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Rebecca Lynn Haigh. PRACTICAL PIECES AND OTHER STORIES: A COLLECTION OF SHORT FICTION. (Under the direction of Mary Carroll-Hackett) Department of English and Modern Languages, July 2007.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how people own the truths in their lives, their failures as parents, spouses, and individuals. I have discovered that the exploration of past mistakes reveals an opening to a brighter future, one that is worth taking, if only to experience the journey. For my characters, the idea of home shapes their desire to change or to escape into a place of their own making, a world apart from their own. In each of my stories, a moment exists where the character must choose to leave in search of happiness or stay, accept failure, yet still long for a new life, just beyond reach. My characters are often blue-collar workers that dream of finding employment in Corporate America or long for careers they once had, jobs that defined them as being "accomplished." Many of my stories show the divide between the working class and white-collar America in economic and social status. My characters struggle to bridge the distance between these two worlds or at least wish to carry a piece of the greater life with them, for safekeeping. Several authors have influenced my work, such as Raymond Carver and Amy Hempel. Their minimalist writing style and the subtle, yet powerful

meanings in their works have inspired these stories. My fiction is about longing, the need to find a place worthy of being called home, not only as a journey of personal growth, but as reparation for failures that have shaped my characters into who they are now, leaving only the echoes of the people they once were.

PRACTICAL PIECES AND OTHER STORIES

by

Rebecca Haigh

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

Master of Arts in English

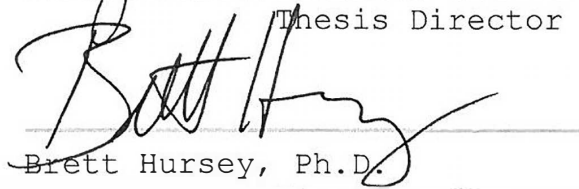
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Dedication

I would like to thank my thesis committee, family, and friends who have given their insight and wisdom into the pages of this collection. May each of you find pieces of yourselves in these stories and stuff them in your pockets for safekeeping.

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Bible Stories

"What story do you have for me tonight, Julie?" I ask, sitting on the edge of her bed.

Julie grabs a corner of the yellow covers, then yanks them up to her waist.

Every night, she tells me about her teddy bear that needs to be saved from the monsters under the bed or the man who knocks on her door in the dark or the scary ghosts just outside the window. She tells me her dreams from the night before or what she thinks she might see when I turn off the light.

"They're still coming." Julie pulls the Bible from under her pillow and places her hand on the black cover. "I don't think this works."

I gave her my Bible a few weeks ago, the one I had in Catholic school, pages still dog-eared from past lessons. My mother used to read the Bible to me before I went to sleep, told me to place it under my pillow for protection against bad dreams.

"Why not?" I ask.

"I'm still scared." She thumbs the golden pages.

"It did just fine for me when I had nightmares," I say. I want Julie to believe that the nightmares can stop.

"Maybe you shouldn't talk about your dreams, then you won't think about them before you go to bed."

Julie places the Bible on the nightstand.

"Have you tried to fight the monsters?" I ask. Years ago, my mother told me that if I could find a way to stand up to the monsters in my dreams, then they would go away. The monsters transformed into other fears as I grew older. In elementary school, I dreamed of losing sight of my mother in the Chesterfield Mall, searching for her in a crowd of strangers. Now, I dream of losing Julie, that someone has taken her from her school. I wander the halls, calling her name, but she's disappeared.

"No," she says. "How can I fight them?" She looks at the green desk lamp glowing on her dresser.

"I don't know. You could trap them in something or wish them gone," I say. Maybe she could be brave enough not to run. "You know your father and me are just down the hall. So if you need us, just come knock on our door, okay?"

"All right, Mom. G'night." Julie snuggles down into the covers.

I kiss her on the cheek and walk down the hallway to my bedroom. I don't tell her that I still have nightmares of being lost. Now, I dream of the state fair, looking for

her father, Greg, and Julie by the Ferris Wheel, and when I find them standing in line, they don't recognize me. I reach out for Julie, to see if she's real, my baby girl, and she pulls away, crying for her father to hold her. Greg says, "Don't worry. She's not your mother." After these bad dreams, Greg wakes me up and whispers ssh-ssh until I fall asleep again.

I stop in the hall and wonder if I should tell her. But I know I won't. I step into the bedroom, leaving the soft orange glow of the nightlight behind me. For both of us.

Lights in Richmond

I'd only gone to Richmond once with Daddy, an hour-long trip from our home in Farmville. He'd taken me there at night to see Christmas lights on rich people's houses. Mamma'd had a cold and stayed home.

Daddy didn't like the radio on when he had to concentrate on the road. He shifted in his seat, leaning forward to see the highway covered in light snow.

As we drove, I daydreamed about Christmas morning, Mamma's oatmeal raisin cookies and the fire in the woodstove. Only five more days before I could open up my presents. I wanted a new bike, a ten-speed, and hoped it would be under the tree this year.

When we neared Richmond, Daddy slowed down and drove between two large stonewalls that marked the entrance to Brandermill, our destination. All of the houses looked the same with snow on their roofs, wreaths on their doors, and brick chimneys.

Daddy said, "You could live here, Lynn. All you'd have to do is want it enough." He nodded at the streets as we passed.

I stared out the passenger side window at the lights that framed the outside of a beautiful colonial home, but couldn't imagine real people living inside it. House after

house, each one lit up with white Christmas lights and candles in the windows. I wanted to knock on their doors and ask them where their daddies worked.

"Wouldn't you want a house that big?" Daddy asked, pointing to the yellow Victorian house in front of us. I smiled when he said this, and he laughed, really hard. I can't remember another time he laughed hard enough to show all of his teeth.

He pulled up to the curb and parked the truck. "C'mon," he said.

Zippping up my blue coat, I stepped onto the lawn. A few inches of snow covered the yard, and the sidewalks looked as if they hadn't been cleared in days.

Daddy walked in his big boots toward the large yellow house at the end of the block. It looked a little out of place; most of the homes across the street were made of brick or stone. This one had yellow vinyl siding and a spire on the east wing. No lights on this one, no cars in the driveway.

When I caught up to him, I asked, "Who lives here?"

"Marvin Walton. I used to work for him in the summer. I mowed this lawn; it's his house. Your grandpa sold furniture for him on Second Avenue at Walton's Furniture. Walton promised your grandpa the business when he retired.

But Walton couldn't give it up, he loved the money and running the place. Eventually, he sold it all, but he never did give your grandpa a chance to buy it from him." Daddy bent down, grabbed a handful of snow, and packed it solid. Rearing back he tossed it extra high and let it fall down upon the roof.

I stepped back and watched the snowball explode on the roof with a loud thud.

"Go on," Daddy said. "Take a shot."

I packed the snow, aimed at the chimney, and threw it at my target. It missed the chimney by a few feet, then burst against the shingles leaving a small dot of white snow.

Daddy cocked his arm back, letting another snowball roll from his fingertips through the air to the eagle mounted on top of the garage. It hit the eagle in the face, coating it with thin, white powder.

"Where's Mr. Walton now?" I asked.

"In a retirement home. Keeps the house though. You see that eagle I just hit with the snowball? That used to hang on his store," Daddy said. "Your grandpa used to polish it."

I looked up at the eagle and tried to picture Grandpa standing on a ladder at Walton's store, rubbing oil onto

the eagle's wings, then Daddy, years later, mowing Walton's grass, both dreaming that the eagle would someday be theirs.

The eagle shone from Christmas lights on the house next door, twinkling red and green against the big bird's wings.

Daddy rubbed his hands together to keep them warm. "Your grandpa waited several years for Walton to give him the business. Don't think he gave up on the idea, but Walton never made good on his promise. When your grandpa quit, he moved to Farmville, found him a job selling cars. Even now, he thinks he should have opened up a furniture company for himself, shouldn't have wasted all those years."

Grandpa had held a lot of jobs. So had Daddy. But now I knew it could have been different. If Mr. Walton had kept his word, then my grandpa, my father, and I might have had a house in Brandermill.

"We've got more houses to see. Let's get going," Daddy said. "Tomorrow, I'll build you a snow fort." He headed toward his old Ford truck, pausing to look back at the eagle, its eyes fixed forward as if protecting Mr. Walton's house.

Last winter, Daddy had made the biggest fort I'd ever seen. He started early in the morning, packing the walls hard till they were more like ice than snow, then we'd crawl inside and pretend we were explorers lost in a frozen cave.

"What you think? Would you like that?" He walked to the truck.

I followed. "Yeah."

Daddy opened the truck door for me. Holding the door, he looked back at Mr. Walton's big, yellow house again. "I bet those rich people never built a fort like us. Never once."

I hopped in the passenger seat. Daddy shut the door. Christmas lights sparkled from the houses around us except the yellow house; it stood alone in the dark, the snow from our snowballs spattered and gray in the shadows.

Daddy got in and started our old truck. "Yeah, Mr. Walton never could build a fort like us."

As we drove away, I watched the big, yellow house grow small in the mirror, and thought, he never had to.

Shiny Things

One in the morning--time for Mrs. McCallahan's medicine. I push the cart down the hall to Room 219 in Sacred Heart's Nursing Home and slide through the narrow doorway.

Mrs. McCallahan's cheek rests against the windowpane. She does this often, staring out at the parking lot below. A lamppost flickers, lighting raindrops against the night. In the chill, she pulls her yellow housecoat around her thin frame so only the blue hem of her nightgown shows.

The cart squeaks as I wheel it past the bed to Mrs. McCallahan's chair. She holds a collection of metal objects knotted together with yellow yarn. A month ago, I had almost thrown them in the trash when Mrs. McCallahan grabbed them off the end table. I thought some kid had left them there, but she said, "It's my rosary. My granddaughter gave this to me."

In the pale light, she twists the makeshift rosary in her hands. The car and dog from the Monopoly game dangle there, a silver ring, and a small locket. The shiny things click together as she rubs them and whispers, "Glory be to God the Father, Glory be to God the Son, Glory be to God the Spirit, Three in One." The prayer stretches into a

sort of lullaby, a chant, and soon, the words fade so that she only mouths the shapes of them to herself.

