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Heaven and Earth:
A Collection of Short Stories

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation consists of two components: a collection of short stories called *Heaven and Earth* and a scholarly essay on Alice Randall’s *The Wind Done Gone*.

The focus of both my critical and creative work has been on the formation and development of identity in terms of gender, class, culture and ethnicity. The title story of this collection follows two American women visiting East Germany before the fall of the Berlin Wall. During their travels, these characters confront not only their loyalty to each other but also American attitudes about class and nationality. Although my fiction works primarily in the realistic tradition, it simultaneously subverts traditional ideas about conventional morality, thus challenging social institutions and political ideologies that affect identity. For instance, many of my stories feature women who reject patriarchal assumptions about gender and culture. In “Sliders,” a young pregnant woman comes face to face with antiquated notions about gender while eating hamburgers with her grandmother. “Things in Common” explores how issues of class come to bear on the development of a lower middle-class teenage girl growing up in the rural Midwest. Conversely, a short story called “Gravy Train” explores the impact of wealth on an urban young woman’s self-esteem.

The collection’s title, *Heaven and Earth*, like that of the title story, represents a meeting of the real and the ideal, a metaphor that can also be applied to the condition of the women in my fiction. While these characters suffer from both earthly tragedy and
petty frustrations, they also experience moments of transcendence, that is, moments that keep them yearning for more of life despite its ongoing difficulties.

The critical component of this dissertation explores these issues in an essay asserting the sociopolitical impact of *The Wind Done Gone*, Alice Randall’s 2001 retelling of Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*. Randall’s revisionist novel challenges the ideas of racial purity and historical truth, and it is my intent to question the same types of prescribed notions about identity in both my academic and creative pursuits.
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PICTURES OF THE DAY I WAS BORN

Part of me wishes I could go back. Back to before this weekend, before I met my birth mother. She gave me a gold necklace and a t-shirt from the bar. The necklace has a pendant in the shape of a horseshoe: beams of light surround a crowned gold heart. It reminds of pictures I have seen of the sacred heart of Jesus, and I can’t help but wonder what it is that I believe in. I don’t wear gold. Just silver. But how can I tell her that?

I just got off the phone with my mom, my real mom. That’s what I call her when I have to distinguish between them. Louellen is my birth mom, or usually just Louellen.

“I can see everything for what it is now,” I said to my real mom when she called an hour ago.

“Really?” she said. “What does that mean?”

“I was worried that I would feel conflicted. That I wouldn’t know who my real family is. I used to feel guilty about it, but it’s not the same anymore. Now I know that you and Louellen are two different parts of my life, and that’s okay.”

But as soon as I hung up the phone the guilt returned. Now, I want to call my mother back and tell her that I never want to talk to Louellen again. I want to tell my mother that I love her, that she’s the only mom I need. I don’t realize how transparent I am until my husband Henry
asks me what’s wrong. I can feel him circling, searching me for clues, but I don’t want to give in to his interrogation so soon.

“What did your mom say?” he asks.

“You know,” I say. “The same thing she always says.”

“Let me guess. She said she was fine with Louellen being here this weekend. She said it’s no problem at all. But you can tell it actually pisses her off?”

I don’t even respond to Henry. I don’t have to. He knows he’s right. He knows me, and my family, as well as I do, and he’s heard our story over and over. My younger sister Robin and I were both adopted before we were six weeks old. Like kittens. Just old enough to be weaned, but not old enough to remember. Except we’re not from the same litter. In 1970 I was born in a Baltimore city hospital, the illegitimate daughter of a nurse-in-training named Louellen and her ex-boyfriend Joe who had gone to Vietnam only months before I was born. After Louellen said her goodbyes to me, I spent a month and a half living in a Catholic orphanage being raised by nuns before meeting the two people I would come to know as parents.

Robin has also met her birth mother, but her story is still more of a mystery—her mother Natalie was only fifteen when Robin was born in 1973, and her upper-middle class parents pressured Natalie into giving Robin up for adoption. On Robin’s eighteenth birthday, Natalie filed the paperwork to find out who had adopted Robin. Less than a month later, she received the information in the mail and called. She had been waiting all those years just to make contact. Robin and Natalie have a tenuous relationship now—crafted out of rambling emails, awkward phone calls and one short visit. To this day, nobody knows, or is willing to admit, who Robin’s biological father is.
My parents never hid the fact that we were adopted. Before I was old enough to read, I was able to recite by memory the story of how I came to be their daughter. And they always said that they would support us if we wanted to look for our birth mothers or any other family. They said it, but I never believed it was true. I believed, instead, that doing so would be uncomfortable for all of us and in some way it would hurt our relationship. So I never thought about it in any serious way. It wasn’t an option. I was at least *that* devoted to my parents—devoted enough that I wouldn’t even consider the one thing I was afraid would truly wound them.

“So what are you going to do?” Henry eventually asks me, and I realize I should do *something*.

“I don’t know,” I say. “Maybe I’ll email her later. It’s too late to call back.” It occurs to me that email might actually be the best option. It will give me the chance to go over some of the details we didn’t get to on the phone, and it will allow me to do so without having to deal with any more of my mother’s endless questions.

Louellen married my biological father, Joe, two years after she gave me up. The wedding took place six months before their second child Joey was born. Henry likes to joke that the two of them had yet to figure out where babies came from. After Joey, they had three more: Chris, Lee and Amy. So we’re all fully related. Not half brothers and sisters, but the real thing.

The adoption agency found Louellen eight months ago, mere weeks after I had filled out the necessary forms and passed the required psychological tests. It was during one of these interviews that they had first mentioned the possibility that Louellen had reunited with my birth father. These things happen, they said. So I was prepared for the idea, even if it made me feel somewhat anxious. But when we found out for sure, the shock hit Henry hard, as if he never
really understood the whole thing was real. Suddenly, I had more family than he did. Overnight—or thirty years later depending on how you looked at it—I had inherited an entire brood.

I met Henry at an outdoor concert about five years ago. I had called to get a ticket and found out that if I went alone, I could sit in the second row. Going solo seemed like a worthwhile sacrifice to make to be that close to the stage. Although I was intimidated about going alone, I was more afraid of the idea that I was too chicken to do it.

When I showed up at the concert, Henry was already in the seat next to me, slumped down in his chair and thumbing through a paperback. He looked up at me as I approached, and watched me check the number before I took the seat next to him. Although he didn’t smile, I could see interest flickering in his eyes. He sat up straight, and after a moment, shoved the book in his back pocket. There wasn’t anyone sitting on the other side of him, and I sensed that he wanted to talk to me. He would glance in my direction and then turn away before I could catch his eye. This game went on for a few minutes until he looked directly at me. “I’m Henry,” he said simply, offering me his hand like it was an invitation. I laughed at his assertiveness but reciprocated. When he gripped my hand firmly, as if he respected me, I took it as a sign of some greater power at work.

After the concert, we sat on the lawn behind the pavilion telling each other every thing we could. Henry had been traveling by himself for the summer, visiting friends and passing time before he had to go back to graduate school in the fall.

“The end is in sight,” he said about his trip. “Being alone too long gives me cabin fever.”
“Cabin fever?”

“Do you know what I mean?”

I did know what he meant. “I feel that way at work sometimes,” I admitted, “like something has to change, or I might crack.” I told him about my uninspiring job as a project manager for a photo archive company, about how I really wanted to be taking my own photos but the only work I could get was shooting weddings. Henry told me about his desire to teach history, and by the time the grounds crew kicked us out, my mouth felt gummy, and the skin in the corner of my lips had begun to crack from dryness. My paper beer cup lay before us in the damp grass, torn into a thousand tiny pieces.

“You destroyed that cup,” he said.

I looked down at the shredded wax paper. “I don’t normally do things like this.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” he said.

I had always wanted to find someone like Henry—someone who wasn’t afraid to be alone but who still knew he needed others, someone who thought about these things as much as I did—but I never thought I actually would. I figured it was impossible. The weird thing was, even that first night, Henry sensed this about me. He tuned into my apprehensions about love as readily as most guys tune into a football game.

Sometimes I think Henry has always known me, sometimes he even knows what I want before I do. Like with Louellen. I think Henry wanted to know where I had come from before I could put words, or even thoughts, around my yearning.

“But aren’t you even curious?” Henry asked me when I told him I was adopted on our first real date a few days after we met.
“Not really.” After dinner in Chinatown, we had decided to get dessert. By the time we got to the subject of adoption, our remaining ice cream was pooled at the bottom of our plastic bowls. I swirled my spoon around the chocolate mess while I considered his question. I really wasn’t curious about my biological mother, but I also wasn’t ready to admit any more than that so I said, “I guess I never thought about it.”

“You never thought about it?”

He sounded skeptical so I tried to explain. “I have a great relationship with my mother. We talk about everything. I don’t lie to her like some people do. It’s not always easy, but it works. I don’t need another mother.”

Henry leaned back in his chair. He was just barely nodding his head. It was as if he was taking in what I had said, trying to find some new angle. Finally, he said, “But what if you’re an heir to some great fortune? What if you’re a Kennedy? Or, what if your real mother is Annie Leibovitz? Don’t you want to know?”

Henry would speculate this way for hours, but I knew his interest was deeper than just wanting to know if I was entitled to some great fortune. Slowly, carefully, his interest in my past became my desire to find Louellen. But at first the desire was Henry’s. Before him, it was the one question I was always afraid to raise.

Hi Mom and Dad,

I just wanted to let the two of you know that everything went great with Louellen this weekend. Besides feeling a little like I wanted to throw up while I waited for her flight to come in at the airport, everything was smooth sailing. I really can’t believe how easy it was.
Yes, she looks a heck of a lot like me, and we have much in common. Louellen talks as much as I do, she’s just as open as I am about everything (she’s totally fine with the adoption and how everything has gone—it’s amazing how well-adjusted she seems), and she also tends to lose track of time and run late like I do.

On the other hand, it looks like I got my desire to plan everything out in advance from Mom. Louellen was content to just wing it and sit around the apartment, but I kept hearing a little voice in my head saying, “What are we going to do next?” Henry and Louellen practically had to tie me down to the sofa.

Well, I guess that’s all for now. Hope you all are doing well. I’ll talk to you more soon.

Hannah

Louellen looked like me, stood like me, and talked like me, but even after she has come and gone I still feel as if she is as odd and unknown to me as any other stranger we could have picked up at the airport the day she arrived. And for all of our similarities, she was nothing like I had imagined she would be.

When she got off the plane she was wearing a lavender-colored cotton twin-set with dark violet flowers embroidered on the surface. Her hair was shorter and less kinky than mine, but it was exactly the same shade of brown: a henna-colored auburn—the kind that looks dyed rather than natural. Her eyes reminded me of tiny black bullets, just like mine look in the mirror, except that hers were framed by deep lines that crawled across her skin like flesh-toned spiders. My wrinkles aren’t as pronounced as hers, but they are there, even if they’re not yet visible to a less critical eye. As soon as I saw her, I knew that in twenty years I would look just like she did.
Back at the airport this morning for her flight home, she protested as she took her glasses off for one last photo: “You’ll see my wrinkles,” she said. I pretended that I didn’t know what she was talking about. We stood under the terminal’s artificial lights smiling, an arm around each other, like we were old friends.

Later, driving back from the airport, Henry told me that it was strange to see someone who resembled me so much. I knew that his words meant more than he was willing to admit yet, and I was immediately worried about what that might be. I’m not sure Henry likes the idea of Louellen now that she’s a real, living person and not just an imaginary character we dream up as we lie in bed trying to fall asleep. Maybe it’s because Louellen and I are so similar. I got the photos developed this afternoon when we got home from the airport. In one picture, we look like we match—just like one of Louellen’s sweater sets. Maybe Henry is afraid that now that I know Louellen, I will become more like her. I’ll start getting wrinkles and voting Republican.

And yet, I can’t help but wonder if all of this—all of the guilt and anxiety—is Henry’s fault. Maybe if it hadn’t been for him, I never would have looked for Louellen. Maybe I would never have wondered who I really am.

When I was a kid, I didn’t worry about it much. Being adopted. My parents told me it meant I was special, they told me that only someone who loves her child more than herself can give her up, and I took what they said at face value, I trusted that it was true. I can even remember telling other kids that—that I was special, that my parents had paid for me. It was silly, but some part of me always believed it. Some part of me still does. When my parents cleaned out their basement last summer as they got ready to move to a smaller home, they actually found a
receipt from my adoption, and I discovered exactly how much special costs. At two hundred dollars even, I was a bargain.

I used to fantasize about who my birth father might be. When I was little, I watched the Dukes of Hazzard and imagined that John Schneider was my long lost dad. Then as a teenager, I started to believe it was Art Garfunkel. Finally, before I found Louellen, I had settled on Bob Dylan as the most likely possibility. The only requirements seem to be that he have curly hair and be famous. I never fantasized about having a birth mother. In fact, just the idea of such a person made me uncomfortable. And by the time I started daydreaming about my unknown father to “Bridge Over Troubled Water,” I was smart enough to know I fantasized about birth fathers because my own father wasn’t giving me everything I needed.

I only saw my father in pieces while I was growing up, and all of our activities revolved around the things he liked to do: we would jog, fish or play basketball, we would go to the liquor store, and we would visit the dog pound. The pound was the only one of these places to which I actually wanted to go, and dogs—especially down-and-out, needy ones—were an interest my father and I shared. So sometimes on Saturdays, we would go to the city-operated animal shelter. It was as dirty and pathetic as you would expect such a place to be: the stale smell of urine and the super-potent toxicity of industrial cleanser worked in conjunction with the high-pitched howls of the abandoned dogs to give me a headache that would often take hours to shake. But I didn’t care. I wanted to be there. As I walked along the cages, I tried not to think about the idea of numbered days, and, for the most part, it never bothered me. Now it seems obvious that this look-the-other-way type of behavior was something I learned from my father, but at the time I
was oblivious to how he dealt with this cruel reality. I was so happy to be with him, and so eager to get a pet, that I could look past the small imperfections in our time together. On good days, we even got to walk one of the dogs. It was on such occasions that I would give in to my emotion and end up in tears, begging to take the animal home as my father led me quickly back to the shelter to return the miserable little pup.

Despite my many pleas, we never did get a dog from the pound. My mother was worried about poorly-trained or rabid dogs, and she didn’t care for mutts. She wanted a pure-bred, and eventually that was what we got.

Over the past few years, I have found that my mind is getting sharper, more focused, and now, at the age of thirty, it works as well as any fine instrument: it’s tuned to meet my needs, to question what I’ve long denied, and to anticipate my next move. This is what causes me to think back on the dog pound and to wonder why we went there so often if my father knew we would never take anything home. I would ask my parents for an explanation, but I already know what they would say. My father wouldn’t say anything, hoping to avoid a real conversation if he could, and my mother would say that I think too much, that I overanalyze things. She’d tell me that my father took me to the dog pound because I liked it—simple as that—and that I should worry about important things, like my career. I’d eventually interrupt her with more questions, and finally she’d retaliate, attacking me where she knows it will hurt most.

“You never give people a chance to finish, Hannah,” my mother said to me on the phone earlier tonight. “You are always one step ahead of people, finishing their sentences for them and going on to a new thought.”
“I didn’t do that with Louellen, I swear. I’m not like that with everyone. Just you. You’re family.”

“Aren’t we lucky?”

Dear Hannah,

Your dad says hello, and we are both happy for you. You are at a perfect age and maturity to handle meeting Louellen now, and I am glad it has worked out for both of you.

We already know from what you have told us about Louellen’s letters that she has many qualities and talents that you have inherited. She has an ability to feel comfortable around people. She is thoughtful and creative. One thing I would like to ask . . . has she ever played the guitar or a musical instrument. Oops, I think that was Robin’s mom.

Hannah, I am really glad Henry is with you for support. This is an important time in your life. Relax and enjoy it. It will be over sooner than you want it to be. And yes, there will be many questions that you forgot to ask. A lifetime cannot be reviewed in a week end. Enjoy Louellen and cherish her and her family.

I hope your dinner was great, and her flight is a good one on Sunday.

With lots and lots of love,

Mom & Dad

One the phone tonight, I also told my mom that meeting Louellen has made me realize I’m too hard on them. But all I can think when I re-read this e-mail is that weekend is one word, not two. And that it’s typical for my mom to get my sister and me mixed up. All my life I
thought that it was my biological mother who played guitar. No wonder I could never carry a tune.

Both my sister and I wanted to take piano lessons when we were young, but my parents said they couldn’t afford it. We had a four-bedroom colonial with a landscaped yard and an inground swimming pool, my dad was a vice president at AT&T and he had a golf membership at the Watchung Country Club, but for some reason we still couldn’t afford a used piano. After much persistence, Robin and I finally convinced my parents to let us “try” piano. For six weeks, we went to private lessons after school on Wednesdays. On the four non-lesson days, we trudged a block up our residential street to practice on a piano at a neighbor’s house. When the trial period was over, my mother kept promising to work on my father about getting a piano, but nothing ever came of it. Except of course that I can still do scales and because of all the money they saved, my parents are millionaires five times over.

Louellen turned out to be the opposite way with money. She told us this weekend that they just gave my biological brother Joey a thousand dollars to buy a car and that Chris still lives at home. After college, my parents told me that they expected that I would get a place of my own, and even though they never said it, I knew I could never ask for money either. They claimed that people who gave their kids money did them a disservice, and they cited my mother’s youngest brother, the family stoner, as evidence of this. Of course, it’s at times like these that they always fail to remember that my grandfather bought my mother a brand new yellow Kharmen Ghia convertible when she graduated from college. My father sold that car the same day they were married as if it was a piece of extra baggage he couldn’t wait to dump.

* * *
Louellen’s kids—my four brothers and sisters—have all been diagnosed with learning disabilities, problems that have to do with things like hyperactivity and not being able to pay attention. I wonder how I escaped. Or if I really did. My mother’s words come back to me over and over again: You are always one step ahead of people. I wonder about having such a gift. At times my brain feels like it’s on speed, racing ahead of me at an unwise rate of travel. Maybe thinking fast is more of a liability than an asset.

In school, I was always in the gifted and talented classes. I suppose this means that I often did well on tests, that I never worried about being stupid, never believed it when people said I couldn’t do something. My first term in college I failed freshman comp, but I didn’t feel like a failure. In fact, I never even contemplated such a possibility. Instead I did as little as I had to do to get an A the next semester. Although I was educated enough to know that bad grades didn’t mean I was dumb, I’m not sure they tell this to kids with learning disabilities or kids who grow up poor, and I can’t help but wonder how things would have been different had I grown up in Maryland with Louellen and Joe.

Robin and I have always been like any other sisters. We wanted to have both nothing and everything to do with each other. We loved and hated each other with an intensity usually only reserved for siblings and spouses. Growing up, we fought over everything: clothes, boys and mostly, our father’s attention. Only once did it evolve into violence. It was a situation that escalated around two of those factors.

My father had just picked up my sister from swimming practice, and when they got home, he told my mother and I about how Robin had won all three practice heats of the fifty-meter freestyle.
“You should’ve seen her go,” he added. It was the word “seen” that alerted me to the fact that something was different, off.

“What do you mean, we should’ve seen her?” I said, but before I let him respond, I asked him the question I really wanted answered. “Did you see her?”

“I did,” he said casually, totally unaware of the problem he was about to cause. “I left work early so I could see the little fish in action.” I didn’t say anything to him then, but my father’s words hurt me more than he would ever know. I had been a champion debater for three years, and he had never taken the time to attend even one of my matches. I had always been told that he was too busy with work to attend, but his actions that night revealed the truth: he just didn’t want to.

After dinner, I hit my sister’s closet to take out my revenge. I was in the sweater section, looking for something to wear with the jeans of hers that I already had hanging over my arm, when she came in and found me knee-deep in her wardrobe.

“What are you doing?” Her voice was louder than was necessary given how close we stood to each other.

“Finding something to wear,” I said as I continued to flip through the hangers.

Her next words came out in a scream: “Get out!”

I ignored her and thought about how easily she overreacted. This only made her angrier, and she came over to where I stood and pulled on my shoulder, as if she could yank me out of her room. I looked at her before I pushed her back, and then she started at me. The jeans dropped to the floor as we shoved and slapped until we were so twisted together that we had to step apart to keep our balance.
“You’re just jealous,” she said, and even though she meant that I was jealous of her clothes, she was right. I was jealous. So I stepped forward and threw my fist into her face. I didn’t know what I was doing, but it didn’t matter. The effect was still the same: her eyes popped open, and then she started to cry. Immediately I wanted to take back what I had done, but it was too late.

When I found out that Louellen and her kids were all jocks, I was at a loss. Robin had always been the athletic one in my family. The only two people in my entire birth family to go to college went on basketball scholarships. I still can’t figure out how that makes sense given everything they say about DNA and the nature-versus-nurture debate or even, more simply, what it means about me.

“Do you like country music?” Louellen asked me on the second day of her visit.

“Not really,” I said and immediately regretted it. I wondered if I was I supposed to lie to her about things like this.

“Oh,” she said. There was a pause. I’m not good at pauses. I like to fill them up with words. Everyone knows that about me. Well, everyone who knows me, and I realized then that Louellen doesn’t really know me at all. I feared that I had irreparably hurt her feelings because I don’t listen to songs that twang. I let myself imagine that our relationship would end before it ever really got started.

“I was just wondering because we have karaoke.”

I looked at her, not sure what she was talking about. The word karaoke tapped on my brain like a knock-knock joke.
“At the bar,” she added, as if she knew I was confused.

“Oh, yeah.” I had forgotten about the bar. Their bar. The family business. I told myself to pay better attention. Louellen’s husband Joe, my birth father, and his mother run the place. Even though it’s called “Joe’s Restaurant,” food is an afterthought, and the place mainly appeals to bikers because—thanks to an irresponsible grandfather clause—they can pull their motorcycles right up to the outdoor bar and have a beer without ever leaving the leather seats of their bikes. Louellen pitches in on weekends, and she works weeknights as a nurse in the hospital where I was born to help make ends meet.

“We have it on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and we all get up and sing.” Louellen was still talking about the bar, but I was having trouble focusing. *Knock, knock. Who’s there? Your mom. Your mom who? Your mom who sings karaoke.*

“Do you sing?” she asked.

“No, I can’t sing at all. Never could.” I thought it was strange that she could sing, but I couldn’t. Then I thought: maybe she’s not my mom after all, maybe the adoption agency people made a mistake, an administrative error or something like that. But then I looked at her face and saw the truth: no one has ever looked like me before, and Louellen could be my twin. I wasn’t sure whether I should be relieved or disappointed by this reality.

“Can you?” I asked her.

“No, I can’t either.” She blushed as she spoke and chuckled a little to herself. “I’m a horrible singer. But I don’t care. I just get up there and do it. We all do.”

Later she showed me pictures of it. The karaoke-singing family from Maryland. She told me they all get up and sing “Family Tradition.” Together. And she wasn’t trying to be funny. It sounded to me like the von Trapp family singers on moonshine. I cringed and hoped it didn’t
show on my face. After she was gone, Henry laughed and made fun of me. He said I’m going to have to sing with them when we visit next summer. I didn’t join him in the joke because I simply couldn’t fathom how I would get out of it.

Before we met, Louellen and I talked on the phone. She sounded different long-distance than she did in person. I didn’t have the face, the body, to go with the voice. All I could go on was what I heard. I had photos, but they weren’t a living, breathing being so it was her voice that gave me a moving picture. I saw a teenager, young and awkward. Nervously tripping over herself, her words. Uncertain of who she was. The picture was wrong. She’s the opposite of that—sure of who she is and comfortable with it. Solid. A delicate rock. As we ate breakfast this morning, I listened to her words echoing in the air in front of me and recalled my original picture of Louellen. Her voice sounded gravelly because she had just woken up. Mine does the same thing in the morning. I was surprised again at how many of our different pieces seem to match. Every hour I noticed something new. It made me wonder if other people notice these things all their lives.

hey hannah,

i just wanted to say hi real quick before i run off to class. my mom (your mom too!) is flying to see you today. i am sure you are aware of that. don’t be too nervous. there is absolutely nothing to worry about. i am going on a road trip to charleston, south carolina to see rob. i am very excited. he said that it is in the upper eighties there so i am taking my bathing suit. have fun with my mom and take care of her. i am sure you two will love the time you spend together. i will talk to you when i get back. good luck.

love,
My biological sister Amy always writes “love, amy” at the end of her e-mail messages. She only found out that I existed eight months ago, but she has loved me online ever since. I don’t even say these words to my real sister Robin or my mom. I tried to ignore it at first, hoping she wouldn’t do it again. But she did. Every time. Finally, I gave in. Now I sign my messages the same way. I feel as if I must.

I bought birthday cards for Louellen to take back to my biological brothers Chris and Lee. Chris will be twenty-five next week and Lee twenty-three the following. I reluctantly signed their cards “Love, Hannah.” It was four months after we met before I put such a declaration in writing to my husband, and I’ve done it with these two strangers before we’ve even met. I worry that, like me, they’ll find this salutation overly effusive, that they won’t get that it’s a family thing, that Amy started it. Then, I think—they are family, right?

Amy called twice while Louellen was here. I couldn’t tell if she was calling for me or calling for Louellen so I said, “Do you want to talk to your mom?” right away, and she said yes both times. Now, I’ll never know for sure if she was calling for me or not. Amy and I have talked on the phone before. But this weekend her voice—like her mother’s but younger, more boyish—sounded strangely unfamiliar. I passed the phone away quickly, like it was diseased.

Despite my contact with Amy, I’ve avoided Joey, Chris and Lee—my three new brothers—completely. I never had any brothers, and I don’t know how you do it. As if there’s some trick, some secret I need to know.
They’re not like any of the guys I know either so that doesn’t help. In their pictures, they wear wool ski hats and plaid flannel shirts—thick, dark whiskers cover the pale skin of their jaws. They look like they could beat somebody up. They look like they just did.

When I first got the pictures, I was shocked. I expected to see six people who looked exactly like me. These people were my flesh and blood after all. But when I saw six people with different bone structures and different eyebrows than mine, all I could think was why didn’t any of them look more familiar?

Now, I know what to look for: Chris’s eyes, Amy’s smile, Joey’s forehead. And even though I look exactly like Louellen did at my age, it took me a while to see even that—as if I was blind to my own likeness. I haven’t figured out what I share with Joe, my birth father, yet. But I want to. I had expected to see a mirror image, but I finally figured out that it’s all the pieces together that make the picture whole.

As much as I value the moments I had with my father as a child, I long for a single positive memory with him from my adolescence. Right around the time I started looking like a woman, my father began treating me differently. I had a huge growth spurt when I hit puberty, and by the time I was thirteen, I looked like I was twenty.

I clearly remember when my father first took notice of how much I had changed. It was the night of my eighth-grade graduation, and I had worn one of my mother’s dresses, one which no longer fit her. The knee-length dress was shimmery and blue, and it followed my curves just closely enough to draw attention to them. My father had watched me walk in the room, looked me over appreciatively, and told my mother he couldn’t wait until she was able to wear that dress again. I felt proud—like I had won my dad for myself, like I had his approval. But it was the last
time I remember him noticing me or at least looking at me directly. After that, he kept his
distance more and more, as if he were afraid of me, or confused by who I was becoming. Henry
always says that he imagines the hardest thing for a father would be when his daughter begins to
take the shape of a woman, that he too wouldn’t know how to relate to a child who is developing
breasts and becoming desirable to other men. I understand what he is saying—I even believe
it—but that still doesn’t make my relationship with my father any easier a reality to live with.

Joe, Louellen’s husband, gave her a red rose wrapped in plastic to pass along to me
during her stay. It’s sitting on top of the television in one of those cheap vases you get when you
buy a single stem at the florist. I can’t help but suspect that it came from a gas station. I’ve never
liked red roses, but I force myself to appreciate the thought. Unlike Louellen, Joe hasn’t written
me, and he hasn’t called. It’s almost as if, to him, I still don’t exist.

That reminds me of another thing my mom said on the phone: “Did Louellen ask if you
were mad at Joe?”

I am angry with him, but I won’t admit it to my mother. I’m angry with him for breaking
up with Louellen when she got pregnant with me. It feels like he abandoned her, like he
abandoned us—probably because he did. But I know that my anger has never really been about
rage. It’s about fear and apprehension. I don’t want to have another dad whom I can’t talk to or
connect with. I don’t want to suffer again through the awkward silences of an emotionally distant
father.

Louellen told me that the night before she came to visit, Joe said he wasn’t sure if he was
comfortable with her coming to see me. She told him that he didn’t have much choice in the
matter; she was going to do it. I was surprised that he hadn’t mentioned his hesitation until the
night before she left. When I told Louellen this, she said he wasn’t very good at being open with his feelings. As I recollect this conversation now, the thought of it makes all of my worst insecurities take flight. Then I remember something Amy had said in her first e-mail. She said that she didn’t think her dad would know what to say if he ever met me. Remembering this, makes me feel even more panicky, more edgy—the same way you feel when you have to go to the doctor or get a shot. I’ve spent my whole life dealing with a father who can’t find the words to form a relationship, a bond. I’m not sure I’m up for doing it with another.

“I’m not mad at him anymore,” I said in answer to my mother’s question, knowing I’ve already told her this at least twice. “I forgave him the second Louellen told me he felt bad. There’s no use being mad at someone who knows they screwed up. He feels bad enough.”

“Uh-huh,” my mom said. I wasn’t sure if she was hearing what I was saying, and this made me want to change the subject.

“You’ll never guess what Louellen’s first car was,” I said.

She paused to think, and then in an energetic voice began to say the name of her first car: “A Kharmen—,” she started to say, stopping before she had completed her words.

“Yes, a Kharmen Ghia!” I said, forcing myself not to wonder why she hesitated mid-sentence, pleading with myself not to think about one of my mother’s worst character flaws. But it came to me anyway: my mother didn’t allow herself to finish her thought because she could not stand to be associated with people like Louellen, people who don’t winter in Florida and retire when their money-market account goes platinum. It just took her a minute to remember that Louellen isn’t like her, she isn’t one of her people. “Isn’t that weird?” I said, determined to smooth over my anxieties. “You both had the same car.”
“Hers must have been used.” My mother’s delivery was hot and short, her words came through the receiver like spitballs, as if she could convey her superiority through the telephone line.

“No,” I argued, “she went to the dealer and bought it herself. She said she made payments.” I said words that I knew to be true in an attempt to convince her, but somehow I felt I would still lose. “She had saved up,” I added, fabricating new material to strengthen my case, thinking somehow it would help.

“You can buy a used car from the dealer,” she said. The anger had gone out of her voice. She sounded complacent. As if she knew she had won.

After we got off the phone, Henry asked what my mom said about the Kharmen Ghia. He knew before I answered. That’s why he asked. But I didn’t want to admit my mother’s shortcomings out loud. I told myself that it was okay that my mother said those things, made such haughty implications. I told myself this is how she makes herself feel better. I know this to be true. She thinks that’s the only thing she has over other people: money. Then I wondered why she needed to make herself feel better. And the feeling of guilt came back to me all over again. And, for a second time, I wished this weekend had never happened.

Money is not all she has, though. Far from it. My mom has a lifetime of memories with me. Good memories and bad memories, happiness and resentment. Thirty years of me, for better or worse. That’s a lot. The only thing Louellen has that she doesn’t is the day I was born. And obviously I don’t remember that.

Louellen took pictures, though. Pictures of the day I was born. I’m quite a bit smaller than I am in any of the six-week-old baby pictures my parents have. I hardly have any baby fat
yet, and my skin is a shade of pink that reminds me of chewed-up bubble gum. At first I thought it was odd that there weren’t any pictures of Louellen, but just pictures of me by myself. When I asked her about this, she just looked at me without saying anything, and then I realized that, of course, she had been alone.

You weren’t supposed to take pictures, Louellen told me but admitted she didn’t know that until she’d already done it. She said she couldn’t believe how much I looked like her when I was born. None of the others looked that much like her, she said. And she’s right. I’ve seen their baby pictures too. But that’s all she has that my mom doesn’t. That one day. And now this weekend too.

Louellen left a card behind. Snuck it into our bedroom when I wasn’t looking. Henry was in on the plan. My name is written on the envelope, and there’s a little flower drawn next to the scripted letters. The card has a Monet on the front. “Pond Lilies” it says on the back. I’ve noticed how well Louellen picks out cards. They show famous works of art or quote well-known writers. The kind of stuff I like. My mom gives me cards with glitter. You’d never know she’s the one with the college degree.

Dear Hannah,

Every day I offer a silent prayer of thanks that such life was placed in my hands and that now I am being blessed with the miracle of touching even a part of it.

I felt that perhaps this early birthday gift would be a gentle reminder to you of how much I treasure the gift of your life and hopefully the friendship we will share.

Happy Birthday today and everyday.
Love,

Louellen

It’s the gold necklace. I can’t help but think—*if only it was silver*. I could wear it every day. In the car on the way to the airport this morning, I complained to Louellen about how my mom can never pick out gifts for me. She doesn’t understand what I like, I said. Now, I feel like a jerk. Louellen doesn’t know me any better than my mom. The cards were just a fluke.

I think about how Louellen uses the word blessed. Like my grandmother does: “We are so blessed,” she always says. My real grandmother, that is. Joe’s mom—my only other living grandmother—doesn’t know I exist. Louellen told me that when Joe broke up with her after she got pregnant with me, he never told his mom what had happened, and he is still afraid to tell her now. In his mother’s mind, this weekend is not unlike any other—she thinks Louellen is at a nursing conference. She has no idea that in fact her daughter-in-law is meeting the child she gave up thirty years ago.

Dear Hannah,

We’ve been thinking about you and did try to call you once. I hope all is going well for you and Henry. I know your birth mother is coming to visit soon. It will be an emotional experience, and I will be anxious to talk to you. But no matter what, you belong to us. We love you very much. Have a great visit and a very special love to Henry too.

We love you!

Grandma & Grandpa

*P.S. Get something you’d like from us for your birthday.*
My grandmother’s words are the ones that stick with me the most after Louellen has left. *But no matter what, you belong to us.* She sounds so sure of herself. So proud. I would think that this experience would have caused doubts for everyone in my family, including her. But she is unshaken. I realize that to someone who doesn’t know my grandmother these words may seem possessive or proprietary. But I know her—she says this only because she is confident about who she is and what family means. If only she could clear it up for me.

I won’t see either my mom or Louellen on my actual birthday. My parents are in Florida for the winter. They’re retired, and they joke that they are spending my inheritance. My birthday isn’t for another two weeks, but I just found out I was supposed to be born thirteen days before that. Which means tomorrow is the day I was supposed to be born thirty years ago. It’s no surprise I was late. I found out this weekend that I inherited my tardiness from Louellen. As we hurried down the airport corridor to her gate only fifteen minutes before takeoff, she joked about how she couldn’t remember the last time she’d been to a flight that early.

Henry and I used to fly back and forth to see each other before we lived in the same town. He was at the University of Massachusetts studying history, and I was working for a photo archive company in Philadelphia.

My favorite place in Philadelphia has always been the Franklin Institute. Growing up, we lived wherever my dad’s job took us, and for most of the time I was in grade school, we lived in New Jersey about an hour from Philly. Every year, our school would take a field trip to the Franklin Institute, and every year I couldn’t convince myself to go inside the three-story heart
that was one of the museum’s main attractions. The narrow canals in which thousands of other
kids ran up and down through the ventricles and auricles of the giant heart were too
claustrophobic for me. I did manage to work up the courage to give it a try once, but within
seconds I started hyperventilating and had to crawl out, backwards, the way I had come in. But
my failed heart experience never stopped me from loving the place or the sixty-foot plaster heart.

Henry and I went to the Franklin Institute the second time he visited, six weeks after we
had met. We sat on the wood bench across from the heart. Henry is afraid of heights so, of
course, he understood when I told him about my inability to actually go inside the heart.

We went to White Castle after we left the museum, which eventually became Henry’s
favorite Philadelphia restaurant, mostly because they didn’t have them in New England. Before
Henry, I had never really liked White Castle—probably because as a child I had heard that they
put worms in their hamburgers—but I didn’t tell him that until at least his third visit. Instead I ate
fries and avoided the burgers. I told Henry I wasn’t that hungry. While we ate, we started talking
about about fate and love and marriage. I was dragging one of my french fries slowly through the
ketchup pile when Henry said something that made me think about where we were going.

“For all we know, we could end up spending the rest of our lives together,” he said.

Even though his comment was in context, I still couldn’t connect any aspect of the rest of
our conversation to what Henry had just said. I knew he was trying to make some kind of
philosophical point about something bigger than the two of us, but all I could think about was
how once he said it out loud, it became a real possibility. As I contemplated the idea of sharing
forever with any another human being and the surprise of actually finding just the person with
whom I wanted to take on so much, I found no words to explain how this feeling came to me.
Instead I just stared at Henry, waiting for him to take his words back. And as I watched him
watching me, I became aware that under the fluorescent lights, it would be easy for him to see
that my eyes were blinking unnaturally fast, and I worried that it would be just as simple for him
to know my thoughts.

“Of course, that would never happen,” he finally said, and I became afraid that he was
trying to tell me that, in fact, it never would.

Months later, Henry explained that the look I had given him at that moment had been so
full of fear and shock that he had assumed that I was a commitment-phobe. He thought he’d
scared me so badly that he started backtracking before I went running from the White Castle and
out into the dark Philadelphia night.

Each time Henry came for a visit, I stayed at the airport until his plane took off when he
left. I watched it go skyward until my eyes were blinded by the sunlight and lost it. I thought it
was good luck.

I tried to bestow the same luck on Louellen today, but the windows at the Amherst airport
were too small. The plane got to the end of the runway, and I couldn’t see it anymore. I ran
across to the other side of the terminal, searching for the plane’s tail. Nothing. I scanned the sky
for even a speck of silver. I told myself this was not a sign. I told myself not to think about the
possibilities.

After Amy called yesterday, Louellen tried to figure out if Amy was ovulating.

“I don’t think Amy and Rob are sleeping together yet,” Louellen said. “At least I hope
they’re not.”
I was silent. I thought maybe Louellen would know what that meant. But she doesn’t know me well enough yet to read my signals. She doesn’t know I only keep my mouth shut when I don’t want the wrong words to come out—I know Amy and Rob are sleeping together, and I know Amy’s on the pill. She has said so in her e-mails.

“We get pregnant easy in this family,” Louellen added.

“Really?” I imagined myself with a basketball underneath my grey U-Mass t-shirt.

“I got pregnant with Joey while I was on the pill.”

When I told my mother about Joey’s conception, she said, “You have *got* to tell Amy.”

“Why?” I asked.

“She could get pregnant too. She has to use a condom.” My mother’s plea sounded rather frantic, and I wondered why she was so invested in Amy’s ability to procreate.

“Yeah, well, I don’t think that’s the kind of thing I can e-mail her, Mom.” I tried to imagine how that would go.

* * *

Dear Amy,

I know this is going to sound strange but your mom told me today that she got pregnant with Joey while she was on the pill so I told my mom, and she said you should use a condom even though you’re on the pill. Hope you are having fun in South Carolina with Rob!

Love,

Hannah

* * *
Henry is asleep. It’s after three in the morning now. I wonder if Joe is home from the bar yet. He closes seven nights a week.

Louellen made it home okay. She called after I talked to my mother. I was worried that her flight would have trouble, but I guess my signs have been off today. I can’t read anything. Maybe it has something to do with all this change. She said the flight was fine and that I should fly out and see them soon. I reminded her that I don’t fly and, just like I do with my mom, said, “remember?” before I could stop myself.

I know I won’t be able to sleep tonight. The gold necklace sits in a blue leather box on the table next to the bed. I can see the square outline of it in the dark. It makes me think of the rosary my grandmother bought me at the Vatican. The clear glass beads came in an ornate green and gold case that I carried with me everywhere, clinging to it like a life jacket when I used to fly—they say the miraculous medal will protect you from fatal harm. Over time, the gold and green paint wore through, revealing a dull grey fabric. I still carried it. Then one time during takeoff I realized I had forgotten it. I closed my eyes and prepared for the end, but nothing happened. After that I stopped going to church.

I imagine the blue box becoming the same way, worn from overuse. I’ll carry it everywhere since I don’t want to wear it. Like a talisman. It will protect me. Or maybe it will help me understand.

I don’t fantasize about who my birth father is anymore. Now that I know who he is, I worry about how badly things could go when I do meet him. I am willing to bet it will be even more awkward and uncomfortable than I have imagined. I can see all of us—Joe, Louellen, Joey, Chris, Lee, Amy, me and Henry—sitting around a table at the bar and not having anything to say
to each other, enduring an uncomfortable silence. Henry likes to sit in silent communion as he calls it, but quiet makes me nervous. I can’t take it, especially in social situations. I imagine I’ll get nervous and tell Joe’s mother who I am. She works at the bar and lives upstairs so I’m sure she’ll be there. I can’t even believe that she wouldn’t have already seen the resemblance, that she wouldn’t wonder why her entire family is sitting with two complete strangers, that she wouldn’t know before I uttered the words, that she wouldn’t see herself in my face.

But then I remember it’s not easy to see things like that. It takes practice.

Dear Hannah & Henry,

Thank you for a wonderful week-end. It was all I expected and more. I feel like we’ve known each other for years. The two of you seem to share a special relationship. Continue to grow as the unique individuals you are, and I’m sure you will continue to grow in love as one.

Be Good to Each Other and Love Tenderly. God Bless.

Louellen

P.S.—the money is for all the phone calls.

Louellen’s thank you arrives a week later. “Shit,” I say out loud when I see the word weekend split in two. A twenty dollar bill falls out of the envelope.

“What’s that for?” Henry says.

“Phone calls.”

“How many phone calls did she make?”

“Not twenty dollars worth.”

“It’s our inheritance,” he says, laughing.
“I blame you for this mess,” I say, but I can’t help but smile as I say it, and then I think about what that word means—inheritance. It makes me wonder if I’ll ever be a mother. And if so, what kinds of things would I leave behind for my kids? What would I be able to give them? I imagine myself writing a letter to my unborn daughter when she is a fully-grown adult like me. And maybe it’s her thirtieth birthday. The letter would say things like “Hope to see you this week-end. Love, Mom.” And there would be a pair of silver earrings tucked into the envelope. But my daughter would let out a breath of disappointment at the sight of the sterling jewelry, thinking woefully about how she only wears gold.
It was Memorial Day, and I was pregnant. My grandmother and I had just returned from Hicky’s Hamburgers where we got carryout for lunch. We were sitting on her porch out back, eating greasy burgers Hicky called “sliders.” I’d taken to them as a kid, but now I only tolerated them because they were Grandma’s favorite. I’d often suggested trying something else, but she always resisted.

We ate quietly, my grandmother poking questions at me now and then, about baby names and the like. I asked some questions too, easy ones to loosen her up. I was trying to find out what she thought about my “situation.” She responded in her usual manner: abrupt, ending each sentence with a kind of half-nod and “The Look,” her special form of punctuation. The nod was an old habit, born of years gazing down her nose at her children and their children too, but “The Look” was more intentional. It was her way of making sure you were paying attention, and God help you if you weren’t. After a lot of nods and several “Looks,” I let some time pass without words so I could work up the courage to ask her something I’d been wondering about lately: why she had waited thirteen years to have her second child, my Aunt Vicki.

“Well, you know, I had three miscarriages between your mother and Vicki,” she said.
I hadn’t known this, but I didn’t think she was expecting an answer, so I just nodded back at her.

“Well, yeah, Phillip and I had seven children, but only four of them lived. It was common. It is God’s natural way of selecting, you know. There’s no reason for us to start deciding now what God’s been doing for us all along.”

I stopped chewing. My slider didn’t taste right anymore. I looked at the pile of ketchup on my plate and wondered if there was anyway to spit it out without my grandmother noticing. I put the napkin up to my face, pretending to wipe it off and let the meat fall into my hand.

“That’s awful,” I said.

“No,” she said firmly and gave me “The Look,” as if to say, didn’t you hear what I just said? I put my napkin down on my paper plate and turned the awkward bulk of my body to face her so she would have to know I was listening. Finally, she went on.

“We knew it was what God wanted and that was just the way things were,” she said, her eyes staring into mine. Unwilling to be shaken off, I held her glare until she looked away to light up a cigarette. “The first two after your mother were miscarriages,” she said. “The third was almost a stillborn.” She stopped for a moment, as if to remember. “I didn’t know what was happening. I thought I just had to go to the toilet,” she laughed. “But when I got there, blood and fluids came out all over the place. Then I knew something else was coming, so I reached my hand down and wouldn’t you know, there it was . . . so small, it fit right into my hand.” She held her palm out in front of her and curved it carefully like she was holding something precious. “With its tiny feet dropping off at my wrist.”
She put her other hand inside the open palm and made a fist. Then she unrolled the fist and let her fingers hang off the edge of her palm imitating little feet. I could see the fetus, small and wet, in her hand.

“So, I pulled my pants up, and carried it into the bedroom. Phillip took a look and said, ‘Why, Nellie, what have you got here?’”

She looked up at the sky, her eyes shining in the sun.

I was surprised she looked so happy. “So, what happened?” I asked, reaching over to touch her arm.

She turned quickly, looking at me like I was a stranger.

“What happened with the baby?” I said.

“Oh. It was too late. Like I told you, that kind of thing didn’t matter. It was God’s will.”

I picked our paper plates up off the table and walked to the kitchen. My plate was destroyed—the ketchup had eaten a hole through it while my grandmother’s plate looked untouched, as if it hadn’t even been used.

“Aren’t you going to finish your slider?” she asked me.

“No, I’m not,” I said as I lifted the lid of the trash can and dumped the used plates inside.
THINGS IN COMMON

It was the things we had in common that brought Lyle Enyeart and I together even though we were nothing alike. Lyle was a local: he’d lived all of his eighteen years in a small town in northern Indiana. I had only lived in Tipton for three short years. We had attended the same high school until the previous year when he was kicked out for punching a part-time computer teacher who’d told him he’d never think fast enough to code. Most guys like Lyle would’ve dropped out at that point, but Lyle wasn’t one of those people who fit a type—he didn’t always do everything people expected of him. And he was determined to finish high school so he enrolled at the only private school in the county, Lakeland Christian Academy, for his senior year. Lakeland was outside of town, about fifteen miles from where Lyle lived with his parents on a spacious lot adjacent to a 400-acre soybean farm, a long commute for a high schooler, but one that Lyle was willing to make since he wanted to avoid a life of unskilled labor. Lyle’s father—J.R. Enyeart—had dropped out of high school at sixteen and had worked at the Tipton quarry ever since.

Lyle was one of only nine students in his class at Lakeland, the rest of whom had all gone to school together since kindergarten. I had been at Tipton Community High since my sophomore year, when my family relocated from Connecticut in 1984. At Tipton I was one of
those students who, unlike Lyle, did everything they wanted me to do. I made the honor roll, played on the varsity tennis team, and participated in enough extracurricular activities to adequately fill out my college applications. I was even well rounded enough to drink a few wine coolers every weekend. I was unexceptional in my ability to be average. Unlike Lyle, who seemed to belong wherever he found himself, I never felt like I really fit in, and that feeling was reinforced by the fact that most of my peers still saw me as an outsider even though by that time I’d been in Tipton for most of high school.

When I first moved to Tipton, I was a star. Everybody wanted to know to get to know me and find out where I got my two-tone jeans. But after my shiny newness had worn off, I found myself hiding in the bathroom during lunch rather than experience the humiliation of eating alone in the high school cafeteria. This is how I met the Debbies: Debbie Kwilinski was the nicer of the two, and she was the one who found me in the last stall, crying and finishing a tuna sandwich. I always suspected that Debbie K. was so sweet on the surface because was trying to compensate for something. She had a gorgeous face, and she was always perfectly groomed. But she weighed over two hundred pounds and openly criticized how she looked. Debby Jones, whom everybody called D.J., was less sympathetic to my situation. She remembered that I had sat with the most popular kids in school when I first arrived at Tipton and told me that I acted like a know-it-all in the English class we had together. But she had been friends with Debbie K. since kindergarten so she went along when Debbie K. suggested I sit with the two of them and their friends at lunch. Both of the Debbies had grown up in Tipton and planned to stay the rest of their lives. Even D.J., who was in two of my Honors classes, only set her sights as high as a teaching degree from Ball State and a spot at Tipton Elementary. I knew that the only reason they spent time with me was because they felt sorry for me. Even though I was aware of our
differences, they provided me with a badly needed sense of belonging, and I clung to their charity desperately, like it was something I could have easily lost.

Our friendship had been tested once, but somehow managed to survive. The whole thing started in art class when my teacher, Mrs. Jenkes, was talking about her failed painting career.

“My husband always tells me, ‘if you could just sell one painting for $50,000, the four of us could live on that all year.’”

I should have known to keep my mouth shut when the other kids laughed and nodded in agreement, but instead I said, “How could a family of four live on $50,00 a year?”

Mrs. Jenkes jaw dropped, but it was the girl sitting at the table next to me who answered my question. “I have two sisters, and my dad only makes $35,000,” she said.

