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THINGS I REMEMBER WHICH I CANNOT PROVE AND OTHER STORIES

by

Austin Eichelberger


A thesis in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in English

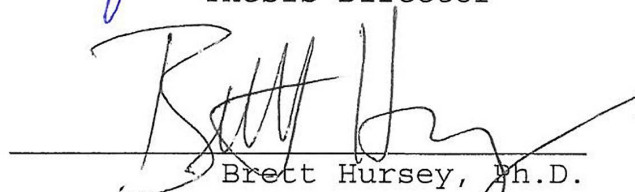
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April 2009



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AUSTIN EICHELBERGER

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April 2009

Dedication

For my families - the one I was born into, the one I chose
in friendship and the one that found me through writing -
all of whom have always encouraged me to express myself and
been willing to listen when I did.

Acknowledgments

I would like to extend my sincerest thanks to Dr. Brett Hursey, for giving me the time to "marinate" that he knew I needed and then showing me how happy he was when I returned to Creative Writing. Also, to Dr. Steve Faulkner, who always supported my use of non-traditional structures in my non-fiction and paid me the compliments he knew would keep me working hard. In addition, I would like to acknowledge my peers and fellow writers in workshop, each of whom helped improve my work in different ways - your critiques were invaluable. And finally, to Mary Carroll-Hackett, who has become more than my professor and my boss, she has become my creative and literary guide and a very dear friend. She is the woman who led me to my tribe, showed me the customs of my new people, always encouraged me to go further and then provided the tools and opportunities needed to do so. I will never be able to thank her enough, but I hope that the work contained in this thesis will begin the labor on that impossible task.

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Things I Remember Which I Cannot Prove

The only dreams I remember deal with the memories I haven't told anyone: the tunnel-visioned shame of getting a quick slap from my dad the day I told him I kissed a boy on the cheek in kindergarten; when I was nine and spent an entire week awake, scratching the infected bite on my foot from the lizard my sister put in my sheets; bright-hot pain through my left eye when my older brother punched me for walking in on him and his girlfriend; the woozy stink of chemicals during the hours I spent in the school photo lab trying to correctly mat the family portrait Mom didn't even thank me for; the Christmases when I was twelve and thirteen, when Dad didn't come from work 'til New Year's - already drunk and fuming; the whitish-blue color of Mom's face when I told her I was dating a black girl and the whine of her shoe's heel on the linoleum floor as she locked herself in the laundry closet; my bedroom window's heavy squeal as it slid shut the night of my high school graduation, the black-red blood-blister it pinched on the center of my palm after I emptied my dad's wallet, then climbed down the lattice and sprinted the whole way to the bus station.

A Lungful of Air

The soft crash of waves moves away from the dock, the one that sits in the middle of Crater Lake and is held in place by a heavy chain that connects to the slick wooden bottom and is rooted deep in the muck twenty feet below. Alex sits closer to the shore, his palms flat on the rocking planks, as I sit in the middle of the platform with my knees up, my elbows perched on them. I glance behind me at the power boats humming across the water, the big brick houses across the lake from the little state-owned stretch of sand; and then turn my head to the beach, the girls sunning in their new bikinis, the clutter of guys drinking by the grill, Shana's two kids in the water and her watching them from the little sandy crescent of the shore.

I watch Shana, one hand blocking the sun from her eyes, and remember leaning on my kitchen counter, finishing a Milky Way, as she promised over the phone that there would be enough people that I wouldn't even have to look at Alex, and that she'd be sure to keep an eye on him to make sure he wasn't bothering me. That plan is certainly working out well. I hear laughter as the youngest kid, perched on a green inflatable crocodile, drifts to shore by the boat ramp and Shana pushes the float back out into the water. I

wish it was shaped like something more docile - a duck or something.

"It's weird, huh, Mark?" Alex turns to me, his tricep flexing like it would when he used to bend over me in the bed of his dad's Chevy.

"What is?" I keep looking at the land, at the tall pines that border the sand and then hold close to the uneven line of red-clay shore that curves out from the beach to make this tiny cove. I know the pattern the trunks make after coming here for years; Shana and I used to drink here in high school when the moon was full because we could bring our boyfriends and there was plenty of space to sneak off and be alone with them. She brought Jason until they split up, then it was whomever she happened to be dating, a football player or a man too old to go to our school; I was always with Alex.

"That we're all here together again." He swings his hands around when he talks, like an orchestra conductor. We used to make fun of him for it, but he would just flick us off as one of his hands swooshed by. "It's been, what, three years?"

"Four." I gaze down and lower one of my hands to the wood beneath me to peel a large splinter from the dock. Fucking dangerous. "Since we were all together."

"Damn, it's been that long?" He turns his body toward mine now, spreading his legs across the dock so that his dripping feet sit on either side of me. "Doesn't seem like it."

I look up at him, the even olive skin over his swimmer's muscles, the dark blond hair that falls over his eyes, the bright red swimsuit. "No, it doesn't." I toss the splinter into the water where it floats like the inflatable crocodile by the shore. My mind, like I knew it would when I saw the float, shit, even when Shana first told me that we were coming to the lake, starts grasping for every image of a crocodile I've ever seen and places them all in the water beneath me. Sometimes it's not crocodiles, but it's always something. For years - beginning after Shana and I watched "Jaws" when we were eight - it was sharks, even in fresh water-

"So what've you been up to?" He's looking straight into my eyes and leaning back on his arms.

"Nothing." It's not worth mentioning that I'm still not over him and still haven't left this podunk little town; that I work too much at the deli and drink whenever I'm not working. "You?"

"Well," he says, turning to watch the birds in the line of trees to his right, "Darryl and I had a one-bedroom

up in Richmond, but then he left a few months ago. I kept the apartment." He pauses as the sparrows flit from branch to branch. "Got a job as a bank teller downtown." Alex flicks his head back in my direction, moving the hair from his eyes. "You want to swim?"

I look down at my baggy t-shirt and loose jeans. "Nope."

He blinks and pouts his lips. "Why not? You like swimming."

"I used to like swimming. Now I just don't enjoy it anymore." The crocodiles beneath me swing just past my mind's eye, stirring up sediment as they circle the thick chain beneath the water. "Besides, I didn't bring a suit. That's why I wanted to row out."

Alex glances behind me at the paint-flaked rowboat I rowed to the dock. He had swum behind the boat, despite the fact that I had told him to leave me alone. I give Shana a death-glance, but I know she's too far away to catch it. I should've hit him with an oar.

"Oh." He just looks at me for a minute, then stands, his calves and forearms suddenly lined and solid as he stretches. "Well, I'm going to swim."

"Have a great time." He does a perfect swan dive into the water by the boat, rocking the dock. I lean my head

back and shut my eyes, the warmth from the sun creeping along my face and neck. I can just see the hungry crocs below, waiting in the shade while he dives before zooming up from the silt to catch his leg, his arm, his mouth opening to scream, the bubbles floating to the top as the water turns red like in the movies. God, what an easy solution.

I hear Alex surface and blow the water from his lips before going back under. May as well try to get a tan. I pull my t-shirt up, the soft cotton rubbing the point of my nose and along my arms. I try to ignore the skin that folds over the waist of my jeans, the weight that's crept back ever since he left and I started volunteering for more shifts, lay the t-shirt on the dock behind me and lie back. I don't know why he's so stupid. I barely swam the last time we were here, just after graduation. It was sharks that time. I remember when we'd just arrived, I swam all the way out here with him, shit, all I could think about as we swam out was getting on this dock and lying in the sun next to him. We stole touches and stopped to kiss under the water until we reached the dock - remembering it makes my chest ache, even after three fucking years apart. It was new then, the boards freshly lacquered, the metal not yet rusting. I had jumped in with a snorkel mask to try and

follow the dock's chain down to the bottom, and when I looked around in the murky brown, I could just picture rows of big, white teeth charging out of the depths faster than I could hope to swim. I knew they weren't there, and I do now, but I still told Alex I was tired and made him stay close as we swam back. It's always what I can't see that scares me, the places where I know shit lurks but I can't sense it. It's why I shut my bedroom door when I'm alone in the apartment at night, you never know what's creeping up behind you when you stop payin—

"Come on, just get in the water, Mark," Alex calls as I sit up, water splashing onto my feet, speckling my jeans.

"No," I say to his head, bobbing a few feet out in the blue-brown water. "I'm not wearing trunks."

"So what? You have boxers. Come on, it's fun." He splashes more water onto the dock. I roll my eyes and lie back down as my stomach churns. Why is he being like this? He was the one who made me leave, told me he had grown past me, why the fuck—

"Come on, babe." Alex's voice is low and a little raspy, the same tone it would always fall to when he whispered to me. I turn my head to see his hands wrapped around the grey metal poles of the foot ladder, his eyes trained on me. Why the fuck did he just call me *babe*?

I cough lightly to clear my throat and sit up, folding my forearms over my lap. "You're not allowed to call me that, Alex." I look down at the near-white wood of the bleached dock, the twisting dark lines that show the color of the wood at its core. The dock rocks as Alex climbs the ladder and I exhale hard, the muscles in my hands flexing tight.

"Why not, Mark? I used to call you babe all the time." He stands over me, smiling down, his abs flexed in the sun, drops of water shining on his skin. He may be a prick, but he's sure a beautiful prick. Alex kneels beside me, softly placing his hip, then his shoulder on the wood beside me as my shoulders and neck tense. His wet fingers graze my bicep and the muscle jumps, the skin tight with goose-pimples. "Remember?"

The water and the crocodiles, the dock and the shore wash away as I look at the bright sky and the slowly-moving clouds and think about that word, *babe*, that single fucking word. When he would squeeze my hand at home football games in the back of bleachers and wink as he said it; the times when his jock friends would sneer as I waited for him at the pool and he would say it into my hair when they were out of sight; the e-mails he would start with it; the handwritten notes on Christmas presents and on my birthday;

breathing it in my ear because I told him to be quiet while my parents slept in the next room or while we had his dad's truck for the weekend; when he actually fucking said, "Babe, we had a good run, but I think Darryl won this one."

I sit up and push his arm off me. "Shut the fuck up, Alex."

"What?" His stomach flexes as he speaks and I fold my arms over my belly.

"I said shut the fuck up." I turn and grab my t-shirt, pull it over my head and stand, taking a step toward the boat as he scrambles up.

"What are you doing?" He steps in front of me, between me and the boat, the layer of fine hair on his chest catching and reflecting the sun's light.

"I'm leaving, dumbass. I don't want to be trapped out on this dock with you." I stare at him, trying my best to keep my "don't fuck with me" face on as a shiver runs through my knees.

His arm moves toward me and he touches my shoulder. "Mark, it's just been awhile since I've seen you—"

I step back, over the shallow puddles he left on the planks, as the dock and boat begin to mash together, our movement driving them into each other, forcing waves out toward the shore. "I know it has, Alex. And hopefully it's

going to be even longer the next time." I turn back to the shore and step to the edge of the seesawing dock, my toes clutching the rubber bumper that goes along the rim. The crocodiles are swimming closer in my mind, black eyes gleaming under the water - I need to get to that fucking rowboat - and my heartbeat doubles, my neck goes slick with sweat. The muscles of my legs feel like they're going to explode as the sound of a speed boat swings closer behind me.

"Mark. Come on. I just want to be close to you." The dark green and brown ridges of the crocs split the water before me, their jaws opening, as they twist and swim around the chain, as they wait in the shade of the dock, ready to flick their tails and break the surface with rows of teeth and scales. "Like we used to." I feel his fingertips on my back and I suck in a breath, filling my lungs despite the pressure in my chest, and leap clumsily away, kicking my legs at the claws and teeth that are waiting to slash and swallow me whole; the water moves coldly up my skin as the shore disappears from sight and Alex's voice fades behind me into the din of rushing water.

Shore Leave

Across the airstrip, soldier's feet applaud against the pavement while Sari runs toward them, her children's hands in hers, to welcome Jack, her husband, back from the ruined land of her ancestors. She almost laughs, picturing Grandmother's reaction to Emma in a skirt and cowboy boots at nine, how Jack cackled for days about the face Grandmother made. Sari's right knee aches as her foot strikes the asphalt, but her legs will not slow and she doesn't try to stop. The rock in her stomach tells her he's there, and she pictures Jack's grin so she can match it to his face, but features blur in all the camouflage and buzz-cuts. Sari's son Adair runs ahead of her, his yells of "Papa" so excited and sharp that he sounds scared.

The men stride forward and Sari is the only woman - only civilian - as the stomping men surround her and move on. Her mind spins through the past few weeks - the mail she's let pile up, none of it bearing a military insignia; the times she's forgotten to plug in her cell phone because Jack usually reminds her; the names she's neglected to record at the hospital, despite Post-It reminders from the doctors and receptionists - but none of this reveals a reason for Jack's absence. The first coffin is unloaded from the plane and the blood leaves Sari's face and settles

wetly in her gut. She tells herself that Jack is one of the men - same height, same build - carrying the plain wooden box with a flag placed delicately overtop, even as she pictures herself in all black, receiving a flag folded into a triangle from a man wearing the same uniform as her husband's.

Her daughter's touch startles Sari; the soft, clammy lines of Emma's palm are not the dry, rough fabric she was imagining, and she jerks away from Emma as if burned. The soldiers are breaking rank now, jogging to their families, laughing and hugging and crying, as a uniformed man with a clipboard walks up to each wife who is frantic, confused, places a hand on her shoulder, makes a check on the list he carries. Sari swallows hard as she remembers the fading scent on the pillow next to hers, pictures the watch she has already wrapped and labeled for Jack's thirty-fifth birthday, imagines the weight of the unfamiliar hand that will soon rest on her bicep. Emma looks up, not smiling anymore, asks where Papa is and all Sari can murmur is that she doesn't know; she looks for her son's ever-present smile and finds Adair halted beside her, grim, searching for a quick wink on the face of every passing man.

Escaping Glamour

Colored light dances in James's shit brown eyes as they cut into me, his one-sided smirk pushing his left cheek into a tiny rosy fist. Fuck. A dryness coats my open mouth and I clamp it shut, licking my lips. The music thuds and my heartbeat echoes hollowly in my ears as I pull back, snatching my dark blue coat and making sure my wallet is still there (god, it just got really fucking hot in here).

"Phillip!" James squeaks, the glitter scattered across his hand shimmering as he reaches for my elbow.

