Strike anywhere

Katherine Margaret Saunders

Follow this and additional works at: https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/etd

Recommended Citation
Saunders, Katherine Margaret, "Strike anywhere" (2018). Graduate Theses, Dissertations, and Problem Reports. 3959.
https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/etd/3959

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by The Research Repository @ WVU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Theses, Dissertations, and Problem Reports by an authorized administrator of The Research Repository @ WVU. For more information, please contact ian.harmon@mail.wvu.edu.
Strike Anywhere

Essays

Katherine Saunders

Thesis submitted
to the Eberly College of Arts and Sciences
at West Virginia University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

Masters of Fine Arts in
Creative Nonfiction

Christa Parravani, MFA, Chair
Anthony Swofford, MFA
Mary Ann Samyn, MFA

Department of English

Morgantown, West Virginia
2018

Keywords: Appalachia, creative nonfiction, feminism, Ohio, personal essays
Copyright 2018 Katherine Saunders
ABSTRACT

*Strike Anyway*

Katherine Saunders

*Strike Anyway* is a collection of fourteen creative nonfiction essays, spanning twelve years in the author’s life—from adolescence to Saunders’s late-twenties. These essays span several locations: Wadsworth, Ohio; Athens, Ohio; and Morgantown, West Virginia. *Strike Anyway* tackles such varied subject matter as sexual violence and gender inequality, romance, friendship, natural history, regional history, and true crime. Flash essays, braided essays, and more account for this non-chronological account of one writer’s coming-of-age.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thesis Preface</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red Smock Girls</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As-Is</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good Boy</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting in Trouble</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Coefficients of Being and Doing</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basin Street Blues</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haint</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bile</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cadillac Hill</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fire Opals</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Girlfriend Experience</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Nice Place to Grow Up</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magic Cicadas</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lionel</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Strike Anywhere is a collection of fourteen essays, which trace twelve years of my life, from adolescence through the present-day. In the manuscript’s pages, I work a crappy job at K Mart, fall in love a few times, and live in a haunted house (and a place that only feels haunted). I’m taught chemistry by a serial killer’s father. I vomit bile from grief. Grandmas and dogs die—as they typically do. Through both long-form and flash essays, I unpack what it means to be a teenage girl, growing up in a small Ohio town. Sometimes the essays’ realizations and confessions are funny; in other instances, they’re devastating.

Strike Anywhere is arranged thematically as opposed to chronologically. This decision is a less-predictable approach, and my manuscript is ultimately more interesting for readers who might otherwise tire of a straightforward retelling of my life’s major plot points. I’ve borrowed this strategy from other collections I admire: The Boys of My Youth by Jo Ann Beard, The Wrong Way to Save Your Life by Megan Stielstra, and We Are Never Meeting in Real Life by Samantha Irby. As my essays swing back and forth through time, readers can trace the collection’s emergent themes, unspooling how events from adolescence have affected the adult narrator.

The majority of my essays are focused on both platonic and romantic relationships. In “Red Smock Girls” and “Getting in Trouble,” I describe my attempts to define myself in relation to other young women my age. For teenagers, trading stories of sexual experiences can seem like a kind of cultural currency, and in these two essays, I expose the divide between those “in the know” and the inexperienced. Additionally, in essays such as “Bile” I celebrate positive female friendships; many of the female characters recur throughout the collection—a testament to how profoundly women have impacted my life.
I never used to conceive of my writing as political, but recently my feelings have shifted. Daniel L. Ulin’s review of Megan Stielstra’s *The Wrong Way to Save Your Life* describes a prescient moment in the collection:

In one of the book’s most powerful sequences, [Stielstra] remembers being asked, during a college writing class, to define her attitude toward her work. “If your writing is political,” her teacher told the students, “stand against that wall . . . If it doesn’t have anything to do with politics, stand against the other wall.” Stielstra opted for the latter, explaining, “I write love stories.” A gay student and a woman of color, standing at the opposing wall, responded that they did the same. “To this day,” Stielstra writes, “I struggle to explain what happened in that moment. All of the clichés apply: lightbulb, lightning, ton of bricks . . . It was the first time I’d considered how a person could be perceived differently based on their identity.”

As a white, middle-class, heterosexual woman, I won’t claim that my own essays on sex and love carry the same need for visibility as Stielstra’s classmates’ stories do. But writing a love story doesn’t simply mean that my work is divorced from political engagement.

   In fact, in most of my essays on love, I’m also writing intimately about place. The concept of home is deeply political at its core, critical in informing how we negotiate our identities. This theme of home is woven throughout the collection, and several of my essays—“Red Smock Girls,” “Haint,” and “A Nice Place to Grow Up”—directly address “home,” which was a series of places for me: Wadsworth, Ohio; Athens, Ohio; and Morgantown, West Virginia.
My exploration of home is closely entwined with discussions of gender, and in turn, the omnipresent threat of sexual and domestic violence. For women, in particular, our perceptions of our homes are likely shaped by how safe we feel in the places we inhabit. As my essays describe, our physical locations also frequently dictate our choices in profession, in romantic partners, in reproductive matters, and in our ability to leave.

Megan Stielstra’s work has given me permission to stop dismissing my voice and experiences. In my best essays, I move beyond mere self-reporting and aim to articulate more universal concerns about the world around me. This is true of “The Girlfriend Experience,” which marks an end to, as the collection has traced, an unhealthy and unequal relationship. This is also true of “Cadillac Hill” and “A Nice Place to Grow Up,” which both discuss the consequences of what should have been an innocent late-night ride with a family friend. Another undercurrent in my essays is a thread of anger. Initially I dismissed my rage as nothing more than “teenage angst,” but more recently, I’ve realized how this diminishes some of my most difficult experiences.

In many essay collections I admire, I’ve observed how the author uses the book’s closing piece, not just to tie up what preceded, but to also gesture towards future work. My concluding essay, “Lionel,” is more research-driven than other essays in Strike Anywhere. In this essay, I recount my interactions with Lionel Dahmer, the father of notorious serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer. Through telling Lionel’s story, I scrutinize my own fascination with serial killers and true crime—and I interrogate my own anger. One way for writers to articulate something universal is to broaden an essay’s scope, and incorporating research allows me to achieve this. Ultimately, “Lionel” is indicative of the kind of writing I hope to produce in the future, still decidedly personal, but perhaps a little less self-interested.
So how does a writer know when her work is done? It’s a question I’ve pondered through most my writing life, as I’ve sat torturing the same sentence for the sixtieth time. I didn’t have a satisfying answer when I recently revised an essay I first began outlining almost seven years ago—to the point where I no longer recognize the original, naïve narrator who first gave that essay its shape, but not its eventual voice. What I know for certain, now, is that my work will not be finished on April 26th, when I submit this manuscript to the College of Arts and Sciences. If this conclusion sounds like an apology or excuse for sloppy, unrevised work, that’s couldn’t be further from my intention. In fact, I’m quite proud of the essays comprising *Strike Anywhere*.

