HOW TO KEEP THE GIRLS INSIDE

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Abstract

How to Keep the Girls Inside

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The following novella is a collection of flash fiction-length stories, connected by the voice of a single female narrator and expressed in vignette-style. The novella is divided into three parts, each consecutive section loosely following the narrator’s growth in age and maturity over a timespan of approximately fifteen years. Set in a fictionalized struggling rust-belt city, every aspect of daily life—from the ordinary comings and goings of neighbors and friends, constantly led elsewhere by opportunities outside of the city; to the dramatic shifts in weather patterns, seasons mirroring life cycles; to the influences of renewed religions juxtaposed with old abandoned physical structures from past eras; to the general realities and inherent dangers found in plainly existing as a female within the confines of an elusive rape culture—affects the narrator as she navigates first through childhood, plagued by her young mother’s tragedies, then as she struggles to recognize her own sexual identity in her young adulthood, without the guidance of her mother who is also filtering her own complicated experiences to identify herself.
Acknowledgments

My motivation to explore these particularly feminine themes comes from the heartbreakingly normalized and commonly overlooked struggles of girls and women, who undergo the constant pressure of locating themselves professionally, socially, and sexually within constantly fluctuating cultural expectations. I am grateful to be surrounded by strong women who share honestly their vexing daily experiences.

This project began as incomplete, undeveloped flash fiction pieces during my studies in the noncompetitive desert sanctuary of writing that is the University of Nevada, Las Vegas’ MFA Creative Writing Program. Recognition for the progress and expansion of these stories into a connected, contextualized novella is owed to my brilliant friends, colleagues, and mentors—specifically the participants of the Fiction Workshops, including my incredibly talented professors, Douglas Unger, Maile Chapman, and Richard Wiley; all members of the Good Hair Fiction Club, a group of writers who earnestly encouraged each participant’s work to become its best version; and my girls, Jean Ho and Brittany Bronson, whose unwavering support for and dedication to work that wasn’t their own inspired and reinvigorated me even through the hardships of living abroad.

The novella was reworked and edited in the center of magic realism, the complex metropolitan city of Cartagena de Indias, Bolívar in Colombia, where I spent two years living, working, and serving as a Peace Corps Master International Volunteer. Within the quiet, comfortable home of two remarkably generous women, Damary del Rio and Lilia Montes, I was afforded love, acceptance, support, and muchcoveted privacy to continue work I had started years prior and accomplish this current draft.
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Part One
I.

My mother was beautiful, thin, and dry as toast that sat out too long on a plate. She never wanted attention. When people spoke to her, she looked past them. Mostly, she wanted to be left alone. She often dressed like an unimpressed teenager, even after she would reach her twenties, black T-shirts and shapeless jeans. She read some books. We had a bookshelf. She cooked simply. We had a cookbook, which my grandmother gave to her. When I was very young, my grandmother lived with us in our apartment. In memory, she hovered distantly, like a dusty yellow star, swooping in to handle motherly issues when my own mother couldn’t. Doing the dishes, for one. Putting me to bed. I spent a lot of nonspecific time with my grandmother.

My mother’s best friend, Sonya, died. It was a lot for my mother. Sonya disappeared one night, and my mother hoped for her return for months. During that time, my grandmother made dinner, and my mother sat at our small kitchen table tense, stuck in unresolved thought. Every day, my grandmother would shove a plate of food in front of my mother’s face, point out that she was losing weight. My mother never responded, not even with a shrug.

Sonya would never return. Though the incident was whispered about in every corner, in every kitchen, under women’s breaths, no one would tell me about Sonya’s violation and murder until years later. My grandmother could see that, as a very young girl, I was concerned, noncommittally, as any child pretends to be when mirroring the emotions of the adults around her. She told me that Sonya got hurt because she went out alone one evening, all by herself. My mother also used to come and go from the house as she pleased, often alone. Now, she only left for work and came straight home, and sat and sat.
When distant neighbors found Sonya’s body, her parents held a wake. Vibrant yellow flowers, smelling like rain from another place, laid upon the closed casket centered in a room too big. My mother wore a black formless dress tucked at her waist with a mustard yellow, velvet belt. She never stepped close to the casket. Friends and family of the deceased knew to greet my mother because of how much she loved Sonya, how close the two were. They did so quickly, because her blank canvas face made them uneasy. I remember standing next to my grandmother, holding her hand loosely. She would die soon, too, and her spare room would become empty and remain empty for years, my mother never turning the space into something for herself or for me.

My mother and Sonya had grown up together. I was just a girl when it all happened. My mother was a girl, too.

That same year, on nights when my mother worked at the restaurant late or came home and immediately flopped onto her bed without eating or saying hello, my grandmother sang Christmas carols to me before bed. She did this even in the summer. The season made no difference. She smelled like baby powder and tied her hair in a lazy-hanging bun, gray strands slipping from the sides. I don’t remember any particular carol, I know many made their debuts, but I do remember the top bunk where I slept with my stuffed bunny, and I remember her voice, tired and a little out of tune like a worn violin, singing as if she had to. Not much more about my grandmother resides in my deep memory, except for a sort-of myth she occasionally slipped into the routine, and even though it now seems strange or inappropriate, she claimed it was every girl’s story. When she spoke the myth, her voice took on a gentle tone, and often, she pressed one hand on my belly. Though the carols stayed with me, in a sense, the myth marked me.
“Little Kitty Webb,” my grandmother began, “a native to this city, rode her pale blue bike up and down the quiet streets and bathed in the orange light of the streetlamps night after night. She was young and fit, and on the brink of adult reasoning and sensibilities. Her bicycle was a trusty steed that took her to the edges of the city, but always circled back before dawn.

“Little Kitty Webb never looked left or right, only straight ahead toward the moon and the trees and the hills. Leaves brushed her face. Birds chirped her onward. As fast as she could pedal, as strong as her legs were, she whizzed around darkened corners. She liked the feeling of air along her legs and of muscles, stretched and hard, moving with purpose. She flicked the bell on her handlebar and it rang out, a short song on those cool nights. Onlookers and passersby heard the bell and looked up shocked, ‘A street vendor at this hour?’ But within seconds, Little Kitty Webb raced by, and strangers smiled—the girl couldn’t possibly be selling herself.

“Little Kitty Webb sweat so long and hard one autumn evening. She considered the bitter wind, but pressed onward. This night—to the park, and the bridge over the rolling river, and back to the streets of the city. Her bell rang out!

“‘Little Kitty Webb,’ a man on the corner said to himself, and he watched her disappear behind twisted branches. Her bell rang out again, and a man crossing the street stopped in his tracks. He reached his arms out to touch. ‘The girl couldn’t possibly be selling herself.’

“Little Kitty Webb never came home that night. Some said the city couldn’t contain her. Others said she was nothing more than a spirit. But others knew. Her bell rang out. And others knew. Her wavy brown hair flowed over her shoulders. Her naive eyes, open so wide. And others knew. Her bell rang out.”
I didn’t think much about Little Kitty Webb then. I assume it must have been my grandmother’s way of handling tragedies. Some nights my curiosity got the best of me, and I asked my grandmother what it meant, who she was, where she went. If my mother was listening any given evening, she would enter my room, interrupt us, her eyes strained by the nightlight, her voice slightly desperate.

“Tell her what happens.”

My grandmother never told me, though. She looked at my face, smiled.

“We don’t know what happens,” she said to the room, “Or why.”
II.

I became a nervous child after my grandmother died, when just my mother and I were left to live together. I wasn’t quite old enough to be alone in the house, but my mother left me regularly to go to work. During school months, things were easier for me. She woke me up by opening my bedroom door and stating my name and the time in a low, uncoffeed voice. On days she worked the morning shift, by the time she woke me up, she was already tucking her shirt into her pants and tossing her oversized bag on her shoulder on her way out of the house. I just had to get myself ready. I learned fast how to get dressed, do my hair, brush my teeth. In the early days, she would put the plain Cheerios box on the kitchen table, maybe as some gesture to prove to herself her ability to provide. As time went on, she left the box in the cabinet for me to fetch. Sometimes I did, and other times I just ate breakfast at school where the cafeteria aids would serve me a personal-sized box of the same cereal with a pitying look in their eyes. Their glares in the breakfast cafeteria line was the place where I first learned that my mother wasn’t taking suitable care of me, or at least was doing the bare minimum. I accepted it, though, reminding myself that she was still sad about Sonya and her mother. Like me, she was alone making things work without her mother.

If she took the night shift, I returned home from school to an empty house. I had my own key. Various renters lived in the apartment downstairs at any given time. One middle-aged, bleach-blonde woman named Mary was overly curious about my situation, and constantly stopped me at the door, as if she had been waiting all day for my arrival, to offer me a snack. Even if I wanted the snack, knowing that my mother wouldn’t be home to cook dinner, and I would have to microwave some small tasteless packaged food, I never accepted. I didn’t want
anyone to prove that my mother wasn’t doing enough for me. I didn’t want to add to her sadness. I thought if I waited long enough, she would discover for herself what motherhood should be.

Another tenant, named Jillian, moved into the downstairs apartment after Mary moved away to take care of her sick daughter in Maine. Her move coincided with my mother having a bad case of the flu. Jillian thought it was odd that she had never met my mother, that in the week she had lived in the apartment downstairs, she hadn’t seen or heard her once.

She caught me at the front door and asked, “Can I come upstairs to say hello to your mom?”

“She’s at work,” I informed her, quickly closing the door behind me.

My mother wasn’t at work, but I knew she would hate the unwanted visitor, especially in her state, so I lied, and I kept lying to Jillian for days. Finally, she suspected I was living alone in the house and lying about even having a mother. She was the one who called Social Services to come and intervene.

Jillian poked her nose through the curtains to watch. Standing before officials in her pajamas on the porch with her red nose and pale face, my mother would have been humiliated if she ever were to feel such strong emotions.

After the Social Services visit, news of which spread throughout our neighborhood, when my mother got well, she made one small change to her routine. She began to participate in the mothers’ neighborhood watch group, which met once a week in our next-door-neighbor’s apartment. I daydreamed about what my mother did at these meetings. Did she speak? Did others respect her? Did they ask her questions? I never attended a meeting, myself, so I never knew for sure, but I imagined her sitting up straight in a circle of older women, failing to blend
in. I assumed she joined the group solely to make her presence known, so people would leave her alone. They did.

My mother and I had our system during the school year. When summer vacation began, we had to face each other every day, and my presence seemed to remind my mother of her unpleasant reality, that still she hardly knew how to take care of herself, let alone a daughter. I made sure never to demand too much from her. I would wear clothes until they ripped or rose from my belly from my natural growth. If I had a question or something I needed, I held onto it as long as I possibly could before tapping on her bedroom door to ask for help in my quietest voice. Some questions I never asked, like who or where my father was, and over time, his faceless image disappeared into the sea of blurred unknown facts.

My mother acted most classically motherly on one occasion when she got into a car accident and had to spend two nights in the hospital. My next-door neighbor took me to visit her the first evening. My mother and I were alone in the room. She wore a neck brace and peered at me without turning to me.

“It’s fine. I’m fine,” she told me with a strained voice. “I’ll be home soon.”

My heart thumped when she said this, and I wondered if I felt nervous because she was in the hospital or because she would come home soon.

That same neighbor let me spend the night at her house. I slept on the floor of her son’s room. He was my age. His name was Milk. When I walked into his bedroom, I noticed how cluttered it was with toys I had only ever seen on T.V. commercials. He glared up at me from a handheld video game.
“Do you want to play Legos?”

I liked him because he only asked me that single question and nothing more. We sat on the floor cross-legged. He divided all the pieces fairly, pulling handfuls out of a large bucket and carefully assessing how potentially we both could use special pieces. I built a small home with wheels and had a lot of pieces left over. Milk used all of his pieces and my extra to build a transformer submarine/spaceship/hovercraft. He developed the storyline for our game. His guys and my guys were old friends. My guys would spend years driving to a place to park and watch sunsets, and during those years, his guys would go on adventures in space, to cities under the sea, floating islands. They would meet new people, eat new foods, fight in wars, and then they would come find my guys’ motorhome in the mountains and spend the night telling them details of the last few years. He invited my guys to join his, but they never wanted to. They just wanted to relax in peace. We played like this, my guys parking and his guys finding them to tell them stories, for hours until we went to bed.

Sleeping on Milk’s floor was more comfortable than sleeping in my own bed.

“You can use my blow-up mat and my goose feather-filled sleeping bag. I only use it when I go camping.”

The sleeping bag smelled of something I could only pin as nature, not grass, something different I had never smelled before.

“And here’s a pillow.”

He threw down to me an oversized pillow that was so comfortable I fell asleep as soon as I put my head down. That night, I dreamt of what I thought camping must be like, dirt, trees, sunshine, water, a tent, a family. It almost felt like a memory, but then I woke up.
When my mother returned home from the hospital, we fell back into our routine of not needing each other. She took care of herself, she got well, and I spent more and more time with Milk, at his house and outside, ignoring my home reality and becoming less sympathetic to my mother overall. The older I got, the more sisterly we became. I treated her as a peer who had some flexible authority over me. The more time I spent away from her, the happier I was.
The two ends of my street were very different, one end smelling green and grassy, leading to the gardening neighborhood, the other end smelling more like my mother’s work shirts and leading towards the old red apartment building. Just as the tenants in the downstairs apartment, the people who lived in the apartment building moved in and out so frequently that we never got to know them too well. In fact, we only knew them by the music that swelled from different windows, a clashing of rap and rock at any given time. No one who lived there seemed bothered by the noise.

Milk, who had quickly become my best friend, and I felt inclined to introduce ourselves to a neighbor who lived a little ways down the block, nearer to the music. He had lived on our street long enough for us to assume he was different than the people who came and went, that he would stick around for a while. We became friends. His name was Greg, and he was the only blonde-haired man on the street, so despite what he told us about being from Maine, we knew he came from California. He looked to us older than my mother but younger than Milk’s. He was one of those earthy guys, always with a smile, very pleasant to talk to. He once picked up a pill bug, which rolled around in his hand, and he kissed it. We imagined he gardened, he hiked, he piloted an airplane. And after Milk and I discussed thoroughly who we thought Greg really was, we only saw Greg in a 1940s leather pilot jacket with goggles.

Milk and I loved Greg, and we sat on his front porch with him and talked for hours, he in his porch swing, us on the carpeted steps. He talked about a time when he danced with a strange and beautiful woman with rich black hair in Spain, and about meeting for the first time his
second-cousin, who had great wealth, in Greece. It was hard to imagine places we had never been.

“Where do you guys like to go?” he eventually asked.

From under his swing, a gray cat jumped into his lap. “Do you know this cat? She’s always hanging around.”

“We only know her because she’s been here forever.”

Greg nodded.

“We just play on the street,” I said, interested in his original question.

“We go up and down the street and play whatever we think of,” Milk confirmed with animated arms gesturing.

Greg considered our responses while stroking the cat. “What about your back yards?” he asked.

“Our parents usually park their cars back there.”

“And the dogs on the corner,” Milk added.

“Rottweilers,” I interrupted, proud that I knew the breed.

“They look over the fences from down the block, and they’ll bark all day if they see us back there.”

“Pity,” he said, and he meant it. “You can play in my yard.”

Milk and I tried to wrap our minds around the idea that an adult would offer his space to us. Did he know we would take it over…completely? We took this offer home with us that night to consider, and I made the mistake of telling my mother about how wonderful Greg was and his offer to us. She sat at the kitchen table with an open bag of potato chips in front of her. I reached in to grab one and she looked up at me, her slow eyes sailing to catch mine.
“Does he have a wife?” she questioned, her words gurgled like I was the first person she had spoken to all day.

“I don’t think so.”

“He wants you to play with him in his back yard?”

“He likes Milk and me. We’re his friends.”

“A grown man can’t be friends with children.”

Children. I knew some adults found us annoying, but I usually thought of myself as an equal to my mother. We were Greg’s peers, his friends, and it was our decision to talk to him. It wasn’t as if he had sought us out. Though my mother forbade me in her languid yet stern way to enter his back yard, Milk and I couldn’t resist.

We accepted his invitation on a bright summer afternoon. We adored Greg, his friendliness, his cleanliness, his nails always trimmed to the right length, and we gladly traipsed behind him down his driveway, which stretched a lot farther than we assumed. Greg was up ahead of us, so we couldn’t even see him anymore.

“A little further,” his voice echoed.

Milk and I followed him down the plain cement path, green lining the cracks, until we spotted his leather jacket. He stood at a wooden gate at the end of the driveway.

“It’s just through here,” he said, and he unlocked the gate and pushed it open.

Inside, there was land. Land in the city. An enormous space. Milk and I tossed off our mothers’ leashes, ran out into the yard and got lost in it. We couldn’t see our yards from his because of the tall wooden fences separating his from the others. That meant the Rottweilers on the corner couldn’t see us, either. How this yard existed on the same street we lived remained a mystery to us. Vines and yellow flowers covered the fences. Two weeping willows swept the
ground towards the back. There were slopes with grass that felt clean, so it was a city wilderness. Our wilderness. I picked every different flower I found and made a girly crown for Milk, the purple and yellow making his brown eyes lighter. Milk climbed up trees he spotted, the easy short, twisted ones and the tricky, tall, straight ones.

Greg smiled, his eyebrows friendly and his arms straight down by his side. He stood watching us for a long time. Eventually, he called to us and led us to a smaller fenced-in area with a large empty doghouse that looked like it was from a cartoon, wooden with a red pointed roof.

“Do you have a dog? I asked.”

“Nope. Never have.”

“Why do you have a hidden doghouse then?”

“Just in case.”

“In case you get a dog one day?” Milk chimed in.

“Something like that.” He seemed to lose interest in our questions.

We waited quietly for a moment that went on too long. Robins’ chirping loudened. Then he livened up and said, “I’ll give you the key to this fence. You can use this space as a clubhouse or something.”

Milk didn’t even have a key to his own house. When my mother first gave me the key to our apartment, I dropped it in the snow by accident. I cried because I wasn’t wearing a glove, and the snow was too cold on my hand to reach in and find it, and I knew she’d be annoyed. We accepted Greg’s key like it was a very important instrument entrusted to us.

“I want you two to have some privacy,” he concluded, “A place where nobody can see you.”
We spent weeks building a clubhouse in that smaller, fenced-in area. We raked up leaves and twigs, tied them together with yarn and dental floss, and made a canopy. Greg gave us old paint and watched over the fence as we painted the inside white and red, and we scratched our names on the side of the doghouse, Greg’s, too.

I removed old dusty books from Milk’s father’s library and took them to the clubhouse. There was one by Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, which Milk and I read to each other aloud for hours in the doghouse under flashlights. By the fourth Meditation, we got bored with the questions of speculative truths. We tried to kiss instead, but didn’t like it. Then, we rolled down the hills of the yard until it stained our skin green. I collided with a rock that cut my knee up badly. When I went home and stood before my mother, my leg covered in dirt and blood, she figured out where I had been spending my time all those weeks. She sauntered to the phone and called Milk’s mom, as if she was telling on me, explaining in her laconic, disapproving tone that we were spending all this time with Greg, an adult male who wasn’t married and who wanted to play with children. We begged them not to confront Greg, so instead, Milk’s mom grounded him for two weeks. My mother did the same. I let her because it was the first time she had punished me. It felt right. Milk and I were never again allowed to visit to Greg’s house.

We worried that Greg would think the worst, that we hated him, that we didn’t appreciate his generosity, that we found a better place to play. At the same time, our mothers’ fears about Greg shook us. Perhaps there was something we didn’t know about Greg, something terrible. We didn’t return to his yard.
During the remaining summer months, we saw Greg walking on his end of the street. I hadn’t noticed that he was a smoker until I watched him flick a cigarette onto the sidewalk by the apartment building. I tried to think back, *Were his teeth yellow?* He stopped for a long while to talk to a man, who refused to smile, seated on the front steps, his legs spread wide.

“Why is Greg down there?” I asked Milk.

“Those people do drugs, I think.”

Milk and I had classes in school about drugs, so we knew about them as words associated with photos of black lungs or missing teeth.

From down the street, we could see Greg wearing normal clothes, jeans and a shirt.

“He must have lost his leather jacket,” Milk said.

“Let’s walk close by and wave,” I suggested.

