

University of Nevada, Reno

No Man's Land

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

by

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THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

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Abstract

Eight short stories by Casey Bell

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DEVIL'S POOL

The girls sprawled on a large, mineral-specked rock. They came to Devil's Pool every afternoon that summer. The swimming hole, hidden along the Wissahickon Creek, was shaded in thick ancient oaks; only the strongest sunbeams could penetrate the canopy. Misty wore a cotton tank top and jean shorts, and Deb a paisley, spaghetti-strap bikini. Deb's mother told them repeatedly never to swim at Devil's Pool. There were rumors it was an outlet for one of Philadelphia's wastewater treatment plants. And every few years, someone was badly hurt or drowned there, landing wrong after leaping from one of the mammoth rocks surrounding the alcove, or from the high stone arch over the water, a footbridge built in the 1890s. Deb and Misty decided these were myths. If any body of water was compromised, it was the Clifton Heights community pool, crowded with diapered toddlers and middle-school boys who would lift one another on their shoulders to peer into the women's changing rooms.

They snacked on chips and drank Coke, thumbing through *Glamour*. *Exclusive tell-all interview with Pat Benatar. Hot Weather Fashion: 115 Look Changers. The Five Things You Don't Know You're Doing to Scare Him Away*. They'd been there since 1pm and the sky was going pastel. Misty brushed a mosquito off Deb's arm.

"Do you want to go?" Misty said. "It's getting late."

The alcove had cleared out since the afternoon. When a group of older boys emerged on the opposite side of the swimming hole, their laughter broke the calm. There were four of them. They settled on a long flat rock and pulled cans of PBR from a cooler. They wore bright swim trunks and muscle tees. They'd brought a battery-powered radio and after a few minutes, Van Halen drowned out the birdsongs. Jocks, Misty observed.

Two of them peeled off their shirts and dove into the water. They swam to the shallow end and tossed a football, but one of them kept glancing over at Deb and Misty.

“That guy’s staring at us,” Misty said.

“Looks that way. Subtle, right?” She returned to the glossy page.

Misty and Deb had watched the summer Olympics, and the boy in the water was shaped like one of the swimmers. Rowdy Gaines or George DiCarlo. Thick shoulders and slender hips. A little forest of hair on his chest that thinned on its way down his stomach.

“Do you know him?” Misty asked.

Deb reached for a potato chip. “I think that’s Rob Henry.” She chewed with her mouth open. “He’s a senior at Temple. He’s friends with Mark Feldman’s older brother.” Deb wiped her shiny fingers on her towel. “Kind of hot, don’t you think?”

Rob Henry’s muscles torqued as he threw the ball and water glistened along the little valleys where his hips joined his torso. “I mean, in a conventional kind of way, maybe.” Misty was practicing Deb’s disaffected blasé, but the words felt counterfeit.

Rob Henry waved. Misty turned back toward the magazine.

“Is he still looking?” Deb asked. Misty nodded. “Watch this.” She untied her top, covering her small, pale breasts with her tanned forearm. She turned on her stomach. “Is he watching?” All four of the boys looked with undivided focus.

“Yeah,” Misty said. “You know the sun’s about to set, right? I don’t think they’ll assume you’re working on your tan.”

“You honestly think they care?”

She could have reached out and plucked the line connecting the boys’ eyes with Deb’s body. Misty felt trapped and unwanted at the same time, a mouse on a glue trap.

But instead of gnawing her feet to get free, she flipped a page of the magazine. A Jovan Musk sample jutted from the spine on a perforated card that read, “Unleash your own natural powers of seduction.”

Misty could hear the boys talking. “Go fucking talk to them, jackass.” The other boy in the water jabbed an elbow at Rob Henry. He started to swim across to the girls’ rock. Misty was cold and hungry and still had homework for summer school geometry. She couldn’t do proofs. Theorems, axioms. So useless and so impossible.

“Deb, can we go?” she whispered.

Deb tied her bikini top and lit a cigarette. This was a new thing she did, not hearing, or pretending not to hear. Going slowly when Misty wanted to rush an exit. Rob Henry hoisted himself up and dripped on Misty’s towel. There was a swirl of dark hair on his big toe.

“Excuse me. Would you two like to join my friends and I?” Polite, but coated in a film of sarcasm. This was how boys talked. Deb said it was so that if you didn’t like them back, they could pretend they were never serious to begin with.

“Do you have beer?” Deb said, through a spiraling plume.

“We do. And Jim Beam. And some weed.”

Deb considered for a moment.

“Let’s go,” she said.

“Seriously?” Misty mouthed.

“Be. Fucking. Cool.” Deb mouthed back. Rob Henry extended a wet hand to help Deb up.

On the other side of Devil's Pool, sitting cross-legged on the boys' rock, Misty nursed a PBR until it was dishwasher warm. It was dark now, and "Her Strut," by Bob Seger played on the radio. Five or six other college kids, including three girls, showed up with camping lanterns and flashlights and a case of beer. The boys made a fire in the middle of the rock. And the girls, who ignored Misty and Deb altogether, stripped down to their underwear and plunged into the swimming hole. Their faces were silver with water and moonlight when they crested, hair slicked back. Misty thought of the large brown fish that lived at the bottom, how she'd felt them skim by her leg or the top of her foot. She wondered if there were eels or water snakes that only came out at night.

Misty draped her damp towel over her shoulders. Cicadas sang out like tiny string orchestras, playing the same staccato note from all directions. And lightning bugs beacons and faded in syncopation. The yellow glow attracted either mates or prey, Misty couldn't remember which. Every twenty or thirty minutes, one of the boys would offer Misty a beer, or a cigarette or a hit from a joint. "Still good," she'd say, holding up her full, warm can.

At the far edge of the rock, Deb and Rob Henry sat next to each other with their legs touching. They passed a joint back and forth and drank whiskey from a plastic cup. Deb wore his muscle tee and it hung loose on her, exposing a fine-boned, freckled shoulder. She laughed and flashed her white toothy smile again and again. Her hair was drying into sandy waves. She always looked more beautiful after they'd gone swimming, Misty thought.

Rob Henry whispered to Deb, cupping a hand around her ear. She nodded, and he took two beers, a blanket and a flashlight and led Deb into the woods.

Misty looked up at the sky, too clouded and close to Center City for stars. The belly of the stone arch above the alcove gleamed in the firelight below. She studied the intersections where stones were joined with mortar, looking for congruent angles until Rob Henry emerged from the woods, followed by Deb, who had a leaf stuck in her hair. He grabbed another beer and joined the group standing around the fire. Deb scanned the rock until she found Misty and sat down next to her. Her eyes were heavy-lidded. “Can you drive us home?” she said.

#

Misty drove Deb’s car down Livezey Lane. It was a sputtering, gunmetal gray Escort she’d saved up for all year working at the mall. A concave impression of a telephone pole divided the rear bumper into two segments and kept the trunk sealed shut. The path back to Route 1 was dark and curved. Misty only had her permit and she struggled with the gears, lurching the car forward, letting it wind too high before shifting. Misty kept her eyes wide and rotated them between the road, mirrors and speedometer. She hated driving at night. Deb leaned her head against the passenger window.

“So. What was that all about?” Misty asked when they merged onto the highway. She turned to check her blind spot, and moved the whole car with her, drifting into the other lane. A pickup truck laid on the horn and swerved. As it passed, the woman in the passenger seat, older and holding a small white dog on her lap, raised her middle finger.

“Fucking Christ, Misty, be careful!”

“I didn’t mean to! Jesus.” Misty adjusted the rearview.

“What was what about?” Deb asked, after the pickup was a safe distance ahead.

“Deb. Come on.”

“Nothing serious. I just went down on him.”

Misty was quiet.

“What? My God, you are so uptight, you know that?”

“It’s just that you can never take things like that back.”

“And why would I want to take it back? I liked doing it.”

“I’m just saying you should be more careful. You don’t even know that guy. What if he has some kind of disease? And what about Mike?”

“You hate Mike.”

“I don’t hate Mike.” Misty searched for a softer description. Deb’s boyfriend of six months had dropped out his senior year and was attending Lincoln Tech for HVAC repair. He called Deb “baby girl,” and put his hands all over her, even in public.

“I just don’t get why you’re with him.”

“He’s complicated,” Deb said. “He seems quiet, but he’s really deep, like emotionally.” Misty could only ever recall Mike uttering a handful of sentences the entire time she’d known him. His fingernails were always dirty, and he smelled like stale cigarette smoke. He was an outline of a person. Blank, but somehow still occupying time and space. “And, I mean, it’s not like Mike owns me.”

“Right,” Misty said. “Mike doesn’t own you. But I just don’t think it’s very smart to go around giving random oral sex.”

“Okay, it’s not random. He knows my sister. And he’s friends with the brother of someone in our class. We talked for like an hour. He’s a business major at Temple. He plays ultimate Frisbee.”

“We don’t know him,” Misty said.

Deb rested her head back on the window. Misty took her eyes from the road for a second. Yellow light poured from the lampposts over the highway, bisecting each of Deb’s long, lean legs in shadow.

Deb and Misty had both been round-bellied in elementary and middle school, different from the girls around them, all shrunken principal dancers. They were both latchkey kids of single mothers. They’d alternate between Deb and Misty’s house after school and eat multiple bowls of Lucky Charms until one of their moms got home and made dinner or spread greasy takeout cartons on the coffee table in front of the TV. While puberty had tapered and elongated Deb, it thickened Misty. She liked to look at Deb, though sometimes it hurt her. Deb didn’t seem to notice either way.

“What was it like?” Misty finally said.

“What?”

“Deb. You know what I mean.”

“Now you want to know?” Deb turned back to Misty, upper hand retrieved. “First it wasn’t very smart, but now you want details?”

“Oh my God, not if you’re going to be like this about it. Never mind.”

“Fine,” Deb said. She rolled down her window and let the wind tousle her hair.

“Will you just tell me?”

Deb turned back toward Misty and pulled her knees up to her chest.

“So we made out for a little while. And he felt me up. And then he leaned against a tree and unzipped his pants, and—”

“Wait, he didn’t ask you first? He just unzipped his pants?”

“It doesn’t really work that way, Mist,” Deb said. She rolled up the window. They were three exits from Clifton Heights.

“Then what happened?”

“I mean, what do you think happened? He took it out, so I started sucking it.” Deb seemed to enjoy shocking Misty gradually like this. Her stories, tame to start, would quickly gather speed. “But it was kind of big, like girth-wise, but not length-wise, and my lips felt sore from kissing since he was like devouring my mouth, so I used my hand, too. You can do that, you know, if you can’t get a good enough grip with just your lips.”

Misty felt her cheeks redden.

“I cannot believe you did that,” she said. “In the middle of the woods. How do you know nobody was watching?”

“I didn’t swallow,” Deb said. “I spit it on the ground. Just because of Mike and everything.”

“Right,” Misty said. After a moment of quiet, Deb rested her head back against the window and drifted off.

Misty wanted to volley back the same level of knowledge when Deb talked about boys and sex, and at the same time to be spared the humiliation. The only way she could imagine baring herself to another person—the asymmetry of her breasts, the coarse red-brown curls between her legs, the pale inner tube of excess around her middle—was if she was deeply in love. Misty thought it would need to be someone who thought her soul was so beautiful, it seeped through to the outside.

#

Two days later, the girls were dangling their feet in the water.

“I just don’t think you want to seem super inexperienced your first time,” Deb said to Misty, handing her a cigarette. Misty took the smoke into her mouth, but not her lungs. “Boys don’t really like that. They like confidence.”

Misty thought back to her boyfriend in eighth grade, Mark McCord. They would meet beneath the bleachers in the empty gymnasium and Mark would jab his tongue, rough and flexed, into Misty’s mouth. The insides of her lips would mash against her braces as he pressed his face, barbed with patches of blond stubble, to hers. This went on for five months, until Mark asked Danielle Gallagher to the semi formal instead of Misty. Had Misty been more confident, she wondered, would she have kept the boy’s interest? In the two years that passed, Mark McCord had grown six feet tall and developed severe cystic acne on his face and on the back of his neck. He was president of Physics Olympics and he and Misty didn’t acknowledge each other when they’d pass in the hallway.

“If you could have sex with any celebrity,” Deb said, “who would it be?”

Misty considered and discarded faces, bodies. They’d gone to the movies almost every weekend during the school year, and sometimes they’d see the same films over and over again, repeating lines back to the screen in different accents to the fury of other moviegoers. Misty thought of Phoebe Cates in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. Shelly Long in *Night Shift*.

“Probably Harrison Ford,” she said.

“In *Blade Runner*? So hot.”

It was the middle of the afternoon and the low clouds were swollen and gray overhead. Deb promised they’d leave early. Misty had never finished her geometry

homework from the other night. She was falling further behind and was grateful that her mom was too busy with work, always taking overtime shifts, or else sleeping to recover, to notice. Her math teacher was short and stiff-shouldered and had graying temples. Each time he hovered over her desk to check her work, Misty noticed she was bigger than he was, and how awkward it felt to outsize an older, male authority figure. He wore a tight wedding band that parted the dark hairs on his knuckle, and Misty wondered if he had a very small wife at home whose legs dangled off the couch as he relayed to her the trials of teaching summer school math.

The other students in the class were all obvious budding criminals. Misty hadn't made honor roll since middle school, but she appeared wholesome. "Misty Bennett?" a boy with gelled hair and a diamond post earring had said when she walked in the classroom on the first day. "The fuck are you doing here?" Misty shrugged. "Fucking math, man," he'd said.

Misty promised herself she'd catch up. She just needed to clear her head first at Devil's Pool.

"I think you should practice. Before you meet the person you actually want to sleep with," Deb said. "So it's not as big of a deal. So you're more relaxed."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, normally I would say we should find you someone you don't really care about, who you'd never see again. But for you," Deb studied her for a moment, sizing her up, "I think practice by yourself."

Misty looked around to make sure they were alone. "Can you be more specific?"

“So you start off by thinking about something sexy. Okay, picture Harrison Ford in *Blade Runner*,” Deb said, “all sweaty and muscly and climbing onto the bed, big, rippling biceps and delpods.”

“Deltoids?”

“Whatever. So he’s crawling on the bed and he makes his way on top of you and fits his hips between your legs and—”

“Where am I? I’m just laying there?”

“You’re in, like, a sexy negligee, drinking a glass of wine. No, champagne. And smoking a cigarette. And you have stiletto heels on.”

“That wouldn’t spill all over the bed? The champagne?”

“No. Misty, just listen, okay? So he’s on top of you and kissing your neck.”

“I feel like he’d try to make sure I wasn’t a replicant before any of this even happened.”

“Misty!” Deb reached for a Coke. “You get so hung up on all the wrong details.”

“I’m sorry. I’m listening. Then what happens?”

“Only if you’re going to take it seriously,” Deb said.

“I swear.” Misty closed her eyes.

“Okay. So he fits his hips between your legs, and he’s kissing you and then he pins your hands over your head with one hand, which he can do because his hands are so big. And then with the other hand,” Misty had lost track of hands and was counting at least six, “he slides the negligee down and starts sucking your nipples. And his stubble kind of hurts as it brushes on your skin, but in a good way.”

Misty clenched her eyes shut and thought of Deckard. On the run from murderous cyborgs, exhausted from nearly losing his life in a fight with Roy. Soaked and chilled from the rain.

“And then he slides his hand between your thighs and starts rubbing you over your underwear. And then he kisses your belly and kind of nibbles your hip bones and then works his way down.” Misty began to imagine Deb in bed with Deckard instead. Deb would know how to respond. She’d tilt her head back, let out a little moan. Misty’s cheeks went hot and she felt her airway tighten. “And he takes your underwear in his teeth and pulls—”

“Okay.” Misty opened her eyes. “I’m confused. How is this practicing?”

“I swear to god, Misty, you are so immature sometimes. You touch yourself as you’re thinking about it. You know what I mean? Or you can do it in the shower.”

Misty was quiet. On Deb’s advice last year, she’d experimented with the showerhead, and once or twice had what she thought may have been an orgasm. She’d felt a surge of warm, radiating waves through her whole body, even her fingertips. But there’d been no narrative streaming in her mind. Instead, Misty tried to rush since her mother had commented on the increase in the water bill, and had once rapped on the door and poked her head in to ask what was taking so long in there, just as the warmth between Misty’s legs was about to peak.

“Maybe I’ll give it a try,” Misty said.

“Have you thought about a vibrator?”

Misty tried to parse Deb’s words, innumerable steps behind.

“Tracy showed me hers once. She picked it out with her boyfriend and she said they use it together, for when he comes too fast. But she said it’s actually a lot better than real sex. There are catalogs, you know. You can mail order one.”

Deb’s sister, Tracy, was five years older and used to choreograph dances to Captain and Tenille and Patti LaBelle for Deb and Misty to perform for an audience of dolls and stuffed bears arranged in neat rows.

“Well, just think about it.” Deb said. “So the first time isn’t, like, crushing or anything.”

“Yeah,” Misty said. “I’ll think about it.”

#

Later that night, Misty sat on her bed with Toby, a gray-muzzled golden lab. She stared at her geometry book as *Synchronicity* by The Police played in the tape deck. “Prove ABCD is a rhombus.” Misty hated the curt commands, and that there were no new ideas to be discovered, just rote memorization of agreed-upon paths. There were two more pages of problems. Misty decided to go downstairs for a snack. Toby trailed behind her.

In the kitchen, her mother was adjusting the antennae on the small television on the countertop. She was just home from work, with messy hair pulled back in a clip. Misty saw a dark thumb-shaped bruise on her forearm as she adjusted the antennae. She worked in a behavioral health and crisis services center, and it wasn’t uncommon for her to be pinched, have her hair pulled, or, like tonight, have a patient, delirious and petrified, lash out while being strapped to an exam table and cling onto her arm for life. Her glasses were a little crooked, her eyes puffed and sleepless. She’d spread her dinner on the

kitchen table, an inflated foil orb of Jiffy Pop and a bottle of red wine. Toby positioned himself in front of the fridge and began to snore.

She said, "It's late."

"I'm finishing my homework." Misty opened a cabinet and reached for a box of Pop-Tarts.

"You know, there's an awful lot of sugar in those things. Are you hungry? You want me to cut up an apple for you? There are baby carrots in the fridge. You want me to heat up some soup?"

Misty opened the silver package and bit into a frosted strawberry Pop-Tart. "I'll take soup," she said.

"Soup instead of Pop-Tarts, Mist," she said, taking a drink of wine, "not soup *and* Pop-Tarts."

Misty shrugged and took another bite. They were drier at room temperature and Misty poured a glass of Coke. She sat down at the table and watched an episode of *Knight Rider* with her mom, who ate half of the popcorn and finished two glasses of wine as her eyes grew heavy. Then it was midnight.

"Okay, I'm crashing." She pulled herself up and kissed Misty on the top of her head. "But I'm three to 11 tomorrow, so I'll see you in the morning. You're okay, though? Things are going all right?"

"Everything's good," Misty said.

"Love you."

After Misty heard her mother's bedroom door shut, she opened a can of tomato rice soup and emptied it into a small pot on the stove. Misty opened a drawer of utensils

and her eyes gravitated to a mixing spoon with a long handle and a soft rubber grip, smooth with curved edges. She studied the shape of it and wrapped it in her palm. She stirred until the soup bubbled. The flecks of swollen rice reminded Misty of larvae, and she poured the whole steaming pot down the drain.

