THIS IS LIFE:
A Love Story of Friendship

by
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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
M.F.A.
in the
NEOMFA
Program

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
May, 2011
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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the universal journey of self discovery against the specific backdrop of the south coast of England where the narrator, an American woman in her early twenties, lives and works as a barmaid with her female travel companion. Aside from outlining the journey from outsider to insider within a particular cultural context, the thesis seeks to understand the implications of a defining friendship that ultimately fails, the ways a young life is shaped through travel and loss, and the sacrifices a person makes when choosing a place to call home. The thesis follows the narrator from her initial departure for England at the age of twenty-two through to her final return to Ohio at the age of twenty-seven, during which time the friendship with the travel companion is dissolved and the narrator becomes a wife and a mother. It is the story of a young woman with grandiose ideas and expectations who learns to redefine terms like “happiness” and “success” as she begins to understand what it means to be an adult. The thesis is presented in three parts, which mimic the experience of arrival, acclimation, and departure.
Prologue

March 2005
Akron, Ohio

The wind finds the narrow pathways between cars, tunnels between my car and the silver Pontiac. I’m wearing a long canvas jacket with bright blue and green flowers on it and a homemade scarf, but the wind is sharp, persistent. Caitlin stands in front of me, in an evening gown. Red of course, and sparkling, with a daring slit that reveals the pale flesh of inner thigh. Her wide set eyes are heavily lined but smudged. She decided last minute to make her going-away party an Oscar party, but I found out too late, my name nowhere near the top of the list of people to call. I hadn’t really felt like it anyway. Her hair is down in loose waves, curled hours ago with hot rollers, and it flies behind her and over her face, blindfolding her unexpectedly and then revealing again. My hair is short, layered, flat-ironed, highlighted. I’ve been spending a lot of money on my hair lately, on clothes, on spinning classes at Fitness One that I went to a grand total of two times before abandoning. Impulse buying. I finger the long gold earring that hangs straight and delicate from my right ear, feel the swirls of the green rose that sits at the bottom. The wedding’s only seven months away. In my head, each frivolous purchase is one less calla lily, one less floating candle.

The wind changes direction. A thick strand of hair gets caught in Caitlin’s lip gloss, sticking for a heavy second, then tumbling to her shoulder. It’s an Ohio wind, and we both know it well, both grew up with that wind snaking its way underneath wooly hats, up coat sleeves, down spines. Even though the temperature has sat above freezing
all week, and the last clumps of snow have diminished, melted and trickled down thirsty sewers, the wind smells like snow. Like freezing. Like cold, packed earth and slick tarmac.

“I love you,” Caitlin says. Her cheeks are pink, and her eyes are red, watery, one slightly more open than the other. She’s drunk, crying. Even her shoulders are pink, bare and goose-pimpling in the wind.

“I know. I love you too,” I say, nodding my head. My hand rests on the handle of my car. I want to get in, crank up the heat, turn on the oldies station and just sit for a moment while warm air pours over me from grated vents and cold air wraps around my car, making creaking sounds. I want to think while the engine idles, think about all the ways we have failed. And then I want to go home. It’s late and I have an hour drive ahead of me. Terrified of freeways, I have never driven from Youngstown to Akron by myself until today, Caitlin’s going-away party. I spent most of the evening alone, sitting on a backless stool at a high-top bar table, chain-smoking Marlboro Lights, taking thin sips of my white Russian and stirring the ice until it melted. Watching Caitlin. Occasionally I made small talk with one of her friends I’d never met and wouldn’t remember, and I had a brief conversation with her dad. But mostly I just watched the way she filled the room, the way she illuminated the space she was in as though a spotlight hung just out of sight, the way the people around her changed when she talked to them, awakened.

“No, I mean, I really love you. I do.” We’re in the parking lot now, just us. We stand outside a small bar in a darkened plaza of squat storefronts, a middle America bar that promises and delivers neon Coors Light signs, muted sports on overhead TVs, a cigarette machine. Caitlin is gesturing big drunk gestures, and her speech has a searching
quality. I know this Caitlin. I know her well. She wants to get this right. “And I know everything got yucky between us, but Annie? I love you. And if things would have been different, just lined up just slightly different, I don’t know.” Shoulders slump, remembering. “You know?”

My left hand tightens in my pocket, gripping my keys. “I know.”

“We could have been crazy old ladies together, living in some fabulous mansion. Or on a houseboat. Or anywhere, you know? Tuscany. Cyprus. We could have had a whole life together.” Caitlin’s voice rises on the word “life,” threatens to crack. The wind shifts and barrels into us. I lose her words but she keeps speaking. “…I don’t know why it didn’t happen that way. It just didn’t.” She’s crying openly now, tears brimming and spilling, nose running. “But I really do love you. Despite everything.” She throws her arms around me, squeezes.

Her hair blows in my eyes, and long strands wrap around my neck. It smells like smoke and snow and shampoo and perfume. And I think of all the times we’d been this close and how today feels faraway already, even though it’s happening right now. “Hey,” I say into the side of her face, into the wetness. “Hey, I’ll see you soon you know.”

“I know,” Caitlin says. “I just can’t believe I’m going back there without you.”

We slide out of the embrace, and the wind relaxes momentarily, chasing a scrap of paper underneath a car. Caitlin tucks her hair behind her ear, wipes her face. Back there. I remember creaky boards beneath my feet on a long pier, the blue-black mussel shells littered on the sand, the curve of a pint glass, the sharp smell of battered cod. The air around us rushes again, electric, filling the empty spaces between cars with a
momentary savageness. My jacket billows below the last button. Caitlin grabs her dress just in time, fingers with painted red nails pulling the shimmery fabric together where it splits.

“You should get back to the party. It’s cold, and you have a lot of people waiting for you inside.”

“Yeah, yeah you’re probably right. Listen, thank you so much, for coming tonight.” Caitlin looks over her shoulder at the glass and metal door of the bar. “How’s my hair?”

“It’s fabulous.” We both laugh, and she hugs me again, quick but hard.

I watch as she walks toward the door, the curve of her hips, her pale skin, watch as the wind follows her, pulls her by the dress and hair.
Part I

“This joy you feel is life.”

~Gertrude Stein
Chapter 1

Fabulous Girls

Everything was purple. Not even a nice purple, a mulberry or a plum, but a dingy grayish purple like slush under streetlamps. Or brain matter. Caitlin and I sat on the kitchen floor of our newly rented flat and sifted through the damp mound of ruined laundry. Purple t-shirts. Purple socks. A pair of Victoria Secret cotton panties with the word “pink” now ironically scrawled across the backside. In purple. Not even a week into our year abroad, and our prudent wardrobes had already been decreased by a third. What care we had taken in packing our suitcases, rolling clothes into tight tubes rather than folding, stuffing underwear inside boots. How resourceful we’d been, making each item count.

An hour before, we had been alone in the flat for what felt like the first time since we arrived. We were sharing the two-bedroom accommodation with two French girls who seemed nice enough but worked 5 AM breakfast shifts at a hotel and slept through the majority of the daylight hours. Otherwise, they spoke French to each other in hushed tones, always keeping us on the perimeter. Caro and Angelique shared the pink bedroom, Caitlin and I shared the red bedroom, and we all used a common kitchen, bathroom, and lounge. It wasn’t that Caitlin and I minded sharing the space with the French girls. It just came as a bit of a shock, considering we hadn’t found out about them until we first walked up the gravel drive and through the front door of 5B Spencer Road.

The agency hadn’t told us there’d be roommates.
They also hadn’t told us when we’d signed up for the “Work in a Pub in London” program that we wouldn’t be working in a low-ceilinged, half-timbered pub with a quaint name and dark red lampshades, but rather that we’d be working in a three-star commercial hotel in Bournemouth, a seaside resort town a hundred miles south of London that I heard of for the first time three weeks before stepping on a Boeing 747 with a one-way ticket. The French girls raised eyebrows and shrugged shoulders as they peered through our half-open door to see Caitlin and me pushing our two single beds together in the middle of the room. Four thousand miles from home, it was easier to fall asleep when I could hear Caitlin’s steady breathing, see the patterns her long red hair made when it splayed across the white pillowcase.

Finally alone for an entire afternoon, Caitlin and I had decided to spend the time settling in. Playing Bon Voyage mix CDs given as parting gifts from college friends, we opened the bay windows as wide as they would go and let sunshine and September fill the flat, a runaway sea breeze ruffling the fringed throw that hung like tousled feathers over the sofa. Laundry seemed a refreshingly normal activity, but when we confronted the washing machine, it was a front loader that had strange buttons and numbers that didn’t make any sense. At home, my machine had exactly two dials: one that said “Small-Medium-Large” and one that said “Cold-Warm-Hot.” Every machine I’d ever used had these identical dials. Easy. After a few minutes of head-scratching and knob-turning, we’d decided that 30-60-90 must be milliliters and must refer to how much soap to use. There was a picture of a beaker full of liquid next to the numbers. It wasn’t a giant leap.

“It’s a lot of clothes,” I’d reasoned, looking at the crumpled jeans and balled-up socks. “How about 90?” What was the worst that could happen?
The worst that could happen was that we could wash all our clothes in water that was 90°C, ten degrees away from boiling. The worst that could happen was purple.

We sat cross-legged on the vinyl flooring with barely enough room for four elbows and four knees, and assessed the damage. The clothes were warm and wet, heaped like some sort of drowned animal, the air in the room reeking of mountain-inspired fabric softener. I could taste it in the back of my throat. Neither of us wanted to be the first to cry. This was supposed to be the adventure of a lifetime, but so far, it kind of sucked.

“It’s just clothes,” Caitlin said finally. She held a purple tank top up to the light.

“Yeah, I mean, it’s just…stuff.”

We were world travelers. We were fearless. We wore bandanas.

Caitlin fingered the embroidered flowers that decorated the neckline of the tank top.

“I really liked this top,” she said, her voice cracking just a little.

“I know.” A sob broke loose, a strangled sob beginning in the pit of my stomach and building momentum as it clawed its way out into the open air. “Your boobs looked fantastic in it.”

“Let’s throw a party,” Caitlin said. “Parties always cheer us up.”

A week had passed since the laundry incident, but we were still feeling the purple tinge of defeat. In college we had thrown monthly theme parties with elaborate costumes, decorations, signature drinks. We were Cartoon Sexpots once. Caitlin, with her Veronica Lake waves and Grecian curves, had been Jessica Rabbit in a shimmery red gown and
purple gloves. I was Betty Boop—black wig, fake eyelashes, lacy garter with a bright red heart.

“Yeah! That always cheers us up. Let’s do a theme.” We’d just gotten home and were hanging out in our bedroom. We’d walked for hours and had been charmed by Bournemouth’s brightly painted beach huts, the old-fashioned carousel by the seafront, the green lull of the sea. But it seemed every evening around this time, when the sun began its noticeable descent and the breeze turned cool, goosepimpling our skin, we remembered how wide the world was and we felt far away and small.

“Okay, but let’s be realistic and start with something manageable. We don’t know our resources here yet,” Caitlin said. She had been lying on her back on the bed, with her hair hanging over the side, just brushing the red carpet. She sat up suddenly, perched on the edge of the orange and white duvet. “What about a Fall theme?”

“Okay. Fall. We’ll need tons of leaves. And buckeyes. Shit, wait, do they have buckeyes here?” Coming from the Buckeye State, I took such details for granted. I took off my shoes and socks and examined my toenails. Acorns maybe. Something rustic, earthy.

Caitlin grabbed a pen and her yellow legal pad from the bedside table. She loved lists, found them calming. During the final months before our big departure, I had read Caitlin’s dog-eared copy of The Fabulous Girls Guide to Decorum, a book that was full of lists. What Every Fabulous Girl Should Have in her Refrigerator. What Every Fabulous Girl Should Keep in her Bedside Stand. There was even What Every Fabulous Girl Should Pack in her Suitcase. Sure, the list referred to a weekend getaway, but we had
copied it faithfully right down to the staple black cocktail dress. Mine was strapless and slinky. Caitlin’s had a dangerously plunging neckline.

“And we can rent a Fall movie to have running in the background. *Hocus Pocus* maybe?” Caitlin tapped the pen against the legal pad.

“Hmmm…maybe. I think we can do better.” I walked across the room to get the black tri-fold nail kit. “What about drinks? Something with pumpkin liqueur?”

“And butterscotch. Oh! Or a caramel apple martini?”

“We could even have caramel apples. Or, we could bob for apples.”

“Nah, too Halloween-y. We just want *seasonal*. Think Martha Stewart, not K-mart.”

And so it went until we had four full pages of party notes and I had a creamy French-tipped pedicure. A familiar buzz of excitement filled the room, and outside the open window, someone whistled, and a dog barked. A Jack Russell maybe, or a Dachshund. Something small but not too yippy. Then the question dawned on us for the first time.

Who should we invite?

Caitlin set the notebook down with a smile that was about three seconds away from crumbling. “You know what we need?”

Fabulous Girls didn’t need anything because they had the gift of anticipation. Every last detail accounted for, every need met. Fabulous Girls never tried out new recipes for dinner parties; they prepared meals they could simmer, stuff, and sauté in their sleep. When attending parties, they brought wine never flowers. Flowers distracted a hostess, throwing her off course with unforeseen stem-trimming and vase-fetching.
Whenever they stayed in a friend’s home for an extended visit, they discreetly left wrapped thank-you gifts on the carefully made bed. A copy of Mrs. Dallaway. Fancy soaps.

“What?”

“Friends.”

_Happy Night Feeling: Shit Hot [9PM]_

Nothing in this world like the Friday night feeling, swear to god. From about lunchtime onward, you’re useless. You try to get work done, but you’re drumming the Chili Peppers on any available surface, and you realize you’ve spent the last half hour mentally scanning your wardrobe. Cream peasant top, dark jeans, brown stilettos? Red scoop neck, black flares?

No use eating dinner; it will only slow you down. Stop by the off-license on your way home. Bottle of Captain Morgan’s spiced rum and twenty Marlboro Lights. Hell, it’s the weekend, make it Marlboro Reds. Down a quick Captain and Coke while you chat with your flat mates, and then hit the shower. Make up. Cigarette. Hair. Cigarette. Change your shirt three times. Cigarette. Cigarette. Cigarette. One more Captain and Coke, and it’s time to head into town.

You are ready.

Shit hot, man, shit hot.

Untouchable.

Cait and I both have the night off—near-miracle in the world of a barmaid—and we’re getting ready together. The Feverkicks are playing at O’Neill’s, should be taking
the stage around ten. For the last month or so, we’ve been having inconsistent flings with Al and Joe, a couple of guys who are friends with the lead singer. They sometimes come home with us, and we take turns dragging one of the single mattresses out into the lounge. They are English and hilarious and unsettlingly handsome. It is what it is.

I’m in the shower, rinseing the Garnier from my chin-length hair, deciding whether to go curly or flipped out tonight.

“Hurry up,” Cait says. She’s naked on the floor in the bathroom, finishing the bottle of shiraz we cracked open and filing her nails. “I want to have time to dry my hair.” Her hair is thick and almost tickles her waist.

“I’m nearly done.” I’m yelling because my head is directly under the shower’s stream. My eyes are closed, and hot water runs over my ears, my neck. A moment later, I open my eyes, and Cait is standing inside the shower inches away from my face.

“Boo,” she says, deadpan.

“Fucksake! You’re going to give me a heart attack.” We’re both laughing.

“Move over,” Cait says. I spread Noxema over my face and look at her chest. We both hover around the five foot mark, but our bodies are different in almost every way. I am olive and compact, proud of the effortless definition in my stomach, but the trade-off is that my body is more or less what it was when I was twelve. And I was a late bloomer. Cait has the kind of body that art students should draw, full of soft S-curves, ballooning in all the right places, hips, breasts, ass. My family is Italian, and my college roommate was Colombian. I’ve only ever been around brown nipples, and I’m always surprised when I see how delicately pink Cait’s are, almost translucent.
Out of the shower, I throw on jeans and a wifebeater over a padded black bra, half dry my hair, and set it in jumbo Velcro rollers. I walk into the lounge and sit at the table. Jenny’s there. Jenny replaced Angelique in the pink room when Angelique pissed off our landlady and bailed. Jenny’s Spanish friends are there too, Javi and Nico. Javi is slick, with black curls, tailored jackets made of two-toned leather, pointy shoes. Nico is taller, slimmer, quieter. Jenny says when Nico smiles, he has no eyes. She doesn’t know the word *squint*.

Jenny’s cool, and her Spanish friends are cool because they always bring weed. Real weed, not some useless sticky resin ball you have to break up, that leaves your fingers brown and stinking. I smoke a joint with them while Cait finishes her shower and dries her hair. I look out the window. Rain, rain, rain. The yellow trees are dripping.

“Fucksake!” I yell into the night, pissed because we’ll have to walk to O’Neill’s in the rain, but also inwardly a proud at how easily the British slang is starting to slip out of my mouth. That was the second uncalculated “fucksake” in less than an hour.

Everybody laughs.

Jenny cocks her head to the side. “Are you going outside soon?”

Now I’m laughing. She means, am I going *out* soon.

“Yes, pretty soon.”

Javi takes a bottle out of his bag, lines up shots of Sambuca. It’s anise on fire, and my nasal passages close and my throat contracts. I take out my pack of Amber Leaf loose tobacco and rolling papers. I roll cigarettes for later, for when the Reds have all been smoked and I’m too far gone to roll straight and tight. Nothing sucks more than a baggy cigarette that won’t burn. I lay them on the table, three, four, five, until I hear the
hairdryer stop. Springy brown tobacco strands make patterns on the table, like when I was a kid, playing that game with iron filings and a magnet. I try to make a sailboat. It doesn’t hold. I walk back into the bedroom.

Cait’s in front of the mirror, wearing black pants and a wrap-around top that creates an epic cleavage. She smoothes Burt’s Bees carrot cream over her face and the light, sweet smell fills the room.

“Is that what you’re wearing tonight?” Cait doesn’t look away from the mirror. She’s dabbing concealer on the stubborn blemishes scattered across her chin. Spots, the Brits call them.

“I think so, yeah. With my brown boots.” Now I’m concealing imperfections, dusting powder, bronzer, shimmer.

“See! You would so be the guy.” Cait paints thick black lines on her eyelids with liquid liner. We laugh about who would be the guy if were lesbians. I probably would be the guy. I close my eyes, and Cait paints thick black lines on my eyelids. The applicator is cold, and I imagine Cait’s licking my eyelids, only she’s tiny like a hornet.

I take out my rollers, and my hair falls into a dramatic flip. My collar bones jut out like butter knives beneath my skin. Cait stands beside me, all red and black and smooth, smelling like caramelized carrots.

We are ready.

Shit hot, man, shit hot.

The parking deck was cool and dark, and cutting through the ground level shaved a good five minutes off our walk home. Our first trip to Asda three days before had resulted in a
very miserable, faltering journey home. The scenery—a freshly-mown field lined with red and yellow roses, a stretch of closely situated Georgian townhouses, all painted nuanced shades of off-white and converted into bed and breakfasts with hand-painted wooden signs, a greasy fish and chips shop—would have been exciting, had we been free to absorb it. Instead we’d over-shopped and our plastic bags dug into our wrists and forearms, leaving angry purple rings in our skin. We were determined to be more competent the second time around, to downsize and slip into the European mindset of shopping every other day, buying fresh and coping with smaller spaces.

“Let’s get some flowers to brighten up the flat,” Caitlin had suggested, one of only a few rash purchases. The cheerful-looking arrangement now sat on top of our grocery bags, wrapped in green tissue.

“I wonder if there’s a vase in the cupboard somewhere. I didn’t even think to look,” Caitlin was saying when I became aware of footsteps behind us, purposeful and too close.

“Got a lighter?” a voice asked. A gravelly voice with a thick Scottish accent that echoed off the concrete. My shoulders stiffened, but Caitlin looked over her shoulder and smiled.

“Sorry, we don’t smoke.”

“Aw, mate, give us a quid then so I can go and get one.”

“Sorry,” Caitlin said. “We don’t have any change.”

The square of sunlight shining through the exit seemed miles away, a far-off pinprick. Cars filled the spaces, parked in neat rows, large yellow license plates with boxy numbers and letters, but no one else was coming or going. The Scottish man jogged
up ahead of us and spun around, grabbing the front of the shopping cart and stopping us hard in our tracks.

“Give us a quid,” he said and stared into my eyes, unwavering. He was younger than I’d thought when he was behind us, probably only a few years older than us, and wore a flannel shirt under a heavy jacket with the hood pulled up over his head, badly stained jeans. Blonde hair grew in uneven patterns up his neck and across his pointy chin.

“I told you we don’t have any cash,” Caitlin said and tried to push the cart to the side so that we could move around him. He gripped the metal, his fingertips turning white.

“You don’t have any caaaysh?” He mocked. “Are you American?”

Caitlin curled her lips into a disapproving scowl. “Look, we don’t have any money. Just let us go.”

“Then I’m taking these,” he said and grabbed the flowers out of the cart. He ripped the heads off of two pale carnations, rolled them between his fingers, tearing apart the petals and white fluff. Concentrating on the flowers, he’d let go of the shopping cart.

“Let’s just go,” I said under my breath. Caitlin held her solid pissed-off gaze while the Scottish guy tore another flower from its stem and threw it across the parking deck, laughing. The flowers would have looked so pretty on the round table just next to the bay window in the lounge, would have been a lovely splash of color amidst the white walls and white sofa cover, the framed print of gray beach stones that hung opposite the couch. Just then, the automatic doors opened and closed, and a man with silver hair walked past us. The doors opened and closed again, and a little boy’s high-pitched voice echoed off the concrete.
The Scottish guy leaned over the cart and whispered. “You remember September 11th? You guys deserved it.” He spat into our cart, his spit landing on a plastic bag with a soft splat and running down the side. He walked off at a leisurely pace, still separating flowers from stems, hurling carnations at parked cars, not once looking back.

It was only once we were back in the flat, groceries put away, spit-covered shopping bag at the bottom of the trash, that we relaxed. Only once we were enclosed in the white walls and red carpet of our bedroom, that we laughed.

“He tore up our flowers,” Caitlin said, incredulous. “Jerk.”

The whole episode suddenly seemed like a comic strip or a farce. Home safely, not mugged, tiny refrigerator full of groceries—suddenly the Scottish man bullying the £4 bouquet of flowers seemed like an old Abbot and Costello routine. Give me a quid. I’m taking your flowers. There was zero logic. We laughed in deep gulps and breathless shrieks. I wiped tears from my eyes. Caitlin, lying on her back, kicked her legs in the air.

“I know what we need to do,” Caitlin said, turning to face me, surprisingly solemn though her cheeks were still bright pink. “We need to invent our own happiness.”

“Just like that?” I perched half-way up, leaning on my elbows. I was understandably skeptical. She’d said it like inventing one’s own happiness was as simple as deciding which t-shirt to wear or what to have for breakfast.

“Sure. I mean, what else are we going to do? Be miserable for a year?” She walked over to the bed, fished her pocket calendar out of her purse. “Today is September 1st. By October 1st, we will be happy,” She declared. “We will love our lives in this place.”

“October 1st,” I repeated, considering the probability of the suggestion.
“And we’ll do something really special to celebrate.” Caitlin tucked her hair behind her ear. She was getting worked up now, starting to believe in her own plan.

“Like what?”

We looked around the room, the four white walls that had become our sanctuary, the place where we’d spent the majority of our first four days as World Travelers. Caitlin sprung off the bed and over to the closet, sliding open the folding doors.

“We’ll change to the orange pillow cases!” She pulled the spare bedding off the top shelf, sheets and pillowcases tumbling to the floor, and held up one starched pillowcase. It was a deep orange, a burnt pumpkin, a sepia. I glanced at the bed, at the white duvet set with the single modest orange stripe across each pillow. “On October 1st we will be happy, and we will change over to the orange pillowcases to celebrate.”


Caitlin walked back to the bed, swaying her hips dramatically and waving the orange pillowcase over her head like a flag. She sat down and took a pen out of her purse. With steady strokes, she wrote the words “O.P. Day” in the blank square on her pocket calendar.

It was nearing midnight. We’d walked from Spencer Road into town, sat at Thresher’s Wine Bar, half-heartedly sipping a vinegary house red, then corked the bottle and walked aimlessly around the town centre as though we were waiting for someone, or for something. The night was warm and still, oddly quiet, laced with the scent of exotic flowers and wet sand. Only two weeks into our stay, we were too new to the scene to understand that Bournemouth, with its cutting edge nightclubs and brass and velvet
casinos, with seven gleaming miles of white beaches, was a machine that ran almost solely on the frivolity of holiday-makers. In mid-September, Bournemouth was grinding to an eerie halt. But all we knew as our footsteps echoed off the pavement was that a restlessness hung over the town like a wooly blanket, itchy and too warm.

We took turns carrying the corked cabernet in search of a place to sit under the open sky and drink. We walked through Central Gardens, which glowed with a filmy haze of moon, past a miniature golf course, a closed ice cream stand, past the massive white hot air balloon that was parked for the night in a roped off area like some kind of prehistoric elephant. We followed the course of a narrow manmade canal, walking under archways adorned with twinkling lights and oversized cut-outs of tropical flowers, past transplanted palm trees and dark waxy bushes heavy with crimson berries.

We found ourselves on a cement ramp that eased down into cool white sand. A hundred yards or so to our left Bournemouth Pier stretched one thousand feet out into the sea. Old fashioned street lamps lined the promenade, and the laughter of revelers inside the pier’s amusement arcade, restaurant, and bar bounced off the water but was quickly carried away by the wind that whipped in sudden gusts, haphazardly disturbing clothing, hair, the canvas backing of the blue and yellow striped deck chairs that slept in neat rows at the edge of the sand. Canvas flapped like bed sheets drying in the sun. This unbroken stretch of beach was completely empty, and ahead the English Channel rocked back and forth, black and sparkling.

“Let’s get our feet wet,” Caitlin said, or maybe I did. In my memory, our voices sound the same.
We took off our shoes and socks, rolled up our jeans, and left our jackets and purses in the sand. Tentatively, we stood at the farthest reach of the surf, letting the water just barely wash over our feet, occasionally foaming up to our ankles. It was cold. Caitlin uncorked the bottle and took a long sip before passing it to me. As I tipped the bottle back, she began to sing a low sultry song about mist and blue and a flickering old flame. We walked a few steps farther out, and the water smacked our calves, dampening the folds of our jeans. We looked at each other, the lights from the pier in her eyes, lights from the stars and the water inside my own. I could feel myself shimmer. The water wasn’t so cold anymore and, without a word, we staggered forward into the waiting sea. We were up to our waists, our chests, our necks finally, rising on tip-toe with each swell, laughing at the moon, howling with the madness of shared possibility.

“This is life,” Caitlin said, the first words spoken since the soles of our feet had sunk into the sand. “This is our life right now. This ocean. This sky.”

I looked into the blackness, the vastness. Disrupting the horizon, a bit of earth jutted out, a gray shadow above the water. My geography was so bad I couldn’t quite figure out what it was. France? The Isle of Whyte? I liked the uncertainty, the not knowing.

This is life. It was a simple epiphany but one that could only happen fully-clothed, neck-deep in the English Channel. Something within me swelled and snapped. I was twenty-two years old, soaking wet and four thousand miles from home. Four thousand miles from home. I was standing, with my best friend, at the very beginning of an awesome and terrifying adventure. Who the hell cared about Ohio? Who cared about
rusted-out steel mills and tired cornfields? It would all be there when we got back. All I cared about in that one frozen second was this ocean, this sky.

I poured the wine out into the purple sea. The sea and the midnight sky and the wine—everything was purple, a mulberry or a plum. My skin was purple, and Cait’s hair, and the people laughing on the neck of the nineteenth century pier, who had chased summer all the way to a lookout point one thousand feet over the rolling water. I whispered into the long neck of the bottle, “This is life,” and replaced the cork, sealing off our sacred message. I threw the bottle deep into the night, watching its graceful arc in the light of the moon, watching as it hurled through the indefinable space in front of the horizon and disappeared.

_Friday Night Feeling: Fir and Mná [12AM]_

I’m at that point where I’m holding my pint glass low, down by my thigh, so I can tip a bit out when no one’s looking because it’s three quarters full and if I drink it all, I’m going to pass out. I decide it’s a good idea to go to the toilet.

“I’m going to the toilet,” I say. Or think I say. I don’t know. The bass vibrates in my throat. Cait’s talking to some guy, some air traffic controller with spiky hair and a tight Diesel t-shirt. Her cheeks are red, and she looks a bit cross-eyed.

I make my way through the crowd. It’s late, packed. The Feverkicks are playing on the small stage area. The lead singer has shaggy dark hair and when he makes chord shapes with his left hand, his fingers look gnarled and arthritic. He plays guitar aggressively, like he’s out to prove something. I have to squeeze past people, cut through couples, carve a path like I’m going for a touchdown, fake them out, go left. Everyone
looks familiar, not regulars exactly, not like washed out old alcoholics who chain smoke roll ups with shaky hands and only leave their favorite bar stool to take the occasional rinse. No, it’s more the same mesh of faces, thrown together week after week, like the small loyal crowd of football supporters who gather at Dean Park to watch the Cherries play. We’re strangers with a common ground. Pints of Guinness. Flipped up collars. Loud music. Sloppy laughter. We might nod to each other or even smile, but we don’t speak. We are all terrified of being the one to utter the words that break the spell.

I reach the alcove with the two doors. Like all good soulless Irish pubs, the toilet doors are painted in rich salmon and mustard and labeled in Gaelic. Fir and Mná. I come here almost every night, but damn it if it doesn’t throw me every time. Mná is the ladies’ but it has all the same letters as MAN. You put two hundred wasted people in the same room and tell me if you think that’s a good idea. Mná swings open, and two women in their forties and dressed in black walk out, wine glasses in hand, cigarettes lit and half-smoked, as though they just exited the VIP room. A faint muskiness lingers in their wake. Ah, Mná, women’s.

I walk through the door. The floor is black and white tile, and it makes me a bit dizzy, all those white squares. The bathroom smells clean, like disinfectant and not at all like piss or vomit even though I know that’s what’s running through the pipes. Strongbow sloshes in my stomach.

Of course there’s a line. We wait, three or four or maybe sixteen of us, leaning on the green walls, reading the fliers plastered on the doors of the stalls. Some band or other is playing next week. An Oscar Wilde quote is framed and hung above the paper towel dispenser. *Work is the curse of the drinking class.* Some of us hold drinks. Some smoke.
We all look in the mirror too much. The Feverkicks pump out Oasis covers. And SO, Sally can wait...

The toilet flushes. A brunette with a floppy orange flower in her hair walks out. She’s wearing a miniskirt and brown snow boots, as though somewhere between her left ear and the soles of her feet a drastic climate shift took place. A cold front. A tropical storm. She doesn’t wash her hands. We all walk two squares forward.

“Checkmate,” the woman in front of me says. And I get it. I’m laughing. Checkmate. I don’t know what I say but I must say something because she whips her head around and says, “Are you American?”

“Yeah, I’m from Ohio.”


“I’m just traveling for a bit. I work at the hotel over the road.”

“Fucking brilliant. Say something else. What do you do? Reception?”

“No, I’m a barmaid.” She’s smiling wide, and she has pointy eyeteeth like me. Fangs.

“BARRR-maid.” She mimics my accent. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-two.”

“I’m Kate,” she says, and she grabs my hand. Her fingers are bony and cold. She has short blonde hair, and she’s thin but in a weird flat way. Wide hips, sagging skin, like maybe she used to be heavier. Clumps of glittery eye shadow clogging her crows’ feet, lines on her neck. The toilet flushes. “Come in with me.”

We’re both in the stall and she sits down and starts pissing. I’m leaning against the wall, and the toilet roll holder digs into my back. I don’t know where to look. Kate’s
talking about how she has a kid, how she used to have a body just like mine before her
daughter. Her stream is loud and steady.

“Turn around,” she says, and I face the door. “Just as I thought. Look at that ass.
Now that’s a twenty-two-year-old ass.” Kate grabs my ass hard. I jump a bit, and she
laughs. “Mmm-hmmm, turn back around. Yep, pert little tits. Fucking brilliant.” The stall
divider is speckled blue and gray with tiny flecks of silver. It’s like we’re inside a sand
dune.

Kate pulls her panties up, black, lacy, and then her jeans. She grabs my face,
arctic fingers curling around my ears, my neck, and her pores are so big if I look into
them, I’ll see muscle or skull. I think she might try to kiss me but she just laughs, howls
like an absolute maniac and leaves without flushing. I’m relieved, not about the kiss
because who the hell cares but because my bladder is throbbing, and my stomach is
unsteady. I sit down and piss on top of Kate’s piss. I’m sitting there for who knows how
long, trying to decide whether or not I need to throw up. I’m counting my drinks. Seven, I
think. At least seven at the pub. And a shot of Sambuca with Jenny’s Spanish friends
back at the flat, and wine. I’m in the middle stall, and I keep track of flushes, right stall
vs. left. Suddenly, I hear Cait, my Cait.

“Annie? Are you in there?”

In Health class when I was sixteen, we all learned CPR on the dummy, Resussi-
Annie. It was just a torso and a head with vacant eyes and a malleable rubber mouth. We
took turns breathing into her. Annie, Annie, are you alright? Somebody call for help…

“Yeah…”

“Shit, I’ve been looking everywhere for you. Are you throwing up?”
“No.” Cait always asks if I’m throwing up. She has never thrown up from drinking before, and she thinks it’s funny how I’m always puking. Or cute, or something. I think she secretly thinks she’s better than me for this distinction, that she can hold her liquor better than I can. But that’s total bullshit. I just drink way more than she does.

“Let me in.” I pull up my pants and let her in. Now’s Cait’s pissing. Cait’s pissing on top of my piss and on top of Kate’s piss. I can’t get my head around this. I’m about to tell her because it seems hysterical or maybe prophetic.

“Guess who just got here,” Cait says.

“Who?” I’m staring again at the blue and gray speckles, looking for the metallic flecks. Sand blows in my eyes. Toilets flush like crashing waves.

“Al and Joe.”

“No shit.”

“Yeah, like ten minutes ago. They’re at the bar.” She pulls her pants up and flushes.

We wash our hands and examine ourselves in the mirror, the fluorescent light unforgiving. I’ve spilled something down my front, and my black bra glares through my thin wifebeater. My eyeliner is blurry, and my lipstick’s gone. A soggy cigarette butt sits over the drain, soapy water pooling around it. I probably should have thrown up. I take lip gloss out of my purse, smooth it over my lips. It’s shimmery and smells like cookies.

I wonder if Cait has any bathroom stall secrets I don’t know about, and even as I’m thinking it, I realize how weird that is. But I don’t tell her about Kate, about all our piss swirling down the U-bend. I hold onto my secret like candy wrapped in foil.

“I think I looked prettier when I left the flat.”
Cait laughs. Her eyeliner is blurry too; her pale skin, blotchy. “Me too.”

This is the funniest thing either one of us has ever heard, and we laugh so hard pink creeps back into my skin. We make silly faces in the mirror, fake model poses with sucked in cheeks and pouty lips. Fishfaces.

Caitlin and I faced each other inside the White Flame, straddling folding chairs, our shirts hiked up and tucked under our bras. Caitlin kept giggling. When she giggles, her eyes go all sleepy and her head lolls, like a cartoon bee in a field of poppies: drunk, yellow pollen dusting everything marigold.

“It tickles,” she said. The Asian woman tattooing Caitlin smiled, tossing a dark purple lock of hair out of her eyes. Something brassy and loud played on the CD player.

“No it doesn’t. It feels like a cat scratch.” It didn’t hurt exactly—I’d been terrified of white hot pain—but it was uncomfortable. My flesh was raw and alert.

My tattoo artist was a woman as well, an English girl in her mid-twenties with dark hair and a colorful sleeve of skin art. A purple seahorse the length of her forearm, bright watery flowers. Everything looked like it was gently bobbing in deep-sea ripples, and I wondered if the Asian girl had done it.

I wasn’t against tattoos. I had just always said that there was nothing I wanted on my body forever. Until Caitlin. Until that night on the beach. I wanted that night on me forever, her voice like hot butter rum in my lungs, wanted the salt spray from the Channel to course through my veins, wanted the cold, wanted the urgency, wanted the moon.

And, apparently, I wanted it in Times New Roman font size twenty-four on my back for fifteen quid.
We discovered the White Flame on a business card. It was taped to a window in a piercing studio near the hotel we worked in. White Flame was written in some kind of gruesome calligraphy with sharp flames rising from the W and the final E. The address on the card read 293a Wimborne Road, Winton, BH9 2AA. We lived life on foot during those early months in Bournemouth, never travelling farther than we could walk and only occasionally splurging on taxi rides home when we finished particularly late bar shifts. We liked saving the money, but even more so, we liked seeing everything there was to see in Bournemouth, the details we’d miss inside a gray United taxi or a yellow double-decker. Signs posted on telephone polls that said, “Stick it, don’t flick it” and accumulated an elegant assortment of chewed-up gum, soft shades of blue, green, pink, and white. The graceful construction of the dark green trashcans, curved like ionic columns, that appeared every twenty feet or so, the word Litter painted in swooping gold letters. The smell of rain mixed with clay.

We didn’t venture very far outside of BH1, the town centre, and had never heard of Winton. BH9, eight ripples farther from the sea and the upscale Indian restaurants and the familiar white façade of the Royal Bath Hotel, sounded like another universe. As with every other detail of our travel plans, Caitlin figured out this glitch. She acquired a bus schedule from the news agent’s across from the hotel, studied the strange grids and color-coordinated tables, and told me what time to be ready. We waited on the Lansdowne Roundabout and, like magic, the 4B appeared and screeched into stillness long enough for us to board. My first ride on a double-decker whisked us away from the familiar touristy din of the town centre and looped past the sea, around small green parks and crooked bungalows, and into the tumble-down reality of Bournemouth’s suburbia. Faded
awnings over corner grocers kept the shade off of turnips and bruised beets. Greasy chip shops advertised daily specials with handwritten A-boards. A green and white sign announced the local watch repair shop. Then the sudden dinging of the bus, and a black sign wedged between a paper craft store and a sandwich shop and the now-familiar calligraphy of the White Flame.

I’d never been inside a tattoo parlor before. I had my nose pierced, but I’d gotten it done at a very sterile trendy place where Fabulous Girls like me went to get piercings. The piercing was a barely perceptible crystal pinprick on the left side of my nose that you could only really see when the light reflected off of it. My mother cried and said I destroyed my face, but hardly anyone else noticed. The White Flame was cluttered and had the faintly offensive odor of stale cigarettes and something thick and balmy, not sweat exactly, but a reek that rises off sleeping bodies. Aggressive tattoo designs hung in poster-sized frames and sat between cellophane sheets inside two-ring binders. Jagged tribal designs on broad shoulders. Japanese anime faces on freshly-shorn calves. Celtic crosses.

This is life. It was simple—three little words, ten letters. But when the woman at the front desk asked us to describe what we wanted, suddenly there were all sorts of questions of punctuation and capitalization, font and size.

**This is life**

this is life

~ This is life ~

This is life!
(Kidding, I would never tattoo an exclamation point on my body.)

This is Life.

And questions of placement too. Apparently “lower back” was not a very specific term. Neither was the self-deprecating “tramp stamp” or the English equivalent “slag tag.” Suddenly I was immersed in discussion with a complete stranger, tackling issues like distance between tattoo and top of butt crack.

When it was over, I strained to see my new tattoo clearly, but couldn’t get a good angle and couldn’t manipulate hand mirrors to get a close enough view. I looked at Caitlin’s which looked like mine. She was much paler than me, and I wondered if my skin was anywhere near as pink as the puffy red outline swelling around her freshly-inked words. This is Life.

Caitlin examined mine, bent over and blew a stream of cool air over my stinging skin. Her breath came in soft, measured spurts, one, two, three.

“Happy O.P. Day,” she said.

I stood up and laughed out loud. It was October 1st. Right on schedule, we were happy. “Happy O.P. Day yourself.”

I felt like we’d just done something important, something that mattered. We’d just taken an ancient dagger to the softest folds of our palms and touched our hands together, letting blood run warm and scarlet down our wrists, our forearms. We’d stuck an iron in the fire and branded each other with the glowing tip. You are mine. This is ours.

Later, we rubbed Savlon cream on each other’s backs. Just before bed, we changed the pillowcases, smelling the stiff fabric, fluffing the pillows, satisfied. We fell asleep on our stomachs with the sheets turned down, letting the night air soothe our skin,
our faces resting on the triumph of orange cotton. The thing about tattoos is that after the pain and after the scabbing, they heal, the ink as smooth and as real as your own skin. They last. Far longer than impulsive midnight swims, longer than glazed eyes and shared madness, longer even than the kinship of a single moment. They last as long as the salt-spray itself, as long as the waves that pound and pound indifference upon the constant shore.

**Friday Night Feeling: Wit' Chu [2AM]**

We’re sitting in a booth next to the far wall where a “My Goodness, My Guinness” sign hangs. The glass on the frame is covered in a thick layer of grease, freckled with splashes from old drinks. Al sits next to me, his arm loosely around my waist, thumb moving back and forth on the thin strip of flesh between wifebeater and waistband. It’s going to be a mattress-in-the-lounge night. Cait and Joe sit across from us.

“Come on,” Cait says to Joe. She holds her hair in a make-shift ponytail at the back of her head, the bottom layer wet with sweat. “Come dance with me again.”

The Feverkicks are finished for the night, having rounded out their last set with “Hey Jude,” the big finish. We were all dancing, sloshing drinks, sticky and spilling beer. *Na Na NaNaNaAAAA*. The lead singer jerking his limbs like an epileptic, the dusty lights igniting the steel strings of his guitar.

Now a DJ pumps out Justin Timberlake.

“Hey, I have a question for you,” Joe says. “You’re American, right?”
“Europe rhymes with syrup!” Al says. They love to quote idiotic Courtney-isms. Courtney, whom we have never met, is apparently the only other American they have ever met. One of them has slept with her, but it is unclear which.

“Yeah?” Cait lets her hair fall down over her shoulders. It hangs in tousled ropes.

“You know how he says, ‘It feels like something’s heating up,’” Joe sings the Justin Timberlake lyrics in a charmingly flat baritone. “‘Can I leave wit’ chu’?” Dramatic pause. He takes a swig from his pint of John Smith’s and leans forward. “What’s chu?”

Cait looks at me, her jaw actually dropping before curling into a smile. He can’t be serious.

“You fucking knob,” Al says, laughing his silent breathy laugh. He sounds like he’s choking. His ribs shake next to mine, and the movement makes me nauseous. I dig my nails into the vinyl booth to steady myself.

“What’s chu? What’s CHU?” Cait’s pitch rises as she repeats the question, and she’s laughing so hard she can barely get the words out. She squeezes his cheeks hard and makes a noise like she’s fawning over a baby. “Come on, let’s dance.”

Joe pulls at the elastic headband that keeps his hair out of his eyes like David Beckham. He acts resistant but being one of those men who can actually dance, it’s just for show. They’re back on the dance floor, singing along, slamming body parts together, sweating. Cait uses her hair like a prop when she dances, running her fingers through it, shaking it in theatrical ripples. I imagine her holding a feather boa.

Al and I sit at the booth, and I make smears on the oak table with the rings of condensation left by our pint glasses. He takes out a yellow Swan pack, fishes out two filters, and begins rolling cigarettes for us. The open pack of filters spills out on the table,
the floor. They roll and bounce, and I pick one up and squeeze it between my fingers. It’s spongy like an ear plug. Al lights his cigarette and takes a deep drag. The cigarette makes a sharp gasping sound as the thin paper burns and flakes away.

“What’s chu?” He says under his breath and shakes his head. He flicks his cigarette over the ashtray. It’s big, sectioned into four like a veggie dish at a barbeque, and it’s filled with butts. Marlboros. Embassy’s. Benson and Hedges. Curled up rollie stubs.

I light my cigarette. The room closes in on me a bit, blackening around the edges, and music and voices pour directly into my ear drum through a long funnel. If I concentrate on the white swan on the pack of filters, I’m fairly certain I won’t throw up. It’s outlined in green, and the contrast of green on yellow makes the backs of my eyeballs hurt.

“…but I was old enough to know that nothing lasts forever,” Al is saying. Fuck, that sounds important, but I can’t focus on him and the swan, so I just nod my head and try to look absorbed. He leans back far in his seat.

The lights come on full force, and the music cuts out. Everyone’s moving around at once. Cait and Joe appear, and Al’s grabbing my hand, and then we’re outside. The fresh air smacks me in the face, clears my head just enough. We stand outside the pub while people curve around us in a steady stream. The rain’s stopped but only just, and tiny rivers snake in iridescent trickles in the crack where curb meets road, purple and green with wet oil.

Cait pulls me aside. “I’m going to go home with Joe.”
“What?” I don’t understand. I can smell the hot grease from the KFC over the road, and I’m so hungry the lining of my stomach is stuck together. I collect all the spit in my mouth and swallow hard, frantic to open it up.

“We’re going to get a taxi to Joe’s friend’s house. He’s having people over, and I’m going to stay there with Joe.” She’s holding my face, and her voice is low and deliberate, each syllable puncturing the night. Am I too drunk or is she? All around us, voices echo.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, it’s fine.” Cait’s eyes are slits of hazel and white, and her chin is tucked too close to her neck, her head cocked to the side at a funny angle. “I’m fine.”

I lace my fingers over hers, and our hands are exactly the same size. “You’re absolutely sure you’re going to be okay?”

“Positive.” She kisses me. A soft, sweet, wet, drunk kiss. “I’ll call you in the morning.”

Cait and Joe cross the roundabout toward the taxi queue, and Al and I start walking home. We’re walking fast, and in seconds we’re past the thinning crowd, alone on the pavement. There’s that chemical mess of energy between us because we’re drunk and about to fall dizzy into the cotton sheets together.

“Shit, I need to stop at the ATM,” I say because taking out rent money is the sort of thing I only ever think about at two-thirty in the morning when I’m wasted out of my brain. We’re at least five minutes past the machine.

“What—now?” Al asks. He only slows his pace a fraction. The streetlamps cast a yellow glare on his face.
“Yeah, now.”

Back at the ATM, I face the screen, try to make sense of rectangles and numbers. Rent is sixty quid. Did Cait take out her money yet? I think about chasing her down and asking, but I don’t. I think about taking out one-twenty just in case, but there probably isn’t that much in the account. Al puts his arms around me from behind and rests his chin on the top of my head. His fingers trace the letters on the small of my back, then slide across my stomach and lock together. Rain evaporates off the pavement, thickening the air we breathe. I press sixty.

“All set?” he asks as soon as the money spits out of the machine. I turn and look up into his face. His eyes are the same exact shade of blue as mine, but it doesn’t feel important. I glance in the direction of the taxi queue, looking for a shock of red hair, a feather boa.

“All set,” I say, still gazing at the row of silver taxis that stretches down Meyrick Road like a necklace. I fold the soft twenty pound notes into my pocket, one half of what we need.
When I was a kid, I felt like I was destined for something great.

I mean, I really believed it.

I didn’t know why exactly, but I knew that my name would one day appear in history books. And not just in some mustard-colored sidebar, but a real section with its own bold-face subtitle, a solemn photo. Not a used textbook either, with fourteen other names written inside the front cover and mustache doodles on Elizabeth Cady Stanton like we had at St. Rose Elementary. No, I was going to be in a brand new state-funded book, a book with gold-edged pages and glossy color photographs. Maybe I would invent something or cure something. Or maybe I’d lead a campaign against a pressing issue of social injustice. I could see myself in Africa, in earth tones and a safari hat, digging out a fresh water tap with nothing but my hands and a rusty trowel. I wasn’t afraid of getting dirty. Of sacrifice.

I imagined crisp designer suits, pencil skirts and double-breasted blazers with sharp lines. Long imposing conference tables. I penned half a dozen acceptance speeches. Was it tacky to thank God or classy? I could never decide. I sat in the back of Mrs. Jenkins’s phonics class, flipping through the pages of our plaid-covered book with a secret smile, knowing I was special.

For a brief period of time in 1992 when Kim Zmeskal, only sixteen years old, dominated all conversations about the Barcelona Olympics, I stared at my own tiny,
streamlined body and imagined that heavy gold medal being lowered over my own head. I could feel the silky strap on the back of my neck, the weight of the medallion.

But then Kim Zmeskal’s whole life teetered on ten centimeters of suede-covered wood. On the first night of the competition, she fell off the balance beam, didn’t she? Fucked it all up.

I was eleven. I bounced back.

“Get out,” he said, cutting the ignition. He put his car in park, in the shadow of the trees that grew near the faded blacktop of the parking lot. We were at random gas station in Ohio.

“What?” I searched his face, a sickening yellow in the neon glow of the sign. It was around ten o’clock, but it was an oddly dark night, starless. It could have been three A.M. We could have been at the bottom of the ocean.

“I said get out.”

“You can’t be serious.” I’d grown accustomed to his mood swings, the way his thin lips grew redder and wetter, the way he squared his jaw, talked through his teeth.

“Get out of the car.” He turned sharply to look at me, pulling the keys out of the ignition and tossing them on the dashboard with an unceremonious clatter.

“No. I’m not getting out.” We were somewhere between twinkly-lights and checkered couch of my L-shaped dorm room and his empty apartment, frozen in a moment somewhere in the hour-long drive between. I didn’t have a cell phone, and I refused to be the type of girl who had to ask to use the gas station telephone to call for a ride because my boyfriend and I were fighting.
“Get out of the car.” His voice was steady, low, full of gristle and bile. Not long before, we’d been walking down the frozen foods aisle of Acme. I was cold, slipping my hands inside the floppy sleeves of his navy soccer hoodie I was wearing, and he was laughing, joking about how I was always cold.

*Caitlin and I are thinking of going to Europe after graduation,* I’d said, and immediately his shoulders had stiffened, his forehead creased. The argument began like this and turned into something more vague, less negotiable. The foggy boxes of frozen entrees became the neat rows of Trident and Tic Tacs, a register drawer swinging open, and then the tan interior of his Plymouth.

“I’m not getting out,” I said. “Just take me home.”

“Take you home? Take you home?” He laughed. His features scrunched up and twisted. He curled his lips, swishing saliva back and forth between his front teeth and then spitting. He flung the seat back into full recline, closed his eyes, and fell asleep.

The spit hit me just below my right eye, somewhere near the faint divot on my cheek, the scar from when I sliced my skin with a piece of glass as a small child, playing on the paved floor of a pavilion at a family reunion. It felt thick and too heavy, warm for only the briefest second, and then cold as it slid down the side of my cheek.

Naturally, I assumed I’d go to an Ivy League school. I liked Yale. I liked saying it, liked spelling it, liked imagining it embroidered in boxy lettering across a gray sweatshirt. Harvard seemed too obvious, Princeton too forgettable. If I wanted to make the right impact, it would have to be Yale. Unless I went abroad. There were a couple weeks in the eighties when I made pretty firm plans to attend Oxford University in England. I watched
Alex P. Keaton tour the grounds on *Family Ties*, and I was mesmerized by the narrow perpendicular arches, the gothic spires, the perfectly geometrical campus greens, the lush grass that only university fellows were permitted to walk across. I didn’t have the language of course to recognize these details, but I knew that Oxford was dark stone and echoes, musty books and winding hallways. And I knew that it was across the ocean in England, the gray and silent place where stories were made.

It wasn’t that I was itching to leave home. On the contrary, I quite liked Girard, Ohio, the double-decker shopping carts at Sparkle Market, the massive climbing tire wedged into the earth at Liberty Park, the fireworks over MacDonald Bridge each summer at the close of the Italian Fest. The stringy-hot cheese grease from a slice of Little Peppino’s pepperoni pizza and the way the tar-patched black top went soft in the sun while I ate my Dilly Bar outside the Dairy Queen. It was home. But I obsessed over being educated somewhere spectacular and over the notion of doing something important entirely by myself.

When I was fourteen, my sister Mandy graduated high school and moved forty-five minutes away to begin adulthood on the fourth floor of Wright Hall at Kent State University. I helped her unpack. We hung prints of daisies and butterflies, arranged picture frames, made a livable space of the cinderblock and linoleum. Afterward, we attended an icebreaker social for the dorm, burgers and hot dogs, long ears of corn roasted inside their papery husks.

But in my head, I imagined my own college meet and greet. A formal tea, with cucumber sandwiches and miniature fruit-topped cakes placed on ridged paper. A housemother who would lovingly but sternly teach us all to recite the rules in precise
unison. I’d retire to my dorm room, sit at my mahogany desk, and switch on the green rectangular library lamp. In a leather-bound journal, I’d record the name of each girl and a defining detail so as to learn all their names as quickly as possible. They would be my sisters, my bosom buddies.

We sat cross-legged on the floor of Caitlin’s dorm room. The carpet was a dull blue, padless and scratchy. Outside snow lay in dirty drifts along the perimeters of campus where early morning plows had recovered cement walkways, rendering the world an ugly mess of salt stains and car exhaust. Despite the cold, Caitlin’s windows were cracked open, and the filmy red curtains rocked lazily like water. *They’re very sensual curtains,* Caitlin had said when she bought them. She’d said the word *sensual* like each letter was wrapped in a rich ganache, tasting the sounds on her tongue.

A blue pen and a yellow legal pad sat between us, the top page blank and imposing. Graduation was just a semester away, and we were planning our year abroad together. It felt right to do this on Caitlin’s floor. Hers was a room of possibility. When a friend of ours confided that she was feeling self-conscious about developing a small pooch that hung over the waistline of her favorite jeans, I received a phone call.

*Emergency party,* Caitlin said, authoritative and urgent.

*Why? What theme?* I was getting used to the way her mind worked.

*‘Love Your Belly.’ I’ll explain when you get here.*

When I had arrived at Caitlin’s dorm, a dozen or so girls were assembled, all with t-shirts tied up in knots or tucked underneath bras, revealing bellies. Bellies that were tanned and toned, pale and furry, stretch-marked and squishy. We feasted on peanut
M&Ms, vending machine Twix bars, canisters of Pringles. After a jug of Carlo Rossi blush wine, the Belly Parade embarked. We ran through the halls of Centennial, drumming on our bellies, knocking on random doors and shouting “Love your belly!” to bewildered residents.

I couldn’t imagine taking this trip with anybody else.

“I couldn’t imagine taking this trip with anybody else,” I said.

“I know! Me neither! You’re the only person I know who would actually go. Everybody talks about doing this, but nobody actually does it.” Caitlin shook her head. Several of our girlfriends had initially wanted to travel with us, but had already flaked. One to grad school. Another to Baltimore with a boyfriend. We’d only met the year before, but Caitlin and I often found ourselves talking about each other in superlatives. The best, the funniest, the craziest, the most reliable.

The most like me.

Was I like her? Or did she make me believe I could be? Caitlin’s words—Nobody actually does it—sunk deeper into the core of myself. Outside the window, boots crunched on snow as students trudged to and from class, to Miller Dining Hall or to the lonely stacks in the basement of the library, all of them complacent, mediocre, building firm plans that would lead them into comfortable lives. I hated them. All of them. I wanted to climb out of Caitlin’s window and run across Hinsdale Road, past the student center swarming with backpacks and scarves and cigarettes and cell phones. I wanted to scale the ivy-covered stone of Bates Hall and shimmy up the bell tower, sniping each one of them with firmly-packed snowballs. Just so they’d feel the sting on their faces. The wet! The cold! So they’d look skyward and wonder—what and how and why?
I was only twenty-one years old, but I realized that I’d broken pretty much every single promise I’d ever made to myself. In high school, I said I was going to be valedictorian, but I wimped out of Honors Chemistry, and I finished second in the class. As a runner, I set a realistic goal of breaking a six-minute mile, but my fastest recorded time was six minutes flat. My big sister bet me fifty bucks I couldn’t make it through high school without getting drunk, and the last big party of my senior year, I downed Zimas on a hammock, and I spun and I spun.

I vowed to save myself for marriage, made a big stink about it, gave abstinence talks to area grade schools, then lost my virginity in the afternoon in a sweaty dorm room with the perky ruffle-covered boobs of a Saint Pauly’s girl looking at me from a poster on the cinderblock wall. Like it was nothing.

And it was nothing. Just like all of it. Nothing.

I was planning this trip with Caitlin not because I’d always wanted to see the world but because I was terrified of the world, terrified of my own world without this in it. Maybe if I could do this one thing—and really do it because Nobody actually does it—then maybe I’d be okay.

“So where do we start?” I picked up the legal pad and the pen and wrote the words “Cait and Annie Go Global!” in the top margin. I traced the letters, darkening the ink and rounding the tips of each letter with a dark blue ball.

Kindergarten was mostly okay. Only two devastating things happened all year. First, I peed my pants. Not because I was lazy or stupid or thoughtless like all the other kids who peed their pants. No, I knew I had to go and I knew exactly how to go and what to do
afterwards too. Wiping, flushing, washing—the whole process was really quite blasé by that point in my life. But I was too shy to ask Miss Wagner where the bathroom was. The long empty halls outside Miss Wagner’s room were disorienting. No tables or bean bag chairs or cubby holes for personal belongings. Just blue walls and closed doors. I sat on my miniature salmon-colored chair and concentrated with all my might on not peeing. Filtering out the blather of my classmates, Miss Wagner’s bouncy yellow hair, the construction paper kites that hung on the cinderblock walls, I squeezed my legs together, knee bone smacking knee bone, gritted my teeth. Inevitably, I lost control, and hot piss spilled down my legs, puddled on the asphalt tiles beneath my chair.

“Did you pee yourself?” William Wence asked with a connoisseur’s enthusiasm.

“No,” I said, calmly and dismissively. “I spilled my milk.”

William Wence’s pudgy hand shot up in the air.

“Miss Wagner,” he said. “Miss Wagner, Annie peed herself.”

The second devastating thing happened on the very last day of school. Unbeknownst to us, Miss Wagner had saved all of our worksheets from the whole year and had organized each student’s work in a bright pocket folder. On our final day together, she presented us with this rich, comprehensive body of work. She placed a yellow folder before me, smiling wide and pretty.

“You did such wonderful work this year, Annie,” she said, pausing for a few seconds before moving on, lingering in a way that made me understand. She meant that I was smarter than the rest of these jerks. I’d known it all along, but now she was telling me that she knew it too, wanted me to know that she knew.
Breathless, I opened the folder. Perhaps she’d left me some sort of message, a sign. Flipping through the pages, I saw the familiar assortment of stickers. A smiling strawberry. An elephant with a spray of stars streaming from his trunk. A shiny metallic butterfly. Each one lovelier than the one before.

And then I saw it.