We reached the corner across from the red apartment building, music spiraling out of the windows. Milk waved to Greg, and I saw how young Milk looked, with his round face tilted up, his chubby arm lifted and his hand shaking from side to side. Maybe Greg didn’t see us. His not seeing us seemed deliberate, though, like he knew what people were saying. He didn’t wave back.

When the air became crisper, we saw a moving truck in Greg’s driveway. We watched it pull away, looked at each other, and immediately started to walk toward Greg’s house, which felt colder, distanced. We knocked on his door and heard the knock bounce off the empty walls of the empty rooms. We needed no permission then to enter his backyard.

We walked cautiously up the driveway. It seemed shorter and narrower, like we would fall off the edges of it. We came upon a yard very different from what we remembered. It seemed
smaller, almost like my own yard. One of the willows had been chopped down. Remaining trees were losing leaves. The grass was uncut and grew long weeds. We approached the smaller fence. It was left open. Our names were still inscribed on the side of the doghouse. Milk and I kneeled and peered inside. We saw our dusty *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Milk took Greg’s key from his pocket, placed it inside the front cover, and put it back in the doghouse. With Greg went our wilderness.
IV.

My mother gave me Moon because I once expressed sadness for not having siblings.

“You have so many friends your age,” she said quietly, lying on her side in bed, a veiled gray light coming through the window.

Since Milk and I spent our summer days outside, we had made many friends, it was true.

“Friends aren’t related,” I told her. “They’re not brothers or sisters. They only know me outside.”

“Invite them inside. I’m not having another kid.”

I couldn’t invite them inside, though, because I had lied. I told them I had a bunny, which I really didn’t have, only the stuffed toy. I confessed this to my mother, her body a shadow on the bed. She rolled onto her back and turned her face to me, still shadowed and gray. The ceiling fan made her loose hair dance on her forehead. I thought she was going to scold me in her winter beach way, but she didn’t. Her sideways lips upturned into a small, almost indecipherable smile.

“Ok.”

I stood silent and waited for her to change her mind. Instead, she rolled back over onto her side, her body sloping like a tired cat’s. She sighed a content sound like the end of a song and repeated, “Ok.”

Someone at the nearby church gave Moon to her for free with the stipulation that she would come visit one Sunday. Moon became my little brother, a floppy-eared fat bunny, so heavy I could barely hold him in my arms. My mother loved him, too. I could tell by the way she carried him, like a baby. She let him roam free in the house, and he knew us and followed us wherever we went.
Hundreds of kids, it seemed, lived on our block, a long street packed in with houses side by side that stretched from the apartment building to the gardening neighborhood. The nurse who lived a few houses down always walked to the bus stop in her scrubs, earphones plugging her ears. The man with a yamaka, who always wore suits when he mowed his lawn, had two older adopted daughters from Colombia who smoked cigarettes on their porch and watched him work.

One boy in the neighborhood was always slightly dirty. It showed in his hair, reddish brown and greasy, and on his skin, with freckles that made it seem darker than it was. I couldn’t tell if he was tan or dusty.

The first afternoon I saw him, I stopped right where I was and watched him tower over Milk, placing his hand, fingernails blackened with dirt, on Milk’s shoulder, and squeezing it so hard Milk shrunk beneath the tight grip. He said one word, “Gay,” and walked away laughing.

I remember looking Milk up and down in that moment, his overly long shorts, his bowl-cut hair, and thinking, Gay?

The second time I saw him was when I had found some bricks and set up a small, enclosed area on my front lawn for Moon to graze. Proud and eager to show off my tiny piece of land with Moon inside, I posted a sign with his name on it and stickers of farm animals that Milk’s mom had given me. That boy approached me with a slim, yellow-toothed grin, and I positioned myself in front of my sign so he wouldn’t make fun of it.

“When you go inside, I’m going to steal that rabbit and eat him.”

That was all he said to me and then he took off down the street, stopping to scratch his knee every few steps. I brought Moon and my sign inside and didn’t let him out front after that.
The boy’s name was Nick, and his only friends were his twin sisters. The twins were notorious, so much so that nobody called them by their real names. Nick and the twins never played with the rest of us. I’m not sure if anyone had ever invited him.

I never actually saw the twins, but I had heard enough about them to paint a portrait in my mind. They were bleach blondes with buck teeth, and always wore bright shorts, pink and green, and plain T-shirts that used to be white but were now stained. The twins were old enough to wear bras, but they didn’t. Their freckles framed their green eyes. They rode mountain bikes that they had stolen from other kids who had come and moved since. They were lanky, tall bullies, and if they wanted to harm or insult anyone, they did it without shame. They learned all of this from their older brother. No one knew who their parents were or if they had any, so we pictured them living on their own in a smelly crooked house past the red apartment building, but not too far away.

Milk and I were usually together, but there were those rare moments when my mother made me do something else, like clean Moon’s cage. During my chores, Milk had walked alone to buy some snacks at the corner store when Nick ran up behind him and pushed him to the ground. Then he pulled Milk up and pinned him against a wall with his strong, dirty arm, lean muscle visible beneath his tight skin. Milk told me that Nick smelled like garbage, and that the twins had appeared almost out of nowhere. They rode their bikes in circles in the middle of the street, laughs sounding like wild horses. Nick took all Milk’s money and walked off, leaving his fate to be determined by the twins, who threw down their bikes right there in the middle of the street.
Milk told me one of those boney girls grabbed him while the other one slapped him and kissed him. He was crying, not because the girls were hurting him, but because Nick had taken his money and his mom would be upset. The twins kept teasing him and calling him names. They both gave him one last kiss, Milk’s face sandwiched between their dry lips. He escaped with little physical damage.

After hearing about Milk’s assault, all the kids on our street vowed to gang up on Nick and the twins next time we spotted them. We worked out a system. We bought a bag of colored whistles. If anyone saw them, he or she would blow the whistle and all the kids would come out, run after them, and get back at them. The tricky part was that no one really wanted to hurt them. No one wanted to beat them up, not even Milk, because even though no one liked them, everyone sort of felt bad for them.

The day it happened was another one of those rare moments. I was out shopping with my mother. She had off from work that day, and finally had noticed that I was growing and that she needed to buy me new sneakers. These days came along once or twice a year, days when she decided to pay attention and take care of one aspect of my life. At the discount store, a young man measured my foot. The whole time, his head hung down towards the measuring device, but he kept lifting his eyes through his pointed hair to look at my mother’s face. White specks rested on the collar of his black uniform shirt. When I looked to see if my mother had noticed him, she hadn’t. She inspected a small shoe for a toddler in her hand, her lips straight as a pencil, eyes blank. The man continued glancing at her, so I did too. The bones in her face and chin always looked softer when her hair was down. He followed us to the checkout and tried to talk to her.

“Nice day out today,” he mumbled.
“Mm,” she replied, but her eyes followed a fat little girl out the door.

“I can give you a discount,” he said.

Her trance interrupted, she looked at him, confused. “What?” she asked.

“You’re very pretty.”

“Oh.” she said very quietly, while her cheeks bloomed red.

That’s all he said. He gave us a discount. I planned to tell Milk all about it, about how I had never seen her embarrassed like that, how she seemed almost anxious, but Milk had his own story to tell.

Someone saw Nick and the twins down the street and blew the whistle, and everyone ran out of their houses and, just as we all had planned, hurried down the street toward them. When they reached Nick and the twins, Milk heard the group’s heavy breathing and the Rottweilers barking on the corner. Nick and the twins formed a triangle, Nick in front, twins in back, and faced the group. Milk, sensing the general hesitation among his friends, finally spoke.

“Do you want to play with us or not?” he asked.

Nick fidgeted and groped the bottom hem of his ripped black shorts. He didn’t respond, and Milk wasn’t sure he had heard him, so he asked again. The twins sat on their bikes rolling slightly forward and back. They looked at each other and started laughing. Milk told me they almost couldn’t breathe, they were laughing so hard. Then, they turned in the opposite direction and slowly biked away.

Nick didn’t smile. He didn’t make any face. He just turned and followed his sisters who laughed the whole way down the block, past the blasting music from the red apartment building.
The mass of kids stood somberly on the corner, the gray cat lounging by their sides, and watched Nick and the twins disappear, three stick figures moving against the hazy blue sky.
My mother started working in an office answering phones. Like some moms in the neighborhood, she was always home in the evenings now. Other moms weren’t so lucky and still worked at night or even through the night. Her new schedule allowed regular church attendance, where people gave her clothes. She started to wear a different style, articles of clothing that I imagined office workers wearing, black pants or sometimes kaki, button down shirts, nothing special. She also began to read the local newspaper in the morning. She cooked again, small things. At night, she held Moon in her lap and watched T.V., almost like he was her pet. She had routine.

My summer life was the opposite. I charged in and out of the house as I pleased with little intervention from her, even at night.

The kids of the neighborhood knew many games, but when there was a full moon, dozens of us gathered at Josh Whine’s house to play Vampire, a game in which whoever was “it,” the Vampire, must turn others, the Hunters, into Vampires who then worked together to catch everyone else until there was one kid left standing.

We needed a shared back yard with no fence separating properties. The yard didn’t need to be that large, it just had to have two sides to enter and exit. We stumbled across the space years prior while playing hide-and-seek, and forever after used it as our Vampire yard. When Josh Whine moved into the back apartment, he saw us playing on a full moon night. He opened the window. There was no screen. He jumped through it onto the sidewalk and asked if he could join us. From that point on, he was part of the group.
One summer night, after what we considered a triumph with Nick and the twins, in that we made them feel uncomfortable, we all stood in a circle to decide who would be the Vampire. Josh Whine was the slowest runner, and even though he was fairly new to the neighborhood, everyone was privy to that fact. Perhaps he felt the water in his body pull toward the moon while his tongue ran over his canines, because he volunteered.

There was something mysterious about Josh Whine. I imagined him walking into the dark of his back yard while we counted down from ten, hearing our kid voices shout the numbers slowly. Ten hung in the air, five bounced from tree limbs. I pictured him surveying the yard. If he hid in the garage, he knew he would catch someone. He knew that once we entered the yard, no one could leave until someone cried that he or she had spotted him.

I imagined the wheeled wooden door of the garage was cracked open, so Josh Whine slid inside, the musty air filling his nostrils. From the shadows, he peered through the line of broken windows on the door and saw us, the Hunters, approaching. Maybe he felt his teeth grow, and he waited for one of us to enter his space.

We played many rounds, and Josh Whine caught kid after kid. Standing in the safety of the lamppost light, we heard muffled screams. If we believed it, he really was turning them into something other. Finally, two of us, a younger boy and I remained. We participated in the quiet of the night, speaking the numbers to each other like a prayer. Ten through five passed gently from lips to ears. The other numbers trailed off. I barely heard the number one. After the countdown, we ventured into the yard. No lights marked the path for us, but so many kids had been caught. We saw them peeking out from every corner, from inside garbage cans, from
behind rakes, trying to hide anywhere in the yard. Some even had climbed on the garage roof to hide among fallen leaves, their wet eyes blinking.

“Vampire!” I shouted, and I ran so fast to the light, breathing heavily over the boy’s last scream.

I groped the lamppost, savoring its glowing safety. I was the only one left, the winner.

The sun was just rising, orange light brimming between houses, when I did my victory search of the yard. There was not an extra breath, no coughing, no whispering voices, no presence at all. I slid open the garage door, and the gray cat escaped and startled me. No one was there.

A few weeks later, on a gloomy afternoon when Milk was out shopping, I sat on Josh Whine’s front porch steps with a carton of orange juice. He had his radio out and tried to find a station, but the overcast sky wouldn’t allow the radio waves to settle. We listened to quiet static.

I knew I didn’t know about everything, but something about Josh Whine made me curious. He was from a country in South America. He was the one who educated me about the two adopted girls from Colombia. Before I met him, I didn’t even think about South America or know where it was. He kept telling me over and over the name of his country, but I could never get it right. I had never considered a kid growing up outside of my neighborhood, but something about his country made him very different from the other kids. He was our age, but he seemed older. His house always smelled like an unfamiliar spice. Just he and his mom lived there in the smallest apartment I had ever seen on our street, a house the size of mine but divided into six apartments instead of two.
After we played Vampire together, I saw him race without his shirt on. Compared to Milk, whose baby belly hung over his shorts, Josh Whine’s torso looked strong, like a man’s. He shamelessly defeated some high school kids, and he wasn’t even wearing shoes. I don’t know why we all assumed he was the slowest runner among us, when clearly, he was an anomaly.

I was on his porch because he called me over and it felt weird to say no. He bit into a red apple and said, “I have two really sharp teeth. You want to see?”

I did want to see, but I told him I didn’t.

He chomped loudly on the large chunks of apple and caught me staring at his mouth.

“See?” he said, and he bared his teeth at me.

I saw his two sharp teeth, one on each side of his mouth, like a dog’s.

“Wow.” I looked away.

“I bet I could make you bleed,” he said.

“You would bite me?”

“Not hard. It wouldn’t take much.”

Something stirred in my stomach. “Okay.”

He slid next to me on the steps, took my hand and extended my pointer finger. He opened his mouth and gently inserted my finger. Then he slowly bit down on the plump flesh between the two knuckles. I watched his sharp tooth break through my skin. It hurt but I didn’t pull away. His hand gripped mine a little tighter. He closed his eyes. My blood rose past his tooth, spread like veins across his tongue, and dripped down my hand. He opened his eyes and released my finger and I felt a shiver.

He held my finger up to my face. “See,” he said, stood up, and went inside.
The radio’s static seemed louder after he left. I sat there and stared at the small wound on my finger for a long time.
Milk was always doing things with his mom. Maybe it just seemed like that because I
was never doing things with mine. Aside from the neighborhood watch meetings and church on
Sundays, she was never doing anything with anyone, but I wondered why Milk’s mom never
invited her out. I knew she was significantly younger than Milk’s. My mother’s routine, however
solitary, made it seem like she was finally feeling at least ok with things.

Milk and his mom brought me along with them often, but sometimes they went without
me, and I had to hear about all the interesting things they had done. Out in the country there was
a place that had seventy-five different flavors of pie. It was a long drive to get there, but Milk
said it was worth it.

“They let you taste the pies first,” he said from his kitchen window. I kneeled at my
bedroom window, my arms resting on the dusty wooden windowsill.

“Any pie?” I asked.

“You can taste them all if you want. You have to go.”

“How am I going to get there?”

“Your mom can take you.”

I slouched to the floor and out of Milk’s sight. I knew she would never be up for it, and I
didn’t know if I was either.

“Just ask her. She gave you Moon.”

He was always using Moon as evidence that my mother was capable of doing something
nice, but after a few months with him, I understood that Moon was really a gift for my mother.
She loved him more than I did.
I wanted to ask my mother to get it over with to prove to Milk that he would have to take me. I left my bedroom and dragged myself to the living room where my mother was sitting in the chair next to the front window. She was sitting up, staring through the window down at the street, really focused on something, like a cat trying to make sense of a quick-moving shadow. I sat on the couch across from her.

“Milk’s mom took him to the country for pie.”

She turned her head to face me. Her eyes were naturally outlined by the black of her eyelashes.

“What is it that you want?” She already seemed worn out by the question I was going to ask her.

“Can we go?”

“To eat pie?”

I bit my lip and nodded.

“They went to Vern’s? In the country?”

I shrugged. “Milk said you can taste the pies.”

“That’s Vern’s.”

Becoming aware that my mother had experienced a life in the past in which she had gone to taste pies with someone made me hopeful.

“Let’s go now,” she said, standing up to stretch.

The rush of excitement made me move extra fast to put on my shorts and sneakers. I couldn’t believe that all I had to do was ask and she would say yes. Milk was still waiting at the window, eyes open wide and optimistic. I gave him the thumbs up and took off.
My mother put Moon in a little carrying case and brought him along for the ride. She drove what used to be my grandmother’s car. She had never once taken it to a car wash, but kept it as clean as she could otherwise. It had a distinct smell of evergreen air freshener and raw potato. I sat in the backseat, always.

I only had visited places outside of the city with other kids’ parents, never my own mother, and the sensation of watching the skyline become smaller behind us while my mother took the winding roads into the hills of green was almost uncomfortable. There was no music and we didn’t talk. I sensed she still didn’t know how to be with me. That, or she didn’t care to think about it. It reminded me of days before I had met Milk and filled all my time with him, days when she and I shared the space of the apartment in silence mostly. I noticed Moon nibbling on a carrot and realized she consciously had tried to make him comfortable for the journey by giving him a snack. Maybe she’d do the same for me.

“You went to Vern’s before?” I finally asked her, my voice making its way helplessly to the front seat, like a butter knife cutting through crusty bread.

“A long time ago.”

“Who did you go with?”

After a moment, she cleared her throat as if she was going to tell me a long story, but then she just said, “An old friend.”

I was pretty sure that friend was Sonya. I was always forgetting and remembering the tragedy. The weight of my mother’s brief answer made me feel a little sick. I was too scared to ask anything more, so I sat quietly.
A sudden loud pop made me jump and my mother lost control of the car for a few seconds. She slowed the car abruptly and I realized what seat belts were for as mine locked tightly over my shoulder. The car wobbled to the side of the road.

“Shit,” my mother exhaled.

“What happened?”

“The tire.” She opened the door and stepped out.

I had about one hundred questions, but I stayed put, feeling the heat creep in slowly, making my hairline moist. My mother stood at the side, head tilted down, no expression. Then she turned out toward the street and leaned on the car with her arms folded.

I figured we would be here for a while, so I unbuckled, slid over, and rolled down the window. I craned my neck to see her. She didn’t look at me. She was staring into the oncoming traffic. A truck wound toward us. It was an old truck with a blue cab and a wooden-gated dumping bed. Without any gesture from my mother, the truck slowed and pulled over behind us. The kind of man I had only seen in movies kicked open his door and jumped out. He filled his overalls with a small gut, but appeared big and strong. He placed his hands on his hips. They were large, dirty hands, like Nick’s, but older and more calloused.

“Flat tire, Missy?” He spoke to my mother with such familiarity that I thought she somehow knew him.

My mother nodded, looking him in the eyes.

“Why don’t you smile, pretty thing? I’m here to help you.”

She looked to me. He followed her gaze and smiled at me, wrinkling his stubble-covered face.

“Why don’t you come on back to the truck with me?”
She walked with him behind the truck and out of sight. All I could hear was Moon’s crunching and flies buzzing outside the window. I waited too long.

They returned. They looked the same, normal. The man carried the tire, and she held some tools. He changed the tire with me still inside the car, and I bounced higher and higher. He finished in minutes.

She followed him back to the truck with his tools. I didn’t want to seem nosey, so I watched in the side mirror. The man took my mother’s chin in his big hand and spoke to her. He looked like the Beast grabbing Bell’s face, almost ogrely. She pulled away from him sharply and started for the car. He stood like a pile of bricks, glaring at her. She swung herself into the driver’s seat, started the car, and we spun off, stirring up dust behind us.

“Do you see?” she asked, finally breaking the silence with her sadness.

“I didn’t see anything.” I sounded guilty.

“No, you can’t see yet. Can you?”

See what? I thought, but stayed quiet the rest of the way.

We weren’t that far from Vern’s. By that point, I wasn’t even in the mood for pie. We arrived at a small diner that looked like a log cabin I saw drawn in my history book. The sign read Vern’s, in cursive, and had yellow light bulbs that weren’t on yet. There were no other buildings or houses around, just open fields and trees. I heard the wind shaking the leaves. My mother took Moon’s cage from the back seat, and squatted to place it gently in the open grass.

“Won’t someone take him?”

“Nobody will want him.”
We left him there. My bad mood changed as soon as we stepped inside, and I smelled fresh-baked pie crust wafting from the ovens. There were pie cases in every direction and I ran to the closest one I saw. I already knew which one I wanted, Banana Cream, because it was so tall, piled high with whipped cream.

I must have made an expression of awe when the pie arrived to our table, because my mother made a gasping sound when I shoved my fork, hard in, to take my first bite. I paused to make sure it was okay, but she was smiling, so I realized the sound she had made was a laugh. While I squished the sweetness around in my mouth, I tried to think of the last time I’d heard her laugh.

“If it’s that good, I’ll have to try some,” she said, her voice as flat as the field out the window. She forked a glop of whipped cream into her mouth.

“Isn’t it so good?” I asked her.

She swallowed and nodded once, with certainty.

