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Unreal City: Short story collection

Kelle Schillaci

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UNREAL CITY

SHORT STORY

COLLECTION

By

Kelle Schillaci

Bachelor of Arts
Loyola Marymount University
1997

a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

**Master of Fine Arts Degree in Creative Writing
Department of English
University of Nevada, Las Vegas**

**Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
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Kelle Schillaci

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Unreal City

Short Story

Collection

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

~~Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing~~

Examination Committee Chair

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ABSTRACT

Unreal City Short Story Collection

By

Kelle Schillaci

Douglas Unger, Examination Committee Chair
Professor of English
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I adopted the title of this short story collection after viewing the work of Italian sculptor Mario Merz, who, in turn, borrowed the phrase from T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land. I first saw Merz' "Unreal City" structure at the Guggenheim in Bilbao during the summer of 2006, while traveling through Spanish Basque country. Merz, an integral artist within Italy's *Arte Povera* art movement (and outspoken anti-Fascist political figure), utilized cheap, industrial materials—or "found" materials—when constructing his igloo structures, emphasizing the temporal nature of their very existence. Designed as an extended metaphor for the life of an artist, the structure itself remains a sustainable yet impermanent concoction of twigs, rubber, mud and clamps. Merz' signature construction motifs are often coupled with fragments of political or literary ideologies, subtly woven into these "poor" construction materials.

In this collection of short stories, the individual pieces are meant to function as self-contained narratives. And yet, read together, subtly repeated "themes" and "ideas" weave and resonate throughout the collection. The notion of the temporal exudes an

undeniable presence—with details of specific place and time often discarded in favor of more emotional landscapes. Identity, too, is presented here as something temporal, as characters face adversities that challenge their self awareness and social constructions. Often, it is the mundane moment that defines them; and there are plenty of mundane moments captured herein.

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Many thanks to the friends, family members and acquaintances whose likenesses may or may not appear to be replicated within this particular collection (for their love, support, and, of course, their understanding that this *is* fiction, after all). Special thanks to my graduate committee—KC Davis, Richard Wiley, and Dr. Evelyn Gajowski—whose time and feedback I highly value, and for which I am very grateful. And with especially heartfelt gratitude, I thank Douglas Unger, my advisor and mentor, without whose support, readership and guidance this collection might never have seen the light of day.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
THE COUPLE NEXT DOOR	1
LATEX FETISH.....	18
A PERMANENT MARK.....	25
COMFORTABLE DISTANCE.....	41
TRAGICALLY MUNDANE	57
WHAT IT IS	64
RUNNING STILL	81
BEST LAID PLANS	95
YOUNGER STILL	102
THIS ONE THING.....	119
SHE COULD EASILY DISAPPEAR.....	125
VITA.....	141

THE COUPLE NEXT DOOR

Evan balances two steaming mugs of tea as he tiptoes into our office. He somehow believes that if he's quiet, they'll follow suit. But they've been going at it all night.

"He's going to throw her out again," I say. We pause for the thunderous roll of a sliding glass door as it's flung full force into its jam. My stomach clenches. I have to remind myself to exhale. "I can feel it."

Evan sets my mug down and sidles up to the wall, cupping his ear against it the way I used to, like a kid spying on his babysitter. A sudden shatter, a thrown drink, and the explosive spill of glass and liquid crashing against the drywall forces Evan to jerk away. He's like a monkey, all limbs and nerves. His steaming tea sloshes over the mug but his reflexes are quick. It hits the carpet instead of his jeans. The dog pads out of the room, tail tucked between his legs, heading for our bed, where he knows he's not allowed. I ball my fists.

"I really don't want to get involved," Evan says. "Seriously."

He always does that, tacks on a 'seriously' to things that by nature already are. He uses his bare toe to wipe at a dark, wet tea stain in the shag carpet. Things like that didn't matter as much when we weren't homeowners paying a mortgage on a condo in which neither of us feel at home. Neighbors didn't matter as much, either. All the rules changed

once we signed those papers and entered a new demographic. Overnight, Evan's neat freak tendencies morphed into something borderline pathological.

"So what do we do, call the police?" I say. "I can't get anything done here."

It grows quiet for a minute. I take a sip of soothing chamomile, and it burns the tip of my tongue. Evan likes his drinks scalding hot. Even the mug is too warm to hold.

"Not yet," he says.

He stands there, his head cocked to the side, waiting. I return to my book. Sure enough, the screaming starts again, and the neighbors' high-strung English sheepdog begins to bark, then finds a squeaky toy and starts chomping. He's like the pathetic only child, going to any length to stop his parents from fighting. *Hey, look what I can do!* Squeak. Squeak. Squeak. I get up, careful to hold my mug by its handle, and Evan follows me as I stomp back into the family room. We sit on the couch, jaws tightened, and stare at the muted TV—the frozen scene of a foreign soldier caught packing his rifle. I imagine he's glad that I'm not reading tonight. If he had it his way, we'd spend every moment together side by side on the couch, alternating between heady documentaries, trashy dating shows, and the occasional dirty download. Tonight it's the tale of an American soldier in the French Foreign Legion, which Evan pauses as the fight outside escalates. He flips channels and cranks the volume on a Saturday Night Live rerun.

"Worst season ever," he says, as Colin Quinn delivers the out-dated news, the picture of Saddam Hussein being held up as the butt of a joke that's not so funny anymore. I tuck my cold feet beneath my thighs. Then comes the slammed door, the sound now invading the space of a new room. Evan mutes the TV again and we sit silently until the knock comes. It'll come, alright. It always does.

It's been like this since we moved in a couple months ago. Evan is a night owl and stays up hours after I've gone to bed. It's easier for him. He puts in his hours then he leaves his work at the lab. Luckily, our bedroom is attached to the neighbors on the opposite side, a pair of quiet lesbians who brought us a fern the day the moving trucks dumped off our stuff. They offered to watch our dog if we went away on long weekends. Our Chihuahua, Sam Goody, is uncharacteristically low maintenance. He mostly just sleeps. Evan smokes on the porch at night and gives me the reports in the morning; how the woman next door sneaks out of her house and crosses the street in the middle of the night; how a man waits for her in the apartment complex across the street; how the two of them go upstairs together. She leaves by herself. He never walks her out.

"She's usually up there for about an hour, sometimes less," Evan reported early one morning over coffee. He gets up when I do, sometimes earlier, despite having gone to bed hours later. I wonder if his sleeplessness will someday catch up to him, or if he really doesn't require as much as the rest of us. His insomnia has grown far worse since the move. He makes the morning coffee—a muscle-bound brew that could strip paint—while I flip through the news channels..

"She comes out alone and sprints across the street," he told me. He likes to tell the story slightly differently each time, though the details don't change much. Sometimes she comes back holding limp pantyhose in her hand like dead fish, or with a man's dingy undershirt pulled over her sunken chest, the black straps of her bra hanging out. He catches all the details with his scientist's mind, as if conducting a live experiment. He has a hypothesis for everything, but he generally sticks to the facts—the itinerant list-maker. Pros and cons before every major decision.

“She always fumbles through her keys really loud,” he once told me. “Then she just starts kicking at the door until he lets her in. Steel-toed boots, I think.”

“Has she ever come over here?” I asked.

“I leave the lights off,” he said, not really answering the question.

“What if she comes over?” I asked, again. “What are you going to do?”

“Pretend I’m not here.”

“What if she sees you on the patio?”

“I’ll duck for cover,” he said.

“We shouldn’t have to do this,” I said.

This time, she knocks quietly, a staccato knock-knock-knock with one knuckle. More of a *rat-a-tat*. It sounds downright cheerful after all the screaming. I scowl at my husband who shrugs as if refusing to deal with it. I go to answer, which he knew I would do. He’s been using that one raised eyebrow on me for years and it rarely works.

“I can’t just leave her out there,” I say.

“Do what you’ve got to do,” he says.

She’s a wreck of smeared mascara and wild half-bleached hair with black roots. Suddenly we’re living in a *COPS* episode, the way she stands there all white-trashy righteous with her left leg splayed out in front of her, belligerent, her one arm crossed over her nearly non-existent chest, the other bent to hold a cigarette to her lips. She speaks between vacant puffs.

“I’m so sorry to bug you guys,” she says. “The rat-bastard locked me out again.”

She raises her voice on the word bastard, so that maybe her boyfriend can hear her from next door, and I find myself studying her for cuts or bruises. Her tiny body is swaddled in layers of clothing. Baggy jeans, a hooded sweatshirt, battered work boots with untied laces that seem too heavy for her legs to lift. Her eyes are dark underneath with bags, not bruises.

“Can I come in for just like a second?” she says, again. I take a step back, and she makes a move to step inside. Then she suddenly pulls back, as Evan appears behind me, leaning in so my body is sandwiched between the two of them.

“We can call the police for you if you want,” he says, holding both the door and the wall, pressing against me so that there is no possible way she could get in. *Fake left, go right.* As if she could get past him. He’s a tall guy, and he’s built thick, though it’s not the first thing you notice about him. It may be the glasses, or the way he slouches a bit in his dark t-shirts. You don’t find yourself thinking about his size.

“No, yeah, you don’t need to do that,” she says, stepping away in small increments. A weak shuffling of heavy boot leather. “I’m just going to wait it out. He’ll be fine. He just needs to cool off.”

“We’re about to go to bed,” Evan says. “But I can get my cell phone if you want.”

“No, that’s cool. I’ll just hang out here until he cools off,” she says, chewing on a nail now that her cigarette is smoked. “He’s just upset. He just needs to cool off.”

“Okay,” Evan says. He doesn’t move. I push back at him, nudging him with sharp elbows so that he’ll at least ease the pressure against my backside. He takes a half step back, still holding the door with a stretched hand and ignoring my shoves.

“Are you okay?” I ask her. She’s not looking up much now that Evan is there.

“Oh, yeah. I’m fine, really. Sorry to bother you.”

She walks away from the door and back to her own apartment, knocking quietly and waving us away with a disturbingly wide smile.

“Have a good night then,” she says.

Evan shuts the door and puts his hand at the small of my back, pressuring me toward the bedroom. I throw an elbow out in mock self-defense and he catches it, pulls me toward him with a newfound physical force.

“It’s not our problem,” he says.

I’ve never seen this side of him. Pushy and domineering. Insensitive. He brings it with him into the bedroom. I never go to bed without first brushing my teeth, washing my face, taking my little pink pill. He tackles me on the way to the bathroom, tosses me on the bed, and he’s a different man—all strength and passion. I go to bed with a dirty face and I don’t even take my birth control pill until morning, after a rousing and rare bout of pre-breakfast sex. I can’t remember the last time we did that. We both still make it to work on time.

I’m distracted all morning, not just from the events with the neighbor, but from how it had affected our love-making. I can’t shake from my mind how different he’d been, almost like I’d had a kind of exciting affair. I wonder if he felt it, too. I replay it in my head, grinning to myself. From our very first high school kiss eight years ago, I’d always been a bit tentative in bed, so he’d let me have the control. All this time, I thought I wanted it. I coveted the upper hand, while fantasizing the opposite. But I couldn’t tell

him that. And here, he'd figured it out all this many years later without my having to say a word. It was the best love-making we'd ever shared. We really fucked.

The lab where he works is close to home, and he usually goes there to grab a sandwich at lunch, his typical salami and provolone with yellow mustard or turkey and brie with Dijon. Then he watches soaps or talk shows to clear his head before riding his bike back to work. He's been in science all his life, and it was more important to move for his career than my own, since I could pick up temp work anywhere and still make more than I had made teaching. He watches TV constantly, as an antidote to whatever it is he does all day that make his eyes and brain ache every night.

"Those test-tubes you use are like psychic fortune-tellers," I once said, when he refused to go into his job over dinner, denying me the details I crave. "Do you ever have to tell the patients what it is they have?"

"That's the doctor's job, not mine," he said. "I just give the doctors the facts. It's up to them what they want to do with them."

He's in no position to make the final verdict. He runs the tests. He assists the lab. He's a technician in a white coat, thick glasses, warm smile. He likes it when I read beside him in bed. He asks me to read out loud, always lamenting the fact that he hasn't picked up a novel since college. He admitted, only once, that he envies artists. He has a love-hate relationship with fact.

Today, when he finally answers the phone, I can hear a voice in the background, only it's not Jerry Springer or General Hospital. It's her voice, the neighbor's. Evan whispers loud into his cell phone, but I can hardly make out what he is saying. She is yelling now. Panic invades my stomach.

“What’s going on there? Where are you?” I ask, forgetting that I’d dialed our home phone. It hits me: the neighbor is inside our house!

“She was waiting on our doorstep,” he says. “She’s got a black eye.”

“What is she doing right now?”

“She’s in the office, talking to the cops. They’re going to come over and file a report.”

“So you’re going to stay with her there?”

“He kicked her out this morning then took off with the keys. We called a locksmith.”

“Doesn’t she have anywhere to go?” I ask. I picture her at my desk, rifling through my books and pictures. I can see her in there, swirling around on my chair on the side of the wall where I sit as she and her boyfriend fight and throw things, ruining my nights and invading my world, forcing me into situations over which I can’t control.

“I’ll explain later,” he says. “I have to go. A cop just pulled up.”

“Good luck,” I say. “Call me later. Love you.”

“Bye,” he says.

My afternoon is filled with a meeting, a conference call, and a co-workers’ birthday party which means cake in the break room and an office-wide disintegration into discussion of happy hour plans arranged by Sandy, the office manager. I’d rather stay at my desk and finish the filing so I can leave, but Sandy insists we all partake in birthday celebrations. I scoop two fingers through white frosting and shove it in my mouth, hoping for an immediate sugar rush that doesn’t come. I grab for a second piece. Sandy pawns

the rest of the carefully tin-foil wrapped cake off on the computer geeks and follows me back to my desk.

“So you don’t mind driving then?” she asks, leaning over to fuss with her bangs in the small mirror attached to my monitor. I’d forgotten that I’d volunteered the day before to drive to happy hour. I hadn’t made many friends in town yet. I wanted to make an effort. Socializing is important here, and Sandy is the main coordinator. The “go-to” person, she calls herself. “I’d rather be the ‘go-to’ than the ‘go-fer,’” she giggled on my first day. I used to teach World and U.S. History to seventh and eighth graders. And suddenly I’d sunk to this inexplicable new level of hell.

“I don’t think I can make it,” I tell her. Then I explain the situation at home, with sudden desperation to shovel past the small talk and get at something real.

“It’s good that he’s so helpful, your husband,” she says, totally over-simplifying the matter while caking on fresh coral lipstick. “I don’t know. Men like to play the role of the rescuer, you know? It’s dangerous business.”

“But he made it so clear last night that he didn’t want us to get involved,” I say.

“He just didn’t want *you* involved,” she says. Then she straightens up and rubs my shoulder as if comforting a teased child. “But you should wait until you hear what happened. You never know. I know what will really help. A margarita.”

“Thanks, but I think I’m just going to go home,” I say, turning off my computer and remembering why it is I have such a problem making friends with women. “I’m sure everything is fine.”

“Swing by later if you feel like it,” Sandy says. “We’ll probably end up going out somewhere after happy hour. You know how those sales guys like to drink.”

“Don’t I know it,” I say. But I don’t know anything about it. I don’t care to know anything about it. And I hate saying things like that. I’m embarrassed already at having revealed anything about my private life. This is only a temp job, I remind myself. Besides, what would she, or any of them, know about married life? Ten years older than me and most of them are still single. *Hmph.*

She bounces through the cubicles toward the Sales department, and I walk out to my car, dialing Evan’s number as I make my way through the parking lot.

“Hey, babe,” he answers on the first ring. He’s crunching on something loud. Carrots?

“What happened? I’ve been trying to call you all day.”

“Oh, yeah, sorry,” he says, mumbling. “I went with Darla down to the station and forgot to bring my cell phone.”

Darla? She has a name now.

“So what happened?” I ask.

“What?” And then I can hear her voice again, rising in the background.

“She’s still there?”

“I’m actually over at her place,” he says. *Crunch, crunch.* Potato chips? “I think Rick just pulled up. Listen, can I call you right back?”

“I’m on my way home,” I say. “Why are you at her place?”

I hear yelling in the background, a pounding of fists against doors, Evan’s muted voice, as if he’s holding his phone down at his side as a fight ensues. Then it goes dead. I try again but his cell goes straight to voice mail. I have a half-hour drive ahead of me, assuming the normal rush-hour traffic. It takes me over an hour.

By the time I get up to our door, all is quiet. I peer over the neighbor's patio fence to where their giant sheepdog lounges lazily beside a plastic kid's pool. The blinds are open, revealing an empty family room. I kick their fence, one sudden hard kick that hurts my toe. Our condo is unlocked and Evan is sitting on the couch, feet propped on the coffee table, drinking a beer. Sam Goody makes figure eights at my feet, more like a cat, rubbing calves and begging for treats.

"Hey, babe. How was your day?" he says.

"Not as exciting as yours," I say. I walk toward the bookcase to grab the bag of milk bones shoved between my dusty history books. "Did you go back to work?"

"I called in from the precinct. I even put a cop on the phone to back my story. It'll be the talk of the lab tomorrow." He sinks into the cushion and motions for me to join him.

"Is she still here?"

"Darla? No, she left a while back," he says. "That bastard sweet-talked her into dropping the charges. They went out to dinner. Imagine that!"

"So she just went home, easy as that?"

Who is this man all of a sudden, rattling on about precincts and sweet-talking bastards? Beer cans litter the counter and coffee table. Not bottles—*cans*. This from a guy who usually tortures himself deciding over which import draught to order, and even then still opting for a jammy Cabernet if that's what I'm drinking. Sam Goody begs for treat after treat, which I pass his way, not even thinking about it.

I head into the kitchen and Evan gets up and follows me, his hand swiping at my rear-end.

“You should have seen him kissing my ass,” he says, taking another hefty swig of beer. He’s grinning, taking pleasure in his tough new vocabulary. “I thought at first that he was going to kill me, the way he came home pounding on the door like that then found me in their place.”

“Wait, what?” I ask. “You did what? I can’t believe you did that! You don’t know this man. You don’t know what he might do.”

“I didn’t have a choice, honey,” he says. “She said he hit her. She was physically hurt. What was I supposed to do?”

I open the refrigerator then slam it closed again, then head for the cabinets. I can’t decide what I want. I open and shut wooden cupboards whose loose hinges don’t quite fit together so the doors swing right back open.

“What do you need? What are you looking for” he asks, opening cupboards before I reach them. “Want me to make you something? Are you hungry? I have leftovers from lunch. I never had the chance to eat.”

“I was thinking more like a drink,” I say. I grab a wine glass from the cupboard and rub a paper towel to gather dust along the rim. He sets his beer down and places his hands on my hips, offering a strong squeeze.

“Consider it done,” he says. He’s floating, all macho, as he gingerly lifts the glass from between my fingertips and shepherds me back into the family room, positioning me on the couch. He begins untying my shoes. He’s never been like this. I can hardly recognize the mood. Jubilant? I let him yank my shoes off one by one.

“How about a martini?” he says, rubbing my feet a bit too hard. “Nice and dirty, the way you like them.” Is that a *wink*?

“Sure, yeah,” I say. He flips on the TV, places the remote into my hand, and heads back to the kitchen. The dog leaps from the couch to follow Evan to the kitchen. I can tell he’s riled up by the day’s activity.

“Push play and we can watch the rest of that movie from last night,” Evan hollers over the din of drink preparation.

“I thought we decided it sucked,” I say. We had stopped it halfway through, out of sheer boredom, which had been the point in which I’d headed to the office to do some reading, which was when the fight next door had begun.

“Right,” he says. He winks at me, again. “Want to pop in a dirty movie?”

“I’d rather hear what happened today,” I say. I’m obsessed now, craving every last detail, imagining this woman, who now all of the sudden has a name, has a shared history with my husband that I’m wholly unaware of. Did she sit on the couch beside him? Did she cry in his lap? Did he prepare her an icepack and hold it gently against her bruised eye as she told him all her dirty secrets? Had he found out where it was she went when she crossed the street in the middle of the night?

“There’s not much to tell,” he says, walking back into the family room, holding two empty martini glasses in one hand and bouncing the shaker around with the other, sparks of ice flicking onto the coffee table, my bare arms. He sets the glasses down and does a sweeping pour, lifting the shaker far above the table so that the drink streams into the glasses in a waterfall.

“I could do this for a living, I bet,” he says.

“It sure put you in a good mood, whatever it is that happened,” I say. I get up to grab olives from the fridge, but he’s already got them speared and set out on a saucer. We’re not afternoon drinkers. But here it all is, right out there before us.

“I’d have gotten those,” he says. “Sit down and let me serve you, why don’t you? How often do you get such treatment?”

I take a sip of the martini. He does the same. I realize that he’s not wearing his glasses, that they’re sitting on top of an opened book on the coffee table. Does he always take them off to make drinks? Have I just never noticed before? Did he have them on when I came in? There are two beer cans on the stand beside the TV, a third on top of the set, in addition to the one on the coffee table that he’d been drinking from when I came in. One of them must have been hers.

“Not bad, eh?” he asks, prodding now, then offering his glass up for a toast.

He has no idea how upset I’ve become. Not a clue. How could he not? How would he? We’ve known each for years, have been married for almost four, and he’s never had a need to rescue me from anything. If anything, I was the one who helped him, when his parents refused, at first, to come out for our wedding, warning him that we were too young. We should wait a while, experience life apart.

I made sure he didn’t feel bad about it, constantly reassuring him that I didn’t blame him at all for their reticence. He was nothing like them. I comforted and supported him, and my family welcomed him with opened arms at our small ceremony. I didn’t complain, not once.

Evan didn’t have to rescue me, not even then, not even when I suffered a short-lived case of cold feet and my older sister sat with me in the hotel room and told me that

if I wanted to back out, it would be okay, nobody would be angry. But her words made me so defensive that I immediately wiped away the tears, re-applied my makeup, and walked down the aisle with my head held high. I was doing the right thing. I was marrying a good man. The kind of man who would help a person in need. If only I were a person able to show my own ability to need. Just once. Once in a while.

“I told Darla she should call the police next time this happens,” Evan says, beginning, finally, to detect my discomfort. “I don’t want her showing up here at all hours, bugging us. I told her to get a cell phone, and keep it on her at all times. I told her she shouldn’t come over here unless it was a dire emergency.”

“Was she okay?” I ask. This shared intimacy of theirs swells in my stomach, this set of rules that has been determined between them, like capricious lovers.

“She had a black eye, a couple bruises on her arm where he’d grabbed her,” he says. “But she seemed okay. I mean, as okay as you would expect.”

“I wouldn’t know what to expect,” I say. I am curious over bruises that are not my own.

“I guess that’s true,” he says. He wraps an arm around my shoulder and pulls me against him. He un-mutes the TV and restarts the movie. French soldiers march across the screen, heading into battle.

“You know, he didn’t seem like such a bad guy the first time I met him,” I say, referring to the woman’s boyfriend.