I had figured out by then that I shouldn’t say anything else, but keeping my mouth shut wasn’t enough to stop what had already started. After class ended, the girl and a few of her friends tailed me to the lunchroom. When I got to our table, Debbie said, “What’s going on?”

“This bitch said it’s impossible for a family of four to live on $50,000 a year.”

“You said that?” D.J. yelled at me.

“I didn’t know, okay? It was an honest mistake. I’m not good with numbers.”

“You’re taking advanced Trigonometry.”

The girl from my art class jumped in again. “I think you should take that as a personal insult, D.J. I mean, how much does your dad make?”

I watched D.J. look around the room and take in the scene. There were three girls standing in a semicircle around the girl from my art class, as if forming a protective shield around her. At the same time, other students were approaching our group, tipped off by the raised voices. I had been at Tipton for less than six months but already I had seen half a dozen
fights break out within the walls of the school. Girlfights were just as common as those involving boys, and I had learned quickly that status was directly affected by how one responded in these situations.

“You should kick her ass, D.J.,” the girl said, and the others offered their agreement. D.J. glanced from side to side, as if she was trying to decide what to do. I knew she felt like she had no choice, but I didn’t care what anybody thought of me so, while everyone was watching D.J. and waiting for her response, I turned around and ran all the way back to the art classroom. My reputation was ruined but D.J.’s remained intact, and thus our tenuous friendship survived.

From my perspective in exile, I could see that I was considered off-limits in Tipton: nobody wanted to be partnered with someone who was different. The result of this was two-fold. First, I rarely ever dated anyone from Tipton. Instead, I found myself latching on to guys from out of town whenever I could. And second, for some reason, my desperation made me more aggressive rather than less. Together, these two things meant that I acted differently around people from other high schools, which is how I got together with Lyle.

We were drinking at Wonnie Gelbaugh’s one Saturday night. Wonnie was the guy we went to when we needed alcohol. He bought Busch beer for dozens of underage kids in Tipton, but we were in Wonnie’s inner circle which meant we got to party at his place whenever we wanted. The only rules were no drugs and no narcs. When I first met Wonnie, he had accused me of being a snitch—probably because I wasn’t from Tipton and because I drove a nicer car than most teenagers.

Some other girls hung out at Wonnie’s from time to time, and one of them, a junior named Darla Wynne, was there that night flirting with Lyle. Darla wasn’t what you would call
attractive. Her face wasn’t really the problem. It was unoffensively plain, but split ends made her hair look dry and frizzy and her hips were too wide for her otherwise thin frame. For this reason, she hardly ever dated—Tipton guys or otherwise. I knew that I was at least more attractive than Darla so when I saw her sitting indian-style on the floor across from Lyle, who was sprawled out like he owned the place, I felt like she didn’t deserve him, and I decided to make a play for him myself.

I walked up to the two of them, holding an open beer in my hand like it was a trophy, and said, “What are you guys doing?”

Lyle looked up at me through narrowed eyes and said, “Blackjack.” He nodded when he said it, and I imagined that he would have tipped his hat if he’d been wearing one. Darla tried her best to offer me an artificial smile, but her lack of enthusiasm made it totally clear: she wanted me to get lost. I ignored her and said, “Can I play?”

“Sure,” Lyle said. He scooted his body across the carpet and folded one of his legs in so I would have room to sit at his feet. I had known Lyle for at least a year, but during most of that time, he’d been dating a sophomore named Leslie. Leslie was just one step above trailer trash, and everybody knew she was easy. Girls like that weren’t welcome at Wonnie’s—as if drinking beer and playing quarters required a pedigree of some sort—so Lyle always came alone. He was pretty good-looking for a guy from the sticks—he was thin and tall, and he had straight dark brown hair that was just long enough to reach his shoulders where it curled up at the ends. But it was the way he held himself that made him so attractive: he would stand in his black cowboy boots and Levi’s with his skinny hips hitched to one side as if he wasn’t some nobody from Indiana but an extra on a John Wayne movie set. His ex-girlfriend Leslie, on the other hand, was cursed with a witchy look: she had a long narrow nose, small, black eyes that looked like dots
and a flat boyish figure. I always figured he was only with her because she put out. I had heard they’d broken up sometime over spring break, but I didn’t know the details and thought it would be impolite to ask.

I nestled myself in the empty space between Lyle’s long legs and gave him a steady look as I sat down. He smiled that same smile I’d seen him give me before—his top lip turned up slightly and his eyes closed just a little—and I knew right then we’d end up together by the end of the night.

“Do you even know how to play?” Darla asked me after I had invaded her space.

I didn’t look at her right away, but let my gaze linger on Lyle just to be sure he understood what I was saying, and then turned to Darla and said, “Sure,” answering her question.

“You and I have played here before.”

“Whatever,” Darla said and picked up the stack of cards that sat on the floor between us.

As it worked out, conversation wasn’t what Lyle and I bonded over that night—instead it was a real and urgent need to make out, which we did for a good hour in Lyle’s powder blue Ford Pinto after we left Wonnie’s under the pretense of my getting home for a curfew. Unlike just about everybody else that hung out at Wonnie’s, I had to be home by midnight, a perfect excuse to leave. But after I got home and had satisfied my mother’s interrogation, I climbed out my bedroom window to re-join Lyle at the cul-de-sac at the end of our street. Lyle had parked under a shady chestnut tree which covered his car in near darkness. As I approached, I could see the red circle of his cigarette lighting up in the night. I hadn’t felt nervous all night, but when I was realized what was about to happen, anxiety kicked in. It wasn’t like parking was anything I wasn’t accustomed to. I’d always found Lyle attractive—he had that great sinister smile—and he
was easy to talk to, but by pursuing him the way I did at Wonnie’s, I knew I had been saying something, something like *I want to be with you*. I realized then that I had no idea if I really did want to be with Lyle Enyeart and that, until that night, I had also never spent any time alone with him at all.

Lyle was way more experienced than I was. I wasn’t overly concerned about him pressuring me into doing something I wasn’t ready to do, but I was aware that I was putting myself in a slightly dangerous position, the kind I knew I was supposed to avoid. He always *seemed* like a really nice guy, like a couldn’t-hurt-a-fly guy. But on the other hand, he did have a reputation for fighting and losing his temper, usually after he’d been drinking. I’d heard stories about Lyle hitting guys until they cried at the Time-Out Inn. But I could never reconcile these stories with the Lyle I knew: a sweet, quiet person who, unlike some guys, never had anything but nice things to say to me and my friends. And during the few times things had gotten ugly at Wonnie’s, Lyle would just sit behind his beer grinning.

These were the things I was thinking about as I walked up to Lyle’s car. I could see through the front window that he had reclined his seat and his eyes were closed. With his arm hanging out the window, his cigarette glowing in the dark, he did look like the kind of guy I should be afraid of. But rather than frightening me, I found that part of him exciting.

I was just about to reach the front of the car and walk around to the other side when he opened his eyes and saw me. The smile I liked so well spread across his face like a reward for my return.

“Hey,” he said, and I noticed that he sounded like he’d been sleeping. He had one arm behind his head, and he looked as comfortable as if he were in his own home.

“Are you tired?” I asked as I leaned in the open window.
“Just dozing,” he said. I waited to see what he would do next: ask me to get in or to tell me that it was getting late since he’d been waiting nearly half an hour. But Lyle didn’t say anything. He just lay back in his seat watching me. I could tell at that moment that he was really into me—it was the way his eyes never looked away from me, as if he didn’t want to look at anything else as long as I was around—and seeing that gave me a sudden rush. Immediately I wanted to get close to him. So rather than waiting for an invitation, I walked around the front of the car—because I knew he would watch me do it—opened the passenger door and got in.

“I thought you’d never get here,” he said, tilting his head in my direction.

“Well, you know—my mom.”

He dropped his arm and turned his body fully in my direction. “Your mom?” Something about the way he looked at me when he spoke—the way he tilted his head to the right just a little and let the one eye that was facing me lock into my gaze in the same way that someone will do right before they kiss you—told me that he wasn’t sure what to make of me.

“Yeah, she waits up for me.”

I looked at him. Again he didn’t respond. I got the feeling that he was completely content listening to me so I went on.

“I have to convince her that everything is okay.” I looked at him again and blushed a little, wondering what he must be thinking. “You know, she wants to make sure that I haven’t had too much to drink or that I haven’t been using any drugs.” I paused. “That I haven’t lost my virginity, that kind of stuff.”

Lyle let out a little gasp and jerked his head toward the front window. Then he started laughing. I wanted to ask him what he was laughing about, but I felt embarrassed even though I wasn’t sure why. Finally, he looked at me and managed to ask, “You’re a virgin?”
“You didn’t know that?”

“Shit, I didn’t know anybody was a virgin anymore.”

“Sorry.” I felt as if I had done something wrong, even though I didn’t want to feel that way. “I thought you knew.”

“How would I know?” Lyle asked with a laugh.

“Well, because we have a pact—we and the Debbies—to wait until we get out of high school. I figured you’d heard about it. I thought everybody knew.”

Lyle stared at me, and I knew he was waiting for me to explain, but I held out long enough that he finally spoke. “What for?”

“What do you mean what for?” I asked him.

“What is the pact for?” he asked.

“Oh, I don’t know. I guess it’s because nobody waits any more. So it would mean something if we did. Don’t you ever want to do things differently than everybody else?”

Lyle put his hands on either side of the steering wheel as if he was about to drive off. “I know what you mean.” He turned his left hand over and inspected his palm, then flipped it back over and held it out for me to inspect. “See this?” he said, pointing to the gold class ring on his finger.

I noticed that the words “Tipton High School” carved around the outside of the stone in the center. I held my hand out to Lyle’s and looked at him for approval before I ran my finger over the green glass of the stone. “It’s nice,” I said. “I like the color.”

Lyle lifted his hand up and looked at the ring again. “This ring cost me two hundred dollars. Two hundred dollars. It takes me an entire month to make that kind of money. So I am not about to give it away to some girl, I don’t care who she is. That is what makes me different.”
I smiled. “So you get it, then. If you think about it, it’s kind of like we’re both breaking the rules.”

“Breaking the rules, huh?”

“Yeah, because it makes us different than everybody else.”

“You’re right about that. You *are* different.” He started to say something else and then stopped. Eventually, he said, “I’ve never been out with a virgin before” and flicked his cigarette out the window. Then he turned to face me and slipped his hand onto to my leg. I responded by shifting my body in his direction. He caught my eye and smiled at me before he spoke again. “I don’t know if I can go out with a girl I can’t sleep with,” he said. Even though his words sounded like a threat, his smile seemed to be sending a different message. I looked at the dashboard so he couldn’t see my disappointment. I hadn’t noticed it before but Lyle had a R.E.M. cassette in his tape deck, a surprise. I had always taken him for a heavy metal and hot rod guy. It occurred to me that it was possible that Lyle wasn’t angry with me as much as he was curious. That’s why he had smiled. I had managed to surprise him. And what he was saying about not being able to date someone like me, those were just words. It was as if he was trying to convince himself.

When I turned back in his direction, Lyle reached out to touch my face. I tilted my head so that it fit into his open palm, and when his skin touched mine, it set things in motion. We both leaned into each other at the same time, but before we began to kiss, he held on to my face with just the one hand and stared at me, as if he was trying to figure out who I was. Up close, I noticed that he had the smell of clean laundry, and I could see that his smooth skin lacked any imperfection. He was flawless from such an intimate perspective, and I found myself wanting to touch that purity.

* * *

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When I woke up the next day, I was well aware of what was ahead of me: the day-after insecurities. I knew as well as anyone the way things worked. It was possible that I would never hear from Lyle again and that the previous night had just been a one-time thing. I never thought I’d be the kind of person to play games with my emotions, but it seemed like my only choices were to go along with this broken system or not participate at all. The latter was inconceivable to me. It had been a complete shock when I first learned that this was how things worked, but eventually I became more conscious about the choices I made: I wouldn’t let anything happen with a guy I wanted to be sure would talk to me the next day. What this meant in reality was that I often fooled around with guys I had no real interest in dating but acted more careful, even coy, with the ones I really liked. Still, no matter how much I tried to avoid getting emotionally involved, I nearly always found myself hurt when the phone didn’t ring the next day.

Things hadn’t been so calculated with Lyle. I had always liked him but never considered him boyfriend material because of Leslie. My actions the night before had been largely motivated by competitiveness, and as a result, I hadn’t gone into the situation conscious of what I wanted. I had just let things happen, and though I had stayed true to my word and said no when he reached for my pants, I had nevertheless put myself in the position I always tried to avoid: I had opened myself up to a person I wanted to see again. Vulnerability wasn’t something that made me comfortable, and experience had led me to believe that a relationship with Lyle wouldn’t happen. Still I couldn’t help but get my hopes up. And even though I didn’t want to be that kind of girl, I knew I couldn’t call him first.

Instead I tried to distract myself. There was never much going on at my house. Even though I had a younger sister, it always felt too quiet to be a real home. Both of my parents spent most of their time at the printing plant where they worked, and my sister had adapted by learning
to entertain herself on her own. I, however, had never grown accustomed to the quiet. I spent most of my time alone in my room, which is where I spent that Sunday wondering if Lyle would call. I started out with a bag of Doritos and the remote control, but when I grew bored with that, I pulled everything out of my closet so that I could clean it, figuring that would occupy hours of my time. But the phone rang less than thirty minutes later.

“Hello?” I said, aware that the shakiness of my voice probably revealed my apprehension.

“Relax.” I immediately recognized D.J.’s voice. “It’s just me.”

“I am relaxed.”

“Yeah, right. I know how you are.”

“Whatever.”

“So? What happened?”

“Nothing.”

“That’s a load of crap.”

Ever since D.J. had started dating her boyfriend Alex, she’d become curious about other people’s relationships. It was like she was trying to make sure she had the best guy. Funny thing was that her boyfriend was uninspiring. Sure, he was popular, he was going to college, but he never had anything significant to say. It was like he wasn’t real. Nevertheless, I knew that D.J. wasn’t going to let me off the hook until I fessed up so I gave in and told her the truth. “We made out. It’s no big deal.”

“I can’t believe you made out with Lyle freaking Enyeart. He’s such a hillrod. What was it like? Did he try to suck your guts out or what?” D.J. had a way of making everything good seem unappealing.
“Actually, he knows what he’s doing,” I said.

“Oh my God,” she said. “You like him, don’t you? You like that hillrod. You’re never going to get out of this town if you hook up with the likes of Lyle Enyeart, I promise you that.”

“So what? He’s hot as hell.”

“He is not hot. He’s a loser.”

“No, he’s got something, and I might as well have as much fun as I can while I’m stuck in this town.”

“This is classic. Gretchen Bradford and Lyle Enyeart! Unbelievable. Don’t you know what they say about oil and water? What are you going to do? Take him to the prom? I doubt you could get that long-haired freak anywhere near a tie and cummerbund.”

I wasn’t sure what to say. D.J. could be so negative. Why did she care who I went to the prom with? At least I wasn’t throwing the best years of my life away on some dorky-looking guy who couldn’t even hold a decent conversation.

“Well, I’ve got to go,” D.J. said, saving me from saying what I really wanted to.

“Calculus and shit. Can’t wait to tell Debbie about you and Lyle though. She’ll just freak!”

Not less than a month before Lyle and I got together, I had broken up with the guy I had been dating all year. Joel was an alcoholic from Plymouth, but he was the first real boyfriend I ever had, and I wasn’t confident enough to be picky about such things as long as I had a date come Saturday night. But ever since Joel and I had broken up, the prom had been weighing on me. Lyle and I had hooked up at Wonnie’s a week after spring break, leaving me less than a month to get a date. Even though Lyle had showed some interest in me by calling and asking me to do something the next weekend, I couldn’t imagine asking him to the prom. I simply wasn’t
capable of handling that kind of rejection. So rather than directly asking Lyle, I decided to float the idea by Debbie, who was less quick to judge than D.J.

“Why do you want to go to the prom anyway?” Debbie said. “It’s boring.”

“I just want to do it because of what it represents. It’s a part of life, a rite of passage.”

“But you went last year.”

“Yeah, but this is our senior year. This is it. Next year there won’t be a prom.”

“Oh darn.” Debbie said.

“I just want to go out in style. I want to show them that they can’t intimidate me.”

“Why do you care what they think?”

Debbie was right. I shouldn’t have cared what they thought. “Anyway,” I said and paused to let her know that I wanted to change the subject. “Can we just ignore the details and figure out if I should ask Lyle?”

“Fine.” Debbie said. I was well aware of the fact that she could tell me I was on my own at this point, but I suspected that she would give in, as she usually did with me. “If you want to go to the stupid prom, it’s your problem. I’ll call Carlos and see if he knows anything.”

Debbie had been infatuated with Carlos since our Junior year when he had taken off all of his clothes during an especially raunchy game of truth or dare at Wonnie’s. It was his confidence that won her over. Carlos adored Debbie’s attention, but he treated her like a sidekick more than someone he would date. Fortunately, he was also friends with Lyle.

I was doing my World History homework when Carlos called me two days later. “Well, I talked to Lyle,” Carlos said.

“What did he say?”
“He said he’s up for it—he’s going to call you and all you have to do is ask him to go. He’ll say yes. He wants to go to the stupid thing as much as you do. He didn’t go last year, and it’s not like they have a prom at Lakeland Christian Academy.” When I hung up, I thought about how weird it was to imagine Lyle going to a Christian school. Was he able to talk to those people? And if so, what did they talk about? My only real experience I had with the insanity surrounding born-again Christians in Tipton was during my Junior year when I served on the student council with Daniel Bowers. Daniel and I spent hours talking while we bagged popcorn at home football games, and he often looked at me like he wanted to kiss me. But he never managed to get through an entire evening without telling me that I was going to hell. I couldn’t imagine Lyle putting up with that kind of hypocrisy on a daily basis.

The same night that I talked to Carlos, Lyle called. It was just before eleven—which everyone knows is too late to call on a weeknight—but I answered the phone before anyone in my family had the chance to say anything. Lyle’s voice sounded dusty, as if he’d spent the day walking through the fields that sat next to his parents house, breathing in the dirt like it was oxygen. As soon as I heard him speak, I wanted to see him again.

“What’s going on?” he asked casually, as if we had just run into each other on the street.

“Nothing,” I lied. Lyle didn’t respond, and I knew I should wait for him to speak next, that that was how things worked, but I couldn’t stand the silence, so I spoke again. “I mean, I was reading.”

“Reading?” I could tell by his tone that he was as surprised to hear me tell him I was reading as he would have been if I had said I had been changing the oil in my car. “What are you reading?” he asked. “Homework?”
“No, it’s just for fun.”

“For fun?” He let out a little laugh. I waited for him to say something else—something about whether or not he liked to read, or whether he hated it, or if he thought I was weird or something like that. Anything. But instead of offering his opinion, he didn’t react at all. Eventually, I felt compelled to keep the conversation going.

“Yeah. It’s a story about a guy who tries to bring his dead cat back to life.”

Again, he didn’t say anything. I considered the possibility that maybe the whole thing with Lyle had been a mistake. Never in my life had I had such a difficult time communicating with another person. And I couldn’t help but wonder, if things were going this poorly now, what would happen when I asked him if he wanted to go to the prom. It was a subject I knew I was expected to bring up, but one which I couldn’t imagine introducing.

Later I realized the only time it ever felt wrong or uncomfortable with Lyle was on the phone. I liked talking to Lyle in person, it felt easy, but without the physical connection, something was missing. Our differences were pronounced on the phone in a way they weren’t anywhere else: he took long pauses, and I rattled on at a rapid pace.

“So,” Lyle said. I wasn’t sure if this one word was supposed to indicate that he was gearing up to say something else or if he was trying to ask me something. I waited for a minute to see if he would go on but he didn’t say anything so I started to talk, but just then he spoke again as if it were the most natural thing in the world to pause that long in the middle of a thought. “You want to go to the prom?”

“You’re asking me?”

“I suppose I am.”
“No, it’s fine. I just thought I’d have to ask you. I mean, since the prom is at my high school and all.”

“I figured you’d never get around to asking.”

“You figured that?”

“Yup.”

I was embarrassed, but I still let out a little laugh.

This time, Lyle spoke before I had the chance. “You wouldn’t have, would you?” he asked.

“I don’t know—maybe not. I didn’t want you to say no.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t have said no.” I thought he might expand on this assertion by explaining why he wanted to go, but he didn’t seem interested in offering anything more than straightforward answers.

“You wouldn’t?” I asked.

He must have understood the real question I was trying to ask him because rather than just saying no, he said, “Nope,” and after a short pause added, “I want to go with you.” It would have been easy for Lyle to say something more non-committal, and I was unprepared for his directness. “So,” Lyle said again, and this time I knew that meant there was more to come. “How do we do this?”

Over the next few weeks, Lyle and I spent every weekend night together, alternating between nights drinking with other people and nights parking behind the airport in Lyle’s Pinto. It was a hatchback, and we would climb in the back and kick our feet out the open trunk. Unlike with other guys, with Lyle, it was just as much fun to talk as it was to make out so we spent just
as much time talking and laughing as we did fooling around. I soon learned that even though the words came out of Lyle slowly, he always had something to say, something he wanted to think about out loud, to share. So rather than seeing a movie or going to Wonnie’s before we went parking, Lyle and I would go right to the middle of nowhere and spend hours doing what amounted to a whole lot of nothing.

“Do you ever,” he said and then hesitated before he finished. “Do you ever think about what you would be like if you’d been born somewhere else?”

“Sure.” I thought all the time about where I’d been born and how different that made me from everyone in Tipton. “Yeah, I’ve thought about it.”

“Really?” Even though this seemed like a normal thing to think about, Lyle actually sounded surprised to hear that someone else shared his thoughts, as if he’d never mentioned to anyone.

“Yeah, of course.”

“Me too.” He paused. “I think about what it would be like if I were born somewhere else. I think about it all the time.”

“Like where?”

He looked at me in a way that showed genuine surprise. I got the feeling that he found it hard to believe I wanted to hear about these things.

“Well,” he said and looked out into the darkness of the night. The moon was in its new phase, hidden in the earth’s shadow for these last days of the month, and difficult to see. I could only make out the individual strands of wild grass surrounding the car. Lyle kicked at the brush with his foot as he began to talk. “I think about places like New York or Los Angeles. All the places people always think about. But then I think about other places too.”
It was my inclination to jump in at times like these and ask what other places he meant, but over the past few weeks I had learned to be patient with Lyle, to wait until he went on to his next thought. That’s how he operated, and I found it worked better that way with him.

“I don’t know. Some place like El Paso, Texas. Or Nova Scotia.” Lyle rubbed the top of his nose with his index finger and went on. “What would it be like to be from Canada, to be from a place that was totally different from the place you’re from or the places on T.V.? Who would I be?” I knew that Lyle was asking these questions because he didn’t know who he was or who he wanted to be. I knew he was in a phase of trying to figure these things out. Graduation was looming—and life, Lyle’s real life, was as close as the next full moon. But for me, there was still time. I was going to Amherst in the fall, and who knew what would happen after that. In that way, Lyle’s concerns were completely different than my own, and although I could understand that, I also knew I couldn’t help him much except to listen. I didn’t know what his life should be any more than I knew what mine should. But for some reason, I couldn’t bring myself to tell him that. I knew he had to work this question out for himself. If he’d ever directly asked me what I thought he should do with his life, all I could offer was that he should go to college. But how could I say that to someone who was barely making it through high school? Before I could figure out what to say, Lyle put another question to me: “Do you think I’d be different?”

I considered what Lyle was asking me. I didn’t want to say the wrong thing—it seemed like there was too much at stake. When I felt ready, I said, “I think you’d be the same person on the inside, but who you are would manifest itself in different ways.” Immediately, I questioned why I had shaped my words the way I had. Why had I been so abstract? Would Lyle even know what I meant? And the way he responded reinforced my doubts: he moved away from me, leaning his shoulder against the frame of the opposite side of the car. From that perspective, he
looked at me in a way that said he wasn’t quite sure he could trust me. He was suspicious. “What I mean is that even though things on the outside might be different—you might have a different haircut or wear running shoes instead of cowboy boots, and you’d have a different job or different challenges in life—even though those things wouldn’t look the same, you’d still be the same person.”

“Like I’d still be getting in trouble and getting kicked out even if I went to boarding school?”

“Exactly.” I was thrilled he understood. “You’d still feel like high school is about stupid people telling you what stupid things to do. No matter where you were. And you’d be right.”

“Yeah, you’re right. That is what I’d think.”

“You know, a lot of things have changed for me since my parents moved here. Everything is different—I don’t fit in and a lot of people can’t stand me.” After I said this, I paused, knowing most people would say something in my defense but I went on when I remembered Lyle wasn’t prone to saying things just to make people feel better or just because it was expected of him. By that point, he knew as well as I did what my situation was in Tipton. “But I still feel like exactly the same person on the inside. The same person living a different life.”

“Sounds tempting, doesn’t it?” Lyle looked towards the dark sky. I followed his gaze. There was nothing to see but a few weak stars that looked as if they might peter out at any moment. I wanted to tell Lyle to do it—to leave, to start over, and that I knew this place would only hold him back but I was afraid of offending him the same way I had with other people when I pointed out the problems of a place like Tipton.

Lyle turned back to me and said, “You want to go with me?”
He smiled at me in that way he did so much of the time—there was a flicker in his eye that said he was up to something—but at the same time I saw something different, something that looked like fear. I knew I couldn’t go with him, yet I was afraid he’d never go on his own. Instead of answering I shifted my attention back to the night sky. Someone who was less comfortable with himself would have said “just kidding” or made a joke when I hesitated to answer his question. Lyle simply waited. I didn’t say anything because I wasn’t capable of lying, and I liked Lyle too much to tell him the truth.

We sat motionless for so long that I let go of time and waited for life to stop altogether. I don’t know how much time went by before Lyle reached over and pulled me to him. When he did, I wanted to touch him in a way I never had before, in a way I knew I couldn’t, but I also wanted to sit there, without moving, forever. I pulled back to tell him this, but as soon as I caught his eye, he kissed me. He kissed me like he couldn’t control himself, like I might never see him again.

“Let’s put the seat down,” Lyle said as he reached up to unlock the latch and pushed the seatback flat. I scooted back into the space Lyle had made for us. When he turned back to me and put his hand on my far shoulder, I let myself lay back, putting my hand on Lyle’s shoulder and bringing him with me. The upholstery tickled my bare arms, and I let myself giggle in the same flirtatious way that I often despised in others.

“You never change,” Lyle said, grinning. He lowered himself on top of me. I could smell the scent of fabric softener that I had learned to associate with those nights. Even though he was a thin guy, his weight still felt significant on top of me, and I loved that feeling of density, of substance. It made me feel secure. He kissed my neck, and I closed my eyes, waiting for him to continue.
Lyle had told me that he’d be driving his Pinto when he picked me up on prom night—he mentioned washing it and something else about not wanting me to be disappointed because he couldn’t afford a limo. I told him I didn’t care, but I did have trouble adjusting to the image of the two of us showing up at the prom in a two-door hatchback. It turned out to be a picture that would only exist in my imagination because that night Lyle showed up in his best friend Dusty’s Black Nissan 280ZX. It might not have seemed like a big deal to anyone else, but I knew Lyle probably had to promise Dusty at least a twelve-pack to get the car.

“I’ve got to have it back tonight,” he said when he opened the door for me, “but at least we’re going to the prom in style.” This was a Lyle I’d never seen before: polite to the point of being chivalrous, but more importantly, proud. It was the best gift he could have given me.

We went to the Holiday Inn first to have our picture taken. That’s the way they did it in Tipton—photographers rented space at the hotel and people dropped by on their way to the dance to have their portrait taken. As we waited in line without speaking, I could tell Lyle was checking out the other guys to see how he measured up. He’d picked out a white vest and tie instead of a loud colored cummerbund, and I could tell by the way he was sizing up the others, he thought he was the best looking guy there. He looked good, surprisingly good. I had always been able to see something in Lyle, but now he looked like the kind of guy whom other women would see something in. I knew I looked good too. Sometime in the past few months, I had shed my awkward teenage self without even knowing it. As I was getting my hair done that afternoon, I realized for the first time how attractive I looked, and it surprised me that I actually felt confident and good about my decision to attend the prom with Lyle. Already I could tell that it would be a totally different experience from the year before when I had gone with a friend and
still had braces. Other couples didn’t seem as comfortable as Lyle and I were. There was a good
deal of fidgeting going on and nearly everybody kept fooling with their hair and makeup. Others
looked around as if they didn’t know what to say to the person standing next to them. I noticed
that Lyle kept his hands in his pockets and stood tall, facing me the entire time we were in line.
Just as we had gotten close enough to see the the front of the line, we saw Carlos approaching
with a sophomore cheerleader.

Carlos walked right up to us, shook his head, said, “Damn” and then offered his hand to
Lyle. “Damn, I never thought I’d see this guy cleaned up.” The two of them acted like they had
just sealed some kind of business deal.

“Me neither,” Lyle said, shaking his head in time with Carlos.

Carlos grinned at me, “How did you do it, Gretchen? You got some kind of power over
him or what?”

“He wanted to do it,” I said.

Carlos snickered and looked at Lyle incredulously.

“So you like to dress up and go dancing, huh?”

“Shut the fuck up,” Lyle said, but he said it in a tone that sounded like he thought Carlos
was funny rather than insulting.

“Well, you two kids have fun. Word is there will be cops at the big shin ding so you
might want to leave your bong in the car.”

After Carlos was gone, Lyle said, “I should’ve kicked his ass,” but then he laughed
loudly as if that was the last thing he wanted to do. He wasn’t usually prone to showing emotion
in public so it was a pleasure to hear him let himself go that way.

* * *
Things were awkward for a few minutes when we finally arrived at the high school. Chaperones and teachers were checking people’s breath and looking in their coats for flasks. I could tell the imposition of authority made Lyle uncomfortable, and we had every reason to be nervous since we both had been drinking screwdrivers out of tall McDonald’s paper cups on the way over. But we loaded up on breath mints and cologne to avoid detection after Carlos tipped us off. Out attempts at a cover-up seemed obvious, but it must have worked since they hardly noticed us, even though Lyle’s presence was enough reason for them to give us the once over.

Once inside the decorated gym, Lyle and I were able to forget the outside world. The gym was covered in aqua-, tangerine- and gold-colored tissue paper. A mural of a sandy beach and a fluorescent blue ocean was propped against the far wall. Streamers were draped under a fake crepe-paper ceiling, and a disco ball hung in the center of the room, reflecting the colors in neon dots. Lyle, who I never expected to be interested in dancing, reached out for my hand like we were in an old movie or something. “More than a Woman” was playing as we walked nervously to the center of the gym floor. Neither one of us really knew what we were doing. We looked around at the other couples and imitated what they were doing—I put my hands around Lyle’s neck and he put his hands gently on my hips. We found a comfortable rhythm and swayed back and forth together for a while without talking, watching the people around us and taking in the scene, until Lyle said, “I can’t believe we’re here.”

“It doesn’t seem real” I said.

“Well, it is,” he said, and he laughed softly, like somebody was tickling him.

I laughed too because I was happy and because I knew how much it meant to him to be there, to be able to do something that other people took for granted. This was what we shared—a desire to embrace these moments, to live them fully.
I don’t know if the music got louder or if I finally started to feel the effects of the alcohol, but I felt a rush of energy pass through me. I looked up at Lyle and he leaned into me, wrapping his arms all the way around my waist and pulling me closer to him. The room was dark except for the light reflecting off the disco ball, but even in the darkness, I could still tell he was smiling. I could feel it.

“Thanks for inviting me,” he said.

“You were the one who asked me. Remember?”

“Well, thanks for saying yes,” he said.

I wanted to thank him back, but from the way he spoke, I could tell he wanted that to be the last thing that was said, as if his words would carry more weight if they were left alone.

After the second slow song ended, Lyle grabbed my hand again and headed for the door. “Let’s get some freaking punch,” he said as we left the gym.

The perimeter of the cafeteria was lined with chairs, and a few tables were set up in the middle of the room. Cookies were displayed in circles and Rice Krispie treats were piled in pyramids. Two large plastic punch bowls sat at either end of the skimpy buffet. Lyle walked up to the bowl where Daniel Bowers stood serving punch, and I had no choice but to follow him. Daniel was wearing an ill-fitting tweed coat and a blue-and-red striped tie that looked like it belonged to his father. Daniel didn’t serve us any punch. Instead, he started making small talk with me. “Back for another year, huh, Gretchen?”

“Yeah, I figured I would give it one last try.” I was surprised to see Daniel at all since, as a senior, he was no longer obligated to work at the prom. “You too? Wanted to come back for one more prom?”
“I haven’t got anything else to do. And at least we didn’t have to bag all that popcorn this year to make it happen.”

“I never minded.”

Lyle picked up a clear plastic mug and pushed it in front of Daniel’s face. “Uh, hello?” he said.

“Do you want some punch?” Daniel asked Lyle.

“It looks that way, doesn’t it?” Lyle said.

“Daniel, this is Lyle,” I said. “Lyle, Daniel. We’re on the student council together.”

Daniel took the empty cup from Lyle with his left hand and shook Lyle’s hand with his right. I could see the muscles in Daniel’s arm tensing when he felt Lyle’s grip. He let go abruptly and handed us our punch.

“Well, have fun, I guess,” I said to Daniel.

“Hardly. Everybody’s drunk and sweaty,” he said.

“How awful,” I said in mock exasperation and turned away from Daniel. Even though I knew he intended his comment to be hurtful, it had the opposite effect on me—I felt sorry for Daniel rather than feel bad about myself. And I wished that he could share some of the high I felt that night.

After dancing the last song, we beat the traffic out of the high school parking lot by taking a shortcut through a private drive that led to a residential street.

“Could you believe that guy?” Lyle said.

“Who?” I asked, as I kicked my shoes off on the floor.

“That guy serving punch, the one you were talking to.”
“Who? Daniel?”

“Yeah, him.”

“What about him?”

“It was like he had something stuck up his ass. I bet he goes to the Lakeland church, doesn’t he?”

“Yeah, how did you know that?

“He’s just like the rest of them. Think they’re better than everybody, think they know it all.” Lyle looked in the rearview mirror as if he expected someone to be following us. “Did you know that they don’t dance?”

“Who?”

“The people at Lakeland. They don’t dance,” Lyle paused. “That’s why he was serving punch. He’s not allowed to dance. Forget about getting laid. These people can’t do anything. They don’t even go to the movies. For God’s sake, they’re not allowed to wear jeans. It’s no wonder they look like they’re about to blow.” I laughed, and Lyle said, “I have to deal with that shit every day.”

It was hard to understand how Lyle could exist in such a world. The only thing that seemed to be getting him through that year was the totality of his desire to finish high school. Even though Lyle would later go on to become a small-town cliche—spending six months in jail for assault and working as a bartender after he got out—during the time that I knew him he was determined to avoid that stereotype, to accomplish things no one believed he could.

After exchanging Dusty’s Z28 for his Pinto, Lyle pulled off his tie and hung it on the rearview. I changed my clothes in the passenger seat, dodging his hands while I did it. Debbie
was waiting for us at the end of her parents’ street because she hadn’t bothered to tell them she was going with us.

“What are you going to do?” I asked her when she got in the car.

“I left them a note,” she replied shortly.

I gasped. I could never get used to Debbie’s audaciousness. It had taken me weeks to convince my mother that it was normal to stay out all night after the prom. Lyle told me his parents expected him to do it. “Saying what?” I asked Debbie.

“That I’m going to a party, and I’ll be back tomorrow.”

“Jesus,” Lyle said. “You don’t think they’ll sic the police on us, do you?”


“Just checking, kiddo,” he said, and I looked in his direction just in time to see him wink at Debbie in the rearview. When I looked back to see her expression, she was looking out the window, but I could see she was blushing.

We met up with the others at the abandoned Big Lots on Old Route 30. D.J. and Alex rode in a van with a group of people from their health class. The night clerk looked fairly suspicious when I asked for three rooms at the Fireside Motel, but I had all the right identification and a Gold Mastercard with my name on it so he had little choice but to give me the rooms.

“We charge all the rooms in advance so don’t think you can skip out in the morning without paying the bill.”

“Fine,” I said, trying to act official.
“And if you take anything, it’ll end up on here.” He shook the card in the air before handing it back to me.

“Sounds fair.”

“And no partying or underage drinking,” he added. He looked out the front window of the lobby for my cohorts, but could only see Lyle’s Pinto since the other two cars were already at the back of the motel lot. I followed his gaze out the window and saw that Lyle looked older and totally straight-laced in his black jacket and white shirt. Debbie sat in the middle of the backseat, and her perfectly styled big hair gave her a look of respectability as well.

After Lyle went into the bathroom the next morning, Debbie knocked on the door of our hotel room. There were two beds in the room, and Debbie flopped down on the one that was still made. Before I could say anything, she picked up the remote control and started flipping through the channels. I continued packing my duffel bag, but a minute later, she said, “So what happened?”

“What do you mean what happened?” I asked while I pushed my pajamas into the bag. Debbie turned the TV off and shifted her attention to me. “Last night? What happened last night?” Even though I didn’t look at Debbie, I could tell she was facing me.

“Nothing happened,” I said as I reached for my hair dryer.

“You mean, you didn’t do it?” When she said this, I turned to look directly at Debbie and said, “What do you think?” Debbie stared at me. Her face looked like it still had a question, as if she had no idea what my response would be.

“Of course not,” I said.
Debbie continued to stare at me in the same way, as if she was waiting for me to go on. I wondered why she was even questioning me considering that she knew as well as I did that we were both committed to waiting until after high school to have sex.

Debbie stared at me for a minute longer, and then she looked down at her nails the same way she always did when she expressed disappointment in me. Debbie visited the salon every week and her nails were in pristine condition. This week her nails were painted a color she had described as “slut red” when we picked her up the night before.

“Because I wouldn’t care if you did,” Debbie said as she picked under one of her nails. “I would have if I were you.” I noticed that Debbie’s voice sounded different than it normally did. Normally, Debbie couldn’t speak without lacing her voice with bitterness. Now, that edge was gone, and without it, her voice almost sounded like a whisper.

I sat down on the edge of the other bed. “But what about the pact?”

“Forget the pact,” she said. “You’re supposed to do it on prom night. It’s like some kind of rule or something.” She turned her hand over and examined her open palm. “At least you have someone to do it with.”

I wanted to tell Debbie that she did, too. I wanted to reassure her. I wanted to be there, in that hotel room, alone with her, away from Lyle and everybody else we knew. I wanted to tell her that it didn’t matter if I had someone to do it with and she didn’t and that everything would be different next year in college. But I wasn’t able to control so many of those things. I knew she didn’t have anyone to be with, at least not anyone she wanted to be with, and I knew that things probably wouldn’t change, and she probably wouldn’t go away to college. And more importantly, I knew she was smart enough to know when I was lying.
Just then, the door to the bathroom opened, and Lyle walked out wearing nothing but a white hotel towel wrapped around his skinny waist.

“How’s it going, girls?” he said, chuckling to himself a little. He strutted to the middle of the room and stood with his hands on his hips.

It took Debbie a second to respond, but when she did, her usual edge was back. “I’ll tell you what’s going on. I’m going to laugh my ass off when you lose that towel,” she said.

“I’ll be the one who’s laughing,” Lyle said. “Because I’ll turn around in circles and slap both of you silly.”

I blushed a little and looked at Debbie. Her eyes were big, but the smile forming on her mouth told she was more entertained than shocked. Eventually she couldn’t hold back her amusement. She started laughing wildly, as if the bubble of sadness inside of her had been popped, and it was all coming out. And as soon as she gave into it, I started too. Then she pulled out a pillow from under the sheets and threw it at Lyle, nearly falling off the bed as she did it. He hitched his waist to the side and dodged the flying object. She quickly grabbed another pillow, and this one hit Lyle dead center, just above his naval. She reached across the bed and grabbed the others, throwing them in his direction, but she was too hysterical at that point to come close. I, too, was nearly out of control, but I managed to swing my pillow against Debbie until she had no choice but to turn back to me and defend herself. We clobbered each other with pillow punches until, finally, I was too winded to keep fighting. The activity stopped suddenly, and for a moment I didn’t hear anything except the sound of the two of us panting heavily, trying to catch our breath. It was then that Lyle spoke.

“You know what you need,” he said, pointing at Debbie as if he was making an accusation, “What you need is a man.”
My eyes cut to Debbie, and I watched her face go pale. When she looked back at me, I could see her pleading with me not to say anything else.

When Lyle picked me up the next weekend, he surprised me by coming inside to say hello to my mother. He looked great in his worn Levi’s and plain red t-shirt, and I thought about how surprising it was that things had worked out so well between us.

“Lyle,” my mother said when she greeted him, “the prom pictures came out great. You looked incredibly handsome.”

I wondered if Lyle would blush, but instead he acted comfortable with the compliment. “Thanks, Mrs. Bradford.”

My mother expected him to say something else, something to keep the conversation going, but I knew that it was unlikely Lyle would do so with someone he barely knew. I wanted to speak so that Lyle’s reticence would be less apparent, but I couldn’t think of anything to say and finally my mother stepped in again.

“Do you have big plans for graduation, Lyle?”

“Nope,” he said, and paused in the way I had become come to expect before he went on. “I’ll just take my piece of paper and be on my way.”

I had already told my mother that I wouldn’t allow her to throw a graduation party on my behalf, but I could tell by the way she tilted her head back, as if she wanted to examine Lyle from a different angle, that she was surprised that Lyle wasn’t interested in making a big deal out of the event either. I worried that if no one spoke up, the next question out of my mother’s mouth would be about what Lyle planned to do after graduation, but she surprised me and said, “Well, I guess you can two celebrate together.”
The warm weather that arrived at the prom had continued through the week so we drove out of town that night to get a better look at the sunset. It was flat all over northern Indiana, but the farther you moved away from Tipton, the more you could see, and about ten miles out of town, it seemed like you could see forever. Lyle turned down a dirt road off of 900 North that led us out into the middle of a field of corn so vast that when we stopped we couldn’t see where it began or where it ended. We were taking a risk. Normally, we parked in the empty lot behind the airport, but this time, we were encroaching on privately owned farmland. There was a chance we’d get caught and kicked out. Or worse. But something about our success at the prom and the upcoming graduation made us feel invincible.

Lyle put on his favorite Eagles song and turned it up loud enough that we could hear it outside the car. We got out and sat on the hood of the Pinto, leaning back against the front window as if it were a lounge chair. The car still felt hot from driving, and the temperature was already warm enough that it was easy to pretend we were lying on a beach in the tropics when I closed my eyes. We listened to the whole first song before either one of us said anything, and Lyle spoke first.

He said, “This is perfect.”

“Yeah,” was all I said.

Even though Lyle and I had totally different lives ahead of us, like the prom we had this in common. We were both content to close our eyes, listen to the music and wait for the next breeze to come along. It was as good as things ever got in a place like Tipton, Indiana, and all I could think about was how great an ending it would provide for my time there to have an entire summer, my last in Tipton, full of nights listening to music and watching the sun set with a guy
who, if nothing else, could at least understand why I might enjoy that. It would be a perfect
sendoff. And when I think of Lyle now, I remember him as a feeling more than an actual person:
the feeling we shared that night. I remember sitting on the car at dusk and watching the sun slide
off into the West. And when I think of that now, I experience both a feeling of peace and a deep
and guttural sense of regret.

An hour later, after listening to both sides of a sixty-minute mix tape, Lyle hopped down
and turned the car off. He lit up a cigarette and leaned against the door frame while he smoked.
The sky hadn’t yet changed from blue to black, but it was late enough to make out the stars as
they emerged from the darkness. I watched the night settle in and daydreamed about the future.

I could tell Lyle was watching me, but I didn’t look at him. He spoke after a few minutes
had passed.”I always hate those people who feel it necessary to name every star in the sky.”

“Why?” I asked, turning to look at him.

“It takes all the fun out of it,” he said. “Makes it more like work.”

“I never thought of it that way.”

“Can’t they just enjoy it?” Lyle asked.

“They think that is enjoying it,” I said. I felt the need to defend those kinds of people
even though I understood exactly what Lyle meant, even though I felt the same way.

“Don’t you get it?” he asked. Now, he sounded like he was angry with me.

“Get what?”

“It’s not all about being smart. There’s more to life than books and names.”

“I know what you mean. I get it,” I said.
Rather than respond, he looked at me. I could see the same suspicion in his eye I had seen in him only once before, but it only flickered there for a second. Then he said, “Yeah, you do get it, don’t you?” He stepped up to the front of the car and leaned across the hood, reaching for me with his one empty hand. “That’s what I like about you. You get me.” He flicked his cigarette behind the bumper and reached out with the other hand, sliding my butt across the car and turning me in his direction until he stood between my legs. “I do like you,” he said, and his words felt so real, so honest that it was as if I was falling into them.

“I like you too,” I said. I didn’t care if I sounded corny. I just wanted to say what I felt.

Lyle put his hand on my neck and pulled me towards him. At first, kissing Lyle felt even more intense between us than it usually did. But then Lyle pulled away from me. For a second, I thought he looked like something was wrong, like he wanted to hit something, but when I caught his eye, he softened and let himself smile a little.

“I think we should do it,” he said.

I knew what he meant, but I still said, “Do what?”

“I think we should do it,” he said exactly like he had said it before, except this time he ran his hands up and down the top of my legs for emphasis. It didn’t feel like affection, as much as encouragement, as if he was trying to say, “Come on!”

Instead of holding Lyle’s gaze, I looked at the ground. His boots were muddy from standing in the dirt. “After graduation,” I said, trying to make it sound like a compromise rather than a suggestion.

“Why?” he demanded, moving his hands from my knees to either side of my legs and slamming them on the hood of the car.

“It’s just a thing. I just want to say that I made it through high school.”
“It’s just plain stupid, is all.” Lyle turned his head to the left as if somebody was approaching out of the night. When he turned back, he said, “You know it doesn’t mean anything?”

“But it does.” I said, fully believing that it did. At the same time, I felt like I was losing somehow. Like I was wrong, and he was right.

He looked at me again and said, “It’s not real, you know? This is all in your freaking head.”

“It’s just three more weeks. Three weeks is like nothing, and then we can do whatever we want. Okay?” I offered this bargain even though I had no idea whether or not I would honor it. I wanted to keep Lyle, but I also wanted to preserve the notion of myself as a good person, a good girl.

He held my eye as if he was trying to decide if I was being honest with him. “Oh, for fuck’s sake, just forget it,” he said and pulled me down off the car so I stood in front of him.

I looked up at him, waiting for an answer.

“Okay, okay,” he said.

“Okay,” I said.

He sighed loudly and said, “I don’t even care. I just want you.” Then he kissed me, without stopping to talk about where it was going or what we were doing.

I didn’t hear from Lyle on Sunday— which wasn’t really that unusual. Nevertheless, I noticed it, I was aware of it. An entire day had passed without us talking. That happened sometimes. Nevertheless I kept the knowledge of this void in the back of my head, like a
notation. Or a warning. But by third period Monday morning, I had forgotten about it, for the
time, while I got caught up in the busy work of finishing high school.

So when Lyle’s ex-girlfriend Leslie cut me off in the hallway outside of my Economics
class, the absence of his phone call wasn’t forefront of my mind. I thought she was just doing it
because she was pissed that I was with Lyle. She did these kinds of things every week or so just
to remind me that he used to belong to her. But when she stepped in front of me that morning,
she stretched her arms out to her side dramatically, as if she was getting ready to take flight, and
it wasn’t really possible to pretend she wasn’t there. When she had finished her performance, she
positioned her right hand directly in the center of the back of her head and flipped me off. It was
a stunt designed to get my attention, and it worked. I noticed Lyle’s class ring on her finger
immediately. I could even see the pink yarn she’d wrapped around it to make it small enough to
fit her bony fingers. Then, as if perfectly timed to follow my noticing the ring, she turned around
and gave me an enormous smile, a smile that stretched her lips so thin that it looked painful, a
smile that said “I win.” It became obvious right away what she was saying, what had happened.
Sometime after dropping me off on Saturday night, Lyle had gone to see Leslie. He had wanted
to get back together with her, and the only way she could take him back without being
humiliated, was if he gave her his precious class ring. Of course, he’d given it to her. He’d
decided that sex was just that important to him. And this was how I found out I had been
dumped.

Lyle never called me again. I never called him either. What was the point? He had
demonstrated that he was more interested in having sex than he was in having a real relationship.
I was more than wounded—I felt gutted. Not only by what he had done, but by how he had done
it. Maybe it wasn’t his idea, maybe Leslie let me know what was going on before he had the chance to do it himself, and maybe he was so embarrassed by Leslie’s actions that he didn’t bother to tell me himself, but he could have at least called to tell me that.

In order to deal with the hurt I felt, I steeled myself inside my still intact morality and went through the last weeks of high school holding my head high even though my insides were twisted. At least I had done the right thing, I told myself. Lyle was the weak one in this situation. And if he was too weak to wait a couple more weeks, then he didn’t really care about me.

