ON BEING:
THE FICTIONAL YAMAS AND NIYAMAS

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Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing
University of Melbourne
March 2010

submitted in partial fulfillment for the requirements for the degree
MASTER OF FINE ARTS in CREATIVE WRITING
at the
CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY
December 2016

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for the

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ABSTRACT

This thesis consists of ten short stories that are structured, formatted and thematically aligned with the yamas and niyamas, the ten moral tenants of yoga philosophy. The yamas and niyamas are the first two limbs of Patinjali's eightfold path, or the path to enlightenment through yogic practices.

The yamas account for five principles that guide ethical living and instruct followers on how to interact with others and the world. The yamas consist of: ahimsa (non-violence), satya (truthfulness), asteya (non-stealing), brahmacharya (non-excess), and aparigraha (non-possessiveness). The niyamas are guidelines for personal practices that relate to, develop, and enhance one's relationship with self. The niyamas are: saucha (purity), santosha (contentment), tapas (self-discipline), svadhyaya (self-study), and ishvara prandihana (surrender).

Each story in this collection loosely correlates with and comments on its assigned yama or niyama. As a collection, the stories function as glimpses of being—fractal pieces of life from inside differing existential or personal crises. The characters face moral, personal and spiritual dilemmas, often grappling with ghosts from the past, striving to make sense of what *is* through varying tools and coping mechanisms.

The highest goal for this thesis is to act as commentary on the modern condition by using the spiritual and existential lens to diagnose and categorize modern afflictions. Some characters reach towards *being*—towards harmony or enlightenment—as dressing for their wounds. Others merely grapple with their conditions of dis-ease. Still others contribute to, and worsen, the disharmony.

Guided by ten moral principles, these stories stand alone and work together to lead readers into the depths of varying states of being, while shedding light on modernity's inherent conflict with ancient spiritual practices.

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AHIMSA: Non-violence

"Ahimsa leads us to a peaceful reconciliation with our own true nature."

These Stories

Step one is throwing dresses in a suitcase. The clock reads 2:58 a.m. and you're suddenly, immediately out of bed. It's two months early but something's happening, and the clothes you set aside (you did this at month four, in excited preparation) are folded and ready to go.

You grab a bag from a corner of your room and pack. You can feel your heart throbbing in your chest and in your gut, where the thing is stirring and causing a pain you haven't felt before. You have your cell phone, your keys. You run out the door with your brown hair knotted and flying behind you, a shirtsleeve hanging from the back of the suitcase, waving a final goodbye.

You pull up to the hospital at 3:36 a.m. The pain hasn't subsided and when you describe it to the doctor (as you're on your back on a bed being wheeled into the ER) you see nothing in his face but taught lines that pull at his mouth.

You focus on breathing. You hear the doctor conferring with nurses as they look at your ultrasound and prod between your legs. You say nothing but it hurts, the pressure, and when a small gasp escapes you a nurse walks over and pats your shoulder like a dog.

They hook machines to you: blood-sucking tubes, needles and bags. Organs are turned and moved within you-- first the doctor, then nurses reach inside. They pull, they push, but the pain is too much to bear so you demand that they stop while you catch your

breath and start to cry.

*

It was six months ago that you found out. You bought the test at your local pharmacy and waited until your husband came home to take it. He sat at the kitchen table, his hands clenched in a fist. He was chewing his lips and sweating by the time you emerged from the bathroom, but when he saw your smile he leapt up and strode towards you.

You embraced for a long time, that late afternoon in the kitchen. He told you to sit on the couch, to watch the five o'clock news while he went grocery shopping and prepared a steak for dinner. It wasn't often that you ate like that -- potatoes, asparagus, cheesecake-- but it was a celebratory dinner neither of you wanted to forget.

You waited another month to tell your families and two weeks after that you told your friends. Once the doctor had seen the baby on a screen, had told you everything looked fine and directed you to the next steps of this-- as he described-- incredible journey, then you both decided it was safe to spread the news.

It traveled quickly, and you were bombarded with congratulations for days.

*

The door swings wide and a new doctor walks in, introduces himself in a calm and measured manner. He is the OB/GYN on call, he tells you. He's here to see what he can do.

He shakes your hand before throwing back the stiff blue sheet that covers your naked body. He sits between your legs, scoots closer, dives in.

*

In the beginning, the tests ran fine, the ultrasounds were clear and easy. This is how it started: your suburban dream growing perfectly within you. You kept up with your freelance photography between doctors' visits, birthing classes, mild exercise routines and reading the library of baby books you'd ordered online. You sold the furniture in the guest room to buy a crib and changing table. You researched cloth diapers, plastic bottles, alternative nursing methods. You met other expectant mothers and shared over iced teas hypothetical schedules of your post-conception cycles, what your doctors said about red wine, the cost of high-tech running strollers.

At home your husband painted the nursery with non-toxic pale green. You chose farm animals as the theme, glued a trim above the wainscoting of yellow chicks marching like fluffy soldiers on a cream background. They trotted boldly around the room and you often laughed at their resolve.

Your mother took you maternity clothes shopping and for the first time you learned about her pregnancies. She was pregnant four times, only three of which were successful—something you hadn't known—and you sat humbly while she told you her story. You, the middle child, were the easiest birth. The last one was the hardest, she said. The miscarriage was her first.

*

You try to stay calm but you're increasingly surrounded by frantic activity and anxiety-producing beeps. Somebody sits near your head and wipes from your face sweat that's dripping down your neck, wetting the sheet beneath you. You hold the stranger's hand and cringe as a lightening bolt rips through you.

Your pain is reflected in the machines that dance and flash around you more

fervently in each passing minute. A nurse explains that you're having early contractions but you shake your head at her, tell her it's too soon. She has shoulder-length blonde hair that stays perfectly in place as she checks the needles in your arm and hands. She smiles gently and says something about being unsure, that it could be a false alarm, that they are still determining a plan of action.

You watch the rhythm of your heartbeat on paper and you see, on another piece of paper, an erratic line jumping up and down, scribbling madness.

*

The first few months you lived in prenatal bliss. Your nails grew long, your hair got thick, your breasts got to be twice their regular size. You started showing at fifteen weeks and quickly transitioned into maternity clothes, which accentuated the bump and made you feel more feminine.

You took long baths, ate spinach daily, got pedicures under the excuse that you didn't want to be footsore later on. You basked in the glory of allowing attention to fall upon you.

This is how it started: you pitter-pattering ever so gently down the path that you had known was yours from the beginning. A house, a man, a future: nothing out of the ordinary but it was extraordinary enough, you thought. Because in the space between work assignments and homemade meals you now had a purpose: a life-- not just the baby's but yours, as well-- was growing inside and all around you.

It didn't come all of the sudden, the fear. It was a trickling of anxieties and insecurities, a few whispered words that turned into a dictionary, a novel, a storyline that

inebriated your thought process, infiltrated your peace. It slid in slowly, this growing, gross acknowledgement that something could go wrong—tales of miscarriages, stillbirths, umbilical cord nightmares, chapters on premature delivery, emergency C-sections—all of it found a home in your conscience, in your expanding awareness of the possibility of imperfection.

It started with education but turned into a sickening churning that happened only at night when the lights were out and you were alone, when your husband was asleep or away, when there was nothing but the sound of moving air outside your window and no light but the dull glow of a streetlamp outside. Then you would stare at the ceiling and rub your belly and feel something like doom growing inside of you. You'd try to brush it off or change your mind, think of something else, but the sleepless nights that started accumulating only magnified the dread that was seeping under your skin like a disease.

*

You've been at the hospital for over an hour, now. They come in a team and tell you—don't ask—that they're moving you from the ER to the delivery wing. You feel tears on your cheeks as they unplug the bags and monitors attached to you.

In the elevator you puke twice. You try to say sorry but spit up more, inviting half a dozen hands upon your face and neck as they wipe you down and sit you up and tell you in a dozen different ways that it's okay.

In your new room, a nurse in a blue suit brings you cold water and encourages you to sip. You try, you gag, and she returns with ice, which you suck as you stare at the ceiling and breathe through your nose. The room is glaringly white and from inside the insular bubble of nausea and growing pain it's all you are aware of: a dizzying, electric

reflection of florescent lights on plastic tile and the headache it produces in you.

*

You eventually told your husband; you said it to him in front of a fire in mid-October, your belly sticking out of the top of your pajama pants. You were sipping a cup of tea and reading and when you set the book down he looked up at you. *I have a bad feeling,* were the words you said. *All of these stories.*

He sat next to you that night and listened, somewhat confused, infinitely patient to your, in his opinion, mild concerns. It was the process of a woman, he thought, to worry like this. A stage that would pass after a few days of handholding, of back rubbing, of extra doctor assurances. He promised to go to appointments with you and replied to your doubts in the car rides home by restating whatever had been said by the men and women in uniform: that the baby was healthy, that you were healthy, that there was nothing more you could do to ensure a safe birth than what procedures you already had in place.

He told you all of these things but watched, first for days and then weeks, finally months, as his words and the reports of others fell off you like water—swept away by your rattling of fears and premonitions.

What was it that you saw? In your dreams it was a stillbirth—a baby with staring, bulging eyes, yellow skin that melted at your touch. During the day it was whatever you could find on the internet—your new job, this obsession—blogs for grieving parents, for parents of children with birth-related deformities, for families who spent months in the NICU or lost the child before it even became one.

All of these stories, these tales of horror that you scanned through the dimly lit computer screen in your home office, they compiled within you, stacked like papers

against a wall, evidence of what could go wrong. And once you spelled it out, when you verbalized these fears, made extra appointments, sought specialists—then it became real, and knowing became a sudden and desperate need that couldn't be filled.

*

In your body you feel a small, squeezing pulsing. It rises and falls with your breathing, so that all of you—even your fingers and toes—feels like one huge heartbeat, contracting and releasing and contracting again.

A dozen uniformed men and women come into the room, one after another, each carrying a separate clipboard and administering different tests. Most throw back the sheet, dive in with one contraption or another, eyes darting between your body and the computers that translate the news. They stab you, prod you, take things from you, inject you without asking. They come, they do their business, they speak to each other, they leave.

You overhear them say "blood pressure," "EKG," "dilated." You hear the rummaging of utensils, of metal on metal pans. The snapping of plastic gloves on wrists, the crinkling of hospital sheets and gowns as strangers crunch around your pelvis, moving closer to the source.

*

By month six the doubt that filled you had become a constant, trickling leak of trust, which only grew and deepened as you sought answers and got nothing satisfying in return.

You blamed the doctors in their angelic white robes. They held clipboards and made little eye contact, they sat on swirling leather chairs while you waited, half-naked,

to be seen. They tapped their pens while you talked, cocked their heads before turning to the computer to log your concerns. They recycled phrases of research-based reassurance and used charts to tell you how you were.

It was no surprise that you lost hope, lost confidence in them… but as the weeks went by your resolve weakened, and the wilderness of thoughts grew within you.

Though he, your husband, stood by you. He watched you, didn't he? He held your hand, massaged your feet, helped you focus on what was to come. He took you to playgrounds to bask in maternal giving. He came home from work with new nursing gadgets, teething toys, baby blankets. That's how it was in the beginning—you the victim, he dutifully at your side. But at some point—frustration mounting, fear of incoming grief consuming you—you pushed him away, too. You knew it was wrong but couldn't stop it. You were alone in this, you said. He was not living it, could only be an observer, and so you decided that he could not come with you. Because though it was his baby it was not his baby—not yet—for only you knew and only you, ultimately, could be responsible.

*

The pain is nearly constant, the sheets underneath you, wet. You struggle against an invisible hand that clenches fistfuls of your intestines, that turns your stomach into a figure eight. You're moaning, that much you know. You're not sure what time it is but the room is getting lighter.

A set of nurses who've been assigned to you encourage you to roll to one side; they rub your back, your feet. They point to the machine next to you as you seize and writhe and cry out. They monitor your everything levels and assure you that you're doing fine.

It's here in the early morning amidst the nitpicking care of strangers that you admit to yourself what's happening. You look around, see without denial where you are.

The nurse is speaking to you now but you don't hear. You pay attention only to the screaming coming from inside of you—it's asking questions, demanding answers. It's yelling like a rabid animal, pounding its fists and slamming on tabletops and screeching about the injustice, the insanity that has been the past seven months of your life. It pushes away kindheartedness and sneers at happy stories—it mocks hope, bites at vulnerability, rejects its inclusion into anything.

It wrings a tension inside your center and up into your throat that releases upon the emission of a long, low howl—a sorrowful cry that echoes in the plastic room and sounds so strange that they surround you.

*

And so he left.

He loved you, he said, but he had a business trip planned in California and was going to stay an extra few days, just to catch up with friends there, to soak up the sun, relax.

You watched him pack his suitcase from the other room and didn't complain. It was a gray afternoon and you felt all right. You sipped from a mug of tea at the kitchen table and listened to his footsteps in the bedroom, his excitement tangible though he did his best to hide it.

The click of his briefcase told you it was time. You let him come to you. He set his bags down and leaned over you, pushed your hair to the side and kissed your neck, turned you around in the chair and pulled you up. You tried to resist but he embraced you like he

did when you were first married, all of you engulfed by him.

He held you back at arms length, stared you square in the eye and said, *I love you*. You looked down and mumbled the same, tried to hide your eyes from his gaze while he bent his knees and peered up at you.

When the door clicked shut you sat down inside a growing bubble of shame. The guilt of your demanded isolation sat heavy in your stomach. You saw it in his eyes, the effect of months spent trying to bring you back from whatever precipice you were standing upon. And there he was, suitcase and wistfulness in hand, still the man you married, standing patiently at the gates for whenever you would come back. He was biding his time, trying to understand, and that presence summoned the former you—the enthusiastic, the naïve—and by yourself in the kitchen you met her and realized for the first time how different you had become.

*

From a distant land outside your body you hear movement and the sound of voices. They're instructing you, now, telling you when to breathe and when to lie back. There's a pulling and pushing sensation, pressure in every part of you below your chest.

Frantic voices rise around you. Activity triples. The door swings constantly with the influx of hurried traffic. Machines of varying sizes dance and jump beside you. Flashing robots fight for space while nurses reach through them to get to you.

The beeping to your right gets louder, more urgent. It speeds its pulse while a nurse checks it, switches dials on and off. She yells numbers to the doctor who bends like an archaeologist between your legs.

*

For the first time in eight months, you are pain free. Around you exist no hospital beds, no nurse staff. You are not a patient anymore, not a wife, not a problem.

Your mind is still. Your body works in complete harmony, and the sensation of blood coursing through your veins is warming, soothing. You follow a drop from your heart to your feet and back again. You marvel at its circular journey.

You wonder how you hadn't noticed this before-- the sheer magic of floating inside time and space. Without touching you feel your hair, your face, your knees, your perfectly flat, unpregnant belly. You can't help but smile. A laugh erupts from the core of you and echoes like a drop of water in a pond.

Here there is no desire. Here there are no expectations.

The reverberations are endless.

You sit inside this bubble and wait for nothing. Free from the obligations of the past, from the weighty sensation of being. You lift your arms behind your head and feel a wave like water run up and down your body. You breathe in deep for the first time in as long as you can remember. You let it go.

It's then that you hear the crying. It's far away at first, a call from a foreign land. You try to shrug it off but your mere attention to it draws you closer.

You approach it out of instinctual curiosity as the wail gets louder, more urgent. You hear the fear in it. You hear urgency in several different voices around it, around you, and remember in a jolt where you are.

And it's then that you feel the extreme deformity of your body. You open your eyes to a massacre. Blood coats the sheets and towels around you. Splatters of it cake your thighs, smears of it on your chest, your arms. Your head is soaked, hair itchy on your

neck, and that's when the pain hits you-- searing, ripping through you from the center of your being.

You are heavily drugged, that you recognize immediately. But you don't float; you sink, so heavy you can't even move your legs.

You panic. You yell out slobbery words. You thrash, try to push aside the devices that surround you. The needles in your arms, your hands, the tubes in your nose-- all of it has to go.

You are mid-yell when dozens of bodies swarm you. They push you hard into the bed, hold your hands and legs down, talk rapidly, angrily-- meanwhile, that horrible wailing persists from the other side of the room-- and then everything gets hazy and everything goes black.

*

Can you hear me?

A tiny sliver of light. Two dark figures hovering.

They set their hands on you and you turn your head, move your feet, feel the huge soreness between your legs. You groan.

Lick your lips if you can hear us.

You try to respond but nothing happens.

Let's get the doctor in here.

He enters in a burst through the door. You open your eyes a little more, watch him set his clipboard down beside you. It rattles the metal table.

Hi there, he says to you in a loud voice. *How are you feeling?*

You swallow.

Are you in pain?

You poke your tongue at the gluey wall of your lips. They open a crack.

Let's increase her dosage, he says to the nurse.

She spins a dial by your bed and soon after you are gone.

*

You wake at night to the sound of stuttering breathing. You move your fingers, your toes. You suck in air through your nose, start unclenching your jaw.

Somebody touches your right arm, but they don't fiddle with your IVs. They don't adjust the blanket over you or ask you to rate your pain. He rubs your arm slowly, gently, the way he always has. He holds your hand in his and moves his thumb left and right, back and forth over your fingers.

You open your eyes and look at him. He tries to smile, offers you a sip of water. It spills down your chin and he wipes it off, wipes down the whole of your face, smoothes your hair, pulls it off your neck. You close your eyes and let him.

You lie in silence for you don't know how long. You listen to your breathing, only faintly aware of his presence. Then you remember.

You open your eyes, stare at him.

I heard crying, you say.

He puts his hand on your cheek.

It was her? you say.

He adjusts his seat, scoots closer to you. He looks down, and when he lifts his head he's smiling.

SATYA: Truthfulness

"Be more authentic and more real."

Times Square Lights

It was nighttime when they left. The city was awash in electricity: streetlamps, traffic lights, snaking rivers of automobiles upon asphalt; bulbs burning in hundred-floor apartment and office buildings alike; dim, red hues spilling out from restaurants, pubs and cafes; all tones and angles of beams striking each other, illuminating all.

They were used to this. One adapts to these things in a city. They had learned to tune it out, the constant stimulation that would have otherwise disrupted and disturbed them. They had devised subtle, unconscious ways of ignoring it—the lights and the noise and the rush of human activity—and as they left their ten-story dormitory building and walked into the night they linked arms and remained enclosed in the bubble that protected them from the world.

It was a Friday night, winter. The temperature hung around thirty degrees, but they had promised each other that they would spend the evening off campus, so they bundled themselves—thick coats hanging down over short skirts and tights—and were now on their way.

There were three of them. They lived on the same floor and had met that way this year, their first at university. They came from different parts of the country but, by chance or fate, had found each other within the first few hours of school and had stayed together since.

They marched towards the subway line and chattered to one another about the usual things that college freshman chatter about: upcoming due dates, rigid professors, cute classmates with whom somebody exchanged a flirtatious word.

Around them, Friday night traffic—both foot and car—swirled. Each restaurant they passed seemed to be at max capacity. Couples, groups of friends came laughing out of their doors, fed and wined and falling over each other on their way to whatever next destination they had. Music jangled through glassed-in café fronts while groups of smokers stood outside, huddled under rising clouds that leaked continuously into the night.

It was at this point that one of the girls—a tall brunette—turned to face the others, pulling them into a small circle under a storefront canopy. She was from Massachusetts and was used to being in charge.

"You guys," she said. "Do we have a plan for tonight? For, like, if something happens?"

The shortest one of the group, a strawberry-blonde, frowned.

"What do you mean, *happen*?" she said. She was homely compared to her friends, stubby feet and thick palms and a throaty nasal voice. "What is going to happen tonight?"

"Oh, I don't know," said the tall girl.

"What are you planning for?" said the third. She was a dark-eyed girl with short-cropped hair. She walked with a slight hitch in her gait (the high-heel shoes certainly didn't help this). She had been raised in a small, southern Ohio town amongst cornfields and horses, and so was still adjusting to the chaos of city life and felt a pang of nerves shoot through her at her friend's vague suggestion.

The leader sighed and rolled her eyes. She was bored with her friends already. They were only in the second week of their second semester, but she had high hopes for herself. She had heard stories of New York; now she expected New York to deliver.

"Oh, I don't know," she said. "Like, if we meet some people. Or if *one* of us meets some people."

The wind kicked up and whipped their cheeks. They huddled closer, pulling the collars of their coats over their faces and huffing hot air against their skin. The Ohioan's nerves subsided a bit at the recognition of her friend's insinuation.

"Shouldn't we all stay together?" said the redhead. "Like, make sure we go to the bathroom together and watch each other's drinks and everything? Isn't that what you're supposed to do?"

The Ohioan nodded in agreement, though she kept her gaze down. She knew she should be ashamed for being nervous; she'd been dreaming of the city for years—ever since she was a young teenager and had discovered its existence—but it had surprised her in its enormity and strangeness.

The three of them made a point to leave college culture each weekend—to find some new gem that they could take back to class with them, stories with which to wow their peers—but tonight would be different. They had recently acquired IDs and were planning on putting them to use, partly in celebration of the redheaded girl's birthday.

"Oh my God, you two," said the brunette, standing over her friends with her hands on her hips. "You're both acting like we're going on a mountain expedition or something. We'll be fine, okay?" She shifted onto one foot and sighed. "Let's just get to

the bar and see what happens." She turned them all in the direction of the subway line and they headed off again as a single unit.

Even in the cold the city doesn't sleep. Despite the way the wind funnels between buildings and beats across innocent faces, despite the accumulated brown and gray slush that swallows boots of children during the day and ladies' shoes at night, city dwellers head out and stay out. You don't move to New York watch TV, after all.

This what the Ohio college student was thinking as she traversed the narrow sidewalk passageways that opened and closed around her, moving human bodies for gates. Here, man pays no attention to the moods of the weather—an island nearly impenetrable, even by mother nature—and so learns to live with little concern for whatever is happening outside his window.