I remembered the day they were moving their stuff into the apartment. It was just the two of them, no other helpers, on a hot day in late spring. He moved like a machine, her boyfriend, tracking items back and forth from the rented U-Haul. He took off his shirt

between the third and fourth trips, and, unlike my husband, he was thinner than I would have imagined beneath his clothes. He handed her the really light stuff, or walked past her with another heavy box he had lifted with bent knees, the way they always say to lift. She wore flip-flops and a denim miniskirt. Mostly, she just sat in the grass and smoked cigarettes. Occasionally, he would lean over, still balancing an awkward box, and light them for her, with a shiny Zippo. We watched them through the kitchen window, wondering if they were the kind of people we'd befriend in our new city; if we'd have intimate dinner parties and play poker at the kitchen table like we had with our old college friends.

When he was done moving all their stuff, I watched him lock up the back of the truck, offer out a hand to help her up, and he said, "Let's see if we can get the truck back before five and save ourselves a day's rental." She shrugged, waved a bug out from in front of her face and squinted directly into the sun.

Maybe we'd all get drunk one night and it would turn into a rousing bout of strip poker, I'd imagined, and he'd get angry when she pretended to lose each hand, just for the sheer pleasure of stripping down her many sloppy layers of clothing in front of practical strangers. But in the end, she had far fewer layers than I'd thought. She was just a sad, rather oblivious phantom, and I was the pathetic one, left wondering what it was she did at night, and what it was my husband took away from their brief shared encounter.

We once again hear the sound of raised voices outside the apartment and Evan leaps for the remote that has fallen into the cushion between us, pushing at my leg as he digs into the plush pillows. A door slams and the voices disappear. But it's enough. He

turns off the TV and reaches for me instead—that new look of his, hungry, from the night before, returning to his pale eyes as he pulls me toward the bedroom.

LATEX FETISH

It starts up again when I'm in the grocery store, begging for my tongue as I sort my way through a bin of sorry-looking eggplant. It only gets this way, fueled by such incessant urgency, when it's out in public, never when tucked away at home, in the privacy of our own apartment. No sir. This urge—powerful and pulsating; a gleaming, cherry-red conductor of throb-action distraction—becomes uncontrollable the moment I have an errand to run or an interview to conduct. This morning it's not causing any real physical pain, unlike last week, a minor shift which I remember, while thumbing the soft spot in an over-pale eggplant, to count as a blessing. The eggplant is out of season and, along with most of today's produce, looks wilted and frail. I lack focus. I can't concentrate. The strong, consistent measure of radiant pressure might stem from my mouth, but it goes much deeper.

Come on, just do it, it says, *You'll feel sooooo much better*; the idea ribbon weaving its way through the curls of my brain. It's a small gap, a shallow space, an emptiness, a nothing, really. Upper left side, way back, tucked between the very last molar and what is left of the second to last molar, which now contains a thick protuberance that the dentist refers to as a "build-up." My mouth is an über-expensive, small-scale construction site. Stretchy yellow caution tape should criss-cross my

perpetually chapped lips. He doesn't talk much—my dentist. Not like the last guy. He just does his job. He wears powder-free latex gloves, has spiky hair, and peers deep into my mouth using a super-deluxe, extra-magnifying, two inch-thick binocular-type attachment temporarily fused over what might be his everyday glasses. I assume his vision is poor, and that he wears even thicker lenses in his “real” life, and that he was probably made fun of before his years of dental school paid off and his colleagues, not to mention all the women who like to date dentists, started taking him seriously. But it's not like I've run into him at the dog food aisle at PetSmart and can tell you, right off, exactly what he looks like without the latex and the baby-blue exam mask. I like to imagine he wears those powder-free latex gloves everywhere—golfing, fancy dinners, the opera, home alone in his kitchen, finely slicing organic Japanese cucumbers with a razor sharp paring knife.

Finally, my tongue gives in to its pressure, seeking out the gap and pressing itself hard into its deep recesses. My tongue is like an octopus, like the rounded body part of the marine animal, not the tentacles, but all squishy-purple and relentless. Stale blood, like ink, still coats the fresh hole. Rusty saltiness erupts on my taste buds. My dentist didn't tell me how much the procedure would hurt once the numbness wore off. He doesn't tell me much of anything, just hands me back over to the hygienist after each procedure. I discovered the true extent of the pain during the long drive home through heavy afternoon traffic, as the thickness in my cheek turned to tingles which turned to throbs which turned to the raging anger of tender gum line scraped raw and bleeding.

“That's what this new dentist is lacking,” I told my friend Rachael, who came to comfort me after the first half of this two-part procedure. “A good bedside manner.”

“Does that term apply to dentistry?” she asked. She had brought me a six-pack of snak-pack pudding, the suspicious kind that doesn’t require refrigeration, and asked if he’d given me any vicodin for the pain. She loves vicodin. She’s also convinced I may be harboring certain feelings for this new dentist of mine. I held the room temperature plastic pudding container against my cheek, as if it might administer a cooling relief. She suggested I use a bag of frozen peas, instead.

My mom had me believing, when I was a kid, in the notion of squeaky clean as more than just an abstract concept, or something people say without really meaning “squeaky” clean. But listen, she’d say, while she washed my dirty hair, then rinsed it under the tub tap. *Listen*. I was sure I could hear it squeak, once all the conditioner rinsed out in the drain. You’ve all been told this, I bet. To listen for that particular squeak.

He’s all hands and fingers and squeaky plastic, my dentist. Wordless. The squeak of powder-free latex gloves against teeth and along numbed gums provides a strangely pleasing internal thrum and echo, like a straw being quickly pulled and plunged into the plastic top of a fast food soda, only better, as the dentist works—silently. I imagine he’s got boxes of them at home. A room just for gloves. Boxes stacked floor to ceiling. Some lined in vitamin E to keep his hands well moisturized. Boxes sent by pharmaceutical companies across the country, hoping to become the brand that beats all brands. All of them engineered with a fully textured finish, allowing for the best, most powerful grip. They can’t all have the best, most powerful grip, can they? My dentist—his grip is powerful. No one could deny that.

There's no way you can lay there on your back, head tilted at a strained angle just barely narrowing in on the very edge of slight discomfort, while this man, this man leans over you, his hand firmly gripping your jaw, forcing you to tilt a little more sharply, a little more discomfort, a firmer hold as your lip quivers from the stress of being wrenched open too long, but you keep it open just the same, because his hand says so, until finally, he releases pressure and you're allowed, finally, to rinse. No way you can go through all that with someone, share something so intimate and bodily, and not have certain feelings. Am I right?

I test the skin of a sorry-looking batch of pale Roma tomatoes—even sorrier looking than the eggplants—with puckered red skin slung loose from withered vines. This is not a good season for produce. It's been a long time since I've even bothered. My spongy tongue is working the hole, pushing at the teeth, curling itself around the build-up. There is no time for inferior produce.

“Can I help you?” a slightly chubby produce stocker eyes me as I firmly thumb a Haas avocado, applying even and consistent pressure equal to, but not greater than, that which I feel in my mouth at any given moment. My tongue leaps now, almost as if embarrassed, from the gap, allowing me to answer.

“No,” I say. “I’m just browsing.”

Two kids battle near the perishable salad dressings, using fruit roll-ups as swords. The produce man is disturbed, throws a glare in their direction until they drop their weapons in a plum bin, then brings his gaze back to settle on me.

“The darker the skin, the more ripe they are,” he says. “The more ready they are to eat.” I can't tell if he is flirting with me or upset at my molestation of his fruit and

veggies. My nervous tongue goes back to work, furtively exploring the rigid porcelain surface of the crown next to the gap—a yellowish crown my dentist installed three weeks back. Installed, as in, say, a stereo system or a tricky Mac utility that ends up taking far too much room on your hard drive. *Installed*, he always says, as if my mouth were a man-made machine, in need of constant upgrades.

He scraped so hard on my gums while installing that porcelain little varmint, that I could barely muster the strength to grunt, to grab at his sleeve, to remind him: “Wait! Hit me with that Novocain, mister!” And whatever happened to nitrous, anyhow? Where’s my happy gas?

Realizing his mistake, my dentist grasped at both the inside and outside of my cheek and shook the flesh between his thumb and index finger, a bit too rough, to be honest, like, he has to be doing this to make a point, right? Then he delivered that stab of needle into three different areas surrounding the infected mouth-zone so that eventually the whole left side of my face, from jaw line to eyebrow, was completely void of all feeling.

“Good time for me to get into a fist fight,” I once said to my quiet dentist, after he’d numbed the holy bejeezus out of my face, just like that. He kind of half smiled in response to my non-witty repartee, while motioning to the hygienist which instruments he would need for my procedure. Stupid, I thought, kicking myself on the inside. Stupid, Stupid, Stupid.

A bruised tomato, an off-purple eggplant, a value-priced three-pack of cinnamon flavored floss—I calculate the sum of my purchases, trying to remember what else I could possibly need, then remembering, it will soon be that much harder to eat solid

foods once again. Guacamole might work, so the avocado remains. But I remove the tomato from my cart and add it back to its sorry-looking pile. I then follow suit with the eggplant. The stock boy eyes me from over the display of iceberg lettuce. As if anyone in this resort-style suburban community would ever resort to iceberg.

“I forgot,” I say, as if owing him an explanation. “I’m going to the dentist today for some serious dental work.”

My tongue behaves itself as I crack a wide smile, settling on the floor of my mouth like one of those flat fish that camouflage themselves in the sandy ocean depths, waiting for unsuspecting prey, or, more likely, protecting themselves from enemy sea life.

“You don’t generally see people smile when they say that,” he replies.

“Oh, I’m lucky,” I tell him. I imagine he’s checking out how sparkling white my teeth have become, thanks to a new and improved whitening system. They hurt like hell after the first couple applications, far worse than the “slight sensitivity” the hygienist warned me about once the dentist left the room. It wasn’t like I was doing it for vanity, though. And once I’d adopted a diet of soft, room-temperature foods and purchased, in bulk, a colorful array of soft-bristle toothbrushes, the pain was hardly noticeable. Likewise, I learned not to drink from straws after the first of my two extractions, when doing so led to dry socket; and I even stopped smoking. Who wants to pick the dingy yellow porcelain veneer when attempting to match color shades for a new crown, anyhow? After all this time, I forget now where my own teeth have ended, and where those that he gave me begin. This mouth belongs to him. *My* mouth is his work of art—it’s true. And if protecting it means eating less and hurting a little bit more; so be it. He

knew when he scrawled his “after-hours” phone number on the back of his business card that I would never dare abuse the privilege. Likewise, I know he’ll be there the next time a temp crown pops off on the drive home from a holiday meal, or when a risky bite into a closed up pistachio nut results in a chipped veneer in the middle of the night.

Who else would offer me a special discount every year, when I come in on my birthday for my cleaning? Who else would, year after year, with his hands always plunged deep into my mouth, say, without ever requiring a response of any kind, and lacking any judgment: “Of all the places to be on your birthday, you choose to be here with me!”

Where else would I go? Who else would even notice? Who else would ever be there like that—just for me?

The produce guy looks at me as if awaiting some kind of explanation.

“I love my dentist.” I tell him, and he shrugs and returns to his iceberg. He wouldn’t understand, anyhow.

A PERMANENT MARK

A funnel of smoke rises up through the hood of Wendy's engine as hordes of disgruntled L.A. rush-hour commuters ignore her blinking signal. Trapped at a dead stop, she motions toward the driver of the red Le Sabre next to her, driven by a young white kid wearing a bandana tight and low across his forehead, bumping his chin up and down with the bass of a rap song Wendy vaguely recognizes.

"Dude, you're smoking!" he says, pointing to her hood.

"I need to get off." She motions at the space in front of his car and he waves her over. The car behind him honks and he raises his arm, pumping his middle finger into the air. He draws to a complete stop, guiding Wendy's car in front of his own. He repeats the maneuver with the next two lanes, the pair shoving their way strategically across the 405 to the Venice Boulevard exit. Wendy doesn't know this exit, although it's within miles of the university where she teaches her evening course. Her class would be shuffling into the sound editing room about now. Behind her, the young man in the Le Sabre motions with both hands, like an enthusiastic air traffic controller. She makes the left turn at the exit ramp.

The street is lined in swaying palm trees and overflowing dumpsters. She imagines her classroom of students, the automatic trust she offers with such natural ease to each new semester's batch. She has placed the same kind of simplistic trust in this boy

in a bandana who leads her now into a neighborhood marked with laundry lines and children on corners. She knows Venice, closer toward the beach, but not this part. This is the part the news stories come from, she thinks. The 'Check Engine' light on her dashboard finally blinks on.

"Two more lefts," the kid hollers from behind her.

An old woman hobbles slowly down the sidewalk, balancing her bulk behind a wheeled walker that has been converted into a basket for carrying two heaping grocery bags. The second turn empties Wendy onto a side street where she spots a vaguely marked garage. A sign dangles haphazardly from the roof: "Repairs."

"Freddy here will take care of you," the boy says, standing beside his car and stretching his arms skyward, exposing a taut, muscled stomach, muscles curving v-like toward the elastic band of his boxer shorts. His fingers turn to tracing the thick black lines of what appears to be a fresh tattoo on his bicep. He drops the sleeve of his shirt as a man emerges from the garage shadows and steps into bright sunlight.

"What can I do for you?" Freddy says, looking at Wendy then turning to pat the young man on his arm, making him wince. He lifts the sleeve to check out the fresh artwork. He shakes his head, clucks his tongue, and lets the sleeve drop.

"Out rescuing young ladies?" Freddy asks the lanky teen, suddenly sheepish around the graying older man.

"Thanks again," Wendy says, as the kid heads back to the Le Sabre. He waves his arm as if discarding the gratitude and hops back into his car.

Wendy dials the departmental office at the university first, but there's no answer. It's a ghost town in there after five o'clock. Her car is up on the rack, dead. She debates whether to check the class roster and call one of her students' cellphones, as if they wouldn't eventually figure out that class had been cancelled. Her boyfriend Adam tells her she gives too much to the class. He used to love the way she was around people; the way she talked to people with her eyes as much as her mouth. Then she was attacked in the bathroom of the arts building on campus by a troubled student. It wasn't one of hers, but that didn't matter to Adam. Her attacker was a kid in his late teens, a manic-depressive, who went on, later that night, to attempt suicide in his friend's dorm room. Stuff like this happens everywhere, only usually much worse. She got out without a scratch. He was psychotic maybe, everyone agreed, but not necessarily violent.

"She's going to take a while," Freddy says, walking out from the garage, wiping his thick fingers on a grease-covered rag. "We need to wait for my mechanic. I just own the place."

"Can you tell what's wrong with it?"

"Wish I could," he says, shaking his head. Sweat drips down both sides of his face. "Come on in and have a seat."

"Not drivable, right?"

"Oh, no," he says. "I couldn't have you driving off in that right now. Don't worry. Max will be here soon." He shuffles into his office.

"I got the TV if you want to watch your shows," he hollers through the door.

"Thanks, I'm just going to make some calls," she says. She chews a pinky fingernail while debating whether to call her boyfriend. Adam will make such a deal out

of it, worrying like he does. She chews a bit of cuticle, bites it off, spits it out, then dials Adam's number.

"Aren't you in class?" he says. She can hear people in his office. He has her on speakerphone.

"My car broke down," she says. She hears a clamor as he picks up the handset.

"What happened, honey? Are you okay?"

"That stupid car, I told you this would happen eventually."

"Where are you?"

"A repair shop in Venice."

"Where?"

"Off Venice."

"Where off Venice?"

"In Venice."

"Oh, shit, honey," he says. She can picture him standing now, pacing. "That's a bad neighborhood."

"It's fine. Really. A guy helped me off the freeway and helped me find the place."

"Helped you find it? Who did?"

"Yes, it's okay. It should be fixed soon."

"Helped you how?"

"It was some kid. I don't know. He helped me find the place. They're fixing my car."

"What's wrong with it?"

"I don't know yet."

“They’re working on it?”

“Not yet.”

“Okay. Listen, I know a place on the Westside. Take your car over there instead.

Guy’s name is Paul.”

“The car was smoking, Adam. Are you hearing me? It’s not going anywhere.”

“Smoking? Are you kidding? What’s wrong with it?”

“I’ll find a bus or something.”

“Yes. Yes, do that. Take a cab. Come to the office.”

“It’ll take hours and cost a hundred bucks, easy, in this traffic,” she reaches into her bag for her wallet as she says this, remembering she is down to her last five dollars in cash.

“Okay, then. Let’s do that. I’ll call the cab company. What’s the address there?”

“I’ll call them and call you back,” she says.

“I love you,” he says. He hasn’t stopped saying it since the attack. Not that he hadn’t said it before, but not with such vehemence each and every time. *It’s going to be okay*, the words always seem to say. *I love you*—like a strange, implied challenge.

She closes her bag and hoists it over her left shoulder so that the straps cut hard across her chest. Inside, Freddy is leaning back in a rolling leather desk chair, rocking a bit as he watches General Hospital and eats Cheetos.

“You don’t have an ATM here do you?”

“We take credit, checks, whatever you’ve got,” he says. “Want a Cheeto?”

“I’m hoping to get cash for a taxi,” she says, waving off his offer.

“You’re leaving the car here then?” He swipes an orange-crust finger across his thigh, staining the denim.

“Looks that way. Only I have to find a way home first.”

“You don’t have someone who can come get you?” he says.

“It’s rush hour.” She realizes she never gave Adam the name of the repair shop. Nobody knows where she is.

“I’ll give you a lift up to the grocery market up at Lincoln. They have an ATM. I’d let you write me a check for cash, but I can’t cover much. Slow week.”

“Is it in walking distance?”

“Depends. Couple miles, I suppose. Easier in a car,” he steps up slowly, raising his giant girth from the seat. His hands rub his lower back as he steps around the cashier.

“Let me close up the shop and we can be on our way.”

He makes his way to the cooler display where he grabs a bottled water and hands one to Wendy. His finger grazes the small of her back as he gently steers her toward the door. Then, with a heavy jangling of keys the shop door is closed, and he is busy hoisting the garage door down. He leaves about a foot of space open at the bottom.

“So that Max can get in,” he says. “I don’t give him a key to the place.”

He walks to an El Camino parked around the side of the office. Wendy watches helplessly a moment, then follows, remembering, yes, this is how she would have acted *before*. It wouldn’t have even occurred to her to act otherwise, right? Or is she over-compensating? It’s hard to tell. He starts up the engine, which hacks and coughs a bit before settling into a more confident hum.

“Never judge a mechanic by his own car,” he says. “I’m old. I like old, stubborn things.”

She smiles, holding her knees with both palms. Her hands leave sweat marks in her corduroy pants as the car turns onto a residential side street. Freddy, too, knows the neighborhood short cuts.

“That kid who led me here came this way, too,” she says.

“I grew up in this neighborhood,” Freddy says. “I’ve seen it all.”

“It was nice of him to help me out,” she says.

“Derek’s a good kid,” he says. “Gets himself into trouble. They all do.”

Her curiosity peaks at the word trouble. She wants to ask. She wants to know what it means to be a good kid that does bad things. Troublesome things. What kind of troublesome things does he do?

The attack happened on a Thursday night. Wendy stopped by the woman’s restroom after her 4:30 class. It was mid-fall. A couple of weeks earlier and it would have been light out at the same early evening hour. Class had been shortened on account of the midterm, and she’d been underdressed for a sudden breezy shift in the L.A. weather. She walked quickly, arms crossed and hands tucked beneath her armpits, short-cutting through the arts building on her way to the parking lot. She’d paused, gauging whether or not she could make it back to the apartment she and Adam shared in Koreatown without first going to the restroom. Why chance it? She could still hit rush hour and be stuck on the freeway for hours.

Her attacker was ducked behind the door, in front of the first of two stalls. He had a pocketknife, duct tape, and a thick black magic marker. Later reports alleged that he'd been waiting for his ex-girlfriend, who was a grad student in the art department. But it wasn't a case of simple misidentification. He looked Wendy directly in the eye. Maybe he thought she was a student. Her students always mistook her for one of them, even after she started her first-day lecture, always eyeing her from the seminar seats, or flirting far too obviously throughout the semester. He kick-slammed the door behind her before she knew what was happening. He was careful not to touch her breasts, though he lingered over them decidedly before criss-crossing them with tight strips of duct-tape, craning her spine and securing her torso to both the toilet's plumbing and the wall directly behind it. He shoved her knees together, wrapping the tape several times around her jeans, forcing her muscles to cramp and spasm as he affixed her to the commode. It was only after he left her there, in the dark bathroom, that the denim darkened in tell-tale patches, as she waited for what felt like hours for campus security to show up and rescue her.

Within days after the attack, the university erected a series of blue-lit emergency kiosks throughout the campus, and enhanced mobile security units to escort women to their cars once the sun went down. It was all her students could talk about in class, though they made thinly veiled attempts to hush themselves when she walked in, their faces often turning away from the lingering ink marks that were still, though faded, visibly slashed across her arms, her neck, her forehead and cheeks. He hadn't cut her, but the wounds he left in permanent ink had a lasting and startling affect.

"You'd think he'd have used cruder words for the female anatomy," she had joked to Adam, trying to convince herself, after yet another face washing, that she could,

in fact, go back out in public like that. She wasn't about to play victim, after all. Besides, sticks and stones, right? She wasn't *hurt*. Her students looked stricken when she showed up for the next class. They were worried for her, for themselves. She couldn't wait until spring for a new batch of students. She wanted those sad faces to disappear, as the ink itself began to fade from her pale skin.

"See, they have an ATM sign right here in front," Freddy says, pulling slowly into the shopping center, allowing, with a friendly flick of his hand, every man, woman and child to pass before his truck. Wendy feels a sudden affection for him.

"They're like sharks, these drivers," he says. "Look at how they're already eyeing us, as if we're going to steal their precious parking spots. Easier to take it easy."

He reaches over her knee, as if for her hand, and she makes a grab for his, without thinking. He shoos her hand away. She's immediately embarrassed, but he smiles.

"Just getting my tobacco," he says, popping open the glove compartment. "Why don't you go ahead in and I'll meet you out here. No sense trying to park."

The ATM machine at the front of the store is broken, so Wendy walks to the express lane, where the lonely cashier is holding out her arms and practicing balancing on one foot, and then the other. Her arms are splayed like propellers.

"Do you have enough cash to cover a \$100 ATM withdrawal?" Wendy asks.

"Lemme check," she says, still attempting to balance on her one foot while snapping gum and keying the register open. She scoops up the drawer, under which several large denomination bills have stuck with static.

“Sure, got plenty,” she says. “But you have to buy something in order for me to open the register.” She slams the register closed, gloriously unaware of her own irony.

Wendy grabs a couple packs of gum, some Tic-Tacs, a tube of Chapstick. Even in a time-pinch, she can’t curb her impulse buying.

“How much you want back?”

“A hundred,” Wendy says. “Wait, better make it one-twenty.”

“Just punch the amount in the machine,” she says.

Wendy looks at the LCD screen on the machine.

“It says to wait for the cashier,” she says.

“Yeah, it must still be busted,” the girl replies, and she begins pounding on the register keys. “I’ll just enter it for you. Twenties okay?”

It takes a couple minutes for Wendy to spot Freddy’s truck. Both windows are down and she can make out Dr. Laura’s radio talk show as Freddy exhales a smooth trail of smoke from the slight ‘o’ in his mouth formed by the tip of his pipe.

“I can pay you with a credit card for the car, right?” she asks, startling him. “I mean, I just got enough cash for the cab, is that okay?”

“Sure thing,” he says, starting up the car. It coughs, sputters, and dies. He turns the key again, slowly this time. The car sputters again, and dies.

“We gotta just give it a minute or two,” he says.

