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Why Everything Is a Whole Lot of Nothing Worth Losing or Getting Back

David Kinzer

University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

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Why Everything Is a Whole Lot of Nothing Worth Losing or Getting Back

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

by

David Kinzer
University of Michigan
Bachelor of Arts in English, 2011

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Professor Padma Viswanathan
Thesis Director

Professor Toni Jensen
Committee Member

Professor Michael Heffernan
Committee Member

Abstract

In these three stories, David Kinzer answers the collection's title with the precision of the hard sciences. In "The Humanist," the strained relationship between a father and son becomes even more complicated when the son marries. In "Château Royale," a young woman moves into a new home with a dark history. The final piece, "Starting After Midnight," follows two young people in the aftermath of a one-night stand. All of everything is inside: Gatling guns and *The Birth of Tragedy*, Anne Rice and Taco Bell, kit foxes and sex tips. The answer is waiting. All you need to do is read and add, one plus one, until you reach the sum of everything.

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Before I gave up wondering why everything
was a lot of nothing worth losing or getting back...
—Michael Heffernan

Why everything?

Why spaniel why snake why desire this why life why ladybugs graveyard the bedroom window why paintings fade in sunlight why diamond-cut jaw why Oedipus' eyes why baby-chewed plush Scooby Doo why cheese-and-guava empanada why the receptionist at the doctor's office made me cry why the French teacher in college made me cry why I'm belly down on the sun-bleached wooden bench and crying why fear people why giantess why tawny why tourniquet why emcee when you can't get paid to be a fucking emcee why satin chemise why itsy-bitsy why Ruskin catalog why failure why any emotion why Odysseus came home why an ash-and-butt strewn silver Firebird why with two Guns N'Roses roadies why lithium why silence why chianti fiasco why I said yes I will yes why lick why pretzel M&Ms why mystic fetid smoke why you doing this even without a record contract why Batman why Wolfman why purple cartoon ghouls why Dickinson's desk why I'm telling you this why excitable boy why egg wash the brioche why white Nikes and orange shorts why build a cage with her bones why she wanted to be Zooey not Joyce why tires on the gravel jostle my heart why Uncle John why leggings why slink why rhapsodize you why so vile why brown eyes big as your palm why calamari and artichokes why I can't see a single consolation not one not once why kill a thing for its horn why charge admission why tent city why silver nitrate why drag so hard Ms. Lake why peekaboo why kangaroos why Kramer why sequins why aspirins why biers why days of gingham and chambray why she never told me what she needed why there was no in to be let in why i'm so lonesome i'm so far why cry into caskets why die without cursing why anyone would read this why would anyone read this why order why blunt and ugly logic why eyelets for laces why lanyards why brain gout why sluiceway gate why I abhor it here why flood the valley why cocktail shaker cap?

The Humanist

The couple spent their layover in Denver discussing the parade of people who trundled before them in desexed vinyl coats, pulling identical roller bags. There was a young woman with Coke bottle glasses, a triangle of frizzled hair and a green sweater that Maya said must have cost at least \$400, and there was a man in designer sweatpants with zig-zagging stripes in black and white. Aristotle said he looked like a zebra-centaur.

Sometimes they talked about ages. There were two women who they agreed were both sixty years old, but one woman wore a shaggy Christmas sweater and tore coupons from an AARP newsletter, and the other was skinny with heeled leather boots and a shiny MacBook.

“That woman looks so joyless,” Maya said. “She’s working on a spreadsheet. God, there aren’t any good options when you’re 60. I don’t know what I’ll do.”

Aristotle put his hand on her knee, and she breathed deep.

“You should keep a monkey,” Aristotle said. “You know those youtube videos of people who keep monkeys in their backyard? That could become your identity. Wouldn’t that be a good identity to age into? You know, to bypass the business bitch/forgotten mom binary.”

They talked about a ten-year-old girl who waited alone for a flight to Cincinnati. She had on a winter coat of pink and blue synthetic material, puffy enough to make the girl inside seem smaller and more alone.

“I want to buy her a candy bar,” Aristotle said.

“I should do it with you,” Maya said. “Otherwise, you’re just a weird stranger giving a kid candy.”

At the magazine stand, they bought a package of Pretzel M&Ms, just in case she was allergic to peanuts and because it felt more sensible and substantial than the plain chocolate kind. The girl took the bag without a word, then went over to a flight attendant who was standing behind a computer and asked for her permission to eat the candy. The flight attendant made eye contact with the two strangers, first Aristotle, who looked backed confused and then defiant, then Maya, who smiled back, biddable, as she put her hand on Aristotle’s shoulder. The flight attendant nodded at the girl, and the two sat down.

“Before we see him,” Maya said, “is there anything else you should tell me?”

“No,” Aristotle said.

Across the hall, the girl bit through the middle of an M&M and then studied the moiety.

“I used to do that, as a kid,” Aristotle said. “My hands would be so gross after. Tie-dyed.”

“About your father,” Maya said. “Anything about your father?”

“I could never eat candy in the house. He would yell at me. I must have touched one of his books. From then on, I had to go outside to eat candy. The front lawn. In December. Not a joke.”

“But they still gave you candy?”

Aristotle snickered through his front teeth. “He’s just kind-of an asshole,” he said.

“That’s what an asshole would say.”

Aristotle nodded. “It takes one to know one,” he said. “The elegant logic of elementary school. Except I still liked him when I was in elementary school. All boys like their dads when they’re in elementary school.”

“Not true,” Maya said. “Remember that when we’re there.”

A man announced Flight 4780, nonstop air travel to Detroit. The girl tipped her head back to drop the last of the M&Ms into her mouth, and Aristotle waited for her to crumple the blue bag and throw it into a trash bin before standing up.

“Remember what your therapist told you,” Maya said. “Your anger is your problem. “

“That’s not something a therapist would say. It has to be much less accusatory than that.”

“Well, all I know is what you told me about what she said. God, you’re such an asshole.”

The door to the jet bridge opened, and Aristotle apologized and grabbed Maya’s hand as a gush of cold air hit.

Lewis believed he was a good father. A gentle man, encouraging even with interests, like soccer, that he himself had no interest in. Above all, he tried to instill in Aristotle an appreciation for what Lewis called essential humanist values—the goal of man is the obtainment of

knowledge; through this knowledge man achieves freedom; only free men, truly philosophically free, will form a better world.

Until Barbara's diagnosis, Aristotle had been an ideal pupil. Lewis's favorite anecdote, the one he'd talk about with Barbara when, behind their closed bedroom door, they'd gloat about how wonderful their son was turning out, began with Lewis receiving a phone call from Aristotle's teacher saying the boy had vandalized his social studies textbook. Not just his own textbook, in fact, but the entire classroom set. Lewis, who was himself a high school teacher down the street, met with Mrs. Potter that very afternoon, and she showed them the textbook. It was a guide to the different countries of the world, and each chapter included a table with facts: population, language, and then the prevailing religion, but Aristotle had crossed out that word and replaced it with SUPERSTITION, printed with a blue gel pen in the clumsy and colossal hand of a small boy. That night, Lewis and his wife took Aristotle out for pizza buffet. The boy built a breadstick fort on his plate as they told him to respect public property.

Aristotle was 16 when he found out that his mother was dying, and, with nine years' reflection, Lewis understood that the boy's reaction could have been worse. Granted, he grew uninterested in the sciences, which he had loved since childhood, when Lewis would make a bedtime story of heroic Galileo and his persecution by the Church. But Aristotle's grades did not slip; he did not resort to the brief bliss of drugs or, thank goodness, the lies of religion. Instead, Aristotle sought answers in philosophy, like his father, but not the philosophers that Lewis displayed proudly on his shelves: Locke and Descartes and Comte. He forsook even his namesake and all the other Ancients. The boy instead turned, inevitably, devastatingly, to Nietzsche. Starting with a furious storm through *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, he then proceeded with

great rigor through the entire canon, reading behind his locked bedroom door in nightlong binges, reading through squinting eyes in the dim dawn as he rode with his father to school, reading in open rebellion at the dinner table and ignoring Lewis's perfectly reasonable arguments against relativism and the will to power.

For the last few months before college, they hardly talked. Lewis's discussions of the American Human Convention, whose local semi-weekly meetings he'd attended for more than a decade, were met with impolite condescension. Even recounting their days at school was no longer easy: Aristotle had memorized a few pat lines about the deception of so-called knowledge which he'd trot out when questioned, and, if Lewis volunteered some information about his teaching, Aristotle would ask what right he had to criticize his students, then call his father a petty demi-god.

But again, he was on neither drugs nor Christ, and Lewis was proud when his son left to study philosophy at the University of Michigan, as he himself once had. The boy's success there astounded his father—not only did he earn a grade point average one whole integer greater than what Lewis had been capable of, but Aristotle was also granted a prestigious mentorship under a renowned professor. This was, however, a professor of metaethics and semiotics, a noxious combination, and each summer Aristotle came home praising ever more revolting names—Heidegger and Althusser, Foucault and Lyotard, Derrida. Lewis would order their books and then peruse them for particularly perverted bits of logic which he could disprove for his son on the boy's next visit. Yet when the professor's recommendation helped Aristotle into Stanford's Doctoral Program, it was official that the son had far eclipsed the father, and whatever authority Lewis might have had to teach his boy how to live was dispensed with, negated, no more.

Such was the situation when, at the age of 62, Lewis received a call from Aristotle in which the boy said that he'd gotten married and that he planned to bring his wife to Lewis's home for the winter holiday.

"What's her name?" Lewis asked. It was evening, the second week of December, and Lewis struggled in the dark to recover a pen from the junk drawer, finally writing down the name Maya on a receipt for Thai takeout.

"How long have you known each other?" Lewis asked.

"Two years. Since I came here. She was a student then."

"She's not anymore?"

"She dropped out."

There was a long pause.

"Why didn't you tell me about the marriage before the wedding?" Lewis asked, as calmly as he could. "I would have liked to have been there."

"It's not a big deal," Aristotle said.

"Marriage?"

"I mean this marriage. She's Chinese. She was on a student visa. Once she dropped out, she lost it."

"Oh," Lewis said. "Are you two seeing each other at all?"

"Yeah, but it's not serious."

"It's not serious, but you're married?"

"That's right," Aristotle said.

"Because you can get in a lot of trouble for that. It's a type of fraud, isn't it?"

“But we’re seeing each other,” Aristotle said.

“But not seriously.” Lewis exhaled, unsure if he was doing this to rid himself of frustration or to express it.

“Yeah. Listen, I have to call you back.”

“Okay,” Lewis said. “This is... I look forward to meeting her.”

Aristotle and his bride were to come home on the 21st, and by the 20th, Lewis had cleaned the home enough that he would not have to apologize to his son about the filth. The final step was to prepare Aristotle’s bed, but this turned out to be more troubling than anticipated. Would Aristotle sleep with his new wife? Was their relationship that far along? That is not to say, of course, that they hadn’t made love before, but acknowledging that in front of your lover’s parents takes some courage. And she’s Chinese. That’s a modest culture, isn’t it? But she wanted to study in America, wanted to stay in America badly enough to marry a boy she did not yet love. So Lewis ignored her culture and instead considered the bed, which was a twin, the same bed that Aristotle had grown up in, and not big enough, not really, to fit both the grown man and his wife. Lewis still slept in his marriage bed, which was a king bed, which seemed silly to sleep in alone, and wouldn’t it be so perfectly utilitarian to redistribute this space, which he was hardly in need of, to the couple that needed it more? But still, what if Maya was not yet ready to sleep together with Aristotle? To push her toward such an arrangement would be rude, pimpish even. Barbara would have known what to do, or at the very least would have been able to get the boy to pick up the phone when she called.

On the day of their arrival, Lewis put fresh sheets on the couch, and on Aristotle's bed, and on his own bed, so that Maya could sleep in any one of them, and if the couple had arrived just a day later, Lewis would have bought a queen-sized pullout couch, in case they did want to sleep together but not in the bed which Aristotle's mother and father had made love in, years ago, the bed in which they'd conceived their son. When his son looked at the bed, did he see it as the bed in which he was conceived? Lewis did not know what those eyes considered, and wondered at, and hoped for. Was Maya the woman his son desired a family with? Or was the green card marriage evidence that he did not hope for a genuine family and had given up faith in the quintessential bourgeois construction?

Those same things which give us joy may not give joy to our children, that is what Lewis was thinking as he waited in his car at the airport. It could serve as the introduction to an essay, he decided, and he was trying to determine its subject when the backseat car door opened, and he turned to see his son's face behind him.

"Did I scare you?" Aristotle asked.

Lewis shared many facial features with his son—a prominent but not ugly nose, lips and eyebrows that were long and flat, a smooth and pale complexion—but Aristotle had inherited his mother's dark green eyes, whereas Lewis's were soft, piney brown, and Aristotle had kept his hair long. The curly strands rose outward from the boy's skull as if heat waves radiated from his brain. Outside, snow fell and melted on contact with the hair.

"Where are your bags?"

"Back here. You have to open the trunk."

“Sorry,” Lewis said. He flipped the switch and turned around to decipher his daughter-in-law through the back windshield. She was taller than he’d imagined, and she wore an open leather jacket, black with silver zippers, the leather jacket Plato would put in his realm of ideals, and beneath it was a blue summer dress. Lewis saw as she got into the car and closed the door that it was a short dress and her legs were bare.

“You must be freezing,” Lewis said.

“Dad, this is Maya.”

Aristotle sat next to Maya in the backseat, and he put his arm around her as she leaned in to shake Lewis’s hand.

“How do you do?” Lewis asked.

She smiled, and Lewis worried for a moment that the girl had not understood him, but after she jostled her jaw twice he realized she was having difficulty balancing a wad of chewing gum under her tongue.

“Good how are you Mr. Meyer?” she asked, all in one breath, between chews. Finally, Aristotle handed her the M&Ms receipt to spit the gum in.

“I get nervous on flights and the gum helps,” she said.

“Where are my manners,” Lewis said. “Congratulations.”

Aristotle shook his head.

“You don’t have to do that. It’s not a thing like that.”

Maya put her hand on Lewis’s shoulder.

“No,” she said. “Thank you.”

“You’re right,” Aristotle said to Maya. “Thank you,” he finished, but it seemed to Lewis that he was still talking to Maya, not thanking him at all.

Outside, a car signaled for Lewis’s spot along the curb, and he pulled out onto the drive.

“Did you tell any of the family?” Aristotle asked.

“I didn’t know if you wanted me to. You never told me. Do you want me to?”

“No.”

“So that’s okay then.”

“It’ll be the three of us for dinner on the 25th, like normal? I mean, not like normal, but...”

“Your aunt and uncle won’t be there, if that’s what you mean. I’m sure they’d happily make the drive, if you wanted them to, or we could—“

“That’s okay. It’s a short break, and there’s so much work I have to do. If it wasn’t for her, I don’t think I’d have come.”

“That’d have been three years without seeing me,” Lewis said.

