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Warm Enough To Undress

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WARM ENOUGH TO UNDRRESS

THESIS

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
The University of Mississippi

by

RACHEL S. SMITH

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ABSTRACT

Warm Enough to Undress is a collection of six stories that trace pathways and barriers to intimacy in a modern, global world. The characters in these stories are saturated with proximity and access to others—through phone, web, and travel—yet they struggle to participate fully in their closest relationships. A woman discovers her childhood friend is gravely ill; a mother’s visit to see her son is marked by deception; a secret affair begins to dissolve. These stories are about disappointments and triumphs in love, affinity, and desire.

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GHOST RAMPS

At our end of the Arboretum an unfinished highway ramp rose forty feet over the lake. Its thick cement legs stood in pairs going into the water and I always felt I should hold my breath when I swam between them. Kids leaped off the ghost ramp all the time, though I never had. There was one boy named Wilson who jumped and his legs were paralyzed. I didn't know him but I thought of it every time I went to that lip of the park. We drank there often and I would pose in my tank top and cutoffs on the hill, letting the boys admire my body. There was little I preferred to that.

I know now and knew loosely then, this was a place men went to thwap against each other in the bushes near the muddy bank. Parallel to the ghost ramp, the 520 bridge stretched across Lake Washington. The two tracks of columns were covered in ivy and stenciled with NO TRESPASSING. The ground under the bridges was always in shade. Between them lay our domain: a few hundred yards of grass, the shore hemmed with blackberry bushes, and next to each bridge, a muddy bank. Canadian geese touched down there, gliding over the water in pairs. Cars crossing 520 had their lights on in the afternoon and we would watch the red glow crawl east to Redmond.

It was a gray Sunday around four o'clock and I was sitting in the parking lot, in the passenger seat of Rik's Subaru. We were drinking cans of Milwaukee's Best from a half rack torn open on the floor in the back. It was early fall, almost my birthday. I was going to turn

fourteen. I felt the way I usually did at that time—a little shivery, as though I had just been sick with the flu and lost a few pounds. I was loose-jointed and eager for something to happen.

Rik and I had cruised Broadway for thirty minutes, back and forth. At the south end we circled Pike and Pine. Rik pointed out the Cha Cha Lounge, its name flashing in red neon, and the Baltic Room. He must have hoped I'd be awestruck by his ability to frequent bars. The last bar at the north end of Broadway was De Luxe. That was near Cornish where my friends and I had taken ballet until we started puberty and had to do pointe.

I passed my empty to Rik, who slammed it against the dash to crush it then threw it at me. A few drops sprayed my arm. His car radio played the Steve Miller Band and the windows were cracked, though not enough to cut the smell of the cinnamon bun tree hanging from the mirror. We had fallen into a lazy companionship and it was a couple of weeks now that all I'd wanted was for him to lean over and kiss me for hours. I liked him and I wished he'd feel the same about me.

“Lift your shirt up,” he said.

“Pass me another beer.”

“Are you twenty-one?” He was twenty but could buy alcohol most places with his cousin's ID.

I unzipped the small pocket on my backpack and took out a Camel Red.

“Say, ‘Please, Rik, may I have one of your beers?’”

“Please, Rik.” I flicked my lighter and inhaled. “May I have one of your beers?”

“Wait—I just realized you're fifteen.” This is what I had told him, which he believed and liked to bring up. “Fifteen is too young for beer. You'll be an alky before you can drive.”

“I can already drive,” I said, which wasn't true.

“What would your parents say if they knew I was getting you juiced?”

My mother had been dead six years and my father was liberal about most things. As long as I came home for dinner, around eight. While we waited for delivery he would bring out a small glass of gin and soda with simple syrup, a sweeter version of his cocktail, and set it by my place at the table. He hoped to instill in me a sense of moderation, though he had none. He’s a person who denies himself nothing and whose indulgences are rarely tainted with guilt. This is something I love and admire about him, although in myself I’ve tried to develop some restraint.

“Show me your boobs,” Rik said, handing me a beer. I could have reached back and gotten the can myself but having things done for me made me feel delicate. I could also tell Rik liked being asked. He liked being in charge. I popped the beer open and worked the tab off. The can was warm.

My father worked at Microsoft and was always buying stereos. This while our couch was ripped on the armrests and the house had no rugs. We kept our clothes in plastic bins as though a dresser were an extravagance. “Have you *listened* to music lately?” Dad would say at the table, taking the remote from his pocket and clicking the Bose louder. His love for baroque and classical was almost embarrassing. For my thirteenth birthday he gave me a mix CD called “Bach-hanal” with the lesser-known cantatas. I listened to it until the first three tracks skipped, wanting him to see me try to cultivate an appreciation. At dinner he sat forward in his chair, eyes half-closed in concentration. I spooned curry over a scoop of rice or split a burger in thirds, cut the food small, put my silverware down and counted the beats in each measure to slow my chewing. “Doesn’t it lift up your spirits?” he said, looking at me. It didn’t really, but I loved sitting there with him, taking small sips and feeling my focus go soft. I pretended we were married and that this was what marriage would be like.

“You eat junk all day,” he said, not knowing I ate nothing if I could help it. I thought elegant women only nibbled things like scones. “I ate Paydays when I was in school,” he said. “I stuffed Paydays down my throat all the time.” When I cleared Dad’s place there was always a ring of food bits around where the plate had been.

Now I set the beer can between my thighs and lifted my shirt up to Rik. I was wearing a good bra, a lightly padded B-cup Maidenform, blue with an eyelet pattern at the edge. I had bought it with babysitting money. Rik reached to touch me and I settled back in my seat and let my shirt flutter down. I knew enough to show some resistance.

“Damn,” he said.

We watched a couple of guys walk past. They were about Rik’s age, but had a fluid way of moving that made them seem more comfortable than Rik usually looked. The tall one had his fists stuck deep in the pockets of his hoodie.

“Dudes are sketch, Rose,” Rik said. “You’ve got to be very, very careful.”

“Not those guys,” I said. “I’ve got a good sense of people.” Men didn’t come here to prey on girls. I opened my door and hung my leg out, flicking my cigarette in a practiced way. The guy with the hoodie had his arms out and was spinning around. He unzipped his sweatshirt and wasn’t wearing anything underneath. The bottom of the hoodie flew out with the weight of the zipper and the carefree feeling about him made me feel energetic. I wished Rik was feeling carefree and would suck on my neck in a commanding way. But he just sat, same as me, watching Hoodie stumble around and fall on the grass.

“Come on,” I said, pushing off my seat and leaving the car door open behind me. I ran over the hill holding the beer away from my body, letting it splash out. I was light and my joints

were like springs. On my arms and chest I could feel goose bumps but I didn't want to put a sweater on and compromise what I knew to be a good view of my cleavage.

Rik came behind me with my backpack, dropping it on the ground a few feet away at the edge of the lake. I could see from the bulge he had loaded it with beers. He unzipped and offered me one, but I said no, shaking what was left in my can. "I have to babysit for the Ledbetters at six," I said. "I'm controlling myself."

"Are you a good babysitter?" He swung the backpack on again and reached for the branch draping over us.

"Pretty good," I said, watching him chin-up. The Ledbetters lived in a medium-large house with expensive furniture, as did the other two or three families I sat for. I couldn't see the path that took people from being my age to having juicers, backyards and infants. Among the strollers and the three-level lamps, it was in these other houses—the Ledbetters', the Feinsteins', the Crawleys'—that I formed my idea of romance and marriage. That love itself was full of thrilling, inscrutable gestures. I pictured a sort of silent, life-size chess match with the goal of backing one's opponent into a state of titillation. I imagined the Ledbetters constantly titillated. At least that their gestures and clipped phrases seemed to loom with bigger things.

"I used to babysit for my brother," Rik said. He stabbed the side of another beer with his car key, let it foam out, and looked back toward the parking lot. The guys we had seen were standing on the hill by a trashcan. A third had joined them and was kissing the tall guy with deep tongue. "I kept feeding him formula, one bottle at a time. I gave him seven or eight of them. My mom said he would stop when he was full but he kept drinking until he finally threw up in my mouth."

I lit another cigarette. I had smoked so many already that it burned my throat.

“That was when they still thought Freddie was going to be normal.” Rik shotgunned his beer and crushed the can against the tree. “Everyone was happy.”

Rik had told me what was wrong with his brother but I couldn't remember. He had described his parents as the kind of people who had dozens of those free t-shirts they give out when you donate at a charity event, and who wore them regularly. I imagined a larger version of the Crawleys. But the week before, when I had gone to Rik's apartment, it didn't seem like he came from that kind of family. He had a constrictor in a glass tank and a closet where he grew marijuana. It reminded me of a place that gets busted on *Cops*. I was thrilled to be there.

“Hold it for me.” I offered my cigarette to Rik. He never smoked but he took it and pretended a seductive drag, blowing air in my direction. I was sick of nothing happening, of him making no move on me. He was a nerdy type, gangly arms and too smiley. He did the same things that cooler kids did but had an awkward way about him. I didn't mind that. I understood why he hung out with my group of friends rather than girls his own age. Girls his age wouldn't like him. His cachet came from being old in relation to us. I loved his big handsome teeth and polo shirts, and the way he presumed to take care of me.

I undid the buckles of my sandals and dragged my jeans off without unbuttoning them. Rik pushed his hair from his forehead.

“Watch,” I said. I pulled off my shirt with both hands and turned my belly to profile, flat as a blade of grass.

He made a face that gave me a hollow feeling in my ribs. But I didn't stop. It would be worse if he thought I'd lost confidence. I asked for my cigarette back and he stepped forward to give it to me. I thought maybe he wanted to turn around and watch the boys who were still kissing on the hill. If he did, he didn't turn. At the edge of the water I took off my bra and

underwear and tossed them on the ground next to him. He crossed his arms and stood in place, moving his weight from one foot to the other.

The water was thigh-deep where I stopped backing up. I turned away from him, watched the freeway and finished my cigarette. It wasn't five yet but traffic was stopped. The sky was white with dusk and I felt bad for the people sitting in their cars—although they were warm. I was so cold I couldn't stand still and I felt my shoulders hunching like a child. I had gotten naked a number of times that year: in Andrew Nagel's hot tub, with high school boys gulping wine coolers in the park, in a family-size tent in Ellen's backyard. One time here in the Arboretum with girls. Some kayakers had seen us and cheered.

"I'm freezing my ass off," I said.

"You want me to say it's a nice ass or what?"

I wanted him to jump in and drag me deep into the milfoil, to kiss him underwater, and for us to float together on our backs until it got dark.

"Come out here," I said.

"I'm dressed." He toed at the shallows in his Nikes.

I gave him a look, a head tilt, and said I wouldn't come back on my own. He tossed his keys and wallet on the ground then waded out, jeans sucking to his skin.

"Take them off," I said.

"Take them off," he mimicked. He dove around me and floated to where you couldn't touch bottom. "Come here."

I swam out and treaded water inches from him, our legs bumping. I set my jaw to keep my teeth from chattering. Rik's hair was wet, slicked off his forehead, and he had drops of water in his eyelashes. I took him by the arms and pulled in to kiss him.

He pushed me underwater. I took a little water in my mouth going down but I've always been a good swimmer. My eyes were open and everything was muddy green and light except his white ankles. He held me down by my shoulders. I flutter kicked through the cold water, felt its resistance on my fingers when I moved my hands. I let a little air out from my lungs and pulled away, but couldn't get free. I remember the panic and that I tried to relax and stay under and like it.

How many times did I swim there? Six? Ten? Fifteen? We were mosquito-sized next to the ghost ramp and we barely skimmed the water. The cement legs loomed high and stuck deep into the ground below.

I kicked with the full force of my strength and Rik held me down by the shoulders. My lungs were heavy, scratchy, bursting—full of sand.

Rik let me up in one motion, his hands gone. I found the air brilliantly. Later I would have grape-size bruises on my shoulders from his thumbs. He pulled me out to shore and my legs felt only half there as he held me up. I was light with breath and as happy as I remember being at that age. I'll do it again, I wanted to say. I was so excited by the thought that something had happened that wasn't right.

The air was fresh and cold and the sky was a blanket on the pure good world. My breath rustled each little sac of my pink lungs. I touched everything—my hair, my thighs, my cold knuckles. Blood rushed into my cheeks and fingers. Rik stood behind me and tried to stick my shirt over my back like Velcro. The cotton clung to my skin then it fell off. We stayed there, him shivering, facing my back, his hands holding my upper arms. I wasn't sure what had happened but I felt that something had been thrillingly exchanged. He had taken my rook, or my queen.

“It’s five,” Rik said. He took his jeans off, wrung them out, and put them back on. I shook out my shirt and pulled it over my head.

“Don’t forget your wallet,” I said, “and your beer can.”

I went, next to him, to the car, feeling the low and sparkling sun. Rik put down his visor and turned over the ignition. “You cold?” he said, and switched the heat on.

The tall guy in the hoodie and his friends had gone away. I wished they were there to see us leave all wet.

“Let’s go to McDonalds,” I said. “I’ll dry my hair with the hand blower.” I wanted one of those apple pies in the cardboard sleeve—eat half and save the rest for the Ledbetter kid. As we crossed Montlake Bridge I looked across the bay at the line of cars stopped on I-5. On a clear day those drivers had a view of Mount Rainier, and the best view of downtown. Even now as it got dark they would see the skyscrapers with their lights on looking spectacular. They would see Lake Union with a few boats lit up, crossing. They would see the space needle with its wafer crown.

“Show your boobs out the window,” Rik said half-heartedly. He touched the hem of my shirt and his cold fingers pressed my side. He just didn’t know what else to say. I thought about taking my arms out of the sleeves of my t-shirt, undoing my bra, and pushing my breasts against the glass. Rik would laugh and wipe his eyes and say something about if he had sisters. I looked at the smudges on the windshield, probably from my bare feet, and thought even if I did bad things, I wasn’t really rotten—I didn’t want to be. I wanted to tell this to Rik, but I couldn’t put together the right words that wouldn’t sound stupid and young.

My hair was dripping on my shirt, getting it wet in back. I turned the heat down and put on my seatbelt and told him I'd buy him a McChicken sandwich. Rik rubbed his hand over my leg. "Your body's dope, Rose." I wished he would say something else, something important. I had a feeling I couldn't have put words to. It was like going to someone's house with solid wood bookcases and realizing yours are veneer, and that they have little chips in them where you can see the particleboard. Rik was veneer. I was veneer. But as we flailed around, so small, we were trying to find some solid, fine thing.

I went to the ghost ramp by 520 often that year. Rik started hanging out with a guy older than he was after he lost his cousin's ID. None of my friends liked the guy and after two or three months no one ever talked about Rik. A few of my friends got their driving permits and I got a disc of Handel opera for my birthday. It was an uncommonly dry, mild winter. One day over Christmas break my friends and I lounged on that grassy stretch in the sunshine. We wore bikinis under our clothes but it never got warm enough to undress.

ISN'T THAT WHAT I'M HERE FOR?

We live four blocks from the Enchanted Village—open year round—and tonight I want to ride the Teacups. I love feeling my organs swing around in my torso, my hair fly up. In these empty winter months the park does an evening special and Jeremy and I go. It's our routine. The roasted nut smell sits so thick in the air that I'll still smell it on my coat when I get home. Even the cold I don't mind. Tonight Jeremy buys two cotton candies and when he finishes taps a rhythm on the rails with the cardboard cones. We're waiting for Bumper Cars, the ride with the shortest line.

"Watch out," I say, grabbing Jeremy by the sleeve as a few teens barrel out of the Bumper Arena. Jeremy doesn't pay attention.

"Bay Area condo on the water, old friend. Good food, no? She's a chef or something?"

He means Tina. She called today, the first I'd heard from her in fifteen months.

"California is lonely. I want to see you," is what she said.

"Last I heard, fine dining. Desserts," I say, inching along the fence with the line.

"You missed her wedding," he says, which is true. I'd been in a dry spell—freelancer's bane—and at the last moment got offered a gig and didn't go to the wedding. This worry roiled up and I felt desperate to take anything I could get, just to sit in front of an Avid, patter my fingers over the keyboard and know I was still in the running. Even the jobs no one wants are hard to get in TV.

Jeremy smoothes the hair above his ears, showing the gray underneath. He climbs into a red car and I take a purple one with racing stripes. Kids grip their steering wheels and try to turn them, making engine sounds with their juvenile vocal cords.

Music starts on bad speakers and half the cars creep forward. I spin my wheel away from Jeremy and hit the gas, putting a gap between us. I could visit Tina. I have a week left cutting *Blonde Gourmand*, a cooking show hosted by a former hair model named Celeste. After that, no gig and I've been saving money. But there's Jeremy. I don't love being away. He's getting bumped by a blond kid in a Batman costume, putting his hands up in surrender. When the kid tries to veer away, Jeremy crashes into him.

I lap Jeremy. He's going to tell me just go, and I will because he's one of these people who never seem to have a hard time. I mean with anything, life in general. Nudging a pigtailed girl—she's driving sideways—out of my way, I poise myself to ram him. Five seconds and there's a perfect clearing, nothing but scratched wood floor between us and he's looking around, but not at me. I can see his shoulder blades spread out under his blue t-shirt, the line of his bicep and the birthmark on the back of his neck. I press my boot on the gas and wait for the surge forward, the slam into him, his sharp-toothed smile.

Instead I get a puny glide, the music cuts and the lights go out.

Kids groan and Jeremy throws his hands up. Then he spots me and steps out of his red car. The operator ushers us from the arena and we snug our coats and watch him place a closed sign on the gate.

“Don't they have generators? Did they bust a fuse?” Jeremy surveys the park from our corner. Lights are out on the Ferris Wheel. In one of the upper pods someone is flicking a lighter, moving the flame back and forth, flicking again. Flashlight beams dart around the base of the

wheel, spotlighting its rusted skeleton. The Flying Saucer on the other side of the main path is still bright and spinning, its lights blurred into a pale green band. We follow the line of rides still getting power past the Scat, the Gravitron and the Octopus. At the Wild River we listen for the rattle and splash of log boats, but we can't even hear the river running. We hike up the hill to the Teacups and they're out too. For five bucks the high-schooler manning them lets us climb into a teacup and we sit on the curved plastic bench with our knees propped up against the wheel.

“She said they just put a hot tub in at her complex,” I tell Jeremy.

He pulls my hand toward his lap, scrubs the muscle along my forearm with his fingertips and asks did I buy curtains for the bedroom yet. (I did.) In the dark we hear the river turn on again, and we stay there, watching the kids scurry around the half of the park still with power.

A week and I'm at Tina's condo, over-tipping the cab driver and tugging my suitcase up a flight of stairs to the second floor. I'm resolved to act natural around Tina. What always happens around her is I say awkward things and make bad cracks to compensate. I act obsequious and then feel embarrassed for myself. Still, she's my oldest friend and I'm hers. She said she might not be home when I arrived, and she's not, so I pick up her spare key from the neighbor and let myself in. The place isn't big, but it's new. Large, expensive appliances in the kitchen, sliding glass doors from the living room to a patio outside.

All over the walls hang photos of her and Ulise. Tina's waifish as usual with those knobby bones that poke up on the shoulders, but her posture, her expression—she has an essence about her—calm, slow and kind. Ulise, on the other hand. One side of his mouth sneaks up higher than the other. His eyes are too big, too sunken, and his haircut is bad. It's not just that's he's bad looking—he is an ugly man—but he also looks smug and closed off.

I walk the docks to the end of the point, about half a mile, and think about Tina, her living here. It's late January, cold and dry, and no one else is walking around. The water spreads out gray and ridged in front of the Lego buildings across the bay. As I walk back the dock lights go on. I try to wait up for Tina on the couch with my book but next thing sunlight is coming in through the sliding glass doors, through the blinds, there's a blanket on me and my neck aches.

Tina's smaller than I remember. I can tell her black hair is longer, even as it is now, looped at her nape. She's pulling a teabag around in her mug, ignoring the quiche she's set between us, saying how thrilled she is I'm here. I lift a sliver of quiche from the pan. "Can I serve you?" She covers her plate with her hands when I try to drop the slice there, so I lay it on my plate instead. Tina starts making notes on a sticky pad next to her napkin. I can make out the time of day running down the side of the paper and today's date at the top.

At noon she pencils, *MD appt.* Next to it she presses the lead tip against the pink paper and scribbles a little dark cloud. "I've been living at the doctor's office to tell you the truth."

My first thought is she's pregnant but I don't feel right asking.

"Ulise says it was unkind of me not to tell you but I didn't want to say it over the phone." She fishes the teabag out with a spoon and wraps its string around, squeezing the liquid out.

Even now, she's smiling, but only from the habitual effort of it. I don't think she even knows she's smiling.

"I have this kidney thing. It's kind of a big deal."

I know about kidneys. My uncle had kidney failure and my mother gave him one of hers. Then, four years later, the doctors thought she had a problem with her kidney. She wouldn't tell anyone except me and Dad because she didn't want it to get back to her brother and for him to

feel bad. Turned out it wasn't her kidney. She got well. Tina and I are both only children, but her parents are dead.

Once Tina's told me about the kidney thing, Ulise comes in the kitchen like he's been standing in the hall waiting. He's wearing his bathrobe. He walks to the table and sticks his hand out to shake mine. I say nice to meet you and scoot aside to make room in case he wants the chair between me and Tina, but he stays standing. Tina touches her mug to her lips but doesn't drink.

"Is that the quiche Merle brought?"

"This one's from Florence. I put Merle's in the freezer."

"Tina basically wet herself when you said you'd come." Ulise walks back to the fridge and hangs on the door.

I don't say anything, just sit, stupidly mute, wondering how did Ulise corner Tina away in this condo.

"So great of you to come," Ulise says, like I don't know Tina, like he's thanking me for coming to an auction for the Humane Society.

