

UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI

Date: 4-Aug-2010

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hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of:

Doctor of Philosophy

in English & Comparative Literature

It is entitled:

Mother, Mother (a novel)

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Mother, Mother:

A Novel

A dissertation submitted to the
Graduate School at the University of Cincinnati

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.)

In the Department of English and Comparative Literature
of the College of Arts and Sciences

2010

By

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Abstract

Continuing a tradition of literary retellings, the creative portion of my dissertation—a novel currently titled *Mother, Mother*—is a loose reimagining of the Grimm’s fairytale “Snow White.” Set in modern day, the novel does not simply revisit each element of the original tale, but instead explores the complexities of mother-daughter dynamics, as well as the cultural definitions and demands on female beauty and the ways women are (de)formed by such forces. Beginning with Blair’s miraculous birth in a snowstorm, the novel follows her childhood and early adult years as she attempts to come to terms with the death of her mother and her thorny relationship with her stepmother, Vivian. Rather than creating a distinct polarization of “good” and “evil,” this version attempts to present its characters as fully-developed women who struggle with their roles—both as (step)mother/daughter, as well as women in a contemporary society obsessed with youth and beauty. The novel is particularly concerned with mirrors and how they shape not only our present but also our past and future selves. The first-person, retrospective narrative also creates a certain amount of ambiguity surrounding the “truth” of the magical experiences of Blair’s early childhood and asks the reader to consider the artificial aspect of all memory.

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Part I

Six Identical Arms

I was born in a snowstorm. Not in a hospital during a snowstorm. Not stranded in a car or trapped in a house. But off the back of a snowmobile in the middle of a snowstorm. In some more temperate place you would have called it a blizzard, but these were too common to us. Blizzards are frightening and wonderful—the prospect of being cozily locked up, of slowly going mad. Snowstorms are less glamorous; they imply heaviness and inconvenience—which is precisely how it must have seemed when my young, ill-advised parents decided it would be quicker—and yes, safer—to take the snowmobile across the village to the clinic where I should have been born.

They never made it to the clinic. They'd only been on the snowmobile a few minutes when my mother screamed "Stop!" and my father asked "Now?" and the next thing they knew I was huddled beneath her jacket and we were racing home. This is how I like to think of us. His arms around her, her arms around me, and my arms making six. Six—like a snowflake's nearly identical crystal arms. Whoever decided seven was such a magical number should have taken a closer look at six.

Magical—or a close approximation of it—was something the mountain village where I was born wanted very much to be. There were no megaplex theaters or chain restaurants or hospitals (hence the clinic). The whole feel of the place was supposed to be Alpine, as though we'd been miraculously plucked from capitalist America and plopped smack in the middle of some remote Bavarian goat-herding community. Only with ski lifts and tourists and five dollar

hot chocolates from a machine. All the buildings had been affixed with cheap half-timber facades and perpetually empty flowerboxes. The gift shops sold giant ceramic steins, cuckoo clocks, and little fairy-tale castles trapped in snow globes. Even as a child I'd look around and shake my head and think, "People. This is Montana." But someone had tried very hard to make it all come off as Old World rustic—which to the tourists was another kind of exotic. The safer kind. So we went along with it.

Being born into a place that is both real and not real, you don't worry so much about the truth of things. People say, "This is how it happened," and you say, "Okay, this is how it happened." It wasn't until I ran away from there that I began to understand the distinction. But that doesn't come about for a long, long time.

I was born by snow, both my mother and father died by it, and sometimes I think I'll die by it, too. But now I'm just being too tidy. Probably I'll die in a hospital, somewhere far away from here. In a place where they've never even heard of snow. I'll say, "Wait, I was supposed to bite it in the snow!" and they'll shake their heads and whisper that my mind's already gone.

But I can't help it. When I close my eyes and imagine dying there's always snow. Piles of the stuff spilling around me. It's all you can see.

My mother thought I should be named after the snow I was born in, but my father said, "Oh no, she's had enough of *that* for now."

He suggested Blair because it was dry and barren.

"How horrid," I can almost hear my mother saying. "Why not just call her Drought or Prude or Shrew." I like to imagine my mother would have put her foot down for the snow and the white and how she must have seen it all as coinciding with the beauty of my birth. Her first child, a daughter. She must have fallen asleep that night dreaming of me.

But, of course—as these things happen—she died the next day. There was no time to consider the possibility of any other name. And so it stuck.

Within a year my father had taken a new wife, Vivian. I like to think of it this way, as though he simply popped into the wife shop and selected an adequate model. This is preferable to thinking of them sneaking about until an “acceptable” amount of time had passed. Which is, no doubt, what must have happened. We no longer live in a world where widower men with children *need* a woman, as they once did. But then again maybe there was some part of him thinking, *won't this just be easier—for the child also, won't she need a mother*. I could live with him replacing my mother on my account, with him making that sacrifice for me.

My mother had come to the resort as a seasonal worker, and though technically not foreign, her dark skin and long black hair made her seem so. When necessary she could ape her parent's Tejano accent; thus, she was considered temporary and expendable—and this would have been just fine with her. She'd grown up on a little island off the coast of Texas, a place so decimated by its hurricane of 1900 that nearly eighty years later people were still looking around themselves, asking, “Am I still here? Have my legs blown away?” This hurricane is still considered the deadliest natural disaster in American history. And not my mother, not anyone from that thin strip of Gulf coast, was ever allowed to forget it. If she would have lived, she would have quizzed me: “How many people died?” and I would have answered automatically, “Eight thousand.” Or maybe not. Probably her stories would have been more personal, less concerned with statistics—though they're all I have to go by. I know little more about it than what I've read in books, and people who write books—at least the ones I've read—seem to like data. Numbers, I imagine these writers saying, are what's real. You can rely on a number.

I'm not so sure though. I have these images in my mind, and they're far more real to me than anything you could read in a book.

I see my mother facing this hurricane, standing on the edge of some pier, the wind and the brown ocean swirling around her. But she is unafraid; she opens her mouths and swallows the hurricane whole. It whirls madly inside her, sucking her heart, her lungs, her womb into its spin, but the hurricane can't break her, and eventually it calms. She's won—at least she thinks she has. What she doesn't know is that this hurricane is just festering, waiting for its chance to break free. Of course, this is impossible; my mother was not born until 1960, over half a decade too late.

The winter after she graduated high school she came to Montana because she wanted to see more of the world and because she'd never held real snow in her hands before. She knew the snow would be cold but never imagined it could also burn—and that's what she must have liked most about it. That it could be two opposite things as once.

When she arrived she was assigned to serve coffee and juice at the grand breakfast buffet in the main lodge—a privilege granted because she was pretty and young. That is, pretty enough to be easy on the eyes, not so much to be a threat. This job was considered “better” because it did not involve stripping beds or scrubbing toilets. Also, she earned more in tips, which were under the table.

I don't know what my mother did with these tips, but I like to imagine she kept them in a jar under her bed. Perhaps a jar her own mother had given her as a going-away gift. Filled with something delicious—sweet roasted peppers or spicy orange habañeros—which had reminded her that not all the world was covered in snow. When whatever had been there was gone, she'd have begun filling the jar with the stray dollars she collected every morning. Left on the tables

out of pity or obligation—she didn't care. One day she would take this jar and do something wonderful with it.

But then she met my father. Got pregnant. Brought me into a storm. Died.

A sad, sad story, people like to say, but don't they all end that way?

My mother did not die from complications of childbirth so much as complications of personality. For though she was a small and delicate woman, she'd grown up the youngest in a pack of sturdy brothers. And as with animals raised outside their kind, she must have believed that she too was strong and built to run and chop wood and wrestle in the mud. No one ever told her she'd be better off sitting in the corner, sewing lace with the old ladies of her family. No one told her, and so she ran and chopped and wrestled her way up through life. When she came to Montana that first winter she learned to ski and shovel and steal from the lodge kitchens industrial-sized baking sheets that could double as sleds. In return for teaching her these things, she taught my father—who despite his love of adventure really knew nothing about the basic survival of life—to chop wood. This was how they must have fallen in love.

Sometimes I believe that. Other times I think: a bar, tequila, accident, me.

Perhaps my mother died because my father was a ski bum—though it's hard to blame him for loving something so much. He'd abandoned his parents' normal Midwestern expectations to work a ski lift for minimum wage in exchange for a seemingly endless winter. The morning after I was born, the snow had settled into a soft powder, and as the sun crept over the eastern expanse of the mountain, it lit up a clear blue sky. Just the kind of day my father lived for, perfect runs, perfect light, perfect snow. On these mornings he woke at dawn; he needed to be earliest to the lift because once a trail had been skied it was ruined for him, degraded by others' tracks—so he had to be first. Powder—there was nothing else like it in the

world, he once told me, so light; skiing it was like flying. And when he said that I thought of those six brittle snowflake arms snapping beneath him, and it seemed a cruel thing as well, only I couldn't tell him so.

But that morning after I was born, he knew he'd have to stay inside. My mother was sitting up in bed, and I slept curled in her arms. Some things, he understood, were more important than snow.

"See," my mother spoke to me. "We don't need doctors. Hah! They're not even real doctors." Growing up as she did, surrounded by women who knew how to "do things" and men who seemed unbreakable, she'd only ever known home deliveries. "I can handle this," she told my father. "No problem." Her own mother had never stayed in bed for more than a good sleep after giving birth, and my mother knew she'd be the same way: resilient, indestructible. Only she was wrong. She couldn't have known what was lurking inside her.

So on that perfect morning, when my father stood by the window of their employee-subsidized apartment gazing out at the mountain, my mother said, "Go," and my father said, "But?" and my mother commanded, "Get out," and my father shook his head. And then my mother pulled the alarm clock from the bedside table and threw it at him.

Though it missed my father (I like to think she could have hit him if she'd chosen), the clock left a purple-black mark on wall, small at first, but then it began to grow, like a bruise. My father wouldn't notice it until the next morning—my second, his first without my mother. I imagine he stared at the mark for a long time, though he couldn't have seen the expanding. It would have taken him a day or two to realize, but then it was too late. By the time my father left the apartment to move in with Vivian—not so many months later—the bruise had grown into a large oval. During the day it seemed to be competing with the window beside it—one letting in

the day, the other the night. The manager insisted my father repaint the walls or there'd be no deposit return. But for each coat of white my father applied, the bruise seemed to grow darker, and it spread until it covered the entire wall, and then the entire apartment. "Is this some kind of joke?" the manager asked. My father shook his head and left without the hundred dollars he'd put down just one year before. Only a funny thing happened. The next day when the manager returned with his own bucket of paint, he found the walls had turned a sickly greenish yellow. "You ski bums think you're so funny," he screamed at my father over the phone. "I'll fix it," my father said, though he had no idea how. Only, when he returned for the last time, he found that the bruise was gone. *It hadn't simply disappeared*, he told me, so often I could mouth the words with him. *No, the walls somehow renewed—like skin that's healed after a cut.*

So in the end, her throwing the alarm clock turned out to be something wonderful in its own way. But on the morning after I was born he'd turned to her and shouted, "If you keep breaking all our things, we'll have nothing left!"

It was true; my mother had a habit of hurling plates of food across the room, of pitching books or shampoo bottles or the porcelain religious figurines she'd brought from home—whatever happened to be in her hands at the moment. And it didn't take much for her temper to flare. She'd grown up in a house where violence was a language—not just of rage, but of annoyance, of distrust, of play, of love. So her throwing things wasn't always to show anger. And my father understood this about her, or after a while he did, but he also knew they didn't have the money to be constantly replacing things she broke.

They were poor—not an accidental poor either, but poor by choice. He because he wanted to ski and to buy fun but expensive toys like snowmobiles, she because she wanted to stay with him—even though her parents had begged her to come home where she might find

good work or even go to school. They didn't care if she'd been knocked up. Even if it was by someone who came from a pale-sounding place like Ohio. "Forget that silly boy," they'd warned. "He'll just leave you cold when he's had enough."

And so on the morning after I was born, when my mother threw the alarm clock and my father worried that she'd break all their things and they'd have no money to replace them, he must have also been thinking of his duties to her and how he just needed to prove to her family that he wasn't *that* type. The type to turn tail and run.

"Oh no," he said. Replacing the broken alarm clock on the bedside table and climbing into bed beside her. "I'm staying right here beside you today."

Maybe if she'd gotten angrier, if she thrown a lamp or a chair or me—maybe then he would have done what he'd promised and she'd have stayed where she belonged and things would have turned out differently for everyone. But instead she shrunk away from him and began to cry quietly. At first he thought he was hearing something else, mice in the walls, perhaps (this was not uncommon). It seemed a shuffling sound, tiny scampering feet. Only when he looked at my mother and saw her eyes were wet, did he realize that his insisting on staying was far worse—to her—than if he'd abandoned her completely. And so reluctantly he climbed out of bed.

As he left she must have been thinking, "This man. He really loves me."

When he found her that afternoon, collapsed in the snow, a shovel at her side, me bundled in a bassinet beside her, he could only assume she'd wanted to prove her toughness to him. That she could give birth one day and be out shoveling snow the next. Like her mother if there'd been snow in Texas. A stupid, stupid thing to do—though for years I believed, as my

father told me, that it showed bravery and gumption. He'd say, "You're just like her, so spunky." But now I think, gumption? Is that worth dying for?

How did my father feel when he found her? She would have already been dead for some time; her lips blue, her limbs stiff. Devastated? As though his life could not possibly go on? He never said. Maybe he was waiting until I'd aged a bit, when I might better understand the complicated emotions a man feels when he finds his wife dead, his newborn motherless. He couldn't have known that he too would be snatched away without warning.

So when he told me of my birth, he didn't worry about describing the adult pain he could just as easily fill in later. Instead, he chose to entertain me: he waved his arms; he imitated my mother's voice; he occasionally fell to the snow, clasping his hand to his heart and shouting silly things like, "Out, out, brief candle!" In that way I grew up thinking of my mother as a kind of non-person, a supporting actress in the story of her death. She had little background and was only on stage long enough to make the main event—her dying—believable. It was a story about getting to the end.

A wonderful, gripping story I begged him to tell over and over again.

My favorite part, when I was a child, was the bleeding from the inside.

"You couldn't see it?" I'd ask, knowing the answer of course. I'd imagine the perfect red blood pooling beneath her skin, the tearing, the spreading. And I thought if he hadn't found her—if she'd been left there forever—she would have turned a deep, romantic, apple red. From the sky she would have seemed a pin-prick of blood on the snow.

This fantasy was also fueled, in part, by something Vivian later told me. After my father was killed, I still craved his stories, so I begged Vivian to tell me about my mother. Only Vivian claimed they'd never met, had never even laid eyes on each other. But I was a persistent child,

not letting up when I wanted something. And I wanted a mother. I was fascinated by her, not so much because of who she was, but because she was dead. Really, really dead—I'd been there beside her after all—unlike my father, who, for many years, I believed was simply lost somewhere in the mountains.

“She was a flower eater,” Vivian said.

“What?” I asked, loving her answer before I knew it. Feasting on flowers! That must be something reserved for fairies and queens.

“She ate flowers—or their petals. Only the red ones, though. Red rose petals. Maybe she thought they'd color her lips,” Vivian added, rolling her eyes—not because she was jealous, but because Vivian was, and I say this without hesitation, the most beautiful human being alive. Sometimes it hurt to look at her. Like the white glare of snow in the sunlight. I always thought, if she wanted, she could turn a man blind. It was safer to view her with fingers fanned across the eyes.

It didn't occur to me to ask then how Vivian knew this strange thing about my mother. Surely my father hadn't told her. And I didn't think about how small our village was, how few residents there were, how easy it was to know the darkest things about people. Instead I liked to imagine that Vivian and my mother had been best friends, that my mother had made Vivian promise to marry my father if anything should happen. So I told myself this was just the first of many wonderful things Vivian would reveal to me over the years. I liked the idea of her passing the stories slowly, like peeling a Clementine and feeding me the tiny slices one at a time, so that I'd never be satisfied, would never stop wanting more.

But I was wrong. This was the last thing Vivian ever told me about her. I mean, the last thing that was ever true to me.

*

Michael was born when I was three. When Vivian's stomach began to grow, my father explained, "That's your half brother or half sister in there." This terrified me. Which half would it be? The top or the bottom? The left or the right? Or perhaps something more monstrous—eyes without lids, an upper lip but not a lower, fingers but no hands, feet but no legs.

I tried very hard not to think about it. I hoped that by ignoring this half thing, he'd simply shrivel in Vivian's belly and leave us all alone—but he kept growing.

When Vivian was a week from her due date, my father drove her down the valley and through the mountain pass to where there was a small city with everything a small city should have—not just movie theaters and chain restaurants, but also buses, stop lights, sprawling cemeteries. And a hospital. He wasn't taking chances this time. He'd even arranged for me to stay with him in a nearby hotel.

Things had changed for my father when he married Vivian—though I didn't realize it then. Vivian was our official "local artist." Her mountain-scapes and big skies would never hang in museums, but the tourists liked them well enough to pay ten times what they could have been worth. And Vivian must have known she was not an "artist" so much as a manufacturer. On a good day she claimed she could knock out ten canvases in one afternoon. Even after my father died, when she became obsessed with painting her own face and would spend entire evenings locked in her studio, talking to her mirror, not knowing I was watching her through a crack in the door—even then she managed to turn a considerable profit with her landscapes.

So when my father married her, he also found himself better off than he'd ever been, and paying for us to stay in an overpriced hotel was nothing at all like replacing a five-dollar alarm clock.

The week we spent in that hotel was wonderful. It seemed a world away from the darkness of the main lodge where I sometimes played. There were no stone fireplaces, no Wagner pumping across the loudspeakers, no buck heads staring down at us with their shiny black eyes. Instead the halls were an endless maze of doors and beige carpeting and emptiness. I could run from one end to the other without having to flatten myself against the wall as returning skiers tramped by in heavy boots. I didn't have to curtsy and say "*Guten Tag*," as my father had taught me. If I passed anyone as I was running down the hall of this hotel all I had to say was " 'scuse me!" and they'd say something like "How cute!" because what could be more adorable than a little girl running around a near-deserted hotel like a maniac?

Only in the evenings, when my father took me to see Vivian for a few hours, I'd remember why we'd come, and my terror of this half-person hiding inside her would return. But then one afternoon my father lifted me before a window; on the other side all sorts of babies were neatly packed in plastic boxes. "Oh thank goodness," I thought, "we get to pick out a whole one."

"That's him," my father pointed, and I didn't know to which, but I didn't care because they were all whole—no halvsies, no monster babies.

"His name is Michael," he said.

"I love him," I replied—because I knew even then how to get what I wanted. And right then I wanted my father to not forget me. So I claimed to love this squirmy little pickle I didn't

care a thing about—and who was clearly of no relation to me, just some abandoned child we got in exchange for the rotten half thing that came out of Vivian.

I never told my father I knew about Michael—that he was no one to any of us. But for a long time I'd dream of my real brother, the one who'd been discarded. Sometimes he was the left half, others the right, but always he was naked and emaciated and dragging himself by his one arm. He wore a banana peel on his half head—perhaps because I associated banana peels (a la Oscar the Grouch) with garbage cans, which was exactly where I assumed they'd thrown him—trash for the trash. In good dreams I saved him, and we'd run away together because I'd realize he wasn't so terrible after all. But in the bad dreams he'd attack, scratching at my arms in attempt to tear from me the side he was missing. "Mine," he'd shout. "Mine!" At first I wanted to resist, but in the end I'd give up because I knew I owed it to him.

Even when I was awake, I often thought of him. I named him Jones, and when Michael tried to play with me I'd sometimes say, "Oh, no. I'm playing with my real brother, Jones." If I wanted to be especially mean I'd tell Michael about what had happened in the hospital. About how Vivian was afraid of the half baby, so they traded him in for Michael—who was whole but clearly only wanted by desperate people. At first Michael called me a liar and threatened to tell Vivian, though he never did. But after a while he began to like the story. Or, more specifically, he began to like Jones. He'd ask, "How does Jones walk?" or "How does Jones ride a bike?" Then one day *he* claimed to be playing with Jones. I could have done the meanest thing of all and told him Jones was a lie. Maybe if I'd known how things would play out, the kinds of trouble Jones would cause, then I might have gotten rid him quickly and easily before Michael knew better.

But I decided to let Michael have Jones, if that's what he wanted. And he kept him—much, much longer than he should have.

*

Michael was the kind of child we all want to love. Not because of his smile or the way he'd say things that made adults respond "How clever!" but because he could only return his love to one person at a time. Which is to say, we were all competing for him and didn't know it. Perhaps Vivian knew, but she pretended not to. Even my father, who was really a caring man and claimed to have no favorites of any kind, would glance at Michael when he didn't think anyone was watching. In that look I could tell he was calculating. How much attention could he give Michael? Not so much that Michael would grow bored or contemptuous. But enough to make him hunger for more. That was the trick. It wasn't enough to simply love him. Even when I was mean to him, I knew that on some level I was only trying to entice him. To make him beg for my love.

My father must have figured this out as well. When I was five he began giving me skiing lessons. Michael was just two then and was deemed if not too young, then too small. But rather than letting that be that, my father insisted Vivian dress Michael in his bibs and sit with him at the bottom of the bunny slope where he could watch as I learned. My father would ski backwards with me following, snowplowing, my skis a giant V. "Very good," he'd say to me, though his eyes would stray to Michael.

But this is not to say my father also didn't love me. As my skiing improved, he began taking me up the lifts. At first to the beginner greens, then the intermediate blues, and finally the

black diamonds. Being so small I could easily maneuver the moguls, and I craved the steepest hills. As I lay in bed the nights after we'd skied, I'd close my eyes and imagine slopes so steep you had to strain to keep your skis on the snow, or else you'd simply fly away. And I thought, if I ever found that hill, maybe I'd just let go. It wouldn't be so bad, knowing you'd first had a moment of flight.

Vivian never skied, nor did she give any explanation, she'd simply say, "Not for me." So my father and I spent many days together on the slopes without Vivian and Michael. This was when he'd tell me the stories about my mother. And about the snow people.

I know how it sounds. A lovely story about people made of snow who live in the forests of the mountain. Who you can only see by the light of the moon. Who would grant you a wish if you were pure of heart.

Wrong. This was not that kind of story. My father wasn't trying to entertain me with this one, he was trying to protect me. These snow people did dwell in the deepest woods, that much is true—but they were not made of snow. Far from it.

They were made of flesh and blood, like humans, only by some genetic mutation stretched taller and thinner. They were called snow people because their bodies were so hot, that only by living in sub-freezing temperatures could they manage to survive. What's worse, they aged so rapidly that at twenty they might appear eighty. Maybe if it had only been the heat, there wouldn't have been a problem. But the snow people were like us, they feared growing old. To keep themselves young they needed child's blood, which could only be got by thieving. So, deep in the forests they made their homes—and they waited. It was said that if you were walking through a woods and felt something tugging your arm, it might be a snow person trying

to steal you away. You would know because you could feel their warmth—and you could hear it. Soft, like simmering, my father had explained. Like steam begging water to let it free.

When a child was captured by a snow person she would be too enchanted to run away. Very gently—because they didn't really want to hurt anyone—the snow person would prick each of the child's fingers with his needle-like nails, then place those fingers in his mouth, one at a time. He only needed a few drops to regain his youth. If you didn't know better you'd call it beautiful. After that, the child would be set free, not remembering what had happened, no one the wiser.

If that was all, though, there wouldn't be anything to fear. But there was a side effect, of course. Over the next few months, the child would begin to age at an incredible rate. At first it would just seem an early puberty, but within a year she would appear decrepit—only that's all it was, appearance. Her heart would stay young. And so she might live for more than eighty or ninety years an old woman, without the solace of a good life behind her, without the comfort of knowing her time would soon expire. A child trapped in an ancient body. If the parents loved her they'd do the only kind thing and smother her in sleep.

My father had seen it happen once—a young girl thrust suddenly into old age. The wrinkled flesh, the hunched back, the gaping mouth where teeth should have been.

“And what happened to her?” I asked, wanting desperately to know her with my own eyes. To see what these snow people could really do.

“She went into the lake at night,” he said.

At first I thought he meant she went there to live, that perhaps there was a whole town of geriatric children living in secret underwater homes. And I thought, how wonderful for them to have a place of their own, a place to forget that the world didn't want them anymore. But then I

realized he meant something much different. That growing old must be horrible, to drive a person to a thing like that.

“Do you understand why I’m telling you this?” my father asked.

“So I’ll never get old,” I said smartly; I was six then and trying not to show my fear.

But my father shook his head. “Never go into the forest alone. Bad things happen to little girls who wander away.”

For a long time after, I’d worry over the backs of my hands—which were where, I’d overheard Vivian say, you could always tell a woman’s age. I’d examine the veins and wonder, “Have they already gotten me without my knowing? Is this how it begins?”

*

From my mother I inherited my ebony hair—it wasn’t shiny and smooth as hers must have been but was instead dull and crinkled, as though someone had forgotten to give me a good ironing and coat of gloss. From my father I’d acquired fair Irish skin that burned easily in the sun, but was otherwise thin and translucent as rice paper. For as long as I can remember Vivian tried to convince me I was a “Victorian beauty,” that my skin was “perfect” and “flawless,” that my hair just needed a little oiling to make it shine. She’d rub thick lotions over my face, saying my skin was a gift, that I needed to protect it. But all I saw was the clash. I’d stand in front of the mirror and chant:

*Blair, Blair, long black hair
doesn’t match your skin so fair*

Secretly, I knew I was supposed to be beautiful. I had to be. My mother had been pretty. Vivian was nearly indescribable. It was just the way things would go, eventually. This was what kept me going—that someday—what still does, though I’m old enough now to know better. But the hope was also what made it dangerous. Because no matter how I turned my head or tilted my chin, it would just be the same Blair looking back at me. A Blair who wasn’t me exactly, but she was very, very close. And I thought, if only this mirror could get things right, then I’d see how beautiful I am. This is why women like me love mirrors, the same way some women love men who beat them. We know, we know, we know, that one day the mirrors will change.

*

Of course, it’s not in the nature of a mirror to change. Like us they grow old, their silver deteriorates, they chip or just go out of style. But they refuse to change.

One day when my father and I returned from skiing I found Michael in my room. He looked at me and said, “Jones thinks you’re ugly.”

“No he doesn’t,” I insisted, my words usually enough to force Michael to retract his.

“Yes,” Michael looked at me solemnly. “He does.”

“Really?” I asked, momentarily forgetting that Jones was not real. I’d already been in school for nearly a year by then, and I knew what happened if you were ugly. There was a girl in my class with a hooked nose. We formed circles around her and chanted. We threw snow at her and told her to leave. I thought, if that was me I’d escape to the forest and take my chances with the snow people. I’d run far, far away. Because what could be worse than letting people see your ugliness.

“Do you think so, too?”

Michael shrugged. He was, after all, barely three then. He likely had little notion what ugly was. Just a word he’d picked up somewhere. A bad word. Perhaps he was only trying to express anger or frustration, but I was too young to understand that.

“Where is Jones right now, Michael?” I asked intending, I suppose, to stomp on him, or kick him, or somehow make a lesson of him.

But Michael pointed to the mirror over my dresser. “In there,” he said.

I looked into the mirror and saw myself and thought, “*I am* ugly.”

“Out,” I said, and he obeyed, because what else could he do?

In my top drawer I kept a hidden stash of pencils, crayons, scrap paper. We weren’t allowed to keep toys in our rooms; Vivian’s idea was for the bedroom to be a place for us to be alone with our thoughts—as if such a thing was what all children longed for. But I didn’t like being alone with my thoughts, so I kept supplies handy for the days I was grounded. From this stash I pulled a red marker, climbed onto the top of my dresser, and began the tedious process of covering every inch of the mirror’s surface. When I’d finished, I was at first disappointed—through the color I could still see myself staring back. It wasn’t me, exactly. It was the evil me.

And I decided I liked the evil me. I’d keep her around.

But the next day when I returned from school the mirror was perfectly clear. Not even a hint of red remained. Neither Vivian nor my father said anything about it. And it scared me a little, the not knowing. What if Jones really was in there, had reached out and scraped himself clean? What if he was just waiting for the chance to pull me in, trap me forever on the other side of the glass?

*

When I went to school Michael begged to go with me. Really he could have come along (things worked like that), but I wanted to be on my own. I was like my mother, I suppose. I had to prove to everyone that I didn't need anyone.

The school in our village was small, just seven classrooms, each housing two grades. No cafeteria, no gym, no library. And that left us kindergartners homeless, wandering the halls, a little gang following a little teacher, Miss Holiday—whose attempts to live up to her name were flimsy at best. She was a tiny woman who nearly always wore itchy turtlenecks that made her head appear disproportionately enormous—a light bulb without the glow. And she never seemed to eat anything but black licorice, which she kept coiled in her pocket. When she thought no one was looking she'd tear off a piece with her teeth; this left her smiles gray, as though her mouth had died before her and was desperately trying to rot away.

During my kindergarten year we spent most of our days outside. Despite the several feet of snow that blanketed the ground from November to April, most of the worst weather came in the night. The days were often sunny and warm (one of the reasons the tourists liked it so much)—so given the right layers and enough distraction, we were comfortable enough.

Of course, having school in the snow doesn't much lend itself to learning. Mostly we played Duck, Duck, Goose! in a tight circle, except on days when the preschoolers tagged along. There wasn't any official preschool in our village, just an older woman called Fraulein—whose real name I later discovered was Sharon—who ran a kind of day care from her home. Being overwhelmed by the fifteen or so children running about her, she'd often send the older ones our way. "Go play with Miss Holiday," she'd say, and they'd come running down the street (our

residential area was small and seemingly safe; it was not out of the question for children even younger to go about on their own).

Because Vivian worked from home, I'd never suffered Fraulein's rule, and for that reason I found this woman fascinating in both a frightening and ridiculous way. She was nearly six feet tall and had arms like buckets. Perhaps she was our one true German, or perhaps she simply adopted the role because of her wheat colored hair and her manly frame—but for whatever reason, she daily crammed her enormous bosoms into the same style of Oktoberfest Dirndl worn by the resort staff—apron and all. And then she'd clomp around after the children shouting, "Nine! Nine!" At the time I thought she must be a little slow because though she shouted "Nine!" there were always far more children. (Miss Holiday was to have taught us simple German phrases, but never seemed to get around to it, what with all the ducking and the goosing.)

The children Fraulein sent us were demons. You could almost see the tails flicking beneath the seats of their pants. For one thing, Fraulein seemed to know only one way of handling them: with lollipops and gumdrops and jelly beans. They came to us so hopped up they could not sit for more than a few moments at a time. So when we played Duck, Duck, Goose! these demons would often leap up and fly around the circle though they'd not been called goose. This led to confusion and, on several occasions, head-on collisions that ended in the preschoolers being sent back to Fraulein and everyone else sitting for the rest of the day in the box of silence (an invisible cage of no speaking, masterminded by the child-hating Miss Holiday).

In our village it was not unusual for children to come and go. Our parents worked in the tourist industry, which was fickle and changeable. So when new people came, no one said anything about it. There were no formal introductions or get-to-know-you sessions. I've seen

this kind of thing in movies: some shy, recently transplanted child is forced to stand in front of a classroom of strangers and tell her name, her hobbies, where she's from. On screen this perhaps illustrates how alienated and vulnerable the new student feels. We're supposed to identify with and have sympathy for this person. But for us this would have simply been a waste. So many children filtered in and out—few of them lucky enough to be attached to someone like Vivian, who had a permanent job and a solid income. Sometimes we couldn't even learn their names before they mysteriously disappeared, no notice, no goodbye. For that reason, I hadn't made any real friends in school—though I longed for one.

Then one day Ed appeared. She came with Fraulein's demons—though walking calmly behind them, not running as though her head were on fire—and sat beside me in the circle.

“Hi,” was all she said. She seemed older than the others, more sophisticated, almost regal. And her hair was silky and straight and shone golden in the sun. She smelled like apples. I knew immediately that I wanted to have her to myself.

After a moment, she leaned over and whispered, “My daddy is a doctor.”

Not wanting to reveal that my own father was merely a lift operator and occasional instructor fill-in I replied, “Vivian is a painter.”

“Houses?” she asked. And I fell in love with her simplicity, the way she was so in need of my guidance.

When we began to play, I noted how carelessly she chased. How easily she let herself be caught. As though she couldn't care less whether or not she sat in the pot. Each time it was my turn I would call her Goose! And though I was quicker than she, I always let her catch me.

“There’s a girl named Ed on the phone,” Vivian shouted later that afternoon, and I came running. Before she handed me the receiver, she repeated, “A *girl* named *Ed*.” But I didn’t care what she thought. A girl who wanted to talk to me, this was all that mattered.

“Hello, this is Blair,” I said, identifying myself as I’d been taught.

“Want to come over?” Ed asked, as though we’d known each other for years.

Later I’d find out that her real name was Edwina, that she’d been named after an aunt or a great grandmother or someone who no longer meant anything. But for a long time I just assumed the name was an accident. As if her parents hadn’t looked at her closely enough when she was born, and by the time they realized she was a girl the damage was done. My own name, I’d always thought, was perhaps to blame for how I turned out. If I’d been given a beautiful name, I too might have been beautiful. But my father had made a mistake. So I liked this very much about Ed—that her name was also a kind of blunder.

Ed and I became fast friends, which isn’t hard when your choices are so limited. But I’d like to think in another, bigger place we would have been friends anyway, that we would have been drawn together by the way we filled in each other’s gaps. Ed had no siblings, for instance, so she adopted Michael—looking at the three of us in a row, you’d never guess that he and I were the two connected by blood. Where my hair was black, theirs was pale blond; where my skin was fair, theirs was a warm toffee.

Sleeping over with her was a thrill. Her home was so different from mine. There was a spare bedroom with a pull-out couch that squeaked and gasped at our every move. We called this “our room” because no one else ever used it. Under the couch we’d hidden yellow legal pads on which we drew absurd pictures of Miss Holiday and Fraulein, dancing together or sitting on toilets. Once her father found these pictures, and instead of scolding us, he added a few of his

own. Then he proudly pointed to the sketches and said to me, “Don’t tell me this isn’t art!” Unlike her father, Ed’s mother rarely said anything about anything; she wandered around the house as though looking for something—her tongue, perhaps. She would sometimes appear in front of me, take my face in her hands, and whisper, “Now there’s a rare-looking bird.” When I asked Ed why her mother acted this way, she pointed to her head and shrugged.

After Ed’s parents went to sleep, we’d sneak down to the kitchen for a snack—something I never could have done in my own home, but here there were none of the same rules. We’d fold American cheese slices over and over until they were tiny squares that we’d eat one at a time. Then we’d nibble on dill pickles and ladle whole milk from our glasses with her Barbie’s shoes. In this way we’d feast hours into the night, pretending to be little tiny people eating little tiny food. Then we’d fall back on the mattress and shout, “I’m so full. I’m such a pig!”—which somehow seemed infinitely hilarious.

The next day I’d run home and tell Michael of all the things we’d done. He’d say, “Jones and I ate pickles too,” and I’d reply, “No you didn’t.” Then he’d ask, “When do I get to come?” and I’d shout “Never!”—but even then I knew I had to be careful with him. I knew what he was capable of, his way of making people fall hopelessly in love with him.

I knew I couldn’t keep him from Ed forever, but as long as it was the three of us, I could always stand between them.

*

I have only one real memory of Vivian before my father died. That is, one memory where she and I are alone. “I’m going to show you something very important,” she said. We were in her

studio, and she took a small glass jar from the cabinet where she kept her paints and brushes; when she held it up to the light, the thick fluid, slid lazily down the side. Inside there was a black coil. “For cleaning my brushes,” she said. “It’s very dangerous.”

“What is it?” I asked, longing to hold this very dangerous jar in my hand.

“White Spirit,” she said. “But the name doesn’t matter. It’s poison. Remember that.”

I think, now, there must have been more to this conversation, that she must have been showing me all the hazards of her profession—for my safety, for Michael’s. But for a long time, I only thought of the spirit jar, the possibility of what it might contain. And what I could store there, if I ever had the need.

*

When I was old enough my father took me to the mountain peak. The sky was clear, and the sun shone so brightly on the snow you had to cup your hand over your eyes. From his pocket he pulled a small black bag. “This is your mother,” he said. Not yet knowing about cremation, I thought he meant to pull her out, as though she were a rabbit. I was afraid, for a moment, of having such a tiny mother, afraid I’d break her, or lose her, or accidentally feed her to a dog. “These are her ashes,” he explained. “I wanted to wait until you were old enough to remember.” And then we opened the bag and really let her fly.

Only that never happened. I wish it did, but it didn’t.

My mother was Catholic. Catholics go in the ground. So he sent her back to her family to live with them forever as fertilizer. And I never saw any bit of her ever again.

*

Now comes the part I don't want to tell. But it can't be avoided.

I've already said it would happen, but haven't given the details. And if it weren't for them, there'd be no reason to go on at all. I'd just say, "When I was seven, my father also died." I might add, "Like my mother, in the snow."

A strange coincidence, perhaps, but that's the way things happened—or at least, that's the simple version. It's easier to remember things as simple, even when they're not. Is it any wonder we so often remember things in pairs? We like it better that way; pairs make for good songs.

One, two, buckle my shoe, my father used to sing to me. *Three, four, shut the door*.

In real time, my parent's deaths were seven years apart, but in my memory they are pulled closer, the misshapen scraps of my early childhood filling in the narrow gap between.

Five, six, pick up sticks. Seven, eight, lay them straight. Only it wasn't my father singing; it was Vivian. And what were nine and ten? I can never remember. *A big fat hen? Never sleep again? I knew you when?*

I wish I'd known my father better. For all the time we spent together on the slopes, for all his stories, I still look back and wonder, "What do I really know about this man?"

Perhaps his death wasn't such a surprise. I should have expected as much from a man so fond of risk. The summer before he died, he took me on a hike through the mountains. Near the peak we came upon a bear. At the same moment we spotted the bear, he spotted us, let out a low growl, reared onto his hind legs, and began waving his paws in a way that would have been comical—if it weren't dangerous. "Don't run," my father said, and before I knew it he'd hoisted

me onto his shoulders, and begun to wave his own arms, screaming back at the bear. The bear roared, my father screamed. My father and the bear, not fifty feet from one another, a battle of showmanship, of manhood. “Help me out,” he whispered. And without hesitation, I too began to shout and throw my arms wildly about.

Later, when I’m an adult and in love with another man, this man—Joseph—will say, “You must have been terrified; how were you not terrified?” Perhaps he believes my story, though likely not. But his desire to ensnare me with reason is not my concern; I remember no fear, only the feeling of dizzying elation.

“If that had been a mother and cub we’d have been done for,” my father later told me, after the bear grew bored with us and wandered away, stopping to paw the ground once or twice before disappearing in the distance.

“Why?” I asked. “Aren’t mothers nicer?” I didn’t mean to offend him, it was just that most of the mothers I knew—Vivian excluded—were soft and weak and smelled like Dove soap.

“Oh no. Don’t underestimate the mothers. They may seem nice, but they’ll kill you before you come spitting distance to their babies. They’ll eat you alive.”

“And the fathers?” I asked, hoping that somehow the fathers would do worse.

“Oh the fathers,” he said, laughing. “Fathers just want to play.”

“Your father was like a boy,” Vivian whispered to me at his funeral. “He never would have grown up.”

I think she would have liked him calmer—if he’d spent more time petting and adoring, as was befitting someone like her. Vivian’s was the kind of beauty thought to be extinct. The kind of beauty that drove men to do crazy things—to go on quests, to fight dragons. To forget their wives. With a woman like that it’s nearly impossible for a man to stay in his seat. He has to get

up and run around and prove he's worthy. So I understood how my father wanted her—even when he had her, she was unattainable. And really, once he saw her, he had little choice in the matter. He was no match.

But why did Vivian choose my father? A man who loved adventure and the rough thrills of the mountain. A man who could never love her in the way she needed to be loved. As though she were a woman of glass. My father had never learned to carefully handle fragile things.

I guess Vivian thought she could tame him. But she didn't know that before her—before my mother even—he was bound to a covetous and resentful bride, just waiting to snatch him back the first chance she saw. She was willing to murder him, if that's what it took.

And that's what it took.

Avalanches are tricky. Single flakes of snow are so delicate, floating down from the sky, those six brittle arms that break so easily—but then they build and build and build. Eventually they collapse. I imagine this would be both horrible and beautiful. A monstrous sea of white falling around you, swelling, suffocating, and then nothing, darkness. No way of knowing up from down. Quiet. This is what I think about most: How quiet it must have been, curled in a big belly of snow. The only sound: your own heartbeat—and that must have felt as if it was coming from all around. I often wonder who he thought of first, my mother or Vivian. Or me. I'd like to think there's at least a chance he thought of me.

*

Our house opens its mouth and all the people fall in. They bring finger foods and Kleenex and fear. To Vivian they say, "What a good man." To each other they whisper, "That could have

been me.” They swirl around us, picking things up, putting them down, pouring more wine. They shed tears and embrace. They wipe their eyes and blow their noses and eat the tiny cakes, leaving the wax cups on tables or dropping them to the floor. They talk and talk and talk and talk. Circling and spinning and gusting, whirling around the edges, faster and faster, grabbing at us, trying to snatch us into their confused orbit. We flee their outstretched arms, huddling in the eye of the room, where it’s eerily calm. Vivian, Michael, Ed, and me. Vivian’s arms around me, mine around Ed, hers around Michael. Only we can’t tell them apart, the eight arms. Two more than there should be—but that doesn’t matter because they are the same arms. And for this one moment, we four are the same person. When we finally let go, the people have all fallen down. Vivian takes a broom and sweeps them out to the curb.

Part II

Der Spiegel

Mirrors don’t sound like humans when they speak. Instead their voices resonate like a finger ringing crystal. Something like music but without all the fuss. Natural, you might say—if talking mirrors can be called that. When they die, they don’t make any sound at all. So in that way, they are like most of us, leaving the world without voice.

*

After my father died, you’d think the world would have paled, that I would have lost my faith in the magic of things, but it would take more than the death of a man—which is, after all a

very common thing—to douse my belief that my life, if nothing else, was as enchanted as it always had been. If anything, I began to feel the air with great intensity, as if the seemingly empty spaces surrounding me were speaking out, humming—clamoring—for my attention. And because I thought this must be my father’s way of speaking to me, I relished the cacophony, not bothering to sort things out.

I don’t remember much about Vivian before the accident. She was a kind of ghost, hovering about me; it seemed I could see right through her, which made her a simple thing, nothing to worry over. But now that I had to see her, I couldn’t understand her. Having already lost two parents, I came to believe I could only hang on to this last one if I rolled her flat and pressed my thumb into every inch of her.

Most days Vivian locked herself in her studio. Not only when we were away at school or playing in the woods, but also when we were home—when we needed her. We were only children; we couldn’t be expected to go about our lives without guidance. Michael began coming to me for the things Vivian should have been there for. Help picking out clothes, finding a lost toy, homework. Sometimes I liked doing these things for him; I thought he’d be grateful. That he’d love me most. And when no one else was around, I think he did.

But then Vivian would appear, and he’d forget me.

The more she ignored us, the more he loved her.

Sometimes I’d purposely upset Michael just to see how Vivian would react. Once I pushed him off his bike though he’d done nothing. It was late fall, and the snow hadn’t yet packed; he slid across the blacktop, tearing his thin khakis and scraping his knees. I hadn’t meant to hurt him; I’d only wanted him to go tattling to Vivian, to see if *that* might draw her out. But instead Michael sat on the curb sobbing.

“Vivian! Michael’s dying!” I shouted as I ran inside, but she didn’t answer. “There’s blood *everywhere!*”

I tried the handle on the studio door, but it was locked. Where was she? If she’d heard me, why didn’t she answer?

When I’d fallen from my own bike a year before, Vivian had rushed to the medicine cabinet, retrieving a small brown bottle and a pair of tweezers. Though in pain, I’d been fascinated by the meticulous care she took in plucking the tiny pebbles from my knee, the way the hydrogen peroxide fizzed over the wound. Many years later, Joseph will tell me no one uses hydrogen peroxide anymore because if a cut is deep enough the bubbles can get into the blood stream. “You can die from that,” he’ll warn.

“Why do you have to take the mystery out of everything?” I’ll ask him.

By the time I say that, I’ll be learning to think of my body as an experiment, a mystery waiting to be solved. I’ll be ready to hurt. But on the day I pushed Michael off his bike, and he sat screaming by the road, and Vivian was nowhere to be found, I was trying to hide my excitement. My proximity to what I considered his brush with mortality. Even though I’d caused his pain, I was jealous of it.

I went to the medicine cabinet and stole nearly everything I could scoop into the basket of my shirt, then inexpertly went to work on Michael’s knee. Really, he wasn’t hurt so badly as I’d wanted him to be—probably all he needed was a good cleanse and a few Band-Aids. But I acted out a scene dire as any television medical drama. I dumped the entire bottle of peroxide over his leg and shouted, “Hold still!” as I examined the wound, squeezing at the skin in search of pebbles or dirt, and finally rubbing ointment over what turned out to be little more than a cut

and wrapping it in gauze. By then he'd stopped crying, and sat watching me, the way I'd watched Vivian dress my wounds not so long before.

"There now," I said. "All better."

But when he stood to walk his bike home, the bandage slipped to his ankle, revealing the wound beneath.

"I'm sorry," I said. And I was—but more for my inadequacy as a nurse.

Later I found Vivian sitting on the piano bench, fingers poised over the keys, though she wasn't playing, and told her what had happened—even my role as perpetrator—but she only nodded. "Sometimes the world works in mysterious ways," she said.

"You mean God?" I asked.

She laughed, "Who told you that?"

I realized she'd been mocking the idiom—and now me for believing it. I sat beside her and played a few notes; I'd counted once—eighty-eight keys. Such a symmetrical number; divided by two it became forty-four, or four, twenty-two. I don't think I was supposed to know that yet, but certain numbers made a kind of sense. It was no different than looking at flowers or people. Some were beautiful, others were not. No one has to be taught to see that.

"Where were you?" I asked, but she didn't seem to hear.

"Don't you believe it," she said. "Nothing happens for *a reason*. Things happen, and then people—idiot people—search for a way to make everything okay."

She stood, leaving me alone at the piano, and walked to the studio, locking the door behind her. I hated when she left us for whatever she went to in there. Her paintings, her perfect second self. In her studio, Vivian looked into a mirror and became an eighty-eight. It didn't seem right for her to run away from me then. I pounded the lowest note, then walked my fingers

up the keyboard until I hit the highest, which I hit again and again. It seemed an impossible sound—more a breaking, really. To what extremes, I wondered, could a person's voice go before it stopped being human, before it became a scream.

The Immortal

When I was five, my father gave me a book of German fairy tales. At first I could only read the simple words: “girl,” “run,” “apple.” And so I pieced the stories together. Read this way, I could control the narratives as I wanted. The princess could marry a prince, or not. But as I learned more words, the stories began to grow smaller—and there was something frightening in this, the shrinking of their possibilities. As if I’d unearthed a more solid, definitive text. *The text.* I still believed written things carried truths spoken words couldn’t.

You better not let Vivian see these, my father had warned.

But why? I’d asked.

Because they are full of wicked stepmothers and she won’t like them very much.

And as the words began to fall into place, I found it was true. Someone clearly had it in for the stepmothers, who tended to get dumped into spiked barrels or have their eyes pecked out while everyone else got to live happily ever after. This seemed unfair, even if they weren’t always as attentive as they should be. Sometimes there was an ugly daughter, who in addition to being hideously disfigured, was also punished in the end. And, of course, there was always a pure and beautiful and good daughter who married the first prince or king who came along. This too seemed unjust. Though the beautiful girls never complained, I had trouble believing they could all be so satisfied. Inevitably some of these princes must have been ugly or old or simply incompatible. So in the end it seemed no one won, except the prince, who got to murder one woman and dominate another.

But despite all of this I loved these stories—and still do. At night I'd pull the covers over my head and read them with a flashlight—not because Vivian was strict about bedtimes, but for the romance of it. And I read them over and over again, until I no longer needed the help of books, but instead carried the narratives inside me, as though they were actual lives I'd lived.

After learning a story, I'd lead Michael and Ed in acting it out. Ed always played the damsel. Michael was the prince (or occasionally the good brother); he was only five or six then, but already was beginning to resemble my father, the way his eyes turned down lazily, the way he cocked his head when trying to sound authoritative—though he never quite could. And it was nice to see Michael so heroic, to see him coming to someone else's rescue for once. Forgetting Jones, even if for only a few hours. Because Jones, I'd explained, did not like the forest, which was such a wild, unforgiving place, and reminded him too much of his own strangeness. So Michael gladly left Jones tucked safely in his bed, where he could rest and be still.

I took the remaining evil roles because Ed couldn't have done them very well. There is no such thing, in a fairy tale, as a beautiful blonde witch—though in real life, I suspect, this is not impossible. I, on the other hand, was just right for evil; my hair black, my eyes green—the color of jealousy, one of my teachers had told me. She hadn't been talking about my eyes, when she said this, but she'd been looking at them.

“Why is envy green?” I'd asked Vivian later. I thought, as a painter, she'd have a better explanation. At school that day I'd painted a watercolor of a girl with enormous green eyes. Vivian held the paper between her thumb and index finger.

“Who is this?” she asked.

“You,” I said, though I'd originally intended it to be me.

“Blair, I need to tell you something,” Vivian said, crouching so her eyes were level with mine. It was strange for our faces to be so close and so still. “Watercolor is for people who have no talent. Next time one of your silly teachers forces you to do this, you tell them I said that.”

I nodded, though I never could say it. When the teacher made us paint with watercolor, I’d wait until the end of the day and rip my work into strips, dropping them into the garbage when no one was looking.

*

What I liked most about playing the villains in our games was the endings, the violent deaths. I could be torn to pieces by wild animals or burnt to a crisp in a fiery oven. I would roll on the ground, shrieking and flailing, before succumbing to my fate. Then I’d jump up, and we’d start another game.

Ed liked these stories, too, because they ended in her marrying Michael, which they both pretended to be disgusted by—though neither ever refused. And it made me a little nervous, to let there be something between them I could never be part of. Very subtly, then, so they wouldn’t realize, I began to change the endings. I still enjoyed my own violent death, but later, just when the happy couple thought they were free of me, I would return. Because I was evil, after all, and evil things know how to trick death, to sneak back to life when it isn’t looking. And in returning to these stories, I could thwart the happily ever after. As with my alternate versions before I knew all the words, I could make it so the princess stopped marrying the prince. Instead, she would become his mistress—which, I was old enough to know, was a terrible and

shameful thing. And sometimes, if she saw how wrong things had gone for her, she would—like the girl from my father’s story—walk into the lake. Which I now understood was what you did when the things of your life turned on you and there was not another way to go.

*

Not long before I left him, I told Joseph about how I’d changed the games. I was proud of how inventive I’d been at such a young age, and I wanted him to appreciate it as well.

“That makes sense though,” he said. “That’s easy.” We were in bed, and I’d rolled onto my stomach so he could massage my calves, tight as they so often were.

“What do you mean?” I asked, my face muffled in the pillow.

“Hadn’t your father just died?” He pressed deeper, as though trying to get to the bone.

“Then you make up a game where you can’t die. Where you could become immortal.”

“I didn’t even know that word,” I argued. “I didn’t.”

“Well,” Joseph asks, “do you have to know a word to want it?”

“Okay,” I said, rolling over. “Okay; so what?”

“I’m just saying.”

Joseph was the kind of person who just liked to “say things.” Because he knew how to make me feel I needed him to interpret my life. I was nineteen then, officially an adult and old enough to stand up for myself. But that’s what being with someone for long enough can do. It makes you forget you can turn around and shout, “That’s not it at all!” And by “it” you mean “me.”

The Devil's Sooty Brother

Vivian was not a fan of Jones. She did not, of course, know properly what Jones was—but then, neither did Michael or Ed. I'd kept Jones's origins secret. To Vivian, Jones was simply an unseen half-person whom she'd been forbidden to sit on, though she repeatedly did—out of spite or ignorance I couldn't say. This alone might have been enough to disincline Vivian toward him. Really, though, I think what she had most trouble coming to terms with was his invisibility.

“What does he look like again?” she'd ask me—she knew better than to ask Michael. “How can he only be half? What's been done with the rest of him? Is his other side walking around somewhere looking for him?”

Vivian insisted on logical explanations. It was not enough, for her, to simply say *Jones is what he is*.

I, too, was beginning to grow weary of Michael's attachment to Jones. *He's not real*, I wanted to shout. *I made him up to make you jealous!* But even then, I knew he did exist, in his way. Because Michael's love had made him. Because Michael's love had a way of changing things into what shouldn't be.

So I knew I couldn't simply tell Jones out of our lives as I'd told him in. I'd need to wait for a justification—one Michael couldn't dispute. And at Vivian's fortieth birthday party, he finally gave me one.

“The big four-oh,” I remember her walking around the house that week, speaking under her breath. “The big four-oh.” As if it were a poem or a song, something that needed to be memorized and sung aloud to make it real.

Vivian seemed so young to me then—too young for forty, a ridiculous number anyway. Four, oh. Like a mistake.

We spent the day of the party cleaning the house and prepping hors-d’oeuvres. Ed had come over early, and together we wrapped bacon around water chestnuts and pinned them with toothpicks. We placed chocolates on three-tier trays and chilled Champagne in silver ice buckets. “Real Champagne,” Vivian said, touching their golden foil tops. “From France.” Ed and I looked at each other. *France!* It seemed the height of refinement. Later when we sneaked some for ourselves, we forced smiles, trying to hide how the bitter bubbles burned our throats. “Splendid,” we said, nearly choking. “So elegant.” Then we poured the rest down the sink.

The guests arrived in twos and fours, carrying bottles of wine and cases of beer. They brought blocks of cheese and platters of mysterious concoctions. We were a small village, but we loved our celebrations. Everyone worked for the resort in one way or another. Our parties reminded us that our world wasn’t all bowing and scraping.

The evening went on in the usual way. Mingling, laughter. Stories told a little too loudly, but no one minded. For a moment, our world was simple and bright. Ed and I slipped in out and of the guests. They patted our heads, and made a small circle around us, encouraging us to dance wildly. We did the Monkey and the Swim. We held our noses and shimmied to the floor.

Vivian moved about the room, laughing and collecting plates. She drank the French Champagne from a crystal flute and spoke into the ears of her subjects. As she did this, she

sometimes turned to me and smiled, and I knew she was telling stories about how clever and good I was. How I'd scored a hundred percent on every spelling test I'd ever taken. How it had been *my* idea to fill the vases with white lilies and river stones.

Only Michael sat facing a corner, his back to the room. When anyone tried to tempt him back to the group, he'd simply shake his head, the blond strands of his pudding-bowl cut swishing across his forehead like a dust broom. I understood to leave him alone when he was like this. Trying to pull him toward you only pushed him further away. Vivian should have known this too. Vivian should have left him be. But she was so happy that night. She wanted him to share that with her.

"Michael," Vivian said later in the evening. "Come sit on my lap for the wish giving."

Michael turned but didn't look at her. Or rather, he looked through her. If there hadn't been so many people, maybe she wouldn't have pushed him, but I knew she couldn't stand to be rejected in front of everyone.

"Michael," I whispered, putting my hand on his shoulder. For all the mean things I'd done to him, when it came to other people, I knew he needed my protection. He was soft, like an old pear, too easily bruised.

But he only shrugged my hand away and turned back to the wall.

I could have done something more, I suppose, but part of me wanted to see her beg. For her to know the way I'd been feeling. Then maybe she would stop locking the doors and leaving us alone. Maybe she would say how wonderful I was to do so much when she could not. And that from now on things would be different.

"Michael," Vivian repeated, her eyes darting around the room, desperation lodged deep in her throat.