“That’s longer than I thought,” Aristotle said.

The car swung around the entrance ramp to the freeway, and they all listened to the breaks and the turn of the wheels.

“It’s a tough program,” Maya said, “but I’m sure your son has told you all about that. I just wanted to meet you and introduce myself and get the tour of St. Clair Shores, all that. See my husband’s roots.”

It was strange, the way Maya said husband—she let out a silent laugh, as if the word were a joke, but then she touched Aristotle on his abdomen very gently and looked over at him,

the way a wife will sometimes share an intimate joke with her husband, only in this case the intimate joke they shared was their marriage.

Lewis lost himself pondering this strangeness and then was faced with the strangeness of what to say to this stranger, now his family.

“Are you used to cold weather?” he asked.

“Not too much. I lived in England when I was a kid, but that’s not much colder than northern California.”

“England? My goodness.”

Aristotle sighed. “I told Maya about what an Anglophile you are,” he said.

“Rational thought and philosophy were invented by the Greeks and then perfected by the English.”

Aristotle snickered.

“What?” Lewis asked.

From the rearview mirror, Lewis could see that Aristotle and Maya were looking at each other, but he couldn’t tell what their looks were communicating.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“No, you laughed,” Lewis said. “What do you want to say?”

“Well...” Aristotle began.

“Well, yes, what?”

“It’s just that none of what you were saying is true. How can someone invent rational thought? What does that even mean? And the idea that philosophy was perfected by the

English...how can someone who cares about philosophy as much as you do contend that perfection is, at all, an operable term?"

"John Locke, Isaac Newton, Francis Bacon. You should be thankful, every time you step in a car, for the culture that invented the scientific method."

"And what a gift that was," Aristotle said, leaning forward and enunciating so that Lewis could feel his son's spit on his neck, "to the native peoples of all the other continents, South America and Africa and India, who managed to create intricate, thriving civilizations before rational thought and philosophy had them digging for gold ore sixteen hours a day under threat of lash or musket or Gatling gun."

Lewis first wanted to reach back and wring the boy, but he calmed himself, then he wanted to critique the boy's logic, as if the Gatling gun was really what Socrates had in mind when he strolled through Athens and expatiated on the good, but he decided to limit himself. The more limited the claim, the easier it is to hold.

"India's not a continent," Lewis finally said.

"Yes, it is. Not according to the English scientific method, but it is."

"Hey," Maya interrupted. "What city are we in?"

It took a moment for Lewis to take in his surroundings.

"Taylor," he said. "That blue arch behind us means we drove past Telegraph. They built those arches for the Super Bowl, back in '06. Bussed all the homeless people from downtown over to Pontiac and spent the rest of their money making modern art for people driving into the city from the airport."

All three of them sighed knowingly, then Lewis could hear the soft squeaks of Maya's jacket as she hugged herself for warmth.

"Maya, if you want, I have some old coats of my wife's, if you want to borrow, if you get cold."

"No, that'd be weird," Aristotle said.

"Really, don't worry about it," Maya said. "I have warmer clothes in my bag. Leggings, that sort of thing."

"That's good," Lewis said, and they drove on, through Dearborn and past the Henry Ford and Greenfield Village and then into Detroit, and Maya looked out the window at the abandoned gas stations and at the chaos of the ramps to Canada and 96 and the Lodge and 75 and at the billboards for Honey Baked Hams and unfamiliar lawyers with collagened and lifted faces, and, when Lewis determined that her attention was fully given over to these sights, he said to his son, "Yes, I see how her wearing your mom's coat could be weird."

When was it that Lewis began to lust after his daughter-in-law? Was it when she revealed that she'd studied theater at Stanford and designed a Euripides production? This certainly met his approval, but perhaps in a more paternal fashion; he was happy that his son had found such an intelligent bride.

It wasn't really until dinner that Lewis sensed something other than a familial tie between Maya and himself. Aristotle had asked Lewis what he was working on with the American Humanist Convention, so Lewis talked about his petition to the Troy City Council, requesting a Prayer for Reason be uttered during the city's National Day of Prayer festivities. Maya said that

it sounded like rewarding work, and even if this was just her patronizing him, how long had it been since he'd been politely patronized by a woman? The ones he saw regularly—the schoolteachers with their stained cardigans or the grayed lesbian who served as President of their Convention Chapter—had known him for decades, and, except for a year around Barbara's death, had long since done away with politeness, were quick to dismiss him when they grew bored with his discussions of Hume or his difficulties controlling students. To Maya, an actually interested individual, Lewis couldn't help but continue talking about his petition—he said *his* because he had written the first and second draft on his own—and how the City of Troy had just approved it.

“I hope it's worth something,” he said. “You know what they say, one changed mind is worth the fight.”

Aristotle fidgeted. “But if it's approved, is it really a fight?”

“What do you mean?” Lewis asked.

“Nothing. Forget it.”

Lewis washed his mouth with red wine. “Tell me your thoughts,” he said.

“It's just,” Aristotle started, “it's just that a fight implies working against something, a person or an organization. In most contexts. But you didn't work against anyone, certainly not physically but not even in terms of gaining negative media attention. There were no angry editorials or letters to the ACLU. Your fight against was just a request to speak at the Prayer Day, a request which therefore condones or sanctions the Prayer Day's existence. I understood what you meant, but your intent hollowed the individual words. Do you see what I mean?”

“I failed a language game,” Lewis mumbled.

“Whatever words you use, I think it’s good,” Maya said. “The people who celebrate the National Day of Prayer are the most religious families, the ones who home school. A Prayer for Reason might be the first time those kids hear that they don’t have to be religious. Maybe it’d be better to say that, instead of fighting against the event, Lewis *subverted* it.”

And Lewis’s heart swooned at her correct and courageous words.

Later, after Aristotle excused himself to study in his bedroom, Lewis sat with Maya in the living room, and they watched a documentary about Thurgood Marshall. Her legs were still bare, and she smelled of nothing more or less pleasant than fabric softener, and her face showed great appreciation when Marshall lectured on the power and promise of the Constitution.

When the documentary ended, Lewis allowed the remote to land on a sitcom he’d secretly loved for many years, the one about obnoxious geniuses who live together. There’d been a time when Lewis would have thought pathetic the emotional connection he now had to these fictional characters, and though Maya had no reason to be aware of this, when they bellowed together at Sheldon’s antics, this constituted for Lewis great intimacy.

The truth is that Lewis did not merely *lust* after Maya—he fell in love with the girl that night. Yes, that was this feeling, and he’d first felt this falling and last felt it too on his second date with Barbara, thirty-three years now past, when they were supposed to watch a Dickens adaptation on the CBC together but instead drank gin and tonics and talked until two about all the books they’d read and all the books they wanted to read but that still didn’t exist, the books they’d someday compose together.

But no sooner did he understand Maya in this new context, the short line of his loved, than she took her first step up the stairs to go to bed. She was to sleep in the master bedroom,

while Aristotle slept in his old room, but Lewis needed to stop her, to turn her around, to just momentarily keep her from leaving him.

“So, technically now, your name is Maya Meyer?” he asked her.

And she laughed and laughed.

Looking to the Greeks for advice on father-son relations is a troubling endeavor. On the one hand, Athenian culture was profoundly patriarchal. For instance, men who took action against their elders, in particular their fathers, were considered impious. Hence *The Euthyphro*, in which Socrates gawks at the eponymous citizen for having the gall to prosecute his own father for murder. Piety, it could therefore be deduced, took precedence in Athenian culture over what we might today call justice. (Of course, Lewis also knew that Socrates would contend that such a distinction is meaningless since piety is defined in part by justice, so perhaps it'd be best to say that for Athenians, filial justice took precedence over civil or political justice.)

Yet, no matter how much the Athenians obsessed over how to appropriately honor their parents, they obsessed more over killing and maiming them. They do it in *Oedipus Rex*, and they do it in *The Oresteia*. They said that the primordial father, Uranus, was castrated by his son, Cronus, and that Cronus was later humiliated at battle and imprisoned for eternity by his own son, Zeus. Some said that Cronus was castrated, too.

This is then an essential conflict of classical culture—children owe to their parents complete reverence, and yet children want, more than anything, to kill them—but for as much attention as is paid to this problem, no final answers or explanations are ever supplied. It is

simply the state of the Earth. Oedipus was fated to kill his father. It is asking why that drives him insane.

Lewis tried to learn from the Ancients not to bother with the why of the Fates or to futilely attempt escape their net; he had to accept what was and let his son alone. During the day, Aristotle worked in his bedroom and then, in the evening, went out with Maya to the same restaurants Lewis once treated him to. Of course, Lewis couldn't help thinking back to those days, the happy ones, but then his mind would turn to the other days, when Barbara was in the hospital and when she wasn't anymore. Lewis said little to his son then because what was there to say? And he remembered Aristotle looking up at him from his bowl of Corn Pops like he expected his father to help somehow, as if Lewis had words that could make a boy forget his mother was dead. It wasn't until Aristotle pulled out *Zarathustra* that Lewis was able to talk to him about something, and maybe he went overboard in his criticisms, but it would have been fine, Lewis felt, if the boy didn't go to school right then at peak rebellion. In another six months, Aristotle would have cooled down. Maybe he would have gotten involved with science again or else have moved onto something new, Bob Dylan or T.S. Eliot or botany. But the timing was all wrong, and the boy was fossilized the moment he left for Ann Arbor, was still the boy who hated his father.

And now that boy had a wife. Lewis tried to be cautious around her, to not give in to his swelling sentiments, but during the day, while Aristotle studied, Lewis was compelled by the rules of hospitality to spend his time with her. They went to Elaine's Bagels and Somerset Mall, where Maya shopped for a Christmas gift for her husband. (It was Barbara's contention that if the family celebrated a Christmas which was orthodox in its secularity, the boy would never be

tempted by religion, and so they continued to celebrate the holiday even now.) They watched the movies that Lewis had rented from the library, some Ingmar Bergman and *The Palm Beach Story* and that one where an elderly Tolstoy banters with his wife.

Lewis served tea and dried figs and apricots from Nino Salvaggio while they talked about their lives. Her father was a businessman, she said, sent at the age of 30 to obtain an M.B.A. from Manchester. Beginning at the age of 5, Maya lived there with her family. Her mother fell in love with the place and managed to keep the family there an extra year, until they finally retreated back to China, where the dad managed an investment portfolio. They sent her to boarding schools in the U.K. after that, but she was rebellious and hated it.

“I wasn’t Chinese, not really,” she said. “That was just a place I went on holiday. And I always loved American culture—Rodgers and Hammerstein, *Guys and Dolls*, *Grease*.”

“Just musicals?”

“In primary school, I discovered Williams, and that opened me up for straight shows. Now, of course, I love them, more than musicals even. I mean, O’Neil! *Anna Christie*! I directed it, as an undergraduate. I did a terrible job, but it was wonderful to hear the cadence of those words every day.”

Lewis asked her, as tactfully as he knew how, why she dropped out of Stanford.

“I knew after the O’Neil play that I didn’t really want to be involved with theater on a day-to-day basis. You put all of your expectations on one project, and then when it fails, and it will always fail, it’s heartbreaking. But I convinced myself that it was directing that was the problem, that designing was for me. And I needed to study something if I was going to stay.”

“But one can’t keep lying to oneself,” Lewis said.

“Exactly. Then I met Ari, and I’m grateful for what he offered me. I don’t know if there will ever be a kindness great enough to pay him back.”

“It’s not like you’re some gorgon. I’d say he did well enough in the deal.”

They laughed.

One day, Lewis drove Maya downtown to James L. King Books.

Maya said that Aristotle didn’t want to go, that used bookstores depressed him, reminded him just how much was written and immediately forgotten.

“But I think there’s a romance to it,” Maya said as Lewis merged onto the freeway. They passed a thirty-foot tall metallic cone that marked a National Coney Island and resembled a vase or a tub of popcorn cast in aluminum.

“It’s reassuring,” Lewis said. “The books end up there when people move or die or need money. Whatever happens in their life or in the city, the books survive, even the ones that weren’t enjoyed, that weren’t understood by their first owners.”

Lewis paid for Maya’s books before she could stop him, and when they got home, Aristotle was already downstairs, waiting for them.

On the 25th, Lewis gave the couple their combined holiday-wedding gift, which was a very large check, since newlyweds need money, he reasoned, and he didn’t know of anything else to give. He also gave Maya mittens and a matching scarf, for the weather. In return, Aristotle handed him a small brown box. Inside was a tiger made of porcelain, off-white like porcelain but with black stripes up the stomach and orange stars painted on the stripes.

“Do you remember,” Aristotle asked, “taking me to the Toledo Zoo when I was a kid?”

“Because it was less crowded than the Detroit Zoo,” Lewis said. “You would talk the whole way there about the animals you wanted to see. Baboons, Mommy. I remember you repeating that, over and over one year, and your mother got so annoyed. Baboons, Mommy.”

“But the best part was lunch, the tiger cage.” Aristotle turned to Maya. “There were these tiger cages built in the twenties. Of course, you don’t keep tigers in cages now, but they kept the building, so that became the zoo’s restaurant. They had murals of tigers and lions there, and I was just enamored with it, with the idea that tigers once prowled where I was eating my grilled cheese.”

Maya touched Aristotle’s arm, and Lewis turned the tiger over in his hand.

“You’re frowning,” Aristotle said.

“I’m afraid I’ll break it.”

The boy leaned forward. “Should I have gotten you something plastic?”

“No, no,” Lewis said. “I’m just such a klutz. But it’s very nice. I’ll keep it here,” he said, and he put the tiger on the coffee table in front of him beside a photo of Barbara holding Aristotle’s hand as he walked to his first day of kindergarten.

They sat in silence after the gift giving, until Aristotle said he would spend the afternoon upstairs, working. Maya followed him, saying she’d read, and Lewis immediately began reprimanding himself. He wanted to suggest they spend the day together, but he didn’t know what to suggest they do. When Aristotle was a child, they all played board games together on the 25th, but the only game he could remember now was Risk, and he didn’t remember liking it, and the boy would probably call it politically incorrect and offensive to colonized cultures. (Lewis

could respond by saying that any of the countries could win, even the ones that started in South America or Africa, but again, he didn't really want to play it, so why was he anticipating this argument that he didn't want to have?) The suggestion, then, that they do *something* without actually naming *anything* seemed equally awful, a demonstration of how little he ultimately knew his son. Of course, it didn't have to all be on Lewis, and he thought briefly that maybe Aristotle wanted to suggest they spend the day together, too, but the boy wanted to treat the 25th as unsentimentally as possible, as tribute to his father's ideas. But no, Aristotle was already quite forthright with his opinion of Lewis's ideas. They wouldn't speak until dinner, and it would be fine. It was no special day, and maybe Lewis would think of something to do tomorrow.

When they ate, Aristotle asked his father if he had done any dating.

"Not really," Lewis said. He tried not to look at Maya as he addressed the question and then blushed at thinking that he wasn't trying to look at her.

