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The act of running

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The act of running

by

Jennifer Anne O’Neill

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

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: Creative Writing
Program of Study Committee:
Stephen Pett, Major Professor
Diane Price Herndl
Diane Debinski

Iowa State University
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The Act of Running

The luggage set was a wedding gift from Travis’ mom and dad. Italian leather in a soft, quilted pattern. “Versace,” said his mother. “They’re monogrammed.” I’ve loaded everything I’ll need, even my flat-iron and a couple pairs of earrings. It’s a shame to be a slave to such things, I tell myself, and then I shrug. I have been a slave to worse.

The last six months before my mom left, all she did was clean. I came home from school and she’d be kneeling, sponge in hand, with a bucket of dirty water. She played the music just loud enough to drown out the little sobs. I didn’t know that she was biding her time and building her nerve. Wavering. Scrubbing out an apology in advance.

As a teenager, I never understood why she couldn’t just be happy. One night I awoke, walked into the living room to find her rocking in the chair to the cheerless music escaping from her headphones, tears streaming down her face. Her words were slow and labored. “It’s your dad,” she said, her face contorted in a failed attempt at composure. “He doesn’t know me.” I was dumbstruck, bursting with the awareness that he would have done anything for her. I had never heard them fight about anything. I had never seen them kiss, either. The chair squeaked back and forth, and she told me I was too young to understand.

Before I leave, the entire place should be dusted and vacuumed. Travis is going to have to learn to do these things by himself. I’ll move all the furniture in the bedroom and even use the wand attachment to vacuum up the cobwebs. Travis is in love with his walnut bedroom set. A wedding gift to me, he called it, although I wasn’t as impressed with it as he was. The same with the painting that hangs over the sofa. He thought I would love it, forgot my earlier comments that this type of thing wasn’t art, just a nicely
marketed mixture of ugliness and fraud. “Never mind how much it cost,” he said.
“You’re worth it.”

He is always doing that. Pointing to something new and shiny—something heavy—and saying, “Look how much I love you.” My ring, for instance. It interferes when I reach for something in a pocket, pulls out chunks of hair when I shampoo. When I work, it jams like an extra finger in my clay as it’s spinning on the wheel. I should take it off and put it someplace safe and clean, but I know I would forget to put it back on. Travis beams and says Tim’s wife is very jealous. He always tells me I should go with her and treat myself to a manicure. He doesn’t understand this is a lost cause on someone who works with her hands. Besides, I chew the skin around my nails until it’s wrecked and ragged. There’s something satisfying about the tearing away.

I turn off the vacuum, slide the dresser in a slow, heavy arc to reveal a stack of Mom’s old artwork. Watercolors, oils, and pastels. At the bottom of each one, Mom’s neat and scrolling signature. Dianne Perkins. She left them in the closet when she moved, and no one knows I have them.

She taught me to do portraits. To look in the mirror at the placement of my nose and mouth. The little flecks of color in my eyes. I learned to fill them in with cobalt and king’s blue. To shade in the little pink corners, the delicate lash patterns. After that, I felt as if everyone I drew looked like me. Once, I mentioned this to Travis, and he said it wasn’t any surprise—that artists were self-absorbed. Not to mention emotionally unstable. “I don’t mean you,” he said, and gripped my hand. “Look at your mom, though.” Then he apologized. Said he didn’t mean it. That she couldn’t help the way she was. “Don’t worry,” he said. “You’re nothing like her.”
She used to draw horses running, their manes waving with the movement of their gait, muscles flexed in all the right places. The ultimate symbol of freedom, she said. The faces are easy. The slant of the eye sockets. The way the jawbone starts right beneath the ear and moves toward the soft chin, lips, and nostrils. I can draw them standing still, but I’ve never been able to capture bodies in motion. The act of running.

I didn’t think it would be this way—that there would be a need to run. I hoped that he would weigh me down with the sound of his laugh and his shining plans for being ordinary. Stable. He had faith in me, had faith that I could be okay. Be still. I thought he was a blessing, and he really ought to be. A year has passed, and now I realize how unfair it was to drag him into me.

Mom has always told me to create. It turns out she knew my art teacher when I was in high school. Mr. Pittman. He was a caring man with a silver comb-over and a gentle voice. I remember the day in spring, when he took us all outside the classroom to sit behind the school and sketch the bungalows across the street. An exercise in perspective, he said.

My friend Corey used colored pencils to sketch a shelf full of faces shaped like soup cans. Liquid personalities, canned and pickled for consumption. At the top was a giant sign that said FOR SALE in bright red. “I’m working on perspective too,” he said. What I liked about Corey was that he never did anything he didn’t want to.

“I’m glad I don’t live in one of these houses,” I said to him.

“Yeah,” he said. “It would suck to live right by the school.”

“Besides, they’re just ugly,” I told him.
“You’re lucky to live out in the country,” he said. “Plus, you guys have one of the nicest houses I’ve ever seen, even if you do have to put up with cow smell.” Corey was always commenting on my perfect home and textbook family. This was back before my Mom had left.

Corey was a skater kid. A frayed and tattered dirtbag who my dad couldn’t stand. All pimples, clumps of hair falling in his eyes. He lived with his mom in the trailer park down by the library and only came to school when he felt like it. I was in love with him.

As we sketched, Mr. Pittman wandered over and crouched down behind us. I thought he was going to give Corey grief about not drawing the bungalows. “Ms. Perkins,” he said, because he always called people Ms. This or Mr. That. I glanced up at him. “You can let your mother know the apartment is ready to be moved into.” His voice was lowered, as if he sensed it was a sensitive issue.

“What are you talking about?” I asked. I didn’t stop sketching. I figured he was confused.

“The house on Second Street,” he went on. “Martha and I painted the kitchen a lovely ivory color and installed a new microwave above the stove. There was a branch in the back yard that needed to be removed, and—“

This would have made sense if he had been talking to someone else. “What are you talking about?” I asked him again.

“Your mother is Dianne Perkins, isn’t that right?”

“What—are you talking about?”

And then, slowly, his kind eyes seemed to sink and his face turned a sickly shade of pale. I learned a lot from Mr. Pittman.
All of this comes back to me as I rifle though the stack of Mom’s old artwork behind the dresser. Flipping past a couple scenes in watercolor and ink, I find what I’m looking for. Oil on canvas, a herd of mustangs stampeding forth. The background is an open desert vista, the sky a blissful polychrome. Beasts of every color, a trail of dust behind them. At the front of the herd, in the shape of a horse at full gallop, a patch of naked canvas. Or what used to be. I can’t imagine why she didn’t finish it.

A while back, I decided to do it myself. Decided I would make her a golden palomino. Blonde, like me. I laid out all my brushes and a dozen shades of yellow and brown, and went to work. At first, I could still make out the sketch marks, but I couldn’t get the shading right, the tension in her muscles. They flex differently with a canter than with a trot, differently with a slow gallop than a full one. Differently at each point in the stride. The sheer number of muscles in the neck alone was overwhelming, let alone in the forelegs and hindquarters. The entire thing was ruined. I have kept it hidden ever since.

I always liked Dad better, tried to be like him, although it’s hopeless. He is the stable one. The loyal one. He never spoke badly about her, even after the house on Second Street. The worst thing he ever said about her was that she was a free spirit. Dad and Travis are joined at their cores.

Hanging from the corner of the mirror on my dresser there’s a Cubs cap Dad bought me when we traveled to Chicago for a game when I was younger. He is a die-hard fan. Said the hat represented unfailing loyalty to a cause, no matter how difficult. One thing about Cubs fans, he said, was that they were loyal until the end, and loyalty was the greatest virtue a person could have. Mom said the hat was a symbol of hopelessness, of
the ultimate lost cause. She told me, “Promise you will never chain yourself to something that makes no sense.”

I replace the dresser, lift with my legs and slide it back into the deep sinkholes pressed into the carpet. Mom bought a new bedroom set a year or so before she left. I didn’t know it was so that she would have one to take with her.

After my talk with Mr. Pittman, I asked her what was going on. If she was leaving. “Don’t tell anyone,” she begged. “I’m just trying to figure out the best way of doing it, okay?” Since it took her a full six months to pull the trigger on it, I never knew if she was going to be there when I got home from school. What would be missing? What would she take? Would I be able to tell, just by looking around, that she was gone? I came in the front door each day at four o’clock, wondering.

Travis won’t be home until after five. Two hours until his shiny F-150 pulls into the driveway. *Wikan Construction Co.*, it says on the side. He’s so damn proud of that truck, and of course, Dad is in love with it, in love with Travis. With the idea of him. The same way Travis is in love with the idea of me.

The bathrooms really ought to be cleaned, and I have new shower liners for each of them. Mom would always sigh when she scrubbed. Audible heaves of martyrdom. I hated her then. I hated her because Dad worshiped her and she didn’t care. I pour a cup of coffee and step out onto the front porch to have a cigarette. Usually I go out back to smoke. I like to avoid the family next door. The Rissmans. The ones who will not relent, who want to talk for hours on end about their yard fertilizer in the spring, their snow-blower in the winter. Roger will want to hear what site Travis has been working on, and
how the hell he likes that Ford. *How* many horse power? Ruby will ask if I plan to make any pies for the holidays. Pecan or pumpkin? Do I use a canned filling or homemade?

It’s cold. I glance up the hill toward the road, survey the crystal sheath coating the branches in the yard. Travis says it’s the weather that’s made me blue. I flip the box around and stare at the little camel, the familiar font. The warning on the pack: “Smoking by pregnant women may result in fetal injury.”

Right after high school, Corey’s girlfriend Stacey got pregnant and had an abortion. Sometimes Travis and I will see him behind the counter at the Kwik Trip here in town. “Aren’t you glad you didn’t keep hanging around with that loser?” Travis will ask.

Travis said abortion is sick and wrong. I told him, not if having the baby makes you a slave to a life you don’t want.

Prior to her leaving, I asked my mom more than once, “If you’re really that unhappy, then why don’t you just go?” I thought she would mention the safety and certainty she found in Dad. I thought she would say that he was kind, and that he kept her grounded, kept her from flying away. That she would be a chaos without him. A whirlwind. Her eyes flashed with what seemed to be resentment and she told me she had trapped herself. The day she left, I told her I was sorry to have been such a trap to her. Such a weight. I kicked a hole in the wall where her easel used to be.

It has all become too much. This life inside me. I don’t know what I will do with it, but I will not stay here. Today I will leave. I head back inside to scrub the bathroom. All the while, I avoid the temptation to brush the tears from my eyes. My hands are all covered in cleaner. I should open the window, let out the poisonous air.
The phone rings and it feels like my heart stops. I run to look. The caller I.D. says WIKAN CONSTRUCTION. It will just be Travis calling to tell me about his day. He is always doing this. He’ll tell me about his lunch at Joe’s Cafe. The onions, he will say, were a tad chewier than he likes. Not terribly chewy, nothing unbearable, but just a little bit chewy. He will seriously say this. He will tell me they use the onions he really likes, the white ones, not the red kind. Tim likes their onions, he will say. I will grind my teeth and pretend I do not resent him, pretend that the safety, the strength, and the certainty make up for the utter tedium and the fact that, despite his efforts, he cannot know me.

He’ll want to talk about our trip, the one he thinks we’re taking. He plans on leaving together as soon as he gets home from work. A week in the city. A pre-holiday holiday, he called it. He’ll want to know if I have all our things packed. The suitcases are lined up neatly by the door. *My things.*

The phone keeps ringing and I don’t answer it.

I clean the china hutch. I dust inside where no dust goes, where Travis’ grandmother’s china set gawks out at the world. The pattern is a pretty floral design in cream and lilac. I’ve been trying to chip and shatter them one by one.

“A family tradition,” Travis said after his parents gave us the set. His eyes shined and he said, “Someday our grandkids will get this collection. We’ll save them for when we have company. When family comes, or when Mark and Tim bring their wives over.” The earthenware set, the work of my hands, pile in crooked stacks beside the bed and sofa.

“I’d like to get a hot tub,” he added. “Everyone wants to hang out in a hot tub. You can serve up a gorgeous dinner on Grandma’s china and then we can hop in the hot tub and watch movies on a giant screen TV.”
A deep shudder creeps up from the base of my spine and all I want to do is hurl the goddamn saucer up against the wall, against the set of seven gold-trimmed mirrors his mother bought and said were *to die for* and proceeded to hang in the center of the living room, or against the glass on that hideous painting that Travis bought *for me*, because, after all, I love *art*, so I should love *this*—the painting that I want to smash to dust.

I have to go. Now. Time has gotten away from me, and it’s almost five. If I don’t leave now, I never will. I drag two suitcases out the door, lose my balance on a strip of ice. The car trunk opens with a crack, a cold splitting noise, and I toss the luggage in.

My coat. I haven’t packed my coat, or hat and gloves. Which closet? Where do I put these things? It’s a race through the house, a race against the clock. How did I let this much time pass? My watch says a quarter till. I grab a down parka from the hallway closet, search the pockets for some gloves. Nothing. Nothing on the top shelf. Nothing on the kitchen counter. Fuck it. I have to go.

My zipper sticks and the phone rings. Where the hell are my keys? And am I seriously going to carry the rest of my bags to the car in one trip? The phone rings. Hell yes, one trip. It will be Travis, calling to let me know he’s on the way home, wanting to know if I’m packed, if I want anything from the store. Christ, where the hell are my keys? I grab another suitcase and a couple small satchels, sprint to the car, the front door hanging wide open. The keys are in the trunk lock. Thank fucking God. I dash up the steps again, grab my purse, a backpack, and a small duffel. Why in the world did I pack all this *crap*? I slam the front door closed, the phone still ringing, toss my bags in the trunk, and barrel into the car. When I start it up, the clock reads 4:52. The lights are still on in the house as I peel backward up the driveway, out toward the road.
And then, a familiar whir. The sickening half-squeal of spinning tires trapped on the ice at the top of the knoll. “Fuck!” I let off the gas, feel the car sliding forward, gun it again. All I hear is whirring, spinning. Life’s way of telling me to just goddamn forget it. The fruitless screech of tires saying, “Are you kidding? Get your sorry ass inside.”

I let the car rest, drift forward, thinking I will start again from the bottom, take a different track this time. The clock says 4:55, and my cell phone rings. I reach for my purse, not to answer the thing, but to turn the thing off. Everything spills. Nevermind. From the bottom of the drive, I begin backing out again. The phone still. It’s on the ground now, lodged somewhere beneath the pedals. I accelerate, hope to God nobody is behind me.

That whir again. That spinning, eating into my core, desperate. Then a tapping. Startled, I look to my left. Roger Rissman is knock-knocking. The phone rings. What the hell does he want?

“Do you want some help?” comes the muffled yell. I roll down the window, take my foot off the gas. The car stays put. “Looks like you can use a hand,” he says.

The clock reads 4:57. Hell yes, I can use a damn hand.

“Looks like you’re going on a trip,” he says. “Ruby said you were loading some things up.” Just what I need. Witnesses to my frantic escape.

“Yeah,” I breathe. “Be gone for a week.”

“Oooh,” sings Roger.

“Little get-away, you know?”

“Sure, sure.” He cranes his neck sideways, peers inside.
“I’m waiting for Travis, of course. But I thought I’d back the car out. You know, before it got any worse.” Dumbass! Before it got any worse? It’s not as if there’s snow coming down.

“Well, say,” says Roger, “I’ve got some ashes in the garage that I can sprinkle back here for you. Unless you want me to just try backing her out for you.”

“No!” I tell him. “I mean yes! Ashes are good!” Roger heads back across the yard and a pair of headlights round the corner at the next block. I spin my tires. At least the phone has stopped. The lights whiz passed the driveway in a blur. Not Travis.