In her bedroom, Misty got under the covers with the spoon and closed her eyes. She imagined Deb's Deckard scenario. But in her version, she could tell he was hungry and cold, having just narrowly escaped with his life, so she told him he could take a hot shower and made him a plate of spaghetti. They sat on her bedroom floor as he ate. Misty played her favorite tapes for him and they just talked. She tried to imagine different variations, but they all ended the same way, with Misty listening as he poured his heart out. She wished she'd been assigned a different fantasy, and decided the best option was to clear her head entirely. Misty pictured a windowless white room with no furniture. She opened her legs and breathed in deeply. She'd put a finger inside before, feeling the silken warmth, like the inside of her cheek, but she thought maybe there was something about the shape that made a difference. She tried to gradually slide the spoon handle in, but the dry rubber resisted. Misty wet her index finger in her mouth and carefully spread the moisture over the handle. She tried again, working it gently in and out, penetrating only an inch or two at first, and then going deeper. There was pressure, somewhere between a dull ache and needing to pee. When she was nine, Misty had jumped from the high dive at the community pool and landed with her legs awkwardly splayed, and when she'd changed clothes later, there'd been blood on the crotch of her bathing suit. So there

was no blood when, after a few minutes, Misty removed the handle. She'd expected immense pleasure, the kind powerful enough to rewire a person's reasoning abilities.

She pulled her pajama pants back up and quietly went downstairs. She rinsed the spoon under hot water in the kitchen sink, and was about to take the dish sponge to it. She decided instead to wrap it in a paper towel and throw it in the trashcan.

Misty could not sleep that night. She never finished her homework, but she was working over the concepts in her mind, diagramming the long arc between herself and Deb.

In the morning, Misty made her way downstairs to make breakfast before catching the 102 bus. Her mother stood at the stove, stirring a pan of eggs.

"Hi Mist," she said, sipping coffee in her pajamas. "Hey, do you know anything about this?" She lifted the spoon from the pan. Misty swallowed back a gag. "Toby was walking around with it in his mouth when I woke up. It didn't look like there was anything wrong with it so I just gave it a good scrub. It's funny, he hasn't gotten into things around the house like that since he was a puppy."

Misty could only shake her head no.

"You feel okay?"

She nodded. "I have to go."

"You don't want a ride? I can drop you off if you give me a minute." She scooped eggs onto the spoon and took a small bite. "And these are done—you don't want any?"

Misty grabbed her backpack and was out the door.

Deb sunned herself as Misty tried to work her way through a pile of past-due assignments. She was impossibly behind. A little brick of worry burned hot in her stomach all the time, singeing the lining. The only time it cooled was when she was under the green, shimmering water at Devil's Pool, when she could only see or hear the outside world through a muffled remove.

"Are you losing weight?" Deb said, changing positions for an even tan.

Misty looked up from the textbook. "What? No. I mean, I don't think so."

"Must just be my imagination." Misty did feel that she was becoming smaller in Deb's eyes. "All that homework is killing you, isn't it?"

"Basically. You're lucky you did so well last year."

"Well, I had Mr. Dale."

"And?"

"I mean, all you have to do to get an A in that class is wear a low-cut shirt and lean over a little when he comes to check your homework. Let him look, pretend not to notice." Mr. Dale was pot bellied and had teeth too big for his mouth. A rectangle of light perpetually reflected on his shiny, bald head.

"That is absolutely disgusting," Misty said.

"More disgusting than that?" Deb pointed with her cigarette to Misty's book.

"Do you have any idea how much easier everything is for you?" Misty snapped.

"What's your damage, Mist?"

The thought of recounting the spoon incident, which looped in the front of her mind, made Misty's breath catch, jagged in her throat. "Nothing," she said. "I'm fine."

“Well anyway, I meant to tell you that I ran into Rob Henry at the mall when I was on my lunch break the other day, and he said there’s a house party at Alex Bittner’s house. Remember him? Kind of a jock, but kind of cute? He was two years ahead of our class? Anyway, Rob said we should come.”

“He said we should come or he said you should come?”

“I told him we’d be there. It’s tomorrow night.” Deb drank from her Coke. “We can get ready together, it’ll be fun.”

“I don’t know if I really want to.”

“Of course you want to! We haven’t had fun all summer. Please? Say you’ll come?” Deb reached over and tucked a strand of Misty’s hair behind her ear. “I don’t want to go without my best friend.”

#

Alex Bittner’s house was in Lansdowne. After several attempts, Deb parallel parked down the block with one tire up on the sidewalk. Deb pulled lipstick from her purse and applied a fresh coat in the rearview mirror. “Here, look at me. Now pout.” The coral shade that made Deb look bold, a little older, only made Misty’s teeth look yellow.

They’d gotten ready together in Deb’s room, which was painted purple and plastered in posters. Bowie, Duran Duran, The Eurythmics. It smelled like Jean Naté and jasmine incense. Deb picked out a mini skirt and leggings with a cropped blouse, exposing her midriff. She’d dressed Misty in tights and an oversized Cure T-shirt that she wore as pajamas, cutting the neck wide so it slipped over Misty’s left shoulder to reveal a bra strap. Deb wanted to belt it, but Misty had refused.

“It’s like a sack of potatoes without it,” she’d said, holding up the thick vinyl belt in one hand and a glass of strawberry wine cooler in the other.

“It’s flowy this way,” Misty had said. “It’s fine.”

Misty had let Deb do her hair too. First she’d backcombed, and then crimped.

“You want to go big,” Deb said, clamping the iron around a handful of steaming locks, “but you also want movement.”

#

Misty perched on the arm of the loveseat. College kids surrounded her; they stood in small groups, talking, drinking beer from plastic cups. The girls flipped their hair and shifted their body weight. One girl with crimped blonde hair and high-waisted jeans kept sticking her hand in her back pocket to emphasize a point, or to agree or laugh. Misty studied them all, filing the movements away to try out later. She wanted to casually enter a circle of smiling people. But she clenched when she tried to talk to almost everyone but Deb, who’d promised to be right back approximately one hour ago.

The lights were low and *Born in the USA* blared through the stereo. She’d known it would be like this, but Deb had convinced her nonetheless. When a tall boy with a popped collar stumbled and spilled a full cup of beer in her lap, Misty was done. She thought of leaving without finding Deb first. She’d walk to the bus stop at Baltimore Ave. and go home. She turned the idea around and around in her head. Deb could just drive herself home in the morning. But Misty instead found herself climbing the stairs, pushing past a crowd of people leaning on the railing.

Hanging all along the floral wallpapered hallway were framed photos of Alex Bittner’s family, posing in different formations around a Christmas tree, a birthday cake,

a roasted turkey. The pictures tilted on their hooks when Misty pounded on the first door at the top of the steps. She turned the knob, but it was locked. Misty moved to the second door, and when she opened it, she found a boy she recognized from Devil's Pool, one of Rob Henry's friends, cupping the back of a blonde girl's head between his naked legs. "Close the fucking door," another boy yelled at Misty from the corner of the room. Misty slammed the door shut. In the hallway, she tried to wipe the image from her mind.

Misty heard what sounded like Deb's laugh coming from downstairs and she pushed back down the steps. The party had doubled in size and Deb stood in the kitchen with another girl in the middle of a circle of cheering people, the loudest among them, Rob Henry. It took Misty a minute, watching from the periphery, to realize the game. They downed shots of vodka from paper cups each time Madonna sang the word "baby." Deb's eyes were glassy.

I don't want to be your prisoner, so baby, won't you set me free.

Deb drank.

If you want me, let me know. Baby, let it show.

She drank again, dancing out of time and nearly losing her balance.

Keep on pushing me, baby, over the borderline.

Misty could see it happening in slow motion. Deb's eyes turned far up into her head and she fell forward, landing her jaw hard on the linoleum. The sound, a crack like a splitting tree trunk, cut through the music and the crowd. It was louder, Misty thought, than she would have expected for a person with Deb's slight frame.

#

A needle protruded from the back of Deb's limp left hand, secured in place with white medical tape. Misty held her right hand. Deb's jaw was wired shut, so you couldn't see that she'd chipped her two front teeth. Alex Bittner had refused to call an ambulance, so in a wordless exchange, Rob Henry helped carry Deb to her car and Misty drove to the emergency room.

It was three in the morning. On the other side of the privacy curtain, in the hospital room where she'd been admitted, Deb's roommate flipped through television channels in a steady rhythm. The woman's legs were in casts, elevated to make an obtuse angle of her body. The hospital had called Deb's mother, who was too mad to sit quietly in the room with her unconscious daughter, and instead, paced the hallways or cried into the payphone to Tracy. Deb made faint noises through her closed lips that sounded like a series of m's. Misty stroked her hair. "You're okay," she whispered.

There, in the grainy half-light, Deb's face looked delicate, a fading projection on thin paper. Misty grazed the tips of her fingers over Deb's cheekbone, across the soft, sloped bridge of her nose. She traced her index around the circumference of Deb's lips, dipping down at her cupid's bow. Misty brought her face close to Deb's and softly kissed her. With her lips just parted and flush against Deb's, Misty felt like she did with her head under water in Devil's Pool, the sound waves thick and slow. All of the noise in the room, the beeping monitors, the hissing television, diffuse and muted. Misty lingered there, squeezing her eyes closed. She saw the two of them, standing on the stone arch over Devil's Pool in their swimsuits, the sun beginning to set, Deb smiling and swaying, their toes over the edge, curling for grip. Too far from the water to judge the depth, they hold hands and count to three.

CORA AMONG THE ROSES

I divided Margot into two large cast iron stockpots. The 14-year-old tabby's muscles were toughened by years of hunting mice and they resisted the knife. I had to wrap both hands around the wooden handle, using my weight to help the blade. The blood congealed as it dried and her fur clumped and coated my hands. I chopped root vegetables and added fresh herbs. Lloyd, who lay upstairs, barely breathing, would be expecting his dinner soon. I sit here now at the kitchen table, sipping tea. Waiting as both pots simmer and fill the room with steam. The windows are overtaken with climbing ivy and as the sun streams in, they look like golden green stained glass.

#

I was 13 when I started working for Lloyd. I lived alone with Grammy Marley and Lloyd lived in one of the only other houses in Le Roy that wasn't dilapidated or abandoned. My mother, Rose, had me when she was young. A year later, she dropped out of the 10th grade and ran off with a boy who was not my father. I have no memories of her, but Grammy kept her school picture on the mantel. A band of freckles saddled the bridge of her nose, like mine. In the picture, she's holding this bloodless smile, all controlled and compulsory. Around my eighth birthday, I found her journal stuffed in the back of the closet in her room, which became my room. There were drawings of flowers and winding, leafy vines, and lists of boys' names, and little scenes dated in the future, where she'd talk about how wonderful it was to be a successful movie star, how overwhelming it got to be so popular, and how insanely in love she was with her husband, Paul Newman. She'd written about some of the fights she had with Grammy

too. One that always stood out was the time Grammy locked her in her room for three days with no food after she didn't come home one night. Grammy said it would make her body weak so it'd be easier to get the Devil out. There were other entries, more as she got older, that were just about longing, really. For a bigger, different fate, for a mother who didn't have a Bible verse ready for every situation, for a father who didn't drink himself to sleep every night in front of the TV, for money, and mostly just for the feeling of being far from here.

Grammy was a closed off woman. Devout. She wore a faded apricot-colored apron, and the threadbare fabric between her hipbones was perpetually damp from wiping her hands after washing the floor or scrubbing the oven. She used to attend the small church in our town, but she had a falling out with the preacher as she became increasingly evangelical. She'd say she could do more of the Lord's work from her own home, without the interference of that pastor with his sloppy morals and his little flock of heathens. I had a friend at school named June. We'd eat lunch together and climb trees. But one day when we were in the third grade, her mother told her she wasn't to speak to me anymore, that Grammy had knocked on her door and told her she wasn't a real Christian if she wasn't born again. Things had escalated. There'd been yelling. "A religious nut" was the term used. And I guess word got around, because soon none of the kids at school would play with me at recess or sit by me in the cafeteria. The next year, Grammy pulled me out of school and I did my lessons at home with her. We used an

arithmetic workbook that she ordered through the mail, but mostly I just copied passages from the Bible.

Grammy would never say it, but I knew during all the moments she spent on me—keeping me clothed and fed and clean, teaching me scripture, ushering me to and from school, and showing me how to operate in the world—she was thinking in the back of her mind how this wasn't her choice, to have a child dropped into her life, to start again from the sleepless beginning, only this time older, more tired, worn down by a fire-eyed daughter whose defiance was electric.

Grammy's husband, Jack, suffocated inside a grain silo a few years after I was born. My understanding was that he'd never been a particularly good father or husband. His primary interests included whiskey and television. He was walking down the grain when it all of a sudden collapsed. No one saw him go under. I imagine it was on that day that the last remaining chink in the wall separating Grammy's heart from the rest of the world filled in, closing out any light or air, except a few pinholes here and there.

Grampa Marley's savings helped for a few years, but when it ran out, we couldn't get by on the money Grammy made as a clerk at the general store. She drove Grampa's sputtering, bald-tired Galaxie all the way to Lamoni to ask for work at the coal plant, which paid almost twice what the general store did. But they said a woman underground was bad luck. So every Saturday, she started taking that sad car to the Decatur City farmer's market. She made sweet smelling little soaps in the kitchen using lye, milk from our skinny goat, Fern, and wild hydrangeas, which grew all around the house in white

puffed halos. She'd twist the pretty soaps up in neat squares of brown kitchen paper and cinch them closed with string, delicately working hydrangea leaves between the knots. She sold less with each passing week. Nobody could afford little niceties like that.

Grammy brought home a few staples from the general store, but mostly we ate what we grew in the garden. And we could usually rely on Fern's hay-scented milk for cheese and butter. But over time, filling the Galaxie with gasoline to drive all the way to Decatur City seemed increasingly foolish. The last time Grammy came back from the farmer's market, it was midnight. She walked in the door with a big splash of mud on her dress, too mad to talk. She'd run out of gas on Highway 2 and walked miles to a payphone to call a tow truck. That car just sat in the driveway ever since, disintegrating into the dirt like dinosaur bones. It was 1973 and the whole country was in a recession. Every night when we watched news, there was a story about either the oil crisis or the farm crisis or the rural flight affecting nearly all of Iowa.

I was a spindly child, and Grammy had little patience for my regular interest in second helpings. The day she sent me on the three-mile walk to Lloyd's house, I was to offer my housekeeping and laundry services Saturday mornings for two dollars. I'd never formally met him, but I did ask Grammy about Lloyd a few times when we passed his house on the way into town. Before retiring, a luxury in a town where most people just worked until they died, Lloyd moved his way up to shift manager at the Lamoni coal plant. Rumors were that when he was in his thirties, Lloyd married a woman who had a little girl, about five or six years old, from a previous marriage. They all lived together in Lloyd's house for nearly a decade, and then one day the wife took the girl and left.

There'd been all kinds of yelling and commotion, and she peeled out of the driveway in Lloyd's car and never came back.

Lloyd didn't remarry, never had a family to support after that. He saved every cent he earned, making him wealthy by local standards. A lot of people kept to themselves, but Lloyd came off like a recluse. He didn't linger outside the post office or the general store to chat. And he'd stopped going to church after his wife and stepdaughter left. I think it was because he didn't associate with anyone in our small town, the same way we didn't, that Grammy thought he was a good man.

The only times I'd seen Lloyd, he was outside tending to his garden, shears in one hand and a wooden T-square in the other. Lloyd would give a single nod of acknowledgment when Grammy and I passed by.

His garden contained dozens of immaculately pruned rose bushes in perfect rows with soft yellow and blush blooms. Dense hedges were cropped into meticulous right angles. Not the smallest, most tender shoot deviated without meeting the severity of Lloyd's shears.

It must have been 100 degrees that June morning I was sent to Lloyd's, and I felt queasy by the time I was half way there. Grammy Marley insisted I make a good impression and wear my high-collared dress with stockings and a hat and even gloves. I took my time passing the farms between our two houses—the Anderson's, the Blackwell's, the Walker's—and each showed signs of suffering, a roof crumbling on a barn, a plow or harrow, too expensive to repair, rusting away in a sunbaked field. Lloyd

was notoriously curt and was known to yell at children who wandered onto his land, occasionally with rifle in hand. The worst part was I felt like Grammy and I were some kind of charity case. I'd tried telling her I was embarrassed, but she said I had no idea what actual humiliation meant.

When I finally arrived and knocked on the door, my clothes clung to my body. My eyes were hot in their sockets. I heard Lloyd's footsteps and when he opened the door, my vision went strange like television static. An awful high-pitched whir rang in my ears. Then there was just blackness.

When I opened my eyes, I was supine on a chaise in Lloyd's sitting room with a damp towel on my forehead. The shades were drawn and a fan oscillated with a gentle rattle. On an end table next to me, beads of condensation glided down a glass of ice water. My hat, shoes, gloves, and even my stockings were arranged on the chair across the room. The tight collar of my dress had been unbuttoned. I sat up to reach for the water, dizzy and bleary eyed, and Lloyd heard me stir.

"Heat exhaustion," he said, standing over the chaise. Beneath him, I could see tangles of white wiry hairs jutting from his nostrils. Twin tufts sprouted from each ear too. He was a large man whose sloping shoulders and neck conjoined in a solid mound. "Think it's wise to dress like that? In this heat?" Lloyd was impatient. "I have no interest in reviving wilted children who find it right in their half-formed brains to collapse on my porch. Now that you're back among the living, how about I call your grandmother?" I knew if I moved, I'd throw up. "Not too talkative, are you? Probably scrambled your frontal lobe in that sun."

Before I could speak, Lloyd turned and headed for the kitchen. A large orange tabby, who I hadn't noticed resting on the windowsill, jumped down and followed him. I overheard half a conversation in which Grammy explained the cause for my visit and then apologized profusely for my intrusion and collapse. Lloyd hung up the phone and made his way back to the sitting room, where the pounding in my head slowly eased. The tabby followed and sat at his feet.

"Cora. I thought that was your name. Now Cora, I'll pay you your two dollars per week," he said. "And I expect you here at 7am every Saturday. Not 7:05, not 7:02. And I'd suggest you find yourself some more sensible clothes for the summer. We must all learn at some point to pay attention to our surroundings."

I nodded. Lloyd gestured toward my belongings. "Your things are right over there. I'll see you Saturday morning. 7am. Don't be late."

"7am," I managed.

"Come on, Margot," Lloyd said to the tabby, who kept sideways eyes fixed on me as she followed Lloyd.

#

My domestic abilities never impressed Lloyd, but he did seem mildly pleased that I'd removed the brown sweat rings from his undershirts with lemon juice. I darned his socks and tried to patch up holes and tears whenever I came across them. The first few weeks, Lloyd followed me around the house instructing me on technique, though I'd helped Grammy take care of our house since I could walk. He'd point out small spots I'd

supposedly missed, or show me more efficient angles to work the broom. "Not like that!" he'd yell from across the house.

On top of his dresser, Lloyd kept his World War II Victory Medal beneath a bell jar. When I moved the feather duster over the glass Lloyd grabbed my wrist. He brought his face down in front of mine. "Don't ever touch that," he said, squeezing hard enough to leave a mark.

After about a month, Lloyd started to work in the garden while I cleaned. Or else he would sit on the porch reading and smoking, feeding Margot sardines. Sometimes he'd feed her a whole tin in one afternoon. That cat was the single recipient of Lloyd's approval. And I got the sense, watching the two of them together, that the feeling was mutual.

Lloyd would periodically check on me while I cleaned, pointing out certain sections that were beneath his standards. But for the most part, I could finally breathe and move with a little ease. I could notice all the beautiful things about that farmhouse, with its floorboards the size of tree trunks, and its gnarled wood beams stretching overhead, the honeyed glow of the light through the windows. My favorite room was on the first floor. A single worn, leather armchair sat in the middle of the room and crowded bookcases lined the walls. There were two wooden step stools for reaching the upper shelves. This was Lloyd's reading room, and I liked to linger in there whenever I could. I skimmed the titles and traced my fingers along the worn spines. Once when I'd finished for the day and Lloyd was counting out my quarters on the porch, I asked him where he got so many books. Most people only had the Bible.

