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The Worst

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THE WORST

By

MOLLY ELIZABETH LAICH

Bachelor of Arts English/Psychology, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI 2008

Thesis

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Approved by:

Perry Brown, Associate Provost for Graduate Education
Graduate School

Kevin Canty
English Department

Debra Earling
English Department

Andrew Smith
Media Arts Department

The Worst
By Molly Laich

Table of Contents

Other Terrors Lurk

Sorry, Charlie

No Hands

The Sting

Look Out

Women

Trevor and the Gun

The Neighbors

Ducks

My Cold and its Cure

The Significance of the Bear

Kristen Doesn't Like Surprise Parties

Other Terrors Lurk

There are places you don't and can't know about. People are trapped there and God has forgotten them. No one knows anything about them. If anything, the statues are made *out* of them. There are worlds where damned children eat cereal made of maggots – worlds where you might watch your hands turn into hooves. Beware also ordinary horrors. Blood in your saliva, a bus stop and swollen feet, dropping your children off at school or a loveless marriage: imagine it. Know that other terrors lurk. Know that a person can dig a hole down into their stomach and then crawl inside of it like an imploding star. I talk to you from there.

Sorry, Charlie

The dog had ripped everything to shreds and we'd been evicted. We were homeless and drinking at Travis's parents house while they were out of town. We tried to keep the mood light. Before passing out, Andy, the dog's owner had made up all these thought experiments that Eric, Travis and I continued.

Okay, Eric said. I travel back in time, and I give my fifteen-year-old self a blowjob. Does that make me gay?

I said no.

Travis said yes, and not just gay, but a pedophile.

Alright, Eric said. What if I travel back in time and my *eighteen* year old self gives *me* a blowjob. Am I gay? What about conjoined twins? If my twin fucks a guy but I'm asleep, does that make me gay?

According to Travis, the answer was always gay. I thought it depended on whether you shared a penis. I can't say for sure when or how it turned, but it did. It turned. My friends were not readers; they were naturally gifted. Somehow the gay thought experiment led to questions of agency, responsibility, the problem of evil. Somebody, God knows who, but one of us suggested that we should move beyond theory, and that the only rational, noble thing to do was to kill Andy's dog.

We ate candy from dishes washed down with warm beer, and we conspired.

Eric and Andy had been my boyfriend once, but not Travis. Travis wasn't my type – too wily, high strung, the kind of grown-up boy that eats sugared cereal for dinner, but I still loved him. I loved all of them. There were others, passed out throughout the house or not there that

night, a bunch of twenty something men and me, and we were more than just friends; we were a family, and that's why the three of us decided we had to do this thing for Andy.

What if we just drove her deep into the woods and left her somewhere? I think I must have suggested. Someone had to have brought this up.

Clichéd! Travis said.

Weak, Eric agreed. A pathetic dodging of responsibility.

These were the silly men I spent all my time with. Eric was tall and handsome, with a huge intellect, wasted on music trivia, on playing the guitar, and on truly mind-bending RPG strategy. He wore the same socks for weeks and felt incredulous about the lives of others. He believed that nobody was better or worse than anyone else. For example, (he often said) I like to gamble, drink beer, and smoke cigarettes, and well... what do other people do to have a good time?

Travis agreed that the purpose of life was to hang out and have fun. He had a vault of half-drawn comics, films conceptualized but not produced, and a tattoo of an S shaped snake on his forearm that he often told people stood for Sarah.

That's me. I'm Sarah.

I hope you believe me when I tell you they were good. The truth is that I thought I was better. I'd been accepted to a big, important school across the country. I was going to leave everything, the land of greasy pizza boxes, beer cans for ashtrays, the sick feeling in the morning that gives way to ache in the afternoon, and I was going to make something of myself. I was wrong. I can see that now. All of us had dreams so precious we kept them to ourselves, and I think we all believed, sadly, that the others amongst us were doomed.

Andy was different. He hung his head and walked into the room like an apology. We were all drunks, but Andy was somehow worse, a sad clown of a drinker. I felt a personal responsibility to make his life happier, since I'd broken his heart. I was sort of famous for it. I often saw myself walking barefoot over a path of broken hearts, sharp edges like shattered Christmas bulbs. So yeah, sue me, I thought a dog would help.

We lived in a tiny town that felt like a prison, the kind of place where everyone knows everyone. Some time earlier I'd gone to a bar and met a stranger with a black puppy sitting on the stool next to him. Imagine a cute animal. I went to her and she put her paws on my shoulders, like a girlfriend aiming to level with me. The man introduced us. She was a girl named Charlie. He'd found her abandoned in the city. She was a good puppy, he said. He wanted to keep her but there were roommate issues. He had a small apartment. He asked me to understand.

It's just that I have so many cats, I said, but in my mind, she was already home and curled up in front of a fireplace that does not, and never existed. I brought the puppy home first and convinced the other roommates second. It would make a perfect birthday present for Andy, I told them. It would make him happy.

What about all the cats? Travis wanted to know. There are three goddamn cats in this house.

Eric corrected him: there are four goddamn cats in this house.

Boys, boys, boys, I said. And the puppy was ours.

But goddamn. Turns out puppies quickly turn into dogs, and after six months of the thing spinning through the place like a top, shit in my old fashioned typewriter, financially crushing vet appointments, pseudo pet psychology, attacking strangers, barking, snarled gums, shivering,

and shedding all over everything, it had all added up to the shit-storm that happened that evening, leaving us homeless and drunk in Travis's parent's kitchen.

We made steady work of all the booze in the house. The plan grew legs and galloped through the living room. For Andy's sake, and yeah, for Charlie's too, we were going to undo this thing we'd done. She wasn't meant for this world; some animals are just cursed with chaotic brains, not wound up right. If Charlie had thumbs she would pull the trigger herself. We would take on the guilt of murder for Andy so he could get a nice place and a girlfriend and stop being such a sad sack all the time. Everyone agreed.

An alcoholic's dream state: you see only what's in front of you, and you think that's the entire world. We brought up a million ideas and rejected all of them. Poison, bludgeoning, a knife, a rock, a gun.

We're off task, Travis said. Does everybody have a drink? Keep drinking.

The three of us looked at Andy and the sleeping animal and then back at each other.

Eric suggested we take her out back, put her in a sack and throw her in the lake.

I said it was awful, this thing we were doing. Travis told me to shut the fuck up, and we set out on our task. I don't know what else to say; we just got up and started doing it. We found a sack of potatoes in the garage. We poured it out and dozens of spore-covered potatoes rolled around on the floor.

Une pomme de terre, Travis said, and then he picked one up and took a bite. An apple of the earth.

It was my job to get the victim on the leash and outside. She was sleepy but thrilled to be woken up, and then all of us were in Travis's back yard, sliding down cold, wet grass towards the water. Eric went on about how awesome our lives would be once this thing was over. He

said we were going to get back on track. We would drink less, eat better, and start working out. I for one plan to do a hundred push ups as soon as this bullshit is done with, he said.

Our last bottle was almost gone, so metaphors about optimism versus pessimism were no longer relevant. The night stars twinkled and the full moon looked down on us approvingly. It seemed right again. I thought of werewolves and new beginnings. Charlie dragged her feet and whimpered, and Eric picked her up and threw her inside the boat. It was a rickety aluminum thing. I had on a long skirt that dragged on the earth, gathering leaves and grass, and now it soaked up stagnant water at the bottom of the boat. We made it to the center of the lake before Travis managed to drop one of the oars. Surely oars float, but this one had a mind of its own and drifted away.

Charlie whimpered. She feared the water collecting at her feet and barked at it, tried to murder it with her tongue and then spit it out. She made the boat shake back and forth. It occurred to us then what we were doing, that maybe we should think it through. We wondered how we'd gotten this far.

I said that it was because we were assholes, and we saw in her the things we hated about ourselves.

Travis thought that was insane. He wondered where the whiskey had gone.

We'd left it on the dock.

You mean that dock? The one way the fuck over there?

The moon reflecting off the water made a kind of humiliating daylight and we saw each other's faces. I started crying. The guys hated when I cried, and usually I was good at turning it off. I'd discovered the secret to getting men to love you, and it was so deceptively simple I thought I should write a book: just be like them. Listen to their music. Learn about sports and

Dungeons and Dragons. Don't cry. But I couldn't help myself. Charlie whined with me. She raised her head to the heavens and howled at the moon. Then she squatted down and peed in the middle of the boat, and the four of us steeped in murky urine.

Eric re-introduced the plan, and I sobbed no.

Just give me the bag, Travis said. We won't throw her in the lake. We'll just put her inside so she doesn't capsize the damn boat and kill us all.

And then what, I said. We'll have a dog in a sack, and we'll still be in the middle of a lake in a boat with one oar.

The hysterical woman has a point, Eric said.

Travis pulled the sack off my shoulder and put it suddenly over the dog's head in an, aha! Gotcha! Moment. She wore the thing like a ghostly Halloween costume with no eyes cut out. She circled around panicked, got tangled in the string of the bag or something, I don't know how it happened, but it ended with Charlie in the lake, me in the lake after her, and a tipped over boat. Keys, wallets, cell phones; all of us went under.

Drunken people drown in lakes all the time. This is a fact. I held this thought with clenched fists. I told myself to appropriately panic, to take what had just happened seriously. The water was so, so, cold, and somehow thick, like syrup. Sticks and seaweed floated on the surface and my skirt billowed around me. I thought of life flashing before my eyes, and it did, sort of, a stilted half-life in smoke, a lot of down time and missed opportunities. Weak, girly push ups. I clawed madly at the water and resolved to do better. I saw my elementary school playground. A yearbook torn in half at the spine. My father's face.

When I made it to the dock Eric was already standing at the edge, hugging himself, shivering and looking out over the lake. I knocked the empty bottle of whiskey off the side when

he pulled me onto the deck. A quick survey showed only half of us had made it to the shore. We screamed and paced and looked out across the water, but it was still so dark. A layer of mist rested on the surface, at ankle's height if you were walking across. Something twinkled on the horizon that could have been splashing, or nothing.

Here is where my memory betrays me. What happened in those panicked minutes? I've tried to repaint the picture so often the canvas is nothing but a wet, muddled mess. Eventually we climbed up slick grass to the house, shivering. What were we doing? It was the wrong direction. In my memory we crawled on our hands and knees, but there would have been no reason for that. I'm sure we walked. There's always this nagging sensation that we should have stayed longer. Jumped back in the lake. Tried harder. Today I feel it as a persistent sting, like a broken tooth. An exposed nerve.

Charlie was waiting for us in the garage, her tongue hanging out and her wet tail wagging behind her. The torn potato sack hung around her neck. She did that thing dogs do with their heads when they suspect they've done something wrong but don't know what it is. Are you guys mad at me? She sniffed at a potato and looked up at us meekly.

Why is Charlie all wet? Andy wanted to know. He was awake, standing in the doorway. She ran to him and he bent down to cradle her in his arms. She whimpered and cried and bit at his face. It was slowly fading into day. We watched an Oldsmobile turning around the corner, its headlights cutting through the morning mist like daggers. It was Travis's parents.

Andy set the dog down. Where's Travis?

I stared down the car's headlights as they turned into the driveway. My mouth tasted blue. Eric ran around the side of the garage and puked in the bushes. I heard car doors open, the

ding, ding, ding, of a turn signal left on, and Andy's voice repeating my name: Sarah. Sarah.
What happened to Travis?

That was a long time ago. We suffered police reports and funerals, the hushed whisperings of locals; did you hear what happened to that boy out on the lake? It never stops. Eric got married and left. Andy lives in someone's basement, his stepfathers, an uncle, I don't know. I heard he takes medicine that keeps his brain ticking the way hearts are meant to keep beating. As for me, the school thing fell apart. I wade through this place, the water knee deep, high enough to hold me here, anyway, and I am mostly numb. Dogs used to make me wince, to hear a chorus of them barking in the distance, but not anymore. Now it's just like anything else.

No Hands

I was at a grocery store, dreaming of finding a boyfriend and searching for frozen peaches—that's all I wanted, a boyfriend and frozen peaches—when a man with no arms approached and asked me for my phone number.

To be fair, he didn't have no arms. One arm was cut off mid-bicep, and the other ended just below the elbow. It made a hook. The hook held a plastic bag of groceries, deftly. The stubs were not grotesque; they were smooth, like tiny, bald heads. Really what he had was no hands.

Also, no, it wasn't so abrupt, and it had happened outside. First, a native girl (I live in Canada, we call the Indians "natives") came up and said, "Excuse me," and then, "I don't mean to be rude ..." which you would think meant that I poised myself to be offended, but I was in some kind of supermarket trance. This native girl with dull eyes and fat cheeks, I was ready to tell her anything. Recall: "I don't mean to be rude, but how tall are you?"

"I'm six-four," I told her. I know, right? That's tall for a girl! I don't play basketball. I played a little volleyball but really I'm not good at sports. I lumbered around the court, mindlessly lobbing the ball over (bump-set-spike, not) or I stood at the front with my hands raised at the net, blocking the returns the shorter girls so ferociously jumped at, their one shot at glory; I blocked these spikes and felt bored doing it. This was high school. But I had an inconsistent serve, away games were far, and I quit. The native didn't ask about any of this.

But it was exciting to be talked to, and I wondered why she wanted to know. People ask often but usually the context is clear. They're drunk, or the conversation has turned to freakish physical abnormalities already, how tall *is* the world's tallest woman, or they wonder if I play basketball. The native seemed urgent. Maybe she'd fallen desperately in love with me.

I was considering this as I walked empty-handed out of the grocery store, that the fat-

cheeked native had fallen in love with me, and that's when the man with no hands abruptly asked for my phone number. Again, no, not so quickly. He said other things first, like "How are you."

The honest answer was that I had needs not satisfied. There were things missing that made me unhappy, and their lack filled me with a dull ache. I said, "Fine."

This was the first time I got a load of the weird half arms, the hooked grocery bag. He gestured excitedly with the other arm, mostly in the shoulders. I tried not to very obviously *not* stare at the arms, especially the nubby ends where I expected bones to protrude but didn't.

"You got a boyfriend?"

Both you and I know that I didn't have a boyfriend, and here's a good reason why. Whenever this comes up I tend to panic. I say, "Yes, I have a boyfriend and he plays football," and I would have done the same then, ordinarily, but the arms. He was okay looking. He was too short, of course, but welcome to my world, and his voice had a slight Canadian twang that made me think I was better than him, but the arms. I said no, I didn't have a boyfriend.

The plump native stood by the whole time, scratching her elbow, looking bored.

"Can I call you sometime?" he said.

"What?" Because I'd heard, but not understood.

"Can I get your number? I'd love to take you out."

How the hell was he going to take his cell phone out of his pocket, let alone punch in the number? I had to see how this was going to go down.

"Okay," I said.

"Great! What's the number?"

"Do you want me to write it down?" I groped at my empty pockets, pointlessly.

"Just tell me," he said. "I have a great memory." God was that disappointing.

I told him the number and my name, which is Caren. I spelled this for him too, C-a-r-e-n, because it means something to me, getting it right. His name was Dylan. He did not extend the left stump and invite me to shake it. I tried to catch the native's eye but she'd clearly checked out of this one. I thought she might be a little fucked up even, and then I admonished myself for being racist, but it turned out I was right. I would find out later that she was basically always high on horse tranquilizers. Dylan grinned. I wished desperately that someone would mention the missing hands, but it never came up.

