

University of Nevada, Reno

Ask Again Later: A Story Collection

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in English

By

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May 2012

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THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

We recommend that the thesis
prepared under our supervision by

ANNELISE HATJAKES

entitled

Ask Again Later: A Story Collection

be accepted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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May, 2012

Abstract

Ask Again Later is a collection of short stories that explore issues associated with debilitating insecurities, infidelity, and the aftermath of traumatic events. The stories are told from diverse perspectives, including a young man in college, a woman whose child is stillborn, and a teenage girl struggling with her body image. These stories also comment on gender relations and societal expectations. They call into question what it means to be a bad mother or a bad father, and examine the psychological impact of abuse on children growing up in these circumstances. These stories seek to call readers' understanding of their own morality into question.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my committee chair, Chris Coake, for his encouragement and patience. I would also like to thank James Mardock and David Ehrke, who graciously agreed to be on my committee. I would like to thank my mom, who has saved every story I've written since elementary school and my dad, who encourages me by hand delivering magazine clippings about successful writers.

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The Raven's Nest

Before walking into the Raven's Nest, Chuck thinks about what he should do with his hands. Once he has a drink in his hand, has something to hold onto, he'll be fine. But now, he has to put them somewhere so that the regulars will think he's just like them. Muffled twangs of the slide guitar creep out from beneath the bar's dented steel door. Someone inside is laughing. First, he decides to shove both hands in his pockets with his thumbs inside his two front belt loops. No—this is all wrong. The pockets feel too tight, the belt loops too loose. Just one hand in the pocket feels much better. Chuck looks down at the crease in his jeans and frowns, tries unsuccessfully to flatten the crease. His back problems don't stop him from standing up straight when he walks inside.

A dart flies past his face, and he tries not to flinch, but when he hears someone in the booth laugh, he knows that he must have. There's no dartboard in sight.

-Hey, you looking for the country club? someone in the booth asks. The crease in his jeans feels like it's burning his skin and he doesn't want to look at the man in the

booth, so instead he walks straight to the bar. One woman is bent over the jukebox that still sounds muffled, and she squeals after someone pinches her ass. She bends over farther and sways from side to side and Chuck can't stop looking at the back of her dimpled thighs. The soles of her shoes make a sticky sound when she walks back to her booth.

Chuck's left hand is still in his pocket and he's playing with his wedding ring buried in the bottom of it, slipping the ring on and off of his pinky finger. He picks up bottle after bottle of beer with his right. Someone spits on the floor next to him and laughs. The bartender is waving his arms around telling a story and never loses eye contact with someone in snakeskin boots. The man in the boots laughs so hard, he nearly falls off of his stool. Everyone's always laughing here.

The drinks keep coming even though Chuck doesn't ask for them, and he wonders if that's just what they do at the Raven's Nest. Neon lights are buzzing, and so is he. The last time he drank this much, he was in his twenties or thirties. He's glad that the bartender isn't clearing away the bottles. The glass barricade between him and the bartender is impressive. After a few more, he'll tell a story too. Chuck's worried that if he doesn't say something soon, everyone's going to forget he's there. Even if someone threw a dart his way, that would be okay. He'd say something funny and they'd see all the bottles lined up and it'd be all right. Everyone would laugh and want to know who's the new guy. The jukebox is off and the place suddenly feels empty. Even the bartender's stopped telling stories. -This fuckin' thing, he says. -If it worked any less, it'd be like Jerry here. The bartender points to someone sitting at the other with his thumb. Everyone thinks this is very funny.

Chuck's lost track of which beer he's on when the blonde sidles up next to him.

-What is it you got in there?|| The blonde winks and he steadies himself on the barstool before answering. She looks down at his pocket and he does too. How long has he been sitting there with his hand in his pocket? The only women who come into the bar are prostitutes, a fact that he takes comfort in. He doesn't have to worry about embarrassing himself by asking someone else where he can find a hooker. How doesn't know how you would go about asking that. Chuck's done his research by going to some of the other bars by the truck stop and has found out The Raven's Nest is the best place for him to find what he's looking for. All of the bars and the people in them look the same at the other bars. But the Raven's Nest is different. Everything here is darker here; the lights flicker on and off.

Most of the other regulars at the bars have had her. Her name's Sugar, and it seems like she's all the guys at these places can talk about. She's always getting pinches and pats on her ass, but she seems to like it. Tonight, she's wearing jeans that sit low enough to show a tattoo of a pink rose and the cursive initials JT above her right hip bone. Sugar's still looking at Chuck's pocket and so is he. It feels like they've been sitting there for hours. Somebody's boots are shuffling across the floor and somebody at the bar is asking for another drink.

-Nothing,|| he says finally and both of them are relieved he's come up with something to say. He wants to say something better and do something better with his face. She looks at him like she's waiting for him to disappoint her. The jukebox finally kicks back on and there's more shuffling around to the music.

-I've got to...|| He needs to get away from her sad, unblinking eyes. This is happening faster than he's ready for and the bathroom feels too far away. He focuses on her broad face and the cigarette hanging from her lips. He squints his eyes to correct his double vision. Her face isn't made up of individual features anymore; instead, her face is made of shapes that shift when she talks. The thought of having to walk past the men in the booth is paralyzing. For a moment, he considers never leaving the stool, never having to walk past anyone or talk to anyone.

She's saying something about the bartender. Something else about her favorite food. He nods and looks to the bathroom again. Her hand's creeping up his thigh now, and he wonders how long she can talk to someone who isn't talking back. The wall of beer bottles is gone and the bartender's asking for money. Chuck needs to pay and get to the bathroom before Sugar gets any closer. Somebody's tapping his foot to his heartbeat and he feels like everyone in the room can hear it. They're all waiting for his next move and he's happy that he can get away from all of them by taking the ten steps to the bathroom. Before getting up, he says to Sugar again, -I've got to...|| This time, she cuts him off and laughs.

-Jesus, twelve beers later, I thought you would've popped by now.|| Someone else starts laughing too and he feels heat between his legs before he knows what's happening. When he makes it to the bathroom, he locks himself in the only stall and prays that nobody walks in, that everyone in the bar leaves, that his wife, Gabriella, comes to get him and brings a fresh pair of jeans. He takes the longest piss of his life and almost cries when he does it. Thinking about his line of bottles makes him feel better. Even what Sugar said makes him feel better. He's just a hard drinker, no time for

bathroom breaks. Laughter echoes off of the stall walls and he's surprised to find out that it's his own.

He presses sheets of toilet paper onto the front of his jeans and reads the carvings in the stall. Someone's taken the time to write out part of the preamble to the constitution and he wonders if that's what people at the bar think he's doing. It's not a bad idea. If anyone's got doubts, he can come in and see for himself what was going on in that stall. It'd be the funniest thing anyone's ever read. He scans the floor for a tool, a pen, anything. There's nothing on the floor but patches of thin, yellow grime, pieces of toilet paper, and a penny. He digs in his pockets to find his car key and smiles at his cleverness. Now, what to write? There was a joke his dad used to tell about a blond, a redhead, and a brunette. Or was it a blond, a redhead, and a Jap? It had something to do with a karaoke bar. No, that's it. A Chinese girl, an American, and a Jap walk into a karaoke bar, but then what? Someone asks for the bar nuts or something.

He'll start with what he knows, and hopes the rest will come to him as he carves. He starts to carve the -A,|| but the key isn't sharp enough. The other people must have had a knife or a razor. Chuck wants a knife more than anything else in this world. If he had one, he wouldn't even need the joke on the stall wall. He'd walk out with the light glinting off the blade and ask, -Someone looking for me?|| No one would be looking for him and they'd all look away knowing that he was looking for trouble. -No sir,|| the bartender would say.

Both of his fists are clenched, and he shoves his keys back into his pocket. He feels his ring and it chills his knuckle. He freezes. His legs are cold where the wet spot has almost dried. Gabriella thinks he'll be home around ten. His watch says it's half past

ten and he guesses it will be another hour at least before he gets home. On his last three Sunday outings, he came back at least a half hour before he said he'd be back, so if he comes back late tonight, she'll be okay. He hates himself for not thinking to leave earlier. Suddenly, something smells sickeningly sweet in the bathroom.

He stands in front of the urinal and stares at the urinal cake, rehearsing what he'll say to Gabriella when he walks through his front door. The car wouldn't start. It has needed a new battery for a while now, and she knows that. He'll say he didn't want to leave it in the bowling alley parking lot and had to get help jumping it. Or he'll say some friends had too much to drink and he had to drive them both home. They live clear across town and it took longer than he expected. She'll think he made a responsible decision. But he doesn't have many friends in town and he's no good at bowling.

Maybe she won't even be up when he gets home. Maybe he can slip into bed next to her without waking her up. He grins at his blurry reflection in the mirror above the urinal, and wonders why anyone would want to watch himself while he took a piss. She is always tired on Sundays after doing errands all day. She will probably be asleep when he gets home.

When he comes out of the bathroom, Sugar, the bartender, and two men by the jukebox are the only people left at the bar. She looks different than she did before. He can't quite figure out what has changed, but he doesn't like it. He wonders if she's pulled her hair back or if she's changed her shirt. He stands studying her and is embarrassed when she catches his gaze. Nobody asks what he was doing in the bathroom, not even her. She's smiling and seems glad to see him now. One of her front teeth has a metal cap on it. He hadn't noticed that before.

-Are you ready to get out of here or what?||

He nods and as they walk to his car. He clutches his stomach. Every step is harder to take than the last.

-You okay there?||

He shakes his head. Then nods. He doesn't know why she's still walking with him, why she isn't inside talking to the bartender. It seems like everyone in the bar knew what he needed--the drinks, the woman--and he never had to say a thing. Maybe that's what people wanted, just for you to shut up for long enough to guess what you need. The air is cold and helps steady him.

He fumbles around in his pockets for the keys. The lights inside the bar turn off and the darkness makes him dizzy. He hopes that in the dark, Sugar can't see that his hands are shaking. Somehow, she knows and she wraps her hands around his. Her hands aren't much warmer and feel rougher than his. His fingers feel brittle. When they get in the car, Chuck wraps his fingers around the steering wheel and his knuckle pops. His hands stop shaking. Sugar slides across the bench seat and begins stroking his right thigh. Her fingers start pressing hard into his bony leg. Sugar's pointer and middle fingers trace the crease of his pants like a pair of miniature legs walking toward his zipper. She gets too close and he shrugs her off, but she doesn't seem to care.

-You mind if I smoke in here?|| She already has an unlit cigarette in her mouth.

He shakes his head, but he does mind. That smell will be another problem he has to take care of later. Small puffs of smoke sneak out from the right corner of her mouth and the air in the car feels thick. He doesn't know if it's from the smoke or something else. His keys feel too cold in his hand and for a moment, he forgets what he's supposed

to do with them. The engine's roar surprises him and he watches his fingers still curled around the key. Sugar starts whispering in his ear and her breath is hot. Her cold nose presses up against his face and he feels like he can't move until he pushes his shoulder up to his right ear, making a barrier in between him and her hot breath and cold face. She slides back to her seat and he tries not to look in the rearview mirror to check for lipstick on his collar. He worries that he smells like her, like cigarettes and old bubblegum.

-You're the boss, you know. She flicks her cigarette butt out of the window. He feels better when she says this and is thankful that she's still in the car. Yes, he is the boss and he'll take her wherever he wants to. He can tell Gabriella anything he wants when he gets back home. When Chuck was little, every night his dad came home from the mine covered in black soot. Chuck promised himself that he'd be his own boss someday and wouldn't need to take orders from anybody.

His body is driving the car without him thinking. They pass a few fast food restaurants and he realizes he's hungry, that he hasn't eaten a thing since the cucumber sandwich he had for lunch. His stomach's still uneasy and the thought of the sandwich makes him cringe. The thought of Gabriella makes him cringe more. A growl escapes from his stomach and he looks at Sugar to make sure she didn't hear it.

Chuck's only driven a few blocks from the bar and wants to drive back. It's getting too late and he's having trouble staying in the lines on the road. Gabriella might be waiting for him on the loveseat in front of the TV. She might be waiting right by the door, worried.

But Chuck has driven too far now. He doesn't want to take Sugar back to the bar. Everyone at the bar will think he's a wimp, and call him a pussy. He remembers the

double shot of whiskey Sugar bought him earlier. The bartender laughed at the way his face crumpled up after he took it, and for a while, he'd blocked the whole thing out of his mind. But his stomach makes him remember and he retches into his own shirt sleeve. He sneaks a glance at Sugar and she doesn't do a thing, doesn't seem to notice. Nothing comes up, but something burns in his throat.

If Gabriella saw him now, she'd kill him. He's at risk for kidney disease as it is, his dad and uncle both died from it. She'd talk about his dad's funeral, remind him of how he cried so hard that someone else had to give the eulogy, how he'd promised to be healthy, to stop drinking. And he had, but that was before he'd walked in on Gabriella and Jim, the lawyer from the -I'll fight your DUI for \$999 – guaranteed billboard, in the bed they'd bought together when they first got married. She needed a protector, a real man, she'd said, but she didn't love Jim. It was a cry for help, one of the self-help books said. It was her way of saying that she needed something that he wasn't giving her.

Jim's billboard and Gabriella's cucumber sandwiches seem so far away now. The farther he drives away from the bar, the better he feels and he wishes he'd done this a long time ago. Driving on the surface streets is taking too long. The red lights are stopping him from finishing what he's started.

The sign for the onramp is blurry. He has to be smart now, focus, make a plan. Parking up behind Serenity Cemetery, that's smart. No one will find them there. There's no gate at the back entrance and there aren't many lights. There's not a whole lot of security and he'll be fast anyway. It is getting late and his stomach still hurts. He exits the highway and pulls up to the back entrance of Serenity. There are even fewer lights than he remembered. Sugar yawns. She seems unfazed by the location choice. She

slides back to his side. He wonders what she'll do next, if she'll try to make quick work of him. Chuck thinks of the other men at the bar.

-Oh yeah, that guy. I think he left with that blonde prostitute. No, hooker. They'd say hooker. He wants her to say the right thing again and looks at her, pleading with his eyes.

She starts to unbuckle his belt. Silence. He wants her to call him the boss again or ask what he wants. He worries that she doesn't know what he wants and that she hadn't known the whole time. Nobody knows what anybody wants and he's dizzy again. People don't mean what they say and he doesn't feel like the boss. The car feels too small.

-I need some air. It's the first thing he's said since the bar, and his voice squeaks when he says it. He can't leave the car fast enough.

He likes that he's out of the car and she's in the car probably wondering where he went. He can come back in when he wants to. He's the one paying her. She starts screaming something after him and he doesn't care. His shoes are too tight and his toes hurt, but he keeps walking and doesn't know when he'll stop. The sound of wind passing through the trees rips at his ears. The clang of the flag against the flagpole pierces through his eardrum. Even the drumming of his own heartbeat reverberates throughout his body.

Something is rustling in the bushes. The rustling is coming from the security guard, he's never been more sure of anything in his life. They do stakeouts for just this sort of thing. They've probably been waiting for someone like him all night. He feels

like the ground is holding onto his feet and the feeling makes him panic. Chuck yells at his feet, -Go!! and he's going.

If the security guard catches him, everyone will know what he did and what he didn't do—the guys at the bar, Sugar, Gabriella, his daughter. Sugar will tell them everything. They'll make jokes about him. They'll call him a sad old man. The men at the bar will say he couldn't even fuck a whore. They'll find out he didn't quit that day at the shoe store; he got fired. He never got the raise he celebrated with his wife and he wasn't ever going to now. He was too slow at the register. When people asked him to try on a pair of shoes, he brought back shoes that were the wrong color, the wrong size, the wrong style. They'll find out that he was dishonorably discharged after leaving the base. All he knows about combat, he read in books. He's never killed anybody. He's never saved anybody. It will all start here in the cemetery.

Chuck can't see his car with Sugar inside and he's disoriented. What's happened to all of the lights? He holds his arms out in front of him and tries to reach for a tree, a tombstone, anything. This is the most he's run in years and his knees are starting to ache. His mouth is dry and his stomach is knotted. He tries to make out the shapes in front of him to find a place to hide, but can't tell what anything is. He would crawl inside an open casket if he could find one. The casket would be warm and safe and no one would be in there asking about Sugar and Gabriella.

His foot catches on something, a tree root maybe, and he's on the ground. There's a loud pop on his way down and he wants to scream for help, but doesn't at first. The security guard must be looking for him using a big flashlight and Chuck can't be found. He tries to move his foot but can't. He can't see his foot in front of him, so he

feels the ankle. There's something sticking out of it and his instinct is to pull it out. It feels like a rusty nail and he screams.

Chuck starts to cry when he feels the blood on his ankle. He's alone and no one's interested in finding him. He can't hear anymore rustling and thinks that maybe even the security guard has given up on him. He wishes Gabriella would appear and hold his cold face against her chest. Chuck wants his daughter Jenny to be there too. He thinks of goals he'd planned to achieve before Jenny came back to visit. If everything were the way it was supposed to be, he would have learned to fly a plane or would have become a volunteer at the VA hospital by now. When she came to visit, he would have told her that life is too short to work at some shoe store. She would have smiled and later, she would tell her husband that her father was doing well. He was an important part of the community. He was in his sixties, but didn't look a day over 50, she'd say.

But he can't do any of that if he doesn't get help. He tries to drag himself along the ground using his elbows, but he doesn't know which direction to go in. On his first day of basic training, he looked much like he did now, crawling on his elbows with tears running down his cheeks. He'd kept trying to tell the drill sergeant that he had hurt his shoulder during the repelling exercise, but the sergeant didn't listen. The recruit next to Chuck had called him a faggot and Chuck had kept crawling.

He will do anything to see Jenny's face again, even if it means crawling to nowhere. As he crawls, he thinks of her seventh birthday when he bought her ice skates that he couldn't afford. Gabriella told him that he could only take their daughter to the big rink in Bloomfield; nothing else was safe enough. He remembered Jenny looking up at him with big, brown eyes, her fingers laced together as if she were praying, and asking

in a whisper if he'd take her out to skate on the pond behind their neighbor's house. It was frozen completely through, she told him. The boys down the street were just on it last week. The rink wouldn't open for another two weeks and she wanted to try out her skates now.

-Only if you can keep a secret from your mom, he winked after he said it and thought to himself what he looked like to her. He liked that they were going to have a secret.

-Yes yes yes! She jumped up and down and looked up at him, smiling.

He watched her as she started skating.

-Dad watch, she said as she pushed her legs out in front of her to propel herself forward. He clapped for her. The still, frigid air stung his ears and he tried to pull his hat down to cover them. -Watch this. She leapt into the air with her arms above her head and tried to twist her body, like the skaters they'd all watched on TV. He began to clap his gloved hands for her again. As she came down, he heard a crack. Jagged seams extended from the blades of her skates.

-Daddy help, it's breaking! Her cheeks were pink and her teeth were chattering.

-Don't move. He ran in circles trying to find something to throw her so that he could pull her away from the ice. It was so cold. The cracking was getting louder and the ice broke beneath her. He heard her gurgle and his legs were running to her before his mind knew what he was doing. As he lay on the ice fishing for her, he felt the ice giving under his weight. He went under. He tried to open his eyes under the water. The two of them thrashed around, trying to grasp for something above them. He felt a big hand grab him under his armpit. He gasped for air. He yelled for his daughter.

His daughter was fine, the neighbor told him. Mild hypothermia, but she'll be fine he said. It's really not a good idea to let your daughter skate on the ice when it hasn't frozen through; it's not even November yet, the neighbor said. Chuck looked at the ground. Thank you, he mumbled from behind chattering teeth.

As his daughter sat in the back of the ambulance wrapped in heavy wool blankets, she didn't take her eyes off of him. He tried to conceal his chattering teeth by pulling his blanket up over his mouth. The neighbor was a firefighter and had saved them both. Once, Chuck heard his daughter tell one of the new neighbor kids that her dad was a volunteer firefighter. He did not correct her.