“I’ve spent years collecting them,” Lloyd said, unclamping his pipe from between his teeth. “My father was a clergyman and he read to me from the time I was a small boy. He had the good sense to teach me to appreciate literature. Not many readers in this town, though.” Lloyd stopped counting. “You a reader, Cora?” I nodded. “And what is it you’ve read?” Lloyd patronized. I hesitated, but eventually listed the contents of the small shelf over my bed at home, looking up like the titles were printed in the clouds.

“‘Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland,’ ‘Treasure Island,’ ‘The Black Stallion,’ ‘The Secret Garden,’ ‘The Wind in the Willows,’ and ‘The Prince and the Pauper.’”

“Just children’s stories.” Lloyd resumed counting, unimpressed. “Anyway, I inherited my father’s books just before I got shipped off to the Pacific. He had a wonderful library, all the classics. Most of what you see in there is his. But I’ve made it a point to add to my collection at every opportunity. He told me everything a man needs to know he can learn from literature. And I’ve believed that my whole life.” Lloyd bit back down on his pipe, closing the explanation. He dropped the quarters in my cupped palms.

“Tell you what. If you’re interested, you can borrow one book at a time. I can’t see how some more exposure to the English language would do that little brain of yours any harm. First instance you forget to bring one back, or you bring one back that’s got folded pages or is scuffed up from those grubby fingers, though, and our deal’s off.” Lloyd jabbed his index finger into my shoulder. “And I dock your pay too. Mark me.”

As so often happened when Lloyd addressed me, I could only respond with a nod, adding further support to his assumption that I was just barely capable of full sentences.

“We have an agreement then?” I nodded again, and Lloyd rolled his eyes. “Go on then. Go and pick out a book and then leave me in peace for God’s sake.”

Just that morning, I’d kneeled on the floor and read the first few pages of a book called *Emma* before I heard Lloyd’s footsteps and frantically put the book back, pretending to dust the baseboards as he peered in. I ran back into the house and freed the book from its shelf. On the porch, Lloyd held his hand out to inspect my selection. He pulled a small ledger from his shirt pocket, the same one he used to record the height of his roses, and noted the loan before shoving the book back at me.

#

I was 14 the first time I noticed Lloyd looking at me. My breasts were growing and I wore a training bra Grammy dug out of a box of my mother’s old clothes. Every time I moved, a strap would slip down past my shirtsleeve, or the band would ride up and I’d have to crane my arm behind my back to work it back down. My bottom was rounder too and the relaxed pants I’d always worn were tighter. I’d be bending or reaching to clean and I’d feel his eyes on me. Lloyd would just be standing across the room or down the hallway, puffing on his pipe. He’d look me up and down, sucking his teeth before moving on, Margot trotting behind.

That was the year I’d started bleeding, and when I told Grammy, she brought home a sanitary belt and these big, stiff cotton pads from the general store, but provided no instructions on how to use them. When I walked more than a few steps, the pad roamed all around, eventually migrating into a wad in the very front or back of my

underwear, which became stained with blood. I tried to remove the stains before Grammy saw them, but she'd occasionally find evidence in the laundry and lecture me about how a woman should be so clean and discreet about her cycle that it's invisible and undetectable to anyone but her.

This was also the year Grammy started repeating herself and forgetting words. She'd call me by my mother's name, Rose. At first I corrected her, but it happened so frequently that it didn't seem worth it to frustrate her even more. She'd start a sentence and trail off. Or forget what was ingrained in her daily routine, like taking her blue smock to work or turning off the water after washing her hands. Grammy, who'd never once called in sick, who worked on holidays and took any and all available shifts, started missing days at the general store. She'd get confused about what time she was supposed to go in. And when she was there, she'd have trouble with the register and start yelling. One day I got a call from the manager's wife, Loretta. "It's not really working out anymore with your grandmother," she'd said softly. "We think she may need a little rest. How about you have her give us a call when she's feeling more like herself again."

I asked Loretta if I could take some of Grammy's shifts, but she said they'd already given the job to their grandson, and since he was family, they'd only have to give him a fraction of Grammy's pay. Grammy just sat at home after that.

Without Grammy's paycheck, we had a hard time with groceries. Loretta sold me a few things on credit, but we were drowning. I didn't want to, but I told Lloyd that Grammy lost her job.

He offered me three dollars per hour. I kept my Saturdays and I started going to Lloyd's on Mondays and Wednesdays to clean and cook too. We needed the money, and after a few months, Lloyd took me on full time.

The more time I spent at Lloyd's house, the more he snapped at me. For little things usually, like forgetting to fold the flat sheet over the top of the quilt, or not centering the pillows on the couch. The more Lloyd snapped, the more nervous I became. He'd clutch my wrist for emphasis, and I wore a bracelet of thumbprint bruises.

#

I'd been in his bedroom one afternoon, gently dusting the glass bell jar covering Lloyd's war medal. Margot came into the room, stinking of sardines, and became transfixed by the feather duster. She leaped onto the dresser and swiped, sending the bell jar crashing to the floor. I stood in shock before I heard Lloyd's footsteps on the stairs. He filled the doorway, breathing heavily, eyes darting around the room. Broken glass covered the floor. Margot crouched in the corner, licking the paw she bloodied, and the medal gleamed from the middle of the floor. I stood at the center of the disaster.

"Margot jumped—" I began. Lloyd closed the space between us.

"Margot keeps this house free from vermin, and she's an exceptionally clean, intelligent animal. Which is more, it appears, than I can say for you. You have a simple

job," he said, hushed. "And I overpay you out of kindness, because of the situation with your grandmother."

I tried to apologize, but Lloyd barreled forward.

"There are rules, Cora. If you're going to work for me, you must follow them."

Lloyd closed the door and said to sit on the bed.

"Now I want you to repeat after me." He sat so close that our legs touched. He breathed heavily. "I am a slow and clumsy child and I will try harder."

I froze.

"Cora!" Lloyd yelled and I felt the vibration in my feet.

"I am a slow and clumsy child and I will try harder." The words came out in one note. Lloyd told me to say it again, and I did.

"Now I want you to remember this lesson very clearly, Cora. So that you'll understand how serious I am. I need you to bend over the bed."

This is the part of my memory where the images abstract into shadows and outlines, just a line study on a dark page. But I do remember the sound of his belt. The way it cut through the air. How his breath rattled with wet muck from smoking his whole life. I don't know how much time passed, but when Lloyd finally stopped, the sun was setting.

Lloyd put his belt back on and smoothed back the hair that fell in his face. "I am sorry it had to come to this," he said, winded, "but I'm afraid it's the only way you'll grasp the consequences of your actions. I know how girls your age can be." Lloyd gestured to

the glass on the floor. "Now I want all this cleaned up before you go." Lloyd went down the stairs and took his shears to the rose garden.

I finally stood and began to sweep up the glass and wipe up Margot's blood, and the pain became searing. When I left the house, Lloyd did not look up from his shears.

That night at home, Grammy was on the couch staring vacantly at the television. I fed her dinner, helped her in the bath, and got her into bed. In my room, I gently peeled off my clothes and climbed on the bed. I tried to sleep, but instead just laid there with my eyes open as night filled the room.

#

The next morning, Lloyd barely acknowledged me. I carried out my regular routine, dusting and mopping, doing the laundry, mending a tear in a cardigan, preparing Lloyd's meals. But my movements became thick and imprecise. My hands shook and sweat all the time, and the smallest noise or motion sent a wave of worry up my spine. To steady myself I'd recite lists in my mind. Constellations, presidents, bones in the human body.

Weeks passed like that, with me moving through the house leery and wide eyed. And then one evening as I stood at the sink washing dishes, I heard Margot's paws padding on the tile behind me. She rubbed her cheek against my leg, marking me with her scent, and then, without warning, perched up on her back legs and sunk her claws deep into my calf, drawing blood. The China serving platter slid from my grip and shattered on the lip of the sink. I stared for a moment at the geometric shards and then turned to find

Lloyd's silhouette in the doorway, backlit from the flickering television. He loosened his belt as he approached.

After that, my hands shook worse. I broke a number of vases, a picture frame, an ashtray handed down three generations. Soon Lloyd began hitting me at regular intervals. He'd call me into his bedroom at the end of each day. And before he loosened his belt, he'd run his big hands, red and calloused, over my chest and up and down my legs to make sure, he said, that I wasn't trying to lift any of his valuables. Every night in that room, my mind would loosen and detach, hovering far above the house and the scenes it contained. I thought maybe Grammy was right to go and lose her mind and only have her body.

#

The day before I turned 16, Lloyd told me to make a chocolate cake the following evening. "We'll celebrate," he smiled, revealing his yellow teeth and receding gum line. "You didn't think I'd forget, did you?"

That night back at home, I laid in bed reading. Lloyd needed a new ledger several times over to track the books I borrowed. Over those years, I'd worked my way through almost the entire reading room. There was one shelf containing the plays of William Shakespeare, and up until then I'd avoided it. With every other shelf exhausted, I took a book home called "Hamlet." I struggled, sometimes only getting through a page at a time. But my need to be elsewhere, even if it was only in my mind, was strong. So I persisted until the story unfurled, line by line. I'd felt immense pride when my reading became

fluid, but also incredible lonesomeness. There wasn't a soul I could relay this achievement to who would care, aside perhaps from Lloyd. I remember that night I fell asleep with the book on my chest, just after reading the scene where the ghost of Hamlet's father explains that Claudius, his own brother, poured a vial of poison in his ear while he slept. It had been a perfect secret that no one but a ghost could reveal.

I woke to the frantic bell of my alarm clock and went about my early morning routine. I got Grammy out of bed, helped her in the bathroom, dressed her and fed her breakfast. She'd recently started yelling at me in the mornings.

"Rose! You little harlot!" she'd scream, swatting at me as I tried to comb her hair. "You'll pay for what you've done, the lord will see to that! Perilous woman!"

Nothing calmed Grammy down more than bacon, so I cooked some for her every morning, and I'd make extra when she was having an especially bad yelling fit. I'd set her up in front of the television and bring her a dish of bacon, and after a few bites she'd forget whatever tirade she was spewing.

I fixed myself one scrambled egg and a cup of coffee. "Happy birthday, Cora," I said under my breath as I sat down to eat. Then I got myself ready to head to Lloyd's house. Just like every day, I spread peanut butter on a slice of bread and filled a thermos with milk for lunch. And then, as I was putting the lid on the thermos, Grammy started screaming and flailing her arms around wildly over on the couch. "God who avenges, shine forth! God who avenges, shine forth!" I was so startled that I knocked the thermos over, spilling milk everywhere. I brought her a piece of bacon still warm from the skillet.

I sat beside her and tried to calm her, and she eventually took a bite, and then another, until the yelling subsided.

Back in the kitchen, I kneeled to wipe up the glassy white pool and noticed Grammy's basket of soap-making supplies, just behind the curtain under the sink. Neatly organized in her basket were a few little tins, some dried out hydrangeas and sections of string and kitchen paper, and, directly before my eyes, a bottle of lye. In small print on the label, it read "sodium hydroxide," and under that was a skull and cross bones and three words in the clearest print I'd ever seen: "Danger. Corrosive. Poison."

#

When I got to Lloyd's house, he was sitting on the porch, feeding Margot one wet sardine after another. I went to the kitchen to put my apron on and found a box on the middle of the table with a large red bow. Lloyd walked in behind me and gestured toward it impatiently. "Well?"

"For me?" I managed.

"You going to open it, or what? We both have work to do. Rose bushes aren't going to prune themselves out there. House isn't magically going to get cleaned on its own."

I cautiously untied the bow and Lloyd stepped closer. The metallic rot of his breath lingered. I lifted the lid and found a leather-bound book with gilt-lined pages.

“I couldn’t help but notice you’ve taken up an interest in The Immortal Bard,” he said. “It’s the complete works of William Shakespeare.” Lloyd folded his arms, waiting for my reaction.

“I don’t know what to say.” I held the book in my hands, examining it.

Lloyd took my chin between his thumb and forefinger and tilted my head up so our eyes met. “No one cares more for you than I do, Cora,” he said. “Remember that.”

I nodded, sensing he wasn’t quite satisfied.

“Repeat it back,” he said, gripping my chin harder.

“No one cares more for me than you do,” I recited, hollow.

Lloyd released my face. He turned and lumbered toward the door for the garden. “Remember, cake tonight,” he hollered over his shoulder, “to celebrate.”

I can recall how sublime the sunlight was that day. How it poured through every window in the house, regardless of angle or direction. The old farmhouse hummed in the glow. Around the midday, I got to work on the cake, combining the ingredients carefully in a large mixing bowl. I looked over my shoulder to check for Lloyd and quickly emptied a small amount of lye into the batter and stirred thoroughly. I was alert, like one big live wire, while the cake baked. I worried the lye would change the color or consistency. But fifty minutes later, I pulled a perfect, golden cake from the oven. I melted sugar into egg whites and added cocoa for a buttercream frosting. My fingers felt too big for accuracy. It was the most beautiful cake I’d ever made, though, and it sat on the counter for the rest of the afternoon, radiating.

That night after he finished his dinner and I cleaned the dishes, Lloyd insisted we sit down for dessert together. I brought the cake to the dining room on a glass serving platter.

“That looks wonderful, Cora,” he said, folding his hands over his middle. I removed a neat wedge and transferred it to his plate.

“None for you?” he asked, unfolding a napkin over his lap and digging in.

“I don’t deserve any cake,” I told Lloyd, which I could tell pleased him greatly.

“That’s very interesting to hear you say,” he said, licking his lips and plunging his fork back into the large slice. “And do you want to tell me why?”

“Because of all the trouble I’ve caused you, the aggravation.” Lloyd beamed. Crumbs collected in the corners of his mouth as he ate, congealing with strings of white spittle.

“I feel like you’re finally learning, Cora,” he said, working his words through thick gobs of icing. “After all this time. I can’t tell you how relieved I am to see you responding to some structure. Not all girls can learn like that. And this cake, by the way, is divine.” Lloyd had two more slices after that.

Before I went home, at the time when Lloyd usually brought me into his bedroom, he yelled from the bathroom that he wasn’t feeling very well and that I should leave for the evening. “This happens when I over indulge,” he’d called down to me, sounding strained. “Too much sugar for an old man like me.”

Over the next few days, I began adding pinches of lye to all of Lloyd's meals, and sprinkling it atop Margot's food and water too. The cat noticed immediately and stuck to her regimen of field mice and stream water. But Lloyd cleaned plate after plate. I made his favorites—pot roast with mashed potatoes, meatloaf, beef stroganoff, working my way through the container of lye. It took about three weeks for him to become weak and bedridden, spending long hours in the bathroom emptying himself.

Lloyd became too ill to tend to his garden, and made me promise to keep up with the pruning and watering. I was to bring him measurements each morning for his ledger. "Swear to me, Cora," he'd said, gripping my wrist before I left his bedside one morning. "Swear. That garden's been my life's work." He explained to me, at length, important details about latent buds and new growth, about how much air the leaves needed to prevent mold. And I stood at his bedside nodding. I did go into the garden each day, but only to sprinkle lye on the roots and hack off a few blooms with Lloyd's shears. I let the hedges and ivy break free from their imposed shapes, the way nature wanted, and they sprawled grandly any direction they preferred.

"The garden is looking so lovely today," I told him as I brought his lunch, which he could barely touch. "It's practically singing." I handed Lloyd his ledger filled with fictional measurements.

Lloyd smiled meekly. "You've no idea what comfort this brings me. If you're caring for the garden the same way you're caring for me, then I have nothing at all to worry about."

When the bottle of lye was nearly empty, Lloyd seemed to understand that he wasn't getting better. "Cora," he wheezed from under the covers. "It seems I'm not able to beat this stomach flu. Will you call a doctor, my dear girl?" Lloyd's breath was acidic, his teeth translucent at the tips. His lips cracked and split when he moved his mouth too much.

"Of course," I said, pulling the blankets over his chest. "I promise. And what can I bring you for dinner tonight? Whatever you'd like, I'll prepare."

"Such a good girl, Cora," he muttered. "I'm so terribly cold. Will you bring me some soup? Something to fortify me?"

"I'll make you the best soup I know how," I told him. "I'll use Grammy Marley's recipe."

"Thank you," he mouthed and drifted back to sleep.

Downstairs, I put a tin of Margot's sardines in the pocket of my apron. I went out to Lloyd's toolshed and selected his largest, sharpest shears.

"Margot," I called, walking slowly through the wild, overgrown garden. Withered rose petals crunched beneath my feet. I dangled a silver fish by its tail in one hand and held the shears in the other. "Would you like a treat?"

SYBIL AND THE SAGUARO

(For Simone de Beauvoir)

Sybil had been sleep-starved since the baby was born. For the past ten weeks, she'd had only two or three hour reprieves between the crying. In his crib, Elliot wailed in piercing, severe screams so hard that Sybil thought he'd blow his little lungs out.

He was premature and colicky, born with no hair, no eyebrows, no eyelashes. Pale blue veins traced beneath his translucent skin. Elliot's eyes were black like his father's and when Sybil looked into them, no matter how hard she searched, she couldn't connect. He wouldn't latch on to Sybil's breast—a condition her doctor called nipple confusion. He writhed and resisted when she tried to place him in a nursing position, straining to find the muscles to turn his face away from her. If Elliot wasn't sleeping, he was screaming.

Sybil's husband, Ted, tried to be helpful. He made oversized portions of Sybil's favorite foods, like he'd done before Elliot was born. While she was in her third trimester, Ted did all of the cooking, and Sybil would sit under a blanket on the couch eating bowls of mashed potatoes with butter and garlic, and fat noodles smothered in tomato sauce. Ted made chocolate chip cookies and Sybil ate them hot out of the oven with big chilled glasses of milk. Careful not to wake her, he quietly collected the dishes stacked on her basketball belly.

Now, though, the thought of food passing through her seemed grotesque. She was torn and needed stitches after the birth. There was blood and swelling and burning. Sybil wanted some semblance of control over her body's mechanisms. Still, Ted cooked, and

untouched foil-covered dishes filled the fridge. Sybil was frail and her cheekbones jutted. But what did it matter if she wasn't nursing? She could not produce the milk that the baby did not want. A neat little circle of nothing, Sybil thought.

Ted told her all the time that she wasn't being patient enough, that things would get better. The baby would sleep, he insisted. Her body would mend. All of this was natural. Sybil thought about the slow death of a wide-eyed wildebeest, jerking between the clenched bloody fangs of a lion on the savannah, and how that was natural too.

Ted was always trying to calm Sybil down and insisting that she needed to give herself time to adjust. The last time he told her to be patient, they were in the car on the way home from one of Elliot's check ups, and Sybil thought of driving off the road.

#

It was midnight when she decided to leave. She'd just put Elliot back in his crib after giving him a bottle and swaddling him snugly. The baby never seemed comforted or sated, only like he'd exhausted himself. Ted snored on his back with his mouth agape.

Sybil moved through the dark house, her cotton nightgown skimming the floorboards. She stopped before the front door and slid on her brown leather sandals. Without thinking to close the door behind her, she stepped out into the clear cold air.

Sybil walked down the driveway to the quiet street. Rows of porch lights and lampposts illuminated one manicured lawn after the next. The neighborhood hummed a hushed white noise while everyone slept in their designated spaces.

She walked and walked, falling into a mindless rhythm. Sybil went for miles. Spaces between the houses grew longer, until the Catalina suburbs fell away and she was alone on the black road under the sprawling star-strewn sky. The moon was slung low in

the sky like a lone pearly eyeball. Sybil walked toward it staring straight into its glow. Moonbeams stretched down and looped around her, pulling her onward. She moved away from the road, deep into The Sonoran Desert. Clumps of saltbush and junegrass peppered the gently sloping hills. Giant saguaros reached their arms to the inky sky, suspended in holy praise.