"I mean, some," he said. "One women at the Convention. Or two. I guess it depends what you call a date."

"I know the feeling," Maya said, smiling.

"What about online?" Aristotle asked.

"I tried, but it's hard to get responses, as a guy. It's, you know, an uneven playing field. There are many more women than men, but you know, it's fine."

The boy was gnawing at the bottom of a chicken leg like a dog.

"I'm probably too picky," Lewis said. "Your mother was such perfection. How could I find someone who could make me forget about her?"

The boy bowed his head to the table to drop the drumstick, still like a dog.

“You don’t get lonely?” Aristotle asked. “On the phone, you sometimes sound...lonely.”

“You two talk on the phone?” Maya asked.

Everyone laughed too long. Lewis turned his attention to his salad and made great progress until he met with an impregnable grape tomato.

“Tell me about your afternoon studies,” he said to Aristotle.

“I’m not sure I want to talk about it,” he said.

Lewis nodded with a knowing smile.

“Very protective of the work.”

Maya nodded, and Lewis thought he had an idea for a joke.

“Are you concerned that I’ll plagiarize you?” Lewis’s rush to speak flattened the playfulness from his tone, and his words had the quality of battery.

Aristotle shook his head.

“I just don’t want you shitting on it.”

“What? I don’t. . .”

“You either think I’m too obtuse or too smart to read whomever it is I’m reading. It’s always, ‘Oh, what a brilliant man this was, and how dare you criticize him.’” The boy spoke with a smile on his face, but his words were slow, and his hands shook when he spoke. “Or it’s ‘what an imbecile Leibniz was, don’t bother considering him, he’s not worth your time.’”

When he stopped talking, he continued to stare at Lewis, and his hands continued to shake.

For dessert, they had a store-bought pecan pie.

“Do you remember the pies your mother used to make?”

“They were much better than this,” Aristotle said. “This is like mud they put sugar in.

Why do you buy it?”

“Your mother spoiled all other pecan pies for me. Why get better, when I can’t get hers?”

Lewis took a bite of the pie, let its muck spread out over his tongue, and then swallowed it in one gulp.

“Besides,” he said, “a pie that was merely very good would just help me to forget the old pie. I’d rather have worse pie since it allows me to better remember your mother’s pie. I derive more pleasure from that memory than I would from any pie I could make or purchase.”

He closed his eyes, and he could see Barbara in the kitchen, a tress of her hair trapped below her left apron strap, and Aristotle’s head was hardly taller than his plate, and the red sweater he’d be too big for in a year hung over his shoulders and bagged in his lap.

“Do you remember, she’d bake pie all day and she’d give two to your aunt and one—”

“Stop it,” Aristotle said. “Don’t you think it’s sexist and superficial, remembering a woman like that? A baker of pies? It’s a Kroger commercial, not a woman.”

Aristotle drew his hands together as if he were about to applaud himself, and then he pointed at his father with both hands, a gesture which reminded Lewis both of prayer and a handgun.

“No lies, that’s all I’m saying. Don’t lie about my mom, and don’t lie about me, and don’t lie about yourself. Mom made pies because her sister stopped when Uncle Ben got diabetes, but she hated doing it and would curse out the aunts the whole time. The only times I’d hear her

swear, it was when she was making pies. ‘Fat ass Betty, make you own nut shit.’ Those were exact words to me when I was twelve.”

“That doesn’t sound like your mother,” Lewis said.

“It was. You idealize everything until it’s just bullshit.”

Lewis stood up and then sat back down, his fist outward and traveling down with his body so that it hit the table before the rest of him landed on the chair.

“She wasn’t bullshit. Don’t tell me my memories are bullshit.”

Lewis felt immediate shame and looked at his son, then averted his eyes, darted them to Maya’s face, where he found a searching look. He knew she was deciding whether to attack Aristotle on his argument’s glaring flaws—for starters, did Barbara not bake pies? can this not be said of the dead, that they baked?—or to save Lewis embarrassment by changing the topic as quickly as possible. It would be an entirely selfless decision for Maya, and Lewis saw the workings of her mind as a red flush, as reason glowing in her cheeks, reason and its cousin virtue, and he saw what Catholics see in portraits of the Virgin with Child—a devotion to mankind, without regard to personal needs or desires, which we call beauty, True Beauty.

“I never got to talk to you about that seminar we sat in on last week,” she said to Aristotle, “the one about pottery and erotic imagery.”

And with that, Lewis was saved from his son.

Lewis did not speak to his son for the rest of the night, though many questions occurred to him: If you did read Leibniz, what did you get out of him? What exactly is the teaching stipend Stanford affords its graduate students, and if it’s enough that you can wait until just one

week before your flight to buy two airplane tickets across the country during the busiest and most expensive travel season of the year, why isn't it enough for a haircut that would at least make you look semi-professional? What is it that Maya sees in you? You're smart, of course, but Stanford must be full of smart men, so what is it about you in particular? How can a boy as young as you, and as angry as you, appreciate a woman so loving and so lovely?

Was it Montaigne who concluded that beauty cannot own itself? That a woman's beauty does not belong to her alone but to the world which decides what is and is not beauty? Certainly it does not belong to her lover. Not to her sole, petulant, petty lover.

When Aristotle went up to study, Maya volunteered to help Lewis with the dishes.

"I'm sorry about all the tension," he said, "between me and the boy. It must be uncomfortable for you."

"I'm sorry about it too," she said. "He is under a lot of stress now, and I know this isn't what he wanted. You wouldn't believe me if I told you about what he planned for this trip, how the three of us could get along. But as soon as we got here, I guess there were just too many memories."

Maya tipped over the pot that Lewis had made the potatoes in and had been left to soak, and the dirty water transformed the sink, momentarily, into an Amazonian fall. They both stepped back, and Maya apologized for the spill.

"What does he say about me?" Lewis asked her.

She was walking around him to grab a paper towel, which she used to dab her shirt at the belly button where the water had darkened an orange stripe to reddish brown.

"He says that you're an Apollonian man."

Lewis blushed. “You mean handsome?”

Maya chuckled at him. “I don’t think that’s what he means. He means as in Nietzsche. He means you believe in beauty and knowledge.”

Lewis blushed even redder, and he shook his head, as if doing so would cool down his cheeks—it didn’t make logical sense, but he was too embarrassed for logic. He threw his face down and busied himself with a dirtied serving spoon.

When the spoon shined, he spoke. “I know my son doesn’t mean that as a compliment.”

“I think it’s more complicated than that.”

“He would say you should believe in chaos, not knowledge, but why would a sane man choose chaos over beauty?” Lewis found himself gesticulating with the cleaned spoon, so he walked around Maya to return it to its drawer. “He’s up there studying, looking for wisdom. He’s married now, for God’s sake. What chaos is there in that life? He agrees with me, you see? He just won’t admit it.”

“Again, I think it’s more complicated than that.”

Lewis walked around Maya, back to the sink. She was wearing perfume. That was new. It smelled of cut pineapple and sweet sauces and bright flowers that hadn’t yet been named.

“It’s always more complicated,” Lewis said.

“Do you know what Nietzsche thought about Euripides?” Maya asked.

“No, though I assume it was an extreme response with convoluted reasoning.”

“Of course,” Maya laughed. “Nietzsche liked him the least of all the tragedians because Euripides’ heroes were the most realistic.”

“Yes, that makes as much sense as I expected.”

Their hands touched as they both reached for paper towel, and both their hands quickly receded.

“Well, Nietzsche understood drama differently from Aristotle. I mean, not Ari. The Greek Aristotle. That one thought that the tragic hero suffers from a flaw in judgment, which implies that if you live your life with perfect judgment, you won’t suffer. Euripides’ characters were the most flawed, their suffering the most justifiable, so they backed up Aristotle’s theory and refuted Nietzsche’s.”

“Which was what exactly? That bad decisions don’t lead to bad outcomes?”

“Just that ignorance isn’t the cause of suffering. Being in the world is the cause of suffering. The more perfect the tragic hero is, the less his suffering is deserved, and that’s true to the world, since suffering is unavoidable.”

There was a single droplet of water on Maya’s collarbone that must have landed there when the pot fell over. It was the size of a small pearl, and it filtered and reflected the overhead light into the same pale pinks and blues that dance on the surface of pearls.

“You’re sharp,” Lewis said. “I couldn’t have asked for a more brilliant woman for my family.”

Maya blushed.

“I can’t keep up with your son,” she said.

“You’re going to take the world by storm, I know it, even if it isn’t in theater. What do you think it will be? I know that you have family money—”

Maya laughed.

“I’m sorry. That is not a polite thing to say.”

“It’s okay.”

“And I don’t care however much money you have. The point is that you have time to decide what you will do, how you will make the world a better place.”

“Or a kinder place,” she said. “It’ll still be the world, but maybe it can be kinder for someone. That sounds sentimental.”

“It’s refreshing,” Lewis said. “A change from Nihilism and unremitting cruelty.”

“The purposeless life,” Maya said. “The life that’s just the dark, driving, insatiable desire for power. Yes, I hear about that from Ari too.”

They smiled and lifted hot plates out of the dishwasher.

Before Maya went up stairs, Lewis asked her how she was sleeping.

“You have a good, firm bed. Much better than the apartment in California. I live between two dogs, one that barks for 1:00 a.m. walks and one that barks for 4:00 a.m. walks.”

“Here you don’t get up?”

“No.”

“You sleep straight through?”

“Straight.”

Consider it this way—a man will look at a woman’s body when she is clothed. A woman should not be catcalled on the street; this does her emotional harm. But a woman understands that a man will look at her, whether the man finds himself attracted to her or not, and a woman, if she hopes to interact with the men around her, is okay with this. Whether or not the male gaze is intrinsically immoral, it is a moot point, since a woman must, practically speaking, find it

morally neutral, as the male gaze is unavoidable. So it is okay for a man to look at a woman. It is important to establish principles, since from there, all Lewis was doing, was intending to do, was to pull back a sheet, maybe just the coverlet and leave the sheet still on. All he wanted was to gaze at her bare leg, which he'd done already, when she was wearing that short dress at the airport. Now, perhaps, he would see more. The thermostat had been set a few degrees warmer than normal, so it seemed likely to him that she'd be sleeping without any sort of pajama pant, so her whole thigh would be exposed and he would see up to the line where thigh caved before pelvis, where the elastic band of her underwear would have settled, and maybe he would see past the underwear, the fabric that is used for women's underwear is something less than opaque, but he would not touch her and she would not wake. Since she would in no way suffer from this interaction nor even be aware of it, no transgression would occur, and if she did wake and was as rational as he knew she was, what transgression would she say had occurred, that he looked at her? Is this Saudi Arabia, where a man may not look at a woman? No, this was no crime. Ethically, morally, by law, Lewis was guiltless.

But assume what Lewis saw that morning, long after the boy had stopped his studying and fallen asleep, in the darkness and total quiet of 5:00 a.m. Here was a girl, lying alone and yet not alone, for she was together with her perfect beauty and all the associations beauty has had for millennia. It is not true, what Montaigne said; a woman is in possession of her beauty, and a man can only marvel at it, marvel at her, but he cannot possess it any more than he can possess her. The master/slave dialectic as it applies to men and women, Lewis thought, but he didn't think, not really, in the same instant the idea flamed and fell to the wind, and what remained constant was the girl, lying on her side with the comforter pushed away, the sheet already half-open, her

long leg bent over it and her back exposed and her underwear, blue with white stitching, exposed, and it must have been a size small or extra small or, even, he shuddered, a child's extra large, since it stretched around her not-at-all considerable hips as if this would be an effort, to embrace this girl, this young girl, whose face was so smooth, who slept with her mouth open as if breathing blessings to the world around her, and Lewis raised two fingers to that mouth, as if to receive this blessing, and this is when Maya opened her eyes.

Lewis braced himself doubly, first for the scream which he assumed Maya's mouth was forming to make, second for the consequences of this moment, which he assumed would outlive him, would be a story told to his grandchildren when they reached an age of reason and inquired why they'd never met their grandfather. This moment would be his legacy.

But Maya did not scream. She merely stared, as if waiting for him to speak.

"Are you okay?" he asked her.

She nodded.

"Then go back to sleep," he said, and he pulled the sheet over her and left her in his bedroom, closing the door behind him.

"Dad, Maya told me about what happened this morning."

Lewis sat at one end of the kitchen table. On the other end was a box of leftover bagels. Aristotle and Maya sat in the middle.

"She told me that you were in the bedroom."

Lewis knew that this conversation was coming. Maya hadn't come down for breakfast like she usually did, and with his ear to the air vent, Lewis could tell that the two of them were

talking in Aristotle's bedroom, and though he could not hear what they were saying, he knew what they were saying. His heart faded, then pumped with dizzying intensity, and he knew in this panic that he had to formulate a cogent defense, but he'd been so convinced that no transgression had occurred, he'd forgotten that such convincing would not matter, a transgression would be assumed.

"That you were watching her."

Lewis shook his head, then nodded it.

"Just to make sure she was okay," he said.

"Lewis," Maya said, and he looked at her open eyes for the first time that morning. Their brown matched his, almost perfectly, like wooden beads all carved from the same tree.

"Are you lonely?" she asked. "Ari told me, before we came, that you were lonely."

"I get along. There's school. There's the meetings. It's full, you know, it's a full life.

Look, morality is a rational thing. It's not divined from God on high; it's something that we must rationally establish ourselves, and there's no reason why checking in, just checking in, wasn't a moral good. Let's use our reason. I thought I heard something, a footstep, an intruder. It was, wasn't it, for her benefit, her safety?"

"You're rambling," Aristotle said.

"We don't want to talk about morality, or intruders," Maya said. "We want to talk about you."

"But I really did—"

"Stop it," Aristotle said. "I hate—"

Maya's fingers dug into the blue wool of Aristotle's sweater, and she took over the discussion.

"We just want to help you. What you did isn't right, morally or ethically or however it is you wish to construe it. But I know you're alone and have been for a long time."

"And that...I hate *that*," Aristotle said. His voice was as low and soft as it had ever been, and he clenched his fist as he repeated himself. "I hate that."

The room was quiet until Maya leaned forward and began to speak.

"What Aristotle said to me this morning was that he didn't believe that he could be less angry if you were this lonely. And I said that I could make you less lonely. That I could love you."

Maya presented Lewis with a smile, reassuring but postured, and Lewis focused on the space between her features, on the skin which was uniform in the way that only skin which is new, both to the world and to one's own eyes, is uniform, uniform such that is possible only before days and weeks of company reveal the flaws in another's form, uniform like a blue square of pool water is uniform when seen from a rising plane, as uniform and as distant.

"When Ari said we're not serious, that's part of what he meant. We see other people, and we talk about it, and it is not a big deal. We like to talk about it, sometimes. Like a game."

"Or it's less like a game," Aristotle said, "than other ways of doing things, all that shit which is part of how our society constructs sex and romance and attachment. I don't love out of habit, and neither does she. There's always a reason."