Roger is taking a long while. He said the damn things were right in the garage. What is he doing? Glancing over across the yard, I can see Roger and Ruby, animated as always. She with a newspaper, waving hello, he with a bucket of goddamn salvation in powdered form, yakking away about meatloaf, I suppose, or an upcoming church bazaar. I spin my tires.

Roger jogs warily across the icy walkway, over to my car.

Headlights illuminate his timid gait.

No. Travis.

A truck door slams. “Howdy, neighbor!”

“Hello,” says Roger. “Slick night to be starting a trip, eh?”

“Aw, nah. The roads aren’t bad, but it looks like we have a few slick spots around here.”

“Running out for something?” he asks me. “I called to see if you needed anything from the store.”
I lie and say I didn’t hear it. “It must have been when I was loading the car.” I pause and tell him I need to get some aspirin from the store.

“Little pre-holiday stress headache?” Roger asks. “You know what Ruby does for those?”

I cut him off and say, “Listen, Travis. I haven’t finished packing yet. Let’s just get this car moved and head back inside.”

“Leave your keys,” says Roger. “Take care of what you need to, and I’ll get this rig backed up.”

“You don’t need to do that,” says Travis.

“That would be so helpful!” I tell him, stepping out of the car. I pat Roger on the shoulder and head for the house. Travis hops in his truck and drives it down into the garage.

This is it. It’s over. The jig is up. I throw my coat down on the sofa inside.

“You look haggard,” says Travis when he steps in the door. He looks around. “House looks great.”

“I didn’t get your things packed,” I tell him.

“Oh?”

“I had a strange day.”

He takes my hand. “Are you alright?”

I am defeated. I choke down the lump in my throat, force out the words, force out a map of the rest of my life. “I’m pregnant,” I say, and because I know he will mistake them for tears of joy, I allow myself to cry. He laughs. I laugh, somehow. What have I done? He shakes me, grips my shoulders.
“This is great!”

“You think so?” Of course he thinks so.

“Are you kidding? You know this is exactly what I want! We have to call Mom and Dad. Do your parents know?” He drills me with a dozen questions, most of which I cannot hear over the indelible whirring, that sickening spinning carved into my brain. He kisses me, stops short and looks concerned. “You look like you need to sit down and rest.”

Vaguely, I hear him ask some questions about what items still need to be packed. I tell him again I hadn’t gotten to his things yet. He sits me down and says, “Sit tight,” and kisses my forehead. “I’ll grab my stuff. We can make some phone calls in the car.” I’m not sure what else he says. There’s only the whirring.

Travis bounds quickly up the stairs. Through the window I can see that the car has been moved out of the driveway. Under the streetlamp, Roger Rissman catches my eye through the front window. He beams, thumbs up. I wave. Smile.

Travis is chattering happily away upstairs, expecting a response, I suppose. I drift toward the big oak door, thinking nothing, feeling nothing. The whirring is gone, and the spinning now, replaced by the soft latching of the door behind me.
Where She Goes

We tried our best to give our daughter everything, but from a young age, a stormy sadness brewed out of nothing and whipped around her so violently that we could scarcely see her through it. Her eyes became hollow and distant, her lips pulled into a frigid scowl. She barely left the house that final summer. She was fourteen.

We tried to get her help, Rick and I. We pleaded for an answer to the mystery of what had gone so wrong.

“I just can’t deal with things,” she said. She was curled up in herself, lying in bed with her hair in sweaty knots. Her skin was pale and grayish.

Rick sat with his chin in his palm, sat there in the painted chair that was normally home to a floppy-eared rabbit I had made for Katie when she was a small. The rabbit choked in the crook of his elbow, and children laughed in the park behind the house.

I touched her forehead. “Is there something here at home that bothers you?” I asked. I had been spending a lot of time at work. It was a time when people wanted to shop for houses. And Rick, as usual, was keeping busy with things for school. Lesson plans, and summer Driver’s Ed classes. But I didn’t think she had been neglected, and besides, the extra income had allowed us to add onto the house and to re-do Katie’s bedroom. It looked more like the bedroom out of an interior decorating magazine or a television show than the room of a teenager in our small town. Katie chose to wrap herself in a tattered quilt instead of the brightly-patterned comforter that served as a stylish centerpiece to her newly decorated room.
She shook her head, almost imperceptibly. Above her was a large bulletin board plastered with photographs and little notes and drawings that she’d passed with her friends during class.

“Has something happened with your friends, sweetie?” I asked. We had wondered if there’d been some sort of falling out, some teenaged social angst that had precipitated at least some of this. It didn’t seem that way though—her friends still called and asked for her to join them for their movies, their slumber parties, their trips to the pool. She declined these invitations, and eventually, refused to talk on the phone at all. We had resorted to telling Katie’s friends that she was sick. But too much time had passed, and people were beginning to wonder. There was a rumor, I was told, that she had been sent away.

“No,” she said. “My friends are fine.”

“And what about—“

“Fine,” she said firmly. “There wasn’t anything wrong at school. That’s what you were going to ask about next, right?” She sat up now, for what as far as we knew was the first time since yesterday. Her cheeks puffed outward as she exhaled, her chin pointed upward and her gaze fixed on the clump of dried up flies caught in the well of her light fixture. “You saw my report card.”

Rick stood up to unscrew the piece of glass beneath the bulb and discarded the flies into a wicker wastebasket in the corner of the room. He would have known if she’d been having problems with her classes. He would have heard it from his friends and colleagues there. But all he’d heard was that she’d become withdrawn. Melancholy. He’d seen her every now and then in the cafeteria, she with her regular group of friends,
swallowing her food absently and jumping, startled, when someone suddenly demanded
that she participate in whatever topic they discussed.

“Is there a boy?” Rick asked.

“A boy! Christ! What do you think I am, normal? It’s not about a boy,” she said.
“My life is fine.”

“Fine? Sweetie, how can you say everything is fine when you’re unable to even
get out of bed in the morning?”

“I didn’t say everything was fine. I said my life was fine.” She had always been
this way, drawing careful lines with her words, frustrated by those who were unable to see
those divisions.

“Then what exactly is it that’s not okay?” Rick asked, replacing the glass basin.

“Less immediate things,” she breathed. “God. Things that aren’t as visible to you,
to anybody around here. Things you’re able to not absorb, that you’re able to somehow
not let affect you.”

And then we knew what kinds of things she meant.

Rick sat down at the edge of her bed and touched the knot of blankets where her
feet were nestled. “I don’t know what to do, Sweetie.”

And then she sank, pulled the blankets up around her ears and sobbed and sobbed,
curled again in a tight little ball, and the sobs swelled into wails that shook her shoulders,
shook the entire bed and clawed their way inside us—left us feeling frail and helpless, like
lost children ourselves, or as someone who seeks impotently to prevent some death or
tragedy—then slowly dwindled in noise and measure as she drifted into sleep.
As soon as Katie was old enough to understand where meat came from, she refused to eat it. “Sweetie,” said her dad, the next time we attempted to serve her meat. “Animals eat other animals. We’re all part of the food chain.”

Katie cried and said she didn’t want to be a part of it. She threw the hot dog that had been placed before her and it tumbled, embarrassed, across the linoleum. She brought home an abandoned bunny and a bird with a broken wing, nursed them carefully and watched them die. We learned to cook with tofu.

The kids in her kindergarten class each sponsored a starving child in India. There was a photo of Devaki on the front of the little carton we kept in the kitchen. She was small and frail with a facial abnormality that distorted her nose, and Katie colored a strip of butterflies and rainbows and pasted it over the surface of the box. Each week she would put her entire allowance inside and beg for us to bring the girl to live with us.

“But it makes you sad to look at the girl’s picture,” I said to her. “Don’t you think it would be sad to see her every day?”

“No,” she said. “She would be fat and happy, and we could get her nose fixed by a doctor. We would play together every day.”

It seemed that she would die of a broken heart when, after a painfully persistent round of supplication, Rick said through clenched teeth that Devaki would remain in India, and if Katie wished to continue assisting her, she would never mention the girl coming to live with us again.

This pattern continued as she grew, and we tried to get her help, but she resisted. It was as though there were some type of grid across the surface of her mind that only let
in all the sad things, and filtered out the sunlight and the smell of flowers. If I pointed to the honeysuckles and bleeding hearts by the side of the road, she pointed to the road-kill and the bits of trash.

We brought her to a therapist, where she sat with her arms folded across her chest, her chin jutting outward in defiance. She said she didn’t want to be fixed if fixed meant being comfortable with a world so cruel.

These, Rick and I understood, were the kinds of things that had been bothering her lately. The problems he and I were either blessed or brutal enough to not absorb, to not be wrecked by. We wondered if she secretly hated us for our blindness, our insensitivity, for living our lives happily in spite of all the world’s pain. For bringing her into a world too harsh for her to bear.

It was dangerously hot that summer by the time Katie stepped, for the first time, out the front door into the midday sun. She said that she was going to get some exercise. Of course, this was long overdue, and so I didn’t want to argue with her.

“Don’t play too hard,” I said, looking up from the newspaper I was reading on the patio, relieved. “This heat will really get to you. Where are you going?”

“Huh?” she said, absently. “Oh, I’m going for a jog.” Katie had run track during the spring and had grown to enjoy her long runs across town. On her days off she would jog to the T intersection at the edge of town and take the gravel south along the river’s edge. Rick and I didn’t know whether to be alarmed or amazed by her stamina, but it seemed to make her happy so we did not object. So, as she started jogging down the road that day I felt relieved. Perhaps she was finally coming out of her slump.

When she returned to the house an hour later she was flushed and out of breath.
“Have you been running all this time?” I asked.

The sunshine had coaxed out a patch of freckles across the bridge of her nose, and for the first time in months, she wrapped her sweaty arms around me and smiled.

*     *     *

Over the next few weeks, Katie took on a remarkable transformation. Her skin shone dark and tan and her atrophied muscles took on strength and definition. She smiled, although infrequently, and laughed. In the mornings she ate breakfast with me. Oatmeal and oranges, most days. Then she would pull on her running shoes and disappear, sometimes for an hour or so, sometimes more. She never told me where she went to. In fact, she didn’t say a lot at all but seemed rather distracted, as if mentally reviewing for an upcoming exam. Recounting rules, facts and formulas.

Toward the end of summer I was sitting at the breakfast table waiting for her to emerge from the upstairs. I was planning a shopping trip, a back-to-school event, and was hopeful that she would share my excitement. It occurred to me that she would need lots of new clothes. She had sprouted inches over the course of the summer, and this spurt, it seemed, had left her long and ropey.

“Morning,” she said, stepping into the kitchen. The ice-maker in the refrigerator chugged and churned as she filled up a tall glass of ice water.

“How about some shopping?” I asked. “You need some new clothes.”

After a long drink, Katie sat down at the table and began to pull her shoes on. “I don’t need anything, Mom.” She had always been this way, reluctant to replace old things, burdened with the awareness that many people did not have the same luxury.
“You’ve gotten so tall,” I told her. “You’ll need jeans for the fall, at least. How about a new pair of shoes? I’m sure you’ve put a lot of miles on those.”

She sat pulled back from the side of the table opposite me, her toes pulled close to her body and her knees flayed out in a wide butterfly. Her feet were the same shape as mine. The same size. As she knotted her worn sneakers she examined the fading tread on the bottom and the compressed mid-sole, a layer of dirty white. “I like these, though. I don’t need new ones yet.”

In my mind I decided to get a pair just like them—for myself. I had never had a pair of running shoes, and besides, I was sure she would gladly take over the new pair once they were in the house.

“Fine,” I told her, “but your clothes from last fall cannot possibly fit.” For the summer months, her staples had been old tee shirts and gym shorts. She had grown rather gracefully into her new height, and didn’t seem to have sensed the change. “Go try on a pair of your old jeans.”

She rolled her eyes and said, “I’ll do it later, okay?”

I didn’t like the attitude she was giving me, so I looked at her sternly and said, “Now, please.”

She turned and trudged up the staircase and emerged a few moments later in a faded pair of blue jeans. They hung to her heels. “I don’t understand how those can still fit you,” I said. “You must have grown at least two inches. Where are those sitting on your hips?”

“Mom,” Katie growled. “I’m not eight years old anymore. I can tell whether or not my pants fit.” She tugged at the waist, revealing a wide gap between the fabric and
her body. Her hipbones protruded in little knobs, a yawning gulf between them, and when she released her grip her jeans hung loosely about her. That was it—they were falling so much lower now. A summer of intense exercise had trimmed away a layer of flesh, and the fit of her clothing was different because of it. It seemed that the roundness of her behind had dissolved as well, allowing the worn fabric to suspend more loosely, and to hang down lower than before.

“Well,” she asked, “are you happy?” She cocked her head and looked to me, expectantly, but there was something in her stare that I did not recognize—a sunkenness in her eyes, her face. Her teeth seemed large and squarish, and I wondered how this all had not occurred to me before.

“How much are you eating during the day, Kate?”

“Mom!”

Weeks back, when she’d begun working out so furiously, I had suggested that she eat more, but she had countered that people in America eat more than what is necessary, and that she would be fine. There was no telling what she ate while Rick and I were at work, and our evening meals had always been somewhat hit-or-miss. “I’m just wondering if you’re taking in enough calories to account for your new exercise routine. How many miles have you been running?”

“As many as I need to.”

“What does that mean? ‘Need to.’ It’s not as if you’re training for something.”

“Don’t you understand?” she asked. “This is the thing that makes me okay. It’s like, my happy pill, alright?”

“Well, it seems to have become an obsession. This does not seem healthy.”
Katie slumped into a chair across the table from me and sighed. “I’m not going to convince you it is healthy. But it’s better than the alternative, lying in bed all day long, crying over wars I’m not a part of and people who I’ll never know or see. You’ve always reminded me not to worry about things beyond my control, but I need an obsession. Something to occupy my thoughts so I can deal with things.”

Rick and I were always thankful for Katie’s honesty, even though it had been shocking to us at times. I shouldn’t have been surprised, then, when she told me, point-blank, that it was just that: an obsession. “I don’t understand how it all works,” I told her, fully expecting continued candidness. “What do you think about while running that allows you to forget everything else?”

Katie threw her knobby elbows onto the table, resigned to the discussion. “It’s not just when I run. It lasts all day.” Her breathing seemed to quicken as she discussed the effect. Her eyes shone and the words tumbled out faster. “I think about numbers. Meters, miles and fractions of miles. The percent I ran today compared with yesterday. This week’s mileage compared to last week’s. I estimate the distance between everything, between myself and whatever I’m moving toward. Of course it’s constantly in flux, so it’s the perfect thing to focus on.” She reached across the table for a section of orange and shrugged, then popped the slice into the back of her mouth and added, “Perfect.”

I felt, at the same time, alarmed and relieved. At least she was not doing this out of distress over her body image. The number on the scale, perhaps, was not as important as these other numbers. Certainly, a battle with some form of obsessive compulsive disorder was preferable to one with an eating disorder. I didn’t, however, know how to deal with the issue, and decided I would talk to Rick and we would think things over later that night.
“How about you skip your run today? It’s so hot outside and getting worse. We’ll spend the day together—maybe hit up a nice cool movie theatre later on. What do you say?”

Katie twisted her ponytail through her fingers and pursed her lips. “I need to go,” she said. “I need to take this run, and later I’m meeting Claire and Stacey. For lunch.” She headed upstairs then, to change back into her workout clothes, but hesitated halfway up. “By the way, Stacey’s having a sleepover next Friday. That should be okay, right?”

Thrilled that Katie was resuming her social activities I chirped, “Of course, sweetie. We’ll hang out another time, okay?” And then she blew me a kiss and bounded out of sight.

