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A bad time for pop culture

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A bad time for pop culture

by

Keri Anna Phillips

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)

Program of Study Committee:
Debra Marquart (Major Professor)
Jane Davis
Jill Bystydzienski

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Graduate College
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the master's thesis of

Keri Anna Phillips

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Major Professor

For the Major Program
In memory of

Van Allen Phillips
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I'm obsessed with VH1's *Behind the Music*, the hour-long rockumentaries that follow the same formula: childhood passion and genius; early success; the downward spiral into drugs, illicit sex with groupies; a comeback in the works, an inner peace with having fallen off the glorious success train but still having what matters—the music. Of course, some people are murdered or killed in plane accidents. And it doesn't matter who the musician or band is—Megadeth? Sounds good to me. Notorious B.I.G.? Seen it four times. When there's a weekend marathon, I take a sabbatical from my life, buy some Raisonets in bulk and settle in for the long haul, only answering the phone during commercials. It's my guilty pleasure, only I don't feel so guilty about it.

It's great drama, and there's something satisfying about knowing that everything will turn out okay in the long run (except for Milli Vanilli, but even then there's a lesson to be learned). As I watch, the *Behind the Music* of my dad's life plays over and over inside my head. The pictures of him as a kid with his mini drum set; his early days in bands who all dressed in uniform baby blue suits and played Holiday Inns; the strings of rehab clinics, bar bands, smashed guitars, drugs, wives; and the two years of sobriety before his death, when he listened to music constantly, CD's stacked in piles around his house in leaning towers about to tip, music a soft haze as familiar as air to live his last days in. I see the beginning sequence of the show now: the words **Passion, Success, Downfall, Glory** shooting across the screen, the narrator setting up the story, a synopsis of my dad's life.

The context of my childhood was rock 'n roll. My mom and dad met at one of his gigs when she was eighteen, he twenty-four and already with one marriage and kid under his
belt. His dad is a drummer, his sister is a drummer, my brother is a drummer—and not hobby-drummers. Drummers who give their entire lives to drumming, who refuse to get day-jobs no matter how little money they’re making, who get sucked into the cliche but devastating, life-smashing alcohol and drug addictions that come with rock ‘n roll lifestyles. Drummers who use drums as instruments of transcendence, taking them places where they don’t have to follow the rules of normal people. I grew up with an inflatable Rolling Stones tongue logo hanging from the living room light fixture, and I thought my dad was basically Mick Jagger for the first eight or so years of my life, and I was Pat Benatar waiting to happen. I’m still not quite over the surprise of getting older and not becoming famous—or at least remarkably talented.

I have all these old eight by ten glossies of my dad’s bands. There is So What, with eight men all dressed in baby blue suits, white ruffled shirts, shaggy hair. My dad looks beautiful in this picture, feminine, with long, dark hair curling in sweet commas around his ear lobes—like David Bowie in his early days. My aunt was the alpha-female of this band, the vocalist, and she’s wearing a long blue flowing dress, almost prom-style, with permed hair in tight, shiny curls. Then there’s Lickety Split, a black and white shot, down to six members—two women now: my aunt with her hair feathered in a halo across her forehead and her lover at the time, Susie—all with very serious looks on their faces, my dad pointing his finger gun-style at the camera. Then moving into the early eighties, there’s Max Danger and the Stilletos, the band that practiced in our garage when my brother and I were kids. When I
asked her, my mom said, “Our house was always the band house, always the practice house.”

This picture is how I remember my dad at that time: wearing a black hat with a bolo tied around the brim, an untucked dark blue dress shirt with a skinny black tie, his bottom lip pooched out slightly as Phillips lips tend to do. He’s holding a pair of drumsticks crossed over his chest. Cross my heart and hope to die. Then there’s the other members: Bernie, Rick, and Cedrick, all looking jaded, ridiculous with rock ‘n roll attitude of the Dodge City plains.

When Max Danger practiced, my brother and I would perch on the stairs leading to the basement and listen, playing the stairs with our palms, me playing my plastic toy tambourine and singing along. “You kids come up here and play outside,” my mom would eventually yell, scared even then that we would follow in our dad’s footsteps. “You don’t need to be down there messing with their stuff, getting in their way. You come up here and help me clean out the fridge.” As soon as my memory kicks in, my mom was never enthusiastic about my dad’s music. At night, I’d go to sleep to the sound of the band still rehearsing, the feedback from the microphones winding its way through my dreams in the form of screams or car wrecks.

When my dad was still sleeping and my mom away at work, I’d play with the musical equipment—put the microphone up to my lips and kiss it, run my fingers up and down the strings of the guitars, play the drums with the metal whisky sticks that sounded raspy, soft so as not to wake my hung over dad, and shake the bean-filled gourds until I thought they were about to rise up and shake themselves. The garage was a place where magic was made, where my dad became competent, alive, and happy. Even the light of the room was different, dark
and sweet, stained from what happened every other night at nine, when Max Danger practiced.

When I was six, they got divorced. By the time I was eight, I couldn’t imagine them ever being together, ever liking each other. For the first few years after the divorce, my mom would pack my brother and me up and send us on week long visits to my dad, who lived on various couches of various houses in Dodge City before moving to Gypsum, Kansas, a tiny town pock marked with old, abandoned houses, the wispy main street anchored by a shop called Sundries that sold root beer floats, old toys still left-over from the late seventies, and baseball cards, the gum in them hard as pink slate.

My dad was haunted here. He drank more than ever, always vodka and soda water in his insulated Kwik Shop mug, and only played occasionally with his new band, The Wizard of Ahh’s. He lived with his new wife and baby daughter in an old house next to an abandoned Victorian house. He told us that in the middle of the night, he’d see a man’s face up against the window, grinning. He told us the house next door was full of evil spirits and that he’d go there to seek them out, find out what they wanted. He kept an old machete in the corner. He told us, “Whatever you do, you have to believe in God. No matter what.” To my brother and I, God was nothing more than a powerful ghost that came to haunt my dad when he was most sick, most sad.

This was the time when I found out my uncle Von was sick with AIDS, a disease I’d only read about in my Weekly Reader at school. My dad had started crying, saying, “My
brother is dying in a fucking wheelchair." I found pages and pages of crumpled up letters written on yellow legal pad paper to his dad, his brother, my mom, his misspelled pain splashed like blood across the pages.

At night, Joey and I would run through the abandoned house and catch fireflies, pinch off their lit behinds and rub them on our arms, cheeks, so we glowed like the wide-eyed ghosts of children that lived there.

We left those visits scared, ravaged, much older than when we came. The last time we visited before my mom prohibited us, my dad gave me a pair of red, lacey panties, the kind little girls don’t wear, that had the band’s logo printed front and center on the crotch. “Don’t let your mom see these,” he told me.

Cut to a newly discovered home video-like footage of my dad’s first band. His hair is short and fringes his eyes, he is holding a guitar carefully, as if he’s not used to the feel of it, doesn’t want to drop it. A smile on his lips as he counts the rhythm to himself, his motley crew, never to be seen after this first deep stab into the heart of rock ‘n roll, flashing in front of the camera, equally as timid, as enthralled, as in love. The video camera is an older model and doesn’t pick up sound yet, so the music is a silence that glows all around them, a radiation of light and movement that makes the picture throb slightly. My dad is whole and pure, yet to hurt anybody, yet to lose himself in the drug that will make him hurt people, hurt his kids, leave Joey and I to piece together his life by the albums he left in our house. Led Zeppelin’s House of the Holy. A double-record Woodstock collection. Janis Joplin’s Pearl.
They all seemed to contain hidden messages, hints to my dad’s life, if we just listened close enough, if we could understand that music like it was written, encoded in delicious symbols, just for us.

My brother graduated from college last year. It was a miracle of sorts, worked by my mom who was paying big bucks for that piece of fancy degree paper, who called him relentlessly, making him go see his advisor, reminding him he had to take a math class. Not that he didn’t work hard—sometimes. He mostly just wanted to play his drums. He was a member of three different bands, spending his weekends an hour away in the Twin Cities, playing bar gigs. “C’s get degrees,” he would say, cranking out bad papers one night a week.

Last spring, my mom and I were sitting on her porch drinking hot tea when she said to me, “My worst fears have come true. Joey’s becoming a musician. He’s becoming your dad.” She never called my dad by his name, as if he didn’t exist to her, only in relation to me, a far off historical mistake that stuck. “I should never have let him play the drums. I knew this would happen, goddammit.” This was soon after she discovered he’d been smoking too much pot and had acquired a nicotine addiction on top of that.

“Oh, he’s nothing like him,” I told her. “He’s going to college. My dad didn’t even finish high school. Joey’s very different.” But I wasn’t so sure. When I had found an old Dodge City High School yearbook of my mother’s sister’s, I saw a picture of my dad as a teenager and I was amazed how much he looked like my brother. I seemed to have gotten none of my dad’s features. I look like my mom. Joey has my dad’s same skinny build, dark,
almost-black hair, long straight nose, slightly hunched back, long bony fingers that wrap around drumsticks like knotted rope.

Joey’s senior recital was amazing. The auditorium was packed—it had the largest attendance of any senior recital in the last several years, the house manager later told us. He played pieces he composed—mostly jazz, but also marimba pieces, chimes, snare, and trap set. Whenever watching him play, I want to cry, because it’s something so pure and so familiar. His bottom lip sticks out and hovers, the underside shiny-pink, and his back curves around his drums like a giant ear listening close to their secrets.

The last piece was dedicated to my dad, who had just passed away a few months before. I was expecting something soft and lovely, something with several marimba mallets tucked in the nooks of his fingers playing lilting harmonies; instead it was full of cymbal crashes and dark, low sounds. One of his friends from the dance department danced to the piece and it was the most terrifying dance I’d ever seen. Wild arms pounding her chest, her body convulsing on the stage, my friends scattered around the auditorium, mouths open. The program dedicated the piece to our dad and was named after his initials: VAP. The sound effect of disappearing. It was the bravest, most emotional thing he’d ever done in my eyes.

We’d never talked about our dad a lot. What was, was, and we both knew the circumstances. We lived them together, saw the same scorching images, heard the same delicate shells of words. But after his recital, I haven’t quite thought of my brother the same way.

He’s the good pieces of my dad, the beautiful hands, the heart-breaking talent, without the alcohol, without the meanness, without his words slipping to the ground, shattering into sharp pieces for us to walk over again and again.
When we were kids, we used to go hang out at my grandpa’s music store. He doesn’t own it, but he’s always worked there and does almost every job there is to do: sales, instrument repair, ordering, billing. He drinks ten to twelve glass bottles of Dr. Pepper per day and suffers from semi-severe heart burn as a result. Though that doesn’t stop him, of course.

“Hey Monkeys!” he called to us when we came through the door, the bell strung across the top tinkling to call him from the back rooms where he repaired instruments with all sorts of strange tools and flames to pry things open, weld them shut again, all the while watching golf and drinking more Dr. Pepper than can be healthy for a person. Now there’s an electronic sensor that beeps when a customer walks through the door. “So what’d you learn in school today?” he asked. “Hey, I got a new sound to show you.” He brought us into the main room to show us a new electronic key board that came in with a setting that sounded like people singing. I could play whole choirs singing Chopsticks in wavering falsetto “ahhh’s.” I could play Halloween Jamboree in a setting that sounded like glass shattering. I could play Jingle Bells with the ethereal “wind flute” setting, all six notes of my chords hollow, windy tones.

Once one of my friends told me that her mom wouldn’t take her to Dodge City’s only music store because the cigarette smoke was so thick that her mother would have an immediate asthma attack. My grandpa would chain smoke, a cigarette always dangling from the corner of his mouth, the ash always too long, always about ready to fall. When I was very little, I remember reaching out and touching it, just to see what would happen. Then my grandpa holding my finger under the running tap saying, “It’s alright, it’s alright,” not knowing what else to do.
He's a personality in Dodge City. Everyone seems to know him or at least recognize him. But as I got older I became more and more angry at him. As my dad’s drinking became worse, as my aunt’s drinking became worse, as my dad’s brother lay sick with AIDS in California and my grandpa never went to see him, not once, I thought of him as a horrible father. Why didn’t he do anything when his kids fell into these patterns? Where was he? He was at the music shop, repairing instruments, drinking Dr. Pepper, chatting with Dodge’s band instructors who stopped by all the time. He was watching golf, trying not to think about bad things. He’s still that way. I suppose it’s his survival mechanism. Like a narcoleptic, he goes into a caffeine induced sleep-trance when the going gets rough. I’ve never seen him in a bad mood.

The downward spiral of my dad’s life caught him in the throes of drug addictions and alcoholism, the haze that constantly colored his identity, making me squint my mind to see the “real” Van. This part of his Behind the Music happens halfway through the show, the crescendo to the climax, the breaking point. It’s taped in a collage of recreated rooms destroyed in drunken stupors, blood stains on the furniture and carpet; interviews with his son, daughter, and ex-wife, who say, “We didn’t know how to control him. He was ruining his life and ours;” polaroids taken of him, eyes half-closed, fingers spread in a peace sign or a raised middle finger, hair grown long and not brushed from his face, a glass of vodka always in one hand—it became his signature. Janis Joplin had her Southern Comfort; my dad had
his vodka and soda water in an insulated Kwik Shop mug. The show doesn’t go into his kids
catching a glimpse of him hitting their mom. The show doesn’t cover the days and days he’d
go missing, only to show up with his head split wide open, claiming to have been attacked
with a lead pipe. The show doesn’t cover his daughter being just a little scared of him, scared
of saying the wrong thing, scared of catching him at the wrong time. Glad when he left, but
lying awake at night fantasizing about him telling her how beautiful and smart she is, how
she can play that flute with the best of them, should be an honorary member of *Jethro Tull*
based on her raw, sparkling, Phillips talent.

By the time I was in college, I hadn’t spoken to my dad in seven years or so. When I got an
email from him (an *email!* ) saying he had cancer, I wasn’t too concerned. Five years back,
I’d heard he almost died of liver failure. Two years before that, he was in a car accident,
hanging on to the last silver thread of his life. I was convinced that man wouldn’t die, though
I had written short stories about his death, had weird fantasies about it. His death would be
something I could understand. A reason I never saw or talked to him.

Though the fact of cancer wasn’t so shocking, the appearance of his words were
numbing. They seemed to come out of this dark, unknowable void, through time, through
the history of committed acts, into my life that had nothing to do with him. After running my
fingers over those printed-out words, after falling asleep with the paper next to my face, the
black letters up close and fuzzy, wanting to absorb them, wanting to make them real,
hearable, or understandable, I wrote him back. And we gradually got back in touch. His
voice sounded older and more careful than it ever had before. In the terrifying light of cancer, the startling light of sobriety, he wanted to make amends. He wanted to know me. He was married to wife number four, an old hippie named Julie who has tattoos all over her body of all her ex-husbands’ names. Jim, Clay, and the strangely literary Holden. I sent him a mixed tape of songs. He talked about new bands he was listening to, old bands he was rediscovering. It was something we could talk about. We talked about Joey and his music.

“You know I love you,” he said once. And I believed him. It was exhilarating to hear those words and believe them.

I went to visit him later that summer. Even though he was really sick and had no hair, he still played in a band, but he no longer played the drums. He played bass. His new band wasn’t nearly as hip as his old ones were, but they had that older musician dignity about them. They played covers of classics and they played them tightly, every note tucked in place, every chord change sharp and right-on. I thought, This is the part of Behind the Music where they show the musician in his new project, half-hopeful, half-resigned, more or less at peace, something like sadness, something like tenaciousness on his face. Now focus in on his daughter, a small smile on her lips. Flash to his son playing drums in some college band. The legacy lives on.

I remember playing a tambourine on stage with Max Dangerfield at a street dance in El Dorado, Kansas. We are playing “Proud Mary.” I just got a new perm and my hair smells sweet and strong as it bounces off my face. I am groovin in my jean skirt and striped tee-
shirt, my high-top Reeboks flaring their pink tongues. I remember my dad playing lead
guitar bending down on one knee, playing right to me, just two musicians jamming on stage,
like Bono and the Edge, only it is me and my dad, he in his standard black jeans, white tee-
shirt, red Converse All-Stars, my brother somewhere in the periphery break-dancing,
spinning on his head, his skinny, scabby legs twirling above him, and waves of people
dancing and showing their shiny, pink faces like so many stars spread out across a black tar
sky, the plywood stage vibrating, my aunt behind me drumming, singing about Proud Mary
in that strong voice, that voice I can still hear if I squint my mind just right, that voice that is
still out there in Kansas somewhere, and lightning breaking open the sky behind it all.

It starts to rain and the band begins to pack up. Someone from the crowd asks me,
"Are you with the band?"

"Yeah," I say, trying not to laugh, to start dancing again. I am in the band.

"Can you all play another song for us?" When the rain comes down, I stick my
tongue out to catch it and think, _Oh God, let me be in a band forever._

I haven't given up hopes for my own musicianship. I played the flute all through school,
stopping in college when I wasn't first-chair anymore. I got pretty good at the end of my run,
playing _Carnival of Venice_ until my fingers could play those three octave runs on my pencils,
forks, cats, toothbrush, in my dreams. But it wasn't rock 'n roll. You can't play the flute and
dance at the same time, though I have tried. You can't impress your friends at parties, or,
more importantly, you can't sing along.
I got a guitar for my last birthday, one worthier than my abilities, which is a bit embarrassing. I feel like the guitar is sad that someone better didn’t buy it, it got stuck with me and my sensitive, plush fingers that can only push so hard, but I do what I can. I haven’t gotten too far. I go for long lapses of not playing, having to start at the very beginning again and again. One can only play “Hot Cross Buns” so many times before the magic wears off. But I like to hold it and smell it, its shape a shape I’ve always been around, always known. There’ve always been guitars, drums, tambourines, microphones lying around the house. After my dad left, my mom used them to decorate the house—the bongos became plant stands and the gourd shakers were perched on the mantelpiece. I have all intentions of learning to play my disappointed guitar. After my homework is done. After graduate school. When I have the time. Until then, I’ve always got karaoke to save my soul. And writing down what I can of the flesh, the marrow of my own music.

My brother is doing better. He doesn’t smoke cigarettes anymore, which convinces my mom he isn’t headed toward imminent destruction. He plays jazz and rock gigs in the Twin Cities. He plays the kind of music I don’t quite understand, not in the same way I understand other music. Complicated, uneven beats, drum solos that would sound unplanned and messy if you didn’t listen closely. One of his gigs is a band called Wookie Foot. They’re a bunch of hippies who sing about drugs and alcohol, which freaks my mom out (one lyric goes “I just gotta get out of rehab”). But he’s got a college degree and a level of sensitivity that’s rare for a man.
We went to visit my dad together the last few months before he passed. The car ride from Minnesota to Kansas is a good twelve hours, and we talked more than we had in a long time.

"Have you ever asked dad why he stopped everything? Just quit being our dad?" he asked me in the car.

"No, did you?"

"Yeah, I did."

"What did he say?"

"Not much. That he was fucked up and had a lot of problems."

"Yeah, well we knew that."

"I feel sorry for him. I mean, this is it, you know?" And that's how that month went. In the surprising fact of my dad dying, all anger and resentment seemed to slowly fade and turn to a music box tinkle in the back of our minds. This was it.

For those few weeks, we existed in a state of music, when everything somehow returned to how it used to be when we were kids, riding on waves of rhythm and melody, everything starting, falling into chorus, and ending sweetly, understandably. We listened to some of his CD's together, talked about how brilliant he was in unexpected ways. He did get the highest IQ score ever recorded at a rehab clinic in Western Kansas. We sat with him at his sunken recliner and talked about art—music, writing, creating. We watched bad movies and helped our dad smoke even more cigarettes, for he was too weak to do it himself. Those weeks, Joey and I went to get groceries together, went to the funeral home with Julie, to the funeral where we saw Bernie and Cedrick and some other old band cronies. Rick, Max Danger's lead guitar, had died a few years ago of lung cancer, the same thing that finally did
my dad in. This year George Harrison died of the same thing. Our dad’s death brought us back to him and back together for a bit.

My one regret about that month is the soundtrack to my dad’s passing. When he was in bed, Julie wanted to play tapes of the old radio program *The Shadow*. My dad also enjoyed old movies, artifacts, scraps of the past. But it didn’t seem right. He should have gone out to something closer to his heart. Steely Dan, Beethoven, John Coltrane—his friends.

The night of the funeral we all got drunk together, listening to some rap music of Julie’s teenage son. We smoked cigarettes, blasted music, and cried. In my drunken state, I thought of my mom in Minnesota with my step dad, wondered how she felt, what she was thinking. My life split in two somewhere after their divorce and the pieces were so different, so incompatible that I often think of myself as two halves; one the way I look, my sense of justice and compassion; the other the way I sing to music in my shower, the way I dance around my apartment when I’m all alone, the car-dancing routines I’ve created and perfected, hand-jiving on a level you’d never think possible if you didn’t get stuck by me at a stoplight.

I’m in a serious relationship with a musician now. I suppose it was inevitable. But he’s more like me than the musicians I’ve known. Zac’s scared of most illegal drugs, can’t afford to drink a lot (he works in a recording studio on a very low rung), and he loves *Behind the Music* too, as an outsider peering into the fast, intuitive, feel-good-then-die lives of musicians. He never met my dad, but after looking at a picture he said he reminds him of a young David Bowie. “My thoughts exactly,” I say.
He went with me on a trip to Dodge City a couple years ago and met my Grandpa Clyde. “Wow, what a great guy,” he said. At my dad’s funeral, my grandpa Clyde didn’t cry or show any emotion—he led his newer, alcoholic wife (same old story, different circumstances) around by the arm and got her drinks of scotch to calm her down. Two of his four kids gone, one hanging on to the bones of her own alcoholism and grief, and his face is still the same—he never ages too much. Maybe gets a little smaller, caves in upon himself, forgets to comb his still-blue-black curls down into submission.

I think of him often, what he thinks about on all his uniform afternoons. I think of him, my dad, and my brother as the people in Iceland, operating with a very small gene pool, only the Phillips men seem unaffected by the genes of their wives, passing down that same nose, that same drum-love, that same beautiful face down and down and down. I try to think of the music instead of what happened between the songs—the music behind the story and the way it’s most true, memorable, the way my dad lives in a song, the way music carries my brother across the face of all his relationships, the way my grandpa only thinks in terms of notes and time signatures—music as blood.
Jasmine waits for ten o’clock, stuffs a towel against the crack of light beneath the door, turns off all lamp light and relaxes into the corner of her beige, faux leather couch to smoke her nightly bowl of marijuana. It’s snowing outside, the first snow of the season, the flakes fat and juicy as they slap against her window and slide down like dirty tears, and Jasmine thinks it’s nice, it’s atmospheric, an appropriate palette to paint her own tears all over tonight. Her smoking has become a nightly ritual since she met the son of her co-worker, Rita, who sidled up to her desk over her lunch break to ask if she’d like some “doobie.” Jasmine found herself saying, “Sure, I’ll have some doobie,” and that’s how it all started. Now she smokes every night, listens to Bob Dylan, writes terrible poetry, the angst-ridden, over-indulgent kind she wrote in high school. She sweet-talks her cat, Fabio, who is annoyed by the smoke and crouches in the corner, giving her dirty looks. She thinks Fabio is the strongest proof of god when she’s high.

Out from the smoky, candle-lit air of her apartment, the phone rings. Jasmine is initially panicked and assumes it’s a client calling her. She can’t talk to a person suspended over the brink of suicide, pills dropping slow-motion into a desperate mouth, while she’s high. It’s unethical, or immoral. She lets the phone ring for what seems like hours until she hears her own voice gurgling away on the answering machine. Does she really sound so nasal, so forty-something?

Jasmine is so saturated with problems and sadness and dead ends and knives stuck into backs and mean words said to children that they leak out into all aspects of her life. She can read sadness in eyes now—it emanates like light; only it’s felt, like electricity.
out at the organic market tonight, she sensed the snarled, rooted sadness of the clerk seeping out from her fingers all over her shrink-wrapped cheese, into the sack, and back into Jasmine’s life for her to absorb and ball up with the rest of it. A dutiful receptacle for the down-trodden.

The machine beeps. “Umm hi? This is Earl. Um, I need to talk to you sometime if you get the chance.” It’s her brother, Earl, who only calls when he needs a loan or a place to crash when his basement apartment is flooded or so cold that his glass of water develops an icy membrane on top. “Yeah, give me a call at the club tonight if you get this, or tomorrow I guess at my place. You can wake me up, that’s cool. So, I guess.” He guesses what? Jasmine sinks back into the couch, pulls her afghan up around her chin, shakes the residue of Earl’s voice out of her mind; just that sound, that particular blend of apathy and sweetness, makes her cringe with fierce love, annoyance, longing, with a bit of derision lapping up against it all. He doesn’t call much, hardly ever. When she calls him, he’s usually asleep and disoriented, saying something like What time is it, Jesus Fuck, give me a break.