We are as disconnected from the earth here as we could possibly be, thought the girl. In rural Ohio, weather was synonymous with life. She felt a pang of homesickness as she saw, in her mind, acres of yellow fields, century-old farmhouses, Amish-built bank barns, miles of pasture space left open and vacant to just be.

Home: it was humble, but it was what she knew. She felt herself sinking into a bit of sadness, but caught herself. Rural Ohio, she thought quickly, might be beautiful, but in the country one has no nightclubs, no elite college students, no endless train loops to ride. One has no gourmet food, sports leagues, Sunday picnics in the shadows of some of the world's most tremendous towers.

New York City—on this relatively small stretch of land lays wait enough experiences to fill thousands of lifetimes. Here exists so many vast and differing human

beings, each with their own stories that bounce in between them, checker across city streets, zigging and zagging until they rose into real people with real lives and real histories, all of which she could feel everywhere she went. The Ohioan saw herself here, too—endless potentiality stretching out in front of her as dozens of tangents upon which she could choose to walk or not walk, depending on what she wished. The city was a playground; the city was meant for discovering; and whatever slices of it she could access existed then for her and her alone, and the thought sent chills through a place inside of her that even the cold couldn't reach.

The other girls had visited Manhattan from the time they were little. Living nearby and having been raised by people who cherished things like plays and museums and artwork, the redhead and brunette had spent at least one weekend a year in New York for as long as they could remember. For this reason they were better prepared than their third member for college life in the city, and repeated exposure rendered them much less impressed.

They therefore thought little about their current place in things—though visiting and living in a place are two very different experiences, and they were learning this, no doubt—but their familiarity with things like the train lines or the geographical locations of neighborhoods safe to explore had given them an early foothold, and thus extra security as they took on the town this night as first-time independent people.

The girls welcomed the heat of the subway platform, dank and dark as it was, and felt themselves melting further as they found seats on the train and rubbed palms and thighs together.

"All right," started the brunette. "Are you guys ready?" She looked at the other two expectantly. "You're not going to act weird, right? When we get there, just smile and hand the guy your ID. It's really not a big deal." She was speaking in a quiet tone to avoid the attention of nearby strangers, which added to the intensity of her words.

"Yeah, of course," said the redhead. She looked in rapt attention at her wise friend and felt a pang of desperation run through her. Since when had the brunette known so much about breaking the law? The redhead couldn't remember a time when any of them had confessed to a sin as egregious as this—but maybe there was something about the girl that she didn't know. "We're obviously not going to make a scene out of it," she said, a bit defensively. "And the worst that can happen is that they say 'no,' right?"

The Ohioan leaned forward to hear the answer.

"Yup," said the brunette. "But it's Friday night in New York City. Nobody's going to care about us."

They sat back in their seats. From the outside one might have thought of them as best of friends—their physical closeness, the gossiping and phone-checking that usually interrupted any hint of stillness or melancholy amongst them—but there on the train, whether from the sudden woozy heat or the drinks they had had before leaving, each girl drifted off into her own thoughts, casting a warm glow of silence over them.

The brunette stared at the ground and imagined all that was to come—not just tonight, but every day and night of the next three and a half years. She was beautiful and knew it, and in her mind ran different scenarios of the wonderful experiences she was bound to have—the rooftop bars and cave-like wineries, the art shows and rock concerts… She imagined Wall Street hopefuls, law students, model hipsters,

undiscovered musicians, all of whom would, in their own time, know her and admire her as she took on the city, piece by piece. She had no doubt that the world that would greet her as she greeted it: with full confidence in the other's greatness.

In the redhead's mind played out the scene that was just before them: the entranceway to the Times Square sports bar, which she had picked as her birthday destination. She watched the three of them stand in front of the bouncer like children waiting for their turn on a fair ride, asking in girlish voices to please, sir, let us in tonight. How foolish they would look if they were sent away. Already she could feel the eyes of the crowd outside staring them down as they walked away. *How laughable*, they would say to each other. *What stupid, silly girls.*

The redhead felt herself tightening at the thought of it, and leaned against the Ohioan for support. She dared not bother the other with her fears, but the girl from the country might well understand her reservations. Her friend leaned back against her and nudged her in a friendly way.

On the train with them was a fine selection of the diversity of New York: an older woman wearing a headscarf, a teenage boy with massive headphones hanging around his neck, a man with a small child on either side of him. The Ohioan studied these people, wondering where they came from, where they were going.

Home, she imagined—most of them were going home.

At her own house back in southern Ohio, she'd curl up with a book on a night like this, no doubt dreaming of the city. She'd ignore her little brother and close the door to her bedroom to drown out the noise of the TV—her parents started watching at 7pm each night—and would bury herself in somebody else's story, distracted only by wandering

thoughts of a future life that would look so completely different from what she had always known. And yet tonight, even in the excitement of the evening and the anticipation for the events to come, she felt a part of her longing for the warmth and comfort of the familiar and safe, for the life that had nurtured her so carefully into being.

It was a two-block walk from the subway to their final destination. The girls trotted along the sidewalk as much as they could, hopping over puddles and slush banks, dodging strangers.

The Times Square area was bustling with activity, and the closer they got to its core, the denser the street became. They turned a corner and found themselves facing it, the center of the world itself, and stopped in unison to gape.

They'd been there several times before, even at night, but the Square's novelty hadn't yet worn out. It was, to each girl, the defining piece of Manhattan, the place from which all life and activity on the island came—and however wrong they were about this, they felt in that moment that they stood witness to modernity and civilization and all the luxuries that came with it. On a big screen above them ran several movie trailers, ads for hair products and makeup lines. Nearly naked men and women glared seductively down at them from giant billboards—see three underdressed girls huddled together, looking up with doe-eyed expressions at the massive images surrounding them—and all of this stretched down every illuminated street as far as their eyes could see.

Times Square is a cacophony of colors. Every shade of red and orange and yellow flashes and blinks and run laps around huge screens, brand logos stamped like tattoos on storefront canopies, metal street signs wave from under the snowfall on tall metal posts,

interspersed between faces of beautiful strangers pasted onto every surface or wall or glass available.

The entire square was a dizzying hub of lights and movement, and there at the fringes of it all stood the girls, feeling more than ever that they were witnesses to something great, something much bigger than themselves.

"Wow," said the girl from Ohio.

"Yeah," said the brunette.

The Ohioan's gaze found the M&M store, and she looked admiringly at the two-story candy towers that housed millions—billions—of chocolate pieces. Every shade you could imagine, they have, she thought to herself. A rainbow in the middle of the night.

"Sometimes I still can't believe we're here," said the brunette. It was the first and last thoughtful statement she made that evening.

"Yeah," said the Ohioan. The redhead nodded in agreement.

They stood like that for another few moments before, in a sudden jolt, the energy of the place hit them. They looked at each other with round eyes and growing, gaping grins before bursting into cackles, the meaning of which only they could know.

"Let's go!" cried the brunette. She grabbed the arms of the other two and they bounced their way down the sidewalk, laughing and teasing and flirting with each other as girls do.

They found the place—a big sports bar half a block from the square—in a matter of minutes and joined the line of people waiting outside. They certainly weren't the only young people wanting entrance; the brunette scanned the crowd with determined eyes and, to her joy, found absolutely nothing lacking. There were some older folks, sure—a

fair amount of thirty-somethings in relatively conservative dress—but there was no shortage of college kids, either. Girls and boys just a few years her senior stood in groups on all sides of them. She could hear the baritone laughing of young men and it sent shivers of anticipation through her.

The girls chatted excitedly with one another for several minutes before the cold and the monotony of waiting began setting in. The redhead could feel her body stiffening, though it may have been from the fear of rejection rather than the temperature. Around her were groups of what appeared to be very confident, comfortable city people: people whose daily lives consist of activities like this. It was no deal to them to be here. She pondered this and felt increasingly like an outsider as they grew nearer to the bouncer at the head of the line.

She turned to the Ohioan to ask a question about something she hadn't yet considered—what they would tell people they met about their age and year in school?—would they tell lies to potential new friends?—but was struck silent at the look on the girl's face.

The Ohioan had her back turned from the bar and was staring at something on the other side of the street. The redhead followed her gaze and immediately identified the source of her friend's shock: in an alleyway on the other side of the street was a dark figure leaning into a dumpster. The girls watched as the figure pulled something from it, slid down against the wall and started taking hungry bites.

The redhead glanced back at her friend and saw that her expression had faded into something that resembled shock.

"Hey," she said gently. The Ohioan looked at her. She'd seen homelessness before, of course—you couldn't spend a semester in New York without encountering the vast economic disparity that existed in every modern city—but there was something about this figure that shook the girl. She turned back to watch him eat while a pit opened in her stomach and started to churn.

Perhaps it was that she was still tipsy from earlier drinks; perhaps the booze had made her too sensitive, too receptive to the suffering of others. She tried to wrangle free of the heaviness settling around her, but there was no denying what was happening right before them.

The figure ate in near stillness. His knees were pulled up to his chest, feet hardly visible under the folds of coat that hung from him. In another place—even in some corners of New York—she wouldn't have noticed him in a dark and dingy alleyway like this. It was something that she had probably passed by a hundred times, she realized—completely oblivious to her surroundings, and not only because of the particular strands of lightlessness that hid figures in places too dirty and secret for her to know.

But here in the glow of the Times Square lights, even the unseen are visible. And the Ohioan saw. The slumped figure was lit entirely in the glow cast from the burning reds and yellows, and so he sat in complete visibility despite his location. The Ohioan swore she could almost make out the M&M rainbow glint its dozens of hues over the dumpster and onto the overflow garbage pile beside it.

She became conscious of the chattering crowd around her. She moved with it as it pushed on hundreds of shuffling feet towards the open door of the bar, though she felt less a part of anything as she ever had. A woman laughed a fake, plastic laugh as a male

counterpart joked in a deep and sarcastic voice. The conversation was not intelligible but it needn't be; every word spoken by the waiting crowd blended together and rung inside the girl's ears, churning into something indecipherable that disrupted her thoughts and unsteadied her even further.

She looked back across the street and saw that the dark figure had wrapped his arms around his knees, condensing his form to keep warm.

"Hey," said the redhead again. "You okay?"

The brunette looked up from an engrossing text-message conversation. "Who's okay?" she said.

The redhead glanced at her tall friend and nodded at the Ohioan, who turned to face her friends. "There's a homeless person over there," she said.

"Where?" said the brunette. The Ohioan pointed.

"Oh," said the girl, once she had spotted him. There was a moment of silence between them before she said, "It's okay. Trust me. They're everywhere."

The Ohioan paused. "Everywhere?" she said. There certainly hadn't been many homeless people in her town. Those who struggled received lasagnas or spaghetti dinners from neighbors; that's how it worked.

"Yeah," said the brunette. "For sure. The city tried to get rid of them but it's, like, practically impossible. It's too bad, really. Ruins the vibe."

The country girl looked at her friend, half gaping, and the redhead, ever the diplomat, just shrugged and winced.

"What?" said the brunette, readying for confrontation. "It's the truth, you know. Whether you like it or not." She motioned to the alleyway. "There's nothing you can do

for those people." Her phone let out a loud ding and she turned back to it, her face cut into sharp angles by the blue light that shone up from her palm.

The Ohioan stared blankly at the third, silent member of their party. She could think of nothing to say in reply, but there wasn't any need. The girls had reached the front of the line. With one last glance at the solitary figure, the Ohioan followed her friends in giving a polite "hello" to the bouncer, who greeted them with a silent nod. He studied their IDs one by one, and one by one motioned with a short jerk of the head that they were permitted to go on. It was as simple as that, and as they walked—a single unit again—past the man and through the doors of the bar, they exchanged looks of silent surprise at the simplicity of the moment they for so long had prepared.

The bar was not a revelation or a shock. It was simple, a long oak bar on the left side of the room that stretched nearly the entire length of the place. In quieter evenings, the dozens of leather-bound stools would be tucked neatly under the overhang, but tonight every single one was employed or strewn about the alcove. The right side of the room sunk several steps from the bar, and housed the tables and booths that made up the rest of the seating area. Each open wall was home to at least five or six wide-screen TVs, and the Ohioan could make out several different games playing at the same time.

The bar was packed—the young, the old, groups of animated friends and loners hunkering over a single drink—and the girls spent a moment taking it all in. It was not only the brave new world that lay before them that rendered them silent but also that they had been accepted into it without question.

It was here, near midnight on this particular Friday, that these three college kids experienced what so many do in their first few years of early adulthood: without knowing it, they had crossed into a world of unlimited freedom, of endless opportunity. Whatever chains had previously bound them—parents, families, restrictive rules, limiting, conditional fears— in this single act, sprung loose. Theirs was now, quite instantly, a new life, and they waited there on the cusp of it, breathless.

They looked at each other, each girl thinking the same thing, and it spread across their faces and awoke in their eyes in unison. And whatever coldness the nighttime walk had cast upon them—including the heaviness that bore itself into the sweet Ohio girl—was shaken off and immediately forgotten.

They dropped their arms from each other and stepped forward into the scene as individuals, disconnected for the first time that night. Youth may stay attached, but adults operate on their own and on their own terms, and so as the girls made their way to the bar, they drifted subconsciously away from each other.

The night had begun. They bought their first drinks and melted into the scene—no longer themselves but members of a crowd that undulated according to its own desire. They found a standing table in the alcove, set down their coats and purses and sipped and chatted with each other as if they were the most interesting people on earth.

It wasn't long before they gathered some attention—some stray men approached before whole groups did, small parties of girls and boys—and so in this manner the college students proceeded into the night, faking their way through myriads of conversations and people.

The girls eventually felt comfortable enough to leave their table and began mixing with the crowd themselves, and so they did. The tall one received most of the attention; she learned how to receive drinks without paying for them and how to be served immediately upon approaching the bar if she had to buy her own. And though she was full of talk, she actually had no desire to meet any one person in particular, and so she moved from stranger to stranger, gracing numerous hopeful men with her delightful and entertaining presence, guaranteeing none of them anything other than a conversation and a six-dollar debt.

It was no matter, though, for they all received her warmly, and she settled into a sort of rhythm that had no meter or measure at all, but under the influence of several glasses of wine felt most predictable and sane.

Not far behind her was the Ohioan, who had long forgotten the episode outside the bar and was well on her way to drunkenness. She laughed loudly and flirted unabashedly with a boy she had met—a tall, dark Fordham student, a senior—and he kept her going with a steady supply of whiskey and Cokes, which he also bought for the redhead, kindly, who stuck close to her girlfriend's side and did her best to make small talk with the rest of the Fordham student's peers.

The redhead was tipsy, sure, but she felt, as she watched the other two loosen and descend into the flow of the night, that it would be her role this evening—her birthday evening—to stand watch over them. She would have fun, sure, but being a bit apprehensive of people in general, she could not in good conscience keep up with the other two in their drinking. They grew wilder and more carefree by the moment. She sipped from her whiskey and felt the coils of anxiety tighten around her.

The three of them went on in this fashion for several hours, until, at a quarter to two in the morning, the boy with whom the Ohioan was now exchanging sloppy kisses made a noise about heading out for a cigarette.

"I only smoke when I'm drunk," he told the Ohioan. "And I'm drunk."

A group of five of them gathered their coats and walked out of the bar. The cold air sobered them. They zipped themselves up and popped hoods over heads, huddling in a group for warmth. The redhead had looked around for the brunette before they left, but to no avail. She hadn't seen her in several minutes and was starting to worry. She knew the girl could probably hold her own, but still—New York City, Times Square, alone?

She watched as the Ohioan swayed and then leaned against the Fordham boy for support. How many had she had? The redhead had kept count of her own—three, so far—and while she certainly felt the booze working, her nerves kept her closer to sober.

"Do you want one?" the boy said to the girls.

"Yeah," said the Ohioan.

"Do you?" the Fordham student said to the redhead. "Do you smoke?"

"Oh," she said, casting her eyes down.

"No," said her drunken friend. "She's good." She looked over at her friend and said, "Right?"

The boy, who had lit his own and was cupping the flame to light the Ohioan's cigarette—which hung limply in her lips, she completely at a loss as to what to do with it other than to replicate that which she had observed in others—gave a stifled laugh. "So you're just going to stand out here in the cold and watch us?" he said to the redhead.

Her blush deepened, and she was grateful for the cold air that hid the shame crawling on her cheeks.

"Hey," said the Ohioan, brought back to her senses for a fraction of time. "She's cool." She shuffled closer to her friend and leaned against her, sharing a moment of companionship before taking her first inhale.

It burned her throat but she repressed a cough and blamed her eyes watering on the cold. She hadn't felt anything like it before—the dry hotness that was cooking her from the inside out. It took one more puff for her to feel it, a whole new drunk, and she swayed again under the influence of this second sort of buzz.

From the outside see this: five young people standing in the midst of a bustling city night, shoulders near touching in a perfect circle of exclusion and anonymity. See trails of smoke rising from outstretched fingers, see boys smiling, laughing, being boyish, while girls looked on in appreciation. See them all descend into hysterics and crowd closer, ever closer, keeping not just the chill of the city away but everything and anything else that didn't directly apply to them.

The Ohioan stood tall. A wash of what felt like pride came over her. From humble beginnings she had risen to meet the city. Despite its confusion and chaos, despite hesitation and fear, here she was, among it—no, a *part* of it—and the thought of it sent a surge of confidence over her. Who was to say she didn't belong? Nobody, she realized, in this vast and diverse metropolis, could define her as anyone but who she presented herself as.

It was with this thought that her face cracked open; she could contain her excitement no longer.

The boy from Fordham saw her change and said, with smile on his face, “What are you laughing at?”

The Ohioan burst into true laughter and said, “I don’t know. You. This. Everything.” She waved dramatically with her arms, took another puff of the cigarette, and threw back her head in the delight of sudden freedom.

The boy laughed back and, stomping out his cigarette, threw her over his shoulder and carried her back towards the bar. She looked around at her friends and surroundings and felt that she was seeing it all from an entirely new vantage point.

The city was hers, as far as she was concerned—and yet as soon as the thought went flitting through her head it lost its impulsion, for what did she see from over her boyfriend’s shoulder but the shadowy figure in the alleyway, hugging himself just the same as he had so many hours ago.

There comes a time in a night when the high wears off; the buzz grows thick, like molasses, and everything that you see and hear occurs through a screen of detachment, exhaustion. The body, no doubt, is craving rest, and a certain, huge heaviness hangs from you as if it’s intentionally slowing you down, asking for you to allow the part of you that’s been missing to catch up.

This is what the Ohioan felt in the final hour of the night’s debauchery. The free spirit feeling, the momentum that had gotten her uptown, gotten her drunk, that had swept her off her feet a mere hour ago, it was disappearing, a bottle with a steady leak. And despite her best efforts to convince herself that she was still having fun, that she was still

happy, she could focus only one thing now, and it weighed on her as heavily as it had before.

She glanced around the bar and felt a loathsomeness that would have surprised her if she hadn't been so tired. It was the noise more than anything that got to her—the TVs were still blaring sports information and the crowd at the bar had thinned only a little (and those who had stayed had gotten progressively drunker and louder)—and it dawned on her that they had been out for nearly an entire work day's worth of hours and that it was beyond time to go home.

The redhead, whose buzz had worn off hours ago, located the brunette. The Ohioan saw them approaching and fell into them with great relief.

"Let's go," she said, and that was all that the other two needed to hear. They snuck by the group of Fordham students—now belligerent and more obnoxious than ever—grabbed their coats and darted out the door without a word of goodbye.

The night hit them in the face, cold and shockingly calm. For the scene that had been just hours before a madhouse of lust and life, the city was transformed. Sure, there were taxis on the road and lights shining from inside every building, but the city—and so the girls, too—were cast under a stillness that is known only to those who wander in the earliest morning hours.

It would be a long haul back to the dorms, and the Ohioan was filled with dread at the thought of it. She longed suddenly—desperately, with a panicky pull in her throat—for the comfort of home, for the warmth and safety that she had always known. Her body craved the twin bed in her childhood bedroom. She wanted to draw the curtains shut and lie down for days; she wanted to wake to the sight of horses grazing in her neighbor's

field and to the sound of her brother's video games that echoed in the wall between their rooms.

In her mind—her spinning, drunken mind—a small war waged. She was exhausted; the city had captivated her with its shiny colors—she, a hypnotized bug to the light—and then it dropped her, forgot her, abandoned her now that she was tired and wanting to sleep. The place that had before offered her hope and joy now looked and felt like a concrete prison; it was wet and cold and inhospitable; it was unsafe, and even in the glow that no city ever loses she felt an incredible darkness cast over her.

The Ohioan followed her two friends across the street, dodging slush piles and brown puddles. She stepped onto the sidewalk and was about to trot up alongside them when she froze. Without realizing it, her friends had led her directly to the site that had been on and off her mind all night, and she had followed them blindly, too deep in thought to recognize where they were.

She looked at the mysterious figure and then at the two girls who walking away, entirely oblivious. The brunette was telling the redhead all she had done and encountered that evening, and they slipped around the corner with no knowledge of the predicament that held their friend behind.

The Ohioan didn't stop them. She looked around, desperate for some instruction as to what to do. She knew she was foolish for caring, but it was ten, maybe fifteen degrees outside. And this man, she thought, this man has been sitting out here for so long.

There was no one in the street; not a smoker outside the bar or any sign of traffic nearby. Somewhere in the distance a cop's sirens ran a couple of big whoops—a drunk driver getting pulled over, no doubt—and the young girl stood by the corner of the

alleyway and listened and looked and felt all around her, taking in what little was to be absorbed like a satellite.