A glaring red X.

One short angry line intersected by a long disappointed slant. It was the single ugliest result of pen on paper in the history of written symbols. This can’t be, I thought, my pulse sucker-punching my esophagus. This simply can’t be.

I chewed the skin around my thumbnail, bit down hard and tasted blood. I began frantically shuffling through the pages until I saw another red X and then another and another. There were six red Xs all together. Six. I glanced at Miss Wagner who was across the room, handing a folder to an eager classmate. She was smiling, proud. I looked away before she could see my stinging eyes, my shame. The fluorescent lights felt too bright, too hot, and I could hear them buzzing above our heads. With slow, deliberate movements, I returned the papers to the pocket, smoothed them down, closed the folder. I focused on the corner of the folder, the place where already the white fluffy inside was curling out of the nauseating yellow. Hot tears swam inside my head but did not fall.

In fourth grade, my pediatrician told me I was in pre-ulcerous condition. In high school, I missed thirty days of school in one year and watched my blood gush and swirl inside test tubes at an immunologist’s lab. Maybe they’ll name a disease after me, I thought longingly as the nurse removed the needle from my arm, placed a cotton ball on the dot of blood that sat in my elbow crease. They didn’t. I was fine.
“We need to decide some basics,” Caitlin said, reaching for the legal pad. “How long do we want to be gone?”

“I think a year is good. As close to a year as possible.”

Caitlin wrote “One year” on the first line of the page. Her writing was plainer than mine, rounder, and I wished that I was doing the writing.

“And when should we leave? The end of summer?”

“Yes, end of summer. That way we can save up some money.” I needed to do some serious saving. The figure in my bank account was double digits. Caitlin had a car nicer than either of my parents’ cars that she was planning on selling. I didn’t even have my driver’s license. Caitlin’s dad was a successful attorney in Akron. My dad was a special ed teacher in Youngstown, and my mom worked part time as a nurse. Mine weren’t exactly the type of parents who could help us out financially.

Caitlin wrote “September 1st?” on the second line.

“Okay, and how many places do we want to go?” Caitlin put the pen down and pursed her lips, pushing her bottom lip under her top lip with her index finger. This was a more complicated question. “I think three would be ideal. I mean, we can travel wherever, take weekend trips, but I don’t think we should live in more than three places.”

“I agree completely,” I said. “I don’t want to be crazy tourists sleeping in a different city every night and never really knowing where we are. I want to live somewhere long enough to really know it.” I pictured cobble-stone streets, pastel-painted buildings, window boxes with tumbling lilacs.
“Long enough to love it,” Caitlin finished my thought. We smiled, and a silent rush of excitement surged through the room. She picked up the legal pad again, scribbled notes as we talked. We decided on England first—no language barrier—and agreed we ought to stay through the holidays so we could spend Christmas with friends. Italy was next because it was the only other place we both knew we needed to go, and because orange trees blossomed in spring, and we couldn’t conjure a prettier image than orange blossoms.

“Where should be spend the summer?” I asked.

“I don’t know. France?”

“Or Greece?”

“Hey—let’s just keep it open. Who knows where this year will lead us? I kind of like the idea of not knowing.”

“Yeah, yeah, I like that a lot.” Not knowing.

Caitlin wrote, “There are years that ask questions and years that answer” a few lines down on the page. It was a Zora Neale Hurston quote. We’d both been reading her for our World Lit class, lounging in our pj’s and slippers on opposite couches in the parlor of Bowler Hall. Are you on page 114 yet? Tell me when you get there.

“‘Years that ask questions and years that answer,’” I read out loud. Christmas in London. Orange blossoms in Italy. Not knowing. “It’s perfect.”

The phone rang. I sprang to life with mythic speed.

I was living at my parents’ house the summer after graduation, working as a sales associate at a professional women’s clothing store and saving as much money as possible.
My parents never answered the phone, scarred from the record sixty-four hang-ups in one
day seven years before when my older sister was a senior in high school. They left the
answering machine switched on permanently so that calling the house meant at least
thirty seconds of, “Hey D’Angelos, it’s so-and-so, are you there? Is anyone around to
pick up the phone?” Most of my friends weren’t that patient and would hang up without
leaving a message.

I bounded down the stairs and through the dining room, past the garage sale
hutch, rattling the china plates and bowls and reaching the phone just in time.

“Hello?”

“Hey, did the agency call you yet?” Caitlin asked. She was living an hour away at
her parents’ house in Akron, but we talked almost every day. We’d signed a contract
months ago with Alliances Abroad. They’d advertised a program called “Work in a Pub
in London,” where they found jobs, accommodation, and work visas for recent college
graduates who wanted to do exactly what we wanted to do—spend no more than six
months bartending in England. We had already submitted all the paperwork and paid the
fees, had even bought our one-way tickets to London Gatwick for a flight that would take
off in just three weeks. But we were still awaiting our assignments. Every day I dreamed
up quirky pub names. The Goose and Gander. The Golden Boar. I was hoping for Soho
or Notting Hill. Maybe Covent Garden.

“No,” I answered. “What’s up?” I reached for a pen from the wicker basket of
pens on the phone table, anticipating a name, an address. I tested it on the memo pad,
well aware that out of the thirty-odd pens in the basket, probably eight worked. A smooth
red squiggle on the first try. My pulse quickened.
“They want to know if we want to go to Bournemouth.”

“What?”

“Bournemouth. Yeah, I don’t know. I guess it’s like this big resort town. Annie, it’s right on the ocean.”

“The ocean. Wow.” I had never even thought about the ocean. I knew logically that England was an island, but I never consciously associated it with beaches. “What happened to London?”

“I don’t know. It’s not even close. Like two hours by train. They said they could either get us separate assignments in London or they could get us in the same place in Bournemouth.”

“Oh.” Separate assignments? I traced the M in the upper corner of the memo pad.

“I guess they’re expanding the program or whatever. Listen, I Googled Bournemouth. It looks completely gorgeous.”

“I don’t think I want to do separate assignments. Do you?”

“Of course not.”

“And I have kind of always wanted to live by the water at some point in my life.”

True, but still. The London in my head froze. The red double decker bus grinded to a halt. Big Ben’s fourteen-foot minute hand hung useless between two-foot numerals. Open market shoppers on Portobello Road stopped suddenly, manicured hands resting on silky scarves, used records. People on the sidewalks hesitated; black umbrellas that moved up and down in instinctual synchronicity paused mid-cycle. Every leaf in Hyde Park was perfectly still.
“Annie, I think we should do it. I think we should go to Bournemouth.” Caitlin’s voice was steady and assuring.

“Well, I guess that’s the spirit of the trip, right? This whole idea of not knowing.”

“Alright,” Caitlin said, giggling, a tone of bewilderment skimming on the surface of her laughter. “I guess we’re going to Bournemouth, wherever that is.”

That night, I dug through my boxed-up books from school, found the one I was looking for, a heavy hardback book that had cost me forty dollars, Portrait of Britain. The cover featured a crumbling ruin of a castle reflected in a lake. I flipped through the index and quickly found Bournemouth. It was located in the central region on the south coast, Dorset, the West Country. I loved this book for its stunning photography, sometimes a two-page spread of a single sweeping shot, but the only picture of Bournemouth was a two-inch by two-inch square of a row of old-fashioned-looking beach huts, painted white with alternating trim work, red, blue, and yellow. Next to the beach huts was a toy train that I assumed gave rides up and down the beach. No images of capping waves or unbroken blue or white sandy beaches. The blurb next to the picture read: In central Bournemouth the amusement arcades, casinos, nightclubs and shops cater for the city’s many visitors. During the summer, pop groups, TV comedians and the highly regarded Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra perform at the Winter Gardens Theatre, off Exeter Road. Pop stars? Comedians? Not exactly the sophistication and grandeur I associated with London. I stared at the beach huts for a long time.

I didn’t go to Yale. Or Oxford. I never even applied. In fact despite being salutatorian of my senior class, a four-year letterman in two sports, a state finalist in Speech and Debate,
and a student council representative, I only applied to two schools: Loyola of Chicago and Hiram College. I chose Hiram, a small private school about twenty minutes north of Kent State, on the enthusiastic recommendation of my dentist. I had no interest in dentistry but after a root canal, a freak sixth wisdom tooth, and several fillings, I trusted the guy. He seemed content. And I liked the way he described Hiram Hill and the old bell tower, the way his eyes looked past the miniature sink and the gargling saliva-sucker that hung from my mouth, as though he were remembering something private and integral.

With just 850 students, Hiram had only a couple hundred more students than my small private high school. The village of Hiram itself had a population of five hundred, all of whom we dubbed “the townies.” One stoplight, one bar, one corner store. On Wednesdays, we’d travel two towns over to line-dance at the Boot Scootin’ Saloon in Mantua, pronounced Man-a-Way by Portage County residents, stripping the town of any romanticism that might have linked it to Romeo’s place of exile. Historically, Hiram made two big claims. One: James A. Garfield, twentieth president of the United States of America, was once the president of Hiram College. And two: Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, was tarred and feathered in Hiram, Ohio (though he wasn’t actually executed there). We also liked to take credit for the mildly anthologized poet Vachel Lindsay, who attended but did not graduate from Hiram College.

Not a whole lot else happened.

I had a pretty typical college experience as far as the small college circuit goes. I smoked weed on the roof of the Quad from a murky blue pipe I kept hidden in my sock drawer, took poetry workshops, pressed fall leaves between the pages of my favorite books. I went to homecomings, toga parties, the Kegs and Eggs breakfast in the early
April sunshine on the Martin Commons during Springfest. During finals week, I walked to the B-side Café at midnight in my pajamas to drink black coffee and eat bagels smothered in cream cheese and strawberry jam. I performed in the *Vagina Monologues*. I was evolving.

The morning I left Ohio behind, I listened to “Leaving on a Jet Plane” on repeat while I packed last minute items, wiping shampoo and conditioner bottles dry after my long shower, sealing them up in gallon freezer bags. I stood in front of the full-length mirror in my bedroom, scrutinizing my attire. Gray yoga pants, a wifebeater, brand new cross-trainers, and a purple bandana. This was it.

My parents and baby sister Gracie drove me to Cleveland Hopkins International Airport. Mandy was living in Chicago at the time, and my sister Chloe had just moved into her very first college dorm room earlier that week, so my final goodbye was aimed at just half of my family. Not quite two years after the 9/11 attack, Cleveland Hopkins still had drop-off only departures. We exchanged tearful but brave goodbyes. My mom cupped my cheeks in her hands for a long minute, said she couldn’t believe how soft my skin was, and then they left. I walked through the automatic doors alone and was immediately swallowed up by the commotion. Airport employees in blue polyester, talking into walkie-talkies. A wall of television screens with numbers and codes, people holding up boarding passes, comparing. The constant whirring of luggage on wheels rolling over smooth linoleum. The smell of coffee. I looked around but didn’t see Caitlin anywhere.
I found the Continental desk easily enough, smiled at the blond woman behind the counter, and sat down on a chair in a row of chairs that was bolted to the wall. Straight ahead there was a clock. Caitlin was ten minutes late. No big deal. After a few minutes, a young guy sat down next to me. He was wearing shorts, a t-shirt, and a baseball cap.

“That’s a lot of luggage,” he said, smiling. “Where are you headed?”

“Bournemouth, England.” I’m not normally one for small talk but I welcomed the distraction.

“Never heard of it.” He smiled again, waited for an explanation.

“Me neither. Until three weeks ago,” I said. “It’s about a hundred miles south of London, right on the coast.”

“Wow, that’s really cool. What are you doing there?”

I looked at the clock again. Caitlin was nearly twenty minutes late.

“My best friend and I are moving there. We just graduated college, and we’re going to work overseas for a year.”

“Wow, sure blows visiting my uncle in Wisconsin out of the water.” He laughed, took his hat off and ran his fingers through his hair. “So where is she?”

It wasn’t like Caitlin to be late. She prided herself in her organizational skills. I was the one who was always arriving places last, flustered and out of breath. Punctuality is the virtue of the bored, I frequently quoted.

“Sorry…What?”

“Your friend,” he said. “Where is she?”
“I don’t know. I guess she must be running late.” I couldn’t even call her. She’d already had her cell phone turned off for the year. I’d actually tried calling her on her dad’s phone right before leaving my house, but it had gone straight to voicemail.

“Oh, well I’m sure she’ll be here any minute.”

We carried on with forgettable airport. I smiled in the right places, nodded a lot. But my eyes kept wandering back to the clock. It was a standard analog, white face, black hands, and it seemed anachronistic in the hurried buzz of the international airport. Surely the clock should be digital, military time even. The closer that long minute hand came to completing its revolution, the angrier I got at the clock. How long had it been screwed to that wall, and why hadn’t anyone bothered to update it? How could people rely on a battery-operated clock when they needed to catch international flights?

“Hey,” the guy in the chair next to me said, his tone dropping slightly. “It’s been an hour. Are you sure your friend’s coming?”

“Yeah of course, she’ll be here.”

“I know, I mean, hey I don’t want to upset you, but what if she doesn’t show up?”

“She will. She’ll be here.” I unzipped my carry-on, checked my ticket and passport, re- zipped.

“Yeah, but I’m just saying if she doesn’t, what are you going to do? Are you going to get on the plane anyway?”

In one month, Caitlin and I would huddle by the glass washer in the hotel, sweating out the previous night’s Tequila binge, forcing ourselves to drink pints of water every half hour until our shift ended. We would take a taxi home, pack a shared suitcase, catch a bus
to Heathrow, and sprint all the way to the departure gate, the final two passengers to board that Sunday evening’s last RyanAir flight to Dublin. We would sit on the plane, laughing and gasping for air, oblivious to the irritated expressions of our fellow passengers. We would arrive in Dublin at one in the morning, the cobblestone streets loud and full, would slip into our hostel bunk beds and fall asleep. I would never once wonder how Caitlin knew how to find the right gate.

In three months, we would stand on thick grass, breathe in the scent of wet dirt and wild heather, stare into the unbroken majesty of the Scottish Highlands. Caitlin would reach for my hand, squeeze gently, and I would watch her wipe a tear from her eye.

“God, it’s just so beautiful,” She would say, looking into a deep crevice between two mountains, her words floating out into the hazy green mountains and up into the marble gray of the Scottish sky. And I would realize that I was crying too.

Four months after that, we’d sit in an internet café inside Rome Ciampino Airport with all of our luggage gathered at our heels, each of us one bag lighter than when we’d departed, forced to downsize by airport regulations. Caitlin would check our bank balance, see how much we had left on her three thousand dollar credit limit, search for last-minute cheap flights back to England. I would read over her shoulder, hover, chew the skin around my nails. Frustrated, she would send me off to buy gelatos while she made travel plans.

“You remember the gelato place we passed when we first came in, right?”

“Sure, no problem.”
I would find it with no problem but would get hopelessly disoriented in the intricate web of Rome Ciampino. I would wander, with a nutella-flavored gelato in each hand, blinking away tears. I would ask nonthreatening strangers for directions and would get sad head-shaking. *No, no parle inglese. No English.*

When the cool gelato began to run down my wrists, I would wonder if I should eat them both before it was too late or if I should throw them away. Or maybe if I just turned the next corner, I’d see the blue sign hanging over the internet café, see Caitlin’s familiar straight-backed posture at the computer screen. Occasionally I’d take a lick, the smooth chocolate mixing with the salt of my tears and the sweat and the filth of the day. More often, I’d wipe a tear away with my wrist and smear nutella gelato across my cheek. Sticky and tear-smudged, I would eventually toss the empty cones and soggy napkins in a trashcan.

“Annie!” Caitlin would finally yell, and I’d turn around to see her behind me, clean tears streaming down her face. “Where have you been? I’ve been so worried about you.”

Over the next year of my life, I would need Caitlin, in a new and finite way. And she would need me. During our entire year abroad, we would only spend the night in different places once. Just one time. We would become family. We would solve life’s problems together, walking for hours around the narrow streets of Bournemouth, finding comfort only in constant motion, in the rhythmic pounding of feet on pavement, our purses bouncing against our hips. We would walk through the parks, through the Square, down by the water, sit on a favorite bench and gape into the uneven sea, watching the rough waves rise and fall, swell and then break.
“So…” the guy sitting next me in Cleveland Hopkins said. “What are you going to do?”

I looked at the woman behind the Continental desk, at her short blond hair and the way it moved in one piece when she turned her head. I watched the minute hand on the clock, my luggage at my feet.

“I don’t know.”

I think most children believe they are destined for greatness, that they are an heir to a lost oil fortune or a cello prodigy or the future starting point guard for the Lakers. But somewhere along the way, people stop believing. By the time I walked across the black turf surrounding the football field to accept my degree encased in its blue folder with a shiny gold *summa cum laude* sticker, I realized it was just a Bachelor’s degree in English. I was never going to cure cancer or discover a new life form. No one was going to name any constellations or diseases or important buildings after me.

Why do people stop wanting to be ballerinas and baseball players? How do they decide to become janitors, telephone operators, kindergarten teachers? Somebody has to make icing roses to pile on bakery cakes, count the cash register drawers at the end of the night, stock the shelves at Wal-Mart. Our whole world revolves on the axis of mediocrity, turns with the momentum of forgotten dreams. And somehow, we’re all mostly happy.

I had accepted this world view by the time I reached my senior year of college. I crumpled up my half-filled-in Peace Corp application and threw it in the trash. I registered to take the GRE. I finally took my driver’s license exam. And failed.
I wasn’t destined for greatness.

But something within me quivered, stirred, clawed at my gut.

My bladder was full. Pulsating. The kind of full that hurt to lean forward, hurt to breathe too deeply. I leaned back in my seat and concentrated on being still, but the train was fast and rattling. Probably for the best—no danger of falling asleep that way. Caitlin’s head was against my arm, her eyes closed, her breathing steady.

“Wake me up when we get to Bournemouth,” she’d said a little over an hour ago when we boarded the train. Her eyes were bloodshot, and the last smudges of yesterday morning’s eye make-up cast a shadow on her half-shut lids. “Just listen for Ringwood,” she mumbled, sinking into my side. “We’ll be the next stop.”

During the twenty-odd hours of straight travel, the airports, the subways, the crowded sidewalks, the cold marble of Victoria Station, I’d had very little responsibility. From the moment Caitlin had burst into Cleveland Hopkins Airport, red-cheeked and out of breath, she’d managed our departure. Caitlin was the one to wrestle our over-stuffed carry-ons into overhead baggage compartments, the one to decode the colorful bent and twisted lines of the London Underground map, the one to pronounce with absolute conviction, “Circle Line,” and fiercely drag her luggage down the teeming stairwell. Caitlin was the one who wandered through the ebb and flow of the roped-off ticket line at the train station while I sat on our mound of suitcases, watching her purchase the tickets for this final leg of our journey. Soon we’d pull into Bournemouth Travel Interchange and surrender ourselves to a gray taxi, ride the three short blocks to Spencer Road, and walk up the gravel drive of our new home.
Provided I didn’t fall asleep.

My strategy was simple. I was a light sleeper with a small bladder. If I had to go, there was no way I could sleep. So I chugged two bottles of water when we boarded the train and waited. The train’s movements, though erratic, possessed a certain solipsistic effect. I leaned my head on the enormous windowpane, smearing the glass with the oil from my forehead, and my teeth rattled against one another, the vibration sending an odd tickle through my gums and nasal passages. I snapped my head up, refusing sleep. Our car was mostly empty, a few scattered passengers flipping through newspapers or looking idly out the window. A man wearing a black suit with the thinnest pinstripes frowned at his laptop screen, and I could smell his watery coffee. My bladder throbbed.

Once outside of the sunlit stone and loose echoes of London, the English countryside revealed itself in streaks and blurs. The landscape was sectioned into geometrical plots, ownership marked by hedges and brambles rather than fenceposts driven onto the earth. Browns and greens rolled over each other in a way that somehow exhaled gray, an afterthought. As though the thick clay that collected in the damp darkness beneath had found its way into the very veins and pores of the vegetation, the land itself exuded a wetness, a Readiness.

I shivered, cold from the stillness, the sleep that hung all around the train, from the feeling of dried sweat and a bare neck. My shoulders ached from the day, and I needed a shower. I rubbed the knot between my right shoulder and my neck with the cool pads of my fingertips, feeling the groove where the strap of my suitcase had carved a canyon in my skin. I tried to stretch without waking Caitlin, pushing my shoulders down, rolling my neck. The movement caused the image in the windowpane to flicker.
A face stared back at me, small features, pointy chin. Her hair was pulled back with a purple bandana, loose waves spilling out from the well-worn cloth, fine tendrils escaping. Deep half-moons sagged below eyes too gray to be called blue, exhaustion etched in the fine lines that crept from her eyes like spider silk. She looked like she belonged on a train, like she belonged to tomorrow or thirty years before or any time in between. Transient, rootless. A tiny diamond sparkled in her nose, filled her face with an unexpected resilience, a capacity to last. I looked into her eyes that were my eyes and listened for Ringwood.
Chapter 3

The Roundhouse Hotel

The first time I ever turned left onto Lansdowne Crescent from Holdenhurst Road, I was on a mission. The day after our arrival Caitlin and I, having slept off the first and most immediate wave of jet lag, dug fresh clothes out of our still packed suitcases and decided to get our bearings. Holdenhurst Road was one long stretch of depravity that ran from the bowels of Boscombe straight through to the Lansdowne Roundabout, the dingier outer fringes of Bournemouth’s town centre. Boscombe was known as much for its used book stores and artsy antique shops as it was for the prostitutes and bedsit stabbings that made frequent headlines in the Daily Echo. We were looking for the Roundhouse Hotel, the name that had been printed in our Alliances Abroad assignment pack next to the word “employer.” Rounding the corner, I looked up from page 5 G3 of my Bournemouth street map and sucked in a deep breath of September air.

“It’s beautiful,” I said. The roundabout itself held a full manicured flower garden. Blue petunias and yellow day lilies, bright French marigolds and muted purple echinops. The explosion of color was contained by a wrought iron fence, each post curving dramatically into a graceful spear. It was a circular oasis amidst the congested traffic that came and went aggressively from five directions, the steady motion of Mini Coopers and Rover Metros only enhancing the roundabout’s enchanting stillness. I didn’t know yet that Bournemouth was the winner of Britain in Bloom, that flowers and ferns and even transplanted palm trees could be found at almost every twist and turn.
At the same time, Caitlin said, “It’s hideous.”

I followed her gaze and found the Roundhouse Hotel. A six-story cylindrical monstrosity with pebble dash concrete facing on the lower two stories, the hotel vaguely resembled a giant cigarette stubbed out right smack in the middle of Bournemouth. Massive and modern, it disturbed the scene the way Salisbury Cathedral would disturb a trailer park. To the left, Bournemouth College sat, brick and stoic, with an 1903 dedication plaque and a chiming clock tower climbing toward the cracks between clouds. Across the road along Lansdowne Crescent, crumbling four-story Victorian storefronts housed an upscale pizzeria and a tired Irish pub. Even the KFC seemed discreet, tucked inside a tall sandstone building, the Colonel peeking respectfully through an enormous curved window.

The next day, I pulled on black trousers and a starched white shirt and retraced our steps back to the Roundhouse. Caitlin and I had been scheduled different orientation shifts, and I gave myself double the time I needed to get there because I was notoriously bad with directions. I clutched my map and, miraculously, I arrived at the Roundhouse in just twenty minutes. I moseyed around the neighboring shops killing time. School kids in blue blazers and striped ties crowded the bus stop on Meyrick Road. A girl in a thin cotton blouse with an unnecessary training bra peeking through offered a ratty ten pack of Mayfair Lights to her friend, who was thick with baby fat and had long blond hair. After lighting up, the smaller girl mounted the larger girl’s back, and they piggy-backed the stretch of pavement behind the sheltered bus stop, shrieking with laughter and exhaling small clouds of smoke that trailed behind them like kite strings.
I glanced at the clock tower and decided it was close enough to 3 PM to walk through the front doors of the Roundhouse and begin my stint as a hotel barmaid. The word barmaid sounded fantastically archaic and fed my very romantic ideas about working in a hotel in England. I had visions of all the quirky Brits I’d befriend, the mates I’d write home about and the way we’d giggle about whether one should say parking lot or carpark. Tomato, tomáto. I was gravely disappointed to cross the lobby and find Jenn Schneck behind the bar. She had a sleek black bob and was nearly six feet tall, slim and toned like a ballerina but with an awkward masculine posture. From Wisconsin, Jenn was probably more American than I was.

“I thought there were two of you,” she said. She was sitting on a low stool next to the glass washer behind the bar and didn’t even look up from her book.

“What?” I looked from side to side and felt suddenly inadequate, like maybe there should have been two of me.

“Alan said there were two of you.”

Alan was a name I could latch onto. Alan van der Wiel was the bar manager at the hotel, and Caitlin and I had spent an hour the day before filling out paperwork with him. He had a salt and pepper mustache and looked vaguely like a cartoon mouse with his slightly buck teeth, pinstripe pants and stiff black waistcoat.

“Oh right, yeah, my friend Cait. No, we’re on opposite shifts.”

Jenn shrugged and closed her book. “Well, if you’re here, I suppose I can clock out. Emilie’s training you.” She stuffed the book into a small triangular backpack. Wrapping a scarf that was nearly as tall as she was three times around her neck, she walked out the automatic doors. Sitting on the red plastic bench at the bus stop where the
school girls had been, Jenn resumed her disinterested slouch. She lit a cigarette and stared with solemn blue eyes down Old Christchurch Road, willing the yellow double decker into existence.

I watched the space where Jenn had been for a few minutes, not sure what to do next. What if someone walked up to the bar and ordered a drink? The mechanical whirring and swishing of the glass washer suddenly stopped and the red light in the upper left corner turned blue. I’d never tended bar before, but I was pretty certain this meant the cycle was complete. I opened the door and jumped back as wet steam and hot beer water assaulted my nostrils. Leaving the door open to clear the steam, I walked the length of the bar, taking it in. There was a very deliberate order, a tight organization. Rocks glasses stacked in threes, pint glasses in twos, Tom Collins glasses in neat rows, all atop a black plastic mesh designed to protect the glassware that was plastered to the wooden shelving with old spills. A row of silver measures of varying sizes lined the countertop next to the till like a tiny fleet of soldiers, the shiny cocktail shakers holding them in command. No space was wasted.

I was only newly twenty-two and hadn’t spent much time in bars as a patron, let alone behind one. Looking at the rows of liquor bottles backlit and reflected infinitely in the mirrors behind them, I realized there was a certain aestheticism behind a bar. The electric blue of the Bombay Sapphire melted into the deep green of the Gordon’s gin. Dark whisky ambers gave way to the subdued ochre of single malt scotches. Crisp clear vodkas. Tiny flakes of gold rising and falling in the belly of the dusty Goldschlager bottle. I rolled words around on my tongue that were new and exciting. Glenlivet.
Glenfidditch. The bar top shined under the lights, and brass fixtures were spotted with character and frequent splashing.

“Which are you?” A thick French accent cut through my quietude, and I turned to face huge brown eyes and pouty lips curled into an inquiring half smile.

“Annie,” I said. “Are you Emilie?”

“Oooh, another American!” She clapped her hands. “Alan said we had some more Yanks arriving. Looks like I’m getting out just in time,” Emilie said, but winked and then crinkled her nose in a manner that suggested we’d just shared a private joke.

As Emilie showed me where the ice bin was and how many lemon slices to cut for a night shift, she told me that she was leaving in a week. She’d just been hired as a barmaid at Moon on the Square, a popular pub in the town centre for twenty-somethings who were tired of the driving house beats and disorienting blue lights of the nightclub scene but still irresponsible enough to spend half a week’s wages on a good piss-up.

“Always busy,” she explained. September marked Bournemouth’s denouement, and she was too restless for the long months of a hotel off-season. There was a sort of liquid quality to her movements and speech, and her dark hair fell in soft waves of uneven lengths past her shoulders. I felt cooler just talking to her. It was the only shift we ever worked together.

The bar was opposite the main entrance and had its own seating area, half a dozen wooden tables with three chairs each, that bled into the lobby and reception area with its patterned carpet and upholstered furniture. The receptionists stared at us all day and we stared at them, and occasionally someone checked in.
“Here comes Pint-of-Fosters Joe,” Jenn said. After a few days at the Roundhouse, I learned that Jenn was miserable with her placement in Bournemouth and not at all miserable with me personally. She too had used Alliances Abroad and had intended to live in London where her best friend was taking university classes. Instead, the agency had taken her fifteen hundred dollars and plopped her down blindly behind the bar at the Roundhouse Hotel, a two hour train ride from London. She’d spent the last month making small talk with her male Romanian and Sri Lankan roommates who spoke very rudimentary English.

“Who?” I was a restless worker and had taken to de-gunking the rubber seals of the glass washer with a butter knife when we were quiet, which was most of the time.

“You’ll get used to him. He’s harmless.”

An old man with a tweed jacket buttoned overtop of a deep red cardigan was walking toward the bar. He was average height but thin in a way that made him appear to fold back into himself. He placed both hands on the bar, and a nickel-sized age spot sat like a wedding ring on his left hand.

“Pint of Fosters,” Joe said.

“Hey, Joe, how’s it going?” Jenn asked in a loud clear voice.

I reached for a pint glass and faced the tap with determination. No matter how many times I watched Jen pour smooth pints with neat two-finger width heads, I could not master the art. I angled the glass so that the spout of the tap touched the place where it curved outward and pulled down on the Fosters lever. As the cool beer swirled out, I gently turned the glass upright, but the spout erupted, and I was left with the familiar disappointing pint of thick white froth.
“That won’t do,” Joe said, shaking his head fretfully. “That won’t do.”

“It’s alright, Joe,” Jenn said, pouring a perfect pint. “This is Annie. She’s training.”

“Eh?”

“ANNIE’S TRAINING.”

“Eh?” Joe cocked his head to the side, presumably favoring a good ear.

Jen looked at me and rolled her eyes while Joe produced a brown leather change purse and stacked his coins on the bar top. Two pound coins, three hexagon-shaped 20p pieces, and five pennies.

“ANNIE’S TAKING EMILIE’S PLACE.”

Joe smiled and nodded, raising his pint in a salute. He stood at the bar until he was finished drinking, each sip leaving a foamy mustache on top of his own wiry white one. Then he nodded once more in farewell and walked out through the automatic doors. Over the next few days, the series of events repeated itself in much the same way. Fosters frothing. Sad head shaking. “THIS IS ANNIE.” “Eh?” But as the days became weeks and months, and Joe’s face became the only one I could expect to see with any regularity, I watched his mind being gobbled up by Alzheimer’s or some other vague and greedy form of dementia. Some days he’d order a jacket potato to take home with him, and I’d have to chase him out the door because he’d leave his lunch wrapped in foil on the bar. Occasionally he was angry and frustrated.

“Hey, Joe,” I’d say, reaching for a pint glass.

“No! No! You’re not the right one. Where’s the other one?”

“You mean Emilie, Joe? Emilie doesn’t work here anymore.”
He always asked after Emilie, as did many customers, but on days like this he was inconsolable.

“But she’s supposed to be here,” he’d whine. “She said she’d be here.”

On those days, I’d silently slide his pint toward him and never ask for the £2.65. Joe would mutter to himself, agitated, and look expectantly at the kitchen door every time the head chef rang the bell and called, “Order up!”

Other days, he was extremely talkative. I learned all about his son with the important job in London, his three granddaughters, his wife Helen who had passed away years before, I think from diabetes. On one such day, Joe walked up to the bar with a devilish smile, and I imagined the wrinkles and white hair melting away, the age spots fading into a smooth complexion, the shoulders widening into a strong, confident back. Joe must have been quite handsome once.

“Pint of Fosters.”

“Hey, Joe, how’s it going?”

“My wife had the best legs in all of England.”

Not expecting such an announcement, I laughed out loud.

“She did. Truly sensational legs.”

Joe took a picture out of his pocket. He laid it on the bar and nodded his head as though this confirmed everything. I picked up the photograph and looked at Helen’s legs. They were indeed envious. The photograph was a black and white, curled at the edges, taken sometime in the forties I’d guess from the fur stole and Veronica Lake waves. Helen was pretty in a wide-eyed way, mouth half open, caught between a smile and a sentence, although I sensed her beauty was magnified by her goneness.
“You’re right, Joe, she’s gorgeous,” I said and returned the photograph.

“You know what I used to love to do?”

I shook my head, smiling. Joe placed the index and middle fingers of his right hand over his mouth in a V and wagged his tongue wildly. I was horrified to see such a crude gesture from such a feeble old man and embarrassed because such situations are ugly and unnerving. But at the same time, I was profoundly sad. I was sad for the violation of Helen’s privacy and sad for Joe’s crumbling mind. I was sad that two people could love each other so much and that this uncomfortable moment in a tacky three-star hotel could be all that remained.

Joe stopped suddenly. “They cut her legs off,” he said. “Both of them.”

“I’m so sorry Joe.”

He put the picture back in his pocket and sipped his beer. In between sips, he turned the pint glass in absent-minded circles with his thumb and middle finger. “I really miss those legs.”

A week or so later, Joe came in and performed a rousing rendition of “I Left my Heart in San Francisco” in a warbled baritone. I clapped enthusiastically.

Around the holidays, he came in with his important son. His son walked up to bar.

“Two pints of Fosters, please.”

“Certainly,” I said and poured two neat pints.

“You must be Emilie. We’ve heard so much about you. Listen, I really appreciate you looking after Dad so well.”

Joe’s sipped his pint, smiling from beneath a froth mustache.

“No problem,” I said.
Not everyone was harmless.

“I want to buy you something for Christmas.”

John stopped in on his lunch break every now and then and had taken quite a liking to me. He was in his late thirties and had oily skin and dark hair. It was never exactly clear what he did for a living but I knew that he made a lot of money and I suspected it was not all through legal enterprises.

“Don’t be silly, you don’t have to get me anything.” I reached for the Grey Goose, anticipating his usual, a double vodka on the rocks with a twist.

“But you’re so far from home, like. You should have something to open.” John smiled widely, revealing the black hole in the corner of his smile where a tooth should have been.

After two months behind a bar in a country where tips are not a given, I’d learned the necessity of playful banter. “Well, I’m not getting anything for you anyway,” I said and took the five pound note from his hand, smiling in what I imagined to be a coy way. He must have had something tattooed on his hand at one point but all that remained were blurry lines and an indistinguishable smudge between his thumb and forefinger.

John took a long sip and winced. “Still,” he continued, “a girl needs a present to open on Christmas. Something pretty.”

The skin under his eyes hung in deep purple half moons, almost green. I didn’t like where this conversation was going. The ice cubes made a tinkling sound in his glass.
“Something a bit…slutty. I bet you’d like that, eh? Something slutty?” His voice was quiet, breathy, and even though the bar was empty save an elderly couple sitting at a table against the back wall, I was sure all six stories of the Roundhouse could hear this exchange. I stood there, holding the five pound note, not knowing what to say. The phone rang at the front desk, and the upbeat *Match of the Day* theme song blared from the television set.

John took another sip. The ice cubes tinkled.

“Don’t worry, I’ll think of something,” he said.

I backed away and rang his order into the till. The register snapped open, smacking me in the chest. I took my time counting out his change. One pound coin. Two five p’s. When I held my hand out, John grabbed my wrist and squeezed so hard my fist involuntarily opened and the coins dropped onto the bar top, rolling to a stop.

“A thong, maybe? I know you like thongs, you fucking filthy bird. What size are you?”

When I didn’t answer, John squeezed my wrist harder. His knuckles turned white and the tattoo remnants looked sharper, but I still couldn’t make out what it had been. I stared at the two 5p coins on the bar, thin and dull, the Queen smiling weakly through the grime and tarnish. John leaned over the bar and whispered in my ear, his breath like Benson and Hedges and the lemon I’d just squeezed.

“Doesn’t matter, love. I shouldn’t expect you should have ‘em on long.”

Laughing, he released my arm, took the final swig of his drink, and left. In the morning, three round fingertip-shaped bruises lined my wrist. Deep purple, almost green.
The next time John came in, I was on shift with Caitlin, and she served him while I hid in the alcove next to the glass washer. Hot water swooshed behind stainless steel right next my ear, radiating heat, thickening the air.

“Annie’s not here,” Caitlin said when John asked after me.

“Yes she is,” he said. “I see her bowtie on the counter back there.”

“She’s not here,” Caitlin repeated, her voice flat and unconcerned.

“I know you’re there,” John said in a loud voice, leaning over the bar just far enough that I could see the shiny place where his receding hairline touched his forehead. But he never came back.

It’s funny how resort towns shine like glitter when you’re there on holiday but creak and groan like an old machine once you outstay the time frame of a packaged deal. My first few weeks in Bournemouth, I walked around with my jaw hanging open, gaping at the ornate window casings and doorways of the four story Victorian townhouses, the yellow and red roses that lined the bowling green where senior citizens wore dazzling white and rolled what looked to me like bocce balls with careful form and precision. I walked past the balloon vendors and ice cream stands that lined the beach, listening to the music from the rickety carousel, the piercing bark of a Norfolk terrier chasing the surf, and the rhythmic call of the sea. I felt like I was inside someone else’s postcard.

But the longer I stayed, the harder I looked and the closer I listened. The Inferno used to be a pub called the Fire Station because at one point it had actually been the fire station. The Opera House, another pub, used to of course be an opera house in an age when Bournemouth was capable of sustaining high culture. Landmark was a trendy
restaurant located in the shell of a gothic church, blue and purple light pouring through the perpendicular arches. You could tell exactly when someone first moved to Bournemouth by what they called the massive night club on Westover Road. I called it Bliss. The bartender at the O’Neill’s called it the Cage.

The hospitality industry was the lifeblood of Bournemouth’s economy, and new restaurants and bars sprung up like weeds all over BH1. A gourmet burger joint that lasted less than six months. Fruit, a claustrophobic vodka bar that boasted a hundred and one types of vodka—and nothing else. The Last Resort Hotel had a dark gray exterior and, living up to its name, was intentionally a piece of shit. Clubs that stayed open until 4 AM. Clubs that had plump sofas instead of straight-backed wooden chairs and hookahs on every table. Clubs that sold £12 cocktails with branch-sized sticks of ginger for garnishes. Everyone had a gimmick. Everyone was trying to cash in on the sunshine and the sea, and in the process, everything that made Bournemouth a charming Victorian seaside resort town was drowning.

In a weird way, it all began with the Roundhouse hotel. The Roundhouse was the first hotel built in Bournemouth since 1938 and only the second major seaside hotel built in all of England since the War. It went up in 1969, after the Imperial Hotel which had stood on 1 Meyrick Road since 1888, had been bulldozed. The hotel’s developers had envisioned something spectacular, the pinnacle of modernity and sophistication, but had also planned practically, targeting dependable businessman rather than tourists. Thirty-five years later, the Roundhouse survived but was very much an eyesore, reminding entrepreneurs of the danger of succumbing to fickle and regrettable period architecture and generally cheapening the local skyline.
The thing about hotel bars is that they stay open as long as guests keep drinking. There is no last call. No clock that runs fifteen minutes fast, denoting “bar time.” You don’t turn up the lights or cut the music. You stand in that sixteen foot by four foot hole pouring pints and measuring whiskey until the last reveler has squeezed his eyes shut and opened them wide again, and fumbling for his room key, gone up the dingy elevator. And in a town like Bournemouth with more clubs and pubs per square mile than any other town in Europe, with Stakis Casino and Spearmint Rhino and the soft sand and crashing waves, a night shift usually began when there was nowhere else for people to drink.

Alan told me this my first day, when Caitlin and I sat on the patron side of the bar filling out direct deposit forms and signing contracts that waived our right to the usually required eight hours between finishing one shift and starting the next. He’d said something slanted and noncommittal like, “There is no official closing time, which I’m sure you realize.” And far too dazzled and jet-lagged to read fine print or ask questions, we’d nodded. Yes, yes, of course, we realize. And we’d signed on the dotted lines.

What Alan didn’t say was, you will work these shifts alone because we don’t generate enough business in the off-season to pay more than one bartender per shift. The 120-cover restaurant adjoining the bar will be dark and creepy. The kitchen closes at ten, and the chefs will be in street clothes and out the door by 10:30. The lobby and front desk will be dimly lit and vacant. One night porter will roam the hallways of all six stories and will eventually tell you when you are relieved of your duties. You will have no direct phone line or pager system with which to contact him should an emergency arise. This night porter works the night shift at a three star hotel because he is of his own breed,
because he lacks the social skills and personal hygiene to work by the light of day but still likes his healthy portion of power. Because he likes having first dibs at touching the round firm asses of the foreign wait staff as they file in at 5:30 A.M. to lay the tables and polish the toast racks for breakfast.

Come to think of it, he didn’t mention anything of the bizarre hierarchy within the hotel. He never said how the Chinese were given stiff blue housekeeping uniforms and cleaning trolleys and expected at work at 4 A.M., that the Germans with their polished accents were relegated to the front desk, that the restaurant was staffed by Colombians who took classes at English 2000 during their three hour break between split shifts. He never told us that the head waiter who was actually a twenty-six-year-old architect from Bogotá was occasionally trusted with a bar shift and allowed to get an hour’s nap on a roll-away cot in the canteen before his 6 A.M. breakfast shift. But he definitely implied that we were lucky to be behind the bar and that it had everything to do with the fact that we were American and somehow at the top of the corporate racism ladder. At the top, but not exempt.

And so it happened that I found myself closing the bar at 4:45 A.M. on my second day of work. I’d been behind the bar for nearly twelve hours straight. A coach load of Scottish golfers had arrived that morning, checking in, downing a quick round of Kronenburg, and then heading straight to Queens Park. When they returned several hours after dinner, they were freckled and red-faced and more than a little drunk.

“You on your own, love?” asked a stocky man with full beard and wild eyebrows.

“Yes, sir.”
“You’ll be earning your wages tonight, I expect.” He opened his mouth wide and laughed a deep rich laugh that was simultaneously kind and foreboding.

I poured pints, measured spirits, filled the ice bin, wiped the bar top, learned the different English coins, lit cigarettes for fumbling drunk men, cut more lemons, made mistakes on the till, gave incorrect change, filled the ice bin again, wiped the damp hair off my forehead, laughed at shit jokes, ran rack after rack through the glass washer, lined up shot glasses on the bar, broke a glass, struggled to understand the harsh R’s and unfamiliar cadence of the Scottish accent as the men got more and more intoxicated, emptied drip trays, emptied ash trays, emptied plastic buckets that caught beer caps, and filled the ice bin again. Somewhere in the middle I ate a cheese and pickle sandwich standing up.

Finally the last few golfers stumbled up to their rooms, and I surveyed the wreckage. There were sticky rings on every surface and at least two more loads of glasses. The chairs were scattered throughout the bar and some had even found their way into the lobby, one actually turned over on its side in utter defeat. All twelve ashtrays were brimming with butts, and the whole place smelled like stale cigarettes and rancid beer.

I took a deep breath, rolled my head from side to side, loosening my aching neck muscles, and attacked the scene. As I was sweeping under the last table, something slim and white caught my eye. I stooped down and picked up an untouched cigarette. I crouched under the table, fingerling the spongy filter, marveling at the miracle that this fragile cigarette had made it through the night intact. It hadn’t been stepped on or splashed on or bent in half, hadn’t split open and spilled its dry guts on the floor.
Overcome with a sense of entitlement, I stood up and walked back behind the bar. I slipped the cigarette in my purse and grabbed the blue Bic lighter that sat in a rocks glass next to the till.

Everyone smoked in England. If they didn’t smoke, they’d just given up. And if they’d given up ages ago, they still had the odd one in the pub or outside the back door of their office building or leaning on the rail overlooking the rows of striped deck chairs that lined Bournemouth beach. In early September, it was still warm enough that smells hung in the air like cartoon thought balloons, narrating the life of the winding streets. On my way to work so many hours before, I’d turned the sharp corner from Holdenhurst Road onto Lansdowne Crescent and walked through someone else’s post-tea cigarette. I could almost see him with his unshaven face and wrinkled jacket, sitting on the wrought iron bench outside of Gump’s Sandwich Shop, smoking a roll-up and looking with satisfaction at the half eaten crusty roll on his plate. The dregs at the bottom of his mug. Occasionally, a crisp breeze blew in off the Channel, a clean sea breeze carrying with it Harry Ramsden’s fried cod and the promise of October. But the world quickly resettled, and the clay from the buildings, the tar from the streets, and the smoke from the collective exhale of an entire culture seeped into my pores.

I walked the twenty minutes back to our sleeping flat and arrived home sometime before 5:30 A.M. The first pale streaks of morning were breaking through the sky, light filtering in through hairline cracks in the clouds, silver and soft, more like moonlight than sunshine. All the way home, the cigarette sat in my purse. The conscious part of my mind thought about everything that had happened already and everything that would happen in the next year while my subconscious continued making change and recording drip tray
wastage, continued hearing the frequent ding of the register drawer bursting open. My feet ached the way they only can once you stop doing whatever it is you’re doing and sit down. It honestly never occurred to me to get a taxi. And even if it had, I only had a handful of change to show for my twelve hour shift and no idea how much it would cost. The fingers of my right hand played with the blue Bic lighter in my pocket, turning it over, running my thumb back and forth over the rough igniter.

I didn’t know yet that Boscombe was dangerous. I’d spent all of my life in a small Italian-Catholic suburb of Youngstown, Ohio. Every building was a variation of a timber frame square and no one ever had enough money to do much with their own, so my eyes were accustomed to peeling paint and potholes, Sammy-Quick-Stop and Jib Jab Hot Dog Shop. To me, Boscombe’s stately Georgian homes with their white render facades and eight foot bay windows denoted history, culture, and wealth. As I cut through the small park across the road from the flat, I never saw the syringes and flattened Stella cans that hid in the grass. I didn’t know that one street over, working girls marched up and down the pavement, getting in and out of the cars that cruised Holdenhurst Road at an idle crawl, girls and cars inching along with assembly line banality. All I knew was that I was exhausted, in a new way that was both thrilling and terrible, and that I wasn’t quite ready to go to sleep.

I unlatched the creaking gate outside of our flat and walked across the gravel drive just as the perimeter of my world gave way to the inevitability of the sunrise. Soft oranges and yellows crept up from the underbelly of the earth like an unexpected blush, warm and inescapable. I leaned back against the front door, holding the moment in, stretching it as far as possible. In a few minutes, I would walk upstairs and slip under the
soft white duvet next to Caitlin. She would roll over, half asleep, and mumble, “I’m so glad you’re home.” I would close my eyes and untense my knotted muscles and surrender to cotton sheets and dreamless sleep. Hours later, I would awake to a new day and in the months to come, a new everything.

But right then, leaning against the front door and watching dawn overtake night, I wanted nothing more than a smoke. I took the cigarette out of my purse and let my bag drop to the ground with a faint thump. It was slightly smashed from its time among the feet of the rowdy Scottish golfers and from the journey home inside my purse. Smashed but not broken. I put the filter to my lips and flicked the lighter, taking in a deep and filthy breath. The smoke stung my throat and snaked its way up my nasal passages, scratching the backs of my eyeballs so suddenly that I shut my eyes. For a few dizzying seconds I remained this way, silent and still and full of fire. And then I opened my eyes and exhaled, watching the smoke drift outwards and upwards at the same time, towards the park and up into the trees, dissipating, then fading into the morning light.
Chapter 4
Going for One

Caitlin fell in love. Forgetting to eat, desolate moors, *Wuthering Heights* kind of love. Love that exploded like a hand grenade, plopped down from somewhere distant and unclear and bursting into heat and flame, unavoidable shards, changing the landscape permanently and with no warning. Like every great epic romance, it happened just when she decided to turn her back on love.

Or rather, when we both had.

We did everything in stark parallels. Before embarking on our Bournemouth adventure, we’d both just finished degrees in English literature, both almost made out with our mutually favorite English professor at the department picnic, both stripped down to our underwear and played make-shift slip-and-slide on the slick grass of the soccer field in the pelting rain during our final week of school. We performed in the *Vagina Monologues* together, sitting side by side on backless stools, dressed in all black, reciting stories we saw as important paraphrased from nameless women we believed mattered. We wanted more out of life, and we both believed the other knew where to find it, that it was something we could only discover through whispers and laughter, through the gamble of a one-way ticket, through empty pint glasses and constant conversation. Something we could only uncover in tandem.
Since arriving in Bournemouth, the parallels had grown even bolder and more defined. I looked for Caitlin’s coinciding line like it was the magically appearing second line of a pregnancy test—*Yes, there it is! There is life here after all!* We learned how to pour pints together, how to apply for a National Security number together, and how to roast a thirty-pound turkey for our first-ever attempt at cooking Thanksgiving dinner (Who knew it would take so long to defrost?). We both broke up with our long-term boyfriends from home—both named Patrick—within the first few weeks of our year abroad. We held each other and cried under the striped duvet that covered our twin beds pushed together, not about the boys from home but about our fear of embracing the unfamiliar world we’d landed in, of the joy and responsibility of piecing together a life four thousand miles from home when both of us came from close-knit families, from the intimacy of sisters. Afterwards, we lay side by side on our backs on the carpet, ankle crossed over ankle and hands folded on flattened stomachs, with cool, wet peppermint teabags weighing on our closed eyelids, drawing out the redness and the uncertainty.

We even had the same birthday, June twelfth, which made us both Geminis. 

*The Twins.*

With Al and Joe who, naturally, were good friends, we’d both engaged in purely sexual relationships for the first time—*Aren’t we modern? Aren’t our lives textured and interesting?*—and we’d been left feeling simultaneously in awe of the freedom and disgusted by the ugliness of such an arrangement. Both relationships failed in the same week. Once Joe lost interest in Caitlin, Al recognized the fact that we had nothing in common aside from drinking together at the Irish pub and occasionally messing around
on a mattress dragged into the lounge while our best friends did the same on the other side of a thin wall.

They stopped calling us. We pretended not to feel slighted.

In Bournemouth, the leaves changed gradually from green to yellow to gone before I had a chance to miss the lurid reds and rusty oranges of northeast Ohio in the brief and certain miracle of autumn. Before I knew it, it was Halloween, and we realized it had been almost two weeks since we’d heard from Al and Joe at all. Caitlin and I dressed as Daphne and Velma from Scooby Doo. She teased her red hair, bought purple tights with seams down the back, found the perfect purple mini dress at a charity shop, a pea green silk scarf to tie around her neck. I borrowed a slouchy orange turtleneck from Jenn, who was a half an inch shy of being a full foot taller than me, and drew freckles on my cheeks with liquid eyeliner. We sat at O’Neill’s, sad cartoons, drinking hard cider and singing along too loudly to the songs the DJ pumped into the pub. We had discussed Halloween with Al and Joe weeks before. Joe’s broad shoulders and wide grin would have a made a perfect Fred; Al’s lanky frame and messy hair were exactly right for Shaggy.

“I’m done with love for a while,” Caitlin said, straightening her purple headband.

“Seriously.”

“I’m done with sex for a long time,” I answered. I took my compact out of my purse and checked my freckles.

The Saturday after Halloween, Caitlin and I were scheduled a noon-to-ten bar shift, but we were angling for a nine o’clock finish. Alan had recently hired a new barman, a
Colombian, who had been delegated to all the late-night weekend closing shifts. While I felt a small pang of guilt that this new hire had to endure all the brutal 5 AM closes on his own, I couldn’t deny how well it had worked out for me. Aside from the obvious safety factor, it meant that Caitlin and I didn’t always have to work opposite shifts, and that Jenn was also free on weekends and could decide that with Emilie gone and a flat full of men, she really ought to befriend us even if we did trump her position as the American barmaid in Bournemouth. The three of us took to late dinners, bottles of wine, and reckless binges at O’Neill’s that usually ended with afterhours rounds of shots with the Phil, the pub manager, and his bar staff when the pub was dark and empty.

The hotel, like O’Neill’s and like Bournemouth’s seaside hospitality industry in general, was in the depth of its slow season. In early November, it was well past the September farewell-to-summer parties and far too soon for Christmas bookings. Some nights, we were lucky if the 127-room hotel had a dozen rooms filled. I stood behind the bar, polishing glasses with a damp towel while Caitlin sat at the low stool next to the open glass washer. Steam poured out of the machine, coating her brow and upper lip with a light sheen despite the chill in the hotel lobby that wafted our way from the frequent shifting of the automatic doors. Jenn had finished work a few hours earlier and had been hanging out on the patron side of the bar, her waistcoat tossed on the empty stool next to her, her bowtie loosened and dangling. She chain-smoked Mayfair Lights and occasionally picked at the clumpy skin of the jacket potato that sat cold on her plate. Caitlin and Jenn were both uncharacteristically low-key, and I could see where the mood was heading.
“Do you guys even want to go out tonight?” Caitlin asked, handing me warm highball glass.

“I could go for one,” I said. Going for one was code. It sounded casual, sensible, innocent even. It was meant to lure in the hesitant friend, to disguise a deep-seated desire for raging debauchery. It was true that I liked the wind down time after work, the release of finally sitting on a solid high-backed chair after ten hours in my Mary Janes, the first sharp sip of cool pint after passing drinks over the bar to other people all day. Caitlin and Jenn knew this. Going for one was believable. But that night, I was feeling restless, up for anything. I turned the highball glass in my left hand with practiced precision, running the towel simultaneously around the inside and the outside.

“Yeah, I guess we can stop in for one. I just don’t feel like talking to anyone tonight.” Caitlin fingered the curling label on the side of the glass washer, rolling the clear plastic open and then letting it roll back into itself.

“Me neither,” Jenn said, pulling her short black hair straight down over her eyes and pressing the very tips under her chin. She poked her tongue through her hair. Go figure, Jenn never felt like talking to anyone.

“Don’t worry, we’ll be totally mellow.” I placed the highball glass on the mesh-lined shelf and reached inside the glass washer for another. O’Neill’s was a different place on the weekends, open until two instead of eleven, throbbing with live bands blaring inside a close space, tables pushed to the perimeter to make way for dancing. Weekend O’Neill’s had become the thing I looked forward to most in my week, and I didn’t want a week to pass without its energy, even if we were tired.
“Fine,” Caitlin said. “We’ll go for one. But I’m not talking to anyone but you guys tonight.”

“I’m not even changing out of my uniform,” Jenn said.

O’Neill’s wasn’t much to look at from the outside. Just a dark blue eyesore on the end of a parade of crumbling shops outside Bournemouth’s town centre. Bleeding back from the pub down Old Christchurch Road, was Beats, a used record shop, followed by the red and green logo of the Royal Mail, and Gump’s sandwich shop with wrought iron tables and chairs set up outside, even when it was gray and drizzly. Quite a ways farther down was the Square, with the looming walls of St. Peter’s, outdoor market stalls, manicured gardens, and the sea. But O’Neill’s was a good twenty minute walk from the careful improvements of Bournemouth Borough Council, and its allure remained visible only to those who longed to be inconspicuous. Those who sought to blend, to get lost, to be swallowed up and washed away.

In the summer, O’Neill’s was packed with tourists, down from London for a golf outing or a stag do or just five minute’s peace by the sea, looking for a quick drink before they hit the strobing nightclubs or the brassy casinos, but in the wet chill of November, O’Neill’s was just like the rest of Bournemouth. Quiet. Worn out. Like a reception hall the day after the wedding, when the sunlight’s filming in through the windows and the decorations are falling down.

In the three months Caitlin and I had lived in England, O’Neill’s had quickly become our “local,” as the locals would say. We first wandered inside the thick black door on our third night in England. The Feverkicks, friends of Al and Joe, had been
playing that night, and were also playing the second time we went to O’Neill’s just a couple weeks later. We walked toward the stage area, drinks in hand, just as a song was ending. The lead singer curled his long fingers around his microphone and pulled it close to his lips, catching my eye and nodding. This one goes out to the American girls. We danced and laughed and drank and sang. Looking around the room that was so full of faces, a handful of which were already familiar, I sensed important things would happen in this space. But even more so, I sensed that we belonged.

We often walked to the pub right after finishing a bar shift, still wearing our black trousers and untucking our pressed white Britannia Hotels shirts, loosening top buttons. We ate cheese and onion baguettes and drank pints of Strongbow, the hard cider acrid but somehow refreshing at the same time. We became fast friends with Phil, the charming metrosexual manager with a clean-shaven face and an array of bold-colored dress shirts, who stood just inside the door, kissing people on both cheeks and tossing “darlings” and “babes” around like a new form of currency. We were on first-name basis with the fulltime bar staff, always pausing at the end of the bar to pass our coats and bags over the divide, to be strewn across the prep table in the back until after hours, when we’d all sit at the round booth by the front door and Caitlin and I would help ourselves to double shots of Jack Daniels from the massive bottle that hung upside down in the opticals.

So. Our plan to go for one and to not talk to anybody had some obvious holes in logic. We were fixtures in the pub. We were part of the mechanism. Even just walking into O’Neill’s required standing on tiptoes and offering a cheek to the platinum-haired doorman who spoke in a thick South African accent, who never asked us for the cover charge and always ushered us to the front of the line that wrapped around the sidewalk in
exchange for only a few minutes of banter and the promise of a drink later. Walking from the doorway to the short flight of stairs that led into the main bar area required at least fifteen minutes with Phil, who in a Satsuma or asparagus-colored shirt, made us promise—*Promise, darlings!*—to wait for him to finish so we could have a drink together. And it didn’t help that we had carved a reputation for ourselves as wild girls who drank as hard as we danced, smoked as much as we laughed, and could always be counted on to say something utterly unexpected and in the flat, unmusical intonation of the American Midwest.

But more than all of this, what made our plan to go for one and not talk to anybody impossible to execute was really one simple, undeniable fact: We were irresistible.

There was nothing particularly remarkable about any of us. Photographs from that time reveal three young women who were attractive in the basic way that women in their early twenties are attractive—careful make-up, form-fitting clothes, not overweight, no obvious deformities, a general dewiness—but no one who would turn heads or stop traffic. Back home, Jenn, at 5’10” with a choppy black bob and angular features, walked the fine line between striking and mannish, Caitlin was queen of the theatre geeks, and I was a girl-next-door. Our personalities weren’t extraordinary either. We were quick to laugh, had a flair for cooking, read good books, took long walks. It wasn’t a physical phenomenon and it wasn’t, I don’t think, anything unique to us personally.

We were irresistible because we reeked of possibility, a contagious energy, because we were fresh out of college and unleashed in the wide world, because we
buzzed with the sizzling electricity of being outside of our own lives, because we were young and happy and free.

