A Living Layer

and other stories

by

Lyndsey Reese

A Practicum Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Approved April 2012 by the
Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Peter Turchi, Chair
Thomas McNally
Melissa Pritchard

ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2012

ABSTRACT

A collection of six stories. Each story features a different cast of characters, ranging from high-school-aged girls to 70-year-old women in retirement communities. Most stories are told in the third-person limited point of view, and adhere to a traditional narrative structure, occasionally utilizing "found" text, such as letters and an entry in the DSM, to advance plot and set the tone. This collection explores the lives of characters afraid to articulate their desires and unable to communicate as they grapple with loss, suicide, trauma, illness, and the dissolution of family.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

IN TRANSIT

On a late Sunday afternoon, Geoffrey boards the 67 bus at Northern and Place, carrying a fish bowl, which he has tucked under the crook of one arm. He's the last person in line, and he climbs the bus's steps slowly, his movements even and calculated. Already he can tell that it's stuffy in here, the air stagnant and warm, and he won't be able to hide the bowl. The driver looks at him sideways as he moves his bus pass across the scanner but says nothing, and Geoffrey makes his way towards an open seat. He isn't surprised to discover, once he gets himself situated with the bowl balanced evenly across his knees, that the other passengers are all staring in his direction. A man in dirty work boots slouches in a seat lining the window, curling one lip as he stares at the fishbowl in Geoffrey's lap. Geoffrey recognizes this expression, and it isn't a good one. It is a look that says, *I could fuck with this guy if I wanted*. A look that says, *I can't believe how easy it would be to ruin this guy's day.* Two women seated next to each other at the back of the bus lean their heads together, whisper, smile. A teenager wearing earbuds casts quick glances in his direction. Geoffrey bobs his head as if in agreement with the others: yes, this is strange, this goldfish on the bus.

He would not have taken the bus at all if not for this: his girlfriend wrecked his car a month ago. When he last saw his grey Corolla, perched upon a flatbed tow-truck beside the highway exit ramp, the extent of the damage promised neither a swift nor full recovery. Its crumpled position reminded him of a winded runner crouched by the side of the road suffering from a side stitch. The

thin black paneling stuck out at odd angles like the tines of a broken hairbrush. The driver's side door would never open again.

Geoffrey hardly gets seated before the bus lurches forward, and a few drops of water spill onto his lap. A blue placard hanging above the front windshield reads: *Food and drink prohibited*. Geoffrey sits up, and cups his hands around the fishbowl's wide mouth, wishing he would've dumped out more liquid before he left. He's thankful he had the forethought to leave his ipod on his kitchen counter—bringing that along would've been a disaster.

At the next abrupt stop, water threatens to slosh over again. Geoffrey is beginning to realize that he will be wet and uncomfortable by the time he gets to Gabrielle's apartment. An older woman, in her early fifties, boards the bus, and there's a loud thumping as she hauls an oversized suitcase up the steps behind her. She's wearing a magenta tracksuit, the pants of which stop an inch or two above her sneakers. She struggles to maneuver her bag, which Geoffrey now sees is covered in tiny Mickey Mouse emblems, down the aisle.

"This is tricky," she says under her breath, looking pointedly at the man in construction boots, who tucks his legs underneath his seat as she passes instead of getting up to help her. She puts both hands on the suitcase's handle and gives it a good wrench, passing by the open seat next to him. "Narrow aisles. Very tricky."

Her hair is tucked up beneath a floppy canvas hat that looks like it should be worn on safari or a serious fishing trip, which is part of the reason Geoffrey doesn't see her scar—a long jagged line running from forehead to chin—until she sits down next to him, her suitcase jutting out into the aisle and effectively

blocking him in. That she should sit here, when there are seats open on the long bench at the front of the bus, annoys Geoffrey, who quickly feels guilty for being bothered. She's just another passenger. Even though he can tell already that she is the kind of person who believes that friendly conversation isn't a luxury of public transportation but a god-given right, his Midwestern upbringing has drilled into him: do anything, but do not be rude.

And here he is, sitting with the perfect conversation-starter balanced delicately across his knees.

It takes a minute, but she eventually turns and says, "What do you have there?" They're both facing the front of the bus, and Geoffrey knows that once a conversation starts, he'll have to endure it for the length of his ride. The transfer to the airport is several stops after place where he needs to get off. What is he supposed to say? *This is my girlfriend's goldfish. I'm taking it back to her. I think we need to break up. Things are not great for me right now.*

"A friend's pet," he says, leaning against the window. He tries not to look at the scar on her cheek. Instead he looks at the man in boots, who has stretched one arm out across the back of the seat next to him. The woman's scar reminds Geoffrey of a creased sheet of paper, a line so pronounced that it could never quite disappear, no matter how much pressure was applied to smooth it out.

"Why would you bring a thing like that on the bus?" she says. "It's terrible to carry things. If it were up to me, I would not have this suitcase. It is big and unnecessary. I hate travel. We all have to do things we don't like. Even me. I'm

stubborn when I want to be." She laughs quietly to herself and shakes her head. "Oh, I'm stubborn all right."

"I don't have a car," he says, thinking back to the accident. Gabrielle wasn't wearing a seatbelt when she ran the red light. She never wore a seatbelt, despite Geoffrey telling her every time they got in the car, *put on your seatbelt please*, and Gabrielle saying she would without actually doing it—but this accident was one of those rare instances where a seatbelt would have killed her, trapped her in the driver's seat as a truck slammed into her side of the car at 50 miles an hour. Instead she suffered only minor scrapes and bruises as she was knocked into him and out of harm's way, a detail for which he was both grateful and relieved, but at the same time—and he will not admit this to anyone—he felt as if she had won the argument just when he thought that they'd reached a stalemate.

Gabrielle doesn't know this, but Geoffrey thinks that it might be best to call it quits on this particular relationship. After dating for over a year and a half, they've been arguing. A lot. It was an argument, which Geoffrey started, that distracted Gabrielle so that she didn't see the changing traffic light in the first place. They haven't been arguing about anything substantial but instead over increasingly mundane things, things over which Geoffrey thought he would never argue with a girlfriend. The remote, for example. They actually fought over the TV remote one night as if they were reading from the script of a domestic sitcom. They fight over when to eat dinner, whether or not Geoffrey actually knows how to change the oil in his car, which movie to see when neither of them really wants

to see a movie in the first place. Yet all of these little things amount to one substantial problem: an inability to spend any time together without fighting.

He hasn't decided what to do, but he comforts himself with a promise: he will take it one step at a time. He did a good job of fish-sitting while Gabrielle was gone—he even changed the water without her asking—but for now, all he needs to do is return googily-eyed Clarence to Gabrielle after her week-long trip to South Carolina, a task that seemed relatively simple in its conception, but has become more complicated in application. His legs are cramping. He's spilling water. The woman next to him won't stop talking.

"Last car I had," she says, "was a Honda Civic. Good car. Banged it up good, though. It was red. I called it 'Little Red.' You do that? Name your cars and things?"

"Not really."

"What's that little guy's name?" she asks, nodding at the bowl.

Geoffrey looks down at the goldfish, who is hiding behind his plastic sandcastle looking disoriented and confused. The water is getting cloudy again. "Clarence," he says.

"That's a name! Like the angel from *It's a Wonderful Life*?"

"Yes, actually," Geoffrey says, surprised.

"Love that movie. I watch it even when it's not Christmas. Just yesterday, actually. That's how come I remember."

The bus driver slams on the brakes to stop at a light, and more water sloshes onto Geoffrey's lap. He grimaces. The construction worker on the bench

puts his other arm out to keep his balance. He looks annoyed, tosses his head towards the front of the bus, and says to Geoffrey, “What is it? Dude’s first day?”

“Seriously,” Geoffrey says. This is the worst bus driver he’s ever had, a guy who accelerates too quickly and doesn’t know how to gently ease off the brakes before a complete stop. He starts driving before passengers are completely seated, and assumes no one is getting off if they aren’t off the bus within a second after he pulls opens the door.

“I’ve had him before I think,” the woman says. She readjusts her hat, pulling it down so that it partially obscures her eyes. “Maybe not.”

“I can never tell,” Geoffrey says.

“You’d think he’d get a handle on it by now,” the construction worker says, louder this time. “It’s just a fucking bus.”

Geoffrey feels protective of the driver’s feelings. He watches the man, hoping that he hasn’t overheard their conversation—Geoffrey hates criticizing people who could easily overhear. It’s pointless and cruel.

The construction worker juts his chin towards the woman next to Geoffrey. “Where you going?” he says.

She pulls the suitcase closer to her legs as the bus moves forward. “Visiting my granddaughter. She’s over in Indianapolis.”

“And you’re flying there? What is that, 20 minute flight?”

“No car,” she says, without elaborating. She stares ahead, and gives another tug at her luggage. Geoffrey was hoping she’d get caught up in a conversation with the construction worker and forget about him, but he’s

surprised to realize that this woman—who seems as if she would talk to anyone—has decided that she won't talk to this man, has decided that there's something unsavory and undeserving in him, and Geoffrey cannot see how she came to this conclusion so quickly.

He checks on Clarence. There's even less water in the bowl now, and he's getting concerned. Clarence doesn't look great—but then again, who's to say what a goldfish looks like when it *is* doing great? He hates this. He hates fish-sitting. It makes him nervous; it makes him doubt his ability to maintain control over his limbs because it reminds him: his mother gave him a feeder fish one year for Christmas, and in his excitement, he dropped the bowl on the hardwood floor before tripping over his own feet and stepping on the small wriggling body. Since then Geoffrey has known: a glass wall between living creatures does not guarantee a favorable outcome for all of the involved parties.

But fish do not always make him nervous. For example, dead ones do not. No problems there. Living ones, provided they are not the objects of love and affection, do not make him uncomfortable either. He cannot put his finger on what it is about fish, because it isn't even about fish. Fish are just animals. For Geoffrey, in his day-to-day life as a terrestrial being, fish aren't even threatening animals. And the thing is, he's not *afraid* of them, per se, but he does become aware of himself, of his body, of all the things his body can do, of all the different ways he could use his body to intentionally or unintentionally harm another living creature. Fish inspire in him the same unease he feels standing beside a busy street. The cars whipping by, Geoffrey realizes that all it would take is one step in

the wrong direction and something disastrous would occur. One little movement. And how unreliable is life then, the entire process of existing in the universe, if one little movement is enough to substantially alter it?

The bus comes to yet another abrupt stop. This time, because Geoffrey is bent over to examine Clarence, the water from the bowl doesn't spill out onto his pant leg, but instead splashes up and nearly hits him in the eye. The construction worker, who must've been watching him, leans back in his seat and laughs. Geoffrey feels embarrassed. He quickly reaches up to wipe away the water. The woman turns to see what's so funny and catches sight of Geoffrey as he drags his finger from cheekbone to chin, his lips parted, his lower eyelid exposed. It's a ghastly expression, one children make at Halloween to look like ghouls, but the line Geoffrey has drawn down his cheek follows the same path as the woman's scar.

Geoffrey blinks a few times and laughs at himself. From what he knows about her, this is the kind of thing the woman would find silly, just another hazard of "carrying things" on the bus. At first he doesn't realize why she's looking at him like that, with such hurt, but as he lowers his hand from his face, he sees that she has drawn hers up to her chin, the bottom portion of her scar now hidden.

"Excuse me," she says. She gathers her things, pulls down on her hat so that Geoffrey can no longer see her face, and makes her way towards the front of the bus, grasping the bar along the ceiling to keep her balance as the driver's acceleration threatens to knock her over. Geoffrey wants to say something to her, to call out an apology, but it took him too long to realize what was going on, and

now he's too aware of the bemused expression on the construction worker's face, watching her as if this were a show. Stopping just short of the yellow line at the front//that demarcates the standing area, the woman bends and says something to the driver—Geoffrey cannot hear what—but the man says in response, "From now on pull the cord if you'd like to get off. There's no need to holler."

The bus lurches to a stop, and water sloshes from the fishbowl onto the floor. The driver gives Geoffrey an eye in the rearview mirror. Geoffrey looks down, rubs the sole of one sneaker over the wet spot in an attempt to make amends. *I am responsible*, he says with his sneaker. *I am cleaning up my mess*. He doesn't look up as the woman hauls her Mickey Mouse suitcase off the bus. He's thankful for the driver's speed as they pull away from the curb, but he can't stop himself from glancing back. The woman sits on the ground—there is no bench here—and stares out at traffic. She looks lonely, tired, and he doesn't know whether or not she'll make her flight.

"What the fuck was her problem?" the construction worker asks, but Geoffrey doesn't say anything in response. He sits in silence until a few stops later, when he stands and trundles off the bus.

Gabrielle will not be at home when Geoffrey arrives at her apartment. He's planned it this way on purpose. He didn't want to see her before, but now he does. He's angry, he's sad. It's a quarter-mile walk to her apartment complex, which on a normal day does not feel all that daunting, but today, carrying Clarence and his bowl, he finds the distance painstaking and great. He tucks the bowl in the crook of his right arm and tries to walk slowly down the street,

sloshing more water as he goes. He knows this was a stupid idea. She got back in town last night. He could've just called her and she would've come to get the fish. He wouldn't have had to make an hour trip, but he hates that he would've had to ask Gabrielle, to tell her explicitly that he wanted her to get Clarence when she should've already known.

The water continues to slosh out of the bowl as Geoffrey's steps become less careful and more impatient, and his side is quickly soaked. He feels self-righteous. Justified. His wet shirt is a physical manifestation of his grievances against Gabrielle, and he is glad to have it. He crosses onto a portion of the sidewalk that has begun to deteriorate. In some places, he can see the steel rods peeking out from beneath the cement, and he finds himself thinking of broken bones, fractures puncturing skin. In a translucent trash bag stuffed with some indistinguishable purple plastic, he sees fresh bruises, the kind so large and deep that they will turn a spoiled, sickly yellow before fading. He was spared injury during the accident—other people, like Gabrielle, like the woman on the bus, weren't as lucky—but now he sees injury everywhere.

A family of four approaches him on the sidewalk, and he hugs the outside edge, the side closest to the traffic, so that the couple's two children do not have to walk beside the busy street. He becomes as nervous as he always does as he listens to the *whoosh* of passing cars, and when he looks up, he sees Gabrielle pulling into her apartment complex half a block away.

He readjusts his grip on the fishbowl. He glances down at it, curious how much water is left, only to discover Clarence, lively orange Clarence, floating at

the top, a tiny thread of blood seeping from one gill. The plastic sandcastle has fallen over, and the pebbles at the bottom of the bowl now take up more volume/space than the water itself.

Clarence didn't look good during the trip—so why is Geoffrey surprised? Why is he surprised that he is soaking wet, the fish is dead, and the woman's face is scarred yet his isn't?

He remembers Gabrielle once likening the color of Clarence's scales to that of grilled cheese. Early on in their relationship when she first got him, they sat together on the side of her small bed, feeding him flakes of fish food. Geoffrey said to her, "It would've been better if he weren't a goldfish, and, you know, he were actually an *angel* fish. *That* would've been good."

"Too cute," Gabrielle said, her words muffled by the ponytail holder she held between her front teeth. She took it from her mouth, tried to loop it around her messy hair, and gave up. She dropped her arms and looked at Geoffrey. "That shit's too *cute*. He reminds me of you."

"The fish?"

"No, the angel."

"I'm not sure how to respond to that."

"I mean it like—he's everybody's favorite character from that movie. Who likes wassisface? The main guy."

"I don't remember his name, but I know who you're talking about."

"Nobody likes him. He's too whiney. But Clarence. Clarence just has a very nice heart."

“And he fucks shit up.”

“Yes, well—” Gabrielle said, smiling. “That, too.”

She flopped back onto the bed, and Geoffrey lay down next to her. They turned towards one another, each propping their head up with a bent arm, but one of Gabrielle’s rings got caught in her knotted hair. She tried to untangle herself as Geoffrey watched in amusement, her movements becoming increasingly erratic until she finally gave up and pulled all of her hair down over her face, one hand still buried in her twisted curls.

“Well, I’m done for,” she said. “Go on without me.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure. I’m going down fast. There’s no hope here. A captain has to stay with her ship.”

Geoffrey reached over and drew back the curtain of her hair, leaning his face in close to hers. “You’re mixing your metaphors,” he said. “Silly.”

“I’m not. They were already hopelessly mixed before I got to them.” She stuck out her lip and exhaled sharply out of the corner of her mouth. “Just like this hair here.”

Geoffrey leaned over to the edge of the bed, grabbed a comb from the bedside table, and propped himself up on his elbows in front of Gabrielle. Holding a clump of her hair in one hand, he began the long process of untangling her from herself, starting at the ends and working his way up, careful not to tug or rip, taking instruction from Gabrielle when the process became complicated and

involved. When she was free, Gabrielle rolled on top of him and kissed him, running her hands through his hair, and they spent the rest of the day in bed.

More than anything Geoffrey would describe her as kind, but her kindness is not cheap or insincere, born from duty or obligation. He's dated women before that were like that, had friends, too, whose kindness was a veneer, more of a shield against their own insecurities than anything else. But Gabrielle means it—at least, she does with him. Even when they argue. Perhaps *more* when they argue. Because Geoffrey knows, when they are angry and mad, he knows how she could respond to him, using details of their intimacy to gouge and damage, but she never does. She never lands a cheap emotional punch. He knows that is a deliberate choice, so the fights, painful and unpleasant though they may be, reflect back that kindness, a trait his experience has shown him to be rare.

Standing outside of Gabrielle's apartment, Geoffrey dismisses the idea of going back home, not because a return bus trip would mean another uncomfortable hour, but because he does want to see her. He knocks at her door.

When she answers, she's surprised to see him, but she's quickly disappointed when he offers her the fishbowl and sees that Clarence hasn't made it back.

"What happened?" she asks, tucking a strand of curly hair behind one ear as she stares down at the dead fish.

"I don't know. The bus ride—" Geoffrey stops. "It was bad."

Gabrielle leans in closer. "You didn't change the water, did you?"

Geoffrey freezes. "Was I not supposed to?"

"No, I told you—you didn't have—I just said to feed him. You didn't need to change the water."

