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Little Rituals

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LITTLE RITUALS

By

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Bachelor of Arts in English and Philosophy

Nebraska Wesleyan University

2009

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Master of Fine Arts -- Creative Writing

Department of English

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The Graduate College

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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THE GRADUATE COLLEGE

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ABSTRACT

Little Rituals

By Bruce Johnson

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The following stories represent what I have accomplished in my three-and-a-half years in the Master of Fine Arts-Fiction program at University of Nevada, Las Vegas. They are all realist stories, most of them with a minimalist leaning. Together for the first time, they are more than a mere sum of the writing I've done in my time in the MFA program. They are the stories that, when I read them now, still occasionally delight me. Most of the stories that I wrote as an MFA candidate do not pass this test, and thus are not included here. If there is one thing I hope to have learned from my time at UNLV, it's how to tell when something is working and how to be brave enough to leave the rest behind. I hope that the following stories work, and that they delight my committee as they still occasionally delight me. I am deeply indebted to the creative writing professors at UNLV, and all of my fellow MFA candidates who helped me workshop these stories.

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These Damn Things

Roger and I found Gary in the kitchen and sat down. His wife, Marie, put a copper-colored tray of sugar cookies in the center of the table. She asked if we wanted anything more and it was clear from the way she asked, her voice wavering and her eyes miles away, that she'd been crying. Her son had been gone for almost a day now, run off to who knew where, but they hadn't called the cops yet. No one wants to call the cops on their own child.

No, Marie, I said, this is perfect. They look delicious. She nodded slightly and walked off to her bedroom, where we heard the door shut. I wanted with almost all there was of me to tell her I knew where Bryan was, but instead I let her go.

A fly landed on the table and Gary slapped it with such a bang it forced my eyes shut. He brushed the body to the floor and wiped his palm on the knee of his jeans. These damn things, he said. They get in through the holes in the screen door. I must kill three a week. Then he looked out the window and started to cry. He was mostly bald and rubbed his smooth scalp with both hands as if trying to iron out the wrinkles in the brain beneath.

It's not that I don't want him here, he said. He's a troubled boy. He needs some simple discipline, some goddamned rigor.

I told him I didn't think military school was the ideal place for a troubled teen. He looked from me to his bony fingers now resting limply in his lap and said that no, it wasn't, but in an ideal world there aren't any troubled teens.

What would it take for you to let him stay? I asked.

Bryan had shown up on my back porch the night before. Trying as he might to keep quiet, he couldn't have known of the insomnia that kept me lying awake in silence most nights, or that I always left my window cracked to let the room breathe. I heard him rap on Jess's window, and I heard the whole hushed conversation they had when she came outside. I even heard the dull creak of the porch swing swaying slightly in the nighttime breeze, and pictured them there holding hands. I'd long ago decided it's not eavesdropping as long as I pay the mortgage.

She asked him what was the matter, but of course she knew. It had been the subject of many late night tirades she'd made against Bryan and his parents and the way of the world. His parents had long threatened to ship him off if his grades didn't improve. Now it was August and his summer school grades had been abysmal and they'd made their final decision.

I leave in two weeks, he said.

They sat there a long while in silence. My mind waded in the shallows at the edge of sleep, my thoughts a jumble.

I guess I don't know what to say or how to say it, she said.

Say you love me.

All right. I love you.

They kissed in that sloppy wet way of teenagers, and she let out a soft moan filled with desire. She said maybe they could run away together, that they could find somewhere to go where no one would find them.

I went out to the kitchen and grabbed a beer, not caring much whether they saw the light. Her love life didn't bother me and she knew it. After her mom left, it was

always me that took her to get her birth control filled and all that. Me who held her hand while she waited the two minutes for pregnancy test results since John Bradley'd dumped her and she didnt want to do it alone. Bryan wasn't like that. They'd been dating six months and he was good people. His dad was a close friend of mine. He even worked well with his hands—helped her change her oil and showed her how to solder the loose wire on her hair dryer.

I drank my beer halfway down in a couple gulps and went outside. I clicked on the porch light and pretended not to see his hand up her shirt.

Bryan, I said, I think you might as well come inside.

We went to the living room, which was lit poorly by some ancient lamps that always gave off a low hum like the bulbs were about to burst. The fireplace in the corner was dark, because the season wasn't yet cold enough for fires.

Look, I told them, we're all on the same side here. No one wants Bryan sent away.

They sat on the couch holding hands with the nervous, worried look of a couple at a doctor's office, waiting for test results.

I'll talk to Gary, I told them. I'll do my best. But there's some things you need to do, too. Number one is call him. The poor son of a bitch will be worrying himself to the brink of madness. So call him and tell him you're safe. Just don't tell him where.

Bryan shook his head. I've barely been gone two hours. I'm sure they haven't noticed yet.

Then call tomorrow. And when you call, for Christ' sake don't argue. Don't cajole. Just tell them you're safe and that you love them. Simple as that.

So he can stay here? Jess asked. They looked at each other hopefully. It made me

happy to play hero, to see her so happy and think I was in some small way the cause.

Yes, I said. He can stay. *But*—and here I narrowed my eyes and pointed a finger at Bryan—only for a day or two. I'll talk to Gary and see what I can do, but if I can't do anything then you have to go home.

He nodded solemnly. Yes, sir, he said. Absolutely.

We shook hands. Jess gave me a hug, and a kiss good night. Then I went back to bed and stared up at the ceiling.

So the next day I sat in Gary's kitchen talking baseball with Roger while Gary stared down at his hands. After a few minutes Gary excused himself and went to the bedroom to talk to Marie. We all knew she was the kind of woman who would hold this against him forever if it wasn't fixed to her liking. In the narrative of their marriage, Southgate Military was rapidly becoming something that was always Gary's idea and not hers.

I took a bottle of scotch and three tumblers from the kitchen cabinet over the fridge and headed out to the back porch without saying anything to Roger. He followed. We sat in the ratty lawn chairs that formed a half circle around the iron firepit filled with half burnt wood from last winter and poured three glasses. We waited. Roger sipped his scotch silently, watching the firepit like his eyes could sift the ash and find beneath what we were to do. We heard the muffled, wordless murmur of Gary and Marie arguing inside, sentences like instrumental music—sad and filled with worry.

Despite our long history, or maybe because of it, things between me and Gary weren't always the friendliest. All our lives, we had similar tastes in sports, clothing, and

women, and this meant a strong sense of competition. But almost always it was Gary who came out on top in these things. Case in point: Marie, my once high school sweetheart. They both swore up and down nothing happened while we were together. I had no reason to think otherwise.

Roger's part in all this was I needed a confidant, and he was the only one I felt I could tell without it being some deep betrayal of Gary. We'd all been friends since we were kids. I could still hear Roger's mom calling him in for supper—she actually had a big bronze bell she'd ring like a town cryer, bellowing out his name in a way we'd hear blocks away.

This isn't right, Roger said. It's not our place.

Bryan's not some malfunctioning appliance Gary can ship off for repair.

That don't matter. It's not our choice to be making.

Fine then. Go on and tell on me.

Gary came out of the house with a white bug candle he set on the ground in front of us. He lit the wick, sat down and took the scotch I'd poured him. The bugs fly to the light, he said as if someone had asked.

I stared into the flame so small we all knew it wouldn't do a damn thing against the gathering insects and took a sip of the warm scotch.

You never answered my question. What would it take for you to let Bryan stay?

If you know where he is—

I don't. But he might call you. Or he might call Jess. You better be thinking what you want him to know.

Gary said nothing. The moon was half full and mostly covered with black clouds.

White rays of pale moonlight poked through, the only light in the otherwise black sky. It was starting to smell like rain, which was rare for summer, and this reminded me of how when we were kids we'd all camp out in a tent in my mom's backyard. We always told ghost stories while the rain and wind buffeted against the tent's thin walls. I asked Roger and Gary if they remembered those days.

Again, Gary said nothing. Roger picked up a leaf and started tearing tiny strips from it. I remember, he said. Do you remember being seventeen, parking our cars out in the country with a couple girls and a cooler full of beer?

I nudged Gary's knee. Remember that, Gary?

He said he did.

I said, And when we stole all those pumpkins from Earl May and smashed them in the school parking lot? Or when we'd knab liquor and chew from the grocery stores?

He smiled. I forgot about the pumpkins.

Well, remember. We got into plenty of trouble. We turned out okay.

Gary's smile twisted into a grimace. He coughed into the back of his hand and spat into the firepit.

You've got some nerve, he said. A man like you telling me how to raise my kid.

A man like me.

Yes.

I've done fine by my child. That's why she's still here.

Well. Maybe if you really cared about her, you wouldn't have done what you did to her mother.

I didn't say anything. That wasn't fair, what he said. I'd cheated on Jess's mom,

yes, but that was not the first of the many wrongs we inflicted on each other over the years. Nor the most important. It was just the excuse she used to finally leave us like she always wanted.

Roger grabbed the bottle of whisky and uncorked it. He looked up at the moon and took a long drink straight from the bottle. Children must make men crazy, he said. I don't know why you two can't ever just shut up for a minute.

Gary shut his eyes with a pained look and rubbed them with his fingers like he were trying to unsee something. Women are better suited to family, he said. Family tears a man up inside.

I'm sorry for what I said, Gary told me after a while.

Don't worry about it.

This hasn't been easy on me.

I said don't worry about it.

He took a pocketknife from his jeans and flipped it open and started twisting the blade's tip into the plastic armrest of his lawnchair, a thing I knew Marie would chew him out for later. He paused to blow the pile of plastic powder away then he began digging again.

Bryan doesn't get into trouble like we did, he said. He's not chasing skirt or stealing beer from my minifridge. Hell, the fridge is open, he can take it if he wants. But this ain't the first time he's run away. When he was seven, Marie found a Playboy under his bed and chewed him out and that night he packed himself two peanut-butter-chocolate-chip sandwiches, put a leash on Edgar, and walked off into the night. We found

him two hours later trying to start a fire with two sticks under the creek by the biketrail.

He shook his head. I don't even know what a seven-year-old does with a Playboy. But he told us crying that he'd brought Edgar so that when he ran out of sandwiches he could bash his head with a rock and throw him in the fire for food.

I looked over at Roger and he was staring me down, hard. I looked back at Gary. He probably saw that in a movie or something, I said. I'm sure he wouldn't of.

You know he was suspended in middle school.

I sighed. Yeah, I know. Vandalism, right?

It wasn't just vandalism. He smashed the window to the counselor's office and spraypainted hateful things inside. Called him a faggot, called his family faggots. And you can be damned sure he never heard that word in my house.

Then this summer there were the spiders. He started collecting spiders everywhere he could—colorful ones off webs in the country, wolf spiders from sandboxes, egg sacs full of blue gnat-sized babies. Marie found a whole drawerful when she went looking for her mason jars so she could make jam, and I heard her scream from out in the yard. He told us laughing when he got home that they were for Connie Mitchell, she'd dumped his friend and he was going to give her a fright.

All this time, Gary was carving deeper and deeper in the armrest, long thick slits crisscrossing faster and faster, digging a hole in the thing. Now he stopped this knifework and stared down at what he'd done as if it had just materialized unbidden. The kid's a creep, he whispered. He's missing something real important that the rest of us have.

There was a deep clenching feeling in the depth of my stomach, like a hand crushing it tight. Imagine a plot laid out like a web for poor Connie, or a poor innocent

dog watching its boy try to make fire.

How are his grades? Roger asked, and I knew I didn't want to hear the answer.

His grades? Gary squinted into the empty firepit like he was looking out into the far distance. His grades are bad, yeah. He cuts class like we all did. But that ain't what we're worried about.

Before long, Roger ran to the store and returned and then we were all smoking cigarettes, a habit we'd each dropped almost twenty years back when the wives were pregnant. The smoke burned my eyes and lungs and throat and I didn't vocalize what we probably all wanted to, that this was a dumb idea. We were talking about pretty much anything that wasn't Bryan, but mostly the past—because what is a friend good for if he can't stand witness to the fact that you were once young?

About this time, Bryan called. Marie leaned out the the screen door with the portable phone in hand and said her husband's name. We ceased our chatter. Her eyes were wet, her voice hoarse from crying. It's Bryan, she said. It's our son. Gary flicked his cigarette into the yard and went inside.

The screen door shut behind Gary and silence fell. I watched the candle's small flame flicker in the warm wind. The smell of rain still lingered and the trees in the surrounding yards groaned and bent slightly in the humid air. Gary's trees were a particular mess, with their skeletal limbs hanging low and unruly and blocking huge swathes of the night sky. Roger wiped the sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief he pulled from his jean pocket and asked me in a voice steady and cold as a surgeon's hand whether I was going to tell Gary or if he had to.

I suppose you'll have to. That boy needs a home.

He's dangerous.

There's no reason to believe that.

Disturbed, then. You heard Gary. He's got some important wires crossed.

Maybe so, but what good's a drill sergeant screaming at him while he does push-ups going to do? He needs a household. A shrink. Some love. Military school won't fix what he needs fixed.

I asked for another smoke and Roger gave me one. I cupped my hands over the end and lit it, a motion fully reflexive, muscle memory still called up from almost twenty years prior. I realized now I was arguing just to argue, just to win. Roger said again he was going to tell Gary, and I told him if he was going to do it then he better do it already.

Gary was in the house some time. The temperature didn't drop any but the night became quiet, quiet enough that aside from the occasional creak of the house behind us or a tire squealing in the distance the only sound was Roger flipping over cards on the blackjack game we'd begun. I started to wonder if I shouldn't just go home and wait for the cops to show up. I wasn't sure what sort of trouble I'd fixed for myself by harboring the kid, but if I knew Gary he'd pursue it as far as the law would let him. This wasn't going to be the charitable lesson in parenting I thought. More likely it meant the end to a long friendship.

Roger flipped over a card on his armrest, which put me at thirteen. Hit me, I said.

Bust.

We heard the screen door open and we turned to see not Gary but Marie coming

out to join us. She wore a faded black tee from the band her husband used to play in and some rumpled jeans that looked like they came straight from the laundry basket. Her hair was pulled back to show off the soft white skin of her neck and the crow's feet that had crept out from the corners of her eyes the last few years. She sat down in Gary's chair and sniffed the half-full glass of scotch he'd abandoned. She made a face but took a drink anyway. Then she ran her fingers over the hole in the armrest Gary'd made with the pocketknife, face expressionless.

You want dealt in? Roger asked.

She shook her head. Soon as Gary's off the phone I'm headed to bed. I'll take a cigarette though.

When at first neither of us moved she smiled, lines rippling her forehead. You must have known you boys reeked, she said.

So we sat and smoked in the quiet dark. After a while, Roger asked Marie what Bryan had said on the phone.

He said he was afraid. Afraid what would happen to him and Jess. Afraid that if he went away, he'd be so changed when he got back that no one would recognize him or love him anymore.

Her voice caught, and she continued in a lower, quieter tenor. Then he said he's afraid we already don't love him anymore, and that's why we want to send him away.

Roger nodded. Gary's in there talking to him?

Talking. Yelling. Scolding. You know Gary.

