Removed: a novel

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Removed: A Novel

by

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

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Program of Study Committee:
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Iowa State University
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dedicated to memory of

Helen Lemke

08/27/1924 – 03/28/2007

I love you, Grandma.

I wish I knew your stories better.
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After all, the heart is not a small stone to be rolled this way and that.

The mind is not a box to be shut fast.

- Anne Carson
No little girl ever dreams of being married by a divorce attorney. Kristen and Laura knew the majority of revenue coming into the law firm was earned from divorce proceedings as Laura pulled her car up to the curb. Jill wore the white dress, a nod to tradition in this nontraditional setting. Kristen and Laura together chose something old, new, borrowed and blue for Jill to have on hand during the ceremony. Blue: Laura had pinned a small bit of blue satin ribbon near the hem of Jill’s knee-length skirt. Borrowed: the bride wore a gold heart necklace Kristen had received as a gift for high school graduation. Old: two of her oldest friends stood at her sides. And new: the baby just beginning to grow, to uncurl its limbs inside her belly.

Laura parked under the shadow of the Cathedral of Saint Anne. Kristen climbed from the passenger seat, carefully straightening her skirt as she stood. In the rearview mirror, Laura saw Jill’s eyes sweep up to the church’s domes and spires. That was the fairy tale, to be married within the opulent building before them, underneath the ceiling mural of the patron saint of pregnant women. St. Anne surrounded by angels and clouds, both fluffy, white and impossibly tall. The shadow cast by the building covered the whole parking lot, all the way to the door of the next building, their destination.

No one wanted to be married in the shadow of a church. Laura knew Jill wanted a ceremony lit by holy candles on the altar, blessed by the priest and witnessed by all her family and friends. Instead, the three girls were meeting Jill’s fiancé, his best man, and Laura’s boyfriend Kevin in the lobby of the lawyer’s office next door to the cathedral. The
building was tan, a nondescript square of a building—it's only distinguishing mark, the sign posted in the middle of the parking lot.

The call from Kristen a week ago had taken Laura by surprise. She had not realized people still had shotgun weddings, that people still felt pressured to get married the instant they found themselves accidentally, unexpectedly pregnant. She also couldn't imagine marrying someone she had started dating only months ago. All three girls had been friends as children, saw it as a blessing that at least they were twenty-one, not seventeen, when Jill found herself three months late and too nervous to take a pregnancy test. She had not known for sure until the doctor came in with the results.

The lawyer, the fiancé, the best man, and Kevin were waiting in a conference room where the ceremony would take place. The ten-foot mahogany table shone in the center of the room. Light sconces hung on the walls, golden and giving the space the cozy feel of a den instead of an office. The wedding party had trailed the lawyer through the double doors and followed his directions to line up in a certain manner around the room. Jill and her fiancée stood near the head of the table, holding hands. Jill’s belly had just begun to tent the stomach of her shirt. Laura and Kristen stood off to Jill’s right, while the other boys were to the groom’s left.

The lawyer stood to the left of the couple. “Do you…” the lawyer asked.

“I do.”

“I do.”

They exchanged rings that had not been sized yet to fit their new owners’ fingers. Jill’s would not stay on her hand; her husband’s would not go any further than his knuckle.
“You know what to do next,” the lawyer said. And the newlyweds kissed. The kiss lasted too long; Laura grew uncomfortable. Kristen, busy exchanging a variety of glances with the best man, paid no attention. Kevin met Laura’s eye, but he just smiled at her. When the kiss ended, Laura stepped around the table and up to the couple to be the first to hug them.

All this followed by a speech from the lawyer: “I’ve been a divorce attorney for twenty years, so I’m going to put these back in your envelope and return them to you,” he said, folding the vows and handing them to the groom. “And here’s what I want you to do with them. Take them out every so often and read them to each other. Once this thing becomes real, it can be easy to forget about all the pretty words that you spoke to each other today. I’ve found that the couple that reminds themselves of their vows is the couple that stays together.”

Typically, a divorce attorney does not make an appearance in the wedding ceremony little girls dream of. But then, neither does a swollen belly. All that doesn’t come around until well after the ink is dry on the witnesses’ signature lines. Laura watched Kristen dot her “i” and cross her “t”; Kristen couldn’t look away from the best man long enough to keep her signature flush with the line. And all this in the shadow of St. Anne’s.
Chapter One – 2:49 p.m.

I know what to do with her no more than one cloud in the sky knows what to do with another.

-J.M. Coetzee

In between a woman she had never met and one she had known all her life, Laura faced the painting on the wall with her hands clasped low against her stomach. The woman to her left, the one she did not know, turned from the exhibit occasionally to coo down at the baby, sitting quiet in its stroller. To Laura’s right, Kristen looked like she wanted to fall into the painting.

What startled Laura was that even though she and Kristen had been friends their entire lives, Laura knew no more about the way Kristen’s life worked day to day than she did about the woman she hadn’t even met.

Kristen leaned forward, as her head moved from side to side and back. Laura tried to determine what it was about the painting that kept her friend so captivated. The painting, titled “torsos” with a small “t,” showed two naked stomachs facing each other. All Laura knew for sure was the two people must have been standing extremely close; only a couple of inches separated their bellies. She felt how even the slightest breeze would be cool against that expanse of skin, bared for the eyes of the artist with his paint, his brushes.

Perhaps the models for the painting had not stood close together at all. Perhaps the shadows, the way the curves of each compensated for and responded to the other, was a product of the artist’s imagination instead of the actual bend of the light or a true representation of the way they, those models, would fit together just right, torso to naked torso.
“Oh, darling, what’s wrong?” the mother said, stepping away from the painting, reaching towards the stroller. Laura watched as the woman crouched down and leaned in toward the child whose face increasingly showed the wrinkles and creases of displeasure. A boy, Laura was certain, even though the baby wore pale green, the color of mint ice cream.

Last night: 2:13 a.m.

Then there were nights like tonight when Laura woke, legs wrapped up in the bed sheets, an obituary fully formed in her head. These obits, however, had nothing to do with the challenges of her job. They weren’t destined for the collage of lives she collected at the back of the local section of the *Milwaukee Tribune*. These were only hers, strictly personal.

Those nights, when she dreamt these sentences of tribute, these phrases in memoriam, to her family, her friends who were actually still living, her emotions were more tangled than she wanted to admit.

Laura flung back her white down comforter and pulled her legs free of the bedding. She wasn’t going to reach for the phone, call Kristen. It used to be she could have called in the middle of the night, but that time in their friendship had long passed.

The dreams had always been too real, of the words she spilled onto the page in short, even lines that broke down the entire life of her family member or, in this case, a friend she had known since she was a toddler. She dreamt of waking and going to her office, of sitting at her desk to start her day’s work where she would find lines worth of words she did not remember writing but knew she had. And then she would read about the death of a person close to her. This night the details of Kristen’s life were all laid out before her, including
those most final of details. These dreams had become so real recently that they felt closer to her core than even the things that happened while she was awake.

Forcing herself to lie back down, smoothing the covers over her body, Laura stared up at the ceiling in the half-dark. The curtains were not closed all the way; the moon was bright, big and close in the sky. She looked at the thin dark line between the frame that hung above the bed and the wall, wondering what might be happening there, on the other side, the inside of the painting she had hung shortly after moving in. Anything she could hold onto to stop thinking about the folder her boss had slid onto the corner of her desk midway through the workday, which was waiting for her attention in the messenger bag she carried to and from work. To stop remembering so clearly why she could, even after all these months had passed, only sleep on one side of the bed. She still slept exclusively on the right, as if at any moment during any night, she might wake up and find that she was no longer alone. Laura focused her attention firmly on the painting to help clear out the idea that she was going back to the museum in a few hours without him.

Six months ago

When she said she wanted snow on the day of her wedding, Kevin let her choose a date in mid-December. There had been several inches of fresh, lovely snow that day but no wedding. Two weeks earlier, they had said goodbye not only to their hopes for a beautiful wedding day but to their relationship as well.
In the kitchen, a cup of herbal tea gone cold between her hands, Laura watched the square of light move across the counter as the sun rose. She did not remember whether she had taken even a sip as she sat. She thought about the night they met, when he drove her home through a lightning storm. The electricity threw streaks across the sky sideways, lining up to the horizon like felled trees. They had not known each other but a couple of hours, yet Kevin noticed the way she clutched at the door handle and whispered his question: “Are you okay?” That was six years ago.

Kevin had been gone for two days, leaving behind a note that told her he loved her, that he would be back early Sunday morning. Sunrise on Sunday discovered Laura at the counter, sleepless and waiting.

When he opened the door, she shifted to face him until she was seated sideways. He was still, framed by the doorway for a moment. He must have been certain that he would make it home before she woke. Typically a late riser, Laura’s presence in the kitchen would have surprised him. Unable to sleep, she had stared up at the ceiling over their bed for several hours before finally giving up on the pretext of sleep.

Friday she had spent listening to music, doing a small amount of reading, but mostly drafting several articles for work. At her paper, death was still treated like news, to be dealt with instantly, electronically. Saturday she had brunch with a coworker who had just become a mother and then ran several errands. After watching a movie, she had tried to go to bed early, anxious for Kevin’s return.

A poster of Edgar Degas’ Two Dancers on Stage hung over their bed. Kevin had brought it home for her one day, and usually when she looked at it, she thought about him and the way their relationship was built, so solid. But this time she could not think about
anything but Sara, the coworker, who had brought her child along to brunch. The baby had slept while they ate and chatted. Meeting that new little person, seeing how Sara looked at her son—all had Laura thinking about babies as she pulled back the covers on her side of their bed. What happened to ballerinas who had babies? Do their bodies ever return to the perfect proportions necessary to execute the moves required of an elegant, graceful prima ballerina? After babies, do they continue to dance, professionally or not? Did either of Degas’ dancers, so elegant en pointe, have little ones waiting in the wings? Too many questions.

Then her thoughts turned from the ballerinas, and she thought about being pregnant herself. Having a baby. Being a mom. The way her belly would swell and then deflate, how her heart would only grow. She was nearly asleep, a smile small on her face. On that edge between asleep and awake long enough to recall a long ago conversation from early in their relationship, Laura’s eyes opened, and she ended up on the kitchen stool facing Kevin when he came in the door.

“Hey, babe. Been up long?” he asked, dropping his bag on the table by the door and coming over to stand next to her, kiss her on the forehead.

“Couldn’t sleep,” she said, wishing she could lean into him, let herself remember his strength, the warmth of him. Borrow some of it as her own.

“At all?” He took the mug from between her fingers. He walked around the central island and put the tea in the microwave.

“No.”

“Worried about the wedding?” he asked. The timer beeped. He removed the mug, drank from it and then set it back down on the counter before her. Laura did not know how
to answer his question; she turned her head so that she could look at his face when he sat next to her, not speaking.

He filled the silence: “Well, want me to make something for breakfast?” She shook her head, no. She wasn’t hungry, would not be able to eat. The silence built, layered itself between them. After several minutes, Kevin stood and walked over to dig in the cupboard. Laura watched the way his shirt stretched over his back, hugging the shape of him, as he reached for something on the top shelf.

“Hey, Laura?”

She was surprised to find him watching her from across the counter, his hands laid flat on the surface. Hadn’t he just been rummaging in the shelves?

“I asked a couple of times if you wanted some juice?” he said, gesturing to the carton of grape juice he had retrieved from the refrigerator. Shaking her head again, Laura stood and walked over to the window. There was some snow on the ground, but only in dirty patches around the yard. The sun was high enough to shine over the rooftops of the neighboring houses.

“Laura. Can you come and sit down a minute, tell me what is going on?” Kevin had taken his seat at the counter again as she inventoried the contents of the yard behind their building: dirty snow, the trees, a bird house bathed in patches of golden light the sun had just begun to scatter across the lawn.

Turning, she leaned against the windowsill instead. “I want to ask you something, and I need you to be honest with me.”

“Of course,” he said.
His eyes were dark, even in the bright light just beginning to shine through the windows. Watching him for a moment, Laura tried to concentrate all her thoughts into a single sentence she could actually articulate. He watched her, eyes narrowed like he was trying to solve a puzzle laid out across her face. The longer the silence lasted, the more he fidgeted. He had taken her mug, moving it back and forth between his hands as if he were trying to measure its weight. She took a deep breath, heart jumping, and exhaled: “I want to have a baby.”

His face told her he had not expected that. His fingers flexed around the blue ceramic of the mug. “Now?” he asked, nodding his head in the general direction of the bedroom.

“Not right this minute, but someday. Soon.” She would not let him joke this away.

“That doesn’t sound like a question.”

“I meant it as one.” Her wedding dress was hanging in a closed garment bag in the back of the closet, tailored to fit every curve of her body.

And Kevin just looked at her. She said nothing, waiting to hear the words she knew would be the end of their relationship. The futures they envisioned were just too different.

“Where will you go?” she asked.

“Are we sure about this?” he asked.

She thought so.

The next afternoon, Kevin used a free hand to wipe a tear from her cheek as he carried the last of his things out of the apartment they had shared for nearly a year. Even as it was happening, Laura knew she would remember every detail of this moment. His last trip to the car, the moment he was gone with the clear intention of coming back just one last time,
Laura leaned against the doorjamb, unsure they had really made the right choice. And then he came back into view. At that moment, Laura realized it was this that would haunt her worst—the look on his face as he climbed those steps towards their, now her, apartment to say the final goodbye.

He would stay with his brother, the one who would have been the best man in the wedding, and keep paying half her rent until the lease was up. He stood before her, and she waited for him to speak, even to say something practical about the rent check or the spare key to the building.

His mouth did not move but for a sad smile. His arms lifted briefly from his sides but fell back. There would be no hugging their goodbye. Instead, she stepped close, stood near enough to smell him—the spicy hint of his cologne, the sweat he had worked up during the move. “I’m going to miss how you smell,” she said with the exhale of her breath.

She heard his own breath catch, heard the slight aberration before it corrected itself. And still he didn’t speak. She wanted to ask what he thought at that moment. But what right did she have to ask anything of him anymore?

“You could tell your mom I cheated,” he finally spoke, his back to her, his hand on the doorknob.

“She’d never believe it,” Laura said. He turned to kiss her forehead twice as he left then placed the key on the table near the door.

For hours afterward, Laura sat on the couch they had chosen together. She did not read the book that lay on the cushion next to her, nor did she watch tv or listen to music. She
hardly even moved really. Surrounded by maroon and brown throw pillows and blankets, she just sat on the cream-colored couch, staring across the room.

The bookcase lining the wall on the other side of the room had been an engagement present from Kevin’s uncle. Before Kevin had packed his things, the shelves had been full of their books, mingled together and color-coded. What was left looked so much sadder now that he was gone, had taken his books with him. He had a whole collection of art books with the full-page glossy pictures of masterpieces in painting and sculpture. He owned books about philosophy and political thought, history and science. And now there were big gaps in the seven-foot tall shelves, and some of Laura’s books, mostly fiction and poetry, had fallen sideways.

What made Laura saddest as she studied what was left of the books from across the room was the blue shelf. The bottom shelf of five had held the books with spines in shades of blue and purple. When they moved into these rooms, Laura spent a whole evening selecting places for each of the books based on shape. There were four books that somehow ended up in a separate stack on the floor, two of Laura’s, two of Kevin’s, that all had spines in various shades of blue. Even though she was nearly done, the shelves were nearly full, Laura started her arranging over, using color instead of shape this time.

There were only two of those blue books left. Laura stared at her two lonely blue-spined books for several hours. And she decided that she would move.

Months passed. And Laura finally moved out, into a smaller apartment that she could afford on her salary from the newspaper. And she sold those shelves. Kevin had not wanted
them, and Laura could not stand to be alone with them, even in her new living room, where Kevin had never been.

Laura’s fingers traced the scar across the bridge of her nose. And she remembered, lying alone in bed, waiting for the time to pass before she returned to the museum for the first time without him. She remembered how, after they kissed, he would touch her face, run his thumb over her scar. It was one of the things that made her attractive to him, he had told her so. He also wondered about the scar that kept half her left eyebrow from growing, the one just below and to the side of her right knee. Bitten by a dog when she was twelve, fallen off her bike at eight or nine. And the scar and bend in her nose had come from Kristen’s elbow connecting with her face.

Kevin had loved those scars, those things that had been imperfect about her. “Besides, I’ve always thought scars had the most interesting of stories to tell,” he told her when he revealed the reason he had initially approached her. And that was what she thought about now, so that she would not have to think about the return to the museum.

He had liked her body best when she had just gotten out of the shower. Her skin felt softest, and her hair hung straight, long, and cold down her back. As it dried, the strands would wave and usually frizz. But that did not bother him at all. When they were together, she had showered at night, gone to bed with her hair only close to dry.
This morning, Laura forced herself to stay in bed as long as she could. Her alarm would not sound for another hour, but even the mattress was starting to feel uncomfortable, too hard, like it was trying to press into her skin. Her nerves felt too close to the surface, as if they had been slowly rising ever since the day she had talked Kristen into returning with her the Milwaukee Art Museum for the first time since the end of her relationship. She was anxious; memories of Kevin had been coming back too quickly, too regularly for him ever to be far from her thoughts these last few days. Her body was trying to tell her something.

She was late.

The sky was just beginning to lighten, even though the sun rose early in August. Laura did not think she had slept long enough, but the remnants of a dream came back to her in a rush. She had been losing a game of chess against her third grade teacher, Miss Miller, while drinking tea from tiny china cups, so small she could hardly hold onto the handle. Hanging over the table was a painting of a dark haired woman who whispered Laura hints from behind the veil of canvas. There was no memory of what she had said, but Laura knew that she had not been taking the painting’s advice. The woman had been shaking her head at Laura from within the picture.

After her shower, Laura came out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel and grabbed the jeans she had discarded the night before up off the floor. After pulling them on and choosing a plain white tank top, Laura reached over and smoothed first the sheet and then the comforter over her bed. The left corner, even after her restless night, was still tucked in. After all these months without him, and even though he had never spent a night in this bed, Laura still could not bear to sleep on his side. Slightly disgusted with herself, Laura retrieved
her hair band from the bedside table, stretched it over her hand and allowed it to snap into place around her wrist.

And even though she had already checked twice, Laura picked up the remote from the night table and turned the television to the weather. Across the Midwest, the day promised to be bright, the sky clear. While she could not tell it from the report, she knew from experience that there would be a wind coming in off Lake Michigan. The museum stood on the coastline, creating a great mix between the modernity of the building and the natural setting. Even as she turned off the television, Laura knew the weather wasn’t what had her so concerned. If she could focus on the weather for a while, she could stop focusing on this return to the museum, which had somehow taken on an epic scale. She was confronting something; she just wasn’t sure what she hoped to accomplish by doing so.

As it dried, her hair smelled of mango and pomegranate. She ate slices of an apple for breakfast then tried to occupy herself with a book until she needed to leave to meet Kristen. The scent of her hair kept distracting Laura from the story, though. It was new, something she had not tried before, something she could not have used while she shared a bed with Kevin. He had been allergic to something in the shampoo she had used when they first started dating. Her hair had smelled like lilacs; there was never a problem until they started sleeping together. Something about that artificial scent made him break out in hives whenever he spent the night between her sheets. The fragrance had bonded to the threads of all those linens; it hid in the spaces between individual strands of the weave, particles of flower too small to see. She had donated all of them, along with her towels.
There were also the times when they had ended up in the shower together. His preference for fragrance-free shampoos and soaps also kept him from smelling like fruit and flowers on the days after. When she ran out of shampoo the first time after Kevin left, she had bought the Kevin-safe brand out of habit.

Sitting sideways in an armchair, her legs hanging over one of the arms, Laura inhaled the scent of her hair and wondered how late Kristen would be.

Sunlight had been peeking through the gaps in leaf cover along the road as Laura pulled out of the parking lot and turned east onto her street. The c.d. in the player was unlabelled, but she knew it was Kevin’s. She knew it was one he liked best, so he had probably searched for months to find it, but she was going to keep it. Laura would keep pieces of him wherever she found them scattered throughout her life.

The drive should have taken fifteen minutes from her apartment. One wrong turn on the back roads she had taken to avoid an accident on the interstate, and Laura was nearly an hour late. She considered calling Kristen, now that she had found her way back to the interstate she had set out to avoid and once again knew where she was, but Laura assumed that the unexpected delay in her schedule would have them reaching the museum at nearly the same time.

Lateness bothered Laura, but she was accustomed to Kristen’s. After spending more time than she wanted to think about waiting for Kristen to be ready in both high school and college, Laura knew to always bring along a book when they were meeting. They saw each other less now, since Kristen had moved to California to accept a lucrative job offer after
college working with student loan agencies, but they had spent days together in Milwaukee before. At this point in their lives, neither had any reason to return to the north, where they had grown up together. Instead, they met once a year in larger, more metropolitan areas where they had little, if any, shared history. Their lives were lived apart, but their friendship was strong. Laura preferred spending time in the places that were home to neither of them, where they could be on even ground.

“We could spend the day at the art museum, unless that would be too…” Kristen trailed off. Laura checked her phone, to make sure their connection had not been cut.

“Is that what you want to do?” Laura asked, not wanting to consider what might be overwhelming about returning to the museum.

“Really, there are lots of other things we could do,” Kristen said, not sounding very convincing. “If it’s nice, we could really just walk the lake shore. Or shop?”

“I think shopping would be worse than going back to the museum.” Touched that Kristen was so concerned, Laura understood her friend would not have brought up the museum if it weren’t something that she really wanted to do.

“Do you mean that? Don’t do this just for me. I don’t care what we do.”

“Then let’s go to the museum. I loved that place well before Kevin, certainly before he proposed. And I haven’t been there since…well, since that day. It’s time I go back. With you.”

“Really? Are you sure you’re sure?”
“I’m positive. We’ll have a good time there. We’ll walk around, look at the art. People watch. It’ll be a good day.”

By the time they were ready to say good-bye, Kristen had agreed with Laura, that it might be a necessary trip. Laura did not want to spend an entire summer day trapped in a place where she and Kevin had spent so many hours while their relationship was developing, but Kristen said that she could understand wanting to return to that place, to confront all the things that had happened there. That is what Laura wanted to do. Face those things that had just risen back to the surface.

As she climbed from her seat, Laura realized she had pulled into the parking spot at a significant angle. While she considered straightening out her car, she heard her name. She looked up and saw Kristen, still several rows of cars across the parking lot, smiling with all her teeth. Laura waved then ducked into the car and reached across the driver’s seat for her bag, which was on the floor on the passenger side. Kevin had hated it when she had put her bag at his feet.

For a second, Laura thought she could still smell him on her car’s interior, but then Kristen called her name again and Laura turned away from the car, shoving the door closed. Locking her car, Laura straightened and smiled at her childhood friend. The two women looked at each other for a long minute. They had not seen each other in nearly a year. Laura wondered what Kristen saw when she looked at her. And then she
thought about what Kristen had looked like in the sixth grade when her mom had forced her into wearing her hair in braided pigtails everyday.

Although she considered the amount of time that had passed since their reaching each other in the parking lot to be slightly awkward, Laura spread her arms to hug Kristen. They had been friends for more than twenty years, ever since they met, nose to elbow on the twisty slide in the playground. Kristen’s sharp elbow, Laura’s broken nose.

The day was hot but the breeze off the lake cooled Laura’s skin. She walked beside Kristen, aware of the silence between them. They followed the sidewalk that ran from the parking lot up to the museum, which was just north of where they were.

The last time Laura had walked this stretch, she had been at Kevin’s side.

“So pretty,” Kristen said, the first thing since they had left the parking lot. Laura nodded, looking out over the water that seemed to stretch on forever. But Michigan was just over the horizon. Not quite the romantic destination she would prefer. Then she was distracted by the unexpected height of the surf coming to shore and breaking against the barrier wall. Seagulls hung low in the sky, hardly needing to flap to stay aloft in the wind.

“You okay?” Kristen asked. Laura had not realized she had stopped, staring out at the lake.

As she started to respond, Kristen’s cell phone rang in her purse, drowning her out. Laura leaned against the fence built to keep people back from the water while Kristen said hello and walked off the sidewalk and onto the grass. Laura watched her walk a little way, then turned her attention north.
The contrast between the blue sky and the white sculpture that was also the museum’s welcome center was bright. The top of the building extended up into the sky in a triangle of white beams and glass panels. Jutting from one of the legs of the triangle were two large fins, hundreds of feet in length, one on each side of the building. They looked like the sails on a boat. Did the building ever wish for a different lake? Or perhaps not a lake at all. A literal ocean of water to look out at, to watch over, to consider traveling. Where would the museum-boat go if it could free itself, take the day off and run away? Over the sails, the mast of the museum rose from the east end of the building. From that mast, a series of cables ran down to a sidewalk suspended over the museum mall, Art Museum Drive, and into a courtyard the city had labeled a park, to which the building was securely docked.

“If that boat lifts anchor, I hope I get to go, too,” she said as Kristen came up beside her.

Kristen laughed: “Then let’s get inside. I’m ready to see the art anyway.”

Laura did not comment on the fact that the building itself was supposed to be art.

“Who was on the phone?” Laura asked as they walked toward the museum.

“Tyler.” Kristen did not expand.

“Everything all right?”

“He just worries,” she said, brushing off the call from her boyfriend with a shrug and a small smile. “The real question is, are you sure we want to do this? We could still shop instead.”

“That doesn’t sound at all like fun,” Laura said. Kristen had never been so considered about people overhearing her phone conversations before.
“Okay,” Kristen said. Laura could hear worry in her tone. And that moment she realized exactly what she had persuaded Kristen into doing with her.

The whole day in the museum ahead of them, she continued to walk toward the building with Kristen matching her step.
Chapter Two – 11:24 a.m.

Passion occupies a space that is not vacated until another passion occupies it.

-Charles Baxter

Laura wanted to feel the lake water between her toes. Her feet were mostly bare already, clad in black foam flip-flops. Pebbles on the sidewalk pressed sharply into the soles of her feet through the thin barrier. Her hair brushed against the skin on her arms, left bare by the white tank top she wore with day-old jeans. Kevin had always rolled his eyes whenever she pulled on the same pair of jeans from the previous day.

“I wish we could play in the water,” Laura said, trying to kick the memory of Kevin out of her head. She could easily slip out of her shoes and…

“I love sailing,” Kristen replied, stepping up close to where Laura stood at the fence. Their upper arms touched.

When Laura looked at Kristen, she saw sadness in the small creases at the sides of her mouth. Usually ready to bust out grinning, Kristen looked like she wanted to cry but refused to.

They stood for a minute, side by side, bare arms touching, silent and staring out at the water. A sailboat, bouncing on the crests of waves, was coming close to shore. There must be a landing somewhere near the museum.

“I like the idea of sailing, skimming across the water, a whole ecosystem beneath your feet,” Laura said. She had never actually been sailing. Even though the shores were rocky and the waves were strong where they were, Laura wanted to swim out to that little
boat, climb aboard, and take off to some place she had never been. Or maybe just the other side of the lake would have been far enough.

“Maybe we can go sometime,” Kristen said, her voice quiet, vacant. Where the white hull of the boat met the waves, that is where all the ship’s stories were told. A crust of salt from one place washed clean in another then ran through dirty water or fresh rain.

At that moment, Laura would have given most of what she had to know the stories of that boat, not because she had heard them or imagined them, but because she had lived them from the deck of the craft.

The message he left said he would stop by on his way home from work at six. She had discovered the box of his things while packing all of her own stuff into boxes for her move across town. He had called back nearly immediately; she had not answered the ringing phone. Laura listened to his message as he left it, then another three times, just to hear the sound of his voice bouncing off the walls in the apartment again.