It was hours before Sybil stopped. A pale sliver of golden sun peered over the mountains. Her head felt full of feathers, hovering far above her body, just barely tethered. Sybil's feet were sticky and raw. The sandals rubbed away her skin and her blisters had broken open miles ago. Dried blood the color of the surrounding rocks caked in the spots where the leather had worked at her skin. Her nightgown was tattered and dirty. Sybil shivered.

A mule deer and its fawn approached from over a hill and stopped to chew on a shrub. They were so close that she could have reached out her hand and touched the mother's long sable ears.

All around her, the saguaros towered. Sixty-foot titans casting double long shadows down the hills. Directly ahead, from deep inside the largest of the saguaros, Sybil thought she heard muffled music. She stepped closer, spooking the deer, who bolted on spring-like legs. Her movements felt illusory, like she was walking under water or on the moon. The cactus called to her. The earth crunched beneath her burning feet as she made her way closer to the looming queen. Gleaming silver spines protruded from hundreds of green areoles.

Sybil placed her fingers between two of its long vertical ribs where there were no spines, and the flesh felt warm and silken. The warmth radiated up her arm and into her

chest. She looked up to the very top of the trunk to the giant's crown. The music was clearer now and seemed familiar. Sybil wanted to be closer, to be enveloped. She bent down to remove her dirty sandals, leaving them at the foot of the cactus, and stepped inside. Her muscles slacked and everything was quiet and warm. Then the music grew louder. Sybil recognized the song. "Wouldn't it Be Nice," by The Beach Boys.

#

When Sybil opened her eyes, she felt better than she could remember in months, possibly years. She'd slept deeply in a plush, oval bed with silky green sheets, but she had no memory of getting to this place. The bed, and in fact everything in the room, was green. Even Sybil's skin looked green. Her nightgown had been removed and she wore a jade satin kimono. Her feet were cleaned and neatly bandaged.

A gentle knock came at the door of Sybil's strange room. In walked an elegant woman holding a tall glass of champagne. Her hair was parted in the middle, twisted down the sides and finished with a bun at the nape. She perched on the edge of Sybil's bed and extended the glass toward her. Sybil took it but didn't bring it to her lips. The woman nodded, and Sybil took a small sip.

"All of it," she said in a thick French accent. Sybil drained the glass, keeping her eyes fixed on the woman.

"That's very good," the woman said. "You'll need to keep your mind limber while you're here. You'll find that a champagne regimen is just the thing."

"Where am I?" Sybil finally managed. "Does my husband know I'm here?"

"Let me ask you something," said the woman. "What would Prince Charming have for occupation if he had not to awaken the sleeping beauty?"

Sybil stared, bewildered. “I don’t understand,” she said. The woman patted Sybil’s knee over the bed sheet tenderly.

“Mystery is never more than a mirage that vanishes as we draw near to look at it,” she said. “You need more sleep. I’ll be back with more champagne after you’ve rested enough.”

The woman reached for the empty glass, smoothed her skirt and left, dimming the lights to a cool forest green on her way out. For the quick moment the door was open, Sybil could hear “Good Vibrations” playing in the corridor. The champagne warmed her cheeks and she felt her face and neck relax. She sunk down into the lavish bed and slept for long, beautiful hours. Each position she discovered was more comfortable than the last, and the bed somehow anticipated her every shift.

#

“I’ve already told you,” Ted told a police officer as Elliot screamed in his arms. “When I woke up, she was just gone. No note or anything.”

Purple half moons sagged under Ted’s sleepless eyes. He’d searched the house for Sybil after the baby woke him at 4 a.m. The front door was wide open and Ted walked around the yard yelling her name. Sybil’s cell phone was charging on the bedside table. Ted knocked on the neighbors’ doors too. No one had seen a thing. He played a horrid kidnapping scene in a loop in his mind until he finally called the police.

“Sir, can you think of any reason why your wife may have left?”

“That’s what I’ve been saying,” Ted said, exasperated, “she’s just missing. There *is* no explanation.”

“Was there some kind of argument or confrontation between the two of you?”

“No, nothing.” Elliot wailed and squirmed over his shoulder. He bounced his weight back and forth trying to lull him. “There’s been nothing between us.”

“Would you say she was in a normal frame of mind when you last spoke?”

“Yes. I mean, not normal normal, but normal for right now.”

“You want to clarify that for me, Sir?”

Ted ran his hand through his hair.

“She’s been stressed since the baby was born. Not totally herself. She’s not sleeping. She’s had all these mood swings. I mean, I think it’s just hormonal, from the baby, but she wouldn’t just take off without a word. Something must have happened. The door was wide open for Christ’s sake!”

“Is she on any kind of medication?” The officer seemed aloof, not worried the way Ted wanted him to be.

“Nothing.”

The officer jotted this down in his notes.

“I think maybe some herbal supplements? Unless she stopped taking them.”

“Would you say she’s unstable?” the officer asked.

“She’s worn out,” Ted said, switching Elliot to the other shoulder, “She’s not eating right. But she’s not unstable.”

“She left without her cellphone or wallet, you said?”

“No keys, no phone, nothing,” Ted said on the verge of tears now. “I already told you all of this. When will you start looking for her?”

“I need to file a thorough report, Sir. The more information we have, the more effective our search will be.”

Ted took a breath, trying to tamp down his anger. “She didn’t take anything with her.”

He gave the officer a photo of he and Sybil on their honeymoon in Corsica. She wore a black bathing suit, a wide brimmed straw hat and her brown leather sandals.

“You’ll just have to be patient while we look into this, Sir,” the officer said.

#

“A woman on her own always appears rather bizarre, doesn’t she? You see, men do not actually respect women. Instead, they respect one another *through* the women they keep. Their mistresses, their girlfriends, their wives. And when the male’s security no longer protects her, woman is made to be weak and vulnerable in the eyes of a superior class that’s hostile to her. Aggressive, mocking. She’s reduced to nothing but a kind of erotic perversion.”

“An erotic perversion,” Sybil repeated as the French woman slowly guided her down a long green corridor.

“Finish your champagne,” she said. And Sybil emptied another glass of emerald bubbles.

“Where are we going?” Sybil asked.

“Today I’ll take you to the crown,” she said. “We can look out over the desert and you can tell me all your troubles.”

As they walked, Sybil saw another pair of women coming in the opposite direction with arms linked, each holding a glass of champagne. One of them wore a green, satin kimono like Sybil’s, looking a little dazed. The other was dressed in a black turtleneck and slacks. She had a half-inch Afro and wore thick-framed glasses. As they

approached, Sybil could hear their conversation. “You see,” the woman with the Afro said to her companion, “black women are programmed to define ourselves within this male attention and to compete with each other for it rather than to recognize and move upon our common interests.”

“Audre, my dear,” the woman with Sybil said. “It’s lovely to see you. Such a beautiful day.” They kissed one another on the cheeks in a French hello.

“Bonjour, Simone,” she answered. “Always a pleasure to see you. A beautiful day, indeed.”

“Mon amie, I wonder if you could leave some more of those manuscripts on my desk,” the woman with Sybil said. “This intersectionality, c’est merveilleux. I want to learn more.”

“Of course I will, Simone,” the woman with the Afro said. They clinked champagne glasses.

They walked on and Sybil felt weightless. Every inch of her body rested and new.

“That’s your name?” she asked the woman. “Simone?”

“That’s right. Watch your step.”

Sybil followed Simone into a vaulted elevator that rose smoothly for several minutes. An instrumental Muzak version of “God Only Knows” played through invisible speakers. A soft bell chimed once when they reached the top and the doors glided open to reveal what looked like a cathedral. Fluted cactus columns supported the arching ceiling and light poured through an ornate lime rosette window at the end of the nave.

Simone extended her elbow and she and Sybil linked arms and strolled through the aisle.

“What brought you to this place?” Simone asked, handing Sybil a new glass of champagne.

Sybil searched her memory. All of the sleep and champagne left her mind feeling smooth, but she reached and waited, and eventually thought of Ted and of Elliot.

“I got lost,” Sybil said finally. “The whole world just felt . . .” Sybil couldn’t find words.

“Our image of the world,” Simone said, “just like the actual world, is a mere construct created by men; they portray it from their own point of view, which they of course conflate with absolute reality.”

“I don’t think I was supposed to be a mother,” Sybil said. “I’m worried I’ll never love Elliot.”

“The notion that motherhood is woman’s supreme goal is precisely as meaningful as a jingle on the radio,” Simone said, patting Sybil’s arm.

“And my body. It feels not like my own anymore. Like I’ve lost contact with it.”

Simone nodded in understanding.

“Yes. Female bodies are expected to be flesh, but only discreetly, quietly, conveniently,” she said. “Fated only for motherhood, deprived of her real world talents and her magical, transcendent status, woman is diminished to nothing but a shadow.”

A tear ran down Sybil’s cheek, and Simone topped off her drink. They sat together in a long pew the color of an avocado.

“What have I done?” Sybil said.

“It is not your fault,” Simone said. “A woman in this situation hardly has means for sounding her own heart.”

#

Ted sat uncomfortably on the ground staring into the cactus. The sun bore down overhead, burning the part in his hair and the tips of his ears. The police found Sybil’s sandals, caked with dried blood, in this exact spot three days ago, at the trunk of the tallest saguaro he’d ever seen. It surpassed all the surrounding cacti in height and girth by several feet.

As soon as Ted’s mother arrived from Chicago to help with Elliot, he’d driven out to the Sonoran to see for himself. The police marked the spot, and combed the area to no avail. They were still searching for her. After the police showed him where the sandals were found, Ted spray-painted an orange X on the road so he knew when to pull over, and he left brash neon stripes of paint through the desert leading to the spot.

He sat in front of the cactus each day she was gone. Beneath the unrelenting sun, Ted looked deep into the ribbed trunk and sensed Sybil’s presence. He remembered when they met. He was a grad student, and Sybil worked at the campus gallery. In the early days, he brought her little gifts every time he saw her. A sweet from her favorite bakery, or a small, handpicked bouquet pilfered from the garden outside the science building. Once he brought her a tiny piece of moon rock from the lab. There was nothing he wouldn’t do for Sybil.

Ted balled up his fist and swung with all of his strength at the cactus. Spines gashed open his knuckles leaving a smear of blood behind. He yelled her name and it echoed into the hills.

#

“Men of today are two-faced, and this is painfully damaging to women. On the whole, they may say they are willing to see women as equals, but they still command women to forfeit their purpose, to remain inessential,” Simone said to Sybil.

They both reclined on soft green tufted chaises in the crown of the cactus, nibbling on moss-colored chocolate truffles. Moonlight poured through the rosette window, dousing the cathedral in cyan. “I Know There’s an Answer” played softly in the background.

“For woman, though, these two paths clash. The woman wavers uncertainly between them without really being suited to either, and this, you see, is the source of her inability to find authentic balance, to find peace. Here, let me have your glass.”

“It wasn’t like that at the beginning,” said Sybil. “We *were* equals. He loved that I loved my work. And then when I got pregnant, everything changed. He needed to manage and fix everything all the time. I felt like I was being erased.”

Simone nodded, pouring more champagne for Sybil, whose mind had never felt more limber.

“Well for man, there is simply no division between his public and private existence. The more he asserts his grip on the world in his actions and in his profession, the more masculine and powerful he appears. These innately human and

fundamental values merge together in him. But for a woman, each independent success is in direct conflict with her femininity, because by nature, the 'true woman' must remain the Other."

"Simone? Am I allowed to stay here with you forever?"

"For as long as your heart desires," said Simone, clinking her glass with Sybil's.

#

Ted continued sitting vigil at the cactus during the daytime, convinced that his wife was nearby. She'd been gone for over a week. He dreamed of her at night, and in his dreams, Sybil called to him. She was trapped in a windowless tower and couldn't find her way home to her family where she belonged. Ted stood outside the tower, powerless to help.

One early morning when Ted woke from his dream, he searched the garage for his wood splitting axe before driving out to the saguaro. As the sun broke over the hills, Ted made his way to the giant cactus, the large axe gripped tightly in his hand.

He stood in the shadow of the saguaro, breathless from the long, rocky walk away from the road. Ted lifted the axe high above his head and brought it down powerfully, hacking off a great arm. He felt the vibration in his shoes when the massive limb hit the earth. Ted raised the axe up high again and sunk it deep into the trunk, breaking the taproot. Water seeped from the cactus into the thirsty ground. Ted brought the blade down again and again, harder each time, as the sun

stretched over the land, slashing away at the saguaro's flesh until the giant began to rock loose from its roots.

LIKE A CIVILIZED HUMAN

Claire had cleaned the gash with Germoline and taped a gauze bandage to Lee's cheek. He sat in front of the television watching *My Favorite Martian*. She set a glass of chocolate milk with a long straw on the shelf next to his wheelchair. Claire draped a blanket over his shoulders and planted a kiss on the crown of his head. She walked into her bedroom and closed the door.

It was Andy and Kyle Davey who'd thrown rocks at Lee, the sons of Mitch and Barb Davey, the preacher of the Malvern Evangelical Church and his wife. The boys were 10, Lee's age. They were severely freckled and pale with black hair in matching crew cuts. Their dark eyes were cold, reptilian. Claire had never seen them not making noise, or punching or chasing one another. Back when Lee was still in school, Claire would bump into Barb regularly at General Wayne Elementary. Barb was petite and wore frost-colored lipstick that would congeal into sticky little white globs at the corners of her mouth. Claire was always polite and nodded hello, and Barb would start about the mission. "It's all about bringing folks who are outside of relationship with God," she would say, extending her arms from her body, "into what we like to call reconciliation," then she'd clasp her hands over her heart, "and an all new sense of identity in Jesus."

Mitch Davey was popular among the children in the neighborhood, and since Kyle and Andy didn't have the patience for it, he sometimes played catch with other people's sons. He had an oversized smile and was charismatic in what Claire thought was a grasping kind of way. Claire didn't attend his church, but she'd still had regular encounters with Mitch in their small community. She remembered how he'd let his hand

linger on the small of her back when he greeted her at the PTA fundraiser party. Or at the post office, how he'd give her a little pat on the hip.

Claire lit a cigarette and picked up the phone. Every ring was interminable.

"Hello? Davey Residence."

"Barb, this is Claire Hall. Lee Hall's mother, down on Stonybrook?"

"Oh, Claire! How are you?" Barb covered the receiver but Claire could hear her clearly. "Mitch, it's Claire Hall calling. You know, that little crippled boy's mother?"

Barb removed her hand. "Claire, listen, we're just finishing up supper over here, oh hang on a sec, will you?" Barb covered the receiver again. Claire heard clattering dishes. "For the last time, we do not stab one another with our utensils at the dinner table, angel, okay? Mitch, will you remind your son how to act like a civilized human?" Barb uncovered the phone. "You still there? How about I give you a call back in—"

"Barb. I'm calling because your boys threw rocks at my son today."

"Sorry, say that again, Claire?"

"This evening, your sons rode their bikes to my house, and threw rocks at Lee. He was out front in his chair. And one of them, Kyle or Andy, I don't know which one, hit him in the face and cut his cheek."

"Now slow down, Claire, I'm not sure I understand what you're trying to say."

"Your children just attacked my son, Barb." Claire planted her words slowly, firmly.

"Well I don't see how you can be so certain it was Andy and Kyle. There are a lot of young boys in the neighborhood. You know just the other day, Claire, I thought I saw Nancy Rogers' little boy walking down the block, and I told Mitch and do you know

what he said? He said, Barb, that boy's a full-grown man now. Off at college. So it couldn't have been him. It was another little boy who looked just exactly the same. Can you believe that?"

"Barb, I saw them with my own eyes."

"You know what? I have a feeling this is just a big misunderstanding. What's today? Thursday? See, there you go, it couldn't have been Andy and Kyle because they volunteer down at the church thrift store every Thursday after school. They love it down there. Never miss it. But you sound awfully upset. I'll tell you what, how about you come over this evening and we can talk about this in person? I'll put some coffee on and you can tell me what's on your mind. I just made a peach pie this afternoon."

In her mind, Claire bashed the receiver down again and again, permanently deafening Barb and smashing the telephone to pieces.

"That sounds fine, Barb," Claire stubbed out her cigarette. "I'll be over later tonight." She placed the phone back in its cradle.

Claire watched television with Lee for an hour. He was distant and wouldn't meet her eyes, like he'd walled himself away.

The news came on. Police were continuing with dynamite attacks on black homes in Birmingham, and protestors had gathered in the City Center. Birmingham was almost a thousand miles from Malvern, but the riots had been making national news all month. Claire watched Lee study the screen, a line of young protestors holding hands, facing off a battalion of armed police head on. She wanted to say something smart or comforting, something poignant that he'd remember. About the true nature of monsters. About

conditions in which justice is absent from its post. She reached for words commensurate with the senselessness.

Lee could no longer walk. He'd started losing control of his vocal cords over the last year. The mobility he did have left him suspended in slow motion, moving in half time. "Gradual muscle wasting" was the phrase the doctor used. Claire had rearranged all the furniture in the house to make wider paths for Lee's chair. She crocheted soft sleeves for the armrests in his favorite shade of red and pinned a Phillies pennant on the back upholstery.

After the news, Claire got him ready for bed. She brushed his teeth and ran a comb through his hair. Lee's mop of curls was identical to his father's. Claire remembered running her fingers through George's hair, how it would spring and coil just like Lee's, the way he'd let it grow a little longer in the summer, and how it would sometimes spill into his eyes when he'd lean down to kiss her or to take her in his arms. Lee had George's green eyes too, tender and inquisitive. As a child, George had the same small gap between his two front teeth that Lee did. Would it close like his father's when he got older? And how much older would Lee get?

She tried not to let herself speculate like this, but the question gnawed at her always. As she helped Lee into his pajamas, Claire thought back to the Punnett square she'd learned about in high school, about genotypes and phenotypes, and wondered how it was that her dark hair and brown eyes hadn't exerted any dominance, but the genes that caused Lee's condition had been passed down maternally. Every year, he looked more like his father, who she still thought about every day. In all likelihood, Lee wouldn't live

long enough to fall in love. Claire pushed this thought down and tried to quarantine it in a remote corner of her mind. Lee was here now. He was here now.

She tucked Lee beneath the covers and switched on his beagle nightlight with its big yellow eyes aglow.

“You know, people like those boys,” Claire reached for the right words and brushed her fingers gently over the bandage, “they’re the kind of people . . . well, deep inside they’re fearful. And because of that, their whole lives will be small.” Claire felt the words’ palpable ineptness as she spoke them. “What I mean is that they don’t deserve a minute of your time.” Lee wouldn’t look at her. She read *Where the Wild Things Are* to him and he drifted to sleep just as the forest began to grow in Max’s room. “I’m sorry,” she whispered into his curls before shutting off the light. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

In the kitchen she poured herself a glass of whiskey. Claire hadn’t felt like this, boiling, savage, since Principal Gopnik at General Wayne asked her to come to his office when Lee was eight. She remembered the way his voice resonated, nasal and final. And how the fluorescent lights overhead emitted a high-pitched mechanical hum.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Hall, but we just don’t have the proper resources to provide Lee with accommodations he needs now. I’m afraid he’s uneducable. Now there are a variety of options—”

“Mr. Gopnik, Lee is by no means uneducable. He’s incredibly bright. He reads all the time at home. And he can still write. It’s just that he’s getting weaker. Like I’ve explained, it’s a neuromuscular condition. He just needs a little extra time and—”

“There are specialty private schools,” he talked right over her. “And of course there are institutions, homes, that can help to alleviate the burden on the family.”

Principal Gopnik adjusted his thick-framed glasses and leafed through the file on his desk. “Though, these are pricey routes to go down, depending on your financial situation. Am I correct that it’s just you, Mrs. Hall? Mr. Hall is deceased?” He flipped another page in the file. “When was this?”