Maybe you should let him stay, I said. It was blunter than I'd meant it to be.

Her eyes narrowed and she pressed her lips together tight, her breath shallow and

ragged. So you don't trust us, either, she said. Isn't there anyone who trusts us to do what's best for him? We're his parents, for Christ' sake.

I didn't know what to say, so I reached out and took her hand, twined my fingers around hers where they rested on the cut-up armrest. She let me. I held her hand the gentle way I'd hold my sister's if I had one.

He's a kid in love, Marie. It's not about trust. He's got fire in his veins. Don't you wish you could go back twenty years and do something extravagant like that?

She looked down at my hand encircling hers and shook her head. Her breath became deeper and calmer and she shut her eyes. She looked for a moment like a statue, or something embalmed. No, she said. No, I don't want that at all. All I want is my son back.

Roger went inside to find something to eat. Marie and I sat there with her hand buried limply beneath mine and even with all the years behind us of our lives twining and untwining around each other, we couldn't find a damn thing to say so we just stared at the bug candle's flame still burning quietly.

A fly landed on my hand resting on Marie's, and I looked down at it rubbing its front feet together. Twenty years back, Marie touching my hand would have sent me into a fit—any skin of hers touching any of mine would have lit off fireworks in my chest. Now the movements of the fly registered more.

I unwrapped my hand and went inside and found Roger standing over the sink eating a cube of Marie's cold lasagna.

Just give me one hour, I said. I'll try to make him come home on his own.

Roger swallowed the bite of lasagna down with a gulp of tap water and said,

Okay.

When I arrived at home, it was near midnight and the house was dark but for a dim lamp in the basement visible through the window well. I stood on the porch a while and stared at the house that had seen almost all the iterations of my life and family—me alone, me with Jess's mom, me with her and Jess, Jess and me, and finally, for the last twenty-four hours, Jess and Bryan and me in what I felt was a privileged glimpse of what Jess would someday look like with whatever husband she chose for herself. Most parents never got that glimpse. And she looked happy, damned happy.

I went inside and grabbed three cans of beer from the fridge and set them on the table. I called out Jess's name. I called out Bryan's name. When no one answered, I grabbed the beers and went down to the basement, making sure to be plenty loud so if they were fooling around they'd have time to put their clothes back on.

The whole basement was quiet and I knew something was wrong. Jess never went to bed so early. The door to her room was shut and no light shone from beneath. The bulb hanging from the ceiling in the center of the room lit it dimly and I had just enough time to notice that her laptop was not in its usual place next to the couch before I crossed the room and opened her door and turned on the light.

The room was in perfect order, tidier than I'd ever seen. The first thing I noticed was the dresser, how empty the surface was because her jewelry box and hand mirror were gone. I crossed to the dresser and opened a drawer, which was empty.

When I dialed her number it went straight to voicemail. Here was her voice, cheery and normal and nothing wrong, and I knew that she and Bryan were gone. I turned

and saw the note on her pillow and before I even crossed the room to read it I dialed 9-1-1, knowing as I did that it was the death of something between us.

Nubs

When I was seventeen, I fell asleep with a stomach full of sleeping pills and woke up in the hospital psych ward. They'd pumped my stomach, they said. Now I was on suicide watch. My feet were bare because if they gave me shoes I'd use the laces to hang myself. They led me to a group therapy session and handed me a coloring book called *How to Be Safe*. It had pictures of little kids wearing bicycle helmets and saying no to drugs. I colored everyone's eyes blood red, the crayon in my fingers worn to a nub. I asked the nurse, Brody, how the hell this was supposed to help me feel better.

He put a finger to his lips. "Shh," he said. "Watch your language. 'Hell' costs three points."

In my session with the head psychiatrist, Dr. Hornberger, she explained that there was a point system to reward good behavior and punish bad. The points you earned bought certain perks, like extra dessert or slippers for your feet. Her hair was pulled back in a bun so tight you'd swear she was in constant pain.

"The human psyche," she said, "is like a balloon. The more we bottle up our feelings, the bigger it inflates. Eventually, it pops. Is that what happened last night?" This is the sort of Freud-for-Dummies I'd be putting up with for the next twenty-eight days.

I picked up the picture from her desk, showing her in front of the Eiffel tower with a little boy and a little girl. "Is your husband dead?" I asked, looking at the picture. "Or did he leave you?"

She smiled slightly in a pained way, as if she smelled something foul but refused

to acknowledge it. “Neither,” she said. “He was the one holding the camera.”

“Oh.” I put the picture down.

“I find it interesting that those were your first conclusions.”

“Me, too,” I said.

That evening they let us watch TV in the rec room. It was pre-screened children’s programming. Muppet Dracula was teaching us how to count. I felt tired and demeaned and at the same time happy just to have a splash of color in the otherwise corpsewhite ward. Beside me sat a girl named Crystal, her left thigh pressed against mine. She had short, boyish hair dyed light-blue and a lumpy face that looked as though it were molded from clay in an elementary school art class.

“I thought this show was dumb even when I was a kid,” she said. She glanced over her shoulder at Brody, who was barely paying attention. She smiled at him, flashing her yellow teeth.

“I used to love it,” I said. “I made my mom tape it for me.”

“You’re cute,” she said.

I gave her a half smile. I wasn’t about to return the compliment.

We were alone on the couch. There were four other kids, and they each had their own chair. “Keep quiet,” Crystal whispered in my ear. I felt the fingers of her left hand creep up my inner thigh, under the blue gown they’d given me. She stayed facing forward, eyes on the TV for Brody’s benefit. I faced forward, too. She ran her fingers along my scrotum and gave it a squeeze. The anti-anxiety drugs made me feel like a character in a movie, a mere image of myself. She started to rub my shaft. I was dimly

aware I didn't want this, but it was the only physical contact I would have for who knew how long. I reached over, arm crossing hers, and slid my hand under her gown.

She breathed deep and released me, still soft. She took my hand, moved it up against her warm underwear and held it there, tight. Then she murmured something I couldn't hear, something monosyllabic. I leaned in close, moving my fingers and trying to hear. "Rape," she said.

"What?"

"Rape!" she shouted suddenly. The other patients' heads jerked over and saw my hand up her gown. She stood up, slugged me in the eye with the heel of her palm and ran across the room. "This pervert molested me!" she said, pointing. She crossed her arms over her chest and started to shake. When they led me away to get my statement, she winked at me and put her fingers thoughtfully to her mouth.

Since there were conflicting reports—someone saw Crystal put my hand there—all that came of the incident was a burst blood vessel in my left eye where she slugged me.

When I got back to my room after lunch the next day, someone was sitting on the twin bed across from mine reading a dog-eared copy of Huck Finn. He had a deep scar near his right eye, like a hooked blade had just missed it. He was huge, a muscle-builder bulge to him, and looked even bigger crammed into the tiny blue gown that stopped just above the knee. He said he was my new roommate, and asked what the hell quiet time was.

"We're supposed to keep quiet for the next half hour," I said. The room was

small, two lumpy beds with sickly green sheets and a shared nightstand. The Huck Finn he was holding was the only thing on my person they hadn't confiscated, a book I'd had with me because I was reading it for school. "That's my book," I told him.

His name was Hank. He told me he was hauled there after he left the gas on all four burners running full blast overnight, hoping his dad would blow them both to smithereens when he lit his morning smoke. "He likes to gamble," he said. He ran a finger along the scar on his face. "And to take it out of my hide when he loses."

I murmured something sympathetic.

"So what's your story?" he asked.

I tugged at the hospital bracelet circling my wrist, my identity in numbers and bar code. "I don't really have one," I said.

Hank and I became fast friends. We had the same wry sense of humor, the same nihilistic appreciation for the facility. The standard stay was twenty-eight days, we learned. For twenty-eight days, our whole lives were to be narrowed down to fit the facility walls: the nurses reading us tidbits of pop psychology, the comings and goings of various addicts and violent reprobates, group games that would make a middle-schooler feel childish, a balanced diet in pre-measured portions. A release from any and all responsibility of our own.

I followed Hank's lead and he was happy to let me. At lunch, I sat beside him, making snide remarks about the nurses and the other head cases. When someone else joined in, I fell silent and waited for our rapport to resume.

We made up a new game to keep us entertained. Rather than trying to amass as

many points as possible, Hank and I competed to remain at zero. This was harder than it sounds. The nurses were criminally generous with points if you had none. They'd give you five for something silly, like eating all the food on your plate. Then you had to lose five—curse loudly, flip a tray, throw a plastic cup against the wall.

At night we stayed up late talking, long after the nurses told us lights out, whispering so they wouldn't hear. The nurses peeked in every half hour, and we pretended we were asleep. He told me pensively how his dad hocked his schoolbooks for poker money and stole the cash he earned delivering newspapers when he was twelve. He asked me again for my story, why I tried to do what I tried to do. We were sitting on the edge of his bed. Nurse Brody had just checked on us, so we had time before they checked again.

“It isn't really anything,” I said. He stayed silent, not pressing me to go on. I started again, struggling to make it make sense out loud. “I've got a good family. I do well in school. I wish I had more friends, but who doesn't? I just can't find a place to fit. Everywhere I go I act different. It's like I'm just a reflection of whoever I happen to be talking to.”

I stared forward, at the lines criss-crossing the tile floor. He hesitated a moment, then patted my shoulder.

Outside, I had plenty of friends. People to smoke weed with, people to copy homework from, people to chatter at. On a good day, it didn't always strike me as the petty high school bullshit it was. *How did you like the new Call of Duty? Someone said so and so likes you know who.*

The facility, meanwhile, thrived on simplicity. Each day sliced into manageable, fifteen minute increments. Group activities any idiot could do. Everything on an even keel. They thought if they gave us less to worry about, we'd be fine. Instead, the opposite proved true. The only thing separating the happy from the depressed is how well the former are able to distract themselves.

“Feeding time,” Hank said happily every day at noon. We ate in the rec room. The nurses unfolded a long card table, enough for all eight of us to sit at, then they brought in lunch trays from the cafeteria and white plastic spoons. No knives or forks, even plastic. Half the time the food was cold. I got the sense we ate whatever no one else wanted, usually Salisbury steak or the dark parts of the turkey.

“Me and the chick nurses here are really hitting it off,” Crystal said one day. “They like to watch me pee.”

Me and the others laughed nervously. Brody, tired eyed and reeking of cigarette smoke, scribbled something on his notepad. This was the worst part, we all knew, the lack of privacy. Don't tell me about demeaning until you've had to have a nurse peek in on you taking a shit.

Crystal nudged Hank. She motioned to me with her spoon. “Did you know this kid molested me?” she said. “Tried to grab my coot while we were watching Sesame Street.”

The other kids laughed. Brody hushed her. “*Language*,” he said simply. “Five points.”

“I didn't know you had it in you,” Hank said.

“She's lying. She's a nut bag.”

“He flashed me, too,” she said. “He’s got a tiny dick, size of a pinky.” She wiggled her little finger in the air to demonstrate.

“All right, come on,” Brody said. He grabbed Crystal by the arm and pulled her up. “Quiet room time.”

Everyone snickered. That was fine. But it was Hank that bothered me, the way he wouldn’t meet my eye. When we weren’t clicking it felt like I was displaced, nowhere, another piece of run-down psych ward furniture, another crayon worn to a nub.

The facility was large. Five bedrooms with two beds a piece, a rec room/dining nook, a group therapy room with games lining the shelves, the nurses’ quarters, and the quiet room. There was always a nurse stationed beside you, usually Brody working overtime. Then there was Hornberger, flitting by silently to slip into her office and shuffle some files around. She saw us only in half hour increments, at random times throughout the day.

The quiet room was across from her office. None of us had been there beside Crystal, but she talked about it plenty. It was a white room with padded walls, something straight out of a TV drama. If you acted out, they threw you in there until you were ready to cooperate, piping a voice in through an intercom until you agreed to be good.

One night, they let us stay up late to watch *The Lion King* on the old picture-tube TV in the main room. Hank told me in whispers how he remembered his Dad taking him to see it when he was young. They sat in the front row and left when Hank started crying at the death of the father lion. After the film, when it was lights out, Hank read to me from Huck Finn when I told him I never got past the first chapter. We sat on the edge of

his bed. His eyes went wide and soft skimming the words. “I never seen anybody but lied,” he said, again and again, then went on. He read several pages, tongue dancing out the overblown dialect.

“It's no kids' book,” he said, as if I had suggested it was. “It's about friendship. And granting humanity.” He shut the book and handed it back to me. I stared down at the cover, felt its heft in my hand.

“De-humanized. That's how I feel,” he said. “Especially here.” He touched my leg tentatively. He leaned in and whispered, warm breath in my ear, asking if I ever felt that way.

I shook my head. Then I covered his hand with mine and slid it under my gown. This is what he wanted all along, I realized. This is why he's so distant.

We didn't want the nurses to hear the movement of the bed, so we got each other off with our hands, the sounds of our hurried breath mingling with the warmth of our hands on each other's bodies. We propped pillows under the blankets on my bed, so when the nurses checked each half hour with their cursory glance they'd think they saw me there.

When the sun came up, streaming through the thick windows that wouldn't open, I snuck back to my own bed and waited for the morning alarm.

I tried to touch his hand before breakfast, and he slapped me with the back of his palm. “It's day time now,” he said. “Someone might see.”

In the commons area, nothing had changed. Crystal got in a fight with a new kid who insulted her tit size. She kneed him in the crotch, he fell down quivering, and they

threw her back in the quiet room. We were zoo animals, ripe with disease, liable to be tased at any time.

Hank and I fell into a quick rhythm. We spent our nights with legs intertwined, the moon's muffled light coming through our window. We wouldn't make love (I was afraid of the possible pain) but we'd get each other off at least twice nightly. I liked to kiss the scar beneath his eye. I started to take him into my mouth. We were opposites in every way; I was skinny and unsure, he broad and forceful. Sometimes, he'd make me gag and refuse to stop.

I learned he'd been with others like this before. I tried not to think of it. At night he made the whole world better, like a salve rubbed on an old wound. I was half of a greater whole. During the day, everything was its old savage self.

"We are concerned about your lack of progress," Hornberger told me on Day 14. "And your friendship with Hank. You two are not progressing like the other children."

I was in her office, my eyes narrowed against the room's harsh white light. "We're not children," I said. "And point totals are no way to measure mental health."

"I don't give a damn about your points, Ralph."

I popped my knuckles. I'd never heard her this frank before. My throat was coarse as sand. "Can I have a cup of water?" I asked.

"Not yet. Tell me about the night you were admitted."

I stared down at my hands. I knew I had to give her something. "I was at my friend Keith's house," I began. She started to scribble. I bounced my leg tepidly. I'd been trying to forget the outside world, that old feeling of my insides scraped raw. "His house is the party house. Weekends, everyone goes there to drink the liquor in his mom's

cabinet.”

“And where was his mother?”

“Working. Like always.”

“And?”

I told her I didn't remember much, and it was the truth. I'd gone there with a girl from my A.P. Algebra class, who said she needed help with her homework. She was friends with Keith. We worked for a bit, then started taking shots of spiced rum when we got the answers wrong. People started to show up. Soon we were drunk.

