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HELLBENT ON HEAVEN

By

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Professional Paper

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

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A collection of stories that follows a family contending with their daughter's mental illness and substance abuse.

Index

Somewhere Near LA	1
Teach Me Something	17
Detention	30
Guard	40
Darby	50

Somewhere Near LA

When we pull up outside the hotel I want to go swimming but my dad says no, we are going to go find something to eat because Rebecca is hungry. I don't complain about that because I'm used to it. She's always hungry or something and we always do what she wants us to do, even though she's older. I'm just saying, I was sitting on the sunny side the whole way and swimming would be perfect right now. But I don't say it.

My dad told me that we were going on this trip to look at schools for Rebecca. At first I thought he meant colleges but he said that she might move to Southern California for her senior year, which really doesn't make sense so I don't think she will.

We park forever from the door like always. When we used to visit my grandparents in L.A. my dad would let Rebecca out by the door of the hotel and she would bring one of those trollies to the car. We would load it up and she'd let me sit on top of the suitcases and she'd run across the parking lot with me clinging to the gold bars and laughing hysterically.

I get out but Rebecca's just sitting there with her sneakers pressed to the back of mom's seat. She jerks the door shut. Then she flicks the door handle and swings it open again, then snaps it shut, then opens it again. When my mom reaches to pat her shoulder she says, "Back off, I'm not a fucking dog," so we all stand there like idiots watching her.

It would be better if my brother were here. But Sam is 22 and he's at a wedding. If you're 22 or if you're my sister you can do whatever you want. A family pulls up across the aisle from us and starts getting out of their car. One of the boys looks my age or maybe 7th grade with red hair and green eyes and Rebecca is slamming the door and this boy is like gorgeous and he's just looking at us and I want to die.

I take the suitcases and my dad follows, leaving my mom watching Rebecca.

The suitcase gets caught in my backpack and clips my ankle, right on the bone. “You might as well have parked at home,” I say. “You’re like blind to parking spots. I mean, are you elderly?”

“Let me take Rebecca’s suitcase,” my dad says, but he’s already carrying too much. My parents sound so sad all the time now.

“It’s ok,” I say. “I’m just kidding.”

When we get to the front desk the boy is there with his family. He looks at me over his shoulder and smiles half way, like he’s happy I’m here but not surprised, so I try to make the same face back.

I didn’t want to come here because I have a science test on Monday and Mr. Roberts is a really hard teacher and now that I’m in middle school my grades are going to count for getting into high school but in the elevator my dad promises a midnight swim so I guess this trip is ok.

After I go put Rebecca’s suitcase in my mom’s room I see the boy in the hall. “Hi,” he says, and walks over. “I’m Dylan.” Then he looks down the hall and adds, “vending machine.”

“Putting my sister’s suitcase away,” I say, praying she doesn’t walk out of the elevator. Maybe he didn’t notice her in the car earlier.

“You’re lucky. You have a sister. I’m just here with my parents. Excruciating boredom.”

“Totally,” I say, but what I’m thinking is that I’d love to go on a vacation with just my parents for once and we could do everything I wanted to do, like the pool or hamburgers and fries dipped in milkshakes, which is vacation-only food but I never get it because

Rebecca is a vegan, and they'd watch movies with me and not be stressed and we wouldn't fight about anything.

“Hey, my parents are making me go to Point Doom Beach or something tomorrow. Maybe I'll see you there?”

“Ok,” I say.

He goes back into his room which is 208 and I notice he doesn't stop at the vending machine.

I jump on the bed and pull out my iPhone to text my best friend Katie. Rebecca got the phone for me for Hanukah last year even though my parents said I couldn't have one even after I made a power point explaining why it's pretty much necessary. That was when she worked at the sports store.

This year she didn't get us stuff for Hanukah. She wrote us each eight letters with one thing she really liked about us for each of the days. I got smart, funny, genuine, stubborn in a good way, ridiculously good looking (that's what it actually said), imaginative, good at science, and her favorite person in the world.

My dad comes in after a while and sits on the bed.

“Rachel,” he says. Yep. My parents named us Rebecca and Rachel. My sister's best friend when she was my age used to say “I need some R and R” whenever she wanted to come hang out.

“Do you know why we're here?”

“We're looking at schools and spending time as a family,” I say, but I feel like he's about to spring something on me.

“Yes, honey,” he says quickly. “But we aren’t sure what our plan is for--I mean Rebecca might be switching schools and everything.”

“I don’t think so,” I say. “Why would she want to switch for her last year?”

“OK,” my dad says. “But she might. So I think it would be good for us all to spend some time together and just relax, OK? Before all of these transitions.”

“OK,” I say. I open my bag and pull out my notebook and start working on my science homework.

Rebecca walks in right away and sits on her knees on the bed next to me.

“Oh my God, did you see that boy in the parking lot?”

“The cute redhead?” Thank God she saw him because I was going to pretty much die if no one knew how unrealistically gorgeous he is.

“His name’s Dylan and he’s in 208 and he’s going to Doomed Beach tomorrow and he wants me to come too so you have to help me get mom and dad to take us there. Should I go ask when he’s going?”

Rebecca grins at me. “No way. Wait for him to tell you.”

“But what if he doesn’t?”

Rebecca messes up my hair. “Are you kidding? He will.”

She picks at a torn-loose thread on the knee of her jeans.

“Rae,” she says, kind of quiet. “Did dad talk to you about whether they’re leaving me here?”

“No,” I say.

“They hate me,” she says.

“No they don’t.”

“They do and they hate Cole and that’s why they’re doing this,” she says. Cole is her stupid boyfriend. I don’t think they hate Cole but once my mom told my dad that he smelled like dope and when I asked she said nothing never mind that Cole is troubled which I know means something else and when I asked Rebecca what dope is she said it’s what old people call weed. Cole doesn’t have any parents.

“I have to talk to him,” Rebecca says, “but they stole my phone. Listen, you have to give him this if I don’t come back with you.” Rebecca hands me an envelope. It’s stuffed with letters.

“You’re being dramatic. You’re coming home with us,” I say, but she looks really intense so I put them in my purse and go back to my homework.

When she tries to keep talking to me I ask if she can just let me finish and she gets all pissed.

“Fuck your homework, Rae, you sound like you drank the capitalist Kool Aid. Mr. Roberts is evil anyway and always creeping around our block.” I see Mr. Roberts sometimes, too, drinking coffee out of his peace coffee mug in his messed-up station wagon with coexist stickers. “He thinks I’m dangerous, that’s what he told mom and dad when I was in middle school. She’s a *danger*. Now he drives around just *watching*.”

“What the heck are you even talking about?”

“All you care about is getting As but what are you going to do with all those As? You just get into high school and then they tell you what to think and what to want and you get more As and you get into college and more As and then a job if you’re lucky and you know what job you get? A job telling other people what to think and what to want. It’s meaningless.”

I just lose it. School is meaningful and my grades are meaningful and I'm going to be a doctor and that's meaningful and she just talks, it's all she does, and what's meaningful about that? I start shouting, "Shut up shut up shut up," over and over, and my eyes are closed so when she grabs my shoulders and starts shaking me saying "be your own person, Rae," and it totally freaks me out.

My parents both appear, like, instantly, yelling, "Girls, stop it!" and Rebecca lets go of me.

My dad looks like he's going to yell at her so I can get my homework done but he doesn't, he says to me, "You have to be kinder to your sister right now. She's having a tough time and you have to help us out."

Rebecca doesn't want anything on the menu even though she picked the restaurant. She makes me switch seats with her so she can be in the corner. My mom orders plain pasta even though she doesn't want it because it's vegan and she thinks Rebecca will eat some of it. My dad keeps offering to share his salad with Rebecca. I order a pizza and when my salad comes, I eat every bite of it. It's good, too. Rebecca touches her temples.

Once, she didn't talk for four days and later she said she couldn't. She said she couldn't explain it, she just couldn't talk. After that she started seeing doctors. It could be a brain tumor. I looked it up and she has all of the symptoms of a brain tumor.

My mom suggests we get to-go boxes, but I wait for my pizza to come and then I pick up the first piece and start eating.

"Mr. Roberts showed us a brain," I say. "It was colored so you could see all the parts, all the synapses connecting when the person thought, like a translucent purple jellyfish."

My mom suggests we go home.

Rebecca doesn't turn her head, but she says, "Your daughter was telling you about brains." She sounds like she doesn't have enough air in her lungs. But she can talk. She's talking and she was only pretending before and she doesn't have a brain tumor, she just has us all acting like she does. We can't even have dinner without her ruining everything.

My dad stops putting his food in a box. I really don't want to talk about class anymore but they're looking at me.

"Honey, we can go if you need to," my mom says.

"Oh, fuck you," Rebecca says. "Let's go home. Let's fucking get in the car and go home right now."

"What were you saying before--about jellyfish?" my dad says. They weren't even sort of listening. And what does it matter. I don't want to talk about a stupid science class.

Somebody has to change the subject so I say, "Can we go to the beach tomorrow?" I don't want to make it sound as important as it is. "Doomed Beach or something. I heard it's cool."

When my dad shakes his head Rebecca kicks the table leg and screams, "If you don't want a daughter you shouldn't have had one." The whole table is quiet and the people at other tables are looking at us and then looking away.

"I'm sorry," she says. "That may not have been the best way to express my needs in this situation." She's been saying things like that ever since she started seeing this new doctor who's supposed to help her with her attitude.

I can't help it that I start laughing. And then Rebecca does and my mom does and my dad, too, and we're all laughing.

“Can we go now?” Rebecca asks but nothing’s even wrong with her. She doesn’t have a brain tumor or anything.

“I’m still eating,” I say and put the next piece of pizza in my mouth.

“Rachel,” my mom says. “Grow up.”

When we get back to the hotel, there’s a piece of paper under the door and I follow Rebecca into her room to read it.

“Pt. Doom Beach bright and way too early. Hope I see a girl with beautiful eyes and she actually tells me her name this time. --Dylan”

“We’re going,” she says. I really have the best big sister even though she’s a jerk sometimes I start worrying that my swimsuit’s not very cool but I know if Rebecca takes me she’ll make me look cool, like I meet boys at the beach all the time.

I ask Bec to French braid my hair because she always tries to teach me but I can never do it. She says to sit down on the floor but I’d rather sit on the bed.