Turning, I click my teeth together and pull puffy sleeves over my thin arms until the elastic cuffs clear my dark hands. What a bastard - so short-sighted. I laugh, but it slides out more like a whimper. He really needs to start thinking before he - when did this club become so fucking popular, anyway? I can barely move through these bodies and I can remember when James and I were the only fucking ones who came, out here dancing all alone, none of these screeching queens and-

Someone slams into my right side, launching me toward a pair of gyrating bodies. I throw out my left arm to catch myself and it lands squarely on another man's corduroy ass before I tumble to the floor.

"So sorry, trying to leave," I mumble as he reaches to help me up. I smile sweetly as I can and wipe off my pants, pulling my jacket back onto my shoulders and looking out at the throbbing crowd of men.

If I can just make it to the red Exit sign, I'll be fine (just need to make it there). I thrust my hands out in front of me, palms together, and push my way through the crowd until the red light turns my jacket purple and my hands bright and neon. The double door is tall and covered in layers of bright, screaming colors trampling each other to be seen. I push the metal bar down with both hands until it clicks and I slip out, shutting the door to Avalon behind me.

There he is again. I've seen him twice so far tonight: at the bar, just as I came in (late) and then in the bathroom. He came in behind me and went to the urinal next to mine. Like, right next to mine (out of at least 20 perfectly good empty ones). So, I smiled and said "Hello," being sure to make eye contact and not to look down, wouldn't want to seem easy. After that, he stood behind me in line for the sink, having finished his piss seconds after I zipped up. I could see his sharp, masculine features reflected over the sink just beside my petite nose

and round lips, his heavy brow, deep set blue eyes and thick, weathered skin - "Just getting ripe" if you ask James, whose queeny ass told me he'd be here tonight. God, the music is so loud, this vodka tonic (2 slices of lime, light ice) doesn't even have enough alcohol to drown it out.

The man's broad shoulders and tapered waist aren't in skintight material, he's wearing a dress shirt and slacks. And he moves funny - I think he has a limp. Oh god, a limp. I imagine some tragic, romantic disease. I can see it now. I'll clutch his arm on his deathbed (6 months from now), wrapped in silk pajamas, and lament on how I swear to spend his fortune wisely and always with a thought for the rest of mankind, and how I will never, ever forget his gaze-

Maybe one of his legs is shorter than the other. That might be awkward.

I bet not, though, he's leaning on that leg now, ordering another beer and they look like they're the same length. Who does he keep glancing at? He's looking right behind me, there must be someone-

I turn around to see a wrinkled little man who winks up at me. Maybe not.

I look back to the bar.

Gray-blue eyes shine beneath his buzzed sandy hair and the corners of his thin lips rise a little. His broad shoulders relax back and his chest pushes against his blue shirt, accenting his slender, solid hips - only a soldier's body has that kind of shape, built with such confident practicality. I can almost see the nametag across his left pec, Weston or Ryans or Jones. He leans back on the bar, centering his attention on...me.

Shit shit shit, what can I do? I look so gross tonight, I wish I had worn those other pants (these ones never fit right) - and where is James, he always knows what to do. Should I acknowledge him (this Soldier Man, this Mr. Jones)? I mean, he did smile at me, it would only be polite to respond. Okay, yes, just a small wave.

"Oh excuse me," I mumble as my wildly swinging elbow knocks over a butch's drink, "Uh, here." She glares as I toss her a 5 from my pocket and look back to the bar under my arm, feigning fixing my kinky cropped hair. Mr. Jones isn't there anymore, unless he's behind that group in drag. Where could - right befuckingside me. I can't meet someone looking like this, where the fuck did my jacket go? I discover my ski coat on the chair in front of me, grab it and go.

Let's see, left here, through the back bar (for all the leather daddies who just hate "that techno-machine bullshit"), past the bathrooms, hello bartender who I made out with 2 weeks ago (I was so trashed).

"Sorry, so busy, call me later this week." I flash him my best glamour pose and run through the lime green doorway onto the wooden deck.

James is standing in the bright doorway twisting his head and standing on his toes, spying every gossip and smoker on the crowded, hushed deck except me.

"James, over here."

He turns and nods - grinning - and swings his hips over to me. "Let's go inside, girl, it's cold as shit out here, you're done with that anyway." He slides my cigarette from between my fingers, fills his lungs and crushes it out beneath his shoe. "Come on." We go back in past the bartender, who winks, and James pulls me close. "Isn't that the one that you kissed last week? Timothy or Steve or something?"

"Two weeks ago, and it's Rupert. I was drunk."

"So? Why should that stand in the way of a completely legitimate lay?" He pushes past a hairy man who's at least

250 and giggles, pointing at the man's waist. "Glad I still have my girlish figure."

I smile at the man, mouth "Sorry" and slide past him. "James, Rupert's not what I want, at least not right now. I mean, he works at the bar, it's not like I'll never see him again." I pull my pack of cigarettes back out, counting them quickly (twelve; I need to quit). "And I want more than just sex." James turns to me with his plucked eyebrows raised, lips folded together, and puts the bottom of his right wrist on my forehead.

"Do you have a fever, baby? I could take you to the hospital. Nauseous at all?" He smiles up at me. "Really now, dear, is that any way to talk?" He pushes me through the narrow door, back in to the blur of flesh and denim, the rows of bar stools bathed in spinning primary colors. "Look, sculpted men everywhere, stripping down from the heat." His left knuckles rap against my shoulder. "Come on, Phillip, how can you not be turned on by this? I mean," he growls, "just look at them. Waiting for guys like us to come and scoop them up." He raises his hand and mocks licking an ice cream cone, his fingers sparkling as he bobs for a moment. I look around the bar at the scattered drinkers and talkers.

That's 3 times I've seen Mr. Jones. But he hasn't really moved - now he's watching the dancers. Maybe I should go talk-

"I mean, just look around," James sputters, "that's the whole appeal of this place anyway, every place like this." He leans over the bar, ordering his drink (on tip-toes), pink shoelaces straining, and then leans back to me. "Darling, look at us. We can choose any man we want and you want more than sex? Why do you think these men are here? For the dancing?"

I shrug my shoulders and wiggle my coat off, slipping it over the back of the stool beside James. I look over to my left, at Jones. His gaze seems so empty, he's just watching the movement, not the bodi-

"It's for sex, Phillip, I thought you were more clever than that. I mean, it's the whole motivation for places like this, a setting where we can come and be ourselves and do what's important to us." He leans back, sipping his appletini (3 slices on the side).

"And what is important to us?" I finish my vodka tonic and slide the glass up the bar, sucking on the second lime. Do I have work in the morning? Probably not, since it's Saturday (but I think my name was on the schedule). Damn it, I don't want to clean up shit tomor-

"Drinking and fucking, of course." James looks at me, chocolate eyes wide and innocent, "What else is there? I mean really. The family idea was like three years ago, careers always blow, all movies are the same thing, we don't play video games and fashion has been lame lately. Come on, Phillip, what gay man wants more than sex? What man period, for that matter? You are such a lame ass."

I shake my head, looking down and clicking the toes of my brown shoes together. Maybe I can turn around and Jones will be standing there, drink in hand, eager to know me. He would be different, I'm sure (pure intentioned and affectionate). I look back up. Nope, still watching the spinning dance floor.

"Who the hell do you keep looking at, Philly? Do I know her?"

I sit back (I hate it when he does that). "Him. There, in the dress shirt." I focus on Jones, caught in a flurry of snowflakes from the disco ball, and James follows my gaze.

"Why does he stand funny? Is something wrong with him? Surely you don't want faulty parts, do you, dear? And what about that haircut? Very 1998."

"James, he's probably in the Army or something. What happened to don't ask, don't tell?"

The worn wood flexes a little bit beneath my feet as I step through the green doorway out of the bar, and pull my blue sleeves up over the chill on my skin. I hope Rupert doesn't hate me for not calling him (I should call James, who knows where the fuck he is). Which pocket are my cig- there they are (jacket, left hand side). Lighter, lighter, okay. My condensed breath halos around the flame and my nostrils burn in the cold air. Mmm, god, I've been dying, this tastes superb against the vodka. I pick my drink up from the railing to my right and exhale, the ice in my glass like tiny bells. A fence (the chain-link kind) seals the deck off from the alley behind and people huddle in groups, arms crossed and laughing. Jesus, it's freezing out here (but at least it's quieter than inside). Why did I ever think D.C. would be warm in the winter?

I don't think Jones (is that too forward? I don't even know if that's his name) followed me. It's always so awkward to be caught in the place you escaped to. What would I say? I suck in more smoke, set my glass back down on the railing and stuff my hand into my pocket. 'I was staring because of your limp and then got scared because you came up to me, so I decided to skedaddle. Sorry!' Never. James would kill me if he knew I turned down

another guy (he hates hearing me complain about single life - he always tells me if I want to bitch, I should call my mom) .

3 weeks ago, I said goodbye in my parents' downtown condo as Mom set a bag of newspapers (to get recycled) in my blue striped passenger seat. As I backed the car out of the driveway, the papers flooded onto the floor. I hit the brakes, reached down (the top headline: "Tenth Car Bombing") and the image glowed sepia and red - black-robed women weeping on their knees in the desert. The edges of the photo were blurred but in the center, a pool of blood and oil gleamed in the dirt, and a figure, arms rigid, mouth screaming - hollow. I had looked at her and couldn't move. I blinked, shifted my feet, yanked the bag around the papers (lit a cigarette).

I look down and ash on the split planks of the deck, raise my cigarette to my dry lips. What they've seen - the broken stones and fire and blood. Tiny bumps rise on my flesh and my guts are tight, burning (Jesus, talk about nightmares). I gulp my drink, pulling another drag off my dying cigarette. He must come to loud places like this so he can't hear the screa-

James peeks through the lime doorway just as I raise my eyes, "NOT GUILTY" written in bold shimmering letters across his chartreuse shirt.

"Ah, an Army man," James chirps, bumping my right shoulder with the knuckles of his left hand, girded in imitation silver. "I had one of them once, a real asshole. So rough, it was delicious." He raises his martini glass to his lips and breathes in the liquid. "I'll bet he's the exact same way. They love it when you call them 'Daddy.'" His shiny blond hair tumbles in laughter. "And they hate to spend the night. Best kind of man." He sets his drink on the bar behind him, reflecting distorted neon (his teeth break the skin of apple slice number 2). "I think they're like that because of," he sighs, spitting a seed at some twink, "the romance of war." James's right index finger has found its way into his mouth and he bites down on it, snarling.

"What? What romance is there in war?" My mind flashes back to the blood and gasoline (that woman's face). My throat feels tight as I swallow spit.

"Darling, just think of it: the dirt, the sweat, all those men crowded together. Why, when they come back from the trenches," his spine straightens as he clicks his heels

and salutes theatrically, eyes focused forward. "They're just dying for some cock, sir. Out there doing what men do. Killing things. Any man coming back from a day of that, let alone weeks or months," James's grin widens, tiny wrinkles multiplying around his eyes, "all he can think about is getting off. I mean, what's he going to do, darling, cry about his dead friends?"

Smell of Rain

"There is no evil that has no remedy, and
the remedy for sin is repentance."

-Midrash Tahoma, *Medieval Hebrew*, trans. 1917

Noah crouches at the water's edge - in the lush little place sculpted by the river's steady hands - filling the last gritty ceramic jar to follow his laden sons home. A woman he does not know approaches and kneels in the grass beside him, her jar - glazed intricately in purple, even lines spelling the laws of God - catching the wild rush of water.

Noah hefts, stands - thick hemp cutting into his shoulder, the jar's swing and thump against his rib - and she turns to him, her knees bent against the soil as she speaks, "Noah."

Pausing, he focuses on her voice, watches the river's thin waves as he listens.

"You are needed."

The jar under Noah's arm shifts - he grips the dusty clay as he begins walking toward the path, veins running like wide scars across his hands.

The woman's dark features grow soft in silver light - the expansive, blinding light of stars - and in a thousand tiny voices she moans, "Cain."

He feels something like ice spread just under his skin, and the muscles of his feet and legs become infantile, unsure of footing. Noah drops his jar to the ground - rupturing the sides - as he turns back to her, his vision centered on the vessel held out on her fingertips, the script now aflame.

The angel's voice again fills the green, shadowed space. "Though you may wander until the End, you will not find Death until your debt is repaid." He steadies his legs by flexing each muscle in turn and spits on the dirt. She sighs again like splintering glass, "Your task is at hand," and it echoes, flooding the trees and pushing the leaves into waves.

Noah looks back at the clear water swelling against the grainy shore and asks, "Am I responsible for them all?"

The angel slowly nods, the light of her face shimmering and refracting against each blade of grass, each wave's crest. Noah squints as he gazes across the desert - toward the thick forests of the West where his sons will gather lumber, the plains of the South where they will collect the fauna - before turning back to the broken walls

of clay and rivulets of water slowly muddying a path toward the source.

*Midrash is a practice of Judaism, a re-telling of stories from the Torah in order to understand them in a new light, carried out in the spirit of the Midrash Tahuma, which states that "you are meant to make the Torah your own in this life." In a contemporary literary sense, it has come to mean the re-telling of any myth or religious story to tell any details of a story that were not originally provided.

Over Easy

I saw her step into the Pancake House, through the dust-colored glass door and across that faded yellow tile. Her name was Nancy; I had met her years before at a gay club, a few years after my divorce. Now, a little boy toddled along at her side, his hand in hers. She hadn't changed much - same curly brown hair that wouldn't stay back, broad hips and sloping, thin shoulders, little pinched eyes beneath her plucked eyebrows. Not ugly; not beautiful. The boy had big eyes that were a shade of water-blue, almost white around the pupils, that seemed to glow as she walked over and sat him down at the table next to mine. He wore tiny jeans with an elastic waist and a red shirt with a dinosaur on it.

I looked down at my eggs, at the speckled white plate smeared with yolk and ketchup, and for a minute listened to the grinding purr of the open kitchen, the murmurs of the people sitting up at the bar and some waitress yelling from the back. My grits were halfway gone from the little bowl and the only thing left in my glass of sweet tea was the ice. I figured I was done.

I got up, using my thumb to adjust my sports bra - the one with the seam that bites into my right side - and lit a

cigarette slowly. Then I picked up the little blue bill and walked over to Nancy's table.

I don't think she recognized me at first - I've put on some weight and my hair's gone a little grey, plus my skin color is better since I graduated from NA. I got the red keychain and everything. They give you a gold one when you make it a year. It hangs on my keys and I show it to anybody who asks. Nothing to hide.

She looked up at me from the menu, her eyes screwed shut a little bit, as the little boy across from her hummed in his highchair and stared at me.

"It's Nancy, right?" I said as I stuck out my hand. She nodded and shook my hand as her eyes flickered over to the little boy. "I'm Mindy. Remember? From Blaze's? I knew Tommy, that bartender—"

She jumped up then, tossed those almost-too-thick arms around me. I never knew her that well, but I hugged back.