One of the most valuable things I’ve learned from my time in this program is that our work as writers is never done. Our writing fails the moment we stop ruthlessly scrutinizing our work; when we accept imperfect turns of phrase and incongruous jumps in logic; when we allow ourselves to dart away from unpacking difficult, complex material for fear of going there; or when we cease reflecting on how we’ve grown (and sometimes how we haven’t). I will continue to be a student of writing long after I’m named a “Master,” and my manuscript, *Strike Anywhere*, is a reflection of both the skills I’ve refined during my time in the MFA program at West Virginia University—and what I have yet to learn.
Red Smock Girls

“If you’re still clocked in, you’re not supposed to be hanging around the break room,” Judy, the HR bitch barked. She swept from her glass-paneled office, a menacing tower of permed hair. Her curls were tight, springing close against her skull. “Quit gabbing and get to work,” she said, slamming her door.

“I guess we’d better get back out there,” my coworker, Brianna said. She sighed. Brittany, another red smock girl, rolled her eyes. I adjusted my nametag and followed them back into the store’s grimacing mouth.

The K Mart break room always smelled of cigarettes, even though employees were forbidden from smoking within 500 feet of the store.

“You can go to your cars if you want to do that,” Manager Carole had said. Brittany had done just that; I could see her pack of menthols peeping from her pants pocket. During her breaks, she listened to the radio and blew smoke rings. I wondered how she purchased cigarettes because we were both only seventeen.

When I had fifteen or thirty minutes to myself, I heated congealed ravioli in the communal microwave that bore what seemed like a decade’s worth of splatters. I’d sit with my sad meal and kick the unreliable television. The television picked up only the most basic channels and a couple of them were in Spanish. I liked watching reruns of Degrassi, a Canadian teen soap opera. The teens on that show had bigger problems than mine—unplanned pregnancies, abusive parents, eating disorders, and drug addictions. I just had a job I couldn’t stand and a boyfriend I didn’t know how to dump.
I took the job at K Mart after I ran over my neighbor’s mailbox. That morning, I woke to find that frost had settled on my windshield—the first truly cold day in November. I was always running late to school and didn’t bother to defrost my windshield. Instead, I drove with my head stuck out the driver’s side window, hoping for the best, colliding with the Storms’ mailbox at the bottom of our street. My black Ford Taurus was unscathed. The Storms’ mailbox lay in splinters on the devil’s strip.

“Leave them a note,” my mother said, exasperation rising in her voice. “And start looking for a job.” I was surprised to learn that the Storm family’s mailbox cost eighty dollars, more money than I had in my bank account. After applying to several positions—Target, White House Chicken, and Bob Evans for a hostess gig, I discovered that The Big Red Hell was the only place that wanted me. I accepted the job one week before Thanksgiving. With minimal training, I was flung at a cash register, to face the crowing of Black Friday shoppers. Every day, I balled my fists deep into the pockets of my red smock, scowled, and loathed my register’s insistent slam: opening, closing, and opening again.

The other cashiers, all girls or women, shared my bad attitude. Brianna, Brittany, Meredith, Robin, and one-armed Jennifer. I wouldn’t have wanted them for friends under ordinary circumstances, but under the store’s relentless florescent lights I loved them. We complained about our bosses, our customers, and the mean grannies who worked at the service desk. We flirted with the 0-1s, boy employees who spent most of their time in the cavernous stock room, handling new merchandise. They seemed to have more fun at their jobs than we did, sliding down the freight chute and even escaping the store to retrieve shopping carts from the parking lot. We often paged them from our registers, asking them to look up a price or to mop up
spilled soda. We giggled into our phones, waiting for a glimpse of them. They smelled like sawdust and ammonia. They fascinated us.

Girls couldn’t be 0-1s. We were 0-2s, the public face of the store.

“Smile, always smile!” Manager Carole instructed us, her own smile stiff and forced.

“Why can’t I be an 0-1?” I asked her once.

“That’s just not the way we do things here,” she said.

The sofa in the break room was dingy, grey as the pails of dirty mop water the 0-1s lugged around the store. The sofa was stained and apparently burned, as though someone had been stubbing cigarettes out on the upholstery. I asked where the sofa had come from, but nobody knew. It had just always been there, for as long as anyone could remember. Once, I propped my feet on the sofa, relieved to rest my swollen ankles for a few minutes after hours spent standing upright at my register.

“I can’t believe you,” Margie, the surliest of the service desk grannies, had mouthed, glaring at me. She was middle-aged, fond of blue eye shadow. Her hair was styled like Dolly Parton’s, over-teased and too big, too grand for K Mart. “Have a little respect and get your feet off that couch!” Stunned, I swung my feet, planting them on the mottled linoleum floor.

Someone was always screaming at the red smock girls crowding the break room. Once, Brittany brought in an issue of Cosmopolitan. She read an article, “Bad Girl Sex: 69 Spicy Secrets to Blow His Mind,” to Brianna, a couple of 0-1s and me: Brittany was blonde. Her eyes were heavily lined. My parents would have never allowed me to wear that much make up. Under Brittany’s red smock, the shirts she wore were low cut. Her breasts were always threatening to spill out, and I could tell that the 0-1s hoped that they would. They openly admired her, the way
she swung her hips when she walked about the aisles of the store. But Brittany didn’t simply walk—she flounced, she strutted.

“Are G-spots real though?” I’d asked earnestly, searching her face after I looked up from the article she’d passed around the room. The 0-1s snickered at me. Brittany smiled, but not unkindly.

Our conversation lured Judy from her office. She snatched the magazine.

“Show a little decorum! And Brittany, I’ve warned you about your shirt before. Pull it up.” Brittany tugged at her top, but only managed to expose more skin.

I only realized later that no one had answered my question.

Brianna and I worked the closing shift together one night in December. The store was dead. We compared grades on our papers for Mr. Singleton’s class; we had just finished reading *The Great Gatsby*. Tyler, one of the 0-1s, mopped the floor in front of the locked cigarette case.

“That guy is back again,” he said. “I saw him when I brought in the shopping carts.”

“He’s nuts,” Brianna said, knowingly. The man in question had been sleeping in the parking lot since Black Friday, hoping the store would restock Wii gaming systems. Was the Wii for him? His children? Didn’t they miss their father? Were they dozing in their beds as he slept on salt-strewn concrete? We knew nothing about him, only that he was disappointed every morning.

“I don’t understand why he doesn’t just sleep in his truck,” Brianna said.

“Or why he doesn’t just call the store,” Tyler said.

“When are we getting the next shipment?” I asked.
“That’s the thing—we might not ever get one,” Tyler said, shaking his head. He said the service desk grannies had explained this to the man. But he still came back.