Jasmine scoops Fabio onto her lap, tries to cradle him like a baby and look into his eyes, but he’s not having it. He twists free and digs his back claws into her leg as he jumps away. “Yeah, you little fuckball Fabio.” And she immediately feels guilty, sad, like no matter what she does in this life, everything is always bouncing away, giving her a bloody nick to remember them by. She retrieves her notebook and pink pen from under the couch and puts that in a poem entitled “Scrape Away.”
That night Earl dreams cartoony, slow-motion dreams, the kind you want to tell people about, only he won’t tell anybody about this one. He dreams of a pregnancy test, the sticks that you pee on and that develop little symbols in the window to affirm or deny the suspected pregnancy—only this was a personified stick, with arms and legs, like the personified popcorn and candy that dance around in the commercials at the Drive-In. Let’s Go Out to the Movies, they sing. The stick isn’t singing, not that he can hear anyway, but it is dancing alright. The prophetic symbol, which makes up the stick’s mouth, is a smile. The colors are old-time pastels, like the ones used in the beautiful, pastoral cartoons of the 40’s, but the dancing stick is sinister—he is scared of it. When he wakes up, he almost wants to laugh at how textbook the dream was. Or maybe he wants to cry.

He props his head against the cinderblock wall of his basement room and smokes a cigarette. Snow is pressed against the entire surface of his one, high window, creating the effect that he’s snowed into this room, that he’s got an emergency on his hands. This comforts him in the same way the idea of death does. This is it. There’s nothing he can do, so he might as well relax.

He is a bit surprised Jasmine hasn’t called back yet. She doesn’t go out on weeknights; she hardly goes out at all. He knows she worries about him. Sometimes when he’s working in the club, sweeping up the cigarette butts that have turned inside out all over the floor, or checking the bathroom stalls for assholes doing drugs, an image of his sister flashes into his mind, the look on her face if she were to see such things. Her lips ruffled in disdain, her arms folded over her chest, a hand reaching to tuck hair behind her ear. He imagines her watching TV. Reading a magazine. Eating soup, drinking expensive coffee,
talking on the phone to their mother in Northern Minnesota about him, how he’s so lazy, how he doesn’t brush his teeth, how he’s going to end up like their father. He’s found that these words usually make him more apt to not shave before he sees them, to not bother tucking in his shirt, to leave in his earrings and lip ring, to play with his tongue bar in front of them. A part of himself takes over that wants to shock them, and make them squirm. His mom recently added an addendum to her will that states he’s not a partner in her and Harold’s trust until he’s thirty. It was symbolic, of course, a gesture to say Grow Up.

Earl untangles himself from layers of blankets and flannel shirts spread over for extra warmth, and picks up his guitar. He plays some songs in bed and thinks of Charlotte, the girl he met at the club, slept with a few times, and who is now pregnant with his child. So says
laughing at how he orders a “crapaccino.” Granted, Earl has charm, that roll-out-of-bed, fuck-you-all kind of charm that she, herself, could never get away with, not even on Halloween.

“Hey dude,” Earl says and stares into his mug as he sits down.

“Dude yourself,” Jasmine says, and swirls the tea bag around by the string.

“What?” Earl looks up at her, over the lip of his tipped mug. “Oww, this is hot.”

“Nothing.”

“So how’s it going?”

“Oh, okay. Nothing new. You know.” On the way over, Jasmine thought of anecdotes, clever things to say to Earl. “Well, I have these new neighbors who play the worst butt rock you’ve ever heard. I call them the butt boys.” Earl grunts a courtesy laugh into his coffee. “I’ve been experimenting with different kinds of ear-plugging devices. The most successful involves the heads of q-tips and gray tape.”

“Impressive,” Earl says and glances up, kind of smiles.

“I talked to mom today.”

“Oh yeah?”

“She and Harold are going to a craft show in Wisconsin.”

“Are they still making those wood carvings?” When Earl and Jasmine get together, they begin conversations with affirming all their common knowledge: a mention of childhood, or of their mom, or an object in their old house. It’s like a password. Yes, you are my brother, Yes, this is my sister.
"Of course. And Mom is making these lawn things. Like those wooden bent-over butts that people stick in their gardens? Like sets in play, you know?"

"Bent-over butts?"

"Yeah, like the one Mrs. Grealy had in her front yard? That polka-dot butt?"

"Ohhh, yeah." Earl laughs again. He yawns. Jasmine knows that Earl yawns as a defense mechanism, to stop the words coming at him from her or their mom. When he yawns too much, she is sure to frown, ask him about his health, his sleep habits.

"I’m playing the 400 Bar Thursday. You should come. You should bring Josie and come down for awhile," Earl says.

"Maybe I will. But Josie moved to Colorado, remember? She got that internship at a publishing house." She can see Earl trying to think of another name, another friend.

"Maybe I’ll call a friend from work or something."

"Yeah, I’ll put you on the guest list."

"Okay."

"Hey, actually, there was a reason I wanted to talk to you."

"Oh really?" Jasmine coats her words in sarcasm, but Earl doesn’t seem to notice.

She hopes he doesn’t ask for money.

"Yeah, well, I’m kind of in some trouble."

"Are you preggers?" Jasmine says and laughs.

Earl looks up at her, right into her smallish, dark eyes. His lip is twitching and his knee is jiggling the table so that her tea mug is rattling like teeth. She stops laughing.

"Oh my god. I was kidding, but you are. Or someone is."

"Yeah." Earl says this like he’s been asked if he wants milk in his coffee.
“Well who is pregnant, Earl? I didn’t even know you had a girlfriend.” Jasmine tries to remain cool, stay calm, because she knows if she looks upset or angry, Earl will run away.

“I don’t, really. Her name is Charlotte.”

“Well, do you love her?”

“I don’t know. Actually, no, not at all. She’s a terrible person. But that’s not the point. I can’t be a dad.”

“Not the point? Jesus, Earl. Get a grip.” Jasmine takes a sip of her tea and leaves the rim of the mug over her face for a few seconds. What can she say to him? He doesn’t even know what he’s done.

“Get a grip? Is that what you tell your clients every day?”

“You’re not my client. And if you were, I’d talk to you about responsibility for life, and respect for people.”

“Fuck off, Jasmine.”

“I don’t understand you.” Jasmine’s heart is beating fast and she’s on fight-or-flight mode and all the pain that she stores inside is pressing up against her throat, and is pulsing there like the beating wings of an exotic insect. “I don’t get you at all, Earl. It’s like you’re not even on this planet, you’re in your own little drug-induced, video-game reality where you think you’re this fucking Mick Jagger or something.” The “ing” of Jasmine’s “fucking” was like the sound of metal scraped on metal. “This is a real life you’re talking about.”

Earl rolls his eyes as dramatically as he can. “You should hear yourself, Jasmine. Your rhetoric is disturbing. You sound like Jerry Falwell only worse because you’re a woman, and you’re my sister, and you have no idea what you’re talking about.”
Jasmine sees that Earl is breathing hard, his mouth held in a strange way, like he might cry. But he never cries. Not even at their father's funeral last year, not since he was little, not ever. "I'm sorry," Jasmine says.

"Just forget it."

"How can I forget it? Listen." Jasmine is trying to speak kindly and softly, like she's speaking to one of her patients. "I'm sorry. You just act like you don't care about anything."

"Well, you don't know me too well, Jasmine."

"Stop being dramatic."

"You're so hypocritical. And patronizing. You probably talk to your clients like this and I bet they hate it."

"How? What are you talking about?"

"Nevermind. I got to go to work. We're setting up for a big show tonight." Earl gets up and walks out, without looking at her. Jasmine thinks of yelling, Wait, just a second, I didn't mean it, but she doesn't. She thinks of tackling him, wrapping her arms around his skinny waist. She hasn't touched him in years.

Jasmine watches the crapaccino girl stare at Earl as he leaves and swoon all over the counter top. Jasmine stays in her seat and finishes her tea, slowly, thinking of all that she should have said, thinking of Earl's baby to be, a miniature Earl in a diaper. Or maybe the baby would be different, like her. Maybe the baby will grow up having no idea how Earl is her dad, how that terrible person is her mom, having no idea how she's related to anybody in this family except for Aunt Jasmine, her saviour, her Mary Poppins Galore.
The next day Earl waits at the exact same coffee shop for Charlotte. Coffee, the social lubricant of our generation, Earl thinks. When his parents met, at one of his dad's gigs, it was soft drugs. Now it's an even softer drug, with sugar and chocolate mixed in to make it taste better. He thinks that if he can squint his memory just right, he sees his whole life as a continuous string of awkward, guilt-riddled, accusatory meetings with women. He said this once to his band buddy Pablo who replied, "Crazy bitches," which made Earl want to puke all over his guitar—he's physically sensitive to violence or violent-sounding words. But even he has to admit if there ever was a crazy bitch, it's Charlotte.

Finally she shows up, twenty minutes late, dragging her beaded, faux-Indian purse behind her on the ground, a Trident wrapper caught in the beading. Her fat-soled, pleather boots are unlaced, the tongue and sides peeling from her legs banana-style. When she walks in the door, she glances down over her body as if to make sure there are no stains, that her clothes are on and intact.

She sits down on the chair that is still warm from Jasmine's pain the previous morning.

Take Two, Earl thinks. "So, what's the word?"

"The word is I'm pregnant. What do you think the word would be?"

"I don't know. The stick could be wrong."

"Three sticks can't be wrong. Hey, go get me some coffee, will you? If they can be wrong, mine weren't." While Earl is buying the coffee, he sees Charlotte take out her little notebook with a picture of Mary's burning heart glued on the front—Catholic images, without attached meaning, are hip these days—and start writing in her bubbly, third-grade
handwriting. When he sits back down at the table, he sees she’s writing a list: “Shit To Do Before The Baby’s Born.” On the front of the notebook, Mary’s heart burns a little brighter.

“Okay, Charlotte, let’s talk about this.”

“Yes, let’s do, darling.”

“What are your thoughts?”

Charlotte makes a you’re-so-weird face and writes the first item on the list—buy prenatal vitamins. “Well, Earl, now that you ask, I know what I’m going to do about this. And you don’t have to worry about anything. I spoke to my mom, to my doctor, and to my god and we’ve all decided that I’m going to have it. I’m going to have the baby, and I’m going to raise it all by myself, and give it the life I always wanted as a kid.” As Charlotte spoke, her voice got higher and more babyish, which makes Earl nervous. They had an entire fight, the first of their fledgling relationship, with Charlotte speaking in this voice.

“Yeah right, Charlotte. You don’t want this baby. You can hardly take care of yourself.”

Charlotte looks up from her list and turns on sadness like a soap opera starlet. Tears start welling in the corners of her eyes and she says, “Why me, Lord? Why me, why me, why the fuck me?”

“I’m sorry. You can take care of yourself. But not this baby. Think about it.”

“You think about it.”

“I have been. And I talked to my sister about it.”

“Your shrinky-dink sister?” Charlotte is bitter about Jasmine, jealous that she is more put-together than she herself, something Earl has never understood.
“Yes, and she suggested adoption. We can always give it up for adoption, and you can go back to your old life again. Just taking, you know, a nine month sabbatical.”

Earl lies without premeditation. The lie springs from his lips and sprouts wings, flying around the table, and he watches it, tries to understand where it came from.

“I can’t do that, Earl.”

“Why not? Sure it’d be hard, but you’d be doing a good thing.”

“I’d rather kill it than give it away.”

Earl loses all feeling in his lips and they flap there, like surrender flags. There’s nothing he can say to this woman, this woman who only four days ago made him laugh by doing a Sally Jesse Raphael impression while naked in bed, who one week ago brought him a bag of greasy donuts in the morning, who three weeks and two days ago told him that she was a painter. He wouldn’t be surprised if she sent him her bloody ear in an envelope. She’d send it to spy on him, to use his life against him.

“Fine. I need to go.” Earl drops a dollar on the table, for a tip, something he’s never done before, but feels is appropriate.

“Go then. We’ll be just fine without you. I’d expect you to leave us. Just like your dad left you. Family patterns repeat themselves. It’s all cyclical. I could tell how you’d react just by knowing your history...”

Charlotte keeps talking as Earl walks out the door, the image of Charlotte’s face up-close projected over everything he sees. He imagines the fetus as a constellation of barely-moving stars turning over in the sky, moving closer and closer to meaning. He thinks, It’s funny, how a complex string of biological snaps and flashes can lead to being connected to this woman forever. No matter what happens. Not funny, exactly, but frightening.
That night Earl dreams he’s in the waiting room of an abortion clinic. The nurse brings out a jar with a pickled fetus. When Earl looks at its small, wrinkly, alien-like face, he sees it’s his dad’s. He wakes up and can’t remember what’s real and what’s not.

When Mike pulls out a condom wrapped in gold foil packaging, Jasmine thinks he’s offering her one of those chocolate coins, that’s how long it’s been. But he opens it and much to her surprise, slides it on deftly, almost magically.

Two days after her coffee date with Earl, Jasmine met Mike at a Twin Cities-wide social workers conference on crisis counseling (there has been, in addition to the seasonal rash, an outburst of teen suicides as of late, most of which have leaned more toward guns, razor blades, and even a bra in one case, than the less traumatic pills, carbon monoxide, and poisoning—Jasmine has found that the more messy and quirky the death, the harder the emotions are to clean up afterwards) and they fuck carefully in her apartment, either fucking around or fucking over all the pain that they both carry. It’s unlike Jasmine to have casual sex, or sex in general, but Mike laughed too appropriately at her dark jokes, identified too closely with her dread of counseling grief-stricken teens.

After Mike’s second orgasm and Jasmine’s almost-an-orgasm, they lay in bed, Mike’s head at an awkward angle, his cheek pressed against Jasmine’s armpit. Mike giggles and sighs, and on the lowest, softest note of that sigh, right before the excruciating silence that would follow, Jasmine realizes she is regretful for every moment of time spent with Mike. She rolls away from his heavy, damp head, wrapping the sheets tight around her body.
The Human Burrito: a game she used to play with Earl, rolling each other up in blankets, sometimes the mattress of the fold-out couch, then sliding down the stairs. Maybe she could roll off the bed and into the bathroom, where she could hide until Mike left. That's what locks on bathroom doors are for.

"Holy Hell," Mike says to the back of Jasmine's head. "That was just what I needed." He starts picking up the books on her nightstand, ruffling the pages so that they send a breeze over the back of Jasmine's neck. She shivers in disgust.

"You feel that?"

"Yep."

"Does it feel good?" He then starts blowing on the back of her neck, running his fingers over her lower back. Jasmine sits up, pulling the sheet with her then clipping it to her body with her chin, not looking at Mike. Out of the corner of her eye, she sees his nipples, remembers noticing moments ago that they are covered in swirls of hair, the only hair on his chest shooting out from his nipples like electricity.

"So what are you up to this week?" Jasmine says in her nicest voice.

"Well, I'm working. As usual. As I'm sure you are. And going to the French Film Festival at the U. Do you want to go, by the way?"

"Maybe." Mike gets quiet for a long minute or two, and Jasmine realizes maybe she's being harsh on him. Her attractions to men are unpredictable, inconsistent. A word or a look or a particular sound in the throat or a hidden smell come upon too quickly will turn her off forever. And she's off of Mike.

He picks up the framed family picture on her nightstand and brings it close to his face—his glasses were flung off in the living room—and says, "Is that your twin?"
“My twin? Why do you think I have a twin?”

“This guy looks exactly like you, only different. He’s you as a man. With a bad haircut. And a lip ring? Is that what that is?”

“No, he’s not at all, actually. Do you want some tea or something? Chocolate milk?”

“No thanks. Are you close?”

“Grapefruit juice?”

“No. With your brother? Are you two close?”

“No, not really.”

“I’m incredibly close to my sister. She’s living in California now, with her husband and kid, but we talk two, three times a week. It just happened the last few years. We hated each other as kids, lost touch in college, then came back together and found that we have so much in common, underneath everything. The same genes, I guess. Blueprint, whatever.”

“Earl took care of our dad when he was dying.”

Jamine watches Mike stare at his own reflection in the glass of the picture, his nostrils changing shape as he moves his head slightly.

“He fed him and bathed him, helped him go to the bathroom. Helped him smoke cigarettes, the thing that killed him. Helped him eat popsicles. Talked to him about god. You know, the business of dying.”

“My grandfather died a couple years ago. It’s hard. Cancer.”

“I wasn’t there. Can you believe that? You’d think I’d be the one there.” Jasmine sits up in bed, her back toward Mike, kicking her feet softly against the bed frame.

“You want me to leave, don’t you?” Mike’s voice is back to being professional-like, interested, polite. Jasmine feels a little guilty, but at least he’s stopped giggling.
"What?"

"You’re not into the talking all night, cuddling thing, are you?"

"I’m sorry. I thought we were having a good conversation," Jasmine lies.

"I’ll leave. No problem."

"I’m sorry."

Mike gets up, shakes himself down into his khakis, buttons up his denim shirt while looking at the framed pictures on Jasmine’s desk. Old friends she hasn’t spoken to in months. Years? An old boyfriend she keeps in touch with. Where does he live now? Denver? Seattle?

When Mike is all dressed, belted, and combed down with a spit-dampened finger, he turns around and faces Jasmine, his hands hard knots deep in his pockets. "You look beautiful."

"No I don’t, give me a break."

"You do, really, you’re beautiful." But Jasmine knows what liars look like. She deals with them all the time. Hell, she grew up thinking lies came true if you lied them. According to this theory, she just turned beautiful, really beautiful, in Mike’s faltering stare, caught and turned upside down, all her plainness shaken out of her like coins by his forced, yellow words.

"So are you, Mike." The least she can do is return the favor. "You’ve inspired me to get in touch with my brother, to try to re-connect."

"Really?"

"Yes. I should."

After Mike leaves, Jasmine waits for the lie to manifest into truth, waits for the urge to call Earl. But it gets stuck in the leftover smell of Mike’s deodorant, his semen. He
marked his territory and left. If Jasmine squints her memory just right, takes an eraser to the random nights, the framed photographs, she can see her life as a string of encounters with men wanting to love her, but failing, because she’s made not to be loved by men. It’s in her genes. Her blueprint.

Jasmine rolls off the bed and into the bathroom, a human burrito picking up lint, cat hair, an old button along the way, the small byproducts of living sticking to her like guilt.

The day of Earl’s gig at the 400 Bar, he decides to quit smoking. He’s had enough. He’s unhealthy. His lungs are heavy and sticky and his dad’s ghost stands by his bed in the middles of nights, hacking his death cough all over Earl’s blankets. Smoking has turned sinister, as has Earl’s own music. His songs are his Frankenstein, out of his control, his evil experiment that has turned against him.

But that night, Earl drives his Rabbit through the gray, slush-choked streets to the club, his guitar tucked like a weapon in the back seat, baby heads twinkling in his peripheral vision. He doesn’t even want a cigarette.

Jasmine is drinking expensive beer at a table, her hair now a different color.

“It’s called ‘golden harvest,’” she says to Earl, who lets his mouth hang open for a few seconds to show his surprise.

“I like.”

“Thanks, man.”

“Don’t man me.”
“Indeed.” Jasmine is more relaxed around Earl. She sips her beer and lets it taste good.

“Beer? Since when do you drink beer?”

“You think I don’t drink? Do you think I drink Diet Coke at the bars?”

“I don’t know. I never see you drink.”

“Well, I don’t really.”

“Exactly.” Earl laughs his easy laugh that he laughs around friends, the crapaccino girl, the laugh that Jasmine has previously wanted to extract from him and keep in a jar. She loves to hear it now.

“I’m sorry about everything I said. You’re right, I don’t know what I’m talking about.”

“But you do, is the thing. I’ll be right back.” Earl approaches the bar and starts his tab of free drinks. He comes back to Jasmine’s table, the beer already half-finished.

“No I don’t.”

“You don’t what?”

“Know what I’m talking about. I don’t even know Charlotte or how you even feel about it. So how do you? Feel about it.”

“I don’t even know. It’s not that I don’t want to feel a certain way, I just don’t. Sometimes, feelings don’t come.”

“Is that a song?”

“Probably. By Barry Manilow.”

“No, Barbara Streisand.” Earl laughs at this.
“You know, maybe it won’t be so bad, Earl. Seriously. Think about it. Mom and Dad were younger than you when they had me. And they made bad decisions, and they struggled, la la la, but it turned out okay. And you got me. And Mom and Harold. And Fabio, who will like you much better now that you’re sans cigarettes. You know?”

“I know. I was thinking that too. About Dad. About him being my age. How no matter what I do, I’m walking through his footsteps.”

“Don’t say that.”

“What are you talking about? You tell me that all the time.”

“But you’re not.”

“Okay. And you’re not walking through mom’s.”

“Jesus, I know that.”

“Oh, sorry.” They laugh loud and Earl’s band members see them from the stage, where they are setting up, and are surprised. “Dad loved you, you know. Just as much as he loved me or anyone else.”

“I know.” Jasmine feels shy all of a sudden, like she might be blushing. “I mean, it’s nice of you to say that. I never connected with him the way you did. He always looked at me kind of funny. Like I was in cahoots with mom, working against him. I know he must’ve loved me. I know that fact.”

“Okay.”

“Families are such weird constructs. Different expressions of the same genes. Well, almost the same.” Jasmine’s hair looks the color of lit-up honey in the dim, already smoky light. “Your cheeks are so pink. I don’t think they’ve been so pink since you didn’t smoke. Which puts you at about twelve?”
“Yeah. Twelve.”

“I try too hard. At everything,” Jasmine says.

“It seems like it.”

“And I make this cage of trying too hard around myself and I see you outside of it, throwing eggs at it or something.”

“Such a poet, such a poet. I got to play now. Stick around.”

“I will. Drinking beer. Good luck or break a leg or whatever.”

Earl plays his guitar like he plays everything else: effortlessly, beautifully, poetically, what he lacks in skill and technique, he makes up for in soul and the way his lips move around his lyrics. To Jasmine, the music isn’t understandable. She doesn’t really get it, but it covers the ball of pain she carries like a wet blanket. Sometimes she thinks she sees their dad playing, but she always does when she watches Earl play. It’s an act of magic she’s come to expect, the blurring of faces and age.

To Earl, it’s his music again, if only for this night. Earl plays his love for his sister in every note until the room glows with everything they share, their common territory. Their DNA is lighting up and flashing like the pink and blue stage lights suspended around Earl’s band. Yes, this is my sister. Yes, you are my brother.
The Pause Before Emergency

Arland is at the oven, boiling a hotdog for his lunch, turning it over and over with the tongs. The next thing Arland knows he’s on the kitchen floor, his cheek against the grainy, yellowed linoleum. He can’t move his arms or legs. He thinks he’s moving them, but when he looks at them, there they are stretched out long and limp as cold wieners, which reminds him... He tries to talk, but his tongue is thick and heavy in his mouth and only lolls off the sides. He grunts, but he can’t grunt too loud; his throat seems to have closed up tight, so tight it’s a wonder he can breathe through it. But he’s breathing, he’s thinking, he remembers that hotdog up there and wonders if anyone’s bothered to turn off the stove. He wonders how long he’s been down here.

He tries to call out to Darla. But then he remembers. A black cricket emerges from a crack in the linoleum near the bottom of the stove. The cricket’s looking at him, sizing him up, testing the waters, the zenith of his steely eye working small circles. Arland remembers hearing during the War how the Nazis tortured Jewish captives by sewing up crickets in their emptied eye sockets. He had a nightmare about that soon after and awoke to the feel of cricket antennae tickling his inner eyelids. He shivers and tries to call Darla to get the bug spray. Nope, no Dar.

He realizes he is in a state of emergency right now. Dar was always telling him he’d have a stroke if he didn’t shape up. He should hear some sirens, feel cold, strong hands hoisting him onto a stretcher any minute, but he’s stuck in the pause before his emergency. He remembers the pause before Darla’s emergency started. She’d been sick, and they both knew it was coming. After getting the call from Ray’s partner saying he wanted to meet
them, things only got worse. The radiation had been stopped a month before and they were waiting for her to slowly pass. But not how it happened. Not so quietly. He had woken up one morning, gone to the kitchen and drunk two mugs of instant coffee while reading the headlines and the comics in color, "Blondie" and "Beetle Bailey." Beetle Bailey was sleeping again, working out elaborate schemes just so he could sleep a little longer, fool the Sarge. Dar's teeth were in a glass on the window ledge, the water giving them the illusion of chattering. He went to wake her for breakfast an hour later and saw that her lips were funny, so slack and white, drooping to one side of her face like he'd never seen before. As he sat with her, the pause seemed to stretch out, waver, encompassing each year, each moment sparking and whistling before his eyes like those kind of whirly firecrackers that circle and circle in the air before fading and burning out. He called the doctor—he didn't know what else to do—and then held her hand until the funeral home people arrived and friends, neighbors, people he couldn't identify swarmed around him, stuck their wet cheeks to his, clawed his hands too tightly, suffocated him in so many words, words like when he used to say his name over and over as a child until it was just a strange, guttural syllable. But before the hearse arrived, Darla had her pause and he got to be there.

The sun goes behind a cloud and the light in the kitchen goes soft. The cricket goes back into the crack and Arland realizes it's because his arm is starting to move. Deep in his chest there is heat, some energy, movement that he's able to shoot to the tips of his fingers, his toes, and make them move a little. So he's not dead yet. He focuses on this heat, on his legs. He's moving more now, and imagines himself a turtle upturned on his shell, arms and legs kicking the air as thick and resistant as water. He tries to call out. His mouth is working, the sound moves the air around him, opens up his throat.
He looks in the living room and sees the back of Darla's white, curly head above the back of her recliner, almost glowing like the white globes over the street lamps outside. He closes his eyes, tries to call to her. When he opens them, her head is gone. He wants to sit in her recliner, to feel the seat where her legs and butt made permanent impressions in the cushion. He wants to breathe the air she breathed for so many hours, so many years, knitting, watching TV, sitting in that chair.