“There were twenty, thirty people there,” I said. “Kristin and I were on the couch, and she tried to kiss me. I wasn't interested is all. Everyone was watching. I pushed her off and went upstairs to the bathroom. That's where I saw the mom's sleeping pills.” I folded my hands numbly in my lap. The story felt like something I was excreting, old and irrelevant. “I'd been real down lately, and I just took a bunch. Then I curled up on the floor of the bathtub. Last thing I remember is someone pounding at the door.”

“Did you parents know you were depressed?”

“No one knew. Not even me.”

“What do you mean?”

I met her eyes full on. *Is this what you want? Will this help me?* I felt like an image flickering across a screen, coming into focus. “It didn't feel how I thought depression would feel,” I said. “It was sadness, but not despair. It always felt like a passing phase, like there was something better just around the corner.”

“And then?”

“And then I wasn't so sure.” I rubbed my eyes with my thumb and forefinger. I

told her I didn't like the group sessions, the judgmental quips of the others, or all these talks with her. This place, these walls, they were wearing me down. I listened to the scratch of her pen tip on the notepad, her shoulders sloped fervently.

“How have you been sleeping?” she asked.

“Beautifully,” I said.

Hank would never let me in his bed at quiet time. “Someone might see,” he’d say. So he’d lay down with Huck Finn, face scrunched thoughtfully, finger tracing the lines of print left to right, while I stared out the window at the parking lot. I got to know the makes and models of the cars. I saw the new admits clutching their bruised limbs or failing hearts. Families usually left either ecstatic or stifling tears, and only a handful of cars were there from one day to the next.

“I have a surprise for you,” Dr. Hornberger told me one afternoon. “To show we appreciate your cooperation.” She was beaming. Her smile looked like it might break her face apart.

I was led to a vacant room. My parents were there, holding hands on one of the empty beds. Mom wore her favorite pearls, Dad his best jacket—like I were some show they had to get dolled up to come see. I stayed standing, arms crossed over my hospital gown.

They said they were told not to come sooner. I asked them how they could let the hospital put their only son in a place like this. “They treat us like children,” I said, my voice wavering. “They pester us all day, and the other patients are nuts. Night is the only time there’s any peace, and it’s only for a few hours.”

Mom started to cry into her open palm. Dad patted her other hand in his lap. “You’ll be out before you know it,” he said. “This is all for the best.” He sounded unsure.

I watched him comfort my mom until the nurses came and got me. I wanted to tell them it was okay, wanted to believe it was okay—that I had something to hold onto now.

Their visit rattled me, bad. It was an intrusion. A small but persistent hole, punched through the hull of our craft floating on top of the world. “I don’t want to have to go home,” I told Hank, eyes buried in his bare chest. “There’s nothing out there anymore.” His hair scratched my lips.

His eyes stayed trained carefully on the ceiling tile. I buried my face deeper.

Days passed. Oppressive white, clawing my retinas. The plastic sheet cover crackling beneath me. Fluorescent lights flickering overhead. Food fit for pigs. Hank’s callused hands. Moonlit fellatio. Red wax beneath the nail. Popping happy pills. Shortness of breath. Point totals and parked cars collecting dust. Nurse Brody back from break, reeking of smoke. Stern Hornberger, how’s that make you *feel*. Crystal’s shrill laugh. The taste of come. Watching the Count on Sesame Street, ah ah ah.

Hank just back from breakfast, sweeping the sheets from both beds. “Where is it?” he said. He tipped the nightstand over, lamp clattering to the floor but not shattering. “Where the fuck is it?”

We’d lost Huck Finn. “The nurses must have taken it,” I said.

“But it’s mine,” he said viciously.

“Actually, it’s mine,” I said. My eyes ached. I hadn’t slept. The night before, I couldn’t get hard for him no matter what we tried. So I’d sucked him off, swallowing it

all, trying to drain him so he'd be drained like me.

Brody pushed the door open tentatively. "What's with the noise?" he said, scanning the whirlwind sheets and the toppled nightstand. "It's breakfast time." He had the air of a beat cop eager to turn a blind eye.

"The noise is you took my fucking book," Hank said. "Huck Finn."

Brody shook his head. "Language," he said absently. "I didn't take your book. I didn't know you could have books."

Hank pushed passed him through the doorway, into the main room where the others were eating breakfast. He loomed over them, voice rumbling. "Where is it?" he said.

Most of them stared down at their plastic trays, eyeing the scrambled eggs and burnt French toast sticks. Brody told him to calm down. Dr. Hornberger came out of her office.

Crystal started to smile. "I think you're a little old for children's books," she said. "But here it is if you want it." She reached under her gown and pulled a wad of shredded paper from her underwear, strips of the faded cover visible throughout. She plopped the mess onto her tray, tiny shreds drifting into the air.

She said, "If you're lucky, it might still smell like me."

This is when Hank in a calm, matter-of-fact motion, reached over, grabbed the back of her head, and slammed her face into the tray. Food and paper flew. She started to cry, then lunged at him, trying to claw at his eyes. Brody and Hornberger intervened, holding them both back. Brody got Hank in a full nelson and muscled him off to the quiet room. Hornberger helped Crystal wipe the food, blood and tears from her face, scolding

her the whole time.

She'll be fine, I thought. Hardly a scratch. I fumbled with the scraps of paper, my mind muddled, stomach grumbling, and tried futilely to piece a page back together. When I gave up, Brody put the strips in an empty coffee tin for me and let me take them back to my room.

At lunch time, Hank's usual seat next to me sat empty. When Crystal started to sit there, Brody told her no. She should have been in the quiet room, too, but there was only space for one. "Sit at the other end," Brody said. "Leave Ralph alone."

She held her hands up innocently. There was a small, potato-shaped scab above her right eye. "What for? I'm not the psycho smacking people up."

Brody looked exhausted, black bags beneath his eyes. Our sickness was spreading. He was being worn down.

"It's fine," I said. "Crystal, sit down."

We ate. Cold ham sandwiches soggy with mayo, pickle on the side. I stayed silent, wordless without Hank. Food in a place like that acquires a new significance. It's all terrible, objectively. Too salty, too cold, too bland. But you're so starved for the tiniest burst of flavor, you take what you can get.

"So what," Crystal asked, "are you not allowed to talk without your boyfriend?"

"He's not my boyfriend," I mumbled.

"Good," she said. "You're too cute for him. What's your story, anyway? You don't seem like the suicide type. We're a rough breed."

I put down my sandwich half. I stared at it seeping condiments onto the puke

green tray. I didn't know what to say anymore. Hank talked for me so often. "I don't have a story," I told her.

"Come on," she said, "everybody has a story." She smiled, teeth thick with yellow plaque. It was the first smile I'd seen in what felt like weeks.

"I guess it was my dad that did it," I said slowly. "He liked to gamble. And to take it out of my hide when he lost. So one day I left the gas on, hoping his morning cigarette would blow us both to hell."

"*Murder-suicide*," she said. She whistled. "I didn't think you had it in you."

I went back to my silence, wrapping it around myself like a warm blanket. Hornberger led Hank out of the quiet room, his eyes glazed and distant, and sat him down beside me. Brody brought him a tray. Crystal welcomed him back, and said she hope he learned his lesson.

"So what was your dad's game?" she asked me. "Horses? Blackjack? Craps?"

I said nothing. I shook my head, and started to scratch at a speck of hardened food on the table.

Hank turned to me. "What's she talking about?"

"His dad, the deadbeat gambler," Crystal said. "The one he tried to blow up."

"His dad," Hank said. I looked at him, my voice gone, throat closed to the size of a pinhole. I felt my face redden.

"What's the matter with you?" Hank asked.

"I—"

"Shut up," he said.

In our room after lunch, I sat on the edge of his bed. I wanted him to sit beside me. Instead, he stood over me, like a parent scolding his child. “That was my story. My life. You had no right.”

“I was just playing,” I said. “Messing around.”

He slapped me. Hard. Tears blurred my vision.

“That’s all this is to you,” he said. “Make believe. This is my *life*. Do you know what it was like in the quiet room?”

I put my hand to my throbbing cheek. “Lonely,” I hazarded.

“Peaceful. I feel like a new man.” Outside our room, there was the pop-fizzle of the TV turning on and a muffled burst of laugh-track.

“I love you,” I said.

He laughed dryly, eyes miles away. “You’re a parasite,” he said. “You’re draining me.”

“I know,” I said, and lunged at him. I grabbed the back of his head and forced him into me, meshing his lips with mine. I burrowed my fingers into his hair and grabbed at his belt buckle. He shoved me away. He was always so much stronger than me. He slugged me, right below the eye, closed fist, and I cried out. I was vaguely aware of falling, and the dull smack of the side of my face on the white tile. Then his foot connected with my stomach.

Sharp pain turned to nausea, and I shut my eyes and said “Please.” The door opened, and they took him away.

That was the last of him I ever got. Even the hospital psych ward would not abide two violent outbursts in one day, though I would have. I would have swallowed it

politely, as with everything else, and tried to convince myself I liked it.

* * *

On my last day I sat in Hornberger's office nodding gratefully. My hands were folded neatly in my lap. Away from the sun, they'd become white as the walls around me.

“You've learned everything we have to teach you,” Hornberger was saying. “Go make us proud.”

My feet rested on the floor in puffy white slippers, toes slick with warm sweat. I was smiling my best smile, for Hornberger and everyone else. I'd been practicing in the bathroom mirror, lips parted wide like a hole torn in the fleshy fabric of my face, teeth bared to the world, eyes reflective like glass. “It's been a pleasure,” I said.

It had been roughly a week since Hank was moved to county correction. I would never see him again. Brody was the one who let me know, sitting with me on the edge of my bed, an icepack wrapped in a handtowel pressed to my swollen face. When I started to cry, he put his arm around my shoulder and waited. Later, I heard him argue with Hornberger outside my room. “Don't you dare open that door,” he snarled at her. “You let him be.”

When I couldn't get hard enough to jerk off, I spent the night tearing at the scab above my eye, letting the blood run. I willed it to stain, to leave some mark of what Hank and I had behind. But when I woke in the morning I stared down at the streaked blood and realized coldly that the sheets would only be replaced, the bed filled with another patient. That it was childish to ever think otherwise. From then on, I played the game

they'd set for us. I no longer shot for zero. I found I was a natural at gaining their points. All I had to do was be their mirror, blank but for them. This was why things failed with Hank, I realized. I didn't reflect him right. I cowered, instead of yelled. I whimpered when he hit me, instead of hitting back.

Hornberger told me that last day she was so proud, that I was destined for great things. That she'd never seen someone turn a corner so quick. Her eyes began to water, and I scrunched my face sympathetically. I hadn't learned to cry on command just yet, but I knew it was only a matter of time. I stood up, thanked her for all her help, and shook her hand.

Any thoughts of Hank I might have had are gone now, extinguished like the last batch of dying embers in a firepit when the rain comes. I know now what he always knew, what I should have known: that it's only on the surface anything is ever gained. Underneath, it always goes back to zero.

As Is

It's almost five, and you can hear the clock tick. Chuck will be home soon. What am I doing, she thinks, sitting at the kitchen table, exchanging pleasantries with two strangers? They need to be gone, long gone, yet here they are. Here I am, offering them a smoke and a cold beer.

The bride-to-be's name is Mel, short for Melanie, and she accepts a beer and a cigarette gratefully. She smells like velvety, flower-scented lotions, and her smile fills the room when she talks about her husband-to-be. "He's a hairdresser, but I swear he's straight," she says. She laughs, covering her mouth like a child who's just let some secret slip.

The other one, Tammi, is Mel's maid-of-honor. Tammi doesn't smoke a cigarette, or drink a beer. Tammi's all business. Everything she says is matter-of-fact, like a typewriter key stamping a letter to the page. "We should really be going soon," Tammi says. "We don't have a lot of time."

"Of course," Wendy says. "The dress is in the garage. I hope you like it."

No one moves. Not even the bride-to-be wants to see this unused wedding dress hanging from a plastic hook on the garage wall.

Wendy lives in a dying town an hour's drive outside of Lincoln, Nebraska. There's a post office, a bar, a small cluster of modest homes, and Chuck's grocery store. Her house is small and run-down, but she bought it for almost nothing. When she looks

around, she sees the way she wants it to look someday: a new coat of paint, modern appliances, marble countertops, windows with working latches. She doesn't notice the warped kitchen tile or the faint smell of piss that reminds her the previous owners had cats. At least, she tries not to notice.

Chuck will be home soon. But it would have been rude not to invite them in. She posted the dress to Craigslist on a whim one night, sure no one would want it. She was furious because Chuck, her former fiancé, had made her cry when he yelled at her for shrinking his favorite yellow shirt. He's a wide, looming human being, with shoulders hunched like those of a cave man, and when he gets like that his raised voice is like the bark of a wild animal. He's never hit her, but damned if he doesn't sometimes look like he wants to.

But now that the women are here, she's not so sure she wants to sell the dress after all. Chuck makes her happy, most of the time. A man is hard to find in such a small town.

Over another beer, she learns Mel and her husband-to-be were together only a few months before their engagement. That they can't wait to make their lives together. Mel shows Wendy the ring so Wendy can tell her how beautiful it is. It's princess-cut and molded in white gold, the diamond set shallow in the band.

“So why exactly are you selling this dress?” Tammi asks. “If it's so beautiful.”

Mel shoots Tammi a look that could peel paint. Wendy smiles. She's starting to feel a little better, a bit bubbly with drink. This is just what she needed. It's been a long time since she let herself just sit down and have a beer. Soon, she'll be ready to sell the dress.

She tells Tammi: “Sometimes things don't work out the way you expect. Chuck

and I had a rough patch a bit back, and he moved his things out. We're taking it slower this time around." Hearing things described this way, the way she's heard Chuck describe them, they sound perfectly reasonable. She lights another cigarette, sucks the smoke deep into her lungs, and holds it there.

The truth is, the former spouses-to-be are nowhere near marriage now. Last winter, while Chuck was in the other room clipping his toenails—a small, intimate act he could never bring himself to do in front of her—she flipped through his phone's gallery looking for pictures of them together. She wanted to frame one as a surprise. What she found instead were pictures of the new stock girl at his store, couldn't be more than nineteen, posing in her underwear for Chuck's tiny camera.

Almost as an afterthought, she tells Tammi: "Plus, I need the money. As far as secrets between couples go, this one will be pretty minor."

Tammi smiles. "So Chuck doesn't know." Wendy can see she relishes this new bit of info, sucking the flavor from it like the last bite of a fine steak.

"No."

"Are you going to tell him?" Mel asks. "I don't know if I like sneaking around like this."

Wendy stabs out her cigarette. "We'll see how you feel a little closer to the wedding," she says.

Wendy thinks she hears Chuck's key in the lock of the front door, and her nerves turn tense. It's like every muscle is seized by a tiny spasm. Then she realizes it's only the sound of the tree branch scratching against the front door in the wind, the one he keeps saying he'll trim. The branches are dry and leafless. It's turned autumn on her.