And if I hadn't come? I'd like some tea, but instead I ask Tina about her treatment.

"I hate the smell of the nurses. I hate the waiting rooms," she says.

"Have you seen a naturopath?" I only ask because I read something last week about holistic medicine.

"Quack," Ulise says, tucking his hands into his armpits and flapping his elbows. He winks at me and I look away. "Quack quack."

Tina stands up and says she's taking a shower.

Ulise is a pharmacist, which seems both similar to and opposite of Jeremy, who's in liquor. While I'm away, Jeremy's going to a rodeo to promote Beefeater. Before I was even on the plane, he texted me a picture of himself in a fedora and chaps. He looks ridiculous. I'm not going to show it to Tina.

"Pills," I say, watching Ulise tap them out of prescription bottles he's produced from his robe. He arranges them in little neat piles on the counter and then transfers the piles into a weekly Morn-Mid-Night container.

"Sixty-eight," he says when he's done counting. "But some people take more. Old people, but also more young people than you'd expect." He snaps each lid closed and plants a hand against the edge of the counter.

"How are the co-pays?"

"Tina doesn't have insurance."

I'm asking too many questions. It's rude, but I barrel on. "Not through your job?"

"I was between jobs when she got this thing. Floating for a couple of months."

"No emergency coverage?"

"There was a paper we never signed. Our coverage was returned null when we put in the first claim."

"So how are you managing?" I can't help feeling that he was irresponsible, that this was his fault.

"Work discounts, make do," Ulise says and then he gets into the fridge and asks do I want him to buy eggs.

*

“Gotten any calls?” Jeremy wants to know when we get on the phone. He means work. I’ve told him I’ll come back when I line up the next gig. The truth is I haven’t told anyone I’m even looking. Mostly I work on cooking shows, though for a year or so I’ve been trying to get a spot on a one-hour drama. I haven’t tried hard. I always freeze up when it comes to going for what I really want, but I’m getting ready to change. Working on this last show, the Sugimoto cleavers in the product boxes took on a new allure. I hated when the show runner came by in her white undershirt and gold chain-link belt to screen episodes. She complained about the music (on which the producer had insisted) and then ordered the two of them sushi delivery. The rest of the time, the producer sat behind me on the couch planning her wedding, making twice my weekly rate and looking up once an hour to say, “Can I hear what it sounds like with the ‘nice and’ cut out of that line?”

“Which line?”

“The thing about pine nuts.”

I keyed back on the timeline to play it for her. “I love pine nuts because they’re nice and buttery and extra delicious.”

“What do you think?” she said.

I had cut the line out of this scene twice already and she had made me put it back in. I’ve had a few interviews for what I consider respectable shows, but I’ve been passed over. Instead I get calls from twenty-three year old production coordinators who ask if I’m available to cut *Kitty’s Kitchen*, *Splurge* and *Save or Dream Spa*.

“I put up the curtains,” Jeremy says.

“How do they look?”

“Not bad,” which means he doesn’t like them but expects I will. I think about telling him to exchange them, but I really like those curtains so instead I ask about the rodeo.

“Great sales, and they let me keep the chaps.”

I can tell he wants to wear them for sex. Jeremy likes dressing up. When we first started dating I went with it, hoping he’d notice my tepid enthusiasm, but he didn’t. Since then we’ve compromised on once or twice a month, and I’ve gotten to where I usually like it too.

Then I look at the clock and realize it’s time to pick up Tina at the doctor so I tell Jeremy not to watch too much TV and say I miss him and hang up.

This first week I’m here, Tina and I take four hot tubs. We trade magazines. I try on some dresses she wants to donate (none quite fit) and drive them to St. Vincent de Paul. We bake muffins and sit on the dock throwing stale bread at the ducks. She naps on the couch in the living room, takes baths and sometimes falls asleep on her neck pillow with the water running. I can’t believe how much she sleeps. We drive to the nephrologist, the gastroenterologist, the dialysis center, and the blood place. She drinks mocha coconut Frappuccinos and sometimes I see her eating ice cream. Meals, no. “I’d like to try the naturopath, Helen,” she says one day in the car, so I make her an appointment, thinking it can be a surprise.

We get in the hot tub when Ulise isn’t home, I suspect so we won’t have to go in with him. Tina and I grew up in families that were always covering up and I think she’s still a little hung up about these things. “This is like one long sleepover,” she says as she bunches her hair on top of her head and stretches an elastic around the knot.

“Remember when I wanted to stay up to see the clock turn 2 A.M.?” I say, moving in front of a jet.

“I wouldn’t because I wanted to get up early and make your mom breakfast in bed.”

“Suck up,” I say, like I’m trying to not to pander to her, like I’m trying to pretend she’s not sick.

“And the tye-dye.”

I remember the tye dye. White Hanes undershirts we took from my dad’s dresser, pulling the hems down to see if we could wear them as dresses. The gallon milk jugs we asked my mom to save to mix the colors. Looping rubber bands around nubs we twisted into the shirts. Waiting for them to dry, lying on the grass in our bathing suits. Running the Hi-8 camcorder to model them and turning it off when we climbed onto each other, grinding crotch on crotch, which felt good and humiliating at the same time.

“We wore those shirts constantly,” I say, thinking maybe Tina’s not even remembering the play sex—if you call it that when you’re two eight-year-old girls. “I wore mine to bed and kept it on for school.”

“I know. And the models, and the kites,” she says. “Remember making kites?”

In Tina’s complex they turn the heat up so high at night that my feet and hands swell and I have to remember to take my rings off before bed. I’m sleeping on the living room floor. The couch is too soft and, even though I know she’s not contagious, it’s where Tina sometimes naps during the day and it feels like a sick place. I miss lying next to Jeremy, the dark hair on his arms, his small ears and the way he puts his hand on me while we’re falling asleep. After Tina and Ulise go to bed, I listen through the wall to them talking and try to make out what they say.

We ate pasta again and I’m full and can’t sleep, so I take my phone and laptop into the stairwell and call Jeremy’s cell. On the voicemail I get a recording of the woman they give you

before you create your own message. Jeremy's had the phone over a year. I press one to leave a message and then change my mind. Instead I sit on the stairs, open my laptop, and log on to the neighbor's unsecured network.

Away from Jeremy, I want to work on myself. I compose an email listing my qualifications and describing the kind of gig I'm looking for—hefty, action-filled stories that you watch on the couch with a blanket and the ice cream melting next to you because you don't want to miss anything. Not shows you keep on in the background while writing thank you cards or straightening your hair. The experience I've acquired in seven years, listed in bullet points on the computer screen, looks paltry, unimpressive. These are shows no one has heard of. But what can I do? I've taken the work I could get, always managed my rent, and for the past three years I've made deposits to an IRA. I couldn't have turned those jobs down. I address the note individually to everyone on my contacts list, save the drafts, and one by one open them and click send.

“Oh,” Tina says, “I like this.” We're sitting on the couch. She's eating a donut and clicking through channels on the TV. I'm examining the photos in a coffee table book called *Maasai Women*. Tina has a stack of photo books—*Trains and Airplanes*, *Photography of Ansel Adams*, *Classic Erotica of this Century and the Last*—and those kitschy books you put in the bathroom. She doesn't have novels, biographies, or any substantial thing to read in the condo. I look up at the TV and see Celeste's giant mane flipping around over a tray of fish tacos. It's my show, *Blonde Gourmand*, episode three.

“God,” I say, reaching instinctively toward the remote.

She grabs my hand.

“This show is something else. Have you seen it?”

“Sure, I’ve seen it.”

“I know, everyone has. Before you came, Mary from Pilates brought over a quart of bean salad from episode one. Ulise ate it in a day.”

I don’t tell Tina I cut the show. I’ve complained to her already about what idiots could like the brainless slush we churn out. I swear I even said show names. I’m glad she wasn’t listening. The idea of her admiring me—for this—makes me sad. So I sit there and watch episode three with each of Celeste’s lines echoing in my mind before she speaks.

“Wow,” Tina keeps saying, every time there’s a close up on Celeste quick-dicing an onion or a peeling the skin off a roasted pepper. As she turns a tilapia fillet on the grill to reveal its perfect charred lines, Tina’s leaning forward toward the screen. I start to want to tell Tina it’s my show, but we’ve watched too long—it would be awkward for me to say it now.

Ulise comes home flushed, touching his fingertips to his cheeks and rubbing his hands together. He unwinds the scarf from his neck, walks over to Tina and kisses her. I wonder if she tastes different now, the chemistry of her body changed, compounds seeping through membranes, passing into her bloodstream. And her blood getting only seventy percent clean from dialysis (this is what I read in a pamphlet). I can tell Ulise is working hard, not sleeping well. His eyes look more sunken, the skin around them papery, and his fly is unzipped all the time. I don’t say anything about it.

He says, “So I’m suspended from my job.”

Then he and Tina go into the kitchen and I watch the end of *Blonde Gourmand* on low volume and hope Tina will tell me later what happened.

We have tickets that I bought for a boat ride and we all resolve to go and have a good time in spite of what's happened with Ulise's job, in spite of Tina's kidneys turning off inside her body. I follow Tina into the bedroom and help her take off her clothes.

"You can't come in," I say to Ulise, who's tapping at the door. I pull a short blue dress out of the closet. "Wear this," I say to Tina, and she puts her arms up and lets me slip it over her head. She holds up her hair while I pin the straps tighter in the back. I turn on the straight iron, soak a cotton ball in toner and wipe her face.

"So what happened?"

"A new manager saw Ulise not paying for my pills." She lifts her hand toward the dresser and I pass her a hairbrush. "I haven't been dressed up in—"

She doesn't finish. I want to wrap this cord around her neck and pull. I can't stand her good attitude and her sweet forbearance. Instead I separate a ruler's width of hair, run a comb through and follow with the straight iron, making sure not to touch the metal to her skin.

We walk to the docks. This boat, it's enormous. It has a dining chamber with a popcorn stand and a sushi cart. All kinds of people are sloped around the sides of the room and at the rails, some well-dressed and others in khaki pants. I'm wearing leggings, high end, but I feel like an outsider, like there's something nagging me that I keep trying to delay.

Ulise has his arm so tight around Tina's waist he's pulling her dress up a little. There's a band playing Salsa on the first deck. A tall man, maybe Korean, is dancing by himself to the music. A woman grabs his hands, moves her feet in step with his.

Ulise and Tina dance together for a slow song and when the band picks up we all three sit on a bench and watch the lights go by across the water. Tina has a down coat draped over her shoulders and a scarf hanging around her neck. I have a wool sweater on. There are outdoor

heaters glowing all over but I'm still glad I made her wear tights. Ulise gets a glass of wine and starts sipping it as he walks back. Then he goes back to the bar and gets one for me too. "Sorry," he says, embarrassed, I think, as he hands it to me.

"You two are depressing me," Tina says, pushing Ulise up and nodding me onto the dance floor with him. Ulise only wants to dance with Tina, his china doll. I've seen him hold her like a teacup. He would commit Hari-Kari for her, I can tell. But Tina wants me to stand in.

So I buck up, take Ulise's hand and lead him onto the floor. I say I'll backlead this one if he wants. I took a Salsa class once with Jeremy and he couldn't figure out the steps.

Ulise is actually pretty good. He keeps rhythm in the quick-quick-slow basic and I give my hips in to the lead. I'm looking at the band, the other couples, at the loose button in the middle of his chest. When the song ends, I let go, step away and look at him. He's smiling at Tina. Tina's over there glowing so we dance a few more. I take a layer off. Ulise looks different sweating in the boat lights, a more handsome ugly.

Ulise wants me to go to Pilates. He says I can use Tina's ten-class card, which otherwise will just expire. I think Ulise is sick of me being around all the time and wants a couple of hours undisturbed to screw his wife. So I go to Pilates. I walk to the BART and from the platform I watch some men on the scaffolding of a new shopping center across the street. I'm hoping they'll look this way. Even though I'm not on the market. At Pilates the women talk to me and they all ask about Tina. I'm glad she has people here who seem to care.

Walking back to the BART, I get a call. "I've got a show for you," this woman says, a producer I worked with three years ago. I stop and sit in a bus shelter and take out a pen, ready to

write on my arm. “The editor who cut the pilot has an ulcer and can’t commit. The pilot—I’ll send you a link to watch it. Call back once you’ve gotten the chance.”

I stop at the grocery store and buy three steaks, a baguette and a bag full of tomatoes. I’m humming as I walk up the stairs, down the hall, and as I knock before letting myself into the condo.

Tina’s sitting on the toilet with the door open, crying.

“What’s going on?”

“Food doesn’t stick inside me. It burns like it’s scraping out my insides.”

I don’t say so but I think it’s because she eats everything she isn’t supposed to. I’ve read the “Eat Right to Feel Right on Hemodialysis” list many times.

Tina asks for the tissues from the bedroom, which are softer. Of course I get them. I’m trying to stop myself from thinking of the ways I suspect she is culpable for this kidney thing. The way she ate nothing but onion rings and fries in Denali, when we worked there together the summer before college. What she has told me of her sedentary twenties, driving, delivering produce to the fine dining circuit, building her connections.

Her condo has thick carpets in the bedroom and the hallway and I’m noticing them now, their quality. On the wall there’s a photo of Tina and Ulise, one of those Glamour Shots that looks like it was taken in 1996, and I think, in contrast with the condo, how tacky. She looks different now, like she might blow away easier than pollen if she stepped outside. When she lived with us after her parents died, she had diarrhea for the whole six months. Tina didn’t tell me, my mom did. “From the trauma,” she said. I never got enough time in the shower each morning and was always leaving the house without drying my hair, without eating breakfast.

“Thanks,” Tina says as I hand her the Kleenex box.

I find a tealight—small comfort, I hope—and take my time going through the cabinet for matches. I light the candle, set it on the shelf by the sink and ask if I can get her anything else.

“You can go,” she says through her hair. Her elbows rest on her knees and with both hands she’s cradling her head. I want to reach out, smooth her hair, and work my fingers over her scalp.

While Tina’s napping I sit in the hallway and watch the pilot with earbuds. I chew two of my fingernails off, it’s that great. You can’t believe how fast I call.

“I’d love to cut it. When does the series shoot?”

“First three episodes are already in the can,” the producer says. (Her name is Alison.)

“What a relief you’re available last minute.”

“I guess we start cutting in the next couple weeks?”

She sucks air through her teeth. “We’re looking right away. You know?”

I like Alison but I know if it’s more convenient she’ll go with someone else. “Listen, I’m available. Today’s Wednesday. I can start Monday, no problem. Really.”

“Higher Powers are already foaming at the mouth. Monday, I can sell. And maybe they’ll want a quick interview, formality, you know?”

“Could we do phone? I’m in LA.” It sounds better, more like a job, than Bay Area.

“Phone, sure.”

I ask is it safe to get my ticket.

“Unless you hear from me tomorrow—God forbid some hitch—go ahead.”

So we hang up.

I can see Tina’s door open down the hall when I slip back into the condo. I put on socks and scoot into the kitchen on the varnished floor.

“Tina,” I say, loud enough for her to hear. “Want tea or an ice pop?” I bought these one hundred percent real fruit juice ice pops. If she only eats dessert, she could at least have those and get vitamins. Isn’t that what I’m here for?

“Is there ice cream?”

“Some.” I let the freezer door hang open and the motor kicks on.

“What kind? The brownie kind?”

I close the freezer and run my finger down the hemodialysis list. Ice cream is bad—potassium high. “These ice pops are better for you.”

“That’s okay.”

It doesn’t feel right to deprive her, so I wrap a paper towel around the pint and bring it to her with a spoon, thinking I’ll tell her about the job and we’ll celebrate. Tina’s sitting up in bed with a blue sheet tucked around her. She pries the top off and scrapes the spoon over the flat surface like she’s combing a sand garden.

“Did you know Ulise did crab fishing in college?” She hands me the pint and the spoon. “With his brother. Opilio season just started and they said they could use him. In a month he might make fifteen grand, more if he can stay to process.”

I take a bite, leaving the brownie bits for her.

“We didn’t have savings. We’ve cashed our IRAs. Ulise has been talking to realtors, hoping to sell this place. You know, we literally couldn’t pay for the pills.” She looks at me.

“We’re maxing our credit cards on food.”

I know it’s insensitive, but I’m thinking, then why do you buy frappucinos?

“What about you, with Ulise gone for weeks?”

“He leaves now. You’ll be here.”

So I don't tell her about the job.

At dialysis they say she's waterlogged. She's taken in too many fluids. This she tells me when I pick her up. What exactly is wrong with her kidneys is they've stopped working, but the doctors can't figure out why. Acute renal failure. Possibly from an infection. Possibly an over-exposure to metals or solvents. They've told her to limit salt and protein and fresh foods. I'm not sure what that leaves her.

"What's your dry weight?" they ask me," Tina says. "They have my chart right there. My brain is all fuzzed." She's thirsty. They've got her too dry now, she thinks, so I buy her a ginger ale. I shove a straw in the can, hold it up to her mouth and pull her hair back.

"Only half," I say, pulling the can away after a few sips to gauge how much is left. Her lips look chapped.

"I'm hungry."

"You don't eat."

"There's a man at dialysis, he's been on for thirty years. He says he eats as little as he can stand and that's how he's lasted. Cuts down the work required of the artificial kidney."

Starvation for survival. Of course that logic makes sense to Tina.

Instead of taking her home, I drive us to the Chinese restaurant. Tina calls Ulise and I give the waiter my Mastercard and tell him no check, my treat. I order Mu Shu Pork, General Tsao's, Egg Drop Soup and Crab Rangoon. I point at pictures on the menu and order things listed only in Chinese. We drink our tea with sugar. Waiters bring bowls of clear liquid glistening with fat on the surface. When they lift the lids off goblets of rice, plumes of steam spread above our plates. Crescents of beef and onion sit thick in red syrup. I poke a dumpling

with my fork and watch the water dribble out before I lift it and dip. Tina eats. She's moderate, but she scoops from every dish onto her plate and smells each forkful as she lifts it to her mouth. I want to hold her head to mine, cheek to cheek, and feel her jaw move as she chews. I want to run my fingers over her hot gums. She is eating, glowing, alive.

No call from Alison, so I go online in the stairwell and get my ticket. Triple what I paid to come out—less than a week in advance. As I'm sitting there booking it, the naturopath calls. "Just a reminder of your appointment tomorrow with Dr. Yu."

I had forgotten.

Inside, Tina and Ulise are in the bedroom with the door closed. I curl up on Tina's couch and wait for them to come out. Before I forget, I want to tell them about the appointment. I have to tell them about my job. I imagine them, knees touching, him tracing his finger against her skin from neck to hip. I picture my heart like a seed in my chest, small and tight with being here alone.

Jeremy has plans. He's going to get me to marry him one of these days, probably soon. He's going to quit liquor and buy us a cabin in Pátzcuaro, a Mexican colonial town. He says I'll write for TV (like it's easy to just do that) and he'll sell Dos Equis with the labels steamed off to tourists at the lake. The funny thing is I believe he could sell beer in Mexico, make money, and we'd be comfortable, fine.

"The touristas will buy it at a markup, four-hundred percent"—he does his witchy eyebrows—"and they'll be so happy thinking they're getting authentic Mexicano home brew."

I'm thinking about this when Alison calls. "Look, you said you could use a few more days, don't come Monday. Let's shoot for Wednesday," she says. "You haven't gotten your ticket yet, have you?"

"I was just about to," I say, hating the way I lie to avoid inconveniencing her, how I kowtow over something so stupid.

"Good. Hold off. I'll call you this weekend, latest Monday."

"I'll be available," I say, thinking she's found someone else.

In the morning we load into the car, me and Tina in the front and Ulise in back with his oversized duffle. We head for the airport. I didn't realize he would leave so quickly. I know I should tell Tina I have a ticket to go too, but now I'm less sure the job will pan out. I don't want to explain my eagerness to buy the ticket or let her know I might get jilted now.

"I made an appointment with the naturopath," I say to Tina, breaking the silence.

She's resting against the car door and she perks up, smiles. "Oh, boy."

"You want to go see a quack, that's fine," Ulise says from the back. "Just look at the account balance before you write a check." He unwraps a mint from his pocket and puts it in his mouth.

"It's my treat," I say, watching him in the rearview.

"With all due respect, Helen, you can't subsidize our lives."

"Ulise," Tina says.

"It's just an appointment," I say.

"Then what? Get in good with the receptionist there so I can start snagging herbs for Tina?"

“I don’t want you to steal,” Tina says.

“Good. Good for you.”

Ulise looks out the window and scratches at something on his cheek. A drop of blood beads there and he wipes it away with the back of his hand. I understand if he resents me staying while he goes.

Tina and Ulise stand with each other for a long time at the airport drop-off while I sit with the motor running and stare at the shuttles and cabs. I think about circling, but don’t.

“Deep internal toxins,” says Dr. Yu, after he’s felt her pulse and smelled her breath. I sit on a swivel chair watching as he lifts each eyelid and massages his fingers behind her ears and around her armpits.

Sitting across from her, he creaks the stool. He asks about her eating, her bowels, her pain and how long it lasts.

The woman at the front desk places four small baggies in a line and holds up a sheet of paper. “Dr. Yu has made this chart of your vital energy flow. You can see it is blocked in these areas.” She sweeps her pencil over the areas marked with red. “He recommends these herbs. You boil them, let sit for two hours, then boil again, then drink as tea. You do this two or three times every day. Dr. Yu also suggests you come back next week.”

“What’s the cost of the herbs?” Tina asks.

“These herbs, thirty dollars. Each appointment, fifty dollars.”

I shrug and look at Tina. “Not bad,” I say and take out my Mastercard.

“Check or cash only,” the woman says.

“Helen,” Tina says.

I know she's thinking, What's the point? She won't come back here once I leave.