"I didn't even recognize you, it's been forever." She nodded to the little boy, her hand still on my arm. "This here's Tony. Here, you want to sit down?" she asked. She sat back down and smiled up at me.

I slid behind her, pushing the empty chairs at my table in against the plastic tablecloth, and sat on the hard wood of the chair beside her.

Nancy looked over at me. "How are you?"

"I'm doing good, I reckon. Changed a little since my bar days, but I'm good. What've you been up to?"

She looked sideways over at little Tony, still humming away happy as you please and watching me with them blue-white eyes. "Been taking care of this one. He's my niece's son."

"I see." I tapped my cigarette in one of the gold-foil ashtrays they put on each table. I waved smoke away from my face but Nancy didn't seem to mind it. She must be about forty now - she'd been early thirties when I met her. "I was wondering if he was yours, if you'd found a man or if a man'd found you."

She grinned at me, all teeth and thin lips. "Nope. It sure must have been a while, you must not remember how I was at the bar."

Truth was, I did. Nancy was one of the girls that would lean too far over the pool table, missing a shot just to stretch out her ass in tight jeans, her mouth small and coy because she knew all the single women like me would stare. The kind of girl who orders drinks for everybody on the tips she got that night. Her hair wasn't as frizzy then, her eyes not as thin and wary. She looked back over at Tony. He smiled and said "Momma."

I puffed on my cigarette and pushed it cherry-first into the little tray. I moved the light metal to the edge of the table with my thumb as a skinny waitress strolled up.

"What do you need to drink?" she asked. "More sweet tea for you, Mindy?"

"Nah." I looked back over at the mess left on my table. "I figure I'm good."

"I'll take a Diet Pepsi and he'll want some apple juice," Nancy told her. The waitress snickered down at Tony, who reached his baby-fat hand out to grab the pen in her short apron. She sidestepped him.

"Be right back with that." The waitress swished away in the green knee-skirt they asked all the girls to wear.

"Did he say Momma?" I asked, thinking of my daughter, her little blonde mass of hair and wide, almond-colored eyes. I shifted my cigarettes on the table; the waitress yelped as another waitress spilled Nancy's Diet Pepsi across the kitchen floor.

"Yep. I've had him a while. He barely remembers his real Momma now - I got him when he was near five months old." She leaned across the table and held the hand he strained out at her, rubbing his sausage fingers with her wide thumb. Her fingers looked soft, like she smoothed them

with lotion every night after Tony fell asleep - like she'd been doing that same thing ever since she was a kid.

"What, she didn't pick him up one time?" I plucked another cigarette from the pack and let the box fall back on the table, raising my lighter to my mouth. That first inhale is always the best.

"Nah, I took him from her." Nancy looked at me as she pulled her hand back and I suddenly saw how vivid her hazel eyes were, this shining brown with streaks of leafy green pulling in toward the pupil. They were beautiful.

The waitress set the drinks on the table and lifted her order pad, pen ready. "What would you like?"

Nancy stared down at the menu for a second. "Well, I just want the number six with bacon. And he'll have the kiddy waffles."

The waitress scribbled and nodded, lifted Nancy's menu from the table and strode back off to the kitchen. Two men at the bar looked over at us from under their caps and then went back to pointing at the newspaper spread in front of them. Little Tony curled his hands up and smacked his fists against the table, looking up all surprised-like when they hit.

I leaned in to Nancy. "Do you mean like kidnapping?" I took a long drag from my cigarette and held the smoke in my mouth, letting it creep out slowly.

Nancy laughed, this big, quick guffaw. "Naw, naw. Nothing like that. My niece had this boyfriend - a grown man, I tell you - and he put Tony in the hospital." She cast out her hand for his again. "He was drunk, snatched Tony from the crib one night and broke both his arms. I couldn't leave family in a place like that, growing up that way." The way she looked over at Tony was tender and shy, like if she looked too hard, the damage the hospital fixed might pop back up again. "He's been my baby ever since I went to that hospital. My niece didn't have a say in the matter, not after I got social services to come see Tony. They handed him straight to me and that was that." Her straw got caught on some bubbles and lifted up, tipping out of the cup toward her. She fixed it between two fingers and sipped, still looking at Tony.

Tony spread his fingers in front of his mouth.

I thought back to when Stacy was a kid, older than Tony though, when I taught her to rub the cocoa butter on her hands after the bath, slowly in figure-eights up her arms and onto her shoulders. Back when I was married, I told myself if I devoted enough time to my husband, I would

stop staring at women, would stop watching their movements instead of his. When that didn't work and he caught on, he kicked me out, told the divorce court some bull: that I was cheating, that he was scared for Stacy. When her daddy told me I'd have to leave, I told Stacy to watch the stars for me. "When they twinkle, it means mommy loves you," I'd said. She'd smiled real big and gave me a hug as the crickets made their noise off in the woods. Then her daddy moved halfway across the country and wouldn't even let me talk to her. He kept the front door locked after the first time I came to visit her, would say Stacy was in bed even if I called in the middle of the afternoon. I used to save up my paychecks and drive over there, just watch the lights of the city they lived in from an overlook on the parkway. Her junior year of high school, she sent me a letter saying she wouldn't send me a school picture because anyone who abandoned her the way I did wasn't worth talking to. She never responded to the letters I sent back; I gave up a few years later, after three or four came back with "No forwarding address" stamped in red on the envelopes. She must be out of college by now, on her own; she might even have a kid.

"I'm going to give him a good life, though," Nancy said. "Social services still keeps a quick eye on me. They

want to make sure nothing like what happened before happens again." She turned her head back to me, the corduroy over her knee slipping from under the crinkled tablecloth and running into my thigh. My palms were itching like they do when I want to be in the car, driving. "But how are you?" Nancy stared straight at me.

I looked over to the kitchen, at the cook in his backwards grey cap, moping over some omelets behind the grill, at the skinny waitress talking to the two men at the bar and bending to set her elbows on the slick surface. I couldn't tell what they were talking about, but she was laughing and looking into their eyes. "I been good," I said, crushing out my cigarette. "But I have to go, I reckon, got to meet somebody uptown for a minute." I stood even though I didn't have anybody to see. "It was nice to catch up. I hope Tony isn't too much for you. They can be."

She smiled again. "Yep, but it's worth it. They're worth it."

"Yeah," I said. I squeezed between the chairs again, my cigarettes and crumpled bill in one hand, and shook her hand from the end of the table. "I'll see you."

Her mouth moved like she wanted to say something, like she had a question, but it went still as I turned for the cash register. As the waitress rang me up, I pulled singles

out of my thin wallet and handed them over when she stuck her hand out. Then I turned and walked in shaky steps to the dingy glass door and the burning sunlight outside.

About Letting Go and Holding On

Justin, Rebecca's punk "sometimes boyfriend" at college, wants to cut her hip-length blonde hair on her twenty-first birthday, crop it off into an uneven, choppy style that hangs down longer on one side than on the other. They've been watching a movie at his house and drinking to celebrate her birthday - it's a Tuesday, after all, and she has classes to attend and a History Club meeting tomorrow, no time for a "real party" - and Justin swears that Rebecca would look just like Scarlett Johansen if she'd only cut her hair. Rebecca refused at first, drunkenly pouting about how she "always hates short hair on girls" and that "it would never look good" - she's sure. But she puts it into a ponytail anyway, sits on the lid of the commode with a towel wrapped around her shoulders and watches it fall in sheaves on the tile floor.

The tile has the same blue flowers as her parents' bathroom when she was growing up, and as she watches strands of hair shine against the pattern, she thinks of the time her dad cut her hair too short when she was eight, after she got lice and tried to fix the problem herself.

"The bugs," she had sniffled. "They're itchy - the worst thing ever."

Before her dad had walked in and seen her, Rebecca had been looking in the mirror above the bathroom sink and cutting the hair on the top and sides; she neglected the back, the only part she couldn't see. When her dad had pulled out a pair of scissors, it still hung halfway down her back, the hair clustered around her face in chunks just above the line of her jaw. She had sat backwards on the closed toilet as he cut her hair; Rebecca had had no mirror in which to watch the length disappear.

When her dad had finished, she looked in that same bathroom mirror and pouted at the layers above her ears. She saw her dad watching her face in the mirror and had pushed her mouth into a smile, hugged him quickly from the countertop.

She had then bounced down onto the soles of her feet and rushed out the door as he unzipped his shave case and replaced the scissors inside. Rebecca had run through the white kitchen, past her mother - who called her name three times before giving up - and out the back door into the darkness of their fenced-in backyard, straight out to the rickety swing set. She had slumped in the middle swing, dragging her feet and sobbing until dinnertime.

Now, sitting on the couch in the living room after sweeping the hair from the bathroom floor, Justin uses his

foot to push aside the ashtray that rests on the coffee table. Rebecca presses play on the VCR and sits down beside him on the sofa as he wraps a pale arm around her shoulder. She giggles. "I can feel your skin—" she looks into his brown eyes, at the dark curl of his lashes, "—on my neck."

Justin smiles at her. "Good," he says. "I'm glad you like it."

Rebecca threads her legs between his, even though she knows this will make her calves fall asleep, and they sit like that - braided together on the stained sofa - for the hour that's left of her birthday.

Hazardous Conditions

Jason met me at a coffee shop - that Starbucks on 12th and Hull - because it was a public place and I was hoping we could both let everything out and be done with each other. Neither of us really took any time after we split; we just fell right into it with somebody new, and I'd had some feelings brewing that I couldn't shake - the hurt and all. He was only with me for two years, but it was one of those first-time-ever, toppling-head-first, can't-even-think-when-they're-not-right-in-front-of-you, have-two-arguments-and-three-sex-sessions-in-the-same-day kind of relationships. We tried to be friends the first few years apart and hang out or drink together, but we'd always end up screwing, even if we were dating other people. Then we'd get mad at each other for a few weeks because I wouldn't leave Aaron or because he was still pulling that I'm-too-sensitive-to-let-go bullshit. The past year, we hadn't really talked, but when I saw him in the grocery store last week, we'd both agreed there were still things we wanted to say.

So I told Aaron - that's the guy I started dating right after Jason - I had to go back to the office to finish customizing a PC for delivery before Christmas Eve and rode the bus to town. Aaron was more of the stay-at-

home-to-decorate-the-guest-room kind of guy, while I've always had to get out of the house sometimes so I didn't go crazy. I loved Aaron - not the same way I did Jason - but every once in a while I'd get to feeling like there was something in Jason that I missed. Like, Aaron would laugh at a movie or flick the hair from his eyes or run his tongue along my earlobe and I just couldn't help but think of the way Jason used to do that same thing. I'd make do with memories most of the time, and I never told Aaron I thought about Jason, but I'd wonder, standing in the shower or doing push-ups on the rug in the living room, if Jason ever thought about me. Kind of at the same time, you know, not like in-a-comic-book-I-can-read-your-mind, but like there was something that still attached us.

At Starbucks, Jason paid for my coffee, but he's always done that, and we sat by the bathrooms where there weren't many people and talked about the election a few months back and the ad he's working on for some chip company. I was the one who brought up why we met.

He looked at me. "I know, Damon. But isn't this how we work things out? By just talking and acting like friends?"

I shrugged. I really wasn't sure. The most closure I ever got with an ex was when I set fire to the front porch of a guy's trailer because he stopped answering my calls

and then cleaned out our joint bank account. He had run out through the back door while I watched the molding on the front door melt and that was it. We never saw each other again. He didn't even press charges. His neighbor - the son-of-a-bitch who introduced us - told me that he spent a month and a half building a new porch, and in the meantime, had to wade through the poison ivy that grew in back. I figured he deserved it.

Jason was looking at me across the fake wood table, his head to the side. "How do you suggest we do it, Damon? We could go to a movie or a museum, if you want, but I'm not sure how that would help." His foot bumped mine under the table as he took a sip of coffee.

I pushed a hand through my short hair and looked down at the table. "Oh, I almost forgot." I turned and reached into my bag - the over-your-shoulder kind that bike messengers carry that I had hanging over the back of my chair - to pull out his copy of Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*. It looked worse than when he gave it to me because it fell in the tub once - accidentally - so the pages were wrinkled and black from mold, but I told him thanks for letting me borrow it. "I liked it."

"Did you?" He held the book with his fingertips, looked at it out the corner of his eye like he used to look

at the home-style dinners I'd cook, and set it on the edge of the table. "What did you think of the ending?"

"It was good. Kinda unexpected. But at the same time, you could see it coming, you know?" I really only got half-way through, because that's where I was when he called to break up while I was running a bath, but he probably won't know the difference. I almost looked up SparkNotes on the ending before I came, because I knew he'd be a smart-ass and ask, but I was running late. I smiled at Jason and took a big drink of my coffee. It scorched my tongue - they always brew it too god-damn hot.

We sat there for a minute, him eyeing the book and me thinking about what Aaron was going to have ready for dinner. While I rubbed my raw tongue on the roof of my mouth, Jason looked up at me, one of his eyebrows pulled up. "So I thought of you the other day."

My heart picked up a little bit because I remembered three days before, when I'd thought of him while I was feeding the puppy - his name's Brutus and he's one of those always-all-over-everything-in-reach dogs. Jason squinted. "You still read about government conspiracies, right?"

I nodded.

"Well, I found these crazy videos online about fluoride in our drinking water and how it's really killing

us while it's whitening our teeth." He grinned. "I only drink bottled water now. When I saw it, it made me think about how you used to rant about those things."

Just then, a friend of Aaron's walked up in a too-shiny sarong, threw her arms around me and asked about Aaron and the puppy. We got the puppy a few weeks ago - it's a Beagle-Great Dane mix - you know, to kind of see how we do before we look into adopting in a few years. He and I are going on four years, so I figure once this stuff with Jason is all settled - the emotional stuff, I mean - Aaron and I can settle down and give our moms some grandkids.

"Aaron's good. The puppy's growing fast, so we have to keep an eye on him." Brutus loves to chew this damn ottoman that she gave Aaron, and I had to plastic wrap the legs so she wouldn't come over and see teeth marks in it. I didn't tell her that, though.

She looked over at Jason. "Who's your friend?"

I stared at Jason and shrugged. "Just a friend of mine, a coworker--"

"Oh, hi," she said, and smiled. She threw her long red hair over her shoulder as she shook Jason's hand and looked back over at me. "Is Aaron here? I know he doesn't like coffee."

"No, he's at home, but he knows I'm here," I lied.