"But it got all foggy. It was gross."

"But you have to take out the chlorine with these little drops."

"So why didn't you give them to me?"

Gabrielle steps away from him and the bowl. "I was trying to make it easier. Less of an inconvenience."

In the bowl, Clarence is bobbing upside down at the top of the water, his pale belly surfacing and submerging as the shaking of Geoffrey's hands agitates the remaining liquid. Geoffrey cannot think of a single thing to say. He is disturbed by the knowledge that he has ruined something without understanding the mechanics of how. He cannot isolate a specific moment on his trip when something went wrong, the first choice he made that facilitated such unviable conditions—Gabrielle insists it happened when he changed the water, but he's not so sure. Clarence's death is nothing like their car crash, a stunning burst of noise and motion that threw them into each other. There wasn't a moment on the bus similar to the one in the car, when Gabrielle turned to him and said, "What do you mean this is the wrong exit? You *told* me to get off here" seconds before the truck slammed into them. There was just the miserable ride.

"It's ok," Gabrielle says, touching the back of his arm. "You didn't do it on purpose. He's just a fish."

"It's not—I'm sorry."

“Come inside,” she says, opening the door. But Geoffrey doesn’t move. Gabrielle turns back to look at him. “Are you coming?”

He knows he won’t go in with her—what would be the point?—but he doesn’t want to say so just yet. He wants to stand here on her porch, in the last minutes of their relationship, the weight of Clarence’s bowl heavy in his hands. He wants to feel thankful that they both came out of the accident ok, that neither of them have scars other people can see. He knows why Clarence died, but he doesn’t know, he can’t know, and nothing Gabrielle has explained to him about chlorine levels in tap water will account for what happened during the time on the bus when he wasn’t watching.

Gabrielle steps towards him, puts her hand on his back, and for just a moment he lets himself feel the warmth of her palm. Comforting and sweet.

CHAPTER 2

A LIVING LAYER

As Christine stands over the sink, crying into a bowl of half-eaten Cobb salad, she realizes this is the place where she has all of her breakdowns—if she is going to cry, she will cry in the kitchen. The sudsy sink water and the piles of dishes loom, in their small way, over the remainder of her evening. These items instill in her the same anxiety she experiences when she knows there's about to be a loud, sudden noise without knowing exactly when—like waiting for a call while sitting next to the phone.

It is 1985, one of those years she thought of as a girl in knee stockings, understanding that it would come to pass, should she be alive for it. But at the same time she believed that because she could not picture a version of her future life and what it would look like, what *she* would look like, she couldn't live in a year so far away. But here she is. She works as a clerical. She will be married in three weeks. She permed her hair two months ago and has not yet come to regret it.

She catches a glimpse of her reflection in a dark window. Her eyes are swollen, her cheeks blotchy. At twenty-nine, she does not realize that she's pretty. She won't realize it until she has a daughter, looks at her sweet face and thinks, where did those cheekbones come from? And even then, knowing that it's *her* daughter, she will consider, briefly, the notion that her vision has been warped by love, that neither of them are beautiful.

Christine meets up with her fiancé at the hardware store the following morning. It's located in a new strip mall, and the parking lot is difficult to turn into. Several of the other storefronts are empty. The reception hall she reserved for their wedding is across the street, and she tries not to look at it—contrasted with the newer buildings near the hardware store, it looks old and tired: the way she feels.

She and her fiancé stand side by side as he looks at lumber. The store smells like wood and something else, something like oil. At the end of the aisle an employee restocks a low shelf. Her fiancé references his notes, which he repeatedly stuffs back into his pocket only to pull out again moments later. Christine offers to hold the paper for him—she is not doing anything with her hands—but he just folds the sheet an additional time before tucking it into his front shirt pocket.

"There," he says. "I can get to it easy now."

He plans to build a curio cabinet for the dining room—their dining room—a gesture that seems sweet on the surface, but Christine probes it, searching for a defect, *a flaw in the wood*, anything to discredit the generosity of his gift. He insisted that she come with him to the store. He likes having her around. Now she is bored.

"I can't make up my mind," he says, moving between two indistinguishable sets of lumber. He runs his hands through his hair.

"What are you looking for?" she asks, stepping towards him, feigning a casual patience, which she can feel fading from her like energy from an old battery. She thinks of herself suddenly as a battery, a small self-contained source

of energy, limited and prescribed, used most often in items that are allowed some mobility. She knows: she does not have to stay in this store with him.

He, too, is self-contained, but he is insular. She can tell he doesn't always pay attention when other people speak, and if he does, it's because he and his life are somehow being affirmed by the conversation. His self-assurance is imported; it's never manufactured domestically. But then again, it doesn't need to be. He gets along just fine.

"Which of these do you like better?" he asks, gesturing at the two stacks. "Either will work."

"Oh, I don't know."

"Either of these will work," he says again.

"So what—" she says, but he has turned from her and strides down the long over-sized aisle. She thinks for a moment that he might talk to the employee—perhaps he thinks he might, too—but he veers away, turns left at the end of the aisle, and disappears from sight.

By the time her daughter turns two, Christine will realize she has inherited her father's abruptness, and Christine will lust after the days when she only had to manage one short fuse. His characteristics on their child—her child—will seem out of place. An accident. She crosses her arms and sighs.

Christine puts one hand to her forehead and watches as the employee who has finally finished restocking the shelves makes his way towards her down the long aisle. She pays attention to his stride, relaxed but purposeful. When he's at the halfway point, he stops to pick up a receipt that's fallen out of another

customer's pocket and Christine decides he is a kind man, the sort of person who would be the first to stop on a crowded street if he saw a stranger caught in a compromising situation. He reminds her of Hal, a man she once dated, who broke up a stranger's fight in a bar, who managed to calm angry men with a few words.

Her fiancé will do this often—he'll walk away without warning, without answering a question or finishing his sentence before he turns to leave. When this happens again in ten years—when her fiancé gets frustrated in the hardware store and leaves standing alone in an aisle—Christine will go straight to the car and stay there. Sitting with her head against the sedan's window, she'll notice that the strip mall hasn't aged well. By then the storefronts will have filled up and emptied again. Only a small jewelry store and an Indian buffet will remain, the reception hall appearing clean and new in comparison.

But now Christine is only a little bored and maybe annoyed. She stands alone among shelves that tower ten feet overhead, unsure of whether or not to stay put. The salesman approaches. Christine wants to talk to him, maybe about lumber—she can repeat the terms used by her fiancé—but maybe about something else, too: his name, the location of certain items within the warehouse, the average time it takes him to get from one place to another with a walk like that. She decides she will. It's a choice like any other choice. The decision to speak.

From behind her, her fiancé calls her name. "Chris," he says. "I ordered the lumber. Let's go." She can feel his impatience at her back. She continues staring down the aisle, watching the man make his way closer to her, and she

realizes, just for one moment, that she does not have to turn around. She could stay here, ignore her fiancé, and—

And what?

* * *

Game day for Local UBC 12's softball team: Saturday, miserable heat, warm beer, a weight-like feeling of obligation. Christine sits in the stands, the aluminum bleachers burning the back of her thighs. She should've worn a long skirt—not jean shorts—but the other women with her in the stands are the kind with a little grit, women with big hair but little makeup, women who know how to unhitch a trailer, drink a beer, and do so with an essential flair of femininity. Christine can't even change a flat tire.

It isn't a good day for the team. It's the top of the sixth and she can see her fiancé on the field, squinting into the sun. He's playing second base, and playing it badly—a few pitches ago he missed a ground ball. It hopped up over his mitt and bounced its way to the outfield. Her fiancé swore, kicked at the dust. He is drunk, but this makes his error—and the subsequent tantrum—no less embarrassing.

Christine does her best to cheer in the stands and makes small talk with other women seated nearby. She has a mystery novel in her purse just in case. She tries, very hard, not to look at the bleachers behind the other dugout where her fiancé's ex-wife cheers for the opposing team. In the car, her fiancé mentioned that Suzette would be at the game. It hasn't occurred yet to Christine to question how he knows that she'll be here on this day so specifically. Her fiancé does not

disclose information freely, nor will he ever, which Christine knows in a place deep down in her gut, but as with any trait like this, anything so intangible and wisp-like in its transience, she entertains the notion that at any moment he might just start *speaking*.

If Christine had known beforehand that Suzette would be here today, she would've skipped the game, no doubt about it. She had laundry to do. She could've read at home. In the three years she's been with her fiancé, she's only met Suzette once, at a softball game the previous year. Suzette wore her blonde hair long and tangled, carried a beer in one nicotine-stained hand. Their interaction was brief, a quick exchange at the end of the game as Christine and her fiancé headed towards the parking lot and his truck. Suzette stood over a duffel bag on the sidewalk in front of them, legs on either side of it as she tried to stuff a mitt into a side pocket. Suzette smiled wide and friendly, gave a two-fingered wave with her occupied hand. Christine's fiancé did not stop walking, but they exchanged greetings, cordial on her end, guarded on his. It wasn't until Christine was seated in the passenger's seat of his truck that he explained: *that was my ex-wife*.

It's not that she's unaccustomed to ex-wives. Hal had an ex-wife, too, but Christine knew all about her. How they'd met. The kinds of things she wore. She was a good woman with a temper, which he alternately respected and disdained. She was brave, but they were too young and they took every opportunity to wound each other. She had no career aspirations to speak of, which made him

uncomfortable he said; he wanted her to want things even if she could not expect to have them.

Christine was surprised Hal was so open with her. Already by that time—at twenty-two-years old—she had begun to form opinions about the way men were and the way women were. Men didn't know how to talk, but women did. Men valued reason and logic, but still made no sense sometimes. Women valued emotion with all of its unclear and impenetrable corners, and so women made no sense a lot of the time, but if you knew anything, you knew you couldn't blame them—emotions were unmanageable and caked with wild dirt.

But Hal? She did not quite know what to do with him. He could not fix anything with his hands. He was *too* open sometimes. At times his affection felt like glue on her skin.

Her fiancé is not like that. Not at all.

Christine sips from her warm beer. Earlier she was trying to drink it slowly—she has to drive later. It tastes awful, so she knocks the rest back in one quick gulp, places a hand to her chest as it slides down. Her neck is burning. She needs a break and wants a snack. Rising from her seat, she begins to make her way down the bleachers, stepping over stray limbs, half-opened purses, and the delicate fingers of young children. She's at that age where she will start having children soon. She won't want to wait too long. She waited long enough to get married as it is.

The ballpark is crowded. There are four diamonds butted up against one another at the backstop so that if you were to look down on the field from above,

each would appear to be a quarter of a large circle. A large concession stand sits in the middle, where the fields meet, and Christine heads there, weaving her way between overflowing garbage cans and groups of people. It's hot and the air smells like old leather. She's old hat at this—she's been to so many of his games—but even though the sun is setting, it's still sweltering outside and she wants to go home. She gets into the middle line.

From somewhere nearby, she hears someone call her name. "Christine?" She turns, searches the area behind her, but no familiar face jumps out of the crowd.

"Hey there," a brunette in the leftmost line says. Christine turns to her, but the woman is backlit by the setting sun.

"Oh," Christine says, squinting. She puts one hand to her forehead. "Hi." She tries to get her bearings, but as this greeting leaves her mouth, as she focuses on this person standing beside her, this woman with tangled hair, she realizes this woman is no stranger at all—it's Suzette.

Christine has thought about what it'd be like to talk to an ex-wife. She's had imaginary conversations in her head—what would happen if the two women met without knowing who the other was? What if they liked each other before discovering their titles: ex-wife, new fiancé? She's imagined that kind of scenario before, imagined it with Hal at least, but in the case of her fiancé? No. Suzette has been a mystery, a chameleon of sorts, and the changing color of her hair—blonde to brown—is evidence.

"Oh, hello," Christine says again. She can hear her tone of voice, the voice she uses when answering phones at work.

"I just saw you standing here," Suzette says, gesturing at the ground where Christine is standing. She's cheerful and happy. She has no care in the world. She looks that way too, dressed in short overalls and a pair of ratty sneakers. "Figured it'd be strange not to say hi."

"Oh, I'm glad you did," Christine says, trying to match Suzette's casual attitude. A wave of nausea passes over her. It is such a hot day. Suzette's long hair clings to her neck. Christine can see strands of it plastered against her skin. "Aren't you hot?" she says before she can stop herself.

"*God,* yes." Suzette lifts her hair from her neck a moment and fans the bare skin underneath. "I hope that doesn't offend you. I'm not much of a church girl myself, but don't want to offend."

"No offense taken."

"Good." Suzette lifts her hair up again. "But this *heat*. My ponytail holder snapped. I about cussed myself out on the ride here. Too late to go back."

The lines move and both women step forward. "Are you enjoying the game?" Christine asks. It's like she's reading from cue cards. All of her movements feel mechanical, jerky. She slides her hands into her pockets, hoping to conceal her ring.

"Yeah, I sure do love softball. Kenneth—" Suzette tosses her head back towards the field. "—my husband, he loves it. He'll be drunk as a skunk when we get home."

Christine digs her hands further into her pockets. She stares at the concrete, feels sweat sliding down her spine. She feels faint, ill. Like she's eaten something spoiled and needs to take an important test all at once.

Suzette touches the back of Christine's arm. "Are you ok?"

Christine can feel grit on Suzette's fingers, her hand hotter than the humid air. "Yes. I'm ok. I hate—"

"You must hate this." Suzette adjusts the strap of one overall to stop it sliding off her shoulder, but she doesn't stop looking at Christine, her eyes full of a gentleness usually reserved for children. "I used to hate this."

"I don't—I don't hate this." Christine rubs her hand over her upper arm. She feels as if she has intruded upon the past, stepped into a room she wasn't supposed to enter, and stubbed her toe against an object that wasn't supposed to be there.

"Oh," Suzette says. "That's good. I used to get *bored*. If I can be frank, the other wives—" She lowers her voice. "They used to be bitches. But say, I hear you're getting married."

"Next week, yes."

"Yeah, he told me a while ago. Congrats. That's exciting."

"Who told you?" Christine asks, but a concession worker has Suzette's attention now, and she doesn't seem to hear. Christine steps up to the other register and orders two beers, both for herself.

As she turns to leave, Suzette gives a little wave, which Christine returns. She watches Suzette walk off, her body shapeless beneath the jean fabric, even as

she moves. Christine gathers her beers, takes a long gulp from one before heading back to the stands, feeling sure, so sure: Suzette is nothing like her.

How does Suzette know Christine is getting married? Well, word travels in a community like this. Word gets around. People talk.

Either that or Suzette heard it from her fiancé directly.

That could've been it, too.

Christine rolls over, pulls her pillow over her head. She has a hangover. Last night she drove home drunk from the softball game, her fiancé drunk in the passenger seat. She was careful, slowing down as she passed the overpass on 32, relieved and thankful once she realized that the concrete pillars weren't hiding a patrol car or two. Now she's being punished with a crippling headache and more nausea. She's skipping mass this morning and hunkering down. Her fiancé put a glass of water on her bedside table once he got up to start his day, told her to feel better. She does not.

The thing is, Christine knows that *not* talking to someone is an act and it is a draining one, especially if you've had a certain level of closeness with another person, say, if you've been married. She knows about this kind of grief, has lived through it herself—although without the marriage, true—but replacing intimacy with silence, she knows, feels like scraping off a living layer of skin. So what if he and Suzette talked. What was worse than not talking? Who was capable of that anyway? Who could hold on to that heavy silence when you knew that what you carried before was so light?

Well, she remembers, *she* could. She did that just fine. After all, she hasn't talked to Hal in nearly four years. That's a year longer than they were together, so sure, she's over it. She presses her pillow against her face and groans. It was hard, but not impossible, and now she can't remember the last time they spoke. She thought she would. How could you forget something like that?

Five months after she broke up with Hal, she met her fiancé.

Christine was on a blind date with a man already balding in his late twenties. He'd taken her to a party, and the date was going badly—his self-consciousness about his hair loss was a matter Christine could not navigate with grace. She isn't a patient person. Her teenage daughter will be even more impatient than she is, and Christine will use the contrast between them as evidence that her own impatience was a product of youth now long outgrown, but here's the thing: at fifty she will still snipe at slow baggers in the grocery, she will walk out of the bank cashless if the line is too long, she will hope her husband takes less time in the hardware store.

When her date went to the restroom, Christine noticed her fiancé, leaning against a wall, his arms crossed. He had a good-natured smile, which made him look like the kind of person casual enough to try anything once. Christine, boozy and brave, in a moment of boldness rarely repeated, walked up to her fiancé, whispered in his ear, "You and me, we should leave." He took a long sip from his drink, set it on the table next to him, touched his hand to the small of her back. Together they left.

In nineteen years her daughter will ask her, “What did you like about dad when you first met?” Her daughter will have dyed blue hair, the roots now showing through. Christine will not answer. Her daughter, behind the wheel of a car, eight hours into a cross-country road trip, will look over at Christine in the passenger seat. It’s a week before the start of her freshman year of college. She asks again, “What did you like?”

“Your dad is handy,” Christine will say, repeating what she’s told herself for years. “He knows practical things. He’s got good instincts. He fixed the roof.”

But really it’s his discerning attitude that Christine likes, the discerning attitude that accompanies her fiancé’s reticence. That he would share anything with her—and share he does, at least in the beginning—means that he sees in her something trustworthy and good and deserving of intimacy. That first night, on a park bench blocks away from the party, holding a brown bag wrapped around a Budweiser, he told her that he was married once. There was an unplanned pregnancy. An accident. But she miscarried four months after the wedding, and the marriage miscarried, too.

Christine told him she wanted things for herself, talked of the ambitious life she hoped to have. She wanted to be a stewardess; she wanted to learn how to make delicate desserts with alliterative names; she wanted to own a house that had a library. But she did not tell him in more concrete terms because her ambition still only existed as an abstraction. Her boldness, he said, he liked. He knew so few brave women.

Christine likes that he knows how to build, to make things with his hands, that he can create physical objects that take up space in the real world. She likes that he is so concrete and interested in the tangible. On the park bench, she found out he was a carpenter, asked him to build her something and look—now he is. He's building a curio cabinet for their home.