“What an idiot!” Brianna said, sucking on her tongue ring.

“I’m ready to check out,” a customer announced, appearing at my register. I turned around to see Alex, my boyfriend, leaning against a rack of tabloids with headlines describing how an Arizona woman had been impregnated with an alien fetus.

“Hi,” I said. My lips curled—more sneer than smile.

“I never see you anymore,” he said, sliding a pack of red licorice whips down the check-out lane.

“I’m working a lot,” I said, ringing up the candy. Even though I hated my job, I was glad for the excuse, too. Alex and I had been together for a couple of months. The new kid at school, Alex had recently arrived from North Carolina. In gym class, since out names were alphabetically close, we were frequently partnered for activities: badminton, football, and weight lifting. He told me that his mother had thrown his father out of the family’s new house. Another woman was involved. Now, his mother was working part-time at the library, but she spent most of her free time crying in her bedroom over Alex’s father. Alex was lanky and soft-eyed. And after his parents split up, he looked perpetually wounded.

On our first date, he’d taken me to dinner at the Taco Bell where he worked. We ate quesadillas and at the end of the night he asked me to go to the Homecoming dance with him. I said yes, not because I really wanted to go with him, but because no one had ever asked me before.

On the night of the dance, I’d worn a sequined gown. He paid for my expensive meal at a restaurant in downtown Akron. We kissed at the end of the night, a kiss more teeth than lips or
tongue, a kiss that did not render me knock-kneed and giddy. Before I started working at K Mart, Alex would help with my chemistry homework. We’d work in my parents’ basement after school. Invariably, Alex slid his hand up my skirt, grasping my thighs, then reaching higher. He wanted me to touch him back.

“When you see it, you’re gonna want to jerk it,” he had said, trying to guide my hand to a strange bulge in his pants. I wasn’t convinced, but I let him dry hump me on the sofa. Feeling crushed beneath him, I softly moaned because it seemed like the right thing to do. I closed my eyes; I couldn’t stand to look at him as he writhed and bucked on top of me.

At my check-out lane, Alex handed me money for the licorice whips, his brows furrowed with disappointment.

“We’ll talk about this problem later, then,” Alex said.

“Don’t forget your candy,” I said, bagging the licorice whips.

“They’re yours,” he said, sadly, before shuffling through the store’s automatic doors.

A few days after buying me the red whips, Alex cornered me in the store again. We stood in the Seasonal/Miscellaneous aisle. I had been tasked with pushing the stray cart, putting abandoned items in their rightful places. The car over-flowed with Christmas lights, sporting goods, and bags of pork rinds. I realized that I still didn’t know where anything belonged, but the service desk grannies got mad if I asked them for help. So I just hid the items in random places around the store, hoping they would go unnoticed. Still, I was grateful to escape from my cash register, and I always dreaded when the service desk grannies would page me to return to the front of the store.
“Are you okay?” Alex asked, trailing behind me. I considered the question. I wasn’t, but I also knew that I didn’t have any right to be as unhappy as I felt. Almost everyone I knew had a crappy job, Alex included.

“I’m tired,” I said.

“You look it.”

“Thanks.”

“I want to help you,” Alex said urgently, stroking my wrist. I didn’t deserve his tenderness and I didn’t want it.

“I think you should stop visiting me while I’m working,” I said. Alex opened his mouth as if to argue, but I was already pushing the stray cart away, one of its wheels squeaking, useless and broken.

I stalked back to my register. Brianna was organizing the cigarette case. All of the packs had expired months ago, but we kept selling them.

“I think it’s cute that Alex comes in to see you,” she said.

“Yeah, it’s adorable,” I said, my voice bitter.

“Yikes,” she said, looking up from rearranging packs of Virginia Slims. Brianna had a boyfriend too, but he wasn’t her first. I was surprised to discover that she’d had loads of boyfriends, because she wasn’t particularly beautiful and she didn’t flaunt her body like Brittany. I identified with Brianna. I wasn’t particularly beautiful either. I was awkward. My hair frizzed, and in the months since tennis season had ended, my body had gone doughy. Although I’d sprouted breasts—seemingly overnight—I wasn’t comfortable showing much of them. I preferred to wear high-necked white blouses under my uniform. That’s why it was hard to say no
to Alex when he thrust his tongue down my throat. I wasn’t sure if anyone else would want me as earnestly as Alex.

I felt linked to Brianna, but I was aware that she and Brittany shared something I couldn’t. They were girls who *put out.* They talked in the break room about sex, trading tips. They never asked me if I was a virgin or not. My silence on the subject likely said it all.

“Bryan was an asshole the other night, so I told him that my period was late,” Brittany had said once, throwing her blonde head back, laughing. I didn’t understand why she thought that was so funny—joking about a missed period. Wouldn’t our lives be fractured by an unplanned pregnancy? I knew what little money I’d managed to save since paying back the Storms for their mailbox wouldn’t be enough to pay for an abortion. But Brianna had laughed at Brittany’s joke, so I had too.

“Do you want to get dinner with me and Brittany after work?” Brianna asked me.

“Oh, I don’t know,” I answered. We’d never really hung out much outside of work.

“But it’s a Friday night!” Brianna said. “You can’t just go home and do nothing when we get off.”

“Okay,” I agreed. She was right. I deserved to have some fun. And we’d just gotten paid.

After the service desk grannies finally cut us loose, Brianna and I clocked out. Brittany had had the night off, but she showed up in her wheezing car to pick up Brianna. She waved at me, a cigarette balanced between her fingers. Such defiance, I thought. She was clearly breaking the 500-foot rule.

“I’ll meet you there,” I told them, walking to my own car. I noticed the man who slept in the parking lot, still there, stretched across the pavement. I shook my head, half-admiring his
routine. I hoped tomorrow a new shipment of Wiis would arrive. Then, the man could leave, triumphant, even though I couldn’t.

When I reached my car, I noticed something appeared to be stuck to the driver’s side window, small stickers spelling out the words, “Cheer Up!” Alex, I fumed. His intentions were kind. Brianna or Brittany would have thought it was sweet that he cared so much about me. But it felt like an invasion—a command. And I couldn’t comply, not just because he wanted me to. I scraped the letters off the window, my fingers cold, bare. My knuckles cracked as I tore the letters in half. The pieces tumbled to the ground, lost in the thin layer of fresh snow that had just started falling.

In my car, I waited for the heater to kick on, rubbing my tingling hands against my legs. I drove through town. The streets were hushed and houses blazed, strung with Christmas lights, wreaths on every door, silhouettes of a Christmas tree in almost every front window.

I met Brianna and Brittany at a Chinese restaurant located in a strip mall. Its neon sign read “NEW STYLE.” I wondered what the old style had been and if the new way was better. It was the best Chinese food in town, but that didn’t mean much.