Now, he reaches for his ankle again and he can feel that it's still bleeding through the dress sock he stole from work on his last day. He starts screaming again and the wind is howling louder. The sound of the wind silences him whenever he tries to yell for help and he feels like there's some greater power trying to keep him in the cemetery. Chuck rests his face against the grass, exhausted, and laughs to himself. At least if he dies from some infection before anyone finds him, he'll already be in the graveyard. Less work for everybody.

Either he'll die here or someone will find him in the morning. He wants it to be light so he can see what's happened to his ankle. Part of him hopes that it's as gruesome in reality as it is in his imagination. He thinks for a second that he should have kept the rusty nail in there. It would look grotesque and while the paramedics pulled it out, he would not yell. He feels the ground around him for the nail even though he knows that it's nowhere nearby and regrets leaving it where he fell. His ankle barely feels attached and he hopes that the doctor will have to do surgery on it. The more he thinks about the

pins, the surgery, and the souvenir nail, the less he thinks about the pain in his ankle. Maybe the infection's spread and after the surgery, there won't be a foot at all. He'll have to walk around on crutches. People will open up doors for him and Gabriella will let him eat his dinner in front of the TV instead of at the table.

Gabriella will feel guilty for everything she did with Jim. She'll say that Jim wasn't the real man after all; Chuck was. He'll come up with a detailed story about how he saw a dog run across the street into the cemetery and how he chased it because he was worried. He'll say it was a medium-sized dog and that it was a very windy night. The more details he put in, the more people would believe him. They'll say he was very kind to worry about a little animal like that. Everyone will listen to the story and get excited when he tells the part about the nail, the blood-soaked sock, and the army crawl in the dark. Gabriella will think that while Jim was paying for billboards, Chuck was trying to rescue animals.

Even the people who know what happened will feel bad for him and call it an -unfortunate accident|| or maybe even -tragic accident.||

He thinks of his military portrait that hangs in his bedroom. Gabriella thinks it's a very handsome picture of him. He thinks of himself walking on his crutches with his left pant leg pinned up. It is all clear now. He will wear his hat that says, -If you like your freedom, thank a vet.|| He smiles at the prospect of strangers coming up to him to thank him for his bravery. Maybe he will start volunteering at the VA hospital. People there will understand his struggles.

What Could Be Left at the Hospital

Brenda looked from the doctor to the blue balloon that sagged in the corner. The once puckered edge of the full balloon had begun to flatten, and it lazily bobbed up and down, reflecting glimmers of light off its metallic surface into Brenda's eyes. Brenda pushed and watched as the top of her knees shook. She felt pressure from the doctor's gloved hands against her numbed inner thigh. A nurse in faded pink scrubs held onto Brenda's forearm. James watched Brenda and Brenda watched the doctor, who was sweating through his surgical cap.

If she hadn't been in so much pain, hadn't felt like she'd pass out at any moment, she would have laughed at the thought of the pile of unopened hypnobirthing CDs from her mother that lay on her nightstand.

-You don't want to bring the baby into a world of chaos where you're screaming, her mother had said. -Look here. She'd pointed to the CD case. -It's a method that's as new as tomorrow and as old as ancient times. This one's even endorsed by that gal from those action movies. Brenda had never planned on listening to them, but now she wished she had. Maybe if she had, she would be focused on her breathing. Maybe the feeling that someone was reaching into her lower back, twisting and squeezing her muscles would go away if she had used them. She wanted to scream and cry and tell the doctor to pull it out, make it stop. But before she could, it was over.

The doctor motioned to the nurse for the clamp. -The cord, he said in a rough whisper. A pair of stainless steel scissors separated Brenda from the small, lifeless body now in the doctor's hands. Before she was induced, she had asked if she could hold this baby, the one she hadn't wanted, because she'd been told that was what many other women did.

Maybe it was the smell of formaldehyde and old flowers or maybe it was the wide-eyed look on James' face, but at first, Brenda could not look at the boy.

-Do you want to...like we talked about.

Brenda did not respond. She knew what he was asking and no, she did not want to hold the baby. James nodded at the nurse.

-I'd like to see, or meet the baby. He paused before each word. The nurse put the baby gently into James' arms and returned to Brenda's side, resting her hand on her forearm once again. James moved closer to the nurse who had already washed and begun swaddling the child in white linen. He looked at the baby as he held him, and began to cry.

Brenda knew she was supposed to look at the baby. Meeting him would be the only way that Brenda could get a sense of closure, she'd been told. Brenda waved James toward her with her hand. James bent down next to the bed and tilted the boy's face toward her. The baby's translucent skin revealed a network of blue and green veins. Brown hair thinly covered the top of its misshapen skull. Puffy, red eyelids stood out further than the baby's nose that had been flattened during the delivery. Eyelashes stuck together in small, crusty clumps. Brenda could not see herself in the baby. Its pale lips were parted and Brenda felt that at any moment, the boy might say something. Brenda reached out for the baby, but drew her arms back. She shook her head and James walked away still holding the baby.

He looked at her then with the same look he had the night he found her lying on their living room floor half naked, her round belly pointing up toward the ceiling, a quarter empty fifth of gin beside her. His eyes were narrowed and his lips were pursed. It was a look of disapproving revulsion, the same one he had the time he slapped her across the face when he found the pamphlet that read -Know Your Choices in her purse. These memories of Brenda's were buried in the same place that the memories of the baby's face would later be buried.

James turned his back to Brenda and she hoped he would not turn around to face her again with that look on his face. His shoulders were hunched slightly forward and his feet were spread far apart. His shoulder blades showed through his thin t-shirt and his right sleeve barely covered the text of Corinthians 13 tattooed on his arm. When he started to turn around, Brenda looked out the window.

She wondered what was happening on the street below, and visualized men in suits whistling for taxi cabs and homeless men using their coats to shield themselves from the wind. She thought of couples sitting on benches, making plans for dinner and women in high heels talking on their phones. She noticed that the doctor had left and wondered where he'd gone and why the nurse was still rubbing her forearm. The IV in Brenda's hand was taped down and she could see that the vein it stuck out of bulged beneath her skin. James was trying to get the nurse's attention and Brenda was relieved when the nurse left her side.

Brenda heard parts of the muffled conversation between James and the nurse who both faced the door several feet away from her. -Really not abnormal...-may want space...-arrangements for the body... Their figures were fuzzy and Brenda did not try to focus in on them. She heard people walking up and down the hallway outside, their shoes making soft thuds on the hard, white floor. Squeaks from hospital bed wheels crept into the room and Brenda thought about who was on the bed. Was it someone like her, who had come to the hospital with a live baby and would leave with a dead one? Did they have a deflated belly? No, she decided. The person on the bed was not like her. She changed her mind again--there was no one on the bed.

Brenda looked down at her stomach and it did not look any smaller than it did before she had the baby. She knew better, but still hoped that that the moment the baby was out, her stomach would be flat again, just like the pregnant Barbie she once saw in a commercial. The round belly, a baby clasped inside, could detach with one click, and then Barbie would return to her usual size.

Brenda could hear the nurse telling James what could be left at the hospital. If James and Brenda wished, they could arrange to have a funeral for the baby, which might help them both. If they decided to do that, arrangements would need to be made with a funeral home, and while those arrangements were underway, the baby's body would be kept safe at the hospital. If they did not choose to have a service, they could instead leave the baby with the hospital, which would then be responsible for disposition of the body. Either way, there would need to be an autopsy. The nurse spoke as if she were discussing a business proposition with James. James was still holding the baby as he talked to the nurse, who began suggesting support groups.

Brenda knew she should want to go to the support group. She should want to cry and write a poem about the dead boy that she would frame along with the prints of his small feet and impossibly tiny toes. If she went to the group, people would pass around a box of tissues as everyone shared their upsetting stories, and when it came to Brenda, she'd share hers and everyone would think it was very sad. She would not need the tissue, though, and the other people would think there was something wrong with her. Someone had told her that grieving was complicated, that everyone had a different process, and she liked to think about that. There was nothing wrong with her; she was just a complicated person. That's why she couldn't explain why she'd once cried during an infomercial for an alert system for old people so they could get a hold of someone if they fell down and couldn't get back up. She'd guessed it was the black and white dramatization with the white haired woman squirming around on the ground and the thought that someone might never check on her. Brenda had been glad that James was already asleep and didn't hear the wheezing noises she made as she cried. How come

she'd cried when she was little and saw a three-legged dog whimpering as it tried to jump into the back of its owner's car, but couldn't cry when she found out she'd never know the baby that had been growing inside of her for those eight months?

She wondered if other people in the group blamed themselves and if she should too. She guessed a montage played in their heads of missed prenatal vitamins, overly aggressive workouts, glasses of champagne at the company Christmas party. Like them, she thought of her slip-ups like the night with the gin and the diet soda she drank every morning. The feeling of guilt from her misgivings was fleeting, though. She'd decided that whatever happened to the baby happened because it was supposed to and she couldn't have avoided it even if she'd wanted.

Her thoughts of the soda, the gin, and the dead baby downstairs were subsumed by others--like the two-bedroom apartment she would return to with the makeshift office turned makeshift nursery. When she got home, that would need to be taken care of. She would return the crib and the rocking chair from the baby shower. The teddy bear border along the top of the walls would need to come down, but the yellow wall color could stay; it did make the room feel warmer. The sonogram in a frame of metal hearts that James bought Brenda for Mother's Day would need to come down too. Until she figured out what to do with them, she could move the baby's clothes from her closet to the hall closet. This to-do list felt much better than the what-I-did-wrong list.

She looked at James and the nurse, still standing near the door, and tried to figure out what they were talking about, but couldn't. She wondered whether or not she could still take her maternity leave and if not, when she could start working again. She would need to think of what to say when people came up to her offering their sympathies.

Brenda knew that the people who would say, -I'm so sorry, or -I can't imagine what you're going through right now, or -Let me know if I can help you with anything would not know that she did not cry when she found out the baby was dead.

These people did not know that the last time Brenda remembered crying was in James' mother's bathroom during and after her baby shower. She had cried softly into a towel and then had splashed cold water on her puffy face. Then she'd reapplied her makeup and smiled as hard as she could and opened her eyes up wide in the mirror, practicing her gift-receiving expression. Practicing in the mirror helped; she'd smiled while she opened up gifts and played games. She'd smiled while she cut the cake in the shape of a blue bottle and talked to her friends from the accounting office where she worked.

Brenda thought about the baby shower and what people who went would say. She considered the possibility that they might expect their gifts to be returned. It might be a nice gesture on her part.

A page for Dr. Steinberg came over the loudspeaker. James walked back to the bed. The baby and the nurse were gone. The skin on James's face was red and blotchy and his eyes were red too. He put his hand on top of her head and stroked Brenda's eyebrow. Brenda had never seen James look so fragile. The wrinkles around his eyes didn't look as deep as before and his jaw looked less angular. Even his tattoo looked lighter.

-We still have a lot to go over, but we'll be able to leave soon. James continued to rub her eyebrow and Brenda turned her face toward the window. Before leaving the hospital, there were forms to sign and Brenda hardly remembered looking at them. The

nurse came in to check on her every once in a while and when she did, she talked to James. Brenda did not say a word because she didn't know what to say. She wondered what other women like her said. They probably wanted their men to hold them close and tell them that everything was going to be okay and the women would want to believe it. Brenda felt that she was one step in front of them. She already knew that it wasn't going to be okay, and it was better not to think that it would be.

Shadows cast on the brick façade of the building across the street turned the bricks from red to deep brown. Brenda felt safe inside the building, separated from her coworker's impending questions and her mother's condolences. Maybe she could stay in the hospital for weeks and weeks until no one remembered what happened. Or maybe she would just never go back to work, her parent's home, or her own apartment. Instead, she could find a way to get to her car and drive for hundreds of miles. The memory of the day in the hospital would fade as her town disappeared in her rearview mirror.

Clear medicine that had been pushed into the vein in her hand through the IV made Brenda unsure of when she was awake and when she was sleeping. She wasn't sure if the image of James pounding his fists into the empty bed next to hers was stolen from a dream and implanted into her memory. Maybe he had. It'd be just like the time he got fired from his job at the insurance company and didn't say anything, but instead slammed his fist into the closet door over and over again until the door cracked and his four knuckles bled. When Brenda had complained about it, he'd told her that hitting things kept him from hitting people and that she should thank him for that. She didn't know if she was dreaming when the nurse said that the baby's small eyes and the smooth

groove in its upper lip meant it had Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. No, she decided. They wouldn't have done tests already and they didn't even test for that, did they?

She knew she was dreaming when she was suddenly home watching TV. There was a loud knock on the door and when she answered it, the nurse stood before her. It was dark outside and she couldn't make out much of the nurse aside from the stethoscope in her pocket. She saw the nurse's big white teeth when she smiled. The nurse handed her an envelope and Brenda asked what was inside. She could not quite hear how the nurse responded. She opened the letter and tried to read it, but the words lifted off the page and started to float in the air.

When she woke up, the nurse was hovering above her. Brenda learned that she could speak with a chaplain or a counselor if she wanted. Brenda shook her head. James lifted his hand in objection, but Brenda did not acknowledge him. Instead, she turned her head and closed her eyes.

She thought of the counselor, who she guessed would be an attractive woman with a couple of children of her own. The first thing out of the counselor's mouth would be something predictable. -I am so sorry for your loss, she would say. Brenda would not believe her. The counselor wouldn't know anything about Brenda except that she was the last patient standing in between her and her next break. The thought of having to talk to the counselor or anyone else made Brenda feel sick. She felt herself bleeding and pressed her legs together to try to make it stop. She closed her eyes.

She dreamed that she and three other women who looked just like her were playing hopscotch at her high school. Two men in blue suits watched from the side and whispered to each other. Birds flew in circles above them all and the men started

laughing. One asked to hold Brenda's hand and she agreed. She started to walk toward them, but turned around when she heard a dog growling. She could not see any dog, only the other hopscotching Brendas, and suddenly she was at work. She started punching numbers into her calculator, but the machine was broken. Brenda started to run away from the client sitting in front of her. She heard a dog growling again and this time she saw it. The dog was growling at a wailing baby with skin where its eyes should be.

When Brenda woke up, she was home. She tried to shake James awake and he grumbled a bit before falling back asleep. She decided that she didn't actually want James to wake up; she'd rather be by herself. Slowly, she tried to get out of the bed. She could feel each of her stitches throbbing and kept both legs together as she slid out from under the comforter and got out of the bed. Her mouth was dry and she started to walk to the kitchen to get a glass of water. On the way there, she saw the door to the nursery slightly open. She looked inside, and it looked the exact same as it had before they went to the hospital. Seeing the teddy bear border and the crib made her feel overwhelmed more than sad. Each item represented a chore. She looked at the teddy bears smiling down at her and shivered. Bubbles in the wallpaper border made one bear's beady eye bulge out beyond the wall. Brenda sat down in the rocking chair and clutched her stomach.

She looked from the teddy bear's bulged eye to the flickering night light and methodically rocked back and forth in the rocking chair. While she rocked, she thought of the baby that could have been named Jonathan or maybe Jeremy. He would lie in the crib with a blanket tucked beneath his arms. He would start crying when he was hungry and Brenda would be annoyed. When he got older, he would play with the cereal in his

high chair. He would not be good at baseball, but would like reading. When he was in high school, he would be shorter than most of the other boys and some of the girls. In college, he would meet a girl with big blue eyes and crooked teeth.

This boy needed decisions to be made on his behalf. She was responsible for teaching him how to balance his checkbook when he got his first checking account and how to cut an onion without letting the gas from the onion's layers make him cry. Without her, he was nothing, nobody. He wouldn't have anyone to tell him to brush his teeth or make his bed. Thinking of buying him a Rubik's cube and teaching him how to solve it made her feel important. He'd know that she'd made many sacrifices for him. Her body would never be the same and she had to put her job on hold. She'd have to move back in with her parents in Modesto so that her mom could watch him while she worked and try to save up money for him to go to college. Someone could learn from her mistake of dropping out of school to move across the country with someone who seemed good enough. Yes, it would be her looking out for her little boy. James would be somewhere else with someone else. He would never care for this child like she would or make the sacrifices that she would make.

Brenda fell asleep in the rocking chair, and when she woke up the next morning, James was gone. A note that read -Gone outll was resting on their bedspread. When she called his phone, it went straight to his voicemail. She left a message asking where he was, one asking him to pick up some pain reliever on his way home, and another saying she was getting worried.

She didn't want to be alone anymore. Everything she did was louder when she was alone—the sound of her clammy feet sticking to the linoleum in the kitchen, the

sound of the metal spoon clinking against the bottom of her cereal bowl. Any other person in the apartment would do. She turned the TV on and clicked the volume up to fill the emptiness.

When Brenda returned to work three weeks later, she could tell everyone was being careful about what they said, except for Steve. In the break room, someone said she looked tired. She was tired and didn't need anyone to remind her that her outside matched her inside. She shrugged.

-How is the little guy anyway?|| Steve asked. Everyone in the room was silent and Steve seemed confused as he looked from face to face. One of Brenda's coworkers bulged her eyes out at him, but he must not have gotten the hint.

-Keeping you up at night, Brenda?|| He smiled and kept looking around the room at the other people who stood sipping their coffee. Two people left the room without saying anything and the stout woman next to him finally elbowed him in the ribs. Brenda sipped from her mug of coffee and said, -I've just been tired.|| She wasn't ready to say anything about the baby out loud because she worried that the way she talked about him would sound wrong. There was a delicate balance between appearing sad and happy. She knew she was supposed to look side, and she was sad. But she didn't want to seem so miserable that other people wouldn't want to be around her. She also should seem happy enough that people thought she was being brave, but not so happy that people thought she was cold-hearted.

Even surrounded by people that first week back at work, Brenda felt alone. Nobody told her to her face that they were sorry, but they picked out condolence cards

that Brenda later threw in her trash. She saved one with lilacs on the front that read, -This too shall pass, and pinned it up next to her computer screen. Lilacs were her favorite flowers, a fact that James could never remember.

One hour before Brenda got off work that Friday, she got a call. She thought it was James calling. Anytime the red light blinked on her office phone or her cell phone vibrated in her pocket, she thought it was James.

-Guess who's in town? The familiarity of her mother's voice made Brenda light up inside for a moment. She scanned the office half expecting her mother to jump up from behind a cubicle wall.

-I've got some great things planned for us this weekend, hon. Are you surprised? I wanted you to be surprised.

Brenda's mother had a thing about planning surprises. She was always planning surprises for Brenda's dad before they divorced. He'd told Brenda that he'd hated every one of them. The sweetness of the thought Brenda's mother put into the surprise was always overshadowed by the inconveniences they caused. In high school, Brenda's mother would surprise her with trips to the mall that would make Brenda late to softball practice.

Brenda told her mother that she was surprised and when she hung up the phone, her coworker, Jennifer, who listened in on every one of Brenda's phone conversations, scooted her chair into Brenda's cubicle.

-Hot date? Jennifer raised her eyebrows up and lowered them a few times. Brenda tried to smile and shook her head.

-I wouldn't call my mom a hot date, she said before packing up her things to leave.

Brenda's mother's idea of a fun weekend was different from Brenda's. Brenda wanted to wear her sweatpants all weekend and watch her favorite show about women who kill their husbands. When Brenda asked where they were going, her mother told her that telling her that would ruin the surprise.

-Just pack a weekend bag with a nice dress and maybe a light jacket, her mother said on the phone. -Anything you forget, we can pick up when we get there. Like all of her mother's surprises, this one had a lot of buildup. Brenda felt ridiculous packing for a trip she knew nothing about and the prospect of having to buy what she didn't already have made her anxious. She'd been avoiding her own reflection since the baby. Before getting into the shower, she wouldn't turn the fan on so that the mirrors would fog up.

Her mother said Brenda had a case of the baby blues.