Time passes (hours? minutes?) and Arland regains his movement little by little. He manages to kick his way into the living room, his forehead gliding across the matted carpet, taking long breaks to catch his breath and work his fingers. He notices how dirty the carpet is, the sour odor of stinky feet and spilled soup. The housekeeping has gone downhill since Ray's incident a year ago, he knows, and has become nearly unbearable since Darla passed, and he realizes it's a good thing he's never bent down to smell the carpet. His life had turned into an intricate trail of dominoes and as each struck the next, fell from high places to strike the one waiting below, around and around, the carpet got dirtier, older, stinkier. After Darla passed, Ray's partner, a man named Jon with a heavy Spanish accent, called again, wanting to come visit Arland, talk about Ray's childhood, about Ray's last days. Arland told him the house was too messy, that he couldn't have visitors. Jon offered to help clean it up.

He manages to hoist himself onto the sunken, soft seat of Darla's recliner, though his legs become twisted underneath his weight. It'll have to do. He wants to put his hands on the wood armrests of the chair, the places where the wood is darker from the oil of Dar's hands, but his arms won't move right. They twitch. He looks at the lamp Darla made. She was always making things out of trash or throw-away items she bought at garage sales. This was a lampshade made from the rough, brown-gray egg cartons she saved for months one
year. In the middle of each egg cup is a different colored marble that glows when the lamp was turned on. Now, Arland thinks it looks like dozens of eyes all staring at him, moving slightly. Maybe they're Darla's eyes now, or Ray's. Darla with her hot glue gun, gluing all those little marbles into egg cartons snipped open with fingernail scissors. She was always making things. She used to say it was because she was a “depression girl,” always trying to save money, be creative, make materials stretch until they fell apart in their hands. After the War, when Arland got a good job with the city, he would get frustrated with her for still making her own clothes with her old sewing machine, clipping coupons and organizing them alphabetically. He bought her a mink coat once. That was what all the men were buying their wives that particular year, but she refused to wear it and took it back. He never bought her anything else after that. Now he wishes he would’ve. He wishes a lot of things.

He slides his waist off the seat of the armchair and lets the weight of his legs pull him to the floor and moves slowly across the living room to the dollhouse Darla made out of shoeboxes, each box a room, one with a partition down the middle to separate the bathroom from a laundry room. The furniture is made of soap boxes, match boxes, fabric sewn and stuffed with beans, sand, salt, with Oriental carpets painted on the floors, flowers and vines twisting together in heart-shaped patterns. There are three people made of wooden clothespins, one for each member of their family. Darla saved old hair from kitchen haircuts and glued it to the tops of the clothespins. She wanted them to be real like that. She even glued on little tufts for eyebrows. Her and Arland’s clothespins had grayish brown hair, but Ray’s was blond and still seemed to shine. Arland remembers Ray scrubbing his head with a bar of green soap, refusing to use shampoo.
Arland reaches up and pinches Ray’s pin between his fingers and brings it close to his face. He looks at the eyes, painted blue balls in black ovals, pointing slightly in different directions, eyelashes so slight and curled he can’t tell if they are painted or if he is making them up in his mind. He brings the pin up to his nose and inhales, trying to smell that green soap again. He presses the pin to his lips until it hits his teeth, and holds it there for a long time. He remembers hearing about voodoo from his buddies overseas, using dolls to contain the spirits of people. Maybe Ray can feel this kiss, his hands around his body. Perhaps Ray will be released from the pin and tell him all the things Arland wants to hear so badly, so very badly.

Someone knocks on the door and pushes it open. It’s Marcy, the Meals on Wheels Girl. Marcy is a housewife who volunteers her afternoons to bring plastic trays of food to old people like Arland. She’s loud and sort of friendly, but she never looks at Arland when she speaks—she’s always scanning the room, picking up Darla’s trinkets, saying, “Well isn’t that the sweetest thing?”

“Well good afternoon to you, Arlie! How you doin’ today, huh?” Marcy is already in the kitchen, peeling the foil off the top of the tray. In her wake, Arland smells her hairspray, strong and too sweet. Arland lets the spark of energy in his chest smolder for a few seconds, then pushes his voice as loud as he can, trying to say “Call 911.” It comes out low and scratchy, one painful scrape of sound.
“What was that, hon?” Marcy calls from the kitchen. His throat is so dry, so tight, he bides his time until Marcy comes back into the living room. He crawls toward his armchair as Marcy shouts, “You just hold on one sec, here, I’m bringing out your dinner. Mmmmm, sure looks good today. The ladies made you up some meatloaf, some peas, some chocolate cake. I’ll put half in the fridge like you like, mmkay?” Marcy is opening the fridge when she shrieks. “Arland! You left the flame on and there’s a hotdog all burnt up still in this pan!” He hears the small thud of the hotdog in the trash, the clatter of the pot in the sink. “You need to be more careful. That’s just plain DANGEROUS, Arland. DAN-GER-OUS, I’m telling you.”

“Well what are you doin’ on the floor?” Marcy is in the living room and slides her arms up under Arland’s armpits and tries to lift. Arland pushes against the floor and Marcy leans him onto his chair, groaning low and hoarse like some kind of animal. She moves his TV stand, holding his plastic tray of food in front of him, the steam from the food making his face hot, damp. “There you go, nice and hot.” Marcy stands, hands on hips for a moment, then goes and turns the TV on. “You like that Young and the Restless, now, don’t you? I been watching it too, lately. It’s getting good. That Victor Newman is quite the man, isn’t he? I bet you were like a Victor Newman in your days, huh, Arlie?” Marcy cackles and runs her slick, fake nails through her hair. Marcy finds the remote that has been knocked to the floor and turns up the volume. “You hear that alright?”

Arland is trying to get Marcy’s attention. He tries to say “Call 911” again. He wants to tell her to call Jon back, Arland wants to talk to him.

“Huh? You need to speak a little louder, hon,” Marcy says and turns to him.
He grunts, a new burst of energy making his tongue flick up in his mouth, splitting his grunt into two syllables: Call-911, though it sounds more like :Ca-wuh.

Marcy looks at him, confused. “Arlie, you need to get more rest. You seem real tired. Let me get you a napkin.” She’s back in the kitchen. Arland reaches out his arm, knocks the tray over.

“Oh. ARR-LAND!” Before Marcy is in the living room, she’s back in the kitchen, then in the living room, paper towel roll in hand, scooping the peas back into the tray. “Five second rule, I always say. The food’s on the ground less than five seconds, it’s okay to eat, right? Here, I’ll brush off the hair.” Marcy resets the tray, drops a paper towel onto Arland’s lap and says, “Well, I need to get going.” Arland grunts once more, looks at her face, hoping she’ll look at his, notice something is wrong. He must look different, he guesses, like his old war buddies who had strokes—part of their faces numb and plastic-like, or gently shaking like his washing machine on spin cycle. But she swings around, her big butt near Arland’s face for a brief second, so close he considers nudging it with his head, burying his face in the large, faded seat of her Levi’s, then she lets the screen door slam behind her, calling out, “You have a nice day!” And any flicker of energy Arland managed to muster slowly leaks out his nostrils, his parted, papery lips along with his raspy breaths as the sound of Marcy’s car fades down the street and around the corner. If Darla was still here, they’d get a good laugh out of Marcy and her flightiness. But Arland is the only one left.
Arland thinks he might die here. No one will be here until tomorrow when Marcy comes again. Maybe if she notices the untouched food still on the tray before him, she'll know something is wrong. He knows Marcy is a good person, underneath all that blue eye shadow. After Ray's memorial service, she brought him and Darla a casserole full of cheese, greasy hamburger, canned corn, comforting things. When Darla passed a couple months later, Marcy brought him an angel-food cake that he ate for every meal the next three days or so. Often, he wishes she'd bring him another casserole or cake rather than the congealing portions of Meals on Wheels, but who's he to complain? Darla never was the best cook, though she tried when Ray was around. She'd make ham and instant mashed potatoes with canned gravy, which was better than her home-made attempts anyway. Ray never ate much. He was always small and finicky, always eating little bites and not too many. But he sure liked them pronto-pups. Every year at the state fair, Arland would buy him three or four for lunch, just happy to see him eating like a normal, healthy, growing boy. He'd squirt on the ketchup and mustard in long, neat stripes down the length of each pup and eat them horizontally, so as not to drip. Then they'd go look at the horses, pigs, fowl, or maybe go to the tractor sales lot and let Ray sit on the high seat of a particularly big tractor, watching the crowds pass as he finished his pup, Darla always in the background muttering her mantra Be careful, be careful, please be careful. That was something he could tell Jon.

That was before Ray got older, started leaving them alone to go to the grandstand with his friends, wearing baseball caps low over his eyes, his hands hard knots deep in his pockets. Before Ray stopped talking to him. Before he'd started to go to his room after school, play records loud, sneak out in the middle of the night. Before Frank started to
ground him, shout at him, whip him, push him farther and farther away from him and Darla, into a territory that made Arland scared for him, made him think of those men in the army who were too scared, too angry to fight, who cried and screamed at night, who got in fights with each other instead of the real enemy.

Arland remembers Ray as a kid, building elaborate cities out of sticks and mud in the dirt of the front yard. He’d build rivers that ran through his cities, walls made of packed grass lining the borders. He’d fill them with ants. Arland wants to go outside and see what’s left of it. He’s sure there’s some sign, some trace of Ray’s cities. It can’t all be gone, not even after all this time. There will be a sign from Ray.

He pushes the tray over and flops his body to the floor. He is on his elbows and knees, making ground. He thinks of performing drills at boot camp, crawling beneath the barbed wire, sand grinding into the flesh of his knees where he’d find it still embedded days after. It had felt good, though, being so close to the ground, moving quickly, stealthily, his body working like a machine. That was all before Darla, before Ray was even alive. When Arland was a single, whole man, all his parts and mind belonging just to himself and to his country.

When on leave in his hometown of Enid, Oklahoma, he met Darla, all sweetness, perfume, her lips two watery smears of red that he couldn’t stop thinking about. And then his life just rolled out and out from under him without too much thought or consideration to the space he was leaving behind like the blurred landscape seen from a car window.

Arland musters new strength. He develops a theory: if he pretends that he hasn’t had a stroke, that nothing has happened, that Darla is in the kitchen scrambling some eggs, he may be able to pick himself up, start walking and talking like normal. It’s all brain
chemistry. Shooting the right signals through your synapses. And the funny thing is he feels like he is up, walking toward the front door, hearing the squeak of the screen door and the hum of its slam, walking through the tough grass in his bare feet to tell his neighbor that he's had a stroke, please get some help. But he's still lying on the floor, his fingers kneading the carpet fibers.

After Ray’s incident, Arland was always checking up on Darla. She got so nervous, so sad she could barely breathe, it seemed to Arland, and he was always trying to make things easier for her. Laying out her clothes in the morning, making the breakfast himself for the first time in forty-five years of marriage, reading her stories from the paper. She stopped making things. The last thing she made was an elf doorstop, its legs long and filled with hard black beans to stuff against the cracks under doors, to keep the drafts out. She made it for Ray and sent it wrapped in newspaper pages to San Francisco. They never heard if he got it or not. Those last few weeks, sitting in her recliner, Darla would mumble, “I wonder if he ever got that elf I made him,” as if that elf was stuffed with some kind of magic that would save him from himself. Arland imagined he did get it, that he might have opened it, might have stuck it in his closet, might have hugged it to his body, might have laughed at it. Arland didn’t know Ray well enough to say. But he knows that Ray never said thanks, never called to say anything the last ten years or so. He lived his own life in California, surprising Darla once every couple years by showing up at the door around Christmas, once bringing a bouquet of Hawaiian flowers he bought specially in an exotic flower shop. Always a surprise. Always like that, showing up with kisses and sweet words, making Darla weep with happiness, then gone for years at a time. Always hot or cold. He never understood that boy, not since he was little.
The flowers are still in the basement. They don’t die. You put them in the basement in the winter, hang them upside down, and they’re good to go once spring comes. Big pink and yellow heads, prickly, shiny, not like any flowers Arland had ever seen before. Darla used to run her fingers over their rough stems, their shell-like surfaces, talking about how Ray might turn around, meet a nice girl, get a good job. And Arland didn’t say anything. In some deep, unspeakable way, they both knew what Ray was doing.

Arland is moving again, refreshed and slightly agitated thinking about those flowers in the basement. He should throw them away. Just something else that his niece will have to clean up once he’s gone. He is at the door, trying to push it open with his head. The metal of the screen door is cool and calming against his forehead. He reaches up his hand to pull down on the lever, to let the screen door give way. It’s stuck so he lets his arm hang from it, occasionally trying to yank it down. It finally gives and his head is sticking out the door into the cool, resonant air of outside. He feels better now, like he can do it, he can make it. He can almost see those little cities stretching across the yard, with bridges, streets with little metal cars, mud igloos with chimneys, a bright green baseball diamond glinting in the center.

On Ray’s last visit, six months ago, right before everything started to unravel, before Darla took on grief like a slippery hill, never making it up without sliding further and further down, they couldn’t help but notice how skinny Ray was, how his cheeks were sucked into his face, how he looked so old to be their son, so old and tired, dark, sunken smudges under his eyes, his fingernails long and too yellow for a man in his late twenties. But Darla made him dinner, chattering about this and that, while Arland watched TV alone, trying to think of something to say to him. But he never could speak to him. His words would get stuck in some sour hole in his throat and stay there, burning, while Ray ate those same small bites of
food, not too many, hardly any. He had Darla's hair, though. Yellow and wavy, curling in sweet commas under his earlobes.

Arland pushes his body through the door so he is on the wood of his porch, the blue paint coming off in long, crumbling flakes into his clothes, onto his lips which brush the porch as he travels slowly to the steps. He manages to swing his legs first down the steps, riding them down as Ray used to when he was a kid.

What could he have done? What could he have done different? Why was he such a bad father, his kid gone so terribly, terribly wrong? Arland hears neighborhood kids playing a couple yards down, their screams fluttering through the cool spring air, an omen that the cold would soon give way to more such screams, bicycles, barbeques, even a parade down Hickory street complete with fire engines and shriners in miniature cars. Ray used to collect the suckers they threw to him and store them in his pillow case, eating one a day until they were all gone.

Arland notices he is cold, how cold his toes are, the tip of his nose. He tries to speak and almost sounds like himself, can almost make his tongue form words. Ray was his big failure in life, yet there was something beautiful about Ray, something unlike Arland, something soft and desperate. The way he played when he was a kid, almost giving off light as he ran around the yard, scaled the oak tree out back of the house and perched, singing, on long branches, dangling his legs below. *Go Tell It on the Mountain.*

Arland is now lying in the grass of the front yard which is not tough, as he imagined, but wet, still damp from the memory of snow. His face is now pressed into the dark earth which smells dark and mossy. He runs his hands over the grass, the dirt, feeling for sticks,
bundles of grass, green plastic army men set to guard the territories. A message written with a stick. Anything.

Ray looked so peaceful all laid out with a suit on. The first time they’d seen him in a suit since he was a little kid. The morticians even cut his hair, filled in the hollow places in his face with make-up. He was handsome. Like Arland when he was in the Navy.

“Help me.” Arland’s tongue is working. He pushes his vocal cords, tries to call out again. “Help.” Jon would help him. He even offered. He would know what to look for, the kinds of clues Ray would leave behind. And he could tell him what Ray thought of him, if he loved him despite everything.

He rolls his head toward the house and sees something unexpected. There, on the ledge of the living room window, is the glass with Darla’s teeth still in it. He had forgot all about them, and there they were for everyone to see, a part of Darla preserved in a glass. They seem to be moving in the water, like the morning of her death, but this time they looked like they were trying to say something.

Arland hears footsteps from the next yard over and his neighbor lady’s voice calling out, “Arl! Arland, are you okay?” But now he wishes she would go away so he could concentrate on Darla’s teeth, on the slight rippling of water in the glass, the small movement made for him, he is sure of it. Maybe they will tell him that Darla has seen Ray, that he’s okay now, tell him the reason for everything going so wrong, forgive him. That Ray is a whole person again, his chest sealed up, strong and hard, a heart beating surely within. His arms no longer bone-thin and purple, but lean and taut like they were when he was a teenager.
The neighbor is at his side, her fleshy, warm hand on his shoulder, her large frame blocking his view to the window. “Oh my God, what happened to you?” she asks.

Arland doesn’t try to answer. He saves his strength. His emergency is about to start. Soon he hears sirens screaming in the distance, coming closer and closer and all the years and moments of his life are hung dangling, upside down from the limbs of the tree, caught in the rays of sun, hung from outside the window, caught in the hair of the neighbor, all the memories and unmemories are twirling and sparking before fading as the cold, strong hands lift him from the ground.
Circumstances of Starvation

Jolie awakes with Spacey Valentine wrapped around her neck breathing warm, meaty cat breath on her shoulder. His long, black fur around her face sways with her own breath, and she watches awhile before she grabs him by his scruff and moves him down to her stomach. He's developed an abscess, a pouch of puss, on his side beneath his spine. She pokes it down with her finger, like she used to do with the soufflés her mother makes on special occasions, and watches it slowly inflate with puss again. Spacey doesn't seem to care.

The Tae-bo music is blaring downstairs and she can hear Billy Blanks barking out motivational orders: “Your buns should be burning by now!” and “You’ve got to dig down deep inside and find the strength!” She usually waits in her bed until she hears the blender whir, signaling that Emily’s done. It’s always a bit awkward bumbling around the kitchen that is actually the corner of the living room while Emily is squatting, twirling her fists around each other as fast as she can, her face as red and shiny as a beating heart. Jolie always has the feeling lately that Emily shoots her dirty looks between sets, but she can never be sure with Emily. When Jolie first moved in, and Emily still wanted to hang out and bond, Jolie tried Tae-bo one morning. She couldn’t help but laugh awkwardly as she punched and kicked the air as gracefully as she could manage, and she was conscious the whole time of her loud, wheezy breathing. Emily asked her if she had asthma and offered to get her a drink of water.

When Jolie hears the blender kick in, she puts Spacey Valentine on the floor and goes downstairs, making sure her footsteps are loud enough so as not to startle Emily, who gets snippy when she’s caught off-guard. She tells Jolie she’s still not used to having a
roommate. Emily is perched on the bar stool—she doesn’t own a kitchen table, just a bar with one stool—patting her face with a towel, sipping a pink, chunky “power drink.”

“Mornin’,” Jonie says. She is immediately aware of how sing-song she sounds, like a mother.

“Oh, hi,” Emily says, not looking up. She’s frowning intently into her power drink, turning over spoonfuls as if she’s not quite sure what’s in it.

“Um, I know I keep saying this to you, like every morning...” Jonie begins and sees Emily roll her eyes heavily towards her, “but you should really make an appointment for Spacey. His sore is getting bigger, I think.”

Emily looks at Jonie like she doesn’t know what she’s talking about, or like she shouldn’t be talking at all.

“I mean, I don’t think it hurts him or anything. I was poking around at it this morning, and he was just kind of watching me.” Jonie is aware how nervous she sounds and she hates herself for it. She clenches her fist, digging her thumbnail into her palm out of habit. Since she got her new job and started painting her nails, the tip of her right thumb was always the first to chip.

“Well, Jonie, don’t play with it, for Chrissake. You’ll probably pop it all over yourself. Serves you right for messing around with Spacey’s tumor like that.” She doesn’t seem to really be paying attention to what she’s saying. She gulps the rest of her power drink, sighs loudly, and asks, “So Jonie, what are you doing today?”

“Same-o, same-o,” Jonie says and moves toward the refrigerator.

Before she opens it, Emily says, “Oh, Jonie, I’ve marked all my food with a sharpie, so you’ll know what’s mine and what’s yours.
"Okay."

"I can’t afford to share or borrow food anymore. I’m so-o-o-oh broke. And I don’t eat very much, you know."

Jolie opens the fridge and the eggs they bought together have a twirly "E" on the carton. "Well, we bought these eggs together, right, so can I still have my share?"

"Well, I think you’ve had more than six, but go ahead. See, that’s the flaw with the system." Emily makes a clucking noise off the roof of her mouth that usually signals her leaving. She adds, "I don’t mean to be bitchy about this or anything, I just really can’t afford it. I’m going to jump in the shower now." She clods up the stairs. "See ya," she throws down at the top.

Jolie takes an egg anyway and taps it on the edge of the stove a little too hard, slick egg white licking her fingers. She thinks of the puss in Spacey’s bulbous growth. Things are getting worse. She feels she should have a talk with Emily, to let her know that it’s not just about Marc, or the bathroom, or now the food, but just an issue of incompatibility. But she has a hot feeling smoldering in her stomach every time she’s around Emily that she did something wrong. And if she can only figure out what it was, maybe things will go back to how they were when she first moved in. She realizes she’s using the logic of a child of divorced parents and decides to be stronger in her convictions.

When she first met Emily, when they got together for café mochas after Jolie responded to the ad Emily put in the Sideview, Jolie was intimidated by Emily’s presence. It wasn’t that Emily was so beautiful—she did have the blond-white kind of hair that her mother would call gossamer or angel hair, but that Jolie just thought of as webby for the spider web effect that a lock made falling across an ear—it was that she was so shiny. Her
voice, her eyes, her webby hair, her large hips, her white, white neck seemed to emit light, Jonie observed as they sipped scalding coffee in a shop painted in primary colors. Even the other customers seemed to notice and stared at Emily as she waved her hands expressively, laughed at Jonie’s attempted humor. She smiled a bit too long and her sentences wandered off into distant places, as if she wasn’t really talking to Jonie, but making sure her light was shooting all through the coffee shop. Jonie stared at her heart-shaped lips that bent in funny directions when she talked.

She asked Jonie if she fit the requirements of the ad, which read, “23 YEAR OLD FEMALE SEEKS FEMALE ROOMMATE TO SHARE 2 BR APT. MUST LOVE CATS. NO SMOKERS OR LESBIANS, PLEASE.” Jonie said that she did, though she felt self-conscious and embarrassed, remembering what her brother said to her only a few days earlier. She had gotten her hair cut, in what she hoped would be a hip, city-style haircut for her new job—it was very short and she put purple gel in it to spike it around, make it look intentionally messy. Her brother Jay had said, “You look totally butch.” That’s when she decided she needed to start wearing make-up more and buy some skirt-suit outfits at the mall.

Emily told her she thought it would work out, though she’d never had a roommate before, and was forced to place the ad when her credit cards were maxed out. She would just have to turn her work-out room into a second bedroom. She even said she thought living with Jonie would be “a blast.” Jonie had sparkling hopes. Her future landscape was studded with good things: a new career proof-reading at an advertising firm, café mochas, this shiny new friend, nail polish in all shades of pink, and a whole city stretched out in all directions around her, the sky line framed in her bedroom window like a postcard.
At first things were great with Emily. They made meals together, watched romantic-comedies on weeknights, and talked about the future. Emily wanted to marry her boyfriend, Marc, have a bunch of kids, and do “party-consulting” on the side. Now, she worked the Victoria’s Secret at the mall, where she’d just been promoted to shift manager. Jonie wanted to move up in ABC, maybe become an ad-writer, and meet a quiet, considerate guy who would love Kansas City as much as she does and take her to all the bars and night clubs. Emily reassure her, perhaps too much, “You’ll meet someone when you least expect it.” Jonie didn’t know how to least expect it.

After the first couple weeks of living with Emily, things got strange. Once Jonie walked in on Emily and Marc having sex, Emily’s thick legs straight up in the air and Marc’s pink butt hovering above her. Emily heard her and screamed for her to get out, bringing her legs down on Marc’s head, scrambling for the covers. Jonie felt sick and her own legs spongy as she made her way to her own room, where she shut the door and stared out the window for a long time. She kept saying dumb things out loud to get her thoughts off what she’d just seen, like, “Oh dear, it’s September already.” Then she felt worse.

Later, Emily knocked on the door, walked solemnly into the room, and sat down on the edge of Jonie’s bed, looking around at all of Jonie’s things. She sighed and said, “Jonie, I just want you to know it’s okay what happened today. I know you didn’t mean to walk in on Marc and me.” Her hands were folded on her lap, her hair damp from the shower making two wet spots on her tee shirt, one right above each breast. Her legs crossed at the ankle, where a thin, silver ankle bracelet seemed to be squeezing her ankle bloodless.

Jonie looked to the side of Emily, at a Prince poster on her wall, and said, “Yeah, I’m really sorry about that, Emily. I knocked, but I guess you didn’t hear me. And I didn’t see
Marc’s truck in the parking lot, so I had no idea he was here or I never would’ve come in like that.” Emily sat still, as if contemplating the sincerity of Jonie’s words, watching Jonie closely. Jonie couldn’t look at her. Perhaps it was the wet spots on her shirt, or the tightly-lipped quality of her mouth, or the light she constantly put out was simply too much for Jonie to handle at the moment, but Jonie looked at Prince instead, who was naked from the waist up, his ribs poking out, a row of wishbones down his torso. Emily turned around to see what Jonie was staring at.

“Oh God,” Emily said. “He looks so emaciated. Like a victim of a war or something. I’m so glad that look isn’t in style anymore. Not his body, but I mean his hair and that cane thing he’s holding. The eighties were such a bad time for pop culture.” Jonie didn’t say anything. She felt sorry for herself, and for Prince, and wished Emily would just leave. And she did, a few seconds later, first running her fingers through her hair, flicking fat, fragrant drops of water all over Jonie’s quilt and carpet.

