

ABSTRACT

NINE STORIES FROM THE LAND OF FIXED GEARS AND LONELINESS

by Catherine Marie Sayre

This collection of inverted love stories and wry tales of family and friendship explores the ways the political intersects with the everyday, especially when unexpected. Most of the narratives unfold from the perspectives of young women whose lives refuse to conform to any typical bourgeois standards of adulthood. These voice-driven stories are playful with their tone, language, and subjects, and they use humor and absurdity as a method of exploring serious issues of human connections and misconnections.

NINE STORIES FROM THE LAND OF FIXED GEARS AND LONELINESS

A Thesis

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Gertrude

It belongs to the imperfection of everything human that man can only attain his desire by passing through its opposite.

—Søren Kierkegaard

Gertrude and Bob had been married for nine declining years. Nine slumping years. The slope not close yet to reaching a nasty or ugly point because the starting crest had been so high. At the beginning, in that dusty decade gone, Bob would appear outside Gertrude's tiny ticky-tack house and rev his moped engine, at the same time leaning on the Fischer-Price-like horn until Gertrude's parents curled their frowns around moth-hole curtains to peek at their daughter's new—first and only—boyfriend. Before Bob could even saunter up the stoop steps, Gertrude's heavy Absinthe-colored Mary Janes would clack their way past the curtains and out the door. Timid and intimidated by anything new, her parents huddled together at the window, watching Gertrude and Bob disappear in a screech of romantic rubber. His moped's zenith of 30 MPH in 0 to 60 seconds afforded Gertrude's parents a long shot of their daughter's ride into the moonrise, her arms tightly around the black-jacketed figure in front of her. Anyone on their block could see: Gertrude and Bob were in love.

And so, despite the moped's lack of a back bench seat and windows to fog up, Gertrude and Bob took home Sidney Vincent Baxter, Sid, from Saint Anne Mercy's nine months after their third date. A courthouse wedding shortly followed. Gertrude's parents stood side-by-side, hips touching and eyes wide, as Gertrude smirked down the aisle, fluttering long pretty fingers at Sid who was tightly cocooned in his grandmother's arms. A wrapped box from Target with four soup bowls and four dinner plates and a stainless steel tureen lay at Sid's grandmother's feet. No one shed a tear.

But life felt lived now. Bob's film student glasses became less and less for fashion sake and Gertrude's 1950s secretary look scored her just those sorts of jobs at the city art museums. Gertrude and Bob blinked and let their life grow prosy. Now Bob spent his days making quirky greeting cards to sell at local paper stores instead of writing his literary essays and book reviews (all as yet unpublished and unfinished). Now he complained about being overworked, though he had no deadlines. Now before sleep, she just said good night and gave him a smile. At nights they were nine or ninety years old

lying together in the dark like crayons in a box, innocent as hell. Now it was Kierkegaard not kisses in the bed.

Tonight, Gertrude lay in bed next to Bob reading a book (like most nights) about Kierkegaard's life, his failed love-affair with Regine Olsen—his attractive and lovely fiancée, who *was as light as a bird and as bold as a thought*—and tried to do Eye Yoga. She was one of the short-sighted who believed wearing glasses made your vision worse, instead of accepting eyesight gets worse as one ages. So she tried to strengthen her eyes through exercises, which involved squinting at words on the page without any bifocalic help. Then she would alternately shift her vision from close to distant points several times, moving Kierkegaard close enough to kiss, then far away with outstretched arms.

The house next door, its bedroom windows facing Gertrude and Bob's bedroom windows, sounded as if it were imploding. The voices were muffled, but rage is a tonal language and through the white-noise whirl of Gertrude's fan, rising and falling wah-wahs could be heard, like distant whale sounds. The neighbors' consonants seemed to merge into the their vowels. "Maybe," thought Gertrude, "the neighbors are French." She knew the French enjoyed *liaison*, and the sounds coming from next door didn't break themselves up into words; they just came in one continuous sound wave. "The French don't separate their words, they just mush them together like verbal porridge," she remembered. The walls of Gertrude's bedroom visibly undulated.

Gertrude picked up the Kierkegaard biography and began to read again. *Man's restless quest for the ideal form of life seemed suspended. Tradition ruled supreme, undaunted by the first rumblings of...* Bob cleared his throat. *Man seemed finally at rest and his life firmly integrated into a meaningful whole...* She turned a page, making the silence in their bedroom seem almost as riotous as the battle next door. The couple next door started making love. Loud, deafening love. The kind with squeaky bedsprings and was-that-the-lampshade-crashing-to-the-never-mind-just-shut-up-and-kiss-me.

"Do you want any water?" Bob yawned, making sticky dry noises with his mouth. "I'm parched."

"Bob?" Gertrude asked the man lying beside her with his big roman nose nearly inside his book's spine. *We do not know how or when it happened. But suddenly the high noon of joyful expectation has left us...* "I think—Bob? I think I'm an *exis-tentialist*."

The neighbors continued to howl. The bedroom windows facing the neighbors started to become misty.

He scribbled notes on the paper in his lap, as if trying to make up for dropping out of college, and seemed willfully to ignore her statement. His eyes surveyed his wife from their corners as he kept half of his attention still on his work. His eyes were not large but always seemed immensely focused and alert, drinking in details to be remembered in visual verbatim much later, in his notes and notes and notes.

She put down her bio and placed a postcard in the page.

“And what does that word mean to you, Gertrude?” When she met him in high school, she’d been wholly infatuated by his brilliance, his record collection, and his condescension. Though she’d made better grades then and made the bigger paycheck now, she still let herself be burned by his searing astuteness too often, as if she were a cynicism pyromaniac. “Or are you just using it in the typical sense that everyone misuses it?”

“Are you going to keep reading?” she asked the roman-nosed book spine instead. She watched her windowpanes bow to the beat of the couple next door.

“Hmmp.”

“Are you?”

“Gertrude. Of course.”

“Good night, then.” He did not kiss her. She turned off the light beside her bed and curled up like a snail, her nose pointing away from the scribbling in Bob’s lap. As always. That night, instead of feeling that today was the first day of the rest of her life, she realized, staring at the spine of her book by the light of Bob’s lamp, today was the first day of her, what was it, existential crisis.

The next day, the second day of her self-proclaimed crisis, she tried to style her hair in accordance of her new existentialist lifestyle. She had no exact image in mind, so she did the best she could with what she had. The day after that, on the third day of her crisis, she decided Bob was a chump who was living a lie, and that he needed to have an existential crisis, too.

“Been there,” he said, chewing on his pen. All the pens in the house were chewed.

She asked if he would at least accompany her to the bus stop with Sid.

“I need to read,” he said.

His philosophy books surrounded his armchair in piles as if he were a child building a fort. Papers waved amidst the pages of several books as reminders of Bob’s short attention span and inability to read one book at a time. She couldn’t prove he ever finished any of them, yet he awed all friends and acquaintances at any party at which they made an appearance.

She closed her eyes for a second and imagined a different husband. When she opened her eyes, the dreamed-up husband lingered for a moment behind Bob’s chair, where she’d conjured him in her mind’s eye. She exhaled.

“You make me feel like I’m not a priority in your life at all.”

“*This* is my priority.”

“And I’m not?”

He slid his glasses down from his forehead onto his sharp nose bridge and regarded Gertrude. “Why don’t any of the people in my life understand I need to read?” He added he would cook dinner later. Their general agreement included Bob’s househusband tasks in exchange for Gertrude’s kisses etcetera. Both acknowledged he got the better end of the deal.

She gathered Sid and left to Bob’s “No one even reads the existentialists now!”

She loved to walk side-by-side with Sid to the bus stop and let people see their shared DNA. He had his father’s brutal nose and mother’s charming hair. Sid drew out his goodbye as the corner, gazing up with his large lovely eyes. Not ever remembering (and sometimes not knowing if) his mother would disappear and instead his grandmother would meet him at the after-school bus, he clung hectically to Gertrude’s thighs.

“Yes, sweetie, I’ll miss you madly, too!”

This was a caricature, more on one side than the other, but a marvelous one.

“Did you remember to pack extra books?”

“Aren’t I coming home?” His grip tightened.

“You are. But just in case. Grandma may want to have dinner with you.” This meant Gertrude was busy. “But you’ll be back before bed.”

“I brought *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*.”

“Good.”

She walked back home and placed the Kierkegaard bio in her bag to read at the city art center during long intervals of nothingness.

That day, the front desk, where she worked half the time next to the receptionist, could barely be seen. A large bouquet shrouded the workspace. Gertrude put her messenger bag underneath the desk and sat in the red chair facing the bouquet. No one mentioned the large pyre of orange and yellow petals bursting from her desk. She dove her hand in and looked for a card. Brushing off the pollen, she unfolded the note and read: *A docent is a docent is a docent.*

But she could not concentrate. The tawny cellophane crinkled as she tried to arrange tours and events, or help the exhibit designer/specialist with the layout for next month. The receptionist never arrived at work that day, and Gertrude also had to answer phones that rang and rang. She had never been so busy. She left her desk only to eat her peanut butter and jelly sandwich in the break room and to give the flowers more water. They were already dry, and manifestly grew as Gertrude watched. During her lunch, she finally started to wonder, who on earth would give her flowers? When she came back to the desk, the buds opened a little wider and when the phone started ringing, she distinctly heard the leaves whisper, “Feed me?”

The USPS man came to deliver the mail and flirt with Gertrude as usual. When she jabbed the box cutter into the tight taped space between the package flaps, she couldn’t get him out of her mind. Was he the type—? She stared at the bouquet. No, too obvious. She remembered the special chocolate chip cookie he’d given her two days ago as a present, and looking at the flowers again, she went red and fell desperately in love until she shook her head and put down her weapon. She smiled. She decided to dial Bob.

“Guess what!”

“What, Gertrude?”

“I just—Oh. Are you busy?”

“Yeah, actually, I am,” he sighed. “Is it something important?”

“No,” she said, “nothing important.” And she said goodbye, putting the phone gently in its cradle. Always fucking busy, she thought. With no results. She stuck a finger in the rocks of the thirsty bouquet. The flowers were like sponges, like two guilt-free leeches on someone’s paycheck.

Several handsome patrons with messy hair and tight jeans walked in to examine the pieces in the front room where her desk was. She shook off her disappointment. She poured water from her Nalgene into the vase again—already the level was going down. By now, the desk was hardly visible underneath the spread of the leaves, so she stood up to meet the eyes of the hipster boys examining the paintings, posing with indices over their lips and heads at bombastic 45-degree angles. She felt revved up for love.

At 9:30 a.m. the day after, her alarm went off for the second time that day and she stepped onto the chilly wood floor in her bare feet and felt a strong but gentle hand caress her ankle. Her heart jerked in fear but her body responded calmly. Her foot slid back to let her body kneel. Her hair swept the ground as she peered upside down at the body under the bed. It belonged to Gavin, the Irish experimental painter whose series of oils, “Second Skin,” was being shown this month. Since its installation on the eve of First Thursday, he penned romantic post-it notes, left on her desk while she helped buyers or curious onlookers.

Sorry I missed you, me auld flower, a pink one said. Perhaps we’ll see each (m)other again soon.

In response, she’d started wearing mascara to work and waving her Kierkegaard bio around like peacock feathers.

“Are you comfortable down there?” she asked Gavin.

“Not really, old beanie!” His accent made her want to lick him.

“Do you want some fruit leather?” From the pocket of her jeans lying on the floor, she pulled out an individually wrapped strip she intended to give Sid as a snack on the way to the bus.

Gavin yanked off a mouthful of strawberry leather and nestled in with the dust bunnies. She told him to keep the noise down, but didn’t mention Bob in the room below.

“But I’ve missed and adored you in equal amounts!” he murmured.

“I’ll be in to work today,” she answered with a lip smile and added, “Old bean.”

He settled in with his fruit leather. Gertrude placed the dust ruffle back down over his face and let him fade away.

At home after a half shift at the city art center, though they could hardly spare her, she folded the laundry and brought Sid's clothes into his room, trousers balanced on her palm and shirts hanging like Barrel of Monkeys off her forearm. When she noticed Adam, the part-time children's docent from the art center, stacked between the board games on the top shelf of Sid's closet, she tried not to scream. At that same moment, Bob's voice called to her from his study and she jumped twice.

She kept her eyes on Adam in his crouched position behind *Cranium* and she asked Bob with a shout what he needed. Then, only half listening to the response, she asked Adam in a whisper what he wanted.

"Not all the pieces are in the Monopoly," he said.

"Sorry?" she said.

"No, that one is fine, good to go."

"Adam?"

"You look very beautiful in that sweater."

She smoothed out the polka dotted cashmere and her fingers felt the electric shocks as the static crackled in answer.

"How about that coffee, now," he said. "Remember you said we could go sometime?"

Last week when Gertrude clicked her square heels up to a ketchupy young patron to remind him of obvious no-food policy, who in return reminded her that he could and would do exactly as he "fucking" pleased, Adam the volunteer, a short but terribly muscular man, gave the ketchup man a punch in the face. He tried not to hit hard but, alas, the ketchup man fell to the floor in an unfortunate explosion of French Fries. Gertrude felt very embarrassed at this act and also oddly exhilarated. She promised to reward Adam, take him out. Bob never defended her honor and quite often it was Gertrude who had to yell back at teenagers who harassed Bob on his dorky gearless Raleigh.

Bob called Gertrude again, just her name, Gertrude, stretching out the *Grr*.

"Who's that?" Adam asked.

"Oh, Bob, probably." She hadn't mentioned a Bob at work.

“Why are these clothes so small?” he asked, jerking a finger below him. Zooreka tumbled down and Gertrude slammed the closet door, catching the box before it reached bottom. It prevented the closet from closing like an awkward doorstep.

“Oh, Sid, I think.” She hadn’t mentioned a child at work. Adam said nothing.

She moved the box to shut the closet then went to show Bob how to use shortcuts in his word processing program.

Before bed that night, Gertrude gave up on Bob (who would probably stay up all night, again), and walked into the bathroom. When she turned on the light, several of her suitors squinted and bumped into each other in frenzy. There were twice as many now. Some old faces, some new. With nowhere to run, they timidly tried to pet her robe as she pulled it closed at the neck with one hand. One climbed in the shower to make space and nearly ripped the curtain off.

“Stop it! Stop it!” she cried, brushing away fingers like flies. “I need to brush my teeth!” She opened the medicine cabinet, whose latch was unfastened, and she stomped her foot at the toothpaste. “Where the fuck is the cap?” She looked around accusatorily. “Jesus!”

The men looked guilty, and when she swung her arms furiously in no particular direction, they scattered like cockroaches.

“Arthur!” she called after one of them with the wild wooly hair that stood at a seven-inch radius from his skull. She hadn’t seen him since high school and noticed his jeans still had holes just under the butt. He scampered away into the darkness like the rest.

On the sixth day of her existential crisis (“And what is so existential about it,” Bob asked), the day her Kierkegaard biography was due back at the library, Gertrude began to wonder if this were a crisis at all, or if she just needed a vacation. She kept waiting to crack open like a nesting doll, to reveal new versions of herself, smaller yet more solid Gertrudes, until she arrived at her essence. Of course, she feared she might be hollow.

Inside a peacoat dangling on a hanger, Taylor, or whatever his name was, grinned.

“Too bright, sugar,” he said. “Close the door?”

She pushed the door shut, breathed in, and opened it halfway again. Peeking full-head in, she imagined kissing him before claustrophobia kicked her lungs into hyper ventilation mode.

“Gertru—Gertrude?” Bob asked, bemused.

She slammed the door on Taylor.

“Huh?” she said, her back against the coat closet door. “What?”

“Gertrude, I need my coat.”

“Why?” She sounded annoyed. She mentioned the early autumn sun and pointed at the blue sky peaking through the far away living room window.

Then she looked at Bob’s strong jaw line. She stared at him in a way people do when they’re told not to stare: hard and involuntary. He had no chance of ever being handsome because his thin, dark Madonna face made him too beautiful and feminine.

“Aw, Gertie,” he said in his joke voice. “I could punch you in the baby maker.” She laughed aloud. He kissed her cheek (she glowed!) and left without his coat.

At work, the volunteer with the ring in the tip of her nose blathered on about her trip to the coast this week. As other docents walked in, they called Happy Birthday to her. She smiled with too much teeth and took the flowers down off the desk, so she wouldn’t be obscured.

She told Gertrude they could throw them away now. They were rotting.

“No!” Gertrude cried. She said she liked them and why was it her business?

“They’re mine,” she said. “See?” She showed Gertrude the docent note.

Gertrude blinked. True, Gertrude wasn’t a docent, but she played one when too many volunteers had to study for finals. What was going on?

The USPS man came to deliver a package. She smiled. He told the volunteer Happy Birthday and brought her a cookie. The volunteer giggled. Gertrude was trapped. The USPS man asked about the flowers and Gertrude thought she saw them exchange knowing looks. The volunteer probably smirked at Gertrude, but she didn’t look up from her computer to see. She hid behind her computer screen and continued with the write-up for next exhibit’s brochures. After the artist biographies and painting styles had been edited and transcribed, she just started typing nonsense so at least she could keep typing.

She wished there were a way to keep moving all eight fingers without producing words, like treadmill typing. Typing in place.

So no one loved her. The constant clack soothed her. The next ten people who came in all knew the volunteer by name and by fucking birthday. Gertrude was a permanent employee who had worked there half a decade, and no one would look at her. Gavin came in to ask the volunteer if any of his paintings had sold since yesterday when he came in to ask, and before the volunteer could open the correct files, Gavin received a call and had to run out. Gertrude could have told him: none.

“Oh my god! You have a *kid*? How old are you?”

Gertrude stiffened. The receptionist grabbed the photo next to Gertrude’s computer, the one where Sid was in a room with a blue light. Gertrude forgot where she’d taken it and looked at it like the picture was foreign to her.

“You look like you’re not even thirty!”

“I’m not. I’m not even thirty.”

“Wow. I can’t even imagine having one until I’m, like, forty-five.” The receptionist pulled out clandestine Chinese take-out from her desk drawer and quickly put the chopsticks in her mouth. “I really want to travel first, you know. Also make sure I’m with the right partner, stuff like that.” She sighed through a full mouth and acted lost in her own daydreams for a moment. “What’s his name?”

“Who? Oh. Sid.”

“Sid’s *adorable*!”

“You know, he really is.”

Gertrude lay next to Bob late at night after the city art center closed. No one hid in the closets or couched himself under the bed. The neighbors had finished making love. Bob had shown his greeting cards that afternoon and had received money for his perfect irony. As with the completion of any major project, he felt proud, clever, and needy.