“Al, Yogi, Roger?” she suggests. Al, Yogi, Roger is what we play instead of rock, paper, scissors. Roger is our black Lab and he sheds on everything and chases the cat. Yogi is the cat and she sleeps upside down and invents yoga poses and hunts the gerbil. The gerbil is Alexander the Great and he was our trial pet so we got him first and when Roger was a puppy Al bit him on the nose. He never got over it. Whenever he saw Al, Roger just went to a corner and shook. Anyway, we always play Al, Yogi, Roger, and Roger beats Yogi and Yogi beats Al and Al beats Roger. I put out two fists, which is supposed to look like a bone for Roger, and Rebecca puts her thumb and fingers together for little teeth, which means Al. He was a pretty violent gerbil. She sits on the bed and I sit on the floor between her feet. She pulls a piece of my hair back and I close my eyes and I can see her fingers in my head,

tucking the ropes of my hair under each other and grazing my scalp in that quick, neat way that seems like magic.

When my dad comes to get me for midnight swim I kind of wish Rebecca would come but she gets up to talk to mom so I don't push it.

It's an outdoor pool because it's always pretty warm in L.A. or wherever we are, but the night has cooled the air and we both hesitate at the edge of the pool. The fence is dotted with yellow lights but the water still looks black in the dark.

"Can a person turn bad?" I say.

"No. Sometimes something happens to someone that makes it hard for them to act like themselves. But they still are the same person," my dad says.

"What happened to Rebecca?"

"Well, it isn't something outside of her. It's in her head. Brains are very complex, and sometimes they get sick, just like the rest of your body can. But we are going to help her get better."

"Is it a brain tumor?"

"No. Where did you get that idea? No."

"Then why is she such a total idiot?"

"She's doing her best and we have to do our best to love her."

"I used to love her."

"Rachel," my dad says sharply. "You do love her."

But what I mean is, I used to love her and it didn't help.

My dad says, "There might be a place here that can help her better than we can. She might stay here for a little while."

"Like a school?"

“Sort of. But with doctors, too.”

“OK. Fine.”

“Would you miss her?”

“Maybe.”

“Rachel, it isn't her fault.”

“Then whose fault is it?”

“She's schizoaffective.”

I jump. My toes hit the water and then it rushes up around me. The cold knocks the wind out of me and goes straight to my center. In the dark under the water I imagine that each of my cells has been dyed a royal purple and that I can see the microscopic particles all living and breathing and splitting inside me but my lungs ache and I know that I'll have to come up again out of the water where all I can see is the row of lights glowing like blurred headlights on the fence.

“Does she know where you're leaving her?” I ask my dad in the elevator.

“No,” he says, not looking at me. “Not exactly.”

“You know she's not stupid,” I say.

“I know honey.”

“You guys are treating her like she's an idiot.”

My dad turns to me and he gets that look like he gets when he has to explain something to me that he's sorry he has to explain. “She's sick.”

“So treat her like she's sick,” I say, and the doors open and I step out.

In the morning at the continental breakfast Rebecca seems ok again. They're looking at the school today I guess and my parents are thinking about leaving me at the hotel when they go. Rebecca says fine if she can take me to the beach first. It's nice she remembered. My parents say, no, heck no, no way. I know Rebecca's not being very good lately but I think it's pretty mean.

I get an idea so I say, "dad, I left my science binder in the car," and he hands me the keys to go out and get it and keeps talking to Rebecca.

When I get back to the room my dad's reading, waiting for my mom to come back from Starbucks. I ask can Rebecca and I watch TV in the other room so we don't disturb him and he thinks for a second and then he says yes. When I get in the room with her I pull my dad's keys out of my pocket and her eyes go super big.

We peer out the door and the coast is clear and we sprint for the elevator and press the door close button a thousand times and it won't close fast enough and my dad's going to come out any second and it closes and we both start laughing madly. Sometimes when she's supposed to drive me to school Bec takes me on an adventure instead and even though I hate missing school it's always amazing, like the Exploratorium or the Japanese Tea Garden or the art museum if there's something cool there or a movie, and she lets me pick, even if it's R or if it's a movie she totally doesn't want to see at all.

We reach the car and jump in and pause for a second to just look at each other. I can't believe we pulled this off. For once we know something our parents don't and they can't tell us where to go or when or whether we can yell at each other. I'm looking at her and honestly what I'm thinking is that I'm the luckiest person in the world to be here with my sister and I don't even care what happens with the boy because when I'm with my sister I'm the kind of girl who meets boys all the time.

The first thing she says is, “Do you have the letters?” I don’t know what she’s talking about at first but then I remember the letters for Cole.

“Yeah, I have them.”

“Give them to me. I’ll give them to him myself.”

“He’s in LA?” I don’t know what the heck she’s talking about. I just want to go to the beach. And then we can go back to the hotel and decide what happens next. Because I know Rebecca’s mad but we can figure it out as a family.

She’s kind of driving fast and I’m trying to memorize the roads we’re going on in case we get lost and I’m thinking about my dad looking up from his book and how he trusted us and how he said yes we can go in the other room to watch TV. I say, “slow down,” but she doesn’t.

Her hands are shaking and I’m scared and I’m trying to think what hotel are we in what is our hotel called in case I have to tell a police officer later where are my parents, “Rebecca, can we please go back,” but she doesn’t slow down and I need to just grow up, just grow up, because I wanted to go, I want to be here with my sister.

But I’m not the mature one for once, I’m not, because I’m sick of this, I’m sick of excusing everything she does because she’s my sister, she’s my big sister and I tell her, “I hate you, I hate you, I hate you,” I’m sick of always doing what she wants when there’s a gorgeous boy waiting for me on a beach and she’s driving too fast now, it’s way too fast I know that and I don’t drive but I know it anyway and she says, “They’re trying to dump me somewhere, in some rehab, or I don’t know where, I don’t know where they’re trying to leave me, I just want to come home.”

Maybe she’s crying or maybe I am and we’re not leaving her here, we’re not, and if I have to then she can just grow up, too, and stop being so mean and then they’ll let her stay,

because it's not just her that's sick and doesn't she know that, doesn't she know the whole family is sick now, we're all sick and she won't just try, and we're going too fast and Rebecca is crying.

"Where are they taking me," she keeps saying, and I finally decide I'm going to do something and it's unbuckle and kneel on my seat and lean towards her and scream so loud that maybe it will break through her thick skull and she'll stop doing this like I asked and she'll actually listen to me, and what I scream is, "They're leaving you in a nuthouse idiot so stop the stupid car!"

She doesn't slow down and I'm so mad, I'm so mad at her I feel like I'm going to break my palms open with my fingernails, because she doesn't care, she doesn't care that I'm scared and I want her to slow down and now we're both going to die and I'll never see Dylan.

I open my window and the air makes a roaring noise that's how fast we're going and I reach into my purse which is on the floor and I pull out the envelope with her letters to Cole and I look right into her eyes and before she can lunge over and grab them I rip them open and throw them out. The letters stick for a moment to the door, I can see them in the mirror stuck to the car by the wind and I know I shouldn't have done it but it's too late and I want to reach out the window and pull them back into the car but I can't and it's too late and they rip away like when you dissolve something in a solution and it explodes and then vanishes.

All of a sudden I hit the dash with my shoulder and there's a screaming and it smells like something sweet and bitter at the same time like when there are roofers next door and the back of the car swings one way and then the other way and then it evens out and the car squeals and stops in front of some super nice house with a lemon tree out front and she

leaps out of the car and starts running down the street looking for the letters. Someone must have just been washing a car because the sidewalk is wet and some of the letters are stuck to the ground soaking up soap and water and I can see Rebecca on her knees in the side mirror, peeling them up one by one. I'm not grown up I'm just scared, like, really scared, and I can't look at my sister it's just too sad.

I think about being too mad to follow her but instead I get out of the car and walk right up to her thinking she's going to kill me, but when I reach her she looks up and I notice she hasn't brushed her hair and she looks like someone I don't know, squatting on the sidewalk with a limp, wet piece of paper. I want to love her. I want to love my sister but I'm so mad.

If I were who I was yesterday I would say I'm sorry but I don't and what I do instead is I hit her.

She doesn't kill me. She stands up and looks right at me. She looks at me like she just recognized me.

"Jesus," she says. "Are you ok?" I run through all my body parts, my limbs and head and even my shoulder, but nothing hurts.

"I'm ok," I say. She puts a hand on my shoulder, starts walking me back to the car.

"Are you sad about Dylan?" she says, and I shrug because who cares about Dylan, I just want to go home, I just want to go back to the hotel where my parents are, I just want Rebecca to stop being so weird and far away and then we can go to the beach, we can go anywhere, I don't care where we go.

"What about the letters?" I say.

"Come on," she says, "they're just letters."

"Ok," I say.

“We should call mom and dad,” she says, and I’m so grateful I can feel it in all my muscles and tendons and skin.

“Ok,” I say. The sun is strong by now and it feels like it’s seeping into me, warm and smooth. I hand Rebecca my phone and it rings about half a ring before I hear my mom on the other end crying. When she hangs up Rebecca’s teeth are chattering which is weird because it’s L.A. and about a million degrees.

Rebecca climbs onto the roof of the car so I do, too. She puts out a hand to help me up and I take it.

“I don’t mean to be such a bitch sometimes,” Rebecca says. “It’s just neurons misfiring and serotonin not going where it’s supposed to and stuff.”

“You’re leaving us, too,” I say. “How do you think we feel about that?”

She leans her face against my hair. It’s almost like she’s kissing me.

“I’m sorry,” she says, and I don’t think I’ve ever heard her say that, and I don’t remember how far we are from the hotel but I hope it’s far and I hope it takes a long time for our parents to get here.

“If you wanted to run away, why did you take me with you?”

“I just couldn’t leave you behind,” she says.

I’m the worst sister on earth.

“Mr. Roberts loves environmentalist stuff,” Rebecca says. “Bring in a newspaper article about global warming or logging or something and you’ll get an A for the semester, guaranteed.” Her shoulder is pressed to mine, our legs thumping against the car in unison.

“But don’t get too close to him.”

“Fat chance,” I say, laughing. Maybe everything’s going to be ok. Maybe my parents will let her come home with us.

“I’m serious. I think he’s how they got to mom and dad.”

“What?”

“I think Mr. Roberts helped them make mom and dad leave me at the place tomorrow. I think he helped set the whole thing up. So they could brainwash mom and dad into leaving me in that place and then they’d always know where I was. I think they’re leaving me at that place so they can put a chip in me and give me drugs to make me forget what I’ve seen, because I see things.”

All of a sudden I know what I did. I know what I did to my parents. And I know that she’s not Rebecca anymore and she doesn’t have anything and we’re leaving her behind and she can’t even tell her stupid boyfriend she’s going to miss him because I threw her letters out the window.