Claire stared at him. His gray mustache with yellowing bristles, the way the skin around his eyes sagged and creased, swallowing up his small gray eyes. His paunch spilled over his belt, stressing the buttons on his pastel shirt.

“Two years ago this May.” Claire remembered everything about that day. She had just gotten home from picking Lee up at school when a police officer knocked at the door. It was a head-on collision. A driver in the oncoming lane had become drowsy and drifted across the yellow lines. George had no time to stop. It happened so quickly, the officer told her, that he couldn’t have suffered for long.

“That’s a damned shame, Mrs. Hall.” The Principal took a cigarette from his desk and lit it. He leaned back in his chair and regarded Claire. “Woman like you, though, pretty face, good clothes, shouldn’t have a hard time meeting people. Even with the boy.” He extended the Lucky Strikes to her. Claire grabbed the whole pack and put it in her purse. She stood and smoothed her dress, keeping her eyes lowered.

“Thank you, Mr. Gopnik. I’ll make alternate arrangements for Lee’s education.”

“Look, I’m just trying to help. It’s not easy, but you’ve got to look at the situation realistically here.”

Claire turned to leave and on her way out of the office, she swiped a tall stack of papers off a filing cabinet. They floated toward the floor, slicing little white arcs through the room.

“Hey! What in the hell, lady!” he’d yelled after her as her heels clacked down the tiled corridor.

It had taken Claire almost six months to find Mrs. Graff. She was a retired high school teacher with cottony puffs of hair and impeccable posture, also a widow. Claire liked how Mrs. Graff was always direct and to the point, sometimes blunt. She and Claire would occasionally have a cigarette on the porch and talk for a while after Lee’s lessons. Tuesdays, she and Lee worked on English and math, and Thursdays were for history and science.

Earlier that day, Lee and Mrs. Graff sat before a large book with glossy photographs and elaborate diagrams called *How Living Organisms Work*. “Now there are five basic necessities that every living thing needs,” she’d said to Lee, counting them out on her knobby fingers. “Sunlight, food, air, water and a habitat with the right temperature.” Lee had focused on a photograph of a tree frog in the book as he listened carefully. “Now, it’s important to note that there are what we call limiting factors that can make it impossible to survive. Things like your soil PH, your water temperatures, sometimes you’ve even got a physical barrier, say a landmass or something, that makes it hard for the organism to just pick up and go somewhere more hospitable to life, where it’s more likely to thrive. But every creature in the world, Lee, from little microbes you can’t even see to humpback whales so big they could swallow you up and not even know it, every one of them has its own special set of living needs. It’s one of the things that ties us all together here on Earth.”

Claire had passed through the dining room with a hamper full of laundry and overheard fragments of Mrs. Graff’s lesson. She’d loaded the washing machine in the

basement and considered her own living needs. Lee. Maybe food. Maybe water and air. But mostly Lee. What was her limiting factor? What did it mean if your living needs were sometimes indistinguishable from your limiting factor? Claire hated herself for thinking that way. It was just that she got so tired. Lee was almost always a sweet and gentle boy. But as he'd gotten older, more self aware, Claire thought he looked at her like he hated her sometimes. When she had to hoist him in and out of the bathtub, or help him on the toilet. "You think I chose for things to be this way?" she'd snapped at him one evening when he tried to refuse getting undressed for a bath.

Lee had every right to be angry, Claire thought. He used to run wild in the mornings, stomping his bare feet against the hardwood floors, eager to get outside and race the other children in the neighborhood to the bus stop. But now, he started each day supine in the middle of the floor. Claire was practice in the routine. She'd remove the braces he wore at night and begin the exercises. Gentle stretches for his arms, trunk and legs to lessen contractures and rigidity. Several repetitions of light resistance movements, with Lee pressing each foot and then his fists into her palms. "Excellent job," Claire would say to him every time. But Lee knew how weak he was becoming.

Claire thought she should have been better about protecting him. She'd been washing dishes when it happened, and had come running when she heard the boys laughing. They'd torn away on their bikes and Claire chased after them. She took giant, pounding strides and reached the end of the cul-de-sac before the heel on her left shoe broke loose. Claire lost her balance and skinned her palms when she tried to break her fall. The boys had pedaled furiously over the hill. "I see you!" she shouted after them. Her voice dissipated into the open air and they were out of sight. She looked back at Lee,

who covered his face with his hands. She'd rushed past him when she saw the boys. She'd left him.

Claire refreshed her whiskey and tucked her knees under her chin. She lit a cigarette and turned on the radio.

—recently issued an injunction against protests, picketing, demonstrating and boycotting, providing the legal grounds for mass arrests. Hundreds of black students were placed in custody today at Kelly Ingram Park during what protestors are calling the Children's Crusade. Birmingham Police Commissioner Bull Connor ordered the release of attack dogs and powerful fire hoses on the demonstrators, and numerous teens have been severely beaten with batons. Despite this violent crackdown, demonstrations persist, and the youth continue to—

Claire quickly turned the dial and bright static filled the kitchen. She could picture their faces clearly. Staring into the eyes of the police dogs with raised hackles and wet fangs. Trying to shield themselves as the grown men planted themselves to steady the fire hose. The blood on the batons. She hadn't touched the dial, but the static swelled louder from the tinny speaker.

Claire closed her eyes and saw herself walking over to the Davey's house, her body cutting through the cool night air to the other side of the neighborhood. She would bring a wooden bat down on the boys' knees again and again. Barb and Mitch would watch closely, but they'd be powerless to intervene. They would beg Claire to stop, but she would only hit harder. She would pluck out the boys' long black eyelashes one by

one, or snip their earlobes clean in half with kitchen shears, or press the brothers' skulls together between her palms until they crunched and flattened.

Claire put her jacket on and opened the front door. She idled on the threshold.

NO MAN'S LAND

Mimi. Or Miriam, as you're always correcting me. I thought you'd at least come down here yourself. Instead you hired some white woman from an agency. You arranged for my abduction. Casually, remotely. Trish Hopkins from a place called Flanders Meadows. And all I can picture when she says this is Flanders Fields, and she says it's a first-rate facility. She says that I should have been notified that she was coming, her records say the daughter informed me. So I closed the door, obviously. I told Trish no thank you. And you can imagine, Mimi, my surprise when she said that you'd provided her with a key in case of "just such an issue." So the next thing I know, there's Trish putting my shoes in my suitcase right next to my underwear, sole to crotch. So I say how about I decide what I'll pack, Trish. And she says she's done this before and to trust her. Flanders Fields will provide for my needs, she says, they have one of the best memory-care units in the whole state of Florida. And what am I supposed to do? I stand there, watching.

Mimi the problem solver. Mimi the Manhattan corporate lawyer, enforcer of administrative protocol. Sometimes I think I should have enrolled you in Catholic school. Maybe you'd have lashed out against the nuns and their dogma and we'd have been on the same side for once. Do you remember when I said you could go to summer camp when you were nine? And you told me to sign you up for something called FUNCTIONAL Mathematics Camp? It's not like you got any of those left-brain leanings from your father, trust me on that.

I know you've always gone around thinking your childhood was too loose and untidy, that our family was strange. The time I left you at the Paddock Mall, adrift in a

sea of women's clothing racks, and I'd made it all the way to the car before I realized you weren't behind me, dragging your feet like you always did. The time I was late to pick you up from third grade and your teacher stayed with you until I came. How mortified you looked when I pulled up in the car. How our place was always a mess, so you'd never bring friends home. You've got a long list of my offenses stored away in your arsenal. Always at the ready. The thing you forget is that I was on my own. I was young. I had no idea how to be a mother, Mimi. I think this is part of why you walk around trying to keep other people's lives tidy. It's compensatory, like you're looking for something you lost.

This Trish person goes on touching my things and saying what a lovely place Flanders Fields is. How happy I'll be. There's arts and crafts, she says, rolling my socks into balls, stretching the elastic, and movie night, and even a classical music appreciation club. And she says that you'll be down later in the week to visit and help me get settled in and make arrangements for the house. I've lost count of how many times I've told you that I don't want to sell my house. Mimi: judge, jury, executioner. I could have stayed in your periphery longer if I hadn't crashed the car. It doesn't seem to make any difference to you that it was only *one time*! I wish you could have seen the look on that little Chihuahua's face when he ran out into the road. I'd have been a monster not to swerve, Mimi. And you go on about how there have been other signs that I'm *unwell*. The tub incident you like to bring up all the time. Yes, it overflowed when I was running a bath, but like I've explained to you so many times, I saw the most marvelous bird with iridescent green feathers out the window, and I was just grabbing my sketchbook and trying to get it down before it flew off. And it's true the water made it all the way into the

living room, but I did notice. It wasn't a hopeless disaster the way you like to imagine it, the way you go around telling people. And I still can't believe you asked that terrible Connie woman next door to keep an eye on me, what a betrayal that was. You knew she was a snoop, and she just took that to mean she should spy on me all day and report my every activity back to you. She enjoyed that, you know, got up on her high horse. An occasional flood and car crash are perfectly normal occurrences during the course of a human lifespan. I think most people would agree on that, Mimi.

And you never could wrap your head around this, but I had systems to help myself remember. Color-coded sticky notes, which you can get down at the Publix. A three-pack for \$2.99. Red on everything that needed to be turned off. Green on things that needed turning on. Yellow on things to be monitored. And it made the house look so bright, Mimi, you just had to think of them like little Pan-African accents. And the stickies were great for the car too. Green on the gas. Red on the brake and on the horn and gear shift column. Yellow for the wipers, the lights, the turn signal. And the whole set up is entirely customizable. You can just keep adding as many layers as you need to remind yourself. It's all about making the ordinary look different, new. I explained this to you, but you wouldn't hear me. Took one look at the house, and you decided that I needed medical and psychiatric evaluations. You needed me to have a diagnosis so you could have something indisputable to point to. I'll never forget what you said to me, that I'd always been crazy, and now it was just getting harder for me to hide it. I remember when you walked into the hospital after the car accident. You were rude to the nurses, like I told them you would be, snapping demands. I could tell you were annoyed when one of them patted me on the arm in sympathy on her way out the door, like you knew I'd

turned her against you. And then all of those forms you made me sign. I signed the damned things just so you'd stop hounding me. Power of attorney. Remember I said is there a form I can sign for quiet of attorney? Absence of attorney? You didn't think that was very funny. But to be my age and still cracking jokes is a sign of mental vigor, Mimi. Your mind was made up though.

Early dementia, the doctors said. And there are medications that might be able to help, but the more serious thing, and you took my hand for this part, all tender seeming, was that there's a mass on my left lung that's likely spread. From smoking my whole life, you made sure to emphasize that part. When you were little you used to hide my cigarettes every chance you got like a self-righteous little tyrant. They'd need additional testing to be sure. And you say first they need to get me situated in a professional facility where I won't endanger myself or others, one that specializes in reality orientation. You have to understand how quickly this was all happening. How I felt like a bystander while it all just barreled past. One step at a time, you say, and I make up my mind to pretend I cannot hear a word you're saying, which is my favorite game to play with you since it infuriates you so much, especially when I smile.

I knew people who went to nursing homes. My friend, Rita Moore? Rita had trouble with her memory, but she wasn't stupid. Her daughter in law came up with this idea to keep a log of all her visitors. Each time a family member paid a visit, they'd write down their names and the date and what they did together. *Louis and Angie, May 2nd. Got ice cream, sat by pond to feed ducks. Mary-Kate, June 7th. Went to hair salon and then to movie.* The book was filled with entries like that, but Rita said no one ever really came to see her. It turns out the daughter-in-law would just take the book once every few

months and fill it in with all these lies. Thought Rita didn't know any better. I visited her just around the time she'd stopped eating. She was a hollowed out shell by that point. The place smelled like bleach and Vaseline and latex gloves. And everyone's shoes squeaked and reflected along the shiny, waxed tiles. And those fluorescent lights made people look yellow and sickly, more than they already did. They stuck a feeding tube in her, Mimi, and do you know what happened next? She died from something called aspiration pneumonia a few months later. But I'm sure it was a first-rate facility.

In the bedroom this Trish is touching all of my things like it's perfectly normal and then when my suitcase is full, she looks up all perky and bright-eyed and says she thinks that's about it, and is there anything else I think I'd like to take with me? And I'm surprised she's asked and not just gone ahead and handcuffed me. Why not put a muzzle on me at that point. Throw me in the back of the van and take me for a nickel ride, Trish. I tell Trish that I'm not sure. That I'd like to take one last look around the house if it's okay. I'll at least need my sketchbook and some extra pencils, which I think are in the garage. They're not very sharp, I add. And Trish says yes, that's fine and she'll take a last look around to make sure all the appliances are off. There's a sticky-note system to make that easier, I say. And Trish gives me a look like she feels sorry for me.

I walk toward the garage and grab the car keys hanging next to the door. And I look back and Trish is by the kitchen sink with all these sticky notes clinging to her fingers, flicking her hand like a cat shaking water off its paw. There are so few moments in life just like this one, humming with perfect clarity, Mimi. So I get in the car as quietly as possible and then I open the garage door, which of course gets Trish's attention. She comes running out yelling to stop. And I gun it.

24 West is the fastest route to the ocean, and, no, I don't need a map or a little talking computer, thank you. If you don't have machines in your face every minute of the day, you learn to observe your surroundings, rely on your innate senses. This is Seminole country. People forget that. There didn't used to be a freeway here, divided down the middle with manicured little rows of milkweed and palms. There's traffic, but it's not bad, and the middle lane has an easy rhythm to it, not that you appreciate things like that. You've always been a left-lane person, a passer.

I think maybe when I was a child, Mimi, which I know is difficult for you to imagine—me as an innocent—and all I cared about was climbing trees and plunging into swimming holes and napping in the sun, I saw the world for what it really was. And everything I learned after that—about how you are the money you make, about how you're always being looked at so you'd better look good, about how you need to secure yourself a man and get married and keep your figure and keep an orderly household—it was all a lie. Conjured up to keep you frozen. Keep you subordinate and buying things. We're born knowing the truth and then we're trained to forget it. I honestly believe that, Mimi, and I hope you know I tried my best to raise you with those same convictions.

It's maybe an hour and a half to Cedar Key. You always talk about how this Skylark isn't safe anymore, but it's a tough car. It's seen me through all kinds of confrontations and close calls. Hail storms, crazed men with shopping carts in the street. Part of me wouldn't be surprised if she floats when we hit the waves. Trish is probably telephoning at this very moment. Notifying. Reporting. She'll be on the phone to you. To the Florida Highway Patrol. To Flanders Fields. There's probably an APB out on me. That look, though, on her face. And how she stood there flailing her arms in the

driveway, like that'd somehow convince me to reconsider. You're probably pacing on the phone in your office, fuming, panther-like. You know what'd be lovely, Mimi? One of these Salems I keep here in the glove box. I don't mind if I do.

Christ, you were always so horrible to travel with. Even on short trips in the car, you were so critical. You hated how I drove, the backwards routes I took to avoid left turns or freeways. How messy the car always was, how my pile system for cassettes was not an actual system. You did really like some of those cassettes, though. That was always nice if we were arguing or if you weren't speaking to me. You loved jazz. Thelonious Monk especially, but you'd pronounce it The Loneliest Monk. Remember when I'd put on jazz records after dinner and we'd dance around in the kitchen until late at night? You'd be tired for school in the morning, but I still say it was worth it, the way you'd spin and swing your body and you'd let the music take your mind. I wish we'd had more moments like that.

The day you were born, Mimi. I was petrified. They were still using Twilight sedation back then. Nobody knew how dangerous it was. Evan sat in the waiting room watching television and eating pretzels. I can't recall a single second of the actual birth. They'd put this saccharine-smelling mask over my face and time wobbled loose from its meter. Then hours later they brought you to me, swaddled, impossibly small. I was nauseated and couldn't keep a clear thought in my head. You were covered in these soft translucent hairs with bruises all down your neck and back. The nurse said something about how they were only stork bites and they'd fade in the next few weeks. You were a downright misshapen little thing if you ask me. Dented and swollen from the forceps. Evan physically recoiled at the site of you, which I thought he could have done a better

job of concealing, at least in front of the nurse. There'd never been any kind of initial imprinting, and I wonder if that made it easier for him to leave just a few years down the road. I am sorry for that, Mimi. I hope you know. You had these dark eyes too big for your head that just swallowed me up when I stared into them. There was a tiny universe under construction behind those eyes, gears turning, building blocks stacking. You were a wonder.

Later that night I made my way to the nursery to look at you. And it was just down the hall, but I could barely walk. They'd stitched me back up and wrapped me tight, but there was no ignoring the fact that you'd torn me, Mimi. I rested my forehead against the nursery window and I watched your body rise and fall with each breath. I didn't know how it'd be one long, blind curve ahead.

You weren't altogether wrong when you said that I didn't always consider you when it came to the men in my life. Evan was bad, but there was also Brock, who you saw when he'd come over for dinner and spend the night every other weekend for about a year or so. He'd bring you a toy each time and call you things like darling and doll-face. And I remember you'd look at me like, *him? Really?* Brock said we couldn't get too serious, but he'd also told me how much he cared about me, how beautiful I was, how intelligent. I was still so young, Mimi. There were a lot of reasons why things didn't work out between us. One was just the sound of his name. Whenever I had to call out to him in a crowded place like a park or a grocery store, if he couldn't hear me, I'd have to keep saying his name louder and louder, and I could tell by how people looked at me that I seemed deranged, chicken-like. A bigger reason was Brock being married, I never told you this part. The last time I saw him, his wife, Vanessa who was an airline attendant,

was working over the weekend so I'd stayed at his place. You were having a sleepover with Tracy Gomez in the apartment beneath ours that weekend. Vanessa was due back early in the morning, and I was supposed to wake up at dawn to disappear before she arrived. Instead, I woke up to Brock shaking me saying *what the fuck*, and when I opened my eyes the sun was streaming into the room. I was naked and my mouth was dry and sour from vodka martinis and cigarettes. The sheet was dark red and wet beneath me. It spread in a wide circumference, a Rorschach of an eagle in mid flight. I was early. And Vanessa was too. Her car pulled into the driveway and she cut the engine. Brock screamed at me to get my things and go out through the back. I tried to say I was sorry and he held out his hand like a traffic cop. *Go*, he said. Brock piled blankets on the bed, frantic. I was so stupid, Mimi, I asked would he call me and he said to get the fuck out of his house. I scrambled for my dress, wrinkled in a pile on the floor. My hands shook and I got the thing half on, backwards and crooked. I made it out the back door just as Vanessa was turning her key in the lock. I bought you a toy every other weekend until you stopped asking where Brock was.

You were always naturally strong. A born leader. At one of our first apartments in Ocala, there was that swimming pool out back. Remember how the management kept a cover on it at night? You couldn't have been more than ten years old at the time. We were out on the patio next to the pool one night. I was reading the paper, having a beer and a cigarette. And you had tested into what they called rapid math at school. You were doing your algebra on the chaise next to me, stopping every few minutes to sip from your Coke can. And out of nowhere, this deer charges over the fence and goes headfirst into the pool cover. And she's writhing around and trying to fight this big piece of plastic and

the thing is panicked, she's going to drown. And you're little, but you walk right up to her, even though I try to grab onto you and I'm yelling that you'll get your skull kicked in, and you reach down and grab on tight to the cover and hold it steady, planting yourself firm so the deer can shake herself free. But even then, she couldn't pull herself out of the pool. It was too deep. *Mom*, you'd said with this grave look, *go inside and phone the police. Now.*

So I did and out the window I saw you sit down on the poolside and start talking to the deer. The police said they'd send someone from Fish and Wildlife over, to sit tight. You sang all eight songs from your school's chorus recital, *Hooray for the USA*, to the deer while we waited for the men to come. I knew those songs well. I'd been late to that recital since I had to rush from my shift at the restaurant, so you sang the parts I missed to me on the car ride home. *We are springing to the call with a million freemen more. Shouting the battle cry of freedom! And we'll fill our vacant ranks of our brothers gone before. Shouting the battle cry of freedom!* You belted it into my right ear from the passenger's seat. Two men came in khaki uniforms with a tranquilizer gun. The deer slowed, but she refused to comply. She kicked and thrashed her massive head around as they hoisted her out with blankets and ropes. You kept on singing just trying to soothe the poor thing. And even through the splashing and the men barking commands, the voice from your small body resounded.