“Sweet things make up for a lot,” she said.

The sky was still lit up by the already set sun on our drive home. Moon’s cage sidled up next to me in the back seat. My mother and I didn’t talk for the ride back, but this time, the skyline and its lights grew larger as we got closer. I felt more and more comfortable with my full belly the bigger the city grew in the frame of the windshield, until it couldn’t fit anymore, and we were inside of it again.
VII.

The city streets were, at times, busy. With all the activity, I was fairly young when my mother discovered she couldn’t keep me from playing in the street. My mother seemed to be the youngest on the block. When she wasn’t clouded over with sleepy sadness, she had the attitude of a kid. At times, it seemed like she cared, but really, she was merely flexing some false sense of authority over me, like a power-hungry, older sister. She knew I would cross the street whether she said I could or not, yet unlike other kids’ conversations with their mothers, ours went like this:

“Can I cross the street to play with Milk?”

“Milk lives next-door.” She laid lazily on the couch, flipping through a thick book without reading it.

“We want to play with other kids.”

“No.”

It was pointless to ask why, when her response was plainly, “No,” so I had to go in another direction.

“How will we play then?”

“Don’t cross the street.” She didn’t look up from her book.

“All the other kids’ moms let them cross the street.”

“What if you get hit by a car?”

“I won’t.”

“What are you supposed to do when you cross the street?”

“Look both ways?”
“How many times?”

“Ten?”

She pressed her finger into the current page, looked up at me annoyed, “If you get hit by a car, you can never cross the street again.”

On the other side of the street lived Inis. There were kids from different countries who came and went, but Inis was the first child I met from Israel, and she was the most beautiful six year-old I had ever seen, with big and black eyes, just like her hair, which was thick and curly. Her curls were soft to touch, and her teeth were so small. So were her hands.

Milk suggested that we pretend to be married and adopt Inis as our child. I agreed, but only if I was a cool aunt and Milk could be whatever he wanted. Everyone loved Inis, and all our other friends felt jealous that she was ours. We would build a house on Milk’s front porch. We would scrounge around our attics for old toys, and we would create the best home we knew how, where Inis would play.

“What are you doing?” my mom asked when she saw me coming from the attic with an armful of toys. This time she stood tall at the table, making herself a cheese sandwich.

“I’m getting toys for Inis.”

“Who’s Inis?”

“Our friend.”

“Why do you have toddler toys?” She cut the crusts off the bread.

“She’s young.”

“Why are you playing with a baby?” She asked this with a long sigh.

“We’re not. It’s just pretend. We’re just playing.”

“Pretending what?”
“That Inis is our child.”

“You’re a mother now?”

“It’s just pretend.”

When I came out with the toys, I saw all the kids on the street playing TV tag. I saw Inis running in circles on her front lawn. When she spotted me, she ran to me, straight across the street. Everyone watched Inis and everyone watched an old blue Chevy zip down the street. Our voices shouted her name in unison, but that just made her run faster. The car hit Inis, shoved her to the hard street, making a sound like metal hitting a wall, not like a child’s soft skin. It left her on the ground with a bruised, bloodied face. The kids flooded the street and the car screeched to a stop at the corner. We all gathered around Inis’ motionless body. Milk and I glanced at each other and felt like the kids we were.

A slender woman, with hair down to her waist, split the crowd. I had never seen Inis’ mother until then. Her beauty silenced us all, and we watched her nervously. She bent down next to Inis, pulled her up and into her arms. She pressed her head of curls gently against her chest. Blood stained her buttons red. Inis wasn’t crying. She was very quiet. Her eyes blinked into her mom’s shirt. A few kids ushered the woman who had been driving the car into the circle. She was young, blonde, and nervous. Inis’ mother asked one question, “Whose fault was it?”

Milk and I stood silently, our heads hanging in shame. We never taught her to look both ways. No one else spoke up and a pressured silence grew.

The driver finally blurted, “She ran into the street. I didn’t even see her.”

Inis’ mom set Inis at arm’s length. She looked at her with such intensity. Then she slapped Inis, hard, across her red cheek. A collective child’s gasp echoed from the crowd. I
started to cry without realizing it. The driver held her hand to her mouth before she looked at Inis and said, “I’m sorry.”

Then she walked back to her car, and with her sad eyes, she apologized to us all and we forgave her. We blamed ourselves.

Inis’ mom picked her up like a baby, and I noticed how small Inis was. She carried her up the front porch steps of their house and slammed the wooden door behind her. When I turned to go inside, I bumped into my mother, who stood behind me in her jeans and faded black T-shirt.

“Was that your child?” she asked.

I was crying a lot, so I couldn’t answer her.

Other mothers stayed outside a while, discussing the possibilities for safety, more neighborhood watch meetings or constant alternating posts. My mother stood, somewhat alert but quiet. No one looked to her for her input, not even Milk’s mom, who wanted to move on from this accident to discuss Nick and the twins, the real rogues of the neighborhood.

Another mother shouted, “Why are these kids even playing in the street to begin with?”

My mother glared down at me, then put her hand on my back to guide me home. Inside, I cried into my pillow on my bed, everything making me sad all at once.

The next time I saw Inis after that was in the backseat of her mom’s car, driving away towards the gardening neighborhood. Her head was full of those black curls. She smiled with her little girl teeth and waved, hello or goodbye. I couldn’t tell which.
Summer was coming to an end. We felt the air become crisper, watched the sun set sooner. On one of those last nights, Milk met me on my front porch. He was very fidgety, and when I asked what was wrong, he responded, “I heard something today. In two days, the world will end.”

“How do you know?” I asked.

“Someone told me that Nostradamus predicted it.”

When I asked who Nostradamus was, Milk informed me that he was a saint or some smart guy who predicted a lot of things that happened.

“Like the discovery of the earth being round,” Milk said, sounding uncertain.

I couldn’t risk doubting it.

“What do we do then, with our last day here?” I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know.”

I didn’t know, either, so we left each other. I went inside and closed my door. I leaned on it for a long time, wondering whether or not I should burden my mother with this information. I opted to tell her. She was sitting on the couch with her legs up, the glow of the television bouncing off her face, twinkling in her drained eyes. I quietly stepped into the living room and said as solemnly possible, “The world is going to end on Thursday.”

“What makes you think we’re so lucky?” she asked, staring at the TV.

“Noferatu predicted it.”

“You mean Nostradamus?”

“Does it matter?”
“So what? He predicted a lot of things that weren’t true.”

“Wait, what?”

“Do you know anything about him?”

She was right. *What did I know?* How naïve of me just to accept what Milk had told me. We had to take this into our own hands, own the end of the world. I went to my open bedroom window and saw Milk next door, in his kitchen, across the driveway, where I spotted the gray cat parading by. I called to him. My voice traveled between our houses. He looked up and came to his window, and I asked where he got his information. Josh Whine had told him. Josh Whine was nice now, most times, but he did tease a kid right after the kid’s mother had died, so he wasn’t always a reputable source. As far as my take on Josh Whine went, I was always curious, but mostly occupied with Milk, and didn’t have time or strong desire to explore a real friendship with him.

Milk assured me, saying his mother confirmed the claim by plainly stating, “It makes sense.”

“We need to find out if it’s true. What are you doing tomorrow?” I asked.

“Hanging out with you, stupid.” Of course we would spend our last day together.

“Then we’re going to the library.”

“That’s a far walk.”

“We have to look this up to see if it’s true.”

He agreed, and we closed our windows and I sat in bed, feeling comforted by the fact that we wouldn’t find anything the next day. But we did.
In the religious section of the Danzer Library, we found a book of Nostradamus’ predictions. Milk and I crouched down on the floor and held the oversized book across our knees. Josh Whine was right. The date was printed and published in black ink right in front of our faces. Tomorrow would be our last on earth as we knew it. We both sighed and propped ourselves on the floor against the bookshelf, book pushed off to the side.

“Now what?” I asked him.

“I don’t know.”

We plodded home in silence. A bus full of people rumbled by, and I worried for the woman frowning in the window, holding her bag in her lap. We resolved to break the news to my mother first. She decided not to spend her last day on earth folding underwear. So she went by herself to the movies instead.

We kept walking, hoping to find friends, or anyone we could warn. We ended up on the pastor’s porch in the gardening neighborhood. His young wife was sitting out in a flowery chair, reading a pink book. She was one of the people who gave us Moon. Earlier in the year, she had started visiting my mother at home, so I knew her alright. We collapsed on the steps.

“Tanner, tomorrow the world will end,” we told her. “We looked it up in a book.”

She folded her book in her lap and looked at us with such vigorous, blue-eyed concentration that it disarmed us.

“How interesting. Can you even imagine it? What do you think will happen?” she spoke slowly.

I didn’t know what to say, because I never thought of what it would look like when the world ended. Would the physical earth implode? Would we just disappear? Would Jesus do something?
“Wow.” She was still talking aloud, to herself. “What if it already happened once before? What if this is the afterlife?”

Milk and I glared at each other, confused.

“Look at Diana across the street there,” Tanner pointed. “Her garden is so gorgeous, isn’t it? And Felicia’s too, over there,” she gestured to her neighbor on the right. “Her garden, my God.”

Along the perimeter of Diana’s front porch, hanging, potted flowers swayed in the breeze. It was true. Their gardens made their houses seem so much nicer than ours.

“They both decorate cakes. Did you know that?” Tanner continued.

Maybe I would ask Felicia to make my cake for my birthday some year. I started daydreaming about white chocolate and strawberries, but reminded myself that none of that would matter when the world ended tomorrow.

“Oh, wow. It’s so incredible to think about. That this could be it,” Tanner continued.

That an adult was so convinced of our finding scared Milk and me, so we left.

As it grew dark, we returned to Milk’s front porch, where I could see my mother sitting on the top porch, overly calm, with Moon resting in her lap. Milk and I ate ranch sunflower seeds, the salt of each seed making our lips pucker, and watched the neighborhood kids play. We didn’t join them that night, though, not on our last night. We didn’t tell them the news, either. We didn’t want to ruin all their fun. Instead, we just sat there, looking out over our street. We watched a little boy and Inis dance on her front lawn. We watched the Colombian sisters share a cigarette. We watched other kids with big goofy smiles run through Josh Whine’s sprinkler, which made muddy puddles in the grass. I closed my eyes and listened to the blaring music from
the red brick apartment building, those Rottweilers barking. I listened to everyone whistle and holler and skate and zip, and I heard our world coming to its end, with its ordinary finale.
Part Two
When our mothers let us ride our bikes a little farther, Milk and I discovered the water. At the edge of the city, the river and the lake met, and across the river lived a whole new country. The first time we rode to the river, it was dusk, and when we came upon it, its white rapids made us nervous, so we quickly left.

When we decided to return to the river the second time, it was day. We tied up our bikes and climbed all over the surrounding rocks. An old gray man lounged with his fishing pole propped against the rocks. His long beard made his face shapeless. He looked like someone I had seen in a painting that used to hang in my grandmother’s bedroom, a blurry fisherman type. I didn’t know people like him actually existed.

“Come here, sit down, before you kids scare all the fish away.”

“Kids?” Milk asked. We approached him, smiling and out of breath.

I sat down on a rock next to him. “We’re not that young.”

“I don’t care how old you are. Just stop making all that noise,” he said, half smiling, his voice sounding like a cough sitting right at the edge of his throat, ready to come out.

Milk picked up a pile of rocks, threw them into the water, then reached for another handful.

“You keep throwin’ stones, you’ll fill up that whole river. Then there won’t be a river.”

Milk looked down at the rocks in his hand, then out at the river.

“So?” he said.

“Kids,” the man mumbled. “What do you know about this river?

“We don’t know anything,” Milk said, dropping his handful of rocks.
He sat in silence for an uncomfortable amount of time while Milk and I stared at him. Then he started.

“A bridge crosses the water at the end of the lake and the start of the river,” he said, and we knew we would be sitting still for a while. “It’s not a pathway, nor is it a gateway into one world from another. It’s not a tunnel, nor does it hold anything or anyone. It’s a rusty structure, and the rust breaks apart in the winter and coats the river with red, a red that tells stories about the loss of trains that are not there, passing; the conductor who is not there, smiling; the people who are not there, sleeping, dreaming. There is only imagined cargo passing slowly, always slowly over that old breaking bridge, over the lake and the river all at once. Fog gathers beneath the metal, but the bridge is not concerned with what passes beneath it. Nor is it concerned with the river that penetrates the lake. Samantha fell into the lake at the mouth of the river one cold January.”

“Who’s Samantha? I’ve never heard of her,” I protested.

“Just listen,” said Milk.

“The lake, one of the Great Lakes, thought itself an ocean,” the man continued, wiggling his hips into a more comfortable position. “It couldn’t tell the difference. But Samantha knew it couldn’t pull her out, it couldn’t pull her in, deeper and deeper. It wasn’t controlled by the moon or tides. It was controlled by the river, the river that didn’t flow south. The river that rushed, neither silently nor cautiously. The river that didn’t stand still, didn’t know peace, could not love.

“What if Thomas hadn’t stretched his arm out into the lake to grip Samantha’s arm, and hadn’t rescued her? Let’s assume Samantha remained in the lake momentarily, passed through the fog and red beneath the bridge, and poured into the river. Let’s assume she froze into an ice block of herself, a mass of ice, bone and flesh that sailed down the river at thirty-five miles per
hour from south to north. Let’s assume she slept on the river and touched fish and wet plants
with the icy soles of her feet.

“Men wouldn’t discuss it. Men wouldn’t be comfortable with an ice-cold, frozen woman. Only women would ponder and play with the notion. They wouldn’t say it was the river’s fault. They wouldn’t discuss the implications, the Falls. They wouldn’t consider the fish or fog. They wouldn’t discuss her life or her death. They would see only Samantha, a beautiful goddess of a girl, frozen and floating down the river. Her hair full of icicles. Her name, a language the river couldn’t speak.

“If Thomas hadn’t saved Samantha, she would have moved away from downtown, toward the suburbs, toward the northernst parts, passed the sinking islands, through the factoried landscape. She would have passed beyond the locks and the canal, passed history. She would have plummeted to her frozen future, a watered pounding, six-hundred thousand gallons per second, sixty-five miles per hour. She would half dream of a reality she once knew. Six hundred thousand forces slamming into her, crushing her, shattering her frozen body into broken Samantha pieces.

“If Thomas hadn’t caught Samantha,” he sat up, the water moving in his reflective eyes, “the river wouldn’t have been named river. It wouldn’t have been the same at all.”

The man settled back against the rocks, and looked at us directly. “But, he did save her. So that’s that.”

“Who is she?” I asked, still caught up on this detail.

“She’s you, dummy,” Milk said, elbowing me. “And I’m Thomas.”

“Yeah, right,” annoyed that he assumed I needed to be saved.

The old man shrugged.
We left. Milk was overly excited. He got like that sometimes. His eyes grew wider, playful, and he smiled big like when he was a kid. He rode his bike slightly in front of me the entire ride home, swerving to cut me off once in a while, to make our tires bump.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “If you fall, I’ll save you.”

I didn’t respond. Even though Milk was joking, I kept seeing that story happen to me, and it carried into my dreams that night. Except I didn’t see myself falling in, I saw myself jumping in with resolve. The river drew me into its quick unknown, and when Milk reached his arm and pulled me out, I felt such defeat, like I was drowning on the dry land.
The scent of floral spray tingled my nostrils, so I knew Tanner was in the apartment. She was a hard woman to read. She had clear, round cheeks on a very expressive face. In one moment, her eyebrows arched with mature concern. In another, a childish pout washed over her. Then, a sly closed-mouth smile spread sideways. The first time Tanner invited herself over, I tried to stop her. I stood in the crack of the door, telling her that my mother was too tired. In a sweet, disappointed tone, she told me she had brought cookies and offered a cellophane-wrapped dish. Then she glared at me and insisted that she see my mother. Before I responded, she slid past me, apologizing while practically nudging me with her shoulder, and made her way up the stairs. I panicked momentarily, then grew curious about how my mother would respond. To my surprise, she talked to Tanner, the same way she talked to me, dryly with brief sentences. She didn’t seem threatened by Tanner’s presence. My guard fell, too.

Tanner’s visits became more frequent. Usually, my mother and she chatted in the living room. Tanner was the only person my mother cared to allow in the house, but then I remembered the ease with which Tanner entered our realm, and I wondered if another woman would ever do the same. I supposed the two were friends, but it was so hard to believe. Tanner was so sunny, it overwhelmed me. She analyzed every concept, every word that came from my mother’s mouth, which were few. If my mother wasn’t talking, Tanner was, almost constantly. To some extent, my mother must have enjoyed the company. Perhaps it was that Tanner was so completely opposite of anyone from my mother’s past that she could block memories or form new, unrelated ones.
This particular visit was the first time they isolated themselves in my mother’s bedroom, door closed tight. I pressed my ear against the door and listened to their voices dance around the room. My mother’s voice sounded solemn and sad, Tanner’s serious, and sword-like, like that day with Milk and I on her porch when the world was going to end. I imagined them as two fish swimming around the square space behind the door. Tanner a black fighter, my mother a simple goldfish. Tanner chasing, my mother trying not to appear like she’s escaping.

Finally I heard Tanner say, “Let’s pray.”

Cold air from my mother’s opened window passed through the crack under the door to my feet. I got the sense that the room had emptied. It made me nervous, so I sat on the couch in the living room with the T.V. on to distract myself.

The creak of her door sounded and Tanner approached. I didn’t turn to look. She put her hand on my head and said, “Your mother just got saved. It’s great news. You two should celebrate.” Then she floated out the front door.

I didn’t like the pressure on me to plan a party for the two of us, so I went to my mother’s room to check on her. The two lights, the window’s and the overhead light mixed together were too bright, causing me to squint. My mother sat on the bed, a box of tissues beside her, none used. She looked like herself, sad eyes.

“Are you the same?” I asked.

“I don’t know.”

That night, she prepared pasta with peas for dinner and didn’t watch T.V. She left her bedroom door open and turned on her bedside lamp for the first time ever. I sensed, even though she appeared the same in that moment, something was going to change.
Sometime after this interaction with Tanner, my mother started to wear dresses. Her attention to her hair gave it a fuller and browner look. She didn’t seem as tired. She was pretty, which was an old realization, renewed by general hygiene. She gathered old work clothes in a box and shopped for new styles. As these changes became more permanent, she assumed a more feminine figure. She was conscious of her appearance, almost like there was a man in her life. At the same time, the absence of a man in her life was a glaring truth, at least for me. I didn’t so much care that she never mentioned my father. That we had never discussed him became so normal, I mostly forgot that there had to have been a man at some point. Nobody else ever asked about my father, either, and I think it was because, for so many of us kids, it was just as common not to have a father as it was to have one.

With her aesthetic transition, my mother also began to worry to about things. A certain moral awareness replaced her teenager-like responses. Suddenly, she cared about how much time Milk and I hung out together. We spent most days together, this was true, but it had been true for so long that I couldn’t understand her sudden apprehension. I attributed it to what happened in the room with Tanner, and to her increasing church-going tendencies, where there was a strong focus on family values. She also started to care whether or not I made it home for dinner. It was always just she and I at the table. This evening, a torpedo-shaped meatloaf stood between us.

“I thought you’d grow out of him,” she said, in what I understood to be a motherly tone.

“Grow out of him? He’s like my brother.”

“Boys change, you know.”

“We all change, though.” I was thinking of her styling her hair and of the recently formed bumps on my chest that seemed to rise from nowhere, like hills that suddenly appear in a flat landscape.
“When he tries to kiss you, you’ll see what I mean.”

“Maybe I want him to kiss me.”

She didn’t have seconds. She was annoyed with me, I could tell. Not annoyed mad, annoyed sad. Recently, every warning she gave me seemed to relate back to her young loss, and was infused by newfound religious expectations. The truth was that Milk and I had kissed so many times that I had lost count. Only a few times stood out in my memory: in Greg’s doghouse, on the ferris wheel at the summer carnival, in the oversized tree with low-hanging branches that we climbed, nothing too exceptional. And we weren’t crazy about it. I dressed so much like one of the boys, baseball cap and all, that we had to hide out when we kissed, because Milk was worried people would think he really was gay.

There was one time, though, when Milk and I stood on the corner in Tanner’s neighborhood. I had just gotten a new pair of navy soccer shorts and Milk said I looked good, so I kissed him. When I peered past Milk’s face, a lean black man on the corner came into focus.

