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THE ‘I’ OF MY STORY

by

David C. Madden

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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THE ‘I’ OF MY STORY

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Adviser: Jonis Agee

The narrators in these eight stories all use the first-person point of view as a means of character-building—both in terms of the literal roles as narrators, and also in a more therapeutic sense. Borrowing from the confessional and self-protective tropes of the memoir, these narrators speak in their own distinct voices in order to figure out what their lives mean. Jim, in “Go Pitt,” discusses his job as a chemist and his lifelong football fandom as a way to understand his HIV-positive status. The group of people who compositely narrate “Beekeeping” continually shift their focus among one another rather than place it on their friend’s leukemia. The unnamed narrator in the title story tries to figure out his place in the world, and in his family, over the weekend of his grandmother’s funeral. In each story, I exploit the small but vital distance, in the first-person point of view, between narrator and character to reveal to the reader the depths and contradictions of selfhood that first-person narrators usually try to hide.

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INTRODUCTION

In a 1911 letter to H.G. Wells, Henry James praised the former's just-published *New Machiavelli* while also remonstrating with the man about his use of the first person, calling it that "accurst autobiographic form which puts a premium on the loose, the impoverished, the cheap, and the easy. [. . .] It has no authority," James wrote. "No persuasive or convincing force." I came across this quote months after having begun the stories in this dissertation, all of which make strategic use of the first person point of view, and one can imagine the shame I felt: here was The Master, as we're wont to call James, dismissing my whole project as cheap and easy. But when I thought about his stance, I found myself agreeing with him. The narrative "I" in fiction has, indeed, no inherent authority, and this, I knew, was its power. If my goal as a fiction writer was to engage the reader to such a point that the story takes place not on the page but in her head, what better approach than the first person? As soon as an omniscient narrator gets swapped out for a single character from the story, the reader's relationship to that story changes. We can't rely on any outside presence to interpret events or aspects of character for us; that interpretation must come from within.

I said "strategic use of the first person" earlier in referring to these stories, and what I mean by this is that I'm interested in using perspective and point of view to drive a story. I'm interested in those places where a narrator betrays or forgets his or her character-self. Erica, for example, the narrator of "Pamela," recalls a teenage summer learning to type with a fondness for her own grown-up bravado, whereas the secondary

characters show she was more of a child than she'd like to think. In "Beekeeping," a group of people collectively narrates the story of their friend's battle with cancer, their narrative focus kept not on her but on each other. The tensions in the story result from this notion of focus and its intersection with attention and devotion. For me, fiction becomes thrilling at moments where one sudden detail or line of dialogue exposes the rift between narrator and character—a rift that the first person likes so often to camouflage.

A current meme on Facebook as of winter 2010 reads as follows, meant to be posted as one's status for a day:

> [BLANK] WILL BE COMPLETELY HONEST FOR 24 HOURS. You can ask me one question (only in my inbox). Any question, no matter how crazy, sinister, or wrong it is, I WILL answer no matter what. You have my FULL honesty, and I CHALLENGE you to put this as your status and see what questions you get asked!

As a meme is hasn't caught on—not like, say, Doppelganger Week, where users swap out their own profile photos for pics of celebs they most resemble. Who knows why certain memes thrive and others fail. For me, the 24-hour truth serum meme seems redundant in the midst of a rhetorical zone as openly transparent as Facebook. "Steve can't wait for his trip to Oregon," reads one friend's recent status update, and I have no reason not to trust this is the case. "Kelly's verdict is that key lime cake is not as good as key lime pie, but that maybe it just needs a good frosting next time." "Julie is disappointed that Kanye West didn't crash the Grammys." There is, in the Facebook status update, rarely any invention at work—none of the crafty language or reek of coincidence that we expect from fictions. What we have instead is confession, the self opening the self up for

scrutiny. What we have is the public use of writing to enact some direct transliteration of feeling and desire. Facebook as diary we're all invited to unlock.

Wayne Booth, in his essay "Distance and Point of View" calls not for a distinction between first- and third-person narrators, but rather between *dramatized* and *undramatized* narrators. "Surely," he writes, "the moral and intellectual qualities of the narrator are more important to our judgement than whether he is referred to as 'I' or 'he'" (127).[1] For me, one of the chief joys of reading fiction is found in working through a narration to slowly uncover the character, if you will, of the narrator: her obsessions and preoccupations, her vocal tics, what she chooses to dramatize and what to summarize—or leave out altogether. Nabokov's Humbert Humbert the *raconteur* and defendant is a wholly different person from the Humbert Humbert who fondled his stepdaughter, the man who pulled the trigger. The difference lies in motivation. Humbert's character is driven by obsession, his narrator by examination, and any attempt to get at Humbert's true nature needs to take both of these split selves into consideration. Every first-person narrator is on some level unreliable (here, again, is what James was complaining about), but the path through any narrator's unreliability is this consideration of character. The trouble I see with Facebook and Twitter is how both the brevity and the immediacy of its messages—few updates are written in the past tense—encourage us to conflate author and narrator and character. The way these forums insist we readers are getting direct access to authors (i.e., many of the people we know in real life), when in fact all this access is contrived—mediated by a narrator who's a somewhat foreign entity: a person driven by one thing, to present a life in bite-size and often carefully clever capsules.

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[1] Booth, Wayne C. "Distance and Point of View." *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction*. Ed. Michael J. Hoffman and Patrick D. Murphy. Durham: Duke UP, 1996. 116-133.

In the workshops I teach, I harp on these distinctions between author, narrator, and character more, perhaps, than I should. I have little nesting boxes I draw, and students by the end of the term roll their eyes when I scribble them on the board. *Oh, great...this again*. It's not just a central occupation for me; it's the best way I know to get a sense of how a story operates. Students, as authors, are often surprised and maybe only sometimes delighted to see how they've created a narrator persona amid all this plotting, all this character development. It's a treat for us fiction writers to pin errors and sloppiness on a fallible narrator—and the added layer of invention makes our stories richer.

I open this collection with "Go Pitt," a story that seeks to invert our natural readerly focus on narrators and characters. Its narrator, Jim, is, in the Boothian sense, highly dramatized. His act of narration forms the source of the drama. Traditionally in fiction, the distance between a story and its reader is mediated by dramatization. "Show don't tell," is the mantra here. With "Go Pitt" I've tried deliberately to tell and not show, to let Jim's narrative act steal the spotlight, as it were, from the story he tells. It is, in many ways, as confessional as a Facebook update—and, I think, no less contrived.

GO PITT

As a kid I had a perpetual cowlick and a meager collection of autographs I kept in an envelope at the back of my underwear drawer. The cowlick I tackled with hand-me-down ballcaps and the autograph collection I sorted alphabetically by last name. It was a short-lived collection. One of the last autographs I asked for was that of Vince Lombardi, who made at the other end of our county a one-time appearance I begged my mother for weeks to take me to, and by the time we arrived the line of fans waiting to meet the man who had rekindled the energy and spirit of Washington's football franchise, to say nothing of the things he did for Green Bay, stretched all the way back to the entrance of Hecht's. This was in 1972. Lombardi had retired three years previously. I stood patiently in line for twenty minutes before it became clear to me that I had to use the bathroom, and while it would have been simple for my mother to hold my spot while I darted out of the line for a minute, she'd left me to get some shopping done. At the thirty-minute mark it was impossible to stand still. I jigged and I toe-tapped. Directly behind me stood a hefty man in high shorts holding an 8 x 10 glossy of the coach in his two broad hands. These I saw at eye level every time I'd swivel around to find my mother, and behind them at certain angles I could see the swell of his belly wrinkling his T-shirt's cotton, forming what looked like a set of arrows pointing inward. At one point I looked up at his moustache and found an open mouth grinning down at me, and in my shame I turned away and that's when I lost all control. I remember the waxy green plants clustered in wood-veneer boxes at the center of the mall's main corridor, large leaves jutting everywhere like the oars to

some sinking lifeboat. With every step I took toward the coach's table I felt one thigh pull at the skin of the other through the tight bond of wet denim. My mother returned just before I reached the front of the line, and immediately she took my hand and marched us over to the J.C. Penney where she bought the first pair of sweatpants she saw and shoved me toward the fitting rooms. "I don't understand why a *ten-year-old*..." she said. The sweatpants were crayon blue and came down to just above my ankles. I came out of the fitting room bleary-eyed and ashamed, and on the way home our car was quiet but for the raindrops that pounded the roof. I was ten years old and my ten-year-old body had failed me. I threw the soiled jeans away as soon as I got home.

For what it's worth, it wasn't until my second year of college that I ever kissed anybody. He was the teaching assistant in an introductory chemistry seminar I had to take, and throughout the semester in what my university called recitation sessions I didn't say a word and Richard and I (his name was Richard Chester Van Horn) never had any reason to interact. I had always done the reading for that week, and I cleared up during the seminar anything that may have been confusing about the difference between top and bottom quarks, say, or the eccentricities of the ion. As such I got exceedingly good grades, to the point where I must have stood out enough to Richard that when he and I ran into each other at adjoining urinal troughs at a Panthers game the following year he remembered my name. "Richard Van Horne," he said, reminding me of his. I ducked my head. "Last year? Chem one hundred?"

He spoke loud enough for everyone in the men's room to hear, but was polite enough not to offer his hand.

I said hello, furiously willing him away. By the time I was able to finish up and maneuver around the squarely held shoulders of three-dozen game-day fans to the men's room's exit, I'd thought I'd lost him. But there he stood, waiting for me, offering his hand at last. It wasn't his attentions I was afraid of, nor, when I think about it, was it what I thought he might be after. Of myself at the time I knew only that I didn't have in me what my roommate and the other men on the floor of my dormitory did: this tug in their groins toward the women around our campus that outnumbered men 59 to 41 percent, this need in our nightly common-room confabs to bring the discussion around to women and their bodies and the things they might be doing with one another up on their floors, which were stacked in our building on top of the men's floors as if to emphasize woman's general inaccessibility to man. What I'd come to realize about the men on my floor is that they wanted to share in the bounty of women through speculation and braggadocio, as though an available woman could be manifested right on the floor of the common room if the will of the collective was great enough. My will wasn't as great as theirs, is what I knew. I also knew that I couldn't look away when they showered within eyesight, no matter what my staring might have cost me. Richard must have been able to detect all this, somehow, and I remember being afraid of the conversation that would ensue. I'd only in my life to that point spoken with men who weren't available to me and women I'd wanted nothing from.

"Are you here alone, or...?" he began things by asking.

"No," I said. "No. I'm here with my roommate."

My roommate was a kind and generous guy named Brad who red-shirted on the wrestling team and spent much of the schoolday seeking out parties happening over the

weekend, to which he always brought me along, introducing me to women with whom he thought I would do well. If I was a disappointment, he didn't harp on it. Brad had a collection of cardboard bar coasters he kept in a high stack on his dresser, and one of women's phone numbers he wrote right on the cinder-block wall as if he were a prisoner counting the days of his sentence.

"In the student section?" Richard asked. And when I said yes he insisted I join him and "some friends" in their seats, which were closer to the 50-yard line and only twenty rows up. "Cal couldn't make it, so there's a spot and everything."

He pointed, and I followed the line of his hand to an area closer to the action, so to speak, than I'd ever been before, where the fans were older and paid better attention. To turn down such access to the game would have been foolish, I knew, and so that afternoon I abandoned Brad and went with Richard Chester Van Horn. I don't remember the score of the game but I remember that we won, and that afterward I went with Richard and his friends to a bar, one in a neighborhood of the city not even adjacent to the one that held our campus, one that played quiet music on the loudspeaker and didn't have any TVs blinking in the corners of the ceiling. I was served beers without incident and Richard made me laugh by telling me stories about hunting with his father and uncles as a kid. "I had a Ralph Lauren jacket that I always wore with matching hat and gloves," he said. "They called me 'The Gentleman Hunter'." We sat there for hours. The night ended at one of his friends' houses, and Richard led me upstairs to a dark bedroom. The drinks gave us things to talk about, mostly our own personal histories, his much fuller than my own. It was hard, lying under his gaze, wanting my body to line up with all these bad ideas I'd developed for it. Out of modesty I let him ask most of the questions.

When one grows up as I did with three older brothers one becomes whether one means to or not a football player. I was the requisite second man of the two two-man teams with which we turned our backyard into a ballfield, and because I was the smallest and least aggressive I was traded among my brothers like a heavy sack they had to carry. “Okay, you guys take Jim for a while,” I’d hear every twenty minutes, and eventually my inability to match them on the field led me to best them off the field. I read biographies of players and histories of teams. I scoured like an occultist through the numerology of players’ statistics and spent weekend mornings cleaning my room with sports-talk radio playing in the background. I held imaginary conversations with my parents’ friends in which I spent upward of an hour asking them how incredible they considered the career of Don Shula. *In just two years he led the Miami Dolphins of all teams to a perfect season. When do you think we’ll see the likes of that again? Huh?*

When it came time to start looking at universities I’ll admit that much of my decision was based on the quality of that school’s football team, though because I had by that point in my fandom cultivated inexplicable prejudices and allegiances I couldn’t apply to just any good school with a good team. I couldn’t attend a school whose coach once coached in the Big 8, for instance, or the SEC—two conferences I considered to be full of showboats and martyrs. I ended up at the University of Pittsburgh almost by default, unfortunately right after Johnny Majors had left, but coach Jackie Sherrill was a man crafty enough to get the ball moved swiftly down the field, and by the time I graduated with a degree in chemical engineering I was able to see the Panthers in four bowl games, and even watch them win, something not one of my brothers, all of them high-school diploma-holders, had ever accomplished.

I got my first job out of college at DuPont, working in one of the company's offices outside Philadelphia on a long-term project to find safer alternatives for the chlorofluorocarbons that had recently been connected to the ozone layer's slow depletion. It was my job to explore the whole group of alkyl halides, and so I'd spend most of the workday sitting at my desk on the second floor of a three-story building, sketching chemical structure diagrams. For an hour I would erase and redraw fluoride and hydrogen ions, doubling or rebonding them, shuffling them around the way I would a strong safety in some defensive playbook. And though I knew that the end result of the job I had to do—my bread and butter, so to speak—was a saved face for a company that had been caught doing much public damage, the everyday work of it was extremely pleasurable. I had a few co-workers with whom I shared lunch hours. I had a boss who left me alone. I drove a Volvo and owned a condominium in the city.

Richard and I were never really a couple, but he'd known the right things to say that made me less awkward with later men. All the same, it had always whether or not I like to admit it been difficult for me to meet the other men who might share, well, my interests. In Philadelphia at that time there was enough of a "scene" that I knew simply from walking through the right neighborhoods where the men who wanted to congregate with men could do so without high concern, but I never felt comfortable in these sorts of places. They were nightclubs, mostly, and any quick peep through their front doors would reveal an array of jackboots and biceps I may have wanted to pleasure of getting a closer look at were it not for all their rapid spinning under the rapidly spinning lights. Here were a hundred happy men moving as one, whereas I, for example, never went to prom. On the afternoon I met Charlie I had been awake for thirty-three hours, having stayed up the

previous night to page through The Pitt Stop catalogue and circle all the items I could tell were new. Which accounts for the first two hours. I don't remember how the other thirty-one were passed, though I do know that I never missed a day of work in the seven years of my employment at DuPont. They gave me an award when I left, a walnut plaque which I still have in a drawer somewhere that reads, DEDICATION — IT STARTS WITH SHOWING UP FOR WORK, IT CONTINUES WITH DILIGENCE AND CAREFUL ATTENTION, IT ENDS NEVER. At any rate I was poorly rested that afternoon and when I came upon Charlie on the bus I thought he was my brother Bill, older than I am by eleven and a half years, because he had Bill's same crisp brushcut and Bill's same shaggy eyebrows. Bill, of course, was still living back in Virginia at the time, so imagine my surprise. I sat down right next to the man and said, "Bill! Hi!" Every head on the bus turned right to mine and I asked Bill what he was doing here.

"My name is Charlie," he said.

I looked down at his hands and saw he was twiddling a guitar pick down the ridges of four thin fingers and that's when I realized my mistake. Bill has always had the hands of a drunken Mafioso. So I apologized and explained the situation of my being sleep-deprived and Charlie seemed such a good sport about the blunder that I offered to buy him a drink someplace nearby. "Shall we get off at the next stop?" I asked. I was sure to hold his eyes with my own. After years of living in a city as large as Philadelphia I'd become adept enough at understanding how much from a man could be read by looking him right in the eye that I was able to sort all men into three groups. This worked particularly well with strangers seen across restaurants or queued up in civic offices. Men whose eyes met yours and then looked immediately elsewhere, as though they were

taking a brief survey of the people in the room that might try to do them harm, comprised the Group of Surefire Peril. I paid this group little attention. Men whose eyes met yours and stayed put long enough to effect in you a heartbeat like a fire alarm comprised the second group. This was the Group of Feasibility. But the third group, men whose eyes met yours and lingered one, two seconds before falling to the floor, then finding their way back up again, meeting yours, lingering, falling, and then lingering and falling, doing this little dance of glimpses and peeks, these men formed the Group of Unsound Conclusions, and back in those days it was these men that I found myself almost daily trailing after.

Charlie's eyes met mine and fell and met mine again. He was a self-styled singer-songwriter who moved to a different city every couple years or so. "I get restless," he said. By design he moved alternately to cities where he knew a lot of people and cities where he knew few if any. He'd been in Philadelphia three months. "I don't know anybody yet," he said. "Not really." Though he looked as old as Bill he was a year younger than I was, and he was a vegetarian. When he wasn't alone in his room recording his songs—which he described as "minimalist folk with no vocal emoting"—and making copies of his demo tape he was out on the street trolling through bars and asking whether he could audition for a gig. I thought about getting his autograph. All this I learned over the next several hours, at the sandwich shop where Charlie ate a hummus wrap and I did the same for the sake of camaraderie, at the sports bar that was only a couple blocks from my condominium where he drank gins and tonic and I drank beer and tried to avoid the TVs all around us broadcasting the Eagles' gleeful triumph over the Redskins, at the danceclub where it was so hard to talk to one another that we soon ended the evening

back at my place. I'd known him for nine hours, but he had a trunk as broad as a contrabass and a backside.... Well, a backside like twin bowling balls. It was only after I had him lying face down on my bed that he told me he'd never done anything like this before, and at first I didn't believe him. Then he looked so shyly over his shoulder at me I found myself made stupid, ready to believe anything.

At the end of the Eighties I stopped traveling westward through the state for Homecoming games, after Pitt hired from nowhere coach Paul Hackett, a man unable to produce a winning season, and thus began the gloomy and pessimistic years of my fandom. When The Pitt Stop catalogue would come in the mail I still read it through from one cover to another but I no longer held a pen in my hand while doing so. New recruits were names I'd never heard of and soon forgot after their freshman seasons. Even if I'd wanted to watch a game or two it wouldn't have been easy as the Panthers were a team so lackluster that no networks wanted to send camera crews out to the stadium to capture what would usually amount to nothing but a very long string of incomplete passes and balls run for rare gains of three, four yards.

My TV was kept tuned elsewhere, and Charlie was long gone, off to Austin where he knew everybody. It took a while to meet anyone else, but given all the kicks in the teeth going on in the NCAA it seemed in those days imperative that I do so. And how did I do it? Once we had an alternative newsweekly to pick up on street corners every Wednesday after work, it sometimes worked out that one could scour over the highly coded pages in back and find a date by the weekend, though I was never very good at dating. Instead, I fell back on my own preferred methods. Whether or not I had any control over it, those were the days I straggled among the Group of Surefire Peril, and

while it may reveal something unseemly about my character I feel I should confess I can't remember any of their names. I remember instead all their sad overtures. Once, a man dropped his drawers just inside my entryway but kept his coat on the whole time. Once, a handgun holstered to a hairless leg. Once, even, a co-worker. I remember taking great care. I remember always taking great care, and toilet stalls with misspelled graffiti—*Leave day and time I will be here weakly*. Most of all I remember being left to fall asleep alone, always alongside a new vacancy, the bedclothes soiled and clung to my stomach.

If it was a weekend I was out wandering, but during the workweek my days grew longer and longer as the country stood idly by awaiting *Operation Desert Shield*, and I was moved with the increase in demand over to Kevlar. There I worked on a team charged with making the fabric lighter yet stronger and therefore more expensive, and one late night in my cunning I was able to nab two state-of-the-art helmets. They were brown and beige and sandy and in my hands felt as light as two dried gourds. On a whim that Christmas I gave them to my parents. They'd come up that year to Philadelphia with my brothers and on Christmas morning I made them open the boxes together. We all sat around my living room to watch and when they realized that the helmets were helmets their faces changed. Each of their eyebrows inverted. "A helmet!" my father said, and my mother said, "A helmet?"

"It's what I'm working on now," I said. "At work."

My father tried his on and made as though he were carrying a rifle. We all laughed except our mother, who frowned and placed hers back in the box. "I guess all's I need now's a motorcycle," she said. I told her it was a war helmet and that seemed to get

her more upset. To break the tension, Kevin started handing out his gifts. It was a tense weekend, cramped up in my condo, my folks in the spare bedroom upstairs and Kevin down on the couch; Bill and Dan in hotels with their wives. It had been my idea to haul everyone up from Virginia and why? What we had in Philadelphia to celebrate the holidays was what every city in the world had. A public outdoor ice rink. Malls with Santas. Downtown's unspectacular tree. Bill's birthday fell on the 26th—a Saturday, if I remember—and rather than celebrate one last night together with cake everyone decided to beat the traffic on I-95. Cleaning out the guest room, I found the helmets in the closet with a note written in my father's hand: *Save these for the troops, son, but we sure do appreciate the thought!*

And then I heard from Charlie. He called one night after I was already in bed but before I'd been able to fall asleep. It had been three years since we last spoke and knowing his restlessness I wondered where he was calling from, where he may have been living these days. He spoke to me very, very softly. I suddenly had so little to say. It was a warm night. I watched the fan in the corner swivel its head from one side of the room to the other. Then he apologized and said, "I shouldn't have lied to you," and I hung up the phone and let myself breathe in and out a few times. I smoothed the bedsheets and cleared some dust from my endtable, where a tall glass of water caught the light and threw it around the room at new angles. The water inside was lukewarm. Room temperature. I saw my body as a loose group of cells strung together. Transmission, I knew, was an act of will, not an act of fate or luck. *You should have been smarter*, I told myself. *You are a scientist and you should have been smarter*.

The Kevlar project was short-lived. Administrations changed and thus did intracorporate priorities and I started to get shuffled around a lot. I was moved to a position in the research and development department working with organic polymers, and then I went over to Corian. All this happened very rapidly, and it was around that time that the hairs on my crown had left in such dramatic numbers that I started to shave my head close, like a grunt. It made me look more mature, I thought, but the real bonus was that my cowlick at last was tamed. It was a minor victory, but this was a time for minor victories. One random day I was called in to human resources and asked to tender my resignation. They could no longer find suitable employment for me, the lady said. Many internal changes to the company were being undertaken, she said, and the cost of retaining me as an employee was greater than the benefits my work provided the company. She was sorry that she had to let me go, she said, as if this were her decision—and maybe it was, made one morning over coffee by a complete stranger, this married woman whose name I had seen on internal company documents but with whom I'd never spoken face-to-face or on the telephone. We had this conversation in her office two or three weeks after I began antiretroviral therapy, and seropositivity was not just a new vocabulary word but also my new status, forcing me to track T cell counts like I once tracked rushing yards and QB ratings. I couldn't help notice during our interview this human resources executive keep her distance from her side of the desk. They offered me a respectable severance package and the people in my team threw me a going-away party with cake and punch. I got that plaque from the company and a gift certificate to Waldenbooks, one I never bothered to cash in.

Over the next few months I sold my condominium and left Philadelphia. I had plans to do as Charlie himself did and move someplace where I knew no one and where no one knew me. All my life I'd followed whatever men I felt could lead me somewhere, and yet I never found a way to fall in love with them, never felt that emotional urgency coming from somewhere noble inside me. It was a failure of the heart, one I meant in my travels to correct, but at night when I tried to picture my life in a strange new city I wasn't able to see anything past the end of my bed, so I abandoned anything so romantic and moved back to Virginia, making trips home to see the family much more cost-efficient. This was right around the time the movie *Philadelphia* came out, which my parents told me was very good—"Very sympathetic, Jim," my mother said—but the only film I remember seeing that year was *Dave*, which I went to alone, and found with its themes of disguise and benevolent hoodwinking to be a far better fantasy. One scene has Kevin Kline sitting in the Oval Office with Ving Rhames, who plays a secret service agent, and Kevin Kline is giving Ving Rhames some ideas about a softer and less intimidating wardrobe. Kevin Kline suggests maybe wearing a sweater sometime. "You don't think a sweater would make my neck look too big?" Ving Rhames asks, and the line is played deadpan for comedy, but I went home touched and caught up in appearances, wondering what new clothes I might try on, what sort of political celebrity I might ever be mistaken for.

In the fall of 1997 it seemed likely that Pitt was headed to its first bowl game in nine years, and that Thanksgiving my brothers arranged a game of touch football in our parents' backyard as some exercise in nostalgic derring-do to pass the time while the food was warming in the oven. We hadn't played together in years, and twenty or thirty

minutes were spent deciding whether I could fill my historic position as fourth man or whether it would be our father. That morning I had vomited up my egg breakfast and hours later I remained glossed in a heavy sweat, the Pitt sweatshirt I wore blotched dark in the armpits despite the thirty-one degrees on the outside thermometer. Everyone insisted I rest except our dad, who made mention of his back that had in sixty-six years grown tight and gnarled like a bulb of ginger. “Just don’t overdo yourself,” he said. I assured my brothers I could play and assured Bill, my teammate, we would win. He and I shook hands as if in agreement and his was so cool and so dry I wanted to wear it for a while like a glove I could wipe my leaking brow with. We boys scrambled back and forth through the long backyard, running makeshift plays and cutting jerky twists around one another to avoid any outstretched hands. I remember feeling good about being outside. I remember running and trying to breathe deeply. Every ten minutes our father would step out on the deck and sip from his beercan and laugh with us at every dropped pass. Bill’s kids and Dan’s were glued to their video games in the basement and I wished they were there outside with us. Historically I’ve never enjoyed having an audience but that afternoon I felt the need for one, just to have someone to look at whenever Bill or I scored another touchdown, someone whose enjoyment precisely matched my own despite having had no participation in the play. It was just the four of us though, and as the turkey took longer than our mother had expected we continued to play far longer than we should have. Far longer than I should have. I missed a pass at one point and when I turned back to face Bill, our quarterback at the time, I saw him from an alarming distance, looking small and unrecognizable like a child’s action toy tossed into a neglected corner of the schoolyard. And then the air around me seemed to melt and whatever breaths I could take

came into my chest like short needles. All of a sudden the sun was gone. I fell to the frozen ground and all my brothers started saying my name at once.

