# BIRDHOUSE AND OTHER STORIES:

# EXPLORING QUIET REALISM

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Honors Tutorial College

Ohio University

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements of Graduation

from the Honors Tutorial College

with the Degree of

Bachelor of Arts in English

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by

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April 2016

# “Birdhouse” and other stories: Exploring Quiet Realism

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# Exploring Quiet Realism

## Introduction

The short stories that make up my thesis project were inspired by my notion of "quiet realism." This concept is therefore the lens through which I seek to describe, explore, and understand the stories and writers that have inspired the writing of these stories. I first articulated the term "quiet realism" while reading James Joyce's *Dubliners* during a tutorial with Professor Patrick O'Keeffe in the spring of my junior year in the Honors Tutorial College. It was how I came to describe the type of story whose ending feels subtle and unexpected, in that there is no obvious external resolution—no distinct feeling of an action closing the narrative; instead, a central character experiences a quiet, poignant, internal emotional resonance, like smacking a pair of tweezers against your palm and holding them up to your ear to hear small, metallic hum in the brief two seconds before it vanishes.

One concept of the traditional story is a narrative in which a change occurs, whether that change be in physical, emotional, or spiritual circumstances, or some mixture of the three, in one or more persons involved. Usually, it is suggested which events were the cause of the change (plot) and what the change was (character development). These stories follow the general shape illustrated in Freytag's Pyramid, consisting of an introduction, rising action, climax, and falling action, usually bringing the action and characters to a point that feels observably full-circle or complete. An example of this kind of narrative arc in a short story is "My Oedipus Complex" by Frank O'Connor. Larry, the narrator, enjoys his mother's attention while his father is

away in World War I. His father, essentially a stranger to Larry due to prolonged absence, returns, and Larry is relegated to second priority for his mother. Conflict and mutual antagonism ensue between Larry and his father. Larry's mother has another child, and the story ends when Larry and his father identify with each other after Larry's father is neglected in favor of the new baby in the same way that Larry was neglected in favor of his homecoming father. The final scene shows Larry's father reluctantly but gingerly putting an arm around Larry as they sleep in the same bed, forced to relinquish the "big bed" to the mother and new baby. The change in father-son dynamic is neatly stated in the last line: "At Christmas he went out of his way to buy me a really nice model railway" (O'Connor 265). The action of the story finishes a complete arc, fitting perfectly into Freytag's pyramid.

In quiet realism, however, the shape is harder to discern, and the stories are more focused on the exploration of the characters' inner lives. By the end of the story, the reader is aware that someone or something has changed, but it is less apparent what caused the change or what the change was. Quiet-realistic stories like this, especially Chekhov's, are impressionistic in the sense that they rely on mood or impression much more than events. For example, in "Gooseberries" by Anton Chekhov, Ivan Ivanych's story is interrupted at first by rain, then by the pleasantries of bathing at his friend's estate and being served tea by a beautiful maid. He finally tells his story after he and his two companions are settled into a room where "not only Burkin and Alekhin, but also the old and young ladies, and the military men, who gazed calmly and sternly from their gilded frames, listened to him" ("Gooseberries"

313). Ivan tells his story about the empty happiness of his complacent brother, satisfying no one, but he goes to bed comfortably in the country house of a wealthy friend. Ivanych identifies a "point" to the story he tells and talks about how it changed him, but it seems that the process of telling this story and professing this change to friends, and failing to get the desired reaction, produces another change in him or in the other characters. However, that change is not outwardly apparent and it is somewhat hard to tell who changed and how, though the sense remains that a change has indeed occurred. The impression that readers are left with is that of the smoking pipe left on the end table that no one pays attention to.

I have discovered that the stories and writers I admire most, including Joyce, Chekhov, Lorrie Moore, Alice Munro, and Raymond Carver, left an impression in a similar category of feeling through the shapes of their narratives and the moods that come alive within those narratives. Quiet realism has evolved from a way to categorize stories I admire to my own pet sub-genre: a mental box in which I store, sort, and analyze the literature I enjoy reading, as well as a 'holy grail' to strive toward in my own writing. My concept of quiet realism started with a collection of examples in the form of stories that shared some unexplainable something—a specific emotional atmosphere that seemed to be the result of components I couldn't articulate. This introduction is a step toward that articulation.

Quiet realism has much to do with the inner life—what is not quite visible and what often is difficult to say. It draws from Chekhov's notion that "every man lead his own real and very interesting life under the cover of secrecy, as under the cover of

night" ("The Lady With the Little Dog" 374); it draws from Joyce and the epiphany, great and terrible, but also invisible and silent, occurring in the untouchable and inarticulable landscape of the soul; it draws from stillness, paralysis, and what teems underneath the surface of the everyday and the ordinary; and it draws from outsider characters, like Joyce's, trapped in static, familiar places.

For the sake of this discussion, I trace quiet realism's roots from the British realist novel of the 19th century to the kind of American realism, or "dirty" realism, that Raymond Carver popularized in the 1970s and '80s, taking into consideration how the 'genre' of realism and the form of the short story grew together to make quiet realism possible. I also unpack the "quiet" in quiet realism from multiple linguistic and literary angles, using the stories of the writers I admire as examples of the implementation of the various facets of quiet realism. Finally, I discuss my own stories in terms of quiet realism, how the stories came to be, and my own artistic method.

**A Brief History of Realism in Short Fiction: "Fragments of Everyday Reality"**

In her book *Realism*, Pam Morris explains that the development of the 19th century realist British novel, the first major popular form of realism, coincided with the conflict between materialism and idealism spurred by "the rise of the empirical sciences like botany, anatomy, and geology" (3). The physical sciences allowed a new way of understanding the world beyond and without "metaphysical and divine truth" (Morris 3). This physical, observation-based way of obtaining knowledge about the world brought with it a type of narrative that seeks moments of truth in its exploration of particular, specific aspects of individual human life and mimetic detail rather than

idealistically seeking universal truth in an allegorical, symbolic narrative. Another aspect of this new British realism that contrasted with the dominant idealism was the British realist novel's focus on the lives of characters in the middle and lower class, compared with the idealist novel's usual focus on nobility and life in royal courts. As Paul March-Russell describes in *The Short Story: An Introduction*, novelists such as George Eliot offered a "panoramic view" of life in settings left untouched in idealist novels (45). The scope of these English realist novels both ensured their longevity and snuffed out their opposite: the English realist short story. With the realist novel already so well-established in England and favored for its sustained exploration of "the inter-relatedness between events, people, regions, classes, and economics" (March-Russell 45), short stories were seen by writers and readers alike as naturally inferior to novels in the realm of realism due to formal constrictions.

The rest of this section is indebted to Charles E. May's book, *The Short Story: The Reality of Artifice*, which closely follows the development of the short story as a form and observes where this development coincides with the growth and change of realism as a genre or style. May describes a similar, earlier shift in the focus of short fiction "from the supernatural to the natural" in the 16th and 17th centuries that mirrored the development in English novels but failed to gain such lasting popular traction (3-4). Boccaccio's stories, for example, which were "devoted [...] to the events of everyday life," and French influence on short fiction in England brought short fiction closer to 18th-century realism. However, primary interest in the novel in 18th-century England all but phased out short fiction, relegating popular short fiction

in England to the role of the moral tale (May 3-4). Therefore, the developing realist short story found its stage in America. With the ubiquity of the English realist novel, which was also easily obtainable in America due to loose copyright enforcement, American writers turned to the periodical and thus the short story to get their work published and circulated (May 24). Whereas the influence of the English novel meant longer American fiction also attempted to portray something similar to everyday life, short fiction in America pre-Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville was mostly "allegorically code-bound rather than realistically mimetic," caught in the realm of folk- and fairy-tale (May 21). Critics tend to note Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville as the beginning of the 'true' short story in America, the start of a tradition of short stories that were more 'literary' than their predecessors. May observes how each of these authors blended the English realists' attention to specific, concrete detail and "as-if-real" characters with the traditional symbolic and allegorical tendencies of the short stories and tales of the time. May observes that Hawthorne often wrote stories about realistic characters with their own complex psychologies in fantastical situations, though grounded in specific, mimetic detail, that looked back to short fiction's moral-tale roots; Poe and Melville meanwhile wrote stories with obsessive, sometimes two-dimensional characters existing in complexly-rendered social realities (7-8, 38).

For short story writers in the 19th century, including and following Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville, the problem was "how to communicate realistically the secret psychic life formerly presented allegorically in the mythic romance"—"how to

bridge the gap between romance conventions in which characters *embody* psychic states and realistic conventions in which they *possess* psychic states" (May 47). Writers like Stephen Crane, who combined the subjectivity of human experience with the attempted objectivity of surrounding physical detail, bridged the gap with their impressionistic impulse between the likes of Poe and the innovative technique of Anton Chekhov. Chekhov ushered in a new kind of realism in the short story: a type of realism that came from a different angle than the 'panoramic view' for which the English novel was hailed. Chekhov's realism focuses not on social or political realism, but, as May describes, "fragments of everyday reality" (16). In 1915, Chekhov's recognition in England and America marked a shift in short story form and the type of realism particular to short stories. Critics hailed his stories as 'based on life' and what 'life is like' (May 52). Chekhov's stories avoided the contrived, ironic ending that had become typical in American short stories from O. Henry's influence, shifting focus from plot to mood and character.

Chekhov is the earliest major figure with direct influence on my concept of quiet realism, but to complete quiet realism's genealogy, Chekhov's influence is traceable to Carver, and the resurgence of realism in the "literary divide" (March-Russell 245) between realism and postmodernism in the 1970s. As both May and March-Russell observe, Chekhov's contemporary, Joyce, was not influenced by Chekhov since *Dubliners* was composed in 1904-7, but Chekhov's stories nonetheless "affirm[ed] the directions in which modernist writers were taking short fiction" (March-Russell 93). The directions of which March-Russell writes are what May

describes as “the modernist shift toward fiction in which realistic detail acquired metaphoric meaning through aesthetic patterning” (May 60). Where Chekhov brought to the forefront the practice of writing stories that avoid description of anything not concrete or physical and are impressionistic in that they largely reject plot in favor of mood, often earning the label of “lyric” from critics, Joyce introduced the epiphany, which often transpires in quiet moments that in some way disrupt everyday reality and bring forth a revelatory moment. Both Chekhov and Joyce, as well as Sherwood Anderson, set the standard for short story writers in the 20th century, tasking them with “finding concrete ways to communicate emotional states” (May 61). Anderson in particular focused on dissonant emotional states within his characters; in *Burning Down the House*, Charles Baxter asserts that “emotional misalignment is one of [Anderson’s] great subjects, what Montaigne called ‘soul error’—wanting what you know you can’t have” (44). It is this focus on emotion through external details that characterizes the next development of realism.

Out of the tradition of Chekhov, Joyce, and Anderson and the aftermath of World War I came the next development in the short story. Bonaro Overstreet suggested that two faiths—“that one can know right from wrong, and that people are what they seem to be”—were overturned as a result of the first world war, and that the fiction written in its aftermath was “the drama of what goes on in the mind,” which is an exploration especially suited to the short story and its ability to manipulate mood (qtd. in May 17-18). Hemingway, as Chekhov’s, Joyce’s, and Anderson’s successor, explored the ‘human moods and motives’ Overstreet mentioned and “push[ed]

Chekhov's techniques as far as they can go" in "Hills Like White Elephants" (May 63), in which the abortion that the man and the girl tensely discuss is never directly mentioned. Hemingway trusts the reader and his own writing to fill in the vagueness with the true identity of the 'elephant in the room,' which is not necessarily the abortion itself but the man and the girl's differing desires regarding how they want their lives to proceed. The two primary short story styles in the mid-1900s were the continuation of Chekhovian realism, what Frank O'Connor referred to as the "artful approach to the significant moment," and the "mythic style," perpetuated by American southern gothic writers. May mentions Katherine Anne Porter as another figure in the line of Chekhovian influence, with writers from the American South such as William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, and Eudora Welty as the primary figures on the gothic romanticism/"mythic divine" story that looks back to Poe more than Chekhov in style and structure. Authors in the middle of these two categories, blending the styles a few decades later, include John Cheever, John Steinbeck, and Bernard Malamud (May 62-82).

This dichotomy extended in the 1960s-90s from gothic romanticism and realism, shifting into a divide between postmodernism and 'minimal' or hyperrealism. The gothic/mythic style evolved into "mythic-romance" and the "fantastic antistory style" of Jorge Luis Borges, Donald Barthelme, and John Barth, while Hemingway's continuation of Chekhovian realism extended into the "so-called 'minimalism'" of Raymond Carver, Ann Beattie, Mary Robison, and Tobias Wolff (May 18-19). The postmodernism that emerged in short fiction in this time is essentially the reversal of

the realism of short fiction. The postmodern short story "has a tendency to loosen its illusion of reality in order to explore the reality of illusion," taking its own creation and the act of artistic production as its subject (May 83-4). These stories explore the process by which we as humans create and filter our reality through linguistic and cultural schemas, whereas the realist story seeks to simulate everyday reality in order to reveal or convey some thought or feeling about existing within the reality it seeks to portray. The motto of the postmodern short story is that "reality is a highly patterned human construct, like fiction itself" (May 85). The middle ground between postmodernism and what John Barth called Carver's "hyperrealistic minimalism" is a blending of the two: a combination of realistic characters, setting, and detail with fantastic events, often resulting in what is referred to as "magical realism." These stories mostly follow the paradigm of realism but involve some fantastical element that, in its deviation from the paradigm, becomes the thematic or structural focus of the story.

Carver's "hyperrealistic minimalism" is where the discussion bleeds from historical literary genealogies to the present matter of what I mean by "quiet realism." The style of Carver and his peers, including Richard Ford and Tobias Wolff, is commonly "seen as a counter-response to the influence of postmodernism" (March-Russell 235), and Carver's influence in both style and subject matter, made perhaps more impactful due to his premature death in 1988, can be clearly seen in the work of contemporary short story writers such as Lorrie Moore and even Alice Munro. March-Russell describes both Moore's and Carver's writing as having the same "recurrent

tendency": "the depiction of characters in circumstances beyond their control who can only aim for slight revisions that ameliorate their social condition" (240). Of Carver, May writes "The stories are like stark black-and-white snapshots of lives lived in a kind of quiet, even silent desperation" (92). Carver marks the point in the Chekhovian-Joyceian line of short fiction writers that a style of realist writing is perceived as "quiet."

**Toward a Definition of Quiet Realism**

Realism: Genre, Style, and Reality

Of course, every discussion of realism, which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as "close resemblance to what is real," must consider what is meant by "real." Critiques against literary realism, especially against the realist short story with its formal limitations and necessary shortness, consist largely of the argument that literature, with its reliance on language, cannot accurately represent reality because A) words do not directly correspond to or represent objects, so language in itself cannot meaningfully or fully represent sensory reality, and B) as described by Adam Heron, "the modern world [is] far too complex to depict realistically in a single work of literature," which is to say that realism cannot actually reflect truth about reality. However, James Wood writes in *How Fiction Works*: "fiction does not ask us to *believe* things (in a philosophical sense) but to *imagine* them (in an artistic sense)" (237). For the purpose of this discussion, this section will proceed under the belief that literature as a mode of human expression, and realism as a human attempt to reflect, in

some capacity, lived experience, are capable of "communicat[ing] about a reality beyond the writing" (Morris 6).

As mentioned above, quiet realism originates from Chekhovian realism, hailed by critics as closer to life than any other realist writing, at least in short fiction, due to its fidelity to everyday reality and the fragmented nature thereof; that is, how everyday life does not fit neatly into plot arcs or even linear, chronological patterns of meaning. Every facet of quiet realism points toward the inner life. In that regard, "everyday reality" in the context of quiet realism means the daily, lived experiences of humans both in social reality and the reality of one's inner life. May writes that "although social or public reality is inauthentic, the true reality of the secret private life is always ambiguous. [...] human reality is more complex and problematic than social interaction reveals, indeed, [...] true human reality is often at odds with everyday social reality" (*The Short Story: The Reality of Artifice* 30). Often, the social reality depicted in quiet realism is centered on outsiders, those who exist on the outskirts of what is socially acceptable or within the norm. The outsider status of these characters is rooted in socioeconomic status, gender, familial expectation, mental health, etc. As Frank O'Connor states in "The Lonely Voice," "there is in the short story at its most characteristic something we do not often find in the novel—an intense awareness of human loneliness" (87). This is especially applicable to quiet-realistic stories, wherein writers like Joyce, Moore, and Munro write their stories with a firm sense of place to establish the social reality which their outsider characters struggle to reconcile with their inner desires. Eudora Welty writes, "It is by the nature of itself that fiction is all

bound up in the local. [...] *feelings* are bound up in place" (41). Joyce develops a sense of place over the course of *Dubliners* to give the reader a poignant awareness of social pressures stemming from religious and national identity. By the time the reader reads "The Dead," the biting malice behind Miss Ivors' comments toward Gabriel, and, in turn, his snobbery toward the rural West of Ireland, is not lost in their subtlety. Moore uses place in a way that creates a feeling of solidarity, uniting her female protagonists in their sometimes absurd personal struggles within suburban Midwestern communities that insist on keeping up appearances. Munro uses wide Canadian landscapes and the small towns that occupy them to emphasize the sense of wandering, quiet solitude that permeates them and amplify the isolation of the women who suffer human loneliness and displacement for the sake of independence. These women often use affairs as a way to escape the place and way of life that entraps them in rigid gender roles.