“Mind if I smoke in here?” she asks. He offers his lighter and she lights a cigarette and leans her own chair back. Dr. Laura counsels a couple on how to deal with

the pregnancy of their unwed teenage daughter. The doctor hurls insults at the parents, the daughter, and the “scumbag” who impregnated her.

“Can we listen to something else?” Wendy asks.

“I thought you’d never ask,” says Freddy, as if he’d programmed the radio for her. He lifts a faded blue cassette tape from the dashboard and slides it into the player. The sound is slightly warped, but not too badly. Miles Davis’ *Kind of Blue*.

“I love this,” Wendy says, closing her eyes as Freddy once again tries the key, to no avail. “I used to do sound editing for movies. I even worked on some soundtracks.”

Truth is, she still does it, working now on a short-term project with Sony, with another brief contract lined up immediately once this one wraps. But she’s on her way out of the business to teach full-time. It’s not something she brags about – neither the fact that she’s in the business, or that she’s now on her way out. But for some reason, she suddenly wants to talk about it. Adam is against her decision to keep teaching. He thinks she’s safer at the studios.

“Look, there’s your pal, Derek,” Freddy says, taking his attention briefly away from the engine to point across the over-crowded parking lot. A group of young men, maybe seven or eight of them, though extras seem to keep poking out from behind the dumpsters every so often, stands around on skateboards and next to cars at the far end of the lot, beside a Pizza Hut. Derek is the only white kid in the dark bunch. One of them is throwing bottles hard against the inside of the dumpster. Another rushes around behind him, grabs a bottle, and, with a swift backhand, hurls the bottle straight at the dumpster’s outer panel. The explosive shattering sounds like gunshot, and pedestrians in the shopping center all stop and turn and inhale so quickly their expressions appear almost

comical – all wide-eyed and purse-lipped as the Pizza Hut manager, an overweight black guy in low-riding pants, runs out and starts yelling. The younger kids scatter on bikes and skateboards. Derek and a couple of his buddies hang around, throwing arms and elbows, giving the manager a hard time before strutting their way to Derek's Le Sabre.

"That's his mom's car," Freddy says, shaking his head. "We repaired her water pump last week. I sure hope he didn't steal the thing."

"He said he was late for class," Wendy says. "He was really helpful, too."

"Was?" Freddy asks, staring at Derek while pulling at the dead layers of skin on his chapped lips. "He's trying. You have to give him credit for that."

The car finally sputters to life, and the old man eases his way out of the spot. Wendy feels hurt by the implied accusation.

"I was attacked not so long ago," she says. "Still a little scared, I guess."

"I imagine you would be," he says. "You were in the paper, right?"

He's not the first to recognize her. Had it happened at a larger university, a public university or even a local high school, the attack may not have garnered such media attention. Had the attacker not been a white kid, perhaps it would have harbored even more. But as it was, it became a story about manic-depression and the effects of going off one's meds. The news stories segued into related health reports on the local affiliates. Freddy had heard it and was worried that she was judging Derek too harshly, not knowing the kind of person she was, or prided herself to be.

"You have every right to look at people differently now," Adam had said one night, a couple of weeks after the attack. She had encountered, on her drive home through their own downtown neighborhood, a car full of rowdy teenaged boys. They'd called to

her through open windows, where she had been smoking a cigarette through a thin sliver, listening to a beat-heavy remix of an old Coltraine track on the college rock station. She avoided turning toward the car full of boys as they shouted into her window. Her heart started to pound, her lips dried, and her limbs weakened as she hit the accelerator and ran the red through the intersection. Once home, she ran into their apartment, afraid they'd followed her. They hadn't. Adam couldn't find the words to comfort her. They only seemed to upset her more. He paced the room, put on his jacket, rifled through the knife drawer as she calmed herself down, her fear shifting into shallow attempts to justify the boys' behavior.

"They didn't say anything that bad," she said. "They wouldn't have done anything. It was me. I got scared. It all came back and I couldn't fight it."

He wanted to call the police.

"What kind of car was it?" he said, holding the receiver to his ear, his face a mask of anger and hate.

"It was just a couple of kids fooling around," she said. "Please don't."

Back at the garage, there is a tall, lanky kid fiddling at the underbelly of her car.

"Got a diagnosis yet, Max?" Freddy asks. Max emerges from the shadowy garage, rubbing his long narrow fingers into a blackened rag. He's got the gritty, spiky-haired good looks of a young Hollywood actor; a thick, dark handsomeness.

"This your car, hon?" he says, speaking over his boss.

"She's hoping to drive it out of here," Freddy says.

“No chance of that,” Max says, not breaking steely-gray eye contact with Wendy, his brows bouncing up and down with each syllable. “Not today, anyhow.”

He drops the oily rag and extends his hand in Wendy’s direction, which she takes in a limp shake. His long, lean fingers engulf hers in a show of strength from which she immediately wants to recoil, but instead holds just long enough to appear unaffected. Then his thumb rubs firmly back and forth against the inside of her palm and she yanks it away.

“I think I’ll call a cab,” she says, pulling her cell phone out from her bag. “Freddy, do you have a phone book?”

“Inside, behind the counter,” he says, following Max into the garage to further assess the car.

The only phone book she locates is beneath the register, propping it up on the counter. She scans the shelves, suddenly contemplating the notion of stealing a couple of cigarette boxes from the vast array of over-stock piles. The thought surprises her, and she moves quickly back around the counter and dials Adam.

“Where are you?” he says, picking up at the first ring.

“Still here,” she says. “I thought they could fix it, but it looks like I’m going to grab a cab.”

“You haven’t left yet? I’m walking out the door now. I’ll come pick you up.”

She pauses, still contemplating the idea of a cab. The idea of having to sit in the backseat behind another stranger is suddenly too much to deal with.

“Okay,” she says. “I’ll just wait here then.”

“Wait there,” he says.

She struggles to read the backwards address showing through the office window.

"I'll be there as soon as I can," he says. "I *love* you."

"I know," she says, as Freddy slides by her to perch behind the register.

"Good," Freddy says. "No use spending money on a cab."

"He's coming to get me."

"I figured," he says. He flips the television back on. It's a judge show and Freddy immediately begins to heckle both the plaintiff and the defendant. "This new gal's no Judge Wapner," he says.

Wendy pulls one of the patio chairs inside and leans back to watch the program. Freddy offers her a cup of coffee, which she accepts.

"You can smoke in here, if you want," Freddy says, lighting up his pipe. "I don't usually allow it, but it doesn't look like we're getting much other business today."

She pulls out another Parliament and shares a tin Hollywood souvenir ashtray Freddy positions between them on the counter. He cheers on the ornery judge as she sentences the unrepentant defendant to pay the plaintiff \$500, suggesting she consider, next time she shacks up with a renter, that she make sure all the paperwork is signed beforehand. "She's tough shit, this one!"

"She was an idiot for putting herself in that position in the first place," Wendy says.

"I meant the judge," Freddy says. He flips through the channels before the emcee has a chance to interview the litigants, and settles on a talk show where one of the guests has another in a headlock. Wendy leans her head back against the steel frame of the chair and closes her eyes, listening as every other word on the TV is bleeped out by cautious

censors. She makes it a game, attempting to figure out what it is they're all really trying to say, beneath all the anger and hate. Adam says they're all paid actors working off of scripts. She used to like imagining herself as an angry talk show guest, paid to hate a stranger in exchange for fifteen minutes of fame.

Then one day a stranger duct taped her to a public toilet seat, blindfolded her, and stained her with a permanent marker, leaving marks she couldn't scrub away for all the scrubbing in the world. She wishes, sometimes, that it had been a knife instead, that she'd been discovered bleeding there, instead of how it really happened; as if she needs something more justifiable to excuse the rage she now spends every waking hour attempting to silence or censor, the way the talk shows censor the worst of the swear words, knowing all the while that the audience knows exactly what is being said. Her anger is more subtle; more real, more dangerous. Hers is ready to explode; poised to ignite like a rivulet of gasoline approached by a single, flickering match. She opens her eyes in time to watch a man hoist a chair high into the air, just above the bald head of a man who is too busy shouting at a pregnant woman to register the impending violence. The scene freezes and a voice-over teaser promises a finale you won't want to miss, after this quick commercial break. Someday, I'll break too, she thinks to herself, as Freddy mutes a Roloids commercial and reaches again for his cigar.

COMFORTABLE DISTANCE

After spending several minutes discussing my courses, plans for my upcoming graduation, the computer class she'd recently enrolled in at the junior college and a detailed description of the newsletter she'd created for her next Welcome Wagon meeting, Mom finally admitted the real reason behind her call.

"David's sick again," she said. She hoisted an enormous, exaggerated sigh across the miles of telephone line, hoping for a hefty grenade affect. She seemed instantly aggravated when it failed to detonate such a response.

"The Welcome Wagon still exists?" I asked. I twirled my hair around the phone cord and tried to focus on the muted morning talk shows rather than get pulled into another miniseries drama revolving around my older brother's recurring mysterious illness.

"Dad wanted to make sure you'd be home. Just in case," she said.

"How bad is he?" I refrained from adding a snarky "this time," and took another pull from my fourth cup of coffee. I liked to think my growing ulcer might actually beat David's ailment in a sack-race, if let loose at a company picnic.

"Karen's with him. How's your car driving?"

I pulled the blinds in front of the sliding glass door and saw the dingy carpet of overcast March sky, my car parked in front, covered in moisture from either a fresh dew or an early morning rain, I wasn't sure which.

"It can make it," I say. This was all routine. I'd never actually had to drive to Santa Barbara under these pseudo-emergency conditions. It was simply a pre-emptive measure. I knew the drill. Still, it managed to fill my stomach with acid, sending burning sparks up my chest, into the area in the back of my throat where my yoga teacher said we should breath from, using our *Ujjayi pranayama* breath. "Remember this breath throughout your practice," she reminded us during every class. It helped me to relax; to search for my inner peace even when engaged in a full downward dog or otherwise challenging pose. I exhaled through my nose, making a scratchy guttural noise like Darth Vader.

"Don't make fun," my mom said, her hawk ears picking up my deepened breath. "Your brother is really sick."

Several years ago, David spent Christmas day in the hospital. The holiday started out normally enough. We had both flown home from our respective southern California towns the day prior, and I was downstairs making coffee while Mom threw the ingredients together for a meaty breakfast casserole.

"I'm not eating that," I said, tossing a piece of spicy Italian sausage to the dog. It was the year I had decided—after having dabbled in other, more body-damaging forms of artistic rebellion—to become a vegetarian, and they still refused to honor my decision.

The dog nearly took my finger off with the next greasy bite I offered her, and my mom slapped at my hand.

"That's too spicy for her," she said. "It'll give her gas."

But the dog had already spotted the next piece I had in my hand and was slobbering onto the tiled floor.

"I'll make her sleep in your room," Mom warned, waving a wooden spoon. I turned away from her and secretly popped the piece of sausage into my own mouth instead. It tasted good, all that salt and grease, and I rolled it around on my tongue a bit before swallowing. My stomach wasn't used to meat, especially spicy red meat, and it would likely get upset, but I snuck a bit more from the skillet anyhow, just as Dad walked in whistling "It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas."

"Go wake your brother up," he said, grabbing his "*You toucha my mug, I breaka you face*" mug and nudging me out from in front of the coffee pot. "How often is the family all together like this?"

When I went to wake him, I heard the retching sounds all the way from the stairs.

"Are you okay?" I asked, nearing the bathroom door. The retching paused, replaced by running water. When he finally opened the door, his face was translucent gray beneath his dark goatee; his eyes veined red, pupils huge.

"Go get Mom," he said. I stood there, silent. "Go fucking get Mom."

Dad wasn't sure if he was still covered on their insurance so Mom rushed to her computer room to check the medical files, shoved somewhere between the car insurance forms, school tuition receipts, and product warranties. They argued briefly over who would take him.

"You can both go," I kept saying. David scowled in the corner. "I don't mind."

Dad took him, and Mom and I stayed back, close to the phone. She burned the breakfast casserole, vacuumed three times around the tree, and we finished another pot of coffee between the two of us, jumping whenever the phone rang with more cheery Christmas calls from distant friends and relatives.

They hooked him up to an IV but couldn't figure out what was wrong, or why he'd been throwing up all night. His body was weak and dehydrated, his throat torn raw. They said his lungs nearly collapsed. He admitted to something similar happening once or twice at home, but never to that degree of severity. The gifts under the tree—an obnoxious collection of obscenely wrapped boxes circling the perimeter of the 15 foot Blue Spruce in the front room—sat like that for days, like a frozen department store window display. We watched as all the neighborhood children out in the street tested their new roller blades and Big Wheels and remote control Barbie Corvettes. By the time David came home late that night, he was far too tired to open gifts or sit through a turkey dinner, and it felt like a farce to recreate the holiday days later, just the four of us sitting in the family room, opening presents, taking pictures, saying our thank-you's, while every other family in the country was heading back to work and dragging all the torn wrapping paper, bows, and boxes out to the street corner for trash pick-up. He flew home just before New Year's Eve, without a diagnosis, and that was that. Until the next time. And the time after that.

Dad called shortly after mom, from the office.

"David's sick," he said, panic in his voice.

"Mom already called," I said. I could hear the echo of my own voice in the background. "Do you have me on speaker?"

"Do you have classes today?"

"My classes are always negotiable," I said. My answers came automatically, like the remembered lyrics of a song you don't like but can't help singing. Even when David is healthy, Dad calls and talks to me about David's illness.

"Did you know the drummer for the Eagles has Crohn's disease?" he asked.

"Did you know the bass player for REM had a brain hemorrhage?" I replied.

"I have an article a friend of mine faxed me from a medical journal. You should read it," he said. "It might give you a better understanding."

Crohn's disease. Something about the intestines. Something that the UCLA medical specialists say is triggered by stress and other vague factors.

"I don't need to read an article," I said.

"You're impossible," he said. "I can't talk to you when you're like this."

It's all we ever don't talk about.

The gray mist lingered over Los Angeles, the pungent concrete smell rising up from the street as I half-attended class, jotting notes about the difference between the Russian Formalists' and New Critics' interpretation of a Wallace Stevens poem, before eventually tuning out completely. After twenty minutes of staring out the third story window of the Liberal Arts building, watching as students rushed late into their classes, or toward the library, stopping under the awning of the buildings to shake their umbrellas and brush the damp hair out of their eyes, I needed to leave. I slipped my books into my

backpack and made a break for the door. I breathed a sigh of relief as a particularly annoying student began rambling on about the meaning of what he mistakenly labeled "postmodern structuralism." *Sycophant*.

The small, Jesuit campus had a dead quality, everyone tucked away inside buildings and lecture halls on a gray spring day, as the pavement in the quad darkened in a soft rain. The coffee cart didn't have its usual crowd impatiently awaiting their doses of caffeine before class. A couple of professors walked by holding umbrellas, making menial weather observations and bemoaning appointment schedules. The church bells struck noon. The rain fell harder.

I wondered how my brother felt on his own campus. Four years older than me, he showed up at night, after a full work day, then sat through another repeated math course where kids several years younger grasped the concepts neatly and regurgitated them into blue books on exam days. I wondered what Dad said to him on the phone, and if their conversations revolved around his sickness like ours always do.

"He's sick again." It always started like that. "I hate being this far from him," he said, during almost every conversation.

"You can't blame yourself," I would say. Meanwhile, I watched the muted TV. I motioned for my roommate to deal the next hand. I waved the nail polish dry on my fingertips. I hated when he did this to me.

"Why don't you give him a call?" he said.

"I might do that," I said. But I never called him.

I drove home from campus slowly, listening to growly, over-testosteroned punk channel on the college radio station. Some high school kids were gathered by the bus stop. I slowed at a red light beside them, and the girls eyed me suspiciously as I bummed a cigarette from a mopey kid in a Cure concert t-shirt. I rolled down the window and smoked until the cold, outside air finally made me shiver and the cigarette made me cough. I wanted to smoke more, until my insides burned and my lungs clouded. I wanted to disappear completely, like the smoke of my breath into the atmosphere.

Inside, my roommate was making burritos in the kitchen. She told me both of my parents had called and that she had saved the messages on the recorder. It flashed red in two quick winks from the counter. There was a popping sound from the microwave, and she and I looked down in time to watch an explosion of black beans, rice, and guacamole spray the inside window of the oven.

"I can drive up with you if you need to go," she said when we stopped laughing and she opened the microwave door. Chunks of burrito hung from the ceiling and clung to the walls, drooling down the sides in dark brown streaks.

"He doesn't tell you about it, does he?" his girlfriend Karen once asked me, during a rare encounter when the entire family was together on a holiday. It was a minor one, Easter, maybe, or the Fourth of July.

"We don't talk much, in general," I told her, which is true.

"He thinks this Crohn's thing is a bunch of bullshit."

"I know," I said. "I think I might, too."

David always got sick. Even as a kid. I used to want to get sick. I imagined myself lying in my bed, or on the couch in the family room, covered in one of my grandma's crocheted blankets—the green one with the freakish butterfly with mismatched wings—shivering and pale. I wanted to be needy. He hated the attention, which made it even worse. Mom pushed me out the door with my cherry red backpack and my bike lock, one of those chain combinations covered in clear red plastic. Sometime I took the narrow paths a little faster, without him there to lead, leaning into turns in an effort to make the trip more dangerous. When I got home, he'd be downstairs eating Jell-O and Coolwhip or tomato soup and saltine crackers. I imagined getting tonsillitis so the flaps of skin hanging at the back of my throat would swell to triple their normal size and I'd need major surgery and my only means of communication would be notes scrawled on little pads of paper by the couch, or one of those little bells I'd have to muster the strength to ring whenever I needed some water, or company. Maybe I'd have an extreme allergic reaction to the penicillin. I wanted it to be me, for once. But now I wanted to be away from sickness, as far away as possible. The only drugs I took were administered in smoky dorm rooms, often to great excess, and while they did help take the pain away, the relief never lasted all that long.

"What's the verdict? Am I staying or driving?"

"Could you start with a hello?" Mom said.

"I've been running around all day in the rain," I said. "I probably have pneumonia."

"They're still at the hospital," she said. "I'm waiting for a call."

"My left windshield wiper's broken."

We were both silent for a long moment. I became suddenly aware that if I spoke I might, for some reason, break into tears. I firmed up my breath and took in a deep inhale, straight from the diaphragm, like a properly trained yogi. Mind over matter.

"Do you need me to go up there?" I asked. So nonchalant.

"I know this is hard for you, too," she said.

"Do you need me to go?"

"I think he'll be okay," she said. "I may fly out soon." I pictured a map in my mind, a direct line of interstate 10 stretching from my parents' home in Texas to Los Angeles, then a switch to the 101 to dart north to Santa Barbara, each inch signifying hundreds of miles separating her from her children. I wondered what that felt like for a mom.

"There's another call," I said, as the call waiting beeped in. "It's probably Dad."

"I just wanted to touch base," Dad said, as I clicked over. And then I wondered what this all felt like, for a dad.

"Mom's on the other line," I say, before hanging up on both of them.

The street was full of students heading to and from classes, tossing and grabbing backpacks from the passenger seats of their Toyota Camrys and Ford Explorers. I stopped briefly at the corner 7-11 for a cup of coffee, then suddenly found myself traveling northbound on the Pacific Coast Highway, balancing the steaming cup while I shuffled through CDs in the glove compartment. Tom Waits crooned raspy loneliness while I wove across the strips of coastline through Malibu and Topanga. The shoreline

was angry and gray, the water crashing over itself wave after wave so that I got caught up in the rhythm of the tides and nearly forgot about the road. The hills rushed past the passenger side in a storm of green brush and beige rock. I wanted to see an accident, *be* an accident, as people got off work a little early and competed for lane space under the mist of a minor rain. Rather than slow, I pushed my toe on the accelerator and took turns like a NASCAR expert. In a neat instant, the full album had completed and I approached the Cabrillo beach exit, swerving past the zoo where the weekend rollerbladers usually filled the path.

The volleyball courts were abandoned, but the hardcore surfers still dotted the coast like seals, in full-bodied wetsuits. My brother would be out there with them, *should* be out there with them, if he weren't so busy commuting between home and hospital. I wondered if he even surfed anymore. He spent the years after his initial health scare engaging in a series of idiotic death-defying ventures involving myriad combinations of bungee, heights and the word "extreme," until Karen finally had it with his antics and threatened to leave him. And so he returned to a quieter life of trout-fishing, beer barbecues, and occasional bar brawls when the Steelers played. We had nothing in common as kids, and even less as adults.

I drove past the pier where the hot dog vendor stood morosely beside the guy hoping to rent out tandem bikes and roller blades, both of them shielded from the soft mist by colorful umbrellas and hand-drawn signs offering huge discounts. No one goes to the beach on a rainy Thursday. A cold breeze rushed down State Street as I walked toward the water, near the open-mouthed diving dolphin statue at the entrance to the pier, which had become the landmark where the family met during shared weekend trips.

Mom insisted on walking down the row of artists displaying their paintings, leather masks, and ceramics in the most tourist-laden section of town. David always grit his teeth, joining the excursion but wanting to take us where there are no tourists, to a beach in his neighborhood where you can unleash your dogs. He preferred family-owned hole-in-the-wall Italian joints in Goleta rather to the trendy restaurants on the pier suggested by our parents' hotel guidebook.

A vision of David suddenly struck me, at his sickest. He'd lost at least thirty pounds in the short months following his Christmas day hospital emergency. His shoulders caved in on his six foot frame, though he still wore his old clothes, hanging on his body like so much extra skin. The family had met up for a cousin's wedding in San Diego, and I hardly recognized him at first.

"So what do you with a degree in Theory? Make shit up?" he asked.

"You better watch it," I said, "this is the first time I could probably take you in a fight!"

It was the closest we'd come to discussing his sickness, or my future goals, for that matter, and the two of us quickly returned to a more comfortable distance, making fun of one another's clothing or hairdo. Since then he'd gained all that weight back and more, and was big and bulky now, intimidating with his thick neck, multiple tattoos and dark goatee. He had the look of the kind of guy that would beat up the kind of guys I hung out with.

The hospital's ER wasn't very crowded when I finally mustered the nerve to go inside. A kid in a baseball uniform stood cradling his bandaged elbow and an old guy

coughed in the corner, staring up at a Seinfeld repeat on TV. His every laugh morphed into a deep, emphesymatic cough.

Karen stood in the hallway, twirling a straw in a glass of orange juice. She smiled when she saw me and offered a tight, warm hug, as if she'd either been expecting me, or was relieved at my surprise arrival.

"What are you doing here?"

"I just decided. Is he okay?"

"Oh, yeah, sure. He's fine. You know how it is." She'd cut her hair since I last saw her, dyed it a burgundy red that nearly matched her bloodshot eyes. She wasn't wearing any make-up and looked more frail than I'd remembered her, though I'd seen her only months prior. I didn't want to tell her it was the first time I'd ever seen David in the hospital, though I suspect she already knew that.

"Tough week," I said, and she nodded, although it wasn't meant as a question.

David looked like himself, only tired, or drunk, the way the lids of his eyes drooped down. He seemed dizzy, incoherent, drunk. I avoided looking directly at the needle going into his arm. It was dark in the room so I couldn't see much. *Ujjayi pranayama*, I reminded myself, as my heartbeat got faster.