“Gertrude, oh Gertrude, oh Gertrude,” he chanted, curling his skinny body next to and against hers, a little John Lennon who fit into the nook of her neck. They were both awed after all these years at their bodies’ ability to click into place against the other, as if years of loving and lying next to the other created permanent grooves in their ribs and thighs and stomachs.

“We fit together like puzzle pieces,” she said.

“Platonic ideal,” he said. “Platonic puzzle pieces.”

“Mmm,” she cooed. “Platonic puzzle pieces.”

“But,” she continued with a yawn, “you know that’s not the...platonic ideal...”

She dreamily stopped herself from correcting him. In a fit of insecurity, she’d trudged through the *Symposium* last year when he was into the Greeks and was about to chide him, but the usual desire not to crush his ego overcame her. She didn’t want to compete, just live her life. His aim was good, he knew what buttons to push, but if she would, she could decimate him. Besides, he knew she knew, in a way. She finished all her books. Her way of saying I-Love-You, which she could never quite say all the time, was to keep this quiet.

“You have all the power in this relationship, you know,” he said with his head on her chest. “I like you more than Aloo Saag. I like you more than noise music.” He covered her neck and shoulders in soft, spitless kisses. He moved his books noiselessly out of bed in the process and arranged the covers around her just as she liked it. She closed her eyes and held on.

Afterward, she stretched the upper half of her body out of bed and his arms, and reached over for a black and white postcard of Sylvia Plath, her makeshift bookmark holding her page in her overdue Kierkegaard bio. She held it up, replacing her own face with Sylvia’s face, and said, “Hi, Bob.”

“Hi, Sylvia,” Bob said. “Don’t put your head in the oven.”

And Gertrude said, “I think it’s too late for that, don’t you?”

The morning after, Gertrude woke up with the weight of Sunday pressed against her chest. On Sundays, her day off, her soul rested on tiptoe with expectation, but always was disappointed. Bob got up after an hour of her staring at the ceiling. She heard the padding of little slippers running down the hall as fast as deer when Bob cried, “Leggo my Eggo!” Gertrude promised herself she would get out of bed when Sid and Bob finished breakfast. She heard the toaster pop. She heard the tinny sound of silverware chopping ceramic. Her eyes watered from not blinking. She heard the scraping of forks scratching waffle crumbs and last bits of syrup. A small voice asked for seconds. Her

toes pointed upward and pondered in analytical silence the ceiling. Still, she felt immobile. Stranded on her back like a cockroach.

Bob started eating his plate. After he finished, he opened the cupboard and decided to munch on the bowls then chew on the soup tureen. Her stomach growled, reminding her that her body still was alive. Bob went through the pantry, inhaling the dry spaghetti, eating cereal boxes, bread bags. When Bob started consuming the faucets and sinks then inhaling the floorboards, Gertrude pushed herself up against her pillows. She lay in bed like a single crayon, wanting to be nine-years-old. Bob, with a bigger appetite than his son, breathed in the house then the atmosphere around it, creating a black negative space to suck up all matter, and her bedroom floated above it. Then he tried for the Milky Way but the stars tickled his throat so he sneezed, sending his world, the pasta, the plates, and the floorboards, scattering back into place.

Gertrude promised herself she would get out of bed when Sid came in to say good morning. She reached as far as she could for the doorknob and cracked her bedroom door. If he came up the hallway and saw her, she would be fine.

“Sid,” she thought. “I’m here I’m here I’m here I’m here.”

Soft slippered feet plodded up the hall and Sid catapulted into her bed as if propelled by his own will, as if he did it all on his own.

“Mom!” He kissed her face. She smiled.

Desert

Route 66, now a defunct asphalt scar heating up in the sunlight, stretched across the middle of New Mexico and through Albuquerque. The same year Miriam took to pacing along that street every day for hours was the same year she dropped out of her impressive college in upstate New York to return home with prescription drugs. The wind pushed her with the tumbleweed for miles along the dry, cracked sidewalks, toward parts where Albuquerque became a third-world nation. She walked outside the rusty chain link fence around the dusty state fair grounds where men, released from under-funded state hospitals, gathered like cracked flowerpots in corners as they drank to their downfall. She glided along Central Avenue—the new name of old Route 66—and watched the flashy, airbrushed low-riders, mostly Chevys and Pontiacs, pump themselves up and down with their hydraulics. The drivers would shrill greasy “hey babys” at her with thinly mustached lips as she plodded around in her scuffed boots. She trudged past the many chipping, neon curlicue signs of locally run motels from the forties with their tiny vacancy signs forever illuminated.

Today, she walked with more purpose. She was meeting someone. The thought of seeing him waiting for her on the street corner eradicated her gloominess and buoyed her onward.

She had met Remy, a law student from Columbia who was completing an ineffective internship with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, on one of her walks. She had been standing in line at the diner across from the university, waiting for her tortillas (cheapest and best in the city), and he clownishly looked over her shoulder to see the number on her ticket. His humor, like a paper airplane folded from a flimsy Wall Street Journal page, always fell flat. She liked him solely because he wore black-rimmed glasses, something she associated with big cities, and because he had asked her where she was from, as if she did not belong in this large, dirty town. They both just arrived several months ago from New York—but Remy came on a round-trip ticket. He would return in a few weeks.

Like a man who needs to be told the vintage in order to believe his wine tastes good, Remy warmed to Miriam more after finding out she’d attended Vassar. She omitted the dropping out detail. Ever since then, she kept agreeing to meet him, and,

despite their conversations being as dry as cactus spines, she liked him. She felt close to him when they groped outside the bars he snuck her into—her fluttery butterfly adrenaline confused itself as love. When she walked alone along Central, she found herself wondering, if he were here now, what exactly would he say? How exactly would he say it?

Now she saw him on the corner. His back faced her, but his head pointed off to the side. As in all situations where too many people surround an individual, he gave the impression of being completely and utterly alone. Miriam pushed her oversized Holly Golightly sunglasses to her forehead and her lips relaxed when she knew for sure she recognized him. Like a big-nosed cameo broach, his profile incised the big cloudless sky. He furrowed his forehead by drawing his black eyebrows together, making himself look completely serious and scholarly. This was how Miriam, right before falling asleep, liked to picture him when she lay in her bed: his big, dark eyes drawn together, causing the small scar on his left eye, the eye that twitched when he had not gotten enough sleep, to contract. People swam in between while her boots worked to close the gap in front of them. Any moment he would think to look behind him, but now she could study him like a person stares at someone through a two-way mirror. In a minute, his posture would change because he would know she was looking. For five more small steps, he was hers. He raised his wrist to look at the time then continued the motion to let his hand run through his dark, floppy hair. He started to turn. Her body tensed and she drew in a breath.

“Remy,” she murmured.

He was not the first. He was among a very, very select group—one of two, in fact—but he was not her first lover.

Most boys who had tried to win her over in their clumsy, crass fashion considered her cold. She briefly entertained possibilities with them as she sat on the middle of bench seats in their used cars with AM radios, but in the end, she stayed in her bastion of loneliness. Those who fingered at the ivory keys of her emotions always struck too hard and recoiled from the cacophonous chords bellowing back. She felt things too deeply, making personal connections difficult. She went alone even at Vassar, where she had

attended for one year before her mind clouded and the school psychiatrist, forced to waive her fee, tried to brush her off with free promotional samples from Pfizer.

She left before revising the Mrs. Dalloway paper her English professor claimed publishable. Almost no one would talk with her, and certainly no boys. In school, girls, attracted to the idea of going to one of the old seven sister schools, always stuck with other girls. They sat next to each other in class, wrote long notes when they were parted, and shadowed the other around the courtyards like beloveds. Miriam, a scholarship girl, hated the Vassar boys and girls with their fancy laptop computers carried in the crooks of their thick, black, east coast coats. She shivered in her plain sweaters and autumn jackets as she sat in the backs of classrooms, finding it surprisingly easy to disappear in college.

Miriam discovered Avery, a girl with a short, disheveled haircut who appreciated her thrift-store look. She followed Avery around, slowly shaking off her few friends on her dogged pursuit. Miriam bought the same Julie Ruin album and read the same Michelle Tea books—she even switched a few classes so she could sit next to Avery. Friends at first, they morphed into associates as secretive and close as masons. Avery showed her how to roll her own cigarettes and where to buy pot. Miriam rolled up her long, long sleeves and showed her the ancient, but not so ancient, scars laddering up her arms that she was embarrassed about. Avery told her which professors to avoid, which ones to flirt with for higher scores, as well as which books on the syllabus one should not even bother to read. Miriam, in turn, lent her *The Queen Is Dead*, as well as ran around with Avery at midnight like a cat burglar with spray paint and stencils of Morrissey cut in cardboard.

During the month of Christmas break, their conspiratorial e-mails, once at a record-breaking fourteen missives a day all together (more than half from Miriam), dwindled until one week, Avery did not write at all. She had gone back to Poughkeepsie early because her mother and father had tickets to sail in the Virgin Islands. Perhaps Poughkeepsie's wireless Internet providers collapsed under an avalanche of snow. However, this was not the case; in Avery's next e-mails—short, formal letters saying nothing—Avery did not mention snow. She simply wrote how she hoped Miriam had enjoyed New Year's and that they must get together when Miriam returned. The first thing Miriam did after throwing her bags in her dorm room—upset by the fact no note waited for her on her message pad on her door—was sprint to Avery's room.

“Oh, Miriam,” she sighed. Then she said the thing that Miriam knew but never wanted to hear, the thing that had grown between them like a desert weed. “I’m in love!” Avery let her shaggy head collapse on Miriam’s shoulder, as if in ecstasy. He, apparently, was pre-med and had lived in Paris; Miriam was undeclared and her mom had never left the southwest.

Just like that, it was over. Instead of methodically filling her pockets with rocks and walking into the Hudson, she had quietly boarded the train south during a month when a blue frost covered Poughkeepsie, and headed for the desert.

After she met him on the corner, Miriam, who dressed too warmly for the occasion in her black pencil skirt, decided to take them to the state fair. She wanted something unmistakably date-like, date-esque, date-onic. She wanted to see how Remy would fair under cotton candy, roller coasters, rodeo shows, and other relationship tests. They needed to go before night fell and the well-armed teenage gangs took over the midway. They walked to the state fairgrounds through a thickening Wrangler-clad crowd. Remy wore the loosest jeans of anyone there (he certainly did not dress like someone whose parents paid his full tuition to Columbia, she thought), and one of his stupid, shrunken t-shirts (“New Mexico: Cleaner than the Real Mexico”). He paid her way and the ticket man rewarded her with a paper bracelet.

After making waxed replicas of their hands (Miriam’s, left on her window sill, would melt a few days later) and visiting the livestock competition, Miriam, a bit drunk from the cider Remy had purchased earlier (he didn’t have any himself), wandered toward the cheap pirated Disney stuffed animals. She eyed a fluffy panda and Remy handed the short man behind the stall a few dollars in exchange for some dull darts. The man looked bored and stood off to one side, and Miriam marveled at his clean polo shirt. She remembered the carnival workers looking much different when she was young. Then she saw blue-gray homemade tattoo swirls poking out from his sleeves. When he caught her staring, he flashed a smile less one tooth.

Miriam jerked her attention back to Remy and offered him a sip of her snow cone—something he had also purchased for her—but he shook his head. No. She reminded him he had not eaten a single thing. He nodded. He knew. He furrowed his

brow again in concentration and took several false throws before releasing the rusty dart. She insisted he take just a sip—it was mostly water, anyway.

“I’m not eating,” he said.

“At all?”

“Not until sunset,” he said. She laughed at his silly diet. “It’s not a diet.” He kept his eyes on the un-popped balloons in front of him and narrowed his lips. “It’s the start of Ramadan.”

She scoffed. “No. Isn’t that, like, a Muslim thing?” His parents were from Connecticut.

He stiffened as if he were blushing.

“Yeah, well.”

“Oh,” she said, looking at her snow cone.

The information—more than he had ever shared—did not satiate her craving for knowledge. Instead, it ran right through her like water running through the loose, nonabsorbent rocks around potted Yucca roots. Instead of making her feel closer to him, she felt more lost.

“That’s cool,” she said, trying to glance at his face, but centering on his the back of his dart hand like it was a bull’s eye. “No, I think that’s, that’s neat.”

She had told him her story—or as much of the truth as it was intimate but romantic to tell someone. She had told him she had gone to Vassar, true, and that she was taking a break, mostly true. She left out her breakdown. She said her mom worked in the city government, though in reality she worked in the sleepy Parks & Rec department as someone who ranked little higher than a secretary did. Aside from one or two facts Miriam siphoned out of him, Remy was a blank. She had asked questions, mainly about his family, and he had answered: two parents, still married, with dogs; three-storey house with yard in New Haven; mom a published author, dad worked as an ad exec. Pictures came to her mind of Remy’s future: he would marry a Jackie (but with blue eyes) and help women into their coats one arm at a time at black tie functions where they served beef and Alaskan king crab legs in silver tureens and he would know the exact lineage of his pets and mistresses. Yet, who was this person throwing pointed sticks at half-filled balloons, really?

“Great. Great, I’m not looking for your approval.” He tossed the dart in his hands too hard and it bounced off the balloon, almost hitting the carnie.

“I mean, I don’t care, you know. It doesn’t matter to me.” Miriam tried to play cool. Remy sighed.

“It’s my mother—well, it’s my grandparents. They’re Muslim. I just…”

The carnie jumped from the sound of the loud pop. Remy finally smiled and relaxed his shoulders. The panda was hers.

Yet he made a mockery of the whole event, especially the picking of the panda for her with a flourish. He lived the whole carnival experience as a jaded tourist. Other boys would have given her the bear with a sense of reverence, like handing over a varsity athlete’s sweater or a promise ring. For Remy, the bear had to be ironic. She was touched, but his irony made her look away and blush, confused. She buried her face in the big bear’s scratchy head—it felt filled with something more like coffee cup Styrofoam than fluff.

The man at the booth looked uncomfortable for a moment, thinking he had interrupted a tender moment. Miriam gave him a stony stare and he slinked away toward his floating ducks and whiny carnival music.

Her house, motherless due to her mom’s decision to visit her sister in Flagstaff, sat empty on the south side of Central, and Miriam, after kissing him with her panda resting between them on the gearshift of his sedan, invited Remy inside.

They had fumbled around in cars and bathrooms in bars, and once at Miriam’s never used, cobwebby front porch, where moths dinged the dusty yellow light bulb above them until Remy had finally unscrewed it. The bed moved things to a new level. The bed was like 8th grade graduation—more of the same lay in store, but now it would all go on one’s permanent record. The sheets seemed so white. As the room dimmed and the minute slashes in the Venetians turned a paler and weaker pink, the bed seemed to reflect light from all visible wavelengths. The alabaster bed almost glowed.

Remy, causing the down comforter to swell up as he sat down, looked as out of place as a New York Yankee in a Rockefeller chorus line. The fluffy duvet billowed around his muscular frame and almost swallowed him whole. He kept his posture perfect as he perched on the edge of the bed. Before he sat down, he had looked for another

place—the top of the vanity? The lid of the wicker hamper?—before reluctantly sitting on the bed’s edge.

In her shabby, cramped house (“Cozy,” her mother used to correct her as she dusted the hanging chili ristras and Navajo figurines), he seemed as bourgeois as an electric salad shooter. She stood before him and leaned down to kiss him as his hands snaked up her body. He locked his ankles around hers so she could not move.

“Do you love me?” Miriam asked, suddenly.

“Come on.”

“No,” Miriam said, smoothing her blouse and mollifying her static hair.

“Sure,” he said, with forced flippancy after a silence.

Then he rolled his eyes and told her he had some place to be soon. When she asked what place, he repeated, “Some place.” She shrugged and he started pushing his heels against his toes in order to free his feet from his sneakers. Then, with one big hand, he took a fistful of material near the back of his collar and he dragged his whole t-shirt over his head without turning it inside out. She asked him what he thought he was doing.

“You know what I’m doing,” he said with a lewd note in his voice that came too easily to him in spite of—or because of—his well-heeled upbringing.

She went over to the vanity and looked at him in her mirror.

“What makes you think that’s in store?” She attempted to force a coarse tone of her own but sounded more childish.

“You didn’t answer me,” she said to his reflection.

He came up behind her to kiss her neck with rough lips he said chapped only in the desert, and he started unbuttoning her blouse. She closed her eyes for a second and wondered if the tenderness felt compulsory. She stood still, trying to figure out how old he was, if he wrote with his left hand, if his mom had read him bedtime stories, whether he believed in God, if he loved her at all.

“You don’t.” Miriam felt a throbbing in the upper part of her nose and her nails dug into her palms. To Miriam, this was the one true thing she had said the whole afternoon. It felt pointless to say anything else. On the dresser stood the last bottle of her pharmaceutical sample; she tried to count the blue pills that remained. Three. No, four. He kissed her anyway and she stood there passively. Then he led her over to the bed, and

she let the feather blankets and pillows swell like waves around them, devouring them completely as the room grew black.

Bowels of Brooklyn

I'm at 3rd Ave. and 77th, sitting in the bowels of Brooklyn, the borough I was born and grew up in. I know the system pretty well. I tell Grace, who's in her usual Mao cap and gas station jacket and is here because she thinks we're buying drugs, not state plates, I think it will take us maybe an hour to get to W 86th. This means we'll have to be late for school. Grace shrugs, unfazed.

I'm not allowed to go into the city. But my mother needs a birthday gift—the final commemorative state plate in her collection, Arizona—and the old woman on Ebay told me on Monday just to take the subway over to save on time, shipping, and bubble wrap. Easy. I used to try to go into the city all the time until my therapist told my mom. Or at least I went once or twice. Then Dr. Koltz, a tiny teapot of a man who had the annoying habit of repeating back to me all my own analyses of myself, met with my mother out of his purported concern for my lack of school attendance.

When I turn eighteen, I'm leaving Bay Ridge. I'm taking a one-bedroom on the Upper East, or I'm moving to a giant loft in the Village. My mother can't do anything. She's not the boss of me. I'm only buying her a birthday gift because if I don't, who else will?

The wind howls a warning deep in the tunnel, and we hear a horn blast through the Brooklyn darkness. People float closer toward the platform edge and stare at our outfits. The announcer comes on overhead to tell the underground crowd that if they see something suspicious, they should say something to the authorities immediately. I shift my weight so she's just a shoulder ahead of me, so from certain angles we overlap. Grace comes from a town in Ohio where only 7,000 residential mailboxes receive coupon fliers for the two tiny competing pizza joints, yet she manages to seem more New York than I do with one snarl of her painted crimson mouth. A line of old metal cars rattle to a halt before us in a flustered fashion, and we—Grace and I and some tired looking women with big bottoms—climb aboard the train.