“You made it!” Brianna said. A bell on the front door jingled, merrily announcing my arrival.

Brittany and Brianna were already snacking on egg rolls, dunking them into sweet and sour sauce with their hands, slurping wonton soup. New Style was furnished with décor typical of a Chinese restaurant. Paper fans spread sumptuously on the walls. They were printed with flowers—cherry blossoms or chrysanthemums—and dragons with fire on their breath. I smelled oil, heard dumplings sizzle as they fried in the kitchen.
I took a menu, which featured lots of amusing typos. I ordered green curry. On the counter, a grinning golden cat figurine waved its paw at me, over and over.

“Have you thought about what you’re going to write about for your next English paper?” I asked Brianna.

“Not really,” she said. “I got a D on the last one.”

“My parents would have grounded me.”

“Mine don’t really care. Work is more important to me right now and they know that.”

“And they’re okay with that? That you’d rather be working than studying?”

Brianna nodded. But what about college? I wanted to ask. Brianna was smart. I knew how well she did in chemistry. I struggled to even light a Bunsen burner. She was too smart to waste her days at K Mart, but I didn’t tell her that. Years, later, I’d wish that I had, after I discovered that Brianna had a couple of kids, but she’d lost custody after an arrest for heroin possession. It was an all-too common story for women living in my hometown, even after the K Mart closed and became a tractor supply store.

“If you keep working hard at the store, you’ll probably get promoted,” Brittany said to Brianna. Brittany spoke from experience; she’d just been become head of the domestics department. She folded towels, fluffed pillows, and helped customers select shower curtains. She made two dollars an hour more than we did. Few cashiers made it that far up, and I knew I wouldn’t be one of them.

“That’s what I’m hoping for,” Brianna said.

I thought about Manager Carole, bragging, “I started working at K Mart when I was seventeen too!” She had beamed when she hired me. Manager Carole was at least forty, and she looked even older. I feared turning into a service desk granny. And I feared Alex’s body,
crushing mine under his weight, certain that if we stayed together I would let him undress me, scrutinize my naked body, and pant against me. I knew that in the next year my parents would send me to college—anywhere I wanted to go, to study anything I wanted. But after taking the job, meeting Manager Carole, the service desk grannies, Brianna, and Brittany and all of the other red-cheeked girls who could fake a smile better than I could, I was worried.

I stuffed bamboo shoots into my mouth.

“So what’s the story with the new 0-1?” I asked Brittany, because I knew she would know.

“He’s twenty-two,” she began.

Brianna and I cheered.

“But he has a girlfriend.”

We deflated.

“It’s fine. He’s going back to college at the end of the season anyway,” Brittany said, waving her hand dismissively. We laughed. After all, soon there’d be another 0-1 to take his place.

We cracked our fortune cookies. I didn’t read mine, slipping it into my pocket for later. We paid for our meals and left the restaurant, standing in the parking lot to say our good-byes.

“I’m really glad I came out with you,” I told them. Brittany pulled me into a hug, crushing me against her. I smelled her perfume—baby powder and roses, a trace of tobacco smoke. More snow fell, settling on my uncovered head, clinging to my eyelashes. I knew the snow would blanket the Storms’ new mailbox, the K Mart parking lot and the man lying prostrate on the sidewalk. Wet flakes coated Brianna, Brittany and me as we huddled close, three red smock girls.
When I returned home, my parents were already in bed, the house hushed. Our Christmas tree was alight in the living room. I kicked off my shoe, retreated to the kitchen, and put on the electrical kettle.

What if I folded my life neatly, like I folded my red smock every day, I wondered, as I waited for the water to rise to a boil. Could my life really be made so small—small enough to fit in my slender locker in the break room? Could I marry Alex, raise some brats, claim a house on a cul-de-sac after a few years? Girls in my hometown, even the ones who left for a while, usually returned, even the smart ones with white teeth and good hair. It wasn’t what I wanted for myself, or what my parents wanted for me. But sitting there with Brianna and Brittany at dinner, it had been easy to imagine that it might happen to me, too. For them, it seemed like their best option.

The kettle whistled. I steeped a bag of chamomile tea in a mug and waited for the hot water to cloud, tugging on the bag’s string. Stifling a yawn, I tiptoed upstairs, where my parents snored in happy unison. I’d drink my tea and fall asleep. Tomorrow, I’d get up and wear the red smock again.
**As-Is**

*Bone white party dress. Chiffon, with a raised, light pink embroidered floral motif. Late 1950s/early 1960s. Rhinestones dot the high neckline. Tea length hem. A three-inch rip divides the bodice from the skirt on the left side.*

I would always remember the first one, glimpsed at a pop-up flea market in the Croatian ballroom, swinging on a rack of clothes. I was fifteen-years-old, it was 2005, and I had twenty dollars in my wallet.

“Everything’s ten dollars,” the bored girl staffing the booth said, snapping her bubble gum. She wore plastic pink cat eye glasses. *Fake,* I thought, admiringly.

When my hands brushed the dress and I felt the velveteen embroidered flowers covering the chiffon, my breath caught in my throat. I pulled it from the rack, examining it. The dress was damaged, revealing its age. But my mother could sew, and that seam would be easy enough to close.

“Can I try it on?” I asked the girl in the cat eye glasses.

“Sure,” she said, and gestured to the restroom turned makeshift dressing room. The bathroom was stuffed with young women wearing poodle skirts and crinolines, leopard print wiggle dresses, Bettie Page bangs, and red lipstick. Everyone’s mouths were crimson except mine. I waited patiently for a stall, and when it was my turn, I removed my clothes—a t-shirt and jeans—and slipped off my beat-up checkerboard Vans. I held my breath and fought with the zipper, grown stubborn and inflexible with age. It caught my skin in its teeth, but eventually closed. I emerged from the stall and studied myself in the mirror. The dress fit perfectly.
“Oh you look precious,” a woman said, smiling at me as she reapplied her lipstick.

“Thanks,” I said uncertainly. I’d never owned a vintage dress before. I knew a lot of people would think it was gross to wear somebody else’s old clothes, but it didn’t bother me. Instead, the second-hand dress thrilled me.

I changed back into my street clothes, aware how dull they were in comparison to the dress I clasped in my hands.

“I’ll take it,” I told the girl in the cat-eye glasses, then handed her the twenty in my wallet.

“I’m sure you saw the rip,” she said. “We’re selling it as-is.”

She folded it neatly, placed it in a plastic grocery store bag. The dress’s ripped seam was more serious than I’d initially though, and I never wore the dress. Instead, it languished in my closet. Sometimes, when I was home alone, I’d slip it on, smear lipstick across my mouth, and sashay around the house. I felt the same thrill I’d felt when I first tried it on—the dress had felt like mine, but it had also been more than mine.