The selves they were that night were their best projections, the best they hoped to be, the selves they thought the other could make permanent, turn into reality. Christine understood then why they called it chemistry. She felt herself making something.

In their kitchen one day when she is home from college, her daughter will say with disgust in her voice, "Listen to this bullshit." Her hair is blonde again, but short. She has a tattoo. Reading from a webpage on her laptop, she continues, quoting an unknown source, "'Women get married hoping men will change. Men get married hoping women will stay the same.' Have you heard that before? I hate this shit."

But Christine will find truth in it.

Here are a few things Christine knows a person can get used to: silent trips in the car; a pause in a conversation that means no, yes, maybe I'll think about it, but is never articulated so you can never be sure; silent, expressionless sex; the static on the radio that exists between stations, buzzing in an empty room.

When she learns these things is another matter entirely, but once she does, she'll feel like she has always known. What existed before understanding is another life that she did not live.

The day before their wedding Christine's fiancé brings over the cabinet. She meets him in the parking lot. He needs help carrying it up the stairs. Tomorrow he'll be moving out of his apartment and into hers until they can find a house that's affordable. Some of his things already sit stacked in the corner of her living room. He is a packrat; it seems to Christine that he cannot give anything up, not old softball equipment, not broken power tools, not lightly used patio furniture.

And certainly not ex-wives.

In the days since the game, the days since her hangover—the hangover that never really went away and instead transformed into a tightness in her chest, an anger, an acute ache—she cannot stop thinking of Suzette talking to her fiancé, of her fiancé talking to Suzette, of all of their words she does not know. She knows he's not cheating on her—he hardly has the emotional energy to sustain one romantic relationship—but still, she can't get the idea that they would talk out of her head. Christine picked up the phone to call Hal at one point, but she couldn't do it, not even in retaliation. What would she say? What would it feel like? But she knew—it would feel like putting on a jacket that no longer fit, too tight in the arms, the zipper broken, the lining torn.

Christine stands in the back of her fiancé's pickup wearing a Jazzercise T-shirt and dirty sneakers. Her hands on her hips, she watches as he removes the

ratchet straps from the unfinished cabinet, careful that they don't dent the wood. It sits in the truck bed upside-down, legs in the air. It's made of cherry and matches nothing in her living room.

"Are you ready?" he asks, looking up at her from the pavement. He's positioned behind the tailgate, ready to catch the cabinet and lower it to the ground.

"Yeah."

"You're gonna push it slowly. And then keep your hands on the sides as we lower it down to the ground. But that's just for guidance. Don't actually try to hold it up. You'll hurt your back."

"I won't."

"And keep your feet off the drop cloth."

"Ok."

"You ready?"

"Yeah."

Christine puts her hands against the sides and pushes. The wood is smooth, but she worries that by the time the day is through, she'll have splinters in both hands. Her fiancé, who has been working on the cabinet non-stop, gathers it in his arms and begins lowering it to the ground. Christine keeps her palms against the sides to guide it. Her fiancé lets out a deep breath. She wants to tell him what she's learned in her exercise classes, *don't forget to breathe when you're exerting yourself*, but she keeps this thought to herself. She'll keep many thoughts to herself from here on out.

She didn't do this with Hal. She was a real chatterbox. Even when he told her he was leaving her after three years, she kept talking. She said everything she could think of, not to get him to stay, but because she knew she had to tell him all of the things she'd planned to tell him over the coming weeks, months, years. She had to exhaust a lifetime of words.

Not speaking to him after that was easy.

She didn't ask why. To know the reason was worse. It would box her in. The world was bigger without knowing. She could imagine, invent reasons: he left because he wasn't the kind of man to ever get married; he left because his mother hated her; he left because she didn't understand art; he left because she thought he was something he wasn't; he left because he felt like he knew all there was to know about her and without a feeling of discovery, what good was the relationship? She didn't want to know. Because what would be worse than discovering that he left for no reason at all?

Christine's fiancé waits for her to jump down from the bed of the truck before closing the tailgate. They have to carry it up a flight of stairs to her apartment, but they are a good team. She goes up the steps backwards, and he stands below her, bearing the brunt of the weight. He sets it down at the top of the steps to rest.

What happens next Christine will replay in her head, wishing she could move backwards in time, always to this moment. There are other moments she would say she regrets more, but this is the moment she wishes she could change, although she cannot entirely articulate why.

Standing at the top of the stairs, Christine doesn't watch what she's doing. She combs her hands looking for splinters, worried that on her wedding day her hands will be coarse and raw, concerned that the splinters will snag the fabric of her silk dress. Her fiancé, next to her on the landing, takes a step backwards to look over the cabinet, to double-check that they haven't dinged it in the process of moving. At the same time, Christine loses her balance and takes a step sideways to steady herself. Her foot lands behind her fiancé's. She sees it happen, knows she should move, but his heel gets caught on her foot. He loses his balance, his arms wind-milling, his eyebrows raised in surprise, his lips parted. He almost catches himself against the railing, but the force of this frantic gesture makes it impossible for him to regain his footing. He knows what's happening, lets out a small cry.

The wedding still happens; they have paid for the venue. Her fiancé—soon to be her husband—pushes himself down the aisle in a wheelchair. His left leg is broken and he has two bruised ribs. Christine's eyes are swollen from crying the night before. At the altar, her fiancé tries to joke, says, *At least the cabinet didn't go down with me*, but she can only muster a smile, not a laugh. He spends most of the afternoon sullen, in pain. He promises her that later, when his leg is healed, they'll have their first dance, but months pass and neither of them remember.

In thirty-two years, they will be back in the same hall, this time for a niece's wedding. The place will not have changed much, although this time Christine's husband will be walking, this time he'll be drunk. Christine, in her own drunken stupor during the Cha Cha slide, will tell her adult daughter, "You

should've told me not to marry him. Why didn't you tell me not to marry him?" Her daughter will begin to cry, startled and afraid. Christine is not making sense. She's at the age where remarks like this one can be an indication of a serious problem—a stroke, early onset Alzheimer's, an aneurism. Christine trips and spills red wine onto her sleeve. Her daughter holds her up, grasping her by the upper arm as if escorting a handcuffed criminal.

"You should've told me," Christine says again. "It was an accident." Her daughter leads her to the bathroom, away from the crowd, trying to hide both her own tears and her mother's drunkenness. Christine leans against her, and her daughter can feel her mother's skin, impossibly soft in her late age, as if it is a vague promise of her future. The daughter becomes swept up for a moment in Christine's delusions, cries harder. Thinks to herself, *Yes, I wish I would've told you*.

CHAPTER 3

CONVERSION DISORDER

Our junior year we were diagnosed with hysteria, all of us, a dozen teenage girls. Our symptoms started in late October, the days in northern New York already cold and dark. The walls were faded, stained. The old water heaters in our school groaned, but not loudly enough, not with the necessary fervor. Boys opened the windows whenever they could. We wore layers. Extra camisoles and shirts with sleeves. Scarves that we draped around our necks, even in class. Coats stuffed with down, though we were made to keep them in our lockers.

We didn't know each other well, but we had a shared history: we went to Le Roy's Jell-O Museum for a field trip in fourth grade, we were all at school the day the broken fire alarm went off for two hours straight, we remembered the blizzards that left snow drifts so big we could've hidden inside them like cavernous wombs.

Kelly Newhauser wore hooded sweatshirts and pajama pants. We all knew she wanted to go to a private all-girls school. She liked writing essays. We didn't know why she was at Le Roy High. We would've called her pretentious, if it had occurred to us.

By September she was stuttering. When she had to speak in class, when she had to order lunch. C-c-casserole and a bag of chi-i-ips. We realized she was funny. Our classmates, too. Teachers praised her patience. She told us she faked it once in a while to make us laugh. She wasn't afraid to go ugly for the joke.

* * *

Andrea Ramirez and Susie Wilson sat together in the cafeteria in a far corner half-blocked by vending machines. Underneath the table they held hands, rubbed each other's thumbs like worry stones. We heard they were out of rehab. We all heard a lot about most of our peers. Our town was small. The student body—fond of easy definitions—made sure to keep everyone in their proper place.

But they weren't quite sure what to do with the twelve of us.

Andrew and Susie weren't pariahs, though; they liked conspiracy. They set out to spread it. The third floor is haunted. There's a secret basement level to the parking garage across the street. A student once died in Ms. Schwartz's classroom sixty years ago. Fifty-five years ago. There are rooms buried under the school. Just rooms. No hallways. In the last stall in the bathroom with yellow walls, there is a panel that can be removed and sacrosanct items can be stored there. There are holes in the walls of the girls' locker-room, spread out evenly and fractured into parts. Like a fly's vision. They advised us: move quickly in there.

We're not sure we believed any of it. But it seemed as if they made it come true. We found the hiding place in the bathroom, stored pictures there and other notes. It became a way to communicate. There was no digital trail. We came and went. If you didn't know better, you might not think there were 12 of us, moving in and out of the bathroom stall. We knew time was limited. That half of the building was old, dirty, and scheduled for renovation, to be finished in May. These changes were routine, our principal said, happened every fifteen, twenty

years. Were we excited to see the ‘new’ school? It would be ready for our senior year.

Construction began on the closed-off science wing. Sheets of opaque plastic hung from the ceiling to keep students away from the mess. On our way to class, we could see the shadows of construction workers through the plastic, could hear the sound of drills, the clatter of lumber. The noise interrupted tests and annoyed our teachers, who could barely mask their irritation, but in the rooms closest to the science wing, we could feel change coming, could feel the slightest vibrations in our desks when something heavy hit the ground.

On Halloween Andrea and Susie took a test in U.S. history. Prohibition. Suffragists. The First World War. Ms. Schwartz, a thorough woman, gave an essay exam. Andrea had no problem putting words down in sentences. Teachers liked her—she was a good student, determined—but not Susie. A seventeen-year-old with glasses, Susie looked the part, but she resisted learning, never wanted to sit quietly, never wanted to absorb a lesson made in a classroom.

Midway through the test, Andrea, seated at the front of the room, set down her pen, and looked back at Susie, hoping for the comfort of a quick glance, a small smile. The room stretched between them. We almost didn’t notice. Andrea turned back around, opening and closing her right hand, her movements stiff and jerky, her fingers too cold for fluid motion.

Had she stayed turned around a moment longer, she would’ve seen Susie begin to do the same thing, staring at her immobile left hand like a stranger.

We tried not to watch. We had an exam to take. But Andrea's frustration grew into the room. She shook her hand, beat it against her leg as discreetly as she could. Our pencils scratched against thin paper. Andrea raised her arm—she could still move her arm—to get Ms. Schwartz's attention. She sat patiently and quietly, her eyes fixed on nothing while her hand sat perched on her wrist like a lifeless bird.

Teenie Sutherland was a back row girl. She wore heavy makeup, ripped up jeans. Her knees were ripped up too. She'd cut the fingers off her gloves, but they were cheap and easily replaceable. Mrs. Miller dimmed the lights in class, turned on the projector, and in the dark we grew quiet, listening, staring at a map of northern Europe on blank canvas.

Teenie, though, was a talker—a girl who repeated facts when facts were what was needed; Teenie spoke out of turn. She could be cruel and vindictive, if you let her settle into you. We never called her a stuck up bitch. Tuck and Greg did, though they weren't the only ones. She opened her mouth to speak, to answer Mrs. Miller's question, and what came out was Romania. Then Finland and Scandinavia. Germany, Greece, and Estonia. Lithuania. France. Belgium Germany ItalyPolandSpainSwedenTurkey.

Teenie? we asked. Are you all right?

Moldova, she said.

What?

Switzerland.

Can you text it?

Teenie reached for her phone, hit the keys with her thumbs. She looked more amused than anything else. Our phones buzzed. We looked at our screens. Ukraine.

Her symptoms came and went. She left notes in the bathroom. *Meet me in the parking Sweden I have to go to the drs again. Miller apologized for detention, which was funny. Maybe she's ok when she's not teaching? I drew the next comic on the back. Text me when you're france.*

Teenie could speak without answering questions she wasn't asked, but not always. It was still a game, something playful and light. She welcomed the excuse to interrupt class with nonsense. We welcomed it too. People talked to her more than they once did, as if she were a fortuneteller, someone who could spit out a strange prophecy you could take with you, write down on a sheet of paper, and decipher. Something you could swallow whole.

* * *

Unique Thompson, Katie Jackson, and Debbie Couffman said they were pack animals. They liked the sound of it, the unity. They were on Le Roy's basketball team. Go Knights. Put up the fight. Put up the fight-fight-fights.

Nobody else thought their symptoms were like ours. They chalked it up to a bad game, and then to a losing streak. But we knew their problems were ours from the get-go, made in the same place. We watched from the bleachers as they made errors, which started small. Their arms shook as they lined up for a shot or went for a rebound. Just the slightest shudder, but we could see it, could see

confusion pass over their faces, just for a moment, before they got back in the game. We knew by then what to expect. We tried not to feel like what was coming was inevitable.

Their teammates were angry but quiet. *We believe you,* we wrote, and left candy in the bathroom. Their parents liked to say that a bad season wasn't the end of the world. The coach talked of next year's lineup without making eye contact. The *team*, he reminded them, would pull it together in the fall.

* * *

We were diagnosed with hysteria, all of us, a dozen teenage girls. We went to doctors, were submitted to tests. We had our blood drawn to check for anemia, we had ECGs for cardiac arrhythmia, aortic stenosis. The doctors checked for central or peripheral nervous system disease. The school board called a meeting. Nothing was funny. Our classmates began to move away from us in the hallway, almost imperceptibly, and if we had told anyone of this, our parents or teachers or therapists, they would've said it was all in our heads—of course it was—but that was okay because couldn't we remember how hard it was to be sick?

There wasn't anything to do, so we became people who only made promises that were easy to keep, promises that would, at the right moment, dissolve like tissue paper. In the winter New York is cold. When we stepped outside, our cheeks stung and reddened, our faces flushed with expectation, with dread. Those of us who had cars sat behind our steering wheels after school and knew that the coldness we felt there, in the time it took for the engines to warm

and feel like life, was the chill of something else, something we couldn't pin down.

In January Elsie Frank drove her truck into a drainage ditch beside Route 5.

Elsie, by and large, knew what she wanted and she liked to get into arguments, often political, with her peers, her teachers, the policemen directing afterschool traffic. Her stature suggested a meekness, a certain grace, a desire to please—all traits frequently assigned to small women—none of which suited Elsie. She was gregarious, though, and for most people, this made up for the abrupt way she exited rooms and the condescension at the edge of her voice.

She'd only fainted once before, earlier that week, when she was alone. No one was there to tell her she shouldn't drive. When she was jolted awake by the impact of the crash—the truck nose-down and sideways in an overflowing drainage ditch—she realized what had happened and considered herself lucky. She wiggled her way out of her seatbelt, fought against gravity pulling her towards the driver-side door, and tried to climb out the sunroof, glad, for once, to be so small.

But the laces of her boot caught—on the seatbelt, on the steering wheel, she couldn't see—and Elsie, half-out of the truck, couldn't untangle herself or twist free. It was too dark. Her hands slipped against the roof. Dirty water began to fill the cabin. Elsie flinched as it flooded her boots.

She was only stuck for fifteen minutes. Another driver found her, pulled her out, wrapped her in blankets, removed her boots and wet clothes. She

considered herself lucky. But her feet, she told us later, had faded from her with a thoroughness that felt like erasure. That felt less like numbness and more like a threat. Do this—stay as you are—and you'll lose your feet. Do this and you'll faint again, and the next time will be worse.

Amber Ray might be the saddest of us all, but she was sad before the symptoms started, and she'll be sad once they leave. She'd be the first to tell you. Amber's shoulder-length hair was dark brown at the roots, the rest of it dyed a yellow blonde. She wore rings on seven fingers, and began smoking as a freshman, which lent her a hard edge. She left cigarettes in the bathroom. She lived with her step-dad in a trailer park outside Batavia.

If Le Roy were a face, Amber—and the girls like her, with their white-washed jeans and long nails—were its crows' feet, wrinkles that weren't evidence of wisdom but merely undesirable lines revealing our undesirable reality: Le Roy, you are fading. Le Roy, you're cheap. Le Roy, Kodak pumped chemicals into the ground in Rochester, and it ruined you.

We watched as Amber overheard things she shouldn't have, things we'd already heard but couldn't repeat out of compassion and unease. She shouldn't have listened, but to stay within earshot of painful gossip was to hear her fortune, and we've never, not once, been able to walk away from the promise of our fortune. She heard: Amber? She's got the name. I heard she's stripping already. We can go if you get a fake. She works as a phone sex operator. Those still exist.

Her mother left her for Las Vegas. For Rochester. For Buffalo. I'm surprised, honestly, that she's still got teeth. Beau will tell you. He's got the texts.

Amber's neck began to spasm. She thought, at first, it was a muscle weak from overuse, from sleeping on a futon, but it grew worse. We could spot her from the other side of the cafeteria, her head jerking to one side as she tried to eat, the students around her spread thin like old cloth. She began eating in our bathroom, writing long notes. *My head hurts, I'm lonely but it's really embarrassing to admit that, but then I think, what could be more embarrassing than my neck, yesterday I tried to take a bite of BBQ and got it in my hair. Today Alan took a picture of me on his phone, he held it up until my neck started, I came in here after. I would live with this forever if you could promise me that no one would ever say anything about me again.*

* * *

Louise Barman woke up and knew something was wrong. Looking at her cell phone, glowing bright in the darkness of early morning, she couldn't find the word for it. She was in two places at once. There were words, but she woke up in the room where they weren't. She woke up at the bottom of the ocean, fearful. She shook her head, trying to clear her vision. There were words down here, but she couldn't get to them, and even if she could, maybe they didn't have eyes anymore. Maybe they swam covered in sick translucent skin. Maybe they had teeth.

She stayed in bed for a week. Ate nothing, drank only water. Kept the blinds closed, and curled away from the sunlight. We would've made jokes about vampires and pregnancy. We were like that. But she came back to school pale and consumptive, with eyes like water. We found out quickly: she came back blind in one eye.