Grace, with her greasy Heidi hair swinging, pushes ahead and claims us two seats—two seats I bought because Grace says she's low on cash—which she collapses onto. I wait. The train starts moving again and after a few beats, she straightens herself and moves her tattered shoulder bag to make room for me. As I sit, she bends down to tie

her logger boot lace around her ankle so she doesn't have to thread all the eyelets. Then she gives a few stomps to see if her knot is strong. She looks like she should know how to start a revolution, and I think she does.

I stare at the map—at this rate, it'll take us fifty minutes just to get to W 50th. I wonder if Grace knows the time. I wonder if she's worried. I re-bite the emerging holes in my sweater sleeves so I can poke my thumbs out in safety. Grace looks over; she has seen my wrists before. I'm in retirement from coming-of-age and I still have to wade through three more soggy years of Fort Hamilton High.

'We'd be in American History right now,' she says while staring straight ahead. It's not clear she's talking to me or if she sees me surreptitiously watching my watch. She yawns.

'Hey,' a Bay Ridge accent barks at us. 'Hey youse, Shirley Temple.' His vowels appall me.

'Fuck you talking to?' she snaps back. I squirm in my seat and push my tangled hair into my face out of a habit to hide. I think I want to be her.

The man shrugs. 'That your bag?' He points to her faded knapsack sitting two seats to her left. Her face stiffens. She immediately snatches it toward her. 'You're not from here. If you were from here, you'd keep a watch on your goddamn bag.'

'I'm from here,' she answers.

Another threat to Grace's pleasant mood gets on at 36th Street. He's a manic man in need of a shave who gets in people's faces, polluting the air with words, greedily taking up our silence. He wobbles in the middle of the car, un-tethered, and gets off at the next stop, still violently talking, never pausing for air.

This is the third time Grace has hung out with me outside school, but I can't think of anything to say to her. First, I try to think of clever or dour things to observe about school or this train ride. To distract myself, I silently count backwards from one hundred by sevens. This gets me to Atlantic Avenue. Finally, I ask Grace to draw dark black lines around my eyes with eyeliner. She's done this before. My whole body tingles from being touched with the tip of the pencil and the edge of her palm. She comments on my pointy features.

'But you've actually got a nice nose,' she says.

‘All my life I’ve told people that I have my mother’s nose,’ I say. ‘I just found out that she got a nose job in high school. Now I have no idea whose nose I have.’

‘Weird.’

‘Hey Grace,’ I say. ‘We’re sort of like best friends.’ The words escape me before I can work them through an internal monologue and have them graduate junior high.

Clearing her throat, she looks out into the black window. Grace lets the pronouncement extend into the subway and float away, unacknowledged. Silence creeps onto our subway car. I notice holes in people’s shoes, tears in the cuffs of their pants. Everyone’s body rocks in rhythm to the tracks. Anyone who is out of luck is on this subway.

An hour and a half later, at W 86th, the high rise rises above us, blocking the sun. The day has gained weight and we’ll be lucky if we sneak back into school at lunchtime. I ask Grace if she wants to wait outside under the long green awning or in the baker’s next to the entrance.

‘Which number?’

‘Uh, #622.’

She calculates if the apartment we’re going to will have park view. (‘Even numbers always face east.’) Grace wants to come up.

We climb into the elevator of the beautiful pseudo-brownstone—Brooklyn is still more beautiful, I think—and I stand next to a bearded gentleman who reminds me of Santa Claus in Armani. We exchange small smiles. Two women, an older woman and a twenty-something lady both in designer sneakers, rush in just as the door is closing. They make it, but the door spasms and opens again like a reflex. We all wait.

The woman, her hands full of brown paper grocery bags says, ‘Could you hit One for me?’

Santa Claus obliges and says, ‘You’re welcome.’

‘Oh!’ she says, reddening and rustling her paper sacks. ‘Thank you.’

‘Learn some manners,’ the man says.

‘Man, if my mom wasn’t standing right here, I’d tell you to fuck yourself.’

I nod appreciatively. I'm getting a taste for the Upper West Side, which seems to be no different than Bay Ridge. The only difference seems to be what you rent. The entire elevator ascends in silence.

Six stories later, we exit onto a hallway that smells like a hotel and carpet that squishes like plush, beige Jell-O.

'She's rich,' Grace announces. 'Try to talk her down.'

Grace doesn't even know the price or the item being purchased.

We knock on #622 and, after a bang and a shuffle, the door opens to expose a miniature Russian woman in floral print and a half-apron. She ushers us in with a smile.

All her appliances look museum quality. Her modest refrigerator is rounded at the edges with a single metal handle to pull down like a lever to open. It's the kind of refrigerator with a tiny storage drawer on the bottom but no separate door for the freezer. On top of her pocket-sized B&W T.V., two skinny, bent rabbit ears sprout toward the ceiling. The velveteen flowers blossoming all around the tiny apartment are dusty but remain in full bloom even in the waterless vases. Label-less mason jars, full of maybe jam, line the far edge of her kitchen table.

'Rent-controlled,' Grace murmurs and wanders off to look at the ceramic Virgin Mary on top of a small, ornate dresser.

'Do you want to look at it?' the woman asks.

I don't.

'It's beautiful,' she says, her voice rising to a song on the last word.

Grace is off looking at the woman's figurines. She's running the tips of her fingers over the gold plated ones. From the corner of my eye, I think I see her slip one in her hoodie pocket. I shake my head at the woman.

'Arizona,' the woman says.

She's older, much older, than I expected. Before I can stop her, she unwraps the package to reveal the most unbecoming, faded ceramic plate with gigantic cacti, cattle, and a cardinal all fighting for center plate stage. The reds and greens are garish and I try to grab it before Grace sees.

'What the hell is that?' Grace asks me.

I blush redder than a tomato and I realize it so I blush even fiercer. Then I see Grace is looking right at me, and I nearly pass out there's so much blood rushing to my head.

'State plate,' I murmur. I explain in a rush that it's not for me, no no no, and I go into too much detail about my mother's collection.

'You buy your mom birthday gifts?' she asks. 'You shop on Ebay?'

The old woman approaches me, steps in front of Grace. She wants money. I step back, but she keeps advancing until she's uncomfortably close. I ignore her for as long as possible, looking down at my shoes. She asks again. I wait for Grace to speak.

'Well, pay her and let's go.'

I hide my hands deeper in my sleeves. I tell her I already did. 'On Paypal,' I say, feeling dorky for even using the word.

'Didn't get the money,' the old woman says slowly and kindly.

'Yes,' I stammer. 'I pay Ebay and Ebay is supposed to pay you.'

'Didn't get the money,' the old woman repeats.

'Well...' I whine. Grace looks impatient and I feel heat rising to my face again. Everyone is looking at me and I can't speak. I try to fix the problem by ignoring it, but it's clear the woman has the patience to wait as well. I have twenty-five dollars in my pocket, the price of the plate. I tell myself it would have cost at least ten for shipping and packaging. I want to cry. She stares at me unblinking. After I give her money and take my now fifty-dollar plate, I ask if I may use her bathroom.

The bathroom is no less doily-ed and decorated than the rest of the apartment, but its tackiness and soapy perfume are comforting. The door shuts quietly as I lean against it. I look at the tiny dishes holding tiny soap molded into flowers and baby ducks. I see myself in the mirror and I frown. Grace now thinks I'm stupid. I am stupid. I shop on Ebay for state plates. I try to gauge the amount of time I can feasibly spent in this stranger's bathroom before I start to raise suspicion. My hooded sweatshirt covers my arms, so I decide to make tiny paper cuts into the pads of my fingers with the safety scissors I hide in my bag. After several minutes, I wash my hands with one of the duck shaped soaps and join the living.

‘Hold up,’ she says once we’re inside the subway station at the ticket machine. ‘You said you’d spot me. You said you had the cash.’

We don't have any money to get back.

After the old woman and the lack of metro passes, Grace is not amused. We spend at least fifteen minutes emptying her bag, then my bag, only to shove the contents back inside. I am desperate to keep my one friend I have in school, in the neighborhood, on the planet. Grace suggests we stay underground and hit up the businessmen as they enter the tunnels. Beg. We do. She buys a long cigarette with only a smile off of a handsome man ten or fifteen years her senior. But we need two bucks apiece—not Marlboros.

We keep our heads to the ground for change, but about a dozen homeless men are all doing the same thing, so we have competition. A man sits on his holy Hefty bag—if you see something, say something—and watches me watching the ground. His eyes are half-opened and the only things near his worn-out sneakers that glint in the light are bottle caps.

Grace promenades, only glancing down every fifth step. I realize I look like a southern hound dog in search of a missing member of a broken chain gang. I try to emulate her gait. Try to be cool. We saunter off in different directions.

I smell marijuana—Grace’s smoke of choice.

When I look around, I see two boys blending in near the ticket machines. They don't appear to be smoking. I go up to the guy with the toast-crumb mustache who looks like he has his hand on his crotch but really is just holding up his elephant-sized jeans.

My hands are wet with sweat but I push myself closer, telling myself I owe Grace something for this awful trip. I stammer a hello then ask him if I can have some. I remember to use the term 'dime bag' then downgrade to the more familiar term: ‘joint.’ I’m glad Grace is out of earshot, looking for quarters.

‘Suck my dick,’ he says. His friend laughs.

I ponder this. He catches me off guard. What would Grace say?

‘Nah, man, be cool,’ the friend says. It's unclear if he means me, the permanently uncool, or his friend, the hopefully temporary asshole.

‘Shit,’ he says. He looks around, left, right, and as he looks left again like a third-grader crossing the street, he hands me a pinch of something rolled in a cylinder of paper.

I sweat and tell him I don't have any money and that I'd rather not suck his dick, not today, thank you very much. But he's a rare breed of cannabis smoking Gen Y-er. He shrugs and shoos me on my way.

I have drugs. I run to Grace, who is allowing a slender mod in an *Ask me why I'm Vegan* shirt to flirt with her. She stands aloof but nods, in a composed and neutral way. She murmurs something to him rendered unintelligible to me because of the approaching metal clatter of the R train. She grabs me for a second by the shoulder to pull me toward the rumble and flashes two tickets.

'Grace,' I call after her as she rushes ahead. 'Here!'

When she turns I shove the drugs into her hand but inside I feel low.

'Do you have your lighter?'

'Yeah,' I say. 'Yeah I have my lighter.'

'Well?'

 She extends her hand toward me.

My shoulders rise near my jaw and I look around me. 'What?'

'Gimme.'

Like a reflex, I obey.

Using me as a shield, she lights it and takes one puff and immediately exhales. She coughs viciously.

'Okay, maybe you should put it away?' my voice trails off.

She rolls her eyes and puts the extinguished joint in her bag. Then whispers, 'I'm totally tripping.' I look at her. 'These colors are really vivid,' she says like a hippie.

I've only been high one and a half times in my life, but I know this doesn't happen. She should know this, too. I stay silent. I don't even feel anything. A loud woman in a dirty velour jumpsuit lights a cigarette. Soon, a man in a MTA uniform walks past, seeing the woman but not us. He approaches the lady who hides her cigarette.

'You can't do that,' he says. 'You do that again, I call the cops. I call the cops and that's a 70-dollar fine.'

The crazy velour woman smiles and says, 'You look nice. It's nice to see you again.'

'You do that again, I call the cops,' he repeats, and moves on. 'Look, lady—there's the cops. Next time,' he warns again.

We watch the policemen stop passengers in the hot, crowded station. Grace's eyes go a little wild, and I try to act like she would want me to act.

'It's cool,' I say. 'Right?' I need her to tell me yes.

A pause. 'Yeah,' she says. We walk forward.

The policeman in front of us stops a woman in traditional Muslim dress, and agitated stockbrokers in gray suits rush past this irritating speed bump toward the trains. I overhear the policeman saying to the woman that he selected her simply because he stops 'every fifth person with a bag.' I wait for Grace to say something bitter and insightful about racial profiling in America. She is mute.

'Excuse me,' the police officer barks.

I keep my head down and I keep walking fast. If he were calling me, I would know. If I look at him, he will have been calling me. However, I feel a void at my right side and notice Grace is not with me. She stands frozen five feet behind me, with stretched face muscles like she's had a facelift. I look at her and the policeman looks at me.

'Excuse me,' he repeats.

Out of habit, I wait for Grace to rectify the situation. I don't even think of answering the officer.

'Oh my god,' Grace murmurs. I look for sarcasm but her face is pallid. She looks truly shaken. It's her eyes that search mine as she clutches her knapsack with the joint. 'Oh my god.'

'I need to search your bag,' he says. The buttons of his uniform barely fasten around his middle and I can see the white backdrop of his undershirt. He has his hand out and his tongue is bulging out his lower lip as if it's searching for food crumbs. He furrows his brow and pauses mid-tongue thrust to look over at Grace, who is breathing shallow, nearly hyperventilating.

'Your friend okay?' he says to me. 'She looks sick.'

'I—I'm stoned!' she blurts out like she can't stop herself.

'Do you have allergies?' the man asks.

'I'm stoned!'

'Maybe pinkeye?' he asks.

Grace starts to cry, the real reason for her red eyes, right there in the subway station. I look at my shoes.

The policeman looks confused, like a grammar school student trying to learn to count without using his fingers.

‘No,’ I say.

This registers with absolutely no one for five seconds. Then Grace forgets to breathe heavily and fidget because she is watching me. The police officer forgets to search for his lunch stuck to his gums because he is watching me. The suits, however, rush past me to the metal gates to make their trains on time.

‘Bag,’ he says, as if he didn’t hear me.

‘No.’

‘Uh—’ he swivels in the cocky way police do. He puffs out his doughy chest. ‘Yes.’

‘What?’ I say. I don’t yell but my voice is loud. ‘Do you think we’re not aware of our rights?’

‘Miss,’ he breathes out, making the word heavy.

‘Right,’ I brush my hair out of my face. ‘Officer, I don’t consent to any searches.’

‘Miss.’

‘Officer, we don’t consent to any searches. We’re going to exit the station.’

He rolls his eyes and makes a move for my bag.

‘We’re—what, like secure in our persons, um, against unreasonable searches—I said *no*.’

‘Jesus Christ,’ the policeman rolls his eyes again at me.

I grab Grace in my righteous fury and walk out of the station.

After a few minutes, I find another entrance and lead a speechless Grace in her Mao cap underneath the city surface. She seems smaller and doesn’t look me in the eye. I eventually put us on the R train and we ride back downtown, then over to Brooklyn. There is only an hour left of school, but I decide to go. I leave Grace to continue the downward trajectory toward the edge of Brooklyn. I walk down the halls unscathed and even answer a question in Geometry. On the way home, I buy wrapping paper and a big red bow.

The Bliss Poets Speak Of

So, Charlie said to himself. This is the bliss the poets speak of, as Emma Bovary once screamed. However, she'd said it after getting a damn good rogering from a dirty Frenchman, Charlie Kee thought deliriously, after spending the entire day alone in his apartment. Chloë hadn't phoned, hadn't emailed, hadn't biked past.

Chloë's disregard started months ago, after Charlie moved here and, riddled with an overwhelming and handicapping anxiety at being alone and adult for the first time, had picked the most banal, middle-class apartment he could find. He mistakenly picked the west side of town, when his cooler, hardcore contemporaries hid behind the east bank of the river that sliced the small town in two. Charlie framed old LPs neatly on his wall, putting Dylan's messy tresses and vinyl vocals behind a sheet of glass and his music safely on a low-quality MP3 file. He hung his mother's flowered floury oven mitts on the tiny hooks he stuck above his toaster oven. He ran for 25 minutes three times a week and showered after each run, though he also always showered at 6:30 every morning (8:45 on Saturdays). He masturbated to Internet porn one out of every five times. He read voraciously and hoped one day to consider himself an intellectual.

Last month, for the first time, Chloë had accepted a dinner invitation at his apartment where she insisted, to be generous, on cooking. She prepared a complex yet meatless French dish, left his kitchen looking like a bordello, then scrunched up her nose and examined the contents of his life. She looked at the Dylan, framed.

"Oh, Meine Charlie," she sighed. She squinted and tapped the glass as if Bob were a goldfish who might hear the amplified wallops. "You don't actually believe in sincerity, do you?"

After they finished off two bottles of wine, neither could stop laughing or get up off the hairy floor. (Charlie had yet to ask his mother which brand of vacuum would be the most cost-effective.) Too drunk to bike or drive, Chloë and Charlie lined up side by side in Charlie's juvenile (yet brand new) twin bed, fully clothed in stiff, over-dyed denim and thin, distressed t-shirts. This shot electric shocks through the head and toes of one of them, almost as visible the static sparks coming from Chloë's messy head rubbing the pillow in the dark. One of them could hardly pretend to be asleep and stop fidgeting so the other one's drunken, nearly silent snores wouldn't be disturbed. Charlie had never

lived alone before and when he met Chloë, he tried to persuade her to be his friend, his confidant, his drinking buddy, his soundboard, his study partner, and, of course, his lover.

However, nothing happened that night, and they lay catatonic touching sides like platonic Twizzlers in Charlie's tiny bed. Nothing happened until the still drunken morning, when Charlie begged her to be his girlfriend. Chloë Knightley was his Dulcinea of desire, his Fender Stratocaster of sex, his all-else-pales-compared Chloë. She fastened her eyelids shut and crushed her lips into his as a way of response.

Tonight, Charlie knew something was wrong as soon as he even saw Chloë. She said hello and kissed him just missing his lips. Chloë had looked as if something had suddenly jangled loose inside of her, as if she'd touched a live wire. She was carrying a giant bag with mesh sides. He asked what was in the bag as she wiped her feet on his front-door mat. Chloë unraveled her scarf like she was unwrapping a mummy, obscuring her face. Something muffled in the bag answered him instead, something alive.

"I had an accident," she explained impassively. "On Walnut."

Chloë didn't drive. She'd thrown out her license, not gotten it renewed. She carried her passport to bars and bicycled across town on her fixed-gear. This defined Chloë for Charlie—his neck jerked every time he went past a two-wheel rest stop and his eyes scanned the bike racks for rusty Raleighs with a single, shiny chain ring and toe clips. She had the strongest, nicest calves of anyone Charlie had had the pleasure to picture in a pencil skirt.

"No one was too hurt," she continued. "I had to take him to the vet, though."

She didn't hit a car. She didn't hit a bicycle. From inside the bag, Chloë took out an ordinary looking, but small, black cat with a collar and a limp.