Up to this point, this discussion has treated realism as a literary genre, wide and encompassing as it may be. However, it is useful in the exploration of quiet realism to view realism not only as a genre, but a style. James Wood refers to realism as "lifeness" rather than a genre. "It is the origin," he writes, from which other genres come (247). So, "quiet" can be viewed as the genre-specifying word here—as the way of getting at that "lifeness" as well as the particular aspects of "lifeness" that the text attempts to represent, create, or ask us to imagine.

Unpacking "Quiet"

Below, I will focus on explicating the following definition of quiet realism: stories in the genre of quiet realism *focus on character* through the *juxtaposition of inner life and social being, highlighting the difference between the two* by acknowledging *the unspoken, unheard, and unnamable*; and *having the core belief that attempting to name certain things destroys them, is too painful, or otherwise fails to represent them fully*.

*Focus on character:* As stated in the opening section of this critical introduction, what spurred me to formulate the idea of quiet realism was the experience of reading the stories in *Dubliners* and having a recurring feeling of "why did that end there?" due to the lack or deviation from standard plot structure. Quiet-realistic stories have largely decentralized plots in that although dramatic events occur, a specific event or external happening is not the crux of the story. Rather than the impact or focus being on an event, the "heart of the story," as George Saunders calls it, lies in how the characters deal with the tension in their lives. Plot in quiet realism is a vehicle and outlet for tension which originates from character and internal circumstances rather than externally-generated events. This is in contrast to the kinds of plots in the writings of George Eliot, for example. Rachel Bowlby writes in her article, "Versions of Realism in George Eliot's *Adam Bede,*" that Eliot had, like most realists, "a passionate insistence on the artistic value of the daily and seemingly trivial," yet Eliot's novels, like *Adam Bede*, "culminate in a dramatic and shocking event" (419). Bowlby also notes that "one kind of life story may be tragic in its own

small way," and this "large population of storyless characters is tucked away in the bigger plots of nineteenth-century novels" (431). Quiet realism tells the stories of these characters with their own small tragedies.

It is important to note, though, that this is not an argument that quiet realism is more representative of "real life" than other, perhaps "louder" realisms. As Wood writes, it seems that writers tend to "repeatedly attack one kind of realism only to argue for their own kind of realism" (239). Bowlby echoes this, stating that each discussion of some 'new' genre or subdivision of an existing genre involves "repudiating some current practice or genre which is thereby caricatured as manifestly inadequate for the representation of what the writer takes to be real life" (428). I do not argue that quiet realism represents "real life" or "reality as it really is" in an encompassing way any better than other genres, but that quiet-realistic stories are best suited for representing small moments in our lived human experience that do not necessarily have plot, but are formative to us as people. These 'small moments' often feel like snapshots, and the emotion involved is as fleeting and particular as the moment itself. As May describes in *Short Story Theories*, "If the contemporary short story is fragmentary and inconclusive, perhaps it is because the form is best able to convey the sense that reality itself is fragmentary and inconclusive" (May 5). This is what makes quiet realism particular to the form of the short story, as well, because these 'fragmentary,' 'inconclusive' snapshots of emotion, the thematic focus of quiet realism, are "best manifested in a form that focuses only on the present moment" (May 11). An example of this is "Viewfinder" by Raymond Carver. The first line of the

story captures almost the entire plot: “A man without hands came to the door to sell me a photograph of my house.” Then the narrator and the man have coffee and chat before going outside so the man can take photos of the narrator throwing rocks off his roof. Charles Baxter describes the way the story denies traditional plot structure: “The story ends in the middle of an action, as the narrator picks up another rock. [...] This kind of story begins an action but does not complete it” (Baxter, *Burning Down the House* 74). And in this kind of story, what’s at the heart is not the action or its completeness; it is the strangeness of the moments wherein the man and the narrator’s lives collide, and the way their combined presence highlights the feeling of absence that fills their daily lives due to their families abandoning them.

*Juxtaposition of inner life and social being, highlighting the difference between the two:* Quiet-realist stories often deal with the contrasting nature of inner reality (or inner life) and social reality, that is, how people both are and are not who we believe them to be. Our lives as others perceive them via their external perspective and the way we perceive ourselves via our internal, subjective perspective are often drastically different. People are often aware, at least to some degree, how others perceive them and what their social role is, and this often directly affects their self-perception and shapes their inner life. This is perhaps the principal aspect of quiet realism from which the others naturally follow. For example, the stories in Joyce’s *Dubliners* focus on the inner lives of his characters and the way their buried desires affect their actions. In many of the stories, such as “Counterparts,” “A Little Cloud,” and the most famous example, “The Dead,” Joyce utilizes the unseen forces of societal expectations to

illustrate the conflict between the inner life and social life in how his characters behave alone, versus at home with their families, versus out in the world with peers and strangers. This tension is central to "The Dead," which revolves around Gabriel Conroy navigating the social nuances of his aunts' party and feeling quite accomplished in himself as a socialite and cultured man after successfully giving a speech over dinner. Charles Baxter summarizes the speech well: "It's a lovely, graceful, kindly, and considerate speech, something like the essence of rhetoric. It is, as we know by this time, somewhat false to Gabriel's real feeling about the party and his aunts, but it is false in the way that much socializing is false, [..] without which the social world could probably not continue" (Baxter 128). Later, at their hotel, Gabriel learns that his wife Gretta's thoughts that night are not at all occupied with him, but with Michael Furey, who died for his love for her. Gabriel is faced with the realization that until this moment, a central aspect of his wife's inner life was hidden from him, and his own inner life is empty in comparison, regardless of how successful his social enterprises are—in that moment, "his own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world" (Joyce 223). The cascade of shame, understanding, and desire that fills this moment for Gabriel is the result of his new perspective of his wife's and his own inner life.

This idea of contrasted social and inner life is central to many of Alice Munro's stories, such as "Differently" and "Wigtime." Both of these Munro stories' plots revolve around affairs, but affairs are one of the most commonly-occurring dramatic events in which one's perception of someone they knew is foundationally

upset by the discovery of a new facet of who the beloved really is, as their hidden desires (a large part of the inner life) are manifested in the affair. And while an affair certainly reveals something about the character of those participating in it, it also tends to force some sort of revelation or self-realization in the person whose trust was betrayed, as they must not only come to terms with personal betrayal, but formulate how to continue everyday life in their social reality with the truth revealed.

There are two kinds of betrayal in "Differently": extramarital affairs and layered affairs—when Maya 'accidentally' gets involved with Miles, the man with whom the central character, Georgia, is having her first affair. Maya is the primary character who brings together the differing aspects of Georgia's social and inner realities—"Georgia and Maya became friends on two levels. On the first level, they were friends as wives; on the second as themselves" (Munro 226). As wives, they are figures in the social reality of their husbands, and participants or observers of their husbands' conversations. As themselves, they go to two specific places for lunch, and pretend to be different people in each—"the Empire widow" and her "grumpy, secretly Socialistic hired companion" at the first and "refugees from a commune" in the second. Georgia and Maya go to places where no one knows them in their social identity, where they are free to create their own identities to express parts of their personalities that are suppressed in their social roles—or just for fun. Maya becomes Georgia's outlet and partner in exploring taboos of hidden desire, breaking out of what they see as the monotonous, too-innocent confines of their marriages in affairs with other men, the knowledge of which they share with no one but each other. The story

reaches what might be called its climax when Georgia discovers that Maya has slept with Miles. Even this, though, does not fit the standard form of a climax. The revelation comes in the form of silence, when the expected call from Maya never comes, and the next day Georgia cuts off Maya's explanation by hanging up, again leaving silence. The silence grows and devours their relationship as Georgia refuses to speak a word when Maya comes over to apologize. Georgia is betrayed by her co-betrayer, and it brings her carefully-separated social and secret identities into conflict: "She saw herself as a person surrounded by, living by, sham. [...] She dreaded, now, a life like Maya's. She dreaded just as much a life like her own before this happened" (241). Georgia rejects both a faithful and unfaithful life—either way she thinks of it, her inner life is too dissonant with her social reality for her to stand, and she must upend it. Awareness of this dissonance, like the "emotional misalignment" that Baxter describes in relation to Anderson (*Burning Down the House* 44), is often at the heart of quiet realism because it is not only a social taboo, but also simply painful and uncomfortable to admit that one's life and choices have not amounted to what one hoped they would be. In other words, part of the 'quiet' in quiet realism is the inability to articulate and express to others one's discontent due to an unwillingness to admit that discontent because of what it implies about personal inadequacy in achieving happiness (our individualistic American society and the idea that each individual is the agent of his own destiny makes it your own fault if you are unhappy, and admitting fault is never comfortable) or inability to convey that discontent due to lack of a willing, appropriate audience (hearing about someone else's social/inner "identity

crisis" would naturally prompt the same line of often-uncomfortable thinking in the listener. Also, if you tell your husband you are discontent in your life and the choices you have made, what does that say about your marriage? Further, what happens to your support system if your husband is part of your unhappiness?). This lack of speaker and/or lack of listener results in a norm of silence. Quiet realism acknowledges this silence.

After all of Georgia's reflection on the past and the complexities of her shifting social reality, it is not any certain person or relationship that occupies her thoughts when the story ends, but the moments of "accidental clarity" in the bookstore, where "At times the store was empty, and she felt an abundant calm. [...] She sat on the stool and watched the street—patient, expectant, by herself, in a finely balanced and suspended state" (Munro 231). This is nearly all that can be said of the feeling that possesses Georgia when she is alone in the bookstore, the feeling which again comes back to her when she is confronted with the ghosts of her social past in Victoria. There is something more to it, something relating to a returning sense of her inner self as spectator of the performed roles of her social reality, like the fake identities she would take on with Maya in the restaurants. It is impossible to name directly, concisely, or comprehensively, but the quiet resonance is there.

*The unspoken, unheard, and unnamable:* This is where "quiet realism" becomes the most literal, engaging directly with the silence mentioned above. The unspoken, unheard, and unnamable in quiet realism generally fit into what Baxter describes in *The Art of Subtext* as "a complex set of desires and fears that can't be

efficiently described, a pile-up of emotions that resists easy articulation" (36-7). The unspoken, unheard, and unnamable are often the emotional buildup that result from the disparity between one's social reality and inner life, as discussed above in the context of the Alice Munro story. The mixing cauldron of desire and fear, often the two principal propellants of character, does not bubble loudly, but churns quietly. As Ivanych laments in "Gooseberries," "we don't see or hear those who suffer, and the horrors of life go on somewhere behind the scenes. [...] obviously the happy man feels good only because the unhappy bear their burden silently, and without that silence happiness would be impossible" (Chekhov 318).

In quiet-realistic stories, what characters talk about reminds us of or makes us want to know what they refuse to talk about—"what is displayed evokes what is *not* displayed" (Baxter, *Subtext* 3). What goes unsaid, what no one wants to hear, and what is too difficult to admit is often what creates the moods and impressions that quiet realism is so concerned with, and this is precisely why these moods and impressions are so hard to describe—they are about the failure of words and action to convey what we feel and the degree of complexity and depth with which we feel it.

The sad absurdity that frequently results from the refusal, for whatever reason, to address what lies just beneath the surface of the conversation is a common topic in Lorrie Moore's *Birds of America.* An example of this is "Charades." The central event of the story—a game of charades at Christmas time before the central character Therese's plane leaves—is centered on playing at wordless communication. Therese and her husband are on a team with Therese's parents while Therese's brother and

sister and their spouses form the other team. The tension comes from what no one will acknowledge out loud, which seems to be that no one in the family likes each other that much anymore, if they ever did, and these holiday gatherings are a charade in themselves—"Usually, no one in Therese's family expresses much genuine feeling anyway; everyone aims instead [...] for enactments" (Moore 96). The plot of the story follows a few rounds of the game of charades. Twice, Therese and her brother step out to discuss a charade topic that the other doesn't understand. In these moments of one-on-one communication, what really matters and what is most on Therese's mind is not mentioned. She gleans from the way her brother acts and how easily he gets upset about something as trivial as charades that he has changed, "But now, as with Ann, she has no idea who he is anymore. She only has a theory" (104). And none of the family has any idea who each other is anymore, and they either don't care or won't ask, so the charade goes on. As Baxter observes, "The most important features of life that you want to talk about cannot be spoken of in polite society" (*Subtext* 52), and Therese's family, due to the disconnect that has resulted from the weakening of their relationships over time, now functions according to the rules of polite society. The whole story is full of a sense of speculation about how the family got to this point of friendly estrangement, but it is never mentioned out loud by anyone. In the end, the final words she has to say to her family, has always had to say to her family," are simply 'good-bye' (Moore 109).

There are also formal and stylistic implications in the "quiet" of quiet realism. Quiet realism tends to utilize T.S. Eliot's 'objective correlative' and the way it is

executed by both Chekhov and Joyce. This concept has bled thoroughly into contemporary writing and the usually-useful obsession with "show, don't tell." As a result, the objective correlative finds employment perhaps subconsciously in writers like Moore and Munro, and to its extreme in the minimalist, completely-exterior stories of Carver and his predecessor Hemingway. As Chekhov writes, "Best of all is it to avoid depicting the hero's state of mind; you ought to try to make it clear from the hero's actions" ("The Short Story" 197).

*Attempting to name certain things [...] fails to represent them fully:* If uncomfortable acknowledgement of the unsaid is the way by which awareness of the difference between one's social reality and inner life comes to be, then a general aversion for naming certain things, speaking certain things out loud, is how the unsaid continues to exist in silence even once noticed. There is a human impulse to describe, explain, and give labels to things that happen to us. But sometimes, even usually, trying to convey such feelings or experiences with words is a moot endeavor, and the silence that results from the failure of language to communicate such experience is an aspect of human existence that quiet realism anticipates and seeks to explore. As Charles May writes in his article, "'Do You See What I'm Saying?'," the focus of the contemporary short story has become "the imaginative perspective of a single teller who had seen something, experienced something, felt something, that he or she desperately wants the reader to see but that is impossible to explain" (49). This idea appears frequently in Raymond Carver's stories. Three examples are "Why Don't You

Dance?" and the earlier versions of "The Bath" and "So Much Water So Close to Home."

"Why Don't You Dance?" focuses on a young couple that happen upon an entire house worth of furniture set up on a front lawn in what they assume to be a yard sale. They interact with the man who set up the furniture, and it becomes apparent that he has been fighting with his wife. The young couple drinks with the man and buys things from him in the course of the bizarre, surreal evening, and in the end of the story, some time later, the girl tries to explain the situation and the feeling. She explains it crassly—"And all these crappy records. Would you look at this shit?" (Carver 227), perhaps because it would sound foolish to say that something emotionally important took place on that stranger's lawn. Explaining can't do it justice. "She kept talking. She told everyone. There was more to it, and she was trying to get it talked out. After a time, she quit trying" (Carver 227). If anything, after trying to explain this unexplainable circumstance to others, it probably makes less sense to her than it did before she tried to name its significance through language.