Maybe that’s when the tension began. Or maybe it was a week or two after that when Emily and Marc started shutting themselves in Emily’s room, barely speaking to Jonie. Marc would always grunt a hello as he passed, his noisy KC Chiefs windbreaker brushing against Jonie, but Emily would stare straight ahead and lead Marc away by his hand. Jonie doesn’t really know, though. She just knows that she can say nothing funny or right to Emily anymore, that Emily thinks of her as fat and lazy, and that she gets that hot, sick feeling in her stomach being in their common space when Emily’s home.

She feels like she’s a guest in Emily’s apartment, like she’s not paying any rent or utilities, but just hanging out eating Emily’s food. The walls seem whiter, the smell funny and unfamiliar, the furniture harder, and even the city looks cold and steely from Jonie’s
bedroom window. She talks to her mom on the phone every night, who tells her that she needs to communicate better.

Jonie eats her egg quickly, trying to think of what work will be like today, what she’ll say to Kim as soon as she gets there, and where they’ll go for lunch. Joey Beatrice Boo, Emily’s other cat, is creeping around the litter box in the pantry. Jonie turns on the pantry light to check the status of the litter box and finds it full to the top with cat turds, each standing end on end, like a model of the rocky, cratered surface of Mars. For the first time, she feels real, metallic hatred for Emily. She thinks of dumping the litter box between Emily’s sheets after she goes to work, and she imagines the look on Emily’s face, the precise curve of her heart mouth later that night when she slides her bare legs under the covers.

Today Kim is wearing a long, gauzy skirt that covers the tips of her hiking boots, clings to her legs as she walks. The bottom is lined with a row of peacocks connected by the tips of their feathers like a row of paper dolls. Walking to the Chinese restaurant down the block, Kim seems to be tangled in it.

“Wow, I really like your skirt. Where do you get such unique stuff?” Jonie says.

“Actually, I got this in some little import store in Madison—it was made in India. They’re everywhere there. It was like a school uniform or something.” Kim talks a lot about Madison, where she went to school for Art and Design. She would’ve gotten a job and lived there forever, she once told Jonie, but the job market is so tight being that no one wants to leave once they graduate. She grew up in a small town in North Dakota, where she hated it.
“God I would love to go to India,” Kim says, “Love it, love it.” Jonie sees Kim’s tongue flickering the words off it—*love it, love it.*

“I would go to France,” Jonie says. “I took French all through college, but I think I’ve forgotten it all now. Parlez vous whatever.” Kim is looking at her as if she’s really listening, as if learning French is something that is really important to Jonie. Her eyebrows are arched down and her mouth pulled in a straight line, her head nodding appropriately throughout. Kim listens to everything Jonie says in this way. It makes Jonie censor what she says; not to just rattle, like her mother does, but make sure that she really means what she says.

The streets downtown are noisy, and a light gray fog is settled over the street like sweat from the gray buildings lining both sides. The slice of sky above is startlingly blue and Jonie can’t help but look up at it every so often.

The Chinese restaurant is a small, square room with card tables covered in stained red table cloths lining three walls. Eating out is Jonie’s favorite thing. She hates to admit relishing such a normal activity so much, but she can’t help it. She gets excited. Her favorite part is after the drink is served, before the meal—the anticipation. Jonie orders sesame chicken and Kim orders braised tofu. They both order a pot of green tea, which Kim introduced to Jonie a couple weeks earlier at her apartment. Jonie looks at a shelf full of various-sized, smiling buddhas and a small, white, porcelain figurine of a cat with one paw raised, the pads of the paw plated in a chipping gold. She looks at her own fingernails, which are already flaking dark red chips on to her papers at work. Jonie says, “I can’t keep polish on my nails for the life of me.”
“Don’t wear any then. Who cares? Who looks at your nails anyway?” Kim says. She doesn’t wear any make-up and wears her hair long—too long, Jonie thinks—and loose. If Kim put on some lipstick and cut the split ends off her hair and maybe blow-dried it so it’s straighter, she’d look so much better, Jonie thinks. But she would never say that to Kim. Kim doesn’t care about her looks anyway. Which is weird, Jonie thinks, because isn’t art about looks and aesthetic pleasure? She realizes this is something her mom would say and feels a flush of shame.

“Yeah, I guess,” Jonie mumbles.

“So is your roommate situation any better?” Kim says.

“No, not at all. I think it’s worse. I think she’s trying to drive me out of the apartment.”

“You’re kidding. What is she doing now?”

“Well, she doesn’t do anything, I guess. I don’t know. Maybe it’s just me and things are okay. We don’t have to be best friends or anything. I can’t really tell.” The food comes and Jonie is relieved that she can stare into her chicken instead of Kim’s intense gaze.

“I don’t think it’s you, Jonie. She really sounds awful, I’m serious. Just get out of there,” Kim says, aligning her chopsticks in the nooks of her fingers.

“Well, I can’t just leave. I need to talk to her, but I know she’ll blow it out of proportion or twist it around. It’s just how she is.” Jonie takes a bite, then says with her mouth moving carefully and inarticulately around the burning food, “Get this. She’s too lazy to clean out the litter box and it’s completely overflowing. I’ve cleaned it the last four times. She does not deserve to own pets.”
Kim is expertly maneuvering tofu, cube by cube, into her small mouth, keeping her eyes on Jonie. “Wow. What are her cats’ names again?”

“Spacey Valentine and Joey Beatrice Boo,” Jonie says, leaving silences between each word for dramatic effect.

“That is so funny. Spacey? That’s so bad.”

“She says it’s because he looks like he’s spacing out a lot and Marc gave him to her on Valentine’s Day.”

Kim laughs her laugh that sounds like a flute practicing flawed scales. “That is mind-blowingly stupid.”

Suddenly, Jonie feels guilty. Like she’s betraying Emily or gossiping about her. She imagines Emily in their apartment, sprawled wrong-way across the armchair reading *Cosmo*, or talking to Marc on the phone feigning hurt while winking at Jonie. She doesn’t hate Emily. She just needs to get things straightened out.

“Well, you can always stay with me a few days if you need to. If she starts abusing you or something,” Kim says. Jonie has never known anyone like Kim before. Kim is like gold.

They eat their food and sip their strong, dark tea, talking about all the people at work, the coming weekend, the comeback of eighties music, their universities, their high school personas, and the way they never, ever want to move back home.
The next week, as if to prove Jonie wrong, Emily seems to get a little nicer. She takes Spacey Valentine to the vet, where they surgically remove his abscess. He is now sullen and bleary-eyed and doesn’t bother to wake Jonie up anymore. He skulks around under the bed, occasionally sending up a “Maaaaah.”

Emily even makes Jonie dinner one night—a pasta dish with cucumbers and squash slices in pink, tangy sauce—and they sit cross-legged, facing each other on the living room floor. Emily talks about Marc and what a “tool” he can be, and her job at “The Secret.”

“She is nuts!” Emily says, talking about her mother, letting her mouth hang open for a couple seconds for dramatic effect. “She’s a shop-a-holic, actually. I called in to the Montel Williams show, trying to get her as a guest on a show about shop-a-holics, but they never called back. Their loss. She probably would’ve drove the ratings up, she’s such a freak. She buys so much shit! She buys clothes, in all different sizes in case she loses weight, right, and she buys whatever is on sale. We have so much Christmas and Easter decorations—we have a spare bedroom full of wreaths and ornaments and big plastic Easter bunnies. Last time I was home, I was like, ‘Mom. What could you possibly do with four different light-up lawn Easter bunnies?’ and she just goes, “I might give them away or make a display with all of them. Like an Easter village.’” For her mom’s part, Emily’s voice gets high and cackly, her eyes crinkled slits, and her lips stretch around her words. Jonie thinks how Emily would do an impression of her and feels the pit of her stomach jump a little.

“My mom and I are really close,” Jonie says. “I lived at home all through college.”

“Ewww, really? I couldn’t stand that.”
“It was cheap. Free food. Free laundry. And I like my mom. We’re pretty similar. I guess we’re friends. Maybe we could go on Montel for mother and daughter look-alikes or something.”

“Well, you probably like the same music, huh? Prince and Hall and Oates and Madonna... My mom listens to country. She’s in love with Garth Brooks.”

“Aren’t we all, really?” Jonie says and Emily laughs. Jonie wonders what Emily’s mom thinks of her—if she thinks she’s perfect, or if she can’t stand her. It has to be one or the other.

It’s still tense, at times, and Jonie doesn’t feel completely comfortable around the apartment, but Emily tries to be nice and doesn’t give her looks when Jonie sits down and turns on the TV while she’s eating. Jonie has realized that Emily doesn’t have any girlfriends. No phone calls or mention of any friends. Jonie feels kind of sorry for her, for that. Maybe Emily has a disorder that affects her social life, or maybe she just doesn’t know how to relate to women. Jonie decides that she just needs to relax and be patient to live with Emily. She feels guilty about all the things she’s said about her to Kim and her mother.

To make up for it, she buys Emily a small, plastic Easter bunny at the mall and attaches a post-it note that says, “One for the collection. Ha ha.” She leaves it on the kitchen counter. The next day it’s gone, but Emily never says thanks, never says anything about it, and Jonie sometimes tricks herself into thinking she only dreamed it.
On Easter day, Jonie invites Kim over to see the apartment, order a pizza, and rent a movie. Emily goes out with Marc for their one year anniversary. She leaves before Kim arrives, wearing a tight, white shift with the black lace scallops of her bra barely visible, like a shadow that follows her chest. Her lips are coated in a sweet red, making them look even more cartoonish than usual. Her feet look a bit odd in strappy, sharp black heels, her ankles the same width as the rest of her legs, coming out of the shoes as if they can’t be contained. She moves hurriedly about the apartment, turning her head to look down the backs of her legs for any runs in her hose, before Marc arrives with a bouquet of roses squeezed into a cloudy glass vase. Emily twitters her fingers at Jonie before closing the door behind her.

Kim shows up with two tulips wrapped in a wet paper towel. “First of the season,” she says, and Jonie can tell she knows about flowers, how they work, when the first come and the last die. Jonie never really notices until they’re everywhere and she can’t help it.

They pop in *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* and order a cheese pizza. Near the end of the movie, much earlier than Jonie expected, Emily blusters through the door, slamming it behind her, strands of hair stuck to her lips, caught in the streaky remains of her lipstick. She plucks them away then stands there, legs apart, staring first at Kim, then at Jonie.

“Hi Emily,” Jonie says. “What are you doing home already?” Baby Jane is buying ice cream cones from the man on the beach, but she doesn’t give him any money. She’s caught all because she can’t remember to pay for the ice cream.
“At first, Emily doesn’t say anything. She shifts her weight to one leg, the other one falling in upon it, and she runs her fingernail along her eyelashes. “I don’t want to talk about it. Do you mind?” she says, barely moving her mouth.

The silence stretches out, hangs there, wavering. Kim says, “Hi, I’m Kim. It’s nice to finally meet you. Jonie talks about you all the time at work.” Her legs are drawn up in front of her on Emily’s maroon papasan. Jonie thinks she looks like a little animal cupped in the hand of a giant. She could be crushed.

“Hi,” Emily says. She takes five steps to the kitchen area, throws open the fridge, and starts clinking glass jars, picking up jugs of milk and juice, setting them down again with a metal thud. She takes an empty jar and throws it towards the garbage. It misses and shatters heavily on the linoleum. “Fuck!” Emily shoots off her bottom lip.

Jonie gets up to go help pick up the pieces, but Emily is picking them up and throwing them into the garbage before Jonie can reach them.

“Just let me do it,” Emily says.

“Are you okay?” Jonie says. Emily doesn’t say anything, goes to the pantry to get the broom. Jonie turns around and looks at Kim, who is looking at the TV, holding onto her toes. Baby Jane is dancing on the beach. The crowd has gathered and are tittering at her. Eerie orchestral music is ringing through the apartment. Jonie feels like she should turn the TV off, but thinks of the silence.

“Is anything wrong?” Jonie asks, this time quiet, as if Kim couldn’t hear.

“I don’t know. What do you think, Jonie?” Emily’s words twist in sarcasm.

“Well, we can go upstairs,” Jonie says and turns to Kim.
“No, just please leave my apartment,” Emily says. She throws the last of the shards into the trash and claps her hands off each other.

“What?” Jonie says. She knows what Emily said. Her face is hot and she can feel the beads of sweat popping from the pores of her palms.

“Just get out, Jonie,” Emily says, as if she is right. As if Jonie is being difficult.

Kim is looking at Emily, her mouth slightly open, her nose pinched together in a way Jonie has never seen.

“We’ll just go to my room,” Jonie says, and starts walking towards the hall, hoping Kim will follow her.

“Fine, but tell your friend to get the fuck out of my apartment.” Emily is terrorizing the refrigerator again, her back towards Jonie, by the hall, and Kim, who is still in the papasan, her legs on the ground and her hands wrapped around the bamboo frame, knuckles white.

Kim stands up, gets her jacket that is draped over the bar stool, and says, “See you, Jonie. Be careful.” She pulls the door shut gently behind her. Jonie can’t tell if she was serious or sarcastic.

Emily stops what she’s doing, turns towards Jonie and says, “You can have people over. But can you please be sensitive about it, and when I’m in an obviously bad state, go somewhere else? Is it too much to ask to not have your nasty-looking friend sitting on my furniture staring at everything I do in my own apartment?” As she spoke, her words got louder and higher. Jonie thinks she might burst into tears or start throwing food at her. Instead, she slams the refrigerator door, causing a clunk inside, grabs her car keys from the
bar, and leaves, turning her head towards Jonie, pinching off their conversation with slatted eyes and the slam of the door.

Jonie stands at the nape of the hallway, the living room buzzing. The silence is like the silence after hanging up the telephone after hearing her mother talk for an hour, but worse. A silence with words hanging all over it like grotesque Christmas ornaments. She turns and wanders down the hallway. She is crying, and she hates it that she’s crying. Instead of turning into her own room, she goes down the hallway towards Emily’s room and opens the door. She turns on the light and sees Emily’s messy room, the smell of dozens of perfumes and strange-colored lotions dizzying. There are candles and stuffed animals, framed pictures of Marc and smaller ones of her mother, magazines and catalogues smashed to the carpet, their spines sticking up, and posters of shirtless men, some holding babies, some kissing women. Jonie finds a tube of lipstick lying on the floor and takes the cap off. The top of the lipstick slopes in the middle, as if Emily pressed it hard and square to her lips. She holds the lipstick in a fist and writes in big, solid letters “FUCK YOU” on two of Emily’s posters. She then puts the cap back on, throws it on the floor, and shuts the door behind her.

She goes to her room and gets in bed with all her clothes on. From the window opposite her bed, the lights of the city are breaking into bars and shimmering through her tears. She thinks of the sound of the jar as it hit the linoleum. It’s the sound she imagines the city making right now, over and over, until she isn’t thinking anything but that sound.
The next morning, Jonie wakes up with Spacey Valentine wrapped around her neck. He must be feeling better. For a few seconds, she forgets what happened last night. She is thinking of breakfast and work, until she realizes the apartment is silent. She stays in bed a bit longer, considering what to do. Maybe Emily isn’t back yet and she can sneak back in her room with the 409 and some paper towels.

She walks quietly, heel sliding gently to toe, into the hall and sees that Emily’s door is shut. She walks carefully down the stairs and sees Emily’s car keys on the bar. Her heart is shaking her whole body as she creeps back up the stairs, packs a bag full of work clothes, deodorant, shampoo, some make-up, and hair gel, and drives to Kim’s. Kim is up smoking a cigarette. Jonie is surprised—she’s never seen Kim smoke—but she asks if her offer is still good. Kim says sure and listens as Jonie cries and talks about Emily long into the morning.

Kim’s place is nothing like Jonie and Emily’s. Her furniture is old and made of velvet with wood frames, and her carpet is an oriental rug faded in paths intersecting at the center. Her place smells sweet and musty from the skinny sticks of incense that Kim burns to cover up the cigarette smoke, which still comes out from the pillows, from Kim’s clothes as she moves, but at least there are no cats or litter boxes to stink the place up. Jonie thinks it’s exotic.

The week after the incident with Emily is like a vacation. Though thoughts of Emily and her man posters come to mind, Jonie tries hard not to think of her, and sometimes she
succeeds. She reads Kim’s books, goes to coffee shops she’s never seen before, and even gets her tarot cards read by Kim. Jonie’s future card is the Strength card and has a picture of a woman holding open the mouth of a lion. Kim says, “This means you will have strength and courage in conquering evil attitudes and hate. If there have been difficulties in your life, you will overcome them with dignity.”

“Oh, whatever,” Jonie says, a rush of happiness shooting through her body, “You picked that one on purpose. Or it probably means Danger or something.”

“No, I didn’t! I swear!” Kim loses her serious card-face.

“Yeah, we’ll see.”

Jonie knows she has to go back to the apartment soon and work things out with Emily. At least get her stuff and pay the last month’s rent, but Jonie likes to tease herself with thinking about never going back and sacrificing her material possessions for the relief of never having to face Emily again. She wonders if Emily has retaliated and drawn all over her poster. She thinks of Prince, naked and lonely on the wall of her room.

“Ugh, I need to get back,” Jonie says. Kim is eating sprouts out of a large glass jar, the kind Jonie’s mother makes sun tea in. “How can you eat like that? Like it’s popcorn or something?”

“It’s good, that’s how,” Kim says and offers Jonie the jar. Jonie thinks of Spacey Valentine and Joey Beatrice Boo and wonders if they miss her. She thinks of the movie she and Kim rented but never returned, and Bette Davis dressed up in baby doll dresses.

Kim’s face suddenly gets wide and excited. “Oh, Jonie, there’s something I have to play for you. I think of it every time I’m at work or the store and I think, I have to remember to tell Jonie. And I finally have. Have you ever heard the song ‘Sweet Joni’ by Neil Young?
He wrote it about Joni Mitchell.” She gets up and starts flipping through the milk crate of records. “I have to play it for you. It’s so beautiful.”

“Wow. I’ve never even heard of it,” Jonie says.

“Huh?” Kim says.

“I just said I’ve never heard of it. You’d think I’d have heard of it, since my name’s in it and all.” After a few seconds of hearing the soft ticking of album covers, Jonie says, “I’m not all that much of a music person, I guess. I can’t get out of the eighties. Everyone used to make fun of me. But it was such a fun time, you know? Everything over the top, everything as big and excessive as you could get it. I think I would’ve been more likable in the eighties. I mean, maybe I was, but I was just a kid. Emily called Prince emaciated.”

“Well, he is kind of.”

“I guess.”

Kim finds the record, takes it out, blows on it, sets it gently on her turntable and Jonie hears the electric touch of the needle to the vinyl. They sit and listen together, eating sprouts, Kim mouthing the words. It is a beautiful song. Jonie catches Kim staring at her with a small smile. Sometimes Kim’s affection scares Jonie. Like maybe she’ll lean in to kiss her and all hell will break loose. But now, Jonie feels happy, like everything will be okay. Jonie thinks, if only I’d known about this sooner, how easier my life would’ve been.

Jonie decides to suck it up, go back to the apartment and tell Emily she can’t live with her anymore. She decides to stop by on her lunch break, so she’ll have an excuse to leave if
things get too intense or awkward. She’s wearing an outfit she bought at the import store with Kim a few days earlier, wide-leg pants and a flowy button-up shirt made of the same material as Kim’s peacock skirt. She had to buy new shoes, too, since most of hers were in the apartment. Her lips are coated in a light, frosty pink.

When she pulls into her numbered slot in the parking lot, she can’t tell if she’s disappointed or relieved that Emily’s car isn’t in hers. She uses her key to unlock the door, and holds her stomach tight for what she might see. As she opens the door, the smell of the apartment presses itself against her and she can hardly breathe. It smells like old Chinese food, cat poop, and something unidentifiable, kind of like sweat. She looks around the otherwise normal apartment and sees a jar of pasta on the counter tipped over, the hard pasta mostly gone except for a few sticks smashed to bits on the counter.

As she steps behind the kitchen bar, there are shredded paper napkins all over the floor. She glances at the pantry door, which is open, and sees cat poop spilling out over the sides onto the linoleum around the box, hard and gray. Joey Beatrice Boo and Spacey Valentine suddenly appear from the hallway, crying in hoarse voices. Jonie feels sick.

She opens a can of food from the refrigerator and puts it in the cat dish, struggling to let it drop into the dish before the cats attack the can. Their jaws move wide and ferociously. She opens another can and adds it to the dish, takes the empty water dish and fills it full again.

She wanders down the hall to her room. Her door is closed. She can’t remember if she closed it before she left or not. She opens the door and there is her room, just as it has been for the last three months. Emily hasn’t done anything that she can see. Jonie feels a pang of guilt or stupidity or relief. She glances down the hall at Emily’s room, the door shut
as well, but this time she doesn’t open it. She goes back to the kitchen and finds the pooper scooper. While she’s looking for a bag, she sees a piece of paper on the bar, weighted down by a framed picture of Marc, laced with Emily’s bubbly handwriting. It reads: “Jolie—I can’t take this anymore. I’m going to my mom’s house for a week or two. Please find a place and move out. Please feed the cats. Let me know when you’re gone at this number 233-0983. No hard feelings, we just obviously are incompatible as roommates. Emily.” Jonie realizes the cats haven’t been fed in nearly two weeks. They’ve been eating napkins. Tears bubble at her eyes, and she holds her stomach as she slouches onto the bar stool. She sits there for twenty minutes, watching her tears roll off her nose and splash on the floor. She watches the cats’ jaws flash as they eat and eat, four and a half whole cans of cat food. She stops feeding them after that, thinking of how fish eat until they explode. How they just don’t know how to stop.
The Mechanics of an All-Consuming Fire

In her mother's sewing room painted Dusty Rose, the walls lined with cardboard boxes labeled “Stuffings” “Plaids,” and the sinister “Bear Parts,” Lydia gets a makeover. She doesn't want a makeover, but she almost enjoys Sheila's cold, plastic-like hands touching her face, making the hair on her arms rise and tingle. Of course, she is thinking about her cats.

“Okay, we’ve got Passion Pear, we’ve got Wildberry Blues, we’ve got Run-For-Cover Red, we’ve got Joy to the Pearl, we’ve got Do Rum-Rum, we’ve got Coffee Kiss, we’ve got Raison Some Fun, and we’ve got one tube left of Pink-a-Boo, which would look great on you, real natural but kind of spunky,” Sheila says.

“Ohhhh, I like the raison one,” Lydia’s mom, Vera, says. “Put that one on her. Sheila. She’s got the eyes for it, she’s definitely got those dark, sad, gorgeous eyes, doesn’t she?” Vera’s butt is perched on the end of an upturned plastic crate pulled up to her sewing desk, bent dangerously out of shape by her weight.

“Mom, I should get you a chair,” Lydia says quickly before the reddish brown lipstick hits her lips.

“Don’t move now, hon. Well, if anyone deserves to have sad eyes that I know, it would be this poor thing,” Sheila says. “I just can’t imagine. I simply can’t imagine losing every single thing I’ve ever owned. It would be like losing my entire identity. Just think of me losing all my make-up! When I walked out of that building without any on, people would think I was the ghost of myself, walking right up to heaven!” Sheila cackles and Lydia feels the lipstick veer slightly off the lines of her lips. She fantasizes about wrestling the lipstick
from Sheila’s grip and drawing big clown lips on her. She’ll tell Vince about this later and they’ll get a good laugh at Sheila’s expense.

“Yes, it’s terrible, but Lydia’s strong, she’ll get through this. And I thought it couldn’t hurt to get through it looking pretty, now can it, Ly?” says Vera, staring out the window. “Lydia, Vince is here. Now there’s someone who could really use a makeover.”

Lydia can’t answer because now Sheila is brushing her lips with a big brush full of powder. “This gives it staying-power,” Sheila says. “Is Vince your boyfriend, hon? I sure hear that name a lot from your mom.”

“No, he’s just a friend.”

Vince knocks at the door. Lydia wants to bat Sheila’s hands away and run upstairs to wash it off. But she stays put and prepares herself not to laugh or even roll her eyes.

“Friend with fringe benefits?” Sheila asks and winks at Vera.

Vera lets Vince in to the sewing room. As soon as he sees Lydia, he bites his lower lip and puts his hands deep in the pockets of his trench coat.

“Hello there, ladies,” Vince says.

“Hi. This is my mom’s friend, Sheila. I’m getting made-up.”

“What’s the occasion?”

“Do you really need a reason to get prettified?” Sheila asks. “Well, a reason other than losing all your possessions and treasures and clothes in a raging fire?”

“She’s really just upset about her kitties,” Vera says. “I tried to tell her, just be thankful that it wasn’t you in that apartment, that cats are cats and cats aren’t people and people aren’t cats, but she’s upset.” Vera lapses into talking about her in the third person with Sheila.
“Well, that’s understandable. But your mom’s right, Lydia, that you should thank the Lord for waiting for you to go to work. You should say your prayers every night, because you’re alive. It’s almost a miracle, isn’t it?” Sheila puts a folded tissue up to Lydia’s mouth and says, “Okay, now blot.” Lydia forgets what this means for a few seconds and stares at the tissue, nervous that she can’t remember.

“Blot your lips on this tissue.”

Lydia obliges. She sees Vince lurking around the edges of the room, pretending to be inspecting box titles.

“You want some lemonade, Vince?” Vera asks.

“No thanks, Vera, I’m doing just great. Thanks anyway.”