“I’m playing with Jones right now,” he said. A few of the guests laughed. *An imaginary friend*, they must have been thinking. *How sweet!*

“Why don’t you tell Jones to go to bed and come over and sit with me for awhile? I think Jones will understand,” Vivian pleaded.

“No,” Michael screamed, his tone venomous in a way that seemed far too old for his seven years. His eyes bulged, as though he were possessed. And for a moment I thought it might be all the time he’d spent with Fraulein and her gang of demons. But they’d always been more puck-like, little mischievous fairies. What I saw in Michael’s face was something worse. Something like hatred, but without all the underlying emotion. He’d been emptied of himself, and what remained was too pure or too raw to be good. What remained, was Jones.

Now Michael moved across the room and stood in front of Vivian. By that time, the guests had stopped talking. They gripped their wine glasses and bottles of beer on the chance something might need to be thrown.

Michael seemed to grow before us. “Jones hates you,” he shouted. “He says you’re an evil witch. That you want to cast a spell to make me forget him.”

“You know he didn’t say those things,” Vivian said, forcing calm over her voice. “You know those things are lies.”

If only she’d said “not true.” Michael would have turned away then; he would have dug back into himself, Vivian would have learned her lesson, and things would have gone on as they should. But instead she’d called Jones a liar, and Michael couldn’t stand for that. Because calling Jones a liar meant Michael was also. It’s one thing to occasionally speak an untruth; it’s something wholly different to *be* a liar. Being a liar suggests that at your core you are deeply and irreversibly defective. The truth is somehow repulsed by you.

I should have cupped my hand over his mouth and dragged him out of the room then—before he said what I knew he would say. But like the others I was transfixed. Like them, I was afraid and waiting.

“Thief!” Michael shouted, pointing at her now, his arm extended. “Jones curses you! Jones says you will live forever in the dungeon of your own sins. Your soul will die before your body. Demons will hold open your eyes so you can never turn away from what you have done!”

I looked down as he spoke; his words were mine, a curse I’d created for our games. Binding words, the only means of imprisoning something that could never be captured with a physical cage. If I’d have known how he’d use them—how they’d find their own sneaky ways of coming true, I never would have taught him.

The guests continued to stare, hands tightening over the glasses in their hands. Knowing they should retreat, but unable to turn away. Vivian didn’t say anything. She seemed to be falling slowly, like in a dream, knowing there would never be any ground to end it, just the constant dread, that unending anticipation of impact.

“Then you have to take Jones away,” I finally said. “This is not his party.” I took Michael’s arm. “It’s time for bed now. Say goodnight.” But of course, he didn’t. He made a show of slumping away slowly, turning once to look over his shoulder, then falling in a puddle to the ground.

“I’m salt,” he shouted. “Salt!” Many of the guests had gone back to their drinks and conversations, but a few continued watching him, puzzled by this new theatric. They looked to Vivian, and she turned her eyes away. Michael’s stunt was nothing new—just another one of our games. Sodom and Gomorrah. Normally it sent us into hysterics. A person turning to salt! What could be more ridiculous? But I knew not to laugh this time. After a few minutes,

Michael miraculously lifted himself off the floor and left the room. No longer salt. No longer of the earth.

*

I was determined not to let Michael ruin the party—Vivian’s party. Just before midnight I began gathering the guests. In our village, rather than giving material gifts, it was customary to offer birthday well wishes, which were pronounced with good intentions, but tended toward the numbingly generic. There was a great deal of “that you’ll find happiness in the small things of life” and “that you may always be as beautiful as you are today.” But as with all silly traditions, no one was willing to break form, so that night, as with every other like it, we stood in a circle, held hands, and wished Vivian all sorts of banal things for the years to come. It’s amazing how much memory a flute of champagne can erase in so little time. Michael’s outburst had gone from mortifying to comical to nearly forgotten in less than an hour. Of course, I hadn’t forgotten. And I don’t suppose Vivian had either, but we were pretending. Like her, I’d become especially good at faking it.

As Vivian’s son, Michael should have gone last, but he’d been disgracefully sent off to bed, so I now had the task of giving the final wish. I hadn’t previously considered how much impact my words might have. That something in my speech might right this evening’s wrongs. With so much pressure, I was fumbling for something to say when the door opened.

The man who entered was not what you would call handsome. Though he was tall, his features were delicate and womanly, pinched in the center of his face as if drawn by a child. Beneath his arm, he carried a brown paper package, wrapped in twine.

He seemed so easy; he made me want to run to him and wrap my arms around his waist. Only I'd never seen him before, this man who stepped confidently into our party as though we'd been waiting all night for his arrival. Small as our community was, it would have been embarrassing not to know him. But though our guests did their best to pretend ("How are you?" they exclaimed. "It's simply been ages!"), they whispered to each other: not one could recall his face, let alone his name. He wasn't a tourist, but something more exotic. A stranger.

He searched the room and smiled when his eyes met Vivian's. For a moment it seemed she would smile back, but then her cheeks burned pink, and she turned away. Undeterred, he made his way across the room, and when he reached her, she turned to him as though noticing him for the first time. She extended her hand—which she normally worked to hide—and he took it as if he'd known this hand his whole life, gingerly kissing the only spot on her body that could have fooled anyone into thinking her above the age of twenty-five.

"I'm sorry to have come so late," he said, his voice harder than I'd expected from such a soft face.

"It's nothing," she replied, looking not at him, but at the others.

He leaned into her, and she brought her hands to his chest, palms flat and barring.

"I brought your gift." He dropped the package at her feet and turned to leave.

"Won't you stay a minute to watch me open it?"

The way she asked, there was an apology in it and a pleading. Her voice was begging and desperate just as it'd been earlier that night with Michael. And I knew Vivian could never speak to a stranger that way, or even an acquaintance. But only someone she loved anxiously; someone she feared might not return her love.

"Just stay," she repeated, her voice falling off. "Please."

He didn't reply, though; he slipped out as simply as he'd come in. I wanted to run to him, to tell him we were not so different in our desire to please Vivian. In the way we could not. But I was also shy of him. This unbeautiful man. And I thought, maybe it wasn't such a bad thing, to want saving.

Vivian laughed and brought the package to her chest.

"Open it," the guests prompted, circling around her. "Open it and see what's inside."

Vivian pulled at the twine and the paper fell away, revealing a pair of red heels. Not fire engine red. Not ruby. But like the embers of a fire when it's dying.

"Try them on," the others chanted.

Vivian held my shoulder as she slipped out of her shoes and pulled the new pair on. They were not narrow and pointy, but square-toed, the heels thick and heavy, so that when Vivian walked across the hardwood you could easily distinguish her clomping over the noise of the party. I found them vulgar and ugly, as I could tell Vivian did. Even the other guests occasionally cast a slanted eye down to the shoes, as though they were some drunken thugs who'd stumbled into our lovely little soiree. But no one said anything, and Vivian kept them on, much as they seemed to pain her.

An hour later Vivian pulled me aside to help remove the shoes. This required much tugging (the fit was a little too snug and the leather seemed to grab at her skin). Her feet were red and blistered. Though the party went on around us, I drew for her a tub of hot water and Epsom salt, and she sat next to me, bathing her feet, absently touching my shoulder.

It was then I remembered that the stranger's arrival had interrupted our well wishing before I'd had a chance to give my own gift.

What I wanted was to take away the curse Michael had thrown at her. But I knew about curses; one couldn't simply wish them away. They had to be destroyed from the other end. I leaned into her body and whispered, "I wish you would see me." I imagined my wish reverberating, bouncing around inside her, so that even if she didn't consciously hear me, she'd know in her bones what I wanted.

But if she knew, she didn't show it then. She towed her feet and stood shoeless. "Throw those stupid things away, I never want to see them again."

And maybe it would have been better if I'd listened to her. The shoes would have been picked up by the garbage truck, taken far away—and I would have forgotten the man who brought them. Then later, when he came back into our lives, I would have only the smallest memory of him. I wouldn't build him into something bigger than a man. But it wasn't so easy to cast off the shoes—the only clue to him. I think of this moment as a kind of turning point, my choice to ignore Vivian, to hide the shoes deep in my closet where I knew she'd never search. In the years that followed, I'd shut my door and take them out, easily slipping in my own feet, wondering if they'd ever clutch and grab at my skin, as they had hers. If anything would ever cling so fiercely to me.

The Sleeping Beauty

The festivities outlasted me—I'd slunk into bed around three. An amorous couple had found their way into the little hall that led to Michael's and my rooms, and I'd fallen asleep to an alternation of giggles and grunts. I knew sex from movies, so even though I didn't yet understand the particulars nor the attraction of such an encounter, I was not so naïve as to think the man had simply taken the woman aside to tell her jokes.

The day after the party was a Sunday. I'd slept little and my limbs felt oddly disconnected from my body, but the sun was bright behind my blinds and after tossing in my sheets what seemed a lifetime, I gave up and crept out to the kitchen, which, in addition to the usual smattering of half empty glasses and dip-crusteds plates, had been decorated in messages spelled out in forks and pulled-down streamers and half-eaten crackers. *Good Morning, Campers* read a series of pistachio shells and shrimp tails. *How Can You Have Any Pudding?* was sloppily scrawled across the countertop in red wine. Who were these messages meant for? Clearly Vivian had been among the authors—it was bad manners, she always said, to turn in before your guests leave. And I couldn't imagine they'd been created for Michael, who'd left the party so early, and could barely read words like *Delectable* anyway. So I assumed, with some pride, they'd been scripted for me alone.

It pained me a little, to know I'd have to erase these messages. Now I wish I'd written them down, that I'd tried to force some sense from them. But instead I swept them into piles and

wiped them up with rags. If they had to be destroyed, I might as well do so quickly, discreetly, before Michael woke and claimed them for himself.

When the messages were gone, I collected plates and glasses; I mopped the floors and picked bits of cashews from between the couch cushions. I dumped the left-out hummus and cocktail sauce down the sink and washed the serving bowls. I restored everything to their correct places, so that when Vivian woke, it might be as though the party had never happened at all.

As I rubbed away evidence of the party, Michael emerged from his bedroom, and climbed onto a stool at the kitchen island.

“Blairy-bear,” he said. “I’m hungry.”

Normally I would have fixed him breakfast, only now I thought, he knows where the cereal is, he knows how to fix it himself. But he didn’t move; he wanted some gesture from me that all had been forgiven. And I wasn’t ready to give that, not until I got something first from him. I waited until I’d finished cleaning, then I turned to him and said, “Michael, Vivian is very angry about what Jones did last night.”

He didn’t speak, but looked down.

“We’ll have to hide him, or else she’ll take him away.” I sat beside Michael and took his hand. “And she might send *you* away, too.”

“No,” he whispered.

“It’s like in the stories,” I went on. “People locked in towers for seven years without food or water.”

“No,” he said, his voice barely audible now.

“But there is something we can do. You have to trust me, though.”

He nodded, and I went to the studio to retrieve the spirit jar Vivian had warned me of years before. “We’ll hide Jones in here. Then you can keep him wherever you like and visit him, but he won’t bother Vivian anymore.”

Michael touched the jar skeptically. “How’s Jones going to fit into that?”

“We’ll have to shrink him, of course.”

“Will it hurt?”

“A little,” I said, not wanting to let him think it’d be *so* easy.

“And if we do that, *I* won’t have to go away?”

“I’ll see what I can do for you,” I said, patting his hand, congratulating myself on the generosity I’d shown. Mercy, I knew from my stories, was hard to come by in this world.

Later I slipped quietly into Vivian’s room and sat on the floor beside her bed; she hadn’t woken yet. Even in sleep, she was beautiful. She lay on her back, hands resting lightly on her stomach, lips pressed closed, as though waiting for a kiss to bring them back to life.

My own mouth hangs open when I sleep, little pools of drool spilling down my cheeks. Later Joseph would tell me I snored in enormous gulping gasps, as though I were drowning. But even as a child I knew I was a graceless sleeper. Once, I pinched two clothespins over my lips before climbing into bed. I thought I could train my body to sleep as Vivian did. The next morning Vivian held my chin in her hands, examining the deep red pocks. “What have you done with yourself, Blair?” she asked. What she didn’t say aloud was, “How could you let yourself get any uglier than you already are?”

So as I sat watching Vivian that morning, I was also studying her. *This is how you need to be*, I told my body. *This is beautiful*.

Finally she opened her eyes and rolled to look at me. She didn't seem surprised to find me there, staring intently at her. This wasn't the first time I'd done it. But this day I thought, surely she'd wake, realize how much she'd wronged us, and ask forgiveness.

"We've banished Jones," I told her proudly. "I've locked him in a prison so he won't bother you ever again."

"Umm," Vivian spoke absently. She touched her forehead with the tips of her fingers. Gently, hesitantly, as if it were an egg.

I fetched her an aspirin and asked, "Should we punish Michael today, too?"

"Why, Blair?" She squinted as though my face was a blur to her, a puzzle of familiar features she couldn't quite place. And I thought, maybe my wish is working, maybe she's trying to see me.

"For what he said." I moved close to her and turned my forehead down, hoping she would catch it in her hands and kiss it. Instead she swallowed her aspirin.

"He's too young to know what any of those things really meant." She rolled onto her stomach, pushing her face into the pillow.

"But he tried to ruin your party," I pressed. "Michael needs to learn that actions have consequences."

Vivian didn't reply, her heels peeked out from beneath her sheets, still red and blistered. I wanted to place my hands on her skin and heal it. I wanted for her to say, "Oh Blair, you're such a good and wonderful girl!"

"I got rid of those shoes," I said—though, of course, I hadn't.

She kept her head buried, but her shoulders contracted, and I knew I'd finally gotten her attention.

“Who was the man—”

“No one.”

“Do you love him?” Love—romantic love, that is—was not yet a real thing to me. It was a thing of stories, a way of justifying actions that otherwise made no sense. I was still to learn about the pain that went along with it. The emptiness. The erasure.

Vivian kept her face hidden, but swung her arm weakly toward the door. “Can’t you see I don’t feel well? Get out.”

As I began to back away, she lifted her head a moment, adding, “And forget about that man. He’s no one. They’re all no one,” before dropping back to the pillow.

“You love him,” I said. “I know you love him,” I continued, whispering now. “More than you ever loved my father.” I hadn’t considered this last part until I’d spoken it, but by then it was too late. By then I’d made it true in my saying.

“Get out!” she screamed into her pillow, and as I ran out, I decided any man who could make Vivian feel so much, was a man worth loving. A man worth fighting for.

God's Food

After the party, Vivian began treating me differently. When I'd return home from playing in the woods, she'd look me over—dusty elbows, twigs and leaves caught in my hair—and say, “Blair, you need to start acting like a young lady now. You're almost eleven.”

I wanted to ask what was so special about eleven. Like eighty eight, it was a mirror number—though the basest of them. Twelve, fourteen, even thirteen, with its overtones of bad luck, would be more appropriate. Any of these could be considered ladylike. But eleven? Two skinny sticks standing side by side. Inherently girlish and ungainly in its inability to divide. Still, I wished I could be this young lady she wanted me to be. That I could sit by a window somewhere, sighing and thinking of womanly things, though I wasn't yet sure what those were.

One day Michael and I ran through a thorn bush; the little barbs grabbed at our arms and legs. It didn't hurt, much, and I liked how the blood mapped cool trails down my arms. But Vivian didn't see the niceness of this, my cartographic body.

To Michael she said nothing, but she took my arm and led me to the bathroom.

“Off with it.”

“What?” I asked.

And before I could understand her meaning, she'd yanked my shirt over my head.

Underneath, I wore nothing.

“Look at yourself, Blair.”

I was there in the mirror. Browed face, red-snaked arms, pale white torso. The beginnings of breasts—which resembled tumors more than anything else. I was frightening and ugly, like a peasant, the kind of person you don’t want to lock eyes with on the street. Only this was me. I looked away, but Vivian took my chin in her hand and turned my face back.

“Look,” she commanded. “Look. Don’t you know the difference between what’s good for you and what’s not?”

I was looking, but the girl in the mirror was blurry now, and I saw she was not me after all. She was *that* stranger, *that* scumbag, who steals and cheats and God knows what else. I was so thankful she wasn’t me.

“What do you see there?”

“Some girl.” Despite my disdain, I was almost curious about her. Who was she? Who would let herself be seen like this? “She’s bad.”

Vivian nodded. “And dirty and ugly.”

I started to cry, I think. There was something leaking out of me, burning clean wet streaks across my face. I tasted the salt on my lips. I wanted this to end.

Die, I told myself. *Like in the games, only this time for real.*

But I couldn’t die, not really. Not yet.

Vivian wasn’t touching me, but I felt as though I was being held up by her. I tried to close my eyes, but couldn’t. I felt her all over me.

“You don’t have to be this way,” Vivian said. “You’re almost a woman now. You can take control of your body.”

She stood behind me and held out my arms as if they were featherless wings. As if she wanted to dissect me. To cut me down the middle. But not me. *Her*. Her in the mirror. Not me.

Vivian let my arms drop. Took a wet rag and began to sponge the blood away. Wiped my face and picked the twigs from my hair, piling them on the counter. The rag was brown and red, and I was afraid it was stealing something from me. I wanted it back. But not me. *She* wanted it back. She, she. The bad, evil, ugly girl. Who didn't know what was good for her.

"That's better," Vivian said. "Don't you feel good now? Clean?" She wrapped a towel around my shoulders, and I hugged it to me.

Not me. Her.

"So we're going to start taking control. Right. We're going to start acting like a little lady."

Vivian ran the shower for me. "Go on and wash your hair. When you're done I'll comb it for you. Would you like that?"

"Yes," I said quietly.

She left me, and I dropped the towel. The girl was still there, staring back at me.

I said, "I'm going to kill you."

"Just try," she said.

*

But killing her wasn't so easy. She was always there with me. Not just when I looked in the mirror, but always. Flooding my head, my throat. She had no mouth of her own—only mine,

which she borrowed from time to time. But it was I who had to swallow a spoonful of vinegar as punishment. You'd think she was a boy. A dirty, ratty, nasty boy. The kind of boy who gets sent away for being "wrong."

"We need to make some changes," I whispered to Ed. We were at recess, waiting to kick a ball and run around bases.

"Okay," she agreed; she liked changes well enough.

"We need to become ladies," I said. It was early winter, but already cold. Ed wore a pink knit hat with earflaps and long braided ropes that fell past her shoulders; in it she looked like an elfin princess. My own hat was plain black and made my forehead itch; I was always pushing it back to scratch. It would have made more sense for Ed to tutor me in the female arts—but I couldn't let her know that.

"Ladies?" she said.

"First of all, we can't kick these balls anymore. And if we do, they have to go to the wrong places. If we run, we can't be fast. If a boy hits us too hard, we have to cry." I said all this, though the thought of doing these things made my stomach turn a little. I hated so much to lose.

"Okay," she agreed; she could already do these things much better than I.

"Also, there's a prince. He came to Vivian's party after you left. You must fall in love with him." I hesitated here. I wasn't sure I wanted to share him with Ed, even if only the fantasy of him. But it seemed the only way.

Ed thought about this for a moment. "Is he handsome?"

“Of course,” I lied. How would it do to have an un-handsome prince? And it wasn’t that the stranger was ugly. Perhaps if his features had been spread over his face in the normal fashion then he might very well have been splendid looking.

“Where does he live?” she asked.

“In a castle.” I pointed to the western face of the mountain. “Up there.” This seemed plausible. The rich and famous made their homes above us—or rather, they built mansions and paid other people to live in them fifty weeks of the year.

“When will he fetch me?”

Looking back I see her words as problematic. That a man would fetch a woman. As if she were mail. As if she were a ball. But at the time this seemed the correct way for things to happen. There was a certain romance to it. A kind of sweeping. Off your feet. Out of this life and into something else, something better. This was the lesson of fairy tales. That there was always someplace better, and a man was the only sure way of getting there.

“He’ll come for you when the time is right,” I said. This seemed to satisfy her.

“And will we live happily ever after?”

I laughed then; such a silly question. “How else could it turn out?”

*

Ed had always been naturally graceful, like Vivian. She didn’t need anyone to tell her how to walk, how to hold herself tall and fragile as an icicle. But I couldn’t let her know how little she needed me; so I asked her, “How will you ever marry the prince if you haven’t been properly trained?”

She agreed this was problematic, so that winter we began our training. On the coldest afternoons, I'd announce, "This is no weather for ladies," and we'd stay inside, walking around with books on our heads and sipping tea from delicate, hand-painted cups. The kind that might crumble in your mouth if you pressed too hard with your teeth.

"Why are you trying to act like girls?" Michael would ask. "Let's build an igloo."

And we'd reply, "Go on. We'll be out in a minute"—only we'd never show. What did he know of the things women had to go through to snag a man. I'd read this line in one of Vivian's fashion magazines, and it become our mantra—Ed and I started calling ourselves "The Man-snaggers." I imagined snagging a man would be like catching a fish, that you'd have to be careful how you removed the hook, that you'd have to watch so the scales wouldn't slice your thumb like paper.

We practiced our walking and our grace every chance we got, yet I still felt like a child. It seemed we needed something more. Something transformable. Ingestible.

I told Ed, "If you really want to marry the prince, you'll need to learn to eat flowers."

"Why?" Ed asked.

"All beautiful and clever women eat flowers. My *mother* ate flowers. She called it God's food." I didn't know this last bit, of course, but by the time I'd finished saying it, I believed it.

I knew Ed would agree to anything my mother had liked. Instead of playing with Barbie dolls—which Vivian refused to buy for me anyway—Ed and I had always preferred my mother's figurines. Though Vivian wasn't particularly religious—especially not Catholic religious—I'd somehow come to own a copy of "The Picture Book of Saints." In this way, we could not only identify who each statue represented, but we knew their stories—most importantly how they

died. Of course, there was the Virgin Mary, whose death was not so exciting, but there was also Dymphna, whose head was chopped off by her father; Agnes, whose head was chopped off by a jilted suitor; and Joan—and we all know how that one ended. Only one of the little women proved impossible to identify, so we called her Maria, after my mother. “May I be Maria?” Ed would ask, and I’d nod. I’d trace the vein-like seams, super-glued from my mother’s having thrown them into so many walls. It didn’t matter if Ed played Maria; she was still *my* mother.

So Ed agreed, if my mother ate flowers, we should also.

Roses weren’t so easy to come by, though. We might have pooled our money and bought a bouquet, but I’d somehow come to the conclusion that the flowers had to come from the ground to really count. We’d have to find them on our own.

When the snow had melted and the mountain began to turn green again, we set off, sneaking out while Michael was in the bathroom. This was a woman’s journey, I told Ed. Michael wouldn’t understand; he’d just mess things up.

Ed wasn’t much of a hiker. She didn’t like to be hot or to have her shoes muddied; she didn’t like bugs or snakes or furry things that ran off into the brush before you had a chance to identify them. And yet we still played in the woods when our lady training got boring. So her disinclination toward nature wasn’t the real problem. Perhaps it was that sense of moving toward some unseen point, only to have to turn around and retrace your steps, to move back over old tracks. I’m not sure. When asked, she claimed to love hiking, but I knew she was lying.

“What if we never find the right flowers?” Ed asked. She was following me down a grassy trail at the foot of the eastern slopes. I remembered their names from my days skiing with my father: *War Dance*, *Silver Knife*, *Ambush*. Names that demanded bravery and conviction,

two things Ed would never learn if I tolerated her whining. I put my hands on my hips and replied in a high-pitched voice: “*What if we never find the right flowers.*”

Wildflowers grew abundant in summer, but we were a few weeks early. Still, it wasn’t long before we came upon a patch dandelions, their yellow, furry faces turned up to the sun.

“What about these?” Ed asked.

I stuck out my tongue. “Be serious. We need something really special. We’re trying to be like my mother, not yours.”

Ed nodded. Her mother was strange but not attractive or dead, so that made her pitiable. If Ed herself hadn’t been so beautiful, I don’t think I could have said such a thing. But she was, and so I did what I could to punish her for it. How else could I keep her following me?

We continued our search and soon discovered tall stalks sprouting miniature white bouquets. “Queen Anne’s lace,” I said. I’d seen the pictures in a book at school; the name seemed so befitting now. “This must be fate,” I said. Fate sounded so romantic; I wanted very much to believe in it.

“Are you sure this is okay?”

“Ed, would my mother have eaten flowers if it wasn’t okay.”

I knew reminding Ed my mother had also been a flower eater would be enough to convince her. Or maybe she just wanted to be done with the whole thing. The afternoon sun was beginning to press down on us, as it tends to do at such altitudes. *Get back down to sea-level*, it said. Soon we’d be sweating—another thing Ed hated; she called it leaking.

Ed pulled one of the little white petals and placed it on her tongue. “It’s okay,” she said.

“Take a bigger bite,” I prompted.

“Aren’t you going to have some?” Ed asked.

Again I shook my head. “No,” I said, attempting to sound solemn. “This is a task you must complete on your own. Edwina.” Where had I learned to say such silly things? I must have thought myself so eloquent.

Ed nodded and bit into a small bunch of flowers; the tiny petals clung to her lips as she chewed. “This tastes funny,” she said.

“You’re just not used to it. Remember, this is God’s food,” I said. “Only special people are meant to eat it.”

“It burns my tongue.”

“It’s supposed to,” I reassured her, though of course I had no idea what flowers were supposed to taste like; I’d never tried any myself. I didn’t want to admit I was also apprehensive. What if they were no good? What if I discovered this thing my mother did wasn’t so wonderful after all?

“Do you think that’s enough?” she asked.

“I guess,” I said, and we began to make our way back to the village.

“I don’t feel right,” Ed said.

“Grow up,” I said, and we continued on.

“I’m going home.”

I turned to face her, “Baby,” I started to say, but I stopped. Ed’s face had gone white, and her hands shook. Then she dropped to the ground.

As part of our lady training, we often watched black and white movies with the silly little women who went about fainting as though it was their job. Sometimes we practiced our own, walking into the center of a room and collapsing in a pile on the floor. Ed knew how to pull a convincing faint—but this was different.

I leaned over and shook her. “Ed!” I shouted. “Ed, wake up!”

She didn’t move; her arms limped at her sides, and when I pushed open her eyelid, her pupil rolled back into her head like a doll’s. Luckily we’d made it back to the village. If she’d been smaller, I might have been able to carry her. They say adrenaline kicks on in such situations. Women lifting cars to save babies and that kind of thing. But I was not to be blessed with any supernatural surges of strength that day. Though she was a year younger than me, she’d grown a few inches taller, and I was only able to cart her a few feet before I had to drop her back to the ground. Next, I tried to drag her by the scruff of her shirt, but this too proved futile. Finally, I left Ed where she lay and ran to the clinic for her father.

“She ate something,” I said as we ran back to Ed. “Queen Anne’s lace.”

He surged ahead. Normally he seemed such an oldish man, disturbingly calm, as though he’d been waiting all his life for a late bus, and had simply given up, content to sit on a bench and watch everyone else go about things. Much more like a grandfather than a father—at least, compared to what I knew of fathers. But on that day I saw he could also be a hero—no need for capes or spandex.

He scooped her into his arms just as I reached them, and ran back toward the clinic, Ed cradled to his chest. When I arrived a few minutes later, Ed was throwing up on the ground.

“Get in the car,” he said to me.

We took her to the same hospital in the valley where Michael had been born. It seemed smaller than I remembered—more cramped, full of unsmiling nurses and frightening, beeping machines. And old men—everywhere. Sitting in chairs, being wheeled about, calling out from their beds, creeping along the halls, supported by tennis-ball-footed walkers. They smelled of mothballs and mint; their faces sagged. If I ventured too close, their hands shook; they wanted to

touch me. Once I'd made it safely through the maze of them, I sat beside Ed's bed. Her eyes were open but fogged. Her skin had been drained nearly as white as mine.

"Queen Anne's lace," I whispered.

"No, Blair," her father said.

After Ed recovered, he lectured us both on Poison Hemlock, which closely resembles Queen Anne's lace. "Look for yellow buds," he said. "And purple markings on the stems." He gave me a book on the wildflowers of Montana. "Memorize this before you go making my daughter a lunch of the local flora again," he warned me. To Ed, he said, "You don't need to do everything Blair tells you. She may be your friend, but even friends sometimes do bad things." Of course, he wouldn't have spoken that way in front of me, and she never would have repeated him. So I can't be certain of his exact words. But you don't always have to hear things to know they've been said.

*

After Vivian told me about my mother eating rose petals, I'd begged for more. What else did she know? But she'd give me the same answer every time: nothing, nothing. If she would have revealed the rest of this story sooner, then maybe I never would have pushed Ed to poison herself. Of course, I might have done it anyway, knowing—not just intuiting—there might be some danger. It's easy to think we'd always do right, given the chance. But not probable. The criminal is always so much more compelling.

I'm not sure if Vivian ever discovered exactly how Ed came to be in the hospital. Ed's father was a man who valued privacy. I don't know what he told Vivian, but she never seemed

to make the connection between the story she told me about my mother, and what I forced Ed to do.

“There is one other thing,” Vivian said one day, years after; I must have been in high school. “She got the rose petals from the florist—*for free*. They were just scraps. Leftovers from arrangements and bouquets. Off the floor, even. I used to sell my work there before Gina opened the gallery. Gertrude’s—you know the place?”

I nodded. There was only one florist in our village, though really it was just for show. The tourists wanted quaint little shops: a butcher, a baker, and candlestick maker. And a flower shop. But we had little use for them. I was thinking, *It’s not like we have a cemetery. It’s not like we have a prom.*

We were making applesauce that day. It was fall and some neighbor had given us a bushel of brown-red apples, small and pocked. Vivian said they’d rot away if we didn’t make something of them. So we peeled and cored, boiled, and slowly mashed them in the hand-crank food mill that belonged to the same neighbor who’d pawned the lot on us. The apple pulp plopped into a large bowl beneath the mill.

“The couple who owned the place were indulgent. They’d scoop up the petals into little brown bags. She’d come in every few days. And then when she was...I probably shouldn’t say that part.”

“What?”

Vivian cranked, and I dropped in scoops of warm apple.

“When she was...eating for two,” she paused a moment and looked up at me then; she seemed almost shy to say it, to remind me that I’d come from this woman who my father loved before her. This crazy or wonderful woman who ate roses. “Then she came in twice as often.”

“Why?”

Vivian clutched at the handle as she cranked. Making applesauce is no easy task. It requires strength and a solid grip—two things Vivian had, though she’d rather not. Her fingers were long and elegant, but blue veins darted across the backs of her hands like tiny rivers. She hated those hands; she’d hide them behind her; she’d curl her fingers into her palms. Painter’s hands, she called them. Wrinkled rags. Sometimes I wanted to touch them and assure her, “It’s okay if one part of you is not as perfect as the rest.”

“You know your mother came from superstitious people. She believed eating the petals would help with things.” She paused. “With you. I’m not sure how. This is all coming from your father, of course.”

“He told you?”

“How else would I know, Blair? Do you think a little angel came down and whispered in my ear? I hate to be the one to tell you this, but your mother was a strange woman. They say. Never mind. Let’s just say she liked eating flowers, and leave it there.”

Vivian hit the food mill to the side of the bowl to loosen the last bits of pulp. She banged it again and again, trying to clear everything out.

“Don’t you think that’s good?” I asked.

Vivian stopped, pulled the bowl out of the sink, and began to rinse the mill.

“They warned her,” Vivian finally said. “About what else could have mixed in. Toxins. Pesticides. Who knows.” Vivian brushed my hair behind my ear. “It’s not like we’re taught in fairy tales, Blair. Sometimes beautiful things can be dangerous.”

But I don’t think she said this last bit. I think I added that part.

Later, after mixing in cinnamon and sugar and letting everything cool, we jarred the applesauce and stored it on the shelves of the pantry. None of us really liked the way it turned out—too bitter; these had not been sauce-making apples—so most of it went bad anyway. And yet for several months Vivian refused to throw out the rotting mush. She'd stand in front of the open pantry door, just outside, as though she were afraid to go in, and say, "I'm just sure we can do something with it." Then one day I came home from school to find the jars emptied and drying clean on the counter.

Actually, it wasn't just once that we made applesauce, but every fall. The same neighbor brought us a bushel, lent us his mill, and warned, "These apples aren't sweet enough. You won't like the taste." And yet, every year we made the sauce and stored it in our pantry until it went bad and our house began to smell like a distillery, and then Vivian would finally clean the jars out and say, "Remind me never to do this again."

So I remember making applesauce, and I remember having that conversation, but there's no way of knowing when she finally told me the rest of the rose petal story or if it even coincided with our apple mashing. But I always recall the two together.

Of course, it's possible there's no real connection. That I've only linked these two events so our words will not hang in some empty, faceless dialogue limbo. Maybe I just want to remember Vivian's conclusion to the rose petal story paired with something nicer: Vivian and I working together, using our hands, coming away with some tangible outcome.

Even if this tangible outcome eventually spoiled.

Maiden Without Hands

When Ed returned from the hospital, she claimed she no longer wanted to marry the prince, that we should give up our man-snagging scheme. I think, though, she'd grown fearful of me, of what I might make her do. All through the summer she made a point of keeping Michael close by. That fall I was in sixth grade and she fifth, but even though we shared a classroom, she no longer sat near me or sent notes as she'd done previously. By the end of fall she barely glanced at me. I'd watch her from across the room, tapping her fingernails against her teeth as she read. Sometimes I looked at her so hard, I forgot myself. We'd be in the forest again, only instead of her eating the flowers it would be me. Me in the hospital. Me almost dying. Me saying, I forgive you Ed, I forgive you.

"I don't want to talk to you at school anymore," Ed told me one day at recess. She was jumping rope with a group of girls, and I'd come over to join them. "We can still be friends," she said, touching my arm, "Just not here. They don't really like you." She smiled, and turned back to the others. It was her turn to jump. The girls chanted: *Cinderella dressed in yella. Went upstairs to kiss a fella.* I stood clenching my face so I wouldn't cry, watching Ed hop, her arms tucked behind her back, so as not to snag the rope. No one looked at me as they sang, *Made a mistake. Kissed a snake, How many doctors did it take?*

I left them and wandered toward the edge of the parking lot—our "playground." I hadn't thought of my parents for some time, but now I longed for them. Because if nothing else, I thought, parents don't abandon you. Even when they die—or especially when they do. Dead

they no longer have a say. They're like dolls, like imaginary friends. I could ignore them when I wanted, but they'd always be there for me to pick up again.

The sky that day was so empty and blue; I thought it'd wonderful to float around up there for awhile, to be so far away from everything—like my parents, only able to return. And then I was falling, falling, falling into a thick black pool. When the teachers tried to rouse me, I rolled over and pressed my face into the cold snow, relishing the burning pricks on my cheeks, the way it sent little shocks of pain through my body.

And I remember thinking, *that makes two of us, Ed.*

She and her jump-roping friends gathered around me—envious of the girl who fainted at recess. Ed's ordeal could never be more than a tale, but with me they'd seen, and that made mine the truer story.

The teachers called Vivian, and she brought me home—and even though I was nearly twelve and—by Vivian's math—too old for such attentions, she cradled me in her arms, rocking me. In her lovely, warm mother voice that I hadn't heard for such a long time, she whispered, "I know, I know, I know." And I wasn't sure exactly what she knew, but I liked that she sounded so close; like the words were coming from all around, wrapping me inside them. As though she and I were one, fused together by her voice, and could finally understand each other.

The second time I fainted wasn't an accident, though I hadn't planned for it. I was at recess again, staring at the snow and wondering how there could be so much of it when the flakes themselves were so tiny. And I was thinking, if I was a snowflake, it'd be easy for me to hide, camouflaged among so many others just like me.

I was supposed to be playing a game with the other girls. Even though they didn't like me, I'd been recruited to be "it." But I didn't move, except to bend to pick up a clump of snow

in my bare hand and close it between my palms. “You’re it,” they kept shouting. “Chase us already!” They crowded around me, pushing my shoulders and saying, “Snap out of it.” But I barely heard them, and instead focused on rubbing the snow between my fingers, so slowly, I wondered if it could turn to ice again before it melted. Ed said, “She’s wacko.” And because she was beautiful, and pronouncing on the mental state of others is both easy and incredibly satisfying, they all took up the chant, “Wacko, wacko, wacko!”

I decided I didn’t want to be there with them anymore. That I wanted to be with Vivian. The warm Vivian who could hold me in her mother arms, who could take care of me for a change. Only this time I would clutch her to me, I would keep her. But there’s only so long you can keep a person rapt with your little neuroses. Eventually they have to go about their business without you.

I fainted a third time—but desperately, obviously, without provocation or reason. I marched over to a soft pile of snow and fell easily, like slipping down a slide. Only when the school phoned her, Vivian couldn’t be reached, and I had to sit in the nurse’s closet alone because there was really no nurse, just a cot and a first-aid kit crammed into what should have been a janitor’s room. When I got home that day, I didn’t tell Vivian what had happened even though I’d promised I would. My telling wouldn’t have been the same.

After my fourth faint, a few days later, the teacher on duty told me to stop “pulling things,” and I was again sentenced to the closet. Only this time, instead of waiting around, I snuck out. No one had come to check on me previously, so I assumed (correctly) I wouldn’t be missed. I didn’t matter to me, whether I was caught, only that I got to Vivian. I wouldn’t speak a word but would walk in the door and faint at her feet. And this time, I would not wake up so

easily, I would stay away as long as it took, a week, a month. Until I had her attention. Until she couldn't bear the thought that her own carelessness might have done this to me.

Because we stored our snow boots in the cloakroom every morning, and because I didn't want anyone to question my leaving, I walked home wearing only my "indoor shoes"—a pair of simple black ballet flats. Vivian had bought them because they "went with everything." Of course, they were never meant to go with snow. As I trudged home, icy fingers slipped beneath my arches and crawled up my ankles. And even though I wanted to turn around and go back, I imagined I was a prince, battling treacherous terrain, walking on knives, to save a beautiful woman who'd been asleep for a hundred years. I told myself, *This is the kind of sacrifice you make.*

When I arrived home, I was met with silence. But there was something off about the quiet. It was not alone of itself but hovering—like when you enter a room and everyone immediately quiets because you'd been the subject. I slipped out of my snow-filled flats and stepped across the floor. The sliding wooden doors to Vivian's studio were shut, but I could make out a line of light down the center. As I approached, I heard, "And what about my hands?" The voice belonged to Vivian, I knew. And yet, it wasn't quite hers. It was a voice gone cold. Stiffened nearly lifeless.

I had reached the doors then, and though I was afraid, I peered through the crack. Vivian stood in the center of the studio, her back to me. To her right was an enormous mirror, heavy and gothic, framed by scrolled iron. She'd had this mirror for as long as I could remember, but I'd never paid any attention. It was just an old thing someone had given her; I couldn't remember who. But now it had presence; it stood not like a piece of furniture, but like a man,

like a god. And it was frightening to think something so intimidating could flatten my body, could silence me in its silver.

To Vivian's left, on the easel, reclined a large canvas—not the usual mountain majesty; instead, Vivian's self portrait stared out. In it, she sat with her left shoulder forward and her expressionless face turned toward me. She wore a loose black dress that blended into the dark background so well her head and wrists—the only parts of her left exposed—seemed to glow from somewhere inside the painting.

Several years later, in one of Vivian's coffee-table art books, I came across a Rembrandt print, "Portrait of the Artist at his Easel," which exploits similar contrast of shadow and illumination. He's even positioned the same, left shoulder and jaded eyes forward. I thought, *I know this painting*. And it struck me then, that Vivian must have been intentionally copying the style and pose. That her choice could not have been accidental.

But on the day I first discovered her, I only knew what I saw before me. And though the portrait was nearly complete, the hands remained unpainted. The wrists met the cuffs right where they should, but then abruptly stopped. As if they'd been chopped off. That absence where it should have been filled me with dread, not unlike what I'd felt when I'd first learned of my half-brother. I nearly rushed into the studio and penciled the hands in myself, clumsy as it would be, just to have it finished.

But I didn't want Vivian to turn around. Not because I feared being caught, but because, in that moment, I became very much aware of the possibility that she, too, was no longer whole. That this Vivian-like figure might be stealing something of Vivian's, perhaps not all at once, but in tiny, almost unnoticeable sips. And it couldn't be much longer until she was sucked dry, her body pale and hollow and without essence. All my fault—because I'd let the idea free. It

seemed entirely possible to me then, and still perhaps does, that we can *tell* a truth into being. That our words and thoughts can create what otherwise never would have been.

In the few minutes I'd been watching, Vivian had not been painting, but continued whispering to the mirror, her words fading before they reached me. But from the way she tilted her head and arched her back, I knew her to be cajoling. Not simply asking the mirror for something, but trying to seduce it away. I'd seen her play men this way before, even when my father was alive, for simple things anyone would give in politeness—opening a door, lifting a heavy bag. Only she seemed to like it, as I do, and all women do, who occasionally work a man—taking something that isn't yours, because you are beautiful, or you've at least convinced this man you are. It's a little like revenge.

Only, for all its presence the mirror wasn't really a man; it remained still, all glass and metal. It refused to play the game, and I couldn't watch Vivian anymore, in her failing.

Just as quietly as I'd slipped in, I made my way out. In my trepidation, I'd all but forgotten my original plan, which now seemed powerless against what I'd seen or thought I'd seen. Something I couldn't even explain to myself minutes after I left. Back in the nurse's closet my head felt heavy. I climbed onto the cot, turned off the light, and slept a sweating dreamless sleep until several hours after everyone else had gone.

When I finally returned home after dark, Michael was sitting on the floor eating a bowl of dry cereal, and I began to cry.

"What's wrong?" he asked, as I sank down beside him and tried to wrap my arms around him, but he shrugged me away. "Get off," he said, then took his bowl and left me.

*

Until I caught Vivian painting her portrait that afternoon, I never paid much attention to her mountainscapes, the uninspiring combinations of clear blue skies, mountain peaks, snow-covered fir trees, little cabins puffing smoke from unseen hearths. All perhaps lovely things in nature. But on canvas, they could only ever signify beauty—they could never achieve the thing itself.

And Vivian's customers were fine with that. All they wanted was an facsimile of simple mountain life. Something they could hang on their walls in their city apartments or suburban homes to remind them that somewhere in the world there was still a quiet, untouched place. It was a delusion, of course, but a very nice one.

And this, I assumed, was all Vivian had ever aspired to. The illusion of life, where really there was none. But spying her portrait—which seemed to breath and stir inside its canvas cage, as though waiting for the right moment to climb over the sill—I began to fear that perhaps her moutainscapes might also be alive in a way I'd never before been able to see.

Sometimes Vivian took us along to the gallery where she sold her paintings. Though the gallery was run by Gina—a young woman who knew she was far too hip to be trapped on a mountain all year long—Vivian's paintings were the centerpiece. Not because they were the best paintings, Gina liked to remind us, but because they were the most popular. Though Gina's own work was *clearly* superior, tourists were more interested in Vivian's "Picture Windows"—because looking at them was not so different than looking out anywhere in the resort. Of course, this wasn't exactly accurate: Vivian's work rarely included ski lifts or shopping zones or pretentious little art galleries.

"The difference between Gina and me," Vivian once explained, "is that Gina still thinks she will become a great artist, and I know she will not."

Vivian could have pulled her paintings and sold them from home; and Gina understood this. What she didn't see was that Vivian would never do it because she didn't care. Vivian's paintings were not art; they were income. Or so I'd always thought. Now, though, I began to wonder if Vivian wanted something more from them. If she'd ever imagined herself a proper artist, poor and indifferent to the demands of commerce.

At the gallery we weren't allowed to wander freely, and we certainly weren't permitted to get up close or touch the paintings. Instead, Ed, Michael, and I squeezed ourselves onto a tiny bench by the door. And we had to whisper, if we spoke at all, preferably in German, what with the tourists coming in and out. If I wanted to get close enough to examine the paintings, I'd have to do so at home.

The next time Vivian went to the gallery, I asked to stay home. She'd begun locking the studio door—both when she was working and when she wasn't—and kept the key on a chain around her neck. So she must have felt her secrets were safe. But what she hadn't considered was how natural lock-picking might come to me, that I might be a breaking-and-entering *Wunderkind*. As soon as they'd gone, I turned a hairpin in the lock and slipped in.

Like the rest of the house, Vivian's studio was large and open, with hardwood floors, high ceilings. In the center stood an enormous stone fireplace, tall windows on either side. Normally she kept things neat; she regularly removed the finished landscapes, and her brushes and paints were stored in an antique armoire—the only sizable piece of furniture in the room.

But now the studio had become cluttered. At least fifteen large canvases lounged about, some draped in old sheets, others, portraits, stared back at me. In one Vivian was missing an eye. In another, her nose. But in all the same pose, the same disdain for its audience. Across the floor, crusty brushes had been scattered, spirit jars sat open, their contents dangerously exposing

the air to whatever lurked inside them. The room smelled of wet stones and gasoline and something vaguely acidic. When I breathed in, my limbs felt loose and light, which I liked very much because it reminded me of how I felt just before I fell into the snow. As though I were flying in some unseen space between this world and the next.

Instead of walking, I lifted off and swam to an uncovered landscape that leaned against the wall. I sat on the floor in front of it—my legs crossed Indian style if only to anchor myself to the hardwood—and began to study the trees and the snow and the little cabins. The overall effect was the same as it had always been, so it took me a long time to find it—the mistake. Or rather, it must have been intentional, because how else could the consistency be explained. The trees resembled people. I don't mean to suggest something cartoonish—some friendly, dopey tree with big eyes and a red bow tie. What I mean is they were normal trees, but in their bark, human forms seemed to be trapped. These forms weren't exactly frozen, though. As I looked back and forth, they changed positions, as if pressing toward escape.

I brought my finger to the canvas; I needed to touch the paint, to feel its topography, to know what I saw was real. But just then I heard a low hum. A warning—and not the friendly kind. When I turned, the afternoon sun had slid across the floor, and I noticed what I hadn't before: Vivian's mirror. It seemed to have stepped into the light. But mirrors don't step. Mirrors don't hum. And yet the broken song continued, growing louder and more intense until I jumped up and ran from the room.

The Wonderful Musician

Around that time, Vivian begun leaving us alone more and more, though she never said where she went. When she'd gone, I'd leave Michael playing in his room with Jones and sneak into the studio to examine the new paintings, the figures pulsing in the trees. Sometimes I thought I heard them whispering—though their words weren't like any I knew. But perhaps I imagined this part. I wanted so much to communicate with these trapped people, to assure them it would be okay, that I'd find a way to free them. But when I'd bring my hand toward the canvas, the mirror would let out its warning. You don't need to know a language to understand the gist of a command. This is how dogs learn to obey. It's not the words themselves—which are nothing but an arbitrary bunch of letters pushed together in a way we're taught to recognize—but the tone, the emotion beneath. Later I'd learn the mirror was saying something that might more accurately translate as “Beautiful, beautiful,” but even before the language was clear I knew what it was really saying: *Don't touch. Danger.*

And yet, I wanted to feel my fingertips on the paint. What would happen? Sometimes it seemed I had to know, no matter the consequence. I would enter the studio, determined to ignore the mirror and finally discover the truth. *I have to*, I told myself, *to help Vivian, to save whoever's trapped inside.* I'd become convinced there was some connection between her leaving us alone and the figures trapped in oil. But more than that, I'd become feverishly curious. And I don't mean this metaphorically. At first I'd simply feel a wave of heat surging through me. My skin would begin tingling with beads of sweat, and soon the heat would grow

so intense, I'd go red all over. Not in the pinkish way people often do on a summer day, but as though I'd been painted, thick and matte. The red of apples, of roses. The red I'd always imagined my mother would have turned if she'd never been found.

When I fled the studio, my temperature would drop—not gradually, but immediately. As though I were another Blair. My clothes, damp and clingy a moment before, would be fresh and dry. And my skin would return to its normal blanched pale.

This went on for several weeks—and for all my trouble, I seemed to be getting nowhere. The paintings were still as mystifying, and Vivian just as distant. Sometimes I think she forgot who Michael and I were, she'd stare at us, as though we'd returned to her life, faces she recognized from the past, but she couldn't place our names. "You," she'd say, when she spoke to us at all. "You."

"Blair," I'd say, pointing to my chest the way people introduce themselves when they can't speak each others' language. But Vivian never seemed to catch on.

One afternoon I entered the studio and turned not to the landscape but to the mirror. I pointed to myself in the reflection. "Blair," I said. "Blair." Just to see what Vivian saw when she looked at me. And I thought, no wonder she wants to forget me.

Then I pointed to the mirror. "You, you." This seemed more fitting.

Only when I turned to once again examine the paintings, I felt a rush like wind on my face; as though my father were beside me again, mountain air slapping past us as we slipped down the slopes—a feeling I'd almost forgotten. After he died, I no longer skied; there was no one to take me. But maybe this was just an excuse I'd made to preserve our time together. Now in the studio I sensed something equally powerful.

I stepped back to the mirror and put my hand out, palm reaching to my twin in the glass—then our hands met and she was cold. “Yes, yes,” the mirror whispered—though later I discovered its words were really the same as when I reached toward the paintings: *Beautiful, beautiful*. Only now it was different; now I was being coaxed. *Yes, yes*.

I pressed my other hand to the silver, then my face. I leaned in, and the mirror wrapped itself around me. *Yes, yes*. Its arms not hard as you might expect, but soft and firm. Arms Vivian might have held us with, if she cared to use them anymore.

Mothering arms.

Yes, yes.

*

To know the language of a mirror, you must first rid yourself of any notion that all language makes sense in the same way—that is, through letters forming words that represent specific objects or ideas, though the sounds of these words generally have no direct connection with what they signify. This is why I couldn’t understand the mirror at first—I’d *assumed* the sounds corresponded to words. But when I placed my hand on the silver and stood palm to palm with my mirror self as though we were involved in something holy and private, the meaning revealed itself in vibrations that resonated through me. Not through words, exactly. Just knowing. The way your body knows to lift one foot after another to walk. The way your eyes know to wet when you’re sad or in pain. You don’t explain to yourself how it’s done, you simply move forward. You simply cry.

Beautiful, Beautiful, the mirror said. And for the first time, I admired my image and saw beautiful in front of me. I'd only just turned twelve; I was long-limbed and skinny as a ghost. This was, perhaps, the most awkward stage of my life, so I didn't believe, exactly, that beautiful was the me other people saw. Yet I liked seeing this girl whose skin was so pale and hair was black—and rather than clashing, she could be just right. She was intentional. An unlikely harmony, rather than notes pounded out at random. Dissonant, yes, but now with an underlying melody. She hadn't gotten to the big crescendo yet, but something was building.

*

I've used several musical metaphors in describing my first true meeting with the mirror. This is not accidental. Interacting with a mirror is itself a kind of musical experience. But I've chosen these terms because of their direct connection to what I'll call a "consequence" of my moment of touch. It will seem a wonderful thing at first, this side effect—and I suppose it might have been.

When I left the studio that afternoon, I stumbled out into the great room and, without knowing I would do it, sat at the rarely-played baby grand piano that occupied a substantial corner of the house. According to Vivian, the previous owners had simply left it. Perhaps they, too, lacked any musical ability and abandoned the giant memento of what must have been an impulse—I imagined them saying to each other, *Of course we'll learn to play. If there's a piano in the house, how could we not?* But then things got in the way because who really has time to practice and why bother making music when it's much easier to turn on the radio. And so over the years it sat there unplayed, reminding them.

By this time, the piano had resigned itself to the decorative role (“What a beautiful instrument!” guests always exclaimed, though they seemed to know better than to ask if we played.) So this baby grand must have been a bit startled when I sat squarely on its bench, lifted its lid, and began to play with the skill and easy grace of a master. I immediately recognized the tune—Wagner’s *Ride of the Valkyries*, a foreboding score that had been chosen as the background music of our fine resort hotels, despite the fact that it frightened the tourist children. On this issue, the big people who ran things wouldn’t budge. It was Wagner’s way or the highway. So I’d grown up with Wagnerian operas floating around me; in school, too, they were pressed on us—not only in music lessons, but in art, history, even literature, where we studied Wagner’s poetry and political essays. Anti-Semitism and Nazi propaganda, of course, were brushed on only summarily. It was not until I met Joseph years later that I learned for most of the rest of the world, Wagner’s reputation had been tarnished by Hitler. But we didn’t dwell on this, we thought only of heroes and magical castles. So when I began to play Wagner, I was not at all surprised by the choice.

It’s important for me to explain that I had no sheet music in front of me; I could not then, and still cannot, read music in the normal way. What I had instead was a kind of internal synthesizer that conveyed the sounds from my mind to my fingers without any kind of intent on my part. No conscious effort was involved, which made the experience both ethereal and frightening. At first I begged myself to stop, but I couldn’t. It was as though, once switched on, my fingers had to continue until I’d reached the end.

I’d only ever played this piano once, several years before. Our school had no music room or library; however, we did have a music teacher/librarian, Ms. Spiegel, who spent half her time lugging about a piano and the other half a cart of dilapidated books. These acts themselves were

practically miracles, for she was such a spot of a woman. Seen approaching from the right angles, the piano or book cart seemed to propel themselves, her insignificant frame completely blocked from view. We were so impressed with her feats of strength, that we might have chosen to ignore her complete lack of musical ability and her disinterest in all books lacking lovely illustrations. She was an enthusiastic reader of picture books, and the younger children adored her—though it didn't take me long to realize she wasn't actually reading so much as making up the stories as she went along. I would have forgiven her though, because her tales were all so imaginative and never once the same. If only she'd stuck to the library side of business.

But she didn't. Every other afternoon she'd gather us and poorly accompany as we sang a handful of songs I considered ridiculous. We'd been accustomed to Wagner and here she was torturing us with "Feeling Groovy" and "Sloop John B." Also, she was terrifically ugly. This I overlooked when she was reading to us because she was animated and cartoonish and, most importantly, right in front of us, so her ugliness made a kind of sense. But when she was hidden behind the piano, banging out awkward tunes that we were actually meant to participate in—this was when I'd brood over the way her eyes bugged behind the thick frame of her glasses and her frizzy orange curls fell haphazardly about her blotched face. I could imagine her snaky lips moving along—just a beat off, so that she seemed to be desperately trying to catch up with the song rather than leading it. She was a woman entirely lacking in rhythm and intuition. She thought we still loved her.

My hatred for her may seem petty and unfounded—and perhaps, as is so often the case with unattractive teachers, it was. But at the time, I was so convinced of my own homeliness, that I searched out anyone I could consider more dumpy than myself, and I mercilessly denigrated them because I had to know I was "better" than at least someone.

In addition to making us sing her silly songs, she occasionally made us play some of our own. Early on there was a pathetic set of aged xylophones, whose keys had been loosened to the point where each note seemed one hit away from collapsing the entire instrument. Later there was an incident with a box of spity recorders that were passed from student to student, triggering a minor cold epidemic, ending any hope we'd ever learn to play "Hot Cross Buns" in perfect unison. But those episodes were mild in comparison to what she did to me.

One day after school, I passed as she was pushing the piano back to its closet.

"Blair," she said. "Come here a minute."

I approached, though I'd rather have shouted something nasty and run away. I was only eight or nine then, so this might have been interpreted as "cute" or "mischievous."

"Have you ever played?" She opened the lid, revealing a set of yellowing, uneven keys that seemed nearly as repulsive as she. "Go on," she urged.

I clenched my fingers and drew into myself as though she'd pulled back a bandage and asked me to touch the pus of an open wound.

"It's okay," she said, hitting the keys herself. With her right index finger she tapped out a stilted rendition of "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." The piano was untuned, so the stars, rather than shining like diamonds, seemed dim forty-watt bulbs, unable to light a room, to say nothing of an entire night sky.

"Now you try," she said. I would have refused, except that I wanted to show her how ugly it was. The tune itself wasn't hard to find; she guided my hand, and after a few tries I played it back for her.