*     *     *

Her afternoon jogs we found about because of our neighbors across the street. Helen Jacobs had asked Rick when he returned from the school, “I don’t suppose it’s any concern of mine, but do you really think it’s healthy for her to be exercising that much, and in the midday heat like that?” Her evening jogs I heard of at the grocery store. “That gal of yours must be training for a marathon,” said George at the deli. “She’s run past our house every night this month at seven o’clock. Good Lord, what a string bean!” We thought she had been spending time with friends.

It seemed the urge to exercise had taken her over—that she was concerned with nothing else. She was not only concerned with distance now, but with speed, as well. On the days that she actually spoke to Rick and me, it was only to tell us by what percentage she had increased the pace of her run. The floor in her room squeaked awkwardly as she added up the sit-ups she would do each day, her feet anchored beneath a little arc at the
bottom of her dresser. I interrupted her once. I had knocked several times, but there was no response, so finally I peered inside. “Katie?” I said. “Katie.” But she seemed not to hear me and only continued to mouth the numbers as she counted up the crunches.

The chart I found on a Thursday night at midnight after I heard the screen door close. Rick was sleeping softly as I climbed up out of bed and headed for the window. In the dim glow of the streetlights, I could see her gaunt figure loping down the road. There was a light summer rain outside that made the leaves shine and the black of the road glisten in streaks. Wide awake, I headed downstairs, thinking that perhaps I would follow her, or holler out the door for her to stop and come back to bed. At the base of the steps was a crumpled slip of paper.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>8 Miles ~ 800 Calories</th>
<th>Two Slices Toast ~ 120 Cal.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 Miles ~ 300 Calories</td>
<td>Apple ~ 60 Cal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Miles ~ 500 Calories</td>
<td>1 C. Rice, 1 C. Broc. ~ 300 Cal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 C. Milk ~ 110 Cal.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The clock above the fireplace ticked impatiently as I sat in the living room waiting for her to return home. As her mother, it was my duty to confront her, to confront the situation. But how can you approach a thing you do not understand? Where had this obsession come from? Her claim that it was merely a distraction, something to keep her mind off the sorrows of the world was clearly a lie, and her body—*my* body since she was, after all, my own flesh and blood—was withering daily. I clutched my coffee cup firmly in the darkened room and wanted only to shake her, to scream and to make her realize she
was terrorizing her father and me, but when the screen door finally opened letting in the
patter of the rain and my drenched and emaciated little girl, I only rocked in silence as she
stole noiselessly up the stairs and into her bedroom lost in her world of miles and minutes
and completely unaware of me.

*   *   *    *

The last weekend of the summer. A Friday, the night of Stacey’s slumber party. I
shouldn’t have even let her go, should have checked her into a hospital. I’d barely seen
her eat in weeks, and as she sat there in the passenger seat, her threadlike thighs and bony
knees glaring in the afternoon sun, I knew that I should say something, but the words
seemed to catch in the back of my throat, to hang mysteriously beyond my reach.

At home that night, Rick and I swore we would talk to her the following day.
Together, we would sit her down and tell her how it was going to be: Either she would
start eating and stop exercising or we would check her into a hospital. The two of us sat in
the living room staring at the television and trying, as usual, to figure out where we had
gone wrong.

“What was that?” Rick asked. It was nine o’clock or so.

I looked around the living room. “What?”

The screen door slammed against the side of the house then, and the heavy inside
door was flung wide as Katie staggered in, mumbling and reeking of alcohol. She closed
the door behind her and leaned on it heavily. “I hope you don’t mind that I’m wasted,”
she said in a smeary voice. She rubbed her eyes and inhaled sharply. “I couldn’t stay
there anymore, Mom and Dad.”
We had wondered when this moment would come, when Katie and her friends would begin to experiment with alcohol, but with the events of this particular summer the concern had passed from our heads. Weeks earlier I had actually hoped for such an occasion, something to indicate that she was just a typical teenager after all, someone caught up in the affairs of her own age group instead of the problems she usually concerned herself with. But there in the doorway, she just looked so small. Not the standard boisterous, drunken teen, but an old woman, her pale skin pulled across sharp cheekbones revealing a pair of eyes that had simply seen too much.

“Why don’t you try to get her settled in her room?” Rick asked. “I’ll get her some water and a little something to eat.”

I rushed to put my arm around her, to help her to her room, but she let out a groan and stepped outside the door, vomited over the railing of the porch. What can you do in these situations? I patted her back and tried to speak comforting words to her while she swore, between the chokes and heaves, “I’m fine—I’m fine, really, Mom. It’s no big—deal.” What could I do, but massage the sharp edges of her shoulder blades and spine as she insisted, “Throwing up—is really not that—bad.”

So this was part of it too. How could Rick and I have been so blind? It was as though time had fast-forwarded and Katie had gone from being reasonably healthy, although clearly distraught, to a state where her sickness was out of control, and we had barely seen it happening. It felt so beyond our control. I know I should have said something, but I just crouched there with her, cemented and transfixed.

“You know how scrambled eggs are really soothing when you—swallow them?”

“Sshhh,” I said, caressing her knobby back.
She braced herself against the rail and looked me in the face. “They’re the same way coming up.”

It seemed that after all this time, I would have come up with something to say. That in my spare moments during the day, I would have previewed this conversation in my head, outlined all the words and punctuating gestures. It’s not as if I hadn’t seen the problem. But somehow I had not yet considered the words. Why? What else had occupied my mind for all these weeks and months? I reached for something loving to say. Something to simultaneously comfort and admonish her. Something of a plan. But it would have all been lost on her in that state anyway. She wouldn’t have remembered it by morning.

By this time, Rick was there. When she seemed ready, he picked her up, the frail husk of her, and carried her upstairs into her room. I couldn’t recall the last time he had lifted her in that way, like a small child in his arms. I set the glass of water on her bed stand with a piece of toast, but she didn’t touch it.

Wisps of hair lay stuck to her forehead as she rested. I thought she would fall immediately to sleep, but she continued to moan and mumble. “I hope you see this isn’t about me,” she said.

“Katie, we’ll talk about this in the morning.”

“It’s not about my body, Mom. There’s better stuff to be fucked up over. You understand that, right?”

I saw my face in the mirror of Katie’s blackened window. The same contours as hers, but rounder, my brow drawn sharply into lines. “I understand that you are a very sensitive girl, Kate.”
“And all my friends talk about is clothes and boys, and how, how can everyone just wrap themselves up in those kinds of things? I want to make a difference, but it hurts too much. It hurts too much to face it all.”

I wondered, then, how life must look through Katie’s eyes. The constant rushing in of pain and sadness, the inability to look away, except into a life-threatening diversion that, like her normal cares, had gone virtually unnoticed by everyone else.

Rick stood aimless in the center of the room and rubbed his eyes and forehead with his fingertips. It seemed that everyone had aged. I looked to him questioningly, but he only shrugged and left the room.

I didn’t want to leave her here like this, so frail and so alone. I wanted to make everything new and bright, but I didn’t know what this meant anymore. “I love you very much,” I said.

“I love you too, Mom,” came her faint reply.

I traced my finger from the bottom of her ear across the ridge of her jaw and chin. Her face was turned away from me. “I want you to get better, hun. We’ll find a way, okay?”

She was breathing deeply now, slowly.

*   *   *   *   *

I climbed out of bed at seven, when I heard the knocking at the door. I put on my robe and headed downstairs, thinking it was probably Katie’s friends from the night before. Or Stacey’s parents, maybe. Perhaps they had come home from an evening out and discovered a mob of teenagers spilling from the basement up to the garage and out onto the yard. After dealing with the problem, they learned from their daughter that Katie
was missing. Surely they were wondering where she had disappeared to. They had come to make sure she was alright.

An officer was there instead, and it occurred to me that the party must have been broken up by the police. At any rate, it had been discovered that Katie was missing, and now there was someone here to see that she had made it home.

“Officer, it’s fine,” I told him. “My daughter’s right upstairs.”

“I’m afraid it isn’t fine, ma’am,” he said.

She was in trouble. He had taken down the names of those at the party and was informing the parents. I wondered just how much trouble she was in.

“We know about the party at Stacey’s house,” I told him. Katie came home around nine o’clock last night. Believe me, that’s not typical behavior for her. She’s upstairs and—“

“I’m afraid she’s not, ma’am.”

And suddenly I felt all hollowed out. Katie’s running shoes were missing from their spot beside the door. I sprang up the steps to find her room vacant, her brightly-colored comforter spread carefully across the empty bed, and then I knew. For days and days, there were only tears and aching.

And what? A funeral service that would be fruitless to explain, and a burial that, in all truth, I have blotted from my memory. Fortunately, Rick was able to handle the details, to make all the final decisions and arrangements. For me, there is only a black void filled with faceless mourners speaking shapeless words of comfort without sound. There was nothing they could say to me and Rick. There was nothing we could say to
them, to each other, to ourselves. What can you say when a child dies? There are no words, just a flow of memories that can only be accessed through an open wound.

Here is what happened. Katie woke before us and slipped into her running shoes. We learned from the coroner that her sickness had brought on a severe heart condition that was intensified that final morning by dehydration and exertion. They found her body on a gravel road called Bluebell three miles east of town. We were given her belongings in a plastic sack.

Everyone copes differently, or so they say. Rick brought in a vase of wildflowers every day until they no longer bloomed. The flowers of the summer’s end: honeysuckles, bleeding hearts, and wild lilies. He said they showed him Katie’s presence there.

Together we sorted through her old things. First, we made a pile for keepsakes. Photographs and trinkets that had been special to her. Her yearbooks and scrapbooks. Ribbons from her track meets. A collection of drawings she’d begun at school. We made a separate pile for charity. All the stylish pillows, blankets, and bedroom decorations that I’d bought for her became part of this pile. They were always more than what she’d wanted anyway. The same was true of much of the clothing in her closet. Most of it was unworn. The things she’d worn regularly, the faded jeans, tee shirts, and running shorts, were set into a separate pile for the trash bin. They were so thoroughly used that no one would have wanted them.

I have been told that in the mourning process, the grieved will often hesitate to throw out all the clothing of their lost loved ones, that they feel this to be a thoughtless betrayal. It is said that a caring widow, ever hopeful, will leave her deceased love’s
favorite suit hanging up in the closet, neatly pressed above a polished pair of shoes. For just in case.

I did not want to get rid of Katie’s shoes. Although I didn’t know why, I put them, heavy with sweat and dust, into a shoebox that I slid onto the top shelf of my closet, and when everything was finished, when the gravel roads were hard with cold, I slipped them on, and earth came clouding off the laces as I pulled them tight, absorbing, embracing the contours of a set of toes like mine, an arch as high, a heel as wide, and then I stepped outside, began to stroll and felt my pace, my pulse quicken as my strides grew ever longer, lighter.
Needing You

In the beginning, she said some things I thought were strange. How knowing us—
knowing both of our hearts and cores—was like knowing one of us was dieing. She said
it was our living that made it that way.

I don’t miss her, but I miss who I used to think she was. Who she could have
been. I do miss having someone there, but not the moodiness, the vacancy. I miss the
way it used to be. Before everything that I knew and was—and everything she believed
and wished to be—dug such a rift between us.

It’s for the best, her leaving. The life I want is out of reach with her. And she
knows that. And she needs something different too.

I didn’t mind switching the plates on that old car of mine, the one that’s hers now.
I had to take the old ones back to the office in town anyway.

The bolts were stubborn though, bent and rusted, and the wind bit. I had to use a
socket wrench to unfasten them one by one. I dropped the nuts and washers into a pile on
the brown grass while she shivered and hugged herself there in the wind.

Then I started loosening the bolts up and asked her how work was going, but she
only sniffed and flipped her hair the way she does when she wants to hide her face.

“Go inside,” I said, and I tossed my keys down at her feet. It struck me that she
needed a key to get into my place now, and that it was my place, not ours. They landed
with a detached clink. “It’s too cold out. Just go inside.”

She didn’t leave. Just stood there with her arms crossed, her knees bent a little.
Watching me. Watching my bare back—I knew it—and I felt naked, which was stupid.
My coat kept riding up because of the wind and the way I was crouching, and I knew this would make her sad.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“There’s nothing to be sorry about,” I told her. I knew she had to be a little anguished. She had told me this. She needed to be tortured, not just now, but always. It was part of how she stayed herself. She couldn’t be these things with me. I wouldn’t let her.

I pried loose the old plate and handed it to her. She set it on the picnic table and passed me the new one. Flat and shiny, it looked out of place next to the faded gray paint of the old car.

I started fumbling with it. My hands were numb a little, cracked and white, and it was getting hard to work. The bolts weren’t really long enough, so it was hard to get them connected to the parts in back, especially the first one. I needed a hand. To keep the plate still while I got things started.

“Hold this,” I said, and I think she might have jumped a little. “Get down here,” I told her. “Now make sure these holes stay lined up.”

She tossed her hair again. To make a wall between us. Through the cracks were charcoal smudges, streaks of sadness, hurt and shame.

“Hold still!”

“I’m sorry!” she said. “You shouldn’t have to do this.”

But I didn’t mind it, and I told her so. “You knew I would, though.”

“I mean any of this,” she said, sobbing now. “I’m sorry for tangling you up in my mess.”
I wanted to touch her face, to heal the soul that ached from hurting me. That would have embarrassed her though, made her feel guiltier still.

The things I wanted always crushed her. The things I cherished, all that made me breathe. And she confused me. She and her refusals, her lack of willingness to just accept. Just be.

We needed to be on our own. We both did, and we knew it. In that moment, though, we knelt together side by side on the cold earth, its moisture seeping past our skin into our bones, and our hands worked together for a time, our shoulders gently touching.
A lot of people wonder why I want to work with “those kind of people.” That’s how they ask it. Their brows get all tight, and their mouths shape carefully around the words, as if to avoid contact. I tell them I see the good in people, and I want to help bring it out of them. Although I’ve never been the victim of any sort of abuse myself, that doesn’t stop me from wanting to help others. On the other hand, I can’t stand people who act like they’ve been victimized in some way when really they haven’t. Take my sister Kayla, for example. Since we were kids, all she’s done is complain about how terrible life has been to her. You can’t listen to a word she says.

I really get to make a difference in kids’ lives here at Oak Ranch Academy, even though most of my co-workers call our jobs glorified babysitting. Oak Ranch is a treatment center for boys with histories of violence and assault. My job is to supervise evening activities once the kids get done with classes at the on-site school. There are also times when I have to work weekends or overnight shifts, but even that isn’t so bad, depending on how well the kids are getting along.

Sometimes people ask me if it’s scary working here. “Aren’t some of the kids pretty big?” they’ll ask. Of course, there’s an element of danger. Blake Rosendahl used to pick his nose until it bled and then suck the blood down the back of his throat and hawk it in your face. But he’s only ten, and the smallest kid here. Poor little guy.

We’re trained to physically restrain the kids if they become a harm to themselves or others. Don’t think I’m scared to do it. I might only be five foot three, but I’m pretty tough. I take Tae Kwon Do. Besides, the kids are almost always nice to me. They always call me either “Ma’am” or “Miss Kimmie,” and depending on who’s around, they
might even give me a little bit of a whistle as they walk past. They’re all really good kids, but they have to act tough, you know.

You do have to look out for Patrick Crawford—not because he’s mean, but because he’s so terribly unstable. But you can’t blame him. There was a whole expose on 60 Minutes about his abuse at the psych ward in Lake City. He’s a pain in the neck to restrain because he’ll bite and throw head-buts, and you can’t put him in isolation either because he’ll smear his own shit all over the wall. He wears orange, the color they give to runners. On the back it says, “Oak Ranch Academy – 1-800-555-SAFE.” Fortunately, he’s a little fat, and his gawky feet point outward when he runs, so keeping up with him is about like tracking an ostrich with a broken leg. He’ll be bawling something like, “My peers, they hate me, and the Lord himself can’t stand my soul!” Blubbering and frothing at the mouth, the poor kid will be howling some psycho-behavioral mumbo jumbo. “No cognitive restructuring, no god damn anti-psychotic medications can save my deplorable soul!” And all you can do is follow him at a safe distance—make sure he doesn’t go onto the road.