Sheila shoots Vera an amused sideways glance before saying, “Okay, you’re all done, sweetie. Now let me get my mirror and show you the new Coco Ashton Cosmetics you. New and improved, they say.” Sheila holds a small hand-mirror up to Lydia’s face and Lydia tries not to gasp or look horrified. Raison Some Fun gives her mouth the appearance of having nursed a grape popsicle and the eye shadow has a painted-on look, like small flames licking up off her eye lids. Everything takes on the characteristics of fire, though, everything seems charred, fire tickling the edges, about to catch and explode, hot, iridescent, orange or blue tinted, or wavering like the light above a campfire. Lydia has dreams about fire, about lying in the midst of it, only it’s cold and wet, or watching it consume her apartment, standing on the sidewalk outside laughing or taking pictures. Mostly she dreams about her cats, though. Every night she dreams of them and wakes up expecting to feel them sleeping on her legs or scratching around in the litter box, or their long bodies wrapped around her neck breathing their meaty breath on her shoulder, but then she remembers she’s at her mom’s house now,
no cats, just an ugly, stinky dog named Bon bon that her mom bought when her second husband, Bruce, left her a couple years ago. He’s not near as smart or sweet or beautiful as her cats.

“Oh you look beautiful,” Vera says. “I knew this was just what you needed to pull you out of this funk. Doesn’t she look just beautiful, Vince?”

“She looks really great, I must admit,” Vince is using the voice he uses with customers at Squinky’s, the comic book store he works at. Lydia wants to shoot him a dirty look but resists, looking into the reflection of her own black-ringed eyes.

“Now she just needs to go to the mall and buy herself some new shoes, and get herself a new hair-do or something, hmmm?” Sheila is taking out a purchase form and clicking her pen in anticipation. “Okay, now, so what did you want to pick up for yourself today?”

She orders the cleanser, mascara, and, reluctantly, the toner.

Sheila writes “Action Packed Toner” on the pad and adds up the total cost, rolling her eyes up into her head as if the numbers hovered just above her line of sight.

“That’ll be thirty two dollars, without tax. The poor girl loses her whole apartment and all her possessions and her two little pets, I think I can get the tax,” Sheila says. Lydia thinks, Thanks a lot, you Generous Old Bitch.

When Lydia and Vince are outside, walking to Vince’s car, she says, “You phony. You turn into Eddie Haskell around my mom.”

“Who are you calling phony? You look like Elvira, Mistress of the Night.”

“I can’t help it. My mom is trying to comfort me. I have to let her go about her business. She wouldn’t believe me if I told her that make-up doesn’t solve problems. It’s
like part of her faith or something. If she thought there was something wrong with me before, now she thinks I’m really in need of fixing.”

“Can I take your picture like this? To masturbate to?”

“You’re a disgusting little man, Vince.” This is the first time they’ve joked around since the fire and it feels good. Like she can almost forget the last two months for a couple seconds and pretend that she and Vince are on their way to her apartment to order some pizza, play with Skeeter and Skooter, play some Scrabble. Vince has been there for her, picking up new knick-knacks and kitchen appliances for her at garage sales, drawing her quirky little sympathy cards on napkins. He’s been almost too there. But now she’s glad to get away from Sheila, to have someone to make fun of.

“You do bring out the best in me,” Vince says.

Lydia and Vince are sitting on Vince’s old red couch, falling into each other in the severe sag that has taken over. He found it sitting by a dumpster in the alley when he was moving in and claimed it as his, but Lydia had to consciously not think about how bad it smelled, and the fact that he found a nest of maggots living in it a few months back.

“This couch is so nasty,” Lydia says. Her face feels red and raw from having scrubbed off her Coco Ashton face with Vince’s cheap paper towels.

“Well, perhaps, but it’s better than no couch,” Vince says, then slaps his palm to his forehead. “Sorry, I wasn’t meaning that it’s better than having my couch burnt up in a fire.”
“It’s alright. I haven’t really even thought of my couch until now. I liked that couch. It was a hide-a-bed, you know. I could’ve had guests, if I ever had any guests.” Lydia thinks of how her cats would sleep on the top of the couch, facing each other, symmetrically, looking out the window, watching her as she left and came home, little heart-shaped heads stacked one on top of the other straining to see her. “Jesus, I miss my cats.”

“I know, I know, I know,” Vince says. “Skeeter and Skooter were awesome cats, I’m not denying that, but you’re obsessed.”

“I’m not obsessed! Don’t call me obsessed! I miss my cats! They died, you asshole!” Lydia’s head starts to hurt and the little place behind her eyes tenses up again. She tries to relax. She looks at the TV. They’re watching the Cartoon Network, old Loony Tunes, Vince’s show of choice. The cartoons used to be so beautiful, so colorful, so creative, Lydia thinks. This one is about the evil Pincushion Man who throws needles at the balloon people. She likes Vince for liking them so much. She likes Vince for laughing at her when she wears make-up. They have a comfortable friendship, having known each other since their last year of high school five years ago when no one else liked Vince at school. He wore his characteristic trench coat, had long, greasy hair that he occasionally tied back in a greasy pony tail when he was trying to look nice, and he had a distinctly sour odor. He said inappropriate things in class, always making jokes that didn’t quite make sense to anyone else, pointing out that Chairman Mao was a brilliant, kind, heroic man despite the Cultural Revolution in their Asian unit in world history class, always feeling superior to the rest of their peers in every way. Except for Lydia. He openly admired Lydia, telling her her poetry was deeply spiritual, multi-layered, telling her she had the looks of a 12th century beauty queen, which meant he could overlook the fact that she was slightly overweight. Once or
twice a year, he tried to kiss her—once he put his hand on her breast—but she didn’t mind so much. They both knew it didn’t matter, not really, that it was almost funny in a way. That he was sexually frustrated, sweet twenty three and never been kissed.

“I know. But it’s been two months now. They’re probably waiting to be reincarnated into the children we will make together, right?” Lydia laughs at Vince, laughs at the strange shape he’s holding his mouth, slightly open, his lips twisted in a smirk. Sometimes she thinks he’s good-looking, but most of the time he’s like a dirty, loud-mouth little brother.

“Maybe it will get better when I can stop having dreams about them. Like last night I had this dream, right, that Skeeter was the size of a human and I was the size of a cat and Skeeter was like my owner or something, like we had switched roles...”

“Oh God, Lydia, this is getting dark. I don’t know if I want to hear this.”

“No, just listen, this is interesting. So I’m the size of a cat and I’m trying to crawl up his big cat body, like a cat crawls on you, you know. I was crawling up his body and putting my head in the fur of his neck and inhaling. He smelled warm and sweet, like a mother. And he was stroking my hair!”

“Okay, that is pretty cool, I admit, but it’s pretty weird. I wouldn’t tell your mom about that.”

“Oh Jesus, never. She’d take me to therapy. No, she’d commit me. No, she’d make me go shopping and pick out all my clothes and then I’d be forced to start another fire to destroy them all.” Like she thought earlier, everything is about fire now. She can’t stop envisioning the start of the fire in her head. The firemen told her that it was all due to an old electric fan that she’d bought at a garage sale and left on to keep her cats cool when she was at work. A cat, as their theory went, may have knocked it over, the blades catching on
something, the power making sparks shoot out, igniting a blanket or a piece of carpet. She sees that fan in her head over and over, the cats watching it writhe and spark on the ground, and fire slowly licking its way around her apartment. Where would they have hid, she wonders. The firemen never said where they found them. Were they waiting for her to come in and save them? She knows Vince thinks she’s too sentimental, like one of the girls in high school that he would make fun of, call a “twinkie,” but she can’t help it. She loved her cats. She loved them as she loved <em>people</em>, but no one believed her when she said this.

“You know I was thinking about your Nancy Drew collection. That sucks that you lost them all. You had a lot, almost the whole collection, didn’t you, in mint condition practically. It was my favorite toilet reading at your house.”

“Yeah, I thought of those already. They were my mom’s. She was lamenting their loss before the firefighters had even put the whole fire out. She was crying, ‘Oh, my Nancy Drew,’ and a policeman said, ‘Who? Is someone still in the apartment?’ That was pretty funny. Not that I thought it was funny then, but I can see it now. Nancy Drew probably was real to her, who knows with Vera.”

“Has she backed-off since you talked to her?”

“Not at all.” When Lydia first moved in to her old room, still decorated with high school memorabilia, her prom wine glass full of rocks from her marching band trip to Rhode Island, the cast photos of all the plays she’d been in framed and staggered neatly across her walls, the Andy Warhol Marilyn Monroe print hanging next to them, Vera always seemed to be lurking behind the door, spewing sympathy and goodwill, her body visibly drooping with sorrow and wanting-to-help that overwhelmed Lydia. For the first time since Bruce left, she was touching her, patting her back, resting her claw-like hands on Lydia’s shoulders, kissing
the top of her head. It was kind of nice spending time with her mom, but it was getting scary with shopping for new stuff, making lists of all her burnt-up CD’s and books, trying to remember at least the titles of lost poems, and now getting garish makeovers that made Lydia’s post-fire life even more surreal and ridiculous. She seemed to be watching it all from a distance, and through the wrong end of a pair of binoculars, so that everything was small, silly, far away, a feeling of sadness and dread always in the pit of her stomach, but others’ reactions eclipsing her own so that she didn’t know what she felt. She just wanted to see her cats, hold them again, kiss that smooth, hairless place right below their ears.

“Lyd, you know you can crash over here on the divan. I’ll even sweep the pop cans off and try to clean up the bong water stains so you can sleep on it. But you have to follow my one house rule, no exceptions, not even for you, not for anyone. You can only sleep naked. Sorry.”

“I’m sure I’d catch some kind of skin disease sleeping on this couch.” Lydia rolls her eyes at Vince, remembers why her mother always asks her why she hangs out with him. “But thanks, man.”

Around midnight, Lydia goes to the Village Kitchen for some coffee and a cinnamon roll, to be alone for awhile, no Vera, no Vince who is trying too hard to make her laugh, trying too hard to talk about anything but her cats, what she’s really lost. She sits in a corner booth, the table dusted with a layer of cigarette sludge, until an old classmate comes to wipe it off and drop off a glass with lipstick still faintly visible on the rim. Lydia wipes it with her napkin, decides to go with it. The waitress, Nikki, comes back to take her order.

“I’m sorry to hear about your apartment, Lydia. What a fucking nightmare!”
“Yeah.” Lydia doesn’t know what to say to comments like this. “I’ll have a cinnamon roll, heated up, and a pot of coffee.”

“Sounds good. Do you want an ashtray?”

“Sure. Get me an ashtray, will you. Thanks Nikki.” Nikki and Lydia used to be friends in the third grade. Lydia remembers staying the night at Nikki’s house once. They compared the size of their breasts in Nikki’s room, standing side by side in front of the mirror. “Yours are longer, like bananas, and mine are more round, like apples,” Nikki said to her. Lydia wonders how anyone could have compared her 12-year-old breasts to bananas and wonders if Nikki thinks about this when she brings her her cinnamon roll like Lydia remembers it when Nikki takes her order. They don’t have much to say to each other anymore. Nikki has a couple kids and a husband-like figure who floats in and out of her life—Lydia has no idea how to relate to her. She asks about her kids sometimes, but feels so fake. She doesn’t know anything about kids. She used to kind of think of her cats as kids. She called them her cat-sons.

For the first couple of days after the fire, she kept expecting a phone call from the firemen saying they found Skeeter and Skooter holed up in a secret closet, hungry but intact, managing to breathe fresh air through a hole in the wall. Then she did receive a phone call saying they found the cats, but not alive. And since then, she’d been struggling to remember the precise details of their faces; the feel of their soft, fluid weight on her body; the thin delicacy of their ears, see-through in places; the whipping patterns of their tails, each cat’s distinctly unique; the tone and sound curl of their meows. Lydia struggles to remember all these details in her mourning, to make their lives matter by remembering everything she can, every morning they laid in bed together, every vet visit, every Christmas together,
everything. All pictures of them were destroyed in the fire. And nobody wants to acknowledge their death. It is almost like a conspiracy, everyone stealthily avoiding or brushing off the Cat Situation.

Nikki sets down the plate and mug with a clatter, the coffee slipping up over the lip of the mug, and slides into the booth across from Lydia. “It’s my break. Do you want to shoot the shit awhile?”

“Sure,” Lydia says. What else can she say? She knows Nikki just wants the gruesome details of the fire, to know the amount of damage, dollar-wise, what she’s going to do, if she’s going to sue herself or something.

“I heard you lost everything. Like everything.”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“Why couldn’t those firemen put it out before it burnt up everything? That seems pretty incompetent of them. If I forget to bring out food for like ten minutes, I’m in trouble. It just seems unfair that just because they’re supposed to be these heroes that they’re not accountable for doing their job, you know what I mean?”

“Well, it’s not their fault.”

“Oh, I’m not saying that at all. You’re disunderstanding me. Hey do you got a cigarette?”

Lydia gives her a cigarette. “How are your kids?”

“They’re great. They’re really great. Jonathan is potty-trained now, which is really exciting, and Heather is doing well. There was a question about her head, you know. It was too big, she was having trouble sitting up. Her head was like this big Charlie Brown head that kept weighting her down. But we’re working with the doctors.”
Answers like that are why Lydia hates talking about Nikki’s kids.

“Wow, that’s good.”

“So what all did you lose in the fire?”

“What kinds of treatment are they giving her?”

“What?” Nikki is trying to light her cigarette, but the safety is on the lighter, so she flicks and flicks it, her extravagant nails almost leaving trails of light, like those sparklers on the 4th of July.

“Here let me get that.” Lydia flips the safety. “For her head.”

“Oh, well she basically has to grow into it. She was premature.”

“Oh.”

“So what all did you lose in the fire?” Nikki is blowing smoke out the side of her mouth, popeye-style. If Vince saw her, he’d do a Nikki/Popeye impression as soon as she left.

“Like you said, everything.” Lydia doesn’t want to mention her cats. If Nikki says the wrong thing, she will hate her forever, she might do something rash, like take the cigarette out of Nikki’s mouth and put it out on her wide, oily forehead.

“But nobody died, right?”

“Well, my cats.” She tenses up for the blow.

“Oh, that sucks. Well it’s a relief no person died, right?”

“Yeah.” Lydia sighs. She’s not as mad as she thought she would be. It’s Nikki. Whose life is probably worse than her own, fire, Vera and all, so she’ll give her a break.

“Whatever.”

“So did you burn the whole building down?”
“No, just my place. The people below me had to move out for a week or two, but they’re probably back in there by now. Water damage, you know. From the incompetents.”

“Yes,” Nikki laughs through her nose.

There is an awkward silence where Nikki smokes and Lydia tears off pieces of her cinnamon roll and eats them, licking her fingers, staring just past Nikki. She wonders if Nikki is looking at her but is too chicken to find out. She just wants to leave and go back to her burnt-up apartment that is now taped off with police tape like someone was killed. She has the horrible thought of seeing chalk drawings on the floor of her cats’ bodies.

“Welp, see you later, Nikki. I’ve got to get going, it’s pretty late and I’m staying with my mom now.”

“Okay, thanks for the ciggie. Hey are you still working at Ragstock?”

“That’s a good question. I haven’t been since my place burnt down. I need to talk to them.”

“Yeah. Maybe you can get me a discount, huh?”

“Yeah, maybe. Bye.” Lydia flicks a five dollar bill onto the table and walks out, picturing Nikki’s daughter with the big, lollipop head, and she is sad for that little girl. It’s something she knows she’d laugh at in the right mood and hates herself for that fact for the few minutes from the Village Kitchen to her mom’s dark, quiet house.

The next morning, Lydia wakes up at eleven, lets her eyelids stick together until, through her sheer conjuring powers, she feels Skeeter’s paws kneading her stomach, Skooter’s body like
a hot water bottle down around her ankles. She thinks of their ghost-like presence as havingphantom pains, still feeling pain where an arm or leg should be after it is gone, still feelingwhat her cats would be doing if she hadn’t left that goddamned fan running. She tries tothink of one licking her cheek, but just like that, they vanish, and she is in her old high schoolroom, the blacklight poster of a gigantic mushroom above her bed out of place, almostoffensive to see first thing in the morning. She realizes they vanished because she couldn’tquite imagine them licking her cheeks in the morning—she’s confusing them with Bon bon,Satan’s mongrel child who is scratching her door and whining.

Downstairs, Vera stuck a post-it to the coffeemaker reading, “There’s a surprise foryou in the fridge. Luv, Mom.” Lydia opens the fridge to see a plate with a muffin on it (a muffin? When did Vera start making muffins?) and a picture of her cat-sons propped upbehind it. She feels the air rush out of her body, leaving her light and dizzy as she snatches the picture and sits down at the kitchen table. The picture is of her, sitting on the oldarmchair she inherited from her grandma (gone), a scratchy afghan draped around hershoulders (gone), with Skeeter on her lap looking to the side, profiled, and Skooter curled tothe top of the chair, his tail winding down her shoulder like a braid. She is surprised to see that they look slightly different than she’s been picturing them the last couple months. Skooter’s head looks smaller, in ill-proportion to his body, his orange stripes lesspronounced, less tiger-like. Skeeter is bigger. She realizes she’s been visualizing him moreas a kitten, when in reality, he was a man-cat, complete with jowls. When she first broughtSkeeter home, Skooter hated him, could almost fit Skeeter’s entire head in his mouth, would chase him, rough him up. But they slowly grew to be friends, grooming each other, sleeping together.
As she picks at the chocolate chip muffin that she realizes her mom bought at the grocery store, inspecting the picture further, her mom comes home for her lunch break, bursting through the door in her bright blue Wal-Mart smock that shouts ASK ME, I'M HERE TO HELP!.

"I just read the funniest thing in Cosmo. Here, I brought it home for you to read. It cracks me up," Vera says, pulling up a chair next to Lydia, spreading her wide hands on the surface of the table top, the cold from outside emanating off her body, making Lydia sink back into her chair. "Okay, it's a quiz, see, and you've got to answer all these questions and then add up the points to see which category you fall into. It's called 'Are you a Doomed Spinster,' okay question number one, are you ready?"

Lydia's not in the mood. She licks her fingers and folds her hands in her lap, staring at Vera. "No."

"Oh come on, Ly, you're going to dig this. Okay, question one. 'When thinking of marriage, you are most likely to claim a. My bridesmaids are going to wear pink, poofy dresses with a big bow on the butt, b. I haven't really thought of it yet, though I have an idea who my bridesmaids will be, c. Are you talking about the wedding I'm staging for my cats, where the bridesmaids will wear baby blue collars?' Okay, which one?"

Lydia sighs and answers, "Two, I guess."

"Okay, good. Let me find a pen," Vera is at the counter, digging through a drawers. "I've been giving this to everyone at work, just for fun, you know, to pass the time..."

"Do you ever work at work, mom? I'm just curious. Because it seems like you do everything but work."
"You don’t know the meaning of work, kiddo." Vera is back at the table, Bic in hand. She is less enthusiastic, but she presses on. "Okay, B. Next question. ‘When asked what kinds of conversations you have with your friends, you would answer a. we talk about men, men, and sex, b. we talk about cooking, books, and occasionally men, c. well, I tell my cats everything, but they don’t talk back.’ Okay, which one?"

"Jesus, mother! This is the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard! I know what they’re doing, I know what you’re doing, you’re equating being a spinster with having cats, you’re calling me a fucking spinster!” It feels good to say ‘fucking’ to Vera like that.

Vera looks surprised. She drops the magazine on the table. "Well, I am not. I thought it was funny. I thought you’d think it was funny."

"Whatever." Lydia gets up, drops the remainder of her dense, mysteriously damp muffin in the trash with a small thud, and heads towards the stairs. Vera follows, the magazine now curled into a tube that she is waving as she speaks, for emphasis.

"You are so touchy I can’t even talk to you. You are so touchy no one can talk to you. This is ridiculous, Miss Lydia, and you need to think about what you’re doing and saying to other people, because there are other people around, you know, you’re not the sole person, the sole Lydia."

"Shut up, mom." Lydia’s eyes are burning and a vein is throbbing wildly near her temple. She starts up the stairs, slowly.

"And you need to go to work, for crying out loud! You need to see a shrink or go to work, because I’ve done everything I can for you, and all you do is bitch at me and whine about your cats." Vera is angry now. Lydia glances over her shoulder to see Vera’s face red and wild, her hand clenched around the wooden banister knob at the bottom of the stairs.
“You need to call your boss this afternoon, TO-DAY, because maybe it’ll be good for you to be around other people, to let them tell you you’re being ridiculous. You need to get over this.”

Lydia shuts the door to her room and falls across her bed, the drama and angst of high school flooding back as she buries her face in her pillow and savors the way her body shakes when she cries, the way her moans sound against the stuffing of the pillow, how good it feels to hardly be able to breathe. She picks up and slams her head into the pillow a few times, and she hears her mom knock softly on the door.

“Fuck off!”

“I will do no such thing!” Lydia stops and laughs at this comment. Sometimes she can tell her mom is just trying to play the part of the mom, say the things moms say on TV and this makes her laugh.

“You will not laugh at your mother.” At this, Lydia laughs harder and rolls onto her back to see the grotesque mushroom hovering above, with star streaks shooting around it. She had such terrible taste. She takes the picture of Skeeter and Skooter out of her pocket and balances it on her nose and lips, up close, so Skeeter and Skooter are blurs of orange and black that go fuzzy, bright, fuzzy, bright as her breath clouds over then fades.

A week later, Lydia is back at work at Ragstock, Monticello’s only second-hand store specializing in hip vintage wear that devotes one corner to pleather corsets, fishnet stockings, thigh-high platform boots, and assorted whips and handcuffs. Their primary demographic
includes disenchanted junior high kids and strippers. Lydia has worked here since high school and now holds the post of assistant store manager. Two years ago, they relocated from the dying downtown to the local mall. So yes, Lydia works in a mall.

She is arranging sunglasses on a rack when she catches a glimpse in the narrow rack mirror of Vince hovering behind her. She turns around to see him wearing a pink boa around his neck, some of the fur being sucked up his nose as he breathes.

“You look retarded, Vince.”

Vince looks disappointed and slightly hurt as he unwinds the boa and drapes it over a nearby rack of army jackets.

“I have to pick your shit up, you know.”

“Sor-ry.” Vince picks up the boa and returns it to the corner of the store.

“Hey, I’m sorry. I’m really on edge lately. I don’t want to be here. I can’t believe I still work here. And Vera is driving me up my ass.”

“Why don’t you want to work here? I thought you liked it here.”

“T used to. I don’t know.”

“Hey, look what I found at Squinky’s.” Vince holds out a post card of an amorphized family of cats wearing 50’s clothes and twirling hula-hoops on their waists.

“Thanks.” Lydia is suspicious.

“Yeah, no problem.” Vince scans the store, tries on an army jacket.

“I had the weirdest conversation with Nikki Rucker the other night when I left your house. It was awful. She started telling me about how messed-up her kid is. Her head is too big and she couldn’t sit up.” She waits for Vince to laugh his high-pitched kid laugh, but he
doesn’t. He’s checking himself out in the mirror that slightly distorts his image so that he’s wider, more solid.

“That’s freaking depressing.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” Lydia tugs on the ends of the jacket, buttons up the first couple buttons.

“Thanks mom.”

“You’re welcome honey. I had a big fight with Vera a few days ago. Huge. And I started laughing over it.”

“Awesome. What was it about?”

“She brought this Cosmo quiz home trying to send me the subliminal message that I am a miserable, lonely spinster because I miss my cats.”

Vince doesn’t say anything, but takes off the jacket and hangs it back up.

“Well, if you want to hang out later, stop by. I’ll be wasting my life away playing video games or something.”

“But can you believe that about my mom?”

“What?”

“The spinster thing?”

“Spinster? That is so archaic. I didn’t know there were spinsters anymore.”

“That’s not the point! It’s Cosmo! Calling me a spinster! Don’t you see how that’s wrong on like, forty different levels?”

“You’re not a spinster, you’re just obsessed.” Vince is now looking at the sunglasses, wiping the lens of one pair with the soup-stained tail of his shirt.

“You’re obsessed.”
"With what?" Vince is trying not to look at her, trying on Elvis glasses, then big, dark cop glasses.

"With not acknowledging my cats! I mean, what is the deal? Why is it so hard to understand why I’m sad about my cats? It’s like you’re all just making it worse and worse, like I have to save them from your all’s indifference."

"Okay, Lyd, listen to me. Answer this. Here is a quiz for you." Vince is looking straight at her now, fast and monotone as he does when he’s intense, when he’s bothering everyone around him except maybe Lydia. She becomes nervous. A customer walks in the door and stands dazed in front of the jeans rack.

"There’s a customer..."

"Okay, let’s say you’re on a boat, the big proverbial boat of your life, and it sinks, right? And you have two lifejackets, one for yourself and one for someone else. Me and your cats are drowning, Who do you throw the jacket to?"

"You are so stupid, I’ve got to go." Lydia walks toward the twelvish looking girl and Vince heads toward the strange colors and fake sounds of the mall that stretches in every direction beyond the door as he throws behind his back, "Exactly, Lydia."

Lydia is annoyed. The girl turns and leaves before Lydia reaches her. Lydia looks around before picking up a boot and throwing it across the store where it hits a mirror and cracks spread across it like the fingers of fate reaching around her grief-stricken neck. The cracked mirror shocks her, the drama of it making her feel foolish.

"Fuck you." But her fucks are becoming so common that they are losing power.

"Mother Fucker." That’s better. She looks at the post card that she’d set on the counter and knows she would have loved it when she still had her apartment, still had her kids. Now it’s
sad and kind of twisted. The dad cat is black, the mom cat is orange. The kids are calico and gray. She hates herself for wanting to cry.