"Anna," he said, fingering the tag around its neck. The back had a phone number with no area code.

Anna was the name of Charlie's last and most serious girlfriend who'd moved out without leaving a forwarding address, just a MySpace link. Anna was the reason Chloë refused to even discuss moving in, though her lease at her beautiful sublet neared its end. (Charlie had asked and asked Chloë to share his one-bedroom because though they'd been dating for only a month they'd been good friends for half a year.) Chloë forbade the subject as well as the mention, as Charlie remembered abruptly, of the name Anna.

"It says Anna. See?" he showed her the little engraved metal culprit.

“No. Gustave,” Chloë corrected him.

Chloë explained the collar gave the cat a mistaken gender—she’d just taken him to the vet and had confirmed his xy chromosomes. She’d re-dubbed the cat Gustave and promised to go home to clean a space in her apartment for him as well as plaster his kitty mug shot on telephone poles in the vicinity. In the meantime, she extracted a small bag of cat kibbles for Charlie and threw the collar in the trash. The number on the back led to a shriek of beeps and a phony operator explaining the number was not valid.

He wondered why she didn’t want to keep the cat; she loved cats. Perhaps her apartment didn’t allow animals. That was probably it, he reasoned.

Three days later, she started talking about a man she met at the coffee shop. Chloë, with fast words and disjointed thoughts, told Charlie her conversation with Ned—that was his name—how Ned said he was a vegetarian and he thought there was no excuse not to be. Charlie took the few coherent details from Chloë’s ramblings and whittled Ned into a very tall and skinny boy with longish hair, Chuck Taylor’s, hipster tight jeans, a hipster button down plaid shirt, a lip ring, and somewhat crooked teeth. No, she could not yet elaborate on the qualities of his soul, but Charlie, who’d undergone expensive orthodontics starting at age nine, knew Chloë was a sucker for crooked teeth.

“The other woman who worked there did Tarot,” Chloë said as she cleared the table and started doing the dishes—something she rarely did, but Charlie didn’t take particular note. They used to harangue hippies and new agey ladies with their crystals and Tarot, but he couldn’t read her tone. Chloë’s face was hidden.

“She read my cards,” Chloë said from the sink, as Charlie stayed seated next to his pile of library books and his pile of crumbs. She described the cards, big and antique with French names for the characters: *Le Mat*, *Le Monde*, *La Morte*.

“And?” he asked, staring at the back of her swan neck. Gustave snaked around her ankles.

“What?” She was tense. Was it the caffeine? She filled the sink with a dramatic amount of suds as if it were a bubble bath from a soap opera.

“What was in your cards?” He thought she sounded sincere and he started to feel self-conscious for her.

“Oh,” she said. “Change, I guess.”

After the tarot cards, she only saw him when he asked, and he always had to ask twice. If he couldn't think of a definite plan, Chloë would not meet him anywhere. She only went to work and spent late nights at her coffee shop. One night, Charlie took Chloë to a party with his professors and Ph.D. candidate colleagues. She knew everyone, yet tonight she decided, it seemed, to act completely standoffish.

The dress she wore was something unknown to Charlie, though he noticed she didn't move in it like she would a new dress, so it must have been just lying dormant in her closet for half a year or more. Its thin silk hung loose like paper around her, yet confirmed every bump, every curve as she moved. The dress caressed her thighs when a twist of wind pulled it inward to outline her shape. When she leaned in toward the chip dip, Charlie imagined the professors could see that smooth level surface between her breasts leading down, down to almost her navel. Of course, that surface wasn't really level, no more than the earth's surface was level. The earth was round, her body round. Gliding on the periphery of the party, she smoked long cigarettes with half closed eyes. She spoke to no one and only smiled faintly when people spoke at her.

Chloë brushed past Charlie as he stood discussing some department politics/gossip with Dr. Someone, and he stretched his arm against her, trying to put her hand in his. Her fingers grazed his palm but he didn't hold on tightly enough, because she blew away like a balloon on a string. He didn't want to shadow her and make her asphyxiate on his love (she mentioned this briefly as a problem at the beginning of their relationship), so he left her alone. Nevertheless, he gathered his coat (she hadn't worn one) after an hour and a half, and he started to lead his coat and Chloë to the car.

She took out her strangely shaped cigarette pack, very thin and very wide, and lit herself another.

“Did you buy those?” Charlie asked. He hadn't seen her smoke in months.

“Yes, I smoke, remember?”

The snotty so-called grad student star of the department said in a deep, nasal voice, “Yeah, Charlie, this is Chloë, your girlfriend. Have you two met?”

He wanted to punch the star.

“I smoked when you met me,” she said, keeping her lips still around the half lit cigarette.

She didn't smoke inside his car nor did she speak until they neared the bridge to cross the river. Before they merged into the left lane with the median that would cut them off from the rest of traffic until it sucked them subtly up, up and over until they were suspended above the river, Chloë said, "Wait."

She rose from her stupor and said, "Wait! Turn here."

And he turned.

Following subsequent instructions of turns and bends, they wound up near Chloë's coffee shop (where Charlie had never been) at a beautiful, though rumpiled, two-storey with a porch. An old Austin Mini sat on the weeds poking through the gravel driveway. Other parallel-parked cars blocked Charlie from the curb, and Chloë jumped out as he idled in the middle of the road.

"Chloë," he called. She poked her head back through the open passenger window, waiting with a look of forced patience. He said nothing and she exhaled a world-weary breath. She said nothing, too; she didn't offer a parking space, an explanation, an invitation.

"Can I--?" he started. She gave him a look. "Can I pick you up, or—I mean I don't know."

"No, I'll get a ride from Ned or someone. Thanks," she added hastily and walked off without looking back.

Chloë quit answering her cell phone and then would casually dial him up at an odd times, acting annoyed if he didn't have time for her. Occasionally, after trying to express how he felt their relationship was in peril, she would see him or spend a short night in his bed, smelling strongly of coffee and cigarettes. They always fell asleep with their jeans on, each curled like a shrimp facing an opposite wall. Gustave would keep them both awake by trying to get his footing through the thick quilts, using their spines as balance beams. He would not ask her where she'd been. As she slept, Charlie looked at her like he was looking at something through a telescope. She was far, far away, and he suddenly got the sense he'd never really looked at her before, as if she were a stranger. She seemed an unfamiliar woman with whom he'd been unfortunate enough to get trapped in a claustrophobically small elevator—a 26-year-old woman who was nobody special to him

in the Big Picture sense of things, as far as destiny or the way of the world was concerned.

Then he blinked, and she became his Dulcinea again.

She left and the leaves seemed to change. She said that she needed space. Charlie wanted less but acquiesced. The thought made him picture a vast expanse of galaxies, of solar systems sans Chloë, of unfathomable infinity. The thought made him anxious and he organized his Oxfords by color, from light blue to brown. Chloë still didn't call. His Dulcinea didn't dial, but he forced calmness on himself. He stopped eating but still did the dishes. He trimmed his toenails three times a week. He rearranged his books in order of publisher. Then, suddenly, he suffered a suffocating thought that he had to leave his apartment immediately.

He took a long walk with several of his books for his dissertation in tow, crossing the river, winding up in her favorite coffee shop. The whole afternoon, he glimpsed stately, exquisite ladies smoking cigarettes with the sybaritic poise of young Lauren Bacalls just in the periphery of his vision, thinking each was Chloë. When he jerked around, the women faded into young college girls with too much make-up and skinny calves. He sat there for six hours, not reading a word his eyes scanned in his books and only making notes on her, Chloë. He watched the sun set and sat in the shadows with an empty coffee cup.

Chloë never came to buy coffee nor did her barrista clock into work that day. Charlie was alone, all alone in the darkened, nearly empty coffee shop. The woman at the front—was it the same woman with the Tarot?—stopped taking orders but let the remaining patrons finish their drinks while she swept. He closed his eyes and envisioned Chloë as Bacall in black and white, but he couldn't bring to picture himself in any role opposite her. He knew he was no Humphrey Bogart—he felt more Hubert Humphrey.

At home the next morning, Gustave lay curled on the second cushion of the loveseat as Charlie sat dutifully at his desk doing all his work, as always, always on time. He hated the cat. Why did he have to have the cat? He thought he might put his foot down next time he saw Chloë. He lugged the litter bag up the stairs, cleaned the cat box. Chloë, when she appeared, only cooed and cuddled Gustave, promising to take him next time,

always next time, when she had the carrier and had cleaned her place. He rested his head against his desk, and fell asleep in the middle of his notes only to be startled by a strange noise.

“Hello?” he called.

Only the refrigerator hummed in response to his hello, the clock ticked. The apartment was empty. Gustave didn’t move. Trying to forbid the clock to tick its goose-step seconds, he held his breath. With each sound, he tensed his ear as if to shape the noise physically into her step on the stair. He wanted to do something, but his boots’ laces started to root to the floor. He would be the type who paid hundreds of dollars to skydive, only to stand at the edge of the airplane door, letting the other people be double-dog dared into jumping off first. He would never move.

The seconds ticked until the bell tower two blocks away at the University released big dissolving booms, which his kitchen clock clicked and ticked through. Suddenly, as if jolted with an electric shock, he jumped into his car and revved the engine, dislodging his car from the recently-rained upon unpaved parking lot which fastened to his tires like mud slippers. He hadn’t used his car since his \$100 ticket for backing into some rich kid in his rich dad’s BMW because Chloë distracted Charlie while parallel parking. He ushered the cat outside of his apartment with him, though Gustave was reluctant to leave. The cat had all twenty claws, why hadn’t he forced him outside sooner?

Charlie burned almost a half an inch of rubber off, but with the last push of his accelerator, his tiny four-cylinder leapt over the ice molehill and sat purring on the other side. However, he didn’t know where to drive. The road looked different through a windshield—as if he’d switched abruptly from glasses to contacts. He curled himself up against the squishy steering wheel and prowled the cat-like car along the streets. He became a crazed Bedlam escapee behind the wheel, but very calculating. He thought back to the trip after the party with Chloë, and he tried to picture the directions to that house. With extreme effort, he surprised himself by realizing he could.

All of a sudden, feeling as sanguine as Renfield, Charlie guided his car through the turns until he found himself near the house. Along the way, Charlie pictured throwing open the door and demanding to know where Chloë was spending her time. Or, better, he would crash through the house and overturn breakables in a fit of rage, expecting to find Chloë behind every door he kicked open. He saw the house, he saw the

Austin Mini in the drive, and he parked a few doors down as his heart started jumping like mad.

After several false starts, Charlie climbed to the door and rang the bell. A beautiful girl answered and looked confused. She had slithery tattoos winding around her arms and underneath her dress's cap sleeves. They stared at each other. Finally, a skinny, tall gentleman with a lip ring snaked his skinny, long arms around the girl and said, "Who's this, honey?" Charlie stumbled down the steps, taking the first few backwards before remembering to turn around, and he walked toward his car without saying a word.

When he entered his apartment building, the Raleigh stood like a faithful dog next to the wall-mounted mailboxes underneath the stairs. He climbed the stairs with trepidation, taking two steps lightly with the hope she would be there, then taking two steps slowly fearing what he might find. He put the key in the lock and opened the door.

She acted as startled. "Oh, it's you."

Oh, it's you? He couldn't be the type of man who elicited this response. He felt small. He knew he would be the man who elicited *oh, it's you* from beautiful women until the day he died. His Dulcinea was back, but she was still far gone.

"Chloë," he said as if to start an argument. He was thinking worlds, but when tried to say it in words, he failed. She blinked up at him as he stood, hand still on the doorknob, almost as if she knew his thoughts.

"Hi, Meine Charlie," she said.

Charlie looked into her eyes. They seemed large and perhaps a little uneven with pupils always a little dilated, making her look like an anime character or a cat. She wore mismatched socks and her grease-stained jeans. He wanted to scream.

"Meine Charlie," she had said. Though her French was far stronger, she had picked up annoying tidbits of pidgin German while studying in Alsace-Lorraine, she had told him. He loved her French but hated her German.

Yet those words sounded delicious coming from her lips. "Meine Charlie." Delicious. Why? She swam, ran, and biked faster than him, making him feel forever inadequate. She criticized the way he bought Norton editions of books. She drank his

milk from the container. She refused to bring over a toothbrush. And she was impossible. Simply impossible. Yet “Meine Charlie”—

He smiled at her in return. Why think of the other things? The things eclipsed all the good. Why not focus on “Meine Charlie” and block out the rest? He concentrated with all his might to focus his attention on just one eye so he couldn’t see both at once. She created the emptiness only to fill it.

The Fiqh of Fasting, or Call Me Mr. Lonelyhearts

Joe chooses a desk near mine and asks me who the hell do I think I am. Call me Ishmael, or Mr. Lonelyhearts, or No Name, or Invisible Man, I think. My classmates generally don't call me anything at all.

The day is early, and sleepy students bumble toward their desks before the bell. Joe's about to ask me more rapid questions—this is his usual segue into a soapbox oration—but a small substitute teacher walks into the room. She looks too young to be our teacher. We watch her like kittens stalking a cricket before the pounce. She has her hair pulled back tight and is wearing lots of form-fitting but flesh-curtaining gray wool, and she's similar to what I pictured before sleep the night before last. Lying in the dark, my mind made a mixture of graphic novel characters and my old elementary school teachers—the sexy ones who were into being overtly sexy plus the ones who pent up and pushed down their sexiness and pretended they were old ladies at 25. I woke up after dawn yesterday morning with a sticky stomach and, more than disappointment at missing a chance to eat before sunrise, I worried this'd broken my fast. But I decided I wasn't responsible for unconscious actions. I turn toward the sub and smile.

Roll call. She starts with A and gets no response from the room. A few people throw sidelong glances my way. She repeats her mistake, more jarringly. I correct her.

“Oh!” the substitute teacher says, and to hide her embarrassment: “Such a beautiful name. Where are you from?”

In a flat tone I tell her I'm from here.

She fingers her kiss curls and blinks. Only fools and racist humanists pursue this line of questioning further. She sniffs and comments on the roster's unusual alphabetization according to first names.

Joe and I resume our conversation. He's upset because I let things go sour with Harriet Walsh, my Not-Girlfriend. She won't let me give a name to what we have. Joe is friends with Harriet and, it just so unfortunately happens, in love with her, so he gets all his information firsthand and first thing. Last weekend when my alarm buzzed, I wouldn't kiss Harriet who I'd smuggled into my bed the night before. I set the alarm to shoo her away at a safe hour, but we still overslept and it was dawn when she left. So I just let her go untouched, squashing the peas in my father's vegetable garden as she

crawled out my window to where her Schwinn sat in the vacant lot. The angrier she is, the more vegetables she stomps on. My father still thinks he has a rabbit problem, not a wayward teenage girl problem. But no peas have been so much as snapped since the start of the holiday.

“It’s against my religion,” I say like it’s a joke.

Joe disapproves of my dating Harriet, even though he would die to date her, even though dating her upgrades me in his eyes. Harriet won’t acknowledge she’s my girlfriend, and Joe thinks this is criminal. Or at least disgraceful, my allowing it. Harriet never speaks to me directly. The quick alliances forged between teenage girls slowed our own partnership. Harriet and I communicate through a complex system of adolescent pretexts and teenage liaisons. Gaggles of young women giggle messages at Joe to give to me from Harriet.

The substitute teacher reaches the middle of the alphabet through slow, careful stumbling, and Joe is forced to call “Here!” at J. He usually does exactly as he’s told.

“Too much, man,” he tells me out of the corner of his mouth. “You’re too much.”

The teacher doesn’t teach and instead puts us into groups to work on a project. Joe and I form our own group. Neither of us paid attention to the assignment nor did our homework. I try to think back to Friday’s class—of the many things I remember one is that there is a war. I forget which one we’re making poster board timelines for but uncap my Sharpie with readiness anyway.

Harriet is in this class, too, and her girl group of three bands then bunches against the wall near our corner. She is near but her gaze is distant. She never talks to me in public, so her silence is unreadable.

“The text says...but this was really about...” Harriet, with her usual bent back and flitting fingers, lectures her scholastic gang who blink clumpy eyelashes and write down everything she says.

“Mrs. Winters wants you to think about how the American government tried to help this poor communist country,” the substitute says as she floats ethereally around the room, never getting close enough for contact. “Bring freedom, et cetera.”

“Why do we never talk about anything real in this class?” Harriet calls out, pushing her face out from the constant curtain of her unbendingly straight, greasy hair.

“What about the real reason for the war?”

Because of the late appearance of breasts and early signs of genius, Harriet has been a self-proclaimed feminist and anarchist radical ever since middle school. She often goes without lunch because she's given a street person near the University her allowance.

"Yeah!" Joe echoes. "The reason?" He's decided he wants to be a radical, too. But his parents have a weekend home in Santa Fe and a wine cellar.

"Jeeze," the beefy lacrosse player, Connor, says as he rolls his eyes.

I used to describe as "jocular" before I learned from Harriet that word didn't mean what I think it meant, gets that cocky look like his conservative, sexist values are so obvious he doesn't need to state them. Instead, he says, "Cocksuckers."

"That's enough." The substitute teacher slaloms her hips around the moguls of desks, peering at our poster boards. One hip swish gets caught in the web of my memory, lying in wait to commit sex acts with me later that night. Or one night after Ramadan, I mean. Joe and I lean over our poster board so she can't see it's blank. The teacher smiles at our hard work. Connor glares at me.

"Fuck you looking at. What kind of white boy has a name like yours?"

I don't respond. He's a white boy, too.

"Fucking towel head," he says under his breath.

"What the--?" *Fuck* is a risk of a beating so I stop myself. I stab him in the eyes with my glare and muss my hair violently with my hand. I'm not even wearing a hat. My Yankees cap is stowed safely in my backpack so the teachers won't confiscate it. See? I'm as American as he is, I try to say. But Connor pretends to be absorbed in his coloring.

The few times I am with Harriet, I can walk down the hall and not be bothered. The line of girls and boys with black boots who hang outside on the steps sometimes look at me too when they talk to her. They talk in ways that I would never hear them talk if I were alone, without Harriet. I smoke cigarettes offered to me after they are first offered to Harriet, and people ask me about my records and comic book collection. To them, this is me. If I accidentally touch Harriet, she jumps back like I'm a livewire.

My sister Carmen, named after a stupid television character, walks by the classroom and sticks her face in the open door. She waves at me and giggles. I pretend she's not my sister and concentrate on the blank poster board. The substitute teacher

senses hubbub out of the corner of her eye and asks Carmen why she isn't in class. And Carmen, like most low maintenance girls, cannot fake a thing.

“Uh, getting Starbucks,” she says and blinks.