And now I know what my parents meant when they said grow up. They meant that I shouldn’t be mad but not being mad hurts like getting the wind knocked out of you and it isn’t fair.

“It’s going to be ok,” Rebecca says and she rubs my shoulder. I’ve never loved anyone this much and I try really hard to believe her.

I can feel the synapses firing, making a path through my brain, a map burnt into the cells. My sister is Rebecca. Rebecca fell into her head. And now we can’t find her.

Teach Me Something

The Tuesday before Thanksgiving, my boyfriend appears in the doorway and says he loves me but we aren't good for each other. I laugh. I mean, what the fuck do you say to that? He's looking down at me because I'm sitting on the floor, which is the best place to be when the spins start. "Yeah, right," I tell him. "And we're getting clean, too."

But he says, "maybe we should," and walks out.

*

He doesn't come back that night, which is just fucked. When I get in bed the sheets are cool and smooth as glass. I try to double my pillow up but my arms stumble over the mattress. When I look at them, they look like beach wood and I wonder whether they are still attached.

I wake when the windows are dark and the sheets are a rope snaking around my legs. I try to kick them off and they tighten. A drop of sweat crawls down my neck.

*

Cole comes back sometime in the morning while the light is still thin. Our sweat makes his cotton shirt stick to the skin. He says, "Bec, I'm ruining you."

"That's not what this is about."

He turns my wrist over in his hand. Touches the dark spots on the inside of my elbow where the vein blooms to a black mouth.

"You do it too," I say. I pull my arm back.

"But you're you."

We sleep.

*

When we wake, he's sitting by the bed, drawing me.

"Fucking creep." I throw a pillow at him.

"They were supposed to call last night," he says. "About the residency. They probably gave it to some fucktard modern sculptor making teepees out of excrement."

"I'm sorry, babe. They're idiots. But you have the painting job now, way better money than my coffee-slinging gig, and you'll apply for the next thing." I guess that's why he didn't come back last night. He's really good. He deserved it. He's the hardest working person I know, when it comes to art.

"What's the point? I don't want to make million dollar houses beige instead of off-white. How am I supposed to paint my own shit when I get home from that?" he says.

I wish he'd grow up. We all make compromises.

*

On the way to work I call my parents, because fuck this day. I was going to pull it together but I haven't been to school yet this month.

It's been a while since I've called. When I lived away from home before—half of junior year at this school for fuck-ups—they used to make us call home once a week. But then they pulled me out of there because they said I wasn't getting an education. And they found out that my roommate was there for heroin, which at the time I had never even seen. Living across the bay feels so close, like I'm always about to see them, but I never do. It's not like I don't miss them. But what could I talk to them about?

My mom picks up. I say, "I'm coming home for Thanksgiving. I think I need to."

"We'd love to have you," she says.

"No. I mean, I really need to come home for a while."

"Sure, honey. We haven't seen you in so long."

“Cole got the job with that painting company,” I say.

“Well, that’s nice,” she says, and doesn’t sound like she thinks it’s nice at all. “How are your classes?”

“It’s not going that well here.”

“I’m sure you’re doing great,” she says. “You always do.”

*

While I’m making a fucking latte at my fucking place of employment, Josh, who’s supposed to be steaming for me, says, “can you get me some, you know, yayo?” Who is he, fucking Andre Nickatina? He puts his hand on my back, his fingers moving at the waist of my jeans. It’s fucking degrading. Josh is a shift lead and always giving me meaningful reminders that he once said something nice about me to our boss, who “totally would have fired me on my third no-call-no-show,” but Josh *gets* it, Josh thinks I could *learn*.

“No.” Fuck him. He doesn’t know me. What if I were a narc or something?

“You know,” he says in a stage whisper, like we’re in second grade and he knows the password to the tree fort. “Yay.”

Jesus I’m having this conversation right now. I’m not going to cave. “I meant no, I can’t. Extra hot skinny vanilla latte.” One of our regulars, who always orders a tall nonfat cap, pushes her four-wide stroller out of the way and reaches for the drink. Before I can stop her, she burns her tongue and starts yelling. Why barter for dignity I don’t have? I turn to Josh and say, “Three-fifty for an eight ball I can do.”

*

Cole brings it when he comes to pick me up. BART’s going to stop running soon so he has my car. Josh only has twenties and we don’t give him the ten back.

“Two-hundred to rent,” I say.

“Can’t you ask your parents for rent?”

“I’m dropping out of school. I think that deal is off.”

He takes my hand.

“I don’t want to ask them. I just don’t.”

“Okay babe. We won’t.”

“We’re going to make it this time,” I say. “It’s not that bad. We’re done with the worst day.”

We walk next door to The Roundup. Probably the only dive bar until Berkeley—Lafayette to Walnut Creek has two Lulu Lemons, a Nordstrom, and three jewelry stores, no damn local. Which is why we love The Roundup. And they never check my ID. “Just a quick drink,” Cole says, “nothing crazy.”

I get a Jameson. Cole says, “Irish Lunchbox.” The bartender says, “I know.”

*

Cole gets a call and when he comes back inside, he picks me up and drops me on a barstool, starts kissing my shoulder and up my neck.

“I got it,” he says. “The de Young emerging artist residency. I can’t believe it.”

“I can.” I put my palms to his jaw, holding his head in my hands. “Holy shit, babe, I’m so proud of you.”

“Jesus I’m fucking terrified,” he says. “I have to work in front of the public, like talk to them and stuff while I draw or whatever.”

“You’re going to be amazing,” I say, but I feel like he’s broken some kind of contract, like we put our lives on pause and then when I wasn’t looking, he pressed play on his. I know it’s stupid.

“What about the painting job?” I say.

“They’ll understand. I get a stipend from the de Young, too, at the end of the month.”

“Cole. What are you going to do until then?”

“I have to do this babe.”

I know that he does but he owes me twenty-four hundred dollars. It’s not the money. It’s not that.

“Yeah. Yes. I’ll get more shifts for now. You’ll be amazing. Let’s celebrate.” I kiss him, his face blurring as I lean in.

*

It’s karaoke Wednesday, and Cole sings Dolly Parton, throws himself on his knees when he screams *I will always love you*.

He has a great voice and he’s beautiful there on the floor of this fucking bar, crawling towards me.

*

When our guy shows up we both pretend we didn’t know he would, that both of us were planning on avoiding that shit for maybe forever, even though when I texted him he sent back, *Cole already asked me to meet you guys*.

Cole goes out to smoke with him.

When he comes back in, Cole leads me to the bathroom. On the wall, the kids from the Peets across the way have written, *Starbucks serves grande cumbuckets with a shot of diarrhea*. They’re snobby about their coffee and sometimes I see them after the store has closed, lined up behind the bar swirling steamed milk into little porcelain cups. But actually I think in another life I’d be their friend.

In this life I unfold a piece of tinfoil from my purse and jam the barred window open, pick open the Saran Wrap and drop one little nugget onto the sheet, pop the cap off a hollowed Bic pen from my bag and Cole, the gentleman, lets me go first. I flick the lighter, watch the tar melt and slide with a concentration I've felt in no other part of my life, inhale, taste licorice, in this life I am in love, in this life it doesn't matter, Cole takes his turn, we'll stop again tomorrow, we have needles at home. The door moves against the lock and it doesn't matter, nothing outside matters, I push Cole against the wall and turn my face to his neck.

*

That night I watch him sleeping, his back looking marble in his white t-shirt, and when I hear myself think, *I have to get out*, I fit my body around his, inhale.

*

I have to open Thanksgiving morning because they hate me, but then I have four days off because they hate me. When I leave it's 3:40, still black in our room, and Cole is sleeping with one arm flung over his head, his knees in an L close to his chest like a child.

*

He's still asleep when I get back at 10:30. While I'm packing my bag I say, "come to Thanksgiving at my parents' tonight," but I don't look at him when I say it. For a minute I think he might say yes, that I might have to find a way to back out—would my parents actually turn him away?—but he just offers a short laugh, more like a hard exhale.

*

I am going to stay right for the next four days and then figure it out on Monday.

On BART, I realize I haven't eaten since Tuesday. I look at my jeans, loose around my thighs, my hipbones rising sharply. I used to have to try to lose weight. I pull off my sweatshirt at Glen Park station even though of course it's raining. Only a little.

My sister gets out of the car but my dad stays behind the wheel. She hugs me.

"Jesus, bones. You doing okay?"

"I missed you."

*

My dad follows my sister and me in. My mom is in the kitchen and I stand in the doorway, hoping they won't hug me. They do. My dad tells me to get changed. I reach back to touch my spine, trying to see if I can feel the vertebrae between my shoulder blades. My mom says, "everyone will be here in a few minutes and I could use help with the cake."

Their standard poodle Alyssa comes trotting into the kitchen and sits at my feet. I stroke her ear, her soft tight curls. They take her to the groomer every two months.

In my t-shirt, my pale arm shows a fork in my veins like roots being ripped from the earth, purpling, but I don't bother hiding it. They aren't looking.

*

I go downstairs to my old room. My parents put a TV in the closet and I have to roll it out of the way to pull out a blue and black dress. My sister shows up in the doorway.

"How do you survive here?" I ask her. "They can't even leave a TV out in the fucking TV room."

"I think I'll make it three more years of having to roll a TV two feet," Rae says. "As soon as I move out of the Museum, though, I'm gonna scuff my dorm wall and leave a dish in the sink."

"I think mom Lysoled the turkey."

“She says you wouldn’t help with dinner,” Rae says.

“Bullshit. I just got here. I need to change.”

“She says you’re in a mood,” Ray says.

“She’s in a mood.”

“Her dad is dying.”

Which is the first I’ve heard of that and I feel a little sick.

“He dropped his dentures in the toilet and made grandma use the neighbor’s restroom for a week. Wouldn’t pay a plumber. Wanted to save the fucking dentures,” Ray says.

“Doesn’t he have a bedpan now? What does grandma do with it?”

“I wish he’d just die already. Mom says he’s getting sorry about things. What a joke. Eleventh hour song and dance.”

The last time I saw my grandfather, he lingered at the edge of the room while we talked to my grandma, his skin gone soft and faintly sour. I was young still, I did what my mom and dad did: didn’t talk directly to him, except when I had to, to be polite to my grandma. When we left, he said, “What, no one hugs me good bye?” I turned back. His face was damp and stubbled and he shook me roughly when he let go. I felt guilty for my fear.

“I can’t imagine,” I say. “Having no one who loves you.”