-Now, they've got all these fancy names for it, but that's all it is, her mother said when she picked her up that Saturday morning. -You'll be back to normal in no time. Her mother's eyes widened when Brenda came out to the car and Brenda looked down at what she was wearing. She'd put on what she thought was an acceptable outfit, but her mother's expression told her otherwise.

Brenda's wardrobe had begun to overwhelm her, so she'd created two different types of uniforms to avoid the pressure of choosing different articles of clothing to go together. Sweatpants and a t-shirt were her weekend uniform and an unironed button-down shirt with khakis made up her weekday uniform. Before her mother came to pick her up, she'd put on gold hoop earrings to make up for the dirty shirt. But by the look on

her mother's face, Brenda knew that she was in for a trip to the mall. Just like in high school, she hoped that she wouldn't see anyone she knew there.

-Maybe we can pick up a few last minute things on our way out,|| Brenda's mother said. During the car ride, Brenda looked out at the people on the street. At a stop light, she saw a young boy in a stroller with big green eyes and thought about her baby's clumped together lashes and see-through skin. The rest of the car trip, she looked straight ahead at the glove compartment.

-Open it up,|| her mother said and pointed to the glove box. Inside was a pamphlet with pictures of women lying face-down on tables with rocks balanced on their spines.

-It's going to be really nice,|| her mother said.

-Yeah, looks nice.|| Brenda flipped through the pamphlet and saw happy women with polished nails eating strawberries and drinking champagne.

-They've got all these homeopathic treatments and detox things too that will really help take your mind off of everything,|| her mother said. Her mother thought anything wrong emotionally could be fixed physically. After her husband left her, Brenda's mother had started to fast one day a week. She'd said that it'd made her feel better right away.

Brenda didn't like massages and liked getting her nails done even less. She didn't want anyone else to see the layers of dead skin on her heels or the patches of acne on her back, but she appreciated that her mother was trying.

-You're young, Brenda, and we all have tough things we have to deal with,|| her mother said. Brenda felt trapped in the car. Her mother had already given her several

lectures over the phone filled with the same advice. Brenda wondered if her mother was buying cards to read the contents over the phone or if difficult situations just made people start speaking in the language of greeting cards.

-If you think about it, you're lucky this happened to you when you were young and resilient, her mother continued. -Could you imagine if you were my age and you had to try to get back to normal? Now, you can go back to school like you wanted to and you and James have plenty of time to have more kids. You have to keep your chin up and look on the bright side.

-I know, Mom. Brenda wondered where James was then. She hadn't seen him since he left the note on their bed. After her first day back at work, she saw that he'd come back to pick up some of his clothes, his toothbrush, and his golf clubs before leaving again.

-And we're going to a really nice dinner tonight at the resort after we get our massages. They have a dessert there that they set on fire before they bring it out to you.

-Yeah?

Brenda and her mother pulled into the mall. The parking lot made Brenda nervous. People kept appearing in front of their car out of nowhere and Brenda's mother almost hit more than one.

-Looks like we weren't the only ones with this idea, Brenda's mother said and smiled. A teenager carrying four different colored bags jumped out of the way of their car.

Inside the mall was worse than the parking lot. Loud laughter echoed off of the tile floor and mothers hushed their screaming kids. One woman's son was throwing a tantrum on the ground. Brenda would never let her kids act like that.

Brenda crossed her arms over her wrinkled shirt and stared at the headless mannequins in a storefront window.

-You like that dress? It'd look good on you.‖ Brenda's mother was looking at her wrinkled shirt. Brenda wanted to escape from the mall.

-Sure, it's nice.‖ When they walked into the store, a too-eager saleswoman greeted them.

-Looking for anything in particular?‖ The woman's eyebrows were raised up so far, she looked surprised by her own question. Brenda shook her head, but her mother pointed to the dress in the window and answered.

-That in a size...‖ Her mother looked to Brenda and waited for Brenda to finish the request. Brenda realized she didn't know her size. She hadn't bought a dress in months.

-Whatever size the mannequin's got on should work.‖ Brenda's mother and the saleswoman looked at Brenda from top to toe. They looked skeptical, but the saleswoman got the size she asked for anyway.

The lighting in the dressing room made Brenda's skin look purple. She turned away from the mirror as she undressed and tried pulling the dress over her head. A security sensor scraped against the side of Brenda's head as she pulled it down. She heard a seam rip.

-Is everything okay in there?|| her mother asked. The dress had gotten stuck around Brenda's chest and she panicked. She started to sweat and wiggled around to free herself. She closed her eyes as she pulled the dress back up over her head. When she opened her eyes, she was facing the mirror. She saw the skin on her stomach that was still loose and the web of purple stretch marks spun across her sides. She grabbed the dress from the ground and held it up in front of her to cover them.

-Yeah Mom,|| she said. -Everything's fine.||

Simon Says

Marty had a knack for remembering unimportant details. On his seventh birthday, he was wearing a blue polo shirt and the first toy he opened was Simon Says. He unwrapped his gifts in front of everyone before his mother returned them all to the store. Marty hadn't asked for Simon Says. He had trouble paying attention during games like that because he would find more interesting things outside his window than the light and sound patterns he was supposed to be memorizing.

Even though they were struggling to make ends meet, Marty heard his mother tell his aunt, it was important that she still gave him a birthday. His aunt said Marty's mother was being so brave taking care of Marty without any help. But Marty didn't think his mother was very brave. She had trouble telling the waitress when she was brought the wrong meal. She'd once even eaten something with peanuts, which she was allergic to.

Marty wondered how going home with a closed-up throat was better than asking the waitress to fix her mistake. She made up for her quietness at the restaurant when she got home. She screamed at Marty for leaving his toy cars on the carpet.

Marty wished she hadn't gotten him anything at all. He had already started to make plans for the toys, and when his mother said the toys had to go back to the store that night, he told her that he hated her and she slapped him across the face, called him an ungrateful brat. She left him home alone while she went to the store. While she was gone, he drew pictures of his mother getting hit by a baseball bat. He felt bad for drawing it, and ripped it up into pieces before throwing it in the garbage.

Kids at school wouldn't stop talking about his father and the crash. His father had drifted into the lane of oncoming traffic and the woman in the other car died. Marty didn't want to think that the accident was his father's fault. His dad was the one who held his mother back when she was swinging her arms at Marty. But Marty knew that his father wasn't all good. He forgot all of the important days and that made Marty's mother cry and when she did, his father yelled at her.

After the crash, the woman became a local hero and Marty's dad became a villain. People stood with picket signs outside of the courthouse that said, -Bring Eliza Justice. The signs had Eliza's picture on them and she looked very pretty. Marty's father looked scary in the mug shot they showed on the news. His cheekbones were black and so were his eyes. Marty's father swore it was an accident. He told the police that he was trying to change the CD, but the police said being distracted didn't excuse him from what had happened. The results from the breathalyzer didn't help his case either.

Lisa Petroskey from school knew Eliza, and she wouldn't leave Marty alone. Her mom was friends with Eliza and she took on the job of making Marty miserable. When she came up to Marty at recess, she leaned in close to his face and spit on him. While she stood in front of him, he focused on the little hairs that sprouted from a mole on her upper lip. In class, she started sending him notes that said R.I.P Eliza. When the teacher caught her, instead of reading it aloud like she usually did when she intercepted notes, she folded it back up and put it in her pocket. Lisa came up to Marty that day after the failed note delivery and got so close to his face, he could smell the peanut butter in the corners of her mouth. Snowflakes were falling from the sky and before he knew what he was doing, he saw the blood from Lisa's nose that had splattered on the white ground.

The first time Marty got drunk, he was thirteen. His mother had beaten him upside the head with her penny loafer for forgetting to take out the trash and he'd snuck out with Colby, whose dad had a fully stocked liquor cabinet. They'd decided that they should figure out their limit while they were together so that when they were older, they didn't embarrass themselves in front of other people. It turned out that each of their limits was two shots of brandy, two shots of tequila, and a mug of red wine. When Colby's parents came home early, the two of them ran around the house trying to find somewhere to hide and settled on the Buick in the garage. Streaks of red-purple liquid and undigested pieces of macaroni splashed against the dashboard before Marty had time to open the door. He wasn't allowed over at the neighbor's house again after that.

Marty could drink more in college. At parties, people were impressed at first until they realized that he'd ploughed through all of their booze. His favorite thing to do was get drunk and sit in a corner where he'd play an entire movie from start to finish in his head. He could focus on certain things for hours, but couldn't pay attention to others for more than a minute. Marty was the kind of student professors said had a lot of wasted potential. He failed out of all three of his lecture classes his first semester because he couldn't stop playing those movies in his head. The professors were talking about sexual selection, mitochondria, the aborigines, but he couldn't see beyond the car chases, monologues, and western shootouts playing behind his eyes.

There were three girls before Marty met his wife. Jenny played the guitar for him in her parents' basement. Cassandra kissed his neck behind the miniature golf course. Bella burned the first steak she ever tried to cook. If he could go back and choose to be with any of the four girls, he'd choose Bella. Bella had a perfect heart-shaped face. On their first date, they went to a football game and she bought them each a beer and a plate of nachos. She finished her beer and nachos before he did and asked if he was going to finish his. He liked how much she could eat without any of it showing up on her body. The other girls picked at their food when he took them out, but not Bella. When he was with her, neither of them ever had to ask for a to-go box.

He proposed to her at a wine tasting he'd saved up for, and when she said yes, everyone around them clapped. But Bella threw that engagement ring on the ground when she found out about his coworker at the sandwich shop. She was surprising him at work, and he remembers the look on her face when she saw her fiancé with his hands

wrapped around another woman's waist behind the meat slicer. The coworker didn't seem to mind when Bella walked in. She didn't even set down the bread roll she was snacking on. Later, Bella would be the other woman. Marty would go over to her place and she'd try to teach him how to square dance in her living room like old times. She'd laugh at every one of his missteps. The house would be so warm and he wouldn't want to go back home, but his bride-to-be would start calling his phone.

The first time he met Beth, she asked to borrow some of his laundry detergent. She had some frizzy hair poking out of her bun, and wore a low cut top. They were both folding jeans and she was much better at it. She smiled and he didn't know what to say, so he looked away. She made it easy and took the detergent from him.

-It's Beth, she said and her girlfriends in university sweatshirts giggled behind pale hands. He liked how she showed him that she was in charge.

Two years later, they were riding the bus when he reached for her cold hand after she started to cry about the cancer that was eating away her grandmother's lungs. He promised he'd quit smoking and she buried her head in his chest, said thank you, said she loved him for the first time. But later, she found the cigarettes he kept hidden in the glove compartment, called him a liar. He said he didn't know they were there, would have thrown them out if he'd known. She ripped them all in half, slammed the car door. He said he was sorry and an apology was enough. They went back home and she straddled him when he sat down on the couch. They moved to the bedroom and she acted like nothing had happened.

Beth was under the covers, still sweating and she said she had very good news. He was nervous and didn't want her to say what he dreaded she would. His throat was

dry, his breathing still quick, and the house smelled like the burnt toast he'd forgotten to clean up. She walked to the dresser and pulled out two knit booties that already looked faded. He wanted her to get dressed, but she didn't. She was naked, holding the booties in front of her stomach. The sheet was sticking to his chest and he tried to smile with his eyes. He'd been fearing this moment for a long time. She'd brought up marriage and kids on their second date and he'd been able to change the subject on that night and many other nights. She was on the pill, she'd said, and he'd believed her, reluctantly. That was one way to tie a guy down; he'd seen it in plenty of movies.

She smiled the way she did when he got her the wrong gift for her birthday. Her mouth was a straight line with only slightly upturned corners and it made him feel like he'd done something wrong.

-Who made those? he got out finally. After that, he started to get phone calls from Beth's mother, brother, and father. He needed to get a real job, a bigger place, an education. He needed to own up to what'd happened, put a ring on her finger, stop playing in poker tournaments on the weekends, stop acting his age, start acting older. They all said the same things as if they'd gotten together before and agreed on a script.

During the wedding reception, Beth's stomach nearly touched his when they faced each other reading their vows. He tried to look into her eyes and not at the thing in between them, but felt his eyes drifting down to the mound covered in white satin. The reception was full of people he didn't know. He went to the bathroom and when her father came in, he walked up to the urinal right next to Marty's, unzipped, and said he'd wanted more for his daughter than a minimum wage-earning college dropout.

-You know what's important? he'd asked. -Integrity. And my daughter's walking around with the basketball-sized proof that you don't have any. Beth's the sweetest thing, she just didn't know any better.

Marty hadn't known if he should zip up or let his wife's father finish.

-When she was little, she'd come home with birds the cats left half eaten on our welcome mat, wrap them in blankets, and try to get them all fixed up. We had to start checking the front porch every morning before she woke up so she wouldn't go messing in bird parts trying to save them. Each one of those dead birds broke her heart.

-Anyway, her mother complained about these slugs in the garden and it was my job to get rid of all of them every June. I'd hear her mother squealing in the backyard and I'd run out with the pail of soapy water to kill the things.

-Once, I heard her yelling and ran out with the pail, but it wasn't just one or two like usual, it was probably fifty, a hundred maybe with their slime trailing behind them on the pavers. I got as many as I could find, dumped them in the pail and the next day when my wife went into the garden, she saw that the slugs had all been pulled out of the bucket.

Marty was staring straight in front of him, careful not to make eye contact with his father-in-law, who he could feel talking at the left side of his face. His eyes followed lines of gray grout between the tiles in front of him.

-Most were dead, but there were some trails of the survivors. Our daughter had gone in and fished out every one of those, trying to save them and boy did she yell at me when she found out that I was the one who'd put them in the pail. I tried to explain the

best I could that they were ruining her mom's garden, that they had little tiny brains and didn't even know what was happening to them, but it didn't help.¶

-And you know what, Martin, I think she sees you as one of those little slugs.¶

Marty didn't anything. Instead, he left the bathroom, zipper still unzipped, hands unwashed.

*

Beth's mother reminded him of his own. She made a big show of the baby shower. She came over to Marty and Beth's apartment three hours before to set up all of the decorations.

-You're not actually wearing that, are you?¶ Beth's mother frowned at his plaid shirt. It was bad enough, she said, that they had to do the shower in the tiny apartment. He was to greet guests at the door and he didn't need to look like a dirty lumberjack. A baby shower was a reflection of the mother-to-be's family, which Marty was now a part of, Beth's mother said.

After the shower, Beth folded the baby blanket her mother crocheted and put the matching blue onesies with cartoon monkeys hanging from trees in the dresser. Her stomach knocked over the laundry basket propped on the foot of their bed when she turned to ask him a question. The sound the basket made hitting the ground scared him, but not as much as the realization that her stomach was going to get even bigger in the next few weeks. He dreaded when she wore anything tight that outlined the fleshy knob where the indent of her belly button used to be.

-Are you going to pick that up or do you want me to do it?¶ He was staring at her bellybutton waiting for something terrible to happen. Everything on her body was getting

bigger and her skin seemed stretched too tight. He thought of a jack-in-the-box playing eerie music with a crank that wouldn't stop turning. At any moment, he thought her stomach could split down the middle and two babies wrapped up in their own cords would spill out onto the floor. Pop goes the weasel.

-Hello? She stared at him with lifted eyebrows, impatience embedded in every forehead wrinkle. He looked away from the belly back to his own feet when he picked up the basket before walking into the living room. Everyone was gone and had left half-finished cans of soda on his coffee table and drips of ice cream on his counter. The blue and yellow decorations made the apartment feel even smaller than usual. Ribbons hung down from the ceiling low enough to brush against his forehead when he walked past them. He walked to the kitchen and pulled out one of the good knives. He liked how strong it made him feel. His wife was humming out of tune in their bedroom.

As he held the knife in the apartment's living room, he thought about his wife's father and thought maybe he was right, maybe he was a detestable slug. He imagined himself with slimy antennae poking out from beneath his receding hairline. The decorations still felt like they were crowding him and he ran at them with the knife. He was maniacal as he cut down ribbons and stabbed at balloons. It was exhilarating; he laughed. He felt like a warrior training for battle. Paper plates and crepe paper were no match for his sword. His wife was yelling from the other room, telling him to stop whatever he was up to. She had a headache. But he was not stopping. He was laughing quietly to himself as he cut a yellow stuffed rabbit right in half, let the puffs of white stuffing tumble onto the ground. He'd clean it all up later, but right then he was a warrior and warriors don't clean up stuffed animal insides.

He held his wife's hand when the doctor tried to explain what was wrong with the babies in a way Marty and Beth could understand. The doctor didn't look at either of them when he reminded them that the two boys were sharing a placenta. Marty cringed at the mention of placenta and was glad the doctor wasn't looking. The word sounded so biological. He thought of the video he saw on the nature channel of bald eagles swarming above a pasture, waiting to gorge on cow's placentas. He thought of some scavenging animal swooping into the hospital room after the boys came out and carrying off the placenta.

-As the ultrasound tech and I have told you, the arm on this one hasn't developed,|| the doctor had said months earlier, pointing a flaky fingertip to the black and white picture of the twins. -It could be Twin-to-Twin Transfusion syndrome, which would account for the difference in size, but at this point, we can't really be sure about anything.|| Marty saw himself playing catch with both of the boys. The one with both arms would catch it. The ball would bounce off the other one's stump before he could get to it. Marty's wife sat there quietly. Marty looked at the yellow stain on the doctor's scrubs, wondered if it was mustard from a late lunch. He wished then more than ever before that he'd taken his friend's advice to skip town. His friend may have been joking, but it was very good advice for a joke.

-We all knew this was going to be a high risk pregnancy with you having multiples and your wife's previous conditions.|| The doctor nodded at Marty's wife and she sighed. The doctor acted like Marty and Beth were in trouble and he wanted to tell the doctor that they were doing most things right. They were even married. The doctor

was still telling them what had gone wrong, insinuating that it was their fault, but Marty couldn't pay attention to what the doctor's saying; he was distracted by a spider walking around the doctor's feet.

On the drive home, Beth cried while she crumpled up the ultrasound. Marty thought about the twins coming out, one with all of his parts and the other missing some. For a moment, he felt sorry for his wife and wanted to tell her that everything was going to be okay. But when he reached for her hand that rested on the emergency brake between them, she pulled away.

Suddenly, he had a more comforting thought. What if he were to drive them to the clinic, get rid of both of the people growing inside Beth? When they stopped to fill up the gas tank, she got out to get the key to the bathroom and he wanted to leave her there and keep driving. Once he was free, he would call Bella and tell her that he needed to see her. They could drive off together and never come back. He could drive away from the town where people thought his father was a murderer, where he was going to have to take care of two boys. But he was in the car her father gave her and he'd call the cops before Marty could get to the first red light. And Marty didn't want the gas station attendant asking his wife where her husband went. Everyone would talk and end up hating him more than they already did.

He'd tried to bring up the idea of ending the pregnancy, but it didn't work. He'd tried saying he was only worried about the boys, one of them always getting picked on. Saying he was only worried about her health hadn't worked either, even though he'd taken the time to print out all of the research he found online with gruesome pictures.

But he was going to be stuck, Beth's father would make sure of it. No daughter of his would be buying her ticket to eternal sin just to let her boyfriend off the hook.

He let himself think about what the boys would look like. This thought felt better than the thoughts of his father-in-law and the gas station attendant. He imagined that the good, strong one would look like him and the weak one with missing parts would look like his wife. She was the one with all the health problems, the heart that was too small, the chronic migraines, the issues with her stomach lining. She had all of these invisible problems that Marty was sure were made up until the first problems showed up with the boys. Everything bad that was happening was because of her and her problems. Marty was just a nice guy trying his best. That's how people described him, called him a good guy, said he was doing the best he could with the hand he'd been dealt. She was the one who skipped her birth control pill. She drank all that coffee while she was pregnant and ate all that fast food. It was her fault. Sure, he couldn't finish school and never had the best jobs, but at least all of his insides worked.