The other thing going on in my life at that time was that my sister Heather was getting married in California in a month, and I was expected to do all sorts of ridiculous things on behalf of the big day. She insisted I be her maid of honor, because that's what sisters do apparently, although we were not at all close. I am a tall girl and I dislike formal wear. The coming nuptials required me to spend hours on the phone with my mother, which did not rock, and worst of all, mother had sent me a heavy crate of pictures that I was expected to leaf through for the purpose of some wedding style ultimate scrapbook. There were so many boxes, she said, the job had to be contracted out, but I suspected it was more about keeping me in the loop, forcing me to participate in wedding planning as though this was a fun thing. I was meant to pull out pictures that stood for memories, to know which were appropriate and which were out of sync, ugly, or painted an unpleasant picture. I suggested to my mother on the phone, when this retarded idea was first being hatched, that in order to be true to the time and the situation the pictures should be chosen at random. My brother dressed as Sid Vicious and puking into the toilet when he was sixteen, his friends thoughtful enough to photograph the moment—that really happened! It was an authentic experience, and however indirectly, it shaped the bride my sister was to become. But I am the youngest of three children, the product of divorce at a time when everyone

ignorantly though I was too young to understand, and the point is, my ideas are not taken seriously.

So I mentioned to my mother what had happened that afternoon, that a man with no hands had asked for my phone number, and I don't know what sort of reaction I expected: shock, disgust, indifference, or an admonition of some sort (I was already beginning to harbor the belief that the missing hands were somehow *my* fault) but she was, weirdly, kind of thrilled.

“Is he cute?” My fifty-eight-year-old mother said.

“I sort of don't remember what he looks like.”

“Maybe you'd like to bring him to the wedding!”

I hung up and called everyone I knew. One after another, all of them seemed to think the no-armed man was a catch and this was a really great thing for me. “He probably won't even call,” I said at the end of all of these conversations. I said the words “He probably won't even call” five to ten times that day, and in that repetition, an unfortunate expectation was born.

So you can imagine the levels of despondency I'd plummeted to when on Thursday night, a full three days later, he had not called. On the floor in front of me were splayed a smattering of glossy memories and a box of wine I had to pick up and funnel directly into my mouth if I wanted to drink any, which I did.

I should maybe explain what on earth I was doing in a lonely studio apartment by myself in a town called Medicine Hat, Alberta, when most everyone I knew was in Southern California, enjoying swimming pools, movie stars. The story is both boring and depressing but here goes: Internet lover turned out to be fatter than I expected, and bear in mind, I'm not shallow. I knew he was fat, but he turned out to be *orca* fat. Can't leave the house fat. Danger of falling through the floorboards, soberly and sincerely in need of serious spiritual and medical intervention fat.

But he was funny and kind and apparently very good at Photoshopping pictures of himself. Most importantly, he was a good sport about my revulsion. He helped me get an apartment and a job (I worked at a video store, an illegal alien in Canada if you can believe it) and I found, much to my surprise, that I did not want to leave. I'd been there for a year when my sister decided to get married, and it would be my first time back home. The truth was I didn't miss them, but that seemed wrong and I was determined to prove that I was not a monster. I was in the process of trying to feel good about this.

The pictures overwhelmingly featured Heather. Heather at the beach with her friends. Heather at the pond, feeding animals. Heather with her arms wrapped around the waist of a very tall girl whose head somehow got cut out of the frame. I was lying on the floor, arbitrarily arranging the Heather photos in chronological order, when Dylan called.

“Hey, remember me? We met at the grocery store the other day.”

I pretended to not remember, the way I thought women were supposed to do in times like these.

“You know, the devastatingly handsome man that approached you near the bike racks?”

I wanted him to say something about his hands. I was through ignoring pink elephants in rooms. There was something wrong with him, damn it, and we were going to acknowledge it if it killed us. But he didn't mention them.

“Well, I remember you,” he said. “You're the tall, foxy woman I couldn't take my eyes off of.”

God did that make me angry. How dare he mention my height? As though I were the freak. There were other concerns. Men are sick people. They have weird fetishes. There was this one guy—you wouldn't believe what happened. I should have known when he called before our

date and instructed me on what to wear: heels, a skirt. I feel like a man in a dress. Women are small. That's why rappers call them shortys. I am something else. But he was handsome and I agreed. He invited me to lie down on his bed. He asked me to shut my eyes, that he had a surprise for me. Then he pulled out a tangle of ropes and tried to tie me to the bed. I saw a red camera light blinking on the bookshelf across the room. His breath was excited and shallow. The clincher: a worn copy of *Gulliver's Travels* on the nightstand. I never told Orca how tall I was, and this allowed me to trust him. I did not trust Dylan.

"Caren," he said. He spelled it. "C-a-r-e-n. Would you like to go to a party with me tomorrow night? It's on the Res." That means reservation, which means nothing except that it's in a shitty part of town. Again, not to be racist. "Do you drink?"

I looked down at the boxed wine I'd managed to knock over on its side while we were talking. Wine dripped slowly from the nozzle and I imagined I heard the drops plop, plop, plop, although I didn't. I mean, I couldn't.

I agreed to go on the stupid date without anyone mentioning the missing hands, and it felt like a humiliating defeat. I tried to remember what all my friends back home had said, that a date with a man with no hands was an unequivocally good thing, and I tried to feel good about it. I shuffled absently through the Heather photos. The most recent was taken just a few months ago, with the husband to be. It was a close up of their happy, smiling faces at Disneyland. I flipped from college to Disneyland, college to Disneyland, back and forth. I got up, pensively, and found the tiny magnifying glass from my eyeglasses kit. I can't even tell you what I found. Seriously, I can't even talk about it.

Dylan said he'd pick me up at nine. I know, how does he drive a car, you ask. The answer is he doesn't. The sullen native was driving. I folded myself up in the backseat like an accordion.

Dylan asked how I was and I lied and said I was fine. The native reached under Dylan's seat and threw a beer back to me. The other she set in Dylan's lap. I watched him open his beer with his teeth and tilt it into his mouth. For this maneuver the half arms behaved like chopsticks.

"You never introduced me to your friend," I finally said.

Dylan appeared confused by the word *friend*. "Oh, I'm sorry. Caren, this is my platonic life mate, my partner in crime, the one and only Drives Me Everywhere With a Fist, the incorrigible Rebecca. Becky, you will recall, this is Caren."

Dylan was sort of funny, and he had the best vocabulary of any Canadian I'd ever met. No offense, it's just that I'm a Californian with a college degree and I think people in Medicine Hat are mostly not smart. I became cautiously optimistic.

"Nice to meet you, Rebecca."

Becky grunted.

We drove down a byzantine path of winding roads that led deep into the forest on the edge of town. It was a chilly evening in May. My sister would soon be a June bride and there'd be white lace all over everything but at that moment we were just in the woods in Canada. I didn't start to get nervous until we were really far in—when the road turned into nothing but a patch of grass and the car started bumping along over rocks and tree roots—that's when I started to think these two might have plans to rape and kill me in the center of the forest.

"Here we are!" Dylan threw his nubs in the air and declared, unnecessarily.

"Did you think we were going to rape and murder you?" Becky turned to me and said. We laughed together in what I'm sure they thought was camaraderie, although I was not at all convinced that I was "out of the woods" on the raping and murdering front, so to speak.

"Shall we?" Dylan said, and then Becky looked at Dylan, and then Dylan turned around

to me and said, “I guess we’re going to smoke a little first, is that cool?”

I said that it was cool. I pulled a pack of cigarettes out of my purse and congratulated myself on remembering to bring them. We were all going to be very cool.

Becky pulled some supplies out of the center console. A glass pipe, a lighter, something else in a Crown Royal bag. Oh. It was marijuana, I concluded. We were all going to be cooler than I thought. Becky set the pipe on fire and it cracked and fizzled. So they weren’t smoking cigarettes or marijuana but crack. Were we still on the cool trajectory? I wasn’t sure.

I learned that night that crack smells sort of like burning glue. Becky put the pipe in Dylan’s mouth and lit it for him. Thick white smoke poured out of his mouth and nose, and it was so realistic. I had the very real, pungent feeling that I was starring in a meandering independent film. *Crack* is the perfect word for that drug. First of all, it really does make a cracking sound when you smoke it, and further, its users don’t laugh; they cackle like witches and it is very sinister.

“Do you want...?” Dylan asked.

I politely declined the crack.

Becky put a couple of pills in her mouth and reached over for the beer resting between Dylan’s legs to wash them down. There was something symphonic about their interactions, like they were dancing. “You’ll be alright for later, right?” Dylan asked, and she nodded. He made a kissing noise at the air in her direction and we all piled out of the car. Those tender gestures towards Rebecca, his Seeing Eye dog; they moved me. I believe I mistook them for something else.

Dylan opened the car door himself but I hadn’t been sharp enough to see how he did it. I wondered if he was an alien and the hook sometimes grew fingers.

The party. Oh lord, the party. A big fire in the center, the embers rising up to a clear black sky and a hundred thousand stars—it was, if nothing else, beautiful. There were other, smaller fires with fucked up people assembled around them, none of them concerned with setting the forest ablaze, and so I tried to relax as well. Dylan rested the non-hook arm on my back and led me around the clearing. He talked excitedly and asked all sorts of questions. “So you’re not from Canada, eh? California, wow, whereabouts? Reseda, like the Tom Petty song, wicked. I’ve been some places myself, but now I mostly just work for my dad’s business. Spent some time in Japan, fuck, those people hate pasta. I love pasta. You’re beautiful, you know that? Want to meet some of my friends?”

I lied and expressed interest in meeting some of Dylan’s friends. “Jack, Stacy, Earl, this is Caren.” They were suspiciously normal: mall clothing, frat shirts, those purses you carry under your armpit. They eyed me up and down in a way I found obscene. “Nice to meet you,” they said. Again, I felt danger, upgraded from rape to gang rape.

Dylan left me standing alone with those people while he went to get us some beer from a keg. I wondered how he would carry two beers back. This was becoming for me a dubious fetish, the guessing of how things were done and the discovering.

“Dylan’s new flame, eh?”

I told them it was our first date. We stared back and forth at each other and I felt certain we were all thinking about the lack of hands. Wrong again—I was thinking about the hands and they were thinking about my tremendous height.

“So what are you, like six-three?” Stacy asked.

“That’s close,” I said.

“Do you play basketball?” Jack wondered. “Oh man, I bet you’re sick of people asking if

you play basketball,” and then they all stared at me with eyes that said *But no, really, you have to answer this question*, and I said that no, I didn’t play basketball.

The party was sort of fun, truthfully. I drank a lot of beer and experienced all sorts of knowing looks, until by the end of the night I’d invented a complicated narrative wherein the universe was designed with me in mind and all of these party guests were just characters in a story starring Caren, featuring Caren, in which Caren overcomes great adversity and triumphs, and they were all thrilled to finally have a supporting role, and that’s why they looked at me that way and winked at Dylan and nudged him with working elbows. I allowed myself this feeling—to feel comforted and loved.

I finally got a chance to mention the missing hands and it was disappointing. Dylan had gone off somewhere and I asked Jack, Stacy, and Earl: “What happened to Dylan?” They pretended to not know what I was talking about and I sort of lost it. “How did Dylan lose his hands, and when? How does he work for his father? What does he do? How long has it been? It was an accident, right? It’s not, like, a birth defect. I feel like it would look different if it were a birth defect. Why won’t he mention it to me or tell me himself?”

“Dylan is amazing,” Stacy said.

“He gets along just fine,” Earl added.

I gave up. Dylan came up behind me and rested the hook on my hip. It felt exciting and I forgot. “Do you want to go back to my place soon?” he whispered in my ear. I felt ready to see what sex with a man with no hands was like.

Dylan was like prom king of the hobo bonfire. They all seemed to know and intensely love him, and he had to make the rounds saying goodbye to everyone individually. I was left standing alone next to a dying fire, its embers beckoning to be touched, and there Becky was,

standing next to me, rocking her plump body back and forth on her heels. “Do you know that tall people are blessed in my culture?”

I didn’t know, I said. I didn’t even know what her culture was.

“Yeah,” she said.

I love the native people’s accent. It’s slight and simple.

“You would be at the top of our totem. What is your spirit animal? It’s the giraffe.”

I felt I was a wolf.

“The tallest animal in the forest,” Rebecca said, as though this was very profound. She reached up to touch my cheek and my fears were upgraded from gang rape to ritualistic, Native American gang rape. I flinched.

“Well, anyway. Dylan’s waiting for us. I’m taking you back to his trailer”

Dylan insisted on sitting in the back seat and making out with me the whole way to his house. I felt it was wrong but went along with it anyway. He rested the nub on my face and it felt oddly lovely. The hook played with my hair. Just at the moment I thought the other arm was going to grow a hand to unhook my jeans, we’d arrived, and to my surprise, all three of us went inside the trailer.

“You don’t mind sleeping here with me, do you?” Dylan asked. “I promise Becky will get you home safe in the morning.”

Becky had walked into the living room and sat on the couch in the dark, her hands calmly folded in her lap. I inquired meekly about this set up: We were going to go in Dylan’s bedroom and make love while Becky sat out here in the dark? That’s what was happening?

”How else do you expect to get home in the morning?” Becky asked.

“You do feel safe with me, don’t you?” Dylan wanted to know. Safety seemed to me like

an abstract concept. He could have instead said “You do feel flummoxed with Gerald on the full moon, don’t you?” and it would have made the same amount of sense.

Are you surprised that Dylan turned out to be a phenomenal lover? I was. All I can say without blushing is that he did things with those arms. Imagine the different attachments for a vacuum. His tongue felt sharp and finger-like. I thought of a parrot’s tongue. It was my first sexual encounter since the one time with Orca—if Guinness tracked such things it would have surely qualified as “the saddest hand job of all time”—but this was magical.

I was about to ask. I was about to say, “How and when did you lose your arms?” but I said instead, “Did you ask Rebecca to ask me how tall I was at the grocery store?” He said yes. “I wanted to see if you were kind,” he said. I told him that didn’t make any sense. He shrugged.

My mother had left a long, annoying message on my machine. My big thing in Canada was the shunning of modern conveniences. The video store I worked at stocked VHS. No cable, no Internet, no car. No cats, no friends, no peaches, no boyfriends. The furniture and I, we were tumbling toward enlightenment.

Mother wondered: how did the date go last night? How was the picture project going? Did I get the ancient Aztec facial mud mask she sent? Did it make my pores tingle? I picked up the phone and on purpose called the mad woman back.

“Sooo, how did it go?”

“His helper girl drove me deep into the woods. I thought they were going to rape and murder me.”

A long, uncomfortable pause. My family does not find rape jokes funny and I can’t live like that. This is one of the reasons I left home.

“Honey, did he touch you?”

“Did he touch me? Yes. But not like that, Mother.”

“Do you like him? Second date?”

“I can’t fucking believe Heather got a nose job and nobody told me.”

“Oh, Caren. Are you sure?”

“It changes her entire face, mother. It is not subtle. Who paid for it? How did this happen?”

I should explain. We are a family of struggling women plus my skinny, sickly rock star brother and there is never enough money. The nose job was offensive. It betrayed our bulbous ancestry.