_Suede Coat. Dates from early 1940s–early 1960s. Light brown with blonde mink collar. Buttons are loose and the creamy pink lining is stained brown._

I found the coat in a dusty antique store in Rapid City, South Dakota, on sale for ten dollars, and I thought the shop-owners were fools for pricing it so low. A tacky Mount Rushmore paperweight rested on a nearby shelf. It was going for three times as much as the coat. I wondered, beyond the stained lining, what the coat’s flaws might be. I pressed it against my
nose, expecting to smell something unwearable, a scent I would never willingly take on as my own.

I am used to competing with other women’s perfume. My friend Madeline wears the same fragrance as I do, but it still smells different on both of us, others say. That’s what a good perfume does: it mingles with your own natural scent and braces with it. The same is true of vintage clothing. Maybe the woman who wore the suede coat before me preferred White Shoulders perfume, its musk lingering in the coat’s folds. At first, with any new, old outfit, it seems as if there’s a competition to best the other women who’ve worn it before me: to beat their scent from the fabric and prove I’m a worthy new owner, just as interesting and attractive as the woman who possessed it first.

When I wander through a vintage store, I imagine garments on the rack are murmuring to me, as silks brush against crepe and velvet. Does the garment whisper advice for me? And are all vintage pieces imbued with the voices of other women, their worries, their hopes—the stories of their lives—stitched in each pocket, every buttonhole? I can only speculate about that resounding chorus, eerie and swelling and mystifying as a siren call from a lonely beach: *Don’t repeat my mistakes.*

*Multi-colored, floral print mini-dress. Late 1960s/early 1970s. Cream peter-pan collar and cuffs. Rips on the skirt of the dress that would typically expose undergarments have been mended.*

I didn’t mean to steal the dress; I just didn’t return it. I was seventeen, a junior in high school. My older friend Natalie had lent it to me. I had a date in the city. We’d planned to see a movie at the lone movie theater in town, but when we arrived, it was unexpectedly closed.
“Now what?” he had asked, flustered. He seemed as nervous as I was.

“I don’t know,” I said. I’d never really been on a date before.

“We should try to see the movie again,” the boy had said.

The night before our second date, I went over to Natalie’s house and rummaged through her closet, searching for something to wear. Natalie, like me, collected vintage clothes. I favored the 1950s and early 1960s; Natalie preferred mod fashion.

“I don’t have anything to wear,” I whined. “I hate all my clothes.”

“Wear this,” Natalie said, thrusting a bright mini-dress at me. I recognized it immediately as one of her favorites. “It’s got a little rip, but your mom should be able to fix it—no problem.”

The dress’s skirt was torn in such a way that my underwear would have been exposed.

“Are you sure?” I asked before accepting it.

At home, I begged my mother to mend the dress.

“I can’t wear it unless you sew it and it’s really important,” I stressed.

My mother gave in, laboring over the repairs. As I arranged my hair and put my make-up on, my dad polished my white leather boots. By the end of the night, they’d be scuffed again, but for a few hours they were restored to their pearlescent glory.

Miraculously, Natalie’s dress was ready by the time my date rang the doorbell. My mother liked that. My date even shook my father’s hand, subjected to his stern glare.

“Have her home at midnight,” my mother said, a little sternly. “And have fun,” she softened.
I sat in the passenger’s seat of my date’s Jeep Grand Cherokee. We were going to see the movie at the Highland Theater, an historic movie theater in downtown Akron. Tickets were cheap and there was a real bar in the lobby. The theater had been largely unchanged since it first opened, its marquee as luminous as ever.

Patrons slurped White Russians and vodka sodas from their seats, growing more boisterous throughout the movie. An hour into the film, my date took my hand in his, and I ignored his sweaty palms. I stole glances at him as I munched popcorn. The light from the movie screen illuminated his face. *Will he kiss me?* I wondered. And then: *Could I love him?*

After the movie, we stood outside the theater, shivering in the chilly October night. A gay bar was adjacent to the Highland, and bar regulars chain smoked Virginia Slims near the nightclub’s door. Dance music thudded so loudly that I thought I could feel it in my joints, in my bones. As we lingered on the street corner, the air thick with cigarette smoke, my palms were slick with sweat. As loud bass pulsated inside the club, I felt my heart thud—anxious anticipation for the end of the evening.

When we pulled into my driveway, he got out of the car to open my door. We stood, facing one another, our breath visible. It was 12:01, but the house appeared dark inside.

“I had a really nice time tonight.” My date cast his eyes at the ground.

“Me too,” I said.

He cupped my face in his hand and drew me to him. It wasn’t a graceful kiss, but it was my first, and that made it the best I’d ever had.

How could I return the dress to Natalie after that night, the dress not merely a dress but an *artifact*, like Jacqueline Kennedy’s blood-stained Chanel suit? Natalie asked for it back, just
once, and I’d told her that I still needed the dress, but I was unsure why I couldn’t yet part with it.

I didn’t tell her that I’d continue to need the dress years later, long after the boy and I had broken up, long after Natalie and I got into a stupid argument and stopped talking for over a year, long after we made up but were never as close as we’d once been, long after she got married and changed her name and moved to Asheville to grow mushrooms. Long after I stopped believing that first kisses held transformative power.

_Taupe leather gloves, lined with rabbit fur. Late 1950s/early 1960s. Size small. Fingertips worn._

My grandmother was not a “saver.” When she moved from Pennsylvania back to New Orleans after my grandfather died, she threw out her heavy winter clothes, Aunt Bird’s hulking sealskin coat, and other mementos she’d deemed expendable. I can see why Granny might not have been sentimental about material things (or anything else)—she’d been orphaned by the time she was a teenager and had lived through the Great Depression.

After moving into a nursing home near my parents’ house in Ohio, following Hurricane Katrina, Granny had even fewer possessions: an array of Alfred Dunner pantsuits, some framed portraits of her children and grandchildren, and a few Fenton glass figurines. She stashed the knick-knacks in her walker’s basket, pushing it around the dining room as she shuffled through the common areas. Once, my mother asked her why she carried a glass bluebird with her wherever she went.

“These people,” Granny said, an edge of bitterness in her voice. “They steal everything,” She shot a meaningful glance at a group of residents happily playing cards at a nearby table.
“Now that’s not true,” my mother said. Granny was living with late-stage Alzheimer’s and typically couldn’t remember where she was or who any of the residents or aides were. And for the first time, suspicious of the people around her, Granny became a saver. She hoarded cans of Shasta cola she’d won playing Bingo and boxes of coconut clusters. And she wouldn’t allow my mother to throw out the Christmas poinsettia Pastor Lapehn had given her. It was the end of January and its leaves had dried and dropped.