After closing the store, Lydia stops by the Kwik Shop to pick up a paper, then heads to the Black Cat Lounge, a small, dirty bar with a juke box that plays 80’s power ballads and rock anthems. She and her Ragstock coworkers used to come here the night of payday, but she hasn’t felt up to it since the fire. Her coworkers talk softly to her now, avoid her when they can. She catches them staring at her with bewildered expressions. She sits at the bar, buys a pack of cigarettes, and orders a beer. It feels good to feel dirty, bad, alone, to feel the eyes of the local men on her as she spreads out the paper on the bar and turns to the Classifieds. She’s going to find another job, one where she doesn’t have to deal with high school outcasts or work in the mall. Something she can reinvest herself in, use to reinvent herself.

“Are your friends coming out tonight?” Tracey asks, wiping the bar in front of Lydia, her long earrings glinting in the washed-out, smoky light.

“Um, I don’t think so. It’s just me.” Lydia forces a smile and goes back to her paper, humming the blaring Meatloaf song out loud to let Tracey know she’s done chatting. Most of the Work Wanted ads are for factory workers, cosmetologists, truck drivers. Then she sees one for Adoption Liaison at the local animal shelter. It reads, “Love for animals, people skills, a genuine desire to make a difference required. Apply in person. Women and minorities encourage to apply.” She finds the pen in her purse and circles the ad enthusiastically three or four times. She could work with animals, with cats and dogs, getting
them homes, playing with them, whispering reassuring words into their ears before leaving for the night. It’s perfect. She has people skills when she needs them—she can fake relating to almost anyone who walks in Ragstock. And she’s definitely a woman. She could make up for the fan, for her carelessness, for the apathy of Vera, Vince, and Nikki Rucker. Maybe the fire had a purpose, all the mourning and emptiness were preparing her for her destiny, and this is it.

The small sound of gunfire and shouting draws her attention to the TV behind the bar. There is some news footage of people running from burning buildings, from men with guns. They are somewhere in the Middle East, some stretch of wartorn, barren land, and they look desperate, ravaged, crazed. There are children crying and an old man sagging against the torn down wall of a building.

“Why do you have this depressing shit on the TV?” Lydia calls out to Tracey, who is washing glasses at the other end of the bar.

“You can turn it if you want. I don’t care. Turn it.”

“Where is this anyway?”

“Who knows? And do you really want to? Probably not. This world is so fucked up. I’m just glad I live over here and not over there.”

“It’s all about religion,” says a man sitting at the bar, looking at Tracey, who then gets up to turn the channel. She turns it to Wheel of Fortune.

Lydia goes back to the newspaper and to her beer. She sees the circled ad and reads it again. Love of Animals. People skills. Desire. She crumples up the newspaper and throws it in the trash behind the bar.

“You looking for a job?” Tracey asks.
“Yeah. How did you know?”

“Why else do people read the newspaper in a bar? We’re hiring here.”

“No thanks,” Lydia says and puts on her coat. “I have no people skills whatsoever.”

She feels the eyes of the locals on her back as she walks out and shivers.

At home, she writes in the new, hardcover, deluxe journal her mom bought her. She writes a terrible poem about Skeeter and Skooter and then tries to draw pictures of them. They end up looking like thin, wet rats.

That night Lydia dreams that her apartment is on fire, again, but she is watching it burn, the flames spiking up cartoon-like, up to the sky, reaching out to the surrounding furniture store and Dairy Queen, reaching out to Lydia who is standing on the sidewalk holding Skeeter and Skooter, one in each arm like twin babies. In the dream, she knows it’s a dream, knows that in real-life she didn’t actually see the apartment burn, only the last smolderings as her mom cried about Nancy Drew. But here she sees it all, and in the dream, she’s reminded of watching laundry detergent ads, watching the stains lift magically from the fabric and rise to the top of the water like shimmering visions. Only here, she is watching the make-up of the fire, the inner-workings of the fire, the way it touches, swallows, and consumes everything she’s bought, collected, and made since she graduated from high school, the old electric fan a small jewel flashing in the heart of it all. Skeeter and Skooter are relaxed, occasionally licking her neck in thanks for getting them out of there. And that’s all that matters. She can almost laugh at how beautiful it all is.
“So are done with the ‘stock then? Are you going back? Are you moving in with me or what? What’s the dilly-yo, Lyd?’” She’d called in before the store opened that morning and left a message on the machine. “I’m just not well enough yet, give me a couple more days to pull myself together,” she said. They’d see the cracked mirror and feel sorry for her. Or fire her, depending on which manager sees it first.

Lydia and Vince are tucked into the sag of Vince’s couch, their arms sweaty and stiff from pressing up against each other’s. They’re watching an art film that Vince read about. There is a picture of an eye, up-close, being sliced open with a razor blade.

“You know, I hope to God that that isn’t a real human eye.”

“It probably is. Isn’t this French? The French would slice a human eye open, no problem.”

“What are you talking about?”

“So what’s the deal? What are you doing?”

“I don’t know, Vinnie. My plan is to watch this movie then weep myself to sleep at the horror of humankind.”

“It’s art.”

“Yeah, art schmart. I’ll show you art.”

“So are you going back to work or what?”

“Why is this so important? I don’t know. I might. I should but I can hardly stand it there. I can hardly stand this town anymore. Why am I still here anyway?”

“Because you like it here? And your Vin-vin is here, and your lovely mother. And your cushy job at the mall.”
Lydia snorts. Vince puts his hand on the edge of her thigh. “And your best friend Nikki Rocker.”

“Rucker.”

“I like Rocker better.”

Lydia glances at Vince’s hand there on her thigh, his fingers long and bony, his fingernails ripped short and jagged for playing his guitar. He removes it to light the bowl he has balanced on the coffee table. “Remember when Skooter ate all my pot that one time?”

“Yes, and you picked him up and shook him. That was terrible. I got to see the violent side of you and I didn’t like what I saw.”

“Whatever. It was a love-shake.” Lydia takes a drag of the pipe as Vince’s hand is back on the edge of her thigh. It felt hot on her leg, even through her jeans she could feel the heat of his hand, as if it were branding her.

Through the corner of her eye, Lydia can see Vince’s face hovering close to her, looking at her. She glances over to make him look away, but he holds his gaze.

“Jesus, you looked stoned,” she says, to make him look away.

“I’m not that stoned.” He keeps looking at her. Lydia knows this look. Sometimes she laughs at it, when they are fighting, but mostly it scares her, because she knows it’s a precursor to the admission of awkward feelings or sentiments.

“Let’s watch something else, this is freaking me out. It’s too intense.”

“You’re too intense. Lighten up.” Vince’s hand starts moving up and in towards her hips. She involuntarily sucks in her stomach. His hand feels good, familiar. She closes her eyes and thinks of her cats sitting on her lap, burying their heads in the line where her legs touched together. His hand travels up and cups her breast.
“Vince. Come on.” She doesn’t know what she’s saying but she feels the need to fill the air. She keeps her eyes closed.

“What?” He asks innocently, his hand still under her breast. “Do you want me to stop?”

“No. I don’t think so.”

“It’ll be alright.” He puts his head on her lap and she rests her hand on top of his head, his hair soft, surprisingly soft and clean.

And then they are naked, on his disgusting couch, an art film flickering behind it all, and it seems that everything has led up to this, that it can all be explained and resolved in this act which is comfortable, safe, like coming home. Lydia keeps her eyes closed and focuses on the feel of Vince’s skin, his moving above her graceful, surprisingly adept, nothing awkward about it all, as she’s suspected it would be, when she thought about it. She wonders if there’s parts of Vince, nights of experience, that she doesn’t know about. Every once in a while she sees triangular cat heads sparkling on the edges of her consciousness.

When they are done, they lie still, pressed together, legs over the arm of the couch. Vince is on top of her, seemingly smaller now that he’s relaxed. He says, his head pressed against the side of hers, his mouth moving only an inch or so from her ear, “I’ve wanted to do that for five years, you know.”

Lydia has always suspected, but now she wonders if this is all he’s wanted. Relief from loneliness and a good fuck. Maybe that’s all she’s wanted. Warmth, comfort, familiarity, softness. She feels older than her years. A spinster?

“I had a dream I was french-kissing Skeeter the other night.”

Vince laughs too loudly and digs his knees further into her thighs.
“We need to change positions here. You’re squishing me.”

“I know, isn’t it wonderful?”

Lydia wishes Vince would stop trying to sweet-talk her.

“Just move off to the side. We can lay sideways. Get a blanket first, though.”

They reorganize, and they are lying face to face. This is when it gets strange, seeing Vince’s face up close, the small food bits still stuck between his teeth, his clogged pores up close, his eyes dark, wet pools. His hand is through her hair now.

“Would you have had sex with me if your apartment hadn’t burnt down?” he asks, smiling, like he is kidding, only Lydia knows it’s a serious question.

“Who knows? Maybe it was inevitable. They say men and women can’t be just friends.”

“But do you think you would’ve? If things were normal?”

“I don’t know, Vince. Can you shut up before you ruin the moment?” But Lydia’s not sure if the moment can be ruined, if there was a moment to begin with.

“Okay. I don’t think you would’ve.”

“Okay, whatever.”

“Whatever.”

“Fucking whatever.” They laugh at that. They can’t resist laughing at “fuck” used creatively or excessively.

They lie there like that until morning when Lydia’s mom calls, worried. Lydia feels strange talking to her mother on the phone naked. Vera says she couldn’t sleep. Lydia says welcome to the fucking club. Lydia gets dressed, kisses Vince on the cheek, and goes back to Vera’s to drink tea and read classifieds for a new place. The sun is shining and fire is
singing the edges of everything, Lydia’s body, her memories of her cats, her memories of the night before. But it’s a sweet kind of a fire, a beautiful kind, the kind of fire Lydia can almost laugh at.
Like in one of those dreams where you get up and go about your daily business, taking a shower, making the coffee, going to work, only to wake up and have to do it all over again only things are harder, duller, more real, Cindee dreams her entire day out. When she wakes up and sees her husband, Ben, sleeping beside her, a glistening thread of drool connecting his head to the pillow, she realizes she left him out in the dream and didn’t even notice. Sam, too. It was her life whole and unpunctured, before marriage, kids, or even sex. But here she is with family, responsibilities, and love strung out on their own axis revolving around her head like planets. She looks around the room and sees piles of clothes in the corners, Ben’s work boots flaking off dry mud onto the carpet. She knows the house has a funk to it, that she needs to be more diligent about cleaning, that Ben will start saying passive-aggressive things about not feeling like going to work today. She feels a weight on her chest pinning her to the bed. She rolls over, first legs, then waist, then head, to see the time—it’s six—as the phone rings. Not mom again, not telling me to turn on Hour of Power, not now, Cindee thinks. Lately, her mom has been calling when her religious shows feature unhappy people who find the love of Jesus, or those who never did getting run over by buses.

“Yes, hello?”

“Hi, Mrs. Jacobs? This is Mrs. Doughty, Sam’s teacher?”

Cindee sits up straight and her hand flies to her forehead, a vein throbbing wildly near her temple. “Yeah, what can I do for you?”

“Well, did you know that Sam is at school right now?”
“What? Sam’s at school right now? I haven’t even got out of bed. What’s he doing there?” Cindee stands up and walks to the doorway, peers down the hall, looking for signs of Sam.

“He said he thought it was time to go to school.” Cindee hears Sam in the background making airplane and machine gun noises. “I’ll be working on my lesson plans—I really don’t have the time to watch him right now—could you come pick him up or should I just send him home?”

“No, I’ll be right there. Thanks for calling me. I’m sorry. I don’t know. I can’t believe I didn’t hear him leave. I’ll be right there.”

“You should really pay more attention to what your son is. . . .”

Cindee pretends she didn’t hear her start talking and hangs up the phone. “Bitch,” she mutters. She slides into some jeans and a pink sweatshirt, pulling her hair up into one of Ben’s baseball caps and goes to pick up Sam. It’s that cool, sweet pause before spring and the sun glows pink and cool right over the horizon. She hasn’t been out this early in years.

What is wrong with that kid? Cindee’s mom has been saying the last couple of years that she thinks Sam has ADHD and needs to be slapped on Ritalin or slapped upside his ornery ass, it’s up to you, but Cindee thinks Sam acts like any other normal five year old boy, likes pretend games and noise and attention. Only he pulls stunts like this, gets his wires crossed sometimes. He’s the kind of kid who’d walk straight into the van of a molester-kidnapper type, Cindee thinks.

When Cindee pulls into the circle drive in front of the school, Sam and Mrs. Doughty are standing by the door, holding hands. Cindee stops breathing when she sees what Sam is
wearing—a flannel shirt and his good dress pants tucked into the tops of his cowboy boots.

He has a ring of red something around his mouth.

Cindee takes him to McDonald’s for breakfast. She doesn’t want to deal with Ben, who is snippy and overly critical in the morning. “What were you doing, Sam? Don’t you know that I wake you up every morning and get you dressed and get your cereal and walk you to school? Why did you get up and go without me, huh? What were you thinking about?” Cindee hears her own voice, high and whiny.

Sam is barely listening to her, tearing his sausage patty with his teeth, making dinosaur noises. “Rarr, rarr. I thought it was time to go to school. I wanted to surprise you.”

“Well don’t surprise me anymore, got it?”

“I won’t, I won’t, I won’t,” Sam says, nodding his head in figure eights.

“You’re old mom doesn’t like it when you leave without her. You’re too young. You’re a kid, Sammy.”

“You’re a kid,” Sam says.

“No, I’m the mom and you’re the kid.”

After breakfast, Cindee takes Sam to Bandshell Park, a block from their house. It’s a square park with benches scattered over it, grass now barely poking through patches of brown slush, with an aqua green band shell on one side and a miniature replica of the Statue of Liberty on the other. It was a big selling point of their gray, boxy stucco house that she and Ben bought when she was pregnant with Sam. When she first moved into the neighborhood, Cindee felt like Donna Reed or whoever, cleaning the house, sewing curtains, baking casseroles, planting sullen, pale pansies along the base of the house, strolling to the park with Sam tucked in his carriage. When Sam was a toddler, she made him a playhouse
out of the box the new refrigerator came in and she'd sit in it with him for hours, drawing furniture on the walls for him with a Sharpie. She was happy, so different from what she feels now, like her brain is coated in fuzz, like a wad of gum that Sam has rolled around in the carpet, catching lint, dirt, pubic hairs, bits of graham crackers. When she cleans the house, she wants to drown herself in the mop bucket. She lets the pansies wilt and die and fingers their dry, droopy heads. She stays in bed until Ben shakes her up.

Lately, she has also started thinking more of her own childhood, which really wasn’t so long ago, but seems ages ago. She had Sam when she was nineteen, and by the time she was twenty-two she didn’t really think about what a twenty-two-year-old should be thinking or doing. She just felt old, like she always had, older than ever when she looked in the mirror and saw her hips and butt that had never shrunk back to normal size after having Sam, or the extra flesh around her face and under her chin that seemed to make her eyes and mouth look small and squinty in pictures. When asked, though, Ben tells her she’s still hot, that she still gives him a hard-on. He’s very sweet when forced to be.

Sam is dangling from the monkey bars, all arms and legs. “Be careful, Sammy! I’m serious!” Cindee yells. She remembers playing on these same bars when she was little, when she lived with her mom in the blistering yellow house by the “Welcome to Pratt” sign on Highway 10, where her mom still lives. Once, her mom took Cindee and her older brother Deric to play in Bandshell Park while the municipal band played marches in the shell. Cindee remembers that day every so often as a representation of her childhood, the way photographs define a vacation; the image of her lying flat across the top of the monkey bars, dangling her arms down to tease Deric, who was swinging across them like Sam is doing now, defines her childhood. She doesn’t remember much else. Sometimes, when she squints
her mind and the past bends around to touch the present, she sees Deric in Sam. The same legs, the same sweet chin, the same gray eyes rimmed in long lashes. Sam is now lying in the dirt below the monkey bars, his legs propelling him in circles on his back.

"Samuel! You get yourself out of that dirt! You’ve still got to go to school today, don’t you forget it! Get up! You’re embarrassing me."

"There’s no one even around, Mom! Who are you embarrassed?"

"That’s not the point. You will embarrass me."

Deric moved to South Dakota to live with their dad when Cindee was seven and she hasn’t seen him since. Growing up, she’d get occasional post cards, one of Mount Rushmore that said, “Imagine the boogers these guys must have.” It occurred to her over the years to try and find him, but she was always stopped by the question, What then? Besides, she had a lot to think about these days, Sam and his bad school reports, Ben, who seemed to talk to her always in the same way, like a machine giving out conditioned responses.

She takes Sam home, changes his clothes, packs his lunch and walks him the few blocks back to school. He wraps his whole body around her leg and says, “No, I don’t want to go, please don’t make me go to school. I hate it. Let’s make cookies today, ple-e-ease, oh god Mom, please!”

She peels him off, kisses the top of his head which tastes as sweet and damp as a ripe peach, and gently pushes him toward the door. “You little drama king. I’ll see you later today, Sammy.”

The few blocks home, she runs into Mrs. Dooberry, a woman who seemed just as old twenty years ago when she used to yell at Cindee to get out of her yard. Cindee says “Good
Morning,” and Mrs. Dooberry says, “Yes, isn’t it, though” as if she were talking to herself. Cindee says, “Bye Gladys,” to Mrs. Dooberry’s back just to spite her.

She decides on the way home to think beyond her memory of the park, to the insides of her childhood, to what was going on, what she did, the exact stones of the path that led her to her present life. She thinks of making mud pies and decorating them with bird droppings arranged to spell MOM or CINDEE. She thinks of the Willis family names, their stupid spellings—her mom’s name is Dawna, like the time of day, not the song. She’s asked her many times why she chose such strange, senseless spellings for her children, but her mom always muttered something about being unique. That’s why Cindee named her son Samuel Jonathan Jacobs, the sounds almost aching with sensibility, dignity, good things. Sam. Three letters as solid as a house. A name that sounds like a door slamming shut. She tries to remember more, to think of a day in the life of a five-year-old version of herself, but she only comes up with wisps of images: mud pies, sunshine, a drunk mom talking too loud, passing out on the floor, a brother doing dangerous things with bikes, skateboards, and pocket knives, bird droppings, dirt, a sign, yellow paint chips decorating the dirt of the yard like stars. She feels so old. She steps carefully through the brown slush, trying not to get her jeans dirty, thinking of Sam running through this same slush in the pink light in the cowboy boots Dawna bought him, trying to do good, trying to make her happy.

At Cindee’s part-time job at Dee’s Bakery—she started taking daytime shifts at her old high school job when Sam started kindergarten that fall—she decides to talk to her old friend Joy.
about her amnesia, her emptiness. Joy and Cindee graduated from Pratt High together, and Joy even dated Ben’s best friend for awhile, until he beat her up. Cindee still refuses to let him in the house, to say one word to him.

Joy says, semi-sympathetically, “Oh Cindee, it’s pretty normal, I think, it’s not like you’re in this major depression or anything, you just need some romance back in your life, some spice, some za-za-za-zoom.” When she says this last part, she shakes her hips awkwardly, trying to be funny. Cindee laughs politely.

Joy is obsessed with romance. She lives for it. She even has a subscription to Bride Magazine, even though she’s not even seeing anyone in particular. Not that Cindee can blame her. God knows she’s had her own misconceptions about love and marriage and sex and the whole bit. Not that she doesn’t love Ben and he doesn’t love her—because they do, on a very important level. But she can’t feel it anymore. She can’t feel much at all, just a hum, the sound of static on TV, the sound of her own breath, the presence of nothing, the presence of everything all at once. The dregs of dreams popping up when she least expects it, making her want to cry.

“I don’t think it’s lack of romance, really. I mean, that’s not so great either, but it’s more a lack of substance or feeling. I feel like I can’t remember what’s going on in my life. Like I lost my focus or why I’m here.”

“Whoa, you’re getting heavy on me, Cin. Seriously, just listen to me, I’ve dealt with this many, many times and I consider myself an expert of sorts. Of sorts, of course. You’re just disconnected. You need to reconnect with Ben. Okay, get some candles, something pretty and sparse to wear, right, and maybe do the rose petal thing. You know, make a path of rose petals from the front door to your bedroom where you’ll be waiting. Just try it.
You're just feeling mommed-out. Oprah featured this just last week. You need to reinvent your marriage.” Joy is filling in the shape of a monster truck with icing. “God, this is an atrocious cake.”

“Can you remember your childhood? Like what you did all day and what you thought about?”

“Yes. I have a photographic memory. I remember almost everything. So do you, in your subconscious. You’ve just got to pull it out. It’s like a roll-a-dex. Oh, and you’ve got to exercise.”

“Exercise my roll-a-dex?”

“No, you’ve got to get in shape. Get your endorphins pumping. That’ll make you feel better.”

“You’re right.”

“I’m right.”

“About the cake, I mean. It’s just scary.”

“And everything else, you’ll see.” Joy’s hair has slipped out of her hairnet and the tips are brushing the top of the cake. Cindee doesn’t say anything but turns back to the big mixing machine. She hears Joy’s breath become fast and labored when she fills in a particularly small piece of the truck and she hears her sing verses of pop songs when she moves on to the next color.

A few nights later, Cindee decides to take Joy’s advice about rekindling her romance with Ben. Before he gets home from work, Cindee takes Sam to her mom’s, lights candles around the room and puts on a slippery red teddy that she got from a now-lost friend at her bridal shower years ago. She poses herself luridly when she hears the front door open, but
imagines herself looking like a giant discolored tongue stretched across the bed. Ben looks startled when he comes in the room, not in a good way exactly, Cindee thinks, and laughs in long uncomfortable syllables. But he willingly obliges, though she still feels nothing. But now she feels nothing in rhythmical thrusts. Nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing.

"What the fuck is a fish doing in that plant?" Ben’s mouth twists sideways and his eyes get dramatically wide as they do when he thinks something is ridiculous or excessive. "Someone is going to call the humane society on you." He’s on the Internet playing fantasy baseball, chatting with his friends who play fantasy baseball in other states.

"It eats the roots of the plant. It’s decorative," Cindee says. "I don’t think it has a real brain anyway. Beta fish are barely alive. They’re like sea monkeys or something."

“So you’re collecting sea monkeys now?"

Sam runs in the room in his underwear. “His name is Butthole.” Ben laughs out of his nose.

“The fish’s name is not butthole, Sam. Why would you name him something like that anyway? What did he ever do to you?” Cindee rolls her eyes at the both of them. She’s been taking on craft projects lately. Dawna has taken to making yarn pictures and she told Cindee she should try to express herself creatively, to make something with her own hands coming from her own heart. Her first project was the scenic fish vase, lined with colorful rocks, a scraggly plant growing out of it and a single, transparent fish swimming around the vase. Then she moved on to making elaborate scrapbooks, apparently the rage these days, each
picted head sprouting thought bubbles. She had Sam saying things like I'M MOMMY’S
BOY and I LOVE SPAGHETTI! Ben thinks they’re just plain stupid and Cindee kind of
agrees. Now she’s working on little dolls made out of miniature spools called Spoolies, but
she’s not too inspired. She’s cutting out a little wedding dress for one from a lacy, slightly
yellowed ivory dress she found in her mom’s basement. It must have been Dawna’s but she
can’t imagine her wearing such a thing.

“So how much money are you spending on all your supplies?” Ben asks.

“Not so much,” Cindee lies. She blew most of her bakery money at the Hobby Farm
last week.

“You should be saving it. Putting it in Sam’s college fund. We talked about this,
babe.”

“I know, I know, I know. Just pretend I’m blowing it on beer like you. Would that
justify it in your mind? At least I’m trying to make the house look nicer.”

“That fish is going to die.”

“We’re all going to die, sweetheart,” Cindee twists her words with sarcasm, hoping
Ben notices.

“Do you want to get online before I shut it down? I need to run some errands.
Hardware store.”

“Why don’t we all go? We can stop by the mall or something afterward.”

“I’ll just be gone a few minutes. I really don’t want to make a day out of picking up a
wrench. Why don’t you get on and see if Oprah’s called your name yet?” Cindee entered to
be on Oprah’s bookclub. Oprah’s featuring a Lifestyle Makeover series, trying to get
everyone excited about life, about nurturing their spirits, about taking time to help others less
fortunate, like handicapped and homeless people, about reading books instead of watching TV, which Cindee doesn’t think is a bad idea but can’t understand why *Oprah* would want to promote such a thing. Cindee bought a book that Oprah claimed is heart-wrenching and deeply moving about a mother whose child dies. She wrote a letter in hopes of being invited to a taping of the book club, talking about how much she loves Sam, how she couldn’t bear it if something were to happen to him. About being a mother. But Oprah never responds.

“No, Oprah’s not going to call my name on the internet. Just leave then.”

Ben swivels the chair so that he’s facing Cindee, puts his hands on his knees and lets his head hang against his body. Cindee notices his bald spot has grown to the size of a half-dollar now. Sometimes Sam pushes it like a button and Ben yells at him to cut it out—he’s touchy about that spot. “Okay, so do you want to *do* something or what? What is this about?”

“No, it’s fine. Just go to the stupid hardware store and get your stupid fucking wrench.”

“Jesus! What is wrong with you? And don’t say nothing because obviously there is something wrong here. You never used to be like this. Get my ‘fucking wrench?’ You need to watch your mouth.”

“Yes Dad, whatever you say, Dad.”

“You need a dad.”