“It was an engagement present from Richard.”

Just as I expected, everything had gone to shit when I left. Mother was back with her rich, stupid boyfriend in a world where the rich and stupid come together like magnets. Yes I am freakishly tall, and no, I don’t know how to act, but the truth is, I am pretty. Heather got to be 5'8" and I had the prettier face. It still wasn’t fair but it was a livable arrangement, decided by a power higher than man. I wanted to cry. I kicked the half-empty box of wine across the room and it broke open with a satisfying smack. I watched the wine drip down the wall onto a picture of Heather with her prom date (today, a known homosexual). I thought of blood.

“Is there something you want done?” My mother said.

“Do not even tell me.”

“Liposuction on my tummy and neck. That’s it.”

“Mom!”

“Do you know anything about what it’s like to get old? No, you don’t. Do you know what it’s like to be a woman with a rich boyfriend ten years younger than you in Reseda?”

“What about Brother?” My brother’s name is Russell but I call him Brother, the result of a Berenstain Bear joke taken too far.

“Your brother is the same. Caren, we just want to be happy.”

I took a deep breath. Again, I remembered the season’s mantra: Don’t be a monster.

“Do you want to bring Dylan to the wedding?”

“I just met him.”

“Honey, I’m really happy for you. He sounds like a really nice boy.”

She didn’t know anything about him. She knew that he had no hands and that was it, and this was the family I was expected to rush home to: a family that immediately and enthusiastically agreed that I should jump at the first handicapped man that showed even a modicum of interest. This is what they thought I was worth. I said: “Mother, you don’t know anything about him.”

“I’ve just got a good feeling. Russell and Heather think so too. You know we have good intuition on these things.” They were still high off what turned out to be their accurate prediction that Orca was trouble, but they weren’t even right about that. Not the why anyway. I was beginning to figure out what was happening. It was a modern day reversal of *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*. *Rachel Getting Married*. Other films as well.

“He smokes crack, you know. Did your female intuition tell you that?”

“Well,” she sighed. “Living with no hands can’t be easy.”

Let the record show that I never smoked crack with Dylan and Becky. Okay, there was one time—

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Hands, the lack of hands, the lack of talking about the lack of hands, I couldn't stop thinking about it. I had some time before work and I stopped off at the library. I googled "top ten ways someone loses their hands," and discovered that in Texas Hold 'Em, pocket aces get busted about half of the time. Unrelated, but ominous. Next I tried: "common causes for amputation." Answer: cancer, infection, gangrene, etc. "Accidental amputation" yielded interesting but useless results, mostly tutorials on how to perform emergency amputations. I felt strongly that Dylan's was the result of an industrial accident, the arms caught in the mouth of some unfeeling machine. I thought of the tears streaming down his face as men frantically pulled him out of whatever thing had clenched him, and I felt compassion.

The video store I worked at was probably going out of business. First, when people stopped even owning VCRs we rented out these often-schlepped players for a one-time five dollar introductory fee, but as the years droned on (so I was told) even this was not enough. These days people had incompatible flat screen TVs. It's quaint at first, but the modern world makes antsy pants of us all. Rewinding videotape really does take *minutes*, and we've got to get the kids out the door for soccer practice, etc. When they started releasing even the shittiest, most forgotten films of the eighties on DVD ... the end seemed real fucking nigh. You know it's over when suddenly *Mr. Mom* is available on Blu-ray. I should have been looking for another job. One problem was that before Canada I was an academic, so I had none of the skills required for today's job market.

"Excuse me!" A woman had been screaming at me as I'd been considering this, the end of analog. "Excuse me, Miss?"

"What."

“This movie you rented me cuts out in the middle.”

“Impossible!” my boss said.

The woman was exasperated, and who could blame her.

“She’s probably telling the truth,” I said. The legend is true: According to video store employees, the customer is never right, but that’s only on the subject of aesthetics. My boss was confused on this point and leered at me.

He put the film in and fast forwarded through. “See, see,” he said. It was the 1933 cult classic *Freaks*. It’s about a gang of circus freaks. Midgets; bearded ladies; men with no legs, all torso; men that hop on one leg; lion tamers. The plot involves a normal woman who seduces a little person for his money, and the freaks, well, they turn on her. I’m not making this up.

“Keep going,” the woman said. “It’s towards the middle of the second act.”

The stakes were raised. She spoke our nerdy, exclusionary language. I watched this all happen with heightened interest. Something vital seemed at stake. My cell phone buzzed in my pocket. I lied before when I implied I didn’t have one. I just had a cheap-o disposable that Orca gave me, but my mother doesn’t know this and nobody better tell her.

“There. There,” The woman pointed at the screen. *One of us, one of us!* The freaks chanted and pounded on the table. They were accepting the gold digger into their group, despite her being pretty and normal-sized with no facial hair or missing appendages. The meaning of this scene, important film scholars will tell you, is layered.

The text from Dylan said: “Hey beautiful. Can’t get those long legs out of my head.”

The freaks continued to chant: *We accept you! We accept you! One of us! One of us!* until the tape began to gurgle and whirl and eat itself alive. The unsatisfied customer was now satisfied and with good reason: both the tape and the VCR were fucked.

These cosmic events should have led me to one conclusion but instead I felt the opposite. I stared at the text. I thought about him typing it out with a pen in his teeth, or dictating it to Rebecca, or zapping it through satellites with his mind, and it was settled: I was in love.

We spent the next several days in his trailer, Dylan, Becky, and I. I brought home a stack of old horror films. He even had something to play them on. I drank beer and smoked pot. They did the same, plus pills and crack, which made for a weird mixing of moods with a baseline hovering somewhere at obliteration. We fucked often while Becky sat in the dark living room, her chubby hands folded in her lap. God knows where her mind went. People stopped by occasionally to exchange currency and cellophane bags. I concluded that this was the hitherto mentioned family business. Becky's family, I learned, owned a horse ranch and lived on government subsidies, that was how come the horse tranquilizers. It was a happy time, the kind you know can't possibly last, but still. For once I felt satisfied. I was not bored.

But like I said, nothing lasts. It had been about a week of this. I felt slow and dumb, but Dylan and Becky were cackling and ecstatic, the white smoke billowing out of their faces and hanging off their mouths like Santa beards. They cackled at the film *Carnival of Souls* and I was incredibly irritated, because that film is not funny. It is serious. It's about a young, put-upon woman contemplating her death and there's nothing to cackle about.

I said I wanted to go home and looked over at Becky who was lying on the floor on her back, tangled up in red yarn, doubtless exploring ancient native mysteries projected on the trailer's cracked ceiling. I thought of cats on posters hanging from branches imploring us to "hang in there." Somewhere in this favored land, I remembered, people were working in offices.

I could see then that I was trapped.

“Smoke with us,” Dylan said. “Just once.” White clouds lingered in the air between us; planet Venus. It was not uninviting. The weed weighed my organs down like anvils and they were offering me its antidote. But of course I have the same prejudices as the rest of us, that smoking crack means you’ve gone to an irretrievable place, a place where your self-respect can’t follow, clad in halter tops, sinks full of blackened frying pans and babies raised by cigarette-smoking grandmothers. I didn’t believe in myself but I wanted to believe I might start believing again in the future. He offered me a compromise: “Just come here,” he said. He had the crackpipe dangling from a homemade lanyard around his neck. “Becky.” She crawled over to the couch on hands and knees, reached up and lit the thing. He hooked his arm around the back of my head (vaudeville!) and billowed white steam out from his mouth into mine. It was sexy. It tasted weird. Stars exploded in my brain like snap, crackle, pop! I felt like a balloon released into the air by a careless child. It was the best.

Look, I know now there’s no difference between smoking crack yourself and having it blown directly into your face by your handless boyfriend, but how was I to see it then? I was on crack! Did I want one more? Yes I did. Did I want to go into the bedroom and be tweaked and worked on by a maniacal clockmaker, to have screws turned and the teeth of gears perforate my skin until we both knew what time it was? Damn right, I did. Who knew sex could be so funny? I had my eyes shut for most of it. I loved the colored blobs that floated behind my eyelids and guessed at what the shapes meant: a hotdog! An elephant! “Becky, light us some candles, would you?” Three shadows lingered on the walls. I felt chubby hands on my breasts. I knew it! I thought. I knew he could sometimes grow them! Of course that wasn’t really it.

Lost track of time, fired from the video store, but please, do me a favor and don’t jump to

conclusions. I missed one shift, and like I said the store was going under anyway, but that didn't stop Orca from calling me all exasperated and disappointed, like I was somehow not living up to my potential. He said to me with his thick voice, like a tall glass of cough syrup, "Caren, I'm just worried you're not living up to your potential."

"My Potential. Is that a kind of laundry detergent?" You know the way people talk about things like "personality" or "potential," like it's a real thing that you could take off the mantle and hold in your hands? I hate that.

Orca asked me not to sass him and I agreed. "What are you going to do now?" he wanted to know. My mind ballooned with terrible, frightening fantasies of joining the No Hand family business. I saw myself, bored on Dylan's sofa, my long legs dangling over the side with a bowl of cereal, or rather, I saw myself looking this way to the customers. Only I would know the secret depths that I would swim to in these moments. To love and be loved, to be taken care of; I had decided this was more important than any personal ambitions I could invent for myself. I told Orca only that I was seeing someone, that it was getting serious, and that he would be able to help me while I found another job. I did not mention the crack or the lack of hands but Orca disapproved anyway.

But then Becky didn't come to pick me up that night, and nobody called or sent me any text messages. I told myself not to be alarmed. I walked from room to room in my apartment. Opened and closed the refrigerator. My mother called and wanted to know if she should book another ticket and I impulsively said yes, although I had not mentioned the wedding yet to Dylan. *Field of Dreams*, later parodied by *Wayne's World 2*: If you book them, they will come.

I had known Dylan for eleven days. I stared at my portable phone, dangerously approaching the allotted text limit, and wondered what to say. I decided to text: "sdflaEsk;." It

was a brilliant move. It would get his attention, he would respond, and if playing it casual was still in order, if I were a girl that shouldn't be so easily won, I could say my pocket had done the dialing.

Days went by and he didn't text back. It seemed inconceivable that this was happening to me, *again*. Dude smoked crack all day in a trailer with no hands, and somehow *I* was the one eating gas station cookies at midnight, my heart in tatters.

Brother called. "I'm not as concerned about the no arms, although it's a little fucking weird, Sis."

I elected not to correct him. "He gets by just fine."

"Mom says that you said he smokes crack. Tell me you were joking."

"Once in awhile."

"Christ, Caren."

"Do you think this is fun for me? Do you think I like this?" And then I started crying, which was pretty embarrassing for everyone.

"Aw, Sis. I'm sorry. Bring crackhead armless dude to the wedding, it's cool. Don't cry."

No one understands me! Not now, not ever! I hung up on Brother (this was a trademark, me hanging up suddenly on my family; they pretty much expected it) and dialed Dylan. A meek, squeaky voice answered. "Hello?"

"Who the fuck is this?" I said. If I was going to be the sassy girlfriend of an important handless drug dealer I better start acting the part. Whoever it was, and it wasn't Becky—it was a tiny, pretty thing in cut-off shorts and flip-flops, that much was clear, but *who*, who the fuck—she said in the distance, "Dylan, it's for you."

"Hey babe," he said, you know, annoyingly casual the way they do at the height of their

savagery.

What's going on? Who is that? Why haven't you called me? I heard myself whining these words, and I knew it sounded pathetic but I couldn't help myself. It was so painful! I knew the second he got on the line that it was over and I had misunderstood the entire situation. We weren't getting serious at all. Dylan was not a serious person.

"Look, we had fun, alright? Don't be upset. I never said we were going steady, for Christ's sake."

"You have no hands, you live in a fucking trailer, you smoke crack, and you're breaking up with me?" I didn't say these words; I screamed them shrilly. It was infuriating, this uncanny ability that Dylan had to be happy and to feel good about himself, and further, to have everyone around feel good about him too. I was beginning to realize that this thing that he possessed, satisfaction, it wasn't based on circumstances. It was a skill. Like potential, it was a thing you could take off the mantle and touch. Happiness was a toaster and I didn't have one.

"Caren," he said. "That's not nice."

"How did you lose your hands?"

"I knew it!" Dylan said. "You're just a freaky girl into weird fetishes. I'm not your charity case, okay? I'm glad you're hurt." He added, unnecessarily, "I get along just fine."

"Why won't you ever talk about it or tell me how it happened?" I thought if the story were exotic enough it might go a long way in healing my wounded heart.

"Jesus, Caren. At my dad's sawmill factory in high school. What the fuck do you think? How do people lose their hands? Fuck you." I heard a slight slobbering on the other end of the line and then dead air. He'd hung up on me triumphantly with his tongue.

I saw the girl with the tiny voice perfectly in my mind. She had red hair and an eyebrow

piercing. She had Dylan's hook up inside of her, and most importantly, she wasn't me.

I needed to talk to someone who loved me. I called Orca. "Oh, John," I whimpered. (His name is not really Orca, of course.) I told him the entire story, from the peaches to the bonfire, the crack, the incredible sex, and the alleged redhead. He listened patiently for minutes. I get it now. I shouldn't have said the last part, which was, "John, it's not fair. I love so much. Why won't anyone ever truly love me?" He was quiet for so long I thought we'd been cut off.

"Hello?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," he said. "Is this the part where I'm supposed to feel sorry for you?"

I decided the only thing to do was go find Dylan's new girlfriend and beat her savagely with my fists. It wasn't fair. I know that. She actually sounded like a sweet girl, but I was in pain. I walked the two or three miles to his trailer, and found instead a trailer shaped patch of dead, white grass. An old empty horse cart I recognized as Becky's was chained to a tree alongside the lot, plus the usual trailer garbage. A kitchen sink. A few doll heads on sticks where non-crackheads might have planted flowers. Other things. Reseda seemed far away.

I sat on the grass where the sofa should have been. I thought about my Frankenstein family and how wrong I'd been about everything. There were no blinking red lights hidden in the forest. I was not the star of a television show starring Caren, featuring Caren, in which Caren overcomes great adversity and triumphs.

That's when Becky pulled up and found me sitting there, staring into one of the doll's blue eyes (the other one stuck shut, winking) with a drooping Down syndrome mouth I couldn't explain; one just had to conclude it had been manufactured that way. What was with all the *surrealism* all a sudden? Also I was crying. Becky got out of the car and sat next to me on the grass. Her eyes weren't so dull and she moved faster than I was used to. It was disturbing. She

didn't even look that surprised to see me, not really. "I take it Dylan didn't tell you what happened."

I brushed the tears off my face and hugged my knees into my chest.

"Eh. He heard the trailer was going to get raided so we moved it. I just came by to pick up my cart and all this garbage. We sort of..." she searched for the words. "Broke up."

"Same," I said.

"I'm trying to get clean," she said. She stared at me. "You don't need to cry over Dylan. He's not amazing." We sat there together for a long time not speaking, and it felt a little mystical. I wondered if the spirits of her people were moving through us, if this dead patch of grass wasn't behaving like a crop circle. "I'm glad you're here," she said. I was glad that she was glad. I decided to try kissing her. We kissed and it was not unpleasant. Then we held hands. Fuck, you know? At least we both had hands.