"Come on. I never sent you a wedding gift for Christ's sake." I pull out all the cash in my wallet and count eighty dollars in tens and fives.

At home I make Tina's tea. The condo smells like mud and leaves.

"Hot tub?" she says, waving her hand in front of her face, as though that will clear the air. It's quiet with Ulise gone, and I keep thinking only of dull things to say.

I go put on my suit and feel like the air is pressing in. It's hot inside early tonight, and it's nice to shed my clothes. We walk out, slow, as I've habituated to walking with Tina—more out of the idea that we should move slowly in these conditions than due to how weak she is.

"So what are you going to do?" It's what I want to ask her, but she says it first.

I'm going to fly home to see how the new curtains look in the bedroom, to let Jeremy wrap himself around me in our high, soft bed. I'm going to try for a better gig if this thing with Alison doesn't shake out. It's dark at the hot tub and we leave the lights off as we test the water with our feet and ease in. There's one corner, no jet, with a view between the buildings. From there you can see the bay and the city lights in the distance. I scoot aside and leave the view for Tina. I want to bestow kindness on her, to give her the ocean before I leave.

"I'm going to give you a kidney," I say.

She floats across the tub and settles next to me.

"Helen, that's generous and kind, but no."

"I'm serious. I have two," I say, making a joke she doesn't even smile at.

"I know, but it's not—I'm not looking into that yet."

She drops her head on my shoulder and we sit quietly, listening to the gurgle and roar of the jets. I've been expecting something more desperate than this small body beside me. I think

about her, eight years old, climbing up the ladder, onto the roof, standing there with her kite catching wind, refusing when her parents tell her to come down. I never ventured up there. I lean my head onto hers and keep my eyes open, and I think we're both seeing the sliver of lights.

After the kidneys fail, the average lifespan is eight years. I've read that in the literature. At dialysis with Tina I'm remembering the figure as I look at the people in the two rows of padded chairs. The machines next to them are numbered 1 – 14, and something's spinning in the middle of each big gray box. They look like fake machines to me. Tina's at number 6. She has a fistula, a new almond-sized bump in her arm (I've touched it), but these other people have big knotty ropes under their skin. One needle takes the blood out from the fistula and one puts it back in. Both needles are connected to long, slim tubes and the tubes are connected to the fake machines. There's pop music playing on the radio. Tina puts *Dancing with the Stars* on her own little TV.

I asked to come—parting request—and as I sit there next to her, I'm glad I did. I sense she's going to get well. I sense it the way you sense you're going to roll a six. Which is to say, simply, that I hope for it.

SO THIS IS YOUR ALASKA

I.

Bea had never liked the water. She didn't know how to swim. She knew it would surprise Blake when she walked the gangplank off the *ms Oosterdam*, carrying her sweater in a blue LeSportsac (even Alaska has warm days in the summer). He wouldn't believe it until he saw her waving and pushing her sunglasses up in her hair. Then he would be pleased. She hoped, at least, that he would be pleased. "I've booked a cruise," she had told him. "I'll be in Sitka one day. So if you're there, I'll see you. If not, *c'est la vie*." She didn't want her sons to feel she was needy. She had her own life. Blake did seem happy about it though. And she was grateful to have him, her youngest, close by. October to May he rented a room in Seattle, and until a year ago he had sometimes lived for stretches at home.

This was the third summer he had kayaked up the Inside Passage. His hull had cracked on a rock in Sergius Narrows and he was stuck now in Sitka making repairs. Since he had been there, he'd mentioned a woman (Nancy), which sent Bea into a state of elation. "It's nothing," he had since argued. Yet there he was, still patching his kayak, forgoing all that he had planned. No chance now of watching glaciers calve in Tracy Arm. Too late in the season for Juneau or the tides at Foggy Bay. He must be giving that up for something.

At home in Woodinville, Bea wrote down place names when she got his calls. She had envelopes, sheets of notebook paper, and index cards clipped together in the side pocket of her suitcase—Peril Strait, Little Basket Bay, Frederick Sound, Goat Island. Now on the ship she had

bought a new map and had already sat by the small pool, dotting places he'd been with her red pen. The line stretched up Southeast Alaska on her left thigh; British Columbia remained unmarred on her right.

She understood why he loved coming here. The trees went on farther and thicker than she could imagine. "Over a million islands," he had once said. It wasn't true. Bea had looked it up in the library and there were only two thousand. But now, from the Promenade Deck, as the boat drifted along at a fair clip, she saw the anonymous four-tree islands. Rocky crags splitting inlets, atolls with grass patches and red-footed mergansers. She imagined Blake paddling, stopping to watch sea otters dive and herring beat ripples on the glassy surface. Several times she had leaned over the rail and stared down at the ship's foamy wake, imagining a kayak small as a model in these passages. She held herself there until she felt sunk with nerves and then calmed herself thinking, Blake can swim.

It was evening, day two. Bea had tomorrow to get through and the following day she would spend with Blake. To enjoy. Not "get through," though she did notice herself thinking that way as she wandered the halls. She was letting her hair dry before going up to the Ocean Bar. Have a cocktail there, then attend the late talk on celestial navigation. Yesterday there had been a Captain's toast, a tango show, and she had socialized with a few passengers. Mostly other single women. She might run into them again. Today she had watched eagles circle for prey, and harbor seals bob in the distance like a Whac-A-Mole arcade game. She had dallied around the shopping deck. The ship had stopped in Ketchikan and offered a canoe excursion. Bea had walked down to the docks, even buckled on a life preserver, but couldn't work herself up to get into a canoe. Instead she poked around the main street, went into a curio shop and got out without buying

anything. She sat on a couch in the Atrium and did crosswords as the ship pushed out, then ate a Chocolate Explosion after dinner. Now she felt the band of her skirt pinching and wished she hadn't.

"How do," said an older man as he passed with his wife. Older, but not more than ten years beyond her sixty-five. She had developed a natural sense of camaraderie lately, enjoying the optimism of a blind conversation. She had begun to initiate chit-chat and was happy to find the people here friendly.

The Ocean Bar was done in red and pink with low tables and round-backed chairs. Bea spotted a young woman she had spoken with at the pool, a tall girl named Grace. She was sitting at a table by the window. Her father worked in the corporate offices and Grace said in summer she jumped on and off ship whenever there were cabins. Bea stood near the entrance, surveying the room. The carpet looked worn from this angle. She didn't want to intrude if Grace was talking with a friend (or a man) who had gotten up to fetch her a drink. A few people nudged past and the tables filled up. Women wore well-cut clothes, and seemed comfortable, like they waltzed on these ships any time they felt inclined, like Grace. Bea went to the empty seat at her table.

"I didn't see you at spinning today," Grace said, scooting her glass aside to make room.

"No, I didn't make it to spinning. I think I was at the buffet. The opposite of spinning."

The waiter came and Bea ordered an Alaska. She pointed at Grace's drink. "What are you having?"

"Pomegranate Martini." Grace plucked off the orange garnish and laid it on her napkin.

"Give me one of those instead, please," she said. "And another for her."

A man walked to the piano and sat down to play. Bar seating wrapped around its edge and a few people were hovering.

“Are you married, Grace?”

“Not even a boyfriend.”

“Unbelievable. I have three sons and none are married.”

“We’re a generation of floaters, I guess. Always looking for something better. Never satisfied with someone perfectly wonderful.”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-eight.”

“I told you, Blake, my youngest—he’s twenty-seven.”

The waiter served their cocktails, setting Bea’s down first. He was Indonesian—all the workers were, Bea had heard. Printed on the schedule was a staff cultural show, sometime around day four. It gave a whiff of something exploitative, or maybe she was out of touch. But the staff were all friendly and they seemed to enjoy themselves as much as she supposed someone would, doing their kind of work in such stunning environs. A haze of light feathered behind the ship, illuminating its wake. On shore, trees were printed against the night sky like shadow puppets. They must be passing inlets stretched out like fingers from the waterway, with hidden beaches at their ends. Her son knew these waters well.

“Blake might get married soon.” Bea realized it was unfounded, but the words stoked a little thrill. What was the harm pretending with people she would never speak to again? “He has a girlfriend named Nancy. Isn’t that a lovely name?”

“Very nice name,” Grace said and surveyed the room.

“So is yours. Of course, I don’t know anything about the girl.” Bea lifted the martini, spilling on her hand. “I met someone, her name’s Nancy,’ he says, so casual. But, Grace, he’s been boating in Alaska for three years. Is it crazy to think this has been going on?”

“My mother has wonderful intuition. It drives me nuts.”

“My boys are all private. The last girl I heard about, they had been going for two years.” This was her middle son, who had last year settled into a bartending job across the country so the girl could audition—for what, Bea had no idea. She had only met the girl three times.

The pianist started playing ragtime. It made Bea feel jumpy.

“They have yoga tomorrow,” Grace said. “Very gentle, you should come.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“You’ll feel like you’ve got a new body when you walk out of there.”

“That’s nice of you to invite.”

“All you can do is keep your head down around here,” Grace said. “These men are vultures.”

Bea hadn’t experienced this—and Grace was so pretty. But there were men her age. Maybe she wasn’t paying attention.

Grace dropped her head to the side, looking toward the windows. “I say it because that man’s looking at you.”

Bea straightened. “Who?”

“Just wait. Silvery hair, on your right. Navy jacket.”

Bea sipped her martini. “I’m a little warm,” she said, taking off her cardigan, glancing over her shoulder. The man looked about fifty, maybe older. “Too young, Grace.”

“Looks your age,” Grace said.

“Ha.”

“Ha what?”

“I’m not looking anyway. I took marriage as something sacred.” Bea felt this earnestly, and though she wasn’t closed-off to meeting men, she doubted that she would (or could) become so joined with another person again. Her husband had run off in the typical way, with a pushier, thinner woman. Someone nothing like herself. She had tried to date at the outset—a two-year frenzy of split checks and unopened Astroglide in the nightstand. This was sixteen years ago, when she was turning fifty, and now they were dropping at her age. Many people spent years of their lives alone.

“He’s hunky,” Grace said. She leaned forward to inspect something on the varnished table, scratching at it with her fingernail. She had fine hair that slipped out of the elastic holding her ponytail and Bea could see her bra outlined through her cotton dress. Wouldn’t Blake go all wobbly for a girl like that? She wondered if Nancy looked anything like Grace.

Bea’s room was big enough to open her suitcase, but there wasn’t space to walk a circle around once it was open. She had gotten an interior cabin, thinking a view of water might make her anxious. And it was more economical. Now she found she didn’t mind seeing the glittery chop off the deck or out the window, and the cabin gave her a closed up feeling. It made her want to go up to the shopping deck and look at the diamonds. Her husband had never been one to buy jewelry. She deserved a treat sometimes—Herb Farm dinners, weekend getaways, cashmere sweaters. In this way she had got up a balance on her American Express and no longer had any idea how she might pay it off.

It was close to midnight; the shopping deck would be closed down. Bea was tired but not ready to sleep. She didn't want to put on the television. It was too late to call anyone at home. She thought of her eldest son traveling somewhere in Scandanavia, hoping to cinch an electronics deal. She might call him. Since college he had acquired a sales position and a polished, cynical look. She opened her flip phone and scrolled to his name.

He answered on the sixth ring. "This is Pat."

"Are you having a wonderful trip?"

"Hi, Mom."

"How is it?"

"It's work."

"You sound good."

"You know it costs two-fifty a minute to use the phone over here."

"Well call me back—"

"—It's fine, Mom. I'm just saying."

There was a pause and Pat sniffed into the phone.

"Do you have a cold?"

"No."

"Where are you?" Bea asked.

"Sweden."

"Where in Sweden?"

"You never heard of it."

"Maybe not, but you could still tell your old mom."

"Tumba. Population 37,000. Ever heard of it?"

“Never did. Do you want to know where I am?”

“—Mom, listen. It’s a bad time. (Sniff.) But, yes, where are you?”

“Pat, I’m in Alaska. I’m going to see your brother day after tomorrow.”

“That’s nice, Mom.”

“You’re gonna do great, Pat. You’re going to have good sales over there.”

Bea hung up and plugged the phone into its charger. She took the map out of her handbag and spread it face down on the desk. Alaska was shown in bold on an outline of the world. Next to Sweden she wrote “Tumba 37,000—Pat.” She left the map out, took her coat from the closet, and headed out to the fore deck for one more glimpse of the islands.

“Think about moving your inner thighs toward the back wall,” the woman was saying from the front of the room. Bea couldn’t see how. It wasn’t her first yoga; she had gone three or four times to the Shala, which was her neighbor’s carpeted garage. This was harder. Her wrists ached holding her rear in the air and she kept thinking of the person behind her, how heinous she must look from that vantage. “Let go of thoughts as they enter your mind.” Bea didn’t want to let go of her thoughts. Last month she had gotten on the phone with her middle son’s girlfriend and been mortified she couldn’t remember the woman’s name. Her thoughts slipped too easily into opacity and trying to retrieve them was like squinting into an icefield. She stayed collapsed in child’s pose through “windmill your arms up” and Virabhadrasana. When she crawled off her mat after class, rolled it up and walked to deposit it in a large basket next to the others, she was surprised her flesh felt smoother on her frame.

Bea had been disappointed that Grace was not at yoga, but now felt glad she had stayed anyway. She had a satisfied, fluttery feeling (and pleasantly empty; she had gone without

breakfast) and thought it wouldn't hurt anything if she walked around the shopping deck for ten minutes before making a plate at the buffet. She zipped her sweater on, feeling sporty. As she rode the glass elevator up, she noticed herself humming.

A pair of diamond studs were set in a large display case. Not featured, off to the side, among the more modest offerings. She always thought if she had a daughter, she would buy a pair, 1 carat, as a graduation present. She almost bought studs once when she was pregnant, before she knew the sex, but was saved from it by having forgotten her wallet in the car. When she herself was ten, her mother had forced her to give away a birthday present, a cuff-style bracelet woven from three colors of gold. (Those episodes of frenzied generosity were in those days taken only as caprice.) The gift had been forced on a young woman, a foreign friend of a friend who passed through, joined them for a late and jubilant dinner, and was never seen by any of them again. It had left Bea with a sense that the world was incomprehensible and unfair.

Bea asked after the price of the earrings—too much. Then she took a lap around the deck and played a scarf through her fingers at the other end of the mall. Some marrieds stopped near her to admire a painting of Tlingit totems. She thought of herself stepping off the ship, down the gangplank tomorrow, with this elegant touch. She was not a shallow woman. And had she brought up three boys just to let them pity her—old, pruned, unadorned?

“Do you have a special occasion?” the woman asked, taking the earrings from the case.

“I'm seeing my son tomorrow.”

“Couldn't be a more special one, I guess.” The woman smiled, showing clear braces.

“I haven't seen him all summer,” Bea said. “And maybe I'll meet his girlfriend.”

The woman nodded, wrapped the box in tissue and rang the earrings up.

Bea gave her a credit card, mindful of rewards points, and light with the floaty feeling of purchase.

Grace wasn't in the Ocean Bar at cocktail time, and Bea wondered if she had hopped off. She did see the silver-haired man. She had put the diamonds in and brushed her short hair back away from her ears. She had gone to the onboard salon for her nails. From yoga she still felt straight and nicely stretched out. At home, Bea walked the dogs twice a day. She ate reasonably and had always taken care of her figure as best she could. But it was rare for her to put on makeup, as she had tonight. It made her nervous, like something was now supposed to happen. She took a seat at the piano bar. A waiter appeared quickly and she ordered a pomegranate martini, then looked out the large rear windows. The water looked solid in the evening light. She wondered if the silver-haired man had seen her but didn't want to look back his way.

"Whale!" someone said, and several people ran to look, pulling cameras from their purses, blocking Bea's view. Most of the passengers in the Ocean Bar migrated toward the windows, and Bea followed. By the time she found a spot with a view the whale was gone. She didn't mind. There would be plenty of whales.

She went back to her seat at the piano bar and watched a young fellow step onto the dance floor with a cordless microphone. Recorded music was playing and he began to sing "Let's Fall in Love." Bea hummed along. She finished her drink and ordered another. The singer took a sip of water and invited the couples to stand—"Just next to your seats, where you are." He started on a Dean Martin hit, and more couples stood, leaving Bea looking at the bunched swaths of fabric around their waists. She moved to go to the restroom, but realized quickly that she

would have to push her way through. She scanned the room and saw the silver-haired man not dancing. He looked up and smiled at her.

Bea was feeling expansive from the cocktails. She smiled back, and then turned to watch the singer, trying to show that she was enjoying herself.

The sets were short and when the singer announced a break, the man walked up to Bea and said hello.

“Hello.” She couldn’t remember the last time she was approached.

“Will your daughter join you tonight?”

“Daughter?”

“Didn’t you have a young woman with you last night?”

Bea laughed. “Grace. She’s not my daughter.” Up close she could see his acne scars, the single crease across his forehead, and his thick eyelashes.

“Oh, excuse me.” He straightened to go, then hesitated. “And will she join you tonight?”

“I don’t know,” Bea said.

The man nodded, smiled at Bea, and walked away. She watched him go back to his table, sit and look around the room. He ordered another cocktail, and that made her feel she should order another cocktail too, which she did. The singer started up again. A few people got up to dance and Bea felt woozy. It had gotten choppy, hadn’t it? The waiter brought her martini. She took the orange twist off the rim and ate it, and left the drink untouched.

In her room, Bea climbed on the toilet to see herself in the mirror. Her breasts sagged like stretched water balloons, and her stomach had never lost its pushed-out look since having babies. She’d had her veins lasered, but blue webs still wrapped down her thighs. Her legs were firm,

though. She wasn't a weak woman, nor was she fat. She took off her earrings and bra and put on her nightgown, then got into bed. It was a good bed with 300-thread-count sheets. She had read this in the brochure. The ship seemed brighter and less refined than in the pictures. She could hear a couple giggling in the room next door or in the hallway. She turned over and arranged the covers over her head so she wouldn't hear them. She could feel the slight vibration of the engines. Eventually she fell asleep.

II.

Blake and Nancy had just finished late supper, her husband Daniel asleep upstairs. Their dishes filled the sink. Blake had found a deck of cards in the living room and was dealing for gin. He felt more in love with Nancy than he'd been with anybody. He had stayed with her and Daniel the past eight weeks, wedging himself like a pry bar between them. He wasn't proud of that. And Daniel continued to hold him in confidence. He was a generous person whom Blake had met at the P-Bar and bonded with over boat-building and hobby carpentry. It had been Daniel's idea he stay here. Blake's kayak was fixed up in the shed at the side of the house. He had repaired the hull, and out of a sense of guilt (or gratitude) and the desire to stay longer, offered to add insulation to the workshop. He had several places in the wall opened up and ready to be spray-foamed.

He flipped the top card of the draw pile. "Know what I feel like doing?" he said. Nancy picked a card and lifted an eyebrow. He was always unsettled by how high it arched. "Let's smoke pot."

Nancy sneaked her tongue out at him and slapped a three of clubs on the discard pile.

“Thanks, Lass.” Blake snatched it up, glancing toward the living room, above which was their bedroom loft. He didn’t want to wake Daniel. He didn’t really want to smoke pot, not anymore. He had smoked nightly when he kayaked up the Inside Passage. What else was there to do on those lonely nights? He taught himself tunes on the harmonica and read by flashlight in the warm muted haze. “No—let’s go see if Dr. Frankel is at the harbor.” Dr. Frankel was a sea lion that hung around the fishing boats, climbing on the buoys. Nancy liked to see if she could get close enough to spot his small ears and the hairless patch under his right eye. She liked to get a positive ID.

“What if Dr. Frankel is a girl?” Nancy said and discarded. “Not a young male.”

“He probably is a girl. He’s friendly, relaxed, self-assured. He flops around like a goddess.”

Blake took his turn and felt for her toes. He trapped her wool sock under his bare sole and worked his foot over hers. He wanted to take her earlobe in his mouth, throw her on the floor, snake his arms around her. He wanted the gentle imprints of her teeth on his neck and arms. But wasn’t late enough yet, Nancy would say. She knew Daniel’s habits better than Blake knew his own. Through her, Blake had learned small things about Daniel: his two o’clock snack (chips), the midnight pee, earplugs only when Nancy put jazz on at night.

“Did you discard?” she said. Blake nodded and arranged a meld of eights in his hand. “I had no choice about this, you know?” she said.

“About what?”

She wagged her finger between them. “You and me. Us.” She knocked, placing her discard face down. “Maybe I’m a greedy person.”

It seemed to Blake that Nancy simply lacked a normal concern for consequences, which was most of what made her so appealing. The rest was that she liked to have fun and took a positive view. She never talked seriously about Daniel—what she was dissatisfied with, what Blake had that Daniel lacked (there must be something, for this to go on). Blake respected the fact that she didn't discuss those things, but sometimes wondered how she was reconciling the indiscretion.

“What's your deadwood?” she asked. “I got a gin hand.”

“Ten.” He laid his cards down—a run, four of a kind, two fives.

She penned their initials on a notepad, then turned her face up to him. “You could stay.”

Blake was old enough to know that there would be other women, and that some were worth the work to hang onto anyhow. Her snoozy brown eyes and wine-flushed cheeks—that hopeful look. He reached across the table and grabbed her fingers.

A floorboard creaked upstairs. He moved to pull his hand away, but she held on, then webbed her fingers with his. He listened for Daniel, feeling the edge of her ring when she flexed her knuckles.

“You have to take this off,” he said, fingering the band, “if you meet my mother.”

“Tomorrow?”

“In the morning on the *Oosterdam*, she says.”

“You could tell her I'm a friend you're staying with. We'll take her in the skiff and find whales.”

“I already told her something else.” He took his hand away, tipped back in his chair.

“Nothing about Daniel, just you.”

“That you met the prettiest girl of your life?”

“Something like that.” His mother would not think Nancy so pretty, Blake thought. She’s no Katherine Hepburn or Vivian Leigh, she would say. But she would like her.