She had intended to be away when he came, to leave a note on the door that it was open. The box was just inside the foyer, waiting for him to come and then leave again. But she had not left as the clock counted down to his arrival. Instead, she sat on the couch, just watching the door.

At 6:04, Kevin knocked.

Once he was back inside the apartment, the one they had hunted for together, which was now mostly bare, they said little. There was little to say. He had come for the last of his
things, a box of forgotten mementos, some pictures and years-old letters, things he had not ever noticed were missing from his new place, his new life. But he had not said to throw the box away; he said he would come for it as soon as he got off of work.

And when he was in front of her, it made the most sense in the world to move closer to him, after he had been away, been missing, for so long. They stood in the middle of the empty room, not really talking, just looking at each other, at what might have changed. The basic shapes were still the same—leg, torso, arm. He hadn’t shaven, something she knew he had always done more for her than for himself. But there was something else missing, it seemed.

When their fingertips touched, it occurred to her what it was. Her. He was as different a person as she had become in his absence, trying to make a new life without this partner, this helpmate at her side. But even when he ran his fingers up her bare arm, even as each fine hair stood on its end to meet his skin, she knew they weren’t going back. They were just remembering; their bodies would still fit.

She raised her mouth to his, pressed her lips against that open part of him. His fingers traced the lines of her face, the way he knew she had always liked best. And Laura played all the tricks she knew, that this would be the last time. She knew the way to touch the inside of his elbow to draw the tiniest, most intimate reaction. He kissed the spot on her shoulder that she could feel throughout her body. They were finally saying good-bye to each other’s bodies.

The couch was close enough, and after everything was over, final, Kevin left her there after helping her back into her jeans, her sweater. She lay on the cushions, cheek against the soft upholstery, surprised she did not cry. As she lay there, she stared at the box
he had not taken when he left. But really, Laura had understood all along that he hadn’t come for the box at all.

Kevin had almost been her husband.

“He’s like her accessory,” Kristen said, gesturing in front of her. Laura forced herself to laugh but was actually jealous, watching the foreign couple walking a few feet ahead of them. They were a good-looking couple; Laura could hear their conversation but did not understand a word. If she were to guess, Laura would say they were from Eastern Europe, but mostly just because Eastern Europe sounded like a romantic idea. Their language was what she thought a Slavic language might turn out to sound like.

The couple reached the museum doors just ahead of Laura and Kristen. The thought of Kristen laughing at them, at their relationship, made her sad. They, the foreign couple, Laura and Kristen, were close enough together to look like a quartet as they reached the building. Laura liked that idea, of being mistaken for foreign or being friends with the couple, who she was sure had an interesting story behind how they met—he was eating at a café when she walked by with another man; he had not cared that she was with someone else and had followed her into a shop where she had been trying to buy a gift for her lover. Instead of a gift, she had left the store with a new man.

The foreign man held the door open for the woman and then for Laura and Kristen as well. Laura smiled at him, said a quiet “thank you,” and was pleased when the man nodded to her. He had understood what she meant.
To the left as they entered the building, an elevator offered visitors a ride up one floor to the walking bridge. Laura had been ready to continue on as a part of this quartet, but she allowed Kristen to pull her onto the circular elevator as a group of passengers stepped off.

They rode to the top by themselves. There was a group waiting on the platform; Kristen excused their way through.

“This is really beautiful,” Kristen said. “I love cityscapes!”

And they could see the city of Milwaukee, the clean, tourist-y downtown of it, with all the activity and traffic of a city of more than a million people.

“I like the fountain,” Laura said, “but I prefer the view on the other side, out over the lake.” The fountain was off to the right, with a reflecting pool rippling to accept the water that fell after shooting twenty feet up into the sky. Turning her eyes to the city, she found herself smiling in appreciation of the architecture of the tall buildings that created the city’s profile.

Kristen just laughed and ran ahead. She grabbed on and spun herself around one of the cables that sporadically rose up from the smooth surface of the pavement. Laura laughed at Kristen, who was enjoying herself so clearly and oblivious to the people glaring at her and grumbling as they had to swerve around.

“These people need to lighten up,” Kristen cried back to Laura for all to hear. So much for oblivious.

Taking several steps closer to her friend so she could speak in a quieter voice, Laura replied: “I don’t know why people come out in public, to a museum, and then are grumpy when other people are there enjoying themselves as well.”
Kristen smiled and nodded. They had reached the end of the bridge. Turning back, Laura tilted her head to the right to appreciate this new perspective of the artwork that was also the building.

The museum’s wings span two hundred and seventeen feet; they rest atop the vaulted, glass-enclosed ceiling of the visitor’s center. “The construction of this building would have been something to watch,” she said, standing at the end of the walkway. Kristen, still looking out over the city, turned her head and nodded.

After another beat, each of them staring off in different directions, Kristen spoke. “How are you?” Her voice was small; Laura didn’t remove her eyes from the building. Kristen continued to face the opposite way.

She was asking about the broken engagement. Broken, something in need of fixing. There was no need for further clarification. Laura did not pretend she didn’t understand, though she wanted to. If she hadn’t understood, there would be really be nothing to talk about. But the words did not come, so she just shook her head, unsure if Kristen would even see her movement. Her hair, tied up in a ponytail, barely shifted against her back.

If all had gone according to plan, she would have been his wife for nearly eight months at this point.

“Can I be honest?” Nervous Kristen was going to ask another question about Kevin, Laura did not respond. Kristen would never be anything but perfectly, bluntly honest. But at this moment, Laura did not want to hear Kristen’s opinion on Kevin.

Kristen continued: “Your job creeps me out a little.”
Watching Kristen flinch just a fraction as she spoke, Laura laughed, “Understandable. You and most people.”

“Well, do you like it? I mean, it has you writing at least.”

“Sure, just not the kind of writing I thought I would be doing. Not in college.” They had attended together, been English majors.

“But could you imagine trying to actually make any sort of living as a poet? We’d still be in school, probably, trying to earn PhDs or whatever so we could break into academia.”

Laura laughed at the thought of still being in school. “You know, I don’t think I would say that I necessarily like my job. That would be pretty morbid, wouldn’t it?” Kristen shrugged. “I feel like what I do is important. Honoring people, somehow recreating their lives in just a few inches of column space. There aren’t a lot of places that still consider the end of people’s lives newsworthy.”

“Well, it could probably be a lot like writing poetry,” Kristen said, slowing her step as they crossed the bridge and reached the elevator. Laura raised her face to the sun, letting its heat warm her skin before going inside to spend the day.

“Do you write at all anymore?” she asked Kristen.

Kristen shook her head.

“Me either, other than work if you count that.”

“You know, I was actually thinking the other day that maybe you would have gone back to writing. I mean, if you were ever going to, what better time than when you have something so big to write about?” Kristen probably did not even realize she had been tactless, bringing the conversation back around to the subject Laura was avoiding.
“I suppose. But I never really thought it was something I would pick back up when I stopped.”

“Well, who would have thought you would end up writing about dead people all day?”

At that moment, Laura made eye contact with the middle-aged woman in line ahead of them who had been blatantly eavesdropping on their conversation. The older woman looked away first, her expression a mixture of interest in their conversation and mild embarrassment in having been caught.

When Laura looked back at Kristen, she knew her friend had caught the woman as well. Kristen’s shoulders shook with suppressed laughter. They spent the rest of the wait for the elevator in silence; Laura was thankful the older woman had distracted Kristen from the way the conversation had been headed. The woman peeked back at them over her shoulder several times before she squeezed into the last available space in the elevator. Kristen waved to her as the door closed. Laura and Kristen both laughed.

The cars, all the rainbow of colors, passed on the road under the bridge; Laura smiled, glad she was standing right where she was, against the railing as they waited for the elevator. All the places she could have been going, in one of those cars, didn’t matter as much as the feeling she had of finally arriving somewhere important.

“The whole world is really full of art,” she said.

“Isn’t it great?” Kristen said.
Each time Laura caught Kristen looking at her, she tried to turn away carefully, without calling attention to the fact that she was doing so. They rode the elevator down to the ground floor in silence and then waited for the people in front of them to depart. She knew Kristen was worried, but she did not want to talk about Kevin all day. There wasn’t anyone whom Laura had told the whole truth about that last time with Kevin, for a lot of different reasons.

She could see her mother’s response, assuming that she and Kevin had worked things out and the wedding was back on. “I only wish you all could have worked this out before we lost the deposit on the hall,” her mother would say, not listening as Laura tried to explain.

Jill, who would have been the maid of honor, knew the most of anyone. That there had been a kiss, a physical sort of goodbye that they forgot about when Kevin initially moved out. “Tell me that is all that happened,” Jill had said. “I know you; anything more would break your heart.” Laura hadn’t really lied or admitted the full truth, but she managed to change the subject when Jill asked whether or not they had used protection.

Laura was afraid Kristen would try to joke through the tension. She was afraid Kristen would ask whether or not the sex was good, which Laura did not want to talk about. So she had put off telling Kristen. And now a couple of months had passed and Kristen was standing on the elevator next to her.

“How’s Tyler?” Laura asked, hoping to distract Kristen from reading her thoughts or asking anymore questions as they followed the other visitors away from the elevator.

“Oh, well, I think we’re pretty close to over,” Kristen said. She stopped walking close to the wall, stepping out of the flow of traffic towards a free-standing sculpture made of brightly-colored blown and twisted glass. At least seven feet tall, the curling arms of the
sculpture extended out at all angles in oranges, reds, yellows and some blues. There were glass bulbs anchored in between these extensions, and Laura felt like the sculpture might come alive at any time and slither back to the lake from where it had come. She was certain the thing had come up out of the water.

“Really?” While Laura was used to Kristen’s short attention in relationships, she had thought there was a seriousness in Kristen’s connection with Tyler, which had lasted nearly a year.

“You know there have been some really rough spots in our relationship, and neither one of us is really ready to settle down for the long term right now.” Kristen’s attention was still focused mostly on the sculpture, Dale Chihuly’s “Orange Hair 2.”

“You never really mentioned that the problems were serious. I’m sorry I didn’t realize.”

“Well, you’ve been dealing with a lot.” Kristen finally turned to look at Laura as she spoke. It was clear in that moment that they had been keeping things from one another. Laura just nodded, though, trying to see into the sculpture, to see what held all its pieces together.
Chapter Three – Kristen

She could not bear to touch her own stomach. To get dressed in the morning, she stretched her shirts far from her body as she pulled them on and let them fall into place. While driving, she was careful where she placed her hands on the steering wheel so that the sides of her arms would not brush against her midsection. All this to keep her mind off it, to keep her from getting any closer, but all that avoidance, the extra steps and precautions, would not let her forget for a single second.

There was a baby growing inside Kristen. It had been there for the last couple of months, without her even noticing the change.

She flicked her wrist to engage the left turn signal as she waited at the stoplight. The brush alongside the freeway entrance ramp was dried and brown; she knew it would snap and crack under her feet if she were to walk on it. On her way east, headed out of the city and toward the first swells of land that eventually grew into the Sierras, she had the windows rolled down, and her hair was blowing in the wind as she accelerated to match the speed of traffic as she merged onto US 50. Tyler was waiting for her at his parents’ house; they were going to house sit while his parents traveled downstate for his father’s business. Typically, house-sitting meant drinking wine from the extensive cellar and lounging in the pool for the whole weekend, and Tyler had little else planned.

She, on the other hand, had some news to break. What else might get broken this weekend, she thought as she set her course east.
Just outside the city, she found herself in a steady stream of other vehicles, their occupants all with the same purpose: head east while trapped in a small space with the enormity of their individual lives. The guy who drove the Volvo thought about proposing to his girlfriend that evening while the woman in the SUV tried to figure out what she could throw together for dinner using the contents of her fridge. And to each of them, that was the biggest, most real and immediate concern.

Traffic was so thick, the average speed had slowed to significantly below the set limit. Ignoring the minivans and sedans that drove around her hauling screaming kids from one place to another, she spent a lot of the drive focused on the white dashes dividing the lanes, the grass in the open fields off to the right. It was the beginning of the fire season. Everything was dry and golden; the earth had pulled all of the green back into itself, under the surface. Turning her focus back to the road, Kristen wished she could get down on her knees in the middle of one of these open spaces and dig in the dirt until she could uncover it, turn the whole world emerald again.

The first suspicion hit her two days ago, when one of the girls she worked with told their boss that she had just discovered she was pregnant and would be seeking maternity leave in about six months. Her name was Amie; the conversation took place just outside Kristen’s cubicle.

“I’m two months along, so there’ll only be the occasional doctor’s appointment for months, but I just wanted to let you know as soon as possible that I’d like to be on maternity
leave, or some sort of leave, starting around March.” She was barely pregnant, Kristen could certainly see that, stealing glances at Amie’s side. Without getting up, though, Kristen could see it in her face, the excitement in her eyes that translated into an awkward sort of tension in her body.

At first, Kristen thought it was strange that she wasn’t, couldn’t be excited for Amie. She had been married a couple of years, and they had been trying to get pregnant…and this time, the word caused something heavy to settle at the bottom of Kristen’s stomach. It wasn’t being asked to work some of Amie’s hours months from now that had her anxious after all.

How long has it been? Her memory didn’t hold a specific number of missed months, but it could not have been too long. She would have noticed too many months passing. But it wasn’t July. Not June. May? No, April. Late April, the last time she could remember for sure.

“Are you feeling all right?” Amie asked, sticking her head into Kristen’s cubicle after their boss had walked away. Amie took several steps forward and leaned in close to look into her eyes. Kristen thought for a second that Amie might reach out to feel her forehead, but watching her face, she saw the minute she remembered that they weren’t particularly friendly. She took an immediate step back, out of Kristen’s personal work space.

“I’ll be fine. Congratulations by the way.” Kristen forced the words out between her teeth. Amie smiled, accepting her words. As Julie left, Kristen took deep, slow breaths, while trying not to make any additional noise, not wanting Amie to hear her distress. Nothing is wrong. It’s nothing. Kristen couldn’t possibly be…but it all made sense. Even then, as the thought first occurred to her, she knew. It was more than just nerves that had
been making her queasy these last couple of weeks. More than just the fighting with Tyler that had her feeling tired all day and waking up achy. Shit.

Stopping her car in the parking spot, she pulled the gearshift into park and wished she were here after work to pick up anything else. With her purse over her right shoulder, she shut the car door and crossed the parking lot towards the drug store. She’d never been to this exact store before, in a part of town that she doesn’t spend a lot of time in.

A smiling elderly woman greeted her just inside the automatic door. “Hey there, dear. Is there anything I can help you find today?”

For a second, she considered blurting out the whole story, probably terrifying the woman who expected either a polite greeting or to be ignored by the customers entering the store. Or maybe she had a similar experience somewhere in her life, one that she looked back on and still got a little sick over. Kristen’s stomach clenched as she smiled at the woman and shook her head. The employee nodded back, and Kristen walked passed her. She doesn’t take a basket or cart; she’s there for just one thing.

She should have asked for help when it was offered; she doesn’t know where to find what she was looking for because even though this store had the same feel as the one that she usually went to, the layout was completely different. Instead, she wandered the aisles. She found the hair dyes and the shampoos, the magazines and the romance novels, the shelves and shelves of chocolates and candies, the medicine.

Aisle 9 was labeled “Sexual Health.” If she were there for any other reason, she would have laughed. She started to veer into the aisle, then stopped because there were three other people milling about there. So she flipped through the rows of cheap movies shelved
on the end of the aisle, waited as first the couple then the man by himself selected shiny boxes full of condoms and left the area. She knew no one who lived in this neighborhood or might have any reason to come into this store, but still, she checked over her shoulder before committing to enter the aisle.

No one was watching her.

She pretended like she was browsing, as if there isn’t any one particular item in this aisle that she needed. As if all of these different contraceptives and pleasure enhancers and other awkwardly named products were still options for her as her life existed at this moment.

Moving down the aisle, she picked up several different boxes only to set them back down without really looking at them at all. Her focus was halfway down the aisle, where rows of pregnancy tests promised a woman an answer to what can suddenly become the most important question she has ever asked herself.

When a dark-haired, good-looking guy entered the aisle, Kristen grabbed the first box of condoms she could reach. And nearly laughed because standing there, holding a teal box full of lubricated condoms designed for her pleasure was less embarrassing, seemed less revealing than being caught shopping around for a pregnancy test. The guy looked her up and down as he reached around her to grab a different variety of contraceptive. He smiled, just a little shy. She thought about shouting at him that she was really here to find out if she was going to be someone’s mother, that he shouldn’t be looking at her like that. And then she realized she was acting crazy.

She put the condoms back on the shelf and took a deep breath. This shouldn’t be so difficult. She took the next few steps, confident that she could do this.
Until she was standing directly in front of all those different boxes. And she doesn’t know what she is supposed to choose. There are ones with digital read outs that promise a hundred percent accuracy, ones that show pluses or minuses, ones that show colors—pink or blue, ones for early detection. There was pretty packaging, which seemed awkward. She was torn between her desire to save money and buy the cheapest one and her desire to know for sure and buy the most expensive. But does expensive mean better or just more expensive? She should have done some research before coming to the store.

There was a blue box with flowers around the edges, mid-range for the price. She flipped the box over in her hands and started reading the instructions until she got too embarrassed. With the box tucked vertically between her wrist and her body, she left the aisle, hopeful to block the text from everyone else’s eyes.

It didn’t occur to her until she was turning the key in the door of her apartment that it wasn’t other people she was hiding from. There’s nothing inherently embarrassing about buying a pregnancy test. For all anyone else knew, she was married and trying to have a baby, like Julie. But really, she was not ready to know the truth. And even that was only true if the answer to her question isn’t no.

She rolled up her window as she sped down the highway towards Tyler’s parents’ house. She’d finally cleared the traffic, and the heat was starting to get to her; her head was pounding from the combination of the warm, dusty air and the smell of the hot tar patching
the cracks in the concrete beneath her car’s tires. She thought about turning on the radio but did not reach to hit the button. Her thoughts seemed loud enough to keep her occupied.

The directions said she would have results in three minutes. These next three minutes would decide the direction of the rest of her life. Doesn’t seem like a very long time for something so important to be happening.

She set the test stick on the edge of the free-standing sink and sat down on the rug covering the cold, checked tiles. Leaning against the door, she began counting to a hundred and eighty. Three minutes broken down into all those seconds.

Her knees pulled up against her chest, she can lay her head against her legs. Her hair fell over her face, sticking to her tears. Her body ached, but she didn’t move. Even through the green throw rug, the floor was cold, but she stayed where she was. Within arm’s reach of the answer.

Slowly, she flipped through the numbers. Sixty-eight…eight-one…one hundred and six.

What will she tell Tyler? If this test comes back negative, she needed to make sure to fish the box out of the garbage can. He would find it there, ask questions, panic for no reason. If it’s yes, maybe she could just let him find the box, instead of having to tell him herself, without having to use words like “pregnant” and “baby.”
One hundred and seventy-two. And the time had passed. She was still counting: two hundred twelve, six hundred seventeen, eight hundred, a thousand. And then she stopped counting and just sat.

She thought about talking to God but couldn’t get around the hypocrisy of that. Instead, she thought blue. Maybe if she believed it, she would pick up the white plastic stick, turn it over, and see exactly what color of blue would save her life as she knew it. She never wanted to see another pink thing as long as she lived.

She didn’t know how much time had passed when the phone started to ring on the other side of the bathroom door. While she didn’t get up to answer the phone, the ringing was enough of a push to have her reaching for the rim of the sink. She pulled herself up onto her knees, knocking the test to the floor. It landed answer up.

Her exit. She turned on her signal, tapping her foot on the brake to the beat of the clicking arrow. Kristen pulled her phone from the cup holder and hit Tyler’s speed dial to let him know she was close.
The room was too open for Laura to feel so claustrophobic, like she was being watched, caught between two pieces of glass laid under the hot lights and magnification of a microscope. Or maybe a security guard tucked away somewhere in his little security room was following her every move with his surveillance equipment.

She had to force her breathing to regulate, to calm and steady. The ceilings were so high, the walls were so far away, she tried to focus on how far she was from anything closing her in.

They were, however, surrounded by dozens of people. Laura tried to focus on Kristen, who stood just a step in front of her in line.

They had only moved a couple of feet when Kristen looked back over her shoulder.

“Is something wrong?” she asked.

“I thought I was doing a better job,” Laura muttered, taking a deep breath.

“Of what? What’s wrong? Being back getting to you?” Kristen asked, stepping back until she stood directly to Laura’s right.

“I’m fine,” she said. It sounded like a lie.

“Liar. So you and Kevin came here that often, huh?” Laura nodded. “Are you certain you want to do this? We can still go anywhere else.”

“I’m just overreacting for a minute. This is going to be a good day,” Laura said, not sure who she was trying hardest to convince, Kristen or herself.

She had not been back to the museum since the last time with Kevin when they had walked through the whole building, not looking so much at the art as at the other people. The
paintings on the walls and sculptures on their stands did not change as often or offer nearly as much diversity as the museum patrons themselves.

“Last night I really didn’t want to come here,” Laura admitted.

“Then why did we? Let’s just go,” Kristen said, tucking her arm through Laura’s.

Yet they followed the woman in front of them as she stepped forward.

“Because you wanted to, and because I really think I need to.”

“Well, don’t think that I couldn’t be happy with today if we did something else. Just let me know the minute you want to leave.”

But already Laura knew they were there for the day. She stepped away from Kristen, took a deep breath and looked around the room. The ceiling was high above their heads, and she could see two outside walls, both of which were constructed mostly of windows. The majority of the faces nearby were smiling; some of these mouths were moving quickly, forming words and expressions Laura wished she could read more closely. A small fraction of her settled with each of those observations. She was steadier, watching the excitement happening around her.

“Kevin and I had a lot of places that we liked to go,” Laura said, still looking at the curved lips of one man close behind them. He spoke to, looked at no one, but the smile on his face grew slowly as she watched him. “I like being here. Being without him shouldn’t change that.” The man wore a green shirt, and he caught Laura looking at him still, even as she spoke to Kristen.

He directed a bigger smile at Laura. She was surprised when his face shifted slightly, revealing a careful collage of features that mirrored Kevin’s when he was about to laugh. Laura looked away as her stomach tripped over itself.
“I’ll be fine,” Laura said when Kristen didn’t respond. “I might even enjoy myself,” she continued, smiling at Kristen with her teeth bared, attempting to make her friend give up her questioning and laugh at her instead.

Kristen stepped back from Laura, a strange look on her face. “Don’t be afraid of the things that might bring you joy,” Kristen said. Laura nearly made a snide comment about how serious but held back her sarcastic impulse.

A year and a half ago

They left the museum after two hours of sitting on a stone bench near the entrance to the galleries. People’s expressions were the most hopeful early in their visits. Visitors typically left tired, both mentally and physically, usually contented but rarely with physical proof of the sensation spreading across their faces. Not like when they came in.

Laura had been working too hard lately, letting her job into her heart, too close. Kevin had forced her to take a break, gotten her into the car under false pretenses, and tricked her into agreeing to his surprise visit to the museum.

She had already agreed to marry him.

He took her to a park they liked just down the lakeshore from the museum. The water, its color, the smell and sound of it, its expanse, calmed Laura’s nerves even further. She felt like she had been wearing them too close to the surface.

“Feeling better?” he asked, sitting down on a bench from which they could watch the water lapping against the shore. The white sails of the museum rose into the sky to the north.
“Definitely,” she said, sliding up next to him and settling under his arm.

“I got you something today.”

“You mean besides this smile?” she teased.

He pulled the ring box from his pocket and offered it to her closed.

She liked that he had initially asked without the ring. That the moment had been spontaneous, not planned and staged to the last detail. She opened the box and started to laugh, which hurt him, she saw in his face. But she couldn’t stop long enough, draw enough breath into her lungs, to be able to explain. Instead she showed him the open box. It was empty.

“I hate my job,” Kristen said. “I’ve been thinking about maybe moving back to Wisconsin.”

Laura was not surprised; Kristen had been talking about moving back ever since she left after college.

“Having a real job is still hard sometimes,” Laura said. “I have to remind myself that I am no longer surrounded by people who share my interest in reading everything I get my hands on.”

“I didn’t realize, in college, that the work world wasn’t going to be made up entirely of people like me. Of course, I never looked very hard for a job within my field.” Kristen worked with computers for a company that liaised between student loan providers and education institutions, the first job offer she received after graduation that promised to make
her a lot of money. Laura had waited for something that involved at least some professional writing, something that sparked an interest in her.

“If you’re unhappy, why don’t you go back to school?” Laura asked. Kristen sometimes mentioned the idea of graduate school on the phone but had never done anything more than that. Kristen just smiled and shook her head.

Laura counted the number of people left in front of them in line. Nine, ten, eleven, counting the baby in its stroller several people up.

“It’s easier to talk in possibilities than to take chances,” Kristen said. She picked up a brochure about the museum’s permanent collection from the stand as the line moved another few feet forward.

Laura was looking back over her shoulder to get another look at the man with the green tee shirt when Kristen spoke: “There are lots of things to see.” She had been looking through the brochure that was still open in her hands. Laura watched as she turned to scan the crowd that had lined up behind them for tickets.

“I do love the feel of a museum. Everyone is so hushed in the galleries, like they are standing someplace sacred. Allowing the art to speak most loudly of anything in the room, when most people usually have so many things left unsaid.” Laura followed a path through the mental map she had of the museum. She was not stopping to look at the art displayed on the walls, but at the people gathered around the pieces, seated on the benches, whispering to one another about titles, artists, likes, color, tone, dislikes, shape… She could see Kevin there, wearing green.
“How is your family?” Kristen asked, folding the brochure and tucking it into her bag. They had grown up playing in Laura’s backyard, accustomed to being called in to dinner or bed together.

Laura had hardly spoken to her mother since calling off the wedding. Unsure how to explain the silence to Kristen, Laura hesitated. “Fine,” she said, intending to continue, but she was cut off by the girl behind the ticket counter calling “Next!”

As they stepped up to the counter, Laura read the girl’s nametag: Katie in bold, black lines, the “I” dotted with a star. Her smile was forced; she looked several years younger than Laura and Kristen, probably near or just graduated from college. “Welcome to the Milwaukee Art Museum,” she said. “How can I help you today?”

They bought tickets for the general galleries and were instructed to place a sticker that read “General Admission” on their clothing. “For four dollars, you can also rent a headset that will provide audio tours of the museum. Would you be interested?” Laura was about to say no, thank you, when Kristen held out eight dollars. The girl exchanged the money for a piece of paper and explained to Kristen where they would be able to pick up their headphones. As they stepped away from the counter, Laura thanked the girl.

“So you can buy lunch,” Kristen said, shaking the slip of paper at Laura once. Laura just nodded as they walked away from the counter and into the large open space that connected the ticket line to the museum itself.

The ceiling in the atrium was a quilt of glass panels, all bent and curving to make the triangular base of the building’s wings. The room made a sweeping “v” which came to a point at what could be called the museum’s bow. At that point, there was a wall made up
entirely of rectangular windows. Standing at the end of the room, up against that wall of windows, Laura imagined this is close to what it would feel like to be the mermaid attached to the boat by nails. However, this mermaid would have wind and water concentrated with salt sprinkled in her hair, not the fresh but dirty water of Lake Michigan. And she would bring the sailors luck in their voyage, perhaps lend the ship its name. She tried to imagine what a ship named Laura might look like, what she herself would look like with green, scaled fins instead of legs.

