look at me. They are on opposite sides of Aunt Ruth, my mother’s younger sister. Ruth is crying politely. My father, sitting between my brother Ike and
me, has not stopped looking straight ahead. He was a little young for Alzheimer’s when we found out. Mom was perfectly healthy so we didn’t worry that he’d lose his credit cards or forget to pay the bills and feed the dog.

Allen is making a great effort to communicate his displeasure through his face, like an adult speaking exaggeratedly to a child. His face is gaunter than I remembered.

“Red was her favorite color.”

“No it wasn’t. Her favorite color was green,” I say. I’m not certain that I’m right, but I’m confident enough.

Allen says, “I think I’d—”

But Ike interjects, so quiet I have to stop kicking the toes of my sneakers against the floor and lean over Dad’s lap to catch his words. “We have some big news,” he says.

“Yeah, you’ve missed a hell of a lot,” says Allen. “Dad’s moved in with me and Helena and the kids and we’re selling the house on Larkspur.”

“We have a box of your things in our basement, Mandy. Stuff that was in the house, report cards and old diaries, nothing big,” Ike says. “I don’t know if you want to take it back to Detroit with you or leave it here—it’s not taking up too much space.” He is holding his wife Deirdre’s left hand with both of his.

“Oh,” I say, “I don’t know. Is it okay if I leave it here? I don’t know what I’d do with it.”

Ike says, “Oh, sure.”

Rick has not come to say hello. I’m relieved.
“Speaking of the kids, Allen, how are your little ones?” I say.

“Not so little anymore. Fifteen and twelve.”

I whistle low. “Brianna’s fifteen now, huh? How’re you handling that?”

“Fine,” Allen says, but at the same moment Helena says, “It’s a nightmare.”

Allen twists around to look at his wife. “Don’t say that, Helena. She’s a teenage girl, what do you expect? She’s doing fine in school. She has friends.”

Deirdre takes her hand from Ike’s. “Don’t go on like you’re not concerned, Allen.” She turns to me. “Brie hangs around with some nasty kids. And she’s at that age, you know? She won’t listen to any of us.”

“Oh. I don’t know,” says Ike. “Hey, she likes to have a good time, right? Wonder where she gets that.” He smiles at me. The vaguest trace of playfulness flickers over his face.

Through a clenched jaw Allen says, “The thought had occurred to me.”

“Mandy,” Ike says. We all know what’s coming. “How about you try talking to her?”

The explosion I expect doesn’t come. Allen sits in his chair silently. A small, uneasy noise leaves my throat. I say, “Well, I don’t know how long I’ll be sticking around.”

Deirdre says, “Tomorrow then! You’ll still be here tomorrow. What else would you be doing? I’ll tell her you’ll meet her at the elementary school playground? She’s always there. It’ll be good to meet her on her turf.” Her turf, as if my fifteen-year-old
niece is a gang member or a territorial animal. I do remember fifteen—maybe it’s a fitting comparison. We were protective of our bodies, our boys, our reputations.

I look over at Helena and Allen. Their tired and resigned faces stoke my curiosity.


“Okay,” I say, standing. I haven’t decided yet whether or not I’ll show.

“Excuse me, everyone, I think Mrs. Eckhart is trying to get my attention.”

Allen strides over to my side of the room and grabs my arm. His voice is low and gruff in my ear. “We could smell you several seats away. Miranda, you reek of whiskey. Don’t show up like this around Dad again.” He drops my arm and strides into another room.

I ignore Ike and Deirdre’s concerned faces and lean down to give my wispy father a hug. It is the most insubstantial embrace. Like hugging my son, lanky and bony but without the warmth and energy I’m used to feeling under my arms. I ask an employee of the funeral parlor where I might find the bathroom. She directs me upstairs. On my way I signal to Rick, who is leaning against the wall talking to Jennifer about stock trading. He follows me upstairs, gives me the cold stainless steel flask when I ask for it. Three swigs and I can’t decide if it’s taken the edge off or whetted it. “Fuck him,” I say. Rick grunts in something like agreement, but I don’t know if he knows who I’m talking about.