Only a strange thing happened—under my fingers the song sounded beautiful and complex.

“Very good, Blair,” she said. “You have the touch!”

I had “the touch”—whatever it was. Something wonderful, I knew. More, it must have been exclusive. Not just anyone had this touch. Clearly Ms. Spiegel didn’t have it. In fact, if I understood correctly, not a single other student in our school did. Perhaps no one in our village could claim to have “the touch.” This was it, I thought. This was how I’d prove my worth. How I’d show I, too, was someone worth remembering.

I rushed home to our baby grand. If the cheap school piano had sounded so good by my hand, imagine what I could do with a superior instrument. And I was not disappointed. My stars twinkled. They shone and dazzled and lit the world. Michael even left Jones to come dance along—a pointed, jabbing boogie that seemed perfectly star-like.

After I’d played the song for about the five-hundredth time, Vivian emerged from her studio, and my hands shook a little as I continued to play. I wanted so much for Vivian to exclaim over my skill, to insist I take lessons from a master pianist, or perhaps simply skip that step and begin my inevitable career. Instead she removed my fingers from the keys and closed the lid.

“Really Blair,” she said. “Are you trying to torture us all?” Then she laughed and Michael laughed and finally I laughed as well. Because I’d learned long before that crying in front of Vivian got you nowhere. You had to show how tough you were. You had to show everyone how brutally tough—and that you could be a joke to yourself and everyone else and none of it mattered because so what if some witch-ugly sorry-head teacher thought you could play the piano? So what if you thought this might be something wonderful? So what?

*

That afternoon when I first played Wagner, I knew I'd stumbled on to something different. I watched my fingers fly up and down the keys, not even wondering how they knew where to go, but simply marveling at their dexterity—as though they were no part of me, but some other girl's hands I'd borrowed. And I didn't want to give them back.

Over the next few weeks, whenever I found myself home alone, I played. I won't call it practicing, because that requires effort and occasional failure. All I needed was to hear a song once, and I could play it perfectly—though mostly, I stuck with Wagner. I've since learned that other people in the world can play by ear, that my gift was not completely unique. But at the time, I'd never heard of such a thing, so I guarded my secret—not exactly knowing there would be consequences, but aware that I should handle things with care.

And yet at the same time, I longed to share my talent—because how else would I show Vivian and everyone how very special I truly was?

Just wait, just wait, I told myself.

Of course, I couldn't wait forever. I finally decided to tell Ed. Perhaps a part of me thought I might be able to win her back, by confiding in her. But I also wanted to show I didn't need her anymore. I could be special all on my own.

I asked her to keep my secret, but maybe I knew she'd slip. Maybe I hoped for it.

"Alright," she said. "Show me if you want." Ed's mother had taught Ed a few simple songs, and she tapped them out for me on occasion, but hers were nearly as awkward as my faded stars.

Ed sat beside me on the bench, only, as I began to play, I felt her body sinking away from me. When I finished, she brought a finger to the keys and pressed carelessly.

“We’ll tell Michael, at least.”

“No. You know he’ll just tell Vivian. Michael can’t be trusted.”

Ed slid backwards onto the floor, her ankles still resting on the bench, and lifted her eyes to me. This was how I’d always envisioned us, her looking up at me, trusting that I would somehow guide her. Only, now she seemed doubtful. As though by having such a talent, I was betraying any remaining slivers of our friendship. I was older than her, perhaps more knowledgeable, but I was *not* supposed to be extraordinary.

“If you say so.” She spoke not to me, but to the ceiling, and I knew it wouldn’t be long before Vivian found out.

*

She’d claimed to be running to the store for milk. Maybe she really did forget her purse—though it seemed unlikely. I began to play a moment after as she stepped out the door. As I was coming to the end of *Tannhauser*, a more subtle and quietly joyous Wagner piece, I felt her behind me, watching. She stood silently, waiting until I finished the score and allowed my fingers linger over the keys, letting everything breathe a moment. Giving her time to be impressed.

Vivian stepped closer, placing her hands on my shoulders. She seemed to sink into me. “Where did you learn?” she whispered.

I didn’t answer because it seemed not so much a question as an expression of awe. Or, I wanted it to be.

“Where did you learn that?” Vivian asked, shouting now, jerking me back, my fingers one second resting peacefully and another grasping nothing, air.

“Answer me, Blair.”

This time she tugged so hard I fell backward off the bench, landing at her feet. And she seemed enormous to me. I should have been afraid of her, but instead I felt relief. To have her see me—even in anger—was what I’d wanted all along. And so I thought this was something, at least.

“School,” I answered, not knowing what else to say.

“School!” She shouted, leaning down to slap my leg. “School! You mean Ms. Spiegel who can’t hum a tune taught you to play that?”

I nodded, meeting her eyes.

“Don’t you lie to me,” she said, whispering again. “Don’t you dare.” She pulled me to my feet and brought my face to hers, her hands cupping my cheeks. And I thought, despite everything, perhaps she’ll kiss me, perhaps she’ll say how wonderful I am.

Finally she let go, lifted the bench lid, and plucked a book of sheet music at random.

“Play this then.” She spread across the stand a simple version of “Jingle Bells.” If she’d only asked me to play the song, I could have done so easily—but seeing those black notes jumping up and down across the page repelled me. Vivian pushed me toward the bench, where I sat with my eyes closed and began to play a version far more intricate than that on the page. Even though Vivian couldn’t read music, it would have been easy to guess I was not playing the plain score in front of me.

“Open your eyes,” Vivian said, pointing to the music with her long arms and long fingers, which seemed to be growing. “And play what’s there.”

I attempted to tap out the melody with one finger, but the notes crashed together.

“I’m sorry,” I finally said. “I don’t know this one.”

I thought maybe she’d slap me. Hard. On the face. I imagined this smack echoing in the rafters. Then I would cry and she would cry, and we’d both apologize for what we couldn’t control.

But then Vivian’s body relaxed. “We don’t need this anymore,” she said. “We’ll fix this.”

I assumed she meant for me to stop playing. That, if I could do this one thing, she might act like a mother again. And so I closed the lid over the keys and said, “Okay,” because I thought it was something we’d do together.

But when I returned from school the next day, the baby grand had disappeared. In its place sat a small round table, a glass top resting on three chrome legs, too trivial for such a large space.

“What happened to the piano?” I asked later. Vivian was cooking dinner, something she hadn’t done in some time. More often than not she left a note and something to reheat.

Vivian looked up at me. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Blair.” She’d always been a terrible liar; her eyes betrayed her, the way they blinked, open, shut, open, shut, like trying to clear something away. Only now her eyes were empty.

“Michael,” I said. “You remember.”

Michael glanced toward the lonely table, then at Vivian. He didn’t even smile when he copied her, “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Blair.”

*

Many years later I came across an old spinet piano, similar to the one Ms. Spiegel had lugged about. I was at a yard sale with Joseph, the man who'd become my kind-of husband—but now I'm getting ahead of myself again. Joseph must have caught something of the delight in my face, and he steered me toward it.

“It seems tuned,” he said, lifting the lid and pressing a few keys. “I don’t play, though.”

“I do,” I said.

“Go ahead,” he urged. “If you like it I’ll borrow a truck from somewhere, and we can take it home.”

“Okay,” I agreed. Only, when I brought my fingers to the keys, nothing happened. I waited for the music to rush through me as it had so many years before, but it just never came. Finally, I closed the lid, embarrassed and a little shaken. “I guess it’s been too long,” I said.

“No problem,” Joseph replied, his arm around my shoulders. “You can practice.”

And though I tried to dissuade him, Joseph bought the piano, paying more than it could have been worth. But we had money then, and he liked that he could buy things for “us,” which made the “us” we were trying to be feel more substantial, more like an actual marriage.

I never practiced, though. I never even pretended to. But every once and a while, when Joseph wasn’t around, I’d lift the lid and close my eyes and beg my fingers to play.

They didn’t, of course.

Whatever had been there was gone.

*

Sometimes—even in summer—snowflakes fall like feathers from the sky. Or rather, it was only in summer when snow might be said to do such a thing. Because then snow must be cautious. Must tentatively ask, *Is this okay?* In winter, snow is heavy footed and sure of itself. In winter snow belongs.

But there's something freeing about summer snow. About not being bundled so thickly you start to forget your normal proportions. And the snow comes quickly, without warning. It falls wet and cool on your bare arms and forehead. A moment later it's gone; the skies clear and the world returns to business.

This is how I'd like to remember those months I played Wagner. Lovely and fleeting and without regret.

But I do regret—for instance, that I never taught myself to read music. Or that I never found a way of recording myself, to prove to the future me I'd really done it. Besides Vivian, Michael, and Ed, there were no witnesses, no one to verify my memories are real. Not simply something I made up once the piano was gone.

Not simply an excuse for what came next.

The Spirit in the Bottle

Michael said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Blair.”

I stood slowly from the table, pushed in my chair, and went to my room, where I laid down on the bed and closed my eyes. This is what I dreamt:

I am swimming through the house, which is filled with water so clear it could be mistaken for air. Except that I can feel the wetness gripping on my arms and legs like mud. It tries to pull me down, but I fight my way to Michael’s room and steal Jones in his bottle.

I return to the kitchen where Michael and Vivian are still eating dinner. Somehow they aren’t floating. Somehow they remain strapped to their chairs. And then I realize they are themselves chairs, that their bodies are stiff and wooden.

They watch me, as I scull past them and push open the studio doors.

“What will you do?” they ask, their voices like a choir. Like so many people all rolled into one sound.

But I don’t answer. I take Jones in his bottle and smash him into the mirror. Tiny shards of glass drift around the room. Jones escapes from his bottle and floats out the window.

Michael and Vivian plod over, their chair legs awkward and slow. They join me at the sill, and we wave to Jones as he climbs higher into the sky.

“Will he go to heaven?” Michael asks.

“Don’t be silly” Vivian says. “This is heaven.”

*

Michael said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Blair.”

I took Jones and threw him into Vivian’s mirror.

Everything broke. We broke.

Vivian was screaming and Michael was crying and I was silent. Our faces were red and wet; their faces had become mine. Because no one is beautiful when they cry. No one is *better*.

A man came rushing in. He picked us up and puts us into our beds. He tucked our covers up to our chins and kissed us our foreheads.

In the night, fairies came and swept up the broken glass. They cleaned the brushes and turned lids on the spirit bottles and stacked everything neatly in the armoire.

Only the mirror sat empty. A heavy wooden frame with nothing between its ears. An airhead. A silly woman. All legs, curves—no brains.

And without voice.

Part III

Der Liebskrank Madchen

I wonder, sometimes, when I look in the mirror now. I'm an adult, that huge coming of age looming ahead of us for twenty some years—only when we get there do we understand it's a mirage, like hot sun reflecting on a road. It's not water when you reach it, but thirty, and then forty. There is never any reaching whatever we desire or dread. There is only the slow march forward, the dragging of heels, the weak knees, the pounding of your heart. I like to guess at who I'll be when I get wherever *there* is. Not because I wonder if I'll be someone different, but because I know I will. I know this because I think back on the girl I was. The hair, the skin before me now—none of that is her. I read somewhere that we lose 40,000 skin cells a day. So how long does it take for us to be entirely new? How long until who we are at any one point disappears forever?

In the mirror, I scrutinize the shape of my face. The way the skin has begun to thin over the cheekbones. The lines under my eyes. I think of the her that became me. And would she recognize me? Would she be happy with the way things turned out for us?

Also, I think of Vivian. How for so long she seemed immune to aging. How it seemed she'd found some way of tricking her cells into staying put. All 40,000 of them. As though they'd been frozen by some spell. And how I ran away from her, and stayed away so long, expecting her to never change. So that if I ever did come back, she'd be just as she was before.

How stupid that was of me.

The Princess in Disguise

After the death of Jones things changed, though for awhile we all tried to pretend they didn't. But after a time even that pretend thinned itself away, and we were all just who we were. Michael, Ed, and I still occasionally went around together, but our games lost their intensities. We no longer believed in them as we had—which is to say, we no longer believed they'd somehow save anything. So they became like stories you pass on to a younger child, only there was no child and we'd become such poor tellers.

I decided I'd lost all interest in the magic of things. I told myself to grow up and join the real world. I started buying my own fashion magazines, which targeted girls my age. The ones I'd been sneaking from Vivian now seemed silly and fantastical. All that couture, women dressed like fairies or demons, yachts and faraway islands. A dream world. My new magazines showed girls with loose blond hair in neon green stretch pants. There were advice columns and quizzes and product reviews that I would cut out and take along with me when we went into the valley for groceries. I would search out this lipstick or that perfume and beg Vivian to buy it for me, which she rarely did. Somehow I felt that touching and being near these items would make me better. Which is to say, right.

This was when I decided I could change myself—that I no longer had to settle with who I was, a person of no real consequence, a girl not worth remembering. I didn't even have to be a better me, but could become someone else entirely. And when I'd shed all of the old Blair, when

I'd scraped every last bit of her away, I was so, so sure, I could finally look at myself and be happy.

*

For a long time I wanted bangs very much. Curled bangs stiffened with Aqua Net until they sat on top of my forehead like an ocean frozen in its breaking. The older girls at school wore their hair this way, long and layered and topped off with a pouf. These girls were tall and had breasts and sounded like California when they spoke. They smelled heavily of flowers and mint, and the way they looked at you, you knew not to smile because that was for babies and brownies and ass kissers. I wanted to be them in the worst kind of way—the kind of way that makes you long for regrettable haircuts. That makes you beg for them until Vivian caves and says, “It’s your hair.”

I asked to go to the salon down in the valley, where the stylists had hot pink, glamour-length, Lee Press On Nails and wore their hair like geometry problems. But Vivian insisted on the Kidz Cutz—which was really just a converted garage with two old barber chairs—because it was cheaper and in the village and, anyway, I was still a kid.

Before my appointment I sprayed my hair with Aqua Net until it floated, a brittle halo around my head, stiff to the touch. As though it were made of plastic. I wanted whoever cut my hair to know just what kind of girl I was.

“Here we are,” Vivian said, pushing me a little from behind. In my almost thirteen-year-old mind this was the equivalent of being walked to the gallows. I’d once seen a film where a man is told to put his own head on the chopping block so it can be lopped off. No one is holding him down, but there is no other thing for him to do. He could run, but they’d just catch him and

bring him back to start over again. The executioner, the crowds, they're in no hurry; they'll wait all day—until he decides it's time. And this feeling always stuck with me, to have so much control, yet none at all.

And so I walked on my own two feet into the Kidz Cutz. The women here did *not* wear hot pink press-ons; they were pudgy and wore corduroy jumpers with buttons down the front. They leaned over when they talked to me even though I was almost as tall as them. This woman, “Mam” her badge read, took my hand and asked if I wanted to look at a picture book. One with farm animals. The only words were “Cow” and “Horse” and “Pig.”

“I *can* read, you know.”

“Mam” ignored this.

When she tried to comb my hair the brush snagged midway. “What’s in this?” she asked.

“It’s, *like*, hairspray,” I replied in my bored voice. I didn’t look at her but opened the book to a fat, pink pig. “Oink, Oink.”

“I’ll have to wash it,” she told Vivian. “That’s extra.”

Vivian didn’t even glance at me when Mam said this; she just nodded, and Mam led me to a sink. The water was cold and Mam tugged at my scalp with a fine-tooth comb. “Hold still,” she urged, but I couldn’t; it felt as though she was pulling every hair out of my head. I thought, *This is Vivian’s fault*, even though I knew it was mine.

“Well,” Mam said when she was done and my head was aching. She wrapped a black cape around my neck and led me to my chair. I wanted to face the mirror, but Mam spun me to the wall. She snipped a bit, then stood back and snipped again. “Look up,” she commanded. “Turn your head left.... Now Right.”

“You look so cute,” Mam said when it was over, patting my head like I was seven, as if looking “cute” was the goal. She turned me to face the mirror. “What do you think?” She knew what she’d done, that this wasn’t what I’d asked for. The bangs went from one ear to the other, framing my head like a frilly bonnet.

“This isn’t right,” I said, but Mam shrugged. Nothing she could do about it now, just had to wait ‘til it grew out.

In the car Vivian said, “I told you not to do that to yourself.”

She stopped in the middle of the road and said, “Blair, you’ve got to think more. These people here,” she pointed to the houses. “They don’t forget.”

“How would you know?” I said, and she didn’t answer

The next day I wore my hair in a tight ponytail, the side bangs slicked back with hairspray and bobby pins. In the mirror I examined my head, which was now hard and robotic. I knocked it with my fist, half expecting to hear an echo, tinny and hollow. If I were a robot, if my head were metal, I could have said *I don’t care*, and meant it. But I was a real girl with a real head, and there was nothing to be done about it.

The tuft of bangs on top of my forehead looked all wrong, like a tiny sprig of flowers trying to fill a too-large vase. I dreaded the moment when this head of mine would enter the school. I imagined pointing and laughing and momentarily considered running away. But how would I get out of there. The mountain was prison. I’d need a ride and money and a place to stay in the valley. I was only twelve, so all of this seemed impossible. The only thing I could do was pretend it was someone else’s head, someone else’s idiotic plan to get bangs. Laugh at myself, if I had to.

No one said anything, of course. Not to me.

And the bangs, after a time, grew out. But only after several months of the spraying and flattening.

*

Not long after this fated haircut, Vivian said, “Well that won’t do anymore,” and I asked “What?” and she pointed to my chest. I was wearing a white T-shirt with pink stripe around the middle. “Blair,” she said. “Really.” Then she took me to buy a bra. The bra was white and had no under-wires or padding. It slipped over my head and lay flat across my chest like a bandage. I wanted something better, something with snaps and color, but Vivian said, “No; this is fine.” The saleslady smiled and smiled at me the way adults do when they want children to think they know secret things about life. I wished to die a little.

The next day I asked Ed if she could tell I was wearing a bra, and she said no and wanted to see, but I said, “Some other time.” I couldn’t let her know how plain it was. A few days later, Ed asked me to come over after school. It was so rare for her to want me alone. Just me. Not even Michael. So I went thinking this might mean something. When I got there she showed me her own bra, which was pale blue and decorated with white polka dots. Then she pulled two more from her drawer. One was neon green, the other leopard print. Ed’s father had just dropped her off at the store, and she bought them on her own. She said, “He’s a little afraid of me now. He wants me to be this kid forever.” I thought of my own boring bra and Vivian and how she’d done this to me. How she wanted me to be plain and childish. But I won’t be a child forever.

And I decided, Vivian should be afraid of me, too.

The Old Witch

For my thirteenth birthday, Vivian didn't think it was a good idea for me to have a party. She claimed we couldn't afford one—which was a lie. I pretended disappointment, but really I was relieved. I'd stopped trusting parties after Vivian's. Who knew what might happen. Also there was the question of who would be invited. I was at that age when parties were supposed to transform from nice, chaperoned gatherings with cake and goodie bags, to dark, secretive things. Games were now supposed to involve bottles and closets and parents who looked the other way or went out of town. But Vivian wouldn't have understood that. "You're just a child, Blair," she liked to remind me when I asked for things, like a phone in my room (who would I call?) or additional piercings (she'd reluctantly let me have my ears done when I turned ten). But even though I didn't know why Vivian had lied, I felt relieved to not have the burden of a party thrust on me.

"We'll do something fun instead," she promised. "*A girl's thing.*"

This, too, was suspect. Some girls at school went with their mothers to the salon to have their nails done or drove into the valley for a day at the mall, but Vivian and I had never done these things together. When she took us shopping it was a painful, protracted process. We'd go twice a year: once for winter clothes and once for summer. Fall and spring, were never mentioned. They were the outcast seasons; they had to make due.

I'd always been a quick shopper. I saw what I liked. I tried it on, handed it to Vivian, and if she approved of the price, it went into the bag. But Michael was not so easy. He circled

the racks, dazed by all the options, touching fabrics but never picking anything up. This could only go on for so long before Vivian grew impatient, and began loading him up with an array of shirts and pants. Michael would obediently cart them off to the dressing rooms where he'd try each piece on, meticulously turning himself before the mirror, checking the angles. He'd emerge sometime later with the same pile of clothes. "Well?" Vivian would ask. But he never could decide. In the end, Vivian and I would sort through the pile, picking whatever we liked, discarding the rest. Michael never protested; he never mourned a shirt we'd failed to choose. He took the clothes home and wore them and didn't seem to give them a second thought. It made me wonder why the formality of taking him at all.

But he was growing so fast. By the time he was ten, he'd surpassed my height by an inch. Flagpole, I started calling him, though really his height was beginning to scare me. I'd touch his skin just to be sure it was a normal temperature. I knew I wasn't supposed to believe in Snow People anymore, that I'd tossed them aside when I swore off magic in general, but I still feared them, I still felt their eyes on me, their longing, when I walked through the forest by myself, which I'd begun to do more and more lately.

As much as Michael slowed our shopping trips, I'd come to rely on the ritual of them. I wasn't sure what might happen if Vivian and I went by ourselves.

"And we'll invite Ed, of course," Vivian said with the enthusiasm you'd expect from a different mother. The kind who regularly took their daughters on such outings.

"Alright," I agreed, though this too made me nervous. Ed without Michael had become dangerous.

*

Vivian sometimes let me wonder the mall while Michael tried on clothes. My favorite was a store called Happenings—a not-so-upscale jewelry boutique that targeted teenagers and sold the cheap plastic earrings I bought with allowance money. I liked that I could purchase things on my own, without Vivian. I also liked that if I bought three sets the fourth was free. This made me feel I was getting away with something. When I returned to Vivian I'd proudly display my purchases, large silly earrings that were more like toys than accessories meant to be worn on a person's body. Miniature globes, fuzzy red koosh balls, strings of tiny green turtles that dangled to my shoulders. I also made seasonal purchases, little brooms for Halloween, bunnies for Easter, trees for Christmas. These earrings were large and heavy and hurt to wear for more than a few hours. They often caught in my hair, and I had to slowly detangle them. But I kept buying them because I also enjoyed the discomfort, the knowing I was sacrificing a little for beauty. This made me feel I'd earned something—if not admiration, then at least appreciation.

“Those are earrings?” Vivian would ask when I showed her. I was glad she didn't understand; I wanted them to be something all my own—but I couldn't just let her think I pardoned her ignorance. I'd reply, “Like, duh,” which was how I'd begun to communicate. It meant so many things: “yes” and “only an idiot wouldn't know that” and “you'll never get me.” So much meaning packed into so few syllables. People my age could have entire conversations that consisted mainly of the words “like,” “what-*ever*,” and “ohmigod.” We didn't know we were paving the way for even more minimalist communications to come. We thought we were the only people who'd ever been so bored and put out by our parents.

“Where to?” Vivian asked Ed and me. We stood at the entrance to the “mall”—“just the girls,” Vivian kept saying.

I've since been to larger, ritzier malls, and have learned that ours was pathetic by comparison and in no way earned its title, "Galleria." Galleria's have marble floors and fountains and ice skating rinks. Galleria's have shops where anorexic women try on the clothes for you. They are filled with French eateries and sleek window displays and handbags that retail for five thousand dollars. Our mall had none of this. Instead we had thin brown carpeting dotted with bubbles of red and blue Slushie stains. We had dollar stores and plastic, harnessed bears frozen mid-gallop that cost a nickel to ride. But I didn't know better then, which is to say I hadn't yet seen exorbitant displays of wealth and arrogance, so I thought our mall was all right.

"Let's go to Happenings," I suggested.

"*Totally*," Ed agreed. She drew the word slow over her tongue, *Toad-al-ly*, lazily narrowing her green-shadowed eyes. She'd begun wearing make-up, which her father didn't know and Vivian didn't comment on even though I wasn't allowed to wear it myself. Anyone who saw us together would think she was fourteen or fifteen; that she was letting *me* tag along.

"How about this," Vivian said. "I have some errands to run. Why don't you two hang out for a while, and I'll be back in three hours."

Three hours? She was giving us time at the mall by ourselves, a right she'd never granted before, so it would have been lame of me to complain. I didn't want to mention that she'd promised we'd spend the day together. I knew I was supposed to shun her, to beg her to just leave me alone. But with someone as beautiful as Vivian you can't help wanting her around. You hope for other people to see you together; you believe she might rub off, if only a bit. And I was used to her ignoring me, or at least treating me with the kind of distance other girls my age would have died for. I'd seen the mother of one of the girls in my class near tears when she overheard her daughter tell friends she was always begging her for mother-daughter time.

“She’s a pathetic cow,” the girl said because she didn’t know her mother was right behind her—or maybe she did. Just for once I would have liked to hurt Vivian that way. To make her long for *my* approval. But Vivian was stone; Vivian couldn’t be cut.

“Where do you think Vivian went?” Ed asked when we were alone.

“She didn’t say.”

“But where do you *think*?”

I shrugged. We were browsing the earrings, slowly turning the racks. There were thousands to choose from. Hoops and studs and chandeliers.

“What do you think she’s hiding?” Ed asked this slowly, while picking at the ends of her hair, then looked up at me. As if she knew something, or thought she knew something. But I wasn’t sure I wanted to find out.

“How about these?” I asked, holding up a pair of miniature black swans.

Ed frowned. “Ugh.”

“You’re right,” I said, replacing them, though really I thought she would have liked them.

“I heard something about Vivian.”

This was not unusual. Women like Vivian are talked about, and envied, and raked over. Even then, I was starting to learn that some of the people she called friends weren’t always generous when her back was turned. They rolled their eyes and whispered things as if I wasn’t meant to hear. I wanted to shout at these women and let them know how wrong they were. Whatever Vivian had or hadn’t been to me, she was better than them. That’s why they hated her, of course, but they wouldn’t have liked to be reminded of it.

I picked up another set of earrings and turned them over in my hand, giant blue stars that nearly covered my entire ear. Later I’d put them in, and they’d press into the soft skin on my

cheeks and neck, each point a tiny needle. They cost four dollars, which was expensive. “What do you think?” I asked.

“This place is lame,” Ed said.

I didn’t look at her, but I knew she was testing me.

“Let me just buys these,” I said.

“Kay,” she said. “I’ll be outside.”

But when I came out a few minutes later, she wasn’t there. I walked up and down the mall, peering into each store. I checked the food court, the arcade, the bathroom, but I couldn’t find her. Finally, a few minutes before we were supposed to meet Vivian, Ed tapped me on the shoulder. She smiled and said, “I’ve been looking all over for you.” But I knew she hadn’t.

“How was your little outing?” Ed asked Vivian on the drive home. Her voice was coy and practiced, and Vivian flicked her eyes toward where Ed was sitting behind me but made no reply.

“It must have been really important,” Ed pushed.

“Just some errands,” Vivian finally said.

“Errands,” Ed said. “Really.”

“Yes,” Vivian said, though it sounded more like a no.

“If you say so.” Ed folded her arms in front of her and gave a fake smile.

I turned, then, and slapped Ed, the sound loud and plastic and broken. Ed shrieked and put her hand to her reddening cheek, pinching her lower lip with her teeth. Maybe I wanted her to cry, but she didn’t, she only tested her skin with the pads of her fingers as if her cheek was on fire. She turned and looked out the window.

“Apologize,” Vivian said, belatedly, without much enthusiasm, and I did, but mumbling, so that only I knew I’d said “*you’re* sorry.”

*

The next day at school, I caught Vivian’s name in whispers. The kids in my class looked at me strangely, or not at all, and even the teacher seemed hesitant to acknowledge me—though looking back now, I wonder how much of this must have been projection. My desire to be outcast and talked about with hushed zeal.

At recess I found Ed standing near the door with her huddle of girls. They liked to hug themselves and chatter their teeth and pretend they were going to just die from the cold. I pulled her away, not caring whether she’d forgiven me or not. We were well past that point. “What did you hear about Vivian?”

Ed shrugged, “It was, like, nothing.”

“Tell me,” I said.

“She’s *your* mother,” Ed replied, as if this was sufficient explanation, as if contact with me were a crime itself.

“She is not,” I insisted.

“Stepmother, whatever. I’m cold.”

“Just tell me.”

Ed sighed and looked around—to make sure we were out of or within hearing of others, I couldn’t be sure. It seemed everyone at school already knew anyway.

“They say she’s a witch.”

“That’s stupid,” I said. “Who says that?”

Ed shrugged. “People. I’ve heard she goes into the forest at night and does things to children. That she’s really old and ugly, and she needs the souls of the young to keep up her spell of beauty.”

“What? That’s totally stupid. Wait, really?” Strange as it seemed, I was flush with excitement. Despite my concentrated efforts to outgrow my belief in magic, I still longed for it. I put my hand on Ed’s shoulder and she smiled at me, and for a moment I thought we’d been freed of whatever terrible thing we’d become.

“You’re right,” Ed said, shrugging my hand away. “I just made that up.” She rolled her eyes to indicate I was an idiot for even considering such a rumor. “I saw her with a man the other night. They were, you know.”

“What?” I asked, embarrassed and angry now. “Were they…”

“God,” Ed says. “You’re, like, so disgusting. No. They were just walking together *in a very close way*.” Ed spun and returned to her friends; she said something, and they exploded in giggles.

She thought her stepmother was a witch, I imagined Ed saying. Yes, she actually believed it. What a dimwit!

*

Looking back on this part of my life, I’m sometimes embarrassed by the superficiality of my memories. I think, *Of the things I could hold onto, I’m choosing cheap jewelry and bras and petty confrontations*. But these things were important to me. I believed they defined me. And

the fact that I can't or won't let go of them suggests that they did shape who I was. Who I became. But still, I feel the need to make excuses for myself. To say, well, my life may seem a bit thin here, but just wait, just wait. Only, I'm not sure things ever thicken up enough. I mean, these things that happen to me are the things of life. They are mundane and common, even when they're not. I'm not sure there's ever any escaping that.

The Skillful Huntsman

He came back into our lives simply enough. Appeared might be a better description. One morning not long after Ed's revelation I woke up, went to the kitchen, and there he was, scrambling eggs.

"Hello," he said when he saw me.

I screamed and ran back into my room, crossing my arms over my chest. I'd taken to sleeping in a thinning pink nightgown I'd stolen from a bag Vivian had marked for the Salvation Army. When I'd asked what it was she'd said, "Just something old," which persuaded me there must be more to it, and though I wouldn't have admitted this aloud, I couldn't help but imagine it might be some leftover of my mother's—whose absence I'd begun to dwell on more and more—so I'd taken it as my own.

At school the new thing was to wear your father's old sweaters. The sweaters weren't baggy like you'd expect, but instead fit snugly because fathers back then were thin and gangly for the most part. Hard to think of it now, but the proof is in the photographs. There he is standing next to the pool, shirt off, slim hips and flat belly, bathing trunks short and tight as underwear. When the fathers of my childhood were young themselves they thought things would never change, that their svelte, swimmer bodies would remain solid and strong like granite. They never imagined they'd grow older and wider and have daughters who'd want to resurrect their cast-off sweaters.

All of my father's things had been packed off to charities after he died, so I had to make do with Vivian's discarded clothes. But there weren't many and nothing was particularly old because Vivian never hung on to items she'd lost use for.

"You look like a vestal virgin," Vivian told me the first time she caught me wearing the nightgown. I was a virgin, of course; I was thirteen and hadn't even been kissed, but still her comment stung. As if there was something fundamentally virgin about me. Something that would remain. That I might always be a virgin, which is to say, untouched and unloved.

When I saw him in the kitchen that morning my first thought was, *he knows, he knows*.

I'd spent so many years rebuilding him in my mind. But now here he was, taller than in memory, with a huskier build, and hair that wasn't blond so much as ashen. I'd remembered his features being pinched in the center of his face, but now I saw I was wrong. That his nose and mouth and eyes were spread in a very normal way. Despite the fact that he was unshaven and wearing a thinning T-shirt, yellowed at the armpits and frayed at the collar, stirring crusty eggs in an old skillet, he was much handsomer than I'd recalled. And this—the fact that his attractiveness laid itself so openly for anyone to see—made me question why I'd ever been so fascinated by him.

He's normal. I told myself. *He is not a man worth eating flowers. Not a man to die for.*

And it made me angry, to have been so duped. But I couldn't let it be my fault, so I decided it was his. He'd come to the party in such a dramatic way, how could I not have been fooled into thinking he was so much more than he turned out to be. All morning I stayed in my room, mulling these things over, taking the red shoes from their hiding place and slipping my toes into them. They were like candy now, tooth-rottingly sweet, and I wanted to crush them with my heels. But I decided to keep them—only to remind of how stupid I'd been.

When I finally came out of my room several hours later he was gone.

*

“So you ran away from Heinrich this morning,” Vivian said to me at dinner. I’d made macaroni and cheese from a box, with mixed-in hot dog bits and peas. I considered this healthy and good. One representative from each of the four food groups.

I nodded.

“How do you think that makes me feel?”

I shrugged.

“Now I have to explain to him that you are not a nitwit.”

Some people already thought that. What would be the difference if one more did.

“Are you going to say anything?”

No.

Wait, yes. “Is he your boyfriend?”

Vivian laughed, quietly at first, then louder. Her laughter was like a wind in winter. In hit you and pushed under your skin. Cold and sharp.

I don’t know where Michael was. He must have been there of course, but I can’t see him anymore. At some point I started storing these interactions with Vivian in someplace darker. Someplace alone. I can hardly remember anyone else. There is no furniture. Just her. Taller and taller even though I should’ve been catching up by then. I was a teenager—when things were supposed to be evening out. But they didn’t. Though she never grew older, she got bigger. Not fatter. I don’t mean this literally. What I mean is, she overwhelms the space of my memory.

*

Here are some of the things I found out about Heinrich over time. Not necessarily in this order, nor did all of this information quickly follow his first appearance—though some did. The truth is, I can't remember when I discovered what about him. A little is shaded by the fact that I was repelled by him when he first returned to our lives, as I am now, or tell myself I should be. But there was a time in the middle when my feelings for him were more ambiguous.

That first morning when I found him preparing breakfast was a kind of fluke. He didn't actually enjoy cooking, but seemed to think Vivian would find it appealing or at least courteous. He hadn't waited for her to wake up that morning, nor did he sneak out as he'd been doing for several weeks. He also didn't think about the consequences of Michael or me discovering him. Vivian had done such a good job of keeping him hidden from us; he must have forgotten our existence—or his. Perhaps he'd begun to think Vivian had put a spell on everyone, so that we might walk freely about the house invisible to one another. It was not really a large house, but Vivian's bedroom and studio were on the side opposite Michael's and mine. So it's entirely possible that we were frequently all under the same roof without knowing.

I also learned Heinrich was soft spoken, and that his voice cracked when he whispered. His mother and father had raised him in a big family way, and something about all the laughing and yelling pulled him into himself. Made him weary of shouting and crowds, which he found oppressive and dangerous. He especially hated large home-style restaurants full of boisterous diners and heaping portions and so much ceramic and cutlery. This was a large part of why he ended up living alone in a cabin in the mountains of Montana. A place that could never be

crowded or loud. The cabin had been left to him by an uncle who had no children of his own. He told me this part sadly, and with regret, not for the dead uncle or the unborn cousins, but because it made everything too easy for him. He hated to think people would assume he'd taken advantage, that he felt "entitled." He would have rather built the cabin with his own hands. His favorite smell was of fresh sawdust, and the way the shavings felt in his hand. Almost soft, but not exactly. With a bite.

Heinrich made his living simply, chopping wood and hunting small game, which he sold quietly to the resort—which is to say, under the table. He had one contact, and they made their exchanges twice a week in one of the big resort garages that required a code to enter. Other than that moment when he rolled down his window to punch in the numbers, Heinrich never showed his face where anyone might see it. This was why nobody had recognized him when he'd first appeared at Vivian's party so many years before. Vivian had known him, of course, but she pretended not to. He hadn't been invited. When he saw her reaction, he left. He didn't like making scenes. Or maybe it was the crowd and the noise. Maybe he was afraid to stay. This could have been the end of things—and it was for several years—but when a woman like Vivian tells you she wants you back, there's really nothing else to do. You go back.

I will do that as well. Go back. I don't know it yet, when I discover this about Heinrich. And so I thought him weak. Empty at his core. A thing easily stolen.

Vivian liked to call him her Woodsman, but never when we were around. This is, of course, one of the many things he told me later. One of the things I kept hidden away, for some distant day when it might be useful to know things I shouldn't. I was collecting little darts, to use when the time came.

And there were things even Vivian didn't know—that Heinrich had been in prison once, though he never said why. Not for very long, he assured me, but long enough. He whispered this to me, when Vivian was just in the other room, his lips so close I could feel the bristles on his cheek brushing the tip of my ear. “Jail.” The word felt cold and metallic, and I wanted to press my face to it, just to be close to something so dangerous. He asked, “Are you afraid of me now?” and seemed pleased when I nodded.

But I'm getting ahead of myself again. All that is much later. Closer to the time when I run away. We need to go back to when I'm thirteen. When he comes into my—our—lives, in a very hard way.

*

Over the next few weeks we began to see more of Heinrich. It became obvious to me that he and Vivian had known each other for a long time. Since before his first appearance at Michael's birthday party. And I was old enough to acknowledge the possibility that he'd been there before my father died. That whatever sadness Vivian might have shown at my father's death could have been a lie. Sometimes I would look at Vivian and think, who is this woman who's pretended to be my mother all these years. Now I think, I must have been wrong, that there was something genuine in Vivian's attachment to my father. That I was just angry with her for hiding Heinrich away for so long.

I liked to watch Heinrich in our house, which he seemed to think was his house. He knew where things were. Colanders and wrenches. Items I didn't know how to find. “Has

anyone seen my teapot?” Vivian would ask. Heinrich had, and he could produce it without hesitation.

I started moving things—to stump him. To hear him say, *I know where it is*, but be wrong. So I put the can opener in the pencil drawer; I put a bottle of Ibuprofen in the freezer. Then I’d ask for the objects I’d hidden. He’d approach the place where they should have been, and I’d eagerly anticipate his puzzlement, but he’d find everything right where it belonged. I started to feel I had some kind of shadow, following me around to right my wrongs. Or that perhaps there were just people for whom the universe had an eye out. Vivian, Michael, Heinrich. Their lives made easier by some coincidence. But not my mother. Not my father. And so, I decided, not for me either.

*

Halloween was never a big thing for our village. We’d just come off the Oktoberfest season, the resort was nearly empty, and everyone was concerned with preparing for the coming snow, as well as the tourists who accompanied it. Still, we managed to pull together some kind of costume—very often involving dirndl or lederhosen—and tromp about our three streets. We did this without great enthusiasm. Instead of shouting “Trick or Treat!” we simply walked up and opened our pillowcases and watched the little gifts fall in. Not that they were anything special. At that time, finding those bags of miniature chocolate bars required a several-hour trip to Bozeman that few were willing to make. Instead the adults dropped into our bags pennies, mints stolen from the resort lobby, and popcorn balls. The popcorn balls were the worst because they were hard and sticky and tasted of chemicals. After a while you started to remember who gave

them out, and you avoided those places. We didn't receive apples, because apples—we'd recently discovered—might contain razors, and were therefore dangerous. Also they were heavy and would have been burdensome to carry about. And they were precious. Too precious to waste on a bunch of lazily costumed kids. A few people gave out full chocolate bars to the children they liked—which normally wouldn't have included me, but they couldn't very well drop a whole Kit Kat into Michael and Ed's bags and penny into mine—though some seemed to contemplate it. In this way, I managed to make out better than most. But only by the luck of the company I kept.

When Vivian asked Michael what he planned to go as my thirteenth year he answered, as he always did, "I dunno. A bat?" Several years before, Vivian had assembled him a set of bat wings from wire hangers and an old black sheet, and he'd worn them over his shoulders each Halloween since. If he hadn't been pushed to it, he wouldn't have gone out at all. He didn't like the way people looked at him. Like they wanted to touch his head. Like they wanted to pull him into their houses and keep him for themselves. And I thought, *At least they're interested in you.* But I never said anything because I didn't want him to know how much I longed to trade places. To be the one everyone wanted.

I waited for Vivian to ask what I'd go as, but she only said, "If you like," and went back to helping Michael with his math homework. Since Heinrich's arrival, she'd become increasingly concerned with our scholastic achievements, sitting us down at the kitchen table every night after dinner to quiz us on vocabulary or check our answers.

"I'm going as a Flapper," I announced, though I had no costume. But at the time it seemed a clever, attention-getting kind of thing to say. Heinrich was standing a few feet away

from me, drying the last of the dinner dishes. He wore a soft flannel shirt and moved so fluidly between the sink and cabinets. A little part of me wanted to impress him. Or maybe a big part.

“Oh Blair,” Vivian replied, laughing a little. “You can’t be serious.”

“Why do we have to do long division?” Michael asked. He leaned into the table so that his chin sat on the edge. From where I sat, he seemed bodiless.

“I could be a Flapper.” I stood and began dancing an imitation Charleston. We’d just covered the Roaring Twenties in my history class, and I’d taken a liking to these flappers. I admired their loose boxy dresses and short-cut hair. Despite themselves they managed to make their boyishness glamorous and appealing. But to a woman like Vivian, they wouldn’t have made any sense.

After a moment, Michael stood and began to copy me, though he let his arms fly wildly. “You look like a drugged out monkey,” I said, and he laughed.

Heinrich turned to us and clapped. “Bravo,” he said, and I stopped. My face flushed; was he making fun of me?

“That’s all very well, but you’re far too old now,” Vivian said, reaching toward Michael though looking at me. “Please sit,” she said to him, but his dancing only grew more erratic.

I was too old? This seemed impossible. Hadn’t I gone out the year before? How could I be young enough one year and far too old the next?

“But why?” I went to Michael and wrapped my arms around him. “If you finish your homework, I’ll tell you a secret,” I whispered. I didn’t have a secret, but that didn’t matter. He considered this a moment, then sat back at the table and resumed his work.

“What do you mean, *why*?” Vivian asked, pretending not to notice how easily I’d gotten Michael to comply. “Because that’s how time works. You get older and there’s not a thing you can do about it.”

I watched Heinrich out of the corner of my eye; he’d gone back to the dishes. “But Michael and Ed get to go,” I said quietly.

“They’re younger than you.”

“Please,” I said, desperate now to partake in the ritual I’d only ever viewed as an obligation.

“No Blair,” she said. “That’s the end of it. You’ll stay here and help me pass out the treats.” So not only could I not go, I’d be forced to hand out nickels and dimes to those who could. Kids my age, older even—who lived in houses where thirteen was not some evil number that signaled the end of fun like running into a brick wall.

“Please,” I repeated, but Vivian was pretending to look at Michael’s answers.

Heinrich placed the last pot in a cabinet and closed the door. “Does anyone want ice cream?” he asked. Michael shouted, “Yes!” but Vivian and I looked at each other and didn’t say anything.

Later that night I went to the kitchen for a glass of water, and I overheard Vivian and Heinrich arguing. I’d come upon them fighting before, but never about me. I won’t even lie and say I knew I shouldn’t be listening; I was so fascinated to hear my name pass between them as though it were completely distinct from myself, just a name they were tossing about like a beach ball.

“I don’t see why Blair can’t go,” Heinrich was saying.

“Blair is too old.”

“I’m not sure what that means.”

“My own mother made me stop when I was ten, so I think I’m being generous.” Vivian rarely mentioned her own mother, who was by all accounts tyrannical and forever elderly and died when Vivian was in her early twenties.

“That doesn’t seem a fair comparison.”

“What is fair?”

I heard heavy-booted feet, clomping across the hardwood, then stopping. I couldn’t tell if they were moving toward or away from Vivian, though I imagined it was away.

“Sometimes I think you may be too harsh on Blair,” he said.

Then there was mumbling and finally quiet. I waited a while longer, but heard nothing more, so I got my water and went back to bed. That night I dreamt of Heinrich. In the dream, I went back to the kitchen for another glass of water, and he was there waiting for me. “I’ll save you,” he said. “I’ll save you.” And when he said it, I knew he was the Prince, and I forgot I was supposed to be hating him. But in the morning, I was just a thirteen-year-old girl again, and he my stepmother’s boyfriend.

At breakfast Vivian announced I could go trick-or-treating after all. She spoke in a loud monotone of the kind children use when they are forced to make an apology. She did *not* give any explanation.

“I don’t want to go,” I said. “I changed my mind.” This was a lie; I did want to go, but somehow I couldn’t say that to Heinrich. “I decided you were right. I *am* too old.”

Vivian seemed satisfied with this, but Heinrich looked away and wouldn’t meet my eye.

“I really am too old,” I said to him, quietly, as I was leaving for school.

The Rich Man and the Poor Man

Heinrich liked Ed very much. Not in a dirty way, though. I told myself I would have been happy if he'd looked at her lecherously, if he'd turned to watch her walk out of a room. But instead he treated her as a daughter. He asked her how her day was and called her "pickle face" and taught her how to tie knots. Fancy nautical knots with names like "Rolling Hitch" and "Eye Splice." Sometimes he'd ask if I also wanted to learn, but I'd only shrug, as if knot tying was too boring to even merit a real answer. Of course I wanted to learn, but that was beside the point. I tried to project a you-can't-teach-me-anything attitude; I didn't want him to see me that way, as a child in need of instruction.

The more Ed took to him, the more I wanted to steal him away from her, as she'd done with Michael and anyone else who might have been my friend. One Saturday, he asked Ed and me if we'd like to drive up to his cabin with him. Heinrich often spoke of his cabin, but only Vivian had ever been there. So for him to offer to take us was something special. I knew they needed for me to agree, because without me, he couldn't possibly take Ed by herself, or at least, not with me knowing. And so I declined.

"I have to work on my science project," I explained. Heinrich nodded because he'd no right to discourage my studies. Meanwhile Ed pursed her lips, but said nothing; she knew I had no science project, and if I did I wouldn't give up a Saturday afternoon to work on it. Science projects in our school generally involved poster board and objects found in nature—twigs and leaves, mainly—glued above simple, rudimentary descriptions. *Maple leaf. Birch bark. Robin*

eggshell. Our teachers seemed to believe our lives were themselves a kind of experiment in the physical and social sciences, and so they did little to disturb our backwardness.

I waited then, until Ed had gone off somewhere with Michael, and Heinrich was loading a few tools into the bed of his truck, before rushing breathlessly out to him, barefooted, my shoes in my hand, as though I'd suddenly decided to accompany him after all, when really I'd been waiting by the door for just this moment.

"I'll come with you after all, if you don't mind," I said.

He looked around for Ed or Michael or even Vivian, but there was only me.

"I wanted to look for a few samples that don't grow down here," I explained. "For my science project."

And so I climbed into his truck with him, and we left the village behind. At first we seemed to be driving toward the valley, but then we took a sharp turn onto a road I'd never noticed before, as many times as I must have driven by. And I wondered for a moment, if it were some kind of magical road, that only opened itself to those who knew its secret. But I told myself not to be silly; I was too old for that kind of thinking. Still, as we drove along, I couldn't help but find myself in awe of this narrow, tree-covered path. The trunks were wider than those I was used to, with lower, knotted arms that spread just above us, letting in only slivers of sun. The ground was damp—despite the recent lack of rain—and carpeted with red and yellow leaves—even though they must have fallen months before. There was nothing else, no flowers or low-growing shrubs, no birds or squirrels. Only a kind of vacuum that seemed impossibly untouched. It was strange, to live a place my whole life, and never know this part of it existed. I wanted to imagine we were Hansel and Gretel, that I'd killed the witch, and we'd stolen her truck and were driving someplace better. Someplace safe. But I couldn't really; or not as I

might have before. It seemed I'd found this place too late. After I'd already given up on the magic and the games.

I decided this was Heinrich's fault. For not having brought me here sooner. When I was young and so in love with the idea of him and the world. It almost seemed a crime, then, to bring me here now, with regret sharpening me on its edges.

"It's pretty, isn't it," he said, turning to look at me as he drove.

"I guess," I said. "If you like dead things."

"It's quiet here," he replied, "and that's not the same."

"Might as well be." I crossed my arms over my chest and wished I'd just agreed it was beautiful.

We continued, after that, in silence, winding our way up, up, up, and I thought we'd hit the tree line before long—then we really would be in a dead and frozen place. Finally, though, we reached his cabin, which was not at all humble and cozy like the ones in Vivian's paintings, but was instead shaped like an enormous shoebox with a flat, natural timber roof and walls of paneled glass. Not only was it out of place aesthetically, but also practically. How, I wondered, could something so fragile withstand even the first week of winter, let alone the coldest months, when nights rarely rose above zero and just stepping outside was enough to freeze the hairs inside your nose.

"This is it," Heinrich said, almost bashfully, as if bringing another person here made him understand how ridiculous his "cabin" was. "My uncle had particular tastes."

"Hmm," I said, and then, remembering I'd come with the intention making a great show of my affection, I leaned into him and said, "It's wonderful." I'd meant this to come off as

exaggerated enthusiasm, but as our bodies touched, my voice became softer, and I looked up at Heinrich. Our eyes met, and I turned away.

“I’m glad you like it,” Heinrich said as he helped me out of his truck. Normally I jumped out on my own, but this time I waited for him to open the door and give me his hand, as I’d seen Vivian do. I wanted to show him that I was like her. That I didn’t *need* his attentions, but that I’d *allow* him to bestow them—what I told myself. But also, I wanted to feel my hand in his.

Inside, the cabin was sparsely furnished. Unlike the endless display of taxidermy that was the resort, in Heinrich’s cabin only one small stuffed beaver sat staring from the mantel. This, he quietly explained, had been his uncle’s, and so he’d kept it around for the sake of nostalgia. The rest of the décor relied on natural woods and fibers, woven mats instead of bearskin rugs, simple upholstered chairs instead of overstuffed leather sofas. “Montana,” he said, “without so much *Mantana*.”

I sat down in one of these chairs and waited as Heinrich did whatever it was he’d come to do. Adjacent to the room where I sat was a simple kitchen with bamboo countertops and stainless steel appliances. Above the island that separated the two rooms, a rack of copper pots hung from the ceiling. Though clearly expensive, the cookware seemed unused, ornamental pieces that hung like icicles and collected the light. I wanted to go to them and break them off and hold them in my hand, just to feel them melt—but I didn’t want to seem childish, like a baby attracted to a mobile, and so I stayed put and counted the trees outside until Heinrich reappeared.

Though I was young, I understood that the things in his cabin were not cheap. I’d known before about the wealthy uncle, but had never before considered that Heinrich, too was rich. Seeing him there, though—surrounded by the possessions he pretended to disdain though he’d clearly gone to a lot of trouble to pick them out, to revise away his uncle’s touch and make this

place his own—I understood there were two Heinrich’s. The one who lived with us, who pretended to be rough and earthy and pure, and the one who lived here. And, I wondered, which of him was the one Vivian had fallen in love with. Which of him did she see.

“I’d show you around,” Heinrich said, “but there isn’t much more.” He sat in the chair next to mine.

“Aren’t there bedrooms?” I asked, immediately wishing I hadn’t. Saying bedroom in front of him suddenly made me nervous. As though it were an invitation. I knew very little about men then, about the kinds of things that went on in bedrooms, but I knew enough to be embarrassed.

“Oh,” he said, shyly, it seemed. “They’re just bedrooms.”

“There’s this, though,” I said, pointing to the window, which could hardly be called that because it stretched the length of the living room and kitchen. Outside the forest was still and waiting. It made me anxious, to be stuck here, where I could almost believe I was out there—only it was a trick, and I blamed Heinrich a little. For that, and for making things awkward.

“There is that,” Heinrich agreed.

“Don’t you ever feel trapped here?” I asked, picking at the coarse fabric of the chair. “Like being in a cage of glass.”

“No,” Heinrich said. “I’ve never felt that way, here.”

Instead of saying where he *did* feel trapped, he told me we’d better be going because no one knew where we were, and we didn’t want Vivian worrying.

“She never worries,” I said. “Not about me.”

Heinrich could have—maybe even should have—replied, “Of course she does.” But he didn’t say anything, and I was grateful for that.

*

Each year in late fall—the first day snow blanketed the village—we celebrated Mother Hulda Day. At school it began as a whisper, “Mother Hulda is making her bed,” from mouth to ear. We were supposed to pretend the teachers didn’t know what was going on. At ten am we’d shout “Mother Hulda’s made her bed” and run home to take the rest of the day off. In theory this all happened quickly, but in reality we needed to gather our books and pull on our boots and zip our coats. And only the children ran home. The older ones took our time. We’d grown used to this not-so-simple holiday. When we arrived home, we weren’t supposed to go play in the snow, as you’d expect. There’d be plenty of time for that later. Instead we had to clean. And I don’t mean this lightly. We were supposed to scrub and scrape until our knees ached. Because in the story of Mother Hulda, it is the industrious girl who is rewarded with a shower of gold. All that rains down on the lazy-bones daughter is a kettle of pitch.

For a long time, I was exempt from this tradition. Vivian had never enforced Mother Hulda’s rules. But the year I was fourteen—the first year Heinrich was there—Vivian greeted us at the door with a list of chores.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Mother Hulda needs her bed made,” she said in singsong.

“Since when do you go in for that?” I asked, but she didn’t answer. Instead Michael and I divvied up the tasks, arguing over who had to take the worst.

I began, first, with the dusting, moving from room to room. Picking up objects, putting them down again. Since Heinrich had been there, Vivian had begun making an effort to keep the house clean, so though I went through the motions, really, very little was needed.

“This is stupid,” I shouted to Michael, who was vacuuming the rugs.

We looked at the other items on the list, scrubbing toilets and floors, all things that had been so recently done, we decided to ignore them. Only the last even seemed necessary: Clean out closets and find five items to donate to goodwill. This was the final ritual of Mother Hulda Day, scrounging up things you don’t want and pawning them off on people who can’t afford better.

I went to my closet and pulled three shirts from their hangers, I’d outgrown them anyway. On the top shelf I found a game, Mall Madness, that Ed and I hadn’t played in ages. Then, as I searched the back of my closet I come across the red shoes. I hadn’t forgotten them, of course, but still their existence surprised me. Perhaps because I’d stopped believing in their power, I assumed they’d cease to exist.

I put them on and walked around the room, as I’d so often done before—only now they didn’t slip beneath my heels. Now they fit. And even though I was wearing plaid boxer shorts and an old T-shirt, I felt a kind of command—if nothing else, in my height, in the way I seemed to tower over everything.

I knew I looked ridiculous in them, that I should put them back into their bag and throw them away, but I didn’t. I marched them out to the kitchen where Heinrich was mopping the floor—one of the chores I’d neglected to do—and I put my hands on my hips and said, “Like my new shoes?” turning my ankles in what I hoped was a sexy way.

He looked at my feet, then his eyes traced up my legs.

“Remember me?” I said, in my high-pitched shoe voice.

Heinrich leaned the mop against the counter, and came to where I was standing; in the shoes we were much closer in height. And maybe he would have done something then, but Vivian walked in.

“Where did you get those?” Vivian asked. “They’re mine. I’ve been looking for them for years.”

“No you didn’t,” I said. “You told me to throw them away.”

“That’s a lie,” she said. “Those were a gift, and you stole them from me.”

Through all of this Heinrich said nothing. He looked from Vivian to me and then at the shoes. “Take them off Blair,” she said.

“I can’t,” I said. “Glinda the Good Witch gave them to me. They’re going to help me get home.”

“Have it your way,” Vivian said; she lurched to grab my foot, but I hopped out of her way.

“Run, run,” I said. “as fast as you can, but you can’t catch me.” I ran around the island, waving my arms above my head.

“Damnit, Blair!” Heinrich shouted, and I turned too quickly, thinking for a moment he was joking, then realizing he was not, my heel slipping on the wet floor, my feet flying out from under me. I landed hard, and sat stunned for a moment.

“Are you okay?” they said in unison, coming to help me. Just like two real parents.

I looked up at them and said, “*Vorsicht, nassen Fußboden.*” They backed away, and I laughed because neither of them understood. I could have said anything. That was the nice

thing about knowing another language. The secrecy of it. Your ability to use it to make other people feel as small as you do.