She turned towards the man and took a few hesitant steps. His arms held his knees to his chest and his face was buried between his legs, so the girl could make out nothing about him other than what she had seen before. She paused and waited for a sign of life, saw that his coat was rising and falling ever so slightly, and so stepped nearer. When she was within arm's reach of him she stopped and assessed him once more. Now she could make out the battered, unlaced work boots hanging off his feet, the square pattern of his ragged jacket, the dark green of the sweatpants he wore.

"Sir?" said the girl. She got no response and looked about her one more time. Still nobody, nothing.

"Sir?" she said, a bit louder. She reached out and gave his shoulder a light squeeze. She could feel the bone of his shoulder under layers of clothes. Still he did not move, so she removed her hand and took a step back, wondering if this was some sort of sign from the universe that she'd be better off leaving him alone.

And yet she couldn't. In a gust of confidence she stepped in and shook the man awake.

"Sir, are you okay?" she said in a loud and commanding voice.

The man started. He pulled his head an inch off his knees, and she could see him blinking. He rubbed his eyes and looked around, and started a bit when he saw the girl.

He was surprisingly pleasant to look at. He had a weathered face, sure, but was clean-shaven and had a square jaw, upturned nose and large, even eyes. He looked down at himself as if he had to remember where he was, shifted slightly and said, "Ma'am?" He

stared out from under two winter beanies and the hood of his parka, but he could see her perfectly fine, and she, him, too.

"Uh," said the Ohioan. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry to bother you. I just—I thought—I was worried."

He said nothing.

"I saw you earlier tonight," said the girl, leaning away from him, readying herself to run. "I saw you a while ago and I was worried, you know... because it's so cold… and, well, anyway, I'm sorry to bother you. I just wanted to see if you were okay. I'll go now."

She turned, bright red with embarrassment, and was about to leave when he reached out and touched her with a gloved hand. She paused, still on the heels of her feet, and faced him.

He had blue eyes. They looked up at her without sadness. She noticed a small notch above his right eyebrow and laugh lines that looked like parentheses around his lips.

"You saw me," he said. His voice was deep, like it hadn't been used in a while, and he coughed a bit into his other hand.

"Um," said the girl. "Yeah. Yeah, earlier. We were out there—" she motioned to the bar—"and I saw you."

The man scanned the area, remembering, perhaps, where he was. His eyes locked on the bar's entrance and a flicker of recognition crossed his face.

"Ah," he said. "Partiers."

“Oh,” said the girl, after a pause. She looked around her again. From where he sat, the street certainly looked different. It was a blur of gray interrupted only by thick, muted yellow globes. Everything melted into each other, form and definition giving way to the homogenizing city grime that covered up defects and beauty alike.

Times Square was just around the corner—that was true—but from inside a lonely alleyway, she thought, lights like that are nothing but lies. What is this city but a façade, a giant distraction, if here in this desolate corner you remain alone, forgotten? She felt a flash of anger strike and bubble up inside of her, and she thought back with embarrassment about the silliness of her behavior in the hours prior, the displays of unabashed hopefulness that youth casts upon its victims.

She turned back to the man sitting on the ground beneath her and felt that somehow she had done him wrong.

“I don’t usually do stuff like this,” she said.

He smiled. “Oh?”

“Yeah,” she said. She paused, the images of the night flitting through her head once more. “I’m so sorry,” she said.

For what she was apologizing she had no idea. She owed him nothing; in fact, she owed him less than nothing. She was the only person who had considered him on this cold and miserable night, and yet as she stood there the words fell out of her mouth and she knew immediately that they were right and also that they would never be enough.

The man looked at her in silence. He sat back against the wall and let his arm fall from the girl.

“Oh, my dear,” he said, readjusting his hats on his head and zipping up the last centimeter of coat under his chin. “You’re going to have much more than me to be sorry about in this lifetime.”

She didn’t know what his words meant but she could tell that they hurt.

“Yes,” he said. He pulled his knees in tighter, rubbed his hands together and blew into them. He looked back up at the girl, who stood stock-still in something like surprise. “There’s a lot left for you, my dear,” he said. “So don’t go wasting your apologies on me.”

He chuckled a bit, dipping his chin into his chest to hide what seemed like ill-spirited laughter. The girl pulled her head back into her neck, her reaction to anything offensive or unpleasant. She was about to take a step away when he spoke up once more.

“But it’s nothing to worry about,” he said. “No, nothing to worry about at all. Everything will be fine.” He gestured in the direction of the bar with a flick of his wrist. The Ohioan wasn’t sure if he was talking to her or himself, and for a moment she hopped into the perspective of an outsider and she recognized the ridiculousness of what she was doing.

“Everything is forgiven,” he said. “You know that, yes? Everything is forgiven. All of it.”

A gust of wind whipped into the street and blew the Ohioan over a step. Her hair stood on its ends and danced until the chill got behind her ears, into the back of her skull. She placed her mittened hands at the top of her neck and felt the momentary luxury of warmth.

"You'll lose it all, first, you see," said the man. He stared up at her and she met his eyes with a mix of uncertainty and vulnerability, and then, without another word, he tucked his chin into his chest and curled back around himself.

The Ohioan could think of nothing to say. She stood over him, this strange, lonely man in his artificial cocoon. She searched her brain for words and found only the meekest of responses.

"Oh," she said softly. "Ok then." She was about to bid the man goodnight when she heard, from around the corner, the sound of girls' voices. Loud high-heel clops and swear words punctuated frantic calls that, the Ohioan immediately recognized, consisted of her name and her name alone.

They were looking for her. She turned to the man one last time. He had disappeared inside his clothing—hiding from the visible city—and she felt a pang of pity. Whatever he had done to land himself here, she certainly wouldn't do the same. His story wasn't hers, she thought, and it wouldn't be. She would be fine.

"Right, then," she said to nobody but herself.

She turned towards the voices and at that exact moment her friends rounded the corner and they yelled out in relief and sprinted towards her as fast as they could.

The girl from the country was no longer a country girl but the newest member of the greatest city on earth. She threw back her head and cackled at her disheveled friends as they came at her, half-laughing, half-terror-stricken and the hilarity of the sight of them hobbling on their heeled shoes ignited her. Without another thought she went towards them.

ASTEYA: Non-stealing

"Dissatisfaction with ourselves and our lives leads to an outward gaze."

This Madness

FRIDAY

Listen. I'm not sure what you're thinking of all of this, but I can assure you that leaving is not the right choice. I'm sitting at the table over which you and I have shared so many meals. And the flowers I bought you last week are still here. They're doing well, by the way. I was right that they do not like direct sunlight.

I'm having your leftover spaghetti Bolognese. Which I know you were saving for yourself, but it's going to go bad soon and we both know if there's one thing you hate, it's waste.

On an evening like this you'd tell me to turn down the record. Tonight is Simon and Garfunkel. Not your favorite, which I could never understand. They're timeless, Maura. Simply timeless.

And I'm sitting here, waiting, like a little fool. I'm looking out the window at your potted plants in the sill and thinking: is she just going to let them die?

Listen. I'm not trying to convince you to come back. I'm not pretending that you're not mad, that I didn't make a mistake. I understand you needing space. But I think you're being— I think you're being presumptive—perhaps childish—about what happened. Judgmental. And you've made an irrational—a sudden decision. An impulsive move. And we both know how these things usually work out for you. Right? Let's not pretend.

Last night when I told you about—Stephanie—you seemed calm. Reasonable. I explained. High school.

And the whole time I stood there in front of you—back against the wall, right here in this kitchen—you said nothing. Not a word. Which—if I'm being honest—was strange. You kind of just nodded along.

And I don't claim to know what's normal—how one *should* act in a situation like this—but your reaction—or lack thereof—was certainly disconcerting. It certainly seemed off.

And then—just like that—you picked up your bag and left. No goodbye. Very unlike you. And it stung at first—I'll admit that—but then I thought—I figured you'd be back.

Now, I'm not trying to nitpick—I know you hate that. But when I woke up this morning and you hadn't returned, I thought, *that's strange*. I thought maybe you had stayed at Marcy's or Dominique's and were walking in the woods with them, taking your favorite trail over the bridge where you sometimes see turtles. And I thought about going but I didn't want to chase you, didn't want to intrude. I respect you.

But here I am, twenty-four hours later—sitting here at this table, eating a cold dinner and wondering about you. And it feels ridiculous, if I'm honest.

I know this must be hard right now—but I promise you, your leaving will only make it worse.

SUNDAY

Yesterday I took the dogs to the park—both of them, their matching black leashes—and we walked your path and looked for you. They are worried, I have to admit. They can't seem to settle.

It was a nice day—a slight fall chill in the air—and I let them swim in the river—something you never do—but I figured if there's ever a time to break rules, it's now. They were soaking and muddy and I just laughed—laughed it off like I had not a care in the world.

I know you think I can't be trusted. No need to call me names, which I know you are prone to do. You think I'm still lying—or that I don't care—or that I'm omitting something for the sake of keeping things… discreet. But I assure you—I swear to you—you have the truth.

And don't you— Wouldn't you agree that my track record speaks for itself? Seven years of marriage and not one transgression. I've never so much as looked at another woman. You know that that's true. So don't you think that maybe—just maybe—you are overreacting?

MONDAY

I've called and texted and emailed. Hell, I even tried your mother. She heard my voice and hung up. She never did like me.

Your plants are withering—being outside in autumn is too much for them. And the dogs are in mourning. They stand at the door and watch it, hoping for you. Last night when I couldn't sleep I joined them. The three of us just sitting there, crossing our legs and fingers in hopes that you will appear on the other side.

A friend of ours came over last night. Cynthia, who you know has gone through something like this. Her husband—up and left—gone. I thought she might have a suggestion. A few words of advice.

We finished the spaghetti Bolognese—it had a deeper, almost marinated flavor to it that I thought complemented the red wine well. We talked mostly about her situation.

She was expecting you, of course, and when I explained why you were not there she was displeased.

She listened, which—I admit—was nice. I need company. You know. I've never been good on my own. And she stayed, but not after calling me a few names. Said you were too good for me. I can't say I disagree.

I tried to help her understand—Cynthia—about Stephanie—but she hardly had heard me before she said that, in fact, she didn't care for my reasons. I had to spend the rest of the evening cleaning, for I had bumped her without meaning to. Spaghetti on the floor and everything.

WEDNESDAY

Thank you for your text message. I appreciate hearing from you. I am glad you seem to be okay.

I don't, however, respond well to threats—so I ask that next time you contact me please consider your wording more carefully. It would be silly to throw this away.

Please remember that I have been by your side through everything, Maura. Through your schooling, your first jobs, your recent unemployment. Never have I

strayed. But don't you think for a second that my expectations have changed. My standards.

I have made one mistake. One mark on my record. And I am humble in all of the ways I should be.

And anyway, you of all people should have empathy. What would you call the last few years of your life? Perhaps not a failure. But you've certainly made a lot of changes. That's what I'd say. And not most of them were for the better—no arguing there.

When you failed your first driver's test, did I tease you? And when your boss let you go—finally, that spineless old trout—did I wave my paycheck in your face?

The point is that my indiscretion certainly does not warrant your complete dismissal of me. For years I have restrained my achievements so as not to diminish yours. I have paraded your successes and stifled mine. Quieted things you did not need to know. I was protecting you from your own mind, you see.

So I beg of you, my cherished one, do not address me in ways that do not fit. We have always been civil. Don't reduce us to something less.

Because two can play that game. And we're all only human, Maura.

I want you to think back to that chilly day near Thanksgiving. Two years ago. We were playing checkers in front of the fire. Charles was just a puppy.

I got a phone call. Do you remember? You were annoyed. Rather short with me, actually. It was from an unknown number—but as you might recall, I took it.

I told you it was a potential new client. I wasn't lying. She was looking for an attorney. She remembered my name from school. Is that so hard to believe?

She was going through a divorce herself. Wanted counseling. Nothing formal. A conversation between old friends over dinner. Is that so impossible to imagine?

That weekend you wanted to see a play—the one about the menopausal woman in love—and I had to politely decline. I have always been delicate with you. I have always been careful.

(To me you are infinitely fragile. All those nights you didn't want to be intimate—fine. Did I ever push you? Did I ever ask anything of you beyond what you could offer?)

I went to dinner with Stephanie and we discussed her separation. And then, yes—if you must know—we made love in the back seat of her Sequoia. It was passionate and a bit drunken, I'll admit. And after, of course, I was horrified with myself.

FRIDAY

Even the Rogers have noticed something is not right. They've stopped up twice to ask about the pounding. I tell them—that's just me walking. The music on loud.

I apologized—you know how I hate to disrupt our neighbors, especially the old and senile Rogers—but I suppose it wasn't enough. Our landlord called me yesterday. Said we have a month to get out.

Do you remember the story you told me about you and your friend Patrick? It was your junior year, high school.

You told me how the two of you eyed each other for months. We were talking about old crushes, you and I. Cataloging sexual experiences, as we were wont to do those months early in our courtship.

I know you remember—you and he—some miraculous twist of fate—running into each other on a Friday—a random, rainy Friday—summer break? Seventeen and all the chances in the world.

Stephanie and I—we aren't so different from you, you see. High school lovers that never got— We never had the encounter you had. Four years, neither brave enough to make a move. You know how I used to be. I've told you.

So do me the favor of entertaining the idea—just for a moment, please—that your night with *Patrick* never happened. Imagine those long hours in the early morning—that fog-filled car, your phones buzzing—relentless, worried calls from home—the rain spattered windows—the two of you moaning with all the passion two seventeen-year-old children can muster—

--Erase that all from your mind. Gone.

Imagine instead that this desire—this human need!— stays with you into college. And you can't help yourself from wondering about him: he at home, he eating breakfast, he undressed in the shower, he pleasuring himself at night… Your mind—your life—your waking thoughts consumed.

A full year: twelve months dedicated to a perfect stranger in some secret, silent way.

I'll have you know that my desire for Stephanie disappeared entirely the day I met you. This is true. She was gone, and you became the only one. *Mon cherie*, the apple of my eye.

But then—*then!*—against all odds—a twist of fate—and so many years later—this woman reappears. And she's desperate and lonely and perfectly vulnerable.

Tell me—tell me truly—what would you have done?

SATURDAY

Thank you for your phone call. Hearing your voice was an immense relief. I can't tell you how many awful scenarios have been through my head in the last few days. Reels of you getting picked up by some stranger in a bar. A trucker kidnapping you from the women's bathroom at a rest stop. Your body in a motel, rotting, fly-covered.

I appreciate and respect your desire to keep our conversation brief. You were, I have to tell you, a little terse. It hardly even sounded like you. Are you taking your medication?

And to answer your question—yes. I will be out of the apartment during the day on Monday. Some of us work, you might recall.

I can't say I appreciate or understand you coming to the house when I'm gone—but I do want you to have fresh clothing.

All this worrying has affected my productivity, I'll have you know. I'm hardly able to focus. My legs have started jiggling. Yesterday I had to excuse myself from a client meeting.

And the feedback has not been positive. Not positive at all.

SUNDAY

The day after I made love to her I could hardly look at you. The shame. You were especially radiant—that red dress, those black stockings—like you knew and intended to rub my sin deeper into me.

I called Stephanie immediately and told her I could not continue. Gave her the number of another attorney. Very unlike me.

But for you—for us—I did it. A huge settlement on the horizon, and I willingly let it go.

Of course she would have none of it. Stephanie. She cursed into the phone and refused.

You know how I love a fighter. Strong women, I'm weak at your knees. The hiss in your words and the sneer in your eyes only baits me.

So I let her win. Just like I've let you win so many times.

I'll have you know it was strictly professional. For quite some time. We met in my office only. My secretary can attest to that.

But of course, divorces are messy. And she was in a terrible state. We spent long nights quantifying possessions, dividing. And the money. No children, thank God.

TUESDAY

If you're going to leave me—which I'm assuming you are—based on how many items you removed from our apartment yesterday—you may as well have left the keys and taken your basil.

I'm not sure what your plan is, but I'm hoping you have one—a logical, step-by-step course of action—and so I'm assuming you have located a new, semi-permanent place of residence, and that you will not be sharing this address with me.

I went this morning to Marcy's house. Rang the doorbell and when nobody answered I tried the back door. Had to push through the screened-in porch to get to it. Left a note—there on the doorstep—so she knows I came, looking for you.

Somebody was home at Dominique's. I saw the curtains draw close as I approached. Don't think—and you should tell her this—don't think I didn't notice. But being the gentleman I am, I didn't knock for more than a few minutes.

And really—I understand the clothes, your bathroom necessities—and hell if I care about the dogs—get those brutes out of my house, I say—but our duvet? And the green vase? I ordered that from an antiques dealer especially for the ledge in our kitchen.

THURSDAY

Your mother, bless her heart, has blocked my number entirely. And your friends did the lovely service of reporting me to the police—which, I will tell you, was quite the amusement.

Sergeant Williams showed up on at our home last night. That's right. First the landlord and now a policeman.

Search warrant and all. For what they are looking I am not sure. Did you approve of this? Did your friends put you up to it? You have taken my belongings and my health and now are you seeking to finish me?

My darling, these actions, they are insane—completely insane—but I promise—I assure you—nothing cannot be forgiven. And if you come back—come back *now*—there is still hope.

All I've asked for is one conversation in which you and I can sit down—cordially, like adults—and speak about this matter from our hearts.

In the interest of full disclosure I will report to you that Stephanie has been to our house. Three days ago. She was not permitted within a foot of me except for a greeting embrace. She knows I am in mourning.

Over dinner I told her everything, and then we finalized her divorce. Twenty-two months of negotiations. Is this what you want?

Sergeant Williams found the holes in the walls interesting. I explained—the dogs—the balls. He jotted down a few words on his notepad. The place where the spaghetti spilled he touched with one outstretched finger. But the plate. I showed him. It's self-evident. And of course, Cynthia is fine.

You and I, I told him—nine years—seven married—and never more than two days apart. He did not appreciate my pressing him for details but I really cannot be bothered. Show me to her or be done with you, I say.

MONDAY

I received your papers today. Very speedy action for a coward—for a chronic non-decider like yourself. What are you thinking?

Need I remind you that everything you want is here within these walls? A clean place to sleep. Comfortable clothing. Food for cooking. What have I not provided?

And what, I beg of you, could I have more done to ensure your perfect, safe, tiny existence?

You think you have a right to leave because I cheated. Because some gallant woman not yourself offered to fuck your husband and he said yes. Nine years—nine years of unpredictable silence—incalculable moods—dangling your love in front of me like raw meat to a lion—and you expect me not to crack?

Maura I beg of you—*I demand*— You must end this. You know as well as I do that you cannot keep this up much longer.

And what, anyway, will you do without me? What job will keep you afloat? Don't make me revisit, pull from the pile the remains of your half-hearted ventures. Which, I suppose, you'd like to throw me into—us—this stupid marriage for which I have worked and sacrificed all—your happiness my silver platter—

Will you— for once—please come to your senses?

WEDNESDAY

I have been ordered by the courts to cease contact with you and so I will. I will vacate the property like the landlord has requested and I will answer the second round of questioning from the police—my women, both of them, missing.

I will mop up the various messes in the apartment and put my stuff in boxes and get out. And I will hang my head in defeat, Maura. I will hang my head for you.

I shall leave you with nothing, you should know. You won't get a penny. But take me back—remove these ridiculous bonds from my wrists, this infuriating silence you attempt to place upon me—undo this madness and all will be forgiven. You will be forgiven.

Stephanie is gone. Took her money and ran, it seems. So any perceived threat you had of her must dissolve now. It cannot, it will not, it should not continue.

I am violating the law with this letter and so will end it. But please, if you will: a final image, a single memory of us: Our third anniversary. Naples.

Do you remember the blue dress you wore?

That evening we dined at the steakhouse. We sat side by side on a red velvet bench overlooking the ocean. The walls were retracted, the salty breeze tickled our faces. Do you recall?

You had been silent for most of the day, but it didn't bother me. Three years you had been mine. Three years I had watched the indent around your finger grow deeper with the symbol of my love.

And if you remember: your straps. The blue silk straps of your thin and tantalizing dress—they kept slipping off your shoulders as you ate.

Your doting husband, for you he pushed aside his meal. That's right. He smiled at you instead, watched you sink your teeth into the bleeding cut again and again. For every bite you dipped your head closer to the plate, each time your pesky strap falling loose.

After a while he let it hang. Marveled at the delicacy of the fabric holding you in. Then he slid his first two fingers under it and tugged. Guided it up your arm and pressed it back into place.

This is how I will fix us. My love. *Mon cherie.* The apple of my eye. This is how will we come back together. You will try to slip away, silky smooth from me. And I—me—I will use the softest of touches bring you home.

BRAHMACHARYA: Non-excess

"Leave excess behind and live within the limits of enough."

Anywhere, America

So this is the situation: one million tons of plastic in the ocean and I am behind the counter brewing single-shot espresso filtered through organic cotton in steel metal contraptions that reek forever like beans and dying hope.

This is the situation: twenty thousand Iraqi children murdered by the hands of oppression and we are sipping our coffees and reading the news and scrolling through emails on personal computing machines.

This is the world I was born into.

I know this because I am here, everyday, from dawn to dusk at the corner of two intersecting roads, the names of which don't matter.

It doesn't matter because this corner could be anywhere. We could be in San Francisco; we could be in Cleveland; we could be in the rural scape of North Dakota. Location has been uprooted, made redundant—we don't exist in the physical world anymore-- and because of this we are everywhere. We are the signifying monkeys of a hundred thousand Americans scraping by on the fringes of a mass culture too saturated for its own good.

All of this and we are dying, slowly.

At dawn I have the counter tops clean, bags of beans organized alphabetically on shelves that were disinfected the night before—I know this because it was I who did it—and we are working as a team, hoping only to open the place by six a.m.

It is our goal and duty to serve.