I tell Rick to drop trou and he hesitates but does, wiping sweaty palms on his black slacks first. I fuck him in the bathroom at my mother’s wake, one leg on the sink
and one on the floor, while I look at an inoffensive painting of white lilies on the wall. This does not make me a bad person, I want to say. This has nothing to do with her.

When we leave I see that everyone knows what we were doing upstairs because no one looks at us except Jennifer, who waves a small, uncomfortable goodbye. I doubt I’ll see these people for another ten years. *Get me back to Detroit, I think. I think, Where is Sam?*

My ex-husband left me eight months ago and found a twenty-four-year-old copy editor who cooks vegan and only buys secondhand. I asked if she buys her organic kale secondhand, too. He says she has integrity. I try to have integrity but I’m not good at working within a budget.

There are things I know about and there are things I don’t. This is true for everyone but some people were born to know about everything. Some people know about which buttons not to button on a cardigan and how to fill their tires with the right amount of air and what to wear to a funeral. I don’t know those things but I know how to be a good mom and I think know how to make people listen when I want to, when I have something to say.

“Is the paint from the foyer still in the trunk?” I ask Rick in the car as we drive away from the funeral home.

“I suppose so.”

“And the brushes?”

“Probably.”
“Turn left here.”

Rick and I, we go to my childhood home. They haven’t yet prepared the place to show; the grass is overgrown and on the stoop there’s a mildewed old welcome mat that has been there probably since I was sixteen. Underneath the mat there is a key. We let ourselves in the front door and step into the living room. The house still smells like both of my parents, musky and soapy.

Rick doesn’t ask me what I’m doing until after I’ve cracked the can of paint open, dipped a brush in, and started making short strokes on the wall. I tell him that I’m painting a portrait. It’s a portrait of Twinkle, the cat my mother brought home from the grocery store one day when I was eight. He had been in a box of free kittens. Mom liked him because he was quiet and licked her hands when she held him. The paint is mauve, not grey like Twinkle was, and I only have the one color, but the portrait doesn’t come out too bad. It’s clearly a cat. In ungraceful letters above the cat I paint, “THIS IS TWINKLE. HE WATCHED US DO PUZZLES. IN THIS ROOM, MOM AND I COMPLETED TWO 5000-PIECE PUZZLES.”

I visit each room in the house.

In the room that was mine when I was a girl, I write, WHEN I WAS HOME SICK FROM SCHOOL, MOM WOULD TELL ME THE STORY OF HOW SHE MET DAD AND BRING ME MUGS OF CHAMOMILE TEA.

I write, IN THIS ROOM, MOM CALLED ME A SLUT WHEN I CAME HOME PAST CURFEW AFTER A DATE WITH BRAD CRENSHAW in the den.
I feel bad about the extra work this will mean for Ike, but I have to. I AM HERE, I paint in the hallway.

Rick and I fulfill his dream of watching HBO at the Sunshine Motel for most of the day before I leave to see Brie. No one has called. They must not have seen the house yet, but I know it’s coming.

I drive Rick’s Explorer to my old elementary school. Brie is waiting and I only know her by her recognition of me. A closer look reveals that she has Allen’s nose and mouth, perfectly copied and pasted onto her face from his. She is more generous with her smiles. I tell her to get into the car and she does, perfectly obedient. As we pull away, she waves to her friends sitting on the swings. They look all right to me. No surprise. All teenagers start to look a little weird after you get to a certain age—it’s hard to preference one kind over another.

I glance at Brie. She’s playing with the drawstring on her blue-and-black hoodie, chewing it or rolling it between her fingers. She has bleached a thick blonde chunk into her dark brown hair. I look for family resemblances. Does she have the same thigh-heavy build that I do and my mother did? Our ears we definitely share. And feet, too. It’s funny to see my feet in orange flip-flops. A familiar stranger.

It isn’t until we park the Explorer at Olgham Woods and walk to a bench underneath the picnic shelter that Brie says anything. “Why’d we come here?”

“I need to be somewhere they don’t know I am,” I say.

“My parents?”
“Yeah. Ike and Deirdre too I suppose.”