According to her chart, she has problems sleeping because of her heart condition. That's not it. Her insomnia is because of that damned rosary. She never puts it down.

I hand Mrs. McCallahan a glass of water and a plastic cup filled with her medicine. She swallows the pills with a large gulp of water. A few hours earlier, she'd thrown the medicine across the room. Now, she takes them silently, spiting me with obedience.

As a nurse at Sacred Heart's, I've seen how the old seek forgiveness, loneliness pulling at them through the night. Most tell me their stories, their secrets, but not Mrs. McCallahan. I don't know hers. She only tells them to God. Every day I see her praying. She's counting off all of my sins too.

I transferred from Memorial Hospital to Sacred Heart's after my mother died of lung cancer. During Mom's last days at Memorial Hospital, I blamed work for my absence, created a distance between us until she became a patient to me, her life settled into the sheets I folded. I thought of her as someone like Mrs. McCallahan, staring out the window to forget how the rest of the world looked.

Mrs. McCallahan rises from the chair and walks to her bed. Her hands press into the white mattress to steady herself as she scoots down on her side. In bed, she pulls the blue covers over her thin body.

Against the pillow, her face stretches like an old doily, threads pulled to the point of invisibility. She holds the rosary in her hands, wrapping the yellow yarn around her index finger and thumb.

I turn my cart and say, "I could get you a rosary from the priest if you want. He'll be in tomorrow afternoon."

"No, I have my own," she says.

Her hands stop moving.

"But maybe you need one?" she asks.

I shake my head.

Mrs. McCallahan stares at me, then shrugs. "Hail Mary, full of grace." The words fall steady on the air behind me, the lessening beat of a drum.

I push the cart into the hallway, then catch myself, realize I am finishing the prayer, my lips moving as if I know the words by heart.

Marisol's Rain

In the hour it had taken Anthony to drive from the Gorge to North Bridge Lake, the summer sky had darkened. Anthony hoped to have enough time to launch sailboats with his son Jeremy before rain fell.

"Do you think they'll make it to the other side?" Jeremy asked, wading into the brown water with a sailboat in both hands.

Anthony said, "They might. Let's not go out too far. When the water gets up to your waist, then we can let the boats go."

Cold currents of water flowed against Anthony's legs as he walked. As a child, he had come to the lake with his own father. Together, they'd set their boats on the water and watched them drift aimlessly toward the middle. On windy days, the boats had almost always tipped over, spinning in circles. Now, Anthony designed his with a weight in the bottom of each boat to right themselves in a strong breeze.

Anthony positioned his boat in the water and felt the wind against his back. "Turn it to the sun, Jeremy, so the sails will catch the wind. Now, give it a push," he said.

Jeremy twisted his skinny body, cocked his arm back, then shoved against the wooden frame, sending it forward in a wavy line. Anthony pushed his boat parallel to Jeremy's; their paths matched.

"Look at that, huh? Like they're racing for the finish line."

"Mine's in the lead," Jeremy said.

"All right, we'll come back here next weekend and see whose boat is over by the picnic tables. That'll be the winner. Mine's the one with the red sail. You have the blue one," Anthony said.

"Okay." Jeremy dove under the water, and when he came up for air, he bobbed in front of the sailboats, sending waves that rocked them gently.

"No helping. Your boat's got to sail on its own. Let's go on up and get something to eat." Anthony walked toward the bank. He sat on the grass and opened the cooler. Earlier, Anthony had packed ham and swiss sandwiches for the trip. Grabbing a sandwich, he unwrapped it and took a bite.

Anthony looked up across the lake at the house on the hill where he used to live with his wife Sarah and Jeremy. A year ago, he'd gotten a divorce, and now he had joint custody of Jeremy. Anthony wanted his son to grow up in

the suburbs. He guessed that would still happen, even if he wasn't around.

Jeremy doggy-paddled back to shore and wrung out the water in his green trunks before taking a seat next to Anthony.

"Hungry?" Anthony asked, handing Jeremy a sandwich from the cooler.

"Sure am," Jeremy said.

Anthony shivered under the shade of loblolly pines and watched ripples spread across the lake. "Your uncle Mike and I used to hitchhike to this pond, see who could swim the fastest from one end to the other. You think you could do that?"

"Who would race me?" Jeremy asked.

Anthony shrugged. The last year Sarah and he were married, they talked of having another child. If they had a girl, he would have named her Marisol. He'd liked the name ever since he first heard it on the radio, a disc jockey named Marisol; she had a sweet Southern voice and played rock and roll. He had been thirteen when he first heard that voice, lying in bed at his parents' house in Virginia. Anthony only had a brother.

"I could race you, all the way to the end."

Jeremy gave him a look, the dimples he got from his mother showing on his olive skin. "But you're a better swimmer," Jeremy said. He took a bite of his sandwich.

"You're a whole lot younger. I bet you'd win by a long shot," Anthony said.

Jeremy smiled.

"Next weekend, huh? Look at the sky. Summer rain." Anthony patted Jeremy's shoulder. "You should name your boat. It's bad luck not to name her."

"Jim, that's what grandma calls me," Jeremy said.

"Boats are usually named after girls." After the miscarriage, Anthony had held Sarah, but he hadn't known what to say, his arms pulled tight around her, his mind on the baby, what might have been his little girl. After a time, Sarah wanted to try again. He'd said no. Jeremy had just turned five. He thought they could wait a little longer. But he guessed it'd meant more to Sarah than he knew. Maybe if he'd given her a baby, if he'd given her something else to love, he would have had that life he wanted.

"Marisol. That's the name of my boat," Anthony said, taking a bite of his sandwich.

Jeremy smiled, bent over, watching the ships.

A light rain fell onto the lake. Anthony looked at the boats sailing away, Marisol and Jim, like children huddling against the rain.

A Slow Thin Trail

I sit under the persimmon tree, swatting away blue bottle flies. Every weekend, my sons, Ian and Jacob, come over to my house for supper. Now, they lean over the red gate to the pasture, feeding the horses persimmons from their outstretched hands.

"Atta boy," Ian says, patting the horse's neck. He's the oldest, twenty-one, and has his father's cleft chin. I only recognize the man he's become because of that chin. When he was a boy, I used to place my thumb there, tell him God left his mark.

An old mare sniffs at the sticky fruit in Jacob's hand. He keeps his palm flat--not that she bites, but he's a little wary around her. At ten years old, he rode this same mare on a trail in the woods, and a pack of wild dogs chased them. She threw him off, and he broke his collarbone from the fall. I never let him ride by himself after that.

Jacob jumps off the gate, then sits down under the persimmon tree. Even now, he looks boyish for nineteen, with a soft round face and small, tight muscles. "We should go for a ride tomorrow, the three of us," he says.

I pull at the buttons on my shirt. "That'll be good. These horses don't get out much anymore."

"Might rain tonight." Ian points at the dark sky, gray and heavy. He climbs down the gate, walks to the crab apple tree, and picks up a ripe apple from the ground. Rearing back, he tosses it over the electric fence. It bounces a few times before rolling over to another mare; she stretches her thick neck before taking a bite.

Not so long ago, they were boys, brown hair sticking to their damp foreheads, chasing lightning bugs in the hayfield. They brought flashes of light to me, cupped in their hands saying, "Make a wish, Mamma."

"Be careful," I'd say, "We all got light in us." I had blown into their spooned hands, my youngest son first, my oldest next, waiting patiently behind. The lightning bugs crawled along their fingertips until finally taking flight, only to have the boys jump up to catch them again.

Now, I look at the fence line, the horses grazing soft patches of clover under the shade of oak trees. I had made up my mind to sell them months ago, but hadn't told Jacob or Ian yet. Mark Thompson, my closest neighbor, had said he'd buy all thirty of the horses. I guess I need to tell the boys. Soon.

Ian plucks a persimmon from a branch, shoves the fruit into his mouth.

Pushing my hands into the red dirt, I turn to stare at the house, its peeling white paint, rotten clapboard siding, rusted tin roof. Years ago, their father promised to paint the house a pale yellow, but he's gone now, found another place to call home, a new wife and family.

Ian and Jacob seem to have forgotten about the flash of headlights at nightfall, their father's truck pulling out of the driveway. But I remember. I see what they won't say. About the leaving.

The boys left a little at a time after they turned eighteen, until my house grew empty, their beds and dressers gone with them, their rooms only filled with sunlight on hardwood floors. Crayon marks on the wall I could never wash clean.

Looking at them now, I realize I liked them more when they had nowhere else to go. As boys, they huddled close to me in the dark, wouldn't wander away. I watch Jacob turn to face the driveway and know he's seen beyond the gravel road. I want to see that little boy in him again, expectant, excited, no plans for anything, safe with me.

"Let's go on inside. Getting colder out here," I say. Only April, but the wind and frost never seem to let up.

The boys nod.

I stand, wipe the dirt from my jeans. Ian and Jacob walk together, a few feet from me. We climb the hill to the house, and once inside, the boys wander into the kitchen. Leaving them there, I go to my bedroom for another shirt. The closet door creaks when I open it. Picking through the rack, I slide a blue knit sweater off the hanger and slip it over my head. I hear the boys--men--laughing together, downstairs.

A light drizzle falls on the pasture, over the gravel driveway, wetting the flashes in the trees, dampening lightning bugs my children used to give as gifts.

I want to see my boys playing in the driveway again, racing each other. But as I imagine this, they run further down the road, away, never toward the house. I want to call out to them, see if they turn. Then I sigh. Nothing in this house calls to them anymore.

Rain slashes across the window, flows off the tin roof. I push against the sides of the window to break the seal so it will open, to shove my hand into the rain. But I push too hard. The meat of my palm slams through the glass, a shard cracks loose in my hand, and I gasp as pain rushes through my fingers. My skin feels slick and warm with blood.

I carefully place the shard on the windowsill, stare at its odd shape outlined in my blood, then open my hand to see the mark it made, jagged lines etched into pink flesh.

Rain rushes in through the broken glass, drips onto the hardwood floor, a slow thin trail pooling at my feet. I imagine Jacob, a little boy again, standing beside me, holding my hand, the glass red and sticky as he pulls open my fingers. I imagine him saying, "Make a wish, Mamma."