But really, she insisted, *I'm not so bad off. No one will know unless I tell them, no one will see I can't see.*

Morgan Grant, a round-faced girl, was a trained ballerina, but we were the only ones to know. It was an after school thing in Rochester. We were in support. We wanted to see a performance, but she embarrassed easily. She opted not to use social media sites, which set her apart in a way we didn't find boring. We never felt entitled to information about her life, though we wanted to know.

The texts first surfaced in Health. Mr. Ackerman pointed to a diagram. The nervous system. Snow fell outside. The room seemed to shrink in on us. Posters had been removed from the back wall in preparation for a new coat of paint, and we could see the color it was before it faded, a vibrant yellow, rectangular patches left behind where the Digestive System, the Female Reproductive Organs, and the Declaration of Independence hung before.

We didn't know she was dating Alan. Maybe she wasn't. Her notes to us hadn't mentioned it. Her texts to him had gotten passed along to Greg, who sat in the far corner beneath the Constitution, his phone in his lap as he read off

Morgan's messages. Texts about after school. About how ripe she was, how wet. Plans for titty fucking, head.

We liked sex—at the very least we were already interested in the idea of it—but we wanted to be the ones to say so. At class change, we didn't head to our bathroom. It was under construction and the dust seemed to be everywhere, hanging in the air, collecting on our eyelashes so that when we blinked it felt like we were shedding something.

The next day the boys stole Morgan's shoes from her locker and tossed them over a power line. The laces caught and knocked icicles to the ground. The frayed Pointe shoes dangled there. Like balls, they said. Like a pair of hairy balls.

Morgan's feet went numb. Morgan couldn't taste her food. Whatever grace she'd had she didn't feel anymore. She got an iPhone. She posted status updates. She sat in the courtyard, talking for hours despite the cold, her ankles crossed like a lock.

We were diagnosed with hysteria, all of us, a dozen teenage girls. The doctors ruled out grand mal seizures, cortical blindness, multiple sclerosis, systemic lupus, erythematosus, sarcoidosis. Men in hazard suits told us there were no contaminants in our environment. One by one our physicians referred us to psychiatrists. Our parents did research online, printed out part of the DSM, and highlighted, *Close inspection reveals that conversion symptoms are not, however, premeditated—they simply happen—and although observers may feel a "purpose" is behind them, the patient himself is unaware of any such thing. Many*

clinicians feel that the symptom itself may be a kind of "sign language," or a story of hieroglyphic that conveys what the patient is unable to put into words.

We could hardly believe it. We said, We have words. Listen to us. Don't you know we already have words?

For Jamie Leigh Rice, her symptoms manifested just once, but once was enough. In the middle of her performance in *The Crucible,* Jamie Leigh slid her hands down the side of her skirt. We thought, at first, it was a wardrobe malfunction, something she was trying to fix—she was just being clumsy about it. She was a petite girl. During a lecture on avian biology, Liam, a friend of her older brother's, grabbed her wrist, his large flat hand swallowing hers, and said, You've got bones like a bird, Bird Bones. We chimed in, too. We couldn't help ourselves. Even she thought it was funny.

After all, there are worse names. We won't say them here.

But.

There are pictures of her, we've heard, on Liam's phone. One in particular, where she's sitting on a bed, her bare back to the camera. She's looking over her shoulder, her left breast visible. Her legs hidden beneath blankets. The light quality, poor. A few of our classmates might consider it artful, but we wouldn't; the girl in the photo looks too much like her, despite the precision in her spine, the stiffness of her arms. The flat expression on her face.

She would never let herself look that way on stage.

On opening night, slathered in makeup and buried beneath a heavy costume, Jamie Leigh entered stage right, hovering in the background, waiting to

deliver her lines. The audience was full of parents holding small video cameras, our teachers, our peers. It was nearly Jamie Leigh's turn to speak when she reached her hand down her skirt and slid it around between her legs. We thought the problem was her costume. But her shoulder began to jerk rhythmically, her hand moving up and down, rubbing, until the audience understood she was touching herself in front of an auditorium full of people. We knew this was something she would never find funny. We knew this was something everyone could see.

We were diagnosed with hysteria. All of us. A dozen teenage girls. The posters are on the walls again, the bathroom has been renovated. The science wing has new lockers, which we'll get to use in the fall. We can go to school without coats. It's warm, and we're the only ones who get chills. Unique runs track, but she's not fast; we don't say anything. Kelly tells us she only faked the stutter at first to feel like she was in control sometimes. We ask Elsie and Louise if they miss driving. Amber stays home, curled on the futon beneath blankets, math textbook spread open across her lap, a pencil lost in the folds of her quilt. When Liam, Alan, and Kyle call us sluts, the healthy girls, our unaffected classmates, tell them to shut the fuck up, you pack of assholes, good *god*, how old are you? They smile at us in solidarity.

They use our bathroom now. When we're applying makeup or drying our hands, we can see them watching us, glancing the length of our skirts before complimenting our shoes, staring at our chests while asking us where we got a

certain necklace, and leaving before we can answer. We don't go in there anymore. We're in the walls now, our history written out on wide-ruled loose leaf, with scratches in the margins. Beneath the new, yellow tile we move, a version of ourselves fluid like ink. The dust isn't gone, but we don't feel it. We circle the school, we move together. We want to move with everyone else.

We hear we'll be better. We have a problem that can be fixed. Our doctors are on the national news, explaining the tests, the environmental studies done on our school. The building has been examined. There's no sign of asbestos or mold. We are in good health. It's psychological. A mental problem. We are a mental problem, drawn out on the board, available for solving. It will be done to us, like everything else. We will be solved, our community solvent. Our unpolluted environment will bubble up around us and pieces will come away and our classmates will know where to keep us. Let's have a normal life. We'll be better.

We'll be made better.

CHAPTER 4

GREETINGS FROM KENTUCKY

When Wallace received Jenna's letter in early May, he began to realize that their relationship—if it wasn't over yet—would be over shortly. Sitting on his parents' porch, he swallowed hard and rubbed one hand across his stomach. They had just graduated college, and Jenna had returned to live briefly at her parents' house until the fall, when she would be moving across the country for a new job, and things were not looking good. Wallace tore into the envelope. He'd gotten it into his head that he could renew her faith in their relationship with the assistance of the United States Postal Service, and had sent her a letter two weeks prior, detailing, to the best of his ability, his feelings about her and their current situation. Yes things were tricky now, and yes, they did have problems, but they could do fun things like write each other letters, right? Surely that would help. There was no reason to throw in the towel just yet.

"Write a letter, dumbass," he said to himself, not unkindly. "Write a letter? This is ridiculous." It was a nice enough afternoon, pleasant the way only May afternoons were, with the promise of summer not yet a humid, blistering reality. Next door Clive Thorton, a balding fifty-five-year-old man, pushed a lawn mower across his yard. He was like a truck in that way, devoted to the task at hand, and today he looked miserable.

Sitting in the glaring afternoon light, he unfolded Jenna's letter.

Wallace,

Sorry it's taken me so long to write you back! I always think I like letters, but then when it comes time to write back, I realize I mostly like receiving them, and then I think that just makes me like everybody else, liking to get things and not liking to do much of the giving. So I'm sorry?

A loud thumping made Wallace glance up. Thorton, trying to maneuver the mower around a small tree near his driveway, knocked the mower wheel into it over and over again. Wallace could see the glisten of sweat on his forehead, even from ___feet away. Thorton's face was pinched like a plastic bag. He continued repositioning himself, pulling the mower back only to push it to the same place. As Thorton finally swung the mower around, he glanced up at Wallace and their eyes met for a moment. Wallace half-smiled. He felt young suddenly and exceptionally foolish—he who was not doing yard work but was instead sitting on the porch, a letter in hand. Wallace shifted and drew his legs closer to his body. What kind of person just sat on a porch?

Also, I've been really busy, as I told you the last time we talked on the phone. But I appreciate the effort.

As to your concerns about our relationship, I'll have to think it all over. That's part of the reason it's taken me a while to get back to you, too. If you would like to come visit at the beginning of August, I think we can do something to make that happen. I want to see you before I move to Washington, but I think we need to give it some thought before we get

really caught up in this thing, as this isn't college anymore and I'm not sure how we'll translate to the "real world."

The mower hiccupped and died. Next door Thorton tried to restart it. He tried again. Instead of becoming enraged, kicking the broken machine, swearing, knocking it over on its side—all things Wallace had seen Thorton do to inanimate objects in moments of frustration—Thorton sat down on the ground and put his head in his hands. His sunburned forearms blocked a portion of his face from Wallace's view.

I hope this letter finds you well (haha, this is something my mom would write in a Christmas card), and I'll call you really soon. Things have been crazy and I don't know what's what.

Sincerely,

Jenna

Ps- I know I'll probably ask you this next time we talk, but have you seen my

black hooded sweatshirt??? I think I lost it in the move.

The two men sat for a moment, each on their adjacent property, close but very far away, too. Wallace could have called out to Thorton. They could've had a conversation without needing to yell much. But the last time Wallace had interacted with Thorton he was ten years old and climbing around in the bushes at

the side of his house. Jenna still might call. She said she would, and she was nothing if not magnanimous. He'd seen her give away her sweater to girlfriends when they were cold, she often paid for drinks, she tried to listen to people when they talked, even those people who were so boring that Wallace could hardly endure a five-minute conversation.

So why didn't he think she'd call?

Next-door Thorton still hadn't moved. Thorton had been his neighbor for Wallace's entire life, but Wallace knew next to nothing about him and it had always seemed to Wallace that Thorton liked it that way. He went out of his way to alienate himself from the community. He demanded that no one else park along the street in front of his house. On his best days, he greeted neighbors with a nod and little else.

For a moment, Wallace thought he might say something, offer to help him with the mower, make a dumb joke about something, but before he could Thorton began to cry, a great loud sucking sound issuing from his gut with such force that Wallace—who had no stomach for honesty this raw—stuffed the letter back in the envelope and retreated inside, leaving Thorton to his indeterminable grief.

* * *

Three long days later Wallace stood over the kitchen sink rinsing a coffee pot. His parents sat at the kitchen table behind him working diligently on the Sunday crossword. He looked out the window. Just before he turned to join his parents, Wallace caught sight of Thorton, whose wrists were covered in white bandages.

"Whoa, what happened to him?" Wallace asked. His dad sipped from his coffee. He turned toward Wallace, but didn't look directly at him. "Dad?"

"Huh. What?"

"I said, 'What happened to Thorton?'"

"Oh. Ha ha. Well—" Wallace's dad leaned back in his chair, the front legs lifting up off of the ground, and he reached to scratch his scalp. Wallace knew this laugh. It was the laugh his dad made when he was uncomfortable. His dad sucked air in through his teeth and shook his head.

"It's not funny," his mom said.

"I know. I know it's not. It's not funny."

"What's not funny?"

"Well, the other night—"

His mom took over. "Apparently a few nights ago Clive tried to kill himself. Apparently."

"He *what*?" Wallace moved from his place at the window and walked towards his mother, drawn to the weight of this information with a tug like gravity. His father went back to the crossword.

"Mrs. Lauer came home from work the other night, and parked her car in the driveway. Clive was sitting on his porch, and she's about as friendly as you get with him, so she says, 'Hi' and he doesn't reply, which is unusual. Not in *my* experience, but." His mother shrugged and spread her hands apart. "Anyway, so she says it again, he doesn't respond, and by this point, her eyes have adjusted to

the dark, and she can tell that he's bleeding so she runs up to him, sees that he's slit open his wrists, and she calls 911."

"Wow."

"Yeah."

"Wow. I can't believe that. *Thorton*?"

"I know," she said, parting her hands again to show her loss for words.

Wallace thought of Thorton crying on the lawn. That slumped shape. His own indifference. He felt a sinking in his gut. The sensation was becoming uncomfortably familiar. "Wait, when'd this happen again?"

"Oh, I don't know. Two, three days ago."

"Shit."

"Wallace," his father said. Wallace rolled his eyes. If you didn't know any better, you'd think he was still a kid for the way his parents treated him.

"Anyway. Enough of that." She smiled up at him. "Did you hear back from Jenna?" His mom, a woman easily charmed by good manners and polite conversation, loved Jenna and called her a "delight" when they'd briefly met her on parents' weekend the previous fall.

"I spend all of this morning looking for jobs." This was almost true; he'd sat down at his computer and skimmed through open positions listed on a career building website before checking his email and playing word scramble games.

"What'd you apply for?" his dad asked.

"Well. That's for this afternoon I think."

"Listen," his mom interrupted. She twisted around in her seat, and grabbed a plastic bag hanging from the back of her chair. "I was at Walgreens the other day, and I saw these." She pulled out a package of postcards and handed them to him. *Kentucky!* was printed across the front of the glossy package. There were ten landmarks and landscapes—Mammoth Cave, the Red River Gorge, a dilapidated barn—some of them photoshopped to include unrealistic sunsets, exceptionally large moons, and animals that cast no shadow and stared right into the camera.

"Aw, thanks, Mom," he said, taking the cards from her. When he was feeling happy and patient, he appreciated that she occasionally bought him little things she thought he'd like, even if he didn't necessarily want them. On other days, these gestures bothered him. The gifts—silly magnets; $5 DVDs from Wal-mart; Big League Chew, his favorite gum as a kid—were reminders of how little she knew about him and his life since he'd gone away to school.

His mom leaned back in her chair and said, with a sing-song quality in her voice, "I think you could send one or two to Jenna." It was a tone she used when she wanted to assert an opinion without taking responsibility for it.

"I don't know," Wallace said, in the same voice, his patience fading. He turned to walk down the hallway. "But maybe I will."

Wallace spent the remainder of the day holed up in his room. He had no plans. He wanted to call Jenna, but he thought it would be better not to—he didn't want to seem desperate, especially not when it seemed like their relationship might not continue. That it wasn't continuing. But he couldn't believe she was the kind of

girl who would think that never returning his calls constituted an acceptable way to breakup. Had he misread her so thoroughly? He remembered the Jenna he knew, the girl who made him open-face egg sandwiches for breakfast when he slept over, scrawling his name and a smiley face across the eggs with hot sauce. The same girl who once threatened to clock a guy they met in a bar after he tried to fight a nearly-black-out-drunk Wallace. Wallace almost couldn't stand, and there was petite Jenna, drunk herself, standing at 5'2", both of her fists held in front of her face like a boxer. She'd had lessons. The other guy backed off, reluctant to look like the kind of guy who would even *think* about hitting a girl. Jenna turned to Wallace and said, "Showed that motherfucker, didn't I?" before throwing up on a stranger's shoes.

That night Wallace received a call from Barry, a friend from high school he saw sometimes when he was at home. Barry had not attended college and now worked at an indoor putt-putt golf course. Wallace didn't want to hang out. They'd grown apart, and bridging the gap between them required effort, which was sometimes worth it, sometimes not. Barry, who had once been one of the most resourceful and inventive people Wallace knew, now spent most of his free time playing online poker and discussing the women he'd like to sleep with rather than the ones he did—probably, Wallace thought, because there weren't any.

But after a few hours in front of the computer applying for uninteresting jobs, Wallace needed to get out of the house, and at this point, any company sounded better than none. He drove down to the bowling alley to meet Barry.

As soon as he walked in the front door, Wallace felt like he'd made a mistake. He was tired and not in the mood for bowling. The carpet was worn in threadbare tracks. The stench of bygone smoke lingered in the air, not quite masked by the sickly scent of air freshener. The dim lighting drained whatever color remained in the upholstery, the wall decorations, and the patrons themselves. Wallace found Barry slouched over by the bar, his shoulder-length hair falling into his eyes and his tan tattooed forearms stretched out on the countertop in front of him, each wrist encircled by a piece of gold jewelry.

"Walleeey," Barry said when he saw him, dragging out the last syllable in an artificially deep voice. After four years Barry still greeted him like this.

"Hello," Wallace said, plopping down on the stool beside Barry.

"Listen, Charlene's gonna come by if that's cool with you."

Wallace waited for him to go on, but Barry didn't. Wallace cleared his throat. "Charlene?"

Barry leaned back, and slapped the countertop with both hands. "Fuck! You haven't met Charlene."

"I haven't heard anything about any Charlene." He scanned the area behind the bar. No bartender. "Who is she?"

"She's my girl."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, man. Met her at Dale's. Like a month or two ago." Barry smiled as he drummed his hands on the counter and bobbed his head. He did this a lot, moved as if he heard a beat no one else did.

“You want pizza?” Barry asked. “Pizza’s on me. Drinks, too.” He scanned the room behind Wallace. “Should be here any minute now.” As if on cue, a woman wearing tight jeans and big curly brown hair walked over to Barry and kissed his cheek.

“Wallace? Charlene.” Barry wrapped an arm around her waist as she stood beside him. “Baby? This is Wallace. Buddy from high school.”

Charlene extended her hand to him and Wallace shook it.

“Pleasure,” she said, smiling at Wallace with an exaggeration in her expression that made him uncomfortable. She was pretty, but she wore too much makeup. It made her look like a replica of the person she was supposed to be. “Are we bowling tonight?”

“No, actually,” Wallace began. He looked at Barry, who was smiling at nothing and no one in particular. “Or are we?” Wallace didn’t want to bowl. He was bad at it. “Charlene, are you, uh, a fan of bowling?”

“I’m on a team.” She stood with her weight on one hip, running a hand through the back of her hair.

“Are you any good?” Wallace asked. She stopped combing her hair with her fingers.

“The season hasn’t started yet.”

“She’s great,” Barry said. He was a terrible bowler Wallace knew, but he liked to play anyway. “You should see her. Knocking down pins left and right.” Barry punched the air with his free arm and gently moved his head back and forth. “Bam, bam, bam. She’s the best.”

Charlene smiled distractedly and touched the back of Barry's head. "I do ok."

"Baby, you wanna bowl?" Barry asked, still in his seat looking up at her.

"Let's bowl," Charlene said. "I need the practice."

"Oh, shit," Wallace blurted out. He felt ill, trapped beneath the weight of his own decisions.

"'Oh shit' what?"

"Fuck, man. I'm sorry. I forgot."

"Forgot what?"