Nancy stood and walked around the table to him. The sound had stopped upstairs. She worked her fingers through his hair, massaging his scalp. He could smell the garlic on her hands. “I don’t know if she should meet you, though,” Blake said. “Besides, she won’t want to get in that little boat.”

Blake stood in the foggy morning by the tender wharf, blinking into the crowd. The people coming off the boat looked careful, well-satisfied and old, and there was his mother. Her hair flapping up in the wind. She saw him, waved, clutched her jacket across her chest and tried to hurry past the other passengers. Stuck behind a couple holding hands and moving at a lazing pace, she threw up her hands in mock-exasperation. Blake smiled. He liked his mother’s energy, even if it was oppressive when directed at him.

Bea looked like she wanted to grab him by the arms and swing him around. She looked good, if not a little too much rouge in this light. A little too eager in the jaw. She seized him by his new thick beard and kissed his cheek. He hugged her (Thank God, she would be thinking; his brothers were never affectionate).

“You look like you’re headed to Studio 54,” Blake said.

Her hand fluttered up to her earrings, squeezing one and then the other. Once Bea had lost an earring at a dinner party they had gone to with his brothers and Dad. Blake had been the only one to honestly look, and he found it in the living room, in a seam of a couch cushion. It was the winter when he was eight. Bea had let the host give him a small glass of whisky and

water as reward, and Blake had sat at the table choking it down and feeling proud. Which was how Bea seemed to feel about him and his brothers—unconditionally and unduly proud.

“So this is your Alaska.”

“So it is,” Blake said.

“You look like a mountain man,” she said, shading her eyes though it wasn’t bright out.

He tried to think of something nice to say. “You know, if you take a plane here the runway is so narrow you can’t see it from the air. It looks like you’re set to land in water.”

“I wouldn’t like that at all,” she said. They were standing at the start of the dock, passengers still bleeding out of the boat. She kept staring at him with a big grin. “Gosh, it’s good to see you.”

He took her bag and walked her up to the main street, toward the old soda fountain and the Fur Gallery.

“This is where everyone’s going,” Bea said. “I want to see your favorite places. I want to meet Nancy.”

Blake still wasn’t sure if he wanted Bea to meet Nancy. “She’s going out in the skiff to photograph Humpbacks. It’s a small boat for you—very close to the water, unsteady.”

“I’m a boater now,” Bea said. “Give me a life vest, I’ll jump in.”

Bea’s cruise ship was more like an island than a boat, but he was impressed by her taking to Alaska waters. This resolve to enjoy herself despite the old fear. She rarely went near water when he was a child, but put him in swimming lessons from younger than he could remember. At Madison Beach she sat in the grass overlooking the small sandy bar, the roped-in shallow area, and the endless lake. She made him attend May through September, only the last two months being warm. He didn’t mind. The image fixed in his mind of those lessons was this: A

rainy Sunday. He had mastery over the water, skimming through. He counted his laps and felt bad for the teacher. She was a high school girl, bouncing in the shallows, shivering, doing her best to keep to keep a bright face.

He looked at his mother next to him, persistent and small. He wanted to make it a good day.

“Do you want to go?”

“What else did I come for?”

Partly he wanted his mother to meet her too. He was proud of Nancy, the smooth efficiency of her and the way she lingered around him. Blake took his mother’s elbow and crossed down to Katlian St., past the Pioneer Bar, the slat-wood houses, the Alaska Native Brotherhood Hall, and the bright blue awning of Ludvig’s. Birds chirped and hooted, and the smell of fish carried on a slight breeze from the bay.

Blake hoped to find Nancy still docked at New Thompson Harbor, sipping a latte from the espresso stand, checking her camera and her Pneu-Dart rifle. She was working off a grant, cataloging individual Humpbacks migrating to the area each summer. She heaved around in the skiff until she found whales, then photographed their flukes and darted them for DNA. Daniel never went with her, so Blake often had.

She was there. Waving with both hands when she spotted them, scampering out of the boat. Nancy, always with a careless smile, moving fore and aft with balance like a lynx. An empty wheelbarrow sat on the dock and she rattled it twenty yards toward shore to meet them. Nancy grasped Bea’s hand in both of hers, said hello, and locked eyes in a friendly way. Blake

looked for her ring, but she was wearing gloves. “I’ll just take this back and meet you at the boat,” Nancy said, and jogged the wheelbarrow up toward the public bathrooms.

“Okay with the water, Mom?” Blake said, walking Bea down the dock, hovering his hand around her back.

“Feeling good.” She looked over her shoulder for Nancy.

“It’s not serious,” Blake said. “Don’t start with ideas.” He jumped in the skiff and climbed out with a life jacket. “Here. Put it on.” Bea did. She looked dizzy for a moment, like she was balancing at the edge of a precipice. The way Blake felt when he was in an airplane, thinking of the miles of air below. He held her gently by the arm.

“What a mountain.” She fixed her gaze across the water.

“Mt. Edgecumbe,” Blake said. “Volcano.”

“Gorgeous, huh?” Nancy said, sliding into the skiff and starting the motor. “Let me help you.” She offered her hand and Bea took it. “Just like a little *Oosterdam*.”

“Little *Oosterdam*,” Bea repeated, planting her foot on the blown-up vinyl side, the bench, then the hard flat bottom. She sank down and gave a breathy laugh.

“Is this a little much, Mom?” Blake said.

“She’s perfect,” Nancy said. “She’s gotten in beautifully.” She reached and brushed a small feather off Bea’s pant leg. “Blake tells me you’re new to boating, Bea.”

“This is the first time in ten years. Only a handful of boat rides in my life.”

“It’s very easy. You just sit snug and stay warm. We’ll take you anywhere you like and we’ll bring you back when you get bored.”

“I won’t get bored!” Bea said. “I don’t understand you kids getting bored.”

“Cast us off,” Nancy said and pulled the cord to start the motor.

Blake untied the forward dockline and the aft and they pattered out into the bay. The clouds wobbled, reflected on the water. Fog covered the base of Mt. Edgecumbe and its top was tiger-striped with snow. They passed into the open waters of Sitka Sound and turned up toward Olga Strait.

“How do you find the whales?” Bea asked.

“This morning someone saw humpbacks in Fish Bay,” Nancy said. “I heard it over the radio.” She nodded at a small radio nested in her jacket, on the bench. “But they’re all over right now.”

Blake took the rudder and watched Nancy mount herself on the bow. She looked sturdy there, perched while the skiff dropped and rose in the swells. It had settled into a calm day and the swells would be little more than ripples when they cut the engine and drifted. They passed small islands, some with cabins knit back from shore, among the trees. He imagined harvesting wood and building one of these primitive affairs. The thoughtful planning and simple labor would suit him. He would be content settling here, kayaking around these million islands, setting crab traps. He could do petty carpentry or keep a seasonal job. Pack in for dark winters with Nancy. He looked at Bea. The spray was misting her hands and her face. She was gripping a line—one attached to a bumper, not the boat.

“Any nice men onboard your cruise?” Blake asked. He had suggested his mother look for someone many times.

“I’ve been fighting them off,” she said. “A different man at cocktails every night.”

“That’s right,” said Nancy. “That’s how you do it.”

“See these earrings?”

“Did someone buy them for you?” Nancy asked. “Too forward, but keep them.”

“No, I bought them for myself, for a special date,” Bea said. “I’m planning to have one before I finish this cruise.”

“Good for you, Mom,” Blake said.

“I’ve met a nice woman named Grace, a young girl like you, Nancy. We’ve been having a wonderful time.”

“That’s great, Mom,” Blake said. “What a good idea you had coming up here.” Blake had once seen a picture of his mother on a sailboat, bundled in his father’s sweater and huddled in protest in his arms. They looked happier than he ever remembered them being. In fact he barely remembered them together at all. His mother had been with two men before his father—she had told him once at the breakfast table. This was when he was living at home in his sophomore year of college (the last full year he took), and he was unsurprised that she wanted to talk about men in that way, with him. It had made him strangely hate his father, about whom he felt mostly neutral, and who sometimes set him speechless with laughter when Blake visited him every few years. What he hated was Dad being blind to the way Bea had changed since he left—gradually more weak and confessional, her soul seeming to have sturdiness equal to the sea cucumbers floating limp in the strait beneath them.

“Blow,” Nancy said, pointing over the gray blanket of water and positioning her camera. Blake idled the engine. The mist drifted and a curve of black appeared. A spike-nub of dorsal fin—then a wave of tail. Nancy’s camera made its clickety sound. Water lapped the sides of the boat.

“Grace is going to be jealous,” Bea said. She was holding tight to the edge of the bench now, but her body looked relaxed.

Blake motored at lowest speed to the spot the whale had been.

“Hand me that net, Bea,” Nancy said, pointing to the floor.

Bea gave it to her and Nancy leaned over the water to scoop. “They slough off skin when the fluke hits the water. I take it for DNA if I don’t get a dart.” She held the net dripping over the side of the boat. Blake handed her a freezer bag. She shook the flakes of whale skin into it, checked her camera, and labeled the bag with a Sharpie. Sun was shining through the clouds and a flock of cormorants skimmed the water across the bay. “Blake’s been helping,” Nancy said, and smiled at Bea.

“What’s going to happen?” Blake had asked Nancy days ago out on this skiff. He loved her sealskin tight pants, the gap of her boots just below the knee. The swiftness with which she tied knots.

“Don’t know,” she said. “But I’m curious to see.”

Now Blake cut the motor and they floated, waiting for whales. He hadn’t thought, What if she got along well with Bea? What if it felt so comfortable out here, the three of them? Now Nancy’s laissez faire attitude struck him as selfish, and he worried that he didn’t understand the consequences of things any more than she did. He worried that the way he had been living would soon amount to nothing but a clump of regret.

“Are you okay, Mom? With the water?”

Bea said she was and looked acclimated, with only one hand clinging loosely to one of the lines. “Are you going to use that?” she asked Nancy, pointing to the rifle in a side pocket of the skiff.

“Sure. If we get a good shot. Do you want to try?”

“Me? No.”

“Come on, Bea,” Nancy said. “Do you think you’ll ever get to shoot a whale again?”

Bea looked at it like she wanted to.

“Come here.” Nancy held out her hand. Bea pushed off her son’s shoulder to steady, and climbed up to the bow. “Take your float vest off for an easier shot. It’s not choppy.”

“You think I’ll be okay?”

“Sure, Mom,” Blake said from the helm. “You’re a pro. A real boater.”

Bea took the vest off and Nancy loaded a dart and jiggered with the safety. She placed it in Bea’s arms, snugging it up to her shoulder girdle. “Have you shot a gun before?” Nancy asked.

“I used to shoot targets with my husband,” she said—news to Blake. “Is the safety off?”

“Ready to fire.” A blow misted to their left and Blake could tell she was training the red laser dot on the vapor. “The dart takes a piece of blubber an inch long, about the width of a pencil. If he shows his flank, you shoot.”

“Come on, Mister,” Bea said.

Blake liked seeing his mother hold a rifle. He watched the expanse of water, hoping for a dive. A breeze blew over his neck. One day he had spent with Nancy they found themselves in the middle of three-dozen whales—in every direction flukes waved up and down like Clue cards. It was a clear morning and the groups were bubble netting, swimming underwater in a whirlpool, trapping the fish inside, then bursting up through the water, open-mouthed, into the air. Blake liked the idea of it—taking a mouthful (cod, sardines, krill) and letting the water run out. He couldn’t help thinking of himself and Daniel, flailing fishlike in Nancy’s clutch. Though he did—he knew—have more agency in it than that.

Two boat lengths from Bea a nubbed snout twisted up from the water. It rose, showing its grooved throat, belly, and pinwheel fins, throwing spray. It arced backwards in a sumo-flop,

raising a splash of parting waters. A shot echoed as Bea aimed into its wake. “Whooo!” Nancy shouted. The skiff hit the whale’s swell and Bea stumbled sideways, reaching for something to hang onto. Blake lunged. He hit the floor of the skiff and pulled Bea down on top of him, when she might have caught her balance on her own.

“You never see them breach close like that,” Nancy said, sitting down on the edge of the skiff.

Bea pulled herself up, patted Blake on the chest. “Okay, Blake?”

“Okay.”

The skiff rocked like a cradle over the waves. Blake’s pants were wet in the back, but Bea had stayed dry. She let a breath out, making a little sound like “Ha.” She pushed up her sleeve and leaned over the boat to touch the water. “Like ice,” she said, and laid her hand over Blake’s.

Blake kept his hand still under hers. He felt glad his mother had come. It seemed like something right was happening for her, and she was easy to be around when she was in good spirits like this.

“Open up that bag,” Nancy said, pointing to a dry bag at the back of the skiff. Blake picked it up and undid its folded closure. “There are some snacks,” she said. He pulled out a French loaf and a Tupperware of dried venison they had eaten from before.

Blake tore off a piece of bread and gave it to Bea, and tore off another for Nancy.

“In a minute,” she said. She stood at the bow watching for flukes and took a few more photos. Blake chewed a piece of jerky.

“Have some, Nancy,” Bea said, extending a hunk of bread to her.

Nancy took it and looked up at the trees, pulling the inside of her bread from the crust. They ate in silence, Blake starting to feel chilled like he was coming down with a flu. Nancy chewed her crust, swallowed, and brushed the crumbs from her gloves. "Don't let me eat any more bread or I won't have an appetite."

"That's how you keep your figure," Bea said.

The sun was shining full bright now and Bea's earrings sparkled like a thousand tiny knives. Bea shook the bread down in its bag, folded the paper over, and set it in her lap.

"Could I put my life preserver back on?" Bea moved to the middle of the bench.

Blake helped her into it. "Should we go back?"

"Let me just sit here for a minute." Blake sat next to her and put an arm around her shoulders. They were floating close to shore now, where the gnarled firs grew almost to the edge of the water. "In this gorgeous place."

Nancy had spotted a pod thirty yards off and was kneeling at the bow with her camera.

"Before you leave, I'd like to take you to the shops," Blake said. "Buy you a set of Russian nesting dolls for a souvenir."

"Blake," Bea said. "I'd like you to know something."

He heard a splash in the distance but didn't look up. On the floor of the boat the lines were wet and tangled. He remembered standing on the dock with Nancy, her winding them in coils.

"What's that?" he said.

"I haven't got any money," Bea said.

Blake looked at the lines around her mouth, her lipstick now faded off. "Do you need some, Mom?"

“No, not now. I mean for the long run. I just thought you should know.”

It was no more or less than he would have expected, but he didn't want to talk about it. He straightened her life vest. “Don't worry, Mom,” he said and patted her hand. Beyond the edge of shade from the trees, the water looked wavy and mottled like old glass. It made him angry, her getting confessional again. Why ruin a beautiful day worrying about that?

Blake put a hat on and throttled the engine up to full speed as they drove back. The remaining cormorants skittered and flapped away. The boat flew over the swells, sweeping its faint shadow over the water. Blake braced against the wind, watching the inlet unfold in front of him, feeling the skiff spread its skirt behind.

The P-Bar was loud with men as usual, and tonight it was packed to the gills. Blake's boots felt sticky on the black and white checkered floor. He had spilled drinks here himself. Tourists were sprawled in the horseshoe booths, even with the *Oosterdam* floating away. Who knew where they came from? Blake recognized a few fishermen from the longliners and purse seiners that docked at New Thompson Harbor, though he didn't expect they would recognize him. “Bar seats?” Nancy said.

Blake nodded and moved to grab her hand, then stuck his in the pocket of his jeans. This was a public place and people knew Daniel. Nancy took a seat under the bell—a big brass ship's bell (to ring it meant you'd buy a round for the bar). Blake settled on a stool next to Nancy and ordered a hot whisky. She ordered a Coke.

“That's it?”

“Daniel will ask who I've been drinking with.” When Blake saw Nancy during the day, they staggered arrivals at home. “I'm not staying long,” she said.

They both kept their coats on and Blake put his hand on her back. She was making small swivels on her stool. “You could stay long enough for one,” he said.

The bartender slid Nancy’s Coke a few inches down the bar.

“Your mom had a top-notch time today,” Nancy said. She put her mouth on the straw without lifting her glass and sucked up half the soda. “I had a great time too. I feel like I should stay with you now, after meeting your mom like that. Maybe I should. But, you know, I’ve met Daniel’s mom too. Plenty of times.” She said it like she knew she had done something and now she wanted to take it back. She stirred the ice with her straw and looked up at the clock on the wall. “I told him I’d be home before eight.”

The bartender set a steaming mug with a lemon on the rim in front of Blake. “Six,” he said. Blake had a wallet full of spending money and some more at Nancy’s house—his savings from the year for this summer trip. He put a twenty on the counter.

“Better go,” Blake said.

Nancy pushed the Coke away without finishing it and squeezed Blake’s arm. She said, “I love you,” into his neck then pushed through the people to the door.

Blake squeezed the lemon in his mug and blew on the hot whisky. An old man at the other end of the bar was shouting compliments at a girl seated in a booth with some friends. “A *true* knockout,” he said. “Tell me your name.” The man took off his coat, then his vest, and threw the vest at the wall next to her. It knocked a photograph to the ground and the glass broke. The girl ducked under the table, and her friends readjusted the surrounding frames, giving the man chastising looks. Blake wished he could join them and he wished he felt better. His throat was swollen and the hot liquid burned a clean feeling as he sipped it down.

The old man pushed himself up on the bar and stood. He took his shirt off. He was strong, medium hairy, and the skin hung a little loose over his abdominals. Blake could only hope to look so good at that age. He figured Daniel would. Daniel was steady and active, hauling his own lumber, even milling his own trees. Blake didn't know the man on the bar, but plenty of other people seemed to. He finished his whisky, ordered another, and listened to a woman try to auction the old man off. "Do I hear fifty? Fifty-five. Who's got sixty?" When Blake looked back his way, the man had undone his jeans and dropped them far enough to show half a fur-covered jock strap. It was a novelty Blake had seen for sale in town. He thought if Nancy were here, she would be cheering along. She might even put in a low bid. She fit in here in a way that he admired, and that was something he loved about this place—a person *could* fit in. It wasn't everywhere that was true.

The bar crowd was thinning and Blake wished he could go home to Nancy, make a fire in the wood stove and get under a blanket with her. He wanted to feel her hands in his hair. But he didn't want to see Daniel. He felt a current through the bar tonight, the need for camaraderie and easy friends. "One-fifteen—sold!" the woman said, and a few cheers went up behind him. He stood up, looked at the old man now sitting on the bar, the girls in the booth taking shots with his vest spread over their table. Near the side door boys younger than him were shooting pool with dignity and concentration, and all the patrons looked thankful just to close out another day. Blake reached for the bell, took hold of the clapper, and rang as loud as he could. He needed friends tonight, sure, but there was an ache going around outside of himself. Blake didn't think there was anyone in the place who wasn't feeling a little desperate. It was dusk outside now; the long, light evenings were ending, and soon the cold would creep in. Tourist money would pause its circulation for the better part of the year, and the cost of heat would grow burdensome. People

would get frostbitten, stranded, and knocked into the drink. And maybe he would be here for that this year. He knew the clang-clang, the applause, and the toast to his round were transient pleasures, but he couldn't think of anything else that would endure.

III.

Bea sat in a deck chair by the small pool with a perfect sense of calm. She had brought her map out to chart her own trip but hadn't opened it yet. It was folded on top of the beach bag beside her, weighted by a sunglasses case. Grace was swimming, recovered from two days of the stomach flu. ("I was holed up in my cabin thinking I might die in there," she said at breakfast. "One of those poor Indonesian girls would find me and cry for the rest of the day.")

A fresh towel was wrapped around Bea's waist and legs, and she had spread a sweater over her chest. She was warm and could feel the air on her face.

"What I'd like to hear more about is Nancy," Grace said, toweling her hair, flinging drops of water on Bea and sinking into her deck chair.

"What a sweet girl. And smart, I can tell," Bea said. "I'm so happy for Blake. I'd like to come up here and visit them again."

"Bea, I'm thrilled to hear it," Grace said.

Bea had gone in the pool too. She had waded up to her chest in the shallow end and let Grace hold her and float her on her back. Looking up, she'd seen the clouds, thick like yarn, and the small birds that sometimes came to land on deck. She had lost the feeling of the water and of Grace's hands under her, and she felt herself floating like one of those birds on the thermals. She felt her hair wave out around her. Her heart rate had gotten up and she could sense the fear in her

breathing. But she was separate from it. Like her body had sunk and only her spirit lay on the water's surface, waving there, rotating slowly, blinking up at the future.

HOTEL

Her apartment was small, but she had tried to make it cozy for the party with candles and cheap, brightly colored throw pillows. It was a no-reason-just-for-fun-dinner-party. The kind she thought a twenty-two-year-old should have. She had gotten plastic silverware and paper plates. Fifteen people came, but—it was awkward as each in succession arrived—only one other girl. The boys sat huddled in the living room, their gazes lingering occasionally in the direction of the kitchen. Most of them didn't know each other. Most of them had been there, in some state of undress, before. How unmerciful that she had no TV. She was late browning the meatballs for the spaghetti, and when she emerged it was with great mounds heaped up on each triple-stacked plate. Jenny, the other girl, kept turning the music up. The boys ate well. They all spoke kindly to Liz and left by nine.

She threw the party the night before George came. Now she was lying with him in the hotel bed, between the tucked clean sheets in the Royal Suite. How does one apologize? Liz was thinking. How does such a thing happen? She had invited others and others had said they would come. To some of the boys who came, she had only mentioned the party in an off-handed way, not even invited them, really. It was as though they were magnetized to her, and with their negative charge, they kept everyone she wanted away.