Not everyone is such a pain in the ass. Take Marcus Brown. He’s one of my favorites. I guess it’s because he reminds me of someone else. Or maybe just a representation of someone.

It’s kind of a long story, but here goes.

See, once I watched this special on PBS about Emmet Till, the black boy from Chicago who was lynched in Mississippi for supposedly wolf-whistling at the wife of a white shop-owner. He was just a boy, but a gang of grown white men tortured him to death—drilled a hole in the back of his skull. They said, “We’ll show him not to mess
with our women,” and they weighted down his body with a big fan from a cotton gin and threw him in the river. The actor who depicted Till in the reenactment, that’s who Marcus Brown looks like. So, I have this goofy soft spot for him.

According to the documentary, nobody could agree on how big Emmett Till was when he was killed. Some said he was just a boy, one with a learning disability, or possibly even a speech impediment at that, but others argued that he looked like a full-grown man. Truth is, he was fourteen years old. Some monster, right? The murderers went unpunished. I couldn’t believe this could happen—and within my parents’ lifetime! Then a situation occurred in my life that made me realize maybe the situation wasn’t really so far removed after all.

Let me explain. I have this friend named Faith, and last summer—this was right before I started working here at Oak Ranch—she asked me to go to a party with her. I didn’t want to because I had to get up early the next morning for a food drive we were having. Plus, the party was over on Sycamore, where my boyfriend Zach always told me never to hang out. He told me when girls went to parties in that neighborhood, they got drugged and raped. I told him it would be a blessing to be drugged and raped, but he looked at me like I was a freak.

“I mean, if you were going to have to be raped,” I added.

When his expression didn’t change I said, “Well, as opposed to just—completely conscious—a sharp object to your throat—feeling everything!”

Kayla used to talk about this. Tried to talk me into believing this had happened to both of us. But like I said, it was complete bullshit.

Zach nodded and added, “Yeah, it’d be better to just be passed the hell out.”
I started to say something, but Zach had had enough. “Just don’t go to the goddamn party on Sycamore!” he said. Then he muttered, “Bunch of niggers.”

I never could stand him talking this way, but he had redeeming qualities.

Anyway, Zach left for Canada on a fishing trip with all his buddies, so I didn’t have anything to do that night. I wasn’t planning on going to the party, but Faith came over and got me. I told her I’d go for just a few minutes—that I’d have one beer. As it turns out, I got so trashed that night that I went home with this guy named Joe Hunter, who I didn’t even know. It totally screwed things up with Zach.

I do remember meeting Joe. He said something flirty and plastered the label from his Bacardi on my can of Bud Light, and then gave it back to me with a bright smile. Like he was trying to claim me or something. I knew Zach would be pissed if heard I was flirting with some black guy, so I didn’t really talk to him too much. I didn’t even think he was that cute, but I guess you change your mind about things when you get a certain amount of alcohol in you. I went to go talk to Faith, and the three girls she was standing with told me to stay away from Joe Hunter—that guy I was just talking to—that he had a really bad reputation. One of the girls told me they used to be friends, but then she started blacking out whenever he was around, like he was drugging her or something, and doing stuff to her while she was asleep.

See, this is what I mean about people who want to be the victim. They can’t admit their own fuckups, or they just want attention, and so they make up stories like this. Of course, I didn’t want to be a bitch and say something like that, so I just kept my mouth shut. I peeled off the stray Bacardi label from my can and threw it in the trash.
After that, I must have started doing shots or something, although Faith later said she didn’t remember anything like that. I don’t remember leaving the party, but I do recall the moment I entered Joe’s room. He had a poster of a topless woman on the wall across from the door. It seemed to hang in the air, and it was spinning sometimes. I felt like it was floating at the end of a mile-long hallway, even though I realized in the morning that the room was pretty small. The poster looked all sparkly and seemed to be waving about, rippling like water, but all kinds of bizarre colors. I was pretty sure there was music coming from it.

Blankness. And then his silhouette on top of me.

He must have had some kind of crazy lights set up in there because it seemed the room was filled with dark, bright magenta and green. I didn’t know what was going on, just started noticing his sculpted shoulders and chiseled sides. I remember kind of admiring that for a moment, enjoying the lights and the spinning. And then it occurred to me—he wasn’t Zach. I began to panic. I tried to roll out from under him, but my body wouldn’t move.

I think he was saying something, but all I could hear was the music, pounding rhythms pulsing pink and green.

I tried to tell him to stop, and then I blacked out again.

I’m sure he must have stopped. I mean, you’d think a person would.

The next morning, it took me a minute to figure out where I was. I felt like the same song had been playing all night long, the song coming out of the poster, the one of the girl. I couldn’t even hear myself think. Sometimes I try to remember how that song went, but I just can’t hear it.
Anyway, Joe begged me to stay—offered me some grape Kool-Aid out of a little fridge by the side of his bed, but I had that food drive to go help out with. As I was finding my clothes, I noticed a thick dark scar across his abdomen, and I knew there had been some kind of story about it, but I couldn’t remember what and didn’t ask. I apologized and walked home. I think he really liked me. Poor guy, I didn’t mean to lead him on.

Later that day, I asked Faith what she remembered about the night. She said I’d just gone to the gas station for some candy, and then she just didn’t see me again, and her next-door neighbor, Jimmy Ramirez said the same thing—I was there and dead sober one minute, and the next minute, I was gone. Jimmy has always been really nice. He used to joke around about how if Zach and I ever broke up he was going to have to marry me. Jimmy looked pretty shocked when I told him what happened.

I asked the two of them, “Have you guys ever been so drunk you hallucinated?”

“No, man,” Jimmy said. “That’s messed up, mama!”

He started to say something, but I interrupted. “How fucked up were you guys?” I asked.

Faith sort of looked around and said, “I wasn’t really drinking.”

Jimmy looked like he had more to say, but I had to run. I was feeling pretty nauseous.

Zach really hated Faith after that. He said she should have come to look for me, especially since she hadn’t been drinking. “She should have tried to call your phone or something,” he said, but I knew it was my fuckup.
Anyway, that’s where the whole Emmett Till thing comes full circle. When I told Zach about what happened—over the phone, of course, since he was fishing for the week—he told me, “I’ll kill this guy, don’t think I won’t. Me and the guys, when we get back, we’ll lynch his nigger ass. We’ll show him who not to mess with.” I sure was glad they were in a different country for a week—that they had that time to cool down. There could have been a real live lynching, right here in this town. If they’d been home, they would have done it. I know they would have. Instead, he just broke up with me.

When I saw Jimmy on the sidewalk later that week, he exclaimed to me, “Girl! I’ve been looking all over for you, mama! I heard about what happened to you.” He told me he’d been visiting a friend down on Sycamore and people had been talking about it. This surprised me of course, because for the most part, I didn’t really even know those people, and Zach sure as hell didn’t know them.

Why would they care if we broke up?

“Ol’ boy decided to run his mouth about it like it was something to be proud of,” he said.

I just couldn’t picture Zach going down there and doing something like that.

“God damn it!” said Jimmy. “I knew that was what happened!” He looked me in the eyes and asked if I was okay.

I told him, “Yeah, it just hurts.”

“That twisted son of a bitch!” he said, and wrapped his arms around me. “No one has the right to hurt you, girl. No one, ever.”

I knew Jimmy meant well, but I told him I didn’t want to hear him talk about Zach that way.
Jimmy got all weird and kind of shook me. He said, “Girl, have you heard a thing I’ve been saying to you?”

I didn’t want to get into this with Jimmy. I told him I had to leave.

Sure it was painful, but the breakup was for the best. I didn’t want to be dating a racist anyway.

Long story short, Marcus has kind of become a symbol to me. Poor kid. He’s been here for over five months longer than his court order called for. The problem is, he really doesn’t have a home to go back to. His mom is a total crack whore who can’t even take care of herself, so when he goes for “home visits” he goes to his Auntie Sheri’s in Green Bay, but she can’t support him full-time. Adam Maxwell said Marcus sells drugs when he goes home, but I know for a fact Marcus can’t even count change. You can’t blame him—how can you expect a kid to learn addition and subtraction when he’s busy trying to figure out how he’s going to eat that night, or whether he’s going to be beaten senseless? It’s cute though—when the boys play board games on the main floor of the cottage at night, sometimes they play monopoly. Marcus is always the banker. It’s so nice how the other kids humor him.

Adam also said Marcus brags about belonging to a gang in Green Bay, and that’s why he laces his right shoe up in baby blue every day when he gets done with school. I have to make him put the white lace back in before he goes to class in the morning because the dress code is stricter during school hours. I don’t know anything about gang colors, but Marcus Brown isn’t part of anything like that. He just does it to look cool.

To be honest, I was a little intimidated the first time I saw him. I mean, he is a pretty big kid, tall when he actually stands up straight, and he always has this look as if
he’s plotting. He’s about sixteen. Poor Marcus, he wears a nasty scowl most of the time, and it’s hard to understand him when he talks. What a nice kid, though. It took me a while to figure it out. He started telling me about his family situation, and his problems with the other kids at Oak Ranch. He gets into a lot of fights, but when I come along and tell him to stop he respects my authority.

Marcus is probably the only kid here who Adam Maxwell didn’t used to pick on. Adam said it was because they were working together running drugs in an out of this place, but I know he’s full of shit. It was really just because he knew Marcus would be strong enough to defend himself. With the exception of Marcus, Adam used to rile all the other kids up just so he could beat them down, and of course, I hated him for that. He told me he enjoyed it, enjoyed showing them who was boss. One day he grabbed Mikey Martin by the throat and put him up against a wall, all because Mikey didn’t say “Yes sir,” when told to belt his pants tighter. The kids like to slouch their pants, you know. Well, dumbass Adam Maxwell weighs probably 200 pounds, and before I knew it, he had little Mikey in a full head-lock and was yelling, “Who’s the boss now, bitch?” How therapeutic is that?

I really wish there were video cameras in these cottages because the way the employees handle the kids is out of control. As an employee, I’m a mandatory reporter in cases of child abuse, but if I reported every instance I’ve witnessed here, there would be about three people left with jobs. The older staff, even the teachers in the schools, tell me, “Kimmie, you have to look out for yourself and your fellow employees. Sometimes kids get hurt.”
Well, like I was saying, Adam was especially cruel, and I told him right to his face that if he didn’t straighten up I would tell Murry Kipling and have him fired, but all he said was, “Kimmie, there’s gonna come a time when one of these kids is gonna jump you, and you’re gonna need some help from other staff, and you know what? Nobody’s going to even notice.”

I didn’t know what this had to do with me talking to Mr. Kipling. I went straight up to his office before my shift the next day. I’ve been told he and Adam are friends. Drinking buddies or something, I supposed, but didn’t really care. I told him all about Adam’s attitude, and showed him the notes I’d been taking in my behavior log. Mr. Kipling told me he’d look into it, and he took care of the problem immediately. I felt really bad about Adam losing his job, but it really was better this way. Mr. Kipling also asked if I ever went to any of the bars in town. I told him no, but I think it’s nice of him to show concern for his employees—to make sure they have a way of dealing with stress from the job.

Anyway, within a day or so, Sam Thomas got transferred to my building, Cottage 5, and Adam Maxwell got the boot. Katie Schumacher said he didn’t get fired—just got transferred to another cottage, but she doesn’t know what she’s talking about. I see a car that looks like his in the parking lot, but I’m sure it’s just a different black Civic. They’re pretty common.

Anyway, Sam’s a reliable guy to have on the floor, and there are always at least two other employees in the building. I never feel unsafe. Of course, sometimes there’s a fight during the night, or some poor, scared kid starts freaking out and needs extra staff attention. I’ve also seen it where two of the staff just disappear for hours at a time. Have
sex. Get high. Whatever. I’ve even heard rumors of counselors having sex with the kids when they’re on duty during the night, and about the boys raping one another in their rooms, but I think I’ve never heard anything strange coming from any of the bedrooms. This is how I know my sister was always so full of crap. All the accusations she made toward Dad—somebody would have heard her. Heard me.

Anyway, I know a lot of kids at Oak Ranch are here because of issues dealing with sexual assault, but they’re all recovering, you know? There’s nothing to be scared of. Tonight, for example, it’s me and Sam on second floor. Except he went downstairs to help resolve some little scuffle. Upstairs here, there isn’t a noise to be heard.
Long shot: Dr. Rob Jeffries, the college president and closest thing to God himself around here, explains the Seven C’s of Christian Courtship during Monday morning chapel. Pan left toward his slide show, a photo of this Barbie-and-Ken-meets-Bible-study couple in their late teens across the table from a drab-looking middle-aged pair denouncing the evils of premarital sex, I suppose, over tea and crumpets. Now cut to me, chewing off a hangnail, bored as fuck. I have no idea what he’s said so far today, except that he actually used the word *courtship*. In a movie he’d be played by Jessica Simpson’s dad.

The auditorium is one of those gigantic numbers with stylish architecture and a sweet sound system. On the weekends the college brings in all kinds of modern praise bands and opens it up to the entire community.

A montage of saints: old housewives who hide behind Revlon and recipe cards exegeting the mystery of the perfect table setting, chicks who sit around cooing about how spiritual a guy is instead of just saying they wanna blow him, and sad balding fucks with their *ministries* and their apocalyptic trash-talk. This morning, however, it’s just plain old daily chapel. Attendance required.

Across the aisle and two rows in front of me Lucy scrawls something in a notebook and yawns. She wears a charcoal colored wool skirt an inch or so past regulation length, a boring black cardigan, and a lightly frosted Sunday School-looking hairdo. It’s all theatrics. The nylons, the closed-toed shoes and tasteful lack of piercings—required.
“Chastity!” says Dr. Jeffries. “Chastity must prevail in the Christian dating relationship.” He uses first Corinthians: “’Neither fornicators nor adulterers will inherit the kingdom of heaven.’” Lucy makes a careful note in the margin of her Study Bible. I know what her clitoris looks like. I have photographed it.

Jeffries slaps the podium, and the mic makes an extra pop. Lucy rolls her head slowly sideways and eyes me through slits. This is our game. It’s another Black Monday, otherwise she and I would be sitting side by side passing notes that say things like, “Great party Saturday. Do you feel dirty?”

Often I videotape our little episodes. Sanity sessions, we call them. I’m into film, what can I say? Here at Central I’m listed as an English major, but that will change once I transfer out of here. I really want to just make movies.

Lucy—she’s Central Bible College’s equivalent of a psychology major. “Nouthetic Counseling is the accepted lingo,” she said to me when we first met.

“Sure,” I said. “From the Greek word noutheteo. It means to—“

And here she cut me off, flicked her tongue across the scarlet lacquer of her mouth and placed a finger gently on my lips. “’To grind slowly,’” she said, and I was hooked. This was over a year ago. We’ve been pretty much inseparable ever since. We do our homework together almost every day and spend the holidays with each others’ families. At night, we piss off both our roommates by talking on our cell phones after lights-out in the dorms.

Rob Jeffries Jr. sits diagonally behind me wearing a charcoal blazer and a flashy pinstriped shirt, black on black with a trendy collar. Lots of hair gel and traces of last night’s eyeliner. “Commitment to moral purity!” the microphone booms, “Commitment to
godly standards!” I have on a Sepultura concert t-shirt underneath a classy black sweater in Obsidian from Banana Republic. In my pants pocket there’s an insignificant amount of coke left over from the weekend.