Graduation at Tipton Community High School was on a Friday night in the school gym, leaving time for a whole weekend of graduation festivities and celebration. The ceremony was supposed to be held on the football field, but at the last minute the weather report called for rain and the whole affair was moved inside. As it turned out, the weather was gorgeous—an unseasonably high eighty degrees and sunny—but we were still forced to commence in the stuffy gymnasium. As I sat in a folding chair and listened to the bad speeches, I found myself struggling with an unidentified emotion. I had never felt a part of the high school scene, never felt like I belonged, so I didn’t feel any sense of loss or nostalgia, but I had an emotional response to the events at hand nevertheless. On the one hand, I was excited to be going back East and leaving small-town life behind. Yet I had expected to be elated over this prospect, and I found that my response was more one of calm apprehension. I was looking forward to moving on, I had no desire to stay, and I didn’t feel as if there was anything or anyone I would truly miss, but still, these feelings didn’t culminate in the thrill and excitement I had anticipated. Instead, I found myself feeling overly emotional, almost sad. It seemed to be a response that had more to do with me personally than with anyone I had known in high school or any experience I had been
involved in. I suppose I felt something akin to loss over the passing of time as much as anything else. I was finished with this time in my life, a time I had rarely enjoyed, but a time which I still knew had to mean something and would always be a significant part of my identity. I would carry these memories, mundane as they mostly were, with me for the rest of my life. As I took the diploma that was handed to me and stepped off the stage, I realized that I was no different than I had been before—graduating, even leaving Tipton, didn’t make me a different person. It didn’t make me suddenly happy or well-adjusted. I was going to have to earn all that myself. And later, after the ceremony—while so many of my peers cried and hugged each other, I stood off to the side of the cafeteria with a glass of punch, smiling so no one would know that I felt so little—I understood what this realization meant about Lyle. It meant that for all of my assurances, I had never intended to sleep with him after graduation. I knew that I was no more ready after graduation than I had been before. I knew that, in this way, I had been dishonest with him. And maybe he had known that too.

A month and a half passed before I saw Lyle for the last time. It was July, and the summer had finally set in on Indiana. The perfect weather at graduation had been followed by three weeks of cool June days—too cold and damp to go out on the lake or do much of anything. But when July hit, everything changed and the heat left the town feeling dry and dusty, as if the fields had swept over the streets while we slept. It was only about a week after this change when I saw Lyle again.

It was a Tuesday night. Not much was going on so I had gone into town with the Debbies to try to find something to do. After countless games of Centipede and Ms. Pac-Man, we got bored with standing around waiting for something to happen and decided to head out to the lake
to go skinny dipping. The Debbies piled in my car, and I started the engine. But before I left my parking spot, Lyle’s Pinto pulled in next to my car, and I found myself face to face with the person who had humiliated me. I noticed right away that Lyle’s pale skin had tanned to a healthy shade of brownish red. His dark hair was longer, now falling an inch past his shoulders, giving him the appearance of being older and more of a wild boy, an image I knew he liked to cultivate even if it wasn’t really true.

“Hey, what’s going on?” he asked with a wave. It was an odd thing for him to do—as if he was seeing me from far away—but rather than notice how uncomfortable he must have been, I focused on my anger and wondered how he could act like that, like we were old friends. And when he held his hand in the air, I noticed that on his right hand, his class ring was back in place. The whole incident with Leslie came back to me all over again: the pain and the resentment I had felt for weeks afterwards. I wanted to talk to him, to make things right between us, but more powerful was my desire to let him know how much he had hurt me, to humiliate him. This desire was what led me to hit the gas and turn the car sharply away from his. My tires squealed and gravel kicked up in my wake. When I looked in the rearview, I could see a cloud of dust enveloping Lyle’s car behind us.

“Damn!” D.J. said from the backseat. “What an asshole.”

I smiled at her in the mirror as I tried to make out Lyle’s face through the debris.

“I wonder what he’s up to,” she said. “I’m bored as shit.”

“We are not going back,” I said.

Debbie didn’t say anything, but I could feel her looking at me as I drove away. When we stopped at a traffic light, I finally turned to look at her. “What?” I said.

“What the hell was that all about?” she asked.
“What?” I said, wondering why she was giving me a hard time. “You know as well as I do what it was about.”

She shook her head at me. “You are so stupid. I mean, you are really dumb, Gretchen. You know it?” I knew she was right, but instead of listening to her, I turned up the radio and tried not to think about what I had just left behind.
My parents always say they wouldn’t still be married if they believed in divorce. I must have been about five when they first went to see someone about their problems. We lived then, as we do now, in central Jersey less than an hour from New York City. Everybody calls it the suburbs, but it’s more rural and less commercial than that. There are lots of fields—strawberries and corn mostly—and few strip malls. Among these fields are tucked the big farmhouses and sprawling acreage of both old money New Yorkers and the longtime poor New Jersey farmers. It was at an old farmhouse like this—a sizeable white structure which our yellow Volvo had to drive down an isolated gravel lane to get to—where the counseling sessions took place. The home stood next to a tree that I remember as being as deep and tall as the house itself. The tree’s branches extended from the side door my mother would disappear through every Wednesday all the way to the front porch. The leaves hung thickly between the branches, drooping down between them like a moss-covered flag and creating a sea of shade under which I took refuge from the summer heat while I waited out my mother’s visits. As I pulled up the damp grass in thick fistfuls, I would watch the beastly house and imagine what was said on the other side of the windows facing me. I’d been inside a few times myself—to answer questions and do my part in the family therapy, though I can’t remember saying anything helpful or even specific, and I think
I was really only there to be observed more than interrogated—but usually my mother went in alone. I knew the therapy was for my mother and my father, but in all the times I’d been along, my mother had gone by herself. I was old enough to know that this was part of the problem between them. My father was never around, or at least not enough. He was a workaholic.

My mother would spit out this word rather than say it: workaholic. Like she might get her mouth washed out with soap if somebody heard her. But as she spoke, the tiny circles of her coffee-colored eyes sparkled and her cheeks blushed—turning her translucent, freckled skin to a barely-there light pink and giving away the secret pleasure she found in what she perceived as a kind of profanity.

“Your grandfather was a workaholic too,” she would say. “Promise me you’ll never marry someone like your father when you grow up. Never.”

Then she’d think about the seriousness of what she had said, almost as if she intended to drive home the point with a determined pause. But I knew my mother never did anything that deliberate. She was just considering the words for herself.

Eventually she’d continue. “My mother told me the same thing when I was young. But I didn’t listen. I married someone just like my father. A lawyer too.”

I could tell when I looked at her—again all sparkling eyes and pink cheeks—that this was part of the attraction, part of what excited her. She liked to be able to say it. It made her feel proud to be married to someone who put work above all else. It made her feel important.

But it was never enough, and eventually she’d admit it, nearly breaking down in tears only minutes later as if she had just realized the tragedy of it all. “He’s never around. Just like my father. You hardly even know him.”
I felt like I did know him, at least then, when I was still a child and he could still play the role of teacher or authoritarian in my life. After I got old enough to question him—about the same time I started to get breasts—we stopped talking. As if he no longer had any use for me if it couldn’t be on his terms.

I remind my mother what she used to say about my father just weeks before my twenty-sixth birthday, as we ride the train into the city. Outside the huge window of our coach car the density of the population is increasing—more and more travellers wait at every stop—and the expanse of land is disappearing, being replaced by clusters of neighborhoods and frequent streets. We are going shopping, and I know I should keep the peace inside the train but it’s too easy not to. I tell her that I feel like her words about my father were an unfortunate forecast. She denies them.

My mother’s response is “I never said that.” She sounds sure of her words, yet the benign tone of her voice tells me she’s not convinced. She’s faking it. I can read her like that.

“Yeah, right.” It’s February. The only month it really gets cold here, and, even on the train, I’m covered in layers to protect myself. I snuggle my chin underneath my ivory-colored scarf.

“I don’t know where you get that from, Lauren,” she says. “You always remember things I have absolutely no recollection of.” My mother has begun to look wounded. I can tell by the way her mouth hangs halfway open that I have hurt her. I know what’s coming next before she even says it. “Maybe you just have an overactive imagination.” This comment is meant to put me on the defensive, and my mother relaxes back in her Amtrak seat before she continues, stretching out her short legs in front of her as she does it. Her feet don’t even reach the patterned, blue passenger seat in front of her while my knees fill the space before me, my formerly injured leg is
now just as strong and tall as the other one. I have my father’s lanky frame and my mother’s small features—a mouse’s face on a cat’s body. “I can’t imagine I would say anything like that about your father.” She says this last comment without even looking at me, as if she’s talking to the air in front of her. I know she wants the conversation to end there.

“Well, you did,” I say, in an attempt to let her know that I’m not willing to give up yet.

“It was so long ago.” She says this as if this is an explanation. “I’m sure you just misunderstood.”

Now, I have to look away. The window on the other side of the train reveals how far we have traveled. Industry is beginning to surround us. Soon we will be in Newark. My mother has to know how much this accusation bothers me. *I’m not the one* who misunderstands things. *She’s the one* who always misunderstands. Who forgets. I have a memory like my father. A blow-by-blow datebook with annotations.

I turn to face her when I’m about to speak, but she’s also focused her attention outside the train. “Well?” I whisper so none of the late morning commuters around us can hear me. “Do you think Dad makes time for us?”

“He’s too busy paying the bills to sit around remembering all the things we did wrong to you when you were a child if that’s what you mean.” She makes me sound like a spoiled brat. “Maybe . . . “ she begins, looking at me through narrowed eyes which either mean she’s really thinking about this or she’s really angry, “if you were a little more independent, he would have more time for that kind of thing.”

“I am independent. I live in my own apartment.” I moved out of my parents’ house less than a year after college, long before most of the children of our family friends did. But I left for exactly this reason—because I was tired of it being held over my head. I got a respectable job at
a PR firm—not the best or most high-paying job in the world but a job nonetheless. It pays the
rent on my two-bedroom and a little more, at least enough that I never have to go through the
degradation of asking my parents for money. I am proud of it too. I certainly don’t have to work
as hard as I do. Most of the people we know don’t, and I resent the fact that my mother can’t see
this for the accomplishment it is. “I don’t ask you guys for anything.”

“Then why are we going shopping together?” She laughs when she says this, exhilarated
by her cleverness, and I think about telling her the truth—that the shopping is for her as much as
it is for me—but it seems useless to reply. Anything I might say will only make it worse. So I let
her have the last word and hope she’ll pretend to have forgotten it by the time we pull into Penn
Station.

The counseling supposedly saved my parent’s marriage, and as a result, they became
strong believers in the therapy business. I was eight years old the first time they put this belief to
work on me. My first psychiatrist’s name was Dr. Stuckey. He was a clean-shaven, polished
practitioner who sat in his leather desk chair and tried his usual kid tricks on me, but I was too
smart for them. He asked me to draw a picture of our home, and I knew it was best to draw the
house with clean lines and not-too-careful detail, to surround it with warm, sunny skies and lots
of healthy foliage. Stuckey eventually managed to crack my thin facade and even temporarily
fixed my problem—I was afraid to sleep alone in my room at night—but he never dealt with any
of the real issues which caused return visits to his office when I was ten and led to a more than a
few teenage overnights in my parents’ room.

As I got older, I became more resistant to my parent’s attempts to stick me in therapy,
and though they tried again when I was thirteen (teenage and pubescent angst), seventeen
(rebellious talk and behavior) and twenty (excessive drinking and a low G.P.A.), I never gave in and only attended a handful of counseling sessions over the next ten years. It wasn’t until I finished college that I was mature enough to see that therapy could be self-indulgent and fun, even helpful, if I let it. It was, after all, an entire hour every week devoted to talking about myself. My parents paid for a whole year of sessions to help me work through all of my problems, but I ended up spending most of my time talking about them. After a year with Dr. Goldsmith and five thousand dollars of my parents’ money, I was cured, and I moved out of their house and into my own life.

The irony of it all was that as much as my parents—especially my mother—glorified the idea of me seeking help, they were never again able to recognize when they needed it. On the few occasions I was bold enough to suggest it, my mother was practically violent in her rebuttal—hotly hissing at me in a way she’s only done a handful of times throughout my life. Goldsmith witnessed this hypocrisy too. She came along to one of my appointments with him—she wanted to see where her money was going—and when he asked her about her family history, she became defensive, criticizing him for not focusing on my problems, and then sullen and unresponsive.

But the truth is—she needs help. More than the average person too. During the years since I finished high school and she has found herself spending most of her time alone, she has become a knot of anxiety and repression. Sometimes I wonder who the real Sandy Teller is.

I work in an office of ten, but I have trouble getting past normal business-like interaction. And it’s not as if the others don’t try. I have turned down so many invitations to happy hour that people eventually stopped asking. I always intended to say yes at some point, but after a long day
at work, pajamas and television always sounded more appealing than bar talk. Eventually, the invitations stopped, and I watched from afar as my co-workers laughed about embarrassing moments and bad pick-up lines. I still got invited to more formal events—weddings and baby showers—but I suffered through them with a just-get-through-it attitude, avoiding any real contact with the others. And I quickly rebuked any offers to become more involved. Just the day before, Jenny, one of the other account reps, asked again if I wanted to co-host our boss’s bridal shower. I muttered something about my mother and having to go out of town with her.

“But I didn’t even tell you when we want to do it,” Jenny had said. I know she was irritated by the fact that I didn’t want to be involved. I know what most people at my office think: that I am a snob, that I don’t like to do things for other people. In a sense, Jenny was reaching out by giving me a chance to prove them wrong. But socializing terrified me, and I simply couldn’t face the responsibility of keeping so many people entertained.

“I know,” I said, improvising. “I just have to keep my weekends open right now so that when my mother picks a date, I’m available.”

“Are you sure?” Jenny asked, pushing me.

I looked at her face. Her expression did show irritation, but there was also disbelief. No, I thought to myself, I wasn’t sure, but I also wasn’t ready to make what I saw as a demanding commitment.

“Just call me later and let me know.” Jenny scribbled her number on a piece of paper and handed it to me as if it was list of demands.

“Wait . . .” I started to argue but couldn’t call up any other lies.

“I’ll be home tonight,” she said, “and we can talk more about it then.”
I didn’t call Jenny when I got home that night, and I knew I wouldn’t ever call her. Eventually, she would get the message.

Macy’s is, thankfully, serene. No crowds fill the escalators or work over the racks. Just a few overly made-up women and an abundance of chummy salespeople. More importantly, my wish comes true. My mother and I have left our petty argument behind on the train, as usual. The ghost of our frustrations has floated away through the tunnels and caverns of Penn Station with the engine steam.

If there is one thing my mother and I do well, it is shop. This is our world. The world of spending money and dressing up, the world of cafe lunches and customer service. The piles of sweaters and walls of shoes provide us with a sense of security, comforted by the fact that everything we could ever need or want is within our reach.

“You need a new suit,” Mom says as she fingers of rack of blue pinstripes, a style I would never wear. It’s a statement not a question, but I answer anyway.

“No, I don’t.”

“Yours is starting to look worn.”

I move away from the suits, away from my mother, and towards a black dress—it’s sleeveless and linen. Perfect for a small dinner party, I think.

My mother sees me and says, “How many parties do you even go to?” as if she can read my mind.

“I go to some.”

“You’re not the type. You always stay home. You have the nesting instinct.”
I ignore her words and pull the dress off the rack, holding it in front of me as if I am wearing it. She is standing just a few feet behind me, and I turn around so she can see me. “But wouldn’t it look good on me?” I say this because I know she can’t disagree. I know this is where her weakness lies. I smooth the black material down against my long body to accentuate the flattering cut of the dress.

My mother doesn’t bite. She barely looks up from the suits. “With your height, of course it would look good,” she says.

She doesn’t say it, but I can hear the rest of what she’s thinking: But where would you wear it?

I answer her question even though she hasn’t bothered to articulate it. “Actually, I’m hosting a bridal shower next month.”

“You are?”

“Yes, I am,” I reply, lying as easily as I did when I was a teenager.

In the dressing room, I try on a few suits (Mom wins that one) and the black dress. My mother tries on summery shorts and tops, bathing suits and windbreakers. My parents are going to Florida this coming weekend for a month. Or at least my mother’s going for a month. My father will be there on weekends when he can get away.

When I have the black dress on, I come out of my dressing room to show my mother. I know from years of experience that this will be the clincher. She won’t be able to resist buying it when she sees it on me. I call to her behind the adjacent doorway. She walks out only half-clothed as if we are in the privacy of her bedroom rather than in downtown Manhattan. She clutches a bright pink top to her chest to hide her formidable cleavage, but otherwise she seems unaware of her state of undress. When I am convinced she is watching, I spin around slowly so
that she can get the full effect. The dress shows off my legs—I’m surprised there’s not a trace of
injury or long-term damage—and accentuates my slight curves. I know, even before she says
anything, it’s stunning.

My mother puts her hand over her mouth. She acts like she’s never seen me or anyone
else in a dress like this before. “It’s beautiful. You’re father will love it.”

I stop spinning and smile. This is the effect I was after. It’s not lost on me that she has
said my father will love it even though my father will probably never see it. It’s her way of living
vicariously. She sees me in something, and in the moment that I step out of the fitting room, she
imagines she is seeing herself. That she is going to be wearing the knee-length black dress to a
romantic dinner on the Florida gulf coast. That she is my leggy 5’8” and not her stout 5’2”. That
she’s not the one standing in the Macy’s dressing room in a flesh-colored 42-D bra and
unflattering white tennis shorts.

I don’t just do it for me though—it’s not just so she will buy me the dress. I do it for her
too. So she can pretend that she’s not stuck in her own frame. I do it so that I can see the look on
her face as she imagines the scene in which we will both look this good at a party, even though it
will never happen for either of us. At best, I’ll wear the dress to work—or a funeral—with a suit
jacket and sensible heels. But for right now, I push all of that out of my head and let myself
believe anything could happen.

When we finally leave Macy’s, we are loaded down with packages and bags. I carry a
hanging bag which holds both the suit and the dress. We have both gotten what we wanted, and
the effect is triumphant.

“I wish we could go to a matinee,” Mom says brightly.
“With all this stuff?”

“I know.” She looks up and down the street as if she’s considering her options, trying to find a way to extend the glory. “How about Sardi’s instead?”

I agree reluctantly. Sardi’s has always been Mom’s favorite, and I’ve never had the heart to tell her that only the tourists think it has style.

Mom gets a ten-dollar cheeseburger—medium rare—and I get shrimp salad on toast. The caricatured faces of hundreds of celebrities stare down at us from the walls of the restaurant while we eat. They remind me of circus clowns—their faces are drawn in superhuman colors and their smiles look painted on. I was always afraid of clowns—sometimes it feels like I was afraid of everything.

“Do you remember Dr. Stuckey?” I say to my mother.

“Why do you ask?” The tone of my mother’s voice gives away her apprehension, and she lowers a french fry to her plate.

“I don’t know.” I say. “I was just thinking about him earlier. About how he never really fixed me.”

“Do you think you can be fixed?” My mother laughs as she says this. It does sound funny, and I laugh too. At that moment I feel like I’m getting the real Sandy.

“No, I don’t mean that. I mean that he didn’t ever really deal with the problem. He just put band-aids on it. Covered it up so you couldn’t see how ugly it was.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s hard to explain,” I said, trying to think of an example. “It’s like the way he would tell me to stay in my room until midnight one week, and then the next week he’d tell me to stay
in my room until one o’clock. Eventually I was going to fall asleep in my own bed. Did it really take a doctor to figure that out?”

“Well, we sure couldn’t figure it out.” My mother is eating her French fries again. I can tell by the way she licks her fingers that she’s relishing the salt and grease, and I wonder when she last let herself have them.

“Did you ever try?” I ask. “To figure me out?”

My mother looks at me—not the hurt look. The wide-eyed defensive one that could become nasty in no time if I go too far.

“I just mean he was a professional so why didn’t he ever ascertain why I was so scared?” I take a bite of my sandwich in an attempt to try and make the conversation seem more casual than it really is.

“Didn’t he ever ask you?” she says in an offhand tone that tells me a fight has been averted. “I can’t believe you didn’t talk about it.”

“That’s the thing. I don’t remember.” I think of our first session, the time when he had me draw the picture of our home. “All I remember is playing games and drawing pictures and being all too aware that he was trying to manipulate me. I think he knew I was aware of the way he was handling me, but it was like he didn’t care. It was as if he was saying this is what you get whether you can see behind the curtain or not.”

“Well, you were always afraid of something,” my mother says. “Maybe there’s no cure for that.”

I wonder briefly whether this statement should bother me, but I decide to let it go. “Dr. Goldsmith came pretty close.”
“What did he do that was so different?” Before I can answer, my mother says, “How’s your food? Is it good?” and nods at my shrimp salad. I hold the sandwich out to her, and she leans in to take a bite. She wipes the mayonnaise off with the back of her hand and raises her eyebrows. “Yummy,” she says.

“I guess it was just that,” I say, “talking about why I was scared or what events led up to it. Looking for patterns of meaning or something like that.”

“Patterns of meaning?”

“Yeah, I know it sounds stupid.”

“Sounds like I didn’t get my money’s worth.”

“But it worked,” I take a bite and consider how to best explain this to her. “I’m on my own. I have my own place. I sleep soundly through the night, and I never did before.”

“I never thought of it that way.”

Immediately, I think she’s going to question this. “What do you mean? Me being independent?”

“No. I never thought that you would have any trouble sleeping in your apartment. It’s not like you could drive home in the middle of the night or something. You just have to accept it.”

“I never could sleep in that house that’s for sure.”

“Our house?”

“It gave me the creeps.”

“Your father can’t sleep either. I mean, he says he sleeps better at home than anywhere else, but he still has trouble.”

“He should see somebody about it.”
“He’s already done everything there is to do—sleeping pills, vitamins, tea, warm milk. He just needs to learn to relax. All he ever does is work.”

“That’s why he should talk to somebody.”

“That’s the last thing your father needs.” My mother says this like she’s thought about it a million times, like she knows exactly what he needs.

I look around the room and wonder where the waiter has gone. Eventually, I turn back to my mother. “What does he need then?”

“He needs to retire.”

Then why doesn’t he, I think to myself, but I don’t say it because I know what would be next. *He’s got a family to support or after you get married, maybe.* Sometimes I wonder if my mother likes watching my father suffer. It gives her something to complain about, and she likes playing the martyr.

The check comes, and I don’t even bother to reach for it. It’s pointless. I know I’m not going to pay just as well as she does. Why pretend? But I can never decide which is more humiliating—sitting there and doing nothing because we both know she pays for everything or fighting over the check even though I have no intention of winning. When the waiter comes to pick up her Mastercard—her *gold* Mastercard—I feel like a fool, a twenty-five year old in a schoolgirl’s body. I wonder if they mock people like me. The waiter is probably the same age I am. If the situation weren’t so embarrassing, I might even flirt with him, or at least I would want to. I suppose I would never would actually do it. And truthfully, *I have* been a good girl today. I have let my mother buy me the suit I don’t want or need, and I have let her imagine she was the one who looked stunning in the black dress. I haven’t said anything about the cheeseburger nor have I made any notice of it, and except for the brief argument on the train, I have let most things
go. This is what I’m thinking as we walk through the revolving door and step into the street. The cold winter air and the blinding sun hit my face at the exact same moment, and I think to myself that that’s who my mother is and who she desperately wants me to be—someone who lets things go.

As much as my mother lets the big things go—my father, her own happiness—it is a rare occasion when she lets the little things get away from her. She labors over tiny details as if such minutiae really matter. She’s the salesperson’s most demanding customer, the doctor’s most frequent patient. When I was sixteen I had to have oral surgery because my jaw didn’t fit together properly. It wasn’t a priority to me—the biggest problem was that when I ate a sandwich, the lettuce slid through my misaligned teeth like an eel—but the doctors deemed it mandatory. After wearing braces for a year to prepare for the procedure and a seven-hour operation, it was my mother who wasn’t happy with the results. I was still groggy when she entered the hospital room, the pain just beginning to reach me on the other side of the anesthesia, but rather than inquire about my condition, the first words out of her mouth were, “Her nose!” She wheeled around to the surgeon as if she was going to take a swing at him. “What did you do to her nose?” He mentioned side effects and the difficulty of the procedure, but my mother wouldn’t accept his excuses. “You take her back and fix that. I don’t want her having to go through life with a crooked nose.” Some people might think it was a silly request, but back in the operating room, the doctors found that my septum had been deviated. My mother’s attention to detail had insured that I would have a lifetime of easy breathing.

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The parking lot at the train station is still packed with Beamers and S.U.V.s when we return. It’s only four in the afternoon, and most of the commuters won’t be back until after six. My mother’s car—a silver Oldsmobile—is parked in the second aisle so I walk the short distance with her. The chill doesn’t knock me out the same way it did in the city, it’s less harsh here, but it’s still unbearably cold. I plan on sitting in the car with my mother until it warms up and getting a ride the rest of the way to my Acura. I help my mother put her bags in the trunk. I notice she has bought less for herself than I thought. Nearly half of our purchases are for me. I wish I could do more for her.

“Will you come over for dinner Friday night before you go?” I ask as I close her trunk.

She takes the keys from me and says, “Dinner?” as if she’s never heard the word before.

“At my place.”

The lines around her eyes bunch up as she speaks. “At your apartment?” She tucks her purse under her arm and rests her hand on it like it’s a gun, like it has power.

Immediately, I wish I hadn’t said anything. I can tell that she can’t imagine eating dinner in an apartment, that she thinks it’s beneath her. Or at least that it doesn’t make sense to her.

“Come home, and we’ll go to Espo’s,” she says.

“I want to have you over to my place.”

She puts on a fake smile and responds in a sing-songy voice. “Fridays they have vegetarian lasagna. You always like that.”

“How come you never want to come to my apartment?” I ask.

“What are you talking about? I’ve been there.”

“Only to drop me off or pick me up. Never have you actually spent any time there.” I pause before I continue. “You think you’re too good for it, don’t you?”
“Well, why should we go there when you can come home or we can go out?”

It’s not lost on me that she has avoided directly answering the question. “See, that’s what I mean. You think it’s not good enough for you.” I can feel the frustration rising in me in hot waves, and the heat makes it easier to tolerate the cold.

“We lived in an apartment once too. It’s nothing to be ashamed of.” I can tell my mother is starting to get cold by the way she’s unconsciously swaying back and forth to keep warm.

“I’m not ashamed.” I think about the “apartment” my parents lived in when they first got married—a two-floor brownstone in Brooklyn, hardly the kind of place most people live in when they’re just starting out, hardly just an apartment. “I don’t think that’s it. I think if I had a house, you still wouldn’t come over.” This isn’t the first time I’ve thought about this. Last December I hurt my leg in a skiing accident and had a cast on for weeks. I spent days alone in my apartment, thinking about how my mother never came over, how she refused to help. This is something that’s been bothering me for three long months, something I’ve been waiting to lord over her.

“For God’s sakes, you wouldn’t even come over when I broke my leg.”

“Why would I have done that?”

“Because I needed your help.”

“You didn’t need my help.” Her tone is dismissive, but I won’t let it go that easily.

“I did. I begged you to come.”

“Well, you were welcome to come home. You knew that. You could have had the best of everything.”

“But I wanted to be in my home.”

My mother rubs her hands together, and the sound of her gloves brushing against each makes me feel as if I’ve got an itch. “What could I have done to help you?” she asks.
“Help me get around. Help me with the cooking and the shopping. You could’ve driven me to work.”

“I can’t drive into the city. There are too many cars.”

“You could’ve driven me to the train.”

“I gave you cab money.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“You didn’t have any problem taking the money, did you?” My mother says this in a tone that says she’s got me.

“What choice did I have?”

My mother is wide-eyed again, but this time it’s me who’s angry. “You never told me any of this,” she explains.

“Yes, I did. I did tell you.” I consider my words carefully before I go on, but they still come out wrong. “I mean really, Mom. Will there ever come a time when sending a check won’t be enough?”

I know I’ve gone too far without waiting to see her response. She gives me the hurt look again, except this time, it’s more hidden, under the surface. She lets the corners of her mouth go south, her way of letting me know I’ve really injured her. Her voice is hushed when she speaks again—as if what she is saying is a secret. “My God, Lauren.” She looks at me with disappointment. “You just push and push and push. I can’t believe you’re pulling a stunt like this.” Now, finally, I get anger back from her, finally she gets it, how pissed I really am. She starts to walk toward the driver’s-side door, as if the conversation is over, but I won’t to let her walk away.

“It’s not a fucking stunt, Mom.”
My mother’s neck, as short and blunt as a bulldog’s, snaps back from the car and glares at me. The surprise of her movement catches me off guard and forces me to take a second look. I see in her all the things I love and hate about the ways in which I look like her—the just-right soft brown hair we both wear shoulder-length and tucked behind our ears and the tiny round features that were always all wrong for my long, angular face.

“Do not talk to me that way,” she says.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I was just trying to make a point.”

“I’m going home now,” she says and opens the car door, as if saying she is leaving will make it acceptable for her to go, as if everything between us is now resolved.

She gets into the driver’s seat and starts to shut the door. Before she closes it all the way, she leans out and without turning to look at me, calmly says “I have to go home and make your father dinner.” It’s a thin attempt at an explanation, and I wonder why she’s bothered. Even though I can’t see her, I can tell that her words come through clenched teeth, and I know her well enough to know she is trying not to cry. For a moment, I consider if I am willing to leave things as they are—spinning around in my black dress, eating lunch on her gold card, drawing pictures with Dr. Stucky, even six more weeks riding in the back of a cab with my leg covered in plaster—but the pictures are gone before I can decide. My mother turns the ignition on, and I move out from behind the car so she can leave.

I don’t go straight home. Instead I stop at a coffee shop in the strip mall near my apartment. As I sit in the corner nursing my cappuccino, I notice how crowded it is. It’s an unusual time of day for me to be there, and I am surprised at how different a scene it is from a weekday morning. Teenagers sit around a table playing Jenga, an older man sips his coffee while
he reads. One woman punches keys on her laptop, and another feeds her baby from a bottle. What strikes me is how content everyone seems. No one is rushed, no one is complaining. I try to imagine the last time I felt content. In college, I went to parties, I went out on dates, but no matter what I did I always felt like I should be doing more: studying more, dating more, having more fun. It is this fear about not doing enough that I remember when I think of college. And my adolescence is a time I don’t even like to think about. I was as unhappy then as I have ever been. Before that, my life only comes back to me in pieces: a trip to the beach, a birthday party, a bike ride. All of it seems so peaceful when I think of it now. I know there were bad times too, especially the times when my mother would break down and cry, but there still seems to be a pleasant glow around all the memories I have of that time in my life. But thinking of my mother takes me back to the scene at the parking lot. I can still picture what her face looked like as she drove away: her jaw solidly set in its anger, like it had been cast in cement.

On the way to my car, I stop in front of a boutique and admire some jewelry in the front window. Without considering what I’m doing, I enter the store and look casually through the merchandise.

“Can I help you find something?” a middle-aged woman says from behind the register.

I want to be polite so I say, “Not now, but I’ll let you know if I find something.

She smiles warmly at me, and I notice a bright blue oval hovering behind her. I step closer and see that the color is actually more aqua than blue, and that the oval is actually a large serving bowl, the kind of piece that would look beautiful on my dining room table. As much as I want to buy the bowl, I know I don’t usually allow myself such extravagances. I realize it’s the kind of thing I normally would ask my mother to buy for me.

* * *
When I get home, I am exhilarated by the thrill of spending money I don’t have. More than half a month’s rent gone, and I feel giddy, high. I remove the bowl from the shopping bag and unwrap it carefully from its decorative tissue paper. I set it gently in the center of my pine table, adjusting it a few times to make sure its in the right spot to catch the light. The aqua-colored glass is opaque, and the color swirls around its basin like a turquoise river. I feel confident that candlelight will reflect beautifully in its polished surface. I am so wrapped up in its magic that I don’t notice right away that the answering machine light is blinking. When I hit the button, my mother’s voice fills the room like a voice-over. She tells me where and when to meet them for dinner on Friday. I hit delete without thinking, deciding at that moment that I will go with them, that I will go along with her requests.

My next impulse is to pick up the phone from its receiver before I change my mind about what I’m about to do, but I need to get Jenny’s number first. A minute later I find myself dialing before I’ve decided what to say. Should I apologize for not calling sooner? What if she has already found someone else to help her with the shower? But I’m committed to seeing this through. When I hear her voice on the other end of the line, I won’t take no for an answer. I’ll insist we do it here, at my place. Jenny will help me prepare, she will teach me how to act, how to be, but it will be my party, in my home. And I already know the blue bowl will look perfect.
ANNUNCIATION

When I’m at work, I don’t always spend time with the people I should. I don’t usually eat lunch with the other black girls unless I have to, and I don’t lean over their desks, dishing on their boyfriends with them either. Mostly I just hang out with Jerry, this white boy nobody likes.

I met Jerry not long after he had started at the D.O.J. He was trying to find out if there was a McDonald’s nearby, and everybody was ignoring him. I felt bad. For the most part they pretended he wasn’t there. I decided the least I could do was tell him how to get where he wanted to go. But then, as I started giving him the directions and thinking more about how nobody ever paid any attention to him or ate lunch with him or anything, it made me feel even worse. So I figured I would just show him the way myself. I thought it was a one-time thing, an act of charity you could say. Except while we were eating we started talking about the office and then we got into this great discussion—right away Jerry was easy to talk with. And sometime after the Quarter Pounder and before we got back to 17th Street, we just stuck. The thing is that I like Jerry, I really do. I guess in that way, I don’t really fit in.

The truth is I have never really fit in. I mean I look like I fit in, everybody wants to be in my company and call me a friend, but Jerry is one of the only people I’ve ever met who I am really like, who I really connect with. Other people just stand around talking and saying stuff to
each other, but they don’t really listen, they don’t hear each other, not in the way they should. They just like to hear themselves speak—they like to watch their words swirling around in the air in front of them and they like to listen to the tenor of their voice dancing in their ears. They don’t care if anybody actually ever hears what they have to say or if anybody cares about it either. But Jerry isn’t like that. I was never like that either. I always wanted to yell “Stop!” when people let their eyes wander around my head while I spoke; I always wanted to slap the people who had to jump right in the second I left off.

Of course I want to slap myself sometimes too. I want to kick the living shit out of myself for some of the dumb things I have done. And I have done plenty. For starters, I got pregnant when I was fourteen. My boyfriend at the time, an older guy by the name of Mike Hobbs, drove me across state lines to take care of that. It was only fifteen miles from where I lived in Falls Church to the place in Rockville, Maryland where you could get the job done without telling your parents. I remember cruising home on the Capital Beltway in Mike’s silver Chevette and worrying that I’d probably never be able to have kids again. I worried myself so hard that I lay awake most of that night, watching the lights of passing cars stream across my bedroom walls like a language I had yet to learn. It turned out that I was wrong to worry. I was pregnant again before I got out of high school. Some guy I barely knew. I had sworn I would never have anything to do with any place like that one in Rockville again, but I found I was too stupid or too afraid to stop myself. I ended up at a place just like that only a few miles from our house in Virginia, swearing the same promise to myself all over again.

The second time was different though. The second time was my choice, my fault. The first time Mike made me get rid of the baby, and I think that’s why I had to do it again. In order
to feel responsible for what I had done. Because the first time it had been Mike more than me. And I wanted it to be my mistake. I wanted to own it, to feel the bad part of what I’d done.

But then I got smart. I grew up. I learned to live with the constant ache of regret and the pain of something forever lost. I graduated high school and got a good job at the Department of Justice. I work in the Crime Prevention division, and I make $24,000 a year plus benefits. It’s a fine setup, one I don’t want to let go just yet. Not until I’ve saved up enough money to go back to school and get my degree like Jerry—he went to Maryland. Or at least that’s what I used to think before—before what I found out this morning.

It was the smells that told me first. Just like they always do. The fake apple scent of my Aloe-Vera shampoo then the damp, dusty stink of dirty car upholstery on my way to work. Smells that I don’t normally notice suddenly came alive for me, and I that’s how I knew. It was just like what happened when Mike got me pregnant, and the same way I realized what was going on junior year in high school.

Right away I drew a calendar in my head and started counting back the days, but no matter how many times I did, no matter how slowly I made myself think, I couldn’t get it to work out.

Jerry and I had slept together just once. It was the day of my mother’s fortieth birthday. Jerry had joined us for dinner at my Pappy’s to celebrate. It was the first and only time I let my mother have the pleasure of Jerry’s company, and I knew she thought he was a fine present. Our family is small: just me, my mother and Pappy. My Nana died when I was seven, leaving Pappy to tend to us by himself. Pappy and Nana had two other children, my Aunt Louise and my Uncle Martin, but before I was in kindergarten they had scattered around the country so it was just the
three of us when Nana passed. Pappy learned to cook at that time, and he still liked to make
dinner by himself on special occasions. I called him to ask if it was all right to bring Jerry, and he
said yes, even though he must have known from my mother that Jerry was white.

We ate meatloaf and drank champagne, and Pappy asked Jerry questions about the
Terrapins. Jerry wasn’t into all that, but he played along, talking bowl games and playoffs just
like he was a regular guy.

At some point, my mother joined in. “Jerry?” she asked, as if she wasn’t sure she’d
gotten his name right. “Why don’t you have a wife? Or a girlfriend at least?”

I was embarrassed for Jerry, but he just laughed and took a sip of his champagne before
answering. “I guess I’m too young, Mrs. Williams.”

“Too young?” Mother looked at me, her mouth hanging open like a broken doll, and I
knew what she was thinking: I was eight when my mother was twenty-six, Jerry’s age.

Jerry must have sensed this too because he went on, as if to explain. “Well, I want it to be
right, you know?” He looked at my mother, but she didn’t speak. “I want to be sure. I don’t want
to rush into anything.”

My mother smiled, finally pleased with his answer, and looked at her father. “He’s a nice
boy, isn’t he?”

Pappy nodded and passed the rolls to Jerry like they were a gift.

After we got back to my place that night, Jerry and I talked about the future in indirect
terms.

“Do you ever want to get married, Maria?” he asked me. We were sitting on the sofa
watching television like we usually did, and I was wondering if there was a way to cross the
imaginary line that always seemed to exist between us.
“Sure,” I said, leaning towards Jerry as I spoke. “Who doesn’t?”

“Yes, I know. But you want it to be with the right person, right?” Even though he was over a foot away, the intent way Jerry looked at me just then made it feel like he was inches from my face. I knew he was trying to say something about us, something about me. We weren’t close enough for me to feel the warm temperature of his body, but I could still smell the breath mint he had chewed on the way home from my mother’s. I knew what he meant, that he was right, but there was a part of me that thought I could be happy with anyone, as long as I wasn’t alone.

“Yes,” I said because I wanted to say the right thing. But I immediately regretted not being more truthful and added, “Well, no. Not exactly. I guess I’m afraid of being alone.”

“You’ll never be alone, Maria.” He leaned in closer to me when he said this, and I knew that the imaginary line had disappeared. I wanted to say why not, to ask him if he’d be the one to be there for me. Instead I willed myself to hold his gaze, and when I did, he leaned in to kiss me before I lost my nerve and looked away. I didn’t get nervous or frightened after that, and everything felt right between us.

But it was just that once, one time we had crossed that line, and ever since then we’d been jumping around it, trying to remember where it was and figure out where we wanted it to be. But that one time had been a while back, at least a month because my mother’s birthday came in the beginning of March and now it was nearly time to turn in taxes. My period had come since the time with Jerry—of that I was sure—and there hadn’t been anybody else for months. But my period has never been the best way to judge things: sometimes it’s a few days late, sometimes a few early, and sometimes it doesn’t come at all. It didn’t come for three months after my trip to Rockville. But I wasn’t naive enough to think that having my period meant for sure that I
couldn’t be pregnant. I’d heard stories from other girls, and I knew nothing—even five full days of blood and tension—was for sure.

These are the things I’m thinking about as I make the short walk from my desk to the office kitchen where I meet Jerry every morning at our usual place and time. The hall is lined with the desks of the other assistants, and as I walk I am listening to every word, every sound, wondering who will notice or figure out my news, who will guess by the look on my face, or Jerry’s, who will see me for what I am. But no matter how hard I will myself to listen, no matter how much I strive to concentrate, I can’t hear anything, not even what I know must be the soft, reluctant footfalls of my feet on the brushed carpet.

I don’t know what I will say when I open the door and see him—I know he’ll be there, he always is. I want to tell him right away, to get it out there so that it’s no longer mine alone. And as I lean against the swinging kitchen door, I repeat the words tell him, tell him over and over in my head.

Jerry’s face looks up as I enter and he smiles, he always does. I blush and look at a smudge on the linoleum. He turns back to his tea, and I step closer. I want to tell him, I really do, but instead I watch him go through his routine and try to think about other things.

Jerry and I meet here every morning. I let him think that I like to share his spicy Indian tea, but what really brings me here at the start of each day is less concrete. I want to see Jerry, but it’s more than that. I want to inspect his face for signs of change, of distance. I guess I never expected Jerry to stay the same—to be the person I can count on, the person I can relate to—for long. I keep thinking that at any moment he will change back to the person he was before, the stranger whom no one talked to. And morning is when I can best look for signs—after we’ve
been apart for more than a handful of hours. But every day, so far, I search for signs of desertion, and I see none.

Jerry isn’t what I would call good looking, but I know he looks at least good enough that the white girls in the office should find him attractive, even though they don’t. He is tall, taller than me, and significant enough that you can’t ignore his presence. He has dark, short hair—about the same deep color as planting soil or peat—but next to mine it looks auburn, almost tinged with red. He wears small nickel-colored glasses that he never takes off at work, and he holds his back perfectly straight both when he stands and when he sits, as if he doesn’t know how to slouch—though I know he does. And he wears the same khaki-colored pants that all white boys wear, except he wears the kind without pleats because even though he won’t admit it, he has a good body and likes to show it off. I don’t know for sure why the white girls don’t snatch him up while he’s still by all means free. I don’t know why he’s off limits to them.

“Sugar?” Jerry asks, and I hold out my teacup even though I know I probably won’t ever get around to drinking it. I just do the tea-thing to humor Jerry or maybe to humor myself. Jerry tilts the sugar above my cup, and I watch the tiny white crystals spill into the dark liquid. One of the things I like about Jerry is that he doesn’t rush me, he lets me take my time coming around to him, and he doesn’t mind being quiet together. Most of our mornings are spent like this: in silence. Maybe this is why the white girls stay away from him. Maybe it’s the way he acts. I watched him when he started here—the same way I watch everyone—and noticed that he didn’t warm to them the way he was probably supposed to. He didn’t tag along to happy hour or casually mention the people he knew. Maybe he seemed aloof or stuck-up, I don’t know. Nearly all of the white people in the office went to college so they can’t begrudge him that. Maybe it
was just the fact that he didn’t give off the air of caring what they thought. He didn’t act like he
needed them or wanted their approval. I know they can’t like that.

And I know what they think of me. I even hear them say it—”pet project” they say. That’s what they think I am to Jerry. He’s heard it too. He lets it make him angry, but I don’t worry. I know enough by now to know that I have to float above the little stuff that everyone else thinks is so important. Levitating is what I call it. I told Jerry to try too, but he can’t do it. He’ll learn someday; I only hope it’s an easier lesson for him than it was for me.

“How was your night?” I finally say to Jerry, and he grins at me rather than rush to respond. His grin is perfect—every tooth straight, every molar polished—and his look says exactly what I need to know: he hasn’t changed since yesterday, he still lives for the sound of my voice.

“It was all right,” Jerry says, but I can tell by the way his voice sounds, more timid and less robust than normal, that there’s more. He’s holding back, I know.

“Uh-huh,” I say, to get help him get started.

“Somebody got shot on my block . . .” Jerry hesitates and looks at me to see if he’s got my attention before he continues. “At the gas station down the street, the Amoco on the corner of 14th and Corcoran. They shot the guy who owns the place.”

“Sumeet?” The man’s name comes to me, even though I’ve never actually said it out loud before.

“Yeah, Sumeet is dead.”

I take a moment to consider Jerry’s words. I think about the last time I stopped there, at the Amoco—I needed to fill up the air in my bicycle tires. I had to ask for change to use the
machine, but at first the girl working that day didn’t want to give it to me. I think she thought I was trying to trick her or something. Sumeet hadn’t been there.

“Are you surprised?” I ask Jerry.

“No, I’m pissed,” Jerry says, and I know—I know because his words sound rushed, like they’re all one big word run together, and I know because I can hear Jerry slowly grinding his teeth—that he’s about to lose control of his tongue. “There was only about fifty bucks there,” he says. “Fifty bucks, and the guy’s dead.”

“It’s a bad neighborhood.” I say it casually since I know no good can come of Jerry going much further in this direction.

“Does that make it okay?” he says.

“It’s just the chance you take. Living in a place like that.”

“So we should all just leave the city?”

“You have to protect yourself.”

“That’s just running scared.”

Jerry always talks big. That’s one of the things I like about him—he’s an idealist. But I do wonder. In the short time that I’ve known him, I’ve wondered probably thousands of times what would happen if Jerry’s big ideas got put to the test. Would he be able to live the way he talks or would he chicken out? I guess I always figure most people will chicken out, but I suppose I have to admit that it’s the fact that I still believe Jerry will back up his words with action that makes me want to be around him. The strange thing is I never imagined it would be so soon that I’d be able to put that theory to the test.

“You sure do talk a good game, Jerry.”
Jerry laughs, and his eyes beam at me in a way that says you know me. “Do you ever ask yourself if it’s just talk?” he says, but he doesn’t wait for an answer. Instead he laughs again, and answers his own question. “I do. I worry about it all the time.” While I consider this, Jerry turns back to the counter to put the sugar back in the cabinet.

“You’re no fraud, Jerry,” I say because I want to believe that, and I feel like I have hurt his feelings.

“You’re not certain about that, are you?” he says, and I can tell that he isn’t any more certain than I am, that he wants me to tell him I’m sure about him so he can believe it himself. And I realize that this isn’t the time to tell him what I have to tell him, not while he’s trying so desperately to figure out who he is and what he’s really about, to prove he can walk the walk. I don’t want to skew his response or allow him to give in to some sense of moral responsibility or righteousness, and that’s all telling him now would do. So I pick up my teacup in one hand and slide my hand underneath Jerry’s arm with the other. His skin feels warm underneath my touch, and for a moment, I think I might start to cry.

“I’m as certain as you are, Jerry,” I say because that’s all I can say and I have to get out of there before I show my cracks. I rub Jerry’s arm before I let go and head through the swinging door into the carpeted hallway, back to work.

My job isn’t that hard, but I do it better and faster than anyone else ever could. It’s a simple occupation really—just putting together packages and fulfilling orders for anyone that calls—the Ad Council, the White House, P.S. 47 or just some average joe watching T.V. at two in the morning who happens upon our public service announcement and scratches the 1-800 number down on his dirty dinner napkin. I always think it’s funny to see those commercials on
T.V. You watch them and think “Hey, this is my chance. I’m gonna do something to clean up my streets. I’m gonna take a bite out of crime.” But what do you get when you call? A recording asking you to leave your name and address so I can send you a box full of outdated posters, pamphlets and brochures.

My title is Fulfillment and Distribution Assistant—even though I don’t assist anyone and nobody else does fulfillment or distribution except me. But I know more than I have to know to do my job; I can do a number of other people’s jobs as well. I know more than how to find all the right literature and supplies, pack it up and ship it. I know everything about this place that I can. I know all the facts and all the statistics—94% more likely to die by a gun if you have a gun, 34% more likely to get attacked if you wear headphones at night, 72% of attackers flee when the victim screams, and on and on. I know how much money we spend each year—just under a million dollars which I hear is cheap for a place like this. And I know how to do everything—I know how to answer the phones, I know how to respond to questions from the press, I know how to put together a quarterly report, and I have even testified before Congress, which is unusual for an administrative assistant but I know they picked me because it’s hard to find a black woman who can make the right kind of impression, not because they think I’m important or have anything new to say.

I remember they did the same thing with the commercial Clinton did in ‘94—they found a really pretty, young black girl to tell the story of her friend getting shot and then they showed her in the oval office with Clinton promising to put more cops on the street. They only picked her because she was the right kind of minority—not too black, not too ethnic, and young enough to still be cute.
But even though I know I’m good—no great—at my job, I don’t really get anything out of it. I go through the motions just like everybody else. I get my work done fast, and then I don’t have anything to do except wait for the executive director to stop by and say, “Maria, sweetie, can you do me an itty bitty favor?” in his best desperate voice. That’s how the Congress thing happened too. Jack is always coming to me when other people can’t get their stuff done. Sometimes I think Jack is the one who sees me as his pet project: he rolls me out for big events and local appearances just to prove he can make something out of a disadvantaged black girl from Falls Church. He does it with plenty of the others too. His personal assistant grew up in a trailer park and used to be addicted to heroin, and he likes to brag about how he cleaned her up and got her off the streets even though he didn’t meet her until after that happened. But I don’t mind that Jack uses us like this. I know it’s his game, and just knowing that is mine.