The whole situation made her feel less generous toward George. It gave her an itch to be more demanding. George, who was sweet, patient, and reasonably sophisticated. Who flew Liz

all over the country when he traveled for meetings. Who reserved the Royal Suite whenever Liz agreed to stay. Who was only here for a few days.

“Let’s go to Maine,” Liz said. She batted the papers he was reading down onto the bed.

“We have the suite for four days,” George said. “And I have ninety-five meetings, my bird.”

“We never go anywhere for fun.” Liz lay back against her pillow. “I’ve wanted to go since I was a kid.”

George gathered the papers and straightened them on the bedside table. He said he needed to think about it.

Liz had told him when they started that she wouldn’t make love to him. She didn’t know how old he was exactly, had never asked, but she pegged him a young sixty and that was too old. George had told her he had made love to two hundred women when he was younger. Liz was unsure what he wanted her to make of the revelation, but it felt to her like he was fluffing feathers he no longer had.

George got up at six the next morning. From the bed Liz could hear him clipping his nails. She was a restless sleeper. The bathroom light leaked through the cracks around the door. She walked to the entrance of the suite. The upholstery all matched—the couches, armchairs, and dining chairs. It was a pastel stripe. In the dimness everything looked gray. Liz opened the door to the hall and got the paper.

She was back in the bed, tapping the heel of her pen against the crossword when George came out of the bathroom. He opened the mirrored closet door with one hand, clutched the towel around his waist with the other.

“Is that a hair towel?” Liz asked.

George turned his body to profile in the mirror and gazed at his beach ball stomach and toothpick legs. “I didn’t used to be so fat.”

“Hide a needle in the city,” Liz said. “Eight letters.”

George tugged at his earlobe and adjusted the towel around his waist. “Trashpile?”

“No,” Liz said. “That’s nine.”

While George was at meetings Liz walked to the museum. She worked for a pollster but only part-time. All through college she had been desperate to work in Congress and it had been a step to get this job. Her firm worked on important campaigns, conducting surveys and processing data. But the year she’d been there had made her apathetic. She’d been promoted recently to Junior Analyst, but was still treated like an assistant. Even worse, it was the kind of place where a deliveryman replaced the milk in the office fridge daily, even when it wasn’t bad. She had been filling her time doing other things, hoping something would lead to the pursuit of another, more satisfying career. Nothing had struck her fancy.

The museum ceilings were high and it was quiet, but there wasn’t much art that Liz liked. She liked moving through the space, the echo of her footsteps, and the slow, stop-go pace. She went to the bathroom to look at her phone. No texts. No voice mails. Only a calendar notice for Jenny’s birthday bar crawl. Certainly, in the wake of her own party, she would go. Liz bought a sticky note cube in the museum gift shop and walked up Fifth Avenue to the park. Horses and carriages were staggered along the street. The drivers huddled together smoking. Liz walked close to the horses and stopped to touch their necks. When they fluttered their nostrils she could feel their wet breath.

“Nice ride for a nice lady.” The driver dropped his cigarette into a puddle. “See the pond, Sheep Meadow. Warm blanket for your lap. For you, forty dollars.”

“They have bad lives,” she said, rubbing the horse’s nose. “Their stables are too small.”

“Your titties are too small.” He eyed a couple arm in arm on the sidewalk. Liz looked around to see if anyone had heard him. She felt invigorated by him saying it. She liked being in a place where people would say that kind of jerk off thing.

At the hotel bar Liz ordered a screwdriver and billed it to the room. It was an upscale bar meant to look divey. The walls were papered with black and white photos of trains. They served hamburgers with cabbage for eighteen dollars, prices not listed on the menu.

Liz took the newspaper out of her purse and scanned the bar for a pen. “Gimlet,” a woman behind her ordered, moving toward the stool next to Liz. She undid the belt on her trench coat and left it on as she sat down. She was George’s age, maybe older. The bartender set Liz’s drink on a napkin.

“You have a nice smile,” Liz told the woman. She looked like someone who would like to hear it.

“You aren’t from here,” the woman said.

The bartender brought her gimlet and a dish of wasabi peas.

“My husband and I are visiting from Ohio,” Liz said. Lying was something she did. Only with strangers, though, which made it harmless—not even really a vice.

“I’ve never been.” The woman touched her hair. It was done the way hair used to be done—at a salon with a big helmet dryer and the all the town gossip.

“Fifty percent of Americans live within five hundred miles of Columbus,” Liz said.

“Most people don’t know that.”

The woman was visiting from Florida. She liked the hotel enormously but not the deep bathtubs. “I can’t get in,” she said, stirring her gimlet. “I really can’t.” Her name was Emma Phillips.

Liz worked at her screwdriver slowly, placing her finger over the top of her straw, lifting it and sucking the liquid out from the bottom.

“Do you work?” Emma asked.

“I train dogs,” Liz said. “Part-time.”

“That must be good work,” she said. “If you like dogs.” She smoothed a curl and told Liz that she always counseled young women to marry rich. “But you’re already married, you said. Oh, well. I’m joking, mostly. But that’s real feminism, I’ve always thought. Then you can do whatever you want.”

Liz popped a wasabi pea in her mouth and asked the bartender for a pen.

“I make these,” Emma said, lifting a stack of greeting cards from her purse. “Take a look.”

Liz picked up one with a pie on the front, collaged from strips of sugar packets.

“Inside that one says, ‘Hi Sugarpie,’ ” Emma said.

“Cute,” Liz said, though they weren’t. She slid another card from the pile and spilled the gimlet with her elbow.

Emma swept the pile of cards away so quickly Liz paused a moment, surprised. “I’m so sorry,” she said. The bartender wiped at the drink with his bleach rag. “Can I buy one?”

Emma handed her the stack. “Choose,” she said. “As a present.” She offered the bartender one too.

“I don’t know who I’d give it to, the bartender said, and waved the pile away.

Liz chose the simplest one, blank inside with a birdhouse on the front.

Emma peered at Liz’s crossword and penned *scrapheap*, then started filling in another row of squares.

“Where would you be if I weren’t here?” George asked from his side of the bed. They had eaten a bread and cheese dinner in the suite and sipped their way through almost three bottles of wine.

Liz’s phone vibrated. “Hold on,” she said, and checked the message. *Where are you? Birthday bar craaaawwwwwl. Txt for exact loc. We r moving.* It was from Jenny. She turned the phone off, for now.

“You can answer it,” George said.

“It’s a text,” Liz said. She had been thinking all night that she should go. But here she was, in her panties, in the bed next to George.

“Do I have any?” George passed her his phone.

Liz pushed the trackball and the screen lit up blue. “No,” she said, handing it back to him. “You don’t have any.”

“It’s midnight,” he said. “Would you be home?”

“I’d be in a bar with friends, standing in line for the restroom.” She swung her feet onto the floor and walked, so George could watch her, around the bed and out of the room. Liz liked it when men admired her body but she also felt it made them less credible. Simply because her

figure wasn't that nice. George's body had changed in the two years she had known him. It seemed to her that changes were accelerated at his age. She knew George would listen to her flick the light switch, close the door, lift the cover off the toilet seat, pee, flush, and run the water. She imagined him getting into the bathtub, climbing in over the deep wall. He would have no problem.

She didn't see him often. It could be six weeks, even ten. This time, fifteen. It was the longest yet. He was always flying for meetings. He paid her plane tickets to join him and gave her cab money. Here, he reserved the suite and pressed her to stay with him, even though she lived ten minutes away.

"What did you do in there?" he asked.

"Peed."

"What else?"

"Nothing." She got into bed, inside the sheets.

He gave her a quizzing look.

"What?"

"You take so long." He set his wine glass on the floor and rolled onto his back.

"You're insane." She wiggled deeper under the covers. "I was reading the ingredients."

"Of what?"

"Soap."

"And what are they?" The heater switched off. It was quiet.

"I don't remember. I was thinking about dinner."

"What about it?"

"It was delicious."

“Yes,” he said. “It was delicious.” He rubbed the back of her thigh and cupped his hand under her hipbone. “You’ve lost weight,” he said.

“So,” she said, and switched off the light.

At breakfast George ordered eggs benedict with a side of tomatoes. Liz ordered fruit and brought up Maine. “Tell your wife they confirmed the meeting in Jerusalem and tell the men in Jerusalem that you’re stuck in Dubai.”

The waiter passed their table and George stopped him. “Make sure you don’t forget the tomatoes,” he said. He spread his napkin over his lap and looked up at Liz. “They always forget the tomatoes.”

“You can’t meet with the people in Jerusalem now anyway. It’s too soon after Yom Kippur.”

“We only have a two month window, my bird.”

“Just two days,” Liz said.

The waiter brought coffee in china cups with saucers. George pulled his closer and spilled.

“How’s your daughter?” Liz asked.

“Happy,” George said, sopping liquid from the saucer with his napkin. “She started school to be a nurse. I’m going to let her draw my blood and listen to my heart.”

“How old is she?”

“Twenty-five this month.” George lifted the cup and blew on his coffee. “I think, actually, it’s school to be a physician’s assistant.”

The waiter brought plates and Liz spotted Emma from the bar. She waved. “This woman is good at crosswords,” she told George. “She thinks we’re from Ohio.”

The woman stopped at their table and Liz and George stood up.

“This is Emma Phillips,” Liz said. “Emma, my husband George.”

“My pleasure,” Emma said.

“Join us for coffee?” George said, like he didn’t really want her to.

“No,” Emma said, and asked them how long they’d stay.

“We might go to Maine today,” George said.

Emma gave Liz a sleepy smile. “I’ve always wanted to see Maine.”

“You can’t tell people we’re married, my bird,” George said when the woman left. He broke his yolk and Liz watched it bleed onto the white plate.

“You can’t tell people we’re not,” Liz said.

George arranged the tomato slices over his egg and agreed to go to Maine.

While he packed his suitcase, Liz bought bottles of water and Milano cookies at the deli on the corner. George tried to give her money to buy a GPS but Liz refused. “Give the money to charity,” she said. He was always buying things on impulse, which annoyed Liz now. She sat in the passenger seat of the rental car with her feet hanging out, kicking the curb. She called her boss and said her father was ill and she needed a few days off. She had to buy flowers.

“Don’t buy daffodils,” her boss said. “The pollen can be irritating.” She told Liz to hang in there.

Liz wanted to see the changing leaves and the tackle shops. She wanted a glimpse of some murky bay. “Can we take the state highways?” she said, after an hour on the interstate.

“We’re never going to get there,” George said.

“Where are we even going? We’re just having a good time.”

He took his hand off the steering wheel and patted her knee. They kept driving, flashing past exit signs. Liz took a nap.

“Tell me a story,” he said, when she woke up.

Liz looked out the window. “There was a village full of people with difficult lives. Then famine struck, and locusts.” She reached to the back seat. “Where are the cookies?”

“Oh,” George said. “Gone.”

Liz had met George two years ago in Washington. She was an intern. It was summer break. George was there to lobby for a bill that would offer incentives for manufacturing in his district. That summer it hovered in the nineties for weeks. Liz sat at a small, heavy desk in the front room of the office, where she answered the phone and told people the representative wasn’t available. The secretary sat behind her and used number two pencils. When she sharpened them she let the shavings fall onto the rug. Sometimes the representative noticed and would hike up her stockings, kneel on the carpet and pick up the pencil shavings herself. Liz felt humiliated for all three of them when she did it. After Liz had been there a month, she bought an electric sharpener, wrapped it in floral paper, and gave it to the secretary at lunch. The secretary smiled, touched her wrist and said, “I prefer doing it by hand.” Liz had taken the sharpener home, utterly discouraged.

It was a week or so later that George came. The heat had broken. He sat in a padded chair across from Liz’s desk, waiting for his meeting. The representative told Liz to make him go away. Liz told him his appointment was canceled and he said he would just catch the

representative on her way out. Liz said she was already out and he said he would wait for her to come back. He tapped his pen on the side of the chair for an hour. At seven he invited Liz to dinner.

“It wouldn’t be appropriate,” she said. “Would it?”

He said, “You don’t even have to talk to me.”

It was dark when they pulled off the interstate into the gravelly parking lot at the lobster shack. As they walked to the counter, George slid his arm through hers. The air was damp and salty, and they could hear the water on the docks. Dozens of sailboats had their white anchor lights bobbing in the sky. He ordered a lobster and she ordered corn.

“I don’t like the idea of them screaming,” she said.

“The screaming is a myth.”

They brought their trays to a picnic table on the cracked cement patio. When they sat down the table wobbled. George shoved napkins under one of the legs.

“I don’t want you to give me cab money,” Liz said, smearing butter over her corn.

“Did I?”

“In the restaurant the second night. You took your wallet out at the table and handed me six fifties.”

His lobster bib blew off the table. Liz watched it dance across the ground.

“You shouldn’t spend your money on cabs,” George said. “I’m happy to pay it.”

“I take the subway and buy dresses and sushi with the money.”

He picked up a claw and broke it open. “I want you to have dresses and sushi too.”

Liz bit into her corn.

“Don’t worry, Liz.”

She pulled a paper napkin from the dispenser and wiped her fingers. There was music coming from one of the sailboats. Liz watched the lobster bib float out onto the water. “Let’s go back,” she said.

“Back where?”

“The city.”

“We haven’t seen Maine.”

“We had lobster.”

“Don’t you want to finish eating?”

“I hate eating.” She tossed her half-eaten corn over the low fence, out into the bay.

“You’re perfect, my bird,” George said.

Liz knocked his tray off the table, scattering pieces of shell across the patio. She didn’t want to be there with him. She didn’t want to see him again. The few people at the other tables looked over their shoulders, then back to their meals.

George stood and walked to the car.

Liz tried to make out what song was coming from one of the sailboats. She could feel the breeze through her sweater. She looked over at George rifling through the trunk, his round face and gray fuzz of hair. She found her phone in her purse and turned it on. The messages from Jenny appeared one by one on the screen. *I’m sorry*, she typed, then deleted. It seemed both not exactly true, and inadequate. She looked up at George and he was standing at the trunk of the car, holding a bottle of water like a lantern, offering it to her over the distance. None of her friends knew about him. They had that in common, she and George—being hidden from the rest

of each other's lives—and it made her feel stuck to him now. Not in a good way or a bad way. Just stuck.

The sun disappeared behind trees and Liz watched the edges of the branches light up and go dark without saying anything. They were looking for a hotel. The man at the lobster shack said there was one this way. George turned on and off his brights. They looped around the same roads for an hour and finally spotted a house with a sign that said Hotel. It was hidden by an overgrown bush. George turned into the driveway. They climbed out of the car and crunched over leaves, past a scorched fire pit and a metal slide, up to the porch. They didn't speak. A man answered the door and they said hello, and wasn't it still nice out, and yes, how quickly it was getting dark. Where were they from?

“Ohio,” Liz said. The wood floors creaked under the thin runners.

George asked if there were two rooms available just for the night.

The man waved at the den as they passed. “You can watch TV here,” he said. A game show was on and a girl in a long gown was reading off winning numbers.

They took the keys for two adjacent rooms.

“The farther room is bigger,” the man said. “If that makes any difference to you.”

Liz sat on her bed and took the card from Emma Phillips out of her purse. She wrote, *Happy Birthday, Jenny. I'm sorry I missed it.* She didn't know what else to write. She could hear the shower running in George's room. She thought of the house she had grown up in with its linen curtains and wall-to-wall carpet, and the slide they had passed outside. She remembered how difficult it had been as a kid to demand a “do-over” or a “safety” and not have the other kids

grant it. Adulthood, she thought, was much less cruel. She found the sticky note cube in her purse and walked to George's room.

"Come in," he said.

She opened the door. The room was dark and one wall was full of shelves with miniature owls—ceramic, porcelain, stuffed, plastic, metal. George was still in the bathroom. She could see half of him through the doorway. He ran a razor over his chin and flicked the shaving cream into the sink.

Liz took her sweater off and draped it over the back of the chair, and her dress, and folded it twice. George was quietly whistling to himself. Liz crawled under the quilts and listened to him turn off the water, open the door, and flip the light. She watched his silhouette as he laid out what she knew were khakis and a crew neck sweater for tomorrow, and felt the bed dip as he climbed in. There was the drone of cicadas, suddenly loud. The leaves outside were turning shades of red and the air was damp. Liz wondered how the collection of owls stayed intact, how they hadn't disappeared one by one in the luggage of visitors over the years.

"Tell me a story, my bird," George said, rolling over.

Liz nudged into the hollows made by his body and made up a story. She told it to him so quietly that when she finished and they were at the edge of sleep, neither of them was sure whether she had told it or not.

TOP OF THE WORLD

We're in Jacmel. Sam and I. It's Carnival and Marielle's been doing admin for *Médecins Sans Frontières* down on what she calls "this denuded island." We had to come see it, she said. There was "something special about it."

"What?" I said.

She said, "You and Sam, come. See for yourselves."

Around the same time the agency acquired Fair Trade Haitian coffee and assigned it to me. We do these feel good jobs at cut rate every two years. It's good for image, to say nothing of conscience and morale. I said, "Put me on an airplane. Send me over there." You've got to get the feel of a place to make art. In this case ad layouts and packaging. I can ask for things because I'm the youngest and have the lowest salary. Olay chose my art for the two-page spread last quarter. I've been there three years and the creative director is always coming around, tugging my ponytail, calling me Prodigy. I've been drawing my whole life. The skill that I have is not a big deal.

We're staying at this place called Cyvadier and paying extra for hot water in the room. Sam paid his own plane ticket. We sit on the terrace in the evenings and eat conch and spaghetti. We drink rum on the crescent beach, where our towels fill an eighth of its span. Two miles from here mountains ascend mossed with tropical foliage and palms. A young kid hangs around on the sand, playing guitar. His songs are all bad except one we make him play over and over. I close

my eyes and lie, back arched, over Sam's hambone thighs, hum along and try to feel romantic.
Sam is my husband.

Sam is currently walking around our room, opening drawers and slamming them, lifting the pillows off the bed.

"My goddamn passport," he says, plucking a towel from the chair and dropping it on the floor.

"Where did you leave it?"

"If it were there I wouldn't be looking for it." He picks up the towel again. "Would I?"

"It's something people say." I reposition myself in my wicker chair. "Maybe you hadn't thought it through. Maybe you hadn't really taken a minute to remember."

Sam pulls the sheet off the mattress.

"Do you think somebody came in the room and tucked your passport under the sheets?"

"Maybe I tucked it under the sheets," he says. "Maybe I hid it there."

I had a boyfriend from Romania when I was in college—an older student who had recently moved to Queens. "What does it mean, tuck?" he would say, sticking his head forward in his characteristic way when I used the word. Often he talked about the revolution in his country, lording it over me. "I know horror, Alice."

"It seems like a stupid hiding place is all," I say, pushing up from my chair and walking to the window. We've developed a habit of needling each other. Generally being unkind. I don't know if we'll get past this or if it will keep on as long as we do. We have a fine view from the window at the far side of the room, but it's dark now and I can only see an outline of our slice of bay.

"You're bleeding again," Sam says.

I look at my knee. A scab has opened and a red line has dribbled almost to my sock. I wipe it and lick my finger and Sam turns away with his usual look of distaste.

We're still having sex. Even after Sam goes downstairs and I know he's yelling at the manager over his passport. He comes back cathartically flushed, I feel humiliated on our behalf, we read next to each other, and neither of us speaks or reaches for the other until we've turned the lights off. We have sex and then fall asleep more companionable, facing the ceiling, touching slightly at our upper arms.

The mornings here are dazzling. Roosters crow so loud you think they're next to you, and people don't yet seem heavy with thirst or boredom the way they do in the afternoon. I imagine it's dew burning up in the early heat that makes the air shimmer. I swim to the edge of the cove where our vista of ocean is pinched by the rock jetties, then lie cool on my towel until it's time to get to work. Work is studying the landscapes, the shops with paintings, especially the Carnival papier mache. I sketch in a new thick notebook and diligently fill pages. Not just with what I've seen, but with new logos, ideas for the layouts. Around ten the guitar kid comes to the beach and jerks a thumb up at the parking lot. I jog there and say good morning to the men who have looped down the drive on their motos and are leaning off the bikes, waiting to see if we want rides. Yes, I signal, we'll be right there.

Lucien, our guide, has said that today is the biggest day of the Carnival week. The celebrations, costumes and parade—I hope so because we leave tomorrow afternoon. Lucien first said the parade was yesterday and we sat on the balcony of the Hotel de la Place for three hours, Sam getting hungry and annoyed. He kept lifting the menu and studying it as though he expected something else to appear—like his passport. Then he'd peer past the white railing, at the open

plaza and the colonial buildings we'd walked around admiring, with their cracked walls and faded blue paint.

I put on my shorts and shirt over my bathing suit and I'm ready to go. Sitting on the bed I can hear Sam moving around in the bathroom, even with the rattle of our unbalanced ceiling fan. It's winter here. I can't imagine how a person bears the summer. I asked Sam what he said to the manager about his passport and he said let's not fight. "It's all forgotten by morning," is another favorite thing he says.

As we walk out, the manager stands with his hat on inside the small welcome cabin. He handled my credit card too gingerly when he took the imprint the day we arrived. Like he was descending to take our money. He stares as we pass. I nod at him and he doesn't react, not a twitch. As I ride into town on the back of my moto—arms hung around my driver's waist, dust getting in my eyes—I try not to be ashamed of the things Sam says to people, of being with Sam.

"Keep this dry for me?" he asks, passing me a cigar he's been saving. He's getting sweaty and doesn't want it in his shirt pocket. "Where was the one with the octopus? Remember that one?"

We're downtown, walking near the water, looking between the crumbling houses for papier mache. He wipes his hands on the inside of his shirt. "And the—" He stares at a high wall with a small wood door. This is how Sam talks, shaking his head around, trailing off. "—those demon things with the clapping wings."