Here’s the aerial shot. A peppering of black throughout the auditorium. This little subculture we have—undercover goths and deviants, punks and ravers, heathens of every stripe, really—we’re sprinkled deliberately here and there, avoiding the appearance of conspiracy. It’s this agreement we all have, to wear black the first day of every week. We joke about our allegiance to Satan. Not Satan as in long incisors, costume make-up and a forked tail, just Satan as in the embodiment of rejection. Rejection of God as God is normally described. Black Monday is a symbol, a nod of encouragement that says we’re all in this together. Most of us are pastor’s kids or have parents who work here at the college. We’re here either because we’re forced or because the tuition’s free. It’s bearable because we have each other. Most of us figure we can rack up as many gen ed credits as possible before transferring on to a real college. Meanwhile, we partake in our own form of fellowship, a society of fakers with a soteriology of lies. I guess you could say we’re just like everybody else.

Our roommates hate us and pray to God that He will save our souls. They imagine it will be their prayers that, at long last, will open up the gates of heaven to accept us awful sinners and make us white as snow. Meanwhile, our closets overflow with contraband: condoms and facial jewelry, miniature television sets, playing cards and secular music. We follow the dress code and don’t break curfew. We don’t go on single dates. Don’t drink. Don’t dance. Don’t attend movie theatres. Or at least this is the mask we wear.
Cut to Amens and nods of approval, mass condemnation of the sins of the flesh as Dr. Jeffries rambles on. Fade to me, hiding in the bathroom and texting Lucy a message that says to meet me in the cemetery after lunch.

Later, in the graveyard, Lucy and I are spilled out over a patch of cold grass, the sounds of our bodies drowning out the last notes clanging forth from the bell tower. Inside the hollow of her hip there’s a little pentagram that reminds me of her integrity and the honesty she has with herself. This, this is when the rest just spins and fades away, and all that’s left is what we share. A reality. An experience, dark and drifting, trapped in a moment of pure loss. My salvation: her hot sweet breath spilling over me.

Dissolve to Lucy, stretched across the grass. She says this place will get to her, that all the songs and smiles will bore their way into her soul and trick her to believe in things that aren’t. She says she’s scared of caving in, believing in the God that she’s been taught to. She says she’s scared that if she stays the way she is, she’ll go to hell.

She doesn’t really have these fears. She speaks them naked, speaks them to the lens of my camera and then laughs.

The rules say you have to live in one of the dorms, but Aaron Wilkins’ cousin doesn’t go to Central. He has a sweet apartment right near campus, so of course we like to get trashed there. All we have to do is get a weekend home pass from the Office of Student Development and our weekends are free and clear.

Tonight starts out like any other, really. The characters: Six or seven kids from Central, including myself, Lucy and Aaron. Also, there’s Aaron’s cousin Matt and
assorted non-Central personnel. I have my camcorder, just because. It’s the ultimate party cam, a Canon XHA1 High Def with a quick focus and great noise reduction.

Cut to a girl who we just met. Red hair. Pretty but exaggerated features. “So let me get this straight,” she says, and I zoom in for the close-up. She’s like a fish pressed up against the glass. “You go to Bible College and you don’t believe in God?” She makes a comic gesture that says she’s confused. “Don’t they like, make you pray and go to church and stuff like that?”

“Yeah,” I tell her, panning slowly leftward. “Everyone here’s in the same boat, believe it or not.” I gesture to my friends from school. “All of us.”

She points to Aaron, a questioning look on her face.

“Oh, he actually does believe,” I tell her, and then I grin. “He just can’t handle the sobriety, that’s all.” It’s a claim I’ve heard him make a thousand times.

“So you just pretend,” she says. “Why?”

“Varying circumstances,” I tell her, panning again around the room. I don’t go into the details about how my jerk dad will disown me completely if I don’t give Bible college a try for at least two years, how I have to do this if I want to see my little brother grow up. That kind of thing is a real buzz kill, you know.

Her face is overdrawn. A caricature of confusion.

“Now I’m in my second year. Next fall I’m transferring to a state school for film and photography. I’ll have to make up for a semester or so of classes that won’t end up transferring, but since Dad’s paying my tuition I can use my own money for other things. I get a killer discount where I work.” I tap the side of the camcorder lightly, still don’t focus in on the girl. “One thing about Dad is that he’s good for the money.”
“What does he do?”

“Pastors a church.”

The red-head takes a joint that’s handed to her, puts it to her bloated lips. She coughs and says, “It’s been a long time since I’ve been to church.”

“It’s a booming industry,” I tell her. “New Life Christian is like a Gucci purse. Designer spirituality, you know?”

She hands the joint to Lucy who’s taken a seat on a barstool near the couch.

“What about you? Are you being like, held at CBC at gunpoint or something like that?”

“Not exactly,” says Lucy, eyeing the joint in her hand. “But it’s all about expectations, you know? It’s hard to go against the grain. Everyone wants me here.”

“Sure, but it’s your life. Can’t you just tell your parents you don’t believe what they do?”

“My mother’s not alive,” Lucy says, and I move to an extreme close-up. The corner of her face, her left eye, lined in sparkly blue. She has more guts than me, so she finishes her story. Mentions how her mother died, and how it was her last request for Lucy to come here. I zoom in as close as possible and tilt slowly downward to trace a tear that slithers down her face.

After her first year here, Lucy’s grandmother died the same week her mom had passed away the year before. It was a shitty time for me to meet most of her family. Anyway, it was the same thing all over again as far as Lucy not wanting to let anyone down and all.

Lucy continues, “Barring anymore deaths in the family, this will be my last year at Central.” She hands off the joint without hitting it.
The girl points across the room to a group of CBC’ers practicing their club moves. “Nothing like churchy white kids shakin’ their groove thang,” she says lightly. Then she asks, “Doesn’t it feel hypocritical? I mean, don’t you have to like, say you believe in what the school teaches and stuff like that?”

Cue the alternating shot sequence.

Lucy: “That isn’t the worst sin, I’m sure.”

Red-head: “Aren’t you afraid of what will happen if they find out you’re lying?”

Lucy: “Pshh. That’s the least of my worries.”

Red-head: “What’s the biggest?”

Lucy: “Waking up one day and finding I believe this pack of lies.”

It’s cliché, I know, but fade to black.

Back in my dorm room, I survey my video footage. Jackson, my roommate, is only a pain in the ass. They’d have to find some Mickey Mouse Club reject to portray him in a movie. Or maybe Haley Joel Osment, if he’s old enough by now. His hair looks like it’s been styled by his older sister. He points to my film equipment, the stacks of footage spilling over onto his side of the room. “That stuff takes up so much room, man.”

“Relax, would you?” I nudge the stack over closer to my bed, hoping this will shut him up.

“What kind of documentary are you making, anyway?”

I’ve been working on something for Lucy. A Christmas present, maybe. A video collection of all our favorite times together. I’m going to set it to her favorite music. But
this sounds pretty cheesy, so I don’t mention it to Haley Joel. Besides, I’d hate to show him what “our favorite times” consist of.

I arrange a stack of DVDs chronologically and avoid looking at him. I decide to tell him about a different project. “I want to explore the effect of God in peoples’ lives,” I don’t mention that the film will focus on people whose lives have been destroyed by organized religion. Victims of holy wars and fundamentalist terrorism, people afflicted by every type of bigotry and abuse in the name of some god or other. Lucy’s been helping me out with this, helping me make contacts and develop questions for the interviews. It’s something we feel strongly about.

“That’s great,” my roommate says. “I mean, I really believe you can use technology for the purpose of ministry.” Cut to Haley Joel, ultra sincere and regrettably engaged in the discussion. He closes the paper he’s writing on his computer and looks to me, all ears. Cue the Christian catchphrases: “Satan’s really gained a foothold on the earth through television and other media. It’s good to know there are Christian voices attempting to balance things out.”

Little Haley Joel. He knows absolutely nothing about life outside his little haven of hymn books and home-cooked meals. I’d really like to see him just grow up. Kill the angel chorus and cut to this little fucker, hog-tied on a kitchen table with a ball gag in his mouth and twenty cheerleaders absolutely defiling him. This is his salvation.

“Yeah,” I tell him. “Balance is important.”

“What other subjects are you interested in?” he asks. I respect that he’s trying to talk instead of acting all superior like he usually does, but I’m still not too excited about dealing with him. I pull on a dirty pair of socks and think of just getting the hell away
from him. The very idea of him grates on my nerves. Him and his standards for righteousness, him and his fucking rules.

“Brad?”


And the response, canned and scripted: “Gospel or Contemporary Christian?” Because to him, anything else sounds distressing, obnoxious and panicky.

“Secular music,” I say. I’d like to tell the little fuck that the music he understands as dark and evil is really just a gut reaction to the absurd demands that assholes like him put on people. That it’s all about rejecting things that ought to be rejected. That it’s all about hope and a desire for a better world. But this would all be lost on him.

I slip on my shoes and tell him I’m going for a walk.

“You better hurry though,” he says. “It’s almost curfew.”

I hustle toward the door. So what if I miss curfew? Sometimes it’s better to take a demerit than to have to interact with him.

The following Monday, while I’m checking in for chapel I notice Carter Jensen wears a band of metal spikes around his wrist. An accident, I guess. “Jensen,” I whisper and gesture to his hand. I’m thinking of the student guidebook: “Avoid extremes in fashion and the appearance of worldliness.”

Sometimes I envy him, envy the way he doesn’t give a shit—takes his demerits with a grain of salt. Last year alone he racked up over two hundred dollars in fines and had to sit before the judiciary board. Would have been kicked out of school but his
mom’s the head of Women’s Ministries. The leading female who would play this role: Your childhood fucking lunch lady. Anyway, the kid’s a kind of legend, really. Everybody knows he isn’t saved.

Carter checks his name off the list and says, “I feel rebellious. What can I say?” He shrugs and ducks inside the auditorium as Tricia Searcy saunters past in black velour, floor-length and very clingy. She wears a pair of chunky platforms. The dress is risky for Central standards. Tricia stopped believing last semester but she’s afraid to tell her folks back home. She winks at me and whispers, “Happy Monday.”

Today we have a speaker in from Argentina, some missionary goof from Buenos Aires, and there’s this ridiculous buzz in the air. There’s a short introduction from Nate McGuinness, the head of Student Council, who wears a purple shirt and flashy tie. He isn’t one of us, for sure, but everybody knows he’s a sinner. A complete flamer, God bless him. It’s an undeniable truth, but he has a charismatic speaking style and an impeccable ministry portfolio, so no one really touches it. His salvation: A clever disguise and a front row seat at Chippendales. Nate yammers on about the Argentinian and his tremendous ministry, how souls are being won, and I survey the room to find my people.

Mandy Olson has on the same black sweater she wears every Monday. It’s hand-crocheted and there’s a matching scarf. Mandy’s from around here too, went to my high school. She’s an artist, really into the music scene. We go to lots of shows together. Cannibal Corpse. Cradle of Filth. Her dad is an associate pastor at my dad’s church. Dad says he’s a joy to work with. Mandy, though. She’s a real problem child—isn’t even baptized. Frankly, I’m surprised she was even admitted to the college.

The Argentinian is difficult to understand and so I don’t try.
I look for Lucy. Up near the front there’s a girl who looks like her, but Lucy doesn’t normally sit so near to the stage. Her hair is down, so I can’t see her profile, and she has on a chunky sweater that looks more gray than anything. It can’t be her.

When the Argentine finishes speaking there’s a series of announcements and a closing prayer.

“Dear heavenly Father,” Nate begins, but then his words get muffled in my mind. Crosscut to him on the table next to Haley Joel, bound and gagged, while I offer up my own prayer.

Dear Creator God Who Isn’t There: Keep me far from all of this. Keep me from the snobbery, the well-pressed blazers, the monotony. Keep me from the smugness and disguised contempt. Keep me from the boredom, the shitty music and the goddamn dinner parties. Bless me, I pray, with a lifetime of experience, learning and pure debauchery, late, late nights, and Sunday morning hangovers. In your name I pray. Amen.

Then begins the mass exodus for Columbus Hall. In fifteen minutes I have a World Civ class that I should head to, but I hang out in the foyer, look for Lucy. Eventually, I spot the girl in the chunky sweater. She’s chatting with a group of Lucy’s friends, but I’m still not convinced it’s her until she turns around and sends me a beaming smile. It’s camouflaged a bit. Her lipsticks’s just a little lighter than her signature shade. “Brad!” she says.

“Lucy.” I look her up and down and I can’t help but smile. “What’s this?” I ask. The sweater is a blend of different chunky yarns and black and gray. Bits of white pop out like hidden stars and Lucy strikes a pose.
“It’s called Boucle,” she says, and plucks the nubby fabric. She stops and asks me, “What?”

“Nothing,” I tell her. “It’s Black Monday though.” I don’t want to scold her, so I shift gears a little. “Did you see Tricia Searcy?”

“Wonderful costuming,” she says with a roll of her eyes. “She got sent back to her dorm to change, you know. They’ll probably make her write some kind of essay as a penance. Something about not being a stumbling block to her Christian brethren.”

I laugh, glad the tension’s eased, sling my bag onto my shoulder and start toward the front doors. “Come on. What’s with the sweater?”

“It’s black,” she says defensively. “Sort of anyway. Besides, it’s new. I had to wear it.” Today she isn’t wearing eye shadow, but her smile illuminates her eyes. Her face looks bright and pale at the same time. She slugs me on the arm and says, “Black Monday. Come on. Aren’t there enough rules to follow around here?”

And then she just turns and heads the other way, towards her dorm. Just leaves me standing there.

The scene: Lucy’s bag has spilled across the floor of my old bedroom, the guest room. Lipstick and sunglasses and Basic Bible Interpretation: A Guide to the Study of God’s Word. It’s not a book I recognize as being from a class.

Anyway, the sound track for the scene would be some kind of smooth R & B. My hand is creeping up her skirt and she says, “Wait.”

Cue the screeching record halt noise.

“What?”
“Wait,” she says, and sits upright, props herself against the headrest. “I’ve just been thinking lately.”

“That’s never bad,” I tell her, curious to know what’s on her mind.

“It is though,” she says. “I’m so confused.” She tells me how she’s worried, how she’s scared of what will happen if we’re wrong, wrong about God.

“What if we really are going to have to answer for our actions?” she asks. “What if God really does have a massive file cabinet with all our deeds listed inside? All the partying, all the drinking and the sex. Brad, I don’t want to go to hell.”

“Lucy,” I take her hand. “You know you can’t believe in something out of fear.”

“I’ve been praying for God to make me believe,” she says. “Believe for real.”

I have no idea where this has come from. Rewind a sec. Rewind to just a few weeks earlier, to Lucy smoking pot with me in bed and being real. “Praying to a God you consider a monster?” I ask.

“I never should have said that. I shouldn’t have thought it.”

“You were being honest.”

Lucy sniffs and says, “I wish I weren’t.”

And then she’s crying and she needs to be comforted, and I feel like a real asshole for wishing I could comfort her over something else – anything at all – just something more legitimate than this. Problems with school, with her family, whatever. It’s not that I don’t remember how it was for me, before. The shifting of an entire worldview and all the horror and confusion that went with it. I hadn’t always rejected the faith I was brought up in. I thought we were past this, though – that she and I had put aside this bullshit years ago. But even so, she’s crying in my arms and I can see a fear as real as what I felt back
then, but in reverse, and I just wish that I could make it go away. She cries quietly, with little hiccups, and pretty soon she pushes me away, rising to gather her things. “I have to go,” she says.