"Like spreading pleasure," Maya said. "Making people less lonely. I can do that for you. If you want to be less lonely."

“Why?” Lewis asked.

“Why would you want to be less lonely?”

“No, that’s not what I meant,” Lewis said, but he didn’t continue. He considered Maya’s question, why would a person want to be less lonely, and then why *should* a person want to be less lonely, and the only answer he could contemplate was for his son’s happiness, which is to say for the sake of familial piety, which was, he thought, perhaps only good if a person should not be lonely. This was not an answer that Socrates would be satisfied with. But as for the first question, why *would* a person want to be less lonely, the solution was simple, discoverable across the table, in Maya’s face.

She lifted her hands and placed them, one on top of the other, onto Lewis’s.

“When we were talking, Ari and I, Ari said that the logic would appeal to you. The utilitarian aspect of it.”

“Yes, I can see that appeal,” Lewis said.

What kind of a woman does such a thing? Maya, Lewis knew, was not the first twenty-something to sleep with a man his age. It wasn’t an expression of sexual desire, though perhaps curiosity was a factor. She told him, before the act, that she’d slept with older men before, a professor once at Berkeley and an artist she met in Rome, but Lewis didn’t have to be told that he was of a separate category from such men. Maya could have only loved him out of pity, but, for a night, at least, that was enough.

As for making Lewis less lonely, that didn’t work, at least not that first day, not until the next morning when, paradoxically, one of his guests left.

Maya wasn't awake when Aristotle's car service arrived, but Lewis woke up when he heard the door. He watched his son walk past the threshold, and he said nothing, did not try to stop him. He thought this would pay back, just in part, his indebtedness to the universe, for when Maya woke up and did not scream.

There was a note in Aristotle's bedroom saying that he was going back to Stanford early to study and that Maya should still use her plane ticket as planned. She didn't seem too distressed, as if she were expecting it, so Lewis tried to not to be distressed too. He called Aristotle, and Aristotle picked up, said he was okay, sounded okay, at least as okay as he ever sounded now. He told his father to give Maya a good vacation.

Lewis acquiesced, and he spent the next week with Maya, not like new lovers exactly—they only made love once more, briefly—but like a long-married couple that had been separated by practicalities and were now reunited. They went out to dinner each night and drove to three different art theaters and talked, and most of their physical connection came as hands-on-back, hands-on-hips, hands-in-hands.

They talked about Aristotle, but mainly about his childhood. Maya asked for embarrassing stories and Lewis told her about the boy's diaper accidents and crushes and the time Barbara's mother spanked him for saying "damn it" during an episode of *Wheel of Fortune*. Lewis told her the proud stories too, showed her old essays that had been starred and rubyed, and he retrieved soccer trophies cast in every cheap metal alloy and photos of summer vacations—Aristotle sharing a block of fudge with his mother or lunging a wooden broadsword toward the camera.

On Tuesday, he drove her to the airport and resisted the urge to thank her for her charity. When he pulled the car into short-term parking, Maya put her hand on the steering wheel and said that he didn't need to walk her inside.

"But I've got time," he said, "and I'd like to see you off, if that's okay for you."

Wind wound between the columns of the parking garage, and Maya's feet clacked loudly as they made their way past the beginning of the alphabet, to the first floor entrance by the baggage carousels and ground transportation. Inside, Maya left her bag with Lewis and went to the bathroom, and Lewis went to a coffee stand where he bought Maya an espresso, in case security was long and she needed to drink it quickly. He got himself a black tea and thought about how he'd be holding the cup when Maya came back and how he'd still be holding it when she'd be gone.

He hugged her when she appeared again and held her closely, then let her go with a steady, rigid arm to keep the tea from spilling.

While she was still close, he asked her, quietly, "He knows that I love him, right?"

Maya smiled. "Yes," she said.

"But really?"

Maya smiled again, her lips sharper now. "I don't think he would say it. I think he'd say something like, what do you mean by love? Like the way a boy loves pizza? The way a boy loves a dog? The way a dog loves a boy? And so on. And so on. But don't take it personally. He wouldn't say he loves me, either."

"And you're okay with that?"

"I like it," Maya said. "He only says what he believes in. No bullshit."

At a baggage carousel, a German family stacked cadaver-sized duffle bags onto a moving cart and then an old woman stood before them, staggered by the difficulty of passing the cart with her walker.

“I can see it as a virtue,” Lewis said.

The old woman turned her walker around, avoided the family entirely.

Maya grimaced as she sipped her espresso.

“They have sugar,” Lewis said.

“There’s never enough sugar for espresso,” she said. “Not in the whole world is there enough sugar for just one demitasse.”

They traded drinks then and hugged goodbye, and Lewis left the airport clutching the paper espresso cup for its ounce of warmth.

After a week, Lewis finally worked up the courage to call his son again. He went to the basement to do it. It was unfurnished and cold. The beige phone was mounted on a wall by the dryer, which was itself only a few years old, but the telephone had been there when he and Barbara had first moved.

“She got her first interview,” Aristotle said. “Writing grant proposals, which she has experience with from the theater.”

Lewis nodded for no one’s benefit.

Lewis asked him to tell Maya that he was sorry that he spied on her, that he failed to respect her, as a fellow human.

“As a fellow human,” Aristotle repeated. His voice, Lewis thought, was light with deserved scorn. “You didn’t apologize yourself?”

“I couldn’t,” Lewis said. “When ever I looked at her, and I tried...do you realize that we have the same color eyes, me and her?”

“Both brown,” Aristotle said.

“But the same shade. Remarkable. Scary, actually. I can’t put it into words, but I couldn’t apologize into my own eyes.”

“You haven’t quoted Sophocles yet,” Aristotle said. “That’s good.”

Lewis paused, let his son enjoy his barb.

“Aristotle, I want to be sure that I didn’t change anything. Between you and Maya.”

“We’re fine,” Aristotle said.

Lewis clenched his teeth, pulled his lips together like purse strings, then opened them back up.

“Then why did you leave?”

For a long time, Lewis waited for a response.

He thought about asking if Aristotle was still on the line, then considered simply hanging up, but finally the boy spoke.

“Do you know who the *epigoni* are?”

Lewis said no.

“The idea is that a human can interact with history in one of two ways, and the more destructive is what the *epigoni* do. They see the whole calamity of it, the chaos, the suffering,

and they throw up their hands and say they're too late, there's nothing to be done. Too much has happened before for them to change the world. They step away and give up."

"But that's the bad way, right?" Lewis asked.

"It's not what the *Übermensch* would do."

"Which is what, exactly?"

"I don't know," Aristotle said. "But it'd be transformative."

After the call, Lewis went back upstairs. One of the Canadian channels was running an old British production of *Strange Interlude*, but halfway through he lost interest and changed to a marathon of *The Big Bang Theory*. After two episodes, he made himself a pot of chamomile tea and ate a slice of pie he found in the fridge. It was two weeks old now but still, he thought, good.

Château Royale

Let me say first that I had no money and my boyfriend Kyle didn't either. I'd already quit my job at Claire's and put all my student loans into the car I'd need for school. I knew that was dumb even when I was doing it, but I did it anyways. I guess I was just tired of inventory and of neon and of hog-nosed parents telling their toddlers to shut up. And I did need a car to get to the college, which was like forty minutes north of Warren if there wasn't too much traffic on M-59. As for Kyle, he'd just gotten his degree and would start subbing when school started, but we were still weeks away from a paycheck. We'd been living with his dad for six months by then, and his dad was sick of it. So when he told us we could live in Gene's old place rent-free until spring, we listened.

"No catch," Kyle's dad said. "You can even rent out the extra rooms and keep the cash. But you remember who Gene is, right?"

We were sitting around the kitchen table, a bag of Taco Bell between us. Kyle's dad was so proud of his idea that he'd stopped on his way home from work and brought dinner: fifteen tacos, all beef, not even any of the ones with sour cream and tabs of tomato. I had one unwrapped and Fire-sauced before me, but I wanted to get all this over with before I ate it.

"You know," Kyle said, "the one in jail. The pedo."

That's when the memory spilled over. Gene was the dad's brother, and he'd been picked up for downloading pictures of kids. Kyle had told me when it happened, and I must have put it out of mind, the way you do with uncomfortable shit you don't have a use for, like when you hear about kid soldiers in Africa or some earthquake in China leveling a packed schoolhouse or, well, I guess it's mostly kid stuff.

"Prison now," Kyle's dad said. "Asshole got the book thrown at him. Twelve years. Meanwhile, I've got to do something with the house. I told Mom it was a mistake to leave anything to him, but she just talked my head off about how helpless he was. All it means is that I already took everything I want from there when Mom died, so I just want to get rid of the rest. Sell it."

"You want us to live at a child molester's house?" I asked.

Kyle's dad had his head horizontal to bite into a taco, then swung it back vertical and talked with meat boogers in his teeth.

"Not a child molester. Photos were all he had. He never touched Kyle, right, son?"

"That's right," Kyle said.

"And the police have already been there. You just have to haul out his old dresser, stuff like that. Mom's silver, anything that might be valuable. Everything else can burn."

“You want us to clean out his pedophile shit?” Kyle asked. He’s a big guy with long hair; I’m into Thor-types. I don’t want to sound shallow, but I don’t know if we’d have started dating if he didn’t have long hair. But I’m glad we did. Besides getting his dad to let me move in, he was good to me, like moment-to-moment. Like when he was swearing at his dad, I could tell he didn’t really mean it because his tone was much milder than what he actually said, not angry at all. He was just asking to back me up, and it’d have been cooler if he actually agreed with me, but it was still nice being with a guy who disagreed with his father just for my sake.

“I’m gonna sell the house,” he said. “I would like you guys to help me get it looking respectable. I can just hire some people and sell it quicker. That’s fine with me. But I don’t know where you’d live.”

Me and Kyle looked at each other, adding how much money we had together. It didn’t take much time.

I wrapped my taco back up and said I had a stomach ache was going to lie down and read. That’s what I usually said around Kyle’s dad when I meant that I was going to go smoke a bowl. Not that he didn’t know that’s what I was doing, but why force the issue?

Obviously the taco was going to be soggy by the time I got back, but that was okay. If I’m high enough, I like them like that.

There’s no point going into detail about what I did the next day because it was real dumb, what my mom would’ve called me being split-pea brained. But I really didn’t want to move into the pedophile house, and all I could think to do was to call my best friend, Grace. She used to be a waitress at an Outback Steakhouse, which is good money but rough—people get real upset

about how well-done their ten-dollar steaks should be. She just walked out one day, and then, when she needed money, she started camming. That's taking off your clothes online for money, good money, she said, like she only needed to work one or two nights a week, and she could eat out and impulse buy tights and all that. She'd only been doing it for a little bit, short enough that I hadn't even told Kyle yet. But I already had a standing offer from Grace to join her. Guys paid big bucks for girl-on-girl, she said, and all I'd have to do was take my shirt off and kiss her.

So I went over to her place, just to talk about how much money I'd actually get, but she said she couldn't know until we did it. Anyways, her parents weren't home, so she smoked me out, and we ended up camming that night. If I would have known that I was going to do it then, I would have asked Kyle about it, if he'd have been okay with me doing something like that, but I wasn't expecting to do it. And maybe, if I'm being honest with myself, I didn't ask him because I didn't know what he'd say. I know one time Grace joked about me getting a job as a stripper and he got real weird, didn't laugh at all.

As for the camming, kissing a girl's no big deal, but Grace taking her clothes off, all of her clothes off, that freaked me out. And guys kept sending us messages. I wasn't looking at them—I was just trying to concentrate on, I don't know, being sexy I guess, like a perfume commercial. But Grace was reading the messages, and sometimes she'd laugh, and sometimes she'd look pissed, and even without knowing what she was reading, her being pissed, that pissed me off too. And the one time I tried to read the messages, Grace grabbed my hips with her nails and pulled me away. Finally she said, "This guy wants to see your itsy-bitsy ass."

That did it for me.

Not that I was insulted; I don't have Grace's curves, but her mom's Latina, from Argentina, so that's just genetic. At first I think it freaked me out because I'd never in a million years heard Grace say something so stupid as "itsy-bitsy." Then I started freaking out even more thinking those were Grace's words, and there was this Grace I didn't know who said stuff like 'itsy-bitsy' to turn guys on. Maybe it was just bad sativa. Maybe it was because I couldn't see what Grace was doing, and I couldn't see the camera, and I couldn't see all the men and all they were trying to tell me, but I absolutely freaked out and bailed. I lasted twenty-five minutes and planned to never tell anyone about it.

The next week, Kyle and I moved into the pedophile house.

We decided to get the house ready before Labor Day, when Oakland University started its semester. We even decided to have a little party when we were finished, as an additional incentive for cleaning everything out in time.

The worst part was the kitchen, since no one had emptied the garbage there since Gene had been taken away. I asked Kyle how long ago that was, and he said he didn't know. The trash was all brown liquid-y, and the smell stayed after a whole bottle of Febreze.

Next was the living room. We filled three boxes with old paperbacks like *Bride of the Robot King* and *Carnage at Dragon Inn*. Kyle tried to convince me that we should keep them, but I wanted it all out.

"You're just saying that because there aren't any books here that *you* want to read," he told me.

"No girl books just means that they were all his, and we're not keeping anything of his."

We ended up not finishing the bedrooms before the party. The easiest one had been converted into a computer room with a desk, with the computer taken by the police, and all we really had to do was put an empty desk in a pick-up. But another room held spare furniture and old lamps and copper cowboy figurines, blankets on top of boxes on top of saxophone cases. When Kyle's dad first gave us the tour, he called it "the money room."

While we sorted, we talked about who might live with us. Kyle's only idea was his friend Ryan, who'd be able to put up \$200 a month. Kyle asked if I had invited Grace, and I said that I had, even though I hadn't yet, and then we didn't say any more about it.

The weirdest things we found were videotapes. They were in a box, hidden underneath old sports sections—we only found sports sections in the house, never any classifieds or actual news or even the comics.

I asked Kyle what he thought was on them, and he shrugged. "*Friends* episodes," he said. He put the box outside, but I kept thinking about it, even that night, when we had the party. By then, the whole apartment had been cleaned except for Gene's actual bedroom, so we just closed that door. It was important, Kyle said, to have the party because then the house would be ours, and we'd just be throwing this dude's stuff out of our house, instead of cleaning out a child molester's place for him.

It was a weird party. Not that many people showed up but enough that I hadn't met some of them before, and we went through both cases of beer. I spent most of the time talking to Grace. We had a good conversation about, if we were vampires, whose blood we'd never suck. I said circus clowns. She said she'd never drink a U.S. president "because it's disrespectful."

Late into the party, after the cases were killed and the liquor stores closed and all we had to drink was triple sec and Jäger, one of Kyle's friends got into the bedroom. The bed wasn't made, but it had sheets. There was a small TV on a dresser along with a lot of loose change and a few belts and pill bottles which Ryan took and then pelted at the ground because they were empty. Then they were all looking for more pills, not that the bottles they found were anything good anyway. Then they were looking for incriminating stuff, pulling up the mattress, pulling the sock draw out and emptying it.