When I was a child, Granny visited us one Christmas. She looked so unfamiliar in bulky coats. She wore a pair of leather gloves lined with rabbit fur everywhere, and once, she let me slip them on. The luxurious fur warmed by hands, and I was immediately taken with them. I cast aside my own cheap, shrunken wool gloves.

“Can I borrow them?” I’d ask, as I bundled up to take our West Highland terrier, Albert, for a walk in the afternoons during her stay.

“Well, alright, but make sure you give them back,” Granny would say.

And I’d stroll about the neighborhood’s cul-de-sacs, as Albert pissed on every fire hydrant and nosed at rabbit dens. I’d never cared much for the cold—hated how the wind chapped my face raw and red, how my toes froze in my snow boots, and the tedious production of putting on layers: jeans, snow pants, flannel shirt, parka, scarf, hat, gloves, thick socks, boots. There wasn’t anything glamorous about Ohio winters. Snow turns to a black slush in the streets. In New Orleans, women wore floor-length mink fur coats in sixty-degree weather and velvet mules. Granny’s rabbit fur lined gloves were functional, protecting my hands from the snarling wind, but more significantly, I felt beautiful and special when I wore them, forgetting my long-underwear and Vaseline steaked face.
When Granny moved to Ohio years later, my aunt mailed some of her clothes and got rid of everything else. I helped my mother unpack the boxes, hoping to find Granny’s rabbit fur gloves.

“They aren’t here,” I said, examining the boxes’ contents, strewn across the basement floor.

“You know how she is. She never held onto anything,” my mother said.

But I am a saver. I still have every letter my pen pal has written me in the ten years we’ve been corresponding. I’ve rescued china sets from church rummage sales. I thrift stained, ripped dresses, certain that with patience and mending, they might become resplendent again. The pencil my high school crush lent me? It’s in a battered blue suitcase under the bed in my childhood bedroom. And after scouring Ebay for several years, I finally found a pair of vintage rabbit fur lined gloves nearly identical to Granny’s long-gone pair.

“Throw things out,” my mother urges. “What can you part with?” And I find that there is so little I can seem to do without, as if giving things up is to lose something of myself.

I save because I want to remember, and because for now, I still can.


My mother first thought the mink tippet was creepy. And it was, but that’s why I loved it and knew it had to be mine. We argued quietly for a few minutes, in a stall in the antique mall near the town where my parents live.

“What would you wear it with? Where?”
Everything, I wanted to say. Everywhere. I was twenty-two, then, still young enough to wear feathers in my hair, stay out until the sun rose, and convince myself that even though I smoked cigarettes until my chest rasped and ached, that I could never be killed.

“I’d wear it to the bar,” I said. “Over a silk dress. Or maybe with a sweater and jeans.”

The three small mink bodies were linked to one another by their mouths. One of the mink’s mouth opened and closed, a rather morbid clasp. Legs and tails mingled indeterminately; dozens of polished toe-nails clacked together as I slung the tippet over my shoulders.

“It suits you,” my mother admitted.

Later, I noticed the monogram, a secret stitched across the tippet’s lining. MCM. As close as I’d ever come to knowing the original owner. The more I wore the tippet, the more I wondered who MCM might have been, what the initials might have stood for. One day, MCM was Millie Cora Martin. She’d been my age when she’d first glimpsed the tippet hanging in a department store window, and all winter she’d saved her wages from her job at the bread factory to afford it. She’d worn the tippet on dates with young men. They would have dinner—sole meuniere for her, chicken kiev for him—and down gin martinis. Careful, don’t drink too fast, Millie Cora Martin would silently warn herself before spearing the cocktail onion at the bottom of her glass with a toothpick. She’d never had a head for liquor.

Sometimes the young men would ask to take her dancing, but after dinner, Millie Cora Martin would make up an excuse—a mother waiting up at home for her, a distraught roommate whose boss had gone back to his wife. An early shift at the factory in the morning.
At the end of the night, Millie Cora Martin would stand shyly beneath the porch light. She’d allow her date one kiss, her slightly wetted lips closed, her heart pounding at the thrill of this rare, fleeting contact. Above Millie Cora Martin’s head, dazed moths burned.

Other times MCM was Mary Catherine Marks, a middle-aged widow and Sunday school teacher, who read *The Song of Songs* every night before bed. Or else MCM was Mabel Clark Montgomery, a stage actress who’d divorced three husbands and had just married her fourth (the tippet had been an anniversary present from husband number two). MCM’s identity shifted according to my moods. But inevitably, as I paced the aisles at Kroger, flinging groceries into my cart, wearing the tippet, I’d realize, shoulders slumping, that with every alternate name and life I created for MCM, the further I grew from really knowing her.

Once, I dreamed that the string of dead minks raised their heads and spoke with charmed tongues. I can’t recall if they shared any wisdom or told me about the furrier who had bludgeoned them, one at a time. I couldn’t be sure, after waking, if they’d even spoken my language. But sometimes I recreate the dream in my mind’s eye, and witness their sleek bodies twining about my neck.

“Kaaaatherine,” I imagine them whispering, their glass eyes wild.

“What was she—MCM?” I ask them. “You knew her.”

They gnash their small, pointed teeth. And then they speak as one, in a hoarse growl, “MCM is whomever wears us draped about her neck. But you knew that already.”
Brown and cream silk suit (dress and matching jacket). The Cleveland shop-owner swears it dates to precisely 1952. Shell pink lining in jacket. Kick Slit. Stubborn zipper and there is a small stain on the skirt from stray drops of chicken vindaloo.

I packed the suit carefully, so the silk wouldn’t be crushed. I smoothed the fabric lovingly, as one might their child’s stubborn cowlick. I checked the address on the shipping label at least twice, its destination an unpronounceable town in Finland.

“Are you sure you want to part with it?” my mother had asked me when I told her I’d sold the dress for twenty-five dollars on Ebay. It was more than I’d paid for the dress years before, in high school, but I still felt like somehow I’d been cheated by the auction, even though I’d set the price and agreed to the transaction.

“Yes,” I said. No, I thought.

I knew almost nothing about the girl who’d purchased the suit except for her name and address. Our shared interest in vintage clothes was obvious. And we shared the same measurements—or had, before I outgrew the dress, my bust, waist, and hips straining the silk and the suit’s seams. I’d been ashamed the first time I realized I couldn’t zip the dress anymore, mourning not just my old figure, but my adolescence: inhaling so hard that I coughed when I smoked my first cigarette behind the high school gym; scarfing down cheeseburgers and French Fries from Swensons, a drive-in restaurant in Akron; sneaking sips of gin from the bottle of Tanqueray in my parents’ liquor cabinet; wondering how, and when, and with whom I’d lose my virginity; and slamming my bedroom door so loudly during arguments with my parents that they threatened to remove it from its hinges.
How soon would the suit stop smelling of my Chanel perfume? How many times would she have to spray a cloud of her own cologne to mask my scent? I wondered at what precise moment the dress would cease to be mine. Once I mailed the box, or as soon as the girl opened it. But maybe it wouldn’t be until the first time she wore it out, in her small Finnish town. I couldn’t conjure the image of her—the shape of her mouth or the color of her hair. The timbre of her voice. Maybe years later, she’d discard the dress, shedding it as I had.