"Oh, okay." She paused, took a heavy breath and looked down at the rows of sugar packets as I stared at her, trying not to blink. "Well, I have to run, but be safe, okay? It's starting to snow." She flipped her hair over her shoulder again. "Tell Aaron I say hi," she said. Then she turned and walked to the coat rack by the front door.

I looked out the windows in front. Just flurries, nothing serious. Cabs definitely run in worse. I turned back to Jason and we just looked at each other. Then Jason went to stirring his coffee. I stared down at the floor tiles and let my mind draw lines between the brown dots.

"So I was thinking," Jason said, his hands on the table in front of him, "that if you want to swing by my place after this, I could show you those videos and you'd have a cheaper cab fare. Plus, the traffic here is going to be killer in a few minutes."

I looked at him, wondering if he was up to something. But then I figured if he was going to bring up cheaper cab fare from his place and all that, he must have known I was going home and not to his bed. Besides, if I went with him it would give me a chance to find things about the apartment that were better when I lived there - somebody told me that helps with closure.

The cold outside hit me hard, so I dug my stocking cap out from my bag and pulled it down over my ears. Jason just huddled his head down and took big steps through the flakes of snow, all the way down the ten-block stretch to his apartment.

When we got to his front door, I couldn't feel my toes or fingers and if I crossed my eyes, I could see how red my nose was. I hopped up and down to try and get more blood into my legs. He pulled his keys out.

"Cold?" He looked at me and laughed.

"A little." I kept hopping.

"Come on, let's warm up." He swung open the door and flicked on the lights to the front room. It was that same old apartment, same ratty green couch, same god-damn pictures of fruit hanging by the door. I peeked my head into the bathroom as he hung up his peacoat - yup, those same ugly-ass towels. The apartment was cleaner without me in it, but from what I could see, that was about it. He even had the same little TV set, one of those old ones with the knobs and no remote. As he fiddled with the heat thermostat, I thought about how he wouldn't even get the local news after the HD switch-over in a few months and figured I'd ask Aaron if we couldn't give him the set we have in the kitchen - we never use it, anyway.

"Not much has changed," he said, "but I do have a new computer." He sat on the couch, in the spot where I always used to sit when football was on, and picked up a new HP notebook laptop, one of the so-light-you-barely-know-it's-in-your-hand ones. He set it on his legs and started typing. I pulled my bag and coat off and tossed them on the floor by the door, but kept my cap on. Wasn't going to stay long, no reason to get settled in.

"Here, I pulled up those videos." He pointed at the laptop screen.

I came over and sat on the couch beside him - not right beside, but close enough that I could see the screen. When Jason hit play, this angry-looking man started talking about fluoride and how in the twenties scientists discovered that it kills germs but it takes down your IQ, so it's really not that good, but they put it in tap water anyway. I was getting real into it when the guy started talking about how in '93 dentists all over the country ran studies and decided that it didn't help your teeth that much either, when I felt Jason's hand on the couch cushion by my thigh.

"Sorry," he said, all soft, and looked over at me. I just kept watching the video, trying to read the statistics as they went across the screen, but they were scrolling so

fast I couldn't really catch them. I reached over to pause the video and take a look at the numbers - I guess I leaned into him a little bit, but not much - when Jason kissed me on the cheek.

I looked at him. "What was that?" My mouth went dry and I almost walked out, but I didn't want to give him any excuses to talk bad about me. A thought of Aaron flew into my head - him back at the house, probably beginning to wonder where I was, and me here, not even on the god-damn way yet. My chest ached a little bit.

"I'm not sure." He tilted his head down. "I just miss you."

He looked kind of down-and-out right then, chewing on his cheek in the glow from the laptop. I guess I felt bad for snapping at him, so I put my arm around his shoulder. "I miss you, too, Jason."

He turned his head and looked at me, and I was going to go on, about how just because we missed each other didn't mean we could bust in on each other's lives, but then he leaned in and kissed me full on the lips. I just started kissing back. By the time I stopped and realized, we were lying on the couch with his shirt off, and my cap and shoes were on the floor. "Wait," I said, and sat up. I

looked out the windows and saw spots of snow passing by, those big flakes that mean it's sticking.

Jason looked at me like he had just woken up, blinked a few times and pushed at his mussed up hair. "What?"

"Hold on a sec." I walked to the window and the snow was coming down hard - I mean hard. You could barely see the streets anymore and it looked like restaurants were closing early - at least two had those won't-be-back-'til-this-is-done signs on the doors, and I saw the owner of the Greek place locking up and running to his car. I thought about Aaron out at the house, and pulled my cell phone out of my jeans pocket as my stomach did a little somersault.

"What are you doing?" Jason sat up on the couch and stared at me.

"Just hold on." I dialed the ABC Cab Company and the woman on the line told me that all the city's cabs were on lockdown, the buses, too. The weather was supposed to turn to ice any minute, she said, and if I had any sense, I'd just stay where I was. I hung up the phone as Jason got up and came over to me. He set his hand on my waist, right on my hip like he always used to. I dialed the phone again while he started kissing my neck, up that tendon near the back. I stepped away from him, folded my arms in front

because my hands were shaking, and held the phone with my shoulder.

Aaron answered on the other end. "Thank god it's you, I was just about to call. Are you on the way home? Where are you?" Brutus barked in the background and Aaron said a quiet "Hush, dog."

I looked out the window again, at the buildings across the street that looked fuzzy from the snow falling in front of them. "I'm still at work. I tried calling a cab, but they're shut down because of weather."

He sighed.

"I know, hon," I said, "but I'm just going to slip over to the motel a few blocks away, walking there won't be that bad, and then I should be able to get a cab home in the morning. I don't want to chance getting someone to drive in this." I couldn't have walked to the motel by the office if I'd wanted to in that weather. The snow swirled in front of the windows, spinning up into the air and then dropping back down.

"All right. That's fine. Just be safe." Brutus barked again, the I-need-to-go-out-right-now bark, but Aaron didn't say anything.

"I will, don't worry."

"Then I'll talk to you tomorrow. But call me if you get lonely tonight." I could hear the smile in his voice, so I grinned to make mine sound the same way.

"I will. Talk to you soon."

Brutus howled and I could hear Aaron turn from the phone and say "What in god's name do you want?"

"Bye," I said, as I pulled the phone away from my ear.

"I love y—" The phone was already half-way shut when I heard him say it, and I figured he knew I loved him, so I just left it at that. I'd apologize for that mistake the next day and everything would be fine.

I turned from the windows to the empty couch and slid my phone back in my pocket. "Jason?"

"In here." His voice echoed down the little hallway that connected the front room to the bedroom, but his voice wasn't soft anymore - like that I-never-have-to-ask-twice tone kids use in the toy aisle. I looked down at my shoes and cap on the floor by the couch and pushed the rough spot on my tongue against my front teeth. I thought about leaving Aaron at home so I could run into the city and the icy-white streets outside, about the puppy and that dent on the couch where I used to sit. Then I walked across the room in my sock-feet, past my coat and bag, and stepped into the dark bedroom hallway.

Why to Act Straight at a Urinal

Because it's the only place in this bar where men look at one another when they speak; because in the bathroom - between the walls decorated with graffiti and dried droplets of paint - someone can hit you from behind, into the enamel mold, and the reflection in the metal flusher isn't large enough to see them swinging; because it makes the stream sound stronger, like "a man" would piss; because at the sinks, standing - on the cracked, once-white squares of tile, each corner chipped - in front of the mirror you can catch a curious man looking, but they never do if you look first; and because by the end of this vodka tonic, you'll have had too many to even try and fake it.

The Importance of Experience

In the middle of the empty bar, the place where they play the Coasters at full volume and already know me 'cause I have to drive Dad home sometimes, Starla - at least that's the name she told me - gripped the empty neck of her brown bottle behind a shield of red fingernails. She had told me her name three Buds earlier, before she started analyzing the reasons someone sixteen-years-old would be at a smoky bar just off the highway. "You already told me you have the money, but all kids your age wanna do is treat me like shit," she leered, and tossed her stick-straight blonde hair over her shoulder.

Heat rose from my chest, up my throat, and as it stung along my cheeks, I looked down at the wooden bar, at my water with lime, and pulled a Camel from the pack my brother bought me. He - my brother, I mean - had told me it might be a little tough to convince one of them, but he'd never said I'd get embarrassed, or that she'd know the nasty things I'd want to try with her. I pushed the barstool back, across the uneven floor, as I lit the cigarette with matches the bartender had given me.

"You promise to?" She winked, the bottle on her outlined lips, and tipped it up until it pointed down her throat, her dark eyes still on me. I thought of pinning her

down, fingers wrapped on her neck, and nodded as she wiped her mouth on her wrist - leaving a delicate stain of pink lipstick and beer foam - and tossed her purse over her shoulder as she stood and took my arm.

Who You Have Come to Be

Who You Have Come to Be, Part I

Before, another woman at Palms, the martini bar - or do they call it a lounge? - mingling, twenty-six, with a tight skirt and big earrings; he was a man at the same bar - in a ribbed sweater that hid his belly and showed off his chest, maybe a year older - who bought you a cosmo before asking your name; you were the woman who admitted your secrets - the things that would drive him crazy, what to do in bed, the way you prefer your eggs - and he was the man who listened - the one who came up with routines to avoid freak-outs, let you be in control the very first time, prepared them scrambled with no yolks and a pinch of pepper the next morning; you were the one who wanted to date, he was the one who asked to be exclusive; he bought a cologne because you said it smelled like men should; you dyed your hair blonde because he said dark eyes and light hair together were sexy; he brought the pomegranate cherry juice you love on random dates; you kept a change of his clothes in your compact car for dinners.

What to Do If His Phone Rings While He's In the Bathroom

If at home, call for him softly, if in public, simply watch the caller ID until the last ring; in the final

second, answer - your voice slow and thick like honey from the refrigerator - and make it apparent the two of you are together, but without ever saying so; place his phone just as it was before he left, sure to remove your hand before he enters the room; tell him who called and that you answered, that she seems like a lovely girl and you just wish he'd introduce you to more of his friends; if he smiles, fall back into what you were doing before he left and place a hand on his strong thigh at the soonest opportunity; but if he lifts his phone to scroll through the call log or says he didn't know she had his number, stay up after he falls asleep and sit in the dark of the bedroom - on the mattress you bought for yourself after college, between the sheets you washed just after he agreed to come over - to record and double-check every phone number you don't recognize.

When to Be Sure Your Time With Him is Up

When he stops answering his phone, which is always on, or texting back with a wink at the end of his messages; when he is late for dinner more than three times in a row and his only excuse is traffic; when he decides he dislikes his favorite restaurant, or yours, and would prefer to order take out, eat on the couch, and watch "Office Space"

for the fiftieth time; when he no longer throws an arm over you while he's snoring; when he begins panting too soon during sex and then strolls to the kitchen before you've had a chance to finish, or tells you that James was in the break room discussing the advantages of group sex; then the time has come to collect your things from his bedroom before he gets up for work the next morning, quietly shut the front door and pause on the steps to tie the laces of your shoes as you think of him - inside, shirtless, still asleep - the key to his apartment on the kitchen counter.

Why to Go Shopping After He's Gone

New pajamas and sheets, to make sure the bed doesn't smell like him tonight; backless blouse for clubbing this weekend; Marlboro Lights, carton; necklace to replace the one he picked out; new planner without anniversary reminders; a box of hair dye, ash brown to forget the bottle blonde; smooth metal trashcan to fill with his letters, still-framed pictures, e-mails printed to show friends; twenty-four pack of Yuengling; gasoline, at least a quarter of a gallon in case metal picture frames refuse to melt quickly; woodstove matches to make sure it lights on the first try; sweater to wear while building the fire;

flavor-locked single serving bag of the only Colombian roast he'd agree to drink.

Where to Go When You Miss Him

The Applebee's on Main for lunch, despite the fact that he never bartends on Tuesday afternoons; a quiet café on Landon Street - isn't it just called Café? - that he frequents after work for a chai latte with extra milk, which is better than it sounds; the loud, smoky pool hall by the Civic Center where the two of you would play poker - in the back on Thursdays - and skee-ball; the Food Lion by Waterfront Road that's only three blocks from his apartment and has beer for a dollar cheaper than any other grocery in town; the Lowe's you went to - the one on Corrine Boulevard - to get him a new drill and wrench set for Christmas last year; the voodoo shop on the boardwalk, owned by a woman who really is Creole and will build a doll out of a sock and three stray hairs for thirty dollars; before home, to bed, where the sheets smell faintly of beer and sand, and there's nothing to remind you of how recently he was there.

Who You Have Come to Be, Part II

He only likes comedies; you watch horror and romance; he loves to hike and play horseshoes; you want to swim and

read; he smokes a Marlboro every morning before breakfast; you scrub and put away ashtrays at bedtime; he takes walks when angry, sings in the shower when aroused; you dole out silent treatment, wink when you get a glance; he never hugs strangers, leaves when someone tells him to go; you kiss everyone good bye, lock your knees when challenged; and in the early morning din of an empty apartment - sipping Columbian roast, half-watching the news - you suddenly wonder if it's anyone's fault at all.

Appearances

(I.S.O. "Girl" by Jamaica Kincaid)

Remember, son, to always look your best and never forget to comb your hair - part it on this side to look quiet, over here to appear showy. This is how to wash dishes, gently, and always with an ear on the other room. If one of the boys screams insults at school, be sure to walk away - you're too small to fight and probably always will be. Wash clothes in the sink if the machine is broken, only use a few drops of detergent and give them time to soak. Ask your father how to knot a tie, more than one way, and teach your friends who can't. Learn to keep your hands by your sides and don't wear the same jewelry as girls, even if it's a gift - boys don't wear pink and purple beads. Burn a loose thread on a colored shirt to keep it from pulling further; pull a string on white cloth so it won't leave a scorch. Hang your nice slacks like this so Grandma won't think you're a heathen. Try to squirm less in church, but don't fall asleep. Tuck in your shirt and speak clearly, no one wants to hear mumbling. Be aware if your mouth is hanging open while you listen, close it as soon as you realize. Try not to laugh while chewing, it makes other people look away. Never smoke cigarettes, it killed Granjack and it can kill you too. Brush your teeth every

night, slow even circles, so they will shine white and wet like snow on the fields. This is how to spread hay - over the fence, several piles evenly spaced. Don't throw gravel at the dogs and never near the horses; if they kick you, it's your fault. Never toss walnuts by the house, bust a window and you'll pay for it. Wipe your feet before walking inside, especially if you live there. If someone is your friend, hug them and look into their eyes; if it's a person you don't like, smile and shake their hand firmly. Always be a good host, it will be useful with the right guests. Hold the door open for people, especially if they're only a few steps behind. Look at pictures without touching them. Knock before entering a room. Learn not to be upset when your father comes home later than usual or not at all. Try to not ever cry - it's not becoming on a boy. Learn to listen more than you talk and never swear in front of ladies, it attracts the wrong kind. Before leaving for a date, line your buttons up correctly, sloppy boys never date pretty girls. *But what if the date isn't with a girl?* Wait, you don't - you're sure? All right, son, all right. No, no, you can cry, come here, it's fine. At least you'll be happy. Know that my arms are always here for you, okay? Always be judicious. Stay close to girls who aren't afraid to fight - you'll be tougher that way. Don't tell just

anyone. Never let your guard down, hear me? And don't ever stare - no matter how safe you feel - in public.