"I've gotta head home. I promised my parents I'd go with them to this thing."

Barry frowned and gestured at Wallace's beer while taking a sip of his own. "Stay. Finish it."

"Really," Wallace said, standing. Charlene stared off behind the bar, disengaged from their conversation. "I shit the bed on this one. I gotta run. It's this, like—" Wallace smoothed out the front of his pants, trying to make up as many details as he could. "It's this downtown fundraiser for a guy in our neighborhood who tried to kill himself." Wallace felt guilty as soon as the words left his mouth.

"No shit?"

"Yeah."

Barry pulled his phone from his pocket to check the time. "You're probably already late. When was it?"

"Eight."

"Yeah, you're not gonna make it."

Wallace checked the time on his own phone, as if he were considering Barry's point. It was a bad lie. He sank back down onto his stool.

"And like, no offense dude, but it doesn't sound like such a great time."

"No."

"So we're bowling?" Charlene said, suddenly interested in the conversation.

"Whaddya think, Walls?"

Barry and Wallace made their way over to the counter to rent shoes and pay for their games. They met Charlene at the lane and got ready. Her movements became quick and efficient as she entered their names in the antiquated computer. She seemed warmer now that she had a goal.

"Where's your girl?"

"She lives in Lexington."

"That's right, that's right."

"What's she like?" Charlene called from the ball return. She held her hands over the blowing air.

"She's great. Funny. Pretty."

"That's it?" Charlene said.

"Yeah, when you like somebody, you *like* them," Barry said. "There are reasons and shit."

"Jenna is the kind of person who always knows what to say, and not just like prerecorded responses that people blurt out when they're feeling like they need to be polite. She means things when she says them. And she's a boxer—"

"Wait, really?" Barry said.

"Yes."

"And she fights? In matches?" Charlene asked, sitting down on the plastic bench beside Barry.

"Yeah and she's good, too. She got a black eye this one time during practice and people looked at me weird when we were out—which was not so fun—but she's was proud of it, and I kinda was, too." Wallace paused. "I don't really know what's going on with us right now."

"What do you mean?" Charlene said. She leaned forward.

"Lay it on us," Barry said. "We know some shit."

"I wrote her a letter a while ago and she wrote back, but I haven't heard from her? She hasn't really…called me. In two weeks."

"Have you called her?"

"Well—"

"*Dude*. You gotta call her. If you're gonna be like, a thing, I mean, good communication is what you gotta do. I just, I don't even know what to say. You get busy but you—you call, and that is like the thing. The thing that makes you together."

"I just don't want to crowd—"

"If you don't mind my saying," Barry said, "and excuse me, I know I'm cutting you off here, but it doesn't seem like you're *crowding* her right now." He gestured at the half-empty bowling alley.

"Definitely, definitely not crowding her," Charlene said. She stood up again. "We ready to bowl?"

Wallace took Barry's advice and called Jenna when he got in the car a few hours later. The phone rang once, twice, three times, and then it went to voicemail. He lingered on the line. Her prerecorded message played itself out, and then came the beep. He ended the call, but not quickly enough. His pause had been recorded, which, he felt, was worse than if he'd left a long rambling message about his last few days, her letter, his night out with Barry, all of the trivial things he'd used to pass the time while waiting to hear from her.

When he got home, Wallace tried not to look at Thorton's house as he walked up the driveway. He still felt guilty about lying to Barry. In the kitchen, the postcards were sitting at his spot at the table. He grabbed a postcard and wrote a quick note.

> *Have you ever been here? Looks like it's a pretty beautiful part of the state in the fall. But what part of Kentucky isn't beautiful in the fall? We Kentuckians get a bad rap. An undeserved rap. It's gorgeous here. I hope you're feeling better. I sincerely do.*

Wallace got back in the car and drove to the post office. He pulled his car up to the blue mailboxes, pulled out a pen, and pressed the postcard up against the center of the steering wheel, writing Thorton's name and address in the appropriate box. He put a stamp on the postcard, pulled down the lid, and tossed it in, feeling relief as he released the cold, painted-metal handle, relishing the clang it made as it closed. There was purpose there. Finality. Things Wallace wanted desperately, but lacked.

There were 10 postcards in the package. Over the next week and a half, Wallace sent Thorton over half of them. The second postcard he sent had an image of a jockey and horse in honor of the Kentucky Derby.

> *Clive, today I saw two kids on the street chase down an ice-cream truck. Well, I can't say they chased it down. They just stood in its way. A boy and a girl, about eight years old probably, but I'm so bad at figuring that out. They played chicken and they won. The driver looked frustrated. You'd think he'd want to sell ice-cream but maybe he was having a bad day. I was happy for the kids. I wish I had that kind of fearless determination. Hope all is well with you!*

When it came time to write on the postcard of Louisville at night, Wallace thought he remembered, somehow, that Thorton hadn't ever been there. Perhaps

that was something his mother said a long time ago just to say, though. He couldn't remember. It was likely the kind of thing he heard when he was young, before he understood hyperbole, but it stuck out in his mind just the same, so he avoided any mention of the city.

> *Clive, I never buy lottery tickets, but yesterday I did, and the woman in front of me won $50! She got so excited. I've never seen someone so excited. (Ok, so maybe that's not true.) She started jumping up and down, and then gave the cashier a hug. She tried to hug me too, but I had my hands full, so she just put her hands on my shoulders and gave me a friendly shake. It made my whole day. Hopefully it makes yours, too!*

On the postcard of a rural setting covered in snow:

> *I'm a terrible bowler, Clive. Do you like bowling? I don't know anyone who does. I know people who like drinking beer, who then want to bowl, but I don't know anyone who likes bowling. Not that bowling is terrible. It's just fine. I hope I haven't offended you if you like bowling. Or if you like beer and bowling. I'm digging myself in a hole now! (I feel like there's a bowling pun to be made here, but I don't know what it is.) Wishing you the best.*

When he tackled the second postcard of the Red River Gorge, Wallace felt a little better about his Kentucky knowledge. He hadn't ever been there either, but he'd heard about it from friends at school who loved backpacking with a fervor that often manifested as disinterest in nearly everything else. So he'd almost been there. By proxy, he'd been there. He'd heard so many stories. But still he wouldn't lie about it.

> *Clive, it's supposed to rain this weekend. How do you feel about the rain? Everyone acts like talking about the weather is some horrible thing, but I don't think it is. I like the rain. I like being inside while it rains. I like how green everything gets in the summer when it rains. Like on this postcard! I've never been to the Red River Gorge, but my friends have. Hope you stay dry in the coming days!*

By the time he drove to the post office to deliver his 8th postcard to Thorton, he'd spent the last week and a half dodging Barry's calls and doing everything he could not to come out of his room. He took his meals upstairs. He sat at his window and looked for Thorton sometimes, but had yet to catch him retrieving his mail. It was beside the point, but Wallace wanted to see the expression on Thorton's face when he pulled one from his mailbox if for no other reason than to assuage his curiosity. Did Thorton react at all? Did the postcards have any sort of effect on his mental state or mood? Did they cheer him up or were they obnoxious and annoying? They certainly cheered Wallace up.

Delivering the postcards was the one joy of his day. He felt as if he were connecting with another human being, practicing a kindness that would come back to him in some way.

On the 9th postcard there was an old barn pictured from a county unfamiliar to Wallace. He was not charmed by it. The picture quality was poor, he supposed to make it appear antique, but it only looked tacky. He flipped it over to reread what he'd written.

Here's a joke I heard. (It might be a little bit inappropriate, so I hope that's ok!) Q: What's the difference between an enzyme and a hormone? A: You can hear a hormone.

I hope it makes you laugh!

Jokes? What good were they? And anyway this was a bad joke. Or, at least, it was old and uninventive. As he reached out to put the 8th postcard into the blue receptacle, the summer sun beating down on him from overhead, Wallace's cell phone, tucked into the driver's cup holder, began ringing and he grabbed the phone with one hand and slid the postcard into the slot with the other, and he was amazed to find, when he answered the phone, that it was Jenna on the other end of the line.

"Hello?"

"Wallace! Hi! How are you doing? I saw you called the other day."

"Yes. Ha ha. I was out for drinks with Barry. Thought I'd say hi. I'm good. Looking for a job."

"Any luck?"

"We'll see. I don't know. We'll see. How are you?"

"I'm great. I've just been having a great summer. Sarah and I went up to the lake for like, two and a half weeks. We went tubing with her cousins. I got sunburned so many times I think I might be tan now. Tan for me. I didn't remember that there wasn't cell service or anything up there. So, sorry it's taken me a while."

Another car pulled up behind him in line. He shifted into drive and moved the car into an empty space in the parking lot. So she hadn't been ignoring him. She'd been out of range of cell service, up at the lake spending time with her best friend, a completely reasonable summertime thing to do. But—and there was the "but" creeping in before Wallace could do anything to box it out—*but* she went to the lake every summer and she knew her cell phone wouldn't work. Why hadn't she told him beforehand? It would've been so simple. So simple to call and say, "Hey Wallace, I'm gonna be gone a while and my phone won't work, but hey, I'll call you when I get home, does that sound ok?" And she hadn't. She hadn't done that. Wallace shoved the thought away before he had a chance to follow it through to its painful conclusion: that she hadn't told him because she didn't care if he knew because she didn't really respect him because she didn't really like him all that much in the first place.

No. Instead Wallace took her at her word; she hadn't called because she hadn't been able to. But now she *was* calling him, and this was what mattered.

"Yeah, no, it's cool," he said.

"Ok, good. Hey, I was just calling to see—what are you doing this weekend?"

"I, uh—"

"Cause I wanted to see, do you want to come and visit? I was thinking for a week or two maybe. If you're not too busy or anything. If you can tear yourself away from Barry."

Wallace laughed. It came out of his throat with a clucking sound. He swallowed and continued. "Yeah, lemme check." He tried to stay calm, to keep the excitement out of his voice.

When he got home he packed his things—enough for a two-week stay, one at the lake, the other at her parents' house.

But the postcards. On his way out, Wallace glanced at them, snagged one from his dresser, and jotted a quick message.

> *Clive, I hope you've enjoyed these postcards. Even if they* are *kinda dumb. I think life is crazy sometimes, though, or at least nonsensical and overwhelming, like the universe is playing a trick on us. I don't know anything about the world except maybe this: even dumb things can be beautiful. (I feel weird writing that.) But anyway…greetings from Kentucky!*

He put the postcard in his shoulder bag—he'd send it the following day.

Hours later when Wallace saw Jenna standing on the steps leading down from her porch to driveway, he felt a rush of emotion. He'd called her when he got off the highway because he knew he'd feel uncomfortable walking up the stood and ringing the doorbell alone. Even in the summer heat, she wore jeans and a thin long-sleeved shirt, the sleeves rolled up to her elbows. Her hair was swept back from her face, and she smiled when she saw him.

Wallace didn't know what to do with his hands or how to move his body. But as soon as he closed the door Jenna wrapped her arms around him.

"You're a real person," she said, burying her face in his neck. "An actual person."

Wallace touched the small of her back, pulled her towards him. She smelled the way he remembered.

"I'm so happy to see you," he said. He leaned back and kissed her forehead. She leaned into his kiss and hugged him tighter.

Tilting her head back, she looked up at him. "You should kiss me I think."

"Ok." He hesitated another moment, looked at Jenna, her eyes already closed, and pressed his lips against hers.

It was a strange kiss, familiar yet changed. How long did two people have to go without seeing each other before an average kiss became like a first kiss again, full of anxiety and entirely uncertain? She leaned her hips into his, and the pressure of this movement knocked him back against his car. He remembered this,

that she liked sex, that it was she who initiated it more often than not. He put both of his hands on her face. She paused, pulled back, and said: “Inside.”

“Your parents?”

“At work.”

He followed her into her house. Her bags were packed and set just inside the front door, ready to be loaded into her car so they could depart for the lake that afternoon. Wallace followed her down the hallway and into her bedroom. He’d been here once before, over the winter break. The thick curtains were pulled and it was almost completely dark. He could hear himself breathing.

Jenna closed the door behind them, held Wallace’s face, and kissed him. It was a tender gesture. They stood there making out for a while before Jenna pulled Wallace’s T-shirt off over his head. The air-conditioning in her house was turned down low and goose bumps broke out across the back of his arms. Jenna began to unbuckle his belt as she kissed his neck. He inhaled sharply as she worked his jeans and boxers down over his hips and pulled them down to his ankles. Kneeling there she took him into her mouth. Wallace leaned back against her closed bedroom door and shivered violently as his back touched the cold door handle. He tried to move so that he could lean against the door itself, but he couldn’t, not with Jenna kneeling between his legs. He nearly lost his balance trying.

Jenna stopped. “Everything ok?”

“Huh.” He looked down at her and exhaled; he had not realized he was holding his breath. “Yeah, I’m fine. Is everything ok with you?”

Jenna put one hand on the ground for balance as she stood up. “It sure is,” she said, smiling.. He liked this about her, that she could laugh during tense moments. He liked it, but still, he felt uncomfortable. She leaned in to kiss him, and stopped. “Aren’t you going to undress me?”

“Yes,” he said, suddenly feeling defensive. “I was. I am. It’s cold. I wanted you to be warm.”

Jenna rubbed her hands up and down against his arms, trying to warm him up. It was hard to see her clearly in the dark room. “Oh. Well, thank you,” she said. She continued rubbing his arms. “Let’s go over to the bed, ok?”

Wallace kicked off his shoes, stepped out of his jeans, and followed her. He could not make out her shape clearly, but watched her blurred form as she removed her jeans, her shirt, and slid underneath the bedspread. He did not touch her again until they were both lying there beneath the covers.

On their last night at the lake Wallace and Jenna started out on the wooded path from the cabin to the dock. The night air felt cool against the back of Wallace’s arms and he wished he’d remembered his sweatshirt. He left it draped across the back of the couch near his parents’ back door. He could see it in his mind, a bright red, jarring against the muted background of the living room. In his haste he had forgotten it.

“You’re sure you don’t want something?” Jenna asked. She followed behind him on the path, kicking at the gravel. “It’s dark and I can still see you shivering.”

"I'm not shivering."

"We have sweaters and things you can wear."

"It's not cold."

"Well." Jenna, behind him on the trail, put her hands on Wallace's shoulders and squeezed. "All right. You're not cold."

They reached the end of the trail and came upon the dock. It was a nice night, a beautiful night, the moon reflecting off of the water, the breeze rustling the leaves, the feel of the heat from Jenna's body against his—but it was a cold night. Jenna stepped in front of him and headed towards her family's boat, moving at a light gallop, unconcerned that she couldn't see where she was going. Wallace crossed his arms across his chest and watched her. Jenna was a graceful person. She'd never had any training on how to move her body, except for boxing—and Wallace didn't believe that was a graceful thing—but Jenna was a graceful person, and the night made her seem even more so; it dulled the edges of her gestures so that they blended into one another like a slur.

Wallace felt colder now that she had moved away from him. True, she had offered him a sweater at the cabin, but it was made for a child, had a child's pattern across the chest, and when he put it on, it made him feel as if he couldn't breathe. Jenna, sitting on a couch across the room, shrugged her shoulders noncommittally, and went back to tying her sneakers. If she'd teased him, even a little bit, if she'd said he looked ridiculous or silly or *fancy*, he might've worn it anyway. Now he wished he had.

He followed Jenna to the boat and climbed on board. It was a pontoon boat, and it rocked as he stepped onto it. They hadn't taken it out the week they were there. "I'm not allowed to anymore," Jenna had said, raising her eyebrows. "I, uh, sometimes am not so responsible." She was alluding to something, some event she wouldn't reveal unless he asked, and even then, she might not.

Wallace took the bait. "What happened?"

"I don't have the keys, if that's what you're asking."

"That's not what I'm asking." But he didn't clarify and she didn't ask him to.

Jenna sunk down into one of the plush seats at the boat's bow. Wallace made his way towards her, feeling unnerved by the motion. Crossing the boat made him uncomfortable. He didn't like that something as simple as walking was enough to affect change in his surroundings. He sat down next to her and she slung her legs across his lap.

"Are you having a good time?" she said. "I think we have some booze around here somewhere." She twisted her upper body to look around the boat. "In that cabinet maybe."

"Yeah, of course I am. You're a good time." Wallace leaned back in his seat and pulled Jenna's legs closer to his chest. He was still cold, but warmer now that they were next to each other. "Did you want to drink?"

"Ok, fuck it. I forgot. It's locked. Gotta be."

"What's locked?" Wallace asked, without looking around. He stared out at the dark water. It was pretty, really, if not a little creepy.

"That cabinet."

"Oh."

Wallace listened to the crickets and the sound of the water lapping against the boat. He liked being outside sometimes, just not during the day when it was hot. He sweated too much and felt self-conscious. But being outside at night was nice. You could relax a little bit without relaxing too much. That was a good thing—relaxation in moderation. It was less likely to devolve into laziness this way.

"Is there beer in the cabinet?"

"Yeah," Jenna said. "Whiskey, too."

"I didn't know you liked whiskey."

"I don't."

"Who likes whiskey?"

"My dad."

"Oh."

"Wallace?"

"Yeah?"

"I like you."

Wallace turned to look at her. It was hard to see her face, but he could tell she was smiling. "I like you, too."

"Come here." She took his wrist in her hand and pulled him towards her. He lay down beside her on the plush seat that was more or less a small couch. She

laughed and grabbed at his shoulders as she lost her balance and nearly fell onto the floor. What did she like about him, anyway?

"What—" Wallace said. He let out a long sigh. He lay on his back and Jenna lay next to him, her head on his shoulder, one arm stretched across his chest.

"What?" she said, gently squeezing his side as if doing so would produce an answer from him.

Wallace waited. Sometimes he asked ridiculous questions. "Why do you like me?"

Jenna turned toward him, and propped herself up on her elbow. Wallace didn't want to meet her eyes. He stared up at the night sky. The boat was still now in the water. Jenna's condo was far enough from the city that they could actually see the stars here, and he realized it had been a very long time since he'd really been away from light pollution.

"I mean," he said, "I don't mean it as a self-pitying thing or anything. I just—"

"I know."

"Yeah."