I blow cool air against my skin and know I've lost the wonder of being their mother. I can't say I miss them, only that I liked them better when they couldn't leave me, when they didn't have anyone else to love.

Gazebo

After Mom and Dad separated, I went to work for my dad's friend, Sam, at the greenhouse in Crewe. I ran the register and stayed late to help him build a gazebo for a few extra dollars. I'd promised Sam that I'd only work the summer, then finish up my senior year of high school.

"How much will you sell it for?" I asked, looking at the half-finished structure. We had already built the bench that wrapped around the frame and nailed floorboards into place. The gazebo smelled of wet cedar from yesterday's rain.

"It's my first one. I'd be embarrassed to sell this, Julia." Sam laid a board across the picnic table, measured it with a folding ruler, then marked the next cut with a pencil he'd tucked behind his ear.

"I think it looks nice," I said.

Sam picked up the saw and moved it long strokes across the cedar. The boards Sam cut tonight would become the joints for the gazebo's roof.

"You've never made one before either. What do you know?" he asked, stepping back as the board dropped with a thud. He laid the saw on the picnic table, then wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand and rubbed it clean on his cotton pants. He reminded me of the

men who came over to date Mom, men with strong hands, dark eyes, and a leathery tan. These men looked at Mom different than Dad ever had. And Mom dressed up for them, wearing flower-print dresses and black heels. The men watched her legs like flower stems, like Sam watched mine.

"There's a spot near my pond that's flat enough for the gazebo. You remember, don't you? Under the pine trees?" he asked.

Dad and I had fished at Sam's pond for many years, though less often after Mom left.

I walked through the gazebo and ran my fingers along the smooth cedar boards.

Sam lifted me up on the railing. "What you think? We'll finish the roof on Monday once I figure out how to shingle it. You can sneak out of your dad's house to come see me by the pond. It'll be our place."

I held onto his shoulders to balance myself, then wrapped my legs around his waist. He laid his hands on my hips. I liked Sam, how he touched me, playful and slow. He was twenty-six, and I'd known him for five years, when he worked with Dad at Bailey's Auto Shop in Crewe, then after, when he started the greenhouse.

"Your daddy asked me to come over next Sunday, work on the truck." Sam smelled of sweat and his dark hair stuck to his forehead.

"What time?" I asked.

"Six o'clock."

"I'll be there," I said. Dad almost never had anyone come over since Mom left. On weekends, I went to Dad's apartment on the east end of Crewe, and during the week, I stayed with Mom, who had kept the house when they divorced. Mom worked two jobs, waitress at the Waffle House and cashier at Hardee's to make the mortgage payments.

Sam brought his hand to my face, pressing his finger against the ridges on my scarred cheek. I got the scar a year ago. My friend Jenny had just gotten her driver's license and asked me to ride with her to Saylor's Creek. She wanted to wade in the water, get some sun on her shoulders. Jenny took a curve too fast on North Genito Road, and we skidded into the ditch. I didn't have on my seatbelt, neither did she. I slammed face-first into the dash. I still dropped my head, hoping my hair would hide how the accident had marked me.

But Sam didn't seem to care about the scar. I always felt safe with him, even wore my hair up in ponytail when he was around, though I usually had it straight and never

tucked behind my ears. I had cried when I first got the scar, over what I couldn't hide, but Sam didn't look at me the way other men did, like they saw the scar first.

"'Bout time for you to catch the bus home, isn't it?" he asked, looking at his silver watch.

The Crewe bus ran every hour, and the nearest stop was only a few blocks up the road, next to the Shell station.

"I don't want to go home," I said. He stepped back and let me hop down.

"Why not?" he asked.

"Dad doesn't talk to me," I said. Since Mom left, Dad had softened in some ways; he'd grown quiet around me, didn't tell me what to do, just let me be in my room, the guest bedroom. But it got lonely sometimes, so quiet.

"You ever try talking to him?" Sam asked.

"Yeah, but he's always doing stuff, like he doesn't want to listen. I only like going over Dad's when you're there," I said. Dad usually worked on his truck or on something that was broken in the apartment. He never sat still anymore.

"Don't say that. He only has you left."

"He's never had anyone," I said. Mom had said this to him before she left, to let him know she could do what she wanted. But I said it now because Dad didn't have me

either. He left me alone when I came over to visit. I wanted him to talk to me about something, about nothing important.

Sam stood looking at me.

I waited for him to tell me I was wrong, but then he turned toward the greenhouse, so I cut across the parking spaces in a hurry to catch the bus.

* * *

I sat on the steps of Dad's apartment, my shoulders aching from the hot August sun. I looked at the high rise apartments across the street, all of them with gray vinyl siding, stairs leading up to the eighth floor, and windows facing the street. The lobby had a pool and a gym. Dad's apartment was newer and cleaner than our old house.

Sam and Dad had worked on the old Dodge for about an hour; they had already drained the oil and had the hood up now to change the plugs. Sam seemed to know how to fix Dad's truck, and Dad stepped back, giving him room. Sam had taken his shirt off and had engine grease on his forearms. I watched the muscles in his back move as he worked. We hadn't spoken since the greenhouse, and it hurt to watch him when I couldn't touch him, couldn't tell him I was sorry we had argued over Dad. Maybe I should give Dad another chance. Let him come around when he was ready.

"Julia, go bring us something to drink," Dad hollered.

"Okay," I said. I went inside the apartment and grabbed two Miller Lites from the fridge, a Coke for myself, then carried the bottles to them.

Dad sat inside the truck's cab, throwing empty Coke bottles onto the pavement; he only cleaned the truck on weekends and would probably make me pick up the trash later.

"What's wrong with the truck?" I asked Sam.

He took the Miller Lite from my hand, twisted the cap off, threw it on the ground, then chugged the cold beer.

"Nothing a pretty girl like you couldn't fix. It just needs a little attention," Sam said. He touched my shoulder, lightly at first, then cupped his hand around the bone.

I looked at Dad, but if he'd heard, he showed no sign. He didn't seem to care about much these days. I wanted Dad to tell Sam to get off me, for him to say I couldn't do something. Even if I didn't do what he said, I wanted to be told, to know he cared.

I shifted Dad's beer under my arm and opened my Coke. I smiled at Sam, not knowing what to say.

Dad got out of the truck and took the bottle from my hand. I turned to go back to my place on the steps. Dad didn't like me hanging around much when he had company.

From the porch, I heard Dad say to Sam, "You're young enough to do something with your life. Don't let anyone take that from you."

Their bottles clanged together, and I watched them both drink the cold beer. Sam turned to the steps, his eyes on my legs.

I didn't know how to take what Dad said. Maybe he meant that Mom and I had held him back in life, and if we did, then that's why Mom left. She had no regrets. I knew that.

Dad set his beer on the pavement, waited for Sam to do the same, then they set to work again on the Dodge.

After a time, when they had the Dodge running good, they finished their beers, laughing, cheeks flushed red from the sun.

"C'mon in the house, Sam. Don't have much, just leftovers, Julia's cooking," Dad said.

"Thanks, but I should head home."

"Another time, then." Dad picked up the toolbox.

I waved goodbye to Sam from the steps.

He got in his truck and drove through the parking lot, then made a right onto the highway.

* * *

The following Monday night, I sat on the bench inside the gazebo, holding Sam's hand. We didn't have much work left on the gazebo; half the roof had shingles, the other side open to the afternoon sun. I looked across the freshly cut grass at the stacks of potting soil, peat moss, and fertilizer leaning against the greenhouse, the torn plastic flapping in the wind.

Some nights, Sam and I'd go into the greenhouse, he'd kiss me, we'd take off our clothes, then he'd slide into me, my back against the flowers, and I'd imagine someone looking at us on the other side of the plastic, seeing our shadows, how mine would be swallowed into Sam's dark shape. But no one stood there, nothing there but the sound of the train rattling by on the tracks, cars leaving to be somewhere else.

"Let's go somewhere." Sam stood and led me to his Dodge truck parked in front of the main building of the greenhouse.

"I'll miss the bus," I said.

Sam let go of my hand. "We still got time. Get in the truck." He opened the door and got inside.

"Tell me where we're going." I stood there for a moment, hoping he'd give me an answer.

He slid over in the seat and opened the passenger door. "Let's go," he said.

I shook my head.

"What are you scared of?"

I wasn't scared. I didn't know what I felt. Most times, I would have gone anywhere with him. Many nights we went all the way past George's Tavern, down to the creek, just to watch the sky grow dark. But right then, held by his silence, I didn't move.

"I want you to see my house. Let me keep you for a night." He motioned me in.

I couldn't imagine what his house looked like. I tried. Maybe if I could have pictured myself there, I would have gone. The only image that came to mind, though, was the greenhouse with its smell of flowers and damp soil, the window flashing with passing headlights.

"No, Sam. Take me home," I said. This was as far as we would go. I knew that.

I needed Sam right now because he knew me, about Mom and Dad's separation, how they didn't love each other anymore, and I believed the same would happen to Sam and me, if I gave us that chance. Maybe I only used him like

he did me, to have that warm body, a promise that everything's okay, a need to press our fingertips along the scars we can't hide, pretend they're smooth again, good as new.

He dropped me off a few blocks from my dad's house without saying a word. Walking up to the apartment, I tried to come up with a story about being out so late, but Dad probably wouldn't ask. He never had with Mom.

* * *

Sam and I finished the gazebo the next day. We sat on the bench, my legs in Sam's lap. It would be our place when Sam moved it to his pond, somewhere to get away from Dad and fill a need for both of us.

"Sam, school's starting soon, and when it does, I won't be working at the greenhouse," I said.

He slid away from me on the bench. "Is it your father? Does he know something?"

"No," I said. I'd never tell Dad about Sam, but I still hoped Dad might open up to me. Maybe he did only have me left, and I'd have to forgive him when it came to Mom or we'd never be close.

"So, it's your choice?" Sam asked.

I nodded.

He stood and walked to the other side of the gazebo. Sam said, "I'll move it to the pond tomorrow. You can see it the next time you come fish with your dad."

I nodded again.