Here on the corner of two roads whose names mean nothing, I attend a horde of sleepwalkers each day who, at varying times, crave a burst of caffeinated insanity. Our brains process 20 million billion different pieces of information per second, they say. In a science magazine, I read that there are more electrons and protons inside a single human skull than the entire world has people, that we are universes within universes, and that because of this they think consciousness may go on forever.

Meanwhile we wear khaki slacks and white polo shirts with green aprons that have emblem of our higher order on our chests. We represent not ourselves but somebody greater—something greater—and for this we work tirelessly, we smile and make small talk and pretend this is the future we always wanted, that this what they envisioned when they designed the American Dream.

It was four, five, maybe six years ago that I first came knocking. Mary, the only one who's here more than I am, was assistant manager at the time. She was working for a fat man named Sergio who wore his pants too high and spat when he spoke.

Mary was the one who hired me—me, a twenty-five year old fifth-year college student with not one day in the hospitality industry—and it was four, five, six years ago that I first wore an apron and learned how to make a coffee in under twenty seconds and

sweep correctly for crumbs underneath the radiator that lines the entirety of this 1700 square-foot storefront.

It is here, in this little space that shares a wall with a tanning salon and blasts air conditioning when it's 65 degrees outside, that I have worked, day in and day out, shifts first punctuated by classes at the community college until I graduated, and since then this is what I have come to know: dozens of different colored beans, ground and dripped dry for thousands of different kinds of people, an army of stainless steel contraptions all with unique buttons and levers and switches, the seamless, streakless way to wipe a table and the art of nodding when there was nothing in particular to nod about.

This is the situation: it's 5:55 a.m. on a rainy Tuesday morning in the middle of Anywhere, America, and now is the point in which both Mary and I fall into a familiar madness: the coffee machines are on and running—have been for thirty minutes—and the chairs are down but the cash hasn't been recounted or placed in the registers and I haven't set out the Danishes or bagels in their display case, meanwhile our first patrons start congregating outside the locked doors and demand our flexibility.

This is the scene: twenty-four tables sit amidst sixty-some wooden chairs, every piece chipped or ripped—the two sofas that face the faux fireplace in the far corner of the café—but nobody seems to notice or mind. The walls are painted a friendly, inviting ruby red, though mostly the eye is drawn to the huge photographs of bean-pickers, -weighers and -roasters and the machinery that accompanies the men and women in the pictures.

Step out from this building and into the street and you'll see, from the other side of the glassed-in front, two people working in relative harmony. You'll see a moderately overweight middle-aged woman gesturing with her hands while her back is turned to a gangly man-boy standing beside her, rubbing the aftermath of his shitty morning shave while he leans on the counter and shifts his lack of weight from foot to foot.

Zoom out again and you'll see a small enclave of shops and restaurants nestled along a grey avenue that will become increasingly busy as the morning wears on. You'll see old brick apartment buildings in every direction: unofficial college dorming for the elite campus just down the hill. You'll watch the steady flux of eager learners who inhabit these solid squares and spend their extra dollars here, in this, their neighborhood. You'll see two gas stations, a dance-academy-turned-hotel, a bank with a gaudy red white and blue sign and several strings of electric traffic lights hung delicately between them all.

One more big step out from our neighborhood and you'll see this city in its entirety: trash that floats between concrete and glass buildings, exhaust that rises from the streets like smoke stacks, niches of black holes amongst green and grey expansion and the ever-sprawling shopping mall complexes that accompany 21st century humanity. This is the great American metropolis; this is what they murdered the Indians for: thirty square miles of unabashed asphalt and Astroturf and not a shred of shame to be found.

The first in line this morning are three cologne-wearing, business-suit-attired men. They want black coffees, one with three pumps of caramel lacquer, one half-filled with non-fat milk, his cheap way of ordering a latte without paying for it.

Mary and I oblige. We know better than to question. We know what our customers want: a daily dose of hope and enthusiasm and renewed excitement in comfortable, palm-fitting Styrofoam cups that will hold their early morning aspirations for hundreds of years to come.

The sun is barely rising but our day, Mary's and mine, is picking up pace and will continue on this way until ten o'clock, and so we settle into the manic pattern that's become familiar to us, now— the constant noise, the endless rhythm of repetitious movement. We are the factory workers of the twenty-first century, except our pieces parts aren't made of metal or plastic but of flesh and bone, and we spin out caffeinated suit-and-ties at alarmingly impressive speeds so that they can go on to make decisions for the rest of us.

This is the situation: I am a thirty-something uniform-wearing barista with a receding hairline and hands that smell forever of caffeinated America.

This is the situation: I am a college-educated somebody who fell between the cracks of upward mobility and ended up here, nowhere, at 6:57 on a Tuesday morning in a collared shirt with a nametag that reads "Terrance."

Today, on this chilly October morning of 2009 in which we ran out of soymilk and there are thousands of people in the Middle East preparing to die in a war they don't comprehend, in this particular morning in which the bags under Mary's eyes look worse than usual and my heart has already beat several thousand times since I awoke,

something I haven't seen in our café comes through the doors and stands in line like everybody else.

She is a long-haired, strawberry-blond-colored woman with nervous eyes and a purple sweater that hangs off of her, a red scarf tied tightly around her neck, and this wouldn't strike me as strange or unique at all except that next to her stands a golden retriever.

Mary is speaking to the customer at the front of the line in her most charming tone, saying:

"How can I help you?"

"What size would you like that?"

"Would you like to upgrade for 40 cents?"

"Do you need the receipt?"

and she continues on like nothing's the matter until she sees what I see, and then I can feel her start, pause while her hand remains on the register, and her usual flow of movement and fake smiles that punctuate the better part of our days is, for just a few seconds, placed on hold.

The woman is a shifty creature. She holds the dog's leash in her left hand, shields her chest with her right arm. Her eyes dart as she turns to take in her surroundings, the people standing in line around her. Then she fixes her gaze at a certain place on the floor while Mary and I look at each other and say nothing.

They say every day is a day of potential firsts; they say every day is beholden to unlimited opportunity; they say life is what you make of it and everything has meaning--

that one starfish equals the world, that we are all tiny vessels of thought and creation and that we are entirely in control of our destiny. They say that the future is limitless and that we manifest our everyday, and that because of this, because of all of us being little machines of personalized creation, today wouldn't have to resemble yesterday at all if not for the repetitious behavior of human beings and our belief that things ought to and will continue as they were.

This is what I read in new-age blogs and online forums for metaphysical contemplation: that nothing—not the buildings, not the stock market, not even your relationships—would exist tomorrow unless you believed that they must.

As I juggle two coffees, I take in the dog. He is your typical golden retriever type: long, red hair, white belly and a blackish muzzle. He sits perfectly obediently by the woman's side, not panting or fidgeting, looking neither left or right. He's got some sort of vest around his belly, and though he looks kind the woman pays him no attention.

The dog seems unfazed by the busyness of the café. He stares straight ahead in an almost detached manner and doesn't move except to follow the woman in line. Then he walks with her in perfect synchronization.

They go on like this for a few minutes until she is at the front of the line. Mary hasn't taken her eyes off the pair since she first saw them, and now she stands, defensive-like, both hands on the bar on either side of the register. She is looking at the woman and then at the dog and back again, and then she says in a stern voice I know she's borrowing from somebody else: "Ma'am, this is a place of eating. Our health code doesn't allow for animals."

The woman looks down at the dog as if realizing for the first time that he's there. She wraps her arms more tightly around her body and stares hard at the spot on the counter just in front of Mary. Her hair falls to the sides of her face as she says, in a tiny but clear voice, "This is a service animal."

She tentatively raises her eyes to meet Mary's. They lock gazes for a moment, and then Mary smiles. She shifts back to her right foot, settles behind her place at the register and says, "Well then, yes. What can I get for you?"

Like Pavlov's test subjects I am snapped back into action—Mary's return to the tiny crevice of our existence jolts me back to the job at hand. A soy mocha with whipped cream is my immediate concern, and I jump into its creation as I listen as the otherwise typical transaction transpires beside me, the redhead woman's order—a chai latte— being processed, paid for, and passed to me.

I'm not sure if service animals are allowed in cafes and I'm pretty sure Mary doesn't know, either, but we both continue on as if nothing is the matter. The woman waits patiently, shyly, at the end of the bar, the pick-up station to my immediate left. I take particular time with her drink, wanting to savor the exquisite moment of surprise and strangeness that so rarely enters through our doors.

I step over to her and say, in my most professional voice, "A chai latte?"

She nods and flushes, bends her head, takes the cup from my hand. The dog watches us before following his owner to the far corner of the cafe, where the woman sits down and pulls out a notebook.

In college I studied history. The history of the human race, this is how they framed it: that we were to study all important human events that led up to the current moment, things as we know them now. “It’s valuable information,” is what my former boss, Sergio, told me during my interview for this job. “Knowing where we’ve been, as a species.”

My peers were double-majors, usually in economics or business, or were wannabe teachers prepping for a future in secondary or middle school education. And I? I was distracted. I tried—did the readings, the homework, et cetera, but I was more occupied with this singular, nagging question that plagued the start and end of every day, and it wasn’t beyond my noticing the irony: that my studying consisted of immersing myself in the lives of others while didn’t know how to proceed in my own.

Mary, on the other hand, never made it past high school. She is a single mother of three boys. She has been nineteen and pregnant, twenty-seven and divorced, thirty-three and on welfare. Today she is store manager, in remission from breast cancer, a recovering alcoholic, a single mother who has managed to raise three human beings without anybody killing themselves or anybody else.

Her sons are twenty-two, seventeen, fifteen. The oldest works in the café on nights and weekends, attends a technical college during the daytimes. The seventeen year-old smokes pot and sells t-shirts. The youngest, she says, misses his father and wants to move to Florida.

Mary’s stories (what we do when it’s quiet: exchange histories) have woven their way through this establishment so that now she is as much of the café as the prepackaged

ground beans and shiny thermoses on sale at the entryway. She has permeated the walls: her anecdotes, her sagas, her suffering and pride and fury have found home inside the plaster and paint; her wounds are in the woodwork, her joy scrawled on the branded chalkboard she writes upon each morning, her desires and dreams in the bills in the cash register and in the plastic cups stacked alongside it.

Her story, which she's spilled bit by bit, piece by piece to me over the years-- these fragments that make up her current existence— they float around us and nestle into the crooks and crevices of every item in this place, and you'd think she was caring for a fourth child, the way she nurtures and nourishes it.

It makes sense, I suppose, that a life well lived would find refuge in something as simple as a café. That Mary would cherish it, having survived, as she puts it, in the trenches of existence for so many years. I can't help but wonder, though—I think about this often— what a strange and confounding predicament to find yourself in: to be forty-something and to exist whole-heartedly in the bones and marrow of a business that contributes daily to the end of the natural world. She is midway through life and invested solely in an enterprise that only adds to the destruction that plagues the better part of this society, and how can you justify it, is what I say to her, silently—that much of your life's work and meaning will ultimately lead to trash left in a landfill on the coast of some would-be majestic sea? That you enjoyed it, too, despite the consequences—that it was real and meaningful and full of struggle and success and human life, even as it systematically destroyed it?

"It's a tough time to be young," Mary says to me every few days when she can see that I'm getting glum. "Don't you worry so much. At least you're working."

And this is true, of course. She's right. But I wonder how do you weigh, Mary, the truths and accomplishments that pour forth from individual people—the value of a single life—against the backdrop of mass extinction and melting glaciers? How do you take seriously the significance of your microscopic life when children on the other side of the world can't eat? What does it matter, Mary, to want, to work, to achieve, when all we'll be is a sliver of plastic dozens of feet underneath the earth's surface?

*

This is the situation: it's twelve o'clock at the café and the morning rush that died down around ten is coming back in the form of lunchtime madness.

This is the situation: dozens, hundreds of the hungry and wanting, and we are standing behind this fake quartz countertop offering to them the smallest beacon of light and refuge. They come empty, they come needy and weak, and Mary and I take in their pain and distribute cheese croissants, buttered bagels and chocolate fudge bars accordingly.

Midday brings a different crowd: enter here your stay-at-home moms, your wealthy college students who roll out of bed at 11:39 and stumble half-blindly down the street to us. Here are your part-time workers, your trustfund gobblers, your trophy wives with silver on their necks and arms. Less monochrome suit jackets, more plaid, more bling, more toddlers and pacifiers on the loose across the concrete floor.

And because it's midday and people are awake now, the chatter and rate of movement have significantly increased. Conversation erupts, floats up to the fifteen-foot high ceiling, dances around the rafters and comes back down in the form of busyness, and

even though Mary and I have each had a twenty-minute break, the seemingly sudden increase of activity and franticness does not leave us unaffected.

She is standing in her signature white sneakers behind the register—the podium from which she interacts with the rest of the world—and is using her wide-lipped smile to greet an aging man wearing a green plaid scarf and a beige trench coat.

"Hello, sir," she says. "How are you doing today?" He responds only by looking above her head and grazing his eyes over the drink menu posted on the wall and so she shifts and readies herself for another attempt at an interaction, faking comfort when false ease and robotic niceties are the name of the game.

I've been watching her closely today. Specifically, I've been watching her watch the red-haired woman and the dog, neither of whom have moved in the three and a half hours they've been here. Mary has been scanning the room all day for signs of approval or disgust; not knowing the rules herself she is hoping her patrons will give her an indication of what's acceptable, but so far everyone has ignored the dog and so she's said nothing, not even to me, though I can tell it bothers her that the woman chose to stay.

I am in the middle of making the twenty-second soy latte of the day when I notice that the line in front of Mary is about to go through the doors. I look down at my hands and watch my fingers, stained black from tips to second knuckle, pull open the half-fridge and pour milk into a metal pitcher and switch on the steamer all without my brain really processing what I'm really doing. As I hold the pitcher with one hand I pour a shot-glass of espresso into a to-go cup that waits patiently for whatever is supposed to fill it, and I wonder for the first time in a long time about the longevity of this job.

Six years in a place will erase your memory as swiftly as anything—days and weeks blurring together, moments combining into a stretch of consciousness that you know you're better off ignoring—but here at 12:47pm on this Tuesday afternoon I consider what I am actually doing here and how many moments have passed just like this— exactly like this one now—without me even noticing they existed.

It's fifteen minutes later when the line is gone and—amazingly—not one new person has entered—that Mary approaches me and finally breaks down.

"What is *up* with *that*?" she says emphatically, gesturing over her shoulder to the far corner. I follow her pointing to the where the woman sits, still hunched over her notebook.

"Can you believe she has the nerve to *stay* here this long?" Mary says, turning to scrub the counter with a damp rag.

I look closely at the pair. The dog is dreaming; his nose and paws twitch in response to an imagined squirrel or possum or dog-friend. It calms me a bit, watching him.

Mary nudges me. "Well?" she says.

"Oh," I say. I see her expecting something impactful from me. "I think it's all right," I tell her. "She's probably got a license for him or something. And anyway, it's only a dog."

"Only a dog!" she says. She scoffs, then cocks her head. "I wonder what service he's providing? She seems perfectly capable to me."

I look closer, trying to assess the situation: the woman certainly has no outward injuries—no apparent missing limb or eye or anything of the sort. She's not particularly

thin or malnourished looking—not particularly sick, it would seem— and so it is peculiar, I think, that she would have a service animal with her.

The leash of the dog she has looped around the leg of her chair, but other than an occasional downwards glance, she's paid very little attention to the animal. His eyes flitter open for a moment, as if he heard me thinking about him. He gazes around the room, looks up at his owner, then sighs before returning his head to his paw.

"Do you think he's thirsty?" I say.

Mary frowns. "Who's thirsty?"

"The dog," I say. "Do you think he needs a drink? They've been here for, like, hours."

Mary laughs a little. "Oh, God, I don't know. Give the dog some water if you want. But," she nods at the door as three new customers walk in, "make these coffees, first."

We started from within these walls: first the shop, then the street, then to the city sky scrapers that act as funnels for frustrated wind and smokestack pollution. We started here but are expanding outwards— constantly outwards, this is what they say—and so we go from miniscule hospitality monotony to local neighborhood flair to the contours of this specific concrete jungle…. And then, if you keep going, you will eventually see the state, the country, the continent, and finally if you draw back far enough all there is is this beautiful blue-green orb, circling and spinning and tilting on its axis in a sea of endless black. That's right: Get out of your immediate surroundings and you'll realize that all you

do exists inside of a massive, silent expanse, and when you think of it this way everything that grinds and seizes and seethes sort of falls to the background, becomes meaningless.

It's 1:13pm when I finally catch a break. I'm forty-five minutes away from finishing my shift and the red-haired woman is still sitting in the corner of the café. Her presence is increasingly distressing to Mary, who's guilty conscience seems to deepen in every passing minute that the dog remains inside.

"Had she just come in a gotten a drink," she says as she wipes the counters down with antibacterial spray, "I wouldn't have minded. I didn't say anything, did I?" She stands with her hands on her hips, rag hanging by her side. "But this?" She jerks her thumb over her right shoulder. "Five hours? Nobody stays here that long."

I nod. I agree; it is strange. But strange people come into our café all the time—everybody's a little off, I think—and while a dog is a novelty it doesn't bother me that he's here. Although, I think to myself, he could probably really use some water.

And so this is what I do: with no customers to serve I fill a pitcher from the tap and walk directly over to the strange woman and her dog. I can feel Mary watching me but I pay her no mind; this certainly is not in my job description but it's been a long day and Mary can handle an order or two alone.

The dog sees me approaching and lifts his head. I make eye contact with him and his tail thumps a few times.

As I get close to the woman I can hear her breathing—it's a deep, raspy sound like that of a smoker. Her drink is still on the table, apparently untouched.

"Uh, ma'am?" I say.

She startles a bit and turns in her chair. Her face is pale and squinty, presumably from staring at one spot for such a long time. I steal a glance at her notebook but she shuts it and sets her pen on top of the cover.

"Can I help you?" she says in a not entirely kind voice.

"Oh," I say. I shift on my feet and try to seem nonchalant. "I just noticed your dog, here--" I motion to the floor, from which the dog has risen so that he can better observe me—"and I was wondering—well—we were wondering--" and now I motion back to Mary, who turns her face and busies herself to hide her staring—"if he might like a drink. I have this water here."

"Oh," says the woman. "Sure. I guess that would be fine." She turns to address the dog. "Parker," she says, "would you like a drink?"

The dog looks at her and wags his tail. I take this as my cue. I walk around the chair and kneel before him. He sniffs at my face and nuzzles around the collar of my shirt. It's been a long time since I had a dog, and the familiar smell and feel of his fur brings me back to my childhood.

"Parker, is it?" I ask the woman. She nods.

"Here you go," I say. I set the pitcher down in front of him and he needs no encouragement. He begins lapping immediately, tail still wagging.

"He was thirsty," I say. I pat him again before turning to face her. "I'm Terrance."

"Oh," she says. "Cindy." She gives me a weak little wave, and I think, she's almost cute.

“Cindy,” I say. “Nice to meet you.” I’m not sure why I’m bothering with her at all, except that it’s only the second time all day I’ve taken a pause from the frantic rush and it feels good to rest. “Are you an author?” I ask, nodding towards the notebook on the table.

Cindy blushes and furrows her non-existent eyebrows. “Oh, no,” she says. “I just like to write sometimes.”

“I see,” I say. I am using a patronizing voice that I only use on children. It’s annoying, for sure, but she reminds me of a kid in some ways—fair and tender and removed from the real world by her own imagination.

The dog finally stops drinking and thanks me with a drooling, wet slobber that run down the inside of my shirt.

“Oh dear,” Cindy says. She pulls him away and tells him in a firm voice to “sit”.

“Don’t worry about it,” I say. “It’s kind of nice, actually. I haven’t pet a dog in years.” I scoot closer and rub behind his ears. He melts into my hands and throws himself on his back. “So a service, dog, huh?” I say, trying to prolong the moment. “That’s cool. He seems super well behaved.”

“Yes,” she says.

The logo on his vest reads “Service Animals of America.” It’s stitched in white thread in a circular emblem, the green outline of a dog’s head the middle of the logo. He must be certified, then, I think. But what for?

Suddenly Cindy straightens in her chair. She turns to face me and says, “Actually, service dogs aren’t supposed to be treated like pets. You’re not supposed to give them

attention like regular dogs." She motions to what I'm doing: rubbing the white underbelly of the animal.

"Oh," I say. I understand what she means. "Okay. No problem." I stand to leave but then she puts her hand on my arm. I get chills almost instantly and I think, am I attracted to this woman? Or maybe I am like the dog—untouched for so long, melting at the slightest indication of affection.

"Actually, would you like to take him out?" she says. "I mean, if you want to. If you can." She motions behind us to the bar, where Mary is taking the order of a middle-aged woman and her teenage daughter. "I'm sure he has to pee," she says.

"Sure," I say. "I would like that." I have no idea what I'm doing or why, but it feels right and I think, it's nearly the end of my shift, anyhow. I could use a break. I look back at the bar and see Mary glaring at me, but I shrug and smile as if I have no say in the matter.

The red-haired woman stands up and frees her dog's leash from her chair. She hands it to me and smiles.

"Thank you," she says. "I'm sure he'll appreciate it."

"Are you ready?" I say to the dog. He stands excitedly and breathes on me. "Are you ready?" I say again.

Outside the world is silent. It's the stillness of winter even without snow on the ground. The road traffic is unusually low for this time of day; just a few cars turn in and out of driveways, and a truck rumbles at a stoplight down the hill.

Parker dragged me past Mary's shocked expression and through the doors of the café as soon as I got ahold of his leash, and now he pulls me down a side street, sniffing frozen grass patches and peeing on every tiny tree we pass. He pants excitedly, wags his tail and trots ahead of me, looking back every now and again to express his enthusiasm.

The calm of the neighborhood is almost a shock to my system. My ears ring—the aftermath of nine hours of constant noise—and create what feels like invisible earmuffs. It's a grey day: a thick cloud covering overhead, a yellowish light making all things hazy, almost murky. My eyes are still adjusting, now watering at the cold. An entire day of artificial light and heat will turn you into a crybaby the moment you hit the natural world.