People like to talk a lot about sports on TV and on twenty-four-hour sports talk radio, and when they do these people often like to talk about football as a kind of war, with coaches as generals sending men out on the battlefield and the rhetorical refiguring of offensive and defensive strategies and so on and so on, but I've never had much truck with these metaphors. Football has never been a battle to me, but rather a celebration, some gruff Bacchanalia where men come together for its own amazing sake. This was the feeling in the backyard every afternoon my brothers shuffled me from team to team—*we are brothers, us four, and let's see what we can do together*. Even between the hoariest of archenemies, bad blood spilled all over the field, downed players are helped up off the ground, asses are encouragingly patted, scoring players are bearhugged and tossed like mortarboards in the air, all because these are things the body in its top form can accomplish, and why not show it all off? And why not come together in the tens of thousands to watch it all happen? It's important for me to remember that football is for spectators and that it cultivates fans. The goal of every war is the end of all war. Football ends with a promise of another game next weekend, another chance at physical excellence.

Soon I was lying in an ambulance with my mother on my left holding my hand and a brown-haired gentleman with some meat on his bones looking down on me and shining a penlight in each of my eyes, first one and then the other, like a game. I was breathing but I wasn't happy about it, and I wasn't sure whether the van was moving or whether it wasn't moving. "Go Pitt," the man said, shining his little light on my

sweatshirt, and to this day I rank it as one of the kindest things I've ever been told. One thing I have to cede to HIV is the interminable sense it makes, the neat and clean method through which it wants to form itself over and over again inside my body, letting copy after copy stand as proof of its vitality. It comes down to chemicals going head-to-head with chemicals, and that Thanksgiving afternoon I felt the clarity of HIV's design and purpose to be something I could read and something I could appreciate, even though some mornings I wake up and can feel these chemicals carving up the vital parts of me. It's a plague, I know, and for fifteen years or more I've been living with dizzying migraines, clenched fits of bronchitis, long nights soaked in delirium and chills, and hours crouched cramped over a toilet. And yet I also know that if I were to put the virus under a microscope, if I were to be given a lab in which to do this, I would observe it for hours. I would lose sleep watching it overtake cell after cell after cell, doing its job with steady dignity.

# # #

PAMELA

My dad bought me a car and he wouldn't let me touch it until I could type sixty words a minute because he said that computers were the wave of the future. This was back when saying that sort of thing still sounded prophetic, back when *responsibility* was only a word I'd hear now and again on the radio, so I didn't have any means of arguing with him. "Fine," I said. "What kind of car is it?"

"Alfa Romeo," he said. He stood in my doorway dangling the keys still on the dealership's complimentary keychain. "You can looky but no touchy."

I went outside and lookied. Charcoal grey. Black ragtop. I stood in front of it at the head of our driveway with my hands on my hips like I used to when I was a little girl bossing boys around the gradeschool's blacktop, and the Romeo looked like a face that was grinning as it met me for the first time. *Hello there*. We eyeballed one another and I did the math and we came to the conclusion that pecking out one word a second couldn't be that difficult. I would be driving this car by the end of the month.

In the meantime, she needed a name.

"What about Romeo?" Bridget said.

I held the phone away from my head and looked at it in wild disbelief. "Are you kidding? First of all: *duh*, and second of all, that's a boy's name and this car is a lady. A Beautiful Lady. She deserves a beautiful name."

I gave her a month to come up with something perfect. Now we both had projects to get us through to college.

“I’m counting on you,” I said. Bolsterer. Cheerleader. “But more importantly she’s counting on you, too.”

The next day my dad and I drove to the mall in Mission Viejo to find some typing software compatible with our Apple IIe. I asked why we couldn’t take my car. “If you can find a way to ride without touching it, sweetheart, I’ll be glad to,” he said. So I sat in his boring Lincoln slouched the whole way there trying to envision what the wide California sky would look like over our heads. At the computer store they had not one but two programs that taught Apple IIe users to type, each with a cartoony guide.

“Which do you like?” my dad asked. “The donkey or the cobra?”

“Aren’t donkeys slow?” I asked. I needed speed and I needed it soon and I didn’t want any impediments.

“Erica, just pick one.”

I picked the cobra. It was my boyfriend’s favorite snake. At least I thought it was. When we got home I called him and let him know a computer cobra would be teaching me to type, and he said, “Sweet. Did they have a python?”

“No,” I said. “Just a donkey and a cobra.”

“A python would have been sweet.”

I didn’t have a response for this so I let the line go silent for a bit and played at a kink in the phone cord. “I’m sad,” I said after a while.

“Huh?” he said. “Why?”

“I’m sad you’re going to be gone so long.” His mom was sending him on a month-long Outward Bound trip to save him from doing time in juvie. He was leaving the next day.

"Aw, babe, I'll be back soon. It's like ... twenty-eight days. Or twenty-nine, with travel."

All those days lined up in a row somehow made it worse, made the time seem longer than one simple month standing all alone. "Can't I come see you tonight?"

"I gotta leave at six in the morning," he said. "My mom won't let you."

I breathed slow and deep so I wouldn't end up crying. My mom would've let you, I wanted to say, but instead I told him I loved him and hung up the phone, picturing a python strangling his mother at the neck. *Attack!* Then I pictured her struggling in the back seat of my new car, my boyfriend and me up front laughing with the wind ribboning our hair and the sun beating down on us like hellfire. I was on a mission now. Only a cartoon cobra stood in my way.

*

That night after dinner my dad installed the software and I got to work. I'd used computers before but never in a timed setting. Never under pressure. When it started, the cobra told me his name was Conrad and then asked me what my name was. So I started typing.

`e-r-i-c-a`

Then Conrad introduced me to the shift key and asked for my name again.

`EEEEE`

I wasn't going to relinquish control this early.

Greetingsssss, EEEEE! he said, like a cobra would if it could talk, and I slowly learned about the home row, irritated that it included the semicolon because I had no intentions of using the thing. Just as well that it sat under my right pinky as I had no intentions of using that, either. The first thing I learned as Conrad fed me banal sentences

about regular exercise and floppy diskettes is that typing took four eyes, or at least a keen third. Because I couldn't see the screen and the keys at the same time I had to move my head a lot, and as I typed I felt like some Japanese businessman bowing emphatically at everything Conrad was saying. By the time I was done with the first round my neck was tight and squashed like putty. He calculated my score and it was twenty-two words per minute. Not even half. So I went on to round two with the clever plan to hit the keys as fast as I could, ignoring accuracy in the name of speed. But Conrad was cleverer. If I hit a wrong key I couldn't advance in the sentence until I backed-space and corrected it. End of round two: seven. Conrad deducted w'spm for each error.

Enough. I escaped Conrad and his program and went to the den to watch *Knots Landing*. My dad was there nodding off in his La-Z-Boy, his hand on the arm cradling a dewy tumbler of something on ice. I woke him up by mussing his hair and he pulled sharply away from me. "You're serious about this typing thing?"

"Sure am," he said, rousing and shifting his heft around. "It's both a punishment and an investment. I've got to look out for your future. What kind of job can you expect to get with no typing ability? Shopgirl? Streetwalker?"

I rolled my eyes and tutted my tongue, playing the part of a teenager. "Wasn't mom a shopgirl?"

"That was a different time. You can be anything. What do you want to be?"

I sat next to him on the floor and wetted a thumb along the edge of his glass and then tried to write my name in the chair's leather. I got to *i* before my thumb went dry. "I have no idea, but I'm not worried. I imagine it'll come to me. Like I'll be driving down the street—in the car, of course—and I'll just see a sign that'll let me know what I'm

destined to be. Or I'll take some class to fulfill a requirement and the professor will say something very profound sometime in the third or fourth week, something about the cosmos, maybe, and he'll be looking at me when he says it and I'll just know."

Now it was Dad's turn to roll his eyes. "It never happens that way," he said, raising the lever next to me and lifting himself out of his chair. "You'll see."

I said goodnight and sat there on the floor staring at the television and I wondered how many words, exactly. How many tomorrow, and the next day, and the next until I'd get to sixty a minute? And then thereafter, how many words did I have yet to type before I died quietly in my nineties? Millions? Trillions? Given what they said about monkeys and Shakespeare I knew it was probable that I could type out enough words in the right order to really impress someone some day, but would that someone ever be me? If my future was meant to be tied to a machine, I wanted it to be tied to a car, to something mobile and fast, and not something that offered only keys with letters printed on them against which I could press my fingers millions of billions of times. Even if I became a writer, even if I chose art over wealth, I would write by longhand. That night in bed, I promised myself this before falling asleep dreamlessly.

*

Bridget called later that week with her first idea. "What about Connie?"

I was drinking a grapefruit-juice spritzer and nearly spit it out. "Oh my God, that's so weird that's almost the name of the snake on my program."

"The what?"

I explained the situation and asked her how she knew.

"I didn't," she said. "I just thought it would go well with the car."

"Well, try again." Connie was the name of some nebbishy woman from the Nineteen-Fifties, some head of some small-town temperance league. That wasn't my car. I wanted my car to be more subdued, even if it was a showy Alfa Romeo. Even if it would catch the sun in winking glints as I'd speed it around corners. So subdued but also fierce. Kind of like a cobra.

That day with Conrad was no better than the day before. What he'd do, as I'd type, was slither underneath the words, letter by letter. Then he'd coil up vertically at the end and say something sibilant and encouraging like *Niccccce job!* or *Sssssuper!* And then he'd tell me I was typing in the low twenties, and we'd start all over again. The problem as I saw it was the sentences I had to type. I understood that they were meant to exercise my fingers, force them through habit into certain motions and patterns of motion, but I've never been the type to divorce myself from reality, and when typing out *The sad fed dog was ready for care*, I had to think, *What*? What dog on the planet is sad after being fed? What kind of care, psychiatric? That afternoon Conrad told me that *Jill may pick an onion in July*, expecting me to care half as much about this pending decision as Jill must have. "I'll never type that sentence in my *ganze leben*," I said out loud. "You're being stupid."

And then Conrad's next sentence—*Don't cry, try another voyage*—was so full of cheek I shut the machine off without booting down first.

I called Bridget but she wasn't home, and I wished I could have hung out with my boyfriend, but of course he wasn't home either. He was out in the desert somewhere learning to follow orders. I suppose it was better than the alternative. To spend six months in Juvenile Hall amid a bunch of street thugs and gang-bangers would probably

put a lot worse strain on your skinny little body than a month of bare-bones hiking and camping would. And James's body was terribly skinny—wrists I could wrap a thumb and pinky around, ill-fitting clothes that hung on his frame like a scarecrow's rags, a butt the size of a blueberry muffin. Maybe when he got back he'd be stronger and thicker, a tough guy. Maybe I'd need to use my middle finger instead of my pinky.

*

Even before we had graduated from high school Bridget and I had graduated from getting shitfaced at keggers on the beach. Beer made me bloated and gave me an awful time in the bathroom the next morning, whereas wine lifted itself up to my head and nested there like canaries ready to take flight, so for fun we stopped going to other people's parties and started hostessing parties of our own. Tonight it was her turn and we had an odd number of guests because of my boyfriend, and to remedy the punched-gut feeling of his absence I found some paper in the study and drew his face from memory, including the little scar that sliced his left eyebrow in two and the tendrils of hair at the base of his neck that curled up toward the ears. Underneath I wrote "(James)" for clarity and taped it to the back of the chair that should have been his. The empty chair next to mine.

When the doorbell rang, I was shuffling through Bridget's dad's jazz records looking for the one with the blackest man on the cover. I put it on and opened the door and there was everyone, clumped in a mass on the porch.

"We carpooled," Nathan said. "I sat on Robbie's lap." Robbie nodded like a good boy and in filed The Beautiful Prettys—the art-rock combo for which Nathan was drummer—with their silent girlfriends in tow. I handed these girlfriends wine glasses.

The boys drank the beer they brought. Bridget came in and kissed Nathan hello and stood right next to him, which was always cute because they were both five-two.

"Well here we all are," Nathan said, but here we all weren't, because my boyfriend was sweating out his guilt in the middle of the desert. And then he said, "Uh, not James I suppose." And then he grinned at me like a jackass.

"He's here in spirit," I said, and led us all to the table, pointing out the drawing and demanding everyone say hello.

Bridget served the food restaurant-style, delivering fully plated meals of Cauliflower Curry with couscous and chutney to the table. "Shouldn't we be having rice with this?" Robbie asked, and Bridget said no we shouldn't be, and conversation commenced from there. Where were Bridget's folks tonight? They were at another restaurant opening. Which one was this? Some Brazilian place out in Irvine, where they brought huge skewers of animal flesh to your table, which obviously was a personal assault on everything Bridget believed in, and she didn't plan on eating another meal of her mother's again, not that she ever cooked. When were the Beautiful Prettys playing next? Some house party in El Toro next weekend; it'd been a slow month. Wouldn't it be great if they could play a wedding? No one they knew was getting married, and this last comment of Nathan's caused enough tension among the couples that we swallowed the conversation along with our bites of Bridget's dinner. Maybe desperation eventually led Bridget to tell everyone I had a new car waiting for me, one I couldn't touch until I learned to type, which rustled up so much stupid boy-commotion that I threw a cardamom pod at her head. Those days we'd say anything just to see what happened next.

"He want you to be a secretary?" Robbie asked, which of course forced me to say something about it, all eyes on me. I chewed extra slow to make them wait.

"He thinks computers are the wave of the future."

"What do you think?" This was Alan, The Beautiful Prettys' vocalist, who once tried to sleep with me and who I didn't like to look in the eye.

"I don't even know what *wave of the future* means."

"If computers are the future," Alan said, still staring at me, "then we're all destined to become mindless fucking robots."

By this point everyone was sufficiently bummed out and I saw Bridget elbow Nathan, who disappeared in the kitchen and came out with a tray of cookies. These were his trademark at dinner parties, fortunes written on small pieces of paper and pierced like hors d'oeuvres with fancy toothpicks, which then got implanted into a snickerdoodle, the only cookie he knew how to make. In the end they looked nothing like fortune cookies, but more like flat white ships sailing off to our mouths. "Dessert?" he asked us.

We passed the tray like people did at church and each took a cookie. Nathan suggested we read aloud in alphabetical order, so Alan went first: *Three varieties of cheese lie on your path: Roquefort, Limburger, Wendsleydale.* Absurdism was Nathan's whole big thing; he wrote the lyrics whenever The Beautiful Prettys decided they needed some. Robbie's girlfriend Amy spoke up for the first time all night to read hers: *Onward, fighting through the hoar, the dogsled of your deepest hopes is making record time.* Many people sighed in admiration at this. Bridget got the curt one that seemed requisite. *Facsimilate platitudes*.

"I hate this one like I hate you," she said, and balled it up and dropped it in his beer.

Then it was my turn. I picked the paper up with two fingers and pulled the pick out with my teeth, which I pushed over to the side of my mouth like a trucker. I read the thing quickly to myself—*There's a tremor in the timbre of your mother's voice as she calls you in for dinner from the front porch of your current hardship/obstacle.*—and all of a sudden I felt a hard, hot gripping around my heart and lungs.

"I don't want to read mine."

"C'mon," Robbie said. "You have to."

"I don't, actually," I said and left the fortune lying in the last of my chutney.

*

Bridget called the next morning and apologized and passed the phone to Nathan, who said, "I didn't mean, like, your actual mother. It was a figurative mother. Like a *metaphorical* one. It was the idea: mother. You know?"

I assured him I did and told him what I told everyone when the subject of my mom came up, which was that she'd left when I was so young that I barely had any memory of the woman, and that she'd done such a great job of disappearing that I hadn't the foggiest where she was or what she was like. All this was true. What I didn't say is that so many years later her absence still carved an emptiness out of me, opening up dark caverns of wants more painful than My Boyfriend Back and The Keys To My New Car In My Pocket because of their ambiguity, because what in fact *did* I want? My Mother Back wasn't quite it because I didn't even know my mother and by that point in her life she could have been a terrible person. A Mother Like Everyone Else Has One wasn't

right either because I didn't even like most people's mothers. Even now, the closest I can ever get to pinning it down would be Not To Have To Want A Mother In The First Place, and the only way I knew back then to make this happen was to keep the whole thing out of my mind, which Nathan's fortune suddenly didn't allow. I overreacted, I said on the phone, which was very true. By the time I got home I was more ashamed than anything else.

Nathan handed the phone back to Bridget and I wished her a good time on the trip to Monterey she and Nathan were leaving for that day. "When will you be back?"

"I don't know," she said. "When we get bored, I guess. I'll call you."

They were gone for more than a week. I spent the time practicing my typing at the computer desk with the machine turned off, looking at the ghost of my reflection in the monitor. Even shadowed and distorted through the curvature of the screen I could tell she was sad, so to cheer her up I started typing letters to James. I never turned the machine on. I didn't have an address in the desert so I figured I didn't have a reason to actually produce anything. It was enough just to point out letters every few seconds, poking at keys as if at dead pets.

> James, i miss you, and even if i knew where to find you i couldnt get there because my car is still sitting in the driveway untouched. when i told my dad i was going to find the keys and steal the car one night he said okay but i keep them in my underwear. eww.

Going slow made it hard to keep track of what I had just said, and without a screen to tell me I had to think hard about it. But somehow it was better than talking, like the time over

Christmas break when we went to the beach and he told me he loved me. Afterward we didn't say a word to one another for more than an hour.

```
i keep thinking of that day i think because where
you are there is probably a lot of sand. and i
remember the sand that stuck to the side of your
body when you laid back and closed your eyes. and
i remember the sound of the waves. ive heard that
sound all my life but that day they sounded
louder than ever. it was so warm for december.
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I did this for days, hiding myself in a corner of the house and avoiding both my dad and Conrad, who may have died from so much neglect. I typed anything. This time, it didn't matter. I typed

```
my period came today. right on time. not that we
should have been worried, of course. i just know
how you get grossed out.
```

and

```
when you get home we should go shopping because
you are probably losing a lot of weight and your
old clothes may not fit.
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and

```
mantarayparkerjuniorbaconcheeseburgertimemachinewashmy
hairofthedogsandcatsonbroadwaytogofuckyourselfhelpthel
essfortunatesonofagunshotintheheartofglasseyeintheskyb
luebloodbankoftheswissmissyoumissyoumissyoumissyoumiss
```

until my dad eventually found me. “What’s all that racket?”

“Just practicing.”

He was just back from work and had a drink in his hand. “I can’t figure it out,” he said, smiling.

“What, daddy?”

“Is it that you’re spoiled? Or just stupid?”

He stood tall over me like a rickety stepladder.

“You tell me, Erica. How did I raise you? Is it because you’re spoiled and lazy that I come home from work and find you sitting here clattering at a computer you haven’t even turned on? Or are you just stupid? Hell, I know I’ve seen it on before so maybe you are. Maybe you plan to sit around all summer and wait until your mean old dad comes to his senses and gives you those keys, but I’ll tell you what, it ain’t gonna happen. I’m not raising a spoiled rich girl, Erica. You’re seventeen and it’s high time you learned to work for what you want. You’re taking a test by the end of the week.”

“*Why are you being so mean to me?*” I was crying and couldn’t look up at him.

“Hey, I’m doing you a favor, kiddo.”

He tossed a bunch of envelopes in my lap. They skidded off my bare knees and onto the floor. “There’s your mail.”

My fingers were sticky from rubbing at my eyes and a few of the envelopes got wet, but it didn’t matter. Most of them were more communiqués from UCLA about registrations and dorm life. And then stuck in the middle of the pile was something handwritten, letters curled like little bugs in blue ink, which I recognized as the ugly script of my boyfriend. *Magic*.

Erica,

We stopped today in Yucca Valley and they let us send letters at the post office. The last two weeks have been pretty gnarly. I twisted my ankle on a hike and had to be carried to the next resting stop. Then Bret, our guide, helped me make a crutch out of a fallen branch, so for a couple days I was hopping around like a gimp. Some of the other kids here are FUCKED UP, like Wes who broke somebody's jaw in a fight at school and John who's only 15 but got caught selling coke. There's even a girl here. Her name is Melissa and she trashed her boyfriend's car so I told her we have something in common! Except that she did it on purpose after he broke up with her. She smashed it to pieces with a sledgehammer. Pretty crazy. The food mostly sucks, though one night Bret trapped and killed a rabbit which was pretty good. I'm tired of taking a dump in a hole and everything I own smells like a campfire. Is this supposed to make me a better person? Am I supposed to never drink and drive again? Maybe I won't, but every night I sleep in a bag and count the days until we can party again. Today it's 13. Did you get that car yet? I can't wait to ride around in it.

Gotta go.

Love,

J.

I counted the *I*'s, *me*'s, *my*'s and *we*'s. Seventeen. I counted the *you*'s. One—though one of the *we*'s referred also to me. I tried to hold these numbers right up next to one another

as a function of how much he was missing me as I was missing him, but all they could tell me was that James was focusing on himself and his experiences right now, and James always focused on himself and his experiences, and I never minded because after a year of dating him I considered myself such a large part of both. All he and I did in those days was date one another, and because I was going to college in L.A. and he would be getting a job in L.A., I imagined that we'd continue to date one another until some terrible accident happened such as severe disfigurement or my falling in love with one of my professors. Until that time, it wasn't that I lived for him exactly, but when I read in his letter that he was looking forward to riding around in my still-unnamed car it was enough to say screw you, Dad, and do the work I had to do to get those keys in my hand by the time he got home. But I couldn't start right that moment or else my dad would've thought he won, so I took James's letter up to my room and spent the rest of the night there, painting my nails with magic markers and responding to none of my dad's apologies through the door.

*

I left my room the next morning after Dad had gone to work and had some peanut-butter toast for breakfast. Also, I brewed a pot of coffee. Conrad was his usual self when I pushed in the appropriate disks and booted his program up, all S's and enthusiasms, making me feel good about the decision I made to practice each finger separately. I started with the right pinky, resting on that semicolon, because I'd need even useless fingers if I wanted to beat my dad. And I wanted to beat my dad more than anything. I stuck a motivating image in my head of Dad cradling the keys before me as if handing over his last shred of dignity. It seemed to work. Before today my motivation was James

and the image of us blazing down the highway with the top down, speeding toward places more challenging and strange than the ones we'd spent our lives acclimating to. It had always been clear to me that the relationship we'd developed had a kind of dependency on cars, and so learning to type before he got back to town was more than just preparing myself for some distant career. It was to save that thing that brought us together. It was to work to keep James close, and that morning, locked as I was on the image of Dad with the keys, silently admitting some grand mistake he'd been making all long, I realized that I now had to do the hard work Dad couldn't do—or wouldn't do—when it came time to keep Mom around.

So I threw myself into it. It didn't take me long to learn what everyone already knew, that typing is just memory, it's just burying certain repetitive movements so deep in your bones that typing-desire becomes like a laser beam from brain to fingertips. After two hours my eyes were bleary and itchy from staring at the screen, but I got to the point where if I saw Conrad slither under an *a* or a *z*, my left pinky would kick up automatically, as if the world's tiniest doctor had tapped it with a mallet.

Later, I was lying on the couch when the phone rang and I was glad to hear it was Bridget, asking me what was up as if she hadn't been gone for days.

"I drank too much coffee," I said. "But you're back! How was your trip? Did you come up with a name for the car?"

"Oh, I didn't even think about it."

I found this irresponsible. "Well what did you do all week?"

There was a pause before she spoke and I knew in that pause she was taking an important breath. *Oh no.*

"We had sex," she said.

"Oh my god, come over."

I sat up and rubbed my eyes and felt very aware of my body; that my feet were slopped against the floor and my brain was floating in fluids. I didn't feel ready to properly deal with Bridget's news, so before she arrived I drank a tall glass of milk and stood under a shower so hot it scalded me pink and made my scalp a different kind of tingly. She rang the doorbell and I answered it in my robe, my hair wrapped girlishly in a towel.

"So how was it?"

She followed me into the kitchen and grabbed a Diet Rite from the fridge. "It was so amazing," she said. "I've never felt closer to him. It's like this whole cosmic thing. It's like you're joined together."

"Well you *are*."

"I know but it's more than that. It's just—I wish I'd done it earlier, you know? It's just so incredible. It's like the greatest feeling."

I felt I was supposed to be asking more specific questions about what he did and where he touched and kissed her and what he said and whether it hurt, but I didn't have the interest. Maybe I was a prude, but I had done enough of the other stuff to James to prove myself otherwise, and there was something about how fully Bridget was gushing about the experience that made me a little distrustful.

"You should sleep with James when he gets back," Bridget said. "Then we'll both know."

It was an idea.

Out in the living room the clock on the mantle chimed noon and I stood and waited out its twelve slow dingdongs. Bridget checked some of her cuticles. She asked when James was getting back and I said four days and told her about the letter he sent and the test my dad wanted me to take. “I still need to practice some more,” I said.

“God, really? Didn’t you practice while I was gone?”

I told her I didn’t feel like practicing. I told her I wasn’t much in the mood when all the people in my life were gone and out breathing salt air and letting their skin get brown naturally. “So James is miserable shitting in a hole,” I said. “At least he’s outside.” My own cuticles were pristine and boring. “This summer sucks.”

“I can’t take this,” Bridget said, killing her soda. “I can’t take your moping. Just take the test, Erica. Just win or pass or whatever. Then we’ll have the car and we can get you out of the house.”

So it was *we* now.

As she left I called out behind her. “If I get the car and you still don’t have a name, no way am I letting you inside.”

Maybe it wasn’t true, but if a fire was being lit under my ass I wasn’t going to be the only one burned.

*

Every day for the next three days I took practice tests after breakfast and after dinner. I didn’t run any drills. I didn’t clack empty messages into an unbooted machine. I just took the tests as if my dad were standing over my shoulder and did my best to keep my eye on Conrad and throw my fingers wherever he demanded. By the end of the third day my wpm score was 49. I looked at the number printed in big block text, Conrad bouncing in

place with his tongue wiggling proudly, and thought: *Eleven*. Eleven more words per minute. “Eleven more words per minute” was only five words, which wasn’t even half of eleven. Before going to bed that night I typed *eleven more words per minute* sixty times in the hopes that numerology might visit me over the night and save the day.