Sunday night I call her on the phone to see how she’s doing. It’s been the same thing the last three nights in a row: Lucy, tortured and confused, unable to eat or sleep. I wish I could be there with her now, but Sunday nights we’re required to be in our dorm rooms. I talk with her all night. Early on, my roommate threatens to complain to the Resident Director. I leave the room, against the rules, not so that I won’t keep him up, but so he won’t hear the things I say to Lucy.

Beneath the staircase to the bottom floor there’s a little cubby-hole where I curl up and talk to her on my cell. It’s not that I’m trying to convince her of my beliefs. I only want to remind her of her own. And I swear I mean it when I tell her, “I only want what’s best for you, Lucy.”

The next day Lucy isn’t in chapel, so I look for her in Civ class, but the lecture hall is pretty big. Class is in the pit, the basement of Columbus Hall. Dr. Lucas is rattling on about our nation’s supposedly Christian founding. Our text is called *Defending the Declaration: How the Bible and Christianity Influenced the Writing of the Declaration of Independence*. Of course, we can’t have a normal class on Western Civilization here at CBC. It’s more like “Western Church History from the Asshole Point of View.” More brainwashing and imposed ideals.
I’m nervous about how Lucy’s been acting lately. I look for her and send forth the closest thing to a prayer that I’m capable of. “Please, let her be wearing black.” It’s Monday, after all.

I take careful notes, avoid the appearance of not giving a shit. Besides, Dr. Lucas’ exams are notoriously tough, and Dad will freak if I send home another report card that looks like the last one. All the while, I look around for Lucy, but she isn’t there.

Back in my dorm room, I call her on the phone.

“Hello?” she says.

“Hey,” I say casually. “ Noticed you were MIA from class today, and chapel. What’s up?”

“Yeah,” she says. “You know, I just needed some down time. A personal day or something like that.”

“You feeling any better?”

“Sure,” she mumbles, and her voice sounds far away. “You ever just need to get away from everything?”

“Every damn day of my life,” I tell her, laughing. I know she doesn’t have any more classes for the rest of the day, so I suggest we go for a walk. “Come on, we can sit in the tree behind Columbus and video the people walking by.” It’s this little game of ours, a way of staying sane.

“I don’t know,” she says. “I have a lot of homework.”

“Come on,” I tell her. “I’ll fill you in on what you missed in class today.”

“What did I miss?”
I really want to make her laugh, just make her happy. “First of all, Dr. Lucas had this massive blob of grease across his shirt, the fucking slob.”

Lucy laughs.

“It was the pale yellow one, you know, the one that’s always splitting open at the buttons?”

“You’re talking about Dr. Lucas,” she says. “All his shirts are splitting open.”

“No, for real,” I tell her, and I’m sure I’m making headway. “He had us take this quiz, and while he thought no one was looking he starts picking this nasty scab on his elbow. He’s just up there in front, chiseling away it. You ever seen him do that?”

“Brad, you’re terrible,” says Lucy, but she’s laughing and agrees to meet me outside her dorm.

She looks a little pale when I pick her up. The way a cokehead who hasn’t slept in days usually looks. But she still wants to climb our tree. From a branch fifteen feet or so off the ground we have a clear view of half of campus. We can see the people below us, but they rarely notice us above them.

“Oh,” says Lucy. “There goes Spiffy Jacket Boy.” We don’t know his name, just the careful way he dresses.

“Off to spike his hair and meet his boyfriend,” I tell her.

“Stop!” she says, cocking her head and smiling halfway.

“What?” I ask. “Good for him. At least someone’s getting some around here!”

Lucy isn’t laughing.

“Hey,” I start. “Remember that time you and Mandy were tripping on acid and we made Noah’s ark out of all the stuffed animals back at your place?”
Lucy finally laughs and says, “We didn’t have two of hardly anything, so we just paired them all up and hoped for the best. Remember?”

“Remember? I videotaped it for Christ’s sake!”

“You’ve got to get rid of those tapes, Brad. Do you know what kind of deep shit we would be in if anyone ever saw them?”

And then it hits me: Lucy isn’t wearing black. “Hey!” I tug at the zipper on the collar of her sweater and lecture her jokingly. “You’ve really been slacking regarding Black Monday, ma’am.”

“Cut it out, Brad,” she says and slugs me lightly on the shoulder.

“But it all was your idea!”

“Maybe I needed to do laundry, okay? Besides, it’s maroon. It’s practically as dark as black anyway. From a distance.”

“Lucy, seriously,” I tell her. “If you need to talk this through some more, it’s fine.”

“It’s just—I said. I’m afraid I just don’t feel the same way I used to.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning I really don’t think this is all a load of crap the way we thought it was. I mean it. I’m sure.”

Crosscut to a sketchy comic image: Me, rending my fucking garments and stomping on the ground. Is it really too late? Can this all be undone? “Is there something you haven’t been telling me?” I ask her. “Something specific that changed things for you?”
“Does there have to be an event?” she asks. She doesn’t wait for me to answer.

“Brad, I’ve made up my mind.”

Crosscut to the comic book me, a shiny nine-millimeter pointed at my head.

“I feel different inside.”

I pause to think about it. “Well, that would really change a lot of things.”

“We can’t go on the way we have been.”

“You don’t want to have sex? Don’t want to drink and things like that?”

“That’s just it,” she says. “It’s not that I feel like I shouldn’t. I just don’t want to.
The desire just isn’t there anymore. God has changed me. Maybe I’ve finally been s…”

“Lucy…”

“You know, Brad, a lot of people have been praying for me back home. Like
they’ve sensed that something was wrong, that something’s been incomplete with me and
I’ve been holding God at an arm’s length.” She shrugs and says, “Maybe God is
answering their prayers and reaching out to me.”

To me, this feels like learning someone I love is gravely ill—is on the verge of
dying. For a minute I’m afraid of falling from the tree. I try one last time to remind Lucy
of everything she believed, everything she’s supposed to believe, but she starts quoting
scriptures, going on about how God’s ways are higher than our ways.

She says, “How can we ever hope to fully understand the mysteries of God?”

Crosscut again: Me, on a goddamn street corner considering just stepping into
traffic. “Lucy, you’ve said before that that’s just a copout! A reason not to think, not to
evaluate things for yourself! What’s changed?”

“I don’t know,” she says. “I just don’t know, but it has changed.”
I feel the need to help her – like she’s dangling from cliff and won’t give me her hand to pull her up and save her. She puts her finger to my chin, to lift my face to look at her. “I’m sorry, but we’re through.”

Friday Aaron asks me, “Hey, where’s Lucy? It’s been a while since she’s been here to party.”

“Don’t ask,” I tell him. “I don’t know what’s up with her.”

“I heard she kind of had a turning point.” He sees me frowning. “Maybe it’s not such a bad thing.”

“Not so bad?” I explode. “Well, I guess it makes sense that you wouldn’t think so.”

“Hey, I’ve always told you I’m a believer myself. I just can’t—“

I finish the statement for him. “Handle the sobriety. Right, right. Well, what’s the point then? I mean, if you truly believe in all that shit, isn’t there supposed to be some kind of peace in it? Something like that?”

“There is a peace, I guess,” he says. “There’s just a lot of question and conflict in it, just like with everything else. Maybe Lucy’s figured that out.”

All I can say is, “Jesus Christ, I hope not.”

The weekend passes, and still no word from Lucy. She won’t return my phone calls and I’m starting to get antsy. “She’ll snap out of it,” says Mandy while we’re waiting for chapel to begin. Both in black, we normally wouldn’t be sitting next to each
other, but I guess she’s sort of consoling me today. It’s like, a special occasion or something.

“I hope so,” I whisper, and I really do. I hope it from the bottom of my core, hope that she will just switch back to normal, that she will forget all this nonsense and regain who she was before. “This cannot be permanent.”

But in walks Lucy, past the row we’re sitting in, up toward the front, with no look backward. The moment has an air of finality somehow, the door to a tomb being slammed shut. She wears a long flowing skirt, blue with little flowers on it. A silver jacket, belted at the waist, and matching boots. Her hair is set in dainty little twists, pinned up with sparkly plastic flowers. Between her beauty and her total rejection of me—of herself—the breath is gone from me completely. I picture Lucy caught in an eternal web of email prayer chains and Sunday potlucks, fixing lunch for seven kids.

I will save her from all this. I will deliver her from this hell.

My grandma in Ohio sends me care packages with Trident gum and microwave popcorn. She packs it up with a neat little card inside a carton a little bigger than a shoe box. She sends them maybe once a month.

I take one of these boxes from the top shelf in my closet and consult my list. What to include? I have an old lip ring that belonged to Lucy. I tape it to a note card and toss it in the box, along with some movie ticket stubs and a pack of Zig-Zags. I also have a couple pairs of her underwear, lacy scandalous-looking ones. I throw in old notes, photographs, and printed emails. I never thought that it would come to this.
I have plenty of footage of her. The first CD I choose to include is labeled, *September 20 – Lucy on God and Predestination.* “It’s the equivalent of God designing a cat and then telling it to bark like a dog,” she had said. “And then shoving a fiery foot up its ass because it isn’t able to.”

I also use *October 13 – Downtown Club Rave* and its aftermath, *E-Party at Michael’s.* There’s some more laid-back discussion type material already saved on my hard drive. The stuff I’d been collecting for her Christmas gift. Once I get all the important stuff transferred onto my computer I use an editing program called Final Cut Pro to put it all together. Here’s the end result.

Fade in to a medium close-up of Lucy with her head bowed in prayer. She’s in the student cafeteria looking all pious. Now cut to her driving, just musing casually. “People are easy to fool,” she says behind a lip-sticked smile and bulky fashion sunglasses.

Now the background music starts. Black Sabbath’s “Iron Man.” Cut to Lucy curled up on Aaron’s cousin’s couch. The lighting’s perfect. Lucy pulls a massive bong rip and collapses in a fit of coughs and laughter. “Can you believe we go to Bible College?”

Cut to Mandy with her face blocked out. “How did we wind up here, dude?”

Cut to Lucy. “You should have seen the letter of recommendation from my pastor back at home. My friend Tiffany wrote it!” More laughter, smoke and crippling coughing. “On the church’s letterhead. Her mom’s the secretary.”

Cut to a sequence of sex acts technically illegal in most states, interspersed by a montage of party scenes. Coke. X. Tons of booze. And Lucy, clean and sober, expounding on her total rejection of God.
Dissolve to the car scene where Lucy whispers, “Ssshhh…. We must maintain the lie.”

I burn it all onto a DVD for easy viewing, and with a black sharpie I scratch across the disk, “Lucy.” I put it in the box and tape it shut.

Next, I load my car. My clothes. My video equipment. My books – the ones that aren’t about God.

Jackson storms in from soccer practice and gives me the third degree.

“There’s kind of an emergency,” I tell him, vaguely honest, like I usually am with him. “I need to leave school, and I won’t be back.”

Jackson has a look of panic. I can see he thinks that someone’s died, and I don’t bother telling him otherwise. “Do you need help?”

“You wanna grab that box?” I ask him, pointing to the last of my computer stuff. I head toward the door.

“Where are you going?” he asks, but I don’t answer.

Jackson looks dizzy as I jump into my car and tell him to enjoy having a room to himself. I squeal the tires as I pull out of the parking lot while he stands with his bony legs sticking out of his soccer shorts, his palms in the air, stunned.

The front door of Columbus Hall is open twenty-four hours, so I go inside, expecting to find Dean Wilson’s office closed for the night. A strip of fluorescent light spills out the door across the hallway of the first floor, and I poke my head inside. No one.

Perfect. I don’t really want to come face to face with the guy, but I want to make sure the package I put together makes it to him. I turn the box over in my hands,
remembering my original intent for this footage. A gift to Lucy. Well, it has become a
gift of a different sort.

I glance both ways down the hall and step inside, deposit the box on the desk and
walk away. There is no need to wonder what will become of Lucy once the contents of
the box are viewed by CBC higher-ups. The student handbook and the very culture of the
place itself are very clear about who is welcome as a student here and who is not.

Maybe heaven is the freedom of exile and anonymity, an open road you travel
honestly and earnestly, but with no sure end point. Or the knowledge that you’ve kept
someone from staying put.

Hell could be the staying.

Or the knowledge that you’ve done somebody wrong.

I head to the gas station to fill up my tank for a very long drive. To where? I can’t
go home to Dad – that much is sure – and can’t stay in this town that’s crawling with
memories, crawling with fakers of every sort. I turn up the radio and drive, not knowing
where. And where will Lucy go? She can’t stay here, not any more than I can. After all,
the camera doesn’t lie.
The Escape

The land my family farmed for generations is now home to an eco-tourism hotel with a parrot on the balcony. After my parents passed away, I moved to Mexico City where I lived in a flat with four of my cousins and two of their wives. They too had been forced from their land. I paid my share of the rent with the money I made recovering recyclables from the trash in the surrounding neighborhoods.

My cousins grew tired of the city. Daniel was not happy with his work as a shopkeeper’s assistant; his boss was harsh and unrelenting. Javier’s story was not the same. He owed a lot of money, and he couldn’t pay. His creditors were angry, unkind people, and they threatened to kill him. Although their situations differed, there was one thing they shared: the need to go, to end up someplace else. And so the two of them began to speak of venturing to the United States. These were the two eldest of my cousins, neither of whom was married. They agreed to send money once they were established in Iowa. Javier had some friends there who worked for good money in a plant that processed metal parts for some type of machine. Since they didn’t know any better, they decided to cross the Sonoran desert by foot and almost died.

Each of them took two plastic containers of water and they crossed the barbed-wire fence south of Tucson. In the Sonoran, they learned, temperatures rise to 130 degrees in the summertime. At night they sought refuge in the cool rocks of the mountains. The journey is fifty-plus miles, assuming one goes in the proper direction. Later, Javier said it was impossible to get lost since there was a steady trail of discarded water jugs and other debris along the way.
Their goal was to make it to an Indian reservation on the other side, either that or a federal park. Both locations, they were told, were crawling with immigrants and with smugglers who were willing to transport groups of people for a fee.

Meanwhile, my cousin Ernesto got a good job driving a taxi cab in Mexico City and Raul worked with me in my efforts to recover scraps of tin and plastic. Their wives, Lilia and Adriana walked miles each day to a textile factory where they worked long hours. Since both were newly married, there were no children.

One day, Adriana said to us, “I spoke with Lupe down the hall this morning.” I jumped a little at the mention of her name. Lupe was a beautiful girl, not much younger than myself. She lived with her aunt and mother, and I had begun speaking with her in the evenings. “She says our landlord sold this building,” Adriana said. “They’re going to build another factory here.”

“Nonsense,” said Lilia. “Senor Ramirez makes good money from the rent he gets from the families here. Also, he is a kind man. He would not betray us in that way.”

Raul snorted. “Senor Ramirez is nothing better than a gringo bastard. He doesn’t give a rat’s ass about our family. It is because of his kind that we are in this position to begin with.” I assumed that he was right, that Ramirez was removed from us, and that there was nothing that we shared with him.

Nonetheless, we continued with our work, and Javier and Daniel sent a portion of their earnings every month. Javier sent letters stating his intent to save up enough money so that we too could travel to Iowa. He encouraged us to scrape together what we could as well.
But Raul was stubborn. He said, “There is no way to save our money. We hardly have enough to live as it is. Besides, this is our country. This is where we belong.” He was content to scavenge with me for refuse in the daytime, but Adriana scolded him and said that he should find a better job. Soon she was pregnant, and Raul fell ill.

Lupe and I spent more and more time together. We would walk together to the market in the evenings, and her mother seemed to have a special liking for me, although her aunt was very fierce. Soon, we learned that Lupe had been right, and that our building had been sold. We had one month to find another place. Lilia suggested we move closer to the industrial sector where she and Adriana worked. “Soon,” she said, “It will be difficult for Adriana to make the walk, otherwise.”