I look down the empty street for something to orient us. All I see are single-story cement walls, corrugated metal roofs, and the greenest tree branches I've seen anywhere. It smells like

smoking meat and food scrap garbage. “That way, I think.” I nod behind us. I’m going on intuition even though I know my gut is often wrong.

“Really? I think it’s this street,” Sam says, working the toe of his sneaker into a warped metal drain grate.

“Let’s find Lucien,” I say. Sam turns his face away.

The guide is a point of contention. Sam doesn’t want to hire him on the cheap—he thinks it undermines his dignity. Neither does he want to pay USA rates, as he doesn’t want to feel we’re easy targets or moneybags. He prefers to stumble around until he strikes a place of interest, and if he doesn’t, he’s happy simply that we’re out on our own. The problem is that Marielle already hired the guide and when we told Lucien we’d go on our own he still came to find us the next day. “It’s part of the experience,” I said. “So what if we pay him. We get to know someone local. I’m interested in the people.”

“We can be interested in them without giving them big gourdes,” Sam said. This is what he calls the paper money, which we possess in all denominations of tens and hundreds. Coins Sam calls little gourdes and gives to the kids.

We’ve walked to the end of the street and Sam hasn’t found his yard with the papier mache octopus. I’m the one who’s supposed to be studying the art, but he takes charge. If I say anything he’ll feel hurt because he thinks he’s helping me. We circle down to the next street, closer to the beach, then backtrack in the direction I’ve proposed. I figure if we walk around enough, someone will see us and tell Lucien where we are. I think that’s how things work here. “Don’t worry,” Marielle told us when she met us at the airport. “They like white people. They notice you, sure, but *pa gen pwoblem*.” Marielle has been here for a year and likes to make sure everyone knows she speaks Creole, not just French. It makes her feel she’s part of a collective

cause, aligned with the good fight. Her friends only ate breakfast today, she often says, as though their poverty says something about her character.

“Look, look,” Sam says. He jerks me by my elbow toward one of the houses and we look over the wall. It’s one of the artist’s yards we’ve visited before. The space is full of big lacquered sharks, fish, octopus. Two days ago they were undistinguished cloud-white hills. The artist was shaping mounds of pulp, his arms smeared with paste to the elbows. Now I don’t see him. Wire mesh, scraps of newspaper, and shavings of dried paste are scattered all over the ground.

“Do you think we should do this?” I say, following Sam.

“What?”

“Just walk in his yard?”

Sam shrugs and crouches to touch the arm of a green octopus three times the width of his own. He checks his fingers for paint. “They’re dry.”

I walk along the fence where black and red-painted wooden wings are hung. Their surfaces are smooth and cool to touch. Long-necked dragon heads sit at the side of the yard, mouths frozen open and teeth like ice picks. A school of small blowfish is clustered near me, each with fins, spines and a wide red mouth. To be worn for one day at Carnival, the creatures seem a tremendous enterprise.

Sam is looking at a row of demon heads by the wall—large ears and nostrils, small horns and white eyes.

“If you want to buy it you can offer the man.” It’s Lucien, watching us, hanging his elbows over the wall.

I’m embarrassed that we’re trespassing and that we came here without him. Lucien brought us the first time we were here.

“He’s not here,” I say.

“The man is coming,” Lucien says.

Sam’s scooting a dragon head from behind the house when the artist appears at the edge of the yard. He lifts the bottom of the neck, making the mouth tilt high over a pair of hammerhead sharks. I hurry and steady the neck with both hands. Sam gets underneath. The artist grunts with what I imagine is consent. Sam lifts the eyeholes to eye-level and the neck bells around his knees. Above us the head sways twice my height as he turns left, stops, turns right. Inside that mask, Sam could be anyone. I could imagine him away.

“You can offer the man,” Lucien says again. The artist helps Sam take the dragon head off and carries it back to its slip.

I don’t feel right, the two of us being inside this yard and Lucien outside, looking over the wall. I don’t want any papier mache. I don’t want to carry it around or have to wear it later.

“How much are those?” Sam asks, waving at the demon heads, the smallest thing.

“*Ui san dola Ayisian,*” the artist says.

“Eight hundred Haitian dollars,” Lucien says.

“Fuck Haitian dollars,” Sam says. “How many gourdes?”

“One hundred dollars American,” Lucien says.

“How many gourdes?” Sam says. He thinks if it’s in U.S. dollars the price will be inflated.

“Four thousand gourdes,” I say, trying not to sound pleased with myself.

“*Wi,*” Lucien says.

Sam is giving me his look like, how do you know that? There's no such currency as a Haitian dollar, no bill. It's a way of thinking about the money that I understand but he doesn't. It's the kind of thing he usually loves about me, but now I think he finds it irritating.

Sam looks at Lucien and at the man, and I can sense in the way he's minutely rocking that he's calculating what's in his bill wad. He doesn't want to take it out in public, even just in front of us. "Okay," Sam says.

I think he should barter but I'm not going to say.

He reaches into the pocket of his cargos, works the bills apart before taking his hand out. We all stand there and watch him squint at the numbers, then offer the bills to the man, crumpled.

"He is the good artist," Lucien says as he leads us up the hill. "Now you have to go early if you want to have the table." I'm keeping pace, following behind Lucien and Sam.

"But that's why we made the reservation," Sam says, carrying his demon head under one arm. "We don't want to sit at a table all day."

"It's almost the afternoons," Lucien says. I don't know where else Sam wants to go. We hike up the main street, past Hotel de la Place. Lucien shuffles us up the restaurant stairs and claims our table on the balcony. We take turns in the bathroom washing our hands. Sam puts the head on when the woman comes to our table and I order him a Prestige. She smells faintly of Clorox. When she walks away he tries to put the head on me, but I say no.

"I'll stay here," I offer. "If you want to go walk around."

Sam takes the head off and asks for his cigar. He doesn't have anything better to do than sit here. Besides there is activity in the street and that feels promising. A stage is being built up on a truck below us and vendors are staking positions in front of the buildings.

I feel in the small pocket of my shoulder bag for the cigar. Before I hand it to Sam I press it between my lips and lick them for the sweet residue. I can taste a layer of dirt from the street. Sam is trying to keep his match lit. "Here you go," Lucien says, slumping over from the far corner of the balcony and putting a flame to the end of Sam's cigar. Sam puts his hand up in thanks, holds the smoke in his mouth for a moment, then tries unsuccessfully to blow a ring. Lucien moves back to the corner. I don't know why he won't sit down with us. I like him. I like having him around. He makes me feel worked into the place. I wish I could buy him a new shirt and a shave, but it might be rude. He's not young.

An old woman goes table to table, sticking her hand out for change. Sam gives her the coins from his pocket, something he never does at home. I take out my notebook and sketch the buildings, the demon head, the half-built stage, and Lucien. I don't miss details. That's why they love me, their wonder-girl workhorse. No question I earned my job.

My expenses in college exceeded my student loans and to be taken seriously at the agency I had to wear decent things. I sold my eggs twice to keep up with costs, to be able to buy liquor drinks with the artists after work, put in delivery orders for lunch, and make myself feel like a natural fit there. This was while I interned during my senior year. Every morning of a cycle I locked myself in the bathroom and injected fluid into the skin of my stomach, which I felt proud to do myself. But in the last year or so I've gotten nervous. Who knows how many eggs they took? What if I run out? It makes me want to get pregnant now, which is one reason I keep wishing I could work things out with Sam. He likes the idea of me getting pregnant too.

The woman comes back with our drinks—my chadeque juice and rum on the side, Sam’s beer, Lucien’s beer, and a bowl of ice for me with small tongs. She sets an ashtray in front of Sam, who’s been ashing his cigar on the floor.

“Excuse me,” Sam says, and he points to a chicken sandwich on the menu.

“No,” she says.

Sam moves his finger to the next item, looks up at her, and she shakes her head again. He’s being theatrical. He did this yesterday too.

“This is a third world country,” I say.

“And invested in staying one,” he says.

I ask the woman what *do* they have.

“*Poulet*,” she says.

“Wait,” Sam says. “You have chicken but not a chicken sandwich.”

The woman looks at Lucien, who says it in Creole, and she says, “*Wi*.”

“Okay,” Sam says. “*Poulet*.”

“All around,” I say, and give back my menu. I order for Lucien because I want him to know I’m paying. Sam doesn’t like when I do.

Sometimes I have to remind myself that Sam has empathy. He does neuroscience, something with the nervous system and the synaptic gap. I can’t imagine getting used to days in the lab, microscopes, shaving off thin slices of brain. I think he has had to steel himself to it, but that’s not to say I can pinpoint a way in which his character has changed.

I’m almost nauseous with hunger by the time our plates come. We didn’t eat anything today except a banana in the room. It seems right to spend time hungry when everyone around us is.

I ask Lucien to come sit with us, and he does, though I feel like he doesn't really want to.

"It's going to be the parades soon," Lucien says.

"About damn time," Sam says.

"My friend Marielle told me, 'Take care of Alice and Sam,'" Lucien says, starting a speech we've heard before. "And Marielle is a good lady. She is my good friend and you don't know Haiti. So I have to take care of you. It's my jobs." He nods, lifts a chicken leg to his mouth, bites into it and chews, looking out at the street. "Mmm hmm," he says, nodding.

I look at Sam—he's rolling his eyes.

Sam orders another Prestige and rum on the side and I order more chadeque juice and ice, conserving my side of rum. I only pour a dribble in my glass. I eat so happily I'm surprised to look down and see my food half gone, while Sam and Lucien haven't cleared a quarter of their plates. They haven't even touched their plantains. I have to force myself to slow down, drink water, and keep pace with present company.

Our position up here turns out to be wonderful. The deck fills with people and I feel like a queen by the edge with a view of the street. The papier mache animals are starting to scatter around, move up the street in wide zigzags—roosters, giant heads, dolphins, flamingos, men in armor, Jesus on the cross, skeletons with stub arms. Sam has another beer and puts his demon head on. He's sitting close to the rail and I'm afraid he's going to bump against the vertical beam and knock the ear off. Below us in the middle of the street several men are wearing demon heads just like Sam's. They charge each other, clapping the wings strapped on their backs, then retreat to the edges of the crowd. Each wood clap is louder than a door slam. The way they move is pleasantly fluid, I think because they are muscular and thin and they've done this every year of

their lives. What I don't understand is how they can spend so much money on it when nobody has jobs.

The music's too loud to talk. Thumping island techno with a high-pitched instrument that sounds like someone saying *way-oooh-oooh-oh* on repeat, sped up. The sides of all the buildings are plastered with logos of sponsors—Barbencourt Rum, Digicel, Voila. A pack of men on stilts in red Digicel suits stride through the dense crowd. They shake on mantis legs and do their pelvis dance, and the people spread and make space.

Sam pushes his plate away and Lucien scrapes Sam's leftovers into a pile with his own. Then Lucien motions, am I done with my food?

I feel I should be, having left only a fist-size of rice. When he's added my scraps he carries the plate to the old woman who was begging, who's now sitting at the top of the stairs. She seems so glad for the food it makes me want to weep. I can't help watching her take up each forkful.

We sit at our table, watching the people have their party of the year, listening to the music, Sam getting drunk. I am starting to feel bored. Then I remember where I am, look around and try to work myself back into the festive spirit.

Before it gets dark and we leave the restaurant, a man stops in the middle of the crowd and turns up to us. I'm standing, looking over the rail. He's wearing a bandana and green face paint that's half worn off. I can't understand but he's yelling something like he knows us and is angry. I want to know what, if anything, we've done. I'd like to do whatever would vindicate us. Lucien leans over the rail and yells back at the man. He makes like he's shooing the man away and eventually the man stops yelling and merges back with the crowd.

*

Lucien says we should go home. Even before we paid our tab and made our way down from the balcony, the crowd had changed. The sponsors threw hats and shirts down to the street and people shoved for them. Now men are pulling each other around for it seems no reason. They remind me of men in the mosh pits at concerts, the kind I went to when I was fifteen. The rough aspect makes it exciting. Anyway, Sam says no. He doesn't want to go back to Cyvadier. He tries to put the demon head on Lucien, who takes it in his arms and says he'll hold it for Sam. The stage is at the end of the street, lit up now. Sam wants to slosh around in the crowd vibrating with the music. He grabs my wrist and tugs me deeper into the pack of bodies.

"People are going to make violence," Lucien says.

"Look at these people *out*," Sam says, sweaty. "No way." He's at the unreasonable point in his drunk, which is when he always thinks he has the most fun.

Marielle lives in Port-au-Prince and she's there for Carnival. She's said that Jacmel is better for us, more beautiful and gentle. She brought us out here and stayed two days, which is about as much of her as we care for at one time. I follow Sam through the crowd, reminding myself that this is not a rough town, and wish I had earplugs because the volume is becoming painful. Sam is happier than I've seen him since we came. We push to the side of the street, buy a glass liter of Coke and a flask of Barbancourt rum and pass them back and forth as we three stand together. Lucien's looking behind us, looking worried. "We should go," I yell at Sam.

"We're fine," Sam says, then turns to Lucien and tells him to go home.

Lucien leans in like he can't hear.

"You should go home," Sam says, clapping his arm.

I think Lucien's going to refuse, but he nods and says *na we*, see you, and I say *na we* back. I feel awkward, too ingratiating, using the language. And now, watching him weave through the crowd, I feel foolish throwing his counsel away. But if something happens, it will be Sam's fault. Though it's childish the thought keeps me stuck there and I turn back to the stage.

I slide my arm around Sam's waist and he swings his arm up to hug me back. Instead he knocks me across the face with his elbow. The pain bursts through my jaw and neck and I collapse over my knees, squatting on the ground. Sam is leaning over me, spilling the rum. My cheek throbs in harmony with the music. Sam's told me that pain happens when the signal jumps the synaptic gap. This takes increased charge and sodium flow. I lick the salt from my upper lip and wonder how there's any salt left in my body the way I've been sweating since I came here. I think of the salty food, the woman who ate our leftovers, and the warm ocean water at Cyvadier.

I look up at Sam and he wants me to stand. "Stand up," he's saying. "Don't get trampled."

I stand and touch my cheek, my jaw. Sam kisses his fingers and tries to touch them to my face, but he misses and his fingernail scratches my ear. "Hey, where's the head?" he asks.

"Lucien has it," I say.

"Damn." He touches his head like he's double checking that the mask isn't there.

On the stage a new group is playing. After they sing each line everyone around us chants back. I can't make out what they're saying but Sam is singing, not concerned with the words. He's looking at me, bouncing a little, trying to cheer me up, get me back in the mood.

"Let's go back," I say.

"No."

"Come on." I put my palm to my face. "I hurt."

“No, Allie,” he says. He never calls me Allie but I like it when he does.

“I’ll go back.” He gives me a look like, let’s not start, and drinks the rest of the Coke. Then he puts a hand on my head and lets me lead him out of the crowd.

There are no motos in the usual spot, a cul-de-sac where drivers pick up passengers during the day. Sam tells me to sit here and he leaves to track two down. I like hearing the music pulse from a few streets away. I like seeing women walking around and sitting in the dark spaces on their porches, savoring this high moment of the year. I imagine it’s a blip, that now the country is rounding its spiritual peak, and tomorrow all these people will start thinking about next year.

Sam comes back with one moto. “Come on,” he says, and I hear laughter from a porch nearby. “He says we can both get on.” I climb on the back of the moto and fold my legs up, knees hitched on Sam’s thighs.

When the man lets us off at Cyvadier we pay him double and watch him drive off. His one cracked taillight glows smaller down the road. We can hear the other tourists still dancing on the patio. I link my arm in Sam’s and match steps as we walk to our room. Then the manager is in front of us in his collared shirt and hat.

“Holy Christ,” Sam says.

“You have to leave,” the manager says. “I’m sorry,” though obviously he’s not.

“Come on, *zanmi*,” Sam says. Friend. “Forget about it.”

“I told you check out this morning.” The manager’s smaller than Sam and blinking like he’s nervous. “You said okay.”

“I left the room and my passport was there, and I came back and it wasn’t,” Sam says, grabbing the manager’s shoulder.

“You’re drunk, *Monsieur*.”

“This is a piece of shit country, you know that?” Sam says. “You know that. It’s a fuck off hotel in a fuck off country.”

I’m looking around and I can see the little cabin at the front of the hotel from here. I can see our suitcases stacked beside it. On the second floor balcony the light’s on under the door to our room. Maybe they rented it to someone else at a higher one-night rate. Maybe they’re making big gourdes while getting rid of the unpleasant likes of us. I couldn’t rightly blame them.

“Sam, let’s go,” I say. He could have told me the manager said we had to check out. He’s rude and he always thinks people will cater to him. Moments like this I can hardly look at him. His broad, smooth face and small eyes. His unkempt, fuck-all hair. Sure, his passport is gone. Maybe someone took it, but that can happen when you go places like this. Places like anywhere, really.

Sam still has his hand on the manager’s shoulder. It’s late and they’re sort of locked there—neither wants to back down, but I don’t think they want to fight.

“We won’t be charged for tonight,” I say to the manager.

“No, *Cheri*,” he says naturally—it’s an endearment, that much I know, a friendly gesture that I also don’t think he means. But I’ll take it.

I lead Sam by his wrist to the suitcases and he picks them both up while I take the smaller bags. The manager stands watching us, holding his stupid hat. I think he feels bad that we’re doing what he wants. We lug the stuff up the long driveway and sit up at the roadside on the luggage, waiting for anyone we could hire for a ride. This is Carnival night. People must be out.

Sam tries to lay his big body across my lap, nearly knocking me to the ground. I stand and move a few feet away.

Three motos approach and I flag them down.

“Hotel,” Sam tells the driver. “Hotel de la Place.”

“It’s Carnival,” I say. “The hotel’s not going to have anything.”

“Fuck it, then” Sam says. The driver shifts on his bike.

I remember when Lucien took us to the artist’s place he said, “We’re going to the artist house, *kay papier mache*.” There’s a certain music to the phrase.

“*Kay Lucien*,” I say, hoping this makes sense in Creole.

The men speak to each other, shake their heads and look back at us. One driver props his sunglasses, his dust shield, up on his head.

“Lucien,” I say again.

The man with sunglasses keeps shaking his head and looks down the road while the other two strap our suitcases ingeniously to the back of a bike.

“Downtown, then,” I say to the driver. At least get us downtown and we’ll try to find him from there.

“*Wi*,” the man says and we climb on.

This road is lined with trees, huge fronds and vines, but in the dark I can’t see anything except a ruffle of leaves at the edge of my gaze. Going somewhere it’s hard to stay feeling bad. We drive fast through the cool air. It makes me feel top of the world to be able to flag someone down, catch a ride for peanuts and place myself in a stranger’s care. It makes me feel like anything’s possible.

People are still out on the main street and music is still shuddering through the air. The men pull up in the cul-de-sac, unstrap our suitcases, and look at us with patience that seems kind at this hour.

Sam's driver says something in Creole. "We're looking for *kay Lucien*," I say again, feeling obnoxious for expecting these men to understand. For expecting them to know Lucien or where he lives. I think we should have camped out on our tiny beach. We should have tried to bribe the manager for our room or a cot.

"Lucien?" Sam's driver asks, pointing at Sam like we just said something new.

I nod and he says, "Okay, okay," and motions us down the hill.

"You don't know Haiti," Sam's saying, the driver stopping his bike to wait for us every hundred feet. "You don't know Haiti and I'm going to take care of you because it's my job." He raises his voice over the clatter of our suitcases. "We're coming, Lucien! We're coming—take care of us!"

The driver stops outside a concrete block house and leaves us there. We wait for some time. I start picking at the scab on my knee and Sam's quiet so I think he's sobering up.

I feel my face brighten when I see Lucien's familiar stooped shape. He leads us down a thin passage at the side of the house, into the back yard.

"This is my wife and three boys," Lucien says, opening his hand to gesture at them like a shepherd with a healthy flock. They're lined up in front of a doorway with a curtain. Lucien's wife picks up a lantern from the ground and shuffles the boys past us, to leave by the passage we just came from.

"Come on," Lucien says, ducking under the curtain. Inside there is a mattress on the floor, made up neatly with flowered sheets. In one corner an empty bucket sits next to one full

with water. In another corner a tube TV angles toward the middle of the room. Sitting on top of it is our demon head. I try not to look horrified at the single bare room.

“The floods took away a lot of my stuff,” Lucien says.

“Where are you going?” I say.

“To my sister.”

“Okay, wait,” I say and take out my wallet. Lucien looks politely away. All I have are U.S. dollars and a few small gourdes, so I separate a twenty and hand it to him. He glances at the bill and I think I see a flicker of disappointment in his face. He says goodnight and I walk out with him, take another twenty from my wallet and press it into his palm. He nods and joins his family in the passage and together they walk away.

Alone, Sam and I push our suitcases against a wall. We brush our teeth outside, fold our clothes, set them on top of our suitcases, and climb under the sheets with quiet ceremony. I wish I had given Lucien more money. Sam tries to reach for me and I push his hand away. He scoots closer. I say, “Not here.”

“You’re mad at me,” he says.

“Well.”

“Wait,” he says, stands, and steps over me. He’s an outsized ghost in the lantern light. He has to stoop slightly to keep from hitting his head, and he scoots over to the TV, picks up the demon head and lowers it over his face. I know he’s looking out through the mouth, but I can’t see his eyes. I know his body, the ripple of his spine and the soft of his gut, even now that he’s doubly slumped with the height of the head. But I imagine it’s not him. As he hums for a quiet, breathy minute and dances around the room, shaking his left leg, shaking his right, rotating his hips, I let myself think he’s part of the Carnival, here to perform for me. I watch him, his smooth

swinging arms, the head with its devilish smile rolling side to side. I watch the light shine off a contour of the cheek and one of the horns crack as he bumps it on the ceiling. He comes by me, straddles my legs over the sheet, lays my arms out across the bed, and reaches to take the head off. I stop him and say, although it seems a little stagey, “Keep it on.”