The gas stopped pumping and his wife walked back to the car and looked like she was trying to smile, a bottle of water in one hand and a candy bar in the other. She had dark semicircles of mascara under her eyes and he knew he should smile back, try to make her feel better, but he couldn't. The sound of her flip flops slamming against her heels put him on edge. She was wearing a light pink dress that her belly button poked out of and he felt like she'd worn it just to make him upset. Marty couldn't stop thinking about her passing on all of her problems to the boys, making them sick. They both got into the car and after eating half of her candy bar, Beth started to smooth out the picture of their boys.

Marty fought to have the one with both of his arms named after him. The other one was named after Marty's father-in-law. Marty tried to act like he didn't care which boy was named after him, told his in-laws that he was just happy his wife wanted one of them to have his name. But he worked very hard to make sure that the right baby got his name. -Look at that, he has the exact same birthmark I had when I was born, he said to his wife. -Haven't you ever seen those pictures of me when I was a baby? See it right there? Nobody could see any birthmark. The baby was still red all over from taking all of the blood that was supposed to go to his brother. This baby was the recipient, the doctor had said, and the other was the donor. Marty liked the way that was phrased. It made it seem like one of the babies had the sense to give something up so at least one could be normal.

When the boys were four, Marty was left for four hours to watch both of them all by himself. Beth hadn't trusted him before to watch them on his own. Once, he'd tried to make them grilled cheese sandwiches and he'd forgotten to turn the stove off. Another time, he'd started to watch a poker tournament on TV and didn't see that Junior had climbed into the dryer. Beth had been humiliated when all of the neighbors who'd been called out to help saw Junior run out of the house saying -Peekaboo! But there was no one else to watch the boys; they only had their father.

Junior and Paul played on the carpet and Marty checked the clock every few minutes, hoping that the more he checked it, the faster the clock hands would move. Their faces were dirty and their hands were sticky and he wondered how his wife could

call them her little miracles and believe it. –Dad, look,|| Junior said and Marty retrieved one of his stock responses without looking at him. –Yes, I see. That’s very nice.|| Junior was jumping up and down. –No dad, look.|| Marty was impressed that Junior was already able to tell when he’s actually listening. Not even his wife knew that yet. Junior had his hands cupped tightly. He peeled back his fingers and something hopped onto his shirt. It was a grasshopper that Junior had probably been holding onto since the boys were playing in the backyard two hours before. Marty, Junior, and Paul were struggling to capture the bug and it became a game that was more fun than Marty thought he could have. They were all jumping, pretending to be the grasshopper too. Marty laughed thinking of how he used to catch bugs to feed to his neighbor’s toad and for a few moments, all of the boys were four years old.

Marty was still jumping around the room when Paul yelled, –I got it!|| He made a cup like he’d seen his brother do with his right fist and the crook of his left arm. Marty tried not to look at the area where the rest of Paul’s arm should be, but needed to find out if Paul had actually caught the grasshopper.

The bug container Paul made with his hand and arm wasn’t as strong as his brother’s was and the grasshopper escaped, leapt onto the carpet. The bug only took one jump before Paul caught up. His face was red and he screamed at the bug, told it to stop. And for a moment, the bug did stop, appeared to have listened to Paul’s cry. It stayed in one place long enough for Paul to catch up and stomp on it. He dragged his tennis shoes across the carpet leaving a trail of bug parts in his shoe’s path. Junior held his sticky hands up to his face while he cried and Paul stood still. Then, Junior charged at Paul and

knocked him over onto the streak of dismembered grasshopper. Junior straddled Paul and hit him over and over. Paul cried for his dad. Marty watched as Junior punched.

*

People were always staring at Paul's arm, including Marty. No matter how hard he tried not to look at it, his eyes would start to focus on it until Paul would finally ask, -What dad?|| Once when they were in line to get ice cream, a girl the same age as the boys started pointing at Paul. Even at six, Paul knew to hide the arm somewhere when someone started to stare. The girl whispered to her mom, -Mom, what's wrong with him?||

The girl's mother shushed her and the girl insisted. -No, look.|| She nearly touched Paul's arm and Marty knew he should say something to the girl and stand up for his son. That's what Beth was always doing. She'd say something in her friendly voice like, -Yes, our Paul is a special boy.|| But that wasn't what he wanted to do. If they had already gotten the ice cream he paid for, he probably would have left with his two boys behind him. The explanations were too hard, so instead of saying anything, he acknowledged the woman's apology with a nod and stared straight at the employee who was scooping up their ice cream.

It was Marty's job to pick the boys up from school. Paul looked upset and was dragging his feet while he walked to the car. Marty saw some of the young mothers

picking up their kids and he wondered what they looked like in bikinis. He thought about the boys' teacher who smelled like lilacs and coconut cream pie and scanned the playground to see if she was outside. His visions of Mrs. Nielsen were interrupted by the squeaking of the car door.

-Dad, we got our report cards today and I did really good,|| Junior said. -And today I found two quarters by the swings and Mrs. Nielsen said if nobody says they're theirs, I get to keep them.||

Marty thought it was ridiculous that teachers would give out report cards at such a young age. He wondered what there is to report on--how well they color in the lines or sound out three-letter words? Marty looked Junior's over, and tried to make sense of the report card code. -|| meant improvement needed and Junior needed to improve in classroom participation.

-Says here you need to improve in classroom participation,|| Marty said. He was proud that he'd figured out all this report card business in such a short amount of time and was glad he had some good advice for his son.

-Yeah, but I got O's in everything else,|| Junior said, smiling. Marty used the key. Outstanding. A note at the bottom of the thin, yellow piece of paper read, -Martin Jr. is a very hard working boy. He completes all of his assignments on time, but should try to share more of his ideas in class.|| Marty told Junior that he was doing a good job and read the note at the bottom aloud.

Paul didn't want to give Marty his report card, so Junior yanked it out of his hand. Marty saw that improvement was only needed in a few different areas. He thought it'd be worse.

-Paul, you're having some trouble listening in class it says.¶ Marty turned around to face Paul. -Group work and silent reading too, is that right?¶ Paul nodded, but didn't say anything. Marty read the bottom of the card to himself, decided not to read it aloud.

-Paul struggles during reading and small group activities. He sometimes seems distracted, but I think he is trying his best.¶

Paul started to cry, and Junior called him a baby before punching him in the arm. Marty wanted Paul to hit back, but he didn't. Paul was not trying his best like Marty was. Marty folded up both report cards and when he got home, he planned to store them in a dark place.

The Best Gift She'd Ever Gotten

When Rebecca visited her dad, she knew that her mother worried about what people at the club would say. Rebecca's mother had told her about how Janine Walton told the Bowmans that whenever Rebecca came for tennis lessons after weekends with her father, she smelled like mildew.

During visits with her dad, Rebecca would spend entire afternoons looking out the apartment window at the smog that hovered above the neighborhood's hilly streets. She'd sit on the edge of her dad's olive green couch and try not to let the rough fabric scratch the back of her legs. She would cross her arms and watch the phone hoping that

it would ring and that her mother would rescue her from the musty living room. Sometimes, a woman who wore a leather skirt would come over and when she did, Rebecca's father would give his daughter two moist, crumpled dollar bills to buy a soda from the gas station around the corner. He would kneel down so that his eyes were level with hers and would squeeze her shoulders before saying, -Remember, this is Daddy's friend from work and she's helping with some chores. Remember what'll happen if you tell your mom or anyone else about my friend?||

Rebecca would nod. What would happen would be her father spanking her with his dry, cracked palms. The first time she tried to go to the gas station, she saw a man jerking his body violently and screaming at the newsstand. She held her stuffed panda bear against her chest and tried to walk quietly past. But just before she did, he whirled around and snatched the stuffed animal from her arms. He bent down and whispered in her ear, -They're behind the fucking wallpaper, kid—the toys and all. Get it?|| He thumbed the panda's ear. He talked under his breath and laughed while he shook his head. His mouth opened up wide when he talked and his pupils jumped in all different directions. Rebecca stood still. If she moved one step, she was sure the laughing man would start yelling at her like he did at the newsstand. She began to cry. The man stopped laughing, but still grinned as he slowly offered her the bear, which now had a brown smudge on the inside of its violated ear.

She didn't try going to the gas station by herself after that. The next time her dad told her she had to leave and pressed the crumpled bills into her hand, she walked down the hall to the complex's laundry room, periodically walking back to press her ear up against the door until the thudding sounds from the other side stopped.

When her dad killed himself, Rebecca was six. During the funeral, she saw the woman in the black skirt. She squeezed her mom's hand tightly and tried to hide behind her legs.

-Knock it off, her mom said as she pulled Rebecca's arm to her side so that the rest of her body followed. Later, Rebecca's mom would tell her that she acted like a little brat at her dad's funeral.

Rebecca would defend herself. -I was six years old for God's sake.

-Well, what does it matter? her mom would say in between gulps of white wine. -Your father was a piece of trash and dying didn't make him any less of a piece of trash. You know his favorite hooker came to his funeral? I bet he planned it just so that people at the club would talk. And they did talk.

-I heard that after losing his job at the firm, it only took him a few months to blow through all of his savings, Janine told Evelyn.

-I heard from Elena that was a drug addict. That poor Elizabeth. She had no idea what she was getting into when she married him, Virginia told Jacqueline. And so on and so on.

Part of Rebecca's mother felt guilty for the way she and her ex treated Rebecca. She wasn't cut out for parenting and she knew that, but when you're 28 and everyone you know already has a toddler running around in the most adorable miniature adult outfits—tiny bikinis, little three-piece suits, sequined dresses—it's hard not to want one too. Between the ages of one and five, Rebecca never wore the same outfit twice. Elizabeth

loved to shop for the pink dresses that matched the pink shoes that matched the pink bows. As Rebecca started to get older, though, the clothes started to get bigger, more practical—and once they did, Elizabeth left the clothes shopping to Angelica, the nanny. Angelica did most of the parenting from the diaper changing and feeding to the hugging and playing. She was the one who put Band-Aids on Rebecca's scraped knees before Elizabeth could find out and punish them both for their recklessness. She was the one who made sure Rebecca finished all of her homework. -Focus, mija. Focus. ||

Elizabeth called Angelica by her first name except when she had company over, in which case she introduced her as the maid. Rebecca noticed this, and one of the only times she remembers her mom laughing was when Rebecca pointed at a mocha-colored girl jumping into the club pool and said, -Look mom. There's a baby maid!! Everyone within earshot laughed and Elizabeth hushed her daughter, telling her that she had said something that was very rude and she should go on and play. Elizabeth looked at her friends, all in string bikinis, still giggling and shrugged.

-She's a very smart little girl, || Elizabeth said quietly to the other women.

Rebecca walked back to the pool, confused.

Rebecca never understood her mother's jokes and requests for explanations were met with disapproving stares. She didn't understand why calling someone a baby maid was funny and why pretending to be a duck was not. Rebecca tried to make jokes because she wanted to see her mother laugh the way she did around her friends at the club, but it never seemed to work. It was very funny when cartoon characters burped at the table, but when Rebecca tried that, her mother said she was being rude. Rebecca was

confused because she had been rude at the pool, her mother said, but then it was okay to be rude. It was funny to be rude.

The only times Rebecca saw her mother smile was when they'd go to the pool and her mother would talk to the lifeguard and when Rebecca was on stage at her beauty pageants. She would squeeze his arm and smile. The lifeguard would smile back at them and Rebecca was not supposed to go talk to her mother when she was with the lifeguard.

Rebecca was seven when she entered her first beauty pageant. Many of Rebecca's friends were in the pageants too, but they didn't care about them like Rebecca did. She wanted to be the best and get the biggest trophy so that when people came over, her mother would be proud and would show it off. Rebecca practiced without being told to and was careful not to eat too much candy. On her eighth birthday, Angelica brought her a cake she'd made and her mother only let her have one bite. Rebecca beat her fists on the ground in protest, and her mother put the rest of the cake on the floor near Rebecca's face.

-You want to get fat? Here.¶ Her mother pushed the cake farther toward Rebecca's face and Angelica dropped to her knees to pick it up. Rebecca didn't eat it and at her neighbor's birthday party the next weekend, she gave her piece of cake to the dog.

Rebecca was skinnier than most of the other little girls and she liked that the fake tan she got before the pageants made her look even skinnier. The week before the competition was her favorite because she and her mother would get their hair and nails done together. Rebecca liked when she'd leave the salon with her nails and hairstyle looking like miniature replicas of her mother's.

When Rebecca was a freshman in high school, she met her first boyfriend during a basketball game. He was eating nachos and she made fun of the smell. He said that she was funny, but didn't laugh. The first time they slept together, he told everyone on the wrestling team that she was a slut and having sex with her was like throwing hotdogs down a hallway. He didn't tell them that she cried the entire time or that he told her he loved her before they undressed. Rebecca promised herself then that she would never let anyone touch her without getting something in return. And she found that with Davey when she was in college. He took her to his parents' beach house in Santa Monica on the weekends and to dinner at her favorite sushi restaurants. He showed her off to his friends and she showed off what he gave her to her friends. It was more than that, though. She helped edit his anthropology essays. He was the first person to ever tell her that she was smart. When she started to cry after showing him a picture of her father, he held her to him as tears dampened his collar.

When Rebecca got the call about her mother's move to Chicago, she was with Davey at the beach house. She left the room so that Davey wouldn't hear the way she talked to her mother. Rebecca liked the idea of Davey and his parents thinking of her as a smart, shy college student and she didn't want any of them to see what her mother brought out in her.

She answered the phone asking, -What is it? because no conversation with her mother was a pleasant one and friendly greetings were for people who liked each other.

-Are you busy this weekend?|| her mother asked, and didn't give her enough time to respond before adding, -The movers are coming and if you want any of the stuff that's still in your room, you're going to need to come and get it.||

Rebecca's mother was leaving with her second husband and Rebecca would need to figure out a way to pay for the next semester on her own. The news that her mother wouldn't be there if she needed her hurt, but the news that her mother's money wouldn't be there if she needed it hurt more. She thought of her mother on the phone with the lipstick she painted on far above the line of her upper lip. Her mother had long toes that looked like a shrimp cocktail when they hung over the front of her open toed stilettos and Rebecca thought of those toes as her mother spoke. She was relieved when she looked at her own toes after hanging up to see that they were perfectly contained in her heels.

Her mother was intimidatingly tall with perfectly symmetrical fake breasts that began only a few inches beneath her collar bone. Her skin was so soft that her female friends sometimes found reasons to touch it without noticing. Elizabeth passed her best features on to her daughter, from her striking green eyes to her slender wrists, and anything she did not pass on, Elizabeth paid for. When Rebecca graduated from high school, per Elizabeth's demand, Rick paid for Rebecca's new lips, a chin implant, and a breast augmentation; these were the nicest gifts Rebecca had ever gotten. Sometimes, Rebecca thought that her mom paid for surgeries so that Rebecca would have a constant reminder that her mother had loved her. The phone call felt like a business transaction. At first, she was angry, but the anger subsided and was replaced by emptiness.

After the call, Rebecca went back inside and Davey did not ask if anything was wrong, which Rebecca was thankful for. Rebecca felt secure in Davey's arms, but after a few months, things started to feel too easy. Trips to the beach house became less frequent and Davey started suggesting dates where they could hang out and watch a movie. Part of her liked how comfortable it was, how she could come over in sweatpants and he wouldn't make her change like her mother did. But she also knew that she wasn't supposed to want to go over to Davey's house and leave empty handed.

Two weeks before her birthday, she printed out a picture of a matching jewelry set and left it on the couch when he got up to get a glass of water. He laughed when he came back, which made her anxious. She hoped he was laughing at the fact that she'd printed out the picture, and not at the idea of the gift itself. To the background sound of the movie's last fight scene, she slid her hand between his legs. It was a lot like training an animal, she thought, but not in a bad way. She didn't underestimate the power of incentive.

On the day of her birthday, he came to her dorm room and when she opened the door for him, she saw Davey with his hands behind his back. The hallway's fluorescent light bounced off of his gelled hair. He smiled and pulled a bouquet of flowers and a little red velvet box out from behind his back. There was no way the necklace and the earrings could have fit in that tiny box. She wished she had said that if he was going to pick one, he should have picked the necklace. The curve of his upturned lips flattened as the two of them looked at each other in silence.

-Can I come in? He handed her the flowers and she continued to stare at him. She had asked for a completely reasonable gift from a boyfriend of several months. All

he had to do was pay for it. And it wasn't even the money. He didn't care about her enough to give her what she wanted. Her throat felt dry and the silence made the room feel hot. She thought of all of the lingerie she had bought and the hours she had spent watching movies she didn't like. On his birthday, she had snuck into his room and waited for him to get back from class for two hours.

She'd been wearing a nurse costume with a too-small push-up bra that had started to cut into her chest. He'd said it was the best birthday present he'd ever gotten. That's what it looked like to do something for someone you cared about. She felt dumb thinking of herself in that nurse costume practicing different poses in front of his bathroom mirror before he got home. And if he'd have made it easy for her and told her exactly what he wanted instead of making her guess, she would have gotten it. Instead, she had to try to reach into his brain and spend time worrying about what he would think. He had to pull out a credit card, hand it to a woman behind a register, and leave with the gift she'd asked for, but he couldn't do that.

Rebecca started to cry and Davey furrowed his eyebrows. He looked confused and that made Rebecca angrier. If he didn't know what he'd done wrong by now, then he'd never learn.

-You need to go.¶ She was sitting on the edge of her bed with her head in her hands. He walked toward her and she shooed him away with her hand.

-Rebecca?¶ He walked closer to her and she snatched the flowers from his hands and threw them on the ground.

-I said you need to go,¶ she screamed and he left with the velvet box still in his hand.

All it took for Rebecca to get her own credit card was about 20 minutes and a few signatures. The first shopping spree after she got her card in the mail was even more exciting than she had imagined. She had enough room on the card to buy a chinchilla fur, a custom leather bag, and of course the necklace she hadn't gotten from Davey. For two years, she was buying everything on credit. She could also get cash by charging jewelry and designer clothes on her card and selling them to her richest friends at school. She started to find live-in boyfriends who paid her rent and boyfriends on the side who paid for nights out.

She once intentionally spilled on a purse she'd just bought so she could throw it in the trash and watch as her friends dug it out. The money supply felt endless; everything was replaceable.

But the careless days of chinchilla furs and disposable purses seem far behind Rebecca now. Her latest live-in, Brody, wants her out now that he knows she's been out with two of his friends, and her ex, Brandon, has been calling her every day for the last two weeks trying to track down the three grand he says that she owes him. Her finances aren't the only things falling apart. Black hair that's fallen from her scalp weaves around the holes in her bathtub drain like limp spider legs. Flakes of skin rub off on the inside of her satin pajamas while she sleeps. And two days ago, she bit down hard on a carrot and felt the roots connecting her gums to her wobbly molar disconnect. She wasn't surprised when she saw the proud dental tombstone sticking up from the wet carrot; the top of the tooth has been turning gray, dying, over the last few months and it had finally given up.

Her stylist Celia thinks the hair loss is from stress. –You keep losing your hair and maybe next time, we can give you a comb over,|| Celia says at Rebecca’s appointment today, pulling hair out of the curl brush. The women on either side of Rebecca, both in foils, laugh too loudly. Celia has fat ankles and no style. She couldn’t tell a knock-off Chanel bag if it were being sold out of someone’s trunk. She’s in no position to be commenting on Rebecca’s hair. And like Rebecca would listen to Celia. Celia probably dropped out of high school after getting knocked up and had her deadbeat boyfriend put her through beauty school. Before getting to the receptionist, Rebecca feigns a smile and avoids looking at her reflection in the mirror above the receptionist’s desk. She rifles through the seven credit cards in her wallet to find the one that still has a few hundred dollars in available credit left.