Attempting to put experiences in words and give them names fails the characters in "The Bath" as well. The story focuses on a mother and father whose child is hit by a car on his eighth birthday. The child's party is cancelled and the child is in the hospital, unconscious. The father and mother take turns worrying about the boy and assuring each other that he will be okay. The parents want some explanation or label to assign to their son's unconsciousness; they "are trying to fasten on to some term that will categorize and thus normalize the son's condition, but each time they

use the term ‘coma’ the doctor simply says ‘I wouldn’t call it that’” (May, “‘Do You See What I’m Saying?’” 48). In the later version of the story, which Carver renamed “A Small, Good Thing,” the doctor responds to the parents’ request for terminology and explanation with the “verbatim definition of a coma, [...] which does nothing to clarify the essential mystery of the boy’s inaccessibility” (May 48). Giving the problem a name does not make it easier to understand or to deal with, and does not lessen the pain in “A Small, Good Thing” when the boy dies or the confusion in the end of “The Bath” when the strange male voice calls about something that “has to do with Scotty” (Carver 257). There is a similar effect of trying to clarify things in words only serving to oversimplify and therefore failing to fully represent the complexity of what is trying to be explained in the longer version of “So Much Water So Close to Home.” In the short version of the story, we see what the wife is doing and how she physically reacts to reading about the girl’s death and realizing the implication of her husband’s possible involvement. In the long version, Carver plainly describes her thoughts, but the description of what she is thinking does not help the reader understand the complexity of the emotion. As May writes, “when the female narrator [...] begins to provide a polemical argument in politically correct terms, the complex ambiguity of her reaction to her husband’s actions is lost” (May 48). Not only does the explanation not clear anything up, but it reduces and overshadows the nuance of the emotional atmosphere.

Sometimes, naming and explaining things not only oversimplifies them, but seems to actively make them worse. This leads to superstition, an instinct to not limit

something by saying in definite terms what it is. For example, if a young couple are not yet officially a couple, but are in the state of developing their connection, and one of them feels the situation too good to be true, she might avoid talking about it to others, because that would require containing it within explanations and labels, thereby possibly putting a limit on what is still in the state of becoming. As Baxter writes, "you can't always say aloud what you really crave or desire because for some reason it's unmentionable" (Baxter, *Subtext* 34). And it is said aloud, it cannot be taken back, and the words one ascribes to a situation or relationship or feeling begin to change one's perception of the thing being described. Something like this happens to Georgia and Miles in "Differently," although it may be less of a "too good to be true" situation and more of a "this is too taboo to put into the normal terms of a relationship" situation: "Trouble began, perhaps, as soon as they said that they loved each other. Why did they do that—defining, inflating, obscuring whatever it was they did feel?" (Munro 233). As soon as Georgia and Miles put an explanatory label on their relationship and feelings for each other, they get claustrophobic at the finality of such a label and their relationship disintegrates.

It may seem ironic to have a genre of writing and storytelling in which one of the main tenets is the inadequacy of words to convey all the nuance and depth of human emotional experience. However, quiet-realistic stories do not seek to explain the silence, but rather to show how the silence came to be, and allow the reader to imagine what impression the silence might give. Quiet realism does not tell you that

the metal tweezers make a lovely sound when you smack them against your hand just right; it gives you the tweezers and asks you to try.

**My Stories and Quiet Realism**

The stories in my thesis were inspired by the concept of quiet realism, and the process of writing them was part of the process of discovering what quiet realism is and what it means. As Elizabeth Bowen writes in "The Faber Book of Modern Short Stories," "the first necessity for the short story, at the set out, is *necessariness*. The story, that is to say, must spring from an impression or perception pressing enough, acute enough, to have made the writer write" (156), and that necessariness—in my own writing and in much of the stories that I categorize as quiet realism—is the aspect of feeling or impression that cannot be straightforwardly described. Each of my stories started with a feeling or impression that, when described simply, had little to no impact. In this way, I focused on writing stories that evoke feelings that are passing, situational, and occur within typical or everyday human experience as I know it or as I have learned about and imagined it. Those feelings and impressions needed characters to drive their force and allow them to be transferred into a form that could carry that impression, that particular mix of feelings, and make it, to some degree, re-experienceable for others as well as myself. Writing is an act of sharing and an act of keeping. In writing a story that tries to capture and release through its energy or tension a feeling that is important to me, I am making permanent not just the feeling but its origin. I believe that I will always remember where and how, from what thoughts, these stories originated. So in that sense, one facet of my creative process is

an act of self-preservation, if we believe that everything that we have felt and experienced is part of the constantly-growing or changing self.

The stories all had to come from feeling. When I tried to make them come from events, or from an action-focused ending I had in mind that I wanted to get to, they failed and had to be reworked. The final, successful drafts of each story work toward revealing character in each scene, ultimately working toward culmination in a silent moment, often toward the end. In “Birdhouse,” this moment is Kyle hanging the birdhouse on the tree in the yard. In “At Least It’s Something,” this moment is after Dan has hung up on Lydia. In “The Pedestrian,” the ‘quiet’ moment is when June rolls back over in bed. In “Introverts,” it is when Meg sits alone in the office, contrasted with her final time leaving the Complex. In “Bastet,” it is when Sarah apologizes for what is not her fault, and Jane says nothing. They all sound flat out of context. They avoid summary. The intent in all of these moments is for silence to envelop the narrative like a rolling smog and allow the aggregate feelings to leave an impression on the reader in the empty space left over.

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**Birdhouse**

Kyle's son, Aaron, lit Kyle's hair on fire while he was napping on the couch. Aaron took the lighter from the coffee table in the living room. Kyle woke up yelling, but by that time he'd already suffered second degree burns to his scalp and had to go to the hospital. The hair did not grow back for months, and Kyle took to wearing ball caps. The day of the 'incident,' which is what Aaron's mother, Anne, called it, marked the beginning of what Kyle saw as the 'downward spiral.'

Aaron was seven. The family had moved to the cul-de-sac at the beginning of the school year, and, after the 'incident,' Kyle began to pay more attention to his son's behaviors. Aaron used a steak knife to cut the heads off of his plastic army men in grand executions and assembled a crowd of little green soldiers to watch the spectacle. Once, Anne's straight pins from her sewing kit went missing, and she later found them poking out of insect carcasses in Aaron's closet.

Kyle usually mentioned these behaviors to Anne after the two had settled into bed for the night.

"Today I went in his room and three of his stuffed animals were hanging from the ceiling fan, tied up with yarn," he told her.

Anne sighed and rolled away from him. "You only notice what you think is strange, but you never pay attention when he watches cartoons and builds little neighborhoods from blocks or digs the oregano out of the cabinet for me while I make dinner. He's just a curious kid," Anne said.

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One Friday evening, about a month after the incident, Aaron approached Kyle in the living room. Kyle was watching television. Anne was beside him on the couch with a crossword in her lap. Aaron stood there, looked at them for a moment, and said "I want to build a birdhouse."

Anne cocked her head. "I think he's talking to you, dear," she said.

"Oh. We can do that," Kyle said.

They built a simple birdhouse with a cubic base and triangular roof. They planned to hang it on the young maple tree in the front yard. Aaron wanted to make an occasion out of hanging the birdhouse, so Kyle called around the neighborhood and asked parents he knew to send their kids over at three o'clock to have snacks and see Aaron's birdhouse. Some of the parents asked who Aaron was.

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It was a warm day in late spring and the lawn smelled like yesterday's rain. Five other children showed up, all of them within two years of Aaron's age. Two parents came over with their children—Rachel, the mother in her late thirties who kept a tidy garden and had started homeschooling her nine year old daughter, Kelsey, that year, and Tim, the father of the next-door neighbor boy who was about to start kindergarten in the coming fall.

Anne distributed little packages of potato chips to the kids while Kyle grabbed beers from the fridge for the parents.

"Where's Aaron?" Anne asked when Kyle came back out.

"I thought he was out here," he said.
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Kyle went back inside the house to find Aaron on his parents' bed holding a screwdriver, with the birdhouse in pieces around him.

"Aaron, buddy, what did you do?" Kyle took off his ball cap and grasped at his patchy hair.

"I took it apart," Aaron said without looking up.

"Why? It's ruined."

"They came to see my birdhouse, and now there isn't a birdhouse."

"Yes," Kyle said. "Aaron, all those people are out there to see our birdhouse. What are they gonna do when this is all we have to show them?"

"I dunno," Aaron said, finally making eye contact. "Let's go see." He hopped off the bed and headed toward the door. Kyle followed.

Anne gave her "what happened?" look when she caught Kyle's eye. He pretended not to see and followed Aaron, who marched into the middle of the yard. The parents and children were gathered in a loose semicircle. Aaron stopped, crossed his arms, and looked at Kyle, eyebrows raised. The parents and children let their small talk die down and looked at Kyle as well. Rachel stood behind Kelsey and squeezed her shoulders. Kelsey was the only one looking at Aaron instead of Kyle.

Kyle cleared his throat and said, "I'm sorry, everyone, but there isn't a birdhouse."

"What do you mean?" asked Rachel.

"Well, uh, Aaron was so excited to bring it out and show you all that he tripped and dropped it. It's broken and we need a couple of days to fix it."

"That's not true," Aaron said.

Kyle looked at Aaron and the scrunched-up faces of the other kids. "Well, actually, I accidentally sat on it," Kyle said.

"That's not true either. Why are you lying?" Aaron asked.

"Yeah, where's the birdhouse?" Kelsey asked.

Kyle threw up his hands. Rachel took a step forward. "What happened? Did Aaron do something?" she asked. Aaron was still looking at Kyle.

"Accidents happen," Anne said, glaring at Rachel. "I'm sure, as parents, we understand. This can be a valuable lesson for the kids to learn." She ruffled Aaron's hair with one hand.

"So there's no birdhouse, then?" Tim asked.

"No, there's not," Kyle said. The children had lost interest and migrated a few yards away. Aaron went over to join them.

"Well, thanks for the beer, Kyle. Anne." Tim raised the can toward them.

"We're already all here," Rachel started. "And the kids look like they're having fun." She motioned to them. The other children had started playing tag. Aaron stood still and waved his arms but the boy who was 'it' chased Kelsey instead. She screamed with delight. She was taller and faster than the boy and outran him easily.

"Why don't we have a picnic out here and let the kids socialize? I could run to the house and grab some things to make sandwiches," Rachel said.

"A picnic, at three in the afternoon, on the front lawn." Anne said. The adults were standing in a sort of rectangle, with Kyle and Rachel closer together than Tim and Anne.

Tim said that he and his boy had lunch before they came. "I guess I could stay for another beer, though?" he added.

"No it's fine, you don't need to stay," Anne said quickly. She picked up some chip bags that the children had discarded. Rachel bent down to help. "It's fine, I don't need help," Anne said.

Tim collected his son from the group and left. Kyle looked at Aaron, who still stood there offering his passive body to be inducted into the game. When the boy finally tagged Kelsey she stopped in front of Aaron and tapped him lightly on the forehead with her index finger. He flinched at her touch and took her wrist into his hand.

"Do you like me? Why?" he said quietly.

One of the other kids yelled for the game to resume. Aaron broke eye contact with Kelsey and sprang into action. The other children ran away from him in a herd. He barreled into the young girl who lived two houses down, knocking her into the damp grass. She started to cry.

"Oh, honey, you're okay," Anne was saying. "He didn't mean to."

"Is she alright?" Rachel asked.

"She's fine."

"Are you sure?" Rachel crouched next to the girl.

"She's *fine*."

Rachel stood up slowly. "Kelsey, come on. You've got school tomorrow. Let's go home." Kelsey whined, but Rachel quieted her before asking the little girl if she wanted them to walk her home. Anne had walked away.

When Rachel and the girls were almost to the girl's door, Kyle heard the girl ask Kelsey, "Why did you tag him?"

Kyle looked for Aaron, but he and Anne were already inside.

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The following morning while Anne was at work and Aaron was at school, the phone rang. Kyle put down the birdhouse roof that he had been super-gluing back together. He was wondering if the refurbished birdhouse would be too full of chemical fumes from the glue for the birds to live in. He picked up the phone. He didn't recognize the number. "Hello?" he said.

It was Rachel. She invited Kyle over to talk about what had happened yesterday. She told him to come around noon if he'd like a tuna salad sandwich.

"Sure, yes, see you soon," he told her.

He knocked on her door at one. She still offered him the tuna salad sandwich with the disclaimer that the bread might be a little soggy by now.

"I'm sorry to have wasted your time like that yesterday," Kyle said once they were seated in the dining room at the square wood table.
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"Don't worry about that," Rachel said. She took a deep breath, and after a moment, said "I'm concerned about Aaron." She took a sip from the mug she was clutching. "Acts a bit strange, doesn't he?"

"How do you mean?"

"What actually happened with the birdhouse?"

Kyle took a bite from the soggy sandwich. There didn't seem to be much of a point in withholding. "He took it apart in the bedroom. He went inside and did it right before we were going to bring it out."

"Why?"

"That's what I said."

"Is he getting enough attention at home?" She cocked her head sideways.

"What are you saying?"

"Was he doing it for attention?"

"I mean, he didn't admit that he did it. He let me stand there and look like an idiot. But I'm glad he didn't admit it because then those kids would have an idea of what he's like." Kyle leaned back in his chair and flexed his hands in and out of fists. "He does weird things like this all the time. I wonder if he does it away from the house. I would guess so with how much all the other kids were ignoring him."

"Kelsey wasn't."

"That's true," he said.

Kelsey appeared in the doorway to the kitchen. "You said my name?" she asked.

“It’s nothing.” Rachel smiled.

“Oh,” She stood there. “What are you saying?”

“Good things,” Rachel said. Kyle tried to look at her reassuringly.

“Oh.” Kelsey’s small hand rested on the doorframe.

“Have you finished your lessons for today?”

“No,” Kelsey said before turning and disappearing down the hall.

“Anne doesn’t think there’s anything wrong,” Kyle said.

“Somehow I'm not surprised,” Rachel said. "With the way she snapped at me yesterday when Aaron tackled that girl."

“She says he’s a normal kid. I told her what happened with the birdhouse and she said that Aaron had always liked taking things apart to see how they worked. But that doesn’t make sense. He made it. He knows how it works. And a birdhouse isn’t like something mechanical that ‘works’ anyway.”

“Did you tell her that?” Rachel was resting her chin in her palm and her elbow on the table so that she had to look up slightly to meet Kyle’s eyes.

“Of course,” Kyle said. “She doesn’t get it.”

“Seems not.”

“She told me to cut Aaron some slack and stop assuming he has bad intentions. What intentions could he have had for tearing up the birdhouse? I don’t know what to do.” He took off his hat and laid it on the table.

Rachel’s eyes widened. “What happened to your head?”

Kyle looked at the table and resisted the urge to touch his hair. “Aaron set my hair on fire. Last month, while I was sleeping.” His eyes darted from Rachel’s face to the table.

“Oh my god,” Rachel said. “Kyle, that’s serious.”

“You’re telling me,” he said. “Did you know that Anne would be mad at me for talking to you about this? She thinks I’m demonizing Aaron. I’m just telling the truth. You see my hair.”

“It’s normal for a parent to want to protect their child, but Anne… Have you ever thought about homeschooling Aaron?" Rachel leaned back in her chair. She kept glancing at Kyle's hair. "It lets me keep a close eye and hand on Kelsey’s development. I want to give her a chance to grow up outside the influence of peer pressure.”

“I don’t think peer pressure is the problem. I think peer pressure would do Aaron some good.”

Rachel rested her elbow on the table again. She looked at the ceiling for a moment, tapping her fingers against her cheek. “You might be right,” she said. “How would you feel about Aaron coming over to play with Kelsey?”

“Would Kelsey be okay with that?” Kyle asked.

“Sure,” Rachel said. “Kelsey doesn’t get to be around kids her own age as much anymore since I pulled her out of public school. How about you send Aaron over tomorrow afternoon? It’ll be great. I’ll keep an eye on them.”

She placed her hand on Kyle's shoulder.

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That night, Kyle went to the bar on his way home from work. He worked evening shifts as a security guard at an office building.

Kyle  saw Tim sitting at a booth with a basket of chicken bones in front of him. Tim was looking at the tv, which was showing sports highlights. Kyle ordered another beer and sat down across from him in the booth. “Late shift?” Kyle asked.

“Yeah.”

“I know how that goes,” Kyle said. The waitress brought over his drink. “You work second shift too?”

“I work in IT,” Tim said. “Had some server issues right when I was supposed to get off. Had to miss putting my kid to bed.”

“How’d you get into that? Computer stuff.”

“Lots of school.” Tim took a sip of his drink.

“Right,” Kyle said. They each drank a couple more beers and sat watching the tv for a while.

“How old are you?” Kyle asked.

“34.”

“I’m 28, and my kid’s a couple years older than yours.” Kyle studied Tim's face. Tim was scratching at chipped paint on the table.

“Others seem better at planning than me, though,” Kyle said. He took a long drink.