LIGHT OF IRIS

May 22, 1990. Twentynine Palms, California.

Iris barreled down Highway 62 with the windows down. Her curls were protected by a red paisley scarf tied in a bow that flapped like dog ears in the wind. Winston's thin wisps of gray were tucked beneath a baseball cap that she picked up at the last gas station. It was powder blue with *California Dreamin'* scrolled across the front in neon, bubble cursive. She'd picked out a pair of sunglasses for him too and now, when she looked over at him in the passenger seat, she couldn't tell if he was sleeping.

Iris turned on the radio and worked the dial until she found a golden oldies station. "Love is a Many Splendored Thing" crooned through the Oldsmobile's speakers. Iris turned up the volume and tapped her long red fingernails on the wheel. The whole sky was one big sun, like the tine of a fork stabbed a yolk and it seeped out in all directions. And the ground on either side of the black road was cracked and bleached, peppered with sagebrush and silver cholla. A road sign that read *Joshua Tree National Monument: 10 miles* whipped past.

"You see that, Winston?" Iris hollered over the music, patting Winston's knee. "We're almost there!"

In the visitor center parking lot, Iris shut off the car and reapplied her lipstick, making little m's with her mouth to blot the color.

"Good?" she snapped her compact shut and looked up at Winston, slumped and motionless in his seat. "Not too bad for 65, am I right?" Iris tucked a loose strand of hair back under her scarf. "I'll get us some brochures and nature guides. You stay here."

Iris got halfway to the building before turning around, shaking her head as she approached the car. “I keep forgetting to leave the windows down for you! I’m going to be better about that, Winston, okay?” The glass whined as she revolved the stiff crank. “Two shakes of a lamb’s tail,” she called over her shoulder on her way back to the building. A clear bead of saliva formed in the corner of Winston’s mouth and by the time it grew heavy enough to roll down his chin, Iris was walking back to the car.

“Okay,” she said, shutting the door and spreading a leaflet between them on the bench seat. “Lots of options here.” Iris squinted at the print and pointed at one of the photographs. “Oh, look at this! *The Wonderland of Rocks*. That sounds fascinating, Winston, don’t you think so? And the ranger inside says this time of day we should keep our eyes peeled for roadrunners and desert woodrats! Can you imagine? We’re certainly a long way from Sioux City, aren’t we?”

Winston’s body shifted to the left as Iris pulled out of the parking lot onto the road. He wasn’t a large man, but she had to press hard on his shoulder to return him to an upright position. Iris turned the radio back on and followed the winding road, checking the map periodically and admiring the strange trees, which stood every few feet all the way out to the horizon. She thought the Joshua trees looked like they were caught at a party they’d been forbidden to attend, gyrating and twisting, when suddenly someone had turned on a light and yelled to stop right where they were, not to move a muscle. Some trees arced in a backbend, stretching their arms toward the ground where they came from. Others craned up and out, grasping for sun with their dagger shaped leaves. All of them in irregular angles. She wondered how long they’d been stuck like that, in suspended animation.

When they reached The Wonderland of Rocks, Iris put the car in park and opened the trunk. She pulled out Winston's wheelchair and set it up next to the car. She was practiced by now and knew how to loop her arms around his ribcage and how to lift with her knees instead of her back. But she'd never been a good judge of distance and regularly knocked Winston's head on the roof of the car two or three times before clearing the door.

She put her Polaroid in his lap and wheeled him along the narrow paved path that lead to a wooden plaque. Iris fished in her fanny pack for her reading glasses.

"Okay," she began. "Geologists believe the face of our modern landscape was born more than 100 million years ago. Molten liquid, heated by the continuous movement of Earth's crust, oozed upward and cooled while still below the surface. These plutonic intrusions are a granitic rock called monzogranite."

Iris snapped a photo of the plaque and then took a step back and aimed her lens at the enormous, jumbled rock formations jutting from the earth. She imagined the pair of giant, ancient hands that must have kneaded the granite into these lopsided mounds, just the same way she made meatloaf, squeezing the wet pink meat tight in her fists so it ribboned out between her fingers into crooked little heaps.

"Just magnificent," she said. "Okay, now let's get one with the two of us together."

Iris turned Winston's chair around and bent down so her face was next to his. She held the camera out as far as her arm would reach and smiled.

"Ready? Cheese!" She shook all three photos in the air. "Bobby's just going to love these!"

October 2, 1983. Sioux City, Iowa.

When the mailman came with her delivery in the morning, Iris was so excited that she hugged him, stepping out on the front stoop in her house robe with her curlers still in. Bobby would be at school for another five hours, and then at baseball practice until the early evening. He'd probably want to spend the night at his friend Mike's like he did on most Fridays. Winston was at work at the garage and would spend at least two or three hours at the bar afterwards. She had the day off from Younkers & Brothers, which she desperately needed after yesterday, when spring clearance had the entire department store swarming with needy customers, most of whom forgot their manners in the long lines. She'd barely gotten 10 minutes for her lunch break, and managed to scarf down half an egg salad sandwich and a cup of coffee without so much as coming up for air.

She'd recorded five full episodes on the Betamax. The day belonged only to her and Bob. She grabbed a pair of scissors from the kitchen drawer and took the box into the living room. She knelt on the carpet, then carefully cut the tape and folded back the cardboard flaps. There it was—The Bob Ross Master Set, complete with eight oil colors, a container of liquid white, a number 10 knife, a one-inch brush, a two-inch brush, a number six fan brush, a liner brush and a palette shaped like a kidney bean with a thumb hole, just like Bob's. Iris ran her fingers delicately along the soft bristles. She sometimes dreamed of patting Bob's bushy halo of frizz, ever so gently. And leaning in to smell. Would it be like paint, she wondered. Or maybe earthy, like fallen leaves.

She changed into an old pair of jeans with a rip in one of the knees and put on one of Winston's tattered, grease-stained work shirts backwards for a smock. She gathered up her hair on top of her head in a messy bun and grabbed her easel from the back of the

closet.

Iris set up her supplies in front of the television. She opened all the windows, made a strong pot of coffee, and put in the first tape of *The Joy of Painting*. She spent the whole day with Bob Ross. She painted a bubbling stream, an Alaskan range, and a lighthouse at night, lining them up on the floor along the back of the couch to dry as she finished. The gem toned skies and emerald trees, still wet, burst against the brown couch. Iris was calm and warm, and the knots in her shoulders eased themselves loose. She stopped only for a quick lunch, some tuna and a slice of tomato on toast, and before long it was dark. Time moved uncommonly fast on the rare days Iris had to herself.

It was 6pm. When Winston came home, he'd want his dinner ready. Iris wiped her hands on her smock and packed up her supplies. She laid the brushes out on the porch to dry after smacking them on the railing to shake out extra water. "Just beat the devil out of it," she'd murmured to herself. Chicken-fried steak was Winston's favorite, and since it was a Friday night she had a T-bone thawing in the fridge. She heated up the skillet, dredged the meat in flour and dropped it in the sizzling butter. As it browned, crackling and hissing over the heat, she chopped potatoes. She drizzled them with vegetable oil with a pinch of salt and pepper and put them in the oven to roast. Winston always doused his plate in salt, without ever taking a taste first. She considered blanching some broccoli, but she knew Winston wouldn't touch green vegetables without a complaint first.

Iris poured herself a glass of red wine and lit a cigarette, leaning against the kitchen counter. Maybe he'd come home at his normal time, and maybe he wouldn't. Maybe he'd only have a few beers and a shot or two of whiskey, or maybe it'd be worse, like over the summer when he'd been out until midnight and missed the driveway,

plowing his pickup into the azalea bushes. She remembered how he laid on the horn, cursing, as the neighbors flicked on their lights, one by one, all down the block. Iris had shot out of bed at the terrible noise and run out in her nightgown. She tried for an hour to convince Winston to come inside, but he insisted on sleeping in his truck. He could be mean when he was drunk, and Iris had learned what a waste it was to try and reason with him.

Winston's drinking had become worse every year, but Iris tried to anticipate the best possible scenario, to put positive energy into the universe, like her friend Nancy advised. Nancy lived across the street and had two little girls whose father had run off years ago. Sometimes, if they were both having a cigarette on their front porches at the same time, she'd invite Iris over to have a cup of tea and read cards for her. Iris didn't know if she believed much in tarot, but she was intrigued by Nancy's bohemian ways. She liked the gentle clicks the beaded curtain made when they passed from the living room into the kitchen, and the way the feathers on the dream catcher danced when a breeze came through the window. In her readings, she often circled back to a premonition. Iris had a great journey in her future, greater than her wildest dreams. "It's your high priestess," she'd told Iris. "She's going to travel on a quest to find harmony and righteousness."

At 8pm, Iris turned off the oven. She'd tried to keep Winston's steak warm, but it looked shriveled. She made up a plate for him, covered it in foil and put it in the fridge. Iris drifted off on the couch to an episode *Masterpiece Theater*. She woke up to the growl of Winston's truck at 2am. The headlights penetrated the front window, casting the living room in a cold glow. He struggled to aim his key into the lock. Iris pried herself off the

couch to let him in. She could smell him the second she opened the door. He reeked of whiskey and his eyes were glassy and bloodshot.

“Winston,” Iris brought her hand to her cheek. “You can’t drive when you’re like this. You could kill someone. And what if—”

“I’m fine, I!” Winston brushed past her into the house. She hated when he called her I, like he was really talking to himself instead of her. He opened the fridge and reached for the plate she’d made him, letting the foil fall to the floor. Winston ate the steak cold with his hands, tearing off big pieces with his teeth. His fingers were greasy and he wiped them on his pants. Iris just watched. “It’s really good,” he’d said, his mouth jammed with potatoes. Winston was unsteady on his feet.

“The hell’s all this?” He walked into the living room and pointed to her paintings lined up against the back of the couch. “You painting, Iris? Iris the artist? The Irist!”

“Winston, why don’t you just go to bed? I can bring you an Aspirin.”

Winston bent down and picked up the Alaskan range, smudging the fine oil strokes she’d taken so much care to craft, leaving behind slimy fingerprints.

“Winston, don’t.”

He brought the painting closer to his face to examine it. Chewed potato fell from his lips and stuck to the canvas.

“It’s real pretty, I,” Winston slurred. “For real, I’m impressed.” Winston tried to hold the painting out at a distance for a better view, and he smeared Iris’s glowing sunrise beyond recognition.

Iris buried her face in her hands. Winston tried to put the painting back, but it fell face down into the carpet. He wiped his hands on his shirt.

“I bet it still looks good, I.” His tongue was thick and slow from whiskey. He peeled the painting off of the carpet. It looked like a late Monet now. “See? Still good.”

June 1st, 1990. Abiquiu, New Mexico.

Iris pushed Winston’s chair along the adobe tiles, sending steady vibrations through his body as they moved with the group.

“Looking at this view from the patio, we can get a real sense of O’Keeffe’s inspiration for some of her cloudscapes,” the tour guide motioned up to the sky. “This is also where she spent time working on one of her most iconic pieces, *Ladder to the Moon*.

Pure white light poured into the house and Iris thought she’d quite like to live there. Sleeping and painting, taking long walks along the red and gray hills of the high plains. She’d first learned about Georgia O’Keeffe in the extended studies art history class she took at Sioux City Community College. She’d signed up as soon as Bobby was old enough to start playing sports after school and she had a regular free weeknight. She loved the modernists and the surrealists the most, and how alive their distortions and abstractions were, how they could jar you awake. Winston was against her taking the class from the beginning, even though she’d carefully put money aside for it for over a year.

“Well there goes an awful lot of time and money down the toilet,” he’d said on the day she enrolled. She’d tried to explain, but Winston was rigid. His opinions calcified at the same time they formed in his head.

“As you can see, the home was built in the Spanish Colonial style. It was in total ruin when Miss O’Keeffe found it.” The tour guide’s high heels made satisfying little

clacks along the tile. She walked deliberately and clasped her hands behind her back except to point out a noteworthy object or section of the home. “She bought the property in 1945 and for the next four years supervised its restoration, which was carried out by her friend, Maria Chabot. Follow me and we’ll take a look at the garden.”

Iris stopped for a moment as the group moved on and snapped a photo of a stark, chalk-white cow pelvis resting on a low wooden table. She hurried to catch back up with the group and became absorbed in the tour guide’s words for a moment before remembering that she’d left Winston behind in the last room in front of the cow pelvis.

“Sorry,” she whispered to him, and smoothed his hair down before wheeling him back over to the group.

“During the winter months, Miss O’Keeffe often painted from inside her bedroom window, which, as you can see, overlooks the Chama River Valley. Here in beautiful Abiquiu, she also created her *Cottonwood* series, the paintings of the Abiquiu Mesa, and the Road to Santa Fe. We can really feel and see the time and love that O’Keeffe dedicated to this special house, and the ways that her work was in conversation with this unique space and its landscape.”

“Absolutely incredible,” Iris whispered and pointed her camera at Georgia O’Keefe’s bed. “Can’t you feel it, Winston? It’s like some of her energy is still here.”

After the tour, Iris found a diner and decided they’d better stop for lunch. She ordered Winston a strawberry milkshake and got herself a turkey club with fries and a root beer.

“How amazing was that?” Iris said, still buzzing. “Couldn’t you just live in that house and stay there forever? I mean, that was just a downright holy experience, am I right?”

Iris held the straw up to Winston’s mouth, and he made a meager sucking motion. Pink froth oozed from the side of his mouth and Iris dabbed his face with a napkin.

“You know, most people live their whole lives without ever getting to take a trip like this, Winston. And look at us. Out here, making our dreams a reality. I still can’t get over it. You know what though?” Iris pointed a half eaten French fry at Winston. “I ought to give Bobby a call to say hi and check in. I’m gonna try the payphone out front. You relax here, okay? Back in a sec!”

Iris dialed her son’s number and after five rings, the machine picked up. Iris hated the greeting he’d recorded: *This is Bob. You know what to do.*

“Hi sweetie, Mom here. Dad and I are having a great time on our road trip. We’re in New Mexico! And we just went on a tour of guess whose house . . . Georgia *O’Keeffe*! Can you believe that? Anyway, I’m just checking in. Listen, I hope you’re remembering to feed the cats for us on your way to and from work. And don’t forget that Vanija gets eardrops and her antibiotic for another six days. She won’t scratch you if you wrap her up in a blanket, just like a little jellyroll. I know she’s high maintenance, but that cat is such an angel. I just think it’s so sweet the way she insists on sitting on your father’s lap all the time. Anyway, listen to me, I’m rambling now. So we’re staying in Santa Fe tonight and visiting the Museum of International Folk Art and then the botanical gardens tomorrow. I’ll call back with the number of our hotel when we get there. And keep an eye out for more postcards, okay? Oh and hey, are you remembering to water the—”

The answering machine beeped and Iris heard dial tone.

December 4, 1970. Sioux City, Iowa.

“The what?”

“The *Nutcracker!* The ballet? It’ll be fun, Winston! And we could even have dinner at that new restaurant downtown beforehand. Or maybe just a drink at the bar if it’s too pricy.”

“Don and I are at the cabin that night, I. It’s deers and beers night.”

“On the day before Christmas Eve? When’s the last time we went out together, like we used to? I’m serious.”

“How do we have money for that, I? Hm?”

“Well, I know we have money for you to go to the bar.”

“You know what,” Winston pointed two stubby fingers at her, “I don’t know why you think you’re supposed to have so much more than you do. You want some fancy life, but that’s how things are, I. And you should have checked with me before you got those tickets.”

“I guess I should have.” Iris clapped her hands to the sides of her thighs.

“I’m starving,” Winston said. “We eating soon?”

Winston grabbed a beer from the fridge and turned on the television.

Iris checked on the casserole, lit a cigarette and looked at her husband, who’d turned the volume on the TV up too loud and was flipping through the channels impatiently. She’d married Winston fresh out of high school after a pregnancy scare. In

school, she was in the drama club and the art club, and her marks were consistently high. Winston called her *The Princess*.

He'd worked at his father's car garage and always had money to buy beer and cigarettes, which Iris hadn't tried before he convinced her. He was a little bit dangerous, she'd thought. And he was elusive in a way that made her always wonder if he really liked her. He was a little aloof, detached. On the occasions when he did dote on her, Iris felt like she was special, and she basked in that spotlight. When Bobby came along, she'd wanted them to be a family like the kind on TV. Iris's father had left when she was still in grade school and it had scandalized the whole family. He'd met another woman and moved across town with her. It kept Iris up at night, the thought of how much it would hurt Bobby if his parents' marriage broke up. How he'd be scarred for the rest of his life, stigmatized.

Winston meant well. It was just that he'd had such a rough childhood, Iris often reminded herself. He didn't talk much about it, but Winston had told her how his father had punched holes in the walls in fits of rage, terrifying the whole family. Emotions weren't easy for Winston. There was still good in him, Iris thought. It took work to keep a family together.

July 10th, 1990. Mesa Verde, CO.

Iris fanned herself with the brochure. She and Winston waited in a long line for tickets to a ranger-guided tour of the Pueblo Cliff Dwellings.

"Just look at this view," Iris said to Winston, whose neck was burning. Iris rotated his chair. "You don't want an uneven tan, do you?" she joked with him.

She looked around and wondered what the village might have looked like back when the Pueblos lived here, with no idea that their pottery and shells and turquoise would be excavated and acquired for museum exhibits, encased behind glass smudged by the grubby noses and fingers of tourists' children.

In front of them, a little boy who'd been squirming petulantly turned around and stared at Winston, whose eyes were open and expressionless.

"Mom, what's the matter with that man? Why's he just stare like that?"

"Randy, don't be rude," his mother said, embarrassed. She swatted the boy's shoulder with her informational guide.

"It's quite alright," Iris said, "I'd rather people just come right out and ask than be confused or frightened." She kneeled down to the boy's height and he reached up for his mother's hand.

"About a year and a half ago, my husband was driving very fast, very late at night—"

"It's okay," the mother cut in. "You don't have to tell him."

"No really, I don't mind," Iris waved away the mother's protest. "I have a little boy myself, so I know how these things work. Anyway, he was driving very fast and it was very dark and a he lost control of his truck and drove right into a big old pine tree and hit his head very, very hard."

"Can he talk?" the little boy peered into Winston's sunburned face.

"He can't talk. But he can hear and see, which is exactly why we came to this special place. He's on vacation, just like you!"

"Like me?" he looked up at his mother.

“Let’s go, Randy. We can come back for tickets later.” The woman dragged her son away, and he looked back over his shoulder at Iris as they left.

“How excited are you to get a look at those petroglyphs?” Iris nudged Winston with her elbow. “And we should pick up a Pueblo basket for Bobby before we go; we’ll have to remember.”

November 18th, 1988. Sioux City, Iowa.

“Hi Bobby, listen, I know I keep bugging you, but I just wanted to see if you’d made up your mind about bringing that nice girl you’re seeing home for Thanksgiving. We’d love to meet her! Call me back, okay? You never call me back! Okay, you take care, honey.”

Iris hung up the phone and stirred the chili on the stove. She turned on the radio and started skimming the directions on a box of cornbread mix. Winston pulled in the driveway and she felt the muscles in her jaw tighten.