–A cut and color, right?|| the tall brunette behind the counter asks, and before Rebecca answers, the woman is already swiping the card. Rebecca repeats the mantra –please go through|| over and over, as if the more times she thinks it, the more likely it is to come true. She is sweating now, and lifts her arms slightly from her sides to stop the small sweat stains under her arms from expanding. She watches the machine. The receptionist holds her fingers above it in preparation for it to spit out the receipt. When the receipt finally comes out, Rebecca focuses her unblinking eyes on the small black font that reads –accepted,|| and smiles.

She still has to think of what she’ll say to Celia at her next appointment. It will be something Celia will think about every time she looks in the mirror and she’ll say it behind her back, but loud enough so that all of the other clients and stylists can hear. It’ll have to be funny, too, so that everyone will laugh really loudly.

Rebecca looks in her rearview mirror before backing up and speeding out of the parking lot in her boyfriend's silver Porsche convertible. As she merges onto the highway, she feels a familiar feeling that makes her hairline damp with sweat. She's surrounded by a cacophony of honking horns and screeching tires. A haze of red-gray smog hangs above the city as the sun sets. There's no escape from the smog or the horns or the itchy feeling on her arms. She feels as if red ants are crawling up and down her forearms, their little legs tickling her skin at first and then biting at every bit of her pink skin. She breathes slowly in and out and the phantom red ants continue marching up and down her arms until she can't take it anymore. Her hard fake nails scrape off the top layers of her skin and small white flakes drift down onto her tight black dress pants. She looks at her arm as if knowing what the rash looks like at this moment might make it feel better, but the sight of the red sores blossoming along the top of her forearms makes it feel worse. She fantasizes about taking a wire brush to it. Her skin is hot to the touch and it burns. Soon blood marks her arms in thin streaks, and with it comes something else—relief. If only she could afford to go have the rash checked out, she could stop worrying that the itch would come back. And she could finally start wearing her favorite sleeveless blouses again.

Going to the free clinic is an option, but along with the possibility of finding a remedy comes the possibility that someone might see her there. Not only that, but she would have to sit within whispering distance of Echo Park's lowlifes—people with skin diseases and stained teeth holding crying babies and reading trashy magazines.

Rebecca rolls the top down on the convertible to feel the wind in her thinning hair. She gets a text from Jonathan—he wants to see her as soon as possible. -Meet at

my place,|| it says. She pulls over and yanks up her sleeves to see how her arms look. The skin is less red than it was just moments before, but her arms are laced with long, thin scabs. If she pulls her top down low enough, he might not notice the scabs even if her sleeves were pulled up. She smiles in the rearview mirror as hard as she can to see if the whole where her molar was is visible. It's not, so she begins to drive down the boulevard. The air is getting colder and turns the tip of Rebecca's nose pink.

At the stop light on Jefferson, Rebecca hears sirens in the distance. She looks in her mirrors to see where they're coming from and the next thing she hears is the click of the driver's side door handle as the door opens.

Someone pulls her arm hard enough to pop it out of its socket. The man doesn't look like a person. He is dark moving shapes and he is screaming now. -Bitch, get out of the car!! The command makes her eardrum vibrate. She's thrashing around screaming for help and he hits her in the face with an open palm. It's dark on Jefferson, the only light around is coming from the windows of apartment buildings. Her shirt rips as she struggles and she grabs for anything she can. She can barely see in front of her, but she gets a hold of what she guesses is his arm. She claws at it and uses both of her arms to pull it towards her. She bites down as hard as she can and tastes blood. He rips her off of his arm by pulling her hair. He yells as his knife cuts into her body and throws her out of the car. At first, she feels coldness. The air rushes into her and then the coldness gives way to pain. Two people from the sidewalk are running toward the car and Rebecca screams to them. She tries to get up from the ground and he kicks her in the face. Her mouth is bleeding. Her nose is bleeding. Before the two people can catch up, the man and the car are gone. And as he peels out of the intersection, she feels wetness

on her stomach. Blood is soaking through the middle of her white silk blouse and her cashmere cardigan and her head feels light. Out of her bleeding mouth, she cries for help.

When Rebecca wakes up in the hospital, there is a young boy watching her with his big brown eyes. She wants her phone and her purse. She wants all of her things, but those are all gone. The boy waves at her before he's escorted out of the emergency room by a stern nurse in blood-spattered scrubs. As he waves, he looks right into her eyes, but doesn't smile. It feels as if everyone else in the room disappears as he looks at her, but then he is gone. A nurse with curly hair pulled back with a tie-dye scrunchie tells her she's going to feel a pinch and Rebecca wishes someone were there to hold her hand. She's hated needles ever since she saw one hanging out of someone's arm behind her father's apartment building when she was five. The man had looked sick as he sweat out of the visible pores of his gray face.

No one in the room knows Rebecca and she wishes the little boy would come back. She wishes she would have waved to him before he was gone. Not even the doctor looks at her when he tells her what's happened. He's looking at the IV and the machines connected to her. She wants to call her mom and wants her mom to be worried. The room is bright and Rebecca can't shut out the light. She hears a woman asking about her son and the nurse seems angry with her. The woman can see her son when her condition stabilizes and Rebecca wonders what's happened to the woman. Behind the other curtains, patients are asking that someone call their mothers, their brothers, their wives.

Rebecca tries to get nurse's attention. She wants something for the pain in her stomach and head. People are surrounding her, but no one is asking her if she's okay; they're asking each other if she's okay. She tries to talk, but struggles to get any words out. -Pain, she says and someone injects something into the IV. The liquid feels like it goes straight to her heart and fans out to the rest of her body in hot waves and the pain is gone for a moment. When the pain comes back, it makes Rebecca clutch her stomach and scream. She is screaming by herself until a nurse comes in and whispers a soothing shhhhh into her ear. Rebecca can't see what's beneath the blue hospital gown she doesn't remember putting on. She searches the nurse's face for answers, but none come. Only the shhhhh into her ear and the liquid into her vein. Time is moving so slowly and she wants to know if someone has called her mom. Rebecca's barely spoken with her mother since she left for Chicago. Twice when Rebecca called, a man answered and she heard her mother's voice in the background. -Tell her I'm out. If her mother were here, she would feel sorry for avoiding some of her daughter's calls and she'd apologize for everything she'd done wrong. She'd also stare at the rashes on Rebecca's arms and the visible pieces of scalp beneath her thinning hair.

The doctor comes in and Rebecca isn't sure if it's the same one from before. She wants to pull the short sleeves of her hospital gown down past her wrists. She can't understand his accent and she feels like she's looking at him through wax paper. He tells her that she's still losing blood from the stab wound and she grabs for her stomach, but he intercepts both hands before she can. She focuses on his mouth to try to make sense of what he's saying and is able to figure out there might need to be another surgery. When

she wakes up from that surgery, she hopes that someone, maybe even Brody or Jonathan, will be there.

She tries to remember what the man who ripped her out of the car looked like and the color of the nurse's scrunchie, but the images fade away before she can grab hold of them. The only clear image she can recall is the little boy's face with his brown eyes and long eyelashes. He'd waved at her like he knew who she was. Her father, her mother, Brody—none of them looked at her like they knew her. Her father and mother looked at her, but neither of them could see her. She wonders if she has ever looked at anyone like that little boy looked at her and hopes that she has.

There are bandages compressing her middle and she wants to see what's beneath them. She imagines a jagged scar twisting around her once pierced bellybutton. The skin is puckered along the edge of the pink scar. She imagines wearing a bikini and watching as other people's eyes go straight to the pink line instead of scanning the rest of her slender body like they used to. The more she thinks about the scar, the more gruesome the image becomes.

The pink scar is now purple and extends across her entire stomach. Flaky remains of scabs cluster around the scar's edges. She wants more of the medicine, but doesn't see anyone around. The skin on her arms begins to itch again, but she does not scratch. If the nurse comes back, Rebecca will ask for medicine.

Ask Again Later

-Get dressed. We're goin' pigging. ll That's how most Saturday nights with my Uncle Ed start. He's decided to dedicate his life to getting me laid, probably because it gives him a sense of purpose. I'm not sure the life of a ticket puncher is the most fulfilling. Since mom and dad are gone, it's just me and Ed and a rotation of different stray cats he takes in. I feel like I should humor him since he's the one who's been taking care of me all this time, but after three months, this shit is getting old. If I had anyone else to hang out with, there's no way I'd put up with his antics.

He's never come out and said it, but I know he thinks there's something off with me. He tells me that by the time he was 22, he'd already lost count of how many women he'd slept with. That has to be a lie. Uncle Eddie's always got dirt under his fingernails

and I don't think he's taken a shower this decade. And from what grandpa told me before he died, this isn't anything new. He said that when my dad and Uncle Eddie were in high school, their mom used to make Ed eat dinner in his bedroom because he smelled bad enough to dissolve everyone's appetite before they sat down to eat. My grandpa thought that was a funny story, but I thought it was sad to think of Ed all alone in his room.

-When you wanna get your dick wet, fat girls are the path of least resistance, he says every Saturday and laughs at his own joke. We go to the bar by my old dorm and the bartender knows what we're up to because Ed makes the same fat girl joke and winks every time before we post up at the bar. The bar is called The Magic Eight-Ball and it's kind of a miserable place. The ceiling's painted black and the tile floor near the bar is always sticky. One of the toilets in the bathroom is always broken and people have recently taken to sticking their chewed-up gum to the mirror above the bathroom sink. There's a weird mix of people there too. A bunch of nervous college kids wander in with their fake ID's and hang out at the tables in the corner during dollar draft night. They're the ones who stick the gum on the mirror and put their band's stickers on the inside of the stalls. Then, a lot of Ed-types sit at the bar and quietly drink while light from the two TV's reflects off their faces. I swear those people don't blink while they look at the TV screens. I don't know why the old people at the bar go there and put up with the shrieking girls in miniskirts and chanting frat boys, but I guess when you drink as much as those old people do, it's not a bad idea to find the best bargain. And I can't think of any other place nearby that'll serve you a tall can of malt liquor and a shot of whiskey for three bucks at eight in the morning.

At the bar, Ed'll give me a nudge and look in the direction of a thicker girl and nod, signaling the go ahead. I watch the ground as I walk up to the girl and when I sit down, I try to think of something interesting to ask. The questions I come up with are never interesting, but the girls usually answer anyway. We talk about something neither one of us knows a thing about like sports and when the conversation dies down, which it does in a couple minutes, Ed starts up as wingman. He has a rolodex of conversation topics like how many hot dogs he can eat in one sitting, how many house chores he can take care of with a supply of WD40 and duct tape, how much gas cost just a few years ago. I've gotta give it to him, though. He's got more useless information jam-packed into that greasy head than I thought was humanly possible. It makes me wonder what he could have done if he ever made it through high school.

Ed can't make his way through an algebra equation, but he can tell you anything you want to know about the Cuban Missile Crisis or the mating rituals of the Chinese giant salamander. On any day, he's got five or six books checked out from the library.

The beginning of the end of my social life started the day he first went to get his library card. When he got up to the counter to get his card, the librarian wouldn't give him one because she thought he was homeless. I'm not sure if she came outright and said he looked homeless or if he just assumed, but she didn't give him the card and that was enough to set him off.

-They worry about hobos coming in to watch porn on the public computers and use their bathrooms to take a shit, he told me years later. -So I thought if that's the person they think I am, that's who I'll be. You shoulda seen her face when she saw me

with my pants around my ankles. I'd do it again just to see the look on that broad's face.¶

The head librarian was Mrs. Davidson and her son, Adrian, went to my school. After the whole incident went down, she told every PTA yuppie and teacher about it. I'm sure she would have put up posters with black and white pictures of our frowning faces to warn everyone to stay away from the Bellar men if she'd had the pictures. Mrs. Davidson looked harmless enough with her floral dresses and angel brooches, but the woman was ruthless. She was set on making me the loneliest kid at Greenwood Elementary, which was pretty easy. All it took was a few whispers here and there before every parent had banned their kids from hanging around me. Even my best friend, Elliot, gave me an -it's not you; it's my mom¶ friend breakup talk.

The story was embellished with lots of different details over the years. In one version that I liked, he hopped up on the library counter after finishing at the computer, took a squat, and did all his business there. Then, he said -eat shit¶ before lighting up a cigarette and strolling out of the library. Whenever people tweak a story to make it better, they always add those action movie last lines that no one says in real life.

My high school still had a lot of the same kids from my middle school, but at that point, the story had been revised by so many different people that no one really believed it anymore. It took five hate-filled years, but by my freshman year of high school, people had forgotten the story or at least they'd forgotten my connection to its protagonist. That's because I'd tried to erase my connection to Ed as best I could. I started telling people he was a foster parent who adopted me so that he could collect a check from the state and that we had the same last name for legal purposes. I'd feel bad if Ed ever knew

that I did that or that I still do that, but the torture he puts me through on Saturday nights makes me feel less bad.

He thinks that the more I practice at picking up girls, the better I'll get, but I think both of us know that's not true. Last Saturday, we went to the bar and we both noticed the redheaded woman at the other end. Her black tank top clung to the crevasses where the rolls of her stomach met. The exposed sides of her midriff hung over the waistband of her skirt. She was closer to Ed's age than she is to mine and was wearing fishnet stockings. I thought fishnets were reserved for the skanky Halloween costumes that come in plastic bags and couldn't help but stare. Ed's tongue looked like it was about to roll to the ground. He raised his eyebrows and gave me a nudge before asking the bartender if he'd ever fed enough rice to a pigeon to kill it.

I tried to think of something interesting to say as I walked up to the barstool next to her, and came up with, -Where'd you get those tights? She ignored me and if I were her, I would have ignored me too. If someone walked up to me to ask where I got my pants at, I'd think he was a freak. Only girls can ask that to other girls because they might actually do something with the information.

-Did you hear that they're adding an extra lane to the highway? That's why there's all that construction. This was a question I thought she could relate to, but I was wrong. I think she nodded a little bit, but there was still no response.

The bartender was laughing at Ed's stories and I wished I could talk to people like he could. Eddie is someone who people want to say they know. He's a legend here because people can't believe all the stories until they see him in person. His hair sticks in

dreadlocked clumps and he smells like a mixture of fish and hot trash. At the only party I ever went to, people used him as a conversation starter. Guys used stories about him to pick up girls, but I didn't. It was fun for people to be connected to him through the stories they heard, but being connected to him by blood felt tragic.

The woman was playing a game of blackjack on the machine embedded in the bar and looked like she was winning.

-I heard blackjack has the best odds, I said. She kept playing. -You know, to win. I

-Listen kid, don't you have homework to do or a little league game to play in? She looked at me as she spoke and I panicked. It was much easier when the girls answered my questions and then ignored me or ignored me completely. Ed was looking at us from across the bar and I could see the disappointment in his face. I was blowing it again and I needed to think of something to keep her talking to me. If I didn't, he'd come and hijack the whole thing. I think he mostly wanted me to take someone home, but partly wanted to make fun of me after I made an ass of myself. She and I were looking at the screen in front of her. The electronic dealer was showing a six and she had a three.

-Don't hit that; three's a bust card. She clicked on the hit button with the tip of her pink nail twice bringing two tens and busted. She rolled her eyes and I wanted to say, -Told you so, but thought better of it. The woman was intimidating with her big hair and tall black boots, but was less intimidating than the girls who were usually at the bar. Even the big ones could make me feel like a piece of shit. The worst was when they turned around to their friends and laughed instead of responding to whatever dumb thing I'd come up with to say. Eddie told me never to go after girls in groups.

-They're like a pack of wolves when they're all together and they'll bite your dick off," he'd said. -Figuratively speaking." I hadn't listened. Probability seemed like it'd be on my side. I thought that if the first girl wasn't interested, maybe the second, third, or even fourth one would be. I hated to admit it, but Eddie was right. Eddie was usually right. He said to look for the girls who were alone or with one other girl of an equal level of attractiveness. The lone girls around my age were hard to find, though, so I was left with women like the redhead. That was okay with me since I did it more for Eddie than I did it for myself. Sometimes when I said the right thing, he'd give me a proud nod, which almost made the unbearable awkwardness more bearable.

We stay at the bar until really late when a lot of the casino employees get off of work. Eddie has more luck than I do with them. He's a good looking guy despite his general air of filth. My pock marks and wide-set eyes can't compete with his perfect jawline. After I fail, Uncle Ed comes to scavenge the romantic remains.

The redhead asked the bartender for another drink and I think both of us were relieved when he came over. I asked for a beer even though I really wanted a Coke. The bartender smiled at me like he was in on the joke. The redhead was starting to lose her money and I was worried she'd get up and leave when she did. The video blackjack machine was the only thing keeping us together and I said a little prayer that she'd start to win again.

-So, do you work around here?" I asked and she gulped down some of her drink. -I'm Eric by the way." Giving her my name wasn't by the way of anything we'd talked about. I could tell she didn't want to know anything about me, and that was a bad feeling. She didn't have anyone else there to talk to, and was losing her money in a

machine. Even so, she still would rather talk to nobody than talk to me. I needed to make her want to know more about me, so I thought of what Eddie might say.

-I guess I know a little bit about blackjack,|| I said. She looked at me and I looked down at my beer.

-Is that right?|| She didn't ask it like it was a question.

-Well, I did make a lot of money counting cards before I was banned from all of the casinos around Reno. I played some of the Indian reservation casinos too before they caught on.|| I tried to sound nonchalant and looked over at her to see if she was paying attention. She laughed and my heart sank.

-I bet you did. I bet you got rich doing it too.|| She made me want to curl up in a ball as small as I could under the bar, but I kept on.

-I wouldn't say rich, but you could say I made a decent living for a while.|| I sat like Eddie always sat with his knees really far apart and his shoulders slumped over. We didn't say anything for another few minutes. A young couple came and sat next to me and I wanted to tell them to move. I hated feeling like I had an audience to embarrass myself in front of. I worried that one of them would know something about counting cards and would quiz me about it. I wouldn't know what to say and my face would get all red.

-So, I'm getting pretty sick of the cold here. Aren't you?|| That was a dumb question. She was wearing less than even skinny girls wear when it's hot out. She nodded.

I worried that Eddie heard me talking about card counting. He actually did count cards and he was good. He told me that he didn't do it to make money; he did it to stick

it to the Man. He does a lot of things to stick it to the Man. But I doubt that the Man cares that he steals toilet paper from government buildings or that he saves money by refusing to shower.

-The body takes care of itself anyhow,|| he'd told me. -Putting a bunch of stuff that makes you smell like an air freshener doesn't make you any better off.|| When I was younger, he used to give me shit for taking too long in the shower because to him, anything over one minute was too long. He'd pound on the door and yell, -What are you setting up camp in there?|| and I'd jump out before I could even rinse the soap off.

The prospect of showering started to stress me out, so I gave up on it too until I started to get made fun of at school. I told Eddie when Jared Saxton threw a rock at me and called me Smelly Bellar. Eddie showed up to my school the next day. He found me after school and asked me where Jared was. I pointed to the swing set and when Eddie ran over to him, I followed. He grabbed Jared's shoulders from behind when he was mid-swing and pulled him up into the air. Eddie plopped him down on the ground and said, -You ever call Eric a name again and I'll beat your ass so bad you'll be drinking your little Happy Meals out of a straw for the rest of your life.||

Eddie got in a lot of trouble for that, but nobody ever called me Smelly Bellar after that. Eddie let me use the shower as long as I wanted at home after that too. The only condition was I had to start doing yard work for people to help pay the bills.

While I sat with the redhead, I thought of how she probably had a kid my age and wondered what she would have done if someone called her kids names. I wondered if they lived at home like I did with Eddie and if they ever went out with her on the weekends. The bartender came back and I asked for a beer and whatever the redhead

wanted. She smiled at me without showing her teeth and then smiled bigger at the bartender. She got another beer and it felt good to say, -Put them both on my tab.||

Her machine went ding ding ding and the number of credits went up to \$120.

-Looks like you might be my good luck charm,|| she said and I believed her.