“Cry me a river. He’s getting teary about chasing mom around the kitchen table with a dinner plate when she was nine and meanwhile grandma is carrying a trashcan full of his shit to the field.” Her jaw moves and I know she’s biting the inside of her cheek, something she does when she feels sorry for someone. She’s getting so old, and it’s strange to see this vestige of her childhood self in her teenage face.

“How’s mom?”

“It’s sad here,” she says. “With you gone and everything.”

“I didn’t tell mom I wouldn’t help. I mean, I’m gonna help. With the cake.”

“I know.”

*

My aunt and uncle and my cousin and his wife are in the living room, and some friends of my parents. One of the friends, a psychologist, is talking about a project she leads in Tanzania. “Oh, Rebecca,” she says when I come in. “How’s school?”

“Great. Cole has a painting job now. Union money.” I laugh but no one else does.

I can see that I’m just going to be a total asshole tonight if I don’t do something so I go back downstairs to call Jeremy, then offer to walk the dog.

Alyssa moves in a slow, graceful glide beside me, her shoulder just the right height for me to rest my hand on it, the swing of her back calming. It’s not like it’s that big of a deal.

Cole texts me a picture of him and Jack at the bar, each holding a package of Turkey Jerky. *Jealous*, I text back and he doesn’t respond.

I meet Jeremy around the corner, outside a house with a wrought iron gate and brick steps winding up a lawn. The second story of the house has a porch greenhouse, plants so twisted and blooming so ferociously they look as if they are feeding on one another, a bloodbath of choking ivy and lavender orchids. He says he doesn’t have glass, only coke, but Jeremy is a douchebag so I say I’m tasting it first.

I do a key standing in the street, under the windows of this seven million dollar house; Jeremy moves two nervous steps away. Alyssa pulls the leash and a dusting of Jeremy’s shit lands on my dress. “Fucking cunt,” I say and Jeremy grabs her collar, jerks her head so she drops to her haunches.

“Don’t touch her.”

“Just trying to help.”

I move between them, do another. The burn is insane.

“You buying or not?”

“This is meth,” I say. “And bleach.”

“It’s what I got.”

“Eighty,” I say. I end up giving him a hundred and going home.

*

“School is great,” I tell my uncle and pass the platter of sliced turkey. There’s a thin vein, blue against the white meat. My stomach turns.

“Really interesting,” I say. “But I don’t really know what I want to do right now. Sometimes I just feel stir crazy.”

“Study abroad?” my mom asks. “Berkeley has a wonderful program.”

“Sure,” I say. Excuse myself.

*

I pass my sister when I come out of the bathroom and she looks at me for an extra instant. I sniff. The pain is tearing open my sinuses.

I text Cole *I love you babe* but he doesn’t respond. I don’t know if I can go back to the dining room now but what else can I do. I’m twisting my tongue against my teeth and I suck my cheeks in between my molars to stop it. Metal taste of blood.

My parents are talking about when we went to Costa Rica the year I was ten. I remember being sick the whole time but my mom says, “Rebecca just loved it. If she applies now she can go her sophomore year.” Like I’m not right here.

“Honey,” she says, “would you like some more?” Looking over my untouched plate, holding out a bowl of green beans like some kind of 50s ad.

“They’re vegan,” she says. “They’re so good with Chevre, but I wanted you to have enough food.”

I put a green bean in my mouth. It snaps, sweet and fresh. After every chew I tell myself I’m going to swallow. The stalk gets tough and stringy between my molars. I check my watch. In twelve seconds I’ll swallow. In forty-two seconds. Maybe I don’t have a stomach anymore. Every once in a while I nod vaguely but I can’t hear what they’re saying over the chewing. At seven minutes, I panic, shove back my chair, and go back to the bathroom.

*

I spit into the sink and wash my mouth out. I don’t know what this is. This isn’t good. I feel myself starting to come down and I can’t fucking do that right now. The door rattles but I can’t make the words come out of my mouth so I don’t say I’m in here.

“Sorry.” My mother’s voice.

I pour a fat line onto the counter, then another. I’m shaking too hard to separate it nicely. I’m never going to do this again. When this is over I’ll never do this again, just let me get through this night, please. I roll up a dollar and do one line, sniffing loudly. Don’t care. If this doesn’t get into my brain I’m so fucked anyway. “You ok?” My mom calls. “Fine,” I say. It shoots through me. “Just give me a fucking minute, Jesus.”

I hear her walking away.

I do the other; sparks. Everything’s going to be fine. The mirror swims. I’ll withdraw, go back next semester. I think of how Cole loves it when I kiss his neck, says, “oh my God, are you trying to kill me?”

Blood shoots out of my nose, slashing the white bowl of the sink with crimson. I grab some toilet paper, drops of blood splashing after me, thin pink on the green tile, the white porcelain toilet. The first wad soaks through to a wet pebble. I pile more onto my face, hold my head back. I think for a moment that my entire nose has come off and I'm bleeding out. My fingers stick to flecks of paper with a film of blood.

When it slows, I flush the paper down and start cleaning the sink, seeing another spot, wiping it, realizing the last spot isn't gone yet. There's a faint spray on the mirror. I think I did ok. It looks normal. I notice a dark spot on the neckline of my dress. Not too bad. Not too noticeable.

*

I text Cole, *so fucked, can't leave the bathroom*. He calls right away.

"Hey beautiful. I'm gonna talk to you for a second and you just listen like the fugitive you are. You don't have to leave that bathroom. You could do a lot from a bathroom. You could shower and live on vanilla shampoo. One day you could run a private practice out of there. Welcome to my bathroom. I specialize in a agoraphobia." After a while I start breathing okay again. "I'm a no fucks giving kind of guy," he says, "but I'm so fucking thankful for you." We hang up.

*

I find my mom in the kitchen, everything buzzing, and she asks me to help with the cake. "It's your favorite," she says, and slices into the chocolate with a long knife.

I realize how hungry I am, somewhere.

"I'm a vegan," I say. "Can you even do one thing that's actually for me?"

"Why are you so horrible to me?" She says.

“I’m not ok,” I say. And I know how much I’ll regret this but right now I’m high, I’m up, I can see everything, my whole life split apart, me dying in that apartment with the blinds drawn, or me making it, a hospital bed or something, or something, somewhere I could sleep, someone else just doing this for me because I can’t.

“Please help me,” I say. Alyssa pushes her nose under my palm.

My mother puts down the knife. “I try so hard,” she says. “What do you want from me?”

I can see she’s not going to get it so I pick up her cake knife and I put the point of it right on the dot of a track mark, I know my veins, I know where my blood is, I know where to cut, and I tell her I’m going to fucking kill myself.

I notice then that the kitchen door is open and I can see through it to the dining room, to the table stacked with a palette of color, steam rising over the mashed potatoes and the green beans, and my little sister biting her cheek, staring right at me, the only one of them who doesn’t look away.

Detention

Alexandra Cohen

This essay is assigned by Mr. Howard, who has told me to write about The Biggest Problem of my generation, by which I think he meant that I should explore what is wrong with my peers and also with myself, which I imagine he thinks is: self-entitled, lazy, anti-authoritarian, reckless/ sinful/ immoral, pretentious or otherwise holding opinions he doesn't care for. Respectfully, fuck that.

Johnny Marin is The Biggest Problem of My Generation. Yours too, actually, as your generation is the Creator of Johnny Marin & etc. so don't think you can pin that on us.

Context: Johnny is a creep. Johnny could give creep tutorials. He lives in some SF State Frat House and he's studying some kind of business bullshit. He's a super-senior, which means a super asshole who can't even keep his shit together to graduate because he's too busy driving his car around and looking at himself in the mirror. Johnny went to my school and his little brother Ron (what kind of name is that???) For my generation, I mean, staying on topic) goes here so Johnny thinks it's appropriate to hang out with high schoolers like a Lecherous Old Psychopath.

Well, he's always inviting girls from my school to his parties, probably because girls from my school are young enough to practically worship at the Alter of John, and of course I never go to that crap but Anjali wanted to go one weekend even though, and I am emphasizing this, Anjali *does NOT hang out with that Sicko and is in fact WAY TOO FUCKING COOL TO EVER DO THAT.* Anjali, well, you'd have to meet her. If Anjali was going, I was going, who cares if it was some party for sick fucks.

Okay, I am going to rewind real quick: We played hooky that day which is why I am being Forced to write this Dumb Essay. We just wandered around all day and then that night we got into the pool by Ocean St. because we know a guy who works there and we swam in the last of the daylight slipping through the narrow windows. It was just us and she stood at the edge of the pool, glowing in the dim, lifting her shirt over her head, then shimmying out of her jeans. Every piece of her body appeared, sliced with silver light, skin blooming fresh and petal smooth where the denim fell away.

When I didn't follow she came back for me and took the waist of my sweatshirt, tugged it up. I lifted my arms, let her pull it over my head, her knuckles grazing my ribs. Suddenly I was embarrassed by the whole thing and raced her to the pool. Our hair was slicked back from our faces. Our bodies moved blindly under the water, drifting into and away from each other. I am not sure why this part of the story is so important, except it does Set Up the rest, which is that we decided to do a Dumb Thing and that was to go to that fucking party. I couldn't say no. Her hair hung between her shoulder blades, wings buried under the skin.

Anj said I should bring my boyfriend but here's the thing about my boyfriend: he's not really a Boy per-se and is in fact more of a Man and not the kind who would frequent some kind of lowlife underage clusterfuck. Another thing is he is also not really my boyfriend per-se and in fact Things were maybe not working out at that time and anyway it wasn't something I talked about really, for reasons you would understand if it weren't completely Confidential.

The Frat is actually one of those box houses out in the outer Sunset, blue trim around the windows and a blue door, the kind of place a new family should live. We climbed the stairs and someone opened the gate and I let some douchey Bro fill us each a solo cup

with butterbeer from a keg even though I am Straight-Edge, but I didn't want Anj to think I was a total tool because I told her I quit that DARE thing but that's only sort of true and I can tell you right now that alcohol is not good and if you'd seen what I've seen and if you'd met my sister you would touch that Poison N-E-V-E-R. So I thought I would just sip at it and not swallow, which was a great idea in theory but it meant that until I could find a good moment/ place to spit my mouth was full of butterbeer, which I thought was something you drank at Hogwarts but in fact is something you choke down if you want urine and cotton candy to have some kind of orgy in your mouth. We went out back and sat on the stairs at the edge of the porch and sipped our beers, and I tried to get Anjali to smoke another cigarette or whatever just to put off going into that crowd, and I refilled our cups a couple times (but actually just hers as—well, you get it).