"Shirley, come see this," Grace told me. She was looking at the wall, at a small drawing in a chipped wood frame of a castle. It was mostly black and white, but with smatterings of color: the top of the castle was blue-green, and so were most of the people, though a few were red and one was autumn orange. And there was a hound with a single yellow spot, staring at me.

"It's just like all that book shit you're into," she said. "Queens and knights in love."

There was a caption below the castle, but it was in French.

"Grace," I said, "what's that little arrow above the 'a'?"

"How should I know?" she said. "I was in Spanish with you."

We watched the boys attacking the bedroom for a while, and it was clear to us immediately that they wouldn't find anything, good or bad.

"Boys, it's safe," Grace said.

Except, of course, for the tapes, which I told her about then and how we couldn't find out what was on them without a videotape-playing thing and how Kyle's dad had already sold the one in the house.

“Is that what happens,” Grace asked, “when you get put in jail? People just sell your stuff? Does it stop being your stuff?”

“Kyle’s dad has power of attorney,” I said.

“Oh. Does that mean it’s his stuff now?”

“Maybe?”

“Well, you need to find out what’s on the tapes. You can’t live here if you don’t know what’s on the tapes.”

“I can’t live here if I don’t know what’s on the tapes.” I was nodding like I didn’t have any control of my neck.

“Who is sober?” she said. “We need a driver to go on a detective journey. We are going to *Law and Order!*”

The same guy who broke into the bedroom volunteered—was his name Ferris?—and pretty soon we were in his car, me and Grace sharing shotgun even though only Kyle and the tapes were in the back. When we got to her house, Grace leaned into maybe Ferris and said, “thanks and you can go now.” He was mad, and Kyle stayed in the car to chill him out. Maybe they went back to Gene’s place, our place, whatever.

We were in the living room—Grace’s parents and little sister were upstairs—and Grace was pulling at a nest of cords, trying to ask me about the classes I was going to take. I must not have answered her because she put both hands on my shoulders and asked if I needed a trash can.

I spun away. “I’m fine!”

“Voice-level, Shirley!”

“Sorry,” I said. Above us, the ceiling was earthquaking.

When she finally got the tape to work, it started on an AT&T commercial, a man in acid-washed jeans at a coffee shop, then there was static that stopped to reveal Bruce Willis, a baggage carousel behind him, and then more static, and a new image: a black-and-white sketch of a Dalmatian barking before a fire. Grace fast-forwarded, but it was just more images of Dalmatians and fires.

“There’s nothing on it” I said. “It’s free!”

Grace ejected the cassette and took another from the box. This was a black-and-white movie that started on the opening credits—it was called *Hook and Ladder*. The next tape was in color—ominous images of the Twin Towers followed by shots of the nearby firehouse. And then another documentary about firemen.

“Are these all about firemen?” Grace asked.

We put in another tape—sure enough, there were more firemen.

“We’re free!” I said. I jumped up and then Grace started jumping with me. “Firemen!” we said together. Our faces were red as hydrants, and our teeth were so white. Hers were straighter than mine, but both of us had such white teeth.

That’s when Grace’s parents came down, and when we tried to explain what was going on, about the pedophile and all that, it just made things worse, and then they started saying something about camming—Grace had told me they’d just found out.

After a while, Grace tried to ignore them. She walked into the kitchen and started microwaving some leftover empanadas, but her parents followed her, nipping and barking like little angry spaniels, and she ended up throwing the whole hot plate at them, nailing her mom in the eye with a steaming, sharp-cornered one.

That's how Grace came to live with me and Kyle and Ryan.

That was the Saturday before Labor Day. On Sunday we slept and smoked away our hangovers and finished the bedroom. Kyle couldn't explain the firefighters. He said he remembered having Easter with his dad's side of the family one year and how Gene was this fat guy who smelled like Chex Mix.

"He definitely wasn't a firefighter," Kyle said. "Maybe he had a thing for them."

"*Duh-doy*," I said, and I pushed him back, and he stood so straight, he didn't even move.

I still hadn't told him about the camming. Hadn't even told him that Grace was camming. We were all going to move in together, so why start with conflict?

By the end of Monday, everyone was moved in, and the place was looking pretty nice. In the living room we put Kyle's TV and a futon we got from the Salvation Army in Rochester Hills, and behind that we put this giant picture of a mushroom. Ryan said it reminded him of *Super Mario*. Kyle said it reminded him of the time we did psychedelics in the dunes. We kissed, and Grace threw pistachio shells at us.

"What about that castle picture?" Grace said. "That looks like actual art."

"Pedophile shit isn't art," I told her.

Kyle said, "No pedophile shit. And the mushroom, it's, you know, a still life."

Grace agreed that it was and said she liked it better already. Then all four of us took a selfie in front of the mushroom, and I posted it online with some caption about family being more than blood.

I had two classes Tuesday. There was something called rhetoric that was required, and everyone looked bored and nervous, especially the teacher. But the other one I chose: Advanced 18th-Century European Literature. I'd always loved reading those kinds of books with my mom back when we were still in Arizona. It was weird too because the teacher was just this little dude wearing a Nirvana tee and shorts, and he kept making fun of the books he was assigning. "They can be tedious," he said, "like how a teenage girl's diary can be tedious. In fact, some of them *are* teenage girls' diaries." I'd assumed professors would take themselves real seriously. After all, they called themselves professors, not teachers, and what was that about except saying how serious they were?

It got worse when we went around the room introducing ourselves; the only difference from high school was that the professor asked for our major and class instead of our grade. He threw in a "fun" question too: "if you could choose anyone who'd ever lived, who would you like to have a sandwich with?" His answer was Napoleon, "the only man who'd make me look tall and selfless by comparison." The other students introduced themselves as juniors and seniors and grad students and said people who sounded familiar but I couldn't quite place—Flannery O'Connor, Nicola Tesla, not even people you'd expect, like Charles Dickens or *The Great Gatsby* guy. Then the two girls before me both said Shakespeare, and I rolled my eyes so hard they hurt.

When it came to me, I said I was a junior because I didn't want to stick out. "And I don't want to eat with anyone. Maybe Satan. No, I'd give my sandwich to my mom and let her eat with Satan. They'd really hit it off."

Everyone laughed until the professor motioned for them to stop.

“Sounds like there’s a story there,” he said. Then he told me to stay after class.

The rest of the time, he talked about the eighteenth century, which was apparently when cities started. In olden times, you lived on a farm or in a village, and you knew the family of everyone you met, so you knew who everyone really was. Almost everyone, he said, had grown up knowing the family of the person they were going to marry. Now, suddenly, that wasn’t true. You could fall in love with a complete stranger and have no idea if their name was really what they said it was. And love too, he said, this was another new concept, but I didn’t quite get that.

After class, the professor collected his papers into a briefcase and then looked up, like he was confused to see me still in my seat like he asked. Then he picked up his briefcase and walked toward me, then stopped and turned back. I almost laughed at him, but I guess he just didn’t want to stand over me.

“You said your name was Shirley?” he asked. “I don’t have it on the course list.”

“I’m only part-time, maybe that’s why. This is my first semester.”

“Have you taken English 211?”

“I just told you this is my first semester.”

He smiled but didn’t laugh and then kept going. “So what experience do you have with eighteenth-century lit?”

I’d forgotten what I’d said in class because I started telling him then about how my mom and I used to read old books when I was a kid.

“Your mom? You two must have had a very interesting relationship.”

“This was when I was younger, before high school. But we read together all the time back then, passed books to each other, all that.”

“And what books did you read?”

“All sorts. I’m bad with names, but I can tell you the stories. I saved all the good lines in a book. Whole chapters sometimes. But we read all sorts of things.”

He nodded and sucked in his cheeks, which made one of those gross sounds that bosses always make.

“You see, this is called Advanced 18th-Century European Literature, and it’s meant to be an Advanced class, taken after you’ve taken the Introductory class. It assumes some basic knowledge of the subject.”

I frowned, and I’m frowning now thinking about that. I even kicked my shoe out a little bit because I was so angry, but it was loose enough that the heel slid out, and my embarrassment calmed me down some.

“I have knowledge. Like I haven’t read that book you said we’re starting with, *Moll Flanders*, but I have read that other book you said he wrote. About the guy on the island.”

“*Robinson Crusoe*? Good. What about Jane Austen?”

“I love Jane Austen! Is she from the eighteenth century?”

The professor let out a long, stomping laugh, like hooves on stones. “Good catch. All her novels *were* published in the nineteenth century, but she began writing in the eighteenth, and *Sense and Sensibility*, for instance, clearly takes place in the eighteenth.”

“So the important thing is that it takes place in the eighteenth century?” I asked him, and he nodded, then I got excited, talking about all the Jane Austen stuff I wrote in my journal and how much I’d like a class where I could talk about her.

He thought for a moment and then offered me a deal: all I had to do was bring in my journal and talk about a quote from an eighteenth-century novel, and he'd let me into the class. I thought it sounded too simple, but then I remembered that all these literature professors do is talk about books, so it wouldn't be simple to him but real work. This was going to be my work now too. I wouldn't be turning in twelve-year-old shoplifters or watching with my hex eyes as girls mix five-dollar jewelry with three-dollar stuff. For as long as I would be in school, my job would be to discuss men stranded on exotic islands and royalty plotting revenge in crumbling palaces.

The next day, Kyle was subbing for a middle school math teacher who was extending his break into September. He probably kissed me good morning, but I don't remember. He was stressing the night before—it was his first job subbing. He'd gotten his undergrad degree just the past spring, and I know he was thinking about teaching full-time, so he wanted to do well. I remember him tossing and me telling him to smoke to calm down. He kept me up so late, I don't think I even got up until one myself, and even then it was only because I had a nightmare. I dreamed about my mom. I was real mad at her, but it was for something that she hadn't done, so it wasn't like when she married John or when we moved from Arizona to Michigan with four days' notice or when she passed out drunk during my basketball game. It was something stupid, like she wouldn't buy me a white Hershey's bar. Even though I was 20 in the dream, I was crying like a toddler. Then she said to me that it was too bad that I was too old to be sold. I didn't even know what that meant, but I woke up angry anyway.

Once I was awake, I tried to rehearse. I had a passage picked out, but I wasn't just going to read it—I was going to memorize it. It was long, but I'm pretty good at memorizing things. Like song lyrics. I can get a whole song down in two listens. For real.

I kept getting distracted, though. The room smelled musty, like you'd expect from a house that no one had lived in for six months, and I couldn't help but think of Gene when I smelled it. Then there was Ryan, who was playing beats in his room—the one that used to be the computer room—and sort of mumbling along. I knocked on his door to tell him to shut up, and he mumbled back at me, then opened the door with a real proud look on his face, like a mom holding her new baby. In his mouth was a pair of glow-in-the-dark vampire teeth.

“You fucker,” I said. “Those are mine.”

He mumbled something, so I put my hand up to my ear, and he took out the teeth.

“I'm going to rap with them,” he said. “That's going to be my gimmick! I'll be Count Doom or something. For-real horrorcore.”

Ryan's this hundred-pound whiteboy, a little younger than Kyle, maybe my age. We tell him when his ideas are stupid, but we've done it so much that he doesn't believe us anymore.

I woke up Grace then so I could get out of the house with someone. There were still some cheap things the house needed—silverware, hangers. I told Grace that I wanted to get new make-up, so I'd look like I'd been going to school a few years already, something sophisticated but not trying hard. I wanted the look of senioritus.

We were browsing the aisle at Target, finding lipsticks that all sounded like weed strains —“naked bud,” “heavenly hybrid,” “potent and fatal.”

When the display ended, Grace asked me, “Why do you want to impress these people so much, anyways?”

I know that she didn’t get why I was going back to school. She went for a semester with her parents paying and gave up on it. She said she’d go again when she knew what she wanted to go for, that there’s no point going to school just to go to school, teachers just hold people back. You’ve heard that whole talk before. I’ve even given it, especially when I was younger, like 17. After a few years, I was thinking about school, not as a place where you get something, but as a place where you decide what you want to get. I guess that’s cheesy. But I didn’t know what I wanted, just that I didn’t want to work at Claire’s for the rest of my life, and getting loan money to read books AND not work at Claire’s would be the best of all possible worlds.

“You don’t want to fuck your professor, do you?” she asked me. Her eyes scanned the back of an eyeshadow palette.

“The girl one or the boy one?”

She looked up, hoping that I was surprising her, which I wasn’t. I was just joking around.

“Which one’s younger?” she asked.

I started moving the cart out toward house-wear, but the wheel got stuck on a tube of lip-gloss.

“I think the guy is,” I said. “He’s gross-looking, though.”

“Do you think he’s one of those professors who sleeps with their students? Like that religion teacher I had who just stopped showing up for class one day with no explanation, and then we found out that he got arrested because he paid a girl in one of his other classes to let him paddle her, and then she called the police on him because he was paddling her too hard.”

There was an eight-foot tower of paper towels over us. Since Grace had told me this story a hundred thousand times since it happened, I used the time to try and decide if it made sense to buy the biggest package, which was like a dime cheaper a roll.

“I think the guy was, what do you call it, a rabbi. He wore one of those beanies on his head all the time. And he was beating this girl. But the point of it is that it’s hard to tell the teachers who want to fuck their students from the ones who don’t. Or maybe that’s not the right question. Maybe they all want to, just only some let themselves.”

I flipped a tube of lipgloss at her, not real hard, but it fell at her feet.

“You know that my boyfriend is teaching an algebra class right now, don’t you?”

“Substitutes are different,” she said. “No one fucks substitutes.”

“Again, my boyfriend is substituting right now.”

“Sorry,” she said, and she did that fancy hand-roll thing like princes would do to kings.

“Want to hear the worst thing a foreign guy told me last night when I was camming?”

“What?”

“‘Take off your boobs.’ Your spelled ‘u-r,’ obviously.”

I grabbed her shoulder, laughing, and then when I came back to reality, I decided against buying the paper towel. We’d need to organize a money-pool for shared supplies like that. Otherwise, Ryan would just start wrapping himself up in it and saying he was King Tuf, the rapping mummy.

Kyle was back by the time we were. He was wearing a blue checkered shirt he bought at the Salvation Army for his interview, sweated all through, and he had this look on his face like

people on award shows have when they're giving thank-you speeches, happy but mostly relieved. He told me that his only job was to have the students make name tags for themselves and decorate them. I asked him again how old they were and then asked him to clarify in terms of height.

"I mean, they're the height of regular people. Like the boys will get taller, but that's it for the girls. Just none of them are person-brained yet. I heard a lot of fart jokes. One kid I sent to the principal's office for drawing dicks on another kid's name tag. But it was like he was bullying him, not like they were having a good time and drawing dicks."