On What It Means to Stay

As I crouch behind the front door to our cramped apartment - vacuuming for the second time today - it flies open and I have to catch it with my left hand before it hits me. David's screechy voice overpowers the vacuum's hum in our tiny living room. "I brought Mexican for lunch."

I twist at the waist and look up at him - at that sparse blond mustache he says will soon look good - and scratch the stubble on my cheek. I need to shave. "I thought you were bringing sushi," I call over the whirr.

"I changed my mind," he says, swinging one of his long, slender legs so his foot hits the door. It slams and the wall rattles with a solid thud, rocking the picture on the wall above me like a pendulum. Asshole.

I turn off the Dustbuster and set it on the green carpet; my guts bubble, clinch as I stand and walk past him into the kitchen. Sitting at the table in front of my cold cup of coffee, I lift my left leg over the right and shift the rounded bottle of coffee creamer along the wood grain on the table.

I sniff, but all I can smell is the dry, stale scent of a hangover. "How'd you know what I wanted?" He blinks his thick black eyelashes as he looks up at me and crosses the kitchen to the table.

"I didn't. I just got you some of those spicy burritos. The meat asiado ones. You like those, right?" The plastic bags grunt against Styrofoam containers heavy with greasy Mexican food as he sets them on the table, his keys clanging down beside the bags. Asada, not asiado, dumbass. He tosses his grey windbreaker over the back of a chair and it swishes against the yellow vinyl seat cover.

As I watch him pull forks out of a drawer, I blink rapidly, like something is lodged in my eye. "Remember this morning, when I didn't get out of bed 'til ten because of my stomach hurting?" He was supposed to be here drinking with me last night instead of at the bar with Saruh and Jessie.

"Oh yeah. Want a Hot Pocket?" Without glancing up, he pulls out the chair opposite me and lifts one of the square Styrofoam containers out, opens it and begins assembling his steak fajitas with quick, swooping motions.

I look down into my white mug. "Nah. Don't worry about it." The white chocolate cream slowly roils in my coffee, the color tan and smoky.

My mouth has gone dry and greasy; my stomach is too tight to handle any caffeine. I hate his dopey fucking face.

I turn my head to the left. On the abrupt little balcony, two city pigeons bring more tiny branches and flower stalks, scraps of hay - where do they find these things? - to build the pitiful twig nest I have already ripped down three times this week. Idiot birds.

David is cramming half a fajita into his mouth at once - red-brown juice drips down his chin and onto his white Oxford shirt.

"Shit," he mumbles, through soggy tortilla and peppers. He swallows hard, his throat flexing wide and then relaxing slim again, and pushes the rest of the fajita into his mouth with one spidery hand. "I'm gonna go change," he says as he wipes his mouth with a paper napkin - the metal legs of his chair squeal along the linoleum floor away from the table and he goes down the hallway into the bedroom.

I uncross my legs, turn to the right and stand, slide the smudged glass door open and step outside. Fucking asshole.

As one of the dull pigeons takes flight, its fat little body pulling down the glimmer of sun on salt and pepper wings, I brush the little pile of scrap from the corner of the porch with my foot. All you little bastards, nest somewhere else. This is my balcony.

I turn back to the kitchen as David walks back out, tightening a green tie. He lifts his jacket from the back of the chair with a swoosh. A drop of dried grease clings to his chin.

"Paul, I'm just going to eat this back at the office." He looks over at me and smiles quickly. I nod as he scoops everything back into the noisy plastic bag, tosses his fork in the sink from across the kitchen and passes the ugly blue cigarette-burned couch to the door. He nearly catches one sleeve of his jacket in the wooden frame as the door swings shut.

I turn and lean on the smooth metal railing of our balcony, licking the peeling corners of my chapped lips. I look down the twenty-three stories to the stained, uneven sidewalk to watch the glass door swing open and David stride out. His cell phone is balanced against one shoulder and he's almost juggling the Mexican food to pull the grey windbreaker on over his white shirt. I look down at the blue veins snaking beneath my white, white skin. I look sick.

The only reason I went to get tested was because David started wearing underwear. He had never worn any - no boxers, no briefs - since we had met. I immediately found it sexy, and his lack of undies directly led to him waking

up in my bed. But two months ago, as I watched him get dressed from the still-warm sheets - the government tells me I'm too neurotic to hold a job ever since I had that fit over cleaning the bathrooms at the movie theater and broke my boss's nose - his hips were hidden by green elastic shorts. "What are those?"

He had turned to me with wide, deliberately blank eyes, as if he had ever been a good liar. "What?"

"The boxers. Are those mine?"

Face full of surprise, he had looked down, apparently mystified to be wearing underwear for the first time in three years. "Oh. No. Last night. I got a few pairs. Been getting colder out." Then he'd turned, one black sock still in his hand, and shut the hollow bathroom door before I could ask anything else.

So, just to quiet my paranoia, I sat in the kitchen and called the clinic after David had left for work - I became rather lax after meeting him.

The woman on the other end had chimed, "So are you having symptoms, or just want to make sure nothing is going on down there?"

I had scrunched my nose up and squinted my eyes. Down there? Like, my penis? I thought they had to be nurses to work at these places. "No, no symptoms. Just been a while

since I had a check-up...down there." I had stepped across the flower-print linoleum to the sink - the phone on my shoulder - and started washing the day-old crust of linguini from the pile of cheap ceramic plates.

"Oh my, well, that's no good."

"You're right, it's not." This woman must've been insane. "I was also wondering, since it's been a while, how long do the results take?" I had turned off the water and set my hip against the counter - holding the phone with my fingertips and leaning my head into it, ignoring the rubbery pasta left on David's plate.

"Well, for the less serious ones, only a few minutes. We'll let you know those results before you even leave the clinic." I imagined this woman as Dolly Parton from "9 to 5," chipper and completely oblivious. "Now let me just see when we can fit you in."

As she flipped pages, I had scraped under my fingernails with a prong on a freshly-dried fork.

"How about Saturday at two?" She had sounded like she was smiling. I don't think I've ever smiled in an STD clinic. Or seen anyone who has.

"Sounds great. The name's Paul Williams. I'll see you then."

The phone cradle had beeped as I set down the off-white phone and went to the bedroom. I could feel the dusty quiet of the apartment crawl along my skin as I sat on the bed and chewed my already ragged nails for an hour - they used to look so nice, before I started getting anxious - until I finally dressed to take a jog and absorb some vitamin D.

Now the light in the kitchen has dimmed and I glance at the clock: almost two-thirty. I step inside and sit. The dry terry cloth wrapped around me is scratchy and rough against my bare skin as I look down at the blue clashing with the soft blond hairs on my arm, my skin. Asshole.

My cell phone vibrates on the plastic countertop. I lean my chair back - my tip-toes barely touching the cold floor - until I can reach it and look at the LED screen. David.

I flip the phone open and stare at the screen for a few seconds before putting it to my ear. "Hello?"

"Hey. So I was thinking maybe I could come home from work early today. I told everybody to take the afternoon off. So I'll be home in, say, an hour. Sound okay?"

I lean my head back and stare at the white ceiling. "Sure. You live here, too."

"I know, but..." He sounds nervous or anxious, like someone is standing over him. "Look, I'll just see you soon, okay?"

"All right." I push the top of the phone until momentum pulls it closed and set it on a dark circle in the table's wood grain, just beside the bottle of creamer.

I pull at the waist cord of my robe - my fists tight, shaking knots - and it grips tighter and tighter around my torso, which feels cold and barren. I wrap one thin arm around myself and reach for my cold coffee - the fog of creamer shifts and curls as I lift the cup. I sit still for a long time, picturing my zippered suitcases in the hall closet; the two bookshelves in the bedroom with my pictures and books; the last statement for my empty bank account; Mom's face if I showed up back home, half the country away; David's relaxed mouth as he slept after the last time we had sex.

I didn't even tell David I had gone to get tested. They make you come back in to get the results - something about mixed-up paperwork in the eighties and a privacy of information act. So I sat in the waiting room, trying to tell everyone with my face that I was there for a malaria shot and not for the same reasons that made them slouch into the bright plastic chairs. The only one who seemed to

know was the grey-haired man in the back who winked when the nurse called my name. I sat quietly in the exam room, brushing wrinkles out of my jeans, until another nurse walked in.

"William?"

"Well, that's my last name, it has an *s* on the end, but yes, that should be me. People do that to me all the time, especially in situations like these - where it's listed with my last name first - they always call me William instead of Paul, but it's actually Paul Williams, and then most people ask why I have two first names instead of a first and a last name, but my middle name is actually Lynnwood, which is so rare they think I'm making it up, but my parents were just kind of—" Her face told me I needed to shut up. "Sorry." I folded my hands between my knees and lowered my chin, eyes trained on her wood pulp clipboard.

She looked back down and flipped a page over the silver clip. "Your results are back."

The only other word I heard was "positive." It flashed in my mind like a marquee, big, gaudy red letters - "AIDS" in fucking Broadway lights. I walked out of the exam room and back into that ugly crowd waiting for their turn, their news. When the hunched old guy reached out for my arm, I slapped his hand away hard and glared down at him, my

breath coming out in quick puffs. His eyes went big and watery and I was back in the apartment - on the puke-green carpet of the living room, holding the slip of paper labeled "POSITIVE" that they make you take - with the door locked before I thought to apologize.

When David saw my red-rimmed eyes after he got home, I told him a friend's dog had died. He thought I was angry about doing the dishes all the time, the shelves he promised to build me six months ago for books in the living room, or at least his refusal to vacuum. He had no idea.

I bite the inside of my cheek with my molars - hard - and stand. I march down the short hall to the bedroom.

The mirror above my dresser reflects the bookshelves lining the other side of the room - all the shiny textbooks that I'm still paying for, the bestsellers David refuses to read - and I step up to it and watch my tongue push against the salty, slimy spot inside my cheek. He would crumble if he found out. I can almost see it, his legs limp as he falls to the floor, looks up at me and starts to cry - eyes smeared dark with tears, cheeks turned red and splotchy from embarrassment, fear - his keys and jacket and cell phone scattered on the carpet around him. No more leaving me home to go clubbing with those two sluts, no more watching soccer with the boys or drinks after work until

two a.m., no need to pack and haul my shit across state lines.

I drop my robe in a soft pile on the floor and pull open the top drawer, slip out a pair of jeans and lift my legs into them. I clasp each cold, round button slowly. I reach for a white shirt and then pull back. Fuck it; I may as well be dramatic. I pull the folded piece of paper from my wallet on the dresser and unfold it - the capital letters in black ink shine through the creases, overpowering the rest of the print. I slide it into my back pocket.

Taking big steps, I go back to the kitchen and pick up my coffee mug and the creamer, move to the sink and pour the cold coffee down the drain. I open the fridge - the door makes a soft shushing sound as it swings open - and set the creamer on glass shelf.

I step back, turn and set the paper in the very center of the bare table. Even he should notice that. I move to the glass in front of the balcony and face the sun beginning to disappear behind the tops of tall downtown buildings. At least I had enough time to get ready. I place each hand on a hip half-clad in denim and turn my back to the light. The Dustbuster still sits on the carpet behind the door, gleaming grey from the fading sunlight that

filters through the living room windows. David's key rattles quietly into the brass lock on the front door and clicks as the gears inside begin to grind and turn.

Token

An air of mischievous glee always accompanies me to parties and gatherings - especially those held in lavish whitewashed households, with pedicured lawns, oh, and a circular brick driveway, perhaps a fountain resting in the center - when I get to experience a new place for the very first time. I wait until the sturdy red door has been answered by a gracious woman in a teal dress - her hair styled like Veronica Lake or perhaps Linda Darnell - and I have entered the house, but from there I begin to plan out the rest of their abode - down to the very color of the trim - before I have seen even another doorway.

Led by my hostess on the "official tour," I walk through the rooms just before we arrive in them and try to see which statues she wrongly arranged, which walls seem to have been erected in an incorrect place, which pictures do not suit the colors in my head. The dining room is always simple and just right, though they should have chosen lilies rather than roses and used a burgundy rug; the kitchen immaculate, silver all polished and gleaming - but a permanent island counter would be more appropriate than a wheeled bar; the living room such a gauche, crowded display of bright color and mahogany that it's hardly worth mentioning the list of corrections; and the master bedroom

would do well with a different - perhaps hand carved? - headboard and finer drapes.

A certain delight finds its way into my fingers as we pass from room to room and I begin to lightly touch the trinkets I like, labeling them mine - by the rule of finders-keepers - even if I allow the objects to stay with their now-former owners. When I finally see an article I truly desire - they are always small and shiny, like a polished elephant of jade or a gilded sand dollar on a grey marble nightstand - I ask my hostess as politely as I know if I may pick it up, feel it, inspect it. She always agrees, beaming, and then continues to tell me a story about where she found such an artifact - at a quaint beach shop in Peru - or how difficult it is for such things to be made. She will then turn, one hand gesturing around the room as she laughs, not unlike the tinkling of glass, and steps into the next room to continue our tour.

The only problem with such actions is that I - every time, it seems - forget to place the object back where I found it - unless, of course, they mention the item, in which case I gasp at the forgetfulness that seizes me when I am amongst such sumptuous surroundings and pointedly situate the article just as it was.

If they do not happen to notice, I will only realize the treasure is still in my hand after we have descended the grand staircase again - which curves too widely into the foyer and could be carpeted with something a bit softer - or as I stand before the shallow black marble sink in the bathroom just at the top of the stairs - which calls for a different shade of mauve in the floor tile and someone to please polish the mirror's gold frame. As soon as my mistake is realized, of course, I slip the quartz prism or silver snuff box into my pant pocket for safekeeping, until I can work up the courage to again brave the lilac walls of the guest bedroom or the chartreuse curtains of the game room and promptly replace the relic. I will then rejoin my hosts in the parlor - swaying dully to music or sipping vermouth and gin from crystal glasses - to converse and mingle with the other guests, possibly try a taste of the brie - which was aged perhaps a week too long - or a sip of the cabernet - which was uncorked a season early - and fraternize generally with the other attendants of the party - who are, despite their best efforts, quite charming indeed.