Right when we walked in (wood floors; two overflowing trashcans; no furniture except the plastic table the keg was next to; three beer bottle pyramids; a very grind-heavy dance situation), Johnny came walking up with this guy and started talking to us and they kind of each chose one of us to dance with—one guy with me and Johnny with Anj—and honestly since I don't dance I figured that was what people did and I got up really close to the guy who talked to me and started dancing. Well, to be honest he smelled extremely was above average looks-wise.

I was watching Anjali dance with her long hair kind of whipping around her shoulders and Johnny looking with his Dead Eyes at her. But she seemed so comfortable there, like she was used to all of this and had been here a million times, and her body swung through these lazy S's and then snapped out, the look on her face so sweet like that, like she was carried not out of herself by the music but like farther in, farther into her body which was perfect and moving like she didn't know what she looked like, didn't know that she was

hypnotic, ethereal and fuckable in some kind of Paradox of the Universe, some Black Hole of Hotness sucking all of us in.

She was kind of nearby, and me and Ryan-Johnny were dancing way close, him very tall so that my face was at his chest which was *very* muscular, and me lying and saying I was, yes, a freshman here, and 18, then considering the fact that I was still, at that point, rather awkward and clearly knew not a damn thing about college parties, so then amending and saying I would be a freshman next year, because I realized maybe college-age was not quite believable, as I was in fact not yet old enough to drive even, and him saying, “yeah, that’s cool, you’ll be the prettiest girl here,” and me thinking, *God, does he really think that? These girls are so beautiful, and I’m just, I don’t know what but not that.*

Well, so, he kissed me, and was actually a very lovely kisser, though my whole body was just like revolting at this point, just drunk and dizzy and maybe shaking a little, and he said, “hey, let’s go somewhere quiet,” and I’ll remind you here that I was in fact heartbroken though I cannot go into the details of that. So I looked over at Anj and kind of pointed to Ryan-Johnny and then the door and I knew she would shake her head or come over but she gave me a thumbs up and I don’t know why I felt how I did like there was cold air rushing into my belly but I just did and I had to leave right away and why not leave with Ryan-Johnny as he obviously thought that was a good idea.

We did make-out in a stairwell and went upstairs after someone walked by but all of the rooms were locked so we went outside. We went a bit away, around the corner a bit, and he walked up to a car and tried the handle but it didn’t open so maybe he was drunk, I thought, because then he walked up and opened the back door of his car, which was a totally different car, and he got in and actually kind of pulled me in on top of him, half falling off the back seat. The first thing I said right away is, “my pants are NOT coming off in this car,”

to which he said, “Okay,” and pulled up my shirt. I really did NOT like this situation at this point but I don’t know if you’ve ever been in a Situation like this, but they are *very* hard to get out of. He maybe forgot what I said because he did start with my pants.

Well so really that’s not the point of the story because I went back to the party to find Anjali and she was sitting on the curb with another girl from our high school crying. The girl from our high school whose name I to-be-honest still do not know got up and said she’d *talk* to me and kind of moved us a little away from Anjali who looked so delicate on the street, her knees bent up towards her chest and her arms like a rope knotted around her legs.

I had absconded with some Idiot Boy and I felt a little sick.

The Girl said that Anjali said something about one of the guys putting something in a drink, that while using the upstairs bathroom—which was technically for boys—due to the Eternal Length of the Girls’ Line, she *overheard* Johnny talking about inviting high school girls for that purpose, that his friend was not actually a college student and was in reality a little older than a college student and went to pick up girls who were not entirely prepared to disagree with his plans, well I guess I should say to *assault* girls, and particularly to *pick out* girls who would be more easy to assault and who maybe no one would believe about it later, but I guess, you know, that they maybe were not talking about Ryan-Johnny, because Ryan-Johnny, I don’t think he was there to do that to someone, I think he was a relatively good guy, though I am fairly sick of thinking about him and his face which come to think of it is maybe more like, say, if the albeit very *attractive* serial killer from that show Dexter and Ryan gosling were mixed together, you know, very considerably clean-looking eyes, maybe his whole face a little *clean*, maybe like a statue or something, very well-shaped but I don’t know,

maybe a little like if you touched the skin it would be cold (though I can tell you that no, actually, his skin was *hot*, and eventually quite sweaty, and he no longer smelled good at all).

In any case I guess Anjali had decided to call the cops, as she asserted that they were Criminals, and also that I was MIA with one of them, but this attempt was thwarted by the fact that the frat was *very* irritated by this accusation as it was a bit of a Third Strike situation and there might have been some talk of no longer allowing parties to be held in the Frat House in Question or even disbanding it or whatever one does to get rid of a frat, such as Fumigating. I guess the story was that Anj wanted to call the cops but was told to, “Wait until she calmed down.” The Girl said, “But you’re *fine* though, right, I mean you seem fine,” and I said, “I guess what I really do not understand is why *you* are telling me this and seeming not to want my BEST FRIEND to tell me herself,” and The Girl looked at me in that way that girls can, that you-and-I-both-know look that means we are meant to judge someone and that if we don’t judge them we will no longer be included in the knowing and then we will be judged. In this case, it was you-and-I-both-know that “She’s *drunk*.” Anjali was, in fact, puking between her legs onto the street.

I went over and gathered up her hair and she has a lot of hair, thick and rich and soft and sweet smelling, and rubbed her back until she was done, and then moved her a bit up the hill from the vomit. She wiped her mouth and kept asking was I okay and I said, yeah, of course I was. Then I held her and let her put her head on my collarbone and didn’t even mind her puke breath because she was so sad, and I wasn’t there, and I left her and she was crying.

It was time for us to Get the Fuck Out of there so we started walking up to 19th, the cold air whipping around us and Anj’s hand warm in mine, me tugging every once in a while

to keep her straight and as we walked I thought she looked somewhat gorgeous really, like her tears had sunk into the skin, made it bright and ravaged.

We waited a while freezing at the bus stop both of our arms shoved into my sweatshirt between us and Anj sobered up a bit. As soon as a bus came up 19th we got on and dropped onto an empty pair of orange plastics seats, the sour smell of the dirty metal making me feel like I was falling back into my body. There was a man on the bus sitting up near the front and when we went by him he said, “What, no smiles? You’re two beautiful girls, what’s there to be sad about?” and his smile was floating on his face like his mouth wasn’t quite glued down, and I told him real quiet if he came any fucking closer I was going to slice his eyes out. He said, “Bitch,” but he stayed in his seat.

I wanted to cheer Anj up so I decided to tell her about this guy, who was in fact very good looking, and I told part of it, that we kissed and stuff and that holy shit, hilarious twist: the car he took me to WAS NOT HIS. What the fuck? I thought about leaving that part out as it was not a good reflection of the people I choose to kiss but I left it in because it was important for the next detail, which seemed to me very slightly more interesting than embarrassing.

So what happened was, first I mean, you know, in the car, just to fill you in, I felt a little sick probably because I was drunk, and then I wanted to leave but I don’t know, I asked before if you’ve ever been in such a Situation and I’m not sure if you have but they’re *tricky*, and so I really couldn’t leave. He was sort of jamming his fingers everywhere in the Least Pleasant way so at one point, I guess, there was some sort of a *tussle* and I maybe pushed him and said, “I’m stronger than I look,” and he said, “I’m stronger than you are,” and put his hands on my collarbones and held me down, which I did not like as you might imagine. He said of course that he was only kidding but also said, “What, you came all the

way out here with me to do nothing?” which I suppose is not what someone does, or not someone who knows what they are supposed to be doing. I did get in that God-Awful car, and I did not want to go through the whole who’s stronger sort of conversation again, so instead I closed my eyes and counted to ten over and over. At first he said quite a few very nice things to me in a very *needy* sort of way but then, as I really in fact did not know what I was doing, and also was not even looking at him, I guess that the logistics got a bit complicated, and the bruise burning like lit grass across my thigh sent a map through my nerves and then behind my closed eyes I could see an image of the pale flesh purpling, his hand print graffiti on my skin.

He was no longer saying nice things but was demanding to know why I was not *cooperating*, which even at the time I considered a very questionable choice of words.

Here is what I hate most when I think back on this day, here is what twists in my gut: I *apologized*. I apologized because I had gotten in his car—though of course what I did not know at the time was that it was not His Car—and I had let him take my pants off and now I wanted to be the kind of girl who could give him what he wanted, who could enjoy something like this, and I couldn’t, I just couldn’t, my body would not open, and I said I was sorry, and I said it again.

I will tell you, I assume if you are a woman that you know this but if you are a man, you should know that this is actually I would say an *excruciatingly* painful procedure, though all my friends say that it gets MUCH Better. So anyway my head was turned against the seat and I was thinking that this is it, this is sex, and I’m going to have to do this for the rest of my life.

I was counting to ten and I did that many times in a row and then there was a rap on the window and I could see the faces of two girls bending down to look in. Well honestly

that was kind of, I kind of thought, “Thank God,” because that was the end of that, but when we got out of the car (readjusting and zipping etc., so mortified, obviously) they were pretty pissed. I did tell Anjali this part, about the two girls. They said that it was their car and that if I was going to fucking hook up in their car, a stranger’s car, then they deserved a cut of my Prostitute’s Wages.

Of course I walked right past them like I could not care less because if there is anything worse than being called a slut it’s being called a slut and then crying about it. Ryan followed me but I told him I needed to find Anj and good-bye. He hugged me good night and leaned to kiss me after first saying, “I had a really good time with you,” and I went back towards the house where Anj was sitting on the curb.

Before I added the rather sensitive material about myself and this Hollywood Serial Killer, I showed this essay to Mr. Howard intending to find out whether perhaps I could be done with the whole business, though of course I did change Anj’s name, and he informed me that the writer of this essay is “NOT *mature* enough to be in school at all,” and also stated that “This *young woman* was *a mess*,” by which he meant Anjali, and to which I said, respectfully, “Fuck you, as you are allowed I’m sure on numerous occasions to drink maybe one or two too much and this does not result in your being raped or even having the fear of such a thing happening to you,” to which Mr. Howard replied, “Well, you were there, and you were smart,” –I had not yet added the parts about Ryan-Johnny, to be perfectly honest, as I did not think that they shed the most flattering light on myself—“and nothing bad happened to you.”

Well here is the thing about that. It is true because I did not get forced into anything, I chose what I was doing I guess maybe to prove something to Anjali or to hurt her, I don’t know why I had to hurt her it was stupid and I wasn’t thinking right, and I wish I hadn’t but

I did and it's not like that's going to mess me up like some girls get over it, I mean it's just sex and sure I feel a bit ill about it but I'm just saying that I was not Forced, as Anjali was, and that I was not the Victim of anything and that this story is not about Me and so I hope you can stay focused on what I am saying here.