“I might have something a little stronger,” Wendy says. She goes to the counter, grabs Chuck's whiskey and pours herself a small glass. It's only five thirty, the setting sun just starting to cast its pink light through the blinds, but what the hell. She holds up the bottle. “Ladies?”

“We really ought to be going,” Tammi says.

“I wouldn't mind a glass,” Mel says. “A small one,” she adds when Tammi clears her throat.

Wendy sits back down and slides Mel her whiskey. “Why should you be going?” she says to Tammi, her tongue acquiring a cottony feel in her mouth. She twirls her glass slowly on the rough surface of the tablecloth, leaving a small puddle of condensation. “Is there some man you need to get home to?”

Tammi ignores her question. “What do you think Chuck will do when he finds out?” she asks.

“I'm hoping he doesn't,” Wendy says. “Not for a while at least.”

“All due respect,” Tammy says, “but if you didn't want to be caught I think we'd be on our way home by now.”

Mel turns red, and kicks Tammi beneath the table. But maybe Tammi's right. Maybe that's the only reason anybody gets caught at anything: because they want to be.

“Darryl and I never keep secrets,” Mel says.

Wendy laughs, drily. “Honey, he's got his secrets. You just haven't had time to uncover them.”

Mel shakes her head stubbornly, her tightly pressed lips forming a thin white slit. “You're just being bitter,” she says quietly. “There's nothing he wouldn't tell me.”

Wendy stares down at her drink, twirling it slowly on the tablecloth. There's so many things she wants to explain to Mel, among them that sometimes secrets are things you keep from yourself (not others) and that sometimes men need more than they know. She gives her thoughts a second to settle.

“There's going to be a time that you'll love whatever last secrets you have,” she says, finally. “They'll be all that's left that's just yours.”

The other women glance at each other, and she's suddenly aware how strange she must seem to them, sitting at her hideous tablecloth, eager for fresh sets of female ears. She drains her last bit of whisky and sets the glass back on the table. It's watered down now. “Let's just get on with it,” she says. “You came here for my dress, after all.”

The two women stand on the crack-covered driveway behind Wendy as she throws all her weight into lifting the old garage door. It opens with a screech. The smell of motor oil and rat droppings envelops her.

The garage is a wasteland of old, unused junk only half visible in the fading light, much of it from the previous owner. Wendy was so excited for the deal she got on the place that she agreed to dispose of it herself, which of course she hasn't gotten around to. Since then she and Chuck have added their own piles—a couple broken heels, some faded fashion magazines, cigar boxes filled with receipts, a curling iron he swore he'd fix, a bin of worn sports equipment, albums upon albums of faded photos.

In the corner, a white wedding dress dangles unevenly off the wall, still in its garment bag. The three women stand silent just outside the upper lip of the garage entrance. Even to Wendy, the dark garage seems somewhat sinister, like an ancient tomb they're not meant to disturb.

“If you don't want to sell it,” Mel says, “that's okay.”

Tammi says, “Just because you wouldn't sell the dress doesn't mean she shouldn't.”

Wendy walks forward and flips the light switch. So here's her life, or what it's come to, piled in dusty heaps. She resists the urge to pretend this evening never happened, to just back out and shut the door and shoo these women away so she can let the heaps grow in peace.

“Come on in,” she says instead. “It's too late to turn back now.”

While Tammi and Mel watch, she clears some space for the dress. There's a workbench buried here beneath some old clothes, tools, and half-empty cans of paint. She moves these things to the floor, using all her strength on the paint cans, and covers the bench with a bedsheet. “I guess we'd better lay it out,” she says, breathing heavy, not turning to face the women or the dress.

She's not sure what she's afraid of, what would be worse. Maybe the dress is still beautiful, and she won't be able to sell it. Maybe it's hideous, was always hideous, and these women will laugh at her. Or maybe it's neither, not beautiful or ugly, an utterly forgettable dress you might see on the rack at any bridal store. Nothing uniquely hers at all.

Mel takes the dress off its hook and lays it on the surface Wendy's made, a motion as delicate as a mother placing her child to bed down in its crib. Light glints off the thick plastic garment bag. Wendy grabs a box cutter and slices it open, careless now, laying the tatters to the side. She's half-drunk and just wants this thing over with. No time to be neat about it.

No one says anything at first. The dress, stark white and slightly disheveled, lays there lifeless. Seen here, surrounded by old trash, it seems unbearably plain. A testament to how plain all wedding dresses must be, torn off the bridal store rack and away from whatever magic might exist in the flash of professional photographers and family members dabbing their eyes. Lain out like this it's just a piece of white, strapless cloth, nothing more and nothing less.

Then Mel starts to smile. She picks it up and turns away from Wendy, holding it in front of her so Tammi can see. She turns to Wendy. The garment bag falls to the garage floor.

On Mel, the dress has somehow snapped back to life. Her face beams above it. “What do you think?” she asks. She hugs the dress to her skin. Wendy remembers this electricity she sees Mel feeling. She remembers being able to practically taste the wedding cake, to feel the wedding band sliding onto her finger.

“Not bad,” Tammi says, in a voice like she's sure Mel will turn it down.

“It's perfect,” Mel says triumphantly.

Like new wedding dress, the ad said. Four hundred dollars. Unworn and as is. It's expected, Wendy knows, that buyers will haggle. But it's late now, she realizes with a start.

“What time is it?” she asks. The back of her throat still burns with whisky.

The women shrug. They're discussing the frill of the lace and the way the dress will look fitted to Mel's figure. But of course Mel needs to try the dress on to make sure it can fit with just a few alterations. It looks like it will.

“It's not past six, is it?” Wendy asks hoarsely.

Mel frowns. "I suppose it probably is."

Tammi pulls her cell phone from her purse and confirms. "Six fifteen," she says. "What time will Chuck be home?"

"God, any time. Any damn time now."

The women glance at each other. "I guess we can make the drive back this weekend if we have to," Tammi says skeptically. "I mean, she has to try it on before we can pay."

Mel looks crestfallen. Her smile falters and her eyes plead with Tammi, but she nods. She puts the dress back on the piled plastic. She starts to wrap it back around the dress, but it's ripped irreparably. She gives up and puts her hands in her pockets. "I mean, if that's the way it has to be," she says. "You won't sell it, will you? There aren't any other buyers? You'll keep it safe?"

The whole bag's ripped open, tattered about the dress. What if Chuck comes out to the garage? He'll see it here, see the tattered bag, and ask what happened. He keeps saying he's going to clean the garage. It was foolish to think he wouldn't notice the dress, missing or opened or otherwise. He'll never let her sell it, she realizes. Out of sheer, dumb animal pride if nothing else. But she needs the money. What's more, the dress practically danced on Mel's skin, popping like a champagne cork and sparkling like a new bride's smile. Wendy knows it will never do that for her again. It's only place in her life is the cheap plastic hook where Chuck's hung it.

"Take it," she says, her fear and sentimentality turning to blind defiance. "Just take it."

Inside, after the women have left, after Wendy pushed away their money and

protests and accepted Mel's teary hug and her hair-dresser fiance's business card so they could be in touch, Mel looks at the clock to confirm it's past six thirty. Chuck will be home soon.

The garage door is shut and the remains of the garment bag are on their way to Lincoln with the dress and the bride-to-be, but Wendy knows it's only a matter of time. She glances out the window. He should have been home by now. Maybe he just won't come home at all, Wendy thinks hopefully. But in her gut she knows he will, and she knows she'll be here to let him in, take his boots, and fix the two of them something for dinner.

She stands in the bathroom, and looks down at the hair-dresser's business card. Darryl Hansen. 402, etc. What would Chuck do if he found this? What would he think? She could either tell the truth—and let Chuck know how to find Mel, how to find the dress—or, even worse, let him just wonder who this man was. Besides, Wendy wants no part of Mel's happiness, not really. And she doesn't want to watch Tammi scramble for the bouquet, doesn't want to sit alone at the bar while Mel and Darryl dance their first dance as husband and wife. Love is like a flame—it flares up fast, but it always flickers out eventually. Who wants to stick around to see that?

Better not to take the chance. It's always better not to take the chance. So Wendy rips the card into as many tiny pieces as she can manage and flushes them. Then she goes to the kitchen table, pours herself another glass of whisky, and waits for the former husband-to-be to come home.

Now That It's Gone

It was remarkable that Mitch's father didn't find out about the maid sooner. It was months before the call came from Principal Stegner, ruining everything: months of Mitch skipping school to spend his afternoons at home with her, lavishing her with expensive gifts, bragging endlessly to all his friends, and making sure she took the used condoms out with the trash rather than letting them sit plump in any of the inside wastebaskets.

When the call came, Mitch watched his father's face puff up red with righteous anger. They were in one of the upstairs rec rooms, wearing their best business casual wear and sipping chardonnay while college football highlights played on the HDTV. They'd just returned from one of his father's posh social gatherings, where he'd introduced Mitch to all his friends. "He'll be graduating soon," he told them. "Top of his class. He's going to UCLA next year."

The implication was clear. *Wouldn't you like to hire my boy? To give him an easy internship? Wouldn't that be just grand?*

The phone rang. Dad picked up. It wasn't hard for Mitch to imagine the voice at the other end. Principal Stegner, in her usual pleading and apologetic tone, saying sorry to call so late but this matter is urgent and you didn't answer earlier. Scandal threatens the school. Rumors are flying. The walls themselves are abuzz with murmurings, unsubstantiated but persistent, of the sexual relationship between your son and the family cleaning lady, and the pregnancy that has resulted thereof.

In retrospect, it was probably all Mitch's fault. He broke the rules. He promised her he wouldn't tell anyone about their relationship—because, she said, people wouldn't

understand, they'd paint her as some sort of gold-digging whore or him as some rich kid taking advantage. But he ignored this promise frequently, bragging to almost any willing listener, telling them about the gifts he gave her, the love they shared, the new exciting things she did with the different bits of her anatomy.

Even worse, he was about to break his second promise to her: that if his father ever questioned him about the matter, he would deny it. Because after his father fielded the phone call in his typical business-like fashion, with lots of one-word responses and *I sees* and *I understands*, he hung up the phone, massaged his temples and asked his son to tell him about the cleaning lady. Mitch said the only thing it seemed he could say, the only words his lips would form.

“Her name is Dee Dee,” he said. “She's thirty-five years old, the most beautiful woman I've ever known, and we're in love. We're going to have a baby together.”

There was a beat of silence. His father bit his lip. He was a hedge fund manager, high up and very important. His whole world was what his business partners thought. He looked at his son, voice unsure, and asked, “Dee Dee? You mean that black woman?”

Mitch's father, brimming with rage and chardonnay, yelled at him for the better part of an hour then shoved him out the front door. “See how she likes you now,” he said. “Now that the money's gone.” He slammed the door.

Mitch's mom was off in the Caribbean, drinking sangria and swimming in waters warmed by the tropical sun. The generous divorce settlement she'd received the year prior would keep her traveling for years. Mitch wondered if she'd be ashamed of him, or if she'd just laugh off his hijinks the way she used to. She was a good mother. She still sent

the occasional postcard. But while Mitch's father chased scores of blond beauties exactly like her only younger, Mitch's hormones led him in the opposite direction.

He was buck-naked the first time he met Dee Dee. "It was destiny," he later joked to his friends. "She must have liked what she saw." He had skipped school and was floating with his eyes closed on an inflatable raft in one of their indoor pools, sunning his front half and its untrimmed wisps of blond hair. He'd just pulled himself out of the soft, blue water warmed from the summer sun streaming through the windows lining the west wall, and was letting his body dry. Dee Dee cleared her throat beside the pool. He jumped like a jackrabbit and fell in the water.

When he emerged, he was already begging her not to tell his parents, offering her two hundred dollars not to rat him out. She rolled her eyes and tossed him a towel.

Until then, Mitch rarely thought about how his house stayed clean. Its sterile sheen, smelling the way the kitchen did when the cook cut lemons, seemed somehow automatic, something bubbling up from the marble tile itself. And the house was huge. Mitch often took expensive trinkets from its numerous nooks and crannies: a single earring or cuff link worth hundreds, a fancy tie, a rare baseball card signed by some big so-and-so. Some of these he'd drop in charity boxes on the way home from school. Others, he'd bury at the beach. No one ever noticed.

Notice me! he wanted to scream sometimes, when the museum-like quiet of the house was at its most oppressive. And then Dee Dee did.

Dee Dee. His black seductress. Her beautiful skin popping even in her faded blue denim and ratty work shirt, breasts pert and impossible to ignore. Her scent of flowery perfume and sweat and cleaning chemicals. Her brazenness, unfazed by his naked body

climbing from the pool—simply turning away to go about her business. “I’m going to start upstairs,” she said, pocketing the money he handed her. “Pleasure doing business with you.”

But rather than go back to sunning himself, or sating himself on video games as he had planned, Mitch found himself following her around like a stray puppy. And why not? It felt as if he’d caught one of Santa’s elves at Christmas time, usually unseen though they were. He told her to tell him all about herself. Where was she from? What did she do for fun? Was she married? How did one become a maid?

She did what she could to deflect his questions, to make him go away. She told him her job was not to babysit. He told her he just wanted some company. “Fine,” she said. She held out a toilet brush and a can of Ajax. “If you want to be here, you have to help.”

She told him later it was when he took the brush and got down on his knees beside the toilet, looking up to her for guidance, that she first felt something stir.

Later that day, they watched a film together in the home theater. The place had always creeped him out before, the phony dialogue and staged explosions echoing over of a room of seats empty except for his, but with her it was downright marvelous. And he could see she was impressed, taking in the enormity of the place, the crisp sound of the speakers, the towering height of the images flickering across the screen.

Soon this became routine. She worked at his house three days a week. He learned her schedule and skipped school accordingly. Then they rushed through her housework together, dividing the work, and retired to the theater for their afternoon film. Finally,

after a few weeks of this, halfway through *Princess Bride* they were leaned close in their seats and, driven crazy by her proximity, he kissed her. She kissed back.

When the credits began to roll and they untangled their lips and tongues, she smiled. “Finally,” she said.

Soon after, they made love for the first time in his childhood bed. It was then that they had their talk, and Dee Dee set her ground rules. As always, she was no nonsense. She told him her first job was at age thirteen, flipping hamburger patties in the kitchen at her dad's burger joint. She remembered the smell of grease lingering in her clothes and hair, the steam rising from the grill. She showed him the tiny bumps that still spotted her arms, burn marks from spattered grease. After her dad's drinking cost them the restaurant, she'd made enough money babysitting to feed herself and her brother, even bought them the occasional piece of clothing. When she was old enough she switched to cleaning houses, and now she was comfortable. It was a good gig. She didn't want to mess it up.

So there were two rules: no blabbing, no confessing. Simple as that.

Or so she thought.

So it came that, at three a.m. months later, a week after they'd found out they were pregnant, Mitch rang Dee Dee's doorbell and waited for her to answer. He'd been kicked out, still wearing his dress clothes, his cell phone and credit cards suspended. He fingered the checkbook in his pocket anxiously, wondering how many he'd have to bounce.