But nothing visited. In the morning I saw my dad in the kitchen and he said, “Test today,” and I said, “Let’s just do it right now.”

I made him wait in the other room. I told him to shut the door and not to make a single sound. “How do I know you’re not cheating?”

“Dad, if I could figure out a way to cheat on this program I’m sure I’d be able to ride the wave of the future without superior typing skills.”

“Touché,” he said, and sat himself at the far end of the couch.

And then I just slogged through. By that point I wasn’t able to type without watching my fingers, so I kept my face far from the monitor, shifting my gaze up and down rather than bending my head. I thought I could save time that way. Conrad served me some gems. *Heather’s departure came quickly, and her return arrival was late.* And: *Their mother went shopping for bandages, cookies, and pink leg-warmers.* And: *Yesterday’s science quiz included a few multiple choice questions; no true-false.* I tripped up a lot on the punctuation because I spent brainpower trying to figure out whether it was grammatically correct or just there to complicate the test. Did Conrad truly understand the semicolon? Did I, for that matter? It looked to me at last like a snake, sneaking itself into the rough of sentences and leaping out to bite my absentminded pinky. The sentences came quickly. I kept moving my fingers where they were supposed to go. Slowly I began to feel like a machine, geared and chugging, a robot built for efficiency, and before I

could react to this feeling the last sentence was all typed out and the test was over. The whole thing took maybe four minutes.

When Conrad needed to calculate my score, he'd pop largely on the screen, foreshortened toward the tail—that is, if he wasn't in fact all tail—as if he were leaning out toward me, and deliver a typing tip, some nugget of advice like an electronic cookie-fortune. This time around, I got a strange one. *Most typists have a dominant hand that gets more use than the other. It's okay if this hand strays outside its boundaries every now and again. Just don't get your fingers twisted up!* Was this even true? Before I could get an answer, I got my score: 55.

"Five more words per minute" was also five words, and also much faster to type.

I thought about what to do. Did Dad know how long these things took? Was there time for a take-two? "How's it going in there?" he called, and then knocked on the door, which then opened. "Done?"

"Yeah."

The 55 was large enough on the screen for him to see it. We both stared at it for a while. "I'll take another one tomorrow," I said.

"Forget about it," he said.

The key went *thud* on the desk and sat there like a spitball. I almost couldn't touch it.

"It's close enough."

"Isn't this how spoiled rich girls get what they want?" I said, looking down at the key because I didn't want to turn around and see what my dad's face might be doing. "I wonder if Mom would have given in so easily."

"Your mom's gone, Erica," he said.

As if I didn't know.

"Whatever," I said, poking at certain computer keys just to put some noise in the room. "I don't feel very adult right now."

"Me neither," I heard him say. "Best get used to it."

I went out to the car and tried to drive somewhere but couldn't think of anywhere to go. Plus I felt bad driving her around namelessly, so I just sat inside with the top down and set my radio stations and put the seat in recline and took a little nap in the sun. In my dozing I saw Alan sitting at Bridget's dining table. A bottle hanging from his face. His slouched and arrogant posture. His hair cropped close and parted like Hitler's. If it was a dream he said *hey* in the dream. Then he said he told me so.

*

At four I called James's house to see if he was home and he was. "You didn't call me immediately?" I said.

"I just got home like fifteen minutes ago."

"Come over and see my new car."

"Now?" he said. "Why can't you drive over here later?"

"I'm not dealing with your mom," I said. "Come over."

After dinner his folks' BMW pulled up behind my Alfa Romeo. I watched from the porch and ran to meet him in the driveway, where he stood in his surfer shorts and Stüssy shirt looking rougher and more compact than before, as if he was keeping more of himself from me. "You're so dark," I said. It looked like he'd been whittled out of some hobo's walking stick. "And so tiny."

He stuck his keys in his pocket and kept his fist in there, bashful. “I’m not tiny.”

“You are,” I said, grabbing at him like a prize. “That’s why I love you.” I nosed in past his ear and smelled his hair which smelled mostly of boysweat, but that boy was James so I was happy to breathe it in for a while. Then I pulled back to kiss him but when I did I noticed something new. Something red like warning signs and purple like the stupid tights of a court jester. The pale yellow of panic. It stared out at me from his neck like an angry eye.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“What?” he said.

First he tried to call it a bruise and then he tried to call it a shaving burn. As if he shaved. But we both knew what it was and we knew it was called a hickie because we’d spoken so often about how stupid they were on the people who would brandish them like medals around the hallways of our school. We’d hold hands while we passed them and agree hickies were for careless, childish people. We’d agree never to inflict one on each other.

Or at least I’d agreed.

“Things got out of hand one night,” he said. “I don’t have her number. I’m not going to call her.”

Melissa. The girl who smashed up her boyfriend’s car was named Melissa. I thought about whether or not to let myself cry.

“We didn’t even do anything,” he said.

“You did this,” I said and pressed it like a button.

I told him to go home and not to call me.

"Don't you want to show me the car?" he said.

"*Don't touch it,*" I said. "Just go home and look her up in the phone book and you can make out like teenagers the rest of your life."

I had made it to the screen door and opened it when he said, "But we are teenagers." I tried to slam it shut, but with its auto-cushioned hinge I could only throw it forward a few feet on its lazy arc.

The next day Bridget and I were sitting in the Romeo. The top was down and overhead the sun was vengeful, and I was worried our sweat would ruin the leather seats. "Should we put the top up?"

"No way," Bridget said. She fooled with the radio and tried to find something peppy. "So it's over between you two?"

James had called twice that morning and I told my dad to say I was here, sitting in the same room, but completely unaware that the phone was even ringing. He hated James, of course—the thug who drank himself into a car accident with his daughter sitting shotgun, totaling her car and forcing him to buy her another—so he was all too happy to comply.

"Where do you want to go?" I asked.

"Oh," she said. "Wherever. Don't you want your name first?"

"What name?"

"For the car: it's Pamela."

Pamela had curves and it had attitude. Subdued and fierce. It was my mother's name.

"I don't know why I didn't think of it before."

"That's smart, Bridge. *Pamela*, not Pam. Never Pam, okay?"

"Okay."

It was time for a drive. I turned the key and revved Pamela up a little until I felt goofy and stopped. We pulled out of the driveway carefully and turned her down all the roads that led away from my house. We were seventeen. We were seventeen in the summertime and had the whole world in front of us. "Let's go to the canyon." Bridget just leaned back in her seat and closed her eyes and bathed in the sun. I sped Pamela up the on-ramp to the 405 and the engine's growl made me smile like a drunk, and I got her all the way to seventy-five before all the cars became a wall and I had to stop and fit myself in like a puzzle piece and wait. We sat there and felt the sun on us.

Five minutes later we hadn't budged.

# # #

If You Need Me I'll Be Over There

My grandmother died on New Year's Eve. I got the call from my brother just minutes before leaving for a friend's party, and he assured me in a clipped, loud voice not to cancel my plans. I'm with mom and dad, he said. I've got home covered for now. He told me to fly out the following morning, so I did. At seven I woke from a nervous, kicking sleep and suffered through a hangover that lasted well into my flight, my head throbbing with the plane's increasing altitude. When I arrived my suit jacket was wrinkled and my eyes hung dark and drooping. I looked like a zombie, and my father was the first to tell me so.

Wait out here a bit, he said, rocking on his heels by a potted plant outside the funeral parlor. His pants were brightly black in the sunlight and broke at the exact right point on his shoes. Your mother and grandfather just went in, he said. I don't wanna be there when they see the body.

So we gave them a few minutes and then slipped ourselves in.

At funerals I look around at the corners of the parlor and the knees of well-wishers in an attempt to remove myself from the situation. My therapist calls this "emotional displacement" and continues to give me small challenges to combat it. She tells me, for instance, to call my brother sometime and say that I'm sorry I never tell him how much he means to me, and I bristle in my chair and look at the corner of her office and say that he probably knows this already. She tells me to casually stop a stranger on the street and say that I hope they're having a good day, and I say, You want me to get

knifed? I don’t live in a big city, but you never know with people in small towns. Small towns are where the real danger is.

At any rate, my grandmother’s funeral was well attended, which made my mother happy. I met distant family members I hadn’t seen since adolescence, and certain aunts and older cousins marveled aloud at how much I’d grown and how far from the East Coast I’d moved. My smile was humble and my stance bore the respectful posture I copied from the blank-faced funeral directors by the door. Set on modest wooden pedestals around my grandmother were a scant three flower arrangements; my mother said it hadn’t been easy finding florists open on New Year’s. Throughout the event my grandfather wouldn’t leave the coffin, even during the short service in the next room. My brother and sister sat next to him, one on each side, each holding a hand of his in their laps, and though the whole display seemed tasteful it made my grandfather look almost crucified there in his chair.

The stock I come from doesn’t believe in watching a coffin lower mechanically into the ground. We don’t toss handfuls of dirt on the lid, that sort of thing. So when the pastor finished saying what she was supposed to, we all just walked back to the boxy, grey limousines that had driven us up the hill. Here, as well, my grandfather didn’t want to leave. He cried and said, I love you, Momma. I’ll be with you soon. It was always disconcerting the way he called her Momma, as if their marriage were some happy incestuous union. Also disconcerting: his name etched next to hers on the gravestone, right there in stately small caps with an empty space to the right of the hyphen waiting for an answer. Everyone feels a lifting of emotional weight when the coffin is finally in the ground. At least, this was what my mother had told us. If we can just get him through to

tomorrow, she kept saying, when she's finally in the ground, I think we'll be okay. But I know that the relief I felt when we rode back to our cars was different from the relief other people felt. They were relieved to have given my grandmother a proper burial, to send her off, as the pastor said, to be with her maker and savior. I was relieved that I wasn't expected to feel anything anymore.

My grandmother and I weren't close. We didn't correspond or talk on the phone, but before I moved to California I saw her a few times a year and chipped in with my siblings on birthday presents. We had little in common, she and I, but I wasn't so callous to never notice the joy in her face when she'd smile at something funny. Once when I was little, my sister publicly accused me of urinating on the toilet seat, shouting it across the house on a holiday. The adults laughed in embarrassment and my brother punched my shoulder, and when my grandmother said above the laughter, Do you aim where you shoot or do you shoot where you aim? I thought it was about the funniest thing I'd heard. I laughed along with all of them at no lousy expense.

After the funeral we went to a diner and ate a hearty lunch. I was the last to enter the back room and tried to get a seat by my grandparents' neighbors who raised cattle, wanting to relive those bored summer afternoons when I'd wander up the hill to their barn and watch some cow look stoic and proud while calves fought over the distended udder hanging like a broken chandelier from the low swath of her belly. But these neighbors were among the first to arrive, and I was forced to sit across from teetotalling relatives I hadn't seen in years. They asked me, Why dontcha call more often? and I played with my food and said I was so busy with school, which came out sounding like a lie because it was. For my grandfather's sake, we all tried to keep everything jovial. In

the spirit of this, I made it a point to tell the chef, who was also our waitress, that the chicken was excellent. It was. It was almost as good as finishing the Friday *New York Times* crossword puzzle.

This I did in the living room of my grandparents' now half-empty house. My father sat unashamed in my grandmother's chair, and the rest of us fell around on the floor and couch and watched the evening news. Off and on, my grandfather's chin fell to his chest in a catnap, and the only talking in the room came from me asking for help on clues. I kept my eyes fixed on the folded newsprint. Crossword puzzles, I knew, were solved in a disorderly fashion, moving up and down the long lists of clues and penning in whatever letters can be guessed at with even the smallest conviction. It was all about fitting words into their proper places, and soon I was amazed at how steadily these words could unlock whole new quadrants of the puzzle, which in time I filled with jumbled combinations of letters that looked all kinds of wrong. But they felt right, so I kept penning in letters and my sister thumbed through a magazine and my brother sat near my mother and held her attention. They were talking about taking a road trip together, to visit parts of the country my mother had never seen and my sedentary father had little interest in showing her. I finished the crossword during a commercial and said, Hey, look. They all did, including my grandfather who woke to the sound of my request. I finished the Friday puzzle, I said, arcing the newspaper across the room like a children's librarian. I was even smiling. I've never done that before, I said.

My grandfather squinted over at me. Behind his thick glasses his eyes looked like fault lines. Your grandmother could never do those things, he said. But if she could I know she wouldn't get bigheaded about it. Get proud like you kids.

He was crying now, again. My brother got up and grabbed the box of tissues from the kitchen table. My mother said, Dad, he didn't mean anything, and then turned to me and said, Lemme talk to you, heading to the kitchen. My sister and father didn't move, determined to stay out of whatever was happening.

I am the youngest of three and I don't have a job, I go to school. I live in a time zone different from everyone there in my grandfather's living room. Once, my therapist asked me if I considered myself the black sheep of the family and I said no. I said, Doesn't everyone think of themselves as black sheep? Isn't it kind of vain to do so? She didn't respond to these questions, and when I admitted that sometimes I dreamed of being a white sheep in a family full of black sheep she asked if that was a comforting thought. Not really, I said.

My mother started our argument with, What are you doing? Would you show some respect?

I ended the argument with, I'm sorry, I was just excited.

Who gets excited on the day of their grandmother's funeral? She hissed this almost, trying to keep her angry voice in a whisper. My mother can yell. I remember as a child her screaming my name when I had been bad and feeling it in my ears like a blunt needle.

I'm sorry, I said again.

Don't tell me you're sorry tell him you're sorry.

I looked through the doorway at my grandfather in his chair dabbing at his eyes. My brother sat on the couch and held his hand, like he did by the coffin. He wouldn't look up to me, tending as he was to our grandfather's distress, and I wanted to hack his

arms off with the axe my grandfather kept in the shed. I walked into the room and tried to come up with something to say, but nothing came to me. Historically, I've never enjoyed being on stage. I've never liked having to perform. My father coughed once to break the silence, but nobody else did anything. I'll be outside, I said, and grabbed my crossword off the couch.

I walked out to the front porch, where the cold wind stung my eyes and the cows from the neighboring farm made low, hungry-belly sounds as they treaded up the hill to feed. All the porch furniture was stored in the shed for the winter, so I sat down on the steps and unfolded the newspaper. The Pittsburgh paper reprinted the *Times* crosswords below its own, easier puzzle, and I pulled the pen out of my pocket and got to work under the fading grey sky. Over my shoulder, a large halogen lamp was anchored to the carport, and I moved about so as not to cast a shadow. It didn't work. With the air turning my tired breath into vapor, I solved the puzzle quickly and without fanfare. Soon, my siblings would drive me back to the house we grew up in and stay for a drink or two, before heading in to the city where they had homes of their own. They had lives of their own and jobs of their own and they had found these things within near reach of our parents and our grandparents. That night, I decided to wait them out. I didn't want to go back inside and I never wanted to come back to Pennsylvania.

When the door opened, it was my father with a paper plate of chicken left over from the diner. Here, he said. I know you liked this chicken.

He sat down on the step next to me. Yeah, I said. I did.

Listen, he said. Your mom's just upset. She lost her mother today, cut her some slack.

I took a mouthful and said, I will. I am, Dad.

He sat there and watched me eat. I'm used to this. When I was growing up, my mother worked later than my father did, and he became the family cook. In every memory I have of walking through our front door my father was always ready to make me a sandwich, and I was always hungry for one.

I never seem to do the right thing, I said.

Sure you do, he said. You just need to learn the difference between what feels right and what people expect from you.

My grandfather's house was at a kind of curve in the road, and in the growing darkness, trucks rode past with their headlights on, shining at us and then bending away. My father waved at them, not out of recognition but as an act of courtesy. I'd never think to do this, so I didn't.

Don't sweat it, he said, getting up and rubbing his palms together. Your brother and sister are leaving soon.

Okay, I said, handing him my plate. I'll wait in the car.

My therapist once told me that we're given families almost as a lesson in group membership, as if first we have to define ourselves in terms of others before we know what kind of people we want to become. And when the time comes to turn into that person, she said, the difficult part is holding on to the piece of us that's part of something greater. The family piece. But what I've never been able to figure out is, if the individual and the family are at odds, which one contains the other? Are our families a part of who we are, or are we who we are because of the families we come from? These days it seems that the right answer is yes, that both are correct, but I've always been bad at creating that

union in myself. My brother, however, is a pro at this. Even in adulthood he is always the model son.

In the car I couldn't keep the cold from seeping into the open parts of me. I shivered and sat on my hands. When the front door finally opened and my family came out on the porch to say goodbye, I got out and waved up at them. Soon enough my brother came down to the car, and when he moved toward the door I stopped him and took the keys. I'm driving, I said, and he rolled his eyes and let me.

# # #

Dig In

Even given all the stuff that happened, I've never blamed Joyce. Never even found a way to. She was way too busy putting every show together to care. Joyce, whose office was decorated with nothing but cacti and porcelain porcupines, would have told me to get over it and get back to work. I'm not mad about this. I loved Joyce. She was this hilarious, angry lady who wore flats every day and was much smaller than me and had just permanent greeny eye bags and yelled at all of us on the crew all the time, but she liked my organizing talents and my dirty jokes and smoked cigarettes with me and only me after lunch. Joyce kept everything running. She literally had nothing to do with it.

I remember when she hired me, stealing me from the team that put together the evening news's weather visuals and putting me at the consoles up in the production room to help control the look of *Dig In with Calvin Woolfe*, the cooking show she'd already brought to the top of our ratings after just one season. I started on a Friday morning and she showed me to my cubicle right outside her office and as soon as I sat down she put her hands on her hips and raised her voice. "Okay, Ginny," she said. We were almost at eye-level to each other. "The show needs better captions. Show me what you got on Monday." She went in her office and closed the door and I didn't see her the rest of the day.

I spent an entire weekend figuring out the look I wanted, staying inside glued to the tube for inspiration and snacking, and Sunday evening just before prime time this commercial came on TNN for Nose Better, and the captions like "Non Greasy" and "Moisturized" and "Penetrating Vapors" scrolled in from the top right corner and landed

in the lower middle of the screen. But skewed, on the diagonal. The captions' tone was a muted pink. The words were in a serif font, like in books. I thought it was amazing. Everything about it was counterintuitive. Mr. Davidson was my graphic design teacher at Carnegie Mellon, and he always said that eyes move left to right, eyes move left to right. "Left to right!" He yelled it sometimes, and he made all these demands to guide the eye—"*GUIDE* THE *EYE*!"—on its natural path while we trimmed out pieces of poster board with our X-ACTOs. The captions in the Nose Better commercial, it was like they hit the eye dead on. It was like throwing words at people's faces. Our show was hosted by a man with a restaurant downtown named The Bay and Howl, and I thought captions like these would be amazing, the perfect match for Chef Calvin's extreme personality.

I stayed up past midnight sketching each caption on white paper, and I spent longer time on Joyce's caption—EXECUTIVE PRODUCER Joyce Pulaski—because I wanted her to love it so much. Monday morning I showed her my sketches and explained the whole concept. "No way in hell are we putting anything on a diagonal," she said. And when I asked if she liked how they swept in from right to left she said, "I don't want anything sweeping anywhere. Just put the captions on the screen, Ginny."

I got to keep the serif font, though, so that was awesome.

This is what I mean about Joyce. She was tough and she knew what she wanted, and she was never afraid to tell you you had a bad idea, or you did a bad job. But she always recognized when people did a good job. She always acknowledged your talents.

Episodes got taped every Thursday, and were broadcast every Sunday. I'd been there almost a week before I got to meet Calvin Woolfe, who shook my hand and told me to call him "just Chef Cal." We were on the set, standing right by his hand-rinsing sink,

and Calvin Woolfe was in costume already. He'd arrived in costume, actually, a pressed milkwhite chef's jacket buttoned to the top and this blooming pair of zebra-striped pants. No hat. He stood as tall as a soda machine in front of me, and the blacks and greys and whites of his hair all seemed to be fighting each other, and I couldn't help notice that the forearms exposed under his jacket's rolled-up sleeves were dark and furry like the backs of exotic bugs. I mean, it kind of turned me on. Danny, the production assistant in charge of Calvin Woolfe's needs, was nibbling on the rounded edge of his clipboard and prancing about on his tippy-toes in impatience; he needed to go over Calvin's lines. But I needed to keep the man around for a little while, so I asked him if he had any cats.

"My dear," he said, "I'm a chef, not a spinster."

Those arms were folded up across his chest and he was bowing over a little, I remember, to speak more intimately I imagine. I'd just bought Sebastian the day before and wanted to share with anyone how great pets could be. But Calvin Woolfe turned to his assistant before I could ask any more questions. "I need lip balm and cigarettes."

Danny flew off as though punted into the shadows of the studio, and Calvin strolled after him. "Gina?" he called out. "A pleasure."

I didn't mind that he fucked up my name. People are hard of hearing sometimes, I thought. I was a professional woman now with her own phone extension and her own box of business cards and I had a job to do. Thursdays, during taping, I'd sit on a squeaky rolling stool in the production booth with Joyce, waiting for her to give me the camera cues. It was button-punching work, mostly, the only uplifting part of it coming from those rare times I could let go of myself and my drama enough to just merge with Joyce's whole person, and so that when she, staring intently at her monitors with those

headphones Princess Leia'd around her gorgeous hair, called out to get ready for camera two, camera two in three, two, camera two now, I was already there. Had been there forever it felt like, my right index finger poised and hovering over camera two's little green button. And camera two's feed having been established I would just smile and look over to Joyce to see if she was *feeling it*, but Joyce was a professional woman who paid very close attention to her work.

Taping ended usually around three and Joyce's "That's a wrap, people" always also meant for the workday. It was a reward every week and I took the extra time to walk home, even on cold days. The WQED studios were right on the residential edge of Oakland, right where the neighborhood got tony and expensive, and these were the houses I'd have to walk past to get to Bloomfield, where David and I shared a rowhouse. I always took my time. A good seven of the houses corralled behind wrought-iron along Fifth Avenue had names—they were mansions, really, older than all of us put together—and past these houses I'd slow my pace to a kind of drunken shuffle. Behind all those panes of pristine glass I rarely saw a light. It was so hard to imagine myself living there, but I wanted to imagine myself living there. I wanted at least a room or two I could forget about. A balcony on the other side of my master suite's French doors. A circular driveway coming in from a side street, one that ran underneath a little carport right up to the kitchen. It's where we'd tell the pizza guy to come. Those bushes cut crisply into geometric shapes I thought were tacky, and one house was just lousy with them. I didn't bother slowing past this house—though it was painted a stately yellow—but by the time I got to our dinky little brick thing it was usually just past six p.m. Maybe I'd stop in a

shop or two, or grab a slice at Angelo's. Every time, David would ask if taping went late, and every single time I would say yes.

It became a routine, but I've always liked routines. Fridays I worked alone in my cubicle, writing and printing all the captions for the previous day's episode. The names of the idiots who worked the cameras and lit the set, people like Danny, were easy enough to put together, but the hard part came whenever I had to list the ingredients for Calvin Woolfe's recipes. That first episode I worked on, he made a chicken fricassee and I watched closely everything I saw on the tape, jotting notes on some Post Its. 1 whl chx 3-4lb. 1 yll O chpd. 1 red pep chpd. 1 grn pep chpd. But once all the chopped food was thrown together and Calvin Woolfe made the gravy, the ingredients became lazy and curious stabs at flavor. "Let's toss in some cumin," he said, "and a little bit of coriander. And you know what folks what the heck throw in all the cayenne pepper you want. But hey be careful." He pointed at us, his audience. "This ain't baby food!" I rewound and replayed, looking to see how much was "some" and whether "some" was more or less than "a little bit." How much cayenne pepper was how much you wanted? I rewound and replayed, rewound and replayed. I heard Calvin Woolfe say "baby food!" thirteen times, watched him grin like a winning gambler thirteen times, felt pinned down and accused by thirteen Calvin-Woolfe index fingers pointing right between my eyes. Then I went to ask Joyce.

"Vince just guessed when he did it," she said. "If he got it wrong we never heard from anyone. Eyeball it. Print whatever measurements make sense."

I chuckled. "Oh, *sure*. What do I know about cooking?"

"About as much as I do. Maybe ask Danny."

“Do you have Chef Cal’s contact info?” I asked.

Joyce grabbed the alarm clock off her desk and held it up in my direction, and she clicked one of her long painted fingernails against the front plastic of it. 11:33. “I need those captions in twenty-seven minutes, Ginny. How many minutes?”

“Twenty-seven, ma’am.”

“You have twenty-seven minutes to figure it out for yourself.”

And this is how it went every week those first, oh five weeks? Calvin Woolfe used showmanship to hide inaccuracies, Joyce was on the phone whenever I had problems with ingredients, and Danny was too ... well, he had no idea how much of everything went into the dishes. I had to eyeball it. I had to figure it out. I had to print whatever measurements made sense, even if nothing did. At home one night, I had David quiz me.

“We don’t even have cumin,” he said. “What would we do with cumin?”

“Just use whatever.” I sat the kitchen table with my back to him, smoking a cigarette and trying not to peek. “Use sugar or even coffee. Just don’t let me see you measure them out.”

I heard him rifle through the utensil drawer. In the other room, the TV had been turned off and the lights throughout the house were dark. Sometimes I tried to look at our house from the street, or from the perspective of someone on the street, while I and David were living inside. I gave the house see-through walls, like a doll house. I tried to look at those figures inside and make up stories about them. *Is this a nice way to live? Are they happy, these two? Let’s watch what they do next*.

“So ... what?” David said. “You want me to just hand you some measurement?”

"In a bowl or something. I'll guess how much it is."

"I thought we talked about never bringing work home," he said.

Back then, I felt that David was holding me back a lot, or holding me away from something I almost had in my grasping hands. I've always been a look-forwarder. Here I was with this just great new job, and here he was bringing up old college promises I could barely remember making. "Did I agree to that?" I asked.

"Ginny, I don't want to do this," he said and walked out into the darkness of the house, coughing and coughing like a drama queen. *Quitter.* I quizzed myself, using my fingers to pull from the coffee can whatever I thought a tablespoon was, whatever an eighth of a teaspoon could possibly be. I tried to do a cup but it wasn't even a whole single fistful. It was more like four fists.

Proud, I told Joyce all about it the next day.