We ate frozen chicken wings because he loves them and then had celebration sex, and I made him listen to my reading. He was lying on the bed with the journal, checking for mistakes, and I was reading standing up in front of him. I really felt like I was putting on a show, like I should have had a plastic skull with me. I was talking about death, too, and life. The speech gets real beautiful at the end. Romantic. "You are alive!" that's how it finishes. "And that means you can die. And everything I see when I look at you is utterly insubstantial. It is a commingling of tiny movements and indefinable colors as if you haven't a body at all, but are a collection of heat and light. You are light itself, and what am I now?" Then I did this big pause for the last sentence because the last sentence is so good: "Eternal as I am, I curl like a cinder in that blaze."

Then I bowed and asked Kyle if I was being overly dramatic, if I should try and read the way teachers do, jaded-like.

Kyle pulled me to the bed but not onto it, so I was looking down into his eyes, which were big and green and very calming.

“It’s a little over-the-top already, but in a good way,” he said. “I don’t get what it means exactly.”

I explained the plot of the book a little bit, how it’s about this guy who gets turned into a vampire and that’s why he’s eternal, and now he’s looking at his best friend, who is still a human, and the immortal vampire feels bad for his mortal friend.

“There’s this other part of the book,” I told him, “earlier, when he’s still a human and thinks he’s going to die still, and he’s talking to this best friend about how death makes everything meaningless. He’ll die without ever knowing anything because nobody ever learns the meaning of life. Everyone just stops, and everything they ever knew just stops existing. That’s it; it’s all meaningless. But now, since he’s a vampire, he’ll never die, but his friend will. His friend is still meaningless. That’s what he means by ‘utterly insubstantial.’”

Kyle brought me down for a kiss on the lips.

“You’d be such a great teacher,” he said.

I lay down next to him and nuzzled my nose into his hair.

“Cut it out,” he said and laughed and kissed me again. When his head turned away, the room’s smell hit me. There’s this ridiculous part I remember from reading *Twilight* in school where Bella runs into the woods because Edward breaks up with her, and she digs a giant hole and just cries in it for two days. That’s what the smell made me think of—crying in a hole of forest dirt that’s wet and black like chocolate cake. I tried to hide back in Kyle’s hair, but he wanted to talk to me.

“What was Grace up to last night? She was still up when I was. I saw the light in her room.”

I made a thinking-frown to stall for time. My options were playing dumb or telling him then about her job. Obviously, Kyle was going to find out no matter what, I knew that, but I didn't want to have that conversation then. And I didn't need to. I knew Grace only cammed once or twice a week, so I'd have some time before she did it again, time to tell him later. You can tell anyone anything at any time, but that doesn't mean that you should. When you keep a secret from someone, every second is a calculation.

“Sometimes it sounded like she was talking to someone, but I couldn't make it out. These walls are pretty thick, I think.”

I shrugged again and asked him about some underwear I couldn't find. They were my yellow pair, and I wanted to wear them with my yellow skirt the next day. We probably left them at his dad's, he said, and he promised to look for me later.

I was at the professor's office early, pacing up and down with my old journal in my hands. It's actually a diary, small and pink-striped with a locking strap, but I never used it to record every boring thing that happened every day, like you do with a diary. I just used it to talk about books and about life in general. Everyone's life. Why do people get up in the morning when they're unhappy? Why doesn't everyone just kill themselves? (Those were the questions I was asking myself when I was a kid.) I didn't like the idea of a diary that someone could hold and say “This is what Shirley's life was like. Can you believe how lame she was?” My journal was more about asking who my teachers were when they got home, what they watched on TV, how ripe they liked their bananas. Who my dad was before he left, who my mom was before I was born, that sort of stuff. I got it all wrong, I'm sure, made up crazy things because I didn't

know how people worked. Like we lived below this old woman who I always thought was crying, which she wasn't—it was just the hiss of the pipes—but I made up this story about how she was sad because she couldn't get tickets to see the Suns, as if this babushka lady was tearing up every night because of the Suns.

I must have gotten distracted looking at the journal because I heard the professor in his office, clearing his throat real loudly. I realized it was past the time I said I'd be there, so I was tripping already at the tip-off.

Then I went to close the door, but he asked me to keep it open, and I made a face because I didn't want anyone else to see me reading. The professor was wearing a black shirt with chalk dust on it. He smiled, and I put the journal on the table, opened to the page I was going to read from. I wanted to make a show of putting it on the table. In my mind, he'd do a spit-take, like “oh my gosh, she doesn't even need the book.” Of course, he didn't do that, and I just started reciting. I only stumbled once, at the beginning, saying “tangled composting thoughts” instead of “tangled uncompromising thoughts,” but he stopped me before all the good stuff, like when Lestat's talking about the “vast secret terrain inside him” or how “his mind was merely a portal to a chaos stretching out from the orders of all we know.” He just wanted to know who the author was, and I told him her name was Anne Rice. And he looked like a fucking vampire himself when I said that, pale white, and I had victim-dread, like I was crouching against a wall and just watching his face come out of the shadows.

“Anne Rice isn't an eighteenth-century novelist,” he said, as if that was an argument. “I thought you were going to read an eighteenth-century novel you liked.”

“Yes, an eighteenth-century novel,” I said. “The book starts out in 1750, something like that. That’s what eighteenth century means, right?”

He shook his head no, which is always the thing with teachers. They say that there’s no wrong answers—we’re just going to talk about books, it’ll be like a conversation with your friend—but they’re liars. Everything you say in front of a teacher they judge. Every word can be wrong.

“It’s not when the book takes place; it’s when it was written. Anne Rice wasn’t writing in the eighteenth century.”

“I know that. The book starts in the eighties. Lestat’s a rock star.”

“So then you know that it’s not an eighteenth-century book.”

I could feel my heart beating and sweat on my knuckles and underneath my arms, and I imagined in my mind getting up right then and bolting, but I just cursed the cheap deodorant Kyle bought and kept talking to this guy.

“You said that it has to do with when a book takes place.”

“No, that’s not right,” he said, shaking his head again with his eyes closed now.

“When we were talking about Jane Austen, you said that what matters is when a book takes place. Remember?”

He stilled, then looked down at his desk, which had folders on it and Post-It notes and a shiny Apple laptop I could never afford and Batman action figures with Catwoman holding a whip. If I was still a kid, do you think I could have figured him out? If he cried at night because Kurt Cobain was dead, if he came home to a drooling Chihuahua or if he had a gigantic Mastiff that made him feel more manly, if he hoped to be teaching at Harvard instead of Oakland, if the

love of his life left him years ago and if he still thinks about her every Friday at 4:00 PM while he waits to get out of the parking lot, if there was a boy he wished he'd have been brave enough to kiss in school, if he was the kind of teacher who sleeps with his students, if he was the man who said "itsy-bitsy."

"I believe there's been a misunderstanding," he said. The difference between me when I was a kid, writing in my journal, and me that day was this: in ten years, I stopped giving a shit about people. I couldn't know if or when or why that teacher cried or what he felt when he saw my tears on my yellow skirt. Of course, Lestat was right about there being a vast secret terrain inside of everyone, but I knew then the teacher didn't care about the terrain inside me and he never would. That's what a 'misunderstanding' is, when someone doesn't care about how you understand things. I'll never tell someone that there's been a misunderstanding. I'll just tell them what the words really mean: fuck you.

I squirreled up in the bedroom then. Kyle was out helping his dad sell more leftover stuff from the house, but I pretty much ignored him when he came back. It wasn't a good way to manage anger. I wasn't dumb, I knew that, but sometimes you don't want to talk to anyone. It was a mood where I'd scroll down on websites until the loading button came up, then wait and scroll down more, not even reading things, just drifting down. I didn't think I could take any other classes—the college's website said you couldn't take a class if you missed the first day, and the only classes I'd been to on the first day were English and rhetoric. Not that I wanted to go back there after that. Mean smug fucks, that's what teachers are.

I came out of the bedroom just to pee and grab cheese crackers or Gatorade. When he got back, Kyle slept next to me and tried to hold me and get me to say what was wrong, but I didn't want him.

His dad came back to pick up the last of the leftover stuff, and he sat in the kitchen while Kyle walked an antique sewing machine to the door, talking loudly enough that I could hear him from the bedroom.

"It's a shame about some people," he said. "Some people just look for excuses to be sad, but I think they're just looking to not do anything. Gene was like that."

I started crying, and Kyle must have heard, because when I looked up, he was coming to put his hand around me. I would have shouted 'No!' if I could have pulled a word up and out my throat. Instead, I stood up, like I was about to butt his head, and he backed away, and I stepped out of the bedroom just to see him standing beside his dad, like a little kid running from a bully. Grace had her makeup mirror on the kitchen table, and before the dad turned around to see what was going on, it just reflected the mustache, like the mustache itself was sitting at the table, and everything just seemed so surreal and crazy, with my big Thor hiding from me and looking for protection from his dad's mustache. I cried and laughed and cried.

Late into the night, I listened to Grace moan in her room and Ryan mumble-rap in a voice like crumpling aluminum. I tried not to think about the smell. I tried not to think about Gene. I tried not to think about what job I'd get now. I tried not to think about how much I hated it here.

After three days, I finally cracked and let out some words. It was six at night, and I hadn't left the bed, not even on a food trip, in twelve hours. Kyle was sitting on the floor Indian-style, asking what was wrong, what's wrong, Shirley, what's wrong?

"I'm just worried about where my clothes are."

"What clothes?"

"My clothes. My underwear. My yellow underwear. I can't find it. I can't find my clothes."

I was under the comforter on the bed and flung it off. I could smell my sweat, taste my morning breath. I was wearing a white T-shirt with a missing sleeve and orange basketball shorts. Kyle had been subbing earlier, and he had on khaki pants and a black shirt; he looked like an actual human being, which made me hate him.

"I can help you look for it," he said.

I stayed still, waiting to see if the hate would drain back down.

"And, when you want, I can help you look for a new job."

The hate did not drain.

I admit it, I was down for a long time, and Kyle was starting to turn against me. On Wednesday, I think, he said that he couldn't live like this anymore. Okay, I said, and he said he'd stay the night at his dad's.

It was going to get okay though; words would come soon, and as soon as I could talk to Kyle, I'd be myself again. My routine was well-established: first I'd talk to Grace, then I'd be

ready to be normal with Kyle, and we wouldn't even have to bring up what went on. It hadn't been this bad before, but it'd been bad, and it'd be okay again.

Except there was this guy, Marcus. Him and Grace had an off-and-off thing, like they were always breaking up with each other, not like me and Kyle, who just spent time away. They'd loudly, publicly breakup and then get back together quietly, like they both knew they should have known better, and each time, I'd think "Oh, when did they get back together?" But apparently they *were* back together then because when I knocked on Grace's door, she wasn't there. It was two, just when Grace usually got up, so I figured she had slept the night at his place. I even opened the door to her room, to see if she was there, and she wasn't. She'd hardly moved in—there was a mattress on the floor with a pile of clothes on it but most of her shit was still in boxes. She'd always had a bad habit of starting things and then getting distracted. Maybe we both do, I was thinking. Then I saw it: hanging on her wall was that fucking pedophile's castle. The bitch had kept the drawing.

I stomped out. Ryan was sprawled out on the living room futon, his eyes sunset pink, and like I said, I needed to talk to someone, so I sat next to him.

"I thought you'd be asleep," I said.

He shook his head. "I never sleep, 'cuz sleep is the cousin of death."

He was watching some animated show on his laptop—big chins, yellow hair, pale corpse flesh.

"What's wrong?" he asked me.

“We all agreed that we’d get rid of the stuff that used to be here, right? All of that pedophile stuff, right? Well, Grace didn’t. She kept something. She told me one thing and then she didn’t do it. She kept that painting, and it’s hanging in her room.”

He took a while to say something. On the show, an alien got an award for making a vagina joke.

“Maybe she couldn’t stop herself,” he said. “Like maybe she tried, and she couldn’t.”

“Yeah, like her and Marcus,” I said, and I tried to sound as disappointed about that as possible because I didn’t really care about it, and I didn’t want to think about all the ways she actually hurt me. I wanted to still be her friend.

“She’s trying to be a better person,” he said. “We’re all trying to be a better person.”

I reached over him and pressed the spacebar on his computer, stopped the show. It was giving me a goddamn headache.

“What if some people aren’t?” I asked.

“Like who?”

“Like Gene.”

“Who the fuck is Gene?”

I sort of laughed, I was so angry, and I considered all the different answers I could have given. Gene was the man whose house we were living in. The man who took pleasure in the pain of children. The man obsessed with firefighters. The man who looked at the castle and dreamed of living in it, just like Grace dreamed of living in it and maybe thought I dreamed of living in it, too.

“Fuck,” I said, and I got up and went into Grace’s room and took the painting off the wall. I’d figured it out, that he hid his shit in the back of the painting, like bad guys do in movies. He saw the same movies I did, so he knew the tricks. I threw the frame on the mattress, glass side down. Grace had a tote bag by her pillow—I emptied it on the floor and then chased after a ballpoint pen and punched it through the paper and slashed the back open as far down as I could. Then, even though it was open, I pierced it again with the pen, and again, harder. I wanted to pierce through all the secret photos of children, the children he’d raped, the children he’d killed, and then through his fucking fantasy castle and through the glass, the mattress, the floor, straight down to the foundation.

But there was nothing but the castle. I didn’t even crack the glass.

I put the frame over my head so that everything in it dropped out, but there were no secrets inside, nothing at all but the picture, printed on flimsy, now punctured paper and the wood and the glass, all of it scattered with the shit from Grace’s tote—gel pens and lip gloss, pictures of boots torn out from a magazine, the stub that’s left over at the bottom of paychecks, and an envelope, one of those big blue-and-white Priority mail ones. It was sealed but without a stamp, addressed to some dude in Arizona, of all places. She’d only written a first name, “Calvin,” and I needed to know who this Calvin in Arizona was. I’d already destroyed the painting on the wall, so I thought why stop now, and anyways envelopes are free, so I opened it. Tucked inside was underwear, folded over twice in a plastic sandwich bag.

My yellow underwear.

And there was a handwritten note stuck inside the envelope. Grace signed my name “itsy-bitsy Shirley,” surrounded by green hearts.

I fell over on the mattress, crying. I cried until I was empty and then turned on my side so that more came out, the way you turn a can on its side and scrape the edges for the last of what's inside. I know that sounds dramatic, but you'd be crying too. Even if you're some downtrodden single mom of four or a 16 year-old dude who thinks he's tough and thug, you'd cry. The girl you thought was your best friend, who even lives with you, is pretending to be you and selling your clothes to perverts, and you can't tell your boyfriend about it because he can't know about why she is stealing your clothes, and you've fucked up your whole future, and there's no one left to even talk to.

Except Ryan, who knocked on the door.

"I'm sorry," he said, "to ask this, but could you give me a ride to work? I zoned on it, and now I have to be there in thirty minutes, and you're here, with a car, and if you could just drive there, please, drive me there."