But other times weeks go by at work without me hardly noticing the time change. It’s times like these when I get lost inside myself, in the workings of my mind and my imagination. I don’t mind it there. The only problem is that when I do this, when I really let go, sometimes it takes over too much of me, and I forget to let anyone in. And then when I wake up, days later, I realize how lonesome I have become. So I go crawling back to the girls who I’ve spurned in days past and give them compliments about their new hairstyle and ask about where their boyfriends took them shopping until I’ve placated them enough to get back in. And then everything’s okay. Until the next time.

The weird thing is that I haven’t let myself get lost in my head like this since Jerry and I happened. He won’t let me slip away—as hard as I have sometimes tried. And because he’s done that for me for all this time, now I’m afraid of him leaving me. Now I have something to lose.
I’ve only had one other serious boyfriend in my life. His name was Corey and we dated on and off through most of high school, and by senior year we were pretty serious. I always thought Corey was the one. Thousands of times I imagined myself walking down the aisle at our wedding in a strapless white gown, a small bouquet of white daisies tucked between my hands.

I can still picture Corey standing at my locker after the seventh period bell waiting to drive me home from school. Corey always knew how to hold himself, even when he was young. He would lean against my locker with his arms crossed against his chest and his eyes would follow me the entire time I walked up to the place where he stood. He never looked away. No matter who said his name or who walked by, his attention stayed focused on me, and for some reason, I thought this meant that he would stay with me forever, that he would never leave. At that time I couldn’t imagine life without Corey’s eyes upon me any more than I could imagine my life now, outside of Falls Church and independent of anyone or anything there. But eventually Corey did leave.

One day in April, almost a year after we had graduated, Corey spent an afternoon packing his things and moving out of the apartment we’d lived in for nearly eight months. While he got his stuff together, I paced around the apartment and struggled to believe what was happening. We argued over stupid things like who should get the T.V. even though I had paid for it, but I wouldn’t budge on the television or anything else. I figured if Corey was going to leave me, there was no reason to give him anything he wanted anymore.

Then his friends came by to help—three of them showed up in one car, and they were talking and laughing and having a good time, as if it was just a day like any other. I hated them for acting that way. Corey acted embarrassed when they asked him what was taking so long, and I wondered if he was going to say goodbye to me and our life while his friends waited in the car
outside, honking for him to hurry up. I tried not to think that he had planned it that way. That he wanted to avoid dealing with me and the look I get before I am about to break down. And I still pretend that that wasn’t what happened.

When he had finished packing, he looked at me like he didn’t know me that well, like we hadn’t spent a significant part of our lives laughing and crying together, and he shrugged at me as if to say “What did you expect?” And then finally he did leave. For a moment I felt relief, but not a second later I was overcome. I felt the all-encompassing emptiness of losing someone whom I never thought I could lose, the feeling that you don’t have anyone else in your life, that you are entirely and utterly alone, the feeling that it will always be that way. It was a wound I knew right away I’d never be able to fill. And I learned later that my gut feeling that day was right—I’ll never stop the hurt I feel from losing Corey, it will always be with me, though I think about it less and less all the time.

Since then, I have always promised myself that I would never again make myself that vulnerable to someone. But now I realize that it has snuck up on me, that it is the possibility of this kind of pain that I now face with Jerry, and it terrifies me to the point that I fear I might become hysterical, that I might hyperventilate or weep or both. I have to stop myself and take a deep breath in before I can begin to try to figure out how this has happened, how I got here. Jerry and I only slept together that one time, and otherwise we have kept a safe distance between us, as if we didn’t want to catch something. The problem is that just beyond that safe distance there is a real understanding, a true intimacy, which I don’t think I ever had with Corey. Jerry knows that I eat pizza when I’m happy and carrots when I’m upset. Jerry knows that as good as I am at staying on top of things at work, I am absentminded at home, leaving the refrigerator open and nearly always forgetting to pay my phone bill. Jerry knows that my greatest fear is that my life
will be exactly the same twenty years in the future as it is now. I can’t help but wonder . . . if I had let Corey in more, if I had let him see the real me, would he have still left? With Jerry, I see that I have never worried about trust because he exists outside the world I know—how could someone like that hurt me? But now, as I contemplate his disappearance, I see that he could. He could very easily hurt me very much. He could—he might—leave a hole ten times the size the one that Corey left behind.

Gerise stops by my desk that afternoon, and right away I tense up. Gerise is the glue that holds the girls in the office together, but still I don’t feel right around her, as if there’s something shady or off about her. Maybe that’s why I never gravitated towards the social thing at work.

Though it isn’t like the girls in the office to include me, they don’t ignore me either. They know I have other things I would rather do, they know I’m not like them, and they have figured it out about Jerry, of course. But I try to do my best to still be a part of the community, to help out when I need to. I’ve been to just about all of the other girls’ houses—sometimes for baby showers, other times to help on moving day. One time I drove all the way to Indiana with a girl named Missy because she wanted to see her boyfriend who spent a year locked up in Terre Haute. So even though I am not really one of them, it isn’t any surprise when Gerise shows up at my desk and acts like we are old friends.

Gerise is all dolled up as usual. Her dress is one of those two-tone rayon numbers, with aqua on one side and purple on the other. The combination is dizzying, and if I look at her too closely, my head starts to throb.
“Have I shown you the pictures from our vacation, Maria?” she says. In her hands, Gerise holds a red and white photo developing envelope, and I watch as she opens it using only the ends of her long grape-colored fingernails to flip through her choices.

“Huh-uh,” I say as I find myself leaning forward to look even though I’m not really interested.

“Oh, you have got to see these,” Gerise says, but instead of holding the photos out to me, she flattens the envelope against her chest and takes a deep sigh. “We had the best time! It was just so romantic. I wish you could have been there. Well, no I guess I don’t wish that, do I?” Gerise laughs, and I wonder how long it will take for her to show me the pictures.

“Where did you go?” I ask because I know I should pretend to be interested.

“Oh my goodness! Didn’t you hear?”

I shake my head and Gerise continues.

“My sweetness took me to Cancun! Can you believe it?”

The vague idea of Cancun and Gerise comes back to me like the image on an old postcard. “Yeah, I guess I did hear about that. So how was it?”

“Well, it was just so . . . well, I can’t even begin to tell you how perfect it was so just let me show you the pictures.” Gerise holds the envelope out in front of her and pulls out a few photos which she sets down on my desk, without turning them around to face me. I lean over and put my fingers on the edge of either side of the upside-down photos, gently turning them around in my direction. I thumb through the pictures of Gerise and her boyfriend Kenneth and ooh and aah like I’m supposed to. I remember when Corey and I used to talk about going away together. Sometimes I wonder if I will ever have the things I once dreamed of.

“No, you went too fast, Maria—did you even see the ruins?”
“I saw them,” I say and hold the photos out towards Gerise insistently so she has no choice but to take them. “Thanks,” I say, but I say it in a way that I know makes it clear to Gerise that I want to be left alone.

“Okay, I’ll leave you to your work,” Gerise says in a voice that seems to say don’t you want me to stay longer? “Wait. I almost forgot.” Gerise lifts a small tropically-decorated shopping bag off the floor, and sets it carefully on my desk. “Kenny and I got you something. You know, to thank you for covering for me that weekend with the P.S. 12 kids.”

I had nearly forgotten that Gerise had asked me to help her with those kids while she was gone. Gerise is the youth outreach assistant, and she had scheduled a camping weekend with the fifth grade class at P.S. 12 and then completely forgotten about it when Kenneth announced he was springing for a trip to Mexico. It had been a great weekend for me since I don’t normally get to work with the public and those kids shined as bright as any star. One of the little girls—an eight-year-old named Kenya—had especially taken to me. As soon as we boarded the bus, she was standing next to me in the aisle, asking my name and all kinds of questions. By the time we arrived at Harper’s Ferry, she had latched on for good, holding my hand as we walked to the campground. On the second day, some of the kids went rafting, and Kenya wanted me to go too. I told her it wasn’t for me and I’d see her later, but she insisted she was too scared to go without me. I made excuses and avoided her eye, but Kenya’s persistence won out in the end. I just couldn’t say no to that little girl, and when we splashed through the rapids and across the rocks, I reached out to make sure she didn’t fall in the water, all along aware that she could have very easily been my own child.

“Oh, yeah,” I say and wonder if my face has given away any of what I’ve been thinking.
“Well, open it,” Gerise insists. I looked into the bag and see a small white gift box. I take it out, dislodging the shopping bag by shaking the box until the bag falls away from it. The box is perfect—it has a pretty palm tree stamped on the top and a gold sticker holding the flap shut—and I think about not opening it at all, leaving it just the way it is. But I do open it, and after I pull at the tissue paper, I see a small jar. When I remove the jar from the box, I read the blue and green lettering on the label and let out a sigh. Macadamia nuts. I’m allergic.

“What is it, Maria? Don’t you like those? Have you had them—they’re amazing. I can’t keep my hands off of them.”

I nod at Gerise and try to think of what to say.

“Oh my God!” Gerise says. “You’re not the one who got sick the last time we had those, are you? I thought that was Priscilla? Oh my God!” Gerise starts to laugh. “I am so stupid,” she says. “I’m so sorry. Well, maybe Jerry will want them?”

I manage to give Gerise a small grin, which finally gets her out of my office and away from me. I don’t really care about the nuts anyway. The camping trip was kind of like they say—its own reward. It wasn’t something I would have traded for a real gift anyway.

Gerise is gone, and I’m alone here in the literature cage—they call it that because it really is a cage with fencing all around it. I think it’s to make sure no one breaks in and steals anything, but that doesn’t make much sense. The insistent buzz of the industrial clock on the wall behind me reminds me that there are no other people, no other sounds to drown out what I’m thinking. Normally I like the solitary aspect of my work—I thrive on it in fact. I get lost in the absoluteness of my autonomy. But today the isolation feels jarring, as if some deep part of me understands that I’m really not alone any more at all. Or maybe it’s the threat of really being
completely alone this time. I think of Gerise’s pictures again and wonder how you get to be in a place like that, a place where you go to Cancun and bring back pictures and stupid Macadamia nuts and feel happy. I don’t know if I’ve ever been happy. I don’t know what kinds of things would make me happy. And I feel uncertain of what anything means right now. But being scared is just not an option. I was scared before, the last time, and I did everything wrong. I won’t give in to the temptation of taking the easy way out again. But what else can I do? If only I knew Jerry would stick by me, if only I knew anyone who would. If I had told him this morning, I would already know.

I stand up from my desk and quickly lock the door of the cage behind me. I move hurriedly down the hall, and the certainty of my decision to tell Jerry blocks out all of my other thoughts. I find that I am almost running on the way to his office, not caring who might notice my swiftness or how my fervor might appear to others. I simply must be in his presence again, I simply must know how he will respond.

I stumble through Jerry’s door, and all I am able to see, to take in at all, is his face—his tender face. His eyes awake as he sees me, and his mouth opens to greet me. And I tell myself I know he will be happy, I know he will take us in with wide and genuine love.

“Maria,” he says and reaches his hand out to me. The areas between his fingers are a deeper pink than the rest of his flesh, and I think how before Jerry I never noticed things like that. I take his hand in mine, not caring that I have never done such a thing in public before, not worrying that Jerry might pull away, and he doesn’t. The sensation of his skin against mine sends a jolt through me, and I wonder if he feels my body kick back.

“Maria, are you okay?” Jerry turns to face me completely now, and I can feel my face flush with his attention. I force myself to believe in him, to trust. I hesitate for a second: I start to
speak and stop, and I imagine the words leaving my body so quickly that I won’t even know I have said them so I try to slow myself down by breathing in and out as slowly as I can. I look up into Jerry’s eyes and finally speak.

“Jerry, I’m pregnant.” I enunciate the words as clearly and precisely as I can.

Jerry’s neck lurches forward so far that his head appears to sit directly on top of his torso. It looks as if he suffered from some kind of muscle spasm or uncontrolled tremor. He puts his hands on either of my arms and pulls me farther into the space of his office.

“What?” he says. I sense in Jerry’s tone something familiar, something off, but it’s not an emotion I’ve witnessed in Jerry before. No, it’s others who have responded to me like this. I close my eyes as if to shut out the feeling of doubt, of disbelief I can tell is now there.

“I’m pregnant,” I whisper and open my eyes. Jerry doesn’t look away, and I tell myself that’s good, that means he’s not afraid.

“You’re pregnant?” This time the question in Jerry’s words is more pronounced. And the words of another question are immediately there, between us, but I ignore them and hope that he doesn’t give voice to such a thing.

I can’t find my voice to answer so I drop my head and simply nod. Prayers I haven’t prayed in God knows how long come to me, and my silent recitation of them begins without any will on my part.

“Who was it?” Jerry asks.

With this one question, I am able to witness how things will go—Jerry denying me, Jerry putting me out. And I wish I could go back, back in time to the moment before this fracture, back to choose a different end.
THE OTHER MAN

“What is it that you see in Danny anyway?” you asked me over dessert at the most expensive restaurant in College Park. The one all the professors go to when they entertain visiting writers and the one all the other grad students think is too pricey to bother with—which, of course, made it all the more appealing to you. You insisted that we come here to see what all the fuss was about, and I can never say no to you. I knew all the waiters thought we were the perfect couple. I even knew we looked good—no, great—together: you in your charcoal grey Calvin Klein sweater, the one that sets off your olive skin so well, and me in my black halter dress and Jimmy Choo sling-backs. It almost felt like we were a real couple, and I even thought we’d made it through the evening without having a disagreement until the subject of Danny came up. After taking a moment to consider your next step, just like you always do, you went on: “Is it his status as a college dropout, his employ as a computer geek, or his wake-and-bake habit that you find so appealing?” You stopped talking to scoop up the rest of the Tiramisu we were sharing, and I took the opportunity to think about what it was that I did see in Danny.

Sure, he is all you said, but that’s just the surface stuff. What I like about Danny is that he is different. Maybe it is his lack of education and his drug habit, or maybe it is his thoughtfulness and his strangely possessive cat. Bottom line: he isn’t like other guys. How many guys keep cats
who want to scratch their lover’s eyes out? And even when he is high—which I admit is mostly all the time—Danny’s eyes look as clear and blue as the kind of ocean you only see in travel brochures. When I look at him I think of dinner cruises and parasailing and Margaritaville, and even though I know they shouldn’t have, these images give me a sense of contentedness, of peace. But these are all things I could never share with you. On the other hand, I could tell Danny, and I did. And we would joke around about going to one of those all-inclusive resorts and lazing on the beach in our own private cabana.

It is Danny’s ability to do this with me—his ability to dream, to laugh—that makes me feel like I am getting the real him, not the notion of who he thinks he should be, the way it is with everyone else. I know you thought it was time for me to move on. You’d said as much. But I wasn’t interested in relocating when Danny feels so good.

“I guess he just feels real,” I said.

You ran your tongue across your upper lip, collecting the remaining sweetness, and gave me a look I’d seen from you too many times before. “But it’s not going anywhere,” you said as you dabbed your mouth with the cloth napkin, and I wondered why it was that you always talked about where I’m going rather than where you are right now. In the three years we had been in graduate school together, I couldn’t remember one time when we talked about your future. Sure, we talked in general terms, about what kind of guy you’d like to be with, about where you’d like to live after you finish school but it was never about anything real or concrete because your whole life had become about abstract things, about the dissertation. I couldn’t even think of an instance when you’d socialized with anyone besides me. By all rights, you are my best friend, and I love you in that kind of way, that gay-best-friend way, but sometimes I think you want me to live so you don’t have to.
The first time Danny convinced me to try Ecstasy with him, he refused to have sex. He mumbled something about it being too much.

“Too much?” I said, asking for clarification.

“Yeah, you know? Too much.” I laughed and thought about how you always talked about Danny’s inability to articulate. He’s no Joyce, you liked to joke.

You know I’ve never been one of those people who did a lot of drugs—that’s one of the reasons we could hang out. But I never pretended that I avoid them either. Basically if they’re there, I’m there. But the chemical thing scared me, and it took weeks for Danny to talk me into Ecstasy. I won’t lie to you about it now even though I hid it from you before: as clichéd as I know you’ll think it sounds, it was simply amazing, it was phenomenal, it was the best sex I ever had with my pants on. When Danny lightly ran his hand along my arm, I felt it all the way down to my core. Of course, I couldn’t tell you about it, with your codes and your ethics and your twelve steps. But I secretly wished you could feel it too. And more than anything I wanted to tell you how much trust I felt for Danny after it was over.

After I had dinner with you that night, the Tiramisu night, I lay on Danny’s bed alone, thinking about the questions you had asked and tracing an imaginary line on the ceiling. I know I should’ve been thinking about where we were going, about how Danny always said he’s not into the commitment thing, about how he never talked about who he’d dated before, but instead I thought of the way it felt that night he touched my arm, the goose bumps on my flesh. I know we didn’t make sense—he doesn’t get Faulkner, and I don’t understand code—but somehow we connected.
Danny walked into the room, but I didn’t notice him until he spoke. “Are you thinking about him again?” he asked.

I rolled away from him and put a pillow over my head so he wouldn’t see my face flush red.

“The other man,” he teased.

I laughed, and he pulled the pillow away gently. I looked at his eyes and involuntarily thought about snorkeling. I couldn’t remember the last time I felt so at ease with another person. Danny kissed me, and things progressed as usual. Something about Danny made me feel more comfortable than I had ever felt before—as if there was nothing wrong with desiring sex or being naked, as if there were no rules. Things were never better between us than they were that night, and for once, the cat let us sleep in peace.

“But what do you talk about?” you asked over lunch a few days later at a new pan-Asian place you found in the District. “You can’t just fuck all the time.” You paused and then added, “Or can he?”

“Isn’t this the best green curry you’ve ever had?” I said.

You put your chopsticks down pointedly, set your hands on the edge of the table and leaned in so I could get a close look at the way your eyes were glaring at me. I knew you were trying to be funny, but I also knew you wouldn’t let it go until I answered.

“I don’t know what we talk about,” I offered. “What does anybody talk about? What do we talk about besides food and who’s sleeping with who in the department.”

“We talk about fucking literature, that’s what we talk about!” Your voice raised just enough to make me uncomfortable, and I looked over my shoulder to see if anyone was listening.
You ignored me and went on. “We talk about film for Christ’s sake. We talk about the beauty of art, or have you forgotten?”

“Speaking of film, what are we seeing this weekend?”

“Why don’t you see a movie with him?”

“Oh no, we can’t see a movie together. Remember? All we do is fuck.”

“Oh yes, I forgot.” You snorted and became distracted with collecting noodles on your chopsticks. I knew I would have to give you a real answer sooner or later. I thought about the conversations Danny and I had shared—the ones that didn’t revolve around Club Med. Some nights we climbed out his apartment window and took the ladder up to the roof of his building. We would sit in rusty lawn chairs and try to find the stars behind the yellow haze of the city lights. Sometimes we would talk, and other times we would just look. All I knew for sure was that it was there, on the tar roof of Danny’s apartment, that I most liked to wait for another night to pass.

“I don’t know what we talk about,” I said. “Sometimes we talk about what we want to be when we grow up, or how things are different than we imagined they would be.”

“You mean, he talks about what he’ll be when he grows up, and you say you’ll wait for him.”

“I’m not waiting for anything. I’m content with the status quo.”

You snorted again. “And by that, you mean the fucking.”

“Would you shut up about that?” I looked around the restaurant as obviously as I could, hoping that you’d honor my request.

“I’ll say one thing,” you added, “he must be fantastic in bed.”

* * *
That weekend Danny and I went to see a movie, or a film as he called it. Danny said movies are the extended commercials that come out of Hollywood, and films are the things I see with you.

During the “film,” Danny laughed a couple times, and I could tell he liked it because his body was slumped over to one side the same way it would be when he would first slide into a comfortable high.

I smiled and looped my arm around his. It felt nice to have someone to touch in the dark of the theatre for a change.

When the movie ended, I gripped Danny’s arm so he couldn’t get up. I didn’t want to have to tell you that he failed our test. We both always said a guy isn’t worthy if he can’t sit still through the credits. And when we walked out, I asked him what he thought.

“I don’t know,” he said with a grin that told me he was trying to hide something. “It was entertaining and all, but what was the point?”

I thought about how you would answer such a question and then composed my words as carefully as I could. “The point,” I said, “was to show that reality is a construct, that nothing is actually real.”

“Yeah, right,” he said and looked away from me as if he was irritated, as if he’d rather be somewhere else. It was a look I hadn’t seen on him before.

“Didn’t you at least like the use of a non-linear chronology?”

“Why can’t they just let a story be a story?” he asked. “It was a good story, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, it was,” I said.

“So why mess with it? Why not let the story speak for itself?”

“It’s an artistic choice,” I said, thinking that this should be obvious.
“It’s only innovative if it’s never been done before” Danny said, and I couldn’t think of a reason to argue.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said, as we approached the car. “Or wait a second! If my car is just a construct, then I guess we’re not going anywhere. Are we?”

“Very funny,” I said and waited for him to open my door.

That Monday at school I told you about my excursion out with Danny. You listened attentively as I described my impression of the imagistic direction and told you how the lead actor made me so hot that I couldn’t wait to get back to Danny’s place.

“And what did Danny think?” you asked when I finally stopped rambling.

“Danny thought the film lacked innovation because the director was just emulating the same techniques we’ve seen so many times before.” I wanted to sound convincing so I added, “He thought it was derivative.”

“Is that what he said?”

“What?”

“Danny?” you asked. “Did he actually say ‘the film lacked innovation’? And does even know what the word derivative means?”

I didn’t answer your question. Instead I looked over my shoulder to see who it was that I heard rustling down the hallway. “Hi, Kara,” I said as a young woman walked by the open door of your office. For a moment, I imagined what would happen if she just kept on walking, if she went down the stairs and outside, never to return again. It was a thought I had been having a lot lately: What would it be like to leave all this behind? But instead of finding an answer I turned back to you, and when I saw your probing face, I was suddenly aware that I was growing tired of
your questions. I looked over my shoulder one more time and then leaned in to say in a whisper, “I don’t want to talk about this anymore.” I sensed that I needed to be as firm as possible, more explicit, if I was to avoid further interrogation, so I added, “I don’t want to talk about Danny.”

“I don’t want to talk about him either,” you said in a voice that seemed to say I was dismissed, as if I were one of your students. Your brusque manner surprised me because, even for you, it seemed more bitchy than usual. I sat back abruptly, not sure how to feel. But you went on before I could get a handle on my emotions. “I don’t think you should see him any more. That’s all there is to it. You might as well just end it.”

“What?” I said and wondered if you were becoming the controlling and manipulative person everyone says you are. I thought about what it was that would make you think you could tell me what to do and what it was that would make you hate Danny so much. “Just because you’re in graduate school, doesn’t make you smart. Maybe you don’t like him because he just is smart.”

“No, I don’t like him because he’s not trustworthy. And I simply don’t want to see you get hurt. I care about you, that’s all.” Your voice had taken on that paternal tone I despise so much, and just like the other times you’d talked to me this way, I immediately felt the need to get away from you.

“I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about. You have no reason to think that about Danny or to say it.”

“I don’t need a reason,” you said. “I can just tell.”

I stood up and pushed my empty chair towards you. I wanted to shove it at you, I wanted to hurt you. Not because of Danny or anything you were saying, but because as much as I wanted to, I could never force myself stand up to you, because you and I didn’t make sense anymore.
When I left school that afternoon, I went right over to Danny’s. He was working on a freelance job, debugging or something like that, but he still took the time to kiss me even though I had shown up announced. While he finished, I lay on his bed and played mind games with the cat, teasing her with one of Danny’s socks.

Later, Danny and I ordered chicken wings for dinner. We decided to eat on the roof, and when we finished I lofted the bones into the alley without a thought to littering or consequences or anything else. It was my own small form of rebellion. Danny asked me what was wrong, but I couldn’t tell him the truth because the last thing I wanted was for him to hate you, even though he’s not that kind of guy. I couldn’t lie either because you know I’m no good at that. I said maybe we could talk about it later. Danny was good at taking hints, and he changed the subject, but that night things never felt right or easy like they usually do. And later while Danny breathed deeply, I was unable to sustain sleep. I would wake abruptly, with a jerk, certain that the cat was working her magic, putting a spell over Danny and me as we slept.

You and I didn’t talk for days, three to be exact. This was how we always fought so I didn’t worry about this altercation being any worse than normal, even though I secretly wondered if it should be. The phone rang on Thursday, and I knew it was you because of the time: ten minutes before three. You always called then, twenty minutes after your last class. I picked up on the first ring, just happy you’d made contact. But you sounded distant, and I realized that this time our skirmish hadn’t healed on its own.

“Can you come over tomorrow night for dinner?” you asked.

“You’re cooking?” I was skeptical.
“Just come over and see.” You barely said goodbye before hanging up.

I arrive at your house promptly at seven. I know you don’t like it when people are late, and I want to put things right so I am catering to your way of doing things: being on time, wearing the pashmina scarf you gave me for Christmas, and carrying a bottle of Pinot Noir.

You open the door as if you see me coming—even though your window doesn’t face the street. It isn’t until I get to the doorway that I sense you are not alone.

“Am I early?” I ask, confused by your lackadaisical demeanor.

Your mouth is pursed into a sour knot. Instead of answering my question, you jerk your head back, indicating something behind you. You haven’t been on a date in years—no one’s ever good enough for you—so I can hardly believe what I think you’re trying to say.

Instinctively I enter the room in a rush. At almost the exact same moment that I see him, I realize what is happening, I know it is Danny who is there with you. I know you are trying to prove something to me—about his loyalty, about who he is, about his sexuality. He is asleep on your couch, his body rising and falling with his breath. His shoes sit on the floor under the coffee table, and the top two buttons of his shirt are opened, revealing his pale, hairless chest. It’s a familiar sight, and if I try hard enough, I can almost pretend it is like any other day when I come out of the bathroom and find Danny asleep in his own apartment.

I walk over to the couch and sit down. With just the tips of my fingers, I brush his shoulder. I know he won’t respond because he’s always been a deep sleeper. I can feel you watching me, wondering what I will do next, but I don’t care about you anymore. I lift my legs to the surface of the sofa and inch back into the curve of Danny’s body, just as I’ve done before.
Danny puts his arm on top of mine, and I feel at home. As I lie inside Danny’s shell and wait for him to wake, I start to imagine what will happen next.

Was I surprised to see him there? Not really. The funny thing is that I know your attempt to break things down will only make us stronger. Now, I can see the parts of Danny I couldn’t see before. I can see that I can’t cage him in any better than you can control me. In this way, what you did will give us a new freedom: we’ll no longer be tied to the old rules of love. We’ll make our own way and be as happy as two people can be. Danny will say something about trusting our instincts and book us passage on a Carnival cruise line. We’ll go all-out: play shuffleboard all day and drink Mai Tais all night. We’ll gorge ourselves on the all-you-can-eat buffet and make friends with other like-minded couples. I know it’s just the kind of thing you would approve of.
THE ‘VILLE

There are two high schools in Somerville, New Jersey: the public school, Somerville High, and the Catholic school which is called Annunciation. The two rivals play each other twice every year in basketball to keep the matchup fair. I had been an Annunciation fan since I began kindergarten at St. Anne’s, the Catholic grade school down the street. The first game was held at Annunciation on the third Friday in December the year I was in eighth grade.

Annunciation was leading by twelve at the half, putting the cafeteria in a festive mood while I stood around with the other eighth graders drinking soda and making small talk. A few minutes before the lights flashed, another eighth grader named Joe Simmons caught my eye and nodded his head toward a side door off the cafeteria. I had known Joe since kindergarten, but we had become closer that year. I followed him as he walked in the direction of the door and was surprised to see that the hallway outside was empty except for a couple of Annunciation band members who were drinking from a flask. Joe looked over his shoulder at me and said “this way” in a whisper. I had never seen Joe as covert, and the way he was sneaking around made me want to giggle. After rounding the corner at the end of the hallway, Joe put one hand on the metal bar across the exit and raised the other to his mouth to shush me. The heavy door clunked loudly when he opened it but no one followed us outside. The night air was chilly but relatively mild for
December, and I shivered as we stepped outside. The football field was behind the school, and all of the overhead lights were on even though there hadn’t been a game there in nearly a month. It was so bright that I could see the moisture collecting on the individual blades of grass. The electric green shade of the astroturf reminded me of spring.

We walked down the sidewalk, and I said to Joe, “We’ll miss the third quarter.”

“I don’t care,” he said. “The ‘Ville’s going to win anyway.”

“But we’re up by twelve.”

“Yeah, but they want it more.” He paused and looked out at the football field. “They hate us.” I sensed that Joe was talking about more than the rivalry between the two schools, but I wasn’t sure if I knew all there was to know. Joe and his sister Tonya were the first people in his family who did not go to public school and all of Joe’s cousins went through the Somerville public school system. And I understood what it was like to be pulled between these two worlds. At least twice a year, the St. Anne’s basketball team played Somerville Middle School. It was always a strange experience because guys on both teams played football for Somerville Pop Warner for three months every summer, and a few St. Anne’s cheerleaders—including me and some of my friends—were also on the championship Somerville Pop Warner squad. Yet we’d get together in a drafty old gym every winter and not only pretend like we didn’t know each other but shoot dirty looks across the court as if it was a contest to see who could act the toughest. Some of the other St. Anne’s cheerleaders were afraid of the Somerville girls, but I didn’t let them intimidate me. When we cheered together in the summers, things were never congenial, but we put aside our differences to make sure that we held onto the New Jersey Pop Warner cheerleading title. Having to work with people we didn’t trust was what made us a great club: each one of us was determined to practice harder and perform better than the next girl. We
didn’t want to leave any room for criticism. Joe was on the football team, as were half a dozen
other St. Anne’s eighth-graders, but I had no idea if the football players experienced the same
kind of antagonism as the cheerleaders.

“They hate us,” Joe said. “They really do. Did you know that?”

I could sense that Joe was trying to tell me something. “I get that feeling sometimes,
yes.” I examined the profile of Joe’s face while his eyes were on the field. His skin was smooth,
and he had a very pronounced jawline, the kind you see on movie stars. This combination made
him look undefeatable, and I felt at that moment like he could accomplish anything he wanted.
“But I don’t really know why,” I said.

“Yes, you do,” he said, and he finally looked at me. It was as if he was willing me to
admit what I had long tried to ignore. Joe had never said anything out loud before about the race
issue, but I knew that’s what he was talking about. I didn’t know how to tell him that even
though I could feel it, I couldn’t ever put words around it. But maybe Joe couldn’t either. I never
did find out because before I could ask him about it, Joe said, “We should go back,” and started
in the direction of the school.

The game went into overtime, and with thirteen seconds left, a sub for Somerville tipped
in a layup on the second try, giving them the lead for the first time. Annunciation had the ball for
the duration of the game, but they were never able to connect, and when a last-second attempt to
score was knocked away by Somerville’s center, shouting erupted from the stands as if a player
had been intentionally hurt. Annunciation’s players held their arms out in the time-out position
even though the scoreboard showed four zeroes across the clock. The refs huddled near the
scorer’s table, but after a few minutes, they looked up from their circle and called the game over.
The yelling continued from the Annunciation side, and some of the men shook their fists at the officials. Somerville fans started filing down the bleachers even though people yelled things like “Foul!” and “Put the time back on the clock!” Soon, the raging fans rolled onto the floor like marbles, wheeling steadily across the gym floor to the visitor’s side. I saw a red-faced man push one of the Somerville fans who was trying to make his way to the door, and after that both groups rushed towards each other, as if a flame had been lit under a pile of newspapers. The basketball court was overrun with angry fans before a minute had passed.

Just then, one of the eighth grade teachers, Sister Anna, stepped from the floor onto the bottom bleacher and yelled up at the group of us who sat in the last few rows.

“Stay where you are!” she yelled, enunciating each word as clearly as she could, her hands cupping her mouth megaphone-style. “Do not move!”

Sister Mary Ellen, joined her and shouted at us in a more frantic voice. I could barely make out what she was saying, but the words “one foot off these bleachers” and “suspended’ managed to reach me. The threat worked. None of us moved an inch from where we stood. Instead we remained still, watching as parents and fans pushed, shoved, punched and kicked each other until the police finally broke up the fighting a full twenty minutes later.

The next day was my friend Laura’s birthday. Rather than do the boy-girl thing, Laura opted for an all-girl sleepover. Laura McAllister was one of the only girls in my group of friends who hadn’t been out on a single date—even Shelby Scarletti had held hands with dorky Carl Morris after the riot.

That’s what they were calling it—a riot. The papers had picked it up, though the television stations out of New York didn’t concern themselves with local news. The police had
not yet determined how the whole thing started, but I still had a clear picture in my head of the man who threw the first punch: he had medium brown hair and freckles, which were made more intense by the fire under his skin that night. I was sure I could identify him if asked to do so, but I wasn’t about to volunteer for that job. He wasn’t someone I thought I had seen before, but I kept a look out for him nevertheless, sure that someone so rabid would show up at another event.

We rehashed the events of the previous night over and over at Laura’s—after she’d opened the cassette tapes and makeup we’d presented her with to celebrate her fourteenth year. The only time we stopped talking about the riot was to watch the premiere of the new Michael Jackson “Thriller” video, but after staring at the T.V. for the full eight minutes, we returned to the subject of the fight.

“My dad says he’s not going to let me go to Annunciation,” Chloe announced after Laura had snapped off the television set. I stared at Chloe, waiting for her to continue. “Because of the riot. He says it’s too dangerous.” Chloe paused, and she lifted her head to the ceiling, as if she couldn’t bear to face us. “He says I have to go to boarding school.”

“Because boarding school is so safe?” Laura said. “I hear kids who go to boarding school sit around and get high all the time.”

“You can’t go,” I said to Chloe, touching her arm. Chloe Kelly had been my closest friend since the seventh grade.

“Don’t worry. I won’t.” Her tone was determined, but I didn’t see how she would be able to change her parents’ minds.

“It doesn’t matter,” Hillary said, and we all turned to her for an explanation.

“That’s reassuring,” Laura said.
“What? Nothing will be the same next year. Sounds like Chloe will be shipped off to prep school. I’ll be at Huntington Central and Jessie will go to the ‘Ville.”

We had always known that Hillary couldn’t afford to go to Annunciation. Her parents ran a failing funeral home in Morristown and had been forced to sell their house and move to the second floor of the run-down mortuary a few years before. She was the youngest of nine, and all of her older brothers and sisters had gone to public school after eighth grade. But it wasn’t something we ever talked about, as if life could go on the same way it always had at St. Anne’s.

“Great way to celebrate my birthday,” Laura complained.

The mention of Jessie’s name didn’t help either. We’d all been friends with Jessie for years, but after her parents divorced the previous year, she had drifted from our group, even though she still cheered with us, and her absence left a void that was never mentioned but one which I always noticed. Before Chloe and I had become so close, Jessie had been my best friend since the first grade, but we had grown apart and now I hardly ever saw her outside of school-related activities. It was as if she was intentionally pulling herself away from our group, preparing for the inevitable.

“Well, I’m not giving up that easily,” Chloe said. Hillary shot her a dirty look. It wasn’t like Hillary had a choice—her parents couldn’t afford to send her to a private high school. Chloe’s parents just didn’t want to send her to Annunciation. “I’m not going to some stupid boarding school. I’ll fight them.”

“Like you know how,” Hillary scoffed.

“And you do?” Brenda said.
“No, but I’ve been learning. My brother showed me how to throw a punch.” Hillary pursed her lips, as if she was trying to keep something inside. “After the game last night. He said I needed to learn to defend myself.”

“Which brother?” Brenda said. “Because if it was your faggy brother, then don’t kid yourself.”

“You’re just pissed because Tad wouldn’t let you feel his thing.”

“Jesus!” Laura said. “Can we please not talk about this on my birthday?” I’d heard rumors about Brenda and Tad but didn’t know if they were true.

“Well, let’s see it,” I said to Hillary.

“What?”

“The punch!”

At first Hillary moved toward me like she wanted to lunge at me, but then she got to her feet. “Okay,” she said. “First, you’ve got to know how to make a fist.” She held her open palm out to us and then rolled her fingers in, her thumb resting on the end like a lid. We all followed her directions, making fists and holding them out for her approval. “Don’t put it inside,” she said when she examined Shelby’s fist. “That will just get you a broken thumb.” I checked the position of my thumb and waited for Hillary to continue.

“Hold your arm up at your side.” She pulled Shelby’s arm up to her side. “Like this.” I could tell that Hillary was enjoying being the center of attention, just like she did when she taught us a new cheer, and I wondered if she would someday become a teacher. “Now, pronation is the key to doing this right. You have to pronate. Twist your arm inward as you throw your arm forward.” Nobody moved so Hillary said, “Here, watch me.” She demonstrated in slow motion,
and then gradually sped up her actions. Brenda mirrored Hillary’s movements, and the rest of us followed.

Hillary grabbed a pillow off the floor and held it up to Brenda. “Here, hit this.”

Brenda looked around the room, as if she expected one of us to stop her, but when no one did, she said, “Okay.”

We all took turns practicing on the pillow. Hillary, Brenda and Laura were fairly proficient, but the rest of us seemed to be lacking the necessary skills. I practiced so long that Laura started whining about being bored. I was never able to make much improvement though, and by the end of the night, I still hit like a girl.

I don’t sleep well at other people’s houses. The floor hurts my back after a sleepover, and I’m always worried about being the first to nod off. I have a real fear of waking up the next morning with a sleeping bag full of baby powder or finding my bra collecting ice particles in somebody’s freezer, even though that kind of stunt went out of style in sixth grade. That night at Laura’s was no different. I couldn’t sleep. And after everyone else had finally drifted off, I decided to walk off my anxiety. When I reached the top of the basement stairs, I heard the wind beating against the walls of the house like a blanket, the sound of which led me to the front window. I could see the trees struggling against the wind and snow gusting from the sky in endless waves. Despite the ugly weather, the landscape was stunning. It was difficult to see far, but everything that was visible had been colored with a thick coat of white: the lawn, the mailboxes and cars, the bird bath in the McAllister’s yard. Drifts of snow approached the house in graduated mounds, and I wondered if the roads would be cleared by morning.
A noise startled me from behind, and I withdrew from the window. It sounded like something had fallen in the kitchen so I walked in that direction. When I switched on the light, I saw Brenda buttoning her pajama top. Laura’s twin brother Finn stood in front of Brenda with his back to me, as if he wasn’t going to turn around. He was stripped down to his t-shirt and boxer shorts. I didn’t think he was going to acknowledge me, but after a moment he spun around—his white tube socks gliding on the linoleum—and greeted me with a grin. “What are you doing up, Erika?”

“I wasn’t tired.”

“Yeah, me neither,” he said, and then he looked in Brenda’s direction. “I guess Brenda wasn’t tired either.” He laughed after he said this, and I felt uncomfortable with him for the first time in my life.

“I’m going back to bed,” I said.

Brenda stepped forward and said, “I’ll go with you.” She took my arm in hers and led me toward the stairs. After we were in the basement, Brenda followed me to my sleeping bag, as if she was going to tuck me in. I sat on the floor, and she squatted down next to me.

“Listen, Erika,” she said. “I don’t want you to tell anyone about that, okay?” She was using a patronizing voice with me, the kind that said, I know I can get you to do what I want. But abruptly her tone changed, and she barked at me, “I know you have a big mouth so just keep it shut.”

Nobody had ever accused me of being a gossip before, and I was infuriated by Brenda’s suggestion. She and I had always had a tentative friendship, one made up of awkward conversations and a forced alliance, but we tolerated each other through avoidance. I knew she was trying to intimidate me, but I still planned to tell Chloe as soon as I had the chance.
“Not even Joe,” she said as a final warning and retreated to her place on the other side of
the room.

I expected the game to be the only thing anyone talked about Monday morning at school,
but our attention was diverted by another incident. When I got off the bus with Brenda and
Chloe, Kendall Smith walked right up to me and said, “Joe wants to talk to you.” A month
before, another surprise had greeted the three of us when we stepped off Bridgewater Bus 35.
Someone had spray painted the words “Brenda Rourke gives head” in tall white letters on the
playground blacktop. Since then, the pavement had been resurfaced, erasing any sign of the
previous month’s slander.

At first, I didn’t know why Joe wanted to talk to me. But in the time it took for me to
walk from the bus bay to the fire escape, where the other eighth graders had already gathered, I
heard enough whispers to put it together: Joe was going to ask me out. Normally, this wouldn’t
be a big deal—plenty of eighth graders had boyfriends. It was all fine as long as you didn’t give
blow jobs, like Brenda. The problem was that Brenda had no self-esteem. Even at fourteen I
could see that. And the problem with Joe was that he wasn’t like everyone else. Oh sure, he was
in my circle of friends—he was a basketball player and I was a cheerleader, we were both
popular in that junior-high, being-popular-is-all-that-matters sort of way. But, like Kendall, Joe
was not white. The two of them were the only black kids in our class of thirty-eight. When we
were in fifth grade, Aaron Powers was also in our class, but he’d gone back to public school only
a year after he’d started at St. Anne’s. And the class behind us, the seventh grade, didn’t have
any black kids, though they had a Dominican girl named Estrella who lived in an apartment. The
next non-white person after that was Joe’s little sister, Tonya, a sixth grader who was on the
junior cheerleading squad with my younger sister Alli. Because our school was almost entirely white, no one paid much attention to these things. More often than not we identified ourselves as St. Anne’s Spartans, especially to our rivals.

Money was a different issue. By eighth grade we all knew that Catholic schoolchildren wore uniforms so that nobody could tell who had money and who did not. Although this worked for a few years, as we became old enough to spend the night at each other’s houses—sometime around the fourth grade—it failed to serve its purpose and we quickly found out about the disparity between us. But, by that point, bonds had been made, friendships solidified in finger paint, rendering this new information futile.

Although there wasn’t much divisiveness among us, there was a line between the walkers and the kids who rode the bus. The walkers lived in Somerville, the town where our school was located, and just about everybody else lived in the suburbs. Somerville was a pleasant town, but real estate had dropped in the seventies amid suburban flight, and most of the houses needed repairs. During my overnight adventures in Somerville, I had encountered staircases with missing steps and apartments I had to access through wobbly fire escapes, a far cry from the in-ground pools and lush lawns of the nearby suburb where I lived. Joe was a walker.

When I finally did reach Joe that morning, I felt like I couldn’t breathe as easily as I normally could, as if the short trip across the playground had left me winded like the senior citizens who walked from their special shuttle bus to the school church every Friday to join us for mass.

“Hi,” Joe said with a smile. He didn’t usually smile around other people, and I could tell right away he was flustered. In the last few months, I had learned to predict his emotions as well as I could with any of my girlfriends. Joe was hardly ever nervous. He was one of those
guys—like most of the good basketball players in our school—who seemed perennially confident. But today, Joe was clearly nervous: his body swayed back and forth, and his eyes were open wider, as if trying to improve his vision. His smile was also changed. Normally, he showed pleasure with a sly grin, the kind that said *I've got it going on*, but that day, his slyness was replaced with a forced smile, the kind that was usually present on the girls in the choir when they first stood up to sing in church. I quickly saw why he was so nervous: it was as if we were on a stage. There were a half a dozen groups lingering close by, trying their best to catch some piece of our conversation or to glean my position.

“Hi,” I said to Joe. I looked around at the others, wondering what they were thinking about me. I looked down at my puffy purple jacket and school uniform and wished I looked more grown-up. It was at this point that I realized that I didn’t know what I would say when Joe asked me out and, more importantly, that I wanted to avoid such an awkward moment. So rather than wait for that moment, I decided to not leave any openings for him. “Did you finish your religion homework?” I said.

“Nope, I’ll do it at lunch.”

“What about Math?”

“Yeah, I did it.”

“Not that Sister Anna will care. She probably won’t even go over the homework. We’ll probably end up talking about *General Hospital* the whole time.”

“Listen, Erika—”

“I guess you don’t watch *General Hospital*, do you?”

“No, I’m not a girl. But—”

“What are you saying? That you have to be a girl to watch soap operas?”
“Erika, stop. Please.”

I had no choice but to stop talking. To go on would be obviously rude. So I closed my mouth and looked directly at Joe, willing him to chicken out. But he didn’t.

“Listen, Erika, will you go out with me?”

For a minute, I didn’t respond, and it felt like the whole playground held its breath while I tried to find the answer I was supposed to give. I didn’t want to say no because I liked Joe, but I felt unsure about saying yes. Could I say yes?

“Can I think about?” I finally said.

“You want to think about it?”

“Yes. Is that okay?”

“I guess so. I mean, yeah, I guess that’s fine.”

“Okay, great!” I felt like I had negotiated a ceasefire.

“I’ll call you tonight,” Joe said, and my moment of accomplishment was over before it began.

When I turned around to walk back to my girlfriends, I felt the eyes of every eighth grader on me. I held my head up and walked confidently across the blacktop, dismissing their stares with my assuredness.

By lunch, it seemed like everyone in the school knew about what had happened that morning. Nevertheless, I was still surprised when Sister Anna pulled me away from my tuna salad sandwich. Sister Anna taught math, and I was in her algebra class. She could be an formidable woman, a fact compounded by her size: she was nearly six feet tall and obese. But her appearance was a facade; her real personality was friendly and laid-back. Her weight caused
various health problems, most notably her sneezing spells—the longest of which had topped out at thirty-two sneezes; she had asked us to count. Climbing the stairs to her second-floor classroom was also a problem. On such occasions, Sister would wheeze for ten minutes before being able to resume any regular conversation. For the most part, we weren’t privy to these struggles—Sister Anna tended to stay on the second floor from early morning until after the last class let out, but after mass each Friday, we witnessed her declining health first-hand. We would watch Sister move towards her chair in the front of the room, breathing deeply even after she sat, and, at these moments, I worried she might give in to the struggle and die. For this reason, it was surprising to see Sister Anna, two floors down from her post, in the basement cafeteria, beckoning me to her side.

I got up without saying anything to my tablemates and walked slowly over to the empty table where Sister Anna had sat and pulled out an empty chair for me.

“Erika,” she began, taking a deep breath in before she continued, and I wondered if she would start to sneeze. But Sister went on after a moment. “Erika, do you have something to tell me?”

“No, Sister Anna, I don’t.” I used her full name as we had been instructed to do in the classroom, hoping my formality would somehow alleviate the problem.

“Now, think, Erika. Are you sure?”

“I’m sure, Sister.”

Sister Anna looked at me with huge eyes, and I understood that I was to think harder, to examine my conscious for anything that might be considered an offense. For some reason, this called to mind a lesson we had recently had on the seven deadly sins and their opposing virtues. We were talking about temperance, and its opposite gluttony, when Sister Anna had told us her
own story of temperance. She explained that every day after school she walked next door to the convent, plucked a red cream soda from the refrigerator and sat down to enjoy it while she watched *General Hospital*. She told us that all day she looked forward to the first sip of the cold soda and that sometimes just the thought of the sweet drink helped her make it through an especially trying day. But, she explained, once a week, no matter how bad she wanted that soda, she would open the refrigerator door, pick up the can, let the moisture on the aluminum wet her palm, and then return the unopened soda to the refrigerator shelf until the next day, forcing herself to go without, to sacrifice in the name of temperance. Religion class was the next to last class of the day, and I spent the bus ride home trying to figure out what good it did for Sister Anna to give up her red cream soda. She had talked at length about sacrifice, but I couldn’t see what good it would do if she gave up the soda without giving it to someone else. As I sat next to Sister Anna that afternoon, I tried to think what sin I might have committed, what I hadn’t been able to give up, but I came up with nothing.

“I don’t know, Sister. There’s nothing really.” I knew I was disappointing her, but I wasn’t going to fabricate a story for her benefit.

“Erika, I heard that one of the boys,” she paused and looked over her shoulder before turning back to me. “I heard that Joe asked you out on a date.”

I was surprised to hear Sister Anna mention something personal, but I acquiesced. “Yes, Sister. This morning.” And then I added, “How did you know that?”

“Well, Erika, I don’t think it would be a good idea for you to say yes,” Sister said, ignoring the question I had put to her. I had become very close to Sister Anna over the year—she saw me as one of her best students, often calling on me when someone else couldn’t correctly answer the question, and since I was able to talk to her like an equal, we had forged a bond—but
at that moment I saw a side of her I had not been acquainted with before. I immediately understood what she was trying to say—that things were different with Joe, that he was different. Not only did I feel disappointed in her, I also felt angry. But I wanted to make her put her implication in words. I wanted to make her admit her sin so I pretended that I didn’t understand what she was getting at.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Well, it’s complicated, Erika.” I noticed right off that Sister Anna was using an unfamiliar tone. In the classroom, she alternated between authoritative and light-hearted, but now she sounded patronizing. Her soft, apologetic tone made it almost seem like she was pleading with me.

“Yes?” I said.

“Well, I just think it’s something you need to discuss with your father first.” After she said this, Sister seemed to have answered a question of her own, and she continued with more resolve. “Yes, you need to talk to your father. He will explain to you why this wouldn’t be a good idea.”