"I've got to clean up here. I don't have time to drop you off at the bus stop." He turned and walked away.

I made my way up the road to the bus stop. When the bus arrived, I sat next to a woman with dark hair. She smiled, the way my mother had when I was a child. I smiled, but looked away, thinking that if I didn't, she'd see Sam somehow, see what I didn't want anyone to know.

As the bus jerked away from the curb, I shifted in the seat. Sam had given me the choice to be with him, to have the gazebo as a place beyond Dad's sight. But I worried Sam might be a different person at the gazebo, that he wouldn't take me like he did at the greenhouse, or look at me with desire at Dad's or hold me the same way he did in the woods at George's Tavern. Maybe I wouldn't know him anymore if I went to the pond to wait for him, not recognize the same man that touched the scar on my cheek. It wouldn't mean anything to him, the gazebo. Giving in to Sam meant I accepted him for not loving me. I'd known all along that he didn't, but I'd decided maybe there should be more.

* * *

The next day, Dad and I went to have supper at Mildred's Diner in Crewe. We sat at a booth in the corner. I wore my hair in a ponytail, and a waiter that I recognized from school asked me what I would like to drink. I told him iced tea with lemon. My Dad ordered the same, and the waiter left to bring us our drinks.

Dad looked across the diner and smiled at a little girl, about six I'd say, sitting one table over from us. She grabbed a daisy from the vase when her mother wasn't looking, and pulled one petal off, smiling at it in her hand. She dropped it onto the tablecloth, and said, "He loves me, He loves me--"

She closed her small pink fingers around the next petal. Before she could pull it off, I looked away, imagining daisies around the gazebo, blooming like wild.

Ethan's Chair

Miss Dee wiped the Formica tabletop clean with a white dishcloth. For ten years, she'd worked at San Giorgio's Italian Restaurant and had grown to like the harsh chemical smells of Clorox, the way it masked the odor of grease and pasta.

Miss Dee folded her dishcloth in half, scrubbed the chair's curved wooden frame, its red upholstery. The restaurant had a private dining area by the kitchen, red booths that ran the perimeter, and small tables near the foyer doors. She always cleaned the smoking section last, finished with this chair. As she worked, the chair wobbled slightly, and she stopped to run a finger along the gash in the seat. Miss Dee wanted to end the night washing Ethan's place.

She missed her husband Ethan, how his clothes smelled of gasoline and oil from working as foreman at Kenbridge Construction. On Fridays, after his shift, they used to eat dinner at San Giorgio's, order the specials, chicken Parmesan and veal.

Eleven years ago, Miss Dee lost Ethan to a driver asleep at the wheel. A few months later, she took the job at the restaurant, wanting to remember how he looked at her

across the table, smiling like he had a good story to tell, his head tilted, cigarette in one hand, blowing smoke at the window overlooking Main Street traffic. The pieces of Ethan's stories seemed more real when she touched his chair, and she didn't want to forget how he talked to her, as if they sat alone in the restaurant. That's how she loved him.

Now, she heard the cooks in the kitchen, the clatter of dishes and running water. She looked out the window at Mike Rowe's truck pulling into the parking lot. Mike owned San Giorgio's, and every night, he made a deposit at the bank. Lately, he'd been taking Jessica, a new waitress, with him.

Mike walked through the foyer, his keys jangling on his belt loop. "That's all you got left, Dee?" He picked up a menu that had fallen off the Formica counter and returned it to its place by the register.

"Yes, sir," she said, dropping the dishcloth on the table.

Mike stepped behind the counter and rested his hand on the door that led to the kitchen. "Make sure Jessica comes in here, will ya?" he asked. The door slammed against the white-tiled wall as Mike walked past one of the cooks.

The girl hadn't come in with him, so Miss Dee glanced toward the door, setting her rag aside. Mike had a temper, especially on slow nights when he didn't pull in as much money. Something had to be wrong.

Pushing open the double doors, Miss Dee hurried outside the restaurant to the parking lot. She found Jessica sitting on the ground, her head leaning back on the passenger side door. "You hurt?" Miss Dee asked, crouching down in front of her.

"No." Strands of hair stuck to the young girl's wet, flushed cheeks.

"Mike leave you out in the parking lot to cry?"

"What of it?" Jessica asked.

Miss Dee sat down beside the girl. "I thought you might want to talk about what happened, that's all. Ain't no one here but you and me and the birds."

Jessica grabbed the side mirror and pulled herself up. "He said I wasn't his first pick for shift manager."

"Well, everyone knows that, Jessica. Maggie is." Maggie had worked at the restaurant for five years; she knew how to run the place and would make a good shift manager. But Mike usually ran away the good ones, and Maggie would be gone soon too, Miss Dee figured.

"I want the job. He offered me cashier on Wednesday nights." Jessica wiped her tears with a napkin she had stashed in her change pouch.

Miss Dee folded her arms across her chest. "Let me guess--eight dollars an hour, which is more than you'd make as a waitress on those nights."

"How you know, Miss Dee? He tell you 'bout this?"

Miss Dee shook her head. "A hunch is all. I've been here a long time."

Mike always promised new girls a chance at the shift manager position to keep them working for a month or more without quitting. Miss Dee knew Jessica wanted to impress Mike, though nothing would come of it. Mike found the girls who wanted something too much and used that to keep them at the restaurant for a long time, always longer than the ones who saw right off that Mike would lead them wrong.

If Miss Dee had been twenty years younger, she might have gotten the same proposition. "You gonna take the job? Cashiering?"

Jessica shrugged.

Miss Dee fiddled with her apron string. She wondered if her husband would have thought Jessica pretty. The girl had the same dark hair as Miss Dee. Wide hips and a wide smile, just the kind of girl Miss Dee had once been.

"Cashiering ain't hard, do what the boss man tells ya, then give the customer change, and tell 'em to come back.

'Least you not a dishwasher, girl. Now, I don't count washing dishes as being the high point in my life, but I'd be a cashier any day over that. Hear me?" Miss Dee said.

Jessica pulled her ponytail tighter. "Come with me to the bathroom, Miss Dee. I have to wash my face. I can't go in there. I don't want Mike to see me upset."

Miss Dee smoothed the wrinkles in her red apron. "Here, if it'll make you feel better, I'll walk in front so he won't see you first."

Jessica looked at her reflection in the truck's window to tuck in her white shirt. "Thank you."

They crossed the parking lot to the foyer, then to the restroom, just past the register. Miss Dee held the door open for Jessica, then stepped behind her into the small space.

Jessica turned on the faucet and splashed hot water on her face, blinking away the mascara running into her eyes. "You think Mike still likes me?"

Miss Dee reached for a brown paper towel from the dispenser. "If you think he does."

"I've been here for three months. Mike's seen me. He knows I do my work, but he won't, you know, talk to me like

a man talks to a woman." Jessica blotted the soft skin around her eyes. "He talks to me like I'm just a girl."

But you are a little girl, Miss Dee thought. Maybe Mike was actually looking out for Jessica. As a cashier, she could be Mike's go-getter, do his personal errands, and keep the reservation book. Nothing too hard.

"He must think something of you if he made you cashier," Miss Dee said, not sure if that was the right thing to say.

Jessica reminded Miss Dee of herself as a young girl. On dates with Ethan, Miss Dee talked too much around him, waited for him to look at her a certain way, for all of his attention to be on her. That's why she worked at the restaurant, to imagine Ethan alive again, to get closer to that attention somehow. She touched the corner of her apron, the rough canvas between her fingers, and understood what she'd done. She didn't want to forget all those years with Ethan, but Jessica had shown her how much she'd already lost, how she couldn't be young anymore, be the girl that Ethan loved, just Miss Dee now, beyond all kinds of promises.

Jessica threw the paper towel in the trashcan. "Mike needs you to train me tomorrow on register."

Miss Dee held the bathroom door open for her, and they walked into the foyer. "Sure thing, but you need to catch on quick." Miss Dee wasn't going to let a girl get away with making eight dollars an hour as cashier while she made less doing more, training her at that.

"See you in the morning, Miss Dee. Seven o'clock," Jessica said. She left through the foyer's double doors, waving goodbye.

Walking over to smoking section, Miss Dee removed a pack of Marlboro Reds from her shirt pocket and lit a cigarette with a Bic. She pulled out the red upholstered chair and sat down. She wondered how much longer she'd do this routine, if she'd wait tables at San Giorgio's for ten more years, listening to the noise of the customers and sit in Ethan's chair, imagining a conversation with him.

She puffed on the cigarette, flicked the ashes into the glass tray. Miss Dee hadn't meant to be hard on Jessica. She saw a lot of herself in the girl, always wanting something more but never quite reaching it. Miss Dee looked at her watch: 10:20. A few more minutes and she would leave the warmth of the restaurant, walk across the street to the BP gas station, a block more to the bus stop, a plastic hut with a bench, and then board the

Buckingham County public bus, heading to her one bedroom house.

Either way she'd be in good company, never alone, part of the fabric of the restaurant, and she'd pass her old life at this table and smile at her young self and nod at the customers as if they understood when she handed them the specials.

The Distance Between

I sat on the stoop, leaning against one of the wooden posts that support the roof. Every Friday night, Holly went to the party at the Lawrence boys' farm to see her boyfriend, Joe Lawrence.

I'd never been because Holly won't let me go. She'd never told me why or what happens there. A few times, she'd come home drunk. Joe had dropped her off at the end of the driveway so that Mamma and Daddy didn't see his truck, then Holly'd walk to the porch, and I'd help her to our bedroom upstairs.

Tonight, Holly made me her look-out again. Mamma and Daddy don't know she's out there, and if they ever catch on, Daddy'll whip us both.

Holly'd been gone for about two hours when I heard her running toward the house, her flip-flops sending out puffs of red dirt.

She breathed hard through her mouth and put her hands on her knees. "We gotta hide, Lizzie. Joe's coming to get me." Holly leaned against iron railing on the concrete stoop to steady her breathing.

"What'd you do--" I asked, "steal from him?"

"Naw, I left him. He hit me cross my mouth, and I threw a bottle of Jack Daniels at his windshield, cracked it good."

"Are you stupid?" I said, a little too loud. Mamma and Daddy had their bedroom window open.