My first instinct was to tell him to get the fuck away from me, but I couldn't do it. I was certain that Kyle's dad was wrong, that self-pity isn't bad. If shitty things happen to you, you should feel shitty. If the people I love disappoint me, and I disappoint the people I love, and there's no undoing any of it, don't tell me I should just brush my hair and feel better. So I wasn't seeing some silver-lining since there was no consolation, not one. I just felt numb. Maybe I really had emptied myself.

"Okay," I said.

It wasn't a long drive, but we had to get on M-59, and there was traffic by then. My Saturn didn't have air. The windows were down.

"I'm going to be late," Ryan said.

I was driving barefoot, and whenever I broke, I broke hard so that I could push my foot into the pedal.

“I remembered who Gene was,” he said.

“Good, I guess.”

“Do you ever think what if he didn’t do it? Because it doesn’t make sense, being into firefighters and little kids. Those are way different. What if Kyle’s dad put all that evil shit there because he hated him and wanted to take the house?”

“Ryan,” I said, trying to stop him, but then I had to rush to catch a light and he kept going.

“And now that we live there, if we ever find kiddie porn, like underneath the floorboards or something, I wouldn’t be able to prove that it was Gene’s and not mine. And, check this: if you were a pedophile, or if Kyle were a pedophile, this would be the perfect house to live in.”

“Ryan...”

“Nah, let me finish. Kyle could keep a whole stash of kiddie porn and he would have a built-in excuse. ‘It’s not mine; it’s the convicted pedophile’s!’ Even if you found your boyfriend’s child porn, you couldn’t prove it was his. You couldn’t prove anything about him.”

We were on a block with a 45 mile per hour speed limit, a half-mile from a stop light in either direction, and I floored the breaks. Don’t worry, there wasn’t anyone on my bumper, but I took a big breath first and closed my eyes until I heard the honking behind us and Ryan said “What the fuck?”

“Turn on the radio,” I said. “I will crash this car if you speak to me again.”

He jabbed the dash, and I hit the gas. When I pulled into the Panda Express, Eminem was rapping about how he couldn't make jokes about beating women anymore, and Ryan got out before I even put it in park. But I did put it in park, and I watched Ryan getting yelled at by his boss for being late and looking like shit. Had he figured out how to use me as an excuse? Did he say that he had this bat-shit suicidal roommate who had a complete bitch meltdown in the car? Were those his words in my mind or just me talking about myself?

Even when I stopped crying, I didn't start the car. I kept seeing the pedophile's painting, when I closed my eyes and when my eyes were open, and all I could do to distract myself was imagine the real castle somewhere in France. It smelled like horseshit and fish, and that yellow dog was barking, and knights in armor were yelling at their vassals. I tried to imagine growing up in that world, knowing for sure who I was and what I was for. Even if I wasn't something good like a knight or a queen, if I was just some lowly maid, I'd know that I was a lowly maid, and I wouldn't disappoint myself. And I'd know who everyone else was too. There'd be a King who I'd bow to, and we both would know that was what I was there for—bowing—and he wouldn't pretend like he wanted to talk about books or make fun of lipstick names or be a good uncle or father or lover. He wouldn't pretend to want to help me. It'd be an honest place, surrounded by a moat and a tall brick wall.

Starting After Midnight

1.

“I think my period’s starting,” she said.

He was washing his hands and then lumbered into the room with deliberately long strides, like a sleepwalker in a cartoon. His smile, too, was deliberate. They had met that night, and he wanted her to recognize that he was happy about what had happened between them.

“I need an excuse to wash sheets,” he said and put his fingers between her toes.

She said she wanted to sleep but sleep on the couch; he slept in the bed. When they each woke up, it was the day of the farmer’s market; zucchinis stood upright in buckets, and small dogs were held tightly on their leashes. A man sold pig parts from a row of coolers colored white, saffron, and plum. Two women played mandolin together, their music drowned out by mothers

calling after children who spun between strangers' legs. He said she could help him pick out berries; she laughed at him and kept walking.

He bought her a cinnamon roll. She ate half and said she wouldn't like a box. He had a poppyseed bagel, lifted fallen seeds up with one finger and then sprinkled them onto the cream cheese. She had a bite without comment. After, he drove her to her car, a bruise-green Corolla hidden between two pick-up trucks so that at first they panicked that it'd been towed. Their kiss goodbye was slow, shielded and soft, as if their breath carried something precious which neither was willing to give up.

2.

Her car was filled: skirts in white trash bags and shoes in plastic grocery bags, a folded card table with postcards glued to the top, desk fans, a floor fan, forks and spoons and knives that did not match, Brita filters, a martini shaker with no cap. A Matisse in a gold wood frame leaned against the passenger side window. The picture was already faded when she bought it at a Salvation Army; its dark reds and blues made pink and lavender. She didn't realize this for years, until a boy saw it and asked if this were deliberate, to show the passage of time. He suggested she leave it in a field until the colors grew so faint that the canvas was practically colorless—she could put it in a show like a Duchamp readymade.

What an awful suggestion, Kayla thought. What an awful boy.

3.

Dimitri drew and listened to an album she played on Spotify the night before, electronic music that was serious, not EDM. He drew a city in ink, tall modern buildings without perspective and then threw it away. He took out *The Stones of Venice*, a gray leather-bound copy, the cover splitting at the corners like spitting mouths. He opened to a random page and tried to copy the illustration, a late Gothic arch with the stone face of a man, blank-eyed with the beard of Socrates and lips parted in warning or wisdom, as the central filial. The album stopped and he started it again. He added a man underneath with the same face but a body with open limbs like he was caught in searchlights. Now the face seemed to say don't, please, don't. The album stopped again and he started it again. He looked up a review, a pan, and kept listening, trying to determine who was right, the critic or the girl.

What part of him—unacknowledgable, malignant—wanted to side with the critic?

4.

Kayla hadn't stayed over at his house the previous night to avoid Luisa, who was still her roommate for one more week, but it was what one might call a powerful incentive, and she was crestfallen to open the apartment door and see Luisa circling the kitchen island like some omnipotent, ill-intentioned bird.

"I thought you were moving out already," Luisa said.

"I told you, the apartment's being cleaned until the fifteenth."

Luisa had in her hand an enameled mug, the globular, hand-crafted kind with mystical thermal qualities.

"I mean, because you weren't in last night."

“I was sleeping at a friend’s,” Kayla said.

“Forrest’s?”

“No,” Kayla said. “New friend. You don’t know her yet.”

Luisa smiled and sipped, sighing as she swallowed, a sound which started as an expression of satisfaction with her coffee but which she stretched out suspiciously long.

“I think Alice said she saw Forrest out with some of her friends last night,” Luisa said.

“That sounds true,” Kayla said. She took one step into the living room, then stopped and turned back. “Is there more coffee?” she asked.

“Not of mine, but I don’t know if you’ve packed your bag up or not,” Luisa said. Her hair was up but loose, and as she walked past Kayla and into her own bedroom, a few thick strands fell and swung like the tasseled rope of a curtain just drawn.

5.

Distressing texts from a friend, the subject moving too quickly from how terrible *The Simpsons* had become to how difficult it was to find pleasure in the world. Dimitri set up a video call. The friend couldn’t make eye contact with him, just looked in the corner of the screen and then the other corner of the screen. There was a ceiling light behind him, which made Dimitri’s friend appear to be nothing more than a nervous cloud. He talked about neglect, or abuse through neglect.

“I don’t know if that’s too strong,” the friend said. “I don’t think it is. I see people who talk to their parents, vacation with their parents, and I think, what is wrong with you? They don’t really love you, and you don’t have to pretend that you love them.”

“It must be so terrible, to not have that sense of security,” Dimitri said. His face was conspicuously well-lit in the corner of the screen. He felt self-conscious and exposed, talking to a shadow.

“I just learned early something that every child learns eventually,” the friend said.

“Maybe every child already knows it subconsciously, too, before they’re really aware of it.”

“Aware of what? That their parents don’t love them?” There was a pause, and before his friend came up with an answer, Dimitri decided that he needed to answer it himself. “Because, I mean, I think my parents loved me. I never really had any doubts about that growing up.”

“No,” the friend said. “Some parents love their kids. But the thing is that it doesn’t help. People have loved me, I think, maybe, but it doesn’t help.”

In the long pause of agreement that followed, Dimitri thought that he wasn’t doing well, wasn’t helping, was just joining his friend in feeling bad. He wanted to change the topic of conversation to the night before, but clearly now was not the time to brag about sex. He brainstormed other topics of conversation. The good *Simpsons* episodes, *Futurama*, Prince albums, health problems, yes, health problems would be good because we have names for them, and names make things less frightening.

The friend said he had his health, then laughed.

“Not even any bad hangovers?”

“No,” the friend said. “I haven’t been out in a long time.”

She was too frustrated with Luisa to care that their friendship was over. Over a guy, what a sexist cliché. How embarrassing, that Luisa had made it come to this, and over a guy that Kayla really didn't care about—after all, she was fucking a stranger last night and not him. And she used to care so much about Luisa! Friends since college, when Luisa, a musical theater major, brought Kayla out of herself and into the shared world. They'd lived with each other on and off since then, a friendship that outlasted any other in Kayla's life.

She went into the bathroom to take a shower. Luisa had already taken hers, a fifty minute routine with water hot enough to kettle-sing. Since the bathroom was unventilated, walking in was a powerful experience, like stepping out of a temperature-controlled plane and into a squally jungle. She decided to take a bath because a bath in this climate would feel like a hot tub in a sauna.

She ran the water and tried to remember what they'd talked about the night before, her and Dimitri. He didn't seem judgmental when she said that she didn't have any ambitions. She'd just lost her job filling up cups of coffee—had been late too many times, hungover too many times—and now her most longterm desire was moving away from Luisa. But men were rarely judgmental about this, maybe because they sensed opportunity in a woman's lack of selfhood, a shortcut to being adored. Dimitri definitely wanted that. It was in his smile, which was sweet and artificial, and it was in how much time he spent on foreplay and in the way he kept asking how she liked her cinnamon roll. He was the kind of guy who'd tell his therapist—years later, when he'd do couples therapy in the months leading up to his first divorce—that he was a pathological people-pleaser. She wasn't like that, didn't want adoration. Or she didn't think she did. Her eyes were tan brown, like dead leaves or expensive leather, and she couldn't read them anymore.

She had asked him to describe his perfect city. He told her that the cars could only drive around the perimeter, so, in essence, the city would grow inside of a racetrack. The cars would travel incredibly fast, and inside the city, in the dead center, you wouldn't hear them at all, just people talking and children bouncing basketballs and paranoid chipmunks sprinting into shrubs. It would be like the nineteenth century. But as you moved outward, the noise of the cars would build gradually—hiss, hum, buzz, rumble, thunder. The race track would be raised slightly from street level, which would decrease the likelihood of fatal accidents involving pedestrians but would also mean that inhabitants wouldn't have to be eye level with technology and time, could ignore it if they'd like and let their humanity flourish.

“The racetrack would act like a moat,” he said.

“But it's raised,” she said, “so it's more like prison walls.”

“Don't be so negative,” he said.

“Don't build prisons,” she said.

He must not have been serious because he wasn't offended. She bet if she asked today, he would give her a completely different perfect city. Maybe self-made tiny houses surrounding a single office building of glass. Maybe it'd be modeled on old monasteries, a huge complex where work and leisure, employers and employees, mingled and combined. Maybe he'd just say Paris or Barcelona or Rome, his perfect city already standing somewhere they weren't.

7.

Elaine came. She worked at his company's sales department, but lately she'd disappear in the middle of the day, apparently to the bathroom, where she was attempting to deprive her

migraines of stimulus. Dimitri thought of her head pressed against the locked metal door, the lights off, listening to feet on the carpet outside the door. A new problem, Elaine said. She wanted to give him Vicodin for Valium. No problem, Dimitri said.

She put the pills in her purse and told him about a woman whose baby died in the womb and turned to stone.

“It sounds like a myth,” she said, “but it’s true. The body calcifies what it can’t get rid of. To avoid infections.” She was sitting on a pillow on his sofa, maybe the pillow Kayla’s head had been on the night before.

“What are they called?” He was standing before her with a glass of water. The strung-together metal beads on the ceiling fan clicked irregularly as the blades turned.

“I don’t know. Litho something. The Greek for stone baby.”

“Litho, pedo,” he said.

She put her feet on the rug. “Why not Latin? I feel like Romans were better doctors.”

They were going to meet her boyfriend at a cheap bar downtown. They would sit at picnic tables on the open porch and text other friends to come over, then wait anxiously to find out how deeply their company was desired.

“Do you know what they called bipolar disorder in the nineteenth century?”

“Was it Greek?” she asked.

“Just English. They called it brain gout. Like it was the disease of brain kings.”

She didn't like Forrest, at first, because of his clothes. They were too good. He wore fitted button downs in shades of plaid that signaled 'These are the plaids of a man who cares about his plaids.' His Oxfords were deliberately weathered, and his cowboy boots weren't ironic: they just looked good on him. He dated Luisa until she got tired of him cheating on her, and then they tried to stay, if not friends, then friendly, and they regularly attend the same events. At one of these parties, Forrest's shirt caught Kayla's eye. The design was bizarre—ruins in fog and some kind of blue fowl or maybe just a paisley teardrop, but not too busy, just unique. She asked him where he found it, and he said a Goodwill.

"I didn't think you'd go to thrift shops," she said.

"Sure," he said. "I'll shop anywhere. I want to find beautiful things everywhere."

That sounds so gross, she thought. Sexual attraction is so gross. She asked Luisa's permission before she slept with him, and Luisa gave it, saying that she understood the attraction, obviously, and it wasn't like Luisa was the only woman who'd had the pleasure. The truth, which Kayla and Luisa both knew, was that Forrest could be with anyone. One of the wonderful things about him was that he seemed to genuinely accept everyone he met, and people loved having him around because he was easy to be around and because he was handsome and having a handsome person smile at you reaffirms your worth—that's just human fucking nature. He wasn't particularly smart, had a low-level office job at a construction firm, the kind of job that indicated he cared more about his clothes and his workout routine and his home-brewing system than he did about his career. She liked this, too. He took photographs of trees at sunset and was working on a memoir about his Little League team. One season, the third basemen got leukemia.

"He didn't die," Forrest said. "But it was close."

Sometimes he asked Kayla to read a chapter, and she always struggled with advice. It was fine, just not interesting. “Feel things more,” she wanted to say. But that was also her advice to herself, and it was very, very difficult to put into practice.

She rang the doorbell of Forrest’s townhouse and waited for him to come and embrace her in his confidence. There were two shrubs planted outside, bare and clean, the kind of shrubs that indicated the person inside was conscientious and polite but didn’t need to impress you with this one thing. He had so many other things to impress you with. And anyways, all that looked bad about the shrubs was that they seemed very small and very alone, and Forrest was the kind of man who’d never considered whether shrubs could make someone feel small and alone.