Days would be long, nailed to the hull of a ship. Finally, as the sun set one day, Laura would pull the nails from her hands, her side. Diving into the water, she would stretch to crack the layers of salt that had crystallized on her skin. Dizzy from inactivity, she would swim just a little bit ahead, leading the ship toward land.

Kristen’s fidgeting as she stood next to Laura ended her fantasy. All Laura wanted was to stand still for a moment, to admire the view, take some time and pretend. Kristen clutched her stomach just before speaking.

“The view from here makes me a little sick,” she said, taking large steps back from the windows, not looking where she was going. Laura turned from the window and opened her mouth to warn Kristen, but she had already walked into the man wearing the green tee-shirt and carrying a sketch pad. The one with the smile even when he had no one to smile for. Laura had not noticed the sketchpad he carried when she had watched him standing in line behind them.

The man dropped his pencil as he reached out his hands to steady Kristen.

Bending to pick it up, Laura listened to Kristen as she flirted with the man in apology. “I’m really sorry, but I just didn’t know how else to get your attention,” Kristen said. The
man laughed, and when he did, Laura again saw that hint of Kevin hidden in his features.
The sound stopped, but the light of laughter stayed in his eyes as he caught and held Laura’s
gaze.

Kristen’s obviousness embarrassed Laura. The man, however, while not seeming to
take Kristen very seriously, causally turned Kristen’s advances into an actual conversation
that included both women. He was friendly and considerate. Laura extended her hand, and
he took the pencil from her.

“I wonder if that guy is an artist?” Kristen said, as she and Laura walked away from
the windows. He had wished them each a pleasant visit, said good-bye, then disappeared
down the hallway that would lead to the first galleries. Kristen made to follow him right
away, but Laura wanted to stay a few minutes more near the view.

She was certain he was an artist. He had been carrying a sketchpad and pencil, she
said to Kristen.

“He was, wasn’t he? Glad someone was paying attention. I wonder what he draws.”
Kristen’s tone was slightly mocking, hinting at something Laura understood but pretended to
miss.

Laura wondered what his name was. And he probably drew the shadows cast by
curved surfaces of artifacts in the museum, the look on an adult’s face when captured
unexpectedly by a memory nearly forgotten of a good day much like the one they were now
experiencing. That is what Laura would draw if she could. Those were the kinds of things
she had always wished she could write, but she had little talent in any writing more creative
than the layering of facts required by her job.
Stepping away from the window, Kristen slid her arm through Laura’s and drew her to the entrance of the hallway that led to the art. The wall to the right was constructed of more large glass panes from floor to ceiling, but there was a stretch of green lawn between the building and the water here. Separated from the shore by five feet of calm water, there was a breaker constructed of rocks. The surface of the calmer water was spotted with ducks and geese.

The museum’s featured exhibit was just off to their left after they had gone only a few feet, in a room separate from the main bulk of the exhibits. Signs hanging just behind a glass wall boasted about the featured artist’s use of neon to create his art. Suspended from the ceiling was a circular piece that consisted of a neon pink spiral and words that followed the curve of the line: “A true artist reveals the world’s mystic truths.” As the colors changed throughout the sentence, Laura saw the idea of coming together, of the variety of life, that the artist might have had in mind when creating this piece.

“It says here,” Kristen read from the sign hanging to the left of the piece, “that this artist is a Milwaukee resident. I wonder if his family lives in this area. Or is in this room right now. He must be proud having something hang in his hometown museum.”

Laura smiled at the image that popped into her head: the artist and his family, large and loud, celebrating the homecoming of the work of art the signs also called minimal and elusive, designed to make the viewer think. “Like the piece is returning home or something. I’d bet he’s proud to have his work hanging in any museum,” she said.

Walking down the hallway that led from the atrium to the main galleries felt like being inside a dry cloud. Tones were hushed; the walls, ceiling and floors were all white.
The left wall was built entirely of windows separated by large white frames. The blue of the sky and water was brilliant against all of the white inside. Laura looked away from the windows and over Kristen’s shoulder at the bronze statue on its pedestal. Placed sporadically along the left wall in the hallway were a series of bronze sculptures each creating their own display; this one showed a woman reclining on a flight of stairs. Her head was too small for her body, and her dress was ill fitting. But she looked regal, even though she was essentially featureless.

“I wish we could touch it. I wonder what she feels like,” Laura said as Kristen took another step towards the piece.

“I like to be within an arm’s length of the art. Where the artist would have stood,” Kristen said, holding a hand out in front of her, not touching the bronze but caressing it with six inches of air between her fingers and the metal.

Maybe she thinks she can get closer to what the artist sees, Laura thought before she said, “I would rather take in the whole of the work at first, then move closer if something about the piece interests me.”

“Just another way we are different,” Kristen said, stepping back to where Laura was. Kristen tipped her head first to the left then all the way to the right.

When she looked at Laura, who had been watching her instead of the art, Kristen said, “I want to see every angle.”

The thought of examining every angle of every work of art in the museum overwhelmed Laura. “That is a lot of angles.”

“Less with art than with people,” Kristen replied. At that moment it occurred to Laura that it was quite possible her friend was much braver than she was herself.
Kristen handed the woman the receipt she had for the audio tours when they reached the end of the hallway. The woman gave Kristen a device on a long lanyard and a set of headphones and held another out to Laura.

“Okay, girls. There are three tours, one for families, one for adults and one highlights our museum director’s favorite pieces. Under certain pieces, there are numbers. You just type in those numbers and then you can learn all about the different pieces through the earphones.” Laura nodded and looped the headset around her neck.

The woman told them to have a fun day in the museum, and Laura wished the string around her neck was just slightly shorter. The audio device hit her low on the stomach every step she took.

“All right, let’s get started,” Kristen said, stepping through the doorway that lead into the first gallery.

Kristen and Laura decided against a guided tour in favor of being able to explore the museum at their own leisure, but there was one starting as they entered the first room of the museum. As Kristen veered off to the left into a separate gallery, Laura walked slowly, listening to the beginning of the guided tour: “This first gallery is the antiquities room. The museum’s oldest, most historical works of art are contained in these first few galleries. The galleries toward the end of the tour contain the museum’s newest art. Designed to show our guests art on a timeline, the galleries…” Laura lost track of the voice of the white-haired man leading the tour as she followed Kristen into the side gallery.
Laura found Kristen in front of a painting of a girl with flowers the color of fall leaves, some of the petals high enough to obscure part of her face. Her eyes were brown and large, and Laura felt like they were capable of registering her presence.

“Look at all this art. Isn’t it unbelievable?” Kristen said, gesturing about the room without taking her eyes from the painting.

“Why unbelievable?” Laura asked as she spun a circle to look around. There were some very interesting pieces, certainly, but nothing too hard to believe.

“Read the sign,” Kristen said, gesturing back toward the doorway. Laura moved a few steps back toward the gallery entrance and read the poster that told her the art on these walls were the product of Wisconsin high school students. This gallery contained the Gold Key winners of the annual Scholastic Art Awards; the Silver Key winners were in another gallery later on in the museum.

Laura began to walk around the room, wondering about each of the children who had created a work of art that now hung in this museum, about how proud they must feel that they had pieces on display. She looked at the paintings, the photographs and computer art. There were two display cases of jewelry and several with small pieces of sculpture spread throughout the room. Towards the back of the gallery, Kristen motioned for Laura to come at look at a sculpture the artist had titled “Dirty Dress.” The bust and fitted torso were made of metal, the layers of the skirt, a gray sweatshirt material and bits of torn mesh.

“If Cinderella had been a mechanic, this is what she would have worn,” Laura said.

On the other wall, Laura came across a painting by a student, Andrew Lee, titled “Modern Mermaid.” Lying in an empty kiddy pool on a patch of lawn that was only partially
green, a little girl contrasted her backdrop starkly. The plastic pool was yellow with green and orange flowers that were the size of the girl’s head. The girl’s mouth was open, like she was yelling to someone just outside of the painting while reclining in her pool. The difference between the shocking, bright colors of the pool and mellower colors of the girl convince the eye, at first glance, that the girl was painted in black and white.

Another glance, however, shows the real colors that blend together to create the complex appearance of the girl’s skin. She is neither a little black girl nor a little white girl; instead, her hue is a shimmering combination of teal and purple. She looks like she might just be underwater after all.

“You almost wonder if that girl buys her own hype,” Kristen said, peering over Laura’s shoulder at the small mer-girl.

“What do you mean?”

“How would you feel about having your likeness hanging in a museum? And being called a mermaid, no less?” Laura, part of her pressed back up against the glass where she had been a momentary mermaid, just smiled her recognition at the girl in the painting and followed Kristen out of the gallery.

The tour that had gathered in the first permanent gallery had gone when Laura and Kristen reentered the space. They were alone with the art, with each other. “I actually think it would be wonderful to be mythologized,” Laura said.

“Well, we’ve maybe come close.” Kristen dug for a moment then pulled a business-sized envelope from her purse. “Remember the slide show we had at fifth grade graduation?”
Laura had forgotten but remembered quickly as she opened the envelope Kristen had offered her. She shook the three slides into her hand. “Where did you get these?” Laura asked.

“I actually forgot that I even had them, until I moved. I had this whole box just full of papers and things, mostly from college. I thought I’d sort through, see if there was anything I might still need and trash the rest.” Laura nodded, holding small slide frames up to the light until she could make out the pictures. “It’s crazy, some of the stuff I found in that box. I couldn’t believe what I’d just been carrying around with me as I moved from place to place.”

“I know, exactly. I couldn’t believe some of the scraps of paper I had thought to keep when I moved after…” Laura did not finish her sentence, but Kristen nodded that she understood.

*Three girls stood in a triangle, girls one and three framing the child in the middle of the shot. Girl one had just released the basketball that was just about to hit the ground. Girl three was extending her hands to catch it. Girl two, who was little ten-year-old Laura, was only half facing the camera. Her eyes were aimed at a point off in the distance. She was looking across the grass soccer field to where the boys were playing tag football. Just after the shutter closed, Kristen had caught the ball and thrown it to Laura, calling her name as the ball slid from her fingers. Laura’s attention focused just as the ball reached her. She caught it. The other little girl was Jill.*
Two boys bent over pieces of paper spread out over their desktops. One had his head bent so low, his face was completely hidden. His name was Dave; he had been Kristen’s first crush. The other boy stuck his tongue out at the camera. He held a ruler in his right hand, a pencil in his left. The shoulder in the picture, over which the shot had been centered, was Laura’s. The left-handed boy across the desk from her was her first boyfriend, Matthew.

Hanging upside down with her knees bent over the middle bar of the monkey bars, a girl reached out a hand to another girl, Laura, still standing on the platform. Two long braids extended down from Kristen’s head, as if they were reaching for the ground. Laura’s arm stretched as far as it could; she had her other hand wrapped around the handle behind her so that she could reach further without falling. But her fingers were too short to meet Kristen’s, who pulled her hand back as soon as the camera flashed. Laura had forgotten to fully regain her balance before letting go of the handle; she scrapped her face on the woodchips. Kristen had flipped down from the monkey bars carefully, gracefully, and went inside to the bathroom with Laura.

“Wow,” Laura said, “I can’t believe I’ve never seen these before.”

“Yeah, well, they’re contraband. At first, I was nervous to tell anyone I had taken them. I was scared I would get caught for years! Then I sort of just forgot about them until they turned up in the bottom of that box.”

“And technically, I have, haven’t I? The slide show and all.”

“Exactly.”
“I’d nearly forgotten how much I loved Matthew,” Laura said, placing the slides back into the envelope. They looked at each other, seeing in each other the children they had been, then laughed.

Laura could hear Kristen’s cell phone ringing in her bag, but her friend made no move to answer the call. Once the ringing stopped, Kristen pulled the phone out and hit several buttons.

“Forgot to silence it,” was all she said. Laura tried to remember if she had ever seen Kristen screening her calls before.

“Do you think it is true, that you can’t move on from someone until you have found someone new?” Laura asked as she and Kristen ducked into another side gallery, before beginning the permanent galleries.

“I think it can be. If you let it,” Kristen said.

The walls were full, displaying pictures on a theme of working class culture. Laura’s attention was drawn to one particular picture, of a young Hispanic woman that hung alone on a six-foot section of white wall. Spotlights fixed on and illuminated the frame. The shot had been taken in black and white, but Laura was certain the skirt the woman wore was a bold shade of red, a much bolder shade than the brick of the wall she had been photographed against. The woman’s hair hung in curtains, highlighting the cheekbones and eyes so sad that Laura nearly cried. But the woman’s head was high, a hand on one hip like she was ready to leap from the surface of the print with her “r”s rolling and her hips shaking to the beat of the band. Laura reached back and pulled the rubber band from her own golden hair
and shook out the waves in it. She did not think her hips could move like the photographed woman must, but she wanted them to.

“She is beautiful,” Kristen said, having observed what Laura felt was the perfect amount of silence.

“She’s ready,” Laura said, already telling the woman’s story in her mind. Her boyfriend was leaving, had promised to return for her, but she knew that they both were aware that this could be the end for them. But she loved him, wanted to be happy for him as she sent him out into the world…

“For what?” Kristen stepped closer to the picture.

“Anything,” Laura said, her hair falling down to frame her face.

Not all of the photographs were done in black and white. In some, the colors were so vivid, Laura was certain they would fly up off the page and stain her skin. “Which is your favorite color?” Kristen asked. The picture they were standing in front of was a splash of shades of green. Each shade had her imagining the different greens she knew. Green grass in early spring, still slightly brown but full of hope. The green sweater she had worn the day Kevin moved out. Green walls, the light color of mint, in her mother’s bathroom. Green ribbons of the Northern lights across the sky.

And all the blues. Most vivid, she saw Kevin’s eyes.

Laura answered blue, stepping sideways slightly until she stood before a picture of an old woman, knotted hands stretching up towards the clear blue of the sky.

“Why?” Kristen asked.
“What do you mean, why? You aren’t supposed to ask why,” Laura said, turning away from the blue in the picture and her series of blue memories.

“Why not? I don’t think people ask why often enough.”

“Well, it’s entirely subjective. It’s my favorite color. There isn’t always a reason why.”

“Maybe there should be,” Kristen said. Laura stepped away from her friend who did not move to follow.

Many of the pictures were multi-generational. Grandparents, parents, children, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Laura could have spent a whole afternoon in that one room but forced herself to keep moving.

Until she reached a picture of an elderly couple. They weren’t touching, just sitting on the porch next to each other. There was space between them, but it was warm. This couple didn’t need to touch; they could take each other’s presence for granted because it had never been any different for them.

When Laura looked over her shoulder, she found Kristen was just a few feet away. “I want to realize one day while I am sitting on my front porch looking out at the goings on in the neighborhood that I have been with this person sitting next to me for longer than I have been without him.” Kristen didn’t say anything; Laura wasn’t sure she had heard.

“Well, look who has been following us around the room?” Kristen pointed around her own left shoulder. Laura followed the line from the tip of her friend’s finger across the room to the guy who had dropped his pencil at their feet earlier.
“He’s not following us,” Laura said, laughing. “This is a public museum; he’s got a sketchpad. He’s just enjoying the art, looking for some things to draw.”

“Or he’s looking at a different kind of beauty. Us.”

Laura rolled her eyes for Kristen’s benefit but found herself looking back at the guy and his green shirt. He opened the sketchpad he carried but did not start drawing. He wore the same small, private smile on his face as he looked at the piece of art in front of him that he had in line. Laura could not see what he was looking at from where she stood, but she thought it might be the picture of the woman in her red skirt, hips ready to roll.

Kristen led Laura to the plaque next to the doorway that opened into the next room. While her friend read aloud about the photographers who had compiled all these shots of middle and working class families over almost thirty years, only a small percentage of Laura’s attention followed the dips and flows of Kristen’s voice. The rest of her mind was caught up in drawing comparisons between Kevin and the guy in green.

“Are you ready?” Kristen’s tone told Laura her friend had noticed the lapse in her attention.

“Oh, yes,” Laura said and followed Kristen through the arch.
“Can you imagine all the places this has seen since it was uncovered?” Laura asked as they walked into the first of the antiquities rooms, the beginning of the permanent collection. As she spoke, she walked up to the glass case that contained an ancient Egyptian sarcophagus dated between 500 and 250 B.C. Kristen had pulled the museum brochure out of her bag; she waved it at Laura.

“There are nearly 20,000 pieces in the permanent collection,” Kristen read off the page.

“Wouldn’t you rather just look at the art for yourself, instead of reading about it, since we came all this way?” Laura said, slipping around a cluster of people so she could get a better look at the paintings covering the lid.

“I like knowing the context in which I should be looking at something,” Kristen said, following Laura to a better vantage point. The lid was painted to resemble the body that must have been laid within. Ignoring her friend’s comment, Laura saw the small number inscribed under the description of the piece on its nameplate. She pulled her headphones over her ears to listen to a woman telling the story of the artifact as if to a child. The audio woman explained the meaning behind the various markings on the lid and also said that Pedusiri, the man who had been mummified and placed inside of this particular sarcophagus, had demanded before his death that some of his gold be used to plate the face of his coffin. The blue of the cloth around his head and the detail of the elaborate collar at his throat were
symbols of his powerful status. “The reason the face on the lid has such big eyes,” audio woman said, “is so Pedusiri’s spirit can see out of his tomb and into the world.”

Laura removed the headphones, which were uncomfortable over her ears. “This is creepy,” Kristen whispered to her.

What if the spirit of this man, so long dead, was watching them through those eyes right now? Then, nodding in agreement, Laura asked: “What do you think they did with what was left of the body, when they took his coffin to put it on display?” Kristen shuddered.

“After being dead that long, there was probably only dust left,” she said. “Let’s move on.” Laura followed when Kristen started across the room.

Laura walked slowly passed a case built into the wall displaying old silverware. The dates themselves, just seeing how long some of the pieces had lasted, were more interesting than the pieces themselves. They looked like forks, after all. And Laura has seen all this before.

“Hey, come look at this,” Kristen called from one of the freestanding cases in the middle of the room. Laura was patient, allowing people to pass before she made her way toward Kristen. The majority of the visitors were drawn first to a large tapestry that covered the entire wall at the rear of the room, which made for an awkward traffic flow.

“What?” Laura asked as she came up behind her friend. Kristen tapped a finger on the glass and pointed to a cup made from a nautilus shell in the middle of the case. The story it told resembled a creation myth, with a tortoise cast in gold as the base, a golden man who stood on the tortoise’s back as the stem. The man’s knees are bent under the weight of the
shell, which he balances on his head and which is more than twice his size. The shell’s gold
decoration and the semiprecious stones that accent its mother-of-pearl color must add to its
weight. The lip of shell had been rimmed in gold, and atop the swell of the spiral was
another, smaller gold man riding astride a sea monster. He seemed to have hold of the
creature by invisible reins, as if riding an angry bull instead of a mystical sea-being with
hard, jeweled eyes.

Laura’s mermaid alter ego came across monsters like this all over the bottom of the
vast, dark sea. She would be able to take the reins from that man, her hair streaming behind
her as they explored.

“Could you imagine drinking out of that? Do you think people actually did?” Kristen
asked, after Laura took a step back from the display.

“I don’t know. But I think anything drunk from that cup would taste salty,” she said,
still rushing about the deep sea atop the monster she controlled with just a slight tug of the
reins. “But it’s interesting,” Laura added, when she saw Kristen’s face. She hadn’t thought
what she said was all that strange.

Twelve seconds into the audio explanation of the tapestry’s significance, Laura
pushed the stop button and pulled the headphones from her ears again. While she was
interested in the history of the five century-old work of art in front of her, the recording was
annoying. The man’s voice directed listeners to specific discussion points within the twenty
or so feet of the tapestry, distracting Laura from the areas of the whole picture that interested
her the most and also not giving her enough time to linger on the smallest details. The nearly
expressionless faces of the fifteen figures, the folds of the women’s skirts as the fabric
brushed in the dirt at the foreground of the overall picture, the bend of all the heads towards the figure in the middle of the action and the tapestry. The man was clad in armor; Laura considered the things he saw, the things he did, in the heat of his battles. The calm in his expression suggested that the victory had been his.

The man in green had come up behind her and now stood just off to her left. His sketchpad was still closed and tucked away under his arm. Laura found herself wondering what he would have to say about the scene before them, if he would have anything to add to what she thought she knew about the story on display here.

She hoped he would think she was focused on the tapestry, instead of knowing she was so aware of his presence. But he was paying attention to her; she had twice caught him looking at her only to look away when their eyes met. He did not come any closer or speak to her at all.

“Laura!” She heard Kristen calling her from somewhere across the room but could not see her. At that moment, the room was suddenly crowded with people. One last glance at the man, then Laura made her way in between the other visitors until she found Kristen. Once at her side, Laura looked back towards the tapestry. Foot traffic had cleared slightly, but he was no longer standing where she had left him.

“Did you see the torso of the Roman athlete?” Kristen asked. Laura had not but muttered that she had. Kristen continued to speak, but Laura was not listening.

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Eight months ago
Laura offered to pay all her friends back for the bridesmaids’ dresses they weren’t ever going to wear even though she could not afford to. When she called, Kristen had been offended by the offer.

“I worked hard to fit into this dress; now that I do, I’m going to save it and wear it next Halloween! I’ll be a prom queen or something.” Somehow, even though she had not smiled in days, Kristen had Laura laughing.

Until the tone of the conversation changed. “How are you?” Kristen asked in that loaded way that Laura had come to dread.

“Fine.”

“Have you talked to him at all?”

“No.”

“He called me.” Long pause. Laura, Kristen, Kevin, they all went to college together. Kevin had gone on a single date with Kristen before she realized he would make a better match with Laura and set them up. “He wants to know how you are.”

“Tell him I’m fine.”

“So tell me about Tyler. What is going on?” Laura asked as she and Kristen crossed into the next gallery, which displayed Renaissance art from Southern Europe. The predominant theme in the room was blatantly religious, something that had always made Kristen uncomfortable.
“We’ve been on the edge the past few weeks whenever we actually spend any time together.” But Kristen’s focus remained on Nardo di Cione’s “Madonna and Child,” a painting done in brilliant colors set against a golden backdrop. The Madonna held the Child in her arms; he was sitting up, leaning back from her slightly and looking up at her face. Both figures had the faint rings of halos about their heads; the Madonna wore a bold red dress and was draped in a royal blue cloak. The baby was bare-chested, wearing a patterned cloth wrapped about his middle.

Laura was jealous of the serenity on the woman’s face, of the way her child looked up at her. She turned away from the painting and back to the conversation she had been having with Kristen.

“Why? What happened between you two?” she asked. Laura was used to the ups and downs of Kristen’s relationships and also of her storytelling. Kristen had never been the kind of forthcoming storyteller. Even when she had something she wanted to share, Laura would have to question Kristen about the topic and occasionally prod her along until she could piece together the whole story.

“I needed to do something he didn’t agree with,” Kristen said so quietly that Laura barely heard her response at all. Something she saw in Kristen’s eyes, when her friend finally looked up, stopped Laura from asking any more questions on the subject.

“Well, how’s work?” she tried instead.

Kristen’s eyes immediately lost their shadows. “I hate the job, really, but the money’s fantastic,” Kristen said. She then explained to Laura again how much territory she was responsible for in her market, as a district manager. Laura tried to pay attention through that and as Kristen explained some of the new things her paychecks were allowing her to
purchase, but she faded in and out of the conversation as the Madonna’s child met her gaze across the distance of nearly seven centuries.

“Hey, what’s back here?” Kristen stepped through a door that had been propped open. Laura did not remember having seen this space in the museum before. Tucked away at the bottom of a stairwell was a small alcove, walls covered with contemporary landscapes. Laura stopped just through the door, not, at the moment, feeling very fond of tight spaces.

“How do you, I mean, what do you write when…” Laura stepped closer to her friend when Kristen trailed off without completing her thought. Kristen had stopped at the bottom of the steps. Laura waited, assuming the rest of the question would follow eventually.

But Kristen was not looking at Laura as she spoke. Laura looked in the direction Kristen faced; there was a young mother pushing her child in a stroller several feet from where they stood.

...when it’s a child who has died? The rest of Kristen’s unfinished question spoke itself.

Few people considered that side of her job. When people died who hadn’t lived full lives that ended in peaceful sleep. And so few people actually die that way, though it is considered the most natural.

“Most of the time,” Laura said, watching the mother bend over to touch her baby’s face, as jealous of her as she had been of the Madonna, “the parents spend time figuring out exactly what they want the paper to run. Like so much else they had planned to do for their child was cut short, the least they can do is this one thing. So mostly, my job will just be to copy edit.”
She glanced at Kristen as she finished speaking. Kristen asked no more questions, took a step forward, feigning interest in the landscape hung on the wall in front of her.

The turquoise of the sky serves as warning enough. Laura doesn’t need to read an instrument but can watch the sky as it opens, spreading its peacock colors, so unexpected and seeming unnatural but really the most natural of all. Colors that pure cannot translate onto canvas. But the impact of them can.

Against the horizon of the painting, a strip of sunset colors like the paint couldn’t help but run together: pinky orange, rosy purple, and yellow rich and deep. There is some rain falling, through holes in the clouds that open further and let out the fury of the sky. But for a moment, Laura can see a painter standing on his front porch, cataloguing what paints he would need to use, the oils he would spread across the surface of canvas to capture this moment. Perhaps not its actuality but the energy, the feel of the coming storm.

And there would be a fence, a land break between the lawn and the field, to mirror the two-faced sky. Brown and green of the ground. Green and blue of the sky. All this broken by the white triangle of the gauge, its warning clear. This sky is beautiful but menacing. Take cover.

“Where do you think these parents, these people who find themselves suddenly parents without children, get that kind of strength?” Kristen’s voice was low; Laura barely heard her. They had walked past only a few more paintings.
“I don’t know. I couldn’t do it myself, I don’t think.” Laura stepped forward until she stood directly next to Kristen. “Really, not all of them do. In fact, I have this assignment right now…”

“…an assignment?” Kristen interrupted.

Surprised by the tone of her friend’s voice, Laura asked, “What?”

“A baby died, and you call it an assignment?” Laura considered the question a moment, but she didn’t correct herself. She cannot let herself get too emotionally involved. It hits hard enough when she sees the label that marks certain folders as children before she has even read the details contained within. Before she has even seen a picture, if there is one, or had the time to get invested.

“It’s my job, Kristen. They’re all assignments.” That maybe hadn’t come out the way she meant it. “They all hurt,” she tried to explain.

Kristen just looked at her a minute, as if she couldn’t quite make out the edges that separated Laura from the rest of her field of vision. Like she wasn’t standing there at all.

“I…” Laura started, but Kristen walked away, left the alcove to return to the Madonna’s gallery.

Yesterday

Stepping off the elevator, Laura pulled down the bottom edges of her jacket, straightening the hem under the strap of the bag she carried her files in. Even on the nights when she knew she wouldn’t have the time to do any work, Laura didn’t like leaving the files
she was working on at the office. If she did, she spent the whole night imagining those people, trapped in dark filing cabinets, alone and unable to speak to one another. Because dead people cannot speak for themselves. That is Laura’s job.

“Good morning,” she said to Celeste as she passed the reception area on the way to her desk.

Most obit departments were run the same way as the advertising departments. Paid for by word, pictures by inch, written by the families themselves. The Tribune was still old-fashioned, treating the end of lives as news.