Then she giggles again and scampers off, which she can do because she's slightly dumb but with A+ grades, and she's a soccer player.

Harriet glares at me in a way that reminds me about the missed morning kiss. She repositions herself closer under the pretense of borrowing Joe's eraser. Harriet accosts me, breaking one of her own rules, and asks why the fuck Carmen gets to drink coffee and am I just making this whole fast-holiday thing up?

“Ramadan?” Ruth, the teacher's pet, asks as she's walking toward the supply area in the back of the room. “That's real. It's even on the calendar. Look,” and she points to a September square with tiny black letters on Mrs. Winter's scenic calendar of Canadian outhouses. I don't explain that if you're a woman, you can eat and drink coffee during, you know, certain times of the month. Instead, I blush. Sweet, simple Ruth. She looks soft and smells like organic milk.

I wonder if dating Harriet made me more complex—the way she crawled into my window and she continued crawling until she was underneath my covers. Harriet's pain made her seem profound. I begged her to talk—to tell me more about the ache of being a white girl from the suburbs with dyed black hair and two sets of parents. I absorbed all her opinions like silly putty. At night, when we were alone, I put my arms around the tiny ball Harriet has made of herself and made myself a vessel for the secrets in her brain.

“You're the only one who listens to me,” she said.

She uncurled to kiss me in the biting way that she did, and just as I closed my eyes I felt her spring on top of me.

“But I don't need you,” she said, jerking back.

I grabbed hold of her to steady her. My mother and father's room is far away, so even though my mother is an insomniac, the wide layout of our home makes it nearly soundproof. We live in a short ranch style home stuccoed to look like adobe. We also have yuccas outside our home and rocks instead of grass and when my sister sneaks out, she has to cushion her soles so the gravel doesn't clink. Harriet kissed me quietly like she says, like she didn't need me—but like she needed me to need her back.

“Ramadan,” Harriet spits at me now while walking back from the sharpener, brandishing a pencil sharp as a cat’s claw. “You’re about as religious as a capitalist on Christmas morning,”

“Should’ve just sucked face, man,” Joe says in my ear when Harriet’s back is turned. He shakes the Sharpie at me in like a prosthetic finger waging its admonishment.

Near the end of class, Connor’s dirty and aggressive boy group of hyper-muscled rejects finishes a violent poster that looks like *Apocalypse Now*. They show the class. *Charlie don’t surf.*

The substitute says that’s based on a book and have we read that book? We have not. She asks us if we even know the author of the book. We do not. She tells us she was a Political Science major in college and nowadays no one pays attention to the world. She says she bets none of us even read the news, not like in her day. She’s only ten or so years older, but we drop our heads in shame. A voice no one can place says that’s not true.

“Oh?” my teacher asks. I look up, and eye contact makes me culpable—but before I can look away, she says my name.

“Yes?” I pretend to be looking up for the first time.

“Where do you get your information?”

My mind is an utter blank. For a moment, I am mortified that I can’t remember ever picking up a newspaper or even finishing an assigned article. Ever. I repeat the first show Harriet told me about. The only one I can remember.

“The *Daily Show*.” This gets an unintentional laugh from the class. I sigh, hoping the pressure is off.

My teacher’s eyes widen. “Really?” Then her eyes narrow. Her curls become electric. “What do you like about it?”

I shift in my chair. I tell her it’s more legitimate—I’m parroting Harriet—than any real news on T.V. And, I add, it’s funny. The latter I know is true: Harriet made me watch clips from the Internet. Of course, it’s also true that I didn’t understand the jokes. Harriet insisted that this had nothing to do with the show.

“I see. So, you like political satire?” the teacher asks.

I tell her I don’t know. Then I blush. She doesn’t believe me, but the bell rings. People gather their things and Harriet approaches me.

“That’s not your favorite show,” Harriet says annoyed. “That’s my favorite show.” Harriet growls, “Do you even know who you are?” and walks away.

Joe looks at me, disgusted but sympathetic.

But this irritates me. I *do* know who I am. Sort of.

“Listen,” I say to him. Harriet is already gone. “Listen.”

I was born in west Beirut. I moved with my parents during the 80s, the civil war, but I’ve been here all my life. My sister doesn’t want to stay in our immigrant family; she knows she would move out soon and meet an American man from the Midwest, etc., who will take both her hands in his when they are cold, a man who would erase her dissimilarity, her immigrant-ness. She brushes her hair and memorizes her textbooks, so she can lie in bed and imagine what her life will be like when it finally starts. My mother knew this beforehand—she was already on her way here when my sister was in her womb, so for her daughter she picked an innocuously Western name. But for me, the firstborn born in Beirut, she chose an Arab name. Forever after, people have looked at me in the hallways to see why my skin isn’t quite Spanish, not quite white.

At home, my mother asks me to pray with her, but I tell her I have to study. The house is dark and red from the low Western sun, and where the hallway starts, a line of light separates the carpet from the bottom of my bedroom door. I lie on my bed and close my eyes. It’s for her I don’t drink coffee this month or eat in the cafeteria for lunch or kiss. I don’t believe in God, and I don’t believe in her country, but my mother looks at me with the look of ten thousand years of history I don’t even begin to know, and so I close my eyes during Maghrib prayers. On my bed, I imagine who would be the first person to notice if I one day disappeared from school, and I think about a new pair of navy blue Nikes I want, and I think about Harriet, the way she smells like cigarettes and hair dye, and my eyes are closed so tight I feel like they will never open.

I can see the sun set behind my eyelids, and I hear my mother saying to me, “It’s time to get up.” She says this standing above my bed in the twilight. “You’ve been asleep. It’s time to get up, Amir.”

Fucker

Yes, the stories are all true. He was a fucker all right, and indeed, he fucked her.

Her name was Eve, lovely lady fulgent in the dark, bottom like a bowl, plump posterior that made the fucker go for the precious parts of the anterior. We held our breath when she passed, and our eyes pendulum-ed with the *swoosh swoosh* of her skirt, just to glimpse the outline of her hips. The fucker overshadowed Eve in people's eyes, but, undoubtedly, we were drawn to her, too.

And he, the eponymous antihero of this tale, noticed Eve as well. For years, she existed outside his radar until the morning when she finally grew out of her hand-me-downs and uncoiled her hair from her ponytail bun. The first sight of her that day five years ago at age 14 walking along the mesa drained his energy so completely that the café attendants had to lay him in the backroom on a makeshift cot of bags of flour.

"Fuck me," the fucker said. "When I wake up, remind me that I'm going to fall in love with that girl." He fell asleep but continued, mumbling, "Fuck. Remind me she's going to fall in love with me."

The fucker: soon as he could talk, we felt an inarticulate but sharp attraction. Everyone everywhere in this pocket-sized town suffered a certain fascination, but no one felt it more poignantly than the young women. They appreciated his manners, they told themselves. His dark Pueblo eyes, his mother's eyes, the left almost imperceptibly smaller than the right. His sliding solo dances on the café linoleum when he was happy. The way he restored natural rhythms in the town as he moved.

But there was more. As his female playmates matured into bipedal beauties, this particular boy's loveliness, his smell and his voice, stirred them. He smelled faintly of Chapstick, bitter almonds, and sweat. And his voice—he spoke, despite all his grown-up sex appeal, with a scarcely detectable lisp. His childish and halting way of making "s" and "z" into the soft sound of "th" loosened something at first pityingly maternal then carnivorous inside their bodies. Across their faces, these women would see the impact he made writ large in flushed pink. In private, this longing manifested itself in curious ways. One woman climbed out her bedroom window after midnight and stood beneath his each night until sunrise. Another ripped clean all the labels on all the canned goods in

her parents' pantry in tongue-tied frustration, leaving behind only mysterious shiny metal.

And one very sickly girl would eat very little for breakfast, skip lunch, and then hunt for rain in this desert town, walking in circles in the mesa along U.S. 550 hoping to fall unconscious on the cactus hoarfrost. During the winter, the outside was suicide—the lack of atmosphere in the desert caused temperatures to plummet to nearly zero after dark. She hoped for a romantic revival from this boy, now nearly a man, after she succumbed to the sleepy premier stages of hypothermia. (Why she indulged this fantasy, no one knows. He had never been known to step foot in her side of town.)

But Eve was not proud of his popularity or intellectually annihilated by desire. She fought the constant tide of traffic and the gushing, gossiping flood toward him, and swam upstream, away from this boy, like a fish propelled to make an unexplained backwards migration against the current. Sometimes she would simply shut her eyes and cling to anything—a movie ticket stub, her mother's gas range stove, the crooked door handle to the town café—in order to stand still. Her eyelids would cling together and she would seem to be imagining these torrents as tributaries, gushes to be freed into distant and unknowable seas—freedom we knew she wished to find.

We weren't surprised. We just acted it. We loved to gasp at the round proof of the act rising beneath Eve's uselessly baggy sweaters. Or maybe the willful ignorance of her father, the owner of the failing private ranch. Or her wan mother's public tight, bright red smiles and betraying bloodshot eyes. Or else the preemptive house arrest of her younger, stunning sister, Lillian—a shame, her breasts just budding and it being near bikini season. All this doubled with the delightful revelation of now knowing idle talk is almost always true.

Before Eve bubbled and her secret burst, though, we watched her with only a vague interest. She was easy prey for lesser contenders, so why? Why, for instance, was she the only one to rebuff the fucker? The only one impervious to his charms? Her life was nearly too quiet to notice. Had we waited in breathless anticipation for any signs of contact between the inamorato and his would-be mistress, we would have asphyxiated on our own casual curiosity.

Like her sisters, though she wasn't married, she lived the wonderful life of a housewife. She was allowed to stay home to cook and clean all day, and to take care of her aging, sickly mother. She hardly ever—nearly never—had a lazy moment. Like in school, putting forth her best efforts sucked her time like her sister Lillian did a lollipop. Eve, we remember, graduated with excellent grades, and in her drawers and locker she kept brochures for the University down in Albuquerque. Her mother, unwell in bed with a perpetual dampness in her lungs, did her best to whittle away Eve's fantasy hope.

"Eve," the mother's tiny voice wheezed from her bed in a room humming a dehumidifying hum. "Evey, you don't have time. You best start chopping the vegetables and beef, we're having hominy stew and cabbage tonight."

Eve hurried to finish the floors because it took hours just for the stew to boil after every chopped chunk of meat and carrot fell into the mix. The house was old but it still stood, and as the kitchen filled with hominy steam the walls creaked. The roof barely raised itself in its patches into a pitch unlike the other flat-roofed pueblo style houses in the area.

Still the brochures kept peaking out from their mailbox marooned at the edge of their dusty lot. Even when the University catalogs stopped arriving, because she already had two copies of each degree program's booklet, the ads seemed to multiply in the pages of magazines, or they flattened and stretched themselves across the side of billboards. We could catch her looking at these mammoth signs, letting her heart unfurl, in peels of fire, and she would let herself burn with a clear, consuming light. Her father saved enough money to send her brother to school, and she waited, patiently, for a few years, for her turn. When her brother came home after dropping out of school, his gaunt teenage body now lost in a baggy hooded sweatshirt and generic black jeans, Eve tried to leave.

Her father, with thick pouches of leather skin under his eyes and a drooping Poncho Villa mustache tickling the point of his chin, shook his head and his empty wallet.

"If you've already paid his tuition," Eve said. "And if *he* isn't there," she said. "Then," she said, with hope.

“What do you want to be?” her father asked her. “What is it you want to go and be?” he growled above her. His voice had so long to go, from deep in his chest to the tip of his tongue, that it came out as a distant roar.

But before she could answer, he put a sandpaper hand on her shoulder and handed her a grocery list. She blinked and he was out the door, off to work the lazy, time-consuming work of the nearly unemployed self-employed.

For a brief moment, her skirt no longer swooshed when she moved but hung languid and limp like wilted salad around her legs. She stayed home and helped her mother. Her only escape was the movies. But they were far away. Maybe that was the point.

It all boiled down to this: Eve was fucked. A thing as remarkable as it was risky. She fought it for as long as she could fight preternatural and hirsute magnetism equaled only by subtle facial asymmetry. And now she had lain smooth and round like a beautiful whale swimming in thin sheets.

We pictured it: Eve, short but muscular Eve, placing two palms on his hairy chest and pushing, pushing with all her might until she could breathe again. Him popping off, plump and piggish with his tiny curved belly in the air. He would pant then sniff once when the panting was done, and then he'd curl up like a seashell spiral with his head on Eve's stomach. We wondered how long she'd had to hold him before he was zipped, pantsed, and cocky again.

If there was blood on the sheets—like we pictured it—there was no more blood afterward. Not for weeks. Not for months. Finally, after sixteen weeks, Eve had to tell. But for sixteen weeks, she could ignore the event in her belly. She continued to go to school, to do her chores, to cook family dinners. She continued to overlook the fucker. For sixteen weeks, her papa kissed her, his favorite, on the forehead when he came home from work. Her papa asked her, every day, for those one hundred-twenty days, “Who's my baby?” For sixteen weeks, Eve answered, could only answer, “I am.”

For sixteen weeks, Eve continued to live, go to school, and do her chores because she knew she could take care of herself. She also knew she was creating a replacement. So she told. Then her papa slapped her. Her mother wailed; we heard dishes crashing. The word slut reverberated across the tumbleweed and almost down to Albuquerque. We

heard Eve cry and cry and cry until even her hiccups were whispers. After the tempest, mother, father, sister, sister, and brother sat her on the coffee table, or somewhere central, and surrounded her in a congress. Names. Eve was fucked. They wanted names. A name. Not for the baby. Because they needed to know. Now.

“Why, I’ll kill that fucker,” papa said in a deep growl.

But the fucker was once himself a virgin. He was not born a fucker, but, rather, became one. Fucked his way into it. Fucked as if born to do it, true, but existence still preceded the fucking, in essence.

The woman who got that notch in her bedpost was the kind, frumpish, and unabashedly honest nurse who cared for the fucker’s grandmother, with whom he lived alone. The fucker’s birth mother was sick and living in a state hospital down state and so the grandmother alone cared for the young crowd-pleaser. And Nurse Rosa cared for the grandmother.

Each day, Nurse Rosa—whose husband was, on a much more amateurish and sloppy small scale, a bit of a fucker himself—as some of us were all too well aware—pushed a broom around the fucker’s pink one-bedroom manufactured home. The television thrummed incessantly as his grandmother expanded her frame to fit the contours of the couch. A wall away, the virgin fucker captained the bedroom, in his bed covers, shaping what he knew of the world through comic books. Nurse Rosa used the household broom with the wheat stalk fringy bottom tied with thick twine to sweep the living room, kitchen, and bedroom, then emptied dustpan and repeated. Her brain fogged, swimming from thought to thought, distracted by the strange not-quite-a-smell coming from the bedroom, like the rumor of sex, faint and virginal.

One day, after a preview of swishing noises down the short hall, the fucker watched the broom circle the bed, getting closer and closer, until Nurse Rosa, who had not made love to any man but her husband in all her life, was sitting right at the foot, on the space freed up because the virgin fucker’s legs were bent close to his face so he could use his knees as a desk for his comic books.

Somehow that moment God Almighty touched the power switch on the fucker and whispered, “Go.” But before synapses could snap and pheromones moan, Nurse

Rosa picked up her broom and swept on through the house and was gone with the dustpan for the day.

The next day, when she came to give the grandmother her bath in the tub with the special railings, the floating island of grandmother admonished Nurse Rosa for the filthiness of her grandson's room. As her hair swam out from her scalp like achromatic tendrils, she stressed that the bedroom needed to be cleaned right away. The grandmother grabbed a fistful of Nurse Rosa's skirt near the thigh as she was hoisted from the milky water and looked her square in the eye.

"Be very attentive," the grandmother said in her mannish voice. For the grandmother loved her boy and was no fool.

So toweling off the grandmother and braiding her hair, she rolled her to the television and left her beached in the well-worn recliner. Then Nurse Rosa set off to work. Nurse Rosa, let it be known from those who know, was no fool either. As for loving the fucker? Well, again, Nurse Rosa was no fool. As we've mentioned, the fucker was not without his charms. Everyone seemed drawn to those asymmetrical eyes, but mainly his smell.

The fucker never questioned the nurse's presence in his room. Not knowing what to do, she dusted and swept. She picked up his wilted socks surrounding his bed and put flowers in a vase from the kitchen. Then she peeled his petals, starting with the socks on his feet, then his shirt, then his jeans. She layered the floor with his clothes like icing on a cake. Finally, she worked her way out of her smock dress like a fish undulating its body over the waves. She told us she felt more excited that moment at twenty-eight than on her wedding night eight years before. The young fucker was paralyzed, mouth hanging open, body hairs standing up like cactus spines. His grandmother probably heard his gulp all the way over the racket of her daytime TV shows. Who knows, just that the TV got a little louder in volume. He looked pale, a bit green, and very, very unhappy. He shriveled up smaller than before.

In truth, the grandmother also had told Nurse Rosa she was worried about her grandson. The grandmother, too old to knock, had wheeled her walker in on him in the bathroom once as he was drying himself and she'd caught a sight of him she hadn't seen the likes of for 20 years, not since the grandfather was alive. She stared with embarrassment and horror. She lamented his arrested development, but had no one to ask

to make sure. Nurse Rosa, interest piqued, swore to explore. As a nurse, she felt it was her duty to play doctor.

Nurse Rosa said later, never one to equivocate a direct question, “She was right.”

“Although it’s not *what* he has,” Nurse Rosa told us wisely.

Nurse Rosa laughed when the fucker first said no. The fucker said no to her assault on his lonely love life of one. She proceeded; like all the women in his life to that point, she was much older and knew what was best for him. She needed to free them from the prison of abstinence: his imposed by the lightness of youth, hers by the darkness of marriage. Rivers of sweat started running down her back and, without pomp or circumstance, she impaled herself on the small, helpless boy. She said he gave her a look of panicky happiness, and in one heroic gyration, he became, as we knew him today, the fucker.

Sex in this way is like food. If it tastes good, it must be bad. If it’s on your plate and you know you have to eat it, then it must be good, though you no longer want it. The denial of certain kinds makes you righteous. Political. Then you may judge others harshly for what they cannot help but devour—even if they know no other way, even if they need it to survive.

Six years and sixty-eight lovers later (an approximation in no way completely accurate but of which we were fairly certain), the fucker discovered many, many men in Sandoval county did not remain faithful to their wives despite the fact they were Catholic. It wasn’t the cuckolded men whose reputations the fucker tarnished. Yet he couldn’t bring himself to feel ashamed, and neither could the fallen women. The lovers felt no regrets. Yet he became infamous, a reason to lock up your daughters. And yet everyone kept coming.