I pulled myself up, steadying on the counter as I reached down to unstrap the shoes, which I dropped on the floor. I didn't say anything else, but slipped past Vivian and spent the rest of Mother Hulda day in bed, trying not to upset my aching tailbone, betrayed by how easily Heinrich had changed sides. When Vivian was in a room, she was all he could see. She was all anyone could see.

Pride Grows in the Heart Like Weeds

I wasn't particularly interested in the boys at school, because they seemed exactly that—boys. They were lanky, with spaghetti limbs and apple-smooth chins. Only their voices had changed, and the deepness there seemed false, like trying on a father's tuxedo, and finding it long and baggy. These boys liked to ski and to stand in small circles looking at us girls, who confused them so much. Hadn't we been just like them? Thin and flat and only concerned with play? When did we grow in such strange places? When did our hair become shiny and our eyelashes black and full? When did we start hating ourselves and each other? The boys didn't understand us, which is why they wanted so very much to touch us, if we'd let them.

The resort had a small but free movie theater that showed skiing videos and G-rated family films about dogs and peer pressure and overcoming obstacles—never anything magical though, never anything to overshadow our little fairy-tale world. But despite our objections to such films, we let the boys walk us there and sit by us and tentatively put their arms around our shoulders. During the day we'd stand in the halls with these same boys and say mundane things to each other. In class we'd write these boys silly notes that read, "Miss Peterson smells like bacon" or "I hate math *so, so, so* much." In the evenings talk on the phone, more nothing. We called this affiliation with one particular boy "going," which I now understand is a shortened version of "going steady," but at the time thought was a phrase of our own invention. I enjoyed scoffing when the adults asked "Where are you *going*?"

In this way, I had several "boyfriends" who lasted a week or a month, who would walk me home and awkwardly kiss me on the cheek or occasionally the lips. Some of these

boyfriends came inside and met Vivian. They liked very much to look at her, and barely glanced at me while she was in the room, but they kept their distances. She was like a bronze sculpture in a museum, sectioned off by velvet ropes, Do Not Touch signs at every corner, and a rent-a-cop close by, just waiting for someone to cross the line.

When Heinrich was there, he'd say, "What's *your* name." And this was not a question, but a way of staring them down.

The boyfriends had simple forgettable names like Jimmy or Bob and simple forgettable faces; their features drawn as with sidewalk chalk, blurred and uneven, just waiting to be washed away in the rain. Because there weren't really so many boys to go around, we had to cycle through them. A full rotation took six months or so to complete, so in all, I probably "went" with each of these boys three or four times—before I got fed up with the whole arrangement and gave it up for good.

But I didn't give up the opposite sex entirely.

When I was fifteen I began hostessing part time at one of the resort restaurants—Specchio, the best and most expensive in our village. The only one where reservations were required. The décor was dark, contemporary Tuscan, a combination that shouldn't have worked, but somehow made the space feel earthy and mysterious and rich. I wore a black dress with long sleeves and a scoop neckline. And black heels, which I had to carry with me in a bag and slip on when I arrived. Even though I looked foolish walking across town in a formal dress and snow boots, this was the position every girl at my school wanted. I had not been given preference because I was pretty or particularly gifted in the art of seating diners, but because of Vivian and her sway. The other girls knew this and held it against me, as I would have, if I'd been them. But I was not them and took full advantage of my luck.

Many of the seasonal staffers were just eighteen or nineteen years old, clean out of high school, as my mother had been. They worked and skied and drank in their tiny shared apartments. Unlike the boys at my school, they didn't go to the free theater to watch the G-rated films, but they did want to touch me. Only they were more experienced and were not satisfied with the cautious conventions of high school dating. So I went with them after our shifts. To their bedrooms, to their mattresses on the floor and their unwashed dishwater-colored sheets.

And I let them touch me.

I would lay there in the dark, their heavy bodies pressing down on me, their whiskey-moistness overwhelming my nose and ears, their chins prickling against my cheeks, and I would think about the snow—how it could both freeze and burn at the same time. And what a surprise it was that sex could be the same. Not exactly cold and hot, but the tearing. The way I both liked it and not.

I liked it especially when their flat mates would knock on the doors—how if no one spoke up quickly enough the doors would sometimes open and the light would shine down on us like some righteous high beam. Then the person at the door would apologize and everything would go black again, but not before they'd had a good look at me. This local girl who was willing. So sometimes the person at the door would become the next person on top of me. Which made no real difference, who he was.

And in this way they were very much like the school boyfriends. A lazy Susan of options. When I was bored I spun to the next one. They weren't *boyfriends*, though. At work they talked and flirted with me, and if I showed up at a party they wouldn't ignore me. But they never walked me home or made awkward promises. And they never met Vivian—which was what I liked best about them.

*

“You never bring boyfriends home anymore,” Vivian said to me, the corners of her mouth stiff because she was trying not smile. I think she liked imagining I was unpopular. She’d always liked it better when she could be in charge of how I saw myself. I was sixteen, and it was winter break, so I’d no choice but to be at home more than I’d have liked. We’d had fourteen inches of snow in the last twenty-four hours and the world had become so thick and white you couldn’t see the house across the street; for this reason Vivian decided I shouldn’t go into work that afternoon.

“But I have to,” I tried to argue. “I’m on the schedule. They need me.” I would have like that to be true, but a hostesses in a small restaurant is easy to replace. My chief tasks were smiling and wiping menus and saying things like “Today our chef recommends the duck confit.”

Vivian laughed and called my manager and that was that.

She said, “You’re not walking over there in this weather.”

I looked out the window, which was large and panoramic and made it seem that all the world was boxed inside it. I thought of my parents and the day I was born. How Vivian never talked about my birth because she didn’t want to believe the story. The blizzard, me coming into the world on the back of a snowmobile. She called it a lovely, ridiculous tale. I thought, sometimes, she was jealous because she was born in a hospital, which is about as exciting as having an egg for breakfast.

“What? This snow? I was made for this.”

“No one was made for this. That’s why we invented houses.” Vivian sat on the sofa and flipped through one of her coffee table books. This was what she did when she wasn’t painting but wanted me to think she was busy, so I’d go find something else to do. But more and more she wasn’t painting.

Gina had recently decided to cut back on Vivian’s landscapes, claiming they weren’t doing as well. “That’s just fine,” Vivian said—of course, it wasn’t. Rejecting her paintings was akin to rejecting her, and this was something she couldn’t stand. Only instead of trying to make her paintings better, she let the quality slide further. Gina described several as “mushy” and “the stuff of public television” But Vivian didn’t seem to care anymore, about her work. And I longed, sometimes, to go back to the time before I broke the mirror. When at least she cared about her portraits.

I sat beside Vivian and touched her hair where it rested on her shoulders, as I used to when I was young. When I would wonder how it was possible for someone who seemed so flawless to have little stray hairs like everyone else. “What about the snow people?”

“Them,” is all Vivian said, brushing my fingers away. She claimed not to believe in *them* either, but she was very much afraid of snow people. Or not so much the actual bodies as what they stood for. Ageing, the danger and inevitability of it.

“What if Heinrich takes me?” He’d done this before when the weather was bad, though never in any storm like this. I liked to be alone with him, in his truck, as if we were going somewhere, together. I liked to imagine the look on Vivian’s face when she found out we’d run off. It wasn’t to hurt her; I just longed for her to see how badly I was wanted.

“He’s not here,” she argued, though this point, we both knew, was moot. By the time of my shift he would be there; he’d only just run next door to help the neighbors with a frozen pipe.

“No,” Vivian said. “If it’s so important I’ll pay you what you would have earned.”

“It’s not about the money.”

Vivian shook her head. “Blair, people die in this kind of weather. They get lost and freeze to death. I can’t let you go out.”

“Fine,” I said, making a show of getting off the couch, throwing myself into an easy chair, and crossing my arms. I muttered, “This place is like a prison,” which was something I’d begun saying a lot.

“Yes,” she said. “It is.” She rose up to go to her studio, but stopped and came back and placed her hands on the back of my chair. “You never answered my question, about your little boyfriends and why you don’t bring them around anymore.”

“You know,” I said. “They’re idiots.”

“They seemed nice to me.”

“Only because they were, like, drooling all over your pretty feet.”

“Don’t be vulgar, Blair. We can’t always be choosers in life. Sometimes we have to make due.”

“Because that’s my lot in life, making due.”

“No,” she said. “Not just yours. Don’t think you’re special.”

*

Vivian always knew she was beautiful, but I don't think she enjoyed anything more than the constant reassurance. The men stopping to look at her, my silly boyfriends afraid to even meet her eyes. Women asked for her advice, which she gave incompletely, like recipes missing ingredients, so the women would have to come back and say, "I tried it, but I just couldn't make it work for me. How *do* you do it?"

And she didn't mind wheedling for compliments. She needed them, like water, like air. Sometimes I think she might have died without them, that she'd have withered into a raisin. But she was an addict; the compliments never satiated her, and she was forever searching out more. At breakfast she might storm into the kitchen and proclaim, "I slept horribly last night. The bags under my eyes are like overcooked dumplings." And we all knew to chime in, "Oh no, your eyes are the most beautiful eyes in the world." Or she'd say, "This morning I found a grey hair. Soon I'll look like that scarecrow, Frau." And we'd know to say, "Oh no, your hair is brown as the earth and soft as silk." Heinrich, too, was expected to join in the act, which he did with great aplomb, barroom pickup-lines met with poetic flair. When she complained about the dullness of her skin, he'd chant, "Oh no, you glow as though the sun took the place of your heart." When she called her arms "sacks of chicken gizzards," he countered, "Oh no, if angels had arms like yours, they'd clip their wings and forever renounce heaven."

But then one day he made a mistake. It's possible he didn't quite understand the ritual—or that he assumed it was all for fun. He must have thought it'd be a good joke, or perhaps he was getting fed up with constantly needing to stroke her ego. Maybe it was just too early in the morning to be thinking clearly.

It was early fall then, and already very cold in the morning. Michael and I sat at the kitchen island, eating our cereal quickly, bowls held to our lips. We weren't talking about it, but

we both wanted to be earliest to the shower. All week we'd been losing hot water. Normally we had enough to last through four showers, but that week anything after the first was a gamble; the temperature fell from pleasant and warm to sub zero without warning, and you were left screaming in a shock of cold mountain water. Heinrich, normally so adept at fixing things, had had no luck, so men were coming to have a look at it, but they wouldn't be able to make it up this far until the next week. The situation made us anxious, though we all insisted it was nothing. We made a show of having breakfast first, of waiting until our dishes were done before casually announcing, "I guess I'll go on and have my shower now." So we were racing through breakfast, but trying to pretend everything was peachy.

Vivian entered the kitchen bundled up in a long flannel housecoat, her hair twisted on top of her head in a quick bun. "I look like a farmer's wife," she said, sitting at the table. "Soon my cheeks will sag and I'll start saying things like 'warsh'."

If Michael and I hadn't been sucking down the last of our cereal, we might have been able to speak first. Instead, Heinrich made a show of bowing low as he said, "You're lovelier than the loveliest rose on the vine, it's true, but Blair here might be just as pretty as you." At which point he turned to give me a wink, an exaggerated, head-bobbing eye snap that wasn't meant to be any secret.

At first, no one said anything. Even Heinrich seemed to realize his faux pas; he looked to me as though I was supposed to be his savior. Like I could be the words themselves and crawl back inside him.

Vivian stood. In the yellow morning light, she appeared hollow and wooden, like a gourd or something holy. The kind of thing you'd hang on a wall to ward off evil, but you'd fear as well. Because it has power and can do things you can't understand. I'd never seen her that

angry, though I think I always knew she was capable. She reminded me of the people painted into her landscapes. The way they throbbed and pressed, trying to escape the canvas. This thing she was now was like that. Something clawing to be let out.

“Are you out of your mind,” she said. “Are you out of your fucking mind.”

I dropped the cereal bowl onto the counter, not caring that milk sloshed over the sides and onto the floor.

“What’s so wrong with me?” I asked. “Why can he say that about you but not me?”

She turned and looked at me. She should have said, “Because he’s a adult, and you’re a child, and he should know better.” But instead, she said, “Don’t be so proud, Blair.” And even as she said it, she reached up to smooth a stray hair behind her ears. Her beautiful, perfect ears.

“Me?” I said. “Me!”

“Yes,” she said. “You.”

A Hole Where the Heart Should Be

After Heinrich's mistake, a strange thing began to happen. I don't know if it had anything to do with him. Perhaps nothing. But I look back and see him disrupting something fragile, some fine balance. Though this can't be entirely true, because so many of the things that shaped this story have stemmed from earlier than Heinrich, before he even showed up at Vivian's party. And yet I can't help but see him as a kind of spark. Flint on rock. And then the catching. Then the fire.

But regardless of the order, what began to happen seems impossible now, which is simply another way of saying I can't explain it—but I also can't entirely convince myself it never happened. Because I remember it, and memory plays a funny trick with feasibility. Memory doesn't care about any world but itself.

The first time I thought I'd simply heard wrong. I'd gone to buy a gallon of milk at the local market—which was little more than an overpriced convenience store for the tourists—and as the clerk handed me the change, she leaned forward and whispered, "She wants your heart on a platter. If I were you, I'd run."

"What?" I asked. This is the kind of moment where time stops. Where you feel like you're touching everything, but slowly. The air, the counter, this woman who had limp hair and a tired face and looked as though she might just as well sit on the floor rather than answer me.

I must have stood staring at her for several seconds because she narrowed her eyes. "*Die Milch ist uber ablauft*," she said. *The milk is about to expire*. This was code. It meant, get on your way—there were tourists lining up behind me. Our code wasn't anything we'd ever

discussed, no one had ever written the rules out, and the words were always changing. But there was one constant—the code was always in German. The tourists never knew German, and if they did, our sentences were always mundane enough, always somehow connected to things going on. So when she'd said, "She wants your heart on a platter," I at first assumed it was code. And it was so odd a thing to say that I forgot it wasn't in German.

The next few days were slow and liquid, and I wondered if others could see this strange thing that had been said to me, as though I were wearing a toxic green glow. I found myself turning away from people who looked at me too long. At home, I locked myself in the bathroom and stared into the mirror. I took off my shirt and touched the place on my chest where my heart was buried, and I wondered, *what good would you be, flat on a plate like a fish?* And in that way I convinced myself there was nothing to it. It was incomprehensible to me that anything of mine might be so coveted by someone else.

The next time it happened I was on my way to school. We were running late and Michael had gone ahead of me, but I wasn't in any hurry. In our school there was no such thing as tardiness. We didn't have any bells telling us where to be and when. Things started when they started. That morning was particularly crisp for early December and the sun shone on the snow, making it sparkle. It wasn't yet late enough in the year for things to start going gray, and I was enjoying how very white and clean everything was. At one of the houses, a dog stood in the yard, and I stopped across from it. Betsy, her name was. A fat bull terrier, who began to growl but stayed put. Then her owner called from the door, and Betsy turned and ran inside.

"Come here, Blair," Mrs. Bludt said. She was a round sort of woman who should have been merry but was instead sarcastic and plain; if you spoke to her on the phone you'd imagine her tall and bony. Severe is how they call such women. The kind respected and feared. But

though Mrs. Bludt's voice was stern, her body was not, and bodies are what matter most, so no one ever took a thing she said seriously.

She had a small yard, barely even that really, just a patch of snow no wider than a car. But I stepped closer anyway, because I'd been told, and I was in the habit of doing as commanded.

"She will stop at nothing," she said.

"For what?" I asked, moving closer.

I thought perhaps she meant Betsy.

"She wants your heart on a platter!"

"What?" I shouted.

"Run," she whispered. "Run. Run. Run." Her voice was stiff and monotone and frightening in its lack of emotion.

"What?"

Mrs. Bludt pulled back, wrapping her pink housecoat tighter around her shoulders.

"Blair," she said. "Get a hold of yourself. Go on to school now."

If the first time had been strange, I now felt fully shaken. Instead of going to school, I walked to the resort and sat in the lodge cafeteria. It was still early in the season, so there were few skiers. They came in and out, ate their lunches, drank their over-priced cocoas, and hardly noticed me. I sat in the corner, up against a pillar made to look wooden and rustic, but was really industrial steel sealed in plastic and fashioned to resemble a freshly cut tree.

I took a book from my bag and pretended to read. The book was about bodies and how they change and grow and how horrible things—like hair and blood—start spilling out of them. The kind of book perhaps useful to a child of ten or eleven, who has not yet gone through these

changes. Our teachers didn't have "time" to teach these things in school, and so for a long while had not discussed them at all. But some zealous parent had made a thing of it, so now, several years too late for most of us, we were required to read a chapter every week about the things most of us had already experienced. Every Friday we took a quiz over the reading. The quizzes were multiple choice, with answers so easy it was clear the teachers would rather not have us read these books at all. Most of our teachers were of a mind that this kind of learning should happen in the home. And most of our parents were of a mind that this kind of learning should happen in the school. Vivian found it all ridiculous. She saw the book and laughed; "What's that supposed to teach you?" So I'd been reading it diligently to spite them all. I was now on the seventh chapter—this was the big one, the one about sex, which I was anxious and eager to read, though I shouldn't have been—only I couldn't get past the first sentence, "A man and his wife lay close together, kissing and touching."

How did they know it was his wife? Why were they so sure about the kissing and touching part? And about being in a bed? And why a man and "his" wife? Were they suggesting a kind of ownership? The sentence was incredibly unsettling, despite how banal it tried to make the whole act. It wasn't even clinical, as was the rest of the book. Instead it was colorless and soft, like American cheese. It melted easily and had no taste to speak of. But I tried very hard to linger over this sentence because even though it was the worst kind of lie, it was much simpler than thinking about hearts on platters.

Despite myself I began to wonder what such a thing would look like—a heart on a platter. I knew the things beating inside of us were not shaped like Valentine hearts, but lumps. And I knew they were not bright red or pink, but a kind of muddy color. I knew also they had lots of arteries and contracted and moved blood throughout the body. Put on a platter, a heart

would no longer be attached to a body, so somewhere there must be a person with a giant hole in her chest—and according to what I’d heard, that person would be me.

Really, not much to like about this scenario.

Of course the other part of the sentence was the *wanter*. The first time I hadn’t thought much about the “She” doing the wanting. But now I had no choice but make the obvious assumption that “She” must be Vivian—because who else would desire something so frightening and gruesome? And what precisely did she plan to do once she had said heart on platter. The only logical thing would be to eat it. Fairy tales are full of women cutting up their rivals and placing them into stews. They either eat the stews themselves—perhaps to gain the power—or they feed the stews to the unsuspecting loved ones of the girl in the stew. Notably, the loving fathers are prone to eating soups full of their beautiful daughters. Or so the wicked stepmothers think. Normally someone has made a substitute—the stew is actually made of a pig or a person of little consequence and the girl has run away.

So this was when I decided. If Vivian really did try to get my heart on a platter—I’d have to run far away and never look back.

“Blair?”

I glanced up from the book and saw Heinrich coming toward me.

“Someone phoned from school. I’ve been looking for you all morning. I didn’t want Vivian to know.”

I laid the book on the table, pressing the heel of my palm into its spine so that Heinrich would have to see the words, “Chapter Seven: Lovemaking.”

“I don’t *need* your protection,” I said.

He sat down across from me. “Why didn’t you go into school?”

“Who needs school,” I said, “when I’ve such an intellectually stimulating book to read?”

He slipped the book from beneath my hands, held it before him a moment, then laughed.

“This is what they have you read.”

I bit my lip and nodded. Lately I’d discovered there was something sensual about teeth, about the baring of them, about the way they pressed into a lip or a shoulder leaving their imprint.

I leaned close to him and whispered, “I want to show you something.”

We hiked along in the snow near the bases of *War Dance*, *Silver Knife*, and *Ambush*, passing an occasional skier, but it was early in the season, and most of the trails had yet to open. Heinrich followed me, so close I could feel the warmth of him. Every few minutes I turned back and smiled; I wanted him to think I might seduce him, even if he’d tell himself he’d refuse in the end. And every time I looked back, I knew he was swallowing a little more of me. Eventually he’d be filled with my smiles, my furtive glances. When we reached the spot, I stopped quickly, and he had to place his hands on my shoulders to brace himself, so that I could feel his momentum ripple through me.

“I almost killed Ed here,” I said, without turning. I did not intend this to be a casual utterance. I wanted him to know it wasn’t a joke. I told him the rest of the story, leaving out only that he was the prince. Because I couldn’t let him have that part of it. “Do you understand why I’m telling you this?” I turned then, and our faces were so close we could feel each other breathing.

“It’s only fair,” he said. “You want me to know.”

“No,” I said. “It’s not fair at all. It should have been me. That’s what I want you to know.”

He looked down at me, and for a moment he was all I could see. “Are you saying you wanted to die?” he asked—not as a parent would, the concern mingled with everyone-goes-through-that-kind-of-thing approach. But as though I were the only person in the world. As though he could save me.

I shook my head. “It’s because of you,” I said. “I mean, it was because of you.”

“What?” he said, putting his hands on my shoulders like a man who might kiss me. And I thought, *Oh God, he might kiss me.*

“It’s late,” I said, stepping away from him.

“It is,” he agreed, and we began the hike back. Only this time we didn’t speak. This time I didn’t turn to smile.

*

After I took Heinrich to the spot, I thought he’d avoid me, I’d thought he’d be afraid to meet my eye, but instead he began showing up at the restaurant. Sometimes he’d just drop in to say hello, other times he’d sit at the bar, watching me, but pretending not to. He would stare at the waiters when they stopped to flirt with me, touching my shoulders and leaning in to whisper. Against my better judgment, I’d begun spending more time with one in particular. His name was Salvador and he was from Brazil and I wanted him the way cold skin wants heat.

I remember almost nothing about him now. Just my desire, and even that seems rootless.

“I don’t think Vivian would like you talking to these boys,” Heinrich said to me.

“They’re not boys,” I replied.

“Exactly. You know what they’re interested in? Only one thing. Do you know what that is?”

I turned and looked him in the eyes and said, “Yes,” in such a way he’d understand I more than know.

He didn’t say anything else about it, but he started coming in more often.

One evening he cornered Salvador as he was trying to exit the kitchen with a tray-full of entrees hoisted on his shoulder. I saw this from my post but couldn’t hear what they were saying. *You’re too old for her/ You’re not her father*, was the kind of exchange I imagined, and perhaps hoped for. But later, when I was lying with Salvador on top his bed, and we were contemplating each other’s fingers, which were so different in their coloring, mine white as snow, his warm caramel, he said, “I really like that Heinrich.”

“Heinrich?”

“Yeah,” he said. “He’s a good guy.”

Salvador didn’t explain why he’d come to that conclusion, nor did I press for more. He kissed me, then, but did not go further. “I really like you,” he said. And I could tell he meant it, and that this would paradoxically mean the end of our fun. Because boys who “like” girls take their time. Boys who like girls wait to get to know them.

Later that evening, when Vivian was in the other room, Heinrich told me he spoke to Salvador; he said this as though he didn’t know I saw it with my own eyes. “I told him you were a jewel,” he explained. “And he agreed.”

So I was a gemstone. Cut and polished. Held between the fingers, admired. I imagined them contemplating my hard lines. Holding me up to the light. Commenting on my coloring, my clarity. I’d been to a jewelry store with Vivian many years before. She’d wanted to have her

wedding ring cleaned, just a chip of solitaire, really. The man behind the counter had asked how a woman like Vivian could stand such a cheap thing on her finger. He'd been trying to sell her something bigger; he was young and seemed hesitant, as if he were reading from a script, but Vivian snatched the ring back and said she wouldn't need his services after all. I knew she hadn't done it for herself, but for my father, and I loved her very much in that moment. Later, though, after Heinrich, she'd stopped wearing the ring. I'd gone in search of it once or twice, opening her drawers, slipping my hands beneath the clothes, feeling for a box or pouch, but I'd never found it.

"That's all?" I asked. "I'm a jewel." What I meant was, that's all you think of me, that I'm pretty in a stone kind of way, but you'd just as soon lose me or trade me in.

"I just wanted to make sure he knew. He seems like a decent sort of young man. Like he might treat you like a lady. That's what you deserve."

That's the funny thing about deserving. Heinrich assumed because I—in his opinion—deserved something, that I'd also want it. But I wasn't interested in being treated like a little lady, a thinly veiled code for girl and weak and powerless. As though I'd broken and someone—some gallant man—might paste me back together with his attentions.

After a while, I lost interest in Salvador, though he was as beautiful to me as ever. But when we were together, he became so dull, and I wanted to say, "Please, please, please don't talk; just let me look at you." And it was that I was so blatantly objectifying him, the way I was making *him* into a woman, a jewel, that scared me most.

I didn't tell Salvador how I felt. I wanted to hurt him into knowing better. So I climbed into bed with his flat mate, Joel, who didn't even work at Specchio, but at the lunch cafeteria, which was the lowest restaurant and made him smell of fried things. I waited until I heard

Salvador return, and then I walked out of Joel's room, my shirt untucked, my hair a mess—and I laughed. Not at him, but at myself, for being so cruel. I laughed because I couldn't believe I'd do this even as I was doing it. And I wondered where a person could learn such behavior, such cruelty—or if it was just part of you. If some people were born rotten at the core.

*

After what I did to Salvador, he reacted as any decent, emotionally-betrayed person would: he told what I'd done, not to everyone, but to the right people who'd be sure to spread it around for him. Really he could have chosen any of the female servers. They were not at all like the girls from my school, who were content to pass boys from one to the next like a bottle of cheap wine. The girls at work were older and each was intent on capturing one boy all for herself—and if she could not make him love her, she would at least suck his life away until he had no choice but to commit himself to her for the rest of eternity. The fact that I'd had a taste of nearly every male at the restaurant did not win me any favor—particularly when the guy was already supposed to have been captured by one of the girls. The only respite I'd gotten from them had come when I'd begun seeing Salvador exclusively. They seemed to decide, as a tribe, that sabotaging our relationship would not be in their best interest, and so they encouraged it: slipping their arms around my waist, whispering secrets into my hair, telling me what a catch Salvador was.

But that I let him go, and the way I did it, was more than they could stand for.

They might have made things worse for me at work; they could have turned the managers against me or ratted on me for any number of petty infractions we all regularly committed. But this must have seemed a beaten path, and what would it have accomplished anyway, besides

alienating me further than I already had been. No, they needed to do something I wouldn't expect. They needed to get at the root.

And the root, it seems, was—is always—Vivian.

It was late winter when the girls made their move, and by now we were all very sick of the snow, which was flat and dull and dangerously slick. The roads and paths were treacherous, melting in the day and freezing over in the night, and had to be traversed with great care because this was the time of year for accidents—broken bones, concussions, and not only for the elderly. So in addition to being irritated by the way winter just wouldn't let go, we were anxious and alert; we held our bodies stiff and were suspicious of the sun, which for all its shining seemed to do little good. It was on one of these days that I returned from school to find Vivian waiting for me at the door.

"Some girls from Specchio have been to see me," she said.

"Oh."

"They're worried about you, so they say. Do you know anything about this?"

I shook my head and, in truth, couldn't imagine what would be concerning enough for them to seek out Vivian.

"They say you've been having some...trouble." She seemed to want me to fill in the unspoken blank between us, so that she wouldn't have to.

"Everything is fine," I said, trying to squeeze by her, but she blocked my way.

"Blair, why don't you put down your things, and we can have a talk."

I dropped my bag on the floor. "Talk."

"Let's sit down," she said. "I'll make tea." Whatever it was, she wasn't angry but instead seemed to want to comfort me. If they'd told her what I'd really been up to, she

wouldn't have come to me, she'd have gone straight to the manager and told him I quit. Then she would have lectured me on decorum and STDs. Or maybe just decorum. For her that would have been enough.

We sat at the kitchen table, sipping from our tea and staring at each other. This was not something every day for us: we never bonded over warm beverages; we did not chat.

"Blair," she said, turning the mug in her hands. "Blair, you know, we've never really talked about boys and how they can be so...cruel to girls—especially younger girls. I mean, I know you don't think you're young—no one ever does—but compared to the boys you work with. And I know how sometimes they can...say hurtful things..."

I was beginning to understand something about this situation now, not precisely what was said, but that it was meant to suggest my ineptitude as a woman, that I was meant to be pitied and fussed over. Also that Vivian, who was so used to me not needing such things, was relishing her role as soother.

"You can quit, if you want," Vivian went on. "In fact, you should. After what those boys did to you. It embarrasses me even. I'll call that manager right now and—" "

"No!" I shouted, spilling some of my tea on the table, about which Vivian said nothing. "I mean, that won't be necessary."

"But it must be humiliating for you to even go there again. I couldn't stand it."

I still didn't know what exactly she'd been told—a lie, whatever it was, but I saw now the intention behind it. I also understood that convincing Vivian this supposed transgression could be overlooked would never work.

"You want me to quit?" I asked with forced shock; this was my last hope, to make it seem cowardly. "Am I just going to be a quitter?"

“You won’t be quitting at all,” Vivian said sharply. “You’ll be taking the high road.”

The high road, for Vivian, was not something to be argued with. To do so would have been the equivalent of a priest denouncing God; it was unthinkable.

And so I never did discover just what was meant to have happened to me. That it supposedly involved boys and humiliation, likely sexual, was clear. That Vivian’s own pride was at stake was also apparent. Now, though, I can see that whatever else, she must have also wanted to help me in the only way she knew.

Of course, that she might have had better than evil intentions was no consolation to me then. All I could see was her trying to control me, to mold me into the kind of Blair she could easily manage. A girl without core. And I began to believe, in earnest, that she really did want my heart on a platter. Not to eat, but to keep a hand on it. To squeeze it between her fingers.

Not literally, I suppose. But in a very heavy-handed metaphorical way.

Witch's Cake

After Vivian quit Specchio for me, my life became dull—which is to say, duller than it had ever been. I'd just turned seventeen and was finishing my junior year of high school and had been through every boy in town more than a few times. Also, I was virtually friendless. When I'd had a job, I didn't need girls, nor did I want them, with all of their silliness and hang-ups and wanting to talk about sex as though it were the holy shroud of Turin. And the way they could say things that sounded nice, but weren't.

I could have gone back to Ed and her posse, but in the time I'd been preoccupied by work and waiters, Ed shed her followers. She and Michael had become something more than just children playing. They'd become their own world, which only reluctantly included anyone else. Her spite for me had devolved over the years, but what remained was a kind of pitiful distance, and I felt always as though we were staring at each other from opposite peaks on the mountain.

And so while we agreed, wordlessly, to hang on to each other for the sake of the past, it no longer became necessary, or even comfortable, for us to interact on an intimate level.

This was when I decided to devote my mind to something outside myself, though I didn't know yet what. I'd witnessed what passions do to people, to Vivian particularly, but I also saw how they might be defining, redeeming even. I was such a void then, friendless, jobless, without any particular talents—or at least none in the eyes of the world. I longed to somehow fill myself in, or at least appear whole to anyone who cared to look.

There were things enough to choose from, I found, in the library in the valley. Heinrich had begun selling fresh game to one of restaurants there, and several times a week drove down to deliver his kill. It was not much out of the way for him to drop me off and pick me up as he returned. This gave me nearly an hour to explore the stacks for myself, a luxury I'd never experienced with Ms. Spiegel's pathetic cart of books.

At first I was drawn to the glossy novels displayed on tables near the front; these were the "Librarian's Picks" and filled the time well enough with their exciting plots and witty protagonists, but they did nothing for that part of me that longed to situate itself in something permanent and self-defining. To go about claiming to be a person who liked to read novels was easy and suspicious, as though a novel reader were some kind of social leech, sucking and sucking but never giving anything in return.

So I knew if I wanted to create a passion that others found credible, I'd have to venture into the non-fiction stacks. The facts—people liked to say—give me the facts. Just the facts. It's a fact. As a matter of fact. But facts can be so overwhelming and contradictory. When I asked a librarian about nonfiction, she pointed me to the biographies. "You mean you want to read about a real person. A true story." She was older than Vivian; her hair had gone white, and I thought it a beautiful and brave thing. And maybe I'd expected too much from her because of it; I'd expected her to know that "true" and "story" can never go together. That once something became story, it gave up the pretence of truth. But she didn't know it; she led me over to a shelf and pulled "The True Story of Amelia Earhart."

"I found this very inspirational," she said.

"Thanks," I said, taking the book from her. When she wasn't looking, I slipped it back.

After that, I was hesitant to even go to the card catalog for help. Instead I wandered the aisles, dragging my hand over the books' plastic spines and singing a song. When I came to the end, I'd take whichever book my finger had stopped on, not even looking at the title until it had been checked out, and I sat waiting for Heinrich on bench in the lobby. In this way, I perused many volumes on matters I had little interest in: the origins of agriculture, bird watching, the fabulous world of food molds. But I gave each topic a shot—even though most disappointed in the end. This went on for several weeks before I finally hit on something that seemed worthwhile.

*

The book was called *The Witch's Cake*, and I stood staring at the plastic-bound cover for a long time wondering just what this book, which sounded every bit fiction, could have been doing in the nonfiction stacks. The image on the front was of a round dark-chocolate cake, from which a slice had been removed to reveal several layers of sugary icing. On closer inspection, I realized that the supposed wisps and whips of icing contained human-like forms, desperately attempting to pull themselves from between the tiers of cake. I brought the book closer to my face and for a moment, the figures seemed to be moving, flailing their arms and crying out in agony, not so unlike those trapped in Vivian's paintings years before. I dropped the book then, and it landed on the linoleum floor with a loud slap that brought the white-haired librarian to my aisle.

"Everything okay," she asked, eyeing the book on the ground. And for a moment I feared she'd sweep it off the floor and forbid me from checking it out. It was clearly not a "true" story. It was not the kind of book meant to teach young girls how to be.

“Yes,” I said, picking it up and holding it to my chest.

The title of the book alluded to a cake made of rye and the urine of a person afflicted by a witch. When fed to a dog, the witch was supposed to feel pain because a part of her was in the urine. At the time of the Salem Witch Trials, this was considered legitimate proof of witchcraft, as was spectral evidence, which allowed a person to claim that the apparition of a witch was afflicting and tormenting them. I found all of this fascinating and ridiculous, but I was also impressed by the ability of those young girls to create an illusion so completely and utterly convincing that nineteen people were hanged and one man was crushed to death before the larger courts intervened, and not surprisingly ruled the use of spectral evidence inadmissible.

It struck me that I, too, could use my body to such ends. I could faint at will, but I also wondered what else I might do, how far I might take things. And the power I’d have if, like those Salem girls had, I could stop people—Vivian, Michael, Ed, Heinrich—if I could grab their hearts up to their throats. Then they’d really know, I was not someone to be trifled with.

*

After reading the book on the Salem trials, I began to look into manuals on actual witchcraft—“Wicca,” as it is so adorably called. But this consisted mainly of worshipping the nature goddesses and spells meant to manipulate others in generally positive ways—love potions and the like. I was more interested in something physical and dark, that didn’t require chanting or adulation. I already had the necessary aptitude, I simply needed to hone the skills I already possessed. So I decided to give up on books. I decided to take matters into my own hands.

And this would have been easier if Heinrich hadn't begun to seek out my companionship during the days. It was summer then, and I was not in school, so he—who also had little to do on the days Vivian pretended to be busy painting—would often knock on my door with menial requests, helping him in the garden or accompanying him to the grocery. These led to other tasks, and soon I'd find I'd spent the better part of a day with him. We passed much of this time talking, and this was when he told me about his childhood. The noise, his desire to escape. I began to feel I knew him better than Vivian ever would, because he saw me as a kind of receptacle for all the things he was afraid to say to her. It was only in the evenings, when Vivian controlled his time, that I was left to myself. And even though I knew I was just a stand in, it began to irritate me, that he ran so easily to her side the moment she emerged from her studio.

At least, though, this gave me time to myself. I'd lock my bedroom door, turn off the lights, and lay on the bed with a pillow over my face. In the beginning it was frustrating, to feel the blankets and hear the noise of the house. I wanted to pull into myself so hard, the world would leave me. It took several months of trying, to do, I wasn't exactly sure what. And often I fell asleep only to wake beneath the pillow, sweating and gasping for air. It began to seem I'd never figure it out.

One night Michael knocked on my door to ask if I wanted to go on a walk with him and Ed. Because I was sick of getting nowhere with whatever I was trying to do, I agreed. The street was so dark without the moon on snow to light the way, and we didn't say much. I suspected most of the talking between them happened when I wasn't around. That quiet coupled with the darkness was frightening, as though we'd all been sucked into something with no way out. Something deep, like a well without walls, just the black.

“What are you going to do after you graduate?” Ed asked me as we walked. I shrugged. I was going into my last year of high school, which should have been exciting and liberating; *so much possibility*, people were always telling me. *You’re smart enough, Blair*, one teacher had said. *You could go on to college and study something*. Better than nothing—but I wasn’t so sure.

“Maybe I won’t do anything,” I said. “Maybe I’ll die young and no one will remember me. I’ll just be that girl, you know, the one who died. That wouldn’t be so bad.”

“Don’t say that,” Ed said, quietly, thinking, maybe, of the time I nearly killed her. How she almost was *that* girl.

“I could be a ghost,” I continued, liking that I still had some effect on Ed, that I could still bend her a little. “I could haunt this place and people would tell stories about me to the tourists. I’d be famous.”

“When you say things like that it drives me crazy,” Ed said.

“Hey,” I said. “That could be your thing. You could be the girl who went crazy.”

“Stop,” she said.

“Just a pretty girl,” I said in a wispy voice. “No one knew what was lurking inside her.”

She turned, then, and walked home, slow and careful, as though we were beasts who might follow if she attracted too much attention. As if her invisibility could save her.

“Aren’t you going after your girlfriend?” I asked Michael, testing him; the exact nature of his relationship to Ed was no longer clear to me.

“She’s not my girlfriend,” he said. But I knew, then, that she was—or if she wasn’t yet, she would be. Michael had made her love him more than me, but that happened a long time ago. Now they were just waiting for their bodies to catch up.

“Don’t go too hard on her,” I said. “She’s delicate. You’ll break her open.”

“You would know,” Michael said before he, too, turned to go home.

I was left in the dark, with no moon and no snow, only the few lights from the windows, which were curtained and blinded like doors. It reminded me of something I heard once as a child, a line from a movie, about God closing doors but opening windows. And I’d always found the image hilarious: this big, bearded man sneaking about opening and closing, like some giant, mischievous gnome. But now, I decided, there must be something more to it, that perhaps it didn’t have anything to do with God, but was just an overwrought metaphor to remind people if we couldn’t get out through the door, we could always climb out a window. Which seemed more exciting, anyway. In the first, you simply walk out, but the second you escape. This requires cunning, a trick of the eye. Everyone expects you to walk out the door, but while they’re not looking you slip through the window.

I’d read a bit about magic tricks in my library days. About the art of distraction. And I decided if a magician could draw the audience’s eye here so a quarter could come out of his ear there, then why couldn’t I do that with myself—tell my body I’d be going out the door, but instead, I’d sneak out the window.

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After that it got easier. I told myself, body, you’re just going to faint now. And my body was already perfectly willing to do that. Only once I entered that darkness, I said, *hold on, I just want to rest here a moment*. My body would grow anxious at first, but after a while, it began to give. I whispered soothing things: *This will be good for you, too. It will help us understand each other*

better. And once my body had settled down, I went to work on the other things, the outward signs, the breathing and the heart beating. Soon I didn't need the pillow over my head or the lights off; soon the noises outside of me became like a radio I could turn off and on at will. I never kept myself out for long, though; there had to be a trust, an understanding that this was just a little game we were playing. So I never said anything to anyone. *This will be our secret*, I told my body, *no one will ever know*. But this too was a diversion, because even as I promised it, I understood that to learn such a trick and never show it would be wasteful. And if I'd learned anything from Vivian, it was not to squander a talent.

Who Could Not Shiver and Shake

When I was very young, I remember Vivian eating peaches standing over the sink, the juices spilling down her chin. She ate quickly, and mechanically, the goal not to enjoy the fruit, but to finish it. She kept these peaches in a brown bag by the windowsill. This was meant to ripen them. They were large and red, and looked more like apples than peaches. But the smell was delightful, and when she wasn't looking, I'd open the bag, poke my nose down, and breathe them in. I didn't eat them though. I was afraid of the pits—or at least, I said I was. I very often said I was afraid of things I had no real fear of. Cellophane, mailboxes, disappearing. There was a book about unusual phobias in our shabby school library cart, which I checked out several times—until I decided it'd simply be easier to claim I'd lost it. Then Vivian was supposed to pay twenty dollars, but went to the principal to complain about all she'd contributed to the school (namely her used and unwanted art supplies), and in the end no one had to pay anything, and I got to keep the book.

What I liked most was how strange all the fears were. Being afraid of normal things wasn't at all appealing. There is nothing special about the fear of heights or poisonous snakes because they *should* be feared, or at least respected. These things might actually harm or kill a person. But to fear the color blue, or window curtains—this was inexplicable. One of the strangest I came across was *Teutophobia*—the fear of German things. That schnitzels and steins might strike real horror into a person's heart seemed nearly unimaginable, but was at the same

time fascinating. So I tucked this word away for later. Another little dart for my ever-growing collection.

*

I don't recall exactly when I discovered *Teutophobia*, but I remember when I finally used it.

Precisely.

Each year, the resort hosted a month-long Oktoberfest as a final hurrah to the summer season—really it was just an excuse to draw people to the mountain in what would have otherwise been a phenomenally slow time. Beginning in late September, we'd help set up large white tents at the base area; these would house the long wooden tables with attached benches that were purportedly “just like the ones in Munich”—though no one I met had ever actually been to Germany. Each weekend we filled these tents with beer and pretzels and rowdy tourists. On a platform in the center of the tent, Oom-pah bands with names like Alpine Echoes and Three Crazy Austrians sang, *I don't want her, you can have her, she's too fat for me, she's too fat for me, she's too fat for me*. For ten dollars, the revelers—well past the point of making calculated monetary decisions—could take a midnight “Sesselbahn” ride into the mountains. This practice, however, was discontinued after a man slid under the lift bar and fell nearly a hundred feet. By some act of God, he survived. Being someone of no real importance but exceptionable wealth, and being embarrassed by what he called the public joke made of his good name (this was not our finest moment on the national news), the rides were discontinued and the *Menschen* were left to get their thrills on the polka floor.

Each year, every class was forced to spend the first few weeks of the school year rehearsing the songs and dances to perform during the festival. The youngest children performed at one o'clock, and each hour thereafter the next group would perform. We clapped and stomped and spun in our dirndls like bells. And we were largely ignored, because there was beer and we weren't, after all, particularly skilled or willing. As a rule we kept our faces blank and performed our steps clumsily, turned left when we should have turned right and so on. But this was a tradition and no one thought to question it, and so every year we learned a new routine, performed it with mediocre enthusiasm, and received half-hearted applause.

The one thing I liked about these shows was that each year my group's time slot was an hour later, which meant the tourists were an hour drunker—which is to say, they became the *real* entertainment. By the time I was seventeen, I'd been twirled and dipped and kissed by any number of inebriated men who'd decided to crash our performance. I once led a polka with a buxom woman, who, when we'd finished, spat at me—or attempted to, though most of the dribble landed on her own chest—and said “You fickle Germans,” before stumbling away.

It also happened that much as I tried to slouch and appear dazed, my teachers began to pick me out as one of the better dancers. I was given several “leads”—which generally amounted to me standing in the front, or occasionally doing trickier steps. Not that anything we did was difficult. Anyone who could walk without tripping over her shoes could manage.

My senior year, and I hoped my last, I earned the role of *Der Liebskrank Madchen*—the lovesick girl. But *earn* may be too strong a word; this implies I worked hard and auditioned and was awarded this part, when in reality I was simply chosen. Because my hair was so dark and my skin so pale, I tended to stand out in a crowd regardless. My teachers most likely assumed I'd be an eyesore, so they might as well put me in the middle of things and make a spectacle of

me. My job as the *Krank*, as we called it, was to moon about while the boys performed the *Holz hacker*—a silly wood chopping dance. I wasn't supposed to really say anything, just skip around the back of the stage, swaying my skirts and putting my hand over my heart, until the end of the act when I'd have my big moment: One of these "burley men" blows me a kiss, and I faint. We practiced this routine several times, and all the teachers remarked at how well I pulled off the stunt, how gracefully I swooned to the floor, as though slipping out of my body. They compared me to Vivian Leigh (presuming I wouldn't know who she was). They seemed to have forgotten my fainting fits from so many years before. Or else they chose to believe my skill was only coincidental. Whatever their take, they seemed happy with my supposed counterfeit.

At the first performance, all went as planned. I skipped, I swooned, I dropped to the floor; the audience seemed pleased. Or so I'm told. I don't remember exactly because of course I was not *pretending* to faint. I blacked out just long enough to miss most of the applause, but I was up in time for the next dance.

For a month of weekends the show proceeded just as planned. But on the penultimate night one of the nearby men swooped me off the floor into his arms and ran me several times around the tent before the teachers could stop him and pry me out of his grasp. Though the teachers feigned concern, the rest of the place went nuts, and the man who'd carried me became a kind of hero. Someone fashioned a cardboard crown and placed it ceremoniously on his head, and for the rest of the evening he sat holding court on a stool atop one of the long wooden tables. I was likewise lifted to sit next to him, playing his queen, receiving bunches of chrysanthemums pulled from the resort landscaping, the roots limp and white and spilling bits of topsoil onto my aproned lap. The people in charge liked when things got out of hand in this way—which is to say, mildly. No one was hurt; there'd be no threats of lawsuit. But it'd make for a good story,

help draw a bigger crowd the next year. And so the man who'd swept me up was given free beer and pretzels and everyone went home pleased with how the evening turned out.

Vivian had a policy of never attending any of the performances, which she called dull as feathers, though I suspected she was embarrassed for not only Michael and me, but also herself for being connected to two people so completely lacking in talent. Therefore, she hadn't seen what happened for herself, but with our village being so small she'd gotten wind of it before I returned that evening, a little drunk myself on stolen sips of beer.

"I heard you put on quite a show tonight," she said, meeting me at the door. The hall lamp was dim, and she was half in the shadows, like her portraits; she was flat and shining.

I laughed a little and tried to slip past her, but she put her hand on my shoulder, hard, so that her palm pressed into my collarbone and choked me a little. I thought maybe she'd also been drinking, and I wondered where Heinrich was. Had he been in the tent? Had he seen me? I hoped he had. I hoped when he told about it, he spoke with a kind of longing he could never show for her.

"You shouldn't get used to this kind of thing, Blair. Next time they'll want something more. What will you do then? Fly out of there like a bird?"

"I'll think of something," I said.

"And after that?"

She dropped her hand, and we stood facing each other. I was almost as tall as her. Almost. But she knew how to use her height—I did not, yet. All I could use were words, because they are easy and shoddy.

"You're jealous!" This was a triumphant thing to say because I knew I was correct. For all her beauty and all her stature, Vivian had never been made a queen. Even for an evening.

Even by a bunch of drunken tourists. But despite the power and truth of what I'd said, as the words left my mouth I felt myself shrinking. Knowing a truth and saying it aloud are two different things. Vivian never would have spoken so cheaply.

She stood facing me for a moment more, then retreated, and I was left alone.

That night I slept in spurts, awoken by frightening dreams—Nazis, but without Swastikas or SS or Hitler. Then I realized that in the dreams I was the Nazi and what was frightening were all those people—that is, knowing what I would do to them. It made me sick because in the dream, despite all I'd learned about the horror and inhumanity, I knew I'd do it anyway, without blinking or second guessing. But also I understood the guilt of what I was about to do would never leave me. That I'd carry it inside myself forever like a parasite. Only *I'd* know it was there. The next morning I forgot the dreams, or at least their contents. All I was left with was the feeling of them. And the sense that I had to make amends, somehow, for what I knew I would do.

Our Sunday performances were always planned for earlier in the evening under the misconception that people would want to stop drinking and go home at a decent hour. This never happened, of course, because they were tourists and had nothing better to do in October in Montana than sleep the day away. These people did not come here for the beauty or the majesty; they came for the party. So even though the festival purportedly ended at nine, it would go on well into the night, as it always did. And because we older students were expected to stay after the dances to mingle and throw out a few German phrases, we would be grouchy the next morning at school. This happened every year, so we knew what to expect.

I didn't begin the Holzhacker with any real intention of doing things differently. I would sway and I would swoon. But when I sheepishly lifted my eyes to the crowd a few seconds into

the act, I found Heinrich staring back at me, intently. There was no Vivian, or none that I could see, except through him. And I knew that having him retell things to her would be more valuable than if she'd seen for herself. Because of the words he'd choose, because of the way he'd say my name. And how she'd wonder about the meaning behind the words, the things he wouldn't or couldn't say. I was thinking a little of what she said to me the night before, too. Her implication that I'd never be able to top myself. And I was feeling the guilt that wasn't mine, from my dreams, though at the time I don't think I could have articulated this part. But it was there nonetheless—or at least, it is in my retelling.

I didn't yet know exactly what I'd do, but I had the sense that when they asked me later, I'd say I couldn't explain what happened. I'd say I was possessed.

I didn't know yet that no one would ask me later.

So as I said, the dance started off in the usual way, only instead of waiting for my big finale, halfway through I pranced up to the front and began to spin wildly, like a top or a child. Like a hurricane or the way you feel when your father dies. All of these things. I spun and spun and spun, shouting *Die Deutschen toten mich!*, *Die Deutschen toten mich!*—the Germans are killing me—then I fell dead to the ground. But maybe that's too passive, too much like something that happens *to* a person. Something that can't be controlled. There is no active way to describe dying. There is killing, there is murder. Even killing oneself implies some outside force. What I was doing came from inside: I was dying myself—an unseemly, tricky phrase in English. I prefer the German: *Umzusterben*. *Ich starb*. *Ich starb mich*.

Everyone waited, but I didn't sit up and smile. I stayed that way—a self-made corpse. *Starb mich*. Star beam-ish. Something magical and terrible all at once. After a moment, they inched closer; one of the boys from the dance shook my arm and asked me to wake up, but I

refused. Another boy jostled me, and then a man from the crowd, but...nothing; I remained limp and unresponsive.

Next I was hoisted onto a partially cleared table, a blue checked cloth beneath me, empty beer steins at my feet, bits of salt in my hair. A man was grasping my wrist, trying to take my pulse, but now I could control that too. Pull it back until it was nearly undetectable.

Someone had sent for Vivian, for Ed's father as well because they thought a doctor was what I needed, as if he was some miracle worker. As if he could bring the dead back to life. But only I could do that.

In the meantime, Heinrich had pushed his way through the crowd and was standing over me. Holding my hand and saying, "Blair, Blair." And then, "Come back, come back." But I wasn't ready yet; I wanted to take this a little further. I wanted this to be something no one would ever forget.

It might seem strange, that I could know all this when I'd seemingly lost consciousness. But I wasn't asleep, so to speak; I was hovering between life and death—star beamish—and could perceive everything around me. I could feel and taste and touch and see and hear all at once—and with more precision. My eyes didn't need to be open because my soul, or whatever you want to call that inner self that's separated from the physical body, was wide awake. More so than it ever could have been if my physical body were alert. I'd practiced this many times, of course, but I'd never gone this deep. I'd never so perfectly separated myself from my body, as though I were a magician and my body merely the assistant.

Vivian was taking her time, as I knew she would. She wouldn't believe, as they must have told her, that I wasn't even breathing, that I might be dead. She'd need to dress properly

and fix her hair. Then she'd amble over because running was such a desperate thing to do. And Vivian could never let anyone think of her as so easily overtaken by emotion.

In the meantime, a makeshift vigil had been set up around me; the single citronella candles that burned on each table were positioned on my benches and checkered cloth. I knew the warmth on my fingers and legs—but I didn't *feel* it. I was also aware that Ed and Michael were standing beside me, holding hands, as many others did. I could understand that—the need to be in contact with a living person when the possibility of death is close by. And there was also the fear, but no one wanted to show it because fear is selfish, and we are supposed to be brave at such times.

Heinrich was not brave, though; he was like a child struck from behind. He had no way of knowing the pain would be so intense. Or at least, that's what I'd like to think—and more importantly what I wanted Vivian to see when she arrived, which would be any moment now.

I felt her coming before anyone saw her. The energy surrounding her was intense and complicated in a way I couldn't clearly untangle, but there were two emotions, even though she couldn't show them: There was jealousy, and there was guilt.

When she first arrived, there was confusion; most of the crowd were tourists, and few knew who she was, but then a whisper spread among them, "The stepmother," one mouth to another, so that the word engulfed us with everything it could mean and had meant, and they parted to let her through. But they were giving her way because of her relation to me; they couldn't see her beauty; they only saw me. And she knew this—though she kept her eyes forward, her back straight. Though she was just as beautiful as she'd always been. Only now I'd done something she never imagined I could do: I've cloaked her beauty with my own supposed tragedy.

And there was Heinrich, his forehead resting now on the tablecloth beside my left hip. Seeing him, you'd think he was praying. But Heinrich couldn't think clear enough to that; he didn't want to think at all, in part because his thoughts were treacherous. But mostly because this treachery was not as much of a surprise as it should have been. And he couldn't turn them off, not completely. Practicing alone in my room all those nights, I never realized I'd be able to see into people like this. As though their minds were a box I simply had to unwrap to peer into. This wasn't the same as reading words; it was more a touch—the way a hand knows hot from cold, even in the dark. And I liked what I felt inside Heinrich, his desire, his guilt.

When he looked up at the approaching Vivian, their eyes met, and it was clear, but only to them and to me, that there had been a betrayal, though just what couldn't yet be articulated, because the what hadn't happened yet. Not completely, not physically. And it couldn't be stopped, or not exactly, but Vivian could still do something.

“She’s faking!” Vivian pronounced, and the crowd gasped.

“No,” Heinrich said. “She’s stopped breathing. And there’s no pulse.”

“My father’s coming,” Ed said, hopefully. “It’s not too late.”

“Of course it’s not,” Vivian said. “Because she’s laughing at us all right now.”

Vivian moved the candles away from me and took my palm in hers, she leaned into me and whispered, so quietly I wondered if the words were actually forming in the air or if I could just feel them coming from her, like heat: “What if we opened you up and looked inside you? What would we find? A perfectly working girl so set on making a scene that she waited until her heart was pulled out to admit it was all a trick.”

“Please Blair,” she said, louder. And now she was doing what I’d always wanted—begging for me. But it wasn’t because she wanted me back—not really. What she wanted was to have the control, to be the one to decide for me.

Ed’s father arrived. He pulled my blouse to the side and placed a cold stethoscope on my chest over my heart. He listened a moment, then shook his head. Ed began to cry, and Michael beside her, and then others: the boys from the dance, and tourists who didn’t even know me. I was pleased with how thoroughly I’d fooled them, so pleased I almost woke myself to prove it was a talent and not simply an accident. But there was a power in staying dead, in holding them rapt with my tragedy. It was intoxicating, watching them mourn me.

“Such a beautiful girl,” they said. “What could have caused this?”

And others said, “Perhaps she was driven mad; perhaps someone else is to blame.” They looked at Vivian and didn’t see her beauty. What they saw was the dark, the ugly unfathomable. The evil—though it wasn’t not there, or not so simply. But people want to see the evil, when they can. It’s comforting to believe in; it makes pure goodness a legitimate possibility. Evil allows for the existence of God.

Vivian must have sensed their thoughts, their judgment. “A bad thing,” they said, “a bad, ugly thing to happen to a child.” But all she could hear was *bad, ugly*, and she could hardly conceive of such things connected to herself.