Just before the front door is again opened and closed for me, I will turn in the foyer to picture the house and imagine my things - both those that are theirs, the

souvenirs and artifacts of these glamorous travelers, and those that are mine, the everyday belongings which sit plainly on the other side of town in a two-room apartment situated above a butcher's shop - filling tall rooms, brightening wide walls, clearing the hardwood floors.

I always leave the congregation of polite sophisticates smiling, the edges of my vision crisp, at having found a new place for my mind's restless legs to roam; and at the weight in my pocket - perhaps a silver skeleton key or a tiny owl statuette - to arrange on a simple wooden shelf when I arrive home.

Getting the Message

"Happy birthday, Julien!" Sarah shouts across the crowded shuffle of the Channel 8 news room. "You finally made it to middle age! Join the party!" She pushes her glasses up the bump of her nose.

"Thanks, Sarah. Not sure I'm glad to be included." I smile at her as she sticks her tongue out at me and turns back to the copier, flipping open to the gray top. I set my messenger bag beside my desk, shake the mouse to wake up my computer, grab my coffee mug; time to work.

In the break room, Alicia is talking to David. "The Tony's are a sham, I tell you! It's all politics. Not one of those shows was worth a damn, especially the one starring Oprah. I mean really now - Oprah?" She turns to me. "Hey babe, happy birthday." A one-sided smile jerks across her face and she pokes me in the side with a finger. "How's it feel to be forty?"

"Glorious. Thought I'd never make it." I pour the coffee into my discolored mug, stirring creamer in until the liquid is khaki-colored. "So, Licia, I have a question."

She turns to me, ignoring David's rebuttal, eyes wide. "Yes, dear?"

"In your experience," I say, tapping the spoon on the edge of the sink, "is it even possible to be friends with an ex?"

"Sean called?"

I put my weight on my left leg and take a sip.

"Texted, about my birthday. He always does this shit. It's been five months, going strong with no contact, then bam! The perfect way to start my mid-life crisis."

Alicia pats my arm. "No, honey. Fuck it. One friend of mine says she's friends with all her ex's, but she only means in the bedroom. Unless his dick is good enough to never let go of, fuck him. Besides, you guys were only together a year, right?"

I look down into my coffee. "Three. But it has been a while. And I've slept with other guys since." At least, I've woken up on other guys' couches since then.

David walks out of the room, one hand over his face. "You guys are so weird."

Alicia looks after him. "Dumb fucker. Anyway, no, honey, fuck it. Drink your coffee, do your work, and think about how successful you are without him." She winks at me and walks out of the room as I lean back against the counter.

I pull my cell phone out of my pocket and look down at the screen blinking 9:45. Shit. It was stupid to text him back. I look out through the windows into the office, at Alicia on the phone at her desk, Sarah cussing as she scrambles to hold the reams of copied paper spilling onto the floor. I mean, Sean and I could at least *try*. It's not hard to be friends, you just have to do it; we just have to do it. I look down at my phone and dial Sean's number.

After seven rings, I hear "You've reached Sean's phone. You guys know what to do." I can hear my voice in the background, laughing, from two years ago when the message was made. Suddenly I'm on our old couch, drinking that Coors again - his favorite - and it spills and rolls down my palm and chest as he tickles me and prances away, pointing to the phone when I reach for him. *Beep*. "Hey, Sean, it's Julien. Well, you knew that from my number. But, so, anyway, I got your text this morning and it was really sweet, but that's not what I'm calling about. I'm...I'm calling because I guess I just want to and-" The spit in my throat thickens and dries; I set down my coffee. Suddenly my fingers ache like the time he shut them in the front door, I can see the stray calico kitten he made me leave on the street, smell the smoking computer the time he kicked it after his porn opened up a virus. I look at the pointed

toes of my brown leather shoes. "And I just wanted to call to tell you I've decided to say fuck it. We can't be friends, Sean - we never could, even when we were together. Obviously, or we would be. Don't call me again. You should know better than that by now."

I hang up the phone and slip it back into my pocket. My coffee has tiny circular waves as I raise it to my lips, and I hold it with both hands to keep from spilling. My cell plays "At Last" by Etta James and I already know it's a text from Sean.

"hey, i am @ work. cant pick up. srry. :("

My thumb jerks to the reply key before I take a breath, shut the phone, and walk toward the door. Fuck it.

Idols

Raymond arrives at St. Anthony's hospital - after answering the phone, a mention of his son Arty, a frantic cross-town drive - and drops into the uncomfortable chair by his unconscious son's bed.

Arty has always been the quiet kid hanging around Rockville Comic Shop in baggy Wal-Mart jeans and over-sized Spiderman t-shirts, Raymond thinks, but the last three years had turned to hell without Sue. Arty's school-assigned books weren't even worth bringing home; shifts at the wood-working factory left Raymond too dirty and tired to argue about grades.

Raymond had imagined an accident happening to Arty before - right after Sue drowned at the lake - though in Raymond's mind, Arty's hospital room would never be quite this bright. But after those thoughts, after the chalky taste of terror had passed, Raymond always had reassuring visions, images of himself at the accident. He would watch his muscles strain as he pushed the cars apart in the middle of the interstate, or lifted the red Camaro about to hit Arty into the sky, or ran past in a blur to pluck his son - a yelp of disbelief, the apologies and admiration - from the driver's seat just before impact.

Before tonight, Raymond would sit in the kitchen after work - before Arty came home, reeking of marijuana, and locked his bedroom - to brainstorm, to try and find sports and clubs Arty could join to help him connect with someone, anyone. Raymond thinks of the time he offered Arty a job at the factory - just some inventory gig, nothing serious. The entire week after his boss said to bring Arty in, Raymond imagined himself - after a quick glance in the shower-steamed mirror or as he wiped sawdust from his cheeks - rendered brightly before a blue sky, stomach flattened and pecs expanded, and Arty smiling beside him. In Raymond's daydreams, they were a team: father and son as athletic, outgoing, confident. Arty had refused the job and disappeared for two whole days after telling Raymond the one person he didn't want to be like was his father.

Raymond, in the plastic hospital chair, pictures his son at age three, grinning and asking to be carried piggyback; Arty's mint condition Spiderman #1, wrapped in cellophane, and X-Men anniversary issues, never touched without gloves, which Raymond stole and donated on Arty's thirteenth birthday as a "time to grow up" gesture; Arty's thin teenage frame sitting on the hood of Raymond's Honda, puffing cigarettes and sneaking beers on warm, humid nights.

Raymond wipes his nose on his cuff - crying for the first time since Arty's grandfather's funeral six years before - and imagines the accordion-folded metal, bright spray of glass, roach burning a hole in the driver's seat. Waiting for his son to come to, Raymond stares down at his hands as he turns them over and over, trying to find the faint black outline that he knows is not there.

Bypass Surgery

Ann Young holds her husband's still fingers with her own arthritic hands inside the cramped Cessna 206 as her teeth take on the washboard rattle of the engine. The silver wings balance over low, gradual mountaintops rising like snowdrifts in the yellow-red grit, pointing from Namibia to Kenya. The plane is headed to what Mathusi says is one of the closest and best surgeons outside Europe. Ann's mouth is pulled out tight and her eyes monitor Thom's still face, the slow rise of his chest as he lies on a stretcher that takes up the right side of the tiny plane.

The outdated EKG machine in front of her beeps steadily, mixing with the hum of the tiny generator keeping the machine alive. The medic from the lodge - who, at their hut in Namibia, only said that Thom could be in a coma related to a heart attack and they needed a licensed physician to know for sure - is asleep in the chair beside the pilot's. A smell like gasoline and vomit hangs in the air and the rest of the tour group is in the middle of safari by now, but Ann pushes away everything else as she sits and stares at her husband.

Two years earlier, Ann and Thom sit at a bar in Honduras with a young couple, watching wild monkeys swing

right up to take fruit from the bartender's hand, long after all the other retirees have gone to bed. They drink tequila mixed with papaya juice until Ann's eyes droop irresistibly and the young husband starts singing Patsy Cline songs. Ann teases Thom about going to trendier places, places that attract more youthful travelers, as the singer's wife laughs at the drunken crooning. Afterward, the Youngs stroll along the beach to their thatched villa, each with an arm around the other's waist. Thom glances down at Ann.

"I was thinking we should go safari in Africa for our next adventure. What do you think?" He lifts a cigarette and holds it in his lips, lighting it with his free hand.

"Thom, why do you want to go there? I want to see cities - Athens and Cairo and Paris. Not just animals. I can go to the zoo at home." She pushes her toe into the sand as she steps, flicking up a tiny moonlit spray in front of them.

Thom gestures with his cigarette and the cherry streaks orange against the dark sky. "I know, dear, but there's so much culture no one sees in Africa. It would be good for us. Besides," he glances at her sideways, "in Africa we can find you a leopard to wear in Paris." He winks at her.

Ann giggles and places a hand on his chest. "Fine, Africa next. But after that, you have to promise we go to Paris."

He laughs. "I promise." Thom stops and turns to her, his eyes half-shadowed. "You'll love it, Ann, you'll see." They walk further down the beach beside the reflection of the moon - a thin smile on dark waves.

In the rattle of the small single-engine plane, Ann watches Thom's lips, which are almost smiling the way they always do when he sleeps - but the sight makes her stomach cringe, so she looks out the Cessna's window at the faded sky, turning from gold to green to navy against the darkness of dawn.

The sharp pinch of Ann's teeth on the inside of her cheek distracts her watering eyes as she pushes her attention to the landscape some 3,000-odd feet below her. The small plane rumbles around her and the fabric of the seat feels over-starched and stiff. The rising sun, Ann knows, will send all the nocturnal animals back into the bush to rest, as the reflections of light on the frail clouds call out the daytime fauna. She shifts her weight and squeezes her hands together before placing them in her lap.

Below, among the algae-green trees and twisting varicose rivers that separate Namibia and Zambia, a herd of elephants appears as grey pin-pricks scattered by the water's edge.

Thom nearly jumps out of his seat three days into the trip to Africa - his whispers hoarse and urgent - as he taps the native guide's shoulder and points to an elephant's slim grey trunk, rising over the scrubby green brush. He grins the entire time the group follows the small herd of elephants, obviously proud that he - the one whose favorite animal is the elephant - had been the one to spot them. When the Jeep gets close enough, Ann watches the lines of the aging matriarch's trunk and shoulders as she feeds, eyes always focused on the open Land Rover.

Ann looks down and flexes her fist again and again, the air around her thick and shimmery-hot, and watches the joints of her fingers as the wrinkles deepen and then disappear like on the elephant's dry skin. The wind catches the red silk of her scarf as she reaches up to pluck some leaves from her husband's hair.

"The Silver Terminalia," she says, pride glowing hot in her chest and strengthening her voice. She read about the Terminalia on the plane from the States to South

Africa. "See, Thom?" Ann holds the small velveteen branch between two tan fingers, in Thom's field of vision.

"It's beautiful, dear," he says as he lowers the black binoculars, turning to Ann with his toothy grin. As he looks back to the immature elephant hiding behind its mother, his right hand pats Ann's knee in that familiar rhythm, his wedding band tapping against her kneecap. She thinks of their rehearsal dinner, when his mother grinned at the prospect of rain, and of Thom's eyes as he held Angela for the first time. Ann's mind immediately moves to the fact that Angela's own baby shower is in a week, and the idea that her little girl is about to have her own little girl sets off quiet nausea in the curve of Ann's stomach.

Ann looks down, twirling the grey-green leaf between her fingers as the jeep engine rumbles on and jostles them past the aged matriarch.

As the Cessna hits a patch of wind, clattering up and then dipping down to a slightly lower altitude, the pilot - a striking African man whose accent softens English words into nearly a whisper - turns to Ann, a cigarette held out in his hand.

"Oh, no thank you," she says.

The man laughs, and in the din of the tiny plane it sounds surprisingly loud and confident - sharp. "No," he replies, in a voice that, for him, must be like yelling, "Do you mind if *I* smoke? I will open a window, but we are low enough that only your ears will pop."

"Yes, yes, of course," she says. "Sorry."

The pilot cranks open one of the rectangular front windows and the air in the plane comes alive, gleaming and hot, as the shift in pressure plugs Ann's ears against the soft noise of moving air. Ann smells the smoke from the pilot's cigarette, looks down at Thom's still figure, and closes her eyes, forces herself to yawn. The expansive white noise of the air inside the plane comes back suddenly, filling her head.

Ann sits at their house in Maryland, listening blankly to the rain pat against the window as she stares at the blooms on the cacti she planted in the front yard. Angela is home from the second grade with a slight fever and is in the living room, napping in front of the television. As Ann moves from the window to get the coffee grounds, Angela sticks her head into the room.

"They say it's gonna be floods, Mom," Angela - who just turned eight - says. "Lots of them."

"Oh, don't worry about that, honey," Ann answers.

"We'll be fine."

Two hours later, the creek is flooded and lapping up the sloped side lawn to the Youngs' house. In the half-mile to the main road - which rises above the low field of their lawn and leads to town - the creek crosses the driveway once, but the bridge still shows faintly above the water. Ann calls Thom to tell him to meet them just in case anything happens and grabs clothes and a few irreplaceable objects like wedding and baby photos, birth certificates, before wordlessly packing Angela into the car. She speeds down the gravel drive - thinking only of the creek, the rising water, the road just beyond - until the engine sputters out, half-submerged in water, just before their bridge.

"Shit." Ann breathes the word as her hearing and vision become crisp and she rolls down her window, pulling Angela against her chest and stepping out into the water, which swirls around her thighs. For a second her mind flits to how composed she is, how hysterical she should be.

"Mommy, look - it's me," Angela giggles, poking her head away from Ann and looking down at the water. Angela kicks at her reflection from high on Ann's shoulder, sending a spray of water up around them and nearly knocking

Ann off balance. Mud seeps around Ann's feet as she sloshes across the submerged bridge, staring forward at the edge of the driveway emerging from the water.

Ann, stepping onto the length of driveway that leads from the bridge to the main road, sets Angela down. Water leaks from her shoes as a pressure rises from her chest to her throat, expanding coldly in her lungs. She breathes heavily, trying not to cry.

"It's okay, Mom," Angela says. "We called Daddy, remember? He's going to come meet us."