The inside of O’Neill’s wasn’t much to look at either. Just the generic pseudo Irish theme that was thrown up years and years ago, when the stage area was still seating and the miniscule shots booth was where the old men of Bournemouth hung their jackets and walking sticks. Like a lot of places outside of the center, away from the hanging lights and silver service of the seafront, O’Neill’s bore the mark of decades of heavy living. Stained carpets and patched wood flooring were scarred by a thousand discarded cigarettes. A signpost announcing “Kilkenny 24m” hung on ancient repainted wallpaper. Not one stick of furniture in the whole place matched. Doorways and archways, dusty lamps with red shades fixed to the walls, peeling Gaelic phrases in swooping cursive gilt. Above the entrance a sign read Cead Mile Failte. A hundred thousand welcomes.

We got past the doorman and Phil, deposited my red leather jacket, Caitlin’s furry coat, and Jen’s thick cable-knit sweater, and we stood at the far end of the bar, scanning the room. It was surprisingly full, considering it was just past ten and early November. There wasn’t a vacant table. Though I had been the one pushing for a night out, I had to admit my feet hurt, and I had been hoping for a quiet drink or two first, a spot of downtime while we waited for our second wind.

“Fantastic.” Caitlin sighed and leaned against the pillar at the end of the bar.

“There’s nowhere to sit.”
“Let’s get drinks first and then find somewhere.” I quickly ordered two pints of Strongbow and Jenn’s gin and tonic and led the way up the three steps to the top bar, which was smaller and narrower, usually much quieter. But still no empty tables.

“What about there?” Jenn asked. She nodded in the direction of a long rectangular table that could seat ten people. There were only three guys seated and they were at the far end of the table and seemed engrossed in conversation. “We could just sit on the other end.”

We approached the table and Caitlin asked if anyone was sitting there.

“No, no one at all,” answered the guy sitting farthest in. He smiled slightly but vacantly, the kind of smile that is more of a muscular reaction than a conscious thought. His shoulders were broad and his hair was badly in need of a cut, thick and brushing the tops of his ears. He returned to his conversation before we even sat down, lifting a hand-rolled cigarette from the glass ashtray and inhaling. We sat on the other end of the table and angled our chairs away from the three guys. They seemed as uninterested in us as we were in them.

Once we’d gotten comfortable, Jenn took her pack of cigarettes out of her canvas backpack. She flicked her lighter a half a dozen times before tossing it on the table in frustration.

“Piece of shit,” she said.

“Need a light?” The guy who’d said we could sit at the table flashed a genuine smile, commiserating, and held out a black Bic.

Jenn slid down the space that separated us from them, held her cigarette to her lips but as she inhaled, her eyes widened and she exhaled immediately.
“Oh my God,” she said when lungs were emptied. “You like Rival Schools?” She
gestured to the guy’s t-shirt. He looked incredulous, obviously impressed that she’d heard
of this band. Jenn remained on the other end of the table, smoking and talking about
music I knew nothing about. Caitlin and I exchanged a look of mild irritation—we
weren’t supposed to be talking to anyone—and I left to see if Phil was free yet under the
guise of buying another round of drinks. If we were going to talk to people, I’d rather it
be friends.

I couldn’t have been gone more than five minutes, but I returned to a completely
different scene. Jenn was animated, talking to the Rival Schools Guy and his friend with
the long curly hair and cartoonish eyebrows.

“I know, it’s like, they’re totally labeled ‘post hardcore’ but so is everything else
right?” Jenn stabbed the lime in the bottom of her glass.

“Yeah, pretty much everything being put out is lumped together as ‘post
hardcore.’” The three of them were vibing pretty hard on this issue. I’d never heard of
Rival Schools, and I’d never heard anyone say “post hardcore” until right then.

Across the table, Caitlin was even more lost in conversation with the third guy.
He wore a tight gray t-shirt and a striped beanie. Jagged tattoo points and curves crept out
from underneath both his sleeves and down his lightly freckled arms. Caitlin was
laughing loudly, with her head thrown back and her fingertips resting on his forearm.

“Drinks are here,” I said. I was holding the three glasses awkwardly with both
hands. No one looked up. I set the drinks on the table with a loud clunk.
“Oh, hey,” Jen said, reaching for her second drink and looking at me slyly. “This is Lee”—she gestured towards Rival Schools Guy and then the guy with the long hair—“and Kris. And, uh, what’s your friend’s name again?”

“Steve,” Lee said. “That’s Steve.”

Steve ducked his head to the left and smiled, his right shoulder popping up as though the two actions were inversely related. He was all sharp angles, like a wooden puppet. I watched Caitlin twist the ends of her hair while Steve talked, watched Jenn lean her dark head forward while Lee lit her thousandth cigarette. This is total bullshit, I thought, and took a long sip from my pint.

And just like that, Caitlin was in love. She didn’t say as much, and no one really addressed it, including her and Steve—after all, we were scheduled to leave the country in less than two months—but a recognizable shift had occurred. She was distracted, scattered, not herself. Conversations started mid-thought, with some random detail about Steve or relived laughter over something he’d said. She began spending money on credit for the pay-as-you-go mobile phone we shared so she could text more. She started making plans mid-week with Steve and then informing me—We’re going to such and such with Steve and Lee this weekend—instead of making plans with me first and then inviting the guys, as it had been with Al and Joe and with the other friends we’d made. She wanted to go to the Litten Tree and the Slug and Lettuce instead of always O’Neill’s, to go out for lunch, to drive to the dramatic cliffs of Hengistbury Head and stare into the crashing sea, or at the bright specks, people as small as ants, flying kites in the fields below that stretched all the way to the ruins Christchurch Priory. I wasn’t jealous exactly
or at least consciously, just thoroughly taken aback. And not quite sure what to do with
myself.

Jenn, who had an off-again-on-again thing with an air traffic controller from
London decided to flip that switch back on and began spending most weekends away,
returning to complain about him but always leaving again Friday afternoon. Subsequently
I was paired up with Lee, whom I found genuinely good-natured and enjoyable but had
no interest in dating, not that he was even sending any signals my way. Mostly we just sat
together and smoked, talking about the guitar shop he and his friend Kris were weeks
away from opening and about where Caitlin and I might end up next in our travels. We
liked to pick out gag partners—men in their sixties with swimmy alcoholic eyes, women
with red Mohawks and backless shirts in the middle of November—for each other in the
pub, dissipating any expectation that he and I should couple off just because the air was
heavy with the connection of Steve and Caitlin. Go on, get her number—I dare you! We
never actually tried.

The guitar shop’s grand opening was scheduled for the first Saturday in December. The
week before, we sat at O’Neill’s and Caitlin grilled Lee and Kris about their marketing
strategies, of which they had none. The shop hadn’t been a business venture so much as it
had been a couple of guys in their early twenties who had found their identity through
playing guitar and had a lot of time, a little money, and no real plans. Kris reached into
the deep pocket of his jacket and pulled out a stack of paper. He set it right next to the
ashtray and with no regard for the sticky rings left over from a collection of glasses. I
reached across the table and grabbed the top sheet. The flyer was bright yellow with a
plain black Ariel font. *If you don’t come to Summerland Music, I’ll shoot you in the face.*

A picture of Kurt Cobain pointing a gun straight ahead, greasy strands covering his eyes, iconic cardigan hanging open. It wasn’t exactly an inspired bit of advertising, but at least they’d remembered to include the address and phone number of the guitar shop. It was located in Purewell, a place I’d never heard of but that Lee described as beautiful. There was a river, ruins of an ancient church, flocks of geese.

“Well, why do you still have so many?” Caitlin asked, grabbing the whole stack.

“The shop opens in a week.”

Lee cocked his head to the side and scratched behind his ear. “We tried handing them out but just got a lot of strange looks.”

“You’re not trying hard enough,” Caitlin smiled a coy smile. “Come on,” she said, motioning me to follow her. O’Neill’s was already filling up. People clustered near the bar, leaned against the thick pillars in the middle of the dance floor, sat on the high-backed chairs that surrounded the chunky wooden tables. But it was early; the room still had a sharpness, a clarity, and the low rumble of voices could be heard beneath the thrumming bass and the periodic twang of tuning guitars. We sought out small groups of guys with indie side-swept bangs and obscure band t-shirts, thick plastic frames and corduroy jackets. I let Caitlin do the talking. *Hey, you should come to our friend’s guitar shop Saturday,* she said over and over again in a way that sounded much more like, *You should clear your calendar and spend the entire day eating thinly sliced kiwi off of my naked body.* Within fifteen minutes, the stack was gone.

Back at the table, I slid into the booth next to Lee, and Caitlin stood in the space between Steve’s legs, draping her arm around his neck.
“You’re amazing,” Steve said to Caitlin.

Kris laughed. “God Bless America,” he said and took a sip of his Jack and coke.

“You’re amazing,” Lee echoed.

When the day of the opening rolled around, I decided I didn’t want to go. Part of me felt guilty because I was letting down this new friend I’d found in Lee. But more powerful than the guilt was the restlessness that had been growing inside of me since that night Caitlin and I polished glasses and decided whether or not to go to the pub. I didn’t like Caitlin making decisions for me, making plans for me, assuming I would want to do everything she wanted to do. Or maybe I didn’t like the idea that we no longer wanted to do the same things. I wasn’t sure if there was even a difference. I couldn’t name what it was specifically that I wanted to do and in what way she was thwarting my plans. Probably she wasn’t. But I was sure, as I snuggled under the duvet and the rained drummed outside my window, as I listened to Caitlin sing in the shower in the next room, her outfit already laid out beside me on the bed—I was sure that I wasn’t going to go to the guitar shop’s opening.

“What do you mean you’re not going?” Caitlin asked when I told her. Her hair was wrapped tightly in a towel, the soft material pulling at the skin around her eyes, making her face more severe.

“I’m just not going. I don’t feel like it.”

“Well Steve and Lee are expecting us to be there.”

“Go ahead. I want you to go. I just really don’t feel like it.”

“What am I supposed to tell them when you don’t show up?”
“I don’t care. Tell them I have to work.”

I knew by then the way her mind worked, and I watched her weigh her emotions. She was obviously irritated that I was choosing an afternoon in bed over an outing, choosing solitude over the company of people she wanted to impress. But at the same time, she seemed quietly thrilled at the thought of a day out with just Steve.

“Fine,” she said after a long pause. “But you should really call Lee later and ask how it went.”

An hour later I watched through the window as Caitlin slipped inside Steve’s bright red Toyota. The rain had stopped and though the sky was still overcast, the clouds seemed thinner, less dense, like a spool of cotton batting that had come unwound. No water could hold in such loose binding, and I trusted that it wouldn’t rain again, at least not for a few hours. Taking my time with breakfast and dressing, I considered the ways I might spend my afternoon. I could start Christmas shopping, or I could give the flat a good clean. I could listen to music and write in my journal for a bit; I’d been so bad about keeping up with my journal, even though three separate people had given me travel journals as parting gifts and I’d sworn to fill them with tales of my adventures. In the end, I went for a walk.

I walked slowly and without direction, heading toward Lansdowne because that’s where the Roundhouse and O’Neill’s were, and so that was where I almost always went when I was on foot and one of the only places I could find instinctually. When I reached the busy roundabout, the well-groomed circle in the middle of the hotel, the pub, the school with its climbing clock tower, I paused. Should I walk along Meyrick Road and down to the beach? Or should I turn down Old Christchurch and mosey around the shops
that led to the Square? I chose the latter but never made it as far as the Square, stopping instead at the Horseshoe Common, a small park halfway down Old Christchurch, the place where the road bent around Elements, the massive nightclub that was deceptively tucked inside a storefront with a low-hanging sign, where a sharp, decisive turn needed to be made in order to reach the arcade of shops and restaurants that filled the town centre.

The Horseshoe Common was flat and grassy with a cement pathway snaking through the thick oak trees that shaded the curious haven that spilled off from the bustle of Old Christchurch Road. I loved those trees, had spent many of my afternoons off during the early days when Caitlin and I always had separate days off getting acquainted with those trees. My favorite was off to itself, away from the path and from the others, a squat tree with a trunk that forked prematurely into two solid limbs. I could sit in that tree without awkward climbing or uncomfortable balancing, could fold my legs up and lean against its lower limb, just staring at the crisscross of branches, the patterns of sky that peeked from between. I liked to look at the forms of the other trees, to let my eyes unfocus and find the shapes of women in the full branches, women bowing, dancing, leaning toward, or shrinking away. But that day I sat instead in the crook of its roots, a soft place between the knobby tendrils that stretched out of the earth and back inside again. The grass, still wet, dampened my thin jeans and cotton underwear. My fingers traced the jagged designs of bark, plucked pieces of grass and rolled them into wet balls. When I began to feel more lonely than alone, I headed home.
Chapter 5  

December in Bournemouth

I pushed open the door of the phone booth and ducked inside. The rain fell sideways against the clear walls in heavy breaths, and I felt like a small child in the backseat of the car, chewing the strap of my seatbelt and watching the water bead and trickle. Sheltered, contained. I slipped the calling card out of my back pocket, picked up the receiver, and punched the numbers, or rather, the number-shaped depressions in metal. Calling card number. Credit card number. Pass code. Country code. And finally, my parents’ familiar phone number. The flat looked grand from a distance, our bay window jutting out like a cloudy gemstone. Tall oak trees lined the small park that made up the other half of Spencer Road. Their bare branches bowed and stretched in the wind, limbs slick and jagged.

The phone rang. One, two, three times. And then four.

*Hi, you’ve reached the D’Angelos. Please leave a message.*

It was my dad’s voice, soft and welcoming. I imagined even pre-recorded sales calls felt something when they heard that voice.

*Beep.*

“Hey, it’s Annie. Is anyone around? Anyone there to pick up the phone?” I ran my fingers up and down the phone cord, over the metal ridges. The metal made everything colder, stranger. I imagined a metal bed, metal sheets, a metal tooth brush. “Hello? It’s around two in the afternoon here, and it’s my day off. I’m calling from the
payphone again, so you can’t call back…” I reached for a coin, felt for the different shapes. “Hello? Well, I guess maybe you’re not there…” I picked out a fifty p, just in case. “I just wanted to check in, nothing important. So, uh, I’ll just try again later. Okay. Bye.”

I dropped the coin back into my purse, hung up the phone. Jogging the short block back to the flat, I counted Christmas trees in windows and wondered which, if any, were real. The rain found places that made me shiver, slid inside the neckline of my hoodie, the thin line of exposed scalp where my hair was parted.

Our phone was broken. With little hope of repair. In early December, I’d come home to find Caitlin and Caro on the floor of the lounge, hovering over the phone, the flat in its usual state of perpetual clutter. An open DVD case on the floor. A vase of half-spent flowers on the table, yellow dust and curled petals scattered across the finish. A white shirt, flat and crisp, hanging half off the ironing board.

“The phone’s not working.” Caitlin knelt on the pink carpet, bent over the telephone we kept on the floor, stretched to its cord’s fullest capacity. Her hair fell like an auburn curtain, hiding her face and the phone. Caro sat beside her, and I could see Caitlin’s worry in Caro’s huge brown eyes. She must have missed her phone date with her mom.

“What do you mean not working?” I zipped my key inside the pocket of my handbag and kicked my wet Mary Janes off in the general direction of the door.

“It’s just not working.” Caitlin tucked her hair behind her ear. Her cheeks were pink, the kind of pink that precedes tears.
“Not working! It’s sheet!” Jenny called from the kitchen. The water was on full blast.

“Well, I mean, is it the actual line or just the phone?” I didn’t know how such distinctions were made, but it felt like the right question.

Caro shook her head slowly from side to side, her long side-swept bangs swinging back and forth. “Just nothing. You pick up ze receiver and just…pshoo…nothing.”

A loud clamor bounced from the kitchen into the lounge, the jumbled clanging of stainless steel saucepans, lids crashing to the floor.

“Fuck off!” Jenny yelled at the pot.

Normally, Caitlin and I would share a private smile when Jenny made a slip like this, not in a superior way, just in the way that can’t be helped when native English speakers are around non-native English speakers, a recognition. But Caitlin just cradled and re-cradled the receiver, pressed buttons. Pshoo. Nothing.

“Hey, it’s fine. We’ll just tell Maria when she picks up the rent Thursday.” I took my black socks off and cracked my toes. Caro winced.

“Yeah, right, because we all know how she’ll get right on that,” Caitlin said.

“Just like ze washing machine, right?” Caro raised her eyebrows. “Maria is a big, big bitch.”

There was a certain inarguable logic to that. Spencer Road was Maria’s first venture as a landlady, and she seemed entirely unprepared for anything unforeseen, especially appliance maintenance. Our first strike had been the Hoover, which had surrendered in a cloud of regurgitated filth around the same time we moved in.

Angelique, the curvy olive French girl who lived with us briefly before Jenny, had taken
the rap and after several tear-filled yelling matches with Maria concerning responsible vacuuming, had also surrendered and had moved into a townhouse just outside the Square.

Strike two was the washing machine. My fault. I lucked out by breaking it moments before fleeing to Ireland for a three-day bus tour, the taxi arriving, buzzing our intercom, clothes still locked in the machine. The perfect crime. Maria never did yell at me, but she never fixed the washing machine either. She knocked a measly five quid a week off our rent and left us to drag our laundry four blocks away in a rolling suitcase to the nearest launderette.

I could already imagine the conversation. And now the phone! Who did we think we were? And hadn’t she fixed up the place so nicely for us? The slightest mention of even the simplest of needs resulted in a tirade. Look at this carpet! Brand new! Did we know what this place looked like before with shitty carpets?

“You’re right,” I said. “She’s not going to fix it.”

Caro and Caitlin nodded in unison.

“Big big bitch!” Jenny hollered from the kitchen. The water was back on, and I could smell the industrial smell of generic bleach.

“Well, she better fix it by Christmas,” Caitlin said. The word Christmas hung in the air, sounding for the first time, like some kind of threat.

With no Thanksgiving to mark the end of autumn, and really only vague echoes of Halloween manifested primarily in skimpy nightclub attire, Christmas crept into the streets of Bournemouth as early as late October. Before the leaves could fade and shrivel
from branches, Christmas found its way into shop windows and restaurant propaganda, velvet ribbons tied around lamp posts. It was a slow infiltration, a siege that took hold of the town piecemeal. A holly wreath on the door of the newsagent’s. Suddenly bits of tinsel inside the display cases at Earnest Jones, the usual two-carat engagement rings pedestalled on festive backdrops of green and red satin—*Give her the gift of Forever this Christmas*—and then Santa hats and plaid scarves on the faceless mannequins that stared out from Debenhams onto the granite and marble-toned tiles of the Square, while high-heeled shoppers flitted in and out, sat on the cold metal chairs outside Obscura Café, and warmed their hands on ceramic mugs of tea. A silent creeping. Down Old Christchurch Road, storefronts were framed with gold garlands, and miniature stockings hung in the windows with employee names scrawled in glitter. *Book now for Christmas!* on A-boards dragged onto the pavement, on hand-written signs taped to windows frosted with spray-on snow.

It never really snowed, not in real life. Not one single softly pointed six-sided flake. Not one rain drop that curled into hail. Not even transparent half-snow that liquefied instantly on impact. It got colder, sure. And grayer. And wetter. But the temperature sat defiantly in the low forties, and it didn’t snow. For an Ohio girl who grew up with knee-deep trenches, insulated full-body snowsuits and faux fur-lined boots that dripped in the hallway outside Mrs. DiRubba’s classroom, for someone who once made an igloo that lasted all season, who sipped hot chocolate from a Care Bear thermos inside the white walls and contemplated the fuzzy dark and muted almost-silence of packed snow—the absence of snow came as both a hideous disappointment and a stumbling relief. Certainly it was bragging rights when talking to anyone back home who
complained about shoveling buried driveways or navigating around the invisible and sudden tragedy of black ice. I laughed.

But walking through the narrow winding streets on my days off, curling around the green grass and dipping trees of the Horseshoe Common and onward toward the gaping Odeon Cinema on Westover Road and finally the sea, I couldn’t help but miss the sharp intake of breath that occurs involuntarily when you’re unexpectedly blinded by the glitter of sun on fresh snow. I felt a sort of vertigo induced by three months of Christmas and still not an inch. Was it October? December? I couldn’t curb the clamminess of the tinsel and oversized bobbles to my left when to my right there were clear sidewalks, transplanted palm trees, and the dizzying expanse of rolling sea.

Somewhere in the middle of it, Jenn left. Her visa expired, her time up. A giant hand stretched its fingers, cracked its knuckles, preparing to snatch her up from Bournemouth’s blue-gilded horizon and plop her back in snow-covered Wisconsin. The weather had just crossed over into a true English winter, frequent bone-pelting rains, a perpetual gray. Caitlin and I teased her, said Bournemouth was weeping for her departure. She was moving back into her parents’ suburban three-bedroom ranch house to look for work. Bartending maybe. Or perhaps she’d get a job teaching at her old dance studio. Caitlin and I took a taxi to her flat in Charminster, sat at the table in her yellow kitchen chopping green bell peppers and red onion in uneven slices. The table monopolized the room, chunky pine, large and oval with a leaf inserted for extra space. Its surface was heavily scratched, had met many travelers, withstood cigarette burns and Tequila spills, wasabi stir fries placed directly on the table top in scorching woks. We
were making a vegetable curry. Jenn, standing near the counter, sprinkled water on garlic and coriander naan bread, wrapped it in foil, and placed it in the center of the oven. Red wine sat in pint glasses, sipped only when remembered. The room was thick with coconut and cumin, a visible warmth rising from the old-fashioned metal radiators in a wavy haze.

“You guys suck at chopping vegetables,” Jenn said, leaning over the breakfast bar that jutted out in front of the table. Such a big table seemed preposterous in a small kitchen with a built-in breakfast bar.

“What? They cook better this way.” Jenn and I both liked our vegetables al dente but had different views on how to produce the desired effect.

“All I’m saying is if you guys ruin my last korma in this country, I’ll basically never forgive you.”

“Well we’ll basically never see you again anyway, so you lose,” Caitlin said, biting off a piece of raw pepper with an assertive crunch. Jenn mouthed “Eff you” and held her lips pursed in the small, rounded shape that could have been a kiss and pointed at us with the wooden spoon in a mock threat.

A small radio sat on the Formica countertop, spewing hype about which song was going to be Christmas Number One that year, the Michael Andrews/ Gary Jules version of “Mad World” or The Darkness’s ironic “Don’t Let the Bells End.” Bored with the same discussion from 2CR’s same deejays, or perhaps saddened that she wouldn’t be around to find out—hard to say as her face wore its customary shrug of indifference—Jenn turned the dial on the radio, skimming through static and garbled voices. Suddenly, the sliding orange marker hit the exact right spot, and “Stand by Me,” poured into the cramped kitchen. Jenn danced her way back to the stove, stirring the simmering korma
sauce, and began singing the familiar lyrics under her breath in an exaggerated tenor. Caitlin, never one to resist showcasing her smooth vocals, belted out each “darling” like she was auditioning. Still chopping, I offered “shk-booms” on the expected beats. Despite the impending goodbye, a feeling of togetherness coursed through the room, washing over the twinkling lights, the general vibe of almost-Christmas.

“Hey,” I said. “This should be our song.”

“Yeah!” Caitlin scraped her pile of peppers off the cutting board and into the mixing bowl. “Whenever we hear this song, we’ll think of each other. No matter where we end up.”

“Sorry guys,” Jen said, scrunching her nose and leaning over the pot to smell the korma sauce. “This is already my song with my brother.”

“So what, it can be our song too,” I said, gathering up the papery outer-onion layers and walking over to the bin. I tossed the onion curls on top of soggy paper towels, cigarette butts.

“No it can’t,” Jenn said. “Cuz I’ll always think of my brother first. We’ll have to think of another song.”

“‘I’ll Stand by You’?” Caitlin suggested.

“Nope. That’s already my song with my friends from home,” I said. “Simon and Garfunkel’s ‘America’?”

“What? That’s not even about friends.” Caitlin had a slight aversion to my obsession with sleepy poetic songs. *Your music makes me tired. Let’s put on something we can dance to.* She took a sip of wine.

“Yeah, yeah. I just really like the song, alright?”
“Well, it can be your own song then,” Jenn said. She turned the igniter on the gas stove, and after a few clicks, a blue flame swirled beneath the frying pan. The onions and peppers hit the pan with a loud sizzle. We never decided on a song.

In the morning, Jenn buttoned her knee-length pea coat, wound her long nubbly scarf around her neck, and swept her black bangs out of her face. She bent to hug me first and then Caitlin, brave face, eyes dry and focused, and then she slipped into the waiting car. Caitlin and I stood in the center of the sleeping street, watching the car pull away, pause at the end of the road, and turn right, watching until there was nothing more to see except the pale slate of the morning sky, parked cars, quiet pavement.

Later, I walked to the Roundhouse for my evening shift. I hesitated in front of the bus stop outside the hotel. It was vacant, though I knew it would fill up in the next fifteen minutes and then empty again, repeating the process four times an hour until midnight. People coming and going. School kids in gray blazers and striped ties. Portuguese chefs, unshaven, unshowered. Pale, droopy-lidded women with bulky pushchairs and Marks & Spencers bags. The constant traffic of our humdrum lives. Groceries. Dry cleaning. Lunch. Work. I looked at the red plastic bench, remembered Jenn sitting there the first day we met, her wind-ruffled scarf, her bored scowl. She had occupied this exact physical space and now was gone. I looked from the bench to the pebble-dash façade of the hotel to the painted black door of O’Neill’s over the road. Her life, her body, had existed in all these spaces, blended so seamlessly, and now was gone. Evaporated.

Gravel drive, oak trees, bay windows, plastic door, cold metal.

One, two, three. And then four.
Inside the hotel, Christmas erupted from cardboard boxes. Detached Christmas tree segments from at least a dozen trees were spread across the lobby and lounge like dismembered limbs on a battlefield. The room smelled crisp like blue spruce, and I wondered vaguely if it actually did or if it was just a trick of the mind, all those soft vinyl pine needles on the floor. Garlands spilled out from the opened boxes, and red velvet ribbons interrupted the almost solid blanket of green that covered the waxy floorboards. Alan had been pacing for days, muttering to himself about how we were behind, that Christmas bookings were upon us. He had an odd sort of pocketed mania, an energy that revealed itself only once in a while. He was normally a pretty laid back boss, often coming behind the bar to do the ordering and pausing in the doorway. Did I ever tell you about the time I saw Bob Dylan get booed in Hyde Park? Or, You know I was a chef in Amsterdam for ten years. Wild place, wild place. From the look of things, his manic streak was in top gear.

“Where’s your bowtie?” Alan asked. I smiled, deciding he must not be particularly stressed today, just motivated. Alan always asked about my bowtie when I walked through the automatic doors for the start of my shift. He lifted his arms in an exasperated shrug, a smile tugging at the thin lips that hid beneath his thick salt and pepper mustache. It had become somewhat of a greeting. The correct response was, Oh man, I’m sorry. I knew I forgot something! I could never bring myself to wear the simple
black bowtie that had come wrapped in plastic with my Roundhouse Hotel uniform. The
paisley waistcoat and short-sleeved white shirt that was four sizes too big were bad
enough on my petite frame. With the bowtie, I looked like a ten-year-old boy and felt like
an organ grinder’s monkey.

“Oh man, I’m sorry, Alan. I knew I forgot something!” I walked past the pine tree
massacre, stepping over tree parts in a beeline for the bar. Preferring stooping to lifting, I
ducked under the hinged wooden bar top that opened upwards like a drawbridge and
glimanced at the clock on the till screen. “Hey, at least I’m on time.”

“You’re five minutes late.”

“Exactly.” I grabbed a thin Tom Collins glass, filled it with ice cubes, a splash of
lime cordial, and soda from the gun. I was thirsty after the twenty minute walk.

Alan shook his head affectionately. “Well, once Father Christmas here gets these
trees hooked up, I want you to fix all the ribbons to them. I don’t know, bows or
something. Just make it look pretty.”

For the first time I noticed Malcolm on his knees amidst the wreckage. He was in
his chef’s whites but didn’t have his hat on. His thin shaved head was shiny beneath the
low-hanging lounge lamps.

“You can fuck right off,” Malcolm said without looking up but somehow in
Alan’s direction. Malcolm wore the stereotype of “grumpy chef” like a badge of honor.
Even on his best days, the days he snuck out back to the dumpsters behind the canteen
and smoked long joints, the days when no one ordered anything besides baskets of chips
and cheese and pickle sandwiches, Malcolm’s forehead still frowned and his speech was
freckled with obscenities.
“Tsk, tsk.” Alan lowered his gaze and pointed his finger as though he were scolding a small child. “‘Tis the season, Malcolm.” And, turning on his heel, he disappeared into the corner office behind reception.

I snickered behind the bar, and Malcolm’s head shot up. “And you,” he said, but he was smiling. The broken kind of smile, lopsided and uncertain, that occasionally washes over faces unaccustomed to smiling.

I hurried through my opening routine, fetching ice, cutting lemons, screwing the spouts back onto the beer taps and laying the rubber mats across the bar. I turned on the bar TV and searched for Christmas music, but when Malcolm threw a loose tree part in my direction, I settled for football highlights instead. When I was through, I gathered up all the red ribbons and joined Malcolm on the floor. We worked mostly in silence. The ribbon was the thick cloth type, with thin wire running along either edge, so that you could arrange shapes that stayed, images that listened. It was satisfying work. Soon I had rows of neat uniform bows spread across the floor, waiting to be hung.

“Ass kisser,” Malcolm said under his breath. He was still struggling with the trees, trying to match up midsections with bases, torsos with heads. The trees he had put together already remained skeletons, full of bare patches where he’d been too lazy to bend the branches, to straighten and arrange.


“You actually like Christmas?”

“Of course I do. Don’t you?”
Malcolm raised his eyebrows, lines rippling up his forehead all the way to the space I imagined a hairline would be if he didn’t shave his head. “Have you worked Christmas in a hotel before?”

“No.”

Malcolm smiled for the second time that afternoon, and this one sat more comfortably on his lips, beginning as a surprise and settling quickly into a smirk. “Well, I hope you like turkey.”

The metal cord of the payphone tapped against the thin shelf that must have held a phonebook once. I held the receiver to my ear and dialed the extensive numbers that would connect this phone booth on the south coast of England to the old white farmhouse in Ohio, the house with doors that open outwards instead of inwards and hot and cold water taps plumbed the wrong way around. The buttons were cold, and the earpiece was cold. I tested the air with a puff of breath that faded into white before my eyes and set my change purse on the shelf, lined up octagonal fifty and twenty p coins.

The phone rang one, two, three times. And then four.

*Hi, You’ve reached the D’Angelos. Please leave a message.*

*Hi Dad,* I thought into the phone.

*Beep.*

“Hey, it’s Annie, are you there?...It’s about…eleven o’clock here, which I guess is around six your time. Is anyone around to pick up the phone? … I was just on my way home from work, so I thought I’d—”

“Hello? Annie?”
“Dad! Hi! I figured if I kept talking, you might pick up.” I immediately inserted two fifty p’s, not wanting to be interrupted.

“Oh yeah, I was just in the kitchen, putting the finishing touches on dinner.”

“What are you making?”

“Nothing fancy. It’s just me, Mom, and Gracie tonight. I’m doing that casserole with the chicken and broccoli. I was just making a little side salad and slicing some bread.”

“Sounds amazing. I really miss your bread.”

“It’s just a plain white Italian.” My dad’s hobby was artisan bread-baking. He’d spent years researching the techniques used in Tuscany. “Do you want me to call you right back so you don’t have to pay for the call?”

“No, you can’t. I’m still using the phone booth.”

“Your phone still isn’t fixed?”

“Nope, not yet.”

“Well I hope it’s fixed by Christmas.”

“Me too.” I inserted more change. My dad talked a little about my sister’s cross country meet and how she was coming along with the trumpet. Outside the phone booth, one of our two neighborhood prostitutes walked past, the blonde one, beginning her slow crawl. Normally I preferred brunette women, trusted them more easily, warmed to them faster. I never talked to either of the two prostitutes who claimed Spencer Road with their nightly pacing, never even made eye contact, but for some reason I liked the blonde better. Her boots were ankle-length instead of the standard knee- or thigh-high boots, and she wore a scarf and a jacket. The other one never wore a coat, just crossed her bare arms
and stared ahead. I called the blonde Patti in my head, not because she looked particularly like a Patti, but because she was a part of my daily scenery and it seemed as though she ought to be called something. Patti was as good a name as any.

“I bet Gracie looks so cute in her band uniform,” I said.

“She sure does, but don’t tell her that.”

Patti crossed over at the end of the road and walked back toward the phone booth, the corner of Spencer and Derby. I’d never seen her inside the phone booth, but I bet she used it. Would Patti the Prostitute and I use the same phone to call home and say Merry Christmas? Maybe she’d warm the ear peace, fog the booth for me.

“How are things there anyway?” my dad asked, finally through reporting all of his news.

I watched the swing of Patti’s ponytail. She cut through the little park across from the flat, rather than heading for Derby directly. She was right; it was a much nicer route. I usually cut through the park too.

“Yeah, fantastic. Getting ready for Christmas at the hotel. But I’d better go. I’m almost out of change. I really just wanted to hear your voice for a minute.”

“Okay, Annie, well I’ll say a prayer your phone gets fixed soon. Call us whenever you can.”

After we hung up, I stayed in the cubicle for a few minutes, leaning against the side, refusing to open the door, refusing to let my dad’s voice and prayers and chicken casserole escape into the night.
I did like turkey. In fact, the first morning I walked into the Roundhouse Hotel and smelled three massive turkeys slow-roasting in sage and cracked pepper, I stood stock still in the center of the lobby just breathing for so long that the receptionist lowered her dark-rimmed glasses and asked, “Are you alright?” The food in England in general and at the Roundhouse specifically had been less than appealing for most of my stay. I had never been a meat and potatoes girl, had never boiled vegetables until they were mushy or eaten them without at least salt and butter. I abhorred lamb, thought it tasted like a dirty dishrag and thought mint sauce smelled like rotten toothpaste. At my house, very little was ever prepared without freshly minced garlic, homegrown basil. We seldom used recipes, cooking by genetic memory, and when all else failed, we covered everything with shredded mozzarella and parmesan. The free meals on-shift at the hotel had been necessary to our budget, but Caitlin and I often found ourselves just picking at side dishes, baked potatoes, salads with no dressing.

That first mouth-watering turkey morning, I polished glasses with rediscovered vigor, sliced lemons to perfection. And when I was allowed to make my plate in the kitchen, I didn’t hold back. I covered my plate and ate until I was uncomfortably full.

The thing about working in hotels is that the faces change every day. You work hard to create an experience, crisp red ribbons, a perfect floater on an Irish coffee, shining silverware, Christmas crackers placed at exact forty-five degree angles on each plate. The guests appreciate this precision, this attention to detail. They may not say it or even notice it, but as they sit there in their paper crowns, laughing over the obvious puns and cheap trinkets that explode from their crackers, when they bite into a roast potato that is crispy on the outside and fluffy like a cloud inside, well, they feel it. They smile harder,
laugh louder, look at the faces they are sharing the moment with and believe that Christmas is right there in the room.

But the next day, it’s another party. Another set of faces. Of crisp ribbons, Irish coffees, paper hats. It’s another roast turkey.

Christmas dinner, though it varied slightly from venue to venue, household to household, was a centralized concept in England, a firmly set menu. There was turkey, of course, and cranberry sauce. Roast potatoes and parsnips. Sausages wrapped in bacon. Chestnut stuffing formed into balls and baked in individual servings. And always, there were sprouts, round like tiny cabbages and split open for more even steaming. A second vegetable was customary, but not specified. Vegetable number two seemed the only area where there was any sort of real wiggle room. At a corporate three-star operation like the Roundhouse, whose Christmas bookings mostly consisted of local office parties and coach loads full of senior migrating citizens, the second vegetable was carrots. Somewhere more upscale, like the Royal Bath Hotel with history and table service and upright linen napkin fans, might serve asparagus or white celery.

It got to the point where I had to start rationing myself just for the sake of variety. I’d eat just sprouts and turkey one day, carrots and parsnips the next. One shift I’d have potatoes and gravy, and another time, I’d eat stuffing. And always, I’d eat standing up, plate on top of the perpetually swooshing glass washer, steam collecting on my forehead and wilting my hair. At the start of each shift, I’d pause in the lobby and brace myself for the reek of turkey slow-roasting in sage and cracked pepper. All day long, I’d work right next to the hot kitchen, the turkey vapor washing over me in nauseating waves.
The phone booth was ugly.

The souvenir shops at the airport and all over London, even the shops down by the water in Bournemouth, all sold ceramic figures of old-fashioned red phone boxes, the word “telephone” painted in swirling gold. The red phone boxes still existed in London’s inner pockets, but there weren’t any in Bournemouth. I wasn’t sure if there ever had been. The phone booth on the corner of Spencer and Derby was cheap, made of industrial plastic marred with Sharpie graffiti, obscenities carved with pocketknives.

*Hi, this is the D’Angelos. Please leave a message.*

Later, after Jenny left and the agency deposited a new girl on the doorstep, a German with blonde hair and a striped cardigan, rainbows on her trainers, a girl who lived in the pink room with Caro but whose name I barely caught and didn’t remember since we only shared the flat for one week—later, the German girl would tell us how she used the phone booth at the end of the road. She’d tell us how she called her friend, giggled into the receiver, until a man stepped inside the private space. She’d tell us about his black hoodie and flash of knife, how he pushed, and she kicked, and how she ran and ran, not knowing if he followed, her rainbow trainers slamming pavement littered with cigarette butts, chewed gum.

*Beep.*

“Hey, it’s me. Is anyone—”

“Annie!”

***
A few days before Christmas, I finished a late bar shift and splurged on a taxi ride home. As I stepped out of the car and onto the pavement, I noticed a curious pinkish light shining through our bay window. I tipped my head back, trying to see what could be casting such an unusual glow. I swung open the black gate and crunched over the gravel drive. The night was dry, but fiercely cold, and the wind cut through my thin white shirt. Why were there any lights on at all? Surely everyone was in bed.

Up two flights of stairs, I wondered. I wondered about the light and about Patti the Prostitute and about the other one with the dark hair. I wondered if they were friends or competitors. I wondered if it would ever snow in Bournemouth and if it did, what the beach would look like, snow where sand should be, a ghost of itself. I slid my key into the lock and turned softly to the right. Music wafted out into the hallway as soon as I cracked open the door, a slow, dripping melody, a voice I recognized but couldn’t quite name. Frank Sinatra maybe. Or Dean Martin. A Christmas carol, slow and lingering, an end-of-day song.

Caitlin was sitting on the white loveseat, a book in her lap, her legs stretched out across the cushion. She was wearing her glasses and her gray fleece sweatpants, ready for bed but waiting up. The overhead light was off, and white twinkling lights hung around the window frame, soft and familiar. Caitlin must have cleaned; a sheen reflected off the table, and Hoover tracks indented the carpet.

“Hey,” she said, setting the book face down on her lap. Her voice was low, aware of the night. She smiled.
In the corner, just right of the bay window, a tiny Christmas tree stood on plastic legs. A single strand of white lights was double-wrapped around the thin trunk, arranged just right between branches.

“What’s all this?” I asked, sinking into the easy chair and slipping off my shoes.

“A peace offering, I think.” Caitlin started to laugh but yawned instead. I closed my eyes and rested my head against the white throw that covered the chair. “Maria dropped the tree and lights off when she picked up the rent.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, seriously. Plus, she said the phone should be fixed by tomorrow.”

I sat upright again, opened my eyes. “Tomorrow? Really?”

“Yeah, I know. Fixed by Christmas, who’d have thought.” Caitlin picked up her book, read a few lines and then dog-eared her place. “She’s not that bad really, is she?”

“I suppose not,” I said, looking at the tree. Our tree. I’d been looking everywhere for Christmas, in the shops, in the hotel, in the wet walls of a phone booth, and suddenly there it was, there in the pink glow on Caitlin’s calm and quiet face. “Where’d the cd come from?”

“Steve took me shopping. When I told him about the tree, he said we needed some Christmas music. He bought us presents too, for under the tree.” She gestured toward two tiny parcels, wrapped in blue and silver paper. “I’m pretty sure they’re socks.”

“Socks? That’s hilarious.” I melted back into the chair.

“We should invite them over, Steve and Lee, to decorate the tree.” Caitlin set her book on the floor, flopped onto her side.
“Hmmm…” I settled into the purple space just before sleep. Judy Garland sang out the last weary notes of “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” and after a pause, the small pink lounge filled with music again. We sat like that for some time, hovering between asleep and awake, before crawling together into our makeshift double bed.
Chapter 6

A Circle of Faces

New Year’s Eve was a strange affair.

Phil offered to pay Caitlin and me fifty pounds each, cash in hand, to work glass collection at O’Neill’s for the night. He gave us official baby blue O’Neill’s shirts and said we’d definitely be done before midnight. I spent the early evening hours stuck in gridlock traffic with Martin, the painfully quiet barman who had offered to give me a lift to Asda before our shift so I could pick up couple of frozen pizzas. Caitlin and I were moving to Prague in four days and didn’t have much besides bread and pickle left in our fridge. Martin and I played exhausting rounds of twenty questions to fill the thin air inside his gray Citrën, and I stared at the green numbers on the dashboard clock. Back at the flat, we ate the pizzas while they were still piping hot, burning our tongues on the bubbling cheese.

Finally at the pub, Caitlin and I wove in and out of trashed revelers, stacking shots glasses inside rocks glasses inside pint glasses, filling racks, running them through the glasswasher, and fending off the occasional ass-grabber. We made a pact to kiss each other at midnight instead of any of the guys who might try for a midnight kiss. New Year’s Eve was a dangerous sort of holiday, filled with clinking glasses and unbridled hope. Her face was the only one I knew I’d see in the coming months, the blank and terrifying new year. I was all she could take from this place, and she was all I had.

Instead, we got unforgivably drunk.
Caitlin kissed Steve, and I kissed nearly everyone, and we ended up back at Steve and Lee’s house, where I had never been before, sitting on blue couches and trying to keep our eyes open until five AM so we could surprise home with a phone call at midnight. We didn’t make it. Steve made mugs of sweet, milky tea, and I felt my buzz slip away from me like a lost glove. The walls were unfamiliar, and the carpet, and the sleek black cat that periodically darted across the room and scratched in a litter box somewhere close but out of view and never, I don’t think, actually shat. Caitlin and Steve eventually disappeared to some quiet shadow in the house, and I asked Lee for some shorts. He returned with a pair of baggy boxers and sat on the couch while I went into the kitchen to change. I took off my O’Neill’s shirt, tossing it irreverently on the vinyl flooring, and returned in my wifebeater and Lee’s underwear. Back in the lounge, I stretched out on the wide couch, my head in Lee’s lap, which felt comfortable the way a head in a lap does in the abstract hours of early morning. My eyelids betrayed me, and as I wandered into sleep, I thought to myself these exact words: What a bizarre way to spend the first hours of 2004.

Four days later, Caitlin and I left Bournemouth for good.

Last Night [9PM]

“He’s not coming,” Steve says. His face looks sad, so sad, like dead puppy sad. I think he’s apologizing to me.

“What?” I lean in, cock my head to the side. We’re right next to the felt-covered speakers, and all I can hear is the White Stripes, “Seven Nation Army.”
“What do you mean Lee’s not coming?” Cait asks. “We’re leaving tomorrow morning.”

“I don’t know what his problem is. He said he was still hung over from last night or something.”

“He’s seriously not coming?” It’s strange to see Steve without Lee. Like I expect them to exist only as a unit, like me and Cait. What does Lee do when Steve’s not around? Is he at home on the blue couch? Is he petting the black cat?

“Seriously. I’m sorry.” Steve’s fingers drum the tabletop.

A yellow tarp hangs over the fireplace. A goodbye sign with stick figure pictures of Cait and me drawn in green paint. The sign was hung before it completely dried, an amateur mistake, and paint drips down in faint streaks, punctuated with heavy droplets. And there’s not just a sign. There are balloons too. A sign and balloons and a section of the pub marked off with streamers. Our own corner. It looks so shit, slapped up quickly by guys who work minimum wage behind a bar, words spelled out in ugly boy handwriting. I might cry because it’s so sweet, because the world is so small sometimes, and then sometimes it’s so goddamn big.

“It’s cool,” I say. Lee’s not coming. I guess we don’t say goodbye then. And that’s weird because we’ve hung out almost every day the last couple weeks. I think about his bad haircut and rectangular glasses, the way he snored at inhuman decibels on the couch on New Year’s Eve. And it’s also not weird because we only met a little over a month ago. Besides Cait, there isn’t a single person in this room I’ve known longer than four months. “Totally okay. Tell him we can say goodbye forever another time.”
Steve squirms. It is weird that Lee isn’t coming. The night unfolds in snippets and glimmers. I stand in the center, and the whole pub spins around me. Flipped-up collars. Brimming ashtrays. Heavily-lined eyes. Indie haircuts. All those fucking sheepskin snow boots. Uggs and knock-off Uggs. Boots with fringe and boots with flaps that fold to the floor. I stand in the center, with my smudged pint glass, and laugh at the ludicrousness of snow boots. I don’t want to think about goodbyes anymore, pretend that they matter, that people who are mere acquaintances but feel like more because of geography and gravity might say something, might find words that fit into truths, might uncover a formula that would make these rituals mean something. We could say our goodbyes or not say them. Either way, we’ve stumbled into an end.

“Well, hey, let me get you a drink.” Steve looks at the half empty glass in my hand. “What are you drinking? Strongbow?”

Over the hectic weeks preceding our departure, Caitlin and I planned for the inevitable in different ways. We knew we wanted to end up in Italy but weren’t quite sure how to make the leap. Teaching English seemed our best shot at employment. Caitlin researched TESL programs and found the perfect solution, a four-week intensive certification program at a school called Via Lingua. The Florence Via Lingua was fully booked, but they had another school in Prague that had several spots open for a course that began the first week of January. She organized our applications, paid the fees, signed a tenancy agreement for a flat in the clunky-sounding Kobylisy, which an agency assured her was a short tram ride from Vltavska. I made skeptical, smart-ass remarks like, “Oh, right, Kobylisy to Vlatavska, of course.”
Caitlin found cheap flights, one-way tickets for £32 apiece, direct from Southampton, which was only a forty-minute drive from Bournemouth, saving us the two and a half hour journey to London Gatwick or Heathrow. She asked Phil if he could drive us to the airport, gave the hotel notice of our last shift and Maria notice of our last week’s rent. I started drinking Southern Comfort on shift and smoking cigarettes openly at the small, circular tables that remained empty on the patron side of the bar.

Caitlin organized our going-away party at O’Neill’s, reserving the front section near the fireplace, and instilled enough fear in the bar staff that we could be fairly positive there would be a giant banner announcing our departure. She bought a blank red journal to leave out during the party so that people could write us goodbye messages, and we could have a tiny piece of them to carry with us into the next leg of our journey. I wrote “Goodbye Bournemouth” on the first page in fancy red lettering with blue and gold embellishments. Admittedly not a huge contribution to the moving process, but it was all I could muster.

**Last Night [12AM]**

“No fucking way,” I say to no one in particular. I look for Cait but don’t immediately see her. In the doorway, a blue vintage jacket, messy curls, cornflower eyes, and beside him long hair in a David Beckham headband, a red t-shirt.

Al and Joe.

About ten seconds ago, I swallowed something someone handed me. *Yeah, cheers. Thanks. Love you.* A dark liquid in a rocks glass. Black Death: Jack Daniels, Sambuca, and Tia Maria. As soon as I swallowed it, I knew. I knew I’d tipped the scale.
Now, the Strokes are blaring from the speakers, the jumbly drumbeats bouncing around the room like popcorn. People dancing, jumping. Last niiiiite, she saiidi. The scarred floorboards become a trampoline. I try to take a step towards the door, but I have to steady myself. Everybody’s bouncing. When they land, it shoots me in the air. I’m going to fall off the side. I’m going to break my arm.

And suddenly Cait’s beside me, squeezing my arm. “Al and Joe,” she says. We haven’t seen them since it all broke apart, haven’t heard from them once.

“No fucking way,” I say again. I reach for a cigarette, transfer it to my left hand, which now holds both my drink and my smoke. Caitlin, for about the third time ever, is speechless.

They walk straight for us, without even stopping at the bar for a drink. Down the three short stairs and across the crowded floor, Al is smiling and shaking his head. Joe is talking, but I can’t make out what he says.

“What’s all this then?” Al says, amused. His voice is natural, as though we’ve been chatting all afternoon, making a grocery list, talking about the weather. He looks at the balloons, the yellow tarp hanging over the fire place, Goodbye Cait and Annie painted in sloppy green letters.

“It’s our going away party.” I rummage around inside my purse. Where’s my lighter?

“You’re leaving? When?”

“Tomorrow. For good.” I finally feel the familiar plastic. When I flick the lighter, nothing happens. Cait and Joe are already separating away, slipping toward the thick
pillar that stands like a massive tree trunk in the center of the pub. I try to catch her eye but she’s looking into her pint glass.

“Really? Back to America?” Al makes a thoughtful face, like this is the first time he’s considered Cait and I have a life outside this dingy pub, outside the lumpy mattress we dragged to the lounge. I flick my lighter again—nothing.

“No, to Prague actually.”

“Wicked, I was there for a stag-do once. So, wow man, this is it then, Number Twelve?” Number Twelve, his messed-up version of a term of endearment. He says more words, I think, but I’m back in the flat, back in September. He’s sitting on the chair in the lounge, and I’m on his lap. How many girls have you slept with? I ask. I’m in my underwear. I cross my arms over my chest. It all feels a bit weird now. We’re not drunk anymore and all the lights are off. We smoke in the dark. You’re Twelve, he says. He kisses the bones that poke out like knuckles on the back of my neck. Lucky Number Twelve. Better than thirteen, yeah? Ooo, that’d be unlucky.

“So this is it,” he says again. He holds a lighter out in front of my face, flicks it, and produces an effortless flame. I lean in, cigarette to lips, breathe.

Black Death pools in my stomach. I picture it bleeding into the other mess of drinks like an oil spill. The floor is still bouncing, and I’m afraid to move.

“I guess so.”

“Well, fuck, let me get you a drink then.”

An insistent drizzle drenched Bournemouth, unhurried but deliberate. It never poured, never fell in pulsing sheets, but it had its way in the end, rolling down the Victorian
storefronts, dripping off empty branches, soaking the streets and collecting in iridescent puddles between parked cars. Caitlin and I dressed in sweatpants and hoodies and took a taxi to the Lansdowne Roundabout, with three suitcases full of laundry plus our bedding. With such a daunting amount piled up and no time to wait for it to air-dry on our zig-zag airing racks, we decided to use the large facility with jumbo tumble dryers a few doors down from O’Neill’s. We sat in the launderette all morning, lulled into pensive silence by the constant hum of the machines, the heavy fragrance of too many fabric softeners, the rain-streaked windowpanes. The washing machines were small, and the tumble dryers were expensive, one pound buying only twenty minutes of dry time. We took turns darting through the rain to O’Neills, handing over stacks of pound coins and returning with pocketfuls of twenty p’s. Caitlin and I sat on orange plastic chairs, watching our clothes spin in rhythmic circles, sticking to the side on the way up, reaching the center, and falling. Tweety Bird pajama pants rolled over a Michigan t-shirt and collapsed.

“I can’t believe we’ll be in Prague tomorrow night,” Caitlin said, suddenly cutting into the calm of the electronic hum. Our time in Bournemouth was out. We had our going away party to look forward to that night, and then it was off to the airport first thing in the morning.

“I know.” I stared into the dryer, trying to focus on the threadbare Michigan t-shirt, following its loops and plunges.

“I mean seriously, tomorrow we’re going to wake up in our bed at home and then at night, fall asleep in some weird bed in the Czech Republic.”

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s nuts. Especially the Czech Republic. We never even thought about going there.” The Michigan shirt flopped behind my favorite jeans, the fabric at the
knees already beginning to thin and fray. Caitlin tipped her head back against the orange plastic, and we slipped back into vibrations and silence. After a while, I forgot about the Michigan shirt. I stared at all the clothes at once, the colors blurring, garments rendered indistinguishable.

“I’m going to step outside,” I said, reaching for my tobacco. The launderette was too warm, too many machines running, the air thick and close. I rolled a thin, straight cigarette and pulled my hood over my head. Outside, a firm gust of January wind made my eyes water. I thought about the previous January, and how I’d walked across campus in the tight air of single digit temperatures, my fingers and the tip of my nose tingling. It had been the kind of cold that braces shoulders and clenches stomach muscles, that refuses snow but hardens the white crust that already covers the earth into sharp edges and hard ruts. I’d walked head down through the biting air and imagined England, tried to will it into reality. Would we work in a pub with painted black half-timbering? Would the doorways be low and narrow?

There, in that moment outside the launderette, with a paper cigarette and a wispy drizzle, everything seemed to happen quickly and at once. Cars zipped around the roundabout, the 3B rolled to a stop in front of the bus shelter, and the people inside the bus traded places with the people outside. They trickled into the post office and the newsagent’s, lined up at the cashpoint outside NatWest, disappeared down side streets. As I watched the bus pull away again, I thought about all the things I’d done in Bournemouth and all the things I’d never do. I couldn’t believe I hadn’t eaten lunch on the tip of the pier or that I’d never just paid the ten quid and flown above the town in the hot air balloon that docked in Central Gardens. We hadn’t spent more than a few
afternoons in London, hadn’t seen a West End show or toured Buckingham Palace. We never made it to Cambridge or the Lake District or any of the places we wanted to visit. I couldn’t believe I was spending my last day in England doing laundry. I didn’t feel ready to move on. In fact, I felt paralyzed. I threw my cigarette on the pavement, the rain immediately snuffing out the last embers, the cement dark and slick and still not dusted with snow.

“You remember back when we were planning this whole trip?” Caitlin asked when I sat back down beside her. I nodded, shivering slightly not having realized how cold it was outside until I stepped back into the hearth of the launderette. “Remember how we said we wanted to stay somewhere long enough to love it and then leave?”

“Yeah.”

“Well I take it back. That was lame.” Her eyes were wet, and she was laughing, a tense gasping sort of laugh.

“Totally lame,” I said. “The lamest.” She leaned her head against the side of my arm, and we watched our clothes spin. Her fingernails were painted bright red for the party and seemed far too fancy for sweatpants. In the next dryer over, our bedding swirled, and the duvet cover’s plastic buttons slid against the inside of the dryer with a rhythmic clang. Somewhere in there, two orange pillow cases rose and fell.

_Last Night [2AM]_

Sometimes there are voices. Sometimes it’s quiet. Sometimes toilets flush, and sometimes they don’t. I’m happiest when they don’t. The swooshing makes it worse. There’s laughter and roaring hand dryers, the hiss of cigarettes landing in the sink, high
heels on the tile, and then nothing. I grip the toilet with my right arm, and press the left side of my face into the seat. The only thing that is real is this black plastic seat, the porcelain curve where the seat refuses to complete its circle, the hard space that gets splashed with piss. I want the toilet seat to be cold, but it’s warm from my face and other people’s asses. My eyes flutter between open and closed, hone in for just a second on the amber mess inside the toilet, and snap back to darkness, to purple hoops inside my eyelids whirling in endless patterns. Cait keeps coming in, telling me who’s leaving. Every time she enters, she lets the music in, and it gets worse.

“Open the door.”

“I can’t.”

“Come on, open it.”

“Cait, please, I can’t.”

“Well, Juli and Marcela are leaving.”

Juli and Marcela. The Colombians. We worked beside them in the hotel since day one. They invited us over, cooked us arepas and bean soup. Marcela taught us about menthol cigarettes and how they pushed your food down into the right place after a huge meal. They’re like us, a duo, one dark and one hot, one all humor and the other all sex. I want to hug Juli, to feel her coarse ponytail on my face, hear Marcela’s bangles tinkle like wind chimes.

“I can’t, I can’t.” I think I’m crying, but who can say at this point. I can’t open my eyes. When I do, everything goes white. The toilet, the silver knobs, the checkerboard tiles. Everything.
And then Cait’s gone. And, I suppose, Juli and Marcela. It’s just me and my toilet seat again and the sweat on my forehead.

I love this toilet seat.

I’m definitely crying now. Weeping. Fuck, I realize, holy shit, I’ve always fucking loved this toilet seat. I feel lucky to know this. Lucky to discover the truth before it’s too late.

We’re so lucky, I think at the toilet seat, we’re so lucky.

Our last morning began, quite unremarkably, with a breeze. Cool air sifted through windows left open all night from last smokes, nudging awake sleeping bodies, bodies heaped on the floor and couch, bodies leaning at awkward angles against the fat easy chair. The early air skimmed across arms draped over rib cages and heads resting on shoulders. A jigsaw puzzle of faces and limbs. The breeze lifted long bangs off foreheads, ruffled the tablecloth spread over four friends in a makeshift bed sheet, goose-pimpling skin. It poured through the lounge, fresh and ready, with the promise of rain and the faint shuffle of naked branches.

The flat woke up in stages, people stretching, rubbing eyes, the bleary disorientation of clawing out of a half-drunk slumber. Why am I on a pink carpet? Whose shirt am I wearing? Shit, my head, my head. The bitter taste of rancid cider, the glassine chest ache from too many cigarettes. The slow dawning of the day’s finality. There was tea and instant coffee, toast and cheese. First smokes stubbed out halfway through. Eyes darting to the clock on the wall. I took a long shower, too hot, steam snaking down my
throat, settling like a balm in my lungs. Dizzy, I clung to the shower curtain, the stream pattering the plastic like rain on an umbrella, loud and irregular.

This is it, I thought to myself, my hands gripping the white plastic. This is it.

I dressed quickly, bypassing make up, pulling my hair up wet, and rejoining the group. A few more faces had arrived, people who hadn’t stayed but had stopped in to say goodbye. Steve sat on the edge of the easy chair, Caitlin squeezed in beside him, and Lee was cross-legged on the floor, wearing his brown and purple striped jumper. He was bent over the red book in concentration.

“Hey, jerk,” I said. “Thanks for coming last night.”

“I know, I’m a loser.” He shrugged slightly, hand swiftly covering the page.

I sat on the floor in front of Caitlin, and she reached down and caught a loose strand of my damp hair. She twisted it and tucked it into one of my messy pigtails. I surveyed the room. Steve and Lee, a few of the Colombians, friends from the hotel, Phil and the bartender with the spiky blonde hair, Caro. This strange mesh of people who only sort of knew each other, who really only sort of knew us, but all people who had shared the night, people who wanted to hold onto it just a little bit longer, to stretch it out, to sit in the pink and white stillness a few moments more, before the room cracked, before the flat crumbled, and we all melted away from each other.