"You don't think you could ever like a girl, could you?" she asked me.

"I doubt it," I said.

Medicine Hat, Alberta has a population of around 60,000. It's known mostly for the Saskatchewan River and its funny name. Medicine Hat translates as "hat that a mystic Indian chief wears" or something like that. I guess that's not so much a translation as a further explanation.

"But I don't know," I said. "Maybe." I stared into the doll's winking eye and decided that the Canadian experiment was officially over.

*

I bought Becky a dress that makes her look tiered, like a wedding cake. We're on our way to California. This is her first time on an airplane. Sometimes we have sex but mostly we

like to hold hands. She says her spirit animal is a crow. The place setting is still made out with Dylan's name, because fuck you, Mom. Guess who's coming to dinner, now.

The Sting

It was only natural Gwen should feel nervous on the first day at her new job. A short, simple man in half sleeves led her around the office, pointing out all the wrong things while neglecting the important ones: “this is where we keep the office plant,” he said, flying past vital filing cabinets, the fax machine, other things.

They came around a corner to emerge at the front desk where a young man sat. He wore a white button up shirt with tattoos poking out through the cuffs, a scruffy half-beard, and tiny hoop earrings. He had blue, penetrating eyes. If they belonged to a woman, men would have compared them to space crystals. On a man, they were obscene. The most striking thing about him though was probably the huge protrusion sticking straight through his chest and out the other side. Gwen tried not to stare.

“So that’s the office,” said the tour guide, whose name turned out to be Billy. “Any questions?”

“Yeah, one. Why does that man at the front desk have what looks like a javelin or a bee stinger jutting through his chest?”

Billy looked at her with drowning eyes. He’d been poised for an unanswerable question and now, with the dream realized, mewed in its heaviness.

“Who, Jacob?” Billy said. “You can’t have any funny hair colors or facial piercings, but ear piercings are allowed. I don’t know if they’re appropriate on men, but it’s kind of a, you know, weird issue I guess.”

“I’m talking about the spike through his chest.”

He looked at her as though she’d abandoned English for the clicking tongue of the !Kung people. “I hope you don’t write advertising the same way you talk. Confidentially,” he leaned in

and whispered: “Jacob’s okay. I mean, I don’t have anything against the guy, but I think the only reason he has a job here is, well, you know.”

“Billy, I don’t know.”

“Let’s just say the women seem to like him. And women kind of rule this place. I’m not saying I have a problem with that at all. I think women are great.” Billy got all red. “I mean, I don’t think they’re worse than men or anything. Smarter I mean. I mean I don’t think they’re not as smart.”

So began Gwen’s career at Smith & Winston Incorporated. That first day she felt distracted by the spike sticking through the receptionist’s chest, but anytime she mentioned it to anyone, they looked at her like she was crazy or stupid, and since she didn’t want to get the reputation as the woman who on her first day goes around asking everyone about the handsome boy at the front desk, she abandoned the questions and tried to forget about it. Still, it was a hard thing to let go. In the beginning she made a point of coming through the front door so she would have to pass by his desk, but something always seemed to come up. He was late that day, or he was at the printer, or he’d gone out for an early lunch with one of the girls and the others were left behind to chatter about the event. Gwen began to think she’d imagined the thing entirely, when finally, on her first Friday morning, she walked in and there he was. He cradled his head in his hands as if his entire family had died in a horrible fire and the police had just come around to tell him he was responsible. The spike was still there, plain as ever, like a grotesque special effect in a film. She had not imagined it. It looked organic in matter – like the arm of an insect broken off at the base, or more likely, a giant hornet’s stinger, left inside after the angry attack. He had on an argyle sweater with a hole cut out around the point of penetration. Oddly, it looked like the most natural thing in the world. Of course the sweater would do that. He looked up when

she walked past, and she found herself lock eyed with the office dreamboat. She knew that *she* looked guilty, but surprisingly, so did he, and in the stare down they came to an agreement that seemed to say, “I won’t tell if you won’t.”

When she got the job at Smith & Winston she decided she wasn’t going to do the same thing she always did, which was to fall immediately and deeply in love with one of her coworkers, to obsess about him until something monstrous happened between them that made further employment impossible, and then to move on to another office where she would make the same mistake over again. The economy was ill and she wasn’t getting any younger. It had taken her three months to land this job. In the mean time she’d had to move back in with her mother in the suburbs. It was the town she grew up in, but she’d been gone so long it felt like a strange place. It was depressing. If she lost this job, that was it. She was toast. She was so determined to the cause this time around, she’d bought ugly black slacks and sweaters to wear to work in place of the sexy, office chic wardrobe that was her usual. When on Sunday night she found herself laying out the tailored suit with seemed stockings and the blood-colored pumps, she did it with a hint of self-awareness, but ultimately, resignation.

Jacob wasn’t at the front desk when she came in Monday morning. She stood around for as long as was at all prudent, and then for a few more minutes after that, but she had no business being there, and so went back to her cubicle hidden away in the corner. She thought about Jacob all morning, scrambled with pictures of cotton balls and peroxide. She thought of wounded animals and the petting of soft fur. It wasn’t until late that afternoon that she abandoned pretty things and allowed her face to attend to work with ugly concentration. She had a chewed up pencil between her teeth when she noticed him standing in the doorway of her cubicle. He turned his body and she saw again that the stinger went straight through the other side, ending in a point

that sort of drooped down a little. It likely had been sharp once but became dull from sleeping on or leaning against things.

“Hi,” he said.

It was the first time she’d ever heard his voice, and consistent with everything else about him, it dripped with the sultry cadence of delicate lovemaking. Gwen crossed and uncrossed her legs. She took off her blazer and arched her back. For a second she thought her self-control would betray her and she would rip her blouse open and drop down on her knees in front of him. It occurred to her then that an uncomfortable amount of time had passed without her responding.

“See you around,” he purred.

By the end of the day, all the women in the office somehow knew everything and offered their opinions. Apparently Jacob didn’t say “hi” to just anyone. This was like the equivalent of second base. “I would stay away from him,” the plump, married women advised. “We heard he just broke up with his girlfriend,” one of the customer service reps said. Another commented under her breath: “Not that that ever stopped him before.”

Gwen collected a wealth of dizzying, conflicting facts about Jacob. Some said that he’d been in prison for a crime he hadn’t committed. Others said the prison rumors weren’t true and those three years were spent instead in a Hindu monastery. He was either 28 or 31. He may have been married once. Everyone agreed he had a problem with alcohol and possibly drugs, but that the hung over, strung out look suited him. Billy told her one afternoon with a beet red face that Jacob didn’t even like girls, that the woman he was purported to have been involved with was actually a man named Chris, but where this information came from was “confidential.”

In matters of the heart, once a thing is decided upon, the facts make little difference. Jacob was always in her thoughts. Every night she had elaborate, cinematic dreams that all stood

for a future where they would be married, have children and stay together forever. One night she was a nurse running across a post-apocalyptic battlefield, when she came upon a fallen soldier. There was no time for anesthesia. With shrapnel buzzing all around them, and with a mother's tenderness, she pulled a piece of broken glass out of the wounded soldier's leg. She turned into a sleek black panther and licked the wounds. Somehow, with paws and not fingers, she dressed the gash, and the soldier rode on her back into a sunset ripe with nuclear holocaust, exploding in firebombs. She felt the dreams were important clues.

Gwen had been employed at Smith & Winston nearly a month before she found the courage to bring up the thing. The conversation started routinely enough. "What are you up to this weekend?"

His words were always perfectly normal, almost boringly so, but to her they felt like feathers teased across her bare shoulders. She shuttered before answering. "The girls from the office are going out tonight, to the new Martini place downtown."

He nodded. "I thought I might stop by."

Her heart started beating out of her chest. She couldn't hear herself think. This was a date. They were going on their first date. She remembered then that the man she was obsessed with had an unnatural and disturbing protrusion in his chest.

"Jacob, I have to ask. What's with the..." she pointed at his torso, not knowing what to call it.

He looked down at the stick or spear or whatever it was. "Oh. It's just this thing I had done."

"A thing you had done?"

“It was a while ago,” he said. He looked like he might start crying. It was incredibly sexy.
“See you later.”

The girls were supposed to meet at the Martini bar “nine-ish” and she’d arrived pathetically, exactly on time on the off chance Jacob planned to get there early. It was an exotic place filled with good-looking people and glass tables lit from underneath in neon. Gwen took comfort in some of her more frumpy co-workers discomfort. A tiny voice inside her warned she shouldn’t feel so smug, but she swatted this away. The Martinis were fattening and like twelve dollars. It was well after midnight. She’d already run up an astronomical tab and there was still no sign of Jacob. She felt her red lipstick fade with every sip, until all at once she was so drunk and upset that she decided to sneak out the back door and smoke the joint she’d put in her purse by way of consolation.

The drugs worked. She sucked down the entire thing and leaned her head against the brick wall with her eyes shut, thinking of nothing at all. When she finally looked out at what she now considered an indifferent world, she discovered Jacob standing in front of her, grinning wickedly. His stinger looked glossy and ready to party. She saw too his forearms for the first time. They were inked in serpentine dragons swirling through Asian characters. She decided to be different and never ask him what the tattoos meant.

“Does somebody smell a skunk?”

He sounded loud and gruff all of a sudden, and she realized he was one of those types to arrive late to bars, already sauced, to pick up women. She laughed nervously at his not very funny observation.

“So are all of those office whores inside or what?” he barked.

Gwen felt herself getting incredibly depressed. It hadn't occurred to her that Jacob's facial hair really did tell the story and he was just an uninteresting asshole. She decided not to believe it, that he was having a bad day or he was drunk, or maybe the puncture wound had become infected and it was going to his head.

They went inside and continued to have a terrible time together. Jacob tried to buy her and several other women a drink, which she haughtily refused. He began loudly talking to a short, blond girl about the tenants of Buddhism, and then drinking. "Half of these fucking drinks aren't even really Martinis," he told her.

Gwen tried to hide out in a corner, where the women followed, prodding for developments. "He's just an asshole," she said, glumly. The girls from customer service rattled off a number of alternative explanations for his behavior, while the remaining, homely woman reminded everyone that she had been right about Jacob all along. Two of them had the idea to bring her a Godiva Chocolate Martini independent of one another and she sucked them both down without a thought.

Jacob walked towards the back door, pantomiming a smoking gesture in Gwen's direction. Although she didn't smoke, she decided to give him one more chance and followed him outside, where he grabbed her by the arm, pulled her in close and kissed her on the mouth. It felt wonderful and dynamic, except her chest bumped against the blunt end of the stinger and it was hard to get her face close to his. He turned to the side. She ran her tongue along his neck and sucked on the tiny hoop dangling from his earlobe. Mouth on metal; she tasted chocolate gurgling up her throat, and just managed to turn away from him in time to vomit a kaleidoscope of Martini flavors on the pavement. One of the office girls came out and tried to drag her off by the elbow. He said: "It's okay. I'm okay to drive. I can take her home."

Gwen had heard people compare heavy drinking to time travel, but this was the first time she'd experienced it firsthand. She woke up to find the two of them cramped in the tiny guest room she was staying in at her mother's house. She wondered why they'd ended up here instead of Jacob's place, how they'd snuck by her mother's room, who paid her outrageous bar tab. In addition to a single bed, the room contained a random smattering of books, all of her clothes separated into senseless piles on the floor, and her mother's sewing machine, draped in torn panty hose and the evening's carefully selected cocktail dress. Gwen looked down to find herself in a Pink Floyd t-shirt and checkered pajama bottoms. Jacob had his back to her and was examining a hardback copy of Dennis Rodman's autobiography, *Bad as I Wanna Be*. (Her mother had a hard time throwing anything away.) Gwen was thirsty. "Do you want some water?" She asked, casually, the way she imagined someone who had not been blacked out for God knows how long might ask something.

"I brought you some earlier. It's on the table next to you." His voice had returned to its original, sexual hum.

She drank the entire glass down in one gulp and went to him at the bookcase. They tried to come together, but again the spike came between them. She felt not at all sick and sexually confident. She whispered hotly in his ear. "I wish you'd let me take out this stinger."

"Oh yeah?" he said. He pushed her down on the single mattress and they rolled around atop the Care Bear bedspread.

"I'm serious," she said. "It can't be comfortable. We can doctor up the wound once it's out. I have hydrogen peroxide and gauze. I can give you one of my mother's Vicodin."

"I'm six months sober," he said.

They kissed and touched and clawed off each other's clothing. She touched the stinger. His head tilted back and he moaned softly. "It won't hurt at all," she whispered. "I can do it in a way that will make it not hurt."

"It's just that it's so close to my heart," he said.

They continued to kiss, but the burden of the thing never left their minds. They panted together in passionate frustration.

"Okay," he said breathlessly.

"Now?"

"Do it quick, before I change my mind."

She took the thing in both hands at the base. It was maybe the width of a babies arm. With a single tug, she pulled the stinger from his chest. It made a brief, vacuous sound and then it was out. The thing looked like a single, fat eyelash, and she threw it down on the floor next to them. It was as simple as removing an earring. Jacob flipped Gwen onto her back and slipped himself inside. They fucked for several ecstatic, wanton minutes, their bodies wrapped together as closely as two humans can.

They came apart and stared up at the ceiling with shallow breath, an island onto their own thoughts. Gwen opened the window and they smoked cigarettes. They used the floor as an ashtray and she only coughed once. Gwen listened to his heart beating rhythmically, like a song. "How does it feel?" she asked. They put out their cigarettes.

"I'll be honest. It feels weird."

These were the moments that everything else in life led up to. She felt happiness running up and down her body, like her blood was carbonated. Gwen thought about not just then but how

pleasant the memory would be later. In the moment, she imagined herself running the encounter over and over in her mind.

Jacob talked about different things. He believed that humanity was doomed and life was meaningless. She agreed. He wanted to save up for a new place. Sometimes he wrote songs. “I should tell you: Lydia, my ex girlfriend. We still live together.”

“Mmm,” Gwen said. But she was asleep.

“It’s just, we’ll have to tread carefully from here on out.”

When Gwen woke up in the morning she was the only one in the room. She looked down at the stinger on the floor. It had started to shrivel up, which was interesting. Jacob must have been pumping some kind of life into it when it was still lodged in his chest. She noticed two single drops of blood on the sheet, and for an irrational moment she wondered whether the blood was his or hers. It felt profoundly religious.

She waited a full twelve hours to text him. “*how r u feeling?*” she wondered. It took him around four hours to respond. It was disappointing but not surprising. Gwen had never known a man who responded promptly to text messages. “*ok*” he said.

There were no correspondences between them all day Sunday. She was only just beginning to allow herself to worry when late Sunday night, her phone exploded with the ring she’d assigned his number: harpsichords. But it was a woman’s angry voice. “Bitch, what have you done to Jacob?”

Gwen was very bad at confrontation in the moment and began stuttering a tattered defense.

“Who the fuck told you you could take it out in the first place?” Lydia wanted to know.

“He did.”

“No, he would never do that,” she corrected him. “Where did he say he got it?”

“He just said he had it done,” Gwen said, lamely. The stakes were unknown, but nevertheless she felt strongly that she was losing the argument.

“He said he just ‘had it done?’ *Ha*,” Lydia snorted. “He didn’t have it done. I did it. *I* had it done.”

“Oh.”