"I know, honey," Ann replies. "But the window is down, all the albums will be ruined." Ann pushes her shaking face into her palms, wiping tears and rain from her chin and nose. "I wish he had been here," she sobs as she looks up at the car, dark hair falling in tendrils in front of her eyes, a cold shiver rushing down her spine. "They're all ruined now," Ann says as Angela hugs her legs, "I can never get them back."

Unsure of what will happen to the belongings still in the hut and realizing that the small, clanking plane is crossing countries, Ann reaches down to the khaki purse between her feet to make sure she remembered her passport. She lifts the purse to her lap and sees her wallet - the

leather worn thin, the zippers broken and stitching loose - beside the dark blue cover of her passport. She pulls the wallet out automatically, opening the folds of leather and counting the money she brought along. African doctors, she assumes, will not accept American insurance, so she checks the slim pockets for her credit card. Finding it, she carefully closes her wallet and places it back in her purse.

The plane jolts and the sleeping medic opens his eyes, blinking and mumbling. Ann squeezes the slim bones of Thom's hand and watches as the African's thick fingers pull a long cord from the collar of his shirt. Ann squints at the serpentine carving on the string as the medic shifts back down in his seat, his thumb sleepily polishing the dark, gleaming wood.

The Youngs sit at the head of a long table, which Ann rubs softly with her fingertips as Mathusi, their African guide, speaks. Beneath the thick lacquer, the wood is raw - polish shimmers disappear into the shallows of black knots and skim high over mahogany bumps. Thom and Ann laugh - his thin and throaty, hers robust and spastic - as Mathusi tells a joke involving zebras and hippopotami.

The twelve tourists are grouped around the table in what used to be a hunting lodge, their backs to the wild blackness and sounds of an African night in the bush. Wine or coffee sits before each and their faces glow slightly in the dim electric light. The tourists on this trip are older - Ann noticed this as soon as they met in La Guardia - they all have grandkids who are grown and suitcases that match their travel clothes. Ann is confident that while she and Thom may have lived the same number of years as the other tourists, they are not nearly as "old." She smiles shyly and looks down the table.

"And that is why the giraffe must always spread his legs when he drinks, so that he remembers he is not always the most watchful eye in Africa," Mathusi says, his hands flat on the lacquered table. He smiles widely, his teeth so white and straight, and Ann breathes in the heavy scents of sage and dry dirt that drift through the cold night air.

Ann looks at the couples, and then at the two widows who always sit together and appear on the verge of tears, before turning to Thomas. "The end was funny, but I couldn't hear the beginning," she says, leaning over.

"Ask him when we're on safari tomorrow - he tells it better than I would." Thomas winks at Ann and his right hand pats her knee three times.

Ann smiles at Thomas, the knowing smile they have developed after college and children and countless arguments. Sophia - the widow whose hair is spiky-short and slightly purple - is leaning in, over-enunciating to ask Mathusi what he thinks of the political turmoil in Zimbabwe and what it could mean for the upcoming days of the trip.

"It should not have an effect on our plans," Mathusi says slowly, as if Sophia might be the one who would have trouble understanding English. He draws a map of the border between Zimbabwe and Botswana on the smooth table with his fingers.

Margaret, the woman to Ann's right, leans over as her husband John takes another sip of his coffee. "You know, I love Africa, but I really can't wait to get home. Every time I go somewhere, I'm afraid my garden will have wilted by the time I get back."

Ann turns to Margaret, sets her elbow on the table, places her chin on her raised hand. "I used to grow flowers, when we lived outside the city. Roses and lilies. I loved to plant cacti, too, because they're so tall and resilient. And the blooms are so bright." Ann pauses, looks out into the darkness that hides the scrub brush and gangly cacti of the African desert. "Our kids used to play in the garden. When they were young."

Margaret clucks her tongue. "Before you even realize it, they're grown and gone."

"Well, our daughter Angela," Thom says, leaning back in his chair, "she's about to have her first child."

Ann beams, lifting her head from her hand, and nods to Margaret as she speaks. "Yes, her baby shower is next week, the day after we get back." Thom smiles at her. "We can't wait to go. I got the cutest outfit for the new baby." A happy thrill rises in Ann's chest as she thinks of Angela as an infant, dressing her, the sun bright on Angela's red hair during afternoons at the park, the leaves and flowers they would pick together. She thinks of Angela with her new baby and is surprised by the coolness of water in her eyes.

Margaret sighs, squinting. "How wonderful. John and I always wanted our kids to keep having more." She lifts her hand over John's, shadowing the veins and thin white hairs, and looks at him as she places her hand on his. "They're near too old now."

The plane's shadow glides along a road with scalpel-like bends, soil worn down to the color of bone, that pushes forward through the red-brown and pale greens of a desert winter; the smallest twitch of Thomas's thumb brings Ann back to the soft ridges and lines of her husband's

skin. Her throat is dry and traces of stale cigarette smoke curl in the air around her.

Thomas is breathing with a rasp that holds back the air for a minute, and before she hears each intake, Ann squeezes his hand, teeth clenched together, the hollow feeling of only water in her stomach. His left knee jolts up and her mind tells her he is going to stand, that he is awake and he was just sleeping and she was silly to think he would ever leave her, because she knows he would never leave, he would never give up that part of himself, and she knows he would never hurt her like that - ever - not if he could help it at all.

When Ann's eyes focus a second later through clots of mascara and Thom is still on his back, eyes closed and legs stiff, her throat feels swollen and tight. She coughs roughly, swallowing, as the EKG machine lets out a steady, peeling tone. The medic sits up like he did earlier, blinking wildly, and spins to look back at Ann and Thomas. As he struggles to get his seatbelt undone, his fingers slipping again and again on the metal clasp, Ann turns back to the plastic plate window. Thomas's round fingers go cold against the heat of her palm and Ann lets go, stilling the shake of her hand against her thigh. He is gone now, she thinks, and he cannot come back - the question of whether

he could or would is irrelevant. A sudden calm like Ann has never felt before - yawning so wide and deep that she finds it almost disturbing - streams through her, relaxing her shoulders and easing down to her stomach as the medic places two fingers beneath Thom's jaw.

Below, iron red and turquoise dapple the sandy earth and Ann's eyes, as her mind lists the many names and faces she will have to contact, wander the flat line of Africa's dawning horizon.

Pearls

Between the pale green walls of the seventh grade locker room, Ferah Mooney told me - after another man left her mom again - that there's always another woman.

I twist the string of black spheres hanging around my neck - the only anniversary present I got last year, the one I bought. David stares at my reddened fingers as they pinch between the spaces linking the calloused beads, the dry taste of anger coating my tongue. Knobby hands folded on the smooth wooden table between us, David tilts his head down, eyes still focused on me. A memory of him surfaces, coming home drunk, the gleam of the crease I found in the side of my Beamer the next morning; and then the yellow centers of the daises he brought to the office to apologize - which I later found out he plucked from the mulch out front.

I look out the tall glass doors of our dining room - at the ice on the edges of the little pond, the leafless branches of the begonias and oak saplings I planted - and move my tongue roughly against my lips. The corner of David's mouth is twitching like it did when he asked me out for the first time, twenty-five years ago - his blond hair was longer then and he had more of it, his cheeks were

always flush, his fingernails not yet yellowed or ragged. Across the table, he sighs and slouches in his seat.

I clear my throat. "I'm the only one on the mortgage, aren't I?" I know the answer; his credit was always terrible, but I want to hear him admit it.

"Yes." His fingers weave together tighter, the tips showing red, his knuckles showing white.

"Next time you face a decision like this, then," I draw out each word as I look back at him and stand, "I'd choose a warmer season to admit infidelities." I open the hall closet that has his luggage - the matching set I bought him for his birthday, for all the unannounced trips the firm was sending him on - and stack each piece against the wall before walking upstairs and locking my bedroom door.

Cassandra and the Gift Horse

"I thought you said you could take care of this, Sean." I hold the smooth, tri-folded piece of paper in my hands, the typewriter marks crisp and apathetic next to my round pink fingernails, the paper's sharp corners vibrating with the rumble of my little Dart's engine. I told him this would happen. A bubble of stomach acid creeps up my throat and I swallow it back down.

"I did, baby, I am," he says, his words running into one another. "Olivia, there's nothing to worry about, don't worry about it - I'm not going to Vietnam, baby, no matter what that letter says - I'm not getting shot by some goddamn communist." He grips the steering wheel until his knuckles glow white on his chapped, red hands. Sean hunches forward, a bulging blue lump with a brown cap on top, glaring through the lazy falling of snow as if he hasn't been driving through weather like this since he was fifteen. I watch him reach up to wipe the fog from the windshield with his puffy sleeve. "Goddamn hippies in Ohio. I wrote essays for them, hundreds of essays, and now those goddamn draft dodgers don't remember my name. They said we all believed in the same shit, that non-violence could overcome a war, and then they apparently all forgot who the fuck I am." He hits the steering wheel with his fist, wipes

the windshield again and fumbles to light a cigarette as another acidic swell gurgles in my stomach. "Not even goddamn Tommy Hill, the one whose dad is a general and could cross anybody's name off the goddamn list." He exhales a roiling ball of smoke and cranks down the driver's side window. "Not even that fucker, who promised I'd be fine."

I lean over to rest my forehead on the window and look up, into the falling snow and at the tops of the tall pines on the edge of another town. I could really use another beer; the last six-pack died an hour and a half ago and a salty, dry taste is creeping through my mouth. I glance over at Sean, his eyes wide and manic. I'll be thirty in two months; why am I doing this? We've been driving for three hours at least; he wouldn't tell me why at first, when he picked me up from Doctor Campbell's office - "Just want to drive" - and didn't even give me time to change clothes after work. But I knew what was wrong once I saw the military emblem on that torn envelope in the floorboards.

The last road sign told us we had just entered Troy, a hundred and sixty miles from Providence and our little apartment with peeling floor tile in the kitchen and the tiny bathroom he painted blue last August; from Scooper and

Tramp, who are probably yowling with hunger by now. I set the clean-white letter on the floor, swallowing hard as a cold sweat coats the skin of my throat and face. I lean back in the seat, grit my molars together and tap the fingernails of my right hand on the cool glass window, *click click click, click click click*.

"Will you fucking stop that? Please." Sean tosses his spent cigarette out the open driver's window, the air frosting his breath.

I sniffle, wipe the cold bulb of my nose along my wrist, and pull my green coat tighter, fastening the zipper right up to my chin.

"Not that cold." He shakes his head, streaks the fogged windshield with his bare hand and reaches for his cigarettes. "But maybe this is best, Oli. I mean, goddamn, it's how we survive, by being scared, by feeling like we don't really know what's going on, you know? It's the only thing that keeps us moving." He lights a new cigarette, the first acrid, hazy breath filling the car, before slapping his palm against the curve of the steering wheel. "That's it, Oli," he says, not looking at me, "there has to be fear inside your heart for you to keep going - there has to be."

The bitter smell of smoke reaches my nose and my throat spasms again as I turn from Sean, six years younger

than me with his face flushed and smooth, to rest my chin in the hollow of my palm. I force myself to smile as I look past the dark gray dashboard and busted radio, back to him. "I love you, kiddo." My left thigh sits just beside the crevice between the front seats and I picture him reaching over to clasp my knee while he smiles at me like he always does and tells me he loves me too.

His eyes flicker toward me in the shallow reflections from the headlights and he breathes smoke out hard through his nose. He grips his cigarette in his front teeth, both hands on the wheel, his clumsy lips slurring his words: "No room for love unless there's fear, baby."

I hold my eyes closed for a second, lifting my head from the cold zipper pinching against my neck. Then I push my legs together against the door as I shift to face my reflection more than Sean or the road. A quiet, burning belch rises in my throat as I watch the snow fall in clumps that collect in the corners of all the windows, framing my face and dark curly hair, Sean's silhouette behind me. He could've at least said it back. When we first moved in - back when he convinced me we could save money living together and would surprise me with dinner or shelves he built for the bathroom, back when he crawled into bed when I did to hold me - we used to lie out in the snow when it

fell, those first two years. We haven't had the chance this year to wander out to the picnic table in the little fenced-in backyard and hold each other, all bundled up in our coats and scarves and gloves, as the snow slowly erases everything around us. My stomach knots up, this time tighter and higher up, as I think about the heat of his arms and breath on those snowy days; I remember waiting until the numb prickles rose to my knees to go inside and warm up. Feeling small beside him used to be so natural.

I drop my face into my hands, dragging my fingertips through the thin sweat on my forehead to my jaw, resting my fingers along the smooth boned line. The low grumble of the engine and the sound of wind through Sean's open window fill the small, cold space between us. The last time we had a good conversation was weeks ago; he writes to so many papers and magazines about the war that there's hardly ever any of him left for me. He hasn't even noticed my skin, how clear and soft it is, or my good mood, how cheery I've been for a good month and a half, almost two, or how I take longer to get ready in the bathroom each morning, coughing quietly. He might never notice; might not get the chance, now. I let out what sounds like a small laugh and rub my knuckles against my eyes, wiping away water. I guess I have

to tell him, but he won't want to hear it anyway. He'll tell me I have to be wrong.

"Hand me another pack of cigs, eh, Oli?" His right hand sits out, upturned, waiting.

I lean forward to the glove box and tug the handle, opening the smooth, cold little door. "Where are they?"

"No more in there?"

"No."

"Look in the back, there should be some in a bag back there." His hand jerks toward the backseat, thumb extended. "Behind my seat."

His seat. Sometimes I think he forgets whose car this actually is. I turn around to look and, as my vision turns from the road, my stomach goes cold and coils up again, grinding tighter this time. I push my feet against the floorboard to wiggle into the shallow space between us and reach the plastic bag I can see peeking out from beneath the driver's seat. I pull back and set my jaw as I push my knees onto my seat, stretching over the back support and down to the floorboard in the back, the top of the seat round and firm against my queasy stomach.

"What the hell are you doing? Can't you just squeeze your small ass between the seats?" He snorts and flinches away as my hip grazes his shoulder.

I get a hold of the thin, crumpled bag, pull it from under the seat and toss a pack of Camels over my shoulder into his lap. "There," I say, as I drop the crinkling bag back onto the floor. I bend and maneuver back down to a sitting position, huffing as I put a hand on my seizing gut and pull my hair back from my face.

"Open it for me," he says, not even asking.