“I can see you two,” he said in a voice light like whipped cream.

His name was Adam, and people talked about him because he was the only adult male in our neighborhood to openly have a boyfriend. One afternoon, when Milk and I passed by his house on our bikes, Milk corrected me, “Jamie is Adam’s husband, not boyfriend.”

Adam ran the newspaper delivery service in our neighborhood, and I only ever encountered him in passing. The first time he addressed me, I was straddling my bike in the middle of the street, waiting for Milk to catch up to me.

“Hey, pudding.”
Adam was smiling at me from his front porch swing. His voice mingled with the sounds of his wind chimes. He had a sharp, muscular face. He wore dark green shorts with a belt, and a white T-shirt. With a newspaper opened in his lap, he perched a cigarette between his fingers.

“Hi,” I said, but Milk was already by my side, and we were riding off again.

From that day on, when I rode by Adam’s house, he always called out to me, “Hey pumpkin,” “Hey snickers,” “Hey beauty,” and I always replied the same way, “Hi,” and that was the extent of our interaction.

Only boys worked for Adam, and some were my friends. Josh Whine took up weekend work with him, and I heard stories about their a.m. rides in the back of his pick-up truck, sitting on top of the tied stacks of newspapers. How Adam always had a thermos of hot chocolate on the cold mornings and lemonade on the warm ones. When Milk asked his mother if he could work for him, she didn’t say anything bad about him, just said, “No.” That meant my mother said no, too.

When Josh Whine came to school with blue hair, he paraded and said, “Adam did it for me.” Milk and I were jealous, because this meant Josh Whine got to hang out in Adam’s house, and we never had been invited into his house. Josh Whine reported to us what his house was like inside. Adam was very tidy. Folded blankets rested neatly over the sides of the couches. Pillows were tossed at perfect angles. A huge tropical fish aquarium covered the length of the interior wall.

“His living room looks like something out of one of my mom’s magazines,” Josh Whine reported.

Adam’s house stood on the corner of the gardening neighborhood by Tanner’s. He didn’t have a spacious back yard like his other neighbors, so his garden dominated his front yard and it
was the most experimental and wildly appealing on the block. Tipped buckets full of all different kinds of colorful flowers spilled onto the lawn. Green climbers and hollyhocks covered his property, and trees grew crooked and purple in every direction. One tree’s branch stretched through his second-story window, with glass surrounding it, and Josh Whine told us that Adam had adjusted his living room furniture to accommodate it. He hung blown glass art from the branch, as if it were another wall to decorate.

“Don’t bugs get in?” I asked Josh Whine.

“Aren’t there bugs in everyone’s house?”

“Ew,” I said, knowing he was right.

The evening we saw Josh Whine walking home with a fire engine red mohawk, Milk and I sat on Milk’s porch, playing cards. There was a breeze, so I wore my green hoodie and pants.

“Would you ever dye your hair like him?” I asked Milk.

“Never. He looks so gay.” He said this in a low voice.

Stunned by his words, I glanced over to Josh Whine. He was getting older. I guess that meant I was, too. He had developed a punk style that suited him. He wore makeup. I didn’t. He looked good in it, contoured. Milk was always talking about looking gay. I wondered what he meant.

“How does someone look gay?” I asked, ready to argue.

He paused, looked to Josh Whine who disappeared into his driveway. “Do you want me to dress like that?”

“At least he’s got style.”

“Don’t be a jerk.”
Silence fell, and we continued playing cards.

“My mom is talking about moving,” Milk said.

“It’s your turn. Wait, what?”

“She’s been saying it for a while, but now I think she’s more serious.”

“Why now? What about me?”

“She’s looking for a new job. Outside of the city.”

“Why would anyone want to live outside of the city?”

He didn’t respond to this. He was focused on his turn.

“All the kids move away,” I said.

A very distinct smell reached our noses at the same time. Milk continued staring at his hand, and said, “Someone’s house is burning.”

We knew that smell, because for one reason or another, houses caught fire regularly in the city.

“I don’t hear sirens,” I said, and waited to take my turn. “It smells close.”

We finished our hand and followed the smell to Tanner’s neighborhood. The abandoned house next-door to Adam’s had caught fire. Milk and I stood beside each other and watched all the neighbors pour out onto the street with their big, curious eyes. I had never seen a real fire before. The flames danced wildly, not caring about anyone or anything, only their own destructive course. Adam stood, tall, with a cigarette dangling from his lips. He held a large hose, leveraging it between his body and his arm, pointing at the side of his own house that faced the burning house next to it. It took too long for anyone to realize that no one had called the firefighters. The house burned down to the ground, and a week later, the only thing left behind was a wide, empty lot full of dirt for Adam to expand his garden.
There was talk that Adam had started the fire, but Josh Whine told us that wasn’t true. And in fact, the women on the block, namely Felicia and Diana, Adam’s only true gardening competitors, never admitted it, but they seemed jealous that their next-door neighbors’ houses hadn’t burned down. On our walk home, Milk and I joked to each other that they secretly considered how they would do it, how the fire that night had started at the back of the house, in the kitchen on the first floor. Perhaps it was gas related. Perhaps there was some kindling shoved between ignitable surfaces.

I imagined that their secret plans sprouted from something more than envy, though. Maybe they feared the same thing Milk feared without knowing it, the complete spread of Adam’s unkempt garden, crossing the street and claiming back the concrete, passing through their yards. And insects, his vibrant insects—lovers of the untamed earth, and proliferators—would crawl into their perfectly pruned gardens with their average brown and black insects to entice them, to teach them the ways of the wild. What Felicia and Diana were most nervous about was that their insects might prefer that lifestyle. Then the whole neighborhood wouldn’t be theirs anymore. It would be Adam’s.

The more I thought about it, the more I believed it wouldn’t be so bad.

That night, Milk and I returned to our houses late. Before we parted to our own houses, he grabbed my arm and turned me to face him.

“What is it?”

He looked down at my hand and grabbed it in both of his, rubbing the top with his thumbs. We were always hitting each other, or pushing or tagging. He never had taken my hands.
He looked at my face and saw the anxious crease between my eyebrows. Milk still had traces of a kid in his face, chubby cheeks, baby ears.

“You got to wash off this fire.” he said. “I can feel it on your skin.”

“I will.”

When I turned to go inside, I had to tug for him to release my hand.

“I’ll see you tomorrow. And like every day after that,” I told him.

He stood under the tree in his front yard and watched me walk into my house and close the door. When I entered my house and peeked out the front window one last time, he was gone.
The local Mediterranean restaurant was small and orange inside. A lot of people came to eat there alone. Sometimes, Milk and I would stop by after school. Milk was really good at tricking the owner, Adam’s husband, Jamie, into giving us things for free. We rarely had money, so Milk would order, and after we were done, he always confessed to Jamie that he had forgotten his money. Unlike Adam, who knew us only as candy-themed terms of endearment, Jamie knew us and liked us well enough, so sometimes, he just gave us a look and said, “Come on, guys. Next time bring some money.”

As Milk and I were finishing dessert, we could see the clouds shifting rapidly through the window. We had shared a small piece of baklava, which was Milk’s favorite. This time, Milk had a little money to pay. We stepped outside to walk home. The sky was deep gray, like the sun had already set. There was no rain yet, just dark clouds shrouding the blue sky. We were in no rush. We both liked when it rained, even if the temperature dropped.

“You know the wooden fence behind my garage?” Milk asked. “You can climb it and get on top.”

“Of the garage?”

“Yeah. We should do it and watch the storm come in.”

“Right now?”

“When we get home.”

“My mother will never let me do that.”

“Don’t tell her, then.”

“I should let her know I’m home, at least.”
We arrived at our houses and decided to meet in the back yard. I walked into my house and my mother was sitting at the kitchen table, looking through a cooking magazine. Today, she wore glasses, and I wasn’t sure why. She hadn’t needed them in the past. Sometimes, she dressed like her new self, but still she acted like her old self.

“I’m just going to be out back with Milk.”

“It’s raining.”

“Not yet.”

“The house is completely dark. It’s going to rain.”

“When it starts, I’ll come inside.”

“Lightning.”

“I’ll come back in. Don’t worry.”

She didn’t look up at me once, so I left out the back door. Milk stood on his side of the fence. As if he had changed just last night, he looked a little bit older, his cheekbones showed on the sides of his face. He motioned for me to come on. I made sure my mother wasn’t watching through the back window, hopped the fence, and followed him to the back of his garage. It was strangely earthy back there. No grass. Worms tore into the mud under our feet. Sure enough, the wooden fence had footholds. Milk reached his legs up and balanced between the fence and the garage until he was able to hoist himself up.

“Now it’s your turn,” he said, “Put your foot on that ledge and I’ll grab your hand and pull you up.”

We did just that, except when Milk pulled my arm, I lost my footing and scraped my other arm badly on a nail that stuck out from the roof.

“You made it,” he said, as I wiggled myself up.
I showed him my bleeding arm. “But I cut myself.”

“We’ll go in soon.”

We sat on the rooftop of Milk’s garage and peered into our neighbor’s back yard on the other side of the wooden fence. We thought it strange that other people lived right behind us, but we’d never seen or spoken to them. Their yard was so much bigger than either of ours. It had grass instead of cement, like Greg’s. A full-grown tree stood tall instead of power lines. Two collies hid from the rain under the back porch. Milk and I perched without saying anything. Our neighborhood seemed a little more aggressive all of a sudden, as if all the bugs and small animals were calling for the rain to come. And finally, with a loud crash of thunder, it started to pour. We were drenched within seconds, but neither of us moved.

“I used to be scared of storms,” I shouted over the rain.

“I know. You called to warn me whenever you thought a storm was coming.”

“Cause I was worried there was going to be a tornado.”

“Tornado,” he yelled. “Have we ever had a tornado?”

“No. I was too young to know, though.”

My arm hurt very badly, but I didn’t want to move. A stream of blood flowed down it, mixing with the rain. A lightning bolt shot down from the gray sky and struck near our neighbor’s house. The collies let out two crying yelps, but stayed hidden.

“That was really loud,” he said.

“And close.”

I looked at Milk. He was soaked through. His brown hair looked black with wet. His bangs dripped into his eyes, and his eyelashes dripped onto his lips. We stared silently at each other through the rain.
“I always want to kiss you,” I shouted. “Not because I want to date you. I’m just really happy we’re friends.”

“I know what you mean,” he shouted back.

Then he slid next to me, kissed my cheek, and put his arm around my shoulder.

I heard the back window of my house screech open, and my mother called my name a few times. She sounded scared. Without thinking, Milk and I leapt down to our separate backyards.

“I’m here,” I shouted.

My mother looked lost in her anger, but I was still thinking about Milk. We both paused before we went inside.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I called to him over his fence.

“See you.”

When I got inside, my mother had retreated to the living room with Moon on her lap. She stared at the floor and then at me.

“Why are you bleeding?”

“I cut myself just now.”

“What was Milk doing behind the garage with you?”

“Nothing.”

She paused, and her flat voice became very serious. “I don’t ask you to do anything. Ever.”

“What’s the big deal?”
“Milk.” This sentiment had been a long time coming. For her, it didn’t matter that he and I had grown up together. In this moment, his name contained everything bad that would ever happen to me.

“He’s my best friend.”

“You really could’ve gotten hurt out there.”

“It’s not like I would’ve been struck. How often does that even happen?”

“And you lied to me. You’ve never lied to me like that.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I want you to take a break from Milk.” She said it like she was telling me what was for dinner. It was nothing to her. The words just spilled out. I protested for what seemed like hours. I begged her, pacing back and forth in our living room, but she wouldn’t budge. She sat on the couch, stroking Moon’s back, resolute as always. She appeared to take the slightest pleasure in denying me access to my friend, to teach me some lesson. I knew her opposition responded to something greater, something direr than Milk, but I couldn’t figure out exactly what.

That week, the week of the storm, I started having muscle spasms. I attributed them to how much I had been crying over not being allowed to see Milk, but once my jaw locked, my mother realized I’d actually contracted tetanus. My unpleasant time spent recovering in the hospital only confirmed my mother’s fears and caused an argument between her and the hospital, who notified Child Protective Services after my school’s administration had confirmed that my mother had neglected to keep me up-to-date with my shots. The situation was only serious for a few days, and got cleared up. However, amidst my recovery came an overwhelming grief, mostly for my mother. With her new moral approach to life, inspired by Tanner and the church, she had begun to feel in charge of her emotions, her style, her outlook, even me. This incident seemed to
remind her that she still wasn’t completely on top of things, that I was still a burden in unpredictable ways, and that even if she rehearsed motherhood day after day, she could never quite get it right.

Only two months would pass before Milk would move out of the city. Awake on the hospital bed, I lay silent, and sad with all of this knowledge, reminding myself that the hurting I felt was physical, too.
I expected that getting over the loss of Milk was going take a long time, but was surprised to find that his move soon became for me like everyone else’s, normal. With or without him, I would keep up with my tom boy ways. Because of my short hair and my loose, plaid shirts, strangers assumed my gender was male, and maybe it was, for a time. My expression had made sense to my boy friends, which made it easier for them to hang out with me. It wasn’t until my mother started bringing me to her church that I was invited to a girl’s sleepover. The girl was a church acquaintance, and my mother, recognizing the lasting quality of my questionable gender identity, made me go. A few of us played pin the tail on the donkey with some of the younger invitees, even though we felt too old. When it was my turn, I was blindfolded, and wandering around the acquaintance’s living room, when I bumped into a girl who asked, in a singing voice, “Hello, who are you, little boy?”

I pulled the blindfold down from one eye, and that was how I met Buena. She was shorter than me. She tied a red, faded bandana around her head and wore an extra-large, tie-dyed T-shirt that read “WWJD.” A blue bubble cross appeared beneath the writing.

“Little? I’m older than you, I think,” I told her.

When she heard my voice, she said, “Oh. You’re a girl.”

Buena started attending the church regularly, too. Her pants were always too short for her, and her brown sandals with straps looked like shoes a mother would wear. She had yellow teeth sometimes. After I spent some time convincing her, she joined in my after-church ritual, playing football at a nearby park with some church boys. I taught her how to play, and I covered her so the boys wouldn’t hurt her. A long pass was thrown, and miraculously, she caught the
ball, but I was standing close and in front of her and wasted no time. I tackled her. As our bodies passed through the air, I smelled her, and I didn’t get up immediately after we hit the mud. I imagined burying my nose right inside her armpit.

I could tell Buena liked me because she invited me over a lot. Most of my weekends were spent at her house. For this, my mother was grateful. Aside from being nervous about my gender identity, lessons at church also made her guarded about my purity, so the fact that, finally, I had made a girl friend, quieted her new Christian fears that had been unsettled by my close relationship with Milk.

Buena had her own space in her parent’s attic, with a bed frame that she and her father had built from wood. Whenever she and I entered that space, she stripped off her clothes and spent the rest of our time up there, naked. I didn’t think much of it, because she was so comfortable. We read magazines, listened to music. I occasionally brought Moon along with me and she let him roam free. We dyed his fur pink. Buena taught me how to braid her hair.

Eventually, we took a shower together. It seemed about as natural as eating lunch together. I sat at the back end of the tub, and she stood facing the spray of the water above her. I looked at her body. Sometimes, Buena seemed like a woman, and other times, she seemed like a girl still. Her breasts were large, like a woman’s, and I thought of the boys, what they might think of them. Her skin still seemed young, though, tight. Her face, too. I looked at her crotch. She had hair there, and I was glad mine finally had come in. I always had new questions I didn’t want to ask my mother, questions I saved for Buena.

“Do you use tampons?” I asked her in the tub.

“Of course, everyone does.”
“I don’t. It feels funny.”

“It’s normal for it to hurt the first time.”

“No, I don’t know if it hurts. It’s just too much.”

She sat down on the other end of the tub, allowing the water to spray me right in the face. She spread open her legs and pointed to her vagina, a small black hole surrounded by her pink skin.

“It’s right here. This is where it goes.”

“I know where it goes, Buena.” I spit out some water.

“If you just keep pushing, it’ll go in. It might hurt, but it’ll go in. And after that, it won’t hurt anymore.”

“Okay,” I said dryly, because even though I had started the conversation, I wanted it to end.

“Are you crying?” Buena asked.

“No, it’s the water.”

I couldn’t tell what was wet on me, and I didn’t care. I stood up and held out my arms for her to grab. I yanked her up and we stood next to each other so that neither of our bodies got a full spray. She was the first girl my age who I saw naked. Buena and I were under the water, and I loved her.

Her parents were out of town for the weekend, so we sat in Buena’s living room, I on the couch, she in the big cushy chair. She started crying, and this wasn’t the first time. My boy friends always made fun of me when I cried, so I wasn’t used to hanging out with someone who
cried regularly, but Buena’s crying could start from thinking about her dog dying five years ago, or the French fry she had just enjoyed, or anything, really.

Her body was small and naked in the chair, so I approached her and climbed into the chair. From behind, I wrapped my arms and legs around her body to stop her from crying. After a moment, she turned to put her hands on my chest. She pushed me hard, away from her.

“Get away from me,” she snapped.

She moved to the couch and continued to sob, and left me in the chair. I stared at the floor, which was green and flat, cold on my bare feet.

Something changed for Buena after she pushed me. She acted normal, but then a switch flipped from time to time, and she became another mother to me. At night, she always rubbed my back and asked if I was sad, and I started to wonder if I was. We ignored her bed and shared her futon, and before we slept, she read books aloud to me. Whenever I seemed down, which to her was somewhat often, Buena would draw a bath for me. The only baths I ever took were at her house. She would add bubbles and leave a folded towel on the toilet seat. I would enter the solitary space she created for me and lock the door. Visit after visit, I bathed alone in Buena’s tub while she sat in the next room, at the kitchen table, reading and listening to news radio. I hummed to myself, my eyes closed.

Buena and I sometimes showered together like we used to. But sometimes, she showered with me like a mother and a baby would, not as friends. She would sponge my back and sing songs from church, never stopping to talk or ask me about my thoughts. She wanted to take care of me, and she wouldn’t have it any other way.
On news radio, Buena had heard about a lone male wolf that was traversing the countryside in the northeast. Researchers had been trying to repopulate the area with his species, and their hope was that he would find a female wolf and mate. He had a tracking device around his neck, and the researchers were interested to observe that, even after years had gone by, the wolf still hadn’t found a mate.

“He’s just picky, I guess,” Buena heard the voice joke on the radio.

“There’s no rush,” another said. “He’s waiting for the right woman.”

“Aren’t we all?”

Buena and I frequented a discount movie theater. If it was a hot day, we arrived hours before the movie started, and we hung out in the lobby eating dollar popcorn and drinking a single jumbo soda, which we shared. We enjoyed the air-conditioning, because our own houses didn’t have it, and we watched back-to-back movies. Sometimes, we’d take an intermission and buy some french fries next door.

On a sweaty autumn afternoon, a skinny lady from Germany cornered us in the lobby and, without our asking, told us that men liked blondes with big hips and full bodies.

“And girls like that are asking for it,” she continued.

She had short black hair and was twig skinny. She adjusted her earrings, which were bold and plastic, and licked her bright red lipstick off her teeth.

“Asking for what?” I spoke up.
“That’s what the German men like,” she repeated to herself. “That’s all they like,” she mumbled, stumbling away.

The theater was mostly empty, except for an older man who decided to sit at the end of our aisle. We saw the white in his eyes, even in the dark. His eyes moved between the screen and our legs in our shorts.

“Why is he here by himself?” I whispered. “Isn’t this movie for girls our age?”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Buena said.

That just confused me, but then, Buena looked over at him and said audibly, “Ew.”

Soon after, he left.

The church started a weekly gathering for young people, which was open to the public, and because it was in the city, it filled with neighborhood youth. April Sandy was one of the new girls and she was developed. She had small breasts, but she had them. We all had them to some extent, but April Sandy let them hang out of her tiny shirts. She dyed her hair normal colors, like lighter shades of brown. She liked to hold babies.

“That girl’s asking for it,” I overheard a conversation between my mother and Buena’s.

“Who lets her out of the house looking like that?”