"What do you mean?" Tim asked.
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"I wasn't planning on getting anybody knocked up when I was 21. Accidents happen. We weren't even married then."

"Oof." Tim grimaced. "I can't imagine."

"Everyone told me that everything would make sense and feel right the moment he was born, but I wasn't even there. I was in the fuckin' bathroom."

Tim now fidgeted with a straw wrapper, folding it into a tiny square. "I admit that I didn't immediately fall in love with my kid either," Tim said. "He was a loud, fragile, squishy little blob that I didn't even know how to keep alive. But my wife and I got the hang of it."

"Lucky you," Kyle said. "I only pretend to get it every now and then because it gets Anne going. I still have no idea what the hell I'm doing." He flagged down the waitress for another beer.

“I don’t know, man. Sometimes I blame myself,” Kyle said.

“For what?”

“For Aaron. For the way he acts.”

“Why would you blame yourself?” Tim picked up one of the bones from the basket in front of him and started gnawing at the cartilage.

“Maybe I don’t pay enough attention to him," Kyle said. "Or at least I didn’t before. I’m trying now. I went to that woman, Rachel, I went to her house. We talked. She wants to help me. With Aaron.”

Tim put the bone down, wiped his fingers on a napkin, and finished the rest of his drink. “Listen,” he said. “Kids are weird jerks sometimes. You can do your best but there will be times when that doesn’t matter.”

“What if those times happen more often than not?”

“Maybe there’s nothing else that can be done,” Tim said. He stood up. “But I’m not going to pretend that I know your situation.”

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When Kyle got home, Anne was at the kitchen sink washing dishes. She didn’t turn when Kyle walked in. He took his keys and wallet out of his pocket and put them on the table. She was prettiest from the side. Her eyes looked soft and kind from this angle, and the lines of her face were smooth and definite.

He walked up behind her and placed his hands around her waist. She flinched. He laughed. “It’s me,” he said.

“You scared me,” she said, but there was laughter in her voice. His arms remained around her while she washed and rinsed more plates. “Did you remember to stop by the pharmacy and pick up my prescription before work?”

He dropped his hands and she sighed. “Sorry,” he said. “I forgot.”

“Are you drunk?” she asked without turning away from the sink. “I can smell alcohol on your breath.” She turned off the faucet and wiped down the sink.

“No, I'm not *drunk*. I went to the bar for a couple drinks.”

“Aaron went to bed an hour and a half ago.” She wiped her hands on a towel and hung it back on the rack.

Kyle took the towel and started drying the dishes. “How was work?” he asked.
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“Same as it always is,” Anne said and went to the bedroom. Kyle followed. He was about to tell her that Rachel called, but decided not to.

After they climbed into bed and turned out the light, Kyle asked “Do you ever think about homeschooling Aaron?”

“Homeschooling? How? And take him away from his friends at school?"

“Aaron has friends?”

“Jesus Christ, Kyle. Of course he does.”

“It’s not like he tells me about it.”

“Well maybe if you would ask him,” Anne said.

“It didn’t look like he had friends yesterday.”

“He has friends. That doesn’t mean that they live in our neighborhood. Where's this coming from, anyway?"

"That woman, Rachel, our neighbor, homeschools her daughter. Seems to be going okay. She mentioned it to me."

"Rachel? What would she know? I don't like that woman. She thinks she's everyone's mother." She shifted. “I’m sorry, Kyle. I didn’t mean to snap about Aaron. Rough day at work.”

Kyle reached for Anne. He put his hand on her breast and she stiffened. When he tried to kiss her neck, she rolled away. “Come on, baby, you said you had a rough day. Let’s blow off some steam.”

“Not now,” she said, and bunched the covers around her.

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Kyle finished gluing the birdhouse together and left it drying on a shelf in the garage. Aaron started going over to Rachel and Kelsey's house when he came home from school. Anne was at work, and Kyle walked Aaron over. Kyle stayed for a half hour each time to talk with Rachel over coffee. He didn't tell Anne about any of it, and Rachel knew this. He retrieved Aaron before he left for work and got a progress report from Rachel about Aaron's behavior. Once, Aaron tied several of Kelsey's dolls together with yarn and strapped them to her cat. Rachel told Kyle that when she explained to Aaron why that was wrong and that he could have hurt the cat, he simply said "okay," but Aaron was otherwise well-behaved. He followed Kelsey around and watched her play. Rachel told Kyle this made her uncomfortable, but said that maybe he was just getting acclimated.

On a Wednesday night when Kyle came home from work, Anne was standing just beyond the door with her arms crossed. "Where is Aaron, and why didn't you answer your cell phone?"

"What do you mean where's Aaron?" Behind Anne he saw that the house was a mess. There were coats on the floor and closet doors were open, their contents spilling out. "Did you do that?" he asked.

"Yes. Aaron is not here. I was looking for him," she said, pronouncing the words carefully. "Was he here when you left?"

"Of course he was here. He's probably just hiding."

"You don't understand, Kyle. I've looked *everywhere.*"

Kyle stepped past her and started searching the house. He even took a flashlight and ladder from the garage and opened up the attic, which would have been unreachable for Aaron. It seemed he wasn't in the house. Kyle went into the bathroom and turned the water on before dialing Rachel's number.

"Kyle? It's late," she said.

"Have you seen Aaron?" he asked.

"Not since you picked him up this afternoon. Why? What happened?"

"We can't find him, and Anne knows nothing."

"Of course," Rachel said.

The door handle rattled and Anne called Kyle's name. "I have to go," he said. "Call me if you find anything out."

Kyle and Anne took their search outside. They looked around the entire cul-de-sac, searching the shrubbery outside their neighbors' homes. One of the neighbors opened the door and asked what they thought they were doing. Anne told the man their son was missing, and he apologized and closed the door. Anne suggested calling the police but Kyle refused. Close to 2 a.m., his cell phone rang. It was Rachel.

"Aaron just came out of Kelsey's room," she said.

Rachel was waiting for them on her porch with her hands on Aaron's shoulders. He was looking around at the potted plants and flower beds. Anne took Aaron by the hand and glared at Rachel.

"Why the hell was he over here? Get your hands off of him." She turned to Kyle. "And *you*. Don't think I don't see what's going on here."

"Does it occur to you," Rachel started, gingerly touching her hands to her chest, "that maybe there's a reason that Aaron came over here?"

"You self-righteous bitch," Anne said. "Don't try to tell me how to raise my son, and don't you dare try to raise him behind my back."

"Rachel's a nice lady," Aaron said.

Anne closed her eyes and exhaled sharply through her nostrils. "Great, Aaron," she said. "We're going home." She marched him across the yard and back to their house.

"I'm sorry she called you that," Kyle said.

"I would honestly expect nothing less." Rachel's gaze was fixed on Anne, who didn't look back.

"But hey, you got the 'nice lady' endorsement from Aaron."

"I finally experienced first-hand what you're dealing with," Rachel said.

“Where was he?” Kyle asked after the door to Kyle and Anne’s house was closed.

“In Kelsey’s closet, apparently. He came back over after you went to work, it seems.”

“You didn’t know he was there?”

“He snuck in. And Kelsey helped hide him, I grounded her. They won’t see each other for a week.”

“I’m sorry about all this,” Kyle said. He looked across to his house. Anne and Aaron had already gone in the front door.

"It's okay. I really need to get back to bed, but you can drop by tomorrow to talk about it if you want."

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At home, Anne and Kyle put Aaron to bed. They came into the kitchen and Kyle rubbed his hand across his face. "What are we going to do with him?" he asked Anne.

"Why the *hell* was he over there?" she hissed.

"What do you mean?"

"My god, Kyle, stop asking me that. How long? How often? What have you done?"

Kyle walked into the living room where it was dark. He took off his ball cap. "He's been going over there for a couple weeks now to play with Kelsey."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Her voice was deadly quiet.

"You don't like Rachel, and you wouldn't want him going over there. But I honestly think this is his best chance, Anne. We're not here to keep an eye on him, and he never plays with other kids."

Kyle raised his voice, but Anne kept hers controlled.

"Are you serious? You think going over there will help him? You don't see it now but that girl Kelsey is going to be more a freak than you think Aaron is now. If you want to talk about someone who never plays with other kids, look no further. Her own mother is ostracizing her."
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"Do you even know what you're saying? You're calling her a freak because she only plays with your son. What does that say about him?"

"He's not just *my* son." She strode up to him and pulled on his shoulder to make him face her. "You didn't want him. I get it. You don't want him now, either. "

"You don't get it," he said.

"What don't I get?"

"He's not normal."

Kyle slept on the couch that night.

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The following Saturday, Kyle approached Aaron's bedroom door with a baseball in hand. He knocked twice before opening it gently. Aaron was lying on the bed. "Hey buddy," Kyle said. "What's up? Do you wanna go out in the yard and throw around a baseball?"

Aaron was quiet and unmoving. "Aaron?" Kyle placed a hand on the child's body. He was warm. Kyle waited to feel breath. It took almost a minute, but Aaron's chest started expanding and contracting so shallowly that it was hard to detect. Kyle shook him. His eyes were closed. "Aaron, quit playing around."

Outside, Kyle found Anne weeding the flower beds. "Something's wrong with Aaron," he told her.

"What?" she asked, her eyes wide.

"Come see for yourself."
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They took him to the hospital. At first, Kyle and Anne were in the room with the doctor and Aaron. Then the doctor asked them if they would mind stepping out, just for a few minutes. Anne held Kyle's hand in the waiting room.

Another mother and child entered the waiting room. There was a pencil sticking out of the child's knee and a trickle of dried blood trailed down her leg. Her face was shiny with drying tears, but she looked calm.

"What happened?" Anne asked the child.

"I was playing and fell on a pencil," she said. "It hurts."

"I bet," Anne said. "My Aaron is in there now." She motioned her head toward the double doors leading to the examining rooms.

"What's wrong with him?" the girl asked.

As if on cue, the doctor emerged from the double doors. Aaron stood beside him. Anne gasped and put her hand over her mouth. "Aaron is fine," the doctor said.

"What happened?" Kyle asked. Anne dashed over and wrapped her arms around Aaron's head.

"Well, it seems that he was pretending."

The woman with the little girl scowled at Kyle.

In the car on the way home, Anne gushed from the back seat, where she sat with their son. "I'm so glad my baby is okay!"

Aaron shrugged under one of Anne's embraces. Kyle said nothing. He was wondering what Rachel would say about this.

At home, Aaron went straight to his room. Anne followed and shut the door. Kyle sat down on the living room couch and turned on the tv. Ten minutes later, Anne came back out. “He doesn’t want to talk about it,” she said. She sat down beside Kyle. “It’s probably nothing.”

“Probably nothing?” Kyle changed the channel. “I was trying to get him to play ball when I found him.”

“Good,” Anne said. She looked at her nails.

“Did you see the way that other mom was looking at me? Looking at you?” They both kept their eyes on the tv.

“So what,” Anne said. “Let them look.”

“Aaron’s not the only one that his stunts affect,” Kyle said.

“I knew you would say that.”

“Anne, what are we going to do about us?” Outside, a lawnmower hummed.

Anne took a breath. The afternoon sun shining brightly through the windows made all the shadows of the furniture in the living room crisp and black. "Us remaining together is crucial for Aaron. I think you know that. And at this point, that is what is keeping me invested in 'us.'"

"Anne," he said. "Why can't you see? Why don't you see what is going on with our boy, and what it's doing to us? Not just you and me, but this family." He stood up and pulled off his ball cap.

Anne crossed her arms and slumped back in the couch. "And if I do see?" She looked at him. "If I look at him the same way you do, then what? He is a seven-year-old boy. It can't be as simple as either of us want it to be."

She watched her husband leave.

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Kyle knocked on Rachel's door. Footsteps thumped, then Rachel opened the door. "Oh, Kyle," she said. A kitchen towel was draped over her shoulder and she wiped a light sheen of sweat from her brow with her forearm. "I'm making dinner. Do you need something?"

"It's Aaron. And Anne. Can I come in for a minute?"

She looked over her shoulder into the kitchen, then turned her head back to Kyle. "Sure, yeah," she said. She walked back to the kitchen and Kyle followed.

He watched her dart around between the oven, sink, and refrigerator, his hands in the pockets of his jeans. He waited on her to look at him. Eventually, he spoke up regardless. "I don't know what to do, and I need your help."

Rachel put a casserole dish in the oven. She set the timer and looked at him. He told her about what had happened at home, at the hospital, and what Anne had said.

"What should I do?" he asked.

She wiped her hands on the towel and laid it on the counter. "I don't know how to tell you this, Kyle. I don’t want Aaron to come over here, at least for a while, until I figure out what to do."
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“What? Why? What happened?”

She paused. “Kelsey’s been acting...kind of strange.”

“What do you mean? Is she sick?”

“Well,” Rachel began. She walked over to the fridge and wrote something on a magnetic notepad. “I caught her stealing. She took my earrings and then lied about it.”

“What does that have to do with Aaron?” Kyle asked. He adjusted his cap.

“She’s never done anything like that before. It’s very unlike her. And I’m not saying Aaron had anything to do with it, but she doesn’t hang around any other kids. I just want to figure out what’s going on."

Kyle crossed his arms.

“Just for a few days,” Rachel said. “Maybe we can pick back up when I get this straightened out.”

"I hope the dinner comes out alright." Kyle said. He nodded and left.

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Instead of going through his front door, Kyle went in the side door to the garage. He picked up the reconstructed birdhouse from the shelf. It still smelled like super glue. He took a spool of fishing line from the shelf below and walked out to the front yard, holding the birdhouse in one hand. He stopped in front of the young maple tree. He looked at the cookie-cutter houses of the cul-de-sac encircling him. The grass on all the lawns was brilliant green but sprinklers were ticking away.

Kyle bit off a length of fishing line and tied it to metal hook sticking out of the birdhouse roof. He looped the other end of the line around a branch, knotted it, and let
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go of the birdhouse. It swung gently before it stopped. The birdhouse looked like it was levitating—a sad, shabby box suspended between the branches. Kyle took off his cap, rubbed at the stubble of new hairs growing from the ravaged scalp, and looked down at the birdhouse. He could not imagine what kind of bird would live there.

**At Least It's Something**

"Can you come home this weekend?" Lydia's mother asked.

"This weekend? As in tomorrow?" Lydia replied. The phone was on speaker.

"Yes, tomorrow. Dan woke us up last night with his yelling, and it's the third time this week. I just want to see if you can talk to him."

Lydia glanced at Paul, who was waving his hands, shaking his head, and mouthing 'no.'

"Fine," Lydia said. "I'll come. I can skip my lecture tomorrow and get there in the afternoon. May as well come now since Paul and I have plans next weekend."

When she hung up the phone, Paul said, "We have plans this weekend, too."

"I know," she said.

"You know what it's going to do to you."

"I know," Lydia repeated. She fidgeted with a hair tie, twisting and un-twisting it around her fingers.

"Do you?" Paul said. He had paused the video on his laptop. Lydia was sitting on the arm of the couch, facing him. He was seated on the opposite side, legs crossed. "Lydia, I don't want you going to your parents' house. You come back and you're a mess."

"They need me. Dan needs me." She looked at him. "It's complicated. You know that." The hair tie snapped and went flying across the living room. She flinched slightly, then continued. "And I think it helps sometimes, if only a little. He's my brother."

"But is it worth it for what it does to you?" He closed his laptop.

"It's something. It's better than nothing." She looked down.

"Listen, I wouldn't be saying this if they just wanted you to visit. How often do they want you to just visit instead of asking you to do something like this?"

"I don't think you're being fair," Lydia said. "Your family is different. Normal."

He moved closer to her and put his hand on her knee, then opened his laptop again and clicked open another tab. "When are you leaving?"

"Tomorrow around one."

"You could just call him."

"It's Dan we're talking about." Lydia walked across the room to retrieve the hair tie.

"I still don't think you should go," Paul said.

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Last summer, Dan had taken a bottle of painkillers left over from their mother's hip surgery. He mixed the painkillers with a bottle of allergy medication at a high school friend's party. It sent him to the hospital for two days. Their parents did not call Lydia then. She found out the next time they visited her. Paul was at work, and her parents took her out to lunch. They told her not to tell anyone about it, but of course she told Paul. What else was she supposed to do?

Her mother shrugged and said, "Dan tells me nothing. Ask your father."
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"He doesn't tell me anything either," her father said before putting a French fry in his mouth. "Just that he doesn't want to talk to your mom."

"Maybe you're getting him to think about things differently," her mother said to Lydia.