"I like you," Jenna said, kissing his forehead. "I like you because you're a good person to have on the team. There are some people, you know, who are bad at it, and are selfish and don't know when to pass or sit on the sidelines, but you're not like that. It's really good."

"That's nice of you to say."

"I mean it."

"Well—" Wallace still wouldn't look at her. "Thanks. I wasn't trying to fish for compliments or anything."

"Ok, good, cause now I'm going to fish for some since you didn't: why do you like *me*?"

Wallace turned towards her. He wasn't cold anymore. As he shifted his hips, his knees bumped hers and nearly knocked her off the narrow seat again. He caught her at the waist as she let out a surprised yelp, and began laughing.

"Next time *I* get the inside. You're abusing it," she said.

"I know, I'm clumsy. I like you because—here, don't fall off." Jenna scooted closer to him. There was the sudden sound of an engine running off in the distance, a car with the muffler removed maybe, or a saw of some kind. It was a small sound, from somewhere far away. Wallace thought about Thorton mowing his lawn, the strange coughing noise the mower made as it died, his seat on the porch. He looked at Jenna. "You're braver than I am."

Wallace had just walked in the front door and already his mother was asking him about his laundry. He made his way to the kitchen where she was sitting and dropped his duffle bag on the floor next to the table.

"Does that go there?" his mother said.

"Just for now?"

"I've heard that before," she said, singing.

"I'll move it." Wallace pulled out a chair and sat down. "So…"

"Just a sec." His mother held out one finger towards him. She had a book open in front of her and Wallace could see she was nearing the end of a chapter. He was happy to be home. He knew the feeling wouldn't last, but it was still nice for now. He might call Barry tomorrow. He would apply for jobs later in the afternoon, while he had some extra energy. He did have energy! Wasn't that a thing. Maybe he would apply for one or two in Seattle. Jenna had mentioned it, like it wouldn't be a terrible idea. He drummed his fingers on the tabletop.

"Ok," his mom said, snapping the book shut. "Tell me all about it."

"It was fun. I had a good time. We went to the lake. They have a boat."

"Oh, fun. That's fun."

"How was home?"

"You're not going to tell me anything more than that?"

"We didn't get to use the boat, really. So."

"Ok, ok," she said. She put her hands in the air, palms towards Wallace in a dramatic show of backing off. "I know you can't tell your mother everything anymore." She was teasing him.

"What's new around here?" He knew it would make her happy to sit and talk a while. She was easy to make happy in that way. "What's this book you're reading?" He tilted his head sideways to read the title, but couldn't make it out.

"This is *Breaking Point*. It's Dad's." She let out a long sigh. "But you wouldn't believe it. I can't believe it really."

“What?” Wallace leaned back in his seat and put his feet up on the chair across from him. It was the only way to sit in these chairs comfortably.

“Thorton—our neighbor? He passed away.”

Wallace tried to sit up, but his rubber sole of his shoe slid against the seat of the other chair and he momentarily lost his balance. “*What*?”

“Don’t fall.”

“Jesus—when’d this happen?”

“Wallace, please. What have I said?”

“I know, but what happened? When?”

She leaned back and crossed her arms over her chest. “It’s impossible to know—”

“You don’t have *any* idea?”

“Just what the neighbors have said, which is not a lot.”

“But when?” Wallace realized he was leaning forward on the table, putting all of his weight on his elbows.

“Days ago. Sunday, maybe.”

“But that was—”

“Five days ago. That’s when we found out, anyway.”

“How’d he die?”

“I don’t know Wallace, but given what happened a—”

“How can you not know? This—” Wallace began to stutter. “This is—this, I mean, you don’t talk about *any*thing else. Mrs. Lauer—”

“I haven’t seen her to ask.”

“Don’t you guys, like, talk on the phone?”

His mother frowned, realizing that Wallace was about to up-end the table. She sat up, put her hand against its surface, and pressed down. “We talk on the phone. Wallace, stop leaning on the table.”

He sat back and gripped his knees. He remembered now that he had not put the last postcard in the mail while he was on his trip. He knew exactly where it was—in the side pocket of his duffel, now likely crumpled by the curvature of his overfull bag. He had not put it in the mail. He didn’t want Jenna to ask him questions about it, to probe him for information.

“How are you not more upset about this?” he said.

“He was a neighbor—”

“But we lived next to him, for my—my whole life practically. I don’t—”

“It *is* upsetting. The poor man always seemed miserable. But what can you do about that?” She shrugged and parted her hands. “What can you do? You can’t do anything.”

She stood and went to the sink to rinse out her glass. Wallace stared at the wall across from him. The pattern of the wallpaper suddenly seemed absurd. He looked around the kitchen. Everything looked absurd. The empty dish rack, bare and skeletal, rested beside the sink, covered in soap residue. His mother’s collection of half-melted candles sat on the windowsill, which, it now occurred to Wallace, was a very bad place to keep candles. Absurd. These things were ridiculous.

He got up and made his way to foyer. He was in a daze. His mother had acted like it was nothing telling him Thorton was dead—if he stayed in the kitchen, who knew what she'd talk about next. He opened the front door and walked out onto the porch. It was just to get a breath of fresh air. He needed it. He sat down on the top step. The grass in the yard had grown long since he'd been out of town and he knew he should take the initiative to cut it before his father had to ask him. Despite how much he tried not to, Wallace kept glancing over at Thorton's house, hoping to see something that would reveal anything about what had happened there. Wallace stared at the red front door. Who knew whether or not he had died at the house? It looked the same as it always did. The grey shutters; the trim lawn; the garbage cans lined up in a row, one after another. He thought of the unsent postcard and felt ill.

In his pocket his phone began to ring. The street was quiet. Most of its residents were either at work or in school. Wallace felt lonely. He felt like he would be alone on the stoop for a long time whether he wanted to be or not. He pulled the phone from his pocket. Jenna's name flashed on the screen. She was likely calling to make sure he'd gotten home ok. He held the phone delicately in his lap with both hands as if it might break. He sat for a few seconds, listening to his ring tone, a soft tinkling melody that Jenna had teased him about the first time she'd heard it. Wallace meant to change it, but he liked it, found it peaceful. Sitting on the porch, he listened and willed himself to calm down before answering.

He flipped open the phone. “Hello?” He paused. “Hello? Jenna?” There was no answer. “Jenna? Are you there? I can’t hear you.”

He pulled the phone away from his face in frustration and looked at the screen. *One missed call*. So he hadn’t gotten to it in time. It was strange when that happened, when he missed a phone call by half a second like this. It was such a little thing, but he hated it. He hated that his expectations—so steady, so reasonable—were upset at the very end, right when he thought he could be sure.

Jenna would leave him a message. Her messages often went on for a long time. They were stories of her day or what she was doing as she was on the phone. He could call her back now. She would switch over and answer. It would take no effort at all.

CHAPTER 5

TWO TRUTHS AND A LIE

On Saturdays the nurses round up the residents of Heritage Hall for a community meeting, knocking on doors at 10 am, calling out names with singsong voices. Emma and Julia have taken to hiding during this time—that is, as well as two seventy-something women can hide from the overeager twenty-seven-year-old nurse in charge of collecting them. They crouch down behind the sofa in their shared living room, and listen to the crackling and popping of their joints as they move. Emma tosses aside a stuffed animal left behind by her granddaughter. They take care to make sure their elbows and feet are tucked away and out of sight, accepting that their bodies will be in pain for the remainder of the day after this little exercise. Emma points to Julia's hair and tells her she needs to lighten up on the mousse from now on—it is the height of her up-do that will surely give them away.

The nurses think their hiding is a funny game. Today Julia and Emma are discovered by the resourceful and enterprising Nurse Kelly, known for her affection for the *Today Show* and her sparkly pager. She knocks and enters their living room with hunched shoulders, turning her head from side to side with exaggerated motion, tiptoeing around an end table as if she were a willing and eager participant in what she believes to be a grown-up version of hide-and-seek. They can smell Nurse Kelly before they see her—the stench of her department store perfume is so powerful that Emma and Julia discuss it strictly in terms of taste rather than scent.

Emma and Julia try hard not to move, but they are found out anyway—there aren't many places to hide in their apartment. Nurse Kelly launches herself onto the sofa and leans the upper half of her torso over the back, shouting "Gotcha!" There is a light in her eyes; she is having fun. Emma lets herself rock backwards onto the floor. Emma has a long-standing invitation to live at her daughter's, but she's too independent and stubborn. It's one thing to live in a place where the staff is paid for their assistance. It's quite another to rely on family, racking up emotional debts with constant requests, favors that cannot be repaid. Emma doesn't do that. She says she's staying put.

Standing up, Nurse Kelly greets Julia and says, "Those are *gorgeous* earrings." Julia touches a hand to one ear self-consciously and smiles. "I mean, just *gorgeous*. My grandmother had a pair like that, and oh my gosh, do I want them. I tell her, 'Meemaw, I want those. Save them for me.'" Nurse Kelly brushes her hair away from her ear. "What do you think? They'd look good on me, wouldn't they?"

"Just the style for you."

"I should've been born in a different era," she says, touching my forearm and nodding earnestly. "I think about that sometimes, honestly, I do."

Julia smiles and nods before looking down at Emma, who has not moved. She stares at the ceiling and looks bored. Practice, Julia's sure, for what is to come. Nurse Kelly follows her gaze, and she stiffens. She doesn't like Emma. She doesn't like Emma's hair, cut so short that it's nearly a buzz, or her dirty mouth, cultivated throughout long seasons of construction work. When Emma swears,

Nurse Kelly says to her, “I would think that a woman with your life experience could come up with a word better than that.”

Nurse Kelly raises her eyebrows and purses her lips, telling Emma to get up. In the doorway she gives them an order punctuated with a clap for each word: “Remember, ladies. Five minutes.”

Clap, clap, clap, clap.

Julia and Emma aren’t required to go to these meetings. But it’s *encouraged* in such a way that they know non-attendance is not an option. For the most part, the meetings themselves are not terribly painful. Their president—elected by her fellow residents once every six months—updates them on events, changes in policy, birthdays. That sort of thing. Julia has built up quite a tolerance for dull meetings. She’s plucky like that. Emma, on the other hand, who seems to have spent most of her adult life outdoors, has not and sees no reason to start.

Heritage Hall is set up so that residents are arranged according to different “levels.” These levels are distinguished by varying degrees of mobility, mental health, age, and so on and so forth. The ultimate goal is for “the staff to help residents live as comfortably and independently as possible.” Emma and Julia are “Level Purple,” which means they need the least assistance. They joke that it is like being the oldest kids at summer camp. As random roommates paired up two years ago, they each have their own bedrooms, and share a small kitchen and common area. They can prepare their own food if they’d like, but they’re also welcome to dine with the other residents so long as they specify when. Julia and Emma are not allowed to take charge of their own meds due to a state law, but

they're free to leave when they please. Emma keeps an overnight bag packed by the front door. "For when I need it," she says.

They go to the meeting where they listen to an announcement about daylight savings time, and take a vote on whether they'd prefer candy or cake as dessert at the upcoming Halloween party. The man seated next to Emma is asleep, drooling on the collar of his shirt, so Emma votes for him—she's adamant about having Halloween candy on Halloween. Because, as she puts it, "Cake here tastes like crap." She doesn't whisper and Nurse Kelly shoots her a look. Emma lowers her voice and continues, "They can't ruin Hershey's."

"Or Almond Joys."

"That's because Almond Joys are already messed up. "

"I'm not having this conversation," Julia whispers, crossing her arms across her chest in mock irritation. Emma, playing along, continues to pester her throughout the meeting with one-liners about spoiled coconut and the travesty of including nuts in candy. It is good to have a friend, even better to have one in the middle of a Community Assembly.

Afterward they play Saturday afternoon bingo, which is supposed to make up for the dry and tedious last hour. Being easy to please, Julia forgives everything once she's seated at a long table, a bingo card and a glass of orange juice in front of her. This week the cards are decorated with ghosts, skeletons, and dancing pieces of candy. The bingo chips are orange and black. Emma, hell bent on winning, verbally harasses the men at the next table, egging them on, an edge

in the playful tone of her voice. She turns back around and says, loudly enough so he can hear, “Freddie cheats.”

“How does he cheat?”

Emma rolls her eyes and opens her mouth to explain, but they’re interrupted by a petite woman at the front of the room—Anne Hathaway, the temp nurse with long black curly hair who can’t be more than twenty-two. She is their favorite. This is her first time running bingo. Most notable about Anne Hathaway is her tattoo, a scene that stretches from her right shoulder to elbow. Which, she’s informed them, is commonly referred to as a “half-sleeve.” She’s required to wear a long T-shirt underneath her scrubs to hide it, but her first week she showed it to them as they clustered together in the empty rec room.

“I got it when I was 18,” Anne Hathaway said, yanking up the tight sleeve of her shirt. “We’d just finished up this section on Greek mythology in my English class. And I liked the story of Persephone and Hades and how we got the seasons, but I liked it better when I thought about what it’d be like if Persephone *wanted* to go, if she barged in and set up camp and said, hey underworld, I live here now, gimmie a shelf in the closet for all of my crap.”

Julia and Emma leaned closer. Etched into her skin was an image of the sky and earth, crosscut so that the bottom half depicted a scene from the underworld and the top an autumn landscape, the yellows and reds of the trees contrasting the dark tones of the earth. On the back side of her arm, Persephone lounged in the underworld, not just eating the Pomegranate but enjoying it in her solitude, a look of pleasure on her face that was childlike in its sincerity.

"I like my version better," she said.

Now at the front of the dining hall, she leans into her little microphone and calls out the first number. B17. Emma scowls at her cards. Julia gives herself a little self-congratulatory clap as she reaches for a chip. She can't help it. She loves bingo.

There's a pause as Anne Hathaway tries to reposition the mic, but she gets caught up in a cycle of over-adjustments. Julia's sure this isn't how she wanted to spend her Saturday afternoon, trapped in a stuffy room. Retirement communities have a reputation for being depressing, claustrophobic, and lonely places, sealed off for the benefit of the general population, not entirely unlike a Tupperware of old chicken pushed to the back corner of a fridge. But the only thing that depresses Julia here is that microphone. As Anne Hathaway struggles to bring it closer to her mouth, Julia can feel her mood plummeting. The mic—small and old, and therefore not out of place—certainly has seen better days, but its cheap quality and the speed at which it's fallen apart serves as a reminder: there's no reason to keep anything fancy here.

But she finally gives up on the mic and the game continues. She barks out letters and endures one charged exchange with a surly gentleman in the front who calls her "*Ms*. Hathaway" only when he wants to argue. The game passes quickly. Neither Emma nor Julia win. Once the game is over, they approach her at the front of the dining hall where she cleans the popcorn maker. Emma has a crush on Anne Hathaway and will find any excuse to talk to her. She wants to tell her she's scrappy. She admires her sass, her talent for subtle mockery.

“I don’t trust people who say my name too much,” Anne Hathaway says, nodding towards the argumentative man’s seat. She tosses a handful of popcorn into her mouth. “I truly don’t.”

Another nurse, a man named Gregory, walks past their little gathering, wheeling the bingo equipment towards a hall closet, and Anne Hathaway’s head snaps in his direction. He is grinning. “Don’t you make a *Princess Diaries* joke,” she tells him, pointing. “Don’t you dare.” She turns to us. “He’s been tormenting me. He thinks he’s the funniest.” She raises herself up on her tip-toes and calls over our shoulders: “I’ve never heard that one before, Gregory. You’re a goddamned genius.”

Emma and Julia like her.

Later that night, after a regretful decision to try out the kitchen’s Chicken Parmesan, Emma and Julia retreat to their living room clutching their bellies. They get to talking. They’re old and they don’t use their TV. “Why should we,” Emma says when anyone asks, gesturing to the hall, “when we can listen to Alice’s whenever we want?”

This is Julia’s favorite part of the day. She and Emma each lie on their backs on separate couches. They make things up. They become storytellers. They invent. Sometimes they gossip about the other residents and the nurses, which is fabrication like anything else. Last weekend Emma’s teenage granddaughter told her about a game called “two truths and a lie.” They decide to play, taking turns guessing what is real and what is fake. Emma goes first.

“One. When I was nine, I made my first pie. Rhubarb.

"Two. My first husband—"

"Frank?"

"Yes. Frank. He once did a back flip off of the roof of our ranch and into the swimming pool we had in our backyard, but he didn't quite have the right clearance, and he broke his left arm when it clipped the concrete side.

"Three. When we first met, I thought you were going to be a real bore."

Julia laughs. "You did?"

"You had a lot of Reader's Digest at first. An awful lot."

Julia can't argue with her. She *did*. Trial subscription. These things happen. "Ok, well, number two," Julia guesses.

"Wrong. Number one. It was strawberry."

"Strawberry," Julia says, pressing my palms against my full stomach. "Was it any good?"

"Honestly, I can't remember."

Julia stares at the circles of paint on their ceiling that overlap one another like eager, pushy children, and thinks of Anne Hathaway arguing during bingo. "Lie."

Emma rolls onto her side, propping her head up with one arm. "You're right. Every bite was delicious."

* * *

When Julia wakes up in the morning, Emma is gone, out with her family for Sunday brunch at Denny's. She loves Denny's and gets mad if Julia makes fun of

her. If Julia is lucky, Emma will bring her back a chocolate muffin the size of a small Cantaloupe.

Around lunchtime, Anne Hathaway knocks on the door, lets herself in. Even though Sunday is unofficially known as “Visiting Day,” it’s not difficult for Julia. Still, Anne Hathaway, if she has a shift, often comes to keep her company. She pities her, Julia thinks, but she is too kind and aware to admit it outright. For all of her distain for Nurse Kelly, Julia thinks she believes Nurse Kelly’s favorite aphorism, that loneliness is the defining and universal ailment of the old. Julia never married, never had children. She grew up an only child. The staff treats these details of her life as they would the particularities of a disease.