“He’ll probably die now, you know. I hope you’re happy about that.”

“Don’t be absurd,” Gwen said. It was her boldest stance yet, but it was just good luck; she was only channeling something her mother would have said.

“Fuck you,” Lydia replied. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Gwen felt confident that once they had a chance to really talk, everything would right itself. When she finally saw Jacob on Monday morning, he looked as though he’d crawled out of the cemetery. She put her hand on his clammy forehead and he pulled away. “I’m okay,” he said. “I just don’t feel well.”

Later that afternoon, the office chattered with news about Jacob. He had reportedly come out from behind his desk, as if in a trance. They said that blood poured through his shirt as though he’d been shot in the chest, except of course he hadn’t been. He collapsed and the ambulance took him away.

The drama of the situation had reached a baffling crescendo, and Gwen found herself unable to even comprehend a logical next move. She spent Monday night in front of the television with her mother. They knitted scarves and watched *Dancing with the Stars*. They did not talk about what happened. Every commercial break Gwen snuck off to try calling or texting Jacob’s phone, but no one ever answered. “Hey, this is Jacob. Leave a message.” She considered

playing the greeting over and over and masturbating to the words, but it would be too much hassle, to keep calling.

On Tuesday the office air felt heavy, as though everything were draped in black, suffocating cloaks. It didn't take long to overhear the big news that Jacob was dead. "They say he died of a broken heart," a girl in accounting said, shaking her head. "That's stupid," one of the few men in the office replied. She heard everything from diabetes to a drug overdose, to a mysterious puncture wound that suddenly started bleeding, to a weak heart, as in "perhaps Jacob was just born with a weak heart." Later that morning, Billy came by Gwen's cubicle to take her to see the handsome, redheaded woman in the HR department.

"It's weird, what happened," Billy said. He pulled at his necktie and walked at a double pace to keep up with Gwen's long gait. She held her chin up high and pushed her shoulders back. Billy lingered at the door. "I always liked you," he said. He turned red and looked down at his shoes.

"I always liked you too," she replied. She didn't know if it was true because she'd never considered the question, but it felt like the right thing to say.

A lot of things were said in the HR office, but really it's only the last bit that mattered: "Anyway, we're going to have to let you go."

Gwen found the news underwhelming. She looked down at her hands folded sadly in her lap. "Okay," she said, "But why exactly?"

It turned out the redhead had a fiery personality. She slammed a pile of papers down on the desk in front of her. "Do not even think about giving us a hard time on this one, Gwen. Do not even think about it. Why, why, let's see. Well, you murdered our best receptionist, for starters. I mean, unless you want us to take this to the police."

Gwen considered saying, “Don’t be absurd,” but decided instead to say nothing. They wanted her out immediately. They would mail her any paperwork. She took off her heels and walked around the office in stocking feet, collecting her stuff. She looked like a little girl on the playground, but then, so did everyone else. She felt surrounded by whispering. She slipped out the back door without ceremony, having talked to no one.

It was early and her mother was still at work when she got home. She pulled off her nylons and threw them on the couch on her way to the refrigerator. She ate ice cream out of the carton and radishes drenched in salt. The rest of the afternoon she spent under the covers in her bedroom. She played the movie of the martini soaked night with Jacob over and over in her mind. His voice lingered like a tongue. It travelled through her toes and out her mouth. She touched herself and thought of nothing. “Dead,” she whispered. “Dead, dead, dead,” until the word itself meant nothing at all.

Look Out

Every year my mother and I went to the city to see the Detroit fireworks. Afterwards we would eat at a restaurant in Greektown where men made of rock wore nothing but leaves in front of their privates. The year before I circled around one of these statues and put my hand under the leaf. A table in the balcony above me cheered when I did it, and I got embarrassed and cried, but my mother hugged me and said that nobody thought I was gross. She was always on my side. She told me that everyone thought I was cute and funny and loved me, and I believed her, but suspiciously.

That was a full year ago and this year I knew a lot more. My mother had a boyfriend that summer named Lou who I didn't like. I hated when Lou came with us places because he always got to sit in the front seat. Mom couldn't hear anything I said in back and kind of seemed like she didn't want to. I sang along loudly with the music and kicked the back of Lou's seat.

My mother clutched my hand tightly when she led me through the crowd. I liked all the black faces and I felt like they liked me too because we were different from each other and that was very interesting. My mother was a drinker. Every year she brought a thermos full of Vodka. We laid a blanket on the grass in front of the river and we stared at exploding lights and the smoky shadows they left behind. Years later, in that same spot, the fireworks would remind someone of Vietnam and he would shoot three strangers, but nothing bad happened that year.

Before the Greek restaurant and after the fireworks mom and Lou got drunk and yelled at each other a lot on the sidewalk while I stared into an alley. At the time I thought anybody who set foot in an alley got raped, and I thought getting raped meant a strange man beat you up and

then took a razorblade and ripped holes in your clothes. I'm through, you crazy bitch, Lou said. He walked off in the other direction and my mom started crying. She took my hand and led me around the city, wheezing and stumbling. It took us a really long time to find the car, and I was mad because I didn't want to find it, I wanted to go to the restaurant where they set the cheese on fire and the waiters scream, "Opa!" which means, "Look out!"

My mom rested her head on the steering wheel. Fuck you, she said. Fuck you. Fuck you. It was embarrassing, her talking to someone who wasn't there. I didn't answer. I think the silence upset her even more, the no one answering. No, she said. Fuck him. Not you, honey. Fuck him. She put the key in the ignition. I had the thought that it might have been safer for an eight year old to drive the car home than for my mother to.

Lou was through with her that night, but not overall. Twenty years after that I was a grown up myself, living in Detroit with a boyfriend of my own. My boyfriend and I filled old water bottles full of whiskey and walked down to the river to watch the fireworks. When we drank too much and screamed at each other on the street, at least we knew where we were, and we could walk home. Fuck you, I would say to him. Fuck you. Not fuck her. I said this right to my boyfriend's face. In this way, my mother and I are different.

Women

We go to a bar. It's one of those nights, where drunkards spill out of doorways to litter the streets, and I am in the mood for this. The women are young and literate and I feel disgusting, like beetles are crawling under my clothes. I have never been so thirsty! Oh sobriety, you stab me, who do you have to kill to get a fucking shot around here, but Theo makes his way through the crowd with a tray full of drinks, surrounded by women. Who are those women? Suddenly we're in a beer commercial drinking tequila. They're making me dance, these women, who up close turns out are just girls. There's a chubby blonde with sparkling cleavage – for real, she's covered in glitter for some reason, and the other, beautiful olive skin and a gigantic mouth with straight up, old fashioned metal braces. Did you ever see that movie *Alphaville*? Well, you've seen *Jaws* at least. She looks like a fucking shark is my point. But pretty.

These twits do not interest me, necessarily. Tonight I'm into women. I've been in love with the bartender at this bar since forever. Oh, Gwen, you pixied, impossible thing. We're facebook friends, so that has to account for something, right? Sometimes at night in my underwear I scroll through her pictures and feel pathetic about it. Most of her interests are cool: hiking, reading - casting spells, what? Why? - Belt buckles. I fantasize about going to some exotic city on vacation and returning with a belt buckle gift, dropping down to one knee and presenting it to her behind the bar, and how phenomenally weird it would be. A bartender, I know, never fall for the help, but she's so good. She always remembers your order, never takes drinks from men but isn't a bitch about it, knows when to cut off a talker, sets lonely customers up with each other, and the way she moves! Those hips! It's not some inner, secret beauty and I'm not the only one who sees it. I should "get in line" as they say. But Gwen, you look me straight in the eyes and you laugh at my jokes, what am I to think.

I think I'm head to toe in overgrown hipster failure. My hair gooped in product, shoes, shirt, glasses – I'm older than I've ever been, and designer frames won't change that. Women have hurt me. In my dreams I am free to hit them and do, but the blows don't land. Next time I'm bringing a knife. You heard me. I will stab a girl.

I guess I got a little creepy, and Sharky, the one I'm dancing with, wants to know what I'm thinking.

“Thought I might head out back and hang myself from a tree,” I tell her.

“You're funny,” she says.

What could anyone ever do to hurt me, for I am the walking dead. I feel like a woman could dart across the bar and slice open my face and I wouldn't bleed. I'm sure that's false though. I should be careful.

I have had close to ten drinks I'd say, and I decide it's time to make my big move on the gorgeous, unattainable bartender. Theo tries to hold me back by my sleeve. “Impossible,” I say to Theo, “is not in my vocabulary.”

“Well, you just said it,” he points out. “So kind of, it is.”

I've got a foolproof plan. Some other, less hot bartender thinks she's going to close my tab for me, and I have to duck away before she comes over, and this fucks up my timing. Gwen, over here, Gwen, Gwen, Gwen, be different from all the others. Brush my hair behind my ears and kiss my forehead. Don't lie. Don't do horrible things that warrant lying. Who am I kidding. You're all the same. Scratch that earlier order, just fuck me. She looks me in the eye when she hands me my bill, and not certain but I think she pursed her lips. Oh how those cherry colored lips recall the richness of melted crayons. She's probably a slut. I write my phone number and

name on the ticket. I circle the name with a heart and I assure myself that despite a sneaking glimpse of tomorrow's embarrassment, I will not regret this later.

Theo has come over to tell me my suicidal ravings have charmed the girls and he needs my help to close the deal. He says that brace face likes me but not him, and Theo wants to get with fat blonde who apparently just wants marijuana, which I have in my mother's basement, so if we could all just get back there somehow, the hope is that something will happen. We make it home, where I put on a James Brown record and prescription sunglasses for no reason I can think of.

Would you believe it, the girls flip. Sharky is Jewish and the gigantic crucifix I've got inexplicably mounted on the basement wall makes her "uncomfortable". I try to tell her it doesn't mean anything to me, but I also don't care and can't convince her. The fat, glittered one likes me now. She puts her lips on my dick, and I play along. I touch her soft breasts with my hands and mouth and her blonde curls rest on my legs. Doll's hair. A pet. She's good. She uses her teeth some. As I'm coming I have the weird thought that I wish the Jew could give the blonde her braces, and I see those braces devouring me. Coming felt like sucking on fillings.

I wake up covered in glitter. In the morning the girls have names. They are Devorah and Kelly. Devorah and Theo slept sexless on my couch and now all of our clothes look like unmade beds. We buy them breakfast. It's depressing.

Trevor and the Gun

My boyfriend Trevor lived with another woman, but it wasn't like that, exactly. They lived in the attic apartment of a house that had been converted into three or four other units. It had a lot of space that was hard to utilize: weird-shaped rooms and crannies where they kept plants, a meditation pillow, their pet ferret's cage. It felt like being inside a science experiment. The bathroom had a toilet and tub, but no sink or mirror. They kept their toothbrushes in jars in the kitchen. It sounds bad, but they were both very tidy.

Trevor was a poet. That first night, we sat in his living room looking at a coffee table book featuring Montana wildlife. The moose seemed to leap off the page, and it's true that beavers are miraculous animals. Emily, the roommate, came crawling out of her room not unlike a woodland creature herself. She was small, with short dark hair and a blank face I wanted to color in with stage make-up. I'm an actress.

"Emily, this is Tristen," Trevor said.

She gave Trevor a tortured look. "I want to cut up that book," she said.

"I know you do. But you can't."

She shook my hand with nothing but love and said, "It's really nice to meet you," and then went back to her room. Trevor brushed his hand along my neck but I was nervous that Emily would come out again and catch us.

That's what happened. Her door opened just as Trevor reached over to kiss me. She scooted past us to take a whistling kettle off the burner (how did it get there in the first place?) and even from across the room, I felt her face get hot.

*

"Do you know that your roommate is in love with you?" I asked Trevor.

“Nah,” he said. He took a drag off of his cigarette and observed the smoke. “She’s a plumber and she makes collages. Also, she told me she wasn’t in love with me anymore.”

“When?”

“The last time was like a month ago.” He put the cigarette out on the bedside table and climbed on top of me. “Every month or so she confesses her love, and then spends the rest of the month working to convince me she was just kidding.”

We laughed.

*

I’m from California. People have said I’m like a ballerina, and it’s true that I used to dance but not like that. I’m beautiful - which is wonderful, I would die if it were any other way - but I feel awful about it. I stare in mirrors for longer than anybody else, and I worry. Once I did cocaine at this party in Hollywood. I bought it from a greasy man who seemed up to something. I gave him my last ten dollars. I’d been drinking and the drugs made me feel sober. Crisp. I hopped up and down in one place and I felt happy until a valve came loose; the stuff was draining out of me. I wanted the party to have an ATM. This is what I feared. It’s a feeling and it looks like this: *Oh noooo. It’s going awaaaaay.* I stared at clocks and felt myself getting less pretty with every ticking second.

I thought it might be L.A.’s fault. I sent away for the University of Montana brochure and it looked too good to be true. A friend had told me Missoula was like living in an enchanted snow globe. It was surrounded by mountains. It had a river, a bridge. There was no sales tax. I thought everyone’s number would start with 555.

*

It was fall. I'd been here one month when I met Trevor, and then Emily. We were both fine arts majors. Emily was from Butte and had never been to college. She said she felt like she could talk to me and it was special because she was usually frightened of other women. I am open to liking anyone, and in particular people who seem to like me. I'm good at talking to weirdos. They think I'm not judging them. It's not true, I am, but I don't hold my findings against them.

We were at this restaurant called The Catalyst. All the servers are gay and it's like their entire life has led up to ensuring that you have a phenomenal dining experience.

"It's not that I have a crush on Trevor," Emily said.

"I didn't think you did," I said.

"It's not that. I'm in love with him."

"Oh."

"It's basically the worst pain you could possibly imagine. I look at him and I want to crawl into his lap like some animal. There's no dignity in it. It festers. Here's what it is. Imagine my heart is a clock and it needs to be wound with this one special key in order to keep time. Well, my brain has decided that Trevor is the key. It's a brain to heart problem, basically. I have, in effect, a broken heart. Because of my brain."

I couldn't relate and it upset me. It may be that I became an actress because I don't know who I truly am, but that's just a theory and impossible to confirm, so I try not to think about it.

"I don't know what to say," I said. "I'm really sorry."

"Admittedly," Emily said. "There are things I could do. I could stick hot poker in my ears or gouge out my eyes."

"Maybe just move out of the apartment?" I said.

“Why would I move out? I love that place, and I love Trevor. What are we going to do, cut Betsy in half?”

“You named the ferret Betsy?”

“I don’t want anything from you.” Emily said. “Just feel sorry for me.”

“So how did you come to live with Trevor?” I asked.

“Oh, well, we’re cousins.”

I tried to censor my face and failed.

“But I mean. Whatever. We hadn’t met before I came to Missoula. It’s not like we grew up together. The family isn’t close.”

I decided to pretend she hadn’t said that.

*

Boyfriends to me are like haircuts that I put up with until they grow out and I can try something new. My last boyfriend was a construction worker named Greg. His pants were always caked in plaster. He had dark forearms, a dark face, and an impossibly large, white belly. It was an experiment in dating non-traditionally handsome men, but eventually I grew bored with his smug satisfaction for the simpler things in life.