The next morning, bright and early, they sat in the waiting room of the plasma donation center off Flower. They gave the woman at the front desk their names and socials, handed her two forms of ID, and sat down while she made copies.

This was Mitch's idea, a suggestion he made as a way to atone. He knew he cost her the job she relied on. This was a way they could each make an extra couple hundred a month, and of course, he'd give his share to her. He couldn't shake the feeling that she was only humoring him, though, letting him think he could help correct his mistake. It was clear they couldn't survive off plasma money.

"You've done this before?" Mitch asked.

"Not for years," she said. "I must have been your age."

He squeezed her hand, and mentally berated himself when he caught himself wondering if it's true black women don't get wrinkles.

Around them, the waiting room was filling up. There were nervous young college kids recently graduated into debt-filled unemployment, old men with dirt-smearred beards and torn jeans, fidgety methheads smelling of sweat.

"Of all the stupid ideas," Dee Dee said.

He wondered what she might mean by this. Donating plasma, perhaps. Or telling his friends, something he'd denied doing vehemently but not, he feared, convincingly. Or his passionate confession to his father. Surely she didn't mean this, them, their relationship, their child-to-be.

He squeezed her hand. "Hey. I love you."

She nodded absently, still staring up at the muted TV mounted in the corner above them. "I love you, too," she said.

The receptionist assigned them numbers, and gave them large red binders bulging with info on the high-risk groups for AIDS. They read bulletpoint by bulletpoint, boldface type disqualifying prostitutes, drug addicts, and homosexuals from donation.

Nurses wearing surgical masks walked in and out of the back room, calling names and leading people back. There were signs everywhere about some neighborhood bake sale being held next weekend to benefit cancer victims, cupcakes a dollar fifty. Mitch folded the sleeves of his Hugo Boss shirt to the elbow, feeling unbearably conspicuous. A nurse called his name, and he stood up.

They led him alone to a small private room where they pricked his finger and spun the blood around in a machine to check his liquid levels. The nurse wore what looked like a welding mask. While the machine whirred, she read him more info about AIDS and asked him if he had ever visited some African countries he'd never heard of, traded sex for money, sex for drugs, or had sexual relations with another man since the year 1977. He said no to it all. The machine stopped spinning. The nurse pulled up the faceplate on her welding mask.

“Did you dress up for this?” she asked.

A few minutes later, he sat in a large room that looked like the run-down doctors' offices he sometimes saw on TV: faded wallpaper, glass containers of cottonballs and popsicle sticks, and an upholstered table covered with butcher paper. The doctor came in carrying a clipboard. She was a black woman a few years younger than Dee Dee. Her lab coat squeezed her breasts tight against her chest, and he felt guilty for imagining how satisfying it would be to tear it open.

Of course, she barely noticed him, even in his dress clothes. He was thankful for this but also disconcerted, since not being fawned over was a new experience for him. Half a glance at her clipboard and this woman was off, spouting out a whole spiel, the list of disclaimers, reiterated info on AIDs, a quickpaced breakdown of human blood and the

plasma extraction process, dizzying his head with facts and questions and more questions, her eyes lighting every so often on the clock above his chair. She moved him to the table and listened with a stethoscope as he breathed deep. She rolled his lymph nodes under her fingers. She picked up her chart and began doodling a butterfly at the corner, a habit she probably acquired to avoid doctor-patient eye contact. “Any questions?” she asked.

“How long have you been a doctor?” he said.

Her pen tip paused. She looked up at him. “Why? You don't think someone as young as me can do your physical?”

“No, I was just curious,” he said cheerfully.

“Oh, or you're wondering what a woman with a degree is doing working seven a.m. shifts at a plasma center?”

He held up his hands. “You misunderstood me,” he said. It was the clothes that were setting her off, he was sure. Again, he silently chastised himself for not snatching a tee shirt on his way out.

“What is this for you,” the doctor asked, “some social experiment? Rich boy comes to live like the rest of us for a day?”

His blood began to thump in his ears, and his face felt hot. Sweat soaked the collar of his undershirt. “How *dare* you talk to me like that?” he squeaked. He meant it to come out furious and authoritative, the tone of an insolent prince, but any insolence was drowned in his voice's boyish crackle.

The doctor smirked. “How old are you, kid?”

“Eighteen.”

“Eighteen years old. Well. Stand up and take down your pants, Mr. Eighteen.”

He did so silently, anger fading into embarrassed resignation. She checked the crook of his knees and inner elbows, running the pads of her fingers over his skin. Then she knelt down and pulled each of his toes away from the others, examining the fleshy parts between them.

She stood up and marked her chart. “Just checking for track marks,” she said without looking up. “I’ll be back.” She let the door drift shut slowly behind her, and he was terrified for a few seconds that someone he knew would somehow see him through the crack, standing here in a plasma center, slacks stripped to his ankles and shirt pitted with anxious sweat.

No one did. He bent over and pulled up his pants.

He was led to the final room. It was filled with leather reclining chairs, white tile, and the sporadic beeps of machines vacuuming out people's fluids. He felt naked and exposed here without Dee Dee. He needed her soft skin, her reassurance. Where was she? Were there additional tests women had to do? What would happen if they found out she was pregnant?

There was a counter near the entrance to this large room, and when he approached it, someone asked him his name and social security number. He supplied them. A man in scrubs led him to a chair on the other side of the room. Mitch shook his head. “I need one next to another free seat. My girlfriend will be joining me.” The man rolled his eyes and led him to another chair.

Mitch tried to remind himself that Dee Dee had done this before, that is was nothing earth-shattering, no low point. It was simply something people did to get by. And

yet he couldn't let go of the feeling that the people here relished the chance to belittle someone like him.

A man with blue scrubs and a soul patch showed Mitch how to pump blood from the vein, squeezing and releasing his fist. He made Mitch practice along with him. "Keeps the blood coming," the man said. He tied Mitch's bicep with rubber and swabbed his inner elbow with iodine. He slapped the vein and watched it rise up. "Are you afraid of needles?" he asked.

"No," Mitch said. He looked down and watched the long needle slide in. His eyes watered at the sharp pinch. If there was ever a thing beneath me, he thought. The man attached the tube that was attached to the needle to a bigger tube attached to the extraction machine. The light turned green. Mitch started to pump his fist, and the man walked away.

The air was heavy with the busy chatter of the other patients, their crude jokes and the inappropriate comments they made about the female nurses. Dee Dee's reserved seat sat empty. He wondered where she was. She'd been distant today, and last night as well. When he'd told her what had happened, she'd stared dumbfounded down at her kitchen table, scratching the rim with her thumb, and said, "You *told* him?"

This was why she was distant, he thought. She was mad he confessed. He didn't want to think of the alternative: that it wasn't him she'd loved after all, but the house he inhabited and the gifts he gave her every chance he got. This is what his father had claimed, red-faced and screaming. That he was a fool to think she loved him back. He was just a dumb kid, allowing a gold digger like her to take advantage of him and his whole family.

Finally, Dee Dee entered the room. She looked shaken, her posture demolished. She sauntered up to the counter, pulling at her lip, and said something to the man behind it. She pointed in Mitch's direction. Someone led her to the seat beside him. A man showed her how to pump her fist and hooked her up.

"This is humiliating," Dee Dee said when the man walked away. "And gross. I feel like I might be sick."

Dee Dee's father used to reuse pieces of floss, she'd told him before. Each evening he'd rinse off the blood and bits of food and string it over the toothbrush holder to dry for the next day. Another time, she'd told him how she and her brother used to go to restaurants and mix hot water with ketchup to make tomato soup. Not as bad as it sounds, she'd claimed. He wondered, then, what it was about this situation in particular that she found humiliating if not the company.

"I was thinking," he said suddenly, still pumping his fist. "Maybe we're going about things all wrong. You were right: I was wrong to confess to Dad. I get that now. I'll go home and say sorry, I'm so ashamed, but things are over between us. Then when he's asleep, I'll take his wallet. I know his PIN. We can drain his account dry and drive east somewhere." He glanced over at her. "What do you think?"

She shook her head slowly. "Mitch, I've got my life here. My friends. My mortgage. I can't just up and leave like that." She talked the way you'd talk to a child, explaining why he can't have that last cookie. He felt his insolence flare up again.

"So what do you want to do? Live off plasma money?"

"This was your idea, not mine. I'll be just fine scraping by."

"Oh, and I won't?"

They looked at each other, tubes dangling from their arms. “I’m no thief,” she said. “I work for my living.”

“I’m no thief, either,” he said. “It’s my dad’s money. It’s not like I’d be sticking up a liquor store.” He couldn’t put the distinction into words. He was entitled to his father’s money, he almost said, but that didn’t sound right. He thought of all the household trinkets he’d taken over the years. He’d never thought of any of that as stealing, not really. He wished he had one of those trinkets now.

They both fell silent, listening to the whir of the machines and watching the TVs suspended from the ceiling. On one, a sixteen-year-old reality star complained through captions that her Maserati had a flat tire. What was she going to *do*? she asked the camera in tears. She had a pedicure at three.

“You know,” Dee Dee said slowly, careful as a mountain climber scaling a steep cliff, “we don’t have to have this baby. If we don’t think we can support it, I mean. I’m guessing there’s one thing your father would be happy to pay for.”

He mustered his best look of revulsion, and turned toward her. “Baby,” he said, “don’t talk like that.”

“I’m just saying. This is not a done deal.” Her voice was quiet, pained, thoughtful.

“So that’s it, then. We throw the baby out with the bank account.”

“I was only thinking aloud.”

“Well, don’t. We don’t need that kind of thinking.”

“Mitch, we have to think this through to the end. You haven’t—” She paused, pulling at her lip again.

“Haven’t what?” he asked, suppressing simultaneous urges to scream and cry.

“You haven’t been out in the real world. You don’t know what it’s like. Babies don’t raise themselves.”

“I know I love you. That’s all that matters.”

Even in his own ears, his voice sounded unsure.

Around them, noise. Mitch listened to the steady din, the assault on the senses. Donors rapping in varied dialect, the squeak of the medical cartwheels, the click of pen tips, the shuffle of money in the corner being handed to people through a slot in bulletproof glass. Beneath it all, the sweet mingled smells of bleach, blood, and iodine. A nurse came by to ask how he was.

He tasted tears at the back of his throat, but he swallowed against them. He told the nurse to go away.

“My father is so obsessed with money,” he said. “I thought you were different.”

Dee Dee stretched out her free arm. She could barely reach, but she laid her fingers on the patch of skin above the needle in his arm. “We just need to think things through,” she said again. “You’re only eighteen. Life is long. All my friends say I’m taking advantage of you.”

“All my friends say the same. I tell them to go to hell.”

Mitch watched her squint at the TV screen above like she was deciphering some sort of answer from it.

“You don’t understand what you’re giving up,” she said.

“You talk like my fucking mother.”

Mitch’s machine dinged. The light on the side glowed green. All done. He wanted to say something to her, something that would put everything in perspective and impress

upon her how everything would work out, it always did, but he couldn't think of what that something might be. "I love you," he said instead, mind going blank but for that. He scratched the patch of skin above the pick in his arm.

"I love you, too," she said. "But you need to talk to your dad. Think about college next year, and who's going to pay for it. We might have to take a break, just for a while. You can't throw your life away."

He felt slightly lightheaded, a little woozy. They said this could be a side effect, to let them know if it happened, but he wasn't about to look weak in front of her. Not right now. He raised his free hand numbly so someone would come unhook him. The man in blue scrubs reappeared. He held a ball of gauze over the needle and yanked it out, then he pulled Mitch's arm straight up in the air and taped the gauze tight against the vein. "Leave the tape for three hours," he said.

Mitch looked over at Dee Dee, suppressing dizziness and nausea. "Dad said this would happen. He said you'd leave when the money ran dry."

He meant it as an idle observation, a piece of info to be pondered curiously, almost as a joke, but it came out accusatory. Her eyes narrowed.

"So that's what you think of me. After all this. That that's all this was."

"No, I—"

"Then get out of here. Take your money and get out. We don't need you."

He stood up, swaying slightly. His head hurt. His pulse pounded in his ears. Here was that feeling of insolence bubbling up again, roiling in his stomach. He saw himself lavishing her with gifts, helping her with housework, going down on her on the living room couch, images interspersed with others: the black doctor chewing him out, his mom

in the rec room wearing ear plugs and doing crossword puzzles while he played guitar, him smashing his own toys when he was a child just to get a rise.

This is how you repay me? he wanted to say. But he didn't. Instead he reached over and yanked her needle out, leaving a thin, jagged trail of blood up her arm.

There was a moment where nothing happened. The room stood still but for the small, fleshy red hole on her inner elbow, slowly expanding with blood, and the reality of what he'd done made itself known in the way his heart felt like a cold hand had seized it. Then she started to yell for help, and blood began to flow from both her arm and the tube now lying on the floor.

He turned and ran. He had just enough time before he was out the door to hear her say it was the rich kid who did it.

Outside, he hid in the dumpster beside the plasma center. The dumpster was shared with the fast food burger place next door, and it smelled of coagulated grease and salt and other rotting foodstuffs. He hoped desperately there were no contaminated needles in here he needed to be afraid of. He plugged his nose and tried not to throw up. They were hunting for him. He could hear them from the dumpster.

A group of angry donors had set out almost immediately to track him down. Furious. Pound that rich kid to a pulp, they said. Then the police came. They started taking angry statements from the people gathered outside, then finally he heard Dee Dee's voice among them, faint and beautiful. He couldn't make out what she said, but he learned from another voice she was fine and they would take her downtown for a statement. "I see," he heard a male officer say at one point, and his anger flared. He heard the accusatory, condescending edge of the words. He wanted to smack that bastard good.

Mitch wasn't finished. No sir, not yet. He'd been woozy with blood loss. He'd explain that to her. The things he'd said, that was just his dad talking. If anyone should be blamed it was the plasma center. They should be sued, leaving people foggy-headed like that. She would understand. She had to. These things always worked out in the end.

He'd call her from home. Tell her he was taking her advice, college-bound, going to be a responsible father. Not like his. Not like hers. And she'd sigh into the phone, voice plump with happiness, maybe even squeezing out a few tears, and say that, yes, she always knew he would be, it was all she ever wanted. And with time his dad would see their love was not something small, not something that a missed paycheck or the stress of a ruptured home could break, and he would respect Mitch for this, and they would never want for anything. "I love you, too," he whispered to her now, again and again like a mantra, just the way he'd say it on the phone. He tried to ignore the nasal sound his plugged nose lent the words.

Consider It Saved

It's five o'clock Christmas evening, and I'm sipping eggnog with my ex-fiancé's whole family. Jan's adopted kid brother is on the floor, tearing violent handfuls of wrapping paper and letting them fall. Her mother Helen rests her hand on her husband's thigh and watches the kid with a smile. She just beat cancer. When she thinks no one's looking, I catch her feeling the place her left breast used to be.

They don't know Jan dumped me three weeks ago.

"Honey?" she says to me, "Will you hand me the scissors?"