Holly panted. "We gotta go, Liz. C'mon to the barn. He'll be here any minute."

I took a step toward her. "He's prob'ly so drunk he don't care about it no more."

"Brian's driving. I seen him get in the truck, then I took off through the woods."

Holly had got herself into a lot of trouble in the past, and I couldn't trust her to tell me the truth except when she had no choice but to. In the moonlight, I saw her swollen lips and knew she wasn't lying. She grabbed my wrist and half-dragged me to the pasture. We ducked between the wires of the electric fence and ran toward the barn. We'd gotten to the corral when I heard someone pulling into our driveway. I looked back at the house, and sure enough, Brian's truck slid to a stop at the big oak tree. The headlights dimmed, then turned off completely.

"They're going to find us," I said.

"They won't, Lizzie. Not if we hide."

Manure stuck to our shoes as we hurried through the darkness. Ducking under the low rafters, Holly pulled me inside the barn.

Scotty, our spotted pony, stomped his hooves and blew hot air through his thick, fuzzy lips.

"Under the hay, Lizzie," Holly said, pushing me in first. "Go all the way to the wall."

I made room for her as she slid down next to me. The straw scratched my bare arms and smelled musty in the heat. We worked to cover ourselves with the hay.

After a time, I heard Brian and Joe walk in the barn. Their footsteps shuffled on the straw, and I watched them through a small opening in the hay.

Scotty whinnied in the corner.

Joe slid his hand along the wooden beams to the middle of Scotty's stall before turning to Brian.

I prayed for a copperhead to slither out and bite them or for Scotty to take notice and pretend to be Don Quixote's courageous steed and charge. But the Lawrence boys had no fear of snakes, or of us. They'd wait until sun-up if need be.

Holly shifted her hips toward me. The hay smelled damp and thick, not sweet like it does when fresh cut.

Daddy and I'd gone into the field to cut hay this morning. We loaded about a hundred bales into the barn. Holly'd been with Joe, skipping her chores, leaving me to take up the slack.

Sometimes it felt like we had different daddies, Holly and me. Hers loved her when she came home and mine loved me when I stayed home. Me--I wished she loved other people more than she loved herself. But right now, I wished she loved Joe less than she loved herself.

Joe stepped into the haystack; straw crunched under his big leather boots. "C'mon, Brian. They gotta be here. Let's try the loft."

I grabbed Holly's arm, scared he might trample us.

Joe turned back to look at Brian. "Coming?"

"Why do you think they'd be up there?" Brian asked.

Joe stood just to the side of our hiding place.

"'Cause Holly and me romp on the hay bales, then she tells me all about her family. Like yesterday, we go on up there, and while she's taking off her shirt, she starts in on how her Mamma and Daddy get into all these fights, broken dishes and such. How Lizzie don't do anything to stop them either."

Joe pulled at his shirt collar, stretching it away from his thick neck. "Holly says Lizzie walks around in a

daze, going to the mailbox and back all day long, coming home looking tired. No, what'd she say? "Restless," that's it. Restless, like Lizzie's waiting for someone to come get her. A wild one, that Holly. Can't believe all those stories. And tonight, Holly grabbed that bottle of Jack from my hand, then threw it at my windshield. But that's how Holly gets when she drinks. Mad as hell. So what about her sister? Wanna see if 'lil Lizzie's all grown up now? You could take her to the orchard, and we could have a good look-see."

Brian didn't say anything, and I hoped he wouldn't. We'd been seeing each other at the end of my driveway, a quarter of a mile down the dirt road, to talk and kiss. No one knew about us, and I didn't want anyone to know.

"You should have the littlest sister. Holly and me, well, who knows? If you ain't gonna help me look, reckon we'll just wait." His voice grew faint as he walked outside the barn door. Brian followed.

Holly moved her legs and crossed her arms. She whispered, "Stay here. They want me. They can have me." She crawled from underneath the shelter of the hay and along the side of the barn. At the stall's opening, she walked away from me, out of sight.

Joe yelled something, but I couldn't make out what he said. Someone banged against the stall, then cried. I imagined Holly's head open, bleeding on the thick weeds and manure.

I crawled toward the front of the barn. Around the corner, I saw Holly limp in Brian's arms. Joe supported her head between his big hands.

Joe said, "Take her to the stoop."

"We gotta tell her daddy about this. Can't just leave her." Brian's voice broke.

"Why not? You see how drunk she is? Her daddy'll think she busted her head on the concrete." Joe shakily stroked her matted yellow hair, like she was a baby.

"He'll know. She'll tell him." Brian took a step back.

Holly's head fell back across Joe's arm. "If she tells him anything about tonight, we'll both get charged. She ain't stupid, Brian. Take her out."

Joe had a point. For all of us, tonight needed to never have happened.

I wanted to chase after them, but I didn't. Fear's too big sometimes. Thirty minutes later, I left the barn to find my sister, Lawrence boys or no. Rain fell, and the smells of a moist wilderness rolled through my stomach.

The rain and sky and fog stretched before me like a cloud as I walked across the pasture, my house hidden behind a wall of rain.

Holly lay semi-conscious on the stoop. The rain had washed her head wound clean, but her top lip swelled to the base of her nose. With my palm, I smoothed Holly's forehead. She responded to my touch, thinking I was Joe and breathed, "Love ya too, babe."

She had come home with bruises and scrapes before. I'd believed them to be the result of a drunkard's walk. Now, I knew better. He'd hurt my sister. More than once. Whether or not she deserved to be hit in the mouth Lord only knows, but I cared about her. I cared about her talking to me, about what she wanted out of life, besides Joe.

"Listen up, Holly. I'm gonna help you this one last time, understand? Won't tell Mamma or nothing. But I swear, this is the last favor I'll ever do for you."

She stared at the stars. I looked up too, fuzzy white dots against a black ceiling of sky.

Just then, Mamma opened the door, pushed the screen, and stepped onto the concrete stoop.

I looked up at Mamma.

"Girls?"

Her own bruised-black cheek shone in the light. Eventually, everything comes full circle. I imagined the scene in my head, Daddy waking to the headlights of Brian's truck, not knowing where the light had come from, he blamed Mamma for waking him, hitting her in his deep, dream sleep.

"Holly?" Mamma said. She stepped toward Holly, placed her hand over her mouth, then she touched her own cheek, the bruise half-hidden behind her fingers. "Get on in the house and wash up. Won't Joe be upset with you when he sees you next?" She turned her attention to me. "Lizzie, help your sister."

Mamma went back into the house, her blue robe wrapped tight around the hips Holly had inherited, the hips I'd have too one day.

Holly could get on in the house without me. I had somewhere to be. I left her there on the stoop, with her hands covering her eyes and mouth, just starting to feel pain from her swollen lip and the lump on her head.

"I'll see you later, Holly." I hopped down off the stoop onto the wet grass. "I'll keep your secret, so don't go telling Mamma everything."

* * *

At the mailbox, I waited for Brian to come. We had our meetings there where we talked and held hands. Brian

wanted to go into the military after he graduated high school, said there was nothing for him here, his family being poor and his daddy out of a job again.

A part of me knew that meeting Brian at the mailbox was no better than Holly going to the orchard or the barn. I was lying to everyone, carrying on with Brian Lawrence when no one knew it. Brian usually met me early at the mailbox, and I'd hoped he'd come see me today.

Soon enough, Brian's Chevy truck sped down the road and into the driveway. He parked near the ditch and got out of the truck.

"Hey," I called out.

Brian pulled at his shirt collar.

I looked at the truck. The truck windows were dark. I couldn't see if anyone else was in there.

"Joe ain't here." Brian walked around to the back and lowered the tailgate.

I nodded.

"Let's talk," he said, hopping onto the tailgate and patting the space next to him.

But I was as close as I wanted to be. He motioned again for me to sit next to him, but I didn't move.

"How's Holly?" he asked, swinging his legs.

"Asleep," I said, not knowing whether she was or not.

"Joe's out cold near our barn. Didn't want to take him in the house. He can barely walk, he's in so much pain. I had to tell him what'd he done to Holly."

"I don't think Holly remembers anything either," I said.

"Well, at least you're okay, Lizzie. Joe'd really been in some pain if he'd hurt you." Brian jumped off the tailgate, then slammed it shut. He walked over to me, slow, like he was wading through knee-deep water.

"I'm glad you showed," he said.

Brian made me feel that I could leave this place, leave Holly, Mamma, and Daddy. I didn't need them anymore, not if I had Brian to love me. But Brian wanted to leave too, join the Army. He never talked of us leaving together. He didn't want to take me with him. I understood this, respected it. It made us seem different because we knew we would leave each other to find our own way out. I didn't want to end up like Mamma and Holly.

"You know, Joe don't mean--"

I stopped him. "Don't." I stepped closer. "When will I see you again?"

"In a week, maybe. Help your daddy bale hay."

"Okay," I said. He turned to leave, but I caught him by the arm. "Tomorrow. I'll be at the mailbox tomorrow."

He smiled, nodded, then got into his truck and sped off down the dirt road. I walked back to the big oak tree, sat down at its base, and pulled my knees up to my chest.

I'd have to go back home eventually, but right now my body ached from being up most of the night. Besides, I had to come up with a good story as to why Holly had a busted head and lip. I should tell Mamma and Daddy that we got into a fight, that I was the one who hit her. I laughed at the idea. Who knows? Maybe Mamma and Daddy'd believe me, though Holly wouldn't think it was very funny.

Solid red mud singed the hem of my jeans. If I ever wanted to go home now, I'd have to find a way to sneak in and change or I'd be in as bad a shape as Holly when Mamma saw me. I shivered in my wet clothes and shoved my hands under my armpits to keep them warm.

I leaned against the wet tree, trying to get comfortable. I tried to imagine sitting under one of the crab apple trees in the orchard, me and Brian curled up under a blanket in his truck bed, but hard as I tried, I could only see him helping Daddy in the field, lifting bale after bale.

So I thought about my leaving, alone, the distance between me and them all growing farther and farther, until

I couldn't see Brian or the hay, or Daddy, or Mamma, even
Holly at all, anymore.