"Thanks," he said as I walked in, and I wasn't sure if he meant for closing the door behind me, or if he was just glad to see me.

"Mom sent you." His voice was exhausted, drained even of expletives, which he tended toward when splayed out on a cold steel hospital bed. At least the times I'd spoken to him over the phone.

"They don't know I'm here," I said.

Karen walked in the room. She wore tattered slippers.

"I'm going to get some coffee downstairs," she said, asking me if I wanted a cup.

"I can hang around here if you want to go home," I told her.

"That's alright," she said.

"Go ahead, Karen," David said. "My sister can take me home. I want the fuck out of here soon, anyhow."

She conceded without much protest, leaning over, tapping his hand, then squeezing it. He grabbed at the back of her thigh as she turned to go, giving her a slight pinch.

"Wake me when you get home," she said. "I'll probably be asleep."

"Check it out," he whispered, and tried to lift the tape and show me right where the end of the needle was plunged under his skin, mostly just to get a reaction out of me, the way he did when we were kids. I'd never live down the tetanus shot visit when I'd actually thrown a chair at the doctor and bit the nurse who tried to pull me out from behind the waiting room coat rack. But I'd ever seen my brother rendered helpless. I'd never seen him acquiesce. I was the placator. He was the placated. He seemed like less than half of his normal self, even with all the weight he'd gained back. I wanted to throw a chair. I wanted to run down the glassy corridor, through the waiting room and into the soft misty rain. I wanted to remember exactly how he looked there in that bed, so that I'd never again wish it were me with some mysterious illness. There was nothing exotic about it.

I kept my side of the conversation going, even after he'd closed his eyes. Once the IV reached its final drops, I walked into the hallway to find a nurse and instead bumped into his doctor.

"My brother's IV is done," I said.

"You're the sister?" He eyed me, suspicious.

"I'm *his* sister, yes," I said. "I think he's ready to go home."

"Well, we'll have to see about that," he said. "I'm still curious as to exactly what brought him here."

"We all are," I said. There was no official diagnosis, and each time his health improved, David refuses to get tests done. It makes doctors skeptical.

"He came in demanding morphine, did you know that?" he asked, tapping his pen against his lip. He'd almost be sexy if he weren't such an asshole.

"It's what the doctors have given him for the pain in the past," I said.

"Assuming that the pain came first." He started flipping through the papers on my brother's thick file. "Maybe the problem is more psychological," he said, pausing a brief moment as if deep in thought. "Or maybe your brother just likes morphine."

"His IV is done and he'd like to leave the hospital now," I said, my voice adopting a cheap falsetto in effort to compensate for the anger building in my stomach, now turning to fear; years and years worth of fear. I was remembering, even as a kid, being so afraid he might die, and that I'd be there in school when it happened and no one would tell me and I'd ride home on my red bike, taking turns too quickly but never suffering more than an occasional scraped knee, only to discover he had died. And that I'd have to live with that somehow.

“Does he do drugs?” the doctor asked me. “A straight answer would help here.”

Yes, he *does* drugs. He smokes pot. He drinks too much beer. He overdoses on Nyquil when he visits my parents, claiming it helps him sleep. He’d been spitting mint-smelling tobacco into fast food soft drink cups since I was in junior high. I didn’t know what else he does, but sometimes I wonder. I didn’t have the answers and I hated the doctor for asking the questions we’d so long refused to acknowledge. I hated him so much that I wanted to punch him. I wanted to scream at him, but instead I felt my eyes tearing up and that made me even more angry.

“Does he have a history of drug use?” the doctor asked again.

“Methamphetamine? Cocaine? Heroin? Is he on any current medications?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “You’d have to ask him.”

“I asked him, alright,” the doctor said. I could tell he was frustrated. “Now I’m asking you. I’m not getting answers.”

“I just want to take my brother home now,” I said.

He motioned for a nurse plodding the opposite direction down the corridor.

David wobbled a bit when he was finally able to stand up, and the nurse told me that was normal after being pumped full of liquids and meds. He signed his discharge papers like it was routine procedure, and maybe it was, maybe that’s all it ever is—routine—and we walked together out the front automated doors, as an enormous black woman was rolled through in her wheelchair. She offered us a weak wave.

"She was here last time I was in here," David said. He held his right arm across his stomach and squinted in the outside light, grabbing his Ray Bans even though the sun was still covered in clouds. He fiddled with the metal bar under the passenger side chair of my car until the seat fell back almost flat against the seat behind it. He tipped his hat over his eyes, quietly falling asleep as I turned on the windshield wipers, turned the radio volume down a couple notches, and carefully drove him back to his house on the other end of town.

I saw a school of dolphins race by in the tides next to my car during my drive back to Los Angeles, in that area of the 101 just south of Carpinteria, where the southbound traffic overlooks the shore and you can pull over onto the shoulder and stare into the water. There were maybe six or seven of them, and looking up the coastline in either direction you could make out the dark silhouettes of surfers bobbing on the almost waveless sea. The gravel shoulder of the interstate filled up with tourists pointing out at the dolphins as the surfers paddled up to the shoreline and stepped out of the water. I drove slowly, watchful of other California drivers who, when it rains, slip and slide and crash into one another like video game versions of reality. The drive should only take a couple hours maximum, but the stretch of Pacific Coast Highway was an artery that day, clogged by minor and major accidents. It takes me nearly six long hours to ever so carefully navigate my way back home.

TRAGICALLY MUNDANE

The jagged edge of the can's open lid sliced just beneath my nail. In the brief, mesmerizing moment prior to pain or bleeding, I clutched my finger and pulled the flesh back, testing the depth of the cut, hoping for something either unremarkably minor, or truly horrific. I entertained a sudden and overwhelming desire for the latter, just as the pain kicked in and the translucent strip of severed flesh filled red. My first instinct was to shake it, scare it off. Red droplets splattered across the counter and then into the sink, where I held my hand beneath a cold stream of water, wondering what an actual murder scene looks like; if it's like the time, last week, pulling out of a strip mall parking lot, when I saw a kid on a skateboard get plowed into by another, slightly older kid in an absurd, raised short-bed pick-up. His skateboard flew upward with the same force and acceleration as when you drag a flotation device under water and release it, how it spurts straight up into the air. The kid went airborne, too, not quite so high but twice as far, hitting the street first with his shoulder, then the rest of his body. The force of the impact lifted him back up a bit, then sent his body skidding harder into the gravel and cement, like a rock skipped across a lake, stripping skin to the bone. I watched it with the same distanced wonder I do the TV, not quite knowing what to believe. The boy's body remained perfectly still as passers-by began to circle in around him, all of them punching emergency numbers into their cell phones. I slowed down, but kept driving. Even the most profound tragedies reek of the mundane.

Now I can't stop focusing on the cut. I'm sitting on the patio, waiting for my ride, though I doubt I'll need to go to the hospital, after all. A pair of mockingbirds has swooped down into the clustering of trees over the mailboxes. They are taunting a stray cat I've been watching since dawn chase mice and roaches around the dumpster. Ten a.m. and it's nearly a hundred degrees out. A trickle of sweat rolls down the bumps of my spine. I should change my shirt before he shows up, in case he decides he wants to touch me again. I explained in a subsequent call that the cut wasn't as bad as I'd made it out to be when I first called him. I'd panicked. I was embarrassed ten minutes into the awkward conversation, once the bleeding finally stopped, knowing this was not the best way to rekindle whatever it was we once had. Disaster breeds disaster. Still, old habits die hard, and for some reason, the sight of blood always makes me think of him.

He pulls up and doesn't notice me on the second floor porch. He stops the car and sits for a moment, allowing me to be the voyeur I've always been. He could be talking to me from across a restaurant booth and I'd tune him out completely, hearing only the conversation between a couple one table over, piecing together parts and making up the rest, the stories of strangers.

I watch him as he reaches into the passenger side of the car, picks something up, a pile of papers and books, stacking it all together then shoving the mess over the seats and into the back, carelessly enough that the books flutter open and everything lands in a crumpled pile. I can feel the distaste building in my stomach – it's more visceral than I'd like to admit. I want that his shirt won't be sweaty when he gets out of the car. I want that some significant aspect of his physical appearance will have altered enough to prove the value of the passing of time; how capable we all are of change.

He sits for a moment before opening the squeaky door of his rusted sedan, lowering his glasses to massage the sinus cavities directly between his eyes. He grips the steering wheel for a moment, despite the fact that the motor is turned off. Finally, he swings the door open.

“It may have been a false alarm,” I holler down to him as he steps out of the car and squints upward, into the sun. I don’t want him to think I’ve been spying.

He asks how his patient is doing and I peer behind me, as if to find her.

Indeed, his pits are a far darker green than the rest of his thin button-down shirt, and he is wearing slacks again. The kind that salesmen pick up at Goodwill, with pre-packaged pleats and an uncomfortably synthetic, anti-wrinkle fabric that rubs like diapers between finger and thumb. This means he is back to his old job. This means he is tired all the time and hates himself but can pay his rent and squander the rest on used records and poorly fitted attire. Salesman should try to dress the part, I always wanted to tell him, but never did. He hated sales, so I encouraged him to give a go at something else entirely. Graphic design. Professional poker. Culinary School. Carpentry. Improvisational comedy. There are so many things we can do with our lives, if driven enough by passion; any passion.

He comes around to the front door of the apartment and I pretend to have had all the locks turned. He finds my habits dangerous. I go through the charade of flipping all four back and forth again and let him in. He sighs at the smell of burnt beans and toast inside. Otherwise, the apartment is the cleanest he’s seen it in years.

“I think you should call someone else next time,” he says, leading me with the tips of two fingers on the small of my back, barely touching me, toward the guest

bathroom. It is the bathroom he used to like to use, when the one we shared became too overflowing with my own litany of products. I like to experiment with scent, which drove his allergies crazy. He takes my wrist firmly and turns my hand over, angling it below the light fixture and very gingerly removing the dish towel I have looped around the wound. The towel looks like a sanitary napkin, an innocuous bloodstain. Meaningless. The ache returns, tenfold, pulsing directly from my heart-beat, *thu-cumb, thu-cumb*, the deep slit opening again, blood running out in thick globs that thin out beneath the cold water into a soft, pink-tinged stream.

He examines the cut, his eyes darting back and forth between it and my sour expression while pressing on the fleshy pad of thumb, checking both the depth of the slice and my expressed measures of pain. I bite my lip.

“It’s not so bad, see?” I say. “I told you.”

He remains silent and gently rubs a swab of antiseptic over the wound and helps me bandage it. The blood isn’t quite stopping, and I can already see a puddle of darker tan Band-aid beginning to blossom outward. If it weren’t under the nail, it would be a better candidate for stitches. But as it is, it would be more of a pain to go through the hassle of a doctor’s visit. I want to stop time for a minute or two, so he can keep on simply cradling my hand in his own, so gingerly.

“It’s not that bad,” he says, releasing my hand and looking away from me. “You should call Amelia next time.”

It’s a low jab and he knows it. He hates Amelia, and I can’t really blame him. Every time we fought I’d run off to her and she’d drag me to some dirty strip club that I hated, and I’d end up calling him in the middle of the night from the payphone next to the

women's room, drunk on cheap, spiced rum and sick of having the filthy marble bags of male genitalia rubbing up all around me, and afraid that he would, after all is said and done, really leave me. Only this last time, I stuck it out, refusing to call him to come pick me up again. I learned how, using precision motions, to shove dollar bills down g-strings without making contact with any germy flesh whatsoever. Parts of me perked up at the challenge. He helps himself to a Coke from the fridge and approaches the door to leave.

"You used to fucking live here," I say. "Doesn't that even register?"

But now I've gone and done it. I change the subject as he walks toward the door.

"I saw the President drive by yesterday," I tell him.

I had, only not yesterday. A week ago, perhaps. It's not like he ever checks the local news anyhow. It had been something else. I was first in a line of cars in the left turn lane, out by the airport, directly beneath the ascending flight pattern. At the red light a brigade of cops, followed by a half dozen black sedans, drove through the intersection, half of them moving into the left lane to stop oncoming traffic. Almost immediately the whole area was in a dead stop. People got out of their cars to watch his entourage, then his actual limousine, pass by, some snapping photos with their cell phone cameras. So many shots; yet not a sniper in the crowd.

There is nothing left to keep him here, and I am no longer interested in his staying. I want only to walk into the kitchen, hold the jagged-edged can lid between my fingers and lick it, as I would a blade, why not, straight up and across, turning it against my tongue as if opening it again and again. He hates it when I get like this. It's why he left in the first place. Tired of wondering what I'd do next.

He senses the change, a calmness he has never trusted in me. I can see it in his sad eyes, the way he stops short in his action of leaving (“once and for all” he’d sworn once if he’d sworn it a hundred dozen times – I figured this time, he meant it. Or last time. I forget which times I believed him and which times I just didn’t care.) This had turned in to one of those times where I already had him gone in my head, so the struggle was simply in making it happen.

I close the door behind him, and kick it, hard, for good measure. I know a little something about pain transfer and the jarred toe makes my thumb feel that much better. Fuck the emergency room, I’d always said. I know he’s still standing there, hovering at the other side. I watch him through the peephole, which he has to know I am doing. How many nights had I interrupted our rented movies to jump from the couch and watch the neighbors coming in or out of their adjacent apartment? They never did much worthy of watching, but they intrigued me, with their weekly water delivery and the way the woman’s eye twitched when she asked me, once, out of pure exasperation of having waited for hours, to please sign for a package should the UPS guy ever show up. “Sure,” I’d said. I smiled at her from over the balcony. “No problem.” Her lingering gaze, the way she paused, keys in hand. She didn’t trust me.

He stands for a half-minute longer, staring across the dingy parking lot to where the mockingbirds now cling to the rusted dumpster sides, still playing games with the stray. He is mad at himself for having come over at all, and his expression is so full of darkness that I can’t stand to watch. He knows what it’s like. I want *not* to lick the candle, if only for his sake. Then again, I also want him to appreciate the fact that the apartment is cleaner than he’d ever seen it before. I want him to understand that it means

quite the opposite of what it seems. And I want to know if, as an added safety precaution, the secret service had decided to dress the President up as a motorcycle cop and have him directing traffic, grinning foolishly at us from beneath a too-tight helmet. There's so much the government isn't telling us.

In the end, I will call Amelia. We'll go on a drive. She'll rattle on about her troubles with money and men, and men with money. I never know what to make of her, or her me, which is why the friendship never amounts to much. But it's something.

WHAT IT IS

It didn't take Erica long to move past the whimsical mai-tais served out off decorative tiki goblets—she's not the tourist type. It didn't take the bartender long to figure it out, either, and he has her dry martini ready by the time she reaches the bar, along with a single tooth-picked olive set beside the glass. She is wearing her red dress, the one her fiancé back home had once complimented her on as they were rushing to get ready for some business outing of his, downtown or uptown or midtown or wherever. But it could have just been his way of rushing her along through her numerous outfit options. It was a ritual they had become too used to playing through; her, upset at having to attend another such function; him, upset at her lack of enthusiasm. This was his business. He had to be there. She had to be with him. But not tonight, she didn't. She didn't have to be anywhere.

She left the condo complex with minimal re-checking of locks, oven knobs (despite having never turned the oven on), and air-conditioner controls. One final peek at her hairdryer—unplugged, stashed safely on a high shelf generally reserved for over-starched hotel towels—and she was ready to go, as easy as that. She knew the best route to the hotel, what side her favorite bar was on, and she parked, for the third night in a row, in the exact same parking spot.

Strangers and friends kept telling her, up to the point of her final boarding call, that she picked the exact right time of year to visit Maui. As if this had been accidental. As if she hadn't, in addition to place, heavily researched travel patterns and determined early November – just after the clocks fell back – as the ideal “low” time for tourists. She needed something affordable; something subdued. She needed to leave as little up to chance as possible. She pulls a paperback from her purse and settles into the high crowned bamboo chair, snuggling into its cushioning and reading as the sun finishes setting. Such stillness would drive Jonathan crazy. He needs always to move; while she savors moments of stillness. Alone on this vacation she reads, while the bartender, Nick, occasionally lifts her empty glass and replaces it with a fresh one.

“Is it good?” he asks, pointing at her book.

“It’s for work,” she says. She tucks the romance novel so that the tawdry cover faces into her napkin. He spots the colorful pamphlet she’s been using as a bookmark.

“You don’t want to use that tourist trap,” he says, snagging the advertisement and pointing at the cheesy shot of a staged honeymoon couple smiling wildly and gesticulating toward a superimposed sea turtle.

“But they look so happy!” she says, playing along. “I might even snag me a catalog model!”

“I know a better boat, if you’re looking to snorkel,” he says. He doesn’t give many details, just tells her to trust him and offers her an address in the marina. It’s not far from the condo where she is staying.

“Eight o’clock, sharp,” he says. “And I don’t mean Hawaiian time.”

It's still chilly the next day when she pulls up to the marina, a spread of morning fog dulling the edges of island coastline. Several different tour boats are docked, bobbing at the piers, small groups gathering at each, with people of all ages being fitted with life jackets and testing their rented flippers by taking exaggerated, giant steps across the concrete. The company Nick works for is easy to spot—it's the smallest of the boats in the marina, a bright green "eco-friendly" pontoon that takes the standard half-day tour to Molokini and Maui's famous "Turtle Town," off the coast of Kihei. The price includes two snorkeling stops and a barbecue lunch, with a portion of all proceeds going to environmental non-profits.

Erica ties a sweatshirt around her waist and debates what to bring for the half day trip. Suntan lotion in three different degrees of SPFs, a floppy sun hat, sunglasses, a paperback, Dramamine, Tylenol, Tums, pens, notebook (she's determined to document the high points of the trip along with the low – it's a new resolution), water-proof disposable camera, extra pair of sandals, t-shirt, bikini top, postcards she'd picked up at the convenience store along with water and sugar-free snacks, a bee sting kit, generic insect repellent, and, finally, her waterproof wallet containing ID, medical insurance card, credit card, bank card, two folded twenties, and some scattered ones. By the time Erica finally makes it to the dock, the boat is full and ready to depart.

"We're just waiting on you."

Erica looks up to see a slightly altered version of her bartender, his lower half now painted in tight, dark blue neoprene, a silly-looking "Eco-Tours" visor pulled too far down his forehead. Caught off guard, she can't quite tell if his smile is friendly, or if he is mocking her.

“You can stay down here, or there are seats up top. They’ve got the better view, but it can get rough up there. Do you get seasick?” He’s all business here, at this job.

“I brought Dramamine,” Erica says, slapping the side of her bag. “Enough for the whole boat.”

“So that’s what you have in there! I was wondering.”

She opts for the back of the boat where a gust of wind sends her hat flying across the deck. A lanky, straw-haired teenager leaps from his seat to grab it.

“They said to keep an eye out for dolphins,” he tells her.

“Thanks,” she says, pushing the hat further down against her brow.

A young couple sits in front with a toddler, maybe three years old, already running circles around the deck in his diaper-thickened swim trunks. Another couple fills the last row. In the row behind her, the teenager sits beside a wheelchair bound man, who, judging from his hair color and similarly wide-spread eyes, must be his father. The man looks young, far too young and fit for a wheelchair. Mid-40s, maybe, with a lean physique, tanned and toned arms. Erica remembers a Dateline episode about paraplegics who overcame adversity to accomplish what others (leg users, mostly) considered miraculous feats – basketball playing, horse-racing, becoming head chef in a five-star Atlanta eatery. All while wheelchair-bound. She is embarrassed at the fact that each and every time she thinks about that program she also remembers another special that featured an elephant who was trained – simply by tying his trunk to a well-slathered brush and placing him on top of a canvas – how to paint giant “masterpieces” that rich fucks bought for ridiculous prices, just for the bragging rights of hanging it on their gigantic walls and proclaiming: “An elephant did that!”

Once Erica's settled in her seat, they shove off from the dock. Nick comes by to fit her with a life jacket.

"You missed the whole safety schpiel," he says with a wink. Not an actual wink, but that kind of squinty eye-thing that looks like a constant wink. At least to Erica, especially when she's feeling scolded.

"What do I need to know?" she says.

He fits the jacket over her torso then motions for her to pull the cord to tighten it around her chest.

"Too big," he says. He replaces it and they repeat the process.

"Better," he says. "You don't have to wear it the whole time, but keep it with you."

"I may wear it to the bar tonight," Erica says.

"With the red dress, I hope?" he says. "Back to work." He moves like a cat, bounding back toward the front of the boat and through the hole leading down to the first floor.

Erica returns to her seat. Seconds later, the teenager jumps to his feet and runs to the side of the boat, pointing out into the water, where he has spotted a school of dolphins. He wheels his dad toward the railing, where the two other couples and Erica rush to join them, watching the sleek dark ovals of dorsal flesh cresting just over the waves in shimmering half-moons of fin and torso.

At the first stop, Erica is the first one in. The initial view is so overwhelming Erica forgets, at first, to breathe through the snorkel. She spots a school of thousands of

silvery minnows and propels herself deeper beneath the surface, until a rush of salt-water clogs its way through the snorkel tube and shoots straight into her windpipe. She surfaces, gasping, with no one nearby. Two young honey-mooners drift off, hand-in-hand, in the opposite direction, their bodies flat on the surface, arms extended, faces plunged downward with only their snorkel hoses vertical. After a moment's disorientation, she turns to search for the boat and finds herself more intrigued by what is happening at the boat's metal entrance to the water than she is with the schools of fish she feels faintly moving in the water beneath her.

Nick, accompanied by the older captain of the boat, is lifting the paraplegic man from his wheelchair and slowly lowering him into the water, his lifeless legs hanging from his torso but still clinging closely together, as if he had the power to keep them that way. The man holds tight to the metal bars, without the help of the crew now, and lowers himself into the water by degrees, so that his body begins to level out, buoyed by the life vest. His arms create wide circles in front of him as he propels away from the boat to where his son watches intently from several feet out in the water. He grins widely as the physical boundary separating the two of them lifts and they become simply father and son, snorkeling together on a warm, November morning off the shores of Molokini.

Erica nears them, her face submerged, watching the rows of coral beneath her, yet hearing, her ears above the surface, the laughter of the teenager as his dad splashes him and challenges him to a race. They settle into the newness of this shared world. Like the couple who drifted out of Erica's view, they float parallel to one another, only the backs of their heads visible on the surface, pointing out to one another various schools of fish, an octopus puffing its way through the sand some twenty feet below, a giant sea turtle,

having appeared out of nowhere, suddenly making its way straight at the group of snorkelers, like a zoo animal trained by experience to expect a tasty handout.

Erica's breath floods her snorkel tube as she gestures wildly at the turtle, forgetting she's floating alone. She feels the same weighty tug she felt the first night while watching the sunset from her condo balcony—but quickly shakes the feeling away. The paraplegic man appears beside her, within a couple of feet, pointing along with her as the turtle swims closer. He turns his head under water to smile at her, a flurry of bubbles escaping through the side of his mouthpiece, forcing him up for air. She meets him at the surface.

“Amazing,” she says.

“Yeah. You almost forget to breathe down there! Can you believe that turtle is probably 300 pounds?” he says. “And I think it's just a baby.”

“It has the sweetest face,” she says. “So gentle.”

“You missed Nick's safety speech,” he says. “There are all kinds of rules of conduct about how close we should get. He says that other tour boats let their divers and snorkelers feed them, so they've gotten too used to humans.”