She snips the ribbon on the present I gave her and pops open the little black box. It's a pair of earrings she originally saw airborne, when I threw them at the wall during our fight. She'd just told me she was leaving me for our friend, Lily, in a voice so cold and well-rehearsed it was like reading a block of text.

Now she squeezes my knee. "Honey, they're perfect." I shut my eyes and feel her fingertips linger.

This is the first time we've seen Helen since she found out she was fine again, after a year of lost hair and panicked trips to the bathroom. I was the one Jan's dad first told. It was the night of our big fight and Jan had locked herself in the bathroom, her cell phone buzzing incessantly on the nightstand until I picked it up. I stopped beating the heel of my palm against the bathroom door. I'd never heard a man Harry's age cry.

When she came out, I told her the news. We cried and hugged and hatched the big plan not to ruin Christmas.

Her folks live on a beef farm outside Omaha. The first few hours of the day, I helped her dad with the chores. We moved bales of hay to the feeders for the cattle and used a sledgehammer to crack the layer of ice covering the pond so they could drink. The cold wind rippled over the white, lifeless landscape. Harry told me how excited Jan had been watching him blow the creek open with dynamite when she was a child, begging for him to do it again. When we came back inside, Helen brushed away the icicles dangling from his beard. I like the chores here. They're good, honest work. Last spring I helped him patch the roof of the barn, and Helen baked me a strawberry pie.

After we open presents, Harry shows me his collection of deer rifles for the millionth time. I nod along, pretending to understand the gun lingo he uses. He runs a clean rag across his favorite and tells me how glad he is I could come this year. When we get back to the kitchen, Harry Jr.'s setting the table.

Before dinner, we hold hands and say Grace. I swear I feel Jan's heartbeat through her fingers. I peek out during the prayer, and Jr.'s eyes are open too. I cross my eyes and stick out my tongue. He giggles.

Harry clears his throat. "For food and family," he says. "Amen."

"Amen," we say.

We stuff ourselves silly: great gobs of gravy heaped on mashed potatoes and turkey, green bean casserole made with real cream, lettuce wedges with grape tomatoes and ranch dressing. We told Helen we'd cook, or at least bring something from Boston Market, but she wouldn't hear of it. Best way to celebrate she could think of was cooking

for her family, she said.

Jan fiddles with the new earring hanging from her left ear. I ask her if there's something wrong and she shakes her head impatiently, ignoring my question. She asks Helen how she's feeling.

Helen puts her fork down and leans back. Her hair's just now coming in again, a layer of thin gray fuzz stretched over her skull. "That's the only thing anyone's asked me in months," she says. "Who cares? I'm old. I'm supposed to hurt. How are you two? Have you set the date yet?"

Jan taps the table impatiently with the tines of her fork. "I told you, we're waiting until we finish school."

"You'd be surprised how much it takes to plan a wedding," Helen says. There's an impatience in her words I know bites at Jan.

"I know, Mother."

Helen leans in close to Jr. "I'm starting to think you'll be married before these two are."

The kid makes a puking sound. "No kidding," Sr. mutters.

"Excuse me," Jan says. She talks the way you might to a stranger blocking your path. She gets up and grabs her purse. I hear her phone buzz in the little pocket just inside, rattling her change. "I need to take this."

Got to be Lily. I tear off some more turkey and try to remember if there was a time she'd interrupt a family dinner to take my call.

Jr. says he wants coffee with his pie, so he can be like me. It's just about more

than I can take. Helen winks in my direction. She goes to the kitchen to check if there's any instant decaf. I excuse myself, and wander off to find Jan.

She's outside the guest bedroom, where we'll sleep tonight. Her smile breaks when I see her. She holds a single index finger up at me. "I have to go," she says into the phone.

"Me too," she says. I wince.

"It's the middle of goddamn dinner," I hiss as she hangs up the phone.

"Don't curse at me."

"They'll know something's up."

"I'm sorry," she says. "We just wanted to talk two seconds. It's Christmas."

I shut my eyes. "I don't want to hear this."

I feel her hand on my shoulder. "I'm sorry."

"You're embarrassing us."

"Why should I be embarrassed? It's my family."

I open my eyes. "Okay," I say slowly. "But how do you think they'd react if they knew what I know?"

Her voice softens, like it used to with Jr. when she cooed at him as a baby.

"Hey—"

"Dessert is getting cold," I say.

Helen picks up her fork and looks down at her plate, smiling. There's a piece of cinnamon apple pie looking back up at her, topped with a big dollop of vanilla bean ice cream.

“The thing I missed most,” she says, “was my taste buds. Chemo made everything taste the way IV tubes smell.”

Harry curls his fingers through those of his wife. “Take the first bite, honey. You deserve it.”

Jan’s phone buzzes in her purse. I poke her in the side and mouth at her, *Turn that thing off.*

Don’t tell me what to do.

You’re being rude.

I’m not going to answer!

She steps on the toe of my shoe. I slap the table in frustration and everyone looks at me, startled. I clear my throat.

“Sorry,” I say. I smile. I take one of Jan’s hands from her lap, where they are wringing each other frantically.

Harry stands up. “Jr., let’s get you an extra scoop of ice cream,” he says.

When he leaves the room, Helen swallows her bite and dabs a cloth napkin against her lips. “You two are acting strange,” she says.

Jan sighs extravagantly. “Mom, we’ve got something to tell you.”

I put my arm around Jan and give her a big, sloppy kiss on the cheek. My stomach’s warm with liquor.

“We’re getting married in August,” I say. “We just didn’t want to steal your thunder.” I take a deep, petulant swig of eggnog.

“Oh, that’s wonderful!” Helen says. She claps her hands together, and stands up to get Harry. Jan sits white-faced with shock and bewilderment.

I can't stand cigars, but when Harry offers me one I take it. He came to me first, I noticed: the kid scampered back from the kitchen to jump up into Jan's arms, but Harry crossed to me and gave me one of his hugs where it's so tight you think his thin arms might just snap off. He whispered he was so happy, and I peered over his shoulder, miles deep into Jan's worried eyes, and smiled.

"Save the date, Harry," I told him.

"Consider it saved," he said.

Now I'm beside him, winter air slicing in through the cracked window as I put the cigar to my lips. My hand shakes. The end sizzles. There's a burning sensation on the roof of my mouth when I suck the smoke in.

Jan's on the floor, cross-legged and texting Lily. Jr.'s beside her, rolling the wheels of his new dump truck in deep furrows through the carpet. Helen's telling us how she added sour cream to the pie crust dough this time. Everyone's all smiles except Jan. Helen asks if we've thought about the venue yet. "We can do it here," she says, "if you want to push the date back a bit. The garden flowers are beautiful in spring."

"Oh, no," I say. I puff my cigar. "We don't want to wait any longer. Do we, honey?"

Jan puts her phone down. She grins daggers at me. "Of course not. Honey."

"Real traditional," I'm saying. My thoughts swirl like the rocks in my brandy glass. I'm drinking it straight now, don't mind if I do, thank you Harry. "In a church with one of those, one of those pointy things, a steeple? And rice for the birds."

"Rice for the birds!" Harry laughs.

“*Honey,*” Jan says. “Maybe you should take it easy.”

I burp. “And a white dress.”

Helen laughs. “Who’s going to wear that?”

I laugh too. In a few minutes, Helen goes to the kitchen to rummage for a camera. We see her pulling out old junk and knickknacks onto the counter: empty photo frames, jumbles of tissue paper, an old watchband. She comes back with the digital camera we got her for her birthday last year.

She motions for us all to scoot together. Jan stands between me and Harry, hands fussing at her side. I pull her into my lap. I give her a big kiss on the cheek.

“Come on,” I say. “It’s a party.”

She turns her head and looks at me for a second, then rolls her eyes. She turns back to Helen.

“Cheese,” she says.

Between pictures, I slide my fingers into hers and shut my eyes. I feel the muscles of her stomach tense, then relax. I picture my hands running up beneath her shirt, then under her beltline, the dip where her stomach ends. I start to get hard. I nestle my nose into her hair, feel my breath warm against her neck. I breathe deep, my lips a millimeter away from her skin.

After the camera’s last click, she sits back down on the floor with Jr.

Just after sunset, as the last bits of red light fragment through the trees that line the farm’s edge, I see a family of deer hop from the tall stalks of corn into the woods for the night. I call Jr. over to point them out, but they’re gone by the time I lift him up to

see. I swallow the last finger of my drink, and cough against the burning at the back of my throat. "I wanted you to see," I croak. I feel dumbfounded. I don't know where to put my hands. I turn to the others. "I wanted him to see!" I say.

"Honey," Jan says. "Sit down. You're drunk."

Sr. laughs. "So what if the boy's a bit drunk? It's just us."

Helen shushes him.

I sit down. "So what if I am," I repeat. The words feel strange on my tongue. I say them again and again. I watch Jan, texting furiously. There's a dirty smile playing at the corners of her lips and eyes. Here we are with her parents, for God's sake.

"Jan's got friends getting married," I say suddenly, like I just thought of it. "Brad and Jason. They're on their way to New York right now. While we're eating Christmas dinner."

Jan's looking real hard at her hand, at a speck of fingernail polish that's chipped away.

Harry pulls at his mustache. "Whole country's going to hell," he says. "A wedding. My God."

"Quiet, you two," Helen says. "You'll make me sick."

Jan stands up. I'm leaned way back in my chair now, and she looks so beautiful I could get on my knees and beg for just one kiss. There's hate in her eyes, though. It must have been there all day, just waiting to claw its way to the surface.

"I'm going to put Jr. to bed," she says. "And then I'm going to bed myself."

"Wait up for me," I say.

"No, thank you. You three have your fun."

I try to stand up, but my feet won't cooperate.

"What, no kiss?" I say. The words slip away from me unintended, and I picture myself trying to grab them back with all my strength. But she's already gone, clambering up the narrow stairs to her old room.

In a couple hours, when the air coming in through the cracked window has turned to a cold rough as sandpaper, Helen stands up and kisses Harry and me good night. She thanks me for coming. I hug her delicately, not sure how fragile she is, trying not to touch my chest to hers.

She laughs. She says, "Cancer's not contagious, you know." When she pulls away, I tell her how proud I am of her for making it through the last year. I wipe at my eyes drunkenly while I say it. I want to tell her to wait just a few minutes, stay with me just a little longer. She kisses me once more on the cheek before going up to bed. "Take it easy, son," she says.

Harry and I throw some wood into the fireplace, and shove handfuls of newspaper between the cracks. I light them. We watch the ink-colored smoke drift up the chimney as I warm my hands.

"Did Jan ever tell you about Jr.'s parents?" he asks me. He's ashing his cigar on the floor now, a thoughtful smile on his face, just begging Helen to scold him in the morning.

"Only that they were friends of yours," I say. "That you were all so close they named him after you."

He nods. "I knew Bill from when I used to work part-time at the rubber plant. He

was twenty years younger. I helped him open his bar, he made me godfather. Then he and his wife got t-boned running a stop sign on a road outside Waverly.”

“Jesus,” I say.

He looks somberly down into his half empty glass. “Actually,” he says, “Jr.'s not really named after me. Bill's grandfather was named Harold.” He clears his throat. “I guess we just thought he'd like being named after me better.”

“Are you going to tell him when he's older?”

“Are you crazy? Jan doesn't even know. He's my son now. Bill's gone. The story's changed.”

I say nothing. My head's clearer now, drying out like a damp rag that's been wrung out and hung on the line. I don't like this secret. Harry and I sit and watch the fire, the flames lapping at the logs so they sizzle and snap like popcorn in oil. When Harry drifts off to sleep, fingers still curled around a glass of watery brandy, I tap his cigar out gently on the hearth and go upstairs.

I shut the door as quietly as I can behind me, not wanting to wake anyone. Jan's lying on the bed, flipping through a magazine.

I sit down next to her. “Hey, I'm sorry. That was so far out of line.”

I touch her leg gently through the covers. “I acted like a jack-ass all day.”

She nods emphatically.

I move my hand away and look at the dresser. It's cluttered with old cassette tapes, crumpled pink tissue paper, a tube of black lipstick from her high school goth phase. Her parents haven't moved a thing in all the years since she left home.

“We shouldn’t have come,” she’s saying. “I shouldn’t have asked you to.”

“I’m glad we did. It’s always nice here.”

“Nice? Hmm.”

“How’s Lily?” I ask.

She doesn’t answer for a moment. “Good,” she says finally.

I swallow hard, vaguely aroused and infuriated by the picture of them together that flits across my brain. “Good,” I say. I take off my jeans, remembering how self-conscious I was the first time I undressed in front of her. I slide under the covers. I hear the murmur of the TV from Helen’s bedroom up the hall. I click off the lamp and stare up into the pitch-black air. This is the last time I’ll fall asleep beside her, I realize.

“Was there anything I could have done?” I ask.

She pauses for a beat. “No,” she says.

I don’t press her. I shut my eyes and try to believe it.

Outside, the cold air whips through the frozen cornfields. Tree branches tap against the window. I try to picture an August wedding, filled with light and blooming flowers, Jan in a white dress dancing with me in a church garden. In a few minutes, she begins to snore. I realize I’ve missed even this, the noise of her breath rattling at the back of her throat. How much there is that I will miss, every little thing. The past, the present, the future we never had.

The roar of the wind brings my mind back to the farm, to the poor cattle feeding on dead corn stalks and half-frozen water, then huddling up for a night in the barn. The roof creaking under the weight of the snow. It needs a new one, I know, but Harry can’t afford that. He’ll be up there alone come spring, cattle lowing below, patching it once

more for the coming winter.

Little Rituals

Bud sits with Vicki, short for Victoria, in the Planned Parenthood waiting room. She pats his hand. She twines her fingers through his. She says it will all be okay, it will all be fine, but her attention is on the TV screen in the corner. Everyone's is. Lately, he's started to suspect she's seeing someone else, and he's determined not to blame her if this is true.

He stands up and begins to pace up and down the narrow aisles. He feels like an agitated bottle of beer, ready to burst. Every so often he glances up at one of the televisions, lets out a whimper, and walks faster. This is all a bad omen, a signal to him. It seems likely that if he stops walking his heart will explode.

The other patients hardly notice him. They move their things so he can pass. God only knows what the poor guy's got, they must think. Sad world. Take a number.

Bud can't endure anything remotely medical, not since his dad died. Not a simple dental cleaning, much less an STD test. When he passes a hospital, he holds his breath like a child passing a graveyard. But this woman, this Vicki short for Victoria, wants papers. She's cautious. She's wise. She needs to see his name stamped in crisp black ink and beside it a list of negative results. She needs to know for sure it's safe to be human and do what humans do.

“Sit down, honey,” Vicki says when he passes. Her voice is tired. She wonders faintly what she has gotten herself into with this guy, but of course she's far away right now. They all are. The whole damn country is. On the television screens, there's a

scrolling news tickers and b-roll of a school, Sandy Hook Elementary, where many children are dead. It's a bad day to be a human being.

A man steps into Bud's path. He puts his hand out like a traffic guard halting a car. Bud stops.

“You need to sit down,” the man says.