“Hiya,” he said, hanging his coat on a hook by the door. He was early, and must have only stayed at the bar for a beer or two.

“Good day?” Iris mixed the dry ingredients in a large bowl.

“Uh huh, it was fine.” Winston reached for a beer.

“Oh, I left another message for Bobby just now about Thanksgiving.”

“Mhmm.”

“Well I’m just wanting to know if he’s going to bring that new girlfriend over. I’m thinking we should use the fancy tablecloth if he is. If it’s just us and Grandma, I won’t bother pressing it. And I want him to ask if she has any favorite dishes that I

should make. You know, just so she feels welcomed.” Iris cracked an egg into the mixture and stirred.

“Yep.” Winston turned on the television, drowning out the radio.

“Well, have you talked to him?” Iris wiped her hands on a towel and turned off the radio.

“Yah.” Winston kicked his shoes off.

“I haven’t been able to get a hold of him. When was this?”

“You bother that boy too much, you know? Gets on his nerves.”

“By asking for a little common decency? When did you speak with him?” Iris put her hand on her hip.

“He came by the garage last week. He said you’d been calling and calling. And I told him not to worry about it.”

“Not to worry about it?”

“He’s a grown man, I. He’s not your baby anymore.”

“Well that’s wonderful.” Iris dropped the spoon on the counter. “I’m glad you decided to let me know.”

She clicked the radio back on and turned the volume knob up so it clashed with the television. Winston walked over to the set and turned it up too. Iris countered, twisting the knob all the way so it cracked and hissed.

“Well, I’m real glad I came home early!” Winston yelled. He turned off the TV and pounded toward the door for his coat and truck keys. On his way out, he swiped the blaring radio off the countertop, sending it crashing to the floor. He peeled out of the driveway. Iris got the broom and swept the fragments of radio off the floor.

Bobby was afraid of his father's temper when he was little. Iris had protected him. She'd take him for walks in the neighborhood if Winston was in a mood. If it was nighttime and the sky was clear enough, Iris would point out constellations. Or she'd sit with him in his bedroom and take him onto her lap, rocking and holding him until his tears slowed. As he grew, though, he pulled away from her. He and Winston drank beer together when he became a teenager. Bobby took up an interest in cars and then slowly started becoming his father.

May 22, 1990. Twentynine Palms, California.

Dear Nancy,

Greetings from my high priestess quest! I hope you're doing well out there in Des Moines and are all settled into the new house. I can't believe little Katie is finishing her first full year of college! It won't be long before Emma goes off to school too. They're growing up to be such lovely people, Nancy.

The road trip has been pure magic so far. We've been to some incredible museums and seen so many wonderful landscapes. Nancy, I had no idea how vast this country of ours was. And everywhere is so different. I certainly never thought I'd get to see any of it with my own eyes, that's for sure.

We spent today driving around Joshua Tree, and get this—we're staying at the motel where Graham Parsons died! The Joshua Tree Inn, it's called. Isn't that wild? I'll send more postcards as soon as I can, but please accept this letter and a picture of Winston in front of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in the meantime. He's relaxing by the pool right now, so I should probably go check on him.

Your friend,

Iris

She examined the Polaroid before folding it in the letter. In the photo, Winston's mouth was slightly agape and he stared off into the distance. Iris's daisy-print purse rested in his lap and he wore a large *I Support the California Arts Council* pin on his lapel. Iris put the letter and photo in an envelope and brought it to the front desk.

She looked out on the pool. Two small girls seemed to be tending to Winston, who was propped up in a chaise lounge wearing his sunglasses. One of them painted his fingernails, and the other poured a beach pail of pool water over his head. Winston's feet shimmered with glitter. They both wore long braids and swimsuits with ruffles. Iris folded her arms and watched. The girls, whose parents were nowhere to be seen, sang the chorus to *Under The Sea* again and again, laughing and dancing around him in circles. Iris would go and have a word with the little girls, but not before she stopped at the bar for a drink or two.

WAX PALM AND BOUGAINVILLEA

Juan Carlos replanted my hydrangeas and lilies into large clay pots on rolling casters so I could rearrange them on my own, so I could be sure they had the perfect balance of light and shade through summer and spring. Or move them into the garage when it got too cold. But they were terracotta behemoths, even heavier with potting soil. I'd push with all my weight, which was mostly bone now. Honeybee, who's on wheels now too, walked slowly alongside me whenever I moved the plants, her little front legs carting around her rear, her tail draping limp behind. She loves Juan Carlos as much as I do. Poor dear slipped a disk after jumping off the couch to greet him. All dachshunds have this problem, it's genetic.

Juan Carlos worked magic on my bougainvillea. Magenta and lemon blossoms, two stories high, holy looking. He trained it to climb all the way up the back of the house, pruning it before each winter, making precision clips with his ear close to the vines like he was listening. The blooms looked whipped and soft like where cherubs might like to linger. It's deciduous, bougainvillea. Which means parts fall away when they're no longer needed.

#

Juan Carlos always comes to help me in the garden. I mean before he got too busy he did. Simple things I used to be able to do on my own, or that Roland would do if I persisted with frequent reminders. But he'd go above and beyond. He was intuitive. So eventually I let him start making decisions about what to plant, how things should look. He had an artist's eye, so it wasn't just that the plants were thriving, it was the attention

to shape and texture and line. The balance between wild and controlled. He'd consult me out of courtesy, but he knew he had free reign and all of my trust too.

I'm not saying I had the same sense as Juan Carlos, but I've always been the kind of person who can tell what the garden wants, which is not always the same as what it needs. The problem is I'm not strong enough to do the physical labor anymore. I'm hollowing in my old age. I eat like a bird. Just a handful of peanuts or an apple for the day. It was always Roland who'd loved big meals. My clothes hang loose. The skin around my neck gathers and folds like drapery.

Some people say women who are never mothers don't age as fast, but I haven't found that to be true. I'm brittle is all I know. Breakable. But it is true that there are differences. I've read up on it. All those surging hormones that make things hospitable for the baby, for example, end up wreaking havoc on a woman's body down the road. And the calcium needed for building the baby's bones depletes the mother of her own supply, leeches it right out of her system. And did you know the volume of gray matter in her brain actually shrinks after childbirth? It's proven.

Roland and I never had children. We didn't even get married until I was 32. I was independent, which was seen as strange back then, though women now do it all the time. I'd worked as a receptionist and served tables on and off. I traveled around, drove out to California on my own in a rusty old convertible I'd saved up for. I met people. I stayed for a few days or a month whenever and wherever it felt right. Or if the transmission would start grinding. My mother was scandalized by it all. And then years later, when the thought of bringing a martini to another self-entitled suit who'd reach around and pat my bottom was unbearable, I went back to school to get my degree in art history. That's

when I met Roland. He taught classical studies. He was older. At ease and self-assured. Roland spoke in a warm baritone that made people instantly believe him. And he was always a little disheveled looking, with a shirt button misaligned or a tuft of hair jutting up on the side of his head, like he had bigger things to think about.

We'd tried a few years in, but it didn't go the way it was supposed to. I'd miscarried four times. That last time, I was far enough along that we'd picked out a name and a color for the nursery. They'd had to do what's called a dilation and evacuation. They put you under and then suction out your insides to prevent infection. It was grisly and clinical. I remember lying in bed when I got home, cramping like big hands were wringing out my organs. I looked out the window and there was a shiny black beetle trying to climb up the glass, but it kept slipping, over and over again, falling on the sill and rocking on its convex shell. I watched the struggle in a loop for what felt like hours. Roland brought me an enormous roast beef sandwich and a glass of milk, which I wanted nothing to do with, and said we could have a beautiful life just the two of us. We'd travel. We'd buy nice things for ourselves. Roland had been married before. He had a teenage daughter, Robin, who stopped speaking to him after he left her mother. He sent cards on her birthday and she'd return them unopened.

#

Roland and I weren't wealthy, but between my salary working part time at the art museum and Roland's tenure, we were able to summer in Paris every few years. We'd rent a closet-sized apartment in Montmartre, a five-floor walk up, and live off baguettes, wine, coffee and cigarettes for two glorious months. We took a cruise down the Rhine

one year, The Gems of Western Europe tour. One year we went to Australia. We'd seen Alaska. Ireland. South Africa. And when we were at home, we ate out whenever we pleased. Slept indulgently on weekends, making love in the morning and lingering in bed until noon. We bought nice wine and beautified our home. I enrolled in pottery classes and took up watercolor. We turned the spare bedroom, which was always flooded in sunlight, into a little studio. We had no creatures to consider other than ourselves. We were free and able.

Still, sometimes when we were out, we'd see couples with young children and I'd get emotional. I'd think how much I loved Roland, and how much I felt he loved me. And I thought about what it would have been like if we could have brought a human into the world and given it all of that big love. Shown it every beautiful thing we knew. Roland would always listen, and he said he wondered the same thing. But we'd also have long conversations about how society only pushed women to make children instead of art so there'd be more consumers in the world, more workers. We were both always of two minds, Roland and I. Plus, he'd said, I'd always have him.

#

After Roland was gone, I'd needed help with the simple things. Mowing the grass, weeding the flowerbeds, watering the trees. Juan Carlos was an angel. He was there for me; he defended me. When the neighbor's maple dropped all its leaves in my yard, he strapped the blower on and sent them all back across the property line. The day Honeybee hurt her back, he'd held her on his lap in the car, stroking her head gently and reassuring her all the way to the vet. He did odd jobs around the house too. Changing an occasional

bulb, opening a jar of pickles. Always so kind, always so easy to smile. He'd ask how I was doing that day. We'd talk.

#

Once in a while he'd get a ride to the house from a friend. But Honeybee and I usually would have to pick him up in the car. She so enjoys riding with the window down, feeling her ears flap wild and free in the breeze. And I drive a coupe so Juan Carlos had to sit in the back. He never seemed to mind. His apartment was out past Market Street, not one of the best neighborhoods in Alamosa. Not that I'd ever mention that to him, of course. I'd always make him a strong pot of coffee when we got back to the house. And he likes these sweet rolls I make with candied fruits, so I tried to have some dough ready. Roland always loved those too.

#

It was Roland who hired Juan Carlos. After his first heart attack, when he'd retired. He'd been young when Roland met him. Bagging groceries at the Safeway. Roland liked the way he was careful to never put the tender greens at the bottom of the bag, or to put the avocados next to the milk carton with its hard edges. He'd asked the boy if he wanted to make some extra money and brought him home after his shift that same afternoon.

#

When you talked, he'd really listen. And if you asked, he'd tell you about the house where he grew up, outside Bogotá, surrounded by giant wax palms and mountains blanketed in forest. About his grandmother and her orchids and chrysanthemums. How he remembered being so little he was only as tall as the lilies. While they were out buying groceries, his parents were killed by the National Liberation Army, which was making a display of intimidating the general public. Juan Carlos was only three. So it was his grandmother who'd looked after him. She was the one who taught him the language the flowers and trees spoke. When he got older, she worried he'd be recruited or else taken hostage and so she sent him North.

Juan Carlos didn't have a yard at his apartment, only a little landing on a metal-rung fire escape, which he'd covered with sprouting pots. I like to think it wasn't just money that kept him coming back for so long. He was free to express himself. He'd seen seed grow to flower, protected, nurtured.

#

I was always amazed at how he just used simple things around the house, natural things. He'd asked to have the teabags from Roland's empty mug and patted the wet tannins down on the roots of the ferns along the fence. And he'd kept the aphids away from the rose bushes by burying dried up banana peels around their base. He just knew. Any time he saw a slug or a snail, he'd douse it in salt right away, always on the offensive. Once, Juan Carlos sliced his forearm when he was reaching for the pruners. He cupped his hand under the gash and walked over to the budding peonies and let the blood soak into the roots. Afterwards, Roland dabbed a peroxide soaked cotton ball along the

jagged cut and wrapped it in gauze. Those peonies bloomed the next morning. They were luminous.

#

He'd come to the house two or three times per week back then, when Roland was retired. Roland had developed a sloping belly. In his old age, he ate cakes and chocolates indiscriminately. And he finished each day reclined with a glass of bourbon, watching television or reading a book. When he'd drift off, he snored in loud, arrhythmic jags. I could hear him from my studio and sometimes I'd put the radio on to drown him out. But I'd always wake him up and we'd climb in bed together when I was finished painting. We'd bought a massive bed after retirement, a California King, it's called. Now with just me and Honeybee there at night, it's like drifting in the ocean alone.

#

When Juan Carlos told me he could only come once a week I was devastated. A lot had changed since we'd first met him. He'd gotten married, bought a little house. He'd gone to night school and earned his associate's in business, and his wife's father hired him at the bank. And of course I was happy for him. But you have to understand how it felt to start losing him.

#

The phonebook is full of men who'll come to the house. To do repairs or work with machinery. And there were plenty of parts of the house that needed remodeling. I

hadn't updated anything since Roland. I started having the carpets professionally cleaned once a week. I had the windows replaced, new cabinets installed. I did the countertops, had the fireplace resurfaced. I kept my planner full.

Honeybee hated all of them. She'd shake with distrust. None of those men were very good conversationalists. You could make them coffee and just sit nearby as they work. Ask where they're from, what they like to do in their spare time. But that doesn't mean they'll share anything worthwhile or real with you. I'd found it very humanizing to have conversations about how divine mother nature is, about leaving home alone and beginning a new life and feeling out of phase with the world. It wasn't easy to find a connection. Saturdays were special.

#

When Victoria got pregnant, she told him she didn't want him gardening for Nadine anymore on Saturdays. *We're not poor*, she said. *Why doesn't she have friends or neighbors who can help her out if she's so lonely? How could it be that she's really so alone? Nice house and plenty of money? Why don't you put more time into your own garden? Our garden.*

#

Nadine was a white lady, but she had the same eyes as his grandmother. Wide and dark with creped lids, slow, so as to really notice things. When he was little, back in Bogotá, his grandmother would talk to him for long hours in the garden as she moved from plant to plant, bending and reaching in a slow, low-to-the-ground dance. He would touch the leaves, tracing his fingers along their shapes and lean close to smell them. She would explain to him how water enters through the stem and travels to the leaves. How soil cycles nutrients. At night when she tucked him in, he'd rest his head on her soft arm. She would sing and comb her fingers through his hair. *Duérmete niño. Duérmete tú.*

#

When Juan Carlos and Nadine would talk, sometimes out in the garden, while he worked and she studied her nails, or sometimes in the kitchen having coffee, they'd play a game Nadine called What Would It Be.

Imagine you float up to heaven and there's a rule that God can only say one thing to you, what would it be? If you had to choose between the power of flight or invisibility, what would it be? If you could only swim in one body of water for the rest of your life, eat one dessert for the rest of your life, listen to one song for the rest of your life, what would it be? Roland had despised these questions, which Nadine would save for long car rides or waiting in lines.

Nadine, I don't know. Why do I have to only pick one thing? Well, it's hypothetical.

You're just supposed to speculate.

Roland would humor her for a few tortured rounds and then turn the radio on or ask about her latest painting.

Juan Carlos could answer Nadine's questions for hours, though, and he volleyed his own back. *If you could only smell one flower, read one book. If you could change just one thing about the world, what would it be? If you were God and you could talk down to the whole earth and tell us all one thing, what would it be?*

They knew each other strangely in this way, but so specifically.

#

"Ms. Nadine," Juan Carlos said to her through the open sliding door to the garden. The sun was setting and the angle cut half his face in shadow. Nadine looked up at him from her mixing bowl, sticky with sweet roll dough. "This is hard for me to say. But, with Victoria having the baby soon, I'm not going to be able to come by to help with the plants anymore on Saturdays. I just wanted to thank you for—"

"I can double your pay," Nadine let the spoon drop to the countertop.

"It's not about the money. And you doubled my pay when Mr. Roland passed. I have a family now."

"Of course you do. You ought to be spending your time with them." Little webs of bone flexed in Nadine's neck.

"But we'll keep in touch, okay? We could write letters. Send postcards maybe?"

"I think that would be lovely."

They were both silent as Nadine walked down the driveway with him to his car.

“We’ll keep in touch, okay?”

“Don’t worry, you can’t get rid of me that easily.”

Juan Carlos placed his warm hand on Nadine’s shoulder. She moved in to hug him goodbye.

#

Victoria rang Nadine’s doorbell. She held the swaddled infant in her arms. Nadine invited her in, ushered her to the couch, poured her a glass of lemonade and sat next to her, peering into the blanket in delight. Juan Carlos had called two weeks earlier to announce the arrival of Sofia. Nadine didn’t want to push, but she’d been eager to see the baby.

“Victoria, she’s just beautiful. I couldn’t be happier for you both.”

Victoria propped the baby up so Nadine could see her face better. She was all cheeks. She had dark lashes and a head of brown downy fuzz. Her eyes squeezed shut against the sunlight through the window. “We’re very blessed.”

“May I?” Nadine opened her arms.

Victoria passed the bundle over and Nadine cradled her, careful and slow. So very fragile. Only slightly bigger than the submarine sandwiches Roland liked to eat for lunch.

“How is Juan Carlos?”

Victoria took a sip of lemonade and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

“Nadine, that’s actually one of the reasons I came by. I thought you might want to meet Sofia. But, I also wanted to ask you to please not send those post cards anymore. The ones with the weird questions. About death and God and food.”

“Oh. I’m sorry Victoria. I certainly didn’t mean anything by them.” Nadine was blindsided.

“It’s not that he doesn’t like them. He does. It’s just that I want him to think about our family now. I don’t want him dreaming about another world. I hope you can understand.”

#

It’s so hot today that Honeybee won’t come out from beneath the shade. She’s under the oak, panting. I tell her, I hear you, Babygirl. I feel weaker than usual today, slower. My heartbeat feels strange, syncopated. Like there are moths fluttering loose in my chest. I bring Honeybee a dish of cool water, ease my hips down to sit beside her and stroke her marvelous silk ears. The new gardener was here this morning. He’s always in a rush, distracted. He works with a little battery-powered radio clipped on his belt, dirtying the peace and quiet, the bird songs, the wind chime, with this harsh electric treble. He’s obsessed with sports scores. Juan Carlos was always so good to only remove the dead or damaged stems. I’ve told him exactly how I like the pruning done, but this man is always cutting too close to the collar. It’s brutish. No stopping to examine or really listen before using his blades.

This new man has hacked away at everything but the bougainvillea, which is overgrown, shaggy looking. It needs thinning out or it won’t flower right. All that undergrowth up there is a drain on the healthy blooms. It’s a resilient plant, but there are rules. I wrestle the stepladder out from the shed, and when I catch my breath I notice I’m feeling light headed, a little woozy. I realize I ought to go inside and rest as soon as I’m

finished. I try to steady myself up on the ladder, holding one arm out for balance. I stretch to reach up into the dense tangled undergrowth, backlit in sun.

I can see the wax palms Juan Carlos told me about, towering trunks cresting the clouds. The orchid roots, looping above the surface of the ground like sea snakes, searching for a branch to coil. The black soil like coffee grounds, warm when squeezed between a small boy's toes. Running through the grass, eye to eye with the lilies. Brushing past the sharp, stiff leaves of a bromeliad with bright angular flowers like red paper spades. The cloud forest off in the horizon, harboring pumas and monkeys, whose eyes glow at night. An iridescent, ruby topaz hummingbird, hovering mid-air, a blur of beating wings. The sideways sun, casting everything in gold with long slender shadows. And right before the light narrows to a pinhole, I see the marmalade bush, with powder soft folds of ginger flowers that spread everywhere and take over if you let them.