-And I'm Tabby. By the way.||

-So, do you work around here?||

-Yep, right around the block. I'm actually on call right now.|| I could barely pay attention to what she was saying. I was excited to get past the introductions and onto the questions. For the first time, I thought it could really work. If I bought her a few more drinks and said things that Eddie would say, I thought she might leave with me. The couple had moved away to listen to one of Eddie's stories about when he was a dog groomer and I half-listened too.

It was the story where he was shampooing a poodle, but couldn't get it to stand up. The dog kept trying to lie down in the tub, so Eddie pulled her out. He towed her off and realized she was bleeding. When he looked a little closer, he saw that the dog was giving birth and he didn't know what to do since there wasn't much space in the grooming van and he was all alone. There was no time to drive to the vet, so he took care of it all himself, which wasn't much of a problem. Eddie had read enough about dogs to rival any vet's knowledge. The story always ended the same way.

-It was the most beautiful thing delivering all those tiny pups, but I'll tell ya, if you'd have asked me that morning if I expected to be fingers-deep in a poodle's cooch that evening, I'd have said no.||

I half smiled at the story's ending and asked Tabby if she wanted another drink. She nodded and lit up a cigarette. I could tell Eddie was starting to get drunk because he was getting louder. He never slurred or stumbled when he got drunk, but he did get loud. It usually just made people want to listen to him more.

-How do you know that guy?|| Tabby asked. -I saw you come in together and he keeps looking over here.|| I wondered whether or not I should tell her Eddie was my uncle. People were laughing at his stories and I couldn't tell a good story if I tried. I always ended up forgetting the most important details and having to work my way backwards to figure out all of the pieces I was missing. My stories are filled with lots of -wait, what was his name|| and -no, that wasn't it||s. But I also liked the idea of people at the bar knowing me and my uncle as a storytelling duo that played off of one another. I get too nervous talking to people I don't know, though. Even when someone's cart is taking up the whole aisle at the grocery store, I have a tough time speaking up and asking them to move. I didn't want Tabby to know that side of me. I only wanted her to know the Eric who counts cards, knows how to play blackjack, and buys drinks. But I didn't get the chance to answer Tabby's question.

-See that little shit down there?|| Eddie said to his audience. -That's my little nephew and we're out here celebrating cause he just passed the bar exam for Nevada. He'll be representing my ass one of these days, I just know it.||

Everyone started to clap and I felt hot all over. I hated when Ed made stuff up about me to help my chances. The bartender smiled at me. He'd heard all of the different stories. One night, I'd just gotten into med school. Another night, I'd released a bunch of animals from their cages at a research lab.

-This one's on the house, the bartender said and poured me a shot of whiskey. I focused on drinking the shot down in one gulp instead of sipping like I usually ended up doing, but it didn't work. I ended up drinking it down in a few swallows and I hoped that no one was paying attention anymore.

-A lawyer huh? Tabby asked and I nodded. -That's pretty impressive for a kid your age. How old are you anyway? I tried to do some quick math, but the whiskey had rattled my brain a little bit. I knew law school was either two or three years and then there's the test and I didn't know when you took that. But I thought of something better.

-Old enough. Another drink?

-You're cute. She squeezed my shoulder. I flagged down the bartender and he poured us another beer. I didn't want to drink mine, but when you're talking to someone and really don't have anything to say, it's important to have something else that you're doing. Otherwise, you're both just sitting there staring off and waiting to leave. I had gotten through more than half my beer before I came up with something else to say.

-Did you know that if you have more than three dogs in your house, you need a kennel license?

-Huh. I didn't. She was watching the TV. There was a pause.

-Well, yeah, I just heard that somewhere and thought it was interesting. Tabby had cashed out and was trying to get the bartender's attention so she could collect. It was time to make my move. My hands felt cold and I slowly rubbed them together between my legs to warm them up. Different words were floating around in my brain, but I couldn't seem to pick the right combination of them. I looked at Eddie at the other side of the bar and felt better.

-Listen, I might be young, but I know what I like. You seem very attractive. I mean you are very attractive and I want to know more about you. I looked from the TV to my beer to Eddie at the other end of the bar. I looked at everything except for her. She laughed, but this laugh was nicer than the first one. It was the kind of laugh strangers have when they're walking from opposite directions and move step from side to side to avoid colliding. It was a friendly, awkward laugh and I felt okay looking over at her.

-You trying to put the moves on me? She looked at me with eyes surrounded by particles of mascara. I couldn't believe she'd ask that. What the hell did she think I was trying to do buying all those drinks? I needed to sound like I was in charge. After all, I was the one paying for everything.

-Fuck yeah I am. She pulled back a little bit and I knew I'd laid it on a little too thick and looked more desperate than flirty. I needed to keep cool and decided to try out one of Ed's pieces of advice. He'd told me that if you say something mean to a girl, you got her just where you wanted her. I didn't believe him until I saw him do it. That's how Eddie worked. Since I was little, he'd tell me a lesson, and then go show me exactly how to do it. He'd showed me how you could get free candy out of the vending machine by putting a coin-shaped piece of metal attached to a string into the machine and then pulling it back out. The day after my parents' wake, he'd taken me out to ice cream and showed me how you could avoid paying for parking by putting an old ticket under the wiper. He'd kept a small stash of tickets in his glove box.

He'd told me about how girls wanted you to be a little mean while we were getting hamburgers after school. The waitress was running around from table to table and when she got to ours, he'd made a joke about how the reason she was so busy was

because all the old guys like him asked for her, the pretty girl with the curls, to be their waitress. She was way older than –girl age. She'd laughed and he'd said, –That is so cute how your eyes get all squinty like that when you laugh. I'd thought that was a rude thing to say to someone. I had squinty little eyes and I thought they made me look like a mouse. But she laughed more and put her phone number on the check.

I searched Tabby's body for a nice thing to compliment. She was a nice looking woman with shiny hair, but there wasn't anything that really stood out as something worth talking about. The key was to say something nice and then something mean. I said the first nice thing I could think of.

–That tank top really shows off your curves. She laughed and pushed out her chest.

–You think so? That was a good start, but I had to think of something meaner to keep her attention.

–Yeah, and I think it's cute how you just said _so.' Do you have a lisp? I could see in her face that that was the wrong thing to say. I couldn't think of anything about her that was endearingly negative and the lisp seemed like the perfect opportunity. I hadn't noticed it before and the fact that it kind of sprung up out of nowhere made it seem like a sign.

–Thanks for the drinks, kid. I've gotta get back to work. I was back in –kid territory and I got flustered. I grabbed onto her arm and it felt hot against my cold hand.

–Let go of me, you little creep. She shook me off and I looked at Eddie. He was already walking toward us.

-I see you got acquainted with my nephew here,|| Uncle Eddie said to her before she could push past him. -Why don't you continue getting acquainted with him?|| He pulled a crumpled fifty dollar bill out of his wallet and tried to push it into her hand.

-What the fuck is wrong with you people?|| She pushed him out of her way and walked out of the bar.

In that moment, I loved and hated Eddie at the same time. I loved that he was there to try to put things back together after they'd gone bad, but I hated how he'd tried to hand her that money. The whole thing seemed so dirty and desperate, and I wanted him to know that I'd never stoop that low. I was having a conversation with Tabby, not trying to pay for anything. It felt like he'd blown my cover and I know it might've looked weird with me sitting with someone that much older than me, but I was just a regular guy talking to a new friend at the bar. I wondered if Eddie was right to treat her like a prostitute and suddenly felt sad for her in her big tall boots. I thought of how nerve-racking it'd be to have to think of things to say to all those different people.

My First Taste

I felt the pile of sticky sweet ice cream between my legs and my stomach ached. Some of the ice cream dripped off my spoon and slid down into pockets of my inner thighs, and my doctor's face popped up in my head. He was pointing at me and laughing at the green stain on my khaki shorts. He was saying what he always says—that I'm accountable for my own actions, that the food doesn't jump off the plate into my mouth. The first time he said that, I wanted to tell him that it feels like it does, but there's really no point. He's got sunken in eyes and skinny people wrist bones that poke out and he doesn't know anything about being a fat girl.

I looked around to make sure mom wasn't home, dreaded her asking me if I'd had too much to eat. "Food coma," she says sometimes. The words fall out of her mouth. She'll stand there staring at me for a second like she's making sure I heard her, and then she'll laugh so loud that it makes Gregory, the dog, bark. She never tells me to stop

eating; instead, she waits until I've had way too much I think just so she can make her food coma joke. The phrase makes me think of long-haired thin girls who look like I used to giggling after they leave the buffet, complaining about being too full with fingers laced over flat stomachs. I want to tell her it's not funny because I'm getting bigger and bigger every day, but I never do. It's all much better when it's a joke.

My room is a dump. Gnawed on chicken legs, popsicle wrappers, and empty soda bottles cover the floor. I leave them all there to remind myself of all the things I've stuffed into my face. It's not a very good strategy, though. When I start to get that awful, empty feeling inside, no amount of trash reminders can stop me from ripping open a box of cheesy crackers.

Tonight, I'd only planned on having a little taste of ice cream as a reward for walking probably over a mile to the park and back. I carefully measured out three quarters of a cup, which is the serving size, and even scraped off the top of the measuring cup with my pointer finger like I've seen my mom do when she cooks. My doctor said to look at the serving size. But, it turns out that your stomach doesn't even realize what you're eating after three quarters of a cup. I let it melt in my mouth and tried to savor each chocolate chip as long as I could, but it didn't work. I put it in a tiny little cup so that it'd feel like more, but that didn't work either. There are all these diet tips online about how to trick yourself into feeling full, but I'm pretty sure those only work on dumb people. I told my mom about the smaller plate thing a while ago and she put this tiny steak on a salad plate and brought out her big hunk of meat on a big plate. I left the table feeling hungry and dumb.

I finished every last drop of that ice cream and sank into the living room couch. Some women were pulling each other's hair on a reality show and I was trying to figure out what they were yelling at each other about. They were in nothing but their underwear flinging their arms at each other, fighting over a guy I think and I wondered what it would feel like to be on TV in my underwear. I couldn't even imagine, but I bet it'd be like that time we were taking our vocab test in the hottest room in my middle school. I was trying to remember what anecdote meant, but couldn't think straight because I was sweating so bad. I tried to be all secretive by pulling my hoodie off in my seat, but I couldn't do it. So I stood up and pulled it off as fast as I could, and felt this terrible whoosh of cold air on my bare stomach and back. I freaked out and pulled down the t-shirt that'd peeled up with the sweater and for a second, I thought I'd just have to run out of the room with my sweater pulled halfway over my head, but I was able to rip it off in time to see everyone's faces as they laughed at me. I haven't worn a hooded sweater since.

One minute I was thinking of the girls on TV in their underwear and the hoodie and the next minute, I was thinking about that ice cream and I don't care what the doctor says, sometimes the food does jump into your mouth. Your hands are spooning out heaps of ice cream into the biggest bowl in the cupboard before you even realize you've gotten up from the couch.

The serving size thing didn't work and the small plate mind tricks didn't work, which is scary because there are eight days left to figure it all out before Jack comes to get me. I'm not going to be in this body where everything jiggles when he gets here if I can help it. I haven't sent him any full body pics yet, but he likes women who are

-average|| to -full figured.|| It says so on his profile. I've told him about almost everything else. He knows that dad left mom for the lady who did our oil changes, that my mom works at probably the only travel agency left on the planet, that my favorite bird is the toucan. We have everything in common that matters. We both like classic country, not that pop country crap and we both love animals. He likes that I have a rabbit that's sometimes named Olivia and other times named Susan. I told him that the first time we talked on the phone and he laughed so hard I think he might've started choking. -You're so weird,|| he said. That first time we talked on the phone, Jack said that I sound very sexy, which was nice to hear since I was feeling bad after eating two whole candy bars.

Now, when he calls, I talk and talk and talk and he just listens, sometimes laughs. We're supposed to get a hotel room when he gets in and it's probably going to be the best night of both of our lives. He hasn't talked much about the future, but I think he'll want to get a nice three bedroom, two bath cottage like I want. I've looked on the website for real estate listings and printed out pictures of some of my favorite houses. It's a buyer's market people say on the news. His profile says he prefers the -quaint|| over the -lavish,|| which I just love.

Mom doesn't know about any of this stuff and she doesn't need to. I think part of her wants me to go off with someone and see someone say something nice to me. She's always worrying that I don't get out enough, but it's been tough lately. I used to be able to shop in all of the regular stores with my mom back when I was skinny and I'd always say, -Look how fat I am,|| and she'd laugh and point to the shadows from my protruding sternum. It was all a big joke because I couldn't gain a pound if I tried, even though I did

try for a while. At dinner, I'd imagine the chicken breasts I ate perfectly forming little mounds where my flat chest was or a whole watermelon replacing my flat backside.

They used to call me Sticks cause of my legs, but now people call me Fatso, Lardbucket, really whatever they can think of. It doesn't bug me like you might think it would. Did you know that basically everyone in this country is fat? I'd rather have a few extra handfuls of flesh than have pants that can't stay up without a belt. When I was Sticks, my pants fell down lots of times since my butt couldn't keep them up. No matter how small the pants, they always seemed to fall down. I'd have to cinch my belt so tight that the rivets in my jeans would leave marks near my hip bones. Now that I'm not Sticks, embarrassing stuff still happens with my pants. I sometimes rip them, especially when I try to squeeze into my old ones. I'll pull up on the belt loops as hard as I can and swing my hips back and forth and side to side to work them up over my thighs. Finally, I'll hear the tear as the loops rip from the jeans and then I'll pull them off as fast as I can. I bet I'd look kind of funny if someone walked in on me doing that.

But don't get me wrong, I'm not happy all the time. There are times when I strip down and look at myself in the mirror and yell as loud as I can, -You're fat and ugly and everyone hates you!! Or I mark up my body with a permanent marker and wish that someone would cut along the dotted lines I draw to make me look like how I used to. Sometimes I wish they could just cut all that extra off and stitch me back up good as new. But I think a lot of people do stuff like that. I did the whole thing where you clip out magazine ads with skinny women who look like I used to and cried when I looked at them, but mom was right. It was just a phase and I was becoming a woman, which meant extra flab everywhere.

I'm almost sure that I gained weight in my toes, but mom said this was ridiculous. I called myself sausage toes and it's still a funny joke between me and my mom. Men like women with curves, my mom tells me all the time, but sometimes I worry that I'll never stop getting bigger, that the fat will creep up on me until I'm just a huge ball of person that has to roll around to get anywhere.

Mom was pretty worried when this whole thing started. I was eating a lot, but mom said that was just what teenagers did. I feel like the fatness happened over night. One day, I was buying bikinis without trying them on and the next, I was in the old lady section stuffing myself into those swimsuits that look like dresses and stick to your legs when you get wet. I'm not stupid and I get that eating more makes you bigger. But everything was so out of control for those couple of years and it felt like the only thing I was in charge of was what I put on my fork. I couldn't make mom stop yelling at dad on the phone or make dad come back home. I couldn't convince Mrs. Cole that I didn't need to retake U.S. history or make Robbie take me out to a movie. But I could make a perfect BLT sandwich and take it into my room where no one was yelling and no one was making fun of my chicken legs.

Anyway, there's this new pill that's supposed to be the fix. The doctor's given me lots of different ones before, but those were all bad. One messed with my brain and made me think my arms were falling off and another made me grind my teeth for six hours. This one's different, though. It's going to make me lose the forty pounds I've put on in the last two years. It'll get me out of the obese category, which will make my doctor happy. I hate hearing him say that—obese. Every time he says it, his lips tighten up to make the -oll sound and he kind of just groans the word out. It's the sound of some

small animal dying and he seems very disappointed in me, maybe for making him make that animal sound. He said that it's not just the extra eating that's the problem, and I was glad to hear that because I didn't like thinking of all of those delicious pizzas as the enemy. He said that puberty could have had something to do with why I gained so fast, which my mom and I agreed with. Neither of us told him that a few nights before, mom baked brownies and I ate more than half of them. I felt better thinking of puberty as the enemy, which it kind of is. Since I went through that whole thing, my armpits smell weird, like really weird and I have to shave my legs, my armpits, just about everything. Next thing you know, I'll be shaving my back too. I'm just glad I'm not in school anymore because I bet they'd start calling me Fatty Sasquatch or Tubby the Werewolf. The dumbest names always hurt the most.

Lots of actors and actresses are using this new pill that the doctor prescribed to lose weight and it's working really well for them. It also makes them really alert. That's how they're able to make all those movies without taking too many breaks. This pill is from some really exotic African root and I'm not even sure it's been approved by the FDA yet, but the doctor knows somebody who knows somebody. He really wants me to be skinny. I do too. Mom pulled me out of school after Robbie and Eric had me meet them in the parking lot for a surprise. I was excited because I'd been letting Robbie cheat off of my algebra tests and he'd told me that I was awesome, so I figured we were all going to go out. I got out there and they were holding a cake, but it wasn't my birthday. I was confused, and before I could figure it out, they smashed the thing in my face and a bunch of people saw it.

Once I'm skinny again, I'm going to take Jack to the high school I'm supposed to be going to now and we'll find Robbie and Eric. We'll pull up in Jack's car right in front of the school. I'll be wearing a tight red dress and Jack will be in a t-shirt that shows off all of his muscles. We'll just point at Robbie and Eric and laugh because we'll show up in a nice car and they'll be eating the lunches their moms packed like losers.

The therapist, or what my mom called the feelings doctor when I was younger, thinks it all came on after dad left. But I'm not sure that guy knew what he was talking about. It was around the same time, but it's a lot more complicated than he thinks. People don't just have something bad happen and decide they don't care about anything anymore and get fat. He just wanted me to talk all the time and never explained anything. -And then what happened, and then what happened? He would ask that for about an hour and then I would leave. I made up a lot of the stuff I told him just to make sure he was listening. But, I couldn't really tell. He just nodded and nodded and never told me anything a regular doctor would. I said, -Sometimes, I think about what I'd look like if I had my head on a rabbit's body. Is that weird? He answered by asking, -Do you think that's weird? It seems like a very easy job to me.

I hate that mom insists on paying for this garbage. She's so nice to me and is trying to help me lose the weight. Even when she jokes about it, I know she's just doing the best she can to make both of us forget that we're sad about a lot of stuff. She feels bad about the pies and cookies she made for me when I'd come home crying. -It's nothing that a warm pie can't fix, she'd say and she was right. One bite of her rhubarb pie and the world of too tight pants and smashed cakes would fade away at least for a little bit. I feel guilty because Mom's getting tired of working extra long hours

scheduling other people's vacations so she can pay someone to watch me when she's working.

I think she has to pay the homeschool teacher too, but I don't know. Most of the time, the teacher sits in the kitchen and makes moaning noises on the phone, but sometimes she teaches me important stuff like what an igneous rock looks like, what Shakespeare wrote about, how to French a guy. She tells me everything I guess friends would tell each other, but I haven't had a friend since my neighbor Maggie moved away in the fifth grade.

I probably would have stayed in school if I'd had friends. Classes were okay, but lunchtime was awful. I didn't want to have people see me sitting alone, so I'd eat my lunch in the bathroom. Some girls found out and they told everyone about. They made up a rumor that I sat in there so long so I could spy on all the other girls because I was a big lesbian.

Mom doesn't know that I've been learning about how to French a guy or that Jack and I have been texting, emailing, calling, and instant messaging for like six months now at least. Jack is a freshman in college. When he first messaged me, he thought fourteen was a little young for him, but we found out that age doesn't matter when you're in love. He looks very sophisticated in all of his profile pictures. He has a mustache and sideburns and can play the guitar. Some of his pictures show him with his dog, but most of them are just of him in front of the mirror. It's very hard to find a picture of yourself alone, you know? I had to teach myself to use the scanner and Photoshop just so I could get rid of mom and dad in the only good pictures I could find of myself. That was the only time mom was a little bit suspicious, when she found that picture of me with her and

dad cropped out. It was an assignment the homeschool teacher made for me, I said. I had to superimpose my face over a bunch of famous people's faces from magazines. It was the first thing I could think of and I think she bought it. She looked at me and smiled and gave me a little pat on the head.