April Sandy looked too dumb to ask for anything. She wasn’t smart or fun, but boys preferred to kiss her over Buena and me, because she wore these black shorts that went right up to the tops of her thighs. She wasn’t extremely athletic, but she showed her legs shamelessly, which were long and meaty, in a healthy way. She had beauty marks up and down them that led our eyes straight to her center. And what was under those shorts? I knew and I didn’t know, because I never thought about it in terms of sex. I never considered that she had space under
there for men, and so did I, for that matter. And that the boys that licked their lips and followed her around had less and less space in their pants when they thought of her. What they did with all the tightened space, I still didn’t know.

We took April Sandy to the discount theater one night. While killing time walking around the lobby, I noticed people’s heads turning to look at her. This never had happened before, when Buena and I hung around in the lobby. For the first time, my shirt felt extra-large and unnecessarily loose, my hair super short, my face too bare.

After the movie ended, April Sandy decided she didn’t want to wait for Buena’s mom to pick us up, so she walked home in those black shorts.


“I like the fresh air.” She took off.

“You’re asking for it!” Buena recited.

“Asking for what?” I persisted.

“It.” She said impatiently, hands on her hips.

There were no forested areas in the city, but while Buena and I waited for her mom, we imagined that April Sandy’s walk went through woods that pressed against that main city street. We didn’t know what happened exactly, but we imagined what everyone said was true, that she would get what she was asking for. That on her walk home, a whirlwind of loose leaves caught her and tangled her hair with dirt and spider webs. The ground shifted beneath her feet and she fell, sprawled on the ground. Dirt, stale feathers and twigs filled her mouth, nose and ears. Cars on the main street stopped, the doors flung open, and dogs inside smelled her, raced to her, and April Sandy was theirs.
Buena and I thought of the northeast wolf reading a newspaper in the Mediterranean restaurant. He sat in the back of the restaurant, wearing a fedora and trench coat, eating a falafel salad, and peering over his newspaper out the front window. He tried to go unnoticed, but after April Sandy had gotten what she was asking for, after all the dogs had their way with her, the wolf tore off his coat and with his quick stride, the wind blew his hat from his head. His freed ears heard her barely breathing, and he approached her slowly. She was unrecognizable, and the wolf couldn’t bear it, her character forever blemished, so he ate what was left of her, her heart still beating in his belly.

April Sandy made it home that night without a scratch on her body. Having only driven the distance, we didn’t realize how close the theatre was to our houses, only four longish blocks. At the time, however, it seemed unthinkable that a girl our age would walk home at night in those shorts. We weren’t sure what it meant, but over the months, Buena would ask me with a silly smile on her face, “Remember when April Sandy walked home?” And we’d laugh nervously at first, because of what could have happened. Then we’d laugh openly, because nothing ever did.
The church building was built in the nineteenth-century. It had all the features a lot of old churches around the city had: stained glass windows depicting religious scenes, a sanctuary, classrooms for Sunday school with chipping paint on the walls, and a large stone tower. I had heard rumors that people did things in the church tower, but I never had been up there, up those cold, dark stairs that led to the dusty attic room. For most of my years at the church, the tower had been incomplete, in needs of roof work. But it was what made the church look ominous on the corner of Tanner’s street.

Tanner had started inviting some of the better-behaved neighborhood girls over for sleepovers. If we wanted to, we could talk about all the things we didn’t understand about God, which was a lot. Mostly, we could just be ourselves.

At one sleepover, we were up late, with a wind storm howling outside and tree branches tapping against the windows. Tanner sat on an oversized couch pillow in the middle of our circle, her Great Dane, Dalí, was the only guy present. He lay next to her, big lazy eyes shifting between us.

She told us, “I like to walk Dalí when it’s late at night. Have you ever walked around here late at night like that?”

None of us had. We all lived a few blocks away.

“Sometimes, not always, when I’m walking Dalí, I think I hear someone playing the organ,” Tanner continued.

“What do you mean?” Buena was skeptical.
“There are no lights, just sounds, and music comes from the sanctuary. I hear it, the quiet keys echoing up through the open tower.” She smoothed the fur on Dalí’s back, and he lifted his head with perked ears.

“Maybe the music director likes to practice at night,” Buena offered.

“He doesn’t have keys, and whoever is playing is sad.” She waved her hand slowly in the air, miming a conductor, index finger and thumb pressing together. “Playing slow, mournful melodies that suspend in the air.”

That was all Tanner needed to say, and it was determined. Our small group of girls was headed to the church in the middle of the night. We stood on Tanner’s porch. Buena tucked her nose into a multicolored, knit scarf. The wind whistled through the trees. Someone’s porch chimes jingled. Our faces were soft, but nervous. Tanner led the way.

We followed her down her porch steps, our feet tapping the concrete, then down the road to the side door of the church. We huddled around her as she fumbled with the keys and unlocked the door. Then we stepped inside, out of the autumn wind. It was black. No moon shone through the window. We climbed up the stairs to the sanctuary on the second floor, and no one spoke a word. As Tanner creaked open the solid wood door, Buena and I held hands, our eyes hardly adjusted.

A lone street lamp glowed through one of the stained glass windows at the back of the sanctuary, and tree shadows danced in the wind. We felt our way along the walls, between the pews, and toward the light. I lost Buena’s hand in the dark. When my eyes adjusted, I saw Tanner at the tower door, working to find her keys again. The door opened and a draft swept through the sanctuary. I heard footsteps walking up the wooden steps, each step groaning from lack of use, and I followed them into the tower. When we reached the top, we looked around and
at each other. This was it, a rocky, empty space with a large plastic tarp covering the holes in the roof, which swelled and sank with the wind.

“How could anyone do anything up here?” I whispered to Buena.

She shrugged.

“There’s nothing up here, Tanner,” Buena said.

“How,” Tanner said, almost to herself, and headed back down toward the sanctuary.

We followed blindly, and when we all got to the open room, Tanner said quietly, “Shh, listen.” I heard the wind and the fluttering of bat wings in the organ’s open pipes that stood tall and threatening, somewhere in the black before us. It was in that quiet place with our hearts beating faster and faster that one solid chord rang from the pipes so loudly that we felt trapped by it. Bats rose from the pipes and circled the high, vaulted ceiling, messily flapping their leathery wings. I pressed my hands over my ears to cover that first sound, and I saw shadows running quickly, the girls passing through the aisles and down the stairs as if a wind blew them right out of the church. I moved to follow them, their screams echoing behind them, and when I made it to the door, I stood there with it open. Buena’s scarf had gotten caught on a black railing, and the wind was tossing it around. I watched it twist and heard something behind me, a sweet laugh that only could be Tanner’s. It moved through the sanctuary, down the steps and to my ears.

I unhooked Buena’s scarf, wrapped it around my neck, and instead of retreating to Tanner’s to receive some lesson about the prank, I walked home, pressing forward through the wind. Before I made it to my house, I paused in front of Milk’s old house. It was tall and green, and it always smelled like it had just been painted, even though I had never seen anyone paint it. The tree his mom had planted when I was very young, before I even knew Milk, was now half the height of his house, and its autumn, color-changing leaves made me wistful.
I lay awake that night, thinking about which chord it was that the pranksters agreed to play. I could hear Tanner saying with her convincing smile, “Let’s try F sharp, or no no, C diminished.”
The gray cat owned my street. Everyone used to call her Smokey until, one day, Adam told me how Smokey corrected him with a stern look. Her name was actually Evie. So Evie owned the street, and her existence was locally nomadic.

Someone would move onto our block, adopt her, feed her, groom her. She was in charge, though. Evie never spent the night indoors. After years passed, and her caretaker moved away, another would move onto the street and discover the gray cat without a home. Evie never left. The neighborhood was her home. She killed birds and rats. She chewed on pieces of tall grass. She lay, fearlessly in the middle of the street, and when a car approached, she just stared deep into the driver’s eyes until the driver had no other choice but to put the car in reverse and drive down a different street.

For my birthday, I had always dreamed of asking Diana or Felicia to bake me a cake. My mother informed me that I would, of course, have to pay them, which I thought strange, because I had spent time with them in their gardens and at their parties as if they were my friends. On my birthday morning, that was the argument we were having as Evie lay on the hot asphalt of the street. She saw the car speeding toward her, and reacted out of character. She chose to move. She chose to jump up and run. The car passed in one swift advance, never slowing or stopping. I imagined all the critters of the neighborhood looking on in horror. Perhaps, the driver didn’t hear the “thud,” perhaps he didn’t even notice. Evie lay, lifeless in the middle of the street, sprawled out in escape. We both heard it from upstairs in our apartment and we both inched towards the window to confirm it.
I had recognized my mother’s connection to animals in her relationship with Moon. In warmer months, she often brought him outside and tied him to the fence so he could graze. Still, her sorrow over Evie’s death surprised me. She was the one who put Evie’s torn body in a shoebox and carried her to be buried in our backyard. She dug a shovel into a small patch of grass and lifted it.

“I’ve known this cat longer than I’ve known you,” she told me.

I had been presented with the fact that there was life before my life, and that thought humbled me, and made me cry. When my mother finished piling the dirt into the hole, she walked over to the back door, then turned, propping the shovel on her shoulder. I stayed back, looking at the tiny pile of dirt, the reduction of what was such a solid presence in our lives.

“They’re not your friends,” my mother rebutted, punctuating our conversation from earlier. “They’re grown adults, and cake making is one of their many jobs. You have to pay them.”

Her comment hurt me. She didn’t understand. She wasn’t there when I had sat on their porches drinking lemonades, and they told me all of the names of their plants and flowers. The one I always remembered was stachys byzantine, lamb’s ear, because it was the softest.

Felicia and Diana were both from Puerto Rico, and they always held huge competing celebrations, sometimes outside, with a mesh of grilled meats and tables upon tables of homemade food. My favorites were always pastelillos, with the crispy outside and the juicy beef and potatoes inside folded to look like an open-mouthed smile. And cake, of course. If I or any of my friends happened to be walking by when one of their parties was taking place, be it for a Tía’s birthday, or a particular holiday, they never hesitated to invite us into their backyards and
introduce their whole extended family to us while hugging us, then they shoved cheeseburgers into our hands. I must have met Felicia’s Tía Claudia at least six times.

I had tasted many cakes from both, because aside from all the parties I had been to, both Diana and Felicia provided cakes for every church function. My favorite cake had always been white chocolate frosting over a strawberry layer cake. The more strawberries, the better. Now, Diana was the one who always baked fruity cakes. I had tasted her lemon ginger cake, her pineapple upside-down cake, her peach cake with a crust, her Japanese fruit cake, all of which were delicious and dense.

Felicia had always featured the chocolate cakes. Chocolate lava, chocolate cheesecake, black forest, fudge rings, each one sweet and sometimes savory. Her cakes made me feel guilty. The choice of which woman to ask was obvious, but I didn’t want to assume that, just because Felicia hadn’t veered from chocolate in the past, she couldn’t make a white chocolate strawberry cake. Against my mother’s will, I walked to her house.

Before her door had opened all the way, she was already hugging me. Inside her house, almost everything was made of glass. I tiptoed around, not wanting to break anything. She asked how much time I had before my birthday, and then suggested we make it right then. She tied a small yellow apron around my waist. We spent the afternoon mixing all the ingredients, baking and frosting the cake. It was a rounded perfection, a sugary masterpiece. She placed it inside a plastic carrying case for me. When I exited Felicia’s house, cake in hand, she kissed me goodbye on the cheek.

On my walk home, I felt uneasy. I knew my mother would scold me for not having paid Felicia, which would only add to the day’s frustration. At the same time, I felt good about the
fact that I was right. Felicia and I were friends. With that thought, I heard a distant gentle tapping on a window. I looked up at the house to my left, which was four stories tall, one of the old Victorian-style houses turned into a set of apartments. It was faded yellow and, like so many of the houses, it had a large wrap around pillar with circular windows.

Standing at the top window was a large man. He wasn’t wearing any clothes and he was touching himself. I stood there, staring up, my mouth agape. I had never seen a man’s penis before, and there it was, erect in his hand, looming over me. The man grinned, which made me tense, and my cake slipped from my hands and fell face down on the ground. I pounced on it to salvage it, but the top had smashed into the carrying case’s lid. The lid cracked and cake bits flew out the sides. It smelled so sweet, I started to cry. Then, I heard a door creaking open and felt someone watching me. Without looking up, I left everything behind and ran home.

When I arrived, confused and upset, my mother finally asked me what kind of cake I wanted for my birthday. I thought of telling her what had happened, but I felt ashamed of the whole thing, the man, the cake dropping, like I deserved everything that had happened.

“It doesn’t matter,” I answered.

We went to the store together, passing by the cake remnants en route. I sat silent.

“Evie would have lapped that up,” my mother stated.

I tried to imagine Evie, but couldn’t. I looked to the same window where the man had been. The frame was empty. We returned home with a flattened, store-bought coconut cake, which tasted artificially sweet and clung to the roof of my mouth.

In church the following Sunday, Diana assaulted me with spatula.

“I heard Felicia made you a cake.”
“I did, and it was delicious!” Felicia shouted from across the room.

“Why didn’t you come to me, mija?” Diana said softly. “I know you love my fruity cakes.”

“I have a lot of birthdays left, Diana. I’m already planning for the next one, and you’re the baker I have in mind.”

She grabbed me with her whole body and squeezed me so tight the breath flew right out of me.

“You’re the sweetest,” she said and kissed me on the cheek.

I searched the room for my mother, to see if she had witnessed this outright affection, but she was seated, eyes focused on nothing, and listening to Tanner, who was beaming.
Part Three
Buena mentioned urban exploring one wet, late autumn afternoon when we had driven the short green distance to the country to view the sunflower fields. When I was younger, the distance between city and country seemed infinite, because visiting the country was the farthest I had ever ventured from home. The more I rode my bike, however, the greater awareness I had of the concept of time and space. I realized I could bike almost anywhere. A thirty minute car drive became a morning bike ride. Buena had learned how to drive recently. Instead of taking the bikes, she got her chance to show off a little bit.

Buena’s parents were always going through some phase. When I first met them, they were hippies, who wore loose-fitted hemp clothing and smoked a hookah from time to time. Later, they became religious fundamentalists, but their propensity to be strict was weak, so that didn’t last too long. Then they got into preservation, and attended city council meetings regularly. Now, Buena was telling me about their recent adventures in urban exploring that ranged all over the city, into old houses, the psychiatric center towers, the warehouses, their list went on. They viewed it as a healthy hobby, not bothering anyone or anything, a simple documentation of what used to be. They took all sorts of shadowy pictures of doors and sockets, of wood binding, and breaking. Buena was sounding more and more excited as she went.

“Wouldn’t it be fun?” she asked me.

“I don’t like empty spaces.”

“They’re not empty. My parents always find really cool stuff.”

“Rotten wood and broken glass?”

“No. Remember I told you they found a giant mushroom in that old basement?”
“That’s kind of gross.”

“Let’s just do it. We could do the grain elevators.”

“Which buildings are those?”

“That massive industrial cement blocks on the south side. My parents haven’t been there. I could be the one to tell them about it, for once.”

“What are we going to do, break in? I’m sure there are fences.”

“Come on, that’s the whole point. They’re abandoned,” she twisted her hair in her fingers, hot pink nail polish reflecting the sunlight. “You don’t have to go in with me. Just ride with me there.”

“Ride bikes? That will take the afternoon.”

“It will take an hour and you know it. There’s nowhere to park a car. Just come.”

I couldn’t understand the appeal, and when I didn’t respond, she stayed quiet. We both looked at the expanse of sunflowers before us, which displayed the most concentrated yellow I had ever seen at once. The yellow pushed into the bronze of Buena’s cheeks.

“How do they get all of this in a yellow crayon?” Buena asked.

“Fine. I’ll go with you.”

We waited until the first snow, when the air and ground was dryer, because riding bikes in the autumn rain wasn’t always so pleasant. It felt good to sweat underneath a light winter coat. We pedaled our bikes silently, twelve miles along the lake to the edge of the fenced grain elevator property and parked them in the shadows of the looming, abandoned structure. There was no need to jump the fence because old tears marked every few feet. We slipped in easily, like mice, scarves trailing behind us as tails.
This was my first time standing right next to this structure. I had only ever seen it in the distance, from a car window on the thruway. To call it huge was a complete understatement. Shaped as three-dimensional trapezoids, the length covered a small city street, the height towered ten to fifteen stories over gravel and wintry weeds. Though it took up an incredible amount of space, the silence of the structure made me think of a gutted turkey, something so empty, where all this life used to be.

As we approached, iron walkways crossed overhead, and I started to get the eerie feeling that someone was watching us. At the back of the building was a chipped, painted olive door that opened to a long switchback flight of stairs. I told Buena I was too scared to go in.

“I’ll go by myself, then,” she said, and she walked right through the open door.

I propped myself on a cinderblock on the gravel, noticing how motionless the ground was, nothing crawling. Then, about four stories up, Buena opened a pink door on the side of the building. There were no stairs, no attached fire escapes, no warnings of a four-story drop. If she had opened that door and walked straight, she would have plunged to her broken end.

With one hand on the knob, she called out, “This is crazy! Why is this door here? And why is it pink? Looks like someone painted it. I could have walked through a pink door and died just now.”

“Be careful,” I shouted back.

“You have to come up here. Come and find me.” With that, she slammed the door shut.

I had no intention of going to find her, so I relaxed onto my cinderblock, and spotted a tugboat in the distance on the gray lake. I watched it pass for what seemed like an hour. I heard nothing from Buena and saw no movement, not on the ground, nor anywhere on the giant cement shape before me. Even the air was quiet.
I was always watching Buena do things. One of the first weekends we spent together at her house, when her hair was short and crazy from the humidity, I remember her standing in front of the mirror, both hands clasped on her head.

“Can you find me a comb?” she asked. “I never comb my hair.”

I handed her a comb from my bag and watched her as she tried to vanquish the black firework on her head. She inserted the comb at the top of her scalp and tried to pull down with all her might, biting her lip, hard. The comb wouldn’t budge.

“Oh, well,” she said, “I give up,” and stuck the comb back in my hand.

There was the time she went to day camp for theatre and came home late. My mother had already dropped me off at her house, so I sat in her room, waiting for her return. She entered maybe an hour or so later with her face painted like a sad clown. She reached for some cleansing wipes and announced matter-of-fact, “I’m never going back there again.”

Then there was the time she wanted to make collages and we stayed up all night. I sat in the puffy chair, eating popcorn and watching her fill up an oversized poster board with magazine images she had spent hours cutting with perfect precision. When she finished, she displayed it on an artist’s easel from her parents’ art class days. The easel was what had inspired Buena to start collaging in the first place.

“It’s so ugly,” she said.
The next morning, I watched her burn the collage in a metal garbage can in her back yard. She complained that she wished the fire had been a more dramatic, that it was too smoky, and not “flamey” enough.

The tugboat disappeared. I could see my breath. I hadn’t heard Buena for a while, so I started to worry. I entered the building, stood at the bottom of the stairs, and shouted her name.

A voice called back, smoky and older, “Leave us alone.”

It hadn’t occurred to me that people might inhabit this easy-to-access structure for shelter, and that those people would be men, and maybe they would be dangerous. I ignored the voice and called for Buena one last time.

“Is Buena her name?” the man said.

My heart pounded in my ears. I pushed the door so it banged against the wall.

“Who is it? Who’s there?” I heard my voice, weak.

“I’m here. Come up the stairs.”

I thought for sure this man had Buena. I charged forward, stumbling up the stairs until I saw him sitting on the floor in the corner. He could have been any man. He looked as average as a white bar of soap, like he had stopped off here after he put in an honest day’s work, clean khakis, a green polo, hair resting neatly atop his head like a carefully crafted bird’s nest.

“Who are you?” I responded, slightly out of breath.

“Buena’s a pretty name.” He smiled pleasantly, like we were meeting on a park bench, but his uncanny presence unsettled me.

“Look, it’s getting cold. We have to go. Have you seen her?”
“Isn’t it crazy how the seasons change in these middle areas, in these places where no one lives anymore, where no one works? Where all that stands are these hollowed buildings that used to signify power and wealth, life and function?”

I suddenly became aware of the room we were in. Massive empty pipes caterpillared overhead. Boxes with colors that were popular in a different decade were scattered across the floor.