Here’s a secret: the fucker felt there was nothing more demoralizing, dehumanizing, and depressing than a refusal. Take that for what it’s worth. Truth be told, he wooed with worry. He courted like a chess genius moving his rooks and pawns to black squares then white squares, with the wisdom of ten moves in advance.

Having never made any love public, we never forgot the way in which she recoiled with horror at the way he waited outside the gates of her ranch in the prickly

pears and skinny Ponderosas to ask to take her to the cinema. He stood each Friday afternoon in the sagebrush in the valley below the baldhead of Cabezon Peak. We were abashed when Eve refused him, so publicly, so many, many times. He who drove the rest of the girls and women to chew their nails down to the nubs and eat the whitewash from the walls. But Eve, the middle child of the family of the penniless ranch, had a richness of spirit behind her small black eyes to keep her from feeling the poverty of a puerile love life from which teenage girls suffer. Each morning, her tiny eyes pricked him, like the hard skinny plants in her yard that did without water for months and months at a time. She left him standing in a pile of pine needles and desert dust.

The day he disappeared from her gates altogether, he gave her a not-yet-torn movie ticket and told her, we heard from her sister, about love. He said he'd spent all his money on movie tickets. He put his hands in his pockets and the unused tickets fell out as proof.

“Don't you need money to eat?”

“Love is more important than dinner,” he said.

“But it doesn't keep you from being hungry,” she said.

From the time she awoke from babyhood to the day Eve was made a woman and a mother, we saw no change in her character. We discussed this many times because we had known her since birth. Other girls in school with us betrayed secrets with their eyes or by chewing on their split ends. No one would have believed that she could have covered up something so big. For when was she ever alone?

Eve rarely got to go to the movies because the Reel Deal theatre was on the other side of the Jemez Mountain Trail, and from east of Cuba to Fenton Lake, mile marker 13 through 38, snow usually closed the road from until early April. She went religiously once a fortnight. Could it be Lillian or her older, married sister was once sick and her father, too distracted with his own problems, let her go alone?

“Did you finish the cooking, cleaning? The mopping, preening?” her mother squealed in her tiny, feminine invalid's voice from her dark bedroom.

“Yes, yes, and yes,” Eve called to her mother. “I have your tea things here, Lillian's homework is checked, dinner is on the stove waiting to be reheated.” Eve

slapped her hands together one, two, three to free them of dirt or kitchen grime. “If I can leave now, I’ll just have time.”

“Go, then. Go,” the voice called from the shade-drawn darkness of her room. “Just this once. But kiss your mother first.”

Because her father wasn’t around to say no, Eve grabbed the tiny spare ring holding the key to the car from its hook by the door, underneath the cupboard and above the light switch coated grimy gray fingerprints, whose nose stuck up until Eve flipped it down to turn off the overhead. As Eve slipped out the door, the empty room stayed visible with the weak power of the setting sun through the Venetian kitchen blinds.

We love to picture heavy, hopeful Eve before she was in the family way, when she traveled to the movies to put her knees up on the seat in front and whatever movie snacks in her lap.

The lights dim. The theatre speakers *zzzzroom* with the earsplitting sound check and the speaker logo flashes on the screen. Eve settles down into her holey velveteen throne with a small package of chocolate covered malt candies. Maybe the fucker takes opportunity of the black hole of time and space between the previews and the feature to slink into the velveteen behind Eve without a flutter from her eyes. The teeth-rattling hum of the sound check vibrates their seats and bottoms. Eve smiles in anticipation.

The theatre is empty except for a fat man in the front row with the most popcorn for his money. His eyes strain upwards and never backwards. The actors on screen are bored of their families and meet cute several times. They flirt as much as the Motion Picture Association rating will allow. The fucker moves a seat closer.

Eve silently slips malt candies through the small black opening between her inflated lips. The candy goes “crunch.” The fucker, now beside her, takes a chocolate malt ball from the package and places it to her lips. The tiny round candy slips just a second too soon and falls into her lap. He goes to retrieve it. The next hand with malt ball that comes to her lips is her own.

“Yes,” the woman on the screen says in extreme close-up.

“Yes,” Eve says to the fucker, extremely close up.

So, perhaps there were no sheets after all.

It is night on the screen and the theatre blackens except for Eve’s leopard eyes shining in the dark. Her masticating jaw is invisible. The plot thickens, the movie moves

forward. The fucker's head disappears from view and the crunching gets louder and louder then finally crescendos in an earth-shaking, seat-shaking cinematic crunchcrunch.

There is one final flourish of crunch, matching the swelling of movie music at the finale, before the floor lights wink up the aisle and the credits appear. The names of the actors, the directors, the moviemakers, the makers of the big everything, the universe, names from baby books, names of lovers and possibly other fuckers glint on the screen and began to roll upwards toward the ceiling. Eve sighs like a death rattle. The malt balls dropped on the floor eventually roll their way to the front of the theatre thanks to the slant. At last, everything fades to black.

In the hospital, Eve shook the walls and the bedpans and the gurneys as they strapped her to a cot with stirrups. But instead of screams or cries from Eve's room, the nurses and patients and midwives all heard laughter. It came as regular as contractions. At long intervals, at first, then semi-regularly, with less unfunny pauses in between. The hilarity sounded like a schoolgirl's titter at first. Then it became quiet laughter, breathy and through the nose, and then, like a fountain of giggles, nervous laughter exploded in jet streams upward, through the wards of the tiny hospital, outside to the cacti. As she started to dilate, her head was thrown back and her mouth was open wide, *hahahaha* pouring from her lips and eyes in confused gasps, like when you can't tell if someone is laughing or if they're crying.

Her hands fluttered like two birds accidentally let out of their cages. On their backs, Eve's pen had scrawled lists to remind her, in blue, of new baby items to buy and new baby chores. As her giggles jiggled her body and the bed, the penned tasks blurred to look like links in a chain. With quick and precise moments, her eyes focused and shining through the laughing fit, she started to rub off the ink.

The fucker came walking into the hospital. We don't think Eve ever called him. He just decided to come. He walked down the corridor with his heels clicking on the linoleum, promenading with confidence and pomade in his hair. Did he know what he would run into? We don't know for sure, but the ensuing battle nearly got fatally violent, which may or may not have been appropriate considering this was a hospital. Eve's baggy-jeaned brother went for blood, but the fucker, who was, it's true, more of a lover than a fighter, still held his own despite great odds of height and stature.

“Boy, have you gone idiotic?” Papa asked.

“She’s mine,” the fucker said, after nine months of silence.

“No, she’s mine,” Papa said. “Son of a bitch.”

Finally, and perhaps fairly, Eve was called to settle the battle.

But when they looked back in her room, they saw it was empty. The sheets were cold. They searched the halls. All that was left was a grandfather, a grandmother, an aunt, an aunt, and an uncle looking in the hospital window of the maternity ward, looking at the baldest, wettest, newest addition to their family.

Green-Eyed Bohemian Monsters

They were meeting tonight at one of their favorite, though pricier, pubs on Templovà, one of the ones with a perplexingly French name, filled with presumptuous Westerners in their early twenties trying desperately to expatriate themselves. There was a newcomer in their ranks, and so the self-exiled crowd felt the need to flaunt their city.

The boy named Lucas blustered in from the cold and searched the large, decaying room for familiar shapes standing out against the crimson. The boy spotted his friends' table soon after his foot stepped on the pub's welcome mat. He stood behind the girl named Avery who, mummified in off-white winter wear, stood searching at the entrance and fidgeting with her slouchy hat and exaggeratedly long scarf. She was new—fresh from America. From behind, Lucas put two hands on Avery's sides to move past her to the table. He smiled at her and pretended to dive for the best seat, the red furry built-in bench, but he, taking an unbalanced, armless and fake Louis XIV instead, offered her the spot.

“Well, aren't you the gentleman, hey?” Roger said to him from behind.

He was pale white from the cold. With awkward, numb fingers, Roger unbuttoned his jacket and joined the table. Then unwrapping his course, gray scarf by extending his arm and moving his neck in wide circles, he kissed Avery and the two other girls—Inger and another blonde girl he recognized as Inger's awkward roommate trying miserably to chat with Inger in Swedish—on the cheek and nodded at Lucas.

“Old beanie!” Lucas shrieked with joy. “What's the craic?” He danced over to his friend and clasped his thin hand around Roger's woolly shoulder.

“I am your king!” Roger said in an affected British accent.

“Well, I didn't vote for you,” Lucas responded in his.

“You don't vote for kings!”

“Well, how'd you become king then?”

“I still get letters for you, bog trotter,” he said to Lucas in his deep, regular voice. “I opened one. Can't be blamed, hey. Thought it was for me.”

“You bloody bastard. What's in the letters?” Lucas smiled, his neck craned for the possibility of a waiter in the big red room. The building used to be an old civic building, but someone had bought it and decided to turn it into a den of debauchery.

Nothing held up the roof and the ceiling sagged but towered high over them, showing off its ornate designs.

“Checks in one.”

Lucas raised his eyebrows and nodded big. Then he studied the room like an owl. With a complete lack of support columns, the whole building seemed like it would eventually collapse onto itself. The imminent cave-in gave the shabby chic place a feel of excitement—Lucas loved to imagine the red sofas and moth-eaten furry pillows crashing through the floor onto the much-mythologized basement no one had ever seen.

“You always said you couldn’t support yourself on writing,” Roger said.

“*Pivo*,” Inger barked at a distant weary waitress while traveling her finger in an invisible circle above the heads of her companions like a witch casting a hex.

“Still can’t,” Lucas said.

“*Prosim*,” Inger added in her usual brusque voice imbued with a sense of purpose distinct from the rest of the group. Inger had a real job, meaning she was not an English teacher. She brushed an invisible thread off of the velveteen sport coat covering Lucas’s small frame.

“Just be glad my new roommie didn’t steal ’em.” Roger said. “Old beanie.”

Roger said they should take Avery somewhere real, without expats. He frequented a small, shabby bar in Zizkov and he mumbled a story about its realness, as if the other bars existed only as two-dimensional sets in the elaborate B-movie of their lives. The others nodded, as if in time to a familiar beat, neither in agreement nor dispute.

“No tourists, hey. Gypsies, even.” Roger smiled proudly then hunched his bulky shoulders. “But be careful there.”

Since arriving in the country, Roger and his supposedly hard-earned money had been parted many times, and, according to Roger, gypsies always figured in. Whether the Romi people roamed the streets looking for tall, broad-shouldered South Africans with thinning hair for the sole purpose of lifting a few koruna off them could be debated. However, to him, this price proved his assimilation.

“One took me for, like, a couple thousand bucks, uh, crowns, koruna, hey. Fucking jerk.” Roger took a powerful swig from his stein and bit his top lip like a piranha to catch the foam. “I could fucking kill him.”

Somehow Roger had finished the beer in front of him, as seen by the surprisingly few tree rings of foam going down his glass. The voices from the crowds behind them amplified their silence, even though they sat at one of the biggest tables in the room. Roger's abrupt anger rendered them speechless.

"We need to show our friend Avery a real shebeen," Roger insisted suddenly. "In Malostranská. My friends at the last bar"—now the drunks in the dark Žižkov bar were friends—"suggested Baránick—or Baráčnická something. That pub, hey? Avery, have you ever been there?"

Avery put her hands under her thighs and shook her head. Her dark bangs fell into her eyes as she tried to smash warmth into her fingers. Inger smoothed her gold hair in the direction of her taut ponytail and exhaled noisily.

"You'd like it—it's a traditional place," he said. "Lots of locals."

"In Malostranská?" Inger said flatly, lowering her eyelids.

"Hard to believe, but true," he answered, taking the last sip of Inger's beer. "You cold?" he asked Avery.

"This bar is drafty. I'm just in the draft."

"Here," he said, reaching his big arms across Inger to dig into the pile of coats on the edge of the bench. He found two over-sized taupe gloves and offered them to Avery.

"No. No, I'm fine." Avery shook her head with fast tiny vibrations.

"Take 'em," he shrugged.

She put them on and looked like she had hands as big as boxing gloves.

"Come on, then," he commanded. Roger, older than the rest and always devising a scheme of some sort, dictated the group plans most nights.

They all willingly threw on their coats and hats, wrapped their thick scarves around their thin necks, and headed outside like children on a fieldtrip.

Roger decided they needed Absinthe before they continued across the river. The group had to drink the customary drink to perpetuate the lie that they lived this life all the time, each of them forever laughing, holding a spoonful of sugar above their stubby snifters, as if they could be cool by association. He pushed them into a nearby bar.

"Is this the place?" Avery asked, taking in the dark wood and the tornado of framed rock and roll posters and records. Framed Elvis Costellos, Rolling Stones, and

Beatles as longhaired hippies rode the arches on the ceiling. The words *Pilsner Urquell* hummed in neon green beside the bar.

“This was our place when we lived off of Jindriskà. Lucas. That small, shitty, overpriced flat. Remember?” Roger turned to Avery. “But no, this isn’t the place.”

Avery heard English and saw young college kids with steins of criminally cheap Pilsner. Suddenly, Lucas lit up.

“Aha! A fellow soul from the Emerald Isle!” He skipped away.

The group turned around and saw their quiet friend Stanley standing amidst a group of barely-dressed women who were lounging on a decrepit red French sofa. The remaining three stood at the bar. Roger looked tiredly and briefly towards Stanley, then turned the conversation back to one of his never-ending revenge plot involving a taxi driver in Zizkov.

“Man knows where he works, see. I wrote down the bloody taxi number—most of it. He didn’t think of that, did he?” Roger’s strong arms flexed as he gripped the handle of his beer. Avery bit her lip.

“Why don’t you just call the company?” Avery asked.

Roger looked surprised that she was addressing him or maybe surprised that she could talk. After a pause, he told her that wasn’t the point.

“Besides, what would they do? They’d all stick together, the skollies.”

Inger ignored the conversation, focusing her intense, total attention on the Irishman who had defected from the splintery barstool next to her to talk to other women. Across the room, Lucas laughed with Stanley, rocking on his heels and tipping his beer slightly, and Inger watched as a small Tsunami of his beer splat on the ground next to his feet. One of the girls on the red sofa clasped her beer tighter and darted her eyes down for a second, in a very delayed reaction, then pulled her eyes up, as well as a fallen strap of her tank top. Stanley and Lucas’s eyes stayed fixed on the girls’ faces, and Lucas’s fingers fiddled with his cell phone.

Avery felt a vibration in her pocket, and shifted her weight to one side to reach her cell phone. Inger’s eyes focused on the phone, as if trying to read the caller-ID. Avery saw a text message from Lucas.

Hallo, old beanie! I fear Stanley-wanley has reached a ten on the bollixed-o-meter.

Avery saw Stanley smiling at his companions with half-closed eyes. She typed:
Dear oh dear! This 'bollixed' can't be good but I can't imagine it being that bad either. Come join us so I don't have to telephonically communicate with your eyes and digits.

After Roger ordered several aniseed drinks, they joined Lucas. Inger led while Avery and Roger held two jade drinks apiece, one in each hand. Avery raised one glass like a tipsy Statue of Liberty to slide in between the roadblock of expats. They arrived at the table with a round of small, green drinks.

“*Dekuju.*” Inger said a flat and perfunctory thank you to the hand that dropped the vivid green drink in front of her. Inger looked beautiful but bored as usual.

“Avery,” Roger said, mussing his flimsy hair. “If you ever need anyone to show you around or if you have questions about visas, or anything, you know, let me know.”

“Oh. That’s nice, Roger. Thanks.”

Roger cleared his throat. “So, you have questions? Do you need my number?”

“Lucas just gave me his at school, too, for that. But thanks. But I mean, sure.”

“That’s a nice boy.” He looked Lucas in the eyes. “Well, don’t let him go on and on about his so-called writing career, hey?”

“What was that?” Lucas asked.

“Nothing. Nothing, nothing.”

Inger laughed proudly but without a smile. “Roger. Has he said anything?”

Lucas turned away from Avery. “It was just one article in the paper,” he murmured.

“Let’s drink,” Inger said.

Avery looked down at the drink and her shock of overgrown bangs fell into her eyes. Lucas only nodded while giving a manic-serious expression and rubbing his hands together. Inger’s new roommate, an English teacher from Canada whose name Roger and Lucas knew but couldn’t remember joined them and buttressed Stanley like a bookend so he could drink upright for a change.

“Have you had this before?” Lucas asked Avery.

Lucas, drop by painful drop, added bits of bottled water to his drink until the liquid in the glass became a jewel of cloudy white—an opalescent milk to do the body good. He did not set his drink on fire.

“Lighter?” Roger, with a grin, offered Lucas a Bic.

“Savage syncretism,” Lucas answered, quoting something he’d quoted many times—he’d bought a book a while ago on being an *Absintheur*. He waved the Bic away. Roger rolled his eyes and sighed, barely suppressing his annoyance at Lucas’s pretensions. Avery darted her tongue into the tumbler like a first-time swimmer putting a toe into an algae-covered lake. Her lips puckered.

“Tastes like—licorice,” Roger, with the unsophisticated palate, said. To her it tasted like NyQuil. He added, “Hey, Avery. This makes you trip a little.”

Across the table Inger stole glances at Lucas. Lucas tried not to roll his eyes—instead he turned to Inger and closed them in a very affected blink. Inger raised her eyebrows and smiled at Lucas with her eyes, not moving her mouth.

The sugar cube placed on the edge of their spoons in a small, shallow pool of liquid slowly dissolved. They picked up their glasses with a sense of responsibility, then, smiling in the greenish glow, lit the spoons on fire and stirred. The glare reversed everyone’s shadows and gave them sinister faces.

“Howzit?” Roger asked and smiled a too-wide smile.

As they walked across the snowed streets, the air thickened with a swarm of stag party partiers, dressed in loud, ridiculous outfits suicidal for the cold. They wore shorts and hung snugly inflated lime-green inner tubes around their round middles. Avery could barely make out the hem of Lucas’s long, black coat in front of her. The haze of men got too thick. A hand grabbed her wrist and pulled her forward. She brushed past a man-child with a “Czech Me Out” t-shirt, and she grimaced to think the hand on her arm might belong to one of these gentlemen. The boys then started chanting a soccer hooligan song, and Avery, her body intimately pushed against a tubby, snaggle-toothed stag, ducked her eardrum out of the line of fire. Once free of the crowd, she saw the hand on her belonged to Lucas.

“Lukáši!” she said.

“Hello, me auld flower,” he said, squeezing her arm where his hand lay.

Avery flushed.