“I’ve got a new file for you, Laura,” Nathan, Laura’s boss, said as he dropped the folder on her desk, on top of the short stack she had just pulled from her bag.

“Since when did you hand deliver?” she asked, straightening the folder so that she could open it right side up.

“Friend of mine from college. Her husband died.” The picture on top of the file showed a family: Mom, Dad, two high-school aged kids. And Laura felt that same kick in the stomach she always did when she opened a file to find someone who had died young, unexpectedly.

“I’ll take good care of him,” Laura said to her boss, who was looking into the file over her shoulder.

“I thought so,” he said, stepping away from her desk as she closed the file, sat down, and shuffled it to the bottom of the stack.
While Kristen stood at the other side of the room, Laura returned to the Madonna. When she stopped in front of the painting, she saw Kristen’s head come up, but her friend did not turn all the way around to look at her. Space, Laura thought. Give her a little space.

It wasn’t really jealousy Laura felt when she looked at the Madonna this time. Maybe she just wanted to be more like that woman, calm and patient, willing to stand so still for so many years, holding a baby in her arms while thousands of people walked passed, staring, intruding on what should have been a private moment. Loving something so much she knew there would be no private moments, just long hours of standing and holding, supporting. If only Laura had someone to support. If only she felt strong enough to support anyone.

Laura was sure to shuffle her feet, rearrange her bag over her shoulder so that her keys would clack against one another, making every sound she could think of so as to not startle Kristen as she came up behind her. Kristen’s head was down; she wasn’t even pretending to look at the painting in front of her.

“My first day, my boss showed me to my desk and warned me that the worst thing I could do was get too close to any assignment. Think of them as characters. Assignments. Whatever I needed to do to be able to distance myself.” Laura stopped at Kristen’s side, stood facing her. “It upsets people, I know that. But if I let it get too close to me, families don’t get the kind of tribute they need for those they love.”

Kristen didn’t seem to respond, other than a slight turn of her head.
“But it does get to me. There are nights when I get home and can’t help but cry. Those nights seem to come more often these last couple of months.” Laura was lying herself bare, opening up for Kristen to ask questions.

But she didn’t. Instead, Kristen raised her eyes to meet Laura’s. There was a sort of forgiveness there or maybe it was just understanding. Whatever the issue had been between them, Laura knew from Kristen’s eyes that everything was resolved. At least for the moment.

“We’ve been behaving like zombies today,” Kristen said, walking up close behind Laura, who had been pretending to study a series of paintings of lit candles surrounded by hooded figures, religious texts carved in stone, winged figures eating fruits and playing string instruments.

“What do you mean?” she asked, stopping in the middle of the room to face Kristen. Laura took care with the words she chose, nervous about saying something that would again set her in opposition to Kristen.

She didn’t look Laura in the eye as she spoke: “I mean, we’re barely speaking to each other. We aren’t really listening to what the other is saying. We’re both staring off into space most of the time, and we’re snapping at each other. Aren’t we?” Laura wanted to interrupt but did not. Kristen’s speech was coming faster than usual; she had something she needed to say, so Laura just nodded her head.

“You said just a minute ago that these last couple of months have been especially hard on you. Why ‘couple’?” It would have been eight months since the break up. Eight months since Laura started screening all her phone calls, rarely answering for anyone.
She paused long enough for Kristen to go on without an answer: “I had hoped these months would have brought you further.”

Laura wanted to ask what Kristen’s excuse for acting strangely was, if hers was supposedly Kevin. Instead, she asked, “From what?”

“You still just seem so sad. I hate how this whole thing has changed you.”

Laura tried to be mad, to be hurt by Kristen’s words. But she couldn’t, wouldn’t. Kristen was really just being honest; she was also being right.

“Sorry,” Laura said. She had nothing else. But as soon as she said it, she knew those were not the right words.

“You don’t have to be,” Kristen said. “I’d just like to see you happier after so much time.”

Laura heard something that read like guilt in Kristen’s voice, but something else as well, something she couldn’t place or understand.

Instead of asking any questions of her own, Laura stretched her mouth as far as she could, baring all her teeth in a gruesome smile she knew Kristen hated. “How’s this?” she said, pointing at her own face.

Kristen genuinely smiled back but did not laugh as Laura had expected. “That’ll have to do,” Kristen said, turning and walking away.

“I’m going to be all right,” Laura said, once Kristen had pulled the headphones over her ears and pushed the correct buttons to call up an explanation of the artwork on the wall in front of her.
Laura went up the stairs first, expecting Kristen would follow when she was ready. The air between them was still a bit tense. Counting the steps she took, to distract herself, six, seven, eight, Laura chose the far right path up the stairs to allow a small guided tour enough room to remain grouped together. Returning the smile of a young girl around twelve, Laura focused on the tour guide’s voice as she began the conclusion of the tour through the museum. “The Milwaukee Art Museum hopes…” she said, then rounded the corner.

There was a middle-aged couple, just a few feet back from the rest of the group, both with impossibly dark hair and eyes. They spoke in heavily accented tones, their heads close together. Laura caught only a few phrases of their conversation, their plans for the rest of the day:

“…and I’ll make that fish for dinner…” the man said. His words blurred with the woman’s response as she cut him off “…and we can drink the wine from…” and Laura lost them as she climbed stairs twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two. She turned to watch the couple as they crossed the landing. As they disappeared, Kristen turned the corner and climbed towards her.

“These are supposed to be some of the last galleries, Laura. The museum’s set up to move on a linear timeline,” Kristen said, catching up.

“I know, but aren’t you wondering what’s up here?” On the landing of the third flight of stairs, there were two sets of double doors leading into several galleries. Between the doors, which were propped open, Laura stopped to look at the tall Tibetan pillars and beams. Dated tentatively as early as the eighteenth century, the pieces fit together to form an altar. What might have been sacrificed or prayed for beneath these beams? The possibilities of what had rested in the chest now sheltered within the walls of the museum and laid into place
between these pillars, all of which was half a world away from its birthplace, intrigued Laura. What bits of family treasure, material or sentimental, had been harbored there, lined in silk?

The red wooden pillars were dull, weather-worn after all those centuries in existence.

“Do you think these pieces come apart?” Kristen asked, drawing Laura’s attention to the place where the pillars met the crossbeams. Had the pieces been shipped in separate crates to Milwaukee after being acquired by the museum?

“I hope not,” Laura said, saddened by the idea of workers having to pull the pieces apart and box them up then putting them back together upon their arrival. “I’d prefer if the pieces have been in constant contact, bonded, pressed flush up against one another for the last three hundred years.”

Pivoting on her right foot, Laura saw Kristen had taken several steps back on the landing and stuck her head out over the railing. “Look who’s following,” Kristen whispered as she backed away from the stairwell and crossed through the open doors into the gallery.

The man in green smiled at Laura as he came up the stairs. Kristen was right; he was following them as they moved through the galleries in such an unsystematic, disjointed order. Or perhaps this man too was less interested in the antiquities and more interested in the modern statements to be made by contemporary pieces. Or maybe he was more like Laura herself—more interested in the people and their reactions to the artwork than in the actual art itself.

Laura smiled back.

He stopped to look at the altar as Laura slid by him and through the doors Kristen had just disappeared through, into the gallery displaying the museum’s Asian art. And she wondered what he thought about the pieces of wood before him, about the juxtaposition of
Renaissance art and Asian antiquities she had led him through, maybe even about her in general.

She was glad for him, if for no other reason than he was giving her and Kristen something to agree on, to giggle about together.

A girl wearing jeans, a red tee-shirt and hot pink canvas sneakers stood in the middle of the Asian gallery writing in a notebook she held in the bend of her arm. “Think she’s an art critic?” Kristen whispered from behind Laura, who was startled. She had not been aware of anyone behind her.

“Or a journalist or poet,” Laura said.

“Or just plain crazy. Maybe she has detailed notes of this trip to the museum, the same way she chronicles trips to the dentist and the grocery store.”

“She could be an art thief. Maybe she’s mapping out something sinister,” Laura replied, using her hand to try and muffle the sound of her voice as they moved through the room. The girl did not seem to be paying any attention to them.

“She’s probably paying more attention to us than we think,” Kristen said, stopping and turning towards the wall to look at a large slab of stone. Laura had fallen a step behind, still watching the girl. Approaching the stone from the right, Laura saw the object was nearly as tall as Kristen and about five inches thick. When she stood next to her friend, Laura noticed how old the stone actually looked; she read the nameplate and discovered the stone had been carved in Burma in the 16th century. Its various surfaces, raised and lowered to different levels, looked so smooth, Laura had to stop herself from reaching out to touch the stone. She could feel the age of it, its coldness and strength, without having to actually
touch. The stone created a small pocket of peace, even in the careful, nearly sacred atmosphere of the museum. Something about the age and presence of the piece soothed what was tangled in Laura’s soul.

“I can feel the smoothness, just looking at it,” Kristen said. Her voice was a whisper, which seemed appropriate in front of this stone rendering of the Buddha’s footprint, which felt heavy with its own sacredness. Laura wanted to fall to her knees and pray.

“Do you believe some things can be sacred without necessarily relating back to any specific religion?” Laura asked.

“Like the woods after a summer thunderstorm. The smell of wet dirt, the noises of small creatures, drops of water falling from the veins of leaves. When it’s quiet like a church. Or museum. Of course,” Kristen said. Laura considered this, looking for evidence of the universally sacred that might be tucked into cracks between the individual toe prints in the stone.

Kristen led the way through the rest of the Asian art gallery, slowly making a circle around the room and around the girl with her notebook. Most of the pieces were small bits of sculpture, things that would have served a practical purpose for their owners. There were dishes in shades of deep blue with white patterns that displayed common scenes from rural China of the time period. Under the protection of a large glass case, there was a farm constructed out of scraps of wood, the buildings of twigs and sticks, animals carved from small blocks.
Laura glanced around at some of the pieces but found very little interesting. Especially once other people began to enter the room. Instead of continuing to walk around, Laura sat down on a bench to watch.

A family of three, the young mother and father each holding one hand of a boy about six who was speaking excitedly. He was too far away to hear, but Laura tried to read his lips, catch just a glimmer of what he was saying to his parents. He was speaking too quickly. She thought that perhaps he was not speaking English at all. Or she was horrible at reading lips. Looking at the painting the boy was point at, Laura heard him explain what he saw in the depths of this abstraction of color. An elephant with two trunks and a baseball diamond in purple and red, two tigers chasing each others’ tails and a clown making balloon animals larger than he was himself. A circus of shapes, color, noise. The boy’s laughter reached Laura; she grinned.

If only she knew that family, was able to bend down and nod at the boy as the words spilled out of him. To encourage him to tell her more about what he saw in that painting and the one next to it. What if she were to have a boy?

As the family moved out of her line of sight, an elderly couple stepped up to the painting, and they captured Laura’s attention. The man, who was wearing a faded Miller High Life ball cap, bent slightly to hear his wife as she spoke close to his ear. Her hand was tucked through his arm; the woman was whispering to her husband about how this particular painting reminded her of the night they had climbed into the back of his pick-up truck and conceived their oldest son, who had died in Vietnam.
When her story started to get too real, Laura turned from the couple, to allow them their privacy. She scanned the room for Kristen but saw only the old couple and the man in green.

Laura stood, took two steps towards the archway that would lead into the next gallery, when someone put a hand on her arm.

“Don’t forget your bag,” the man in the green tee-shirt said, picking her bag up from the low bench where she had left it. He handed it to her.

“Thanks, I got a little caught up,” she said, pulling the strap over her shoulder and tucking several loose strands of hair behind her ears.

“People-watching?” he asked. Laura nodded.

“I’m Joshua,” he said.

“Nice to meet you,” she said, offering her hand for him to shake. He took her fingers between his and just held them, not shaking them at all. He looked her in the eyes the whole time and must have noticed the moment she grew anxious of him because he let her go. There was something strange in the lack of shaking which made this hand holding much more intimate than she would have expected.

“I have to go find my friend,” Laura said, ducking away. She hadn’t even told him her name, she realized when she found Kristen barely into the next gallery, looking at a sculpture.

Against the backdrop of a powder blue sky of a wall, the pieces of cut and forged metal formed a single circular work of art that was at least two feet taller than Laura.
Seresier Louisjuste’s “Circular Composition” asked Laura to stop, look, and take a deep breath. The circle, the artist, had something to tell her.

She waited in front of the free-standing piece, drawn in by the copper colors and tones and how the metal seemed to grow lighter and darker depending on the shadows cast by all the pieces that had been welded together. Something had been completed here. Laura felt certain only that it was not her, so it must have been the art. The piece felt whole and complete. Inevitable.

The Asian art had opened into a long rectangular room displaying African pieces. The colors brightened in the new room; the themes were religious, celebratory. Display cases showed African tribal masks and some woven clothing.

“Wow, that is so many people,” she heard Kristen say. Laura went to join her in front of a painting called “Crowded Market.” This row of pictures was set up to create a multi-perspective look at everyday Haitian life. In this one, Laurent Casimir used shades of mostly orange, yellow, and green to dress the thousands of people that crowded into the marketplace of the village. Laura was quite certain she had never been in such close proximity with so many other people, a fact for which she was very glad. The huge group portrayed there made her feel claustrophobic; the lack of privacy in the painting terrified her. As if all those other people would be close enough to read her every thought and know all of her business.

The only other people in that gallery were on the other side of the room. Plenty of breathing space.

“Look at how they all lose their distinct faces in the size of the crowd,” Laura said, focusing on the figures at the edges of the piece, an attempt to keep her bearing.
“Maybe for them life is more about community,” Kristen said.

“Good point, but just looking at the piece makes me want to hyperventilate a little.”

“Well, take a deep breath and look at something else.”

Laura took each bit of Kristen’s advice one thing at a time. First, she inhaled deeply, expanding her stomach to allow her lungs to fill completely. She exhaled slowly and closed her eyes. Then she turned away from the painting and took two steps, eyes closed.

When she opened them, she saw Kevin standing before her. But then her mind cleared and it was not Kevin at all. He had said his name was Joshua, and he was watching her, smiling to himself.

Laura felt a sharp sensation in her stomach as Joshua turned to look at the walls. Not a pain or even discomfort, but just an awareness of her midsection that she did not normally notice. Kristen, who had not moved far, followed Laura into a smaller, offset gallery with only a few pieces on display.

Maybe she was feeling guilty about the way she seemed to be responding to Joshua, but Laura spoke without thinking: “Two months ago, Kevin and I slept together.” Laura hadn’t meant to blurt out the truth in quite that way, but it was the truth and needed to be said. Kristen’s face registered her surprise.

“You mean, after the break up, you two slept together?” Kristen sat down hard, right on the ground in the middle of the art gallery. At least they were alone in that area.

“Do you remember, I called that night when he came over to get the last box of his stuff? I told you we kissed? I kind of just left out the rest.” The walls were covered in beautiful works of art, many of which Laura had seen before. She didn’t want to explore the
museum anymore. She wanted to have an honest, bare-all talk with her friend, whom it felt like she had been lying to.

“You were really upset that night. Even at the time, I thought more must have happened, that a simple kiss wouldn’t have shaken you up that badly.”

Laura thought that probably wasn’t true. If Kevin were to walk into the room right that moment and kiss her, she would have broken. The man in green, this Joshua following them around, just his slight resemblance to Kevin had her nervous and on edge.

“I honestly don’t even really know how it happened.” She knew that was another lie before she had even said it, so she continued: “That’s not true. I wanted to think that he had come back for good, not just for that box. Just for a moment, I wanted to be able to pretend that he was still mine.”

He would have been her husband.

“That I can understand. But I never would have pegged you as one to indulge in a quick bout of break-up sex.” Kristen looked up at her from the floor. Uncomfortable with having to look down on her friend that way, Laura sat down, cross-legged, in front of her.

“It wasn’t like that,” Laura tried to deny.

“Then what was it like?”

“I don’t know. I think we just needed to say good-bye in that way too. We hadn’t seen each other or even hardly spoken in months.”

“It’s like you were quitting each other.”

“Almost. It just felt like I had been so long without him, and then suddenly there he was and all the time in between didn’t exist or wasn’t important.” Kristen shifted her legs so
that she too was sitting cross-legged. The two sat in the middle of the floor, leaning in towards each other.

“Okay. So I can understand why you would want to have sex again. He was your first and part of you knew it would be awhile before you were with anyone else like that.”

Laura nodded, agreeing to Kristen’s point but nervous about where she was going to take the conversation next.

So she interrupted. “He was my first. Before I met him, I never thought I would have sex before I was married.”

Kristen just rolled her eyes a little. “I didn’t know they still made them like you.”

Laura laughed: “I can’t believe you just said that.” As outdated the saying may be, Laura knew Kristen’s words were pretty true. It was hard to find someone in the world who viewed sex the same way she did.

“One thing I don’t understand.” Kristen said, leaning forward and lowering her voice. There was still, surprisingly, no one around, so Laura knew the conversation was taking a turn for the serious.

“What’s that?”

“Well, you called me that night. You told me about the kiss. Why keep the rest a secret?” Laura could read another, unasked question on Kristen’s face. Did anyone know the whole truth?

“I didn’t really tell anyone everything that happened. At first, I thought it was because I wanted to hold on to that moment. I didn’t want to have to analyze it and label it, call it break-up sex or whatever.” Kristen began to interrupt, but Laura stopped her with a raised hand. “It’s okay. If I hadn’t wanted to hear it now, I wouldn’t have brought it up.”
“Okay. So you said ‘at first’?”

“Well, yes. At first, I didn’t want that. I didn’t want anyone asking ‘was it good?’ because it really wasn’t about the sex itself. It was about getting close to him again.” As she spoke, Laura was having trouble meeting Kristen’s eyes. Instead, she looked around the gallery, noticing not the paintings and other pieces of art, but the whiteness of the surrounding walls, so bright, pure.

Kristen made a noise that encouraged Laura to continue.

“And then I kind of realized that I didn’t tell anyone because I…” the next part felt glued to Laura’s tongue, like she couldn’t shake it off long enough to get it out. “I had stopped taking my birth control.”

Kristen’s right hand grabbed Laura’s left, forcing Laura to turn her complete attention back to her friend. “What?” Kristen asked, holding on just a bit too tightly.

“Well, you were right. When Kevin left, I didn’t think I’d be having sex for a long time. Not until I found someone new who would want to eventually have kids, someone who would be willing to wait to have sex until our relationship was ready for that step. And Kevin didn’t plan it either. He didn’t come over prepared to have sex.”

Laura’s shoulders felt a little lighter now that she had shared the thoughts that had been crushing her. But Kristen was hurting her hand where she grabbed it.

“Could you let go?” Laura asked.

“Wait. I need to understand what you’re telling me. You and Kevin had unprotected break-up sex after ending your engagement because you wanted to have children and he didn’t?”
Laura had not realized quite how bad it sounded until Kristen said it aloud. It only just occurred to her that it might look and sound like she was trying to get Kevin back, to trap him in a situation he did not want to be in but would not walk away from. He was a better person than she was.

Kristen must have seen those thoughts play out across Laura’s face. “I don’t think you were trying to trick him, kid. I just don’t think either of you was thinking very clearly. This could be really bad.”

“I’m sure it’s not. I certainly don’t feel pregnant.” Laura had not yet said the word out loud. It felt weird sliding off her tongue, out into the world.

“Well, you wouldn’t yet,” Kristen said, standing up abruptly. Laura followed her cue and stood as well.

“He doesn’t know that you weren’t on birth control, does he?” Kristen asked, facing away from Laura. There was a window on the wall, but Laura doubted that Kristen was suddenly so interested in the natural scenery.

“No. And he wouldn’t unless he has to.” Laura had a warning in her voice. She didn’t think Kristen would tell Kevin this news, but she had never really understood what the two of them had to talk about that had them still in touch.

“I would never tell him a secret that wasn’t mine to tell,” Kristen said, turning around to face Laura.

Walking up to the window, Laura laid one hand on her stomach.

“Are you late?” Kristen asked.
There would be no point in lying. “Yes.” But even though she was, Laura was certain there was no baby growing in her stomach. She didn’t know how she knew, but she did.

“Have you taken a test?”

“No.”

“Will you?”

“Soon.” And then they were no longer alone when an elderly couple shuffled slowly into the room, arm in arm.

Kristen put her hand on Laura’s shoulder. “You know I’m here.”

“I do.” And Laura stayed at the window a minute to look out over the water as Kristen turned slightly to her right to look at a painting that hung there on the wall.
The water was cool against her skin, just a few degrees warmer than the night air. She was still always surprised by how cool it got once the sun went down after being so hot all day. Descending the stairs slowly, pausing on each, she was careful to recognize the chill against first her feet then legs, hips, as the chemically-treated water ruined Tyler’s mother’s lilac silk nightgown. He had taken it from her room for Kristen to wear when they discovered she had left the bag she’d packed on the chair next to the door back in Sacramento. When she’d come out of the bathroom wearing it, Tyler was passed out drunk on his childhood bed. Which is where she knew she should be. In bed, not passed out.

And she also knew she shouldn’t be ruining his mother’s nightgown; all she would have to do is pull the thing over her head and throw it on one of the lounge chairs. The pool was secluded, fenced in and gated—no one would ever know if she were to swim naked in the moonlight. But she didn’t take the garment off, even as the water reached her waist. She needed some kind of barrier between herself and the bare reality of her stomach, even if the best she had was wet silk.

The chill in the air raised goose bumps on her skin. The skirt of the nightgown, which hung down to mid-calf when dry, was tangling between her legs, hindering her steps as she walked further into the pool.

Tyler had been shocked but did a good job of covering it with concern for her well-being. “Are you feeling okay? Can I get you anything?” And he had understood at that moment why she hadn’t wanted wine with the dinner he had made, why she had fought him so hard about just wanting water with her meal. Why she had eaten such small bites of
everything, though he had spent so much time preparing something nice for them. He had that sweetness in him, he’d taken the day off work to do something nice for her. She wanted to yell at him, that he needed to go to work, earn money, but she didn’t want to fight, did not want to tell him about this thing, this baby, when she was mad. Didn’t want the words to fall out of her mouth, as they would if she were to yell at him.

Her shoes were still on her feet, slippery against her soles. She wiggled her toes and kicked them off, and they floated to the surface of the aqua water. She scooped them off the surface and flung them from her, tossing them through the air and back onto the deck. The lights under the surface of the pool cast a green tint across the skin of her arms as she reached water up to her chest. She looked down at her own greenness, arms up and just skimming the surface.

She looked into the water at herself. The bust of the gown was plastered against the curves of her body, and the clinging of the expensive, wet material showed the very beginning of swelling where there was something growing inside her, or it was most likely a figment of her imagination. A cherry-sized mass of cells with a heartbeat, the doctor said at that first appointment. It was the swelling of her uterus, not the baby itself, that might be showing at that point. She had been the one to ask, though she had not really wanted to know.

When she kicked off the ground and started swimming towards the far edge of the pool, she did it to distract herself from the shape of her belly, from the status of her relationship. Reaching the wall, she did a quick flip turn and swam back toward the stairs.

The breaststroke was her favorite, and though her execution was sloppy, it got her from one end of the pool to the other time and again and again. She ducked her whole head
under water in the middle of the pool, and the loose ponytail she had made of her hair fell out. She stopped swimming, and her hair wove through the water, tangling around her face and neck. Kristen did not want to come up for air.

She stayed under until her lungs inhaled without her consent. Choking, she had no choice but rise to the surface. Coughing the entire time, she swam to the concrete ledge and clung there with one arm until she could breathe evenly again.

The thought of going inside, climbing into bed with Tyler naked or wearing whatever tee shirt she could find in his drawers had her kicking away from the wall again, calmer this time. Back at the center of the pool, she rolled over onto her back and threw her arms up over her head. She laid on the surface, looking up at the sky. Clouds blocked out the stars, but the haze was transparent enough for her to still be able to see the moon. The white orb of it was nearly full and hung directly over her head. She stared at it, wondering if the man up there could see her and if he cared about the ruined nightgown, transparent in its wetness.

Kristen could not be sure because of the darkness in the house, but she probably left a trail of water behind her as she made her way to Tyler’s room. She stopped outside the door, which she had closed on her way out. There were other rooms she could sleep in, but she didn’t want him to wake up alone. He would worry if he woke in the middle of the night and she wasn’t there.

Her hand rested on the doorknob. She was going in, just not right this minute. He wouldn’t have woken up yet to notice her absence.

As she pulled the wet nightgown over her head, trails of cool water wound their way across her skin. Naked, a ball of wet silk in her hand, she turned the doorknob and looked
around the dark hallway, as if to make sure they were still alone in the house. Shaking her head, she entered his bedroom, the same room where he had spent all his nights as a child.

She thought about throwing the nightgown at him, where he slept so soundly on the bed. How could he sleep? But she didn’t want to wake him, to have to talk about what they were going to do next, especially not when he was drunk. So instead, she did the best she could to lay the gown flat, hoping that might mitigate some of the damage she had done. She pulled the undershirt he had worn that day over her head; he had left it laying on the floor, and it smelled of his cologne.

Tyler had sprawled across the majority of the bed, but she made her way around the edge to the other side and pulled back the covers. She laid back on the pillow, and the water trapped between the strands of her hair immediately soaked the pillow. It didn’t bother her, though, as she closed her eyes and wished for sleep, which took too long to finally come.

Hours, she thought, had passed when she woke up, unable to move. The room was completely dark, with the thick curtains designed to keep out the strong morning sun. Tyler’s weight on her chest as he sprawled across her was not too heavy, just confining. She tried to maneuver enough to push him off, but he had her pretty well pinned. She made various sighing noises and even said his name several times, but he did not respond. When she closed her eyes, she tried not to think of how cool it would be out on the back deck just then, about the absolute darkness of the room, about the weight of her drunk boyfriend, about the thing in her stomach that he might be crushing.
The next time she woke, Tyler was gone from the room. The curtains were still mostly closed, but he must have pulled them back to look out at the day because a sliver of sunlight shone through a crack in the middle. She untangled herself from the sheets and climbed from bed. Moving towards the window, she stretched her arms over her head to remove the stiffness from her back.

As she pulled back the curtains, she used her hand to guard her eyes from the harshness of the sunlight. Blinking rapidly to help the adjustment, she scanned the room. Tyler had picked the nightgown up off the floor where she had spread it and draped it over the desk chair. She could see him, younger, smaller, hunched over that desk for long hours solving algebra problems and completing history reports. The nightgown itself didn’t look too bad, considering she’d taken it swimming.

Just as she started to consider going looking for him, Tyler pushed the door open fully and slid into the room carrying two glasses of water. He sat down on the edge of the bed without saying anything; she walked around and climbed back under the covers to lie down on her side of the bed. When he didn’t say anything, just looked down alternately at her face and her stomach, she pulled the flat sheet up over her head. Under the white cotton, she closed her eyes and listened to his breathing. The laundry smelled fresh; he had washed the sheets while waiting for her yesterday. He put his hand on her head, the sheet between his palm and her hair.

“Hey, babe,” he said, shifting his weight towards her on the bed. The movement had her body settling into him, her side pressed against his thigh. His hand moved to her hip, his fingers gentle, stroking the very top of her leg.

“Hey,” she said.
“What happened to the nightgown?” he asked, reaching up with his free hand to pull the sheet down, to uncover her face. She rolled onto her back, draping one arm across his lap and settling down into the pillows.

“Sorry. I went swimming.”

“Clothed?” he asked, the corners of his lips smiling at her.