"We talk about video games."

"Well, it's something."

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That Friday night, Lydia knocked on Dan's door and waited a moment. It was 1 a.m. and their parents were in bed. She pressed her ear and fingertips on his door and listened. No sound was discernable, but she was sure Dan was awake. She opened the door slowly in case he was in the middle of a game. He wasn't. He was sitting in the dark, reading something on the screen. The blue light reflected off of his face. The room smelled like room-temperature hot dogs and sweat.

He was a professional gamer, sort of. He'd won a total of a couple of hundred dollars from what he called "shitty small-time tournaments." He said he had stopped playing the game with his friends from college and high school because they were terrible at it and he didn't like getting mad at them over it. He had stopped answering his phone because it was usually telemarketers. He had stopped logging into the chat programs built into the video games he played because people did nothing but pester him to play with them. He stopped reading his text messages, he'd told Lydia, but he didn't tell her why.
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His computer desk sat in front of the window. His bed rested along the adjacent wall. An exercise machine sat against the wall across from the computer desk. The room was largely empty, with two closets on either side of the bare tv stand. The computer monitor was the dominant light source.

"Hey, Dan," Lydia said.

"Sup." He didn't turn around.

"What are you up to?"

"Just livin' the dream," he said. The fan on his computer whirred steadily.

Lydia stepped into the room and closed the door. "Hey, this is kind of random, but do you want to go see that new superhero movie with me? It's playing in Wilmington tomorrow."

"Nah," he said.

"But don't video games and superheroes go hand in hand?" She inserted a friendly chuckle and carefully sat down on the edge of his bed.

"Do you even like superheroes?" Dan asked. He clicked rapidly between internet browser tabs.

"Well, not really. Is it fine if I sit here?"

"Then why do you want to see the movie?"

He glanced at her and she stood up. "Sorry," she said.

"It's fine, sit, I don't care," he said. She sat back down. Her leg muscles tensed.

"We just never really do things together."

"You're away at college," he said.

He started a video game that Lydia hadn't seen before. It was a role-playing game—mages with curly staves and caped knights, similar to the ones they played in childhood. Dan's party seemed to be in the middle of a boss battle. He cursed quietly and sad music played from the 'game over' screen. "Remember how I used to watch you play video games all the time?" Lydia said. "I know we live in different places, but we can still do stuff together when we see each other."

"We see each other once a month, if that." He plugged a controller into his computer before restarting the boss battle.

"That doesn't mean we can't hang out."

"Why would we hang out? What do we even have in common?"

Lydia looked at her hands. The air felt warm and thick. "I started using Adderall this semester. To help with tests and stuff."

Dan put down the controller and swiveled his chair to face Lydia. "That's what you think we have in common? We like pills?"

There was a long silence before Lydia said, "I don't know. What I know isn't you as a person."

"Me as a person, huh?" The boss battle music was still playing from Dan's speakers. "Okay, let me tell you about my favorite thing to do in my sophomore year of college." Dan's eyes brightened with a certain theatrical mania whenever he started telling a story. "My roommate's name was Joe. Joe thought he was very smart, but he was a dumbass, and he was also high all the time. I was stuck with Joe because we were still in the dorms. Joe got so high that he didn't know where he was. Whenever

this happened, I took something from his side of the room and put it in a box in my closet. Sometimes he would ask where his shit went, and me and my friend would convince him that he'd gotten rid of it somehow. We told him he threw his cellphone out the window and that somebody probably took it. He believed us."

"You stole someone's phone?"

"I didn't use it. I left it in that box. And it's not like it mattered. His parents were rich as hell and bought him a new one the next day."

She looked at her brother. He was leaning back in his chair, his legs crossed with one ankle resting on the opposite knee. She fidgeted with the bed covers.

"One time Joe got suspicious and started looking in my shit," Dan continued. "He tried to look in my closet so I had to lay him out. The next time he was super high I put all his shit back but he had already put in a request to change rooms."

"Don't you feel bad?"

"Nah. Joe was pretty terrible." Dan turned back to his computer and un-paused the video game.

The computer fans whirred louder as the video game loaded the cut scene after he defeated the boss. Lydia spoke up. "Remember when I got hit with that pillow and you entertained me with your transformers?"

When Lydia was in first grade, another child at school hit her in the head with a massive pillow. Lydia was convinced that her neck was broken when the whiplash stiffened her muscles. Her mother set Lydia up in her parents' bed and propped up her neck with a mound of pillows like the one that struck her. When Dan came home from

his fourth grade after-school program for accelerated children and saw his sister whimpering, he went to his room and brought out an armful of action figures. He sat the toys on the chair in the corner of their parents' bedroom and began to act out an impromptu play with the action figures as puppets. Lydia smiled, and his play became more of a comedy, with armored lizards and anthropomorphic cheetahs bonking each other on the head like the Three Stooges.

"Not really." He quit the video game and opened an internet browser to a stream of someone playing the game he played competitively.

"Are you serious?"

"Sort of."

"Sort of serious?"

"I sort of remember."

She looked between him and the screen. Her jaw twitched. Her hands were intertwined in her lap. "Well that's something, I guess."

"Yeah," he said. He looked at his nails and picked at them with his thumb. He put a finger in his mouth and bit off a fragment of skin.

"I'm glad you remember," Lydia said.

"I lost some files up there that time I tripped balls on allergy pills." He tapped his skull with his pointer finger.

Lydia said nothing for a moment and bunched the covers of Dan's bed in her right hand. "Yeah, what happened with that?"

"I took a bunch of allergy pills and tripped balls." He threw his hands in the air in an exaggerated shrug. "I hallucinated a bunch of shit. I broke some things. I ripped a closet door off because I heard you yelling for help from inside. I thought you were stuck in it. Then people came in and were like 'Dan what the fuck are you doing you broke Chris's closet' and I was like 'oh whoops.'"

"You hallucinated me?" She leaned forward a little. "Did you hallucinate anyone else?"

"Nope, just you stuck in a closet. Maybe I thought you were gay."

Lydia laughed. She leaned back, hands resting on the bed. "Are you sure you don't want to go to that movie?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"Thought I'd try," she said.

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"Dan and I talked last night," Lydia said to her mother the next morning. Lydia poked her browning pancake with the spatula.

"What about?" her mother asked. She was seated at the kitchen table, clutching a cup of coffee and working on a Sudoku puzzle.

"Uh, video games and college, for the most part."

"For the most part?" She started working her eraser across the squares.

"Yeah, I don't really remember what else. Movies, I guess. I mean it's not like he's telling me about the depths of his depression or anything." Lydia slid the pancake onto a plate.
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"Well do you want to tell me more? What did you say?" Her mother's voice was loud and unsteady. Neither of them was concerned about Dan hearing; he was nocturnal.

"Hey, Lydia," her father called from the garage. "Can you come out here for a second?" Lydia and her mother raised their eyebrows at each other before Lydia went out. She took the pancake with her.

Her father was standing next to Lydia's car. His arms were crossed in a way that looked like he was trying to conserve heat. "If you can help it, try not to talk to your mother about your brother too much." He spoke in a low voice.

"But she asked me to come here to talk to him. I'm just being a good spy and reporting back." Lydia's tone was flippant, but she matched her father's volume.

"It kills her that he won't talk to her. It's good that he's talking to you, and you can tell me about it if you want, but let's try not to make it any harder on Mom than it already is. She thinks it's her fault."

"Did she tell you that?"

"No, but I can tell."

"Right," she said. "I have my own shit too, Dad."

He rested his forehead on his hand. Lydia put her plate down on an upside-down box. "I know. Everybody does—"

"No, I mean specifically." She crossed her arms. "I have specific, unpleasant shit going on too—"

"Please try to keep your voice down, Lydia," he said. Her eyes became teary and she fidgeted with hair that had fallen in her face. "I'm sorry, hun. You would think that going through all this with Dan would make me more sensitive. And I should be. I know you have your problems too. I'm just tired. Your mom and I are both very tired. We never thought things would be like this. But we appreciate what you're trying to do."

"I'm doing it because Mom asked me to," Lydia said. "Would it be easier if I hadn't come?"

"No, that's not what I'm saying at all." His tone was like the one he used on the phone with Lydia's erratic aunt.

"I mean it's not like I'm making things easier for you by being here. Mom asks me to come home to talk to Dan and I bet you have to deal with the aftermath when I don't get anywhere."

"I like having you home."

"Why?" Lydia picked her plate and fork back up and took a bite of the cold pancake.

"What do you mean why?"

"Mostly we all sit in the same room and don't even talk." She put the plate back on the box.

"Well, I'm sorry you feel like we're wasting your time."

He went to the other side of the garage and picked up a wrench from his metal toolbox. His back was to Lydia. "Dan told me, one of those times he was drunk and

talking about how much he hates everyone and hates everything, that there's no one he can talk to. Not you, definitely not your mom, and only sometimes me. He won't talk to us but he'll punch holes in the walls and yell at video games so loud we can hear him in our bedroom. You're usually easier."

There was a tightness in the air and in Lydia's chest.

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"Oh, he just had a question about a scratch on my bumper," Lydia told her mother when she came back into the kitchen. "You know Dad."

"And why is there a scratch on your bumper?"

"Who knows. Probably something happened in a grocery store parking lot." Her mother frowned. "Yeah, dad had about the same reaction."

"Your eyes look red," Lydia's mother said. "Are you sick? What happened?"

"Nothing happened."

"Oh god, do you hate me too?" She hadn't made any progress on the Sudoku puzzle. "Is that why you won't tell me?"

Lydia didn't reply. She put her plate in the sink and ran some water on it.

"Dan won't talk to me. Your father doesn't tell me about it but I've heard Dan say he hates me. I didn't hear him say why but I bet it's because I made him go to counseling when he was too young. It didn't do him any good. It just made him think there was something wrong with him. And now he hates me for putting him through that." Her voice was frantic and she was clutching at the hem of her cardigan. Lydia
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picked up the sponge and started washing dishes. “And now you’re starting to shut me out, too,” her mother finished.

“Mom,” Lydia said while scrubbing a casserole dish, “It’s okay. I don’t hate you. Nothing happened.”

“I don’t believe you.” Her fists were on her hips. To Lydia, she looked like a pouting child.

Lydia washed more dishes before responding. “Okay, do you want to know what Dad and I talked about? He told me not to talk to you about Dan because it upsets you. And he’s right. Shit, it upsets everyone in the house to talk about Dan, so let’s just not talk about Dan right now, alright?”

The faucet hissed, and tears appeared in Lydia’s mother’s eyes. “Okay, fine,” she said quietly. Lydia finished the dishes, and her mother finished the Sudoku puzzle.

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That afternoon Lydia’s mother drove them to the almost supermarket-sized thrift store, which was the only occupied building in the strip mall that once used to be the shopping center of their small town. Slow, fat rain drops fell so sparsely that they seemed countable.

When they left the thrift store, Lydia and her mother covered their heads with plastic shopping bags and ran across the parking lot to a franchise bakery that had opened the fall Lydia left for university. They had coffee and donuts in the 4 p.m. gloom. Whenever Lydia came for an overnight visit home, her mother spent money on
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her like she was still living in the little bedroom on the other side of the wall from Dan's.

"How are you and Paul?" Lydia's mother asked after removing the lid from her steaming coffee.

"We're fine. Why?"

"Just wanted to ask about your life."

"We're good." Lydia bit into her chocolate-iced donut. "We're actually thinking about moving in together next year."

Her mother narrowed her eyes. "Your dad wouldn't like it."

"But we spend so much time together anyway that it's silly not to," Lydia said.

"What about Dan?" Lydia's mother held her cup delicately with both hands and rested her elbows on the table.

"What do you mean what about Dan?"

"You're not going to come home as much, are you?"

"Why wouldn't I?" The tiled floor was splotched with dried, spilled coffee.

"Sometimes your dad and I wonder if Paul is good for you. It seems like you've changed since you started dating."

"It's not a bad thing to change, Mom. It's called growing up. And I come home whenever you ask."

"Yes, but I have to ask." Lydia's mother took a sip of the coffee. "Everyone likes having you home, but no one but me will ask. Your dad doesn't want to ask

anything of anyone and Dan doesn't even want to speak to anyone. But you won't come if no one says anything."

"I'm just really busy," Lydia said. She dug her nails into her Styrofoam cup.

"We all are," her mother said. "When you and Dan were children, I never imagined that this was how it would turn out."

Lydia said nothing. Her mother sighed and said, "I just wish I could make you and Dan little again."

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That evening, at the kitchen table, Lydia's father mentioned the time Lydia played soccer as a child. For one game, she was a goalie. She got distracted picking flowers and the opposing team scored not once, but twice. When talking about this now, her father's laugh shook his belly, and her mother put her hand over her eyes. Lydia winced, smiling. Dan's door handle turned, abruptly killing their laughter. He walked into the kitchen and did not look at them. He wore a wifebeater and stained sweatpants. The yellow fluorescent light highlighted his paleness, and his clothes hung loosely on his tall, bony frame. He opened the kitchen cabinets. Lydia glanced at her mother.

"Are you just waking up? There's pizza in the fridge if you want it," Lydia's father said.

After a moment of looking into the cabinets, his hands holding both doors open, Dan said, "You already told me about the pizza five times. I don't want the damn pizza." He snatched a box of cereal and knocked several other boxes and bags of
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snacks onto the floor. Bran flakes spilled around his feet. Lydia's parents both moved to help. Dan waved his arm defensively. "Stop it," he said. "I don't need your help."

"It's not a big deal, Dan," their father said.

"I'll go get the vacuum," their mother said.

"STOP," Dan yelled. "I said I'll do it myself. Just stop." He grabbed the dustpan resting against the trash bin and clumsily pushed the bran flakes into it with his hands. He dumped it in the garbage and put the snacks back into the cabinet. He took another cereal box and started back toward his room.

"How's your game going?" Lydia asked.

"I'm not playing anything," Dan said, and closed his door.

Lydia's father moved to the living room. Lydia followed. Her mother stayed at the kitchen table. Her father sat on the couch and turned on the television. Lydia sat next to him. A hockey game was playing. She texted Paul to ask what he was up to. He replied that he was watching a movie and would talk to her later. After an hour, she got up and went to her old bedroom and put her things into her backpack.

She knocked lightly on Dan's door. There was no answer, but she could hear the video game. She did not say goodbye to her parents.

On the drive, she listened to music. Her phone rang, but she ignored it. She changed the radio station. The song that played, "Under Pressure," was one Dan listened to hundreds of times on repeat when they were younger. Lydia associated it with a specific video game they played together in the evenings after school. It was a single-player game, so they took turns playing and watching each other. Dan was

much better at the battles and strategy, but Lydia had better intuition for the mini-games. When the song was over, she turned the radio off and pulled out her phone. There was a missed call from Paul. She dialed Dan's number. He didn't answer. She imagined his phone on the edge of his bed under a pile of clothes, or sitting on the bench of the exercise machine with a long-dead battery. She tried to call him every five miles. About thirty minutes from her apartment, Dan picked up.

"Hey," she said.

"What's wrong?"

"What?"

"What happened?" he asked.

"Nothing happened." Lydia drove a little slower, though there was no traffic.

"You called my damn phone so many times I thought somebody died," he said.

"Oh, no, nothing's wrong."

"Okay," he said. "I'm hanging up."

"Why didn't you open your door earlier?" she blurted.

"I didn't hear you knock."

She sighed and shifted the phone to her other ear. "Dan," she said. "I'm not coming home for a while."

She was driving too slowly. A car passed and the driver honked the horn.

"Why do I care?" he asked.

"Maybe you don't," she said. "Just don't tell mom, okay?"

"Alright, peace." The phone made a cheery *boop* noise when he hung up.

At a gas station, fifteen minutes from Paul's apartment, she pulled over and checked her phone. There was a text from Paul asking when she would be home and how the visit went. Inside, she bought a cup of coffee that had been scorching on the burner for hours. She put her change in the 'give a penny, take a penny' tray and went out and sat on the hood of her car.

The coffee quivered in her cup. Her hands were shaking.

Her phone vibrated. It was a text from her mother: "Why did you leave w/o saying anything? Dan broke his desk a min ago + cut his hand on the glass top. He's mad he can't play video games til it heals."

She took a drink of the stale coffee and watched cars pull in an out of the gas station. It was getting late, and the evening air chilled her. She texted Paul: "I don't want to come back yet. Gonna go see the new superhero movie. Meet me at the theater on state St?"