The housing of which she spoke was a crowded row of shanties in a neighborhood where crime was very high. Even with the money we received from Javier and Daniel, this was all we could afford, and so we sold off all our extra belongings and moved in. Lupe’s family ended up a few miles away, but we continued seeing each other when we could.

Javier returned to Mexico in the dark of night. His voyage home was a secret. He did not want his creditors after him. He brought sacks of clothes and candies and a lot of plans. When he saw the squalor we were living in he said to me, “Antonio, come with me to Iowa and I will get you a good job where I work.”

This place—Iowa—what would it be like? I knew the winters there were harsh and cold, but Javier guaranteed we would always have enough food and a warm place to stay. He told me I would make enough money there to make life easier for Ernesto and
Raul and their wives. In addition, our new place was crowded, and would be even more so once the baby arrived. We would require more money than ever in order to live.

I was nervous about the journey, however. Javier assured me that he knew a safer route. In Iowa he had spoken with lots of immigrants, many of whom had crossed the border several times. “We will not cross the desert, not on foot,” he said. He told me he’d arranged things with a smuggler who would pick us up along the road just north of Nogales. “Many people cross there in this way,” he assured me. “There is virtually no danger.”

I thought to myself that there was danger of being lied to, betrayed. What if this smuggler, this coyote, took our money and abandoned us? What if we were found out by the border patrol? What if the car or truck broke down in the middle of the desert? What I feared even worse was what awaited us if our journey was a success. We would be surrounded by people who did not understand us or our culture, people with whom we shared virtually nothing in terms of common experiences or interests.

Javier persisted. He kicked at the cracked and chipping plywood door and exclaimed, “Please, just look around. What kind of life is this for you? What kind of life is this for Raul and Adriana and for their baby?”

“It’s the same life almost everybody has,” I replied.

“No,” said Javier. “I have seen better.”

And so there were all these reasons why I had to go.

I went to say good-bye to Lupe in the morning, and her mother greeted me at the door. I promised Lupe I would return to Mexico, although I did not know about the future. She was more honest than I, however, and said frankly that she did not believe me.
“You will forget about me there. You will forget about all of us.” She took a broom to
sweep the floor, and her aunt shot me a look of disapproval as I walked out.

Ernesto took us in the taxi cab to the outskirts of the city where we hitched a ride
into San Luis with a man transporting chicken feed. He took us north to Durango, and
from there we went by foot for several miles. When night fell we ate a little from our
bundle and slept by the side of the road. The next day, we met up with a trader who was
traveling to Chihuahua in a small, clean automobile with air conditioning. We told him
we were returning from a visit to our family in the South, and that we lived in Nogales—
that we had a little shop there where we sold jewelry and leather belts. He didn’t ask a lot
of questions, but told us of a man he knew who would be leaving for Nogales the
following morning. That night we slept on the ground inside a little shed on the man’s
property, and I dreamed of a sea of white faces, each pausing to stare and then hurrying
past. In the morning his wife served us pork tamales.

The ride to Nogales went very smoothly. In fact, the man who drove us there
seemed to read our minds and was sympathetic to our plight. “My brother and his wife
left for New York City in the spring,” he said.

We offered little for a reply.

“You are crossing the border at Nogales, no?”

At first, Javier was suspicious of the man. “What does your brother do now?” he
asked.

“He works cleaning office buildings in the evenings,” said the man. “His wife
speaks English very well and works as a receptionist in a dentist’s office.” He smiled and
said we needn’t be afraid.
“They say Nogales is the safest place to cross,” said Javier.

“You have a proper arrangement?” asked the man. “How much are you paying the coyote?”

“Four hundred dollars.”

The man spit through his lips. “And you trust this man? You trust that he will help you out for that? How far is he taking you?”

“He is a friend of a friend,” said Javier. “And yes, I trust him. He’ll take us to a house in northern Arizona where we will meet up with some friends and head to Iowa.

The man nodded.

“We have jobs there.”

The man lit a cigar and said, “Good. Good for you.”

He dropped us off in the commercial district and said with a wink, “I suppose your shop is somewhere right near here?”

We smiled and thanked the man, then purchased some flautas from a street vendor and discussed our plan. The border, Javier said, would be made of corrugated tin where we would cross near the edge of the city. He knew where there was a gap, assuming that no one had been along to fix it. We would then hike north, for only a few miles, until we came to the highway where our coyote would pick us up.

We had some time to kill. It was still daylight, and I was glad for this. We sat and watched the bustling streets. Javier rolled a cigarette and explained that Nogales is famous as a tourist destination for people from the north. “It is an escape for them,” he said. “Here, they can find the colors, the foods, and the sounds that are part of a culture different from their own, all within an arm’s length of their American safe haven. But it is
no escape for us. Reality is far too persistent.” He paused to light his cigarette. “My father used to drink a lot. There were seven of us kids, you know.”

The streets were not as crowded as the ones of Mexico City, but they were just as much alive. Each street was lined with a row of shops: basketry and silver jewelry, glassware and wooden folk art. I nodded slowly, unsure where Javier was going with his story.

“That is a lot of responsibility for a man,” I said.

“The drinking was the one escape he had,” he said. “It was hard to find work then, you know.”

I nodded.

It seemed there were a group of street musicians perched on every corner. Packs of children ran about from one group of tourists to the next, beseeching them to purchase braided ropes of wooden beads.

“My mother would lose herself for hours at a time with worn-out novels. Books about romance and mystery. Papa would yell at her for spending her time and money in that way.”

“Would you like to buy a necklace?” a little girl asked, looking up at a young white man and some of his friends. I thought to myself that they were probably about my age, but there was no way I would ever be part of them. There was no common ground between us.

“But she needed an escape too, you know,” said Javier, and I nodded once again.

Two young women from this group had distanced themselves a bit. One of them, the blonde-haired one, was crying and the other one wrapped her arms around her and
whispered in her ear. I wondered what it was that could be haunting this young woman. She probably had an easy life, plenty of money and a comfortable bed to sleep in. What could possibly occur in her life that would cause her to cry like this in public?

The man and his friend shook their heads and looked away from the little girl to focus on the wares of a man selling pipes and other products carved from wood. The merchant’s face was dark and wrinkled from sun. His hair fell in a thick braid past his shoulders. Two of the Americans stepped closer to examine his goods. Their skin was soft and white, their teeth in pleasant little rows. One pointed to something beneath the glass and smiled to the other.

“You like pipe?” said the dealer.

“Sí, sí,” replied one of the men, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

“You buy pipe, I pack pipe,” the man smiled. “Then we go out back.” The two Americans exchanged a look of surprise and looked more closely at the shelf of goods.

“Mama said it kept her sane,” Javier said, continuing with his story. “And Papa, he just drank and drank. I suppose that’s where my trouble started.” He must have been referring to his trouble-making, his run-ins with the law and with other criminals.

The two women were now exploring the shop of a dealer in painted ceramics and metal ware. The blonde-haired one had ceased to cry, but her eyes were red and swollen. The other one pointed to a painted cat and smiled. The blonde smiled also. “How much?” she asked.

“For American movie star,” said the salesman attentively, “Twelve dollars.”

She fished through a little leather purse that had likely been purchased farther down the street. She handed him the money in exchange for the purple cat.
“Now, here I am,” Javier said. “Running away. Again.”

When the woman turned she was half-smiling and she caught my eye. For a moment there was something in her gaze, her swollen eyes, I felt I recognized.

Later, after nightfall, Javier took me by the arm and said to me, “Are you ready, Antonio?”

I nodded.

He pointed to his wristwatch and said, “It’s almost time.” He led me to the corner where we took a left and followed a row of restaurants and indoor shops. At the end of the street we passed a place Javier said was where all the tourists went for their authentic Mexican dining experience. When I asked him if the food was good, he said, “It is gringo food.”

From the front corner of the building we could see the border fence. It was lined with a heavy blue tarp that fluttered, here and there, in the wind. “The opening is there,” he said.

“That’s it?” I asked. I had expected other travelers, perhaps someone on guard, watching for *el migre*, someone who would give us a secret sign to tell us it was safe to cross.

“That’s it,” he said. “Let’s go.” He set out, daringly close to the brick wall of the restaurant, just a few feet from the windows where laughter and mariachi music spilled out. I followed him.

When we came to the fence, Javier moved cautiously with his hand to the metal, until he found a place where it was loose and pried it open far enough to slip through. I cast a look inside the window and to my surprise there were faces I recognized. The
group of four American tourists who I had watched so carefully at the market earlier that day. They laughed and toasted their margaritas.

“Hurry, Antonio!” said my companion, and I followed his lead. I stole through the gap, but when I tried to run to meet Javier, I felt a snag and heard a sharp grating sound. I pictured hoards of border patrol agents storming out from between the buildings, grabbing us and speaking to us with harsh insults.

But there was nothing. I was merely snagged on the metal of the fence, caught by my shirt and the strap of the sack I carried on my back. My fingers moved to disentangle the fabric while my eyes trailed backwards to the window of the restaurant. The group of familiar tourists was not so far away, eight feet or so, perhaps. I could clearly see the expression on each of their faces.

The first man held up the wooden pipe, the one he had purchased in the market. He spoke animatedly and laughed, perhaps recounting the story of its purchase to his friends. The next held up a knife he had bought. He smiled and used it to cut into his steak. The dark-haired woman was too absorbed in her enchilada to pay a lot of mind to the conversation, by the look of it. The table behind them held their shopping bags.

The blonde woman, the one who had purchased the ceramic cat, glanced listlessly out the window. Could she see me? It was very dark outside by this time, of course, and so I knew that she couldn’t, but her gaze left me unsure. Was she watching me hooked like a fish on this twisted piece of metal, or was she merely dreaming? I was certain she could see into my core, that her blue eyes had rendered the rest of me transparent. How could she understand? Finally, I felt the metal unhook from the cloth of my sleeve, and backed slowly away from the fence.
And then I turned and ran, followed Javier to the road where we met up with our ride north. But the image of the American tourist was frozen in my mind. Her eyes, alight with that familiar something, that recognizably vacant look. Perhaps vacant is not the right word. Perhaps it has more to do with the desire to vacate, the need to end up someplace else, if only for a while.
Farm Land

Never mind the social taboo that keeps me from her. I pass the time dreaming of a future with Daisy Jefferson, an up-and-coming fashion model who smells like citrus and lives in the Hilltop Hotel Highrise on the outskirts of The Farm. When she picked up her snacks last Tuesday she was all alone, and pinched me on the cheek of my costume before backing away. She’s still never seen my face.

The layers of simulated hog lard are made from a slightly viscous polyurethane gel that’s engineered to be lightweight yet jiggly to the touch. Truth be told, it’s an excellent insulator. The outer layer is genuine cowhide that’s factory farmed somewhere out east and treated with a water proofing agent, the greasiness of which lends itself well to common conceptions of pig flesh. I’m damn thankful for this get-up when it’s twenty below.

“Four Corn-on-the-Cubes and an Apple Drizzler,” says a sun-burnt dad in trunks. “And put some extra salt in that there cube.” That there cube. Another out-of-stater trying to sound all Farm Land, showing off for his pot-bellied brats who squeal, “Take a picture with the piggy, Daddy!”

To make a genuine Farm Land Corn-on-the-Cube, you take a pre-skewered block of lightly salted butter substitute (three cubic inches to the millimeter) and dip it in the vat of heated Corn Tad Morsels. The Tads are engineered to cling to the cube, simulating the effect of old-fashioned corn-on-the-cob, but oozing from the inside out with buttery goodness. Then you use the patented Farm Land Hand Rotisserer to coat the outside with an even film of Buttered Liquid Salt. We didn’t use to charge for extra, but now it costs a dollar more. We hand it out in lidded plastic cups.
An Apple Drizzler is just a thawed out pie with caramel on it.

“Kids, get in the picture,” the mom says, and snaps one for the family scrap book.

When you take multiple orders of Corn-on-the-Cubes, the heat from the Tad Vat fills the Feast Stand with a sultry thickness that works its way inside your hogsuit through the eye and nose holes, and what drips into your mouth is either sweat or Buttered Liquid Salt (you can’t be sure), and pretty soon you feel the sickening shift-shifting of the costume as it chafes across your flesh, slippery with a sweat that, mingling with the odors of the costume itself, smells unique from any other, and your nuts begin to itch, but if you move to scratch them some pissed-off honeymooning bride will comment behind her hand to her soon-to-be-pissed-off honeymooning groom, and if you’re lucky no one will report you for the rude gesture.

“You put in the extra salt?” says the Dad as he distributes the Apple Drizzler portions like a mother bird.

“Yes, sir. That will be twenty-five dollars.”

In accordance with the Company bylaws, Farm Land has a trash can at every Feast Stand, and this one is no different, but the mom and dad and brats unwrap their snacks and drop the trash onto the ground, the way most families do. Across the park they shuffle, gnawing at their corn and debating the merits of the various Farm Land attractions.

“Enjoy your Farm Land Feast, and come again!”

The Company says this is the lot we’ve been dealt as natives. They tell us if we just work hard and dream, there is the chance for us to work our way up to a position in management someday and escape the day-to-day drudgery of the park. Maybe that lucky
individual will collect the cash to make an escape, marry an out-of-stater, perhaps. My brother Joe says it won’t be either of us. Our accent is too thick, and besides, would we really want to leave Mom and Dad behind? Would we really want to miss out on the Farm Land sunsets and the lush rows of corn in the Touring Fields?

Hell yes, I would leave it behind! All of it! Trade it for a chance to drive a real vehicle, not a recycled one imported from down south and painted with the Farm Land logo. I’d love to see a real live pig, or cow, or chicken, instead of just people walking around dressed up like them. The only real animals at Farm Land are the ones at the Slaughter House, which, according to the Monthly Update, has grown in popularity to surpass the Silly Silo and the Tractor Tour combined.

This was great news for my family since Dad leads many of the daytime tours there. He was promoted to that shift after one of the previous day guides developed an unsightly growth above his eye and was demoted to evenings, the shift that, due to the lighting, is inherently more dangerous. The few light bulbs swinging from copper colored chains do little to light the far reaches of the House. The Company maintains that this adds to the authenticity of the tour.

The bad news is that the Slaughter House Shower, where Dad used to clean up after work, has been converted into a Mini Market selling cuts of beef, which means that when Dad gets home he’s like a walking picnic table – smooth and stiff from the blood that’s dried on the surface of his skin and clothing. He has to use the family shower to clean off now, which has wreaked havoc on our monthly water rationing.

Mom’s job is not nearly as grueling. She works as a House Wife in the Farm House. Most days, she pickles vegetables trucked in from out of state, or else she bakes
bread or cookies sold in the Country Bake Shop. She says the Farm House is a lot more
comfortable than ours, but if she gets caught sitting down (except on quilting days), her
supervisor says, “What’s that? You want to churn some butter?”

Joe’s job is the reason he’s such a cynic. He’s a lowly Trash Man, the most
despised of all Farm Land positions, and has been taking medication to get rid of his
constant grumbling, which has nearly gotten him excommunicated from the Farm on
numerous occasions. I can hardly blame him— I have my hogsuit to protect me if a
tourist decides it would be funny to get rough with me, but Joe just has his discolored
janitor pants and a uniform tee shirt with the letters T-R-A-S-H across the chest. The
Company Handbook says the humble will be exalted.

I started out as a Bathroom Scrubber, but because of the attention to detail that I
devoted to the hard-to-reach areas behind the toilets, I was promoted to a Wheel Barrow
Wheeler at Garden City, whose vegetable yields were legendary up until the day the dirt
stopped yielding. Since then, the Garden’s doors have closed in favor of the ever-popular
Harvest Cini-Multiplex, a twenty-screen theatre and drive-in, which, according to the
Company Handbook, is essential to an authentic experience of the Farm.