Practical Pieces

I pulled into Central High School's parking lot to wait for my daughter Amanda. She had softball practice every day after class.

Her father Tony promised to pick her up after his shift ended at the Tyson's chicken plant. When he phoned me earlier today, he said he had to cover for an employee who called in sick. As supervisor, Tony usually worked late hours, one of the reasons we separated a year ago.

I parked close to the dugout and watched Amanda jog with her teammates across the infield. Broken chalk lines marked off the bases and a puddle surrounded home plate. The girls squeezed through the gate in single file, then spread across the parking lot to their cars.

She waved goodbye to one of her friends and opened the door to my Civic.

"How was practice?" I moved my raincoat from the seat and laid it in the back.

"Where's Dad?" she asked. She stomped her cleats on the pavement and brushed red mud off her practice uniform, purple sweatpants and a yellow shirt, the school's colors.

"He's working late," I said, gripping the steering wheel.

She tossed her glove on the floor before sliding into the passenger seat. "He said he'd be here."

I started the car and turned out of the parking lot. "Maybe he'll come next time. What school are you playing on Friday?"

"Buckingham County. Their field." Amanda rolled down the window and tried to catch the air, moving her arm up and down with the current.

"I'll be there," I said. So far this season, Tony hadn't come to any of the games or seen her field the ball at shortstop.

"I know." She held her arm straight, palm flat against the wind.

Her father had taught her how to play softball, throwing fastballs that she hit across our hayfield. They made me pitch-runner, but Amanda was the star. Tony and I let her win every game.

"Did you want dinner from Marino's?" I asked. I slowed the car, waiting for her answer. During the week, I waited tables at Marino's, and the owner gave me ten percent off on meals.

"No, just go home." Amanda picked her glove off the car floor and stuck her hand inside.

I'd given her the glove last year on Christmas. She'd hugged me that morning, and later, after breakfast, we played catch in the hayfield until our hands turned red from the cold. Neither one of us said anything about Tony. Instead, we made sure not to stand on the pitcher's mound. That was Tony's spot.

I turned left onto Burkeville Road. "Why don't you call him tonight? See how he's doing," I asked. In the rearview mirror, a lumber truck pulled out of a clear-cut field behind us.

"Can I go over there this weekend?" she asked, shifting her legs toward the console.

"If he says it's okay," I said. The truck gained speed and passed us, blew its horn. I jumped. Amanda punched the glove with her fist.

A few yards in front of us, I saw the road that led to her father's house. When Amanda's not with me in the car, I take the back road so I don't have to pass the turn-off.

Amanda looked out the window and smiled. "He'll say it's okay. Why don't you come over to Dad's too? We can play softball."

"You know I don't want to go over there. Have him drop you off at home on Sunday night," I said. I didn't

want to see his house, the large patio in front, creek in the backyard, to know he had a life apart from me.

Most weekends, Amanda stayed with Tony, and he brought her home on Sunday. Recently, he asked me to pick up Amanda because he bowled nights with his friends. I said no. He had expected me to say yes, give in, but I didn't have to do what he asked anymore. If he wanted to help me with Amanda, he'd have to take her to the house too.

"All right, I'll tell him," Amanda said. She took off the glove and held it loosely in her hands.

* * *

I wanted to tell Amanda how I had left her father once. He had a new job, repairing a bridge, but we didn't have any money. I'd stood at the kitchen sink, washing dishes. A cool breeze had blown in through the open window, and I'd needed to get out of the house for a while, maybe longer. Tony had the television on in the living room, and I just left, slipped out the back door.

Four blocks up the road, I'd sat on the sidewalk, not wanting to go any further, but too mad to go back home. We hadn't said much about the baby growing inside me, the child I'd already named Amanda. Tony had said that we should've waited to have a family. He'd dreamed of us moving to Richmond, finding office jobs, the way we had

talked when we first met. I hadn't lost those dreams, but I believed there were practical pieces in me that Tony lacked, pieces that kept me from leaving everything behind, taking risks in new places.

Sitting on the sidewalk, I'd pulled at the weeds growing in the cracks and imagined Amanda as a little girl, the two of us crossing the street to Dairy Queen for ice cream. Then, I'd wondered if Tony had pictured her like I did. Looking down the road, I'd searched for him in the dark, hoping he'd come look for me.

About twenty minutes later, I'd heard him calling, "Laura, Laura."

When he'd finally found me, he'd helped me to my feet, and we'd walked home together, his hand clutching the soft part of my arm. He'd opened the door open for me on the porch. I'd hesitated, wanted him to say that he was okay, that he'd help me with Amanda, still love me the same, but he hadn't said anything. I'd stepped inside, my hand caught in his as I pulled him behind me.

* * *

Now in the car with Amanda, I knew Tony wasn't going to come find me, wasn't going to call me home this time.

I've wondered what might've happened if Tony had never found me there on the sidewalk that night, if he'd left me.

Back then, I'd believed he'd always find me again, no matter what we struggled with, but a year ago, when I asked him if he wanted to move out after a fight over Amanda's poor grades, he said he wasn't sure. He talked of being scared for me. He worried what I'd do without him, but I'd told him to go. I no longer worried what might come my way. I could live on my own, didn't need to rely on him. He'd packed his clothes two days later and found a place to rent.

I rolled down the driver side window, smelling night gather on the air. "Why don't we take the scenic route tomorrow? We can stop by that country store in Victoria. Buy ice cream or something. It's just us girls now," I laughed, and I looked at Amanda, then at the logging truck looming in front of me.

I steadied my hands on the wheel. "What do you say? Just us?"

Even though she nodded, I knew she hadn't really heard me.

Sidewalk Myth

Rachel Mulligan sat in the spindle-backed rocking chair, its hinges creaking as she rocked. She looked at the discontinued editions of books, antique china sets, odd-shaped vases, ethnic dolls that lined the junk store's shelves, everything full of history, scars, and stories.

Through the front windows of the junk store, Lost Treasures, Rachel watched two well-dressed customers walking toward the entrance, the woman's arm wrapped around the man's waist, her strawberry blonde hair in a bun. The man opened the glass door and let the woman pass in front of him.

Rachel recognized them as salesmen who worked at the Main Street Furniture Plaza in Jackson County. They shopped for cheap furniture to restore and sell for profit.

Rachel had heard stories about Main Street, how the owners no longer competed with places like the junk store. She believed these stories to be myths because she hadn't forgotten about Main Street with its lights and brick buildings and didn't want anyone to forget about her.

They weaved in and out of the rows of furniture, their black overcoats wet with rain.

"How much is this?" the woman asked, pointing to an old piano chair.

"Ninety dollars," Rachel said, upping the price.

The man clasped his hands in front of him as if embarrassed she had even bothered to ask.

The woman's bright red dress flared with the movement of her thick legs. "Would you mind standing? I'm very interested in this rocking chair," she asked, her voice reminiscent of a schoolteacher's tone during recess.

Rachel turned a page in an outdated edition of Ginsberg's poems, staring at the words on the page, but not actually seeing them, the ink blurring.

"It's not for sale," Rachel said. Working at the junk store had its moments. This was one. Rachel would make sure the woman wouldn't buy that rocking chair; she knew nothing about its real value. The rocking chair came from Mr. Johnson, a regular supplier to Lost Treasures. He'd made it by hand, given it to the junk store as a gift, for selling his crafts at fair prices.

"Oh," she said. The woman looked at the man for some kind of relief.

He shrugged, gave a hard look at Rachel, then smiled grimly at his companion.

"May I help you with something else?" Rachel asked.

The woman glanced at the register, an antique itself, rusted along its metal seams. "Yes, we would like a gift

certificate for one of our friends," she said, nodding to the man, her signal, Rachel guessed, that she had finished browsing.

"Lost Treasures only accepts cash," Rachel said, walking behind the glass display case.

"We have money," the woman said. She reached into her black handbag, pulling out a crisp fifty-dollar bill.

Rachel took the money and slipped it through the slot in the register. From under the counter, she grabbed a gift certificate and an ink pen, then signed Rachel Mulligan on the red-dotted line in long cursive writing. All certificates had to be signed for authentication.

For over a year, she had given this couple--and others like them--gift certificates to send to their Main Street Furniture Plaza friends, men and women who Rachel recognized from having worked at Lost Treasures for over a year, people who Sarah had pointed out to Rachel when she first got the job. Some wore their nametags, others dressed as regular people, no different from Rachel, but the moment they opened their mouths, she knew where they were from. Main Street. Might as well be a hundred miles from Jackson County.

"Who is the certificate for?" Rachel asked.

The woman hesitated. "Just leave it blank," she answered.

"All right then," Rachel said. "Gift certificates expire within six months of purchase. Here you go." Rachel handed the certificate over.

The woman took it and placed it in her black handbag. The purse looked expensive, made of leather with a gold metal ring sewn on the front.

Rachel didn't expect the woman to say thank you for the certificate. She never had before.

The Dutch style cuckoo clock sounded the hour, counting the time Rachel wanted to be somewhere else, writing poetry for class or for herself. She knew the clock would never be sold, would remain in the junk store like the rocking chair. The clock hung from a thin wire wrapped around a hook in the ceiling. Often, Rachel had wanted to hit the clock like a piñata, its wheels and springs popping in shock. The cuckoo peeped back at her in defiance, its little house swaying in the breeze from the junk store's open front door.

Through the window Rachel saw Sarah's green Neon finally pull into the junk store's parking lot. The owner stepped out of the car and slammed the door, then walked past where the Fifty-Percent-Off items stood on the

sidewalk. Rachel loved how the mismatched chairs and dinner tables were arranged as if for a party. Sarah walked in the door.

Sarah's face shifted when she saw the two customers. "Hello there. Would you like to look at our fifty-percent off items on the sidewalk lot? They're a bargain. Real easy to fix-up," she said with a wide smile.

"No, thank you. I think we're done." The woman moved to the front door.

The man trailed behind her, glancing over his shoulder one last time at the rocking chair.