I pitied and envied the girl, knowing what history she would inherit. And then I taped the box shut.
Good Boy

All my childhood friends’ dogs are dead. The faithful black Labradors, jumping Jack Russells, and snub-nosed Pugs. Our Albert, a West Highland terrier, died when I was nearly twenty-two. I’d waited for a dog for years, nurturing fish and three hamsters as I ached to turn ten-years-old, the age my parents promised me I’d get to pick out a puppy.

A series of photographs captures Albert’s first night in our home: I’m wearing a soccer uniform, my knees grass-stained and scraped, smiling down at the squirming puppy in my arms. His ears are too large for his tiny head. My sweaty blonde hair plasters against my forehead and there’s a wide gap between my oversized front teeth. Albert—impossibly small and uncertain. A girl and her dog.

But he never liked me much, preferring my mother’s company to mine, curling in her lap most evenings while we watched TV. Terriers are temperamental; you are not guaranteed their love like you might be a golden retriever’s. Albert was cranky. He nipped at my heels as I ran circles around the living room sofa. He barked at the black crows pecking the suet block in our back yard. Before he was fixed, he would sneak into my bedroom and piss at the foot of my bed. Once, he bit my chin and drew blood. I never told my mother, but she noticed the wound, rinsed it with peroxide, and said nothing more.

The truth was, I didn’t miss Albert much when I left for college. I was too consumed with classes, weekend keggers, and arguing with my long-distance boyfriend over the phone. As I settled into my college life and enjoyed my newfound freedom, my parents developed their own new routine. I imagined their lives seemed cracked open again. They weren’t running with me to
tennis matches all over the state. My mother wasn’t packing lunches or fixing breakfasts to suit my picky palate (one year in high school, I would only eat chicken quesadillas for breakfast). She’d taken a new job at a grouting company in town, handling workman’s comp claims. My father was still working long hours and traveling internationally for work, but in the evenings when he was home, they ate dinner together at the kitchen counter. There was no need to sit at the kitchen table, set for three. They started watching television—the local news or *Seinfeld* episodes—as they ate dishes I surely would have refused, if I still lived at home. After that, they’d walk Albert around the neighborhood, making small-talk with the neighbors as they strolled the cul-de-sacs.

At night, they’d settle in to watch British mystery shows, sipping red wine or gin and tonics. They never drank more than two cocktails each. Then, they’d nestle against one another in their four-poster bed, thumbing through their library books.

At the time, I recoiled at the prospect of their daily routine: *Is that really all there is when you get older? Fish Cakes and Masterpiece Mystery?* Now, I appreciate—admire, even—their bland activities. The rituals, the constancy. The companionship. I tried not to imagine what kind of sexual freedom my parents enjoyed with me out of the house. “I’m still very attracted to your father,” my mother said once, suggestively. I groaned and begged her to stop talking before I puked. But privately, I was glad that my parents were still together—and more importantly, happy.

When I was a junior in college, Albert’s health began to decline rapidly.

“Albert doesn’t like to go for walks anymore,” my mother said sadly. She said they’d fasten his little red leash to his collar and lead him to the end of the driveway, but he couldn’t be
nudged to walk further. Normally, he pranced around the neighborhood, his pointed ears alert. My parents were worried. A veterinarian thought it was possible he was suffering from a brain disease resembling dementia. The noise of the house was too much for him. Albert stopped nosing at his food bowl and drinking water. He spent his days in my parents’ walk-in closet, surrounded by my father’s dress pants and my mother’s silk dresses, nestled underneath dry cleaning bags.

Not long after Albert stopped eating and drinking, my parents took him to be euthanized while I sat in a literature class.

“I’m sorry,” my father said after it was done, his voice breaking. It was one of the few times I could recall my father crying.

“There’s nothing you could have done,” I said, managing to quell my own tears until after we hung up. I could never say that we’d put the dog “to sleep.” Although my family had chosen to end Albert’s suffering, he hadn’t simply curled up on the rug, in front of the fireplace, to nap. He wouldn’t wake, bounding towards us, and licking our faces—more loving than he’d ever been in life.

The night Albert died, I went to the movies alone. The theater was screening Casablanca, and despite my grief, I didn’t want to miss out on seeing one of my favorite movies on the big-screen. In the theater, I was surrounded by couples of varying ages—some my age, clearly beginning new relationships. They sat next to one another so uncertainly, fidgeting. Other couples were elderly, their faces lined and soft. I wondered if they’d seen the movie in theaters when it had first been released. Perhaps they’d seen Casablanca with old steady boyfriends or girlfriends, but I liked to think that they’d been together all those years.
The crowd happily munched popcorn and sighed in the dark when Humphrey Bogart
cupped Ingrid Bergman’s face in his. I wept, choking on acrid tears. My eyes darted around the
theater, hoping no one would think a silly movie had affected me so. I was aware of my alone-
ness, staring at the couples’ heads touching in front of me, and the more fervently I tried to stifle
sobs rising in my throat, the harder I cried. I was grateful for the theater’s velveteen darkness.

What was I weeping for? More than Albert, I knew. For the hamster bones—surely dust
now—buried in my parents’ backyard. For the clothes and toys and interests I’d outgrown and
shed like a snake’s whole, impermanent skin. For the love stories I’d seen on-screen, imagining
that a film in black-and-white held truth the technicolor pictures did not. I cried for Albert, for
my parents who’d whispered to him in hopes of making his final moments comfortable, and for
the gap-toothed little girl I’d been.

_Here’s looking at you, Kid._

“We’ll never get another dog,” my father said grimly. He claimed it was simply too much work
to care for a new puppy. I suggested that they think of adopting an older dog. He merely snorted
his derision. What my father didn’t say—what I suspect he felt—is that he couldn’t bear to go
through the loss again. The dog: starving himself, hiding in the closet.

So many of my friends lost dogs around the same time; it seemed everyone’s tenth
birthday present had been a puppy too. I noticed many of my friends’ families immediately
replaced their dead senior dogs with clumsy puppies. In roughly ten more years, the cycle would
repeat again. To get a dog is to understand that if the world works in the order we hope, our
children will out-live us, but we will bury our dogs. Each child’s birth and each puppy’s
homecoming means acknowledging that something, someday will be lost. We don’t expect to be
there as our children wither in nursing homes. But we know we will shoulder our dogs’ weight, carrying them upstairs when their arthritic legs have rendered stairs impossible to ascend. We will watch as their black muzzles turn grey.