She walks over to the small kitchen table. Emma and Julia rarely sit there. It is too small and cramped, and on the rare occasions when they do, they repeatedly smack their elbows into the wall. They set loose odds and ends on top of it. Usually it’s just mail or flyers fliers, but today there are several Yankee Candle Co. tea candles stacked on top of one another in a lopsided pyramid. Emma’s handiwork. She is prone to fits of boredom that are only resolved, she says, by fits of creation. In both of their bathrooms she’s rigged up a complicated series of baskets to hold our shower products; on the top of our bookshelf she built a sculpture of a man walking a dog out of empty macaroni boxes.

Out of nowhere Anne Hathaway asks, “Julia, what is the bravest thing you’ve ever done?” She rearranges the candles on the table, taking them down one by one so that they are lined up in a neat row that stretches from her side to mine.

"Why?" Julia asks, digging the wick out of the candle closest to me. "Are you considering doing something brave?" It's Emma's absence, Julia realizes, that prompts Anne Hathaway to say this. For all of Emma's kindness and affection, she does not readily participate in conversations where sweeping generalizations, or vague, abstract speculations are welcome or encouraged. She is only interested in the concrete, on what can be easily defined by a reliable, governing body.

"I do brave things sometimes."

"Like what?"

"Well, yesterday I took out the trash in the middle of the night. There were raccoons in the dumpster. They scared me half to death. I thought I was seeing the ghost of my neighbor's dead cat." Anne Hathaway holds her hands up in front of her, her fingers curled, and bounces them across the table to mimic the creeping movement of a raccoon, before returning them to her lap. "But really. What was the bravest thing? I wanna know. I like knowing this stuff. It's useful to—"

Anne Hathaway is interrupted by a knock at the door, followed by the sound of creaking hinges. Nurse Kelly sticks her head in the room. She smiles when she sees them her pumpkin earrings swinging back and forth, but it's a dangerous smile; exasperation lurks just beneath the surface, sharp and exacting.

"Anne," Nurse Kelly says without stepping into the apartment. "I've paged you. We need you. Come on, please." As Nurse Kelly disappears back into the hall, Anne looks up from her pager, widens her eyes and scrunches up her lips.

"Whoopsies," she says. She leans towards Julia, half-whispering, half-mouthing: "I'm gonna be in trouble." But instead of fear, Julia finds delight in her

expression. She stands and follows Nurse Kelly into the hall, giving Julia a little wave as she disappears out the door and around the corner.

The afternoon that follows is long without Emma. When she gets back Julia is so overly pleased not to be alone that she tries to mask her enthusiasm. Emma grunts out a hello, drops her things next to the door, and retreats to her room. She has her moods.

In her old age, Julia believes in soulmates. She considers Emma one of hers, though she won't tell her that. Julia feels no shame for it, having paid her dues as a disenchanted, cynical youth. She likes Hallmark cards. She feels her body settling into the cliché like upturned soil settling back into the earth.

Julia moved to Heritage Hall because it seemed like a good idea, a decision born from practicality and common sense. Her dog, a boxer named Roberta, died that January, and all of her earlier reasons for staying put no longer had any merit. She lived in a house in the country. She got lonely in the evenings with no one to talk to. She still went on walks alone, but without any companionship, what had once been relaxing exercise became purposeless and self-indulgent. She realized she might go days without stepping into half of the rooms in her house, rooms that felt like annexed parts of her, parts of her personality and life that she no longer needed. She bought a TV. She turned up the volume. She started using her dishwasher.

Then one day, almost on a whim, she called a moving company and packed up most of her things. A family of four lives in that house now, renters on a three-year lease, to remove any temptation to go back. Like the Persephone

inked into the world on Anne's arm, Julia too has chosen to come to this place. That's how she thinks of it: as a choice. She has all she needs, and what keeps her here is sweet.

When Emma reemerges from her room an hour later, they spend the remainder of the afternoon beside the pool, each perched in a chaise lounge, sipping lemonades Anne Hathaway pinched for them from the pantry. Emma wears a large red hat, which she frequently repositions. The pool is empty now, drained and covered with a blue tarp. Water has collected on top of it, and it seems precarious, ready to fall in on itself at any moment. Emma and Julia aren't supposed to be out here alone, especially not during the off-season. They're liable to fall into the pool and break something, unlike the summer months, when they could fall in and drown or swallow enough water they might wish they had.

Each season has its danger evidently.

But the October sun is a warm, apologetic promise: there will be other temperate afternoons. Emma wiggles around in her chair, trying to settle in. She repositions her towel draped over the back again and again until she finally gives up and allows it to slink down over her shoulders.

"I look like a wet dog after that hike," she says, running her fingers through her hair as if she is trying to shake something free. Her hands have become misshapen and discolored with age, but Julia still sees loveliness in their fluid motion as Emma fiddles, again, with the brim of her hat, her fingers moving in unison. Emma possesses a certain grace that Julia doesn't always notice, and for that it's all the more endearing.

Julia takes a breath and begins, “You’re very—”

But Emma takes one look at Julia’s face and cuts her off. “I may look like a wet dog, but don’t you dare tell me I smell like one.”

Julie and Emma aren’t having the same conversation. Julia feels a flush of embarrassment with the sudden knowledge that she almost paid Emma a compliment that she would not have accepted and she would not have let her take back. How often Emma is in a different place, one where the open acknowledgement of intimacy is strictly taboo, and how reluctant Julia is to stay there, because even with all of the laughter and lightheartedness which she so desperately needs, she cannot live on the surface of things.

Julia gathers up her towel and lemonade in preparation to head inside, citing a chill. Emma puts a hand to her hat to keep it from blowing away and tells Julia she’s staying put.

* * *

The days of the week are full of staff-arranged activities, put in place to safeguard against restlessness and irritability of the residents. The nursing staff is crafty like that. Come Monday they have a day trip; they’re going to the farmer’s market to wander through the tables of vegetables and eat greasy fair food. Indigestion will follow, but at least they’ll be occupied. Anne Hathaway knocks on Emma and Julia’s open door, and lets herself in. Julia hurries between her bedroom and the

living room, quickly throwing things she and Emma might need—sunscreen, water bottles, extra cash—in a shoulder bag.

"Bus is leaving in ten," Anne Hathaway says, leaning against our armchair. "Just giving you guys the heads up."

Emma looks up from her spot on the couch, a magazine spread across her lap, her red hat on the seat beside her. She frowns at Anne Hathaway. She's been in a bad mood all morning for reasons Julia can't discern. "Where's your gear?"

"I gotta sit this one out," Anne Hathaway says.

"No farmer's market?"

"Not today."

Julia pokes her head out of her bedroom. "Why not?"

Anne Hathaway shrugs. "It's my turn to stay."

"You're not going," Emma says. She picks up the magazine, shakes it to straighten it out, and begins reading again. "I'm not going either."

"What?" Julia says.

"I'm not going. I don't want to go."

"Emma."

She shakes her head. Anne Hathaway looks at Julia, her mouth half-open in quiet surprise. "I'm sorry," she stammers. "I *want* to go—"

"I'm not going," Emma says. "I'm catching up on my reading."

From the hallway, Nurse Kelly calls out a five-minute warning. Julia stands next to the couch, her bag slung over her shoulder. Emma doesn't look up from her magazine. Julia removes the items she packed for her one by one,

tossing them on the couch, waiting for acknowledgement, but Emma does nothing. Julia tosses the extra bottle of water on the seat, where it bounces and rolls down against Emma's leg. She moves it away from her with one hand.

Anne Hathaway smiles weakly at Julia. "Have fun," she says. She pauses, looks at Emma, and then mouths: "I'll talk to her."

The farmer's market is fun. Julia buys a bag of tomatoes and eats half of a funnel cake while sitting alone on a park bench. With one finger, she pushes the remnants of powdered sugar into long, thin lines. Not much is different without Emma, but she stares at the cracked concrete beneath her shoes and feels wretched, her stomach in knots from the greasy food and a strange, twisting grief. Julia wishes she didn't so often feel anchored to places, to people. A heaviness settles in her legs. She finds herself coming up with excuses for inertia and fondness.

When Julia gets home two and a half hours later, the door to their apartment is closed and—to her surprise—locked. She rummages through her bag for keys, but she has too much in her hands. The tomatoes. A stick of rock candy for Emma. Letters from the front desk. These things begin to slip from her grasp as she gives her purse a good shake, digging for the bottom. She drops the mail in a heap. The plastic bag of tomatoes slithers from between her pinched fingers before sliding down her leg to land on the floor. Emma's rock candy is the last to fall, but it hits the tomatoes and does not break.

At last she finds her keys and lest herself in. Emma and Anne Hathaway, seated in the living room, turn their heads toward the open door.

“Hey, Julia,” Anne Hathaway says. She’s rolled up her sleeves, and now the bottom of her tattoo is visible. It’s only the second time Julia has seen it. “How was it?” She glances down at Julia’s feet. For all Julia knows, the tomatoes are rolling down the hall. “Oh. Let me help you.” She rises from her seat and passes by Julia, placing her hand on the older woman’s back.

“Hello,” Emma says without fully turning around.

As Anne Hathaway gathers Julia’s things, she enters her kitchen to set down her bag, feeling like a child, the guest of a removed and distant cousin, unaware of what degree of familiarity is welcome given the situation.

“Oh no,” Anne Hathaway says from the hall. She reenters the apartment carrying something in her hand: the shattered remains of the rock candy. “I’m sorry, Julia. I stepped on it. I’m an oaf.” She holds it out, cupped in her palm. The clear, crystal candy has turned to powder in several places. A few pieces remain intact.

“Emma,” Julia says, taking the candy from Anne Hathaway. “I got this for you.”

It’s then Julia notices: several cardboard boxes sit stacked beside Emma’s bedroom door. Julia points. “What’s all that?”

“Oh, we’ve been packing,” Anne Hathaway says.

“Packing for what?”

Anne Hathaway shifts her weight. “Packing,” she repeats. There is a sinking in Julia’s gut; something is coming and she wants to make room for it. “Didn’t Emma—” she continues. “Emma’s moving.”

"You're moving?"

Emma readjusts the afghan across her lap. "Yes."

"But why do you have to move? It's not like you cause any trouble. Not in actuality," Julia says laughing. "It's just stupid stuff. Nurse Kelly—"

"Nurse Kelly has nothing to do with it."

"Well, who else? This is ridiculous. Everyone likes you. You're perfectly agreeable. They've decided?"

"I've decided."

"*You've* decided. Decided what?"

"To move, Julia," Emma says, setting the rock candy on the end table. "I've decided to move."

Julia knows, already, what she will say. She can hear herself. She can hear the strain and pull. It's against her will, like the mail and tomatoes slipping from her busy hands, and Julia knows how Emma will respond, but she cannot stop. "Why?" she asks. "Why are you moving? Why didn't you tell me?"

"It's expensive, you know. And I'm not paying for it. My kids are paying for it. I don't think that's fair and I spend so much time with them anyway—"

"That's not true. That has nothing to do with it." Julia walks further into the living room to stand in front of Emma and her spot on the couch, to make this a conversation, something taking place between two people.

"It's not really affordable. Especially not at this point. I don't need all of this care. You've seen Anne—" She gestures toward Anne Hathaway, who is staring at the carpet. "—she sits in here and plays cards. We don't need her."

Emma swivels her body to face Anne Hathaway, her hands grasping the back of the couch. “No offense, dear. You’re great, but *need* is not the word.”

“That’s not it.”

Emma looks back at Julia. “Then what is it? You seem to know, so tell me.” Emma makes eye contact with her for the first time this evening and raises her eyebrows. She is smug and secure in her argument. These are the excuses but not the reason, and all Julia wants is the reason, the reason why her friend is leaving when nothing has changed, the reason she *can* leave and endure the separation without so much as a second thought. For Emma, Julia realizes, they have always been distinct elements, untouching, unmingling. They created no compound. The process of untangling their lives will be simple—she never allowed them to become tangled in the first place by keeping the conversation light, never truly revealing any vulnerability. By staying along the surface of things.

“It looks like you’re all ready to go. You got a lot done,” Julia says, staring at the boxes in the corner, realizing her best option is to switch gears, to drive out of honest territory and into a lie. “Excuse me, would you? I just remember left something on the bus.”

She leaves their apartment as quickly as she can, but even then her movements are lumbering and slow. She’s left nothing on the bus. She walks with no destination, trying to smile at the other residents she passes in the hall, familiar faces whose names she can’t recall. The rec room is crowded, full of people playing card games at tables or talking over decaf coffee. She passes it by,

searching for solitude, a place to exist without clearly defined obligations, but everywhere she looks is full of other people. What else should she expect just before dinner?

At last Julia tries outside, pushing against the heavy metal door to the pool deck. It swings open freely. The chairs where she and Emma sat a week ago are still where they left them, slightly apart from the neat and tidy stack of the others. After being on her feet all day, she is tired and reluctant, and the lounge chairs look inviting. She sits in one and discovers that the tarp, which covered the in-ground pool just yesterday, has fallen in on itself. Already the pool looks dirty. Rainwater has accumulated at the bottom, murky and full of leaves. The waterline from the summer circles the inside of the pool and the tile there is a crusty yellow like so many stained teeth. There is nothing more depressing than an outdoor pool during the fall and winter, where the neglect and disuse work together to create an atmosphere of endings, finality without elegance or grace. How much the empty pool looks like the foundation of a house, and Julia thinks of her and Emma in the first week they arrived, trailing behind Nurse Kelly as she gave them the grand introduction tour. They stood in the doorway as she paraded out onto the pool deck intending for them to follow, her arms spread as if she were putting it on display.

“She’s like a cruise director,” Emma said, putting her hands into her pockets and leaning against the doorframe. “This place is fancy.”

Outside Nurse Kelly stood next to the water and waved for them to join her, to see everything Heritage Hall had to offer, as if she were still trying to sell

it. Julia shook her head, told her they could see everything from where they were, but Nurse Kelly insisted they couldn't stay in the doorway.

CHAPTER 6

REASONS NOT TO GO SWIMMING AT NIGHT

Giselle's mom won't let her.

Linda takes a hard and fast rule about beach safety: no swimming at night. Parents everywhere like to say, "When you have kids you'll understand!" But thinking about being a parent who gets worried about safety feels to Giselle like looking at something that's far away on the beach. The first time you see it—the pier or big rock or whatever—you think to yourself, Oh that's not so far away, I bet I can walk there. So you walk a while, but then you realize it doesn't look like you've moved at all. You think, I'll never get there, this is a silly thing to do, that pier or big rock is still so too away.

That's how Giselle feels about becoming somebody's mom. Like it's a pier and she'll never get there.

Still, sometimes Giselle asks to go swimming at night anyway, just to be a little obnoxious. She says, "Why not? I'm mostly a good swimmer, and you have said it yourself, I have good common sense"—and then just to be extra annoying—"also, can we have pizza for dinner tomorrow night?"

Linda tells her no—on both counts. No pizza. No swimming. Linda pulls back her long hair, drapes a blue apron around her neck, and reaches behind her back to tie it in a loose knot. It makes Linda look all 1950's housewife, which Giselle tells her sometimes when she's feeling playful and wants to joke around. Linda never gets mad, even though she says she's very neurotic about being an SAHM, which is her abbreviation of Stay-At-Home Mom. Linda does this when

she wants to make fun of Giselle and her friends—among her other abbreviations are DDP ("Diet Dr. Pepper"), and TFIOA ("The Fucking Internet's Out Again").

She's younger than the other moms Giselle knows. For example, Cathy's mom is 48, and does a lot of cross-stitch in her free time. Linda had Giselle on her 19th birthday. Last year when they turned 32 and 13, Giselle said, "Aren't you gonna tell me I was the best birthday present ever?" And Linda said, "Well, you certainly were the loudest." Linda is a pretty spectacular lady and Giselle knows she's a freak of nature for thinking this when she's a teenager, but Linda's smart and funny and people can't resist her. Giselle's dad, Evan, tells Linda how beautiful she is a lot. He includes Giselle too, but she knows he actually just means Linda, which isn't a statement about Giselle's self-esteem or anything like that. Giselle just knows her dad really likes her mom.

When Evan gets home from his job as an office manager for a dish soap and detergent company, he's usually tired. But tonight he walks in and says, "Oh, there are my pretty ladies, what a sight for sore eyes." He gives Linda a smooch, and Giselle a hug. He tugs on the corner of Linda's apron. "Hey, Betty Draper. Whatcha making there for dinner?"

She raises one eyebrow, and half-turns and gives him a look Giselle knows Linda means as early warning. Giselle can tell she isn't in a great mood.

"She's cooking, Dad."

"And what are you doing?" he asks, pinching Giselle's side. "Aren't you supposed to be getting into some sort of trouble?"

“She’s begging for scraps,” Linda says, dumping peppers and onions into a pan to be sautéed. Tonight they’re having fajitas for dinner, which is Giselle’s third favorite meal that Linda makes, bested only by her lasagna and cheesy potatoes. (Cheesy potatoes aren’t a meal apparently, but how can they not be if they’re the only thing you eat for dinner?)

“I am,” Giselle says. “I’m begging for scraps. Gimmie a piece of that chicken?”

“I had the worst day,” Evan says, crossing the kitchen to sit down at the table. He eases himself into his chair. He has premature hip problems, which makes him look older than he actually is. Giselle’s supposed to tease him about being a bajillion years old, which she does sometimes, but not when he’s acting like he actually *is* a bajillion years old. That’s upsetting for both of them. He grimaces as he leans against the back of his chair, which is padded with pillows and a foam wedge he’s supposed to use to help him sit right.

“Oh?” Linda says. Her attention is split between the sizzling in the pan and the recipe book, which she’s struggling to hold open with one sticky hand. She’s trying to hurry through dinner so she can get to work on her paper for grad school. Sometimes Giselle likes to save her homework until the evening so they can be miserable about school together, and then congratulate themselves about being such good workers by eating ice-cream just before bed. But not tonight. Tonight Giselle doesn’t have any homework. She will skip straight to the ice-cream instead.

“Yes,” he says. “But I won’t bore you with it. I won’t bore *myself* with it.”

"Thank *good*ness," Giselle says, rolling her eyes in mock-relief. She accidentally bumps a pan hanging beside the stove. Linda shoos her away. Giselle goes to the table and pulls out the chair next to her dad to sit down.

"You won't have to put up with me long," he says. "I'm going out of town this weekend."