“I didn’t have a suit. And I cannot stand to be naked right now.” And the smile left his face. His eyes traveled down her body to rest on her stomach. It didn’t look any different under the layers of his tee shirt and the bedding when she looked too. She sat up anyway, curling her legs up to her chest and resting her chin on her knees. They had not talked at all about what they were going to do yesterday. They had not talked a lot at all, actually, beyond just the fact that it was true.

They were pregnant. And now they had to talk about what they wanted to do about it.

“Could you get me some aspirin?” Kristen asked. “My head is starting to hurt.” He rose without a word and left the room. The water glasses were still on the table next to the bed. She rose to get one and pulled on a pair of shorts from the top drawer in his bureau.

When he returned with the bottle, he asked, “Is it safe for you to take this?”

She had not thought of that. And she didn’t know. “Maybe I shouldn’t,” she said. He set the bottle on the table next to his water glass. He sat down on the edge of the bed again and beckoned her to sit next to him with a wave of his fingers. Instead, she sat down in the desk chair, water in her hand, wishing she had thought to ask the doctor about painkillers yesterday.
The doctor had only been in the room about twelve seconds when he started his questions: “When was your last period?” And she wanted to disappear.

“I don’t remember exactly. Maybe May?”

“Is it unusual for you to skip a period or two?”

“Well, not really. It doesn’t happen all the time, but it has happened before.” On the wall was a poster explaining the developmental stages of a fetus.

“Other symptoms?” Like pregnancy was a disease with symptoms and prescriptions, something that could be cured.

She shrugged. She hadn’t really noticed anything specific, just some vague aches and discomfort.

“So what makes you think you are pregnant?”

She wanted to scream at the doctor. Couldn’t she just take the damn test? The drugstore one had been positive; she had first cried then started praying right away that it was a false positive.

“Mostly just a feeling.” She didn’t want to admit to the positive test. If she pretended it didn’t exist, maybe that would be enough to make it true.

“Have you been drinking?” He didn’t sound like he was judging her, but she knew he should be.

“Not since I suspected.”

“Before then?” There had been some binge drinking. She and Tyler were in the midst of a rocky period. He was waiting for her to come and meet him at his parents’ house. He thought she was at work.

“Drugs?” Some, recreational.
“Okay. It’s good to know as much as we can. Let’s find out what’s going on in there.”

She feigned a lot of interest in balancing her glass on the arm of the chair. She didn’t want to be physically close to him during this discussion, whenever it finally came. She twisted her neck to look at his face, rested her head against the back of the chair. His eyes were closed, and the only clue she had that he was thinking hard was the tapping of his fingers against his left thigh. She watched him until he blinked twice and opened his eyes to catch her looking at his face. He stared back at her.

“I want to ask you something,” he said, still staring.

And she knew what he was going to say. Deep down, he was a good guy. He wanted to do what would be expected of him in this situation. But she didn’t want to hear him say the words he thinks he should; she wanted to hear what he was really feeling. So she asked him to stop. They both knew their relationship wasn’t very good, that this wasn’t the right step for them.

When he opened his mouth to ask anyway, she stared at him as hard as she could, trying to make him understand that she meant it. If she could just look hard enough, he might be able to see inside of her, to read her emotions without her having to explain everything, draw everything out. That made the whole thing too real, too sad.

“I really think I should ask you this now,” he said, bending at the waist and leaning towards her, telling her that she had his whole attention.
“Tyler, I don’t want you to think this is a timing thing. It’s not because of the timing or the day or whatever.” She was watching him so closely that she could see the recognition in his eyes. He did understand what she was saying. Completely.

And he started talking anyway: “I’m not asking you to respond right now. Just give me a minute…” She rose halfway through his sentence and grabbed his jeans from on top of his overnight bag. She pulled the pants up over his shorts, tied back her hair and walked out of the room.

She was back in Sacramento before she had calmed down enough to answer his calls. When her phone rang again, she answered it, already speaking to try and explain herself: “I shouldn’t have just left, I’m sorry.”

“Are you okay? I mean physically. The drive went safe?” Tyler’s voice was full of anxiety, fear that she had caused him. Kristen started to cry but worked hard to keep the evidence of it from traveling the phone lines.

“Yes. I’m fine. Physically.”

“Okay. Stay at your place, all right? I’m about fifteen minutes behind you.”

She pulled into her parking spot and turned off the ignition. “Okay. I’ll wait right here.” And she was still sitting in her car when he pulled into the space next to hers.

They sat at the kitchen table after he used the key she had given him to unlock her apartment door. Her overnight bag was right where she had left it.

“Okay. We should probably start by agreeing to discuss this like adults. No running out, no fighting.”
“Serious business and all that,” she said, trying to act flippant.

“Stop it. We’re in trouble here. Maybe.”

“Fine. So we discuss all options.” He nodded, though she knew there were options he didn’t want to think about. He had not tried to touch her even once since he arrived. And even though taking notice of such things suggested differently, she was glad for the distance.

He did bring up marriage though he did not ask her to marry him. She brought up abortion though she did not ask his permission to get one. “Ultimately, this is your decision,” he said.

“Maybe, but I want you to be okay with,” she paused, not sure what to say, “whatever. This is yours too.” She gestured towards her stomach but even after the conversation they had been having, she couldn’t bring herself to say it, to actually put it into the appropriate, definite words.

This was their baby.

“Do you really mean that?” she asked, after they had both stopped talking.

“What?”

“About being okay with whatever I decide?”

He hesitated but said yes.
Chapter Seven – 1:15 p.m.

“Would you hang something like this in your living room?” Joshua asked from behind her. Laura had been looking at Prefete Duffaut’s “Spider Queen” and had not noticed him enter the room. The woman who Laura assumed was the Spider Queen stood in the center of the painting, her feet surrounded by her black, eight-legged worshipers, some of whom were dancing across her toes. Though unusual, the painting felt just as sacred as the one next to it, “The Adoration of Love,” which depicted a crucified Christ shining his own sacred light down onto the face of five of his adorers. Laura wished she knew more about Haitian culture, to better understand the pieces.

“I doubt I could afford it,” Laura said, tilting her head as if she was seriously considering putting the piece above her couch.

“I guess not, huh?” He stood next to her, looking at the side of her face instead of the painting itself.

“Plus it isn’t quite living room art, is it? Not really my taste either. I mean, it’s interesting. But if I owned this piece, I’d put it in a more serious room, like a library or a study. Most likely, I’d donate it to a museum. How about you?”

“Probably the same. You’re right; it’s almost too powerful to make good living room art.” Laura took a step back from the Spider Queen, wishing her well and hoping that Joshua would follow. She could use the distraction from the thoughts of Kevin that kept sneaking up on her; even the art wasn’t turning out to be enough. “You know, you never did tell me your name,” he continued.
She was surprised he was so forward. “I’m Laura,” she said, stopping to hold out her hand. She liked his directness.

“Well, Laura, what art, if any, do you have in your living room?”

“You’re the artist,” she said, poking a finger at his sketchbook, “you first, so I know how embarrassed I should be.”

“Mostly, I just have some poster prints, some photography and some drawings and things that I did myself. Nothing spectacular. Artist’s budget and all. Now you.”

“Then I am barely embarrassed at all. I’ve just printed some black and white pictures off the internet and stuck them in pretty frames. I also have some nice pieces of glass that I bought in college, things I couldn’t afford at the time but needed to have.”

“Soft spot for the starving artist?” he teased, stepping around her to move on to the next gallery.

“There were several years back then when I thought I was going to be one. I thought maybe a poet, but it didn’t work out that way.” Laura followed him under the archway and was immediately distracted by the floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked the lake. She walked straight past all the art in the room and looked out to count the sailboats sprinkled across the water. There were eight, their white sails towering over the surface of the lake as it moved in small waves towards the shore and crested two stories below where Laura stood. Seagulls floated on the breeze, dipping down to gather bits of food from the grass near the shoreline. The beach was rocky, and the sun was bright in the sky. Its rays cast boxes of light through the rectangular windows and across the ground, highlighting Laura’s toes. That much natural light made the tattoo on her foot look faded and dull.
She looked around the gallery for Kristen but did not find her. They had gotten tattoos together, both along the ridge of their right arches. Joshua had sat down on a bench and opened his sketchpad. He looked up at her periodically then back down at his page. She stood still for a few minutes, until Kristen came into the room. Laura watched as Kristen stopped a minute, to peer over Joshua’s shoulder before joining her at the window.

“You know that guy is drawing you?” Kristen said as she came up next to Laura.

“Well, I didn’t know for sure, but I figured as much.” Kristen’s eyes lingered a few minutes on Laura’s stomach, as if she was worried the drawing might show any signs of swelling. Never mind that it was certainly too early for her to be showing at all.

While they stood, Joshua closed his sketchpad and came to stand with them. He just shook his head when Laura asked to see what he had drawn.

“I love how I feel outside of time when I’m at a museum,” Kristen said. “I’m surrounded by these artifacts from other peoples’ lives, and it’s like time doesn’t even exist.”

“It is easy to forget where we are and where we belong,” Laura replied, looking at Joshua, who stood just a few steps away. This room contained a mixture of self-taught and folk artists that covered a variety of eras and genres but was mostly American in origin. Laura found herself most drawn to the sculptures but more likely to pay attention to the guy who had joined them than to the art itself.

Until she saw the series of eight wooden sculptures tucked back into a small alcove. Each had been placed on its own floating shelf, all in a row on the wall opposite another row of windows. Laura looked over her shoulder to see Kristen staring out the window and Joshua looking at a painting on the wall. She moved closer to the figures and took in the
details of the pieces. They were a light oak finish except for several small parts of each piece. The black details became more important and prevalent in each statue as Laura moved her attention from left to right. In each, there were two faceless human figures, a tree and a small dark snake. As the figures, one male and one female, came to know each other better, more aspects of the sculpture darkened to signify their changing perceptions. From Edgar Tolson’s the Fall of Man series, the sculptures show Adam and Eve meeting the snake, having sex, being banished from Eden, and having a baby who is then covered in dark clothes that duplicate those his parents wear.

Laura wondered how long she would have lasted before she would have taken the steps toward covering her own nakedness had she found herself in Eden.

Stepping back into the main room, Laura pulled the hem of her shirt down over her hips. She walked until she stood at the window next to Kristen, who she realized was quieter even than before. “What do you think is going on at the bottom of the lake?”

“Nothing. Probably just a lot of garbage,” Kristen responded.

“Really? I’ll bet there are some little fishes down there with little moats and turrets on their castles.”

“Castles made of trash, maybe.” Kristen stepped away and walking out of the room. Laura turned to follow her immediately.

“Not one for a game of pretend then?” Joshua asked as Laura passed him.

“Apparently not at this moment,” she replied. She did not stop, instead trailed Kristen back out through the galleries and down the stairs.
In the center of the room, in a glass display case was a couple, carved out of marble and wrapped up in each other’s arms. Their limbs spiraled, asking the viewer’s eyes to follow the lines from their bare toes, up long legs, across torsos and around one set of male, one of female shoulders to where their lips met in the kiss that inspired the title of the sculpture.

Laura had followed Kristen through the last gallery, paying little attention to the art on the walls. Instead, she had been thinking about what might have upset Kristen, who seemed to be avoiding getting close enough to have any conversation.

They were surrounded by the work of several important Impressionists. There were a Renoir and a Monet near to each other on the room’s north wall. The colors of the two paintings all stood out against one another, a series of dots and brushstrokes. But somehow, the pictures shone through, drawing out the lines of a bridge and a couple conversing under the shade of a parasol in the Renoir and the sunlight and shadow over water in the Monet.

But it was Auguste Rodin’s “The Kiss,” that couple twisted up in each other, that drew both Laura and Kristen into its orbit. The case stood by itself, which allowed them both to stroll around and see the sculpture from all sides and still keep some distance between them. Laura’s eyes tended to focus on the shadowed spaces under the arms, between the bodies of the two lovers. This was her favorite piece in the museum, the one that spoke most to her.

Laura had taken the time to research the piece after an earlier visit to the museum with Kevin. Inspired by Dante’s Inferno, the lovers are Francesca and Paolo, her husband Giovanni’s younger brother. While discovering together the tale of Lancelot and Guinevere in a book, the two were found out and then killed by Giovanni. In the sculpture, which is
meant to portray the last kiss shared between the two before their deaths, a discerning eye will notice the book, which is outlined in Paolo’s hand. However, most eyes, including Laura’s most of the time, glance over the book, too captivated by the majesty of the human forms and their obvious connection to each other, physically of course, but also on a more abstract, harder to define level.

After her first encounter with the sculpture, Laura found that the Milwaukee exhibit was in fact one of the painted plaster versions of the work Rodin completed before creating the first marble version of the work in 1888. Laura loved the little sculpture all the more once she learned it was a draft. Revision, the small steps taken towards the perfection of any final piece, always had a special place in her heart, as it suggests there is still room for growth, for hope and improvement.

Drawing her attention away from the dark places hidden in the sculpture, Laura realized Kristen had left the room. Joshua had taken her place. How long he had been standing there she did not know, but he seemed to have given up on studying the sculpture and was looking pretty intently at her instead. And he did not look away when she returned his stare.

Laura wished they had come to this place together, perhaps even on a date, so that she could ask him all the questions she had. How the sculpture affected him, why he was choosing to pay the artwork so little attention, what else he drew in the notebook under his arm. If she could see what he had drawn of her.

He continued to watch her instead of the art. Then he smiled at her.

They were still on opposite sides of the display case. Laura was not going to be the first to speak. She wanted to see what he would do.
Returning his smile, Laura found herself looking away from him, back to the face of the man, of Paolo, whose features were obscure and indefinite. Laura could see Joshua’s face superimposed above the sculpture’s masculine form. She could not quite bring herself to place her own features over Francesca’s, however. That seemed like a violation. Of what, she was not quite sure.

Joshua didn’t say anything as time passed; Laura pretended she was still looking at the sculpture. He smiled again then walked away, to look at the Monet. Laura slipped out of the room, looking for Kristen.

While standing next to Kristen in silence, looking at John Sloane’s painting of Isadora Duncan on stage in the spotlight with roses at her feet, Laura paid close attention to the reactions of the other people who stopped for a moment, searched for meaning in the painting and then turned in any direction and walked on to the next piece in their experience of the museum. Kristen’s face had shown a small bit of envy, which Laura knew lingered from years ago when Kristen had been forced to quit dancing after an injury.

Kristen moved on from Isadora before Laura was ready to, so she let her friend leave without a word. Laura stayed, looking more closely at the dancer who had been captured bent at the waist, mid-bow directed at her audience that was gathered just off the edge of the canvas. She watched Isadora carefully, but her ears were focused on the young couple who stepped up next to her, into the space Kristen had just vacated.

“Were you ever in ballet?” the boy asked the girl, whom he had one arm around. Laura could see out of the corner of her eye that they stood close together.
“Yes,” the girl said, then paused. “I didn’t like it very much though. I preferred more modern dance.” She was taller than him, Laura noticed. A quick glance told Laura that the girl was wearing strappy sandals with heels at least three inches tall. What kind of girl wears heels that high to walk around a museum? Laura looked down at her own feet, practically bare but for the thin platform of foam she walked on.

“That’s cool,” the boy said. The teenagers did not even begin to discuss the art beyond its subject, which had Laura wondering what had prompted them to come to the museum to spend their day. They would probably go to a restaurant for dinner afterwards and then drive back to the suburb they had come from. West Bend or West Allis, one of the many mid-sized towns contained within the metro that defined themselves by a compass position in relation to the city of Milwaukee.

As the teenagers made their slow circle around the room, Laura stayed where she was, and two women who looked enough alike to be sisters stepped up next to her, speaking to each other in loud voices. The one wearing denim smiled at Laura as she stopped in front of Isadora. The other woman, whose hair was too bright red to be natural, continued to talk about the art hanging over the leather couch in her living room. “Remember, I had the huge Monet poster framed? When we moved, the movers dropped the darn thing and the broken glass scraped some of the paint right off. I had to replace the whole thing,” she said, looking Isadora over with a slight frown on her face. Did Isadora ever feel jealous of the other artwork that people would discuss when they should be focusing on her own perfectly composed and displayed form?

The woman in denim made the appropriate soothing sounds at her sister then smiled at Laura again as the women stepped around her. Laura saw something of herself and
Kristen in those women; she was vaguely interested in the kinds of middle-aged women she
and Kristen would make in twenty or so years.

At least a decade had past since Laura remembers hearing Kristen last speak of
marriage. She had never mentioned discussing that step with any of her boyfriends along the
way, not even during all the discussion that had occurred about the subject while Laura was
planning her own wedding.

When Laura found her, Kristen stood in the middle of the room displaying regional
artists. They said nothing to each other; something Laura felt but did not understand passed
in their eye contact that had Laura wishing she was still a room away.

Instead, she turned her attention to John Wilde’s “Wisconsin Wildeworld.” The
painting was divided into two halves by the back of the painter, who had painted himself and
his sketchpad into the picture. While the majority of the painting was done in various shades
of blue and green, the landscape to the right of the painter was sharp with jagged rocks and
the ruins of temples upon which there were figures painted in the nude. To the painter’s left,
the people were clothed in a fashion that would have been right in the 1950s when the
painting was created. They strolled down sidewalks in front of large houses. Scattered
among these women with children and men carrying briefcases were animals that a
Wisconsin resident could see only in a zoo—zebras, giraffes, lions.

Kristen was looking at the same piece but stood several feet back from where Laura
was. “What do you think it means?” Laura asked, speaking loud enough to break the silence
that had stretched too long and to show her slight annoyance with the silence that was
stretching between them.
Kristen took a step forward but did not say anything. So Laura continued: “The blending of these pieces of families, these animals so out of place and exotic, like there is just something natural about the way we take care of one another.”

When Kristen still did not respond again, Laura left.

The art in the American Abstraction gallery had Laura noticing the way each piece influenced and changed the way she looked at all the surrounding pieces. For example, Jose de Rivera’s “Construction” was a five-foot, narrow black box topped with a curving sculpture of slender silver lines that varied in width as it looped back into itself to shape a bowl that spiraled three times across the top. The most significant element of the piece was the negative space captured within the curves of the metal.

On the wall on the other side of the sculpture, twenty feet from where Laura stood, was a painting by Irena Rice Pereira called “The Breadth of Time.” Through the negative space in the sculpture, Laura studied the geometric shapes in the painting, the lines constructed in blue and splashed with yellow and orange. Like the bowl of the sculpture was holding the essence of time itself.

Still standing alone and looking through the metal frame in the windowless room, she could see the lake, the sky.
Chapter Eight – 2:02 p.m.

We must get our hearts broken sometimes. This is a good sign, having a broken heart.

It means we have tried for something.

-Elizabeth Gilbert

Laura remembered what came next. There were very few times when she knew exactly what was on the other side of a given wall, but these were corners and shapes she knew. When she turned the corner, she would be in the pop art gallery with work by the likes of Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein. Kevin’s favorite.

Two years ago

Bold strokes and primary colors create the shapes of the girl who brushes the tear from her eye before it even has time to reach her cheek. Her hair in waves of yellow, spiraled lines of blue. Her lips showed sharp red while her skin is textured by evenly spaced rows and columns of benday dots.

Kevin stood close, as if to count each of the dots laid out across the crying girl’s face. Laura named her Stella and tried to determine what was making her cry. These weren’t the tears of true loss. She was not breaking down, not sobbing. This was the trickle of moisture that followed a temporary goodbye. Whatever Stella had lost, she knew it was eventually coming back.
“Her brow is furrowed, but she’s practically smiling,” Laura said, when Kevin questioned the conclusions she shared with him.

“Maybe she is just strong, not about to let the world witness her real grief.”

“That’s not strength. Expressing grief over something you’ve lost, that you can’t find or get back, that’s bravery, that’s strength.”

“Why do you dislike her?” Kevin asked, stepping away from Lichtenstein’s “Crying Girl” to examine a line of reproductions of Warhol’s neon tomato soup cans.

“I don’t. She’s just so cold, so detached.”

“She’s enamel on steel. What choice does she really have?” Kevin took her hand in his and led her through the rest of the pop art gallery, pointing out the details he had noticed on earlier trips and sharing with her the details he had accumulated about the artists and the body of their work.

Laura avoided even looking at “Crying Girl.” Instead, she crossed quickly through the gallery and stepped into the next room, where she found herself face to face with a series of paintings by Lux Conners.

Kristen had been the one to turn Laura onto Connors’ work when she took art appreciation while they were undergrads. While Kristen had found very little interesting about the artist, who was known for her intense privacy, something about the work itself had made her think of Laura.
By age thirty, Lux Conners had paintings on display in nearly a dozen major museums. Her work was mainly abstract but even the images Laura had found during a search on the internet carried a lot of powerful emotion. Being face to face with the work was another story. Critics called Conners’ work heavily layered and emotionally complex; Laura found herself drawn to each piece, trying to unravel everything the artist had wrapped around the emotional core of the painting.

“Meaning should be determined and assigned by the viewer without any suggestion or direction from the artist outside of work itself.”

“Art will mean as many different things as there are different people who see it.”

“A painting should serve as an emotional trigger, and I’m thankful that mine seem to be ambiguous enough to bring up a whole range of different reactions.”

—Lux Conners

In the middle of the row of three Lux Conners paintings was a canvas titled “Lost.” The lines on the top half of the painting transitioned softly and curved around one another. As the lines crossed below the middle of the composition, they became sharper, harsher and less connected. The whole piece was done in shades of gray: light and soft near the top, metallic and shocking at the bottom. The painting read like a page in a book, from top left to bottom right. And it told Laura a story as the lines moved naturally from smooth to rough.
She saw, in the softness of the upper half of the painting, the same curves she knew from the rosy cheeks of babies and the round bellies of expecting mothers. The transition was subtle and slow. In fact, the change in the lines was not even noticeable until it had already been completed. There was anger and sadness in the corners at the bottom of the piece, and Laura saw her own sadness, stark and peering out at her from under the layers of paint.

Maybe this is why that painted girl in the last room cried. Constant in her confrontation with the loss in Lux Conners’ painting across the room, Stella had to avert her gaze off to the right of her painting instead of staring down the painting that would shake any woman’s composure and made her cry until her makeup ran down her cheeks and neck.

Laura was glad Kristen was somewhere else at the moment. She stood, looking at the painting, her hands folded over her stomach. She was nearly positive there was no life growing there, and Laura knew she should be glad. Kevin would come back to her if there were; she did not want to trap him. As much as she wanted to be a mother, she found herself praying in front of the Lux Conners’ painting that there wasn’t a little piece of her and Kevin growing beneath her hands. No baby deserved to be that kind of mistake.

Kristen’s fingertips were cool against Laura’s bare shoulder. They had been walking room to room without speaking for nearly half an hour. Laura took a small step back and leaned her head on Kristen’s shoulder as Kristen laid an arm around her waist.

“Can I tell you, though, when you called off the wedding without saying why, I assumed it was because Kevin turned out to be gay after all.”

The absurdity of Kristen’s comment had Laura laughing.
“Well, it probably wouldn’t be so funny if it were true,” Kristen said, smiling. Laura smiled back, remembering several of the conversations she and Kristen had had after they had first met Kevin.

“You are right. That wouldn’t be funny at all if it were true. You probably also considered whether or not he had cheated.”

“Not at all. That’s why I was so sure he must be gay. He never would have cheated on you; he loved you too much.”

Laura smiled again. Kristen’s tone, the perfect blend of seriousness and humor, helped Laura remember the best things about her relationship without stirring up too many of the bad emotions.

Laura and Kristen each took a step back from one another and stood together to look at the third Lux Conners painting. The colors were brighter, and the shapes were cautious but open. Laura saw healing in those lines.

“I wish that I could be twelve again. Even just for a day.” Kristen started to walk away.

When Laura spoke those words, Kristen stopped. She did not turn to face Laura, however, or move any closer.

Laura read Kristen’s sustained stillness as interest so she continued: “Then my dreams about a baby and a husband would still be ‘someday’ and ‘when I grow up’ instead of something that I feel I am missing.”

The silence grew, and Laura turned her attention to the wall of Lux Conners paintings in their carefully spaced row. She smiled when she felt Kristen’s hand on her arm. Laura covered those long, cool fingers with her own and squeezed them just a moment before
releasing her friend and stepping close to the painting titled “Blue.” There was no blue in the picture; Laura wanted to climb into the piece until she could step behind the paint and search under the surface for the color in the title, for the emotional core of the painting.

For all that she had imagined, for all the words they had shared, Laura did not know Joshua. So when he spoke to her so soon after her reaction to Lux Conners and the words she had said to Kristen, she found herself fighting to be calm. While she and Kristen certainly had not fought, nor even had a conversation really, Laura’s emotional response had been strong and rather distressing.

“Powerful stuff,” he said.

“She’s a wonderful artist,” Laura responded after several moments. His smile was soft, his eyes kind, when she finally looked over at him.

Kristen had left; Laura and Joshua were alone in the gallery.

“So, do you come here often?” he asked before Laura could come up with anything to say next. “Wait. Don’t answer that. It sounded like a line, didn’t it?” He shook his head, laughing at himself, which made her hesitant to answer.

“It did, but I won’t hold it against you. I try to come here every few months.” Joshua followed Laura as she stepped away from the paintings. “What about you? You’re an artist.” She had meant it as a question, but it didn’t come out as one.

He nodded, looking down at his sketchpad quickly then back up at her. They stood side by side in the middle of the room, silent and looking around at the other walls. Neither moved forward to get a closer look at anything. Laura was content to stand with Joshua a moment and look at the art from a slight remove. She didn’t have to know him.
Laura jumped when she felt a hand on her leg. She had not heard anyone enter the room and was surprised when she looked down into the laughing blue eyes of a blonde boy who would not have been older than three. He smiled up at her, then started to get a little shy. She saw the moment he realized that she wasn’t someone he knew. Fear for just a flash and then smiles again as he patted his stomach covered by a green tee-shirt with a dinosaur printed on it.

“Wow! What a cool shirt,” Laura said, bending her knees so that she could meet the boy face to face, on his level. He just grinned at her, patting his stomach again.

“Where are your parents, kiddo?” Joshua asked, putting a hand on Laura’s shoulder as he crouched down next to her. Just as his tone lifted to finish the question, a man came around the corner with fear in his eyes. The boy had been missing for what must have seemed like forever to the father. Laura could see the worst possibilities playing on a reel behind his eyelids, even as the worry faded, even as he realized his son was fine. Those were the moments Laura was used to dealing with at work. The worst ones where the reality had sunk in that there would not be any more turning the corner and finding out that everything was just fine. What would she have had to write about this little boy, whose hands had just been warm against her leg?

Laura’s smile was shaky as she offered this father what reassurance she could, as he scooped the boy up against his chest.

“Hey, kid. We were looking everywhere for you,” the man said to his son.

“Daddy,” the boy said, suddenly shy again and burying his face against his father’s neck. “Pretty,” he said.
“You’re right, Davey. Pretty. We’ll show you that one next time.” The father nodded and smiled back at Laura then Joshua. He held his son close as he stepped back around the corner where Laura was sure the child’s mother waited with their other children. A baby, perhaps, or a little girl around five.

“The kid was talking about you, I think,” Joshua said, his hand still on Laura’s arm even after they straightened. She was glad for the warmth of him near to her; work had snuck in and caught her unaware, as it sometimes did. Too much death, too many horrible circumstances. His warmth helped her shake it off.

“Well, that sounds like a line, too,” she whispered.