Only, why? Why did they care? Caitlin and I weren’t anything special; travelers were a dime a dozen in Bournemouth. During our stay we’d met Italians, Palestinians, Sri Lankans, Chinese, Romanians. We’d met more temporary people than we had permanent fixtures, and most from more exotic places than Ohio. Yet our lounge was filled with people who had come to bid us farewell. Tomorrow, and for some later even that same
day, they’d go to work, pour pints or build pumps or whatever it was they did. They’d read the newspaper and clean the toilet and their lives would go on just as they always had. But they were there, then, in that room, paying their respects in a sense. Their respects for what we had shared and for what had drawn them to us, for our uninhibited joy, our recklessness, our slack jaw wonderment for their everyday lives in their creaky beach town. *Thank you for bringing boundless sunshine to an otherwise bleak Bournemouth winter*, Phil had written in our red book. *Thank you for reintroducing me to the glory of cheese and pickle sandwiches.* We had stepped inside their lives and had not only accepted everything exactly as it was, but we had also fallen freshly, irrevocably in love with it all. Caitlin let her fingertips rest on the base of my neck until finally, we stood to go.

“I guess it’s time,” she said.

“Yeah, I guess so.” I grabbed her hand and squeezed.

**Last Night [3AM]**

Time passes, but I only know this as a distant fact. I don’t feel it. I know it through flushing toilets and the swinging door, through the boots that change on the other side of the partition. Maybe five minutes, maybe an hour. Maybe they’ve all gone, and the pub is empty, and if I stand and walk out the door, I’ll see chairs atop tables, a clean-swept floor. The lights will be off, brightened for cleaning and then cut. The pub will be gray forms and rough floorboards, a negative image of itself.

“Annie, open the door, it’s Kat.”
Shit, shit, shit. Kat is the bouncer, the lady bouncer with the deep voice and black boots.

“I can’t.”

“That’s alright, but if you don’t open the door in the next five minutes, I’m going to have to call an ambulance.”

_Scare tactic_, I telecommunicate to the toilet seat. _She won’t do it. No one will ever tear us apart._

“I’m serious, love, open up.” Her voice is firm. She’s an angry librarian, quiet, respectful, but pissed the fuck off. I’ve been puking on her books. I’ve been making too much noise.


“‘Atta girl,” Kat says. “Let’s go straight outside. Your friends are waiting for you.” She extends an arm, but I don’t take it. My face is pins and needles, and the room goes gray from the outside in. 1-2-3.

The door swings. I fear the rush of air will knock me over. I miss Toilet Seat.

The pub is emptying, and colors and faces streak past like rain, a blur through a windshield. I keep my head down, avoid eyes. Outside, Cait stands next to Steve, his arms wrapped around her. He rubs his hands on the sides of her arms, warming her. They lean on his car, look only at each other. I’m parchment. Fragile, trembling in the wind. My top is sleeveless, my shoulders bare. I’m sure I had a coat. I don’t feel cold, but I feel
the cold. I feel it pass through me. I’m a paper doll of myself. The real me is back in the stall. Steve’s car is so red it makes my skull splinter.

Sit in car.1-2-3.

I press my forehead against the windowpane. It’s deliciously cold. I want to lick it like a popsicle, to break off a chunk of glass and let it melt to nothing on my tongue.

Do not puke in Steve’s car.

1-2-3.

In the end, it felt very much like an end. A circle of faces, growing fuzzier by the second, people lined up on the cold pavement between our empty flat and the bare branches across the street, people standing and waving, getting smaller and less recognizable, slipping into shadow, into memory, as our car pulled away. The melodrama of clouds, a soft rain.

Caitlin and I sat together in the backseat of Phil’s rusty Ford Fiesta, and we all tried to sing loud, cheerful pub songs to lift our spirits, but we realized we only knew fragments of refrains. At the airport, we encountered the typical airport setbacks. Excess baggage charges, a delayed flight, a missed boarding call. We drank overpriced coffee out of paper cups, shook our heads. And eventually the last four months—the hotel, the pub, the feel of the sea against my chest and the sting of a needle in my back, the white walls and pink carpet, the silver sky, the waving hands—it all began to narrow, to funnel into a long white concourse that tapered into a departure gate and a makeshift tunnel that led to the doors of a plane, smiling men and women in polyester uniforms, two scratchy seats.
We spent the flight diligently filling out the worksheet Caitlin had made to pass the time: Bournemouth Top Five Top Fives. We argued over our Top Five Favorite People, made various drafts of our Top Five Boys We Wanna Do It With, laughed disruptive squealing laughs as we finalized our Top Five Hangovers. When we were finished, I took the red book out of my carry-on, and we read through the messages from those we’d just left behind. Messages of luck and messages of thanks, messages built from broken English, and messages covered with the pornographic graffiti that inevitably surfaces when such a book is left on a table in a loud and throbbing bar. When I turned to the page that Lee’s wide, calloused hand had so quickly covered a few hours before, my breath caught in my throat.

*An hour from Cleveland is just too far away for me to know.*

The words were written in blue ink with little circles above the i and the j rather than the standard dot. The words looked simple and happy on the page, but their meaning resonated, hung in the stale air of the plane, and for the first time all day, I thought about Ohio. I thought about how no one we had met could ever really know us because they would never see that place, the ramshackle three-sided barn beside my parents’ house, the radio towers that guarded long, lonely stretches of nothing. I thought about how we were flying even farther away from it that very second, farther away from ourselves, farther away even from the comfort of the English language.

It was nearly midnight when the pilot’s voice cut through the hushed cabin to announce our final descent into Ruzyne-Prague International Airport. It was dark outside, and my oval window revealed only blackness. But as the plane dipped and circled, Caitlin grabbed my forearm and laughed.
“Look!” Her eyes were suddenly wide-awake, curious. “Look out the window!”

Thousands of tiny specks shifted on the other side of the windowpane. At first I was confused. Was the plane spitting out dust? Had we flown directly into some kind of swarm? But the closer we got to solid ground, the whiter the flecks became, the fuller and more familiar. They fell from the sky loosely, floating in haphazard pathways and settling everywhere. As the plane bounced across the runway and made its slow taxi around the airport, I watched, speechless, as the white flakes sifted in front of the bright glow of the landing strip, drifting downwards and sideways at once, swirling in momentary circles and changing direction again.

“It’s snowing!” I said. “Oh my God, it’s snowing!” I strained to see out the tiny window, impatient to exit the plane, to breathe the cold, to feel the faint wetness on my face, the gentle chill of snow melting on skin. The plane finally came to a stop, and the seatbelt light clicked off. Laughing, we took our first tentative steps into the strange and snowy city.
Part II

“Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.”

~William Butler Yeats
We came back of course.

Caitlin and I spent just five weeks in Prague, living in a cold two-bedroom apartment with an agency-matched American roommate, another Wisconsin native, this time a very sweet Midwestern type named Sarah Jane with blond hair and a nose that crinkled when she smiled. Sarah Jane slept in one room, and Caitlin and I shared the other, once again pushing our single beds together and falling asleep curled into the shape of each other. Monday through Friday, we’d commute to Via Lingua, a journey that took nearly an hour and involved both the tram and the Metro. Each morning, I’d stare out the window as the metal wheels rolled over the metal rails and the tram slid between two snow-dusted hills and then overtop the River Vltava that frothed below like beer. Via Lingua was housed on the third floor of a six-story building that had an old-fashioned open cage elevator that perpetually moved in a jerky loop, a human dumbwaiter that needed to be timed just so to avoid harried leaps and clumsy falls.

Our class was made up of an even split of English and Americans, one Scotsman, one New Zealander, and one very quiet woman from Denmark. For eleven hours each day, we’d study grammar and phonetics, build lesson plans from magazine clippings and used workbooks, sit for exams. We took basic Czech classes. *Dobri den! Jak se mas?* I’m well, and you? On breaks, I’d ride the elevator to the roof and watch the white sky sift snow, making landmarks disappear. An opera house, a castle, Wenceslas Square, there
and then gone. Caitlin texted Steve all day every day, the tick-ticking of the keypad on our shared phone becoming the soundtrack of our time in Prague.

Once, as Caitlin and I stood on the Charles Bridge watching the lamplight form luminous skipping stones atop the river, a rowdy group of red-faced Scottish men paraded past singing “When the Saints Come Marching In” in throaty baritones. I remembered the Scottish golfers I’d served that very first night at the Roundhouse, and a thrill of the familiar coursed through me in the midst of so much peculiarity.

“The Americans will have a much harder time finding work,” our instructor announced during the final week of class. The rapidly developing European Union made it nearly impossible for Americans to obtain work visas in EU countries. Unless we wanted to teach in China or Japan or maybe stay in Prague, the Czech Republic on the brink of becoming but not quite an EU country yet, our certifications were meaningless. We had our hearts set on Italy. On orange trees in spring, on olive skin, on cobblestone piazzas and real tomatoes. We didn’t work the whole time we lived in Prague, spending frugally in a country whose currency was laughable compared to the British pounds sterling we’d earned and saved in England, but we had nearly drained our savings. What would we do? Where could we go?

Caitlin and I feigned horror, imitated disappointment. Fleetingly pretended to consider Asia. Maybe if we just took a month to get our heads around this, if we just took time to breathe somewhere where we could save up money and make plans. Somewhere we could regain composure, piece together the next phase. Sipping hot chocolate in an internet café in Vltavská, we formulated a plan. Caitlin booked two one-way flights: first
Prague to Southampton, leaving in a matter of days, and then one month later, London to Rome.

We could take on Italy. We were the type of people who actually did things, not the dreaded type who just talked about doing things, right? We had destinies to fulfill, greatness to chase down and harness. We just needed some time.

Caitlin called Phil then and there, the hot chocolate still warm in her mug, and he agreed to let us stay for a few weeks in his long, dimly-lit flat above O’Neill’s, invading his bed while he slept on the couch in the lounge with a spare blanket and no pillow. Phil was safe, constant. *Tell no one*, Caitlin ordered, indulging in her usual flair for the dramatic. *We want it to be a surprise.* They discussed tactics to lure everyone to the pub so they’d all be there, waiting. A grand return befitting Fabulous Girls. Less than a week after we completed our TEFL certifications, we boarded a RyanAir flight back to England, rode a bus from the airport to Bournemouth Travel Interchange, and hired a gray United taxi to take us directly to the blue trim and painted black door of O’Neill’s.

“It’s only for a month,” Caitlin said as we sat in the back of the taxi, the green lights of Asda slipping behind us, with the familiar petrol stations and newsagents of Holdenhurst Road, plastic phone boxes, bus shelters with jagged graffiti and movie advertisements. The groaning 3B wandered past, both levels of the double decker brimming. “It’s not like we’re moving back.”

“The shortest month,” I said, leaning against the soft upholstery of the backseat and staring into the patches of sky that peeked through shifting clouds. “February.”

Just a few weeks. No time at all.
Lee handed me a book—*High Fidelity*. The title was written in an unobtrusive sans-serif font, the name Nick Hornby four times as big in bright yellow. Both sounded familiar, but I couldn’t quite link either to anything. I searched the cover for clues, honed in on a bird’s eye view of a box of records. Squinting under the dim lamplight of O’Neill’s, I tried to make out the writing on the records but couldn’t. It was too small. Lee shifted in the vinyl booth, his brown cords making a high-pitched zhing as he tucked his foot beneath himself and sat on his ankle. We sat in the smaller top bar, which was quieter than the main space, far from the band, with the area around the bar tiled black and white, the furniture arranged in intimate clusters.

“It’s my favorite book,” Lee said. Steve and Caitlin sat on chairs turned toward each other across the narrow table, their bodies curved, heads tilted, twisting into one another like a double helix and shutting out the world around them. Caitlin and I had only been back a week, but we’d hung out with Steve and Lee nearly every day. We’d been so good at the element of surprise with our grand return to Bournemouth that we’d walked into the pub straight out of our taxi only to find it nearly empty. None of our friends—not even Phil, who was supposed to have assembled everyone but had been tied up at a management meeting an hour away—none of the faces we had expected to see had been there. We’d sat at a table for four in the dead center of the pub with our luggage at our feet, looking at the two empty chairs and the new girl behind the bar with the big teeth and the silky scarf in her hair. Apparently, our world had moved on. *I’m calling Steve*, Caitlin had said, and he and Lee had arrived in less than twenty minutes.

“I’ve never read it,” I said, flipping the pages of the book in front of my face, smelling the new paper smell and letting the faint burst of air ruffle my hair.
“I know it’s not the kind of thing you’re probably used to reading. I know you’ve just finished a degree in literature—” Lee emphasized the word degree, delivering both syllables in a calculated staccato, and I remembered Caitlin saying that Steve and Lee never went to college, that both left school at sixteen. Steve worked in a factory next door to his dad’s company, building pumps or something. Lee had just opened his guitar shop, but what did he do before? I had never thought to ask. “But, I don’t know, I thought you might like it.”

“Oh, wow, thanks for letting me borrow it. I like reading all kinds of stuff.”

“No, I—I bought that copy for you. I thought that way, you know, no rush. You can read it whenever you want.”

“Really?” I looked up. Lee nodded, and a glare from the dusty lamp overhead bounced off of his glasses. “That’s so sweet. Thank you.”

“That’s alright.” He took a crumpled bag of Golden Virginia loose tobacco out of his pocket and began rolling two cigarettes. Across the table, Caitlin laughed, and Steve rested one long, freckled hand on each of her thighs.

“So what’s it about?” I asked. Lee sprinkled the tobacco strands along the inside of the rolling paper, using less than I normally did which was probably why his came out so much straighter. He slid the first cigarette towards me. I picked it up but waited to light it until he rolled his. Taking a sip of my Strongbow, I opened the book to its first page. *My desert island, all-time, top five most memorable split-ups, in chronological order*… I skimmed a list of names. *Those were the ones that really hurt.* Wait a minute. John Cusack in black denim and a leather jacket. A blonde girl with blunt-cut bangs. I
knew that story. “Hey, wait, I think I saw the movie,” I said, interrupting Lee’s explanation. “John Cusack, right?”

“Yes, that’s right.” Lee nodded his head, looking relieved that I’d heard of it after all. “And I actually think they did a decent job with the film. Except I don’t know why they had to change it from London to Chicago.”

“The book’s set in London?” I always felt uncomfortable when I didn’t know things about books, like I was a fraud, like someone was going to break into my parents’ house in Ohio in the cricket-quiet of night and steal the navy blue folder that held my degree. I lit my cigarette, concentrated.

“Yes, the whole book has a very London feel. It’s part of why I love it so much really. I grew up in Twickenham, just outside London.”

Lee talked about the book, the movie, about desert island top fives and sneaking off to London by himself on the train when he was twelve years old. His face became animated but his hands seemed nervous. As soon as he put out his cigarette, he reached for the Golden Virginia, spilling dry tobacco on the table. I watched the way the muscles on his face worked. His cheeks bunched up just under his eyelids, like tiny saddlebags hitched to the bridge of his nose, soft and pliable. Before I realized what I was doing, I reached out and touched his cheek, pinching it between my thumb and forefinger.

“You’ve got really great cheeks.”

“Um. Thanks.”

I pinched, squeezing and releasing like I was checking an avocado for ripeness. The band must have been between sets because “Build me up, Buttercup” poured through the speakers in cheerful bursts that filled the bar. Across the table, Caitlin sang the lyrics
to Steve’s face, tapping his thin lips with her index finger on each accented syllable. *I need YOU MORE than ANyone DARling...* It hit me for a second like it sometimes did, how weird this all was. There we were in a pub on the south coast of England, both of us touching the face of someone we barely knew.

“Would you like to go to dinner with me sometime?” Lee asked.

Technically though we’d left and returned, our six-month UK work visas were valid through March first, which meant we actually had the chance to make a little money while we were in Bournemouth. Caitlin and I registered with Fleet, a temping agency located several doors down from O’Neill’s, making us permanently on call for hotel work all over Bournemouth and spilling into Sandbanks and Poole as well. We had four months’ experience behind the bar and fudged as much with waitressing for the agency’s forms, but it seemed all calls pertained to the absolute bottom of the hospitality industry’s ladder—hotel housekeeping.

We received phone calls at six in the morning, directing us to hotels that were sometimes within walking distance and other times required taxi rides that cost almost as much money as we could expect to make for the day. *Can you get here by seven? The rooms must be finished by eleven.* We wore the industry-standard black pants and white button-downs, were given at each location aprons and cleaning carts. We learned to fold hospital corners as though we were working with crisp cardstock instead of cotton sheets, tore three squares from each roll of toilet paper and tucked the loose end into a neat triangle to signal the roll was freshly attended to. We washed two-cup coffee pots and refilled baskets of teabags and sugar packets. Hoovered. De-smudged mirrors with
rubbing alcohol. We were always the only native English speakers. Sometimes the rooms were messy; sometimes, clean. Some people made their beds and left all the towels in a small bundle inside the bathtub. Other people left take-away boxes strewn across a tangle of bed sheets, grains of rice sticking to the pillows, the electric orange of sweet and sour sauce crusted into the carpet.

We received a call the day after Valentine’s Day to clean at the Sandbanks Hotel. We were sound asleep when the 6AM phone call came. We’d gone to dinner with Phil the night before, his treat, to a fancy restaurant with a special Valentine’s menu. Afterwards, O’Neill’s and rounds of shots. It’s Valentine’s, I kept saying. I bet everyone girl here is wearing new underwear except us. Steve and Lee showed up coincidentally though of course because Caitlin had texted Steve. When the pub filled up, Phil retreated behind the bar, and it was the four of us again, repeatedly thrown into this grouping.

That guy keeps looking at you, Lee had said, nodding in the direction of the bar. I think he knows you.

Dark curls, blue eyes, an even smirk.


I started to explain who Al was, that we’d spent some time together early on but that he never made much effort and had eventually just stopped calling, but Lee interrupted.

Go on, you can talk to him if you want.

And I did. I talked to him all night, joining him at his table and letting him buy me drinks, touching his arm, laughing too much. All the while, I avoided the daggers Caitlin was sending my way, refused to feel guilty when I glanced at their table and saw Lee
staring out the window while Steve and Caitlin talked at close range. At last call, Al stood to leave. *Come on, Number Twelve, you coming home with me?* I could just imagine Caitlin’s response. There was no way she’d let that happen. I could pretend to be independent within the thick walls of O’Neill’s, but I couldn’t actually walk out the doors of the pub without her. *Nah, I’d better not.* I rejoined my group at the table, only to be greeted with awkward silence and averted eyes. Steve offered to take us home, and as Lee opened the car door for me, he said simply and without judgment or expectation: *I would have called you.*

The following morning as Caitlin and I journeyed to the Sandbanks Hotel, an extravagant resort on the end of a teardrop-shaped peninsula, Lee’s words ran through my head: *I would have called you.* We were in the back of a taxi, and the driver kept shouting out the prices of each mansion we drove past, explaining with pride that Sandbanks, England was currently the most expensive place in the entire world to build a house. Each multi-million dollar home was tucked into a recess of green and stone, mansions stuck into the sides of the cliff as though a tidal wave had washed them up and spit them out, luxury homes that had taken root in sand and crag, longing to reconcile themselves with the sea.

“You know, you should be more careful with people’s feelings,” Caitlin said.

We’d been quiet all morning, and I knew she was bothered by my behavior the night before, infuriated that I’d embarrassed her by ignoring Lee all night. Despite the cold, the sun was blazing, and a brilliant glare reflected off the water, sunlight smacking me from every direction at once. My head was pounding.
“It’s the day after Valentine’s,” I said, ignoring her statement that I couldn’t refute and thinking again about Lee’s words. *I would have called you.* It had been the exact right thing to say, but I didn’t want to hear it. I didn’t want anyone in this place to know me more deeply than they already did. Messing around with someone I met at a pub was one thing—a good story, a cosmopolitan adventure. *I would have called you,* was something else entirely. We were leaving in two weeks. “I bet everyone in this hotel had sex last night.”

“Gross,” Caitlin said, not amused. We each stared out of our own window as the taxi curled around the long driveway up to the stately entrance of the Sandbanks Hotel, one of us looking at the cliff, the other out to the sea.

Caitlin sat in the bathtub while I stood in front of the square mirror that hung too high above the sink. I had to stand on tiptoes in order to see my small mouth, my pointed chin, straining my calf muscles and dabbing concealer on the half-moons beneath my eyes that seemed to be growing darker and deeper. I was preparing for my dinner date with Lee. The bathroom door at Phil’s flat wouldn’t close all the way, and I kept glancing at the sliver of hallway, not sure when Phil would be home.

“So my mom says, ‘Listen, Cait, you never find the person you’re supposed to be with when you’re looking. Most people find their soul mate later than they want to, and they spend a long time being unhappy about it. Maybe you just found yours sooner.’” She made a face like she was looking at a litter of kittens and then sunk into the bathwater, leaning her head against the back of the tub and nodding slightly, the remaining bubbles scurrying to cover her but not quite managing.
“Oh wow,” I said. “Yeah.” But I didn’t mean it. Caitlin’s mom was somewhat of a guru to us. She’d had a colorful collection of life experiences, children by different fathers, rules that were malleable and complex, sex just because. Despite a string of complicated ailments that left her more often than not confined to a wheelchair, pale, and house-bound, Caitlin’s mom was the most exotic woman I knew. She passed off snippets of wisdom like cocktail party philosophies—*Every woman deserves to have secrets*—and twice during our year abroad, she sent us both hundreds of dollars worth of Victoria Secret underwear that not only fit our bodies but also our personalities. In Caitlin’s box, a red and black corset, a sparkly thong. In mine, a baby blue bra and panty set, a simple black camisole with a pink bow closing a peek-a-boo loop on the chest. Caitlin often bragged about the conversation they’d had the day she lost her virginity to her high school sweetheart.

*Mom, I lost my virginity today.*

*Oh, Cait! Did you have an orgasm?*

I had didn’t discuss sex (or the lack of) with my own mother past the age of about fourteen when she started slipping newspaper clippings about teen pregnancy under my bedroom door and on top of my pile of schoolbooks. We both decided that was sufficient.

I dusted bronzer across my cheeks and the bridge of my nose, considered eyeliner and decided against it. I wasn’t in the mood for cocktail wisdom just then. I wasn’t in the mood for soul mates or falling in love either. I was going to dinner with Lee because he’d asked—on the spot—and because I knew Caitlin wanted to spend the evening alone with Steve, cooking dinner, watching a movie, doing the sort of things new couples did when
they were alone. The dynamic of friends-hanging-out was becoming strained and inaccurate.

“Is that what you’re wearing tonight?” Caitlin asked as she stepped out of the bath, the water already gurgling down the ancient pipes. She sat on the edge of the tub, a towel wrapped lazily around her, running a wide-tooth comb through her long hair. Water droplets dripped from her nose and the tips of her hair, fell onto the thin white towel and disappeared. She often asked this question when we were getting ready, sometimes casually, but other times with the implied “because I don’t think you should” hanging in the air between us. Like now.

I looked at the white button-down shirt I’d selected, the simple beaded necklace, the jeans and boots. “Yeah, what’s wrong with it?”

“Nothing. If you’re going to the library.” She was right of course. It was probably the plainest thing I’d packed in my suitcase. “It’s not really a first date kind of outfit, is it? What about your purple and gold tank top and black heels?”

I went back on tip toe and pretended to very closely scrutinize my eyebrows, tweezers in hand. “We’re just going to some Chinese place. I don’t want to overdo it.” Pluck. Sting. I blew the stray hair off the end of the tweezers, watched it float to the basin of the sink. Caitlin didn’t say anything for a few minutes. She just sat there, combing her hair with slow, deliberate strokes. A key turned in the lock down the hall. Phil was home.

“You know, Lee’s a really great guy,” she said finally, a note of defensiveness in her voice.

“Yeah, I know. That’s why I’m going to dinner with him.” I rooted through the makeup bag, looking for the right gloss. A really great guy. I’m sure he was, but we’d
only met Steve and Lee a month before we’d left Bournemouth and had only been back a
week. We didn’t know anything about them.

“Hiya, roomies!” Phil called from the entranceway in his exaggerated sing-song. He would have been great on the West End.

“I’m naked,” Caitlin answered. “Don’t come back here.” The closer she and Steve got, the less she wanted to do with Phil or anyone else.

“What’s that, darling? You want me to come straight back? Alright then!” Phil laughed, but the floor creaks indicated he was moving toward the lounge and away from the bathroom. Caitlin rolled her eyes.

*Be nice,* I mouthed at her. She shook her head but smiled.

“I’m just saying, Lee might not be tall and skinny like all the other guys you’ve messed around with, but he’s really nice. And he is good-looking, even if he doesn’t tick all your boxes.”

Why was she forcing this? She could fall in love if she wanted to. It didn’t mean I had to. And regardless of who fell in love or didn’t, we were leaving soon. Leaving forever. Caitlin was slipping dangerously close to a life she wouldn’t be able to walk away from. But I was smarter than that. When we’d returned to Bournemouth, I had felt the unmistakable warmth of coming home, and that had terrified me. Bournemouth was not home. It was only ever meant to be the first stop. Italy was next, the land of my ancestors, the origin of all my myths. I’d spent years dreaming of Tuscany, waiting for the bulging grapes, the copper-bronzed soil, the tough, flat bread and the sway of sunflowers. I’d imagined whispers of Dante, the faint brushstrokes of Botticelli hidden in
the soft marshes. Sunlight, shadow, cloves of garlic hanging from the rafters, sweet
breezes and elegant wines. Surely, this was where I would write great things.

“I know,” I said, smoothing a vanilla Lipsmackers over my lips and dropping it
back into the bag a little more forcefully than necessary, letting it clink against the plastic
tubes and wooden brushes.

“You have to try the aromatic duck,” Lee said. We sat at a small table with a single
candle in the center and a thin vase with one silk orchid. The candle holder was round
and squat, dark green wax pooling inside. Lee, who was typically a t-shirt and cords kind
of guy, his wardrobe reflecting the Seattle grunge movement that he wore like a nametag,
was wearing a dark blue dress shirt. Beads of perspiration gathered just beneath his
hairline. We both sipped double rum and cokes from highball glasses.

I had never eaten duck before. For some reason ducks just didn’t strike me as the
type of animal that should be eaten. Ducks belonged in the small oval pond at Tod Park
back home, gliding on the surface and leaving smooth water trails. I used to bring stale
bread in Schwebels bags and break off small pieces, watching the ducks’ flat beaks poke
the crusts, the soggy white clumps of bread floating like lint.

“Hmmm…maybe,” I said, keeping my eyes on the menu. “The Lemon Chicken
looks good too.”

“Well, I’ll get the duck, and you can try it.” Lee closed his menu and smiled. My
favorite spring image was ducks in raingear. I’d often thought if I ever had a baby, that
would be a great theme for the nursery. Soft yellow ducklings in bright red ponchos,
floppy hats. Wellingtons.
“Great,” I said. We set our menus aside, and once the slim, quiet waiter took our order and whisked the menus away, we had nothing to look at, nothing to fiddle with, arrange, pretend to be absorbed in. I realized we were alone for the first time, away from Steve and Caitlin and outside the dark walls of O’Neill’s. We were completely sober and in a restaurant so still we could hear clinking silverware and ice cubes knocking against one another inside the water jug our waiter carried around with him. They didn’t even have any music playing.

We had absolutely nothing to say.

We fumbled with the expected trite line of questioning. Do you have any brothers and sisters? What did you study in school? In between, an awkwardness sat between us, silent and uncertain. I tried the duck to be polite but found it greasy and unpleasant.

“You were right,” I lied, taking a large sip of water but still tasting the oily meat that I imagined coating my esophagus with a slick sheen, leaving a trail like a silk worm inside me. “Delicious.”

“You’re kind of here by default, aren’t you?” Lee asked, watching me arrange the breaded chicken pieces on my plate. It was a joke Lee had made before, often acknowledging the way we got paired up at the bar whenever Steve and Caitlin slipped inside their own world. It was an attempt to shatter the awkward silences that usually followed such a separation, but he said it then in the Chinese restaurant with a subtle recognition, a slow dawning. “You just came out so Steve and Caitlin could have a night together.”
“No, no it’s not that. I’m here because—” I stopped, not sure what to say. It wasn’t that, not exactly. I sipped my too-strong rum and coke. “I’m here because you asked.”

The next morning, the phone rang. I opened one eye and looked at the clock—only a few minutes past nine.

“The phone’s ringing,” Caitlin said, still buried under the duvet, her voice a muffled fusion of cotton and sleep.

“I know.”

“So answer it. You’re closer.” Caitlin couldn’t stand to let the phone ring and was always paranoid it was going to be an emergency back home, something wrong with her mother. I grew up in a house where no one ever answered the phone and was quite fine letting it ring until it stopped. If it was an emergency, they’d call back. After another ring, Caitlin threw the covers back and reached over my body aggressively, grabbing for the phone. She glanced at the Caller ID and dropped the phone on my stomach. “It’s for you.”

It was Lee.

“So our date sure sucked last night,” he said, right after we said our hellos. He sounded wide awake, wired on caffeine, almost unnatural.

“What?” I was taken off guard, not expecting such an honest remark and definitely not with so much enthusiasm.

“Yeah, it completely sucked,” he said again, laughing. “It was probably the worst date I’ve ever been on.”
“Hey!” I sat up, a stupid smile pulling the corners of my mouth far into my cheeks. “Shut up! I didn’t know what to talk about.”

“Listen, come to Poole Quay with me.” He sounded relaxed, in control.

“What?”

“Poole Quay. It’s a harbour about a half an hour away. We can have lunch, watch the boats come in.”

I looked at the dark red strands of hair that crept from beneath the duvet where Caitlin had once again retreated. “Yeah, okay.”

Lee picked me up a few hours later, and we drove into Poole. It was more industrial than Bournemouth, less touristy. The whole strip had a washed-out feel, sun-bleached and empty. A small pub and a few tea shops sat back from the water, the harbor itself cluttered with boats and chunky ropes, flapping canvas, mossy docks. We had coffee and pan de chocolate at a small bistro, sitting outside even though the air was sharp and uninviting. Lee asked me if America really looked like it did in the films, if neighborhoods existed like the one at the beginning of ET. He asked me about my dad’s bread and about Hiram and about my baby sister and if she was any good at the trumpet.

When we finished our coffees, we walked along the water’s edge, amidst the whistles and horns of departing boats and the rhythmic smack of water against the docks. Eventually we came to a wooden A-board advertising “Dorset’s Jurassic Cruise.” A stocky man with a thick beard and gloves with the fingers cut off noticed us reading the sign.

“We’ve got two spaces left,” he tempted, consulting a not-so-official looking clipboard, pages wilting in the sea mist. “Go on, take the lady out.”
“What do you think?” Lee smiled broadly at me.

I looked past him at the medium-sized ferry with a modest deck. A dozen benches faced forward, classroom style. The name Geraldine was painted on the hull in curly red lettering.

We bought the tickets and boarded the already crowded ferry to find not another passenger under the age of sixty-five. A pensioner’s cruise. We got a few odd looks, but we kept to ourselves. Up on deck, the wind raged through us. I was only wearing a thin t-shirt and jeans; I didn’t even have a cardigan with me. We contemplated hiding out in the cabin café, but a voice on the loud speaker told us we were approaching a cave. The ferry glided so close to the rocky cliffs that I worried for a second we might clip a sharp edge. Lee whispered, “Look up,” and when I did, I saw the jagged ceiling of the cave. Stalactites dripped down like murky fingers. The tour guide rattled off facts, but I was distracted by a woman two rows ahead of us. She was wearing a bulky white sweater, and her long gray hair whipped in the wind. Holding binoculars to her eyes, she yelped like an excited child.

“Puffins!” She lowered the binoculars and pointed. “There are puffins on the cliff face!”

She handed the binoculars to Lee. He used them to scan the cave wall and smiled almost instantly. “They’re so cute,” he said. I looked and looked, but I couldn’t make them out. Lee and the woman tried to give me tips, point me in the right direction. “Just to the left,” Lee said. “Straight ahead, in clusters,” the woman urged. They both looked so determined that eventually I called out, “Oh, I see them!” And gave the binoculars back to the lady.
We were sitting on our bench again, and Lee grabbed my hand and laughed. “You didn’t see the puffins, did you?”

“No,” I confessed. And he told me all about the squat little birds that looked like tiny penguins and how their feathers ruffled in the breeze, making them look fat and disgruntled.

Afterward, we sat on a low stone wall near the harbor for hours, watching the boats come in. The sea breeze was cold and fresh, carrying scents from nearby restaurants, battered cod and toasted almonds. An elderly couple walked past, the man dressed in a tweed sports jacket, the woman wearing a fancy green hat. She used one hand to anchor her hat against the wind, and the other rested on her husband’s arm. We made eye contact and smiled. A little girl tightrope-walked the wall and pouted when her mother told her to get down as they approached us. Lee and I jumped up, not wanting to disturb her game, and she clapped her hands, smiling at her feet. Two small children argued over who got a bigger chocolate flake in their 99 cone. Dogs on leads. Bicycles. Down the way, colorful bulbs blinked the word “Amusements.” The blue of the sky melted into the blue of the water, and a deep velvety shadow hung over the sea.

“We should head back,” Lee said, cutting into the afterglow.

Caitlin and I worked our last temping job a few days before leaving Bournemouth for good. Steve dropped us off at a hotel whose name I didn’t catch, not even as we were walking through the front doors. We were given frilly white aprons and ushered quickly into a small kitchen where the chefs wore brightly-colored checked pants instead of the traditional chef’s whites, their smocks bold blues and reds. The kitchen, which smelled of
roast beef and the mild tang of yeast, seemed small for such a large hotel but was a nucleus of sorts with narrow hallways curling out toward a wine cellar, a storage room, the entrance to the service-side of the bar, a large reception hall, and the cold February air that blew in forceful gusts around the dumpsters out back. I kept getting turned around.

We were in the catering department that night, a huge step up from housekeeping, and enjoyed the pleasant tasks of stacking chilled salad bowls and refilling breadbaskets, clearing plates and pouring ice water from crystal jugs into wine glasses. Some kind of awards ceremony was happening around us, cocktail dresses and tailored suits, and we were instructed to be invisible, to stand flush against the walls and scan our sections, to make a brisk sweep and return to our post with as little disruption as possible. Caitlin and I stood, side by side, black pants, frilly aprons. Having to be silent at work was new to us.

“Me too,” I whispered back. I hadn’t told her yet that Lee had kissed me. For real kissed me. She knew about the first time, outside O’Neill’s, a drunken kiss by the black door that had surprised me with its softness but had happened before Christmas, when I had kissed half a dozen people in the frenzied mess of our departure, and been quickly forgotten. No, I wanted to tell her that Lee had kissed me again, after our day out at Poole Quay, and that it had been even softer and more surprising.

A man took the microphone behind a slim podium and began a long acceptance speech. Caitlin mouthed “be right back” and darted from table to table, clearing and refilling. She disappeared to the kitchen with her stack of empty cake plates, and by the
time she returned, the man was nearly done. Caitlin slipped back next to me, glanced sideways.

“You first,” she whispered.

“No you.”

“Okay.” She took a deep breath. The man concluded, and a fresh round of applause filled the reception hall. “Steve and I said ‘I love you.’”

I could feel my eyes widen and my hair whip against my face as I swung my head in her direction. “Oh my God! That’s huge!”

Caitlin whispered furtive details as we stood with our backs to the wall, told me how they had talked under the stars and how crazy it was and how real, that it wasn’t just the madness of an impossible situation. “I love him, Annie, and I think I really needed to tell him that before we go.”

The ladies at my far table were low on coffee. Empty dessert plates spread across my whole section, smears of icing, dark crumbs.

“So what was your thing?” Caitlin asked.

“I’ll tell you later,” I said. “I better do a sweep.”

We had another goodbye party, no sign this time and no toilet stall, just sad faces around a table interrupted by an occasional wave of excitement over Italy. We didn’t want to leave, an even stronger reticence than before, but this time the subject was not negotiable. Our work visas were expired. Legally, we had to leave the country.

Leaving is hard but going is easy. Saying goodbye to a place, an experience, is always devastating, but arriving somewhere entirely new, somewhere unmarked except
with the mark of endless possibility, was the greatest kind of high I knew at twenty-two years of age. Steve and Lee drove us to the airport. Caitlin cried, and Lee looked at me with such sincerity and said, “You deserve a summer in Bournemouth. Come back someday.”

We had no plan, only a reservation for a bed and breakfast in Rome and a train ticket to Florence in several days’ time. There was a Via Lingua in Florence, and we hoped they would help us find a job placement, but we had decided to take a few days in Rome to just explore, to remind ourselves of why we wanted to travel and what worlds we had awaiting us. We had very little money but Caitlin created a working budget. If we ate in the hotel room every day—peanut butter sandwiches, fresh fruit—we could dine out each night in Rome, sampling the best food the world has to offer, drinking limoncello from graceful snifters.

The flight from London to Rome was short, not even two hours, barely enough time to drink a plastic cup of ginger ale poured from a can, the airline hostess moving down the aisle with her narrow trolley and the periodic hiss of a metal tab being flipped, the depressurizing of soda. Caitlin and I said little, closed our eyes, pretended to sleep. Before I knew it, the captain’s voice came over the intercom, welcoming us to Rome Ciampino.

The sky was red when we landed in Italy, red like vine-ripe tomatoes. A raw red, sliced open, dripping bronze. Tarnished shades—claret, eggplant, sepia—melted into one another inside the streaks of cloud that lay flat and low against the Italian sky, undersides dark and heavy, stained like bread dipped in aged balsamic. The sky of my blood, the red of my heritage. The streaks of my veins.
“I can’t believe we’re finally here,” I whispered, reverent, as the wheels of the plane unfolded and bounced across concrete that had hardened over cracked soil.

We held hands, inhaled, wandered into crimson.

We came back of course.
“Purpose of visit?” the customs official asked. He squinted at the red stamp inside Caitlin’s passport. The BUNAC stamp, the one that said the passport holder was legal to work in the United Kingdom.

The one that had expired a little over a week before.

Normally, we cruised right past customs officials. Caitlin and I were petite women, clean and respectfully quiet, and always held our passports and boarding passes ready and waiting. That evening in London Stansted, as we stood awaiting entrance back into the United Kingdom, we were wearing business suits. Mine was a charcoal pantsuit, and my hair was slicked back in a tight bun. Caitlin’s suit was black, and her auburn hair fell in thick waves past her shoulders, her white blouse parted at the top button, revealing a healthy amount of cleavage. Earlier, we’d woken up in Florence to the cracked plaster of a claustrophobic hotel room, taken quick showers with minimal water pressure, and spent several moments in our underwear in front of the brass-framed mirror, scrutinizing. Were we gaining weight? Was my skin breaking out? Let’s wear our suits, Caitlin had said. We’ll feel exotic.

“We’re just visiting,” Caitlin said.

“The address of the place you’re staying?”

“25 Heather Close, Bournemouth.” When we’d first landed in Gatwick seven months before, the customs official had laughed when we’d said Bournemouth, leaned in
conspiringly. Bournemouth? Lots of drugs there. Lots of drugs and nightclubs. Yeah, you girls’ll have a laugh.

“And who will you be staying with?”

“Our boyfriends,” Caitlin said without hesitation. I would never have said that. For one thing, Lee was not my boyfriend. We’d never even talked about it. Yeah, we’d gone out a few times, and I’d spent the night at his place before, but—

“Your boyfriends?” The customs official looked up from the desk for the first time. His eyes were a penetrating blue, a watery shade, eyes that were trained to see through lies. Boyfriends did not seem to be the right answer.

“Yes.” Caitlin glanced at me. I raised my shoulders, a slow-motion shrug.

“Do you know what I see, looking at your documents?” He tapped Caitlin’s passport against the surface of the small counter that stood between us, the counter more of a podium really, an arbitrary space made important only by the choice to view it as a boundary. The navy blue cover of her passport was beginning to show signs of wear, a collection of stickers, curling edges. “I see you have no return flights booked, a very recently expired work visa, and now you tell me you have romantic ties inside the country. I hope you’re not trying to stay here.”

Caitlin and I both laughed, nervous giggles, unsure of how to handle this unexpected sternness. The customs official did not laugh. On the contrary, he kept his jaw firmly set and eyebrows raised so that our laughter splintered into small, tinny sounds that dispersed.

“You girls make sure you make it home.” He stamped our passports and slid them across the counter.
The village of Throop was little more than a gathering of cottages and stables near an old mill on the outskirts of Bournemouth, a village far less associated with glitzy nightclubs and seafront hotels and much more in line with Dorset’s backwoods pastoral reputation. It had the wet green and soft marshes of the English countryside but without the grandeur. Throop was a place where gates creaked and no one minded, where glass bottles of milk waited on doorsteps each morning, a thick layer of cream rising to the top and sticking to the gold foil seals. A place where the neighborhood cats, with no fear of disruption, stretched out for long naps on patches of sunshine that illuminated the roofs of cars. Come nine o’clock, the sharp acrid stench of the local pig farm settled over the houses like a lingering fog, crept into open windows and soured mugs of tea steeping on kitchen counters. Throop was only a ten-minute drive from O’Neills’s, but it could have been a different town entirely, a different time.

Throop had been interrupted somewhat recently by housing developments, brick builds, paved cut-throughs that connected the streets for the frequent walkers and bikers. Street signs sat knee height, wide white rectangles with boxy lettering and names that evoked thatched roofs and grazing sheep. Chesildene Drive. Fritham Gardens. Bucklers Way. Steve and Lee lived together at 25 Heather Close, rented the property from Steve’s dad, parking their cars each day at the abrupt end that stopped just in front of the house. The street didn’t swoop into the gentle curve of a culdesac, didn’t redirect with any grace or planning. It just dead-ended, as though perhaps the developers had forgotten to erase a stray line from their blueprints.
Heather Close was a short road, just a dozen or so terraced houses tucked inside the creases of a development, and number twenty-five sat neat and tidy right at the end. The houses were all pale and sandy with white doors and stone walkways. Some had brass numbers or window boxes with drooping lilacs. A few more disheveled houses had tricycles and upturned scooters out front. But at a glance, each house looked like the one next to it, a chain of Siamese architecture.

Steve and Lee unloaded our luggage, rolled it up the narrow walkway to the front door, while Caitlin and I gathered purses and water bottles. It was late and cold, and I was aching for sweatpants and fuzzy socks. Steve unlocked the door and turned the handle. Inside, directly ahead was a flight of stairs, and on the left hand wall, a row of coat hooks, silver and dramatic. The hooks were angular rather than curved, like checkmarks nailed short-side to the plaster. It wasn’t the first time I’d set foot in the Heather Close house—I’d been there at least a dozen times before—but it was the first time I did so with the completely unnatural notion that I was coming home. It didn’t feel like home, didn’t feel like a place I would take showers or lie stomach-to-the-carpet and read a book. It didn’t feel like a place I’d simmer D’Angelo sauce and toast garlic bread.

“Should I take my shoes off?” I asked, feeling suddenly formal in a place I already knew was low-key on domestic rules. It was clean, but “boy clean.” The carpets were always hoovered and the dishes were done, but hardened toothpaste splashes clumped in the bathroom sink, and the glass dining room tabletop was usually smudged with both fingerprints and pawprints.
“Only if you want to,” Steve said, kicking off his trainers and pushing open the glass-paned internal doors that led into the front room. His long green trousers dragged across the carpet. “You’re at home, aren’t you?”

Caitlin caught my eye and smiled. Home, she said in our intuitive language of eyes and posture. We’re home.

I slipped my black heels off but carried them into the front room and set them on the floor, sitting on the edge of the navy blue loveseat while Caitlin plopped down on the matching couch. I rolled my ankles, stretching and flexing my tired feet. Sheer white curtains hung across a large picture window, and an oddly-shaped purple glass figurine sat on the windowsill. A cursory look revealed a bowl or a vase, but with closer examination I saw that the piece was entirely ornamental. The base was delicate, and the body consisted of four twisting swirls of glass, like four separate arms grasping for something just out of reach.

“Cup of tea?” Steve asked, tugging his striped beanie down lower over his ears. He stood in the doorway between the kitchen and dining room, his back reflected in the glass doors that led out to the back garden.

“Yeah, that’d be good,” Lee said, who was still arranging the luggage at the foot of the stairs. “I’ll put the kettle on.” He walked past Steve and into the kitchen. Caitlin and I exchanged another glance, taking it all in. The throw pillows. The flat screen television. The thick oak coffee table. Sure there was a Jaws poster on the wall, but it was framed and hung with picture hooks. No masking tape rolls or balls of blue tack that left sweaty marks in the corners of the poster. A silky black cat with a purple collar wandered into the room, cast a disinterested look, and padded off into the kitchen.
They’re grown-ups, I thought to myself. All the friends we’d made in Bournemouth so far were like us, travelling, uprooted, paying rent weekly in cash sealed up in an envelope and left on the table. Sharing bedrooms, sharing kitchens and bathrooms with strangers. Even Phil’s flat that we’d just left was a mess, dingy gray carpet, worn to threads in the long hallway. A black plastic trashcan in the kitchen, the massive kind with a swinging top that had obviously been dragged up from the pub. Later that night while we brushed our teeth and washed our faces, taking turns bending over the sink, Caitlin and I talked about Heather Close and giggled. Oh my gosh, they’re grown-ups. They’re just, like, men.

In England, compulsory education ended at the age of sixteen. You could go on to do A-levels of course, which would prepare you for university. Or you could earn a national vocational qualification (NVQ) through on-the-job training and assessment, climbing as high as an NVQ5, which would naturally increase your value and in turn your rate of pay. You could do an NVQ in almost anything. Hospitality management, horticulture, engineering. You could quite feasibly leave school at sixteen, jump right into the work force and in a few years’ time, be considered a level five expert, earning both a decent salary and a decent level of respect.

The legal drinking age was eighteen, which gave the Brits a three-year head start on flushing out the reckless wave of bile and angst that we Americans only just begin to explore in public houses in our early twenties. Lee spent his eighteenth birthday passed out on a long booth at the Seagull, stripped completely naked by his heavily tattooed best friend, until his mother finally turned up, shook her head, smoked a super-long King
(well, and she may as well have a quick whiskey as she was already there), and dragged him home. I spent my eighteenth birthday in an embroidered denim skirt and ruffled tank top, drinking a can of Sprite at a backyard graduation party for my high school’s star quarterback.

The age of consent was sixteen, as was the legal smoking age and the minimum age requirement for enlisting in the army. I wondered if petulant sixteen-year-olds spat out the same argument I always heard from hothead American kids: I can die for my country, but I can’t have beer? I pictured the sixteen-year-olds I knew, the gangly limbs, the oily skin, the determined facial hairs.

For all practical purposes, English adolescents were coming of age way ahead of the schedule I grew up with. I was twenty-two years old and, having gone straight through from preschool to my bachelor’s degree, had only been out of school for ten months of my cognitive life by the time Caitlin and I moved into Steve and Lee’s three bedroom house on Heather Close. Everyone I knew back home was a student. Doing student things. Living in dorms, playing beer pong, working cakewalk campus jobs in two hour shifts between classes. If people had their own apartments, they were student-friendly, meaning there were dark stains on the carpets, cigarette burns perforating the curtains, layers of grout clogging the bathroom tiles. The vaguely nauseating reek of marijuana, Chinese carry-out congealing on chipped Formica countertops, wet bath towels.

In England, my peers had left school a full six years ago. People my own age were advancing in careers, cohabitating with their partners, getting engaged, sending joint Christmas cards, buying major appliances, and acquiring cats. And with free healthcare, it
was no surprise that couples as young as nineteen, twenty, were actively trying to have babies. In my world, a baby at the age of nineteen was the end of your life. Or an abortion.

People seemed happy to get a job, fall in love, and start a life. It was so simple. So obvious. Why not work in an office? Why not take an actual risk with another human being? Why not try for a baby? If it didn’t work out, leases could be wiggled loose, engagement gifts returned, plans changed.

Steve and Lee were no exception. They’d moved in together as the result of a double break-up. Lee had been dating Steve’s sister Ellen for four years, and Steve had been dating her best friend Lisa for roughly the same amount of time. Steve and Lisa originally shared the house on Heather Close while Lee and Ellen had lived in a two-bedroom flat two blocks away. One relationship crumbled, and the other quickly followed suit, the guys ending up in the three-bedroom house and the girls in the flat. But the presence of Lisa lingered at Heather Close, explaining the mug tree, the cups and saucers with silver swirls, the purple bedroom, the emotionally distant black cat, Morticia Perkins, whose surname appeared on envelopes from a veterinary clinic in Moordown but matched neither of the boys’ last names. A framed picture of Lee’s ex-girlfriend/Steve’s sister, in a black robe and mortarboard cap, sat on the end table next to the loveseat.

A brief discussion of sleeping arrangements resulted in Caitlin and Steve sharing the master bedroom, and Lee and I rooming together in the room he already occupied. It was a little awkward, considering this meant we would share a bed and we had never actually “shared a bed” before, but it was better than the alternative, which meant clearing out the
closet-sized third room that was brimming with Steve’s odd array of collectables and trinkets. I was thankful to be back in Bournemouth, for the duration of the summer, and didn’t want to make any waves.

Initially it was a charming setting, and Caitlin and I reveled in our new role of Susie Homemaker. We would wake up early to have breakfast with Steve and Lee before they left for work and then crawl back into our beds for another couple of hours, until the natural light filtered in and nudged us awake. We’d talk about what to have for dinner each night, walk into Castlepoint to pick up grocery items, or swing by the library to check out the new Margaret Atwood and use the free internet. We’d spend hours cleaning, removing all the items from the refrigerator and spraying each shelf with lemon-scented bleach alternative, washing the wire racks in the sink. We mixed hot sudsy bucketfuls of all-purpose cleaner and scrubbed the painted baseboards in every room, experimented with Hoover attachments. During one such cleaning binge, I bent over the bathtub, working the harsh cleaner into a think lather and stripping away layers of limescale.

“Hey,” Caitlin called up the stairs, shouting over the Incubus CD she’d put on for cleaning music. Neither of us was a huge Incubus fan, but Steve was, and we didn’t have much to choose from that we’d heard of really, and Caitlin always wanted to sing along. “Don’t forget what Steve said about the drain!”

The drain!

I ran the sponge over the surface, clearing away foam. Steve had said to be careful when we showered, not to step on the drain or put any pressure on it because it might come loose and fall down under the tub.
“Oh my God!” I hollered. “I totally forgot!” I ran the hot water for a moment, let
the bubbles rinse away. Caitlin appeared in the doorway, a look of concern on her face.

“Did you break it?”

“I don’t know. I can’t tell.”

She peered over the tub. “Hmmm…It looks like it’s separating a bit.”

“Yeah, I thought so too.”

“Was it like that before?”

“I don’t know.”

We both stared at the sliver of darkness between the silver of the plug and the
plastic of the tub. There was definitely a fissure. A noticeable gap.

“What should we do?” I asked.

“Maybe it’s not broken,” Caitlin reasoned. “I mean, if you didn’t get a good look
at it before you started cleaning, you don’t know for sure if it’s any different now, right?”

“Right,” I said, leaning farther over the tub, looking into the obvious space. I’d
only been at Heather Close a few days, and I’d already broken something horribly
expensive. This was just like the washing machine at Spencer Road. Stupid, stupid,
stupid.

“Well, let’s call Lee at work and ask him if he thinks it’s broken.” Caitlin went
into the bedroom and returned a moment later. “Yep. It’s broken. But I think we can fix
it. Lee talked me through it.”

She disappeared again and returned with an industrial-looking tube braced inside
the long barrel of what looked like a plastic rifle, a hinged clamp where a trigger should
be. A silicone gun. “All we have to do is trace around the drain evenly and let it dry.”
We rolled up our jeans so we could both step in the wet bathtub without getting soggy pant legs. It sounded easy enough, but the silicone didn’t squeeze out evenly like toothpaste did, and a considerable amount of force was needed to even produce a small glob. Caitlin siliconed, and I monitored her dispensing. Before we knew it, the silicone canister was empty, and a lopsided ring of clear gel surrounded the drain. We eased ourselves out of the tub and waited for the silicone to dry.

“Do you think we were supposed to use it all?” Caitlin asked, tapping the gun on the white tiles.

I shrugged. Unfamiliar with which pipes connected to what, we thought it best to refrain from running any water until we could determine if we’d been successful, so we put cleaning on hold, examined our toenails, discussed dinner.

“Do you think it’s dry yet?” I asked after just a few minutes.

“Maybe.” We looked back into the tub, and Caitlin reached out to poke the silicone, still a thick slime. The drain, which had clearly had enough at this point, separated and fell down into the darkness beneath the tub with a metallic clang.

“Shit!” I said.

“You know,” Caitlin said, backing away from the abyss, “I don’t think it was broken before.”

In the beginning, this is how it was. We worked together. We laughed. Life was a sitcom, and we played our parts expertly. Best friends living with best friends, full of the giddy hope of a brand new start. It wasn’t weird for Caitlin to pick up the phone and call Lee just like it wasn’t weird in the evenings when Steve and I slipped out back to smoke a joint while Caitlin and Lee, who didn’t partake, sat on the couches and talked. Steve,
quiet by nature, never said much, just leaned against the back door and stared at the night. He was tall and lanky, like a plank against the wall. But as we passed the crackling joint between us, we shared the stillness and the stars, both content to love the way the other was making our best friend happy.

Caitlin took to rising early. I’d hear her waking, brushing her teeth, flushing the toilet, but I’d stay in bed, pull the yellow duvet over my head and lie perfectly still as though I feared she could see through the wall, through the blankets, as though she could see me hiding. The scent of her toast and coffee wafted up the stairs, a smell that should have been inviting but made me retreat further under the covers, sweat as my hot breath filled the dim space that the early sunlight couldn’t quite penetrate. Sometimes I’d hear her greet Morticia, open the door and collect the milk bottles.

She began a diligent exercise routine. Caitlin was a creature of structure, and I could tell the wide open daytimes were chipping away at her sanity. We’d always differed in this way, but it had never been so pronounced before because we’d had work or school or social engagements to break up the hours. Caitlin always wanted to do something, and I always wanted to do nothing. She was a classic extrovert, refreshed by people and activity, and I was an introvert, finding energy in stillness and seclusion. Maybe it was the fact that we had separate bedrooms now, or maybe it was the freedom of caring about someone besides just each other, but we suddenly found ourselves not just embracing but flaunting these differences, wearing them like dark sunglasses and an open newspaper, a cue that we wanted to be left alone.
Each morning Caitlin changed into gray yoga pants and a tank top, piled her hair in a bun on top of her head, and worked out to Amy Winehouse. She did crunches, leg lifts, butt exercises, aerobic routines. We’d never heard of Amy Winehouse, but her debut album *Frank* sat on Steve’s shelf, picturing a shoulder-bearing black-haired woman who seemed both tough and broken, her songs stretching and collapsing like rubber bands. Caitlin played same tracks over and over, sometimes the rattling of plates in the cupboard, harmonizing between reps.

I retreated even further beneath the duvet.

When I finally heard the shower spray against the plastic curtain, I’d creep downstairs and have a cup of coffee, a bowl of cereal. Afterwards, I’d change into my bulky red hoodie and mesh running shorts. I’d comb over Lee’s bedroom, looking for discarded packs of Golden Virginia. Not working anymore, I was embarrassed to ask for money for cigarettes, but the length of the day and the tension of the house made the craving worse than ever. Usually, Lee opened a new pack before the old one was completely empty, and the broken bits of dry tobacco in the corners of a nearly empty bag could be rolled into one or two thin cigarettes. Lee never cleaned up, never threw his junk away, so I could usually find at least one flat pack of tobacco and several packs of rolling papers. I’d roll my findings and tuck the cigarettes and a lighter loosely in the front pocket of my sweatshirt.

We’d meet in the hallway, Caitlin in a towel, drops of water running down her uncombed hair. The smell of Garnier conditioner, green tea lotion.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”
“I’m going for a run.”

“Okay. How long will you be?”

“I don’t know.”

“Okay. Take the phone just in case.”

“Okay.”

Sparse conversations. Efficient.

Once outside, I’d stretch for a few moments on the stone walkway, in case Caitlin was peeking out the large window that sat above her and Steve’s bed, that overlooked the modest patch of grass and in the front of the house. Bend at the waist, hold my toes, count to ten. I began my runs in earnest, feet pounding the pavement, long strides, the cracks between sidewalk slabs disappearing beneath my gray and orange Adidas cross trainers like mile markers on the highway. My breath in my ears, pulse in my throat. But once I cut through the row of hedges at the base of Ashurst Road, deposited myself just outside the development, I slowed to a half-hearted jog, controlling my breathing and letting my form slip, stride shortening and arms tightening. By the time I covered the two blocks to Taylor Road, a long road that ran alongside a grassy field and curved like a comma toward Throop Mill, I was leisurely strolling, taking sharp drags from my dried-out cigarette, exhaling dirty white plumes.

I meandered down side streets, learning the irregular loops and turns of surrounding developments, discovering a long gravel road that dead-ended with a rickety fence and deep tractor ruts. I gazed into the calm brown eyes and glistening nostrils of a grayish horse who, each day, would lean over the fence and sigh. But always, I ended up at Throop Mill. Some form of the mill had existed in that same location since the
eleventh century, but the current structure was built in the late 1800s, a brick building, thick with ivy, a massive sign painted directly onto the south-facing wall, white sans serif letters on a baby blue backdrop. Parsons and Sons. Throop Flour Mills. I’d walk the winding footpath that trickled from the mill and ran parallel to a clear stream. There was a quiet place where the stream widened, punctured with stepping stones that knocked the water off course, resulting in rivulets, sudden whirlpools, miniscule waterfalls. I’d balance, one stone at a time, until I reached the large flat stone that would have been large enough to stretch out on and sunbathe had it been summer.

Instead, I sat on the cool rock, pulled my legs up to my chest and wrapped my arms around my knees, a compact self. In early Spring, the air carried a constant wetness, the scent of turned earth and slick stones, long, lush grass. It was there, on that rock and in that position, that I would smoke my second cigarette and think. Sometimes I’d think about Throop Mill, how it had been harnessing the earth’s energy for a thousand years, how the earth was still giving and we were still taking. I’d think about all the hands and feet and eyes and backs that had worked this bit of land, had known this water. Sometimes I’d think about Ohio. Sometimes I’d think about how everything I knew to be true kept breaking. But most days, I just stared at the patchwork of lily pads, the silent trails of water striders across the surface of the stream.

Caitlin lost fifteen pounds. I gained five.

Back home, a note on the door: Gone to the library. Be back to cook dinner.