As soon as she sent the message, she silenced her phone and hopped off the hood of her car.

**The Pedestrian**

June walked briskly down the convenience store aisle as if she were squeezing through a narrow passage, even though the aisle was wide. Henry followed behind her with the basket. She went straight toward the refrigerators in the back of the store, but stopped a few feet short, staring at the prices. Henry slipped his arm around June's waist. "What's up?" Henry asked.

"The milk is higher," she said and sidestepped out of Henry's arm.

"Oh, weird." Henry said. June took the milk and eggs from their shelves in the fridge and placed them in Henry's basket.

"Anything else?" she asked.

"Nope, I think that's everything," he said. On the way to the checkout, Henry again trailed behind.

The clerk was a middle-aged woman who wore a "#1 Mom" button and a "Have a great day!" button on her store uniform polo shirt. Henry put the milk and the eggs on the counter and the clerk rang them up and bagged them with practiced motions. She eyed the basket and asked "Is that all, sir?"

"Oh," said Henry with mock forgetfulness, "there's this too," and put a box of chocolates on the counter.

June looked at him. "What is this?"

"Chocolate! It's almost Valentine's Day," Henry said and smiled. June still stared at him. He looked at the clerk and raised his eyebrows. The clerk smiled weakly. "Come on boss," he said to June.

"Don't do that," said June.

"Do what?" asked Henry.

"The milk and the eggs will be all." June said to the clerk. The clerk looked at Henry, who was looking open-mouthed at June.

"Okay," the clerk said slowly, "Your total is seven eighty-three."

June handed her the bills and took the change, then grabbed the bag of groceries and went toward the exit.

"Women, right?" June heard Henry say to the clerk. June sighed and rolled her eyes. "I meant some women," he added after a pause. "You know."

June walked out the door. Henry manufactured a laugh and followed after June, leaving the basket with the box of chocolates on the counter.

June marched down the sidewalk through the snow. That Henry had the gall to try and make a show of buying her chocolates when he should have known that she wasn't a sweets person, regardless that money was tight, made her clench her fist around the bag handles so tensely that her nails dug into her hand.

Henry called her name from behind. He called louder a second time. She quickened her pace. He caught up to her and put his hand on her shoulder. She slowed down. "June, what's wrong?" he asked. "What did I do? I just wanted to do something nice for you."

"I want to take a nap."

"Shit, June, are we just going to spend all our free time this semester sleeping?" They now walked side by side.

June shifted the bag to her other hand. “You don’t have to sleep with me,” she said.

“What else am I gonna do?” he asked.

“Go somewhere. Hang out with someone,” she said.

“That was a rhetorical question.”

In their small apartment, June put the groceries into the fridge and went to the bedroom to lie down. Henry followed. Soon June fell into a thick, stiff sleep while Henry writhed beside her, awake and fidgeting. They faced away from each other. He stared at the off-white wall for a few minutes, eyes darting between a chip in the paint and a hole in the drywall that both looked like bugs in the dying light.

He touched June’s shoulder. She sighed and readjusted her leg under the blanket. He shook her lightly and she grunted. She rolled half over and looked at him.

“Babe?” he said.

“What?” she asked with the distressed confusion of someone whose dream had been interrupted.

“What happened today? I thought we were getting better.”

“What are you talking about?” Her voice was breathy from sleep.

“I thought we were going to be okay. When we were walking to the store holding hands, you squeezed my hand. I thought that meant we were going to be okay.”

Some seconds passed before she looked at him, her expression softening. “Henry, I squeezed your hand because I saw a man crossing the street right in front of

a moving bus, and I thought he was going to get hit. I flinched. It had nothing to do with you."

She looked at him for a few more seconds. Then she rolled back over and closed her eyes.

**Bastet**

It was midnight and Jane was sitting at her desk, reading the note her mother had written. The note said her father had come into the truck stop restaurant where Jane's mother worked, and that he would visit Jane after school the following Wednesday. Her mother had written the note on the lined paper of her waitress pad. The note was darkened with grease spots.

Jane's desk rattled, and muffled voices came from the neighbor's apartment as the stereo thudded out an aggressive trap song. Jane looked up from the note and pounded the wall. The noise rose and Jane pounded again. Someone turned down the music. Jane reread the note before folding it and slipping it into a drawer. She stood up and pressed her ear against the wall.

"—even bother turning it down? What are they gonna—"

"Hey!"

Jane turned. Sarah was leaning on the doorframe.

"They were being loud again," Jane said. "Now I think they're saying stuff about us."

"Leave 'em alone, Jane. Frank's a nice guy and he lived here before us so I don't think we've got any right," she spoke slowly, like her tongue was too big to maneuver the words.

"You're acting weird." Jane sat down and took the note out again. She flipped it over and started drawing a flower on the back.

Sarah crawled into bed without taking her jacket off.

"Are you drunk? On a Wednesday?" Jane didn't look at her sister when she spoke.

"No. Maybe a little." Sarah curled into a ball. "Shh, don't tell Mom."

Jane reread the note and went to bed. The voices and music seeped through the wall as she faded into sleep.

Two hours later, the same voices startled her awake. She heard "You don't respect me!" shouted over and over, but she couldn't tell if it was coming from Frank or Ben. Someone stomped across the room and slammed a door. There was more yelling and a crash. Glass breaking. Jane got out of bed and went through the living room into her mother's room. It smelled thickly sweet and flowery from the perfume her mother wore to work every night. Jane climbed into the empty bed and pulled the covers up around her face. The light from the streetlamp outside reflected from the hairspray can on her mother's dresser. She got up to move the can, then burrowed back under the covers.

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Jane woke up in her own bed. Her mother must have carried her there, like she used to when Jane was younger and her mother had a daytime job.

Jane woke Sarah by pulling the covers off of her and wadding them up at the foot of the bed. Sarah curled up into a ball and kept her eyes squinted shut.

The kitchen was filled with the cold bluish light of spring and the sound of eggs crackling in the pan. Jane dumped the eggs onto two orange ceramic plates. One
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of the plates was chipped. Sarah sat down at the table and Jane put a plate in front of her.

"I think one of the neighbors is moving out," Jane said.

"Oh? Which one?" Sarah asked.

"I don't know," Jane said. "They're too hard to tell apart when they're yelling."

"Frank's voice is deeper," Sarah said.

"It was probably Ben then."

"Good, I like Frank better. God, it's so bright in here." Sarah went over to the curtains and pulled them shut.

"Are you hungover?"

"Christ, Jane, don't be so loud about it," Sarah hissed. She got up and took the dirty plates to the sink and started washing them.

Jane took the silverware off the table and handed it to Sarah. "What if something would have happened?"

"What does that even mean?" Sarah scoffed. "Nothing happened. We got a little drunk and watched some movies. It was fun. We didn't even leave her house. Don't worry about it." She put the dishes on the rack to dry. "Go get your shoes on, we're gonna be late for school."

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In the driveway, another car was blocking them in.
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"It's Frank's," Sarah said. They both went up the stairs to his apartment door. Sarah knocked.

There was rustling inside. Sarah knocked again and a voice yelled "Coming!" Frank opened the door. "Sup?" He crossed his arms and leaned against the doorframe. He wore sweatpants and was shirtless.

It was the first time Jane had seen him up close. He was tan and lean but not skinny. She thought he was average-looking, and that her sister's tastes were boring.

"Sorry to bug you, but your car is blocking ours and I need to drive my sister to school." Sarah combed through her hair with her fingers and flipped it over her shoulder.

Frank apologized and closed the door. A moment later he came back out with a shirt on and keys in hand. He moved the car. Jane and Sarah watched.

"Cool car," Sarah said when Frank got out. "Where'd you get it?"

"Got this piece of junk in high school," Frank said.

"Did I see you out at the bars last night?" Sarah asked.

"Yeah, probably." He leaned against the hood of his car.

"Was that pretty girl with you your girlfriend?"

"Nah," he said. "You know how it goes."

Jane shifted her weight impatiently.

"I have to get going," Sarah told him, "But would you mind giving me a ride out tomorrow night? If your girlfriend doesn't mind, that is."

"Yeah I can get you."

On the drive to school, Jane turned to her sister. “I thought you only watched movies last night. How do you even get into bars?”

“That one on High Street doesn’t card.”

After a few miles, Jane turned the car radio down. “Mom left me a note. My dad came to the truck stop.”

Sarah’s grip tightened on the wheel.

“He’s coming to see me next week. On Wednesday.”

“Great, maybe Mom’ll get knocked up again and give us both another baby sister. Then you can get a job and start paying bills for her too.”

“What the hell, Sarah,” Jane said.

“Where does your dad get off, anyway? How long has it been, like ten years?"

“Not ten. Six I think.”

The last time Jane saw her father, she was eight years old. Sarah was eleven. He came home from work and took them to the county fair. Tickets for the ferris wheel were no longer being sold when they arrived, so they walked around the fairgrounds eating funnel cake. In the sharp evening light, sweat gleamed in beads on his forehead where his hairline had receded, and he had let his beard get long. He had told Sarah that he would take it out of her allowance when she dropped the first funnel cake on the ground. Sarah had cried. Jane pictured him now in his dark jeans and burnt orange flannel shirt rolled up at the sleeves, stepping out after dinner for a cigarette.

Sarah slammed the car door when she got out in the school parking lot. She didn't wait for Jane.

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That night, voices leaked through the wall again. The familiar clomping on the wooden staircase preceded the voices.

“Do you girls wanna buy some molly?” Frank was speaking. Jane tried to guess what molly was. She imagined college girls smoking a pipe shaped like a doll.

She couldn’t hear the girls reply, but an unfamiliar male voice said “More molly for us then!” The men laughed. Jane looked at Sarah in the darkness, then put her pillow over her head and went back to sleep.

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The next day, Jane knocked on Frank's door. It was early evening, and Sarah was at work. Their mother was sleeping. The door opened and Frank looked her over for a couple of seconds before he raised his eyebrows and said, “Car again?”

“Can I come in?”

He hesitated, then opened the door wider and motioned for her to go past him.

The apartment smelled of something burnt and skunky. The place was nicer than her family’s. Not as many old nails and cracks in the walls and it felt bigger. She sat on the sand-colored couch in the middle of the room opposite the television. It was stained with dark splotches. He asked her if she wanted a drink.

“Of what?” she asked.

“We’ve got beer and boxed wine. Wait. How old are you?” he asked. There was a clear plastic bottle on the coffee table filled with purple, circular pills.

“Fourteen,” she said. She smirked. He seemed out of it.

"Oh. We have water. I have water." He glanced at a closed door—Ben's bedroom.

"How about some of that boxed wine?" Jane asked.

"Sure, fuck it, why not?" He went into the kitchen, pulled the box out of the fridge, and brought her a full glass. He sat down next to her and popped open a beer. He stared straight ahead, drumming his fingers on his leg. The big tv was showing a football game. Jane didn't know if it was college or professional. She took a sip of the wine.

"You pound on the wall all the time, don't you?"

"Can't study or sleep," Jane said and sipped at her wine.

"You can't just go to a room that's not against the wall?"

She looked at him for a few seconds and started laughing. The announcer on the tv was talking over the cheering crowd. "You sound just like my sister." Jane's feet and legs felt slightly heavy. She was worried her mother would bust in the door at any second.

"Well you won't have to worry about it anymore. He moved out." He looked over at her.

"How do you feel about it?" she asked.

"Dude was a bitch." He picked at a piece of tape on the remote control.

"So," Jane started, "my sister thinks you're cool. She's seventeen. You saw her yesterday when you moved your car. And apparently the night before at the bar." She

looked at him. He didn't say anything. "Here's the thing," she continued. "I think maybe you're not a very good influence. I'm fourteen and you gave me wine."

"You don't even know me."

"Do you hang out with seventeen year olds? How old are you?"

"No, I'm just not a shit person."

"Okay, well, good." She paused. "Would a not-shit person play music that loud on a Wednesday night?" she asked.

"Would a not-shit person call someone else a shit person?"

"My sister tells me not to curse. You still never answered about my sister."

"What about your sister?"

"She's been going out to bars and stuff. I already said that."

"Well that's her prerogative."

She patted him awkwardly on the shoulder. There were footsteps on the outside stairs. She wanted to hide.

The door opened and a girl—older and prettier than Sarah—walked in holding a pet carrier with an orange cat inside. The woman looked at Jane, then Frank. "Who is this?" she asked. She had shiny, long, black hair. She wore leggings as pants and Jane decided that she probably wouldn't like her.

Frank was looking at the carrier. "What is that?" he asked and motioned at it with his beer bottle.

"She was going to be a surprise."

"I'm surprised," he said. He laughed, but the laugh wasn't happy.

"This girl is a kid, Frank," the woman said. Jane kept sipping the wine, which was almost gone.

"She's the neighbor," he said. "She knocked on the door to...why are you here, again?" he asked, glancing away from the cat.

"I was asking about Ben," Jane said to the woman.

"Where is he?" the woman asked Frank.

"He packed up all his stuff and left. I don't think he's coming back," Jane said. "What do you think of that?" she asked them, looking back and forth at the two.

"Hold on," the woman said to Jane. "Frank, I wanted to surprise you. We were talking about pets last week, you know, and so I went to the humane society and I adopted this cat. My lease doesn't allow pets, so..." She raised the carrier up in her arms so the cat was at Frank's eye level and smiled. The cat made a gurgly growling noise. "She's just scared right now," the woman said.

"God, Lyn," Frank said.

"Come on babe. She's cute, you can't deny that." Jane couldn't see the cat's face because it was hiding in the back of the carrier.

"Yeah, she's cute," he said, exasperated. "We need to talk about this though."

Lyn put the carrier on the floor and shut the apartment door. She unzipped the carrier but the cat didn't move. Frank sighed, leaned back, and rubbed his hair. "Do you guys think I need a haircut?" he asked. Jane thought he did, but neither of them said anything. Jane set her wine glass on the end table beside the couch and went over to the carrier. She got down on her hands and knees and peered inside. The cat's

pupils were huge. Jane reached her hand in to pet the cat. She gasped and jerked back her hand, which was bleeding from a long scratch across the back. She stood up while clutching the hand with her other.

"I should go clean this," Jane said. "Thanks for the wine." She left feeling bad for the cat.

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"What happened to your hand?" Sarah asked Jane a few hours later. Their mother had already left for work. Jane had put a Band-Aid on.

"Oh, I was messing around outside." Jane tried not to let the heat in her face become redness.

"You're such a klutz," Sarah said. She was lying on her bed, reading a Victorian romance novel.

Jane was in her own bed, leaning against the wall of their small bedroom, resting her sketchbook against her knees. She drew with short strokes, her face close to the paper.

Through the wall, they heard Frank's voice. "No, no, no, no, no, no, no! You do that. IN. The FUCKING. LITTERBOX." A door slammed.

Jane lowered the book and looked at Sarah. "Do you ever wish we had a cat?"

"I'd rather have a dog," Sarah said, not looking up.

"Really? I want a cat. A big, orange, fluffy cat."

"You sure are chipper today," Sarah said.
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“Well the dudes next door have been quiet for the last couple days. Look what a little peace of mind can do.” She took an orange pen from the pencil case beside her and added color to her drawing. “If I had a cat, I would buy it all kinds of toys and feed it only wet food. Wet food is better for cats, you know. I read that online yesterday.”

“We probably couldn’t afford that.” Sarah turned her page.

“A lot of people get pets who shouldn’t have them.”

“Yeah, and we shouldn’t add to that number.” Sarah closed her book and went over to her desk, which she used as a vanity. She sat down, adjusted the angle of the small mirror, and took out her meagre makeup collection. Jane peeked at her sister over her drawing.

“Hey,” Jane said. “Are you going somewhere?”

“Movies.” She was brushing eyeshadow on her lids. Jane mimicked her makeup-applying face, but Sarah couldn’t see her.

“Can I go with you?”

"Why don’t you get your dad to take you when he comes?" Sarah asked. "Oh, something came for you in the mail today. I don’t really get it.” She opened a drawer in her desk, pulled out a package, and tossed it to Jane.

The package was torn open at one end. The box had been taken out and shoved back inside the padded manila envelope. It was addressed to “Janey” from “Dad.”

“Why did you open it?” Jane asked. She slid the box back out. It was a digital drawing tablet for computers. Jane told Sarah what it was.

"How pointless," Sarah said. "Of course he'd get you something you can't even use." She opened a compact and applied powder to her face.

"Maybe it'll work on the computers at the library." Jane turned the box over and read the blurb and specifications on the back.