I thought about my father. He was a man who spoke rather infrequently and never about friends or emotions, but rather about things that he thought could teach me a lesson. Or more often, when he was in a good mood, he would joke with my sister and me, calling us funny nicknames or reminiscing about when we were little. But he never talked about things like this. Things that mattered. Nevertheless, I promised Sister Anna that I would talk to my father about Joe because I sensed that she wouldn’t let me go until I agreed to do so.

My mother was making dinner, when I asked her when my father would be home.
“Why do you ask?” she said.

“It’s nothing.”

“Erika!” She said my name like it was a warning, and I knew where she was going.

“Leave your father alone when he gets home. He’ll be tired. If you have to talk to him, wait for the right moment. Wait until he’s had time to unwind.”

“Okay, fine,” I said.

“Don’t bombard him the minute he walks through the door.”

After I set the table, I put lettuce in our wooden salad bowls and waited. Last year, some of my friends starting having coed parties. For months, the boys stayed on one side of the party, and the girls stayed on the other. The boys mostly ignored us, playing pool or Atari and eating pretzels and nacho chips, while the girls talked about the boys and watched their activity, never daring to cross this imaginary line. But that all changed at Brenda Rourke’s Halloween party. Brenda’s parents didn’t have a finished basement like some of the other parents, but we still spent the entire evening below ground. Because there wasn’t a pool table or television, we were forced to find other ways to entertain ourselves. We played records and wandered around the room, looking at old junk Brenda’s parents had abandoned. Finn McAllister pulled out a golf club and pretended to take a swing. Chloe Kelley found an old box of photo albums to look through. But after a while, we had nothing to do but face each other. Finn’s twin sister Laura said we could play cards, but after we sat in a circle, Sammy Adler said, “Forget cards” and pulled a 7-Up bottle out from behind his back. I had seen the crate of old soda bottles hiding in the corner of the basement behind the stereo cabinet and had the same thought myself, though I wasn’t brave enough to suggest it. But when Sammy did, nobody rejected the idea.
Although some of my girlfriends had already gone much farther than first base—some had even gone all the way if you believe what you hear—the majority of us had never even been kissed, and we longed for it the way that some people long for their first car. So it wasn’t surprising that when Sammy produced the dusty bottle, there was no dissent. There were more boys than girls that night at Brenda’s, and some of the boys sat two-deep around the circle, with barely enough room for the bottle to point in their direction. This was the main reason why the bottle never stopped at Joe. Like some of the others, he lingered on the edge of the circle, avoiding any possible awkwardness or embarrassment. Even with that precaution, I still found myself holding my breath every time the bottle came close to stopping in the one-inch space that would have to be called his. But the moment never came, and although, like myself, most of the girls there kissed half a dozen boys that night, not one of us kissed Joe. I found myself wondering what Joe kissed like, and if he kissed differently, when my dad arrived home.

My father didn’t say anything to me when he walked through the kitchen. He whispered something to my mother and went upstairs to change. I paid close attention to my father’s behavior, noticing that he sighed loudly while talking to my mother. I remembered what my mother had said about waiting for the right time and wondered if the discussion could be put off until a later day. But then I thought about having to deal with Sister Anna the next day at school, and how she had been so uncharacteristically firm about what she wanted me to do. I knew that I had no choice but to introduce the subject before the night was over.

After dinner, my father went up to my parents’ room to read the newspaper like he did most nights. When I walked into the room, the television was on, and my father was reclining on the bed in his boxer shorts and undershirt.
“Hello, Ricky,” he said, calling me by my childhood nickname. I sat down in the middle of the bed and tried to think of what it was I was supposed to say, but he continued talking.

“What’s going on with you?”

“I don’t know,” I said, suddenly feeling like I was once again the little girl who liked to be called by her nickname.

“How’s algebra?” he asked. I looked up at him suddenly, wondering if he had talked directly to Sister Anna, but his face betrayed no sign of knowledge about the situation.

“Algebra’s good,” I said.

“Are you going to be a wow everybody at the math bee next month?” It was comments like these that made me think my father had no understanding of how old I was or what my life was like.

“Hopefully,” I said noncommittally. “But there is something that I want to talk to you about.”

I watched my father’s face turn from jovial to uncomfortable. “Uh-huh,” he said. I didn’t understand yet that my father avoided conflict not because he had so much stress at work, as my mother would like me to believe, but because he was afraid of intimacy. What I did know was that as things got more difficult, he became harder to talk to, often resorting to one-word answers and avoiding my stare.

“Actually, it was Sister Anna who wanted me to talk to you.”

“Your math teacher?”

I could tell from his voice that he was afraid I was going to say I wasn’t doing well in school. “It’s not about math, Dad.” I waited for him to respond, but he didn’t speak so I went on.
“You know Joe, right? Joe Simmons? He’s on the basketball team? His sister Tonya cheers with Alli?”

“Yes, I know him,” he said.

“Well, Joe asked me out today, and Sister Anna said I needed to talk to you about it.” I knew I was supposed to be asking for his permission to go out with Joe and that’s what Sister Anna was telling me that afternoon, but I didn’t think I should have to do that so I framed the issue in my own terms, allowing myself to honor Sister Anna’s wishes while also being true to myself.

“What do you mean he asked you out?” My father cocked his head to the side and narrowed his eyes. This was how he acted when he was dealing with an uncomfortable issue—requiring further information as if he didn’t understand the most basic words and phrases.

“Like on a date,” I said.

He looked at me again like he was confused.

“He wants to go out on a date with me, Dad. You know, like to the movies or something.”

“A date?”

I was fed up with his slowness and didn’t feel like explaining myself further. Instead, I waited for the information to sink in. I watched my dad studying me. I have the same silver-colored eyes as my father, and sometimes when we look directly at each other, it feels like I’m looking at myself.

“Well, that won’t work,” he finally said.

“Why not?”

“Because it just won’t. It’s not right.”
“What’s not right?” I asked, pushing my father to be more specific. I wanted to see if he had the guts to say it. “I went out with Jack Stiles a few months ago. How is this any different?”

“You know what I mean,” my father snapped at me. Anger wasn’t an emotion he usually resorted to. Instead of continuing the discussion, I looked down at the bed. A white cotton blanket with fringe along the sides covered my parents’ bed. I twirled one of the strings around my finger before I realized there was nothing else to say and got up to leave.

The night of Brenda Rourke’s Halloween party, I had gotten a ride home with Glenn Defino. Glenn and I became friends because he sat behind me in homeroom that year. Even though he was on the basketball team, I’d never seen the coach put him on the court, and he was kind of a dork. He had a nasal voice that made him sound perennially stuffed-up, and he always walked on tiptoe, as if he was afraid of touching the ground. Nevertheless he was arrogant and clever, a combination I’d never really encountered before and that made him interesting.

After the party, Glenn and I compared notes in the back of his father’s station wagon. Brenda, he whispered, kissed like a slut—she rammed her tongue down his throat so far that he thought he might throw up. Shelby Scarletti was sloppy, her mouth moving back and forth across his like a typewriter. He said Laura McAllister and some of the other girls kissed with their mouths closed. It was no surprise that Glenn thought Hillary Thompson was the best kisser—soft and wet, he said—since her long blond hair, blue eyes and pint-sized body made her the most sought-after girl in school. She was also supposedly the only girl who’d been all the way.

“What about Chloe Kelley?” I asked.

“Oh, I’ve kissed her before.”

“You have?”
“Sure, we used to hook up in the coat closet during recess last year.”

“You,” I said, “and Chloe Kelley?” I was doubtful because although Hillary was the cutest, Chloe was the most popular girl in our class. She was captain of our cheerleading squad, and she had been dating Scott Cavanaugh, who I had long been infatuated with, all year. “I don’t believe it,” I said.

“Get over yourself. She’s like butter: spreads easy.”

“You had sex with her?”

“No, not sex, stupid. I just mean other stuff. I mean she’s willing to fool around. Why do you think Cavanaugh’s with her?”

I didn’t really believe what Glenn was saying at first. I had been friends with Chloe since the third grade, and she had never shared any details about fooling around. But then I realized how strange it was that she hadn’t. Normally, when one of my girlfriends got to first base, we all heard a minute-by-minute reenactment. But Chloe had never shared these details with me, and maybe this was why. It surprised me to think that Scott might only be with Chloe for that reason, but I didn’t think Glenn was the type to make stuff up. “Well, what about me?”

“What about you? You’re not easy. You’re a prude.”

“I mean, what do I kiss like?”

“You? You kiss like a wall.”

“What does that mean?”

“I mean that kissing you is like kissing something inanimate, like kissing a wall. You open your mouth just fine, but then nothing happens. You just sit there waiting. You’ve got to kiss back.”

“I do not kiss like a wall. I kissed back.”
“No, you didn’t. And it wasn’t just me. Everybody said so.”

“You’re joking,” I said.

“No, it’s the truth. I wouldn’t joke about something like that. You need to get some serious practice.”

I looked at Glenn and waited for him to start laughing or make a joke, and when he didn’t, I turned away from him and slid over to the window. Outside the ground was already wet from the evening moisture. I tried to imagine what would happen if I threw the car door open, got out and ran all the way home—my shoes soaked through and covered in grass clippings—but I knew that I wasn’t going anywhere.

Joe had called Monday night and again on Tuesday, but I put him off while I considered my options. Two days after the incident on the playground was the St. Anne’s Christmas party in the school gymnasium. Every year we spent the last afternoon before the holiday eating cookies and snacks, listening to Christmas music, exchanging gifts and generally goofing around. It was one of the few times each year when there was no real organized activity, as if the teachers and administrators had finally said, “we give up.” We’d take off our shoes and sit on the floor talking and eating, and the seventh and eighth graders would dance and flirt. The previous year was the first I was technically in that group of older students, but rather than engage, I had gone through a quiet period, standing to the side of activity rather than in its midst, watching rather than being. I hadn’t taken any opportunities to interact with the opposite sex.

But this year, I had joined the mix, and that day, I sat with a large group of eighth graders on the floor in the far corner of the gym. Joe moved around the periphery of my world at first. His distance was intriguing, even mysterious, especially since we had been talking every day at
school for months. I found myself looking in his direction every now and then to see where he was and what he was doing. He moved from one group of boys to another, as if he were monitoring their activity.

Eventually, Sammy took the Christmas music out of the tape deck and replaced it with Night Ranger. When the piano started on “Sister Christian,” the talking slowed. Then Scott and Chloe stood up and started to slow dance right there next to our group. She put her arms around his neck, and he attached his hands to her waist. They stood six inches apart, but I still looked over at the teachers who sat along the edge of the stage to see if they would try to stop them. Sister Mary Ellen covered her mouth with her hand as she whispered something to Mrs. Banner and pointed in our direction. Mrs. Banner smiled, and I got the feeling that they were going to let us do whatever we wanted.

After one song, Chloe waved us in her direction, trying to get other people to dance, but no one would. Finally, Scott left Chloe standing by herself and walked toward us. I wondered what he was doing, leaving Chloe alone like that, and then I realized he was looking right at me. He smiled when I caught his eye, and I felt my pulse begin to quicken. Scott Cavanaugh was the most popular guy at St. Anne’s, and I had been crazy about him since the fifth grade. I looked to Glenn for help, but he’d moved away from me and was whispering something to Kathryn Bateman. I could see that he had leaned over just far enough that he was able to put his arm on the floor behind her without it being obvious. I turned back to Scott and watched him make the last few steps in my direction. He pushed his hair off his forehead and kept his attention fixed on me. He had the kind of hair that was always out of place but never looked messy. Instead his look was more one of studied casualness. His reddish-blond hair coordinated with his skin, which always seemed to be flushed, giving one the sense that he was perpetually energized. He
had dark turtle-green eyes and chubby cheeks, as if his boyish face hadn’t yet caught up with the rest of him.

When he got close enough, Scott reached his hand down and asked, “Do you want to dance, Erika?” I heard some laughter behind me, and I knew that it was funny to some people that Scott Cavanaugh had left Chloe Kelley to ask plain Erika Sutherland to dance, but none of that mattered as Scott held his hand out to me. I stood up, brushing my plaid skirt down behind me, and took his hand, following him to the makeshift dance floor. Finn had appeared at Chloe’s side, and as Scott put his hands on my waist, he and Chloe moved towards each other as well. Soon, Sammy and Hillary joined us, and then a few other couples filled out the group. Lionel Richie warbled out of the tape deck against the backdrop of first-graders playing at the other end of the gym. I nervously looked up to Scott’s eyes without saying anything, and he didn’t look away.

“So what’s the deal, Erika?” he said. He had been smiling the whole time we had been dancing, and I got the feeling that he wasn’t as eager to talk as he should have been. “Are you going to go out with Joe or not?” It hit me right away that Scott wasn’t dancing with me because he wanted to but because he wanted information. Joe and Scott had been best friends for as long as I had known them; they both lived in Somerville, and they both played first-string. I felt let down without being overly disappointed. It was still flattering to me that Scott was interested in my decision, even if he wasn’t necessarily interested in dancing with me. I was also embarrassed, and I looked down at the gym floor.

“I don’t know,” I said but instantly regretted how whiny and immature I sounded. I glanced at Scott as I spoke without looking at him directly.

“Well,” he said, as if the next question was already implied. “Do you like him?”
I blushed without thinking and again was embarrassed by my lack of experience with these things. “Yeah, I like him.”

“Well, I think you should go out with him.”

“You do?” I was surprised that Scott had said this without making any mention of the obvious problem. It was as if he wasn’t aware of it. I looked back at Scott for reassurance, but he was looking at something in the distance. And then, without realizing it, Joe was standing next to us, and Scott had dropped his hands from my side.

“Hey,” Joe said, and I felt a warm feeling wash over my body, the same way it did when I stepped into a hot bath. I was already exhilarated from dancing with Scott, and Joe’s sudden appearance only contributed to that high.

“Hey” was all I managed to say.

Joe didn’t ask me if I wanted to dance. He just slid his hand around my back and pulled me towards him. Scott disappeared. I placed my hands gently on Joe’s shoulders, feeling the warmth of his skin under his uniform shirt. There was no space between us, six inches or otherwise. I looked around nervously and saw that the same was true of the other couples: they were dancing close enough that their stomachs touched, but no one went as far as resting their heads on each others’ shoulders. I glanced over at the teachers, but they were talking and laughing, totally oblivious to the world before them. I turned back to Joe and his brown eyes caught mine. I couldn’t help but smile. His was the face I had been considering all fall. I knew how he grinned when he was enjoying himself, and I knew how his forehead wrinkled when he got angry. But the look he had on his face then was new to me: he didn’t smile or frown, his eyes didn’t move. Instead he concentrated on me with an intensity that I had not seen before in someone our age. The effect was overwhelming, and I had no choice but to hold on.
That night Joe called again, and I finally agreed to go out with him. This didn’t mean much: it meant more in name than it did in action, and it would be weeks before we went on our first official date. Nevertheless, I knew the consequences would be far-reaching, both in my own family and in our small world. There was a St. Anne’s basketball game the next morning, and Joe and I shared a soda after the game. Even during this mundane activity, I was fully aware of the attention we were drawing. Most of the basketball players and cheerleaders were hanging out in the St. Matthias school lobby, having a snack and talking, and many of the parents were there too. My own parents didn’t attend: my father never had time to go to any of the games, and my mother took turns carpooling with the other parents. Joe and I had talked after the games before, in fact we had been doing that all season, but now we were doing it as a couple. And during halftime, when the squad did a cheer for each of the players’ names, I had been designated to call out Joe’s name, just like all the other cheerleaders did for their boyfriends. Even though I couldn’t see the individual expressions on their faces from the distance of the basketball court when I did it, I could feel the parents’ collective discomfort hanging in the air like a heavy cloud of disapproval. In the artificially bright lobby after the game, I could tell that Joe was no more at ease than I was. For the first time, neither one of us said much to each other. Instead we stood together, passing the styrofoam cup back and forth between us like we were playing pattycake.

“It was a good game,” I eventually said.

“I guess,” he said. “I didn’t get enough rebounds.”

“Really?” I knew I sounded dim, but I couldn’t think of anything else to say. I handed the cup to Joe and looked around the room. A few feet away, I saw Chloe, Scott and Brenda. Chloe waved, as if to say that she was just being friendly, but I sensed her gawking was more than that.
“I’ve got to go,” Joe said, pushing the drink back at me like he wanted to get rid of it.

I looked at him for some kind of explanation.

“My ride,” he said nodding in the direction of Kendall’s parents. In the many years I had known him, I had never before taken Joe for a talker—in most situations, he was usually one of the more timid people in our group—but over the past few months, I had learned that when it was just the two of us, he liked to talk a good deal. So his behavior that morning seemed off, stilted, as if he didn’t want to be there. For a second I felt a flutter of insecurity, but then he whispered, “I’ll call you later,” as if to say, everything is okay.

Since it was Christmas break, Joe and I didn’t see each other for a week after that even though we talked on the phone every day. Sometime during that week, Chloe and I got together and decided I should have a New Year’s Eve party. In honor of the occasion, Chloe and Brenda broke out the blue eye shadow, and Hillary Thompson showed up in a denim mini-skirt. The guys donned their regular t-shirts, except for Finn who wore a cream-colored velour shirt with a wide collar. These changes in our regular routine indicated something about the night: the mood was different, people were feeling more festive or more risky, I couldn’t be sure which.

Our basement decor fell somewhere between the plush carpet, oversized sofas, and big screen television of Chloe’ finished basement and the garage-sale feel of Brenda’s cement floor cellar. The floor was lined with a thin blue carpet remnant, and we had a handmade bar, held together with cheap wood and contact paper—nothing like Chloe’s wet bar but impressive nevertheless. Less impressive was the fact that the whole basement, as well as the bar, had once been painted in a pea green color, but I had overcome this flaw by filling all the light sockets with red and green light bulbs, making it difficult to make out the true color of the room.
Unlike the other boy-girl parties, this one took off right from the start. There was too much anticipation in the air to waste time dancing around the whole gender issue. Scott and Brenda hopped up on bar stools and everyone else gathered around them. From behind the bar, Chloe and I held court, serving soda and punch in plastic cups we adorned with colorful drink umbrellas. After a round of soft drinks and pretzels, Sammy pulled a long clear bottle out of his inside coat pocket, more than twice the size than the ones my dad drank.

“Miller High Life,” Sammy announced, proudly holding the beer in front of him like it was something valuable. “It’s the champagne of beers.”

“What are you talking about?” Scott asked with skepticism.

“It says it right there on the bottle, dumbass. Read it for yourself.” Sammy handed the bottle to Scott. “If I didn’t know any better I’d think you’d never seen one before.”

Scott gave Sammy a sideways look, glaring at him through half-closed eyes. He was angry with Sammy, but the color on his face, even more intense than usual, told me he was also embarrassed.

Joe said, “We know you know all about it, Sam. Your dad’s cornered the market on cheap beer” and everybody laughed.

“Well?” Scott said, his pride somewhat restored. “Let’s open the sucker.”

“Does anybody have a bottle opener?” Sammy asked.

“Give it to me,” Joe said, snapping the beer off the bar. “It’s a twist-off!” Joe put the beer under his Annunciation t-shirt and removed the cap.

“Do you want this?” I asked, offering a plastic cup to Sammy.

Sammy looked around the bar, as if he was considering what other people thought he should do. “Nah. We’ll just drink right from the bottle.” He said tipped the beer back to his
mouth before passing it to Scott. After the bottle had made it halfway around the circle, Chloe handed it to me. I had never tasted beer, though my Aunt Vicki always snuck a bottle of Blue Nun to the grandkids at Christmas. We’d revel in the secrecy and rebelliousness of the moment, drinking the sweet wine out of plastic wine glasses and allow the warmth of the alcohol to sweep over us. But drinking the wine my Aunt gave us at my grandparents’ house was different than drinking a beer Sammy stole from his father’s garage. I would have never gotten in trouble for the wine, but if caught tonight, most of the parents would never allow their children to return to our house again. When I looked up from the beer at Sammy, who sat across the bar from me, it became clear that I would be branded something unflattering if I were to pass up the drink. So I put my hand around the bottom of the bottle and took a quick gulp. Just then the lights flashed on and off, and my mother started down the basement steps. Before I could think what to do, Chloe grabbed the beer from my hand and set it gently on the shelf below the bar.

“How’s everything going down here?” my mother asked from where she stood in the middle of the staircase.

“Fine, mom,” I said. Normally, I would be irritated by such an intrusion, but I was so anxious to get rid of her, that I put on a polite voice and smiled pleasantly.

“All right,” she said, pausing for a moment, as if she was considering what she should do next. I watched her eyes surveying the scene along the bar. Half-empty plastic cups filled with soda and punch lined the bar, and brightly colored drink umbrellas littered the counter. I wasn’t sure what she was looking for, but whatever it was, she didn’t find it and finally turned around to retreat. “Just let me know if you need anything,” she called as she ascended the top step and finally shut the door.
I thought would be the end of the beer, but Scott reached over the bar and grabbed the bottle, taking a drink and passing it to Shelby so that it could finish its lap around the circle. When the beer was emptied, Glenn grabbed the bottle and put it flat on the counter so he could spin it. It stopped on Sammy who said, “Screw that. Spin the Bottle is for virgins. Let’s do Seven.”

Without explaining, we all knew he meant Seven Minutes in Heaven. “Where?” Scott said, and a dozen heads turned to look around the basement for a suitable location. We all settled on the same place: a door in the center of the far wall that led into a storage closet that ran the entire length of the basement. “Bingo,” Scott said as he turned back to face the bar. He smirked and raised his eyes at Chloe. “Fill her up, captain,” he said to her as he held out his plastic cup.

“Who’s first?” Chloe asked.

“I’m first.” Sammy said authoritatively. “The bottle landed on me.”

Hillary rolled her eyes, as if it was nothing but a hassle to go in the closet with Sammy for seven minutes, but she still slid off her bar stool without complaint.

“Set the timer,” Sammy said as he grabbed Hillary’s hand and led her through the door in the wall.

“It’s 10:04 exactly,” Laura said.

“So what are we supposed to do?” Shelby said. “Wait for the two of them?” I knew that Shelby wished she was the one in the closet with Sammy. Shelby had a gorgeous face, but she was just the slightest bit pudgy and had never had a boyfriend.

“Uh, dance,” Finn said, as if it was obvious. He was already at the turntable, flipping through records and pulling out a Billy Idol forty-five. Music filled the room, and Chloe flipped on the strobe light she’d brought from her house. Finn started dancing right away, his velour shirt
bouncing in the dark. Laura, Brenda and Shelby ran over to join him. I looked toward Joe and
Scott to see what they would do, and Joe tilted his head towards the floor so I walked around the
bar and followed him. While we danced, Shelby pointed at everything that glowed in the strobe:
Finn’s velour shirt, Laura’s shoelaces, my white jeans, the denim stitching on Shelby’s Gloria
Vanderbilts. We were all following the direction of her finger by the time she turned toward Joe
and pointed at his teeth. I wondered for a second what he would do, what everyone would do, but
instead of acting hurt or insulted, he stopped dancing and flashed a huge grin, causing everyone
to laugh and eventually follow Shelby’s finger to Glenn’s high-tops.

After Duran Duran and The B-52s, Glenn yelled over the music: “Isn’t it time yet?”
I took the needle off the record and whispered. “Sshhh! My parents are going to hear
you!”
“What?” Glenn yelled at me, smiling as he spoke, and I didn’t bother to repeat myself.
Laura looked at her watch and said, “Oh my God! It’s almost 10:30.”
Scott stood up from his bar stool and went over to the door, banging on it and shouting
through the door, in spite of my warning. “Adler, time’s WAY up! What the hell are you doing
in there?” Scott’s voice sounded frustrated but when he turned to Joe, he winked, and I wondered
if what they said about Sammy and Hillary was true. Just then, the closet door flew open, as if it
had been pushed from behind, and Sammy stood in the doorway, his buckle and pants undone,
his head tossed back.
“You kids want something?” he asked in a slow drawl.
Hillary stepped into view and looked at his pants. “You wish,” she said matter-of-factly
as she walked past him and laughed.
“Couldn’t close the deal, huh Adler?” Scott said.

Sammy stared at Scott for a moment but finally walked past him to the bar, spun the bottle and said, “Who’s next?”

Joe and I didn’t have a turn in the closet until eleven-thirty, and I had two thoughts in my head: first, I was desperate to see the ball drop at midnight on the portable black-and-white television my mother had let me bring downstairs. The second was a feeling more than a thought. A feeling of complete panic. I had no idea what went on behind the closet door, and I was apprehensive about finding out. Saying that I would “go out” with Joe was one thing, but actually kissing him made my head swirl. After he closed the door behind us, Joe walked to the far end of the storage closet and sat on an old kitchen stool. Someone had set up two folding chairs in the middle of the floor—Sammy and Hillary, I suspected—but Joe bypassed those in favor of a solitary spot at the back of the room. I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to do so I just stood there—rubbing my hands together and rocking back and forth on my sneakers. When I realized I was doing the latter, I forced myself to stop and stood up as straight as I could. Posture seemed the only thing I could focus on.

“Are you going to sit down?” Joe asked.

I looked at him and noticed how relaxed he looked. He was leaned back on the stool like it was a chair he sat in every day. And his eyes—he looked at me like he wasn’t afraid to look at me, like he was perfectly comfortable with doing so. After a minute, he nodded at one of the empty chairs, and I picked one up, moving it closer but not right next to him.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “We don’t have to do anything.”
“We don’t?” I asked. I was surprised to hear him say it, and for a second, I felt disappointed that nothing was going to happen, but when I looked at Joe for a reply it was the way he stared at me that told me it wasn’t that he didn’t want anything to happen, it was that he didn’t want it to happen like that.

“Too much pressure, you know?” Joe said. “Takes the fun out of it.”

“I guess you’re right.” I said, noticing for the first time what the others must have seen in our closet: cardboard boxes branded with Shower-to-Shower, Tylenol and Reach toothbrush logos, some of the fringe benefits of my father’s job with Johnson & Johnson.

“I know they’re all wondering what we’re doing,” Joe continued. “So we might as well surprise them.”

I couldn’t help but smile. It was this side of Joe that I really liked. He was more thoughtful, more careful than other people our age. He reminded me of myself.

“So I got you something,” he said. “You know, for Christmas.”

“You did?”

He reached in his pocket, and I wondered what he could pull out of such a tight space.

“Don’t worry, you don’t need to give me anything. I just wanted to get you this,” he said, holding his palm out. Inside, a delicate gold bracelet sat in a spiral, like a snake.

“Go ahead,” Joe said.

I reached my hand out to his and lifted the delicate bracelet out of this palm. There was an oval in the middle, and when I held it up to look at it, I saw it was a small medallion with the letter “E” on it.

“I love it,” I said as I slid it around my wrist. I wasn’t sure what to say next so I just said, “Thanks, Joe.”
"You’re welcome," he said, but he seemed a bit uncomfortable and looked away from me. Then he said, "Did I tell you what my dad got me for Christmas?"

I hesitated for a second, still not sure if Joe really wanted to talk instead of doing anything else, but the delight in his eye revealed how eager he was to tell me his news so I leaned forward in my chair to let him know I was listening and said, "No, what did he get you?"

I had been wondering all night if anyone would kiss at midnight, but except for Sammy dipping Hillary dramatically and giving her a big, wet smooch, the new year came in with voluminous confetti and carefree hugging instead of clumsy kisses. It wasn’t until after everyone the T.V. had been flipped off and the music turned back on, that we realized Scott and Chloe were missing. Sammy put an old Neil Diamond record on, and wrapped his arms around Hillary, swaying back and forth to the music.

"They’re in the closet," Brenda said, acting as if it was no big deal.

Sammy stopped dancing and looked at Brenda, "When did they go in there?" he asked.

"After these two," she said, nodding at me and Joe.

"You’re kidding. That loser’s been in there for half an hour? I don’t believe it."

"Believe it," Brenda said. "I think they’re beating the two of you. They’re at thirty-eight minutes and counting."

We all looked at the door and waited.

"Cavanaugh!" Sammy yelled, and I reached over to the turntable so I could make the music louder than Sammy’s booming voice. "You might as well give up. You don’t have the balls to finish the job."
Another minute passed before the door opened. Scott’s face was red, and he came out in a rush, his attention focused on Sammy. “I’m going to kick your ass, Adler,” he said as he crossed the room. He pushed Sammy as soon as he reached him, but Sammy didn’t respond right away, shaking his head in disbelief. “You’re not up for this,” Sammy finally said.

“Let’s go!” Scott said, and shoved Sammy again.

Sammy responded in kind, pushing on Scott’s shoulders until Scott had to take a step back to catch his balance. But as soon as he did, he stepped forward again, rushing at Sammy’s midsection like a linebacker. Immediately, Joe and Finn moved forward, pulling the two of them apart, but they kept kicking and clawing at each other, unwilling to give up.

“Cut that shit out,” Finn finally said, and the two of them let their limbs fall to their side, as if all along they had been waiting for someone to tell them when to stop.

Parents started showing up at twelve-thirty, and by one o’clock, there were only three of us left downstairs: Chloe, Joe and me. Chloe was spending the night, and the suspicion arose in my mind that maybe Joe had told his parents the wrong time. The music had been turned off a few minutes before when the party had thinned out, and the familiar voices of our friends’ parents seeped through the floor like the sound of a television playing in another room. We sat at the bar, soaking up the last of the energy that still remained in the room.

After a few minutes, there was silence above us. Chloe looked down the bar at me, and a surprised look crossed her face, as if she just realized whom she was sitting next to. She jumped off her barstool abruptly and said, “I’ll leave you two alone.” Before she left, she put her arm around me and whispered, “Just get it over with” in my ear.
Earlier—immediately after Joe and I had come out of the storage closet—Chloe had grabbed me by the elbow and dragged me behind the bar. She pushed me down on the ground and then nestled herself in next to me, sitting Indian-style and leaning close to my face.

“So?” she started. “What happened?” It felt like we were in our own private room behind the bar, but I still looked up to see if anyone was listening.

When I felt secure, I said, “Nothing, we just talked.”

“What?” Her raised voice revealed her disapproval.

“Would you please shut up?” I asked, looking over my shoulder nervously.

“Why didn’t you do anything?”

“I don’t know. It just didn’t feel right.” I paused. “And besides,” I hesitated, anticipating her response apprehensively, “what if he doesn’t kiss like everybody else?”

Chloe was clearly confused by my question so I tried to clarify.

“You know. What if he doesn’t kiss like everybody else?” I said the same words again, only this time I said them more slowly, as if emphasizing them would help her read between the lines of what I was saying.”

I think I expected Chloe to reassure me, to say something to let me know that my fears were as unfounded and skewed as I suspected they were, but instead she just said, “Well, you’ll never know until you try it. Seriously, Erika, just try it!”

In that moment, I sensed that there was more riding on this kiss than just my “relationship” with Joe. Chloe was too enthusiastic for it to be just about the two of us. It was about more than that. She had something riding on it too, which made me think that maybe everyone in the room had something riding on it, as if they all wanted to see if we had the nerve to go through with it and as if they too wanted to know if Joe kissed like everyone else.
“I don’t know if I can do it,” I had told her, but she’d brushed off my doubts with a gruff "of course you can.” I sensed that if I didn’t go through with it, I would be letting Chloe, and everyone else, down.

After she went upstairs, I turned to look at Joe and found that he had been watching me. “You’re nervous, aren’t you?” he said.

I eyed a pink drink umbrella sitting on the bar and thought about picking it up so I would have something to hold. “I guess,” I admitted. “Are you?”

“No,” he said, and he said it in such a way that I knew that he wasn’t thinking about what everyone else was expecting or talking about, but that he just liked being with me. His intensity usually made me look away, but instead of doing that, I held his gaze and found that beyond the initial nervousness was a rush of excitement.

“Happy New Year,” he said.

“Happy New Year,” I replied. He started to move toward me, and I knew what was next. My anticipation was again replaced with my old fears, but I had no choice but to go through with it. I couldn’t imagine pulling away from him. I didn’t want to. And so, without the careful consideration I had wanted to give the idea, he kissed me. Joe didn’t kiss like everybody else—instead of being indifferent and business-like, his mouth was warm and involved, as if he really wanted to be kissing me, and I couldn’t resist that invitation so I accepted it and gave myself over to the kiss. Before long, the doorbell rang, and we pulled apart from each other. We both knew it had to be one of Joe’s parents, and we heard his mother’s voice, apologizing for her lateness, echo through the ceiling. Joe looked at me for a second, as if he was trying to decide what to do next, leaned in to kiss me for one second more and then headed up the stairs.

* * *

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Chloe called everybody we knew the next day to tell them about the kiss. She told them about when it happened, the location and added her own analysis of my description: Joe was a good kisser. When we went back to school a week later, we were treated like an official couple. People started referring to us as one unit—Joe and Erika. It was as if the kiss had made it real. I suppose it was inevitable that my parents would find out next.

My mother came to me first. It was a school night, a Monday—just two days after our most recent kiss, a quick moment in a corner at Scott’s house the previous Saturday night. I was sitting on the floor working on my science homework when my mother entered the room. My papers and books were spread around me on the floor like satellites. My mother was the kind of parent who was able to reach her children by putting herself on their level. So I was surprised when she opted not to join me on the floor. Instead, she perched her butt on the edge of my desk and crossed her arms.

“Erika, what’s going on at school?” she asked me. Her question was vague and indirect, but I knew exactly what she was talking about. Nevertheless, I decided to play dumb since that was the game she’d started.

“Not much,” I said, without looking up from my notes.

“Erika.” She said my name tenderly, like she was talking to a friend she hadn’t seen in many years. I was surprised by her affection; I suppose I had expected antagonism.

“Yes,” I said.

“Why haven’t you told me about Joe?” I knew from the sound of her voice—again tender and intimate—that she had been wounded by the fact that I had not been telling her any of what was going on.

“I did tell you,” I said, lifting my head and looking directly in her eyes.
“You told me that he asked you out. You didn’t tell me you said yes.”

“Well, what would you have said if I had told you?”

“I would have said you can’t do it.”

“Well then, I guess there was no point in telling you.” It would have been easy to turn my attention back to my homework, but instead I chose not to let go of her eye, I didn’t want her to think this wasn’t a big deal. I wanted her to think this was the biggest kind of deal, that I knew that this one time she was wrong.

“Erika, he’s black.”

“And?”

“You just can’t do that. Don’t you understand?”

For some reason, being told I couldn’t do something pushed me from feeling self-righteous to feeling angry, and I felt myself taking in air, as if I wanted to impart my words with as much force as I could. “What is wrong with you?” I knew I was starting to yell, but I didn’t care anymore. “You’re the one who says we should treat everyone the same.”

“Erika!” she pleaded, but I didn’t listen to her.

“You’re the one who says that Mr. Henderson is just like everybody else, that we should treat him like everybody else.”

“That’s different, and you know it.”

“No, I do not know it,” I said, “I know that Mr. Henderson isn’t any different than we are, and I know that Joe isn’t any different either. That’s what you always said. Remember?” I could sense that if I wasn’t very careful, my frustration would sweep over me like a sudden wind and wash out of me in tears, and I didn’t want to let my mother see that she could get to me that way. I didn’t want her to know that she could injure me as much as anyone else. I had spent
years crying in my mother’s arms, about boys, about school, about friends. I didn’t want her to know that she, too, could break me.

“Honey,” my mother started, her fondness irritating me even further, “but he is different. It’s one thing to treat everybody the same, it’s another whole thing to date that somebody.”

I had this sense that she was saying something akin to separate-but-equal, but I didn’t want to believe that my mother was that kind of person so I challenged her further. “How is it any different than dating someone who has a different color hair or a different eye color?”

“It is. It just is. Can’t you see that?”

“No, I can’t,” I said, hopeful that she would have no choice but to come around, that she would have to admit I was right, but instead of acquiescing, she dropped her chin to her chest and started to weep softly. I had seen my mother cry only a handful of times before—always when she had been pushed too far. I could hear her delicate sniffling even though she tried to keep it to herself and as much as I wanted to reach out and comfort her, that feeling wasn’t powerful enough to overcome my anger. Instead, I stood my ground, watching her and waiting. A moment later, as if she finally realized I wasn’t going to give in, she wiped one eye and left the room, without ever looking up.

I don’t know what I expected next—that my mother would do something to keep me away from Joe, that there would be more fighting. Anything. But for a few days there was a peculiar silence around the subject, as if nothing had ever been said.

My mother knew that I had been planning to go to the movies with my friends that weekend. She had to know that this group included Joe, but she didn’t say anything, even as Chloe and her brother pulled into our driveway to pick me up. My mother had never before
agreed to let me ride in the car with any of my friends’ older siblings, but for some reason, she hadn’t resisted this time when I asked if I could get a ride with Chloe and Greg. I couldn’t tell if she had simply given in to my demands or if she had something else in mind. My mother had to know that I had long had a crush on Chloe’s brother, but it seemed like a long shot to assume that she hoped Greg would distract me from Joe.

I had known Greg since I was in the third grade and he was in the sixth, and he rarely paid me any attention. The only time I could even remember him speaking directly to me was around three o’clock in the morning the night of Chloe’s thirteenth birthday party the year before. All of the other girls were passed out in their sleeping bags when Greg came home, but after watching *Halloween*, I was too edgy and alert for sleep so I stayed up by myself with only the television for company. Greg flopped down next to me on the sofa as if it was the most normal thing in the world for him to do and my heart raced faster than it did when Michael Myers broke through the thin closet door protecting Jamie Lee Curtis. In an attempt to act nonchalant, I handed Greg the cable box.

He flipped through the channels three times before stopping on Telemundo. After a few minutes, he turned toward me and mumbled, “Can you learn Spanish from watching this stuff? I want to learn to speak Spanish.”

It felt like he was confiding in me, and I relished the attention. His face was less than a foot from mine, and from that close perspective, I could see the red lines shooting out from his grey-blue eyes. I stared at his eyes and didn’t answer, hoping he wouldn’t turn his attention back to the T.V., and for a minute or two he didn’t. He bared his teeth and chuckled, his long hair falling in his eyes as he did it, as if he was laughing at me for not saying anything or maybe considering something. But after a while he did return to the glowing screen, and I finally did
answer his question, saying something like “Yeah, I think so,” even though I had no idea what I meant. Ever since that night, Greg had returned to the same indifferent “hey” he’d been offering me for five years before then, and I often wondered if he would even remember talking to me if I ever worked up the nerve to ask him about it.

Of course, my mother knew nothing about my late-night conversation with Greg, but she knew me well. And she must have noticed that I never failed to mention seeing Greg—or not seeing Greg—after a visit with Chloe. I had never taken my mother for the manipulative type, but I also couldn’t ignore the timing of her decision to allow me to ride in the car with a teenage driver. And even if she did intend to distract me with Greg, I had resigned myself to the fact that his age and experience made him completely unattainable when I realized he was never going to speak to me again.

After we had bought our tickets and waited for Finn to get his Juju Fruits, we headed into the theatre, claiming the entire last row for ourselves. When the theatre darkened, Sammy leaned towards me and said, “Where’s Hillary?”

I looked at the empty seat next to Sammy and wondered how we had missed her.

“Has anyone seen her?” Sammy asked, looking from side to side.

“I thought she was with you,” Finn said, laughing as he spoke.

“Did you lose her?” Scott said. “You idiot. You lost your girl.”

“Seriously,” Sammy said, “where is she?” He was starting to sound a bit frantic, but no one had seen her. He stood up and looked under his coat, as if she could’ve disappeared under the seat.
“Shit!” he said and climbed over the row of bodies, heading for the aisle. A triangle of light swept over us, and Sammy was gone. It wasn’t until after the movie began that Sammy returned, hand in hand with Hillary.

“Excuse us,” he said to Finn, who sat on the end of the aisle with his feet up on the chair in front of him.

“Geez, I’m sorry,” Finn said as Sammy and Hillary pushed their way down the aisle.

A few rows ahead, a grey-haired man turned around and shushed as, and after that, everyone settled down to watch the movie.

I had never before walked out of a movie so when Joe and Scott suggested we ditch, I resisted.

“No,” I protested. “It will get better.”

Scott rolled his eyes at me, but Joe put his arm around me protectively. I felt vindicated, and Scott sat back in his seat with a sigh, mumbling something to Chloe.

After that, the film seemed interminable, and I kept willing it to do something right, but nothing happened. About fifteen minutes later, Scott said, “This movie sucks” in a regular voice that made no recognition of the fact that we were sitting in a dark theatre. The grey-haired man turned all the way around in his chair and gave us a dirty look. Joe turned to me, pleading.

“Okay, fine. Let’s go,” I said, and it was as if our entire row had been waiting for my permission to leave: everybody stood up at once, dragging purses and coats toward the door like they had just awaken from a long nap. The grey-haired man watched us curiously as we got up and headed toward the door. I thought he would make some remark, but instead he returned his attention to the movie.
In the lobby of the theatre, we stood around the video games, not sure what to do next. It would be over an hour before any of us were picked up by our parents, and we didn’t really have anything to do. I could tell by the way that Sammy and Hillary pawed each other that they wished they had somewhere to fool around, but none of us were old enough to drive and we had nowhere to go. Chloe and Scott were all over each other too. They were making baby talk with each other, and even leaned in to kiss each other right there in the lobby. Laura rolled her eyes and excused herself to go the bathroom. I tried not to show my discomfort with the way Chloe and Hillary were acting. Joe stood by my side, but he didn’t go any farther than that—he didn’t try to hold my hand or put his arm around me, and I knew he wouldn’t kiss me. Joe always acted like there was nothing going on between us in public, a detail I appreciated about him. I didn’t know if it was the interracial dating thing that kept us at arm’s length, or if Joe and I just weren’t the kind of people comfortable with PDA. I didn’t like the idea of anybody hanging on me in public, and the fact that Joe was black just made that feeling more pronounced.

Scott leaned toward Chloe and said, “Let’s get out of here.”

Hillary answered before Chloe could. “Any ideas on where to go?” she asked.

“No,” Scott answered, and the shortness in his voice told me he was frustrated with Hillary for jumping in between him and Chloe. “Hey, where were you anyway? Before the movie? Where did you disappear to?”

“I was waiting,” Hillary said, “for Sammy to open the door for me.” Hillary turned to Sammy and gave him a frown.

“Damn,” Scott said, but Sammy interrupted him before he could finish.

“Behind the theatre,” Sammy said abruptly.
“What?” Scott asked.

“Let’s go behind the theatre.”

For a moment, no one spoke, and I could tell they were all considering their options.

“Forget it,” Scott said.

“What? Are you scared?” Sammy held out his hand to Hillary, and they started walking toward the exit before Scott could answer. Instead of saying anything, he looked at Chloe, as if he wanted her to tell him what to do. Her response was to head purposefully toward the door. Chloe turned around to wave before they left, and then they were gone without a word of explanation.

There was a Burger King next door to the theatre, and the rest of us decided to wait there for the rest of the night. As we walked across the parking lot, Joe pulled me away from the others. He led me to a dark area behind an empty van and said, “What do you want to do?” His eyes went to the spot where Scott, Chloe, Sammy and Hillary had just disappeared.

“Maybe we shouldn’t,” I said.

“Why not?”

“I’m worried about my parents.”

Joe stepped back from the van and looked at the sky. The lights in the parking lot gave the night a milky haze. “They don’t want you with me, right?” Joe looked back at me before he finished. “Because I’m black.”

“I don’t care about them,” I said, unwilling to admit what Joe suspected.

“Well, you should.” Joe’s voice sounded angry when he spoke, but his eyes were filled with warmth, and I knew then that Joe felt like he could trust me. I stared at him as I thought
about how much I wanted to let him know that it didn’t matter what anyone else thought, and he moved towards me. I wanted to say something to make things right, but he leaned in to kiss me first. His mouth felt warm and soft on mine, and I found myself stepping closer to him until our hips finally touched. He stopped kissing me just long enough to step back and contemplate me for a brief second, as if he wasn’t sure what to do next, and then he moved back toward me again and kissed me without hesitation.

“They’re going to get caught,” Joe said when I slid in the booth across from Laura, Finn and Shelby. Joe sat next to me, close enough that his leg barely touched mine under the table.

“No shit,” Finn said, “And just so Sammy can get his hands on Hillary’s tiny little boy boobs.” Laura hit Finn in the arm, and Shelby’s eyes opened wide.

“I hope they do get caught,” Laura said.

“Why?” asked Shelby.

“I’m sick of them. Hanging all over each other all the time. Like we want to see that? It’s disgusting. They’re just trying to make us think they’re better than we are because they’ve been to second base. Second base? Big deal. They’re a bunch of retards.”

“That’s nice, Laura,” I said, “calling your best friends retards.”

“Oh, shut up, Erika. I know what you’re going to do. You’re going to call Chloe and say, ‘Oh my God, Chloe! You won’t believe what Laura said.’ Well, go ahead and tell her. I really don’t care.”

I couldn’t believe how childish Laura made me sound. I wanted to say something in my defense, but when I looked at Joe to see what he thought of Laura’s tirade, he just shrugged and said, “It’s not worth it.”
“Why don’t you two go join them anyway?” Laura said.

“Would you just chill out, Laura?” Shelby said, leaning across Finn to put her hand on Laura’s arm, but Laura jerked it off and stood up from the table.

“What’s her problem?” I asked.

“She’s just jealous,” Finn said, and Shelby punched him in the arm one more time.

Mr. Kelley arrived about a half an hour before he was supposed to be there. Laura was in the bathroom again, her absence making it look like Shelby and Finn were together. Seeing the four of us coupled off was probably what set Mr. Kelley off. He asked where Chloe was, and when no one was quick enough to think of a lie, Mr. Kelley could tell we were hiding something. He cursed at us and went looking for his daughter. Ten minutes later, we watched through the long glass window of the Burger King as he ushered Hillary and Chloe into the back seat of his Oldsmobile Cutlass.

My mother was tipped off to the fact that something had happened when I arrived home in the McAllisters’ station wagon instead of with Chloe’s parents, but she didn’t say much once she found out from Mrs. McAllister that I was eating french fries in the Burger King while Chloe’s father found her making out with Scott behind the theatre. Nevertheless, I knew she wasn’t thrilled to hear that Joe had been with us. A few months before she wouldn’t have cared if I had gone to a movie with Joe or anybody else, but now every time she heard Joe’s name, she winced.

I was in the bathroom brushing my teeth that night when the bracelet Joe gave me for Christmas slid off my wrist and into the sink. “No!” I yelled as I turned the faucet off and
watched the bracelet wash down the drain before I could grab it. A minute later, my mother was knocking on the door.

“Erika! What is it?”

“Nothing,” I said. I didn’t want to open the door because I could feel tears forming in my eyes.

“Erika,” my mother said, knocking more loudly.

I knew she wouldn’t go away until I told her what was wrong so I gave up and let her in. “It’s my bracelet,” I told her. “It got washed down the sink.” I looked at the drain as if doing so could make the bracelet reappear. “Joe gave it to me.”

“He did?” This was news to my mother, but I wasn’t in the mood to get into a fight about Joe. And then I began to cry.

“Don’t worry,” my mother said, taking her arms around me. “We’ll call the plumber tomorrow. As long as we don’t turn the water on again, he’ll probably be able to get it out.”

“Really?”

After the plumber fished the bracelet out of the pipes the next morning, my mother didn’t say anything else about it, and I wasn’t sure if she had changed her mind about Joe or if she just felt sorry for me.

My father was next to broach the subject of Joe. He came into my room the next morning to wake me up and sat on the end of my bed like he used to when I was little. Since he hadn’t done anything like that in years, it was obvious that he wanted something, and I wondered if my mother had told him about the scene at the theatre or the bracelet.
Once he had made himself comfortable, he spoke. “How was the movie?” he asked me, but there was none of the usual playfulness in his voice.

“Not very good,” I said honestly. I didn’t intend to lie about my life—to my father or anyone else—so I decided to be as forthright as I could. “We didn’t even stay for the whole thing.”

I think my honesty surprised my father—he raised his eyebrows and grunted at me—as if he’d expected to have to work harder to get the truth out of me. “That’s what your mom said.”

I knew he wanted to ask me something and I knew it probably related to Joe somehow, but I wasn’t sure exactly what he was searching for. And for this reason, I felt like it was best to tell him what I knew, as if that would make it easier on both of us. “There wasn’t really anything for us to do once we left the movie,” I said this in the way of an explanation, and my father looked at me as if another question had just crossed his mind. I knew right away what that question was so I said, “but I didn’t go behind the theatre. I was at the Burger King the whole time.”

“Good,” he said, and I could tell by the way he let his breath out that he was relieved. “Why didn’t you just call? We could have picked you up.”

“I just didn’t think about it.” He watched me, as if he expected me to say more, as if there was more to confess. “I really didn’t mind sitting there and waiting. We were just talking. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

My father lifted his head and looked at the wall adjacent to my bed. He nodded but didn’t speak again for a moment. I looked around and thought about when my mother and I had painted the room pale blue a few years ago. We had picked out the color to match my bedspread, but
while my father sat there thinking, I realized that I couldn’t stand the dreariness of the pastel color anymore. I tried to imagine what color my room should be, but nothing came.