We turn down another side street—a row of comfortable cottages painted different baby-colored hues—and I watch with growing sadness Parker's display of excitement. The poor dog, is what I think. Relegated to a concrete floor for sleeping, eager like a pound puppy whenever he sees a spot of grass. Is this what you were meant to do? I wonder silently. Wait with a sick person all day, while out here there are birds and squirrels and—in the right places—endless fields of green?

As if he hears me, he woofs and bounces up to me. I squat down and, just like I did when I was a kid with my own dog, I rough-house with him, pushing him side to side, grabbing the top of his nose and steering it in circles. He growls playfully and crouches, leaps into the air and dances around me.

I can't help but laugh. I run alongside him, stopping and starting, dodging back and forth. He mouths my hands and arms, smiling that trademark golden retriever smile as he tries to mimic my movements, following me into strangers' lawns, around bushes, across driveways, up and down small inclines.

Finally I collapse. He trots into my arms and licks my face, my neck, then pushes up against me and sits between my legs.

"Good dog," I say to him. "What a good dog."

We're at the far end of the neighborhood, now—about a ten-minute walk from the café. If we kept going we'd hit a century-old cemetery nestled in a few acres of woods—parkland that the city managed to preserve. Beyond that is the suburbs, and beyond the suburbs is horse country. "Wouldn't you like that?" I say to the dog. He wags and nuzzles my palm.

I stand up and look in both directions. Westwards is where we need to go: back into town, past the rows of shops and parking garages, apartment buildings and streetlights. Eastwards beckons, though—a gentle breeze comes over the hill and whistles. Parker leans into it and pulls me in that direction. He seems to sense what exists beyond the street's end.

It hits me that we really should be getting back; it's been at least twenty minutes, now, and the woman must be wondering what happened to us. And Mary? I shudder to think.

I take a few steps in the direction of the café but am stopped abruptly by the dog. The leash is taught; he's straining rather hard against me, which seems an unusual act of rebellion for a service dog.

"Hey buddy," I say. I kneel down and call him to me. "We've got to get going. It's time to go back."

I stand and pull on his leash. "Come," I say. He doesn't budge. "COME," I say again, this time more firmly. He plants his feet in the ground and strains harder against

me. I call him one more time and when still he doesn't respond, I give in to him, letting him take a step forward, and then jerk him back towards me. He lets out a little yelp.

"Come, Parker," I say. "Come here." This time, he obliges. With his head bowed he approaches me, and as I start walking towards the café we fall into step together.

As we descend closer to the row of storefronts, I start wondering if his owner ever takes him out to play. Has he ever run through an open field or chased a rabbit or seen a river? Has he swum in a pool, jumped off a rock, slept in a human bed? Has he ever been allowed to relax and be a real dog, or has his life been scripted from the beginning? Has it always been so serious, so ruled? Has he always been so easy to push around?

I look down and see that the excitement has dimmed out of his eyes. He looks just like he did when I first saw him in line at the café—distant, detached. Perfectly well behaved, yes—but empty, somehow, and resigned.

We round the final corner and are now just a dozen storefronts from the café. I am hit with a sudden nausea and the dog hesitates, sensing it. He looks up and me and whines a bit, wags his tail ever so slightly.

"I know, Parker," I say. "Me, too."

We cross the last intersection and when we stop in front of the most familiar door, I see Mary and Cindy standing, one on either side of the bar, and talking in what appears to be a rather vehement fashion. They are not fighting though—Cindy is gesturing wildly and Mary is nodding, her is jaw set and her eyes are gleaming. They are angry, both of them—that much is obvious—and the cause of their anger becomes entirely clear to me when they spot the dog and me at the same time and turn in perfect synchronization to face us..

Mary's hands go immediately to her hips—her go-to defense position—while the red-haired woman crosses her arms and scowls.

Parker gives off a low, desperate whine. He stands behind me, tail hitting my leg as it fwaps nervously side to side. I put my hand on his head and stand back from the café's front, taking it in as if for the first time.

The green company logo hangs over the doorway—no other signage is necessary, so ubiquitous is their trademark. It's not that big of a café, I realize, and I shiver a bit when I think of how many hours of my life I've spent inside of this small space. The chairs and tables are arranged in neat little rows, as is the sale merchandise and items on the creamer stand. Everyday, I think, hungering mobsters of the twenty-first century come into Mary's home, my place of work, and systematically destroy it. They pillage the place for what they want and then leave their shit behind, and Mary and I, we are the ones who clean it.

It's a constant effort, to compensate for the greedy. Outside of serving, our lives consist only of wiping, rearranging, refilling and emptying. Preparing for the demand: this is what Mary calls it. I look at the dog and think: really, it's more like preparing for the damned.

I kneel down beside him and pat him one last time. He's a good dog. He deserves a better life than the one he has.

I look into the eyes of the two women standing side by side, both watching me with equal intensity. Mary, however, having known me for so many years, has the upperhand. I can see her understanding registering—her eyes widen and she starts shaking her head and holding her hands up as if she were bracing for impact.

Cindy looks from Mary to me and back again, trying to comprehend the wordless communication happening before her.

I turn back at the dog. “Parker,” I say. “Good luck out there.” And then, simple as that, I unclip the leash from his collar. He knows the minute he is free. He takes off in the direction that we came, sprinting through intersections, galloping up the hill. He’s heading to the woods. He’s heading to the country. I’m not sure how I know this, but I know. I watch him disappear around the corner and can’t help but smile.

I turn back to the café and take it all in. This is me, I think. These are my choices. These are the choices that will live with all of us for dozens, hundreds, maybe even thousands of years.

Mary is standing slack-jawed at the bar, leaning against it for support. Cindy is nowhere to be seen. I smile at my boss, give her a little wave. The history of the human race, the history of all of the earth has led us to this very moment. And so, Mary, what are we supposed to do now?

APARIGRAHA: Non-possessiveness

"Clinging to people and material objects only weighs us down."

Things Happen

It's about holding space. That's what Momma tells me at night and in the morning when I'm feeling sad. She says, *I've got you, my girl*, and I tumble into her arms just like that.

Momma leaves every night and I don't know where she goes but she goes. She tucks me into bed, says a prayer over my head, switches on a fake candle and cracks the door so the light can just sneak in. I watch her shadow walk across it. I hear her steps down the hall, and I count ten seconds before the door opens and shuts and I'm alone.

Our house is silent at night. Sometimes there's a car outside that drives by. Sometimes it rains. But mostly it's so quiet I can hear myself breathing and I try not to think of anything at all.

There are horses on my bedspread, they run in a little line, a whole group of them with their tails out behind them and manes flying in the wind. When Momma leaves I scoot down under the sheets and I pull them up under my chin, the horses, so I'm in the middle of them like that, part of their pack, and I let them gallop and listen to their whinnying around me until I'm sleeping.

It was three months ago that it happened. I know this because I watch Momma cross out the days in red on the calendar that hangs by the sink. The marker, she leaves on

the counter, and sometimes from the table I look at it, watch it like it knows something we don't.

Days go by and all that pen does is slash through numbers on blank white pages. Since it happened Momma doesn't make appointments anymore. She doesn't leave the house or me except for nights, when she says she's sorry but she has to go.

I've watched that calendar turn to a fresh month three times now, but as the days go on all it becomes is a pad of red. Momma's waiting. I don't know if she should.

It wasn't that long ago that Momma was here all the time, days and nights. After bed I used to hear her on the sofa drinking water. Her glass would clink with ice cubes and she'd wait up. *Nothing can get my babies,* she'd say to us sometimes. *Not when I'm around.*

She'd watch TV until the early morning, I remember because sometimes I'd wake up when it was dark and go to her. I'd walk around the side of the couch and she'd see me and smile, and she'd switch the TV to silent and open her arms.

Come here, she'd say. *There's space for you*. And I'd crawl over to her and put my head in her lap and she'd stroke my hair just like that, and in the morning the only thing I'd remember was the pitch of the TV ringing in my ears and Momma's clinking glass and the feel of her belly pressing against me as she breathed.

Now in the mornings I hear her get home. There's three minutes of jingling keys as she unlocks the door. I used to sleep through things but now I wake up easy; I'd hear a bird land on a tree outside my window, if there was one.

By the time I get out of bed, Momma's in the kitchen making breakfast. I always find her standing over the sink. Sometimes she's cleaning the oatmeal pot, though mostly I think she just likes to stand there, let warm water run over her hands.

There's always the sound of the faucet squeaking and the quiet when the water's off, and then she turns to me and leans against the sink and smiles.

How's my girl? she'll say. She knows I'm there before I say a thing.

Sad, I'll tell her.

She'll frown and kneel down and I'll fall into her arms just like that, and I'll nuzzle into that place where her neck meets her shoulder and we'll stay like that for minutes.

Back before it happened Momma spent her whole days in the kitchen. There she could watch us in the backyard. Mostly we were out on our own, but if you got scared you could look up and you'd see her, her face visible through some window, and she'd smile and wave and we'd do the same.

Jimmy and I, we had a half-acre yard and a playground and a big pine tree that sat in the fence corner. We spent our days in other places there. We'd climb tall mountains and fight enemies, we'd ride into battle on sticks, throwing stones, we'd camp under the branches of our tree. Jimmy had a funny laugh and a deep raspy voice, and even though he was only three, Momma said she always knew we were okay if she could still hear Jimmy.

Back then things were funny, things were light. Momma'd smile when Jimmy missed his mouth and spilled his yogurt on the floor. She'd sing a song with me, even at

the table. All day we played. Neither of us in school. Momma didn't want us to go just yet, she said. Seeing as all we had was each other.

What I remember is that I came in from outside in Momma's arms. That day. She threw me down on the brown-checkered couch and didn't bother even to take off my jacket or shoes. I remember thinking how strange it was, being in the house fully dressed. Usually Momma didn't allow for that.

It felt like a long time before the lights pulled in. There were so many of them, they shone blue and red into the house, streaks of color that darted off the mirrors and windows and shone into my eyes. When they knocked, Momma's voice was high-pitched. I hadn't heard it like that before.

I remember thinking that on a normal day Momma'd be stirring pasta on the stove and calling for us to get cleaned up. Instead, there were fifteen men and women in brown and black suits, all of them walking in and out of the house, none of them taking off their shoes. A few of them had notepads. A few of them went into our bedrooms with flashlights like our electricity wasn't working.

At some point I saw a whole lot of them in the backyard, snooping around the playground where Jimmy and I had been.

I don't know where Momma goes at night, but when she comes back her hair is messy and her clothes are wrinkled and she has a tired look on her face like she's seen things. Like maybe something bad happened.

She comes in the door loud and there's always the same set of sounds: the crash of keys, the unzipping of her coat, a few moments of silence and then her feet padding towards the kitchen.

I asked her once, right after it happened, where she was going, why she had to leave each night. She said nothing for a long time and I thought maybe she was mad. Eventually she pulled me into her and held me close. *Driving,* she said. *Just in case.*

I don't say much about it anymore, but sometimes when I'm feeling brave I ask her if we're okay, if she's okay. *Of course I am,* she'll say to me. *I have you.*

That night the policemen stayed for a long time. A few of them until lunch the following day. At some point, though, somebody lifted me from the couch and slid me into bed. I don't remember that. The last thing I remember is Momma's voice talking fast and loud.

There were lots of phones ringing. They kept saying things to each other that we already knew. Somebody new would approach us and ask a question. *Yes,* Momma would say, *They were both back there.* She'd point out the window over the sink. Another comment and Momma would say, *No. No. She's fine.*

These days Momma mostly sleeps. After breakfast she leaves our dirty dishes and sits into the couch. *Go play,* she'll tell me, before she gives me a hug and a kiss. *Stay in your room,* she'll say.

She doesn't know it but I stand in my bedroom doorway and watch her sometimes, watch her get up and check that the front door is locked, that the back door is

still blocked by her dresser. I watch her walk around the house one last time before she finally lies down. I lean against the wall just inside the door and listen to her sigh. Sometimes she cries. Sometimes I want to go to her but I can't. I just stand there instead and wonder.

All day I stay in my room with my animals. I have one of everything: a cow and a goat and a cat and a dog, a dolphin and sea turtle, even a manatee. Jimmy never liked my toys much, but I still do. They all live together on a farm plantation on a cliff overlooking the ocean. There's a river nearby where birds fish and salmon spawn. I have a great blue heron who loves to sit on the riverbank and watch for lunch.

My animals graze all day and never argue. They talk to each other in that secret way animals do, and they listen to the wind when it blows. The fish from the river feed the whales and dolphins. All of them know where they're supposed to be because each creature has a place all to itself. A safe place. A home.

It happened on a Saturday. Jimmy and me, we were on the playground like always. Momma was getting ready for a party—she was having friends over that evening, she told us. That day the clouds hung low in the sky, like they were a ceiling just above us we could touch.

We tried, standing at the top of the slide, reaching up like we were tall enough to shake hands with God. We were laughing.

It felt like the first day of fall, that new coldness in the air. Leaves from neighbors' trees were dying. I remember pointing to them, saying, *We'll see colors soon,* and watching Jimmy's eyes follow my finger, trying to understand.

He was wearing blue khaki overalls and a red plaid shirt. I remember. He must have had on his only pair of sneakers, the black ones with dirty white shoelaces. Momma hadn't brushed our hair yet that day and his was flying all around like it was wings.

She was in the house. We waved to her from time to time like we always did. Momma, she was cleaning, and the clouds were so heavy and low, and when the wind started gusting sideways we got busy building a pinecone protection fort and watching Jimmy's hair twirl on top of his head.

It's moody, Momma had said earlier, when she opened the door to let us out.

Before I fell asleep that night on the couch in my shoes and jacket, I heard Momma talking to a man in a uniform. She was crying. He had his arm around her shoulders and they were standing like that, side by side by the front door, both their backs to me.

Momma was trying to hide herself, but I could hear her anyway. *What do I do,* she was saying. The man in the uniform, I could see from the side of his face that he was scared. That he hadn't known something like this before.

It's my fault, Momma was saying, and he kept her close to him and didn't say anything back. Another officer, a woman, walked over eventually, placed her hand on Momma's back. She was short and wide and had black cropped hair. *Ma'am,* she said. *These things happen. We're going to figure it out.*

Momma stopped her crying and looked at the woman, and I don't know what she said, but the police lady, she turned and walked away and didn't come back.

Jimmy and I had been deep into our building. I was showing him how you can stick twigs in the rings of pinecones, that if you do it right they'll stay like that, standing up straight. I was guiding his fingers and holding the pinecone for him, but he kept missing, he was getting frustrated, and I was trying to help him, and that's why we didn't see the man coming.

I told the officers later that this is how it happened. He wasn't there and then he was there. There was nobody and nothing but Jimmy and I and the pine tree, and then there was a blue-jeaned man with dark hair and stubble like the kind Momma says she hates. He stood next to where we were sitting and just stared.

Jimmy being three, he didn't understand. He thought the man was a friend of Momma's. That's what he told us. He crouched down and shook my hand and Jimmy's and said he knew our Momma. We both looked back at the house for her.

I don't know how long he was there. He asked us what we were doing. Jimmy told him. He walked around us, poked at our pinecones. Jimmy got up and wanted to show him the playground.

The man, he stayed standing over me with his hands on his hips like he was deciding something. Like how Momma does when she's mad that we haven't cleaned up yet. I just stayed sitting. I kept my eyes down. And when I looked up the man was gone, and Jimmy was gone, too.

These days Momma just sleeps. It's okay. I'm used to it now. I stay in my room and play with animals. Sometimes she wakes up for lunch but usually it's not until the evening that I hear her. I wait. I don't leave my room at all unless she gets me.

She'll come in eventually, give me a hug and put me in the bath. We eat macaroni in front of the TV and when we're done she pulls me close to her, sits me in her lap and puts her face against my neck.

Are you okay? she'll say to me. *How is my girl today?*

Sad, I'll tell her. She squeezes me tight and says the same thing every time: *Don't you worry, my love. I have space for you here.*

Before everything happened, when I couldn't sleep and I didn't want to bother Momma just yet, I'd stay up listening to Jimmy breathing. At night after Momma put us to bed he'd roll over, turn his back to me, and I'd count seconds between his breaths, one two three counts in, one two three four counts out. I'd watch my fingers' silhouettes on the walls once my eyes adjusted to the dark. I'd make shadow puppets and they'd dance and sing to the rhythm of Jimmy's breath.

On my bed across my blanket are horses. They gallop side by side in a white and grey herd, their manes and tails streaking behind them because they're running so fast. I show Momma at night before the lights go out how they run, and I tell her how the one in front is the bravest, and the one in back is the smartest, and how when I'm sleeping they gallop over me, protecting me.

Because when you're gone, I want to say, because when you're gone I have horses around me.

I don't say that though, I never say that, but I try to tell her by showing them to her, showing her how they prance, how their legs hold them up even when they pound the

ground, how they move together and never leave each other. Momma, I want to say, the horses. We're going to be okay. Don't you see?

SAUCHA: Purity

"The active pursuit of letting go."

Nothing Matters

Come with me to a spring day, four years ago. Come to April, sunshine, sixty-degree breeze. Come to soft leaves budding on ripe trees. Come to late snow melt, mud tracked by hikers' shoes on paved park pathways.

Come to a Sunday afternoon in the little town of Chagrin Falls, Ohio. See it quaint and pristine: red white and blue storefronts, doors propped open, brick crossroads laid across streets with bright yellow *PEDESTRIAN CROSSING* signs demarcating the way. See a waterfall running under a bridge through the center of town. Ice floats cracking over the edge of it. The first warm day after a long and miserable winter.

See cyclists, joggers, dog walkers. Kids on scooters, dads pushing strollers, women holding hands with the elderly as they step around puddles. See grass shoots fighting through sidewalk cracks. New foliage growing in the blossoming spring. Everywhere you look, evidence of a new beginning.

*

It's been four years that I've been at it.

For four years I have awaken to the sound of a screaming alarm. Five o'clock and my square bedroom illuminates in red. I dress in minutes—track shorts, wife-beater, hoodie—and make my way to the kitchen, where I ingest a protein shake that I buy in bulk powder form. I eat nothing else but pack in my sports bag two bars and an orange alongside a fresh button-down, slacks, an extra pair of socks and an electrolyte drink.

By half-past I have teeth brushed and hair gelled. I run the electric razor over the fashionable stubble I keep. I tie my shoes (only so tight) and skip out to my 1995 Camry for the ten-minute commute to the gym.

I park between 5:45 and 5:50 every morning. My spot is in the first row, second to the right by the midsized pine tree. To Clara and Marie, the desk attendants sitting on the other side of the glass doors, I nod. I swipe my ID, the lock clicks, I enter.

*

Let's walk. Take a leisurely stroll down a little paved path by the park with benches and gaze out over the water. From here you can see the Main Street bridge and the foot traffic upon it. Notice how everyone looks over, observes the falls while they walk. Notice that couples stop, face the river together, soak it in.

Watch as duck families paddle up and down the shore. Can you count the babies? Brown balls with beaks cruising in perfect formation behind their parents.

Smile as passersby throw them bread crusts. Kindness on display. Feel generosity flowing from you like water. The kids on the playground: do you know what they are? Young life frolicking in potentiality.

Notice the song of the red-winged blackbird, there on the bush by the bank. The honking of a goose overhead. The water crashing as it leaps over the edge and dives back into itself.

Take a deep breath, marvel in the beauty of it all. The slow thaw. The way the earth always chooses life. Inhale through your nose and let out a sigh.

*

They know me here. They should. Every day of the week—rain or shine, snow, sleet, sub-zero temperatures—I show up. There's been two days in four years that the gym's been closed. Those mornings I spent in my ratty, unfinished basement on a single-station workbench, sweating into concrete floors.

This is my body: six-foot-two, dark features. Black hair sits atop my head and everything else is pure muscle. Flesh and sinew contorted under a carefully tanned and lotioned hide. My feet point outwards just slightly, low legs taper gently into ankles and knees.

The gastrocnemius, the shelf of my calf, juts out from the shinbone at a nearly ninety-degree angle. Above my knee there's another square ridge. The bottom outside edge of the quad, the largest muscle in the body. It hovers like a plate in front of my thigh bone, then dives into my pelvis, disappears under the crisscrossing of the psoas and gluteus maximus, the definition of which can be seen by the naked eye when I flex, pull kneecap up and in and engage the entire front leg.

A six-pack is nothing to brag about. The goal is eight, so eight is what I have. They sit in two neat rows, carefully manicured rectangles that stretch down the length of my torso. You can see them through my shirt when I'm dry.

Upper body comes easy: shoulders rounded like the top half of a beach ball, traps engulfing neck. All day long veins pop from my arms, swollen blue rivers pumping exertion up and down my outstretched limbs. Muscles bulge and skin stretches, maintains only a thin boundary between the external world and the one within.

*

Look around and soak it in. The splendor of it. What miracles exist. That a layer of biosphere wraps its blanket self around us, hugs us to the ground. What chance that our planet circles the way it does around the sun, that our ancestors ever learned to grow food, that all of life has catapulted forward to this moment, here and now, in which you can stand on the bank of a brown river and watch—fully contented and cared for—as the world happens around you.

Contemplate this for a while. The chance of it all and you—*you!*—existing here and thriving. Stand on the shores of this river in Chagrin Falls, Ohio, and take it in.

*

I start each day on the bike. Five minutes, medium resistance, moderate pace until the final thirty seconds, during which I push everything to the max to break the first sweat.

Active stretching comes next. Ten minutes of standing, sitting, lying on the blue mats in front of the mirrors, observing the depth of flexion I am offered today.

Hamstrings take priority to ensure healthy knees. A few backbends to open the chest, elongate the core, warm up the spine. Roll arms in circles, clasp wrists overhead and sidebend both ways for the same count.