"That's great, Ginny, but the only people who copy these recipes down are lonely old-folks-homers dying slowly in front of their television sets. People who'll never even have a reason to cook stewed lamb for eight." I guessed she was right. She was Joyce, she knew her demographics. But I still took the job of recreating those recipes seriously. What other proper document of the process existed? Calvin Woolfe we filed under entertainment, not reference. He hadn't written a cookbook. The Internet wasn't around yet. The hundreds of tapes that filled the shelves in WQED's basement were the only testament to Calvin Woolfe's artistry, is how I thought of it, and I was like his Moses, etching those recipes into a kind of stone.

It's not like I deserve all the credit. And it's not like I didn't try to get Calvin Woolfe more involved. Over those first few weeks I made it a point to get myself in his

sightlines as soon as he got to the studio. One morning I knocked on the greenroom door wearing jeans and some dumb T-shirt. “It’s open,” he yelled and I pushed my way in. He was there with Danny, who sat bent up at the makeup table with his legs crossed, eating lo mein from a take-out box. The room was small and lit harshly overhead by low fluorescents. It had no windows. Cigarette smoke fell over my face as I walked in.

“What can I do for you?” Calvin said. He was stripped to the waist wearing only those zebra pants he always wore, a satyr sprawled on the little sofa in the corner. A clear glass ashtray rested on his paunch like a diamond on some velvety pillow.

I smiled, bashful in his unbashfulness, and asked him if he’d be more exact on the show. With the ingredients.

“You have a problem with my cooking?” he asked.

Danny paused and held his chopsticks in the air like a little set of rabbit ears.

“No, no!” I said. “No. It’s just that I never know exactly what quantities to put in. For the captions.”

Calvin Woolfe stared at me for a moment, smoking.

“On the screen?”

“Gina, this is *cooking*,” he said, stubbing out his cigarette. “It’s not your math homework.” Then he got up from the couch and in that tiny room he took up most of the space, and no matter where or how I moved my arm I felt it would land on his body somewhere.

“Right, but—”

“Chef Cal?” Danny said, appearing suddenly between us. He was holding up Calvin Woolfe’s chef’s jacket. “Time to get dressed.”

"It was nice talking with you," Calvin said, shrugging both big shoulders into his clothes.

So it's not like I didn't try. And I'm not a judging person. I thought it strange and maybe a little unprofessional that Danny was getting so close to Calvin Woolfe, but I didn't run and tell Joyce about it or anything. I'm not a snitch. I just kept doing my job as best I could, watching Calvin on the tapes and teaching myself how to read him, keeping my eyes on his strong hands as they dipped knives into slabs of butter or drizzled oil from a cruet. It was easy to pretend that everything he said into the camera he said to me. After all, I got him first, every week. By the time the rest of Pittsburgh saw the episode my eyes had been all over him, and my captions had been properly placed on the screen like a fence, corralling the man in that TV kitchen I knew from real life.

And then a lot of things happened very quickly. This was, if I remember, around the six-week mark. One Monday morning I saw Calvin Woolfe walk into Joyce's office. Calvin never showed up at the studio on a Monday. Minutes later, they walked out of Joyce's office. Joyce dipped her head into my cubicle. "Can you join us in the conference room for a minute?"

In the conference room I was introduced to Nicole Slayton, head of communications for WQED. We shook hands. Her skirt's hem hung close to her privates, and she kept her hair short, too. It sat on her head like a bunch of dead kelp. When she offered her hand to Calvin Woolfe he took it and pressed his lips to it, and we all sat down around the table. WQED was interested in publishing a book of recipes culled from two seasons of *Dig In with Calvin Woolfe*, and this meeting, Nicole explained, was just to

get everyone's head together and figure out the best way to proceed. "Joyce, let's start with you," she said. "Any ideas?"

"Call Rebecca over at the magazine and get her to start running a column every month with one of Cal's recipes," she said. "And maybe some kitchen tips. We need to build an audience first."

Nicole scribbled some words in her little leatherbound notebook. "That's a fantastic idea."

"Let's talk *cover*," Calvin Woolfe said. "Is it going to be a picture of my food, or do you want it to be a picture of me?"

Calvin started grinning all up at Nicole and she leered in and grinned back and it was like they were going to make out right there in front of poor Joyce. "Whatever you're comfortable with," Nicole said.

"Oh I'm comfortable with whatever you're comfortable with."

"What's my involvement in this book?" I asked. I tried to look everyone in the eye, like conspiratorially. "I mean, where's Danny, you know?"

Nicole explained that I was to help cull recipes. "We figured the easiest way to generate copy would be to go to the episodes, take from the on-screen ingredients lists. That way, there's also some consistency."

"But what about all the *directions*? Am I supposed to write those, too?" I looked to Joyce to come in and spare me, because of course I also had a show to put together. But Joyce sat back in her chair assessing her fingernails' polish and shape.

"To be honest, Gina, I don't really have copies of these recipes laying around," Calvin Woolfe said to me.

"Jesus, Cal, her name's Ginny," Joyce said. "You just heard it a few seconds ago."

"But that's short for Gina, right?" He said. I watched him wiggle a finger in his ear.

"It's really the best way to move forward on this," Nicole said. "Once this season is finished we should have enough recipes to fill a book. Let's just start collecting them, okay?"

I wanted to tell her there was no *let's* about it, but a *lemme*, but a *do this now on top of everything else you already do*, but with Joyce and Calvin Woolfe in the room I held my tongue until the meeting was over and we all had to stand up. Calvin held the door open for Nicole and as she passed through he shook his head once and it was clear he was looking at her flat ass. He followed after her. I had to completely grab the doorknob and open it all the way open again for Joyce.

She and I walked back to our respective offices, and I said I didn't know when I was going to be able to look through an entire season of past episodes.

"There's no rush on this," she said. "So you stay late one or two nights a week, watch an episode or two. It's not going to kill you. And you should have been keeping copies of your captions all along."

Not that this had ever been explained to me. Not that Vince had ever kept copies of his captions, or if he had, not that anyone at WQED knew where they were. Immediately I saw my life at work over the next year laid out for me, the hours I'd spend with headphones in a screening room with a legal pad on my lap. I had a whole season of ingredients all figured out, sure, but now I'd need to become a writer. It would be my job

to translate Calvin Woolfe's on-screen actions into carefully worded on-paper instructions. He prepared usually four dishes each episode and we shot twenty-four episodes a season. That made 192 recipes I'd be responsible for, and I didn't know then what I know now. I figured I couldn't do everything on my own and that Calvin Woolfe would have to help me. A book was coming out now. I imagined late Thursday afternoons over coffee and my notes. I imagined small, intimate tables tucked in the corners of bars, away from all those display windows up front.

So I got started, spending a couple hours on Tuesday and Thursday digging through the archives. Quickly, I realized that I could cull much of the instructions on how long to stick things in the oven, or when to add new vegetables to the pot, from the typewritten transcripts we were required by law to provide the deaf or VCRless. My job was joining my professional voice with Calvin Woolfe's enthusiastic one. He said, "What you wanna do is take that pie crust and just toss the thing on there. Just throw it right on. Let it be sloppy. Get messy, people! It's a pot pie, not a wedding cake!" and I wrote, *Lay crust over bowl. It's O.K. if it looks uneven.* Lots of times the work got boring. It became difficult spending so much time with a man who was cooking food I never got to eat, and one night about halfway through the fourth episode of the first season I realized that I'd in fact never eaten a single dish of Calvin Woolfe's food. Maybe a bite of the leftovers at the end of a taping, but we mostly left that food for the crew. And so that night I got home just after five and told David we should go out for dinner.

"All right," he said, wiping his small hands on a rag. "I could use a break."

We were down in the basement where David did all his refinishing work. That night he was working on my dresser, which I'd bought a couple weeks earlier at a thrift

store. Over in the corner I could see that the previous day's rainfall had leaked in and formed a puddle on the floor, but I was too excited to let it get to me.

"Should we go to Angelo's?" he said.

"I'm in the mood for a nice dinner," I said, and suggested the Bay and Howl.

"That'll be expensive," David said. "Will that guy give you a discount do you think?"

"I'm not going to ask him for a discount, David. Are you serious?"

"All right, all right. Let me go change."

"Oh, you look fine," I said. "Let's just go now before the rush gets there."

"I've got stains on my pants," he said.

I told him no one was going to notice.

The Bay and Howl was dark inside, like a den, with solid oak tables and a thick carpet underfoot I felt I could lay down and curl up on if I wanted to. And I really wanted to. No music was playing overhead, just that great rumble of polite conversation spreading around a great big room. There was even a stuffed bear by the front door. We were sat at a table right next to a big fish aquarium, and through its bluey glass I could see the doors to the kitchen waver like a mirage. I wanted to order something unfamiliar so I chose the Santa Fe spring rolls, and David took forever to decide on anything. "What's pesto?" he asked. "Is it sweet?"

"Just order it," I said. "This is like some kind of *adventure*, right?"

He only said he guessed so, but I knew it was. My plan was to ask Calvin Woolfe to the table and tell him how great we thought his food was. I knew he wouldn't be intimidated by David and his lollipop frame—it's like all head and no shoulders—and I

felt he would be glad I took time out of my personal life to come see him in his element. We'd make plans to go over the recipes, and the book would be a huge success.

The waiter brought us a basket of mixed dinner rolls and I asked him if Calvin was here. "Is he going to be making our dinners?"

"Chef Cal has a personal investment in every dish that leaves his kitchen," the boy said.

And I just clapped my hands then. "Oh, how righteous!"

David poked through all the rolls as if there was some money or candy hiding out in there. "Don't you see this guy, like, every week?" he said.

"He's very busy when he's in the studio," I said, and explained all the new work I had to do in preparation for the cookbook. It only then occurred to me that I'd never brought it up with him before. It's like, at the end of the workday the last thing I wanted to do was talk about work. David and I, at home, usually just laughed together at whatever was on TV. Or he'd read in his study and I'd smoke in the kitchen, listening to the radio.

"You have to write all these recipes yourself?" he said. "They paying you extra?"

"That's not the point," I said. "If I want to do a good job—and I do!—I need to get Calvin on my good side."

"You mean you need to get on Calvin's good side."

Our food came and it was delicious. "Can you tell Calvin Woolfe that we said so?" I asked the waiter as he cleared our plates. "And we'd like to pay our compliments directly?"

"Ginny..." David said.

"Tell him Ginny from 'QED is here."

The boy nodded and took off for the busing station. Then David distracted me and I didn't see where he went after that.

"Let's just go home, okay? I wanted to finish the drawers for that dresser tonight."

"Oh it'll just be a few minutes I'm sure," I said, unsure. The waiter said he was very very *very* busy, though all around the restaurant I found empty tables. But lots of tables had been pushed together for large parties, I guessed. It was the day before Good Friday, after all, so I tried to be patient.

"Why don't you go to the bathroom?" I told David. "I bet a place like this has the newspaper framed on the wall. Go check."

And suddenly we were arguing, right there between the glowing aquarium and the waiters' drinks station. David kept saying things about *purpose*—his *purpose* in life and the *purpose* of marriage in life. It all got a little confused, I thought, and told him so.

"Don't tell me I'm confused, Ginny," he said.

"I didn't say *you* were confused I said—"

"And don't throw semantic arguments at me," he said. "Every time I want to talk about us you want to talk about something else. But you can't run from this problem. I am unhappy with this marriage and you are, too."

"Oh, now who's putting words in whose mouth?"

"*It's clear as the nose on your face!* You work late. You spend hours every weekend shopping. You sit alone in that kitchen because you'd rather do anything than spend time with me. And maybe I'm the same way with my projects in the basement, but

isn’t that a sign of something? All those promises we made in college. Remember? All the things we said we’d never become?”

I didn’t know what he was talking about, and as he kept ranting I found a little cockleshell at the bottom of the aquarium and slid myself underneath it. I’d always wanted a great big aquarium of exotic fish as a girl. Built right into the wall like some futuristic TV screen. But the upkeep?

“Ginny, you’re not even listening to me,” David said.

I kept my voice at a whisper. “I can’t believe you’re bringing all this up right now. Right here around all these people.”

“I want to go see a therapist.”

“Then go,” I said.

“I want *us* to go.”

And I said no way was I going to spend money on some shrink to tell me what I was feeling.

And he said he couldn’t be with somebody who couldn’t even try to be with somebody.

And then he was gone from the table.

Oh, David. In college you wrote hilarious haiku and named a robot after me, even though all it did was roll forward and backward and scuttle clumsily over low debris. But that was enough to make me fall for you, back then. And then right after we got married you turned all serious and you became this strange burden in the house. The only things we talked about were home improvement and vacation planning. We weren’t even thirty! For me it was always like, when else but now could we take the time to be the people we

always wanted to be? When we decided to share our lives together, did that mean giving them up completely? Isn't there a way for two people to get *too* close, for a time?

I sat there for the next few hours, undisturbed. Where else was I going to go? No one asked me to leave the table and no one came to refill my glass of water, so I kept my eyes fixed on the surfboard-shaped window between the restaurant and the kitchen, waiting for Calvin Woolfe to walk past. I didn't see him until after the restaurant closed. A waiter came up to him and pointed at my table, and through his aquarium's glass Calvin looked over at me like a frightened little fish. But then he smiled once he recognized me, and he came over to the table.

"You've been waiting all this time," he said.

"The food was so good, Calvin."

He said that was kind and asked if I wanted to see the kitchen. I jumped at the chance. Literally, right out of my chair. He showed me the walk-in cooler and the place where all the knives were kept, and the hook outside his office where he hung his chef's hat. There was no one else around. I told him of my plan to get a taste of his food so I could write about it better. I said I wanted to try all his dishes. He invited me into his office and closed the door behind me. I suppose I expected this. I suppose this was what I waited all night for, but I'm not one of those slutty girls that sleeps her way to the top. That was never my intention. But when he put his enormous hands on those problem spots at my waist, I didn't make any kind of protest. It was like being held by a sycamore tree. And he just looked so needy, like an animal caught in a foothold trap. I'm not a kiss-and-teller, but what I let Calvin do that night I didn't let David do until after we got married. And it was very, very nice, at first. There were new hands in new places and

new smells of new skin and all that sexy stuff. But then he kind of threw me on his desk and my head banged against the corner of his keyboard, which really hurt. “Fuck yeah, fucker,” he said, and I wasn’t sure I heard him right. I felt his fist in my hair, and he pulled and kept talking. Y*eah bitch, my little bitch*. And, *get on that horsecock, get the fuck on it*. And suddenly I wasn’t having a good time.

“You don’t have to be a shit about it,” I said, coughing, trying to get comfortable.

And suddenly I’d fallen onto the floor.

“Get the fuck out of my office!”

I tried to explain that a girl likes to be taken care of, right? At least the first time.

“You think I need some cunt telling me how to fuck her?” he said. I started gathering my clothes. “Little girl, you hang around my restaurant all night you take what I fucking give you.”

“I only wanted—”

“Get. The Fuck. Out. Of my office.”

All *punctuated* like that. I had to walk back to the house by myself that night through some neighborhoods I avoided even in the light of day. I could have been raped, or murdered, but I wasn’t. When I got home the lights in the living room were still lit, and I found some lies inside me to tell David about what happened. *Those spring rolls didn’t sit right and I had to walk into three separate Eckerds before I found some medicine that cost less than the five dollars I had in my pocket.* Or maybe, *Calvin wasn’t even there that night, he was out in Johnstown opening a new restaurant in an old converted furniture warehouse.* But I didn’t find David in the living room when I walked

in, and I didn't find him in bed, either. I couldn't find him anywhere in the house, actually, so I just fell asleep on my own.

The season ended in June, and by that time I'd finished every damn recipe on my own and sent them to Nicole. It was out of my hands now. What was left was for Calvin Woolfe to write some introduction to the book—or, really, to have Danny write it for him—and for the designers to make the whole thing look nice. Production costs were low enough that QED couldn't afford color photography of the dishes. The book ran through the printing process pretty quickly. In the meantime, work on the show was very scarce and unstructured, and Joyce and I spent the summer taking long lunches in Oakland or even the South Side, when we felt adventurous. I don't live there anymore, in Pittsburgh. I miss its summers most, though. Living in the city, it always felt like I was—we all were—stuck in some gigantic rut, like physically, as though we lived in a place where all the winds and water in the sky coalesced and sat there moodily. What I mean is, a Pittsburgher sees more grey skies than blue, gets hit from above more by rain than by sunshine. And so when, in the summer usually, that sun did come out everyone wanted to just eat it up. Like we were all walking trees, reaching our limbs up high above us. Joyce said this once. We were taking the long way back to work after an *al fresco* lunch on South Craig. She'd been talking about the *Dig In* column that had been running in the magazine for four or five months at that point. "They got a letter from some old kook," she said. "Says all the recipes taste terrible."

"I haven't tried them," I said. We were both walking through the park. Up the side of Flagstaff Hill couples young and old lay close on bright-colored blankets, and all the pale boys had their shirts off, as though in contest with one another.

"This guy claims the proportions are off," Joyce said. "His spaghetti Bolognese was swimming in sauce."

"Wasn't it swimming in sauce on the show?" I asked, trying to remember. "I don't know why Calvin Woolfe can't write them down himself."

"The man can't even read, Ginny. We can't expect him to write a thank you note, much less a whole magazine column."

I thought she was kidding. I laughed because I thought she was just kidding.

"Of course I have no proof of this, so you'll keep your mouth shut about it."

"Oh, my god! How do you know?" I asked, my hand covering that mouth, practicing. *Was he here? Could he hear us?*

"He won't use cue cards," she said. "Danny handles all the paperwork."

Such secrets! At that moment it was like Joyce had given me the best gift on my bridal registry. The new fridge or something. I said, "Oh I know you're my boss and all Joyce but I've got to tell you I don't want to go back to work today it's just so nice out." And Joyce said that was tough. She may have even said "Tough titty," but I could be remembering that wrong.

"You always talk like you're some large plant walking around," she said with a little too much emphasis on "large" maybe. "Like you're a tree that won't set its roots."

Was it the nicest thing she ever said to me? I gave her a little side hug with one arm, but she shrugged out of it.

"It wasn't a compliment, Ginny. You've got to throw yourself into your work more. I don't want any more letters about failed recipes."

I told her maybe there was a typo somewhere, but what I wanted to tell her was that I *had* thrown myself, my life, really, into the job. I wanted to let her know how hard I'd worked to make sure all the things Calvin Woolfe did with food and his hands became something anybody could follow, word for word. *My* words. I wanted to let her know what had happened between Calvin and me back in April, but I knew she'd think poorly of me. I knew she wouldn't want to keep me around. Joyce didn't sleep with anybody, I imagined, least of all a narcissist like Calvin Woolfe. So I nodded instead, like I understood her. And we walked slowly but with a certain purpose back to the office, moving past spots on Carnegie Mellon's campus where I saw younger, nicer versions of David and myself, drifting in and out of certain distant memories.

We got back to the office and Joyce had an envelope on her desk—small and squareish and white. It could have fit into her pocket.

"Ah," she said. "An invitation to the book release."

But I hadn't gotten one!

"Calm down, Cinderella," she said. "You can come with me."

The party was held in the classy restaurant at the top of the USX Tower, about a thousand feet up in the air. Joyce said she'd just meet me there and I was worried I wouldn't be allowed in without an invitation, but as I stepped off the elevator and into the room I couldn't find anyone left in charge of gatecrashers. So I just kind of went in there. I'd never seen the place outside of magazine spreads before, and it was nice but ugly. Salmon-colored paint on the walls and a kind of sea-foam green tint to the pattern in the carpet. I felt like I was standing at the bottom of a bowl of unripe vegetables.

Joyce was nowhere in sight, and Calvin was surrounded by a crowd of snobs, with leggy Nicole from communications glued close to his side. Unprofessionally, I thought. I found the buffet table of appetizers by the north wall of windows and I filled my plate with what I recognized as Calvin's recipes. Mini spinach-mushroom quiches. Chicken satay skewers. Grilled eggplant rolls. I wanted to check whether I could see my house from here, but it was nighttime and through the windows all I saw were blips of streetlights peeking through the trees, my own searching face reflected dimly back at me. I felt like the tallest woman in Pittsburgh, some giant that the national guard has to come in to take care of. David was out there somewhere, maybe. *Incommunicado* as they say in the movies. I tried not to get melodramatic about it, but what was he waiting for? How was I supposed to apologize if I was supposed to apologize for something? Did I have to just shout the *I'm sorry* out to the open air of the city, hoping the wind carried it to his big ears? But he could have been anywhere in the world, in the city, outside the city. All my messages left with his secretary went unreturned.

Danny walked past just then with a copy of the book in his hand, and I saw he was wearing the exact same terra cotta blazer as I was, which made me feel as ugly as the restaurant. So I resolved to leave and pick up a whole pizza at Angelo's and spend the rest of the night eating it in front of the TV, but as I turned to go Joyce was right there with a tall empty glass in her hand. "Have you tried the food?" she asked.

I'd been enjoying very much the chicken satay skewers, but the peanut sauce wasn't very good. "I just can't taste the peanuts." I said, and it was true. It was like dipping chicken into a sticky lukewarm broth made from more chicken.

"Everything sucks," she said. "Pardon my French."

“Who’s catering the party?” I wondered. I saw over Joyce’s low head that Danny and Calvin were huddled over by the restrooms, flipping quickly through the pages of the cookbook as though it were some porno mag one of them had found. Except their eyes weren’t hornily wide open. They were thin and irritable.

“This place is so ugly,” Joyce said. Was she drunk? “It’s like the Easter Bunny threw up everywhere.”

And that’s when Calvin came over with Danny in tow. I watched them stomp through the crowd with their brows furrowed and their arms swinging, like two toughs storming down some dark alley, looking for a fight. “What the fuck happened to my recipes?” Calvin said.

He was looking right at me. It was the first thing he’d said to me since I left his office that night. I asked what he meant.

“A quarter-cup of peanuts? A teaspoon of sugar? A tablespoon of cilantro? Where’d you get these measurements?”

“From the show,” I said, and began remembering the episode perfectly. It was the one he’d filmed after that first meeting we had in his dressing room, the one where he’d said cooking wasn’t math. I’d watched him prepare the peanut sauce at least three times, live and on tape. “You chopped the peanuts and threw in a whole handful,” I said, as though he wasn’t there.

“A whole handful?” he said and he grabbed my hand then, holding the fist of it in his own fist. And then he brought our hands into the airspace between us.

It looked like a big fish swallowing a little one.

"*This* is how you got your measurements?" he screamed, and threw my hand down. The partygoers were starting to look our way, I could tell. Joyce, still wavering in the background of this scene, wouldn't come in and defend me for some reason.

"We trusted you with Calvin's recipes," Danny said. "*We trusted you*."

"My name wasn't even included in the book," I said, looking as much at Joyce as at Calvin. "I mean, I wasn't even given any *credit*."

"And it's a fucking shame," Calvin said. "You think I want my name attached to this? These aren't my recipes."

And that was true. They weren't. They were *my* recipes. Maybe the whole book was wrong, but it wasn't ruined. All the ingredients were there, they just needed some adjustments. People could experiment in their own kitchens. People could revise recipes on their own. There was plenty of margin space for notes. And hadn't Calvin always said that cooking was about play and exploration? That it wasn't rocket science? I reminded him of this.

"I swear to God, Danny, get this bitch to stop talking to me," he said, and stormed off.

So: rude. Rudeness from start to finish. Which is why still after all these years I can't feel too bad for everything that happened. I could have done everything he'd wanted. I could have cut off all my hair for him. I could have laid my body down on the floor at his every prompting. I could have tithed for him or shared my candy bar, and he'd still have treated me like a burden. It was like long ago he'd planned out this life for himself, this mini-celebrity he was now starting to enjoy in town, and that plan for that

life didn't include anyone else. I wondered how Danny put up with it, and it was only then as I left the party that I felt bad for the boy.

I spent most of Saturday in bed, and Sunday in the paper I read all about the book release party in the society column. All the hyphenated names in boldface, once again mine nowhere to be found. I was there, though, buried in polite allusion. "A moment early on when Chef Cal let loose that fiery spirit he's known for all around town didn't put a damper on this sky-high fête. And the food? *Tres délicieux!*" Which was kind, unlike the review of *Dig In at Home with Calvin Woolfe* that appeared in the Food section:

> While it is the job—some may even say the duty—of the critic to impart judgment as objectively and astutely as possible, stepping up to the plate, so to speak, with the same intentions each time at bat, it too is often the duty of the critic to serve the public as a reviewer and inform his readers of some small thing's simple existence. What I mean is, one need not always judge, one can also unveil. One can spotlight. No one has any fun excoriating an unknown. Calvin Woolfe is no unknown, though outside of Pittsburgh he may as well be. His new cookbook *Dig In at Home with Calvin Woolfe* is no *Joy of Cooking*, no *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, no *Beard on Bread*. It's not even *The Yan Can Cook Cookbook*. It is merely a small companion to his weekly show on WQED. And yet this reviewer, being at heart a critic and a lover of food, can find little to bolster about this slipshod collection of jumbled and just *distracted* recipes. Each of the dishes I prepared at home ended up on the plate either

> a sloppy, soupy mess—such as with the mushroom risotto—or dry as the sun-drenched Sahara—as with the London broil. The flavors were all simply absent, as though Mr. Woolfe has forgotten just what it is that makes his food so attractive. This book, in short, is a mess, seemingly put together by someone just guessing at what might constitute a sorbet or stuffed pepper.

Which was true. I still have my copy, with Calvin's name crossed out and my own put there in blue ink, but I don't use it.

I never did find out whether Calvin was illiterate or not, but if he was, why didn't I notice that he never used cue cards, and that Danny went over the lines the studio forced him to say each episode? And then everything that happened between David and me after he left the restaurant that night. It's not like I never heard another word from him again. When I asked his secretary where he was she'd say, *in a meeting with Mr. Prescott* (his boss), or, *in Atlanta all this week at the ASME Annual Meeting*, and I trusted that this was accurate information. No one's that specific a liar, right?

At any rate, I never thought of myself as the one to blame for all this. I mean, it was Calvin's fault for not being more hands-on in the production of his first cookbook, and that Nicole Slayton's fault for putting the whole project on my shoulders. All the same, I resolved to make things better, and spent that Sunday evening skipping TV entirely and going through my copy of *Dig In* recipe by recipe, underlining the ingredients whose amounts I knew, or maybe just felt, I may have guessed at. I just kept thinking of his fist, Calvin's, shaking my own fist in front of my face. It was, from what I could tell, between one and one-third and one and one-half times the size of mine, and I

thought if we could perform the same operation on the ingredients we could release a revised second version of the book, maybe with photographs to make it more attractive.