“Who was behind the theatre?” my father eventually said.

My first thought was that I shouldn’t answer. Any of the names I gave him would make it more difficult for me to stay friends with those people. But I knew that not saying anything would just lead him to implicate Joe, and even though it would cause trouble for me and Chloe, I was still determined to be forthcoming.

“I don’t know,” I said, watching my father’s face as I said it. He tilted his head to one side and smiled at me, the old lightheartedness I loved back in his eyes. I knew he was saying that he wouldn’t let me off that easy. I half expected him to chuckle at me and say, “Come on, Ricky!”

“It was no big deal.” I hesitated before I said any more. Chloe and I had been friends since the third grade, and I knew my father had never really warmed to her family, even though they had much in common with our own. I carefully considered how to answer, hoping to avoid trouble as best as I could. I finally said, “Sammy, Scott, Chloe and Hillary,” trying to hide Chloe’s name between the others and simultaneously take the focus off of the coupling that I am sure he suspected.

He sighed loudly and returned his gaze to the wall. Then, without warning, he spoke again. “Was Joe there?”

“He was there, but he wasn’t with them.”

He kept his eyes on the wall but kept talking. “Was he with you?”

I thought about answering this question as carefully as the others. I could easily say that we were all with Joe. That wouldn’t be a lie. But I was beginning to suspect that my father was
more interested in me being with Joe than he was in who had been caught fooling around. Even if he couldn’t admit that’s what he cared about, I wasn’t going to let him intimidate me. I hadn’t done anything wrong.

“Yes,” I said.

“I thought you weren’t going to see Joe anymore.”

“I never agreed to that.”

“You don’t have to agree. I’m telling you that’s how it is.”

My parents had never been the type to dictate things to me. They always said I had to make my own choices in life, but I realized that up until that point, I had never made any choices they didn’t approve of.

“Don’t you think I know what’s right, Dad?”

“I don’t think you understand that this is about more than what’s right and wrong. You simply can’t see him again. It just doesn’t work.”

I knew he was frustrated, too frustrated to continue the conversation in any kind of logical way, so I didn’t respond. Instead we sat there, thinking about what had been said and what hadn’t. I pushed it out of my head and fantasized about painting the room a different color. Finally he stood up and moved towards the door. I thought he’d say something to bring things to a close or make some kind of ultimatum, but he didn’t even look back as he left the room.

My father’s comments had been weighing on me all week. I wanted to do something to prove he couldn’t control me. So on Friday I asked Joe if he wanted to walk uptown with me after school. We flipped through forty-fives at Sam Goody and went to Central Pizza for a slice. I called my mother for a ride after Joe walked home, and it took her almost an hour to get there.
When she pulled up, Alli was in the backseat in her pink ballet tights. My mother had seemed irritated when I called, mumbling something about having to pick up Alli first.

After my mother drove out of the parking lot, she looked away from the road long enough to get my attention and said, “Where were you?”

“What do you mean where was I? I went to Sam Goody and Central. I already told you that.”

“You’ve never done that before.”

“So?” I didn’t usually treat my mother with such disrespect but my esteem for her was on the wane.

“Well,” my mother seemed to be searching for the right words, “who did you go with? Chloe?”

“No,” I was aware of the fact that I was acting in a way I usually didn’t: I was not giving my mother the information she wanted.

“Were you with Joe?”

“Yes, I was with Joe.” I was getting tired of all the questions, and I knew the hostility in my voice betrayed that frustration. “We walked directly from school to the shopping center. We went to Sam Goody to look at records, but we didn’t buy anything. Then we walked to Central, where we sat in a booth and ate pizza. I had cheese, and he had pepperoni. I called you from the phone outside of there, and Joe left to go home. We didn’t do anything wrong, or anything you would consider inappropriate, okay?” I knew by then that this last part was a lie, that my mother wouldn’t think it was appropriate for Joe to put his hand on my back as he had in the record store, even though it was a friendly gesture more than than a romantic one—but I no longer
wanted to tell her the whole truth about everything. I just wanted to leave me alone. “Is that all right with you?”

“No, it’s not all right with me,” she hissed at me, and I could tell by the way her shoulders hunched forward over the steering wheel that an ugly side of her was coming out. “Your father told you that you couldn’t see him.”

“He can’t tell me what to do,” I said.

“Oh yes, he can.”

I looked out the window and watched the landscape change from office buildings to houses. This was a fight I didn’t want to lose. We were getting closer to home, and I felt like I could hold her off until then and escape to my room. Without looking, I could sense that my mother was sitting back in her seat, as if recomposing herself. She took a deep breath in and then spoke again. “Don’t you ever wonder what he sees in you?”

“What do you know about it?” I said without turning in her direction. We passed a produce stand that had been boarded up for the winter, and I noticed that a few leftover pumpkins still scattered around the abandoned building.

“He is your first real boyfriend. Do you ever wonder why?”

“Because I’m only fourteen,” I said to the window.

“You know what I think?” she said. “I think he sees you as a prize.” I turned back in her direction, unsure of where she was going. “You know,” she said, “it’s quite a feather in his cap to date a white girl.”

It took me a minute to process what she was saying, but when I did I had only one thing to say: “Fuck you, Mom!” I had never held the word in my mouth before, never actually formed my lips around it, and I was surprised by how powerful it felt: like shooting a gun.
“What did you say?” She shouted at me.

“You heard me.” I turned my attention back to the scene outside the car.

“You know what? You’re grounded!”

I had never been grounded before. It wasn’t my parents’ style. “You are not grounding me. You don’t even believe in that.”

“I do now.”

“But there’s a home game tomorrow night.”

“And you’re not going,” she said.

“You don’t have any idea what other people my age are doing. Do you know that?”

My mother didn’t answer right away, and I wondered if I had gotten through to her until she said, “I don’t really care.”

Joe laughed when I told him on the phone that night that I was grounded. “You’re grounded?” he said. “But you’re little Miss Perfect.” I would’ve been offended by what he said if I didn’t think it was true.

“So what did you do to get grounded?”

I had prepared myself for that question because I knew he was going to ask it. I didn’t want to lie to Joe, but I told myself that this was about my parents, not about me. “She found out that I got caught talking in social studies.”

“She did?”

I knew he was having trouble believing my mother would find out about something so trivial and that inherent in his question was another question: who told her? But I didn’t want to
take the lie too far so I moved on with the conversation. “So I guess I can’t go to the game tomorrow night.”

“Really?” His voice went up a little—like the voice of a little boy—before returning to normal. “Well, no, that’s cool. I understand.”

I played with the dial on my radio alarm clock even though it was turned off. “Thanks.”

“No problem. Just make sure to get back on her good side. Next weekend we’re at the ‘Ville, and I think we can win.”

“You do?” I was surprised he was so optimistic about the game since he had been so down about the last one.

“Yeah, I do.”

Somerville High was only four blocks away from Annunciation, close enough to walk, and before every game, there was a march from one school to the other. My mother had dropped me and Glenn off at Annunciation so we could walk with everyone else. After being grounded all weekend, I had decided to change my approach. I told my parents I was going to the game with Glenn, letting them believe that something was developing between us.

After my mother pulled away, Glenn and I found the others. Joe put his arm around me and asked, “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, it’s fine,” I said because I hadn’t told him about lying to my parents.

We stopped at the 7-Eleven on the way to the game, and Glenn bought a pack of cigarettes. Joe scoffed. “You going to smoke those or just carry them around to make you look cool?”
“Shut up, Simmons,” Glenn said. I worried for a minute about what would happen next, but Glenn cracked a smile, making the whole exchange seem lighthearted.

The Somerville gym was just slightly smaller than the Annunciation gym, but the difference was pronounced as so many people tried to squeeze in for the game. Some of the Somerville fans were forced to sit on our side. A few of the girls I knew from Pop Warner came in with a larger group of middle school kids and stood at the bottom of the bleachers where we sat, looking up at the rows of people. There were still some seats here and there so the group split up and divided themselves among the remaining spaces. The eighth graders from St. Anne’s had claimed the same spot we did at Annunciation games: the last two rows on the far right, and after a few minutes of indecision, about eight of the middle school girls sat in front of us. When they took their place, a couple of people in our group snickered, and I saw Shelby get a disgusted look on her face. I glanced at Joe to see if he had noticed, but his attention was centered on the court where the warm-up was already in progress. It was then that I noticed that there were two police officers stationed at the four entrances in each corner of the gym. I had heard that there had been talk of calling the game off after what happened last time, but nothing ever came of it. Nevertheless, something about this game made it feel even more tense than the last one, and I noticed people peeking at each other suspiciously, as if they wondered who among them would be the first to snap.

The game was close from the start, Annunciation and Somerville trading one- and two-point leads. During the second quarter, a foul was called on one of our players, and Coach Hines launched onto the court like he’d been shot out of a canon, his face flushed, his mouth flapping up and down mechanically. As he shook his hand threateningly at the ref, I remembered how ridiculous I thought he looked at the Annunciation pep rally at the beginning of the season. It
was my first pep rally, and I was appalled to see that Coach Hines dressed up like a king for the event: a long red cape billowed behind him, a gaudy gold crown adorned his head, and a red carpet had been rolled out across the gym floor. But it was the way he carried a gold scepter out in front of him like it was a weapon that made me remember that moment then. He was acting the same way he had at the pep rally—entitled—and I felt embarrassed by his behavior. It seemed especially irresponsible considering what had happened at the last game. Eventually, the ref called a technical foul, and though that made Coach Hines shake his head ferociously, it did get him to stop yelling and return, sulking, to his chair. The game got underway again, and Somerville had a one-point lead at the half.

“I need to get out of here for a few minutes,” Sammy said after the buzzer. “This place is hot as hell.”

Joe leaned in my direction and whispered, “I don’t think we should go anywhere.”

His face was so close to mine that I felt myself blushing. “Fine by me,” I said.

“I’ll go with you,” Hillary said to Sammy, and both Laura and Shelby joined them.

It was Scott who warned them against it. “If you leave now, you’ll never get your seats back,” he said.

“You can save them for us,” Sammy said, but Scott shook his head in reply.

“I’m not sticking my neck out for you,” he said.

“Then don’t,” Sammy said and stormed down the bleachers.

The group of girls from Somerville Middle School had also left their seats, and when they returned a few minutes later, some of them sat in the seats left empty by Sammy, Hillary, Laura and Shelby in the next-to-last row.
“Somebody’s sitting there,” Brenda yelled at them from a few feet away when they sat down.

“Not anymore,” one of the girls yelled back, and nobody else argued with them.

When Hillary and Sammy came back, they were without Laura and Shelby.

“Where are they?” I asked. Sammy sat down in the aisle of the last row. I knew it was only a matter of time before one of the cops came up to tell him he couldn’t sit there.

“Waiting in line for something to drink,” Hillary said as she settled herself down in Sammy’s lap.

“Why did you leave them?” Chloe asked.

“We didn’t want to lose our seats,” Sammy explained, even though they obviously had.

Laura and Shelby didn’t return until there was only a minute left on the halftime clock.

Shelby was holding a soda in one hand and a soft pretzel in the other. When she climbed to the top of the stairs and saw there was nowhere to sit, she got an exasperated look on her face. There wasn’t any room, but we all scooted down as much as we could, clearing a space in the last row, where they squeezed in between Chloe and me.

Not long after the game got started again, Shelby started complaining. “I can’t believe they took our seats.” She didn’t use a normal voice, but she still whispered loud enough to cause one of the girls sitting in front of us to shoot her an accusing look over her shoulder. A few minutes later, Shelby started wiggling in her seat. “It’s so crowded!” she said. “I can hardly breathe.”

Joe shook his head at her, and when she started whining again, I told her to let it go. During the next time-out, I noticed that Shelby had put her foot on the bench in front of us and
was gently pushing her knee into the back of one of the girls who sat there. When I looked at her, she held her finger to her mouth.

“Quit it,” I said, but she just pushed her knee further into the girl’s back, as if she were a belligerent child disobeying her mother. She kept pushing until the girl stood up and swiveled around to face us.

“Get your foot out of my back,” she said, though she was unsure who to direct her words at.

“We were sitting here first,” Shelby said, and I shot her a look that told her to shut up.

The girl put her hands on her hips, and yelled “What did you say?” causing Shelby to visibly shake and lean away from the girl. I could tell that Shelby was about to cry so I tried to divert the attention away from her.

“She didn’t mean anything by it,” I said, standing up to face the girl. “She was just saying that she was sitting in that seat first.”

“And?” the girl said.

“I think she just wanted to sit there, but it’s no big deal.”

“Oh, it is a big deal. I’m going to kick that spoiled bitch’s ass.”

“Can we please just watch the game?” I said.

“Don’t tell me what to do. I don’t need a babysitter,” she said, playing to the crowd as if the whole thing was a show.

I don’t know if it was the fact that everyone was watching us but for some reason I felt the need to keep going. “Are you sure about that?” I asked, and this comment set her off for real. She leaned back as if she was winding up for something, but I could tell she was just trying to
figure out what to say. Joe was pulling on my arm, as if he there was some way for him to remove me from the situation.

“Fucking honky,” the girl said.

The only other time I had heard the word honky was from this guy named Chuck Nardy. Chuck lived in the house next door to us with his wife Patti and her parents. Chuck had gotten Patti pregnant when she was seventeen, and they had both dropped out of school. Chuck had enrolled in the Marines on his eighteenth birthday but got discharged less than a year later for smoking weed. Ever since then, Chuck was supposed to be looking for work but he spent most of his days harassing kids in our neighborhood. When Chuck couldn’t find anything else to do, he would plant himself on the hill between our driveway and theirs and talk to me like we were old friends. I was shooting baskets in the driveway one day the previous summer when Chuck told me what the word honky meant.

“Hey Honky,” Chuck had yelled at me with a snicker when he walked out of Patti’s parents’ garage wearing only a pair of cut-off jeans. I didn’t respond, and he started laughing as if no one had ever done anything so funny in his entire life. He stopped on the hill, before he got to his usual spot, and put his arm across his bare stomach, as if he wanted to hold in his cackling, but he just kept on going, howling like an animal. My parents hated Chuck. They thought he was holding Patti back. I knew I should walk away—go inside or get out of his path somehow—but I didn’t leave. I kept throwing the ball at the basket because I didn’t want to him think he could scare me off that easily.

When he had finally calmed himself and sat down on the grass, he said, “You don’t even know what that means, do you?”
I wanted to ignore him, but I found myself saying “What?” instead.

“Honky! You don’t even know what honky means, do you?”

I didn’t answer because I knew he’d know if I lied about it and make fun of me if I didn’t. Besides, I was certain that it was only a matter of time before he told me himself. Chuck pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his back pocket and put one in his mouth. He fumbled around in his front pockets for his lighter and finally got the thing lit. I just kept on with the basketball, pretending like he wasn’t there.

“Honky,” he said, “is what black people call white people when they really want to piss them off.” I stopped the ball when it bounced back to me and waited for him to finish. “It’s the same as nigger, only it’s what they say to us. It’s like calling somebody a white nigger, only worse because one of them is saying it.” He paused for a moment and took his cigarette out of his mouth to look at it. “If anybody ever calls you a honky, you got to call them a nigger back. You just do.”

The word left my mouth before I had time to consider what I was saying.

“Kill her!” a different girl yelled across the crowd. Without looking, I could sense Joe stepping away from me, and then the girl who stood in front of me threw herself on top of me like she was diving into a pool of water. I tried to swing at her the way we had practiced at Laura’s, but there wasn’t enough room to do it the way Hillary had shown us. Her punches came one after the other, and made my stomach prickle with pain. I could feel myself recoiling every time she made contact. It was hard to see, but I could still hear the words around me clearly. Someone was yelling for the police, but I couldn’t hear any of the sounds of the game: no sneakers squeaking, no ball dribbling. I realized they must have stopped the game as a result of
the fight. I was embarrassed by the realization that everyone must have been watching, but I still kept trying to fight back, until my arms couldn’t move anymore, and I realized that two other girls were on either side of me, pinning me down. I didn’t know how much time had passed or why no one else was helping me, but at some point, I stopped feeling the girl’s punches charging into my stomach. I remember only one more thing before I passed out: the feeling of her fist connecting with my head felt like an anvil crashing into my skull.

When the scene was cleared, no one stepped up to say who had been in the fight. At least that’s what everybody told me. I didn’t wake up until I was in the ambulance, and at that time, I had no idea what happened to the other girl. My parents met me at the hospital, but once they knew I was going to be all right, they didn’t ask for details, that night or any other time.

Joe and I only talked once after the game, at graduation that spring, and we didn’t have much to say. How could I ever explain? We still saw each other, but it was always in a group, in school or at a party. I knew Joe didn’t ever want to have anything to do with me so I stayed away, but every once in a while, I would look up and catch him staring at me, his eyes filled with truckloads of emotion, as if he wanted to forgive me, as if he knew I wasn’t really the person I had proven myself to be.
I had the feeling that the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it, and were outside man’s jurisdiction . . .
Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out. I did not say my prayers that night: here, I felt what would be would be.

—Willa Cather

The night Kate Alberville goes to the ice fishing shack with Ty Wilson is the first time a guy ever hits her and she likes it. That’s not to say she has never been hit before, but it is the first time the burn of someone’s backhand across her skin is matched with a hot feeling of desire, the first time she is boasting about it to her friends the next day after school at the B & K drive-in, and the first time she is already thinking about if it will ever happen again.

Ty isn’t her boyfriend—just the guy she’s sleeping with. He’s the cutest one she’s ever been with, and Kate knows she’s nothing special to look at. For nearly a month, they’ve been parking in his new sky blue Chevy pickup on weeknights when there’s nothing else to do. Ty drives out to the empty fields behind the small airport on the north side—the nice side—of Tipton and pulls her to him. Before they start, Kate watches the barely visible outline of the
small airstrip and hopes that the runway lights will illuminate, the sign that a nearby plane is approaching. But most nights the tarmac stays dark.

After they are finished, Ty lets his head fall in her direction, and they sit for a few minutes not saying anything. In the soft blue light off the dashboard of the truck, Kate is able to study Ty’s face and the dark stubble that grows against the green pallor of his winter skin; she believes it is the exact color of fresh earth just after it has been dug up. His profile reminds her of an old-time movie star. Only the silhouette of his strong jawline is visible in the near dark. She knows that if he were to turn and look at her, his thick eyebrows would stretch across his forehead in perfect arches and his dark eyes would take her into their depth, overwhelming her until she couldn’t look away. Sometimes she lets herself reach out and brush her hand against the small hairs along the back of his neck. She could look at him all night if he’d let her. But instead she takes what she gets without complaint: a sly smile when he picks her up, some friendly words on the drive out of town, the gentle caress of his hands on her naked body, and this—a few moments to appreciate his presence, his company. Kate is just average, and for her, boys come around only as often as the seasons. So she feels like Ty is a prize, something to be cherished. She’s desperate to hold on to him, even if she can’t do it in public, even if no one else knows what they do. This means she goes along with him, no matter how far across the line he travels. In the few weeks that Ty has been taking her to the airport, he has taught her to go farther than she’s ever gone before, but the night at the ice fishing shack is the worst.

This is the night when Ty shows up at Kate’s bedroom window just after eleven on a Tuesday night in mid-January with Roger Silverman. January nights are cold in most of the places that Kate has been to, but in Tipton, Minnesota, it is a scalding cold—the kind of cold that
makes the very ends of your toes freeze no matter how many pairs of wool socks you have on. The kind of cold you don’t go out in unless there’s something in it for you.

Kate can tell Ty has been drinking when she first sees his face through the window’s glass. She can’t smell the alcohol on his breath yet, but she knows from the way he stares—without looking away from her gaze and as if he’s not ashamed of coming to see her—that as soon as she steps through the window and into the snow, leaning into his secure frame for support, the bitter smell of liquor will attach itself to her. Because of this, because it is late even for him, because it is so acutely cold, she figures Ty is looking for trouble. Or maybe he just wants to have a little fun. With Ty, she can never be sure.

Roger Silverman stands next to Ty looking utterly chilled and a bit nervous to Kate. His pale face has evolved to an electric shade of pink, and he wears a taut grin. She wonders what Ty has told him, what she might be getting herself into. She hesitates for a second as she considers Ty’s tendency to exaggerate. But then she realizes who she’s dealing with: Roger Silverman was one of the most popular guys at Tipton High School before he graduated the year before. He was on the Homecoming Court and the Student Council. Lately she’s heard rumors about Roger, about how he comes home from school every weekend, about how he’ll never be as big in college as he was in high school. But Kate and her friends don’t usually go out with guys like Roger, even though they get invited to all the big parties. So when Ty and Roger knock on her window that night, Kate hesitates for a only moment—about the wind chill being twenty below and about being afraid, afraid that Ty may have promised Roger more than she can deliver—before she allows herself to go with them.

* * *
The three of them line the front seat of Ty’s pickup and drive away from Kate’s house and all the other houses that sit on the water. No one speaks, and Kate looks out the foggy windshield for a distraction. The frozen lake draws out beside them, a vast and untouched desert of blue-white snow, its beauty apparent despite the season. The emptiness of the landscape appears to lead to nowhere, and Kate stares at it—in awe of this, her world—as if she is seeing it in a picture or on television.

When they park and get out of the truck, the ice is flat and smooth underneath their feet—at least seven inches thick since Thanksgiving. Ty runs out across the frozen lake and slides on his knees almost the whole way to his dad’s ice fishing shack. Snow flies in a small wake around him. The effect is so graceful that it makes Kate think of sleep, a thought she allows to linger until Roger grabs her hand and leads her across the ice. They follow Ty, slipping and grabbing at each other to keep from falling.

Inside, Ty lights an oil lamp on the shelf above the door, and Roger pulls out a leather flask. Even within the four paneled walls, the cold is biting and they have to huddle together to keep warm, drinking Southern Comfort and laughing about how crazy it is to be out this time of year. It surprises Kate that it takes Ty twenty minutes to get the nerve up to say something about what’s going to happen next, and when he finally does, he just blurts it out.

“Want to get naked, Kate?” he says. He passes the flask to her again, and she can feel his eyes searching her face, her body as she throws a drink back. She looks in his direction, and he grins. Kate remembers that this grin is the reason why she’s here, why she can never say no to Ty.

Kate doesn’t respond. She is shocked, even though all along she knows that’s why she is there, why they came to her window. She waits for Ty to flinch or take back what he has just
said. To chicken out. She doesn’t know which part of the entire situation is harder for her to accept—the intensity of the cold, the fact that she and Ty are not alone or the idea that he has actually put words to his desire, to their desire. But Ty doesn’t flinch. He continues to look at her, to take her—all of her—in. She can tell he’s trying to persuade her with his steadiness, his attention.

Without really understanding why, Kate starts taking her clothes off. First, she unlaces her tennis shoes and kicks one and then the other off by tapping her toe swiftly against the heel. With a jerk, she knocks off her oversized parka, letting it fall behind her on the bench she’s sitting on. Then she stretches out of her red rag-wool sweater and plaid flannel shirt, leaving her white turtleneck in place. After she has stood briefly, pushed her jeans down around her ankles and carefully stepped out of them, she sits back down and sets about the more self-conscious task of removing her undergarments. She does this part slowly so she will only have to move as little as possible, both for fear she might get a chill and that Ty and Roger might catch a glimpse of her uncovered parts. She removes her bra without taking off her turtleneck like she’s learned to do in gym class—pulling the straps out through the arms one at a time. Then she pulls her knees up to her face and wiggles methodically out of her underwear, letting the bottom of her turtleneck fall in front of her body and hide her skin for one last second before she finally removes it. Except for her thick grey socks, she is naked. She can tell that Ty and Roger can’t believe it any more than she can, but she wasn’t going to let them think she was chicken. So they all sit there for a moment, accepting this reality and avoiding each other’s eyes, not sure what to do next.

Eventually, Ty looks at Roger and takes charge of the situation. “What are you waiting for, Silverman?” he says.
Roger stands up from his position on the floor of the opposite wall and approaches Kate slowly. Carefully, he sits on the bench beside her, as if it might give under his weight, and she scoots over to make room for him. Kate senses that, like her, he is torn between not wanting to do anything and not wanting to look like a fool. When she realizes this, she begins to feel sorry for him and decides to help him out by reaching over and unzipping his fly which causes Roger’s erection to grow and stretch against the white fabric of his long johns. He turns to touch her, to pull her to him, but before he can do it, Ty begins to taunt him.

“I thought you wanted to get her from behind, Silverman,” he says.

Roger sighs and shakes his head at the ground. Kate wonders what he’s thinking, she wonders how much of what Ty says is the truth, how much they’ve planned things out beforehand. Roger lifts his head to look at Ty and laughs. It’s not a normal laugh, not the kind that escapes you when you hear a joke but the kind of short, unconvincing laugh you let out when you know you have no choice but to give in and you allow yourself to laugh at the position you find yourself in. This is what Kate thinks as Roger chuckles to himself and then reaches over to Kate and pulls her torso in his direction so that she has to get up and stand in front of him. Then he gently presses on her from behind until she realizes what he wants and gets down on the floor. An oval-shaped braided rug lines the ice, and Kate can feel the sickly dampness of its fibers against the skin of her legs as soon as she kneels on the floor. Roger lifts his right leg over Kate and lowers himself onto the ground behind her. He puts his hand on either side of her waist and points her body in Ty’s direction, positioning her between the two of them. She leans forward, now on all fours, and lets her head drop, as if to inspect the navy and tan-colored rug. The imprecise nature of the weaving tells her that it’s the kind of rug that was lovingly made by hand, like many rugs in Tipton, probably a gift from an aunt or a sister of Ty’s father. All the
while she is aware of Roger behind her, taking down his pants, rubbing his hand roughly against
himself and finally leaning into her, brushing up and down against the bare skin of her back.
Kate feels the acid in her stomach rise up and mingle with the saliva at the back of her throat.
She holds her breath and waits for the sensation to pass, waits for what she knows will follow,
coaxing herself to accept it.

She closes her eyes and wills herself to think of something warm. Her mind cooperates,
and she imagines the sensation of sinking into a tub full of steaming bath water, her body slowly
immersing itself in the feeling of warmth. Without realizing it, Kate starts swaying back and
forth against Roger’s frame. She can feel that Roger is hard, and she prepares for what will be
next, willing herself to relax. But Roger pushes himself inside of her too fast and starts
rhythmically rocking against Kate’s body, as if he doesn’t know anybody else is there. Kate
opens her eyes and sees Ty watching her, his hand rubbing against his jeans and his erection
pointing at her through the denim. She squeezes her eyes shut again and tells herself that it will
be over soon, that she must be more than halfway there.

Even with her eyes closed, she can feel that Ty is getting frustrated, impatient. She can
hear his breathing, hurried and loud, underneath Roger’s grunting. She knows Ty well enough to
know that he doesn’t like to wait, that he won’t be able to stand it much longer.

“What is wrong with you?” he says. Kate’s eyes flash open at the sound of his voice, and
this time he yells at her: “Hurry the fuck up!”

She wonders why he is blaming her. She can tell he is angry, he eyes her furiously and
his body leans towards her aggressively—as if he wants to fight—and the skin on his face takes
on the blotchy crimson color of a fever. He is watching at such close range and with such
intensity that she feels as if he is critically aware of every touch, every breath. She is worried that
he can tell she’s not concentrating or trying hard enough. She tries to help Roger relax. She drops her head and tries to resist his thrusts with her hips, tries to slow him down, but he doesn’t respond. She looks up at Ty to see if her efforts have helped ease his frustration, but before she can catch his eye, a glint of light flashes off of his class ring and the back of Ty’s hand connects with her unprotected face. She can feel the hard metal of Ty’s class ring knock her teeth through the skin of her jaw and the strength of his blow whip her head back against Roger’s shoulder. The sting on her bare skin reverberates through her body in a wave: it feels as if someone has wiped sandpaper across her skin. The sensation arouses her. The heat, the pain. The unexpectedness of it. It causes her to let go.

Ty yells again, instructing her to roll over. Roger and Kate shift at the same time; he releases her and she turns in a semi-circle, as if they are used to repositioning themselves together, and the damp feeling of the grooved rug against her naked back causes the unpleasant sensation of moisture to pass through her. She reaches up toward Roger, and this time she does not resist him as he moves inside of her. They start moving back and forth together. She grips Roger’s shoulders and tries to draw him nearer. She feels as if she can’t get him close enough, as if they can never be as tight as she desires. She is aware of pulling on his dense body until she allows herself to let go and enjoy the feeling of his strength and exertion. When he finishes, she leans her head back and rests, holding onto Roger’s frame loosely and taking comfort in the now full weight of him on top of her.

But before she can completely let go, Ty is there, pulling Roger off of her, forcing him to slide out of her with a wet pop. Ty yanks on Roger’s shoulder and urges him out of the way. Even though she always knew this was coming, that this was part of the plan, Kate flinches when she sees Ty unbuckle and drop his jeans to the floor. Fear overcomes her.
With a quick pull on his shorts, Ty’s penis, makes its way out. Ty steps toward Kate. Her words, “No” and “Wait,” float past him and do nothing to slow his forward motion.

As he kneels and pushes on top of her, Kate becomes aware of how dry, how tender she has become. When he forces himself in, it feels to her as if Ty has opened her up completely, fully, as if he has taken over her being and is now obliterating her insides piece by piece. Roughly and mechanically he repeats his movements. She has no choice but to lie there and yield to him, waiting for it be over and unable to pretend anymore that this is what she wanted.

When Ty is done, he is back on his feet in seconds, pulling his pants up and looking down at Kate like he is disgusted with her. He looks to his right and sends the same expression in Roger’s direction. Kate follows the path of Ty’s gaze and sees that Roger sits on the floor in the corner. He looks empty to her, as if he too has felt something, some part of him, leave. His pants are still down, his shriveled penis still visible. Kate starts to tremble, and she is suddenly aware again of the frigid night air. She wants to get out of there—out of the shed, out of the situation with Ty and Roger, and home to the soft comfort of her pillow and the security of her own bed. And even though her body aches from the pain of what has just happened, she wills herself to get up and get dressed as quickly as she can. When she’s put herself back together, she hurries goes out the thin wood door, letting it slam behind her and leaving any discussion inside with the two of them.

Outside on the ice, the night is as clear as it is cold, and the stars seem infinite. It feels to Kate like they are eyes, watching her from every direction. Instead of facing the sky, she watches her blue sneakers skate back and forth across the slippery ice below her and imagines herself as a child again, on the ice for the first time. She pretends that she cannot catch her balance, that the feet beneath her are not steady. She lets herself give into the feeling of helplessness and allows it
to take her over. Her rubber soles slide and catch on the ice again and again as she gets lost in the space of her mind and patiently waits for Ty to take her home.
Sarah was striking, but not in the usual Jewish way—not because of skin so fine, so pale, that it almost seemed to disappear under your gaze. Rather she was striking in her radiance, the way people imagine a girl from California should be. Sarah glowed. Though she had the darkest hair I had ever seen, it caught the light in an unusual way—as if it didn’t know that hair that color should absorb the light rather than reflect it—causing gold light to shimmer off of her thick, black hair in glints. This sense of radiance, along with the pale auburn freckles that crawled across her nose like stars, invited you to stare at her.

I am not so lucky. For every part of Sarah that shined, I have a part that is equally dull. My flat, dirt-colored hair hangs around my shoulders in uneven, nearly transparent strands. My empty grey eyes look at me every morning in the mirror and beg for more. More beauty, more vitality. More. Sarah took more in thick fistfuls—just like the grass I used to tug out of the ground, handful after handful, when I was a child sitting in the small yard behind my mother’s apartment—and I wanted to be able to do that, to take and to have, just as well, no, better, than even Sarah did.

In the three years that I had known her, Sarah had taken wherever she could get: she had taken things that truly should have belonged to her, she had taken things that even she couldn’t
argue she had a right to, and she had taken things that belonged to me. She had stolen from me. Literally. I wasn’t angry though. Instead, I admired Sarah. I wanted to be able to take too. I wanted to learn how to grab at things and reach out for life like it was a possession, something to be held, which I suppose was why we were friends and why I was there, in Germany, following Sarah’s lead and learning to find my way in her world.

Sarah’s parents were born during the beginning of World War II in the part of the city that later became East Berlin. Not long before the wall was erected, economic pressures led them to relocate to West Berlin and eventually to immigrate to the United States just after Sarah was born. Though Sarah couldn’t remember the time in her life when she lived in Germany, she had grown up speaking the language and being told it was her home. In 1983, Sarah spent a semester during her junior year in college in Berlin, and ever since then she had gone back to the city for the holidays, retracing the route of her parents, from East to West. This was the home of Sarah’s history, and five years after she had originally been introduced to this country, I hoped that, in this place, I would be able take a little bit back from her.

Sarah stood in front of the corroding brown bathroom sink, slowly putting on her light-colored foundation. The rust worked its way down the porcelain bowl in long streaks, as if someone had wiped a dirty cloth and left a stain behind. I thought about whether or not I had ever been anywhere so unkempt as I watched Sarah apply her pale makeup in big circles across her face, carefully making blending it in, as if she could make it become part of her own skin. There was only one small mirror on each floor of the hostel so we both had to crowd around it together. Just like the camera in a photo booth at the mall, the mirror crushed our faces together, making them appear as if they were one.
“We better not overdo it,” Sarah said as she hastily put her makeup back into her small lavender-colored cosmetics case. “I always forget how bad I feel when I look nice there.” I watched Sarah’s face drop in the mirror as she said the word “there.” It was a type of sadness I couldn’t immediately recollect seeing in her before.

Sarah never said the words “East Berlin.” It was always “there” or “on the other side.” I secretly imagined that her small pink lips could not form the words at all. She had been to East Berlin on all of her previous trips to Germany, and she kept talking about all the good times she had there. But I couldn’t help but wonder if this trip was something she was doing just for me.

Sarah told me that she wanted me to join her because it was more interesting to travel with a friend. She and my roommate Karin had made the trip together the last two years, but the two of them hadn’t been getting along very well lately. According to Sarah, Karin had become “no fun.” I had always been jealous of the trips Sarah and Karin took together, but I also didn’t want Karin to feel left out. When she told me that she had other plans for the holidays and didn’t care if I went with Sarah, I decided to take her at her word and bought a seven hundred dollar plane ticket to Tegel airport. But after I had committed, Sarah said something else that made me wish I had hesitated longer before I had accepted her offer. She said something about how it would be good for me to see more than my parents’ backyard that Christmas, she said it was time I started living my life. I knew she was passing judgment.

“No matter what happens, Erik and Shel will adore you.” Sarah turned to look at me and smiled. “Who wouldn’t? You look great.” Even though Sarah gave me this compliment, I had a feeling that she was only trying to make me feel better so that I would make a good impression on her friends.
This reminded me of Sarah’s most recent deception. Sarah had met Sheldon and Erik while they were studying at Humboldt University. She and Erik had engaged in a brief fling before admitting that neither one of them was looking for a relationship and promising to remain friends for the rest of their lives. Unlike most people, Sarah and Erik had managed to keep that pact by seeing each other during Sarah’s annual visits to Germany. She had told me all this about their history, but she hadn’t told me until that morning that she intended to set me up with Sheldon, Erik’s best friend. “You should’ve told me,” I said to her reflection rather than looking directly at her face when I spoke.

“I wanted it to be my surprise. I didn’t know if it would work out—you know with our passports and with Erik and Shel—so I figured I’d wait and see.”

“I didn’t come here to meet guys,” I said, finally turning in Sarah’s direction.

“Listen to me: Shel will love you. And it’s the only way to really see things. You have to see the city through their eyes.” She delivered these words in a way that told me I shouldn’t try to argue with her, that we were doing things her way no matter what. So I didn’t put up a fight. I just looked back at the mirror and tried to imagine what two strangers would see when they looked at a face that seemed incredibly uninteresting, even to me.

Shrouded in yards of barbed wire and chain-link fencing on both sides, the wall was virtually hidden. I only got a brief glimpse of it when I crossed its threshold, quickly glancing up above the heads of the guards to its thick cement core. Sarah and I had walked through and past it before I even got a chance to make a clear imprint of it in my memory. Now, looking back, I am able to understand that this inability to focus, to see something I had anticipated for so long, was one of the two things that would make me long to return to the day of that trip.
Erik and Sheldon met us just outside the periphery of the secured area. They were standing in a snowbank along the road, their faces flushed to an almost unnatural color of pink from the December cold. Erik hugged Sarah, playfully kissing her all over her golden face, causing her to giggle and blush in a way I wasn’t used to. Even in the cold, Sarah maintained a look of brightness. Sheldon embraced Sarah tenderly and kissed her politely on both cheeks, as if she was a distant relative rather than an old friend.

“Erik, Sheldon, this is Janie.” Sarah held her arms out to me as she spoke. It felt as if she was presenting me. Erik quickly walked forward and pulled me into an embrace, showering me with nearly the same amount of love he had just shown Sarah. Sheldon was more reluctant, putting his hands cautiously on my elbows and holding me at arm’s length as he kissed the air on either side of me. I immediately felt that the whole idea had been a mistake.

Sheldon was tall. Sarah hadn’t mentioned him being tall. I didn’t usually go out with tall men. They reminded me of my father too much or maybe just authority in general. Yet he was tall. And thin, but not so thin that he looked weak. Instead, even beneath his heavy grey parka, I could tell—by the way he held himself and the way he had gripped my arms—that he was strong and fit. He had light-colored brown hair that hung down to the bottom of his prominent jawline. He was good looking, probably too good looking for me, and I felt that he must have been as well aware of this as I was.

Erik was much shorter than Sheldon. He wasn’t significantly taller than Sarah or myself, and when he flung his arm around Sarah’s shoulder as the four of us walked toward the city, his long dark curly hair mingled with hers, making them look like they belonged together, like they were family. Sarah hadn’t told me much about Erik’s personality. Just that he was absentminded—she had complained that he never remembered to write or call after her visits.
But she always ended up seeing him every time she came to Germany anyway. Erik wasn’t the kind of guy Sarah went out with back home. Sarah tended towards men who flaunted their status; Erik wore jeans, and she had told me that he was a musician. Erik, and little changes in Sarah’s behavior over the past few days, made me wonder if Sarah was a different person when she was came to Germany. Or maybe this was simply a place where she felt she could really be herself. At the same time, I could sense from the way they touched each other—with warmth but without passion or possession—that Sarah and Erik’s affection for each other was more familial than romantic, but that such an insignificant distinction wouldn’t keep them from making the most of their brief time together.

We walked along the street, dragging our feet through the dirty snow, as if we had nothing to look forward to even though I could tell that Sarah and Erik were thrilled to see each other again. Sheldon, on the other hand, was quiet—he seemed dispirited—so I kept my distance. He walked a few steps ahead of Sarah and Erik, and I stayed just behind Sarah, watching her hair catch the light of the barely visible sun.

After walking through the park, we went to lunch. I sat next to Sheldon in the booth while we ate. Even though he pretended I wasn’t there, I could feel the softness of his worn shirt sleeve brush up against my arm when he lifted his drink. I was sure by then that he was ignoring me, but it had taken me a while to figure that out. Whenever I thought he was speaking to me or directing a comment at me, I would turn to look at his face, but he never returned my gaze. Instead he talked to the whole table, only making eye contact with Erik and, on occasion, Sarah. Initially, this outward lack of interest in getting to know me had made me uncomfortable. But as I became aware of how consciously he was avoiding looking at me or speaking to me, I began to
feel as if I had been freed from the unwanted burden of trying to impress him. He was so obviously not interested in me that I no longer had to worry about what he might think of me, if he would like me, or what was going to happen that day. I no longer had to fear rejection because a choice had already been made. This freedom overtook me like sleep, slowly but without much of a fight, and soon I found I was able to say or do anything.

It was in this way that I was able to begin to discover who he actually was. I was able to look at him and absorb the intricacies of his face without feeling ashamed or worried that he would feel my gaze upon him. I could listen to his words objectively, removing myself from any connection they might have to me and judge them for their own merit. I sized him up as if he were someone very very far away—like a character in a movie. Just as I was able to let go of the awkwardness of the situation and relax, Erik jerked me back into reality.

“You know, Janie,” he began. I had noticed that Erik enunciated his words carefully, articulating each syllable and rephrasing certain words mid-sentence. He also replaced his J’s with a Y—pronouncing my name Yanie instead of Janie. And, unlike other Germans we’d met earlier in the week, he never let himself slip into German with Sheldon or Janie, as if doing so in front of me would be impolite. “Shel and I have this idea, or theory, about dating.” Sheldon lifted his head up to look at Erik and grinned. It was the kind of smile that said I know where you are going with this. “We think that the best way to tell what a girl is like on a first date is to see how she treats the help.” Erik paused for a moment, as if to allow me some time to consider the idea. I wondered what Erik was trying to say. “We watch how she speaks to the waiter or waitress. Does she look in her eye? Does she call him by name? Does she say ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ as they come and go? Such moments can really tell you what a person is like. What kind of character they have.”
“But what if the service is lousy?” Sarah said.

“Yeah,” I said. I had wanted to defend anyone who had struggled with the difficulty of a first date, but instead I had managed to say the most incredibly innocuous thing anyone could say.

“That’s the whole point. The kind of person I want to be with would treat even a lousy waitress well. She wouldn’t be rude, no matter how bad the service. Because the thing is, people are always nice to each other on dates, right?” Erik didn’t wait for a response. “Of course they are, because they are trying to impress the other person. Even if they don’t know yet if they like the person, they still want to be sure to make a good impression. You know, in case they decide they do like them later. So you can’t tell anything about someone based on the way they treat you on a date. That’s all going to be pleasantries and politeness. You have to base your judgment on how they treat someone else, someone they are not trying to impress. So you take them to dinner. Dinner is a good first date, right? And you sit back and watch them, watch how they treat the help.”

“Hmmm.” I had stopped eating so that I could give Erik my full attention; there was nothing to do except look back at him. He seemed to be singling me out for this part of the conversation, and I wanted to appear interested. I wanted to reply by saying something equally thoughtful, or at least something witty or smart, but all I could think about was whether or not I had been nice to our waitress earlier in the meal. “That’s smart. And funny really. I guess I mean it’s clever.” My words came out before I could edit them.

“It is insurance,” Sheldon said, again without looking at me, “it insures you from getting involved with the truly shallow.” He casually took a bite out of his sauerbraten, as if he wasn’t
interested in waiting for a response. I was taken aback by his coldness, and I couldn’t help but wonder what Sarah had been thinking when she decided to set us up.

Although Sheldon was oblivious, Erik seemed to notice my disgust because he said, “No, really, Janie, that’s not a bad thing. It’s just protection. Shel means insurance against getting hurt. We all do it. We all protect ourselves from pain. It’s a natural defense.”

“Not me,” Sarah said. “I have no idea how to do that. I always pick the mean ones. I think I like it better that way.”

“Watch how they treat the help,” Sheldon said. His words came out firmly, as if to convey the idea there was no reason to do otherwise now that we had all agreed upon this approach.

“It’s okay,” Sarah said. “I never let them get away with it. Do I, Janie?” Sarah looked at me, and I knew she was thinking of more than one man to whom she had held onto just long enough to get in the revenge or punishment that Sarah had decided he deserved.

“I guess you don’t, do you?” I said without thinking.

Sarah glared at me in response, letting me know that my voice had betrayed more disapproval than I had intended. Then, as if it were some kind of reproach, she asked, “So how did Janie do then, guys? Did she pass your test?” I was sure that this question was my punishment for something. Maybe I had sounded too critical when I had replied to Sarah’s question, or maybe I had committed some larger offense. I never knew what might set Sarah off. I dreaded hearing the answer, knowing that this was Erik and Sheldon’s chance to distance themselves from me without directly rejecting me. Erik took a deep breath in, as if he was working up the nerve to respond, but Sheldon spoke before anyone else could.
“With flying colors,” he said in a sure and confident tone. “That is how you say it in the States, right?” He allowed himself a small grin, as if he was impressed with his own cleverness. I was surprised by how much he seemed to like himself, but more importantly, I couldn’t fathom that the same person, who only moments ago had seemed so disinterested in me, had given me such a compliment. His respect was something I had not expected.

Erik and Sheldon took us on a tour of Weissensee after lunch. The day was cloudy, and the sky had changed from grey to a muddy green, making the city appear jaundiced and sickly. It was the kind of weather that usually precipitated a storm. The sun was not visible, but a brilliant gold light outlined the dark clouds, making it look like they were burning from the outside in. All of my hesitations about the day and about Erik and Sheldon had been washed away by the three words that Sheldon had spoken back in the restaurant. I wasn’t sure what Sheldon had been trying to say—perhaps his comment had been simple honesty or maybe he was picking up on the tension between me and Janie and trying to exacerbate that. Or, and this was what I really thought, he was trying to say something about me, about seeing something in me. Because of this I found myself, for the second time that day, freed from my own insecurities. It wasn’t that I thought that Sheldon was interested in me. I didn’t even care about that. I was only there for that one day, and unlike Sarah, I had no expectations for this trip. It was just that now I could stop worrying about whether or not Sheldon was counting the minutes until he could get out of my presence and about whether he regretted ever agreeing to meet me. I greeted this renewed freedom fully. I let it overtake me, and I found myself leading our group, eagerly searching the streets. Sheldon followed at my heels, talking as I had not realized earlier he could, freely and
without interruption. We glided over the top of a small hill from which we could see four connected lakes spreading out before us.

“The weather is best this time of year,” Sheldon said.

“Winter?”

“No, just before winter,” he said. “Before the cold gets really biting. Now, it’s still warm enough for the world to look this way. The warm and the cold meet to that effect.” Sheldon pointed his chin to the sky, and I studied his profile. In the queer brightness of the afternoon, his face was stunning, almost statuesque.

“You’re staring,” Sheldon said.

“What?” I said.

“You’re staring!”

“I guess I was. It’s something about this light. Makes everything look like it’s on fire.”

Sheldon turned back to the clouds. I looked around for Sarah and Erik and saw that they had fallen about a block behind so I stopped to wait for them. “What’s it like here the rest of the year?”

“Dreary. Perpetually dreary. But maybe that’s just because I’m stuck here. Some people think the summers here are the most glorious they’ve ever seen. It’s hard for me to imagine using the word glorious in this place—seems a contradiction in terms, doesn’t it? But no doubt it can be as beautiful here as it can anywhere else. I always hate it when people come here and say that it never looks this beautiful where they come from. I hate that they don’t appreciate their homes more. But here I am doing the same thing, aren’t I?”

“I guess so. But at least you’re aware of it. That kind of cancels it out.”

“And your home? Do you appreciate it?”
The movement of Sarah’s hand caught my eye, and I thought about my home as I watched her accept the first drops of rain into her open palm. Sarah and I had met in Washington, D.C. three years ago, only a year after I had moved there. The District was one of the most awe-inspiring places I have ever lived. Nothing else I had ever seen up to that point was as dramatic as the drive along the Virginia side of the Potomac. From that vantage point, across the river, each of the spotlit monuments appeared along with its twin, reflecting off the water in soft waves. But the longer I lived there, the more I longed for a simpler kind of majesty, the kind found in open fields and across miles of flat midwestern farm land. The kind found in the place where I had come from.

“Yeah, I appreciate it. You know, I never did before. When I was a kid, I hated the unrelenting monotony of the Indiana landscape. I thought if I had to pass through one more cornfield, I would die. But now, I see it differently. I see it as a certain type of splendor.”

Sheldon reached into the pocket of his coat and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. He held them out to me before he pulled one out for himself and turned away from me to light it. When he turned back, he said, “So, again, you do things the right way. Sarah never said you were smart.”

“I’ll have to remember to thank her,” I replied and thought about what he was saying. Apparently, Sarah had told them things about me, but I had trouble imagining what words she would choose. “Unfortunately, she didn’t tell me much about you—just how she met you,” I told Sheldon. “She’d didn’t even mention we’d be seeing you before yesterday.”

“Sarah loves to keep secrets. We will have to respond in kind, no?”

“I think we will.”

* * *
When the rain finally came, it came fully, with an incredible amount of urgency, as if there was only a short amount of time in which it could wet the earth before the clouds would dry up again. We were still standing on top of the hill, taking in the landscape, when it hit, and even though we had raced to the pub, our clothes were soaked through by the time we arrived.

“So how did you meet?” Sheldon asked once we had shaken off the rain and were seated at a round table in the back of the bar. We had already started in on our second beers before any real conversation began.

“Who? Me and Janie?” Sarah asked but went on without waiting for a response. “Jane lives with my friend Karin—you know Karin, Erik—and we all went skiing together one year. It was one of those perfect trips, wasn’t it, Janie? Everything went right. Or at least almost everything.” Sarah put her arm around my shoulder and leaned in close to me, like she was about to tell me a secret. But instead, Sarah announced her secret to the whole table. “I stole Karin’s date!” Sarah giggled shamefully, but I knew she didn’t feel bad, that she never would, no matter how much she had hurt Karin. Sarah noticed my expression and added, “Oh, Janie, don’t start.” She shifted back to her own chair without removing her arm from my back. “He was all wrong for her.”