"Doubt it," Sarah said. "Wonder how much that paperweight cost."

"You don't have to be such a jerk. You're just jealous."

Sarah turned and glared at her, then snapped the compact shut and stood. "I'm leaving. There are leftovers in the fridge."

"Is Frank giving you a ride?"

"Why, jealous? Don't worry about it."

After Sarah left, Jane took the tablet and matching electronic pen out of the box and pressed all the buttons. She thought of her father going into an electronics store with her in mind or browsing online for hours. She heard Frank's car pull out. Jane set the tablet aside, finished her drawing, and took out her flip phone from her desk. She texted one of her classmates. "Do you want to hang out?"

The girl replied half an hour later. "Sorry, busy."

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Later in the night, when Sarah was still gone, Jane heard footsteps ascending the steps and voices talking next door. She went outside and sat on the stoop.

A little chill ran through her. She stood underneath her neighbors' opened window and looked up. Smoke drifted out with the laughter and yellow light. The
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orange cat appeared atop the sill. It looked at Jane, then jumped down, landing on its feet.

Jane stared at the cat. “Hey, kitty,” she started quietly, even though the neighbors were talking loudly. The cat looked at her, then in the direction of a chirping bird. “Hey, pretty kitty,” Jane tried again, and held her fingers out to it. The cat didn’t react. Jane went over to it cautiously, and it ignored her. She picked it up, slowly at first, but then swiftly once she could tell that it would let her. The cat was unexpectedly heavy. She hauled the cat up the stairs and into her family’s apartment.

Jane took the cat into her mother’s room and closed the door. The cat jumped out of her arms. Jane went to the kitchen and found a box and a stack of old newspapers. She lined the box with some of the paper. She brought the box into the room and laid it on the floor in the closet, pushing aside her mother’s clean blouses and aprons that, even when washed, smelled like grease. The cat stood on her mother’s bed, flicking its tail. It still hadn’t made a sound.

“You’re going to stay here so Sarah doesn’t find you when she comes back,” Jane told the cat. “If she comes back. Who knows. You don’t know who Sarah or Mom is, or what I’m saying to you, because you’re a cat. But we’ll figure it out. Be a good cat,” she said when she petted it. “I’m going to go find you some litter. What’s your name, anyway?” she asked, sitting down beside it and stroking its fur. She considered the cat for a moment. It sat cleaning its paw, still ignoring her. She felt like a benevolent ghost.

She went outside and around the side of the building to the steps that lead up to Frank's apartment. He had left the litter out on the step. Jane pulled a plastic grocery bag out of her pocket and poured a hefty pile of litter into it. Dust billowed up and made her sneeze. She looked over her shoulder before setting the litter container back on the step.

In her mother's bedroom, she poured the litter into the box and placed the box on the floor of the closet. She turned to the cat. "I don't know what your name is, but I think you're a girl, so I'm going to call you Bastet, like the Egyptian goddess of cats. Do you like that?" The cat looked at her, then hopped off the bed, went into the closet, and started kicking litter all over the hardwood floor, raking its right front paw back over and over in violent motions.

There were heavy footsteps on the stairs outside their apartment. Jane darted out of her mother's room and closed the door.

Keys jingled and the doorknob rattled for nearly half a minute. Sarah stumbled in. Her hair was windblown and her face was reddened. She tripped over the doormat but caught her balance on the back of one of the kitchen chairs.

Jane stood on the other side of the room. "Oh my god, Sarah, what happened?"

"Frank ditched out early," Sarah said spitefully. "I didn't know he was such a lightweight. I walked home."

"I thought you went to the movies?"

Sarah went to the living room and collapsed on the couch. It was late and she had to work in the morning. Jane tried to pull her back up.

"I don't need your help, you condescending twerp," she shrieked.

"You're so lucky mom's not home," Jane said. The cat meowed faintly.

"Yeah and you're lucky your dad sends you shit in the mail." She undressed, throwing her shirt in the corner of the living room, where it knocked a magazine off an end table. She kicked her pants off and slung them on the armchair next to the couch.

"What are you doing?" Jane went to grab the shirt and put the magazine back.

"Going to bed. You really are an idiot sometimes."

"Will you let me take you to our room?"

She didn't respond, so Jane took Sarah's arm and draped it over her shoulders. She supported her sister and led her into their room. Sarah fell into the bed. She grabbed a pillow and hugged it to her body.

Jane turned out the light and went to check on the cat. It had curled up to sleep on the pale blue bedspread. Jane ran water into a plastic bowl and put it on the floor beside her mother's dresser.

She went back into the kitchen and sat at the table. She glanced at the scattered stacks of bills and grocery store ads that covered the glass top. Jane thought of her mother in the truck stop, serving tired, gray-mustached drivers secret sauce-slathered double cheeseburgers that permeated her clothes and skin with their smell. Jane's mother would carry hundreds of dishes in a night, then come home in the morning and groan quietly as she stretched out in bed. A roar of laughter came in from beyond the wall.

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On Sunday afternoon, there was a knock on the door. Sarah was in the kitchen and answered it. Jane put down her pencil and listened.

"Oh, hey Frank. What's up?" Jane could picture Sarah twirling her hair around her finger and tapping the tip of her shoe against the tile.

"My girlfriend's cat is missing. Have you seen it?"

"She's your girlfriend now?"

"I get confused with labels. Have you seen the cat?"

"What does it look like?"

"Uhh, orange. Big."

"No, I don't think I've seen any cats like that," Sarah said. Jane stood in the bedroom doorway.

"I could hop in my mom's—my car. I'll drive around and help you look?" Sarah asked.

"No, don't worry about it," he said.

"Do you want my number in case I see it?"

"Nah that's fine," he said quickly. "How's Jane?"

Jane retreated back to their room. Sarah's foot stopped tapping.

"Uh, Jane is fine. Did you want to come in and say hi?"

"Nah I'm good. Catch you later."

"Good luck finding your cat. Let me know if you want help," Sarah called after him. Jane heard him go around the side of the building. He knocked on another door.

"JANE," Sarah boomed. She threw open the door to their room. Jane was clutching a small cardboard box covered in holes. A craft knife was on the bed beside her.

"What's wrong?" Jane asked.

"Why did Frank just ask me how you were doing?"

"What?"

"Frank just knocked on the door looking for his cat. Then he said 'how's Jane.' Why does he know your name?"

"Oh. We ran into each other at the corner store when I was getting eggs yesterday. I introduced myself." She cut another hole into the cardboard.

"Whatever," Sarah said. "What the hell are you doing to that box?"

"It's for a project."

"Right," Sarah said. She walked briskly out of the room.

Jane tossed the box behind her, jumped out of the bed, and went straight to their mother's bedroom. She locked the door behind her. Sarah was in the bathroom opening cabinets and drawers when Jane passed by. Their mother worked double shifts on Sundays and had been gone for hours.

Jane opened the closet and lifted the cat into a hug as Sarah rapped on the door and jiggled the handle.

"Jane! What are you doing in there?"

Jane bounced the cat like a baby. It mewed and she gasped and put her hand on its face. The cat started to squirm and yowl.

"Jane! What was that noise? Open the door, Jane. This is ridiculous."

The cat twisted out of her arms, clawing her across the neck. She let it down and it darted over to the door and started scratching, standing on its hind legs.

"Oh my god, Jane, what is going on in there?"

"Don't you have to work today?" Jane yelled through the door.

"You wish. No homework either."

Jane crumpled down to sit against the bed, watching the cat frantically rake its claws across the door. She put a hand to her neck, and the salt of her fingertips irritated the scratch. Her other hand rested limply on the floor. The cat eventually stopped clawing, and now it sat in front of the door with its nose shoved into the corner where the door met the frame.

Jane's breath came faster and she cried. "I'm sorry, Bastet," she whispered. But Jane would not move. She was encased in a hot blanket of solid dread.

An hour later, Jane was staring at the small, white picture frame on the dresser next to the hairspray can. It was a picture of Jane and her parents. The photo had been repaired with tape. The cat walked toward Jane. She put her hand out, but it walked past her and jumped up on the bed. She didn't turn to look at it until she heard liquid. She snatched the cat off the bed and its urine sprayed her clothes. She grasped the cat under its armpits and placed it in the makeshift litter box. The room smelled rank. Sarah opened the door.

"My god, you smell," she said to Jane. "This is Frank's cat, isn't it?"

Jane's eyes were wild and locked onto Sarah's. "Don't make me give her back," Jane said.

"I'm pretty sure stealing a living thing is a lot worse than stealing most things," Sarah said.

"They're not nice to her," Jane said. "You heard Frank yelling at her the other day."

"Well look what it did to you." Sarah pinched her nose.

"Will you strip the covers off mom's bed? Cat pee stains things."

"We're giving this cat back. Today," Sarah said.

"Why today? Why 'we'?"

"You're insane," Sarah said. She pulled a piece of paper out of her pocket. "Is this why you're stealing cats?" She held the paper in the air.

"What are you talking about?"

Sarah handed the paper to Jane. It was another note from their mother, stating that Jane's father was not coming on Wednesday. "I'm sorry, Janey," the note said. "I shouldn't have gotten your hopes up. He came in again last night + said he's not coming. He's going to Illinois for a job that starts Monday." At the bottom was added "I love you, Janey."

"Where was this?" Jane asked.

"You hadn't read it yet? It was in the glovebox. I found it while you were in here."

"Is he just coming later? Maybe in a few months?"

"I just read the same note, Jane. You should've expected this." The cat rubbed up against Sarah's leg. "If we take this cat back now, I won't tell Mom."

"You can go," Jane said. "I don't want to."

"I'm not the cat thief. You need to apologize."

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Frank opened the door. He blinked slowly and said "Can I help you?"

Sarah pointed to the cat. "This is yours, isn't it?"

Frank looked at her and folded his hands over his heart. "That is my cat," he said in an airy voice. "You found him." He was emphasizing the second word of each sentence.

"Her," said Jane, who was looking at her feet. She still did not want to go in. She held the cat out to Frank.

He took the cat and squeezed it against his chest. The cat made a pathetic noise.

"Can we come in?" Sarah asked.

"Why not?" Frank led them inside.

The blinds were drawn even though it was early evening. The room was lit by a string of multicolored Christmas lights that hung sloppily on the wall. They were lighting up one color at a time, but the blue ones were shorted out; every several seconds, the room was briefly dark. Orange, green, dark, red. Frank motioned for them to sit on the couch. When he sat in the adjacent chair, the cat jumped out of his arms and ran into the kitchen.
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"I just wanted to explain," Sarah said. "My sister Jane took your cat and wanted to keep it. I didn't know until just now."

It was hard for Jane to see anything clearly in the red light. Lyn's voice came from the kitchen: "Oh my god, Nutmeg! You came back to me!" She came into the living room carrying the cat. "You guys, Nutmeg came back!" The way her voice floated matched Frank's.

"I brought her back," Jane said.

Lyn sat in another armchair and put the cat on her lap. It kneaded her thighs before curling up.

It was easiest for Jane to see Frank, Lyn, and Sarah's faces when the lights were orange. "All that matters is that he's back now," Frank said. He was smiling dreamily.

"She." Jane said.

"What?"

"Your cat is a girl. You don't even know the gender of your own pet."

"I didn't know that," Frank said. "I don't know how to find that out. Do cats have junk?" He opened the mini-fridge next to the chair and pulled out a beer.

"Is that Guinness?" Sarah asked. "I love Guinness."

"Yeah," Frank said. He laid his head on the back of the chair. "I feel like if people met me right now, they would love me. Like I could sell a broke-down car to a person with no money. I just love myself."

Sarah stood. "You're being so crazy, Frank. Can I grab a beer?"

He closed his eyes and stretched his arms out. “I feel so aware of my body and the energy all around us, man. Never felt better.”

Sarah took a beer and sat back down. “Hey, did you know that Jane is only fourteen? You could be a bit more subtle.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Lyn said, giggling. She leaned down to the cat and rubbed her face in its fur.

The green lights made the walls and objects in the room the most visible. There were two shiny electric guitars mounted on the wall, their color obscured by the light they reflected. A thin, sleek laptop rested on top of the mini-fridge by Frank’s chair. Jane wondered what Frank’s dad looked like, and if he went to a music store to pick out a guitar for his son, or if he shopped online.

“I heard you yelling at the cat the other day,” Jane said. “Are you going to keep being mean to her since you have her back now?”

“It’s not cool to pee on other people’s stuff.”

“She peed on me too but I didn’t yell,” Jane said.

“Jane,” Sarah said.

Jane crossed her arms. The room went dark, then the red light bathed their faces.

“You were a lot chiller last time you were here,” Frank said. “Do you want more wine?.”

“Last time?” Sarah asked.

"He lost his temper, man," Lyn said to Jane. "Whatever. We all do. But I take care of my pets, and Nutmeg is my pet."

The orange lights reminded Jane of the lights that rimmed the ferris wheel at the fair. Jane, her father, and Sarah fit easily into the same small carriage. The air smelled less dusty as they went up and up. Her father held her hand and pointed to the tops of the carnival tents. "They kind of look like candy," he said. "Lollipops. Or weird mints."

"She was here another time?" Sarah prodded.

"Apparently I'm a bad influence," Frank said. He watched his hand as he waved it in front of his face.

"What does that mean? When was she here?" Sarah asked.

"Who cares," Frank said. "I don't feel like answering all these questions right now."

"Don't be a jerk," Lyn said. Then she whispered to Frank, "She has a crush on you." But it was loud enough for everyone to hear. Frank laughed. Sarah's face turned red, but it was hardly visible in the darkness. No one saw but Jane. The lights cycled: red, orange, green, dark again.

"I don't want to be here anymore," Jane said.

Sarah looked at her and nodded. They stood and Lyn thanked them for bringing the cat back.

They went back to their apartment. It had started to rain and the rooms were dark. Sarah went to their mother's bedroom. Jane followed. Sarah's head was buried

under the pillow. Jane watched her sister in silence for a moment. She picked up an apron that was strewn over a chair and folded it, then gently placed it back. The red apron looked like the color of dried blood in the dark.

"I'm sorry your dad isn't coming," Sarah said. Her voice was muffled by the sheets.

Jane closed the door gently and went into her room. The scratch stung and she pulled her shirt neck down so she could touch it. It had scabbed over, but was still tender. She took the drawing tablet from her desk drawer and sat on her bed, slowly twirling the pen between her fingers. She dozed off, holding the tablet against her chest.

Later, Jane thought she heard Lyn cooing to the cat. It was night now, and the rain was strong and loud. Keys jingled in the apartment door; their mother was home. Jane was feeling bad for her sister.

**Introverts**

Meg is sixteen and bad at making friends. She hangs out on the edge at the indoor skate park called the Complex and watches the lanky boys sail over the ramps. Tyler Wilson is nineteen or so—Meg isn't sure. He talks to Meg about video games and the card game they both play. Meg started coming to the Complex three weeks ago. Since neither of them skate, she and Tyler are only half-members of the social group. Meg doesn't go to the same school as the skaters, and she doesn't ask Tyler why he hangs out with people her age but she's heard rumors. Dropped out of high school, maybe got a GED, lives with his mom, maybe sells drugs, sinks a lot of time into a trading card game.

Tyler is the only person in the group who speaks to Meg without being spoken to first. He looks like a chubby Billie Joe Armstrong and wears button-ups over t-shirts. His voice is gentle. He's told Meg that it is the only physical aspect of himself that he likes.

"Hey, man," he greets her when she walks over to the bowl ramp. It is Saturday night. She says hey and sits on the edge of the ramp next to him, but she keeps a couple of feet between them. They watch the boys for a while. It is fall. Occasional gusts of wind rattle the aluminum siding of the building.

One of the boys comes barreling toward Meg on his board and barely misses her. Meg dodges, squeals, and blushes. "Hey, watch where you're going!" she shouts.

"Don't act like you didn't love that," Tyler says.

"What are you talking about?"

"He almost touched you. I bet you're dripping right now."

"You're gross."

"You're such a virgin," he taunts.

"Oh, shut up," she says, and asks if he wants to play a round of the card game. He reaches into the pockets of his baggy cargo shorts and pulls out two decks. He hands her one. They go and sit at the card table in the corner.

"Come on man, we're friends," he says gently. "You don't have to pretend you don't like him. You're terrible at hiding it. It's just a crush. You never tell me about anything that matters."

"Maybe because you're an ass," Meg says.

"If you hate me so much then why hang out with me? I'm only joking with you, man." He places his deck on the table in front of him and draws a hand.