The truth was we didn’t want to spend our open hours together at Heather Close. The truth was an ugliness was growing between us like a cancer, growing darker and stickier. We began resenting what should have been healthy differences, began cringing
where we used to overlook. Who cared if Caitlin wanted to create a routine? Did it really matter if I slept in? We stopped connecting. The truth was, we didn’t want to.

The house was too small. Unlike the other places we’d lived so far overseas, Heather Close was a new build, no stucco façade, no floor-to-ceiling bay windows, no twelve-inch baseboards or drafty hallways. The building was done in the style we were used to back home—cheaply, built to suffice rather than last. There were definite perks, like the water pressure and wall-to-wall carpeting, but mostly I didn’t notice these things. Mostly, it just felt normal. Translation: it didn’t feel English. A small kitchen in a romantically crumbling Georgian townhouse was quaint. The small kitchen at Heather Close was claustrophobic. There were three bedrooms, but the third bedroom was barely bigger than a closet space, a room that could only be a nursery or a very poky office. At the time, it was used primarily to store Steve’s collection of Star Wars paraphernalia and occasionally as a place for airing racks draped with damp clothing. The two usable bedrooms were next to each other, and the dividing wall was thin.

We could hear them at night. They could hear us. The discomfort of squeaking mattresses, trapped breaths.

Lee snored. His alarm went off at 4:30 each morning, and he slept through a prolonged and intricate series of snooze functions that made the rest of the household burrow beneath pillows and rage.

Caitlin and I, feeling awkward about our expired work visas and the fact that we couldn’t contribute financially, assumed responsibility of all household chores. I learned what Steve’s underwear looked like. Caitlin giggled at quarter-sized holes in Lee’s socks.
There was only one bathroom. An assortment of hair clogged the drain, long stands sticking like paper mache on the shower wall. Lee once asked “whose poos smell like wine gums,” not realizing that his more delicate roommates sprayed perfume to mask offensive odors (though he contested likening someone’s feces stench to fruit chews was high praise). I kept forgetting to put the lid of the toilet seat down, Morticia kept drinking toilet water, and Steve kept making general reminders that this was a serious problem.

Dinner was particularly brutal. Cooking together, and especially for other people, used to be one of my and Caitlin’s favorite activities. We experimented a lot, inventing our own signature dishes. Heart Attack Chicken. Tootin’ Bean Salad. Chocolate Banana Crepes. At one point, we’d fantasized about a travel memoir/cookbook we would someday publish together, each chapter beginning with a photograph and a recipe, and then telling the story of that dish, of those people, that place. We vowed to tweak a recipe for Irish soda bread to commemorate our Shamrocker bus tour and the half hour we spent sitting on a jagged rock on the tip of the Dingle Peninsula, disbelieving that anywhere could be so blue. We researched potato dumplings in remembrance of the café we lunched at nearly every day in Prague, staring out the fogged-up windows at high-heeled boots, snow hats with long braided ties that dangled past erect shoulders. We asked the Colombians to teach us how to make arepas.

But the kitchen was no longer a pleasant shared space, and Caitlin and I resorted to taking turns cooking, mapping out meals for a week, and dividing the days between us. The four of us sat around the dinner table, clinking silverware, talking about our days. Considering Caitlin and I spent our days avoiding each other, Lee’s guitar shop was nose-diving into its inevitable collapse, and Steve worked a factory job he hated in order to pay
for the electricity, water, gas, and food we all relied on—talks about our days were not what one might call stimulating conversation.

“What’s the plan for this evening then?” Lee asked every night, when the conversation bled out, leaning forward, smiling expectantly. Lee was very much a twig-on-the-shoulders-of-a-mighty-stream kind of guy. If someone had said the plan was to pack a bag, hitchhike to London, and catch the next flight to Bangkok, he would have asked how many t-shirts I thought he should bring. If we’d said the plan was to strip the carpets from the entire house and lay laminate flooring, he would have changed into work clothes. It wasn’t that he was spineless; he was just easygoing. There wasn’t much he wasn’t up for if it meant hanging out with his friends.

But the question got under Caitlin’s skin, and each night, her face became more pinched, her posture straighter and closer to snapping. I stacked our plates, headed to the sink. Lee was the last to realize there was no plan. That two and two didn’t always equal four.

Even our nightly menu screamed dysfunction.

Caitlin made salmon with garlic dill sauce when she knew I hated seafood.

I grilled fat, juicy burgers even though she hadn’t eaten red meat in years.

Lee and I still managed to fall in love.

It began with an almost imperceptible movement, the slightest friction of a thumb on an arm, while the four of us watched a movie. Steve stretched out on the couch, with Caitlin pouring herself in to the empty spaces between his long limbs. The lights were dim, and Lee’s arm hung loosely across the back of my neck, his wrist resting on my
shoulder, fingers dangling. I felt the gentle motion of his thumb sliding back and forth on
the lower curve of my shoulder, the place that slanted inward to the sharp line of a tricep.
It was a hesitant step, an expanse of skin no greater than a centimeter explored by the
squattest and clunkiest of appendages, the least sexy digit by far, while our eyes remained
 glued to the images flickering on the flat screen, the nuclear glow of a television set in a
darkened room.

It was such a faint invitation. I could have ignored it.

Leaning into the warmth of his side, I smelled his wrinkled t-shirt. There was no
heavy cologne, no calculated effort, just a clean soap smell and the hint of tobacco. An
evening spent a few inches closer on a two-seater couch. And that was it, no hand-
holding, no intertwined limbs or deep gazing, no electric conversation into the wee hours
where we finished each other’s sentences, couldn’t get over our shared love of something
obvious.

Afterwards, we began spending more time together, or maybe not more time, but
making more of our time. We packed turkey and cheese sandwiches and bananas, a
 thermos of coffee, and had a late-night picnic on the dusty floor of Summerland Music,
talking about my parents and sisters while racks of Gibson and Dean guitars hung unsold
on homemade racks. We drove to a random bench in Southbourne that overlooked the sea
and laughed until our sides hurt. The bench was arbitrary, a painted wooden structure
planted twenty yards or so from the dual carriageway and about the same distance from
the edge of the grass, where the land dropped off, revealing the craggy descent to an
abandoned beach below. The waves rocked steadily, occasionally drowned by the sudden
noise of a passing car.
“I feel like a bear’s going to creep up on us. It’s so dark and isolated.”

“A bear?” Lee raised his eyebrows so high his forehead looked pinched. “A bear?”

“Yeah, a bear. You know, just come lumbering out of the dark and get us.”

“We don’t have bears in England,” Lee said, as though I’d suggested a T-Rex might attack. Or a fire-breathing dragon. An angry unicorn, nostrils flared.

“What do mean you don’t have bears?” I asked, equally shocked.

“We just don’t have ‘em. They’re not indigenous.” Lee gazed into the dark haze that hung over the water, the vague outline of Bournemouth Pier several miles down the shore. He seemed about to speak but instead bit down on his knuckles in a vain attempt to compose himself. “A bear,” he repeated, breaking into a laugh.

We often laughed at how different our lives were, how each day we discovered some new divergence in our journeys from birth to the present. Sometimes, small things. A jar of pickles in the grocery store. Gherkins? You honestly call these gherkins? Other times big things. You haven’t seen your dad in nine years? I’d asked the question a few weeks before as we sat on cold rocks halfway up the jagged cliff face that marked Hengistbury Head, one of Dorset’s prehistoric wonders. On one side, rolling hills, a marshy valley, the lonely stone towers of Christchurch Priory. Kite flyers and dog walkers, the fluttering of geese. On the other side, the dense gray of a choppy sea, slamming against the cliff with such fortitude, I could scarcely believe I couldn’t feel the vibrations. Nope, Lee had said, flicking his lighter absent-mindedly, holding the flame for a few seconds and then releasing, illuminating his face long enough to reveal indifferent blue eyes, uneven stubble. It’s no big deal though. I’d thought of my own dad, his flour-
caked hands, the way his low voice lifted with excitement when he talked about Tuscan bread. The photograph of us after my third-place finish in a high school cross country meet. We stand in front of the kitchen sink, me in my hunter green warm-ups, tired ponytail. My dad, shoulders level with mine, holds up three large-knuckled fingers, smiles deep into the center of the lens.

“What about mountain lions?” I asked after a few minutes.

“No, of course not.”

“Snakes?”

“Not really.”

“Raccoons?”

“Nope.”

A car slowed and parked somewhere close behind us. The door slammed, and a woman’s voice cooed to a dog, whose nails made clicking sounds on the pavement. They moved toward the overgrown grass and walked away from the bench, in the direction of Bournemouth pier, a far-off shadow on the sea.

“No raccoons? That’s mental.” Our laughter tumbled down the cliff, bounced overtop the small and steady waves.

One afternoon we found ourselves alone in the house boiling milk for hot chocolate. I stood in the doorway between the kitchen and dining room, tapping the wooden spoon lightly against my thigh. Lee sat on a chair at the table, finger-picking a soft, familiar melody on his Samick spruce-top electro-acoustic. He was making his guitar face. I’d noticed over the previous weeks that whenever he played guitar, his alert features
slackened, yielded to a calmer version of cheeks and eyelids. His head tilted, eyes cast
down toward the tortoiseshell scratch plate, and his full lips parted slightly in a searching
way, as though he were about to ask a question but had reconsidered and settled back into
private concentration.

“What are you playing?” I asked. “It sounds familiar.”

Lee cleared his throat, immediately rested the guitar on his lap, his face returning
to a practiced smile. “Nothing,” he said. “Just messing around.”

“No, what is it?” I asked again. “I’ve heard you play it before.”

“Eh, it’s stupid, embarrassing. It’s just something I wrote.”

“Really? It’s really pretty. Play it for me.”

“Nah, honestly, it’s nothing. Just some pathetic love song I wrote when you were
in Prague.”

“Well now I definitely want to hear it. Come on,” I said, nudging his leg with the
wooden spoon. I glanced over my shoulder at the pan on the stove. It wasn’t boiling yet,
but the soothing smell of warm milk was beginning to fill the small kitchen.

“No way,” Lee said. “Any shred of cool I’ve maintained this long will go straight
out the window.”

We back-and-forthed on the issue for a bit, but eventually Lee repositioned his
guitar and began to play. His voice, which I’d only heard in rare snatches, was raw, pure
only in its raspiness, its frank emotion. It was a voice that belonged on the blue-lit stage
of a dingy hole-in-the wall pub, a voice that became an atmosphere, a mood. I sunk into
the chair next to his, pressed the smooth concave head of the spoon against my lips,
smelling the cured wood, imagining the excess curling away while someone stripped bark, carved, found a spoon inside a branch.

Somewhere between the first refrain and the second verse, a sharp hiss escaped from the kitchen. We pretended not to hear it, but Lee’s shoulders stiffened, and seconds later it was followed by a louder, more urgent hiss.

Lee paused, fingers still pressing cord shapes on the guitar. “Shit, the milk’s boiling over.”

Lee was always nervous, making messes, losing keys and wallet. Shrinking his favorite sweater in the wash. He always reacted with sheer panic, worried eyes, fretful hands.

“Well keep playing,” I said. “We’ll clean it up when you’re done.”

“Are you sure? It’s going to crust all over the hob.”

“I’m sure,” I said. “Keep playing.”

He tried to reenter the song with the cacophonous accompaniment of a hissing burner, the reek of burnt milk. He played a few more bars, looking up often, checking my expression. We both tried not to laugh, and neither of us heard the key in the lock.

“What is that?” Caitlin called, rushing past us and into kitchen. Her cheeks were flushed from a long walk in the early April air. “Is that burning milk?”

Steve was right behind her. “Oh no,” he drew the words out, the no deflating like a balloon. “Look at the hob.”

The brown foam hardened on the white metal. Steve and Caitlin crowded around the stove, turning off the burner, crinkling their noses. They looked at us, confused, disgusted. How could we let the milk boil over? Why weren’t we cleaning it up?
“I got it,” I said, pushing past them and setting the spoon on the speckled countertop. Lee silently returned the Samick to its stand.
Money was tight. It—which is to say the lack of it—contributed to the already widening crack, the slow splintering that promised to snap. Steve and Lee’s socioeconomic backgrounds mirrored Caitlin’s and mine, but in an exaggerated carnival mirror kind of way. Where the difference between Caitlin and me was her successful attorney father versus my inner city schoolteacher dad, a manageable difference between upper and lower middle class, the gap between Steve and Lee’s upbringing was much more blatant.

Steve never came off as a rich kid, mostly because he hadn’t grown up as one, but also because he was both embarrassed and defensive of his father’s fortune, all details I learned secondhand from Lee. Steve’s dad, a self-made man, owned a window company that exploded into a lucrative business at a time when England’s housing market was climbing toward astronomically unaffordable, and he had purchased four properties in Bournemouth and a detached house in London. The Bradleys lived on wide, tree-lined West Way in a massive house with grand white pillars and a stone wall enclosing their property. Mrs. Bradley was an impoverished Irish immigrant who, once settled into her new life, developed a deep enthusiasm for designer shoes and volunteered as a playground mum at a local nursery school.

Lee was raised by his single mother who worked as a personal assistant inconsistently for a string of employers first in Twickenham and Richmond, wealthy suburbs of London, but eventually surrendered to the easier seaside life in Bournemouth.
They moved into a one-bedroom flat in Boscombe when Lee was sixteen and divided the bedroom with a partition wall. Lee had to walk through her room to get to his. She married and divorced three times, the last ex-husband spending a significant time in prison immediately following the divorce. The flat was later broken into by two kids with baseball bats, one of whom was wearing Lee’s jacket when he landed askew on the pavement after jumping out the second-story window. Lee once sold his CD collection to buy a vacuum cleaner because he’d found his mom in tears, sputtering in a cloud of dust and cat hair. Eddie, Lee’s father, was a one-eyed out-of-work builder who was in and out of homeless shelters back in London.

Maybe it was coincidence that each of us gravitated toward the person who seemed closer to our own side of the have and have-not divide. Or maybe that’s just logic, human nature. Maybe people who grow up having things recognize something in each other the same way people do who grow up wanting things. Generally speaking, Steve and Caitlin had the tact never to ask why we weren’t going out, leaving the house, giving them a night alone. And we had the pride to pretend like we never noticed their eyes willing us to leave, like we never felt envious when they impulsively stopped somewhere for lunch or went out for drinks.

How we dealt with this financial tension, however, was very much an individual thing. Lee, unwilling yet to give up on his bohemian guitar shop, still worked at Summerland Music without paying himself but also got a part time job at the post office. He took me to the same Chinese restaurant we went to for our first date, with the same linen napkin fans and too-strong rum and cokes, on the very day he got his first paycheck.
He took an upright tube of Aquafresh from his mother’s medicine cabinet when Steve asked him to pick up toothpaste on his way home.

Steve complained to Caitlin that Lee splurged on a night out with his first Royal Mail paycheck rather than paying back some of the money he owed but never said a word to Lee about it. He continued working honestly and working hard, quietly shouldering the household expenses. But he became oddly territorial, grumbled if Lee used his favorite mug, glared if Lee sat on the big couch instead of the loveseat.

Caitlin borrowed more money from her dad and maxed her credit card.

I did nothing.

Caitlin countered my nothing with her usual proactive stance. We didn’t have work visas, but that didn’t mean we couldn’t work. There must be something we could do. Babysitting? Or tutoring?

“I have an idea,” she said one afternoon, appearing in the doorway while I was engrossed in a book I’d pulled off Lee’s shelf. Morticia warmed my feet at the end of the bed.

“What that?” I looked up but didn’t close the book.

“Cleaning,” Caitlin announced triumphantly. “We can put an ad in the paper for housecleaning.”

I looked at Morticia, who kept her head tucked neatly inside the curl of herself.

We put an ad in the Daily Echo, and within a week, we had two jobs lined up. We decided on a uniform—jeans, white tank tops, bandanas—and we bought matching orange buckets, which we filled with an assortment of sprays and sponges. We tested the
buckets to see how heavy they’d be. Could we carry them to the bus stop? We made a trial run, walking down to the bus shelter in front of the Broadway Pub and home again. How much should we charge? And should we factor in bus fare? We wanted to be cheap enough that people would choose us without hesitation, but not so cheap that we were slave labor. Sure, Caitlin and I were foreigners scrubbing toilets illegally, but we had standards. In the end, we decided £8 an hour (for the pair of us) plus bus fare was reasonable. Minimum wage was £4.50.

“Sea Road,” Caitlin said the morning of our first job, looking at the address she’d written on a scrap of paper and comparing it to the yellow, white, and pink lines inside the Bournemouth street map. “I wonder if it’s right by the water.”

It certainly was. Our first job was Damian Gavin’s penthouse apartment in a new seafront complex in Boscombe called the Point. We’d lived in Boscombe for four months, but had never once made it to Boscombe Pier. To be honest, we didn’t know it existed. The concerned looks and resounding chorus of, “Oh my, you don’t walk around Boscombe alone at night, do you?” had discouraged us from exploring the streets that leaked eastward from Spencer Road, deeper into Boscombe’s trenches. We’d heard the stories. Knives. Needles. Prostitutes. *Can you spare a quid, mate? Give us your address and I’ll send it back.*

We didn’t know it at the time, but Boscombe was on the brink of a major revival. Soon there would be a regular open market, the sleek silver sides of fresh fish tucked neatly like shingles on stalls made of vinyl and ply, garlic-stuffed olives, purple onions. Europe’s first artificial surf reef would be built; murals, painted on the sides of buildings. Used book stores would surface and vintage clothing shops. In a few years, there would
be open air art galleries and live music on the beach. People would talk of re-planking the pier.

But as the yellow double decker swung behind a bus depot and shopping centre, left on Hawkwood and left again onto Sea Road, Caitlin and I had no way of knowing any of this. What we did know was that we were out of the house, together, and with a purpose for the first time since we’d boarded the orange EasyJet plane that had hurled us away from Rome. The sun was shining warm through the windowpanes, and we were on a road we’d never been on before, a road with quaint teashops and a brick hotel that couldn’t have held more than a dozen rooms, a road that grew kitschier and more crowded the closer we got to the sea, the buildings painted bright cake icing shades of pink, yellow, orange, and blue. Perhaps we sensed a coming change, the crisp assurance of innovation carried on a breeze that smelled at one moment murky like hollowed mussel shells and then sharp like the vinegar and hot grease from the chip trolley parked just off the road. It was hard not to, when Sea Road deposited itself on a circle of pavement that trickled to sand and then to glittering water, while the walls of the Point climbed skyward.

“Did you see that vegetarian restaurant back there?” Caitlin asked as we exited the bus.

“Yeah, Wessex something?” A few twists and turns back, we’d passed a huge Tudor style building, a white render façade with black half timbering, four chimneys topped with decorative chimney pots, and a sign advertising a completely vegetarian menu.

“We should go there sometime.”
“Yeah, definitely,” I said naturally even though it had been a long time since we’d made plans together. And even longer since we had any extra money to make plans.

We were working. We had buckets. We wore bandanas.

Damian Gavin was pretty much exactly what I expected from a single man living in an extravagant new high rise in a typically forgotten part of town. He was tall, dark, marginally handsome. He wore tailored lavender dress shirts with too many buttons undone, pinstripe trousers, leather flip flops. He did something with debts and mortgages, and when he was home, he was usually on his mobile phone in his office, the door half open and revealing jittery legs and ardent pencil-chewing. In his office, Damian Gavin used a booming voice that sounded much different from the timid, embarrassed way he instructed us on what he wanted done. Just, I dunno, the basics I guess. Kitchen, bathroom, hoovering. Do you, I mean, would you do the ironing, if you could? Usually, he left as soon as we got there and asked us to lock up on our way out.

His flat was impressive in its size, its newness, its faint smell of paint and carpet fibers, in its south-facing wall that was not a wall at all but a wall-sized window that, six stories up, revealed a dramatic view of Boscombe’s largely untouched portion of the English Channel. But it was unimpressive in its perpetual state of just-moved-in. The walls were all white; the carpets, beige. Plain white plates and cups in his sink, one sticky shot glass. No pictures hung, no photographs taped to the fridge or propped up on end tables. No end tables. No couch even, for the first few weeks we cleaned Damian Gavin’s apartment. Just open space and ambient light, stacks of paperwork.
In this blank canvas of a living space, Caitlin and I relaxed. We distributed duties wordlessly, having fallen into a routine at Heather Close. Caitlin did bathrooms. I did kitchens. Caitlin dusted and vacuumed. I mopped and ironed. At the Point, we instinctually separated; I carried my orange bucket to the kitchen, and she headed straight for the bathroom. I washed the dishes first—how liberated Damian Gavin must have felt to leave those plates crusted with curry sauce!—and then rearranged the mail strewn across the counter into a neat pile. I turned the tap on to let the water run hot and spraying the countertops with a citrusy foam that audibly fizzled, I jumped when I heard Caitlin scream.

“What is it?” I called, dropping the bottle and running to the bathroom.

“Ewwww!”

“What? What is it?”

Caitlin stood between the toilet and the bathtub, yellow sponge in her hand and an exaggerated grimace on her face.

“Pubes. Pubes everywhere.” She gestured toward the tub and even from my post in the doorway, I could see the wiry black hairs stuck to the inside.

“Maybe they’re chest hairs?” I offered.

“They are not chest hairs.” She sat on the edge of the tub, far from the offending material.

I laughed openly and without reservation, the sound filling the room, smacking against the silver fixtures and the ceramic tile. “Well,” I said, backing into the hallway, “you’re the one who loves bathrooms.”
We nicknamed him Lamian, deciding early on that we would hate Damian Gavin. It had nothing to do with his extraordinary rate of hair loss and everything to do with the fact that inside the generic white walls of his apartment, Caitlin and I found some small plot of common ground. We began to piece his life together through opened mail lying in relaxed trifolds on the carpet, receipts, empty bottles of paracetamol. Lager in the fridge, frozen dinners, chopsticks wrapped in wax paper. Sometimes our discoveries were amusing, a broken cork floating in a bottle of red wine paired with boxer shorts bearing a dark red wine stain. *Someone had too much to drink last night, eh Lamian?* Sometimes they were infuriating, like the day Caitlin found a receipt for the ironing service he’d used before our phone number appeared in his copy if the *Daily Echo*. They’d charged him more for four shirts than we did for two full hours of de-crusting his countertops and de-pubing his bathroom.

One day Caitlin walked into the kitchen with an odd look on her face. She handed me a greeting card.

“Lamian’s a dad,” she said simply and walked back out of the room.

I opened the card and a picture tumbled out. I stooped to pick it up and looked into the big brown eyes of an oldish baby with a dark shock of hair and a smile revealing a not quite full set of teeth. A boy, I assumed from the blue and yellow onesie. The front of the card said, “For Daddy,” and pictured a cartoon dog.

I tried to keep hating Damian Gavin, but I couldn’t seem to get it right after that. There was suddenly something profoundly sad about the emptiness of his swanky penthouse, a shape having been made, the outline of what was missing. It wasn’t a couch
after all, or an end table. The place pulsed with the absence of a baby gate, the lack of sippy cups.

I always set the ironing board up in front of the window wall, and as the steam rose off Damian Gavin’s striped boxer shorts, sweetening the air with Asda-brand laundry detergent, I looked into that unbroken expanse of water, the blue-black vastness and the green slivers that hinted at sandbars, shallow patches, disruptions beneath the surface. The occasional sharp white of a capping wave that balanced for a breathless second before collapsing. The pier carved into the water with such obvious futility.

Did Damian Gavin sit in the emptiness of the beige and white room, in a t-shirt and boxers, and stare out the window during the quiet of night? Did he wonder if that dark-haired baby was sleeping soundly or fussing on the shoulder of a woman he’d once known, a shoulder he’d once kissed? I imagined her shoulder to be freckled; her neck, swanlike and pale. How long had it been since he had held that baby? Held her? I bet Damian Gavin replayed conversations in his head, not just theirs, but insignificant ones, ones he’d had with clients, with friends, probably even ones he’d had with us. Did I sound too curt? Will they think I’m a jerk? Perhaps he even fell asleep on the soft beige fibers, not wanting to disrupt the bed we’d made for him, the crisp hospital corners and calculated pillow arrangement.

I developed a blister on the inside of my index finger from the ironing, from ironing so much so fast and so forcefully. Damian Gavin never dried the clothes completely, and they’d fall from the dryer heavily, cold from hours, maybe days, tangled in themselves, damp and aggressively wrinkled. I’d iron the same item over and over, letting the heat from the iron slowly dry dress shirts, trousers, undershirts, and socks.
Steam and sweat clung to my skin, and my index finger turned red and angry. But looking into ocean, I could understand Damian Gavin, and I could forgive him.

Once Damian Gavin became sad, the sadness of everything else crept up on me. The two hours a week spent in Damian Gavin’s apartment weren’t enough to mend the cracks. Too little. Too late. Sometimes, I’d stand in the kitchen at the Point, hot water on full blast, and I’d attack the limescale in the sink with a green scouring pad. Stripping away the flaking layers, I’d imagine what it would be like to live in the penthouse with Caitlin, to wake to the twitters and squawks of seagulls, the tentative rays of an early sun on the water. But I could never think past waking up. What would we do? What would that life be? My hands would swell with the hot water, sting from the descaler. We could half-heartedly make jokes about Damian Gavin’s take-away preferences or his unusual amount of argyle socks, but the reality was that we were cleaning separate messes in separate rooms.

Our bus rides into Boscombe grew quieter, and the bus rides home were spent in near silence. Sometimes I’d bring a book to read in transit. I wasn’t irritated with Caitlin anymore; I was just sad. The house on Heather Close no longer stretched and heaved with tension, and the inevitable snap—the yelling or wall-punching or door-slamming, the necessary blow-out—never happened; it all just sort of quieted to muted acceptance. Like the penthouse apartment at the Point, the house on Heather Close was empty.
And then one day it was June, and how did that happen? The sky was the pale kind of blue that June is made of, a soft, unhurried blue. Sometimes a wisp of cloud, sometimes not. The wetness of spring settled, and the fat sun baked warmth into the earth.

A few miles away, Bournemouth Beach took a deep breath and welcomed summer. The pier awoke, hundreds of sanded feet wandering up and down the creaky boards. Cameras flashed. Dogs barked. Bare-backed children shrieked into the waves. Beach towels hung over the metal railing, stiffening in the salt-tinged air. Striped deck chairs were dragged to the sand, and the heavy padlocks on the bright beach huts that lined the promenade were loosened and unlocked. The metal grate of the ice cream vendor’s was lifted, and vanilla cones topped with Cadbury flakes passed through the window into hands hungry for refreshment and nostalgia. The mythology of the English seaside grew and spread.

Or so I imagined. We didn’t go to Bournemouth Beach.

_You have to see Bournemouth in summer_, Phil had told us when we’d first become fixtures in O’Neill’s, just as the town was packing up and closing its doors.

_I can’t believe you won’t be here for summer_, Alan had told us when we’d walked out of the Roundhouse for the last time on a cold January night.

_You deserve a summer here_, Lee had said in an awkward airport embrace next to the security gate, moments before Caitlin and I left for Italy.

But who could have known we would collapse so completely? We stuck to our routine—exercising, cooking, cleaning, avoiding—and we never went to Bournemouth Beach. Maybe Steve took Caitlin, probably he did, but she never mentioned it, and Lee
and I never thought to go. Alone, Caitlin and I pretended summer, like so many things, wasn’t happening around and between us.

Caitlin and I sat on the whitewashed bench across the road from the Point, waiting for the yellow bus to carry us back to Heather Close. She set her bucket on the pavement with a solid thunk.

“Do you and Lee have any plans for our birthday?”

Several years before, we’d sat on another bench in the sun, drinking tea and getting to know each other.

*When’s your birthday?* she’d asked.

“Uh, no. We haven’t talked about it actually.”

*June 12th*, I’d said.

*Shut up! My birthday’s June 12th!*

*No it isn’t. Really?*

“You know it’s next week,” Caitlin said, staring straight ahead, eyes following the gentle incline of Sea Road.

*Wow, I never met anyone with my birthday before,* she’d said.

*Me neither.*

“You know, of course. Why? What are you guys doing?”

*Hey! So we’re both Geminis. The Twins!*

“Well, we’re going to the party that night.” The party was a huge family gathering at the Bradley house in honor of Mrs. Bradley’s fiftieth birthday. Steve’s Nan and all the
relatives from Ireland were being flown in. It was Caitlin’s debut. “But I thought maybe we could all go to lunch or something. Exchange presents then.”

Caitlin and I had spent our shared birthday together the previous two years, first my twenty-first and then hers. Two milestones, back to back. Both years, we’d rented a log cabin in Hiram on the biology department’s field station. There was a large fireplace, three bedrooms, two couches, a pond out back. Both years, the cabin was full, friends sleeping in small huddles on the indoor/outdoor carpet that covered the cabin’s floor. We drank cocktails from plastic cups, watched boys put firecrackers in watermelons and set them to sea on the still surface of the pond. Blast off, watermelon rain.

“Yeah, that sounds great,” I said. I hadn’t bought her gift yet. I didn’t know what to get, though we had agreed on a modest amount to spend on each other. The soft bills sat in my purse, waiting.

“Do you want to check with Lee first?”

“No, I’m sure it’s fine.”

“Okay, well I thought we could go to that vegetarian place we saw. Wessex something?”

We passed the vegetarian restaurant with the black beams and pointed dormers only sometimes, depending on which bus we caught. There were several routes into Boscombe. The building was on a corner and called attention to itself, seemed to belong somewhere else, somewhere older and more pastoral. The sign hung above a wide awning, the lettering ornate. I half expected it to read, Ye Aulde Vegetarian Restaurant.

“Yeah, definitely,” I said, picking at a piece of chipping paint that cracked off the bench in a satisfying strip.
They’d called us the Fabulous Doublemint Twins.

A few days before our birthday Steve took Caitlin to Castlepoint Shopping Centre and as a gift, let her choose something to wear for his mom’s party. She came home and modeled a form-fitting sundress with a full skirt, very forties-glam, white with large red roses. On her feet, pointed-toe sling backs, also a deep red. Her exercise routine had paid off; her waist looked small and her chest full but tame. She flitted around the house, trying to catch her reflection in the French doors. Turning this way and that, the fine fabric of her new dress, swooshed and swirled. She dyed her hair a brighter shade of auburn.

Lee gave me my gift in private: a CD.

The morning of our birthday, I rooted around the suitcase I kept under Lee’s bed, grabbed a wifebeater and my faded jeans, the fraying knees now patched with material from old underwear. The same jeans I wore to clean Damian Gavin’s kitchen. The same shit I’d been wearing for ten months.

We piled into Steve’s cherry red Toyota Yaris and headed into Boscombe, but the streets looked different from the lower seats of a car, and Steve had entered the borough from a different angle. We drove around and around, down Sea Road, around the cul-de-sac at the base of the street and back up again, but we couldn’t find the Wessex Something. It was getting late, so we wandered into a vegan café instead, an unremarkable storefront in a line of shops. It was cafeteria-style, pay-at-the-counter, select items and set them on a plastic tray. Steve checked the clock on his phone a lot. Lee didn’t like the beans.
Caitlin opened her gift from me: a halter top covered with red-headed hula dancers and tropical flowers. A pair of sunglasses.

I opened mine: a knee-length sundress and a summery purse.

They were good gifts, chosen with precision. Correct gifts.

Although really, I should have chosen larger frames, something much flashier, more Hollywood chic, something that would have made a bolder statement. She had a much easier time committing to dramatic accessories. And really, I hated knee-length anything. It dwarfed my legs, was not a flattering cut.

The cards Caitlin and I gave each other were the same size, both enclosed in a bold red envelope. We paused, looking from envelope to each other—had we picked out the same card? I could imagine us, separately, facing a wall of cards at W.H. Smith’s, scanning for the right picture, opening and closing glossy card after glossy card, analyzing the messages.

I could imagine us choosing the same card. But we hadn’t.

I can’t remember what was on the front of the birthday card I gave Caitlin that year. It probably had a picture of two women on the front. Maybe it was two wrinkly old ladies, babushka-clad, with tarnished rings and cloudy jewels. Too bright pink lipstick and cat-eye glasses. Old lady perms. Or maybe two little girls playing dress-up. Floppy sleeves, long strings of beads, complicated hats. Maybe it was a black and white photograph, two 1950s women touched up with rich, slightly false color. High-waisted Capri pants, checkered neckerchiefs.

Caitlin and I probably looked at the picture and talked about who was who. *That’s you, the one in the pink cardigan. No, no, I’m the one with the green handbag.* We would
have leaned over tofu and kale, scrutinizing the women on the card, searching for similarities.

I don’t remember what I wrote inside either. I’m positive I would have written the date in the upper right corner, and I would have written “This is Life” underneath. We did that on all our correspondence that year. Christmas cards, thank-yous, invites. But what did I write in that blank couple of inches beneath the card company’s manufactured greeting? The space meant to be filled with personal sentiment.

I don’t know. I can’t remember.

Probably something short and trite like, “Hope your birthday is as fabulous as you.” We liked the word fabulous a lot back then.

My words would have been beautifully scripted. Long tails on my y’s, over-sized capital letters, a full round C at the beginning of her name. I have really artistic handwriting when I take my time, especially when I use a fine point felt-tip pen. I bet I used one of those pens on Caitlin’s birthday card.

I know what I should have said, didn’t say: I miss you.

The following Tuesday, the yellow bus groaned and hissed its way through Boscombe’s narrow streets. Caitlin and I shared a seat near the front, a perfect set of Gemini twins, matching outfits, matching buckets, while the bus swayed and pitched its weary course past pubs and tea shops, revealing as we curved past the cracks between buildings, momentary flashes of sea. The white walls and black beams of the vegetarian restaurant streaked by outside the wide windowpane, the intricate font on the sign remaining grand but unreadable.
“Why didn’t you tell me your dad moved out?” I asked.

I sat on the loveseat, and Caitlin sat on the couch. We assumed these positions naturally, Caitlin on the far end of the wide blue couch, and me in the corner of the loveseat, taking these perches like assigned seats or marked territory. I folded my legs beneath me, my hands resting on my ankles so I didn’t have to decide what to do with them.

“I’m telling you now,” Caitlin said.

“I know, but you just said he moved out a few weeks ago.” I paused, tried to soften my voice. “You know you can tell me anything.”

Her face was normal. It wasn’t sad or angry or even annoyed. Just blank, like a face you’d see waiting in line at the grocery store, looking ahead while fingers absentmindedly traced the mesh netting that contained bulbous, unscrubbed potatoes. A face you wouldn’t notice on a crowded street. Placid, even. Sometimes I heard her crying on the other side of the bedroom wall, and I heard the low soothing tones of Steve’s voice, imagined him stroking her hair, rubbing the hard knots I knew she got at the base of her neck. But in the morning, she was always fresh coffee and flushed cheeks, aerobics and long showers.

“I know. But we don’t—” She stopped, reconsidering. But it was too late. She could finish the sentence or not; either way, the words hung heavy in the air.
“We don’t talk anymore,” I said, finishing the thought that sat ugly between us.

The window was open, the filmy white curtain swaying every so often. Outside a woman’s voice sang Patsy Cline’s “Crazy.” I didn’t know which house she lived in, but she did this a lot—sing Patsy Cline’s “Crazy.” Not every day but often enough that Caitlin and I didn’t even acknowledge it as we sat on the couches. Early on, we had laughed. Caitlin rushed up the stairs, met me in the hallway, a glint in her eyes. *Can you hear that? She’s awful!* I didn’t know if the woman was practicing, or showering, or just remembering something deep and distant, but a couple times a week, sometimes more, her clear voice poured out onto the faded tarmac of Heather Close, in through our screenless windows. Always Patsy, always “Crazy.” Sometimes the notes stuck, growing bigger and stronger; sometimes they wavered halfway through and broke. She stopped and started a lot.

*Crazy, I’m crazy for—*

...*crazy for feelin’—*

...*I’m crazy for feelin’ so lonely.*

She wasn’t awful. She was just uncertain.

“No, I guess we don’t,” Caitlin said. “We should probably talk about it.”

“Probably.” I uncrossed my legs, tucked them beneath me. I was never good with confrontation. I was the kind of person who internalized, bottled emotion, avoided this kind of conversation at all costs, the kind of person who didn’t know how to tell people they mattered or that they’d hurt me.

Caitlin was the opposite. A bull-by-the-horns kind of approach. Let’s talk it out.

We won’t go to bed angry. In a way, I’d been waiting for this conversation all along,
hoping for it. I didn’t know why we hadn’t had it sooner, but I had sensed that when it happened, Caitlin would know exactly what to do. I half expected her to whip out the old yellow legal pad, make a do-to list, suggest a reconstruction theme, create a ritual. I half expected her to actually fix it.

Instead, she just looked at me. The skin seemed to hang a little on her face, bags under her eyes, her lips curled downward in a worn-out droop.

“I feel like you don’t take us seriously,” I said. “Me and Lee.”

“Well, to be honest, we were a bit shocked you got together.”

“Shocked? Why?”

“Because you never seemed that interested. Steve and I always wanted the same thing, from the night we met we wanted to be together, and you and Lee just, I don’t know, didn’t seem to. You seemed…”

*Go ahead and say it,* I thought as Caitlin squinted, searching for the right words. She pulled her ponytail out, shook her head until the long waves settled. *Say we were just your sidekicks.* It was just like when she got to be Daphne for Halloween, purple minidress and platform heels, while I was Velma, in a bulky orange turtleneck and glasses, painted freckles. Just like in Ireland, when we played that drinking game with the tour group in the low-ceilinged pub in Doolin, when Caitlin had been nicknamed the Vivacious Vixen and I was Hippie Chick with a Scarf. Everybody was in love with her. Was it so unbelievable to think one person could be in love with me? I picked at the surface of the couch, the tiny balls of upholstery that formed and rolled beneath my fingertips.
“I mean, do you think you and Lee are going to end up together? Do you see yourself living here forever?” Caitlin asked. She twirled a lock of hair, tucked it behind her ear.

“I don’t know.” Lee and I had only been together a few months. No one could answer a question like that after only a few months. It was already the beginning of summer, and Caitlin and I would be leaving soon. Going home. No one talked about it, but it was there. We’d reentered the country on a six-month tourist visa, which meant we had, at most, until September. It was there in the black stamp in our passports. It was there in the backs of our throats, in the pits of our stomachs. It was under our pillows, and creeping like weeds under our feet, it was growing up the magnolia walls.

“You must have a feeling. A gut feeling one way or another.”

Sometimes, when Lee turned his head a certain way and smiled, his face was so open and so familiar. And sometimes after he left in the mornings, I’d curl into the warmth of the sunken space where he’d just been, breathe in the smell of his sleep. Sometimes we’d walk through the leaning stones and tall spires of the high-walled cemetery on Charminster Road, smoking cigarettes and trying to outdo each other, seeing who could find the strangest name, the saddest story. Or we’d sit in the shade of the tall oaks in Queen’s Park and create dialogue between the dogs that ran and barked and squatted at the other end of the park, straining retractable leashes.

But sometimes, we’d lie side by side in the dark, and I’d play with his hand, trace the calluses on the tips of his fingers, squeeze his thumb at the place where it flattened into nail and flesh. I’d look at this hand that was wide and meaty, fingers that were squat and not at all like the long slender fingers of other boys I’d known, fingers that had
fluttered, brittle digits. Concentration camp physique, a friend of mine had once described my taste in men. I’d look at Lee’s thick functional hand, bitten nails, and I’d think, my God, I’m going to hurt this person.

“I really don’t know,” I said.

Caitlin made a face that seemed to say I’d proven her point. That there was nothing left to say. The Patsy Cline lady began her loop again. I’d always liked “Walking After Midnight Better.” It was more blustery, less forlorn.

“Well we know,” Caitlin said. “We know we want to get married. We know I’m coming back as soon as possible. So maybe that’s the difference.”

We. We. We.

“Maybe. It’s just—the ways you guys are—it’s—it’s difficult to be around sometimes,” I said, not sure why I was pushing it, especially when she wasn’t even engaging, wasn’t accusing me of anything, wasn’t asking why I read thick novels all day so we didn’t have to interact, wasn’t complaining that Lee and I never went out in the evening, never let them have the place to themselves. It was almost like she accepted it. I wasn’t sure why I kept digging, but I did. I needed to.

“What do you mean? The way we are?”

“You know, like you shut everyone else out. The way you’re always touching. The way your faces are four inches from each other whenever you talk, even when there’s a room full of people. It’s uncomfortable.”

“Annie, we’re in love.” Her large eyes widened in exasperation. “We’re in love and it’s new and we don’t know how much time we have together before I have to leave. What do you expect? It’s not about anyone else right now.”
We sat in silence for a moment, and I could feel her eyes on me, waiting for me to say something, to say I understood, to say it was okay, but I didn’t. I just stared at my hands, bit at the inside of my lip, listened to the faceless woman sing Patsy Cline.

*I knew you’d love me as long as you wanted. And then someday you’d leave me for somebody new.*

“Maybe you just never really fell in love with someone like that,” Caitlin said.

“What?”

“Maybe you don’t understand because you’ve never loved someone like I love Steve.” Her voice was quieter now, controlled again. She seemed to sense she was tapping into a reservoir, uncovering a truth.

“You know what?” I’d had it. I couldn’t listen to her talk about the sanctity of their love anymore, couldn’t congratulate her on the cosmic discovery she’d made in Steve. How could she think that’s what this was about? I had loved someone enough to cross an ocean, to leave everything I ever knew for, to mark my body forever with ink. Why didn’t she care? How could she not remember?

Caitlin nodded, silent, perfectly misunderstanding this rift between us. I looked up, looked directly into her eyes.

“I think we should talk about going home,” I said.
I’d like to say it all changed after that conversation. That we talked about it again and
often until we got it right. That we apologized, forgave, became more patient and less
petty. I’d like to say that it was a turning point, but of course it wasn’t. It was just loose
footing, a slip before a fall. Steve and Caitlin retreated even more into themselves, and
Lee and I into each other. It was almost as though the decision to go home had somehow
released us, acknowledging that our adventure together had ended months before.

Caitlin’s dad bought two one-way tickets from London Gatwick to Cleveland
Hopkins via Newark, and my dad sent him a check in the mail for my half of the trip
home. The vague and looming word “soon” that drifted above the house on Heather
Close crystallized, morphed into precise words, exact numbers, July twenty-fifth. Less
than a month away.

We would be one month and three days shy of having lived abroad for a full year.
One year, Caitlin had written in the yellow legal pad when we planned our trip. But we
didn’t quite make it. I considered this a failure.

Cleveland Hopkins International Airport:
Ten months and twenty-eight days before

“What if we find Italian lovers?” Caitlin asked. We were sitting at our departure gate,
awaiting our boarding call. “Just imagine it. Sipping espresso with some scruffy Fabio on
a piazza in Florence, statues everywhere.”
“Well yeah,” I said. “If we fall in love, it’s definitely got to be in Italy, right? And it’s definitely got to be in spring.”

“Imagine our double dates. We could go to the symphony.” Her eyes widened. “And wear our black dresses.”

“Oh picnic somewhere under the orange trees. They’d bring homemade Chianti.”

Caitlin leaned back in her chair, a faraway smile on her face. Across from us, a middle-aged couple sat, the woman reading a paperback with a dark cover and gold lettering. It was new; she was only twenty or thirty pages in, and the spine wasn’t broken yet. I tried to see the title, but her hand was in the way. The man, clean-shaven and graying at the temples, held a dark green jacket on his lap. He stared at a spot somewhere beyond our heads, but I wondered if he was listening. Caitlin sat up, a sharp movement.

“What if we don’t come back?”

“What? That’s crazy. Of course we’ll come back.”

“I don’t know, if we actually fall in love, or not even that, just—anything, you know? We might not want to come back.”

“Hmmmm.” I considered this but dismissed it. It was an adventure yes, but it was just an adventure. We weren’t going to actually up and move anywhere. Besides, we’d already decided on a year. It was written in Caitlin’s legal pad: one year. I’d even taken the GRE so I could apply for grad schools while we were away. The man looked at his watch and made a clicking sound with his tongue. Maybe he’s English, I realized suddenly. Maybe they are an English couple, and they are on their way home. It seemed strange to think that any of these people could be English, that there were as many people returning as there were leaving. I studied his face, light eyes, strong jaw. His cheeks were
a bit ruddy. That was an English trait, right? I wondered if I could ask Caitlin what she thought without him hearing.

“Oh my God,” Caitlin leaned in, her hands pressing against the seat of the chair.

“What if only one of us comes back?”

The woman turned a page, and the small flapping sound caused the man to start. He glanced her way, seemed to read a few lines over her shoulder and then closed his eyes, soft wrinkles settling beneath and trailing from the corners of his mouth.

“What? Now that’s totally crazy.”

Caitlin smiled and shrugged, the florescent lights bouncing off her big green eyes.

Our remaining weeks passed at a pace that was both breathlessly quick and agonizingly slow. Each thing we did became The Last Time we did that thing. Lee and I took a casual walk up Hengistbury Head, for The Last Time. We read magazines on the wicker loveseat in the acoustic room at Summerland Music, for The Last Time. Things became The Last Time even when it was the first time we did them. Lee and I drove an hour and a half to Monkey World and giggled at the fuzzy marmosets chasing each other around a hammock fashioned from a burlap sack. I met Lee’s family at his Nana’s surprise eightieth birthday party, my own debut of sorts, though I mostly just smiled a lot and tried to think of polite and interesting things to say. I wore gray dress pants and a black tank top, moved lumps of coronation chicken around my plate. Annie’s from America, you see, Nana said to everyone I met.

A few days later Lee and I drove to Bournemouth Square to buzz around the open market, tasting olives, dried mango, pretzels dipped in white chocolate. A street
performer played the flute, the bright notes flitting above the heads of bustling shoppers, and a barely noticeable breeze blew in off the sea, fresh and familiar. We wandered down a side street and past the regal white and silver storefront of Ernest Jones. I paused in front of the display case, the early July sun exploding off of cut diamonds and platinum settings. The only jewelry I was wearing was a hemp necklace and a collection of beaded bracelets on my wrist.

“Those are pretty,” Lee said, stepping beside me and letting his hand find the small of my back.

“Yeah, I really like the square cut ones,” I said without thinking.

“Oh right.” Lee peered closer to the windowpane.

“I wasn’t!—I mean, I didn’t—”

He laughed and walked up the narrow sidewalk, calling over his shoulder, “Come on, let’s go get a milkshake from Shake-a-Way.”

For The Last Time.

“How far will nine quid take us, mate?” Lee asked the taxi driver. Nine quid was all we had in both our wallets. We were piss drunk and on our way home, buckled into the back of a gray United taxi. My ears were still ringing.

The four of us had gone to O’Neill’s. It wasn’t supposed to be a leaving party or a big night out, just a simple drink, a commemoration of our last night in the country. It seemed we ought to at least go for a drink. If nothing else, it was an escape from spending our last night on opposite couches, listening to the clock tick down our remaining minutes like a heart monitor. It felt right, retreating to the scarred wood and
bold colors of the Irish pub where so much had happened. And it felt right to do something together. Caitlin and I had showered one right after the other, like old times, and shared the mirror that hung just outside the bathroom. We lined eyes, smoothed gloss over lips, sprayed Caitlin’s nearly empty bottle of Heavenly perfume across both our collarbones. Steve drove us all in his Toyota.

Come in, lovelies, come in, Phil had said when we arrived. He’d been at his usual post in the high-ceilinged entranceway, just past the bouncers. Wearing an unusually somber black button-down shirt, he kissed cheeks and shook hands. A regular politician. I can’t believe you’re actually going. One hand on Caitlin’s shoulder and one on mine. You actually are going right? No surprise twist next week? We’d all laughed. The amount of times we’d left “for good” had become a running joke with Phil. But not long after we’d sat down in a round booth, pints in hand, Steve and Caitlin had decided to go for a walk, get some air.

We’ll come back and get you in a bit, Caitlin had said, and I’d watched her move through the crowd like I had so many times before in that pub, her hair trailing behind her, her shoulders and hips dipping and twisting to fit into the empty spaces between bodies.

An hour passed. Then another. What should we do? Call them? No answer. Get another drink? The pub was dark and loud, and I didn’t recognize the band playing.

“Nine quid?” The taxi driver asked, turning around in his seat to look at us. “Not all the way to Throop, that’s for sure.”

Lee looked at me, mouthed the words, I’m going to be sick.
“Alright, mate, just take us as far as you can.” He heaved, turned a sickly green, swallowed hard. Up Charminster Road, past the Broadway Pub, the taxi curled through the empty streets. I stared out the window, couldn’t keep up. The meter clicked. The driver turned it off, dropped us off at Ashbury Road, the entrance to the development.

“Thank you so much,” Lee said. We stumbled out, ducked into the cut-through to Heather Close. The door was locked. We didn’t have keys.

We listened to Tracy Chapman in the car on the way to Gatwick, her voice rich and dark like wet dirt. Outside the window, Bournemouth slipped away from me as Steve pulled onto Wessex Way and then the motorway, the white stone of the Victorian buildings and bright blooms of the landscaped roundabouts disappearing. A long stretch of gray pavement lay before us, an arbitrary divide between one green field and another, greens layered over browns, interrupted by an occasional hedge, the grayish flecks of far off sheep. We talked of possible stateside visits, what would be the best month for them to come, which version of Ohio we wanted them to see, Ohio ablaze with autumn or Ohio buried under snow. No one even commented on the fact that Tracy Chapman was from Cleveland.

At the airport, Steve and I hugged quickly.

“Be careful,” he said. “Take care of each other.”

“Yeah,” I said. “We always do.” I looked up into his freckled face, his dark blue eyes, a face I’d seen every day for months but had never taken the time to know. What emotion hid in the curve of his eyebrows? “Listen, thanks. You know, for everything.”
We hugged again, and then I turned to Lee who was laughing with Caitlin. Her laughter collapsed into a fresh rush of tears, and she and Steve separated into the kind of goodbye Caitlin and I had melted over so many times during the last year while waiting for flights and trains, sitting on vinyl chairs with luggage at our heels. *Look at the way he holds her face. Look at how she stands on her toes to press her forehead into his.*

Departure gate goodbyes, goodbyes that told stories. Caitlin shook as she cried, and Steve wrapped his thin arms around her.

I tried to cry. I didn’t want Lee to think I didn’t care, but the tears wouldn’t come. They never do when I think they should. Often in the midst of emotion, I stand motionless and watch. Funerals, weddings, graduations, goodbyes. Sometimes I think that makes me strong; other times, empty. My eyes remained dry and clear, so I just sighed, deep and weary.

“I’m going to miss you so much.”

“I’ll see you soon,” Lee said, the only one of us still smiling.

*Cleveland Hopkins International Airport:*

*Ten months and twenty-eight days before*

“Leaving is hard but going is easy,” I said. Caitlin and I sat in the airport’s Burger King, sipping medium cokes. All around us people moved, rolled luggage, talked on cell phones, or walked in and out of the swinging bathroom door just across the concourse. When Caitlin had finally arrived, late and frazzled, we’d squeezed each other tight and checked in right away, sending our suitcases through the tunnel at the Continental desk. We decided a drink was in order as we awaited our boarding call, and at that time in our lives together, a drink still meant a medium coke in a paper cup. Free of the two bags that
weighed almost fifty pounds each, I felt light, not like a feather but in a way that made me feel small.

“Yeah,” Caitlin said, pulling her straw out of the plastic lid and pushing it back in, the wet squeak almost lost in the commotion of the international airport. “I like that.”

I had repeated this mantra a lot over the last few months as I prepared for our year abroad. Leaving is hard but going is easy, I’d thought to myself as I steamed tailored suiting in the professional women’s clothing store I worked at, occasionally getting lost in a daydream and scorching my fingers with the steady flow that gurgled from the industrial steamer. Fortune cookie wisdom, a line that sounded deeper than it was. It made me feel strong, made me feel like we were doing the right thing and pushed away the occasional creeping doubts that surfaced at unusual times. I let my parents’ dogs out, sitting on the warm stoop out back and staring into the overgrown meadow behind the creaking farmhouse, the soft greens dotted with white, yellow, and purple wildflowers, the gentle billowing of bed sheets drying in the sun. And I thought there couldn’t possibly be a prettier slice of earth. I sat on my bedroom floor in front of the full-length mirror where the rust-brown curling iron burn scarred the blue carpet, applying make-up while my little sisters looked on from my bed. What’s that one for? How do you keep your eyes open while you do that? And I wondered what it was I thought I could find so far away.

Leaving is hard, but going is easy, I’d repeat. An anxious prophet.

“Let’s let ourselves be sad until we step on the plane,” Caitlin said, setting her paper cup down with authority. “Seriously, let’s be hideously sad until we get on the plane, and then let’s just be excited, okay?”

“Hideously sad?” I asked, already liking the sound of this.
“Yeah, like, let’s wallow in the absolute depths of it right now. Let’s list everyone and every thing we’ll miss. And let’s try to look sadder than anyone else here.” She scanned the few tables surrounding the Burger King counter. People mostly drank coffee or read newspapers. The Burger King girls laughed behind their twin registers. “How about this?” She curled her eyebrows into pathetic curves, letting her eyes grow huge and her bottom lip pucker into a cartoonish pout.

“Perfect.” I laughed.

In Gatwick, Steve and Lee waited behind the metal railing as Caitlin and I walked through the security gate. We took our shoes off, piled our things into plastic tubs, paused while a uniformed man ran a metal wand up and down the sides of our bodies. Once through, we turned to wave once more and then headed toward our gate, knowing they would watch us until we blended in and disappeared.

Leaving is hard but going is easy, I thought to myself as we walked toward the gate that matched the numbers and letters on our boarding pass. During each phase of our trip, the departure gate had become an absolute barrier, a point of no return not just physically but psychologically too. We will feel everything there is to feel about this place until the very last second, and once we cross that gate, we will only await the new. Leaving Bournemouth, leaving Prague, leaving Italy. And now, leaving Bournemouth again, for good. Going home. It wasn’t so much a “no looking back” rule as it was a forward-only rule. It sounds arbitrary, but it worked.

It worked because we believed in it and because we believed in adventure. We believed in the mind and in the spirit. We believed in chance encounters and a DIY brand
of makeshift happiness. We believed in believing, which is to say we wanted to be a part of something greater than what we could see, taste, touch.

There was no denying that our adventure had ended months before, and that our final destination was our starting point, the completion of a long and complicated loop. The plane wasn’t thrusting us into a new unknown. It was taking us home, back to Ohio, back to humidity and rusted-out factories and pale green cornstalks that would be at least knee-high by July. But in a way, we were flying into the biggest unknown yet. The adventure was over. What now?

As I watched Caitlin hand her passport and boarding pass to the attendant, watched her twist through the turnstile gate, I let myself feel Bournemouth. Sea and silver sky, milky tea, wet clay and purple heather, smoky pubs, acoustic guitars and the squeak of fingers on frets, cotton duvet covers. I held it as long as I could, until the very last second, and then as I followed Caitlin through the turnstile, the cold metal swinging behind me, I let it go.

When Caitlin and I stepped onto U.S. soil for the first time in eleven months, it was in Newark, New Jersey. I had never been to Newark, New Jersey, but I knew enough to know it was the butt of a lot of jokes and had a reputation for being pretty shit. Kind of like Youngstown. We had to transfer our own luggage from baggage claim to another check-in in a different terminal, as opposed to trusting the usual conveyor belt tunnel to swallow our bags, each with a long paper tag secured around its handle, and magically deposit them at our final destination. In Newark, there were lines and arrows on the floor, concocted out of red tape, instructing people where to go. The tape was worn ragged,
curling in places, dirty undersides misdirecting. After an eight hour flight, a five hour time change, and the crushing completion of something far too big and important to understand inside the moment, I zombie-walked the maze of red tape, guiding my own beat-up over-stuffed suitcases from one terminal to another. As the bags slammed against my legs, initiating bruises, and straps carved ruts in my shoulders, I thought to myself that this method of luggage transfer was pretty shit. I didn’t think Newark, New Jersey was doing itself any favors.

Caitlin bought a bag of dried apricots from a kiosk in the airport, and we spent our layover on a bench eating shriveled fruit and nursing separate heartbreaks. I knew she was thinking about Steve, and I didn’t blame her. But I wasn’t thinking about Lee. I missed him, sure, but not really, not yet—I’d seen him just that morning. With Lee, I had a sense of peace, a sense that we’d figure it out, or at least try. He was saving for a trip to Ohio, and I was calling him as soon as I got in. I was thinking instead about Caitlin and wondering what would happen next and how we’d gotten to this point, wondering why we gave up on each other and how it was possible that everything was ending and all we could do was sit in silence, occasionally bumping hands inside a paper bag of apricots. Newark, New Jersey in sweaty humid July, florescent lights buzzing behind my eyeballs. Pastel cotton, thighs, leather, baseball caps, the smacking of flip-flops. Everything was louder. Brighter. Faster. Uglier. American accents bounced off the linoleum floor, rattled in my ears. *Have a nice day. See you later.*

This is it, I thought to myself. This is where it stops.

I recognized my baby sister’s legs.
Caitlin and I were descending a flight of stairs in Cleveland Hopkins, following cattle-style the throng of people who had exited our plane. Planes tend to spit you out into strange forgotten corridors of the airport. In the concourses as you await departure, there are shops with fine pashminas and beaded purses, Panini counters, and good coffee. There are things to do and see. But when you walk across the makeshift tunnel from plane to airport, you find yourself in empty, unmarked territory. Occasionally there’s a lone pop machine. It always makes me feel like when I was a kid and I went to high school basketball games and snuck out of the gym, exploring the dim hallways lined with lockers while in the distance, shoes squeaked on the waxy floorboards, balls bounced, a whistle blew sharp and insistent. A flurry of activity I was entirely disconnected from.

Caitlin and I, drained and jet-lagged, followed the other passengers from our plane, not even paying attention to signs for baggage claim. We walked through a hallway, turning and turning again, down stairs, and then more stairs.

And then—my sister’s legs.

She was fourteen and shorter than me, and her body had that awkward way about it where the pieces didn’t quite seem to fit. She always wore jeans and rolled them up into thick cuffs that still dragged across the floor, perpetually dirty. Because of the angle of the staircase above us, we couldn’t see faces or even torsos, just a cluster of hips, legs, shoes. We hadn’t even been looking, expecting our parents to be waiting at baggage claim. But I knew those stained cuffs, and I knew those green and gray running shoes.

“It’s them!” I yelled.

“What?”