“Only because you thought—and for a whole five nights—that he was right for you.”

“Sarah, you are such a bitch.” Erik laughed, as if the way Sarah treated people was entertaining. But there was also an edge in his voice that betrayed a feeling of contempt—as if he too had been the recipient of Sarah’s cruelty.

“You know you don’t mean it,” Sarah said to Erik playfully. In truth, she didn’t mind people saying such things about her.
Rather than come to Sarah’s defense, I went along with the joke. “It’s what makes Sarah Sarah,” I said. “Anyway, she was right about him. We didn’t need to worry about how he treated the help when he slept with one of his date’s friends, right?”

Everybody laughed, and Erik raised his glass. “Here’s to friends who are willing to sleep with friend’s boyfriends. I like women like that.”

“I’ll drink to that.” Sarah raised her glass to the center of the table to meet Erik’s.

Sheldon shrugged and lifted his mug.

I realized that our game was getting dangerous, that we were blurring the line between humor and accusation, but I wasn’t worried about going too far or hurting Sarah’s feelings. I actually hoped we might. After I drank, I said, “I’ve got another.” Sheldon looked up from his beer. I could see he was curious and that whatever I did for the rest of our time together would get his attention. “How about this? To friends who set you up on a date halfway around the world and don’t even tell you about it.” I knew I was being more bold than I usually would be, but I was still feeling liberated from my normal insecurities and the beer only compounded that feeling.

“Oh, that one’s just right,” Sheldon said and he commanded us to drink, again picking up his mug, but this time shoving it directly into Sarah’s, causing the beer to spill over the side and onto the table. Rather than be offended, Sarah laughed and followed his orders.

Erik wiped his mouth off with his hand and began to speak. “How about . . . well, how about this? To friends who come halfway around the world just to fuck.”

Even though we were playing fast and loose with the truth, this surprised me, but when I looked at Sarah, it didn’t seem to phase her. “At least you’re honest,” I said, and Sarah giggled.
For a second the party stopped so we could catch our breath. Then Sarah pushed her chair back and stood up. She said, “AND . . . to those who wait oh so patiently for those loyal friends to arrive and who always remember to write after their beloved ones are gone.” After she had toasted and drank, Sarah leaned across the table, pulled on Erik’s shirt with her free hand until he got up, and kissed him.

Erik turned to me and said, “I love her” as he dropped back in his chair.

“Who doesn’t?” I said.

“That’s one we haven’t done yet,” Sheldon added. “To all those who have yet to love Sarah. They have no idea what they are about to get into.”

“That fits,” I said. I tipped my glass back and let the beer run down my throat until it was finished.

“Another pint?” Sheldon asked.

“Is it still raining?” I wondered.

Erik leaned back in his chair until he could see out the small round window on the front door. “Still raining,” he said.

“Okay, I’ll have another.”

Erik and Sheldon stood up to go the bar, and I went to look for the bathroom. Unlike in America, this bar was bright, and the fluorescence made everyone look sick. I wasn’t used to seeing people’s faces so clearly while I drank, and the effect was rather frightening. And though I wanted to hurry and get back to the table as fast as possible, I couldn’t seem to figure out where I was going. I wandered around the large room for some time before I finally sought help.

“W.C.?” I asked a middle-aged woman sitting on a red barstool next to the jukebox near the front door.
“Unten.” She pointed down the stairs next to her. I walked around the woman and was relieved to see that the basement was dim.

When I got back upstairs, I noticed the rain was slowing outside and the light was returning to the sky. The pub looked normal again, and I wondered if I had suffered some unusual side effect from drinking so much so quickly. At the table, the group seemed more subdued than when we had split up a few minutes ago. No one was talking, and I wasn’t sure if I was supposed to speak or not. I sat down and began without considering the consequences my courage might have. “So now you know about us. What about you? How did you guys meet?”

Sheldon grunted, and Erik didn’t look up from his beer.

“We live in the same building,” Sheldon said when he realized that Erik wasn’t going to respond.

“For how long?” I asked.

“For-ever,” Erik said to his glass.

Sarah laughed. “For-ev-er,” she sang. She repeated the word as if it was part of a lyric she had heard in a song, and the sound of her melody floated softly above the table.

“We were born there,” Sheldon explained, ignoring Sarah. Erik chuckled to himself without lifting his head. Sheldon leaned forward and put one elbow on the table, as if he was about to tell me something important. “We will always live there. We went to school together. We grew up together. We have done everything together. The only thing we don’t do is work together.”

“Sheldon,” Erik said, finally raising his eyes from the table, “works for the GDR.” He hesitated before he spoke again. He said, “He’s a sellout,” before taking another sip from his
drink. He said the words in a such a way that it didn’t sound like he was insulting Sheldon as much as he was stating a fact.

“Where does it get me? I still live in the same crappy building you do.” Erik didn’t respond, and Sheldon looked at me before he continued. “My parents are deaf,” he said as if it were an explanation. I wondered what that had to do with his job, but my courage had dried up the last time I spoke, and I kept my questions to myself, waiting for someone else to respond, to do something.

“It’s time to move on.” Erik stood up and pulled out my chair. I didn’t hesitate.

The visit to Sarah’s aunt was another surprise. At least to me. I wasn’t aware that Sarah still had any relatives living in Germany so when she said it was time to see Gigi, I didn’t know who she was talking about.

“Gigi?” I asked as we boarded the bus.

“My father’s oldest sister,” Sarah said, as if that was all the explanation that was required of her. Sarah sat in the first empty seat, and I sat next to her. She looked out the window and said, “She never left.”

“How old is she?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she said as she turned back in my direction. Rather than look directly at me, she looked past me, toward the front of the bus. “She’s ancient,” she said. “Eighty-five or something like that.” Sarah’s voice sounded casual, nonchalant, as if Gigi’s age was the least of her concerns.

“Is anyone else from your family still here?”

“No.”
“So she’s all alone?”

Sarah looked at me. I knew that she was in one of her moods, that she had no desire to be interrogated. Every once in a while Sarah got quiet like this—like she didn’t want to be disturbed from her thoughts. I sometimes thought that it was at times like these when Sarah contemplated what kind of a person she was. She had a look on her face that seemed almost disgusted—with herself, or with someone else I could never be sure, but when she finally came out of it and re-engaged with the world, it was usually with more reticence and humility. Of course, her reservation never lasted for long, and she never said anything to prove my theory but I secretly hoped that, at times like these, Sarah gave herself the opportunity to reflect.

So rather than continue with my line of questioning, I let Sarah slip off into her own world. And when I turned to check with Sheldon and Erik, they were both slumped down in their seats like two kids on their way to a long day of school so I sat in silence, enjoying the rhythmic hum of the bus and the passing scenery.

It took us about half an hour to get to Gigi’s apartment, a second floor walk-up on the other side of the city. The bus left us off just fifty feet from her door, right next to a produce market.

“Let’s stop here,” Sarah said.

“What are you afraid of?” Erik said.

“I’m not afraid of anything,” Sarah said. “I just think it’s rude to show up empty handed.”

Sheldon chuckled, but no one delayed Sarah any further, and we waited on the street while she went into the shop.

Sarah came back out with a flower bouquet and a bag full of groceries.
“Jesus, Sarah,” Sheldon said, “you must feel like shit.”

Erik stepped in front of Sheldon, blocking his access to Sarah, and took the bag out of Sarah’s hand as he put his arm around her shoulder.

Gigi was taller than both Sarah and I, and I figured she must be close to six foot. She wasn’t overweight, but her torso had taken on a lumpy shape, as if she had melted in the middle. She had the hair typical of the elderly: every strand was curled perfectly into its stiff place and although her hair initially looked white, when she stood near the light, it appeared to have a yellow tint. She had large round glasses with light pink plastic frames, and she wore costume jewelry: gold drops in her ears, and a gold and purple pendant around her neck. I didn’t know what to say when Sarah introduced us so I commented on her necklace.

“That’s a beautiful stone,” I said, pointing to her throat.

“Was?” she said, her eyes squinting as if to understand, and I realized she didn’t speak English. I looked to Erik for help, and he spoke to Gigi to German.

“Danke,” she said, and I nodded. She continued in German.

When she had finished talking, Erik said, “She’s say it’s nothing, an old piece,” but I could tell by looking at Gigi’s red face that the necklace was more than an old piece of jewelry to her. She had been flattered by my compliment, and I couldn’t help but like her for it.

Gigi said something else, and Erik asked me if I wanted coffee.

“I’ll make it, Gigi,” Sarah offered, rushing off to the kitchen. This left Sheldon, Erik and I alone with Gigi for a second time. The first happening just after we had arrived when Sarah had insisted on unpacking the groceries she had bought for Gigi. Erik started talking first, but since they all spoke in German, I was left to entertain myself. Gigi’s apartment appeared large—the front room was much roomier than the apartment I shared with Karin back home. A beautiful
fireplace served as the focal point, and I studied the pearl-colored glass tiles. The furniture was equally regal: the sofa and chairs had beautifully carved wood legs and were upholstered in a dark green fabric. Both pieces, as well as all of the other furniture, looked like the kind of antiques people would pay a significant amount of money for in the States. I noticed Gigi’s shoes too—they weren’t old and beat-up as I had expected, but free of scuffs or any sign of wear.

“Janie,” Erik said, and when I looked up, I saw that all three of them were looking at me, as if waiting for something. “Gigi wants to know what you do, for work.”

“Oh,” I hesitated before answering. I hated to talk about my job. “I work on Capitol Hill as an administrative assistant.” There will still questions on their faces, as if none of them were satisfied with my answer. “The government. I work for a Congresswoman, she’s a government representative from the state of Indiana, and I work for her.”

This time Sheldon translated my words to Gigi, who responded with a concerned look in my direction and a short monologue.

Sheldon said, “She wants to know if you like it?” He was grinning, as if he found Gigi’s interrogation amusing.

“She does?” I replied, doing my best to avoid answering.

“It appears so.”

Just then, Janie came through the swinging door with the coffee. She set the tray down on the pedestal table between Gigi and Eric and passed a cup and saucer to each of them. When she had seated herself on the floor next to her Aunt, she spoke again. “I hope you’re not giving Janie a hard time, Aunt Gigi.” I was surprised that Sarah had been able to hear us in the other room. Gigi shook her head and took a sip of her coffee, releasing me from the still pending question.

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A half an hour later, Sarah stood up, brushing her pants off as if the floor had been dirty even though the entire apartment was immaculate. “It’s time to go,” she said to Erik, Sheldon and me in English, and her sternness reminded me of a schoolteacher giving instructions to her students. The three of us stood up, as directed, and carried our cups to the kitchen. Sarah spoke to her Aunt in German, and I could hear the disappointment in Gigi’s voice. “Nein,” she kept saying, and I understood at least that Gigi didn’t want Sarah to go.

Night came soon after we left Gigi’s, and the four of us walked in the darkness without speaking or talking about what we would do next. We passed a cemetery, and I noticed how much it looked like an old cemetery in America. The grey headstones came in all the same shapes and sizes that I had seen before. The grass between the graves was spotty, and randomly, people had left flowers—fresh flowers, plastic flowers, potted flowers—throughout the cemetery. The only thing missing was the flag.

I turned to Sarah, “What did you say to her?”

“What do you mean?” Sarah asked, acting as if she really didn’t know what I was after.

“About why we were leaving?”

“I told her we had to cross back before dark. She understood.” Sarah excused her lie by adding, “I’ll see her again.”

We walked on for a few minutes more before Sheldon broke the silence. “Something to eat?” he said.

I wasn’t hungry, and I looked to Sarah to see what she would say. But she didn’t speak, she just kept moving along the street. Her face was pointed forward, as if it was focused on
something in the distance. Either she didn’t hear Sheldon, or she didn’t care to respond. Her body continued moving, as if she was going somewhere important.

“Sarah?” I said.

She came to an abrupt stop and turned to look at me.

“Are you hungry?” I said.

Her face tilted to one side, and I wondered if she hadn’t understand me. She looked confused. But then she answered the question easily. “Yeah, sure,” she said. “Anything.”

“German, I hope,” Erik said. “Otherwise, you are out of luck.” Erik paused before he laughed, but no one else joined his laughter.

“It is not funny,” Sheldon said.

“Of course, it is,” Erik said. “If that is not funny, I don’t know what it is.”

“Let’s find a place to eat,” Sheldon said and turned away from Erik, grabbing Sarah by the arm and leading her in another direction. As I followed them, I felt a feeling building inside of me. Not hate exactly. Envy is what I suppose you would call it. But envy felt like such a benevolent word. What I felt was much stronger. I thought of Karin, back in D.C. for the holidays, and wondered if she ever dreamed of getting revenge on Sarah. Karin and I weren’t really the types for revenge. We would bitch for hours about Sarah and how selfish she was, but never once did we tell Sarah how angry we were or do anything about it.

One time, I did walk out on Sarah, leaving her stranded at a Dunkin’ Donuts in Rockville, Maryland. But Sarah had managed to twist and turn that around to make it seem like it was something it was not.

It was the day last summer when Sarah had moved into her new apartment, a one-bedroom Adams Morgan co-op with a view of the treetops in Rock Creek Park, an impossible
find in D.C. Sarah had enlisted the help of half a dozen friends and had even gotten one of her ex-boyfriends to rent and drive a U-haul truck.

After nearly six hours of carrying all of Sarah’s crap up four floors and finishing up the packing she had yet to do, we all crashed on her floor and waited for the free dinner she had promised us. The ex-boyfriend hooked up the TV, and we numbly watched thirty minutes of fuzzy local news until Sarah returned with three bags full of chicken, pork and sausage empanadas.

I couldn’t eat the food, and Sarah knew it, whether she admitted it or not. We had been to Julia’s, the place where she got the empanadas, once before, and I had found out that Julia’s secret empanada ingredient was cornmeal. I am violently allergic to corn. But it had been a special night for Sarah—a raise at work—so I watched her pry open the steaming empanada and swoon over the sweet rice and banana filling without complaint. Of course, I told her it was a one time thing, and that I wouldn’t be able to go back there again. Not to my surprise, she had suggested going there on another occasion, and I had reminded her that I could not eat there. She had apologized, but clearly it had not sunk in.

When she walked through the door of her new co-op with bags stamped with Julia’s red logo that night, I wanted to cry. I was so hungry, and I knew Sarah had no food. I just wanted to eat, and Sarah had deprived me of even that.

After dinner when Karin pointed out Sarah’s oversight, Sarah said she would make it up to me. She claimed that she herself would drive me any place I wanted to go. I knew Sarah’s generosity was not as limitless as she wanted to imply so I tried to imagine the farthest place that I could reasonably ask her to go. The only Dunkin’ Donuts in the entire metro area, that I knew of, was in Rockville so that was what I suggested. Sarah’s initial surprise quickly turned to
agreeability, and after she swept the other movers out of her new apartment, she was soon
driving—my Subaru, of course—out to Rockville.

I remember thinking as we drove that Sarah genuinely did care about me and reflecting
on what good friends we had become in the two years that I had known her. We even talked
about Karin, making fun of her barely noticeable lisp.

But at the donut shop, everything changed. There was someone there who Sarah knew
from work, and she said we HAD to sit with him. We did, and Sarah completely ignored me after
that. A half an hour later I got up, pretending that I had to go to the bathroom, and left. Of
course, Sarah didn’t get it. She thought I had left her there so that she could get a ride home with
the guy.

Following Sarah and Sheldon down the street in East Berlin made me think the same
thing all over again. Sarah will never get it. As long as I had known this—it had been at least a
year and a half since that trip to Rockville and maybe even longer since I had really understood
this about her, consciously or not—I had never considered not being friends with Sarah, or
saying enough is enough, I’m done with you. I knew this had something to do with why I had
come to Germany with her. I had some vague sense that I made this trip out of spite. Might as
well get something out of her, I figured. Sarah let go of Sheldon’s arm and reached up to tousle
his hair. He stopped walking and turned to face her. His smile seemed to say thank you, as if she
had blessed him. It was a look of contentment, a look that said I know I’m loved.

I was suddenly aware of Erik’s presence next to me, and I wondered if he too was
watching them, watching Sarah do her thing with Sheldon.

Sheldon looked back at us and yelled “Come on!” He waved his arm for us to follow, and
we hurried towards them.
We ate dinner near Sheldon and Erik’s apartment building at a tiny cafe called Himmel und Erde, which Erik explained meant Heaven and Earth. This was also the name of a German sausage dish which Eric warned us away from because, as he said, the sausage was served on top of a spoonful of pureed apples and potatoes which tasted like bitter baby food. I ordered the Westphalia ham because it was the only thing on the menu I recognized. Sarah and Sheldon both had currywurst, and Erik chose the Hassenpfeffer which I found out means rabbit stew. Sarah and I cringed when he bit into a big hunk of meat, and Erik played it up by pushing his fork in our faces.

“The poor rabbit,” Sarah said.

“Poor rabbit?” Sheldon said. “This rabbit had a good life. He knows nothing of our problems.”

“He’s blissfully ignorant?” I asked.

“That’s right,” Sheldon said.

Erik pointed his fork at Sarah. “Sarah, honey” he said, “why are you not eating?”

Sarah had been pushing sausage around on her plate, but she had eaten very little. “I’m really not hungry.”

“Why not?” Sheldon said.

“Hassenpfeffer does not suit you?” Erik said, laughing again at his own joke.

“It’s not that.”

I felt one of Sarah’s moods coming on. I looked at my hands and began to run my left index finger slowly across the knuckles on my other hand, as if touching something soft. The bone protruded from underneath my skin, and it reminded me of when my childhood dog,
Happy, had gotten bumps all over her body the year before she had died of cancer. Erik put his arm around Sarah and pulled her close to him, kissing the top of her head.

“So what is it?” Sheldon said.

“It’s silly,” Sarah said, and Erik brushed his hand softly over her hair.

“Tell us,” Sheldon said. The shortness of his delivery revealed that he was growing impatient.

Sarah lifted her face, and I couldn’t tell if she was angry with Sheldon for pushing or glad that he wanted to know. “It’s Gigi. We should have stayed longer.”

“You had your chance,” Sheldon said. “Why regret it now?”

“I just do.”

“I recently saw a film about someone like you. The main character put his own needs ahead of everyone else, but each time he hurt someone, he was overcome with guilt after it happened.”

I thought Sarah would be offended, but instead she said, “I know what you’re talking about. The Unbearable Lightness of Being?”

“How did you know that?” Sheldon asked.

“Janie and I saw it last week, and I can’t stop thinking about it.”

“Kundera will do that,” Erik said. “Stay with you.”

“I just can’t believe how right he got it,” Sarah said.

“Who?” Sheldon said.

“The director, whoever made that movie.”

“In what sense?” Sheldon said.
“The sex. The way a woman feels during sex. All that. He got it right.” Sarah stopped, and no one else spoke for a moment. “And that one scene—the one where she sleeps with the guy at the bar, you know, to get back at her husband. That was horrible.” Sarah ran her finger around the rim of her wine glass and went on. “That’s exactly what it’s like too. When a woman is with someone she doesn’t want to be with. That’s how it feels. He got it right.”

“It was her choice to be with him,” Sheldon said. “She did not have to.”

“But she didn’t really have a choice?” Sarah said. “Did she?”

No one responded. I thought about what Sarah’s motivations might be for doing this. She seemed genuinely upset, but I had seen that side of her before. The side that made people feel like they had to reach out to her, to be there for her, to help her pick up the pieces. And I wanted no part of her pieces anymore.

“It does not matter because it is not true,” Sheldon said. “I don’t mean to be cruel, but it is just a made-up story.”

“Shel, really,” Erik said.

“And that is no worse than anybody else’s story, is it?” Sheldon asked. He seemed to be turning away from Sarah and her charms somehow, as if he wasn’t the same person who had only moments ago been under her spell. Sarah had a way of wooing people with her attention and then driving them away with her self-centeredness.

“Maybe not,” I said. “But that doesn’t make it any easier to watch.” I wasn’t coming to Sarah’s defense. I was just interested in hearing what Sheldon had to say.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Sheldon said. “Don’t you think when you see enough bad things they all start to wear down your sense of sympathy?”

“You mean you become desensitized?”
“Yes, exactly.”

“Sure, but that’s the point, isn’t it?” I said. “You’ve got to force yourself to care. Every time you see a plane crash or an ambulance come down the street, you’ve got to remember that there are people inside. It could be your grandmother being rushed to the hospital or your father flying overseas.” I stopped and looked at Sarah, pretending to be sympathetic to her before I went on. “And that could’ve been Sarah in that movie, sleeping with that guy at the bar. I mean, how many times have you been to a bar with Sarah when she didn’t go home with someone?”

“Jesus, Janie!” Sarah said.

“What, Sarah?”

“I was talking about something that mattered. Something important. I felt something in that movie.”

“But Sarah, when other people feel things, you don’t care. Why should it be any different for you?”

“You’re so insensitive. Think about what I’ve been through.” I knew Sarah wanted to make it seem like she actually had been through something, but in truth, I knew she had not experienced anything that the rest of us hadn’t. Like everyone else, she had, at times, put herself in a position that she later regretted. Her suffering was not unique.

“What you have been through?” Sheldon said. He leaned back in his chair. “Don’t you get it? You cannot sit here and complain to us,” Sheldon motioned to Erik and to himself as he said this.

Sarah stared at Sheldon expectantly, and I wondered if she thought he might apologize. After a moment or two had passed without anyone speaking, she got up and started for the door. Before she got there, she turned to face the table and said “Janie?” without looking up. I knew
that I had to go with her, but I also wasn’t sure if I could will myself to get up and leave. I tried
to force myself to move, to act, but nothing came.

Erik pushed his chair back from the table. “I’ll go,” he said, saving me from having to
chase after Sarah. Before he left, he leaned over and whispered in my ear, “I’ll take care of her.
Meet me later at the news shop outside of our building. Say around one.”

Sheldon didn’t ask what Erik had said to me. But after they were out the door, he added,
“It is just as well. I have no patience for her bullshit, you know?”

Outside of the restaurant, Sheldon grabbed my hand and pulled me into the empty alley.
The touch of his skin, still warm from the restaurant, surprised me.

“You should put your gloves on,” he said, but he didn’t let go of my hand. “I want to
show you something. But you have to promise not to tell anyone.”

“Not even Erik?” I asked.

“Especially not Erik,” he said. “Party secret, you know?” He winked, but I didn’t know if
that meant he was kidding or not. “Or maybe I do not want him to know everything about me.
You know, I want to keep something for myself, right?”

“I know the feeling,” I said.

“This way,” he said and pulled me toward a busy street where Sheldon held his hand up
in the air every time a car drove past. Finally, an old, beat-up Mercedes pulled over. Sheldon
leaned into the driver’s window and spoke in a low voice to the driver. It was only the second
time I had heard him use German, and I found myself taken in by the sound of his voice. Then he
held the back door open and told me to get in. I could tell right away it was a diesel: the car
sounded sick, like it needed to clear its throat, and the engine shook so much that it made the seat vibrate.

“Don’t worry,” Sheldon said. “We will make it.”

“Where are we going?”

“The place where you can see the best of Germany. A view of the whole world.”

When we got out of the car about twenty minutes later, I began to feel frightened for the first time that day. We were in a completely isolated part of the city, and after the car drove away, I couldn’t imagine how we’d ever get back to Sarah and Erik.

“The car is waiting at the bottom,” Sheldon said and tilted his head in the direction that the car had disappeared. “He cannot make it up the incline. I only hope you are prepared for a good walk.”

It wasn’t until then that I noticed the hill in front of us. There was a steep groove carved into the side of the embankment that Sheldon had started to walk along. At the top of the slope I could sense a stark light, but I couldn’t make out where it was coming from.

“Hurry up!” Sheldon yelled back at me. “You are only here for one day.”

I caught up to Sheldon, and we walked in silence for the time it took us to climb the height of the small hill. At the top there were three wooden crosses planted in the middle of a manicured grass circle which sat on a cluster of concrete steps. The glow I had seen from the base below was a spotlight that was pointed toward the center cross. I walked around the circle and examined the crosses, careful not to get too close. It looked like I had always imagined Mount Calvary.

“Calvary? Is that what you are thinking?” Sheldon said.
“How did you know?” I asked.

“All the Christians get that look when they come up here—like they are seeing a ghost. It certainly is familiar in that way.”

“So what is it?”

“That’s the odd part.” I turned away from the crosses and looked back to Sheldon, waiting for an explanation. He was standing at the edge of the precipice, smoking a cigarette and looking down the hill. “No one knows.”

“What?”

“No one knows what it is, at least not for sure. Some people say it is the place where the first three Jews were killed. During the war.” I inspected Sheldon’s face, looking for some sign of emotion. But I didn’t know him well enough to read him yet. “I don’t believe that though. Clearly, it has been here longer than that. Or else somebody would remember.” Sheldon held his cigarette out over the cliff, let go of it, and watched it drop. He walked towards me as he went on. “Others think it goes back to the 1400s and has something to do with the Crusades.”

“It wouldn’t still be here,” I said.

“I know. But there are still others, and this is the most possible explanation, that think it represents the three churches of Germany—the Christian church, the Jewish church and the Muslim church.”

I looked back at the crosses and considered this idea.

“And you have not even seen the best part yet. Come up here.” Sheldon walked up the steps to the base of the middle cross.

“Are you crazy?”
“No, I mean it. This is the best part. Come up here.” He held his hand out to me as if we were old friends, as if he reached for my hand all the time. I looked over my shoulder and cautiously walked up the white steps to the place where Sheldon stood. “Now, turn around,” he said, putting his hands on my shoulders and leading my body in the rotation.

As I turned around, I saw that—just twelve steps up from where I had stood before—I could see the whole city of Berlin laid out before me. The houses and buildings washed into each other like a river, wave after wave of neighborhoods and parks spread out into a massive sea of grey concrete and dwindling lights.

“Look, there is the the oldest church of Berlin, the Nikolai-Kirche, and there is the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche which was only recently rebuilt. What they say is that you can see all of the churches in Berlin from this very point. That, from here, there is no boundary between you and me. That the churches, just like the people, come together at this one point.”

“It’s perfect,” I said.

“Himmel und Erde?” Sheldon said. I turned to look at him as I translated the words in my head. I wondered what Sheldon was trying to say. “A joke,” he said before I could decipher his intent. “But it really is like where the two worlds meet. It is quite beautiful and the view appears to go on forever. If only it did.” Sheldon did not explain what he was referring to, but instead stepped abruptly away from me and started to move in the direction of the path as if he didn’t want to look at the view anymore. But he turned back before he was even a few feet away and walked towards me until he was within arms’ length. Glancing at the ground, he began to kick the toe of his boot against the concrete steps. I wondered if I had lost him, his attention, until suddenly, he lifted his head and looked at me directly. “My hands are freezing,” he said as he
moved toward me and slid his bare hands into the pockets of my coat. He was so close that I could no longer see the cloud of his breath as he exhaled.

I hadn’t expected him to do anything so intimate, but when it happened, I wasn’t surprised either. “This morning I didn’t think you liked me,” I said.

“This morning you were just Sarah’s friend. Now, I see that you cannot tolerate the way Sarah thinks she can do whatever she wishes, no matter who it hurts. Now, you are more than I hoped you would be.”

“So you like me because I hate Sarah?”

“No, I like you because you think for yourself.”

I knew that he was wrong about me—I had been Sarah’s shadow for so long that it was hard to be sure who I was or what I did think. But at the same time, I understood that he saw something in me that I had only recently come to recognize: that I didn’t want to do what other people expected of me.

Sheldon went on: “The thing I never trusted about Sarah is the way she has adopted the whole American thing without ever considering if it was right for her.”

“Most people do, don’t they?”

“They should not.”

“But haven’t I?”

“You think you have, but really you have not. You don’t take it for granted. That’s why I brought you here. To appreciate this.” Sheldon looked over his shoulder and out at the city. I followed his gaze. “Sarah is so American that she probably celebrates Christmas.” He laughed and turned his face back to mine. “Am I right?” he asked.

“As a matter of fact she does.”
“See what I mean?”

“Christmas isn’t all bad.”

“Neither is Hanukkah, but you don’t celebrate it, do you?”

I thought of the menorah that I had made Karin the first year we lived together, the one that I knew was, at that moment, sitting on our dining room table. “No, not officially.”

“So what do you think?” Sheldon said as he tilted his head towards the world behind him.

“Was it worth the drive?”

“Yes, it was,” I said. Then Sheldon leaned in to kiss me, and I let him do it. And even though I knew the light made us easy to see, it didn’t feel like anyone was looking.

At the door to Sheldon’s apartment, he looked back at me and said, “My parents are deaf so they can’t hear us, but we should go right to my room so we don’t run into them. They should be asleep anyway.”

Sheldon’s room was, strangely, very American. It reminded me of a college dorm room. There was a sofa on the far wall next to the bed and music posters all over the place. I sat on the sofa wondering what I was doing there. I couldn’t believe that I was really going to sleep with him, only hours after I had met him, but I also couldn’t imagine myself saying no.

When Sheldon walked across the room and sat next to me on the sofa, I felt myself stiffening up, getting tense. “You are not going to start feeling guilty, are you?” he said. “It’s not worth it. Don’t be that woman in the movie. Don’t give into that bullshit.”

“I’m not sure I have a choice. It’s just part of me.”
“I never understand why women let this get to them the way they do. You’re intelligent, you know how to think for yourself so you should be smart enough to reject those ridiculous ideas about when it’s all right and when it’s not all right to have sex.”

“I bet you say that to all the girls,” I said.

“It would be very clever of me, wouldn’t it?” He stood up and walked over to the other side of the bed. An old green plastic record player, the kind that children usually have, sat on the bedside table, and he kneeled down to flip through some records on the floor. “Did you know that the Jews don’t believe that premarital sex is a bad thing?”

“Are you being serious?”

“Yes, I am being serious.” Sheldon stopped talking and put an album on top of the turntable. After gently lowering the needle, the song began. David Bowie filled the room. Once the music had started, Sheldon walked back around the bed and stood in front of me. “Think about it—rabbis can marry. The idea that people should not have sex before marriage is a completely Christian idea.”

“Maybe you’re just telling me this so I’ll sleep with you.”

“But haven’t you already decided to sleep with me?”

I laughed and looked at the ceiling. I knew he was right.

“I just want you to feel good about it,” he said as he sat down next to me on the sofa again, and for the first time that day, I was able to look directly in his eyes without looking away or getting nervous.

“I mean it though,” he added. “You know what you want to do so you might as well do it freely, without the guilt.”

“I’ll see what I can do about it,” I said as I reached up to touch his face.
The clock next to Sheldon’s bed said quarter to twelve. It was one of those old alarm clocks with the numbers that go around on a dial like an odometer. I was supposed to meet Erik in five minutes.

“Sheldon, I’ve got to go,” I said even though I knew he was asleep.

“What?”

“I’ve got to go.” I got up from the bed, and started looking for my clothes on the floor.

“But where are you going?”

“To meet Erik. He said to meet him at one.”

“Shit, you’re kidding,” he said.

“Why?”

“You are not going to meet Erik.” I looked at him and tried to imagine why he was telling me what to do. “I mean, stay. Stay here. But please don’t go see Erik.”

“Why shouldn’t I go?”

“Erik just wants to sleep with you.” By this point, I had put my pants and my shirt on, and I was just trying to find my shoes.

“What are you talking about?”

“I mean it. He just wants to have everything I have. He can’t let me have anything for myself.”

“Well, why should you?” I said. “Besides, you’re the one who said sex was healthy.”

After I had my shoes on, I went to the side of the bed and sat next to Sheldon.

“Just stay.” He played with my hair as he spoke. “Don’t go.”
“I’m worried about Sarah,” I said, even though I knew that wasn’t the only reason I was going.

“Fine, go sleep with him if that’s what you want to do. But make sure you tell him where you were before you met him. I want him to know that I had you first.”

“I didn’t know you ‘had’ me. I thought it was a mutual thing.”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Sheldon said, as he rubbed my knee. “I just know him.”

“I have to go,” I said.

“I won’t see you again. You are leaving first thing in the morning, and I have to work.”

“Why don’t you come see us this weekend?”

“Not possible,” he said and he gently stroked the side of my face. I was about to ask why not, to tell him that I didn’t know if I’d ever be back in Germany again and that whatever he had to do, he could cancel it. But then I remembered. He wasn’t allowed to leave.

“Oh God, I’m sorry, Shel. I forgot. I’m so sorry.”

“You can do that. Forget.” He let his hand drop to the bed. I missed him, the touch of his skin, even then. “I understand,” he said.

Erik was waiting at the door of the apartment building for me. He hugged me when I walked out, as if he hadn’t just seen me a few hours before.

“Where’s Sarah?” I said as soon as he let go of me.

“She’s asleep. In the apartment. She’ll be fine.”

“Oh.”

“I’m starving,” he said. “Do you want to get some breakfast?”

“It’s one in the morning.”
“I know. I’m hungry. Let’s go.”

“I don’t know.”

“What else are you going to do?” he said.

I tried to picture myself going back to Sheldon’s apartment, but I knew it was too late for that. I had already left him behind.

“We’ll get something to eat and then you can go wake Sarah and get an early start. She said she’ll be ready by five. There’s no reason to sleep. You will only be here once in your life.”

“You never know,” I said.

“Trust me. You won’t come back.” Erik put his arm around my shoulder and led me away.

Erik ordered an omelette with toast, and I just asked for coffee. He ate for a while before he said anything. He seemed to be considering his words before he began. It was a noticeable change from his gregarious demeanor earlier in the day. I noticed that he cut his eggs with a knife and a fork, even though he could have just as easily eaten with only the one utensil.

“I love Sarah,” Eric said finally. “She’s beautiful, and she never forgets me. You know that she writes me all the time, and she comes to visit every single year?”

“I know,” I said as I played with the ceramic salt and pepper shakers.

“It may not sound like much,” Erik said, “but I look forward to her visit every year. I don’t know why, but I do. Maybe it’s because we have no expectations for each other.”

“None?”
“Well, I suppose it’s hard to not have any expectations, but it’s not the same as with the girls I meet here. If I date a girl here, the whole time I am thinking, is this going well? Do I like her enough to go out with her again? Why do her teeth have to look like that?”

“How does she treat the help?”

“Right. And I don’t have to worry about that with Sarah because it’s just once a year. It’s not a commitment. It’s just about being together for a brief time, about being happy together. That’s all we ask of each other.”

“So this year was a failure?”

“Sarah is unhappy. Things didn’t go as planned. I guess I wanted Shel to have what I have—this one day that he can look forward to every year, to forget about the rest of it.”

It hadn’t occurred to me before that this setup had been as much for Sheldon as it had been for me, but when Erik explained things this way, I could understand why he might want to do this for Sheldon.

Erik continued. “Of course, I didn’t think it through. You coming back is about as likely as you and Sarah being friends two months from now. And Shel. There’s Shel too. He could never enjoy this the way I do. Everything for him has to mean something, everything has to be about something. That’s where Sarah and I connect. Our time together is about nothing. It means nothing. I don’t know why I thought Shel could do that.”

“He seems pretty free to me,” I said.

“Yes, well, it’s just an act.” Suddenly Erik set down his knife and his fork and said, “You didn’t sleep with him, did you? I hope you didn’t sleep with him.”

“Why not?”
“Because you are better than him. You are more alive, more free, more open. He thinks there must be an answer and an explanation for everything. He is so damned analytical, so critical.” Erik paused for a moment and seemed to be waiting for my response. “I know he is my friend, but you don’t want that in a man, do you?”

“I don’t have to want that if, as you say, I am never coming back.”

“Maybe, but nevertheless.” Erik flipped his fork over in his hand. “I’m jealous that you slept with him.”

I was shocked to hear Erik admit this. Why would he be jealous of Sheldon if he had Sarah? “What about Sarah?” I asked.

“Sarah is just a friend. She is like family.” Erik hesitated. He leaned across the table and added softly, “She is asleep.” He laughed at this, and I couldn’t help but laugh too. The situation was completely absurd and yet just as Sheldon had predicted. I had just slept with Erik’s best friend, and here he was coming on to me. I couldn’t begin to understand why the idea had me feeling so excited.

“So that makes it okay?” I said.

“Do you care? Isn’t this what you want?”

“I’m not sure.” I was just as surprised to hear Eric articulate some understanding of my situation with Sarah as I had been to hear him say he was jealous of Sheldon.

“You should have seen your face when you got here!”

“What did I look like?”

“You looked terrified. And amazed. I could tell you had never seen anything like that goddamned wall. Well, who has, right?”
When I thought about that morning, my memory of the wall was eclipsed by the image of Erik and Sheldon, standing on the other side, waiting for us to cross over. Everything was a blur of barbed wire and graffiti. “I don’t even remember it. Isn’t that awful?”

“I am not surprised. But in one day, you have changed. You and Sarah will never be the same.” Erik pushed his plate towards the center of the table. “Don’t you want to make sure of that?”

I don’t see Sarah anymore. I moved out of the apartment I shared with Karin and into my own place. So I was alone when I watched the wall came down on television the next year. The images crackled with the energy of change, the reporters’ voices simultaneously giddy and stunned with the transformation taking place before them, but for me, it felt as if the shift had already occurred, these events just confirming what I had felt coming for months. As the wall was hacked away by teenagers and middle-aged men, I sat on my sofa and let myself imagine I was still there.

Erik and I had spent the rest of my only night in East Berlin in bed, making sure that Sarah would never forgive me. And Sheldon helps me live with myself for giving in to that temptation every day—he taught me that intimacy is not evil. But not everything I took away from that trip is what I was looking for. I don’t know why, but when I remember them—Sheldon and Erik—and their faces in my head, I always feel like I am looking at pictures of people who have died in a war. This is the level of loss I feel as I contemplate this memory. Not really the memory of two people, but more like a memory of a time that has gone. Though it was only one day, much of what happened had to do with the choices I had been making for years, and after that day, nothing was ever the same.
Of course, Sarah can look at a picture of that day too, and I begrudge her that. I want it all for myself—because she seemed to me so much not a part of anything that happened that day, even though she was there with us, even though the idea of her was behind some of our actions. Yet I am able to console myself with the knowledge that some part of her must realize that too.

But it’s not the question of Sarah that lurks behind the memory of this trip. Instead it is a question of circumstance. As I hold the image of these two men in my mind time and time again, I can’t help but wonder if it would have been so special or if we would have let ourselves become so close, to go so far, if Sheldon and Erik had been able to come with us when we left. If we had not known that our time together would be just one day, would any of us have allowed ourselves the freedom to do things that we always knew were wrong? And isn’t it this freedom, and these sins, that will forever keep us together?

I should have been overjoyed that day, and for Germany, for the world, I was. Yet the moment still personified the twisted emotions I had felt since my visit had ended. I could go back to visit Sheldon and Erik whenever I wanted, but more significant was the fact that they could leave. Despite this dramatic change, I knew, as Erik had predicted, that I would never see the two of them again. Even though we were free to do so. Our time together had been about walls and restriction, about being afraid and not knowing who we are. Now we had become, instead, people who were free to seek our true selves.
Who controls how history is imagined? Who gets to say what slavery was like for the slaves?
—Toni Morrison, testifying on behalf of *The Wind Done Gone*

Despite the criticism surrounding Alice Randall’s *The Wind Done Gone*, her 2001 revision of *Gone with the Wind* succeeds in its attempt to expose the historical deficiencies and inaccuracies in both the 1936 book by Margaret Mitchell and the subsequent 1939 film adaptation. At the same time, Randall is successful in drawing attention to the fact that there is no such thing as historical accuracy or racial purity. As a result, questions arise about how the value of a piece of literature is determined.

Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* took the depression-era United States, especially the South, by storm and commandeered the country’s attention when it premiered on bookshelves and played in theatres. Joseph Beck, lawyer for Randall and publisher Houghton Mifflin, explains that “*Gone with the Wind*, reputedly second only to the Bible in book sales and the most popular motion picture of all time, is familiar to people on every continent.” The book was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1937 and has sold over 25 million copies (Miller); the film by Victor Fleming won ten Academy Awards, including Best Picture. Literary critic Eric Harrison
contends that “[Gone with the Wind] fans venerate it the way the Sons of Confederate Veterans adore the rebel flag.” The impact Gone with the Wind has had on the country’s sense of history—most obviously but not only as it pertains to the Civil War—and our societal perceptions of gender, race, class, sexuality and identity can still be felt today. Mitchell biographer Claudia Roth Pierpont writes that “Mitchell’s characters long ago burst through the restraints of their form and, like folk- or fairy-tale figures, passed directly into mainstream consciousness” (Miller).

The impact of Gone with the Wind has not faded over the years. Many have returned to the book and the film again and again while others continue to read and view it for the first time. Readers today still become as obsessed with its melodramatic narrative as the South was during the Atlanta premiere of the film starring Vivien Leigh and Clark Gable in 1939. The effect this piece of cultural history has on such readers cannot be underestimated. Social critic Frank Willison agrees that Gone with the Wind’s “unbelievable tale of Reconstruction in the South has done more harm than people know.” Alice Randall was one of many that read the book at a formative age. Salon’s Laura Miller reveals that Randall “confessed to having first read the novel at age twelve and having ‘loved’ it. That’s a remarkable testimony to the hypnotic charm of Gone with the Wind.” But Randall was also “deeply perplexed” with the book according to Time magazine’s Andrea Sachs:

“There was something in the book that attracted and repelled me. Where were the mulattos on Tara? Where were the people in my family history?”

Randall, 41, is of mixed-race ancestry, and has been told that her great-great-grandfather was Confederate general Edmund Pettus. She decided to write a novel, her first, as the black rejoinder to Gone with the Wind.
Henry Louis Gates, Jr, chair of the Department of Afro-American Studies at Harvard, has also discussed the problematic nature of *Gone with the Wind*: “[T]he embarrassing depiction of characters such as Mammy and the character played by Butterfly McQueen have taken decades for black authors to overcome . . . *Gone with the Wind* especially in its book form, is widely regarded in the black community as one of the most racist depictions of slavery . . . in American literature” (Beck). Barbara McCaskill, Professor of English at the University of Georgia specializing in African American literature, explains the significance of Randall’s revision: “Anyone who believes that pejorative characterizations of blacks are not currently accepted by many who cling to the ‘historical myth’ of [*Gone with the Wind*] must live in a different world than I do” (Beck).

Randall has recognized the negative impact of this cultural icon and decided to respond to the book’s historical misrepresentation and misguided message with a new, revisionist retelling of the depression-era classic. Alice Randall’s *The Wind Done Gone* rewrites the story of *Gone with the Wind* by creating a more accurate representation of what life would have been like on Tara and in the South both during and after the Civil War. Though *The Wind Done Gone* begins where *Gone with the Wind* left off, Randall retells the classic story and many of the original mythic scenes in flashback. Literary critic Claire Davis explains this narrative technique: “Even for those unfamiliar with the 1936 Pulitzer Prize winner, Randall drops enough hints to get them up to speed. She frequently tells the ‘white folks’ version of the story before offering the ‘truth.’” First, and most importantly, Randall introduces Cynara, whom she imagines to be the illegitimate daughter of Mammy and Gerald O’Hara and therefore half-sister to Scarlett O’Hara. Since it was common for many slave owners to have sexual relationships with female slaves, it is plausible that O’Hara, like many other slave owners, would have fathered a number of illegitimate
children on his plantation; Cynara gives a voice to such progeny. In Playing in the Dark, Toni Morrison explains that, except as token characters, African Americans are largely missing from American literature (14), and Randall’s introduction of Cynara responds directly to such oversights. Cynara is also the narrator of Randall’s retelling; through her diary, Cynara recounts her experiences at Tara, which she generically re-names “Cotton Farm,” thus reinforcing the idea that this plantation could have been one of many in the Civil War-era South.

From her diary, the reader learns that Cynara was born the same year as Scarlett, whom she symbolically renames “Other.” The two girls grew up under the same roof at Tara until their teenage years when Cynara is sold by her father to a relation, as was often the case in such situations. Though the two were raised side by side, Cynara is treated like any other slave while her half-sister Scarlett is the one being waited upon. It is also notable that Cynara’s mother, Mammy, pays more attention to Scarlett than she does to her own daughter. In such a mismatched family, Cynara and “Lady”—O’Hara’s wife Ellen—become allies in envy, often turning to each other for the love and affection they do not receive from their own mother and daughter. In one scene, Cynara recalls the time when Ellen asks Cynara to come to her bedroom while Mammy is nursing Scarlett: “[Lady] pulled me into her lap and I suckled at her breast till her warm milk filled me. As always, it was a cheering surprise for both of us. We had been sharing these little spurred-by-envy suppers all my memory” (16). This scene, like others about the women, demonstrates the problem that existed when female slaves were expected to put the care of their master’s children above their own, a fact ignored by Mitchell.

About the time that Scarlett begins swooning over Ashley, Cynara’s new owner falls on hard times, and the illegitimate daughter of O’Hara is sold during a “bare-breasted hour on the auction block” (2) to an Atlanta madam named Beauty, a.k.a. Belle, who puts her to work as a
maid. During her adolescent tenure with Beauty, Cynara meets and becomes the long-time concubine of Rhett Butler—or R. as Cynara cryptically identifies him in her diary. Rhett takes quite a liking to Cynara, and thus decides to educate her—teaching her to read and write and sending her on a “grand tour” of Europe. Eventually Rhett buys Cynara a proper home, complete with a maid and a cook, in what he identifies as the “colored section” of Atlanta, where he visits Cynara every day during lunch while he is married to Scarlett.

After the death of Scarlett and Rhett’s only child, Bonnie, Rhett leaves Scarlett. In a direct reference to *Gone with the Wind*, Cynara learns through the Atlanta grapevine—or as Cynara explains, “the walls have ears, and her maid told my maid, and my maid told me”—that Rhett has left Scarlett by saying “he didn’t give a tinker’s damn what happened to her” (20), reinventing the classic finale of *Gone with the Wind*.

Unlike the original, *The Wind Done Gone* does not end here. After leaving Scarlett, Rhett spends more and more time with Cynara. When Mammy falls ill, Rhett stays with Cynara while Scarlett runs to Mammy’s side on Cotton Farm. Though she is conflicted about her feelings for her mother and Rhett has asked her not to go—he feels it inappropriate for his estranged wife and his lover to be in the same house—Cynara finally travels to see her mother, only to arrive just moments after her death. Once Mammy is buried, Cynara returns to Atlanta, and soon after she and Rhett visit Washington, D.C. where they take up residence together. It is during this time that Scarlett becomes sick and dies suddenly, ultimately allowing Cynara to learn the true nature of her half-sister’s ancestry. After Rhett returns from attending to Scarlett’s premature death, he gives Cynara a packet of Ellen O’Hara’s letters. The correspondence between Ellen and her first love—her cousin Feleepe—explains why it was impossible for the two of them to marry: because their great-grandmother was black which means that if they had married, they likely
would have produced a child too dark to pass for white. “Other never knew,” Cynara writes, “I can only imagine that when she handed the letters to Mammy, she expected Mammy to burn them. She expected the secret her mother never wished to tell her to die with her. She left her daughters to carry their babies without fear of their own children darkening up” (127). The obvious implication is that Cynara and Scarlett share more than a father: they share a mixed cultural heritage, as Cynara says about her sister, “She was just a nigger” (133).

By re-imagining the legendary Scarlett O’Hara as the descendent of an African American ancestor and the sister of a biracial slave, Randall is demonstrating why we can never know exactly who we are in terms of our “racial” identity and that there is no such thing as truth, or purity, when it comes to that identity. If it is possible for the seemingly lily-white Scarlett O’Hara to be of mixed descent and possible for a slave like Cynara to be the daughter of a prominent white plantation owner, the implication is that nothing is as it appears, that truth is a relative term. Simply put, white is black, and black is white.

While they are living in Washington, Rhett becomes increasingly dependent on his lover’s attention and companionship, but Cynara becomes even more educated and more independent from Rhett during their time in the nation’s capital. As she says, “Times are changing. Barriers are falling” (141). Cynara becomes interested in a friend of Rhett’s, a prominent black Congressman, which causes Rhett to abruptly rush Cynara to the alter. Though Cynara goes through with the wedding, her heart is not in it, and after a brief honeymoon at Cotton Farm and a quick trip to Atlanta, she becomes ill and returns to Washington to seek medical care. Rhett arranges for his Congressmen friend to escort Cynara on her journey, and their mutual interest develops quickly: they share their feelings for one another and engage in a brief, passionate affair. “I have done what I would not have done had I contemplated it longer,”
Cynara admits, “And I am afraid, not of his finding out, but of being this new person, a less than perfect person who has violated one of her most dearly held principles, and a person who has never felt such pleasure” (187). Though Cynara returns to Atlanta and makes love one last time to Rhett, afterward she abruptly announces she is leaving him and goes back to Washington. Cynara explains that she is like her father “in my willingness to leave my world and find a better one” (196). Once she realizes she is pregnant, Cynara decides to give the baby to the Congressman and the woman he had previously been expected to marry to raise as their own. Ultimately, Cynara ends up living a life of quiet comfort on the Eastern Shore—“I sold Lady’s earbobs and bought a little house out by the water in Maryland” (202)—where she can read, learn and try to forget her tortuous days as a subservient to Planter, Mammy, Scarlett and Rhett.