I came in the next morning with my copy of the book and a whole timeframe planned out in a notebook. I felt it was very professional, and that Joyce would be proud of how much I'd thrown myself into my work. But Joyce wasn't in her office when I walked in. I thought maybe she was having a pee, and I sat down and checked my phone messages. I didn't have any phone messages, and Joyce's office was empty far longer than any pee anyone has ever had, so I went to see Marci at the front desk and asked her if she knew where Joyce was.

"Called in sick this morning," she said, which even I knew was impossible. Joyce didn't stay home sick, she worked the sickness out of her.

And then when I got back to my desk Nicole Slayton was there with Mike from HR and Don Mooney, the president of WQED, who wore a deep blue suit and stood about two me's side-by-side with a trim waist I could see under his suit jacket. He was smiling so kindly at me that I was confused at first when I heard Mike tell me to pack up all the things at my desk. That I had to leave the building because I was no longer able to work for the company.

"We're sorry, Virginia, but this cookbook fiasco's set the company back a few dollars," Nicole said.

"Eighty thousand dollars," Mr. Mooney said. "And I don't need to tell you that for a nonprofit weathering the storm of a recession that is quite a lot of money."

"I know," I said. "But it's like, five times what I make in a year. Firing me won't save that much money, will it?"

Nobody said anything, and they wouldn't even really look at me, either. We were all just standing around in my cubicle and talking at normal volumes, as though we were doing nothing more than waiting for some meeting to start.

"If we could just go to the conference room, I can explain my plan to revise the book, and—"

"Mr. Mooney's decision is final," Mike said. "Please pack up your desk."

The weird thing was that I didn't even cry, and I always cry when people gang up on me.

They watched me as I collected my things, none of us saying anything. I was glad I didn't bring in a lot of stuff. To think if I were Joyce, and had to run around and find boxes for all those little cacti. But all I had was a CMU alumni coffee mug and a framed picture of Sebastian. I'd brought my own pens and Post-Its in the colors and sizes I liked, but I left those lest they accuse me of stealing.

"Don't you even want to hear my plan?" I asked. "For the book?"

Nicole said she'd take a look, and I handed over my notes and my copy of the cookbook. Of course I never got it back, and though they eventually put out a second edition, it was all different. Not a word of my own work got into it. Like I said, I never blamed Joyce. And I could never even find a single fault with that woman. If hard pressed maybe I'd point to the silly way she put her makeup on her face. She wore enough mascara that it caked up her eyelashes like the sticky teeth of some over-lubed sprocket. It gave her a dark, somber look that maybe wasn't her best option.

I'd never written a letter to the editor before. I guess because I never understood local politics, city council elections, never cared enough about the Steelers or the

Penguins to write a defense of some outgoing coach. And, at least in Pittsburgh, the people who signed letters to the editor always came across as tired old coots who had nothing in life except the chance at getting the last word in. That man who wrote in to the magazine about how awful my recipes were, for instance. Didn't he have anything better to do with his time? But when I got home from work that morning I no longer had my copy of *Dig In* with me, and all I had to remind me of the work I'd accomplished was its review, which I reread and decided to try to rebut. I got some paper from David's office and sat down at his desk to write it. It was the first time I'd stepped foot in the room since he left. Why David needed an office I never quite understood. In the seven years we'd been together he'd never once brought work home, but here were all the things about himself he loved. That ancient Selectric he wrote all his college papers on. A steel T square. A Kennywood mug: ***DAVID***. The brown leather chair I once found on some South Side curb. The plaque he got from winning the 1986 CMU Engineering Invitational for some robot or device he constructed. Knick-knacks and mementoes, all of it by now fuzzy with dust. The only light in the room came from the desk I sat at and it felt exactly like being at the very back end of some cave, my fingers burning from holding aloft the last match in the box. If I had swirled around in his chair I wouldn't have been able to see the front wall, but I knew what was there. I could close my eyes and see the framed photograph of me from sophomore year lying on the grass in the quad, my sweatshirt having ridden up a bit to show the outie I had back then. And my hair? A stupid, sticky mess of hairspray. I'd done so much work over the years to make it nice and natural looking but did he ever notice? Did he ever think to take a new picture? Next to the big-hair photo was the foil wrapper to a stick of gum I gave him on our third

date, sealed in a Ziploc and pushpinned to the wall. That's it: foil in plastic on brick-red wallpaper. The whole wall was like some kind of shrine to this older version of me. The thinner version. There was the Christmas card we sent out the first year of our marriage. There a yellowed copy of the last column I wrote for *The Tartan*. Our wedding photo. Our marriage certificate, which I made him hang up in here because showing those things off around the house is so tacky. It's like what Mormons do. Mormons expecting their first child.

My letter was ten pages long, but by the time I typed it up and did some cutting I got it down to two, double-spaced. I signed it in pen and folded it into an envelope and didn't have anything better to do than drive it right down to the offices of the *Post-Gazette* and set it at the security desk. It was 11:30. I was in bed by twelve.

*

That's probably the end of my story. It took me a long time to find another job, and an even longer time to find another husband. The *Post-Gazette*, though, was quick and printed my letter that Friday, and though I checked every day no letters in response to my letter had followed, which was disappointing. I thought maybe Calvin Woolfe would have something to add. I thought definitely he'd want the last word. Even if he couldn't read the letter, I'm sure he'd have Danny read it for him.

Sometime on Saturday I was in the kitchen adding salt to a pan of sautéed onions and garlic when I heard the doorbell. I thought about whether to answer it—who could it have been? David, if he'd tried to come back home, would have just walked in. I didn't want to disturb my cooking. In the open days of the previous week I tried to get outside and get some sun, and I took out a ton of money from savings and spent it all at the

grocery store, stocking up the pantry, buying produce I'd never tried before, breads that didn't come sealed in a plastic bag. And every day I'd stood around the kitchen making whatever I felt like making on the stove. I had one rule—no cookbooks. Lots of the stuff I ended up with was awful. I remember boiling a lambchop before slicing it into a stir fry, and the whole thing sucked. I just tossed it out and tried something else, what did I care? When the doorbell rang I didn't even know what I was going to do with my sautéed onions and garlic—oh I knew all the terms; one doesn't watch and rewatch and rerewatch two full seasons of a cooking show without picking up a few things—but I knew I was going to add either mushrooms or broccoli rabe and as I was trying to decide the doorbell rang again and then again. I said, "Fine!" and shut off the heat.

It was Danny, leaning against the outside stooprail with a copy of Friday's newspaper in his hands.

"Bravo, Ginny," he said. "Fucking *great* letter."

He was drunk, and it wasn't even *noon*!

"Oh, what do you want?"

"I want Chef Cal's cookbook back!" He shouted this and I thought I heard it reverberate off the houses across from me, so I ushered him inside and asked if I could get him some coffee.

"*I was the true author of that cookbook,*" he said, reading from my letter. "*The idea behind the dishes might be Mr. Woolfe's, but the recipes themselves are my own. If they have any faults, they're my fault.* A little too late, don't you think?"

"Well, I thought I should set the record straight so that people wouldn't think Calvin was a bad chef."

Danny flopped himself down on the sofa, putting his shoes up on the armrest. “People *know* Calvin’s a great chef.”

“I was just sorry about everything that happened,” I said. “It wasn’t even really my fault.”

He closed his eyes and rubbed fiercely at them with his fists. “I know you think of me as some petty faggot, Ginny.”

“I don’t!”

“You do, and that’s fine. I don’t care what you think of me. But you don’t really know anything. It’s clear in your stupid letter. You’re not the author of the book. The writer isn’t the author, okay? Authorship is vision, Ginny. *Vision*. And you don’t have it. And you’ve destroyed Calvin’s whole career. This wasn’t supposed to be some cookbook, it was Calvin’s chance at the bigtime. TV doesn’t last, but print does. And you ruined it. And because he’s my mentor you ruined me.”

I told him about my plan for a revised version, and that it would probably be finished within the year.

“Who cares?” he said, rolling over on his side. Was he going to take a nap?

“You never get a second chance to make a first impression,” he said. “Even deodorant commercials are smarter than you.”

And here I grabbed his two feet and pulled him onto the floor. “I’m not going to let you talk to me like that in my *house*, Danny. This is my *house*!”

“All right, all right,” he said, heading toward the door.

“Why have you been drinking this early?” I asked.

"They fired me, too," he said. "They said my relationship to Calvin had become unprofessional."

This was sad, really, because Danny was so dedicated, and I told him I thought so.

"Well, now we've both been fucked, haven't we?"

At the door he dropped the paper and told me to keep it, which I did, even though I'd already put five copies up in David's office.

"What's that smell?" he asked, sniffing at the air like a dog.

I told him what I was making.

"You a cook," he said with a snort. "That's rich."

And maybe it was.

# # #

KARL FRIEDRICH GAUSS

We were told to spend the rest of the period figuring out a ten-letter word we could type using only the top row of keys for extra credit but I already knew it already from my *Mensa Book of Trivia* so I wrote it down on a small piece of paper with my hand curled around so Danny wouldn't try to cheat and I turned it in and spent the rest of the period not even touching my keyboard but instead telling Danny that I was smarter than he was and how I was like Gauss when he was asked to add the numbers one through one hundred inclusive and he did it in two minutes.

Do you know how he did it, Danny? I asked Danny. Do you? I do. It's easy. Do you want me to tell you?

And Danny said, Shut up. I'm trying to come up with a word.

I didn't tell Danny because then he would know something I knew and he'd be a little less dumber than I am and I put emphasis on the word 'little' because there's so much more that I know than Danny knows. Except sports. But all sports is is memorizing facts and statistics and sports hardly ever comes up on "Jeopardy!" In Trivial Pursuit, I usually save green for the end and then keep waiting until the question is leisure, because those are often about food which I know everything about. For example, the tomato is technically a fruit but legally a vegetable because of a Supreme Court decision made back before I was born. So if you called a tomato a fruit in the produce department it could sue you for damages.

Of course I was bored because I'm usually bored in my classes especially electives like keyboarding so I decided to play one of the creativity games I've invented. I've invented eight creativity games so far and I hadn't yet tried out my latest one because I just invented it the day before, so I turned back to Danny and asked him, Hey Danny, what's the opposite of a gun? And he kept staring at his keyboard as if he could ever figure out the ten-letter word as fast as I could so I said it again. Danny, what's the opposite of a *gun*?

And he said, Shut *up*, Morris. And he said, You're so stupid. A gun is an object and objects don't have opposites.

I laughed really loud so everyone could know how funny I thought Danny was and I said, A black pawn in chess is an object and clearly its opposite is a white pawn. And anyway, it's a creativity game that I invented so you're not supposed to be so literal for once. You're supposed to be creative with it. So just say something, okay.

Ms. Jericho said, Owen. Shh.

And Danny said, No. Play your own game. He said it under his breath but Ms. Jericho heard him and shh'd again.

So I said, If you play I'll give you the answer to the keyboarding puzzle.

And Danny said, Okay what was the question?

I repeated the question of the What's The Opposite Of A Gun? creativity game and watched Danny look up at the ceiling and think of an answer. He always looks up at the ceiling to think of answers. When I finish tests all those minutes before the rest of the class I sometimes watch Danny look up at the ceiling, and one of these days I'm going to play a trick on him and put a message on a piece of paper and stick it on the ceiling so

that when he gets stuck on a test and looks up there to think of an answer, he'll read my message, which will say something clever like, Check the floor stupid, or, Owen is fabulous.

Danny opened his eyes after forever and said, Okay I got it. The opposite of a gun is a hospital, because guns can kill and hospitals can heal. And I clapped once and said, Aha! and before Ms. Jericho could shush me I told him what his answer meant for him as a personality archetype. I said, See, Danny, that's very interesting because all you can think of when I say 'gun' is a thing that kills people, but guns aren't this by definition, are they? When you look up 'gun' in the dictionary does it say right there, you know, noun, number one, thing that kills people? I could tell Danny would take a long time thinking this through so I did it for him and said, No, it doesn't. A gun *can* kill people, but it doesn't have to kill people. So do you think 'hospital' is the real opposite of a gun?

Most of the kids were packing up their bags because we had only three minutes left until the end of the period, and like she always does Ms. Jericho was announcing to everyone that three minutes were left and not to start packing up, because we could do a lot of work in three minutes. Danny noticed this like I did and said, Come on, I played your stupid game now tell me the answer. He had his pen in his hand, the fat kind with black and blue and red and green inktubes inside. He clicked the green which was his favorite and held it over the paper, thinking I was just about to tell him the answer. But I wasn't going to tell him the answer because to play What's The Opposite Of A Gun? you have to go back and forth. Like all of my creativity games, What's The Opposite Of A Gun? is an exchange of ideas so that both sides get something out of playing. I wasn't

going to learn anything from his answer, so I intended to have him learn something from mine, which I knew was the only right answer to the game.

I said to him instead, No I'm not going to tell you the answer because you haven't asked me what I thought the opposite of a gun was. Aren't you going to ask me?

And Danny said, Fine.

And I said, Fine, what?

And he said, Fine, I'm asking you.

And I said, Asking me what?

And he punched me in the shoulder like he always does and actually said, Fuck, but Ms. Jericho was still carrying on about not packing up and she didn't hear him. He said, Fuck, Morris, what the fuck is the opposite of a fucking gun already?

And I said, You don't have to get obscene. But I'll tell you what I think. I think the opposite of a gun is a flower and here's my rationale. A gun by definition is man-made, and it's made of metal, and it's usually black or metallic grey in color. Also a gun is symbolic for destruction, which as you can clearly see is not the same as saying it kills people. And a flower is none of these things. Flowers are made by nature and they are very colorful and they are symbolic for growth and profluency. So if you ask me, I'm telling you: the opposite of a gun is a flower.

Danny said, That sounds like something a sissy would say, except he didn't say 'sissy' he said the F word that my dads told me never to say so I won't repeat it here. I told him that he shouldn't say that word but he just rolled his eyes at me, which like punching me in the shoulder he does a lot, and asked me once again for the answer. Quick, Morris, he said. The bell's about to ring.

But then the bell did ring and Ms. Jericho called out to the class, Class, okay that was the bell so time is up on the extra-credit brainteaser. And most people moaned and picked up their backpacks and put them on their backs but only with one strap because two straps was what most people thought was uncool. I of course always used both straps because I got diagnosed with scoliosis in middle school and using only one backpack strap can really worsen one's condition in that regard. Danny punched me again in the shoulder, right where he did before and where a subsequent bruise had begun to form, so that it hurt by my estimates triply so, and he said, Thanks a lot, sissy, but I trust I don't have to tell you what he really said. And then Ms. Jericho said that only one person had come up with the answer, and when she asked me to inform the rest of my classmates I was in a kind of funny mood after having successfully played What's The Opposite Of A Gun? for the first time so I stood up on my chair and I said, The word, classmates, is 'typewriter.' And then I took a bow and when I came back up a spitball hit me in the lower right eyelid, which caused my eye reflexively to shut as a form of protection, and this combined with the speed at which I brought my hand to my face to wipe away the spitball threw me a little off balance on my chair and I fell to the floor in a rather embarrassing crash. My keyboarding classroom wasn't carpeted like my math classroom was so when my elbow and coccyx hit the ground they had only the dirty linoleum to cushion the blow, which of course wasn't much. It should go without saying that the fall hurt me, but I'll go ahead and say it all the same. I heard all the other students laugh from somewhere outside my field of vision and when I turned my head to get my bearings I saw a few who had started to leave the room come back in and look at me there on the floor. They pointed with their index fingers and did other things with their middle ones

and Danny said, Serves you right, and kicked me in the ribs. I decided that it would behoove me to lie there until everyone had left, and when Ms. Jericho stepped up next to me and held out her hand I took it as a sign that the coast was clear, at least for now.

I left keyboarding and went through the halls and went through my day which was like every day before it and which will probably be like the 484 schooldays laid out before me before I can graduate and leave town for a university. I am not Karl Friedrich Gauss even though I felt like him after getting the extra credit right away. I would probably not become aware in time of the fact that the numbers one through one hundred inclusive include fifty pairs of sums totaling one hundred and one, adding up then to 5050 when all has been said and done, I only know this now because I read it in a book. But my dads tell me that thinking is a job and people can only do a good job if they work really hard at it and I think always. I think about what a bruise is made of and I think about how the word for a bundle of sticks transformed into something pejorative and I think about where to walk and how to step through the halls so that I don’t draw attention, because on the way from keyboarding to gym I have to walk down the senior hallway in order to make it on time, and while none of them probably even know who Gauss is they are larger than I am, large like aircraft carriers, and some of them carry in their one-strapped backpacks not the opposite of a gun, but the opposite of the opposite of a gun. And if the seniors are aircraft carriers and if I show up on their radars as even a small blip, I will feel whatever it is they have in their arsenal and I will feel it immediately and I’ll feel it past bedtime.

# # #

I, Rhonda, Keep Track of the Family Calendar

My story is bad and starts like this.

I have two sons and a husband. My sons are six and nine, and my husband is significantly older than me. I say "significant" meaning like Marilyn Monroe and Arthur Miller, not Anna Nicole Smith and that old man whose money she took; meaning it comes up in conversation but not with hushed voices or raised eyebrows. Joey and Jason, my sons, sometimes look too much alike. They both have unkempt hair, and carry their bodies in lanky, unsure ways. To tell them apart, I check their eyes. Where Jason's—my Jason, my boy, the son I wanted—are hooded in apology, Joey's are fiery and untrustable. He's his father's son, and by this I mean to say that he will grow up into the cunning, crafty man that I married.

My husband, Cary, is not only significantly older than me, he's also the chief medical coordinating liaison for the Humanity Council here in Pensacola. To be honest I don't quite know what-all that means. He told me about it after he got the promotion, and we both had an understanding that I'd remember the conversation. But I didn't, and Cary's not a man who brings his work home with him, and, despite this job's turning my husband into what I as a younger gal would have called a "suit", I suppose I love him for this, for keeping his boring job where it belongs.

I, Rhonda, keep track of the family calendar, only one of my duties as wife and mother. The calendar I use is one of those paper monthly things you can pick up at any Staples. Very plain-Jane, but practical. I keep it hung in the kitchen next to the phone

where everyone can see it, so no one's surprised when I load them into the van for shoe shopping or a daytrip to my Aunt Alma's. When they complain, I refer to the calendar. I even point to it and say, "It's not my fault." I say, "It's not my fault that you can't read," though I don't say this within Jason's uncommonly wide earshot because he's been coming home with notes taped to his backpack saying that his reading skills are, well, I'll just call them late-blooming.

*

Just to give you an idea, here's what I have listed on the family calendar for next week, just to give you a sense of what my life is like. On Monday, Cary has his prostate exam at 9am with Dr. May, and I have to pick up Jason's Wondercape from the dry cleaner's. It's been there, the Wondercape, for more than a week because they had to send it out someplace, after Jason stained it while collecting "Wonderberries" (assuredly poisonous; I about had a fit) in the woods behind our house. Supper that night is Shepherd's Pie. Tuesday I have to clean Sally's cage (our bird) and give her her worm pill, and then pick the boys up from their afterschool activities. Joey has little-league basketball and Jason goes to the Y with his friend Kristine for their Junior Robotics club. He's told me he's building a spy assassin and despite his obvious limitations I have no choice but to believe him in this. Shake-and-Bake Pork Chops with Applesauce, then, for supper. Wednesday I have a few more Christmas presents to return: an ugly sweater Cary's sister was wise enough to send with a gift receipt, and two toys Joey couldn't be bothered with. And that night Cary has to change the oil on the cars, which he loves to do, which reminds him of the days he drove a Camaro instead of a Saab. Wednesday's supper is Spiral-Cut Ham and Curried Fruit. Thursday I have to send a Happy Anniversary card to my cousin Terry,

and that evening, Joey and Cary will go to the barbers together while Jason and I stay home and work on his reading. He doesn't like to sound out words with his older brother around, he gets embarrassed, and Ms. Hatcher, Jason's teacher, says that if only he could sound out the words he's trying to read, slowly, and calmly, he wouldn't get so frustrated, and he would stop throwing his books against the wall. This will all come after a supper of Chicken Tonight with veggies. Friday's an easy day. McDonald's for supper because no one likes to cook Friday nights, and then we'll head to the Video Den for movies. I'll take Joey and Jason to the family section while Cary will wander off to pick up something for the two of us, something we'll watch later on the television in our bedroom.

I leave weekend meals for Cary. "Surprise me," I say and he always does. Last Sunday we had crab cakes, which he actually got the boys to eat, though Joey at one point said, "This tastes like girls," and Cary and I shared a look, uncertain how to continue.

*

I'm going to be frank, as I think it'll help my position. I'm much more of a natural fuck-up than the whole family calendar thing may put forth. Right now, we're a few calendar lines into January, and I'm still able to look around the house and find leftover rubble from the holidays—those aforementioned unwanted toys, for instance, and Christmas cards stacked on the mantle, and big stupid tins of sticky popcorns that nobody wants to eat—all laying around just daring to be taken care of. I'll get to it when I get to it, when I care enough to schedule it in.

More disclosure: I've never liked living in Florida, with its humidity and crowded beaches. It's a terrible state. America's dick is what it is, hanging down there all brazenly, as if the rest of the world is supposed to be impressed. But it's here in Pensacola that Cary had a job. A good job, even, and when he asked me to marry him I didn't object to moving someplace where I didn't have to work. Would you? Sure, it's not much of a life. A shut-in life, really, I mean look at the calendar. I go out to run errands. I schedule in the sending of various greeting cards for God's sake. I know. This is not movie material. But it's mine. It's one of the few things that is, and I find I don't have a hard time taking ownership of it.

*

I'll tell you a quick story. When I was young I had a rabbit named Flopsy. I know, Flopsy's not very original, but I was five. And when Flopsy bit my sister Marcie, my folks sent him to my grandparents, who lived across town. "You can still visit," they said, "whenever we go over." Which was often. About once a month we'd go for dinner, and one such time I went out back to Flopsy's cage and found it empty, so I asked what happened. My grandfather's eyes looked down at mine, and I could tell he felt sad, and he said that her cage had been left open by accident. He said, "She ran off, Little Rho," which is what he used to call me. So I cried a little and we all sat down to supper, some hearty Italian stew. Afterward, Marcie and I went down to the basement to play, where some sausages and animal furs hung from the ceiling. This was nothing unusual. My grandfather was one of those industrious first-generation Italians who did everything himself, despite whatever zoning ordinances may have been in place. He fermented wine in the garage, that sort of thing. Anyway, I noticed that one of the pelts was the same

greyish-brown as Flopsy, and I put two and two together. I ran upstairs shouting, “You ate him! You ate Flopsy!” I even think I had my finger pointed at arm’s length, like some old woman with her cane. My grandfather just sat in his easy chair and tried not to smirk. “I wasn’t the only one,” he said. “You ate him, too.”

Turns out there was rabbit meat in the stew. In other words, my grandparents fed me my own pet. It’s stupid, I know it’s stupid, but I never got over this. I never wanted another pet for fear of what would happen to it. I learned early what it is both to lose things and never find ways to trust people. And it’s been part of my job as a mom not to let this happen to my sons.

*

I am more aware than you are of two things. First is that my life, this life, is dull and common. Second is how much nicer this is than any alternatives I could come up with. I still remember those unthinking, easy times when the only thing I wanted to hear was whatever played on the radio. But things are quieter these days, and my able body’s now pulled in more urgent directions.

# # #

ASHTABULA

At the end of the interview, Drs. Green and Padunov ask if I have any questions. The only question I have is whether I got the job, but I know the importance of communication. I know it's right to ask of those asking.

"He doesn't speak at all, then?"

Dr. Green says no. Her eyebrows are fixed in a severe V.

"Does he try? I mean: does he make any sounds?"

Dr. Green inspects a fingernail and Dr. Padunov leans forward onto the wide steel table between us. It's as if the doctors have a tacit agreement to take turns speaking.

"Not often," she says around the gum she's been chewing girlishly. "His sounds, they are unpracticed, undisciplined. You will begin to recognize patterns of his behavior, over time. This will be one of your duties."

"Of course, that's if you get the job," says Dr. Green, whose inspections have shifted from a fingernail to Dr. Padunov herself. When she removes a tissue from the pocket of her lab coat, it's held like an offering in front of her partner, a velvet pillow on which Dr. Padunov places her wad of gum. She actually reaches into her mouth and gives it to her. The fair skin of Dr. Padunov's face that's been glowing under the cold fluorescents overhead darkens now with the shame of someone who's lost a part of herself. She brushes a strand of hair behind her ear.

Dr. Green asks if I can leave the room for three minutes.

Out in the hall there are no clocks, so I try to count the one hundred eighty seconds in my head but lose track somewhere around eleven. I once wanted to work as a

prison guard, alone up in a guntower, which isn't the most spacious workplace but at least you're outside. At least you get a view of things. Here I'm standing on industrial carpet the grey-brown of lakewater and pressing an ear against the door but all I get is the faint, low hum that I recognize as the sound of blood pulsing through nearby veins. It's a sound I'm too familiar with these days.

When the door opens swiftly at what must be three precise minutes, I fall forward like a clown. Dr. Green is unfazed, her eyebrows set for life. Just underneath her outstretched arm I can see Dr. Padunov holding my briefcase in two delicate hands. Can she tell it's empty? "Welcome to the project, Mr. Person," she says.

*

When I get home it's Lavender on the phone. "Where are you?" I ask.

"Ashtabula."

"Again?"

He says he never left. This isn't good news, but I remain calm and breathe supportively into the mouthpiece.

After a moment, he says, "I just wanted to let you know that I forgive you."

"Lavender…."

"I just wanted you to know that."

"Fine," I say, letting his honest request sliver its way under my skin.

Lavender just says okay.

"Why aren't you calling next week?"

"I might not be by a phone next week."

"I want you to be careful," I say. "Do you have enough money? Do you have a coat?"

His laughter is plucky in my ear like a harp. "I have your coat," he says. "It's warm enough."

I want to tell him that I found a job, but I can tell by the absence of his inhales and exhales that he's already cut the line.