“Even though no one is here to feel the seasons change,” he continued, “to watch the dust in the corner stir after a hot and stagnant summer, by a wind that starts his gentle whisper towards the end of summer and pushes his way in full force by the beginning of autumn. Even though no one feels the cold creeping in through the old cracked glass or the broken pipes, it’s still coming. The wind, when he builds up all of his potential, when he’s as strong as he can possibly be, he moves from here, from the lakeshore into the city. He abandons these empty shells to find life, veins pumping with blood.”

Now the sun passed directly by one of the windows in the room, hanging lower and lazier in the sky.

“I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about. Where’s my friend?”

“Then, comes that one night when the wind rapes everyone in the city.” He smiled again, but the crookedness that made it seem ordinary the first time turned it macabre.

As if roused from a trance, I moved back to the hall, shouted for Buena, then shot down the stairs. When I glanced back, the man wasn’t looking after me. Instead, his head turned up towards the window with the passing sun, looking as though when it disappeared, he would, too.
The sun landed just at the horizon when Buena appeared from inside the warehouse. I saw through a window her head of black hair with hints of red bobbing down the stairs.

“Hurry!” I yelled.

When the door creaked open and she stepped outside, I ran to her, threw my arms around her and kissed her all over her face.

“You should have come in. It was so cool,” she said through the kisses. “There was glass everywhere, doors leading to more doors and then to nowhere. Someone’s stuff was in there, too. Someone lives there. Can you believe that? What are you doing?”

I couldn’t answer her. My eyes were wet and my throat choked. I kept kissing her cheeks, her eyelids, her lips, all over. She gave me a hug and started to laugh, and she kept laughing for the whole frosty bike ride home.
Tanner had been talking about this conference that came to town annually.

“It’s for people like us to talk openly about God,” she told us.

“Don’t we do that already?” Buena asked. She was seated next to me on Tanner’s porch, both of us feeling wider, like two pears, wearing our thick winter coats.

“It’s also for other people,” she said, “like your friends who don’t know God.”

“Do I know God?” Buena asked.

“Of course!” Tanner laughed. Her blue eyes popped against her white puffy coat. “You both should come this year.”

Based on Tanner’s enthusiastic recommendation, Buena’s parents and my mother were eager to send us, despite the price. When my mother asked Tanner about the cost, Tanner’s husband stepped up and found financial support from the church. All it took was for Buena and me to attend church for three consecutive Sundays. Our attendance had become sparse.

Church services were always a mellow experience for me. Unlike my experience in the grain elevator, I felt mostly comfortable in the large, open sanctuary with high ceilings, the pews inscribed with the names of the dead. The palpable history of the building, still living on, undecayed, made the space, the air, even the sermons trustworthy, with the exception of one.

On one of these Sundays, the pastor spoke of women’s roles in the house, and I realized then, after several years, what my mother was trying to be, simply what she thought was a good Christian. But she could never do it just right, because no woman could, it seemed. I thought to myself, *Who could dress appropriately and beautifully, who could withhold sex until marriage, marry to an absolute equal, prepare her house, help with the income, be graceful, humble, and*
compassionate? Who could do it all, accomplish every prescribed step? Who would want to?

The more I listened, the clearer it became that women carried the heavy load in this religion and the men simply benefitted. And if I were someone like my mother, just a little lost, I would internalize all of these expectations and feel guilty for not having met them.

Before I had the chance to process those sermons, the three weeks had passed, and our attendance to the conference was paid for. Buena and I were excited, because neither of us had ever stayed in a hotel room, and we would have it to ourselves without supervision. I daydreamed in a nonspecific way about what our time together might be like.

The first thing we did upon arrival was to start up the bath, water running hot. We both slid in. Buena often complained about her breasts, how they were heavy and hung too low, and she liked to keep them supported as much as possible. She put on her bikini top, after we were already in the water. I, on the other hand, didn’t care one way or the other. My breasts had stopped growing and were simply two pointed, fleshy cones. I liked them just fine. Buena was jealous at the ease with which I chose my outfits and slipped on shirts with or without a bra. That I had the option is what bothered her most. She considered it unfair that it was generally unacceptable for a big-breasted young lady, like herself, to go braless. It also didn’t help that everyone looked at her breasts all the time, boys and girls, young and old, even at church. She told me that during any discussion of sexual purity, she felt all eyes on her, as if the size of her breasts automatically made her impure, and she would have to try harder to cover up more thoroughly, to offer consolation. I often was tempted to step between her breasts and the person talking to them, to become a protective fortress.
She had even purchased a bra called the Breast Lessener, and she pretended to be a giant-breasted superhero. If she were to unstrap her bra, her breasts would bounce all over her enemy, wreaking havoc on everything in their destructive path.

When Buena started comparing our breasts in the tub, a common, self-deprecating activity, I swayed over and rubbed my nose between them. She continued without pause, as always, dismissing intimacy, so I repositioned myself at the other end of the tub and slipped beneath the water, only hearing her sing-song mumbles.

Jeff Party was a well-known pastor of a suburban mega-church and one of the voices on the radio we heard when Buena occasionally switched over to the Christian station. Buena and I had listened to a few of his sermons, most of which started with a variation of this joke: “The only party I attend is the Holy Ghost Party.” While we were both aware of his cheesesiness, we were also excited about the novelty of seeing him in the flesh.

The conference was strange from the get-go. All the songs had nothing to do with any reality I knew. People our age acted very serious. They knew all the words to the songs. They cried while they danced. They did everything that whoever was on stage told them to do—raise hands, get on your knees, walk over here, turn to the left, pray. Buena and I often glanced at each other for support. We both felt confused.

On the last night of the conference, Jeff Party’s sermon revolved around his son, who was a paraplegic from the hips down. Jeff Party stood on stage and announced to a crowd of thousands of girls and boys my age that he believed whole-heartedly that God had told him his son would be healed and would walk. Then he brought his five year-old son onstage, and set him up to stand.
“If you all pray hard enough right now, my son will walk tonight,” he challenged the room in a firm voice.

Buena and I glanced at each other, mystified.

“Pray hard?” I whispered.

The crowd started raising their hands to the stage and speaking out loud.

“Are they praying?” I asked.

She shrugged, and we both looked to the stage where Jeff Party, sweat glistening on his cheeks, was now dangling his son by his arms, like a marionette trying to coordinate his puppet’s movements, in hopes to encourage his feet to plant themselves on the ground.

I felt a tickle in my throat, the beginning of what turned into a coughing fit. My coughs echoed so loudly, someone turned to me and said, “It’s the devil making you cough.”

Buena leaned over, “The what?”

“He’s trying to ruin this.”

The stranger wrapped her hands around my throat and started praying for me.

My cough only got worse, so I slid out from her strangling grip and bent over onto the ground to hack, crouching among a forest of legs.

Buena squatted down beside me and said, “This is weird. Let’s get out of here.”

I coughed my way through the chanting crowd and out of the room.

Jeff Party’s son was not healed that night. Though I had expected as much all along, I still left the conference with an air of disappointment, and I wasn’t sure with what.

In her attempts to perform as an invested person, my mother asked me how the conference was. While she habitually followed motherly protocol in this way, now our
relationship became somehow more strained, more distant. Maybe I was growing impatient. She sat on the couch with Moon in her lap, and methodically dragged her finger from above his nose to the top of his head. Moon was the one constant in my mother’s life, one aspect that remained unchanged, aside from a few of his hairs turning gray. Perhaps the simplicity of caring for him, nothing more than daily food and water, and his unwavering trust in her comforted her.

I tried to tell her about how strange that night had been. She nodded slightly, looking past me, like she used to, so I cut the story short. All of this business at the conference and at church, these were the things that had made my mother think she couldn’t just wear black t-shirts and sneakers anymore, made her think to put on a dress, convinced her that mothering me wasn’t quite enough, that she had to be more of a leader than that. I blamed people like Jeff Party.

“I liked the way you used to dress,” I told her. She looked up at me.

“I was younger when you were younger, too, you know?” she replied. “Now we’re both older, and I have to consider that.”

“Why does any of this mean you have to change?”

She sighed, placed Moon on the floor who shook out his floppy ears and leapt softly behind the couch, and she picked up the book resting next to her on the end table. The book was from a Bible study she had started hosting for an elderly group in our living room on Wednesday nights. Tanner’s husband had recommended a book about God’s grace for her to read and lead a weekly group discussion. She made me read it with her for preparation, and our efforts at mother-daughter discussion tapered off after the first chapter. If the grace of God were a complicated topic to begin with, it only became more elusive after reading this one man’s take on it.

She never answered my question.
I peeked in on Wednesday nights from the kitchen, my gaze traveling through the dining room and into the living room where my mother sat on her armchair before a circle of folding chairs filled with old folks, faces sagging like wet oil paintings.

She hosted for a few months, until one of the women collapsed in our living room. She just fell out of her chair onto the floor. I saw it happen, and that my mother stayed seated. Other guests stood to try to help, but my mother sat staring, like it was a dream. I ran in to help the woman back up and realized she was dead, that if I pulled her arms, I would feel all of her weight, and maybe feel surprised at how light she was.

An ambulance and a firetruck arrived quickly to remove the body. My mother stood behind the crowd, apprehensive. I watched the ambulance team stabilize the stretcher, transfer the body, carry the unit like a carefully wrapped package through the door, down the stairs, and out of the house. The rest of the guests, my mother and I funneled out to the front porch, where we awaited the police in a jumbled circle. The police officer realized within a few seconds that, of everyone present, I had the soundest report. As I relayed all that I had witnessed, the officer took notes, nodded her head.

“Do you have anything to add?” She pointed her pen at my mother, who stood close, slightly behind me.

I glanced back at my mother. Flashing blue and red lights danced across her face. She folded her arms tightly and shook her head no. The officer shifted her eyes between my mother and me a couple times before directing her final comment at me.

“That’s all we need for now, Miss.”
I realized I was the authority figure in this moment. I saw the guests to their cars. I patted people on their backs. I gave one man, who smelled of dusty leather, a reassuring hug. The police lights drifted away, down the block, with a parade of old people’s rusty cars trailing. My mother had already gone inside and had retreated to her bedroom. She was too tense to continue hosting after that.
Buena continued her ritual of listening to news radio, and one afternoon, while she painted her nails, we lay like carelessly tossed pillows on the stiff couch in her basement, legs entangled, listening to an interview with a girl who had sold her virginity on her own accord.

She was twenty three, a middle-class North American, and fairly attractive, according to her. She posted the offer on one of those sell-your-stuff websites. The post read: My Virginity..........$1,000,000 USD. Seconds later, she had a list of interested parties. She recalled to the interviewer protesting against all who were concerned for her: “The reservations of others were endless,” she said. “My mom thought it was plainly immoral. My dad considered me damaged. My closest friends called me a prostitute. My sister kept asking about love. The more I thought about it, though, the firmer my resolution became. ‘What’s stupider?’ I thought, ‘making a million dollars off of my meaningless virginity, or being broke and giving my sex to someone I think I love, but who statistics say won’t be my monogamous lover for life?’”

“How radical,” Buena said sarcastically.

“Why do you say it like that?”

“Because no matter how she wants to see it, it’s prostitution, plain and simple. She sold her sex. What’s the big deal?”

The radio voice went on, “The media disowned me and my church community slammed their doors in my face. I had many high bidders internationally, but I finally made a deal with a forty-seven year-old Canadian entrepreneur who was in an open marriage. His wife wanted to watch us. ‘I could be a millionaire,’ I kept saying to convince everyone. ‘Then I was.’”

“What is virginity, anyways?” I asked.
“Something about your body being a temple,” Buena recited, fanning her hand to inspect her nails.

“It was a business transaction and nothing more,” the voice continued. “I promised I would try my absolute best to perform, as long as he was gentle and kind. I completely respect what happened behind their closed doors. When it was over, I was just like every other twenty something year-old, sexually active, except I walked away with 2.5 million dollars and a good story.”

The conversation ended with the interviewer asking if she had any regrets now that some years had passed.

“I have no regrets. I feel as good today as I did that day and the days before. The only thing that sucks is I had to move to a new country and change my name to be loved again.”

Over the years, Tanner had continued her regular visits with my mother. More often, the pastor joined the two. All their time together meant to me was that my mother was still recovering from the tragedy of her friend, Sonya, that permeated much of my childhood experience. Tanner and the pastor treated my mother like she was the most important person in their world. They mostly ignored me. The pastor attempted small talk with me from time to time, but the tone he spoke with was meant more for a kid, which I wasn’t anymore.

I learned to drive after Tanner and the pastor loaned their car to my mother while hers was at the shop. Among many items they loaned her, a microwave, a hammock, a hammer, they never took it back, so I had a car at my disposal. When I drove, I found myself wanting to be alone more often, so I journeyed to the parkway that ran along the river. The river wasn’t frozen, but most of the lake was covered by a sheet of ice. My favorite time to sit there was during the
thaw, when all the ice cracked and broke, and for days, I could watch the large ice pieces float down the river towards the falls. This frosty evening, I idled in my car while a light snow covered my windshield. I let it all turn white, like an empty canvas, and I occasionally flicked my windshield wipers to paint the canvas with the image of the other country sitting just across the river.

A cop car pulled up, no lights flashing. I figured the cop would fling his door open, roll out of his seat, and tap on the steamy windows, get rid of those taking advantage of this particular parkway’s exclusivity. Before I knew it, he was tapping on my window with his flashlight. I rolled it down, the chilled air cutting my cheek. He directed his flashlight into my eyes and I instinctively looked away.

“What are you doing?” he asked, with a noticeably deep voice.

“I’m not doing anything.” I tried to look around the beam of light.

“This is my job.”

“What is?”

“Can you step out of the car, please?”

“I’m just sitting here. It’s a public park. I have every right to be here.”

“The park closes after ten.”

I looked at the clock: 10:49.

“Officer, there are other cars around. Maybe mine is the first you’ve checked, but I know that people are here doing worse things than I am.”

He clicked off his flashlight, and the light of the moon lit his face. It was earnest, sort of, like the face of someone under a manager’s watch, who could be handing me a bag of fries from a drive-thru window.
“I’m not here to ruin everyone’s fun,” he said, smiling.

“Do you want me to go?” I asked. “I’m too cold to keep my window open like this.”

“Don’t you have heat?”

“I don’t want to waste my gas.”

“Your electricity is on.”

I clicked the keys over once more and the lit numbers of the clock vanished.

“It’s warm in my car. Why don’t you come and keep me company for a little while? Help pass the time.”

“I’m not going to get into the back of your car to stare at a bunch of bars.”

“You can sit in the front.”

I opened my mouth to say something smart, but nothing came out. I knew then, or maybe only in memory, that he wanted me. Whether I could define my feelings or not, the sensation was new to me and provoked a certain curiosity. Besides, he was a cop, and I was sure nothing bad would happen.

“Do you have a gun in there?”

“Yes.”

“What if you shoot me?” I joked, letting my guard down a bit.

“I’m not going to shoot you.”

I stepped out of my car, thinking this felt innocent. I felt innocent.

I was some inches taller than him.

“I’m Officer Pender,” he said. Snow crunched under his boots.

We sealed ourselves into his car, still warm from when he was in it, and the locks automatically clicked. I was there to stay in this other world. Between our two seats was a long,
black gun cradled upright in a rack. He turned the car on and heat blew steadily through the vents.

“I’ve never been so close to a gun,” I said.

“It’s an AR-15.”

I didn’t know what that meant, but I knew now why he wasn’t worried that I would shoot him. The contraption holding the gun looked more complicated than the gun itself.

“There’s no place for teenagers to go,” I told him.

“I know. I suppose that’s why you’re here. You’re not looking for trouble. Inspiration maybe.”

The tone of his voice changed, sounding smooth and slow, now, like the river.

“Tell me about yourself,” he continued.

This was more focused attention than I had ever received. I began to feel trapped. I could see him facing me out of the corner of my eye, but I kept looking forward to the river, the heat suddenly making me feel uncomfortably warm. I didn’t answer.

“Do you like to swim?” he asked. “My wife hates it.”

“Your wife?” I felt safe again, momentarily.

“She doesn’t like a lot of things.”

“I swam well in school when I was younger,” I answered. “My teacher always wanted me to join the team, but it seemed like a lot of work.”

“You look like you have good strong legs for swimming. Nice and long.”

I looked down at my legs like it was the first time I saw them. Officer Pender took my hand in that moment.

“Do you want to go for a walk with me?” he asked, almost in a whisper.
I knew the only place to walk was into the darkness of the harbor breakwall, with the water deep on both sides.

“It’s too cold,” I said, interrupting my own uneasy thoughts.

Steam crept up the sides of the windows. He moved my hand over to his upper thigh and let out a long breath. The heat suffocated me and the presence of the gun between us made my heart beat faster. I didn’t look at him the entire time. With one hand, he unhooked his belt, unzipped his pants. Wherever he put my hand, I kept it there. I didn’t pull away. His sighs faded. He gripped my hand tightly, curved my fingers for me. Any temporary anticipation I had felt prior to this moment dissolved into shame. I stared out the window, watching snowflakes fall and melt immediately upon landing on the hot windshield, their unique shapes lasting split seconds then fading into an indecipherable pool, a slick moisture coating the glass. I took my thoughts elsewhere.

When I was younger, there was only one time that I went to the beach with April Sandy. She didn’t want to invite Buena. Girls were always doing that sort of thing to each other, leaving someone out of plans for no good reason. I felt too guilty to admit to Buena that that’s where I was going, so when she called me that day, I said I was busy doing homework. I didn’t even have fun at the beach. I only had a boring, one-piece and April Sandy flaunted her body in this tiny pink bikini. I came home with sunburn so bad on my arms, legs and back, I cried that night when I tried to lay down, the coolness of the sheets scratching my sensitive skin.

When I saw Buena a few days later, my skin was falling off me like an overly ripe piece of fruit. I walked into her attic, sad for a number of reasons: my skin still hurt, I looked like a monster, and I had lied to Buena and it was so obvious.
“Why didn’t you tell me you were going to the beach with her?” she asked.
“I don’t know.”
“It’s not a big deal.”
“I just feel bad.”
“Come with me.”

She took me by the hand to the bathroom. She made me stand inside the tub and face the wall. Then she pulled off my tank top over my head and started peeling my back.

“Does it hurt?” she asked.
“Don’t you think it’s gross?”
“Ooh, this is a big one.” She pulled the loose skin gently and tactfully, dropping each peel into the tub.

“I’m making a new you,” she said. “Now you’ll never leave me again.”

I felt the sensation of tears forming.

“Especially for April Sandy,” she continued. “I bet she looked like a hoe, anyway.”

Then she started laughing in her contagious, melodic way, the sounds bouncing of the porcelain.

Officer Pender relaxed his hold, tipped his head back, and stretched his legs forward. He tucked his shirt in, made himself presentable again. I drew my hand back to my lap, kept my eyes focused straight ahead. My heart still pounded in my chest.

“I really enjoyed my time with you.”
“Me too.” I heard my small voice break through my prolonged silence.

He leaned forward in his seat to catch my eye. Without turning my head, I peered at him.
“You can stay at the river as long as you like tonight,” he said through a smile. Then, he leaned over, and I cringed as he kissed my cheek. His chapped lips scratched my skin.

“OK, yeah. Thank you.” I didn’t know what I was saying.

When I slammed the door of my own car, a pile of snow slid off the window and I felt exposed. The cold pushed in on all angles of my face, freezing any weak, surfacing tears, forcing the red in my cheeks to sink off the sides and disappear.
XIX.

At least one blizzard buried the city yearly. Sometimes, they came more often. When I was younger, this meant warm houses, snowmen, forts, no school. It meant having one meal all day—hot chocolate with powder so thick it was both food and drink in one. As I grew older, storms acquired different significance. They meant people without homes would be cold. They could even die. They meant old couples would pull muscles while shoveling out their cars. They meant frostbite, earth power. The year the storm hit in October, I felt like part of me was buried beneath it, only to melt away and fade forever, like fallen leaves.

Buena, who became more beautiful with age and the longer her black hair grew, moved into a house with some older girls, college drop outs, at her first opportunity. They had faux French ways about them, wore tiny hats, smoked cigarettes, quoted poetry. Given my involvement in the university, they always looked at me as though I were simpler than they were. To them, real intellectuals taught themselves, and didn’t have to pay to be educated.