Lips pursed, Bud shakes his head.

“It's okay, son,” the man says. He's maybe, what, ten years older than Bud? A youthful thirty-two? Still, he calls him son. He tries to touch Bud's shoulder, a friendly gesture, a moment of warmth to suggest that, hey, we're all in this together, and Bud can't help but slap the hand away. The man's face turns white.

Finally, Vicki stands up. She blinks rapidly, like someone who just woke up in a sunny room. She loops her arm through Bud's. “Sorry,” she says simply. “He doesn't like tests.”

The man looks from Vicki back to Bud. Then he looks up at the TV. Something flutters across his face, a hopeless look of what's it all mean and why bother anyway. The man sits down, and Bud resumes his circuit around the room.

Vicki's eyes join everyone else's at the screen. They are there with the children, their pulses thumping. When a nurse calls Bud's name, he turns and runs out the door.

At the beginning, Bud was something of a sad sack but not nearly so sad a sack as he knew he was now. He clung to her, yes, but with exuberance rather than desperation. And she was happy, he knew she was, to see him around every corner ready with a present or some sweet nothing to share. One time, it was a bundle of fresh-picked

strawberries he'd drizzled with chocolate himself. Another, it was her car waiting in the lot all washed and waxed, never mind that he'd searched all her junk drawers for the spare set of keys. Other times, it was simple kind words.

Then there were the other things she started to let him do for her, in the absence of anything sexual. Brush her hair. Apply a little rouge to her cheek. Pluck the tiny hairs at the ends of her eyebrows as she stared at the progress in the mirror.

But it's not like he doesn't want to do more. He's not the one with the goddamn rule. Hell, when they started dating, she wouldn't even allow a proper kiss. It was all lips, no tongue. It was too dangerous, she said—it would only make them want to do more. Thankfully, the no-tongue rule didn't last long. But it was immediately succeeded by the no-hands rule, which meant he could kiss her but that was all. Gradually, she forgot this rule too—there was, after all, only so much time two people could spend rolling around with interlocked tongues before a bra got unclasped and a breast found its way to someone's lips. But the pants rule still held until December 10, 2012.

“Okay,” she said then, firmly, arms crossed over her bare chest, “I'll give you a handjob but you can't come on me. Not until I see papers.” This is where things still stand.

Though they've only been dating ten weeks, Bud stays with her most nights. He doesn't go to school, and he doesn't go to work. Instead, he's her shadow. Arrogantly, he decided to return to school without interruption after his father's death early last summer, and he failed spectacularly at keeping his head together. He left school mid-semester with little fanfare. Now he's all out of ideas for little gifts, so instead he wanders the campus while she's in class or he stays at home—her home—and does chores to pass the time.

Cleaning dishes, sweeping, knocking down cobwebs, unclogging drains with vinegar and baking soda, tightening various screws. It occurs to him that their relationship mirrors that of his father and mother that last year—Dad on disability, keeping up the home front while Mom went off to work.

It would be just his luck to have AIDs. His list of sexual exploits is short and not particularly noteworthy, but there have been times—two, maybe three times—when he didn't wear a rubber. When he was younger and let his haste to put it in prevail over his better judgment. That young, lusty self seems worlds removed from the man he is now.

When he gets back home—her home—she isn't there. He stands outside in the lot for a moment, staring at the piece of empty cement where her car should be. He took an hour or more to make his way back, slightly chilled in the cold desert winter, scarf itching his neck, breathing slowly into his chapped hands. She should be here. Where could she be?

She could be with him. The other him. If there is another him, that is.

When he gets inside, Sam is sitting on the living room floor, his school books opened across the carpet. This is Vicki's little brother. He lives in the dorm but hates it there, so he spends many nights here on the couch, falling asleep under a throw blanket and the black fleece coat he found in the closet. When Bud enters, Sam puts down the pencil he's using to underline lines of text and pulls at his lower lip.

“Uh-oh,” Sam says.

“Uh-oh what?”

“Uh-oh, you wouldn't be walking in that door alone if things went well. I figured I'd have to clear out of here the moment you two got home.”

Bud sits down on the floor with Sam, his back against the couch. He lets his head fall backwards onto the seat and closes his eyes.

“That's not the face of a guy getting laid any time soon.”

“Why are you here, Sam?”

When Sam doesn't answer, Bud opens his eyes and looks over. Sam shrugs and looks away. “I was watching the news,” he says. “Sometimes, you want to be with your family.”

“Yeah. Well. Your sister should be home by now. I walked here.”

Sam nods, as if that were a perfectly reasonable thing to have done, even though Planned Parenthood was at least a three-mile walk away.

Before long, they each have a beer in hand and there's four empties on the table even though it's barely past noon. They're still sitting on the floor for some reason. It seems more appropriate this way. Furniture is too normal. Today, everything is a little skewed.

Bud tells him what happened. The nervous pacing, the quickened breath, the man who stood up and tried to stop him. The cowardly flight out the big metal door marked EXIT with red letters.

“I'm sure you're perfectly healthy,” Sam says.

“We all said the same about Dad.”

“But was he, really?”

Bud nods. “More or less. Smoking was the one vice he allowed. He never drank, he never ate fried foods, he never fooled around on Mom. He had all these little rituals he did that he thought kept him safe. He said you should tap the car roof for good luck when

going through a yellow light, that you should smile at every police officer in case you ever needed the law to protect you, that if you never gave a girl flowers she'd never turn stalker. Then the classics: don't step on cracks, never walk under a ladder, watch your back on Friday the thirteenth.

Bud doesn't comment when Sam takes a blue notebook marked PSYCH out of his backpack and begins to take notes. He's happy just to have someone listen.

“Dad thought he could keep all these bad things at bay,” he tells Sam.

“It seems the lesson is he couldn't.”

“No,” Bud says. “The lesson is: ignorance is bliss.”

Before Vicki enters, she stands on the front porch, listening to their voices mingle with the sounds of the TV. It's playing some spot for an exercise machine. The kind of thing any person at home at 3 o'clock on a Friday obviously needs to get his or her life back on track.

She was hoping Bud wouldn't be here. She wants to be through with him without having to tell him so.

They first met at the student gym, where she worked odd hours after class. He stood out to her for the unhinged way he ran on the track—with an abandon like the world was about to collapse in fiery apocalypse and he was the only one who knew. Every few minutes, he stopped on the bleachers and panted like a dying dog. One day, she approached him as he was circling the track after the lights had gone out, his walk a reckless stumble, and asked him if he'd walk her to her car. “I'm afraid to be out alone at night,” she said, and it was true. She gave him her email and shook his hand goodbye.

Things were good at first. Being with him is like being wrapped in a security blanket: safe and comforting, if somewhat restrictive. She knows he'd never hurt her. She knows he'd never leave. And he lets her draw her lines, lines she's self-aware enough to know are sometimes arbitrary. You can't catch disease from a French kiss. You can't die from a groped breast. But he never even grumbles. When she tells him to jump, he asks how high and jumps no higher. Most men are not this way. Kevin, for instance, who after their first date was dumbfounded when she leaned away from his eager lips.

Kevin. Who every day seems more impatient. Whose house she just left. And so what? She's not allowed to eat lunch with someone else? That's all it is, so far. They're still waiting on Kevin's paperwork.

Inside, the news returns from commercial break. Concerned voices discuss the carnage they're seeing. She opens the door. "Out," she tells Sam. He doesn't move. She looks disapprovingly at the beer in his hand.

Bud stands up. "Look, I'm sorry. I know that was, I don't know. Childish. Embarrassing. Out of line."

"Cowardly," Sam says, still seated on the floor. "Unfair. Wreckless."

"Stop it, Sam," she says.

"Pusillanimous."

Bud steps toward her and puts his palms out like a politician on TV, begging forgiveness. "I'll go back tomorrow," he says. "I promise. First thing."

She steps past him and walks to the bedroom. She loosens her coat and sits on the edge of the bed, sadly unused for anything but sleep in some time. The sheets are bunched up and knotted together the way they left them this morning in their hurry to

make their appointment.

“I think you should leave,” she says.

“Baby,” he says, and a pained look crosses his face. It's the first time he's called her that, and he seems aware it doesn't fit.

Sam, from the other room, over voices of the newsmen now arguing over what can be done: “Oh, come on, give him another chance.”

Bud looks at her hopefully but she shakes her head.

“There's someone else,” she says.

“Yes,” Bud says, and she's surprised at this response. “I know. But does he wash your car? Does he do your laundry? Does he knock down your spiderwebs?”

Poor Bud. So mixed up. So sad.

“Those aren't the things I need a boyfriend for,” she says.

Sam isn't happy when Bud leaves. He lectures her, tells her she used him, the poor griefstricken son of a bitch. He's like a wounded animal out in the world now, wandering alone to be eaten or die of starvation. She watches the news ticker at the bottom of the TV screen while he talks, letting the words fill her mind like milk poured into an empty glass. She likes this faraway feeling at times, like the world is a simple place where things just happen, sometimes to you.

She met Kevin at an outdoor jazz show. After a few plastic cupfuls of cheap wine, he showed her a Youtube video of him wakeboarding in the UNLV parking lot that fall, the day the city flooded because the ground was too tough to absorb rain. The city stopped. People drowned. Cars were up to their engines. And there he was, grinning at

the camera, shirtless under a gray sky, drinking Bud Lite and skimming the water's surface. He's fearless. She envies this. She wants this fearlessness to one day envelop her, envelop them both, that they both disappear together in this unworried bliss, minds like untroubled water, acting and reacting without thought at all. Kevin never sees any good reason to abstain from his first impulse. She feels compelled to abstain from all impulses, even the impulse to abstain.

As children, she and Sam played a game. Their dad was a historical biographer, their mom an artist, and both needed house-wide silence for their work. So they child-proofed the house, removing anything sharp or poisonous or too high off the ground, and made a game for them: the kid who stayed still and quiet the longest—no smiles, no words, no nothing—got an extra scoop of ice cream for dessert. With time Vicki learned, only eight years old, to suppress all semblance of a smile or snicker. She sat with hands neatly folded, lips and eyes empty, for half hour chunks at a time. Her brother never made it. He'd become scared her face was broken, she was too still, she'd be stuck that way forever, motionless, and he'd start to scream and shake her.

The other kids wouldn't come to their house. It was too quiet, they said. It crept them out. Parents on opposite ends, hard at work at separate endeavors. Then Vicki realized when she got a little older that she could no longer go to the homes of the other children, either. They were far too loud, too chaotic, too full of sharp, dangerous things.

Until Kevin. He wants, she senses, to lead her out into this dangerous space. And she wants to let him, if she still can.

At many hard times in his life, Bud has wished he had the stomach to develop a

proper drinking habit. His father drank whiskey, right up to the day he started chemo. But whiskey's no good for Bud. Anything stronger than a daiquiri and his gut knots up something terrible. It's tough to mourn properly drinking daiquiris.

He left abruptly, without goodbye, as soon as she made it clear she wouldn't change her mind. So was she fucking this guy? he wanted to ask. This whole time? He didn't ask. In any case, surely she is now.

He finds a job parking cars at a casino, the precise kind of thing he always feared he'd end up doing. Good money, no degree required, the sort of thing he could so easily see himself easing into permanently. All the suave sons of bitches handing him bills with discreet handshakes, him saying *Thank you sir have a safe trip home*.

Flush with valet cash, he moves to an apartment on the Strip. Neon lights blink through the blinds at night. Alone on New Year's, he calls in sick and watches the fireworks from his window. The city buzzes incessantly. Car honks and low flying planes. The abrasive boom of packed gunpowder. Siren after siren. One night he watches outside as an ambulance speeds to a stop. He sees on the news a man has wandered fatally into the street and into the path of a bus filled with horrified tourists. His heart trembles. He wants to call Vicki but doesn't. Sometimes, he plays out small fantasies in his head, various ways of winning her back.

The nights get longer, and colder, then they start to thaw out. Soon, it's early February. Bud rents *Dark Knight Rises* on DVD, a movie he couldn't see in theaters because his mom was afraid he, too, would be gunned down like the poor people in Colorado. Dad had died a month prior. He'd promised he wouldn't go, even when it came to the dollar theater.

A cartoon heart on Facebook tells him she's begun a relationship with a man named Kevin. He can't stomach whiskey, so he starts to smoke. It makes him feel closer to his father. Sometimes he has conversations with the dead man, asking him for advice, scolding him for his shortcomings. Then one day he picks up his phone and it's Sam. He fumbles for a bent cigarette sticking out of the pack on the table, Marlboro Reds, the brand Dad smoked for forty years. He feels suddenly light-headed, like he stood up too fast, but he's lying on the mattress on his floor.

“Well hello, Sam,” he says. He levels his voice best he can. Smoke stings his eyes. He has the wild thought that this is it, for some reason Vicki's tasked Sam with telling Bud she wants him back. He hates this thought and he hates himself for having it.

Sam clears his throat. It's clear Sam's got something he wants to ask—he must need me to buy him beer, Bud thinks.

“I've got a couple questions,” Sam says. “I'm, well, I'm sort of writing a paper about you.”

Bud takes a deep drag of his cigarette. This is not one of the many scenarios he's envisioned for getting Vicki back, but maybe he can make it work.

It's Kevin's fault, she'll think later. She never wanted the thing. She knew it was bad news, deep down where your knotting heart knows the things your thoughts cover up. But Kevin convinced her. He made it seem so reasonable to have, like a dishwasher or central air.

“This is what will make you feel safe,” he says.

The truth is, she's afraid too, just like Bud was. In the year two-thousand-twelve,

who in their right mind wouldn't be? In the two years she's lived in Vegas, countless horrors have occurred. A man in the back of a taxi cab shot a man in the next car, which sped into oncoming traffic, killing three. A seventy-year-old former doctor with a blackjack addiction was convicted of medical fraud, scamming people out of thousands by injecting their limbs and faces with placenta he called "stem cells." The SWAT team broke in the door of her best friend's neighbor in a drug raid, seizing several pounds of methamphetamine and shooting the kneecap of one man who ran. All this after an American citizen living overseas was labeled a terrorist threat and put to death without trial.

The times are full of fear.

Kevin's needy in all the right ways. He never lets her open a door or pick up a check. When they make love, he shuts his eyes and concentrates like a lounge singer crooning just the right note. He tells her he never feels afraid. "I make my own fate," he says. Her friends love him. Sam is the sole holdout, not sold on this man. "Bud Lite," he calls Kevin. Kevin thinks it a term of endearment.

He takes her to a show where they have thousands of the things, all sizes stacked high. She's still not convinced she wants one, but she decides to humor him, to go and at least pretend to be interested. Then she gets three feet in the door and sees them surrounding her, bearded men with tattoos and tanktops brandishing them every which way, and she hyperventilates. She runs to the car and breathes in and out of a paper sack.