I see that this won’t hurt my chances of making friends with her.

“Sounds like you know all about your Aunt Mandy,” I say.

“I only found out a few months ago. Doctor asked about mental illness in the family. My parents don’t tell me anything. You’ve been in rehab five times and I don’t find out for fifteen years? Pretty harsh.” She lies on top of the picnic table, knees up and leaning together ungracefully.

Five times. Really? I try to count but the visits run together. “Must have been to preserve the unsullied image of me you had in your mind before then.”

“Right. You were always the cool aunt, though,” she says, slugging me on the shoulder. Growing bolder. “You got out of here.”

“Yeah, to Detroit.”

“It’s better than here, right?” she says.

“Oh yeah. Detroit’s all right.”

“So what do you do?”

I tell her I’m a Certified Public Accountant though I know she isn’t asking about my profession. She groans and asks again. “I’ve dabbled,” I say, “but you won’t be getting any war stories. Hearing about that stuff is the best way to get involved in something, most likely something no good that you’d be better off ignorant of.”

“God, don’t turn into a PSA. You have to give me something.”
“Well, I don’t think that’s what they sent me here for. These days I’m just a measly alcoholic anyway.”

“Are you drunk right now?”

“Actually, no,” I say. “Just for you. Are you high?”

“Not anymore.”

“Oh-ho. Well, uh, good!”

“So what, then? Are you supposed to talk me out of my deviant lifestyle?”

“Probably.”

“But you aren’t going to,” she says.

I shake my head. “Silly thing to expect when I can’t even talk myself out of it. I could tell you that you’ll never be able to find a job. Not true. I could tell you that you’ll alienate people that you care about. True, but you’ll probably do that no matter what. At least I’d have. The best argument against it is preserving your health. But that hasn’t done it for me. I’m convinced that if I got sober, two weeks later I’d find out I have some unrelated cancer. Hardly worth the effort.”

“You haven’t alienated Uncle Ike,” she says.

“Yeah. That’s true. So?”

“So if he’s not pissed, why don’t you talk to him anymore? Mom said you guys were best friends.”

“We were. He’s always been the best-behaved of the three of us.” I stand and walk around the shelter as I talk. “You know—I broke this vase once, a fancy one that Mom was fond of. This was when I was nine and he was eight. I don’t remember how
I broke it. I only remember staring at the pieces on the ground thinking I was going to get my ass whupped and grounded for another two weeks, because just a few days before I’d let the Milkovichs’ dog loose on purpose. And Ike comes up to me and the pieces of vase on the floor, puts his arm around me and tells me not to worry. I go to my room and cry and cry. And you know what he does? He tells Mom and Dad when they get home that he broke the vase, that he’d wanted to show it to a friend but he fell off his bike on the way and the vase shattered. He had put the pieces on his t-shirt, like he’d used it to carry them home—and he had gone and bloodied up his fucking knee on the sidewalk. To make it more convincing. He was such an honest kid that they never even asked why the hell he wanted to show his friend some flowery pink vase.”

Brie’s small smile betrays boredom. But she says, “I think you should talk to Ike again.”

I don’t respond. Instead of Ike, I think of my mother. I think of when I used to call her every week, several years ago, at least twice a week—more than I talked to anyone except Sam and my husband. Her voice was arresting, smoky but not quite low. It was the right voice for a woman who wanted the world to understand she was strong. It was a terrible one to hear break. And after the fourth or fifth time in rehab, how could I keep doing it? I stopped calling.

Any doubts I’m having about that decision now are just side effects of grief. I did what was best.

“Aunt Mandy,” Brie says, warning.
I turn and see a truck driving down the road to the parking lot. Ike leans out the passenger-side window and waves his arm in a large arc, up and down. I can’t make out what he’s calling to us.

I grab Rick’s keys from the picnic table. To the right there’s another road that’ll get me out of here if I make it quick.

“Are you going to leave, Aunt Mandy? I’ll stall them,” Brie says.

The keys are heavy in my hand. The sky around the setting sun is an overwhelming orange. This isn’t fair—I can’t be expected to decide so quickly.