Then hamstrings again followed by rolling ankles, cracking toes, and I'm ready to go.

*

Reach your arms to the heavens and extend your body. Shake out the tension for a moment. Hear a group of small children behind you, cackling to one another. You're

about to turn around, smile at them, make small talk with an observing parent, but then, without further ado, it happens.

From the center of the bridge, hear this: a huge screeching, the sound of a hundred thousand nails on tin. It's a drawn-out mechanical scream that ends with an explosion—a bang followed by the tinkling of glass on asphalt.

Hear screaming. Hear screaming. Hear dozens of voices yelling.

Spin around and look, see: smoke rising from the meeting place of what was just seconds ago two vehicles. See green metal and red metal overlapping, no air between them. See unidentifiable pieces of metal strewn across the grass.

See mothers rushing children away from the scene while the unencumbered run towards it, shouting. Sixteen people are on their cell phones immediately. Traffic stops in all directions, cars parked in the middle of the road, drivers flailing out of doors and tripping, stumbling their way toward the place of impact.

Stand stock still in silence: do nothing but observe. Remain unattached, dear reader, for one of those limp bloody bodies hanging through a shattered windshield is me.

*

The words I say to myself each day: that nothing I know, nothing I feel, nothing I am is ultimately of any consequence.

Nothing I've been or done will be remembered, and it won't be many years past my death that I disappear entirely, dissolve from flesh and bone as the world moves on without me.

Very few of us will end up in a textbook. Our names won't be scribbled on chalkboards. Our faces will be forgotten, our accomplishments unknown, our pains and struggles, growth and sins mere vapor in the mist of time.

This is what I repeat to myself as I begin to work. Because here is where my day actually starts: muscles quivering in anticipation, heart pounding, all senses attuned to themselves. I've done it enough that my cells, they know what is to come. They're equal parts dread and excitement, hate and obsession. Preparing for a two-hour adventure during which they will be completely transformed.

*

Four minutes pass.

See, in this order: three ambulances, a fire truck, too many police cars to count. The bridge fills with flashing lights, the roar of the waterfall overwhelmed by sirens. The sidewalks cease movement, contain only onlookers. Families stand together, huddled, parents' arms wrapped around children, holding them near.

Several men and women are crying. A teenage boy dials a phone, curses loudly. Dogs are leashed and shushed. They sit stone cold at their owners' feet, as if they know, too, what is happening.

Come out of your trance now—do not be afraid. Come closer so I can show you.

Climb the steps from the bank of the river. Easy, now. Don't push past. Make your way through the crowd that's gathered by the entrance of the park. There's a spot by the young maple tree where an old man is standing. See him? Go there.

Crouch under the branches and you'll get a peek. A man with his back to you, he sits curbside, his head in his hands. Three police officers form a semi-circle around him, have wrapped him in a tinfoil blanket. A medic is on one knee, white-faced.

In the center of the road, see this: crews of uniformed men and women scurrying from vehicle to vehicle like ants. Police guarding the perimeter of the scene, stopping traffic and redirecting. The witnesses aren't moving, though. They have parked their cars and are standing half out of them, leaning on doors for support. They are holding each other, on their phones, weeping.

An ambulance lights up. Surrounded by police cars it takes off down the road, its screams echoing up the hill.

In another three minutes the second will leave, and all that will be left is remnants, pieces parts of what was.

Hang around for a while. Watch the crowd disperse. Person by person, family by family the scene is dismantled.

Watch as rescue squads collect their things, stash them back inside vehicles. A trio of them walk towards you. On their faces are straight-lined grimaces. One places her arm around another's shoulder. Says something in her ear.

But the girl, you hear her respond. *She was so fucked up.*

*

I take myself deep inside the forest of machinery, rows upon rows of white metal contraptions designed to create pressure. Most men rotate sections: Saturdays for upper body, Sundays for lower, et cetera. This is nonsense, of course. For me, an impossibility.

I work my way from the bottom up. I wake myself from toe to top of head and leave no cell unturned.

The ultimate goal: to feel the cringing of the body under an ungodly amount of strain. To know the potential and the limits of flesh and bone, to experience the suffocation at the edge and—just in time—to pull back.

*

Let's walk away, now. You've seen enough. In several hours a tow truck and street sweeper will arrive, and all that will be left is a set of black tire tracks on the bridge.

Locals will talk for weeks. They'll follow the story in the paper. They will learn that the girl was seventeen. Driving home from a friend's house in the late morning. Rescuers found her iPhone crushed into pieces in the back of the car and her clothes in a bag on the side of the street.

She was ejected—that's the word they'll use—from her red Mini Cooper. Retrieved ten feet from the place of impact. A senior in high school. A lacrosse player. An older sister of two.

She was crossing the bridge in the left lane when another driver—white male, 26 years of age—crossed the centerline and smashed into her. Head-on collision.

He wasn't drunk, though. Had no history of speeding or breaking the law. The papers couldn't tell you this, of course, but I will: There was no reason for it. There is no big thing. It was a simple lapse in judgment. A moment of distraction. And then.

*

The human body, watch it move. See the way bones shift tendons and tendons contract muscles—the way everything is interwoven, connected, in constant communication. Blood cells and bone marrow, sinewy ligaments to micro-muscles that stitch your insides together. Watch the ripple effect of one movement—a single twitch signaling a waterfall of responses throughout your being.

Thus far I have completed five sets of ten squats and five sets of ten lounges while holding thirty-pound weights. I've done several hundred leg lifts, shifting variations in units of fifty, one hundred pushups, sixty-five pull-ups, crunches that number too high to count.

On the machines I leave a trail of sweat, and I follow it—repeat again and again—through sets until I can continue no longer.

In the second and final hour I will work the upper body—pecs, shoulders, biceps, traps. Most men spend most time on this part of them, but it's a fatal mistake by any fitness standards. You'll see that my chest and arms and neck are not disproportionately huge. Every activity, every lift and strain I measure, monitor, then examine the results so that nothing outgrows anything else, makes any part of my body swell or shrink in comparison.

*

The papers will focus on her, mostly. They'll track her progress through seven surgeries repairing her cervical spine. It was a neck injury, of course. The diagnosis, not hopeful. She'll be lucky if she retains any mobility. But at least she's going to make it.

The other driver sustained head injuries, what appears to be a bad concussion. Several broken ribs and a fractured femur bone, but he'll be fine. His truck was what saved him. And what crushed her.

He'll spend three weeks in the hospital. During this time he'll learn what happened by the court-appointed lawyer. Her family wasted no time. The fault was his, unequivocally.

He'll have no recollection, of course, but something like a memory will be formed from the dozens upon dozens of stories he overhears. Televised news segments airing witness interviews, the local paper's almost daily reportage, an attentive driving campaign launched by an area non-profit, his accident the inciting event.

From these fragments a shaky understanding, a picture painted he won't ever forget.

*

Count with me here: one, two, three, four. Sweat drips from my chin. Eyes stinging, shoulder burn. I breathe and push back against the force that grinds. Break molecules, break boundaries, know that pain is irrelevant.

Five, six, seven, eight. I strain myself into another plane. Clouds fill my ears, sounds muffle, the music beating in your skull tuned out in the presence of the struggle. My chest is rising and falling so hard I can see it under my forward gaze.

Nine, ten. Finally. I push back with one last grunt. Sweat runs from my hands up my arms. I let them hang, wrists resting on the bar above my head as I slouch, clutching to oxygen.

Ignore fear. Grit teeth. The tension in my forearms release like fireworks as I drop my hands into my lap. They are white from the pressure of gripping. The underside of my right wrist seizes from dehydration. I watch it curl and shake. I smile at it like it's not your own, like I couldn't have a lesser care in the world.

*

On the day he is released from the hospital they announce that she will remain immobile. Three teenagers egg his house. He quits his job, sells his motorcycle. He turns on the TV, sits on the couch and shuts himself in.

In the next seven months he declares bankruptcy, sells his home to the bank, buys a beater and crosses state lines. When he leaves he leaves his clothing, kitchenware, blankets and bed. When he leaves he tells no one. When he leaves she is still in the hospital, relearning how to speak.

*

One more set to go and I am all in. There is nothing between me and agony. No denial, nothing to help me play pretend. The music in my ears drowned out by the presence of something greater.

Stakes are raised as I get closer to the end. The clock ticks on, taunts me. It begs me to quit early and I refuse.

At this point hope is gone. Excess energy has collapsed in on itself. It continues to fall with every drop of sweat I lose, every ounce of toxicity I shed.

Three more lifts and it's done. Anticipation builds like a block in my chest, my throat. I can't breathe, can't let it go. I am holding on, holding out for when it's over.

SANTOSHA: Contentment

"The active practice of gratitude and appreciation for what is."

Polar Bears

Push, twist, and pop. A round tablet emerges from an orange, cylindrical container. The fish swims frantically; he thinks it's feeding time. One, two, three, four, six. The number of bottles on the desk. Twelve capsules-- count them out, pick and choose— that will go into her mouth today. Ten scribbled instructions from a doctor. This doctor, number five.

Three spiral-bound notebooks, stacked in the second drawer down from the top. Another, open, violated by pen marks as she writes. Four dirty cups, tea stains and oatmeal remains on the insides. Mold growing up the side of the plastic spoon she never washes. An assignment notebook is open to a day in January. That day, over three weeks ago, is left unmarked. A pack of gum and granola bars sent from her mother in her open purse. "To keep you fueled," the note inside the package reads.

Over-the-counter Tylenol P.M. drops from a shelf like rain. Evidence of the sleep she hasn't been getting, on the loose across the dirty floor. Holey jeans wrap their legs around worn sneakers and stop the blue tablets from rolling any farther. A small backpack filled with magazine clippings sits on the other side of the room atop a single, twin mattress on the floor. The fish settles to the bottom of his tank; dinner is yet to come.

Push, twist, and pop. No child will be getting into these drugs. Hazards and precautions make the label seem almost ornate; black shapes, lines, curves and corners

that create the message that goes around the bottle. *May cause dizziness. Do not use if pregnant. Be careful when using machines*. *Take one pill a day for the next four years of your life. Take one pill every day because you can't function without it.*

The pen on the piece of paper scrawls faster; its marks no longer look like recognizable English. Letters slur together, words indistinguishable from each other. There is a rat race in her head and her body can't capture it fast enough. Physical reality slowing its mental counterpart.

February 23rd, she writes. *2008. Can't really convince myself to get out of my pajamas. I know I've got things to do. My dad called but I didn't answer. What can I say? Thank you for your time and money, but nothing's really helping at all.*

A MACK truck passes by the condominium. Black smoke leaves its exhaust pipe, so thick it looks like it might border between a gas and a solid. She watches as two runners cross the street to avoid inhaling the pollution. The dark cloud vanishes when it hits the trees.

I went to see a different doctor yesterday, she writes. *He said it was my liver. He gave me droplets that taste like alcohol to "heal me." That's what he said—"heal." He said to stop taking the prescriptions. I wonder what will happen to me. It's been so long since I could function naturally. Take only vitamins and St. John's Wart, he said. We'll see.*

She stands, closes the notebook, tosses the pen, and walks to the kitchen. Nutritional health is important in combating the mood swings, doctors have told her. Stay away from refined sugars. Don't starve yourself; don't binge. Drink water, not alcohol. Balance everything.

She makes oatmeal with flax seeds and raisins. A cup of soymilk to wash down the pills and vitamins. *Take with food*, they all say. It's Saturday, and she has nearly forty-eight hours until she has to go to work. She spends each week in the art department of Pittsburgh's bi-monthly magazine. She helps put the layout together, pictures with their articles, and makes random, artistic-like contributions where they're needed. It's not what she got a degree for, but she's been told that it's a good start.

February 24th. Not much difference. Sundays are always kind of non-existent. What is there to do? Get brunch with the church-goers? I'd rather watch Scooby-Doo or draw.

She hits the remote for the TV. A man who seems to be floating in mid-air appears on the screen. Taken out of physical reality and placed in a white void, he waves his hands in excitement and speaks enthusiastically as pictures of meals, twice his size, begin parading around his body and the words "ONLY $10 A DAY" flash in red. The man's voice continues as his image fades to the spaghetti, hamburgers, and chocolate cakes. "LOSE 50 LBS. IN THREE WEEKS," the commercial reads.

She hits the remote again. A Taco Bell commercial.

February 25th. I went to work this morning and could hardly muster enough energy to speak to the people there. Anne asked what was wrong; I told her I was sick. I am sick. I wish I had the strength to tell them not to bother me when I feel like this. "Here I am," I would say. "The 'crazy' of the office." Hey, everybody's got to have one.

She looks out the window in front of her desk and chews on the end of her pen, tapping her fingers against the open notebook. A couple walks by, hand in hand. She scoffs.

Everybody's crazy, anyway.

She wakes the next morning on the couch, a few pieces of scrap paper and magazine clippings stuck to her forehead and cheek. She sits up groggily and pulls one from her face: a woman's naked torso with the cursive words, "radiate with superiority," across her middle-- a lotion ad.

She glances at the clock—it's two hours later than the time she should have been at work. She chuckles to herself and picks up the phone. On the keypad, an infinite number of choices of who she could call, but she dials the most familiar sequence.

"Hey, Marge?" She speaks into the telephone receiver. "Tell Dick I'm not going to be in today—I've got the flu."

February 26th, she writes. *What's that line they use in workout commercials? No pain, no gain. But I'm not gaining anything.*

I'm not going to work. The click-clack of fancy heels, tapping their way from desk to desk, then desk to coffee pot, then desk to desk again. The blank, emotionless walls, my personal cubical-office that seems smaller every week. The nauseating, sterile lighting, the shrill laughter, the dead-end conversation.

She picks up another bit of magazine lying at her feet. *Twenty percent of Americans will experience clinical depression before the age of 20*, it tells her. *For more*

information, call 1-800-SUICIDE. She chuckles again, this time from deep in her chest, and rips the ad down its center.

Push, twist, and pop. Vitamins lie on the counter in a row like little soldiers. No prescription medication needed, she thinks proudly. I am all me. Reach, grab, lift and ingest. Three times in a row to get them all in—she can take four at a time; at the rate she's been going, she's become a master at choking them down.

She tilts her head back, sticks out her tongue. Counts one, two three… until she gets to fifteen. The alcohol-based drops burn her mouth, and her taste buds squirm afterwards.

Dinner from two nights ago, a vegetable stir-fry, sits in a plastic container in the kitchenette's refrigerator. It takes up one of the two shelves available for storage space. Apples, almond butter and soymilk occupy the rest. She rummages, craving for something better. *Eat balanced. Don't binge.* Nothing in the condo will do. She grabs her purse, throws on a sweater, and stomps out the door.

The pattern of traffic surrounds her while she makes the ten-minute walk to the grocery store. The noise of engines grows loud and then fades as cars approach and pass her. They whiz by, one after another, each spraying a dirty, gasoline-smelling mist into the air. Brown puddles coagulate on the sidewalk, gathering old gum, McDonalds' wrappers, dead worms. She tries to block out the hurry of her surroundings, but she's walking in the midst of it and can't ignore the chaos. She squints her eyes and tilts her head down, holding her breath when cars pass and breathing deep when she finds fresh air.

Avoid refined sugars. *Don't binge.* Dunkin Donuts' stands at the corner of the intersection before the vegan grocery store.

February 28th. I ate a dozen doughnuts yesterday. I licked the icing off. I bit deep into the soft dough. I chewed and closed my eyes. I moaned.

The short-and-stubby Dunkin' Donuts lady gave me weird looks. Glaring, judging, big brown eyes bulging at me. Grossly long fingernails, tapping on the counter, clearly trying to make a point. So I ate four in front of her instead of the two I'd planned.

I am ill. I feel heavy and slow. I haven't eaten anything since I woke up, three hours ago. I am bloated and I am going to sleep.

She stands up, hand on her head, and runs her fingers through her dirty hair; tangled pieces cling to her face and she knows she needs a shower. Remnants of old art projects stick to her feet as she walks to her bedroom; she shakes the scraps of paper from her skin and climbs into bed.

February 29th. I've been sleeping. Is it tomorrow? Is it today? Thursday? Friday? When did I see the doctor? Don't I have to go to work?

She stands up and sees black for a moment from the rush.

How many days has it been?

She's missed a lot of work, she realizes, and in an instant, anxiety hits. She dresses hurriedly, applying makeup so fast her mascara smears and she doesn't notice. For five minutes she walks back and forth and in and out of rooms, manically pulling

herself together, grabbing what she needs and shoving it where she needs it. She scurries into the kitchen, heels clip-clopping, bags swinging, knotted hair still covering her face. She brushes the brown mass aside, smudging her makeup once more before slamming the door behind her and making the twenty-minute commute to Pittsburgh Magazine.

The toddler and his overweight mother waddle next to each other. Decrepit, should-be-in-the-hospital old ladies smile and coo as they pass. A car honks at a group of young girls, giggling in their strapless shirts. A truck driver gets off to a middle-aged minivan mother as she passes him on the highway.

The background music is Celine Dion. The crowd unanimously accepts—everyone has agreed that they can tolerate it, even though no one has spoken a word. The illusion of choicelessness gives them control. The inability to change gives them power.

She sits at a small, faux-wood desk in her office at work, furiously scribbling on a yellow legal pad. Her knee bounces underneath the table. Her free hand rubs her cheek and forehead. She never brings a notebook so that she can focus on her work. But she cannot stop.

Chubby mommy tells makeup-slathered old woman that she was due on the 12th. A couple in line smooches and the man who stands behind them stares at the saliva exchange until he remembers he's in public. Layla comes on overhead-- "You got me on my knees." Heartbreak played as the soundtrack of mediocrity. Fitting.

Light blue, flower-decorated suitcases satisfy the wife more than the black one. Happiness is surrounding yourself in beauty. Jerry doesn't like the layout, so he tells

Becky to fix Alicia's article. The quote that begins, "Sometimes it's hard to remember the last time I enjoyed myself," is removed to fit the interior designer ad. So now everything fits.

She scrambles to catch what her mind is producing. She is hardly aware of where she is or what she's supposed to be doing. She tugs at the tangles on her head, freeing dead hairs, then scratching her skull at the place where they came loose.

Pink laces, snow shoes with frilly balls on the toe. Don't eat bananas unless you must. Skittles weren't sweet enough, so now they have a sour sugar layer on top. Polar bears are dying.

Someone clears his throat in the doorway of her office. She jumps in her seat. Neither pen nor mind has left the paper in twenty minutes.

"I know you've got a ton to catch up on," her coworker says, leaning against the doorframe, staring down at her. "Let me know if I can help. I'm glad you're feeling better."

Her trance is broken. She nods, eyes wide, and turns back to her desk. What the hell was she just doing? She looks at the legal pad and pushes it away. The computer is on but she hasn't logged in. She turns again and stares at the portion of the office floor visible from her desk.

All of the employees have decorated their own small workplaces in some way—knick-knacks from travel, posters, "Breeds of the World" dog calendars, welcome mats at the entrances and joke presents on shelves. Postcards from abroad and martini glasses featuring half-naked cartoon women sit next to pictures of the first and lastborn. The framed family photo neatly hidden behind the in-box.

The sound of printers, fax machines, and the general movement of paper fills the air. The tick-tacking of keyboards. Mouses clicking, phones ringing. Pagers paging, alarms alarming. Leather shoes plod on gray carpet. Polite conversation. The chewing of gum. The crinkle of a forbidden snack. A sniffle. A cough. Sniggering from behind closed doors—somebody is the butt of a joke.

She stands, shuts her door, and presses her back up against it, still holding the handle. She looks around her own office, but suddenly feels as though it's not hers at all.

I am an object of my surroundings. A product with a barcode. Scanned and bagged, packaged for the journey home.

How long has it been?

She tries to walk back to her desk, but the cold, white walls begin to spin around her. They close in towards her. The floor tilts and shakes. She sinks to her knees from dizziness.

I merely occupy this space at this time. I am merely a figure moving about a room.

Her shoulders tremble and she thrusts her face into her hands, but she doesn't cry. Pictures of gleeful, young-looking men and women grin up at her from the piles of old publications on the ground. *Save money this Christmas! Lose weight over the winter! Look thinner! Feel younger! Appear better! Live healthier!*

Doors open and close in the hallway. People are still working. Friends keep chattering. Life continues. She lifts her head, rubs her face, and stands.

No medications. This is it. I am all me.

TAPAS: Self-discipline

"The willingness to be both burned and blessed."

Any Way You Can

We'll start in child's pose.

Find a comfortable space on your mat and sink down into your hips. Feet together, knees out wide. Let your belly hang. Let gravity pull you downwards. Arms out in front of you or back behind you. Either way.

Let yourself get heavy here. Eyes closed.

Welcome to this evening's class. I'm honored to be your guide tonight.

As you start to relax, turn your attention to your breath. Those long inhales, those long exhales. Feel your belly rising and falling, your chest expanding and contracting. Notice the air moving in and out of your body.

Go ahead and take one long inhale. Good. Now open your mouth and exhale hot air. Nice. Do it again.

If you're feeling any pain in your hips here, come on up to your knees. Yeah. Just like that. Let's take a minute to just ground and be here.

Whew. Take a few slow, deep breaths. Nice.

Walk both hands over to the right side of your mat. Feel the stretch in your left side-body. Breathe into the space between your ribs and allow the stretch to happen. Back through center and walk your hands over to the left side of your mat. Same thing here. Breath into the right side-body, right ribs, right lungs. Notice the difference between the sides.

Try not to judge it. Just for today, see if you can just be where you are. Just try to accept where and how you are right now.

Reach both hands forward, elbows lifting off the mat. Use your hands to press your hips closer to your heels. A big breath in, and again, exhale stale air.

Beautiful.