He comes out and calmly shows her what he bought her. The white price tag is still hanging from a piece of twine tied to the trigger. There was no waiting period; there's a loophole for these shows. She feels confused and queasy and furious, until he places it

in her hands. Then she turns calm. It's heavier than she thought, like a jagged piece of brick. But cold and smooth, like a pebble resting in a riverbed. A bundle of conflicts. Sleek and shiny and new, and at the same time, very ancient—the power of thunder and fire, roiling in the palm of her hand. New ways to mix ores older than humankind. This is all she needed, she sees. All she needed to convince her. The sheer perfect feel of the thing in her hand.

She tries to put it under her pillow and Kevin tells her she's seen too many movies. “You'll blow your jaw off,” he says. But if not under the pillow, where? She runs scenes in her head. Someone comes in the front door while you're dozing in front of late night TV, you want it under a couch cushion. Not three steps in, they hit the floor. But you're in bed, fast asleep, the living room does you no good. You want it close enough you can check it before you hit the lights at night, stare it down long and hard. But the nightstand's too predictable. A would-be thief sees you reach for the nightstand, you're a goner.

She finally fits it in the space between the headboard and the wall, a little ledge next to where the frame screws into the headboard. Someone nears, she takes it out and blam.

The things she likes most are his hazel eyes, his faith in the black and white nature of the universe, and his belief in the sort of simple solutions she abandoned long ago. The thing she likes least is that something inside her doesn't love him and she knows it never will.

“So tell me the worst part,” Sam tells Bud. They're in Sam's dorm room, sitting

beneath a lofted bed, and the kid has confessed he's bombing his classes. Bad. Danger-of-expulsion-bad. But Bud can't believe it; his face shaved clean, his hair parted neat with a crispy layer of hair gel, Sam looks like he was born for schoolbooks. When Bud asks how the hell he managed to wreck things so thoroughly in only the month and a half since break, Sam says his Psych teachers have it in for him. He explains he doesn't need to go to class to learn the material, but they don't see it that way. So he told them he's been hard at work on an extracurricular activity, a paper to synthesize all he's learned. Now he needs to produce it.

“You know this will never work,” Bud says. “They're only humoring you.”

Sam waves his hand impatiently, like this concern is a pesky insect he's shooing away. “Leave the speculation to the experts,” he says. “Now tell. What was the worst part, if you had to pick?”

Bud lights a cigarette with a match from the book on the table. The kid was kind enough to set these out and crack a window, even though it could land him a hefty fine. He starts to tell Sam about his dad. By the time he made his meandering way to the doctor, he was in stage four. It started in the colon, but it was in the liver where it finally got him, tumors ballooning his abdomen to twice it's normal size. He was like a woman eight months pregnant, but with cancer. His hair fell out. His skin turned yellow. His eyes at the end turned the color of milk, and he babbled incoherently once the toxins his liver was meant to filter out had entered his brain. Still, he had the stubborn optimism, in a moment of lucidity, to tell his son that life was ultimately fair and he was lucky for the fifty-five good years he'd had.

“The worst part is, he was right,” Bud says. “Watch the pill ads. Head pills. Heart

pills. Stomach pills. Dick pills. Death's round every corner. And here we are like witch doctors, drumming and dancing and burning sage.”

Sam puts down his pencil. He pulls absently at his lip. “I don't watch TV,” he says.

Bud nods thoughtfully. He likes the simplicity of this response. He asks if he can have a glass of water, and Sam runs to fetch one from the first floor hydration station.

Bud goes to the desk. He rummages through some scraps of paper. He checks the tiny bulletin board, covered with pizza delivery options. Nothing of use. Then he cracks the laptop and goes to Facebook. There's an event invite, sent by one Kevin Bigby, with a home address listed. He takes a blurry but legible snapshot of this with his phone, closes the window, and shuts the lid just as Sam opens the door.

He smiles and thanks him for the glass of water. “You're supposed to drink six to eight a day, you know, ” he says.

She feels safe with Kevin and their child, the gun. She moves more and more things to his house. Her small apartment begins to feel like a storage locker, a place she keeps a bunch of stuff she used to use. She even moves the gun to Kevin's.

And then: little brother happens.

Sam's roommate lets Vicki and Kevin into the dorm, where he leaves them there to surprise him. Kevin's told her that her brother's flunking class, a fact he confessed but made Kevin swear not to tell. On the walls are all manner of pictures and scraps of paper with thumbtacks poked through—random quotes, observations, or psychobabble written in faint pencil. “He who fights with monsters must be careful,” one says. “Mint chocolate

[sic] chip ice cream—positive reinforcement?” says another.

He's so young, she thinks, sitting here. When he's stripped of these surroundings, it's easy to forget.

Sam comes home at half past six. She can tell he's shocked to see her; he has that embarrassed, nervous strain in his voice like when she'd knock on the bathroom door when he was going through puberty, often just to mess with him. *I'm in here! Who is it! I'll be out in a second!*

“Vicki! Kevin? Oh—hold on.” He starts stacking the papers on his desk and pulls down a couple scraps from the wall. He motions around him and apologizes. “Sorry for all this,” he says. “It's mostly Justin's.”

“Where were you?” Vicki asks. “In class?”

Sam sits down, shaking his head. “No. I didn't make it to class today.”

“I hear that's been happening a lot lately.”

He looks at Kevin, then back to Vicki. He purses his lips, the corners twitching, and nods. He sits down.

“I just don't know if it's for me,” he says. “College. This city isn't built for degrees. My friend Sherry, she dropped out and she makes five thousand a month now. She's a dancer. ”

“So what, you want to strip?” Vicki is already angrier than she planned to allow herself to be.

Sam pulls a pack of cigarettes from his plaid shirt pocket and begins to pack them. She listens silently to the vaguely sexual slapping sound. “I didn't know you smoked,” she says quietly. He puts one in the corner of his mouth and strikes a match.

“I don't know anything about stripping,” he says. “But Bud makes good money parking cars.”

Her eyes burn with the stink of Sam's cigarette.

“Who's Bud?” Kevin asks.

What is it you want from me!? she wants to scream at her brother. Instead, she does what she always does. She lets her mind go quiet. She hears Sam explain Bud from far away, like a neighbor's television faintly audible through the thin wall as you lie awake trying to sleep. The ember at the end of his cigarette glows gently. “You only won because you got the papers first,” he says. “It was any man's game.”

“That's not true,” she says finally. “That part's not true.” And it isn't. But it appears not to matter, because Kevin is walking out the door.

After Kevin leaves, she listens to Sam's explanation of his paper and its requisite interviews with a lonely feeling of hopelessness puffing up, like the ashy underbelly of a fire log glowing red after a gust of wind. This is an all too familiar feeling, her sphere of control shrinking until it's so small it barely surrounds her own heart. *A fascinating subject, Sam says. His dad's death did a number. To be granted privileged access...*

They're bound to keep me on.

She says, “Bud's just a scared, lonely person like everyone else.”

“That's all anyone ever is to you.”

“You're a fool to think your teachers will want this paper. Go to class. Take notes. Kiss ass like the rest of us.”

“He's in pain, Vick. He needs someone. Hell, so do I.”

Sam's playing with the flint of his lighter now, rolling it beneath his thumb, watching the sparks fly. The sound makes her think of grinding teeth.

She tries real hard to trim the rough edge off her voice, to find that gentle tone of an older sister that used to be so natural. "Sam, you have people. You have me. You have Mom. You have Dad. Why would you tell Bud and Kevin about all this, and not us?"

He flicks the flame to life and stares down at it with narrowed eyes. "Because they asked," he says.

The horrible summer heat, the kind that makes him picture sand dunes and white animal skulls picked clean, moves in late March. Bud begins to take long walks. On April Fools' Day, he walks to the address he found on Facebook. Google Maps shows him the way. He stands on the sidewalk, staring.

It's on the outskirts of the city, away from the bustle of drunk tourists and the incessant hum of low-flying airplanes. A skinny two stories looming over a yard of jagged pebbles, off-white paint peeling. He watches intently for something that will tell him what this man means to her. What she means to him.

Hell, he thinks, what does she mean to me? There were others before and since. Her face is blurred in his mind, a smudge of lipstick and soft skin. He remembers little else: the feel of her hand in his, the corkscrew twist in his abdomen of finding his suspicions true. The days drag on. Puff, puff, ash, repeat. In Vegas, you can smoke anywhere but a hospital.

He meets women in bars, clubs, online. Once he drives with friends to the brothel in Pahrump and almost goes through with it. He's getting better at this, preparing his face

to meet these faces. He always wears a rubber. Amazing the amount of feeling a thin layer like this can mitigate. When he gratifies himself, he thinks of being with these new women but in Vicki's bed. Sometimes she's watching, horrified and possibly aroused.

He walks all the time. He runs all the time. At night, like a crazy person, through the back alleys bordering LVB. He's robbed once at knifepoint and is barely fazed. He knows his end will not come from the outside.

This is why Vicki sticks with him, why he still swears sometimes to smell her on his clothes no matter how many times he washes them. He somehow knows he's sick. She knew it, too. The thought of the clinic passes with a skipped heartbeat, a shortness of breath. Puff puff. Is this what a heart murmur feels like? He googles symptoms. No, but it could be any number of other menaces. Some more sinister.

But if he can win her, he reasons, he's not really sick. This was always the thing with her. If she let him be with her, it meant he was going to be all right.

Thursday, April sixth, twenty thirteen. He wakes up at midnight with the urge to walk. Usually his legs send him in spirals, a widening path over the city. This time, he walks in a straight line. He wants to see Kevin's house at night, to see if her car's parked in the driveway.

Kevin doesn't even know about him, he realizes. This seems to be the gravest injustice. He walks to the door. He knocks. He waits. Droplets of sweat gather at his temples. He smiles. Vicki's car *is* here. At least she'll have some explaining to do. He knocks again, louder. It's late, well after midnight now. He's not going to hit him. He's just going to smile and shake his hand, say "I need a word or two with Vicki. Doesn't concern you."

But then Sam answers the door. He's sleepy, rubbing his eyes. Peering out through the sliver of light, over the chain stretched between the door and the jamb. A skipped heartbeat. A shortness of breath. This is *wrong*. His hand presses with rising pressure on the resistant door.

She only hears Sam's half. They're in bed upstairs, dozing postcoitally. Sam is, or was, on the downstairs couch. He hates the dorm, sleeps most nights here now. Her eyes open slightly when she thinks she hears a knock, but she imagines she imagined it, barely audible over Kevin's snores. They've made up, sort of. Her and Kevin. Her and Sam. Nothing's resolved, exactly, but at least no one's talking about it anymore. Her eyes flutter closed. And then, the squeak of the cracked door. Sam speaks in a low voice.

Listen, you can't be here.

Traitor? I'm here for the couch.

No, absolutely not. Hey. Let it go. I'll see you soon.

Hey! Cut it out. Cut it OUT.

Kevin's snores stop. *Stay here*, he says, and throws the covers off before she can say anything. She nods. It's not until he grabs the gun, *her* gun, from the nightstand that she tries to say something, but her throat won't open. She's hardly there. She's watching herself watch the world. They fell asleep to the glow of the TV, and the news ticker partly covered with the green letters M-U-T-E scrolls at the bottom. He takes off out of the bedroom and down the stairs.

She puts on her robe and runs after him. Fear has taken her voice, left her powerless to make a sound. She stands at the bottom of the stairs on the carpet in her bare

feet, toes curling anxiously against the white carpet. Her heart's thumping. She hears a familiar voice, and it takes her a moment to place it as Bud's.

“Let me in,” he's saying. “Let me see her. I only want to see her.”

“Get back, Sam,” Kevin says.

There's the slam of weight against the door, and the creak of wood starting to give. He's trying to break the door, Vicki thinks. What does he think he's going to do?

“Get back,” Kevin says again. And this time he raises the gun.

Sam's eyes grow real wide. “No, we know him,” he says.

Bud, apparently still oblivious, slams against the door once more and the bolt holding the brass chain flies off the wall. The door opens and there he stands, suddenly terrified by the barrel pointing his way. He holds up his hands.

Sam, the only one who seems able to move, slaps the gun in Kevin's hand. The barrel pivots down. There's a bang and a flash, and the smell of gun powder that reminds her vaguely of fireworks at her summer house as a child. Still unable to speak for fear, she starts to run towards Sam when he lets out a strangled shout and falls to the floor.

* * *

It's three weeks later, and this time Bud doesn't walk. Instead, he sits in silence. He doesn't like to walk now, nor to run. Not since Sam's on crutches. Sam says this is a stupid gesture. He says, “You want to run, run. I'll be fine in no time.” The kid's got spirit. He smiled wide when Bud brought him his PSYCH notebook at the hospital, like this was all some sort of vacation. “They'll be *sure* not to flunk me now,” he said, and

started to write. Bringing the notebook was the least Bud could do for Sam.

At Planned Parenthood, Vicki lets him take her hand. It lies limp in his. They both stare straight ahead. The room buzzes around them. People are staring at the suspended screens, shocked. Delivering diatribes. Saying hail marys and various curses.

It goes without saying, he wants to say, that he didn't want it to be this way. He mulls over these words in his mind. Her hand is cold. Her eyes are tired.

Kevin decided to leave when she blamed him and not Bud. Who knows what would have happened otherwise. But Bud's happy, or at least trying to be. He brings her hand to his lips and presses them against her little finger.

The motion of the clinic's ceased. Nurses are staring at the TV rather than calling names. Bud tries to ignore his pounding heart. He asks Vicki what all he'll be tested for. She made the appointment. She shakes her head, and rattles off various afflictions. "All the biggies," she says.

They both stare straight ahead.

"What the world," someone says.

"My God," says another. "What is wrong with people."

He braves a look. On the screen, still photos of runners missing limbs. News tickers, no identified suspects. Death tolls ranging two to twelve. Hundreds injured. Police scrambling. Boston Marathon Bombing, the letters flash.

Bud would love to walk but can't seem to move. His legs are weighed down. Instead, he looks down at his lap and squeezes Vicki's hand. He waits for her to squeeze back. He makes a silent vow not to look up anymore. There's no need. No use running. No use moving at all. He listens to the blood thump in his ears, counting the beats, and

shuts his eyes.

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Awards and Honors

Summer Session Scholarship, *UNLV*, 2012
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Teaching Experience

English Teacher	March 2013-Present
Bridge Linguathec and Private Classes	Santiago, Chile
Teach business and social English to children and adult ELLs of all levels. Create lesson plans for all classes and conduct evaluations to determine the language level of each private student. Responsible for administering and grading all tests, quizzes and presentations.	

Reading Instructor	May 2012 – Aug 2012
Institute of Reading Development	Las Vegas, NV
Provided summer reading instruction to students in eight different age groups, ranging from four-year-olds to adults. Age-specific instruction included phonics skills, letter recognition, comprehension support, long-word-decoding, note-taking, and speed-reading.	

Graduate Assistant	Aug 2010 – Dec 2012
University of Nevada, Las Vegas	Las Vegas, NV
Courses taught: English Composition I, English Composition II, Business Writing	
Responsibilities included all lecturing and grading, as well as designing lesson plans, reading	

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Assisted students with their writing in one-on-one sessions, editing work for grammar, organization, formatting errors, and logical inconsistencies.

Publications

“Consider It Saved,” *Cutthroat*, forthcoming

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