Trevor had told me that just the other day a friend of his told a story about being raped, and he’d wept for her. I thought I saw his pretty blue eyes gloss over, but later I found out that the other day meant “months ago” and that his eyes just did that sometimes, like he had dry eyes and a prescription for drops he used secretly at apt moments.

*

It was Friday night. Trevor had bought a pistol at a gun show and he took it out of its case and showed it to me. We were headed out to get drinks, but first the gun. Trevor was a

vegetarian with long eyelashes and a soft voice, but the voice got louder when he'd been drinking, and I didn't want him to see me jump and cower away when he cocked the thing and a piece of plastic came shooting out of the handle into his palm. "See," he said. "It isn't loaded," but I didn't know what loaded looked like.

"It's not coming to the bar with us, is it?"

We went to this dive-y place called The Golden Rose with photos of prizefighters on the walls and red lighting like a heat lamp. I kept taking off and on my sweater.

"Emily doesn't approve of the gun," Trevor said. "She says that weapons are the tools of violence and all decent men detest them."

"Are you worried that the gun makes you an indecent man?"

"I'm an artist," he said. "It's irrelevant."

He smiled, as if I was supposed to think he was kidding.

*

I met Trevor for the first time at a different bar called The Top Hat. If there's one thing Missoula has a lot of, it's bars. This one had a dirty floor and specialized in live music. Trevor and I had a stupid and obligatory conversation. He bought me a drink I didn't need and we made out in the parking lot, then I got the spins and ran back inside where I didn't puke, and I assumed that would be the last of it. But it's a small town and I saw him at a different bar the following weekend. We went back to my apartment and made love how I imagine snails do, slowly, and then we held each other and said all of those things. "I just got out of a relationship." "We should take this slow." I still had moving boxes around my bed. His favorite play was *Hamlet*. He said sometimes words affected him so much that his throat tightened and it hurt to breathe. This sounded like the one. We didn't take it slow. I don't know about him, but I never do.

*

Certain things nagged at me. There was the gun – why would a vegetarian poet buy a gun? We were in Montana, so I asked him, “Is it for hunting?”

“My God, Tristen. I could never shoot an animal.”

“Right,” I said.

“To look into its shiny black eyes and decide a thing like that? I couldn’t do it.”

I felt tremendous guilt over Emily, like she deserved him more. If it were a contest of want – which, it wasn’t – she would win. “Are you sure you don’t somehow cosmically belong with Emily?” I asked him.

“It’s confusing,” Trevor said. “I don’t want to get hurt.”

“I think you’re mixing up your relationship clichés.”

He took a deep drag on his cigarette, which I’d come to associate with deep thought. “Sometimes I just want to fucking castrate myself, you know?” He held the offending item in his hand. I think we both imagined what that would look like. Blood everywhere, eyes rolled back, body trembling, and what for?

I shook my head, a lot. “Don’t you know anything about women? It’s not that.” I pointed.

He climbed on top of me.

“It’s not that, exactly,” I said. I caught our reflection in a water glass on the nightstand, our bodies like wet seals, and Goddamn, we were good looking.

*

I came home late one night and found that my kitchen sink was clogged with murky water up to the top. I knew I should reach my hand down and try to unclog it, but it was gross. I

called Emily and asked her for advice, and she insisted on coming over right away, like I knew she would. I watched her legs hanging out from underneath the sink, clad in overalls and red converse all stars. It was erotic but I don't like women that way; it was because she looked like a man. When she was done I offered her twenty dollars.

“How about a kiss instead?” she said.

I was surprised.

“I just think it will taste good because you've been kissing him.”

She put her arms around my neck and kissed me twice. She put her tongue in my mouth. It tasted like a Jolly Rancher. I had the feeling that this was a significant moment that meant something and that I should have feelings about it, but mostly, I was just happy to have saved twenty dollars.

*

My boxes were finally unpacked and I lay in bed and worried about the gun. I thought I might lose my mind, pick the thing up suddenly, put the barrel in my mouth and pull the trigger. Trevor could take it out and shoot Emily and then himself; or just Emily; or Emily, all of his neighbors, and then himself. Emily could shoot me; or herself; or me and herself; or me and herself and Trevor, and so on. Any number of scenarios seemed possible, even likely. I felt certain the gun was a foreshadowing.

*

We were making love in Trevor's bedroom. A slit of blue light fell across his face as I hovered over top of him. He wore a silver cross around his neck that reminded me of Shakespeare. I put my hands on his chest and moaned.

“Oh, Tristen,” he said. “Tristen.” It embarrassed me a little but I liked it.

“Wait,” I said. “Did you hear something?”

“Don’t worry. It’s probably just Emily.”

“Emily’s here?”

“Don’t stop. It’s fine.”

What I’d heard was the sound of her weeping. Trevor reached down and touched me and I kept going and it felt good and terrible. The crying grew louder.

“She has to learn,” he panted.

*

Emily was on the floor of the attic, cutting sharks out of a glossy magazine with an Xacto knife, her tiny tongue sticking out the side of her mouth as she cut around the teeth. “It’s all about precision,” she explained.

“It’s the same with poetry,” Trevor said.

“Acting is believing,” I said.

“Every word is important. I’ll spend hours agonizing over a single word, or not even that, just where to place the word on the page.”

“Gertrude Stein,” Emily said.

“A piece of coffee!” Trevor shouted. “A rose is a rose is a rose. Oh Emily, I could kiss you. Hold on - you have to hear this thing I wrote the other day.” He ran out of the room.

“Drinks!” Emily shouted. She got up and busied herself with vodka and limes, and something ran over my foot. It was the ferret, Betsy.

Once when I was alone in the attic, the thing had crawled onto my chest, looked me straight in the eyes and hissed at me. It was the most terrifying moment of my life. When

Trevor got home he'd insisted it had never happened. "Ferrets don't hiss," he said. "And anyway, Betsy loves everyone."

Trevor stood in the center of the room, holding some pages in front of his face. He recited:

*There is no absence that can't be replaced,
and to listen is to join two things*

*When you listen, air
is something else.*

Air assumes the motion of the sea,

And you can hear it."

Emily looked at me, winked, and rolled her eyes.

*"Water isn't blue, and this alone
is mystery enough,*

*but mystery gets bigger
when color stands in for ideas.*

*Breakers
are when blue turns into white,*

then folds back into blue.

*They hide a blue that never was,
but you see blue!*

*And it's a perfect human fault—
a worthy piece of beauty*

you don't mind if you misread.”

It came to me then and I kicked over a glass of vodka on the table. “Trevor, you’re an ass.”

“I’m trying to read here,” he said.

“It’s fine,” Emily said. “There’s a lot of fucking vodka left, there’s no one going thirsty.”

“We heard that poem last week at The Top Hat. Your friend – Brad DeFries wrote it.”

“Oh, how is Brett?” Emily said.

“Brett Defries,” I said. “The curly haired boy with all the poems about God.” I couldn’t believe Trevor had stolen a poem from someone who wrote poems about God.

“We collaborated,” Trevor said.

“It’s fucking beautiful,” Emily said. “Beautiful!”

“It’s not over yet. There’s more.”

I felt as though I were losing my patience for something.

Emily and Trevor were phenomenal drinkers. They filled vodka to the brim as casually as water. Their idea of a mixer was a teaspoon of sugar and half a lime crushed down in the bottom. It felt like a vacation drink to me but all of Montana had the feeling of a vacation from something. I picked up my glass and drank down half of it. Trevor and Emily were sitting next to each other on the couch, poring over the words.

“The poem is about love,” Trevor said.

“But you don’t mention it once,” Emily said.

“I know.”

I ran to the bathroom for some reassurance and then remembered that theirs didn’t have a mirror. It was like an un-fun house. I came back to the living room. “You didn’t collaborate on shit,” I said. “You’re a fraud.”

“Emily, get the gun,” Trevor said. “Don’t let Tristen have it.”

“I never said I was going to shoot anyone.”

“She’s on a homicidal rampage,” he said. “She’ll kill us all.”

And Emily actually went and got the gun and I watched her uncock the thing again and again. She sent bullets flying out the side of it one by one.

“There’s a more efficient way to do that, Emily,” Trevor said.

“You keep it loaded in the house?” I said. “Emily, I thought you hated guns.”

“I took her out to the range last week,” he said. “Look at her, she’s a natural.”

Emily pointed the gun straight at Trevor’s chest.

“Emily, no,” Trevor said.

“If I can’t have you no one will.”

“Tristen, stop her!” Trevor said. “Grab the gun! Quick!”

Nearest I could tell, we'd stumbled into some sort of improvisational thing, but I didn't understand the rules.

Trevor grabbed the pistol out of Emily's hands. "The guilt is too terrible. I can't take it anymore!" He put the barrel in his mouth.

"Trevor, no!" Emily screamed. "Tristen, do something!"

I was beginning to suspect that I was a terrible actress.

Trevor put the gun to his temple. "Come on, Tristen, it's your turn. Try to stop me. Tell me everything I have to live for."

"Do it!" I screamed. "I never loved you! It's Emily I love. We've been lovers this whole time."

"Yes!" Emily shrieked.

"You cunts. I knew it. I'll shoot you both." He pointed the gun at Emily.

She puffed up her tiny chest against the barrel. "Do it," she said. She reached down and rubbed his crotch.

"Emily," I said.

"Are you going to stop me?"

"Yeah," Trevor said. "Are you going to stop her?"

I grabbed the thing out of Trevor's hands. It felt heavy and sinister. I had never held a gun before.

"Do it," Emily said. "Shoot us. I dare you." She put her arms around Trevor's neck. She whispered something, they giggled, and then she kissed him.

It seemed like things might be going too far. I saw the ferret sitting on the windowsill behind Trevor. It stood up on its hind legs, and it hissed. Symbolically, metaphorically,

somebody was going to get shot. I pointed the gun between the animal's shiny black eyes. "Take me out of this fucked up attic!" the ferret seemed to say. My boyfriend and his cousin had their tongues in each other's mouths. I aimed the gun straight at Emily's face and pulled the trigger.

But I'd never shot a gun before and the bullet hit Trevor instead. He spun out of Emily's mouth like a dancer and crashed backwards into the window. It cracked without breaking. Betsy squeaked and I dropped the gun.

"Jesus Christ, Tristen," Emily said. "Be fucking careful." She ran over and picked up the apparently loaded weapon.

And just to really lay it on thick, I stumbled towards the kitchen, felt my knees buckle underneath me, and fainted.

*

I sat up and rubbed my head and said, "Where am I?" because I think I thought we were still acting.

"Oh look," Emily said. "Rainbow-face is awake." She held a blood soaked towel against Trevor's shoulder. He was smoking a cigarette with his free hand. He looked bored.

I imagined smeared cherries across my lips, black drizzle, sea green and blue smudges around my eyes, and I knew I was guilty.

"How long was I out for?"

"I don't know," Trevor said. "Not long. Are you okay?"

Emily stomped around and sulked. The new thing was that she hated me now. (It may not have actually been a new thing.) The question was what to do next. Maybe no one had called the police and nothing would happen at all, but it seemed obvious that Trevor should be taken to the hospital, and I was not eager to explain myself to some cop.

“We’re too drunk to drive,” Trevor said.

“But that’s insane, right?” I said. “What about an ambulance?”

“It just grazed my arm. It’s really not that bad. The bullet is lodged in the wall. It’s like that movie.”

“I didn’t think anything would happen,” I said. That was a lie. I think I thought that Emily would explode into a pile of confetti, and, if nothing else, she wouldn’t have that brain/heart problem to deal with any more.

“I should have checked the gun before we started playing,” Trevor said. “It’s my fault.”

“Emily, you knew the gun was loaded.”

“I did not.”

“How many bullets did you leave in?”

“Two more,” she said. “One for each of us. I just wanted to leave all our options open.”

“I should go home,” I said. “I have to go home.”

The three of us looked outside through the cracked window. It was October. The mountain had a big concrete M on it, like a college thing, like M, for Emily. The hills glowed with wheat against the black, dead sky. It looked cold. It was warm when I’d left my house.

Trevor whimpered.

“Baby,” Emily said. She climbed into his lap. “Do you know that it kills me to see you like this? Do you know that I would swallow the bullet and let it explode inside my own stomach if I could?”

Trevor looked like he’d just put in eye drops, but he hadn’t. If you could freeze the moment in time, you might call it a turning point. I knew then that she would win because she could wait forever.

“Don’t go,” Trevor said. He patted himself down in a panic looking for his cigarettes, where he kept his brain. “This is hard for me to say.”

“It’s worse than that,” I said.

“Just go, you fucking drama queen,” Emily said.

“I hope you and your cousin are very happy.”

“Who told you we were cousins?” Trevor stood up suddenly and Emily toppled out of his lap, like a child. It was touching.

“Oh, well, Tristen and Trevor, that’s not incestuous,” Emily said.

“Calamity makes cousins of us all,” Trevor whispered.

“You didn’t write that!” I said.

“I never said I did, Tristen. God. You’re so mean.”

“So you’re not cousins?”

“Wouldn’t it be weird if we were?” Emily said.

“Totally,” he said.

I kicked a ferret on my way to the front door and I turned the knob.

“Tristen, please.” His eyes were wet again, but the drops were sitting right there on the windowsill behind him; it was impossible to know. “The only people for you are the mad ones. Don’t you know that?”

I thought for a long time before answering.

“No,” I said. “It’s not true.”

*

It was dark and cold and I was lost and didn’t have a jacket. It was pathetic. I wanted to make it to the bridge in order to maybe - but probably not - hurl myself off of it. That’s when I

saw my reflection in the movie theater's window. Damp clothing hung off my frame and my straw-colored hair wisped around my face. It was a scene from a sad film; a beauty queen with a broken heel running panicked across marble floor, but pristine and unbroken. Next I wanted to see how my face looked in the rippled reflection of the river. A homeless man who had camped out in the center of the bridge said to me, "Hey, Beautiful."

I turned towards the Technicolor hill, the M growing ever closer like I might crash into it, like there might be an earthquake and the thing would come tumbling down on top of me, but people don't get hurt in this city. Not really. Stars fell out of the felt black sky and melted on my skin, or else it was snowing, and I thought about how strange it was that I couldn't tell the difference.

The Neighbors

On a cold, dead street in the suburbs of Detroit, with your kids at their mother's, in the house you can't sell, between Christmas and New Years, with your business out of season and anyway, crumbling, you insisted on taking mushrooms, like for old times sake, like when we were in high school, and now it's "let's go wake the neighbors and tell them we love them."

God, I feel tired.

"We should be embracing one another. We should be making love in the street. Why do people shut themselves up in tiny boxes?" you beg me to tell you.

I've been where you are and I know where it ends, and it's here, and I don't want to talk about it.

"I just see love everywhere," you say. "In you, in me, everyone. I should call Michelle."

"Don't call your ex wife," I say. It's cold and it's late. I don't think it's ever been this late.

In the morning you'll feel differently. I promise you that. Icicles are not chandeliers, my friend. Tomorrow your tongue will feel dipped in lint, your truck will be stuck in the snow, and your neighbors will be too shy to help you, even if they wanted to.

It's not that you're wrong; there's just too much in the way and we can't all eat mushrooms all the time.

I have to hold you back by the sleeve, so complete are your childish notions of love, and just as I think you'll break away, the front door bursts open and a woman spills in to the living room with wild eyes and pursed lips to tell us how much she loves us, but especially you. She loves sports and understands exactly that thing you said about love.