“Look! Look, it’s them!”
The staircase was crowded, and we couldn’t move past people, but each step revealed a few inches more. Caitlin and I ducked and strained, looked around the tops of heads in front of us, needing to see. My dad’s knobby legs, Caitlin’s sister’s feet in pointy heels, my mom’s toes, short and straight just like mine, in flip-flops. The wheels of Caitlin’s mother’s chair. At the bottom of the stairs, signs and flowers, shrieks, hugs, tears. And more faces than we’d even expected. My parents and younger sisters were there but also my grandfather and my college roommate. Caitlin’s mom and dad—together—and her sister, both of her brothers, her brothers’ girlfriends, and her best friend from home. My mom held my cheeks in her hands. *My bubba, my bubba*, she said over and over again.

“Should we eat?” someone asked, and everyone agreed that we should. We were hungry, starving we realized, and it seemed unnaturally abrupt for everything to end right there at the bottom of a staircase while strangers poured around us like liquid. There were sixteen of us all together, everyone talking at once, snapping pictures, linking arms, dragging poster boards decorated with glitter and magic marker. *Welcome Home.*

We caravanned to an Olive Garden located a few miles from the airport. I sat on one end of the table, between my sisters, and Caitlin sat somewhere left of center near hers. Every so often our eyes met across the table, widening in disbelief. How our world had stretched and opened. My body was exhausted, but the adrenaline of the room carried me through the meal. Rapid-fire questions, smiles that hurt my cheeks, laughter that flashed molars. My sisters held my hand and ran their fingers through my hair.

“You’re so thin!” My mother called across the table to Caitlin. “You’re disappearing!”
While they shouted back and forth about aerobics and red meat, my dad got up and knelt behind me.

“Is that what I think it is?” he asked, pointing to my back. My wifebeater sat a good inch above my waistband, revealing black ink. I nodded, bit my lip. “Cool,” he said. “Very cool.”

Family-style salads were cleared and then empty plates with smears of marinara, clumps of grated parmesan, followed by dessert plates with melted cream and chocolate drizzle still decorating the perimeter, finally coffee cups.

“All on one check please,” my dad said and picked up the tab for everyone, a reverse gesture from when Caitlin’s father had surprised us by paying for everyone at our departure meal, a gesture that for my dad no doubt had involved weeks of planning, collecting money in softened bank envelopes stacked in a wooden box he kept in the upstairs linen closet. Strange things, these departures and arrivals. Moments surrounded by grand gestures manifested in small calculated actions. When the last Andes mint had been unwrapped and consumed, we pushed our chairs from the table and stood to leave.

Outside the restaurant, everyone drifted toward cars. Caitlin and I stopped, smacked awake by the sudden moment of parting, a journey ending in a split second under Ohio stars and the green and purple lights of an Olive Garden neon sign. We’d spent every single day together alone and then alone together for the last eleven months, together away from all these people who mattered so much, away from this place we knew so well. Our companionship had meant different things throughout the year, but it had always at least meant one thing: we’d spent every single day together for the last eleven months.
“This is going to be weird, isn’t it?” Caitlin asked.

“Yeah. Really weird.”

Car doors opened and slammed shut, the long drone of my dad’s Chevy Venture’s sliding door rolling open and waiting.

“Call me,” I said, meaning it completely.

“Yeah call me, like, tomorrow.” Caitlin laughed.

She looked for a second like she might cry again, but it passed, and we smiled like lunatics. Bewildered and bone-tired, we shared this one last thing: a hug. Her hair was in my face, tickling my nose. She was sweat and coffee and red and curves and ocean and cider and air. And then she was gone.

We crawled into separate cars, one heading east and one heading south, cars that carried us quickly and steadily toward different endings. I collapsed into the backseat, stretching out across the empty third row of seating inside the minivan while my little sisters bickered about the radio station and my parents talked in half-heard snippets …glad she’s resting. Can’t wait to…The Venture carried me sixty miles an hour toward a white house, a three-sided red barn, a blue bedroom with a peeling heart border on the walls and a single bed, the absolute quiet of seventeen acres. I slept the whole way home.
Part III

_Somewhere in everyone’s head something points toward home,
...It doesn’t matter how we come
to be wherever we are, someplace where nothing goes
the way it went once, where nothing holds fast
to where it belongs, or what you’ve risen or fallen to._

~Miller Williams
Chapter 12

Between Dreams

“Are you sure?” Sadie asked, setting the pot of hair dye on the small table beside her chair, the chemical potency of the dye rising quickly and everywhere. A manufactured pop song blared through a radio somewhere out of sight, a forgettable tune, making use of all the expected rhymes, recycled lyrics, and vague emotion. This particular visit, a week before my wedding, I was asking for all-over color. It was admittedly a bit drastic.

The bell above the front entrance jingled, and a man ducked inside, taking off a yellowed baseball cap and revealing an overgrown fade. October blew in behind him, its faint chill and scent of packed dirt, rustled the pages of the magazine rack by the door and then quieted. He scribbled his name on the clipboard at the front desk and sat down. No one took any notice. We were doing important work. We were discussing wedding hair.

Sadie and I had been through a lot of decisions together during the past fifteen months, the time I spent back in Ohio before the Big Day. First the highlights, caramel and honey and thin slivers of platinum, then the lowlights, and then redlights. The redlights had faded fast, just like Sadie said they would, but they looked killer while they lasted, really made my light blue eyes pop. Six months before the wedding, I had walked into Shear Talent with choppy layers that settled between my chin and the base of my neck and said with uncharacteristic conviction, “I need to grow it. I need to grow it so I can wear it up for the wedding.”
Sadie had looked at me with unparalleled resolve and said, “Okay, let’s do this. But it’s not going to be easy, and you’re going to go through some really awkward phases.”

She recommended vitamins, deep-conditioning treatments, warned me against flat-ironing more than once a week. I liked Sadie. She rented a chair at Shear Talent, a hair salon tucked into a plaza on Youngstown-Warren Road, a small salon that welcomed walk-ins and had a kids’ chair for first haircuts that was shaped like a racecar. Sadie was younger than the other stylists and had purple-black hair with a shocking silvery under layer. She’d been studying biology at a regional branch of Kent State but had dropped out of school when her mom got cancer. Sadie always talked about England, about how she’d love to go and check out the garage band scene in London. I nodded a lot, smiled. I didn’t know what garage music was.

Now, a week before my wedding, I sat in the chair and we talked about all-over color, a single shade. Jack-o-lanterns drawn with a thick marker, photocopied, and colored in by clients’ kids were taped to the walls and windows.

“I’m sure,” I said. “I want it to be dark brown.”

Sadie gave the pot of hair dye a stir with a plastic spatula and ran her fingers through my hair, inspecting the brittle ends. Beside us, the neighboring stylist turned on her hairdryer and began twirling a middle-aged woman’s damp hair into soft rolls with a jumbo round brush. Sadie raised her voice above the noise. “It’s just—most people don’t go for dramatic changes the week before their wedding.”

“Oh don’t do it, honey,” the woman in the chair said. “Don’t do anything wild like that.” I looked at her tapered jeans and oversized Steelers sweatshirt. I wanted to go
dark, two shades over my natural color, a rich chocolate. I’d been exercising five mornings a week for the last six months. I was down to ninety-seven pounds, and my triceps were sharp and obvious. My hair was finally past my shoulders, and now I wanted to look Italian for the wedding, classical Italian with my long nose and deep-set eyes. I couldn’t have highlights.

“If you don’t like it, there’s nothing we can do. Your hair couldn’t take being stripped right now.” Sadie peered closer to the damaged ends.

“I know,” I said, surprised by my tenacity. I usually backed down when outnumbered or when discouraged more than two consecutive times. “But I’m going to like it.”

Sadie held the spatula above my hair. “You definitely want to do this?”

I looked into the mirror and put on my best practiced wedding voice. “I do.”

The hair dye was cool on my scalp and stung.

Steve visited Caitlin in September, just two months after we left Bournemouth, and proposed spontaneously in the swirls of a passionate airport farewell in good old Cleveland Hopkins. He didn’t have a ring yet. They didn’t set a date.

Lee visited me in October and proposed on a bench overlooking the Horseshoe Falls on the Canadian side of Niagara, with a square-cut diamond from Ernest Jones and a bottle of champagne. We set a date, one year exactly from the day he proposed.

Steve returned to Ohio for Christmas with a ring (with several diamonds). They set a date, almost full year later than ours.
Caitlin took guitar lessons and web design at the University of Akron, post-baccalaureate fillers to obtain another student work visa and return to England. In March of 2005, she flew back to Bournemouth—for good—alone. We hugged in the wind and said good bye.

She moved back into the house on Heather Close with Steve and Lee on the agreement that Lee would move out when he and I got married.

Something was happening. Caitlin and I were suddenly involved in a weird sort of race, as though the most important events of our lives were batons being passed. She was getting married. I was getting married. My ring had one diamond, hers had a cluster. She was moving back to England. I was moving back to England. We were becoming something entirely other than what we had been. Each nugget of good news was met with forced enthusiasm and silent animosity, a hash mark scratched onto a wall. We were keeping score.

I remained in Ohio, living at my parents’ house and waitressing at a Lonestar, learning to pile leftover portions of charred sirloin and loaded potato skins into a clump and to wrap the clump in aluminum foil so that it resembled a steer head, explaining over and over to disappointed customers that, *No, no this is not the place with the peanuts.* I planned my wedding alone, arguing with the lady at Hobby Lobby about the aesthetic differences between oversized wine glasses and oversized martini glasses. I researched the burn times of floating candles.

Lee and I asked Steve and Caitlin to be in our wedding.

The bridesmaids’ dresses were red.

They said they couldn’t make it.
Caitlin and Steve got married in a secret wedding ceremony in Ohio in August of 2005, one year before their Regularly Scheduled Wedding (and thusly, two months before our Actual Wedding) in order to extend Caitlin’s work visa and keep her in the country. They didn’t tell us.

Lee closed his guitar store.

Steve quit his factory job.

Shortly after Caitlin’s return, she and Steve asked Lee to move out of Heather Close. They were after all (though no one knew it) husband and wife. In the life of newlyweds, three’s a crowd. Lee scrambled to find the money to pay the deposit and first month’s rent for a new flat while we scratched our heads and tried to figure out embassy-issued visa paperwork for “Indefinite Leave to Remain,” a complicated process that would require an entirely new layer of paperwork for a new address.

Lee and I got married in Ohio in October of 2005 on one of those early autumn days that makes a person glad to be alive and glad to be in Ohio, a rich blue sky interrupted by the occasional tuft of white cloud and thick, full maples, leaves only just beginning to redden, to curl into gold. I moved back to Bournemouth—for good—two weeks later.

Two months after that, Steve and Caitlin, with characteristic drama, announced the secret they’d been keeping since August: they ... were ... married!

Lee and I had figured it out months before.

Steve and Caitlin said they assumed we wouldn’t be able to fly back to Ohio in August but if we wanted to, they’d like us to be in their Regularly Scheduled Wedding.

The bridesmaids’ dresses were red.
We said we couldn’t make it.

Kris, Lee’s former guitar shop partner, booked two trans-Atlantic flights less than a year apart to serve as best man for both occasions.

Steve and Caitlin got married (again) in Ohio in August of 2006. I have no idea what the sky looked like.

That same month, somewhere in that exact week, I peed on a stick.

I was pregnant before our first anniversary.

“We won,” Lee said. “We totally beat them at having babies first.”

Every Sunday my family piled into my dad’s 1986 chestnut Ford Aerostar and went to Mass. It was not uncommon that we had to stop at Sparkle Market on our way home for my dad to pick up flour or eggs or some other essential ingredient for Sunday dinner. He always parked as far as possible from the close huddle of cars near the entrance, parked across the expanse of empty blacktop where the yellow lines were faded and cracking, and he always ran from car to store at full speed. I get my exercise in where I can, girls, he would say. My sisters and I would wait with our mother in the minivan.

“Okay,” Mom announced one day in the Sparkle Market parking lot. She took her John Lennon frames off and shook her head, letting her dark curls flop and resettle before returning her glasses to her face, the bridge piece finding the sunken groove on her nose where her glasses belonged so she could become my mother again. The after-church rush overwhelmed the two available check-out lines at the Sparkle Market that was only two blocks up from the church, and often these quick trips took longer than expected. “Here’s the game.”
Three little girl faces smiled expectantly, and even Gracie, still a baby strapped into a car seat, cocked her wispy head to the side in mimicked interest. Our dad was typically the “fun” parent, the one who played Simon and Garfunkel’s “Cecilia” with wooden spoons against the countertops, shouting the lyrics with keyed-up sloppy devotion, the one who ate three scoops of three different flavors of ice cream each night before bed and had fierce staring contests with the dogs. Our mother was quieter, more serious, perpetually sleep-deprived from working nightshifts at Saint Elizabeth’s, the one who sighed heavily and often. But she was also inwardly an incurable daydreamer. She recited Robert Louis Stevenson’s poem “The Swing” when she pushed me—*up in the air,* *up in the air so blue*—in a rubbery black swing at Tod Park. She spent hours clearing alcoves in the untamed acreage behind the old farmhouse, claiming noble names for each freed scrap of land. A patch of soft grass surrounded by tall, smooth trees became the Aspen Grove; a pathway straight and wide that ran the length of the property from the barnyard to our northern boundary became the Lane. When she talked about it, I felt like I was on a grand southern plantation and that the Lane must be lined with blossoming apple trees, elegant arms reaching across the cool shade to touch.

“Here are the rules.” She rolled the windows up, signaling a private nature to our venture, an air of secrecy, a hint at the sacred. “We have to watch the doors of Sparkle Market closely—and this is important—” she paused for dramatic effect. “Because the next man who walks out of the store is going to be *Annie’s husband.*”

The minivan filled with squeals and giggles, and we turned our faces toward the automatic doors across the parking lot. Mandy and I sat in the back, and Chloe next to
Gracie’s car seat in the middle row. Mandy, the oldest and the least patient, pressed her forehead against the glass.

“Move over.” I pushed her shoulder, and she smacked my hand away. “I can’t see.”

My pulse quickened. What if it was someone completely terrible? What if he was old and had gray hair and bad breath and grubby shoes? What if he bought fish sticks? I hated fish sticks. Or worse, what if he was someone I knew? Someone from school? I’d have to watch him each day, sharpening his pencils and making paper football field goals. He should be paying attention in school; I wanted him to get a good job. I had plans of my own, goals.

The doors opened, but a woman walked out, a swishy tracksuit, a cart full of bulky paper bags. I was eight years old. I knew it was just a game. But—but, what if it was important? Some kind of sign. An indication. My mother had chosen me, after all. Not Mandy, not Chloe, not Gracie. Me.

“What if it’s Daddy?” Chloe asked, looking from my face to our mother’s. Even as a five-year-old, Chloe had severe eyebrows. They were dark and thick, raised in uncertain arches. She was not quite sure what was going on but sure enough to be confused.

“Obviously the next guy then,” Mandy said, rolling her eyes.

“Shhhh. Just watch,” Mom said, never taking her eyes off the window.

“Move over,” I said, straining to see around Mandy’s wild ponytail.

Why did my mom start with me? Why not start with Mandy and work her way down? Or with Gracie and work her way up? Or Chloe, the girliest of us, the one who
obsessed over weddings, waltzing around the house with crocheted doilies on her head. Maybe she sensed somehow that I would get married first. Or maybe she was trying to warn me of something, something dark and unavoidable. Maybe she didn’t mean I would marry that specific person, but maybe that type of person. Maybe it would be fish sticks for supper every day for the rest of my life. Or worse. I tried to pull my eyes away from the window but couldn’t. Mandy could have Mr. Fish Sticks. I didn’t want him.

The automatic door swung open.

“How are you sure?” Mandy asked. She was living in Los Angeles, but since telling her of my engagement and asking her to be my maid of honor, my big sister and I were talking almost every day. I shifted the receiver between my shoulder and my ear, the plastic earpiece warm from a long conversation, and settled into the wonky rocking chair in my parents’ sunroom, expertly leaning to the left so the chair wouldn’t capsize. My fingers drummed the desktop beside me.

“What do you mean how am I sure?” I’d only been engaged for a few weeks, but it seemed the question kept popping up. With everyone. I knew Lee and I had only known each other not quite a year, had only dated for about six months and only lived on the same country for four of those months, but still—it seemed like congratulations and uninhibited joy, maybe confetti and sloshing toasts, would have been a better response.

“I guess I just can’t imagine being sure, like a thousand percent sure, about anything,” Mandy said. She talked about her off-again, on-again relationship with the guy she’d moved to New York and then Chicago for, the guy who’d followed her to Los Angeles and then slept with four different women. I listened, but I also sunk deeper into
the rocking chair, careful not to lean too far to the right. The chair, like most items in my parents’ house, had been obtained from a garage sale. Probably my mother was on her bicycle, a white sweat band keeping her thick hair off her face when she slowed and stopped. The homemade sign, the card tables, the careful arrangement of commemorative mugs and pewter bowls and bright plastic toys—it always lured her off her bike, and she always sent my dad with the van to collect her findings. The chair was broken from the beginning of our ownership, an odd combination of a rocker and a swivel chair with something slightly off track so that shifting one’s weight a millimeter too far to the right side resulted in a dramatic collapse. Plus, the upholstery was badly stained, and the wooden arms had been painted white. But this was the chair by the phone, and so this was where we sat.

“…And, you’re moving back to England. Forever. And I’ve never even met this guy. I just want to make sure you’re sure.”

“Mandy,” I said, irritation creeping into my tone. “I’m sure.”

“Okay. Good. But—you’re not going back just because Cait is, are you?”

I sat up sharply. The chair lurched, but I grabbed hold of the desk, steadying myself. “No!”

“Well good,” Mandy said. “As long as you’re sure.”

My wedding gown hung in a plastic sheath from a hook inside my closet. It was a big closet, not a walk-in but deep and wide. Current garments hung front and center, organized by both color and sleeve length, but beyond I could see the gold brocade fabric of the dress I wore to my junior prom, green sequins from a winter formal. The thin black
material of my commencement gown from Hiram College. Old coats. Farther back, out of sight entirely, my First Communion dress hung, a nylon veil glued to a cheap tiara hooked around the hanger, and behind that a baptism dress and a thin bonnet with yellow embroidery. An unpainted plank of wood had been fixed above the clothing rail and served as a shelf for all the fragments of my former selves that didn’t belong anywhere but couldn’t be thrown away. Trophies, honors cords, diaries with gold-lined pages and broken locks, spiral notebooks filled with equations and blue highlighter marks, notes on loose-leaf paper folded into complicated origami. Carved into the wall were the initials of myself and a girl I’d lost touch with a decade before when she’d left Catholic school, the letters BFF in square capitals.

It seemed out of place, my wedding gown, imposing on these secrets of my girlhood. It was sophisticated, well-made, had undergone hundreds of dollars worth of alterations so that it could fit my petite frame, a body that belonged to a younger person, a child. From behind, I could have been thirteen. In the bridal shops, I’d tried on dress after dress, each one swallowing me, collecting in a silky heap around my feet where at least a foot of material would need to be hacked away, while my mother and younger sisters smiled wistfully or shook their heads. The gown I’d chosen was ivory satin, a simple mermaid styling with spaghetti straps and a scooped back that was open but shielded with a beaded organza, twenty-eight cloth-covered buttons climbing from the bustle to the point between my shoulder blades.

When no one was home, I stepped inside the closet, straining to reach the chain that hung from the bare bulb above. I clicked the light on, draping everything with an unnatural yellow, and pulled the door closed. My eyes watered with the mustiness of a
small space that is almost always closed off, a niche refusing the fresh air that sifted through the screened windows and the gentle whirring of the ceiling fan. I unzipped the plastic casing and let the folds of ivory satin tumble to the floor. Slipping underneath the material, I sat Indian-style and motionless inside the private tent of dress, entombing myself in the filmy white.

Stillness, muted light, oxygen.

I breathed in plastic-scented fabric, exhaled satin.

“I’ll tell you right now, if that steak ain’t cooked right, I’m sending it back.”

A woman with a weathered face and a gray tank top concealing a braless, unruly bosom, interrupted my opening spiel. She, like so many, seemed angry to be out for a meal. Not relaxed or excited or even mildly amused. Just angry. Entitled. Someone I didn’t know sang a drawn-out melody on the satellite radio, a song full of trucks and twang. I took the pen out of my ponytail, sensing I’d need to write this one down.

_We’re featuring our Oil Baron Margarita tonight. It’s made with Jose Cuervo 1800, Contreau, and fresh lime_, I thought to myself. “Right, of course,” I said. “Can I get you something to drink first?”

Waters, extra lemon. Coffee. The man with her slouched low in his chair, entirely uninterested, and I couldn’t tell if he’d said he took cream or not because he spoke into his hands, into the side of his thumb as he chewed the skin around his nail. My fingers fluttered to the sheriff badge pinned to my _Don’t Mess With Texas_ t-shirt. Straightening the neon star had become a nervous habit.
“Would you like to start off with our Texas Rose this evening? It’s crispy-fried onion petals with—”

“No. No appetizer. I want a nine ounce sirloin. Medium-well. That don’t mean burnt and that don’t mean bloody. It means pink.” The woman’s lips were thin, and they disappeared into a pinched line when she closed her mouth.

“A medium steak at Lonestar will have a warm pink center and be mostly gray around the edges,” I began, wanting to be perfectly clear on this, trying to avoid having to bring the steak back to the kitchen for the inevitable refire, the swearing from the chefs, but she cut me off again, listed all the times she’d come into Lonestar before and all the times her steak had been ruined. The man moved on to his pinky finger, the skin around his thumb white and puffy from diligent chewing. At the next table over, my Happy Young Couple’s draft beers were below the two-thirds empty allowance, and I could see the young man eyeing the bar. I’m coming, I telecommunicated at him. I’ll be right there. The woman continued, her thin lips tightening with each tragic memory of each exceedingly ill-prepared steak.

Not surprisingly, the nine-ounce sirloin was sent back. The woman’s lips became faint pencil lines as she refused eye contact and demanded to see my manager. The chefs swore. The man chewed his nails. The Happy Young Couple who probably would have tipped well became restless while I fussed over Thin Lips, getting her extra sour cream and another mini-loaf of honey wheat bread, while I stared at the row of Heinz 57 bottles that lined the stainless steel shelving beneath the prep table while my manager lectured me on the importance of describing steak temperatures to our guests.
Later, I sat on a box of Idaho potatoes outside the kitchen door, smoking a Marlboro Light with a fellow server. It was cold, the air dry but tight, and I tucked my free arm and hand inside my t-shirt, the chilled metal of my engagement ring surprising my bare ribs. Across the parking lot lurked the vast concrete edifice of the Eastwood Mall Complex, dark and empty this time of night, a monstrous shadow. A few lone cars slept in random parking spots, perfectly still and left behind. Where were their owners? I never understood. On the other side of the kitchen door, people moved with reckless fury, that energy that erupts at the end of a shift when all that’s left is scraping plates and soaking ketchup lids and bagging bread and icing down the salad tubs. Nearly there, nearly done.

When Lee knelt on a balcony overlooking Niagara Falls and spilled his clumsy heart all over the cold pavement and the wooden bench where I sat, I said yes. I didn’t think about it. I didn’t think about how we’d only been together for six months, only four of which had been spent in the same country. I didn’t think about the complications of marrying someone from another continent and how to choose which one to live on, didn’t consider practicalities like obtaining settlement visas or shipping a life’s worth of belongings or who would have to sacrifice what and for how long.

I just said yes.

Lee was the nicest guy I’d ever met, plain and simple. He was uncomplicated in a way that I’d never experienced before. He said what he meant and meant what he said—all the time. He opened doors and always asked if I was too cold and when he listened, he actually listened, didn’t just plan what he would say next. We didn’t have crazy bleeding heart passion, but what we had was good, every day. The kind of good you could build a
Life is a series of decisions, weighing options and making choices. There is no grand design, no pre-planned path. We hazard guesses, make tentative moves, and when we’re lucky, things work out.

We drank champagne that Lee’s mother, all the way from across an ocean, had prematurely sent to the room and that now made sense, took pictures of my left hand with a shiny square-cut diamond sitting self consciously on my ring finger. My slender finger with its short, clear-polished nail, its knuckle fat from bad genes and too much cracking, was suddenly delighted by white gold and glassy stone, suddenly decadent, critical. Unfamiliar. We made phone calls and fell asleep on a King-size bed in a lavish hotel room with the drapes wide open, watching the mist rise from the dizzying abyss of the Horseshoe Falls, the gauzy cloud that hovered like a hot air balloon, stationary and looming. In the morning, we woke to sunbeams.

I drove the four hours back to Ohio mostly in silence. The radio was low and tuned to an oldies station, and the Beach Boys sang light, even melodies that bounced around the blue interior of my 1994 Mercury Sable. Lee, dozing in the passenger seat, woke up only to talk me through hectic freeway merging and the harried span of time through which I white-knuckled the steering wheel across the suspension bridge that hung over the vast and foaming Niagara River and seemed to bend impossibly with the curvature of the earth, stretching farther than I could comprehend and congested with cars that all understood the lanes and the movement. But the majority of the drive was uneventful, my eyes focused on a gray stripe of road that cut between the tentative oranges and reds of a mid-October landscape, through highway-side fields, carefully
rolled bales of hay dotting a world on the brink of a satisfying blaze. Generous sunlight glinted off the stone on my left hand.

Once past the traffic of Buffalo, I relaxed, let my mind trip over the events of the previous night, the balcony, the champagne, the yes. The road before me merged into imagination, becoming instead a long corridor with white walls, gleaming white tiles and florescent lights. A corridor flanked on either side with bold red doors. Inside each room was a different version of my future self, a different and possible me. The self who moved to Tuscany alone and wrote like mad, like one of Kerouac’s Roman candles, burning in private, unrepentant splendor. The self who collaborated with her big sister to open a trendy coffee house/vintage clothing store right there in Youngstown, Ohio, who sold her dad’s bread and her mom’s knit scarves and purses on thrift store display shelves, who never missed a Sunday dinner. The self who went back to school, who became a master and then a doctor of something, who pontificated in classrooms with eager, driven students. As I travelled through this corridor and the “yes” escaped from my lips, a fierce wind barreled through, and all the doors slammed shut at once, windowless and complete, a fabulous echo. I would never be any of those selves, never do any of those things.

It was a heady moment, a curious teetering before an inescapable freefall.

Saying yes to one thing meant saying no to so much. Choosing to be something meant choosing not to be anything else. Ever again. I glanced sideways at Lee sleeping, his forehead against the windowpane, his jaw slack and half open, the light shadow of a stubble beginning to surface. He was a stranger to me in so many ways. I didn’t know what his favorite t-shirt was, or his favorite breakfast cereal, or what he thought happened
to your mind and soul when you died, or what he wanted to be when he was ten years old. I knew him only then, only there, in that weightless car on that long and arcane stretch of highway. Was that enough?

I looked back to the road, focused on the small white rectangle of the license plate in front of me. I could probably be happy inside any one of those doors, choosing to be any one of those selves, but I’d never be happy trying to be all of them, dancing between dreams and never committing to anything. There was no more Caitlin to tell me which train to get on and how much my suitcase should weigh, no restrictions from school or work, no obvious pattern. I was twenty-three years old, and for the very first time, entirely directionless. Here was a hand, a whisper, a hint of a plan. *Come with me. Let’s do this big thing together. Let’s make this be what life is.* I could sit and watch the automatic doors, waiting to be told what to do.

Or.

I could say yes.
Chapter 13

The Ghost of Alan Littlewood

Some days Alan Littlewood manages a swanky silver service bistro on Westover Road, right down on the seafront. Man, does he have panache. Tall and lean in a tailored charcoal dress shirt and black trousers, he swaggers around the dining room in pointed shoes, shaking hands and laughing openly. He’s got time for everybody. A few minutes for football talk with the lads. Insightful remarks to insert into the gents’ debate over Jameson’s and Famous Grouse. A slick magic trick for the kids. When the sea breeze ruffles his hair and he flashes that dazzling smile, even the matrons in their muted earth tones and bejeweled sandals blush and swoon. He’s sleeping with at least two of the waitresses.

And he’s good at what he does. Hospitality management, that is, although I’m sure there are no complaints from the waitresses. Name any table in the joint and without looking, he’ll describe who’s sitting there, what course they’re on, and what label wine they’re drinking. He knows who’s waiting for their Visa platinum to be swiped and credited. Mixing cocktails of mango juice and white rum in a stainless steel shaker with one hand, he chops garnishes of ginger root and fresh mint with the other. And when Antonio gets backed up in the kitchen, Alan dons a black chef’s hat and mans the grill.

Other days, he is a librarian.
Two weeks after the wedding, my parents and younger sisters piled into the Chevy Venture, with Lee and me in the back seat and six bulging pieces of luggage tucked wherever they would fit. It was the first week of November, and a cold, bone-chilling rain streaked down the car window in loose diagonals that splayed like capillaries upwards and out, water running off the tinted glass and falling. It was nearly seven o’clock, and the sun, though hidden entirely by a sheet of cloud, was making its punch clock ascent. The blue-black of night gradually eased, fading to steel. In my purse, my passport bore the hologram-imprinted visa that granted me “Indefinite Leave to Remain in the UK.” It seemed an odd juxtaposition of words: leave to remain. Leave whom and where? Remain what?

My dad parked the van and everyone helped unload the luggage that sat like sandbags at my feet. Lee and my dad shook hands, looked one another in the eye, acknowledging the weight of responsibility. Long hugs in the cold and then my parents and sisters slipped back into the warmth of the still running minivan. Rain found the backs of my ears, the nape of my neck, and my dark hair whipped melodramatically in the wind as I watched the van pull away. Lee stood beside me, silent, with his arm wrapped around me. I felt small as other cars pulled up to the curb, other people unloaded bags, hugged, and were replaced by more cars and more bags.

“It feels different this time,” I said. “It’s for real, you know? I’m leaving.”

Lee gripped my bony shoulder a moment longer, then piled our bags onto a luggage cart. Inside the florescent lights and perpetual daytime of the international airport, the ache of transition began to fester, to sit topsy-turvy in the back of my throat.
and throb behind my eyes. By the time we made it to the desk, I was sobbing. I cried with such fortitude that the US Airways check-in lady did not charge us the excess baggage.

Alan Littlewood could easily have been a Maths teacher at Bournemouth School for Boys, a middle-aged bachelor with a shaved head and a gray five o’clock shadow. He would never have married because he was married to the job. Coaching rugby with the rigor of a drill sergeant— thick purple vein in his temple pulsing, threatening to burst— he was a presence both feared and respected in the school’s dark corridors. But he had a softer side reserved for those who earned it. He spent several precious after-school hours each day tutoring sixth form students for their upcoming A-levels. His ground floor flat was a den for wayward young men. Many nights, his coat rack would be cluttered with Bournemouth-crested jackets, and the terracotta carpet would be wet with the tracks of boys who had slopped through rain and mud to seek the council of Mr. Littlewood. Alan would rattle into the lounge with a wooden tea tray, laden with steaming mugs and a chipped milk jug filled with real cream. He always kept a few packs of Jaffa cakes in the cupboard for such occasions. The citrus infused vapor of Earl Gray fogged his glasses while the boys drank hungrily, releasing their woes in spurts and sputters. The alcoholic father. The cheating girlfriend. Always the girlfriends.

When the boys left, Alan Littlewood put the kettle on for one last cup of tea before bed. He closed his eyes and rubbed his temples in smooth concentric circles, calculating square roots to clear his head, making equations out of tulips. He loved the numbers, the patterns. His close relationships with the boys had always made the administration a little too uneasy to offer him a deputy head’s position.
“I’m going to call my parents to let them know we made it here,” I said. Lee and I were standing in the kitchen, rummaging through the cupboards. A very minimalist selection. You don’t have salt? I’d asked a few moments before. How do you not own salt? After a brief visit with Lee’s mother who had collected us from the airport and a two and half hour car ride from Heathrow to Bournemouth—with six bulging suitcases tucked wherever they would fit in the five-seater Hyundai Coupe, including under my feet and piled from seat to ceiling, and with an ostentatious bouquet of welcome flowers on my lap—we were finally alone again in England. I was starving.


I didn’t know where the phone was in my own flat, a realization both unnerving and perfectly sensible. It wasn’t my flat. Adding to the existing disorientation of a sudden halt after months of frenzied preparation, the customary jet lag accompanying a trans-Atlantic flight and a five-hour time change, and the reversed reverse culture shock of returning to Bournemouth—was the fact that I was moving into two flats at once. Lee had been living in a heroically shabby apartment right in the town centre, an artsy neighborhood called Poole Hill, where it was not uncommon to see Mohawks and sketchbooks and quilted skirts and aggressive piercings all in the same tea shop. The flat was in a white-washed building called the Cornerhouse and sat above a barbershop, the tall, thin window in the lounge revealing the most delicious view of similarly ornate but deceptively ramshackle white-washed buildings with royal blue trim and black doors. The lounge was shaped like a slice of pizza and had pale blue walls with brilliant white trim, twelve-inch baseboards. At night, Lee said he could hear the saxophones and
acoustic guitars from Mr. Smith’s, the long-standing “it” spot for Bournemouth’s alternative music scene; sometimes, the brassy cabaret tunes from Rubyz, the drag queen bar around the corner. This was the place I’d prepared to move into, rereading Lee’s colorful descriptions over and over again in my emails. The walls were the blue I’d had in mind when selecting fabric for chair covers and throw pillows.

A week before the wedding, the landlady declared bankruptcy and lost the building. As a result, we were moving to a one-bedroom ground floor flat in Charminster, a student-oriented neighborhood quite a few tiers outside of BH1, almost a midpoint between Throop and the sea. A compromise. A rushed and necessary fix. For one week, we had keys to both places.

“My dad got Taco Bell,” I reported to Lee when I cradled the receiver and returned to the pebble-gray kitchen. Lee had abandoned the hunt and was flipping through a newspaper. “They never get fast food. He said they were too sad to cook.”

“Oh man,” Lee said, as though remembering something from a dream. We were fumbling with these new words—husband, wife—these new roles and definitions, play-acting what we assumed we should be. “I keep forgetting to feed you.”

We drove to Asda and picked out a premade Indian feast that came in a carton, smooth oval naans, onion bhaji, vegetable samosas and bright yellow rice, and drove to the new flat in Charminster so that we could eat our first dinner together back in England in what would be our real home. Lee eased his white metro onto the wide gravel drive and, though we’d been married a few weeks already, insisted on carrying me over the threshold. The door stuck at first, and he had to jiggle the handle, push harder than normal while refusing to set me down, but the door eventually swung open, revealing a
long narrow hallway and pine-effect laminate flooring. On the way inside, Lee slipped on a stack of envelopes scattered just on the other side of the door. He reached for wall but missed and tumbled to the floor, with me landing on top of him and the carton of curry sliding down the hallway, mercifully intact.

“I hope that’s not an omen,” he said, sitting up and taking stock of himself, patting his shirt, brushing dirt from the dusty floor off his thighs. A mess of junk mail was strewn beneath us. The heel of a muddy footprint on one envelope, the toe on another. One for a Susan Green. Several generically stamped “The Occupant.” Most were addressed to a Mr. Alan Littlewood.

We ate at the small round table tucked into the recess of a bay window, and simultaneously I could feel the warm air from the radiator and the cold draft from the window. I wondered if Mr. Alan Littlewood had picked out the drapes that hung over the windows; their purple tulips seemed an odd choice for a bachelor.

“I’m back to work the day after tomorrow,” Lee said.

“I know.” I dipped a naan in vindaloo, made fiery smears across my plate. “I think I’m going to need a kitten.”

Maybe Alan Littlewood was agoraphobic. Maybe behind the tulip drapes, he’d hung custom-fit venetian blinds in all the windows, installed an intricate series of locks on the temperamental door. Agoraphobic Alan would most likely have worked for an online graphic design company and racked up higher degrees through the Open University. Web design. Political Science. Russian literature. Books piled up on every available surface, shelfless. Notes scribbled on graph paper, smudged bifocals resting atop an open
computer manual. Each day, he’d dress with extreme care. A close shave with the old-fashioned brush and cup of soap, an ironed dress shirt, gold tie clip. His personal presentation was impeccable, but the flat was cluttered and confused. The linen closet held the expected towels and bed sheets but also a fondue set still in the box, a painting of a wrinkly abbot on his knees, hands folded, eyes forlorn. The drawer in the kitchen was constantly jamming, Red Panda and Original Bhalti menus hovering over the abyss that lives in the backs of cupboards. He’d paced up and down the narrow hallway, leather slippers padding rhythmically on the laminate floor. When the delivery man came to the door, Alan Littlewood would slip the money through the letter box and slink back to the bedroom, collecting his chicken jalfrezi and pilou rice only when he heard the magnetic calm of wheels on gravel.

The phone rang. I stared at it for a second, almost confused by the intrusion of sound. Lee was back to work; the flat, quiet. Though I’d lived in Bournemouth for nearly a year, Charminster was new to me, and all of the people I had known during my traveling bartender days seemed to have evaporated. Or moved back to Colombia or Germany or Sri Lanka. Or maybe just acknowledged that they belonged to a different version of me. Lee was barely around, making a go at LJM Carpentry, his own business, and also subcontracting. Between his quotes and paperwork and twelve-hour work days and the fact that I didn’t even have a job yet, I found myself quite alone. I had exhausted Oliver, the tiny gray and white kitten we’d picked out within days of settling in, who was sleeping in the empty space on the bookshelves, under the slant of the leaning spines. His
front paws dangled over the terracotta carpet with such uncalculated abandon. The phone rang again.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Annie, it’s Cait.”

I was surprised to hear her voice on the other end of the line, her presence suddenly inside my narrow flat. I had felt barricaded inside the cream walls and terracotta carpet, impenetrable. Caitlin’s voice was at once familiar and complicated. “I was just thinking, I know you’re not working yet so you probably have a lot of time on your hands while Lee’s at work.”

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s kind of weird. You can only walk up and down Charminster so many times.” I walked to the window, pulled back the thick cream drapes, compressing their vertical tulips. Bare branches and full sunshine, an eerie brightness reflecting off shadowless pavement, the world outside an overexposure.

It was a Thursday. Thanksgiving. I sunk back into the couch and watched Oliver’s fragile breaths, his thin kitten tail swishing this way and that. Back home, my dad was layering sheets of lasagna noodles and sauce and cool, damp ricotta. My mother was trying to squeeze enough place settings around two tables pushed together that would never be enough room. Soon, my sisters would line up for the Soup Patrol, filling the blue and white China bowls with steaming ladlefuls of wedding soup and placing a bowl on top of each plate, covering each painted pastoral scene, a repeating snapshot of a lone girl beside a winding stream.

In Bournemouth, Caitlin and Steve were hosting Thanksgiving dinner with two freshly butchered turkeys and homemade stuffing, a feast for twenty-odd guests including
Lee and me but mostly people Caitlin knew from the upscale department store she was
working at until the holidays were over, when she would begin a teacher-licensure
program at Winton School for Boys. The event was somewhat daunting and would be
only the second time I’d seen Caitlin since my return.

“So I was thinking, do you want to come over? I’m going crazy getting
everything ready for tonight. Maybe you can give me a hand peeling potatoes or
something.”

An olive branch, a thin twig with pale shoots.

I agreed right away, happy to have a reason to leave the flat, hungry for a
destination, and Caitlin rattled off numbers and letters, the different buses I could take to
get to Heather Close. I told her I might just walk.

“Are you sure? It’ll probably take you twenty minutes, half hour.”

“Yeah I’m sure. I need some fresh air. It’ll be nice.”

Truthfully, I was intimidated by the buses. At least on foot, I could control where
I went and avoid the risk of the bus’s sliding doors closing behind me, trapping me, the
wrong bus whisking me to Poole Harbour or Bournemouth town centre or anywhere else.
I dressed quickly in jeans and a long sleeve t-shirt, a thick scarf, and headed out the door.
I’d only been back in England for a few weeks, but I had spent many hours exploring my
new surroundings. Charminster was a burgeoning, cosmopolitan neighborhood.
Bournemouth boasted more than forty English-language schools, and the majority of
these foreign students lived in Charminster. Charminster Road had any type of cuisine
you could imagine. Turkish, Moroccan, Lebanese, Thai. Indian take-aways on every
corner blanketed the street with the constant aroma of coconut and spicy green curry
sauce. Seoul Food, the Korean grocer’s was followed by A-Mart, the Asian food market, with Sam’s off license in between. Sam carried single cans of Stella and good-naturedly sold alcohol to underage students. *It’s too hard to tell with the Orientals*, he said in his Dorset accent, shrugging. *And the Indians*. Walking from the corner of Heron Court Road past the bus stop in front of Sal and Pepe’s, I’d hear Spanish, French, and Arabic conversations swirling about. Internet cafes, twenty-four hour Laundromats, and Oscar’s, the noisy student wine bar, kept Charminster bustling at all hours.

Thanksgiving morning as I made my way back toward Heather Close, I ventured farther than I had before. I passed a well-kept Tudor-style pub with multiple front gables, a lopsided series of dormers and flowerboxes in each window, a watch maker’s shop, and the gothic-inspired towers and arched windows of Saint Alban’s, the churchyard shadowy and dark underneath the cool stone. When I finally reached Ashurst Road and the entrance in the development, I shivered, from the cold and from the raw remembrance of so much crumpling so fast and so completely. I ducked into the cut-through and walked up the cobble-stone walkway to 25 Heather Close.

Caitlin opened the door, fresh and pretty in jeans and a t-shirt, swinging ponytail, a paring knife in her hand, but the background engulfed her. The carpet—the blue carpet I’d walked on every day for four months—was somehow red, a deep blood red, a feverish scarlet wall to wall, spreading from the entranceway into the lounge and dining room, cushioning each step with thick, lush red. The kind of red that grows over the mushy fruit of an overripe apple, a red that isn’t brown or rust or purple-tinged. Just overwhelmingly red.

“Oh my God,” I said. “The carpet’s red.”
“Oh yeah, I guess you haven’t seen the place, have you? We’ve been busy.” She backed away from the door, letting me in. “Take your shoes off, okay?”

I slipped my blue trainers off and my feet sunk into the red carpet, leaving darker, redder tracks behind me. I walked through the glass-paned internal door to see that the blue couches were now brown and new with firm cushions, adorned with red throw pillows, some velvety with cloth-covered buttons, some with beaded tassels. The white walls were cream; the white trim, dark brown. Wooden shelves hung above the loveseat, boxy and modern, one holding a figurine of a long-necked cat, another displaying a carved figure of a woman curving around a man in an endless embrace. The Jaws poster was no more. Instead, a framed print of Steinlen’s Le Chat Noir, the gaunt black cat perched on a red wall, whiskers protruding against the twilight, its mouth lost to its own darkness.

“Where’s Morticia?” I asked, surprised the cat hadn’t peeked out from a corner for a brief appearance.

“We think she ran away.” Caitlin started walking toward the kitchen, where I could smell a roasting turkey and the earthy pungency of boiling potatoes.

“Oh wow, I’m sorry.”

Caitlin turned around and laughed. “Are you kidding? I’m glad that bitch is gone. Especially with the new couches.”

We spent the afternoon peeling yams and making green bean casserole, sweetening the air with the hearty aroma of the rising corn soufflé. The conversation was surface-level but pleasant, and after a few hours, I walked home to shower and get ready and to wait for Lee. I chose a corduroy mini-skirt with knee-high boots and a brown
sweater, still feeling a bit like I had something to prove, like I wanted to display my slimmed-down, firmed-up figure and my new clothes. When we arrived, Caitlin was in a gray cocktail dress and knee-high boots. Lee and I felt a bit lost in the hub of the party, the intimate clusters of laughter and wine glasses, felt disoriented in the red interior and the veneer of belonging. We stepped outside for cigarettes furtively and often.

After dinner Caitlin announced that we should honor the holiday by going around the room and saying something we were thankful for.

“I’ll start,” she said, taking a sip from her glass and letting the red wine sit on her tongue for a moment before swallowing. “I’m thankful I’ve made enough friends in the last eight months to fill this room.” There was a faint chorus of Aw, we love you too, Cait. I thought about Oliver alone in the flat.

“I’m thankful for George Lucas and Star Wars,” Steve said next.

“That’s beautiful, Steve,” Caitlin said. “Really touching. Thank you for embracing the spirit of my culture’s holiday.” Everyone laughed.

“Alright, alright. I guess I’m thankful for Cait then,” Steve said, laughing but then fixing his eyes on Caitlin alone. “She has brought something only Cait could bring to this house. She’s made it a home.”

The walls were cream. The carpets were red. The couches were brown. The slinky, scruffy Cat Noir fixed his yellow eyes on me, daring me to disagree. In my absence, Caitlin had filled a room with friends, found new faces and new furniture, made a home. Filled each slot, ticked each box. It really was a different house. A different home. Maybe things could be different.

“I’m thankful for old friends,” I said when my turn came.
Most days, I liked to think Alan Littlewood was a dentist. Thirty-seven years old. Young enough to still be passionate but old enough to have established himself. He had chestnut brown hair that receded into a very distinguished M-head, his forehead broad and shiny. He was always clean shaven and smelled like Dial soap, the standard orange bar not the trendier green tea and honey variety. He wore V-neck sweaters and Dockers, ironed pleats pointing down toward sensible loafers. His white dentist coat was stiff and professional, blue embroidered letters on the breast pocket. Dr. Alan Littlewood, D.D.S. I rolled these words around on my tongue.

I imagined being a patient in his office. The chair would be a light tan leather, soft and comfortable, a real upscale piece of dental furniture. He wouldn’t have any of those tacky posters on the wall, the ones you’re forced to stare at while the hygienist scrapes away six months of plaque. A man with surfer shorts and sunglasses, reclining in an overstuffed easy chair, dental equipment set up casually around him. Ten Steps to Overcoming Your Fear of the Dentist. Step one: Discuss your fear openly with your dentist. This never made sense to me.

No, Dr. Alan Littlewood, D.D.S. would have something classy on the wall, a van Gogh print maybe, those droopy irises lulling me to a serene contentment. And he’d play calming music too. Norah Jones or Enya. I’d lie back in that plush chair and admire the creases that stretched across his handsome brow. So close I could count his pores.

We’d have a real pleasant banter between us.
“Why, Mrs. Murray, your teeth are positively gleaming today! Have you been using the Johnson & Johnson clean burst glide floss I slipped in your goodie bag last time?”

“Oh, Dr. Littlewood, you’re too kind to notice,” I’d gush through the high tech dental apparatus in my mouth. But he’d always know just what I meant.

A short time after Thanksgiving, Lee and I had friends over, a small crowd, just us, Oliver, and four or five others. I made chicken tenders and onion rings from scratch, garlic bread sticks and marinara. When Steve and Caitlin arrived, Caitlin’s eyes were swimmy and her cheeks were pink. She was already drunk. We did shots of Jack Daniels together in my narrow kitchen, and she told me how glad she was I was back, that she had a piece of home with her again. And I wondered if married women did shots in cramped kitchens. Was this normal?

“I seriously miss you,” she said, filling the shot glasses again, spilling amber liquid on the countertop. We raised our glasses, hers plain and mine saying “I love Cyprus” in hot pink. I’d never been to Cyprus and had never been particularly good at shots. My eyes watered. I coughed, took a long chaser sip of my rum and coke, the ice cubes slamming against my upper lip. Shouldn’t wives go to lunch? Meet up for coffee?

“I miss you too.” But that’s all we said, over and over. Like we were stuck on that track, playing on repeat but never reaching the next line, never finding the key change, the place where the notes stretched and reached a higher octave, the part that makes the meaning resonate and stick.
A little while later, I was back in the kitchen, washing glasses and wiping the counter. *Clean as you go*, said a laminated sign that hung above the salad dressing station at Lonestar. It wasn’t a bad motto.

“I’m sorry,” Steve said, suddenly behind me.

“What?” I turned around, and he had a pained expression on his face, like he was about to deliver bad news, eyes worried under the edge of his gray beanie. “Why?”

“Cait, uh, Cait’s been sick—”

I laughed. Caitlin had never, in all the time I’d known her, gotten drunk enough to throw up. She was a careful drinker. She rarely did shots, and she had always opted for singles when I had ordered doubles. Once she reached the point where her lips felt tingly, she’d stick her face in the sink and guzzle water. She never got sick. Not during our frequent Carlo Rossi parties at Hiram, where we shared four-liter jugs of cheap blush wine, not off of Strongbow at O’Neill’s, never at any of our farewell or birthday parties.

“On your cushion,” Steve finished. The throw cushions had been my pet project. I’d bought the material—canvassy, mismatched vintage fabrics, varying prints, florals and paisleys, all mossy shades of blue and green—back in Ohio and had stitched each cushion by hand with a dark brown embroidery floss. One stitch at a time. It’s how I had spent my time in England since getting married. All of it.

“It’s okay, really.”

I took care of Caitlin in the bathroom all night, holding her thick red hair off of her damp forehead, wiping her mouth. At one point, I ran her a bath, and helped her undress, fetched a pair of pajama pants and a sweatshirt for her to change into. She put one shaky leg into the tub and then the other, using the wall and my hands to ease herself
down into the lukewarm water. She knocked a ceramic candle holder, a housewarming
gift from Lee’s sister, off the back of the toilet, and it shattered into jagged pieces across
the tile. It was an odd role-reversal, almost as though she’d been saving up, like all those
times I’d been locked in a stall heaving and crying, she’d been patiently waiting for this
one night. I should have felt bad, but instead, I enjoyed it. I liked being the adult in the
relationship. I liked feeling needed. I liked that we were doing something together, even
if it was this.

The next day, the phone rang.

“I’m sorry,” Caitlin said. The cushion had been thrown away in the black bin
behind the shed; the ceramic shards swept up and discarded. The bathroom had been
scrubbed and bleached, the vomit crust washed off the porcelain and the tiles. I sat on the
couch, one cushion short, and watched Oliver bat at a stray beer cap.

“It’s okay.”

“It isn’t though, is it? I mean, we aren’t. Are we?”

“No,” I said, scooping Oliver up off the floor and pressing his warmth and his
fluff against my neck. “I guess not.”

I should stick to the facts. Did it matter which Alan Littlewood I wanted to believe in?
Only one Alan Littlewood lived at 5 Heron Court Road, and this is everything I know
about him:

Alan Littlewood was a Chelsea supporter. Every few weeks, he got a postcard
from Chelsea Megastore with pictures of the latest football fashions. Well built men in
royal blue jerseys. Smiling girls with pigtails and missing front teeth, kicking a football with Chelsea-endorsed trainers.

He ate a lot of Papa John’s. Or at least some Papa John’s, because he received the kind of coupons you get when a company’s database has your details.

He did not have a Discovery card, MasterCard, or American Express, but they all wanted to offer him 0% interest for the first six months.

He must have shopped at Argos a lot or must have purchased something major (A refrigerator? An Xbox?) there because leaflets spilled through the letterbox, sometimes twice in one week.

He was unlucky in love.

Okay, admittedly, there’s no way of knowing that. But sometimes you have to approximate. Evidence: There wasn’t a single nail hole in the wall. Not one. People who are in love, and especially those who cohabitate with women, tend to hang things on walls in a building-a-home type of way. No photographs, no paintings, no knickknack shelves ever hung on his walls. Other signs lingered, indicating the lack of a woman’s touch. The toilet brush left behind was bright green even though the bathroom was blue and purple. There were no light shades, just bare bulbs in the bedroom and lounge. Sure, there were tulip curtains, but they were filthy and outdated.

Alan Littlewood bathed in my bathtub, washed dishes in my sink, padded barefoot across my laminate floor. He must have fought with the front door, with its stubborn lock and tricky handle. Maybe that’s what drove him away in the end.

A thick yellow envelope once announced, “Mr. Littlewood, you may already have won £1,000,000!” Sadly, he never knew.
I began focusing on my new life, on where I was and not where I had been. The flat in Charminster was on Heron Court Road, a street deceptively far from the sea in that it evoked aquatic wonders but was too distant to actually be a place where herons might congregate. Nonetheless, the flat was charming, tucked into a large neglected brick building with eight foot high bay windows, built in the 1920’s, although with a Georgian influence that made it feel much older. Or maybe I just thought so because everything in England seemed fantastically, romantically old. A rickety graffiti-splashed fence kept the Tesco-carpark kids from throwing Stella cans and fag butts in the yard, and just past the blue and yellow trim of the Tesco sign sat Peppino’s, a small Italian restaurant that sometimes sent the aroma of baking bread close enough our way that I could smell it if the windows were open and the weather was mild.

The house was divided into four flats. A narrow strip of pavement led to the main entrance, spilling out into a blue and green mosaic doorstep that curved gently and must have been grand once. We were the bottom left flat, the only one that did not access the building through the main entrance. Our front door was on the left side of the house, facing Arlington Road, and was barely functional. Not only did the bottom not quite close the gap between door and floor enough to keep grit and brittle leaves from collecting in the entranceway, but the handle stuck and the lock exhibited a fickle temperament. Once I actually got locked inside and had to wait and wait until a locksmith came to let me out of my own home.
Our separate entrance was not conducive to meeting the neighbors. Dan lived alone directly above us, and I never saw much of him except a brief flash of a cheap suit and a wide uneasy grin, jaw jutting out like a hungry pelican. What Dan and I lacked in social encounters, we made up for in auditory interaction. Dan spent hours on end practicing—and I use the word loosely—his electric guitar. I think he knew three chords. He poorly played songs that reflected his poor taste in music. Over and over again, I’d wake up to Dan’s fumbling chords above my bed. He’d move from room to room (CLOMP CLOMP CLOMP), seemingly following me. I sought refuge in the bathroom, but we didn’t have a shower, and I’d find myself lying in the tub, Oliver curled on the toilet seat and looking at me quizzically as I submersed my head under lukewarm water for brief gurgling relief.

I’d counter Dan’s futile guitar ambitions by cranking up the volume on my computer, pumping my favorite playlist out into the universe, languid melodies and dripping lyrics. Dan was equally unimpressed. He caught Lee once in the driveway and said, “So I take it your wife likes Jeff Buckley” in a tone that was more than a little embittered. I was offended. Lee laughed at the word wife. *My wife,* he said when he recounted the story. *Wife!* I was not in a marveling kind of mood.

The other downstairs flat was occupied by Mark and Sarah, a childless couple in their late thirties who owned their quarter of the house we all shared and always made that distinction known to the rest of us mere tenants. They were always outside. Mark, an electrician by trade, tinkered in his van, rigging up shelving units and complicated lighting, and Sarah in her dressing gown smoked cigarettes half in and half out of the open doorway. Mark was a strange fellow, energetic in an unnerving, sketchy way. Sarah
had a common face and tired eyes and although her smile was kind, something remained unapproachable about her.

This left the Germans. They lived upstairs, their lounge window directly above the front entrance. Susanna was always stationed there, watching, and whenever I’d pass beneath, I’d hear the scurry of her retreating from her perch. She had short buzzed hair and an intimidating athletic build. Once, she reprimanded Lee for blocking her parking space. He was upset for days. Her partner was somewhere between eight and nine feet tall. He rode his motorbike everywhere, limbs jutting out at right angles like the jointed legs of a giant spider. His English was rudimentary, but we exchanged many waves and cordial nods. His was the friendliest face around.

About a month after Lee and I moved to Charminster, I began working as a dispenser in small pharmacy just past the Fiveways Pub, about a twenty-minute walk from the flat. It was a Rowland’s Pharmacy, part of a national chain that was quickly being swallowed up by Boots with its popular botanical cosmetics line and soft lighting and the new integrated pharmacies that were popping up in grocery stores like Asda and Sainsburys. The Rowlands in Charminster was pokey and had scuffed floorboards and an owl in a lab coat painted in the window, holding a test tube in a feathery grip. We wore white smocks and bottle-green trousers with elastic waistbands. They didn’t have my size.

I developed calluses on my thumbs from pushing pills through plastic and foil blisters, and the skin on my hands tightened, drying out and cracking from the constant contact with paper and the perpetual chill of the dispensary. There were no windows and our work space consisted of floor to ceiling shelves of pills. The boxes were fresh and
crisp, but we left the right side tab sticking out of all the opened boxes, and when I looked at the shelves, the white tabs stared back like fish eyes in a market, blank and unsettling. The pills had strange scientific names, with no hint of purpose or category. Temazipan. Liptisol. Benthuzilide. One bottle was labeled Senna, a lovely herbal sounding name, and had spherical brown pills inside. As soon as the lid came off, a rich, earthy smell escaped into the stale atmosphere.

“What’s Senna for?” I asked the pharmacist one day out of the blue. Not much happened in the way of small talk in the dispensary.

She looked at me blankly, blinking eleven or twelve times (as was her custom), and said, “Regulating the bowels.”

I didn’t make any friends at the pharmacy.

I walked to the work every day at 8:00, and after a few weeks I started noticing the same faces every morning. I’d anticipate them, watching for them as I approached our usual intersections. There was Tired Guy, who was always yawning and unshaven, somewhere near the tapas bar. Nerdy Couple waiting at the Malmsbury Road bus stop. He had a comically large nose, and she wore her hair in a long clunky French braid. They’d sit and shiver together on the red plastic bench. And there was Nervous Guy, eyes flitting left and right outside the Rhode Island Café. Over time, I built quite a rapport with Nervous Guy. I practiced different smiles, contemplated venturing a swift “Mornin’” as he approached. I wore the same floral jacket every day in hopes that he would recognize me from afar. On the rare occasions we didn’t pass each other, I’d worry. Once I saw him all the way up by the Jamaican juice bar. He smiled sheepishly, acknowledging his lateness. We never spoke.
Alan Littlewood was everywhere.

I sifted through the pile of scripts at the pharmacy each morning, certain that I would see his name. I imagined myself running to the front of the shop, pills rattling in hand, shouting, “Mr. Littlewood! Mr Littlewood! Your fluazipan is ready!” And Alan Littlewood, D.D.S. would be standing there, stoically creased forehead and V-neck sweater, happy to see me.

Friday nights when Lee and I went out for half price pizza at Barollo’s, I half expected to hear the hostess call, “Littlewood, party of two.” I’d scan the faces of strangers seated at tables, watch the door of the men’s restroom, waiting.

I searched the society page of the *Daily Echo* every afternoon, looking for news of Littlewood nuptials, Littlewoods birth announcements, Littlewood obituaries. But I began to doubt that Littlewoods got married or had babies or even died. The only place I ever saw those fourteen letters was on MasterCard applications. He wasn’t real.

Only he was.