Through all this I was still lying on the table, dead. I would have liked to wake up, to have this all over with, but it seemed impossible. I’d been out so long; how could I explain being alive? If it weren’t for the tourists, I think we might have gotten away with calling it a miracle. The people of the village would say, “Well, we can’t account for everything in life,” and that would have been that. But our visitors would have pressed for a more reasonable

explanation; they'd want me interviewed and tested and poked at until some scientifically viable truth could be discovered.

And so I waited.

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I should have been taken to a hospital and hooked up to machines; I don't think a thing like this could happen now, in today's world. We know too much about reviving the dead to simply allow the word of a local physician with a stethoscope. But everyone had accepted that I was gone, except Vivian, who was determined to prove I was a fake. And she decided I could just stay where I was until the next morning, when a proper mortician would take me away—at which time Vivian was sure I'd grow tired of my game and return to life.

"Go ahead and have your little vigil," Vivian said, as the citronella candles were replaced around me, so that a girl-shaped outline of light shone in the darkness. I like to think that if it hadn't been for the tent, my figure would have been visible from high above, a kind of constellation for the stars to look upon. And I wondered what kind of stories they would tell about me; a fictional life—a life not mine—seemed lovely just then.

But I was stuck where I was, in a body so close to death I began to wonder if I really was gone, and if this thing I thought was myself was just my spirit hanging about, as people say sometimes happens. But then I remembered I'd taught myself this trick, had practiced and perfected it, and was in control. Except that I never imagined I'd let it go on this long—and there was the chance, I had to suppose, that I might not be able to pull myself back to life as I'd done so many times before.

As I worried over these things, my mourners dwindled, until only Michael, Ed, and Heinrich remained, which seemed only right—though I found myself wishing they too would go away, so I might get on with the business of waking myself up and figuring out what to do. The night, which had been so mild earlier, had gone cold, and Ed stood, Michael’s arm around her shoulders, shivering—as I feared I might. And then what? The game would be up, because dead girls don’t shake and shiver, they lay flat and limp like deli meat.

Finally Michael led Ed away, and I wondered where they’d go, longing to follow, though I could not, perhaps ever again. They walked close together and seemed one body as they receded into the dark. This, at least, was as it should be, and I was jealous only that I had nothing like it myself.

When they’d gone, Heinrich took my hand again, and seemed to want to find some way to blame this—what he assumed was my death—on himself, though he must have known there was nothing to such thoughts, which at any rate were selfish and so he let them go and dropped my hand and turned his back to me.

I thought, *just go*. But then it occurred to me, that this would be irresponsible, to leave a dead girl out alone in the night. So he would stay with me, until they took my body to the morgue, and even then, I’d not be left alone until I’d been examined and possibly had unpleasant things done to me, cutting and probing. Like the ancient Egyptians, with their habit of pulling the brains out through the nose to preserve in a jar. So the dead would know where to find them. And given the circumstances, this seemed not an impossible scenario for me. Only if my organs were plucked out and lined up on a table, I’d have no idea how to put them back into myself. I couldn’t let things get to that.

But if I did find a moment alone to wake myself up, what would I do. I'd have to leave, of course. I couldn't imagine walking into Vivian's house (I could no longer think of it as my own) and conceding. I'd been looking for a reason to leave anyway. Hadn't I? Wasn't that what it had always been about? The games, my desire to set myself apart, to dislocate.

And knowing where I'd go was easy. To my mother, of course. At the time I could tell myself I'd always longed to go back to her. To find what remained of her in the things she'd left behind. I could say Vivian was nothing to me, that all those years what I'd wanted so badly was not Vivian's love, but for Vivian to become my mother.

The problem was I wouldn't get very far if I tried on foot. It was several miles into the valley, and if I followed the road, someone might stop to see if I needed help—a young woman walking alone at night—and what if they recognized me? Though I knew the woods by my house well enough, we'd rarely traveled far, and even if we had, I'd never be able to find my way down at night. The forests and mountains surrounding our village were vast and remorseless; over the years they'd taken their share of human sacrifice. And even if I was able to survive one night, there's no telling how lost I'd wander. And then what? I was like my father in this respect; I'd never learned about the basic survival of life. I couldn't build fires or use the sun for direction. On my own, I'd certainly *would* die.

So I decided, if I could not do this thing on my own, I would seek help from Heinrich. Because he would give it. Willingly. Perhaps not without a price, but there is always a price.

I didn't have a plan, I didn't even have a moment to turn back on my decision, because once I'd determined to ask for his help, I felt a rush, as though my body were flushed out a giant faucet, and I woke, choking, as if I had, indeed, been drowning. I'd betrayed my body, by keeping it dead so long, and now I was feeling the effects.

Heinrich turned and took my shoulders. “Blair! Blair!” he shouted, pulling me into an embrace. I was lightheaded and couldn’t make out anything but the moon, which, after a moment, firmed into Heinrich’s face. So close to mine.

I whispered, “Please don’t scream.” I knew I’d have to act fast because in a moment he’d be running to wake the village with news of my miraculous resurrection.

“Please,” I repeated. “Please.” I had to get him into the right way of thinking. That he was somehow my savior, that I needed more saving, that I’d be in his debt, however he chose to collect.

“Are you alright?” he said, taking my face in his hands as though to examine it. “You’ve been out so long. We thought you were dead.” Then he paused and seemed to contemplate this. “You *were* dead, though.”

“No,” I replied. “That’s impossible.”

“What was it like?” he continued, as though he hasn’t heard me. “Were there lights, like they say? A tunnel?” His eyes focused somewhere beyond me, and I wondered if he thought I could reveal the secrets of the afterlife to him. If I could answer that question we all have, whether we believe or not. Because otherwise we have to believe things just stop, like the whitespace at the end of a novel. That the characters will fall off the page if they try to keep going. That *fin* is *fin*.

“No,” I said, taking his wrists in my hands and speaking slowly. “You’re not listening. I’m alive. Right here. And you’ve got to help me. I’ve got to get out of here.”

“You’d let everyone think you’re dead?” This seemed to give him pause, so I took another approach.

“No, I mean, just for the night. I can’t go home now. My head is a mess. There was a man...” I added this last part, and though it was a lie, I too, was intrigued by its mystery. I would have liked it, if this were true, if I could have blamed my actions, which seemed so silly and rash now, on someone else. “Maybe we can go somewhere to talk,” I said. “Not home.”

“I could take you to my cabin,” he suggested.

“Not there either,” I said. I imagined him locking me in his glass cage until Vivian came to collect me; I couldn’t let that happen. “I need to be out of this air. My head feels like...a star, or something. I need to go down to where I can breathe.”

“The valley. We could drive down and find someplace to sit.”

“Yes,” I said. This was a start. This would at least get me out of there.

“And then we’ll come back in the morning,” he said, more as a promise to himself than too me. That he’d be responsible, that he’d not take this too far.

“Of course,” I said. And maybe I convinced myself I meant it. I would have told myself anything then, just to move. But now I think, it was a lie, of course. How could it not be? From the moment I’d chosen to fall dead, I’d forced myself into a very real exile. And a part of me wanted it, of course, to be the martyr, the one thrown to the lions. But I was so young then. And I was afraid.

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It is a dark night, the moon barely a sliver in the sky, and being so far from any city, nothing but a heavy black forest surrounding, the night feels like a silence and I am buried in it. But inside

Heinrich's truck is cozy, and his headlights are flat on the road; they are weak and dim, but there nonetheless. We don't speak much, as he drives, except to discuss my comfort.

Am I warm?

I am.

Do I feel better?

I do.

Should we listen to music?

I don't think so.

When we reach the valley it's after three a.m. and no place is open for us to sit and talk. No place respectable, anyway. In our world, there is no such thing as an all night diner. At this hour only the dead and the very desperate are awake. The bad people. The evil.

"We could sit in the truck," he says. "Here in this parking lot." We've stopped at a megastore lit up in the night like a palace. I've been here before, in the day, and find it lonely and disheartening, with its so many departments, with its guarantees of lowest prices and superior service. With its people who are everyone and no one at the same time.

"No," I say. "Not here."

"What then?" he says.

"Well," I say. "There are places."

He nods and seems to understand. He's not *that* kind of man, but he is a man. And whatever in him that's fighting against this, is quieted by other things. His desire to save me, perhaps. To please me. Or to know me, because I am no longer a girl to him, nor even human. I'm something celestial. A star, burning—burning, but too far away to feel. A speck. A pinprick of white in the sky.

Part IV

The Dead Girl

I said.

I can't go back.

He said.

I'll help you.

There was a hotel. Really, what you'd call a motel or a motor court. An L-shaped, door-lined building, with an fenced-in pool out front. I remember thinking, *I forgot my bathing suit*. But the water had been drained; most of the tiles had chipped away, and a pile of wet leaves collected where the deep end would have sat. The kind of pool that looked like it had been born empty.

I forgot my bathing suit. Ha.

Later he said.

I'll buy your ticket.

This was after and when he felt he owed things to me.

He said.

I'll give you money.

Because I had none, really. Perhaps the thirty or so in my wallet, but that was at home. I had my bank account, all I'd saved, not much really, but something. They'd be able to find me, though, if I tapped into that. And then I'd have to explain myself—which, looking back, seems

the easier option, but at the time seemed impossible. I was so scared of what people would think about what I'd done, what it said about me. And Vivian, for all her insistence that I was faking, how would she respond if I walked in the door that afternoon and said, "You were right all along." Was it possible, then, that she might kill me herself? I couldn't be sure.

Heinrich went out for coffee and came back with plastic bag. "For you to wear," he said, pulling out a pair of flip flops, black drawstring pants, and a pink T-shirt.

"Lucky me," I answered, but it was a kindness—even if I couldn't let him know it. I rolled up my dirndl and put it in the bag. Later I'd put it in a garbage can at a gas station somewhere in the middle of nowhere. It would get taken to a landfill and vanish forever—as I thought I myself could do. But people aren't so easy to disappear.

We went to the bus station and bought my ticket to Denver, which was just a dot on a map, not any place I planned to stay. But I also couldn't have him know where I was going. He seemed to understand this and didn't ask questions. He went to the bank and put the money envelope in his pocket.

"Will this be enough?" he asked.

Enough for what?

That morning in the hotel he put his hand on my heart. Or rather, the place over my heart, which was my breast. Then he placed my hand on his.

"Do you feel this breaking?" he asked.

What a line. If someone said that to me now, I'd laugh in his face. But then I was so young. I felt I was melting—which is to say, I told myself, *I feel like I'm melting*. Now I wonder why anyone would say such a silly thing. Melting is for ice and snow and wicked witches. For wax and butter. Things that were once solid, but have begun to liquefy. So I

suppose we say we're melting because we feel we're losing our bounds, that our skin has slipped away, and our insides are pooling around us. Even a person burnt at the stake does not melt so much as char. The closest we can come is bleeding. And of course, the metaphor: *I want you; I'm melting.*

But I felt it anyway, that if he didn't wrap me in his arms right then I'd lose all form and slip to a puddle on the floor.

"Would you have given this to me?" He asked, indicating my heart or my breast. And I imagined taking a paring knife to my chest and ripping out the lumpy sloppy thing I no longer had any use for. I'd put it on a platter and give it to him and say, "You take this."

"Please," I said, probably too loudly. I hadn't yet learned about seduction, about cajoling, the art of whispering. The boys from the restaurant hadn't needed any kind of permission or enticement. They just wanted to rip into your body and figure it out. But he was different. He'd already figured me out, and now he was asking for a bit of me to carry home with him. A kind of souvenir.

I said, "You take this," and he did.

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Later I was on a bus; he'd given me five hundred dollars in an envelope, on which he'd scribbled, *I won't tell her.* I fingered the hundred dollar bills in my hand. They were crisp and sharp, like play money. And I was sure no one would take it; no one would believe it was real. He must have felt he owed this to me. That there'd been some kind of transaction.

And what would he tell Vivian?

It had been strange with him, not like with the others—who, as it turned out, were boys after all. Merely curious and looking for some assistance, which I'd so often been willing to provide. But with Heinrich it was like stealing—and being stolen from. I felt as though he'd broken into me looking for something valuable, and when he realized I'd nothing worthwhile, he'd taken whatever else he could lay his hands on and high-tailed it out of there before I knew it was gone.

You wanted this, I told myself, as I sat on the bus. *You could have told him to stop. You could have screamed and pushed him away.*

Another thing I told myself: *You were asking for it.* This what people always say about girls who aren't asking for anything. Maybe attention. Someone to say you're *so* beautiful. You never hear about boys asking for "it"—and certainly men don't—unless "it" is something else entirely. A punch in the face. A beer bottle over the head. What one guy tells the bouncer as he's being pulled off the other guy. *Jerk was askin' for it.* But there's never anyone there to pull him off the girl. And it's only later, if she goes to the cops or gets knocked up, that the whispering starts. *What did you expect, dressed like that?* (like what? A tart? Something sweet and doughy and bad for your health? Something that might make your teeth rot?). *Of course she was asking for it. They're all asking for it.*

But no one else was going to find about me, no one would be there to tell me I was asking for it, so I said it for myself.

"I was asking for it," I whispered, though no one was close enough to hear.

Asking

For

It

I was on a bus, and I was hot. It was late fall, but we were in the desert and the air conditioning only seemed to be working up front where the driver was, but not back with me. The seats were upright and grey and had swirls of harsh primary colors: reds and yellows and blues. The fabric was coarse, like a dog shaved too thin, and it rubbed against my elbows, the soft undersides of my arms. “I deserve this,” I told myself. “This is what girls like me get. What’s coming to us.”

“Are you all right?” he’d asked, after.

I shrugged. I was asking for it.

“Will you call and let me know you’re okay?”

I shook my head.

“And what am I supposed to tell Vivian?”

“Just tell her I’m dead.” I paused. “No, tell her I was alive just like she’d said, but you went ahead and killed me.”

After that he didn’t say anything, though he did squeeze my hand before I boarded. As though I were his little sister and he was sending me off to my first day of school. When I looked out the window before we pulled away, he was standing there with his hands in his pockets, keeping an eye on the door, though he was pretending to look at something else. Afraid I’d chicken out, run off the bus, and beg him to take me back home. Then what would he do? He’d be stuck with two of us. Vivian and me. Two women, every man’s fantasy, right. But in the end, that kind of thing never works out.

There are feelings.

People put too much stock in feelings.

*

The bus left me. It wheezed off its brakes, blew me a final puff of exhaust, and rolled away as though we'd not just spent an intimate two days together. I stood alone on the pavement; the last of the other travelers had left me in Houston, and the bus driver was sour about it, about me, and the extra miles he'd had to go on my account. He was not the same driver I'd begun the journey with. Along long the way the bus stopped, and we'd stumble into a gas station to use the bathrooms and buy cans of coke or candy bars or spongy cakes wrapped in plastic. Dinner. We'd return to the bus and find a new driver. I'd been disconcerted by this at first; I sat straight in my seat, gripping the headrest in front of me as though I could control the bus. I was afraid the new driver would figure me out. Would turn us all around and take me back. Or maybe I was hoping for it. Hope and fear are almost always the same, I think.

“Got a suitcase underneath?” this last driver asked as I was gathering my things. He had a thin, ferret-beaked face, and black eyes that darted about like he was trying to look at everything *but* me.

I shook my head, ashamed he'd found me out. I had only myself and a small canvas tote that read “Garden of the Gods”—a place I'd never been. In this bag I'd collected a toothbrush, a small tube of toothpaste, a barber's comb, and a pair of boy's gym socks, which I'd used to wash my face. One for the water, the other for the drying. At every stop I'd slip the socks over my hands like mitts and scrub away at myself. In the metal rest-stop mirrors, I could be someone else: a girl of taffy, stretched long; a snow girl escaping her mountain.

Heinrich's money I kept under my shirt, near my heart. This was not symbolic, but practical. If someone was going to steal from me, they'd have to really mean it. They'd have to be willing to take me apart first.

"Have a place to stay?" the driver asked.

"Yes," I said; now it was I who couldn't look at him.

"Hold on." He scribbled something on a yellow napkin, folded it twice, and handed it to me. "There'll be people like you there."

"What do you mean?" I asked, but not with anger. I was intrigued to know, who he thought I was. And others like me. Who were they? Circus performers? Tight rope walkers? People who escaped from wooden chests dropped into the ocean?

"Lots of artist types come down here. Like you, with nothing. Street performers." He sniffed. "Think they got talent. I figure you must be one of them."

I thanked him, took the napkin, and stepped down. For a moment the early morning sun was blinding, then the world rebuilt itself around me. At first in smells: salt and rotten eggs. Then in shape: a giant, upside-down trapezoid. And finally in detail: a cruise ship docked in a narrow inlet. *Fiesta!* It read across the side, though there was no party I could see. The liner was not at all as I'd imagined, shabby in its emptiness. Where were all the people? The hunky captains, and the streamers, and the pop of champagne bottles? The hint of kettle drums and pineapple? *This*, I told myself, *This is the place of my mother*. But I didn't believe it, that she could be of a place so devoid of color and noise.

I unfolded the bus driver's note carefully, as though it were an ancient treasure map, something that might crumble in my hands if I wasn't careful. Perhaps I was expecting some line of wisdom, a note of guidance. But what it said was, "How to get to Avenue K." Like a

children's show. I imagined clean streets and talking animals. Incessant singing. Purple faces peeking out doors, smiling at me with big toothless mouths.

Without knowing what else to do, I began to walk, following the driver's directions. The road stretched barren ahead of me, and I thought I'd perhaps entered a kind of limbo where the world might just go on and on in the same dismal way. It was no wonder, then, that my mother would have longed to escape such a place, even if it meant leaving behind her family and all the things she'd known, to live somewhere as alien as the snow-covered mountains of Montana—which seemed so distant to me then, just two days since I'd left them. I thought, maybe I *am* dead, maybe this will be my eternity, following a road that goes nowhere.

What was I expecting to find? My mother young and alive, waiting for me, watching the bus door with anticipation, then shouting my name as I stepped onto the street. As though this were not any real place, but some kind of heaven or Oz, some land that both exists and doesn't. A world you can only fall into when the wind throws you just right.

As I walked I let myself consider the possibility that I really had died and left the world, that this was my hell. To be so near my mother, but really no closer than I'd ever been. And if I were to meet her, would I recognize her? I wanted to believe I would, but all I'd ever had of her were a few faded pictures that meant almost nothing, and the stories my father had told, from which I'd crafted my own vision of her, the way she looked and smelled, the sound of her voice. She was so real to me, this woman I'd created. But was she my mother? There was no way to know.

What Beautiful Child is This?

This was how I came to meet Joseph the day I arrived. I didn't know he was my Joseph then, but thought he was just another man. Or maybe a part of me did know. Maybe a part of you always knows. At least, it's more romantic to think that way.

The real homes on the island are older and closer together. I'm not talking about the getaway houses on stork legs, along the beaches and waterways. Those are for rent for tourists. Or else they are owned by marginally wealthy families from Houston or Dallas or Austin. They are "weekend retreats," and are not meant to be permanent or sensible.

No, the real houses are brick or stucco. They are red or pink or yellow or turquoise. They have tiny yards, thick with vegetation. The lawns—what little there is of them—are never mowed, though this isn't to say they're shoddy; rather, they have an organic and nourishing feel, the kind of place where nature grows into itself. Over the streets, the trees spread wide to make cool canopies, so that walking in these neighborhoods you can forget you're in a state called Texas. And you can forget all of the things Texas means. Cowboys and oil and dry, endless fields. Here there was a kind of Eden. And it doesn't matter to the people who live here if the foundations are crumbling from the humidity. That's how they like their houses, soft and rubbery and damp.

On the day I met Joseph I tried to follow the bus driver's directions, but I was confused and disoriented, and I didn't find Avenue K until late afternoon. I don't know what I thought would happen when I got there. That someone would lead me to a bed and tuck me in? I began

imagining my mother's family still lived here, and that a man—maybe one of her brothers—would call to me. He would see me and know me and shout my mother's name, because despite my pale skin and all of my father's little touches, they'd tell me I was her all over. That I was her spitting image. They'd invite me to stay with them, and everyone would live happily ever after. I didn't believe in this fantasy, but it was preferable to reality: that I was alone, without a place to sleep, and it was already growing dark beneath the canopy of trees. Or perhaps this was a place where it was always dark.

From behind I heard footsteps pounding the blacktop, approaching me. I turned to look over my shoulder, and even though I was alone, I wondered if I was being followed. If someone was tracking my moves, just waiting until I let my guard down enough. Maybe it was the man, the bus driver. This could be his thing, picking out young girls, sending them here, to this dark place, then setting them loose. Watching them. Getting his jollies from the fear in their eyes, which is a very real kind of fear that cannot be faked—and so is much desired.

I began walking faster; then I was running, breathing heavily and looking for someone to save me—or some place to hide myself.

Then the place appeared.

I came upon a little purple bungalow with an open door. Inside I could only make out the cool dark of the shadow, so I snuck closer and closer and then was on the stepping stones and over the threshold. And there I was, standing inside a little empty house that didn't belong to me. This all happened very quickly, without my thinking much about the possible criminal implications of what I was doing. All I knew was that I didn't want to go back outside.

“Hello?” I called, but no one answered. “Is anyone here?”

I should have left then, but instead I found myself looking around. Although it contained all of the normal house items—a kitchen, a table covered by a simple white cloth, a couch, a television—there were camping cots all around. Three were folded and pressed against the front wall, another three leaned against the back, and a seventh had been hidden beneath the large dining table, the chairs pushed back in around it. At first I thought this must be some kind of orphanage—though there was nothing in the house to suggest children—no toys or tiny chairs. But if there were seven adults sleeping in these two small front rooms, how many might be crammed in the bedrooms?

I stepped into the hallway, cautious of making noise. Surely someone must be home if the door was open. Even in my own tiny village, even during the off season, we kept our doors locked. Because who knew, Vivian liked to say, who ever knew, what people were capable of?

The first door I came upon led to a small bathroom with a black and white checker-tile floor and baby blue walls. I lifted the toilet seat and pulled back the shower curtain, all spotless—no shampoos, no soaps, no toothbrushes. Nothing to be thrown in anger or love. It seemed impossible that my mother could come from a place with a house like this.

I continued down the hall—which makes it sound like a long hall, though it was actually only a few feet—and found side-by-side bedrooms. Or they should have been bedrooms. Inside each, the carpets had been pulled up—recently, it seemed—to reveal what must have once been shiny hardwood, but now appeared dusty and pocked with nail holes. The walls of these rooms were a dingy, scuffed-up white. Used walls. The bareness of the rooms accounted for the cots, but it was still inexplicable that seven people could occupy such a small space with what appeared to be relative harmony—which is to say cleanliness. And I should have known better than to assume the two went hand in hand.

I checked another door, but it only led to an equally tidy linen closet where I found neatly stacked pillows and blankets, along with seven black toiletry bins labeled: Sean, Mark, Paul, Rick, Sam, Billy. And Joseph. Did I know even then? I want so badly, now, to think I did. To think we weren't just an accident. That he wasn't just a convenience. The prize behind door number seven. An any man to replace Heinrich.

Sean, Mark, Paul, Rick, Sam, Billy, and Joseph. Such simple names, they seemed to belong to school boys or young apostles. Good religious boys bent on Christianizing the heathens of the world.

Seven, as I'd guessed. Supposedly a lucky number, like days of the week. I wondered if they'd thought of that. And I remembered a story I once read where there are seven children named after the days. They are good children, but a wicked witch turns them into food and the mother must guess who is who. This is supposed to be monstrous, but I always found myself wishing I too might be turned into food just to see whether Vivian would be able to pick me out of a feast. And what kind of dish might I become? I'd like to think something warm and comforting, a sweet potato or fresh-baked baguette, but probably I'd have been cold and plain, iceberg lettuce or cottage cheese. Then no one would ever pick me, and I'd be eaten by the witch—which seems, in any case, not that bad a fate considering what witches are capable of. At least as lettuce there would be no pain.

Of course, I told myself, one can never really know what lettuce feels. It was a silly thing to think, but at the time, I was scared and tired and very much afraid the house itself might come alive. That the furniture would start singing and dancing, and then I'd really have to get out of there. If I could get out at all. I imagined the windows and doors closing like teeth, me slowly digesting inside.

If I'd left then, things would have gone much differently for me, though it's hard to know now whether for better or worse. Maybe I would have met someone else, someone not Joseph, but someone I could have also loved very much. And maybe that love would have turned out better.

But the cots and the bungalow were so tiny themselves; it seemed impossible that the inhabitants could be anything but youths, boys really. Certainly not full-grown men. So what was there to fear? Perhaps they needed a mother. I hadn't had much luck with my own, but who knows what other people need? And because they were boys—tidy, Godly boys at that—and because I was tired and disinclined to leaving just then, and because I'd been thinking about food on an empty stomach, I fixed myself a glass of milk and a turkey sandwich and sat down on the sofa, ate my dinner, *committed myself to heaven*, as Vivian used to say, and fell asleep.

*

I could have woken to a much different scene. Screaming; confusion. Questions: *Who are you? What are you doing in our house?* Threats of police or citizen arrest. But this isn't the way things happened at all. I awoke slowly, much later, which I knew because the room was now heavily shadowed. And quiet. I don't remember if I had a moment of wondering where I was, but at some point I realized I was still in the house with the seven tiny cots—and that I was not alone.

“I didn't want to wake you,” a voice said from somewhere across the room.

After a moment my eyes adjusted to the dark, and I made out the figure of a man sitting in the armchair beside the sofa. I should have run then, to the door and out, and if he followed, I

would have screamed, and what do you think people would have believed—that he’d found me sleeping in his house or that he’d dragged me there by force with God knows what intentions.

It’s so easy to play the victim.

Instead I sat up and said, “Oh.”

I tell myself now I sensed something kind in his voice, that I didn’t run because of that. But the truth is, you can’t really tell much from the sound of a voice alone. If he’d been angry, if he’d screamed, then maybe. Without seeing his face though, I had no idea how he felt about finding me there. Really, I stayed because I was tired and had no place better to go. And I was bored. I wanted to see what might happen.

“Were you lost?” he asked.

“Lost?”

“Sometimes people drink too much and wander into the wrong house.”

“Has that happened to you before?”

“No, but it happens.”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“You mean, you *were* drunk.”

“No. That it could happen.”

To hear this conversation you’d think we were acquaintances passing in a park. We were so polite and correct.

“I’ve been rude,” he said.

“You have?”

“I’ve seen you, but you haven’t seen me.” He flipped on the lamp beside the couch.

I blinked and there he was. He wore paint-splattered coveralls, and the way his knees folded up into his chest I knew he would be tall, that when he stood, he'd be stretched and thin. In the dull yellow glow, his face was long and orange, like a winter squash broken open. And softly whiskered. The face of a man. Not like the boys from my school or the restaurant. He was twenty-nine the day I met him, younger than Heinrich, but not by much. And there was something about the way he held himself so still as I contemplated him. If patience is a feature you can see on a person, just as you can see a nose, an eyebrow, then patience is what I saw in him. Or what I thought I saw.

"I'm Joseph," he said, and I wondered if perhaps he'd called the police, if his calm was simply a way to keep me quiet until they arrived.

"I'm..." For a moment I considered giving a fake name. I could have been a Michelle. I could have excused myself and walked out the door. I didn't think he would chase after me; he didn't seem the chasing type. "I'm Blair."

We leaned toward each other and shook hands—such a conventional gesture for the situation, but I was glad for it. It gave me a chance to breathe him in: Turpentine.

"You're a painter," I said.

"This," he said, gesturing to his outfit. "A friend got me a gig painting some lady's house. I don't do this—*paint* like this. Not very much." He shook his head as if I'd accused him of something terrible. "This isn't really *my* work."

"I'm sorry," I said. "That's not what I meant."

I should have told him about Vivian then, that she was a painter, not of houses, but landscapes. I should have said she'd once wanted something more, to be an artist, feared and respected and misunderstood—which was, I knew immediately, what he also wanted for

himself—but this was what life had asked of her, that she paint mediocre mountain scenes for people who praised the quaintness and simplicity, not of her work even, but of the imaginary worlds she created, the silly imaginary worlds. And I should have said, I understand this about you too, Joseph; I understand you. But instead I sat with mouth hanging slightly open, and I said nothing.

Finally he asked, “Who do you belong to?”

“I’m sorry?” This seemed the kind of question you would ask a dog or a lost child.

“I don’t want to assume,” he said. “But if I had to guess, I’d say Sean—not that he does this kind of thing often.”

I remembered now, the names on the bins. “Not Sean,” I said. And I tried to smile, as if this were just the game I’d been hoping to play.

“Good for you. I lied; Sean does this all the time. Brings women over, let’s them sleep here without warning anyone else. You’re at least the fifth girl we’ve found this year.”

I laughed. “So you think I’m...” I shook my head.

“What are you then?”

This was a good question. A random person who wandered in off the street, poked about your house, ate your food, and fell asleep on your couch. If my hair were a different color I’d surely be Goldilocks. But my hair was black, so I was no one—or at least, no one who made sense.

I shook my head again, and thought back to the names. “I’m with Billy,” I said because it was the first one that came to me.

“He lets you call him that. He hates it when I call him that.” Joseph laughed. “Billy left for Houston this afternoon. He’s got a show all week. But I guess you already knew that. I’m surprised he didn’t take you with him.”

I looked away, unsure how to respond.

“You don’t have a place to stay, do you?”

“Yes,” I said, because I didn’t want to come off as needy, though it’s exactly what I was.

“Really?” he asked, and already I knew this was a man who would never look through me. But he’d never fully see me either.

Which was why I wanted him so much.

*

Over the next few hours, I met the other men who lived in the house. Mark arrived first, rushing through the door with several canvas sacks hanging over his shoulders.

“I’ve been busy today,” he said, showing Joseph his bags, which were full of bottle caps and corroded metal pipes. And he was going to use them to make bookends, because even people who don’t read like bookends, what with all their power to stop things from falling over. To keep things contained. He went on for several minutes about the luck he’d had, before noticing me, at which point he only smiled and said, “Excuse me,” then slipped out the front door with his treasures, and returned a moment later, empty handed. “Excuse me,” he said again, as he passed us on the way to the bathroom, where he began to run the shower. All the while, Joseph did not attempt to explain this man, whose name I hadn’t yet learned. A few minutes

later Mark emerged, wet and clean—though he hadn't been dirty before—and introduced himself as though he just then noticed me sitting on the couch beside Joseph.

The others came in one by one, Sean, Paul, Rick, Sam, and if they were initially surprised by me, they kept it to themselves, and in fact seemed to welcome my presence. Paul cooked up a pot of spaghetti in his own “special sauce” and seemed eager for my approval. “Not too spicy?” he asked as we ate, crowded around the table. “Can you taste that something extra. I don't normally tell people this, but I'll tell you, it's coffee grinds.” And he went on in this way, as they all did, giving me attentions I surely didn't deserve. As though they'd been preparing for my arrival their whole lives.

And I was not so wrong about them, being like children the way to spoke up at me, trying to impress me with their feats of strength (Could I believe that Sean, slim as he appeared, had won third prize in a car-pulling competition?) and courage (Sam had just this afternoon intercepted an attempted purse snatch). By the end of the evening it was clear I was not expected to leave; that, in fact, they'd be insulted if I did.

Over the next few days I discovered they came and went periodically, rarely occupying the house all together. Each of them considered himself an artist of some sort; the two empty bedrooms were normally used as studios. Recently, they'd decided to tear up the ruined carpets and leave the floors bare. Only, once the carpets had been removed, they discovered the beautiful, though distressed, original hardwood that lay beneath, and thus the dilemma: they couldn't possibly destroy the floors. But they couldn't stand to re-cover them either. So they were at a standstill. In the meantime, all of their supplies had been moved to a warehouse owned by the friend of one, but this was only a temporary solution. None of them liked being so far away from their work, and yet, there seemed no way to reconcile the situation.

All of this was explained to me by Joseph the morning after my arrival.

“I should do something,” I said, “to repay your hospitality.”

“But you’re our guest,” he said.

And I liked very much, finally, to be someone’s guest, which involved a certain amount of lounging about and taking advantage. I felt guilty, of course, but told myself I’d been *invited* to stay. I was *wanted*. It would have been rude of me not to act the part.

You Shall Lack Nothing

In the beginning, no one questioned whether or not I should continue to stay on. Everyone treated me with kindness and generosity; no one hinted I was a free-loader, though I obviously was. Each night I stretched on the couch, listening to the men snoring and shifting on their cots, wondering how I'd ended up the only girl in a house of men. I'd fall asleep with the conviction that I'd sneak away the next day, but I'd wake remembering I had little money and nowhere else to go.

I'd told them I was new to the area, and looking for a job, so my first mornings were spent in oakly bars filling out applications. In the evenings I sat with whoever was home, talking and laughing until dark, but in the afternoons, there was a gap to be filled. And Joseph was most often the one to fill it.

My second afternoon there, he took me on the ferry that connected the island to Port Bolivar. Though it was a dowdy, functional craft, intended mainly for transporting vehicles, I'd never been on a proper boat before. My father had taken me to a carnival once, and we'd paid a dollar each to ride the boats, metal tubs with four-by-fours hammered in as seat. We floated around a track in shin-deep water, and I'd thought it was wonderful, the way we wobbled and leaned into each other to keep our balance. With Joseph I stood on the top deck giddy and loving the way the sea air—briny and warm like nothing I'd ever felt before—whipped my hair about, so that on our return to land I found it knotted and unyielding to my comb of fingers. As I stood on the bow that afternoon, I remember also, the way Joseph watched me with the same intensity

as the day he'd found me—though it's possible he was merely admiring the ocean and the day, as I was. More likely he was studying me as a subject, as they all might have been, and this was why they allowed me to stay. So they might examine and dissect with their artist eyes this strange girl who'd wandered into their lives.

In Port Bolivar we held our shoes in our hands and walked along the beach, which was flat and brown and nearly deserted—not at all how I'd imagined a beach would be. But I liked the way my heels sank into the wet sand, and that I could taste the salty breeze on my lips. Beyond the dunes, endless rows of houses stood up on stilts, and Joseph explained that no one really lived in these, but in the summer and on weekends people came down from the cities.

“It makes me a little crazy when they're here,” he said. “So many of them. Every weekend there's a festival for something.”

“I understand that,” I said. “Where I come from, we spend our whole lives trying to figure out how to make the tourists happy. It's a full time job, just being alive.”

“Wait until Mardi Gras. They come down and absolutely destroy the place.”

“But you make money then, don't you?” I asked without thinking. Vivian had always done her best business during the Oktoberfest month. Each year she'd done a series of paintings with typical Bavarian scenes, maypoles and beer steins and pigtailed blonds. She hated these even more than the mountainscapes—which were, at least, real to her. “I could paint pretzels and people would buy them,” she'd claimed.

“It's complicated,” was all Joseph would say about it.

The next afternoon, Joseph took me to the warehouse when he knew no one else would be working, which, he explained, I shouldn't take personally, but was only polite. I nodded as though such a thing never would have occurred to me on my own. I could sense that Joseph, in

his fatherly way, saw this as a kind of learning opportunity for me. A small charity for the provincial girl from Montana. I didn't want to ruin that for him.

"I have two kinds," he warned, as we approached the building, which was not looming and grey and surrounded by a sea of rusted car parts, as I'd half hoped, but was instead a faded, buttery stucco that sat neatly at the corner of a busy intersection. Several palm trees had been planted in a small patch of land between the sidewalk and curb, adding to my sense that I'd stepped into some tropical tease, where even a warehouse might remind you were never far from the ocean, even if it wasn't the kind of ocean you'd always imagined.

"Two?" I asked, though I already knew. It already felt too late to tell him about Vivian.

"The kind that sell, and the ones that don't."

"The ones that don't?"

"There are so many tourists here," he said. "All with horrible taste. Especially during the festivals or when a cruise ship docks. They want everything to be colorful and tropical like a postcard. They want sailboats, you know what I mean?"

I nodded. "And you don't care about that." I pretended surprise. He was taking so much pleasure in explaining these things to me as if they were new. More than what he was saying, I liked the effort he put into it, the way it made me feel to have him try so hard to make me understand.

"Exactly."

We had arrived and Joseph was undoing a padlock and then pulling back a heavy wooden door on a track, and I was trying not to think of the day Heinrich had taken me to his house in the woods, the way he was both shy and proud at the same time, the way I was both in love with him and not. I'd dreamt, the night before, of a man who kept saying "You have to see, you have to

see.” He was leading me by the hand, our arms stretched long because it was difficult to keep up. When he first turned to look at me he was Heinrich, but when he turned again he was Joseph. And I remember worrying that it would hurt Heinrich, to know I was with another man. But then I’d woken and remembered who I was. That it wasn’t me the man in my dream was leading; it was Vivian.

But Vivian wasn’t here and Heinrich wasn’t here, and the only thing Joseph would ever have to know about either of them was my version, whatever *I* chose to tell. And I liked feeling that for once in my life I could have some control over how other people saw me.

There was another story I still had to contend with—mine and Billy’s, that he would eventually return, and that I supposedly “belonged” to him. How that story would end was beginning to worry me. From what I gleaned from Joseph, Billy was the best-known artist of them all and the only one who could survive on his real work, which he was devoted to as though it were his dying mother—but he was also forgetful and skittish, and could not be counted on to remember the simple tasks of life without little nudges now and again. I hoped this combination of traits would be enough for him to save me from the embarrassment and banishment that would surely follow if he refused to acknowledge me—though he had every right to. Whatever I was feeling, or telling myself I was feeling for Joseph would have to wait. Or at least keep itself hidden.

Inside the warehouse was cool and dark; light fell from the enormous checkerboard windows in dusty beams that left most everything in shadows. Everyone had designated an area for his work, most of which was covered with sheets, giving the whole place the feel of an old closed-up house—of the kind I’d only seen in ghost movies. And I liked it, all those

undetermined spaces. It felt as though he taken me to a secret place, somewhere no one else knew.

But one piece sat in the center of the warehouse, uncovered. “Our group project,” Joseph said, leading me to it. “Don’t judge me. It wasn’t my idea. I just helped. I told them no one would want it.” The piece consisted of a large glass case filled with miniatures of well-known paintings, the Mona Lisa, Starry Night. Though the paintings were tiny, they were precise, and I wondered how long it would have taken to complete even one. As I approached for a closer look, I realized it was not just a box they’d been laid in.

“It’s a coffin,” I said, surprised. “A glass coffin.”

“It’s supposed to mean—” Joseph began, but then he stopped. “What do you think?”

“Well,” I began.

“That was a rhetorical question.”

“Oh,” I said. “I know.”

“It’s okay,” Joseph said. He smiled and led me to a corner where several large easels were lined up like school children, most draped with sheets. On the floor beside were several boxes of brushes, paint tubes, mineral spirits—all tools I knew so well. I couldn’t be there without thinking of Vivian, and her own studio, with its enormous windows and the skeleton of a mirror.

“Have you ever done a self-portrait,” I asked.

“Who would want that?”

“You?”

Joseph laughed. “Only a narcissist paints himself and then keeps it.”

“Well then, for a friend,” I suggested.

Joseph pulled one of the sheets up to reveal a beach scene, colorfully clad bathers lounging in the sand before a turquoise ocean. “These are, if you can believe it, are what sell.”

“Oh, I believe it,” I said, before I could catch myself. We’d driven along the shore earlier that day, and the flat, brown water of the Gulf had been surreal. In contrast this painting felt real *because* it was garish and dreamy; it was the *idea* of ocean.

“You like this?”

“No,” I paused. “Or not exactly. But I know why people would.”

“Because they have no taste—or they have American taste.”

“Perhaps,” I said, sounding, I hoped, thoughtful. “But on the other hand, it may be their warmth and the way they make you feel, I don’t know, simple. And there’s nothing wrong with that, I don’t think.”

“But don’t you think art should do more than make us feel good? I mean, when I was a kid, Twinkies made me feel good, so would you say Twinkies could be great art?”

“Andy Warhol might think so,” I ventured.

Joseph shook his head and let the sheet drop over the beach scene. “He wouldn’t have meant it like that. It would have been ironic.”

I shrugged, and he shook his head again, and I thought, *he can’t believe what an idiot I am, to make such a suggestion.*

“What about your work?” I asked, trying for humor. “Will it make me feel sufficiently bad?”

“I don’t think it should make you feel bad. Just something more than good. Something complex, in a way you can’t quite explain. I mean, if you could explain it away, you might as well write a book. I like to think of myself as attempting to create what words can’t.” Joseph

put his hand on my shoulder, and I felt something go through me—like water just before it begins to boil, but that’s not it exactly because it was also cold and dry like winter on your breath. Something I never could have sufficiently to put into words. And so I wondered, but did not ask, if the thing he was talking about could also include two people standing in a dusty warehouse.

“Well,” I said, because no other words would come.

“Right,” he said, leading me around behind the easels. “This is just something I’m working on.” He gestured toward a lumpy pile on the floor, also draped with a spackled bed sheet. “Are you ready?”

“I am,” I promised, but I wasn’t.

He pulled the sheet back to reveal a pile of jumbled mannequin parts—arms, legs, hairless heads, and flat torsos—all painted chalky white so they nearly glowed in the shadows. As I stepped closer I noted jagged black lines, thin as spider legs, reaching across the parts as though they were cracked eggs.

“Look closer,” he said, producing a magnifying glass and flashlight, which I used to examine an arm resting near my foot.

“They’re numbers,” I said. “They just seemed to be lines, from farther away.”

“It’s called *Learning Curve*,” he said, evidently proud, though I didn’t know what to make of it. I don’t think I felt the complex, inarticulate rush of whatever he hoped I might feel. The piece seemed to have something to do with school, but not in any way I could connect with. I thought instead of *Bluebeard*, one of the stories Michael, Ed, and I used to act out. With so few major roles, I always played the room of mangled ex-wife parts. So in that pile of mannequin limbs, I saw only myself—which was not, I don’t think, what Joseph was after.

“I won’t ask if you like it or not,” he said, “because I don’t care. I just wanted you to see.” He didn’t say why he wanted me to see or if he was in the habit of showing his work to women he’d known less than a week, but I knew he was lying a little, and that he wanted very much for me to give some form of encouragement.

“It’s amazing,” I finally said, and apparently he believed because he smiled and took my arm again and spent the rest of the afternoon elaborating the technical aspects of the project, though he didn’t say a thing about what it meant to him. Which was just as well, because perhaps if I he’d told me I wouldn’t have liked him as much, or at least, I would have been more wary. It makes things simpler, I think, to construct the people we love, to read the things they say and do as best fits the person we’d like them to be—that way we always get what we want.

*

Eventually Billy returned, and I should have high tailed it out of there long before that happened, but I was starting to feel at home in this place, which was strange because I was sleeping on a sofa in a room full of men curled up on cots too short for their legs. I offered to give someone else the couch and take a cot myself, but they all insisted I stay where I was. The couch, they argued, was much more comfortable. They’d bought the cots cheap at an army supply store and who knew what kinds of people might have done who knows what on them, so I was much better off staying put.

And so you can see why I was hesitant to leave, surrounded by six men who’d only just met me but—for reasons that can only be attributed to curiosity mingled with misplaced chivalry—wanted to make me comfortable and happy.

I felt safe with them. I didn't ever want to go away.

Things with Billy could have been awkward, but as with the others, he was easy.

"Did we meet at Kenny's?" he asked when we finally met, and I nodded. Then he apologized for not remembering and put his arm around me. He was small boned, and had a pretty, childish face he made up for in words.

"I hope these fuckers made you feel at home."

"They did," I said, smiling. And I wondered if I had really met him at Kenny's, how things would have been different. But by then it was already too late. By then I was stuck on Joseph.

For about a week or so, Billy pretended to be interested in pursuing a relationship with me. He asked me to dinner—which I politely refused once, and he didn't request again—and he kissed me on the cheek, expertly playing the part of a nice young man whose mother's friend has a daughter—you know the kind. *By all accounts very nice...and once you get to know her...well, it's not her fault she's never had a real boyfriend.*

Finally I said, "Oh Billy, I like you very much, but we can just be friends?" and he seemed relieved but tried to hide it.

"If that's what you think."

"I do," I said, but I couldn't keep from wondering. It'd be nice if we could watch our choices play out. If we could make decisions already knowing what would turn out best in the end.

Good Wares, Fine Wares

Not long after Billy returned, I went with Joseph to a festival where he'd set up a spot to sell his work—not his real work, he kept reminding me, as if I might confuse the mangled mannequin parts with colorful images of children on the beach. Billy gave us a ride in his recently purchased car, an eighty-nine navy blue Malibu, whose trunk and back seat were so tightly packed with the paintings that I had to ride half-sitting on Joseph's lap, my neck craned so my head wouldn't hit. I braced myself, one palm pressed to the ceiling, the other flat on Joseph's shoulder. We laughed as we bumped along, singing with the radio, "Hard Day's Night" and "I'm a Believer."

The festival was held along the Strand, a strip of shops—built, Joseph explained, in the style of the French Quarter. When I looked at him blankly he added, "You know, New Orleans." I nodded and said, "Oh, right," pretending to know just what he meant. It was early morning when we arrived, and the tourists had yet to descend. As Joseph and Billy began to set up, I walked down the street and back, glancing into the shops. Boardwalk kitsch spilled onto the sidewalks: snow globes, palm-tree magnets, T-shirts, buckets of seashells all so alike and so perfect it was hard to pretend they ever lived on any beach. I passed booths with smoking grills and kegs of beer, women selling seaweed wreaths, lunchboxes made from old license plates, tea cozies. A man roasted almonds in a big copper pot, and I stopped to breathe it in, the warmed sugar and spice wafting in the air. Across the way, a couple paced in ten-foot stilts, their striped pant legs dusting the ground. On a small stage, a band was setting up, testing their guitars, and

tapping the mics. At the far end of the Strand, Joseph had unrolled an old quilt, laying most of the canvases flat, propping a few against the wall behind us.

“What are we celebrating?” I asked, gesturing toward the booths. I wanted to laugh more, to be the girl in the car, still singing with the windows rolled down, sinking into Joseph.

“It’s called the ‘Harvest Festival,’” Joseph said, frowning. “Not that we harvest anything here. Not that this has anything to do with a harvest at all. But it doesn’t matter to these people. You say festival, and they clamor for the nearest ATM. There’s a festival here almost every week. How else do you get people to a run-down beach town?”

“It’s the spirit of it,” Billy said, laughing. “We’re celebrating the bounty of a good summer.”

“Says the man selling giant paint-specked chalkboards to rich bitches in Bellaire for five grand a pop,” Joseph said; he turned to me. “Chalkboards from a school they just tore down because building a new one was easier than salvaging an historical landmark.”

“Save the soap boxing,” Billy said. “The wannabe rich bitches who buy your shit will be here soon. Blair, you’ve got to see these people. They eat his shit up.”

“Ha!” Joseph said; he swapped two of the paintings, stood back, then returned them to their original spots.

“If he’s not careful,” Billy said, “they’ll want him in there. And then he’ll have to give up his high-minded principals and keep his mouth shut.” Billy pointed to a small gallery at the end of the block. “Lone Star Arcade,” the sign above the door read. Displayed outside was a large, realistic portrait of a pelican.

“Is that a photograph?” I asked, going for deadpan, and Billy laughed.

“See,” he said to Joseph, patting him on the shoulder. “She *does* get it.”

Before I could ask what I *did* get, a man painted from head to toe in silver, arms and legs held stiff as he marched by, rotated his entire torso and saluted us.

“He’s a robot today,” Billy whispered.

“Greetings humans,” the robot said in a high-pitched, halting voice, then moved on. It wasn’t until he was several feet away from us that I realized it was Sean. I called out, but he didn’t turn.

“He can’t break character,” Joseph said, looking after Sean. “He thinks he’s a real actor.”

“That robot shit’s hard,” Billy said. “I did it once or twice. Man, was it hard.”

“I could do that,” Joseph said. “Paint myself up like an idiot, put out a hat to collect spare change.”

“Sure you could,” Billy said. He waved. “Pick you kids up after school.”

After Billy left, people began arriving; they wandered by our display, pausing to read the price tags, always promising to stop by on their way back—it was so early in the day, they explained, they didn’t want to drag around a big painting all afternoon. Joseph was patient with them, almost painfully so. He called out to people as they walked by, asking if they wanted to immortalize their memories. He smiled and waved and handed out cards with his name and the golden image of a setting sun. When people admired his work, he didn’t scoff or lecture, but thanked them, sincerely. Where had his convictions gone? All those ideals he’d been speaking of just a few hours before?

I didn’t want to ask. I stood to the side, holding a money bag, occasionally making change. At lunch I went to a nearby booth to buy cokes and pulled-pork sandwiches. We sat in the sun and ate, which would have been nice, except that Joseph was anxious to get back to selling.

Some did come back, as they'd promised, though most didn't. And the ones who did return didn't always buy. But at the end of the day Joseph had sold six of the twenty-five paintings, making over four hundred dollars—more money than I'd ever held. Except the one time, I reminded myself. Except for Heinrich. Who wasn't here. Who never would be.

Joseph said he was pleased with the money. It had been a better day than most. He only got out to sell a few times a month, so really, he was barely making ends meet. But it was worth it, he said. Because there was always your real work to go back to.

"Yes," I agreed. "There's always that."

As we were packing up, Joseph slipped something to me. I opened my hand and found a small pink conch. "For helping me today," he said. "And for good luck."

"I didn't know seashells were for luck."

"Aren't they?" he asked. "Why can't they be?"

"I guess they can be," I said, sliding the conch into my pocket.

"That wasn't me today," he went on. "That was the other me. He's terrible, but right now he's the one making the money. Can you forget about him?"

"Of course," I said. "You're you, and I'm me." What I meant was, let's forget that everyone has another me. Let's forget the other me's are always there, creeping up in us, showing themselves at our worst moments.

*

A few days after the festival, I was sitting on the sofa by myself when a knock came at the door. I was getting restless; everyone else was busy with their own work, and I'd yet to find any of my

own. I'd spent most of my the morning flipping through old copies of *Architectural Digest*, which Paul had used for a recent mixed-media project, and were therefore cut up and incomplete and left me feeling hopeless for the first time since I'd run away—but they were the closest thing around to mindless reading, so I continued to delve into their decimated pages.

On the porch I found an old woman accompanied by two small children. I fought to meet her eyes, sunk deep as they were in the doughy folds of her face. On her arm she carried a basket, which she held up to me, her hands shaking like newborn birds. I turned away, then looked back, embarrassed by my initial aversion.

"Buy headband?" she asked, her voice clipped with what I took for hesitation.

I examined her wares: homemade head wraps in various colors, coarse as tongues.

"They're lovely," I lied.

"Buy," she said. "Two dollars."

"Oh, no," I said, throwing up my arms. "I don't have any money."

"Buy," she repeated. "For you," she thrust a purple wrap into my hand, and held her palm open to me. "Two dollars," she said.

I thought of Joseph, the way he'd been so desperate for a sale he'd become someone else. And I wondered what the woman must think of herself. Did she hate me for this? For making her beg.

Joseph had collected money for rent and utilities that morning, and had left the cash—nearly a thousand dollars—in a drawer to deposit the next day. He might not notice if two dollars went missing. I went to the drawer and retrieved the money, but when I gave it to her she remained standing on the porch, staring intently at me.

"Come in," I finally said. "It's hot today. Sit and have a glass of water."

As I led her to the table, the two children followed, giving wild shrieks and chasing each other around the kitchen. I sat with her as she drank, her hand trembling; she had few teeth and some of the water spilled down her chin, but I kept my eyes on her—all her ugliness—compelled to make amends for my original disgust. Meanwhile, the children played behind us, opening cabinets and drawers, banging them shut again. I thought, with a mix of superiority and generosity, *they're poor, so I'll let them do what they want; I won't say a thing.*

Later—after everyone had come home and we were sitting down to eat dinner—Joseph discovered the envelope of cash had gone missing. When I realized what had happened, I was so ashamed I began to cry right there in front of everyone. They stood around, not knowing how to comfort me.

“Those old grannies,” Billy said, trying for humor, “They’re the best con artists; nobody expects ’em.” He paused and added, “We should have warned you.”

“I’ll pay you back,” I promised, very nearly sobbing. Like a child, my nose was running, and I wiped it with the back of my hand.

“It’s my fault,” Joseph said. “I shouldn’t have left the money in the drawer.”

“You’re right,” Billy agreed. “She probably didn’t even know it was there.”

“But I did!” I said. “I saw you put it there this morning. And then I let her in the house for a glass of water.”

“Jesus,” Sean said. “What were you thinking?” He’d been sitting on the couch, but stood as he spoke. “I can’t afford this.”

“Easy,” Joseph said. “I’ve had a few good days. I can take care of it for now.”

“But you have to let me pay you back,” I insisted.

“How can she do that?” Sean asked. “Where’s she gonna get the money?” He turned to me as he said this, his eyes wandering down my body, and for the first time it struck me that living in a house of seven men could also be a dangerous thing.

“I’ll figure something out,” I said, moving closer to Joseph. “I promise.”

*

When I was a child, I believed, very seriously, in miracles. A baby is submerged in a cold Utah river for over seventy minutes—and lives. A woman falls 33,000 feet and walks away with a few broken bones. Miracles. Later I learned that in cold enough water the body can survive on extremely low levels of oxygen, that if you hit the ground just right, you could survive a fall from almost any height. From Joseph I learned to scoff at the word, for its cheapness, the way people tossed it around for everyday things, accidents and coincidences. But I still longed for the miracles, the possibility of magic.

Two days after I chaperoned our robbery, I was finally called in about a waitressing job, which seemed, in its own small way, a utilitarian miracle. It wasn’t really, but I liked the idea, that maybe the universe would look after me for a change. My experience hostessing at Specchio should have made me an obvious hire at any restaurant I applied to, but my unwillingness to give a name or number for reference must have been suspicious. I lied, of course, and said Specchio had closed down, that there was no way to contact the former managers, as I’d lost touch with them, but this still meant I’d have to be hired on my word alone. Also, I didn’t have any documents to prove I was twenty—the age I’d given myself—so at the better restaurants, this restricted me from serving. That left me hoping for calls from places

sleazy enough to conveniently forget to ask my age or all-night diners where I'd be counting pennies for tips. Fortunately, if you want to call it that, the job I landed was the former. Kenny's—the local place I'd supposedly met Billy and where he frequented enough to be considered a regular—was owned by a man willing to take Billy's word, if not mine, that I was both experienced and old enough for the job.

I showed up early the day after I got the call, and waited at the bar, until Terry, the manager, noticed me and proceeded to take me on a tour of the kitchen, which was outdated and cramped, though clean. “Here's your apron,” he said. “You'll start tomorrow?”

Terry was a small round-faced man with a head like a soft, white cabbage. He was efficient and crisp and enunciated each syllable—but was without a bite of common sense, so I forgave him his assumptions—that I would accept the job, for one, and that I needed to be told not to take bottles of bourbon if my tips were low.

“Do I look like the kind of person who would steal cheap whiskey?” I asked.

“How, pre-cise-ly, might such a person look?” he replied—and this was to be the tenor of our relationship from here on.

But he was not such a horrible man, and was on the whole mild enough. And Kenny's wasn't the worst kind of place—though it did smell of rotting wood and closeness. The food was basic American fare of the hamburger/french fry variety, and the customers were locals and tipped well enough once you got to know them, especially if you called them by name and remembered their order. Even though it was known as a bar in the evenings, it never got too rowdy or crowded. This is not to say that our clientele was a particularly gentle bunch, but they knew each other well enough to settle their disputes outside, “where the air isn't so tight,” one of the men explained. “I never like to hit a man in front of a pretty lady,” he added, which was, of

course, a line, but one I enjoyed nonetheless. And in this way I knew, I was not so different from Vivian.