I'd like to tell her about Jack, like how he wrote a whole song about me and played it for me using his web cam or how he sent me fancy matching underwear in purple velvet. I didn't tell him that I tried to put on the bottoms and I completely ripped one side. That's the thing about getting fat is you think about being fat almost all the time, but then always forget how fat you are. I'm always trying to squeeze through places that are half my size or picking up shirts that only some fraction of me would fit in.

Mom wouldn't want me talking to anyone online, though. After all, that's how dad and the oil change lady met. The oil change lady was really ugly by the way. She was on the same dating site I was and girls can join for free. It didn't even look like she tried to pick a good picture, or Photoshop a bad one. She probably put up the very first one she found. It was one of her fishing and I swear to God, she looked more like a fish than the fish she was holding did.

Mom met her last boyfriend, Jeff, online and he turned out to be a complete weirdo. He was really nice online and she showed me some of the messages he sent about how he wanted to meet me and how he wanted to take her to Niagara Falls. But when they met in person, he didn't look anything like his profile picture. He looked like he could be my grandpa and he smelled worse than my grandpa did before he died. Even the carnations he brought smelled bad. I saw a black worm crawl out of one of them. It

didn't really seem like he wanted to meet me. He looked at me and nodded while my mom did introductions. I thought about shaking his hand until I remembered I still had mustard on my fingers from the sub sandwich I'd just eaten and I didn't want to embarrass mom. She told me they went to the drive-in theater and he wasn't very respectful of her personal space and that's all she wanted to tell me. She said that I always needed to respect myself enough to demand respect from others and that most men only wanted one thing blah blah blah.

I filled in the rest. I imagined that he sat there talking about some world war he was in, breathing heavy, trying to put his prune fingers all over mom. She probably tried to watch the movie, but couldn't hear what was going on over the sound of his labored breathing and nose whistling. Mom had gotten all dressed up, that I did know, and it was sad to think she wasted her first date since dad on the nose whistler.

Mom says the world wide web, and she always calls it that, is a place for deceit. It's a place for people to make up who they are, sell things that don't work, prey on people's insecurities. But mom's just scared. She hasn't met anyone like Jack who's kind and thoughtful and handsome. She just needs to be more careful.

So, back to the pills. I've been on them for four days and I can feel them working. Four days on the pills, four left until Jack comes. Mom doesn't keep a scale in the house, feeling doctor's orders, but I think I'm already losing the weight. I'm nervous that Jack will think I'm a little too fat, but I found this three-day cleanse that will ship overnight for only \$99.99. I had to slip mom's credit card out of her wallet before she left for work two days ago and I was able to put it right back that night without her noticing. It's really a very good deal and there's a money back guarantee. If I don't lose 15 pounds

in four days, I get all my money back. You see, this was the plan all along. I'm going to use it, lose that weight, but then say it didn't work at all and I am a very dissatisfied customer and the customer is always right. They'll take it back and credit mom's card and then it works out for everyone.

Jack has to drive for like five hours to meet me, but he says it's worth it. He told me to wear the purple velvet underwear, and I don't want to disappoint him, so I'm going to use mom's card to get something like the ones he bought. I'll see if they can overnight those too. I can't wear those ripped bottoms, and I definitely need a more padded bra. When I got fat, the only thing that didn't get much bigger at all was my boobs, which sucks.

He'll get here on a Saturday, which is usually when I go to dad's. I'll just call dad and tell him that I have to do some school tests or something and can't see him. He probably won't mind. He forgets about me a lot of the time anyway. Jack said he's burned me lots of CD's of his music and other people's and we're going to listen to them on Saturday. We're going to drive out to Lake Purdy and listen to them in his car and have a picnic before we go to the hotel. He's going to bring wine too and he asked me what kind I like and I had to look up all the different kinds so that I wouldn't sound dumb. I told him that I usually drank cabernet and he said I was a bad girl for drinking alcohol before I'm allowed to. I wasn't really sure what to say to that because I'm really not that bad, but I kind of liked thinking that I was, so I said, -You have no idea ;).||

Today's the day and I woke up to mom screaming my name from down the hall. I panicked and thought she'd seen our chat about the fancy underwear or saw all the stuff

I've been charging on her card. When I got to the kitchen, I saw that she was crying and I hadn't seen her that bad since I found her naked, curled up on her bed after dad left. It was the kind of cry where your whole body is crying, your shoulders shaking and mouth drooling.

I ran toward her. She knew; I could feel it in my stomach. All of the extra hours she'd worked to keep me away from all of the bullies at school had gone to waste. She had a bad job and a bad daughter who was going to run off with a college boy and never come back. She'd be left paying for all the pills and therapists and her daughter would be off having babies somewhere in a bigger town. I started to rehearse what I'd say about how what me and Jack have is a very special thing, how he's my very best friend, and how we're going to have a fresh start together. I started crying too thinking about my mom all alone with the rabbit and the dog barking at her when she laughed at the T.V. I was really very bad, just like Jack said and not in the fun way he'd meant it.

Mom grabbed me and we swayed from side to side as we cried together.

-I just don't know what happened. What happened?|| She pushed me away from her and looked into my wet eyes.

I stared unblinking and tried to think of what did happen. Maybe it was dad leaving that caused the whole thing like the doctor said. Nothing that happened was her fault, I wanted to tell her, but her eyes looked so empty and I didn't think anything I said could make her feel any better. I wanted to tell her that we were better off now, that everything was getting better and I was happier than before. I'd only thought a few times about killing myself by drinking a bunch of bleach so that everyone at school and dad would feel bad for everything they'd done. That was probably just a phase too. I

wondered if she'd read my journal entries where I talked about that and scanned the kitchen for my little leather notebook. She kept looking at me, her lips quivering. I thought she might say anything at any moment. She puffed out little bits of air from between her lips and I thought she might be saying something I could hear if I leaned in a little closer to her.

The clock past mom's head read nine o'clock and she was going to be late for work. I was grinding my teeth from all of the different pills and I hoped mom didn't notice. The cleanse made my stomach scream, not growl, and I worried she could hear it.

-Sweetie, I don't know what happened. I just didn't see...|| Her cheeks looked so puffy and hair clung to her sweaty forehead. I was only inches from her face, waiting for what I knew was coming. I could visualize her wagging her finger at me, telling me what a disappointment I'd turned out to be, how much she's sacrificed for me. It was all for nothing, she'd say, because I hadn't listened to any of her rules. She'd remind me how much she pays a month for my phone and how she didn't have her own phone until she was almost 40. She'd say that she trusted me to behave while she was away working to get me all the things that I wanted, that she gave up finishing college to have me and all I'd done was cause her grief. I tried to stop grinding my teeth and shut my eyes. I wanted to feel ready for everything she was going to say.

-I was backing out of the driveway and I hit something. It's that car's damn blind spot. I swear I didn't see anything, but I felt the thud and I ran out of the car. It was Gregory, sweetie. He wasn't even breathing when I saw him. It was just terrible.||

She was sobbing again, pressing her fingers into my shoulders. She searched my face, waited for me to say something. My stomach was wrong; it wasn't about me at all.

And then I thought something really evil. I thought about how glad I was that it was Gregory and not the journal or the chat logs.

-He looked so sweet there with his little gray paws and I just can't believe it. Do you remember when we got him as a little puppy? I remember your dad brought him home and I'd said no pets ever, but Gregory was a very special little animal. Do you remember how strong he was and how he could drag that plastic patio furniture around?||

I kept nodding, said I'd help with everything. Yes, I remembered and I was sad, but I wasn't crying anymore. Mom pulled me against her chest again. Gregory was a very good dog and I felt bad for mom since she was so crazy about him, but he was getting older now. It felt like we were taking him to the vet all the time for ear infections and liver problems. We were giving him all these different medications and he seemed so tired all the time. I knew I was supposed to want to cry like mom was, but I couldn't. I wanted to text Jack and tell him about what happened and he'd say just the right thing. He'd remind me that we'd be together soon.

-Should I call someone, mom?||

I was still pressed up against mom's chest and my voice sounded muffled.

-Don't you worry and don't go outside. I wouldn't have you see that. I don't think I can bear to see it myself,|| she said and reached for the phone.

I walked to my room closed the door. Jack would understand what it's like to lose an animal. I think he told me once that he had two mutant gerbils and one of them ate the other one. He wrote a song about it. I felt sorry for mom and for Gregory, I really did, but I wanted mom to leave so I could get ready. I thought about baking a pie for her before Jack got there to make her feel better.

I had a dream last night that Jack was coming and I was thin again, but mom was blocking the doorway. Mom was bigger than the door, which looked like 10 feet tall. She was yelling something I couldn't make out and I think dad was there too. It doesn't take a dream expert to know that I was worried that this kind of thing would happen. If mom stayed home much longer, she'd realize that dad wasn't there to pick me up and would call to see why he wasn't coming.

-This is just like you, Ron, to leave your daughter waiting for you while you do God knows what. She'd keep shaking her head from side to side and rolling her eyes. Sometimes, I think mom imagines that people on the other side of the call can see what you're doing while you're talking to them. He would tell her that I texted him not to come and say something really mean about mom needing to spend more time worrying about herself and her shitty life than about him. She would probably cry and it would all be my fault. Lately, it seems like I can't do anything for myself without making somebody sad. Everyone thinks they can tell me what to do-- the doctor, the tutor, mom, dad. But really, nobody ever asks me what I want, like how many times do I have to tell mom that I don't like watching ice skating on TV and doing puzzles on the coffee table before she stops making me do them?

That's the thing about Jack that mom doesn't get is that sometimes you have to do the things you don't want to to make other people happy. It doesn't seem like such a hard thing to get, but mom just doesn't get it. She means well, I know she does, but she'll never get what it's like to be me. Back when she was my age, things were a lot easier I think because back then, people would forget about you doing something dumb.

Now, you do one embarrassing thing and someone posts about it and the whole world knows.

Jack knows what it's like to feel completely alone like me and once we're together, we can get rid of that feeling forever. I won't have to worry when the internet's down or when I have bad reception because we'll be together and none of that stuff will matter.

Mom's still crying downstairs and I want to go give her a hug, but I also want her to leave. I don't want to be in trouble for trying to be happy and I don't want to think about her or Gregory or dad or anything else except for Jack. I want to keep thinking about which dress I'm going to wear when he comes to get me. So much still has to get done and it's been hard trying to sneak around to finish it all. The underwear I bought online came in yesterday and I tried them on. They looked nothing like they did on the model even though she was a plus size model and I wanted to scream. Nothing ever goes my way.

The last two days, my heart's been feeling like it's too big for my body. It beats so hard and feels like it's taking up so much space. It speeds up and slows down really fast, and it's been making me woozy. But I still want to take some extra of the pills I got with the cleanse and the ones from the doctor just to be extra sure that everything goes as I've been planning it. They make my stomach hurt so bad, but I'm scared that Jack's going to see me and he's going to be disappointed. He's always telling me how hot I am and how he can't wait to see me in the underwear he bought, but I can't believe him. I want to listen to him when he says that and I want to believe my mom when she tells me I look like an angel, but I can't.

When I was Sticks, I was way too small, and now I'm way too big. People want what they don't have, my mom says, but that's not true for me. I want most of what I used to have and some of what I have now. I don't want all that extra fat on my legs, but I do want a little around my hips and way bigger boobs so I can look good in that really tight red dress. I want to have Jack, but I also don't want to think of anyone looking at me in just my underwear.

I just heard the front door close. Mom left without saying goodbye and I'm a little worried she's still crying. It's almost 1 o'clock and there's not much time left. Jack keeps texting me even though I said -No texting while you're driving LOL. He's so excited, but I'm scared. My heart feels too big in my chest again and I can't stop thinking of his disappointed face when he opens the door. I shouldn't have sent those pictures with my face on the underwear model's body last night. I don't think things through before I do them sometimes, but I wanted him to say something nice, something that made me feel grown up enough to want to do what he wanted me to when he showed up. It's easy to talk about all that sexy stuff, but having to actually do it will be weird. He'll know that I'm no good even though I've been practicing really hard and asking the tutor all of the important questions I can think of. I have pages and pages of notes that I've taken, but you know, reading a book about how to ride a bike doesn't magically make you able to ride a bike.

Suddenly, I feel so afraid of everything and I almost want to tell Jack not to come because I'm very sick. But he'd get mad and say that he's been looking forward to this for a really long time. There's only one thing that makes me feel better and that's those pills. I think about taking more than one of each kind and if a little is good, a lot is so

much better. I think of swallowing three of each and watching in the mirror as my body shrinks down to a perfect size and smile. Yes, I'll take three of each. The cleanse came with this juice and some pills, but I've barely had any of the juice. They don't tell you that it actually has a lot of calories and that's the last thing I need right now. I've had to pull out a lot of tricks to make mom think I'm eating my dinner because I know she'll just lie and tell me I'm perfect the way I am. Being this hungry has made me feel like I'm going crazy. I didn't think it was possible to think about one thing all day, but it is. Any regular thought I have is taken over by images of donuts, blocks of cheese, and loaves of bread.

All those pills hurt going down and there's less than two hours before Jack gets here. Mom's texted me to ask if dad picked me up already and asks if I might want to come back home to have a little service for Gregory after she gets off work. The text makes my stomach hurt worse. We weren't planning on being around when mom got home. We were planning on picnicking and then off to the hotel. I don't know what Jack has planned after that because he said it's all going to be a big surprise. My hands are shaking and it's hard to pull my tummy camouflage tights up over my belly. I'm so dizzy and I kind of want to tell mom yeah, we should do a service for Gregory and talk about all of the cute things he used to do. It feels like my stomach is being pulled in all different directions and my blood feels slow. My heart is too big and Jack won't stop texting. My screen lights up and I see -HELLO?! pop up and it looks blurry. I need to sit down.

My head is too heavy and I want mom to come home. I want to tell Jack that it's all going wrong and it's not his fault, but there's Gregory and the underwear that don't

fit, the rip I just got in my tights and everything else. He'll be here soon and I want to hug him and hide from him at the same time. Mom's going to be so mad when she sees that charge on her card and I still feel so bad about Gregory. I'm looking in the mirror and the dress I picked looks too big, but the tights make me feel like I can't breathe. The poster on my wall looks like it's swaying from side to side. He'll be here soon and I need to put my high heels on, but I can't stand up, not now. It's too dark in this room to see the posters anymore and I want to take a nap. My body feels so slow, but my brain is moving so fast. My heart is beating so fast. Everything goes dark.

Something's pounding inside me and it's so loud. It shakes my ribs, my guts, my whole body even through my toes. -You in there, babe?! I hear and I realize it's not inside me, it's outside. He's at the door and he's knocking loud like a cop would and I'm still sitting propped up against my bedroom wall. I feel much better now but my brain still feels like it's floating. Everything is kind of confusing and nothing in the entry way looks like it's where it should be. The knocking, it won't stop and I yell -Coming!! before thinking and I'm up on my feet.

There's no going back now. He's here, right on the other side of the door and I'm excited again. I swing the door open and he's already walking away from the door. My hands are still shaking, excitement I think. I don't know what to say. I wave and try to pull in my stomach.

-Jack?! I look at my feet and see that I didn't get the high heels on. I stand up so straight, it hurts my back. It's darker outside than I thought it'd be. I don't think he's the person from the pictures. I'm not even sure that this is Jack. We don't say anything for a while, but then we both open our mouths, but he closes his again.

-What time is it?|| I ask.

We're quiet again for what feels like a long time.

-I...need to go,|| he says and his mouth is still open. I realize that my dress is tucked into the front of my tights and that I'm standing on the balls of my feet to look taller. I'm still feeling weird and suddenly, the fuzzy outline of his car is getting smaller as he leaves. I steady myself in the door frame and pull the dress out of my tights. I shut and open my eyes as he drives away to bring the world back into focus.

Stealing Diamonds

Adam leaned against the wall, his forehead flat against the hard surface, and tried to brace himself for when his dad threw the next bottle. He could hear quick gulps and loud swallows as his dad finished the drink in his hand. A trail of ants carried pieces of petrified potato chips to a hole in front of Adam's feet. He stood rigid, looked up from the ants, and pressed his shoulder blades together before the bottle flew across the room, hit his spine in the same place the last one had, and shattered on the floor.

The sound of the glass crashing scared Adam more than it hitting him because loud noises sometimes made his dad crazy. When his dad heard noises that were too loud, sometimes he'd hit Adam with whatever he was holding and lock him in the closet for the rest of the night. Other times, he wouldn't hit him with anything, but would look at him in a way that told him he'd be in really big trouble if it happened again. Once while Adam was trapped in the closet, he heard the muffled sound of his dad crying and hitting

his fists against something. Each time Adam's heart beat, he felt a thud of pain in his back and it hurt him to breathe.

Adam looked down at one ant that carried the crumpled up body of another and wondered if the body being carried away was the one he had smashed with his thumb into the floorboard the day before. Soon, his dad would fall asleep in the recliner with his mouth open and Adam would pick up the shards of glass and cut his finger to watch what would happen.

Now, he stood facing the wall knowing better than to turn around, and waited to hear his dad fall asleep or open another bottle. If his dad passed out, Adam could make his escape, but if he heard the pop of another bottle opening, he'd have to stand against the wall for at least another 20 minutes. This was the third night that he'd had to stand against the wall as his dad made the sound of a gun firing before pelting the bottles across the room. The nights before, Adam heard the sound of eleven bottle caps pop off. Tonight, though, nine was enough and Adam went limp with relief at the sound of his dad's snore; his knees were starting to ache.

He knew which floorboards creaked the loudest and was careful not to step on them as he snuck away. The last time he'd stepped on one of the floorboards, his dad woke up and yelled words that Adam didn't understand. Sometimes, his dad spoke in English, and sometimes, he spoke in another language that Adam didn't know. Mostly, his dad spoke in grunts that only Adam and maybe his mom could decipher. Low ones meant that he had already been drinking a lot and was tired. Higher, screechy grunts meant that he was about to come after Adam or his mom. The noise had conditioned

Adam so when he heard the school bus slam on its old brakes a few houses down, he winced.

Adam remembered the time he stepped on the floorboard and it let out a squeal, and when it did, his first instinct was to run. But before he could, his dad was awake and was grabbing a handful of Adam's shirt. He couldn't hear anything aside from the grunts and the sound of his own heart beating. He felt like his brain was rattling inside his skull as his dad shook him.

He practiced hopping from safe board to safe board when his dad was out, positioning each slender foot carefully within the confines of the silent boards. Stepping on those silent ones kept his dad from waking up; they kept him protected. After picking up the glass shards, Adam delicately balanced on the balls of his feet as he walked to his room. He moved quickly from board to board, and after each move, he checked to make sure his dad was still asleep. Once he finally made it to his room, he let out a long sigh. He hadn't realized that he'd been holding his breath. He was safe now, but his stomach started to knot as he realized he'd made a terrible mistake—he'd forgotten his backpack next to the TV. He dreaded walking back into the living room and didn't want to see his dad with white foam gathering in the corners of his open mouth.

The walk back to the TV seemed scarier than the walk away from it, but his math homework needed to get finished. Mrs. Hall said that if he didn't finish his division worksheet, he would have to miss recess and if he kept forgetting to do his homework, she'd have to have a conference with his mom and dad. Mrs. Hall didn't know that Adam's mom had left a few months before, the night before his ninth birthday, and that Adam wasn't sure when she was coming back.

Mrs. Hall was the one who answered Adam's screams for help when the sixth graders locked him in the custodial closet. She squeezed him tight against her and said it was okay now, but he couldn't stop crying. She felt so warm and nice and she smelled like strawberries. Adam didn't tell her who'd locked him in there, but the boys saw him hugging her, so they called him teacher's pet. They laughed at him and said he might as well marry Mrs. Hall while, but he didn't mind. That didn't sound like a bad idea.