Because of my work as a Wheeler, the Company decided I’d developed the
physical stamina to withstand the hogsuit. At first I was wary, fearing the prospect of
being trapped in a position that only allowed for physical gruntwork. This would do
nothing to aid my climb to management. The Company, however, assured me that the
social skills developed by Hogs through their interaction with the public prove essential in
ascending the Company ranks.
Speaking of public interaction, the Company discourages the natives from fraternizing with vacationers for fear that hostilities will rise, grievances will be filed, and ultimately, profits lost. This isn’t typically an issue since the majority of vacationers would sooner leave the Farm than socialize with the working class. But still, there’s Daisy.

I see her once a week or so when she comes in to the Stand with her sister Tiffany who wears a headful of raven ringlets and whines incessantly about how Farm Land is such a tourist trap. “It’s so commercialized,” she says, chomping her gum and peering past the black wall of her designer sunshades. “Factory World is so much more authentic.”

“Yeah,” says Daisy, “but it’s hard to speak the language, and that makes it dangerous. Besides, you’re likely to get your arm cut off in a band saw. There’s no decent hospitals near Factory World, and besides, their rides are lame.”

“Wellcome to the Feast Stand! Have you feasted your eyes on our new Country Sampler? It includes Drumsticks, Barnstyle Biscuits, and our new Corn Tad Crunchers, seasoned with an all-new Secret Butter Breading and available for a limited time only.”

“I’ll take the sampler and a forty-ounce Country Cooler. Tiffany!” Daisy says, and throws an elbow. “Tell the pig what you want.”

Tiff demands two Drizzlers as I flop the Drumsticks in Secret Salted Butter Powder before hyper-broiling them for twenty seconds. The Crunchers are dropped into the mini fryer and drained before being placed in the Corn Crib Carrying Carton. The biscuits can be thawed out with the Drizzlers. As the two depart, I imagine the focus and
communication skills I attain as a Hog will help me in the high powered position I’ll need in order to impress Daisy one day. “Enjoy your Farm Land Feast, and come again!”

“Say,” says a spotted Dairy Cow and a gasp catches in my throat. To the vacationers, Dairy Cows are just your ordinary livestock, but any Farm Land employee knows the power they hold. “I’ve been making note of your skills in marketing and hospitality the last few days. How would you like to tend bar at The Neighbor’s Place?” he asks, leaning in on his elbows through the window of the Feast Stand.

The Neighbor’s Place is the Farm’s hotspot for consumption of alcohol and television. While cheaper versions have been made available to the local public, the atmosphere and beverages of the hip and trendy Neighbor’s Place are only available to the traveling rich. “Tend bar?”

“Sure, you’d be a natural! In fact, I’ve already made my recommendation to the Board.”

Immediately, I imagine the access this would give me to someone like Daisy Jefferson. Surely someone as fashionable as her would spend time at such an establishment. I would mix her a Farm House Martini and gaze into her eyes. “What about the hogsuit?” I ask.

“We’re considering your brother for the position of Hog, assuming, of course, that the Attitude Adjustment tablets continue to take the effect they have.”

“But can he handle the costume?” I ask.

“You be surprised how much exercise Trash Men get during the typical day. The Trash Cans are lacking in popularity, which makes the job of the Trash Men very difficult. They wander far and wide maintaining the appearance of the Park each day, and their
muscle tone and cardiovascular levels are excellent. I think he can handle it,” he says and
puts forth a cloven hoof for me to shake. “Keep up the good work, son, and rest assured
you won’t be a Hog for long.”

On special occasions, Mom splurges on a special supper of roast beef and mashed
potatoes, even though the water necessary for cooking them is more than we can afford.
And today is a very special occasion. “How do you like the idea of being a Hog?” Mom
asks Joe.

“I’m fucking thrilled, Ma,” he says, staring at the staticky TV on the corner of the
table.

“Son, do you have any advice for your little brother?” she asks.

“If they say ‘Jump,’ you say, ‘How High?’” I tell him, devouring the wind from a
metal fan mounted on the window ledge. “The sky’s the limit, that way.” I brush the
sweat from my forehead and look around our little shack. “This could be my ticket out of
here.”

“Well, you just remember where you came from,” Dad spits through his mashed
potatoes. “I haven’t wrecked my health slaughtering sheep and cattle in the dark for
twenty years only to watch my sons disappear into thin air.” Then he starts muttering
about the Farm Land insurance crisis, which began at the same time as the water rations.

“Look, I know this place isn’t perfect, but do you really want to leave the Farm?”
asks Mom. “Can’t you find a local girl to make you happy?”

“Gotta go chasin’ movie stars and shit,” says Joe. And when Mom shoots him a
dirty look he asks, “What? I can’t be goddamn genial all the time.”
“What about one of the Milk Maids? That Marta is such a dear.”

“She’s a looker,” Dad says and gestures with his fork.

“I have to know what life is like outside this place. And who knows? Maybe Daisy will see me as a human being soon, instead of just the pig at the snack shack.”

“Pretty high and mighty,” says Dad.

“Sweetie,” Mom says, “Do you really think a tourist, a supermodel no less, is going to fall in love with a farmie?”

“She’s not exactly a supermodel, Mom. And besides, look at the way I’ve impressed the Company. I can win Daisy too.”

Since the Handbook forbids Livestock Personnel from being costumeless in public, it’s quite a strenuous walk to and from work. Life would be so much simpler if my family owned a vehicle or if the hogsuit did not rule out the possibility of bicycling. Half an hour before sunrise, I arrive at the Feast Stand to stack the morning freight inside and get the fryers heated.

While checking the butter levels in the Tad Vat, I hear a sharp tap-tapping on the window and roll open the blinds. It’s Daisy Jefferson in a halter top and denim skirt.

“I have a strange request,” she says and chews a glossy lip.

I lick my lips and feign composure. “I’m sorry. Breakfast Feasting doesn’t start for another half an hour.”

“Hog,” she says, a hungry look in her eyes. “I’m going on a long assignment overseas. I have to leave the Farm.” She lowers her voice and glances left and right. “I can’t bear the thought of leaving it all behind. Tell me you’ll come with me. We can
make it to the hotel before the sun comes up and hide out there til nightfall. My jet leaves at midnight.”

I ask myself what she wants with me? Is it really me she wants, or would she have taken any random Hog? It doesn’t matter. The Company Handbook forbids employees from leaving Farm Land property. If I were to abscond—in possession of a hogsuit, no less—

“I promise you’ll be well looked after,” Daisy says.

What does this mean? Does she want for me to be her lover? Her pet? “But there’s my family.”

“We can send them money—more than enough to make up for the lost income. I bet they could use some extra cash.”

“Daisy, I—“

“Make up your mind,” she says. “It’s almost daybreak.”

The Hilltop is no place for a Hog. The Company bylaws forbid the presence of Non-Hotel Personnel, so Daisy creates a diversion for the Concierge while I sneak in the elevator and head up to the fiftieth floor. Daisy is only a moment behind me when I reach the door to her room. “Quick,” she says. “Get inside.”

My hogshead is itching me, and I’m dripping from the escape from the Feast Stand. To get the head off, there’s a zipper that goes all the way around, but Daisy stops me. “Wait. You must remain a Hog at all times if this arrangement is to work.”

So any random Hog would have done just fine.
“If you need to shower, do it when I’m running errands or at work or asleep or something, just please do not allow me to see you in non-hog form.”

“What if he’s hot?” comes a squawk from the corner. Tiffany.

“I’m always hot,” I say.

“I mean what if he’s cute?” she says. “You could have a farm hog and a boy toy all at once. You might be missing out.”

While this is the only sensible thing I’ve ever heard come out of her mouth I’m not convinced that she’s an ally. She’s cracking her gum and clicking away on a laptop and I ask her what she’s doing. Ding goes a microwave across the room and the scent of Farm Land Drizzlers wafts toward me.

“Checking on Factory World,” she says. “Pie?”

“No thanks.”

“I bought some shares and the dividends are amazing. Plus, I get to vote on all the decisions. It’s like a gigantic video game slash interactive web site slash reality TV show. I keep telling Daisy she should buy a piece of Farm Land—enough shares to sit on the Board, be part of the decision making process.”

Daisy shrugs. “Well, it would be a way to stay close to the Farm.”

A couple weeks roll by and Daisy still insists upon the hogsuit. I have a bedroom of my own in our hotel suite, so I’m getting ready to remove the costume since I won’t be in her company until morning. Rat-ta-tat comes the drumming of manicured fingernails on the door. “It’s Daisy. Can I come in?”
Perhaps this is the moment. She’ll tell me to take off the suit. She’ll look me in
the face and see me as I am, more than just blue irises behind a mask, and ask me what my
name is.

“She asks, and sticks a towed head inside the door.

“Yes?”

She moves into the room in a cloud of orange scent and sits down on the edge of
my bed. “I was hoping you’d still be awake.”

She drops the towel to the floor and says she’s tired, exhausted from a long photo
shoot. An advertisement for the Porto Lipo Suck. “The model’s life is not all it’s cracked
up to be,” she says, and reclines against the headboard.

“Well,” I tell her, shaken by her presence in my room. “To be honest, I’m not so
sure about my role here.”

“You’re going to stay with me though, right? I mean, you can’t leave. You’re a
fugitive. Your entire family would be excommunicated from the Farm.” Daisy runs a
comb through her dark locks. “Besides, if you stay with me, I think there’s a way we can
get your brother released from his duties there and buy him a place in the outside world.”

She reminds me that her father is a very influential figure at Farm Land.

“What about my parents?”

“Well, they’re not as disposable as Joe. Who will they find to run the Slaughter
House? And who will make a suitable Farm Wife on such short notice? Too much has
been invested in their training. Besides, they’re too old to begin a life outside the Farm.
Joe is young though. He could get a fresh start somewhere.” She motions to the bed and
says, “Lie down.”
I maneuver myself, still suited, onto the bed. Daisy props herself onto an elbow and reaches toward me, stroking the arm of my suit all the way down to my mittened hoof. I don’t know what I am to her.

“Besides,” she says, “things will get better for the folks at Farm Land.”

“How do you know?”

“I took Tiffany’s advice and bought some stock. Quite a bit of it. I’m on the Decision Board now, and I’ve proposed some great ideas.”

Daisy. The savior of Farm Land. I’d like to know the details, but there’s so much citrus in the air, and Daisy’s little tank top is stretched across her chest just so. The suit is so constricting. I imagine that after just another moment of sweating and shifting inside I will feel the relief of fresh air and the soft pillows of Daisy’s lips against mine, the skin of her body pressing into me, shiny and smooth. She sighs and says, “You have to stay.”

I reach for the zipper that connects the hogs head to the rest of the suit, and Daisy puts her hand on top of mine. “Stop.”

My head flops down into the pillow and I stare my little tunnel vision stare into the ceiling fan and grind my teeth. And Daisy, all soft and citrus smoothness sidles up against me, drapes her arm across my chest. She rests her head down on my shoulder and says, “Good night, Hog.”

Two weeks later, Daisy laments a blemish that’s buried underneath a facial mask on her forehead and I don’t tell her about the bedsores from the hogsuit. I’ve eaten nothing but Crunchers and Barnyard Biscuits, and haven’t had a shred of activity since we
flew out on the airplane several weeks ago. Daisy and Tiff use the Porto Lipo Suck, but I feel silly asking for one of these, and it’s getting difficult to get in and out of the suit.

When Daisy’s model friends come by, they’re extra sweet to me, but the hotel staff who come to clean during the day brush past me and mutter, “Fucking hog.”

Daisy opens up the Farm Land web site and logs into the Directors’ page.

“Tiffany was right,” she says. “What a great way to stay close to home. Come and look.”

There’s a picture of a Farm Land sunrise and a menu that says:

What would you like to do?

Check Profits
Buy More Shares
View Farm Land Footage
Check Status of Administrative Requests
Experience Cyber Feast and Online Attractions
Vote for Policy

“Vote for Policy,” Daisy says to the computer. Another menu:

Farm Land Financial Policy
Individual Judiciary Hearings
Excommunication Trials


“I thought you’d never ask!” says the computer. “The status of your last suggestion for financial policy is under review. Probability of policy change: seventy-six percent.”
“Oh my God!” says Daisy. “I hope they make the change.”

“What was your idea?”

“I suggested that Farm Land could save money by only importing half as much water from out of state.”

“What?” So this was the great idea she was talking about?

“No, it’s entirely feasible, Hog! By eliminating irrigation to the Touring Fields and reducing local water rations by a mere forty percent, Farm Land can save millions in yearly expenses. It’s brilliant!”

“No!” I squeal.

“Well, it must be! The online voters agree. Of course, many of them want to simply utilize local water sources, contamination and all.”

“But my family—My mother doesn’t even have enough water to boil potatoes. See, ever since the Slaughter House demanded the Tour Guides shower at their own homes, my family has not had enough to go around!” The thick weight of hopelessness creeps over me as I think of my family back at the farm and the fact that I can’t return to them.

“Look, Hog. You need to look at things objectively, from a business point of view, you know? Tiffany, tell Hog what you learned through your involvement with Factory World.”

Tiffany doesn’t look up from her nail filing. She says, “You gotta crack some eggs to make an omelet.”

“But these aren’t eggs—They’re people.”

“Well, farmies,” says Tiffany.
“Look,” says Daisy. “I would never deny that farmies are people too. But you need to try to come to a win-win situation, you know? A penny saved is a penny earned for Farm Land, and those dollars filter down through every level of the Park. If Farm Land goes under, the farmies will be out of jobs and totally incapable of caring for themselves. Most of them have no real-world education or experience outside the Farm. They’d be helpless without the Company. When the Company profits, everyone in the Park profits.”

“Are you saying the Farm is on the verge of going under?”

“Oh, hell no! They’re making a killing. Millions of folks visit Farm Land every year. You don’t think I’m a successful enough model to afford my own jet, do you? Or this hotel, even? It’s all my father’s money.”

“But my family—We live in a one-room house with a black and white TV, and my father’s concerned about his health and there’s no way to pay for him to see a doctor.”

“Nonsense. It’s all about priorities.”

“Responsibility,” says Tiffany, cracking open a Country Cooler. “Taking the bull by the horns.”

“It’s the way the world works,” says Daisy.

“It’s insane!” I yell, knowing full well that what Daisy says is true. This is the way of the world we live in. So much for a savior. “That’s it, the hogsuit is coming off!” I reach for the zipper, but all I can feel is a mass of stitching where the gripper ought to be. “What the hell?” I ask, a panic rising.

“I told you he wasn’t gonna like it,” says Tiffany.
“I’ve decided I want you in the hogsuit until further notice. Don’t be mad. It’s the one request I make of you, and look at all I give you in return.”

But the suit is disgusting on the inside, and I’m sure that if I could reach in to feel the sores with my fingertips they would be dripping with pus, and if the smell were to make its way out it would send people running for the hills, and for the first time ever I feel not just irritated by the suit but like it’s choking the life out of me, and my heart pulses against it, and my breath accumulates wetly within the mask. Even if I could get it off, what would it matter? I would probably find that I’m really just a hog underneath it all anyway. I can’t go back to Farm Land—I’m a fugitive from justice, after all—and I can’t go out into the world because my only job experience consists of this, and the woman in front of me—the woman who I thought I was in love with—wanted to make little piglets with, is a madwoman who’s totally sane, which means that the only reasonable option is to unlatch the door to the balcony and fling myself, simulated hog lard and all, embracing the wind that I cannot feel and welcoming the quickly approaching concrete and metal and human skin and hair.