He was out there, somewhere. Probably still in Bournemouth. He’d just moved on from Heron Court Road was all. Maybe he moved in with a girlfriend. Or got a promotion and was living in a flash townhouse right in the town centre, jogging along the beach before work each morning. Or maybe things went the other way for Alan. Maybe he was holed up in a bedsit in Boscombe sharing a kitchen and bathroom with three Portuguese men and a Romanian. It never once occurred to me to ask Mark and Sarah
about Alan Littlewood any of the countless times I smiled and ducked past them on the
gravel drive. Or Dan or the Germans either. It was better not knowing.

One night Lee had a dream, a dark dream that quickened his breath and sent his limbs
thrashing. Oliver, who normally slept curled up on my pillow and nesting in my hair, shot
off the bed at the sudden movement. I lay still, staring at the bare bulb above and
wondering if I ought to wake Lee or let the dream run its course. He sat bolt upright,
awake in the way where the brain is trying to catch up with the body, synapses stumbling
over themselves, looking but not seeing.

“Who’s there?” he asked, looking from left to right.

“It’s okay, you’re just dreaming.” I reached out to touch his shoulder but he
pointed, convinced he saw the figure of a man in the hallway.

“Who there?” he asked again, sleep fading and confusion settling in. He leaned
back against the metal headboard. I sat up and lay my cheek on the cool skin of his arm,
rested my temple against the points and swirls of the tattoo that draped itself over his left
shoulder.

“It’s the ghost of Alan Littlewood,” I whispered. Lee broke into a laugh, a deep
laugh that shook his body and tumbled recklessly into the night. We had never mentioned
Alan Littlewood to each other before. Despite the fact the fact that we had both tripped
over envelopes addressed to Alan Littlewood on a daily basis, both glanced at his name
and discarded his junk mail for weeks, we’d never talked about him.

And then we did. All the time.
Alan Littlewood, or rather the absence of Alan Littlewood, became an odd variable that had been missing from our equation, a necessary ghost, a third opinion. He became a talking point outside of ourselves and this weird and wonderful situation we’d been thrown into, these first months of the rest of our lives. Everything had happened so fast. Only two years before, I’d been living in an L-shaped dorm room in Hiram, shuffling in my cherry slippers and robe to the bathroom I shared with forty-odd girls, eating in dining halls, smoking pot on the roof, throwing theme parties with Caitlin and making out with random boys. Then I was a World Traveler. Then a waitress back in my hometown. And then, suddenly, a wife. A grown up with a joint bank account and a pet kitten and a collection of canvas bag-for-life shopping bags for my groceries. Groceries. Opinions on low-energy light bulbs. An electric mixer. Seasonal tea towels.

I’d returned to Bournemouth thinking I was returning to a life I had already built for myself, only to be blindsided by the loneliness of a new flat, a new neighborhood, a new job. I wasn’t drinking Stongbow until my head spun down at O’Neill’s, wasn’t taking leisurely walks along Bournemouth beach, gaping at the mist and the long neck of the pier. I was disoriented. I had tried filling the empty spaces with Caitlin and the kitten and the couch cushions, with passersby on the walk to work, had tried retreating into the solitary folds of my own imagination. I walked around, dazed, with that nagging feeling I’d forgotten something. Somehow I overlooked the dusty steel-toe work boots that sat by the front door and the calloused fingers that strummed the spruce-top Samick on Sunday afternoons. I’d forgotten entirely that the reason I’d moved back to England at all was because I had gotten married, because I had chosen a new life. I’d forgotten that I wasn’t alone at all.
Alan Littlewood slowly took over our lives. Lee and I wrote a comic strip, “The Adventures of Alan Littlewood,” which chronicled his life beyond Heron Court Road, our refrigerator adorned with pencil drawings and dialogue bubbles drawn on looseleaf paper. We scrutinized the flat. *Do you think Alan liked that silver fire grate?* We daydreamed Alans both mundane and farfetched. Store Clerk Alan. Tax Evasion Alan, Rabbi Alan. He became a greeting. *Any mail for Alan today?* An invitation. A song, a prayer. In late December, we mixed flour and eggs and vanilla and ginger, and together, we knelt on the kitchen tiles and watched a tray of uniform Alan Littlewoods browning in the oven.

Shortly after the holidays, we decided to splurge and go out for dinner, to experiment with one of the string of ethnic restaurants that lined Charminster Road.

“Let’s try Sal and Pepe’s,” I offered. Although I knew I should be trying Thai or Mongolian, or anything exotic, I really just felt like a steaming plate of pasta.

“Which one’s that?” Lee asked.

“You know, the one with the antique chandelier in the window.” I slipped my arms into my floral jacket, pulled on my boots.

“You mean the one with the giant head?” Lee dug his hands into his pockets. Admittedly, the enormous head of a very Roman-looking statue, the neck and head of a long-nosed man with bowl cut and leaves in his hair, that sat beneath the chandelier was a much more obvious marker. I laughed. Lee jerked the handle of the front door, forced it open with his shoulder, and we walked into the night. It was cold but clear, and the sounds of distant laughter, trundling buses, and a Friday night energy called to us from around the corner. We walked the few blocks from the flat to the storefront that opened
into a long, deep room with strung lanterns and whicker-covered bottles of Chianti
dangling above a small bar, the whole time talking about Alan. Lee said he felt certain
Alan Littlewood was a teller at a bank, that a dentist or a school teacher would never live
in such a humble flat.

Once we were inside the restaurant and seated at our table, Lee became serious.

“I think you should quit the pharmacy,” he said.

“Really?” I dreaded that job, the silence and the empty hours, the chemical names
with too many x’s and z’s, but I knew we needed the money.

“Really. I can tell you hate it.”

I was about to protest when a waiter in a crisp white shirt and black waistcoat
approached our table, asking what we would like to drink.

“I’ll have a Coke please,” Lee said. “And my wife will have a coffee.”
I quit the pharmacy. In an uncharacteristically irresponsible way, I just didn’t go in. Once I had Lee’s blessing, it became harder and harder to remain stoic, to pull my white smock on and trudge the twenty minutes to Rowland’s Pharmacy each morning in the bleak gray of January, nodding silently to Nervous Guy and wishing my days were different. One particularly dreary Thursday, I just didn’t go in. Instead, I switched the ringer off on the phone and pulled the purple duvet over my head, not even getting out of bed when Oliver wormed his way under the covers, licking my face and pawing my head, reminding me of his breakfast. I lay there all morning and most of the afternoon feeling fiendish in my tank top and sweatpants, imagining the slow realization that would pass through the dispensary like a mild breeze. That’s not like her to be late...No, still no answer...I guess she’s finished then.

Not even a week later, I was waitressing at Frankie and Benny’s, a chain Italian-American themed restaurant in Castlepoint Shopping Centre with light frothy cappuccinos and over a dozen pizza varieties including the Breakfast Pizza topped with sausage, bacon, baked beans, and a fried egg. They have to hire me, I’d told Lee as I slid out of his red cargo van with an application in my hand. I am Italian American. I was hired without an interview—the general manager’s wife went into labor the day I was scheduled to come in, and I received a phone call instructing me to instead report to work that night for training.
The décor was 1940s diner-style, with dark red booths and stained glass hanging lamps, dim lighting and smooth Rat Pack melodies. The kitchen was open, and olive-skinned chefs tossed pizza rounds high in the air and swore good-naturedly—*cabrao do caralho!*—at one another in what, if one tuned in only to the soft g’s and musical lilt, might have been Italian (though was actually Portuguese). The first time I walked into the kitchen and inhaled minced garlic and chip fat, the sweet aroma of tomatoes stewing in basil and olive oil, when I noticed the glint of fluorescent lights on stainless steel, I knew I was finally in the right place. I made my first English girlfriends fast and easily and enough money in tips that Lee and I started doing fun things like going out for a pint at the Brunswick Pub, a tiny local with its own saggy hound dog that slept in a wrinkled heap by the fireplace, or buying light fixtures and spare sheets.

By the time the sun warmed the seaside air, turning the channel murky greens and browns as the world beneath awoke and stirred, I was a supervisor at Frankie’s, responsible for placing orders, enforcing the cleaning rota, organizing theme parties, and checking that the proper defrost protocol had been followed on cheesecakes and cinnamon waffles—all in addition to my normal waitressing duties. On average, I was working sixty hours a week. By the time summer was in full swing, I was considering taking an offer for a management position. Once a Frankie’s manager was given her own restaurant, her name went up on the front door in rich gold lettering. *Annie Murray, General Manager.* It wasn’t history book worthy, but it was something.

“Lee wants to put a baby in me;” I announced over pizza at the end of a ten-hour double shift. Natalie and Joanne stopped mid-chew and stared at me. We were sitting at the bar,
ties loosened and black waistcoats slung over the backs of our chairs. The restaurant was empty, except for us and Viktor and Francisco, who were still running dishes through pot wash and mopping the kitchen floor.

“What?” Natalie exclaimed, letting her slice of American Hot drop to her plate. Natalie and Joanne were both living with long term boyfriends, but neither were engaged or talking pregnancy. Both desperately wanted both. “Are you going to let him?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “It seems a bit soon. We haven’t even been married a year.”

“Man alive,” Joanne said, her springy curls boinging as she chewed her thin slice of New York Deli. “Bozzie and I have been together for years, and I can’t even get him to think about proposing, let alone babies. He’s still on about traveling to Australia or wherever.” Joanne and Bozzie had just returned from a month on the continent, puttering around.

“Well I think you ought to let Lee put a baby in you,” Natalie said, pushing her plate away and lighting a cigarette, her hand suddenly looking natural, fulfilling its purpose. I watched the smoke curl from the glowing tip. Lee and I had given up smoking months before. I’d gone cold turkey, but Lee still chewed 2mg nicotine gum furiously and nonstop, giving himself violent hiccups. “You’re lucky he wants to.”

“I know, but—aren’t you meant to spend some time together first? Just, you know, as a couple?” I pulled a fat green olive off of my Californian, and popped it into my mouth, biting down slowly and letting the bitter olive juice slide onto my tongue. Lee and I had talked about traveling. One of the perks of living in England was supposed to be its proximity to Italy, Greece, Spain, France. We were supposed to take weekend trips,
short holidays, but there was never any free time or spare money, and truthfully, we just
sort of forgot. We never even went to Bournemouth beach, let alone Crete. Joanne and
Natalie both laughed.

“Right, because you spend so much time together now, do you?” Joanne said,
taking another bite of pizza. “When was the last time you saw Lee then?”

The kitchen door swung open, and Viktor and Francisco emerged in street clothes,
having changed out of their chef whites. The dishes had all been stacked and returned to
their metal shelving; the mop bucket, emptied. The chefs talked in hushed tones, even
though we wouldn’t have understood them anyway. It was nearing midnight.

“I vaguely remember him rolling out of bed at 5:30 this morning.” Lee was
currently working on site, subcontracting nearly an hour away, and we were operating on
completely opposite schedules.

“Don’t you want a baby?” Natalie asked, her dark brown eyes wide and
searching.

“Of course I do.”

Sure I did. Sort of. Someday.

In July, Lee surprised me at work. He’d finished early for the day, and I was on an easy
12-6 lunch shift. Normally, I took the bus home, but when I walked out of Frankie’s
doors, my vinyl work bag slung over my shoulder with my apron strings hanging
out, his van was parked in the back of the car park. It was unmistakable, a flat Ford
Escort cargo van that used to be a Royal Mail van and hadn’t yet been sign-written for
LJM Carpentry. It still had the outline of a Royal Mail appliqué. The van was what we’d spent our wedding money on, nearly all of it.

The day was warm, and I squinted as I reentered the sunshine after spending an afternoon behind dark wooden blinds and controlled lighting. The sun was still high in the sky, and a gauzy trail of clouds unwound itself across the pale blue. Lee had his window rolled down, and I walked up to the driver’s side, folding my arms across the window frame and leaning in.

“Hey, what are you doing here?”

“I finished early. Come on, get in.” Lee’s mouth fought a smile but lost, and a wide grin took hold of his face. As he reached across and pushed the door open for me, I saw flowers on the passenger seat. When I was inside the van, Lee handed me the bouquet, a simple arrangement of yellow lilies and orange and white daisies with long, narrow petals.

“And,” Lee said, reaching into the space behind his seat, “these are also for you.” He produced a stack of magazines with bald babies on the covers, soft pink babies wearing only diapers, proud round bellies and smiling well-groomed moms. Pregnancy and Birth, Family and Parenting, Junior. Articles about how to soothe a teething baby, how to tell if Baby was getting enough milk, recipes for homemade baby food, how to accentuate Bump. “You know, to look at if you get bored.”

I was two thirds of the way through The Poisonwood Bible, turning the pages hungrily in the chartreuse hours of late morning over coffee and crumpets while Lee was at work. Sure, I was considering what my next reading material would be, but Pregnancy and Birth wasn’t exactly making a strong case. I looked from the blue eyes of the baby on
the cover to the blue eyes pleading with me in the car, Lee’s blue eyes, dark and clear, and an unexpected thought wriggled into my head. Would our baby have his eyes or mine? Both were blue, but in the way where the ocean and the sky are both blue. No one would ever call them the same. Lee shrugged and bit his bottom lip.

“You’re really serious about this, aren’t you?” I asked, flipping through the magazine. Nappy Rash. Cot death. Cracked nipples.

“I really am,” Lee said, nodding gently, his eyes brimming with so much hope. Lee and I were terrible at making decisions, reckless and floundering, but I trusted hope. I believed in it.

“Okay,” I said, my laughter tumbling out and soaking into stained upholstery of the van’s interior. Was I agreeing? Had I just agreed? “Okay. Let’s try.”

Lee started the engine, and the van carried us home with its usual squeaks and clangs as tools and materials smacked around in the open space behind us, carried us out of the white geometric maze of Castlepoint and past the topsy-turvy bungalows of Castle Lane, all the way back to the congested sidewalks and saffron-scented air of Charminster. No big deal, I thought to myself, as Lee eased the car onto the gravel drive. We were just going to try. By the time I actually got pregnant, I’d be used to the idea.

These things took time, right?

Five or six months at least.

One month later, I crouched on the floor in the narrow kitchen next to Oliver’s bowl. On my knees, I collapsed my body like a folding chair, my torso sliding toward the floor, and a thick whiteness creeping in from everywhere, swallowing me from the inside out. I’m
going to faint, I realized, recognizing the prickly feeling under my skin and the cold sweat that trickled down my spine, remembering the feeling of my skin not being enough from the few times I’d passed out in church as a child. Dizzy spells, belabored swallowing, the choking fog of incense clouding out of a small brass cage swinging from a clink-clinking chain. Hymns pulling at my throat. I’m going to faint. The whiteness became grayness, flickered into kitchen, into a blue and white tea towel and a plastic bowl shaped like a fish—blink—vanished into black. My eyes wide open, unseeing. My face wet against cool ceramic tile. My last thought: I should feed the cat.

Seconds later, I blinked. My kitchen was sideways.

My first thought: You’ve got to be kidding me.

The first test was negative. And the second. And the third and fourth too. Lee was at work when a nagging feeling pulled me out into a drizzly August afternoon to purchase the fifth test, which was unclear and thus immediately followed by the sixth test, which was downright ambiguous. The display screen revealed the faintest, weakest shadow of the positive-indicating pink circle. Was it a circle? Was that there before? I squinted. Five and Six had been part of an Asda-brand twin pack, the first store-brand test I’d bought, and I cursed myself for trying to save the three quid because I was then stuck wondering if the test was cheap and faulty. I wished I had First Response with its classic double line or Clear Blue with its stoic cross indicator and a control line that let you see what a line should look like. Instead, I had a generic pregnancy test with a feeble smudge. Can’t even shell out an extra three quid, I chastised myself, disgusted. You’re going to be a terrible mom.
I stared at the smudge.

The smudge stared at me.

It was definitely a circle-shaped smudge, and though it was practically colorless, I could see how one might describe it as pink, if it absolutely needed to be assigned a color. *A false positive is pretty much impossible,* Lee had explained after the first round of tests, *but a false negative is common. It means your hCG levels aren’t high enough yet.* He’d been reading *Pregnancy and Birth.* And scouring the internet. And making the occasional phone call to the NHS helpline. He already knew way more than I did. *Do you feel pregnant?* he asked. *Lots of women say they feel pregnant.*

*I feel irritated,* I’d said. *With you. Is irritability a sign?*

I held the test right in front of my eyes and tried to discern the dim circle. I placed the test on the bathroom sink and backed up until my back smacked the towel rack behind me. Could I see the smudge from across the room? I wandered out into the hallway and leaned against the wall, afraid to be in the same room with it. I sank to the floor, and tucked my knees under my chin, making myself small and compact. I waited like that, tracing dusty patterns on the floor, until Lee came home from work.

The smudge waited in the bathroom.

“What are you doing?” Lee asked when he opened the door and saw me sitting on the floor, a look of concern washing over his face.

“I think it’s a pink circle,” I said and gestured toward the bathroom. He ran in and immediately out, blinking, unable to stop the hot, happy tears that spilled out of his eyes. His rough hands, still covered with grit and teak oil, pulled me up and his broad shoulders heaved like a deep breath, his arms wrapping around me, lifting me off the floor.
Six additional tests (an unmistakable and fast appearing pink circle, classic double lines, and a bold cross) later, we called our parents. My mother screamed, just screamed high-pitched and wordlessly, for so long that Lee and I stifled giggles, holding the phone up to Oliver’s ear and howling with laughter when he bolted from the wide couch and retreated into the darkness of the bedroom.

“You better not be joking,” she finally said. Since the early 70s, my mother had been a maternity nurse on the labor and delivery floor of Saint Elizabeth’s, a hippie, and a devout Catholic. She was also a mother of four girls, three of whom had ripped their way out before the majesty of epidurals, and she often said her greatest regret was birth control, that she wished she’d left it up to God and had at least that many more. Bearing children had been the communion of all of my mother’s greatest passions—her career, her womanhood, her love for my father, and her spirituality. Pregnancy was not something she joked about. The stirring beneath skin, the twinges, the dizzying ripple of a new and unfamiliar movement—it was the closest she’d ever felt to God.

“I’m not. I promise.”

“Oh Annie,” she said as we hung up, “My girl. Welcome to the second half of your life.”

Her words hung in the room. The second half of my life. A division had been made that I hadn’t even considered. I was no longer me. I was no longer this person who dabbled in this and that, who sometimes daydreamed and sometimes worked so hard her fingers split and bled. I was no longer a person untethered, a person with the luxury of selfishness.
I was a mom.

I was suddenly more necessary than I’d ever been before. Someone needed me, fully and absolutely. It was too big of a concept to understand in one moment, but the words remained, patient, arranging themselves on the bookshelf and across the wooden mantelpiece, tucking themselves between the couch cushions and behind the tulip curtains. Whether or not I felt ready for this responsibility, it was here, wriggling inside the very core of me. Lee and I sat on the couch, exhausted somehow though all we’d done was make some calls, not knowing what to say but knowing we should say something. Oliver wandered back in, walked across my flat stomach, settling himself, his paws kneading the hollow beneath my ribs. Finally, he wound himself into a neat curve on my lap and purred.

“Are you happy?” Lee asked. It was all so new, so raw.

I wanted to be pregnant, to crave Brussells sprouts and boiled eggs, to have no waistline and flowing hippie tops that draped over my belly. I wanted to see toes—fingers? knuckles?—move beneath my skin, to press Lee’s hand to my stomach and say, *See...right there...feel that.* I wanted the woman behind the cash register at Tesco’s to smile knowingly and ask when I was due, wanted blushing schoolboys to give up their seat on the bus. I wanted all of it, and I wanted to be a mother too. I wanted to give, to nourish, to protect. I wanted to know just one person who was pure and vulnerable, someone entirely empty of ideas or opinions or memories, someone I could fill with this love that Lee and I had, this love that seemed too much and too greedy, that needed to be poured into something bigger and more important than anything I’d done or anything I’d known before.
I wanted this to be what our life became. This I knew, simply and completely.

“Of course,” I said.

“But?” Lee asked, sensing my hesitation, my uncertainty.

“But I’m scared.”

“Are you kidding?” Lee rubbed his eyes with the base of his hands. “I’m completely terrified.”

Every morning at Frankie’s, I filled thirty-six helium balloons. It was part of the opening checklist just as much as slicing fruit, putting the mayos on ice, and pulling the chairs off of the tabletops, angling each toward the front door. There were twelve metal hooks throughout the restaurant, and with three balloons to each hook—a red, a white, and a green—I had thirty-six balloons to inflate each morning, thirty-six ribbons to untangle and loop into loose but lasting knots. A helium canister was tucked behind the front desk, and I’d stand there, filling balloons and staring out the double door in front of me, the buses and cars wrapping around the car park, the concrete stairs that led to a connected ring of shops. Sometimes the steady pshhh of the helium lulled me and I’d get lost in thought, jarred back into the empty dining room by the sharp pop of over-extended rubber, fragments of balloon landing on the booth behind me and on the waxy floorboards beneath. The chefs would drop their spatulas and grill brushes, clap theatrically, holler. Burro do caralho! Balloon-filling was tedious, but it was good thinking time, the last quiet moments before the restaurant filled with lunching ladies and sticky toddlers, the hiss of balsamic ablaze in sauté pans, and the nostalgic melodies of
old crooners. It was my stolen moment for reverie before the rush of the day overtook me.

My mother was scared of balloons. When we were kids, all we ever wanted to do was play with balloons, to stretch out the unfilled floppy forms, to pull at them, the certain trick to make them easier to fill. We wanted to blow them up ourselves, to watch the rich blues and oranges and reds grow paler, thinner, as the balloon took shape, growing, becoming a ball, a tube, a teardrop. We wanted to twist the bottom tightly around two fingers and slip the rolled-up end through the stinging crack between, securing the knot. We were so proud when it worked, and we collapsed into giggles and shrieks when the balloon outwitted us, whipping around the room, this way and that. To the ceiling! To the floor! Darting across couches and rocking chairs like a scared bird and making cartoon farting sounds, enraging our dogs that barked at top voice as the balloon lost steam and fluttered to the scratchy brown carpet of our living room. We wanted to taste the wet rubber, to hear it squeak between our teeth.

Balloons were magic. Balloons were wonder. And they came in bulk bags for ninety-nine cents at Girard Book and News, the corner store across from church where we cashed in sweaty handfuls of loose change for Airhead Taffy and Lemonheads. Clear plastic bags with hundreds of balloons smooshed together inside sat low on a wooden shelf, next to cheap plastic trinkets and metallic pinwheels.

But we weren’t allowed to buy them. We were only allowed balloons for birthday parties, balloons that were tied and taped to walls and banisters, clustered in doorways and hung from the mailbox. Balloons are a choking hazard, my mother would say, refusing to let us blow them up ourselves, the papery skin around her eyes pinched and
worried. *Be careful!* she’d shout when the air of the room was flattened by the sudden pop of a balloon, rubber shrapnel disappearing under end tables and behind the television. *We have to find all the pieces!* All fun was put on hold until she could reassemble a perfect destroyed balloon, and rest assured in the knowledge that no children would die that day. Not in her house, not on her time.

The Frankie’s balloons were well-known in Castlepoint. Often on my breaks or on days off when I was shopping, I’d walk the loop around the shops, counting Frankie’s balloons. They were tied to pushchairs, tied to wrists, tied to parents’ watches and belts. Most kids asked for red, boys and girls alike, and at the end of the month, when we were waiting for shipment, the restaurant was sometimes decorated in just green and white. Certain indisputable laws of childhood crossed the cultural divide—kids loved balloons. The restaurant was brimming. Distracted parents asked for balloons for fussy babies and then left them tied to the highchairs. A fascinated child couldn’t resist the impulse and, having asked for a balloon, let it go, watching it rise, floating upwards and bobbing between ceiling fans. *Be careful*, I would wish toward each lost balloon. *We have to find all the pieces!* I’d think when the restaurant was stunned momentarily by the inevitable pop, forks posed in front of open mouths, pizza rounds seemingly frozen mid-toss, while the whole dining room looked around and one child cried.

I threw up for two weeks. I fainted again, this time at the bus stop in front of Castlepoint, clinging to the red plastic bench and slipping down to the pavement. The midwife checked my iron levels, and I began taking supplements. I stopped eating red meat. I couldn’t even look at it. I cut back to one cup of coffee a day and spent all of Christmas
staring at the brie and stilton on the cheese tray and feeling sorry for myself that I couldn’t have any. Lee took videos of my expanding belly with the webcam to send to my family back home. My mother was planning a solo trip for the birth, but they were all desperate to see my pregnant belly, to have an image to cradle, a tangible fact that this was happening. I got heartburn no matter what I ate. I developed pregnancy acne, painful boils beneath my cheeks and chin, and couldn’t use any remedy stronger than an odd lump of clay mixed with ground almonds and lavender seeds that Lee found at a trendy natural cosmetics shop in town. It didn’t work.

I tentatively navigated this new world, this odd arena of women’s things that I felt I should know but didn’t understand. Covered by the NHS socialized health care, I paid nothing but saw only midwives, never doctors. Mother Earth types with comforting eye creases and warm, dry hands. Women who used phrases like “catching babies” to mean delivering, who advocated water births, describing the way newborns swam to their mothers, the instinct of life pulling them to the surface, to the waiting breast, arms, lips. Women who slathered gel on my belly, pushed and prodded to ascertain the position, visited me at home to conduct examinations. They explained dark horrors to me as though they were reciting poetry. Mucus plugs, linea negra, colostrum. Phenomenally disgusting things happening on and inside me that these women all seemed to cherish but that I couldn’t help but wince at. Was there something wrong with me?

*Women either love or hate being pregnant,* my mother told me over the phone. The closer it got to her visit, the more frequently we spoke. I loved the queasiness of first movements, loved listening to the pat-pat, pat-pat of that impossibly fast heartbeat that drummed out of the midwife’s machinery, nearly cried the day Lee and I stared at the
wiggling gray form of our baby on a screen while the ultrasound technician smiled and said, *In my opinion, you are having a girl.* I enjoyed bickering over names. *Margaret? Helen? No way!* But I hated the heaviness, the shooting pains down my legs, the inability to understand how to be inside my own body, the stranger who looked back at me from the full-length mirror in the bedroom. She was ugly, awkward. I felt sorry for her.

I ran into Steve at the grocery store when I was about six months pregnant, sporting an adorable-sized bump that was obviously a progressed pregnancy but way before the shortness of breath and constant sweating, before the kind of belly that tips a girl’s posture backwards and sends her running to the toilet every four minutes. An attractive-sized bump, peeking out of a brown cardigan with only the top two buttons fastened. I was leaving, and he was just walking in.

“Wow,” he said, raising his eyebrows in surprise, smiling with his whole face. “Look at you.”

We’d called Steve and Caitlin with the news months before, but they were bordering on being a thing of the past, our lives slipping farther away from each other though our homes remained ten minutes apart, what with Caitlin earning a Masters Degree and becoming a certified teacher and me pulling sixty-hour weeks pouring pints and serving pizza. I couldn’t remember the last time I saw either one of them.

“Yeah, I’m huge.” My hand instinctually rubbed the lower part of my belly.

“Well, I feel like a whale anyway.” I thought about asking Steve if he wanted to feel my belly. The baby was moving, not kicking, but shifting position. But I didn’t ask, and neither did he.

That night Caitlin called, asked how I was feeling.

“Listen,” she said after minute. “Don’t forget I’m right here. I can’t imagine doing what you’re doing without my mom and my sister.”

When we hung up, the weight of her offer hit me, hard and heavily. I couldn’t imagine doing what I was doing without my mom and my sisters. I was so enmeshed in this midwife world of women and the most female experience since the dawn of time, and I was doing it four thousand miles away from my own mother, a woman who made a life of catching babies, and from my own sisters. And it wasn’t just the pregnancy that scared me; it was everything.

I had thought I was scared of having a baby for the same reasons I’d been scared of getting married and scared of starting a new life in England—this whirlwind life, this breathless movement, this sense of everything happening at once and too fast. Student. Traveler. Wife. MOM. It was fast, but the truth was, I was getting used to fast, getting used to hitting milestones at full speed, ticking off life’s boxes in a flurry while my friends back home studied for law school, worked on MBAs, or just got trashed on dollar shots at a hole-in-the-wall on Route 46.

But deep down, I was scared because the whole time, some hidden part of me sensed the permanence of all this, some part of me knew. I was scared of starting the second half of my life in England. Having children was setting down roots in an entirely different way, roots that would twist underneath the surface, take hold fast and
completely. In a way that involved discussing baptism, claiming a citizenship, thinking about school districts. Raising a child in England would tie me to this place in a lasting and complicated way, and it would mean giving myself over and accepting that I truly might never, ever go home.

My child might never know Ohio. It would be a cool vacation, a far-off dream, cornfields and radio towers, square buildings, funny accents “just like mum’s,” but she would never understand it. She would never know how to catch fireflies in the magic of twilight or what Philly cheese steaks taste like from the Canfield Fair. She wouldn’t know the difference between a poison ivy leaf and sassafras, wouldn’t learn to love the sweet sewer stench of Lake Erie. She wouldn’t know my family. My mom and dad, my sisters—they would just be relatives she saw once or twice a year. She wouldn’t know them.

During my last week of work before my leave, I stopped wearing my black waistcoat. I could no longer make the buttons connect over my protruding belly. I let my purple tie hang loose and sway when I rushed from table to table, let my apron sit low and my unwieldy stomach lead the way, covered only by a thin layer of white cotton. I stopped eating anything with tomatoes and stopped stooping on my knees to clean the legs of the prep table in the kitchen, both of which had caused me heartburn for months. I cheated and drank cappuccinos with double shots of espresso, lying, saying it was decaf. I stopped protesting when my coworkers offered to carry my trays, and didn’t even argue when my boss gave me a measly four-table section right in front of the kitchen on a busy Saturday night. I didn’t want to admit it, but I couldn’t do it anymore. This whole
pregnancy thing had me whooped. Beat. Finished. I was thirty-six weeks pregnant and waiting tables.

I was exhausted. Lee and I had just moved again, this time to a quiet two-bedroom flat at the base of a cul-de-sac. I hadn’t wanted to move, but I was tired of arguing about it. Lee, sweating out the last couple months of pre-fatherhood, comforted himself with preparations. He bought a very practical four-door sedan and spent all his free time looking on local estate agents’ websites. The flat was too small. The neighborhood was too loud, too dingy. We had to move. I, on the other hand, had a very atypical anti-nesting instinct and was in complete denial that having a baby was going to even happen, let alone that this said baby was going to need a room of its own. But he was persistent, and so eight months pregnant, I found myself taping up boxes and wrapping our glassware in newspaper. I just wanted my mom to get there, to tell me where to put my books, the best way to make the dishes fit in the cupboards.

At Frankie’s, we had a system with the balloons. We’d take each cluster off each peg and twist them all together, leaving them in the entranceway and saving deflation duty for last while we filled salt and pepper pots, wiped the black trays with sanitizer, soaked the intricate system of espresso wands and metal filters. Usually, we left the balloons even while we lined up on barstools and devoured pizzas and garlic bread. Thirty-six balloons hovered in unison until someone remembered and got stuck with the task of pulling the plastic plug from each and letting the air out one by one, discarding the limp balloons and tangled ribbons in the black bin liner that sat full and unsteady by the back door.
On one of my last shifts, we forgot all about the balloons, forgot all the way until Joanne, who had accepted the management position I’d turned down, and I stood in the darkened restaurant and she bent over to set the alarm that was tucked inside a cupboard under the hostess stand.

“Oh man,” Joanne said, her body a right angle. “We forgot the balloons.”

“Can’t we just leave them tonight?” I asked. I already had my jacket on, and our shared taxi was idling out front.

“Not really. If they move in front of the sensors, it’ll set off the alarm.”

I walked to the entranceway, and wrapped thirty-six ribbons around my hand. The balloons bobbed above me, bumping into one another with soft thumps. “What if we just, you know, let them go?”

“You can’t be serious,” Joanne said, but her eyes lit up with an impish excitement.

“Yeah, why not?”

“Well, for starters, because all of them say Frankie and Benny’s New York Italian Restaurant on the side.”

I laughed. “It’s not against the law, Joanne. You’re not going to get arrested.”

“Yeah, but you’ll be gone for the next six months. You won’t have to hear about it.”

“Perfect,” I said, grabbing the brass door handle with my free hand and walking into the chill of an early April evening. The streetlights lit up Castlepoint, but the sky beyond was a smoky black, an occasional star interrupting. “You can blame me.”
I waved my hand in the air, acknowledging the taxi driver with the ludicrousness of thirty-six balloons, and then I unwound the ribbons and let them go. Joanne rushed to my side and, laughing, we watched the balloons drift higher and higher, changing shape, an oval, a cloud, a tree, a stream. The ribbons streaked across the sky like contrails, tight and touching at first but then stretching, releasing from one another, fading apart. I held my breath, delighting in the loose patterns and the unexpected shudders of dismantling. Single balloons wriggled loose and followed their own wobbly pathways, the reds and greens swallowed by the night, the white balloons defiantly staring back at us, watching us grow smaller and less distinguishable. The streetlamps, the white roof, the silver taxi, the two smiling faces, one round belly, vanishing.

Days passed. I sat in the silent clean flat, waiting, unaccustomed to downtime. The hours floated around me, meaning nothing, just numbers falling away from a clock and evaporating into the squares of sunlight that toppled through the windows and stretched into diagonals across the cream carpet. An eerie calm seeped from the unfamiliar walls, poured in from the endless green outside the lounge window. I took naps, read, watched reruns of American sitcoms I’d never watched the first time around and that weren’t funny. I existed in the uncertainty of limbo, wavering constantly between the clutches of fear and the whispers of hope. Several times a day, I’d open the door to the baby’s room and just look, just stare at the yellow gingham lampshade, the neatly folded stack of homemade blankets, the unopened package of Pampers on the floor next to the changing mat. I’d open the Johnson’s bubble bath, squeezing the bottle, a cool puff of air escaping, powdery and clean. Tip-toeing to the cot, I’d run my fingers over the giraffe-print sheet,
straighten the floppy elephant that sat in the corner of the crib. Wind the mobile, listen to
the tinkling melody, the song I danced to with my father at my wedding. Baby jungle
animals swung around in a sleepy rotation. What a wonderful world. Each day I bathed in
clary sage oil and drank raspberry tea to tone my uterus. I waited for my mother, and I
waited for my girl.
“Aren’t you hungry?” my mother asks. She’s made a pot roast. Not usually the one preparing meals, she’s brought twenty-five index cards with her, carefully copied recipes, meal suggestions she and my dad brainstormed at the dining room table back home.

“Not really,” I say, rubbing my belly through my thin yellow t-shirt with both hands. Everything feels tight. Lee reaches for another bread roll. We sit at the round table next to the bay window and although the windows are cracked, the air is still. A fat black spider climbs the glass outside. Lee begins talking excitedly about football. Chelsea—his team—is playing in the Champions League final in just a couple of hours. My mother asks football questions. I slice a carrot into thirds, don’t eat any.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” my mother asks.

“I feel kind of…menstrual.” I shift in my chair.

“Mmm-hmmm,” my mother says, reaching for her spiral notebook. Her hands are quick and efficient, much more natural with a red pen than a paring knife. She writes something in shorthand and military time, then sets the notebook on the floor and spears a potato.

My mother’s eyes are hidden behind the glare of her glasses but I can sense their urgency.

“Is the pain getting worse?” she asks.
“I don’t know.” I’m sitting on the edge of the couch. Each time a contraction comes, I lean over the arm, grip the blue throw that drapes over the edge, twist the fringe around my fingers. The contractions have been coming every 2-4 minutes for nearly two hours. My water doesn’t break.

“Do you think it’s time?” Lee asks. The television is still on, although no one is watching it anymore. A green football pitch. The same plays again and again, highlights. Chelsea won the Champions League Final. We’re all very excited.

“I think it’s time,” my mother says.

The floors of St. Mary’s Maternity Hospital have dolphins on them. Blue and green mosaic dolphins arch over cresting waves, splatters of tile with flecks of silver that never quite catch the light. They must have been elegant once, these dolphins. Follow us, they would have said, come this way. Now the maternity ward is well-worn, shabby, could do with a lick of paint and new curtains. The vinyl is torn on the chairs that form a small row across from the reception desk. A woman with glasses and greasy blond hair takes my information down. She wears blue scrubs.

“Look at the dolphins!” my mother remarks as we sit in the chairs and wait. “How charming!”

I have seen these dolphins before. Lee and I toured the maternity ward here in Poole when we finished our antenatal classes. This hospital is a half an hour from our flat, but we chose it. We chose this torn vinyl, these dolphins. Bournemouth’s maternity ward is
entirely run by midwives, which means natural births only—no epidurals, no pain relief, and no Caesareans. If a complication arises, they send you to Poole.

Epidurals were unnecessary, the Bournemouth midwives said. Drugs made the baby sluggish. Try harder. Walk around.

At our first class, a soft-spoken midwife with a thick Welsh accent talked about the importance of a birth plan. She passed out worksheets we could fill out and bring to the maternity ward (if we chose to deliver outside of the home) to make sure our needs were addressed. Six or seven other couples sat on folding chairs, six or seven other babies tucked and turning inside dramatically altered anatomy. We ate custard crèmes and sipped weak tea. Words like water birth and aromatherapy swirled around. I kept listening for hard reassuring terms like epidural and anesthetist, but they never came. The midwife played sleepy sitar music and gave us a few minutes to meditate on our ideal birth scenario. I glanced skeptically at Lee, who raised his eyebrows and smirked slightly but mouthed the words, Behave yourself. I closed my eyes.

A stark whiteness. Crisp, starched sheets, folded at precise 45° angles and tucked under the extra-firm mattress. Glossy tiles that foster a comforting clip-clop, clip-clop sound when walked across by expensive loafers. Bleach and disinfectant. Anti-bacterial hand washes. Hushed voices. The hum of a high-tech medical apparatus. The doctor, a well-dressed man preferably with a beard, in coat so white it is almost blinding walks in. His hair is silvery and receding; his beard, neatly trimmed. His hands must be soft and manicured, but I never see them because he wears smooth, powdery latex gloves.

“Are you ready, Mrs. Murray?” he asks in a deep voice.
“Ready when you are, Doctor.” I inhale sharply with excitement as I see the gleam of the long needle that signals the beginning of my epidural.

“Dead from the legs down, right Mrs. Murray?”

“Oh yes, please, Doctor, that’s what I have written down in my birth plan.”

The sitar stopped abruptly, and the midwife asked if anyone wanted to share. I listened with something between horror and fascination as the other women described their Red Tent visions. *El natural.* Warm baths and slippery babies swimming to the surface, still attached. Aqua babies with slimy gray leashes. I raised my hand.

“Sorry, but I was just wondering…I mean, with a water birth, isn’t there like, blood and mucus and, I don’t know, membranes floating around?”

“Why, that’s what we have the sieve for,” the midwife said brightly and everyone laughed, in on a joke I didn’t understand.

“Mrs. Murray,” the blond woman behind the desk says. “We have a room ready for you.”

Lee, my mother, and I follow her down a dim hallway, and I’m careful not to step on the dolphins. The room is small, but there is a window, and I can see a piece of sky, black and calm. I’m alarmed to learn I will be giving birth in the clothes I’m wearing, my yellow t-shirt. I remove my brown sweatpants, pull the sheet tight around me. The NHS does not provide hospital gowns. My flip flops sit uselessly under the window atop my hospital bag.

My mother notes that there is a full moon. *The labor and delivery floor is always crazy on a full moon,* she has told me many times though I’ve always been skeptical. The
lunar pull rocks amniotic fluid, breaks waters, induces labor. The changing tides, the rush of life. All that jazz.

Three centimeters. Exactly the same as two hours ago. Water still not broken, contractions every 2-4 minutes. I have tried the gas and air machine, but the nitrous oxide makes me nauseous and doesn’t dull the pain.

A young man walks in wearing a lighter shade of blue scrubs, the first man I have seen about pregnancy since last August when the baby-faced Dr. Patil straightened his tie clip and confirmed that, yes, I was pregnant, handed me a packet of Pampers coupons, and gave me a written referral for midwife care. This man could bench press Dr. Patil. He is well-built with an angular jaw, the faintest hint of a five-o’clock shadow. An air of valor, a certain swagger. A surgical mask dangles around his neck. My deus ex machina. The Anesthetist. I wonder where he parked his white stallion.

He talks slowly and deliberately, explaining what he is doing and what it will feel like, checking my IV and taping something to my back. He asks me to sit up and lean forward.

“This is Life,” he says, reading the words on my skin. “I bet there’s a good story behind that.”

I laugh. This man makes women laugh during childbirth. How lovely.

*Dead from the waist down, I think. How lovely.*

The good news: five centimeters.
The bad news: It hurts again. Deep, complicated pain. Seizing and releasing, waves that knock the air from my lungs. I close my eyes, squeeze my teeth together. Lee sits beside me, silent and scared.

“I thought it wasn’t supposed to hurt after the epidural,” I say during a two minute reprieve between contractions.

“It doesn’t always take,” my mother says, her mouth tipping downward in a sympathetic frown. “It works better for some people than for others.”

The midwife catches up on her notes. She is new. The night midwife has left, and this morning midwife has come. Her back is to us, but she is watching.

Lee has stepped out for coffee, his eyes red and puffy, and another midwife has arrived, my third. My mother likes this one best. She has dark hair and Santa Claus cheeks, rosy and bunched underneath her eyes. This is the one, I believe. This is the woman who will deliver my baby.

My mother and the midwife chat like schoolgirls over my head, comparing. What do you do when this happens? And what do you do if that happens? The midwife shows my mother her charting system, and my mother grumbles about the computers on her ward at St. Elizabeth’s…so tedious!

“Do you want to see the Haven suite?” the midwife asks. The Haven suite is where the water bath is.

“I’d love to,” my mother answers quickly and then glances down at me. “You don’t mind, do you?” I shake my head, smile as the women rush out of the room. I half expect them to link arms, hopscotch across the dolphins.
“Don’t you feel cheated though?” the midwife asks as they walk back in, her voice falling, finding its more somber lower register. “You do all the legwork, you labor for hours with these women, days sometimes, massaging them, breathing with them, and then some doctor swoops in to catch the baby.”

The midwife talks about the ethereal wonder of catching a baby, of guiding a new soul into a cold and waiting world, of knowing she has witnessed a peculiar crossing, that her hands have ushered miracles. She speaks of the way, for the briefest of moments, she gets to exist in that damp and heaving space between mortal life and something so much bigger.

My mother looks somewhere far away, somewhere ancient and brand new, a vague smile on her lips. “I have always treasured those few times the doctor was late.”

Maybe it isn’t about doctors. Maybe it isn’t about birth plans or drugs or water baths, isn’t about whether you walk around or lie in a bed. Maybe it isn’t about hospital gowns or IVs or gas or air or breathing or screaming or any particular want or action.

Maybe it’s just about this: women, believing in the moon.

A woman walks into my room. I haven’t seen her before. She wears dark blue scrubs like the midwives but also a white coat. I know before she tells me that she is a doctor, that she wants to cut into me. She does not have a beard. This is not in my plan.

“The midwife has called me for a consult,” she says. “The baby needs to come out soon. It’s too much. Your baby will struggle.”

I nod. She looks at the monitor next to my bed, the screen my mother keeps checking. My mother scribbles in her notebook, tightens her lips. *Annie, that baby is*
posterior and asynclitic, she says later when the doctor woman is gone. Spine to spine and chin-up. I’ve had some time to learn the lingo. You’d have had a C-section last night if we were home. Lee walks from the window to the bed, holds my hand.

The woman who is a doctor examines me, becomes the fifth woman that day to put her hands on me, to shake her head. Not yet, not yet. She smiles a kind smile. She must have gotten high marks during her residency for bedside manner.

“I’m going to give you one more hour,” she says. “If you’re not ready in one hour, we will send you to theatre.”


“If they were going to cut this baby out of me, I wish they would have done it fifteen hours ago,” I joke.

Lee laughs.

My mom laughs.

The midwife laughs.

Tired tears seep from my eyes. I can’t remember a time I wasn’t in this bed. I have seen three different midwives come and go because I have been in this bed longer than their shifts have lasted. My piece of sky has turned from black to purple to blue to white. Everything is faint, brittle. My legs are numb, dead weights, like blocks of concrete that will sink me in a wide sea. I can’t walk, can’t get up and move around, can’t eat, can’t sit up without getting dizzy. A catheter collects my urine. The epidural wears off and variations of morphine drip into my spine. They wear off too. Machines beep and
hum. A printer spits out paper with tall spikes, narrow zig zags. The baby’s heart rate drops with each contraction.

Every 2-4 minutes, the contractions come.

A few hours ago, I tried rolling onto my side but the pinpricks and the whiteness came, and my face fell to the pillow. At one point, Lee and my mother both left, stepped out for lunch and told me to try to sleep. I read a few pages of Marie Claire but the words tripped over themselves, the letters sliding off the page and onto the white sheet, scattering, sticking to my hands and burrowing into the cracks of my knuckles. I closed my eyes and pretended to sleep. Look at her fingers twitching, Lee said when they returned. That’s how I know she’s asleep. I couldn’t feel my fingers. I didn’t have the heart to tell them I wasn’t sleeping.

Tired tears spill down my face, collect on my neck, drip into my hair, and evaporate. I stop believing she will ever come. I stop believing anything is real outside of this bed.

My mother says it is the grace of God.

Lee says, I love you, I’m so proud of you.

The midwife says, Push.

I sit up, and there she is, right there on the bed. A purple curve of back, legs and arms still tucked, unaware of open space, of all their possibilities. Blotchy. Wet. Silent.

She is here.
“Does Dad want to cut the cord?” the midwife asks, and it doesn’t sound gross when she says it. She is smiling too much, and her dark hair is matted to her forehead from working so hard, from focusing, from doing this with me, from catching my daughter. The midwife’s breaths, like mine, come fast and falter in her throat. Lee shakes his head back and forth, lips parted for speech but unable to form words.

I fall back to the pillow. Something’s missing. Something’s gone.

“Come with us, Dad,” the midwife says. A lot of noises happen at once. Pens clicking, wheels on tile, rubber soles squeaking, the clang of metal. I’m so thirsty.

I close my eyes, slip in and out of consciousness while everyone moves around the bed. Watery forms in blue, soothing voices. I don’t know they are delivering the placenta. Or sewing me back together. Or washing me with a warm towel dipped in a bowl of Johnson’s baby soap. Or waiting one minute and thirty seconds for my baby to breathe, another two minutes for her to cry. I don’t know that someone is making me a cheese sandwich and the best cup of tea I’ll ever drink. I only know my mother’s hands, warm and dry, are on my face, my hair, fingers stroking my forehead and my eyelids. Her fingers make sweeping sounds across my cheeks, smooth sounds amplified when her hands pass over my ears like shells. I listen for the ocean, hear only skin on skin, the loudest sound in the room, the only sound. She is here, she is here.

Sometime later, they return. Lee is holding a bundle of human wrapped in a towel. She still has my blood on her face, in her ears. To smell you, to smell where she came from, the midwife explains. Lee places her in my arms, and I look at her face for the first time. Her left eye is bruised, swollen shut, but her right eye squints up at me, locks into mine,
and we’re wild animals on the scorched grasses of an African plain, or buried in the wet shade of a rain forest, or in the packed warmth of a bird’s nest atop a great Sequoia, or on the inky grit of the ocean’s floor. I don’t think I can ever look away.

“Is there a name?” the midwife asks gently. I look at Lee. He nods.

“She is Iris,” I say. And then immediately, “Take her.” The whiteness, the whooshing. “Take her now.”

Lee lifts her from my arms, and the space where she was is now cold. Someone holds a plastic bowl in front of me, and I throw up water.

Iris May is eight days old. Just eight days in the world, but already, she is changing. Her fingers no longer float when she sleeps. Her color has regulated, a healthy pink freckled with red pin-pricks. *Milk spots*, the midwife calls them when she visits us. Iris’s eyes have stopped crossing and have started looking. Her left eye has recovered from her rough journey into light, the swelling has eased, and she now opens both eyes for long stretches of time.

I don’t know whose eyes they are. Maybe they are just hers.

I cup the side of her face in my hand, a face beginning to fatten, to find a shape entirely its own. Already, she is becoming more of herself and less of me. I carry her upright, with her cheek resting on my collarbone, and we walk to the bay window, watch Daddy throw the bags in the trunk of his car, watch Nonna slip into the passenger’s seat and disappear, to the motorway, to the airport, to the sky, to Ohio. How will we ever do this on our own?
“There they go,” I whisper. “We’re sure going to miss them, aren’t we?” Lee will be back in five or six hours, but my mother is gone.

For the first time since she lived inside of me, Iris and I are alone. We wander together all morning, in and out of milk and sleep, looking into each other’s eyes and feeling each other breathe. Hey, she seems to say, Hey, I know you, her eyes wide open and her lips puckered into a surprised circle. We blow bubbles at each other, kisses made of air, promises. Hey, I remember you. I believe in this moment that she does, that she remembers everything that I know, that she knows me from songs and softness, from the luster of dreams, from heartbeats, from prayers. I lie on the couch, and Iris curls to my skin, nestles between ribs and arm, the mid-morning sun bathing us in a rich warmth, dancing across eyelashes and earlobes. Her tiny fingers peek out of a newborn sleepsuit that is too big, soft white cloth covered with cartoon mice and strawberries, a series of snaps. Her fingernails are paper thin, and her hands are so small that I cry.
Chapter 16

Bucket of Chains

I was feeding Iris apricot yogurt by the bay window when the eviction papers came. I wasn’t even dressed. We’d spent a year getting to know each other, and we decided early on that we liked dawdling, we liked pajamas, and we liked open windows. It was mid-May and though the sun filtered through the leaded glass in soft splendor, I was wearing the brown sweatpants that had seen me through the ugliest parts of the previous year’s pregnancy, a gray tank top sans bra, and a long flapping cardigan. The flat always had a bit of a chill in the air—at least ever since the chimney had malfunctioned the previous January and the front room had been suddenly avalanched with decades of old leaves and forgotten soot and unnerving gusts of inexorable wind that blew in off the English Channel. Iris was hungry, alert and eager in her red and yellow highchair, leaning in for each spoonful. I used the blue plastic spoon that morning, held it in front of her face, sing-singing “bluuue spooon” over and over again in my exaggerated mom voice while the sun lit up her face. The sky was so blue and her eyes were so blue and the spoon.

And then, the doorbell rang.

I looked at the clock—9:33 A.M.—and then at Oliver, who was snoozing belly-up on the floor next to the little oak nest of tables, his gray and white tail flicking involuntarily each time he exhaled. “Now, who could that be?” I asked both Iris and the cat as I returned the spoon to the yogurt pot. We’d been breakfasting for nearly a half hour by then, and the yogurt was room temperature. It was settling into itself, a watery
layer rising to the top, a faint odor wafting into the air that was both light and sweet, but with the pungency of fruit that is about to turn.

“Who could that be?” I repeated as the doorbell sounded again. “Do you think it’s a package for us?” I asked, lifting Iris out of her chair. I chattered constantly to Iris, believing it would make her an early talker and had always chattered to the cat because I found it to be a much more focused and satisfying way of thinking out loud. Iris objected as we headed toward the stairs that led down to our front door, lamented in shrieks the apricot yogurt as it moved out of her sight. Oliver flopped lazily onto his side and couldn’t be bothered to investigate such an early intruder.

I hurried, anticipating the third ring of the doorbell, the term doorbell actually quite euphemistic in this case. In reality, we had what would more accurately be described as a door buzzer, a sharp piercing vibrato that should be reserved for game shows and possibly bright primary-colored children’s board games with ticking timers. The kind of buzzer that sounds as long as a finger is pressing against it. Most people responded to this unexpected control with a sort of instinctual Morse code. One short buzz was usually followed by two prolonged buzzes and then almost always followed up with a two short/one long combination. I found this maddening, and was always whisking Iris onto my hip and hurling the baby gate at the top of the stairs in a desperate rush to beat the third ring, the two short/one long combo.

We didn’t make it that morning. Iris was squirming on my hip, and Lee’s running shoes and balled-up tube socks were on the floor where they had landed when he traded his running garb for his carpentry garb in the predawn darkness, and the person on the other side of the door was impatient to fulfill his duty, to shrug off the unpleasantness of
such matters and be back in the office by the 10:30 tea break. We had only just passed the
Edwardian phone chair in the hallway when the doorbell sounded a third time.

“Coming!” I shouted over Iris’s protests. I’d learned in my first year of
motherhood, living in an upstairs flat whose main entrance was at the bottom of a long
flight of stairs, that few things in the world were more frustrating than upsetting a hungry
baby in a mad dash for the front door, only to see a Royal Mail cargo van pulling away,
with my package bouncing up and down in the back. I frequently received reused boxes
from Ohio, postmarked weeks before and addressed in my mother’s familiar curly
cursive. Homemade blankets for Iris, Little Golden books, a plastic comb set with
bunnies on it.

When I swung open the painted black door, I was slightly out of breath, and the
troublesome layer of hair that was never quite long enough to tuck behind my ears was
hanging over my right eye. I flipped the hair out of my face and bounced Iris soothingly.

In front of me stood a smallish man in his mid-forties with kind eyes and hair that
was thick and full but graying quite noticeably at the temples. He was dressed in a suit,
with a yellow and blue striped tie secured at his throat in a chunky Windsor knot. I
certainly wouldn’t call him debonair, but his clean togetherness made me very aware of
my own bare feet and the thin cotton that covered my chest. I shifted Iris a bit higher on
my hip and tried to pull my cardigan closed.

“Oh, hello,” he said with the stereotypical humble cheer that is characteristic of a
middle-aged Englishman. As though he’d just stumbled across an old acquaintance at the
grocery store. Or been resting on a park bench and been entirely surprised to find a lost
puppy at his heels. *Oh, hello.* If this were a farce, he’d be wearing a bowler hat and holding a long black umbrella.

“Is that Mrs. Murray?” he asked, and when I nodded confirmation, he continued.

“My name is David Warner. I’m from Allan and Bath, the estate agents. I’m here to serve you this notice.”

He handed me a thin envelope with the familiar yellow and blue Allan and Bath letterhead. We’d moved over a year before and had just recently renewed our lease. I smiled and thanked him, distracted by Iris’s squirming and my own dishevelment. He said something about the first of July and that he would be in the office if I had questions. The sun shone in my eyes and Iris gnawed on my shoulder, a warm wet patch expanding on my cardigan. He lingered in the doorway for a moment with an air of confusion, a feeling that we weren’t quite finished. As though our transaction hadn’t exactly been completed. I smiled, squinting in the morning light.

“Wave bye-bye,” I told Iris as we watched David Warner walk down the cobblestone walkway and through the wrought iron gate and out of our lives.

I didn’t even realize we’d just been evicted.

Hillcrest Road had been strange only in those loose and floating weeks before Iris was Iris, when we’d just moved in and she was still a faceless concept turning under my skin. In the awkward interim between finishing work and starting motherhood, the upstairs flat had felt suspended, disorienting, seemed to drift between the dark leaves and curious sunlight; the empty nursery, vast and breakable. Not allowed to decorate, we silently thanked the landlords for the neutral walls and carpet but also cursed them for the dark
geometric turkey curtains that hung in the baby’s room. I was robbed of designing a
magazine-perfect nursery but simultaneously unconvinced we even needed one. Why did
we need this extra space? This flight of stairs? But the moment we brought Iris home to
fresh flowers and a homemade sign, to visitors, to pink greeting cards, the moment baby
supplies (sterilizer, breast pump, burp cloths, nursing pillows) came out of packaging and
into practice—I knew we were where we needed to be.

The flat in Charminster was too small. It always had been. We had utilized all of
the obvious space-saving techniques when we moved in, thinking in true newlywed
fashion that it was just right. We used words like “cozy” to describe the size and “quaint”
to explain how there was no shower, just a badly stained bathtub with a limited hot water
supply. We put our smaller pieces of luggage inside the larger pieces, and stored them all
underneath the bed, bought floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. Lee drilled hooks on the back of
the kitchen door, and we hung up our brooms and mops and dustpans. Over time, Lee
built shelving inside the hallway closet, and we bought a very minimalist file cabinet that
slid in place right beside our very streamlined computer desk. But any way you
measured, it was still one bedroom, one sitting room, a narrow hallway, a kitchenette, and
a showerless bathroom.

Inevitably more and more junk got shoved under the bed until it felt as though the
bed were actually floating on great swells, various straps and handles sticking out like
flotsam and jetsam. One particularly exuberant pre-pregnancy morning, I danced around
the bedroom while getting ready for work. I danced in my bathrobe with my green towel
on my head the way people do in cheesy romantic comedies, unabashedly and with no
semblance of grace. Without warning, the flesh of my right heel sunk into the razor-sharp
exposed blade of Lee’s planer, which for some reason was always stored on the floor next
to the full-length mirror in our bedroom. I cursed under my breath and limped to the
bathroom, leaving a deep red trail across the laminate floor.

A few days later, Lee came home from a job with a bucket of chains and set it the
hallway. It was a bright orange three-gallon bucket made out of thick industrial plastic
with a wide lip and a sturdy handle. Chains of varying sizes spilled over the top, and a
few plastic bags containing some kind of metal fasteners peeked out from underneath.

“Put it away,” I said.

“I can’t. It’s a bucket of chains. It doesn’t exactly have a place.” Lee took off his
work boots and then his socks, leaving both in the hallway next to the bucket. Six months
into our marriage, we were learning when to push and when to bend. There was
admittedly a certain logic to Lee’s statement, but my foot was still freshly planed, and I
recognized this moment for its crucial finality.

“Put it in the shed then for now.”

“Can’t,” Lee said breezily, walking toward the bathroom. “There’s literally no
room.”

“There’s no room in the shed?” I followed him and stood in the doorway while he
ran his bath, pouring in too much of the Boots Botanicals bubble bath his mother gave me
the prior Christmas, and the room became an odd mix of white gardenia, fresh-cut pine,
and sweat.

“Not really. I mean, there’s a broken washing machine, a broken refrigerator, a
broken bike, Paslode nails, and a toilet brush.”

“Can’t you just keep it in your van then?”
“No way,” Lee said, pulling off his shirt and letting it fall in a dusty heap, curls of wood shavings scattering across the white tiles. He ran his fingers through his thick hair and more sawdust rained down on the floor. “I have two £300 doors in there right now, and I’m not installing them til next week.”

“Fine,” I said. “I don’t care. Just get that bucket out of the hallway, so I don’t have to look at it every day for the rest of my life.”