Rachel went back to the chair and grabbed an umbrella off the rocker's back, its wooden duck handle heavy in her hand. From the bookcase, she also grabbed a white envelope that contained her poetry assignment for Dr. Stucco, an English teacher at Jackson County Campus. Rachel believed her poetry would get her out of the junk store, at least into a teaching job. But Rachel would still write about working at Lost Treasures, how she wanted to be more than just another person that served people from Main Street. Sometimes, Rachel thought of herself as a myth, an imagined story where she could be anyone and prove to herself that she wouldn't just disappear. She'd be remembered for her poems, not as someone who worked at the junk store.

She turned to Sarah. "I'm late for class and won't get credit now if I go, but I have to drop off my assignment."

"Sorry, Rachel. I had a little trouble parking," Sarah said. Lost Treasures shared a parking lot with Turner's Manufacturer, a furniture company that sold to larger retailers in Jackson County.

"It's all right. I'll see you tomorrow," Rachel said. She walked out of the junk store, opened her umbrella, and crossed the street to the other sidewalk.

An old wooden house with a large concrete balcony rose just to Rachel's left. It stood on the other side of the street, a busy four-way intersection. A week ago, Mr. Johnson, once owner of the duck-handled umbrella and the man who'd made the rocking chair, had painted most of the house a beautiful aquamarine. Where he hadn't yet painted, an off-white color remained; it looked as if the sea crashed over his house, a mass of white foam flowing downward into rolling waves.

From the porch Mr. Johnson took off his paint-splattered hat and waved at Rachel. She extended her white envelope in the air, waving it like a flag.

Rachel reached the end of the sidewalk and waited for the light to turn red before crossing the intersection.

Cars from Main Street sped by, water spinning off their tires onto her thrift-store jeans and faded black coat. She imagined someone stopping, offering to take her up to the college, but the thought dissolved against the sound of rain on the sidewalk.

She crossed the street, and her path changed to huge concrete slabs; their smooth, even surface looked like a gray pond in winter. She walked on toward the English building, a painted cinder block structure that gleamed a brilliant white. As she entered the lobby, other students glared at her rain-soaked clothes; apparently, they all had parking decals. Rachel closed her junk store umbrella without looking at them.

Rachel went to the mailroom, located in the heart of the building, two stories up. She always took the stairs. Once there, she tried to pat the damp envelope dry with her red shirt, but its white paper bubbled with moisture. She searched the list of professor names until she found Edward Stucco's mailbox.

Dr. Stucco's name was written in plain letters; the design simple and quiet, nothing to make him any more or less important than the other professors, but he was different. To Rachel, he was the man who kept her from

getting to Main Street. He denied her a place, a name on one of those mailboxes--a different sidewalk.

After an entire semester of Dr. Stucco's lectures, she had written something worthy of his time, a collection of poems about Mr. Johnson's sea-foam house. She placed the envelope in the mailbox and turned to leave, watching a crowd of students rush past the mailroom, their raincoats mostly dry and their shoes silent on the tile.

She took the stairs down to the lobby, readied the umbrella, then walked outside the college into the rain.

At the bottom of the hill, lights from hundreds of street lamps illuminated Main Street. Rachel liked how the lights looked, especially in the rain.

She passed back by Mr. Johnson's house; the old Victorian mansion towered above the street. The beautiful architecture of the two-story house almost made Rachel forget all about the little junk store on the corner and the college or how Dr. Stucco made her feel. She smiled a little, then something yellow caught her attention on the stoop's steps. Mr. Johnson sat there.

"Hello?" Rachel called, the wind lifting her voice into the darkness of the street.

"That's my umbrella," he said. His yellow slicker whipped in the breeze.

"Yes, it is. I borrowed it from the junk store for the night. I'll be returning it in the morning." She walked over and sat next to him on the cold stoop.

"You like it?" he asked, shoving his hands into his pockets.

"It's beautiful."

Mr. Johnson smiled. "I made it." He nodded at the duck head. "Carved that. Built this house too. So, do you like the new color?"

"I do." The rain pounded on the tin roof and splattered from the gutters.

"Well, I'm glad. Place goes on the market starting next week." He touched the half-painted pillar with his hand.

"What?" She folded her arms across her chest, shivering.

"I got laid off at Turner's Manufacturer. Been there fifteen years. All I know how to do is make furniture," he said, wiping his nose with his coat sleeve.

"I'm so sorry. Have you found another house?" she asked.

Mr. Johnson shook his head. "No," he whispered.

"What about the junk store? We get most of our crafts from you," she said.

"I saw that fifty-percent stuff out there on the sidewalk. None of 'em were what I made. Guess they're all sold by now, been two months since I gave Lost Treasures a shipment. If you want anything from me now, you'll only get my furniture, and that ain't hand-made." He laughed. "Ah, it makes no difference, Rachel. Most people can't tell if I made it or if it's just old junk. I'm sorry. Just makes me so mad is all. I can't believe I have to move away." He turned his head, looking down the slope of pavement, past the junk store to Turner's Manufacturer with its broken windows, plastered yellow walls, and concrete balcony. "It looks so different now."

Rachel thought about the man and woman from the Main Street Furniture Plaza the junk store earlier. If Mr. Johnson sold to them, he would still have a market for his craft, but the realist in her knew it wouldn't be enough. Sometimes wanting it to be wasn't ever enough. Dr. Stucco reminded her of that fact every time he failed her for a poem.

Rachel wanted to own a bookstore on Main Street, to be someone people knew and admired, not just the cashier at a junk store. She wanted to be read, to be heard. Rachel knew Dr. Stucco didn't see any potential in her as a

writer, but she believed. She'd get out of that junk store one day.

"You could go to Main Street," she said.

"Oh no. Not for me. I don't belong there. The money I get from this house will give me enough for an apartment. Ain't no place for me down there." He nodded toward the lights, pulled at the brim of his painter's cap, adjusting further down on his head.

"Main Street is where I want to be," Rachel said.

"Well, I can't tell you any different, but whatever stories you've heard aren't any better than this sidewalk. No sense feeling trapped between the two, Rachel. Home's in the travel, not in the place itself."

She looked at the umbrella, then at Mr. Johnson.

"Here," she said, offering the handle to him, "take it."

"It's the junk store's, Rachel. I can't take it back."

"I'll give Sarah the money tomorrow. No reason why you can't take back what's yours."

He took the umbrella, holding onto the metal with his left hand, and with his right, he rubbed the underside of the duck's beak. "Ya know, there was always a rough spot right there. Never had the time to sandpaper it smooth. I could fix it now. Make it better."

"You could do that."

"Probably should. But you should get walking. You look cold."

"Night, Mr. Johnson," she said, standing.

Rachel waved goodbye, and Mr. Johnson went inside his house. The street stood nearly silent except for a few workers from the furniture warehouse staying late for overtime.

Rachel thought about tomorrow, how she would walk the same street and go to class. Maybe Stucco'd like the work this time. Either way, she'd be there.

Stopping in front of the junk store window, seeing the condensation from the rain heavy on the glass, Rachel felt the urge to write. Mr. Johnson's words came to mind, and with her pointer finger, she printed: 50% off--Main Street.

The wind blew against her pushing her further along the sidewalk. The rustle of leaves whistled through her, and she felt like a myth she'd made up herself, no one hearing that great sound within her yet, only the faint shush of her shoes on the sidewalk. For now.

Drifting

I opened the front door to my sister Myrna's two-story brick rancher and walked through the foyer to the kitchen. Myrna leaned on the counter, drinking orange juice.

"Good, you're here, Jen," Myrna said. She finished the orange juice, placed the glass in the dishwasher. Myrna wore a pair of black dress pants and a green sweater; she obviously hadn't changed after she got off work from the doctor's office where she ran the front desk.

David, Myrna's husband, wouldn't be home for another few hours; he taught high school math. Earlier that week, Myrna had arranged for him to pick up their daughter Brenda from day care.

"Do you have everything?" I spotted a packed duffel bag on the kitchen table.

"I guess." She looked at me. "What do you take--I mean--is there a list?" Myrna laughed. She grabbed her keys and duffel bag off the table, then pushed in the corner chair with her hip, her usual place at the dinner table.

Myrna walked through the narrow hallway into the foyer. She slipped on a pair of sandals by the door.

I followed her. "What did you tell David?" I asked.

"That I'd just be gone the weekend." Her voice sounded shaky. Myrna shifted the strained duffel bag to the other shoulder; it rested awkwardly against her hip.

I held the door as she struggled the bag to the stoop. When she stepped past me, I wanted to tell her to go back in the house, forget today ever happened, but I didn't. To do that would mean forgetting about more than just today.

She locked the door behind us, stuffed her keys in her pocket. On the way to my car, Myrna stopped and faced the house.

"Forget something?" I asked.

"No," she said, twisting the silver watch that hung loosely on her left wrist, "I've remembered it all." David had given her the watch on her birthday, and she wore it everywhere, even though the watchband didn't quite fit.

I opened the trunk to my Civic, and Myrna threw her bag inside. "What did David say? Did he want you to go?"

"He doesn't care," Myrna said. She got in the car and slammed the door.

I climbed in the driver's seat, turned the ignition, and pulled the car away from the curb onto the paved road.

I wanted to tell my sister that maybe David still cared, that maybe he didn't know what else to say to her.

But I just drove, through the neighborhood, toward the highway.

Myrna stared at the houses passing. "Remember riding our bikes to this street? We'd turn around in the cul de sac, then head home before dark. I never thought I'd live here." She laughed, but it sounded tinny.

"I always thought our kids would grow up together on the same street," I said. Kids. Robert, my ex-husband, had left me the morning I told him the doctor said there wouldn't be any children. He'd packed a bag and told me he was sorry from the door.

I took the turn-off toward the ocean, away from downtown Wilmington. If Robert had stayed, maybe we would've eventually drifted from each other, found someone else to love. Still, I wanted what Robert and I had, for him to need me. Myrna had everything I'd hoped for, a husband and a baby girl. Over the weekend, I prayed she'd miss them enough to go back home.

Myrna fiddled with her herringbone necklace, moving her fingers along the smooth metal. "David and I haven't taken any trips since we bought the house. Years ago, we'd get away from Wilmington for the night, find some place near the ocean and walk the beach for hours, looking for shells. David doesn't dream anymore. I guess he's never

dreamed as big as me. We've lost something, and I don't know what it used to be, but I can feel it's missing. Maybe he doesn't love me anymore. But he could love me again, couldn't he?"