She was not a coward. It wasn’t his presence, the way he stood close to her like they had known each other for years and were comfortable with each other’s bodies, that was bothering her the most. She could admit that much. Her reaction to him is what had her nervous, itching just under the surface of her skin. Maybe a little bit of a coward after all, she turned the conversation to the art as they entered a new gallery.

“Every time I come into this room, that guy is so creepy,” she said, stopping abruptly. Joshua did not stop in time and walked into her from behind. The impulse to lean back against him for a moment startled her so she instead took several big steps away from him. When she looked, he was just smiling at her with an apology in his eyes.

Duane Hanson’s sculpture titled “Janitor” was slouching against the far wall near one of the room’s corners. He looked like an overnight museum guard, dressed in a blue work shirt and gray pants. He had a gold pocket watch hanging from his waist. With a hand on
one hip and his head bent, he looked resigned, hopeless, knowing he would never move on to a more exciting or glamorous job.

“He’s just so real, like at any moment he is going to straighten up and head back to work,” Joshua said, moving around Laura and across the room until he stood next to the sculpture.

“And so sad. He looks like his life is really hard.” Laura stepped up behind Joshua while she spoke. “Like to him, all this art is just something to be cleaned up after. Or around.”

On the wall next to the man, a poster warned people to refrain from touching the art. Pictures showed the additional wear and fray on various pieces of the sculpture, the fabric and the props—the pocket watch and the pen in the man’s breast pocket.

“Let’s call him Dwight,” Joshua said. Laura, surprised to learn she wasn’t the only one who named the figures in the art, nodded even though she had been thinking more of a Steven. Dwight seemed too obvious when the artist was named Duane.

“They turned Dwight here into a museum meta-lesson,” Laura said. The sign explained how the museum could understand the desire to touch the hyper-realistic sculpture but also how wearing the constant friction could be on the fabric and the props.

“Well, it is pretty difficult to believe that he is made of polyester and fiber glass,” Joshua said, reading off the nameplate that listed the materials composing the sculpture.

Laura took a step closer to the statue to examine the areas that were listed as most damaged by museum guests and their curious fingers. Dwight’s hairline was lifting up and away from his scalp, the hems of his left sleeve and front pocket were threadbare in several places. Dwight seemed broken down, and Laura wondered what stories he would have to
share over a cold, foamy beer in the bar he frequented more because he lived down the street than for any attachment to the establishment or its atmosphere.

A look over her shoulder told Laura that Joshua had taken a step back from Dwight and her and opened his sketchpad. He was focused on a large, startlingly close-up portrait of a woman’s head and neck. Laura was tempted to walk over and take a look over his shoulder, but then she thought of Kristen.

“I’m going to look for my friend,” Laura said, not quite sure if Joshua had heard her or if she even really wanted him to. Lie. She wanted him to, but she walked away anyway.
Chapter Nine – 2:43 p.m.

Once upon a time there was a boy who loved a girl, and her laughter was a question he wanted to spend his whole life answering.

-Nicole Krauss

What was a single large room had been divided in two by a partition. There were installations scattered throughout the space that made use of all different mediums—stone, plastic, string, light itself. Laura searched the room for Kristen but did not see her.

Instead, she found a small girl dressed in pink and white. The child had climbed onto a platform beneath one of the installations that showcased a piece composed mostly of light and the shadows cast behind four circular plastic discs. The girl giggled as she stomped and hopped her way across the platform with her arms up in the air. Her fingers just brushed the rounded edges of the light.

Laura wondered where the girl’s parents were, why there were so many kids running around the museum alone today. But mostly, she was glad the little girl was having fun. Her hair was pulled back in a short ponytail that stuck out straight from her head and bounced around as she moved. There were other people in the room, watching the girl who had reached the other end of the platform and was spinning around in a tight circle singing to herself. If there had been fewer people in the room, Laura might have joined the girl in her spinning and dancing.

The art over the girl’s head was interesting, the four discs overlapping to create a clover on the wall, but it was the little girl who held most people’s attention.
“Where did you run off to?” Laura asked, when she caught up with Kristen in front of Gary Schneider’s “Insolated Wand,” an installation built of a coffin-shaped block of concrete covered in layers of insulation, lead, and fiber glass. The top layer, the fiber glass, was carved out with egg carton cups, leaving hills and valleys on the upper most surface of the stack.

“What do you mean?” Kristen’s eyes did not leave the structure before them.

Laura did not know how to respond to Kristen and the tone of her question. Plenty of time had past; precedent told her that everything should be all right. But Kristen was upset about something. Trying to determine if she had done something to make Kristen angry, Laura bent to give the impression that she was really just examining the transitions between the different layers of the sculpture that rose to hip-level.

Three women, one older than the other two who looked near the same age, entered the room and stopped on the other side of the sculpture, saving Laura from the need to respond. One of the younger women made eye contact with Laura and smiled at her over the art. The silence between Laura and Kristen seemed to weigh down even the conversation between these three women for a moment. Did they sense they were interrupting?

“This is interesting,” the older woman said in a loud voice. “But I thought that a wand was something a fairy used?”

Out of the corner of her eye, Laura saw Kristen’s body twitch with stifled laughter. She, too, was trying not to laugh out loud when she again made eye contact with the same younger woman, who was trying to remain subtle, laughing soundlessly. A mother and her two grown daughters, Laura decided, as she watched the younger two wink at each other behind the older woman’s back while they followed her toward the next display. Laura’s
eyes followed their path; just ahead of them, she saw layers of brown industrial felt had been cut up in strips and hung in scallops from the ceiling. It looked like a tiered necklace, missing only the jewels that would make it sparkle.

“That woman has a point,” Kristen said to Laura in a whisper. “What’s going on with the title?”

Pointing down a narrow corridor, Kristen asked: “What’s back there?”

“Art?” Laura could not remember what room waited for them at the end of the hall, so she guessed. She led Kristen through the corridor. The walls were close on both sides; Laura knew that if the hallway had been a couple of feet longer, she would have started to panic before reaching the end. After all of the open space, the high ceilings throughout the rest of the building, being able to touch both walls with her elbows out was enough to make Laura nervous.

But then the hallway opened up into the first of several galleries displaying the museum’s collection of contemporary art. Now that she could orient her position in the building, Laura remembered the art in this section of the museum best. She and Kevin had spent the most time with the work here, trying to decipher the meaning and message hidden behind the surface appearance of all the different pieces. The people-watching was best here as well, seeing the frustration of the people who needed to leave each piece with a definite understanding of its purpose and meaning.

Kristen elbowed Laura and nodded her head in the direction of three handsome college-age boys all standing around one of the pieces, which looked like nothing more than a suitcase a weary traveler had left open in the middle of the floor. Robert Gober chose not
to title his installation, which reveals a whole world when someone stands over the suitcase and looks down into it. A hole in the bottom of the suitcase and in the floor beneath shows an underground waterway that flows over smooth pebbles and various forms of aquatic plant life.

“Oh, my god! This is the coolest thing I have ever seen,” the tallest boy said to his friends.

“Are there fish down there?” the black-haired one asked.

“Are there feet down there?” the third asked.

Laura remembered that she had not noticed the two pairs of feet in the water until Kevin had pointed them out to her. One pair was adult feet, naked in the water, while the other pair of smaller, child-sized feet dangled over the surface on legs too short to reach the pool. Scattered around the adult feet, at the bottom of the creek or pond or whatever body of water, were shells and coins and orange pieces that looked like they might be goldfish reflecting sunlight off their scales.

Kristen winked once at Laura with a gleam in her eyes. Whatever had been bothering her was gone from her face as she stepped up behind the boys. “Wow, creepy!” Laura heard her say, as Kristen peered down into the suitcase while standing in between two of the boys, putting her hand on one of their arms while she bent to get a closer look.

From where she stood several feet back, Laura looked around the rest of the room while Kristen pretended to be shocked and a little bit afraid of the feet installed under the floor of the gallery. While still half listening to Kristen’s conversation with the boys, Laura moved on to the next exhibit, never as interested in flirting as Kristen. At least not with boys that young.
“See you later, Kristen,” the college boys called as they left the room through the same corridor Laura and Kristen had come through earlier.

“Aren’t they cute?” Kristen asked as she bounced over to where Laura stood studying Ross Bleckner’s “Outstanding European,” a multimedia painting with real burn marks hovering over the candle flames and an ethereal child dancing around the base of a candlestick.

“Sure,” Laura said, more interested in the painting than in the boys who had just left. “And they are probably late for a frat party.”

Kristen, never good at being brushed off, stepped in between Laura and the painting, blocking her view. “Sure, they are a little young. And I’m technically not even single, but I was just having a little bit of fun. You aren’t the only one who can pick up random guys in the museum.”

Laura sidestepped Kristen and moved closer to the painting, deciding to ignore Kristen’s snide comment as she tried to get a closer look at the curled edges where the canvas had been burned.

“Doesn’t it look like the painting is trying to escape itself?” Laura asked quietly.

“Everyone is always trying to escape from something,” Kristen said, her tone distant. Laura assumed she was referring to her relationship with Tyler; she was only technically not single, and earlier after getting off the phone with him, Kristen had seemed drained in a way that did not suggest a healthy relationship. Just the fact that he had not accompanied her on this trip seemed like a clear sign that things weren’t going to last much longer between them. However, it seemed like there was more pulling on Kristen than just a troubled relationship.
“Well, I know exactly what I am running from. It helps me figure out where I am going, to recognize where I don’t want to be,” Laura said.

Kevin proposed after making her dinner in her own kitchen. There were candles that smelled of apple cinnamon lit on the table.

He had brought her a bouquet of asparagus he then sautéed in olive oil and garlic. Because he had known it would embarrass her, Kevin did not kneel down before her but instead sat in the chair next to hers even though he had set himself a place across the table. In the middle of his explanation of how he had prepared the food, he asked: “Marry me?” He had not planned on proposing that evening. He did not have the ring; he had just ordered it that afternoon but told her that he could not wait long enough for it to even come in before he asked her.

Kristen had been the one to introduce them. She had asked out a guy from her economics class freshman year of college; when the date didn’t go anywhere for the two of them, she gave him Laura’s number. Because he thought the circumstances were too odd, he did not call Laura. Instead, Kristen arranged for them to finally met near midterms, when she invited Kevin over to study for
their exam. When he knocked on the door, Laura was the only one home. She had invited him in and sat talking with him until Kristen finally returned, three hours late.

After having dated Kristen, Kevin wouldn’t ask Laura out, so early in their relationship, she had to do most of the asking. At first there was a lot of hanging out as friends and awkwardly-said good-byes where it felt like there should be kisses. He acted like her boyfriend, driving her home, paying for her meals, but refused to actually ask her. So one night, they were walking downtown when Laura asked Kevin to hold her hand. He did not let go until he dropped her off at her door. When she first asked him out on an official date, though, he said no only to call her from his car, still parked out in front of her apartment, to ask her himself.

They spent their first Christmas together alone in his apartment. Both of their families wanted the new couple to join them for holiday celebrations, but they declined all those invitations and spent the week curled up in a blanket his grandmother had knitted when he was a child.
The air in the museum, though Laura was sure it was very strictly regulated to protect the valuable artwork, felt open and fresh. The ceilings soared stories above her head in the contemporary galleries where some of the pieces were taller than a single story would allow. Here, it was easy for Laura to close her eyes and imagine that she was really outside. Or that if she wanted to, she could step through the majority of the paintings, as if they were portals into alternate realities. She was curious about the kinds of people that would live in each of the paintings, especially the one she found herself in front of now.

Laura was looking at Gerhard Richter’s “Breath.” Different colors of paint rushed down the canvas like water in a stream to form curtains that Laura wanted to reach through and push aside. Each curtain was tattered, riddled with little holes that allowed its deeper layers of color to show through. Near the top was a streaked band of red while the yellow seemed to have settled closer to the bottom of the piece. A pure painting, without the contemporary influence of mixed media, “Breath” made the whole room bigger for Laura.

She wanted to take the fabric of it and cut it into a pattern, make it into a dress that she could pull down over her head and smooth over her hips. Then she would wear that dress dancing around the room. Would Joshua want to dance with her?

Walking toward the next painting, Laura heard the little mannequin from one of the other installations speak: “Sometimes I just don’t get jokes,” the little guy said. Because it was on the other side of the gallery and she would be seeing it later, Laura pretended to ignore it as she turned her attention to the other paintings in the room. Maybe she also found the figure a little bit creepy.

Joshua entered through the open space on the west wall of the gallery. Even the doorways in this part of the museum were wide open, made up more of large open space that
Joshua smiled at Laura, gestured towards her using his sketchpad, but did not come over to where she stood. Laura watched as Kristen noticed his presence.

“It’s difficult for me to sleep at night,” the mannequin said.

Julian Schnable’s “Claudio al Mandrione (zona rosa)” was another huge piece that commanded its own wall. At first the piece appeared to be only a lot of broken dishes painted red then glued to the wall to form an uneven mosaic of shards of glass. And that was pretty itself. But when Laura took a step back from the piece, she saw the shapes of two figures who inhabited the bottom right corner of the piece. The gold band that hovered in the red near the center of the painting suggested a relationship between the figures, tying them to one another. Both of the profiles were masculine, domestic; the faces were close together, cheeks and foreheads made of broken dishes.

“I feel ashamed most of the time,” the mannequin echoed as Laura stepped through one of the many gaps in the wall. In the alcove, she came upon a family—a mom and dad, who were near Laura’s same age, with three children—gathered together in a huddle, looking at a futuristic landscape as a family. Laura felt a little bit like she was invading their moment; the room was barely larger than the bench at its center.

“What do you think of this painting, Maddy?” the mother asked the girl seated on the floor at her feet. Laura guessed she was the middle child, about six.

“Pretty colors. Purple,” the girl replied, playing with the laces on her sneakers.

“Mom?” Maddy’s younger brother broke into the conversation.

“Yes, dear?” the woman said, crouching down in front of her son.
“This museum makes me hungry,” he said with a hand on his stomach and a serious expression on his face.

Laura coughed to cover her laughter and watched the woman stand and hide her smile with one hand.

The boy’s dad bent down to stage whisper “me too” to his son. Smiling and with a child’s hand in both of hers, the woman said they could go and eat now. The man picked up the hungry child, and the little boy smiled at Laura over his dad’s shoulder as they left the room.

The scrolling neon sign on the wall read: “How you move when touched delights life.” The black case for the electronic sign stood out five inches from the white wall, and the contrasting dark and light backgrounds allowed the neon colors—blues, yellows, pinks and greens—appear as if they were ready to keep scrolling right off the screen and across the walls.

“How I move when touched delights life,” she repeated out loud. She wondered what else the artist, Jenny Holzer, had to tell her through this electronic media when Kristen stuck her head around the corner.

“Have you seen this creepy little doll?” Kristen asked.

“At times, I can feel my heart beating.” Laura heard the mannequin speak again after Kristen called her attention back to it. Laura just followed her friend when Kristen left the small room.

“After I saw it the first time, I dreamt about that darn thing,” Laura said. Tony Oursler’s “MMPI (Self Portrait in Yellow)” is a small cloth doll lying on the cement floor under the stairs with a movie projector aimed at its face and a yellow folding chair propped
open and tilted over to rest on its head. “I was the doll, only I was full-sized.” What she did not share was that Kevin had been sitting in a second folding chair just a few feet away, that the movie wasn’t her face like it was the doll’s. Instead the movie in Laura’s dream was made up of scenes from her childhood. She, her secrets, her life, had become the art.

“The recording was my voice, those were my secrets echoing off the walls.” But it was not a nightmare. With each secret her voice revealed, Kevin had moved his chair a little bit closer. She had not been able to move, could not do anything to keep her secrets, but Kevin did not get up and leave. He stayed with her and that had made everything else about the dream seem better.

“What a creepy dream,” Kristen said, bending a little bit to peer more closely at the face of the doll that lay on its side on the floor. Laura, starting to feel unsettled by her emotional reaction to, not the art but her memories, ducked away from the little man and his spontaneous confessions.

“You know what my problem is?” Kristen said when Laura joined her in the next gallery.

Laura thought it better not to respond. Instead, she allowed Kristen to continue as they took a couple of steps to the left, closer to the wall: “I haven’t eaten anything today. Are you hungry?” Kristen was looking at the painting on the wall as she spoke, her tone apologetic.

Laura chose to let go of her confusion about Kristen’s actions, at least for the moment. “I could eat,” she said. From where Laura stood, she could see into the main gallery, where she kept her attention to see if Joshua would follow them. When she turned
her eyes back to Kristen, her friend winked, telling Laura that she knew where her attention had been.

“Looks like you are feeling better about the break up?” Kristen teased, sounding smug.

“What? I’m just talking to a guy. You know, being polite?” Even Laura knew her words sounded false.

“Sure. Polite. We should ask him if he wants to come and sit down with us,” Kristen said, looking around the room.

“His name is Joshua, by the way,” Laura said, looking for him as well. Neither of them saw him at first as they both turned in a circle to search the gallery. He had been there just a moment ago.

“So you know his name.” And he came back into the room at the far end, as if he knew they were speaking of him.

“What did you expect me to do when you ran off like a crazy matchmaker and left me all alone with him?” And when she was done speaking, she felt foolish so she continued: “Honestly? I don’t know what this is, but he’s the first guy to even catch my attention since…well, it’s kind of fun, that we probably won’t ever see each other again.”

“Says who?” At that, Kristen spun on the ball of her foot and walked back towards where Joshua stood pretending like he was not watching them.

Laura ignored, for as long as she could, the urge to go over and see what Kristen was going to say to him. Instead, she felt like the canvas in front of her caught her attention enough and deserved a closer look. The details were amazing; she followed the curved line etched on the man’s left palm which took up such a small portion of the portrait of this
farmer. Just that curve deserved all of her attention. It was a curve that spoke of hard work and times, when the food he needed to feed his family had required a battle against the earth. This was a man not expecting anything or used to convenience; he fought for all he had.

Kevin’s hands had not looked like these, but years of playing guitar had left him with calluses. Laura found herself wondering, however, about how Joshua’s hands might compare to this farmer’s or to Kevin’s. Looking down at her own hands, she was saddened by the bareness of her ring finger. She shivered once and then tried to force her attention to the rest of the painting. That farmer had done so much work and deserved more of her attention.

Joshua’s hand came down on her shoulder a few seconds later. “Your friend invited me along to get something to eat in the café. That all right with you?”

She turned to face him. “Definitely.”

On their way toward the café on the other side of the museum, Laura and Joshua walked together, several steps behind Kristen. They crossed through the gallery of German art. Laura stopped walking when she saw an old writing desk off to their right. With its square base and gilt figures that supported the circular upper portion when the writing surface was lowered, Laura could see herself penning letters to long lost friends, rekindling relationships. Connecting more to her daydream than to the actual artifact, Laura stepped in for a closer look.

She saw herself sitting at that desk, with the top open to reveal all the shelves and drawers. And there were the hidden drawers she would use to hide all the small scraps of her life that accumulated in her pockets and handbag. It would give her some place to work
instead of on her bed or spread out on the dining room floor where she had laid out an area rug the color of red wine.

“What are you thinking about?” Joshua asked her.

The desire to touch him as they talked kept her from responding right away. Kristen joined the conversation: “Aren’t we going to eat?”
Chapter Ten – Kristen

For a couple of days after they got back to town, they pretended like there was nothing important going on. He stayed the night but stayed on his side of the bed. Which was fine with her, but she did notice.

Under the down comforter, a deep maroon in the light, Kristen lay on her side, wide awake even though she had been in bed for hours.

She felt too old to be in this position, accidentally pregnant. Bored and still not anywhere close to sleep, she threw her legs over the side of the bed and sat up.

“You okay?” Tyler asked, rolling over still half asleep.

“Yea, just need some water,” she said, pushing herself off the bed. She knew she was not coming back to bed even as she said it and took the throw blanket off the foot of the bed as she left the bedroom.

That night she had a dream as she slept on the couch in the living room, and she woke up sweating.

When they were six, Kristen and Laura liked best to play under the sweeping branches of the old pine trees at the back of Laura’s yard. The bed of dried pine needles felt almost soft beneath their bare legs in the summer, as long as they didn’t make any sudden movements in the wrong direction.

Even though she was wrapped up in the complex game they had been playing, making up systems of fairies and elves that lived on the various branches that looked like
steps heading towards the top of the tree, where the star would go at Christmastime, Kristen agreed when Laura wanted to play something else.

So they climbed out from under the branches and ran across the yard to sit on the weathered wooden planks Laura’s dad had turned into swings. They raced each other, to see who could get highest in the sky and how fast. The rush in Kristen’s stomach kept telling her that if she could just pump her legs a little bit harder or faster, she could swing all the way around the top bar of the swing set, completing a full circle. But she just couldn’t kick that one more time.

Instead, she let go of the ropes at the swing’s highest arch and jumped. She flew through the air for a moment to land softly on her feet. She turned around to see Laura copy her action, wings sprouting from the shoulder blades of her pink and white striped shirt. Laughing, Kristen start to ask her where all those feathers came from, but she ran off and ducked into the shed they sometimes used as a playhouse.

“Let’s play house,” Laura called back to Kristen as she disappeared into the shed. Kristen looked up at the sky, the clouds shaped like circus animals—a lion and elephant, then ran to catch up. She didn’t want to go inside, where she knew it would be dark. She wanted to stay out in the sun where it was warm, watching the circus unfold against the sky.

But she followed her friend anyway. Stepping through the doorway, she traveled time. Kristen was in her apartment, only she was still small. Seven, maybe eight, thinking she would find Laura wanting to play grown-ups in the kitchen or the bathroom. She checked room after room, but Laura wasn’t behind the couch in the living room, buried under the coats in the closet, wrapped in the shower curtain, or tucked into the space between the fridge and the counter. She wasn’t under the bed or in the cedar chest in the alcove. Only
the guest room was left to be searched, but the door was closed and locked. Kristen knocked and waited, knowing Laura couldn’t be in there. She wouldn’t cheat, locking herself in a room and then hiding.

Tyler answered the door. And she was still seven. He didn’t recognize her at first; she saw the confusion in his eyes. He had a white cloth over one shoulder, and she did not understand what it was.

Then he realized it was Kristen standing at the door. He stepped back into the room but left the door open for her to follow him inside. Instead of the pull-out sofa and the desk she had chosen for the room, she found herself in a nursery decorated in light purples and greens. The wallpaper had a tiny little checker pattern, and the shelves along the walls were covered with stuffed animals and tiny clothes.

“Where am I?” young Kristen asked. The Kristen that was dreaming knew the answer but still felt the same confusion as young Kristen.

“Are you kidding? Could you help me out?” Tyler said, clearly mad, though the Kristen in her dream did not know this man, why he was so angry with her.

“This is your son, too. Stop messing around and help me take care of this kid!”

And he got so angry with her. She started crying in her dream. “I don’t want to play house.” Her voice was so small, she almost didn’t hear herself.

“Who’s playing?” he asked, picking up the baby and thrusting him at her. And the baby’s name was Tate. He was beautiful, and he had Kristen’s eyes.

She drove herself to the doctor’s office; Tyler did not know where she was going when she had left his apartment. Just after he told her the decision was hers, he had stopped
asking her about what she did during the day, why she got up early and left before he was awake. And because he didn’t ask, Kristen didn’t tell him.

She showed up at his place without warning to ask him a single question: “So you are okay with this?”

“With what?” he asked.

“Not having it,” she said, picking at the crusts of her sandwich. She stayed for dinner, but neither of them wanted to cook. So they settled for whatever they could find in the fridge. She had not been eating very much anyway.

“So we aren’t having it?” He did not look at her. And he continued before she could come up with anything to say: “You know what? I don’t want to know. Whatever you decide.”

“Don’t you think that is pretty cowardly?” she asked, getting mad. “We got into this situation together, but you’re putting off all responsibility on me to make a decision.”

“What do you want me to do? I’m not going to tell you that this is what I wanted. But how am I going to say, yeah, I think we should kill a baby? Our baby?”

“Right. Because that’s an easy thing for me to say. You ass.” She pushed back from the table and walked into the living room to gather her things. Tyler followed her into the room and convinced her to stay, to sit down on the couch with him. She drew a blanket over her legs and closed her eyes once she was settled.

“So there goes us discussing this whole thing maturely.”

“I guess so.” He sat down on the other end of the couch. She felt the couch shift with his weight as he sat. “Stay over there,” she told him.
“I can’t say that I want to be all that close to you right now either,” he said. He wasn’t looking at her when she opened her eyes. He was staring down into his lap where he had his hands folded.

“Then why won’t you just let me leave?” But she wasn’t going to lie to herself. Kristen didn’t really want him to go. Mostly just because she didn’t want to be alone, but also because for whatever it was worth, they were in this together.

“Whatever else, we are in this together, Kristen,” he said, looking down at his palms as he stretched his fingers.

Neither of them spoke for a long time. She watched him reach into his pocket, saw him take out the small box covered in black velvet. “I know you don’t want this, but I bought it for you anyway,” he said, placing it on the coffee table. “When I thought you might change your mind.”

“You don’t want to get married,” was all she could think of to say. She knew exactly what was in that box. He had probably even gotten the exact ring she wanted too.

“Well, whatever I feel, I know how you feel. But you should just keep this anyway.”

“You can’t afford it,” she said, gesturing for him to take the box back. Kristen didn’t want to touch it.

“I didn’t buy it. I asked my parents for the money.”

She couldn’t have a child with this man, who constantly asked his parents to bail him out. She would have laughed if the whole thing weren’t so sad, so serious.

“Thanks,” she said, taking the box from the table. It was easier than fighting; she would try to get him to take it back later.

“You’re welcome,” he said, then got up off the couch and left the room.
She sat, turning the box over in her hands, feeling the texture of the velvet as it changed with the friction of her fingers. She flipped the lid open, and the diamond shining back at her was set in the exact ring she wanted, oval-cut with a delicate gold band. Disappointed that this was the moment she received the exact right ring, she snapped the box closed and went into his bedroom to stuff it into the drawer he had emptied out for some of her things. Because isn’t that what people do with the prettiest of things? Shut them up in boxes and hide them away.

She ended up standing naked in front of the mirror after Tyler left. He had not seemed to mind when she hadn’t asked him where he was going in the middle of the night leaving her alone at his place, when she had not tried to stop him from leaving, so she assumed from his departure than he needed the break just as much as she did. They hadn’t been able to talk about anything else, but they had run out of new things to say. So mostly they sat in silence—him staring at her belly, her staring out the window, at the ceiling, at the television—or they argued. The same argument can only last so long before all the things she knows she should never have said got said.

As she stripped off her clothes, dropped them in a pile on the floor, she hoped this exercise in self-examination might help her see what was supposed to happen inside her body next. If she could see the baby, even just the lump that suggested a baby, she might finally know what to do. She couldn’t do it clothed; just the waist of her jeans, the folds at the bottom of her tee-shirt were enough to conceal the extra weight at this point, so early on.

Not for too much longer, she thought, as she unbuttoned her pants. And there it was. The gentle swell of it.
In that moment, she felt what she assumed to be the response to being someone’s mother. More modest than usual. Since her hair was long enough, she divided it into two halves and pulled one over each shoulder, covering her breasts. But her baby still hung out.

She put her hands, very deliberately, on either side of her belly button. She didn’t feel any different, at least not in any way she could physically touch.

She left the clothes she had been wearing crumpled on the floor and dug through Kevin’s bureau for something clean to wear. The edge of a forest green sleeve caught her attention, and Kristen pulled on it to discover a tee-shirt commemorating a state championship of her high school football team. She wondered when the shirt had gotten mixed up with his clothes, but then it started to make sense. She wanted to go home.