Snow had started to fall again since they had been in the bar, but the streets, warm from red trams and heavy foot traffic, only held a light layer of white. The snow amassed on rusty, parked cars and red rooftops. The group huddled together as they walked.

Two broad-shouldered Scandinavians with icy blue eyes walked by, talking rapidly to each other. As one turned to his friend, he kept his hands in his pockets and dramatically thrust his arms close against his body, causing his shoulders to rise near his ears. Inger, smiling, said something sing-songy to them in Swedish. They stiffened and continued walking in the opposite direction.

“They were Swedish, hey?” Roger asked.

“What were they saying?” Avery asked. Inger looked directly at her.

“They were complaining about how cold it was,” Inger said, pulling her coat forward with her pockets. “I said, oh, *poor babies*.” She wasn’t smiling now. A hint of something far more sinister than sarcasm crept into her voice. Her wintry Scandinavian eyes looked dull, and the group stopped questioning her. She startled Lucas by suddenly locking her arm in his as they walked through the streets. A sharp breeze whistled past and, turning their faces, they stopped for a minute before continuing.

“Blow, blow, thou winter wind!” Lucas said.

“Shakespeare?” Avery laughed.

“We are the knights who say Ni!” he responded.

Avery guffawed, her long, cream-colored neck breaking free of her scarf.

“We are no longer the knights who say Ni!” she laughed. “We are now the—the knights who say—”

“Ekki-ekki-ekki—”

Inger gripped Lucas’s arm more tightly, causing him to fall back two paces. Avery walked ahead, and Lucas and Roger noticed the way the wind stretched her white wool coat tightly against the curves of her body.

“I’m hungry,” Avery said. Her lips cracked from the cold, and she blankly chewed at the dead skin.

“No, you’re fine,” Inger said, turning her hard features only halfway towards her roommate. “You can eat at this bar.”

“Across the bridge?” Avery tried to brush the snowflakes away, but once they touched her coat, the flakes melted into droplets of rain and clung with surface tension.

Inger did not respond.

Lucas started to sing: “Heigh-ho! sing, heigh-ho! unto the green holly!” without much attention to pitch.

“Don’t worry. It’s not that far,” Roger said to her. “Be there just now. Well, sooner, now-now.”

“I could go for some *smazený sýr*,” Lucas, the vegetarian, said.

“What’s that?” Avery asked him.

“Smaz, yes,” Roger said, circling his muscular arm around Avery, completely covering her shoulders. “You have to try it, Avery.”

“Wenceslas?” Lucas asked in the tone of Fred asking Ginger for a dance.

They turned and walked towards the square, passing the Museum of Communism, which sat just above one of the casinos.

At one of the many steaming vendor carts dotting Wenceslas Square, the group huddled around and stuttered their orders. The old woman in the middle of the hot dogs and hanging chip bags had no patience. Several other beer-breathed Anglophones leaned on the cart, laughing and trying to cut in line.

“I fucking hate the British. Poms,” Roger spat in a whisper.

“No worse than the American tourists, jeeze,” the Canadian named Kelly, whose name Roger confirmed by making introductions with Avery, drifting in and out of their conversation said. She glanced abruptly at Avery. “Oh—sorry. But, god, you guys are *bad*.”

“Oi! Don’t have all night, love,” one of the drunkards said to the stooped woman serving him fried meat.

“Pommies, pommies, fucking ass-faced pommies,” Roger chanted under his breath.

“Oh, hi, yeah, oh! I don’t know what I want,” Canadian Kelly blustered at the woman facing her with an oily spatula. The woman blinked. “What do you recommend?”

The woman, expressionless, turned to Avery and Roger, who, on Roger’s recommendation, both ordered *smazený sýr*, a cheese sandwich, in pidgin Czech.

“*Ja sí dam smazený sýr, prosím*,” Lucas said.

“Show off,” Roger murmured for Avery’s benefit.

“My turn?” Canadian Kelly said. “Oh, okay. I was thinking of getting—well, something vegetarian, because the other stuff looks scary. No offense.”

“*Nemluvím anglicky,*” the old woman said. In spite of the snow falling on the groups of intoxicated foreigners, the woman only wore a shirt and an apron, as if the cart were her kitchen.

“What?” Canadian Kelly yelled. “I don’t understand you,” she sang each word.

The wind changed and the old woman angrily waved away the smoke from the Canadian’s cigarette.

“Just point at something,” Inger spat from underneath her tightly wound scarf that went up to her nose.

“I’ll have what she’s having.” The Canadian blushed and pointed at Avery. The woman handed her a fried cheese sandwich with too much mayonnaise.

“I’ll get yours, I need to break a five hundred,” Roger said to Avery.

“*Lukáš* already got mine, but thanks,” she smiled. The cold made her face glow a captivating pink.

“Oh,” he let his hand holding the five hundred note crumple faintly. “Great, I—I’ll get yours, hey?” He smiled his broad, charming smile and turned to Canadian Kelly.

“Cool,” she said.

“So, don’t you owe me for some drinks back there?” Roger asked Lucas, leaning towards him as he extended the bill to the old woman. “Naw, mate, it’s fine,” Roger quickly interrupted himself before Lucas could answer. He didn’t see the woman shaking her head back and forth. The bill was too big. Avery reached for her wallet, but Roger stubbornly paid in coins, the snow gathering gently on his shoulders as he counted each small, metal *haléř* found in his wallet and each pants pocket.

After winding their way through several small, crooked streets and crossing the famous bridge, the group following Roger finally reached the destination. The Baráčnická Rychta seemed an imperfect secret meeting place, but no one mentioned this to Roger. Czech students, hipsters, and teenaged alcoholics-in-training filled the homey wooden bar. The group huddled together at the door, adjusting the gust of heat and humidity. Roger’s glasses fogged. He took them in one hand and rubbed them with a handkerchief

from his pocket. The group blinked at their surroundings then instinctively went for the bar. Roger went off in a different direction.

Avery squeezed herself beside two Czech men sitting on stools. She placed her hands palm down on the dark oak bar, and strained to see the bartender. Lucas, catlike though drunk, glided next to her and placed one elbow on the bar. One of the men grudgingly moved his stool over a fraction of an inch.

“Avery,” Lucas said, “Did you know they have a commie-era music hall just down in the basement? Well! Do you want to join me in a jig?”

Before she could answer, the Canadian tottered near them with a bright green drink in her hand and was digging in her pocket for her lighter. She scanned the room with her eyes. Lucas and Avery put their elbows on the bar and their heads down.

After only one drink, Roger returned, placing himself awkwardly in between Lucas and Avery, announcing they had to leave. Too many Westerners. He nodded towards the bartender who approached with a bill.

“We’re paying separately,” he declared to the bartender. Roger saw Lucas and Avery each wearing one of his big beige gloves, even though Lucas had his own, smaller pair. “I need those back now,” he said.

They walked onto the old stone bridge and the thirty silent statues looked down at them. Each stone saint obscured the light and cast lines of shadow, like bars on a gate, over the band of freezing drinkers. Each person felt the cold slowly making his body stiffen, as if the cold was Gorgon, turning to stone whoever it looked upon. The chill crept in the small spaces between their fingers and toes; it wedged itself in and stuck. Lucas hurried ahead (“Heigh-ho! sing, heigh-ho!”), trying to click his heels together but failing, too stiff with cold, and he capered toward the most famous statue of all.

“*Dobrou noc*, Jan!” Lucas called to St. John Nepomuck.

The weathered martyr, with eyes closed, silently hung his head off to one side and did not respond.

Everyone met Lucas and turned to face St. John Nepomuck. One of the gold-leaf stars on Nepomuck’s halo caught the light of a bridge street lamp. The group looked at Lucas looking at the three rusted plaques stuck to the statue’s base on the bridge’s thick brick railing. Lucas bit two of his thickly gloved fingertips and pulled off his right glove.

He reached to pet the golden dog on the left plaque. In the corroded etching, a man in armor, standing in front of a tree, patting a skinny dog by his knee. Hard winters and wet springs had tarnished almost every inch of the brass, but the dog, and a tiny fraction of the armored man's leg, burned gold against its background as a result of polishing from tourists' fingertips throughout the centuries.

"The dog is bad luck?" Inger said from behind her scarf muzzle. "You shouldn't touch the dog. It is a trick."

"I heard one of those things guarantees your return to Prague," Avery said. "Touching it, I mean."

"Yes, of course." Lucas paused and looked at the plaque on the far right, a scene with a large crowd throwing a man, St. John Nepomuck, into a river from the bridge. "Which one?"

"I don't know," Avery answered. "Don't you?"

"Everyone knows that," Roger scoffed.

Lucas continued to pause with his hand outstretched. Roger took two long strides over to the plaque on the right and stretched his hand towards the golden smudge rubbed to a shine. The whole spot around the figure being thrown off a bridge glowed gold, looking like a ray of light from the clouds in the etching. Most tourists missed the tiny body of the man being murdered, and the whole three-inch radius surrounding the figure had been rubbed by accident. Tourists must have thought the peasant woman in the foreground was the lucky thing to rub, because she was starting become shiny herself. Roger started rubbing the tiny murdered martyr with such alacrity, as if he could rub a hole in the metal. Lucas put his hand on the dog.

Avery tried to rub the cold out of her hands and stomp it out of her feet as she stood watching Roger, Lucas, and St. John Nepomuck. The snow muffled all the sound. Avery cleared her throat and tried to hum to herself, but no noise came. The snow slipped down the group and the bridge.

"Avery—" Lucas said.

"Lucas, fancy a cab? I can show Avery around if you and Inger are tired."

"No, dude," Kelly the slurry Canadian said. "He totally 'fancies' our little friend—" she hiccupped. "Our friend. A-Avery," she said with another hiccup, followed by a thump on the chest with her impractical, fingerless gloves.

“What?” Avery asked when she heard her name.

“Yeah, you.” With that, Canadian Kelly bent over and vomited bright green liquid into the snow.

Roger and Inger didn’t speak. Canadian Kelly laughed and laughed, then had a near miss with a lamppost. Inger exhaled hard. Snow continued to fall.

“I’m going home.” Inger walked off towards her house at a pace no one matched, and she didn’t look back or say goodbye to anyone. Kelly blinked. After several beats, she chose to follow with unsteady, wobbly footsteps. She half-ran, half-tripped across the bridge to catch up. Inger and her friend became smaller and smaller until they were just dots disappearing into the shadows.

Lucas looked down at the ground in silence. He shuffled his feet as his ears grew red. No one looked at Avery. She stood alone and stiff, perhaps from the cold.

“Jesus,” Lucas said, pretending to yawn. “I’m shagged.”

“You coming with?” Roger asked, mostly addressing Avery, though he couldn’t quite look her in the eye. He took deep breaths, and each strong exhaled breath hung in the air for several seconds like smoke. “Huh?” Somehow, he widened his shoulders even more and his stance grew more square and aggressive. He swayed a little, unsteady on his feet. “Avery, let’s just go.”

“You could call a taxi,” Lucas muttered.

“Hey, *bru*,” Roger said. He tapped Lucas hard on the shoulder, and the skinny Irishman stumbled a few steps backwards into the snow. “You know what I think of you and your stupid article?”

Lucas apparently had no answer.

They stared at each other, breathing heavy. Roger pushed again, making Lucas dance backwards until his foot slid on wet snow. He hit the bridge’s railing hard, causing it to sneeze white flakes, and then he slid down to the ground. He stared at Roger. Neither of them moved for several minutes.

Their panting caused huge clouds of frozen steam of rise towards the sky. Breathing heavily, their hearts pounded fast, but the men made no noise. Silently falling snow muted all the sound and trapped the two in the blankness of a bell jar. When Lucas finally sat up, he looked around and noticed Avery had vanished. The snow had started

to cover most of their footprints, and Roger and Lucas saw no figure at either end of the bridge. They were alone.

Jasper & Maud

There was a time when it was all about bikes and records, records and bikes. Those who didn't grasp this were the sorrier for it, their lives a little emptier.

Jasper met Maud just in time, he a blank recent graduate (with honors, he said), bewildered to find himself in the Midwest, and, little by little, she entangled her thoughts with his. She lent him EPs, CDs, LPs, DVDs, and MP3s. He set her on a soapbox and devoured her opinions. Her intellect bloomed under the warm eyes of such an attentive audience. He listened to it all. Memorized it. Words, chords, dates, side projects, breakups, reunions. Fixed-gears, Schwinn, Raleighs, clip shoes. She took the rough edges of his personality and smoothed them clockwise with concentric spiral grooves 33½ times a minute.

For his part, he felt like he'd won the lottery, ever since the very first night in North Side, the night after Maud, a stranger, had noticed his street bike in the rack outside of Avant Garage, and he had asked her if she wanted to race around the crumbly city block. And they had, dodging cars and dipping into residential side streets, until dark. Then they did track stands under the streetlights. Maud's pedals restrained the tips of her feet like toe muzzles. She did not dismount while talking to Jasper, who had never asked for a number before, who tried to imitate her balancing act under the spot of streetlamp light. Jasper repeatedly faltered and caught himself with his sneaker toe. He scratched his head each time he bumbled, like a blush, making his unwashed hair unkempt in that boyish 20-something way. He looked rumpled all over, yet he always had the childish smell of fabric softener. His consistent inconsistency, Maud had called it, months later. Shabby but Snuggle-chic.

"I like you," he said, because he couldn't say goodbye, didn't want to.

"Oh. I like you, too," she said, poised to ride away.

"No, I really, really like you."

She landed in the middle of the gutter, on the edge of the circle the streetlight made. With both feet flat on the ground and her threadlike legs straddling the bar, she lit a cigarette by cupping her narrow hand over the match. Jasper continued to balance his bike without pedaling and became unsteady as she stared. He slipped, tried to save

himself by jerking his handlebars back and forth like he was riding a mechanical bull at a cowboy bar. She did not look away.

Now Jasper studied Maud like she was an exam he was intent on acing.

Maud spent her life surrounding herself with and seeking out the unsaved, the ugly and the damned, but even she had her inconsistent mortal idols and prophets, her rituals. Maud papered her walls with her gods, some of them with guitars some of them with synthesizers, all of them somehow famous enough to be ripped out of dailies, weeklies, monthlies, and other glossy magazines. Jasper learned to worship her gods.

Maud. His Maud? Maud was a god. Maud was a heavenly creature, with bad skin. Maud was a demon. Maud stayed awake for days and produced ripped up ripped out giant guerrilla art collages full of love and hope plucked from the pages of coverless music magazines found in dumpsters outside businesses with waiting rooms. Or she constructed mobiles out of bike gears. Her apartment was filled with scissors and razor blades. She always had something sharp on her and tasted like paste. He thought how sad it was for the world that it did not appreciate her genius.

Jasper silently catalogued the wall-to-wall merchandise of Maud's apartment—the names on the bright spines of vinyl records and plastic jewel cases that lined her walls like colorful soldiers standing side-by-side at attention. Maud dropped names like bombs and made his head spin. Jasper Googled it all later in private if he wasn't lucky enough to be tutored or exposed to it here. For here something must be on the turntable at all times. Because when the noise stopped, the silence, even for a few seconds, was unbearable. And whenever they were lonely, she taught Jasper, all they had to do was visit a record store, any record store, and they'd find all their friends.

Maud worked in a record store, in fact—the only viable job for her, she said, in this twisted, corrupt world. For what other job would she have done, she asked Jasper in an accusing way that expected no answer. So Jasper came and wooed her in her element when he could, and she taught him the ways. She postured herself to him as an errant knight, a bastion of rhythm, a watchdog of glam and soul and electro feminist pop performance artists. She stood stooped and scrawny behind the rampart of her cash register, hoarding her albums and singles, the thousands of Holy Grails threatening to pervade unappreciative ears. She taught him the value of these volumes. Only she,

Maud explained and thumbed at her heart, no one else, knew their true worth. This included everyone who was not an employee of, and especially who set foot in, her record store. And, even, the owners. During slow and odd hours, she would clandestinely shoot new prices on old LPs with the tag gun.

“These people don’t fucking know what their shit is worth.”

But no matter what, every customer robbed her a little, she said. Or existed as part of a vast conspiracy to knock down her carefully constructed castle. Small girls with big breasts and ribbons in their ponytails would ask for the latest from the top 40 chart. Cocky men would come in and buy up all the cock rock. Maud taught Jasper that this was a slap in the face, making them say that yes, they did indeed carry those terrible titles; forcing them to point out the record store’s deficiencies.

“And of music, really,” she said.

Music. That was holy. Bicycles were just a lifestyle. Jasper gave up looking for the mythical Maud g-spot and instead searched for the perfect three-chord song to bring Maud to climax.

As far as Jasper’s living, Maud made Jasper get a job in a bike shop, something he was good at, with his strong body and dexterous fingers. Then, meeting on the corner of Hamilton after work each day, they would clip their toes into their bikes and race off in a Tour de France-like *tour de force*, trying to beat each other to their beds, where Maud would jam her record needle into the slick grooves of Jasper’s newly-got records and would send them both to Heaven.

But she never answered to “girlfriend.”

Every trip was a mission now, a reason to find records. Jasper took time off before Christmas to visit his high school girlfriend in New York City. Jasper’s dad had purchased him a ticket to Philadelphia to visit him and his stepmother for a week. Jasper would take the train up north for a few days. Maud couldn’t afford to go—and said she wanted “space”—but she made him a list of stores to hit and recordings to bring back, even shows he might want to see when he was there.

In Philly, they spoke on the phone, but as soon as she received his text message, presumably from the train, *Trenton makes, the world takes*, Maud decided to ignore a few of his calls. He continued texting.

She gets eighty-dollar haircuts, Jasper texted her the first day he got to New York.
Uh! I've been drug to Ugg! on the next.

On the phone, when Maud finally answered, he described the ex's apartment in Manhattan and the restaurants she took him to. She had a miniature dog of some kind. She owned CDs that didn't play music (but offered a higher rate of return). He bragged at his annoyance at being dragged to all the haberdasheries in NYC, and warned her his ex "made" him replace his grungy pants. In pictures Maud had seen, the ex dressed in obsessively constructed outfits layered like Technicolor onions. Maud hated fashion. She already missed Jasper's grungy pants and his fabric-softener-smelling t-shirts.

"Did you go to Permanent Records?" she asked. "Vinyl Mania?"

"Oh," he answered. "Not yet, not yet."

He explained that his ex was a paralegal. Paralegals with her qualifications at her firm made a starting salary of \$80,000. Could Maud believe it?

"No," she said flatly. She couldn't. When was he coming home?

Same day as before, he assured her. But he might stay in New York a little longer than planned.