Because we were so far from the Strand and the seawall, tourists rarely wandered in, and when they did it was with great timidity. There was no podium or “Seat Yourself” sign to indicate how one should proceed, so they’d stand in the doorway, hoping someone might save them, but none of us would. Usually they slipped out after a few minutes. Before long I stopped seeing them altogether, as we all did. Only rarely did I notice some family decked in bright, floral prints, stranded in a sea of movement. I would smile at them, but quickly and with pity, so they knew it’d be better if they turned and left quietly. I couldn’t risk one of my regulars questioning my loyalty—even if to show kindness to an outsider. The fact that I too, had so recently been a stranger myself gave me little pause; I’d decided to accept my luck and watch out for myself. Looking back on my life at this time, I’m not ashamed; I was callous, yes, but not unwise.

Joseph often ate at the bar while I was working, and when it was slow I’d sit with him, sipping a Jack and Coke slipped to me by the bartender—which did not go unnoticed by Terry, but was also not commented upon because Joseph was a friend of a friend of the owner, and that kind of thing held a lot of water at Kenny’s.

Joseph came in despite the fact that he claimed to find the food vulgar and plebian. And I took this as a sign of something. His desire to be around me, perhaps. His willingness to sacrifice. It seemed a noble thing, at the time. Though now I think, big deal, he probably liked the hamburgers more than he was willing to admit. The me telling this is not so easily enchanted as the me who lived it. That girl saw a man who seemed to like her—and it wasn’t because of her reputation, or because there was no one better, or because she had a beautiful stepmother.

Joseph didn't know a thing about any of that. He knew only the me I decided to let him see—and I was so sure I could get away with only showing the good parts.

*

In those first few weeks, I revealed very little of myself to anyone. I perfected the simplest kind of story—all most people really want anyway—that I was twenty (a lie), had graduated from high school two Junes before (another lie), and was sick of the Montana snow (also a lie, though at the time I very much wanted to believe it). My stepmother, who'd always hated me and had been bitterly jealous of how much my father loved me—I was hoping to draw some sympathy here—had finally kicked me out of the house, so I'd come south because I wanted to be somewhere warm and easy. I said nothing about how I'd left, that as far as I knew, everyone at home presumed me dead. Or if not dead, then of highly questionable morality. And when asked why I'd chosen a small Texas island when there were so many other beaches in Florida and California—places people actually wanted to go—I'd say I had no interest in those other places, that they offered no real charm or history, just pretty white sand and big lonely hotels. I said I wanted to be in a place with a past.

“What do you mean, a past?” Joseph asked. “Everywhere has a past.”

“You know,” I said, and he shook his head. I told myself I liked when he challenged the silly things I said.

Joseph had taken me to a coffee shop—my first that didn't include skiers tromping their boots across industrial carpet, though I didn't mention this. The walls were exposed brick and on them hung framed pencil sketches—drawings of stick people walking through stick forests

that cost seventy-five dollars each. This, I thought, was an awful lot of money for something that looked as if it were done by a seven-year-old. I would have said this, except Joseph had already told me they were drawn by a woman he knew, a friend. The form, he explained, was meant as a critique of both traditional and modern representations of the body in art. Also, he said, the drawings were playful and nostalgic, and that the artist had really tapped into something at the root of all human emotions, though he couldn't say what exactly because that, of course, would have ruined it. Already I didn't like this woman, his friend, and I wondered just how well he knew her—even though I had no right to think of him in such a territorial way. He was not mine. Not yet.

“I mean a past that isn't pretty,” I finally said.

“Since when do most places have pretty pasts?”

I thought about this for a moment. The truth was I knew almost nothing about the history of most places; the only place that has ever *really* existed was the world of my childhood, itself a jumble of half-baked shams and illusions. And now I was here, surrounded by the ghosts of my mother, and her parents, and maybe theirs—only I didn't know more about anything than when I'd first arrived.

“All right,” I said. “But I *want* to know about this place.”

“That's different.” He nodded. “That's better.” He was like a coach; he saw me making progress and wanted to encourage me, his putty, his discarded mannequin to disassemble and tattoo with irrelevant microscopic numbers.

We sipped our coffee, which was too hot and too black and was only bearable because it had been served in big green ceramic mugs and because we were sitting at a round mosaic table in chairs that didn't match—mine orange and wooden, Joseph's modern, a green plastic seat

with chrome legs. In the background, a song was playing, the words in French, a woman singing in a deep, pained voice; the instruments were brass and seemed so distant from the woman and us. The album was scratchy, as though coming over a phonograph, but I could see the CD player on a shelf above the colorful mugs. A woman stood behind the counter; she leaned on her elbows and stared at us because we were the sole customers; her only prospect for excitement was that in a few minutes we'd need refills.

All of this was supposed to make us feel good, I decided. The mismatched décor, the sketches on the wall, the music trying to sound worn as old shoes. Kind of romantic in that disheveled, homey way. Except for the girl behind the bar who was there to remind us that if we wanted to continue sitting in this wonderful place, we'd need to buy another cup. That nothing was free and nothing was easy. And of all the things in the room, I decided to like her the best because she was the only thing I could make any sense of right then.

The Shadow Girl

It's not that I never thought of calling or writing home. I came close many times. It was hardest for me mid morning, when everyone was away, and I had little to do but pace about until I could leave for my shift. I'd ceased to be a visitor, and so did not require the constant companionship and entertainment I'd grown accustomed to in my first weeks there. And since the incident with the old woman, I was hesitant to go out alone. So I sat in the house—which was so tidy there weren't even any chores to keep me occupied—wondering what Vivian was doing just then. Michael and Ed would have been in school, of course, supposedly learning, but what were they thinking of? Me? Was it possible they'd accepted me as dead and moved on with things. Or could they have guessed the truth? Could they be looking for me?

If I ran away today, with the way the world is so close, I don't think I could have stayed hidden for so long. But then it was much easier. There was the internet—but it was so new then. And cell phones were still bulky and expensive. I'd paid cash for my ticket, and even Heinrich hadn't known where I was really going. At Kenny's I'd given a fake last name, which didn't matter because we were paid under the table. And I had no identification. I'd never even gotten my driver's license.

If I hadn't left, I would have finished high school and learned to drive after graduation. Heinrich would have taken me down to the valley in his truck, and we would have pulled into that same parking lot, only it would have been daytime and Vivian would know where we were and that I was alive. And after, I would have gone to the community college or Montana State

University in Bozeman, as we'd talked about. I'd have chosen a major, perhaps history or literature, and become something—and maybe I wouldn't have loved it, but at least I'd have done things the acceptable ways. Instead I'd run to a little island, to waitress and live in a tiny house with seven men.

On the days I thought that way, I did consider calling home—even if I wouldn't speak a word—just to hear a familiar voice say “Hello? Hello?” Only I worried the voice would be strange to me now. Already I felt so much distance between the me of the island and the me of the snow. These two seemed, if not wholly different people, then at least two seasons of me. I was afraid to mix them. That if I let them exist at the same time they'd scratch and claw and rip each other to pieces. So I tried very hard to put the other me out of my way. I could take her down and look at her from time to time, but only because I made her into someone else entirely. In this way she became like a precious glass doll—only unlike my mother, I wouldn't hurl her across the room. I would hold onto her.

*

When I was a child, my father told me about the shadow girls, evil spirits who lurked in the corners, waiting for some unsuspecting child to notice them. You glimpsed them, now and again, out of the corner of your eye, but when you looked back, they were gone. Only once in a while, if you were acting very bad, did you fully see them. But once you did, they'd take you over. And no one would ever know, why you'd gone so rotten.

“Why does it have to be a girl,” I asked.

“Because she’s part of you,” he said. “The worst part. You used to belong to her and now she wants you back.”

Despite his warnings, I spent a lot of time searching for my shadow girl. I had to see her for myself, to know if she really was the worst of me. But I never found her. Not until I’d nearly forgotten her.

*

After working at Kenny’s only a few weeks, I’d already paid back much of the thousand dollars, thanks in large part to the overgenerous tips Joseph insisted on leaving me. That I’d been able to come up with the money so quickly was a relief, but still, I was beginning to wonder how long I could go on living for free. As soon as I’d paid back the money in full, I promised to begin contributing to the household expenses. I took as many shifts as Terry would allow, which at first weren’t many, but after he witnessed my competence, and perhaps more importantly how well liked I was by the regulars, he began scheduling me more.

Though it was not difficult work, it was physically demanding, especially on days I worked double shifts, and I often found I had little energy for anything else. I’d finish at midnight—sometimes later, if I stayed on to help the bartender—come home to darkness and sneak around, trying not to wake anyone, but usually failing. In the mornings it was difficult to sleep past seven, which was when everyone else woke. And while they, too, tried to stay quiet, I’d always been a light sleeper and was no match for seven men eating and preparing for the day in a space barely large enough for two.

“Does it surprise you that we wake up so early?” One of them asked me, though I can no longer remember who. Really it could have been any one of them. Besides Joseph and Billy, they were hard enough to tell apart even when I was with them. Of those five, my memory has made one composite man. He is not memorable. He is like the boys from my high school, just a little older.

“No,” I said. “Why?”

“Because we’re artists.”

I must have given him a strange look then, because he added, “Everyone assumes artists spend the day sleeping.”

“Do they?” I asked. I didn’t know anything about what people assumed artists did or did not do.

I often wondered if I should tell them more about myself, about Vivian and her paintings, how I’d lived my whole life surrounded by brushes and canvases and coffee table art books. Then maybe they’d stop talking to me about “artists” as though it were a word I’d just learned. But my presumed ignorance was also what kept me safe. Not just from them finding out that I was in fact not such a decent person, but also, I think, from them kicking me out. Because as long as I could be naïve—as long as I remained the poor stepdaughter who’d been so cruelly cast off by her evil, vicious stepmother—they could be my teachers, my protectors, my contacts with the rest of the world. They couldn’t know she, too, was as artist like them, pandering to tourists, but wanting something more. I couldn’t risk letting them see her as sympathetic or real. The minute I broke the illusion that she was a monster, there’d be questions. Had she really kicked me out? Had I really met Billy, as I claimed I did? What other lies had I told?

Already I was beginning to sense some cracking in our happy little arrangement. Everyone was polite to me, but to each other, I noticed they rarely spoke except to discuss household matters. It seemed odd, once I realized it, that they wouldn't even discuss their work, which you'd have thought to be the thing that drew them together in the first place. I began to wonder if moving their studio to the warehouse had more to do with the closeness of the two small bedrooms, than the beautiful hardwood floors that they'd yet to do a thing about. Of course, these fissures had been present before my arrival, but I couldn't help assume my being there was a blow from which this strange little family would not recover. Maybe if I wasn't there to temper everyone, they might have screamed and yelled and worked things out as people tend to do. Instead they held themselves tight and forced their smiles on me.

*

I might have gone on working at Kenny's for a long time if the shadow girl hadn't found me. She appeared one evening, standing in the doorway, frozen as if she were a tourist, though she clearly wasn't—but she *was* a stranger. She was young, perhaps no more the thirteen, though I suspect she was closer to my age. Her clothes hung baggy on her tiny, pale body, and her dishwater blond hair hit her waist. Her face was clear, though, if empty, and she moved so softly, as I led her to a small table in the corner, that she might have been a ghost.

I should have left her standing alone in the doorway until she went away, then I would have forgotten about her, as I did the others. Except that the others were always men or families, and I could tell myself they didn't matter—and they didn't. But not her. She was calm, not

looking about in confusion as the tourists did, but with a great longing I took to be hunger. Also, I couldn't help but see myself and what might have happened to me, had I not been so fortunate.

She ordered a large salad, a bowl of soup, a hamburger and fries, and two slices of coconut cream pie, all of which she ate precisely, cleaning a plate, then looking up expectantly for me to bring the next course. When she finished, she asked for the bathroom, and I pointed her toward the narrow hall beside the kitchen door.

I went on to my other customers, and it wasn't until ten minutes had passed that I began to wonder why she hadn't returned. Not that it was any of my business how long it took other people to use the restroom. Not that I had any right to be suspicious of a girl simply because she looked poor. But when I checked the bathroom, she was gone. There was a back door, meant for deliveries and garbage, that she easily could have used for escape. I wanted to give her a chance, so I waited and hoped, but she didn't return. I slipped her bill in my pocket, and at the end of the night paid it myself with tip money.

I could have told Terry, only the idea of turning the girl in seemed a betrayal, not only to her but to myself. And I was embarrassed at my incompetence, how easily I again let myself get taken. *Besides*, I consoled myself, *it was just once*.

But, of course, things like this never happen just once.

A week later she came in again. At first I thought she'd come back to pay and apologize. In the few moments it took me to approach her, I concocted several explanations for why she'd run out on me: she'd had an emergency, she'd forgotten her wallet and was embarrassed, she'd simply forgotten to pay. When I handed her the menu, I was almost happy to see her; I smiled and said, "Welcome back."

She ignored my greeting and ordered. This time I watched her more carefully. The way she brought her fork to her mouth, the way her jaw worked, slowly, her eyes blank and unfixed. There was an emptiness to her I couldn't understand. I'd considered myself such a stranger to the world, and yet I moved in it as best I could. I survived. But here was this girl who was on the edge of something even more basic than that. Barely holding on to her existence.

"Do you know that girl," I asked the bartender, pointing her out as she ate.

"Never seen her before."

"She was in last week."

"She say she knew me?" he asked, and when I shook my head, he went back to washing glasses, which he did out of proportion to the number of drinks he actually served. I couldn't blame him for wanting to appear busy; when he wasn't, Terry assigned him the more unsavory chores—the kind that involved rubber gloves and the holding of one's breath.

So the bartender hadn't noticed her, but I was beginning to worry Terry would. He'd been stalking around all afternoon, grumbling about inventories, reminding us not to give out freebies, sodas and extra orders of fries, even to the regulars. He'd installed an impressive stainless-steel scale by the fryer, and insisted we comply with correct serving sizes—because this was a business, he liked to say, not a party.

Against my better judgment, I was hoping she'd pay this time, even if just for that day's meal. But again she disappeared down the narrow hall and didn't return. As before, I paid her bill, and kept it to myself. Terry would have wanted to detain her, to possibly press charges or at least bring in the police to give her a little scare. He'd done it once, when one of the lunch chefs, just a high school kid, had been caught stealing potatoes. The kid had been made to pay back all

he'd stolen in addition to doing "community service," which mostly involved repainting the building's exterior and washing the windows. I couldn't let that happen to my girl.

"She's gone, I think," I told the bartender later on.

"Who?"

"The girl from before."

"Hmm," he said and looked away from me, as though he didn't remember.

Thereafter, the girl showed up every Wednesday at the same time, ordered, snuck out and left me with the bill. This went on for several weeks—which is to say, I let it go on. Because as much as I mentally railed against her six days a week, promising myself I'd stop her the next time, that I'd turn her in no matter what, when she arrived I found myself unable to do anything more than smile, take her order, and hope Terry wouldn't notice.

It might have been bearable, if it were only affecting me, but paying her bills and losing money on what she might have tipped, made it harder to repay Joseph. It also meant I continued to live for free, which couldn't go on forever, even with the most kind-hearted people. I knew I was taking advantage of these men, who were struggling themselves. If I wanted to keep my precarious position in the house, I couldn't afford to lose the affections of even one.

Paragon of Beauty

Ever since I'd arrived, I'd longed to search for my mother. But desire and action are two very different beasts. For, as much as I wanted to do this, I could not begin—or I chose not to. I told myself I had nothing to go on, that my search would be fruitless, so why bother. Sometimes I took out the finger-sized conch Joseph had given me my first week on the island; I held it to my ear and listened, but heard only the emptiness resonating inside it. “Hello,” I'd say, holding the shell like a phone. “Hello?” But there was never any answer, so I sat upon my longing for several weeks and almost succeeded in suffocating it—if it hadn't been for the phone books.

They appeared one morning on our doorstep, one white, one yellow, both weighty and wrapped in plastic. I happened to glance out the front window and saw them resting on our porch. I was still hesitant to open the door when I was alone, but I was also in need of distraction—and boredom trumped my fear.

I brought the books inside and stacked them on the table, one atop the other, like a heavy layer cake. I unwrapped the yellow first, then the white; I set them side by side and ran my thumb along the corners, so the thin pages fell like cards. And then, as if I were assisting some magic trick, I picked one and opened to the white page of names. The rows were so orderly and straight. And endless. More names than you'd imagine, living in a place that seemed so small. I turned to my mother's maiden name, Alaveraz. But there were four columns of Alaveraz, and no way of knowing if any of them remembered her. I could have phoned them all, one by one, awkwardly introduced myself and asked if they'd ever known a woman, if perhaps they were

related. But the thought of it, the apologies, the strange silences, all of this was frightening and impossible. So I closed the book and put my head down on it, but I didn't cry because unearned crying is cheap. I'd learned that from Vivian.

I'd been a child and was trying to force her to buy me something I wanted, I can't even remember what now. We'd gone to the grocery store in the valley, and I was standing in the middle of the aisle trying so hard make her feel bad, but she didn't. She bent down to me and said, "Cry all you want, Blair. But nobody can hear you." And she was right. I looked around, startled to see the other shoppers going about their business, as if I wasn't there, as if I'd never existed at all.

*

I couldn't tell the truth about myself, so I began telling stories that weren't exactly lies, though I'd mix the details around enough to keep them from being entirely true. Joseph and the others didn't seem concerned with accuracy—so long as I kept them entertained. They'd lost the ability to talk to one another. They were like children; their anger only be kept at bay by distraction.

So I told of a girl who fainted every day on the playground until one day she didn't wake up. I told of a wooden man who lived in a house of glass, tempting children to follow him there so he could turn them in crystal statues for his garden. I told of the snow people and figures trapped in paintings and mirrors that spoke a secret language. "More," they said when I'd approach the end and the possibility that they'd have to speak to one another loomed. "Don't end there. Tell us more."

The funny thing was, the more I told these stories, the harder it became for me to separate the truth, which no longer rose above the fiction like heat. I began to question my own memory, and I wondered how much of myself was now rooted in narrative rather than reality. But I could see everything so clearly; I would close my eyes and be there again as if my childhood was happening for the first time. Still today when I look back, I fall deep into my many selves, until I can no longer distinguish past from present, until I am inhabiting the body of the girl I used to be, all that old skin. I'm borrowing her. I need her, I sometimes think, or I will die.

*

Once I found Joseph on the lawn before a large canvas. He'd recreated the yard exactly, the browning crab grass, the low bushes, the moss-covered willow. Only, at the center of his painting stood a peacock in full bloom. I knew he hated this painting. Or part of him did. Yet, he took such care with each stroke, so there was some love in it after all—and this was what he despised the most, not the work before him, but the fact that he couldn't make himself revile it as much as he believed he should.

"What?" he asked when he saw me. Though he claimed to like for me to watch, I knew it embarrassed him.

"Are there peacocks on the island?"

He laughed.

"You see them sometimes," I argued. "In warmer places, living in cemeteries. Because some zoo closed down or someone realized they didn't make the nicest pets." I said this with authority, though I'd only read about it.

“No,” he said. “There are no peacocks living wildly around here. This isn’t Key West.”

I remembered something Heinrich once said to me, just after he came back into our lives. “Good morning, peacock,” he said. At the time I thought, how wonderful to be compared to such a regal bird. But now I know the colorful displays only belong only to the males. The females are plain and gray and not even called peacocks, but peahens. They are like housewives, like dishwater. Dull.

Though I tried not to think much of Heinrich, I continued to dream of him; often it wasn’t even the him I’d known, but the him of before, the him I’d created, the prince. And I’d wake feeling a very deep sense of mourning, much deeper than anything I’d ever felt for my mother or my father. Or even the real Heinrich, after he left me. And I didn’t know what to do with that sadness, because it wasn’t real. Still today, I occasionally have flashes of him, and it stops me. I have to sit down and tell myself, this is not yours, this belongs to the old Blair. If I were a better person I’d find a way of returning it to her. But I like it—the ability to mourn someone who never existed—and so I wrap my fingers around it; I refuse to let it go.

*

After I found the phone books, I began to think more of my mother, who I knew almost nothing about. I had only my father’s stories and a few frozen images of her, which I kept now in my mind because I’d left them at home, in a little album in the drawer beside my bed. As a child, I often studied the photos, the way she stood, the way her eyelids fell lazily when she didn’t know she was being photographed. These were the most precious, because they caught her alive and unposed. In my favorite she’s standing at the stove stirring something; she’s in profile and

between her legs, she's holding a yellow potholder. I imagine her turning to my father after he's snapped the Polaroid, and laughing. *Why didn't you warn me*, she would have said. *Take it again. Let me get ready this time.* But maybe she wouldn't have said that at all; maybe that's what Vivian would have said. Even as I imagine it, I know it's not my mother speaking, but Vivian. Her face and body in my mother's clothes, at the little subsidized apartment stove. I try again—to make that picture of my mother come alive—but I can't. As soon as she breathes, she's Vivian.

Because Kenny's was slow and I had no tables, I was sitting at the bar with a Jack and Coke, swirling the ice with a little straw, trying to make my mother come alive. I even said to the bartender, "I know a woman who lived here years ago. Maria Alaveraz." But he shook his head and went back to drying glasses.

It was a Wednesday night, and I knew the girl would be there. She would come in and sit down, and I'd go to her because I always did. So I turned my back to the restaurant; I didn't want to see her. I wanted to sit there and try to rip the Vivian right out of my mother.

But this could only go on for so long before Terry tapped me on the shoulder and said I had a visitor. "I tried to take her order, but she said she wanted you."

I didn't move, and Terry said, "Well?"

"I want to finish my drink," I said. This was my third; I don't think I could have said that if it had been my first.

"You're done," Terry said, taking my glass and dumping the rest of its contents into the sink.

I sat a moment more, then slipped off my stool and put her order in without the formality of asking for it first. She didn't say anything when I brought her plates; later she went to the

bathroom and didn't come back. I only waited on two other tables that night, and once I'd tipped out, I barely broke even. It was not until everyone had gone, and I was wiping down menus, that I realized tonight was not like the others. Terry had seen the girl, had spoken to her, and I could no longer pretend she only existed as a shadow to torment me.

"Blair," Terry called to me from the office. "Come here."

I went and sat in the doorway on the edge of an overturned milk crate. The office was only big enough for a desk and chair, so whenever two people needed to meet there, one person had to sit partially in the tiny hallway.

"I saw the girl leave through the back door," he said.

"What?" I asked; I didn't want to keep losing money, but I also needed to protect her from Terry. Because protecting her was the same thing as protecting myself.

"Is she a friend of yours?"

"Yes," I said, but he must have known I was lying. "I paid for her."

"She asked for you," he said. "But not by name. She just pointed to you at the bar and said you always take her order."

"That's right. We're not good friends, but I know her."

"I see her in here," he said, again ignoring my lie. "Every Wednesday."

"Right," I said. "She's a regular." Regulars were gods here, so I hoped this would save the girl.

"Do you always buy her dinner?"

"No. She usually pays."

"She better," he said.

“Oh trust me,” I said, though I should have known better. Trust is better unspoken; the minute the word hits the air, it begins to unravel.

Your Hair Shall be Properly Combed

“I don’t know if I can work at Kenny’s anymore,” I said to Joseph. It was afternoon and my shift began in an hour. We sat on the porch, our knees close together, but not touching. This was what I liked about being near him, the anticipation that soon, soon....

It was the first of December, and the sky was overcast; very shortly it would rain because that was what happened there when the weather turned cold. No snow, no sunshine, just an overwhelming grayness I never could have imagined. Even on our little mountain the sun usually shone when it wasn’t busy snowing. And the beauty of the snow was enough to make up for it. But here there was nothing to look forward to. It rained and the water pooled on the roads and sidewalks, nowhere to go. Sometimes there was no way around the puddles and you had to walk right through them. My serving shoes were beginning to smell like mildew and rot, but I couldn’t afford new ones, because I was still trying to repay Joseph. Now Terry wanted to cut my shifts back because of our incident.

“Did you think you’d work there forever?” Joseph asked.

“No,” I replied, though the thought of finding another job hadn’t occurred to me

“Good,” he said, taking my hand in his. “You’re better than that. What did you have in mind then?”

At first I didn’t answer because I could only think of the way his palms felt locked over mine, the pressure so nice and uncomplicated. But then he looked at me with a kind of intensity that made me hesitant to speak.

“I’m not sure,” I said, though I know it was the wrong thing. He wanted a goal, a plan. But I didn’t work that way; I was much better at stumbling into things. I told myself I liked the surprise of not knowing. That commitment and ambition were for the birds.

“What are you passionate about?”

There was that word again. I’d tried very hard to cultivate interest in so many socially acceptable topics. But the only things I’d ever been good at weren’t real. Fainting and turning the forest into a fairy land. I couldn’t say any of this, of course, because I’d committed to only showing Joseph the good parts of myself.

“I like people,” I admitted. “Strangers.”

“Tourists?” he asked with a note of disgust.

I shrugged. “It’s not the touristy parts of them I like. It’s the strangeness. The fact that they don’t know me, and I don’t know them. And I guess I like being the one with the history, the one who is looked at and considered special because I belong to the place they can only visit. Only I don’t have that here.”

Joseph smiled then. “Do you want to go to lunch tomorrow? I’ll take you to the most touristy place I know.”

“Okay,” I agreed, more excited about the prospect of a meal alone with him. Like a real date. I’d never been on a real date.

*

The next day, Joseph returned from the studio before noon and we walked down to seawall to have lunch. I woke that morning wondering if he’d forgotten, and I spent the next few hours

agonizing in a way I wish I could attribute to my youth. I dressed myself as best I could, which was not very well, given my dearth of options, and pulled on the cardigan that had once belonged to Paul, which was at least two sizes too large, but was my only sweater. I would have thought, coming from a place so cold, that my body could withstand a Texas “winter,” but in fact I found myself almost constantly chilled since the weather had turned a few weeks before. It must have been the rain; I wasn’t used to the damp. But also, I’d noticed my clothes had begun to fit looser. This shouldn’t have come as a surprise, given that I tried not to eat too much of the food I wasn’t paying for at the house, and I rarely ate more than a few smuggled French fries at Kenny’s. Still, I felt my body had betrayed me. I looked in the mirror now, and saw myself getting thinner and paler; the bones in my forehead began to protrude. And I thought, soon I’ll be a skeleton, a dead girl walking; soon I’ll get what I deserve.

Joseph might have begun to notice my weight as well because as we sat down to lunch, he pressed me to order anything I wanted. “I normally wouldn’t have come within a hundred feet of this place,” Joseph said, “but I thought I’d give you the whole experience today. Today we’re tourists.”

The restaurant resembled a generic Mayan temple on the outside, and a plastic rainforest on the inside. We sat at a fake bamboo table surrounded by an abundance of flora and fauna, sprouting not just from the floor, but also from the walls and ceiling. Near the center of the room an animatronic gorilla stood before a waterfall, grunting and beating his mechanical chest. As we opened our menus the lights grew dim, and it began to “rain”—with the help of a sound system and plenty of erratic flashing.

“It’s supposed to be storming,” Joseph said rolling his eyes. But then he patted my knee under the table and added, “I’m here if you get scared.”

I laughed because despite the absurdity of it, I appreciated the effort someone had put into creating a world so far away from where it belonged.

“I prefer this rain to the real thing,” I said.

Eventually, the fake rainstorm ended and the lights came up and birds filled the air—or at least the illusion of them. Joseph and I ordered large overpriced plates of rubbery enchiladas that appeared before us a few minutes later and had clearly been nuked on high in a microwave.

After lunch Joseph insisted we go on a walking tour. “Come on,” he said. “What says tourist more than following a guide around in a large group.”

“Fanny pack?” I suggested.

“Touché.”

We made our way to the Strand and found a small group gathered around a woman with a roll of red raffle tickets.

“Two,” Joseph said as he exchanged money for stubs, which seemed a little unnecessary given there were only seven people waiting and one of them was the tour guide. But she didn’t seem to notice.

“Please give me your tickets, and we’ll begin the tour,” she called out in a voice meant for a crowd of fifty. We returned our stubs and the woman collected them in a pouch strapped around her waist.

“Fanny pack,” I whispered, nudging Joseph, luxuriating in our secret joke.

“Welcome to the Historical Walking Tour. Today we’ll be visiting several historical buildings, some that have been on the island since the Victorian age. I’ll also be taking you to the memorial sites dedicated to the lives lost and the property destroyed in the Historic Hurricane

of 1900. It may surprise some of you that our little island has so much fascinating history, but we are full of history here. Please follow me.”

I looked at Joseph, “Historical enough for you?”

Our first stop was a large stone building with a simple façade. The guide explained this was one of the island’s most impressive art deco buildings. It was originally built in 1887 as a train station and miraculously survived the hurricane. In the 1930’s the exterior was redone as we see it today. Now it houses the railroad museum, which we were free to visit after the tour for a cost of seven dollars a person.

“Better get on that,” I whispered, a little too audibly, and the guide gave me a dirty look.

Across the street, the tour guide pointed to the former office of a once prominent lawyer—though she didn’t tell when he lived or what made him so prominent—which had been converted into the island’s most respected art gallery. Joseph laughed when she says this, loudly, so that people would hear and know he disagreed.

We moved on. All of our stops seemed to follow the same pattern: Here was an impressive old building that survived the storm; it used to be a railroad station/bank/house but now acted as a museum/retail store/coffee shop. We were, of course, more than welcome to visit these sites on our own time, and if we mentioned “The Historical Walking Tours” we’d get a discount. This kind of tourism was foreign to me, the attractions, the kickbacks. In our village we had one big draw: the mountain. In the off season we did what we could to keep the resort full, but never anything like this. We never tried to sell ourselves in such a paltry way. Joseph brought me here, I thought, because he wanted to show me the history of the island, but all her accounts were so truncated and dull: buildings and dates and dry facts. Where were the people? I wanted to ask. Where were the stories?

“Where are the stories?” I said aloud.

The guide turned to me.

“Miss,” she said, “These *are* the stories.”

“But no one really cares when a house was built; I want to know who lived there. You know, the real story. Whole families floating down flooded streets on nothing more than a door.”

“We don’t have that kind of thing here,” she said. “We have facts. We have the truth.” She said “fact” and “truth” with such finality that I almost believed her. “If you don’t like it,” she continued, “you can go.”

I laughed, and Joseph laughed, and then we looked at each other and walked away.

“Thank you,” Joseph said as we made our way home. “That was great; you were great.”

“It wasn’t *so* bad. It *was* very historical.”

“You’re right,” Joseph said. “It was terrible.” He laughed, “I could have led the tour better. *You* could have—and you don’t even know what’s what around here. At least you would have made it interesting.”

“There’s an idea. Completely fictional historical tours.”

“No one would have to know,” Joseph said. “It’d be our secret.”

Yes, I thought. Secrets were good, they connected you to another person. They made it so there was no space between you. We’d reached the house, but stopped on the front porch, and I wanted to keep him there with me. Outside, even though it was cool and nearly dark. I laughed and wrapped my cardigan tighter. “Who knew it could be so cold here.”

Joseph put his hand on my shoulder. “We should get you something warmer.”

“I know,” I said, I looked up at him and thought, I have to give him something. I can keep some things from him, but not everything. “My mother lived here,” I said.

“Here?” Joseph asked. “On this island?”

I nodded. We’d been standing close, but now he backed away and turned around to face the street. “So that’s why you came.”

“In part,” I said. “But I don’t think I’ll ever find her. I’m not even looking, really.”

“It’s a big island,” he said. “Bigger than you think. What did you think you’d find?”

“I wasn’t thinking I’d *find* anything,” I said, feeling defensive. Where had that come from? Since when did I need his approval?

Joseph turned back to me. “You did, though,” he said. “Or you wouldn’t have come all this way.” He put his hand on my elbow, not to draw me to him, but with a stiff arm, as if to measure the distance he wanted to keep between us. “Let’s go in,” he said. “No use standing out here in the cold.”

A Secret Lonely Chamber

There was a Christmas, and a New Year's eve, and then suddenly another year, and none of this felt right because the days had gone by just like any others. I worked, the men pretended they needed my stories to survive each other. We'd had no tree, no celebrations. And I was afraid to even mention it because I knew no one wanted to be reminded of how tense everything was. Only Joseph, who'd asked me to go for a walk one morning, said anything. It was one of the few dry days, and the sun was warm on my arms. I was thinking of home—how could I not—and how white everything would be there, how there would be fires and steaming wassail. And that this was my choice, to be here and not there.

“Merry Christmas,” Joseph said, his voice full of irony. Since I'd told him about my mother, he'd seemed more guarded around me. As if I might at any moment give him another reason to doubt me. And he was right, I very well could.

I shrugged and pretended not to know. “It's been so long since I've seen a calendar.” This wasn't true, of course, I looked at the schedule at work each day, hoping Terry would put me back on dinners. But every time it was the same—lunches, and only three times a week. Except for the holidays, when everyone worked.

“I should have gotten you something,” he said, though I didn't think he meant it. He'd told me before he didn't buy into the necessity of gift giving on prescribed days. He believed people should only give when they felt like it. Not when society required it.

“I'm working tonight,” I said. “Why don't you come over?”

“Okay,” he agreed, but then he didn’t. And all night I keep looking to the door, expecting him to appear. When I returned home, they were all asleep or pretending to be; I knocked over a chair and pretended it was an accident.

So I guess I do remember Christmas after all.

*

After the New Year, Terry gave me back my shifts, but grudgingly. Two of the other girls had quit; they just put down their aprons during a shift and said, “We’re outta here.” I wished I could have gone with them, wherever they were headed. I imagined them climbing into a car and driving west, cruising the California shoreline, full of cliché and freedom. Probably they just got jobs at one of the restaurants on the Strand where the tips were better. I don’t know; I never saw them again. But Terry put me back on Wednesdays, though he was always watching, searching for the mistakes I was sure to make. He never got to punish anyone after the two girls walked out.

All through January I felt so alone there. Joseph had stopped coming in during my shifts. He was too busy with his work, he said. He was trying to put some things together, but he wasn’t having any luck. Even the shadow girl had stopped coming, and for awhile I thought I might never see her again. This should have made me happy, but it didn’t.

But eventually she found me again; I could feel her even before she stepped through the door. I grabbed her by the arm, and pushed her back outside before Terry could spot her. It was cold and the sun was setting unspectacularly somewhere beyond the rooftops.

“He’s onto you.” I whispered this, as if someone were listening to us.

She didn't admit or deny my implication, but turned as if to go, then looked back at me.

"Do you have anything you don't need? Anything expired?"

I studied her closely in the waning light. Beneath the skin of her face there were little blue lines, almost invisible, like the numbers on Joseph's mannequins. I wondered what hers would say, if you put them under a microscope. Probably nothing. Like me. She was a blank, an unwanted.

"Meet me out back in five minutes," I said, and she nodded.

Inside Terry was busy looking under tables and lifting floor mats, desperately trying to find something unimportant for the bartender to clean. I picked up a nearly empty bottle of ketchup, and asked Terry for his key to the supply room.

"We're almost out," I said shaking the bottle, knowing how much he hated for the ketchup to be low, for customers to have to ask for more. Among the servers ketchup refills were code. If you wanted to go out back for a smoke, if you had to use the bathroom, if you just needed a break from the floor. You told Terry a ketchup needed refilling, and you bought yourself a few precious minutes alone.

I refilled the ketchup quickly, then opened the back door where the girl was waiting. Her hands shook as I led her into the supply room. I had to be quick; if I didn't return Terry's key soon, he'd grow suspicious.

"Here," I said, offering her a twelve pack of buns and a jar of pickles. Before she took them, she wrapped her arms around my neck like a child. I had to pry her off before rushing back to the floor.

"Thank you," she whispered, and for the rest of the night I felt hers arms, the lightness and warmth of them. I wished I'd taken a moment to return her embrace.

But the next afternoon, Terry took my arm as soon as I arrived and led me off the floor, away from the smattering of patrons who'd assembled for lunch. My first thought was *she left the door open*. Then, *he noticed something was gone*. I was trying to come up with an excuse for the missing buns when Terry pushed me into the store room and said, "Please explain this."

I gasped; the entire room had been cleaned out. The oversized cans of corn and green beans, the enormous bags of ketchup and mustard, the sacks of buns, the sleeves of paper napkins. Gone. Like a magic act without the applause.

"How?" I asked.

"Yes." Terry spoke slowly, as though counting the letters. Y-E-S. All he had left. "*How* is just what I want from you."

"I don't know," I said, and it wasn't a complete lie. I knew I hadn't waited to make sure she closed the door before she left. I didn't know what happened after that, if she'd come back in the night, if there were others. It seemed impossible that she could have done it on her own.

At first Terry didn't say anything, and I thought he'd turn and leave me to contemplate the emptiness, but then he placed his hand on my collarbone and pushed me until I felt wooden shelves poking into my back and legs.

"Tell me" he said, and it was frightening, the calm of his voice, whatever lay beneath it.

I'd never been a good liar, but I was a consistent one. "I don't know," I repeated.

Before he could push me further, I slipped past him and out the back door. Then I was jogging, my arms pumping in an even back and forth, one, two, one, two, breathing deeply through my nose and listening to my slip-proof shoes slap the pavement. *This is easier than it should be*, I told myself. But it made no difference. I untied my apron, dropped it on the street, and kept running.

Instead of turning for home, I aimed for the shore and found a bench along the seawall. The waves were larger than usual, and the water was nearly blue in the twilight. I wondered why the ocean had to be so beautiful today, when I'd rather it be flat and pathetic as it normally was. Baby waves. Little nothings. The first time Joseph had taken me there, several months before, he'd pointed to the ocean and warned, "This is what we make do with. Don't expect anything from it." I should have listened to him.

Later I told everyone Terry and I just couldn't get along, that I quit but—not to worry—would find a new job soon. If the others discovered the truth, I'd lie. I'd say I was wrongly accused, which was not completely untrue.

No one ever found out, though.

At least, no one ever mentioned it to me.

But there was a distrust growing. A general sense that I'd been foolish. That I *was* foolish. And that I'd betrayed something, though no one could say what.

The Wolf and the Man

In February a man Billy knew who ran a private collection in Houston phoned Joseph about The Learning Curve. Unbeknownst to Joseph, Billy had shown this man—Mr. Kaiser—some prints Joseph kept in his portfolio, and he was interested in taking a look. They had an entire room devoted to local artists, and, though they only “borrowed,” many artists had gone on to sell their works to private buyers. Billy’s own work had often been featured there—which, Joseph had often complained, was only because Billy “knew the right people.” Now, though, Joseph was thrilled; I didn’t want to mention that Billy had turned out to be the right person to know.

The next day, the man drove down and met with Joseph, and a week later, Billy and I helped him move the piece into a truck Mr. Kaiser had sent down. Bracing The Learning Curve against my body was strange; it was heavier than you’d expect, and I had to place one hand under a breast and wedge the other in the crook of an arm. The paint left a chalky residue on my skin. I caught our reflection in a window, and we looked like we were carrying a giant funnel cake, but I kept this to myself. No one wants the thing they take most seriously made into a joke.

When our local paper got wind of Joseph’s success, they wrote a brief article for the *Lifestyle* section. Joseph hated it, of course, especially the part that read, “If abstract sculpture isn’t your *thang*,”—yes, someone actually wrote that— “he also does realistic beach scenes.”

“Who told them that?” Joseph demanded of me.

“How should I know,” I said, but he didn’t seem to hear.

“It was Billy wasn’t it.”

“Why would you accuse him?” I asked. “He’s the one who helped you.”

“You don’t know artists,” Joseph said.

“Yes I do,” I argued. “I know all of you.”

“You think you do,” he said.

But despite his reaction to the article, when the “Lone Star Arcade” contacted Joseph a few weeks later, asking about including his work in their showroom, Joseph agreed without hesitation.. They rarely had openings, he explained, and the commission was fair. “Not my real work, you understand,” he said. “The stuff that sells. The beaches and the palm trees. And I wouldn’t do it either except that the money’s good.” I agreed, it was a hard offer to pass up.

He’d asked me to walk over to the Strand with him, and we stood on the corner outside the building looking into the large glass windows. Prominently displayed by the door was a collection of photographs rigged with special lights to create the illusion of motion, waterfalls flowing, stars twinkling. Mesmerizingly garish. We stood quiet for a long time, as though hypnotized.

It was early in the cruise season, but already, the tourists were spilling off the ships. Near the corner where we stood, a large group had crowded around ventriloquist and his wise-cracking marionette. The ventriloquist had been a regular at Kenny’s, and he’d once confessed his two tricks: establishing that the dummy couldn’t talk unless he was making at least a dollar per minute, and insulting the audience. “No one wants some guy taking shots at him,” he said, “but if that guy’s throwing his voice onto a puppet, they love it. The men especially. Call ‘em a mother-effing bunch of gringos, and they start pulling out wallets like you’re a stripper.” We couldn’t hear what he was saying to his audience now, but they laughed and applauded. When

he'd finished, several moseyed past us into the gallery. They stopped before the moving photographs and delighted in their trickery.

"It's good news anyway," I said to Joseph. "Look how many people are in there." He scoffed, and I pointed instead to a group of mixed media paintings near the back of the gallery. "I like those."

"Some of it's not so bad," he agreed.

I shrugged. "Maybe this is a step. You get those people in there."

"Those people who have no taste."

"Those people who give you money."

"Well," Joseph said, turning to take in the people. "I wouldn't mind a little more of that."

*

For the first six months, the eight of us had squeezed into the living room and kitchen, while the two back bedrooms remained empty. At least once a week Joseph mentioned in passing the problem of what to do with the floors, but we couldn't come to a consensus, so nothing was ever done. But after Joseph's work started selling at the gallery, he began to press more earnestly. He even went so far as to call a house meeting, where he announced he'd lost interest in entertaining everyone's opinion on the matter because we would never come to a solution. He was, after all the owner of the house (I hadn't known this before), and therefore had a bigger interest in what was done with it. He was of the opinion that the floors should be refinished, but that the rooms would be used for sleeping not painting. "Who sleeps where?" someone asked, but Joseph ignored this question and continued with his plan. He explained that he'd decided he

would take charge of the project, and the expenses would be divided equally and added to everyone's bill the next month. It was strange the way he called it a bill now, as though he were some distant landlord and we his unruly tenants.

No one objected to his plan, but they grumbled behind his back and made sure I was around to hear it so I'd take it back to him. I didn't particularly appreciate being used this way, like a sewage pipe. But I kept my mouth shut; that I'd yet to repay Joseph and now had no income at all had started to wear on the others.

One evening Paul stood from the table, in the middle of the meal, leaving his plate half full. "I'm going for a walk," he said.

The next day his things were gone; he'd left only a note saying he'd found somewhere else to stay, though he didn't mention where. He'd also left an envelope of money, which he said he hoped would cover next month's expenses—including the cost of refinishing the floors. Joseph took the cash and counted it and said it would be enough. The others agreed, and everyone seemed pleased, though only partially about the cash.

It saddened me to think how this little family I'd stumbled into, which had appeared so happy at first, now seemed completely ordinary and flawed. Like my own family, only more so. Because at home at least there'd been the strangeness of our disputes. Invisible half people, poisoned flowers, talking mirrors. Here it came down to money and space—perhaps jealousy as well, but that seemed only a byproduct of the first two.

The Rabbit's Bride

In the dreams, Heinrich sometimes turned to me and said, "You'll never find her," and I'd ask "My mother?" but he wouldn't answer. "I'm taking you back now," he'd say, picking me up like a cat. Because it was a dream I didn't protest; and because it was a dream I knew he was accusing me of something. "You're not supposed to know about him," I'd say. "I don't," Heinrich would reply, and then I'd wake on the couch, surrounded by seven sleeping men. In the dark their heads were round and soft like pears. Any one of them might have been someone else.

*

After I was fired from Kenny's I knew I'd have to find a new job and fast. I could have tried another waitressing job, I suppose, but I would have had to give Terry as a reference, and I couldn't imagine him saying anything to my advantage. Also there was the problem of my having no identification and no legitimate way of obtaining it. I confessed this to Joseph one evening. He looked me over like a stern parent, and I almost expected him to claim disappointment, but after a moment he said, "That's not a problem."

The next week, I went to a camera shop and had my passport photos taken. Then Joseph and I took the bus to the mainland and hiked nearly three miles along flat, treeless road until we reached a subdivision of small box-shaped houses. The exteriors were all beige stucco, and if it hadn't been for the numbers on the doors, I don't think we could have told them apart. When we

arrived at 712, Joseph steered me up the empty driveway, which did not lead to a garage or carport, but abruptly met the lawn. I found it demoralizing, this unfinished thing.

Inside the lights were low and a man who didn't introduce himself but stayed safely in the shadows asked me to write my information on the back of an old grocery receipt. I began to print the fake last name I'd given at Kenny's, but Joseph took the pen from me and gave his own. I didn't say anything, but took the pen back, and when I'd finished, Joseph handed the man an envelope that contained an amount of money he later refused to disclose. "Call it a gift," Joseph said. Later he added, "It's better if we don't tell anyone about this."

"Of course," I agreed and tried to smile, though it scared me a little. I knew what we were doing was illegal, and this gave me some pause, but what was more frightening was the feeling I'd be crossing some line, and that once I stepped over all the world behind me would fall away.

The next week we returned to the same house; the man slipped a package to us, and we left. Inside, I found a driver's license and birth certificate, which I was expecting, and a marriage license, which I was not.

"I thought, just in case," Joseph said. We were sitting next to each other the bus home; cold air blew against the backs of our legs. I couldn't imagine in what situation proof of marital status would be necessary, but I also felt a little thrill. Since I'd told him about my mother, he'd been so guarded, not just with me, but with everyone. And now, to be suddenly bound to Joseph, even if it was no more real than the stories I told, seemed a move in the right direction. I tried to scoot closer to him, but the seat was curved, and I slid back into the into the cusp.

"We were married on January first," I said, reading the document. "If only I could remember."

“It was simple,” Joseph replied. After a moment, he added, “It was the happiest day of our lives.”

And though he meant it as a joke, I was troubled. Skipping the happiest day of my life seemed exactly the kind of thing I’d do. But I smiled and draped my arm over Joseph’s and said, “Well lucky us.”

*

When we returned that evening, Joseph showed the others the certificate, and I was too ashamed to reveal the sham, so they had no choice but believe we’d married on the sly. They congratulated me and wished us well and went to bed. There seemed an understanding between them because the next afternoon Joseph sent me to buy milk, and when I returned they were gone. They’d taken their few possessions: their toiletries from the baskets and their clothes from the drawers. But they’d left the cots and the linens. Which made the house seem emptier, all those stiff planks where bodies should have been.

“What happened?” I asked Joseph. We’d made a quick dinner of salad and cold chicken and were eating together at the end of table, which had once been so crowded. When I’d first arrived we’d contemplated buying something bigger, but now it stretched like a desert.

“Things have been so tight lately,” he said.

“With me?” I asked.

He shook his head. “This has been coming for a long time.”

“But where did they go?”

He shrugged. “They’ll find places. They know people.”

“But how can we afford all this,” I asked. “Just the two of us.”

“Have you ever had to worry about anything with me?”

I shook my head.

“Then why start now,” he said, touching the back of my hand for a moment, before returning to his meal.

I should have felt settled by this. I should have felt loved. But instead, I began to wonder if this was the same Joseph I’d met my first day on the island. He’d seemed so noble then. So above the things of the world. Now, when I looked at him, I saw the hint of someone else.

I saw myself.

Came no Breath

After the others left, Joseph and I sold all but one of the seven cots. We put a sign in the yard, and I sat with them; by the end of the day they were all gone. With the money we made, we refinished the floors in the two bedrooms, which required only renting a drum sander for an afternoon and applying several layers of stain. It seemed such a simple thing, after it was done, and I wondered how we could have ever let it complicate our lives as it did.

In one of the bedrooms, we pushed the extra cot in a corner, and Joseph moved his painting supplies from the warehouse—which, though he never said, I assumed he was no longer welcome to use. For the other room, Joseph bought me a queen-sized bed that took up most of the floor. We painted the walls sea green and hung gauzy cream curtains over the windows. On either side of the bed we placed two end tables that Joseph had made from scraps of wood and metal, then covered with a clear gloss to make them shine.

During the day, Joseph worked in his studio or in the yard, and I walked to the market and bought food for dinner. In the evenings we sat on the porch drinking wine from juice glasses and watching boys who were not so much younger than me saunter up and down the street in small gangs. They wore their jeans low and tied kerchiefs around their heads and seemed to think of their parading as serious business. They called out to us, though, and said hello because they were only playing at being thugs, and at nine or ten o'clock they all went home safe to their homes and parents. Joseph laughed at them, but I didn't because we were also like them: playing at being married.

I often wondered, in those first few months alone, how long we could keep up the pretense of our happiness. To me it seemed such a fragile thing.

*

In May Joseph bought me a blue bikini and took me to the beach. This, he joked, was our honeymoon, so I'd better remember it. We took a basket with turkey sandwiches and iced tea and sunscreen.

“We'll make a day of it,” Joseph promised.

To have day on the beach and nothing else, was really something. When you live on an island you're always *at* the beach, but you rarely go there. I certainly saw the ocean almost daily, but I almost never *looked* at it. So Joseph and I went and sat on a towel and ate our picnic and gazed out at the sea, which was flat and jade and benign—more a lake, really. But when Joseph asked me if I wanted to go for a dip, I hesitated. I'd never swum in the ocean before and had no idea what could be out there, beneath the blanket of water; I imagined schools of fish, spiky coral reefs, sinister stinging things I'd have no way of knowing I was about to step on.

Joseph laughed when I mentioned this. He said, “The only thing out *there*, is seaweed.”

So I went with him to the edge of the water and tested it with my foot.

“It's freezing,” I said, laughing and hugging my arms over my chest. Even though I'd put on more weight since leaving Kenny's, I was embarrassed by the paleness of my skin in a place so warm and brown.

“You'll get used to it,” he said, leading me, like the man in my dream, only he was never Heinrich, and I was always me. It was a calm day, and the waves only barely broke at the shore,

so I thought, I can do this. But as the ocean climbed up to our knees it began to grow murky, and I wanted to turn back.

“Just a little farther,” Joseph said, and we continued out, up to our waist, and then our chests.

“I don’t like not being able to see my feet,” I said, because even though I felt only soft sand beneath my toes, I couldn’t wholly believe there was nothing lurking around my legs, and I kept waiting for something to sneak up on me and what? The not knowing was the worst part. I’d seen *Jaws*. No one ever guessed what was coming for them until it was too late.

“Stop worrying,” Joseph said, and then he dropped quickly beneath the surface and popped back up. “Go on, you can’t swim in the ocean without going under at least once.”

Can’t I, I almost replied. But I also wanted for him to see how brave I was, how adventurous. I’d already bragged about what an accomplished skier I’d been at such a young age—I’d not mentioned that after my father died, I’d never skied again, or that if I tried now, I wouldn’t even know how to lock my boots into the skis.

“Alright.” I braced myself to go under, but before I could do it on my own, I felt my legs swept out from under me and Joseph’s hands pressing my shoulders back. I hadn’t had time to close my eyes or hold my nose, and despite how salty the ocean smelled, I’d never imagined how it could burn, how I could feel it blazing through me. But once my initial shock subsided, I calmed and turned my head up to the surface where my faint reflection gazed back at me, and beyond that, Joseph, thinking he was teaching me some lesson. And the Blair staring down me said, *Go on, give Joseph a scare; teach him a thing or two.*

After I left Montana, I’d promised myself I’d never do *that* again. Because doing *that* had never led to anything good. But like most things we know are bad for us, I longed for it. To

feel so weightless again. And to create that fear in someone else. I wanted Joseph to worry about me. To imagine, for an instant, how much he'd miss me, if I was gone. So I fell away from myself; my body went limp, and then Joseph was pulling me up and I was choking because I hadn't considered the water and how swiftly it would try to fill me once I was no longer there to keep it out.

"Are you okay?" Joseph shouted.

The water swirled in my chest, and I began coughing. When I stopped, Joseph pulled the clumps of wet hair from my face and pressed them back over my scalp, and I wished I hadn't done it. Because now I was even more helpless to him than ever.

"I'm fine," I said, turning to wade back to shore. Only I couldn't find it; the sky seemed to have taken over, and there was no more ocean, no more earth. Joseph took my arm and began to lead me like a child; I couldn't look at him. Back at our towels, I sat gazing out to where the ocean met the horizon. The subtle curve of it.

Joseph sat beside me. After a while he asked, "What was that?"

"Nothing," I said. "An accident."

Later, at home I took off the bikini and realized my shoulders and stomach had turned a deep pink. I knew it was sunburn, though I didn't remember feeling it earlier in the day. My body had kept it a secret until now, when it burst all over me. My skin was stiff and ached when I moved; I turned the shower on cold and sat at the bottom of the tub with my head on my knees. That night Joseph gave me a green gel, and I rubbed it on myself; for a while I felt better, but soon the cool wore away, leaving my arms sticky, as though I'd been spit out of something bigger than myself.

Laid Her on a Bier

It was fun, for a while, to play the housewife. It reminded me of the time after my father died, when Vivian began locking herself in her studio, and I had to play mother to Michael. But now there was no Vivian, only this man pretending to be my husband in every way but one. And we didn't speak of it, but it was there. That lack. Just after we'd refinished the rooms I'd told Joseph he didn't need to sleep on the cot anymore, but he'd not taken my hint—or else decided to ignore it—he said he'd slept on it so long it didn't bother him.

After a while sitting in the house all day, watching television, making sandwiches, began to wear on me. I had my new identification, so I had no excuse, but whenever I tried to think of something to do, I came up blank. I could have gone back to waitressing, but the thought made me feel sick—the long hours, the filthiness of touching other people's food. I told myself, *Don't think you're too good for it*, but I did. Giving Joseph a glimpse of what I could do with my body that day at the beach had reminded me what I was capable of.

It was late September, and I'd been on the island nearly a year. The weather was beginning to cool, but slowly—not the way it did at home, as though it were rushing to shake all the leaves from the trees so the sky could go about the more serious business of filling the mountain with snow. Here I had to make do with shorter days and cool breezes in the evening.

At home we would have been busy with the Oktoberfest, but here that didn't exist. Instead, the stores were filling with candy corn and pumpkins; I was amazed by how much

Halloween these people wanted. But then, without my noticing it, I began to want it, too. I went to the market and bought a bag of small gourds; I'd been attracted to their harvest colors, their curved handles, the way they'd been collected in a net like fish. But once I got them home, I didn't know what else to do with them, so I arranged them in a basket in the middle of the table. Joseph told me they looked nice, and I thought, "They *do* look nice." The next day, I bought a cartoonish paper witch and hung her on the front door. Then I made spiders from black pipe cleaner, a trick I'd learned on one of the morning shows I was beginning to think I couldn't live without. I placed the spiders about the house, and when Joseph noticed them he said they were clever, which I decided meant he thought *I* was clever.

The next time I went to the market, I noticed a flyer on the cork board by the door advertising a Haunted Walking Tour. This, I decided, was something Joseph and I could do together, something to "get us into the spirit of things," as they say. If you spend enough time with the language of television, it becomes part of the way you talk, the way you think; it crawls down your throat and takes you over. But when I mentioned the tour to Joseph later, he rolled his eyes and asked if I hadn't already learned my lesson with the Historical Walking Tour.

"I'm going anyway," I said because I was tired of puttering around the house like an old woman. "And you're going with me."

"What if I say I'm busy?" He was sitting at the table, looking through one of his sketch books—not at his "real" work, but the gallery paintings.

"Are we lying to each other now?" I asked.

And so he went.

The tour began at nine pm at the front gate of the cemetery. I'd been there once, or at least, on the sidewalk in front of it. I'd meant to go in. I'd foolishly assumed a small island

would have a small graveyard and that only a few hours of searching would reveal my mother's plot. But when I arrived, and saw the rows of tombs stretched over the rolling hills well past as far as I could see, I'd felt sick, and stood holding the iron bars of the fence, until a woman and child walked by, and I heard the girl ask if I was lost. Yes, I wanted to say, very much so. But I only let go of the bars and went home.