Yeah right. You wish that happened.

Don't ask me to drive you anywhere because there's nowhere to go.

Ducks

When he broke up with D, just three weeks ago, his friends advised him to fuck a lot of women. “Not just a few women,” they said. “A lot of women.” It was the typical advice that men tend to give other men in times like these, but when he actually stopped to think about it, what the reality of that entailed, it made him a little queasy. Just the notion of confronting so many foreign bodies like that. His own body was disgusting enough. Pale and hairy, moist crevices, and the exhausting effort it can sometimes take to get to that stage with women... still, how many had there been since he and D broke up, three or four? He hadn't had to do anything to get this one. She'd scolded him for his bad behavior and in the same breath invited him back to her apartment. It was disgustingly easy, and her apartment was disgusting.

She was sort of beautiful, but crass. She looked uncomfortable in her body and had a weird gait. You could tell that she didn't think she was beautiful at all. It was the morning after. He wished he hadn't spouted a lot of bullshit about being a vegetarian and treating his body like a temple because now he was dying for a cigarette. They were sitting on her bed and staring at elaborate cut outs of birds she'd pasted to the walls. She must have done them months ago when she cared something about the way the place looked. Now they were sort of tattered and hanging off carelessly. There was a mallard and a female duck swimming together. The female duck swam ahead but the mallard was in the foreground.

“What do you suppose that says about men and women?” He heard himself ask her, although he didn't know why.

“They're just fucking ducks,” she said. She sounded bored or irritated. “It's not a treatise on male/female relations. The point is that they're cut out so carefully. It's an art, cutting them

out of the background with such precision. That's the point. It's not about how much you hate your mother."

Later they were on her front porch and he was irritated. He looked at her shyly. In the harsh light of morning they both looked ugly to him. She hugged him.

"God, even the way you hug is gross," he said.

"That's not true," she said. She sounded bored. "Kiss me on the cheek."

And he did.

My Cold and its Cure

Tyson brings this other guy with him when he picks me up for our date. The other guy is sitting in the backseat drinking PBR's out of a 12 pack one after the other, like someone eating popcorn.

"I hope you don't mind if Daniel comes along with us," Tyson says, but it's already done, so what would it matter if I minded? The deal is that Daniel is suicidal. It will be good for him to get out of the city in the fresh air, with friends. Tyson tells me all this as though the patient isn't sitting right there. I think this is just his style.

We're going way the fuck out of town to this saloon style bar that is also a hotel. They tell me that interesting things have happened there. I'm Meghan, and this is mine and Tyson's third time out.

Daniel doesn't seem so sad, and I tell him so. He's got a patchy half beard and unblinking, unmoving features, like he has a concussion maybe and he's tired. "I have addictions," he says. "I've slept with over a thousand women."

"You must stay up very late," I tell him. I think I'm funny but no one laughs.

He looks out the window at pine trees blurring past. "It doesn't make me happy."

I tell them all about my cold and its cure. I took 5,000mg of Vitamin C and drank three glasses of vegetable juice, plus a shitload of hot tea with honey and lemon, and I used the Nettie pot about 20 goddamn times.

"What's a Nettie pot?" Tyson wants to know.

"It's like this thing. It's for irrigating the sinuses. Mine is made of porcelain but they make other kinds. It looks like a genie's lamp."

"I've made a woman believe I was a genie," Daniel says.

“Really?” Tyson says.

And Daniel looks at me now from the back seat. He sort of winks without actually winking and I understand the challenges ahead and feel exhilarated.

At the hotel bar when everyone is drunk and Tyson has his back to us at the jukebox, Daniel reaches under the table and puts his hand between my legs and it’s expert. “I have a cure for your cold,” he says. I’m prepared for him to say something stupid like, “my cock,” or “my semen,” but he says, “love.”

“What about Tyson?” I ask, although I’d have done things with Daniel if he’d answered, “my semen” or “my cock” because I was still seduced from before.

After a night of stolen looks and placating the other one, we are back in our room, the one big room for 50 dollars we’re splitting three ways. Tyson falls into a loud snore, but not before whispering, “sorry we can’t fuck. I forgot about Daniel being here.”

“Come sit on my lap,” Daniel says in the dark. He’s in the corner and the light from outside gives him a silver lining. Otherwise he is all black. Daniel is cut out of felt and I go sit on him, expecting the lap to be fuzzy, two-dimensional.

There’s just a hard on there. There’s no magic. I thought I drank a lot but I wish then I’d had a lot more. He puts his hands in my hair and his eyes look like blinking buttons in the center, except for the terrible white that surrounds them. Still I’m smitten by the dry, quiet joke about genies and I still hate Tyson for not getting it.

He touches my hair and breathes loudly. “Shh,” I plead, but Tyson’s snoring only gets louder. Daniel breaks open the front of his pants like they’re Velcro and there it is. I think: a sword, a carrot. I make my face an exclamation and do my best.

But my cold makes it difficult. My eyes water and I can't breathe. He pushes down on my head harder and I gag and choke a little until I see colored balloon animals floating in my vision. In the drunk of it I don't panic; I feel like I'll be able to breathe any second now. I cough and bite down. He pulls my hair back, slaps me and then pushes me down on it again. "That's it," he says, tenderly. I don't know if I'm being raped or not. If I choose to be okay with it I'm not one of those girls with naïve notions of "I'm going to change him." If I'm cool with this, I'm liberated. It would be better if I could breathe through my nose and he didn't have large, snarled hands on my head.

I notice that Tyson isn't snoring. "Meghan," he says, as clear as a bell. Daniel takes his hands away and I turn around to see him sitting up in bed, staring at nothing. Tyson doesn't say anything else. I have a thought about miscalculation that I can't put my finger on. I just know that I've done it.

And I know now about the interesting things that have happened in this hotel, are happening still, and are yet to have happened, and how much it will mean later when my head is clear and I can think about it, and how often and sad and all the things I should have done differently but didn't.

The Significance of the Bear

You know very well one day at a time isn't going to last forever – not for someone like you. You feel trapped. When you go to the movies and the lights dim, the idea of two hours in a room with these strangers is enough to make you want to rush for the exit. You don't because you already know that you'll be just as weary out in the fresh open air of the parking lot. In this way it doesn't matter where you are or whom you're with; sooner or later you will always want out. Still, you have to keep doing things because you are a man, and that's what a man's life is made of. You moved from Michigan to Montana on the whim of a pamphlet and vague hope. A friend had told you, baselessly, that Missoula had the best meetings, and off you went into the pointless fucking void.

You don't have to be a Christian in Alcoholics Anonymous. You can be other things, so you tried out dime store, new age mysticism. It's hypnotizing to think that events have meanings, that thoughts become things. You started with *The Secret* and it was embarrassing. When you tried wishing for checks to come in the mail and they didn't, you looked into it. You worked your way backwards to the heart of the matter, which is that it's not enough to intend for things; you have to get your head buzzing right, and you have to be a good person and meditate and remember to say thank you, always, and still, even then, if the angels don't want you to have it then you can't have it. You despair in the bleak truth that there is always a catch.

When you were first made to admit that you were powerless over the sauce, you promised everyone you'd stick with it forever, but secretly, by forever you meant one year. It's about that time and a voice in your head calls, wanting to know whether you're planning on renewing your subscription.

Drinking a lot is like democracy: it's the worst, but what's the alternative? You felt sick and ugly most of the time, so you got more drunk and woke up broke and embarrassed. You got so embarrassed one night you told everyone you knew that you recognized you had a problem and you wanted to get better. Later you were like, "just kidding about that thing I said about being an alcoholic" but they were all, "no take backs." More or less.

You live in the Rattlesnake mountains, and every morning you drive into town, dreaming of accidental death. Yesterday up ahead of you in traffic you saw a brown bear piled into the back of a pick up. There was a cloth bandage around the bear's paw, applied with what you could only interpret as misplaced tenderness. For a moment you fell in love with the driver of the truck. Was it a homo moment? It wasn't love, you reasoned; it was admiration. (If it were romantic love it would be a valid and beautiful choice, but it wasn't.) The man was an unapologetic killer of beasts and he was in no hurry to escape.

You took a picture of the bear and you showed it to your new AA friends. 'Hey guys,' you suggested. 'Let's not talk about not drinking for a change.'

'That's a grizzly bear,' they said.

'Look at the way the nose turns up. Those are round ears, not pointed like a black bears. No doubt about it.'

'There's no hump,' someone argued.

'Too young for the hump. That is definitely a grizzly bear.'

They told you Grizzly bears are revered in Montana and it's always illegal to kill them. They decided you should report the bear to the state Fishing and Gaming Whatever. You were uneasy. Where you come from nobody calls the police on anybody.

'You can make out the license plate in the picture,' they said.

‘But look at the way the hunter nursed the paw,’ you argued.

‘That’s not a bandage,’ one of them said.

‘Nah, that’s just the tag. You have to tag animals before you take them out of the woods. It’s the law.’

‘Ironic,’ someone pointed out, helpfully.

You wanted to go around the circle and punch every one of them for telling you all these things you never wanted to know about hunting.

‘What’s the big difference between killing a grizzly bear and killing a black bear?’ you asked them, and then you realized it was stupid. ‘Because there are less of them?’

‘Yes,’ they said.

‘Well, I mean, it’s a respect thing,’ another added, but the reception for this comment was mixed.

It’s true that you don’t drink anymore or live in the Midwest, but you still can’t see yourself as the kind of person who would ever call an 800 number to report a crime. You try to imagine the right scenario. If it had been a naked man up there, phallus dangling, stripped of not just life but also dignity - Hell, if it had been a naked woman - you would hesitate. Perhaps they had it coming, and maybe not even in a ‘she was a real bitch’ way - maybe she came at him with a knife. Plus, why would a man have a human strapped so flagrantly to the back of his truck if it weren’t somehow legal? You do that sometimes - reorganize the entire world to fit one anomalous idea.

You tell everyone you’re going to call the wild life people, but you’re lying. You’re not going to. It’s the same way you’re lying when you say your name is Carl and you’re an alcoholic. You don’t believe it, not really. It’s not that you love drinking, it’s that you hate life.

You should say instead, “Hi, I’m Carl and I hate life.” And when you tell the others to keep coming back, the truth is you don't care either way.

What's the significance of the bear? You think about crossing the room to look it up in your spirit animal book, a relic from when you believed in things, but what would knowing do? Anyway, it's just as cold on that side of the room as it is over here. You try to draw connections between the two things: There's your alcoholism, a disease of the spirit, and there is the dead bear and your cowardice. Or indifference. Whatever. You try to weave it all together in a synthesis and nothing happens. You get caught up in the events of the day. A third thing comes up that doesn't match the other two things, then a fourth, until it all becomes one big thing again and you're back to not believing in magic.

You're standing in a church basement in the center of the room, fluorescent lights dangling overhead, surrounded on all sides by smiling men seated in metal folding chairs. They want to give you a keychain. The room is hot and you're sweating and all you can think is: what the fuck. Why.

Kristen Doesn't Like Surprise Parties

Anyone at all concerned with moose preservation in Talkeetna, Alaska was gathered in Partydress's apartment that fateful Saturday evening. Mary arrived just before eight and opened the door to a room full of partygoers jumping out from behind furniture with a, "Surpriiii- oh, it's Mary."

"Mark, hon, we really need to get someone to watch the door – this is getting a little ridiculous. Mary! How are you! Welcome to the party!" The hostess was all smiles and party dress, hence the moniker.

The apartment looked like a *Jetson's* estate sale, hard wooden floors and orange throw rugs that grew and pulsated under foot, a ficus in the corner with veins crawling up the wall and red light bulbs poking out of the greenery like little eyes – but then, Mary had taken drugs so it was impossible to know if this were a weird set up or just how the apartment always looked.

"I don't understand," Mary said. "Is this a surprise party?"

"Oh, no wonder!" Partydress laughed. "You didn't know! That is hilarious."

"Aye Matey," said her husband. "Can I get ye something to drink?" He had one arm wrapped up in his big maroon sweater, his lips curled, an invisible parrot. Mary sussed the whole thing out. Sweater wasn't actually a pirate; he was just pretending to be one, probably per some joke thrown out earlier. Mary prided herself on her skillful inference.

"I'll have a..." she paused to note the drugs rumbling in her stomach set to polish rocks. "Do you have any ginger ale?"

"Adorable," Partydress said. "Just adorable." She started clawing at Mary's sweatshirt, and this she didn't understand. "Oh, I'm sorry."

And Mary was sorry too.

“I just thought I’d take your jacket.”

“Oh!” Mary yelled. “No, this isn’t a jacket. This is my hoodie.” She put the hood up. It held itself together with safety pins and red yarn that made Mary feel safe.

Sweater handed her a slippery glass of ginger ale that looked better than a thousand suns, since no one needs a thousand suns. What would you even do with one? The couple stared at her. Mary looked down at her clothes. It was fall in Alaska, so, dark at seven thirty and just a little too cold – long johns, an ugly skirt matched with whatever, the hoodie, and yes, now she saw the problem. She was dressed like a hobo. The other guests looked nice. They stared at each other together, Partydress, Sweater, and Hobo, and in that triangle came to a profound understanding. If Mary’s clothing could speak it would have sounded: *bzzzzzzzzzzzz wrong answer!*

“So then, I should go?” Mary said.

“What!” Partydress damn near fainted with shock. “Kristen’s not even here yet. What time is it, Mark?”

“It’s just after eight,” Sweater said. “Anyway, Patrick said she already texted she was on her way. No one is going anywhere.”

The three girls from the front office ran over to Mary and pulled her towards the punch bowl. Unpaid interns, smeared in nighttime makeup, the girls whose names Mary couldn’t remember. Truckstop, Hopscotch and Buttercup, she decided to call them.

“Oh my God, Mary,” Hopscotch said.

“We’re so happy you came,” said Buttercup.

Truckstop, the prettiest: “we didn’t think you would make it.”

Mary knew what Truckstop meant. They didn't think she would make it because Hobos don't ordinary come to parties. Sometimes hobos wait outside of parties or restaurants for swans made of tinfoil, but usually they don't come inside, so this was the big event.

"Well, Patrick said that Kristen would be here," Mary said.

"Don't you think she's going to be surprised?" Hopscotch or Buttercup said. One of the un-pretty ones, anyway, so it meant less.

"Kristen doesn't like surprise parties," Mary said.

"Isn't it fabulous?" Partydress called from across the room, rushing over with ginger ale in hand. Mary quickly set the first drink down on the windowsill behind her, marveling at the cosmic profundity of two sweating glasses based on a basic misunderstanding, how delicious they would feel down her throat. She wanted to cry at the great abundance of the universe, to start a conversation with Partydress about the Myth of Lack, that in fact, they weren't lacking anything, not moose or ginger ale, that they were all one beating heart. But there was the doomed party to consider.

"No," Mary said. "It's not fabulous."

"Kristen deserves something nice to happen to her," Truckstop nodded, soberly.

Everyone in the room murmured their agreement that the idea of a surprise party for Kristen was fabulous.

Since coming to Talkeetna, Alaska back in May, Mary had made two friends: Kristen and Patrick. Then Patrick turned into a secret lover in the utility closet at the Talkeetna Historical Museum, making just the one friend. She spotted his gangly frame around the corner in the kitchen, talking to a short, bald man she didn't recognize. Mary didn't want to meet anyone

new, and what was with that weird stranger? Short, bald, a cane with a skull perched on top where the eagle should be, and yes, a plaid sports jacket.