Maud wasn't worried, per se. Not worried about sex. Jasper's high school girlfriend became a bisexual midway through NYU and had dated only women for the past four years. Jasper was good. Jasper was genuine. He was young and naïve and he loved her. The infidelity worrying Maud went deeper than sex.

Just to prove it, she asked, "Are you fucking her?"

"What?" he asked. "What?" Silence. "Does that mean you miss me?"

"No."

Now Jasper, still in New York, realized she maybe loved him.

Her phone vibrated once. She read the message.

Went to Virgin, he wrote.

Tourist attraction. Not a store, she wrote back.

Pretentious, you?

Douchebag, you?

He called her immediately. "Maud?" She could never take a joke.

“Okay, okay. Shit. I’m sorry. You are kinda a pussy.” He heard her suck in air through a cigarette. “Just come home. Cincinnati misses you.”

“Cinci misses me?”

“Yes.”

He returned, as planned, as he would have done anyway, and, trying to cure the soul’s incurable loneliness, they listened to music side by side on Maud’s mattress when he got back until it became dark and then refrained from turning on a lamp. She curled her legs around his and stroked his ears with new bootlegs of experimental rock’n’roll idols.

“Is that rare?” he asked.

“Very,” she answered.

Horizontal on the floor on stained cushy comforters, Maud hooked Jasper by every joint of hers that could bend and pressed the buttons on her hi-fi all night, turning the big round volume knob farther and farther left in hourly reductions to stave off the neighbors. The people above and below them only ever heard noise. When the sky began to turn gray, the melodies were just whispers and Maud’s arm got worn-out from pressing rewind, stop, check, rewind, so she switched to the radio.

“Will you stay?” she asked, in a murmur barely above the bands’. “Will you just stay here until the radio plays something familiar?”

They called in sick the next morning.

Now Jasper wanted something. (He’d graduated with honors, after all.)

To get a handle on his life, they decided to fully dedicate it to music. Of course she owned guitars. And Jasper—making their union seem like fate after all—owned a small, 1992 Casio keyboard he called “Mr. Beats.” They played and played and played, vying to be serious, contribute something important, but soon always they started slipping into riffs from famous hardcore opuses even their fingers had memorized. But this was bliss, too. Jasper excitedly showed Maud an obscure and new song he’d figured out, trying to sing her to sleep, but she’d giggle excitedly—jump out of bed—and not be able to give him the pleasure of playing, she needed to feel it herself. Finally, they were only both happy when they played the same song in unison over and over, then, finally, along

with the original recording, to which they had to retune themselves down a half step, for some reason, to match the sounds on the record.

Of course they started a band. The Not So Quiets. Of course they were going to be famous. Of course they waited for the day they were at a bar and the openers were too dizzy drunk to play and the owners would plead to the crowd through the mike, Anyone out there? There anyone at all can help? Then they'd be the stars. People would like them. People would love them. People might even pay them. (Jasper put the possibility of a two-bedroom with a fire escape in Maud's head, but she just blew air up into her shaggy bangs blandly, hiding her hopefulness.)

But right now, they were keeping their powder dry, that was it. In the meantime, Jasper bought an LSAT study guide.

"No reason. I just like logic," he shrugged then kissed her on the forehead.

Now Maud was jealous, the kind which made the muscles in her chest feel tight, which she took for love. So they moved in together. Because, to be certain about the only thing he was certain about, Jasper was in love. It covered his heart like brambles on socks. And Maud was lonely. So they shared a bed. They shared a toothbrush. They kept their pot in the same tiny glass jar in the same hollowed out book on the shelf. They drank out of the same carton of milk at midnight. He even wanted them to get a joint bank account.

"You crazy!" Maud laughed, a little more high-pitched than usual, to prove it was a joke. "That'd be like combining our record collections. No way."

But they lived together and loved together and rode bikes and scattered their dirty socks around their giant studio apartment together (lease still in Maud's name). They were as happy as two could be who were smart enough not to get married.

At night Jasper planted his bicycle in the living room upside down and immobile like a Kafkaesque cockroach on its back, and with his new tools he tinkered on his old machine. Jasper's gears, at first grinding like they had a grudge, went from a shutter and a sharp crack at each shift to greasy, harmonic whirs. Not content, he continued to tinker. Apart from two sprockets the gears disappeared, and he made a track bike. He painted the frame and bought Caribbean-blue rims for his wheels. He attached bike lights and re-taped the handlebars. Then there was nothing further he could do.

Jasper wanted more. Or felt like he wanted to want more.

“I love you,” Jasper said.

She kissed him hard. “Me, too,” she said.

Jasper spun the pedals fast counter clockwise. The wheels reeled and through the screen of flying spokes he watched Maud as she sat on the floor in the middle of ten or twelve black vinyl LP polka dots. Her legs stretched out in a triangle around one of the wooden LP storage crates and her fingers rapidly flipped through the album sleeves like they were Swiss cheese slices from the deli. She froze in her hunched hermit pose and snapped her head toward him.

“You bored or what? Is this boring?”

Jasper raised his eyebrows and shook his head.

“You can always leave, you know. You don’t have to be here all the fucking time. Go call your stupid college friends.”

Using his hands as feet, Jasper gave one powerful pedal push then sat back, scratching his chest and blindly wiping bike grease on his worn Alma Matter t-shirt, ruining it but not knowing yet. Across the room, the song on the stereo started its dramatic decrescendo finish and began to fade to black. Maud widened her eyes, legs still akimbo with her hand clutching a record sleeve in mid-air, and then she swallowed. She blinked and broke from the reverie, putting her face in the crate again.

“Or stay.” She smiled like it was tiring. “You can stay. Whatever.”

The disc that Maud had been playing stopped. The room filled with the constant click-click-click of Jasper’s bicycle riding upside down to nowhere, and the noisy hum of speakers emitting silence at top volume.

Now, while twirling his pedals absent-mindedly, Jasper phoned his high school ex one weekend. He held the phone to his ear and watched his spokes like arrows of a spinning prize wheel, eventually slowing but never pointing to any reward. After hanging up, he told Maud that maybe he could be a paralegal. Easy. Make real money. Pay off student loans, something Maud didn’t know about. Do something real. Be a bike-accident lawyer, even.

“This *is* real. Realer than that, anyway,” she said.

“I mean really real. See, you don’t understand.”

Maud smashed things. Her Alice in Wonderland mug. His Tupperware already with a crack in it. (Plastic does break when rammed hard enough against kitchen linoleum.) She tried to wrench his framed diploma—“cum laude”—off the wall, but he caught her wrists.

“Leave me then. I don’t care,” she screamed.

After tupper and Maud were cleaned up off the floor, so much as they could be, she repeated, calmly, “I don’t. I don’t care.” Then, like the thrill of suicide, came: “Do what you gotta do.”

“I wish you knew how much I loved you,” he said.

And now Jasper went to law school, of course. For this section, there’s nothing to say, really. Jasper’s toes itched. The big toes and one tiny arbitrary middle toe on his left foot. Jasper learned boxes of records are harder to move than boxes of books because they weigh more. Maud learned space looks empty when half the albums are missing. It feels colder. Deader. Because tagging along was not feminist and there were no top-tier law schools in Ohio. They were adults, and it made his toes itch. Anxiety always made his toes itch.

Without Jasper near her in the record shop, the customers seemed to morph into even more unbearable and Midwestern imitations of cool. Kids came into her shop thinking they knew about music. That was the worst. Girls with short bangs vomiting up the band names their boyfriends shoved down their throats. (She had taught Jasper how you could always tell.) Boys in tight jeans or girls in knee skirts naming the worst “indie” bands Maud could think of—talentless boy hacks who wore ironic t-shirts and thought talking equaled singing—then these indie pretentious patrons would smile at Maud, like, *we know*, and they didn’t know. They didn’t know.

Now, four years later, Maud and Jasper met on the street, strangers. Or, actually they didn’t. Destiny is never neat like that. Loose ends are loose ends and Maud experienced no “change,” didn’t learn shit, as she would say, if she were here. Maybe she stayed poor and pretentious but with passion in her ears and heart, and Jasper moved to D.C., or somewhere Maud had deemed soulless. He worked at a firm and tried to go to the 9:30 Club or The Black Cat once or twice to prove he still loved “it”—all of it—but his ears

hurt despite the plugs and he went home to surf the Internet before bed. So, nothing changed and the ending here doesn't turn out to be epiphanic at all. It just ends.

Maud has one turntable that's cheap and old and doesn't have the automatic trigger function that raises the arm and returns the stylus to its home at the end of a record. When the needle reaches the last groove, it spins against the middle label area banging its head in circles with a rhythmic hypnotic softness until someone lifts it off manually. If Maud falls asleep, the needle just stays at the end going tick. tick. tick. tick. while the record keeps turning.

A Bleeder

I'm here in the emergency waiting room because my wrists are slit and bleeding onto the linoleum rectangle reflection of the fluorescent light above. The guy in the corner looks like Friedrich Nietzsche—the big poufy mustache, the vaguely Germanic features, the nose of a nihilist. He sees me staring, so he nods. No smile, just one of those nonverbal head tilts, meaningless and a little rude when it lacks a grin. But I'm feeling a little sensitive right now. A few seats from him a woman sits drenched from head to toe and reeking of the river. Near the nurse station, through chipmunk cheeks stuffed with pills a bobbing tattooed man mumbles swears, shitfuckshit, while clutching the skin around his liver. He glares at me like he wants me dead. I put my eyes down and I'm bleeding on the paperwork the nurse gave me. They need information because I didn't have my wallet when they found me. See, this outfit doesn't have pockets. No wallet, no driver's license, and no check cards with my full name and middle initial: M.

You're so lucky we have this paperwork, the nurse says. Otherwise we wouldn't know you are! And you could have died, she adds with a scolding look.

Yeah, I say, that's kinda the point.

But she tsks and hands me the clipboard with the pen attached. I wish I had a Someone who would fill in this fine print while I filled in the crosswords. The only relatively new periodical in this waiting room is a *Times Arts* section with the crossword and it's a Monday. I can *do* Mondays. But no one will fill out my forms for me. I start to feel slightly woozy because of the blood loss, only no sewing me up yet, the nurse says. Not until I've dotted my i's and... I put my head between my legs and while I'm down there I think I won't fill out the rest of the form, no social security number, no emergency contact names, and no insurance info, just to spite them. I'll simply sit here and die just to show that stupid squeaky shoed nurse.

Here's something that seems irrelevant but it's not: when I was in fifth grade, I wanted to make a rope swing on a tree in the dirt arroyo behind my house. Four-Eyed Stacey, my best friend when that status functioned as a synonym for next-door neighbor, had a rope so she got half the credit when the neighborhood kids came to swing. There was a long pause before the maiden dangle—Stacey had asthma and I was just chicken.

You're holding up the line! whined these second graders I barely recognized. So, I let all the other kids jump before me. That's me. When all the other kids are leaping off the cliff and coming back for seconds, I'm immobile, unable to be double dog dared into anything. I just stay still and vegetate. Finally, even Stacey left me and jumped. She forgot to let go and came bang smash back into the tree, but she jumped. Then she brushed herself off, puffed on her inhaler, and shoved tissue into her nose. Stacey, straight-A student to a fault, always did manage to see things to the end.

I, on the other hand, never finish what I start. So I pull up my head in order to pencil in the emergency contact section, a life-examining event I always find brutally depressing—*Full name of contact?* I just call her Mother; *Relationship to patient?* Strained—and my eyes meet those of a medium height, medium dark, medium handsome man sitting in the brown and beige speckled waiting room chair opposite. He has an awkwardly angled gunshot wound on his temple. I catch his eye and smile, setting down the clipboard. He smiles then makes a squinty, pained look because blood has dripped into his eye. He wipes it with his sleeve and tries to resume smiling while blinking furiously. I start to wave, but my palms are bloodier than Lady Macbeth's. We both blush at our clumsiness and glance away with shy smiles on our faces. Nietzsche rolls his eyes.

An hour earlier, I locked up my bicycle a couple blocks away and stretched my long, pale body against the sidewalk outside the ER entrance, making the automatic doors agitatedly open and close. Open and close. Open and close. I waited for a wheelchair and an escort. Fanfare. Doctors racing nurses racing candy stripers as they hold my IV and push me on my speed racer stretcher. After five minutes, a screaming bearded man with a detachable finger jumped over me and ran in, but other than that, no one noticed me. After ten minutes near the automatic doors, I decided to walk in on my own. Maybe waiting room Nietzsche is right. Delightful as I am, I apparently am not that delightful.

Now phones are ringing over in the nurse's station; people in those blue-green doctor pajamas are running around with charts and soda pop; the fluorescent lights are still reflecting off the yellowed linoleum floor. In the far corner, I note the wet woman sigh over an outdated *People*. She drips and sighs then, more than once, tries to get up to leave, but the nurse gingerly leads her back to her chair, back to the puddle impression she's made of herself on the beige seat, and places a clipboard in her lap. The woman is

having trouble breathing, like her lungs are liquid, but the nurse pads off again, into the forbidden area of bustling doctors and beeping noises that make this place sound like a primetime drama. Behind those doors lie criers and pukers and most of all the bleeders.

We have a bleeder, I hear someone shout from the other side as the nurse pushes her way back to us through the doors, hips first, squeaky shoes second. I feel lightheaded again and hope this means the end is nigh, but the nurse glances over and mouths at me, I need those forms! So I pick them up again, but worry that if I finish in time I won't be finished off. That means I'll have to go home and prepare for work tomorrow because I never feel like I can believably call in sick unless I have a stuffy-sounding nose.

I throw down my pen after a second, because fuck this, I'm going to die. The pen bounces back on its teeny bungee and clacks the metal clip of the board. My eyes pull at the medium man's across the room like they're magnets, love magnets. My feelings, or my need for feelings, are intense, overpowering. His face has a startling lack of symmetry I notice the more I glance at him, but I try to imagine this is it, my last five minutes ever.

I love you, I say from across the semi-crowded room. I don't mean it, and I've never meant it in my entire life, which is part of the reason for the slicing, but my intentions are good. I want to pack as many meaningful words into my last breaths of life as possible.

I love *you*, he answers. He omits the 'too' which I think is beautiful—shows a real sign of sincerity, instead of a reflex response. His eyes are as big as cookie crumbs and I see he really does love me. Saying it suddenly makes it so. Because of his new attraction to me, immediately I find him more interesting than before and than I thought possible, what with all his medium-ness. Nietzsche gags in a fake and ostentatious way. Chipmunk Cheeks says, Fuckin ninnies, under his breath.

My wounded lover attempts to bridge the linoleum space between us, even climbs over the one row of waiting room chairs placed as a hurdle to our love. He rushes to stand with his head upright and doesn't bother to re-tilt it to stop the blood flow. He has one foot on the other side of the chairs, and then he's down for the count and bleeding on the brown and beige. A flapping limb knocks over a pile of weathered gossip magazines from last year. The waiting room inhabitants observe the scene, with slightly bored faces. The tattooed, chipmunk-cheeked man scratches the left breast of the naked sailor-

ette tattoo on his bicep, and looks more interested than his colleagues in my lover's demise. I'm most disgusted with the fact his head, with its open wound, is touching the grimy fabric of the chair. These chairs, camouflaged as they are against bodily fluid blots and hospital blemishes, clearly carry stains from many months—years even—past. I don't want my lover bacteria-laden. There are sexier ways to die.

My lover twitches one violent twitch. And he's up! And he's over! And he's sitting by my side, but he looks the worse for the wander. I smell his hair—he uses expensive shampoo. I imagine the waiting room patients all use expensive shampoo and really care about nothing. This is all a joke we'll laugh about later. I stick a lock of my hair under my lover's nose. He smiles in a way that looks concussed and moves like he's underwater, as if drowning in our love. The wet woman sighs at our small displays of affection. Fuck off, Chipmunk Cheeks rasps, still digging his tattooed fingers into his stomach as if in pain. Nietzsche counts pennies in his hand and, from his chair, contemplates the ancient vending machine longingly.

What's your. Your. My lover stops to find the words deep in his brain with a look in his eyes that says the words might not be there at all.

Name? I help him. We're already finishing each other's sentences. I gaze lovingly at his new bluish hue until Squeaky Shoes elbows me out of the way. Bitch.

Call the Doctor! the nurse screams and sidles closer to my man, who has melodramatically swooned onto her starched bosom. We need several pints over here! Get a gurney!

The doors swing open and keep swinging. They wheel my lover away. I hear beeps then one long flat-lining beep and I feel sad. My relationship, as usual, is over before it begins. Still, I don't let it get me down. In this place, everyone either comes here alone or leaves alone. We had a good thing while it lasted. I try to carpe diem. I ask Nietzsche for the time.

Then a doctor comes out and places a hand on Nietzsche's shoulder. I'm sorry, she says, in reference to someone not my lover, and Nietzsche's face melts into his hands as his body melts into the floor. Another nurse comes out and stands behind the doctor, forming a front of comfort for the melting man, but he still looks terribly alone.

He's dead? a voice from the melting hands says more than asks.

I'm so sorry, the doctor says like she's said it before.

God! he curses. Are you sure? Is—

Deceased, another doctor says, coming out to join them. Departed. Now the MDs form a wall.

Dead?

Two cute candy stripers lead away a defeated Nietzsche by the elbows, even though there is nowhere to go. As if the scene never took place, the doctors and nurses disperse and begin to rush around again. One striper returns with a nurse and they go straight for the tattooed man. He says something about it being about time with a string of expletives before and after. Shortly after, the wet woman swims in the same direction with a different nurse. I am alone again.

Suddenly, my pocket vibrates because my roommate is texting me to ask if I'm buying toilet paper. It's past midnight. I've been gone for hours when I normally never leave the apartment after dark and I left a suicide note on the fridge. But she's not good at noticing those things. The nurse interrupts my typing and places a Ziploc bag of purple briefs, pocket change, and a wallet in my palms.

You're listed as his next-of-kin. She shrugs. The sheet pressing against the side of the bag reads: Emergency contact *Suicide Girl*.

Finally, with my clipboard gone and wounds that I have to keep wiggling open with my fingers so they don't close, I imagine I hear the doctors' footsteps coming toward me. I imagine the nurse leading me to the wrong room, where my four waiting room companions are scrubbed and suited for surgery. In this fantasy, they leer above me only in silhouette form because of the blinding light then close in on me like flower petals.

The nurse interrupts my reverie and at last leads me through the swinging doors. A doctor joins us and both their hands are on my shoulders as we walk down the loud corridor. Their scoured palms are wise with understanding. I imagine my neighbors in the arroyo yelling: Jump! I close my eyes and gently shrug off the hands of the two bodies leading me. I walk forward, not alone, going where others have gone before me.