The attitude in the country will change after Carnival. We’ll sit on the bus, packed among the other bodies, and rattle over the cliffside mountain road. We’ll page through my notebook and dream up ads, delay our flight, and ride to the embassy in a hired car. I’ll snap at the man in the passport office and as we leave I’ll feel guilty and still snap at Sam. When we arrive at the airport, sweaty and satisfied to fly home, Sam will look around the crowd, choose someone unsystematically, and give them whatever’s left of our gourdes.

LONELY BOY

He had seen Maude first at that party in New Jersey, in someone's house. This was during the early months Will lived in New York. He hardly knew anyone. He was playing pool with a Wall Street man named Marlin and telling him he found New York to be clean and expensive—not like when he visited once, fifteen years ago. The Wall Street man considered that a good thing. Will was thirty and said it wasn't good at all. He was looking for something more edgy than Berkeley, where he had gone to college and lived since, where his friends had become, to his mind, far too concerned with bike lanes, cold-brew coffee, spirulina, neighborhood parking zones, salvage yards and paint color chips. They had become too vocal about their enthusiasm for their lives. The lady doth protest too much sort of thing. Whenever Martha or Seth flipped a chicken wing on the grill and said, "I tell you, Will, I just love being alive," apropos of nothing, as they often did, it made Will feel that he was being accused of not loving his life enough. He went around feeling indignant that he'd been pegged wrong (I love life too!) and at the same time wanting to take those people by the shoulders and shake them. Do you really love eating breakfast? he wanted to say. Do you love looking over your credit card statements? What about the rest of the world dying of AIDS and cholera (*cholera*) and people getting their legs cut off?

Instead of saying that, he observed himself fishing the last microbrew from the cooler and asking Seth what kind of sauce he put on the chicken and did he get it from Trader Joe's.

Will had lost two-and-a-half games of pool to Marlin in the basement of this house in New Jersey and so far the man had made no comment, positive or negative about his life. He had

sat on the arm of a brown leather smoking chair between shots and hadn't said much at all. That put Will at ease. A woman in a red scarf came downstairs and poured them a round of good grappa and left. Then the host of the party came downstairs with Maude.

"I'm making her tell everyone," he said. He was holding Maude's hand in both of his. "It's too much. Go on, tell them where you were."

Maude shook her hand free. She was so pretty with her hair raked clean back from her face, and a long cotton dress on. She took a cue from the wall, told Will and Marlin she had just seen a documentary of Klaus Kinski. "Do you know him?" she said. "German actor."

Will knew who he was, but said nothing.

"He would hide in the closet to practice this pivot." She demonstrated, turning away from them and looking over her shoulder. "He did it in secret so everyone would think he was a genius who didn't practice." She was an actress. She said she had an audition the next day and was too nervous about her lines to have a good time. "I'm here and I'm standing around avoiding people, trying to do the lines in my head. Then I thought of Kinski and went upstairs to find a closet to rehearse." She looked at the host. "He found me." Then she leaned over the table next to Will, sunk the eight ball, and ruined their game.

After the party Will didn't think to call her—he found her terrifying. He was startled when she called him. They met at the park. For a reason he couldn't remember she had touched her finger hard to his cheek and that gesture had bloomed in his mind with a sense of fixedness. They had stumbled into an apartment, a set of monogrammed bathrobes, a life.

*

The party in New Jersey was four years ago. It all seemed hazy and unfixed now. It was impossible to think of anyway—Dr. Carson holding Maude’s left eye open with one hand and passing his other forefinger back and forth. Her gown loose at the collar and showing part of her shoulder. The thin hospital blanket turned down to her waist. Big leggy machines beeped and nurses came in and pushed buttons and the beeping stopped and the nurses left.

“No eyelash flutter,” Dr. Carson said. “No blink.” He let the eye close.

It was the first week of January. Maude had been flipped up over the hood of a red car and had been unconscious three days. The doctor’s words sifted into some reservoir of Will’s half-consciousness, to be culled up at a later, private time. He focused on the white stitching around the pocket of Dr. Carson’s coat. He wanted the doctor to see that he was reasonable. He was calm. She might wake up, he had been told. If she did, it might or might not be soon. Things might be unfixably wrong with her. She might, after some unpredictable number of days or months, be fine.

Dr. Carson picked up Maude’s hand. Will felt his own skin was dry around the knuckles. The doctor pressed the ridge of his pencil into the nailbed of her pinky. Her hand flexed away. He wrote on the papers on his clipboard, tapped his pencil twice, and said, “Wait and see.”

He peeled his gloves off and double-pumped the hand sanitizer on the wall. He was sinewy, Will thought, like a compulsive runner, and he inspired a sense of goodwill and compliance. Will thanked him. He wasn’t sure whether he liked Dr. Carson personally, trusted him professionally, or was simply susceptible to the mannerisms that doctors were trained in med school to have. Will had always generally liked doctors.

Maude made a noise and Will looked at the doctor.

“Reflex,” he said, gave a small nod and left. Will listened to his sneakers chirping—*wait and see, wait and see*—down the hall.

“Temperate,” Will said, standing by the window, describing the weather outside. So far it had been a strange winter of warm weeks shot with slicing cold days. “Clear as gin.” It was possible she could hear him in some far-off way. He washed his hands in the stainless sink and read her his favorite poems of Yeats and Frost out loud. He had no new realization of how good it was to be with Maude. He had thought it every day. To grope toward her after pressing snooze. To stand together on the subway. To kiss her neck while she stood washing dishes at the sink. To pour her glass of wine.

Impossible, it seemed, for the body to be so fragile. Wake up! Wake up! He didn’t want to shoulder this alone. He felt shamefully as though she were doing this to him, as though he had done something terrible and wrong. Sometimes he picked up her hand, held it for a while, pressed his fingers into the long plum bruise on her forearm, and set her arm back at her side. Then he walked past the nurses’ station to the visitor bathroom in the hallway. He ran the water and exhausted himself trying to dismount the handicap bar from the wall. When he stopped his palms were red and raw and his wrists felt unstrung.

On Sunday Will kicked the right side of the sink loose. He didn’t want to be angry, was embarrassed of it. He stayed locked in there, sitting against the tile wall until someone came pounding on the door. The bolt rattled in the lock. He used his fingers to sweep up the bits of porcelain he had cracked off and told the administrator he would pay for the damage.

Signs went up in the hallways: VISITORS, PLEASE TREAT OUR FACILITIES GENTLY. The nurses spoke less to him as they went in and out of Maude’s room. He heard one of them say she’d seen

him rip a towel in half the day before. Dr. Carson cornered him in a small room, called the chapel, that had no TVs.

“Anger is normal,” the doctor said, offering Will the chair across from him. “You just have to do something else to make it release.” They had the nicest chairs in here, with heavy wood frames and green cloth-covered cushions. Will would have liked to drag one away, sulking, back to Maude’s room.

“How many days have you been here?”

“Six.”

“Have you gone home?”

“No,” Will said. “I can’t say I have.”

“Go home. Sleep at home.” Dr. Carson crossed one leg over the other. “Do you have a job?”

Will had a shop. A women’s clothing store he had started in the East Village, which had been locked up this week.

“Go home. Think about working, maybe part time. Establish a routine. It’s the best thing for friends and family to do.”

The idea of leaving seemed to Will like unplugging something. He felt that his presence here, near Maude, was keeping the life from draining out. She could wake up anytime. Or, of course, she could die.

Dr. Carson clicked and unclicked the pen in his hand. “And don’t think too much about the driver.”

“What driver?”

“Of the car that hit Maude.”

After the accident the girl who hit Maude had driven them to Urgent Care. They had decided that would be fastest. Will held Maude, unconscious, across his lap in the backseat. When they got out he saw the dent in the hood from her body. Then sometime later Will had sat with her at the Ninth Precinct for a police report. Lee Farley. Eighteen years old. She had sat straight-backed in her chair, coat off, hands on her thighs, nipples showing through her sweater. She had avoided looking Will's way. Lee Far-lee A palindrome. Lee in the distance, forward or back. Will hadn't thought about her at all.

It was impossible to keep the idea of month after month without Maude from unfurling in his mind: writing checks, folding towels, heating water. *Wait and see, wait and see*. He rode the subway home to Brooklyn and slept on top of his and Maude's bed, on top of a sleeping bag. He brewed a pot of coffee, poured a mug, and tried to drink it. Who would decide if, or when, to throw away each of her little things? Her Playbills? Her hair ties? Her panty liners in the yellow packets?

The apartment had high ceilings, painted wood floors, and cast iron radiators that Maude had liked to keep open. They made the air smell sharp like metal and kept the place greenhouse warm. Will's back was sweating and it occurred to him that now he might close them. He stood up, walked around the couch to the radiator, and turned the knob. Music was coming up from the apartment downstairs. How easily his life had bent around hers.

He looked at his towel in a damp heap on the floor and thought of Lee Farley.

Will stepped into a pair of sweatpants, zipped on a jacket, and jogged down Broadway past Diner, past the oyster bar, past the gourmet general store, all of them closed. He felt like a pin slipping through the air. He ran diagonal across the intersection where Maude had been hit

and felt sick at the sight of the faded crosswalk. He turned up Wythe Avenue and stopped under the Williamsburg Bridge. Will shouldered into the chain link fence and it rattled. There was an echo off the bridge's belly. Will worked himself up the fence, the metal cold on his fingers, and dropped over the other side. He had a sense of spaciousness in his skull. A yellow school bus sat in the lot, alongside a Chevrolet and a rusty Ford. He took off his coat and shirt, wrapped the shirt around his fist, and went from window to window punching them in.

Snow was falling lightly and as Will walked home he wanted to go the other direction and watch it fall on the river. But that would be an act of grief or pleasure, he thought. Neither of which he should feel now. At home he sat in front of his laptop.

Dear Ms. Farley,

I thought we might talk about the accident. It's therapeutic. Would you meet me for lunch? I'm trying to work through my aggression. I'm asking for the benefit of my mental health and not because I want to be friends or forgive you.

Sincerely,

William Frank

The email was honest. It occurred to him that his last name made the note seem like it was meant for an advice column—Betty Desperate, Fred Annoyed-in-Seattle. He found her email address on the back of a receipt with her insurance information, typed it into the “To” field, and clicked send. He drank a glass of water. When he clicked to refresh his inbox there was a response:

Dear William,

I'd be happy to come and help however I can. Just say when and where.

Sincerely,

Lee Farley

Sent from my BlackBerry® wireless device

The brevity of her note upset him. She probably sent it, he thought, while she was speeding on the Turnpike. He clicked delete, then thought of the sign up in the hospital, VISITORS, PLEASE TREAT OUR FACILITIES GENTLY, and clicked undo. He wrote back and suggested tomorrow. He gave the address for Pho Bang, a Vietnamese restaurant he liked near the hospital.

Will had been stomachy about everything as a kid. An unspecified fear had risen up wavelike inside him, not unlike the way he got angry now. In elementary school he had washed his hands secretly until they cracked and bled. Puberty on, he got sick in the mornings before school. Afternoons he went straight home. He read books. Some days he walked to Phil's house up the street and played Dungeons and Dragons (Phil and Will! They had been teased until the eighth grade). He convinced his parents to put a computer in his room for homework, and talked dirty to girls in chatrooms. On one visit to the dentist he found a magazine about websites. He scribbled down a url flagged "sexy" and spent irretrievable hours scrolling through the rooms of Bianca's Smut Shack. He clicked and re-clicked those wavering pencil lines—"kitchen," "hallway," "bedroom"—searching, unrewarded, for vaginas.

He loved real girls but they frightened him until Evelyn Smith in sophomore biology. She wore Converse mesh trainers with no socks, and cutoffs. He tutored her every Thursday and finally touched her when they were seventeen. Her parents went out of town. The two of them holed up in her castle of a house and ate the blue ecstasy pills she had somehow procured. They were both tense virgins. They tangled themselves head to foot on her couch, touched each other on the legs, the arms, the back, watched the sun go down and eventually watched it come up. Every hair on Will's body felt wired together, a fine silky pulse coursing through.

*

Will saw Lee Farley through the glass. It was like the first time when it was the glass windshield of her red car. Now her expression was offensively placid. She was staring at the TV mounted on the wall. He passed the big cloudy fish tank and walked to her, at a small table in the middle of the restaurant. She had a wide face, pale skin, and silky creases in her eyelids. A few strands of hair feathered out from under her hat. She stood to greet him.

“Don’t you want to take off your hat?” he said, as he shook her hand.

She smiled and pulled it off, tried to smooth her blond hair.

The same woman as always was there, working behind the counter, standing over a big vat of broth. The woman took a plate piled with thin-sliced raw meat out of the refrigerator and pulled back the saran wrap. Will watched her peel off a layer of beef with gloved hands and drop it in a bowl. It had seemed convenient to meet Lee here but now he thought he would be reminded of her and wouldn’t be able to come back.

The woman brought a teapot to their table and unstacked two cups.

“Are you ready to order?” Will said.

“I’ll have the same as you,” Lee said, smiling at Will, then at the woman, and putting her hands in her lap. She had the manner of someone anxious to like people, anxious for people to like her.

“I’m glad you wrote,” Lee said. She took a paper napkin from the dispenser on the table and used it to spit out her gum. Then she took another napkin and offered it to Will.

“Thank you.”

“I can’t think how bad it’s been for you.”

“No,” Will said. “I imagine you can’t.”

Lee filled his tea, then hers. Will tried to focus on the music. The voice was Vietnamese but the instrumentation sounded like Celine Dion. He watched Lee lift her cup and blow, brief ridges rising in the surface of the liquid. She set it down, took a pair of tan chopsticks from the jar and laid them on the table.

Will didn't know what to say. He adjusted his position in the chair and his knee bumped Lee's under the table.

"Sorry," she said.

"No. Excuse me."

The woman came with a tray and placed a steaming bowl in front of Will, then one in front of Lee. She set a plate with two cream puffs between them.

Lee picked one up and examined it. "Look," she said. "Here's the little hole where they shoot the custard in." The comment seemed grossly sexual to Will and he looked away, fixing his gaze deeply on the beverage menu under the glass on the table.

Lee didn't seem to notice. "Do we eat these now or after?"

"Do whatever you like," Will said. He wanted to overturn the table and see the soup fly out over the floor.

She peeled the wrapping off the bottom and bit off half of the cream puff.

Will pushed his soup to the side. He glanced over his shoulder at the big windows. "I hate you." He hadn't meant to say it but it felt true.

Lee set the other half of the cream puff on the plate and folded the wrapper down the middle. "I hate you too," she said.

"What?"

"I hate you too."

Will pressed his hands into his thighs. “You hate *me*?”

Lee put another crease in her wrapper. “Yes.”

The bell jingled on the front door. Two men walked in and threw themselves into a booth.

Will could see their reflections in the mirror on the back wall.

“Gotcha,” Lee said. She threw the wrapper over his shoulder.

A laugh caught unexpectedly in his throat. Something creaked inside him. His fist uncurled.

They worked at their soup in neutral silence.

Even if Maude got better, Will told Lee, scooping a heap of noodles up with his chopsticks, it would wash them clean of so much time. “It’s eight days since the accident and she’s still unconscious.” He found he couldn’t say coma. In the best case, the foreseeable months would be full of rehabs, therapies, hospital bills, lawyers, and insurance reps, all going at him and Maude like the sucky thing at the dentist, siphoning up their future happiness. “If she gets better at all.”

Lee clasped her hands together under her chin. It pushed her skin up, deepening the crease under her mouth. “Can I see her?”

Will looked at her hands, fixed there as though in prayer, and felt his throat close with hating her. But there was some little shade to it, some small comforting thing. He was, perhaps, simply grateful to have someone to hate. She had seen what happened to Maude. She was a witness (why was that important?) even if it was from inside the car. And she had come here because he had asked her. She didn’t have to come. She had come because she thought it might make something better.

“No,” Will said. “I don’t think you should see her.”

“If you want it,” Lee said. She put a gift bag on the table. “I brought this for Maude.”

“What is it?”

“Just a small thing. A get well thing.”

“Well. Thank you.” He looked at the purple bag, tied with white curled ribbon.

She shrugged and kept eating her soup.

Will put the bag in Maude’s room on the windowsill next to a bunch of irises he had bought on the walk back. Had he chosen the flowers instinctively to match the bag? The thought unsettled him. “Stable,” Dr. Carson was saying, rising slightly on his toes. “Stable, stable.”

He shone his light in Maude’s pupils then clicked it off and walked to the top of her bed. “Watch for a blink, William. Ready?”

Will nodded. He watched Maude’s good cheekbones and her slack face. It was hard to remember what she looked like with her eyes open.

Dr. Carson clapped his clipboard over her head. The noise was surprisingly loud. He did it again.

“I think on the second one there was a flutter.”

“Good,” Dr. Carson said. “That’s what I saw too.”

Will followed Dr. Carson out of the room and went downstairs to the ATM. He took out a couple hundred bucks, the full amount the machine would allow, and went back to Maude’s room. It was going to cost a lot. Lee’s insurance was paying now, but at some point there would be a cap and he and Maude would have to sue if they wanted more payments, and what about in

the meantime? Neither of them had savings. He didn't know about Maude's parents. She was barely in touch with them. He realized they must not even know she was here.

Will stood next to Maude. He lifted the blanket off her legs and ran his fingers over her shin. The hair had grown in so fast. The bruises on her legs were fading at the edges to iodine yellow. She hadn't broken anything. She was an agile person and it was winter. When she was hit she had been bundled in layers of clothes.

The thought of the accident still struck Will into a blank daze: Maude flipped over the hood of the red car, then curled awfully on the ground. He had bent to her, brushed away the candy wrapper stuck to her coat. Street noise. A car down the block pulsing rap. Maude's eyes had opened, she had blinked, her eyes had closed again. He would startle to find himself sitting in his apartment, staring across the table at a red dishrag flung over the opposite chair—or in the bath, the bar soap disintegrating by his feet on the floor of the tub.

“A car accident,” he told their friends, one by one, over the phone. They were “their friends” exactly. Will had met Maude so soon after moving here that he hadn't made any of his own.

“My God,” they said. “Everything can just be normal and then something horrible like this.”

But it was also so ordinary. Maude was the kind of person who might fall out of a plane and survive. She was so bursting and vivid. She moved with purpose through a crowd. (Was she larger in his memory? How could he know?) A car accident seemed like the wrong thing to happen. It was too common—too cheaply dramatic.

Will told the friends they might come to the hospital and six or seven did, and they brought flowers, and two cried. Everything about them bothered Will. Their flushed cheeks. Their trendy boots. The distance at which they stood from her bed.

“Everything’s changed since we were in high school,” one of the friends—Helen—was saying. “I mean they taught us that blood is blue inside your body.” Someone had a bottle of Grey Goose and they were sipping shots from little paper cups.

“Blood is blue inside your body,” Will said. “Isn’t it?”

Helen grinned at him. “Right.”

“No,” Will said, “It is. Look at your vein.”

“That’s a myth. It has to do with optics.”

“How do you know?”

“My brother’s a biologist.” She looked at another friend—Alison.

“I believe you,” Alison said and she and Helen shared a brief, private smile.

Somehow Will’s life till now, and the rest of it stretching into the future, seemed caught in the seed of that moment: Other people going around knowing things he didn’t. Him showing up someplace to find them waving at him in the distance. Him saying, What? What happened? What did I miss?

When they left Will was staggered with relief. He got more vases from the gift shop, filled them in the sink, clipped the stems of the flowers, and sat down to open the gift bag from Lee. It was a stuffed zebra with plush, floppy legs.

Will had once seen a film in which a pair of twin brothers both lost their wives in a car crash. Zebras figured heavily—a prostitute offered sex for a zebra pelt (Is it a white horse with black stripes or a black horse with white stripes?), the brothers photographed a decomposing

zebra in time lapse. They pronounced it *zeh*-bra, like Debra. It was a film about grief. The gift seemed to Will an obvious allusion to the film, and a sick one—first of all, Maude wasn't dead. He wanted to rip the zebra apart, but—the nurses—he threw it at the cabinet across the room. It didn't make a sound.

He felt around for his phone, found it in his coat pocket and looked for Lee's number. It was there, though he didn't remember programming it in. He paced the room and counted the rings—two, three, four—“Hello.”

“Lee?”

“This is Lee. Is this Will?”

Her voice was so young. She was young. It was impossible. It was an art film and it was old. She never would have seen it. She was eighteen. “I just wanted to thank you,” he said. “For the zebra.”

“It's nothing,” she said. “Obviously.” He could hear her turn down the music in the background. “How is she today?”

“Oh,” Will said. He looked at Maude, prostrate under the blanket. “The same. She's the same.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Yes. Thanks.” He walked across the room and picked up the zebra.

“Can I do anything?” she said. He wanted to give her something to do. He wanted there to be something someone could do.

“No,” he said. Then, “Yes. You could meet me for dinner. Or beer or whatever—I know you aren't twenty-one. It would help to not be alone.”

*

They met at South Street Seaport, in the cobblestone plaza by the shops, where the street carts were out selling mixed nuts. Lee walked with her hands in her pockets.

I don't want to be here, Will thought, strolling at her side. She shouldn't walk that way, with her hands unavailable, stuck. If she tripped she couldn't catch herself. But he didn't say anything. All he said was he didn't want to talk about Maude.

"I moved here from Berkeley," he told her, feeling he should make conversation, be civil. He told her he had worked there as a high school gym teacher, a manager of rooms operations at several hotels, a sous chef. Always starting with enthusiasm, always ending up uninterested and sort of bristling. It felt good to narrate, to state simply this sequence of places and activities and feelings that were supposed to represent his life. The absurdity of it was somehow soothing.