Dressed, she picked up her phone from the bedspread and hit the fourth speed dial.

One emergency. Two Mom. Three Tyler. Four Laura. But Laura did not answer.

“Hey, you’ve reached Laura. Sorry to miss your call, but leave a message and I’ll get back to you as soon as I can.”

Kristen hung up before the beep.

She drove herself to the appointment even though the nurse who had called to confirm suggested that she have someone drive her. She didn’t want Tyler with her beforehand. She didn’t want to him to know, not to save him from the guilt, but because this was happening inside of her and it felt so far removed from him, from their relationship.

And she knew she would hold it against him for the rest of her life, that he had not demanded to come along. That he had left her to deal with this alone. Because he would
have come if she asked him to, but she did not think she should have to ask when this was a consequence of their combined actions, not something she had done to herself.

She gave the nurse at the reception desk her name and sat down next to a pregnant woman sitting with her husband. They might not be married, but she seemed like the type of woman who would never make a mistake that would leave her pregnant before she planned to be. Kristen pretended to admire the highlights in her hair and not to stare at her belly, which was swollen to the size of a basketball.

Sitting there next to a woman who might be due tomorrow, waiting for her name to be called, to be taken back into the private recesses of the clinic, she was still not sure she was going to go through with this. She had to force her hands to her sides instead of resting them over her belly for added protection. She remembered how she told the nurse no, at that first doctor’s appointment, when the woman asked if she wanted to listen to the baby’s heartbeat. Its rhythm would match hers and then she would never be able to…

Which was where she forced herself to stop thinking. Instead, she focused on the light blue paint on the walls, which was starting to chip near the ceiling. And the year-old magazines on the coffee table in front of her. The address label had been torn off; someone brought these from home. First she’d have to meet with a therapist who will check her mental state, who would make sure she was certain about the decision she was making. Then there was the possibility of having the procedure done this same day.

“Kristen?” The nurse called from the left. And she stood, glancing right, towards the exit.
Chapter Eleven – 3:26 p.m.

With his head at this level he almost felt as if he were walking down the painting’s street.

-Dara Horn

The museum never felt more like a maze than when Laura walked beside Joshua as they followed behind Kristen on the way to the café. To avoid being distracted again, Laura ignored the art on the walls so that she did not see anything she wanted to spend time with. Even though all of her attention was focused on navigating around the false walls and display cases, Laura still felt like she was becoming horribly lost.

He was standing right next to her; she could smell his soap without even having to turn her head. He wasn’t standing close enough for her to feel the heat of his body, but she knew he would be warm if she were any closer. Taking a deep breath, she told herself to calm down. There was nothing to be nervous about. He was just a good-smelling, attractive man.

Instead of sneaking all kinds of sideways glances, Laura found herself imagining the scene that must have played out between Joshua and Kristen to lead to this moment. Kristen was far from shy; she had approached Joshua as if she were the museum’s owner or as familiar with him as his little sister’s best friend. Laura was certain he was at least a few years older than Kristen and her. Kristen opens conversations with a joke; perhaps even going as far as to purposely bump into him again and accusing him of being unable to stay away. She would have commented on the art he was looking at, turning it into something sexually suggestive no matter the subject. He would laugh, they always did, and then she
would ask him if he wanted to take two lovely girls to lunch. After he agreed, as they always did, she would tell him her name.

They had come over to where Laura was standing, and he smiled not at Kristen but at Laura the majority of the time they stood under a concrete overhang near the edge of the galleries. Kristen held out a hand for the headset Laura had stopped using, to turn it back in. Joshua and Laura just stood smiling at one another while she dealt with the museum worker.

When she was done, the floor began a light incline as they walked the hallway back toward the reception hall and the ticket counter. Laura tripped over the difference in the floor.

So self-conscious, she thought. She forced her breathing to deepen and slow, then laughed at her own lack of balance. Who was this guy that he was doing this to her? On this day when she should have been, and halfway was, wrapped up in her memories with Kevin. Joshua had reached out an arm to her when she staggered; Laura found herself wishing, for just a heartbeat, that they had not found him in time for him to join them for lunch. His presence was beginning to make things complicated. All she wanted was a sandwich and some time with her friend when they could finally talk about something other than art. Museums too easily mask the real conversations that should occur between friends, in washes of color and light and beautiful history.

“I could stay here and look out these windows all day,” Joshua said to her, stopping to lean against one of the white pillars that divided the wall into little alcoves. Laura wanted to stop, stand there with him, but instead, after slowing her step for just a moment, she continued to follow her friend down the long white hallway, blue sky full of clouds off to the left.
“Three? Follow me please,” the hostess said from behind her podium. She took three menus from the box hanging on the wall, and her ponytail bounced as she turned to lead the way to the table. Because it was late in the afternoon, the lunch crowd had already cleared, but it was just a little too early for dinner. There were no other occupied tables.

The hostess offered to seat them by the windows. Laura took a seat so that she could have a clear view of the water. Kristen sat next to her; Joshua had no choice but to sit across the table. Where Laura could look at him throughout the meal.

As she avoided staring at Joshua, she noticed the air quality had changed. Instead of the recycled air that filled the galleries, the air was fresh with some of the windows across the room propped open. Food smells, also, traced their way through the air from the kitchen, bread backed fresh, the sweet scent of fruit. She really was hungry.

Kristen and Joshua did most of the talking while they waited for a waitress. Small personal details, mostly hometowns and favorite sports teams. Laura listened, pretending to be watching out the window but she was actually watching Joshua as he spoke to her friend. Several times, Laura had to catch herself before she rolled her eyes; she knew that Kristen did not enjoy football as she claimed to and that she considered professional sporting events little more than an excuse to spend six dollars on the smallest cup of beer she could find. Laura was quiet, allowing Kristen to speak for her as she glanced down at the menu.

The waitress appeared with a tray of full water glasses. After they had ordered, Kristen stood up and announced over her shoulder that she was going to the bathroom as she darted between the tables.
After Kristen was gone, Laura looked across the table, meeting Joshua’s eyes for a moment before either of them said anything.

“Are you uncomfortable? Should I go?” he asked. He shared Kristen’s tendency for bluntness.

After thinking about his question a moment, she decided to be completely honest. “I’m slightly uncomfortable, but I don’t want you to go. If for no other reason than Kristen would kill me if you were gone when she gets back.”

“I hope that isn’t the only reason,” he said, leaning in towards her. She understood his meaning.

“It’s not.” His presence certainly shook her up, but Laura was pretty sure she liked it.

“Okay. So comfortable topics. What do you do?”

Laura laughed at the thought of her job being a comfortable topic. “I write obituaries, actually.”

After the initial shock, the expected reaction, Joshua asked: “How does one begin a career in obituaries?” He pulled his napkin across his lap as he spoke. Laura watched his hands as they moved across his body.

“Good question. Usually, the first thing people ask is what I would write about them. Even people I’ve just met and don’t know anything about.”

“What do you tell them?”

“Depends. Sometimes I’ll play the game, when I’ve been drinking or have really nice things to say. Mostly, I just explain about how we get these files and dig through the information we have, selecting what seem to be the most important details. Or we get lists of details from family members or some form of special instruction.” Laura toyed with the
silverware set at her place, running her fingers over the tines of the fork, testing the sharpness of the ridges on the butter knife.

“Well, I’m not going to ask what you would write about me. First because I don’t want to be typical. Second because I don’t want to know how I die. I do hope, though, that you’d have nice things to say about me.”

Laura just smiled, unsure how to respond and still feel flirtatious. Talking about work did that to her. A small group of seagulls hovered just outside the window behind Joshua’s head, popping up and down in their search for food. The view from Laura’s seat looked to the southwest, showcasing both the lake and also the grassy spaces where she and Kristen had walked earlier.

“Miss me?” Kristen asked as she slid back into her seat at Laura’s left.

“Of course,” Laura responded, turning back to the menu.

“Liar.” Kristen’s voice was low, but when Laura looked across the table at Joshua, he was smiling.

“So you guys been friends a long time?” Joshua asked when the conversation stopped.

“Since we were kids. I broke Laura’s nose.”

“Really?” he asked.

Laura just shook her head, laughing as the waitress stepped up to the side of their table. “Blood strengthens bonds,” she said.

After ordering, Kristen asked Joshua about his sketchpad. “Oh, and can we call you Josh?”
He nodded, picking up his sketchpad from the seat next to his. “I actually paint, mostly,” he said, “but today I’m drawing.”

“What are you drawing?” Kristen asked, as he started flipping the pages.

“Things that interest me,” he said, opening the book all the way and showing Kristen one of the pages. Laura could not see what he showed her and pretended like she didn’t care.

While she was looking away, playing with the napkin in her lap, Kristen kicked her in the leg. Laura looked up, saw that Kristen had done so on purpose and was about to say something when she saw that Joshua was holding his drawing for her to look at. In the top corner of the page was a quick sketch of the “The Kiss,” but the majority of the bottom of the page was a picture of her. Laura stared at herself on the page and could not help but smile.

What should she say?

Before she thought of anything, Joshua turned the page and showed Kristen some of the other sketches he had made earlier in the day. His attention kept coming back to Laura, however.

“These are really great,” Kristen said, her tone wistful. Thankful that Kristen was keeping up the conversation, Laura tried to understand not only what she was going to say in response but what she felt in response to the picture. She had understood that he was interested in her. But somehow the reality of it was just starting to sink in. She was here at this museum, this place she was accustomed to shared with Kevin, flirting with this man, this artist who had drawn her picture. She knew it was foolish, but she felt like she should be focused on their memories at that moment instead of making these new ones. Because the other part of her did know that this was a moment she was not going to forget, with Kristen talking in the background and Joshua’s eyes on hers.
Midway through their meal, Kristen stopped talking which brought the entire conversation nearly to a halt. Everything Laura wanted to say would only have been appropriate for one of her two companions. Instead of speaking, she focused her attention on her diet Coke and the turkey falling out of her sandwich.

Joshua probably felt the same way, having things he wanted to say, but maybe only to Laura. And she was thinking too much. Looking out the window seemed to be her only reprieve from her own frantic thoughts. But she had to look over Joshua to see, and the edges of him kept distracting her attention.

“I’m working on a series of abstracts right now,” Joshua said. When he spoke, Laura nearly dropped her fork. Then there was only silence filled by the sounds Kristen was making with her silverware scraping against her plate.

Laura broke her silence: “Where do you start when you’re painting an abstract?”

“I don’t assume to speak for anyone other than myself when I say this, but I start with something small that I know is going to be right. Does that make sense?” He leaned forward towards her slowly as he spoke.

“It is starting to,” she said, glancing at Kristen. Her friend did not look at her or even smile; instead, she continued to stare down at her plate.

“So what are you painting about?” Laura asked, wiping her fingers on her napkin as she finished her sandwich.
“I’m not really sure why, but this year a lot has changed about the way I have been seeing the world. Like it has broken down into littler pieces. Everything just looks different.”

“I think I know what you mean.” Even though Laura could pinpoint the moments that had changed the way she looked at the world, she knew. Kevin’s face was close to the surface. “Sometimes things can happen that make everything else different than it was before.” Joshua nodded at her words. At Laura’s side, Kristen stood suddenly, pushing her chair back from the table.

“Is something…” Laura’s words were cut off as Kristen stepped back from the table.

“I need to make a phone call,” Kristen called back over her shoulder as she darted between the rows of empty tables, set with full dish services just waiting for someone to come along and take the stem of the water glass between their fingers.

“Did she sound upset to you?” Joshua asked. She had, but Laura decided she might want a moment alone, to cry of make the phone call she spoke of. Or had she already been crying as she left? Laura didn’t know if Kristen expected her to follow, and the selfish part of her did not want to leave the table, where Joshua was.

Laura and Joshua were not speaking, but even in silence, too much time had passed for Laura to be able to say she had run after Kristen immediately. Where Kristen had always expected people to take notice of her and pay attention, Laura preferred to remain in the background. If there was going to be an emotional fallout, she wanted to miss the worst of it. Which made her feel like a terrible friend.
Joshua had his attention focused on the space Kristen had disappeared into, as if waiting for her return at any moment. When she did not come back, he faced Laura.

“Well, she certainly isn’t shy about her feelings,” he said, an easy tone wrapped loosely around his words. He meant to lighten the mood, Laura understood, but when she tried to respond in kind, nothing came to mind. She should have gone after Kristen right away. She had taken too much time to think instead of just reacting the way she should have.

“I’ll be right back,” Laura said as she rose, laying her napkin across the seat of her chair.

“No problem,” Joshua said, but she was already halfway across the room and only half sure she had heard him speak at all.

Laura did not find Kristen out in the hallway connecting the café to the museum. She started moving a little faster, trying to think of the possible places Kristen might go. Then she saw the bathroom door with its little skirted figure.

The first two stalls were empty, but the toes sticking out under the brown door of the third were familiar. When knocking yielded no response, Laura stepped back to lean against the cream and black tiles on the wall. She slid down to sit on the cold floor facing Kristen’s stall.

“You all right?” she asked Kristen, whose feet did not move. When Kristen did not respond, Laura continued, hoping some humor would get a response: “What is going on with us today? We must be scaring the crap out of this guy we forced into having lunch with us.”

“We didn’t force him,” Kristen said, wiggling her deep red toenails.
At least she’s talking about something. “The way things are going, that’s how he’ll tell the story to his friends.”

“Maybe. Or he’d just tell them about the two beautiful girls he met and spent the afternoon with.”

“And about how smart we are, naturally.”

“Naturally.”

Kristen was still behind the door while Laura tapped her foot against the floor. “Think you might want to come out here?”

“In a minute,” Kristen said. Laura heard the paper tearing and watched Kristen’s feet shift as she stood.

“Want to tell me what’s going on?” Instead of answering, Kristen flushed the toilet and opened the door. Her eye makeup had been wiped away, the only confirmation of Laura’s suspicion that Kristen had been crying.

“Did you just leave him at the table?” Kristen asked.

“Was I supposed to bring him with me?”

“You were supposed to stay with him and have a conversation. Why the heck else do you think I would go running from the room?”

Laura stood and turned to face herself in the mirror. She ran her fingers through her hair while watching Kristen’s reflection as she took out an eyeliner and shadow. Whatever had caused the outburst, Kristen did not want to give her a straight answer about what was going on; there was little she could do but wait. This would get heavier before it would get better, she knew, as she watched Kristen draw a perfect line of brown at the edge where her
lid met her lashes. She then smudged the line with the tip of her ring finger. “Go back,” Kristen said, starting her other eye. Laura left without another word.

As she crossed through the café back to their table under the window, the waitress was just finishing clearing their dishes. Joshua was gone from the table.

She had planned exactly what she would say to him when she returned. And she was more disappointed not to be able to use her line than anything else. She was not exactly surprised he had excused himself from their meal together. After having met them only that day, Laura knew he probably thought they were borderline crazy. He was under no obligation to stick around and talk things out; just because he had been reminding her of Kevin all day did not mean that he had a role to fulfill. She should not have been surprised that he was gone.

But she was.

Facing the windows again, Laura was having trouble focusing her attention enough to look out of the glass. Instead, her thoughts played out against a blurred backdrop of blue sky, white cloud, and the occasional streak of the seagulls, still pecking to get their share of discarded food.

And she had not realized until she sat down by herself that her feet hurt so much from all the walking they had done. Slipping her feet from her shoes, Laura sat up straighter in her chair to stretch her back while arching her feet at the same time. She stretched her arms out in front of her as Kristen spoke from behind her: “The waitress said our gentleman paid and asked her to give us his apologies for rushing off.”
“Okay. Let’s get out of here then,” Laura said, putting her feet back into her shoes and standing.

“And he gave her this. For you.” Kristen handed Laura a folded piece of paper, which she stuck in her pocket.

“Back to the art,” Kristen said.

“I can’t believe he paid for all that.” Laura followed Kristen through the lines of tables towards the glass doors.

“I can’t believe they took my salad. I wasn’t done yet, and it was delicious!”

Laura laughed: “That’s what you get for running away from the table.”

The Holbrook Gallery showcased 20th century design with surrealistic influences. At least, that is what the sign just inside the doorway explained as Laura read it. She had very little interest in the art in this room; most of it just looked like uncomfortable furniture to her. She certainly would not want to sit on it.

The shelves built into the far wall were encased in glass and started at Laura’s hip level. The most interesting piece Laura saw as she got closer to the case was a lamp by Tiffany’s. The base was a bouquet of lily pads, and the seven individual lights hung from the stand like flowers from vines.

“Laura!” Kristen called from the other end of the room. As she crossed the room toward her friend, Laura was thankful the museum’s other visitors did not seem to mind the interruption. There were only a few other people in the gallery, and none of them seemed to care about the way Kristen’s voice carried across the space between them.

“Look at this,” Kristen said when Laura stepped up next to her.
There was a row of chairs that snaked along the wall on individual platforms raised to various levels. The two Kristen stood in front of were designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. Laura knew very little about the famous architect, but she feigned interest for Kristen’s sake. The longer they stood there, however, the more Laura was feeling ready to leave the museum. Her emotions were too heavy for her to carry around, which made her feel worse. Constantly needing to interpret and react to the various art objects that surrounded her was also asking for her attention.

“Upstairs or down?” Kristen asked, turning to walk away from the chairs. They had passed the stairs on their way into the gallery. Laura just followed, deciding it was her attitude that was causing her annoyance.

“Down,” she said, determined to make the most out of the rest of the time she had to spend with Kristen.

Something important was wrong with Kristen, but their conversations were circling the art instead of the problem. Until Laura ran out of things to say and the energy to pretend that she hadn’t. And she wasn’t interested in the rooms full of old dishes and clothing they found at the bottom of the stairs.

She didn’t want to talk about art anymore. And the piece of paper in her pocket, the scrap from Joshua, had her distracted. Kristen had asked about it, but Laura still had not unfolded the crease to see what he had given to her as what she assumed was his good-bye. The privileged information left her feeling like a spy, carrying top-secret information, for her eyes only.
Though they had stopped talking, Laura followed Kristen into a room with red walls. More interested in remembering the wall color to take home and apply in her own apartment than in anything room contained, Laura settled on the bench just inside the door. Kristen was on the other side of the room when Laura reached into her pocket.

She held the paper in both of her hands for a moment, just running her fingers along the edges. She didn’t want to open it, in case he really had said good-bye inside.

He had followed her all day like a ghost, just a step ahead or behind, on the other side of the next wall. Her awareness of him was as much about him as it was about the way the best pieces of Kevin seemed to be hanging over his shoulder, lighting up the shades of his face until they matched the Kevin in her memories.

Laura still had her engagement ring in its little box, buried under all of the tee-shirts she never wore but kept in the bottom drawer of her dresser.

She opened the folded paper with closed eyes. Then ran her fingertips over the surface, like she would be able to read without looking at the page. Laura watched Kristen on the other side of the room for a minute then looked down.

He had drawn her a picture of a girl’s face with a small figure in the distance. She had been studying the lines and shades of the girl’s features for several moments before she realized she was staring at herself. He had drawn a little arrow to the figure over her shoulder from the word “me.” The digits of a telephone number lay along the edge of the page, small enough for her to miss at first.

Laura smiled as she stood and slid the piece of paper into her bag.
Standing, she saw a vague reflection of herself in the three-hundred year old mirror centered on the wall across from her. The glass was so cloudy she could not make out the distinct features of her face. But she had Joshua’s drawing for that.

The decoration around the glass was a scene with dragons and cherry blossoms, but the haze on the surface is what kept her looking. As if the surface had so many secrets there was no choice but to hide them behind the smoke. Only impressions of what was real were available. “How long does it take glass to go hazy like this?” Kristen asked.

Laura shrugged, reading the sign hung on the wall next to the exit.

“A sign can be many different things—a poster, a gesture, an omen, a mark. Yet every sign is a condensed form of communication, a kind of coded message. The artifacts in this room speak a sign language that all of us can understand: they bristle with information about the past. These artifacts immortalize identity, ownership, allegiances, and intentions. Most importantly, they show us that people of all types—wealthy and poor, black and white, urban and rural—left their mark in some way. When these signs survive, they make a direct connection between our own experiences and those of the past.”
Laura sat by herself in the circle of chairs arranged under the steps. She felt buried by the weight of the museum that sprawled around and above her, the heft of the history and the art collected there and rising three stories high starting right where she was. Kristen had left her sitting while she went on to investigate the other rooms on that floor. The empty chairs in her circle were serviceable replicas of the ones she had been seeing throughout the day in various galleries in the museum. The sign instructed her to sit a moment in each, to test the level of comfort each era and style had to offer her.

The one she had chosen was orange plastic and folded in curves instead of angles. She was slouched down into it, not surprised that the hard material was far less comfortable than it looked. But she did not get up, to test the next.

Kristen had not asked Laura to come explore with her.

“Do you think those bears are going to eat those people?” Laura heard the boy’s voice as she followed Kristen up the stairs. Ducking her head over the railing and craning her neck to look down into the gallery, Laura saw a boy of ten or eleven with his grandmother standing in front of a landscape on the wall. From her vantage point, Laura could not see the bears or the people, but she smiled at the boy’s questions. What euphemisms would she use for someone who had been eaten by a bear in an obit? She turned to share the joke with Kristen, but her friend was gone. She probably would not have thought it was funny anyway.

“Of course,” she heard the grandmother say as she climbed the rest of the stairs.
Martin Puryear’s “Maroon” looked like a giant kidney bean. Constructed of steel, wire mesh, wood and tar, the surface was bumpy and had been painted black. The structure lay on the floor and was several feet taller than Laura herself. Cut out of the top was what looked like the value of an oversized heart, covered with plywood that had a square punched out of its center. Was it supposed to be a heart or was Laura just preoccupied with her own situation?

She had not even noticed that Kristen was just on the other side of the structure until Kristen stepped around it and they were face to face.

Laura was done with the museum. She did not want to see anymore of the galleries, did not care anymore whether or not they made it through all forty-four rooms Kristen had counted out on the map earlier. She opened her mouth to suggest they call it a day when Kristen cut her off: “Strange that he didn’t stick around long enough to say good-bye.”

It took Laura a moment to understand who Kristen was referring to. “Not really,” Laura said. “It was not like he deserted us here. He probably had somewhere to be or else thinks we are crazy.”

“Why would he think that?” Kristen stepped back, towards the top of the stairs without looking. Only inches from the ledge, she not only almost fell, but she stepped directly into the path of an elderly man who had just reached the landing. Laura pulled on Kristen’s arm; she was completely unaware of the accident she had almost caused.

“Well, we’re both running around in here, breaking down in public. That’s a little strange to someone you’ve just met.”

“Breaking down? I didn’t…”
“What else do you call running out of a meal like you did?” Kristen’s stance had taken a defensive edge, which told Laura she should watch her words carefully, but she was beyond caring. She knew there was something big going on under Kristen’s surface, and she wanted to know exactly what it was.

“Keeping a man on his toes.” Kristen’s answer was such a ridiculous cliché that Laura let the subject drop. Kristen was not ready to come out of hiding just yet.

“Blown glass is so beautiful,” Laura said, looking down the row of display cases to the left of the stairwell. The smoothness of surfaces begged Laura to reach through the plate glass and run her fingers over the curves and dips. She loved the way the colors blended and faded into the clearness of the glass, making every inch unique in both its color and clarity. There was something soothing to Laura about looking at the world through vessels made of colored glass.

“Can you believe there is a process that turns sand into this?” Kristen said, point to the large pink shell of a bowl that held nearly a dozen smaller, similarly colored glass balls. Each ball was a different shade, striped with varying consistencies of color and light. There were places of pink so light, they were nearly white, and ones so dark they were red.

“Heat. Time. Skill,” Laura said; she could practically feel the coolness against her palm. The pinks were so pretty, so numerous, she stayed to look longer when Kristen moved down the line. She loved all the glass, but this was the one that demanded her attention even though she was ready to leave.

“Hey, come look at this,” Kristen called from several cases away.
‘What?’ Laura pulled her attention away from the pieces. Her gaze slid over the railing, and she peered down into the contemporary galleries for a moment. Just turning the corner, she saw a quick glimpse of a green sleeve she recognized. He had not left. Laura moved toward where Kristen stood.

“Aren’t they beautiful?” They were lines of glass bundled together at the bottom, like a bouquet of flowers. Instead of rounded stems, however, these had sharp edges and corners. There were no blossoms; these flowers instead bloomed in the center of their stems in lines of orange. “Lemon/Red Crown” by Harvey K. Littleton blended the two colors it was named for into a rich balance that shot through the transparent glass casing as if it were still fluid.

“Sometimes I wonder if everyone has as much trouble coming up with the right words as I do,” Laura said, still visually following the curves of the stems.

“It’s because you know so many words,” Kristen said, stepping away from the case, away from Laura.

She had always felt tricked by the different between modern and contemporary art. Laura followed behind Kristen in the room full of political art from the Vietnam era. She stood in one place while Kristen bounced from one anti-war statement to the next.

And then they turned the corner. Kristen went off to the left while Laura drifted along the wall to the right. Three photographs from a series called “Sihuta Works in Mexico” hung in their row along the wall; each framed the outline of a human form prone on the ground, mapped out in a silhouette of natural materials. One was rocks against the background of sand. Two were flowers creating the body posed in different ways against grass. The most intriguing of the three was in the middle, the one that looked as if the
flowers had discovered a body in a shallow grave and chosen that particular spot to grow, to show their respect for the dead.

Ana Meondieta, that artist, called these her “earth-body sculptures.” She had used material she could have found in nature to leave her body’s impression on the landscape. Even as she focused on the pictures, Laura recognized that someone had come up behind her, was looking over her shoulder. She turned to move out of the way and came face to shoulder with the green of Joshua’s tee shirt.

“The best part of those is the balance she struck between cool and creepy,” he said, gesturing at the wall now behind Laura. The bodies were arranged to resemble the chalk outlines the police used to mark the murder scenes on t.v.

“Certainly both of those. One and then the other; I’m still not sure which wins out, though,” Laura said, looking at his face as she spoke. She had thought him handsome from the first time she saw him, smiling to himself in the admission line, but she had spent much of the day since then too embarrassed to look into his face.

“No reason either has to win over the other right away,” he said, smiling at her. The way his eyes trained over her shoulder had her turning back to the pictures. The purple blooming flowers outlined the silhouette in the center picture. Laura saw the artist, a faceless woman with black hair that hung all the way down her back, laying down on the ground and using sticks and stones to mark the outline of her body. After standing, she planted seeds, and stood in the stillness, the wind blowing her hair around her in waves, waving for the flowers to spring up from the earth. Or she had filled the trunk of her car with potted flowers to transport to the remote spot where the picture was staged. Either way seemed poetic to Laura as she studied the picture and stood with Joshua.
When she looked back at him, however, he was watching her instead.

And when his gaze lasted long enough to make her uncomfortable, she asked

“What?”

He just smiled: “I’ve kind of already staged my good-bye. There’s not too much left to say.”

“Oh” was all she could come up with in response.

“I’m pretty much just waiting to see if this girl will call,” he said, stepping to his left, around a slight corner.

It occurred to Laura as she followed him that other people, seeing her with Joshua, would think he was her boyfriend.

Sketchbook tucked behind his back, he had stopped in front of Joseph Kosulth’s undertaking to capture the essence of an object in various stages. The display was three parts: far left, a picture of a hammer, center, an actual hammer, far right, a scrap of paper upon which was written the definition of the word hammer: “A hand tool that has a handle with a perpendicularly attached head of metal or other heavy rigid material, and is used for striking or pounding.”