9.

The bar’s sound system played bad covers of good songs. Women drank margaritas, men drank beer, everyone drank gin and tonic. Without realizing it, Dimitri was telling the story of an ex-girlfriend eating shellfish. It was in Naples, and they’d been fighting for a week but continued their sight-seeing even though it felt silly and insignificant. One day they ducked into lunch at an empty seafood restaurant on the water. It had a garage door for a wall, all panes of dusty green glass. The girlfriend, her name was Deborah, ordered a stew that came in a silver bucket. It was nothing more than mussels, their shells just starting to part, and thin brown broth. She finished the entire bucket and the waiter, impressed, brought her another without asking, just a respectful nod.

He had to ask if they’d ever met Deborah. One had.

“Sixty-eight mussels,” he said. “I don’t know how they fit.”

“Impossible. Sixty-eight?”

“I kept track with chicken scratches on a napkin. And then another napkin.”

It was no great story. At the time, he was grateful for a distraction from the fight, for an excuse to sit without talking and watch her eat. The crack of the shells, the hushed rubbing of her hands on the cloth napkin, the passing traffic and the indecipherable accents of construction workers, a compact excavator scraping against stone. He gained nothing from this retelling, hadn't acquired perspective on the moment in the intervening years. It's ludicrous, this idea that time brings new understanding. There's nothing to understand about memories. The emotions are already there. Distance is nothing but loss, and everything would be lost if he didn't bother retelling it to friends, strangers, who didn't care, who couldn't care, not like he cared.

10.

It's fun to watch nature documentaries with someone you like on a high-definition TV, fun to see a close-up of a kit fox all glamorous like it's Greta Garbo, fun to do impressions of kangaroo rats with your fist on a boy's back, fun to admit, finally, that you don't really understand what a jackrabbit is.

“It's a big rabbit,” Forrest said.

“But isn't that what a hare is? And why aren't they all just rabbits? Like grizzly bears and black bears are different sizes and still bears. How come rabbits need all these names?”

Forrest didn't know, like she knew he wouldn't know, and that was fine. He asked her if she liked the fox or the rabbit better, the predator or the prey, and she said she loved them both equally, even if that was a contradiction.

They watched a ring-tailed cat slink up a path of silver slate until it was perched on the top of a small cliff, looking down on the silver slate world below.

“Don’t jump!” Kayla said, not sure if she was play-acting concern or actually concerned, as if ring-tailed cats knew suicide.

Forrest held her hand, and she thought about how she didn’t care that he slept around when he was dating Luisa and how she didn’t care that he was still sleeping around now. She didn’t care that Luisa had given her permission to sleep with Forrest but still hated Kayla for doing it, didn’t care that their friendship was ruined because Luisa couldn’t stop caring about some dumb dude. She loved both of them, in spite of them. She resolved to look at the world like it was a nature documentary. She was so angry, so often, and so distant, so often, but maybe if she embraced the distance, if she tried to actually view life and not live it, it’d be easy to appreciate everyone. If you don’t expect things from people, they can bring you joy. Expect as much as you would expect from a kit fox. Repopulate the world with kit foxes. Love it accordingly

11.

“The fuck with those tights,” Elaine said.

She was pointed at a woman leaned over the credit-card jukebox. Her tights were like the background of a Georgia O’Keefe, a layered desert landscape, taupe and then sky blue and then white and then soft pink and then pebbled brown.

“Those have never been in style, but if they were, they’d have been in style two years ago,” Anna Kate said. She was Elaine’s friend. She was wearing a necklace she had woven that morning from green tree vines.

“Do you think she’s going to skip my song?” Dimitri asked. This was a jukebox that let customers move their song ahead of everyone else’s for an extra dollar. A few weeks before, Dimitri had started a fight when his choice of “You’ve Got to Hide Your Love Away” was skipped for a Billy Joel medley. His fist tightened with each song until “Captain Jack” played for the second time, and he approached the man, six foot-one in a thermal vest, about “this anti-human goddamn hate-speech.”

“She looks the type,” Elaine said.

Dimitri struggled to squeeze a lime slice into his drink, the stoney halves refusing to compress together, instead sliding apart at the middle so that only a few droplets of juice escaped.

No one spoke, and the voices in the bar, in one of those instances of either coincidence or self-perpetuating serendipity, hushed one by one as the next song began with a somber horn and organ and then the voice of a man, wooly and gnarled and knobbed.

“Tom Waits sings like a boil bursts pus,” Dimitri said.

“You should go hit on that girl,” Elaine’s boyfriend said.

Dimitri shook his head. “Nine out of ten odds she’s playing that because she thinks it’ll impress some guy she’s with.”

“Maybe it’s to impress you.”

“Don’t do it,” Elaine said. “What kind of sociopath wears those tights?”

“I kinda hate Tom Waits,” Dimitri said.

“No, you don’t.”

“All those 1940s winos, and that voice he puts on, like irony syrup. I think that’s why, deep down, girls like Tom Waits more than guys.”

“Everything you’re saying right now is nonsense.”

“It’s what people think a certain kind of masculinity is supposed to sound like. It’s like gangster rap or Orientalism—we just want the things that confirm what we already believe about people who aren’t like us.”

“I get it now. Like how guys love Fiona Apple,” Elaine said.

“But Fiona Apple’s so good,” her boyfriend said.

She put her flat hand beneath his jaw, Jeeves serving the boyfriend’s mind on a platter, the lone canapé, too misshapen to choose. Everyone laughed, and Elaine curled her fingers and brought his chin in for a kiss. Her fingernails were Tiffany blue when the light hit them, and they left red indents in his chin when they finally let go.

Dimitri wondered how long before he’d hear “Eat at Home” and gauged it at three more songs. He thought about how the worst song in the world would be Tom Waits covering “I’ve Just Seen a Face.” He thought about how Tom Waits was at least better than Billy Joel because Tom Waits was just bullshit and Billy Joel genuinely hated people.

“Are you a girl who likes Tom Waits?” Dimitri asked Anna Kate. She was licking the salt off an empty margarita glass.

“I don’t know who he is,” she said. “Music with words usually makes me sad.”

12.

Forrest popped the cap off with the back of a lighter, hard enough that it folded in the middle like a fortune cookie and fell on the floor, and handed her the bottle.

Of course, she was thinking about sex. The problem is that people fuck not for the action itself but to get things, usually not tangible things, that would be more conscious and therefore less bad. No, people fuck to get this feeling that they're sexually attractive or interesting or worth spending time with, just strip-mining others for validation. People want to make sex communication—"I like you"—but communication is what happens beforehand. Sex is the capper, what happens after you tell the other person that you like them.

"I like you," Kayla said.

"You too," Forrest said.

Anyways, who needs fucking to validate themselves? Solve yourself, that was Kayla's mantra. Nobody can do it for you.

On the screen, two coyote puppies bit each others' backs.

"It's too fucking cute," Forrest said.

"You too," Kayla said, and she put her hand on his thigh and then pressed her fingernails into the denim, then moved her hand down to the side of his knee, then back up to his fly. She wanted to feel his muscles tensing. She wanted his blood to rush for her. She wanted his hand in her hair.

He picked up her hand and put it to the side.

"I'm tired," he said.

"Of fucking me?"

He looked shocked, and it's no wonder, she felt shocked at herself, and she would have apologized except that she couldn't until she heard how he'd respond, but then he just drank his beer until he looked calm again.

"I'm sorry; I'm just tired."

"Do you want me to leave?"

"In a little bit. I mean, I'll crash."

"Okay," Kayla said. She drank her beer.

13.

It was well into morning but not so well that "Closing Time" had come on. The jukebox wasn't being used then, and the music reverted to a soul version of "Dead Flowers" played from a bartender's phone. Elaine's boyfriend was talking about one more round of gin and tonics, and Elaine was trying to get Dimitri and Anna Kate to sleep together.

"You know what they say about Russian men," Elaine said.

"I'm not Russian," Dimitri said. "How many times..."

"Well, he probably has a big dick anyways," Elaine said.

"Whoa," Elaine's boyfriend said.

"Not in a threatening way," Elaine said, and she kissed her boyfriend on the ear lobe.

"Huh," Anna Kate said.

Elaine must have been too drunk to notice that Anna Kate had her eye on a bartender who had a receding hairline but was otherwise well-put together, and anyways it was the kind of balding that brought out the gentleness in his eyes and the slyness in his smile, but Dimitri

wasn't too drunk to notice, took this fact in objectively the way he took in the fifty-year-old man drinking boilermakers by himself as he played successively shorter games of pinball and took in the group of scarved women saying things like "Anything called Winetopia must be fun."

By the time "Closing Time" was playing, the bartender was sitting at their table with a complimentary SoCo round, asking everyone what their favorite part of being drunk was.

"It's easier to talk to people," Anna Kate said.

"Ah, social lubricant," the bartender said, leaning into Anna Kate's cheek.

"I think it's easier to be nice to people when you're drunk," Elaine said.

"That's the saddest thing I've ever heard," Dimitri said.

"It's true though," Elaine said. "When I was visiting my sister in Seattle, I was wasted, and a cabbie charged me double what he should have, and I still tipped him 50%. I was like, 'You're working these late hours, I get it, man, I get it.'"

"I'm the opposite," Dimitri said. "I liked you all much more before we came here."

The bartender started up a private conversation with Anna Kate before anyone asked Dimitri what he liked about being drunk, which was good, because he wasn't sure what his answer would have been. He didn't think he was drunk with Kayla the night before. He thought about her face smiling when she said they were leaving together and her breath, which was sweet with luxardo cherry, and her sweater, which was light and lilac and loose with no shirt underneath, and the sleeve fell down to her elbow when she lifted her glass to her mouth.

No one had any SoCo left, no gin, no tonic, and "Closing Time" had ended.

The bartender asked him how he was getting home, and Dimitri didn't say a word.

"The night's wound down," the bartender said.

“No, you’re thinking of yesterday,” Dimitri said. “It’s not even night yet today.”

“You don’t have to go home, but you can’t stay here,” Elaine’s boyfriend said, getting into the rhythm of the sentence, his head weaving with each anapest.

Dimitri wanted to ask him why he said that, if it was to save the bartender the trouble or to show off his knowledge of a universally known phrase or for the ugly satisfaction of telling someone they need to go away.

“Why are people like you?” he wanted to ask, but he didn’t. All these god damn people, too many of them, people who say that tequila fucks them up more than other liquors and then get drunk and order tequila, people who say ‘mental health treatment’ is the answer to gun violence as if they never heard the words ‘stigma’ and ‘scapegoat,’ people who get angry about Christmas lights in January, people who take videos at concerts and ‘whoop’ into the microphone, people who see you eating a donut and say ‘wow, that looks so good, but don’t you hate yourself after?’, people who sip the drink you make them and then say they know how to *really* make an old fashioned, people who see a free museum and walk inside and say it’s lovely but what if they spent all that money on something useful, people who say that anyone could paint a Miró, people who buy Mies skyscrapers and instruct security guards to let no one loiter in the lobby, people who remind you that architects don’t build anything until they’re fifty because they read it in 2004 in a *U.S. News* in a dentist’s office, people who play acoustic covers of “Hey Ya” and “Smells like Teen Spirit” on a Saturday night at every other fucking bar in this fucking city, people who see something beautiful and just want to own it or tell you that you can’t own it because that’s what people do, they take away what’s beautiful and explain why you deserved to

have it taken away, even though nothing has to be taken away, nothing has to be taken away, nothing has to be taken away, but still they take all of it.

“I guess I’ll walk,” Dimitri said, then he stood and clamped his hand to the table for balance.

14.

At two-thirty in the morning, she received a text from her mom, which she thought was fitting, as she’d just taken one of her mom’s Ambien after spending the last two hours failing to sleep naturally. She just stared at the ceiling with the covers off, thinking about how Luisa kept the thermostat too hot and how much she fucking hated her and how alone she was in the world. And she still hadn’t made up her mind if Forrest had someone else coming over and needed her out of the house or if Forrest was fucked-out from the night before or if he hadn’t showered or washed his bedding and at least had enough decency to know that wasn’t alright. Or maybe he just didn’t want her anymore.

“Did u eat today?” the text read, one in a grand tradition of insincere mom texts. The real question was if she was awake at two-thirty, and, if so, what was wrong with her? One of her mom’s great passions was identifying her daughter’s psychological maladies, and Kayla had been diagnosed with anxiety disorder, anorexia, borderline personality disorder, hypomania complicated by comorbid premenstrual dimorphic disorder, hypochondria, attention defect disorder, and selective obsessive compulsive disorder, among others.

“Yes,” Kayla wanted to text back, though she wouldn’t. (It didn’t matter if her mom was also up at two-thirty.) She’d eaten with Dimitri, and, well, she’d eaten since then, too. A sliced apple, some barbecue potato chips at Forrest’s. And a Frappuccino. That was eating, too.

If she’s still awake, Kayla thought, and I’m still awake, these Ambiens have to be sugar pills. So add that to the food list. She wondered if she’d fucked Dimitri because she wanted to be even with Forrest, which she kind-of assumed before, or to get out of seeing Luisa, or, maybe, because she just wanted to. She thought she’d like him next to her now. The night before, he’d kissed her thigh and then kissed the corner point of her pelvic bone, and she laughed hysterically, she was so ticklish, until he put his hand on her stomach and said “Enough’s enough” and started laughing too. Oh, and she wanted Forrest too, maybe both of them beneath her, holding her up, like a human chaise longue. It’d be grander, even, than Cleopatra being fed grapes by pretty dimpled boys with colorful fans. And she would feel their touch all over her, and she would feel adored, and in turn she’d adore the whole world. She wouldn’t be alone, and everyone would be adoring.

Oh, it wasn’t a sugar pill.

She sat on the toilet and forgot to pee, instead texted her mom back “I love you 2,” then fell asleep with the lights still on, facedown on the mattress, her pillow on the floor.

15.

He woke up in dirty clothes and dirty sheets with dried toothpaste on his lips and called out for Kayla in the other room. He’d forgotten that it wasn’t yesterday.

He wondered if he should have texted Kayla last night. He wondered if he should text her now. He didn't want to seem needy. It probably didn't matter. She didn't really seem like she liked him, was maybe sleeping with him for some ulterior motive, who knows what's boils in the minds of others? It wasn't really very good sex anyways, but he didn't know if he disappointed her or she disappointed him or both, just that needs were not met.

He fell asleep another hour and woke up in white sunlight with the secret to giving directions during sex. All you need to do is precede every request with 'Yes.' How had he not thought of this before? In high school, at 14, before he had ever had sex, that was how obvious this was. Don't say 'softer,' say 'yes, softer.' Not 'oww, teeth' but 'yes, more tongue.' Make your lover feel good, that's the whole fucking thing. Say 'yes, yes, on top, yes.' Say 'yes, higher, that's where it is, yes, higher!' It's so good, yes, and it's going to be better. We are so good, yes, together, and, yes, we will be even better.

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