"On vacation!"

"I wish. It's for work."

Linda pulls tortillas from their packaging and sets them on a cookie sheet. As she opens the oven, she says, "I completely forgot about that."

"Yeah, I'm not looking forward to it. I told you about it this morning."

"Do you have all your stuff packed?" Giselle asks. "You really should do that. Where are you going?"

"Philadelphia."

"Gross. I bet it'll rain. What are you gonna do there? Are you gonna make some soap?"

"I have to do research." Looking up at Linda, he says, "What do think about going to dinner Thursday night before I leave?"

"I can't. I've got a paper due by Friday at noon. We're probably going to go out that night to celebrate the end of the term."

"I'm jealous," Giselle says, thinking of the extra month she and Cathy have left before they get out for summer. "You get done so early."

Linda smiles as she pulls down a stack of dishes from the cupboard. She pauses a moment before closing the cabinet door, staring into the shelves like maybe she's forgotten to grab something but isn't quite sure.

"Well," Evan says. "Maybe when you get back then."

"Yeah, ok. I'll have to see," Linda says. She turns back to the skillet.

The boys that hang out on the beach at night are the worst.

They are the kind that build fires and repeat Giselle's name over and over again until it's not her name anymore at all but something else: Giselle, Gis*elle*y, Gissie, Jizzy, Jiz. Jiz. Haha. They howl as she walks by, and she hugs the shoreline, careful not to step in.

Giselle finds Cathy halfway down the beach, and plops down next to her in the sand.

"Those guys are assholes," she says by way of greeting. She has her phone in her lap, but she tosses it in her purse; she believes in good cell phone etiquette. It's one of Giselle's favorite things about her.

"You're telling me," Giselle says. "Kyle, that kinda fat one, is in algebra with me, and he gets things wrong all the time." Turning over her shoulder, Giselle looks back at them. Kyle is monkeying beside the fire, leaping around in the sand, pretending to scratch his armpits. The other boys aren't laughing. Instead they look annoyed, like they wish he'd cut it out. Giselle finds herself thankful for his antics. Even though it's too dark for the boys to see Giselle and

Cathy over here—the light from their bon fire doesn't reach this far—they'd still make gross noises in their direction if not for Kyle, a boy who is pitiable for his inability to read most social cues and whose earnestness about playing music his peers will not openly share.

Cathy and Giselle like this beach. It's close to their respective neighborhoods, and for the most part, it's well lit—a parent-pleasing detail for sure—but it does get darker underneath the nearby pier and beyond, where the beach shortens and then rises into a small cliff.

The girls do what they usually do. They buy soda and snacks from a gas station not too far away, walk with their feet in the water for a while, and then sit down in the sand when they want to make fun of the couples holding hands, each of them taking on the role of one person and speaking in a mock falsetto. Tonight they spot a much older man walking with a younger woman, one who looks about the age of Giselle's mom. The couple is half-hidden by one of the thick wooden supports, and far enough away that they can't hear the girls over the roar of the surf.

"Oh honey," Giselle says, making her voice as high as possible. "The folds in your neck-skin! They're like the sexiest accordion I've ever seen!"

"Thanks, baby," Cathy says, lowering her voice until it's about to crack. "I wish you had an accordion neck too, but we'll just have to make do with mine."

"It'll be more than enough! I'm flexible!"

"Well, that's one good thing about youth I guess. Yuck, yuck, yuck."

The man and woman stop and turn toward one another, either unaware or not caring that they aren't completely hidden in the pier's shadow. She wraps her arms around his neck and they kiss, the water lapping up against their bare ankles. Giselle and Cathy pause for a moment, waiting for the couple to continue so they can resume their dialogue. But they don't. The man and woman stand in the surf and continue to kiss. As things heat up, the man pushes the woman back against the wooden column. Now the girls can only make out his back and the woman's hands as they move from his shoulders around to the front of him. They can't see exactly what she's doing, but they get the general idea.

"Ok," Cathy says in her normal voice. "This is gross now."

"Yes," Giselle says, turning her head into her shoulder, feeling suddenly embarrassed. "Should we walk?"

"Yeah. That way." Cathy points back the way they came, towards the light of the bonfires and away from the kissing couple.

Cathy's cell phone rings, and it's her mom telling she needs to come back. The girls part ways for the night. When Giselle gets home, it's just before midnight. She walks into the house through the empty garage, frowning as she enters the kitchen. Linda's car isn't here and everything is dark.

Giselle watches TV for half an hour, a blanket draped around her shoulders. She's about to go to bed when she hears her mom's car pull up in the driveway. The engine dies, and a few seconds later she hear the sound of the car door opening then closing, and the click of her mother's heels coming up the front

walk. Giselle feels guilty suddenly, as if their our roles were reversed, as if she were coming home late and Linda were the one waiting.

"Oh, Jesus," Linda says when she sees Giselle. "You're still up."

"Where have *you* been?" Giselle asks in her best parent voice, hoping Linda will smile. She stands in the doorway, one hand gripping the door jam.

"Giselle, honey." She pauses a moment, as if trying to decide whether or not to proceed.

"Yeah?"

"All right. This is going to seem like it's coming out of nowhere. Jesus there's a lot of crap in here." She looks at the pile of clean laundry lying on the recliner. "You were out at the beach tonight?"

Giselle nods. "Yeah, with Cathy and we—"

"And you probably saw some boys," Linda continues, making her way into the living room, sitting down on the couch next to Giselle. Her blonde hair is pulled back into a messy ponytail. A few stray wisps frame her face. Her eye makeup, which she rarely wears, is smeared and blurry around its edges, the way it gets when it's been worn too long and its wearer hasn't looked in the mirror. Giselle glances down at the carpet and pulls the blanket tighter around her shoulders.

"Mom, are you—"

"You're going to be fifteen in like, what, three or four months," she says, running a hand along the top of her hair, and then, as if to herself, "Your father and I should've talked to you about this already. But we put it off." She smiles,

weaves her head back and forth, trying to be goofy. “We did some procrastinating, which you might know a thing or two about.”

Giselle tries to smile back at her, but it comes out as more of a constipated sort of confusion. She believes in the power of facial expressions and nonverbal communication, but Giselle doesn’t know who Linda’s talking to. It’s certainly not Giselle, a girl who feels defined by her immaturity, by her reluctance to become more concerned with bathing suit shopping and the first experiments with makeup than what she’s concerned with now: drawing comics featuring irritating teachers and peers, figuring out the best way to construct a fort in the forest without using any materials from the house.

Linda is addressing a stereotypical teenage daughter. Giselle doesn’t know why Linda’s acting like Giselle is lazy and disinterested—Giselle’s never procrastinated a thing in her life. Sometimes *she’s* the one to remind Linda and Evan to pay the bills on time, although she doesn’t often have to remind Evan. He studies them in detail, especially lately. Last month they were charged an extra $200 in fees—“Whose number is this?” he asked Linda, pointing to the paper. “Some telemarketer or something?” But since then he’s been on the lookout for suspicious activity. “The phone company is trying to pull something,” he said to Giselle.

The silly expression fades from Linda’s face. She stays quiet a moment, as if waiting for Giselle to catch up, and she does, suddenly, all at once. The nature of this conversation dawns on her—oh god, *nature*—and she finds herself silently pleading. *Please, please, please. Make her go to bed.*

Linda sets her hand on Giselle's knee. "Ok," she says, "you're at that age. And we've gotta talk about this stuff, so we're just going to do this now, ok? You're probably going to want to have sex here sometime soon. And I'm your mother and I'm supposed to tell you, don't do it. But—" She leans towards Giselle. "Your dad's not here, so I'm just going to say, if you want to and you feel like it's right and you've given it some thought, you should. It's completely fine. You're a human being and you're going through puberty. Or the back end of puberty. Either way. Your hormones are all over the place."

Giselle notices the hem of Linda's skirt has crept up, exposing a pale but muscular thigh. She tugs down her dress before continuing, "If you're going to have sex, don't be stupid about it. Use a condom. Or tell me, and we'll go get you some birth control. But it's normal. It's completely normal. I don't want you getting pregnant too young, and I don't want you dropping out of school, but I don't want you to feel ashamed and embarrassed either. It's a completely natural part of life. It happens. It's natural."

Giselle opens her mouth to say something. But how can she, when it feels as if Linda is talking to someone else altogether?

"Ok," Linda continues. "Do you have any questions?" She smiles and raises her eyebrows in a look of hopeful sincerity. "No?"

"Uh uh," Giselle says, deciding to stay quiet.

"Ok. Well, you just let me know." Sex education completed, Linda stands up, loses her balance, and grips the edge of the couch. Then she climbs the stairs and goes to bed.

Sharks feed at night and I don't want to get eaten.

Giselle likes her body. Puberty or no puberty. It is a good body that works well, but sharks don't think about the ways that her body works because it is more convenient for them if it does *not* work. Cathy told Giselle that when sharks attack humans it's because they see the bobbing person and want to know what it is, if it's food or whatever, so they give the swimmer a pinch with their teeth, the way humans pick things up with our hands so we can examine them. But they're too strong so their test bite rips off an arm or a leg. We're *not* food, but they think we smell like food, and they technically can digest us, kind of like how humans can technically digest fast food, so bam, we become their dinner.

But Giselle thinks girls who go swimming at night get eaten by sharks because the sharks want them to be juicy seals, but they're not juicy seals. They don't even *look* like juicy seals and Giselle thinks the sharks know this. Giselle thinks they're jerks, but Cathy, staring over at the boys clustered around a nearby bon fire, says "I dunno I think they're kinda interesting."

Giselle stands up, tells Cathy she'll see her later, she's got to go home for Sunday dinner now, her parents are messing with her schedge.

"So late?" Cathy says, still staring off in the distance.

"Yes. My dad just got back from his trip. We were waiting for him."

"Okey doke. Wanna come out later?"

Giselle follows Cathy's gaze. Over at the bonfire, Kyle punches another boy in the arm. Giselle lowers her voice and says, "Bring it Bobby. I'm punching

you on the arm, which means I am trying to fight." The other boy shoves Kyle's shoulder, but then goes back to ignoring him. Giselle continues, "It is not going so well for me right now."

Back at home, Giselle kicks off her sandy shoes by the garage door and joins her dad at the table.

"Philadelphia was a nightmare," Evan says.

"What happened?" Giselle asks, leaning forward on her forearms, accidentally knocking her fork to the floor. She bends down to pick it up, and wipes it on her pant leg.

"We've got to issue a recall on the Double Duty dish detergent—"

Linda laughs from her place by the stovetop. "No other industry loves alliteration like the manufacturers of household cleaners," she says.

"Yeah. It's good for marke—"

"I mean, really. Double Duty Detergent. Super Swiffer Swipes. Just yesterday I saw a commercial for Antibacterial Berry Bowl cleaner when I was in the student union. Who does this? It's inane. Here's one for you. How about you sell the Miserable Marketer's Mystery Mud Mop. I'd buy that. That's what you want, right?"

"Well, no." Evan says. He frowns, slightly hurt. Giselle has heard Linda say Evan is sensitive, but what she actually means is she thinks he's *too* sensitive, and that makes her very impatient. But Giselle does not think that tonight is evidence of her father's supposed hyper-sensitivity.

"That's not his department," Giselle chimes in. She turns to Evan. "Why can't you recall the detergent or whatever?"

"My boss doesn't want to. He keeps holding back, saying the evidence isn't conclusive yet, even though it *is*, and we get more and more calls every day about clogged pipes and flooded kitchens. It's impossible to ignore. He won't do anything about it, which obviously is a problem, but I wish he'd just admit it, at least to me, that this whole thing is bad. It's going to be a nightmare. But he doesn't. He just goes on like we don't really have any say in the matter because there's nothing wrong with our product."

"But is there something wrong with your product?" Linda says. She tosses the lid of the skillet into the sink, where it clatters loudly and temporarily interrupts the conversation.

"Yes," Evan says, answering her question.

"What's it doing?"

"It causes a kind of plaque to build up in dishwasher drains, and after long enough, the drains either become so clogged that the water floods people's kitchens, or the buildup occurs further back in the pipe system so that it creates leaks in other places. There's been some serious flood damage."

"Oh man," Giselle says. "That doesn't sound good."

"No." Evan leans back in his chair and closes his eyes. He pinches the bridge of his nose, and says, "It's been very stressful."

Giselle puts one hand on his shoulder. "Well old buddy, I hope it gets better. I think it will definitely get better. You'll be fine."

He smiles with his eyes closed. “Thanks, ‘Elle.” But Giselle feels for the very first time in her entire life that she has spoken out of turn, opened her mouth on a subject she knows nothing about. Evan’s fineness. His adult job. He waits for Linda to follow Giselle’s lead—even Giselle can see this plea for support, she who is not always quick to pick up on subtlety—but Linda just dishes up spaghetti and says nothing.

Tides are “sneaky motherfuckers.”

Linda’s friends have been calling more and more often. Giselle has fielded calls from a Maria (tell your mother we’re going to Jessie’s for cocktails, don’t let her bring *anything*), from a Jane (does your mother like spinach? we’ve got a ton from the garden), and from Jessie, who is not a woman as Giselle first imagined but a man with an exceptionally deep voice (no message, I’ll call back later).

She jots these down on the pad of paper they keep by the phone until Linda, in a fit of irritation, tells Giselle to just relay these messages verbally. Linda’s got too much to do as it is, what with the house and her research; she doesn’t have time to read through Giselle’s scrawling notes. When Giselle complains she won’t be able to remember them all, Linda says fine. Stop answering the landline, that’s what we got you a cell phone for anyway.

Swimming in cold water uses up more energy than warm water.

Evan cuts out articles from the newspaper about drownings around their town in Florida and sets them at Giselle’s spot at the dinner table where she can find them

in the mornings after he leaves for work. When her dad gets really bummed out, he cuts out these articles more often; Giselle finds one at her place once every two weeks. She knows he tries only to find articles about dead teenagers, that way he can pretend that it happens to people her age more than it happens to little kids, or to dumb spring breakers who get too drunk to recognize that jumping off a cliff doesn't make you cool or interesting because what it does before any of that is make you dead.

When he goes out of town again for another business trip—"Curtis is coming along too this time; hopefully he'll see what a mess he's making"—Giselle again comes home from the beach to an empty house. This time she does not wait up. She locks the front and back doors, slamming them first because she's been figuring out just how satisfying it is to slam things, even when no one else is around to jump at the noise. That night Giselle sleeps fitfully, she has bad dreams, and she wakes early in the morning to the sound of the opening garage. It's barely light outside as Linda pulls into their driveway, and Giselle looks at the clock incredulously—it's 6:08 am. Her mother is just now coming home.

That afternoon at lunch, Giselle asks Linda what a hangover feels like. Linda, who has just woken up, frowns and says, "Why do you want to know?"

"Oh you know," Giselle says, pushing around the marshmallows in her cereal bowl aggressively, spilling droplets of milk on the table. "I was just thinking about having one myself, if you recommended it."

Linda laughs. She thinks Giselle is making a joke. She thinks Giselle is so *cute* and so *agreeable* and so *understanding*. Giselle is none of these things, least of all interested in understanding her mother's situation. In fact, Giselle has no idea what has gotten into Linda, why she feels it necessary to go about her days with little regard for anyone else.

Giselle abruptly stands up, pushing back her chair with force, and then she knocks the bowl of cereal to the floor where it explodes, milk and bits of ceramic flying everywhere. In her startled surprise, Giselle pauses a moment, as if deciding whether or not this was deliberate, but her hesitation passes quickly. She grabs her bag from the back of her chair, stomps down the long hallway, and slams the front door behind her.

If you find yourself in danger of drowning, no one can find you in the dark. Linda doesn't want to act like she has a family? Well, fine. Today she won't. Giselle turns off her cell phone. She's not going home until it's late, until her mom has gotten sick with worry.

Giselle wastes the afternoon wandering around, and as night falls, she sits on the beach, on a strip of pavement close to a parking lot. The bonfire pits aren't far away, and soon a few of her classmates show up, including Kyle. She's not sure what's gotten into them—or what's gotten in to her—but when Kyle walks past with a group of boys and says, "Hey, *Jiz*," she quickly replies, "Go to hell, band nerd." Which admittedly is not the best comeback, but it's better than no comeback at all. The boys snicker—that a girl has challenged Kyle just confirms

his inferiority. Kyle stops a few feet away from her as they walk on without him. He's sweating and she can see his acne clearly, even in the fading light. How could Linda think she would want to even kiss someone like this, let alone have sex with him?

"Your friends don't like you," Giselle spits out. Kyle stands there without saying anything, without even moving, not even to fidget, and Giselle worries suddenly that he might cry. "Don't call me that name," she says, getting up and taking off in the opposite direction, towards the pier, away from the bonfire and the streetlights.

She hurries away and starts to walk with her feet in the water just like any other night, but she walks farther and with more determination, until the lights of the town and flickering of the fires fade behind her. One of her favorite things about the beach, she is coming to realize, is that the roar of the surf consumes her so completely that her thoughts don't settle enough for her to focus on any one of them specifically. She approaches the pier, the shadows beneath it blacker and more foreboding, in part, she realizes, because there's no moonlight tonight. She's feeling impulsive, crazy, and once she crosses into the pier's darkness, she takes off her shirt. She keeps walking, she's self-conscious and nervous, but once she makes it to the other side, beyond the pier, where the terrain begins to transform from beach to rocky outcropping, she drops her shirt in a heap, takes off her jeans, and heads back toward the water.

People swim over here in the daytime, so it's not dangerous exactly, but it's not recommended either. Giselle wades in, stumbling a little in the dark as she

fights the surf. The ocean is cold but it feels good, too. It's still early in the season for swimming, and she shivers. When something brushes against her ankle, she panics and runs into deeper water until it becomes too difficult to move her legs, and she dives beneath the waves.

She surfaces and looks down at her body. It's a new moon, and she can't make out the edges of herself. When she stretches out her legs, she can feel the sandy bottom, but she keeps her legs closer to her body—not all spread out like that—and she treads water, afraid of what's down beneath her, convinced that if she keeps her limbs close, she'll stay in one piece.