He pauses to catch his breath, though he seems in better shape than Erica feels, the sheer exertion of a half hour's worth of doggy-paddling already impacting her tired lungs. He looks different in the water, even from only his neck up. His face so young and glowing, cheeks squeezed inward by the snorkel mask, his lip pulled up and contorted into what could have been a sneer, had he not been smiling so widely.

“They'll swim right up to poachers now.”

He gestures toward his son, now drifting in a face down dead man's float about ten feet away, one of his fingers gesturing toward a turtle coming up beneath them.

"This must be really great for you," Erica says. "To be able to swim on your own."

He pauses, his smile fading.

"I mean, being in the water and all."

"It is what it is," he says. He dunks his head back underwater, and, using his strong arms, paddles quickly away from her and toward his son.

On the way out to the second snorkeling stop, Erica reapplies sunscreen to her pinkened nose, which she then shoves deep into her novel, rather than watching the scenery with the rest of the paired off passengers. At the next stop, she is flippered and masked by the time they dropped anchor, and is the first one in the water. With swift, powerful kicks, she propels herself further and further from the boat, racing the fish that dart in teams in one direction then turn, in unison, and flush opposite. It reminds her first of windsprint drills, then of bad decisions in general. The kind you can't take back.

Soon, she's so far out, scouting for turtles and becoming engrossed in a slick, oil-spot mass of sting rays undulating and scavenging the sea floor beneath her, that the boat shrinks into a tiny speck in the distance. She hears a distant holler in a high-pitched tone and it takes her a moment to realize that, given the distance she'd attained from the boat, it must be much louder at its origin. She squints to make out the scene more than a hundred feet away, wondering if they are calling for her, if there is some kind of emergency, a shark spotting or toxic spill. The screams are filled with dread. Emergency.

But the tiny figures don't seem to be motioning toward her; they're not waving arms or blowing whistles designed to catch her attention and draw her back in. It's as if she isn't there; that she doesn't exist at all. A woman's voice screams; a man's lower bravado yells, making orders, perhaps. Erica can't make it out, can't see the other snorkelers from her tour group. She is further out, nestled against the coral-lined base of the island itself. All she can hear are muted strains of catastrophe echoing off the surface of the ocean as she begins, hesitantly at first, to paddle toward them. She doesn't want to know.

Erica begins to struggle with the precise words she'll use to later describe this event to Jonathan. How will she describe this exact feeling of anticipation, as she swims toward the boat? What words will she use? How will the story end? How purposeful Jonathan would make himself in a situation like this. Man-in-charge. How he lived for these moments. Not in a morbid, ambulance-chasing sense, but as a man who defined himself by his ability to be strong in times of crisis; calm and helpful. *Necessary*. Her legs and lungs grow tired. The ship's passengers are visible on the front deck, most of them crouched over, bent at the waist. The honeymoon couple lingers further back, the woman holding one hand in front of her mouth, her other arm wrapped tight around her stomach. Her husband's arm wraps almost like a head-lock around her neck, forcing her head to bend toward his shoulder.

It's the paraplegic, Erica thinks to herself, but discovers as she swims closer, that it is the toddler they are attempting to save, the red-haired boy who had been napping silently when they reached the second stop. Everyone is circled around the deck, blocking the stairway onto the boat, so she remains in the water, paddling her arms and legs unnecessarily while her life jacket keeps her afloat. The teenager, bent now beside the

child, administers careful CPR, thumping the toddler's tiny chest with gentle, firm pushes against his tiny diaphragm. His crippled father lays awkwardly beside him on the deck, his useless legs pulling his body toward the ground as he, propped up on his haunches, counts out for his son: "1 – 2 – 3 – push."

Erica's arms and legs stop moving in the water, her breath held, eyes closed, drifting in the small tide made by the lapping of the surface against the boat's underside. She drifts toward the back of the boat, concentrating on the counting, the labored grunts of the teenager as he pushes into the child's chest. Finally, the spurting of choked breath, the coughs, the reanimation. She rests now at the back of the boat, a couple feet from the propellers, as the group of passengers emits a noisy, combined surge of sighs, small cheers, and a sudden explosions of tears from both women and men.

She watches as Nick, so in control earlier on, walks toward the back of the boat, lights a cigarette, and clutches hard to the railing, not spotting her bobbing head in the water beneath him as his boss comes up beside him.

"He's okay," the captain says, pounding a rough, sailor's hand against Nick's shoulder.

"We're not fucking baby-sitters," Nick says.

"You should have been paying closer attention," the captain says.

"I was keeping an eye on the cripple," Nick says. "What the fuck do you want from me? Couldn't you have helped?"

"The kid's alright," he says. "It's what matters. Good thing the guy knew CPR. Where were you, exactly?"

Nick doesn't reply. A long pause follows.

“We shouldn’t let handicapped people on the boat to begin with,” he finally says.
“It’s a liability.”

“Get your shit together,” the captain says.

“I’m okay,” Nick says. He clears his throat, stamps his cigarette out on the railing, making sure it is completely out, then shoves the extinguished butt into his pocket.

“I mean gather your shit before we get back to shore,” the captain says. “I don’t want you back on this boat once we dock.”

Erica hears his heavy footsteps as the captain makes his way back toward the passengers on the other side of the boat. She paddles around to the steps.

“We almost forgot about you,” the captain says, wrapping an arm around her and helping to hoist her up onto the deck. “You missed quite a scene.”

“I saw,” she says. She can feel her eyes start to burn, and the captain tightens his squeeze before letting her go.

“It’s okay. He’s okay.”

“I know. It’s just so sad,” she says.

“I know.”

The trip back is silent, like a drive to a cemetery after the service. The couple cradles their toddler, who still sputters and coughs between every couple breaths. The teenager toggles back and forth between staring at the child he’d just saved and pointing out various landmarks and wildlife to his dad.

“There’s that island the woman at the hotel told us about,” he whispers, nudging his dad, seated solemnly beside him, back in his wheelchair.

“Hey, look. Dolphins.”

But no one gets up to watch. Everyone just wants off the boat. Home couldn't feel further away. Staring carefully at the horizon line in order to combat minor bouts of motion sickness, Erica is hit by a new sinking sensation in her stomach: the uncomfortable idea of having to, once they reach the shore, fashion some sort of casual goodbye to say to these people with whom she has just been through so much. Once docked, she skirts quickly down the stairway, her head downward, staring at the chipped paint on her toenail as she navigates the slight leap from boat to pier. The captain squeezes her shoulder as she passes him, having missed his offer of an extended hand. She mutters an awkward “thanks,” and heads straight for her car, not looking back until safely collapsed in the front seat. The other passengers have barely made it to the parking lot, clustered together, perhaps re-living the ordeal or simply making small talk while balancing towels and equipment. She makes her way home as if on auto-pilot, mindless of her surroundings.

The bar has a more sultry vibe when she arrives later that night, entirely off schedule. It is accentuated by steamy-damp air and a far larger crowd of loud tourists. Her “regular” table, overlooking the man-made Japanese koi pond, is occupied by a couple holding hands across the table and drinking from one comically large mai-tai with two enormous straws. Erica takes one of the only empty seats at the far, opposite end of the bar, and a woman bartender, dressed in a red and orange flowered bikini top, leans over the bar to take her drink order, barely able to hear Erica over the cranked up strains of Don Ho's Tiny Bubbles.

“Are you still serving dinner?” Erica asks, realizing she hasn’t eaten all day.

The bartender grabs an upright, spiral bound appetizer menu from the empty bar seat next to Erica’s and plops it in front of her.

“I’ll be back to take your order,” she says. A group of rowdy conventioners whistle at her from the dining area.

Erica can barely make out the distant shoreline, with its varying charcoal shades separating sea from sky, from beyond the heads of the bar’s noisy crowds. Focusing for the first time more on the bar’s interior, she is disappointed by the fake toucans hanging from plastic-bamboo swings, a vast salt-water aquarium offering a caged view of fish that could easily be seen swimming free not 100 feet across the sand, the uselessness of the slow mechanically-rotated fans.

The bartender returns and Erica orders the same pu-pu platter Nick had sent to her table the first night.

“Hey, do you know if Nick is working tonight?”

“He was supposed to,” she says. “He didn’t show up.” She disappears into the kitchen to place her order. Erica can see how overworked she is as the only one in the entire bar, both tending the drinks and running food to the tables. A couple of busboys help serve, but it’s too much work for so few people to handle.

Erica sips her martini, lights a cigarette, and scans the crowd. Random couples sit in the bamboo chairs by the deck, making romantic toasts, while several well-dressed Mid-westerners, a sales team, she guesses, talk business in the seats by the aquarium. A group of rowdy, vacationing football fans are propped at the bar opposite to Erica’s side,

begging the bartender, each time she whisks by, to turn the channel to sports highlights, to turn it up a couple notches, to fix the somewhat fuzzy reception.

The group infuriates Erica with all its restless demands, its complete failure to recognize the pearls of sweat running down the bartender's cheek as she rushes back and forth from the kitchen. They mistake her frustration and exhaustion as sassiness, and keep begging for more, egging her on with hollers of "honey" and "babe." The waitress gives them a warning, her third since Erica arrived, and one of the men responds, once she turns around, by taking a skewered pineapple chunk out of his drink and throwing it over the bar, hitting her in the ass. His friends chuckle, then put their hands up in front of their mouths like scolded children when she turns to look at her shorts, covered now in a splash of pale pink juice.

"That's it," she says, walking over toward the group, her pointed finger aiming at the restaurant exit. "Get out of my bar."

The men – a group of grown men, ranging from early 30s to mid 40s – giggles.

"*Your* bar?" says of the men, a big, muscle guy in khaki pants and tight oxford shirt. "I doubt that very much." And he takes the cherry out of his cocktail and holds it up for a moment, letting it dangle from the stem between his fingers, a grim smile widening across his face while the two lock eyes.

"Are you kidding me?" Her voice raises a pitch, cracks at the end. He cups the cherry in his hand, like a quarterback about to hurl a game-winning pass.

"Go deep," he says.

"Get the fuck out," she says. "And take your little pals with you. We don't need your business."

He lets the cherry stem drop from between his finger tips and flicks it with his other hand. Even his facial expression reveals surprise as the cherry hurls toward the waitress at the same moment the waitress rushes toward the group of men. The cherry strikes her between her breasts. The bar goes silent, everyone focused on what will happen next.

Erica jumps up and reaches over the bar, consumed suddenly by a hatred she'd never felt before—a proactive hatred, impulsive and raw. The olives come first, handfuls of green olives she throws with just the right amount of follow-through – pelting the entire group like machine gun fire, some renegade shots hitting innocent bystanders. She reloads with lime twists, pearl onions, and slick, slippery cherries, throwing at full force until they realize she isn't about to stop. They leap from their bar stools and make their way to the exit, stomping and cursing like unruly schoolboys.

One of them, a man who had giggled along with his friends at first, but remained otherwise immobile during the heated exchange, turns back around on his way out. Ducking from Erica's relentless onslaught, he pulls a stack of twenties out of his wallet and sets it on the far end of the bar.

“What the hell are you doing?” yells the man who threw the cherry.

“Don't pay those bitches!” another one hollers. Others spout similar epithets, one of them kicking over the aluminum menu stand by the exit. Several busboys emerge through the swinging kitchen doors, finally hearing the commotion and coming out to help.

“I'm really sorry,” the man says. “We're not usually like this. It's vacation, you know?”

The bartender stands frozen, her bar-rag tossed over her shoulder, hands on her hips. Erica wonders if she could ever conjure such a steely glare, or if, perhaps, she already has. It's been a long day.

Finally, once the group of men had disappeared through the hotel lobby exit beyond the bar, she walks back over in Erica's direction, picking up some olives and cherries on the way and tossing them in the trash. She takes one of the twenties, her hand shaking a bit, and places it in front of Erica, who shrugs it away.

"There's a bunch here," she says, leafing through the stack, and refusing to take the bill back. "A lot more than their bill. I'm not sure if this makes me Thelma or Louise."

"I wish my fiancé had been here," Erica says. "He would have kicked his ass."

"Which one?"

"All of them."

"We didn't do so bad on our own," says the bartender. She fills Erica's glass and makes one for herself.

"So this is island life," Erica says, leaning back in her up-righted seat, pulling her bare feet out from her sandals and stretching them across the stool beside her.

"It is what it is," says the bartender. A more subdued, almost apologetic, drink request comes from the other end of the bar, and she turns away.

It jars Erica immediately, the fact that the bartender had used the exact wording the paraplegic had used in the water, after, it seemed, she'd somehow offended him by making an off-handed, wholly innocuous, reference to his handicap. What it must feel like for him to be so helpless – always! She wonders if, while he was in the water during

that first snorkeling stop, he spent the time truly enjoying the moment to its fullest, or if he had spent the better part of the hour pushing away the darker thoughts, uncontrollably focusing on the moment when someone would have to reach down and pull his body out of the sea for him, his own arms doing all they could to help but only really succeeding in making the task that much harder on those helping him.

“Just stand still so we can get a better hold of you,” Nick had finally said to him, after their first snorkel stop had come to an end, growing visibly exasperated as he and the captain struggled to pull him up. Erica couldn’t stop staring as the man went entirely limp, even his head seeming to bobble as he gave in so reluctantly to his own helplessness. Then, together, Nick and the captain had leaned forward, each grabbing beneath an opposite shoulder and hoisting the man up in one, well-powered and choreographed effort that lifted him out of the sea and directly back into his wheelchair, in one fell swoop. As if he were nothing more than a sack of weighted flour.

“There you go,” the captain had said, rubbing his hands together as if having just diapered a baby, then motioning to Nick to pull up the anchor. “Now let’s move on.”

RUNNING STILL

By the time you wake up for your early morning run, three messages are already blinking on the machine: one from a drunken and confused friend of Lisa, the woman from whom you are subletting your apartment, one from an automated salesman peddling fraudulent insurance policies, and the final one, a mysterious-sounding half-message from Lisa herself. It sounds like heavy rain and thunder crashing in the background as she mumbles about some sort of accident. Halfway through the message she is cut off, and the machine's automated voice cuts in: "You have no more new messages. Press 1 to repeat--."

Lisa is with her boyfriend, a peace-activist of some sort, traveling through Thailand. Her voice on the line is as familiar as if you were longtime roommates, though you have never actually met and the transaction was completed entirely by phone and online, with the same kind of faceless ease with which you can nowadays procure a divorce or settle a will. She needed an extra couple hundred dollars in cash each month to help fund her travels; and you needed a welcome mat until you could find your own way around town, and a place to unpack some of your stuff, the rest of which is crammed into a storage unit up the road. You press the "1" key three times to advance and repeat the final message, but each repetition yields the same confusing garble. You refocus your energy, double knot your ventilated mesh running shoes, tuck a five dollar bill in your

sock, just in case, and remember to lock the door behind you as you head out into the heat of another desert morning.

You move as a perfectly oiled machine, increasingly aware of each step and the precise measurements of weight you carry; acutely conscious of how one tendon stretches into the next, the pressure applied to the slim stretch of flesh-fabric behind your chiseled kneecaps. Do others notice that fold of flesh, or even begin to understand the importance of such strength and that, at any given moment, it can be stolen, like a breath, just like that?

At the gas station up the street, young boys are rolling and crashing their skateboards through the abandoned patches of cement surrounding and between the fuel dispensers, laughing and smoking cigarettes bought inside at the mini-mart. As you walk inside, a blast of climate-controlled air-conditioning and cigarette smoke pushes past you, escaping out the door and melting into the heat. An old man sits shoving coins into a slot machine, above which hangs a sign advertising "*the loosest slots in town.*" This is not an unusual marketing ploy in Sin City, though it's not usually coupled with an enticing "*win a free car wash*" incentive. But it isn't a free car wash the old man rotating between three machines at once is hoping to win. His must be the owner of Ford Fairlane parked in the handicapped space that the boys outside keep crashing into. A worn cane leans against the end slot machine.

Your knees take the specific brunt of each minor impact, even these smaller steps. but they are stronger now, and continue to propel you forward as you peruse the row of motor oils, marveling at their sparkly promises of a *cleaner overall engine*. The idea is

appealing, the way health food stores herald the virtues of wheat grass juice as nature's miracle. The pamphlets will have you believe it's a miracle cure for all that ails you, yet people still can't be bothered. But you love the earthy, dank scent of it, its murky thickness the consistency of motor oil, delivered in a plastic one- or two-ounce container. You picture it, having surpassed your tongue and sliding down your throat, past your breastbone, as if watching it from an x-ray in a doctor's office. You picture it fighting off unimaginable ailments. Even the taste has become something you savor, enjoying the flavor rather than simply holding your nose and tossing it back, like everyone else. You purchase a bottle of water from a gum-smacking teen who suggests you have a "fabulous" day, and you walk back out to the parking lot.

It's early morning, the moon still a slim sliver in the desert sky, and the temperatures are already warming the asphalt and causing silvery hair-dos to wilt throughout the grocery store parking lot. At homes across the city, couples are slowly, reluctantly waking to talk shows and the itinerant buzz or ramble of alarm clocks. Couples don't argue as much in the morning. They are fueled and propelled forward by the necessities involved. A timed coffee pot turns itself on to brew a full pot, two mugs for now, two steel-insulated containers to go. Showers are had, but rarely shared. Papers shuffled, frozen meals chosen for budget low-carb lunches, car keys lost, found, and rattled. Morning radio shows clicked through and settled upon. Cell phones numbers punched, as bored commuters make calls to the morning radio shows. *Tell the host you love their show. It makes your morning that much easier to live through. Give your opinion on why men prefer fill-in-the-blanks or why women tend to fill-in-the-blanks.*

Explain that while it's been a pleasure speaking with them, you're now nearly late for work. Laugh it up and ask for a free prize.

The coffee shop line spills out onto the sidewalk. You use a row of empty bike racks to prop up one leg, folding your now lean body over and grasping the insole of your foot. Your limbs are more constricted today, their tiredness begging to be considered. You have been working your body very hard these days. You are uncompromising.

“That should be us right now!” A woman says to her friend, pointing in your direction and offering a half-friendly smirk. The other woman dips a finger into her whip-cream and seductively sucks it off her finger, illustrating her priorities.

You work your way across the abandoned softball fields, through the library parking lot, up and around the vacant lot currently being excavated for more and more new apartments and condominiums. Everything must be new, like a mantra. Everything must be new. Your muscles begin, slowly, to loosen.

The real estate agent said it best when she'd called the night before.

“I've got just the place you are looking for. It's much older, like you like. Built in the '80s! I'd be happy to take you by it tomorrow afternoon, if you are available.”

You *are* available, and she knows this. Real estate agents always know. She helped you with your loan application, pre-populating the fields for you convenience. Female. Single. No children. First-time buyer. Debt-free, except for old unpaid hospital bills (which, your loan officer assures you, is the “best” kind of debt, along with school loans, of which you have also accrued your fair share.)

You approach, now moving at a more advanced and steady pace, a group of children loitering near a bus stop. A couple of boys are goofing off in the street, playfully

pushing one another toward oncoming traffic. You run past without reprimanding them, though they look to you as if for some authority on the matter. A car comes from around the corner the moment the boys' attention is on you, and the driver lays on his horn. The driver swerves not to hit them and then wags an angry fist at you, who apparently *should* have been an authority in the matter. The other kids laugh as you continue past. You are endlessly reminded that you are, in fact, no authority on that matter, or any matter, for that matter; you operate solely as a distanced observer in an unfamiliar land.

When you return, the apartment smells of burnt coffee, and the cramped rooms are already unbearably hot. Lisa is scheduled to come back three weeks from Monday. You send her an email she will undoubtedly pick up at an Internet café somewhere in Phnom Penh, letting her know her message had been cut off. You ask if she is okay, and ask her to write or call when she gets a chance, just to ease your mind. You add a brief mention that you may have found a new apartment of your own, to ease her mind. You hate lying like that.

You have been sleeping in her bed, beneath a collage of neatly framed photos of her and her boyfriend. They are organized in chronological order, each cleanly labeled — *Athens, Greece, 1998; Budapest, Hungary, 1999; Giza, Egypt, 2000; Perth, Australia, 2001; Saidpur, Bangladesh, 2003; Los Angeles, California, 2004.*

You wonder what happened in 2002. Maybe the couple had broken up, only to reunite in time for a trip to Bangladesh. Maybe they'd discovered an unexpected and unwanted pregnancy, and travel money was diverted into abortion funds and counseling. Perhaps the camera broke while tracking wild Kudu in South Africa, and the only evidence of that year's trip is a long scar across Lisa's thick thigh from when she

attempted to chase down a spiral horned bull with her cheap Instamatic. And how did Los Angeles become the primary destination for 2004? What a let-down! You should know: You left L.A. for this God-forsaken “oasis.”

Her boyfriend is lean and dark, rarely breaking a grin, while hers is a round face with sparkling deep-set eyes and a perennial, tooth-filled smile. The height and build difference between the two is equally opposing, her short, stocky form generally clad in bright hues indifferent to their unflattering patterns and shapes; his lanky form draped in moody blacks and grays.

You have memorized each and every framed snapshot sub-consciously. Something about them makes you uncomfortable and yet hopeful at the same time. An unexplainable feeling stirs inside of you as you stand before one framed shot after the next, exploring each minor detail while contemplating your to-do list for the day, the beginning of which reads: “Find a place to live.” Her mysterious phone message helps instill in you a newfound level of placement anxiety. Perhaps Lisa is on her way home right now. Perhaps her early return was what had fueled the strange urgency in her normally even-kiltered voice.

* * * *

The real estate agent is late again, but rushes to meet you at the bagel shop in yet another mini-mall, where you have sat for fifteen minutes watching a lanky teenager hand-feed his pet monitor – a sleek, menacing reptile that has somehow been

domesticated into a perfect allergen-free pet. The boy allows you to stroke its skin, like rubbing a well-softened handbag or fine Italian boots.

“His name is Vegas,” the boy says.

“What if you move somewhere else?” you ask him.

“Not much chance of that,” the boy says. “At least not for a couple of years, anyhow.”

“I know what you mean,” you tell him. You share a look. He knows that you know his reasons for staying—he’s not a day over fourteen—but he is waiting to see if you are willing to share yours.

At that moment, Shelby Natch, your real estate agent, sweeps in like a well-pollinated breeze, her arms cluttered with binders and papers, her cell phone already ringing. She clicks it to off without answering, jangling her enormous key-filled keychain.

“Everyone’s so freaked out about the interest rate hikes,” she says, in explanation of her tardiness. “I am so sorry for keeping you waiting.”

She, too, strokes the lizard. Uncomfortably.

“Careful, it can suck you in,” the boy says to you as he turns to leave. Shelby offers a confused expression, but you think you understand what the kid is talking about. You want to tell Shelby that a key chain that heavy can cause damage to her ignition—you’d heard that somewhere a long time ago and believed it like gospel. But she’s already giving you the rushed run-down of the day’s real estate steals and you bite your tongue and nod at appropriate intervals.

The very first apartment is a disappointment from the moment Shelby drives you into the vast complex, taking a half dozen turns through shortened cul-de-sacs incorporating various combinations of the words “palm,” “green,” and “lake”—as if to deny their arid, beige landscapes. You swear you see a tumbleweed somersault past as Shelby navigates the corridors of the confusing lot. Finally, Shelby gives in and calls the selling agent to point you to the correct unit. Visitor parking is sparse, and Shelby can barely navigate her enormous ski-rack laden SUV into the spot, asking you to please go ahead and get out since it is a tight squeeze and she doesn’t want you to smash the door into the Acura parked in the next visitor spot.