“From representation to reality to concept. Pretty interesting stuff,” Joshua said, making it clear he spoke to her only by tilting his head just a bit towards her.

“It’s just a hammer,” she said, too tired to continue the superficial art conversation anymore. Instead, she said: “I think you have a pretty good shot with the girl.”

“Good to know.” She thought he might kiss her hand when he held his out to her, but instead, he just squeezed hers when she offered it to him. “Bye,” was all he said, then he let go of her fingers and walked away.
She had given up pretending entirely. When Kristen found her, still in front of the hammer piece, Laura made her excuses: “My brain is just over-stimulated. Too many pretty colors. And shapes. And a lot of not so pretty colors and shapes too.” It was the emotional subtext of the day that had drained her most, however. While she was physically tired, the worst of it was that Laura felt she was supposed to be focused on her memories of Kevin, like she should be more invested in finding out what was going on with Kristen. But she was just ready to be done, to go home and curl up in bed with a book.

“It’s been a pretty long day, hasn’t it?” Kristen asked.

At that moment, Laura realized that she had not thought once about the fact that she might be pregnant since she had revealed the fact to Kristen. Yet she had meant it when she told Joshua she would call. For the first time since she had been with Kevin that last time, there was not a single bit of Laura wished she was actually pregnant. Maybe she would stop at the drug store on her way home, find out with some kind of certainty.

“Between all we’ve seen today and all we’ve discussed, there’s too much to think about all fighting for room in my head,” Laura said, feeling like she was observing herself instead of participating in the conversation. Even as that sentence formed on her tongue, she wished she could hold onto it, instead of sending it out into the air. She was not sure what it meant, what she meant by it.

She watched Kristen shrug one shoulder then execute a quarter turn. Laura stepped out before she could, though, determined, for some reason, that she would not follow Kristen all the way back out of this maze of a museum. She did not want to be the follower anymore.
But Kristen had never been good at being led. Her attention was easily distracted—

something shiny, someone good-looking, someone okay-looking wearing something shiny. Laura should not have been surprised when she looked over her shoulder to see Kristen’s back disappearing into one of the side galleries. She was anyway.

A big part of Laura was tempted to keep going; Kristen could catch up with her at any point on the way or even once she was out of the museum. Because that is what Laura needed at that moment, to be able to stretch out in the open air, wall-less. Her skin felt like it was wrapped around her too tight. Her hair was heavy and hot against her neck and shoulders, even after she pulled it back into a ponytail. Even though she knew the rooms in the museum were kept at a comfortably cool temperature to ensure the art was protected, she wanted the fresh air. She wanted to be able to sit down on the ground and not move for a significant stretch. Her legs were coming close to rebelling against taking another step on the hard concrete. Almost enough to make her wish she were further from home, so she could sit still in the car longer.

Continuing toward the exit, no matter the effect, felt too much like abandoning Kristen, so instead, she turned back to collect her friend. Kristen was not immediately visible when Laura peeked around the corner into the room. She was going to have to actually go in.

The room was neatly divided in two by a wall that Laura assumed Kristen was hidden behind. What she could not decide was if Kristen was hiding herself away or if it was just a coincidence in her over-active imagination and the coincidence that her friend had entered a room and immediately ducked out of sight.

The work of local artists hung on these walls, so a lot of the landscapes and scenes looked familiar to Laura; whether or not she had ever been to these exact places, she had
been to similar ones. Of course, not all of the art was landscape, but the majority had something else, a color or tone or shape, that Laura felt she could recognize. These artists were the people she was surrounded by in her daily life. These were the ones who experienced the world the closest to the same way she did and still managed to experience it so differently, capture it so beautifully.

Here she came across a series of pastels that had her frozen mid-step. Four pastel drawings, one for each of the seasons, hung in a line, depicting the same field, which could have been any Midwestern field, at the height of, in the midst of the most turbulent natural occurrence of each season. But they were out of order.

This is a place where the world unrolls differently. Summer followed by winter by spring then fall. Nothing exciting ever seems to happen here day by day, but this Wisconsin, this corn field in Wisconsin, has its secret and tumultuous trysts, the coming together of the land and the sky. Four moments in a series of rearranged seasons, all the clouds of different colors, shapes, purposes. Hot and cold, summer and winter, find themselves face to face without any buffer, just a few feet of wall space between them instead of a cycle of three months. Thunderheads at summer sunset reflect pink light back down to the earth, on the corn in its growing season. Mostly green in the fields, blowing in the breeze that is growing stronger by the minute. Then the icy blues of winter, the cornrows cover in snow that falls and blows, picked up by the winds to re-fall, thick as fog. But
the bushes just left of the center tell us the sameness of this place, bushes barren now but hiding their green deep in their roots, buried in the earth.

Spring’s cyclone demands a backward step, space of its own, enough to unleash. Eighty percent of the drawing shows the way the winds have build upon one another, woven into a rotating thunderstorm to hide the secret of a funnel inside. A supercell, debris scattered through all the open air, pastel layers so think as to have dimension raised up above the page. And finally, the calm of fall, full of sunlight and fair weather clouds, a reprieve from the intensity of the previous storms. An expansive sky celebrating the beauty of its own ordinariness.

Kristen did not move once as Laura took her time looking at each of the pieces. Instead, she stood several feet back, staring hard at the fall and its cyclone. After watching Kristen for several minutes without her noticing, Laura stepped into the space between her friend and the drawing. Kristen blinked hard, her first reaction a second of anger that flashed in her eyes and then disappeared completely. Her smile was quiet, a small change in the natural curves of her face. She considered speaking, Laura could see, Kristen even got as far as opening her mouth before deciding not to say anything. For a moment at least, not until she came up with something else to say besides her first, instinctive response.

So again, instead of getting personal, Kristen wanted to talk about the art: “They say a lot just by being out of the order we expect.”
“Like what?” Laura tried hard to keep her annoyance from showing. The art was lovely, yes. Under other circumstances, she might have had a lot to say about it. But as it was, she was more concerned with the fact that their day was ending and Kristen was still not letting her in on whatever of her secrets they had been avoiding talking about all day.

“Just that life is made of moment, no necessarily in any logical order, but just the collage of them all mixed together.”

“Interesting.” Laura paused. “And the collage constantly changes, depending on our moods or focus.”

“Exactly.”

They had only moved a few feet. Laura was still watching Kristen, who was still focused on the pastel seasons. She had moved on to the harsh, cold metallic tone of winter.

“Tell me what is going on with you,” Laura said finally. She watched Kristen look quickly to both her right and left. She shook her head; there were several other people wandering through the gallery.

“Soon,” Kristen said. Laura turned and walked away, out of the gallery. She was hoping that Kristen followed, but she did not look back to see.

Laura ignored the art as she passed through the galleries until she found herself standing in the middle of one of the pieces. As she entered the minimalism gallery, she could not understand the reason why the floor should switch colors in the middle of the room like that. Carl Andre’s “144 Pieces of Zinc” was installed on the floor in the center of the gallery, directly between the two entryways on either side of the gallery. The pieces made a twelve
by twelve square of silver laid on top of the marble floor. When she realized she was standing on the art, Laura walked on her tiptoes to the edge of the piece until she had white floor under her feet once again.

On the wall was a sign that explained the artist’s focus on sculpture as place instead of form. Laura read that the artist wanted to “invite viewers to occupy the work’s space by walking on it, thereby creating a spatial dialogue between the viewer and the sculpture.”

Laura moved back, to try standing on the art, to experience its space, but she found that she could not convince herself to take that last step onto those congruent metal sheets. She had been taught too well that in a museum, one is quiet, respectful and does not, under any circumstances, touch the art. As she stood, Kristen called her name. They walked through the last gallery, which was also the first, with the Egyptian sarcophagus, together, the same way they had come in.

As they passed the ticket counter, Laura wondered about the kinds of things that she might be able to see behind the scenes if she worked at the museum. There had to be storerooms full of art that was not on display, things that were just on their way in or out, waiting to be packaged or packages waiting to be opened, going to or coming from destinations all around the world.

She would not want to work the ticket counter or cashier in the gift shop. Even giving tours be tedious. She wanted a job at the museum where her only duty was to wait for and open the mail, the big boxes and crates that came special delivery. Of course, all of the museum’s big deliveries were most likely scheduled down to the last detail; there was
probably very little surprise involved in opening the museum’s mail. She imagined the museum staff was still excited when they opened every box.

And then they were back in the reception hall. Everything was white and blue, the clear summer sky on the other side of the rows of slanted windows.

Kristen was moving fast; Laura had to jog to keep up. “Angry?” she asked, once she was back at Kristen’s side.

“No.” She stopped walking and crossed her arms in front of her chest and just looked at Laura, a blank expression in her eyes.

Not knowing what else to say, Laura opened her bag and dug out the piece of paper Joshua had left for her. She opened it, handed it to Kristen. “Look at this,” Laura said, turning to look at the windows at the far end of the room.

The large room was quiet for a long time. As more time passed, Laura wanted to fill some of the silence, so she told Kristen about running into Joshua again: “I’m going to call him. Probably tonight even.”

“You should, Laura. This is really pretty.” Kristen folded the paper back up and extended her arm to hand it back. Kristen’s face was sad. “I have to tell you something,” Kristen said, taking a deep breath, pausing for a moment. Laura could nearly see her friend searching for the right words.

And they were interrupted again as a middle-aged couple holding hands walked across the hall towards the exit. Kristen looked startled for a second, but then started laughing. Her laughter was nervous, but Laura joined in, not really sure what else she could do. They went through the door just behind the couple, who were talking about the restaurant where they had dinner reservations.
Chapter Thirteen – 5:06 p.m.

Is there a rule about when a person can start forgetting?

-Heidi Julavits

Afraid to speak first, Laura remained silent as she walked along the sidewalk, even though she was impatient for Kristen to continue what she had nearly started in the reception hall.

The day’s heat was still heavy in the air, but Laura was grateful to be outside even though the sun was still high in the sky and the blanket of humidity lifted as the wind came in off the lake only to settle again, in the exact same place. Laura knew it felt hotter that it actually was, after spending so many hours of the day in the museum where the climate was so closely controlled. Her skin had taken on a slight chill, which she had not noticed until it started to seep away and the heat came back feeling stronger than it had when they arrived.

The water looked even more tempting, though the thought of driving home in wet clothes was enough to keep Laura headed down the sidewalk at her silent friend’s side.

Trying to guess at what Kristen might be holding back, Laura remembered several other occasions when Kristen had been hunting for the right way to break bad news. Freshman year of high school when Matt Turner had asked Kristen to a dance even though he had been dating Laura for weeks. The night in college when Kristen had talked Laura into staying with her at a coffeehouse for two hours, the night before her final, before she admitted that she had been considering killing herself. But Laura did not have any idea what she might be trying to say now.
She stopped walking when Kristen did. Kristen looked down at her feet; Laura mimicked her and saw only pebbles and several dozen blades of grass that had blown off the manicured lawn into the concrete. “Remember when you called three weeks ago and I couldn’t talk for a couple of days because I wasn’t feeling well?”

Laura had not remembered until Kristen mentioned it. But now she certainly did. She had called Kristen to tell her about the last night with Kevin and the possibility of a baby. It was late afternoon, when she knew Kristen would be home on a Saturday. She had only missed one period. But when her friend had said she was sick to her stomach and just wanted to take a nap, they had hung up, and Laura had spent the rest of the afternoon reading.

“I had an abortion. That morning.” Kristen walked towards the water and rested her arms against the top rail of the fence. Laura stared at the spot on the sidewalk where her friend had been standing.

*Mere months after conception, the unborn child was called back to heaven...* Even though she knew a paper would never run an obit for an aborted fetus, Laura couldn’t help herself, in an attempt to step back from the shock, the sadness. *He or she will be sadly missed by all the people he or she could have loved or been loved by.*

“I didn’t tell anyone.” Neither of them moved. “Not my mom, not even Tyler. He knew that I was going to have it done, but he didn’t know when. And he really didn’t agree. He didn’t want the baby so much as he didn’t want to deal with the guilt he knew he would feel. If he had really wanted to have it, I could never have gotten rid of it. But it wasn’t
about a baby. His objection was about what he thought he should do if he ever ended up in our situation.”

Laura heard the words as Kristen said them, but she was not sure what they were supposed to mean.

“It.”

The city was preparing itself for a Saturday night. There were bars starting to open, serving dinner and offering specials on drinks mixed with the cheapest available liquor. Women in spiked heels and skirts several inches too short to cover essential parts of them followed behind men whose eyes were always scanning the room looking to trade up before they headed home at the end of the night.

She thought of them, then of her apartment, the drive home she faced before she could be by herself. And then she considered how empty her apartment would be when she got back. No one was waiting for her there.

But Kristen was waiting here. For comfort, for some kind of a response, some reaction to the news she had been holding in all day, under the careful layers of smiles and humor. Because no one would know just by looking at her that things had not turned out the way she had planned.

“How do you feel now?” Laura asked, still facing the opposite direction. Their disconnect did not escape her notice, but she was not interested in facing the same direction as this person she thought she had known so well.

“Okay. A little sad, but more like I have lost twenty bucks instead of a human being. And that’s a crass analogy.” But she did not sound apologetic.
“Only twenty?” Laura said, forcing her fists to open at her sides. It. Twenty bucks. And Kristen was the one who had been angry with her earlier when she had called fulfilling the requirements of her job an assignment.

The tendons connecting her bones stood out underneath her skin; the tension there was starting to make her arms ache all along their length. Inside, she was battling against the urge to use those fists she had just unclenched, to figure out a way to travel back in time and stop the procedure telling her friend that she would take the baby from her, to go even a step further and take the baby immediately, implant its small, forming heart into her own stomach, where she would really be able to protect it.

“I didn’t know I was pregnant until I was nearly four months in. It had been a rocky four months between Tyler and me, even before this all. A lot of liquor, some drugs. Maybe even enough to mess up a developing kid. I don’t know,” Kristen said. This admission finally made Laura turn to look at her friend. Kristen’s posture was reminiscent of the stance Kevin had taken the day they talked about babies and he left. Her words sounded like an excuse.

Kristen did not look at Laura, even as the silence drew on and tension began to fill the space between them, even though there were no walls to contain it. But apparently this tension had a strong sense of the laws of gravity. It stayed close to the earth, close to Laura, to Kristen as they stood together, not speaking and avoiding looking at one another. Even when Laura moved to stand at the fence next to her friend, Kristen looked at the ground, Laura looked out at the water, wondering what she should say or what she could say at all without saying the wrong things. Those were the only things that kept coming to her mind. She wanted to yell. But maybe not at Kristen. Maybe Kristen did not deserve her anger. Or
if she did, maybe Laura was not ready to be the one who yelled at the woman who had very recently undergone the surgical procedure to end the life growing inside of her.

“I’ve never been so uncomfortable in my life,” Kristen said, eyes still on her shoes. Or maybe she was looking at the small patch of weeds that grew out of the crack in the sidewalk next to the toe of her right shoe. “I know the doctor wasn’t really judging me or else he would have a different job. But I just felt really ashamed.”

Laura watched two seagulls hover in the air over the lake, suspended in the light breeze. Even those birds were probably keeping secrets from each other, she thought. Kristen did not seem to notice or be bothered by Laura’s silence. Instead, she continued to share the details of the abortion and her reactions to it.

“I had the nurse call Tyler to come pick me up. I really thought that he would refuse to come. But the nurse said he agreed right away and he was in the waiting room ten minutes after she hung up the phone. When I came out, he asked if I was okay and then helped me to the car.” For the first time since she had started talking, Kristen turned to look at Laura. Her peripheral vision allowed Laura to see Kristen’s face without actually having to face her. Neither spoke as Kristen watched the side of Laura’s head.

The wind picked up suddenly from a light breeze to a wind strong enough to pull Laura’s hair out of her ponytail. Instead of answering Kristen’s nonverbal questions, Laura pulled the tie from her hair and made quick work of pulling her hair out of her face.

“Say something, Laura.” Kristen stepped closer, wedging herself between Laura and the fence. Laura only have two choices: she could ignore Kristen’s direct question and walk away or she could ask: “What do you want me to say?”
They had been friends too long for her to just leave.

“So what do you want me to say?”

“Something! God, I feel like I laid my soul at your feet, and you’re just ignoring it.”

“You know what? You do this all the time! You have some idea in your head of how I am supposed to react to news when you drop something major in my lap, and then when things don’t go the way you thought they would, I’ve somehow done something horrible.”

“That isn’t fair. I had no idea how you were going to react. But I expected something!”

Laura turned her back to Kristen but did not put any additional distance between them. “I know what I am supposed to say. Something comforting. Even better, I am not supposed to say anything, I am just supposed to let you say whatever you need to about this horrible thing you have done.” Laura heard Kristen gasp at what she said, but she did not turn around.

“And what was I supposed to do? Bring that baby into the world when I don’t even want it? Should I have just given it over to you because you want a baby so badly?” As she spoke, Kristen grabbed Laura’s arm just above the elbow and pulled her around until they were standing face to face. Their heads were close together, but they had given up trying to keep their voices down. There was no one around to witness their argument anyway. The seagulls did not care what they had to say, of that Laura was sure.

“What should you have done? You should never have been in that situation in the first place!” Laura tried to take a step back, but Kristen took a step forward to match her and make up the distance.
“How am I supposed to respond to that?” Kristen asked, stepping even closer.

“You know what? I don’t need you judging my decisions. I did what I thought was best, and it was my choice to make.”

And that Laura could agree with, on a purely logical level. It was Kristen’s choice. It was any woman’s choice. But somehow, when confronted with the reality of her friend’s dead baby, Laura couldn’t see through her emotional reaction to the logical argument for any woman’s right to choose. Especially when she was so badly wanting for a baby of her own. Except for the one that might be growing in her belly. Too many more complications there.

“Well, I think you were wrong,” Laura said, stepping around Kristen to stand against that the fence again. The water had become choppy as the wind continued to pick up. The sky was starting to darken over her head; the quality of the light was beginning to shift.

Several minutes passed. When Laura turned around, Kristen was gone.

Laura was having trouble believing that Kristen had just left her standing there as she walked the rest of the way to her car alone. The highlights of their conversation replayed in her head, but even the meanness of the things they had said to each other did not justify, in Laura’s mind, walking away without a word.

There were clouds beginning to form in the sky. As she walked, Laura dug through her bag looking for her car keys and came up with some lip gloss, her wallet, the drawing from Joshua. Her keys were nowhere to be found. And the sky looked like it was preparing to rain. When she reached the edge of the parking lot, Laura sat down on the curb and emptied the contents of her bag on the grass.
Once she had her keys in hand and had put all of her things back into her bag, Laura began to cry. She drew her knees up, laid her arms across them and rested her forehead in the cradle they made. All she wanted, even today, was to go home and find Kevin there waiting for her. Even after Joshua, especially after her fight with Kristen. And she wanted to know what to say to Kristen, if she had the chance to talk to her again. She wanted to know how to feel about the whole thing because everything like it had too many layers. Kevin and Joshua, her and Kristen, these babies that could have been best friends or eventually fallen in love, if they were both had existed.

The first raindrop hit her on the back of the neck. Laura stood slowly, checking to make sure she had all her things, then hurried the rest of the way to her car. The smell of wet pavement rose from the ground as she jogged.

It was wet but still hot. The parking lot was empty except for a few scattered cars. She slid into her car, set her bag on the passenger seat and grabbed her phone out of the cup holder in the console. She had left it there all day, but the message light was not flashing. No one had called.

Backing out of her parking spot, Laura was watching out the rear view mirror when she noticed a silver car parked three rows away. The driver was just sitting behind the wheel; in the mirror, the person looked like Kristen. The thought crossed her mind, that she could just drive away. But even now she could not leave Kristen sitting there by herself. No matter what happened, they had actually been friends for the majority of their lives.
Laura pulled up next to the car and got out to knock on the passenger side window. When Kristen leaned over to unlock the door, she got in but because she did not know what to say, she said nothing.

Neither did Kristen. Instead, they sat in silence and listened to the newscaster talking on the radio about the weather and Packers training camp.

“It really isn’t your place to decide whether or not I was wrong to do what I did,” Kristen said after flicking off the radio when the tension in the vehicle had grown too awkward to stand. “You were right when you said that all I wanted from you was some support.”

“I can’t suppose that decision,” Laura said.

“But why can’t you support me? Look beyond my choice itself! It sounds like you are saying you can’t support me at all.”

Raindrops made large splashes as they broke against the windshield. Laura watched them, looking for a pattern in where the water landed. “I don’t think that I understand the kind of person that you are.”

“What are you even saying? We have been friends our whole lives. You know me, Laura.”

“I thought I did,” she said, looking out the side window at her own car. Her back window was open a crack; the rain was getting in.

“All right. So you wanted a baby badly enough to end your relationship with Kevin over it. That I can comprehend. But our friendship might not survive this conversation. Doesn’t that bother you at all?” Kristen turned at the waist so that she was facing Laura. She put her hand on Laura’s arm, trying to force her to turn around. But Laura did not want to
look at Kristen. There were tears in her eyes again, but she was not sure why she was crying. She did not want Kristen to see these tears. She did not want this moment to be the end of their friendship, but she still did not know what to say.

Three weeks ago

Kristen called to solidify their plans while she was back in the Midwest for her visit. She was coming back for a wedding and would be staying for two weeks. Laura had finally gotten to the last box left over from her move. They were full of papers that needed to be sorted: paid credit card bills, old greeting cards with birthday wishes and messages of love and support, stacks of old files from work that could be measured in inches and thrown away in piles. But each file was a person who deserved another look before being thrown into the trash.

And there were so many pieces of paper linking her to Kevin in that box. Their lease, receipts for wedding expenses, photographs. Of them together, holding hands, kissing.

When the phone rang, Laura had to pretend she had not been crying. But she knew Kristen did not believe that everything was fine. Kristen, however, didn’t ask any questions. Instead, she suggested they spend the day at the Milwaukee Art Museum.

“Sounds good,” Laura said, glad to have something else to think about. She dumped everything back into the box.

“I’ve actually been doing my research, and I am pretty excited about it.”

Laura laughed, thankful for Kristen and the distraction she offered.
If we aren’t going to talk about this, will you just get out of the car so I can leave?” Kristen asked after five minutes had passed in ever more awkward silence. Laura had been watching the digital clock on the dashboard as the lines filled with green light, which then disappeared, counting down. To what, Laura was not sure, but she definitely felt something coming nearer.

“Usually I am the one who wants to talk about everything, and you are the one ignoring my questions. Strange to be in the other role,” Laura said. She watched Kristen’s hand as she reached for the air-conditioning control; the windows had begun to fog in the mixture of rain and heat.

Kristen turned in her seat, drawing her right leg up underneath her, so that she could lean back against the window facing Laura. Without turning her head, Laura looked at her.

“As soon as I realized I was pregnant, I stopped drinking. And I’ve been completely clean since,” Kristen said. Her admission hung in the air like the humidity outside. Laura considered her speech and then mimicked Kristen’s position so that they were finally facing each other. As far as she was aware, Kristen had not been clean that long since before college.

“That’s good.”

“And you already know about things with Tyler. He was upset about the whole thing. Not so much the baby, but having to be that responsible, make those decisions. He certainly isn’t upset because we aren’t going to be having a baby. Neither one of us is ready for that.
But I do think I am finally starting to grow up.” Kristen draped one around over the steering wheel and was playing with the knobs of on the gearshift.

“You don’t need to make excuses to me,” Laura said.

“I don’t believe that. At this point, I feel like you are judging everything I have ever done.”

The rain was pattering loudly against the roof of the car. Laura thought about how to respond to that accusation but found it easier to think about the rain. Where had the water come from? The drops of water, in their various forms in the water cycle, had probably been everywhere in the world. She wondered how old each raindrop was and about the age of the particles that composed it.

“I meant it. If we aren’t going to talk, just get out of the car! I don’t want to sit here in silence with you right now.” Kristen was close to tears, and Laura was surprised to find herself remaining silent and unresponsive. She did not have anything to say at the moment, but getting out of the car seemed like the wrong thing to do. There was something that still had to be said between them, but Laura did not know yet what that was. And she was not going to get out of the car until it came to her.

“Was there even a wedding this weekend?” It wasn’t the question Laura had wanted to ask, but it was the first to come to her.

“Yes, but I probably wouldn’t have come for it. I just wanted to be at home.”

Laura looked around first the interior of the rented car then the parking lot and surrounding area. “This isn’t home,” she said, meaning the city itself.
“It certainly isn’t,” Kristen said. And Laura knew for certain that Kristen was not talking about geography.

“I know that I have no right to be mad at you like this. Deep down, I understand that I am being ridiculous. But knowing these things doesn’t change how I feel,” Laura said. She had shifted her position and continued her refusal to leave. Through the rain, she watched the museum as the sails closed.

The cloud cover was not full; rays from the setting sun peered through in spots and the golden light spread over the ground in small patches. Kristen had parked facing away from the water. In front of them was the road, which turned immediately into the highway, ribbons of concrete raising up into the air and creating layer upon layer of traffic moving at sixty miles per hour towards a variety of destinations unknown. Each of those drivers was thinking something right now, and Laura wondered if any of them were thinking about what kind of interaction might be taking place between two women sitting in a car in the middle of a parking lot.

“And what is it you feel? Tell me,” Kristen said.

“Suddenly, I feel just horribly lonely. And yes, some of this is about Kevin. And some of it is about my not having a baby, or maybe having a baby, or whatever. But some of it is about you. I feel like I have already lost you.” As she spoke, Laura shifted her eyes back to Kristen’s face. Her friend’s eyes were unfocused and hazy.

“Well, I feel like this conversation is spiraling out of control, and I can’t keep up. I think, for now, you need to just get out of this car and go home. You can call me when you want to talk,” Kristen said, looking out the window just beyond Laura’s shoulder.
And Laura found that, yet again, she did not know how to respond. She looked at Kristen for another minute, hoping Kristen’s eyes would shift into focus and meet hers. They did not. Laura rested her hand on the door handle, paused for a moment, took a breath and had herself convinced that she was about the say the perfect thing. Instead, she said nothing and open the car door. The rain had nearly stopped, but the ground dipped lower just under her door. A puddle had gathered, and water soaked the bottom few inches of Laura’s jeans as she shut Kristen’s car door and opened her own. The dirty rainwater made her sandals slippery; she had pieces of dirt and small stones in between her toes.

As emotional as she had proven herself to be earlier that day, Laura surprised herself by not crying as she watched Kristen pull away. Instead, she started her car, reached to turn up the volume of the stereo, and started dancing in her seat as she listened to song number seven on the unlabeled c.d. Kevin had left in her car. She couldn’t remember having ever heard it before, but she liked it and wished she knew the words so that she could sing along.

And she thought about what Kristen had said, that a moment ago might have broken their relationship. It did not seem real, but Laura found herself stringing together sentences for their obit. If their relationship is in fact dead, it needed to be commemorated. And the little baby she would never meet. Both of them, because deep down, she was sure she was not pregnant.

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Laura stopped herself from going any farther with those thoughts. She would call Kristen tomorrow, give them both some time to think about what they each wanted to say to
one another before they tried to fix the holes this last conversation had torn in their relationship, in their opinions of each other.

When she pulled out of the parking lot, she took one last look at the museum. With the fins folded in, something the museum did each day when it closed, the building looked much less like a sailboat. It cast a much less romantic profile, Laura thought, as she maneuvered her car into the far right lane that slowly became the entrance ramp to the highway that would take her west, back home.