PENELOPE AND THE LOTUS EATERS

Nellie woke at sunrise every morning. She slept in fits and starts, and never for long. After checking on Cal, she'd step through sliding doors onto the paint-chipped deck, and down to the small garden behind the house. In the golden quiet, Nellie would visit with each of the plants, watering them, pruning weeds. She'd trail her fingers over the lavender bush, leaning close to breathe it in, powdery and wooden smelling. She touched her fingertips to the waxy, dagger points of the yucca leaves. They were so sharp that if she wasn't careful, a spot of blood would bead on her index. She'd smear the rust-colored pearl into the yucca. They were sisters in this way. Nellie would kneel in the dirt and gently cup the orange poppies in her palms. Everything else had been planted, but the poppies were wildflowers, New Mexico natives. They grew on sprawling vines, covered in fine, silvery hairs, and they were the prettiest.

In the center of the garden stood an old plum tree, almost twenty feet high. Nellie greeted the plum tree last each morning because she loved it the most. Desert rocks the size of children's skulls encircled the roots. Cal had collected them over the last decade on her weekend hikes along the Zuni-Acoma. Black lava rocks, rhyolite, quartz, all pocked and jagged, like they'd been struck by tiny asteroids. Cal would put an unusual looking rock in her pack and bring it home for Nellie's garden, even on hot days, even if it weighed her down. They would sit together at the kitchen table and look them up in Cal's book, *What's That Rock? An Illustrated Guide*. Every rock was formed by a series of slow collisions—iron oxide invading cavities, shifting plates jamming mineral deposits between corrugated ridges.

In the spring, when Cal was hit on her bicycle, the tree blossomed and fruited profusely. Even though for all the time they'd lived in the house, it only ever yielded few dozen plums each season, small and pale. Cal and Nellie talked about cutting the tree down more than once. They'd sometimes let the last of the summer's fruit fall to the ground and wither, fermenting. Cal liked to watch the rock squirrels nibble the mushed fruit and then stumble a little from the alcohol. But the new plums were big enough to fill Nellie's palm, and they were the color of black rubies. When she bit into them, juice ran down her chin and throat. They were slick and sweet and tart. Cal was out here in the plum tree much more than she was in the living room.

The nurse had arranged Cal in an adjustable hospital bed and hooked her to a ventilator. Nellie had always changed the subject whenever it came up over the years, but she knew, now, how Cal felt. She would want to be at home. She wouldn't want to live her last days under aggressive medical care. After two months in the hospital, they'd changed Cal's status from vegetative to brain dead. Cal hadn't looked like herself in the vegetative state, but she showed what were called signs of wakefulness. Her eyes were open, fixed on the same spot just above the television, and she'd been breathing on her own, sometimes coughing. Now her eyes had closed. Her heart, her liver, and her kidneys soldiered on, but there were no signals relayed between her mind and body. There was no chance, the doctors told Nellie, that she'd become conscious again.

So Cal had come home. Even though they told Nellie it wasn't advisable for a person in her condition to be moved. Even though insurance refused to cover the costs. Nellie had maxed out their credit cards, and the living room filled with machines and monitors and tubes and wires. When she felt the time was right, Nellie would shut off the

power on the ventilator. Without the machine, it would take 30 to 60 minutes for Cal's heart to stop. The button glowed in a brilliant yellow. It was okay, they told Nellie, to take a few days if she needed it. They gave her a number to call after she pressed the button and a pamphlet with information about different support groups. If she wanted, they'd send a hospice nurse to be there as the machine stopped, any time of day.

Nellie wanted to wait, at least a little while. Cal would want it to feel like the right moment. The people she could think to call, their small circle of friends, her sister back in Joliet, would come in an instant, but they'd be there expecting and waiting for Nellie to push the button. Cal had no biological family to notify. She was the only child of a single mother, who'd passed away when Cal was still in high school. Nellie thought Cal would want the moment of her death to be private. Just between the two of them.

The first day after Cal came home, Nellie tried to reach her. It wasn't that she didn't believe the doctors, or wasn't aware that mechanical breathing counted as aggressive means. But she'd read and researched meticulously after the accident. Sometimes, small, almost undetectable parts of the brain could remain active. Nellie wondered if *death of the brain* was a construct. Like *educated*, like *happy*. Who got to decide?

Nellie put Chopin on the record player. The sweeping, graceful piano always relaxed Cal after a long day in the lab. Cal taught organic chemistry at The New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology. She'd make the same terrible joke all the time, pronouncing it *choppin'* while working a knife over a mound of vegetables. Nellie studied Cal's face while *The Complete Waltzes* filled the living room. These were Cal's cheeks, freckled and full. These were her eyes and her mouth, covered with tape and plastic tubing. But this wasn't Cal.

Nellie stayed up late into the night and fell asleep on the couch across from Cal's bed. The glowing yellow button cast a halo around the ventilator. She'd been so positive she would know when the right moment was. But now she worried. What if Cal was sending her signals and she was missing them? What if the moment came and she hesitated, and weeks went by? Or longer?

#

Nellie was on the high dive at the YMCA where she took swimming lessons as a girl. It looked just as she remembered, with wet, powder blue tiles, fluorescent yellow lighting, and chlorine sharp in the air. But the scale was stretched and distorted. The ceiling rose hundreds of feet into the air and the water was deep like the middle of the ocean. Nellie wore a white sequined cocktail dress that was too small and matching, pointed high heels. She loosened her grip on the wet railings and took tiny steps to the edge of the narrow diving board to look down. It bounced eagerly under her weight. Impossibly far below, Cal treaded in the blue water, wearing a black top hat and motioning for her to jump. Cal yelled up to her, but she was too far away, her voice was all echo.

A line formed at the bottom of the high dive. People were impatient and started pounding their fists on the long ladder. Nellie looked down and recognized the woman at the front of the line. She was tall with boyish hips and rope-like limbs. It was Jessie Diaz from work.

You jumping or what? Jessie yelled up to Nellie, pounding harder on the ladder. *People are waiting down here!* The board swayed and Nellie nearly lost her balance. She dropped to her knees and got down flat on her stomach. Nellie wrapped her arms around

the board and hugged it tightly. She was sweating and it hurt to breathe. Jessie started climbing the ladder. *I'm coming up! You shouldn't be up there on your own*, Jessie yelled. *It's too much for you to handle*. As Jessie climbed, Cal stopped waving her arms. She took off her hat and let herself sink all the way down to the bottom.

Cal! Wait! Nellie called out to her, the diving board wet and cold against her cheek, but it was too late.

#

Nellie played Cal's favorite records. They'd said it was okay to take time. She read all of the liner notes at Cal's bedside, raising her voice over the music. Sarah Vaughan, Nina Simone, Billie Holiday. Cal loved soulful songs that meant more than they seemed on the surface. Nellie turned the stereo all the way up. She elevated and reclined Cal's bed. She turned the lights off and opened all the windows, letting the room fill with sunlight. Cal's face was frozen and colorless. Her chest rose and fell mechanically. It bothered Nellie that the ventilator was never in rhythm with the music. She left the records in messy stacks on the floor. It was always Cal who'd taken pains to keep their collection neatly alphabetized.

Nellie's dream of the pool flashed in her mind. She'd met Jessie at work, just a few months before she and Cal moved to New Mexico for Cal's job. Jessie was smart and cute. She'd flirted with Nellie, just subtly enough to make her wonder if it was all in her head. Nellie had found herself thinking about Jessie randomly throughout the day. She'd felt guilty and would have long talks with herself about how it was perfectly natural to be attracted to someone other than your significant other. Monogamy didn't mean you lost

interest in all other people, just that you didn't act on it. Still, if Cal ever knew, she'd be devastated. She would sink.

Nellie brought an armful of plums inside and arranged them on the kitchen table in a neat row. She cut one open with a pairing knife, excising the slippery pit, and remembered one of her first dates with Cal, back in Philadelphia, almost 15 years ago. They'd ridden their bikes to the best record shops in the city. It was a warm day at the end of April and all of the trees were budding and eager. They started at Beautiful World Syndicate and worked their way north and west, stopping for drinks after every record shop. They stacked their finds, mostly used soul, in the wire basket fixed to Nellie's handlebars. James Brown, Percy Sledge, Aretha Franklin. Nellie was smaller and couldn't hold her drink as well as Cal. As afternoon turned to evening, Nellie wobbled a little on her bike.

You don't really want that, do you, Cal asked? They'd made it to Center City and in the middle of an aisle at Long In The Tooth, Nellie held Jane Fonda's Workout Record to her chest. *Is it just, like, audio descriptions of exercise moves?*

Yeah, but it's set to all this great music. Nellie examined the back of the record. *Look, two songs from REO Speedwagon!*

This is good, Cal said, *I'm getting to learn some really important things about you right now.*

Yeah? Like what?

Mostly that you should never, under any circumstances, be trusted to pick out music when you're drunk.

Okay, first, Nellie said, holding up a finger to count, *I'm not drunk. And also*, she added another finger, *I'm extremely trustworthy at all times. No matter what.*

You're going to regret bringing that into your apartment, Cal said. *It'll just take up space.*

You think you know what I want in my apartment? Nellie lightly tugged at the collar of Cal's shirt.

Maybe, Cal said, wrapping her arm around Nellie's waist.

#

Nellie walked through a giant pine forest at dusk. The trees were so tall that their crowns reached beyond the clouds. In a clearing, she found Cal sitting at a table set with the blue plates they had in their first apartment. They were thrifted from Goodwill and had palm trees in the middle with the words *Visit Cape Malea* etched in cursive along the circumference. Cal crossed her legs and chain-smoked.

Those who ate the honeyed fruit of the plant lost any wish to come back and bring us news, Cal said to Nellie as she approached, exhaling a curl of smoke. Cal's posture was angular and her tone was stern. Nellie sat down at the table, leaning closer, trying to understand. *They were trapped in a state of forgetfulness*, Cal said, gesturing with her cigarette. *Their idea of the world was never real.*

You don't smoke, was all Nellie could say. Small, white clouds spiraled from Cal's nostrils, from her mouth, from her ears.

All they now wanted was to stay where they were. Cal spoke slower, more deliberately. *To browse on the fruit and to forget all thoughts of return.*

#

She didn't want to miss the moment, so Nellie tried not to sleep. She drank cup after cup of black tea. Cal had always done the cooking. She'd let Nellie help but only with jobs that didn't require decision-making. Stirring the soup, pouring noodles from the boiling pot to the colander, keeping their wine glasses full. Cal made big, elaborate meals almost every night of the week. Nellie hadn't turned on the stove since Cal had come home. She'd make toast, or cut a sliver from a rock-hard brick of Parmesan, wrapped in wax paper in the fridge. But mostly Nellie ate from the plum tree. There was more fruit than she could handle. Ample, tender, dark plums the size of her fist. She chewed the pits clean, and left them around the garden. Her fingertips started to stain purple. Nellie let everything but the plum tree and the poppies go thirsty.

#

Maybe, Nellie thought, aggravation was more accessible. She poured herself a glass of whiskey and searched for what she knew would madden Cal. Jimmy Buffett and Billy Ray Cyrus played in a loop for an entire afternoon. Nellie refilled her glass and cranked the volume. She circled Cal's bed. Both "Cheeseburger in Paradise," and "Achy Breaky Heart" were in near perfect time with the ventilator. She wanted Cal to lurch out of bed, ripping the tangle of tubes and wires, and smash the speakers on the ground. To take her by the shoulders. To shake her.

#

It was beyond a remote possibility, but what if Cal was trapped in there, in some untraceable way? Nellie decided to keep things soothing. She picked poppies from the garden, and placed them in glasses of water surrounding Cal's bed. She put nature documentaries on the television, and changed the channel every time predator closed in

on prey. PBS was reliably tranquil. Mr. Rogers, Julia Child, Ken Burns' Baseball. She held Cal's limp, cold hand and told her about the sunny weather outside, or sometimes she'd recount the story of how they met. In a poetry class in college. Cal had insisted to the entire class that the juicy mango imagery in Nellie's poem was homoerotic. Nellie had only recently come out to her immediate family and a few, select friends. She remembered desperately wishing there'd be a fire drill at that exact moment, or that someone in a desk nearby would break into a hysterical fit. Anything to stop this fast-talking, strangely self-assured girl from analyzing her out in the open.

Nellie and Cal's friend circles overlapped, but still years passed before they got together. Nellie thought Cal was funny, but a little too sarcastic, too on all the time. But the more time they'd spent together, the more she saw it was a smokescreen. Cal was earnest and warm and thoughtful. And she always had a plan. Nellie, whose previous girlfriends had all seemed so rudderless, loved that about her.

#

To stay awake, Nellie sat at the piano. She only remembered basic chords, but she played to the ventilator like a metronome, a plodding progression of majors. She ate only plums now. Sometimes when she plucked the fruit free from the branch, she could remember a moment with Cal so clearly. Little, unimportant things, like reading together before bed. All the times she'd fallen asleep to Cal's calming voice. Nellie would miss the ends of chapters and Cal would have to recount important plot points. Nellie wanted to read all of Ulysses together, even if it took them years. But the prose was so dreamlike, and Cal's voice was so comforting that Nellie drifted off after a few pages every night. They moved incrementally, and less than a quarter way through, Cal told Nellie it was

blasphemous to paraphrase James Joyce. Nellie could see the book from where she sat at the piano. It was relegated to a decorative object under a potted cactus on the coffee table.

#

Nellie was gaunt and her fingers were almost always sticky. Plum pits overflowed from the wastebasket in the kitchen, out onto the floor. They were scattered throughout the living room and the house took on a syrupy smell. Early every morning, Nellie went to the garden and stepped into the circle of Cal's rocks. She looped her arms around the tree and rested her cheek on the cragged bark, breathing the smell, like dirt and sugar. She would tent her shirt, and fill it with plums. She brought them inside and sat next to Cal.

Nellie sank her teeth into a giant, glossy plum and remembered the day they got the house. When Cal was first hired, they'd rented a noisy apartment near the college in Socorro. A group of students lived across the street and they often woke in the middle of the night to the sound of someone retching in the yard. Nellie had found this place, a little run down, but with fantastic bones, and out past the perimeters of town. There were no neighbors for miles, just big, open stretches of clay and junegrass. She'd found a job writing grants for the New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs, and after that they could afford to fix it up over the next few years. Once they picked up the keys, they drove out to the house. Cal pulled a blanket from the back of the car and they lay on the floor in the living room, staring up at the broad, old wooden beams stretching across the white ceiling. Cal turned on her side, facing Nellie. *We're going to be so happy here, I can feel it*, she said. Nellie ran her fingers through Cal's tight curls. Cal nibbled at Nellie's earlobe, planting kisses in a trail down her neck, across her collarbone.

#

Nellie climbed into the bed and wedged herself between the hard side rail and Cal's body. She brought her hand to Cal's face. Her skin felt cool and plastic and she didn't smell like herself. When she'd gotten the phone call, Nellie was unpacking groceries. Cal was due home from her bike ride in an hour or two. As the words came through the receiver, a carton of ice cream slipped from her grip and rolled along the kitchen floor. *Severe spinal cord injury. Non-responsive. Critical condition.* Nellie's throat had locked. She'd scrambled for her car keys, unable to make her muscles move fast enough.

If it had been Nellie who was hit instead, Nellie who, on impact, had been flung high into the air when the speeding truck barreled through red light, Cal would have found a way forward, a way to make meaning. Cal could think things through, visualize the long term. Nellie lived moment to moment. There'd been an enormous mistake, Nellie thought, pressing her head to Cal's. Cal would have pressed the button by now.

#

Nellie had a small, blue bird in her mouth. She stood on the beach at Corson's Inlet, where she and Cal would often come in the summer since it was so secluded. It was storming, and cold wind tore at the dark, pounding waves. Fat, freezing raindrops pelted Nellie's face. The bird wanted badly to fly free. It flapped wildly and scraped its small, razor talons at the roof of Nellie's mouth and the insides of her cheeks. Nellie could taste the blood, but she kept her lips closed tightly. All around her, giant, black crocodiles, dozens of them, crawled down the beach, making their way to the rough water. The bird was too small to pilot itself in the violent wind. It would be knocked senseless, eaten or

drowned. Nellie breathed through her nose and kept the bird inside. She planted her feet in the sand.

Nellie! Hi! Down here! Cal sat cross-legged riding on the back of an enormous crocodile. She wore the bathing from their honeymoon on Djerba Island with her big sunglasses perched atop her head. The crocodile moved slowly toward the waves, cutting a trench through the sand. Cal rocked from side to side with its lumbering steps. Sharp, leathery scales jutted into her soft thighs, but Cal smiled and waved, elated like she was on a float in a parade.

It's so beautiful here, Cal shouted over the wind and crashing water. *Isn't it just the most gorgeous place you've ever seen?*

Nellie could only shake her head no. The bird scratched and pecked at the inside of her mouth. If it flew down her throat, they might both die.

Hey! Cal shouted from the crocodile, closer to the water now, *I have good news! You don't have to worry any more! I'm serious! Laissez les bons temps rouler!*

Nellie watched as she got nearer to the water. Cal cried out like a winning game show contestant just as a giant, dark wave swallowed her and the crocodile into the sea.

#

In the middle of the night, before the sun came up, Nellie wanted to write a poem for Cal. A perfect poem. Then she could push the button. That's how they'd met, through poetry. That's how Cal had known Nellie was special, smart. Nellie hadn't written for decades. She pulled her hair up in a knot on top of her head and sat with a blank notebook on her lap. Her eyes burned, sleepless and dry. Her lips were lined red with plum juice.

Nellie wrote and erased a single line until sunlight spilled through the windows. She'd worn clear through the paper with her eraser.

Nellie reached for a plum. Her teeth ached when she pierced the skin. She and Cal were hiking at El Malpais. The sun bore down on them from directly overhead. They were climbing over ancient, jagged lava flows the color of asphalt.

Think about all the other things you've changed your mind on over the years. Cal passed the water bottle to Nellie.

I know, Nellie said. But I love our life now. I love how we can travel, I love that we can sleep and have sex and eat whenever we want to. It changes people. Look at Ed and Sydney. Do you think they seem happy? Their house looks like a war zone. And Sydney told me they haven't slept together in over a year.

Cal wiped the sweat from her forehead and left a smudge of gray volcanic dust behind. *Right, but it's not like that's forever. Those kids will grow up. And we're not Ed and Sydney. I mean, that's exactly why I think we should. We'd still be us.*

What about that article we read the other week, about how there's really only 30 or 40 more years of breathable oxygen left on the planet. Global warming. Nuclear fallout. Water World.

So we'll need some smart, loving, people in the world. Cal wanted Nellie to be serious.

It just seems like this enormous leap of faith, Nellie said.

Cal took her hand. *I really think we're leap-of-faith material, though.* Cal said. *Don't you? You don't think we'd be good at it? You don't want us to be a family?*

We are a family! We're a family right now.

We're not kids anymore, Nellie. We don't get forever to decide.

I know I want to spend my whole life with you, Nellie said. Sometimes I think I want us to have a baby, and I can picture it so clearly. And then other times it just scares me so much. I don't know which one is real.

That's the part where you make a decision, Penelope. Cal was hurt. You decide to make something real.

#

Nellie sat on the floor next to Cal's bed with the notebook. Her hair was stringy and hung in her eyes. Every night, she'd written a poem for Cal. She'd spend hours on just one line, carefully picking through, sorting and discarding words. She tried over and over to shape an image that expounded on all the ways she felt and thought about Cal. Everything was too small. She ripped each poem to pieces.

Nellie pulled herself up and walked through the shreds of white paper littering the living room floor. Pieces of poems stuck to her dirty feet, gummy with plum juice. In the garden, Nellie pressed her body against the tree. Fallen fruit blanketed the ground around her. The trunk was thicker than she remembered and she could barely clasp her hands when she wrapped her arms around it. Nellie clung tightly, digging her fingertips into the bark, and climbed high into the thick branches. Surrounded by ripe, swollen plums, she slept.