“Your resident parking assignment will be far more convenient,” she assures you, as you both walk in circles a bit before finding the correct condo. There appear to be thousands of identical units stacked every which way, like a crazy M. C. Escher sketch of an impossible domicile.

“Not what you had in mind, huh?” she asks. She seems as equally disappointed in the place as you are, once inside. Small windows, dark, low-ceilinged rooms and general bad energy seemed to emanate from every sharp corner.

“I was hoping for more light,” you say, trying to hide your own displeasure. A faint smell of curry sweetness lingers in the air, as if clinging to invisible drapes.

“Don’t be discouraged,” she says, squeezing your arm as if she understands your needs at a deeply intrinsic level. “We’re going to find you something you can live with.”

No empty, sugar-coated promises of the perfect place, the two-bedroom-one-bath to die for, or fall in love with. She’s guaranteed you will find *Something You Can Live*

With, which is exactly what you need at this point. You appreciate her candidness and tell her so. She seems to understand completely.

“I’ve been there,” she says. She notices your high-tech athletic sneakers.

“You like to run?” she asks. “I have just the place for you! You can keep in shape and meet new friends at the same time—what can be better than that?”

She explains that she’s a co-captain of the Las Vegas Running Team and you’re not surprised. She’s very genuine, in her own way.

“I tend to run alone,” you say.

“Getting involved in the community is the only way to survive here,” she tells you, and you concede that she may make a valid point. She forwards you mass e-mails about appreciation values in certain neighborhoods, along with dirty jokes and cartoons of the President where you can use your mouse to scrabble his face or insert a sassy punch line in a dialogue bubble over his head.

“Ha!” she writes in the subject line. She could be a friend, in addition to real estate agent, if you were willing to give the friendship a chance.

It rains all afternoon. A long tour of vacated condominiums yields a measly two potential finds. Shelby says it’s the start of the monsoon season, and that once the downpour rages, steam rising from the scorched pavement, you want to be sure to be home.

“These roads aren’t made for rain,” she says. “That’s why everyone here drives SUVs like this baby!” She smacks her dashboard then reaches to retrieve a business card clipped to the back of her visor. She hands it to you. It’s for her car dealership.

The smell of the rain, of the musty earth and soaked asphalt, has you thinking of somewhere else, though you can't quite put a finger on it. It breeds a melancholy you can't quite fight. You arrive back at the apartment and open the windows in the tiny kitchen, the sudden gusts blowing through the apartment and swiping notes and photos from beneath refrigerator magnets, swirling them across the room.

Outside, the air has cooled only by fractions, but brings with it a welcome relief and shallow spattering of well-needed moisture. Using the dial-up connection on Lisa's desktop, you once again access your email, which, save for a handful of penis enlargement and weight-loss ads, is empty of any personal messages. As soon as you disconnect the phone line, the cordless receiver rings.

"Sarah?" The voice is unfamiliar. High-pitched and feminine. It is the first time you have heard your name spoken by anyone in this city besides your real estate agent and the recent long-distance messages from Lisa.

"Yes?"

"It's nice to meet you," the woman sounds nervous, awkward. "I'm Lindsay, Lisa's sister."

She pauses, waiting for your reply, as if she'd already delivered important news. You realize you are holding your breath in anticipation of some dreaded punch line.

"You are staying at her house, right?" Lindsay asks. "She just called from Thailand, and I guess there was some kind of accident. But she got cut off. Have you heard from her?"

You explain the similar message you had received. The two of you quickly realize how little information you have to go on. Small talk reveals only that Lindsay is calling

from across the country and that she hadn't actually spoken to her little sister in over eight months. She had found out from an old friend of Lisa's that you were house-sitting, and that her sister had been in Thailand for weeks.

"Which makes the sudden call from her a little weird," her sister says. "I'm a bit scared, I have to admit."

"I wouldn't worry," you say. "I'm sure she'll call back soon if it's an emergency."

But she doesn't. The number you have taken for Lindsay sits on the bedside table overnight, while you experience strange dreams about haunted movie theaters and a man you once knew standing above you on a tall ladder. He reaches down for you and in an effort to reach up toward him, you stumble forward on awkward tippy-toes and fall, with the full weight of your body, against the legs of the tired ladder. You wake in a sweat to a silent apartment that suddenly feels more like your own.

* * * *

It feels better, now that you've got your breathing regulated, less out of control. You focus on counting along with the fall of your right foot as you increase the speed of the stride and make the last full turn before the grocery store intersection. There is a school you still must pass, and the children are scattered around the field in what appears to be a fire drill. Straight lines of children seemingly divided by height, looking like miniature drill teams awaiting inspection. This is your slow down spot, and you begin first by focusing on the fall of your right foot. Slower. Slower. Slower. Your counted

numbers relaxing, exhaling, quieting. You are in a brisk walk by the time you pass the schoolyard and turn into the parking lot of the adjacent senior center.

Generally, by now, your mind is at ease, filled only with the steady thrum of heel meeting asphalt. Only, you are wondering what has happened to Lisa. Was she caught in a storm? Has she been kidnapped? You have never met her. She is a chronic miss-speller of the word “your” when what she means is “you are.” She travels a lot. It may prove to be her downfall. You hate her apartment. All those slick, white, cookie-cutter walls and the stucco in dull, earthy shades, each building identical to the ones it is crammed in between. You hate her neighborhood, how rarely you see any actual neighbors, and how the ones you do see never bother to say hello. You hate the heat. It is relentless and it is still summer, even this deep into September. There will be no changing of leaves or wardrobes. You are always, always sad. What will you do, if Lisa has disappeared completely?

They probably broke up in 2002, you decide, imagining a version of truth to help you through all this new mystery. She cheated on him, or vice versa. The one had grown tired of something about the other. Or maybe this place was to blame. Both wanted equally to escape, but a week’s planned adventure in the arctic hadn’t been enough for either of them. So they saved their money and stayed at home, instead. They scrimped and saved, eyeing a much larger goal. Only, it just didn’t pan out. After a year off from traveling, they pooled the saved cash and realized it wasn’t enough to start over elsewhere, so they flew to Bangladesh on a discounted fare purchased months after the 9/11 attacks. Her boyfriend, you can tell, is the adventurous type. But she hated it there. She was miserable the entire trip. They came home, fought about what she considered a

colossal waste of money, broke up for a short time, but reunited in early '03. But it was still tenuous. They still wanted to get away together, still prove to each other that they possessed whatever it was that had made them special. So, on a whim, they drove to Los Angeles and pretended themselves into a far more exotic location.

They drank fancy cocktails at upscale bars along the shores of Malibu, shoe-shopped at the trendy shops along Melrose, and leaned over to read the embossed squares paving their way up Hollywood Boulevard. They snapped pictures everywhere they went, as if to gather evidence they could later frame and hang on bedroom walls. Lisa always smiles, though she's the one with all the heavy complaints. Her boyfriend just stands there, always a little bit dumbstruck.

But Los Angeles isn't a place to go in order to solve problems. You know that better than anyone. You left Los Angeles and came to Vegas to escape your problems, the same way Lisa left here, to keep pretending her own dull life away.

You wonder if she succeeded. Maybe it ended in a dirty alley in Cambodia, her unidentifiable corpse discovered by one of those men who bicycle tourists around all the cheap bars. Or maybe it was a happier ending. It wouldn't take much. She finally summons the courage to leave her boyfriend after a fight in a cheap hostel, and goes on to meet a whole new activist while taking snapshots in a rice field. He knows all the region's history, his father or grandfather had served in the War, and he nervously rattles off all kinds of obscure statistics in an effort to impress her. She is impressed. He is sweet and smart and doesn't smile much, which is okay with Lisa, because she smiles enough for a small army. He reminds her a little, but not too much, of her recent ex-boyfriend. She tells him how they used to travel together, but how this time she decided to go on her

own. They'd broken up only weeks prior to departure, she tells him, half-anxious in her lie, fearful that he might appear behind her and blow her cover. He has a bit of a temper, she admits, scoring some sympathy from her new and improved activist. She hadn't even cleared her apartment of his reminders, she thinks to herself, allowing her lie to grow more real, even to herself. "Let the renter deal with all that baggage," she thinks.

He reminds her of him, but only a little. It's in the way he talks to the locals while she hides behind her camera, always taking or appearing in pictures, but still too afraid to spark conversation. She prefers to watch from a distance, the same way you are able to spend hours watching her self-portraits on the walls of her apartment, so many thousands of miles away, wondering when they'll start to reveal even more of her secrets. She is with this new man, ducked inside a hut as a storm rages, not unlike these sudden Vegas monsoons, knocking out phone lines and leaving tourists gasping while the locals simply wait out the storm beneath the thatched roofs of popular tourist destinations.

Her family is so worried, they start to call every couple of hours, as if you wouldn't contact them the minute you heard word from their missing daughter. You want to leave this place. You're willing, even, to pick up and run back to Los Angeles to correct your past mistakes and move on. Start fresh. But they keep calling, and you keep answering. You can't just leave them hanging. You can't let them down. Not now.

BEST LAID PLANS

*Time plays a role in almost every decision.
And some decisions define your attitude about time.
- John Cale*

I could have been anywhere, but there I was. Just past midnight, and still a sweltering 95 degrees beneath the steaming Vegas moon. My feet spun mindless circles in the pool. It was a dry heat, the kind you read about but don't really *get* until you've been there. But I wasn't really there at all. I felt it on my skin the way a coma patient might hear words but lack a deeper understanding. Somewhere, a distant trombone played, a muffled sound so mournful it may have been a voice, or maybe a ghost. No, it was only me now. A clock in the pool house chimed. It was a novelty clock, each number represented by a bird; each hour denoted by a different call. The robin owned midnight, and seemed to chirp on forever. I dialed again, the light of the tiny LCD screen emitting a glow similar to the pool's casual green-blue fluorescence. No answer. Again. No answer. *Again.*

He's gone. I mention this only because there was a slim chance, up until maybe a couple of hours ago. Now, another chimed hour has come and gone, and there is nothing. He is neither here nor there, and the whole plan is under water. I considered jumping in, imagining what that first inhale would feel like; lungs rushing full of water; the heaviness. Dull, velvet gray.

Last week we'd considered a different course, one that would take us not into the dry heat, but the clammy moisture of something closer to the Equator. It could have gone either way, and we knew it even then, as we sat in the car overlooking the stretch of coastline north of Playa del Rey, up into Santa Monica, through Malibu, and beyond. We guzzled wine straight from the bottle, passing it back and forth while watching plane after plane lift and rise up over us, starting out over the water, and then turning back toward the coastline, folding itself then stretching out again into a more graceful nonchalance as it built to its cruising altitude.

I wondered where he was now. If he got out in time, or somehow got stuck in the middle. I considered his face, recreating every detail. How it felt in the dark against smooth fingers. The way he blinks when he talks; the smell of smoke imbedded in his palms. All memories of him are in the dark. Tents in the mountains; the back seats of cars; the carved out niche in the hillside overlooking Topanga Canyon, the room shared between he and his wife, where we snuggled beneath her covers. A freeway overpass. A dimly lit booth in the back of a bar, no larger than a wood-trimmed confessional.

It doesn't matter. Slowly, I pulled my jeans down past my hips and let them drop to the warm concrete, followed by t-shirt, underwear. The water was like bath water; embryonic. I let my limbs dangle, motionless, and stared up into the sky. It was so warm and still, I heard the motion of my hair tangling itself in the water. I heard the soft buzzing undertones the world naturally emits; the distant hum of mechanical things, hushed only in degrees by the late hour. A giant computer stalled on stand-by; an electric breathing I tried but couldn't sync up with my own uneven breaths.

He could be in San Francisco. Yes, maybe he opted for North over East. He had friends up there still. He could have escaped up to the Bay Area to find his best friend. Theirs was a friendship that bordered on romantic love, it always seemed. So much touching and heaviness. It was as plausible a conclusion as any.

But that was a cop-out. I'd rather think he ran into the arms of his friend than consider the more likely options. It was never really a do-or-die situation, we'd just imagined it that way to make the idea more romantic. I was gone either way. I had to go. He had the option. He'd made it feel like it was the other way around, and I'd believed him, even while driving at triple digits to escape from there. I still believed, fueled up and blasting the Stones from a portable tape deck in the passenger seat. I even spoke to him out loud the whole way here, wishing I'd had a cell phone so he could actually hear me. Finally I bought one at an electronics store just outside the city. I realized, then, that I wasn't sure how to reach him if he'd already left, but I found distant comfort in the ring tone, wondering what I would do if she answered.

We had a plan, alright. He'd taken my hand, spread my fingers and kissed my palm. He'd lifted the hair off my neck and blown warm breath down my spine. He'd understood the situation and accepted the terms and conditions. I hadn't asked him to take my hand, blow on my neck or accept anything. He did it of his own free will. I wish I had a tape-recorder. Machinery. Devices. Anything. I wish I had anything.

That was the kind of thinking that got me here. Now the coast was well over 300 miles west, maybe more or less. I'm in a pool, I'm staring at the sky. Could be any sky. Is this sky. This particular, specific sky. As viewed from this specific spot, in a pool, in the desert, dry heat, warm water, 300 miles east of the coastline tides. I've never been good

at finding whimsical pictures drawn into the stars. I could find a million faces, the distinct outline of beasts and creatures carved into rocks and mountainsides, but the sky offers nothing but flickering dots; dots that disappear if you look at them long enough, widening your eyes. They simply fade to black. Stare enough and the whole sky of them disappears and all is inky nothingness. I can't make rocks disappear in the same way, even if I tried. And believe me, I've tried. Once you find a face in a rock, you can't erase it; it won't leave you alone. Even when it gets so dark you can't make out shadows, you can still see it, you still know it's out there.

He could have been on his way to meet me and something happened. Things happen, particularly in that wasteland stretch of *minimall-fastfood-outlet-shops-five-lane-speed-trap* nightmare called Barstow. That's the kind of place where exactly this kind of thing can happen. People disappear. *He was on his way, I swear, officer, can't you please check it out?* The officers have probably gotten sick of checking it out. It happens all the time. People leave. They can't help it. They're tired, or sick, even. Maybe they just got so scared that they had made a really poor decision that once they'd done so, they felt compelled to see it through, the way you finish an exam that goes poorly from the start. Or a war. It should be just as easy to admit you screwed up, you want to turn around and go back. But human nature dictates otherwise. Weakness isn't as bad if you exhibit good follow-through. We hear about it on all the major newscasts.

If he did get lost, and this is only a theory, of course, how long was I to remain here, waiting? How long until my skin shriveled up in this water or dried up against the stucco? What the hell were we thinking, settling on the desert? We're not desert people. We're *Field and Stream* people, minus the bows, arrows and fishing poles. We're water-

signs. Or at least I am. He's a Gemini, meaning he can't make up his mind either way anyhow so at least half the time he's a water sign, the way I see it. It just seemed like such a departure. We were all about departures that night, watching commercial jetliners sail west then eastbound through breezeless skies. No off-shore winds that night, not even a breeze. Just smooth skyline meeting the ocean halfway, as still and even as a perfectly hung frame. We were so used to it, we were willing to let it go completely.

The desert, he'd said, the whites of his eyes gleaming like the bright teeth of a wicked Cheshire, in the backseat of the car where we'd found ourselves tangled and philosophical. As if the desert was something to aspire to. His skin was warm and his bones felt perfect, so perfect I wanted to touch each and every one of them, and tried. I never lost count, just stopped counting. He said it was up to me in the end, but that the desert had a definite appeal. "*I can't put a finger on it,*" he said. "*I just think...*"

The absurdity of the one o'clock chime – here, in the middle of nowhere, in the midst of something, a sparrow chirps the late hour to an audience of one: a naked girl floating on her back in an abandoned pool in a silenced, midnight housing community where she doesn't belong and is only slightly (very, very slightly) beginning to wish she did.

No. I didn't want to belong here. I never wanted that. No one truly *belongs* in the desert. Sure, people may wander through and get caught up somehow in the spectrum, but only momentarily. It doesn't seem right to be born and to die here—one or the other, maybe. But this is a place to run to (from something) or quickly away from (if from here). Maybe those in the latter category die trying, but it can't possibly be out of desire

that they remain here for life. So tangled was I in his breath that night. I held a wet hand out, beneath nose and mouth and breathed into it, testing its warmth.

My skin began to turn. Even in warm water, beneath warm air, you grow cold. I climbed out at the ladder, and the heat of the still-warm earth felt good beneath bare feet. To cover up now would be arbitrary. My clothes were gone, anyhow. Disappeared. The soft mounds of worn fabric set beside the pool house, beneath the chirping clock, had disappeared. Perhaps I'd been watched, my ears just beneath the surface, staring upward, focused on the sound of hair, the quiet hum of the pool light. I imagined eyes in every bush and behind every cactus as I stepped out and made my way back the way I'd come.

The feel of cloth car seats against naked flesh. I knew this feeling and took immediate comfort, refusing to suddenly change the game plan and rifle through bags, through items packed at moment's notice with no thought to climate. I drove and turned and stalled and wiggled and imagined. I played several hands of blackjack in my head, until running out of money. I pulled over as I neared the Strip, its explosion of winks and glitter, and entered a dark and empty mall parking lot. From the trunk came the duffels, the make-shift grocery bag and laundry basket luggage. The black asphalt was warm beneath my bare feet. Systematically, I removed all items from the bags and baskets, lined them up single file like a flea market display balanced carefully along the yellow lines delineating so many separated parking spaces. A car honked from the street, slowed down to watch me as I bent over what looked like a domino display of clothing and knick-knacks, waiting for someone to knock down the first piece. It was a dazzling display.

A group of men whistled and yelled through opened car windows.

People like naked people.

How funny would it be if I were to offer them some flesh, and, when (assuming) they agreed, I sliced some right off the bone and handed it over? Take that! What would they do? I rubbed a warm thigh with a cold hand and then climbed back into the car. The upright dominos disappeared in my rear view mirror as I drove over the freeway to where the city exploded into tracer lights and advertisements offering the best shows. The best dancers. The best slots. The best 99 cent shrimp cocktail. Everything the best. Everything bright. Boys handing out flyers for the women that make them their money. Women on flyers looking lost-eyed and needy. *Ready*. Wanting.

The left turn signal light at the intersection of Tropicana and Vegas Boulevard took too long in arriving, so I got out and left the car idling. Planes were coming in and taking off in all directions. No one ever stays very long. In retrospect, I'm not sure what I was thinking. Leaving yourself that open, that raw, can be very dangerous. But as I walked up the Boulevard, I knew something I hadn't before. Without pockets, I had no need for a cell phone, nowhere to put it. For once, I was unreachable. And yet, I was completely accessible. It was all right there – everything and nothing. All you had to do was look. And they did. Each and every one of them. Some craning their necks for better understanding. Others shielding the eyes of young ones. Only, none of them mattered. Not a one. I wasn't really there. He could be anywhere. It didn't matter.

YOUNGER STILL

Jackie pulls her date toward the bar by his tie. “Another,” she says to the bartender, as she scans the dim interior of yet another tragically hip, Hollywood-adjacent nightclub. She had spotted Charlene the moment she and her date stepped through the VIP line. She should have known better. It was nothing more than numb serendipity that had kept them from running into each other before now, but the wounds are still fresh. Her former best friend doesn’t notice her, though, high as she is, hoisting pastel cocktails among the indie-rock glitterati. Which is just as well. Jackie swings her new, over-filled beverage around like a linebacker, nearly sideswiping the guy behind her.

“That’s Michael Stipe!” Jackie’s rent-a-date whispers, a conveniently hip, yet thoroughly gay mistake made by the escort firm Jackie uses with the regularity of her Prozac and Grey Goose regimen. She is thankfully chest-deep into her third martini – the perfect steadying amount. One fewer (or two more) and Jackie’s mood shifts to (or from) something far more volatile. Jackie doesn’t want to make headlines this time. No, she prefers to keep her cool – her long-practiced *stiff-upper-lip* approach. “Damn! Your friend has connections.”

“*Former* friend,” Jackie says. She immediately regrets having made small talk during the drive over. “Hey, are you from New York?”

“Idaho, originally,” the stud says, steadily eyeing the alt-rock icon Jackie had nearly slugged with her martini glass, his tongue running over his lips like a father

lingering too long at his daughter's slumber party. He hums the eponymous chorus from *Losing my Religion*.

Jackie quickly loses sight of both her date and her nemesis in a flurry of small talk with Hollywood hit-listers, all horny for the *Next Big Thing*. Jackie's clients are always well served, but the process wears her out these days. She just doesn't have the energy she once did. An hour after arriving, Jackie manages to sidle her way out to the valet without so much as an exchange of words between her and her former friend, though she imagines Charlene must have noticed her there, working the crowd solo, while her date slowly stalked his Stipe. Once behind the wheel, she's forgotten how to use her loosened limbs, shuddery now as she tenderly angles a narrow stiletto then pounds the accelerator. *This is the future*, she thinks, lighting a cigarette from the lit ember of the one she just smoked.

She arrives home earlier than she'd planned, and scrubs her porcelain-pale face until it cracks at the edges like chipped dinnerware.

It's hot as a sweatshop the next day, a lingering mid-December heat wave, as Jackie drives up Wilshire to Korea Town, squinting for street signs in the tangled mess of neon-bright ideograms and high-rise brick apartment buildings. Something about L.A.'s gritty downtown underbelly, so unlike the plastic façade of the rest of the city, seems reminiscent to her of something *far more East Coast*. Jackie likes to imagine herself more of a New York type. On sunlit winter afternoons such as these, she pictures herself bundled up beneath a gray, Manhattan sky, skillfully traversing the city's littered sidewalks on sleek, wineglass heels.

She pulls up to the hotel, hands her keys to the valet, and rushes to catch the revolving doors. Her hook-up is all Bogart beneath the pale sodium glow of a faux Tiffany lamp, sipping coffee from a thin-rimmed, flower-patterned mug, as if waiting for the Queen.

“What did you get?” Jackie says, collapsing into the red velvet chair. The weight of her body causes an audible sigh from the old cushion, an eruptive burp of dust and implied challenge.

The young man pulls out a milky-orange bottle with a label slightly peeled at the edges, setting it on the table in front of him. It reminds her of the novelty goldfish-shaped fortunes bought for a quarter at carnivals and used to reveal your future by the way it curls up in your palm. If the tail and head curled together, or just the tail, or just the head – each of these movements meant something different, though she can’t remember what exactly. She vaguely recalls that the worst-case scenario was if it just laid there, flat against her palm.

“Slow week,” the man says.

“I can see that.” She eyes the nearly empty bottle, her drawn eyebrow lifting a bit, revealing a deep-set spider web of creases, into which her pale foundation has sunk. Her baby blues are a deep red. Her feet hurt. She slips out from within her scuffed heels and sighs. She never used to be this tired. She never used to imagine her life would be this way. She imagines herself a boxer. She imagines herself in a box. A cardboard box. On the street outside. Or on the lawn outside her old college apartment, years ago, a slick wet stretch of yellow plastic stretched across the grassy slope as a make-shift water slide while she sipped a gin and tonic from a lawn chair she hadn’t risen from in four hours.