Lee bargained for moving the bucket after his bath which of course became “after dinner” which became “in the morning” until eventually the conversation tapered off altogether. I picked up the dirty socks that lay in stiff balls next to the bucket and later in the week when I mopped the floor, I mopped around the bucket the same way I mopped around the flimsy end table that stood in the hallway holding mail and keys and whatever else needed immediately dumped when Lee walked through the front door. Over time, I stopped seeing the bucket at all. We’d have company and I wouldn’t even remember to say, *Oh, don’t mind that bucket of chains*. I could actually stand in the entranceway and stare at the drawing of a teapot that hung on the opposite wall without having to convince myself the bright orange bucket of chains wasn’t there. I really didn’t see it anymore.

Hillcrest Road had been love at first sight. And like all great love stories, it had found me when I’d completely turned my back on love. I was eight months pregnant. I didn’t want to move from the couch, let alone pack and reorganize and move into a different flat in a different neighborhood. Almost nothing could drag me out of bed the morning Lee and I were scheduled to first view the flat.
“Come on,” he whispered, leaning close enough for me to smell the traces of his morning coffee. “Time to get up and see the flat.”

I lay under the faded purple duvet for a few moments, trying to think of ways to retract my promise to consider this new flat. I knew Lee was restless to move, but I also knew that this restlessness was mostly just the manifestation of his pre-fatherhood jitters. What was the rush? All the books said babies slept in the parents’ room the first six months anyway, if they slept at all, and I was seriously tired. Loose ligaments, restless sleep, chronic heartburn, hideously tired. But Lee’s relentless prodding gave way to frantic whining and harried pacing, and I soon found myself in the passenger’s seat of our recently purchased Vauxhall Cavalier. Conditioned to the perpetual creaks and clangs of Lee’s work van, I found the Vauxhall’s gentle purr disconcerting.

We drove away from Charminster and past the squat bungalows on Castle Lane, the stucco and stone houses with cartoonish curves and rounded windows that leaned at comic angles and always reminded me of the mushroom village the Smurfs occupied. Instead of turning right toward Castlepoint, we headed left into Winton, a neighborhood bordering Charminster that traded cosmopolitan sass for an unadorned frankness. Largely residential, mostly brick homes with wrought iron gates and tidy gardens, Winton wasn’t poor or rich, dirty or clean; it was just refreshingly normal. Post-war suburban homes occupied by people who worked hard and raised families and walked dogs without ever really calling attention to any of it. We turned onto Priory View, ascending a steep hill past a tumble-down abandoned church before turning onto Hillcrest Road. I was immediately surprised by how green it was. And how quiet. Tall sturdy trees lined the
street, and the houses all had gates or stone walls, consumed with holly and climbing ivy.

I looked at Lee who was smiling broadly. He was wearing gray corduroys and his glasses, dressed for the part of prospective suburban tenant. “We could never afford this area,” I said.

Lee braked hard, and the seat belt pulled at my neck.

“Oh my God.” His voice was the flat half whisper of disbelief, as though he’d just been handed a winning lottery ticket. “It’s a cul-de-sac.”

When we met, he had a shaggy self-conscious Indie-rock haircut and got excited over things like Acoustic Moose playing at O’Neill’s and seeing Kurt Cobain’s sea foam green Fender guitar up close at the Cleveland Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. And here he was in a V-neck sweater, getting all worked up over a bit of road that tapered off into a gentle swoop.

Early, we lingered tentatively in the driveway. A wiry man in his late thirties appeared in the doorway. He was holding a sizable cardboard box that was taped shut with a superfluous amount of duct tape. He had a nervous energy about him, and when he saw us in the driveway, he sprung back in cartoon surprise.

“Aha!” he said. “They said you’d be coming.” Two wide set brown eyes peered from behind the box. “I’ll be out of your way in a minute.” He brushed past us and hefted the box into the trunk of a red Ford Fiesta. “I’m moving out tomorrow,” he explained, then added with a faraway look in his eyes, “Can’t wait. It’s so much better to have your own space.”
He was happy to give us a pre-estate agent tour, walking us up the cream carpeted stairs, past the two spacious bedrooms, the toilet that was in a small separate room from the shower (yes, shower!) and sink, and into the huge front room, filling us in on what he called the “cold facts.” The hot water took ages to come on. The water pressure was okay at best. The place had storage heaters and it was nearly impossible to produce a habitable temperature. I was listening, but when we walked into the front room, I was completely taken with the view. The street was named Hillcrest for a reason. Outside of the leaded bay window, beyond the rim of the cul-de-sac, stretched a rolling downward slope of varying shades of green. Dark lush greens rolled over pale new greens, dotted with patches of rich earth and yellow sun-seared greens, what seemed like the largest stretch of unbroken green I’d seen in all of Bournemouth, seen at all since leaving Ohio.

“Oh yeah,” the man said, following my gaze. “That goes all the way to Bournemouth airport. Sometimes, on a clear day, you can see horses grazing out there.”

Lee and I exchanged a look of wonderment.

“Oh and one more thing,” our informer said. “The old boy who lives downstairs is kind of deaf, and sometimes you can hear his TV real loud at night.”

It seemed a small price to pay. Poor water pressure and secondhand television noise. In fact, a half-deaf downstairs neighbor was almost a relief. I didn’t have to feel as bad about the screaming baby who would soon disrupt everybody’s lives. But our eager informer forgot to mention a few things. He forgot to mention that the old boy and his wife actually owned the building. That although Allan and Bath handled the legal paperwork and processed payments, John and Judy, who resided in the flat below, were our landlords and in many ways, our masters.
He forgot to mention that they were pure evil.

Our first meeting with John was innocent enough. Charming even. Strapped for cash, we didn’t hire a moving van but instead moved our possessions in small concentrated waves between the thirty-first of March, when we got the keys to 37A, and the second of April, when we needed to be out of the flat in Charminster. Being eight months pregnant, I was of very little assistance during this process. Manually, that is. I like to think I contributed a great deal holistically. During one such instance, Lee was hoisting the Edwardian phone chair we got for £35 from the British Heart Foundation. The chair was easily worth £100, but we found it at the local charity shop, tucked between 1970’s floral sofas, unforgivably scratched bookcases, and big boxy TV stands that were beautifully crafted but had no use in a flat screen society. The ivory upholstery was spotless, and the mahogany chair legs curled into grand swirls, supporting the chair like staunch ionic columns. It was a source of pride for us, a piece of furniture that was only vaguely functional but remarkable in its anachronistic beauty. When we saw it at the shop, Lee said, “How hot is that,” and we bought it on the spot.

Lee had a history of doing things the fast way. When we first moved in together, I found corduroy pants that he’d hemmed with staples. A pair of charcoal dress pants that had ripped at the inseam and been repaired with superglue. Our first Christmas together, when he couldn’t get the tree upright in the stand on the first try, he went for his eighteen volt Makita drill, fixing branches to the window frame behind the tree. And so as Lee struggled to get a good purchase on the oblong chair that he assured me was “not heavy,
just awkward,” I had visions of the chair falling, the mahogany getting scratched, the
satin upholstery ruined with grass stains.

“Be careful with that,” I warned. The sun beat down on the back of my neck, and
sweat trickled down my cleavage and pooled on the crest of my enormous belly.

It was uncharacteristically hot for the last weekend of March. Bournemouth was
of course a beach town, a postcard kitschy resort town with brightly painted beach huts
and a tired merry-go-round that slept from September through May. In the winter months,
the streets were quiet, empty space echoing between one bewildered local and the next.
But that Sunday, the last weekend of March, the sun was close on our backs, and the air
was thick. Even though I knew the beach was abandoned, I felt certain that at that very
moment, Bournemouth beach was alive with the first rush of Londoners, freckling
businessmen drinking pints of lager and lime out on the pier, crisp linen shirts billowing
expensively in the sea breeze. It was hot, and no one was more aware of that than me, my
T-shirt stretched taut over protruding umbilicus.

Except maybe Lee. He stood in the center of the magnificently exquisite curve of
the cul-de-sac, like a tiny speck cradled in the palm of a carefully cupped hand. His
massive shoulders were scrunched up to his chin level, his neck muscles tensed, and his
jaw set in solemn determination. His dark hair stuck to his forehead in sodden clumps,
and beads of perspiration spilled down from his brow, getting lost in the perpetual scruff
that crept up his face. As he clung to that sideways Edwardian phone chair, knuckles
white, and stared resolutely at the concrete several feet in front of him, something
flickered behind his eyes. All the patience and understanding of the last eight months
evaporated under the unexpected sun. Lee set the chair down in the middle of the road.
“There,” he spat. “Let’s just keep it there.”

I sat down on the chair and folded my arms, in both bewilderment and indignation.

Then, as if straight from central casting, a thin man in his early sixties sped past on a ten speed, rang his bell, circled us, and came to a stop right in front of Lee. He had a bushy white mustache and a nose that proved the theory that noses never stop growing.

“Does she come with the chair?” John asked in the thick country accent of Dorset, an odd mix that is sort of half farmer, half pirate. Our new landlord, cracking jokes and atop a bicycle with a dinging bell—charming indeed. His eyes squinted dramatically and a smile spread across his thin lips.

A couple of weeks passed before I met Judy, during which we mostly just peered out of our respective windows at each other coming and going. She was a homemaker, and I was on maternity leave but hadn’t had the baby yet, so we both had long stretches of time to look and listen. We finally met the day the crib was delivered. The Mothercare delivery man rang her doorbell (which incidentally had a lovely melodic chime) by mistake.

“So we finally meet,” Judy said. She was wearing a bright blue t-shirt that really offset the vaguely orange tint of her freckled face. She was heavyset and smiled a lot in an overweight-people-are-generally-accepted-better-if-they’re-jolly kind of way. After brief introductions, she said something that I will never forget. Not because it was uncommon or remarkable in any way. But because it was the only time I ever heard those
words from Judy or benefitted from their sentiment. She said, “Well, I won’t keep you,” and retreated back into her flat, closing the door behind her.

Judy was a talker. There was no escaping it. I was not. Although I was at a particular handicap because this phenomenon caught me unawares. First the mindful, “I won’t keep you.” Then the faceless, voiceless acts of goodwill that characterized our initial interactions. A pink congratulatory card slipped under the door when Iris was born. A large shopping bag full of runner beans on the doormat with a note attached: “Please eat me. John and Judy’s garden is growing faster than they can manage.” Inspired by this gesture, I left her a batch of freshly baked banana chocolate chip muffins. Later that afternoon, a note fluttered through the letter slot: “Muffins were delicious! Can I have the recipe?” And just as I folded the recipe and prepared to slide it under the door—

She cornered me. “How’s the baby sleeping—is she keeping you up lots-I remember my first was such a spiteful baby-I mean, really nasty. I could hardly bear to let her latch on my breast-You’re feeding her yourself, right?-Any woman who won’t share her mummy milk doesn’t deserve to be a mummy, I say-How do you find time to bake with a three-week-old infant—my goodness, I wouldn’t even believe you had a baby, I never hear her crying and you’re so thin-have you finished the beans—I’ve got another bag ready for you.”

And it wasn’t just that I’d be stuck talking until Judy decided she was done; it was that I’d be stuck having conversations that I never, ever wanted to have. Conversations about how the “lazy A-rab family next door was scamming free benefits, living off our tax money.” About how Judy was positive the lady across the road trained her cat to do
his business in Judy’s yard. When the chimney caved, about how displeased Judy was with the insurance man’s overall attitude and how she planned to write a vicious letter to the *Daily Echo*, expressing this dissatisfaction, and didn’t that insurance man know who her husband was. John did in fact work for the *Echo*, but only as a delivery man and I’m fairly certain he didn’t have much say in which letters were printed.

I lost countless hours of my life to hallway talk with Judy, and no amount of prefabricated excuses on my part could stop this. I tried setting oven timers in advance, arranging for Lee to call my phone at a certain time if I knew I was going out, postponing Iris’s feeds so that she was sure to kick off. But no, Judy was happy to talk over all of it, even my naked, screaming, hungry infant.

John was as quiet as Judy was talkative. But he was no less a presence in our lives. He finished his early morning deliveries by eleven, and Iris and I were always abruptly awakened from our midday nap by the automated voice of his *Daily Echo* van: “Please stand clear. Vehicle reversing. BEEP. Please stand clear. Vehicle reversing.” John spent the rest of the daylight hours and sometimes well into dusk working in the garden. Iris and I would watch him from the kitchen window. He would arrange terracotta planters of varying sizes in a neat diagonal across the length of the yard, only to rearrange them into a makeshift border that same evening. He’d crawl on all fours, inspecting the grass. He was always outside but never wanted to talk. His solution was to blame his hearing impairment for his lack of social interaction. He would pretend not to hear us, and if we would raise our voices or wave dramatically, he would stare into the grass, defiantly
unseeing. But we were always aware that John was very very aware. We were always aware that our home, in John’s eyes, was not ours.

I’m not exactly sure when we decided to move back to America. If I were to dig out the beat-up black expandable file that traveled there and back and there and back with us again, I would find photocopies of government documents that prove we first filed for Lee’s immigrant visa on the sixteenth of October. It was a long and crushing process that did not conclude until two weeks before Iris and I were scheduled to step on US Airways flight 720, direct from London Gatwick to Pittsburgh International, without him. But the decision was made long before we filed for the visa. I think in a way, we always knew we’d leave the cool stone and silver skies of England and build our lives between the tired cornfields and rusted steel mills of northeast Ohio.

It’s hard even to pinpoint why we decided to leave England. Whenever someone asks me, I answer vaguely, *Oh, a lot of reasons.* Or I offer a trite line about missing family or a statement about housing markets and cost of living. All true, but still not quite right. We left England because it was hard, kicking our asses really. We were living dangerously close to our two-thousand pound overdraft, LJM Carpentry had dried out, and Lee was hanging garage doors for a company called Openings. He worked from seven to five, and I worked from six to midnight at the restaurant. We both woke up several times a night with Iris. Days are long when they start at 5:30 and finish sometime after midnight. Lee’s family was a two-hour drive away, my family was across the ocean, daycare was astronomically priced, and none of our friends—not a single one—had kids
or even an inkling of what we were experiencing. And so we watched them slip further and further into the crowd of people we used to know. We were alone.

The decision to move should have filled our lives with some kind of peace, but December sixth, we received notification that our visa application had been received. If everything checked out, Lee would get his visa in six to nine months. Six to nine months? That would be June. We’d been planning an April departure. I was starting graduate school in August. We needed to leave.

This sour news set off a chain of events that happened rapidly and with no recovery time. Our car was vandalized. Our bank details were stolen, and our account was drained of £2600, our entire savings. Lee was laid off from Openings. Our car was vandalized a second time. We found out we couldn’t afford to take Oliver with us. Iris tipped a bottle of boiling water onto her leg and was rushed to the hospital with severe burns, her perfect pink baby skin sliding off her thigh in white sheets. David Warner showed up at our front door with eviction papers. The phone chair sold for £6 on E-bay. And all the while, Lee’s visa was hanging over our heads. We’d sent the wrong information. I hadn’t filed taxes since moving to England. Immigration required an expensive medical exam, intrusive tests. With my maternity leave, we hadn’t earned enough money to prove we wouldn’t dip into any public funds. April became May became June became August.

Perhaps the fault lay with us. We didn’t tell John and Judy we were leaving or why. Not because we were hiding it but because we didn’t know any details. Without a hologram imprinted visa in our hands, we didn’t know the all important WHEN.
But of course they did find out. And of course things did get worse in the petty passive aggressive way that could only happen when you’re living above landlords who resent your leaving. Suddenly we were no longer allowed to park our 1995 Vauxhall Cavalier in front of the house (the garage and driveway had already been established as off limits). Judy set up camp behind her front window, and whenever Iris and I went outside to sit in the sun, she’d peer at us like we didn’t belong there and not even look away when our eyes met. Lee crossed paths with John who was cutting the grass and said, “Looks great, John!” John replied, “Well someone has to look after the garden.” Every time we met in the entranceway, Judy smiled and said in that tinny voice she reserved for misdirected deliverymen, “What a good baby you have. I never hear her crying at all.” Which was obviously a big fat lie.

Once, shortly after Iris’s burn, Judy said to Lee, “I’m sure Annie must be blaming herself for marring the child. What a sad, sad thing to happen.”

Their nighttime laughter, which had always found its way into our quiet bedroom, grew larger and louder. Lee and I imagined Judy prancing around the kitchen with a baby doll on her hip, pronouncing in a high pitch exaggerated American accent, *Ooooh, look at me, I’m Aaaaaynnie!* And John holding his sides and doubling over.

Their television rose several decibels in volume and stayed on all night. They left their windows wide open and the stench of boiled cabbage drifted upwards at eight in the morning.

Lee spent a lazy evening strumming his guitar and was confronted the next morning with a cool, “I had no idea you were musically inclined.” Later that day, when Lee was entertaining Iris with soft acoustic renditions of Everclear, John dug out his big
white tuba that he used to play in the Bournemouth carnival band. He blew four invasive brassy notes. Lee, fed up, matched those four notes. And back and forth they went for the better part of an hour, locked in a battle of wits. I imagine John below, red faced and puffy cheeked, squelching out notes on the tuba. Lee above, calloused fingers and furrowed brow, banging out the most aggressive sounds that guitar had ever produced. Neither willing to give. Not even an inch.

Eviction is a strong word and I suppose admittedly a bit inaccurate in our case. If I step back into that Rembrandt moment with the apricot yogurt and the soft sunlight, I feel like I’m viewing it all not through a lens but a kaleidoscope, seconds before it turns and the fragments reconfigure. If I return to the moment when the blue plastic spoon hovered in front of Iris’s open mouth, I know in my conscious—in my heart—that a lot of things were happening at once. For everyone, not just for me. Somewhere in the rough end of Boscombe, John and Judy’s daughter and her two sons were baffled and grieving, having just been left by the man they called husband and father for the last twelve years. Below us, John and Judy stared at the muted television set and wracked their brains, trying to find a way to help their child. In a small pokey office with cheap vinyl blinds in Winton, David Warner wore his blue and yellow striped tie and reread the fine print on the contract we’d signed that gave both parties a one month release clause. A family near Poole Harbour gazed out their attic window, watching the boats come in and wishing they had a cat. Home is a transient state. No one was ever out to get us. In fact, Lee realized several hours after the Great Tuba/Guitar Showdown, that John wasn’t even home. The “tuba” he’d heard was the next door neighbor’s power drill.
Had John and Judy ever really done anything to us? Had it all been in our heads? The day we moved out, Judy wiped tears from her eyes and hugged me tightly, saying how much she was going to miss our hallway chats. They gave us two different leaving cards because they couldn’t decide which was better and an ornate crystal ornament. When life turned into a shower of shit, had we hated them, just so we wouldn’t hate each other?

I thought I’d be different somehow.

I thought I’d do something more significant than wait tables in a themed restaurant, one in a chain of 162. I thought my professional accomplishments would be more substantial than a 100% mystery diner report and the largest section on a busy Saturday night.

I thought I’d be the kind of wife who packed her husband healthy but deliciously envious lunches every day and actually took clothes to the drycleaners instead of letting them sit in a dirty pile for months until I hand-washed them myself, ruining the delicate fabrics. I thought my house would have season-appropriate Glade plug-ins in every room, thought I’d have a house.

I love the smell of bleach. I love the way you smell it in your throat and the way it stays on your hands for hours after a good clean. Before Iris, I used to reserve a couple hours each week for a “deep clean,” scrubbing the toilet and sink and tile floors with a green scouring pad. It was my favorite way to relax, and I looked forward to what Lee affectionately called “Shiny Tap Day.” I mentioned this in passing to my mother when I
was pregnant, and she laughed and said, “You’re going to have to adjust your lifestyle.”
No I’m not, I thought to myself.

I thought I’d be one of those adorable new moms who wore khaki capris and red gingham blouses and took their daughters in matching gingham sundresses to the Under One’s playgroup, but I just wasn’t. I was a brown-sweatpants-roll-around-the-grass-in-the-front-yard kind of a mom. Frazzled and sleep-deprived and anxious. Never reaching the phone in time, always opening the front door just in time to see the Royal Mail van pull away. And Iris was an only ever half-clothed kind of a baby who ate cat food off the floor and left sweaty patches on the couch when we napped together.

I don’t know why I thought my life would be different. I came from a refreshingly normal lower middle class family from Ohio. My dad was a teacher, and my mom was a nurse. We had a brown station wagon and the weird chestnut colored Aerostar minivan, both used and both consumed by flaking rust and Ohio winters. Our house was always messy, our clothes faded in the wash when everyone else’s miraculously held bold color, and our smelly dogs crapped on the floor well into old age. My parents let my baby sister dress herself when she was only three years old, and she wore neon thrift store dresses over sweatpants and the same pink and green baseball cap every day for nearly a year.

But we danced around the dining room table to old Beatles songs and dressed the dogs up in my dad’s Oxford shirts and ties. After the autumn time change, we’d sit around the dinner table, the world completely dark and no street lamps or illuminated windows from neighboring houses because Pleasant Valley Road was winding and rural, and we’d joke about being the last people left on earth. The kids at school called us “the
least dysfunctional family” they knew. I have no idea where this need for perfection came from.

Once when Iris was around seven months old and suddenly mobile, scooting around the flat on her bottom with surprising speed and determination, Lee nodded in the direction of a package that had arrived from Ohio that was sitting on the floor of the front room. It held a heavy stainless steel cavatelli maker.

“We better move that bucket of chains,” he said.

I laughed out loud, a real laugh, one that formed in my throat and burst simultaneously down into my stomach and out into the waiting air. I hadn’t thought about that bright orange bucket of chains since the day we left the flat in Charminster more than a year before, when Lee finally lugged the thing into his van and got rid of it. I looked at the package on the floor, looked at the curling tape and at my father’s pointy handwriting. The box had been sitting on the floor for well over a month, tissue paper flapping out of the top, and had become enough of a fixture that Oliver frequently curled up next to the cavatelli maker for long afternoon sits. It never once occurred to me to put it away.

Some time later our vacuum cleaner exploded in true vacuum cleaner glory, erupting into a cloud of white dust and cat hair. Lee went out the same day and bought a new one, but the broken Electrolux sat and sat in the hallway, long enough to merit a teasing, “Lee, please get rid of that bucket of chains next to the phone chair.”

Our life at Hillcrest Road wasn’t perfect, so far from it in fact that we had already made the decision to leave. But it was our life, one that we’d built entirely ourselves, one that fit like a threadbare t-shirt. It was our life, and it should have been our decision. The cat, the phone chair, the Vauxhall Cavalier—they were all part of us. These buckets of
chains that sat like strings tied round our fingers, these were the markers of our happiness, the unquantifiable measures of our success.

It felt like our lives were set in motion the day David Warner knocked on our door, like his hand-delivered notice was the spark that set our entire lives ablaze. But that wasn’t even the first time we’d been forced to move against our will. We’d been, at least to a degree, driven out of Heather Close. We’d lost the Cornerhouse in Poole Hill with its pizza-shaped lounge and blue walls before I’d even had a chance to call it a home, leaving Lee to spend his last days of single life frantically searching for a safe and affordable home with only one real stipulation—“My wife will be requiring a cat”—which is how we ended up in the Charminster flat in the first place. But maybe our lives were set in motion even before that. Maybe it was the first night I sat down at a table next to Lee at O’Neill’s, in my wrinkled work clothes with a cold pint of Strongbow. Or maybe it really began when Caitlin and I stepped on an airplane at Cleveland Hopkins International airport five years before, breathless with anticipation. Or maybe some time before that even. Maybe we had always been moving. It certainly felt like we would never stop.

Iris and I watched David Warner walk through the wrought iron gate that morning, heard it close behind him with a faint click. The rust-colored tiles of the entranceway were cool and grainy beneath my bare feet. We went back up the stairs and into the soft light of the front room. I put Iris in her highchair, and she gummed Cheerios while I read the letter from Allan and Bath. Read it once. And then again, my pulse quickening and my brain
not quite understanding, trying to put the words and dates on the page together in a way that made some kind of sense. Oliver trotted off to the bathroom and scratched around in his litter box. I called Lee and read the letter out loud to him, and read it again, panic creeping into both of our voices. What would we do? What would we do?

“Don’t worry about it right now,” Lee said. “I’ll phone them when I get off work and see what’s happening.”

“Yeah, alright,” I said. “But I’m not staying here. I don’t want to see them. I don’t even want to hear them.” The thought of Judy’s throaty cackle and John’s mustache made me shake, made my stomach clench and my throat close. What would we do?

I hung up the phone and felt a strange disconnect. I left the breakfast mess on the table and carried Iris into her room, laying her down on the vinyl changing mat. It was May. Iris and I were leaving for Ohio August fifth, just weeks before school started, and if the visa didn’t come through in time, Lee was going to stay with his mom in London until he could meet us. He’d planned on leaving Hillcrest Road at the end of August. We were talking about two and a half months. No one would give us a lease for two and a half months. I changed Iris’s diaper and dressed her in pink sweatpants, a white onesie, and the pink and green cardigan Joanne had given her for Christmas that was just now starting to fit. She chewed the oblong plastic button that held the sweater in place while I threw on jeans and an old Hiram College hoodie. What would we do? Perhaps we could stay with Joanne and Bozzie. They had a spare room. No, no, not with the baby.

John and Judy’s green Ford Mondeo was not in the driveway, and it was too early for the beeping *Daily Echo* van, so I knew I could make a safe exit. I strapped Iris into her pushchair, and we walked toward Winton High Street. Maybe we could move back in
with Steve and Caitlin for a few weeks. Heather Close was a three bedroom house, and they wouldn’t say no, not if we really needed it. They wouldn’t want us to, but they wouldn’t say no. Not if we asked, not if we were desperate.

But how could I even begin to explain our need to Caitlin? Our desperation? We were still in touch, of course. She’d been at Iris’s baptism and Lee was invited to Steve’s surprise thirtieth birthday party; we saw each other occasionally when mutual friends had afternoon barbeques, but we hadn’t talked about anything that mattered in years. We’d settled into a level of superficiality we could both live with, not quite able to cut ties but definitely not able to trust. I never told her how much Lee and I struggled—with money, with parenting, with the loneliness of change—was ashamed to admit to her that we weren’t on top of the world after all. I’m sure she guessed. But she didn’t know me anymore, and I didn’t know her.

I walked up and down Winton High Street for two solid hours. Thinking and not thinking. The midday sun and gentle breeze that had travelled so far from the sea that it no longer smelled of salt and sand but of clay and concrete lulled Iris to sleep. Without thinking, I wandered into a newsagent’s and bought a ten pack of Marlboro Lights. Lee and I hadn’t had a cigarette almost two years. I walked right into the shop with my sleeping baby and bought a pack of cigarettes, like I did this every day of my life. Eventually Lee called. He’d left work early and was on his way to pick us up. I was somewhere near Binnies Sandwich Shop and House of Tiles when I saw the Vauxhall, and I waved though Lee was already slowing down.

“It’s for real,” Lee said as I got into the car. “There’s nothing we can do.”
Lee transferred Iris to her car seat and folded up the pushchair, storing it in the trunk. We headed out of Winton, past the novelty shops and hairdressers and the dingy pub that sat far back from the road. We left behind the bungalows of Castle Lane and the congested streets of Bournemouth. Instinctually, we drove toward the New Forest, a National Trust heritage spot that we used to take long drives through when I was heavily pregnant and couldn’t do anything but sit and later when Iris was only weeks old and we needed a break from learning to be parents.

We would drive through Dorset’s rustic countryside a lot in the next few days, thinking and not thinking. Eventually we would devise a plan, decide it was best to pack up and leave Bournemouth all together, spending our final weeks in Lee’s mom’s one-bedroom apartment in London. At least we’d be with family. I would even work it out so that my Frankie’s transferred me to the Kingston branch and I didn’t lose any hours, working up until three days before we left. Our friends who we never saw would throw us long and meaningful goodbye parties before slipping entirely into the peripheral of memory. But that day we drove through the New Forest mostly in silence, occasionally starting sentences in sudden sputters and then trailing off, our words hollow and incomplete. We drove deep into the rolling expanse, dipping in and out of shade and patches of purple heath. Wild ponies grazed not even five feet from the road, and a pregnant pony stared vacantly through the window as Lee slowed down. Her belly was swollen and so low to the ground I thought it must drag against the thick brush, and I felt bad for her raw underside. It didn’t seem fair.

“Is Iris asleep?” Lee asked.
I turned and looked at her round face, her drooping bottom lip and the thin trail of drool that leaked out the side of her mouth. Her breaths were innocent and even.

“Yeah, I think so.”

Lee pulled the car over and left it running as we both got out and gently closed the doors so we wouldn’t wake Iris. Browns and purples and greens bled into one another like the murky surface of the sea. I took the cigarettes out of my purse, and we smoked in silence, leaning against the car and occasionally flicking ash into the dry dirt road, the earth packed and sturdy beneath us. Looking into the vast emptiness of the New Forest, the world seemed a wide, wide place and looking into the car at the twitching eyelids of my sleeping child, the world felt so small I could cry. Lee poked me in the arm, and I leaned into the warmth and familiarity of his side. The smoke rose above us, the only cloud in a clear blue sky, rising like vapor, like so many unasked questions and like the only one. What now?
We put almost everything on eBay—the microwave, the bookshelves, a set of Japanese
language instruction books Lee had ordered and forgotten, the Avent bottle steam
sterilizer—and our days became rooted in monitoring the online bidding, discovering
what strangers thought our possessions were worth. My digital camera filled up with
pictures of clean and carefully arranged items, and as I looked around the flat at our
possessions already spoken for, I imagined oversized price tags dangling, handwritten in
a messy scrawl.

Chunky oak nest of tables: £70
Matching glass-top coffee table: £8
LJM Carpentry van: two grand
Boxy orange television set: 27 pence

The DVD player that Lee had spray-painted orange to match never sold. Why
would someone want an orange television set and not opt for the accompanying DVD
player? Was 54 pence just too much to shell out for orange appliances? It didn’t make
sense. None of it did.

During our final couple of weeks in Bournemouth, the flat bustled with strangers
coming in and out, up and down the stairs, tracking dirt across the cream carpet. A pair of
furry Irishman with squinty eyes and fingers blackened with engine grease carried the
phone chair out. The white upholstery! I cringed.
A slew of builders rang the doorbell, each with his own battered cargo can, steel
toe boots, cigarette lit and dangling from lips hidden in thick stubble. They arrived in the
predawn hours before travelling to sites far away that they wouldn’t return from until
darkness settled again. Away went Lee’s ten-inch mitre saw, his quarter-inch Dewalt
router, his eighteen volt hammer drill.

A woman with dark brown hair and the early protrusion of a pregnant belly
showed up one day to collect Iris’s entire nursery set—the giraffe bed sheets and mobile,
the yellow and orange bouncer chair, the jungle blankets and bath towels with triangular
pockets, the plastic bath tub, the floppy elephant that sat in the crib. The Moses basket
that looked so splendidly picturesque with its wicker handles and pale yellow canopy.
Pieces we’d chosen with such care, such precision, saved for, purchased one by one when
we could squeeze it into a week’s budget, driving excitedly the half an hour to the
Mothercare store in Poole.

“Do you know what you’re having yet?” I asked as we stood in the hallway
outside Iris’s suddenly giraffe-less room while Lee made trips down the stairs, carrying
the careful piles to the woman’s car.

“No, not yet,” she said. “But I’ve got a feeling it’s a girl.”

I eyed the neat stacks of baby girl clothes arranged on the wooden card table that
was temporarily set up in the hall, the red embroidered dungarees, the tea cup jammies.

“Would you be interested in clothes?” I asked. “Just, you know, you can have them. I was
only going to give them to the charity shop anyway.”

She smiled, looked genuinely excited, and Lee carried the clothes down in his
next trip. I liked thinking of Iris’s things still intact, clothes and bed sheets and bath
towels together in the same place. I was sending boats made of leaves and sticks down the creek like I used to do as a child in Tod Park, releasing something, hoping it would hold together, wishing for it to still make sense.

Lee developed a strange and disproportionate animosity toward these eBay people. He resented their irreverence for our things, resented their taking of them and their staying in one place, their ability to acquire furniture and three-pronged British appliances. The biggest offender was the coffee table guy. In his mid-twenties, he was tall and lanky in tattered jeans and a v-neck t-shirt, the expected Birkenstocks. His hair hung in thick, ropey dreadlocks, a dishwater blond. He went on and on about Burning Man and how he and his friend were going there soon, and how they just loved America, and how we really must go to Burning Man sometime.

“It’s about as far from where we’re moving as this flat is, mate.” Lee said and lifted the end of the coffee table off the floor, indicating the man should take the other side. As their heads and another of our possessions disappeared down the stairs, I heard the coffee table guy say he was actually giving the coffee table to a mate of his, that he’d probably just use it for extra seating in his flat. They had a lot of parties.

When Lee returned, I expected a smart remark, a reductive hippie-stoner impression, or a bitter rant. But instead he just sighed, looked around the barren front room, bent to smooth the dents in the carpet where the table legs had been. Each time someone came and left, a space was made, a hollow, like a tooth being pulled, a space ugly and unnatural.

The TV stand that had been given to us by the Major, a retired officer of the British Army whom Lee did a series of odd jobs for, never sold at all. The charity shop
wouldn’t take it, so Lee smashed it to pieces under a clear July sky right there in the
driveway with an Estwing framing hammer, proving something with sweat and force,
announcing something with each blow. We.Have.Nothing.Left. We didn’t have time to
think about how we felt—to pull it apart and ache and want—but we did ache, silently,
and more with each disappearing piece of our life. Lee took the splintered remains to the
dump during one of many trips, and tipped the split wood into the “wood only” pile,
drove around the wide loop, stopping to fling Tupperware and wicker baskets and old
work boots and half-dead houseplants over the dump’s concrete barrier and down, down,
a sheer drop of twenty feet to a sea of debris, to the rustle of wind in rubble, to nothing.

When we learned that it would cost us nearly £800 to transfer Oliver, we cuddled
him on the couch and cried. I worked my fingertips into the subtle divots between his
sharp skull and crinkly ear cartilage, the place that made him purr and close his eyes and
sometimes even dribble, and I thought about how stupid he looked when he tried to
squeeze himself into the too-small space between books on the bottom shelf where he
used to sleep as a kitten. Lee put an ad on Craigslist: Free to a good home. Pros: great
with kids, affectionate, thinks he’s people. Cons: portly, dimwitted, thinks he’s people.
We received over thirty calls in less than a week but we went with the first. After all, he
was just a cat.

And the coffee table was just a coffee table.

Our stuff was just stuff.

Eventually, it came down to cleaning, to de-grouting tile, cracking lime scale out
of the toilet bowl with a credit card, washing the skirting boards with sudsy water.
Eventually the London Shipping Company picked up the seven boxes that sat like a tower
of blocks in the front garden. Eventually the carpet cleaners came, and they steam-cleaned the cream carpet, pulling up a year and half worth of dust and cat hair and lazy living. Eventually the window cleaners came, scaling the outside like mountain climbers, the soft squeaks of the squeegee a nearly imperceptible song, light-hearted but canny. Eventually the flat looked exactly as it had when we’d moved in, clean, light, empty. So much life—so much of our life—had happened inside those white walls that it seemed almost mystical that we could leave without a trace. A curious blasphemy of the joy and the mess of our daily lives. But eventually, we slipped away like a penny down a wishing well, forgetting to splash.

I turned twenty-seven just days before we left for Lee’s mom’s flat in Molesey. We made it a grand affair. Twenty-seven isn’t typically a milestone kind of birthday, but that particular June, everything bore a heightened sense of significance. Twenty-seven just sounds older than twenty-six doesn’t it? we kept saying. It did sound older, like a much greater variance than just one year, but of course for both Lee and me, the past year had been spent learning to be parents and deciding how and where to make our home, creating a fissure between who we were becoming and who we’d been. There are years that ask questions and years that answer, Caitlin had copied into her yellow legal pad on that bright January afternoon in her dorm room five years before. I had spent the better part of those last five years asking—asking the water, the haze around the moon, the light reflected off of the thin sheet metal of airplane wings, asking the ragged cat-clawed wicker hamper in the corner of Iris’s room in the purple hours of predawn. Each question
had only led to more questions. But maybe, I wondered—can a question be an answer? Does moving on to new questions mean moving on?

Trish, Lee’s mother, drove the two hours down from Molesey to watch Iris that evening, one of only a handful of times we’d ever left Iris in the care of anyone. I got my hair highlighted and cut into choppy layers with long, side-swept bangs and wore a brand new green tunic mini dress and beaded sandals, a series of tinkling bangles, a sharp contrast to my usual sweatpants or Frankie’s gear. Lee and I went to dinner at Coriander’s, a Mexican restaurant in the town centre that we had discovered during the peculiar week we’d lived at the Cornerhouse as newlyweds. Afterwards we walked to Aruba, a swanky second-story bar right on the seafront with a balcony that overlooked Bournemouth Pier. Aruba was new, had been built during the time when Lee and I had disappeared from any sort of social scene, and though our friends often mentioned it, we’d never been before. Inside, real palm trees stood at intervals behind the bar, their papery fronds brushing against bottles, backlit and blue. The floors and walls were white-washed, and a rectangular mirror at least ten feet high and six feet wide with an ornate bronze frame leaned against the wall, heavy, antique, too self-important to even need to be fixed to a wall. Glass lanterns hung from the ceiling, twinkly lights were draped across the railing of the balcony that gaped at us from the wide French doors, and the room held a soft glow. A breezy tropical melody blew around above our heads, and a bartender in a tailored black dress shirt and a long, thin tie offered us a menu in a bamboo folder.

We ordered outlandish cocktails with intricate plant life garnishes and stepped outside, intending to laugh at how fancy we were pretending to be but instead just standing stock still and stupefied. The wind, fresh off the water, smacked into me, filled
my nostrils, caught the backs of my ears, my spine, wrapping me in salt and darkness.
The sky was black, softened with the occasional tuft of cloud, a milky purple stain against the night, perforated by stars. I hadn’t been to the beach at night since before I was pregnant. Side by side, Lee and I leaned against the railing and stared into the sea, silent, alone with private thoughts. Lee had come to Bournemouth as an angsty teen from a broken home and had found friends and opportunities he’d never had in London. I had come on the brink of adulthood with my best friend, clinging to a weak belief that my life could add up to something extraordinary. Looking out to sea, Lee and I said intimate farewells to the rolling water that had pulled us both separately, before we knew each other, inside the waves and the motion and the sharp fragments of shell in muck, that had dragged us underneath the spell of this town, that had healed some searching part of both of us and of everyone who found their way to this shore. The bankers, the hotel managers, the golfers, the foreign language students, the drunk and dreamy tourists. People who weren’t from this place but who found something of themselves here, something of the selves they wanted to be.

How could I not think of Caitlin? Standing there, on our shared birthday, staring at the sea and the pier and the night, at the dark shadow of the pier on the unsteady surface—how could I not remember the sharp intake of breath that night we poured our wine into the waves? The rush of water between my jeans and my thighs, inside my shirt, eddying around my neck and my shoulders? How could I not remember her arms and her voice and her red hair climbing in the wind, catching the water and sticking to the pink of her cheeks? How could I not smile at our faith and our madness, at the seared kinship of a single moment?
We’d spoken that morning of course, a quick and obligatory birthday phone call. No cards or presents or suggestions of getting coffee or taking a walk, just a five minute phone call. I would see her in a few days’ time, at the going-away barbecue Lee’s friends were throwing for us. We would sit in the sun and eat grilled chicken and pasta salad. Steve would wear a Cleveland Indians baseball cap in our honor and would hold Iris on his lap, setting the cap on her head. In his quiet, gentle way, he would make friends with her. Lee would rescue him when she started to cry, slinging her over his shoulder and impressing everyone with his dad skills, all our non-parent friends who were only hours away from being people we used to know. Caitlin and I would talk about her teaching job mostly and about whether or not Iris was walking yet or saying words or eating such and such. When the sun deepened into the tarnished orange of early evening, we would say goodbye, dry-eyed and unaffected. We wouldn’t miss each other when I moved away. We already didn’t.

As I stood on the balcony of Aruba, laughter and smoke and the clinking of ice cubes mingling with the night air, I watched the space where Caitlin and I had hugged in the water, a space dark and indistinguishable to anyone outside of the two of us. Just a place in the water, which was always changing, always washing in and out, not even the same water we had waded in, but place that I could—at least for one more night—look at and understand. Our lives would always be intertwined in that small space, the shadow of our movements, the echo of a song. So much had depended on that moment, on that spontaneous and irreversible decision to fall in love. With a place, with a choice, with a time, with the best and most beautiful parts of each other.
It was enough, I thought to myself. It was enough to have loved like that for a little while.

Lee and I finished our drinks, sipping slowly, stirring often with red cocktail straws. We walked in the balmy summer air until we could hail a taxi, and then we went home to our sleeping girl and our empty flat. Less than a week later, we left Bournemouth for good.

Iris began walking the day we moved into Trish’s one-bedroom flat in Molesey, took her first steps less than an hour after we arrived. It was almost as though she’d been waiting to leave, waiting for a new and unfamiliar floor, one she didn’t know every inch of from spending her narrow lifetime exploring with her face just inches from the carpet. Lee, who had driven separately with a car full of luggage and boxes we hoped to store indefinitely in Trish’s loft, hadn’t even met us there yet. Trish was in the kitchen, steeping cups of tea and sifting through a pile of take-away menus, trying to decide what we should order for dinner.

“Should we do the Chinese thing?” she asked with her back to us, casually tapping her long nails on the countertop.

“Sure, if you want.”

Iris was standing next to the white pine rocking chair in the lounge, holding onto the seat. She had been standing while holding onto furniture for months and had been standing and letting go for weeks, teetering, her belly-heavy torso rocking back and forth in search of her center of gravity, sometimes finding it but never for long enough to make any sense of the way the world looked from such an independent, upright position. She
gripped the soft upholstery of the chair pad, squeezing the cushion so that her fingertips turned white, and then she let go, her arms flapping at her sides, sensing flight beneath her carriage like a sparrow. She surveyed the room scientifically, her faint eyebrows furrowed in thought. Without warning, she took twelve steps, quick and staccato, across the laminate floor.

“Oh my God!” I clapped my hand over my mouth. Trish rushed to the doorway, leaning her head over the baby gate we’d already thought to put in place between the kitchen and the lounge. “Oh my God, she just walked across the room!”

“Clever girl!” Trish laughed, disbelieving her luck at having been there for at least one milestone in this grandchild’s life who was about to be whisked so far away.

I called Lee with the news right away, and though he laughed, I could hear the disappointment in his throat, the dull ache of having missed it and of knowing that everything was changing, some of it life-affirming and some of it heartbreaking and all of it unstoppable.

Iris didn’t sleep well during the month in Molesey. She never slept well, but she slept even worse in the collapsible mesh travel cot we’d borrowed from Lee’s sister and set up in the bedroom at the foot of Trish’s bed that Lee and I shared while Trish slept on a futon in the lounge. She would wake two or three times a night, stand and scream, shake the flimsy bars of the travel cot, and I would fear she’d tip it over, crash into the wardrobe, split skin, crack bone. If it were still dark, I could usually get her to settle into the warm space between Lee and me, pressing her face to my chest and breathing deep and steady. But if there was even the hint of an early and tentative sunbeam outside the
window, it was pointless. We took to rising around 4:30 each day, rubbing our eyes, squeezing them shut and opening them wide, nauseous with the abrupt transition. Back home, Lee and I would have taken turns with this unsavory duty, working out a system to divvy up the burden depending on who had to do what that day and when. But in Molesey, we had to get up and get out. All of us. As quickly as possible. We couldn’t contain the energy of a just-awakened one-year-old, and the flat consisted of just the bedroom, lounge, kitchenette, and bathroom. It was located in a block of flats, and we feared not only waking Trish but also the neighbors beside and beneath us.

We fell into a routine, rising in the dark, pulling on jeans and t-shirts in a confused half-slumber and trudging to the car, me with Iris on my hip, wide awake and babbling. Lee drove us into Twickenham, another suburb of London not far from Molesey, England’s great rugby town, the place of his childhood. We stopped at the same petrol station each morning for paper cups of coffee and buttery croissants wrapped in cellophane.

Once we got to Twickenham, Lee would park the car on the street, and we’d unfold the pushchair, strap in Iris upright and alert, and begin walking. Twickenham was old and clean and wealthy, like a sophisticated great-uncle torn between regarding us with kind pity or stern disapproval. Narrow streets, some of them still cobbled together with brick and stone, were lined with imposing townhouses with bright blue doors and uniform white stucco facades, large brass numbers and heavy door knockers. The Thames cut through the town with a quiet matter-of-factness, riverboats docked and swaying in the distance, and even the dogs on soft leather leads trotted the sidewalks nose up with an air of superiority, purebred and groomed.
Lee took us to all his favorite haunts, his old grammar school, the flat he grew up in on the corner of Victoria and Haggard Road, the idyllic fountain in York House Garden where green maidens bathed in the shadows, poured grit-flecked water from chipped jugs, contemplated lily pads and paused to listen as soft algae lapped at their thighs and water striders skittered across the lagoon. Some mornings we walked the winding riverside road that held the White Swan, a seventeenth century pub and tavern, painted brilliant white with glossy black trim, a balcony and veranda with railings comprised of decorative spindles so close they almost touched, hanging flower baskets heavy with blooms, and patio tables relaxing under green and white umbrellas. We’d consider that life, the ropes and tackle, talk about how fresh a cool pint would taste sitting at one of those tables after a long day out on the river, smoking fat cigarettes and laughing at the market price of a common carp. But most days, we went to Marble Hill.

Marble Hill Park sat wet and green on sixty-six acres of riverside flatland, lush grasses, mossy shades, soft and furry. The sprawling grounds were situated behind the River Thames and grew around the great house, a Palladian villa built in the eighteenth century as a retreat for King George’s mistress, a quiet escape from the smoke and bustle of London, the clacking trains and raspy voices. Over the years, Marble Hill House became a place for ladies to wear sundresses and linen cloche hats, to sip champagne and watch operas under white tents with hanging lamps and sleek, modern flower arrangements. The house was tall and magnificent with a symmetrical series of windows and a sculpted coat of arms that was too high to discern. The smooth façade was a tawny shade, between yellow and peach, and it stood crisp and stately against the blue behind and the green beneath, as though to say to passersby, And how do you do? And isn’t life
grand? But as the grounds spilled down toward the river, the house became inconsequential; the grass, thicker, longer, more bluntly cut, wet from the inside out, the sharp smell of chlorophyll bleeding into soil, of life happening around and beneath. Along the River Thames, houseboats lay low and flat like sleeping crocodiles, and weeping willows swayed, bending in the breeze to dip their loping strands in the cool gray water ambling east.

Iris learned to run in the dew-soaked fields of Marble Hill Park. Maybe the sky was salmon on the horizon, the warmth and the promise of the sunrise beginning to swallow the inky blue of night. Maybe the trees folded into themselves, full leaves wider than my hands and still curled in the chill of the night, not realizing how close they were to the changing of the sky, the intersection of dark and light. Maybe we were the only people in the whole park, beating even the big city dog walkers who exercised their charges at a healthy pace before commuting into central London to sink into the dregs of their day. It was definitely morning.

In the earliest hours of one of our final days in England, Lee, Iris, and I sat under an old oak tree in Marble Hill Park, the roots dry and rough, peeking out from the black soil in haphazard patterns, surprising the cracked and crumbling surface of the earth with the durability of what lay beneath. Iris wore her pajamas still, a white onesie and pink shorts, her chubby thighs and bare feet free to stretch and roam in the morning air.

“She won’t remember this,” Lee said after a lull in the conversation. We’d been talking about our mornings in Twickenham and how they had become an unexpected
calm in the midst of a confusing and hectic interim. He watched Iris pull herself up to a standing position, steadying herself on my knees. “She won’t remember any of this.”

“No, she won’t,” I said simply. I knew he wasn’t just talking about the park but that he was talking about all of it—the flat back in Bournemouth, the giraffes and the cream carpet, the wet hues of green and gray, the atmosphere of her origin, the intimacy. She wouldn’t remember England. “But we can tell her about it. We’ll have to.”

Iris walked away from us, one foot in front of the other, a pattern that still needed active attention. Her backside was gray from sitting in the dew and the dirt. I realized then that Lee was scared, that he had no idea what life in Ohio would be like, no idea what it would feel like to be worlds away from everything he knew and everything he understood. I was so used to owning the role of the timid and incapable—the one people took care of, first my parents, then Caitlin, and then Lee—that I hadn’t even considered that Lee might be completely petrified. I was going to have to navigate, drive a car, explain procedures for American things like education and taxes and social security. I was going to have to lead us through this next phase of our life together, this curious passage. I was scared too.

We sat in an uncertain silence, watching Iris experiment with her feet, toddling in the long riverside grass, picking up speed and then stumbling. Each time she fell, she turned to face us and laugh, her eyes huge and blue in the fresh air and the damp of dawn, her cheeks full. She broke into a run, a neat straight line, taking her farther away from us than she’d ever been, her blonde wisps full of morning and possibility. She couldn’t believe her luck, brand new working legs and more open space than she could begin to
comprehend. Her laugh was infectious, and Lee and I gave in to the joy of her trials and the grace and the messiness of her falls.

We left England in the rain, a steady drumming, warm and clean. Trish ordered us a London black cab to take us to the airport, and she and Lee hugged goodbye under the light drizzle as I strapped Iris into the unfamiliar car seat and settled next to her. As the taxi pulled away, the rain streaked down the window in lazy labyrinths. The rain in London in August is a beautiful thing. It isn’t the cold pelting streaks of winter, the sharp diagonals that pool in iridescent puddles and send rickety umbrellas into helpless, impractical inversions. It isn’t forceful or relentless. It’s just patient, even, falling quietly, turning the pavement a darker shade of clay and the making world feel not quite so depleted.

Before I knew it, I was staring instead out of the oval windowpane of the airplane, and all the images I tried to freeze smeared before my eyes, blending into the beads of water that trailed down the glass and dropped out of sight. I watched the intricate web of Heathrow grow smaller. Cars disappeared. Then roads. Then endless geometric patterns of hedges. The nose of the plane broke though the barrier of gray with an audible whoosh, and then full clouds rested beneath and blinding sun above. Headphones wrapped in cellophane. The seatbelt lights clicked off, and England was no more.

When we landed in Ohio, it was hot and humid, the kind of August I grew up with, suffered through with the vibration of box fans and cool washcloths on my forehead. The air was thick and close, moisture collecting on brows and upper lips, trickling down
sternums. We’d left the rain and traveled into a place where the clouds refused to buckle. It seemed appropriate, as though I could somehow connect where we’d been with where we were, anticipating something I’d already experienced. My parents and sisters were there with signs drawn on poster board with magic marker, wide smiles, tight hugs and happy tears. We piled into the minivan and rode toward the tired farmhouse, the three-sided red barn, the sweet grass and golden ragweed that tickled my nose and my throat. They stared at Iris, and she stared at them, not exactly shy just infinitely interested. Once we got home, I wandered through house in a daze, stopping to look at a vase I’d forgotten, second-guessing whether or not the pantry had always been painted that shade of green. The windows were all wide open, but the air was still, pregnant and heavy.

Upstairs I discovered my parents had transformed my old room into a nursery, leaving the peeling heart border but painting the walls a buttery yellow, filling the room with a secondhand crib and a chest of drawers, a bookshelf stocked with board books that had probably been boxed in the basement for years. An unopened package of Pampers and wipes sat in a wicker basket on the floor, amidst stuffed toys and a pile of crib sheets. On the walls, my mother had hung a collage of photographs, pictures of Lee’s mom and sister, of our flat on Hillcrest Road, of Oliver and of Frankie and Benny’s and even of Steve and Caitlin. Next to it, she’d hung a poster of all of England’s prime ministers drawn in caricature style, from Sir Robert Walpole with his frilly neck scarf and white curls all the way down to Tony Blair. Laughing, I bounded down the stairs and rejoined the celebration in the living room. I sat next to Lee on the couch and watched my dad feed Iris yogurt. Leaning into the softness of the worn upholstery, I closed my eyes, waited for the rain.
There is a certain kind of sky in Ohio that will break your heart, just to look at it. This kind of sky only happens two, maybe three, times a year, and it’s always in early autumn, and it’s always late morning. It’s a blue sky, cloudless and infinite, and it hurts to look at it for too long, like your eyes can’t quite swallow it all though they keep trying. A rich cornflower blue that is full and deep and belongs somewhere where the only interruptions are lonely radio towers or tall granaries or the stark contrast of fire maples.

And here is what I can never decide and what I’m trying to decide now as I push Iris in the baby swing that she is too big for at Tod Park: Is the sky really that blue, or does it just feel that blue because it is the backdrop for a world that is giving in to the tarnish of fall? The sun shines in my eyes, warm on my face though the breeze is crisp. Iris’s long legs spill out of the swing, and she leans far over the edge, watching the wet mulch blur beneath her. The playground is empty but in the distance, I hear cheering and whistles, the bustle of a kids’ sporting event.

“Come on,” I say, halting the swing and lifting her out. “Let’s go for a walk.”

She takes my hand, her fingernails polished a bright pink that matches the butterflies on her hooded sweatshirt. We walk away from the swings and sliding boards, away from the empty bocce courts and from the wooden benches with their engraved
dedications—*In Loving Memory of*—and head toward a trail I half remember that curls around the edges of the park.

“Where are we going?” she asks.

“Shhh,” I say, hoping the mystery will keep her attention. “It’s an adventure.”

We walk past the duck pond that has long since dried up and sprouted grass, now little more than a faint divot, and into the mouth of the trail. It’s more open than I remember, but we still have to climb a narrow passage to reach the dirt path that once was an exercise trail, fitness equipment stationed every ten yards or so with wooden diagrams of what to do and which muscles to target. I remember the birth of this trail from my childhood, the shiny new metal and red wood, a city-funded project sometime in the mid-eighties. My sisters and I cheered as our dad did pushups on a cement square. Now, I’m surprised to find the pieces broken and forgotten, planks of wood overturned and coated in moss, splintered benches and rusted poles. Each stop fascinates Iris, and she worries me with her fearless examinations. I watch for protruding nails, sharp edges.

“What’s this one?” Iris asks as we happen across another ruin. We slowly circle a series of steel chin-up bars in descending height order. The metal is orange and flaking, and the wooden stakes that support the bars have faded to the weathered gray of driftwood.

“Just exercise bars.”

“No it’s not,” Iris says, reaching for the lowest bar, touching it but unable to grasp. I lift her until she wraps two determined fists around the rough metal, watching the proud smile spread across her face as she swings, knees tucked up, face toward the sky. The hem of her hoodie rides up and exposes the soft curve of her round belly. A three-
year-old’s bare belly is a happy sight, the last unabashed trace of babyhood on a body that is slimming and stretching, sharpening into the sturdy limbs and easy coordination of a child.

“What is it then?”

“Actually a pirate ship.” Her new favorite word is actually. Actually I love you, she’ll say. Actually I want a snack. She lets go, stumbles clumsily and lands in the loose netting of leaves and dirt, snapping twigs and sending a spindly daddy longlegs scurrying for cover. I squint, reconsider.

“Oh yes,” I say. “I see that now.” And for a while it is a pirate ship, actually. The tallest wooden stake becomes a brave mast, and a solid hull materializes around us, the grassy hillside spilling out into fierce waves. The leaves above, with their dark veins and golden edges, become our flag, swaying in the pitch of an early autumn breeze. Iris is the captain and for reasons I don’t question, I am the chef.

We tire of pirates and move on, returning to the worn path and looking for our next stop. The trail leads us up a gentle incline and around the mellow camber of the hill’s crescent, wrapping around the fields below. The dirt on the edge is neat and packed, forming a lip just before crumbling off into clawing tree roots and patches of yellowed grass, occasional cigarette butts and a flattened Coke Zero bottle, down into the thick, full green that lies in the basin beneath us, a soccer field. Or rather, a baseball field with a ramshackle dugout and mostly overgrown diamond, whose outfield has been invaded by soccer goals, new and white. Children, seven years old maybe or eight, wear bright uniforms, blue versus red, and bulky shin guards tucked into striped socks. They run, red-
cheeked and wild, following the accidental zigzags of the soccer ball, the sharp blow of the whistle, the excited shrieks of spectators seated on lawn chairs dragged from home.

Iris runs ahead but I pause, looking at the lawn chairs and remembering the family reunion we had in this same park when I was a kid, chairs lined up in the sun, hot dogs grilling. Some of the lawn chairs below are the newer, collapsible kind, dark green canvas that folds into itself with mesh cup holders, but most of the chairs are the old woven style, different colored strips of material that loop around cheap metal. The kind I know. The people who sit in these chairs are the kind of people I know, the kind of people who live here in this town. They wear sweatshirts over turtlenecks, jeans and baseball caps. Blue coolers sit at their feet and are occasionally opened for the retrieval of a can of pop or a sandwich wrapped in wax paper. From this distance, I can’t hear the things they say, but they smile often and clap hard, talk to each other out of the sides of their mouths while they keep their eyes always on the game. I could be at one of my sister’s mushball games in 1986. It’s all so familiar.

The trees behind the field are in varying stages of surrender. Some stand resolute, full and green. Others already bear the brittle reds that soon will allow the wind to pluck them up and carry them to the low, quiet spaces where they will burrow brown and break apart. But most of the trees change in a patchwork of confusion, segments of the same tree unrecognizable, one limb pale green, another marigold, still another orange like baked yams. I think suddenly of England, and of what soccer games might have been like in our old neighborhood in Bournemouth, under the unbroken shade of the stately oaks that line Queens Park, with leaves that never do much besides weaken into watery shades of yellow and fall away, and I wonder if Iris would have played soccer. I wonder who she
would have been, knowing she would have spoken differently and dressed differently and eaten different things and played different games. How England would have changed the very core of her.

It’s easy to line the moments of your life up like dominos, to imagine one decision toppling the other way and everything else crashing down. What if I’d gone to grad school straight after college? What if Caitlin, Jenn, and I had sat at a different table that night at O’Neill’s? What if, what if. But the decisions you make—the small ones, the intricate ones, the bold and obvious ones—they can’t be undone. My decision to travel the world, and then to live in the world I’d found, to grow into adulthood on foreign soil, changed me. England changed me. It allowed me to feel for a brief time like I was doing something wild and extraordinary, and it allowed me to come home, here, to this place, this life, this piece of October.

“Mama!” Iris calls, rushing back toward me, her pink Sketchers making blithe thumps along the trail. “Come!”

Her eyes are as blue and untroubled as the sky behind her, and her ponytail bounces, blonde curls lifted with the wind of her run. She reaches me, tripped up in the spring of her own sudden stop, barrels into my thighs and knocks me back a step.

“Come, Mama,” she says. “Come, it’s an adventure.” She places her small hand in mine and tugs, leading me forward.