Adam wanted to tell Mrs. Hall that the night his mom left, he thought she was taking him with her to his grandma's house. She'd said that she was going to get them both help, and Adam had packed three changes of clothes, the two medals he got from playing soccer when he was still allowed to play, and the wooden rubber band gun he kept under his bed. He waited in front of his bedroom window, scanning the streets for familiar headlights, but the headlights didn't come. For the next three months, his bag would still be packed in the corner of the room so he'd be ready when she came to get him.

It hadn't been that long, and he knew that she'd come back. Something had probably happened to her when she went to get help. Maybe his dad had found her, hit her on the head, and was keeping her locked up somewhere. Or maybe his dad had somehow found out they were going to his grandma's and by the time his mom got there, grandma was tied up in a chair. His dad hadn't been home since the night before and Adam had thought about making his escape then because the moment his dad got back, there wouldn't be an escape. What if his dad saw the packed up bag in his room? He'd know that Adam was planning to leave with his mom and he'd get blamed for it. Adam had wanted to tell his dad that it was his fault that mom had left.

He wanted to run into the middle of the street and scream for help, but the thought of his dad pulling up in his loud truck paralyzed him. If he ran away, he knew that his dad would find him, and when he did, he would make sure that it never happened again. Maybe instead, Adam could find a weapon like a baseball bat or a glass bottle and could wait behind the front door until he heard it creaking open when his dad got home. He could catch him by surprise, and when he did, he'd hit his dad right in his face until his nose bled and then he'd hit him some more. He'd crash the bottle against his dad's chest and use the jagged edge to stab him. Maybe that'd make his dad say -I'm sorry. I didn't mean to, like Adam said when he spilled the apple juice all over the kitchen counter. His dad had shaken his shoulders so hard his neck hurt for three days, but he was careful not to spill again. And maybe if he hurt his dad really badly, he'd be sorry too, and would want to help Adam find his mom and would try to be better. That night, he fell asleep curled around the baseball bat.

When his dad came home the morning after Adam's failed escape, Adam woke up on the living room floor to the sound of the door creaking. He reached for the bat, but his dad kicked it away. The bus driver was honking the horn at the end of their block and if he didn't catch the bus, his dad might try to make him stay home and clean the kitchen or stand by the TV all day to change the channels and adjust the volume since the channel changer was broken. The plan would have to wait; he was going to miss the bus and Mrs. Hall might call the house to see why Adam missed class and why he hadn't been turning in his homework.

Mrs. Hall was very nice and Adam didn't want his dad to come to a conference and start grunting at her too. He didn't want his teacher to see how hairs grew out of his

ears like an old man or the permanent picture on his arm of a naked woman who looked nothing like his mom. He didn't want her to see his dad's hand with three short stubs where a pinky, ring, and middle finger should be. Mrs. Hall would stare at the missing fingers and would wonder what happened and Adam's dad would try to show how strong his pointer finger and thumb still were like the time at the gas station.

The man behind the counter had looked at his dad's mangled hand and his dad said something that sounded like -watch! as he pulled out a thin, dirty nail that he kept in his wallet and bent it right in half. Adam was embarrassed and didn't want his dad to do anything that made people to look at the hand. The gas station man had seemed confused and a little impressed by the whole thing, but Mrs. Hall wouldn't be impressed. Adam would try to explain how his dad told him that someone called a haji who was Adam's age had handed him a cell phone that wasn't a cell phone, and that it exploded as he was throwing it out of his hand. He'd tell her how other soldiers searched through the dust to find his fingers, and how the pointer finger and thumb and were reattached, but the other ones were in too many pieces to be put back together.

Sometimes, when Adam told people that story, they would say his dad was very brave, and he liked to hear them say that, but he didn't like how they'd stare at the hand because when they did, he did too and it made him remember that the hand would always look that way. It would always look like it was melting and the jagged purple lines between the reattached fingers and the back of his palms made him look like Frankenstein. The hand seemed pieced together; even the nubs of the other fingers seemed like they didn't belong. They were redder than the rest of the hand and were always flaky.

Whenever Adam stared at the deformed hand, it made him remember the night that his mom got a call about his dad and how she started crying and said that there was good news and bad news. She tried to explain that his dad was coming home early, but that something bad had happened to him. She explained what happened by talking to him like he was a baby, using the word –ouchie|| over and over, which made Adam mad. He told her not to act like he was a baby, he was seven years old, but was a little relieved that she didn't describe exactly what it looked like.

He'd show her that he really wasn't a little baby anymore. When she told him about the hand, his first thought was when he was older, he would go over to the village where his dad was stationed and would track down the kid that handed his dad the phone and would cut off his whole hand with a big sword like he'd seen in a movie. Once he found him, he'd say, –I've come to seek vengeance|| in a deep voice before cutting the hand with a sharp sword, which would make a swish sound and afterward, he'd say –that was for my father.|| He would fight off other people with his sword, which would be custom made by an expert fighter, and would leave as the man held onto his bleeding arm.

Adam didn't tell Mrs. Hall or anyone else at school about his plan for vengeance. His only real friend, Bryan, had already made fun of him in front of the entire lunch table for playing make believe so much. Even if Mrs. Hall asked to have a conference, his dad wouldn't go, but he might still answer the phone if she called or try to go to their house. She'd see the broken window in the living room and would sit on the dirty green couch with big tears in it. She'd wonder if the house had ever looked like regular, clean people had lived in it and Adam would want to tell her that it didn't used to be so bad. Adam,

his mom, and his dad used to have dinner together sometimes in front of the TV and sure his dad would call him mean names sometimes like dumbass, but he didn't try to hurt him all the time. His dad was usually nice to his mom, too, always telling her that she was a nice piece, which meant she was very pretty. They used to say nice things to each other, but then his mom started to be sad all the time and would sit in the bedroom crying for hours and hours. She wouldn't make them dinner and it made his dad mad because he said he didn't sign up for cooking and cleaning.

There was only one way to make sure that Mrs. Hall didn't call, didn't come by, and never saw his dad the way he was now. He had to finish his homework. Before leaving his room, Adam peered down the hallway and saw the back of the recliner. He crouched slightly as he walked back to the room to the background sound of his dad's snores, rhythmic and reassuring. Adam jerked around his head in the direction of a familiar sound of mice scratching the inside of the kitchen cupboards. He considered checking the traps, the only chore he liked doing, but thought there may not be enough time if he did. That was a stupid idea. It was only a few more steps to his worn backpack, and he took each step carefully. The mice were still scrambling inside the cupboards and when he was finished with his homework, he would check the traps to see if anymore mice had been killed and if they had, he would add them to the pile in the backyard with the other verminous spoils of war.

Adam slipped past his sleeping dad and got a hold of his backpack. The mission was half complete, but he had to keep to his exit strategy of stepping on only the silent boards if he wanted to get back to his bedroom without waking his father. He looked away from the chair and his dad in it as he crept past him. As he was walking back to his

room, he thought of himself as the suited hero in his favorite action movie, which made the journey back much easier. The bag on his back was full of diamonds and he needed to get back to his getaway car before the sleeping guard woke up. He held his fingers in the shape of a gun against his chest. The guard didn't wake up, and Adam was relieved that he didn't have to shoot him. He was quick on his feet and was able to get back to the room without tripping any alarms.

He was too distracted to start his homework. His mind was filled with secret agents, sleeping guards, precious jewels, and high-tech weapons. Mrs. Hall might be disappointed, but he could get up early and finish it or stay in at recess. He would finish his homework before it was due another night, but tonight, he had other missions to complete.

-Yes, this is Agent Brown,|| Adam whispered to himself. -The mission was completed. I am ready to accept the next one.|| The room he was in was no longer his bedroom. There was no mattress on the floor or cracks in the blue-grey walls. The floor wasn't coated in a film of dust and there wasn't a crucifix hanging beside the door. Instead, the room had bright white walls and metal desks. People dressed in suits were filling out paperwork. Light reflected off the tile floors and on the wall was a portrait of Agent Cruze, who founded the organization. Agent Cruze was Agent Brown's hero. He once killed six armed mafia men with his bare hands and another time, he fought off a whole pack of killer dogs released by his arch nemesis, a former agent who betrayed him by siding with the Ninja Assassins. Agent Brown would take on any mission that Cruze asked of him, but this next mission would be harder than he anticipated.

-Agent Brown, the president's daughter is being held captive by the Ninja Assassins, he said. -They don't want a ransom and they said they'll kill her if an agent doesn't meet with them in the next 15 hours and meet their demands. I've already reserved your flight to China. A woman named Red will meet you at the airport and will give you more details about the rest of the mission. ||

Agent Brown was a little bit nervous about this mission. Up until now, he'd never killed anybody, but knew that this time, he might need to. He had been in his fair share of combat, but was only involved in smaller missions. Being chosen to complete this mission was a great honor; it meant that Agent Cruze thought he was the best agent in the entire organization and he might even get a promotion. It was a good opportunity, but it was also a lot of pressure. For this mission, failure was not an option.

Adam's dad had started to grunt in the other room and Adam held his breath instinctively. Before accepting the mission, he needed to find a place with more soundproofing. His bedroom was dark and he crouched in the corner of his closet, which was darker. He shut his eyes again to become Agent Brown.

The flight to China went by fast, and after stepping off the plane, a woman with red hair and a tight red suit greeted him. She was very pretty and like the other women in the agency, she couldn't resist Agent Brown. After handing him an envelope with the words -top secret|| stamped on it, she kissed him with an open mouth and smiled.

The woman with red hair looked a lot like Mrs. Hall and Adam remembered his math homework. He quietly opened the sliding door to his closet and got his backpack. He turned on the light and when he held the homework in his hands, the sheet of math problems felt so unimportant. The numbers looked jumbled and Adam tried to make

sense of them. After three problems, he slid the sheet back into his backpack, turned off the light, and went back into the closet.

Agent Brown wiped her lipstick off of him and didn't say goodbye before leaving. In the envelope were pictures of three of the Ninja Assassins and a typed note that said to meet the assassins in an old warehouse. It listed the coordinates of a place where his motorcycle and weapons were waiting and had directions to the warehouse. He picked up the motorcycle from a man in a long black coat and a black hat. The motorcycle was state of the art, just like the rest of the agent's gear. It was equipped with a rocket launcher that rose out of the back and it could easily reach speeds of 250 miles an hour.

Adam thought about the first time he'd seen a motorcycle with a sidecar. He'd wanted to ride in the sidecar while his mom and dad sat on the motorcycle. They'd all wear matching scarves like he'd seen in a movie. When he asked his dad if they could ever get one, his dad laughed.

Inside the storage compartment on the back of Agent Brown's motorcycle was a briefcase with two machine guns and a smaller pistol and strapped inside his suit were two knives and a grenade. The agent was trying to speed to the warehouse when he saw blue and red lights flashing in his side mirrors. He had less than a half hour to get to the warehouse and couldn't afford the police getting involved in this. The agent knew the assassins' tactics and this police car following him could also be the assassins in disguise because the assassins really ran everything because they sold drugs and had a lot of money and would kill anybody who got in their way. So, the agent pressed the big red button on the handlebar and to shoot off the rocket launcher.

He didn't look behind him to watch the car explode, but heard the explosion and the sound of metal falling to the ground. The idea of being an assassin himself didn't seem too scary anymore. He felt powerful on top of his motorcycle cutting through the wind, knowing that it just took one click to blow a car and whoever was inside, exploding all of it into lots of tiny pieces. Just a few seconds before he pressed the button, the car was working in one piece and the person inside was trying to get the agent, and was trying to get in his way. But after he pressed it, the car couldn't be put back together and neither could the person inside. He had destroyed it forever and it was all so easy.

He got to the warehouse just in time, but the moment he pulled up, he knew something was wrong. There were no other cars in front and there was no sign of the president's daughter. So, he flipped on the x-ray vision that his motorcycle helmet had and looked inside the warehouse. If the Ninja Assassins thought they were going to catch Agent Brown by surprise, they had another thing coming. The agent saw that there were three of the assassins inside, all with machine guns hanging around their shoulders. They were smoking cigarettes and the president's daughter was sitting in a chair with her hands tied behind her back and had a bag over her head. Agent Brown had the advantage with his x-ray vision, but wished that Red had also supplied him with a sniper rifle so he could take care of the assassins inside without risking the president's daughter's safety. The daughter looked so skinny and could never defend herself against the other assassins, but Agent Brown could defend her.

The girl looked like a skinnier version of Adam's classmate, Alexa. Adam used to chase her and her friends around the playground. Once, while he was chasing her, she turned around to see where he was and she tripped over a soccer ball. She cried and said

he was mean and told him to leave her alone. Adam ran to get the duty teacher and after the school nurse cleaned the pebbles out of Alexa's knee, he brought her two cattails. He'd scraped his forearm when he reached through the playground's chain link fence to get them, but he didn't tell her that.

Agent Brown would catch each assassin and would make them bleed all over until they could never get a hold of anyone again. The assassins would die slowly, and as they did, the agent would tell them that they were the scum of the earth, picking on people who were much smaller than them. He could stab them over and over again as he said -pick on someone your own size and they'd say -please let me live, but he wouldn't. They'd all die saying how sorry they were, but it'd be too late because the agent would have already made up his mind. They were all going to die.

There was only one assassin patrolling the outside of the warehouse and the agent knew that with a building this big, he could find another entry point. It was cold outside and his breath was fogging up the inside of his helmet. He needed to act fast because the fate of the girl was in his hands and if he failed, Agent Cruze would fire him. He kept close to the side of the building as he looked for another entrance and although he couldn't see any other doors aside from the one being patrolled, he did find a window he could slip through. The warehouse was big enough so that the assassins didn't hear him when he got through the window and the agent knew they probably couldn't hear anything over the sound of their own evil laughter echoing off of the walls. He carried the machine gun in his right hand and one of his knives in the other. As he got closer, he heard that the president's daughter had started crying and one of the assassins hit her in the head with his gun. Agent Brown leapt into action. He was not going to negotiate

with anybody or take on any of their demands. Agent Cruze would understand that he had no option but to kill the assassins before they killed the president's daughter.

He ran towards the assassins and caught them by surprise. They began shooting and bullets pierced the concrete columns around Brown. He jumped into the air and got close enough to use his throwing knife. It hit his target right in the neck and the assassin fell to the ground and pulled out the knife, which made blood spurt from the wound. One knife in the assassin's neck didn't seem like enough. The agent wanted to be sure that the assassin bleeding out of his neck would die. He wanted to throw more knives into his neck, his stomach, one right through his cheeks.

Adam was making sound effects of knives being thrown and guns being shot. He wished his mom would come home. When his dad caught him playing make believe, he laughed at him and lifted him off the ground, saying, -You think you're tough, huh?|| Adam shook his head. He didn't feel tough while his feet were hovering above the ground. His dad let go of his shirt and Adam fell on the ground. His dad laughed again and said, -Yeah, real tough.|| When his mom walked into Adam's room once and found him pretending to be an astronaut, she had laughed too. But, it was a happy laugh and she told him that he was a very creative little boy. Adam was careful to make his sound effects as quiet as he could.

Agent Brown was so skilled with the throwing knives that they had become his signature weapon and each one was engraved with his initials and if only he had thought to pack more, he could throw them into every part of the assassins' bodies. Bullets were flying all around the warehouse, some ricocheting off the walls and others shattering the windows, and the agent knew that if he didn't act fast, the assassins would call for back

up. He did a back flip to avoid getting hit and shot at the remaining three assassins. He shot two of them in the chest, but before he could shoot the third, the assassin who had been guarding the door before ran away. The men lying on the floor were not dead yet. They were bleeding and groaning as they rolled on the ground.

Agent Brown was after the remaining assassin, but before he could get to his target, the whole warehouse went dark and Brown couldn't see anything around him. The remaining assassin must have cut off power to the whole building and probably had night vision goggles that he was using to find Agent Brown. The agent reached for his watch, which was also a flashlight, and as he did, he felt a sharp pain in his back. The assassin had thrown something at him, a Chinese throwing star Brown guessed. The pain in his back was sharp and throbbing; it felt like the star was getting deeper, wedging itself in his spine. He tried to see in front of him, but couldn't see anything. He used his last ammo shooting all around him, knowing that if the assassin was close enough to throw a star with that much accuracy, he was close enough to be shot. As he lay on the ground, he heard something and tried to move towards it. He had one throwing knife left and if he could get close enough to the sound, which he guessed was the sound of the assassin running away, he could use the knife to kill the assassin and could army crawl to the president's daughter to make sure she had not gotten hurt in the crossfire.

There wasn't a lot of room for Adam to army crawl in his closet, so he slid the door open again and crawled around on the floor of his bedroom. He found a pencil on the ground and put it between his teeth like Agent Brown would one of his throwing knives.

Agent Brown was able to get closer to the sound, but it was not the sound of the assassin running, it was the sound of mice. Suddenly, he wasn't lying in the warehouse, trying to rescue the president's daughter. He was back in his room and the blocky red numbers on the digital clock told him it was 9:39 at night. The president's daughter was still tied up in the warehouse and Adam shut his eyes so that he could travel back to the world she was trapped in, but he couldn't. The loud thuds of his dad's footsteps coming down the hall were interrupting his mission. Even when he squeezed his eyes tight, he could still see the dirty floor he was sitting on. His back still hurt and he worried that he might not have picked up all of the glass shards in the living room. He couldn't remember if he had made any noise during the mission because even though he always tried to keep quiet as he ran around the room and dodged assassins, it was very hard not to get carried away.

-Shut up and sleep, his dad said as he swung Adam's door open. It was the clearest his dad had spoken since he came home from fighting. Adam remembered how his mom had told him that being a soldier had broken his dad's brain. He was relieved at first to hear his dad talk like a normal person until he felt him walking closer. After his dad came back, everything about him was different, and not just the way he talked. His eyes always looked dark and he walked with his shoulders slumped forward. Adam felt like this person who came back was an alien impersonating his dad. This alien didn't know that Adam needed money for lunch and that he needed help with his homework. The alien had his own way of communicating and he wanted to return to his home. That's why he woke up screaming and crying some nights and why he didn't want to talk to anyone else. Hearing his dad talk just like he did before scared Adam, made him think

that this person might be the same one who used to take him to the shooting range and get him hamburgers after. This might be his dad from before the accident who only spanked him on his butt when he was really bad.

Adam's room was dimly lit and he couldn't tell if his dad was still holding a bottle, so he stood up and backed up against the wall to protect his still aching spine. With every step his dad took toward him, Alex's face got hotter and his head got lighter. He tried to take long breaths in and out of his mouth, but couldn't. His breathing quickened and he wished he had a fast motorcycle outside and a machine gun in his hand. He wished he could at least run faster than his dad or hide until he was old enough to leave. There were no machine guns and no knives, so instead Adam stood as quietly as he could. His dad walked closer and crouched down so that his face was level with Adam's. A tear ran down Adam's face and he did not wipe it away.

His dad grunted as he pushed him against the wall. There was no beer bottle in his dad's hand and Adam was relieved. Adam looked into his dad's dark eyes and wanted to push him back now when he least expected it. He'd push him over and hit him with the math book in his backpack over and over. But Adam's arms felt stuck to his sides. It was like the dreams he kept having where he was being chased, but couldn't run or where someone in all black with big guns was running straight at him, but he couldn't scream for help. Another tear dropped onto his shoulder, but this tear wasn't his own. His dad pushed him again, this time silently, and Adam stood as still as he could against the wall. He kept his breathing quiet and shut his eyes tight to imagine his mom and dad's smiling faces before the alien came. His dad walked out of the room and Adam's imaginary vision of his mom and dad had disappeared and he thought of something

better. It was him and his mom both laughing at a funny TV show and his dad quiet in the corner. His dad left the room. In the hallway he stepped on every creaky board.