Because, she remembers, I couldn't trust my feet.

The man looks at her as if to say: *'I am only one man.'*

She looks at him as if to say: *'I once wrote a poem that was published in a literary journal.'*

"I have a friend on the West side who deals in anti-aging," the man sighs; a used car sales man making one final offer. *'That's all my boss will let me do, ma'am.'*

"I have a friend in INS," Jackie threatens. Desperation clinging now, like the sudden and fierce last-ditch plea to the priest on that long walk to the chair – *'I'll tell God.'*

The young man shakes his head. He taps the pill container against the tabletop. *Cha-cha-cha. Cha-cha.cha.*

"I'm legal, Jackie," he says. "My parents were born in Alhambra. Besides, the INS is part of Homeland Security now. You really should read the papers more often. I mean, besides the trades."

The previous night's events come rushing back to her. The sparkly sheen of her former best friend, whom she hadn't seen for over a year. The friendship had ended badly. She didn't want to think about it. She was still losing business because of it. She needed something to wash away the bitter aftertaste of having to watch as everything and everyone around her changed.

"Dentists in Tijuana do root canals and bridge work for half the price you're charging for this," Jackie says, grabbing for the bottle and holding it up to the light.

"Are you looking at cosmetic dentistry? I know a guy in Torrance."

Her shark-teeth are sharp as razors from years of steady grinding.

“Ever been to New York, Juan?” says Jackie.

“It’s José,” the young man corrects her. “Are you taking this or not?”

He steals back the half empty bottle of prescription meds and starts in on a fast-paced maraca rhythm she feels in her every nerve. She grabs it and begins chewing on the cap with anxious, razor sharp teeth.

“That’s not going to help,” the young man says, reaching an arm to gently stroke Jackie’s pale wrist. “I do have another suggestion, though...”

She looks up with the eyes of a wild horse.

* * *

She wakes to the glare of mid-morning sunlight. Her head pounds. Slipping into her silk chemise robe makes her elbows ache, her wrists and tailbone crying out for sympathy. Still half-snared in sleep, she dials her office and checks the time-stamp on the last message, gauging how apologetic she would have to be to her clients for her inexplicable absence.

“That bastard,” she thinks, scrubbing a thick loofah against pink skin, then pausing to notice how her breasts seem to stand up higher than usual against the spray of water in her piercing hot shower. She notices them again, more closely now, as she climbs into her bra, the sudden, new pain stemming from her ribcage a mystery quickly abandoned and replaced by the surprise she feels at the new fit of her clothing. The firm nature of her calves as she slides, slips, zips Italian leather across firm oblong shapes belonging to another self. She has little time to explore much further, despite this initial intrigue. A Beethoven symphony erupts from her Kate Spade clutch and she is short of

breath in her walk to the kitchen. The purse is beside the orange med bottle which is beside the Sparklett's machine which is where the night had begun and promptly ended – two days later. She shakes the bottle while answering her beckoning cell phone.

“So, what do you think?” José's accent is unmistakable.

“Not sure what to think at this point,” she says.

“It's gotten rave reviews on the circuit,” José says, like an auctioneer looking for higher bids.

“I just missed two days of work,” she says. “I should charge you my hourly rate.”

“It's the immediacy you're paying for. Give it a day or two,” he says. “And you won't be complaining.”

She runs a blood red nail along the rim of the bottle, as if tracing a lover's navel.

* * *

Seventeen messages await her immediate response. E-mail alerts blink like thieves. Jackie's office is a stark advertisement in white – unbroken by the framed photos and knick-knacks her colleagues collect like rows of shark teeth – never discarding the old before the new set grows in. Where there is not wall there is window; where not window, a single doorway. An elongated mirror above her desk reflects the austere interior back towards the swivel chair used only by her clients – a chair spent several meticulous hours in choosing. Her clients are treated to an experience almost otherworldly in its extravagant simplicity. Her quiet assistant had been trained in the art of service. A cup of tea delivered on a sleek glass tray as if from a geisha. A spritz of expensive lavender mist when returning a woman's coat. A blouse designed just low-

necked enough to be equal parts sexy and modest. Mindy was a good find, after a long line of failed attempts. It was key to find an assistant lacking ambition beyond the status quo of a given title; someone content in a position of servitude. Someone willing to create an ambiance of willingness to please, accompanied by an authentic happiness in doing so. This was not easy to find in a city of dragons.

“You’ve missed a number of appointments,” Mindy says, as Jackie hides behind her dark, oversized sunglasses.

“I can’t deal with that right now,” Jackie says. Behind her desk, seated in her far less comfortable chair, Jackie slips her hand down her leg, dipping between leather and flesh, marveling at the sudden new inch of space in between, gently massaging her calves with machine precision, wondering if it would be too much to ask her assistant for a full-body massage.

“You look tired,” Mindy says. “Should I call and tell them you’ve been sick?”

“Shhhh,” Jackie says, motioning with a French-tipped nail for her assistant to please step out of the room. Everything aches. She’d forgotten to shave, the bristly bits of dark follicle spearing and sharp beneath her kneading fingers. Mindy buzzes in her first client as Jackie props herself up, shifting her demeanor like a practiced thespian.

“Looking good, Jack-ay!” her client says, letting loose a purse-lipped whistle. “New hairdo?” He is a commercial actor, always cast as the football-watching, nacho-eating, mess-making best friend. The wisecracking fall-guy husband on the riding lawnmower who in real life would lose a limb to the rotating blades. The guy who would, inevitably, get left holding the camera if he went into porn, which, Jackie would be quick to point out, is where the real money is.

“No,” Jackie says, like a knee-jerk reaction to an over-curious parent. “Just a well needed sleep-binge.”

“So, what do you have lined up for your favorite client?” he says, quickly distracted as he wheels the chair back and forth with one foot, running his hands lasciviously over the tan leather, the mahogany handles.

A glance at her watch, carefully so as to not seem distracted, surprises Jackie. She slides a turquoise ring around the base of her index finger, marveling at its silk swivel over lesser flesh, the hit against her knuckle less jarring now. The skin shows less lines and fewer indents. Smooth like sweet cream butter.

“You know, Russ, I can really see you making the move into theatrical auditions,” she says. Her smile grows like an upturned faucet handle – lifting, pouring forth.

His face lights up. He releases the wooden handles of the chair and leans forward, elbows on thighs, hands together like a faithful apostle, wistful. Yearning.

“Yeah, I mean it,” she says, her spine straightening with a sharp, silent yelp of vertebrae as her argument strengthens. “I think we can get you on a series. It may start as a bit-part, you know how that goes, but one spot leads to another, you make them love you, find your own groove, make yourself indispensable. That’s the key. They need to need you. Then we nail ‘em to the wall. Contract here, sign there, the whole sha-bang.”

“I’ve never heard you talk like this before,” he says, head cocked, smooth-lined face mildly suspicious. Mindy walks in with tea.

“Mint or chamomile?”

She conducts an almost imperceptible curtsy as he grabs blindly for sugar cubes, never disrupting complete eye-contact with his suddenly savvy agent. He bites into them, one, two, three sugar cubes at once. Chewing on the sugar with white, white teeth.

* * *

So this is how it feels to anti-age, Jackie thinks to herself, late again to the dentist. Like a dull aching of repetitive song lyrics being force-fed through the constantly grinding teeth of a shredder.

She imagines calling upon an imaginary friend she once gave birth to on the way to church as a child. *Back when friendship meant something*, she thinks. She wonders why she hadn't been back since. Even the pews were a golden color she attributed, even then, to faith. God is always a yellow light. God's what makes you warm when your blood's gone cold. But now her molars ache along with her incisors and everything was going to hell in a hand-basket. Ham-basket? That had always been the joke with her and her ex-boyfriend. The idea of a vegetarian carrying around a ham-basket, as if, say, to a picnic. Only it's Hell. He always thought that was such a funny joke. He used to look at Jackie as if she might turn into a bird at any moment and drift right out from beneath his leathered palms.

But he was the one who had long ago disappeared, like the lines that had once crossed her brow, and that are now slowly melting away. She remembers, clearly, the question that hung between them while she brushed, flossed, rinsed and then sat across from him on the floor by the bed, following their final charade at pretending it all away. He'd nuzzled beside her and asked: *'Are you sure you won't come with me?'*

So this is how it feels to anti-age, the mantra captured in her head like a sprite June bug now, searching inside itself for a catchy jingle.

It had been one of those rare late-summer mornings when L.A. begrudgingly gave itself over to chilly temperatures. Jackie drove him to the airport and didn't leave the gate until she forced herself to watch his plane's complete ascent, westbound at first, stretching straight over the Pacific before doubling back to head for the far opposite coast.

She was sure. She was. *Sure*. Her career had become everything, far bigger than romance or friendship. She was the dragon lady, the cat woman, the sad sack. She drew in her breath and tightened her jaw, like then, like ever since then, steadily sliding her teeth as close together as possible. She was still late for the dentist. Always late for the damn dentist.

* * *

José sits calmly beneath the same warm glow of light when she meets him the following week. She has a sudden and immediate urge to ask him out to a Governor's ball. Or an Oscar gala. A real black-tie affair with tails and gowns. Or perhaps a fetish party in the swankiest parts of West Hollywood, clad in leather and brandishing provocative equipment, spanking each other with paddles. Anywhere, really. This is the high just before the low. She recognizes this, but gives in just the same.

José smiles as she approaches the table, her whistle-thin heels tapping on tile like glass, like china. She is as fragile as an over-watched masterpiece beneath the arching glow of dim lamplight. She runs fingernails up the lamp's delicate spine to find its off switch.

“I’m experiencing a harsh reaction to light,” she says, running a coral-traced fingernail over her now seamless brow. “Is this normal?”

“It wouldn’t work if it didn’t hurt,” he says. “I hear you’ve booked several promising new clients this week.”

“I went to a party last night at the Renaissance,” she says, her eyes partially closed as she speaks. “You know Charlene.”

“Your former best friend,” he says, holding an imaginary mag-light against their new-found intimacy. They’ve been talking. This *thing* they shared – in hotel lobbies and midnight phone prayers. *Get me more*. There is no need to broadcast. *Shhh, let it be implied*, she thinks. Only, truth was, everyone knew about Charlene and Jackie. How the one had worked for the other, how the one had cheated and stolen and thieved. Both women watched from the check stands of the city’s best grocers how the trades spilled their dirty secrets to anyone who actually cared—which, in Los Angeles, is exactly what they do. But not in a caring way. No. They cared because deals like those made between these two women were big enough to make headlines and big enough to make an impact. Two women duking it out in this business—and not on a casting couch! The fact that they’d been such bosom college buddies only made it that much tastier.

“Yes, my *former* best friend,” Jackie says. She’d bitched to José about Charlene enough times to know that it often helped him boost the dosages a bit. She’s perfectly fine with accepting the sympathy slip-up—there is no room left for pride.

“She booked a new pop band out of Manchester and kept hoisting champagne cocktails at the airline pilots who were at the hotel as part of some swanky convention, as if she didn’t have a care in the world about all the industry heavy-hitters flitting about at

her sleeves.” She bends her index and middle fingers to form quotations around the word “industry.”

“Who the hell drinks champagne cocktails any more?” José says.

“I don’t know, but whatever they were they were inappropriate. *She*,” she says, baring her crisp white teeth, “was inappropriate.”

She gently rubs the back of her hand against her cheeks, forehead, as if checking for fever. Only her face implies something more erotic as the fingertips carve out cheekbone hollows. There is a silence like prison glass between them. Fleeting.

“You attend a lot of parties,” he says, slipping the bottle on the table like from a magician’s barrel-nosed sleeves. Jackie’s cell phone rings—it’s one of her clients. She clicks off the sound and scrunches her line-less forehead.

“She looked like a starlet,” she says, rubbing her temples with smoothly circling fingertips. Eyes closed. “Swaggered around in a red leather print mewing and pawing at the uniformed men surrounding her like something out of a music video. She didn’t look herself. *She wasn’t herself.*”

“I can get you something for the pain,” he says.

“Are you meeting with her, too?” she says, her eyes suddenly wide and anxious.

He looks to her with equal parts elusive toddler grin and patronizing fatherly admonishment. As if to say: *‘Someday you are going to find someone willing to trust and accept you on your own terms – and you will ruin it with a single brushstroke.’*

“You have to tell me,” she says. “Are you?”

* * *

“You know, you really don’t need to do this anymore,” her assistant, Mindy, says, her finger lingering over speed dial #4 on the handset, while Jackie lies back in her special client chair, her eyes closed behind a lavender-scented aromatherapy glove.

What had she meant by that? Had she really *needed* to in the past? Go that *route*? What’s with the barrage of backwards compliments lately? It was convenience that inspired her purposefully non-committal liaisons. If acceptable before, then where was she now, and why was purchasing an escort suddenly beneath her? Was it really that noticeable – this change? What had gone wrong in her childhood to explain this all away? Jackie isn’t about to take this kind of judgmental bullshit from her assistant.

“You’re fired, Mindy,” she says, without opening her eyes. But her assistant has already left the room.

She leans her head back as far as it can tilt before succumbing to sudden, blinding pain, the curved leather arch a perfect contour for her rapidly slimming neckline. (Who knew you could lose inches there?) Another party at nine. Always another party, another opportunity for false flattery. It had been nice, at first. The compliments and surprised reactions. How quickly it turned ugly again – understanding, finally, how little it really mattered. She would go, she always did. And she would see Charlene, she always did. And Charlene would look younger than she had at the last party. Always a shade or two younger than the time before.

* * *

Her agency escort arrives promptly at 8:30.

“Are you from New York?” she asks him, as they enter the Avalon Hotel through the valet entrance off Olympic.

“Jersey,” her latest dial-a-date replies, a half-beat late in his response, eyeing her ample, upright cleavage – daringly displayed tonight in a sleek, plunging neckline. His arm wraps like a loose ribbon across her waist.

“Mom’s from the Midwest originally. Dad came over from Sicily, believe it or not. Full-blooded Italian stallion, making me a half-breed anyhow,” he says. “Half stallion’s better than none at all, right?”

He nudges her roughly, like a football pal or naughty Python reference. *Great, a chatty one*, she thinks. *Immediate partial refund*.

Jackie scopes out the scene like an unarmed sniper, aware of what she imagines to be a thousand pairs of eyes stalling to size her up, plead for her attention, before returning to their own dates and conversations. She spots Charlene by the empty turntable, surrounded by what could only be members of the new UK band she’s representing, or their blokey-looking hangers-on, a splattering of black concert t’s torn at the sleeves.

“Look at you!” Charlene hollers to Jackie from across the bar, one hand held high and split-leveled at the wrist like a pageant queen.

It is a sequence stolen straight from a Discovery Channel special, as Charlene makes the sudden (*predatory*) first move after weeks of party-style politeness in which the two women had gracefully (*silently*) danced around the issues separating them. Now there is movement. It is something positively primordial.

Charlene begins to make her way across the crowded, collectively surging and breathing swarm of black-clad figures swiveling like demons in the dim-lit foyer of the

trendy bar, nimbly extending her electric blue martini glass over the heads of on-lookers. Her jeans are chiseled denim. Limbs to space and back. Lips quivering. She shimmies beside and nimbly around Jackie's Jersey date to land akimbo on her own wobbly leather boots.

This is it, Jackie thinks to herself, imagining a vastly different version of her former friend, like so many late nights spent tormented by the exact image: Charlene beneath the tangled sheets, her lover (*their* lover) winding his arms beneath her again, lifting her, in the exact same way he had once lifted Jackie – with equal parts confidence and alarm. *It's time to find out the truth.*

As if sensing Jackie's impending question, Charlene stands before her defiantly, a shocking sci-fi image in red-leather halter and flaming curvature, a plastic-teethed Cheshire grin growing now into even larger, impossibly toothy smiles. *New-and-Improved Charlene. News at 11 Charlene. 'Who-knew-I'd-get-caught-up-in-the-scene'* Charlene.

Jackie imagines her now in the old baggy overalls and thick wool sweaters she used to always wear, sprawled across the lawn of the apartment the two women had shared straight out of college, so many years ago. Two girls lying in the grass, clutching chip-rimmed wine glasses while they dreamed out loud about the future. Planes in overlapping flight patterns waltzing across the sky above their home.

A bass-line surge coils through the dark nightclub.

Jackie searches Charlene's glowing face for clues, seeking pain behind the blue rhythm of her dancing eyes. As if to say: *'You first. Admit it.'*

“You look fantastic, really. Unbelievable,” Charlene says, almost breathless, reaching out and touching her former best friend, her hands exploring Jackie’s body unapologetically, rubbing thumbs over ribs, over hips, over the bridge of her nose, as Jackie stands rigid, unable to feel.

“Unbelievable,” Charlene says again. She volleys Jackie’s inquisitive stare, as if to say: *‘No, you first.’*

Dial-a-date Jersey thug grins nearly out of his snug leather pants.

The two women eye one another relentlessly, their heads slightly lowered with the focused concentration of wolves eyeing a stray neighborhood Chihuahua. Both looking for secrets. Both hoping the other hurts as badly as she does.

“Is it a new haircut?” Charlene asks, finally able to gain control of her hands, her fingers. She reaches up to stroke a thick strand of Jackie’s supple red hair, all traces of gray now diminished without use of a single Clairol ink-drop. Like magic.

Both women far younger now than when they first met. Younger still, than perhaps each had ever been. The one had betrayed the other. Or the other way around. The one had become something the other detested; and vice versa and the opposite and *what-a-shame* and *such-is-life* and *so-be-it*. A broken heel on a fancy Italian leather boot. Keep moving, people, there’s nothing here to see.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Charlene says. “I mean, you really do look great.”

As if this shared, implied beauty secret was enough to repair and erase the past.

“Really, it’s such a shame...” Jackie begins. She reaches for Charlene’s hand – its attached fingers still peddling restlessly through Jackie’s hair as if battery-operated – and pushes the hand away, replacing it back at Charlene’s side.

This physical contact with her former confidante, the swift brush and touch of fingertips, leaves Jackie gaping at Charlene with suddenly pleading eyes and aching lashes, as if to say: *'Let's leave tomorrow. Let's up and go and leave this whole thing behind us. Contract here, sign there and the whole sha-bang! We can stop talking like this altogether.'*

But the images are coming quicker now, leaving Jackie speechless: *A sleek Manhattan skyline, crooked hall entryways, wind-whipped drapes.*

"...that I can't stay and celebrate with you," Jackie says. "Anthony and I have a previous engagement to attend."

She'd told him to go. It was her fault as much as anybody's.

"It's Vinnie," the Stallion corrects her. He still wants in on this action.

There's still a chance to repair this. The words cling to Jackie's tongue, still unwilling to let go: *'What's your secret? Are you getting what I'm getting? You must be, right? Admit to this one thing, and I'll forgive everything that's come before. I need to know that you are hurting – I mean, real physical pain. That this is all a façade. The whole goddamn thing. We can't get any younger, can we?'*

But Charlene's hands remain firmly rooted at her sides, just as Jackie had placed them moments earlier. Her voluminous lips perpetually parted, but too slightly to allow for words. Jackie's date reaches for a handful of soft, supple red leather, wanting in on the touchy-feely game he'd misinterpreted earlier. Charlene slaps him away. Her eyes go red for an instant, horror flick style. Jackie looks straight through them both, and makes a move toward the warm, glowing red exit sign required by law to disturb the club's otherwise chilly-cool ambiance.

THIS ONE THING

He asks me what's wrong.

"The cat is finally eating on his own," I say.

He looks at me from where he lays, still naked in my bed.

"That's a good thing," I say, squeezing his big toe. "Respond accordingly."

"I'm happy you're happy," he says.

He pinches the back of my thigh as I get up from the bed and pull on a pair of shorts recently abandoned atop a pile on the floor, his shorts, still damp. I walk to the kitchen for a cup of water. Always thirsty. The cat watches me from her perch on the top of the couch. If she weren't so sick, I'd think she was judging me.

"Hungry?" I ask her, still excited by her recent feeding. A feeding on her own. Look there: a sink full of half-filled syringes still dripping tepid baby food solutions—turkey and gravy, chicken and rice. And my baby, she ate real cat food, all by herself, the smell of reconstituted salmon still lingering in the kitchen. I applaud her efforts, gently messaging the scruff of moist fur at her collarbone. She has stopped cleaning herself. Her thick white fur is clumped and greasy. The cat only stares back – but at least it is through eyes that are finally, fully open. Not stuck together by slippery goo and sticky mucus. Open, awake, alive. She has lost three pounds in four days.

“Can you get me some water while you’re up?” he calls from the bedroom, where he lays still naked in my bed. No ‘honey’ or ‘baby’ attached. No ‘sweetheart.’ Just a simple request for water. I could be a waitress or candy-striper. I could be a lap-dance or a safety instructor on a transcontinental flight. I can see his bare feet through the open bedroom door, one foot scratching the toes of the other. Content. Given a different set of circumstances, I could stare at those feet forever.

I grab a large glass and fill it enough for the both of us.

“Want some water?” I ask the cat. Food was one major victory. To see her lap up some water on her quick pink tongue would catapult my newly enhanced mood over the top. I am guilty for rolling around in bed while she wheezed and coughed in the next room. Hungry. Sick. I fill her dish with water and carry it to her, set it in front of her paws where she lays. She sniffs but doesn’t drink. Non-committal. He is half-asleep when I re-enter the bedroom.

“You’re wearing my shorts,” he says.

“Want them back?”

“I prefer them on you.”

He rolls over and swipes a long, strong arm across the distance between us, grabbing behind a knee and pulling me back into bed. A wind whips and curls through the slim opening in the window, lifting curtains and rustling shades. I pull away to sit up and sip from the cup, offer it to him. He finishes what is left and hands the cup back to me so I can return it to the nightstand.

“I’d prefer them even more off of you,” he says, pulling at the waistline of the boxers, like some weak, college freshman come-on that he is used to using, even now. It still works for him, and something about that embarrasses me.

“Look at the kitty,” I say. Her name is Good Luck, like the white ceramic cats in Japanese restaurants, always raising their little paws toward fortune. She often goes by Gluck. And a host of other nicknames. She’s usually very spry and active for her age, which, at six, isn’t that old, even in cat years. She should be experiencing mid-life kitty crises, at most, not battling near-death illness. I should have known something was wrong before it got so bad. I should have seen the signs.

“You took good care of her,” he says, rolling a finger back and forth across my stomach. “You’re a natural care-giver.”

“She’s not out of the woods yet,” I say, staring through the bedroom door into the other room, catching the glare off the picture frames hanging in the hallway, attempting to make out the faces of friends and family he has yet to meet. If it even goes that far. As if he knows my “nature.” As if he could begin to know the real me, given these bizarre circumstances under which we met. He knows the parts of me that I succumb to by virtue of necessity: namely, a sick cat. Disaster. He hung around to help. He didn’t have to. That says something.

He rolls onto his back, draws his hands away from my body, and places them behind his neck, like a prisoner.

“I’m glad you were here to help,” I say.

“I didn’t really do anything,” he says.