Because people think that it's only assault if the girl is literally a sober virgin and the guy is some kind of obviously lecherous old creep whom you have shown no interest whatsoever. And Johnny Marin is, based on numerous unofficial surveys, *very* attractive. Well, I do not find him attractive at all and he assaulted my best friend. Here is the truth about the rest of the story and I'm not sure how this fits in but I'll tell it anyway.

Sitting with Anj on the bus, I thought of standing by the pool. Of the light hitting the curve of Anjali's breasts over the triangles of her bra. The way she reached for me, tugged my head free of my sweatshirt. The way it felt to see again, her face the only visible thing in the night. How young we were, how our silhouettes could have been the silhouettes of kids leaping into the dark. Our reflections in the black pool and how when we jumped in, we shattered them with our bodies and rose up from the water, how strange it is that we looked unchanged.

On the bus right then I wanted to kiss her. I wanted to kiss her but I couldn't because some boy had taken her body and now it was his, and now it was his.

Guard

Sarah Kahn

Through the thick glass of the door, I see Chris lean back in his chair and squint, trying to make me out. He motions “one minute,” goes back to typing something—he tells me that when he’s working the entrance, he mostly plays Sudoku and Tetris. I suppose not a lot of people come through here. I’d think it would get depressing, but he says he doesn’t mind working at a juvenile hall.

I place my things in a neat pile in one of the visitors’ locker: keys, picture ID, iPhone—you’d be proud, I’m texting now. I rub my hands with a baby wipe, slip it back into my purse. *Mom*, you’re probably thinking, and rolling your eyes. *It’s not contagious*. I don’t know what you think I’m afraid of, what you think it is I’m against.

Listen. I’m not perfect. I never said that.

Chris comes out and gives me a brief hug. He smells of warm cinnamon. We step through the metal detector and a surge of nerves ripples through me. Don’t say I’m being closed minded, Bec. You don’t know, with these kids. Where they come from. What they’ve done.

If you were here, you’d say, *Mom, I am these kids*. Well, you aren’t. You had more love in your first year than I had in my first 25.

It takes 48 hours before a person is missing. According to the police, I mean. You said you’d call four and a half weeks ago, Rebecca. I called your boss. I called your school. No one has heard from you. Nothing. Do you know what you’re doing to us? Do you think your father and I sleep?

Do you know what I woke up saying? I was thanking my mother for baptizing you. Your father and I thought it was so ridiculous then, finally out of the house and the kid with my mom, staying out just long enough for her to do it. I saw the Tupperware she brought the holy water in—the woman never flew a day in her life until you were born, got on a plane clutching a little cup of water blessed by her priest. I didn't understand why it was so important to her. I thought of God then as a monster they used to scare kids into being good. I'd grown out of all that, run off with a Jew and made my own life. I thought I had no use for God.

But I wanted you to have something. After you read from the Torah at your Bat Mitzvah, you explained to the temple that vengeance is a form of forgiveness, exacting an agony that is a resolution to sin, God's anger a thing that won't give up, let the lost stay lost.

We gave you religion, Bec. It doesn't matter it was your father's temple instead of my church. We gave you morals. We let you choose your own way. How could you go so far?

"I'm glad you're doing this. It's truly good for these kids," Chris says. It was Chris who invited me here in the first place. He stayed with me one day after a Sunday service. I was telling a friend what was going on with you, the trouble we were having, and she kept saying what a test it was for me, what a cross to bear--as if I were crying for myself. Chris came over, took my arm so quietly. He brought me inside and we prayed for you. He'll make a good husband, like your father. You know, I used to wish you'd date him? I know he's 31, Bec, but he's a good man, doesn't even drink. Nineteen, you won't listen to a word I say. A word anyone says. And he's so handsome. Now I see how silly that was.

"Your experience can really help these kids," he says. After I got serious about church again last year and first met Chris, I used to think maybe he wasn't so bright. But now I think he just says what he means and it's only strange to the rest of us.

Chris's green eyes focus on me. For a moment, I feel there is nowhere to look, nowhere to go, and that I'll never escape his gaze. Then he looks away and I'm sorry he has. We go through a heavy metal door and stand in a small room, waiting for another door to open.

"You've been through a lot and you've been there for your family. These kids need to see that, that someone could love them through anything."

"God loves them through anything," I tell him. "I'm just trying not to mess up the message."

I know what you're thinking, about being God's servant. Faithlessness makes faith look childish. But I've seen God work through people just like you've seen rain fall, and neither of us entirely understands it. If there isn't anything greater, then what is dragging you after that boy who would sell you for drugs, dragging you into that terrible darkness? What made my sweet girl become the snarling, screaming, clawing thing I found in your little sister's room a month and a half ago, your teeth clamped to a belt that sliced the skin of your forearm, claiming you'd die if you tried to get clean? If there is nothing greater, then what's going to drag you back out?

"We've been stretched thin," Chris says. "We're short staffed. Mac's been out with a broken back. A lot of the guards think we should be allowed weapons, Tasers at least. The law acts like these are kids but it was a man who threw Mac down the stairs. I'm not sure what I think. But it's not just for us. These kids beat on each other, too. They try to kill each other." I can't say I'm not horrified, but Bec, can't you hear a grain of truth in that? It's not safe. And who can tell a young man not to follow his rage, his need, to the end? I know what you said when you took that criminal psychology class. *In Juvy, the guards are guardians. These men raise them like inmates and they grow up to be inmates.* I can't say I didn't think of you when I

decided to come here. Thought that maybe you'd like my doing this. Would have liked my doing this.

"They're kids," I tell Chris, and it sounds so stupid.

"You're right," he says. "Love the sinner, hate the sin."

When the next door opens, I get that same sick feeling I always do, the few time I've passed through this door, knowing it's about to lock behind me. I reach my hand out and take Chris's. Is it so unreasonable to be terrified?

Father Michaels said God leads us to Him in many ways, and that all this has brought me back into the church. He says that I can't do more for you than pray now and that I should spend my time helping those I can reach.

Chris takes me upstairs and down a long hall lined by doors. We go into the last one on the left: a level below maximum, 15-18 year old boys. Another woman from our church meets with the girls and she'll be by later. They were worried I'd prefer talking with girls but I said, no, no, the boys sound much more straight-forward.

Inside, some of the kids are hanging off the back of the couch, some playing checkers at tables, two mopping in the kitchen, all of them in orange jumpsuits. They seem like men, thick-shouldered and deep-voiced, only something about them is off: the fuzzy, half-grown mustaches, the pimpled, dewy skin. A guard shuts off the little box TV and everybody moans. Maybe I shouldn't have come at all, maybe I could still somehow back out. Another guard sits on a chair raised up on a platform, looking down. I take a seat at the table.

The boys come then, dropping heavily onto the bolted-down stools, and I see that they are so young. I know some of them from the previous month, but some are new. I feel tiny and I ask God to help me be of service, to work through me. A petite boy I haven't seen

before slides onto the stool beside me, his long hair knotted into a bun high on the back of his head. “I’m Jasmine,” he says, his voice so lilting that at first I think he’s kidding. I want to set boundaries right away, not to let them get away with anything, with lying to me; I don’t want to be made a fool of.

“Is that the name your parents gave you?”

“It’s the name God gave me.” I feel shamed by this, though I can’t quite place how.

“You should see me on the outs,” Jasmine says. “I look good.”

He thinks he’ll get a rise out of me, maybe, so he takes a photograph out and puts it on the table (are they allowed photographs?). The image is of two young girls in a mirror, the taller holding the camera phone. A self photo. What do you call them. The taller girl is beautiful, her narrow waist bare under her cropped-short shirt, her hazel eyes bordered in smoky black strokes, striking against the darker shade of her skin, sequined jeans pressed tight to the pebbles of her hipbones. Remember how we fought in the store, getting you jeans for your first day of high school? Too low I told you. It’s degrading. The girl looks into the mirror, her face belying her age. Look at me, it says.

It’s him. It’s Jasmine. In the photo.

Bec, I know you’d say that this boy has as much right to call himself a woman as I do. It isn’t that. If that’s who he is—I don’t know, it’s for God to judge. But he’s here now and it doesn’t matter how he thinks things should be. I don’t understand why he can’t just make his own life easier, act more like the other boys. I shove the photograph back towards him before the others can see it. We all have to do what we can with what we’re given, what God gives us.

I don’t ask the other new boys their names; I open my Bible to a passage from Job. How many times have I read this, waiting for you to come home?

I hand the Bible to Jasmine to read and his fingers skim the page.

Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said,
Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if you have understanding.

Or who shut up the sea with doors, when it broke forth, as if it had issued out of the womb?

And said, Thus far shall you come, but no farther: and here shall your proud waves be stopped?

Have you commanded the morning since your days began; and caused the dawn to know its place

That it might take hold of the ends of the earth, that the wicked might be shaken out of it?

He purses his lips when he says the last line, shaking his hand and his hips on the stool, something suggestive, a joke that passes between the boys, past me. It surprises me how they laugh with him. What do they think of Jasmine? He must suffer so from these boys, must get beaten.

“What does this passage mean?” I ask. “How does God explain his punishment of Job?”

“Abuse of power,” the boy across from me says. He’s leaning back, low in his chair, still a kid’s performance of a gangster (but how far has he taken this performance before?).

“Police brutality.”

“You know this is voluntary,” I say. “If you don’t want to be here.”

“We get points,” the boy says. I look at him. He stands up from his stool, looming towards me. I don’t move back. “Points towards burritos, bitch,” he laughs and sits back down. I press one shaking hand still with the other. Then he drops to the floor, begins doing push-ups. I see the guard watching over us, counting—I don’t know whether the infraction was swearing or coming too close to me.

I hate myself for wishing the guard had a Taser. I don't trust Him to protect me, don't have the faith I'm trying to bring to these kids. I ask Him to relieve me of the bondage of self, to help me bear witness to His grace.

"We're all so quick to hate God for our suffering," I say, "but we don't understand how He works. We carry that hatred and it stops us from growing towards Him. Today I want us to write down a resentment we have against God. It can be big or small." I know I am rushing through this, but I don't know how to connect to them. How do you befriend all the street kids, Rebecca? They won't even look at me. I hand out paper and wait for a guard to come with pencils. I move around the table asking if they'd like help.

Some of the boys are laughing, drawing on one another's pages, but others are still writing. When they're done, I ask if anyone would like to share.

One boy says he will, reads a list so raw it's a poem, each stanza starting with "I'm sorry."