“You need some sensitivity. You need a lot of things.” Cindee realizes she is crying and wonders how long she has been. She looks at her Spoolie in her hand and feels pathetic, like she’s playing with a sad, broken toy. The little spools feel like bones.
“Do you want to see a counselor about this, Cin?” Ben is speaking softer now, trying to be nice, taking on the voice he uses with Sam when Sam has hurt himself doing something naughty. Skinned his knee jumping from a tree, or rode his bike straight into a bush trying to pop a wheelie. “I don’t know what to do anymore, hon.”

“What do you mean ‘anymore?’ You’ve never done anything about the way I feel. You don’t even notice. You think I have constant PMS, that’s what you told me once.”

“Listen.” Ben is perched on one knee in front of her, his face up close to hers. “I think we need to go out and have fun. We both know that talking about these things just makes it all worse and worse. Let’s go out tomorrow night. Steve’s band is playing at the Midway. Let’s drop Sam off at your mom’s and go on a real date.” He runs his hand over Cindee’s leg until she pushes it away.

“You’re going to start a fire on my leg.”

“Sorry. I just want to make you feel better.”

“I know.” But Cindee is suspicious. It’s like Ben just wants her to shut up, like he really doesn’t want to go out with her anymore. She misses the days when they were dating, when they went to bars together and he was proud of the way she looked and she was proud of the way he knew everyone, could talk to any man there. She liked him in groups, but they hardly went out anymore. “Maybe it’s what I need, let’s go out.”

“Can I come?” Sam says from the corner where he’s stacking pennies, trying to break a world record he found in the Guinness Book. Cindee forgot he was in the room.

“No, you get to go to grandma’s. Fun, huh?”

“Okey-dokey,” Sam says. Something he picked up from Dawra.
As Ben walks out the door, Cindee stares at his back and wonders if he’s ever cheated on her. She’d never given it too much thought until now. Something about the way he talks to her when she’s sad or angry; the way he placates her like a used car salesman makes her think she’s never known him at all. He could be anyone. He could be her father, now just a mimeographed face in her memory, living somewhere in South Dakota; he could be Deric, someone with her same genes, her same blurry past. He could be anyone at all.

The next morning, Dawna takes Cindee to a Bible study group at her church called The Rock. For the last year, Cindee hasn’t really believed her mom goes to such a church, and if she does, it can’t be a legitimate church with a name like that. But here she is in the church’s basement, a room lined with sagging couches coughing up stuffing at the seams, wooden crosses hanging on each of the four walls, the faint smell of old tomato soup seeming to come out of the walls, being introduced as My Lovely Daughter Cindee. She’s surprised at how many friends her mom has, how many people look happy to see her and give her quick, vigorous side-hugs. Cindee thinks the light in the room looks kind of funny, yellower than usual, almost a visible mist around the heads of the study group. Maybe it’s God, she thinks, and wants to laugh.

The session starts with a round-the-circle opening prayer. When it’s her mom’s turn to speak, Cindee holds her breath.

“I’d like to ask God to bless my daughter Cindee, and help her find the joy in life again, and to make Himself known to her in the way that I now know Him, as a loving and
kind Father, to lead her out of the darkness and despair. I’d also like to ask Him to help my grandson, Samuel, in his studies and his play, to keep him safe, and help him become a good, faithful human being.” Was she saying that Sam isn’t a good human being?

When it’s Cindee’s turn, she shakes her head, embarrassed, and motions for the next person to speak. The woman next to her is looking at her with a small smile as if to say I Understand. For a moment, Cindee is scared this woman will touch her, even hug her, so Cindee looks away, wishes she never came to this meeting. She wonders what her mom has told them about her. Probably called her a “lost sheep” or “misguided soul.” Her mom’s religious pursuits all began when she started attending AA six years ago. It progressed to evangelist programs on TV, then to her involvement at The Rock. When Sam was born, Dawna gave him a Bible with his name embossed on the corner, and a little later, videos of animated Bible stories, which are now among Sam’s favorites, most likely because they are the most violent. “It’s all about forgiving yourself, or letting God forgive you. And I need to have that, you know?” Dawna once said to her. And Cindee thought, didn’t her mom need her forgiveness? For all those years of drinking, of dating strange, mean men who looked at Cindee hatefully, for letting Deric move away and get lost somewhere near Mount Rushmore?

During the Bible readings, Cindee wonders if her mom ever thinks of Deric, ever considers trying to find him. After all, doesn’t she need forgiveness from him as well? When it’s Cindee’s turn to read the Bible, she does so carefully, concentrating on each foreign word, not paying attention to meaning. At the age of twenty-three, she still feels like she’s telling a joke when she reads the Bible, though she feels something vaguely sinister beneath it all as well.
After the meeting, Dawna says, "Now that wasn’t so bad, was it? You survived and you gave a nice reading, too. I invited you because I knew we were reading the Psalms tonight and you have such a clear, sweet voice I knew you’d do ‘em justice, just like you did.” Cindee is surprised that Dawna is complimenting her voice—she never has before. “Weeping may malinger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.” That’s true, don’t I know it.”

“I think it’s linger, not malinger.”

“Linger, you say? What’s the difference? Aren’t you the Bible scholar now?”

“I don’t know—never mind. Why do you think I’m so unhappy?”

“Don’t try to start an argument with me, Cindee-roo, now I know you’re not happy.”

“How do you know? That’s what I’m wondering.”

“I can tell by the way you treat Sam, by the way you talk about Ben. I can tell by the look on your face and the way you’re always rolling your eyes at me, sighing and snorting like some kind of sick animal.”

“Oh, great. Thanks.” Cindee can’t look her mom in the eye. She never talks about personal things—it always becomes too sticky. “I don’t know what the deal is. I just feel so sad and empty. I think I’m depressed.”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart.”

“Well. Thanks.”

“I mean, I’m really sorry. I can say that, can’t I?” Dawna puts her hand on Cindee’s shoulder. Cindee realizes her mom hasn’t touched her in a long time and her hand feels hot and softer than she would have thought.

“You can say anything you want. About anything.”
“Well, so can you.”

Cindee thinks of asking about Deric, but to do so would be dangerous, cause pain, and she feels too weak. Like any blow would make her crumble. She feels like she’s made of spoolies strung on pieces of yarn. When Dawna takes her hand away, Cindee can still feel it there for hours after.

Cindee is lying on the floor of her bedroom, staring at the space where the floor meets the wall, at all the dust balls, bug bodies wrapped in spider silk, and paint chips up close, close as a microscope could get, Cindee thinks. She remembers owning a toy microscope and Deric chopping off grasshopper heads with a stick to examine. Those black insect eyes still moved, looking back at their own eyes through the lens.

Sam comes in occasionally, during the commercial breaks of the cartoons he’s watching, and sits in the dip of her waist and bounces, singing a song from one of his videos: “Rickety Tickety, Look at me, How many presents do you see?” Then he counts his bounces up to fifty and more. Sam is a smart kid in many unexpected ways, Cindee thinks. He could count to a hundred before his fourth birthday. It’s only Dawna’s strange fantasy that he has ADHD. But Cindee knows he has other problems. She gets notes from Mrs. Doughty, who is polite and acidic at the same time. Cindee feels everyone in Pratt looks down on her, thinks she’s a bad mother, a strange person, an ingrate. Mrs. Doughty writes that Sam has problems with other kids, is too loud and talkative, too disruptive to the class. Joy suggested
taking him to the Sylvan Learning Center, testing him for disabilities. But Cindee is sure she can fix it herself; she just needs to get herself together. She needs to get up off the floor.

She hears Sam in the living room now, jumping off the arm of the couch, making the floor shake under Cindee’s ear. This over and over. She puts her mouth to the carpet and screams, not from her mouth or throat, but from her stomach, from the electric hole that has been buzzing there for months now, screams longer and louder than she thought she could. When she stops, she hears Sam in the doorway, crying. His pants are wet, a streak running from the crotch of his sweat pants down each leg. This hasn’t happened in years. Cindee pulls herself up and walks to him on her knees, exhausted, and takes his arm, pulls him to her lap. “Sam, I’m sorry. I was just playing a game. I didn’t mean to scare you.” But Sam only cries harder and wraps her hair in his fists, presses his cheek to her neck. “Hon, let’s go change your pants.” But he doesn’t move. They sit there like that, crying, until Ben comes home and finds them like that. Tired, puffy, their bodies pressed together like pieces of clay. Cindee teases herself and imagines she’s hugging Deric as a kid, just to see what it would feel like, just to see if she can time travel for a few small seconds.

The next day, while Ben is at work, Cindee straps Sam to his kid leash and takes him to Crossroads Mall, a sparse smattering of shops, many closed, a few still open, arranged circularly around a courtyard with cloudy sky lights above. She wants to buy something new for her date tonight. She picks out some red jeans and a tight white tank top with stringy straps.
After she makes her purchases, she buys Sam a cinnamon roll from a kiosk and they sit on a slatted bench in the courtyard, a few straggly rays squeezing through the sky lights onto Sam’s face, his mouth shiny with cinnamon sugar. He licks his lips and sticks his fingers in Cindee’s face for her to lick them, like she used to do with him. “No thanks, babe,” she says and he licks them himself, his eyes wide.

Ben and Cindee arrive at the Midway as the band is tuning up, doing sound checks, chugging beers and leaning over to laugh into each other’s ears. Steve, who plays rhythm guitar, winks at Ben as they sit down at a table ten feet from the bar. The stage is actually a corner of the smallish room and the neck of the bass extends behind the bar and comes dangerously close to whacking the bar’s phone off the hook. Cindee worries about that phone.

Before the band starts a real set, Ben’s other co-worker Dave and his wife Lisa come and sit at their table. Cindee never knows what to say to Lisa, who stares unwaveringly at Dave every time she’s around Cindee. “You should really get to know Lisa,” Ben would always say. “You and her are in the same boat, so to speak, you both staying home with kids while your husbands are climbing around on telephone poles like monkeys.” Cindee notices that Ben always seems to forget that she works, too. He talks to her like she stays at home all day, watching soaps, baking cakes. But Lisa doesn’t seem to want any friends. Sometimes Cindee wonders if she’s the same way, deep down scared of other women, but she dismisses the thought with images of Joy, her mom, the other, older ladies at the bakery who give her Christmas cards every year, always ask about Sam’s development, his current reading level and choice of toys.
The band starts into Sweet Caroline. Cindee looks down at herself and notices that her skin is the same shade of white as her tank top, that her breasts seem to be hanging down lower than usual, almost sweeping the surface of their table, already covered in cigarette muck. Cindee doesn’t smoke, but she suspects Ben does occasionally. She can smell it on his clothes when she does laundry. Once she found a crumpled pack in his pocket. But Ben declines when offered a pack at the table. Cindee thinks maybe he’s embarrassed to smoke in front of her.

At the end of the first set, the band scatters and Steve comes to their table, the hair around his face stuck to his head with sweat. Dave and Ben slap him on the back. Dave goes to buy another round of beers. Lisa looks worried, sitting by herself, her hands folded in her lap like she is praying.

“You guys sound really good,” Cindee says.

“Why thank you very much Miss Cindee Sue,” Steve says in a fake southern accent. Cindee is starting to feel her beer and she laughs loudly, brushes her hand against Steve’s leg as she swings forward. Lisa is staring at the bar and Cindee is suddenly annoyed at her. She wants to yell, “Would you just relax Bitch,” but she looks at Ben instead, whose mouth is curled around his beer bottle, his eyes closed for that moment.

After Dave gets back and passes out the beers, Steve produces a small, yellowish joint from a mysterious crevice of his jacket. At first, Cindee thinks it’s just a homemade cigarette, the kind Ben’s dad rolls with pungent tobacco. Then she notices the way Ben is looking at it. Steve passes it around the table, Ben and Dave taking wheezy drags, Lisa pretending she doesn’t know what it is, and Cindee remembering the commercials Parents Who Do Drugs Have Kids Who Do Drugs, though she knows it’s not a big deal, doesn’t
mean anything, really. The drummer comes up behind Steve, touches his shoulder, and tells him it’s time to start and Steve winks again before sauntering to the stage.

Ben slings his arm around Cindee, laces his fingers through her hair. Cindee is feeling good, looking over at Ben, his face broad, smooth, and familiar, his arm just as it has been for years. Cindee notices she is feeling something again, something like happiness and she gets excited. She catches herself bobbing indulgently to the music, ordering more beers when she knows she probably shouldn’t, watching the smoke of the bar become one consuming cloud, swirling around the heads of the band members (like God! Cindee thinks) who are now singing a poppier version of Mercedes Benz. At one point, she stands up dancing, the music sounding better than Janis herself could have made it, Cindee thinks, Ben laughing and slapping her butt. Even Lisa is laughing and clapping her hands and Cindee feels like she’s won some small victory, done something right.

Cindee gets up to go to the bathroom, gets halfway there, remembers she forgot her purse and turns back. She stops short when she sees Ben and Lisa looking across the table at each other, Lisa with a flirtty smile, Ben with his bottle up to his face, hiding his expression from Cindee. And she knows they’ve slept together. She knows it’s all over. And she feels relief, like an antidote to the emptiness she’s been carrying around, flood her chest, her legs, her head. She turns back to the bathroom and locks herself in. She stares in the mirror and remembers getting drunk and stoned in high school, going to parties with the intention of destroying herself, always finding herself in some strange bathroom, looking in a mirror thinking, Oh Cindee, what are you doing? You’re turning into your mother. She stares at her face, her lipstick smeared off the lines of her lips, her mouth a streak of red on her face that is glowing pinkish orange under the fluorescent lights of the bathroom. Instead of
thinking of Ben, how he betrayed her, how he shit on her, how she married her father, she
thinks of Deric. Once again, time collapses in a backbend, and she is looking at herself as a
kid, trying to hold on to the people who come and go just as Sam tries to hold on to her,
make her pay attention. Sam and that cinnamon roll, Sam hanging on the monkey bars, Sam
squirting the TV with his high-power squirt gun yelling, “I’m going to kill you, I’m going to
shoot your brains out!” Sam at school, in his dress pants and cowboy boots, Sam watching
Bible stories, Sam wetting himself, Sam digging half-moon imprints with his hard fingernails
into the skin of her neck. She feels she can’t love him enough.

The next morning, Cindee awakes with the feeling that she’s had a string of horrible dreams,
lived a lifetime in each one. She rolls over to see Ben’s mouth hanging open. She touches
his hair with the back of her finger and his eyes bat within his lids. She wonders what he’s
dreaming of.

She puts on some sweats, puts her hair in a ponytail, wipes at her makeup with some
kleenex and jumps into her blue Toyota to go get Sam.

He’s up watching a religious show with Dawna, eating a purple popsicle. He runs to
her and, in a flying leap, clings to her waist. “Christ, Mom,” she says, “Why are you giving
him sugar first thing in the morning? Don’t you have any cereal or something?”

“Oh relax, that’s what he wanted, and I can’t do much otherwise when he wants
something. You know that—you give that kid everything he wants. If you don’t like, don’t
leave him here anymore. Hire a damn babysitter.”
Cindee gets Sam some cereal and goes back in the living room to sit with Dawna in the other matching rocking recliner. “Mom?”

“Huh?” Dawna is sipping coffee out of an old clay mug that Cindee made in girl scouts and is coloring a picture out of one of Sam’s coloring books, one called Precious Moments full of chubby kids doing holy things, like holding lambs or praying in the rain under all-encompassing umbrellas.

“Do you ever think of Deric?” Cindee watches her mom’s face, but is surprised that it doesn’t flicker, doesn’t change, that she seems comfortable.

“Of course I do. Don’t you think I think about my own son?” Dawna runs her blue-painted nails through her hair, which stays in little rows for a few seconds. “We talked on the phone a month or so ago. He’s doing well.”

Sam comes in the room just then and perches on Cindee’s knee.

“Why the hell didn’t you tell me? I’ve been thinking about him a lot lately, and you could’ve told me something like that. Jesus, Mom.” She feels water building up behind her eyes, ready to spurt. She doesn’t understand her mother, what makes her so casual about loss, regret, mistakes, what makes her bring that girl scout mug up to her mouth again and again when Cindee wants to grab her head and shake it until she cries.

Sam starts singing, “Jesus loves his little children, over the hill and everywhere,” pounding Cindee’s knees with his fists. Cindee wants to put her hand over his face, make him stop, but she doesn’t. She puts her hands on his shoulders and moves him off her lap.

“I didn’t know how to tell you. I don’t know how to talk to you sometimes. You’re so critical, and Deric and I are just getting to know each other. He wants to see you again. He still remembers you, of course.” She puts her coffee and crayon down and sighs.
“You’re not going to believe this. Well, he has a son named Sam, too.” At this, Sam giggles. “It means ‘God has asked,’ you know.”

“Yeah, Mom, you’ve told me that before.” They both look at the TV for a while, Dawna slurping coffee now and then. “Can I do anything for you?”

“What do you mean? You sound like a sales clerk,” Dawna says and laughs, not looking at Cindee but at her nails. She has glued a small silver star on the tip of each one.

“Nevermind.”

“You don’t need to do anything for me, hon. I love you just the way you are, really. And Sam. You both make me happy, you know. I don’t know what I’d do without you. Really.”

Cindee gets up to leave and kisses Dawna on the cheek, and takes Sam to the park to think about her future, what she’ll do, what she’ll say to Ben.

The air is clear and warm and the slush has been sucked back into the earth, leaving the dirt dark brown and clean-smelling. When Sam is on the tire swing, Cindee gets the urge to climb up on the monkey bars and lay her body across the bars as she did when she was little. She does. She lets her arms hang down, fingers tingling. Sometimes time reaches around and touches itself and you don’t even know it, she thinks. Two Sams, hundreds of miles away from each other, the same crazy grandmother. Then she hears Sam’s voice break the air on the other side of the park. She sits up on the bars and sees Sam has managed to scale the body of the miniature Statue of Liberty, and has his legs wrapped around her neck, sitting on her shoulders. He is throwing his fists around in the air, conking the Lady on her head, yelling, “BROTHERS AND SISTERS, I HAVE SEEN THE LIGHT!” Cindee jumps
down and runs to him like she hasn't run in years to safely pull him down, kiss the top of his head and tell him that yes, oh yes, he has seen that light.
Coming Together, Falling Apart

“It’s just so sad. It’s so so sad,” I said. My mom and I were walking through the Mall of America and I was trying to describe to her what it was like spending time with my dad for the first time in seven years. I couldn’t use bigger words. Maybe it was the grief. Maybe it was talking to my mom, who held such bad feelings toward him she couldn’t say his name. Maybe it was being in the Mall of America, the grossly excessive and somewhat sinister mall that claims to be the largest in the country, complete with amusement park, aquarium, wedding chapel, four floors of shops and restaurants, and a small walk-in village made of legos.

“Can he still walk? Can he eat?” Sober for the first two straight years since he was a teenager, and in the last gruesome stages of lung cancer, my dad had emailed me a year before wanting to reconnect, to get to know each other. I’d just got back from visiting him in Salina, Kansas, seeing him small, weak, barely able to talk, his long, dark hair, the symbol I most associated with him, fallen out. I was nervous that my mom would be cold, that she would say something to the effect of him deserving to be so sick, not being able to talk, so thin and pale, almost see-through.

“No. Julie got a wheelchair from the hospital. We have to feed him. He mostly eats popsicles. He still smokes cigarettes. Joey has to bring them to his mouth. God, it’s so sad.”

“He’s not a bad person. He just made mistakes. He’s not a bad person.” She started crying. And I started crying. We had to sit down on a bench—we were holding scalding mochachinnos that we were afraid of spilling—and we cried as people passed and tried not to look too long at us, as children stopped to stare, as one child started to cry with us.
“He’s so sick. And this is how I’ll remember him. I don’t want to think of him like this for good, for this to be it. I mean, this is it.” We cried there until we could walk again, and then, for the first time, she told me about loving my dad, about meeting him, about marrying him, and it was as if my dad became real and I could feel his DNA lighting up and flashing inside me like the multi-colored bulbs strung on the framework of the ferris wheel twinkling above us and our grief.

According to my Grandpa Clyde, who I spoke to on a yearly basis over a buffet lunch at Bonanza, watching him chain smoke and talk his way into intricate, stupefying feats of denial, my dad was doing well. In fact, he was sober for the first time since he was a teenager. After his liver problems in ’96, when we all thought he was going to die for sure, he was told he couldn’t have a drop of alcohol or it’d kill him.

I remembered Clyde saying, “Oh he’s doing just great. He’s married to an old hippie nurse up there, see. She’s got long hair, wears those hippie dresses, and has tattoos all over the place. She’s got two sons who remind him of what he used to be at that age, so that’s pretty funny. He’s playing in a band. But he’s not drinking a drop. He’s working at a rehab clinic, too, doing counseling.”

I was skeptical, but I patronized Clyde with a smile and an “Oh really?” My dad had never held a real job in his life, and I couldn’t imagine educated people associating with him, much less marrying him. I wasn’t sure what kind of person he’d be without the alcohol. I had dreams that when I finally did meet him again, I could see through him, that he was more
a figment of light, a hidden projector shooting out an image that looked like him, and I could reach my hands into the strange colors of his void. And I wondered, if he really had been sober since '96, why wasn’t he attempting to get in touch with me? He no longer had his excuse for perpetual childhood behavior, the thing that got him off the hook, made him “sick.”

I was driving to Salina, Kansas, for a reunion with my dad who emailed me months earlier to tell me he had lung cancer (I knew it had to be addiction-related before I knew the type of cancer) and that he wanted to see me, talk to me, get to know me. I hadn’t seen him in nearly seven years. I hadn’t talked to him since his stay in the hospital for liver failure and that conversation was held in the light of it possibly being the last. But here was another chance for us. I didn’t quite believe he was dying—not yet. He’d been on the brink of death four or five legitimate times before, held back by his shirt collar by some mysterious, inexplicable hand, dangling him over the brink and snatching him back up when we thought it was hopeless. He was a karma refugee, and his staying power haunted me until I gave in to writing short stories and poems about his death. It was much easier to understand and explain than our current relationship at any given time, which seemed suspended on high stilts, stepping carefully and precariously over years of pain, unanswered questions, and, on his part, shame, but always held up by the fact that I liked my dad. I liked his jokes, the songs he’d make up on his guitar, the way he dressed, so much like a kid, his sarcasm that walked the thin line of wit and cruelty.

I savored the car ride. I played my favorite CD’s and sang along with feeling, glancing at myself in the mirror to see what he’d see when he opened the door to me. I imagined my mom at home, sitting at the kitchen table thinking about this strange turn of
events. I stopped at a gas station and walked in and out of every single aisle. I bought a Hershey bar and Coke and ate them parked in the lot. I packed a miniature lifetime into that car ride to prolong the feeling of going to see my dad, to work through some of the lines I was trying out in my head, to psych myself up, to meditate on the gravity of the situation, the drama, the sadness, the intensity of a melting Hershey bar and cold can of Coke on a hot Kansas day when the burnt landscape rolled out and out from under me like so many missed opportunities.

Meridith is nineteen, flushed with beginnings, prone to halter tops and bleaching her long brown hair. She's not quite a high school graduate, God knows she should be, but she couldn't stomach those PE classes, those ugly orange shirts and tedious runs around the track, not even for a diploma, not for anything. So now she lives with her girlfriend in a trailer house that swallows all the dirt and sometimes the bad characters of Wyatt Earp Street and waitresses at Jan's Coffee House with all her girlfriends. Their uniform consists of long denim skirts with their names embroidered on the front pockets, Meridith written in cursive, the i's dotted with yellow stars. There is a blossoming sunrise embroidered on the back, the sun bursting off the tops of the back pockets, orange, pink, and yellow rays curling around my mom's hips like desperate fingers trying to hold her in place. They put all their tips in a big pickle jar behind the counter to split evenly at the end of the night.

She takes orders, refills coffee mugs, cuts up vegetables in the back when she has the time, and chats with her friends, jokes with them about customers, plans the night out. Her
friend Big Bird, named for his rather large beakish nose, comes in for some coffee slipped into a mug on the sly, out of the eyes of Jan. Big Bird tells her there is a band playing at the Dunes tonight, that she should come and meet the band. They're all good musicians and they can all party. She's in. The rest of the afternoon she is particularly good at her job, holding up freshly washed glasses to the light to make sure they shine, carefully wiping crumbs off table tops into her cupped hand, savoring these last moments of work before the night darkens and hides all that is hard and sharp, shining a deliciously dim light on all that is yet unknowable.

The beginning of the end, or the point when the drunken binges, abuse, and overturned, blood-stained furniture became unbearable, was when my mom made my dad move out of the house. I was seven, my brother six. My dad moved into a historical hotel, called the Lorel Lock, which had turned sleazy and shabby over the years, a pay-by-the-hour option available. My dad lived in a room with a metal radiator spanning one wall with windows over-looking Dodge City's downtown streets, some made of planked wood, resembling the old “Front Street.” Dodge City held ferociously to its stories, infamous past, the iconography of the downtown like the set of an old Western movie, everything somewhat authentic but with a sheen of fakeness, of trying-too-hard over it all. But what Dodge City managed to preserve was its roughness, its courseness, alcohol, prostitution, drugs, and even gangs spattering the downtown landscape along with the Boothill museum, Buffalo statue, and recreated downtown Front Street.
My brother, Joey, and I would visit my dad in his room. Sometimes we’d go down to the bar, the Speak-Easy Club, to have a Shirley Temple and Roy Rogers while he drank his vodka sours and shot the shit with the other residents of the Lorel Lock.