I run a finger through the small patch of hair in the concave valley at the middle of his chest. There is no way in hell I could have held the cat down the way he did, I want to tell him. I could never, not in a million years, have plunged a needle full of necessary fluids into the soft polyp of flesh beneath her collarbone. I'm terrified of needles, I told him as he'd sunk the plunger into the syringe and Good Luck seemed to go limp in my arms, the pouch of flesh between thick bones filling up into a convex bubble on her back. The doctor had said that would happen, and that the liquid would eventually disperse more evenly throughout her body. I bit my lip through the rest of his exam, wondering how on earth I would pull off such feats. He doesn't know the slightest thing about me. This is not in my nature, I want to tell him. I don't have a clue when it comes to this kind of thing.

"It helped," I say. "You really helped."

I want him to know, without my saying so, that even at this very instance, I understand his limitations as a virtual stranger in my home, and that I am not busily inwardly misinterpreting his actions or blowing the simplicity of this moment out of proportion, like so many girls are apt to do. I want to reassure him, this kind of thing is fine with me, though entirely unprecedented. A casual fling, I can do that. We both can, right?

His soft, sudden snore carries with it a gentle wheeze. I am more conscious now of sickness; infirmity. I have spent the last week questioning my own strength. I have knelt on the cold tile floor, used soiled blankets and freshly warmed towels to cradle and bind the wild limbs and sharp claws of my sick pet, while forcing a plastic syringe down

her sore throat, coaxing her with soft, gentle words: *This is good for you. Trust me. I'm doing this for you, not because I want to. Trust me.*

I've beaten myself up each and every time I could no longer press the issue, and laid a three-quarters full syringe back down against the tile floor and allowed the cat to struggle out of my grip, cower behind the blinds at the sliding glass door. Wanting more than anything to escape. To die, maybe. *I will never have kids*, I told my friends who called to check in on her condition. *Not of it's anything like this.*

"You awake?" I ask.

"Yeah," he says, almost too suddenly, as if maybe I'd just imagined his snores moments earlier. He rubs a toe against mine. They are warmer than mine. It seems like they're always warmer, as if they've been here, in my bed, for ages.

"Did you want to talk?" he asks. I think for a moment then shake my head, barely remembering why it was that I'd wanted to use such a fragile time to bring up incongruous topics; to explore what it was, exactly, we were engaging in, having known each other mere moments in the scheme of our much larger lives. I sit up for another sip of water before remembering it is gone. We drank it all.

"No, I'd rather not," I say, knowing how futile words can sometimes become, how pointless. Why define it? Why not let it be? The cat is so sick I'm really afraid she might die, really die as in *dead*, as in, I don't know what in the world I'd do if she were to die, even when she's laying, so weak, against my chest, the way she had the night before, her breath seeming to slow, when I'd first called him to come help. We'd only just met. I didn't know who else to call. Can we just focus on this one thing for now? Just this one thing.

“I’m going to get us some more water,” I say. The nurse. The mother. The one I never really had. The person I never imagined myself capable of being.

The cat watches me re-enter the kitchen, gently slides her weakened body down from the couch and follows me as I fill the glass at the faucet. She nudges her nose and cheeks against my calves.

“You’re looking stronger already,” I tell her, leaning to scratch the top of her head. She arches her back a bit: a good sign. A good luck sign. Soon, she won’t need me. And I won’t need him.

Rather than taking the opened can from the refrigerator, I take a new one from the cabinet. I take no chances on old germs, no sir. Not anymore. The opening of the can elicits a more furtive Pavlovian response than I’d seen from Good Luck in days, and the cat begins to purr. She hasn’t purred in over a week. She is living up to her name. I pop the can open and spoon some food into her dish, adding a splash of hot water to dilute it a little bit and warm it up before placing it at my feet.

She smells it, tentatively, suspiciously at first, then takes a small bit up with her tongue. Soon, the entire dish is gone.

SHE COULD EASILY DISAPPEAR

Mrs. Norman's knee quivers beneath her paper gown. She comes in often, another bad habit she's unwilling to break.

"Everything checks out," I say, clutching the cords of my stethoscope against my chest. "The doctor will be in to see you shortly."

"My leg hasn't stopped shaking," she says. "Do you know what it means?"

"The doctor will have answers," I say. I purposefully focus my gaze past her fluff of gray curls to the wall diagram behind her depicting a healthy uterus. The diagramed uterus to the left of the healthy one is puffy and enlarged. Diseased. I've memorized its every curve during conversations like this one, along with all of our framed posters depicting organs in various stages of ailment or abuse. "I'm just here to prepare you."

"Prepare me for what?" I've frightened her with my word choice. She thinks I have information that I don't really have. I don't like to admit it. In addition to being morbidly obese, Mrs. Norman is a heavy drinker. Her skin reeks of cigarettes and alcohol.

"I just check your vitals," I say. "That's my job."

There has been a nurse shortage for several months, or I'd probably be gone by now. I'm better suited for a lab, the doctors keep reminding me. But doctors tend to diagnose more than they are qualified to do. They make recommendations that sound like

mandates. It's no wonder the patients fear them, that their blood pressure leaps in measurable degrees upon taking a seat on the paper-covered exam tables. It is my job to strip the patients down, and they shed their personalities with their clothing. They become prisoners. They lower their eyelids and raise their guards. They aren't real at all, just flimsy, paper charades of their out-of-office selves.

"The doctor will be in to see you shortly," I say again.

Mrs. Norman's thick chart hardly fits in the holder on the exam room door. Dr. Lee brushes past with a coffee cup attached to his lower lip. Dr. Stafford talked more. He also made more mistakes. We nurses had to check his paperwork carefully, paying meticulous attention to the patient's medication history. But he was fiercely amicable, hard not to like, and had warm gray eyes. He never wore glasses, not even for studying charts or x-rays, and his penmanship was impeccable, as if classically trained both in print and cursive. He left without explanation two weeks ago. He disappeared, and Dr. Lee swooped in. Just like that.

Now it's quiet in the nurse's station, the pre-lunch hours filled only by repetitive lull of the receptionist's voice. I snag a donut from the box the receptionist brought in. Dr. Stafford always brought donuts. His white jacket was often stained with the oils he wiped from his fingertips before washing his hands.

"Why do you pick the sprinkled one if you're going to just pick off all the sprinkles?" Andy the intern asks, as I take a seat at the table to take in a quick TV break. The morning talk shows are still on. I watch them on mute, like a religion. They're better without sound, the closed captioning providing the most absurd poetry.

"I don't take them all off," I say, as I pick the rainbow sprinkles off one by one with my fingernails, lining them up like confetti across the paper plate.

"Why don't you just take a glaze?" he asks.

"They don't have the same taste," I say.

"Someone else might actually want the sprinkled donut. With the sprinkles intact," he says.

"Do you?" I ask. I offer him the box.

"You know I don't eat that shit," he says, waving the box away in disgust. He is lean and muscular, a bicyclist who carries the front wheel of his bike in with him each morning, shoving it into the nurse's closet. "Have you ever seen me eat that shit?"

He reminds me of years spent in science labs, surrounded by people who spend so much of their time hypothesizing then proving beyond the shadow of a doubt their empirically-based conclusions, that they fail to illustrate a more simple civility. Kindness. I relate all too well to his judgment and scowls. There used to be more women in the office. Dr. Stafford was a popular doctor, very well liked. He put me at ease, even in front of patients. He'd step in as I was checking a patient's blood pressure and introduce himself with such fluid ease I swear I could feel their heart rate slow a bit beneath my touch.

"You're in good hands with Sara here," Dr. Stafford said, winking or squeezing my shoulder like we were old pals. "I'll be back with you shortly," he'd say. It never sounded rehearsed.

I finish my donut and check in at the nurse's station. Dr. Lee has left an antidepressant medication for Mrs. Norman. I knew I'd recognized that knee bounce, despite having been off the meds myself for a couple of years.

"They say Virginia Woolf was bipolar, you know," Mrs. Norman says as I re-enter her exam room and begin reading off some of the potential side effects of her new medication, having her carefully repeat back to me the appropriate dosages. We never used to do this, until Dr. Stafford had his incident involving a patient with a drug allergy he failed to detect.

"So was Robert Lowell. The poet? And Princess Leia, too!" she says. "The actress who played her, I mean."

"I need to make sure you understand how these are taken," I say. I hold the printed sheet in front of her, pointing at the little picture labels. "These aren't the same as your other medication."

I'm worried that she's not paying attention, and that she'll chase too many yellow pills with swigs of wine or vodka. I need her to pay attention. She takes the prescription and shoves it in her purse.

"I'm afraid it won't matter," she says, standing to fix her blouse, pulling the slightly damp fabric from her enormous pillow of breasts. This is a moment where she needs. She blindly needs, and I watch her knee tremors as if from the distance of a TV screen. I don't have the power to make promises, or even the courage to offer hope. Her daughter, Naomi, is another regular patient. A recent divorcee in her mid 30s, Naomi is only a couple of years older than me. But she's deathly anorexic and could easily disappear into my own slim shadow. Whenever I reach beneath her paper gown with a

stethoscope, I entertain wicked, horrible images of her autopsy. I can make out muscles and tendons struggling to protect the thin bones barely buried beneath her bluish skin. I wonder if her mom also sees her that way, or if the drinking allows her to see her daughter as the healthy girl she once was.

Once Mrs. Norman leaves, clutching her pills to her chest, the rest of the day is rushed and hectic, with barely a moment to breathe until I run into Andy in the break room at the end of the day. I walk with him to the parking lot.

"I want out of this old age home," he says, bouncing his bicycle wheel against his thigh with each step.

"It's an old neighborhood," I say. "What do you expect?"

"I'm not like you," he says, then stops himself.

"I'm not old," I say.

"Not in years, I guess," he says.

I watch as he carefully fastens his wheel back to the rest of his padlocked bicycle but say nothing. I am tired. The practice had been just as busy back when Dr. Stafford was here, but always efficient. Not rushed like it always feels these days, like that panicky flutter of being trapped in rush hour traffic or an angry mob. It never relaxes. *I* don't relax. The office is like one deeply held breath. Still, we function. Like Mrs. Norman's liver, like her daughter's troubled heart.

At home, a sliver of raspberry cheesecake waits for me in the fridge, a leftover from a birthday lunch for the other nurse. Ribbons of pink raspberry loop and thread through cream and I am reminded of my dead brother. They come like migraines—or the

fierce stabs of gall bladder stones—these random, abstract memories. I was nine when he died, barely old enough to bank clear-headed memories beyond his freak, accidental death. Snow and blood, that's about all I can re-create. There are no further details, though I was later told I'd been the one to run for help. White snow and red blood, like raspberry cheesecake, and then he was gone. It was like he'd never been there at all. The house went permanently cold and perfectly sterile-white. His room, the walls, the fixtures, the memories, all of it washed away in a restless field of silent white. After Jim died, our house became a mausoleum. The cleanest tomb.

I finish the slice, making sure there are equal parts cream and fruit in the last bite, before squishing the sweet graham cracker crust with the fork tines so that the dish is nearly spotless before I scrub it several times and place it in the dishwasher.

It's only at night, alone in bed, that I can best connect with my patients, that I am able to communicate the kind of warmth they desire from me, and I'm able to see them as real people, buried beneath the flesh and bones and aches of their diagnoses. I get excited then, considering all the imagined things I might say to them as they perch there, the paper crinkling beneath them as they shift uneasily on the plastic chair.

I consider the obese Mrs. Norman in her thin gown—the width of her jowls and the way her yellowed skin shakes as she speaks. I might hold her thick hand, stroke kindly the folds of warm flesh and say, “It's not your fault your daughter starves herself,” though we both know that's not exactly the truth. To some degree, it is entirely her fault. She's been this fat for so long, her daughter did everything she could to avoid becoming her mother. In that tense moment, I could whisper the words that might help ease Mrs.

Norman's pulse, slow the dangerously building pressure as her tired heart pumps blood through such vast diameters of flesh.

I could clutch the frail bone-hands of her daughter with two of my own, transferring warmth to her cold, damp spirit. I could say, "There is no proof of anything, genetically speaking," and when that isn't enough, I could tell her, "I wish I were as thin and beautiful as you are."

She is beautiful—the way a skeleton is beautiful for being what it naturally is, the way one might hang from behind a doctor's office door, in perfect angles and geometries of bones. She is a running of veins, a bulge of scrambling organs, a diagram waiting to be dissected like a tricky verb phrase. But there are no errors in her biology, and she refuses truth like food, the black smudge of sickness buried in the parts of her skull that I'm not allowed, yet, to X-ray. But at night, rather than using finger tips to manipulate her rail-thin limbs, jabbing deflated veins with swords, I speak to Naomi Norman as a concerned sister, confiding in her my own distorted fears and insecurities. I fall asleep believing it is enough to entertain these imagined exchanges, that tomorrow I might somehow convert them into something real. Alone in bed, I am all strength and potential, so excited by the sheer possibility of it all, that I work myself up into a climax and sleep soundly through to the alarm.

The next morning, Carl Smatters has shingles in exam room four. Raised red bumps have, since his earlier visit, scabbed over, following a route along a nerve beneath his skin. I'd guessed shingles when he'd first come in, describing the pain shooting up and across his back. I've always wanted to see shingles. I remember thinking they

sounded so exotic before realizing they were more like an extreme outbreak of acne or chicken pox than anything else. Medicine is like that sometimes, an anti-climactic letdown. Still, shingles have a strange appeal for me. My ex-boyfriend used to let me squeeze the occasional pimples that cropped up along his shoulders and back during the summer in giant semi-hard mounds. I wore special glasses and gloves and approached them like science, using Q-tips doused in alcohol. Very scientific. We were like monkeys in bed, grooming. He'd yelp and bite his lip. He had the softest mound of pubic hair I'd ever seen, like soft down I'd run and curl my fingers through, meditatively, as we both fell off to sleep.

Carl Smatters likes to find clever ways to show me his pubic area. Sudden slips and drops of his gown, a pulled groin he insist I examine, a call for to me to enter the exam room before he has finished changing. Generally, it's harmless, like a bad blind date. But Dr. Stafford, when he was here, didn't like it. He said that inappropriate sexual tendencies could be the sign that Carl, nearing sixty, could be suffering an early onset of dementia, and he made a point of either walking in with me or asking an intern to join me. Part of me buckled at the notion of admitting that I was incapable of dealing with the problem myself. But I liked having the doctor at my side.

"I'd walk you to your car in a bad part of town," Dr. Stafford had explained, when I told him it was unnecessary for him to join me on my rounds. "This is no different. Carl Smatters is a bad part of town."

And now my favorite doctor is gone, and the other nurse hands me Smatters' chart first thing as I walk in the office. They know I'm not grossed out by gross things. I find rust rings in sinks to be far more disgusting than scabby skin conditions. And I

despise shirts that fit too small, coupled with jeans worn so low that back flesh bubbles over. It's inappropriate. That's how the other nurse dresses when off-duty. She and Andy give each other backrubs in the break room. He'd tried touching me, early on, and I let him squeeze my shoulders until I couldn't take anymore touching and made him stop. It used to not be this bad. It used to be I could take the touching, but now it just keeps getting worse.

"Morning, nurse," says Carl Smatters as I walk in the door. "I'm a little embarrassed by my condition."

"Let's take your blood pressure," I say, setting the clipboard down by the sink. "Do you need a better fitting gown?"

He keeps adjusting the hem of the paper gown, so that it crawls further up his thigh. I'm curious about what it is he keeps trying to show off, if it's really that impressive. I imagine reaching up and yanking it, pulling at his cock and calling it that, too, rather than by its clinical name.

"How's your cock today, Mr. Smatters?" I would say, reaching right up there for it, grabbing it firmly with my fist.

"Call me Carl," he'd say, moaning.

Instead, I quietly take his blood pressure and measure his heart rate, jotting numbers into his file.

"The doctor will be in to see you shortly," I say.

He scratches at his leg, letting his nails travel higher and higher up his thigh, leaving red lines in his skin that I can't help but notice as I leave the room. It makes me think of cat-scratch fever. I wonder what that looks like. It's bacterial. Tender, swollen

lymph nodes and reddish skin. Sounds worse than it is, really, but I haven't yet seen it in person.

In the break room, Andy and the other nurse are whispering and giggling, their heads close together over yesterday's box of stale donuts.

"Your favorite patient is in room two," says Andy.

"And who is my favorite this week?" I ask. He giggles.

"Skeletor," he says.

The other nurse pulls herself dramatically away from Andy.

"Did you just compare an anorexic woman to a fucking cartoon character?" she says.

"Shhh," he hisses, as Dr. Lee rounds the corner.

"Want a donut?" Andy asks the doctor. "It's from yesterday, so it might be a little stale."

"Kiss ass," the other nurse mutters beneath her breath as she brushes past me, giving me a wink. She hated me before Dr. Stafford was politely asked to either resign or transfer, but now she's always making sad stabs at small talk. But I still hate her. I should have left when the others did. But I wanted to see how things would end up for the regulars, like Mrs. Norman and her daughter, even Carl Smatters and his shingles. I hadn't got the closure necessary to move on.

"Sara, I'd like you to work with Naomi today," Dr. Lee says, pouring himself a cup of cold coffee and heading to the microwave. "I understand you two have a history together?"

The history is that the other nurses refuse to see her. They are afraid of her arms when taking blood pressure, and it's nearly impossible to find veins suitable for inserting needles where there appears to be so little flesh. By default she became my patient, and I've come to love her in my own silent way. But she is reticent when I enter the room. Gaunt and pathetic. She is a bigger joke than Andy is capable of making. She is a bone pile, a graveyard, a measuring stick. She is a praying mantis, an infomercial, a protractor. War and fashion ads; network TV. I see in her every frailty of mankind, every grievous error and catastrophe.

The bones of her arm collide, rub together, grind upon themselves as I gently grasp her forearm and wrap the blood pressure band, cinching it so that it circles twice around her arm. It's bad luck to rub your chopsticks together, my ex-boyfriend once told me, while I played with my utensils as we awaited our meal. The wood splintered and broke. She is made of wood, splintering just beneath the skin. She winces a bit as the balloon of pressure squeezes, then seems to zone out, registering away the pain, as if practicing an extreme Buddhist meditation. Finally, though, she reaches her other arm out and tucks a finger beneath the puffed, tightened band, motioning for me to release the pressure.

"I'm not really here for me," she says. "It's my mom. I'm afraid she's really sick. I didn't know where else to go."

"The doctor will be in shortly," I tell her. I release the pressure of the band. Her numbers are always low. I long to study her lab results. She is my patient. She is mine—these bones and neuroses. I want to crack her. I feel her splintering.

"I don't want to see the doctor," she says. "I need your help."

“I’m not sure I have the answers you need,” I say. “I just check your mother in, the same way I do you.”

“I can’t stand to be around her,” Naomi says, pulling away from me as I attempt to take off the pressure sleeve. “I can’t stand to see what she’s becoming.” Her voice cracks and suddenly she is reaching out for the front of my shirt, like some zombie flick, clenching it with white-blue fingers. Corpse fingers.

“I can’t stand to look at her,” she cries. The bones of her skull rub into my stomach, wipe and grind against the bunnies and teddy bears on my colorful nurse smock. She’s doing it on purpose. She has to know how it makes others feel.

“Do you wonder,” I finally say, in a voice less my own than perhaps belonging to the room, drained now of most of its air, “if she died, could you get better? If she was dead?”

I could, if she died. If mother had died a long time ago, I could have gotten better. I could have broken the cycle. Naomi bolts upright. I look past the healthy and unhealthy uterus diagrams and into her eyes. Her dreadful skull softens and pleads with faint blinks. We blink together into sterile silence, registering the impending horror.

“Jesus, no,” she says, her lips turning downward, grotesque. “How could you say such a thing?”

She gets up from the table with a swiftness I didn’t know she was capable of and rushes for the door, swiveling back with an athlete’s grace to grab her purse. She pauses, as if waiting for me to stop her, as if, even now, I have the authority in the room. She is still in her paper gown.

“I could have you fired for saying that,” she says. “I could have you fired, you know.”

I am dumbfounded. I can feel my expression frozen in place, the way it does at such moments. A faulty auto-pilot mechanism. I am hurt by her accusations and impressed at her sudden strength.

“How can you just stand there like that? What’s wrong with you? How can you call yourself a nurse and say things like that?”

“I just wondered if she were to die, if you could get better,” I said, again, as if maybe she and I could forget our differences and talk together like normal people in similar situations. We could learn from each other. “I wasn’t saying you wanted her dead. I’m just saying, if she did happen to die, maybe...”

I let the idea linger there, untethered, free to roam about the room.

“Of course I don’t want her dead!” she says. “I’d rather die myself!”

“Obviously,” I say. Somehow, this statement calms her, though I find it to be the most offensive thing I’ve said in years.

“What do you mean by that?” she asks. Her eyes are equal parts wild and calm, dusted with an ironic curiosity.

“You know what I mean,” I say. “That’s why you’re here. To get me to say it. You need me to, so I’m saying it.”

“You’re crazy,” she says. “You know that?” She begins rummaging through her purse for her car keys.

“This isn’t really my job,” I tell her. “I’m not a doctor.”

“You’re always so quiet,” she says. “For years I’ve been coming here, and you’re always so damn quiet. Like I’m a stranger to you every time.”

“So why do you come back?”

“Because you don’t notice me.”

“I can’t stop noticing you,” I say, shocked at her miscalculation. “I have nightmares about you.”

She sets her purse back on the chair and we are both quiet. She leans against the counter, nudged up between tonsil depressors and a cotton ball canister.

“You need help,” I tell her. She offers a slight, ponderous nod. “But not from me.”

“I know,” she says. “But you always made it feel like maybe it wasn’t so bad. You didn’t react like other people.”

“I just do my job. I’m sorry if I gave you the wrong impression,” I say. “I would advise you to speak to the doctor about this.”

“What is he going to tell me?”

“He’s going to tell you that you are starving yourself,” I say. “And if you go to other doctors, they’ll probably give you all kinds of reasons for it.”

“I can give you reasons for it, too,” she says.

“Do you still want to see the doctor?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” she says.

“I think you should.”

“Okay,” she says.

I shuffle the papers around in her file, writing down nothing, and leave the room.

In the break room, Andy and the other nurse are arguing in loud whispers. I join them at the table, pulling up a chair and looking straight at them. They stop mid-sentence and watch me, as if I might burst open, explode across the table of old donuts and coffee stains. There is nothing more than that to this break-room. We could be anywhere.

“Do you guys ever feel so helpless—” I want to ask something important but the words won’t come. They aren’t neatly pre-arranged and just dangle like wide-eyed animals standing at the recently opened gate of their own captivity.

“Are you okay?” the nurse asks, in the way that we are trained to ask our patients, but with a kind of warmth you can’t learn in class. You either have it or you don’t. Dr. Lee walks in, waving the patient’s blank file in front of him.

“What is this?” he demands of me. “Why isn’t this filled out?”

“What’s the point?” I ask. “She’s already dead.”

The others turn to stare at me, confused and appalled. I shrug.

“Nurse, I think you need a serious attitude adjustment,” says Dr. Lee.

“She’s upset,” Andy says. “Give her a break.”

I’m surprised at his support, and touched.

“Yes, take a break. A long break,” Dr. Lee says, shoving the chart at the other nurse, who takes it and scowls like a punished schoolgirl. “You shouldn’t be here with that attitude. I’m done with it. We’ll discuss this tomorrow.”

I get up and walk out. It’s early enough that the air is still cool outside and I shiver without my jacket. I picture it hanging on my hook inside, and then imagine it still

there, months later, when someone finally notices it and realizes it is mine and that I never came back.

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