Come on up to your hands and your knees. Go ahead and move around however you'd like here. Back-bending on the breath in, then rounding the back on your exhales. Warming up the spine. Follow the pace and rhythm of your breath, and don't rush here.

Take your time. Go slow.

Four rounds of this, all on your own. When you're ready, we'll meet in a downward facing dog.

Great breathing. Great movements. I'm so pleased to be here with you today. It's always an honor for me to stand in front of a class like this.

Okay. Go ahead and move around in this downward facing dog however you'd like. Bending one knee, then the other… Yeah. Stretching out hamstrings, the outside of the hips… Just like that. Start to feel out the body.

It may have been a long day for some of us. It's certainly been a long day— actually, a long journey— for me. It's amazing what it takes, sometimes, to get you onto your mat.

So in this downdog, make sure you're pressing equally into both hands, keeping shoulders square to the mat. Don't compromise the integrity of the pose here.

Let's lift the right leg to the sky for a three-legged dog. Remember your breath. Nice long inhales and slow, conscious exhales. At any point opening your mouth and letting go of unwanted energy. Great.

Right leg down, left leg lifts. Whatever you did on the other side, do here. Notice the difference between your two hips and try not to judge it. We're all one-sided in one way or another.

Ok. Step your left foot forward, then your right.

Stay low here, head hanging heavy towards your mat. Big bend in the knees and reach for opposite elbows. No muscle in this ragdoll. Close your eyes and just be.

This is such an amazing practice. I know you know it. But still—it's such a transformative thing. It's so hard to explain to people who don't get it. From where I started… from the person I was seven years ago… it's just really an amazing thing.

Okay. Release your hands and toe-heel your feet together. On the inhale, take a halfway lift. Hands to thighs, belly engaged. Shoulder blades kissing on your back. One more breath here, then exhale and fold.

Stand tall, dive up. Arms down by your sides, palms face forward. Mountain pose. Feel the four corners of your feet by tilting forward and backward. Then ground down, stabilize. Low belly pulling up and in. Tailbone tucked to engage your core. Good.

Hands to the heart center and bow your head. Let's set an intention for the class today. Mm. Let's set an intention to accept ourselves today. To just honor whatever is present. Because we're all in different places of evolving and coming into ourselves. And it's so important for us to recognize that process and where we are in it.

Let's take a deep breath in and let's seal this intention with one big "Ohm."

Beautiful.

Inhale and reach up, look up. On the exhale, forward fold. Inhale to your halfway lift. Exhale and step back to your first high plank.

We're going to hold this plank for five breaths, but don't worry. You'll be okay. You can drop your knees at any point.

See, here's a perfect example. When I first started practicing I couldn't hold a plank for even a minute. I know! It's hard to believe. It's hard to imagine now. But we all start from somewhere, right? We all have to start somewhere.

So just meet yourself wherever you are in this pose and try not to judge yourself for how long you can or cannot hold it.

Okay. On your next inhale slide forward onto your tippy toes. Exhale and push back to your downward facing dog.

Take a big breath in, and then open your mouth and let it go. Nice.

On the inhale, lift your heels. Exhale, bend your knees. Walk to the top of your mat. Go ahead: Sun Salutation A. Take yourself through it. Follow the rhythm of your breath.

And as you go, try to focus only on yourself. This practice is about you. This next 75 minutes is all about you. So show up. Soak it in. Allow yourself to transform.

We are all here to change, to grow. It's like osmosis. It's like the seasons. Everything's always shifting. And if you come enough, if you practice enough, you will experience it.

I should know. I'm a living example of it.

Nice. Nice movement. Great breathing, you guys.

We'll all meet in a downward facing dog. Take three long breaths here.

I promise—if you had seen me before I found my mat—whew. You wouldn't have recognized me. Inside or out. I was the bleached blond sorority type. Totally unhappy. Had no idea who I was.

When you're ready, lift your heels, bend your knees. Hop to the front of your mat and go for another round. Sun Salutation A.

On each breath out make sure you're exhaling all the way. Right. And try not to be rigid in your poses, in your movements. No stiffness. Acceptance doesn't allow for stiffness.

I don't usually share this—but I'll tell you this today: I used to be a fake-type party girl who drank all week long and ate potato chips for dinner. I know. I know. You can laugh. But the truth is that when I looked in the mirror, I hated myself.

When you've completed your Sun A, we'll meet in a downward facing dog. Good. And when you're there, take three big breaths in, and on each breath out press your chest closer to your thighs. See if you can get a little deeper.

Roll the neck around, shake and nod the head. Nice.

This was seven, eight years ago, by the way—this old self I am talking about. You know.

Ok. Let's lift the right leg in the air again. Bend the knee and open the hip. Roll the ankle around, roll the hip around, roll the neck again.

Step the right foot forward and find crane pose. Your low lunge. Arms overhead, and just ever so gently sink into your hips. We're here for five long breaths. Take your time. Move however your body is asking you to move.

Mm. Yeah. College. Do remember college? Who you were back then? Can you see how much you've changed?

Me? I wore full make up and lipstick all day, every day. Hard to believe, right? I know. And I picked on other girls. In the sorority and not. Trying to impress the seniors, the fraternities. I worked out every day and in between I partied. Lots of drinking. Lots of booze.

Start sinking deeper into your hips. Start to reach your arms up and behind your ears. Heart opening towards the ceiling. Really nice. One more big breath in, and then let it go: vinyasa to your downward facing dog.

When you're ready, lift your left leg high. Bend the knee and open the hip. Go ahead: crane pose on the left side. And while you're here, notice what's here. Notice what's new. What's different. The thing about the practice is that it shows us with such clarity and precision all the ways that we *are*—each and every day. Down to the cellular level.

Anyway, I eventually left. School, I mean. I still remember packing up my room and saying goodbye to my sisters. That was tough.

We all go through tough times. Right? Everybody feels pain. That's non-negotiable. It's a fact of life. We're all going to go through something at some point.

Take one more big breath in, reach up and look up, lifting from the center of your being. Exhale and vinyasa. We meet back in down dog.

Take a huge breath in—the biggest breath of your day! Open your mouth and exhale *loudly.* Nice!

Lift your heels high and bend your knees low. Hop to the front of your mat. A halfway lift right away, and then forward fold. Chair pose.

Just sit into this pose here and get comfortable. We're in no rush. If you take my classes often you know we're going to stay here for at least ten breaths. Sit into a place where you can *be* for ten breaths, and focus on what is occurring within you right now.

Okay. Whew.

I don't usually share this much in class—did I say that already?—but I wanted you to know that I left college. Sometimes you have to leave what doesn't serve you. Sometimes you just have to cut the ties and move on.

Sit another two inches. If you're feeling stuck, put a little bounce in your knees. Just a little movement to help you feel like you're here. Find your breath and keep pumping it.

I moved back in with my parents. Twenty years old, back in my tiny yellow bedroom. Served hummus at a Lebanese restaurant. I know. Totally glamorous.

Ok. Take one last breath in here and fold over your legs. Hug in. Forehead reaching to shins. Whew. That was intense.

Nice work.

Find a halfway lift and a high plank. Slide forward to your tippy toes and lower yourself halfway down. Inhale to your upward facing dog—a big breath in here—and then press your body back to home base: downward facing dog. Urdhva mukha svanasana. Yes.

Right away, your right leg goes high. Step forward to your crescent lunge. Feet at hip width, legs reaching and pressing in opposite directions. Let's interlace our hands behind our head and lean into our own palms. Beautiful. Ten breaths here. No fear.

So: I was twenty and serving food and living at home and not having a grand old time. It's hard, you know, when you're young and most of your friends are off at school getting an education. That's a tough spot to be in.

Switch up your arms—do anything you'd like with them. Anything that helps you to breathe. You're halfway through it. Stick with it.

So I was walking out of the restaurant one day and my ears were ringing and I was dirty and greasy. And I saw this sign. No—not like that. I'm not *that* crazy.

It was a literal sign. Down the alleyway from my job.

You already know, I'm sure.

Okay—one more big inhale and let it go. Vinyasa. We'll meet in crescent lunge on our left side. You go ahead and count your breaths in this pose. Ten of them. Any arms you want.

I'm going to encourage you here to push yourself to the edge—but not past it. Bring yourself right to the brink and then pull back, just a millimeter or two. Feel the burn but don't kill yourself here. There's a balance.

I didn't go in that day. That first day I saw it. You might not believe it but it took me two months to work up the courage to even go pick up a schedule. Two months!

But I did. I finally went in.

Does anyone else remember their first class? Yes? Was it good? Yes? And you liked it?

That's good.

Go ahead—move through your vinyasa. We'll meet in downward dog. Take several breaths here. Wipe sweat, get water if you need.

When you're ready, inhale your heels high, bend your knee low and hop to the front of your mat. Find chair pose, again. Inhale your hands to your heart center. On the exhale, take your twist to the right.

Nice. Sink your hips lower than your heart. Press your right palm into your left to leverage the twist, to go deeper. If you'd like to, you can spread your arms and open your wings.

Five breaths here. Don't be afraid of the pain. Don't let it get to you. Don't let it get under your skin.

When I finally went—when I finally walked into that studio, all my fears were confirmed. The people seemed happy. Kind. Like they knew something.

It was like—it was like—I was kind of like, "shoot". I can't pretend here. I can't fake it.

My first class this teacher came right up to me. We were in warrior II and I was dying—you know, first class, hot room—and I was so terrified. I don't even know why. I was just afraid. And she taught half the class from that space right in front of me. She never looked at me, didn't touch me. Think she knew—that I needed to just be left to deal with myself.

All right, let it go. Forward fold. Take a big breath in through your nose, fill your belly with air. Open your mouth and sigh out.

When you're ready, find your prayer twist the other way. Sit down low and soak it in. Be willing to hurt.

I'll never forget that class. It was like—it was like a light bulb went off. It was like a come to Jesus moment. Like, "oh, there are people out there who aren't suffering all the time". You know? Like, I realized that things could be easier. Things are always *hard,* but… you don't have to struggle through it, is what I mean. You don't have to suffer.

Ok, nice work everybody. Let it go and hug your legs. Then toe-heel your feet out wide and take your peace fingers to your big toes. Halfway lift on the inhale, and then fold in again.

And you know, part of it—part of the suffering of it—is that we're all so conditioned to think that pain is bad. That pressure and intensity are signs of failure. Because if we're uncomfortable, we're doing something wrong, right? Isn't that always what we think? Isn't that what seems right? We've been conditioned to move away from anything moderately intense or unnerving. You know? But if you stay—if you learn to sit through it, wait it out—any way you can—if you learn not to react….

Chair pose will show you that. Yoga will show you that.

My sister, she has a PhD program from Stanford. Biology. She's a researcher. Big stuff. Cancer. Travels to Europe and Canada these days.

My whole life I've been surrounded by people who were succeeding. Who had something to work towards. Something they could dig deep into. Something worth the suffering of trying, failing.

So you see—you see—I just needed—we all just need—I was just searching for something to grab me like that. We all need a place. A belonging. A life purpose. Something that makes the pain worthwhile.

Okay. Release your hands. Find goddess or crow pose. Go ahead. Whichever your body is calling you to do.

From that first class onwards—go ahead, find your high plank to low plank. Up dog to down dog—from that first class I just kept coming. I didn't know what I was looking for. I didn't know what I would receive. I just knew I needed to be there. Sweating and breathing and suffering in that good way.

Keep working in your down dog here.

And at some point—at some point I started changing. I stopped dying my hair. Let it grow longer. Stopped—I stopped using so many products on my face and eyes. I started caring about my health. Not just the way I looked, you know? My actual health.

I—I know—just—I'm almost done here. This has a point. It's important. I promise.

I—I just think it's important to know that we can change. That all of us—that we're all capable of hugely transformative change.

I—I know—just hold this down dog until I finish. We'll move on in a minute.

What was I saying? Oh—yes—then there were these signs that it was, like, leaking into other parts of my life. I don't know. Do you guys notice that? Yes? Like, my relationships got a little bit better? And I didn't even really have to try? I wasn't focused on that at all—it was like, just a happy side effect.

I stopped yelling at my parents so much. I don't know. I just—I just wasn't so angry. Then I stopped dating whatever crappy boyfriend I was dating at the time. Go ahead—you can laugh.

The only person I wanted to be in a relationship with was myself. I wanted—I needed to know me. And the only thing that could teach me was my mat. It knew the true me. The inside of me.

We're always reacting to peoples' outsides, you know? Like my outside shell interacting with your outside shell. It's not *real.* It's not *authentic*.

You know what—we're running out of time here. Let's just take a half pigeon. Go ahead.

Then there was this one day I'll never forget it. Totally elevated my practice. Total game changer. I was in a class—a hot one, 90 minutes, just totally intense. And I was hating every moment of it. You know? I was so angry with the teacher. It was so hot and the class was so intense and it just didn't seem even reasonable. It didn't seem practical or sane.

And I was just, like, going through the motions on my mat, hating everything. The teacher—she kept talking in these platitudes and in this soothing wannabe voice. She just—she just totally pissed me off. I'm sure you've all been there in one class or another. Right? Haven't you?

We're here for three whole minutes. Don't fidget. Just be with the discomfort.

So here I was, twenty-two, maybe? Yeah. Just eighteen months into my practice. A newborn, practically. And I was just absolutely fuming. I was just—I was just totally miserable. Sweat in my eyes, heart racing, like, totally—totally—consumed with fury.

And the teacher—this teacher—she came right up to me, right over to me. And she stood behind me. And we were in a balancing pose—I think it was dancer—yes—dancer—and I was hyper focused on not falling over. Because I was already having a bad practice and the one thing that would make it worse was not being able to stick a pose.

So here we were in dancer's pose—and this woman—this teacher—she comes up behind me and shoves me. Just like that. Pushes me over.

I know. Can you believe it?

I could not believe it.

Okay. Switch sides. Half pigeon on the left.

So of course I turned to her and shoved her right back. Didn't even think about it. Just—like—pure rage. Pure energy. Shoved her right back.

I know. I know. You don't have to look at me like that.

So—the whole class—everybody—we all stopped, of course. The woman just looked me. The students, they kind of gasped and just stood there. I remember. Then somebody behind me swore at me. The teacher just laughed. Laughed right at me. Right in my face.

I think—

I know—

I remember—

I shoved her a few more times. Just—you know—pushing her away from me.

I know. It sounds bad. Are you leaving? Oh? Oh—okay. She has to pick up her child. That's okay.

Well—that day—I had to pack up and leave early, too. I was escorted out of the building. Not allowed back. Ever. Obviously.

The next day the studio came out with a whole PR thing about what happened and said that it was all my fault. Of course. They didn't name me. Which was nice of them, I guess. But they made it seem like it was totally me who started it.

What's that? You've heard about this?

At the place downtown? See. There you go.

Come again? Oh. Well. I'm telling you—I promise—I don't—I wouldn't lie. I wouldn't lie to you about this.

She shoved me first. I promise.

Okay. Find downward facing dog. Roll around your hips a little, stretch out your legs. Last downdog of the practice.

Go ahead. Don't wait. There you go.

Are you guys friends? Cool. That's nice. I usually don't allow for talking in my classes. But that's ok. You're friends.

Go ahead and come onto your back for happy baby pose. This is such a vulnerable pose. It's one of my favorites.

So that happened. My outburst. I mean—it was kind of the teacher's fault, you know? They said she just, like, was trying to help me and I misinterpreted it? I don't know. I don't know. I don't think that's true.

Are you leaving, too? Ah—Okay. No problem. No problem at all. We all have our lives to live. Have a good appointment.

Go ahead and take a spinal twist to the right.

But the good thing is, the really important thing of this whole story—well, there's two things, I guess. First is that I found this studio the following week. Yep. That incident led me here. So I'm so grateful for that. And I did my teacher training here and everything, so. There's that.

Okay—yes, no, I understand. Have a great day.

And the other thing is that I realized what a profound impact a yoga teacher can have on somebody's life. Good or bad. Positive or negative. And also—I hadn't thought of this before—but now that I'm sharing this—I've never shared this before—did I tell you that?—the whole thing forced me to accept myself and my actions. My past.

Wasn't that our intention today? Yeah? Self-acceptance? How about that. Being right where you are.

The whole thing—it was kind of like a wake up call. To change. Yeah. I know. I knew I needed to change.

That day—I felt it. Well—not right away. I was so pissed off for a while. But after—later—when I couldn't sleep, you know—middle of the night—I had this moment—a moment of clear and concise knowing.

That she had just changed my life, that teacher who shoved me.

See—this is what I'm saying—this is what I've been saying all along. Being challenged—being burned—that's how you grow. It's how you change. Get better.

You have to dive into the discomfort to get anything from it. Otherwise you're just running away.

I realized—in all of this—that day—that night—that I couldn't run from my past anymore. My anger, my losses.

I had to learn to be okay with who I was. What I was.

This is why I teach what I teach. Actually—it's why I teach at all. Because you come here—all of you—

--that's right—go ahead—find savasana, final resting pose—

--you come here to learn—to change—to grow—to be transformed.

And I want to help you with that—I want to ensure that that happens—

-- and part of it, part of it is accepting yourself—who you are now—yes—you have to start there—but—what?—what's that?--

-- don't worry, they can wait. I'm teaching the next class, too—

You have to start where you are and then be willing to let that go. Go somewhere new.

I'm just—really—what it comes down to—I'm just so honored to be able to assist others in this. To be here for others. Like I said—it's been a lifetime of learning to get me here. And—you know—however I can help—whatever I can do to instigate your change—let me know. I'm here.

Okay. Come on up to your seated position. Hands at your heart center. Head bowed in gratitude.

Have gratitude for yourself. For others, too, the other people in this room, and for your life's teachers. Yoga teachers, other teachers. Whoever and whatever they are.

Thank you so much for joining me on this journey today. I hope you were able to learn something about yourself.

Namaste.

SVADHYAYA: Self-study

"Intentional seeking to know who you are."

Behind Us Lies the Diamond

We're sitting in a circle, cold metal chairs pulled around an empty space in the middle of a beige room. It's the fifth day of inpatient and the tenth group therapy session I have attended since arriving at Woodsphere on July sixteenth of this year, 2010.

It's Friday, eleven a.m. Marty is talking about the time six years ago she found herself in a foreign country and had no idea how she got there. Sunlight creeps through the half-closed blinds, directly onto me. I always sit with my back to the windows—it helps me cut distraction and daydreaming—but the warmth has started putting me to sleep.

On the other side of the room I hear Marty's sobbing.

"I just can't forgive myself," she chokes. "I just don't know how to move on."

A couple of sympathetic murmurs float around the room, but as somebody offers to respond I instead hear myself five weeks ago, gasping like an old dog over my keyboard in the corner of our open-room office.

Nothing had happened to me. Nobody had threatened to fire me. But it wasn't the first time it started, the heavy breathing, the climbing suffocation that seemed to come from nowhere, that cut off my oxygen and left me gasping like a fish on dry land. In the past few months it'd become weekly routine—a breathing match that came out of nowhere and pushed its way into whatever I was doing.

It was very inconvenient.

Marty takes a deep breath and passes the Word Wand to Phillip, who sits across from her, a pensive smile on his face, hand slightly raised to indicate a need to share.

"Well, I just wanted to say," Phillip murmurs, "that I'm really touched by your courage. You're an inspiration to me. And I also want you to know that you survived all those years for a reason."

I don't hear what Marty says because my thoughts are back in Miami with my wife, three days before I am scheduled to leave for Woodsphere. She is tapping her shoe on the black-and-white-checkered tile kitchen floor and tapping a pen and chewing her cheeks.

She doesn't know what to make of it. Any of it.

"What do you mean, you don't know?" she is saying. "You must know what you're so stressed about. Like, are you working too much? Or is it Jeff going to boarding school?" She pauses a moment. Starts to say something, then stops. Then, "Is it me?"

I am sitting at our breakfast table, cornered and confronted at seven in the morning. My boss—her father—had just called, told me to take the rest of the week off. The day before I had to leave before noon.

"How long has this been going on?"

This comes from the group counselor, Susan. I look at my left hand and notice a faded scar on my thumb knuckle. It looks strange to me, like it's not really mine, and I can't remember how it got there.

Susan speaks again: "Christy, are you there? Tell me how long this has been

happening."

Christy, a forty-two year old meth addict, squirms like a little girl in a highchair. On her arm are three huge red marks—not cuts—but what look like six-inch-long rug burns.

"Christy?" Susan says. Then, "Does anybody want to share how this makes them feel?"

"I don't know what I feel."

This is me to Kim back in our kitchen that morning before I didn't go to work. "I don't know what's causing this."

She looks at me hard and dark and I think, this is how homeless people feel. Drug addicts. This is how they get looked at.

"I swear," I say. Kim scoffs. Leaves the room, leaves the house with a bang of the door.

Two white-clad nurses are escorting Christy out of group. She'll be gone for at least a week, I think.

"Does anybody have anything else to add?" says Susan.

"Yeah," I hear myself say. "I do."

And then I start to choke.

Kim and I met at an undergrad party on Collins Street in the outskirts of Miami. I remember that she wore a blue striped skirt and a black, see-through blouse. I remember

hovering over my plastic cup and watching her from the other side of the room and looking down and away as soon as she caught me.

I knew I was good looking— everybody told me so— but I never felt any confidence from it.

Kim approached me at that party and we talked about baseball by the edge of the dining room full of dancing drunks, then we talked about her high school softball team outside on the front porch, and we talked on the phone the night after that and the night after that and before long we had moved in together and then we found out she was pregnant with Jeff.

We got married the summer after Jeff was born on one of the hottest days of that year, 1995.

Group is wrapping up, people folding their chairs and stacking them against the wall. I am still sitting, a paper bag at my feet. In my left hand is the Word Wand.

I glance at the scar on my thumb try to stand up, but Susan is sitting beside me, holding me down and grimacing like she's just seen something die.

"Are you all right?" she says. She is talking to me, or rather, about me.