“My daughter here is so smart that the principal of her school called to ask if she could skip a grade. But I said no. It would mess her up forever,” he told his buddies. I thought this was true for years, felt some pride that my dad had to turn Mr. Friend down, until my mom told me he just made it up. I played “Sherry” on the juke box, Joey and I dancing up close to it where no one would bother us. Then Huey Lewis, next the Cars. Then the Go-go’s.

I looked over to see a bar full of men staring at Joey and I, kind of laughing, kind of snorting at us, their fists curled around squat glasses or bottles of beer. We became uneasy and went to sit with our dad at our stools.

“You monkeys go upstairs now. I’m going to stay down here awhile. You go on up to bed or watch some TV, okay?”

Joey and I sat in his room for hours. We watched some pornography, amazed and frightened at what we saw. Joey, who was only five at the time, called my mom crying. She came to pick us up, and we didn’t see my dad for a long time after that.

My dad appeared smaller, his head smooth and almost see-through like the head of a baby, the veins curling above his ears, transversing the globe of his head, with tufts of black hair in places. I noticed right away that he was still wearing his Converse All-Stars. I experienced
life wincing at the sight of a pair of Cons—especially the red ones—for all they said about my dad and the way he lived his life. He reminded me of a wizened Charlie Brown.

We hugged and he felt small and sharp in my arms, all bones and angles. I knew he would be older and sick, but I didn’t expect to feel so much bigger than him, like I could take him in my arms and rock him like a mother, his soft head against my chin, or break him by squeezing too hard.

“Wow, it’s so good to see you, honey. Man, you’re a knock-out,” he said.

“Yeah, it’s good to see you too. It’s been so long,” I said. I looked around his house, which was small, dark, and old, all the windows covered with Indian tapestries so the light in the room was stained purple, red, and blue, yet so clear and unfaltering, as I imagined the light of my childhood to exist. I noticed glass plates and vases everywhere, bending the strange light even stranger, old furniture, books and CD’s stacked in dangerous towers on the arm of every chair, on the floor by the stereo, bookcase, table and chairs.

“So how have you been?” I’d pictured this moment many times in many different carnations. The first words out of my mouth, the exact pout of my lips that I hold for effect, the positioning of my hands, the precise dip and color of my words. But it wasn’t how I thought it would be. It was so nice and warm. I mean, it felt good to be there and see him.

“Oh, well, I’ve been okay, you know. I’m trapped in this house all day, reading books, watching TV. They don’t let me go to work anymore so I’m kind of the invalid, and Julie takes care of me.” We were now sitting at the kitchen table, his legs crossed as they were in all old photos of him, his right foot propped on his left knee, his body all triangles.

“Well, that must not be so bad, huh?” I was on automatic, spouting politeness uncontrollably.
“Well, I’m pretty sick of it, but it’s alright. We just got a satellite so we get all kinds of ridiculous channels. You ever watch the Sci-Fi channel? They’ve got all Twilight Zone episodes, Tales from the Crypt, Monsters, stuff like that. You remember watching those shows in Gypsum?”

“Um, yeah. I like Twilight Zone. Sometimes I watch marathons, all day Twilight Zones.” I didn’t tell him I thought of him the whole time, wondering if he was watching the same episode, wondering if he’d ever seen it before, if my eyes were taking in the same pictures his had before.

He got up to get us a drink, and I looked around his house more closely. My dad had always been a collector: baseball cards, records, antique toys, interesting musical instruments that resembled torture devices, horror books and comics, band memorabilia. But he’d always lost his collections on the treacherous path his life had taken, pawned off what he could, left the rest for my mom to incorporate into the décor of our house (she used bongos as plant stands, percussive bean-filled gourds as decorative pieces on the mantle, and hung old guitars from the walls) or to get rid of slowly, as if my dad’s presence were leaking out of our house, barely noticed until years later when I or my brother would ask, “Hey where did that old ___ go?” The remaining pieces would take on more and more meaning, until an old, wind-up Dick Tracy car became the essence of, and all the answers to, my dad’s life.

The band Lickety Split is playing at The Dunes, a flat, warehouse-looking bar slumped in the sullen sand dunes of a murky lake that yawns outward into the eventual sunset—Dodge
City's only lake, and it doesn't even have a real name, except the name of the bar that justifies its weird existence. Meridith, Big Bird, and her friend Christina, who is about to get married to a man she just met and move to Texas, go to The Dunes to see Lickety Split. Meridith in a long, cotton skirt she bought at the import store, a halter top wrapped around her torso, and dangly, gold earrings so long that they keep getting slammed in car doors, dipped in drinks when speaking to someone across the table.

Big Bird is telling them about the band. The lead singer, Bernie, works for a construction company with Bird; the drummer, Valyrie, is also a singer but with lungs like Tina Turner and a face like Debbie Harry; and her brother, Van, plays bass, drums, lead, and sings, depending on what needs to be done at any given gig.

Meridith drinks cheap wine and watches the band perched on a small stage, playing hard and dangerously, the lake doing something like shining through the windows behind them. In between sets, Bird introduces her to the band and her eyes linger on the bassist, his long, thin hands, long, black hair, the way he walks. As he plays, she memorizes the way his back curves to the guitar, the way his fingers dance across the fret board, the way his mouth hangs slightly open all the while, bottom lip hovering, the pink flesh of it softly shining in the bright red and purple lights strung all around the stage, and everything changes. She closes her eyes, pinches her nose, and plunges off everything she's ever known into something very loud and exhilarating because she knows in some true, wild way that nothing will ever be the same after that. See, this is where it all begins, the future packed up into a tight ball in the The Dunes ready to roll out and out beneath them, an opportunity seized and held on to.
Now his house was decorated with similar, though slightly different, items. An old table-like radio holding a collection of ceramic monkeys playing various musical instruments, a corner of plastic, glass, and painted flamingos (“Those are Julie’s” he said quickly when he caught me looking at them), whimsical, soft Maxfield Parrish prints in old, scratched up frames, a dressed-up mannequin in the corner, wooden beads hung on every doorway, an old leather chair with a horse’s head on the back. All kitsch and clutter so that I was instantly comfortable. I weirdly felt at home though I hadn’t been at a house of my dad’s in ten years or so, since he lived with his third wife in Gypsum, a tiny town right outside of Salina.

“You’ll like Julie, I think. She sure wants to meet you and Joe. She’s a nurse working at a weight loss clinic now—it pays better money than nursing homes but she has to listen to all the fat people gripe all day about their emotional problems.” I remember what Clyde told me about Julie: when my dad was still drinking, she drank a lot, too, and they’d get in horrible, earth-shaking, beer can-throwing fights, the cops being called by the neighbors a couple of times.

At that moment, Julie walked in the door. She was small and thin with big red-framed glasses, her long hair dyed red. Every time I saw her after that she was wearing long-sleeved shirts and pants to cover up the tattoos of her old husbands’ names, both of who died. The first was shot in a fight and the second electrocuted at the plant where he worked. Throughout the exhalation of my father’s life that lasted about a year or so, the surreal, poetic, gut-twisting sad, beautiful days, I often thought about her and wondered if she blamed herself, knew that every man she’s with dies only to be tattooed on her body as penance, a reminder that she’s cursed.
"Hi, it’s good to finally meet you. I’ve heard so much about you."

"Good things I hope," I said and wished that I could say something funny, true, or meaningful.

"How are you doin, hon?" she asked my dad.

"Oh sick as a fucking dog, but okay besides that," my dad said, not looking at her, but at me.

"Oh, well, I suppose," she said quietly, rolling her eyes, and went to the kitchen to make us some sandwiches. Those couple times I saw my dad before he died, I was always amazed at her patience, her ability to take any crap he shot her way, her dedication in nursing him that seemed to be the plot of a movie I’d seen before, perhaps a war-time drama where the strong, dedicated nurse whispers strong words into the war-torn ears of her love. Only my dad, on his worst days, told Julie to fuck off and Julie would tell him to shut-up, but kindly, like she was just teasing.

My dad moved from place to place, occasionally popping up in our lives, giving us a twenty dollar bill, buying us some McDonald’s chicken nuggets, or nothing at all, showing us his inside-out pockets when he told us he had no money. He only came by when my mom was at work, when his sister, my aunt Valyrie, was baby-sitting. He talked about baseball or his new band, wearing clothes we’d never seen before.

Years occasionally passed when we didn’t hear from him. Joey, my mom, and I became our own family and thought of my dad as someone floating just outside us all the
time. When I asked my mom why he didn’t come see us, she said, “He’s very, very sick. He needs to get his life together. It’s not you. It’s him.” She didn’t look me in the eye when she said this, but at the wall, just over my shoulder, sometimes falling over her words trying to control her anger and hatred for him.

Whenever my mom and I got in a fight, I imagined my dad as a someone who could potentially swoop in and save me. I envisioned myself yelling into an envelope, “Dad, come get me!” and sending it to a mysterious address, and then he, hearing my words as they float out from the envelope, dashing to his car to save me. Of course, he could save no one. No one could save him. This wasn’t about saving. It was about picking up the pieces of your life and moving forward and forward, trying not to look back or to the sides, for fear of the ugly pain and rejection that was planted like trees waiting to grow and overcome me.

On that first visit to Salina, I stayed one day. He could still get around and go to bookstores, the movie rental place, the music store. We went to a coffee shop in downtown Salina and talked about college. He’d been taking some classes at the local college, but said the teachers and students thought he was weird, “like ‘what’s this old fart doing here?’” and so stopped going. He read a lot though. He was getting into the classics—Tolstoy was his flavor of the month. I’d never read Tolstoy, but I tried to tell him how much I loved Sharon Olds, how she got me to start writing. I didn’t tell him that she wrote poems about her father, his failings, her love for him, how I’d wept over some of those lines thinking of him. Our conversations became ways to get to know each other to an extent but were always built
painstakingly around the real questions that seemed to be hanging upside down right in front of me all the time: Why did he never stay in touch with me? Why did he never want a relationship with me? Why did he never apologize? These questions appeared as gaping, cavernous sores, always skimming my consciousness, waiting to be asked, so raw and painful they almost gave out light, but I avoided them.

Right before I left, he asked, “How’s your mother? I know she’s married now and has lots of money.”

“Well, kind of. Kent is a good guy and they care about each other. She’s doing well. She likes her job. She hates Minnesota, but is pretty happy, I guess.”

“You know, I always think of her as the love of my life. Don’t tell Julie that, for cryin out loud.” Julie is wife number four, mom was number two. He didn’t like wives one or three (he claimed he married three while drunk and always regretted it), and Julie reminded him of my mom. Julie was nothing like my mom. But when it came to my dad, my perceptions were skewed. I could never see my parents together in the first place, not in any capacity. My mom always spoke badly of him, the way he treated us, and he acted as if she hurt him, left him alone to pine away. Imagining them together was near impossible, and I knew that whatever brought them together in the first place and held them in place for seven years was something I had yet to understand, to fathom. There had to be some kind of magic, intoxication, some mystical forces working to push them together before they exploded apart, sending pieces of our family flying in every direction.

“You look just like her, you know that? You don’t have much Phillips in you, a little, but not much,” he said.

“Yeah, I know,” I said.
Meridith and Van get married in a small ceremony in the Church of Christ, a church neither one of them has ever attended, but one that will book their wedding, perform the service of uniting them in holy matrimony. Meridith's mother is weepy and sure of the mistake her youngest daughter is about to make and her father is solemn and tight-lipped, trying not to think of the implications of his favorite daughter pregnant and marrying a long-haired, skinny, arrogant musician. They both attempt smiles for the camera, held not by a professional photographer, but by a waitress from Jan's Coffeehouse. Her parents offered to pay for a wedding, but Meridith insisted she could do it by herself, put something simple and special together.

Meridith is wearing a simple white dress, gauzy and luminous, cinched right below her breast in a princess cut, to hide her growing stomach. Van is wearing a white tuxedo, white shoes that reflect light so brilliantly as to interrupt the photographs with white blotches over faces, one over the bride's bouquet making it appear as if she's holding a ball of light in her fisted hands. Clyde is hovering in the background of these photographs, looking dazed, his curly hair wild and black as it will be twenty years later when this marriage will seem fictional, a result of black magic or white magic, depending on how you look at it.

Meridith and Van cut the smallish though perfect cake together and stuff it in each other's mouths—there have to be some traditional elements involved—and twist their arms around each other for the toast, Van drinking champagne, Meridith sparkling grape juice.

When their daughter is older and finds these wedding photographs stuffed in a shoe box, she will inspect them carefully, looking for signs—signs of love or commitment, signs of happiness, signs of desperation and doubt, but mostly for signs of hope, signs of what is to
come. She will inspect her mother's stomach and think I am in this picture. That's me in there, a ball of flesh, bones, hair, and blood tucked in my mother's body, witnessing the making of this brief, disjointed family.

In high school, I wrote a poem called “My Dad.” It began like this: I remember my dad/ his hands, the way his hands would play me songs on his guitar, his lips, his chin./ I called my dad, to say hi/ but I said nothing,/ unable to speak, unable to think/ So I sat, the silence like bees around my head,/ and said nothing. It got published in a tri-state youth magazine called The Young Adult Press, alongside a haiku about hairspray, and a poem about basketball, the words arranged in the shape of a circle (or basketball, I assumed).

I wasn’t sure why I’d sent it in. I’d written poetry for the last five or so years of my life, but I’d never done anything with it. But here it was, for my English teachers to glow over, my peers to read and scrunch their faces in confusion, some in pity. The words looked strange and cold in the newspaper-like journal of articles, editorials, with a mere half-page dedicated to creative writing, the poems centered in geometric shapes which were set at angles all over the page. Mine was in a triangle. I thought of sending it to him, to say “See, here’s my pain, and it’s published pain.” But I didn’t.

The school counselor approached me and asked if he could use the poem in his counseling sessions. I said sure, why not, feeling past it, authoritarian, in control. At night, I’d cry and fantasize about sending it to him. But I never did. Just as I couldn’t speak on the
phone to him, I couldn't send him my words that every high school kid in the tri-state area stuffed into their lockers.

Weeks later, I read a half-finished letter my mom was writing to her best friend in New Mexico. She wrote her about my poem, then wrote, “I was so surprised. I never knew she thought of him.” And I realized how my dad’s absence turned into the very silence I was writing about. We could barely speak his name.

On that first visit with my dad, caught in the strange workings of getting to know each other, the cogs and gears of connection working together at times, not fitting at others, I took him to his radiation treatment, Julie staying home to cook dinner. I was driving my mom’s ridiculously plush Grand Jeep Cherokee with my dad tucked low into the passenger seat, holding the white plastic case he kept his false teeth piece in.

“It won’t take too long. They just put me in this big metal capsule and shine some lights on me. It doesn’t hurt.”

“Okay, no problem.” It seemed like it should’ve been strange, like I should’ve thought nostalgically of him driving and me, as a kid, sitting in the passenger side being taxied and taken care of, but it wasn’t. I couldn’t remember a time when it was just him and me in a car. My mom told me that when I was a colic baby, I used to cry all night and the only way I would sleep was when my dad drove me around in our small, blue Toyota, the radio playing something that was anything but soothing, anything but something one would
play to lull a baby to sleep. Led Zeppelin or Earth, Wind and Fire or Lee Oskar, whose song *Sunshine Keri* was the origin of my name.

"I’m used to it now. It’s no big deal. It’s a piece of goddamn cake after my chemo."

He laughed his laugh that was a slighter, watered down version of the laugh he laughed when I was a kid. It was sharp and childlike, made you laugh right back at it.

"Oh yeah?"

"I’m like Superman or something now. My body was so used to all that booze, you know, that it was resistant to all the drugs they were pumping into my body. They had to crank it all up just to do something, just so the drugs would have an effect, my body was that used to poison."

The waiting room was a small square room, bordered with rows of orange-covered chairs with cube-like magazine tables between every third chair or so. We sat down, not able to face each other, but straight ahead at the people sitting opposite us, an old lady in a wheel chair and someone who appeared her almost-as-old daughter. They weren’t reading any magazines, but staring straight at us, not bothering to look away when we looked right back at them.

"The nurses here know me pretty well by now. They’re some funny gals, I’m telling you. They call me ‘Radiation Man.’ Because of all that radiation they have to shoot through me."

I picked up a magazine. *Better Homes and Gardens.* I pretended to read an article on how to transform bricks into bookends using clay, paints, some crafty sensibilities. They were ugly. I thought of all the treasures in my dad’s house, the European glass ornaments catching swirls of color midair, Depression era green glass plates lined up in a glass-fronted
bookcase like so many eyes watching me as I lived carefully in his house, old guitars, mechanical monkeys who shook dice and crashed cymbals when you twisted their keys. Julie and he went to antique stores, estate and garage sales, and spent their money on odd, wonderful things that wore history like halos, that they propped up in clustered displays on every surface.

A big-buttoed nurse walked into the waiting room, smirked at my dad, and spit out the side of her mouth, "Phillips."

My dad got up and walked tipsily to the door. He was so fragile that walking seemed dangerous. I noticed that sometimes he didn't seem to see curbs or steps and almost fell down them with straight knees. Like walking in the dark. People stared at him with somewhat frightened looks on their faces, not knowing what to make of this ambiguously-aged man wearing red Converse high-tops and a Yankees baseball cap.

I tried to read another article, but I couldn't stop thinking of him in the gleaming, spaceship capsule, green lights shooting rays into his body, his teeth in their white case somewhere close, chattering in the vibrations of it all, his hair standing on end, his body absorbing that light like kryptonite, hardly able to take it anymore, flinching against its painless penetration.

After I left Kansas to drive back to Minnesota and my own very separate, very different life, out of the strange colors, light, and poems of his, I found his teeth case deep in the cushions of the car seat. I wept then like he had left behind a present for me, a treasure for me to find and remember him by. I didn't want my mom to see that case, so I hid it in a drawer. I didn't want her to know that my dad had any false teeth, that any part of him was
old, fake, or embarrassing. I hid it in a drawer and thought of it at night, glowing in the dark, softly chattering from all its radiation visits.

At 3 a.m., the night opens in a toothless yawn to let Meridith eat an orange. She read in a prenatal care book that to make sure the baby gets enough vitamins, it's wise to feed it in the middle of the night. So for eight months, she sets her alarm clock for 3 a.m. to get up and eat an orange at the kitchen table she got from her grandmother, the kitchen table on which she grew up making cookies and pies.

She peels the orange in one twisting coil of skin, separates the meat of the fruit and eats it piece by piece, slowly, the gold flecks of the Formica table a constellation of thoughts and possibilities, that seem to turn more and more into worries and doubts, her whole life and future growing day by day inside her, her own constellation of milky skin, baby teeth, and soft bone getting harder and harder, wavering there inside her.

Many times, Van is away at a gig, mysteriously gone for days, or passed out on the living room couch. It happened just like that, the wedding and then the not-so-gradual descension into struggle, trying to make things work and hold them together. But she thinks that as long as she eats this orange, as long as she takes her vitamins, reads her books, is careful at the restaurant not to hurt herself, everything will be sweet and whole, everything will come together in one spiraling coil.
Driving home with my mom from getting my high school senior pictures taken, I say something about my dad. It seemed to shatter the air around us, make it hard for us to breathe with each other in the car, hard to speak. I asked, “I wonder why my dad doesn’t call us.”

“I don’t know,” she said, staring straight ahead at the road. She became plastic-like, on automatic when my dad’s name was brought up, after all these years, seven years since she married Kent and built a house in Minnesota, far away from the dirt and scars of Dodge City.

“He doesn’t even want to talk to me now that I’m graduating? Does he even know I’m going to college?” I was overcome with the same dull pain that filled my head every time I let myself think about him.

“I don’t know. He’s sick. He’s got a disease.”

Later that year, I hear that he’s in the hospital with cirrhosis. I call him and have a cold, strange conversation. He has to ask “Keri who?” when we first start talking. He’s not kidding. I thought it would be the last time I spoke to him. I was waiting for his death, for some closure. But before I knew it, he was out of the hospital and on the next leg of his strange, sad, absent life that I knew nothing of.

“When do you think the last time was when we were all in the same room?” Joey asked. We were in the car on the way to Salina, six or so months after my first visit.

“It was in Gypsum. We didn’t really see him after that.”
“Oh yeah. God. This is so weird.” It was as if we were seeking out a mythical figure, a cartoon, something we invented. We knew he was really sick and we were scared what we’d see when we got there. We were trying to prepare. Joey was letting a cigarette dangle off the edge of his lip.

“I can’t believe you still smoke after seeing him with cancer.”

“He still smokes. It’s his last love. He won’t give them up.” Joey had been down more recently. I tried not to feel jealous hearing about how they had played music together, talked about regret, fathers, the real stuff of life. All I could do was talk about movies, TV, my classes at school.

He’d stopped all treatment and was in bed at home, Julie taking care of him as best as she could. When we saw him, we were surprised that he had hair. Most surprising, though, was how beautiful it was, so black that it was almost blue, and curly, locks curling sweetly around his ear lobes, lying softly against the back of his neck. He had always grown it long and brushed it out so that the curls were flattened by the weight.

He couldn’t walk well, so we pushed him around in a wheelchair that Julie had rented. He didn’t eat much, but we helped him eat fudge bars. We made lasagna, but he said it was “fucking terrible.” He still had enough energy and will, however, to make fun of Julie, to do impressions of her as an iguana barking orders at him. My mom had told me how cruel he used to be at times, that the alcohol would make him mean and make him say hurtful things. I wondered if the prospect of death was doing the same thing, like a mind-altering drug, shifting everything just so much that it made him lash out, hurt people he loved. But he was nice to Joey, me, and his daughter from his first wife, Amy, who had left her two infants with her husband to come and stay for awhile.
“I sure love you guys,” he said when he could still talk. Joey would help him smoke cigarettes. He did smoke until the very end, my brother moving the lit ends up and down, his other arm holding my dad up by his sharp shoulders.

Everything was changed in the strange light of my dad’s dying. I was no longer angry, and I didn’t even care about asking the questions that had hurt me for so many years. My brother and I went out for groceries and prescriptions, his car radio the sweetest thing we’d ever heard, the crystal ball hanging from his rear view mirror the most beautiful piece of light we’d seen. It felt so good to feel sad, because I didn’t feel guilty about it, didn’t worry about my mom being hurt that I still missed and loved my dad, despite all that he’d done in the past. I could remember just the good things, hold them in the palm of my memory and run my fingers over and over them. It was forgiving him and also letting myself have a relationship that I’d been held back from all my life.

Just as she fell disastrously and malignantly in love, so does she realize that she has backed her life into a scary, tight corner. The money she makes is sand through her fingers, and her son is beautiful and life-saving, but Van is drunk and mean.

They all come home to the furniture overturned, blood on the carpet, Van puking in the toilet. The blue Toyota is driven off a bridge and smashed.

She moves in and out of the house with her kids tied behind her like wooden ducks on a string, Van finding them, promising to do better, in and out of rehab.

Her father dies.
She goes to college at night, borrowing money from her mother.

They separate and she decides to take her life down a path where he can't find her, where she'll end up somewhere completely different than she ever thought possible, knowing that this was the plan all along, that Van had a purpose, and his purpose will move with her to Lawrence, then Wichita, then up North to Minnesota where she can't believe life was what it was all that time ago.

"I asked dad why he never called us or tried to see us," Joey said in the car once. I was surprised and in awe of Joey, who was so immature in so many ways, so much like my dad in ways that made my mom shudder.

"What did he say?" It was as if I was about to know the answer that would seal my life up into a neat, compact ball of meaning, as if a spotlight was about to shine on the darkest part of my consciousness, a revelation, an epiphany was dangling in the air and all I had to do was grab it.

"He said he didn't know. That he wanted to, that he thought about us all the time, but he was so messed up and so much was out of control and full of shame that he couldn't do what he needed to."

And for the first time in my life, (it's hard to believe it took me so long to do such a simple thing), I started thinking of my dad's life and what pain he must've experienced not talking to his kids, being caught in the terror and grief of an addiction he spent most of his life dealing with, the courage and love it must have taken for him to call his grown-up kids
after neglecting them for so many years to get to know them as a sick person. And I saw his life this way, as a Pollock painting, all chaos, bright colors, actions that happen as soon as he thought them as paint splattered on a canvas, that is at first disturbing, but as soon as I squinted my mind, I saw it as something acceptable and even beautiful in a loud, abstract, visceral way. My mom would call it deluding myself, my friend Maria would call it “romanticized squalor disorder,” but it’s a way I perhaps need to see my dad’s life to feel okay, to understand him as a good, feeling person.

I stayed at his house for two weeks, sleeping on a cot right under the mannequin they had in the corner. I’d lie awake and watch her carefully, sometimes convinced that she was looking at me, shifting her eyes a bit, twitching her fingers. I had to leave after two weeks to pack my stuff and move to Ames, IA, where I was going to start school in a couple weeks. I said goodbye and took the picture of my dad lying on the bed in my head, let it scald its image into my retinas to appear haphazardly when I was packing, seeing friends, sitting in the dentist’s chair, talking to my mom.

_He was a mistake, but the best mistake, the mistake that you might want to happen again, if you lose your senses for a few minutes. He comes to you in dreams, sometimes made of tinted air, sometimes playing the drums that rise up and shake themselves, sometimes as he was when you first remember him, sweet and funny, the kind of man you find yourself in. He’s something you need without thinking too much about, not because he’ll be there or pay the bills, but because you want to be around him, watch him play his bass for a bit, talk about_
some book or another that you read awhile back or that he read awhile back. You'll forgive him because you can't afford not to, you'll forgive him as if everything depends on it, because in some true, wild way, it does.