They called their house the Castle because, for an apartment, it was huge and made of stone and brick. It featured domed ceilings, a large bay window, thin wooden doors rounded at the tops, even a token stained-glass window in the bathroom. They had been living there for a while. Somewhat randomly, they started hosting weekly dinner parties for artists and thinkers in the community. The first party coincided with the October storm. As guests arrived with homemade contributions for the buffet, snow fell heavy outside, covering rooftops, thick like an overly knit afghan. Inches of white along the front steps became feet within the hour.
Snow has a way of bringing out youthfulness. While eating from their paper plates and watching the news, the guests brimmed with excitement. One newscaster reported that a man had already died under the weight of a fallen tree. That only made people more eager to go outside.

The Castle girls didn’t wear coats or gloves, and they all threw snowballs at the outer walls of the Castle. Others rushed outside, tackling each other in the snow. They mocked the storm in October, challenged it to a duel. One girl made the shape of a pistol with her frost-nipped hand and pointed up at the sky.

“Bang,” she yelled.

Something about their regression bothered me, so I walked home, snow piling on my hat and shoulders. When I arrived home, my mother was sitting at the window, watching the snow fall. Moon was on the floor, and I squatted to pet him. I felt his bones beneath his fur. He was getting old. My mother looked done up, dressed and ready.

“You’re not going out, are you?” I asked.

“I’m waiting for someone.”

I knew who that must be.

“I don’t think Tanner can come tonight. It’s really bad out there.”

She turned to me with eyebrows arched in concern. Then the phone rang and she jumped up with such energy, it startled me.

I moved to my bedroom, hearing my mother’s soft hums accept what I assumed to be Tanner’s explanation of why she couldn’t visit this evening. My mother sounded so disappointed, helpless.
I lay awake that night remembering when Buena took me out for my first drink, which turned into my sixth drink within the first two hours of our outing. We were with all her friends, which I never minded, because they always did all the talking, so I never had to. I don’t remember much from that night, but I do remember all their voices, loud, like a flock of overexcited seagulls, and I remember Buena seated next to me in the booth.

“I love this girl,” she announced to the others. “I love her so much.”

She swung her arm around my neck tight, spilling my drink a little into my lap. I looked over to her, our faces very close, our images mirrored—wet eyes, smiling. Then, she slid her hand between my legs gently, rubbing her finger on the inseam of my jean shorts.

“Buena,” I said, jumping an inch, but she pressed her arm down around my neck so I couldn’t move and touched her lips to mine, and my eyes shut tight, a black world of sensation.

Her fingers slid up and down and her tongue pressed through my lips. Through closed eyelids, I saw camera lights flash. I heard the Castle girls shouting over the music. I kissed her back, pushed my body close, finally enabled, grabbing her breast in my hand.

Then she stopped. Her train track smile crossed her face.

“I love this girl,” she said.

When I woke up in her bed the next morning, she was not there. I found her perched at the front bay window.

“Can you believe that, Buena?” I asked, groggy, relieved that she had allowed something to happen, and so publicly.

“Believe what?” she said.

I half laughed at her confused smile.

“We kissed.”
“No, we didn’t.”

“Buena, we did.” I said, suddenly feeling desperate. “And it didn’t feel bad.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t remember that at all.”

She stared out the window at the cars passing.

“Your roommates took pictures. I’ll show you.”

I searched the house, barged in two of the Castle girls’ bedrooms to discover them sprawled in slumber. I found two devices with photos, and brought them over for Buena’s inspection. We scrolled through to see pictures of the bar, me and Buena, drinks, dancing. There were none of us kissing. No evidence.

“Did you delete them? I remember the flash.”

“I really don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I looked at the picture of Buena and me, her arm around my neck. In my memory, she was happy and smiling, but in the photo, she appeared thoughtful, sad almost, her smile slipping away like water draining.

The snowfall stopped during the night when only birds could notice. When I stepped outside in my full winter garb, jacket, scarf, hat, and gloves all making me sweat, I was shocked to see every single tree on my block had broken under the power of the snow. The tree next door had split in half from top to bottom. The weight of the October leaves in combination with the early snowfall ripped the branches right off. I stood, staring at what was left of the tree, and felt such sorrow that it had died so young.

Someone in my periphery snapped a photograph, and when I looked up, I saw Josh Whine’s camera pointed in my direction. As with many of the boys who lived in the
neighborhood and moved away, I hadn’t really spoken to Josh Whine in years. With age comes a gendered silence. I hadn’t even seen Josh Whine in passing in two years or so. Within that time, he had changed. His sharp face and dark complexion, his gray eyes and thick fur hat on his head, made him a man, a winter prince.

“Milk’s old tree,” he said in a deep, delicate voice.

I didn’t speak. From where he stood, I smelled the natural oil in his hair poking out from under his hat. My body felt like a zoo with a broken front gate, animals gradually gliding through.

“Why are you photographing me?” I asked.

“I’m photographing the storm, its effects.”

“Are you back in town?”

“I’d heard the storm was coming, and I didn’t want to miss it. I’m here for a few days.”

“Nobody knew it was coming.”

“Well, here I am.”

Whenever the weather acted erratically, the crows chose one of the parkways which spoked off of the center hub of the city, and they gathered in the treetops. This activity, like the blizzards, occurred yearly, and yet also remained unpredictable. No one knew what pushed them south, and what pulled them to that particular parkway. No one knew how long they would stay or why they had come. Upon their choosing, they flew off, leaving the once blackened trees empty, bare, and wanting.

This October storm was such an event that the crows couldn’t resist, and the broken-limbed trees were covered, dripping black ink. While hundreds of crows squawked and cried,
more flew in from the north. Josh Whine was staying with friends in an apartment around the corner from my house. He wanted me to come with him to photograph the crows.

We found them in the parkway near the pond, which was frozen. We held hands to glide into the middle of it, then sat cross-legged. I closed my eyes. The wet from the ice soaked through my pant legs. I felt the heat from Josh Whine’s face close, next to mine. After he kissed me, I opened my eyes, gently pushed him away, stood up, and walked home alone.

I recognized a familiar physical curiosity, but failed to experience any psychological desire. I wanted it and I didn’t want it simultaneously. I wondered if he pushed into me because I had signaled something. Maybe simply being there, going with him to the park, meant I wanted to kiss. I wondered if he had planned it. I was at once both amused and disgusted. We had just met, sort of, in our adulthood. Why move so fast?

When I arrived home, I went looking for my mother. I was angry. I felt the urge to demand answers: What was happening to me? Why wasn’t I natural in my response? Why didn’t I want it? Was everything wrong? Why didn’t she prepare me for these things? After all this time, why couldn’t she and I talk? I stormed through the living room and pushed her bedroom door open without knocking.

When I experience the next moment again in memory, only then will I hear the voices on the other side of the door, the breathing. Only then will I remember that my body, pushing forward unannounced, and my mind, feeling a split second of hesitance, were not working in sync. That another sense in me noticed that my unpreparedness from moments earlier with Josh Whine would carry into this one, for I was in no way prepared for what I saw when the door swung open and revealed my mother’s naked body pressed between Tanner and her husband. I know that I didn’t stand there longer than a half second, but in my memory, the scent of skin
clouds the room. I see a body, completely naked, seated upright, her head leaned back so that I don’t register her full presence until after the fact. I see Tanner with her bare chest, touching my mother’s breasts. I see her chipped navy nail polish. She’s leaning into my mother, her face buried into my mother’s neck. I see the Pastor with his hand between my mother’s legs, kissing the other side of her neck. He is naked. He is erect. My mother is receiving. In my memory, they don’t stop, but in reality, I don’t know what they did after I interrupted. I fled with as much speed as I had arrived. As I passed through the apartment, the walls in the living room narrowed, the staircase lengthened, the door leading outside felt rooted, and I pushed hard to escape. Outside, I sucked in the chilled air in deep breaths. I wondered where to go. Standing in the middle of the street, I realized no one was bounding down the stairs to offer an explanation. No one was shouting after me.

As a girl, I considered running away from home from time to time. Maybe my mother had made a decision I didn’t like about something simple, like I couldn’t go to the movies, or I couldn’t eat dinner at Milk’s house, or maybe I was just upset about her general lackadaisical attitude, how nothing ever stirred her. I wanted to run away to make her worry, to make her feel sad about me. I would leave. The urge would hit me so solidly and I would drop what I was doing, run down the stairs, and start down the street.

But the further I moved from my house, the greener the air smelled, the louder a car sounded, the more eyes I felt suspicious on me, and I would turn back knowing that she, of course, would care if I really ran away.
I had no intention of returning to my house now. That’s how I ended back up with Josh Whine. I wanted to tell someone what I just saw, to help me make sense of it. When he answered his door, however, I didn’t mention it. Instead, I leaned in and kissed him on the lips.

“Buena and the Castle girls are baking cookies tonight,” I told him.

“Do you want to come inside?” he asked, gently.

“No. Come to Buena’s.”

He hadn’t taken off his coat yet. He jumped into his shoes and reached for his hat, and we were off.

Because of the storm, most of the streets in the city lost electricity for days. At the Castle, we made a fire in the stony living room. I laid down on a sea green blanket behind Buena, my arms wrapped around her warm, solid body. Josh Whine laid down on the other side of me, spooning me.

The world would end a few times in my life. I would return to my house days later, and my mother would tell me the same way she always told me everything, straight-faced, unaffected, emotionless, that maybe it would be best for me if I didn’t stay in her apartment. That there were things happening that she couldn’t explain, things that might make me uncomfortable. She would have already packed some of my things. I would leave abruptly, forgetting the bag. I would cry, but not plead, because I wanted to believe that neither of us were wrong.

Before the world ended that night, however, I heard laughter and smelled cookies in the kitchen, and I dragged my hips away from Josh Whine and towards Buena. We folded into each other like lovers, and sisters, and best friends. Josh Whine pressed against me from behind, and I
was trapped between too many loves, and the smell of cookies was intoxicating. Later, everyone’s eyes were closed to sleep. My body lay awake all night.
As suggested, I hadn’t returned home since the storm. My mother didn’t know where I was exactly. I hadn’t bothered to tell her, but I had a feeling she could guess. It would have been obvious that I would turn to Buena. During those quiet months in the Castle, my confusion and anger secretly grew into an obsession with my mother, in which I reflected on what a complex woman she must have been all along. Early memories snuck up on me, entered my mind without asking permission. I’m not even sure if some were mine, but each one was so vivid that I believe they were real memories.

I was seated on our old red couch, my legs stretched out in front of me, not even close to touching the carpet. My mother was young and held Sonya’s hands loosely. They were playing my grandmother’s records. They were dancing and laughing. I had never seen my mom laugh like that, other than in that moment, her eyes squinted, her mouth open, her body naturally moving as if she did this regularly. They kept looking at me, pointing at me and moving their hips, singing along, but I can never remember to which song, almost like I never heard it at all.

We were in my mother’s bedroom, the three of us. I stood at the edge of the bed, my hands touching Sonya’s feet. I was tickling her without trying, and she playfully tried to shake me off. My mother’s arms dangled over the side, and she pinched me gently, then she joined me in tickling her friend’s feet. She bit her bottom lip. Her friend was laughing so hard, it sounded like crying. Her red hair was in a bun that bounced atop her head at the other end of the bed. The
window was wide open. The curtains were sheer and there was so much light in the room with us, like the memory itself was overexposed.

Sonya’s mother came over to inform my mother of the news. I listened and peered into my mother’s bedroom from behind the half-closed door. It was nighttime and the same window was open. In the air was the moist smell of rain coming. Her mother was saying things I couldn’t hear or didn’t understand, but she was crying and hysterical, grabbing my mother’s shoulders, pulling her head into her chest. My mother’s eyes were drowned. She looked like a doll, empty, staring tight-lipped into the mirror, her head wrapped in a thoughtless playmate’s arms.

I spent long winter afternoons unraveling observations of my mother. All I could do was speculate about her relationship with Sonya, how young they were, what their young love meant and the devastation that pervaded every aspect of my mother’s life after Sonya’s murder. I recognized my mother’s complete cluelessness after my grandmother had died, which resulted in her general immaturity in raising me.

The fact that no reference of my father ever surfaced led me to believe that he was either nobody worth mentioning or a contributor to yet another of my mother’s painful memories. Even though I justified her need for self-reflection, her insistence that I leave the apartment, her firmness still hurt me. It was the epitome of her inability to care for anyone but herself.

When I relived the moment with Tanner and the pastor, I didn’t feel upset with my mother. All of these memories intermingled with the images of who my mother was to me growing up and who she was now, a woman I didn’t know, perhaps never knew, but truly wanted to know in time.
Meanwhile, I was dependent on Buena for everything, her clothes, her food, her bed, her carefree attitude. She never asked me what had happened, and at first, I was relieved, but later, I was annoyed with her lack of concern. It had been months. It was as if this was exactly what Buena had wanted all along, controlled intimacy, which still confused me, because her other actions proved aloofness.

She stood at the counter, barefoot, and chopping vegetables. News radio was on too low to hear.

“A sharp knife is the most important thing to have when you’re cooking,” she told me, eyes fixed on the onion.

The kitchen was too small for two people. I sat in the next room, looking on from a rocking chair. Her comment seemed like it was meant for no one, an audience that wasn’t there.

“I’ve been seeing a guy,” she said.

“A guy? Since when?”

The onion’s scent made its way to my sad eyes. My body felt trapped under a barrel of onions.

“We had sex yesterday.”

My heart stopped beating.

“For the first time. I had sex.”

I heard my long sigh fill the corners of the room. She ignored it.

“I’m glad I’ve been masturbating for so long,” she continued.

The image of Buena made its way into my mind. She’s young, in grade school, pushing her hips into the corner of her desk, feeling pleasure no one else even knew existed, pleasure I
still didn’t fully understand. I had never masturbated. With exception of Buena’s unadmitted touch, my sexual encounters were mostly undesired and abrupt.

“I didn’t want to, at first, really. But I could tell he really wanted it. It hurt like hell. I cried, and he held me for two hours after.”

“Who?” I waited for her to look at me, to acknowledge me.

“You’ve never met him.”

I heard the knife pinching the onion’s skin.

“Really, it felt like I died a hundred times,” she said with her eyes down and her brows raised.

I knew that this was the beginning of me losing Buena, and I felt distraught. I rocked back and forth in the chair, thinking of Buena straddling a faceless man, in control, connected like radio waves, and me, dejected, and stuck in that dumb chair.
Buena and I had learned on news radio that, in the past week, four women in their twenties had been raped in broad daylight in surrounding neighborhoods. The newscaster said it so matter-of-factly, as newscasters do, but Buena and I instinctively glanced at each other. One woman was putting her motorcycle in her garage, another was walking home from work, another jogging, and the last, leaving her house to go shopping.

“Daytime rapes?” Buena asked in the direction of the radio.

“Women should take extreme precaution when walking the streets,” the radio replied.

“What do you think that means?” Buena asked, this time in my direction.

We soon found out what it meant. The implication was for women not to leave the house unless something pressing came up. And when I did leave the Castle, every man became a predator. Because nothing was hunting the predator, men felt safe, which meant more men than women walked around freely.

At first, people hesitated to ask all the usual questions, because girls already knew that if they were out by themselves at night, something terrible could happen, and what did they expect? But during the day, that was something different. If I tuned into the conversations of others, at a coffee shop or in line at the grocery store, everyone was saying the same things.

“These girls weren’t even doing anything.”

“These girls were just living their lives.”

But after a month or so, the conversations turned.

“What was the jogger wearing?”

“Maybe they were her tight winter leggings.”
“Why were these girls even out by themselves, at all?”

When I walked around, the streets seemed unguarded, sad. If I saw a woman walking down the street, she was quick and nervous, like me. No woman lingered too long in any one place. We all began to think about how not to get raped.

Buena locked me out of the car. All of us, actually, me and the Castle girls. We had come to the country to go on a late winter hike, so we could sweat in cold air, and get away from all the urban fears, and Buena started sobbing the moment we left the city. When we parked the car and shuffled out, we heard the click of the locks. The others had given up on convincing Buena through the closed window to come out, so they left her in the car and started on the hike. Still, I stood by the door, watching tears fill her eyes. She perched in the back seat with her knees pulled up to her chest. She glared at me out of the corner of her eye, her lips chapped and wrinkled. I knew why she was upset.

The day Buena told me, icy rain fell from the sky. We sat watching T.V. in her living room, both tucked under the same undersized green blanket.

“I’m pregnant,” she said, slightly smiling, looking forward, and putting a chip in her mouth.

The muscles in her cheek were churning the chip.

There were many things I could have said.

“That’s just great, Buena. You’re going to get rid of it, right?”

That tiny smile ran off her face like an escaped dog. I heard her breath pass through her nose. She nodded, and that was it. I didn’t ask whose it was. I didn’t offer help. I was jealous.
I buttoned my winter coat and sat down, propped against the back wheel by the door. The hills to the east were blanketed with black penciled trees. The half-setting sun emphasized their shadows.

She finally cracked the window, and a voice so small rose from inside, “You made me do it alone.”

I wanted to tell her that I didn’t understand her, that I wanted to touch her, kiss her, be with her.

“I’m sorry, Buena.”

“You need me.”

“I love you.”

“Fuck you.”

An hour had passed by the time I heard her unlock the doors. I waited for the others to return before we all got in. Buena cried for the rest of the day, all through dinner, through our entire drive home. She wouldn’t tell anyone what was the matter, and she insisted we continue with our plans.

When the car arrived to the Castle, Buena stepped out quickly, still crying. She turned to the car, looked at the girls, but not me, and said, “Thanks guys. Thanks a lot. It’s nice to have such good friends.”

She sniffled and walked up the stairs. We watched her, knowing we would follow behind her in seconds. She looked like a girl, so small under the bulk of her black winter coat.
XXII.

After that winter hike, I started spending more time with Josh Whine. I still lived in the Castle, but I felt less inclined to burden Buena with my presence. Also, I didn’t know how long Josh Whine was going to stay. I wanted to take advantage of his unbiased presence.

We stood in the tight corridor that runs through the first floor of the house he stayed at, listening to his roommate poke away abstractly at the piano in the next room, when Josh Whine asked me to go with him to photograph the trains. I realized how little I’d considered the trains, their history. They were a part of my memories as a young girl. I saw them and heard them often. They passed through back yards with their long drawn-out horns echoing between houses and buildings to remind us of their presence, but I’d never stopped really to think about them, about their wheels, about their sliding doors, their smoke, their drivers. I’d never ridden in one either.

“What will I do?” I asked

“Be my lookout.”

“For what?”

“We’re going to some places we shouldn’t. I doubt anyone will see us or stop us. The train yards are pretty abandoned, but just in case.”

“How would I be able to stop anyone from catching us?”

“If we get caught, girls have it easier getting out of trouble.”

“That’s not true.”

He fingered the edge of a painting on the wall.

“What if it’s a woman who stops us?” I asked.

“Really?”
“Fine, I’ll go. I’ll need to borrow some winter stuff.”

We got ready together in his room.

“I’ll make sure you’re warm, first,” he said. “Take off your pants.” He held up long johns.

I slid off my jeans and stood before him in my underwear.

“Sit down on the bed.”

I did so and he maneuvered the tight long johns onto my ankles then up my legs to middle of my thigh, his fingers grazing the sides.

He looked up at me. “You’ll have to do the rest.”

I pulled them up to my waist and plopped back down on the bed. He rummaged through his top drawer.

“Wool,” he said, turning to me with large gray socks.

He knelt down and put each sock on over my own sock. Then he stood up, pulled me off the bed, and squatted down in front of me to start putting back on my jeans, again up to my thigh. I pulled them up to my waist and felt like a thicker version of myself. From behind, he put on me an oversized carhartt jacket, slid my arms in then spun me around to zip up the front. It felt like he was burying me, piling the heavy dirt on so I could rest easy, but I knew the cold would find ways to slip in, through the loose patches, the places where the gloves and coat sleeves don’t quite meet, through the zipper links. He put a black beanie on my head and patted my ears. Then he wrapped a knit scarf around my neck, his fingers touching my chin as he tied it in a knot.

“Who made this for you?” I asked.

“A friend.”
He had friends making him scarves.

“Are you cold?” he asked.

“I’m sweating.”

“Good,” and he put on my hands tiny gloves with fingers and then waterproof mittens over them.

“You’ll have to wear boots,” he said. “Now it’s my turn.”