"I think so," I say. "Yeah."

I feel the soreness in my throat and am immediately overcome with shame. A soft bell rings through the building, indicating that lunch is ready.

"Sorry," I manage to say.

"Nothing to be sorry about," she replies. She pats my shoulder and gives me a look like sympathy before walking away.

I decide not eat. Instead, I sit in my room with my back to the window and think about the past. I brought four photos with me when I packed to leave and I hold them now, finger them like little delicacies. There's a family picture of the three of us in Maine, Kim's home state, and another of Kim and Jeff on a Hawaiian beach. There's my high school baseball team photo and a picture of my parents at their friend's wedding several decades ago. These images are my only connection to the outside world, though I do get once-weekly phone calls to Kim and I've been writing Jeff a letter every day.

I'm not sure what to say when I write, whether I should talk about how I'm doing or just ask about him. I wonder if I should explain my past or if he knows already, if Kim told him in some heart-to-heart they shared once I left.

So far I've stayed off topic: I talk about food, friends, the sports I play here in the afternoons. I talk about the news, the Miami Heat, baseball.

I ask how he's doing, if he's still seeing his girlfriend, Carrie. If they've decided to stay together when he leaves in August. I ask about caddying, tell him to save as much money as he can. I tell him to drive carefully, to listen to music only so loud, to pull over on highways if he gets scared.

These are the things I say all the time and certainly the questions I'd ask if I were home. It makes it all the more strange that I'm here, writing down my half of our anecdotal conversations instead of speaking them.

And this is only the beginning. In five weeks he'll be packed and gone to boarding school and he might never come home. If he stays in New England, if he settles outside of Florida, I'll see him only on holidays, and if he gets married it'll be even less. He'll

have to rotate vacations between us and his in-laws like Kim and I once did, until we grew tired of each other and spent every break apart.

I wonder what Jeff thinks of me, his dad gone away in some crazies' home. I wonder if he actually understands. They say teenagers don't have fully-developed brains; does his comprehend the situation?

I look at the picture I have of the two of them-- Kim squatting behind a toddler-sized Jeff, holding him between her legs. They're both in blue swimsuits on the beach with the blue ocean and blue sky behind them, and the wind is blowing her hair out of the picture to the left.

I imagine the conversation that must have taken place two weeks ago when Jeff returned from school and found me gone:

Jeff: Why is Dad going to that place?

Kim: I think he just needs a break, Jeff.

Jeff: From what?

Kim: Oh... I don't know. He gets stressed out. And, well, sometimes he stresses out more than he should.

Jeff: Why? What do you mean?

At this point Kim would sigh and cross her arms and look at Jeff as if to say, *are we really going to get into this right now?* But Jeff would push on because he wouldn't notice her irritation and, led only by curiosity and concern, he would ask again.

Jeff: From what, Mom? What's wrong with him? What is going on?

Kim would sit down, maybe run her hands through her hair or massage her temples. Jeff would pick up on something, not her anger but that indeed there was something to

hide. He would sit down across the table from her and take her hands as he delivered the next line.

Jeff: Are you guys getting a divorce?

Kim would laugh at this before retracting her arms to her side.

Kim: Oh, no, it's nothing like that. Listen, Jeff, everybody has problems. But your dad... Well, we don't really talk about it that much.

At this point, Kim would have small beads of sweat on her forehead. I know this because they were there the night I told her about what happened and they usually come back anytime anything about my childhood gets mentioned.

I wiped them away from her hairline that night when we were young. We were still affectionate then, lying in bed naked after a night out with friends, post-sex in the tiny apartment we shared. I moved one hand to her pregnant belly. She was six months at the time.

"Listen, Kim, I'm not, like, fucked up or whatever," I said.

She looked at me like I was a stranger. There was a mix of fear and sadness in her eyes and disgust, too-- for whom I was not certain.

"Does it make you feel weird?" I asked. I moved away from her so I could see her better.

"No. No, it's nothing like that," she said. She sat up, put a t-shirt on. "It's just sad. I'm really sad. And I'm sorry."

Back at the kitchen table with Jeff, maybe Kim would think about this, too. Maybe she'd think the same thoughts that ran through her head the night I told her, the things she

couldn't verbalize and so instead apologized.

They are the things she doesn't say to me even now when I call her, and the silence between us screams that there is a problem more so than the fact that I'm calling from a rehab facility in the first place. We try to talk, circulate conversation around the house, the cars, Jeff's tuition. She mentions the family business, new clients, her father's most recent rampage to change company policy. But after every subject or brief flow of conversation lies a roadblock, and eventually we both stumble and stop and sink back into the rigidity we've known for so long and then we say goodbye.

I wonder if that same tension exists between her and Jeff as they sit together at the table without me. Jeff would be patient with her; he'd allow for the silence to grow. He'd give his mother the room she needed to get the story out, and there in the space between them Kim would realize she had to tell him and that she'd never actually spoken the words herself.

Back in my room I set the photo down. I can feel the heat on my face from labored breath. I'm not upset for myself-- that much I know. I don't have any sorrow left for me.

But something is growing within me, and the past few days have given it more time and space to develop. I can feel it pressing on my chest and at the base of my throat, a panicky-like blockage that's intensity is interrupted only by the beating of my heart.

Another bell chimes, signaling the end of lunch. Voices build from the end of the corridor and grow louder as they make their way towards me. Dozens of my compatriots filter out of the cafeteria. It's break time. Older residents are on their way to play chess in the courtyard, the alcoholics and drug addicts will separate by gender and smoke in

different parts of the back lawn. The handful of twenty-somethings usually gathers in the shade by the gazebo and laughs at whoever walks by.

The voices fade around the far corner of the hallway and then there's a tap at my door.

"Patrick?"

It's Susan. I've accumulated enough hours in group therapy to recognize her voice anywhere. I wipe my face, walk to my door and open it.

"We missed you at lunch," she says. "It's break time now."

I nod, turn to grab my sunglasses but change my mind.

"I'm going to stay in," I say. Susan looks at me through squinted eyes. A neat little ponytail pulls at the skin on her face. I wonder if she has kids.

"Okay," she says. "Are you sure? Is everything okay?"

I nod. She pauses, then nods back like something authentic was exchanged between us and shuts the door.

I sink back onto my bed and flip to the next picture-- the one of eighteen-year-old me with my baseball team. I was the catcher, the best on the team. I learned most of what I knew from my father, though I watched hours upon hours of video studying the greats: Bill Dickey, Johnny Bench, and I read everything I could about Yogi. I collected cards as a kid, of course, still have several hundred of them in the attic somewhere.

I remember my childhood fondly. Suburban Tennessee with my parents, George and Marie, and my older sisters, Bethany and Grace. We had a small ranch house with an acre of yard behind it and a detached garage where my father worked in the summer evenings, fixing or creating household problems. He was an auto man by day, worked in

a shop just ten minutes from home, and on the weekends I'd go with him, watch the men through the glass window in the office, play with greasy car parts, read files and understand none of it.

By night he was a drunk, though none of us knew that until we were much older, teenagers at Bethany's high school graduation when he arrived late, intoxicated and loud and none of us were invited to stay for the final processional.

My mother was beautiful, a tall brunette and we adored her though she was silent and strict, even more so than my father. We'd help her in the kitchen and the garden almost everyday, and when I got old enough I mowed the lawn and emptied the garbage and cleared dinner, which we always had together at 6:30 p.m.

My parents would have parties at the house every now and then-- mostly just friends from the neighborhood, sometimes old childhood pals who'd stop by with their children. I suppose there were also my father's work buddies, those gruff men with big bellies that smelled permanently of gasoline.

My sisters and I spent those nights in our rooms with TV dinners; we were left there until the following morning, so naturally we'd stay up until three a.m., eat packages of Tootsie Rolls and, as we got older, sneak occasional drinks from downstairs.

I can see myself around that age-- maybe nine or ten-- in the kitchen, helping my mother prepare for a party. I'd help her chop tomatoes, wipe the counters, watch her sautee vegetables, help gauge how much longer the pasta had to boil. We would talk school or baseball or family news, and when we finished the chores she'd send me upstairs, where I would play with action figures and watch TV while below the door chimed and the noise grew.

The bell rings again. The door to the courtyard opens and shuts with the influx of human traffic. It's time for our two-hour afternoon activity-- we can choose quiet reading, outdoor activities like softball or soccer, or we can schedule in advance to work with therapy horses a half-mile from the main facility. There's yoga and journaling classes, swimming on Mondays, tennis on Thursdays.

Like a slow-moving wave, the sound of activity comes closer. It melts through the doorway, ebbs and flows in the center hall while organizing itself to climb the stairs. It's made of men and women of all ages who have come for a variety of reasons. Addictions, mental illnesses, past traumas... it's a disease-addled group, an amorphous blob with a whole host of unnatural growths that cling to it, make it stop, stutter, go backwards.

The voices disperse into various assigned rooms. A pair of shuffling feet trots down the hallway, then it all goes silent with a gentle clap of a door.

When Jeff was first learning to walk we confined him to the family room. We used pillows to block the half-step up to the kitchen and furniture to keep him from waddling into the office. Kim dressed him in red overalls and miniature Sambas, she had tiny jeans for him that she matched with plaid shirts and animal zipper hoodies. He had more tiny sneakers than I'd ever had shoes, though that adorable baby cackle that he saved just for Kim and I kept the gifts coming. He eventually he learned to squeak our names and then he'd point to and name all of us, our entire families as we sat around and watched him for hours.

At age six he started playing t-ball for the local Little League, and Kim and I went

to every game. Summer evenings when Jeff was young were full of barbecues at the park: sooty hot dogs, Miller Lite and wives gathered away from the fire pit smoke in identical green or pink or blue skirts.

My favorite memories of Jeff playing ball are the games I'd find a quiet place on the bleachers to sit and reminisce about my own career. I'd watch Jeff hit the ball deep into the outfield or just over the first baseman's head and I'd remember when I did the same. The disappointment he felt, especially when he was young, when he made a mistake or the opposing team outplayed him, I'd sit on the bench and watch him with his head down and the feelings he felt I felt, as if it were happening to me, too, and I'd usually try to comfort him with stories of my own failures. When he ran it was like I was watching myself, the way his legs pumped and kicked up dirt and when he slid he'd disappear in the dust and sometimes I thought I saw my former self emerging, dusting off my pants and giving the bleachers the same shit-eating grin that Jeff wore when he made it.

On my dresser at home I have identical pictures of the two of us, both around seven or eight in our team uniforms. We're standing in different directions but we're both wound up, holding the bat over our shoulders, ready to knock the ball out of the field. Behind both of us lies the diamond, our home away from home. This is the place we spent days and weeks and months of our adolescence, cumulatively running marathons as the years went on, our footprints embedded in the dirt years after we were there.

How many times did we sprint from first to second to third and home again? It was the fear of getting out that spurred us forward. It was the pressure of the sport, the parents and gawkers and random visitors-- like my dad's greasy auto pals-- cheering and jeering

from the sidelines. The sweat on our foreheads, the chafing of our legs, the blisters on our feet didn't stop us as we worried, while we ran, about the ramifications of our actions-- that our team depended on us to stay straight, to get the job done. And there at home plate we waited for the impending future, the pitcher's wind and the sound of the ball as it came close, its spin deciding our fate because we knew there were only so many things we could control, and the skill and tact and manipulation of others was certainly not one of them.

I stand, crack the window in my room at Woodsphere. That's all it'll open, but the fresh air that trickles in feels refreshing, at least. I can hear voices falling over the roof from the courtyard; they ebb and flow like a soft breeze. I scoot closer to the window, smell the sweet summer air— thick and humid, drenched in the nectar of flowers, trees, pollinating everything.

North Carolina is different from Florida-- it's not nearly as hot, for one, but something about it *feels* different. The birds sing foreign songs, the traffic rumbles in new, strange patterns, the trees that drop leaves and nuts and branches are oddly shaped, crane their necks at awkward angles, stretch their arms like they're broken.

I sit on my bedside and take it all in, turning to get a view: I can see Woodsphere's narrow, tree-lined drive until it disappears around a bend; its sprawling, perfectly manicured lawns give an impression of complete togetherness which I find funny-- or maybe tragic-- considering who lives here. A hedge of bushes adorns a white sign in the front of the building, nestled beside the grand double door entrance that leads into the foyer and front desk.

From up here on the third floor, I can see over treetops a mile away, and I feel huge. I stand and take it all in-- the quaint, New England-like town with its green lawns and green leaves and blue, blue sky, white buildings and gray roofs visible amidst the color-- I can see over it and beyond it until the earth curves and the clouds bend with it. From here I could fly, I think. From here I am untouchable.

And, as if the earth were sighing in agreement, a gust of wind sends more fresh air into my room, and I stand in its way and breathe deeply.

I was almost thirty by the time my father admitted his part in it-- that my "incident," as he referred to it, was his fault—because it was his friend, he said, because he should have known better.

We were at Easter dinner in Tennessee when Dad started sobbing this at the dinner table. Jeff stopped chewing and started crying, too-- too young to know what was wrong and afraid because of it-- and Kim's polished smile fell flat. We all sat dumbfounded, too stunned to open our mouths, but it was me who finally put a hand on my father's shoulder and told him it was okay.

It's nobody's fault, I told him. He murmured something under his breath, choking back gasping sobs, shuddering underneath my hand.

Dad, I remember saying, *it's okay.* I looked around the room at the blank, horrified faces. *Plus,* I said. *I'm fine. Really.*

That stiff silence in the house after we got Dad upstairs on a couch, the way everybody looked down until I cleared my throat and said it's okay and we should resume eating, I remember it all like it just happened and here in my little one-bed room I

tense just at the thought of it.

Maybe Kim remembers that scene while she sits at the kitchen table with Jeff and tries to explain his heritage-- a family history covered in band-aids, fake smiles, embarrassed suppression, all members waiting impatiently on time for the evaporation of wounds and the erasure of memory. And here is your father, Kim would say to Jeff, bringing everything back up again.

He will cock his head and listen intently, swallowing in the news that nobody wanted to hear: that the man was a family friend, that he died a year later, that I didn't tell anybody for a long time after his funeral.

And Jeff will look back on his childhood differently, now; he'll see a victim where before he saw a man; he'll see a sick person before he saw his father and when he looks in old pictures himself, he'll scan my image for clues of what he never knew was there.

These photos I brought with me, they are pieces of a life that's very different from what the one I'm in now. They are remnants of a time when things were pulled more closely together, and my room at Woodsphere makes this all too obvious. The white walls, the green cotton duvet, the sterile cardboard pillows scream that I am not home anymore. That my leaving was an admittance, an acknowledgement of something that would no longer be contained and I certainly can't deny it while I'm here.

A knock at my door signals that it is time to go.

"One minute," I say.

The last picture is of Jeff and me from Kim's birthday dinner just a few months

ago. I peer closely at my polaroid self: crow's feet around my eyes, laugh and frown lines around my lips. My hair is still dark and thick; I'm lucky that time has not affected it yet. I look my age: somewhere in the middle between youth and full maturity, hovering in the decade where things move like molasses but slowly take shape, so that, by the time you reach your mid-forties, life has some sort of frame to hold you up, things in place to remind you to put two feet forward, to give you purpose when purpose and inspiration become rare commodities. They are highly coveted sentiments in this decade and it's not until old age that any remnant comes back, though by then you're too fragile and tired.

I don't look fragile and tired, though. I look like a father: worn, worried, infinitely hopeful. For all of the hours I've spent horrified at the possibility that something similar could happen to Jeff, I am exhausted. The lines on my face are a map to his past-- to his childhood I couldn't help but connect with my own-- but if the mars and marks and sleepless nights show on my face it's more than anything the evidence that I did everything I could to ensure his safety.

It occurs to me now that he's older, grown past the age of most concern. I sink deeper into the bed and realize that it's over, the years I fretted about; that he made it out alive, unscathed by things I'd die to ensure weren't repeated. He's leaving us, I think. This is true. But maybe he's going to be okay.

In the photo his face is split in a huge, dopey grin. His teenaged ears stick out from unkempt hair and the freckles he inherited from me are in full summer force. He's got his arm around me, the crook of his elbow hooked around my neck. He looks happy, I think to myself: the image of a young boy who'll have the wind at his back for as long as he's alive. A boy who will grow into a man and be free from whatever came before.

Another knock at my door jolts me, reminds me of where I am. I set the photos down and stand.

“Patrick, are you coming?” says Susan. I signed up for volleyball today.

“I am,” I say.

I hit the light, stuff my feet into sneakers, don’t bother lacing them. When I open the door, Susan has a smile on her face. She hands me a ball.

“Are you ready?” she says.

ISVARA PRANIDHANA: Surrender

"Putting ourselves at the feet of something greater than we are."

The Way It Is

"It's funny," he said. "I could be in an underground bomb shelter, sitting around with nothing to do and no one I know, and I could still be happy."

She shifted the phone from one ear to another.

"Really?"

"Yeah," he replied, "I mean, my life's been out of control since I last saw you. Crazy things have happened to me, but I never feel bad." He paused. "I have myself, you know? And I'm always right here."

She imagined him moving his hands away from his body in a straight line, making an invisible path in front of him.

"That's amazing," she said. "Because I'm just the opposite." She paused. "What has happened to you?"

His dad had tried to commit suicide while they were dating. It was Thanksgiving and all his relatives were in town; they celebrated in the waiting room of a psych ward. She had driven by the mental hospital everyday during high school without realizing it. The place was big-- a white, colonial-looking building centered in a few acres of grass. The driveway was long and winding and there were trees on either side of it. Easily the most beautiful place in town. But she hadn't thought about it much, hadn't thought about what went on inside those thick walls, or *who* went on inside of them, until that Thanksgiving, a couple years ago.

So it didn't surprise her when he said, "Well, my dad's not doing too well…" and she knew how to comfort him from the previous experience.

"But I'm still happy," he insisted. "I've had some insane things happen to me down here, but no matter what, I still manage to be totally fine."

She mumbled something about him being crazy for being so carefree. Happiness like he experienced it was something she couldn't empathize with.

"It's weird," she said. "Because we think the same. But there could be nothing happening in my life, and I could still feel completely out of control. Like I have no bearings or base at all."

He laughed. Not a cruel or mocking laugh, but a laugh that recognized the alienation she felt from years ago. It was a laugh that remembered.

"You have yourself," she said, "And for you, that's enough."

She could hear his smile fade.

"And it's not for you?"

"I don't know," she said. She inhaled deeply, held it in for a moment, and then let the air out suddenly. It made a whooshing noise into the receiver. "I just don't know."

The conversation turned more philosophical. He was tired of living by the standards of what he called boring, everyday life, but he said he knew that he could never escape it.

"I mean, wherever you go, whatever you do, you're still going to wake up in a bed--" he sounded exasperated "—in a house or apartment or whatever. It's all the same, always."

She laughed. "Yeah, I know. It seems cruel. But some part of me loves that, the consistency of it all. You know?"

"I guess. But it makes no difference what you do or how or where you do it. Nothing's going to change." He grumbled for a few seconds more and she couldn't exactly hear what he was saying.

"Some part of me finds that incredibly comforting," she said, meaning to cut him off, "and another part of me wants to call it quits when I think about it like that."

"I know," he said.

The conversation rested for a minute, both of them aware of the other's still presence on the opposite end of the phone line. They were in different states but could hear each other breathing.

She held the phone between her chin and shoulder so that she could type on her computer. In her online in-box, among the notifications, schedule changes and professors' emails, was an invitation from a friend to sign a petition. *Prevent the 'Artistic' Death of an Animal!* it said.

She clicked on it. Then she gasped. Four pictures of an emaciated dog assaulted her computer screen. Blown up to fill the whole e-mail, they showed the animal chained to a wall-- lying down, standing, panting, surrounded by onlookers. His ribs stuck out so far that she thought they might leave the screen and penetrate her chest. She could see into the dog's eyes. They were not vacant at all.

She read the letter and he said, "Are you okay?"

"There's an guy in Central America," she said, "who's starving a dog and calling it art."

SIGN THE PETITION, the email cried. *SAVE THIS DOG AND OTHERS FROM THEIR FATE AT THE HANDS OF EVIL.*

"What?" he said.

"Yeah. It says it's supposed to show that the dog is going to die from neglect whether or not he's chained to the wall," she said. She gave him the Internet link for the petition. They both signed it with their email addresses. They were numbers 94,809 and 94,810.

"Jesus. The world is mad," she said.

"It's a crazy place," he said.

On the website of the petition there was a list of other causes in need of signature support. She scrolled down. She didn't reach the end for thirty seconds. Genocide in Darfur, starving children in Ethiopia, Lolita the killer whale dying from being captured and placed in a small, cement tank.

"There's so many," she murmured.

Save the world with music! She clicked on the headline above a picture of four well-dressed musicians. They were standing under a dark, wet bridge.

10% of all proceeds go to AIDS research in Canada, the band's website told her. Then, on the side, *Donate Now!* flashed in purple and red.

"What are you looking at?" he asked.

"Ways that I can save the world," she joked. She needed to lighten the mood. "Which cause shall *you* choose? Starvation, AIDS, murder or torture?"

He didn't respond, so she sobered up. "It's a list of different things that need signatures. To petition or raise money or whatever. You know."

"Yeah."

There was a tense silence between them for a moment.

"I mean, what can you do?" she asked, a bit defensively. "Sit here for a day and sign all these things?"

"Yeah…" He sounded far away. "I don't know."

She said that she didn't know either.

"I guess I try not to think about it," he said. "Everything's crazy. And all you can do is deal with what you can. Things are absurd enough in my own life… and I can't change the way it is."

"But you're okay," she said.

"Yeah." He sounded hopeful again. "I'm fine."

They were quiet for another moment, she still thinking about the artist's dog, and he wondering what she thought of him.

"That's good," she said finally. "I'm glad you're okay."