By raising questions about the O’Hara’s racial ancestry and drawing attention to the absence of miscegenation on Tara, *The Wind Done Gone* has rethought a well-known novel in ways that have a sociopolitical impact as well as historical repercussions, the kind of “cultural work” that Jane Tompkins discusses in her book, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860*. Tompkins argues that, “novels and stories should be studied not because they manage to escape the limitations of their particular time and place, but because they offer powerful examples of the way a culture thinks about itself, articulating and proposing solutions for the problems that shape a particular historical moment” (xi). *The Wind Done Gone* accomplishes this goal by pointing to the problem of historical fiction: that is, that it is sometimes mistaken for history even though it ignores much of history, specifically the stories of African Americans, as is the case with *Gone with the Wind* and so many novels of that time. As Morrison explains, though some literature of that era talks about race issues in a disguised manner, “silence was the order of day” (51). Morrison further claims that such silence was used
to preserve the dominance of whites and therefore must be challenged (51-52). One of the arguments implicit in Randall’s revision is that we can never know the truth of what happened during the Civil War and, by extension, during any time in history, and that we, as a people, can never know exactly who we really are in terms of our “racial” ancestry. In this way, Randall demonstrates the fallacy of racial difference in America. This is a lesson that we, as a society, have not yet learned, and thus one that still needs to be taught. McCaskill agrees: “Although we are more than a century removed from the 1850s and 1860s, the issues that the period raises . . . still linger, especially in the minds of black readers. . . . [T]he public discussion raised by books such as *The Wind Done Gone* is critical to the continued search for healing and truth in our country” (Beck).

The book has literary significance as well as political significance. Its ability to undermine and re-think *Gone with the Wind*, a literary icon, proves this. And Randall’s Cynara proves the value of language through her own use of words—sometimes proper and other times coarse—in her diary. By retelling this ubiquitous story, Randall has reminded us about the power of literature: the power to make us re-think what we believe we already know.

Randall includes various references to other classical literary texts in a successful attempt to keep the literary canon in sight for both herself and her reader. A scene early in the novel evokes Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” and mentions Homer’s *Odyssey*. Cynara says: “As I continued to fan and the guests continued to eat, Other appeared at the table and the wallpaper began to move. In my dream, just as in life, the dining room wallpaper is painted all over with the story of Telemachus, in the land of the enchantress Calypso, searching for his father, Odysseus” (11). The dueling nursing scenes—in which Scarlett
is old enough to ask Mammy for her breast and Cynara is old enough to bring Lady a glass of milk—call to mind Milkman in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*.

As an adult, Cynara is also characterized by Randall as an avid reader of literature and is described by Rhett as having read more books than any other woman he knows; her relationship with Rhett is often characterized by word and language games. Cynara has read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—though she complains that “I didn’t see me in it”—and admits she wants to write everything down, “like Mr. Frederick Douglass” (7), who shows up as a minor character in the book. She owns “three of Mr. Shakespeare’s plays, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Cleopatra*, and *Othello*” and claims that Mammy is like Nurse because “she didn’t know who Juliet was and couldn’t do nothing to protect her really” (88). Randall’s choice of Shakespeare is obvious: Cynara is Juliet to Rhett’s Romeo, the exoticized Cleopatra to his Anthony, and Othello to his Desdemona. In a similar fashion, Randall alludes to *Moby-Dick* when she claims that, like Ahab, Lady’s body is distorted by things such as whalebones (120). Near the end of the book, Randall even moves towards a meta-analysis of her own text. She writes:

No lady in any novel I know makes the kind of mistakes in books that I make in life. In all the literature I know, only one book comes close to what I feel. This is *Great Expectations*. Pip has a guilty family. Almost guiltier than mine. What is owed the rescuer? Do we always fall in love with those who rescue us? Didn’t I know Miss Havisham in calico? (192)

Randall’s use of these canonical references, direct and indirect, within a novel that seeks to parody another classic text raises implicit questions about the various problems that revolve around the issue of canon formation: such as which texts should be included in the canon, how we make such choices and why we elevate any texts at all.
In addition to making important arguments about sociopolitical and literary issues, *The Wind Done Gone* is stylistically impressive; the writing is simultaneously spare and lyrical, the plot is absorbing and the book’s forays into the past are paced well and lend the narrative a sense of history. Randall also displays a deft hand with characterization. Cynara is a likeable protagonist whom the reader is allowed to know well and care about. Randall’s personification of Cynara as thoughtful and independent is a world apart from Mitchell’s arrogant and demanding Scarlett. It is much easier to understand and relate to Randall’s narrator, a woman who maintains her own agenda and pursues her own desires without appearing as self-centered or selfish as Scarlett whose agency is often portrayed as bitchiness, a characterization that many contemporary feminists are still fighting today. Simply put, Scarlett is not as likeable as Cynara; Scarlett is fundamentally selfish and completely out of touch with reality. The best example of this is when Scarlett complains of being hungry and impoverished, a laughable assertion. On the other hand, when Cynara believes that one of her servants is stealing food from her, she defends the thief, saying “I suspect the bacon is someone’s dinner and not on the turkey at all, and I can’t be angry. Everybody needs to eat” (71). Cynara is likeable because she is able to articulate such thoughts.

Cynara also makes herself vulnerable in a way that Scarlett is not able to do by giving voice to her fears and concerns. The diary format of *The Wind Done Gone* definitely contributes to this sense of intimacy, but she is also more honest with herself and with others—the most obvious example of this being the candid conversations Cynara has with Beauty about Rhett and her mother. She is also characterized as humble and caring, as evidenced by her habit of loaning money to freed slaves. In some ways, her character combines all of the warm qualities of *Gone with the Wind*’s Melanie with all of the powerful attributes of Scarlett. This is best epitomized in
Cynara’s relationship with Beauty: though Scarlett shuns Beauty, Cynara does not judge her, and by the book’s end, she doesn’t judge anyone else either. When talking about Beauty, Cynara says, “One way of looking at it, all women are niggers. For sure, every woman I ever knew was a nigger” (177). Clearly, it is Cynara’s own difficult past that allows her to have empathy for others. In this way, Cynara has the rare ability to put herself in others’ shoes, to see things from another perspective, much like the book itself, and this is what makes her so likeable.

There are also many things to admire about Randall’s storytelling ability in *The Wind Done Gone*. The story mirrors *Gone with the Wind* in both an obvious and subtle manner. Cynara is with Rhett in private but longs to marry him publicly. She confesses that “I have wanted this for too long to walk away without the prize I have coveted” (164). When she finally does have him in marriage, she realizes he is not what she wanted—instead she wants the Congressman. Scarlett’s story is the same: she is able to share private moments of intimacy with Ashley but longs to marry him. When finally Ashley is available for marriage, she realizes she doesn’t want him, but rather that it was Rhett she wanted all along. Cynara explains that “Other loved [Rhett] when she had nothing else to love. . . . And me, I loved [Rhett] because he was the prize, and I wanted the prize to feel and know, taste and see that I could win it, but it was his power I craved, not him” (197). Scarlett and Cynara are similar in other ways: they both reject what is expected of them, they both want more of life than what they are entitled to, and they both go after it and often prevail. In other words, both women have agency and are determined to set their own course in life. Both women are rejected by society as well—Scarlett by her female peers in Atlanta who see her as shockingly aggressive, Cynara by the upper-class “colored” society of Washington, D.C. As the Washington doctor tells her, “Whoever you think you are, in the polite society of Negro teachers and preachers and lawyers and doctors, you will always be the
Confederate’s concubine. . . . You have a greater chance of being accepted among old white families than new colored ones” (191). The two women obviously share a history, a home, a heritage and a father as well. Additionally, much of the plot of *The Wind Done Gone*—up to where the book leaves off—is the same as *Gone with the Wind*. These similarities allow the book to work in conjunction with the original and question its inherent message and authenticity, while also successfully parodying it.

Randall’s use of the characters’ nicknames is noteworthy as well. Though superficially the revised names obviously represent the different ways in which people like Cynara and Scarlett see the world, they also serve to characterize the people in Cynara’s world more fully while simultaneously pointing out the offensiveness of Mitchell’s stereotypical descriptions of and names for the slaves in *Gone with the Wind*. Harrison specifically criticizes Randall’s renaming technique, but he is clearly missing the point. “Scarlett is referred to, strangely, as ‘Other’ throughout the book,” he writes. “It isn’t clear what Randall is getting at with all the nicknames, but it’s overdone and annoying” (Harrison). What Harrison fails to recognize is that by renaming Scarlett “Other,” Randall draws attention to Cynara’s—and all African Americans’—otherness and namelessness. All her life, both as a child and as an adult, Cynara was never treated like or given the full privilege of being the daughter of a plantation owner, instead she was cast-off as merely the other child, even by her own mother. She has long been the other to Scarlett, and in this retelling it is Scarlett who is othered by both name and circumstance. The title “Other” also depicts Scarlett as the other woman in Rhett’s life.

Randall’s use of nicknames also alludes to the fact that most slaves never knew their names or had any document of their birth. As the Congressman says, “Find a record that proves me wrong. A birth certificate, a baptism sheet. Anything” (142). In *Playing in the Dark*,
Morrison points out that this unfortunate tradition has been carried over to literature by the inclusion of so many nameless African American characters. Morrison uses the characters in Ernest Hemingway’s *To Have and Have Not* as an example of this problem (71). Cynara, too, worries over this issue, explaining that no one every knew Mammy’s real name and that she is writing her diary because she “is afraid of forgetting” (7). She writes, “If I forget my real name, won’t be anybody to tell it to me” (7). Nevertheless, she holds her name close, as if protecting it from those who might take it from her. Even after she marries Rhett, he still does not know Cynara’s real name: “I never told you [my name]” she tells him at the end of the book when she leaves him (193). By not sharing her name with Rhett, Cynara has managed to take back both her freedom and her identity. In this way, Randall reclaims the namelessness of so many slaves and their literary counterparts.

Just as slaves were not called by their real names, in Randall’s inverted world, Southerners are not called by their given names (though most Northerners notably are). Randall’s revision of all the characters’ names works in this way, revealing Cynara’s perception of each character and thus privileging the African American perspective and experience, much like Toni Morrison’s use of names in novels such as *Song of Solomon, Beloved, The Bluest Eye* and *Jazz*. Prissy is called Miss Priss because she is seen as the lady of the house, and Pork becomes a much stronger character when he is renamed Garlic; Ellen and Gerald O’Hara are reduced to their occupations when they are named Lady and Planter, as is Rhett who is renamed Debt Chauffeur later in the book. Ashley is identified as Dreamy Gentleman, and Mammy has finally become Mama, the proper mother Cynara has longed for her entire life. Cynara’s nickname for Scarlett and Rhett’s daughter Bonnie is also notable; Cynara calls the girl—who looks like her grandfather, the father who largely ignored Cynara—“Precious” because as Cynara explains “I
got his hugs from her, and and they were sweet to me, precious” (17). At the end of the book, Randall’s use of these nicknames culminates in Cynara’s admission that “Cotton Farm”—her nickname for Tara—was more than just a cotton farm and was, in reality, a great Georgia Plantation. This admission further illuminates Cynara’s, as well as the reader’s, new understanding of the world and of herself.

Characterization is used similarly as a tool to exoticize the white characters rather than the black ones. Though some critics don’t understand the meaning behind the slight, Miller recognizes that “Randall’s point is that her in-depth treatment of black characters, and superficial treatment of white ones, is the reverse of Mitchell’s, and that her work is therefore a parody.” Yet Davis criticizes Randall for this: “Randall renders the white characters ineffectual . . . Even R. (Rhett), the dashing blockade-runner, is old, wrinkly, and unappealing.” Davis fails to recognize the point of such an approach: Randall’s one-dimensional depiction of these white characters seeks to draw attention to the flatness of the black characters in Gone with the Wind, who Randall explains are “buffoonish [and] lazy, . . . routinely compared to ‘apes,’ ‘gorillas,’ and ‘naked savages’” (Beck). Morrison outlines the different ways such stereotypes were used by writers, such as Mitchell, to perpetuate stereotypes; she also challenges writers and scholars to expose how these depictions were used as strategies for maintaining the silence surrounding the history of African Americans, which is exactly what Randall is doing.

Though it is an important literary and political achievement, The Wind Done Gone is not completely without fault. The conclusion is the most problematic part of the book. Major changes in Cynara’s life happen very quickly at the end of the novel, causing the conclusion to feel somewhat rushed, not to mention confusing. It is difficult to understand exactly what has happened between Cynara, the Congressman and the “gap-toothed girl” he marries. Cynara’s
thoughts and decision-making processes are not given nearly as much time or attention on the page as they are earlier in the book, and as a result her motives for her sudden choices are never fully revealed to the reader. The most likely explanation of the book’s conclusion—that Cynara gave her baby to the Congressmen and his new wife—feels wholly unbelievable precisely because Cynara’s motivation is so unclear. It is as if the reader is supposed to believe that she gave up her baby in a misguided attempt to atone for her sins. If so, many questions are left unanswered for the reader: Did Cynara have any hesitations? Did she want to keep the baby for herself? Did she think that this was a way to protect the Congressman’s reputation? And if so, why bother if he had already lost the re-election? So much happens so fast as the book comes to a close that many of these questions are left unanswered, and Cynara’s intentions remain unclear, causing the book to finish on a slightly muddled note. Nevertheless, this disorienting end to an otherwise relatively straightforward narrative does not mitigate any of the book’s many achievements.

Despite the book’s successes, its release was largely met with criticism, an irony that is not surprising considering the bias against popular fiction that is often present today, a problem alluded to through Randall’s inclusion of canonical texts. Though the negativity that surrounds the book is by no means universal, it is common. Miller claims in her Salon article that Randall does not have “any competence as a novelist” and cannot “tell an even modestly engaging story,” while Harrison’s scathing Houston Chronicle review highlights “Randall’s more awkward passages.” Implicit in such criticism is the attitude that The Wind Done Gone is trivial and not worthy of attention. Miller also says that The Wind Done Gone is a turgid, pretentious, self-consciously “lyrical attempt at literary fiction,” which raises questions about what makes a novel literary, a term Tompkins considers narrow and limiting (xiii), and who is it that deems what is
literary and what is not. Historically such distinctions have been made by both academics and critics, and usually such critics have tended to be white men. In her Harper’s essay, “Scent of a Woman’s Ink,” Francine Prose discusses how this problem affects women writers: “But some of us can’t help noting how comparatively rarely stories by women seem to appear in the few major magazines that publish fiction, how rarely fiction by women is reviewed in serious literary journals, and how rarely work by women dominates short lists and year-end ten-best lists” (61). She concludes by asserting that “fiction by women is still being read differently” (70). Prose also notes that a significant part of the problem is that reviews in the country’s most important publications are more often than not written by men (62). There are always exceptions, but, by and large, the standards of what makes a piece of writing “literary” or “worthy” have been demarcated by white men in this country more than any other group. Not that any critic in and of himself is racist or elitist, but rather that all critics fall prey to certain cultural or critical assumptions.

The problem with such a situation is obvious: it overlooks the opinions of many other cultural groups. Harrison argues that “Randall’s treatment of this subject is superficial and trite beside [Toni] Morrison’s heartbreaking portrait of an unmoored, wandering post-Emancipation tribe and of a psychically scarred woman haunted by the past” in Beloved. But it is likely that Harrison’s ideas about what makes a text superficial or trite have been shaped by hegemonic assumptions about quality, an assertion implicit in Randall’s retelling of Mitchell. If we are told time and again that the type of writing done by Morrison—or Fitzgerald or DeLillo or Updike—is beautiful, is poignant, is correct, then eventually we begin to have so much invested in those definitions of good writing that all other writing styles appear to lack value. Tompkins argues that novels which perform cultural work “require a narrative structure different from the
plots of modern psychological novels, a structure that makes them seem sensational and contrived in comparison” to more critically acclaimed texts (xvii). Is it not possible that there is something equally beautiful in words that are not ornate but that are diary-like in their simplicity and honesty? Such as when Cynara says, “Why doesn’t anyone assume that a woman on her own wants to be?” (198). Just as critics have come to recognize the beauty in more rudimentary types of art, is it not possible that there is more than one way to write beautiful prose? Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street* is no Shakespeare, but its simplicity, directness and rawness speaks to readers of all ages. Prose defines “serious literary fiction” as “work that is tough-minded, challenging, eloquent, disquieting, and demanding of its readers” (62), and *The Wind Done Gone* easily fulfills all of these requirements.

None of this is to say that Randall cannot turn a good phrase. In one passage, Cynara ruminates on her childhood at Tara:

> It was said around Atlanta that [Scarlett] liked green best because it is the color of money. But I who knew her from the first day either of us knew anything, knew that she loved green before she even knew what money was. You don’t see paper money on a cotton farm. You don’t even see paper money on what it was and I have not wished to claim, a great Georgia plantation. On a place like that, in the place we lived together, half-sisters separated by a river of notions: notions of Negroes and notions of chivalry, notions of race and place, notions of custom and rage; in the country we inhabited in our childhood, you measured wealth in red earth and black men. There was nothing green in it. (195)
Throughout the book, Randall allows Cynara to weave her newly educated speech with the voice of her slave past, her “mongrel tongue” as Cynara describes it (90). One example of this occurs when Cynara’s mother Mammy dies, and she says, “I want to lay down with the body. Drape me over the mass of her” (38). In another scene, she writes, “We taste the path of our abduction in our tears. It’s as if the house is on fire and I’ve got to get out quick” (156). Metaphor is used in a similar way: to demonstrate Cynara’s hybridity. Cynara sounds the epitome of educated when she writes “This is the best I can do with this algebra of our existence” (194) or “Yearning is a heavy purse” (171) but sounds colloquial when she says, “Truth is that love got some sort of sickness that moved so quick and there was no doctor to tend the patient and my love just died” (43). In this way, Cynara is allowed to understand her own liminality and address it directly. She writes: “Now I’ve got a man but ain’t got no way to have with him or without him. Mammy hated when I talked that way. But I knew that language too” (143). Randall handles description in a similar fashion: “Me—I’ve only had one man and no babies, and so my skin is not etched like marble with the pale wiggling seams where life stretched forth to cover life—but I am greedy for weight, the weight of life growing within me” (73). What is notable about Randall’s achievement is that her words are not only evocative but also packed with meaning.

Miller’s assessment that Randall’s novel is turgid, pretentious, and self-conscious also raises the question of whether or not the same could be said about many lyrical, literary and critically well-received books today. It is not hard to pick a passage to illustrate this in any book; what is hard is to find a book that contains not only a plethora of beautiful passages but also has an important message or story to tell. And what piece of literary fiction is not self-consciously “lyrical”? 
In addition to criticizing Randall’s ability as a writer, Harrison is also specific in his criticism of her characterization of Cynara. He writes:

Despite [Cynara’s] perceptiveness, however, she occasionally writes in a gallingly detached way of her tumultuous time. “They’re hanging black men all through the trees,” she writes at one point. “Strange fruit grow in the Southern night. It’s the boil on the body of Reconstruction, whites killing blacks.” One almost expects her to sign off on the passage with a lighthearted “La dee da.” It may just be that this woman, who’s caught in the netherworld between white and black, is extraordinarily self-centered. She writes with much more feeling about issues that affect her personally, such as her sense of estrangement from her mother, who lavished care on Scarlett but sometimes seemed to care not at all for her own daughter (Harrison).

Such criticism is short-sighted. Randall’s choices in the passage Harrison cites demonstrate not Cynara’s self-centeredness but how difficult it must have been for a former slave to talk about lynching. It is, after all, likely that Cynara is more comfortable talking about her feelings for her mother than about the situation of black men in the South. Harrison does not understand the emotional power that such a quick, simple, and therefore subtle, admission can have on the reader. A statement as unflinchingly direct as “They’re hanging black men all through the trees” is more powerful than lighthearted. Harrison later also criticizes the fact that Cynara “grows increasingly conflicted over her relationship with Rhett, who did, after all, wear the Confederate uniform during the war.” But Harrison fails to recognize that fully drawn characters are often contradictory and unpredictable and that this struggle is one of the more important developments of character in the book because it mirrors the experience of many freed slaves after the Civil War. As Cynara’s friend Jeems explains, he was “all tore up” about the
defeat of the Confederacy even though he is only free as a result of that defeat (81). Cynara is conflicted about Rhett’s involvement in the war, and she readily admits this: “R. fought and tried to die in a Confederate uniform to save this place. I have tried to forget this, but I remember” (34). Clearly, her conflicted feelings towards Rhett are affected by the fact that he did wear the Confederate uniform; furthermore this is likely why she ultimately rejects him.

It is noteworthy that more than one critic points to Randall’s songwriting career as evidence of her literary limitations. Randall is the “only African-American woman in history to write a number-one country song, she has had over twenty songs recorded, including two top ten records and a top forty” (“About Alice Randall”). Miller seems to think that such musical success makes Randall incapable of good writing: “Randall is a songwriter, which may explain why her prose so often degenerates into incoherent blather.” While Harrison writes, “It seems only right that someone should give voice to the slaves [Mitchell’s] prose so dehumanized. Probably few people would have nominated Alice Randall for the job, but in the unfortunately named The Wind Done Gone, the African-American country songwriter from Nashville has attempted just that.” Harrison and Miller obviously do not buy into the idea of renaissance talent, and one has to wonder how much this bias colors their perception of the novel.

Yet at times, Miller recognizes the importance of what Randall has done with this revision. She writes:

Randall rightly complains that Gone with the Wind casts an enormous fact of plantation life—the race-mixing brought about by white masters’ rape of female slaves—into obscurity. (The Mitchell Trust has cemented this blindness by prohibiting depictions of miscegenation in all authorized sequels.) And yet, as [Claudia Roth] Pierpont observes, the use of pretty stories to
paper over ugly truths was a tradition in the South long before Margaret Mitchell ever put pen to paper.

It is difficult to understand whether or not Miller is condemning Mitchell’s oversights or trying to argue that because such oversights were common in Mitchell’s time, Randall’s revision isn’t necessary—a criticism of Randall that hardly makes sense. Clearly, such oversights should not be excused because they were common. This is precisely why *The Wind Done Gone* is so important historically: by drawing attention to the historical inaccuracy of a cultural icon such as *Gone With the Wind*, Randall conveys how important it is not to mistake fiction for history.

Making a slightly different argument, Claire Davis dismisses *The Wind Done Gone* by asserting that Margaret Walker’s hugely successful 1967 novel *Jubilee* has already accomplished what Randall sets out to achieve. Davis writes, “In other words, *The Wind Done Gone* is nothing new. And beyond a romp through Tara, it’s nothing much.” But though Davis is right that *Jubilee* has broached this issue before, she is incorrect in her assertion that there is nothing new in *The Wind Done Gone*. For though Walker introduces miscegenation to a Tara-era plantation in the form of an illegitimate child, she does not take it nearly as far as Randall, whose novel makes the mythical Scarlett a product of miscegenation as well. Nor does Walker do anything like what Randall does for the slaves of Tara by elevating them to the role of decisionmakers on a Southern plantation. In this way, Randall’s *The Wind Done Gone* strikes out into new territory by saying that people are not always as they appear, and by demonstrating the idea that “race” is merely a social construct.

Davis also criticizes the lack of new territory in Randall’s book:

Randall isn’t the first black author to explore an antebellum South different from that created by Margaret Mitchell in her now classic *Gone*
As far back as 1892, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper offered “Iola Leroy: or, Shadows Uplifted,” a challenge to the myth of moonlight and magnolias that has held sway in Southern fiction since the fall of Appomattox.

But it is not just the antebellum South that’s different here; it is our perception of what “race” does or does not mean. To argue that a book written before *Gone with the Wind* has already covered the ground that Randall is concerned with misses the point that Randall is responding directly to Mitchell. *The Wind Done Gone* is not just a novel attempting to tell the truth about the Civil-war era South; it is a novel that specifically takes issue with the myths purported by *Gone with the Wind*, especially the myth of a lily-white Scarlett as the heroine and thus the notion of racial purity.

Another issue revolving around the criticism of *The Wind Done Gone* is the issue of whether or not the book is truly a parody. Miller writes:

> Instead of giving her characters their own, separate lives—a strategy that would truly provide a “rejoinder” to the degrading depictions of blacks in *Gone with the Wind*—Randall has them infiltrate and usurp the lives of Mitchell’s characters. The apogee of this strategy is Cynara’s sexual rivalry with Other, and Randall’s need to prove that Cynara can steal the heavily eroticized romantic hero of *Gone with the Wind* from Mitchell’s legendary belle of five counties.

> Miller is correct in assessing that Randall does not give the characters their own lives, but Randall’s revision is not supposed to be about lives different than those in *Gone with the Wind*. Instead, like any other parody, it is about pointing out the absurdity, hypocrisy and inaccuracy of the thing it parodies, by re-casting the lives of the slaves and their plantation masters through the eyes of the illegitimate child of Mammy and O’Hara, a cross between both worlds. Miller’s
criticism that Cynara’s sexual rivalry epitomizes this problem proves that she does not understand what Randall is trying to do. Of course, it is unlikely that Rhett Butler would have gone off with Scarlett’s racially mixed sister during Reconstruction, but isn’t that what makes it funny, what makes it parody? It is so unlikely, and impossible, that it is absurd. And by showing the absurdity of its opposite, Randall has managed to demonstrate how far-fetched the original was as well.

Many of the critics have also argued that a parody should be funny, and that *The Wind Done Gone* is not. Miller claims that “Randall’s novel feels like a former lover’s obsessively detailed and exhaustive catalog of her ex’s faults; it has neither the giddy, lofty scorn of true parody nor the independence of the ‘brilliant rejoinder’ its flap copy professes it to be.” But the title of the book alone is not only giddy and funny but also a rejoinder in the sense that it forces the reader to take a second look at the melodrama of Mitchell’s title. On a slightly different note, Harrison complains that “it isn’t a humorous book.” Similarly, *USA Today* founder Al Neuharth explains that “Randall said she wrote [*The Wind Done Gone*] so that ‘whites and blacks could have a deep, hearty belly laugh together.’ That’s unlikely.” But how could a reader not laugh at a Pork who controls O’Hara by keeping him drunk or the idea of a gay Ashley Wilkes? Even the actor who played Wilkes in the film adaptation was foppish and effeminate, the opposite of the strong, masculine leading man. It seems likely that many readers would get a good chuckle at this send-up of Scarlett’s long unrequited love. And isn’t this Randall’s point anyway—that things are not as they seem? That Ashley Wilkes is no more a heterosexual than Scarlett is purely white? In this way, Randall’s humor and characterization jibe perfectly with her message.

Davis takes a different approach to criticizing Randall’s skill at parody: “the genre of parody is limiting. Ultimately, it cannot transcend that which it seeks to overturn.” *The Wind
Done Gone does not attempt to transcend Gone with the Wind but rather exposes it by helping the reader question all of Mitchell’s implications. Similarly, Davis, like Miller, also criticizes Randall’s inability to let go of Mitchell’s characters. She writes:

If Randall came to bury Scarlett, not to praise her, she has done neither. Gone with the Wind still remains at the center of The Wind Done Gone. And if Cynara manages to break free from Other, Randall cannot break free from Margaret Mitchell. She cannot imagine a South without the O’Haras, without Rhett, without Mammy.

Davis is right in asserting that Randall cannot imagine a South without the O’Haras, without Rhett, or without Mammy, but her admission speaks directly to the power and the mythic status of Gone with the Wind. Randall’s revision is not supposed to be about lives different than those in Gone with the Wind. Instead it is about pointing out the absurdity and inaccuracy of the thing it parodies. Randall does not imagine a South without the O’Haras, Rhett, or Mammy because our society so often still associates these characters with that time in history. And that is precisely the point: if Gone with the Wind is going to continue to be associated with this period in history, Randall wants this to be done with a sense of awareness rather than through an historically inaccurate lens. This revision openly admits the fact that Randall, and her readers, cannot let go of Tara, but it also recognizes that though the South had its O’Haras, Rhetts and Mammys, it also had its Cynaras and Garlics (Randall’s new name for the her stronger revision of Pork), a fact of crucial importance which the original fails to admit. Davis continues by saying that “It is curious that in Randall’s attempt to move us away from the land created by Margaret Mitchell she brings us closer to it. Cynara may have left Atlanta at the end of the novel, but Randall’s readers are still back at Tara.” But that is exactly what Randall is
trying to do and succeeds in doing—move the reader closer to Tara, to the truth of Tara, so that it can be seen for what it really is.

Though the reviews were largely negative, some well-known writers and academics praised the book during the trial over its copyright battle with the Margaret Mitchell estate:

Nobel laureate Toni Morrison described Randall’s prose as being “by turns evocative, wry, plangent.” James Carroll weighed in with a *Boston Globe* op-ed piece that said Randall’s book brings “vividly to life the people who move on the margins of *Gone with the Wind.* . . . a rebuttal” to “the most damning lie America has ever told itself. (“Statement”)"

Such praise raises questions about why this book was so poorly received. Given that much of the criticism is unable to withstand scrutiny, one can’t help but wonder what issues lurk behind the attacks on Randall. I would argue that it is the continuing pervasiveness of racism that colors these critics reviews. Just as Prose argues that there is a bias against women writers, I would argue that there is a bias against writers of color. It is not the old-fashioned prejudice of the South rather it is a manifestation of the new kind of prejudice, the hypocritical and widely tolerated beast of institutional racism. The problem facing writers such as Randall is not the prejudice of individuals, but rather the prejudice of an entire system. According to Morrison, there is a paucity of material on issues of race because silence about such issues has historically ruled literary discourse (9-10). For this reason, it is incumbent on readers and critics alike to be aware of prejudicial attitudes within our institutional systems, to question those attitudes and to try and overcome them. Randall’s revision seeks to encourage such questions and, for that reason, should be embraced. Ironically, it is the executive director of the Margaret Mitchell House, Mary Rose Taylor, who best articulates Randall’s accomplishment: “It’s important to
examine *Gone with the Wind* from different perspectives. Randall’s work affords Southerners the opportunity to learn more about ourselves. In the end, that’s the purpose of literature” (Neuharth).
Works Cited

DISSERTATION PROSPECTUS

My dissertation will be made up of two components: a collection of short stories will serve as the main portion of my dissertation and fulfill the creative component, and the critical component of my dissertation will be a scholarly essay called “Black is White: Telling the Truth about Gone with the Wind in Alice Randall’s The Wind Done Gone.” Dr. Brock Clarke will serve as my dissertation chair; Dr. James Schiff and Professor Michael Griffith will be second and third readers on my dissertation committee.

CREATIVE DISSERTATION
Heaven and Earth, A Collection of Short Stories

During the 2004-05 academic year, I will finish my creative dissertation, a collection of short stories titled Heaven and Earth. The title story of this collection follows two American women visiting friends in East Germany before the fall of the Berlin Wall. During their travels, these characters confront not only their loyalty to each other but also American attitudes about class, ethnicity and nationality. The story uses four main characters—the two American women and two East German men they are visiting—to demonstrate the many differences between the two cultures. Unlike the American women, who can travel from the United States to Europe on practically a moment’s notice, the men are not allowed to leave East Germany. The contrast
between these characters is meant to depict the vast political differences between two contemporary cultures and to point out the average American’s ignorance about such issues. In this way, the story also illustrates the characters’ feelings of isolation and restriction, though the plot itself is largely about loyalty and betrayal and how it affects the two main characters’ relationship as friends. “Heaven,” in this story, is supposed to represent the heaven-like qualities that both friendship and life can offer, the inherent joy of being alive; while “Earth” represents both the reality of the relationship between the two women—their behavior and their betrayals—as well as the poor quality of life and lack of freedom in East Germany.

Though the title story of the collection is set in East Germany, the main characters are Americans, and all of the other stories I have written so far are about American women struggling with issues of sexuality, gender, class and culture; I see these issues as being the major themes that unite the collection. The collection’s title, _Heaven and Earth_, like that of the title story, represents a meeting of the real and the ideal, a metaphor that can also be applied to the condition of the women in my fiction. While these characters suffer from both earthly tragedy and petty frustrations, they also experience moments of transcendence, that is, moments that keep them yearning for more of life despite its ongoing difficulties.

In order to best capture the issues facing women in the world today, I have chosen to work within the realistic tradition, relying on straightforward linear chronologies and everyday language as well as familiar settings and characters. In “Stalking the Billion-footed Beast,” Tom Wolfe asserts his belief that realism creates the “absorbing” or “gripping” quality peculiar to fiction. He argues that Lionel Trilling was correct in his 1948 assertion that great characters are produced by a portrayal of “class traits modified by personality” but incorrect when he said that the disintegration of the old class structure made the technique useless. Instead, Wolfe argues
that although the class system has changed over time, it is by no means gone. American society, he contends, is “merely more varied and complicated and harder to define.” For this reason, Wolfe believes that giving up realism is like giving up electricity; that is, it does not make sense, and thus he calls for a return to realism and authenticity. Though I don’t agree with Wolfe’s assertion that authenticity is achieved solely through investigative research and reporting, I don’t think our difference of opinion on reporting mitigates our agreement about the idea that realism is a technique worth reviving. Rather than rely on researched material, I believe authenticity can be created by grounding one’s fiction in the social problems that plague our society.

Although my fiction writing primarily works in the realistic tradition, it simultaneously subverts traditional Judeo-Christian ideas about conventional morality, especially as they pertain to contemporary society’s expectations for women. In this way, I hope to challenge social institutions, heteronormative mores and political ideologies that affect identity. Many of my stories feature women who reject patriarchal and religious assumptions about gender and culture. In “Sliders,” for instance, a young pregnant woman comes face-to-face with antiquated notions about gender and women’s rights while eating hamburgers with her grandmother. While the young protagonist ultimately rejects her grandmother’s perceptions about the role of women in society, she still recognizes the ongoing conflict between her own values and the values of earlier generations.

Nearly all of my fiction is shaped by a similar rejection of the status quo as it relates to class issues. The importance of evaluating such concerns is made evident by Wolfe when he asserts that the class system, though modified, still affects characters in compelling ways. “The Lake in Winter” explores how issues of class come to bear on the psychological development of a lower middle-class teenage girl growing up in the rural Midwest. Conversely, a short story
called “Gravy Train” explores the impact of wealth on an urban young woman’s self-esteem as well as depicting her struggle for independence from her family. In “Pictures of the Day I Was Born,” the thirty-year-old protagonist struggles to find a balance between these two extremes—the upper-class elitism of her adopted parents and the blue-collar narrowmindedness of her biological family. These stories attempt to examine the ways in which class affects the ongoing development of a woman’s gendered identity while also challenging the American tendency to equate money with success.

Similarly, the collection attempts to examine race by drawing attention to the ways in which a woman’s “racial” identity affects not only her perception of herself, but also how society perceives her. “Annunciation” retells the New Testament story of Christ’s conception in a contemporary setting and portrays Mary as an African-American woman. By portraying a religious and historical figure generally believed to be “white” as African American, my intention—much like Alice Randall’s in The Wind Done Gone—is to demonstrate through my fiction one of the primary contentions of the African-American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois: that race is a social construct. According to Donald Gibson, “Du Bois explains [in The Souls of Black Folks] that since one’s sense of race and racial terms comes only from experience, the meaning of being white or black is not inborn but is derived from experience; hence racial distinctions, insofar as they carry negative or positive meaning, are functions of a social dynamic.”

This story is also the most obvious example of how I try to use fiction to challenge social institutions, primarily Christian doctrine but also all religious dogma by implication. In my revision of this biblical tale, Mary is not a virgin at the time when she conceives Jesus, nor is the pregnancy with Jesus her first. Rather, Mary—who has been renamed Maria—has had not one but two abortions as the result of unwanted pregnancies. In this way, the story challenges the
notion that spirituality and goodness are the sole propriety of the pure and virginal by offering an alternative to the way in which the Bible depicts Mary.

Because it is my intent to challenge American social institutions, I aim to create fiction that appeals to both the literary and mainstream reader, much like the writers I most admire: Junot Díaz, Douglas Coupland, Jhumpa Lahiri and Pam Houston. Houston’s short fiction features characters who are both cynical and empathetic. Even though their pessimistic outlook on life can be somewhat offputting at times, it does not prevent them from being characters to whom the reader can relate. For example, in “How to Talk to a Hunter,” Houston’s protagonist is critical of her lover and her own inability to assert her desire for love and commitment. The story is permeated by the sense that no romantic relationship is perfect and that it is often necessary to sacrifice a part of oneself in order to sustain that romance, thus causing the reader to bristle at the narrator’s low expectations and poor sense of self. Yet as the same time, Houston never allows her characters to fully give up hope, and by the end of this particular story, the narrator is shown leaving her dysfunctional relationship in search of a healthier one, just the kind of thing Houston would have had the reader believe her protagonist didn’t think existed. Since I have a tendency to want to make all of my characters likeable, Houston’s ability to invent emotionally complex characters in this way inspires me to create more well rounded characters of my own, the kind whom the reader will both relate to and bristle at, much like real people. This is a technique that I utilize in some of my own stories, most obviously “Pictures of the Day I Was Born,” “The Other Man” and “Heaven and Earth.”

The reason I find Díaz’s fiction inspiring is because he is able to write stories about average people but still make their day-to-day lives seem both interesting and dynamic. His work appeals to me as well because his characters are often struggling with the ways in which class
and culture affect the quality of one’s life in America, themes which are central to my own work. I also admire Diaz’s ability to write literary fiction that is visceral and smart. His writing doesn’t draw too much attention to itself, but it does say something significant about the world and its people. This is the kind of writing I seek to emulate; I do not want to write what Donald Hall would call the “McStory” and what is often referred to as the “workshop story”; in other words, a story that is well crafted and careful but also doesn’t take any risks or display any originality in terms of style, voice, or subject matter.

John Aldridge bemoans this lack of originality in his book *Talents and Technicians*. He claims that graduate programs in creative writing teach writers that “the taking of risks is decidedly not the gateway to literary success.” Such stories also often rely on their own type of formulaic plot and characterization while also being overt in their attempt to sound intellectual by utilizing ornate language and evocative metaphors and by focusing on the writing above all else. This is the sort of writing that B.R. Myers calls “affectation” in *A Reader’s Manifesto*. This writing feels forced rather than organic, often resulting in what Wolfe calls “tiny situations” and “anesthetized emotions” and what Aldridge describes as “wispy moments.” As Myers explains, for these writers it is “more important to sound literary than to make sense,” and he argues that it is the type of writing that says “I express myself differently from you, therefore I am a Writer.” Wolfe and Aldridge both believe that this is the reason why so many stories that are being published in literary magazines today sound alike. Hall maintains that this problem of sameness is the result of the fact that such writers—mostly students and graduates of MFA programs in creative writing—are more interested in publishing than in the process of writing or the quality of the work. Diaz’s work offers a good example of how this problem can be avoided since he is able to write in a voice that is unique to his experience as a Latino-American coming of age in
suburban New Jersey rather than that of a typical MFA graduate; Diaz’s characters are often uneducated, their language mostly crude, a far cry from the flowery prose, overwritten sentences and pretension of many of his peers.

Aldridge argues that it is creative writing workshops that teach writers to avoid original writing. He writes that “a piece of writing marked by originality of style or point of view or that does not conform to what is considered fashionable as measured by its resemblance to the work of certain admired mentors such as Raymond Carver or Anne Beattie will undoubtedly be disturbing to many members of the [workshop] class and so will not be deemed acceptable.” For this reason, Aldridge contends, “Uniformity or homogenization of effects is made to seem a cardinal virtue.” Aldridge clearly values listening to and trusting ones’ own voice, much the way Diaz is able to do in his short fiction.

Aldridge also recognizes the divide that exists between what academics consider worthwhile literature and what is being read by the general public. He explains that “if the general public in its ignorance has not yet come to recognize just how important these writers are, then that, in the academic view, is simply further proof that they are important.” This is a problem I strive to overcome by appealing to both a mass audience as well as an academic one. My desire to write for both the academic reader as well as the lady on the bus most often manifests itself by focusing as much on plot as on character development, an element of fiction writing that I think too many writers today often neglect, usually those trying to write the aforementioned “workshop” story. As Myers asserts, “any accessible, fast-moving story written in unaffected prose is deemed to be ‘genre’ fiction,” rather than literature while everything written in “self-conscious, writerly prose” is considered literary. In this way, I buy into Flannery O’Connor’s assertion that, “In a story, something has to happen.”
Contemporary writers seem more concerned with style and language than content and meaning, and as a result much of the short fiction being written today lacks a larger world view or significant meaning as critics such as Myers, Aldridge and Wolfe note. Aldridge argues that contemporary fiction lacks such depth:

even though [writers today] may encompass far larger quantities of experience with a far greater realism, they fail, as a rule, to endow that experience with sufficient thematic significance, to justify their extensive treatment of it. Their work typically makes little or no specific social, political, or critical comment on the material it concerns, but seems designed to produce a wholly uninflected landscape-painting effect of verisimilitude, a mirror image of reality that is offered simply for its own sake.

It is this self-serving tendency—that is, writing for its own sake—that I want to avoid. Aldridge advocates “a strong symbiotic relationship between [ ] individual experience and the developing macrocosm of contemporary history” and claims that personal experiences are most valuable when “presented in the form of a dramatic conflict between the emotional needs of the individual and the moral imperatives imposed by society.” This is the type of fiction I aim to write, stories that, as Diaz’s work does, illuminate the effects of our society’s institutionalized prejudices about gender, race, class, and culture; or in Aldridge’s words, stories that “produce some climactic insight into a truth about the human condition.” Specifically, I hope to demonstrate how a woman’s sense of self is negatively affected by the inherent pressures of such external forces and the expectations put on her as a result of those forces. My stories draw attention to specific social and political injustices and call for moral reform, two goals that Aldridge claims contemporary fiction is lacking. Rather than breaking these categories down into separate entities, it is my intent to demonstrate how much they interact with and affect each
other. Myers makes a similar assessment to the one made by Aldridge when he argues that the contemporary notion of literary fiction “allow[s] critics to praise a writer’s prose without considering its effect on the reader” or its meaning, what Myers calls the “sentence cult.” In a related way, Wolfe complains that “The young person who decides to become a writer because he has a subject or an issue in mind, because he has ‘something to say,’ is a rare bird” and that most young writers today think writing is 95% talent and 5% material when in reality it is 65% material and 35% talent. Aldridge goes so far as to say that American writing is now bereft of a moral and mythological community to generate serious art. Because I am primarily interested in writing fiction that deals with sociopolitical issues, Aldridge’s, Myers’, and Wolfe’s criticism of the state of contemporary fiction can perhaps help me avoid the pitfalls that would prevent me from achieving this goal. Though the contention that contemporary American writing is bereft of morality may be a bit overstated, it is an important point for me to keep in mind as I write about issues revolving around gender, class and culture.

The collection as a whole attempts to make the argument that though our society is less overtly prejudiced about gender, race and class than it was in the past, these issues still largely determine one’s identity, both in terms of how people see themselves and how they perceive and are perceived in the larger world. In this way, my fiction attempts to challenge the social construct of identity.

I have made significant progress on this collection of stories while at the University of Cincinnati, writing drafts of twelve stories and one novella totaling 225 pages. A tentative schedule for completion of the dissertation project provides for me to give Professor Clarke a completed draft in December of this year, thus allowing me to complete and defend my dissertation by the Spring of 2005.
Bibliography


CRITICAL COMPONENT

Black is White: Telling the Truth about *Gone with the Wind* in Alice Randall’s *The Wind Done Gone*

*The Wind Done Gone* by Alice Randall takes on the cultural behemoth *Gone with the Wind* and exposes the historical deficiencies and inaccuracies in both the 1936 book by Margaret Mitchell and the subsequent 1939 film adaptation. Randall’s parody recognizes the negative impact of this cultural icon and takes its misguided message head on with a revisionist retelling of the depression-era classic by depicting a more accurate representation of what life would have been like on Tara and in the antebellum South.

By re-imagining the world of the Tara plantation with the legendary Scarlett O’Hara having a half-black sister who eventually steals O’Hara’s husband, *The Wind Done Gone* has opened up history and a well-known version of history in ways that are not only important socially and politically but are also significant to the literary world. By offering readers another
perspective about what life might have been like on a plantation such as Tara, Randall’s revisionist narrative makes the point that many historical novels, and even history books, ignore the stories of African Americans, especially slaves. In many cases, we have been given a sanitized version of history, especially as it concerns race. Therefore we can never know the truth about what happened during the Civil War, or during any time in history, and that we, as a people, can never know exactly who we really are in terms of our “racial” and cultural ancestry. If the seemingly lily-white Scarlett O’Hara is of mixed descent, and if a former slave is the daughter of a prominent white plantation owner, the implication is that nothing is as it seems in Gone With the Wind and throughout history. It is important for literature to address this misrepresentation because literature affects the way we as a society perceive and understand history. Randall’s novel does that by attempting to expose just one of history’s many lies: that a person’s cultural heritage can be determined simply by looking at the color of their skin. Toni Morrison testified on behalf of Alice Randall when the Mitchell estate tried to stop publication of The Wind Done Gone. Morrison raised important questions about history and the value of Randall’s retelling when she asked, “Who controls how history is imagined? Who gets to say what slavery was like for the slaves?” Randall’s motivation is implicit in Morrison’s question: Randall wants to expand our perception of history and challenge the notion of historical truth.

Though many are quick to criticize Alice Randall and her spare writing style, the historical, social, political and literary impact of The Wind Done Gone must not be ignored. It is crucial for readers and critics alike to recognize their own prejudices and assumptions about what makes a piece of literature worthwhile, and to admit that many of those assumptions are created and affected by the prevailing power structure. If the meaning and full impact of a book written from the perspective of a former slave is to be understood, then such assumptions and prejudices
must be constantly challenged and re-assessed. In the words of Mary Rose Taylor, executive
director of the Margaret Mitchell House, “It’s important to examine Gone with the Wind from
different perspectives. Randall’s work affords Southerners the opportunity to learn more about
ourselves. In the end, that’s the purpose of literature.” The thesis of this essay is to contend that a
book that takes on all the inaccuracies and stereotypes of this type of classic should not be
written in the same style that Margaret Mitchell employs in her novel because doing so would
require Randall to employ the Master’s tools, which would ultimately impede her attempt to
show the story of Tara from an entirely new perspective. If Randall’s form is to follow her
message, she must allow Cynara, a slave who has only just recently learned to read and write, to
use the language appropriate to a person who is new to the written word. In order to turn things
inside out, to prove that things are truly not as they have seemed, that black is actually white,
Randall must write in a different voice.

By disclosing the secrets of plantation families like the one portrayed in Gone with the Wind, Alice Randall uncovers the truth of the lie that is called “race” today and the resulting facade that so many people still hide behind in this country. In other words, she uncovers the lie—or more literally, the misperception—that “race” is a genetic characteristic, that it is more than a social construct or a figment of our collective imagination that has been created to make one group feel superior to another. By reimagining Scarlett O’Hara as the descendent of a slave, Randall has drawn attention to the fact that no one—not even the lily-white and pristine Scarlett—can know who their ancestors were and if they are, in truth, white or black, thus pointing out the artificiality of the contemporary notion of “race.”

The negative reviews of The Wind Done Gone, however, raise a question about the
quality of the writing in Mitchell’s original, specifically the question of whether or not Gone with
the Wind is literary—meaning is it well written, lucid and polished, does it demonstrate an understanding of our culture and does it say something important about human nature. Many regarded the 1936 novel as poorly written, but it still managed to be a bestseller during its time and is still read today. In that sense, much like its film adaptation, it has become a part of American popular culture. Recognizing Gone with the Wind’s place in our culture answers the question of why would Randall choose to retell a story that was so poorly told in the first place, that is often not considered literature in the truest sense, that wouldn’t at first seem worth retelling. It is because the book’s appeal as a social text is so pervasive that it overcame any of its flaws or its lack of literary success. Much like Biblical stories that are retold through a different lens, Randall rewrites Gone with the Wind because of its popularity and the effects of its popularity rather than because of its quality.

In my essay, then, I will fully explore how Randall handles characterization, plot, language, metaphor, parody and literary allusion in her novel. In an overall sense, though, it’s important to note that Randall’s writing style directly reflects the education of her protagonist since the book is written in diary form. In the beginning of the novel, Cynara has only just learned to read and write so her language is rather elementary and course, a narrative choice on Randall’s part that it seems some critics have misinterpreted as poor writing. As the book progresses and Cynara becomes more well read and articulate, this change is reflected in the quality of the writing as Randall begins to utilize more complex sentences and more involved metaphors. This evolution demonstrates that it was a conscious choice on the part of the author to utilize an uneducated voice in the beginning of the book and a more refined one later. None of this is to say that the quality of writing isn’t strong from the start—for Randall writes some extremely evocative passages throughout the book—but rather to say that, much like the plot of
the book, Randall’s writing style picks up at the point where *Gone with the Wind* left off and moves forward—both in terms of quality and achievement—from there.

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