Lavender is my brother. It's always been hard to find the correct words to talk about this. I've tried looking into the grammar of it, but it doesn't hold any answers. *Drown* is the kind of verb that can or cannot have an object after it, depending on context. But to say that I drowned Lavender makes me a menace, and to say that I caused Lavender to drown imbues me with a plan. A sinister plan, something I'm to this day incapable of. And then to call the drowning unsuccessful—which it was; he never fully lost his life—is to make it sound like a different kind of failure than the kind it was: a failure of guardianship. It was an accident, of course, the kind of mishap that sometimes comes from the scrambling and wrestling of kid brothers. I wasn't careful when being careful was what was called for.

Lavender didn't talk for years afterward. No doctor could explain it. At home, he spent most of the day in his room, reading or feeding his pet rabbits, and we all seemed to follow his lead, keeping very quiet as we moved around one another. At school he had a hell of a time. They called him *mute motherfucker* and so on, and I'd hear about it and wish that he could go deaf as well. But he withstood it all until graduation, when he boarded a bus and left town. That was two years ago. Our grandmother had a vocabulary that hadn't stood the test of time, and she called Lavender *simple* in a loving way, as

though the accident were an improvement on his life. I remember this a lot and wonder whether drifting around the country is, for Lavender, a stab at simplification.

When Lavender spoke again, it was to me, at the dinner table the night before he left. “I forgive you,” he said, and back then I heard it as an absolution.

*

The next morning I try to savor that peculiar taste of waking up with a purpose. I try to let it linger on my tongue, but it’s soon washed away by the ferric coffee I brew in a hurry and then by a deluge of increased responsibilities. The doctors have seventeen impenetrable forms lined up on the interview table when I arrive. Dr. Green tells me that I’m free to look over these with my lawyer, but the only lawyer I know is my father.

Dr. Padunov begins turning pages to display signature lines. “Dr. Green and I have been working for thirty years on the project. There is a lot of time and money at stake. If you speak to the Subject or jeopardize the project in any way, we will need to ... recover from that loss.”

When my nerves are up, which these days is often, I rub my eyes. I rub at them with loose fists like a midnight toddler thirsty for something. By “recover from that loss” I take it to mean they’ll wring some money out of me if I mess things up, but I don’t have any money. I’ve got a tub of margarine in my refrigerator and ketchup and a box of baking soda.

By the seventeenth form my signature looks like an error scratched out on the page.

The walk to the Subject’s room is down three blank hallways filled with nothing. It’s blank and hot and I’m finding it hard to breathe, and even though I know we’re on

the fourteenth floor of an office building downtown it feels as though we're in some hideaway deep under the Sahara. The only sign of life other than the silent three of us is a voice that issues from a loudspeaker. We arrive at a security door and the doctors look up at a camera in the corner, raising their chins as if posing for a dual portrait. "Go ahead, doctors," the voice says, and we enter the observation room, which looks out into the Subject's room through what the doctors tell me is a one-way mirror. From above our heads comes the mic'd-in sound of a man's steady breathing.

We gather here and Dr. Green sets her eyes on me, scanning to see that I'm prepared to stop talking. "No more speaking after this room. Not anywhere. He can see your lips move. He reads faces very well. So get it out of you if you have anything to say."

I don't have anything to say. The doctors prepare me for my introduction. Look him in the eyes, they tell me, and shake his hand when he offers it. Smile if I can manage to do so genuinely. If he touches my elbow, shoulder, or face do not pull back or react with alarm. If he suggests a game of chess politely decline by shaking my head carefully. I'll know if he suggests a game of chess. There will be time for games of chess later. If I don't know chess I should learn chess immediately.

Lavender taught me chess years ago. I should be okay.

Inside is a short antechamber of the kind made to keep atmospheres separate, like on Hollywood spaceships. The door behind us closes and Dr. Padunov opens another. We enter and we're in and the air is immediately colder and heavier. The room is dim, no overhead fluorescents, and what light there is comes from a twenty-by-twenty-foot square chamber encased in glass with curtains pulled into the corners. When we arrive the

chamber is empty and the door is ajar. I worry that he's escaped when I see a door on the opposite wall open and I hear the faint white noise of flushed water. The Subject wears a heavy, dun-colored garment—an overgrown shirt that falls to the ankles. Whether he looks like a man from a Bible story or a man from the future as envisioned by dystopian novelists I can't quite tell. All I know is that it's a ridiculous thing to try to use a toilet in. He sees us and smiles. His smile is warm enough so the skin around his eyes creases. Dr. Padunov moves forward to embrace him as though it's been years since they last saw each other; Dr. Green follows, her eyebrows never bending from their V. She presents me by draping an arm around my shoulder and moving an open palm through the air from the Subject's personal space to mine, as if giving me something of his. His eyes are all over me. In my day-to-day, when it comes time to sustain eye contact I've habitually failed to impress. Sometimes I'd rather look at anything than another person's reading of me. But this is my job, so I fight temptation and hold his gaze, which is hard because his eyes are such a pale brown they don't look real. They look like the eyes of a doll you'd design from a catalogue. He doesn't smile as we shake hands. He doesn't reach for any other part of me. In seconds he's dropped my hand and turned his focus fully to Dr. Green. I stand around and try to pay attention. No one's saying anything. Then Dr. Padunov guides me out of the room and I look over my shoulder to see if anybody's watching, but they're not.

In the observation room I start gasping for air and murmuring "Okay," just to hear words, just to make sure my voice is still in operation. The light's much brighter out here. I feel like a man who's just surfaced from the bottom of the ocean, and Dr. Padunov watches me in sympathy.

*

I moved down to Tucson two months ago and already I've learned something. To live in the desert is to know your boundaries. The city ends right over there, at the mountains. After that, you're on your own.

I haven't made friends in this town yet, so when I get back to my apartment, I turn on the television to find some. The set is positioned in the corner of the room, balanced among the furniture, and throughout the evening I try to keep moving. I sit on the couch for one show and then one of the chairs for another. I drink icewater in short glasses that I sip like cocktails. When I try to laugh out loud at the jokes of sitcoms I find it's not so hard.

There was once a time in my life when guilt was merely a tool my parents employed to get me to act properly. These were times of tears willed fiercely back and insincere notes written begrudgingly by way of thanks. Then Lavender stopped talking, and these days it's more pervading. Guilt is an emotion I wear without cover, without rest, like a hairdo that stubbornly won't go out of style.

*

By the start of the second week the Subject and I are embracing as a means of saying hello. I'm told this is progress, but inside his thick arms I feel momentarily captured. I feel like something he's keeping from other people and I don't what to do with myself until he pulls away. "He has only his body," Dr. Padunov told me once. "Think of each gesture as a conversation. He could be testing you to see how open you'll be with him."

I was hired to perform a series of what the doctors call "engagements", which involves following their directions and keeping a journal of my thoughts and

recollections on both the engagements in specific and the workday in general. *Today went well. I hope S gets more open around me. I'm feeling more comfortable here.* I never know what to write, and every day feels like a test I'm taking.

For my second engagement of the day I'm told I'm to eat cups of blueberry yogurt in front of the Subject until something happens. Nevermind that I hate yogurt; it's his favorite, apparently. We sit down together at a little metallic table just outside his chamber, me at one end with maybe a dozen plastic bowls of yogurt and him on the other scowling like a preteen. He won't even look at me. I start forcing the stuff down. I do it quietly in case the doctors consider slurps and belches to be language of a kind, and every few bites I catch him giving me the fisheye and dropping his scowl into a look I'd in any environment other than this feel pity for, but the doctors told me never to offer him anything unless he asks for it. "How can he ask for it?" I said. "We don't need to talk as much as you might think we do," Dr. Green said. Dr. Padunov didn't say anything.

By my third bowl I'm trying to make it look as though this is something I'm enjoying very much but it's hard as the yogurt sticks in my throat and fills my belly like cement. Then the Subject just reaches across the table and takes one of my bowls, takes it without asking as far as I can tell, snatches it so nastily that some of the yogurt burbles onto the tabletop, and because there's no spoon other than the one hanging from my mouth he's forced to scoop up the yogurt with three fingers and a thumb, like some big monkey. He's happy and unremorseful, any fool could tell, and that's the end of the engagement. As I get up from the table and start collecting bowls he stares at me with brows furrowed low in an expression I can read as clearly as a stop sign: *Where are you going?* The words seem to pass through the air from him to me. I can hear them, I think,

and I act on reflex. “Um,” I say and then immediately I blur it into a cough, knowing what I’ve just done. *Cough-cough-cough.* I cough some more to get whatever it was out of my system and the Subject goes back to his stolen yogurt.

Back in the observation room Dr. Green is on me like a mess of warts.

“That’s your one slip-up,” she says. Her arms are folded across her chest like a bar bouncer. “Do it again and you’re fired.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “It was an accident.”

“There are no accidents,” she says. And now we’re joined by Dr. Padunov who bends around the doorjamb and leans almost coyly against the far wall. Dr. Green and I wait for her to say something. In my head is a song I can’t place, a few lines from the chorus running around and around on loop.

“You need to have control,” Dr. Green continues. “You need to learn to discipline your voice. Dr. Padunov and I thought, after everything you said in the interview concerning your brother, that you had accomplished this. Don’t make us feel that we made a mistake.”

She leaves then to let Dr. Padunov finish me off, and Dr. Padunov pops in a piece of gum. She offers me one that I decline. “We’ll be taking over your engagements for a while,” she says. “It would help your position not to speak with us for a few days. I don’t want to talk to you like a child, but speak when you’re spoken to, and we’ll go from there.”

*

I get a lot of practice over the weekend, where I leave the house only on Saturday to check something out of the library, but I can’t find the energy to turn a book’s pages.

Instead I let the television tell me its stories until I fall asleep on the couch. I don't speak until Sunday afternoon, when I say, "Oh," after finding a dollar bill in my pants pocket. And then I say it again when I can't think of anything to spend it on.

Monday's our birthday, Lavender's and mine. I spend it at work waiting to be spoken to, wanting recognition, but the doctors don't say a word to me and the Subject lives without language. We go through a couple engagements, one in which I'm supposed to continually cheat at chess and see how he reacts. The only cheat I can come up with is to sneak pawns back on the board after he takes them, and after my second attempt at this he grabs the chessboard with two hands and throws it over my head. The plastic pieces scatter across the floor like cockroaches and as I pick them all up I feel shortchanged and lonely. *All the engagements seem to make me look mean and selfish*, I write in the journal afterward. *What gives?*

At home there's an impeccably timed postcard from Lavender. We're not twins, he and I. I'm three years older than him and the explanation for this is simple and embarrassing: our parents' anniversary is nine months previous. Growing up, no one understood how we could be twins when we looked so different. He was tall and fair and I was neither. But people would hear about the birthday thing and assume we were twins and this made us very upset. "We're not twins," we'd insist together, in unison, like twins.

The card's postmarked from Erie. *Happy Birthday, bro!* Lavender writes in his familiar scrawl. His letters always read like yearbook valedictions. *I hitched here with a guy who has a sister who lives in Tucson. He said it's nice. Someday I'll visit. Up here a lot of the squirrels are black. It's cold but I still have your coat so don't worry. I'm*

washing dishes at a diner called Charley's, not Charlie's which is across town. I might not stay long. Remember that I love you, bro, and I forgive you! -L.

I read it again, and then once more; every exclamation point a sharp, poking finger.

*

And then Ms. Ranheim appears all of a sudden, standing in the observation room with Dr. Padunov. She's tan and fleshy like the women I see on prime-time specials, and wears the thin, loose sweats of a yoga instructor. I can smell her perfume from five steps away.

Dr. Padunov says both of our names and leaves us to get acquainted.

Ms. Ranheim moves around the room as though she were born in it, setting her bag inside an overhead cabinet and flipping through the journal I and the other assistants write in. Is she one of us? She asks me when I started and I ask her the same, and then I ask what she does with the project.

"I sleep with him," she says. "Once a month, like clockwork. It's not very *romantic*, but it's something."

"You mean you have sex with him?"

"Uh huh," she says. I want to figure all this out, but she tosses the journal aside and opens the door to the antechamber and I have to close my mouth. My heartbeat starts to become something I can feel. I haven't had another person see me naked in years. It's been only a month for the Subject, but he's as jittery as a virgin, sitting at the edge of his bed and gazing at Ms. Ranheim as she moves from curtain to curtain, pulling them closed. On his face he wears an expression that's as full of dread as it is hunger, as if she were both predator and prey. In my room there's nowhere else to look but through the

one-way, and I couldn't turn off the loudspeaker if I wanted to. Soon I have to listen to the Subject moan, sending out low staccato grunts like the gruff nickers of some tall thoroughbred. It's the only noise I've ever heard from him and it's like he's said his first word. It's like I should be proud, though the person who wrangled it out of him was Ms. Ranheim, who from what I can tell is as silent as a stick of butter, lying flat on the bed. Or is she? I consider the available positions. Is he looking her in the eye? Have they left the chamber lit? I think that if one of the doctors were to come in right now, Dr. Green particularly, she would be sore about my just sitting here. But what are my options? Finally, after just another minute or two the Subject's nickering rises to a sound of pure distress. I think the speakers in this room might blow out, but they don't. Not a peep from Ms. Ranheim.

Seconds later, she pulls open the curtains, fully clothed, and the Subject is curled up on his side. Asleep, from what I can tell. When she enters the observation room she slams overhead cabinets and muscles chairs into place with her bare feet, like some angry kickboxer. Despite it all, I have an erection still and have to keep my chair wheeled right up to the desk. "I don't mind if you listen," she says from over my shoulder. "He's not my *boyfriend*."

"It's just they didn't tell me about this."

"Of course not." She stops fighting the room for a moment and looks down at me. "They're the doctors. They have hard-ons for silence. What did you *expect*?"

I just shrug and she looks at me like I'm some kind of idiot, like I'm the one whose actions are inexplicable.

"Look, you can't just sit around and *wait* for them to tell you what's up. They don't work like that. Try getting one of them alone. It's not easy, but try Padunov. She usually connects with the boys."

The boys. Ms. Ranheim sits down and begins lacing her shoes and I fit myself into an imaginary lineup of dozens more like me. How easy it is to make a person feel replaceable, to swap one face for another, erasing the one that came before it. Without a name I'm not quite sure who I am to the Subject. I'm not the one who raised him. I'm not the one who gives him what Ms. Ranheim gives him, and because of this she holds all the power in the room. "Do you like it?" I ask, stuck close to the desk. "Having that kind of ... access to him?"

The chair legs screech across the linoleum. "*I'm not a whore*," she says. "You can call me a *whore* all you want. You can *sit* there, and not even *look* at me and think whatever you want, but this is just a *job*. And I'm just as much a part of this study as *you* are."

"I'm sorry."

"You might *think* I just go in there and fuck him and leave, but I have to pay *attention*. I have one of these little logbooks, *too*." She grabs mine and tosses it up in the air, and it lands bent on the floor like a dead bird. "And from what I read mine's a *lot* more detailed than yours. It takes him an average of thirteen seconds to get an erection and three and three-quarters of a minute to achieve climax. Okay? When he's done he prefers rolling off to the left five to one over the right. Okay?"

"Oh," I say. "Okay. But can't they...." Science doesn't always help provide the easy words for things. "Can't they let him ... take matters into his own hands?"

She fishes a tie out of her bag and pulls her honey-colored hair into a ponytail. “Well it’s not the *same* is it? There’s no *emotional connection*, is there?”

“Is there?” I ask.

No answer. She’s all packed and ready to go home—shoes on, hair up. Her accusations have turned my erection to nothing in my lap, and I stretch my legs to get as comfortable as possible given the heat of the room. The Subject rolls on his back, and through the one-way mirror we just watch him lie there like a newborn.

“I wonder why they never even bothered to give him a name,” I say, just to break the silence.

Ms. Ranheim snorts. “Ask his mother,” she says.

I turn to look at her, but she’s watching him still. Her eyes are red and squinted razor-thin at him.

“What?”

“Padunov,” she says, plain as hello. “You can’t see the resemblance?”

The only way I could place the Subject’s features onto Dr. Padunov would be to stick him in a freezer for three days and douse his hair in bleach.

“Are you sure?” I ask.

Ms. Ranheim crouches down to the level of my chair and looks me pitiably in the eyes. “You’re *never* going to make it here,” she says.

And then she’s off, walking away to the sound of the Subject’s somber breathing and waving at me over her shoulder.

“Maybe I’ll see you next month.”

*

Until which time Ms. Ranheim begins to muscle in on my sleep patterns. She appears randomly, fleetingly. In our old house, say, waiting for my mother to finish sobbing by the mantle. Or floating on a raft in Lake Erie, playing Twenty Questions with me and Lavender. And then she'll pull my shorts down. And then she'll be replaced by personnel far more troubling. Dr. Green. My father. I awake dry-eyed each morning, weary of her fuzzy visitations.

One day at work I make the Subject laugh. We're in the middle of one of our triweekly fitness engagements, which I like best because they've started to pull a shape out of my thin frame, curving up my shoulders and legs. It's when we're jumping rope in the space outside his chamber, he in nothing but a pair of bold red gym shorts, and me dressed in some old sweats I found in the back of my closet. We hop in time like a pair of professional welterweights until I catch the rope around my ankle and tumble over, but this isn't what makes him laugh. In fact he walks over to me and offers his hand. In the month or so that I've known the Subject he's always kept a distance, as though I was dangerous or had B.O. So I feel I've accomplished something. I take his hand and hold on as he hoists me from the floor. And I'm thankful for the help. I want to tell him thanks and I almost say "Thanks" but catch myself in time. He moves back to his place and I go to pick up my rope that's jumbled between my ankles but I don't accomplish it carefully enough and down I go again, toppling over sideways, and he laughs. It's a high, loud cackle, a laugh that's all teeth, like a monkey's. Again he offers me his hand and again I take it and by the time Dr. Green comes in with our protein shakes it's like everything's normal, like he and I have been friends for ages.

It's weeks before I hear from Lavender again. He calls one day after work, right as I get home from a confusing afternoon spent with the Subject in front of a mirror, tying three dozen neckties in four kinds of knots, none of which I knew too well, and in my lingering bewilderment I find I've got nothing but questions in me. Where has he been? What did he do for his birthday? Has he talked to mom and dad? Is he having fun up there? Does he have a girlfriend? Is he happy?

"Am I happy," he repeats slowly, as if buying time on a quiz show. In the background I hear the sounds of car alarms and chugging engines.

"Yeah, I mean, with your job?"

"I don't have a job," he says. "Not any more."

"What happened?"

"I think I'm happy about it."

"Did you get fired? How are you paying rent?"

"Something will come along I imagine," he says, always the cipher.

"You're not worried?"

"All I have to do is wait and meet the right people. I'll find another job. There's always another job. Why, are you worried?"

"No," I say. "I guess not."

Sometimes at night I try to picture Lavender and his life in some faraway city and I always make it so romantic. Open afternoons spent reading in diners. Obscure jobs that lie on no recognizable career path. An attic apartment without any clocks. It's nice to think about. I fall asleep to fantasies of shirking all responsibility.

"Well, how's Erie?"

"It's getting so cold. I might move somewhere warmer. Have you ever been to Louisville?"

He knows I haven't. I moved once to Texas to go to college and then to Los Angeles for a regretful year. Now I'm here. I moved to Tucson in the hopes I could draw him west, south, anywhere away from the lakes. But Lavender's stubborn. His movements have designs.

"Maybe you could come to Tucson."

"I should come visit sometime, yeah," he says.

"No, like, move here. Find a job."

"Why would I want to move to Tucson?"

"To get away."

"To get away from what?"

To get away from what. To get away from what.

"Ashtabula," I say. "You've been ... hovering around it ever since you left home."

For a while he doesn't speak, and I'm about to, but then he does.

"I don't want to get away," he says. And then: "I like it up here."

He tells me his quarter's run out and that he has to go. I say bye and he says bye and then we both hang up on each other. No *I forgive you*. It isn't until I'm in bed that night that it hits me, and I'm up most of the night wondering what's happened.

*

And then Ms. Ranheim returns. She's in the observation room when I show up for work, standing in a thin robe and talking with Dr. Green. Has she done her job or is she about to

do her job? I stop in the doorway and rub at my eyes and they look at me like I'm a stranger. Dr. Green is the one that talks next. "Can you give us eight minutes?"

I wander the halls and find Dr. Padunov's office. The door's wide open and I see her slumped at her desk, her head mostly out of view behind the white hill of her shoulders. Her elbows sit astride the computer's keyboard and she looks to be praying, but then I realize her face is in her hands and I knock lightly. "Dr. Padunov?"

She erects herself and swivels around. "Mr. Person. How can I help you?"

"Are you all right? I was just passing by and—"

"I'm fine. Can I help you with anything?"

I take this as an invitation. There's a plush armchair in the corner and I sit in it and look around. None of the overhead lights are on, just Dr. Padunov's desk light and the glow from a fishtank to my left. Inside swims one lone guppy, but other fish could be hiding. On the wall across from me is a tableau of photographs showing a boy's development. It's the Subject, and I scan the pictures and watch him grow and somewhere around what looks to be age sixteen I start to see the resemblance Ms. Ranheim was talking about—the same lithe pointedness to the jaw, like the top of an egg. But the ears. Where his seem built for aerodynamics, hers jut from the head like butterfly wings. I wish I knew more. I wish I could go ask Ms. Ranheim how she knows everything, and then it occurs to me that I could just ask Dr. Padunov.

"Are you related?" I ask, just like that.

She peers at me carefully and I listen to the fishtank bubble and glurg. "Is who related?"

I gesture over to the wall of pictures. “I mean, he kind of looks like you,” I say. “In the jawline?”

“Whether he does or not has little to do with your work here. You are meant to see the Subject as his own person.”

“But I don’t know anything about him. I’ve never even been told what we’re studying here. Can you tell me?”

She reaches into her desk drawer and pulls out a pack of gum, folding a stick in her mouth without offering me one. I watch her chew with her eyes closed, as if working some complex equation in her head.

“I can call you Stegosaurus and call a stegosaurus Mr. Person. This is language. But what does it mean? If no one else agrees on the use of these terms, the terms are meaningless. Yes? And if everyone agrees to use no terms at all, no words for anything—”

“Then isn’t everything meaningless?” I ask.

She shrugs at me like I’m the one with all the answers. “Would you say that your interactions with the subject so far have been meaningless?”

The outstretched hand he offered me the other day. That laugh I produced in him without thinking. I say no and she seems satisfied with the answer.

“The purpose of the journals,” she says, “is to have a record of an experience, using language, that we can one day compare to the Subject’s understanding of the same experience.”

“But how? He won’t have a way to describe it.”

“He will,” she says. “It has always been the plan to introduce language, but we need to wait until his developmental process is complete.”

“But he’s, what, twenty-five?”

She looks over at the photographs. “He’ll be twenty-six next month.”

“So then he’s fully developed.”

“Can you be so sure? We may say an eighteen-year-old is an adult, but what does that mean? Is the eighteen-year-old finished growing physically? Has he developed emotionally?”

At eighteen I went off to college to get away from parents I didn’t have anything to say to and a brother who wouldn’t talk to me. In my dorm room I’d read with the door open, waiting for people to come in and tell me about themselves. I slept through classes. I masturbated relentlessly.

“How can he develop without ever being spoken to?”

“This is what I have been telling you. This is what it is our aim to study. We believe the engagements will mature him to adulthood. We are patient people. We will wait for him to get to this point on his own.”

I try to follow the argument, but all I think of is this picture I get in my head of the Subject standing on a busy street corner in his goofy robe, scared and uncertain, like a boy abandoned by distracted parents.

“But he’s your son,” I say.

And then Dr. Green is standing like some monster in the doorway, blocking much of the light from the hall.

“Mr. Person,” she says, “you may go to your post now.”

No traces of Ms. Ranheim remain in the observation room when I get back. Only a memory I see on the Subject's face as he lies naked in his bed, the sheets bunched on the floor. I try to give him his privacy and write in the journal even though my shift just started. His breathing, heavy on the exhale, accompanies me as I write.

> *My brother didn't say a word to anyone for almost ten years. During that time we watched him grow and grow until he was taller than me. He would jump up and slap the tops of doorways, and I started doing it too, but never when he was around. We didn't talk about it because*

I'm interrupted by the sound of laughter through the loudspeakers—a chuckle, really. I look up at the Subject and wonder what's so funny, what's going on in his head when he can't put any words to his ideas. Maybe he's got an invented language he can't share with us. Maybe he's made up words for what he does with Ms. Ranheim, names for the doctors and me, terms for what he thinks about living in a glass cage with so much to say, but no means with which to say it.

*

Another postcard from Lavender when I get home, which seems to be nothing more than a photograph he wrote on the back of. It's a picture of the house on Lake Erie, the one our grandfather built. *Back in Ashtabula for now*, he writes. *Still pretty cold. -L.*

I turn back to the photograph. Under overcast skies the house gleams white, still, all these years later. It all looks properly put together, though the grass is overgrown and one of the frontyard trees is torn in half. From some storm I imagine. Until the summer I was twelve my memories of that place and that time had been warm and edenic. Going swimming past bedtime, flashlights in hand. The rope tied to the long oak-bough from

which we'd arc out over the lake's surface, timing our release to the half-second. It's important for me to remember that we had all this, that at one time this family was happy together even if we didn't know it.

Then I turned twelve and Lavender turned nine and we drove up to Ashtabula, arriving too late and too sleepy to swim, so we swallowed breakfast whole the next morning and ran to the boat dock to dip our skinny feet in the water, waiting for digestion to run its course. The water was very cold, but we were tougher then. After half an hour, we slid right off the dock to surface-dive and horse around. We liked to swim out as far as we were allowed—maybe forty, fifty feet. Mom kept an absent-minded watch from the cabin's back porch and shouted "Boys!" when we got too far. It carried through the air like the cry of a mourning dove.

Suddenly we were racing back to the edge of the dock. I swam overhand, trying to breathe without stopping, but Lavender swam like a dolphin, sluicing his lanky body underwater because he cold hold his breath a very long time. He was there, one hand gripping a woodplank, when I finished. "I win," he said.

"You cheated," I said. "You can't swim like that in the Olympics."

"This isn't the Olympics. I'm faster than you."

I held him underwater. Dunked him, really, pushing his body down with my arms and legs. He surfaced, spitting and laughing at me.

"I'm faster than you," he said, sing-songy. "*I'm faster than you-ou.*"

"Shut up!" I said, my voice loud and piercing enough that my mother should have heard me. She should have come down to see what the fuss was about.