We were late for the tour; a small group had already formed around the guide—Laura, her badge read—but she let us pay as she gave her opening. She had a pretty round face and was built like an athlete—not at all the kind of person who could inspire fear. Perhaps if she'd draped herself in black and dusted her face with white powder, but instead she wore khaki pants and a red polo shirt with the logo, *Island Walking Tours* stitched above the image of a Victorian house—haunted, I deduced, because several bats were sewn around the roof. Otherwise it was the same uniform worn by the guide of the Historical Walking Tour.

As we assimilated, Laura was giving a brief history of the island, including the hurricane of 1900, which, she promised, would figure prominently into our journey that evening. For our first stop, we entered the cemetery and gathered around an enormous stone angel perched atop a hefty tomb, its robes flying back, revealing bent knees, as though it were about to pounce on us. At its base, only a name, *Samuel*, was inscribed and nothing else. Who did we think this was dedicated to, she asked us, someone high in the community? Yes, we agreed. Big memorials were for important people, right? But no, this grave was actually home to a boy who died as an infant. She asked, then, if we noticed the angel—as if there were any way we couldn't—and then directed us to look closer. But we only saw the knees, which were gnarled and bony under the cemetery's yellow gas lamps. What about the toes, she asked, and we craned for a better

view of the angel's shadowed feet. Then we gasped. Where the toes should have been, instead there were hooves.

"The child buried here," Laura triumphantly informed us, "was deformed at birth. Instead of two little feet, he sprouted hooves. We know he was born in the year nineteen hundred. Just around the time of the hurricane. You think," Laura paused here, "maybe this boy was born *in* the hurricane—but that's not quite right either, because, you see, he was born at the *exact moment* of the hurricane. He cried out, and they say the devil flew from him and tore through the island, angry at having been cooped up inside the boy for so long. Well, you'd assume the mother would be dead, having just given birth to a monster, and she nearly was, but she had enough time to look at the baby and whisper to the midwife, 'kill it.'"

I could tell, from way Laura lowered her voice that we were supposed to find this prospect unthinkable. But given the circumstances, it didn't seem unreasonable. I've often wondered how my own mother would have felt about me, if she'd have known how thoroughly I'd wrecked her insides. That I'd be the death of her.

"Well," Laura continued, "the midwife didn't want blood on her hands, but she didn't know what else to do, so she took the baby—just went out into the storm—and disappeared. Their bodies were found a week later. You might wonder, how a week could have gone by. But there were thousands of bodies. Imagine them, piled and bloated beyond recognition." I did. So many bodies piled like something everyday. Like autumn leaves. Like apples.

Laura continued, "The only way the baby and midwife could be identified were by his hooves," and here she pointed dramatically to the angel's feet and began to back away, slowly, as if the monstrous child might spring to life and attack her if she moved too quickly. That, I took it, was our cue to follow her, but I wasn't ready. Where was the father? I wanted to ask.

What happened to the dead mother? And who put up the money for such a grandiose tomb if the parents were out of the picture? But Laura had already begun another story.

Over the next two hours Laura led us around the island, stopping primarily at houses that survived the storm but were haunted by the ghosts of their owners who did not. From what I could tell, most everyone went mad after the storm: women wildly searching out their dead children for years after, successful men hanging themselves and haunting the houses they once inhabited, a seemingly sane doctor who, after his death in 1940, was discovered to have collected several hurricane corpses in a wheelbarrow, preserved the bodies, and kept them in his basement—not for experimentation, but for company. They’d all been positioned around a dinner table with one chair left empty, presumably for himself.

Though I found this tour more entertaining than its Historical Walking sister, there still seemed a flatness. It wasn’t enough for me just to hear the stories. I wanted to go into this doctor’s basement, to see the corpses he’d so lovingly preserved. I wanted to ask him why he’d done it and if it made things better. Or were the bodies just a reminder of whatever it was he’d lost. I think I also felt as I did with Joseph that day in the ocean. That I had to prove something, to these people, to Laura. That skimming the surface was not the same as real.

That almost sounds like it means something, doesn’t it? The truth is I could sit here all day and claim my motivations were purely educational. But after awhile all rationalizations start to ring disingenuous. Really I wanted these people to look at me and see something they could not get from the stories alone. From their silly fascination with the dead. I wanted to show them the real thing.

So I waited until Laura came to what seemed to be the climax of her last tale, and then I screamed and dropped dead to the ground. By that time we’d made it back to the cemetery and

were standing just inside the gate; thanks to the landscape's acoustics, as my head hit, a loud crack echoed around us.

When I woke a moment later everyone had crowded around. They pretended concern, but what I saw in their eyes was excitement, how they couldn't wait to get home and tell everyone they knew that some poor girl had actually passed out during the Haunted Tour. *From fear*, I imagine them saying with delight.

"I'm so sorry," Laura said before we left. But I knew she was thinking she must be *some* kind of tour guide, to produce a reaction like that.

Later, as Joseph and I walked home, he stopped and took my shoulders in his hands and brought his face close to mine as if to taste me. As if truth were something you could breathe in. "You did that on purpose, didn't you."

"What?" I asked, trying to play dumb.

"The fainting, like that time at the beach."

"How could I do that," I said. "Don't you think it'd be obvious if I was *pretending* to faint."

"You weren't pretending," Joseph said, and there was no question in his voice. He didn't even wait for my answer, but turned and continued walking. I had to jog to catch up with him.

"That was an amazing little trick," he said, and even though I'd promised not to show this side of myself to him, I was flattered. This was the first time he'd ever called me amazing, or even seen anything I could do on my own as worthwhile.

But I couldn't give myself up so easily.

"I just got lightheaded," I said. "It happens to people. I could have epilepsy."

“You don’t though. And what you did didn’t just happen. You made it happen. If I asked you to do it again, you would.”

I didn’t reply to this.

“You would,” he repeated. And before I had a moment to laugh and tell him he was crazy, and he grabbed my arms and kissed me hard, like he was trying to take something from me. The way Heinrich kissed me when he’d thought I’d come back from the dead.

“You would,” Joseph said again as he let me go. “The question is, what are we going to do about it?”

*

Later Joseph put his arms around me, and said, “I knew you were something,” and kissed me, this time not even as though he wanted to steal from me, but like a wolf, like he wanted to consume me. I kissed him back, and thought, *finally, finally*. We were standing in the kitchen, and I began to push him toward the hall.

“Wait,” Joseph said.

I stopped, expecting him to tell me he hadn’t meant to give me the wrong impression. That he just got caught up and couldn’t we go back to being celibate, fake-married people. But instead he said, “I just have to know, what you can do.”

“Whatever you want,” I said, kissing him again. And I realized I wasn’t so unlike the girls at Specchio who’d have done almost anything to have one man all for themselves. There was some power in it, so it could be worth giving up a little of something else.

He brought his lips to my ear and whispered, “Show me.”

I didn't hesitate; I fell dead in his arms, and then could feel his mouth on mine. After a moment I opened my eyes and exclaimed, "You brought me back to life. My hero!"

But Joseph didn't laugh; he asked, "How do I know that was real? Anyone can close their eyes and pretend to faint. I want to see what you can really do."

I paused now. A quick blackout was nothing, a card trick, a sleight of hand. Not so difficult, really. Nor so bad. But to do more, would reveal a much larger part of myself I'd promised never to show him. Only now, I saw, this was what he'd wanted all along. A Blair who couldn't be explained.

He was just a man, I told myself. How much was I willing to trade to have him? And it may seem a cheap, silly thing, to want another person so much. To feel you *need* him. But as much as I'd like to think I know better now, I don't know better. I will never *know better*.

"I can die," I spoke softly; I wanted him have to struggle to hear me. "Not just faint. I can leave my body and come back again whenever I choose. Do you believe me?" There was a part of me that hoped he'd say no, that we'd laugh and pretend it was all a good joke. But I also knew if I didn't give him this, things between us would never change.

"I do," he said. "Just as soon as you show me."

"Alright," I agreed, "I'll go and lay down on the bed and you can look at me and take my pulse and try to bring me back. But nothing you can do will be of any use." I was trying to scare him a little, trying to give him an out if he needed it. "Do you want me to do that?"

"Yes." He took my hand and led me into the bedroom.

Which was not at all how I thought it would be.

*

The next morning I woke early. I wasn't used to that half of the bed, or the feeling of clinging to the edge, teetering between falling or accidentally bumping Joseph. I was afraid to move, afraid Joseph might wake, or worse, disappear. He was on his side, turned away from me, with the covers pulled over his face, so that I could only see the top of his hair. And feel the warmth of him. Which was enough for the moment.

He woke eventually, and rolled over to me and put his face in my arm.

"What now?" I asked.

He jerked back, then, and looked up at me, perhaps only with surprise at the sound of my voice, but at the time I thought: *He's mortified, disgusted. He's only done this out of pity or curiosity and now he's regretting it.*

We didn't speak of it that day or the next, my fainting, where it had led. And I was afraid that by keeping so quiet, we'd eventually forget, and that by forgetting it'd be as though it had never happened at all. But on the third day Joseph met me in kitchen before breakfast. I'd already been up for some time, and was sitting at the table drinking a cup of coffee, black, as Joseph had taught me was the only way to have it. He sat down beside me, took my hand, and said, "I don't want us to be that kind of couple."

"What do you mean?" I wanted him to think I was irritated—and I was, but I also liked the way he used the word "couple," which seemed to imply something more than platonic. Something interlocked in a way that couldn't be easily pulled apart.

"How old are you, really?"

"What?" I asked laughing.

"It's just," he began, but before he could say I seemed too young, I cut him off.

“Twenty one,” I said, “in January, twenty-two”—my island age, three years older than my mountain age. When you live with a lie for long enough, it can replace the truth, but I worried sometimes about those three missing years, if I’d ever get them back.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll believe you.”

Why? I wanted to ask. Because I could die. Did that somehow make me a person who could be trusted? I was beginning to understand this funny thing about talent: I wanted so badly to be admired, but there was something frightening in it, the way it took me over, until the dying was all anyone could see. Until the living me disappeared.

“I don’t need to sleep on the cot,” he went on.

I should have said, *Why don’t you just say what you want. If it’s me, say it.*

“Okay,” I agreed. I blew on my coffee, though it had already gone lukewarm. I was trying to sound casual, like I didn’t care one way or another. As if he could sleep in my bed or not, and if he did, he could love me or not. No difference. Only it did matter. Because just having him was not enough. I needed to know he wanted to *have me* as well.

In the Black Ground

All through that winter, Joseph said nothing about my dying. He slept in my bed, and I began to hope he'd lost interest in my body's other tricks. But I should have known better. Joseph was not a flighty or forgetful man. When things mattered to him, he mulled them over, grinding them down until they were smooth and fell fine through the fingers like sand.

During the days, I'd sit on the sofa and watch the morning talk shows, which were all about how to fix broken things: cakes, gardens, bodies. The afternoon lineup was nearly the same, only now the broken things were people. Mothers in search of their babies' fathers, boys who wanted to hurt their mothers, strippers who wanted people to see how smart they were, professors who wanted to be strippers. Nobody knew what was what anymore. Nobody was willing to just stay put. And that's what I admired about these people, despite their obvious yearning for attention, the things they were willing to do for it. We were not so different, me and those people willing to air their troubles on national television. It wasn't the fame, though, not really. It was the desire for someone to take five minutes to really look at them. To stop whatever else was going on and just pay attention.

In February Joseph took me to a Mardi Gras party in Port Bolivar. We wore black masks and a bag of plastic beads bought from the dollar store; as we dressed, we pretended to be strangers. "Who are you," we kept saying to each other. "Have I seen you before." On the ferry over, we drank Jägermeister from a flask and our tongues went purple. The deck was crowded

and hot; Joseph pressed me against a railing and kissed me. I liked thinking he was the only thing keeping me onboard. That if it wasn't for him I might drift away like mist.

The party was on the beach. Vendors pulled up with grills hitched to their trucks, and we stood at a table pulling the heads from crawfish to get to the meat, throwing their shells into piles. Tiny red bodies with little black eyes.

Later we danced to a terrible cover band. A bunch of white kids from Kingston who thought they were Bob Marley. But we loved them anyway. We loved everyone. We touched elbows and hips and hands. We gave away beads, and collected new. We lost each other, then found each other again.

"Who are you?" Joseph shouted to me from behind his black mask. "Do I know you?"

"A thousand and one girls you've never met." I said, pressing my lips into his neck. Then I felt hands tugging me from behind. I turned, and there was Billy smiling with his pretty boyish face; instead of a mask he wore a crown of feathers.

"Oh you!" I exclaimed.

"You too," he replied. "Come on."

And I shouldn't have gone. I should have reached for Joseph and anchored myself to him. But Billy was tugging my arm. "I have to show you," he was saying, like the man in my dream. "You have to see."

"Show me," I said, following him through the crowd, the shoulders and the arms. I was laughing. I was thinking this was the entire world. Soon we reached the edge of a clearing; before us a woman was juggling fire, the flames flipping through the air, casting an orange light over everything. I'd seen her once before, in the daytime. Joseph and I had gone to the Strand for ice cream, and she'd gathered a small crowd. She'd worn a white halter top and had a small

hard face; when she turned, I saw the body of a dragon tattooed across her back. “The amazing fire girl,” Joseph had said, affecting scorn, but he kept looking over, and I knew he admired her.

“There,” Billy said, pointing. “That’s her.”

“She and Joseph,” I said, understanding now.

“Not for awhile, though.”

“How long?” I asked, but instead of answering, Billy pressed his face to mine, kissing me so hard I could feel his teeth. Overcome as I was by everything around me, I kissed him back.

“What was that?” I asked when we pulled apart.

“An experiment,” he said, draping his arm over my shoulder. I was about to ask how it turned out, when Joseph came up from behind. “Hey!” he shouted, and for a moment, I thought he’d seen us, and my heart began to race. Did I hope he had? Would it have been better? But then I realized he was just saying hello. He put his arm around my waist—unaware anything unusual had passed—and was about to say something more, but when he saw the fire—when he saw *her*—he stopped talking. He’d lost his mask somewhere along the way, and I watched his face, the way his cheeks lifted, the way his lips twitched as though he were trying not to say her name. Her hands were quick, nearly invisible in the darkness, and the fire rose and fell, little red bodies, graceful as dancers. I wanted her to drop the clubs, to remind everyone it was only a trick, but she didn’t. When she finished, the crowd applauded, and she blew the torches out.

“She’s good,” Billy said.

“Unbelievable,” Joseph agreed.

“Really?” I said, turning to them. “It’s just juggling. What’s not to believe.”

“Can you juggle?” Billy asked so earnestly I wanted to lie.

“No,” I said, removing my mask. “But I can do this.” I took a few steps back, spread my arms, and dropped dead into the sand. What I hadn’t accounted for, was the fact that the crowd had already begun to fill in, that it was not so unusual to see people—especially skinny little nothing-girls like me—pass out as the party went on. Other than a man who nearly tumbled over me, only Joseph and Billy had noticed what I’d done. When they bent down to help me a moment later, I’d already come back.

“How did you—” Billy began, but then Joseph interrupted.

“If you don’t feel well, I can take you home.”

It bothered me a little, that he thought he had any right to be protective of my abilities. As if he had some stake in them. As if they were his.

“No,” I said. “Let’s stay a little longer.” But by then, the magic of the evening had gone. Billy rode the ferry back with us, and I kept looking at him for some sense of what the kiss could have meant. Only he refused to meet my eye. He stood at Joseph’s other side, talking low, and after awhile I stopped trying to listen. When he left us that evening, I watched him walk away, his hands clenched by his side, and I understood that our possibility had passed. That he’d made a choice to kiss me, I’d made a choice to be foolish and bold, and now there were no more options.

Kill Me into Art

After my Mardi Gras stunt, Joseph began to look at me differently, the way Vivian often had — not with admiration or love, but as though I was a problem he was trying to solve.

“How long can you stay that way?” Joseph asked me one afternoon. We were sitting on the front porch, and he was sketching me in charcoal, as he sometimes did. Mr. Kaiser had called about The Learning Curve. People were responding well, and he wondered if Joseph had a companion piece for a month-long special exhibit, the original artist had backed out at the last minute, and now they needed a replacement. Of course, Joseph assured him, and now he needed to put something together by the next week.

“What do you mean?” I answered, but I already knew.

“Never mind,” he said. His hand moved quickly over the page, building me onto it. It’s a strange thing, watching your image appear on paper—not as you see yourself, but as you are seen. You want to say, *No, not like that, like this, like this*. But you never say anything. On that day, though, I didn’t have to worry about my urge to advise because the angle kept me from seeing.

“A long time,” I said. “Hours, days, forever, if you want.”

I hoped he’d say, “Of course that’s not what I want,” but he only looked up at me and said, “Days. Really.” He spoke not with surprise or skepticism, but with anticipation, like a butcher asking the weight of a cow, calculating the cuts, the profit. Already, he was planning me out. How to divide me up.

“Look,” he said, turning the notebook so I could see.

He’d drawn me above the neck, my face taking up most of the page; my eyes were closed and my hair crowned me, a dark halo.

“You killed me,” I said. “You’re not supposed to kill me.” I was joking, I think, but also, I was not.

He shrugged and ripped the sheet out of the notebook. “You’re so beautiful,” he said, looking not at the real me sitting beside him, but at the dead me. At the girl who could know the one thing he couldn’t.

*

“Have you ever been in a coffin?” Joseph asked me later that night. We were lying in bed and the lights were out, so I couldn’t see his face to know if he was joking.

“What kind of question is that?” I asked.

“It’s legitimate,” he said. “I don’t know what you did with yourself, you know, before.”

“What do you mean, before. I was in high school. I wasn’t a vampire.”

“I just mean, with your gift. I didn’t know if you’d ever—”

“No,” I cut him off. “I’ve never laid in a coffin before. I’ve never even touched a coffin.” In school, I remembered learning about specially designed “safety coffins” that had bells attached above ground, so if a person were accidentally buried alive they might ring for help. At the time, I’d found the idea fascinating, and I imagined myself six feet under, a little house all to myself. Now, though, it seemed terrifying, the idea of slowly dying inside a tiny

box, your only hope that someone passing by would notice something so insignificant as the ringing of a bell.

We were quiet for awhile; it was a sticky night, and above us the fan circled slowly, the blades bright and moonlit and useless. But if we turned the power up any higher, the fan shook violently, as if trying to escape the ceiling where it attached.

“I’m still thinking about the show,” Joseph began again. “You remember the glass coffin with the miniatures?”

I nodded, though it was too dark for him to see.

“Eventually they gave up trying to sell it, and one of Billy’s friends who owns a shop in Beaumont bought the paintings. They weren’t supposed to tell me; they made almost two grand. But Billy let it slip the other night. He felt bad—said I could have the coffin if I wanted. I told him to forget it. But now I’m thinking, maybe I could use it after all.”

“Billy?” I felt my face flush, and I was glad it was dark. Now that the moment had passed, I was sure Joseph would find me out.

“Yeah; who else.”

“I mean, what will you put in it? Your beach paintings?” This seemed potentially risky. If the owners of the Lone Star Arcade got wind of it, they might take offense. Joseph’s sales had been mediocre at best, and now that he had full charge of not only all the household expenses, but also me, we couldn’t afford to have him dropped. On the other hand, I was starting to miss the Joseph who would have taken that risk. And so I hoped he’d say yes, that Lone Star Art could do without him.

“Not my paintings,” he said; he reached for me in the dark, and his hand fell awkwardly on my face. “You.”

*

At first I thought it would be a problem, getting the coffin from the warehouse to Houston, but as it turned out, it wasn't as heavy as you'd think, and Billy was happy to help Joseph drive it up to Houston. "He feels guilty," Joseph assured me. "He doesn't want me to say anything about the money." And I agreed, that *had* to be why he suddenly become so helpful. Why else?

Starting the next week, Joseph and I took the bus to Houston's art district every Friday and Saturday for a month. The collection was housed in a large contemporary building—thirty-foot white walls and smooth mahogany floors, stunning in its simplicity. The windowed ceiling had been affixed with special shades, programmed to censure the light. This kept things preserved and beautiful. So in that way, the entire space was like an enormous tomb full of things rotting away at a slower rate than the rest of us.

The collection itself was amazing, a smorgasbord of surrealists, modernists, and tribal arts. The original owners had been wealthy—and partial. They didn't care for impressionism, for instance, with all of its fuzzy pastels. They'd been more interested in the strange, the unexplainable—an aesthetic the current curators wanted to maintain. This was where I came in.

We'd arrive early, before the museum opened to the public, and I'd strip down so Joseph could paint my body a thick, chalky white. Then I'd carefully drop an old white slip over my head, and apply Fire Engine Red to my lips. Finally, I'd lay dead in the coffin with a little pillow under my head and my hair spread like a crown, as in Joseph's sketch. When the museum goers filtered by, I'd quickly open my eyes every few minutes, then go back to dead. The idea was to

startle the audience, but also to leave them wondering if I was some kind of trick. Was I a doll, or a real dead girl?

“Kill Me into Art,” Joseph had titled it. The coffin was placed on the floor of a small pass-through room, where I was the only exhibit. Some visitors glanced at me and moved on, but others stood peering down at me for a long time. Several even knelt to view me from different angles. *She’s so lifelike*, they were thinking. *She could almost be real*. Sometimes when I opened my eyes they’d jump back or let out a small scream. And in this way I felt more like a monster in a haunted house. Going for the cheap thrill, then retreating.

I guess I could have said no, that I refused to become the object for his art—but, Joseph had argued, that was the point. That I be objectified in order to destabilize my objectification. This was why I needed to open my eyes, every few minutes, to shock people, to remind them I was not a thing of beauty, but a girl—a woman, he corrected. That beneath the paint, lay humanity.

But if I knew anything about art, it was that everyone saw what they wanted to see in it. So while some might see me as a protest against the killing of women into art, others would see a girl made into fantasy, a fetish. Despite that possibility, I couldn’t help but like it, the way everyone looked at me—the admiration. “How striking,” they said to each other and themselves. “How beautiful.” And I wished Vivian were there to see. “Look what I can do,” I wanted to tell her. “Look at me.”

The Living Dead Girl

The funny thing about being killed into art is that after awhile you start to feel like art. You begin to expect people to stop and stare at you on the street, to treat you with reverence, to let you cut in line at the cash register. When that doesn't happen you start wondering what's wrong with the world, with all those idiot people who can't see you for what you are, a thing of beauty.

"What if we did it again?" Joseph asked a few weeks after the show ended.

"Another gallery?" I asked. I was eager now; I'd already begun imagining us traveling the world, my face on banners in Berlin, Paris, Tokyo. On television—not the afternoon talk shows, but in the evenings, on the major networks. Then Vivian would see me, really, at last. And know. She would finally know.

"Not exactly," Joseph said. "The May Festival, in a few weeks."

"Here?" I asked. "For the tourists?" I felt my chest sink back; instead of trendy artists, I saw the women with their fanny packs, the men in Hawaiian-print shirts, the screaming, sticky-fingered children. "It wouldn't be the same."

"It would," Joseph promised, but it wouldn't. We both knew it couldn't be.

"I don't know," I said.

"Look," he said. "If you want to go out and get another job, do it. But one way or another, we're going to need to start generating some income here. It's been over a year since you were fired from Kenny's."

"Quit," I said. "I quit Kenny's."

He shook his head. “Either way, we could use a little more cash.” This was true, Joseph’s paintings at the gallery were moving slowly, and we only received a small honorarium from the exhibit. But the idea of putting myself out there for the tourists made my skin itch.

“You know,” I said. “I heard once that the most common thing couples fight about is finance.” Correction, I’d heard it just that morning on one of my talk shows. Relationship 911, the segment had been called. How spend your money without losing your honey.

“Well then,” he said. “Don’t fight me on this.”

*

Compared to the intricacies that would come later, the first festival was simple. Each showing couldn’t have lasted more than ten minutes from start to finish. We bought an old canvas tent with heavy metal poles, and set up in a small park with a few other acts, a bendy lady who—for five dollars—would pose in a photograph however you wanted her, a man dressed as Darth Vader who’d fight you in a “light saber dual” for a dollar a minute, three dollar surcharge if someone filmed. These were the kinds of things the tourists liked; they wanted to participate, to feel they’d somehow mingled with the locals. And they wanted that feeling to come cheap.

Outside our tent, we hung a sign, painted in dripping red, “The Living Dead Girl.” I hadn’t wanted to change my title, to be labeled like a circus spectacle, but Joseph insisted it was the only way. “You have to sound exciting,” he argued. “You have to sound impossible. That’s how we get them. We make them think they’re seeing the unbelievable.”

We’d decided Joseph would collect ten dollars a head outside, and every hour on the hour, he’d ring a bell—my warning to get myself dead—and lead a group to see me.

Using a load of two by fours, Joseph had built up an alter on which the coffin lay, me inside. Gone was the white body paint, which would have been hot and messy in the unventilated tent, but I still wore the white slip, colored my lips red, and spread my hair like a crown. Joseph added a plastic, black rose, which I clasped against my chest.

As I waited that first time, I considered the possibility that what I was doing—or letting Joseph do to me—would somehow destroy my strange talent. That who ever decided to grant me this power would see how I'd chosen to exploit the gift, and revoke it. Which was not such an unattractive scenario in itself. To be unburdened of my ability. The only problem would be Joseph, whether I could still be anything to him if I was just a regular living girl. Vivian had been right—now that Joseph knew what I could do, there'd never be any going back. How can you top returning from the dead?

After awhile, Joseph rang the bell and led the first group to me. He lifted the coffin lid, and for another five dollars, my audience could inspect me one at a time. I lay still as these strangers began to poke at me, hesitantly at first, but then with more insistence. They didn't want to believe I really was dead. I watched their shadowed faces, the way they narrowed their eyes as they searched my body for any sign of life, any clue I was not really what Joseph had told them I was. A dead girl.

I remember them all: three men, seven women, and one child, a boy who stood away from the others. The men were the gentlest. They touched me lightly, as though they were in the habit of spoiling dead girls, of leaving bruises or breaking their fragile dead fingers—and didn't want to be guilty of it again. But the deeper parts of them wanted to lie down beside me and feel the coldness of my body next to theirs. The women hated me, a little, because of the gentle way the men handled me. Because they knew men were never so careful with living women. But

what could they do to me, I was already dead. The child, frightened me because his thoughts moved too quickly, and I would have liked him to go away. Children are so reckless. They believe too much, and I feared what this boy might do to me, light me on fire, jump up and down on me like I was a mattress. He might do those things, if he thought he could get away with them.

“Now,” Joseph said, spreading his arms like some kind of messiah. “If there is any doubt that this body before me has any life left in it, I encourage you to take your refund and go on your way.”

We hadn’t discussed this, but I knew Joseph was willing to take things as far as he could to legitimate the lie we were telling. The audience shifted a little, turning their heads to see if any were brave enough to take Joseph’s offer, but no one did; Joseph went on: “Now you’re about to see something amazing. I will bring this girl back to life right before your eyes.”

“How?” the boy asked.

“With magic,” Joseph answered. He asked everyone to be quiet and still, then he closed his eyes and moved his lips, holding his hand over my forehead as though he were performing some spell. “Arise!” he shouted. “And live again.”

As we’d planned, I opened my eyes as wide as I could and arched my back to make it seem some unexplainable force had burst through me. I sat up and yawned and asked, “Where am I?”

They began to applaud, and I was surprised to find their admiration directed not at me, but at Joseph, who smiled and bowed, smiled and bowed. Then they were gone, ushered away by Joseph, and I was preparing for the next group. All through that first festival, I’d awake to Joseph’s triumph, each time I thought, surely they’d see. It was me. Me. But I was wrong. It

wasn't me at all. I'd become something else entirely. The thing they came to see. The Living Dead Girl.

The second festival was to be in late May, and Joseph decided we needed a story—to get their attention, play off their emotions, do more than just herd people through the tent. I agreed; I was beginning to understand the value of holding someone rapt a moment longer. If I could have gone back to that first time I fainted in the ocean and kept Joseph at bay with more skill—if I could have removed one layer at a time, instead of all at once, I would have. Even now, I was still be holding back, just a little, just enough. Maybe I’d never let him get to the end of me.

“Our story?” I asked, though I knew what he meant. We were having lunch, ham on rye, no Swiss, no tomatoes—because I hadn’t bought groceries in a week. I kept saying I’d go, but it was so hard, with all those talk shows. Lined up one after another. Hooking me with their weighty previews. Ten things every woman needs to know about breast cancer. The deadliest bacteria you’ve never heard of. I thought, if I don’t watch this, I’ll catch something; I’ll die for real.

“*Your* back story” Joseph said. “For the show. We can’t just have people believe you fell dead out of the sky. If we’re going to be successful with this. If we’re going to make it the act to see.” It was strange the way he’d begun to talk about it. At first he’d seemed as repulsed as I was, but now he was becoming invested. Now he was starting to believe the lie of it.

“I could be a teenage runaway,” I said, raising my fist theatrically. “I fell in with the wrong crowd and now I’ve paid the ultimate price.”

“No,” he said. “That makes it sound like you’re a troubled kid. Like you need to be taken back and placed under parental care.”

“Maybe I am. Maybe I do.”

“Seriously.”

“Alright,” I said. “How about this: There was once a beautiful, young girl who lived with her evil stepmother. The woman grew so jealous of her stepdaughter, that she hired a man to take the girl into the forest and kill her. She was willing to pay good money, and he was poor enough to do things he wouldn’t under better conditions. But when the day came, the man felt sorry for the girl and let her go if she promised to run far away and never return. The girl agreed, and she ran and lived happily for many years in a town by the sea. But then one day, the stepmother was watching the national news, which was airing a story on the island where the girl lived. It just so happened that the girl was passing by a spot of the beach. ‘Well,’ the stepmother said, ‘the moral of this story is you should never hire a man to do a job you can do yourself.’ So she got herself on a plane and flew to the island and found where the girl was staying. Then she dressed herself in rags and posed as a poor old woman selling apples door to door. The girl—who was really a very compassionate and innocent girl—felt so sorry for the old woman that she bought an apple and bit right into it. But the apple had been poisoned, and the girl fell dead to the ground.”

“Hmm,” Joseph said. “There needs to be some connection to bringing you back.”

“Let’s say: Only the girl had always been too quick an eater and never chewed her food properly before swallowing. So the apple had in fact lodged in her throat. Then you can thump my chest, and I’ll have a bit of apple in my mouth and it will come flying out when I wake up.”

“How would I know the apple is in your throat?”

“I don’t know. Let’s say you have X-ray vision.” I laughed, but Joseph did not.

“That’s absurd,” he said. “And also, far too complicated. Stories need to be simple. Like, an evil witch put you under a spell, and you’ve been dead a hundred years, but if someone is pure of heart they can bring you back with a kiss.”

“That’s a bit like stealing, don’t you think?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s already been done.”

“True,” he said. “But that’s why people will like it. They’ll fight over who gets to wake the beautiful dead girl. And they’ll be willing to pay more.”

I wanted to object, but the truth was, watching myself dead and unmoving, even I could not ignore how striking I was, in my stillness. Why shouldn’t people be lining up for the chance to kiss my beautiful dead lips? Being dead was so much easier than being asleep; dead I could control my body—purse my lips, elongate my neck, arch my back. When I was a child we sometimes played “Swinging Statues;” someone swung you around, and you landed in your statue pose. But I always decided ahead of time, how I would land, and this was what I liked about the game, that I could manipulate how I wanted to be, that it wasn’t left up to chance so much as it seemed. Each time I’d died for the show, I felt the same control. And maybe this was why I allowed myself to be displayed before crowds of strangers. Because although it *seemed* Joseph had power over me, only I knew that really, I was the one who decided whether I woke up or stayed dead.

Rice on White

During this time, Joseph and I continued to live inside the domestic story we'd created. In the morning and early afternoon he painted. I kept the house in order, went to the market, prepared meals. Looking at us from the outside you'd think, how lovely, a little old fashioned perhaps, but they seem so happy. And really, I can't say I was unhappy. It's hard, in recalling this time of my life, to focus on the good parts. It's not that they weren't there, every day, it's just that they have less impact in the overall direction of the story I'm telling. I don't have room for everything; there has to be hierarchy in details. Perhaps if I told it another way, they'd be all you could see. But as I'm relating it now, the lighter moments are sometimes hard to spot. I don't want them to be invisible, though. I don't want to paint Joseph as a money-grubbing hypocrite. I can't say precisely what his intentions were in exploiting my abilities as he did, but I would like to believe he had, in part, some sincere desire to help me become something extraordinary.

He took me to a real circus, once. The traveling kind, with big red tents and overzealous clowns. I was twenty-two then, or nineteen, depending on who you asked, but either way, it seemed I should have been too old for such a thing. I thought, at first, he'd only come for notes on how to make our own show more spectacular. And maybe he had. Yet there was something else. I didn't notice, initially, but when the acrobats took the ring and began flipping and flying in the air, he leaned over to me and said, "Watch the way they move so lightly, like flying. It's beautiful, what the body can do." And I understood, then, that when I died for the show he

looked at me in the same way. Which took away, a little, from the unpleasantness of having so many fingers on me.

*

Sunday nights, after a festival, were my favorites. They meant a week, maybe two before I had to die again. I was always very hopeful, for what I might be able to accomplish during those long stretches between performances. I'd wake Monday mornings and make a list of things to do. Every time I'd think, this is the week I find my mother. But then I'd turn on the television, and there'd be the talk show host threatening me with an upcoming segment: hidden calories in everyday foods, the best bathing suit for any body type. And I'd find the day had gone before I knew it began.

Some evenings Joseph took me to dinner at the seafood place by the marina. We'd walk in just like anyone, order drinks and food, talk about everyday things. It was nice to be away from the tourists, who sometimes recognized me, who thought they could continue to prod me and say "How do you do it? How on earth do you do it?" For a while I could forget that I had become a character of myself.

On these nights, too, Joseph would let go of his magician role and tell me stories about different artists he'd known. One man, he said, never showed up anywhere as himself. He was always some kind of performance art. Painted blue like Papa Smurf, only with a giant red dildo as a hat, or with twenty microphones pinned to his clothes, the cords split and frayed. "That guy," Joseph said, "people joked that he was crazy, but I always thought, at least he's out there doing something." When Joseph told me stories like this, he sometimes made promises to get

back to his real work, which he hadn't mentioned in weeks. And I wanted very much to believe him because I, too, felt a strong desire to get back to another part of myself, though I knew this was impossible. That a person could locate an earlier version of themselves wandering around like an Alzheimer patient on the street. That you could say, *Well, it's a good thing I found you when I did. Come on home now.*

Joseph occasionally told me about his own childhood. He'd grown up in Sugarland, a suburb of Houston, which despite its name was about as magical as a bag of flour. The roads were straight and flat, and if you followed them for not so long you'd end up in one of many fields. They were different fields, of course, but were all so similar they might as well have been one. Joseph's parents owned a three-bedroom ranch in a new subdivision with a community pool at the end of the street. When it was warm, his mother walked him and his sister down for the afternoon. He was consistently amazed by her ability to swim without wetting a strand of her expensive salon hair, which was sprayed into place once a week, God help the person who disturbed it. Joseph spent a considerable amount of allowance and grass-cutting money to pay for his mother's re-stylings. But he couldn't help it; he was drawn to her hair, always needing to test what would or would not merit a trip to the salon. Water, of course, that was the easy one. But also stranger things. He'd once dumped a bag of dry cereal over her head to see how many of the little rings would stick, only he hadn't accounted for the dust, how it would cling to the stiff waves of his mother's head. "Like rice on white," she'd apparently said, not noticing how fitting the inversion was.

"I thought she looked lovely," Joseph admitted, "like someone who'd just come in from the snow. Like someone from a movie."

Growing up in Texas, snow was mysterious and unfathomable to him. It had snowed exactly once, when he was ten years old. Early in the morning, he'd spotted the flakes falling and ran out to catch them in his hands. But they were so light; they became water before they hit his skin. This seemed unfair, as though nature were playing a joke on him. As an adult, he'd once visited New York City in late winter, and the sky had dropped two feet of snow. The ground turned gray and slick and he watched a cab slide across the road and crash into a storefront. "It was terrible," Joseph said, "I had to buy these overpriced hats and gloves, and you could hardly get anywhere. People just stayed in their hotels."

"Snow really isn't so terrible," I tried to argue, but he'd already been convinced.

When he was young, Joseph's mother treated him like a little prince. She didn't believe boys should do chores because it would discourage them from getting decent wives. Her version of why buy the cow. So unlike his sister, he was pampered and spoiled and sent to expensive lessons in painting and violin. It didn't seem unfair, at the time, because his sister's only talents, his mother told him, were in the home. And she was given every opportunity to hone those.

Sarah, her name was, and Joseph now believed his mother's only goal with Sarah was to make her as plain and practical as she herself was. Not because his mother thought that was the role of all women, though. She admired the working mothers, the lady doctors and business women who wore power suits with shoulder pads up to their ears. But they are none of us, she said. And perhaps she thought it a noble thing, what she was doing to Sarah, making her into a martyr of domesticity. But she couldn't have imagined that Sarah would take things farther. That she would cut herself and cut herself until one day she bled out all over the carpet.

"You can't imagine it," Joseph said, "the smell of blood dried on ten-year old shag carpet. There is no chemical that gets deep enough for that."

After the funeral, Joseph couldn't look at his mother anymore. Because she was still so sure she'd done everything just right. Joseph was an adult by then, or very nearly so, and he found a job painting houses on the island. He packed a duffel bag and left for good, too stubborn to return for what he'd left behind.

"That's terrible," I said.

"Is it?" he asked. "At least they know where I am."

"Ha," I said. "Good one. And what about your father?"

"Him," Joseph said, laughing, but he wouldn't say any more.

The drive from the island to Sugarland takes a little over an hour. I know because Joseph drove me there one afternoon that summer. He borrowed Billy's car, and we sped up the freeway, which seemed to go on forever with its malls and chain restaurants. Finally, we pulled into the subdivision, slowing as we passed his house. He refused to get out of the car, and I didn't force it because he'd never suggested we were going for a visit, and besides, his mother no longer lived there, but shared a condo with her sister somewhere farther north.

"Those trees," he said, pointing to two mature oaks in front of his house. "They were just saplings when we moved in. When my sister was born, I tied a pink bow around each trunk."

Then he pressed on the gas, and we were gone.

The Forgetting

You'd think dying would be so easy, like napping, that I'd feel rested when I came back to life. But I didn't. Leaving your body behind takes a lot of energy—there is a heft involved in ripping yourself away. Imagine trying to throw a bag of concrete across the Grand Canyon. It's not for the weak. And once you're out of there, floating around, you have to fight against everything pulling on you. Your body trying to grab you back, death trying to snatch you away. So I'd awake and do my part, then when they'd gone, I'd fall back down on the cot and sleep until the next show started.

I began to have half-conscious dreams, during these between-show naps. In them I'd be serving someone, Joseph sometimes, but more often someone else, though it wasn't always clear who. Not Heinrich—though I tried, sometimes, to make it him, but my dream self could no longer summon him. I'd pour red wine, then this someone and I would lift our glasses, but here the dream stops. It doesn't end though, it rewinds and starts over again. This was the frightening part of the dream, the way it repeated itself. And also, that I allowed it to go on. Because I knew, in a way, that it wasn't real, that I could wake up any time I wanted. But I didn't. I just let it keep going and going.

At night I slept no better. Except that now the dream lasted until morning, when I'd wake with aching muscles, as though I'd been fighting. Punching and kicking and pulling hair. I'm surprised I never found any bruises. And I thought, surely I must have been keeping Joseph awake. But, no, he always said he'd slept just fine.

“I don’t dream,” Joseph told me once. We were eating cereal the morning after a show; I’d hardly slept at all.

“Of course you do,” I replied. “Everybody dreams.” This was one of the few things I recalled from the science I’d studied in school. That we could forget our dreams seemed so frightening at the time. When I was very young I believed the dead could speak to me in sleep. I went to bed every night hoping for some message from my mother or father. Sometimes they did come to me, but strangely, in bodies that weren’t their own. And they never recognized me. They’d look right at me and not know.

“Okay,” Joseph said. “But I never remember. So it’s the same, to me, as if I didn’t dream at all. Right?”

I didn’t know. I wanted for him to be wrong about this, but it seemed there was something to his argument. This idea that a dream is only real if it’s remembered. I’d heard on one of my talk shows that our minds are programmed to forget because otherwise life would be unbearable. And that memories are just the stories we tell ourselves because we don’t want to let them go. Which is fine when the recollection is a good one. But when it’s not, we’re just torturing ourselves, with the all that retelling.

I wonder now what kinds of stories Joseph will tell himself about me, how *he’ll* choose to remember us. Or if he’ll let himself forget me altogether. Because that’s always easier, isn’t it? Maybe I think I’m doing him service, by forcing myself to relive him. If that will somehow make it easier for him to let go. I see him coming across the things I left behind, thinking, *she must have been a nice girl, whoever she was*. And even though its self-indulgent, I’m in love with how much this image breaks my heart.

The Princess and the Pea

All through the summer and fall, Joseph and I continued performing at weekly festivals. There was—apparently—no end to what could be celebrated. Not just July Fourth and Labor Day, but also the Autumnal Equinox, Harvest Week, Columbus Day. When there was nothing specific to observe, Joseph was sure to find some church or community organization throwing their annual carnival.

Over time my body grew used to the dying. I no longer ached on the mornings after, I no longer needed to nap in the afternoons, just to have the stamina to walk down the street. And I became accustomed to the touches of strangers. I longed for them even. Also, the kisses, which were always soft and hesitant and unpracticed. I knew I was not Blair to these men, but I was someone—the one who got away, the wife who’d grown cold, the dying grandmother. The kisses said, *Please, please, come back to me*. I thought, this is the least I can do for these men, who want so much for me to simply open my eyes and tell them they’d saved me.

Sometimes I wondered if Joseph was ever jealous of these men, their mouths on mine. Sometimes I wished he was. Just like I wished he’d seen Billy kiss me the night of the Mardi Gras festival. I still wondered, sometimes, if I’d made the right choice. Billy was forgetful and compulsive, but he was also beautiful and kind and never would have asked me to do what I was doing. He knew about the shows; when the festivals were farther away he lent Joseph his car. But he never stayed to watch, even though I hoped he would.

“I can’t see you that way,” he told me once when I asked him.

“Like what?” I asked.

“Like a buffet.”

We were all in the car, me in the front, Joseph in the back, but the windows were down, and the radio was on, and Joseph was marking up a notebook he'd begun using to keep our records, little microscopic tallies, like those tattooed mannequin parts, so he didn't hear.

After that, though, I could no longer fool myself into believing that what I was doing resembled art in any way. Now I saw myself as a Smorgasbord—feeding not the stomach, but the part of people that wants to be dirty—even if only for a moment. They'd touch me, then wipe their fingers on their pant legs, as if I was a germ. As if they might catch me.

In the mornings Joseph still painted—but quickly, the way Vivian used to. Like something else was controlling his arm and he was merely a cipher. He no longer attempted to pretend disdain for what he was doing, that would have required too much effort. His paintings had become a series of reconfigurations; the objects remained the same. The sand and the waves and the women in sun hats and brightly colored dresses. He painted them holding cocktails, sitting at cafes. They were the kind of women who it'd be nice to be for a day. Women without cares. Women who didn't exist in the real world. This was why they sold, though Joseph no longer lectured me about it.

As winter drew near, the festival themes changed to Christmas and the New Year. Santa Claus sat in his throne with his army of elves, and glared over at our tent. *What did we have to do with hope?* He wanted to know. *What did we have to give?* The Winter Wonderland Festival was the worst—fake snow everywhere, people wearing scarves and hats even though it was almost sixty degrees outside. In Montana we'd be lucky to get that on a summer day.

To keep with the spirit of receiving, the touches became angry and demanding. *Why won't you just wake up*, they said. *Why are you trying to manipulate our anticipation. We know you'll wake up. We just know it.* To escape them, I began going deeper into myself, thinking

more about Vivian, the events of her life—or what I knew of them—as if it were a catalog of expensive objects I’d never afford. But I could look, I could run my fingers over the crisp pages—so in a way, this, too, was a kind of fantasizing.

Vivian never spoke much of her childhood, except to say that her parents were wealthy and dull and not worth fussing over. I’ve since wondered if she could have meant that, if she could have written them off so easily. Because at one time we are all young and our parents mean everything to us; there is nothing else in the world. So even if her relationship with them slowly disintegrated over time, there must have been something for her to hold on to, some thread of memory that made her long for them again.

And this was true for me as well, because I found the longer I was away from Vivian, the more I began to pine for her, despite everything that had passed between us.

Vivian’s own exodus was not so different from my own, if you forget, for a moment, the event that immediately preceded my leaving. She was raised on the East Coast, in a suburb of Boston, in what she called “the traditional manner,” which is to say, with expensive private schools, that catered not so much to learning as to developing propriety in addition to a comprehensive—though not enthusiastic—understanding of the arts. She was also, as she explained, tortured in the ways of homemaking, and spent several painful hours a week learning things like cross-stitching, napkin folding, and silence. Things she claimed did her no good at all—but what she could not see, though I could plainly, was that no one else in our little mountain village stood quite as straight nor spoke nearly as eloquently as she. And these things, these supposedly inconsequential tweaks of manner and decorum, added to the mystique of her beauty. Made her almost untouchable. Though I tried very hard to copy her mannerisms myself, I lacked both the discipline and the desire to follow through, and so, over time, I became a kind

of leper, the skin of etiquette I'd tried to paint myself with, constantly rotting away, exposing the real me underneath, the me who picked her teeth and scratched her arms in public—two great sins never once committed by Vivian.

After graduating high school with above average—but not, mind you, pretentious—grades, Vivian went on to study art at a respectable women's college of her parents choosing, where, she says, the instructors were not so interested in fostering talent, as forging an army of master copyists. “We painted two things there,” she explained, “flowers and fruits. The rest was passive. We studied the great masters, Renoir, Rembrandt, Degas. Every safe man they could throw on us. But we weren't meant to aspire. We were just women after all. And what would suburban housewives hang above their sofas—if not for us?”

The first time she spoke this way to me, about her training, I was young and believed her to be sincere. I thought she'd surely taken up the great cause of sending affordable art to the masses. And I was proud of her. It was only later, when I began to learn that adults rarely speak what they mean, that I understood how bitter she truly was.

After finishing college, Vivian took up in modest rebellion. She lived in a scrappy part of Boston with a man and wore only black. When she visited her parents, she barely looked at them, and when they told her she was living in sin and begged her to come home, she only laughed. “They were like children,” she told me. “They couldn't wrap their tiny brains around any idea they hadn't thought up themselves. They wanted me to marry a banker or something. A respectable man. Paugh.”

And so Vivian lived on with this nonrespectable man and tried to paint, as he did, with great disdain for form and function, but she found herself, always, coming back to the flowers and the fruits. Even when she made the apples blue and the oranges square, it seemed there was

no way for her to escape the binds of her education. “Everyone around me was doing things,” she explained. “You can’t imagine how hard that was for me. To be so stuck.” I did understand though, but I knew it wouldn’t ever do to try to explain that. She seemed greatly resistant to the idea of anyone else’s problems matching her own; she liked to think of her trials as uniquely hers and unparalleled in pain. But I can’t grudge her that because I am not so different.

Eventually the unrespectable man left her—as her parents always warned he would—and not without first calling her work “uninspired” and “juvenile,” the consequences of the latter her parents never could have envisaged. Vivian came home, then, sullen and broken, and was in all likelihood, cruel to her parents—on whom she blamed her failure as an artist. And so they did what any concerned parent of her generation would have done—they sent her away, to visit some distant artist cousin in a Colorado village, not unlike our own, who painted hills and trees and all the things Vivian had been trained for. In any other story, I suspect, a young person in such a situation would rebel wholeheartedly, but Vivian saw a great opportunity. “I’d let go of the me who wanted to be free and whimsical,” she told me. “I was never really that girl anyway, much as I tried to force myself.” And so she searched out a mountain village of her own, one that was rising, but had not yet found its own resident artist, and then she wrote to her parents, asking them to send her things along, as she wouldn’t be returning home then or ever. They complied, of course, but I can’t imagine willingly. Or perhaps they assumed, as many parents do, that this, like other things, would pass, that their daughter would come to her senses one day and return to them.

But she didn’t, and eventually, one at a time, her parents, who’d had Vivian late in life and were old by then, succumbed to respectable deaths; her father’s heart attacked him while he was doing yard work, and her mother went in her sleep, a year later. And with their deaths

Vivian inherited their fortune, which she saw no qualms in using to bolster her own business, and which, after all, she must have felt she deserved. I asked Vivian, once, if she regretted not seeing her parents before they died. At the time she'd said only, "How was I to know what would happen?" But now I think, or at least I like to imagine, she buried her sadness so deep, that even she forgot its existence.

*

Vivian never told me the bulk of this. Bits and pieces, of course. The main events, her moving to Montana, her parents' deaths. The rest I conjured over a lifetime. A story I told myself so often it became fact. And it's hard to say, anymore, where the embellishments are hidden.

What's important is that it gets at the bigger truth. That there was a sadness inside her. I imagine it hidden like a hard pebble, no bigger than a pea, perhaps, but irritating and painful; something no amount of padding could ever fully alleviate. I wonder, also, how many of these little stones have been lost inside my own body and what kind of surgery I would have to perform to locate them. I would have to dig, I suppose; it would be messy and I'd all but ruin myself in the process, but it could be worth it.

Or maybe not. Maybe I'd just come out scarred and no better off than I'd been before.

*

Actually, I've lied a little. The truth is I wasn't just thinking of Vivian more and more. I was seeing her, and I don't mean in my mind. Sometimes it made me a little angry, too, to be

glimpsing her—the woman I’d run away from—instead of my own mother, who I’d been trying so hard to run to. But this was just another lie I told myself, because by then, if I’m being honest, I’d given up searching for my mother, who was after all, not real to me in any way that mattered. I suppose I could have found her, if I’d wanted, if I’d put any kind of effort into it. Only now, I recognize, all along what I really wanted was for her to come to me. Which she never could have done—but Vivian did.

She came to me first in my sleep. I’d wake in the night to find her standing over me, only when I tried to speak, she’d float away, breaking into tiny little specks of Vivian. I was dreaming, of course, but I felt sometimes if I could hold onto her a moment longer, she’d materialize before me.

Then she began attending the shows.

The first time it happened, I forgot everything and sat up before anyone even had a chance to touch me. But when I saw her with my living eyes, it was not her after all. She was just a woman, and not even one who favored Vivian. She was round with short blond hair and eyes like baby onions. I looked at her and said, “You’re not her,” and Joseph ushered everyone out, promising refunds.

What the hell was I doing? he’d asked. Had I lost my mind? *Yes*, I wanted to say. *Maybe I have*, but instead I apologized and felt very much like a child and promised it wouldn’t happen again.

The next time Vivian walked in, I stayed calm and watched her. I felt her hands on my wrist and her ear on my lips, and I wanted very much to whisper, *I’m so sorry*, but when I woke she was gone. She’d become another woman again.

After that she came to nearly every show, always standing off the side, just as beautiful as the day I left her. And even though I knew it wasn't really her, I hoped each time, that Joseph would pick her to perform the life-saving kiss—despite the fact that he always picked a man. I considered asking him to pick a woman, but I wouldn't know how to explain this request. So I had to be satisfied with the brief touches of this Vivian who was not Vivian.

Poverty and Humility Lead to Heaven

That New Year's Eve there was a carnival in Port Bolivar. As with the Mardi Gras party, the festivities spread several miles over the beach. Nobody wanted to be inside their tiny houses, with their Y2K-prone computers. This was not just any new year; this was the end of a century—a millennium, depending on how you counted. 2000. A shiny new number, waiting to be filled. Even I was in awe of its emptiness, its capacity for transformation.

We celebrated with a special midnight performance. Joseph sold raffle tickets for the opportunity to be the one to wake me. I don't remember who won. By then I'd stopped caring about the men who kissed me.

Instead of using our tent, we performed on a music stage in front of several thousand. The organizers of the party paid us five hundred dollars—nothing compared to what they must have made that night. One of the local bands played “Auld Lang Syne,” and I lay dead as the audience counted down. “...three...two...one...Happy New Year!” Then his lips were on me, but I waited to open my eyes. Everyone held their breath, and in that moment, I looked deep into Joseph and he was thinking not of me, but of the money we'd lose. Of our reputation.

And so I woke up, I put my hand on the back of the man's head, and pulled his face to mine and kissed him hard. The crowd applauded. They whistled, and whooped, and shouted “Happy New Year.”

Joseph stood to the side and watched.

*

In January we didn't have a single show; the New Year's Eve gig and raffle had paid well—and, Joseph said I needed a break. But I also knew there weren't any festivals more until Mardi Gras, so his concern didn't seem genuine.

Although we weren't performing, Joseph spent his afternoons away from the house. "Where are you going?" I'd ask. "It's a secret," he'd say. And I assumed it had something to do with the show, networking, trying to drum up interest. That was all he seemed to think of anymore.

Joseph and I didn't have a computer, but there was a library near our house, and I began walking there in the afternoons. I'd sit for hours looking at pictures of the ski resort's website, searching for any glimpse of Vivian, Michael, Ed. But I never found them; most of the shots were of slopes, anonymous skiers with poles held aloft to let you know they were smiling beneath their layers. This wasn't really the place I'd lived, this was someone else's vision of it.

"It's snowing now," I'd say to Joseph. "At home."

"In Montana?" he'd ask. "Don't worry, that kind of thing never happens here."

And although I knew he was right, I began to hope for it. I'd watch the weather reports each morning, anxious for that dip below freezing, that one chance cold front. But the forecasts refused me, they humphed and turned their backs and said, *Mid-fifties for me*.

At the end of the month, we celebrated my twenty-third birthday. Joseph picked up a chocolate cake at the bakery, and we ate it together after dinner. The frosting was thick and sugary and stuck to my throat like paste. Then Joseph said, "Twenty-three, still a baby." Really, though, it was my twentieth birthday. The same age my mother was when she had me and when

she died. I should have been thinking I'd finally become an adult—only I'd already been one for so long it hardly seemed notable. And I was saddened, for the first time, that I'd lost those three years. That I might never get them back.

I thought then, of writing home, of trying to salvage whatever was left of that part of me I'd so casually thrown away. After dinner I even sat down with a pen and paper, but there was no way to begin, and what could I say anyway? That I'd turned myself into a side-show act? I sat staring at the empty sheet until Joseph asked what I was doing.

“Writing a grocery list,” I lied.

“Good,” he said. “We’re almost out of milk and turkey.”

So instead of writing a letter, I wrote those things. Then I asked Joseph to finish the list, because he seemed to know better, what we needed. I said this in a mean way, and I went into my room and shut the door. I thought, at the very least, Joseph might follow me in, to ask if I was okay. But he didn't; he never did. Instead he finished the list, and when I came out later, I found it stuck to the refrigerator with a magnet.

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The day after my birthday, Joseph wanted to take me to make confession. As a child his mother had always made him go the day after his birthday—to start the new year cleansed of the last. I told him I wasn't Catholic, but he said it didn't matter.

“But you don't believe in that,” I said. “Do you?”

“I don't know,” he said. “But the act of unburdening, can be freeing.”

“And what do I need to unburden?”

“Okay,” he said. “Maybe nothing.”

“I don’t believe that about your mother. You hate your mother.”

“I just thought it would be a nice thing to do together,” he said. “You’ve been unhappy—”

“How would you know?” I interrupted.

“—and I know it’s strange, but confession always made me feel better. Like I could start over. Don’t you ever just want to feel that way.”

“Okay,” I said, though I wasn’t convinced. But I went along anyway. I always went. And I was starting to hate myself for it.