"Fine, whatever," she says and shuffles her deck. "I like him."

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A month after they met, Meg's cellphone vibrates under her pillow. It is 12:43 a.m. and she is not allowed to use her phone past midnight. She had told Tyler this. They had been texting earlier. She gets up, locks her bedroom door, and sits down on the floor, thinking that maybe if she's lower to the ground her voice won't carry. "Hello?" she says in a whisper.

"Hey, man," he says. "I think I'm gonna kill myself."

"Oh my god," she says. "Why?"

"Why do you care? We're not even friends."
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"You're the one who called me. I'm not supposed to be on the phone right now." He has called her like this once before.

"I guess that says it all," he says. His voice cracks. "I've got a bottle full of pills right here, and I'm not fuckin' scared to do it."

"Don't. You said we were friends earlier." Meg says. The house creaks, and she scrambles into her bed. She knows the difference between house-settling creaks and and parent-footstep creaks, but she wants to be safe.

"Don't what?"

"Don't kill yourself, Tyler."

"Don't use that fuckin' tone with me. I'm serious. I've tried before. I wish it had worked." His voice is frantic, with a controlled urgency.

"I know you're serious," she says.

"Then stay on the line. If we're friends, Meg, talk to me."

"I'm not gonna be able to talk to you for weeks if I get caught on my phone. Can I text you instead?"

"I thought you would care more than this. Just another reason I'm an idiot."

"Tyler. What are you talking about? We're friends. I like you fine. You can be a nice guy sometimes."

"You're ridiculous for thinking you have a chance with Evan, you know. He doesn't know you exist. They would all think it's funny."

"I know," she says. "You're being a jerk."

"Thought you said I was a nice guy."

"Sometimes."

"I should just tell Evan you like him."

"No," Meg says.

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want you to. Because friends don't tell other friends' secrets."

"But we're not really friends," Tyler says. "It's not really a secret. There's no balance here, and that's why it's not a friendship. I tell you things but you don't trust me. You would be happier if I just killed myself."

"No, Tyler. I wouldn't be happy if you killed yourself."

"Relieved, then," Tyler says.

"No, stop it," Meg says.

Tyler interrupts. "You just don't want to admit it, because that would make you a terrible person."

"It doesn't feel like we're friends if you're threatening me."

"Oh my god." Tyler laughs mockingly. "Don't try to make this about yourself, Meg. This is not about you. I told you I want to fucking die and you're making it about you. This is why we're not friends."

"I wasn't talking about that. I was talking about what you said about telling Evan," Meg says.

"So you're changing the subject. Fine. It wasn't a threat. More like a suggestion. I just wish you would trust me more. I told you about trying to kill myself,

and depression, and pills. I need it to be a two-way street. That's how friendship works."

She covers the receiver. Her hand is quivering. At least he isn't talking about killing himself anymore. This feels more manageable. "Okay. I'll tell you a secret. This is goofy but I can't think of anything else." She pauses. "I write fanfiction."

Tyler breaks into a laugh. "Fanfiction? Like anime characters fucking?"

"Not all the time," Meg says quietly.

"Oh my god. You write erotic fanfiction. You're such a nerd. I love it, man."

"So now you know something that you can't say isn't a secret. Are you satisfied?"

"For now," he says.

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A couple of Saturdays later, the skater group is taking a break from the ramps to play a few games of cards. Meg is matched up against Evan's friend Chris, and Tyler is matched up against Evan. Meg is losing. She and Chris are playing on the table while Tyler and Evan sit cross-legged on the floor. Meg keeps looking at Evan but tries not to be obvious about it. She finishes a turn. Her phone buzzes.

A text from Tyler: "You write fanfiction about Evan, don't you?"

Tyler looks at her and laughs. "You're so red," he says. "What's up?"

Chris and Evan look at her. "Oh man, she is," Evan says.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Meg says. "My face is red?"

"Maybe you just have some kind of awful skin condition," Tyler says.
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"Why are you looking at my face so much?" Meg asks.

"Why do people look at trainwrecks?" he retorts.

Evan laughs and says "Holy shit."

Meg tells Tyler to shut up. They go back to their game.

Later, when they have finished their games and Evan and Tyler have stepped away, Chris says to Meg, "Do you think Tyler likes you?"

"God I hope not," she says.

Tyler puts his hands on the table and Meg flinches. "You don't have to worry about that," he says. "In fact, you don't have to worry about anyone here liking you."

"You're savage," Chris says. Meg crosses her arms.

When Meg gets home, another text comes. "Don't be such a bitch. I thought we were supposed to be friends."

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Meg is twenty-one, at college, and she kicks off her semester by going to a party. Her boyfriend Sam stays in.

Jeff Harris is hosting the party. Meg talked to Jeff about two years ago when he was a freshman. They talked about gardening at a university-sponsored "bash" that was meant to help new students get socially acclimated.

When Meg arrives at the party there are five people there. She knows two of them other than Jeff, but they are talking to the other two people. Meg asks where the beer is, gets one, and sits on the couch. In the corner of the room is a color-changing lamp. Jeff is sitting on the couch, legs spread and in a deep slouch. He is nodding to
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the music playing from a laptop on a table in the corner. Meg apologizes to Jeff for not making it to his party on opening weekend.

"I went to another party on Friday," she says. "Then my introvert meter was full. I can't do two parties in one weekend."

"No, dude, I totally feel that," Jeff says. "You're talking to a huge introvert."

Meg doesn't know what else to say. One of the other people mentions lucid dreaming in their conversation. Jeff speaks up and says that lucid dreaming is amazing.

Meg asks him how it works, and Jeff says that you have to find something to look for as the sign that you're dreaming, something that looks or feels the same every time, like looking in a mirror.

"Like recurring dreams? I only ever have recurring nightmares," Meg says.

Jeff says that it could still work, as long as she can tell when it's happening. She needs to pay attention to the particulars, look for patterns, he tells her, and find one specific clue.

"Yeah, but I don't want to think about them that much," Meg says. "And I really don't want those dreams to happen again. I think it was an anxiety thing. But if that's the case then I'll almost certainly have them again," Meg says. She takes a big drink from her beer.

"You have anxiety, too?" Jeff angles his body toward her on the couch.

"Yeah, mostly normal college stress stuff and social anxiety. Honestly half of why I came here is to try and beat social anxiety. Like, it's my senior year and I still

don't really have friends. I have my boyfriend, Sam, and I love Sam and he's great, but sometimes I just feel like a loser weirdo for not having friends at this point. So I'm trying to get out more. But then I come to things and just end up talking about myself and not knowing what to do with my hands."

Meg thinks she has just talked too much, too early. No one is even drunk yet.

"I make dreamcatchers," Jeff says. Meg raises her eyebrows. "I think they actually help. Plus they're just fun to make." He shrugs. "I don't know."

"I joke that my boyfriend, Sam, is my dreamcatcher. He's part Native American."

Jeff laughs with a closed-mouth smile. The song switches to an aggressive, thudding pop hit.

More people arrive at the party. Meg knows a few of them. She flits between groups, drinking from her can when she doesn't know what to say. She goes for another beer every half hour. After a while, the party migrates to a beer pong tournament in the garage, where a semicircle of chairs and couches face the beer pong table.

Jeff and Meg end up on the same team. They sit in old armchairs while they wait for their turn. The other seats are filled with other guests. The garage door is open and warm September air filters in.

"I never knew we were so similar," Jeff says. He is leaning forward, bracing his elbows on his knees. They had been talking. "I'm not good at maintaining friendships either. I have anxiety and depression too. We both hate small talk and

we're both connecting so easily." He is speaking in a quiet, lazy half-mumble. "It's like you're me, but as a girl. Even the way you dress."

She is wearing purple skinny jeans and a t-shirt with cats on it. Jeff is wearing tight black pants and a band t-shirt. They both have wire-rimmed glasses. His are rounder. Meg is sitting stiffly, but leaning close to hear him.

Jeff stands up. "Hold on," he says. He goes back into the house. He comes back a minute later, sits down, and hands her a small dreamcatcher. The frame of it is wrapped in leather cord, with what looks like white thread for the web-like center.

She looks at it and says, "Hey, thanks. What's this for?"

"You talked about having nightmares. Maybe this will help."

"Oh. Well, thanks," she says. She puts it in her purse and fixes her gaze toward the beer pong game.

When it is their turn to play, they lose. They synchronize their shots and laugh when they both miss.

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It is the middle of December and Meg is sitting in a red armchair in the back room of the campus coffee shop across the street from the English department. The coffee shop is full of people gazing at laptops and books. The sterile quiet charges Meg with a scholarly can-do attitude. She types a draft of a final project report on her laptop, balancing it on her lap. Her feet rest on the coffee table in front of her. The paper is due the next day.
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She sees Jeff come in, but the angle of her chair hides her until he sits down. They make brief eye contact and exchange head nods. Meg shifts her laptop around. She picks up her coffee cup and holds it in front of her face, then puts it back on the table. She fidgets in the same kind of nervous way in reaction to people she likes and people that make her uncomfortable. She isn't sure if she should be uncomfortable.

Jeff stands up, laptop in hand. He leaves his backpack next to his seat, comes over, and sits in the chair adjacent to Meg.

"Hey," Meg says too loudly, glancing at him quickly.

"Do you wanna read this poem I just wrote?" he asks. "I think it's pretty good."

"Uh, sure, I guess, if you want me to," Meg shrugs. "But I'm not really a poetry person."

"I literally just wrote it, like, 15 minutes ago." He laughs and passes the laptop to Meg. He has very thin lips and a mole above his mouth on the left side. He is wearing a floppy, gray beanie.

The poem is four lines long, each line ending in a rhyming monosyllabic word. She reads it twice, quickly. Her face turns red. She hands the laptop back to him. He is smiling.

"Okay," she says.

"Yeah," he says. "I made this girl a dreamcatcher. I don't know." He shrugs. "What did you think of it?" His expression changes back and forth between a mouth-corner smile and a straight-mouthed stare.

She keeps her eyes on her screen, grits her teeth, tries to get back into the paper. She can only concentrate on the heat and steady whirring sound coming from the fans of all the laptops. “Like I said, I’m not really a poetry person.”

“What do you mean?” He leans back in the chair and crosses his legs. “Everyone’s a poetry person, like—”

“I mean it’s not what I study,” she says. “I study fiction.” She glances at the other people in the coffee shop, wondering if any of them are eavesdropping.

“Yeah, I know,” he says. “But what did you think? I know you’re good at literature and I wanted to get your opinion.”

She looks toward the front of the coffee shop. Gail, the middle-aged owner with blond hair and glasses who Meg thinks of as a spacey surrogate mother, has her back turned, reaching for something on the shelf. Meg looks back at Jeff. He is still looking at her.

“It was fine,” Meg says. Jeff seems unsatisfied. “Rhyme schemes are hard,” she adds.

“How’s your dreamcatcher working out?” Jeff asks.

“Oh, um, I never really did anything with it. I guess I don’t know how to use it,” Meg says. She fidgets with a loose thread hanging from the seam of her pant leg.

“I would’ve shown you if you would’ve asked,” he says.

Meg moves her feet and looks at the table where they had been resting. There is a pamphlet titled “5 Ways to Survive Finals,” with an image of a woman hanging

onto the edge of a cliff. The cliff is labeled “finals.” She flips the pamphlet over. Meg sees a girl at a nearby table look at her, and she puts the pamphlet back on the table.

Jeff reads a line from the poem out loud. Meg cringes, turning her face so he can’t see. “I really like that line,” he says. He shrugs again and repeats “I don’t know.”

“You’ve got some internal rhyme there too, with ‘ail’ and ‘fail.’” Meg speaks as quietly as she can without whispering.

“Yeah, there’s internal rhyme in every line. And a lot of word sounds going together.” He reads some words from the poem. “What’s that called? Like, the device?”

“That would be assonance or consonance.” She doesn’t look at him for a while. “Yeah like I said, rhyme schemes are hard,” Meg says. She looks for Gail again but doesn’t see her. The silence is now uncomfortable. “I’m only good at poems when I’m upset or depressed or something. And then I’m still not good at poems. I do stories.”

“I think I’m pretty good sometimes,” Jeff says.

Meg wants to immerse herself back into the project, but she can’t regain her train of thought. She pulls her laptop back onto her lap and holds her hands above the keyboard, tensing and curling her fingers. Her eyes dart back and forth on her screen. Jeff starts to bounce his leg.

Then he stands up. “Yeah, well...” he trails, and goes back over to his original seat.

Meg steals glances at Jeff, but he doesn’t look at her. She glances at other students in the cafe and feels like she is a microsecond too late to catch each of them

scrutinizing her. She stares at the sentence she left hanging in the middle of her paper, reading it over and over but not remembering how it was supposed to end.

It seems undeniable that the song Jeff sent to the email address of the magazine Meg edited was also about her. It seems undeniable that he pretended not to know Sam's name the previous week when she and Sam ran into Jeff at an art gallery. How could Jeff not know Sam's name when the three had volunteered at a dog shelter together the last time Jeff had asked Meg to hang out with him? But that was at least a month ago. Jeff had picked her and Sam up at the apartment they shared and drove them all there in his car. Sam sat in the back, and on the way there Meg and Jeff exchanged small talk. When they got to the shelter, Sam and Meg walked a dog together while Jeff walked another dog on the other side of the property. They only traded brief comments about the dogs' temperaments inside the kennel when switching out the animals.

With the seemingly undeniable comes the seemingly possible. Just a couple of weeks ago Meg saw Jeff in the same coffee shop. He sat at her table and asked how she was. She said that she had stopped going to group therapy. He said that he had just gotten diagnosed with bipolar disorder after going on a bender, stealing clothes from retail stores, getting obsessed with a girl, and cutting his hair. It seems possible that it was not a confession, but something else.

It also seems possible that Meg misread the poem.

Jeff gets up and Meg tenses. She sneaks glances and sees him putting on his coat and backpack in swift, stiff motions. It has been mere minutes since he went back to his seat. He walks past her and leaves without saying anything to or looking at Meg.

She tries again to get back to her paper. She stares at the screen. She scratches her head. She hears footsteps coming toward the back room and her pulse quickens. It isn't Jeff; it is a girl she doesn't recall seeing before. This happens three more times before Meg decides that she cannot stay here. She is frustrated at Jeff, she thinks, and later tells Sam, because she was making such good progress on the paper and doesn't want to waste time thinking about this when it doesn't matter.

She puts on her coat and places her folder and laptop in her backpack. She looks at the other students with their books and laptops, and none of them look up at her. When she walks to the front of the shop, she almost tells Gail why she is leaving. Instead, Meg says "Have a nice holiday break, Gail."

"You too, Meg," Gail says. "Have a good night, good luck with finals."

Meg makes eye contact, smiles, and nods.

Meg walks quickly, looking cautiously at the faces around her, and heads straight for the English building. She is grateful that she has the key to her magazine's office with her.

She locks the door of the office behind her and tapes a piece of paper over the window in the door. She turns on the light. The wooden conference table that takes up most of the room is surrounded by empty chairs. She sits down at the desk. Her leg bounces furiously.

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On a Saturday night at the Complex, the skaters have gone home. Meg and Tyler play a last game of cards. Tyler makes a play to win the game. Meg knows she has lost, but writes down the score anyway to find out by how much.

"I can't believe you still haven't beaten me," Tyler says.

"Your deck is better than mine."

"Sure, that's all it is."

Meg stands to leave, paper and pencil in hand. She walks toward the door. "I gotta go," she says. "See you next weekend."

Tyler follows her out the door and grabs her wrist. She tries to jerk it free, then looks at him. His eyes look frantic. "What are you doing?" she asks, and tries to pull her arm away again. He steps forward, takes hold of her shirt collar, and pushes her against the side of the building. In an instant, her fist tightens around the pencil she is holding in her other hand and she stabs it into his stomach. The paper flutters out of her grip and drifts to the ground. They look at each other in mirrored panic. He lets go of her wrist and shirt and she lets go of the pencil. She looks at where it went in. He fingers the area and blood transfers to his fingertips. A red halo expands on his shirt.

"What the fuck," Meg says.

"What did you just do?" He is holding the bloodied hand out to her as if to offer her something.
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She looks at his face and takes a step backward. She turns and runs to her car. When she gets in and starts the engine, her headlights illuminate him. She doesn't look at him and drives home. She never again returns to the Complex.

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Meg opens her backpack and takes out a book. When she is reading she grips her wrist and considers how small it is, wonders how much pressure would be necessary to break it.
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