At the sound of a toilet flushing, Mary prepared herself for David Lynch to swing through the bathroom door riding a llama, amidst everyone's nonchalant faces. Seriously, it would have seemed normal. It was just a field biologist with curly blonde hair in tight ringlets that glistened. Curly must have run wet hands through his hair instead of drying them on a towel. Mary congratulated herself again on this uncanny ability she'd acquired, to know everything. She stared down at the orange carpet, long and shaggy between her toes. The fibers grew little fingers and slid up her leg. She thought she heard someone, the carpet moaning low. It was erotic, and then suddenly terrible.

"You don't understand," Mary told them. "Kristen doesn't like being surprised."

"No, honey. It's just a bit of fun." Partydress touched Mary's elbow and she pulled it away frightened, as if the hostess had fingers made of hot embers. "She's going to love it."

That voice, like talking to a child. She remembered kindergarten. There was a square of carpet almost just like this, but ruby red, not orange. That carpet sounded like fat strawberries plopping off the vine. In this apartment, this *Logan's Run* film set of a love nest, all she heard was the howling of sick dogs. She thought maybe something should be done.

The room got quiet, and everyone turned to look at Mary. Somewhere, a needle scratched off the record. She decided then that she hated them. She decided to go to the kitchen and find Patrick and ask him if he would sneak out the back door with her so they could find Kristen, to warn her to stay away from this doomed party where Hobos need not enter.

She took one step forward, and Curly the field biologist grabbed her by the other elbow with hands as cold as Satan. "Mary," he said. "The new director is dying to meet you."

Mary and Curly had never been close, so this sudden familiarity struck her as suspicious, maybe even terrifying. Also, she didn't know what the words 'the new director is dying to meet you,' meant. The new director of *Logan's Run*? How could such an old film have a new director? She remembered her job. That she was at a work party. Her name was Mary, she was 28, and she was such a little fucking kid, so petrified of her peers that she did not save for later, but rather immediately dropped the LSD the fat Indian with the feather dangling from her hair had traded her for a ride to the liquor store. She made these deals with herself all the time. Mary, if you do your taxes, you can eat not one but all the cupcakes. If you go to this party, you can fall off the wagon. After you eat all the cupcakes, you can vomit in the sink.

Get it together, Mary, she begged herself. You're here, working in Alaska. Your rich uncle got you the job. They were trying to save you, remember? You're surrounded by land, and on that land, mountains, beyond that, a coastline sharp as daggers, then a freezing cold ocean, and you are utterly alone. The new director is dying to meet you. He's right in front of your face. His jaw clamors like a ventriloquist's dummy with no master! He's shaking your hand, Mary. Try not to hold it like a dead fish.

"I'm Mary?" She guessed.

"It's great to meet you," he beamed. He was handsome. He was conspicuously handsome, with a green drink in hand that complimented his gray suit. The glass emitted a vapor, like a haunted house special effect, a sinister potion, and she felt her eyes well up with tears.

"You're the copy editor from Michigan, right?"

The new director! This was the guy, the one whose ominous arrival had been chattered about for weeks following the disgraceful exit of the *old* director. Mary didn't understand why

the director of a Moose Preservation Non Profit Organization in Talkeetna, Alaska should have such a rugged, wilderness jaw-line, such thick, wavy hair, round, straight teeth and plump but chiseled cheekbones. It seemed to her that a terrible mistake had been made – a mix-up at the post office had sent them this man, and an Italian underwear company had received their bearded, wolf-shirt clad director.

“It’s really great to meet you. Cindy tells me you’re good friends with Kristen. Wow, a big to-do, eh? Can’t wait to meet her, too.”

Overflowing, exploding, breaking into a thousand marble pieces and rolling ecstatically on the floor in frenzied enthusiasm, what a load of unadulterated dogshit. His face looked like dewy wood. Brown eyes and black pupils leading down to nothingness. If you jumped inside of them, Mary was certain you’d never hit the bottom. She wanted to shake him, to find so much as a rattle inside.

“I hope you like crying women, because she’s going to hate this.”

He made his brows furrow into concern, and he modulated his voice to deliver a gentle contradiction. “No, I’m sure Kristen will really appreciate how much all of her friends care about her. You know, a little bit of fun.” He brought the steaming potion to his mouth and sipped it, the way people who don’t have problems with drugs or alcohol sip things, as if to say, ‘look Mary, this is how you do it. Casual, fun, not crazy.’ The New Director kept talking. “A chance to kick back for all of you, especially after such a disappointing mating season.”

The bastard imposter was taking jabs at the spring calves. Why would they send someone who hated moose? He clearly hadn’t read the multi page, heavily annotated article she’d written for the department website about the lack of water runoff from the higher peaks into the valley after a particularly mild winter season, how that effected the trout populations,

and in turn, the bears, the wolves, the trees and the grasshoppers – *oh my god, Mary, you're a copy writer for a Moose preservation Non Profit Organization in Talkeetna, Alaska, how the fuck did this happen?* She looked around the room. The walls and furniture turned to dust and left nothing but crude blueprints.

Partydress moved frenetically from person to person, straightening vases, her heart beating like a little bunny. Her eyes should have been placed on either side of her head. Partydress grew up with an alcoholic mother and all she wanted was for everyone to be happy, the way she wished her own life was back when she was a little girl, when she had no control, and that's why there's never, ever a run in Partydress's stockings. She would paint her legs a sheer nude if she could.

When Truckstop moved, the others followed her like ducklings. Hopscotch had been prettier when they were younger but something flipped, a case of stolen identity, and ever since, every night she dreamt of murder. Buttercup dreamt of tying Truckstop up and licking powdered sugar off of her skin, but she misinterpreted the dream to mean she had a weight problem. Mary wanted to go to her and whisper in her ear, 'it's not a problem, it's an opportunity.'

The bald, short man with the plaid jacket and the skull cane, he wanted everyone to think he hadn't spent most of his adult life in and out of institutions, that he'd had friends, lovers, serious girlfriends, and he wasn't just invited to this party out of family obligation. Lord knew he was someone's cousin or uncle.

Curly was happy to be a field biologist. He worked hard his entire life and he thought the spinach dip was fabulous. He wanted to remember to ask the hostess for the recipe.

Awkwardly handsome, tall and gangly Patrick. He loved Mary, but she frightened and confused him, and he didn't want to end up married to some weirdo. He didn't want the world to

think he was a weirdo too, although he secretly suspected he was. Mary tried to assure him through telepathy not to worry, that he wasn't one, and also to forget about marriage because nothing ever works out.

Seeing all of them like that, so plainly, like a dress caught in the doorframe and ripped off on prom night, like the way she felt the first time she saw her dirty fingernails under a microscope – then, suddenly, she loved them again.

Except for The New Director. The others were complicated messes, leaning casually, affected against the plastic film-set furniture, all with a thousand different strategies bouncing through their heads on how best to get the most love out of this life, but The New Director couldn't touch solid objects. The New Director walked through walls. He had an automated, invisible teleprompter floating in front of his eyes that told him how to project what it looks like to think and feel, and oh, Mary was on to him.

“Don't you think?” The New Director asked, regarding a statement she'd long forgotten.

Mary decided to try the truth on for size. “When I look inside you I don't see anything. Like, there's no soul.” Clichéd perhaps, but she wondered how The New Director would respond to nut-job metaphysics.

A microscopic panic flash in the eyes, a hint of something, like computer virus blocking software, whirring, noticing the problem, quickly correcting itself, and then wiping the indiscretion from the cache like it never happened. “Oh?” he chuckled. “I hope it hasn't run off somewhere.”

“You don't understand. I'm not being cute.”

“Oh, but you’re being a little cute, aren’t you?” The New Director pulled out the big guns. He thought, ‘I’ve distracted women with sex before, this could work,’ but it was too late. Mary had known soulless men, and this was one of them.

Patrick grabbed Mary’s hand and pulled her into the doorframe of the kitchen. His hand was warm, which meant that hers were cold and clammy. She tried to pull away to wipe it off on her skirt, to relieve him of this wicked atrocity, but he wouldn’t let go. She leaned against the doorframe and he towered over her, his other hand resting above her head. It was very good-looking of him. He looked into her eyes, and a kind of unscrambling took place. She changed her mind on the subject of marriage.

“Mary, I... what’s wrong with you? Why are your pupils so huge? Are you fucked up?”

Mary opened and closed her mouth. She felt thirsty for that ginger ale.

“Never mind, it doesn’t matter. Mary, I have to tell you something.”

Another cliché, but it’s true: her knees went weak.

“Okay, everyone!” Sweater called out. “Kristen is coming up the walkway, for real this time. Get in your places.”

“No,” Mary said, to no one. “No, no, no.”

“It’s okay,” Patrick kissed her on the cheek. “We’ll talk about this later.” He unlaced their fingers and Truckstop dragged him behind the couch. The others giggled behind her. Curly’s head poked out from behind the fichus. The short, bald man with the plaid jacket and the skull-topped cane opened the closet door, and Kristen walked in.

“Suuuurprise!”

Mary hadn’t hidden, and she didn’t yell surprise. She looked at Kristen’s face. Her best friend, Kristen. Pretty long hair and a red dress. She wore dresses every day, something about

not liking the feel of pants. She twirled her yellow hair whenever she talked to you and took care to cover her cleavage with scarves. Kristen looked at Mary, predictably horrified.

“Kristen, I’m sorry.” Mary tried to emote this with her eyes, but it was impossible to know if she got the message.

A pregnant pause, as they say.

Kristen covered her face with her hands, ran into the bathroom and slammed the door shut behind her.

“Oh, no. Kristen...” Partydress whimpered. She was devastated.

“What’s going on?” Hopscotch or Butterscotch said. “Where did she go, what happened?”

“I told you,” Mary said, again, to no one. “I told you Kristen doesn’t like surprise parties.”

One of the guests stepped out of the closet with what police would later report as being a .50 caliber Desert Eagle, chrome with a 6” barrel and 7 round magazine. The room erupted into confused chaos. The party guests dove back into their original hiding places. Gurgled gasps and screams, calls of ‘what on earth’ and ‘oh my god’ followed.

Well look who just caught up, Mary thought to herself. *I told everyone this party was doomed, and now they’re all so surprised.* And that’s why she didn’t move from her spot in the doorway. She didn’t put her hands in front of her face and her fingers weren’t blown off in the standard “defensive wounds” style that was so in vogue that night. The murderer cocked the gun and pointed it at Mary. The bullet went through her tattered black hoodie, the one that made her feel safe, and fragmented inside her stomach.

She felt warm sand under her bare feet. Waves lapping against the shore. Seagulls. The salty air. She wasn't in Talkeetna, Alaska anymore. She saw a slideshow of old familiar faces. Her mother baking bread in the kitchen as Mary pulled on her pant leg. She saw her childhood best friend, Dylan, the one that drowned one summer, but he was not drowned. He was alive and smiling. Somewhere, she felt confident, there were plenty of Moose, tapping their little hooves on the floor and turning their heads comically to fit gigantic, felt covered antlers through doorways. She saw them sitting up like humans, smoking cigarettes and playing cards. It was funny. Somewhere, in the deep recesses of her mind, Mary laughed. Her guts spewed out like a Rorschach test on the wall behind her. Her knees buckled, and with a last gasp, Mary's lifeless body toppled to the ground.

The only survivor at the party that night was Kristen. When she'd heard the first gunshot she felt frightened and confused. She didn't know what to do. She considered running back out into the party, you know, heroics, to jump in front of the bullets or overtake the gunmen, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. With shaking hands, she pried open the bathroom window and tumbled out into the cold, Alaskan air, and on a broken ankle she didn't feel until days later, hobbled down the street to get help.

As for the rest of them: legend has it they found the three girls tangled together. A single bullet travelled through all three of their temples, serious JFK conspiracy shit. Hopscotch's hands were purportedly strangled around Truckstop's neck. Butterscotch's tongue was lodged in Truckstop's ear, again, allegedly.

Patrick died alone with the warm hands he used to cover his face blasted into a million pieces. His fallen frame took the shape of a gingerbread man, conveniently, like a crime scene chalk-line.

They found Partydress and Sweater together on their knees, their fingers laced in prayer and their bodies toppled forward on the kitchen floor. The killer pointed the gun straight into Partydress's temple. It didn't happen instantly; there was likely some desperate pleading beforehand, as evidenced by the salty tears staining her cheeks. Sweater too walked the plank, yo, ho, ho! No. Nobody was left to make the joke, and honestly it's not at all funny. It turned out they were Mormons, and afterward the media, particularly the Mormon community made a big to-do about the couples enduring love and the strength of their faith. They believed they'd done everything right and caught the comet to the planet hidden behind mars or whatever it is. As an added bonus, and not to lay it on too thickly but it's true – Partydress had been pregnant with twins.

“I did everything I could.” The New Director read the lines off the teleprompter in a tortured, raspy voice that proved to be his last.

“Shh, Shh,” The nurse told him, with tears in her eyes. “I know,” she said. “I know.” That was the angle the newspapers went with, the heroic acts of The New Director. It was said that he'd played dead in the corner after suffering a series of devastating but not immediately fatal wounds. A bullet grazed the side of his head and shattered a framed picture of a daffodil on the wall, as if to foreshadow the barrage of sympathy cards that doubtless followed.

After the killer surveyed every room and felt satisfied with the carnage, he put the barrel in his mouth and left a blood splattering behind him that looked sort of like antlers.

But back to The New Director's heroism: he hobbled through the room, and through blurry eyes obscured with copious tears, found only the field biologist still breathing. The New Director pried his bloody fingers off the trunk of the fichus and cradled his curly head in his lap. It was still glistening. The field biologist had been literally “shot through the heart.” When the

ambulance came to rush The New Director to the hospital, he told them Curly's last words had been, "I miss my mother."

"Will you tell her," The New Director begged them. "Will you tell her he said that?"

No one can ever know whether the field biologist actually said that, but the bloody footprints tracked through the apartment on the thick orange carpet corroborated the rest of his story. The New Director eventually died from blood loss, but with the official record showing that to the bitter end, despite such unspeakable horror, he always said and did the right thing.

So Mary was right about some things, but not all. If someone asked her beforehand, she would have predicted it was The New Director that went postal and murdered everyone that night, but no. She'd underestimated the short, bald man in the plaid sports jacket and the skull-topped cane. It's true he used to care what people thought of him, whether or not they knew he'd been in and out of institutions or if he'd ever had a girlfriend, but eventually something snapped or withered away and he stopped caring. Some doomed persons are just born with less than the rest of us, and by the night of that party, he was all out of love. No one was there to ask her, but if they had been, that's what Mary would have said into the microphone. In those last moments, she loved everyone in the room. She didn't need to hear what Patrick had to tell her, she already knew. Even the soulless New Director. He didn't get it at the time, but he would, she was sure. The blood splattered everywhere; every ounce of carnage, for Mary, each droplet took the shape of tiny hearts. On the leaves of the ficus. Smearred in the eyes of the dead. Mixed invisible in the red punch, all of it: love, love, love, love, love. And that, if for no other reason, made the doomed surprise party a resounding success.