I looked at my sister. "Talk to him," I said. Maybe that's how David loved her, letting her choose him over and over again. If she came home on Sunday, he'd forgive her.

Myrna crossed her arms. "We had a fight yesterday morning. David said I should find another job, something that made more money. I told him that we should both change jobs, travel, do something different. But I said this more to see what his answer would be. I wasn't really serious, though I had thought about leaving Wilmington, moving further up the coast. He said my job wasn't as important as his, that he couldn't just leave. I asked what made him more important, so much better than me. David didn't say anything. He walked outside, stayed there 'til dark. I thought I was the one drifting. But he's never walked out on me like that, left the house that way. He didn't seem to care. He didn't even say he was sorry." She looked at me, her eyes urgent. "I don't want him to be right about me. I am important, right?"

I nodded, then we sat in silence for a few minutes. Myrna picked at the fuzz on her jeans, looked out the window at the string of cars moving along the highway.

I checked the rearview mirror, wishing I could see the ocean.

Myrna shifted in her seat. "I was thinking about calling Mom. Does she know anything? You know, about how David and I fight?"

"Not from me. I'm leaving that up to you." I merged into bumper to bumper traffic. The highway heat waved around us.

"You have to tell her for me."

"Tell Mom you and David are just taking a break?" I sped up to change lanes, then looked for my next turn.

Myrna rolled down the window. "She won't believe me. She'll think I'm like you." She stopped, looked at me. "I'm sorry."

I tightened my grip on the steering wheel. "I've already done my marriage issues with her. Let her think what she wants."

Myrna pulled at the herringbone necklace. "You know, Mom and Dad fought so much when we were growing up. But she always sent us outside to play. We never heard what she said to him."

I shook my head. "She didn't want us to see her cry. Besides, she lost every argument." Easing off the gas pedal, I merged into slower traffic on Highway Seventeen.

"But at least she fought with him. She didn't run. Or hide. Look at us. We've both run away like we've got no home to go to."

We passed hotels and seafood restaurants, then I turned down a street filled with row houses, each one built the same, two-stories with bay windows and a garage. "No, Myrna, that's not true. I did fight, just not with Robert. I fought with what I said and didn't say, what I should've done, but didn't. I blamed myself for not being able to have children, thought I was cursed, and blamed Robert for not wanting to adopt."

I looked at my sister. "Let's turn around. Go back."

"Why?" Myrna stared straight ahead. "I've made my decision."

"Have you? You could talk to David. Let him know how close it is to being over." My mind drifted back to the day Robert left. I had needed him then, his pain also mine. But he'd stood there in the silence, then left.

"I wish I'd said something to Robert. Something to make him stay. I don't know what I would've said, I've

thought of those things so many times since then. Any one of them might have changed his mind."

A white car cut in front of us, and I tapped the brakes to give him space. I looked at Myrna. "Do we both have to leave home for good?"

Myrna looked away. "You know, if we'd listened to Mom and Dad fight, maybe then we would have known what to say."

I glanced at my sister, then back at the road, then made the final turn into my driveway.

A Lucy Moment

In the bedroom, I slide a silk nightgown down over my hips.

My husband Aaron looks at me. He's lying in bed shirtless with the covers up to his chest. "Maybe. I'm expecting a phone call."

A month ago, Aaron lost his job as a staff writer for Merck Editing, a small publisher in Richmond. Now, he hopes Watson Publications will phone him any day about his application.

"We'll be all right, you'll see, Linda," he says. He watches me crawl into bed next to him.

But I don't know anymore. I lean over and turn off the light. "If you don't go to Richmond tomorrow, maybe we could take a road trip. Go hiking in the Blue Ridge."

"What brought this on?" he asks, turning on to his side, toward the window.

"I don't know. We haven't seen much of each other," I say. Until Aaron finds work, I'm working on nights at the Citgo station and cashiering at the bowling alley on weekends.

Aaron brushes against my leg under the covers. "What if someone calls while we're gone?"

I touch his shoulder. "I just thought you'd like to go."

He shrugs away from my hand.

We say nothing for a few minutes, but I can tell he's still awake. He can't sleep on his side, only on his stomach.

I try again. "Do you remember that time we walked behind the waterfall on the Blue Ridge?"

"Yeah, I led us across," he says.

* * *

Two months after we married, Aaron and I followed a trail to a waterfall hidden in the woods. We walked to the bottom of the carved-out bank, then we took off our shoes and waded upstream.

Another couple stood in the knee-deep pool. They wore brightly colored bathing suits, and the woman had on a white straw hat. The man cupped his hands, splashed her, and she held onto her hat, kicked water at him, laughing. He ran through it, hugged her.

We smiled, nodded as we passed by them. They smiled back, not at us really, still more at each other.

Aaron pulled at his shirt collar, as we passed them. "I almost drowned once."

"Really?" I wondered why he'd never told me this before.

He stared at the swirl of brown leaves in the current. "Dad had taken me to my friend's pool party. I was four at the time. Seemed like the whole neighborhood showed up. We played tag under water. But with so many people there, I couldn't get to the surface."

I looked at Aaron. "What happened?"

He crossed his arms. "Dad must have seen me; he dove in, grabbed me around my waist, then brought me to the pool's edge. He lifted me onto the deck, and I coughed up water."

"You were okay, right?" I asked.

Aaron stepped in front of me, closer to the water's edge. "He wouldn't let me go back in the pool, but he let me stay for the rest of the party for cake and ice cream. I guess Dad didn't want to embarrass me by taking me home."

"But you aren't scared of the water now," I said.

"No, but I still remember the feeling, drowning. I still have dreams about it. If not for Dad, I don't know who would've pulled me out," he said.

Aaron grabbed hold of my wrist. "Let's go through the waterfall."

"What? No." I laughed.

He looked at me. "Come on, we can do it. Ready?"

He stepped on the slick brown rocks, into the darkness behind the waterfall. Black leaves gathered in clumps, thick with mold and red earth. Water rushed over us, and I squeezed Aaron's hand. I slipped on a piece of rose quartz, and when I looked up at Aaron, ripples of light scattered across his pale skin, the colors of his clothes swirled together, red shirt, jean shorts. We came back out drenched, our clothes sticking to our bodies, then waded to the bank, next to our dry shoes.

* * *

Now, in bed with Aaron, I shift closer to him, our feet touching. He rolls over onto his stomach, then drapes his arm over my chest.

"It's late," he says.

"I know," I say. I lie there motionless as he falls asleep, counting the cars that drive by our little house.

He breathes shallowly, small bursts of hot air on my face. I try to sleep, but can't.

After a time, I hear Aaron snoring and lay his arm gently on top of the covers. Sliding out of bed, I walk down the hallway to the living room and turn on the television. The theme music to "I Love Lucy" fills the room. I settle into my side of the loveseat out of habit,

then stretch my legs over onto Aaron's side. Light from the television casts the walls and loveseat in a black and white glow.

On the television, Lucy drinks cough medicine and gets tipsy. I laugh softly. I could be Lucy. Dye my hair red and be lovable to millions of people. Maybe then Aaron would see me again. I miss how he looked at me back in those odd moments, like right after I stepped out of the shower or stumbled into the kitchen to pour myself a cup of coffee or peeled away my work clothes after a long day at the bowling alley. He'd smile at me like he had a secret to share, then waited until I nodded, as if I understood the secret by being near him, and he trusted me to keep it safe. That's what I want, for his eyes to open up to me again.

When Aaron still worked at Merck Publications, he talked about his job in a hushed voice, as if the opportunity would break, float above his head and disappear when he tried to reach for it.

He's always wanted to write, have his own office. But I worry it won't happen for him, that we'll run out of money first, then he'll tell me to hold on a little longer. Aaron says he's not scared of writing, of getting turned

down, that it's gonna happen, but I know he believes that I've lost confidence in him.

Maybe I have. But like Aaron and his writing, I don't know how to get it back.

I pull at my nightgown, the silk fabric clinging to my skin. I already know how the episode plays out, Lucy goes home, talks to her friend Ethel about her commercial failure, then Ricky walks in, briefcase in hand, calling out, "Lucy, I'm home."

That used to be us. The day Aaron lost his job, we sat at the kitchen table, drinking coffee. I touched his hand and asked, "The job wasn't ever real, was it?"

Aaron said, "No, babe, I don't think it was."

After that day, Aaron didn't look at me the same, like something inside him cracked, told him to hide itself from me. Maybe he believed I was ashamed of him. He pulled away when I tried to get near him, as if he knew I didn't approve of him writing anymore. I wanted to tell him he should look for another line of work, something to get us through this, then, later, he could go back writing. Now, we needed another plan. Now, I'd lost that dream he still held while he slept. I'd already let it go to see if it could float.

I wonder if Lucy ever felt doubt creep into her bedroom at night, if she looked over at Ricky and told him, "You're no good at this. Do something else with your life." Or if she ever heard the music Ricky played in her sleep and knew that it wouldn't last, it would play out like their marriage, chords hit too high, too soon, their lives wrapped up in Ricky's dream.

I imagine Lucy waking up at night, leaving Ricky in bed, and tuning in to watch herself on television. She'd parade around in a dress and apron, her hair in a bun, and Ricky'd laugh at her, the cue for the audience to laugh, and in that moment, she'd know her life was staged, that she'd always welcome Ricky home, try to please him as a wife should.

I turn off the television as the credits roll on the screen. I walk down the hallway into the bedroom and crawl into my side of the bed. Aaron stirs in his sleep, then turns away.

"Aaron?" I whisper. He doesn't move. I scoot closer to him, lay my hand across his chest.

"I want to believe," I whisper. "Get us back to where we started." I look at his face, clean-shaven, a dimple in his chin, and wonder if we'll ever be like that young couple at the waterfall again. But I know I'm the one that

has to pull him out of the water this time, not let him drown.

A car passes outside, then another, before I close my eyes, try to dream of the waterfall, how Aaron held my hand, and I followed, waiting for him to see us safely across. We'll be all right. I just have to let him believe he's leading.