I sat on the bed and watched him get dressed. He started by taking off all of his clothes except his navy boxer briefs. His body was what I imagined a desirable male body looked like, broad shoulders, tight abs and waist, toned limbs. Then, like a sketch turning into a painting, he added layer after layer, starting with a thermal undershirt and pants. When he was done, his face was covered to his eyes with a black scarf. His eyelashes were black and thick, and made two fish shapes around his brown eyes. In them, I saw every color shine that contributed to that rich brown, gold-green and black.

Dusk rolled in when we set out in my car, the same car Tanner had given my mother. I considered it my official property in the separation. Our first destination was the bridge to the other country that passed over the river. The sun beamed pink in the winter sky, overcast and fading like smeared cake frosting. Josh Whine took pictures and I sat on the hood of my car, still warm. Because I wasn’t doing anything else, I just watched him and saw how strange the whole act was. The bridge remained lifeless, yet Josh Whine photographed it as if it were changing.

Suddenly, it did. Snow shifted, a loud cry came from the bridge as it began to move.

“What’s happening?”

“A boat’s coming,” he announced, pulling his scarf down under his chin.
Down the river, two other bridges were lifting straight into the air, rusty flakes falling into the river. The bridge in front of us was spinning on its central axis. The river appeared split into two paths.

My eyes watered from the dry air. Josh Whine’s breath trumpeted out from his lips.

“I got it,” he said.

When we drove away, I spotted some old fishermen on the riverbank, casting their lines. We headed to the train yard. I parked my car on the bridge downtown that overlooked them. They appeared as colored pencils lined up, ready to be selected for a drawing.

The easiest way to access the yard was by cutting through an open factory with doors tall and open wide. Though no one was in sight, all the fluorescent lights were turned on. Josh Whine found a rolling flight of stairs so I could hop the fence in my inflexible wintry outfit.

“All you have to do is jump down,” he told me.

I followed him without thinking. Once we were in the yard, we chose a train at random, climbed its side ladder and sat on the roof with our thick legs dangling down the side.

“I want to sit here and take some photos from the train’s perspective.” With that, the train started moving. Josh Whine instinctively grabbed me.

“I’m fine,” I said. “Just cold.”

“This is good.” He perched his camera on his bent knee.

“There’s nothing, just snow.”

“Isn’t that incredible?” He snapped out-of-focus, moving pictures of the white on the ground and the white horizon, lights from the city streets reflecting off the cloud-sheeted sky.

“My car,” I said.

“We’ll get it tomorrow.”
We jumped the train at a point that was in waking distance to Josh Whine’s place. That night, while defrosting in his bed, I had a dream of my mother when she was my age, maybe younger, around the time of Sonya’s death. I saw her seated on a train top in some of her ripped jeans, her old sneakers, one of her t-shirts, her long brown hair getting taken up in the wind, wrapping around her face and her cold ears. When the train began to move, she didn’t even think to get up. I could feel her emptiness, her heart like the train, on tracks headed somewhere automatically, predestined. Like a stone, she sat still, unfeeling, until she and the train were out of sight, blurred into white distance.

Josh Whine and I returned to the same spot the next morning. My car once again was covered with a mass of untouched snow. He wiped his arm across in one swoop. He snapped one more photo from the bridge. When I glanced down to the train yard, it was empty, like a womb.
XXIII.

Buena left.

The year before, when we fell back into old habits, and she allowed me to spend the night in her bed, clung to her side, kissing her neck, she told me she was moving to Mexico. She was moving to Panama, she was moving to Colombia. It didn’t matter where. The night before she left, she told me she was moving to Peru, to Ecuador, to some other place.

“These countries are all different, Buena,” I scolded her. “You can’t just randomly select one.”

“My name means the same thing in each of those countries. It makes perfect sense.”

She told me she needed to be somewhere where the blood in her veins could slow down, relax in a community. So, she left.

I don’t know exactly how or where or with what money. For all I knew, she could have simply moved a few blocks down, but I didn’t see her for years. I tried to think of all the reasons why she wanted to leave. The smallness of the city, the harsh winters, the general stagnancy of the Castle girls, the memory of the abortion, the plainness of everything. I could see it all clearly mapped out before me, and still, it felt like she was only leaving me.

I moved in with Josh Whine and his roommates. I transferred my dependency onto him. When I wasn’t in class, we did everything together: planned our days, went for walks, cooked all meals, went shopping together. When spring rolled in, we opened all the windows of his dusty house, decorated with herbs and flowers. And we maintained a platonic friendship in which I slept in his bed with him most nights, and he held me while I missed Buena.
I came to know Josh Whine much better during our nightly chats. He grew up with a single mother, who miraculously held no resentment against his North American father, who left years prior to move to Germany, leaving them in the U.S. When Josh Whine turned thirteen, his mother gave him an in-depth book about sex and sexuality. Josh Whine read every page, studied every picture, felt proud when his classmates made gestures or joked immaturely, and he mentally corrected them with anatomically correct vocabulary. He knew what the clitoris was before many girls knew for themselves, and was excited about all the things he could do with one. He read that chapter over and over again, but couldn’t imagine himself trying any of this on girls his age. Instead, he fantasized healthily about older women in his life—his teachers, his mom’s friends, women at the supermarket. He even thought of his mother. He was glad that she had a clitoris. He didn’t waste much time considering her sexually. He was content to know that the vagina wasn’t just some open space, but rather, a complex ecosystem that was part of every woman.

He was the most open person I ever knew. He told me about his first girlfriend, who was a Catholic virgin, and who didn’t intend on having sex any time soon. He stood by her, spent time with her, watched movies. And if, when they were kissing innocently, he experienced an erection, he knew it was natural and was comforted by the fact that he could masturbate later and take care of his need for release. He was nineteen when he first had sex. His girlfriend initiated it, and they talked thoroughly before making the decision. He knew she didn’t know what to do but he did, so he took his time, laying her on her back, pulling her hips to his mouth. First, he simply breathed in the smell of her open legs, then he opened his eyes and faced her vagina, as if it were another living being in itself.
With soft fingers, he gently pulled back the hood to reveal her clitoris and began first by soaking the area with his saliva. Then he moved around it with his tongue, grazing the sides with every circle. He spread his attention to the labia and the vagina. He listened to her breathe, felt her legs twitch, tasted her wetness as it began to self-produce. It tasted slightly sour, like he had read some could, and he enjoyed the foreign flavor. When she was reaching climax, she pulled his head into her with her hands, smearing her fluids on his face until she finished. Josh Whine felt empowered with this skill he knew he had mastered, and observing the results of his knowledge produced in him an erection.

I imagined him allowing her to sink back, relax, waiting for her to regain composure, then beginning again, knowing that she may need more foreplay before penetration, as the book had said. This time, he added his fingers into the action to prepare her vagina.

He told me by the time he entered her fully, she was beyond ready. She was destined.

He was a pro, and an experience like that could have been mine, too. The first thing he did to me was kiss me, slowly, gently, studying the way my lips moved. Feeling my hips pressing into his, he unzipped my pants, sucked his fingers so they were dripping and slid them under my panties to rest gently. I wanted something to happen. But nothing did, because the more he tried to maneuver and accommodate me, the less I could feel. When he tried to insert his finger, I instinctively pulled away.

“You’re wet,” he whispered.

“No, I’m not.”

“You are. I can feel it. You’re body is ready.”

“I don’t feel anything.”
“That’s how it should feel.”

“Like nothing?”

He pulled his hand out of my pants.

“You’re not into me.” He wasn’t upset.

“I don’t want to feel nothing.”
Josh Whine didn’t go back to college. He said he would later. I had the suspicion he was sticking around for me, waiting for me to overcome several issues he had identified. I didn’t want him to go. Spending time talking with and learning about him made my situation with my mother seem desperate. I thought of her constantly, and Josh Whine’s emotional maturity allowed for a detailed contemplation and dialogue. He taught me how to express myself. He was the first person to point out to me how my mother was years younger than my current age when I was born, how lonely, inadequate, and confused she must have felt, how depressed.

He and I were strolling arm-in-arm down the produce aisle in the market.

“Hell, just call her,” he told me.

“I’m considering it.”

I thought I saw my mother everywhere, at cafés, on the street. I thought I saw her as we passed the ethnic food aisle, but the woman was holding a baby.

“That’s your mom,” Josh Whine said.

“I thought so, too. It’s not her.”

“That’s your mom. Look.”

I swung my whole body around. She was reaching to the top shelf for Indian jarred sauce. She wore a long, white, flowing dress with a denim jacket and brown sandals. Her hair was down, and I saw just how young she actually was. She propped a baby on her hip.

I don’t remember walking to her, but suddenly I was standing in front of her.

All Josh Whine’s suggestions of creating a safe space for healthy dialogue flew out the window.
“What’s going on?” I asked.

We were almost the same height, she an inch taller, and she tilted her head down, making eye contact.

“What does this mean?” I continued, impatient. “Whose baby is this?”

“You’re making a scene,” she said, almost uninterested.

“I’m making a scene?”

She stared at me, lips loose, no words waiting to come out.

“Tell me,” I said more quietly. “What does this mean?”

She still said nothing. The baby pulled at the neck of her dress.

“Is this your baby?”

Before she answered me, I had fled the store. I waited on Josh Whine’s front steps for him to return.

He meandered down the block and then finally planted himself before me.

“I talked to her,” he said.

“You talked to my mother?”

“She was really nice.”

I had no words. I couldn’t think of one person ever who had referred to her as nice.

“Whose baby is that?”

“Do you really have to ask?”

“What did you say to her?”

When he relayed to me their interaction, I couldn’t even imagine her confessing it. I couldn’t see her lips forming the words, her eyes showing the emotion. I couldn’t picture the scene.
“Why did she keep it?” I asked him.

“How am I supposed to know?”

“Why didn’t she tell me?”

“Go there. Ask.”

That night, after we ate dinner, I lay in his arms in bed, crying, this time, for all of us.

The city was one of those small cities in which people lived close but could avoid seeing each other without much effort. Given that Josh Whine’s house was in walking distance of my childhood home, it wasn’t long before I packed what few things were mine and the articles of clothing I had acquired in Buena’s desertion, and I made the journey home.

I turned the last corner to see a small street, one I had refused to step foot on since I had left. Most of the paranoia from the daytime rapes had worn off, but I noticed that no man passed me on my walk. My house looked mostly the same. Some paint was chipping on the sides. There was a “For Rent” sign in the downstairs apartment’s window. I wondered how long it had been empty.

I opened the door with my old key and walked upstairs and into my living room. The scent of rug and curtains hit me, dust stuck in the fabrics. The baby was sitting upright on the floor, playing with a stuffed elephant. A small guinea pig roamed nearby on the carpet. The baby wore a diaper and tiny blue T-shirt. I stood over her, gazing down at her. Her little blue eyes moved stiltedly from my shoes, up to my knees, paused at my stomach, and finally, made it up to my face. She seemed as if she would tip over if she looked any higher. I could feel my mother standing behind me, and when I turned, she was there.

“Moon died,” she said in a voice I’d forgotten. “Over a year ago.”
“Oh. I’m sorry.” I spoke low, but she heard me.

“I buried him in the backyard.”

“This is your baby.” I surprised myself with the statement.

She tipped her head to nod slightly.

“Where have you been?” she asked.

A flash of anger swept over me, remembering her asking me to leave.

“It doesn’t matter. I’m here and I’m staying,” I told her.

“OK,” she said, the same way she always said everything, plainly, without emotion, even though I knew she must have felt relieved, or happy or something.

I took a deep breath. “Do I put you in a box?”

“What?”

“Do you act this way because you think I expect you to act depressed?” Josh Whine’s genuine words echoed through my mind.

She let her guard down. “Maybe that’s part of it,” she said. “I was depressed, though.” Her voice was real, present.

“I know.”

She had never admitted her own weakness to me before. I felt this was a big enough step for now.

“I want to meet this little girl,” I told her.

“OK.”

She smiled at me. It wasn’t a forced or fleeting smile. It wasn’t fake. She smiled because I was there, and she felt happy.
I bent down and whisked the baby into my arms, carried her outside to the top porch, which looked out onto the street. I sat with her in a chair and settled her facing outwards so she could see everything. A father held his own baby across the street, bounced her up and down. He and I made eye contact. He grinned, perhaps thinking I was the young mother of this baby. I didn’t mind. In the middle of the street lay a black cat, flicking its tail on the cool spring asphalt.

“I have a lot to say to you, you know?” I told the baby. “I have a lot to say. And I’m going to say it all to you. But not right now. Right now, I’m just going to bounce you up and down. I’m going to tickle your belly and kiss your head and let you be. We have time for all of the talking.”

She was wiggling around, so I picked her up off my lap and turned her to me, lifted her so her little toes were touching my legs. She was so fresh, so clean.

“It’s you and me, girl. And our mother. And all the other girls. And the nice boys, too. We’ve got to know ourselves and take care of each other. Sounds easy, right? That’s all we have to do.”

With time and effort, my relationship with my mother would change. It would develop into one of two peers, two confidantes, even. She would tell me what happened over time, over countless cups of coffee. The time I walked in on her with Tanner and the pastor was not the last time they were intimate. My mother would continue to explore with them sexually after I left. They would continue to exploit her vulnerability. This baby was a direct result of their relations. The three agreed it was best for my mother to leave the church and act as a single mother, given Tanner and the pastor’s reputation in the community. I would suffer betrayal and fury on my mother’s behalf, and I would tell her how I felt for her, how I kept her close, in my mind, in my
dreams, over those years. I would share. Not everything, not all at once. But I would tell her I loved her.
Curriculum Vitae

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EDUCATION & LANGUAGE

Master of Fine Arts Degree, Creative Writing – Fiction
University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Nevada, Dec. 2015

Bachelor of Arts Degree, English
Hilbert College, Hamburg, New York, May 2010

Advanced High in Spanish Language Skills
Peace Corps Colombia, Cartagena de Indias, Bolívar & Barranquilla, Atlántico, Aug. 2015

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

TEL English Instructor
Aug. 2013 – Aug. 2015
Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje (SENA), Cartagena de Indias & Barranquilla, Colombia
- Developed curricula with host-country nationals of ESP for Hotel Administration & Tourism
- Created syllabi, lesson plans, assignments, and in-class activities for ESP & EFL for A1, A2-level Colombian students in Health Administration, Hotel Administration, Event Organization, and Tourism
- Taught EFL to B1 & B2-level Colombian college instructors with various career backgrounds

College English Instructor
Aug. 2011 – May 2013
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
- Developed syllabus, lesson plans, assignments, and in-class activities for twenty-five freshman undergraduate students and implemented all materials in semester long courses
- Taught a variety of Composition courses including English Composition (ENG 101) and Research Writing (ENG 102)
- Graded essays, exams, homework assignments, and determining final records and grades for students registered
- Advised students outside of class to discuss grades, essays, classroom difficulties, and dealt with individual student concerns efficiently and appropriately

Institute of Reading Development Instructor
May 2012 – Aug. 2012
California State University, Fresno & College of the Sequoias, Visalia
University of Nevada, Las Vegas & College of Southern Nevada, Henderson
- Implemented lesson plans for varying levels of enrichment reading classes
- Managed programs independently in various sites
- Collaborated with parents to evaluate their children’s reading capabilities

**Writing Center Consultant**  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

- Assisted students in developing, editing, crafting, and improving essays
- Tutored students in formatting and editing essays, bibliographies, case studies, resumes, cover letters, research papers, and personal statements
- Utilized teaching, mentoring, and communication skills in tutoring sessions

**INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE**

**Peace Corps Volunteer**  
Cartagena de Indias & Barranquilla, Colombia

- 06/15 – Bilingual Cultural Day – In Barranquilla, Regina presented information about her hometown of Buffalo to an audience of 100 SENA students and staff
- 05/15 – Oíste Poetry Jam – In Barranquilla, in collaboration with Mazzino Pizza, Regina co-planned and co-hosted a bilingual poetry and fiction-reading event, also featuring visual and musical arts, for an audience of 80 people.
- 11/14-08/15 – Oíste – Regina performed role of Copy Editor for Peace Corps Colombia’s quarterly online journal, a publication relaying PCVs’ experiences and reflections of living and working on the coast.
- 11/14 – English Song Competition – In Cartagena, at Colegio Maria Auxiliadora Regina judged an English Song Competition to promote bilingualism.
- 10/14 – FIT Feria – In Barranquilla, Regina co-organized and implemented the activity station and resume review station for over 100 students to spontaneously practice English at a job fair.
- 10/14 – Cultural Collage – In Cartagena, Regina co-facilitated with Volunteers Colombia an extracurricular cultural exchange for 60 SENA students to practice English involving collages and cookies.
- 08/14 – Juego de Busqueda – In Cartagena, Regina co-hosted with Volunteers Colombia a city-wide extracurricular English scavenger hunt with 50 SENA students to practice English skills.
- 04/14-08/15 – Publications – Regina published various articles, creative non-fiction and flash fiction pieces related to life on the Colombian coast.
- 05/14-10/14 – Stay Smart – In Barranquilla, Regina co-founded the Peace Corps Masters International Committee and co-planned and hosted various bilingual academic events to discuss scholarly journal articles.
- 01/14-07/14 – English Conversation Club – In Cartagena, Regina co-hosted, co-created materials, and facilitated a weekly English conversation club for Colombians to learn and practice English.
01/14 – World Map – In Cartagena, Regina co-planned and collaborated in painting a World Map on an exterior wall of the library at Fundacion Afrocaribe.
01/14 – Day without Garbage – Regina participated in a garbage pick-up in La Boquilla, a corremiento north of Cartagena.
08/13-08/15 – Think-Stop – Regina maintained a public blog documenting her time on the Colombian coast.
Received training in Spanish, Communities of Practice, HIV/AIDS Prevention, and Project-Based Learning

Service Learning Volunteer
Touch Africa International, Kaloleni & Malindi, Kenya
- Replaced earthen walls with cement at children’s school in Kaloleni
- Researched and managed the constructing of two keyhole gardens at the orphanage site in the coastal town of Malindi
- Presented experience and accomplishments to faculty and staff of Hilbert College

Writing Intern
Magneto Communications, Sydney, Australia
- Published “Written Off: How Bad Writing Can Deepen Your Recession”
- Co-created “What Writing Tip Has Made/Saved You the Most Money” through Survey Monkey and developed incentive through Oxfam duck donations:

Development Volunteer
Knox Presbyterian Church, St. Vincent & the Grenadines
- Restored cement patio for a housing development for single mothers
- Collaborated with nationals to plan and host community nights

PUBLICATIONS & PAPER PRESENTATIONS
“Waiting for Friends”
Portland Review, online publication, Oct. 2014

“How to Get Raped”

SALES & CUSTOMER SERVICE EXPERIENCE
Sales & Marketing Associate
Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, Buffalo, NY
- Co-developed marketing plans and coordinated weekly program inserts
- Coordinated weekly Symphony Shuttle Services & dinner packages for clients
- Directed Gift Shop volunteers & reconciled Gift Shop cash weekly through Patron’s Edge ticketing system
• Collaborated with and worked as Box Office staff & Donations staff

Sales Representative
Shoefly & Clutch (two businesses, same owner), Buffalo, NY  
CityLove Clothing Co., Buffalo, NY
Sep. 2009 – May 2010
• Educated clients about products
• Performed as sole customer service representative
• Fulfilled opening & closing duties

Server/Barista/Cook
Café 59, Buffalo, NY  
Gelato Bar, Los Angeles, CA  
Lexington Cooperative Market, Buffalo, NY  
May 2006 – Feb. 2007
• Served & prepared for clients all food & coffee beverages
• Educated customers about special products
• Performed clean-up & opening/closing duties

CO-CURRICULAR INVOLVEMENT
Oíste, Online Magazine, Colombia  
Neon Lit, University of Nevada, Las Vegas  
Good Hair Fiction Club, University of Nevada, Las Vegas  
Hilbert Horizons, Student Literary Magazine, Hilbert College  
Sigma Tau Delta  
Great Expectations Club  
The H-Files, Student Newspaper, Hilbert College  
Aug. 2014 – Aug. 2015  
Aug. 2011 – May 2013  
Sep. 2008 – May 2010  
May. 2009 – May 2010  
Sep. 2008 – May 2010  
Sep. 2004 – Sep. 2010

REFERENCES
Eder León, Program Manager (acting)  
Peace Corps – Colombia  
Centro Empresarial Las Américas  
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Michael Giambra, Director of Sales and Patron Services  
Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra  
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