Lavender said it again and I dunked him again. Harder, this time, and longer. I kicked at him with my feet while he was down there, and I could feel my toes butt into the back of his head. “Shut up!” I yelled again, in case he was listening.

I got out of the water, furious and worried. As I walked back up to the house I knew that Lavender was still underwater and I told myself he was faking it to get attention, that when he realized I was gone he’d come back up and stop being a baby. At the house I climbed up the steps to the porch, my towel like a shroud around my shoulders. My parents were in the middle of some discussion and stopped talking when they saw me. “Where’s Lavender?” Mom said.

I looked out to the lake. I didn’t see anybody.

“Where’s your brother?” Dad said. He visored his hand to his brow and peered out at the lake. Then he went off running. Mom and I watched as he sloshed into the water and dove to the bottom. He dove and surfaced. Then he’d turn. Then he’d dive again and surface again. It was a while before he came up with Lavender’s body slung over his shoulder, limp and dripping like a sack of wet laundry. Even then we didn’t talk about it. None of us said anything once the ambulance drove off, not until we’d been in the waiting room for an hour.

“Did I leave the coffee pot on?” my mother said.

The magic of it was that we all blamed ourselves. We each found a way to make the guilt our own.

*

For the Subject’s twenty-sixth birthday we go to the desert. Turns out it’s quite the production, requiring the Subject to be thoroughly blindfolded in a dark cloth, wrapped

many times around his head. Noise-canceling headphones over his ears are connected to an iPod full of classical music. Padunov handles the iPod. Green handles everything else: me, the Subject, the yogurt, the water, the cooler, the umbrella, the chairs, the large black bag that looks like it might hold a badminton set. It's like a day at the beach for a couple of terrorists, smuggling a large blindfolded man out of the building and into the grey Lexus Padunov's parked next to the elevator. We run across nobody and nobody speaks.

It's such a quiet car. It's the quietest car I've ever sat in. Even when two firetrucks fly by the sound is faint and distant, like a kitten crying down in the basement of a big house. No one's saying anything and the Subject isn't doing anything but bobbing along to the music, and so I'm left to think my own thoughts.

We drive toward the mountains. For a while the car moves around tight curves, and cars pass every few seconds, heading off to where we've headed from. Then the mountains fall away and all we've got in front of us is desert. Padunov parks the car in an empty rest area and everyone gets out. We march single-file away from the road through yucca trees and brambly bushes that scrape at my shins. No one has a watch but the sun is almost at its highest in the sky and our shadows are like puddles we can't seem to climb out of. Dr. Padunov guides the Subject over the shrubby land with her right arm. His head is wrapped in cloth and his stupid garment blends into the landscape and he looks at last like a prophet born to wander through the desert.

Everyone's happier to be outside. The doctors both wear large sunglasses and smile easily. The Subject kicks up his heels every few steps. He holds Dr. Padunov's hand and raises it over their heads like a champion. Then Dr. Green drives the beach umbrella into the hard desert floor with a grunt and we stop. The Subject gets his

headphones and blindfold removed and he starts running around like an uncaged chicken. He strips off his garment and there's the red shorts. It's the only red thing for miles. The doctors go about setting chairs near the umbrella and putting on sunscreen.

A Frisbee is produced and the Subject and I try to toss it back and forth and then we toss a football with less success. I've never been good at throwing things away from me. We soon get bored and Dr. Green gives us jumping ropes and like robots we begin the fitness engagement we've been doing forever. He and I jump facing one another, both of us counting in our heads, me using the numbers everyone knows and the Subject doing God knows what. We try to bounce and land together. Then it's down for three sets of push-ups and then we have to hold each other's ankles for sit-ups. By the end of it all the sun is just past its zenith and I'm starting to sweat everywhere. I take my shirt off to feel more comfortable and to make the Subject feel more comfortable. Nobody likes to be the only one topless.

For a while we sit under the umbrella and gulp water. The Subject eats a couple yogurts but I'm not hungry. Dr. Padunov uses a towel to blot at his brow, mopping up the sweat, and while she's occupied with this I see Dr. Green behind us taking temperature readings with a digital thermometer. All it would take for everything to change would be for the Subject to look 90 degrees to his right. I want to tap his shoulder and point, to help him understand what kind of life he lives, how it's so different from everyone else's, but it's been twenty-six years for these three. I'm not sure I'm willing to be responsible for so much history.

We've been there for a couple hours when Dr. Green opens the black laundry bag and pulls out a couple of air rifles. The Subject sits up at the edge of his seat and his

whole face opens in the way I've only ever seen when Ms. Ranheim's in the room. Dr. Padunov is setting up a row of glass bottles some forty yards away, and I follow the Subject's lead. I've never held a gun before. When I bring it to my shoulder like he does it's like a third arm I don't know what to do with.

A snap cuts through the air, like someone breaking a pencil in half, and immediately the fright of glass shattering. The far left bottle crumbles in pieces.

He lowers the rifle and looks at me. It's my turn. I aim for the bottle on the far right and click the gun and hear nothing but the *thwoof* of air forcing out the pellet. The Subject laughs and explodes the next bottle in seconds. It's almost like he's shooting from the hip.

The doctors nod at me encouragingly. *You're doing fine. Have fun with it!* But it isn't fun. Why can't he shoot all the bottles himself like he wants to? I aim and click just to get it all over with, and somehow even without trying I smash the second bottle in. It explodes because I made it explode and I feel myself smiling as I lower the gun.

Click, explode. Click, explode. And the twelve bottles are wrecked to nothing.

I hand my rifle to Dr. Green. The Subject keeps clicking his gun. He aims at a cactus and laughing when he hears it smack the flesh of the tree. The doctors do nothing. Not a thing. They stand there and watch. We wait for him to run out of pellets.

He turns through the landscape in an arc, back and forth, firing at anything. Suddenly he starts forward a little. He pumps once on the cock but holds it there. I step away from the umbrella to get a look at what he's looking at. I can't see anything. But then there's a glimmer of color close to the ground and I make it out: a large jackrabbit. It's the size of a soccer ball, with half a dozen tiny jackrabbits scattered behind it.

Click.

One lies flat on the dust, and the others scatter here and there. The mother won't move at all for some reason. I look over at Dr. Padunov and Dr. Green. *Do something.* I say it with my eyes. I shout it. *He's killing rabbits now, can't you see?*

But they just watch him. It's the one thing we all have a lot of practice with. What else can you do with a person who can't say anything? You can only look at him and wonder what he'll do next. You can watch him stand or sit or move and all the time the only thing you're seeing is his empty, empty head, so ripe for filling. Out here in the desert sun is an unnamed mute man with a gun and suddenly it seems as though anything is possible. I watch him standing tall and still, his feet planted in a wide stance, his eye squinting in the sun, his bold red shorts marking him somehow as important. Here is the man of the hour. His lips are twisted up together in a grin as he cocks the gun as quietly as he can. He's trying not to make a sound. He's being so careful. The gun clicks.

"Hey!"

It's me shouting. I run up and grab the gun.

"Sorry," I say. He stares at me, terrified. "I have to do this and I'm sorry."

Dr. Green is beside me in a heartbeat and yanks the gun out of my hands. Over her shoulder I see Padunov stand very still, watching the Subject, waiting. He runs toward her and Dr. Green glares at me. Her eyes are set deep in her face, white and bold. I stare into them, trapped, and the next thing I know the butt of the rifle slams into the side of my head.

*

I come to and I'm alone. The doctors have taken everything and if I've been out long enough for them to pack up camp and get out of sight there's no way to catch up with them. So I walk toward the road and think about my pending sunburn. My face like the Martian landscape. An inadequate disguise. I feel so bad about this. I'm living under a sun that can burn me in the thick of winter. A town without rain to wash things away. My shoes kick up hot dust with every loose footfall forming a lesser wake behind me and I keep my head up and pay close attention to the things my body is feeling. The heat pressing in on my face and neck. The sharp throb in my legs. The dull swell coming from my left temple. How far the marathoner has to run before he hears the word *congratulations*. And how soon his body's pains fall away, like water off a boy's wet head.

Back at the rest stop I don't see anyone. Cars pass every couple minutes on the road, a rumbling going left to right or right to left. I cross the highway easily and head backward toward the mountains, keeping my eyes on the land I've already traveled over. Next month will be different from this one. Next year might be the same, but I just need one person to pull over. All I need is one quick ride to ask for, and I'll go as far as it takes me.

# # #

BEEKEEPING

Had we had an origin story, it would have been a lie. The nine of us fated one jackknifed year to survive a multiple-car pileup or rent rooms on the same sickening hotel floor. To step from our own doorways at the same time, to look up, eye meeting eye meeting eye, and to nod in mute recognition. Something stagey like this. Composed. While we'd've liked to've thought we were formed from the sludge of some old sea, from celestial rainwaters all falling together, the reality was far less traceable. We lived in the same small town, but so did everyone else. People called us on the phone to join up for a drink, for a movie, for dinner, for a show, and soon the right number of phone calls were made in the right combination that the lives we engineered over evenings and weekends started recurrently to cohere. It was everyone's origin story, except ours had a star. She earned the role by being first in our hearts, or for simply being first to pick up the phone. All that time, we thought we moved independently of one another, but it turned out we were in orbit. This we were able to acknowledge only afterward.

We'd spent years in bars. Decades, maybe, glib and garrulous, and suddenly one day we were in the hospital, surrounding her bed like some royal audience. Some royal audience dressed for the occasion. We all wore paper gowns. We had latex gloves on our hands, and elastic bands around our ears that held spongy green masks over our faces. We all looked the same, and we all looked at our friend. Her face was unbridled but adulterated by whatever fluids they'd tapped her to. Her cheeks big and pink like marinated chops. Her lips chapped white. We had a lot of questions.

"How's the food?"

“What’s this machine do?”

“Do you want me to run out and get you some nachos?”

“Have you played with the bed positions?”

“If your nurse cute?”

“Has anyone talked to Craig?”

No one had. Craig was probably out of town anyway. Nancy would take care of it, she said. “What do you want me to say?”

“Tell him I met someone new,” she said. “Tell him he’s a doctor, an oncologist up in Omaha.”

Mildly, we protested.

“I don’t really want to see him right now.”

And who were we to insist on anything? The radiation had sizzled up her salivatory glands, and even just talking felt like tiny papercuts in her throat. We sat there and looked at all the buttons in the room. We made fun of the little paper hat she had to eliminate in, the little paper hat that measured all her wastes. She didn’t want to laugh but she was laughing the loudest, which was kind of her. It was easy to believe she was going to fight this and going to win because she was. But first she had to poison her body with chemicals. First she had to lose her appetite and all of her hair. First she had to get all the marrow out of all of her bones and have it replaced with someone else’s. But whose? One of ours?

Nobody said any of this out loud.

“Let’s do bracketology,” she said instead, and someone went out to find a piece of paper, some new air.

*

She and Craig always used to host the Halloween party everyone went to. We made it a potluck. One year she took a plastic skull and wrapped it in chopped ham and set it on a platter lined with lettuce. It was disgusting, cannibalistic. We ate the thing bare by the end of the night. That was the year Wes and Amy each brought a pumpkin pie, and wouldn't it be fun to have a blind taste test to see which was the winner? This was probably Kyle's idea, but it could have been any of ours. We stood in a ring around the dining table, the chandelier dimmed romantically. Craig had seen that Wes and Amy each brought their own pumpkin pie, but he didn't know whose was whose, and as we trusted him in this matter he became the judge.

That was the year Craig went as Fidel Castro and she as Patty Hearst—our little revolutionaries. Craig chewed a big stick of a cigar that ended the night as a muddy stub at the bottom of the candy bowl. The beret she wore was beautiful, her wig this ivory curtain. Here was the palest Patty Hearst we'd ever seen. Well: the fairest. Those two always won the costume contest.

She cut a slice of each pie and put them on separate paper plates, which she shuffled on the table like three-card monte. Craig made a big show of covering his eyes. Wes was dressed as the Tin Man and Amy had wrapped herself in periwinkle tulle to resemble an oversized shower poof. They stood like some rebus in the corner, both of them a little anxious. They were Ingrid's new work friends, after all. Many of us met them for the first time that night. Craig included. He took a bite of one pie and swallowed and nodded and then he took a bite of the other.

"Well, which *one*?" we asked.

"I don't think I can pick a winner," he said. What a gentleman!

"Oh, come on," we said. "One of them has to be just a little better."

"No," he said. "Neither of them are very good."

What? we wondered. Was he kidding? He must not like pumpkin pie, we insisted.

"Oh no," Craig said. "I love pumpkin pie. It's probably my favorite."

Was it any wonder why she left? Maybe sometimes in bars or over email, two or three of us couldn't figure out how this, our first marriage, became our first separation, but that no one was surprised by what Craig had done says something about who he was at the time. That none of us bothered to organize a rematch says something more.

*

Alice, her younger sister, was the sort of the person we saw once a year, and we tried each time to remember the name of her fiancée. Hunter? Gunner? It was a violent name and she was this silent object, a part of our friend's past which few of us rarely got access to. And Alice was tall. *Tall*. In a room she carried herself and her endless hair high over our heads as haughtily as one of those African antelopes with the baroque horns drawn right out of Dr. Seuss. She could have slept between bookcovers, she was so thin. She could, we all knew, have been a model, had her passions not been pledged in full to mother earth.

Maybe every other hospital visit we'd arrive in our paper gowns and see Alice sitting in the corner, quiet and smiling. She took, usually, the chair by the window, the vinyl-upholstered one that moonlighted as a bed. This left her parents with few options. Marshall tended to prop one ham on the bed's bottom corner while Connie stayed tethered, umbilically, to the network port in the floorboard. Always the laptop, always her

head bowing near to the screen as though by static forces, always her eyes squinting and her face sickly in the LCD glow. She'd sit on the floor like a kid cramming for a final exam, looking for the answers the doctors weren't giving, or couldn't give. It was a kind of tableau we'd come upon. Father, mother, daughter, convalescent. We tried in the room's little vestibule by the restroom to render it in classical composition, but it was like there was one figure too many.

"Good news, I think," her mother said from the floor one hot Saturday. "Well, news. Let's just say 'news'." She squabbled up from the floor to hug us each in turn. We hugged her and smelled her: a bread's wet dough overyeasted and left outside in the sun. But who could fault a mother her freshness at a time like this?

"You look good," Kyle said, the flirt. "I mean: considering."

"I'm so glad we got a chance to see you," Nancy said. It had been maybe a week since we'd seen them last, but wasn't this true for all of us? We all nodded and murmured. *Uh-huh!*

Marshall's posture while sitting was cubistic, all twisted up like a newspaper used to swat a gnat. He showed everyone this wrinkle of a smile and then wordlessly returned his gaze to his daughter's head resting shut-eyed on the pillow.

"It's me!" Alice in the corner raised her hand and waggled it at us. "I'm the news," she said and we thought: *No. What now?* She kicked her feet up in the air a little, and flashed us her eyes, smiling like she'd been picked as some tribe's new priestess. Was this a riddle?

"She's a match for the transplant," Connie said. And then a round of whoops and hollers. *Atta girl!* "Statistically it's a one in six chance that siblings have the same blood

type," we were told, and wasn't that a good sign? Wasn't it what we'd been waiting to hear? We were not, we knew, a naïve group of people. We knew the dangers. We knew what had kept bringing us together in this unlikely setting was a life that we knew was at stake. But we also knew we were special. This cancer wasn't *killing cancer* but rather *scaring cancer*, and for all of us to get through this with everyone's life intact we knew we were going to need all the good omens, all the statistics on our side. And here they were: delivered to us like winning hands.

"You must be so proud," Kyle said, taking Connie's hand in his.

"Of what?" she asked, and looked at us for an answer. And then she looked at Alice. "Of course," she said. "Yes: of course."

She reached for the laptop on the floor.

The architects, the interior decorators, whichever professionals consulted to turn the industrial spaces of the hospital into rooms one could maybe rest in and get better, had done good work when it came to the lighting, all of it recessed along the room's top edges behind heavy molding painted a kind of warm puce. Light didn't fall in there so much as it swell outward, as though we were on a TV screen, shot through with cathodes. If Alice's bone marrow matched her sister's then things would change and infection would be less of a threat and we could all turn back into our street selves, but for now we were still in disguise: hairnetted, bootied, begloved. After five minutes we had nothing else to say to one another, to this wrecked family. Then, in the bed, she shifted her head from one pillowed cheek to the other, suddenly, as though she'd been haymakered by a ghost. We watched this and it woke her up. Her eyelids slammed open. "What happened?" she asked and gaped back at us, this mob of lunchladies filling the room.

*

She kept a blog. Well, we all did. We were all each other's chief audience for everything. But during the four months that she was in the hospital the first time, having moved from the Internal Medicine/Hematology-Oncology Clinic to the Lied Transplant Center to rest and let her DNA be overtaken by her sister's, her posts came throughout the day. We all set up RSS feeds and were thankful for the distraction.

"What else do I have to do?" she wrote. The posts came and came, their chronology reversed. We'd never commented so much before.

Years later, we still had it bookmarked. It was a way to hear her voice in the dull broken hours of the workday when the hums of our desktop computers seem to get a little louder. We'd read each sentence and at the funny parts we pressed the red button on the little keyfob-sized machine Wes made for everyone, the one that played her jackhammer laugh. *HAhahahaha!* He found an old voicemail he'd never got around to deleting, a late-night one where she was a little drunk. "Nancy just mooned me," she had said, and then she laughed, and Wes was able to isolate that laugh and put it on a loop.

Most of the time we read on her blog the restaurant reviews, because they were the most chatty. They were the ones that sounded like we were at the bar, chatting.

> This place kind of reminds me of walking to the deli counter at IGA when I went to Lincoln High. It has a very small-town feel.

Yeah, we'd say. Yeah, us too.

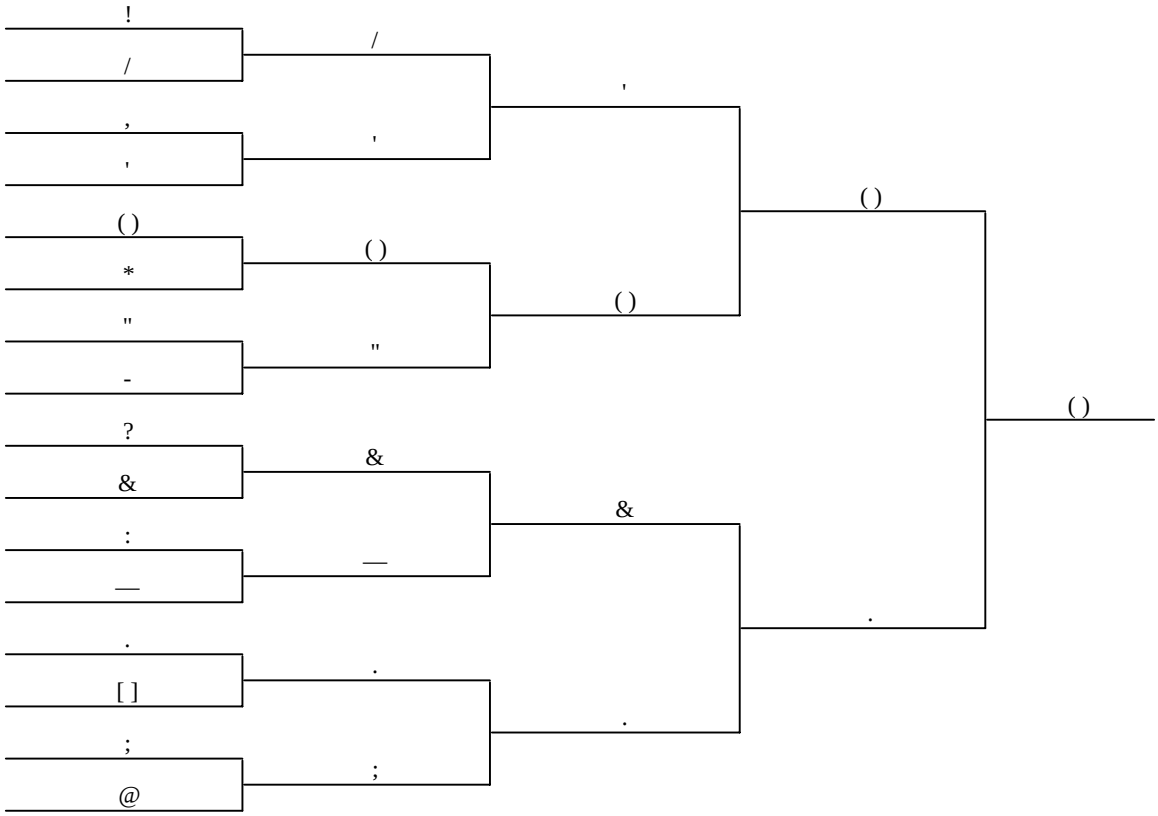
> This place bills itself as "A Lincoln Original since 1976." Just like me!

And then we'd press the button. Maybe ten times.

It wasn't all restaurant reviews. Lots of it toward the end was hospital updates. Sometimes she'd review movies or new TV shows. We'd read it all. We never discriminated. We had this one memorized, word for word:

> GREAT news!
>
> Dr. D. told me today that I'm 100% engrafted with Katie's cells and my bone marrow biopsy showed no signs of leukemia! I'm back home for good now.
>
> I'll still have to stay on lots of meds, get blood tests in Lincoln once a week, and go back to the Med Center once a month or so. I'm VERY happy!!!

And we were all VERY happy!!! We'd all prayed VERY hard!!! Even those of us who weren't VERY religious!!! We thought, Man we are VERY invincible!!! She is so VERY invincible!!! We thought, this is the VERY end of everything!!! We don't have to wake up every morning VERY scared!!! Now we're able to go back to being VERY stupid!!! And VERY selfish!!!



She moved back into her empty one-bedroom. She had the Patty Hearst wig and another long brown one and a short purple wig that made her look like a dollbaby. She had more headscarves than a gypsy, and as the days got warmer she'd rush behind closed doors and yank them off, showing us her bald canary head. A survivor. She was "A Survivor" and she bristled at the name. She said, "It's like a cult." She said, "I didn't go through the Holocaust." She asked us for cigarettes, "Just a puff," and we'd hold our cigarettes out in the air and she'd lean in to give them a quick kiss. Should we have denied her? She was A Survivor. And she was A Smoker. A veteran smoker at thirty-two of Camel Lights that she sucked and held like Dum Dums. The day after she got admitted to the hospital, that first time, we watched as she unplugged the little machine attached to her IV tower and followed us down to the parking lot to smoke a cigarette. She in her pyjamas connected to a bag of saline. We in our jeans and our warm jackets. This was before the royal paper garments, but we still made an embarrassing tableau. The plan was to quit, was for all of us to quit, but who wanted to quit after all that we'd won? A Survivor! A Survivor among us!

One very hot Saturday we threw her a welcome-home party in Nancy's backyard. It was also a housewarming party for Nancy, and a late birthday party for Ingrid. Nobody invited Craig. "That fucker," Amy said.

"We had lunch last week," Kyle said. "He said he'd follow her wishes. He seemed really messed up."

"Gained, like, twenty pounds," Wes said.

"Shh," Leah said, and she covered her ears.

Nancy's yard was long flat mat of green ringed with overgrowth. We were standing in the back under a sprawling sycamore tree with one hand on our hips, the other holding our wines and fuzzy navels, peering down on the wide leafy hole the home's previous owners had used as a koi pond. "I don't want koi," Nancy said. "What do I do with it?"

"Just make it a carp pond."

"Make it half a hole."

"You can throw your empty bottles here."

"Yeah, it'll fill up in a week."

"You can throw your empty boyfriends here."

"Oh, that'll take *years* to fill!"

We were all so fucking hilarious.

"Use it to bury your enemies," she said from somewhere behind us, silhouetted by the low evening sun. The hanging knot-tails of her headscarf looked in this light almost like hair. "Set up tombstones and everything. They'd never think to check your own backyard."

Was it too soon? In everything we looked to her to take the lead. The doctor forbade her cigarettes and alcohol but also fresh fruits and vegetables. It was the summer of the salmonella scare, and strolling next to her down supermarket aisles we'd hold up everything, *everything*, and ask, "Is this okay? What about this? No?" And now this mass-grave joke. Was she laughing? She took four steps closer and we checked and she wasn't, but she did look proud. She was glowing now, not glowering.

And then we saw that Craig had shown up after all.

"That *fucker*," Amy said.

He dug through the beer cooler by the grill, and he got one for the birthday girl. It was all a big show, as though "work" had "kept him". As though he were merely late and not uninvited.

"Well of course I mentioned the party," Wes said. "Last I checked Craig was still our friend."

"It's fine, guys," she said. And she was the one to walk up to him. And she was the one who hugged him. Though he hugged her back. And he was the one who asked if they could go inside and talk. But she was the one who said, "Yes. Okay."

They were gone maybe five minutes. Maybe six.

Craig told us about it later.

"I don't know. I guess I thought all this would bring us back together."

We were crowded in the waiting room of the hospital, and everyone shut up and let him talk.

"She asked me about the house, and I told her a family from Croatia was interested but that it fell through. I think I said it was lonely there without her, and she kind of rolled her eyes. *I couldn't help it*. She asked me what my plans were once the house was sold. She said, 'I heard you were going to move to Chicago,' but I don't know who gave her that idea. And then she said, 'Craig, listen to me.' I remember she said my name and it scared me. And that's when she told me she didn't love me anymore. She didn't hate me but she didn't love me, either. You know?"

We didn't have any idea. We knew Craig wasn't the best husband. Depressive and aloof. Prone to basements and tantrums. But he loved her so irrevocably. Everyone

knew. She knew it, too, but all the same she left. To completely remove someone from your life, it was nothing we could ever be prepared for.

In the end, Nancy turned the koi pond into a fire pit. It was amazing, really, the transformation.

*

The fourth of that July we spent dancing. No one had the stomach for skyward explosions. At a bar downtown called Downtown, we watched her dance limbward, stuck, it seemed, on marionette supports. And there was the left cheek and the right cheek of her butt that she butted out to the room's dark corners at one and three and two and four and yet off by something near a sixteenth note. Her head bobbled like a lid over a boiling pot, her purple wig shimmying. The men in that bar were studly, strategic, allowing themselves to dance only with the promise of further rewards, and, at that, “to dance”: a stuck, stupid swaying of lowered hips. Hands in all the obvious places. She took one of them home that night. Disappeared with him, and none of us ever heard anything about it.