His voice shakes a little over the words. Just a child, so shut out from the love in this world. In his face I see a hunger for God I haven't seen in so long. The boys are quiet, not looking up, afraid to be weak.

"Thank you," I start, but Jasmine cuts me off.

"Forgive me, father," he mimics in the boy's voice. Now they all break free of the trance, falling so easily into cold laughter. The boy tries not to let hurt pass over his face, laughs with the others. Jasmine picks up his own paper and reads.

"I'm sorry for sucking his cock so well, he really seemed to like it at the time. I thought he knew who I was, he was rough like he'd be with a boy. I'm sorry I blamed god when he beat the shit out of me and I ran away from the group home and when I got home my dad still wouldn't let me back in." He turns to me. "I'm sorry for thinking you weren't,

god, because I guess you were there with me that whole time. Were you watching, god?" he says, slowing his words. "Did you cum, too?"

I don't look back for help from the guard. I tell him myself, and my voice sounds so cold and far away. "On the floor."

He lowers himself onto his knees, leans to the ground, pushes his lithe body up once, twice. The bones of his back show through his jumpsuit and his skinny arms are trembling to lift his body.

"That's enough," I say, "that's fine." But he keeps going, his breath raking with each strained push-up. I know what you'd say, Bec, how you'd see me now. I know I've messed up, messed this all up. I don't want her to hurt, beautiful Jasmine with her hair twisted so tight to the scalp. But if I knelt to hold her now, she would turn away.

When she stands and sits beside me again, I put a hand on her shoulder but the guard motions me away. Tears brim in my eyes. "You're so angry at Him," I say, "but God loves you."

"I don't need you to tell me that shit," she says. "I know."

I see now that I've been so wrong.

After the guard lets me out, I walk down the hall alone. Chris comes to let me back into the lobby.

"I'm useless," I tell him, "Jasmine was being awful, and I made her do push-ups."

"Sometimes they need to be told. These kids are here for a reason."

"I cried," I say, "I almost cried in front of them." We move through the second door and Chris comes out with me, opens my locker and takes out my things.

"They need you, your guidance," Chris says, and I try to imagine how he sees me as we step through the door out into the bright, fog-filtered light blanching the cement stairs.

“You’re so wise, what you say at Church. It’s brave to be emotional when you’re supposed to be held together. It’s so much easier pretending, you know?” I glance up at him and see that he is staring again. “You’re a beautiful woman.”

I want to crawl into his body and look down on myself. How can I say how I want to be swept away, how I want to be anywhere, anyone else? The ache of you gone, Rebecca, of you where, and where.

I thought you were doing better, that the fact that you were staying with us that weekend was a good sign. When you locked yourself in your sister’s room—the only door left with a lock—I kept thinking maybe it was something else. I don’t know what you remember about all that, the state you were in. Your father kicked the door. The syringe landed noiselessly on the carpet.

“That stuff stays out of my house.”

“I can’t stop.” They teach you in Al Anon that to cosign is to kill. Addicts are manipulators.

“I have nowhere to go,” you said. “Mommy. Please.”

I thought you’d be back in the morning, that we’d have time to fix things.

Maybe I didn’t. Maybe I couldn’t forgive you, in that moment. In your sister’s room. Your sister’s room. How could you.

Your father let you leave, but when the door shut he said, “We didn’t give her anything to prevent seizures.”

I said, “What the fuck was I supposed to do? What were you doing about it?” but he wouldn’t yell back. He just kept telling me it was going to be ok and I hated him.

Chris touches my hair, then pulls his hand back. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I know. You’d never.”

I reach for the collar of his shirt, my knuckles knocking the radio on his shoulder, and pull him toward me roughly. I kiss him softly once, then hard enough to hurt, my tongue pushing into his mouth. I want him to know that I'm not who he thinks I am, that I'm not sorry.

Do you hate me? Do you? Say something.

Darby

Sarah Kahn

As a rule, Mark wasn't around during camp hours because he was allergic to children. I don't know, maybe it was work he was allergic to work, but I liked to think better of him than that.

After the campers finally left, I found him up in the barn, standing behind Darby. She tossed her head at me, the ropes clanging as they swung. I figured eighty-grand was too much to spend on any one thing, but you should've seen her. Her dark coat was splotted with gleaming caramel on her flank and haunches, the faint stamp of health that seemed to seep up from an inner well of excellence. She had a hot head and sweet temper.

"Hey, sexy," I said, combing my fingers through her forelock.

Mark leaned around her to see me. "Hey, Alex."

Mark was *that guy*, arrogant in that entitled way that should have been base but somehow, confoundingly, made him even more charming and attractive. It was obscene.

I was staying in the guesthouse by the barn, which was really more of a converted garage, with the other working students. A bunch of us worked summer camps in exchange for free jumping lessons and an illegally small sum of cash, but it was Friday and I was the only one who'd shown up for work that morning. The rest of the girls were off killing brain cells and having horrible sex with idiot boys in their parents' Priuses. Mark lived in the main house. He was twenty-five and I was going to be sixteen that summer.

I was staying that weekend, as always. The bus ride was two hours, there was always some kind of drooling creep in the back, and I hated going home.

The other girls gave me a hard time for being Mark's favorite, said if I weren't such a virginal baby I would have already gotten laid by the hottest guy in the greater Bay Area. I told them to kick rocks, that I wasn't too much of a baby to ride all the horses they were scared of, and that I wasn't going to have some kind of twisted soap opera affair with a pedophile cowboy and end up weeping in therapy three years later. They were all starry eyed over him, which is why he hated them.

"Darb bucked Kelly off last night," Mark said. "You know her thing about the mounting block. I'm not saying I meant for it to happen, but I happened to be looking away at the time."

"Always the dick," I said.

"No, listen—I'm busting her out. Kelly's too scared to ride her now. I finally get to see what she can do."

We all drooled over Darby, but Kelly wouldn't let anyone but the grooms touch her. Even Mark she micromanaged, not wanting him to "push her." Kelly was one of the Catalogue Equestrians. She wore pale blouses and immaculate breeches and had an endless scroll of pictures of Darby she subjected everyone to, but in reality she was too terrified of the horse to ride her. She was one of the handful of unemployed middle-aged women who were Mark's bread and butter. Even when he didn't show up until the last twenty minutes and spent most of that talking about himself, Kelly paid for her lessons, laughed at his dumb jokes. It was hard to decide who was grosser.

"Maize took a crash course in dirt pie," I said. "I called the parents."

"Why didn't you come get me?"

"Couldn't find you," I said.

"Not your fault, little girl. Anyway, it's good for 'em."

Mark didn't do feelings. He was a silent type, like a statue, or a hat. But he always knew what I was feeling. I was grateful for that.

"What did you tell the parents?" he said.

"Party line: I'm eighteen, perfectly safe, she's such a good rider, etc., etc.," I said.

He looked at me for a minute, like he was searching for something. "You hardly pass for fifteen," he said.

"Shut it, old man."

"They card you at R movies," he said.

"They card you nowhere."

"Got my ID at fourteen," Mark said. "Been 21 ever since and I don't expect to be 22 for a ways yet."

"I take it back," I said. "They check your AARP card."

"Come here, you little brat," he said.

I stayed back.

"Come on, darling," he said. I moved out of the aisle and behind Darby's haunches. Mark was holding her tail, wrapped up in the tail bag she arrived in that kept it from breaking off and getting short. Kelly went crazy over keeping her mane and tail "healthy," as if they weren't attached to a twelve hundred pound animal afraid of plastic bags.

"Thought Kelly didn't want this to come off?" I said.

"Here," he said. "Hold." I put my hands out and he handed me the dock of Darby's tail—the muscle the hair grew from, where the tail bag was knotted. He started working at the knot and I could feel his breath coming in and out of his chest. Even covered in manure, he smelled some kind of pheromone cinnamon cake.

“Left the bag on too long,” he said. “Circulation got cut off.” When he loosed the knot I felt the tail fall off in my hands. I’m not talking about just the hair—well, half the hair too—but the dock, the actual part of her body that she could lift and swish and all that—it had rotted clean off of her. All that was left was a jagged couple inches of flesh, with long, patchy wisps of hair like a balding hippie’s.

Mark was already up by her head when she realized it was gone. Her hind leg flashed out in a kick and her metal shoe smacked the bar of the crosstie, the clang shuddering through the pole.

I tripped left trying to get clear of her but she kicked out again, clipping my knee so I twisted down, landing on my palms, trying to hold my body up off the pain shattering in my leg. I knew my head was low now, right at the line of her hock. The glint of a shoe slashed past my temple and Mark grabbed me and lifted me like nothing, set me at the wall, Darby’s legs kicking away from me now. Something in his face was scared for a minute, tight-jawed.

He took her head and she dropped it a bit and blew hard, quiet now and looking embarrassed. He rubbed her crown and behind her ear. Darby nosed him. He had a way with them, he could calm them down like that.

I stood. Something deep in my knee was bruised and I could feel it starting to swell, but I didn’t think anything major was broken. Maybe a fracture buried in there, but I’d fractured my foot and broken my finger before and kept riding before. I limped out of the crossties and when he saw I could walk a bit, he said, “Well don’t be a little girl about it if it’s not broken.”

I almost wished it were broken, so I could show up with a cast later and prove something, though I didn’t know what. When I used to ride with the dressage trainer, she would write up an incident report every time one of us got bitten or fell off. The first time I

fell off after I started riding with Mark, he said the incident reports were the “sad diary entries of pussies.”

I put my hand on Darby’s shoulder, the coat thin and soft as silk over the bone.

“You were just a horse,” I said. “Now you’re a pin the tail on a Darby.”

Mark ducked under the crossties and picked up the tail from where I’d dropped it.

“You think it hurts?” I said.

“Probably not. Dead by now.”

We stood in the aisle and unwrapped the tail from the bag like it was a gift. The dead bit was mottled purple and blue, a crispy ash color at the ends. No wet blood, only a scab like dried lava.

“Not often you meet a girl who’ll rip a rotted tail off a 1200 pound animal,” he said.

I raised my eyebrows at him. “Molding young heroes,” I said.

The feel of the thing was warm and picked. He sliced away the hair with the knife and tossed it in one of the big trashes, then put the dock in the brush box.

I picked up a brush and started working the dirt up on Darby’s flank.

“Kelly doesn’t technically know I’m taking her out,” Mark said. “She thinks she’s ‘unsafe.’ Why the fuck she bought an animal instead of a Porsche. I don’t know what you guys do out here, but it’s not riding. In Georgia, we rode good, not pretty. If I fell off working my dad’s ranch and didn’t get back on, he’d beat me so hard I got a second concussion.”