They crossed the street and stood under one of the tall ships, eye-level with its shiny black hull. Will had always liked looking up into the net of ratlines, imagining what it would be like to climb them out at sea in a gale. He unbuttoned his coat. It was one of those evenings that started out warmer than he expected and stayed warm a long time before turning cold.

"I expected New York to be more edgy," Will said. "But I haven't minded the way it is. I've liked it actually." He didn't say that he had liked it mostly because of Maude. "I don't think the city's lost its edge exactly. Just the edge is dull and it's buried somewhere, and I've become the kind of person who won't find it."

A storm of birds dipped down onto the pier and spread up again into the sky. "I don't think my generation is that concerned with being edgy," Lee said. She started walking again, toward the water.

"Well," Will said, then stopped. He realized he had been content talking to Lee, but he didn't care very much what she had to say. A tour group was lined up in front of the Water Taxi

stand. They looked like high school kids and Will felt bad for them, not free to strike out on their own.

“Take music, for example,” Lee was saying. “If you had tried to be a musician when you were my age, you had to send tracks to a record label, right? If a label liked you, then you got on the radio and sold albums. You were edgy when you were in a sort of buffer zone where your songs were out there, but not a ton of people knew about you yet.” She did a little spin and jogged in place a few steps. “But now everything goes out into the same big swirl—YouTube, blogs, blah, blah. And if it’s good, people listen. The buffer’s gone. You’re good—Bam. You’re hot.”

Will watched her shake out her hair. “I don’t know if when you say edgy, you mean the same thing that I mean when I say edgy.”

“Right up there”—Lee nodded toward the mall across the street—“there was an art festival a few months ago. This guy called me. He wanted me to meet up with him but first he told me to come see him do the lights for the art show. So I went, and the installation was a girl naked in front of a screen, posing and dancing really wild, pulling her butt cheeks apart. I mean, she was pretty good. There was a small audience. We sat and watched. The guy did the lights. We clapped.

“‘So how did you end up doing this thing,’ I ask him when we leave. ‘Oh,’ he says. ‘She’s my ex-girlfriend. But don’t worry, she’s a lesbian now. Her girlfriend was there too.’ ” Lee started walking again and Will matched her pace. “That was our first date,” Lee said. “He thought he was edgy. But really the whole thing was just small. That’s the thing about my generation. Nothing’s taboo. We don’t know what to risk, so we just try not to be small.”

They stopped at the end of the dock, at the rail. The Brooklyn Bridge arced gently over the river, its orange lights long and trembling in the water below. Had anything been taboo when he was her age? He wasn't sure. He thought some kids had been so free, but not his set. But what was his set? He had just been a nerd.

He thought of how Phil had started wearing capes when he had become a dungeon master and that was too nerdy even for him. Will had stopped going to his house and instead played HORSE with some Latino kids a few years younger than he was. He thought of the ecstasy he had done in high school with Evelyn Smith and realized, with a wash of relief, that he had spent six, maybe seven minutes not thinking about Maude.

“Not reactive,” Dr. Carson said. He had a syringe in his hand.

“What is that?” Will said.

“50ccs of cold water,” Dr. Carson said. He had Maude propped up and her head tilted to the right side. A nurse finished changing a bag on one of the machines and left. Dr. Carson injected the water into Maude's ear. “See her eyes don't move?”

Her eyelids were mostly closed. Will searched for movement underneath. “What does that mean?”

Dr. Carson shrugged. “Wait and see.”

Will had made a point of not looking at the patients in the other rooms on the floor, walking past the nurses' station with his head down, into Maude's room. It was a straight shot from the elevator. Still, he caught glimpses. There were mostly men on this floor. “Motorcycle accidents, sports accidents,” Dr. Carson said. There was one woman who seemed too well to be there, who raced loops through the halls with her IV.

One of the nurses—Amparo—hustled in with sheets and towels and a plastic basin. She laid them out on the rolling table with the bathing things. “I’m going to wash her. Do you want to stay, Mr. Frank?” They always asked, and Will always felt it was a polite way of telling him to leave.

“Yes, I’ll stay.”

“You’re going to stay, Mr. Frank. Okay.” She filled the basin, washed her hands and put on gloves. Will was so used to the snap of the latex he sometimes heard a similar sound in the park or at home—a baseball off a bat, a rubber band—and startled, unsure for a moment where he was.

The nurse pulled back Maude’s blanket, covered her with a sheet, and untied her gown. She folded her washcloth into a mitt, wet it, and wiped Maude’s face, her eyelids, and ears. She laid a towel under Maude’s arm and turned the sheet back, just exposing it. She washed each arm and her breasts. Her breasts. *Your body’s a carnival*, he had told Maude, running his palm over her breast. He had never been with a woman who swelled up so much every month. Her belly felt spongy under his fingertips; her breasts let out under her shirt looked like Madonna cones. The other three weeks they lay smallish and close against her chest. Will hadn’t preferred one way to the other, but the change itself was erotic. Like at any time something else about her might turn different, the constant possibility of surprise.

Amparo washed her stomach, then started on her legs. A machine beeped and she looked at it and pushed a button and went back to Maude.

“You do a good job, Amparo.” Will said.

“I would hope so.” She squeezed out the washcloth and went back to rinse the soap.

“Do you ever shave their legs?”

“No.”

“It takes too long, or what?”

“I’m not an aesthetician, Mr. Frank.” She worked gently between the toes. “I’m a nurse.”

“I know you’re a nurse.”

“You can shave her legs if you want to, Mr. Frank.”

He went to the Rite Aid on the corner, bought a Venus Embrace pink razor and a can of women’s shaving cream. He closed the door, pulled the sheet up to her waist, freed her right leg. He kept the rest of her covered and put a towel down. He filled a plastic basin with water. Her skin seemed thicker, like layers of tissue paper, matted and damp. She made a small noise. Those noises didn’t excite him anymore. Will shook the can and let the foam expand in his palm. Her calves were narrow now, and they seemed stringy inside. Even like this, it was still her body. He had put his hands on her so many times. He ran a wet cloth over her shin and felt an erection come. “Reflex,” Dr. Carson would have said, if he had been there.

“You sit in the hospital all day,” Lee said at Liquiteria on 11th Street where she had already ordered him an Immune Rocket Booster juice. “The second Maude’s better you’re going to lose your adrenaline and be sick yourself for a month.”

“Don’t talk about Maude,” he said. He took a sip through the straw. “What’s in this?”

She read from the wall: “Carrot, celery, beet, ginger, flax seed oil & Immunity Now.”

It was a small place with blue tile on the walls. They sat at the counter. The kind of place his Berkeley friends would have liked. “What’s ‘Immunity Now?’ ”

“That’s what makes it eight dollars.”

It wasn't just having someone to hate, Will thought, watching Lee take the lid off and stir her juice. She dipped her pinky in the thin layer of foam. If he wasn't here, wouldn't he be in the hospital chapel kicking apart the nice chairs?

For two weeks Will and Lee hung around the St. Mark's bookstore, walked through the Strand, and saw movies (no sad dramas, no romantic comedies). They went to the galleries in Chelsea and moved from bench to bench, bought rice pudding near Little Italy and threw most of it away. They played hangman and drank deli coffee. She talked about philosophy and parties. He talked occasionally about hockey, brew pubs, and books.

Not so unlike a courtship—but without kissing, without gesturing out into the future. Just fumbling toward the other warm thing nearby.

“Are you asleep?” Will asked, half past midnight, when Lee picked up. House music pulsed in the background.

“Hang on,” she yelled into the phone. Will had turned the radiators in his apartment back on and was sitting naked and sleepless on the couch. He shifted his angle so he couldn't see himself in the black reflective front of the flatscreen.

The music got quieter and Lee came back. “Okay. Hi.”

“Where are you?”

“Party. Downtown. Want to come?”

“No.”

“What up?” She sounded breathless.

“You're busy. I'll talk to you later.”

“No, talk to me now.”

“What do you want me to say?”

“I don’t know. You’re the one who called.” Someone laughed in the background and the phone was muffled and Lee said something Will couldn’t make out. “Sorry,” Lee said. “Just hang on.”

Will went to the window. The trees were bare and the thin ends of the branches reminded him of a head massager he had bought for Maude at Hammacher Schlemmer. She’d sat on the floor between his knees while he rubbed the spindly legs over her head, making her hair staticky. He didn’t know where it was now.

“Are you there?” Lee said.

“I changed my mind,” Will said. “I’ll come out.”

Lee was waiting on the corner for him when he got out of the cab. The street was crowded, little packs of drunk people going by. Lee turned right, then left, checking the street signs. “I know the promoters,” she said. “There’s a lot of money in underage.”

“Underage?”

“Underage parties.”

Will pictured high school girls in chainmail micro-minis waltzing under a strobe light with trays of blue cocktails. Odd that he and Maude had met at a party, it occurred to him. She didn’t like parties at all. “Everything’s a scrim for something else,” she would say. “It’s always some guy with fifty questions about where’s the best wine bar to take his cousin and as soon as somebody turns the music up, there he is again, trying to hump your leg.”

Lee stopped next to a shuttered Chong Hing Jewelry store and took her mittens off. A few young people stood outside a wooden door. A beat pulsed from some cavernous depth. He followed her inside, past the coat check. A bouncer took money from some girls ahead of them,

slapped Lee's hand and waved them inside. Lee was wearing a tan dress with a high neck and a short hem. Her limbs were thin and long and her torso seemed stout in comparison. She looked smooth and slithery, stretched like a snake heavy with a half-digested mouse.

The music flooded them. Neon lights zipped over the crush of kids, a checkerboard floor. A strobe light froze and unfroze a glittering boy onstage. Was this a rave? He had thought raves were all wallet chains, pacifiers, and rainbow suspenders. This seemed somehow more advanced. Against the far wall half a dozen chiseled fish spit arcs of water crossways. A large pool underneath reflected the colored lights. At least there were no glow sticks. Will didn't think he could stay if he had to wave a glow stick. He did, he realized, want to stay.

Lee nodded him on through the crowd. He tried not to bang into anyone as he made his way. She pulled him by the wrist past the bathrooms and down some stairs. Peeling linoleum floor. Couches. A mini-fridge in the corner. Some girls stood in a corner of the room smoking cigarettes. A small dog with a green bandana lay flopped on a chair. The music was loud even here. Lee spread out on the couch and crossed her legs. "Have a gummy." She pushed at a plate on the coffee table full of bloated gummy bears, the colors all blanched. A pink one split in half when she tried to pick it up. "They're full of gin," she said. "The milky looking ones are absinthe."

"I'll pass," Will said.

The girls in the corner got quiet, looked at them, and laughed a little.

Lee scooped a pea-size bit of the broken gummy with her fingernail and re-crossed her legs. "Why are you here with me, William, and not in the hospital with your girlfriend?" Lee picked up the pack of cigarettes on the coffee table and flicked the bottom. She plucked one out

and dropped the pack back on the table. “I know that sounds judgmental, or combative. I’m not trying to be combative. Of course you don’t have to say anything.”

Will watched her lean over the table and roll the cigarette between her fingers so that the tobacco sprinkled out in a pile. “What do you want me to say?”

Lee looked at the ceiling. “I don’t know. I got the feeling somehow that you’ve been spending this time with me because you felt bad for me.”

“Why would I feel bad for you?”

“Yeah,” one of the girls in the corner said—they were laughing again—“Why should he feel bad for you?”

“Forget it,” she said to Will quietly. She crumpled the cigarette paper and filter, stood, and walked to the back of the couch.

The wall was a full mirror and Will watched her stare at the girls. They were huddled together, examining something, ignoring them now. “Ow,” one girl said, and jerked her hand back. Lee had pulled her hair into a braid and flyaway strands stuck out all over. Her skin was still glossy with sweat. She wiped her face and turned her head and he could see she had streaked her makeup perfectly down her cheek, like it had been drawn there in black pencil with a protractor.

“Lee?” Will said.

She looked at him in the mirror.

He was going to say that he was sorry she had hit Maude. He was sorry she would have to know for the rest of her life—whatever happened—that that was a thing she had done. He was sorry for other things. Slippery, unarticulable things about the ease of sitting there together. He felt he should apologize for that too. But instead what came out was, “Have you got any drugs?”

Lee raised an eyebrow. “Drugs?”

“Isn’t that what people do at these things? Aren’t there drugs?”

One of the girls picked up the dog and left the room.

Lee nodded. “Hang on.”

She came back with four little white pills and they swallowed them with a bottle of Poland Spring. The music got louder. “Upstairs?” she said, pointing at the ceiling. Lee seemed at home here, like she had spent time in clubs all her life. The DJ booth rose up to the left. Girls in bikini tops yawed out from the crowd. The glittering boy was still freezing onstage. Lee bounced her shoulders naturally. Will’s muscles tensed and resisted. He stayed close to the wall. Electrical tape ran patchwork away from the speakers over a bundle of orange extension cords. It gave the impression that this place was built up haphazard and might at any moment be stripped back down.

Lights fell like tiny windows over the crowd. Across the room the fountain was soapy now and clouds of bubbles floated in the air. A kid in front of Will danced in white pants and no shirt, doing something weird with his wrists. His hands circled each other, birdlike, one following the other. The rest of his body waved in response. Lee was a few feet away, dancing with a guy in furry boots. She seemed to flutter with the music, letting the beats soak, untz, untz, into her deep little atoms and float out again through her limbs.

Will let his gaze move from one kid to the next—they were all kids—and he felt in awe of them. The way they danced was so recklessly public. They didn’t know the feeling yet of how life would unfold, lacing them tighter into all the stupid things they had done. The way the past became onerous to forever slump around. He wasn’t so much older, but he knew, didn’t he? As

he thought about now, he didn't feel laced into anything. He felt as though he could step out from his life like stepping out from behind a shoji screen.

Lee was shimmying near to him, detached, exultant. Will wanted to crawl into her body and feel what that dancing was like.

“Yo, Grandpa-pa,” she said, seeing him. She wrapped her hand around his, which was still holding the bottle of Poland Spring, and lifted it to her mouth. She swallowed and commanded him, “Dance.”

The lights were bright and shivering. They danced, drank water, danced, and stumbled out into the street. The air was cold and plush. A few kids stood outside, leaning against a bike rack, a tree. A couple, bundled together, crossed the street. Down the block a man was eating in front of a Döner Kebab cart. A car revved nearby. Will felt quickened, like he wanted to sprint on the hard white sidewalks, run up over the people like stairs into the cold, thin air. He rocked back on his heels.

They walked toward Houston, watching a few cabs pass. They had their lights off. A woman got out of one. The cab pulled away, she adjusted her shoe and walked away down the block. Will wondered where she was going, if she had been anyplace special or had something special now to do. She had a long neck and good shoulders. He could tell, even under her coat. What time was it? Three? Four?

They stood waiting to cross at Houston, Lee facing him, hanging her heels off the curb. She had her hands in her pockets again. He looked up. His eyes focused and the sky grew starry. Will's mind felt sharp, glassy, clear. He felt achingly how delicate, how precious everything was,

as though he held a small origami box. He might drop it—he looked at Lee—with one little forward push. Cars flashed by. Her ribs were sturdy, expanding and contracting with breath.

He gripped her wrists and pulled her hands free from her pockets.

She watched him, pleased and curious, as though they were new lovers and he had moved to hold her hand.

“If you fell,” he said. “You’d be done. You wouldn’t be able to catch yourself.”

The light was green. She said nothing. They crossed.

Will’s shop came into sight, as he had left it weeks ago. He unlocked the door, punched the alarm code and switched the lights on. They cast faint circles on the floor, a detail he had always loved. Dresses hung down each side wall by color and a mannequin stood well-dressed in the window.

“Not bad,” Lee said. She ran her hand over the row of dresses. “Can I take my shoes off?” She already had a hand on her boot.

Everything was the same, just dustier, and in the back there was a new hill of cardboard boxes the buyer had brought in and stacked. Will found a couple of X-ACTO knives in the drawer and began cutting the seals. As a kid he had imagined that sound of knife to tape as a ripping open of the galaxy, a brief portal to another world. Each rip opening something new, unretractable. Will kicked an open box into the front of the shop and grabbed an armful of hangers.

“Can I try this on?” Lee said, holding up a sheer blouse with long sleeves.

“Sure.”

She stepped into the dressing room and stayed there for a long time.

“It doesn’t look good,” she said.

“Try something else,” Will said. He finished the box and broke it down. Each movement felt easy and slow, brimming with life.

“Could you choose it?”

“Don’t you know what you like?”

“No, you.”

Will moved from rack to rack, spacing the garments evenly as he went. Little clouds of dust had formed at the edges of the floor. He chose a blue dress, a party dress, and passed it to Lee over the door.

“Thanks.”

She came out and arranged herself in front of the mirror. “Do you like it?”

It looked good on her, great even, but now he could tell it wasn’t the kind of thing she would wear. “Yes,” Will said. “I like it on you. But try something else.”

“I want this.” She ran her fingers over the hem.

“Then take it,” Will said. “Please.”

Lee sat on the floor with her legs bare and stretched out in front of her. He watched her feet: Point, flex. Point, flex. He could see the veins and tendons shift where the light fell.

Astonishing, he thought, what went on under the skin.

His phone rang. Where was his phone? He could hear it, but it was distant, like a transmission from far away. That’s exactly what it was, though, wasn’t it? he thought, as he listened to the ring.

“I’d like to do something,” Lee said.

“Oh?” Will snorted and then wondered why he had.

She stood up and walked to the window where the mannequin stood with clothespins at its back. She unclipped the clothespins, unbuttoned the blouse, and worked the sleeves off, then unzipped the skirt in the back and let it drop to the floor.

Will watched her peel the clothes off the mannequin in front of the big window like he had peeled the blankets back from Maude's legs. He felt the possibility that something might start kicking in him, wanting to crash the mannequin to the side and use one of those plastic arms to shatter the glass. But it didn't. He felt good, and calm.

"Throw me another of these, would you?" She turned to face him and tugged at her blue dress. It was already wrinkled in the front.

He remembered where he had put his phone. "Wait," he said to Lee. He stood, walked to the back room, opened the drawer where he kept the X-ACTO knives and picked the phone up, its little light blinking red. A missed call from the hospital. No message.

"What is it?" Lee said, standing in the middle of the back room, barefoot. She hugged her arms around herself.

"I don't know." Will looked around—where was his coat? "I have to go to the hospital."

Will set the alarm and they rushed back into the street pulling their coats on.

From a short distance they must have appeared an undaunted couple, flying on the perfect edge of life, freed of history and future, as they waved down a cab and rode it together, telling the driver, Faster. Faster. Faster.

VITA

Education

- Master of Fine Arts, Creative Writing, University of Mississippi (2012)
Emphasis in fiction
- Certificate, Film Studies, PCFE Film School (2005)
- Certificate, Documentary Production, University of Washington (2004)
- Bachelor of Arts, Psychology, University of Washington (Dean's List, 2004)

Publications

- "Darts," Nonfiction, *Brevity* (September 2011)

Film Credits

- **Director/Producer/Writer**, Documentary Film, *MINUSTAH Steals Goats* (Total Run Time: 59 minutes, November 2010)

Public Readings

- Broken English Reading Series, Oxford, MS (May 2010)

Teaching

Graduate Instructor, University of Mississippi

- ENGL 311: Beginning Fiction Workshop (Summer 2011, Fall 2011, Winter Intersession 2012, May Intersession 2012)
- ENGL 211: Introduction to Creative Writing (Spring 2012)
- ENGL 102: Freshman Composition with Research, "What is Important?" (Summer 2010).
- ENGL 102: Freshman Composition with Research, "Society and the Environment"

(Spring 2011)

- ENGL 101: Freshman Composition, “What is Important?” (Fall 2010)

Teaching Assistant, University of Mississippi

- ENGL 222: World Literature from 1650-Present, Dr. Peter Wirth (Spring 2010)
- ENGL 222: World Literature from 1650-Present, “The Ethics of Encounter,” Dr. Sarah Lincoln (Fall 2009)

Guest Lecturer

- “The Breakdown of the Fence as a Barrier in the Film Rabbit Proof Fence.” ENGL 222: World Literature from 1650-Present, “The Ethics of Encounter,” Dr. Sarah Lincoln (Fall 2009, University of Mississippi)
- “Post-grad strategies for landing freelance and staff work in the commercial, television, and film industries.” Career Planning for Film Majors (Spring 2007, School of Visual Arts, New York)

Editorial

- Assistant Editor, Fiction, *Yalobusha Review* (2009-2010, 2010-2011)

Honors and Awards

Writing

- Nominated by Richard Ford to submit to the AWP Intro Journals Award (2011)
- Finalist & Special Mention, *Copper Nickel* Fiction Contest, judged by Ron Carlson (2010)
- Honors Fellowship, University of Mississippi (2009-2012)
- Teaching Fellowship, University of Mississippi (2009-2012)

Film

- Official Selection, International Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam (Documentary Feature Film, *MINUSTAH Steals Goats*, 2010)
- Student Development Grant, University of Mississippi (2010)
- English Department Independent Study Grant, University of Mississippi (2010)

- Paul Robeson Grant for Independent Media, Funding Exchange (2009)
- Independent Artist Grant, New York State Council on the Arts (2008)
- Film and Video Grant, Jerome Foundation (2008)

Professional Development and Service

- Wrote and produced a short film for (and about) the MFA Program in Creative Writing at the University of Mississippi, including interviews with Beth Ann Fennelly, Tom Franklin, Chris Offutt, Richard Ford, and others.
- Organized the annual Ole Miss MFA Third Year Reading in partnership with Square Books (2011)
- Participated in bi-weekly teaching development seminars through the Center for Writing and Rhetoric, as well as a peer-observation exchange. Worked with a teaching mentor who also observed my English 101 class. (2010-2011, University of Mississippi)
- Attended seminars with visiting writers, including Ron Carlson and Michael Chabon, as well as literary agent Lisa Gallagher (2009-2011)