In the weeks that followed she was on the horn most days with her principal. She would like, she explained, to come back for the fall semester. The principal thought it wasn’t a good idea. She was on the horn with Dr. D. Dr. D was on some perpetual excursion—boats or golf, it was never clear—but left messages that explained what he thought: he thought it wasn’t a good idea. She was on the horn with her parents, and she was on the horn with us. “I’m sick of being sick, you know? I am sick-of-being-sick.” And we told her she wasn’t sick, not anymore. She was now not-sick. It was, we assured her, a new club. Or, well, the same old club just with new leadership? She ignored us and

got on the horn with other schools, and we tried to get on with our lives. Between naps and bank queues we asked ourselves the tough questions, like: had we done enough? We'd visited the hospital as often as we could. At least once a week. Maybe every other week. We'd thrown her a party to signal that everything was fine again. She couldn't drive and so we drove her anywhere. We drove her to the supermarket whenever we went to the supermarket. We drove her to her doctor's and we drove her to the movies. "Can I smoke in your car?" she'd ask, and we'd roll the window down for her. That was for about two months. We had two summer months when we were able finally to forget about her.

Kyle started looking into sperm donation. It was a confusing decision. Kyle was 32, and healthy, and looked like all of our fathers when they were younger and stronger and covered in hair. Was this a new fetish thing?

"I got the idea in the hospital," he told us, reminding us that she had had eggs harvested before they got pickled by the chemo. "I want to be a father, but what if I can't be? I think we all know now that anything can happen."

"Wait, are you banking sperm or donating sperm?" Leah asked.

"All I'm doing is looking into the difference," he said, but he'd already sworn himself off briefs and everything.

Ingrid adopted a puppy, Nancy hired a landscape architect, and Wes and Amy started an intraoffice volleyball league. Everyone planned vacations and everyone took them, none of us with the others, and everyone put the photos up online. We either looked at them or we didn't.

We gave her her room. She blogged at home and walked to restaurants for lunch. She accused one of the newer Mexican places in town of serving canned chicken in her burrito and we were all surprised when the manager posted a comment demanding she remove the accusation. “My blood is boiling,” he wrote, purply, and he called her sick and irresponsible. “This blog is for reviewing restaurants,” she wrote back, “not making judgements on a person’s character.”

It was a boring argument, but it passed the time one afternoon between smoke breaks. She was some kind of vigilante!

*

Kyle was out of town when he heard. He was visiting his parents. Leah was at a thrift store checking out a bird’s-eye maple drinks cabinet. Ingrid was driving her car to the car wash. Wes and Amy were at the movies, her phone on vibrate, when Nancy texted them. Nancy was with her, having driven her to the hospital. No one knew where Craig was. No one knew where to go or what to talk about. No one knew what to do with the rest of the day.

We checked her blog:

> Dr. D explained what’s going on like this—there’s two alpha dogs inside my body fighting it out: the Leukemia and my new immune system. They will fight to the death; one of them has got to go.

In April there had been no Leukemia in her body and now it was August and there was Leukemia in her body, and we thought, Where did it come from? Was it a cigarette, a bottle of booze? Canned chicken? Air-conditioned air?

We started talking immediately about chances. Did we know we had a one-in-ten chance of winning two dollars on a scratch-off lottery ticket? We did. We had a one-in-ten chance of finding a four-leaf clover given a field the size of one half-acre. We had a one-in-ten chance of ever seeing Africa, a one-in-ten chance of appearing on TV. We had a one-in-ten chance even just once in our lifetimes of having a threesome. We all had so many one-in-ten chances. Leah and Joel had a one-in-ten chance of having twins. Craig had a one-in-ten chance of making partner that year. It could've happened. We had a one-in-ten chance of all these things happening.

We had, it turned out, a one-in-ten chance of dying of Leukemia, and she had a one-in-ten chance of surviving it.

aluminum foil
contact lenses
contact lenses
bread
pantyhose
bread
toothpicks
helicopters
toothpicks
hearing aids
jeans
hearing aids
bicycles
staples
staples
kayaks
cereal
cereal
adhesive bandages
circuit boards
adhesive bandages
holograms
potato chips
holograms
contact lenses
toothpicks
cereal
holograms
toothpicks
holograms
holograms

From that point, the day of her final blog post, we had ten days. We weren't given ten days. Dr. D gave everyone hope at first, and then when the chemotherapy had no effect, and when a skin infection where her PICC line went in spread to inner, more perilous parts of the body, then Dr. D said her time was limited, countable. But not ten days. Nobody said ten days. Nobody knew we had only ten days.

We lived at the hospital for that time. We carried each of us oversized bags full of hygiene products, and in the public restrooms we looked at ourselves in the mirror as we cleaned our teeth, as we rolled deodorant in our armpits. We looked sickly under the greeny fluorescence, our eyes zombied with sleep-lack. Sometimes we could spend an hour in there, putting on a pretty face for her, rehearsing all the careful bedside things we talked about. Sometimes we only wanted to get away from one another. The waiting room on the oncology floor was small, smaller than any of us needed. All the ugly chairs faced inward on each other.

We sat there as the days passed.

Day One

We crowd around her Hill-Rom adjustable bed, her lunch slid over toward the windows, untouched. "See all my cards?" she says and we can't even count them all. "This one's from Matthew, one of my students."

It's a handmade card, made from green paper, something a preschooler would give to his mother. Inside, a cut-out photograph of her face. She's smiling, a big ham.

Matthew's drawn what looks like a pith helmet over her head and a mess of rags underneath. Facing this: *YOU'RE GREATER THAN ANY GATSBY!*

"That's me as Daisy Buchanan," she says. We all pass it around. "I'd much rather have been Jordan, but...." But what?

But Jordan's harder to draw?

But Daisy's prettier anyway, not to mention richer?

But Matthew doesn't know her very well?

But none of us ever, not once, made her a card?

"You look like a Muppet," Ingrid says.

And Joel says, "A Muppet with a broken hip."

HAhahahaha!

Day Two

Nancy had the longest hair of everyone we knew. Now it's gone. Our work schedules vary, somewhat in tune, and throughout the early evening we each come out of the elevator and walk right past the grumpy lesbian whinging her crossed legs in the waiting room. Well, *what*? What are we supposed to think?

"She's sleeping," Nancy says. "Her parents said no visitors for a while."

We sit and wait. We are expert sitters and first-rate waiters. Kyle sits always closest to the main corridor, eyeing the nurses, and Wes sits always with his back to the "poisonous" television. "They may as well hand out cigarettes," he says and we glare at him.

Nancy sees Dr. D and ushers him into the waiting room, asking for an update. It's Dr. D we try to keep focused on, his thin little lips, his "some other treatment" and his "running out of tests," but what we really do is stare at Nancy. Her head looks sprayed with something dirty. Suddenly, she's our friend's spit and image, and it scares us how easy it is to transform.

Later, she is awake. We file in and find chairs and tell her all our ups and downs. Amy found five bucks in the back pocket of a pair of shorts she now fits into. Leah's boss told her to stop taking such long lunches. Kyle met a new guy on the Internet. "He's like, twelve," he says. "I don't think anything bad has ever happened to him." She is generous, here, with her laughter.

"Isn't anyone going to ask about my hair?" Nancy says.

Day Three

Leah has a large new sketchpad and a bucket of colored pencils. An actual bucket, of translucent plastic. "They were on sale," she says. We do bracketology through the evening. Power beats money for best reason to become a prostitute. Beekeeping beats yoga for most spiritually fulfilling hobby. Cancer beats AIDS for best cause to throw one's money toward.

Everyone's pleased. A silent African man comes in with a tray of food. He wears a polyester vest. Sitting up in bed, she opens each dishcover and takes curious peeks inside.

Annie beats *Grease* for best movie musical. Kyle's Bertoia diamond chairs beat Ingrid's Heywood-Wakefield dresser for coolest piece of furniture any of us owns. Sausage beats bacon for best breakfast food.

"That is bullshit," she says, smacking her hand on her mattress for punctuation. "Bacon is, like, ten times better."

She smoothes her stringy blanket. She hasn't touched any of her food.

"But we voted," Leah says. "We agreed to a democracy."

"Um, the girl dying in the bed," she says, pointing at herself, "she gets at least three votes."

But that, too, is bullshit.

Day Four

Kyle never shows. Won't answer any attempts to get him on the phone. She has a fever of 103.

"I think it's important that we all be here every day," Nancy says. "For her."

"Maybe he's sick," Joel says. "We're not supposed to come here if we might be sick, right?"

"Call, okay, and tell us you're sick, and then I'll forgive you," Ingrid says.

"She's not even awake to greet us," Wes says.

"So now it's boys against girls?" Nancy says. "Does anyone want to tell us we're being too emotional?"

We are being too emotional. We have hawkeyes, now, for missteps and insensitivities. We all work to do the right thing when we don't any of us know the right thing to do.

Kyle never shows. Soon a nurse crouches in the center of the waiting room and tells us our friend needs sleep. It's like we race one another to the elevators.

Day Five

Wes unties his shoes, kicks them off. "Does anyone know why she quit with the bees?" he asks.

It was before Wes knew her, knew any of us. Long before she'd married Craig she lived in a shotgun apartment with a strip of grass behind the garage and a generous, trusting landlord. One late-winter morning a man in white pulled up in a white van and installed on that grass a white wooden box, full of tremor and hum. He had a long beard, she saw, but not a beard of bees. All that summer and the one thereafter she'd arrive at weddings and backyard cookouts with piss-colored mason jars that landed on counters with considerable force. "My bees threw this up for you," she'd say. And when pressed: "I don't know, make mead." We were all too afraid, and half of us allergic. Up close, the hive must have looked pestilent, honeybees rolling over one another in a mad boil, and so we never got close. But she did, with her bonnet, her veil. She harvested the surplus. She did this for two years, maybe three, and then we all stopped getting honey.

"I think she got stung one too many times," Leah says.

"Why are we remembering her?" Ingrid asks. "Quit it with the past tense, *please*."

Day Six

Ingrid brings enough Mexican food for everyone, and we make a petit buffet at the foot of the bed. Despite a week of periodic nausea, a bad sign we've been ignoring, she has enough of an appetite to eat one fish taco. "I'm in love with this taco," she says. "Why didn't I have this growing up, every day?"

Connie's here with us. "You never would have eaten it," she says, and we beam. It's like the President of the United States is in the room. We're lucky even just to get to stay. Our voices are soft and apologetic. Her oldest daughter is dying right in front of her. Whenever we talk about it, we try to look Connie in the eye, but we try not to read what we find there.

"You could have made me," she says. "I would have hated you for it, but not forever."

Day Seven

Amy has taken up knitting. She purls golden yellow around something long and green. "Why did I pick these colors?" she says.

No one has said anything in more than an hour. "She has pneumonia," Connie told us when we arrived that evening. She said it was "full-fledged." She said that "none of the treatments are working." She said that "they have run out of options." We all watched her stand perfectly still.

"These are puke colors," Amy says, but she keeps knitting, and Kyle keeps flipping through a magazine, and Wes keeps toying with his shoelaces, and Nancy keeps praying to a god she believes in, and Ingrid keeps trying to breathe in and out, and Leah

keeps picturing a casket, her face all made up and false, and Joel keeps holding her hand, and Craig keeps away. All this time without even a phone call.

When she quit with the bees, she took up knitting. That's what Amy's doing.

Day Eight

Joel looks up from a crossword late in the evening and asks us all in the room, "Doesn't Daisy Buchanan die at the end of *Great Gatsby*?"

"Go fuck yourself," Nancy says.

We hate him. They decided hours ago to stop her treatments, and we hate him, and we tell him so.

Day Nine

Craig has appeared in the hallway outside her room. We've all just come back from the cafeteria, belching. He embraces her mom and her dad, one at a time. Everyone's face is crumpled and wet.

"This is fucked," Amy says. "What is he doing here?"

"Does he think she wants to see him *now*?" Nancy says. "On her deathbed?"

It's the first time anyone's ever said *deathbed*. Craig's dressed up nice, like for work, even though it's Saturday. We watch him go into her room and we watch him close the door behind him. It's an hour before he comes back out again.

"Did you guys have sex?" Kyle asks. He's got a hillbilly grin on his face. "One last time?"

Craig walks right to the elevators. "See you guys at the funeral."

Later, Marshall makes an announcement: she wants to see each of us, alone, in her room. She wants, he says, to say goodbye. No one wants to go first, but we do. We go in one at a time. We get about fifteen minutes. Afterward we come out smiling. Why? What are we doing? We are sitting for the last time with a person we love. To look in her tired eyes and watch her smile even though she'll be dead tomorrow. To watch as she makes jokes more deftly and quickly than we do. To hear *HAhahahaha* after everything. It pushes all of our living organs together. Our guts crash into our broken hearts, and every lung collapses. Our clear throats choke and she's found so much to laugh at. The permutations of her name to give our firstborn children. The little space she scooches to make for us in bed. Our old inside jokes, timed impeccably. We sit stupid as she gives us these things one last time, handing them over like heirlooms and that's why we smile. Because we've never felt this kind of hurt and here she is to heal us. We weep, and she laughs.

We say: I'm sorry.

We hear: I'm not.

Nobody tells anybody what we talk about. This we guard with our lives.

Day Ten

She is in a coma. She won't wake up. They tried, her parents, to get her released to their house, but she can't be moved.

The hospital has changed. The ceiling lights have been replaced with higher-wattage bulbs. The air is ten degrees warmer and the creamed coffee walls have been brought in about five inches. The chair cushions have been restuffed. We're sure of it, but

we don’t mention it. We try to be quiet. We try to think about death. We try to understand it, but we don’t. Instead we think about ourselves, the jobs we have to go back to tomorrow.

We go home. We go to sleep. We wait for the phone call.

her appetite
her laugh
her laugh
her bright eyes
her hair
her bright eyes
her laugh
her libido
her fevers
her fevers
her fear
her immune system
her immune system
her immune system
her immune system
her leukemia
her smoking
her leukemia
her sense of humor
her promises
her sense of humor
her leukemia
her leukemia
her blog
her brain
her brain
her fight
her plans
her fight
her fight
her leukemia

These days pass, and then another one did. And then another. At the funeral, five people stood up and read prepared comments that reminded us of all the things we'd lost. Nancy was one of them. We all made room for one another on the pews. The ceiling was stone and built high, high over our bowed heads, our wet heads, our tired heads, and if it weren't for the fact that our friend was dead, if it weren't for the fact that she was born a mile from there, it could have felt like Paris. Rome. All of us on a trip someplace romantic, dressed to the nines in the world's oldest cathedral.

It was a hot, harsh day. The church was full of crying people none of us had ever seen before. As we filed out, the pianist played Bette Midler and we cringed. *Tasteless. If she were here she'd put a stop to it.*

For weeks we were alone again. It was hard to feel her haunting us, but we wanted to. We spent hours in front of summer blockbusters, buddy comedies, and we wanted to feel her hand bump ours in a bucket of popcorn. We wanted smoke in our cars. We could picture, we thought, her in the bathroom mirror, hidden in our steams. When bored, when sad, when terrified. We yanked down our pants and played with ourselves, and we thought we saw her watching. Laughing. This was the best we could do?

Oh, we had the grandest plans. Her parents started a scholarship fund. Ingrid organized us into a fundraising team for a cancer walkathon. Joel and Leah donated all her books to a women's prison. Wes gave us her laugh, tinned and looped, waiting for our pushy thumbs. "I'm going to write about her," Kyle said. We were at the park one evening. A jazz band was playing in a shell fifty yards down the hill, and we didn't bother to listen: Kyle hadn't written anything since college.

"I'm going to do it," he said. "I'm going to write about her. I'm going to heal our wounds."

And how were we wounded? Our blood was clean. Our heads of hair stayed intact. We hadn't been tapped with plastic tubes feeding our veins clear fluids. It never hurt us to talk, although it should have, the stupid things we said:

"She was probably so scared, but she wouldn't ever show it."

"I'm glad she stayed in Lincoln at the end, so we could all be close to her."

"I wonder what happened to that ugly blanket we got her. Remember? The fleece one with the wolves?"

"She was such a bad dancer, bless her heart."

"Thank god she donated her body to science. I hate an open casket."

*

In the weeks that followed that following week we said so few things we should've. We hurt, but we didn't want to remind anybody. We said, "Oh it's been forever," but we never said, "Let's get together next week." We didn't want to plan to get together. We wanted something else. We wanted some kind of usher to set his hand in the smalls of our backs. An older gentleman, maybe, in a nylon jacket, leading us down to cleaner, roomier seats near the sideline. But separate seats—each of us out of one another's line of sight. It was like we all had one job to do now and that was to remember her. Except that we had paying jobs of our own. Nancy was given her classroom at the high school and had to teach inside it for eight hours each day and not remember her. She didn't want to get distracted. None of us did. It was hard work, and when two of us were in a room together after such a hard day what else was there to do? What else was there to talk about?

We weren't, in short, in rooms with one another those days.

Not one of us had ever seen her teach. Even Nancy, who taught just right down the hall. It was a terrible revelation to each of us, whenever it came. One of a shameful litany, a new inversion on that old drinking game. *Never did I ever try her kolaches. Never did I ever see her roller-skate. Never did I ever make her a greeting card. Never did I ever hear her tell that joke, the one about the hooker and the duck.* Of course, never had we ever watched Ingrid edit copy or Craig bill his hours, but that work was squirreled away inside cubicles and offices shared with other shirtsleeved associates. Every morning she had an audience, and never had we ever been a part of it. What was she like?

Amy imagined a wooden desk at stage right, one of those old, oranged relics where the drawers get stuck, and every day a steady accumulation of apples, each of them red and shining, in solid rows and columns so that by the final bell there isn't enough room even for a pen. "I know she hated apples," Amy said. "But maybe not these ones." Joel saw her weave among her students' desks snapping up all the folded notes they passed behind her back. *Kayla is a hoe*, they all read, every last one of them, and she goes up to the board for a teachable moment. "If you guys are going to be successful high school students," she warns, "you'll need to learn your epithets."

So much of this went on in the comments page of her blog where, as the days passed and her death went from everybody's worst nightmare to one of the things that happened that past summer, we found it easier to "talk" or "share" or "communicate."

"I know that whenever she taught *Their Eyes Were Watching God* she came to class that week dressed as Zora Neale Hurston—perfectly in character." Kyle could see it perfectly. The little hat of brown felt swept down over her forehead. A string of wooden

beads over a sensible sweater. Big gold earrings in the shape of maple leaves. And a wig. "And blackface," Kyle insisted. "But rather than accuse her of racism the administration admired her courage and dignity because she was too smart to get all Mammy with it."

We had nothing. No memories to recollect. But we had stories to tell. They came errantly, every other other day. Our time alone online was our only time together, and the effect was cordial and lonely, like a picnic in a ghost town.

She made up her own versions of old Seventies' game shows her students had never heard of, Nancy insisted, and encouraged them to come to class wearing their parents' old clothes. She hired a psychic to lecture on the pilgrims' belief in the supernatural. The psychic's name was Joyce, and after her lecture she consulted with the spirits to figure out the essay questions on the coming spring's AP exams. Every student got a 6. "Correction," Wes said. "Every student at the funeral got a 6."

Craig didn't imagine anything, but he didn't have to. Once, ages ago, he got it all, recounted in accurate, nonfictional detail back when he shared a bed with her. Whatever he knew about that woman, the public one we never met, Craig kept to himself. For a while, they had between them the secrets every couple cultivates, and what might she have told everyone after she left him? We all had a capacity for betrayal.

Old teachers never die, Leah had read on a mug in the kitchen while cleaning out her short-lived bachelor's apartment. *They just lose their class.*

For young teachers, things must be different. They never lose their class, they just die.

*

And suddenly: that walkathon Ingrid had signed us all up for. It was September 11th, but did anybody give a fuck? How could we remember the deaths of thousands when we'd never learned one of their names? All that day and all the previous three days rain had made the ground a filthy sponge everyone stepped on gingerly. The walkathon was held in the corner of a park that surrounded a man-made lake, the surface of which trembled in the rain. Five or six large-scale tents had been erected around a wooden pavilion where restaurants served up chicken fingers and spaghetti marinara. One whole tent was reserved for the family of Johna. IN MEMORY OF JOHNA said a sign that was hanging, with some photograph of a young woman, attractive in the plain blonde way at which Nebraskans have excelled since the dawn of time. The tent was virtually empty. One of the tents was a place to get balloons filled with helium and these little plastic torches that blinked on and off. The torches were battery powered and looked precisely like discrete, pocket-size vibrators. White and shaped appropriately for insertion. Were she there, she would have loved it.

Everywhere, little make-upped sorority girls spread like overgrowth people had to cut through to get to the free food, or the registration table. All their baby-Ts were pink. They wore them as solemnly as armbands, their lip gloss shimmering even under the dank overcast sky of a rainy November, their hair tied tight in spiky pigtails. Wes and Amy arrived first and found the cafeteria table Ingrid had reserved, covered in a red plastic tablecloth where the rainwater pooled. "Have a seat," Wes said. Amy took one look at the flimsy folding chair dotted with rain and kicked it over onto the grass. Lincoln's Country Leader had secured media sponsorship. At one end of the park rain fell on an empty stage dressed in the radio station's promotional fineries. Rain fell on two

large speakers covered in protective wrapping. Rain fell on the microphone standing front and center. In honor of the thousands of dead strangers who died ages ago, the radio station played through the rain-soaked speakers a proud string of patriotica.

"Don't confuse the message!" Craig yelled upon his arrival at the table.

When Ingrid arrived she hugged Wes and Amy and Craig. "Are you going to walk?" she asked everybody and everybody answered, "Are you?"

It's what everyone was here to do: walk once around the lake holding signifying balloons. What everyone had already done was solicit donations for leukemia and lymphoma research. It was unclear which of these steps was the most meaningful. No one looked happy to be outside. The chicken fingers came two to a little basket with an orange-colored ranch-based dipping sauce. Kyle, when he arrived, showed up with two baskets. "I had breakfast," he said. "That's it." Over at another table a girl took her T-shirt and made a knot of it in the front. "Who invited all the Kunta Thetas?"

There was a place to get your team's picture taken, over in the back behind a couple of tall pine trees, and Ingrid led us over once everyone had arrived. It was a procession of umbrellas, two black ones and a red-white one, and then another black one, and then a golf umbrella in blackwatch plaid. Everyone found it easy to smile, even as the radio station switched its broadcast to recaps of media clips from *that fateful day*. "A plane has just hit the second tower," said a somber woman's voice. Then the sound of a police siren. And heavy tympani. Everyone was on edge. "Any news on the house?" Joel asked Craig. "Should I ask?"

"Paid off the mortgage," he said, and this got everyone's attention.

"Her life insurance policy," he said. "She made her parents promise."

“She had a life insurance policy?” Amy said.

“I knew that,” Nancy said. Her hair by then had grown into a kind of tight, light umbra on her scalp. “We all do, at school.”

“I have a buyer now, and he wants all the furniture,” Craig said. “Cross your fingers.”

Every big-hearted walkathoner in jeans had the darkened sludge of rain splashback ringed around their calves. Nobody smoked. At one distant cafeteria table on the grass a thin insect of a woman sat alone, staring nowhere, her jacket’s hood slumped down along her nape. Was she crying or was it just the rain on everyone’s face? Our team had raised more than seven thousand dollars. How that broke down, who raised exactly how much from whom, the web site tracked and published with continuous updates. Who would have thought Craig would win?

“I found a place in Chicago,” he announced. “I move in three weeks.”

Amy congratulated Craig and said she’d miss him. Why did she just hug Craig like that? Why had Ingrid worn flip-flops? Why didn’t Joel just go grab food now, before commencement of the walk proper? Why with the rain was it important that everyone walk in it for an hour? On stage a series of blond people stood in a sad little chorus line, passing microphones back and forth, and presented themselves as the family of Johna. They recited, in turn, lines from printed materials and took in all the attention no one wanted to pay them. Girls in the crowd tittered and tugged and at the hems of their jorts. “Seriously, are you guys going to stay?” Ingrid asked. “It’s raining.” She went umbrella to umbrella. She took a straw poll. Seven out of eight people weren’t sure. “Well let’s discuss,” she said, but suddenly it was time for a moment of silence, led by one of our

local weatherwomen who worked the weekend shifts. She wore a baggy raincoat as bright as the sky she should have forecasted. Some staffer held an umbrella over her head while she stood there, silent. And Leah was silent. And Kyle was silent. And Ingrid was soaked. Craig was leaving everything behind in a matter of weeks. Joel was leaving his job soon, any day now. Wes and Amy were going to elope, they just didn't know when. Nancy was so hungry, and so wet, and so tired.

The lake in this park was the largest in the city, which was what you got when you put civic money toward something. The walk would be led by a fire engine and then a banner proclaiming our collective cause. No one other than walkathoners were around to witness the walkathon but all the same the walkathon began. All the errant support groups, sorority girls, officemates, and old folks, all the unshaken families, the Survivors—all the people still alive coalesced into a kind of undulant beast that seethed and glided forward to a little gateway. Rainmist weighed down everyone's balloon to where it could only hover just outside umbrella range. Hordes of girls inside the mass found ways to hug their umbrellas into their little armpits, and they clapped and called rhymed chants out into the heavy air.

"If she were here," Ingrid said, "she'd've been like *F this I'm getting a drink*."

"I mean, we raised the money already, right?" said Kyle.

Underneath their umbrellas some people nodded and some people shrugged, and soon it became a race to see who could get out of the parking lot first. Craig actually ran to the new Mini he'd bought with the rest of the insurance money. He zipped aggressively down the lanes of cars and made it first to the parking lot's exit, where he stopped and let two people pass, two tall wraith-like figures huddled close under an

umbrella in rainbow stripes, their bodies a mushroom's stem. The couple reached the curb and stepped up on it and Craig sped away from everyone.

Nobody'd made any plans to meet up.

The couple with the rainbow umbrella took their time. They tried to avoid the puddles. They kept close, each holding the handle with one hand. The umbrella was just wide enough to keep the rain off their shoulders. The sky rumbled and the rain fell harder and splashed. Their shoes were soaked through. The walk was easy. It was nice to get outside. No need to rush. They could meet up with them later, all the friendly friends of their daughter.

For Sarah

# # #