I used to give him shit for being a stoic damaged-boy, but I wanted to rip the hearts out of anyone who had hurt him.

“Ya’ll are princesses,” he said.

“Supposed to call my sister tonight,” I said. I knew one of the working students had told everyone my sister was in rehab, so I didn’t bother explaining.

“You can use the house phone if your service is bad.”

“She sounds like a fifty year-old car starting in winter either way. She smokes like she can’t breathe plain oxygen.” I hated how my sister chain-smoked when I visited her, the acrid smell making me nauseous. I tossed the brush into the box and it clattered. “She’s going to kill herself one way or another. Least this is slower.”

“Hey,” Mark said. “Why don’t you throw some tack on Darb. You’ve earned it. You work harder than anyone out here. Anyway, you’re a mini version of me, so I gotta like you best.”

“Are you serious?” I said.

“You scared, princess?”

I picked up her saddle. When she was ready, we walked to the arena, down past the house, the barn empty even for a Friday evening.

She was something else, big as a truck and graceful. I moved her up to an easy, ground-eating canter and she saw a deer down by the creek, a bit back from the arena. She slammed on the brakes and dropped her shoulder like she was trying to dig for safety, then crashed around and tore off bucking. When I tried to slow her up, she reared. I pulled on her, half hanging off the rein, but her head just twisted back, her body rising so high I thought we’d flip. I saw my bones crushed beneath her, thought of the eighty-grand I didn’t have, her straight bones and dense muscle all slashed up.

“Let go of her,” Mark yelled across the arena. “Let her go.”

I thought he was trying to get me thrown but I did what he said. I sat lighter in the saddle and closed my hips, looping the rein and leaning up her neck, and let her go. The

power that had almost wrenched me out of the saddle leveled out and then she ran, so fast I couldn't feel her hooves hit the ground. The pain in my leg was someone else's. I was fifteen, and everything in the world was mine.

When I pulled her up, she came back easy, showing off.

"You gave me a heart attack there," Mark said, but he was smiling. "It's good to see you riding like that."

We jumped that night, Mark cranking the fences, a foot higher than I'd ever jumped, then almost another foot, until we were galloping around a 4'2" course, the power when she took off making my stomach flip and my knee shoot daggers. Mark was drinking out of a big-gulp and I kept messing with him, asking for a sip. By the end of the ride he was so drunk that half the poles were off a hole or two on one side or another. The whole course looked like a funhouse.

I still think of that day as the best I've ever ridden. I still remember it as the closest I've ever been to being a part of a horse.

When I slid off her, the pain came back into focus and I winced.

"I grew up around a lot of tough assholes," Mark said, "but you could've hung with us." He offered me his cup but I shook my head. I knew what that stuff did to people.

He chucked something at me and when I caught it, I felt the scabbed flesh flex in my hand. I screamed before I could stop myself and he laughed dryly, like he was disgusted. He turned and walked away. I threw it at his back but missed.

It was night by then and the light from the barn up the hill was like a dropped flashlight, just enough to turn pitch to shades of black, shadows and silhouettes. I took off Darby's halter and let her go, thinking she'd have a run like she usually did, but she stayed by me, chasing me like she thought she was a dog. When I limped behind the old mounting

block, she splayed her legs like a colt and refused to come closer, her nostrils flared and blowing. She wanted to trust me, but she felt something I couldn't understand. I couldn't get her up to it. Not for eighty grand or anything else.

"That's a piece of wood," I said. "You weigh a ton." She flopped her bottom lip.

I called my mom and left a message saying I was staying the weekend. The last time I'd called my mom, I had waited on the phone while she cried, not sure if I could hang up.

When I turned towards the gate Mark was there, watching us.

"Creep," I said.

"I thought you were coming up to the house." He hopped up to sit on the fence. Darby nickered and trotted to him. His face was sweet in an easy way, something in it opening.

"You look happy," I said to him.

"Great panacea." He lifted his drink to his mouth.

"Cure all your problems, cause all your family's," I said.

He took a long drink. "Funny story. My mom got alcohol poisoning on my fourteenth birthday. I had to break the door and call an ambulance. She made me pay for the door."

"Do you talk to your mom anymore?" I said.

"Been half a decade. More than that for my dad. She calls every once in a while. What do I need her for now? I grew up without her help."

"I feel like that, too, like I lost my whole family," I said.

"Well you didn't, Alex," he said. "You have your whole family, even if things are a little fucked up."

"I'm sure your mom loves you," I said.

“You think you know things, huh?” he said. “You’re just a kid.”

When I put my hand on his knee he shoved it off and jumped down from the fence. “We need to give Darby antibiotics.” I didn’t know what he was saying or why he wasn’t looking at me. He said, “Her tail.”

He kept half a pharmacy around. Sometimes I thought the only actual work he did was fix the horses up when one got sick in the night.

“Get going,” he said. “I’ll show you how to shoot her up.”

I haltered Darby and we walked her up to the barn. In her stall, she set her nose on the nape of my neck, her breath hot on my skin. I leaned against her.

He handed me the vial and needle. I knew how to fill the syringe and flick out the bubbles, but I’d only injected IM, into the muscle where nothing much could go wrong.

“You’re doing it.” He was still working on his drink.

“I don’t think I can.”

“Grow up,” he said. “Not everything’s easy.” He told me to stand at her neck and then he stood behind me, my whole body pressed flat to his. He slid my hand up the bottom of her neck where the muscle made a column.

“Here, you feel that? That’s the vein.” He pushed so the blood would gather. “Right there, that feeling like an anchovy flipping under the skin.”

I wanted to feel what he did but I didn’t feel anything.

He dropped my hands and moved away, picked up the needle.

“Do exactly what I say,” he said. “You’ll be fine. Just don’t angle it too far and hit the carotid artery.”

“What happens if I hit the artery?”

“She’ll probably die.” He was dead serious.

My hand was shaking but I looked for the vein like he said, slid the needle in. I couldn't feel the pulse under the skin, only the sticky scratch of her hair. I thought I found it and I moved the needle. She jerked her head and I was terrified I'd rip the vein. Could you do that? I pushed the plunger and the liquid slid up into her neck.

Right away Darby's head flew up, flecks of white spraying from her mouth, and then she reared up and flipped over backward, crashing onto her back so the ground shook under us, her body convulsing on the stall floor. I moved for her but Mark's hand was on my shoulder, holding me back. Her legs were thrashing. He held me so tight to his chest I thought he was crushing my ribs. It looked like some kind of rabid dinosaur. It looked like an exorcism.

For the moment in my life when I had killed that horse something in me turned. What I did was unforgivable and I would have done anything he asked.

Then she went quiet, her ribs still heaving. I ripped free of Mark and fell to my knees by her. He stayed back and Darby lifted her head onto my lap. I stroked her ears and the plane of her face.

"You hit the carotid," Mark said, running his hand through his hair. "Fucking scared the shit out of you, didn't she?"

He put out his hand. I stood and then she put a leg out tentatively and kicked out a hind leg and then she was up. She dropped her nose and blew, bits of shavings flying up around her muzzle. "Come on, come on, baby, it's okay," he said, and I didn't know anymore if he was talking to her or me. Maybe that should've been a sign. I could never tell if it was me or one of his animals he was talking to. He reached to push bits of my hair back. "It's okay."

He pulled me towards him, and everything that was spinning stopped. “You’re okay. You’re okay.” He kissed my forehead and I lifted my face. At first our lips met by accident, because there was nowhere else for them to go, but then he kissed me again, hungrily, like he was trying to rip off pieces of my flesh, like he was trying to get to the bone.

When he started on the button of my jeans I pulled his wrists away, but his hands went back, working the fly down.

“Stop,” I said. I tried to think of everything I knew about sex, if I was supposed to do something with my legs or if he would lift me up, and then what.

“Look at you,” he said.

I didn’t want him to think I didn’t want to. “Can we just slow down?” I said, taking his wrist again, pulling it away from my pants. “I’ve never done this before.”

“I’ll teach you,” he said. He kissed my cheek, my temple, the nape of my neck where the wisps of baby hair grew, my collarbone, like he was inventorying my parts.

His hands were dry and rough with dirt. He rocked his hips against me and pain sang through the nerves in my knee. I turned my head.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know.” I didn’t want to say I was scared. “Maybe I want to lose it to someone my own age.”

He moved away. My skin was cold where his body had been. He looked so young then. I forgave him and I told myself it was something else, that it was me who was being a child.

“Jesus, what am I doing?” He punched the wall. “Oh my god, your mom is going to kill me.”

“She doesn’t care what I do.”

“Shut up!” he said. “Shut up shut up.”

“She won’t find out. She doesn’t know anything about me.”

His face looked stony. “You don’t understand.” He picked up his drink and drained it. “I’m a piece of shit,” he said, “and I’m going to ruin you.”

He looked scared in the dim light. Like he’d been caught with something. I went to him. I didn’t have to, but I loved him.

I leaned into his chest and he rubbed my back, tangled his fingers in my hair, swayed with me like I was a kid. His body pressed against me and his breath came beating out of him.

“I couldn’t help it,” he said.

He never meant to hurt me. Maybe I sound stupid defending him but I know he didn’t want to hurt me.

“Why didn’t you let me go to her?” I said. “When she was having the seizure?”

“You couldn’t have saved her,” he said. “When they fall like that, you just have to wait and see which way it goes.”

Mark said he was going to the house and I said I’d shut the barn after I called my sister. He waited for a minute then headed down the hill.

As soon as I heard my sister’s voice I knew I missed her. I told her about Darby, about her tail and the ride and the antibiotics.

“I am going to learn to inject IV,” I said. “I’ll bring the vet coffees until she teaches me.”

“Oh yeah?” my sister said. “We should start a phlebotomy school. You’re more addicted to horse than I ever was.”

“Can I tell you something? Swear you won’t tell?” I said.

“Yeah, little girl. Of course.”

“Mark kissed me.” I said.

I could hear her sucking on a cigarette, and then something clattered and she swore. “I’ll kill him,” she said. “I’ll fucking kill him.” But what could she do? She was stuck in rehab.

After I hung up, I flipped out the barn lights, and in the dark I could hear the horses breathing and shifting. For a moment, it seemed as if there were no world outside that barn. The light in the main house was on, the only visible thing in the black. I limped toward it. I didn’t feel guilty, like I thought I would. I felt a wild, hungry, fearless love. Stronger than I was, utterly selfish, and looking for nothing like redemption.

I was fifteen. What did I know about love? It hurt all the time, so I always knew it was there.