I stare at him for a second and then snatch the box from his lap, peel off the cellophane wrapping and place it in his outstretched hand. I look out the window again, at the glow of a city just on the other side of the dark pines, at the slowly falling snow. Maybe if I just don't say anything, we can go back to how we were - before this letter to him and this change in me. Sean's lighter flicks in front of another cigarette, and the flash illuminates my small car for a second, defining the door beside me, the stippled dashboard and, in the edge of my vision, the small space between our seats. We could just drive, maybe head south where it's warm, and make our way to Mexico, hopping from resort to resort and beach to beach, drinking piña coladas and changing our names in each little city. A gas station sign shines ahead, the snow around it turning red and orange, the 76 white and clear. My stomach squeezes taut, hollowing itself out, and I swallow back another sour

burp. I can drive when he gets tired and he can drive when I do; we'll always keep moving, and just forget about the world and the war, and stay on the road. "Sean, pull in here. I want to get a pop."

He pulls right up to the building, headlights searing the red brick wall, and turns off the car. He begins steadily tapping his fingers on the steering wheel and the sound fills the quiet space like a drumbeat in an open plain. "Hurry, Oli."

I take a breath, my stomach still and settled for a second, and push open the car door, squinting as the air pushes my curls into my face. I get out with my purse and walk around the car to the door of the store. I turn back to my Dart, the heavy glass door to the shop open halfway. There's Sean: this kid driving my car, his hazel eyes showing yellow in the fluorescent light as he stares ahead, zoned and scared. He looks addicted, or at least manic; off somehow. I turn into the shop as the letter on the floorboard pops into my mind and my guts do another cold, acidic flip - I told myself this would happen. I clear my throat as the door shuts behind me with a chilly breath.

I pause just inside the door and then walk slowly down the aisles, down past the glowing beer freezer along the back wall. I tug on the cool metal handle of the soda

freezer, pull a plastic green bottle from the shelf and let the freezer fall shut with a soft whoosh. I wander through an aisle of candy and cheap toys, up to the cashier and show him the bottle of pop. As I hand him a ragged five, I glance around for the metal racks they always have just by the door. When the smiling man hands me my change, I grin back and thank him, moving toward the exit. I glance out at Sean - his furrowed, glossy eyes not even seeing me. I swipe a free copy of Northeast Real Estate, Inc. - the pictures of empty houses on the front fuzzy but bright - and stuff it in my purse with the money in my hand.

"Sean," I say, knocking on the driver's side window.

He rolls it quickly down and looks up at me, his eyes open too wide - showing too much white - his mouth slightly open, silent.

I swallow hard again, the burn easing quicker now, push my hair behind my ears, and motion with my head toward the store as I speak. "Hop out. My turn to drive."

Nightcap

ISO: Dave Eggers' "She Waits, Seething, Blooming"

He is sitting at the wooden kitchen table, the white layers of remaining coconut cake resting just in front of him; his name and the numbers of "Happy 40th" already eaten by guests, now gone. After work, his husband John phoned, telling him he was sorry, but he'd be home in an hour, at 7:30. It is now 12:13 and the driveway is empty except for a blue Nissan, which he imagines getting into to track John down, still wearing his bow tie and vest; he will howl through the streets like a banshee, his cries leading him through tangled avenues and dimly lit alleyways. He thinks of John's face when he pulls up to the restaurant where John sits with his lover, their legs rubbing together, laughing and winking; he imagines throwing his patent leather shoes from the car - the ecstatic thump on the thick glass, the pause in their conversation - before fuming inside, showing everyone what kind of man his husband is and how badly John has treated him after so many years! A wicked dryness rises in his throat as he moves from the table to the cabinets, searching for the leftover vodka and a tall glass; he knows, however - and realizes as he is on tip-toes, fingertips grazing the bottle - that there is no other man, that John often has to stay late for

work, though usually not this late. He fills the clear water glass to the top with vodka and stands over the sink, taking slow sips. This is still inexcusable, he thinks, to do this tonight, of all nights, and of that - no matter the excuse - John must be made aware; he looks through the small window over the sink to the house next door, now dark - they came to the party, saw John not here. The half-empty cup meets the countertop with a thud as he turns back to the clock; 12:26. His pink tongue slides across his dry lips and he closes his eyes, focusing the pressure building in his chest, shaking through his arms and fingers. What will he say when John walks in the door? Should he even let John speak? Perhaps he should sit there, silent, until John's rambling excuses are done, before letting go of the supernova burning in his lungs; but what will he say then? He can't possibly concentrate on only the follies of this night; there are so many other things this could lead to, so many other places this one night could take them!; like just last year when he waited for hours at the airport; the time John said he should start going to the gym, no matter his honesty; the hotel bumping their reservations on their honeymoon... A buzzing begins in his ears and he grins, thinking of when he was a teen and would turn Metallica and Def Leppard up loud enough so that he could scream without

his parents hearing; that overload of noise would shut out the rest of the world, and he had never found anything else quite like it. He turns back to the sink as the low rumble of John's engine slides up next to the house, the low headlights bleaching the pines in the backyard. This will be delicious, he thinks, swallowing; it feels absolutely like my birthday, my surprise party about to begin. This will be loud, volatile. We will scream and scream until I explode. He sets the empty glass in the porcelain sink and turns, resting his back against the counter, arms folded in front; the clock says 12:32; this will be delicious.

Poison Control

Sara Beth stood looking out the kitchen window, across the sweeping hill of the yard, down the abrupt slope that led to the fence by the pond and opened to the wide, empty countryside beyond. Her blonde hair washed down both shoulders and over the cordless phone she held up to her ear, and her eyes - that same clear blue her Momma's had - flickered to the fence posts and the oily crows alighted on each. The line of trees to the right shaded the ground dark green, and the tall grass on the edge of the slope bowed in the breeze.

"Yes, Annie, I'm tellin' you. If you've got a man, you need to keep him. Yes, I mean whatever it takes." She sighed. "Well, then try harder. Me, I'd drive clear to California if Johnny would even agree to talk to me. Loneliness is no fun, Annie, you know that. Why would you try to go back to it?" She set one delicate hand on the edge of the sink as Tyler burped and giggled behind her. She turned to him and held her other hand over the receiver on the phone. "Say excuse me."

"'Cuse me." He grinned at her from the table and picked up his lidded cup with both hands, slurping apple juice through the straw in the top. His wide brown eyes watched Sara Beth as he drank.

"Annie, I tell you, babysitting Tyler is just a joy. It's so easy." She smiled at the little boy. "It makes me want a kid of my own." A cold rock dropped into her stomach as she turned away from Tyler. She pictured Johnny sitting across from her in his Camaro, on one of the cold nights she'd told him they didn't have to use a condom, even after she heard about him straying, just so she'd have a shortcut to starting a family. "I almost wish Aunt Mary and Uncle Tommy wouldn't be back so soon." She looked down into the metal sink, then back out the window and paused, listening, as she swallowed dryly. "Girl, you already graduated, what would you do if you didn't have him? Leave the house and start babysitting like me? Besides, you know Amber and Julie Anne need you there, and you can't do enough on your own to keep them happy. You already have everything you could want, why throw it away?"

Tyler called out to Sara Beth, "Done." His plate rattled across the wooden table as he pushed it away with one of his chubby hands and jumped down from his chair.

"I know, Annie, but listen, I have to go. Tyler's done eating, I gotta go occupy him." Her narrow, unpainted fingernails tapped the edge of the sink. "All right, girl, you, too. Talk to you soon." The phone beeped loudly as she

set it back on the cradle. Sara Beth turned to Tyler. "What do you want to do now?"

"Play." Tyler stretched his arm and stood on tip-toes to reach the cup that still sat on the table, which Sara Beth handed him. "I wanna go outside." He smiled at her and clasped the cup with both hands.

"Okay, get your shoes on. We'll go outside."

Sara Beth sat reading one of the coverless romance novels her aunt left laying around, her "Jackie O" sunglasses perched on the tip of her nose, the breeze light on her skin beneath her over-sized white t-shirt. She took a slow sip of water and set the glass back on the concrete. Tyler ran in circles, throwing and chasing a red rubber ball. "You almost caught it?"

Tyler stopped and looked up. "Yeah." He glanced down at the wandering ball and ran to catch it.

Sara Beth smiled and set down the book. "Want to play catch?" She walked over to where he stood with the shiny ball in both hands and smiled down at him. "Come on, I want to play."

Tyler shrugged. "Go ov' there." He pointed across the yard, the ball tucked against his chest with his other hand like the boys on the football field during Homecoming.

Sara Beth turned and walked a few feet before turning back to Tyler. "Throw it to me."

His unsteady little hands hurled the ball, which loop-dee-looped in the air. Sara Beth ran to catch it.

"Maybe we should kick it, you think?" She dropped the ball on the ground and tapped it with her foot, watching the bright dot of the sun on the rolling ball.

Tyler stooped and then stood again, and with a grunt, swung his foot back and forward. The ball loop-dee-looped again, this time toward the house, and rolled into Sara Beth's glass of water. The glass clinked against the concrete but didn't break, just rolled in a wet arc by her empty chair.

"Well crap. Hold on, Tyler," she called, jogging over to the patio. She turned back to him and kicked the ball, which rolled past his legs. "You get the ball, I'm gonna get more water." Sara Beth picked up the cup and the cool water rolled down her fingers to her wrist, along the same path that Johnny used to kiss when he was bent over her, his eyes soft and dreamy. She tugged open the glass door to the dining room.

Inside, Sara Beth stopped at the bookshelf, by Aunt Mary's silver-framed pictures - Tyler and Uncle Tommy standing on a dock with two small yellow perch on the end

of fishing line; Aunt Mary on a Ferris wheel with Tyler - in the photos they all smiled genuinely, just like in the family portraits Sara Beth could remember having taken at the Methodist church when she was a kid, her mom's hair coifed up, her dad's slicked down with gel.

Sara Beth moved to the sink, flipped the faucet on and tested the shushing water with a fingertip as the humid smell of steam swelled in her nose. She looked through the window again. Tyler's ball was perched on the edge of the slope, a yard or so from the crows preening on the fence, the red sphere held in place by tall grass that bent under its weight. Tyler was stooped with his knees splayed, hands on the ground by the edge of the mowed lawn. Sara Beth raised the full glass of water to her mouth and drank as she flicked off the water faucet and stepped away from the sink.

She closed the screen door behind her, pushed her large, round sunglasses up on her nose and set the water down on the patio. "Tyler," she said. "What are you doing?"

He turned his head and looked at her as she walked toward him. He plopped back onto his butt in the soil and lifted his hands, filled with grass and dirt. Sara Beth thought of the detectives on the true crime shows she watched as she fell asleep - after Momma had gone to bed

and Sara Beth had sneaked outside for a joint - how they always wore gloves when they had to dig, how she wished Tyler wouldn't get himself messy. She looked down at him and the shallow hole in front of him as he teetered a little bit and looked up.

"Look, Sar' Bef. Worms." He held up his hands and Sara Beth could see that the mass of dirt was writhing, made up of slender shiny bodies twisted around one another. She lifted her sunglasses. A tiny triangular head poked up and clamped down on Tyler's finger. Sara Beth squinted before jolting back from the ragged brown stripes and olive green tails of baby cottonmouths - the nests Momma always told her to watch out for, the only snake in the area with poisonous babies. A swift heat traveled under her skin.

"Fuck," Sara Beth whispered as Tyler blinked his eyes sleepily. She smacked his hands toward the pond, scattering the tiny vipers into the tall grass. With this many together, they have to be newborn, Sara Beth thought. Her hands trembled and went frigid as she pictured the mother coiled nearby. The only snakebite Sara Beth had seen in person - swollen and infected, but that was on an adult - flashed in her mind like a movie trailer, and the internet photos of far more grotesque necrosis from all manner of species pushed against one another for attention in her

mind's eye. Tyler's dark eyes went large and filled with water as he looked at the snake that still hung from his finger.

"Fuck," Sara Beth whispered again, her chest tight and her skin itching. When Daddy had got bitten by a rattlesnake while they collected wood for a bonfire, Momma had packed everyone into the car and made Sara Beth - the oldest sibling - tourniquet Daddy's arm as they drove, her sisters crying in the backseat. Daddy had passed out - the weight of his heavy head and warm scent of his slow breath on her shoulder as she urged Momma to drive faster, faster.

Sara Beth's arm shot forward. She snatched the baby snake from Tyler's hand and screamed from her gut, cold running down her spine again and again as she flung the whipping snake out toward the peaceful, shimmering pond. One of the crows leapt up and flapped hard before landing in the grass where the snake had fallen and burying its head among the reeds.

Sara Beth's hearing became sharp - she heard Tyler's wailing and looked at his swelling, pin-pricked hands as she snatched him from the ground and turned back to the house at a full run. Her glasses dropped behind her as one foot slipped on the slick grass and her hands gripped Tyler's screaming face to her chest. She stooped and kept

running, digging her toes into the soil and trying to suppress the thoughts of Daddy's useless hand, Momma's numb face as they sat in the hospital lobby waiting for a doctor, the wide mouth and shaking rattle of the snake that had sent them there, all terrified that Daddy wasn't going to be around to laugh at jokes or chop firewood or quiet Momma's anger ever again.

One of her feet landed on the rough concrete - Tyler's small voice whimpering now - and Sara Beth searched her mind for the spot where she'd tossed her purse and the keys to her Honda, picturing the oil-black feathers of the squawking crows behind her.

Sara Beth stared at the incandescent shine on the faded purple walls of St. Theresa Hospital's emergency waiting room. The uncomfortable plastic chairs seemed designed to look futuristic, all smooth lines and clean colors; magazines covered the tiny tables that sat scattered across the room. Tyler lay asleep in a sterile bed, a clear plastic mask over his nose and mouth, down the hall from the waiting room. The doctor had been telling Sara Beth that Tyler was fine and just needed to rest, that she got him to the hospital in time for the antivenin, when Uncle Tommy had come brooding into Tyler's room and dropped

silently into the seat beside his son's bed. When Sara Beth had stepped to the door, Uncle Tommy had told her without looking up that Aunt Mary was parking the car and to go wait for her out in the waiting room. Sara Beth had just nodded, bitten her lip, and inched the door closed behind her.

Sara Beth's trembling fingers lifted a magazine from the stack closest to her and she flipped through the ads in the front as a man across the room, who had the same smooth muscles in his forearms as Johnny, snored, his head leaned against the wall. The receptionist behind the smudged glass panes was talking on the phone, using one fingernail to clean another as she faced away from the waiting room.

Sara Beth closed the magazine and stood, chewing on her cheek as she walked to the rack of pamphlets nailed to the purple wall in front of her. She reached her hand out past the front row to the line of brand-name pamphlets - crisp blue and green papers with words like Ortho Evra, Lunelle and Depo-Provera emblazoned across them - as Aunt Mary, sounding far-off and quiet like in a wide field or a dark room, called Sara Beth's name and rushed over from the waiting room door.