The cathedral was enormous, limestone walls, a Spanish-tile roof. There was even a tower, with a bell that actually chimed as we entered. Inside it smelled like water; it was cool and dark, and I liked how my eyes had to adjust from the outside world, the way this new mysterious place remade itself in front of me. Wooden pews stretched toward a marble altar, and from the ceiling, a bloody Jesus hung suspended on his cross. Not so unusual for a cathedral, I guess, but I’d never been inside one before. At home there was a small chapel at the resort, in a plain room sometimes used for conference overflow in the summer. Few of us went to the church because compared to the views from our front porches such a thing seemed inconsequential, and so I could not speak with authority about the practices that went on there.

“I want to kneel here for a moment,” I said as I slid into the pew. I knew that’s what you were supposed to do, but when I folded my hands and closed my eyes, my first impulse was to drop to the floor. “No dying,” I whispered. I tried to imagine my mother in this same church, bowing, and sprinkling herself with holy water, and accepting little wafers on her tongue. Did

she ever feel they filled her with something, these little rituals? Or was she only performing them because they were all she'd ever known.

Vivian had also been raised Catholic, and, though she never said, seemed bitter—like a dumped girl still in love, wanting desperately to hate the boy, yet when she closed her eyes at night, he was all she could think of. So Vivian made snide comments about the church, but kept several volumes on their art and architecture.

“Look here,” Vivian liked to lecture me, pointing at the photographs in the book. “Do you know what they’re doing with all this height and grandeur.” I’d shake my head and she’d go on. “They’re tricking you—your mind, your body. They want you to feel small and lightheaded and ecstatic. That’s why you’re made to kneel with your head tilted back. Then you stand up and feel a rush. You’re not being filled with God’s love. You’re being asphyxiated. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

I didn’t, really, but with Vivian it was always better to say I did.

Joseph led me to a wooden booth and said, “This is the confessional. When you go in, say, ‘Bless Me Father, for I have sinned,’ then go like this.” He made the sign of the cross.

I wanted to do it for him, to prove something to him, about my willingness to be adventurous, only I couldn’t. Or wouldn’t. I was afraid of sitting inside a little wooden box and of the priest, what he would think, that he would somehow know I didn’t belong. So I refused, and Joseph for the first time seemed irritated with me in a way that was not patronizing. He walked out of the cathedral and got on a bus and went home. I didn’t follow, but sat for a long time in the pew, looking up at the bloody Jesus and wondering why this was so important to Joseph and what he could have expected from me.

After a while an elderly man in a black suit knelt several pews ahead of me. He folded his hands and leaned into them, praying; I wanted to be him. Not for the faith, which is easy enough to come by, but for the safety of it. The unburdening—as Joseph had said—the handing off, the protection. Things I’d always longed for.

Longed for, a woman said. Her voice was grainy and low. The sound a boot made when it stepped into unpacked snow.

I looked around, but we were alone. This man and I.

Longed for, I whispered back, wondering what it was, exactly, I really wanted.

*

When I left the church it was night, and I found Joseph sitting on our front stoop in the dark. With the light on there were too many moths, hurling themselves at the glowing bulb. I’d once told Joseph this made me sad, their mindlessness, their inability to fight their compulsion. At the time he called me silly, but he’d kept the light off ever since. And I appreciated it, though I’d never said so. I lowered myself beside him, and didn’t say anything.

“I’m sorry,” Joseph finally said, touching my hand. “About today.”

My body fought for a moment, between pulling back and falling into him—either would have been easy.

“I shouldn’t have left you,” Joseph went on. “I shouldn’t have forced you to do something that made you uncomfortable.”

I nodded, but didn’t speak.

“What are you thinking?” he asked.

“Home,” I said. “That maybe I should call home.” I waited a moment. “Or maybe I should *go* home.”

“To visit?”

I didn’t answer.

“You mean to visit,” he said.

But I wasn’t sure what I meant anymore. If I thought he really cared anything about me, it might be different. If I thought he loved me. But that wasn’t something we’d ever discussed. That wasn’t part of our language.

“What about us?” he asked, and for a moment I almost said, yes, please let’s just talk about us for a minute, but then he added. “The show.”

“Is that all the us there is?”

“No,” he said. “I mean there’s us, and there’s the show. We’re already booked for Mardi Gras.”

“What do you want?” I asked. “Me or the show.”

“You, you,” he said. “Of course you... But the show...”

“Won’t you forget about that stupid show for just one minute.”

“Why?” he said. “They’re the same thing.”

I looked at Joseph. One of the streetlights shone down, slicing him like a half moon, a half man. *Mine*, I imagined him clawing at me. *Mine*. Only this time I didn’t owe him anything.

“I’m going to bed,” I said, getting up.

“But I think we should talk about— ”

“Nothing,” I said, letting the door slam behind me.

*

Later I dreamed I was following the man again, only this time when he turned it was Vivian. “Come on, Blair,” she said, “You have to see,” but I let go of her hand and she was gone. I woke, suddenly, gasping, then lay quiet, listening to Joseph breathe. For a moment I considered, rolling over and pressing my face into his neck, but then I remembered our conversation. I could go home, if I wanted. I could make him suffer. It would take only a call.

After a while, I snuck to the kitchen and sat at the table holding the cordless phone in my lap like a kitten. In the day the walls were a faded yellow; Joseph and I were planning to repaint soon. We’d been to store for samples, and they sat on the counter, little squares of possibility. In March, we’d decided, that seemed a good time for change. But in the dark, there was no color. In the dark there was no April.

I dialed the number—not even knowing if it was the right one anymore—and waited.

“Hello,” he said, his voice deeper than I remembered. Full of sleep and hatred. But of course it was. He was an adult, or nearly so.

“Hello?” he said again. Between us there was a black, endless space no amount of talking could erase, and realizing this, I turned the phone off and pushed it across the table, quickly, as if it were something dead, as if it might bleed on me. Why had I phoned? What had I been expecting to say? Calling home wouldn’t change the fact that Joseph was in the bedroom, dreaming about the show, about money. And even if he forgot in the morning, they’d still be with him. Because they’d become a part of him. Instead of returning to bed, I sat awake for a long time, staring at the colorless wall. I thought of Michael, if he’d fallen back asleep already

or if he, too, was sitting awake, wondering. Eventually I put my head down and closed my eyes, my cheek pressed flat against the table. *Tomorrow*, I told myself. *Tomorrow* I'll figure this out. As if tomorrow were some magical place without pain or consequence.

The Hurricane

The next morning I woke early, my face red and sore, and I wondered if I'd really called Michael, if I'd heard his voice. Or if it had been a dream, if I'd imagined it. I stood from the table, my muscles stiff, thinking I might slip back into bed for a few hours, but then I remembered I wanted to make Joseph suffer.

I went into the bedroom, intending to make a show of pulling my clothes from the closet, as if I were angrily packing, but Joseph wasn't there. The bed had been made, the comforter pulled and smoothed flat as in a hotel. I sat on his side of the bed, stunned by his disappearance. Where had he gone? How had he snuck out the door—right past where I'd slept—without waking me? Even though I'd been contemplating my own departure just moments before I felt betrayed by his leaving. I was supposed to be the one doing the escaping; he was supposed to be sitting here, trying to convince me to stay.

After a few minutes passed, I went into the kitchen and stood before the open refrigerator. Eating had no appeal, but there seemed nothing else to do. I brought my cereal to the couch and turned on the morning show, and listened to the hosts banter about the weather. "Gonna be a wet one," they said. "Better bring your umbrella." And I thought, *Better bring my umbrella. Better bring my umbrella. Better bring my umbrella.* Finally, I heard the front door open and ran to it, just in time to block Joseph from coming in.

"Where have you been?" I shouted, my arms spread across the doorway.

"I was hoping to be back before you woke," he said, frowning.

“That doesn’t answer my question,” I said. It was then I saw he was carrying a mid-sized canvas wrapped in a white sheet. I backed up and let him enter.

“This is for you,” he said. “I was going to save it for something, I don’t know what. I’m always waiting for moments.”

“My birthday wasn’t a moment.”

“You know, a real moment.”

“It *was* a real moment,” I said. “You know, not everyone made it out alive.”

“Okay,” he said. “I’m sorry. But it’s here now. For you.”

I took the canvas, letting the sheet drop, and held it before me. The girl in the painting turned her face up the sky, her hair fell loose and natural on her shoulders, her eyes were open, and she’d brought her hand up to shield them from the sun.

“It’s me,” I said, looking up at him.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’ve been working on it the last few weeks.”

“Thank you,” I said, trying to understand what it meant, what I felt. It wasn’t like his real work, but it also wasn’t what he produced for the tourists. “Why did you—”

“After what you said last night—I had to make sure you knew. There’s the girl in the show, and then there’s you. And this is you. I mean, this is me seeing you.”

I touched the face of the girl, the place where her lips parted in a laugh. And she was beautiful, in her happiness. “You seeing me?” I said. I met Joseph’s eye, and saw it was true. Or as true as it could be. That he was seeing as much of me as I was letting him.

“Let’s go for a walk,” I said. “I have something to tell you.”

*

We left the house that morning and walked to the seawall. Along the way, I told Joseph what I'd done, how I'd left Montana. About Heinrich and Vivian and how I'd lied about belonging to Billy. My real age. My real self. "I can't be her anymore," I said, and Joseph understood. He didn't say there was no such thing as being one person, that we are always many, and always pretending. He didn't say it, even though we both knew it.

"You can't be her anymore," he agreed, and then he took my hand. "Would it be stupid if I said, 'Hi, my name is Joseph.'"

"Yes," I said. "Very." But he knew I meant, no. That I meant, let's try to figure this out.

Though the morning sky had been blue, by the afternoon it was gray and low. In German the word for ceiling and blanket are the same. *Decke*. A covering over. A protection. And this is what I thought when I looked at the sky—only I knew it was an illusion, that it would soon open over us, merciless, the way we all are, sometimes.

"Don't forget your umbrella," I said.

"I know," he said. "But we'll survive, I think."

"Let's go to the pier," I said, and I began to run. "Let's try to catch it."

"With what?" he asked, letting me pull him along.

"Our throats," I said, thinking of my mother, that finding and creating can be the same.

*

Later, we returned, wet and cold and fantasizing about a warm bath, an evening spent undercover. But there was a message on the answering machine, and though my teeth were

chattering, I stopped first to press play. “Blair,” he said. No other man would phone me and say “Blair” and then nothing for several seconds. “I have caller ID.”

“Who’s that?” Joseph asked—and there was fear in his voice. The beginnings of jealousy. What I’d always wanted, wasn’t it?

“We don’t have to listen,” I said, reaching for the skip button.

“No,” he said, touching my wrist.

The voice went on: “I don’t know why I’m calling. I don’t know if you deserve this. But I thought you should know Vivian is sick. I thought you should know...” his voice trailed off before adding, “She could die,” and then the phone clicked and the message was over. I wanted to laugh at the absurdity of this statement. There was no *could* in dying, just a matter of sooner or later. But I knew what he meant. Sooner. Or else he wouldn’t have gone to the trouble of calling me back.

I sank down onto the couch in my soaked clothes. The couch I’d slept on all those nights, that first night. And there was Joseph in the dark, and then the light. Unreal as a dream, and for so long I’d tried to keep him that way.

“Your brother.”

I nodded. “I called him last night.”

“That’s why...” Joseph sat beside me, his body heavy and wet. The sofa was old, the springs had long ago lost their bounce, and we sank into the cushions. If we could have just melted to them—if we could have just become the couch—it would have made things simpler.

“I didn’t say anything,” I said. “I just sat there breathing like a stalker.” What I meant was, I didn’t plan for this. If I’d understood him sooner. But then I might never have known

about Vivian. I could have gone my whole life coming up with excuses to keep myself hidden away. “It would have been worse,” I said, and he nodded.

“Will you go,” he said, slowly. Not asked. It wasn’t really a question.

“I’ll come back,” I said. I dropped my forehead to his shoulder, and felt his arms around my back. “I will.”

Part V

The Terrible and Wonderful Waiting

I take the Greyhound back to Montana, because even though I'd been living easily enough with fake documents for the last few years, I'm not so stupid as to attempt to fly. The bus is heavy and smells like fried cheese; it stops in several cities along the way, and I wonder if they are the same I'd stopped at the first time, though I can no longer remember for the most part. Denver, I recall, only because I'd gone there first, in hopes of keeping Heinrich off my trail, as though he'd nothing better to do than follow me around. Also, I decided it would keep Vivian and Michael from finding me, which was what I thought I wanted. But now, I understand, it was only what I feared *they* wanted.

Heinrich has been gone as long as I; after he left me that day, he went to Vivian and told her everything—or enough. Then he went away, and I'm glad for it. Or I tell myself I am. But there's a little part of him that will always hang on me, just as Joseph will. When I left, I only packed one suitcase. I wanted to convince us both I'd be back. No more shows, Joseph promised. No more dead girl. And he meant it. But maybe I can't be with Joseph without her. Or maybe I'm just afraid. I haven't decided yet.

It didn't surprise me, as I once thought it would, to learn they'd always known I was alive. For Heinrich to say he'd taken me to the morgue and had me cremated without Vivian's consent, all in the few hours that had passed since the night before, would have been absurd. I know that now—I knew that then, but it was a beautiful lie, in its simplicity, in the way I could

be born anew out of it, without attachments. And I could tell myself I'd go on and forget all of them.

The Greyhound drops me at the Bozeman airport, where I catch an old school bus to the mountain. How people who can't afford a car rental travel to the resort. Bumping along the pass in stiff, army green seats with phone numbers, and hearts, and pornographic rhymes scrawled on the backs. *James Helwig is a little girl*, one reads. *Get out while you can!* another warns. I run my fingers over these messages from the past and wonder what I would have written, had I been a student on this bus. It's late and dark, most of the others are sitting with their eyes closed, heavy bags on their laps and in seats around them. I want to watch the road, but the moon is small, and I see nothing except approaching headlights. Still, I try.

When we arrive an hour later, I'm dropped off first—much to the dismay of the tourists, who seem to think they should be escorted to their overpriced lodge before the locals. It's early February; the roads are ice and tourists this time of year are always anxious to get places. I want to say, "Excuse me, I'm not even wearing gloves, do I look local to you?" But instead I just say "See you on the slopes," which is about as likely as them seeing me on the moon.

Then I'm at the house again, standing on the porch, wondering whether or not I should ring the bell. It's hard to believe I was ever the girl who lived here. All that skin is gone, replaced, and I am new—what I tell myself, though it's not so easy to believe any more, or at least not so simply. Being here again, it's impossible to keep up the pretense that I could be broken in half like a shared stick of gum. I am one Blair or a thousand of her or none.

On the phone Michael said it was Toxic Encephalopathy, which sounds like a made-up disease, a cellophane overdose or something similarly strange. In a chemical she was using. The white spirit. After I left, she'd become careless again, leaving the bottles open, locking herself in

the studio for days. And she wasn't eating. "I did that to her," I'd said to Joseph, before I left. But he shook his head. "You can't ever know," he said.

After a moment I decide to try the handle, but it's locked, so I ring the bell and wait. I see him through the window, coming to the door. Michael is tall and thin, as I imagined he would be, but his hair has darkened. He is a young man now—no longer a little angel—and I'm relieved; it's much easier to distrust people who don't appear to have dropped straight from heaven. When he opens the door, we don't know whether or not to hug, so we don't. I wonder what he's thinking about me, if he sees me changed, or if I'm still the girl who left them.

"You made it," he says.

"I did," I agree.

He takes my bag, and I follow him in. I've only been gone two and a half years, yet it surprises me that the house is the same. I've changed, Michael has changed, but here we are in this house that's just as it's always been. Even Ed's still here, standing at the kitchen sink.

"Ed," I say and go to her, but when I'm closer I see she is not Ed. She is a woman in her early twenties; she has a pretty, tired face.

"Oh," I say.

"Mary," Michael says, but he doesn't explain.

I lean forward and shake her hand. She pretends not to have heard my blunder. And in this moment I despise Mary—which is easier. Liking her would require some effort, and right now I'm so tired from traveling. Tomorrow I'll think about reconsidering.

Later, when we have a moment alone, I ask Michael about Ed, and he tells me her parents moved away not long after I left. He hasn't heard from them since.

"What about you?" I ask.

“What *about* me?”

What I want to say is, *she’s supposed to be here now because how can we be whole without her*. But I’ve lost the right to make such demands. I have to take what I’m given now.

“Well, who’s this woman?”

“She’s Mary,” he says, shrugging.

“I mean, where does she sleep.”

“Who do you think you are?” he asks. He shakes his head. “She’s been coming to help with Vivian.”

“But Vivian isn’t here.”

He shrugs. “Don’t worry about it,” he says. And I know I have no right, but it still bothers me. That he’s gone ahead living without me to tell him how.

*

Michael should have been a high school senior this year, but he’d graduated a year early. When I think back to our childhood, I don’t ever remember wondering what kind of job Michael might have as an adult because I never imagined he could be anything but a boy. Now he works at the florist, mostly creating large arrangements for the resort, which, it seems, has made a solid effort to soften the décor. There are fewer buckheads and antlers clawing from the walls, though they aren’t completely gone. Each bouquet cancels out a carcass, kind of like good deeds and bad deeds—as long as they’re equal, your soul will make it to heaven. If you believe in heaven.

Since Michael has to work until five, Mary drops me at the hospital. I find Vivian sitting up in the bed. The television is playing a soap opera, but she’s not watching it. She’s gazing at

the backs of her hands, examining them, as if searching for proof . They're the traitors of her body and always have been. She doesn't look up at me, but says: "So you're still alive. Well, so am I."

She's older now. Her hair has begun to gray. And there are wrinkles, as though someone has cracked the marble of her face. But maybe this is a trick; maybe the preserved Vivian is still lurking beneath this wig and mask.

"Yes, well," I start to say something but stop because what could I possibly say? So I continue standing in the doorway.

"I wish I knew why you left," Vivian says, but it's clear she doesn't want an explanation or an apology. She wants me to do something I can't, to go back in time and never leave at all so we wouldn't need to have this conversation now.

"I came to see you," I say.

"You came to see me," she says, "like this."

"No."

"Well, it doesn't really matter, does it? Go on and sit down if that's what you want to do, but for God's sake stop standing in the doorway like you'd rather run away."

She doesn't say "Again," and I'm grateful. I sit in a chair beside her bed, and we both turn our eyes up to the television, watching as the soap opera plays out before us. It doesn't matter that we don't know the characters or the intricacies of the plot, so long as we keep ourselves occupied. When this show ends, another comes on, and we continue watching.

Finally Mary returns. "Oh gosh," she says. "I hope I'm not interrupting. I just wanted to bring by some cookies and see how everyone's doing."

She places a foil-wrapped dish on the table and says, “I’m going to run down to the cafeteria for a cup of tea. Would you like some?”

We shake our heads, and I’m silently begging Mary not to leave because at least she’d be able to mindlessly jabber on, but she goes anyway.

“The tea here is terrible,” Vivian says loudly, looking toward the door. Then, after a moment, she whispers. “That woman drives me crazy sometimes.” She laughs, but sadly. “She’s always thinking of ways to be nice.”

“Nice people,” I say with mock disgust.

“Yes,” she agrees. “You were always more like me.”

I wonder if I should be insulted by this insinuation, but I’m not. “Thank you.”

“We understand each other, I think. Even when we want to pretend we don’t. Not like Michael who was always something else entirely.”

“But you had to love him.”

“Of course you do,” Vivian says sharply, then her tone softens. “It was never a question of love—not with either of you. But with him, I’d look at him and wonder how he could really have come from me. You, though, it was funny, you were all me. Sometimes I almost forgot. Well, sometimes I wanted to forget.”

I don’t know what to say to this because even though her words are unexpected, what surprises me is that she’s saying them aloud. Something I’m not sure I could have done if I’d been her.

“Well Blair,” she says, patting my hand now. “You made it just in time.”

“I did,” I agree, and I think we’ll stop talking for a while, that there should be a long, romantic pause—pregnant with all that has been said and unsaid. This is how we talk about

pauses. Pregnant. As if we could press our hands into the stomachs of them, just to feel the something kicking beneath. But instead of letting the pause grow, Vivian grips my hand, and I turn to look at her. She is still Vivian; even now she is stunning. Or perhaps more so, because of the way time has finally decided to show itself on her.

“Blair,” she says, sitting forward. “How is it there, where you were? Is it beautiful?”

“Beautiful,” I agree, painting over the truth. “White sand beaches, palm trees, turquoise water. Like a dream.”

“I knew it,” she says, smiling. “And you were in love.”

“Yes,” I say. “Sometimes I think I still am.”

“Ahh,” she says, as she sits back and closes her eyes. “There’s never an end to that.”

*

I would like to have ended there, but that would be disingenuous and cowardly, though preferable because then I wouldn’t have to tell the part about Vivian’s death. It should come as no surprise; that’s where things were headed anyway. But there’s always the hope. Even when you don’t believe in such things as miracles, you can still long for them. And grieve for their lack.

Not a week after I returned, the doctors called us in the night. We woke—Michael, Mary, and I—and convened in the kitchen, our interrupted sleep hanging over us like a fog. We wondered, but didn’t ask, if the call had been real or if we’d dreamt it up together. She’d slipped into a coma, they said, as though she were something wet and slick they could no longer hold on to. A fish or a water balloon.

They said we had options. What they meant was, we could prolong this, or we could put an end to it. Neither choice pleasant. It reminded me of a game we used to play: Would you rather eat a worm or a beetle? Would you rather fall from or jump off bridge? Be the person in the bed or the one standing beside it?

So we had to come to a decision, though we didn't make it right away. Death is delicate and must be mulled over, even when it's obvious. The living, we need it for ourselves, that time to believe there's a choice—and that we're making the right one. But really there is only the waiting, and in the end, the end, which is not a choice either, but merely the thing that comes after—the letting go of the terrible and wonderful waiting.

I like to imagine Vivian now, in a casket, which is not made of glass but lead—chosen not for the view, but to protect the body inside. Her hands are folded over her chest and her eyes are closed as though she's been waiting a hundred years to be woken with a kiss. And perhaps, one day, she will be. I feel, sometimes, as though she's already been woken, in my telling. That if I wanted, I could tell her back to life.

I suppose I have.

Because she's not in the ground, not really. She's flying over our heads with her arms outstretched and her eyes wide open. The wind doesn't scare her, nor the distance to the trees below, which are so tiny. Thumbprints of green against the snow. The world is just a thing she used to hang on, but not anymore. Now she's let go. What she wanted—or at least, what I want for myself. And this is, I hope, the same thing.

The Pen Has Been in Their Hands:
“Retelling” Narrative Authority in Austen and Beyond
(Critical Portion)

“Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands.”

—Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (221)

I

Adrienne Rich has argued that “Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival.” Though the “us” she refers to is women, retelling is a necessary component to the survival of all narrative—without retelling narrative cannot evolve. Genre, style, and content would all remain fixed and unchanging. Equating retelling to narrative evolution may seem counterintuitive; however, a retelling is more than a look back. The German term for retelling is *Nacherzählung*—a compound of *Erzählung* (telling) and *nach*, which can imply both “after”—as in “re”—or “toward,” a purposeful movement away from one thing and to another. Focused as we are on the “re,” the “toward”—that is, a retelling’s ability to move

the “official” narrative forward—is sometimes overlooked. This ability to simultaneously interrogate the past while pushing ahead is what makes the retelling such a powerful narrative device.

The roots of the retelling trace back to the oral tradition of storytelling. In literature, classical texts, fairy tales, myths, and legends often serve as fodder for the retelling; these include modernist works such as Joyce’s *Ulysses* and postmodernist works such as Donald Barthelme’s *Snow White* and Angela Carter’s collection *The Bloody Chamber*. In film and theater, the practice of removing a text from its original boundaries—such as resetting *Romeo and Juliet* in contemporary California—has long been popular. Even in traditional film adaptations that do not announce revisionist motives, the subjective nature of the process pushes them into the realm of the retelling. Today a new brand of commercially successful pastiche-like refurbishings are emerging, such as Seth Grahame-Smith’s *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*. But are these really retellings? As old as the form is, as popular as it continues to be, relatively little scholarship has been devoted to the question of what exactly a retelling is. Is a parody a retelling? A beloved children’s story told from the perspective of its antagonist? Scenes of zombie fighting inserted (ad nauseam) into a classic novel? In my research, I’ve come across nothing to identify the characteristics or functions of a retelling—a curious gap, given the pervasiveness of the form.

To begin, I will define the “retelling” as an original object or subject¹ that has been selected, studied, and re-created as a new object/subject. To some extent, all narratives are retellings. At the most basic, syntactic level, all written texts generate new meaning through the rearrangement of previously used words, phrases, tropes, motifs, and so on. However, what I

¹ I want to use the terms object and subject here to differentiate between specific object (such as a novel or film) and general subjects (such as romance), which can include generic modes or Jungian archetypes.

want to focus on here is the intentional appropriation of an “official” version of a narrative in order to tell it a new way. Retellings, as I identify them here, modify an original in subtle or obvious ways, thus contributing to the evolution of the text. But to what extent is this the explicit aim? In order to answer this question, I would like to develop a terminology to differentiate between two specific methods of retelling.

Though terminology is by nature artificial and inherently flawed in its inconsistencies, I find it both practical and valuable to approach a subject armed with some kind of system—even if one’s goal is to deconstruct that system’s rules. And this is precisely the goal of the retelling. All retellings—to greater or lesser extents—are created through a combination of following and breaking the rules defined by the “official” text they wish to retell. If there were no rules, a reader would have no reference to the original, and if those rules weren’t somehow broken, there’d be no retelling. Perhaps one of the most notoriously straightforward examples of “rule-breaking” is the opening of Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, where the narrator both gives and denies the rules through a technique alternatively termed “Negation” by Terry Castle or “Disnarration” by Robyn Warhol. In the first pages of the novel, the narrator uses negative constructions as means of exposition, explaining, for instance, that Catherine’s “father was not in the least addicted to locking up his daughters” (1). This alerts the reader to both the gothic romance convention (the locking up of daughters) and the fact that this novel will not be adhering to this norm. By simultaneously giving and breaking the rules, the narrator can also call attention to their illusive nature.

But not all retellings break their rules as explicitly as *Northanger Abbey*. Thus, I would like to differentiate between two broad means of retelling that I will call adaptive and fractive. In the former, the producer/writer must consciously make changes to the chosen text in order to

accommodate the old version under the new constraints of a different form. In Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, for instance, this includes significant expansion of the very short original text. Though these modifications are made deliberately, the reasons for privileging some choices over others are either subconscious or concealed, and the effect does not necessarily reflect a desire to deconstruct the authority of an "official" text. In addition to text-to-film renderings, adaptive retellings can also include translations, cross-genre movement (such as prose to drama), expansion or compression within a genre (such as a condensed edition of Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*), and those narratives that must be tailored to meet the expectations of the ethos of a new age (such as the removal of racial stereotypes—as Disney's 2006 release of *The Adventures of Brer Rabbit* attempts).

By contrast, in fractive retellings the producer/writer attempts to both critique and push boundaries by explicitly breaking from the original text. The goal is not to reproduce the same story in a new form, but to bring the story to an already existing audience in a way that both induces the evolution of the narrative and deconstructs the authority of the previous "official" text in order to replace or complicate our understanding of the original, as well as interrogate the notion of narrative authority.

Unlike adaptive retellings, which adhere to the point of view, setting, and style of the original, fractive retellings depend on some kind of reversal or upheaval to subvert the parent text. In many instances, marginalized and/or "evil" characters are given voice in order to upset the point of view that controlled the original. This surprising perspective creates sympathy where there was initially none or very little. Previously nameless characters, such as the Witch/Elphaba in *Wicked* or Alexander T. Wolf in "The True Story of the Three Little Pigs," are given names, and the silenced—Jane Fairfax in Joan Aiken's retelling of Austen's *Emma* or

Bertha in Jean Rhys's *The Wide Sargasso Sea*—are given voice. In order to further distance a narrative from the rules of the original, fractive retellings are often set in a different time or place. As Mary Gaitskill's *Veronica* and countless retellings of Shakespeare and Greek mythology can attest, setting a narrative formerly conceived as grounded in an “other” place not only reveals its relevance to our experience, but also exposes the fallacy of otherness.

Finally, a text can be fractively retold through the use of parody, satire, pastiche, allegory, and so on. Some texts that use these techniques would also fall under a subcategory of didactic retellings, which rather than deconstructing an abstract notion of textual authority seek to teach a specific lesson or moral. However, many remain incredulous toward both authority of the original as well as the mode the author chooses for her retelling. For instance, in *Northanger Abbey* the narrator parodies gothic romance, but she also relies on the conventions of the genre. The narrator presents the possibility of a gothic plot (General Tilney's mistreatment of his wife), then denies it, only to later reveal there was some truth to it, thus undercutting not only her original parody, but also the form of parody itself.

In creating these categories, I do not wish to suggest a rigid and impenetrable border; many adaptive retellings employ fractive techniques and vice-versa. Likewise, though many texts employ adaptive and fractive methods, they are not necessarily retellings. For instance, Seth Grahame-Smith's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* promises to “transform a masterpiece of world literature into something you'd actually want to read.” However, the text does little to transform. Though Grahame-Smith adaptively condenses the original text and uses the freed-up space for fractive scenes, the zombie sequences have little effect on the original plot—to say nothing of offering any discernible comment on the conformity and repression of women in nineteenth-century England. Although this project announces itself as a fractive retelling, the

text reveals itself to be not concerned with retelling so much as mining the original for profit.

Thus, the use of retelling methods alone does not constitute a retelling. In order for a text to be a retelling as I've defined here, it must generate some kind of forward movement.

While fractive retellings—by definition—actively push evolution, many adaptive retellings, though they don't explicitly seek to change perception, do so—at times with tremendous effect. Recently, retellings of the *Wizard of Oz*, such as Gregory Maguire's *Wicked* and the Broadway musical of the same title, have become extremely popular. What is often overlooked, however, is that these two works are retellings of a retelling; that is, they primarily derive from the MGM 1939 film, rather than L. Frank Baum's book *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Take the green skin of Elphaba (the Wicked Witch of the West). In Baum's version, the only thing we know about the Witch's appearance is that she has just one eye, which is powerful as a telescope, a trait replaced by the crystal ball in the film. As with the well-documented decision to make Dorothy's silver shoes ruby, the choice to give the witch green skin was likely motivated by the use of Technicolor for the Oz portions of the film—thus reflecting that in adaptive retellings choice is often subordinate to the new form. This modification has been all but lost to the larger cultural memory; even books that explicitly claim to be condensed, illustrated versions of L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*—such as the “Commemorative Pop-Up” book put out by Simon & Schuster in 2000—sometimes include images of a green-skinned witch. This example illustrates the potential power of a retelling to not only reimagine but also *replace* an original, thereby becoming the new “official” text.

In “The Narrative Construction of Reality,” Jerome Bruner argues, “The normativeness of narrative ... is not historically or culturally ‘once and for all.’ Its form changes with the preoccupations of the age and the circumstances surrounding its production” (55). Likewise, the

way a narrative is retold often reflects contemporary cultural mores and concerns. Donald Barthelme's fractive retelling of *Snow White* both reflects the way gender roles have evolved since the Brothers Grimm tale was written, while blatantly deconstructing the notion gender of roles. Meanwhile, the modifications in Walt Disney's 1937 adaptive retelling of *Snow White* also reflect specific social preoccupations with the roles of men and women. However, the Disney version, rather than using these changes to question conventional gender roles, reinforces them. As Jack Zipes argues, the formerly anonymous dwarfs are given names and characteristics, not only because Snow White is insipid and boring, but as a representation of "humble American workers ...[each of whom] will succeed just as long as he does his share while women stay at home and keep the house clean" (349). Though in the Brothers Grimm version Snow White comes upon a cottage where everything is "indescribably dainty and spotless" (84), Disney's heroine happens upon the dwarfs' cottage in a state of utter disarray—which she explains by assuming the residents "have no mother." This Snow White employs the help of forest animals who—under her motherly, finger-wagging guidance—help her clean. In this scene, Snow White completely disassociates herself from the fact that her own (step)mother has just tried to have her murdered. Though these changes are adaptive—they're meant to fill in the blanks of the original—they make an implicit value statement—that feminine worth resides in necessary maternal care—which subordinates plot and character development.

When the dwarfs of the Brothers Grimm tale find Snow White they're immediately fatherly and protective. However, when the Disney dwarfs come upon Snow White in their beds, covered by a sheet and moaning in a decidedly sexual manner, they mistake her for a monster. It is not until they realize she is both beautiful and harmless that they can accept her. Even without going into the juxtaposition of Snow White's innocent beauty to the glamour and wickedness of

the stepmother, it's clear that Disney's *Snow White* has been adapted to privilege a mothering femininity over a sexualized one. In this adaptive retelling, both the monster and the angel suffer from a kind of insanity, but the film unmistakably determines which is more acceptable. These choices reflect not only a cultural rejection of the 1920s flapper but a strong urge to keep the woman imprisoned in her mind and in her house.

In addition to the ways Disney adapted the story, he also redefined public perception of fairy tales, creating a distinctive "canon" of "animated classics." As Jack Zipes points out, "Disney became the orchestrator of a corporate network that changed the function of the fairy-tale genre in America" (351). Zipes goes on to list the ways the Disney fairy tale positions the story as secondary to the technology, which uses the story as a vehicle for the film, rather than the other way around. These changes reflect adaptive methods, where modifications are made in order to better suit the new form. Though the Disney adaptation does not explicitly break the rules in the way fractive retellings do, it has completely altered, not only the "official" Snow White narrative, but also the way of fairy tales are adapted, and by extension, the cultural expectations of the fairy tale (happy endings, singing animals, etc.) as defined by the animated film.

Both fractive and adaptive retellings have the potential to transform the "official" text, but the means by which they do so are different. Where fractive retellings announce their intention to critique and shift audience thinking, adaptive retellings hide it—sometimes even from the writer/producer. Yet the impact of adaptive retellings can be just as large—if my examples are any indication. This should not, however, point to an inability of the fractive retelling to cause wide-scale change. As I will show using Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, fractive retellings can alter the course of an entire genre—in this case, the novel.

II

In his elaborate conceit equating the country dance to marriage, Henry Tilney, the ostensible hero of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, explains to Catherine Morland, the heroine, that, "in both [matrimony and dancing] man has the advantage of choice, woman only the power of refusal" (57). This declaration that refusal is power alludes to Austen's own position as a woman writing in early-nineteenth-century England. In "Sense and Reticence: Austen's Indirections," Susan Lanser explains that the conservative political landscape of the 1790s positioned the traditional marriage plot as a structure of masculine authority meant to "valoriz[e] female domesticity" and "destabiliz[e] female authorship" (Lanser 65). Furthermore, women who employed an authorial narrative voice were "represented not only as defective but as threatening and dangerous" (65). Thus, female writers were severely limited in their subject matter. Moreover, they were required to choose a distanced voice rather than a personal one. Given these constraints, even their capacity for "refusal" had to be handled subtly.

Perhaps as penalty for its overt narrative intrusions, *Northanger Abbey*, though originally accepted for publication in 1803, was not published until after Austen's death. According to Lanser, Austen's inability to have *Northanger Abbey* published in her lifetime contributed to the relative decline of overt narrational intrusions in her later novels. But, as Lanser notes, "generalizations do not disappear after *Northanger Abbey*; rather they are rendered contingent

and ambiguous through Austen's use of an 'indefinite' free indirect discourse that allows the narrator an equivocal participation in the thoughts of her characters" (73).

Critical preference for Austen's more distanced narrators continued well into the twentieth century. J. F. Burrows, for instance, argues that in *Northanger Abbey* Austen has "yet to 'learn the art of 'distancing'" (136). In *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne Booth devotes a chapter to analysis of why Austen's authorial distance makes Emma, despite her flaws, a likable character, thus equating authorial detachment to the success of the novel. This perhaps reveals Booth's modernist bias to the aesthetic of an impersonal narrator. But it also exposes a deeper prejudice against the active and aggressive narrator of *Northanger Abbey*.

Despite subsequent critics' partiality to the less intrusive narrators of Austen's later novels, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out in *Madwoman in the Attic*, many paradoxically use Austen's subtlety as grounds for rejection. Emerson was "horrified by what he [considered] the trivializing domesticity and diminution of her fiction" (109). D. H. Lawrence called Austen an old maid who "'typifies 'personality' instead of character'" (109). Perhaps most perplexing is Anthony Burgess's claim that Austen's novels fail "because her writing 'lacks a strong male thrust'" (9). Even those who have defended Austen have often done so with reservation. Henry James praises her "'extraordinary grace'" as a sign of "'her unconsciousness'" (110). Likewise, though E. M. Forster claims to admire Austen's work, in *Aspects of the Novel* he describes her as a "feeble and ladylike" "miniaturist." He goes on to criticize, "Except in her schoolgirl novels, she cannot stage a crash" (76), thus insinuating that Austen's prose is quaint, delicate, and polite. What he doesn't acknowledge is that Austen stages invisible but violent "crashes"—not of the stagecoach but of the societal variety. Moreover, he relegates her earlier works to childish obscurity, dismissing them as "schoolgirl novels."

Men haven't been the only writers suspicious of Austen's subtle protests. Charlotte Brontë famously rejected Austen's work as being "elegant and confined, 'a carefully fenced, highly cultivated garden with neat borders and delicate flowers; but no glance of a bright, vivid physiognomy, no open country, no fresh air, no blue hill, no bonny beck'" (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 109). However, Brontë's distaste for Austen is more complicated than it at first appears. Her critique articulates not the abstract, gendered essentialism of Burgess, but a legitimate claustrophobia stemming from her desire to escape the confinement of both her age and her predecessors. But Brontë also owed a debt to Austen. In "Narrative Refusals and Generic Transformation in Austen and James," Robyn Warhol confirms that *Northanger Abbey* paved the way for "heroines without special beauty or gifts [to] take their places in Victorian novels in ways they could not have figured in the works of Ann Radcliffe or Fanny Burney."

Drawing on Harold Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence where an author fears his work has been created not by himself but by his predecessors, Gilbert and Gubar posit a specifically female anxiety of authorship where women writers subconsciously worry about the inappropriateness of their authority. However, Brontë's critique of Austen also reveals an unmistakable anxiety of influence. As Warhol points out "Victorian heroines whether beautiful or plain could get married or they could die, but they could not (with a few notable exceptions like Charlotte Brontë's Lucy Snowe) come to the ends of their novels single and in perfect health." So while Brontë may have escaped a traditional ending in *Villette*, *Jane Eyre* is structured as a marriage plot not unlike Austen's. Brontë critiques the tradition, using gothic violence as a tool for commenting on the repressive forces of her time—but in the end the grotesque woman, the monster, is still silenced. It is not until Jean Rhys publishes the *Wide Sargasso Sea* in 1966 that the story can be retold from Bertha's point of view. Thus, through

several fractive retellings of the marriage plot, we can trace an evolution from the suppressed, to the present but silenced, to finally a deconstructed female grotesque. This progression helps reveal the enormous impact *Northanger Abbey* had on the genre of the novel.

III

Though there has been a recent resurgence of interest in Austen's earlier fiction, many critics continue to view the narrator of *Northanger Abbey* as inferior to those of Austen's later novels. Susan Lanser explains that "Studies of Austen's narrative methods are prone to represent *Northanger Abbey* as a flawed or crude novel in contrast to later work" (61). And while many critics have defended the novel, Michael Williams claims that the variety and breadth of defenses reveals an inconsistency that keeps a reader from fully engaging with the text of *Northanger Abbey*. But this inconsistency is not a failure; rather, it reflects a combination of retelling strategies that, while they don't always mesh, do show how Austen's work attempts to transcend the conservative conventions of her time, and by both establishing and complicating its own authority, deconstructs the authority of the "official" narrative.

In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen's narrator is the least submerged of any of her full-length novels; therefore, it is here where we can see her retelling techniques most clearly. As a parody of the gothic romance, the novel relies on disrupting traditional gothic tropes. From the outset, the narrator announces that Catherine Morland has a "thin awkward figure, a sallow skin without color, dark lank hair, and strong features" (1). Moreover, she is "often inattentive, and

occasionally stupid” (2). Not exactly the makings of a heroine—but this is precisely the point. Likewise, when Catherine arrives at Northanger Abbey, she is sorely disappointed. As she notes, the “form” of the windows is gothic, “but every pane was so large, so clear, so light! To an imagination which had hoped for the smallest divisions, and the heaviest stone-work, for painted glass, dirt and cobwebs, the difference was very distressing” (128). Indeed, the description of the window reflects the way the text similarly retrofits the gothic frame with its parody. But despite the fact that the text breaks the rules about what a heroine should be and where a gothic romance should take place, it also remakes the rules, so that Catherine becomes a heroine and Northanger Abbey becomes a gothic setting.

In addition to upsetting gothic modes through unconventional characterization and setting, the narrator of *Northanger Abbey* uses what Robyn Warhol defines as narrative refusal, or “a strategy for addressing the unnarratable in fiction, rather than simply keeping quiet about it.” Warhol goes on to discuss two kinds of narrative refusal in *Northanger Abbey*. In “disnarration” the narrator says the opposite of what she means, and in “unnarration” the narrator refuses to speak. Both techniques offer a critique while at the same time attempting to move beyond the limits of that genre. In this way, narrative refusal is a method of retelling; however, it is almost adaptive in its passive-aggressive approach. In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen also employs a more active and openly aggressive fractive device that has received little critical attention from either her opponents or supporters.

Discussion of narrative strategies in *Northanger Abbey* often turns toward the novel’s unlikely hero, Henry Tilney. Both the novel and Henry have been described as “incoherent,” yet critics perpetually press readings that seek a reductive coherence, oscillating between praising him as a wise teacher and disparaging him as the patriarchal silencer of Catherine Morland. At

times he seems the character the narrator most identifies with, and yet, the narrator clearly takes pleasure in mocking him. How, then, does one account for the narrator's ambiguous depiction of her hero? What do these supposed inconsistencies suggest about the function of the narrator in the novel? Finally, how does the narrator's relationship with Henry reflect a fractive retelling strategy?

In "*Northanger Abbey* and the Limits of Parody," Tara Ghoshal Wallace suggests a competitive relationship between narrator and reader, whereby the reader becomes "not only a partner in the unfolding of the narrative, but also an opponent who struggles with the narrator for control over the text" (262). I wish not to refute her arguments but, as she herself points to Henry as the obvious vehicle for elucidating such a struggle, to reposition Henry Tilney as the narrator's figurative rival. In this way, one can begin to make sense of the narrator's ambiguous treatment of her hero. Moreover, we can read the "competition" between the narrator and Henry as not only a retelling, but an active and aggressive confrontation of the "official" text that constricted Austen and other women writers of her time.

Though Henry has often been aligned to the parodic voice of the narrator, she often points that wit back on him. Thus, Henry's relationship with the narrator should not be simply reduced to terms of likeness. To be sure, there are a number of ways in which Henry's speech closely resembles the narrator's—as many critics have pointed out, they are both witty and have a highly developed critical language—but as J. F. Burrows demonstrates in *Computation in Criticism*, they have an intriguing syntactical bond as well. Aided by computer technology, Burrows offers a statistical analysis of the most common words used in all of Austen's major works and some of her juvenilia. Of all Austen's characters, Henry Tilney is second only to Mr.

Collins of *Pride and Prejudice* in correlation with the pure narrative's idiolect² (136). That is, his speech patterns are most like those of the narrator when she is not engaging in free indirect discourse. Likewise, of all the word-types that occur only once in *Northanger Abbey* (and therefore suggest higher diction), the highest percentage go to the narrator, with Henry coming in a close second (179). Finally, Henry averages the longest sentences of all the main characters in *Northanger Abbey*, which again places him in closest proximity to the pure narrative (214). This comparison suggests the connection between Henry and the narrator goes beyond simple resemblance to create competitive tension in linguistic prowess.

It is also important to note the difference between the speech patterns of Henry and Catherine. Of all Austen's characters (including comparisons across novels) Henry and Catherine have the tenth lowest coefficient, or resemblance, in the way they speak, and of all romantic pairings they have by far the lowest coefficient (0.551) (86). Meanwhile, Henry shares with the narrator an anxiety for the decline of language, often reprimanding Catherine for using words like "nice," "faithfully," and "amazing" (20), of which the narrator also implicitly disapproves. The word "amazing," for instance, is used sixteen times in *Northanger Abbey* before essentially disappearing from Austen's lexicon. Thirteen instances of the word are attributed to Isabella Thorpe, whom the narrator openly critiques, while the other three instances occur when Henry reproaches Catherine for using the word she gleaned from her friend (Burrows 69). Catherine says, "But I really thought before, young men despised novels amazingly." Henry then responds by critiquing both her assumptions and her linguistic faults: "It is *amazingly*; it may well suggest *amazement* if they do—for they read nearly as many [novels] as women" (83). The censure of the expression and the word's subsequent

² Idiolect is defined by David Lodge in Burrow's epigraph as a "special, distinctive, unique way of using the English language."

disappearance further illustrate that Henry and the narrator share comparable regard for the power of language and contempt for its abuse. At the same time, Henry's verbal capacity to influence Catherine heightens the narrative tension.

Though it is true that Henry can never genuinely challenge the narrator's authority, Austen does grant him latitude in order to contrive a rivalry. Henry is allowed to take over, not necessarily of the novel itself, but the narratives that might influence Catherine, those she may be constructing in her mind from a patchwork of her own reading and surroundings. For Henry, the manipulation of Catherine's narrative reality serves both to test and educate her as he molds her into the role of wife. Henry actively attempts to retell onto Catherine three conflicting narratives: sentimentalism, gothic romance, and Bildungsroman. However, in each case, the narrator effectively manipulates and thwarts his efforts in order to showcase her own prowess.

When Henry first appears, the narrator describes him as having "an archness and pleasantry in his manner which interested, though it was hardly understood by [Catherine]" (11). This immediately sets up an ironic conspiracy between the two, at Catherine's expense—Henry and the narrator understand each other in a way Catherine does not. But though the narrator identifies with Henry's linguistic proclivities, she often allows him certain powers of narration, only to set him up to fail—just as, not coincidentally, Henry sets similar traps for Catherine. Unaware that he is being handled similarly, Henry, upon meeting her for the first time, almost immediately launches a narrative ambush on the unsuspecting Catherine. His remark seems innocent enough: "I shall make but a poor figure in your journal tomorrow" (12), and spurred by her surprise, he begins to narrate the particulars, concluding, "*That*, madam, is what I wish you to say" (13, Austen's emphasis). He is clearly forcing a narrative that seems at best superficial and at worst sentimental—not because of anything she's done, but so that he can flirt

while simultaneously showcasing *his* parodic skills. Despite the fact that Catherine interrupts, saying, ““But, perhaps, I keep no journal”” (13), he presses with a more extended harangue that culminates in the assertion that “Every body allows that the talent of writing agreeable letters is particularly female” (13).

Though Catherine responds by doubting, albeit hesitantly, his assertion, Henry ignores her, instead going on to mock female letter writers and finally declaring, “Excellence is pretty fairly divided between the sexes” (14). The immediate intrusion of Mrs. Allen allows him to support this claim via his knowledge of muslins. Yet his display does not seem to have its intended effect on Catherine, who responds, ““How can you ... be so—’ she almost said strange” (14). A few lines later the narrator delights in informing the reader that “Catherine feared, as she listened to their discourse, that he indulged himself a little too much in the foibles of others” (15). This disclosure both reinforces the narrator’s control over Henry while simultaneously directing skepticism at the narrator’s own methods—because what is free indirect discourse if not an indulgence in the foibles of others. As Catherine refuses to share these thoughts aloud, this statement does not affect the narrator’s competitive edge over Henry, but it does undermine the notion of absolute narrative authority.

Henry’s narrative stretches beyond the kind of parody that the narrator excels in, losing control as it flounders in exaggeration and insincerity that even Catherine recognizes as outlandish. Henry’s sarcasm is lost on Catherine; she simply sees him as odd—information the narrator takes pleasure in supplying to the reader and keeping from Henry. As the narrator joins Catherine’s amusement in the moment where she evaluates Henry most accurately and objectively, it becomes clear that the narrator does not furnish his rhetorical aptitude so that he might actually seize control, but in order to exhibit her own superiority.

But Henry is not so easily overcome. When Catherine reveals her assumption that the abbey is “just like what one reads about” (124), Henry launches into a gothic tale of a “gloomy chamber” that is “undoubtedly haunted,” in which Catherine, the implied heroine, discovers the ““memoirs of the wretched Matilda”” (124–126). Henry uses second person to place Catherine directly in the narrative: “Unable of course to repress *your* curiosity in so favorable a moment for indulging it, *you* will instantly arise, and throwing *your* dressing gown around *you*, proceed to examine this mystery” (125, my emphasis), which is of course exactly what Catherine later does. It does not seem accidental that the narrator completely drops out of the novel from the point where Henry begins the gothic narrative until he can no longer go on. The physical reality of the novel is replaced by that of Henry’s narrative, which might seem to suggest that Henry has somehow usurped control.

However, once Henry reaches the climax of his tale, “when [Catherine’s] lamp suddenly expires in the socket and leaves [her] in total darkness” (126), he suddenly loses his power to narrate. Here the narrator reenters, relishing her task of relating that Henry “was too much amused...to be able to carry it further; he could no longer command solemnity either of subject or voice” (126). It becomes clear that the narrator never really lost control, but chose to grant Henry the reader’s full attention, in order that his failure might both destabilize the authority of “official” gothic conventions, as well as highlight the narrator’s own finesse. Having lost command over his narrative, Henry asks Catherine to finish the tale on her own, which she shortly does, much to his chagrin, at the expense of his father.

Though Henry’s first two narratives take place in contained spaces (the first time he meets Catherine and their ride to the abbey), it seems almost every time Henry speaks to Catherine, he is attempting to indoctrinate her in “The World According to Henry.” For

instance, when Catherine suggests that “to *torment* and to *instruct*” might be synonymous, he responds, ““it is very worth while to be tormented for two or three years of one’s life for the sake of being able to read all the rest of it. Consider—if reading had not been taught, Mrs. Radcliffe would have written in vain—or perhaps not at all”” (85). His endeavor seems justified, but Catherine’s response is “a warm panegyric...on the lady’s merits” (86), which reinforces the authority of the novelist and strays from his intentions. Furthermore, the equation of tormenting and instructing might ironically be directed back on his own attempts to instruct/torment Catherine.

Henry makes another notable attempt to press his coming-of-age narrative on her after Eleanor Tilney misunderstands Catherine’s explanation of the London horror. Henry’s presumably exaggerated account of the “mob of three thousand men assembling in St. George’s Fields; the Bank attacked, the Tower threatened, the streets of London flowing with blood” (88) is intended to silence Catherine’s gothic fantasies. However, according to Henry Rogers, “Henry’s comments, which are specific references to the Gordon Riots, demonstrate concretely that what appears wildly imaginative and implausible may in fact be reality.” The narrator, understanding that contemporary readers would have been cognizant of recent events, allows Henry his rant, not to reveal that Catherine’s gothic predilections are ridiculous but that they carry potentially reasonable implications—a suggestion that later comes to fruition through Catherine’s instinctual distrust of Henry’s father.

Henry’s most desperate attempt to force his Bildungsroman onto Catherine comes after he understands her conjectures about his father, which, as the conclusion to the gothic romance Henry began, upset Henry’s sense of narrative control. When he asks, “What have you been judging from?”(159), he seems unaware that she’s only using the tools he’s provided to finish the

tale he's written her into. His defense of his father is not entirely convincing but is punctuated by his own doubts. Henry asserts, "He loved her," but then undercuts the statement with, "I am persuaded, as well as it was possible for him to" (158); he repeats this claim, "His value of her was sincere" (158), but again undermines himself by suggesting his father was not permanently afflicted by his mother's death. Sensing the force of his justification faltering, he shifts from the half-hearted defense of his father to a series of rhetorical questions. As with his gothic tale, when Henry's narrative power fails him, he seems to turn desperately to shaming Catherine.

At this point the narrator reasserts her control, explaining that Catherine's "visions of romance were over" (159). Henry has effectively transformed Catherine into a woman *he* can respect, but he had to do the dirty work of tormenting/instructing and shaming her. However, Catherine does not fully make the transformation into a woman the *narrator* can respect until several chapters later. Only after the narrator reveals General Tilney's reasons for dismissing her—particulars she only partially hears from Henry—does Catherine finally feel confident in her own opinion without Henry's aid or approval. As the narrator explains, Catherine recognizes that "in suspecting General Tilney of either murdering or shutting up his wife, she had scarcely sinned against his character or magnified his cruelty" (201). Here it is Henry's turn to be shamed; the narrator does not allow him to speak, but instead describes him as blushing and pitiable.

In the end, Henry may redeem himself as a character, but his narrative powers are revoked. The last seven chapters of the novel see Henry's speech limited in both length and authority—he is not even allowed to make his own marriage proposal. Just as Henry has used Catherine as a pupil to demonstrate his narrative prowess, the narrator has used Henry as an instrument for "fixing" Catherine. Once the narrator no longer needs to borrow his voice, his

provisionally granted linguistic proficiency can be recalled. Employing the metaphor of competition should not suggest that the narrator is actually vulnerable; however, by granting Henry some dexterity, the narrator can create the illusion of competitive tension in order to reveal her own talents to be far more refined, sophisticated, and controlled.

Yet despite the narrator's seeming triumph, she is still required to officiate the marriage. In his 1999 collection *Narrative Realities*, Harry Shaw suggests that criticisms of Austen's marriage plots are justified because they reveal a "complex distrust of narrative itself" (134). However, he stops short of allowing Austen a share in the distrust. This is despite the fact that all of Austen's marriages are marked by the narrator's suspicion and haste. Of Henry and Catherine's wedding, the narrator says only, "Henry and Catherine were married, the bells rang and everybody smiled" (205). Austen can grant Henry his bride and his happily ever after, but her indifference is evident.

In an earlier draft of this paper, I claimed the aim of the text was to cure Catherine of her provincial naiveté—that the subsequent marriage to Henry seemed rather secondary to this goal. But now I'm not so sure Catherine has changed much or if that's even the point. Burrows argues that because Catherine and Henry's idiolects do not evolve in the way the heroes' and heroines' of Austen's later novels do, this "betrays a comparative failure in her art" (136). However, I hesitate to use such a narrow term. Failure connotes not only a lack of success, but a stoppage or a collapse. I prefer to read *Northanger Abbey* as a text in process, a retelling in the *Nacherzählung* sense of "toward"—imperfect, yes, but also aggressive and confrontational in a way that only begins to reappear, as many critics have argued, in *Persuasion*, Austen's last completed novel.

In *Northanger Abbey*, the narrator slyly retells the “official” text through a facade of competition, but she also subtly challenges the concept of narrative authority. The novel concludes, not with an image of fusion—as you might expect from a narrative whose supposed goal is marriage—but with a narrative refusal that is itself a kind of fracture. Catherine and Henry have gone ahead with their wedding, despite General Tilney’s desire to tear them apart. But rather than this break weakening them, it has “perhaps” added to the “strength of their attachment.” However, the narrator refuses to resolve anything. Her last words offer two possibilities: “I leave it to be settled by whomsoever it may concern, whether the tendency of this work be altogether to recommend parental tyranny or reward filial disobedience” (205). Not only does this line splinter the novelistic conventions of instructing(tormenting) and establishing closure (here, marriage), but the phrase “whomsoever it may concern” suggests that though the narrator will comply with certain novelistic conventions, her actual concerns lie elsewhere. Just as the last line emphasizes the merits of disobeying the parent, the narrator breaks the rules of an “official” text in order to critique its authority. Thus, where adaptive retellings *try* to fuse this kind of breakage in order to conceal it, *Northanger Abbey*, as a fractive retelling, seeks to highlight the rupture, thus purposely destabilizing the notion of textual authority.

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