Later, my mother would show me the clumps of white fur the veterinarian had clipped from Albert’s still-warm body. The vet had presented my parents with clumps of Albert’s fur, his ashes, and a single inky paw-print on a piece of stark white paper. My mother tucked Albert’s remains away in one of her dresser drawers, near my yellowed baby teeth and the engagement ring she’d received from a man she loved before my father. It seems we know so little of the ones we love. Crumpled love letters from my mother to my father before their marriage, line this dresser drawer. I read the words on their pages, but only once. I couldn’t shake the feeling that I’d intruded on something private—something that had nothing to do with me. Passion may fade, like ink on a piece of floral stationery. Dogs die and children leave home. Then what remains? Fish cakes and *Masterpiece Mystery*—maybe it’s the most I could hope for.
Getting in Trouble

i.

When Natalie’s parents left town one weekend in July, they gave her one hundred dollars to buy food. Instead, she called me, begged her older brother to buy us wine, and I arrived with an overnight bag to share the empty house. I’d met Natalie when I was a freshman in high school. She’d been a junior then and seemed so much older than me; she’d already earned her license and drove a Jetta. Most weekends, she drove us around Akron. Together, we raced down Cadillac Hill, admired the Signal Tree, and drained mugs of coffee at Angel Falls, a café in Highland Square, the neighborhood where most of Akron’s poor, aspiring artists resided.

“We’ll live here someday,” we often said, imagining a shared apartment in one of the crumbling, ancient houses off West Market Street. Many of the apartment buildings were named after their original owners, their first names now obsolete and unfashionable: the Doris, the Lucretia, the Millicent.

Natalie taught me how to score vintage designer dresses at the Goodwill and how to inhale cigarette smoke. We liked to share kreteks, clove cigarettes that crackle like autumn leaves underfoot.

Our dreams of moving into the Adelaide still out-of-reach, we settled for pitching a tent in her parents’ backyard. We’d play records on Natalie’s thrifty record player until her parents told us to knock it off. I always admired how she knew just how to place the needle without scratching the album. One night, I snuck gin from my own parents’ liquor cabinet into the tent, and disguised it in an empty water bottle. We tilted the plastic bottle to our lips, savoring the
acrid bite of lukewarm Tanqueray. We were inexperienced drinkers, light-headed and giggly after a few sips.

On the weekend Natalie’s parents left town, we drank sangria mixed in an empty shoebox, because we hadn’t thought to buy a pitcher. When we were hungry, we snapped green beans from the plants growing in her mother’s garden. At first we steamed them, then gave up and ate them raw. By the time her parents returned, the plants had been picked bare.

“Let’s call the boys,” Natalie said, courageous from the sangria. It had tasted like cardboard and leather—not a bit like wine.

“Okay,” I agreed. Her crush was a boy named Jon. He was more than a crush; they’d recently slept together. It had been Natalie’s first time. I’d asked her what it was like and she’d told me sex was funny. I was surprised because I’d never heard sex described in such terms. Instead, others I’d asked focused on the dangers of pregnancy, the risk of eternal damnation, or doomed love.

My crush was named Aaron. He was a bushy-haired boy, who played drums in a terrible band that I pretended to like, and once he had touched my bare legs, lightly tracing his fingers up the length of my calf.

“Do you see that muscle there?” he’d asked me. And I’d felt my stomach tighten, and my breath quicken. The muscle pulsed and he withdrew his hand.

Natalie called Jon first so I could see how easy it was to flirt. She purred and slurred into the phone. I hardly remember what she said. Instead, I marveled at her spreading smile and the freckles splayed across her nose. I thought briefly about clasping her face in my hands and kissing her.
“Your turn,” Natalie said, passing me the phone.

I giggled as I dialed Aaron’s number. He didn’t pick up.

ii.

“Don’t expect to pass your driver’s license test,” my mother told me, exasperated as I struck yet another orange rubber cone, practicing maneuverability the night before my exam.

But I did pass. And my mother hadn’t known what to say, watching in stunned silence as I posed for my license photo. In the picture, I look surprised, eager, defiant, and forever dressed in a brown A-line dress printed with tiny white polka dots. It seemed like the best photo I’d ever taken. I was round-faced, new-breasted—and like any other 16-year-old girl, not quite as much a woman as I wanted to be.

“Can I borrow the car?” I asked.

“Ask your father,” my mother said.

“Ask your mother,” my father said when I called him at work.

“What do you even plan on doing with the car?” my mother asked, and I realized I didn’t know. I did know that answering “just driving around” probably wouldn’t satisfy her. I called my friends. Natalie was on vacation in Arizona. The DeMilio sisters were grounded. My neighbor Brian was at band camp. So I called Nick.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he said, by which he meant smoking pot in his bedroom and listening to the Dead Kennedys.

“I got my license,” I said. “Do you want to go somewhere?”
I picked him up at his house a few minutes later, telling my mother I was going out to dinner with Audrey, because I knew she wouldn’t approve of Nick, a high school drop-out. It seemed that I’d simply always known Nick once I started high school, although I couldn’t remember the exact time or place where we’d first met. He was legendary, skipping class to smoke cigarettes behind the high school with Mrs. Khourey, an English teacher with a raspy voice and yellow fingernails. Before he dropped out, he swaggered through the school hallways, wearing a ripped denim jacket decorated with innumerable pins. He constantly tossed his head, or else raked his fingers through his long, dark hair to free the strands from his eyes. He wasn’t handsome but he didn’t need to be—he was bad.

“Let’s go to Wendy’s,” Nick suggested, after he slid into the car. There weren’t many other options in our small town just outside of Akron. Nick and I both ordered cheeseburgers and Frosties from the dollar menu. He paid for our meals in quarters.

When we were finished eating, we drove around town. Nick’s cigarettes stank up the car and I hoped my mother wouldn’t notice. Nick told me about what he’d been up to since dropping out, mostly a lot of partying.

“I was fucking this one girl in the bedroom at this guy’s house and then she, like, bled all over me. So we had to stop,” he said, turning to me, searching for a reaction.

“Well, what happened?” I asked.

“She was a virgin. And she hadn’t told me beforehand.”

“Was that wrong?” I asked.

“Hell, yeah; it’s not cool.”

“You wouldn’t have wanted to be with her if you’d known?” I asked, a little nervously.
“No. Virgins are always trouble,” he said. “They always fall in love with you. You never stop loving the first person you fuck, right?”

“I wouldn’t know,” I said, quietly.

Nick lit another cigarette and was silent for a few songs playing on the car’s stereo.

My cell phone buzzed loudly in my purse. Even though my mother had told me to never answer the phone while I was driving, she was the one calling, likely to demand that I return home.

“I think it’s nice that you’re a virgin. You should wait. I wish I’d waited,” he said.

When I dropped him off at his house, he paused at his front door to wave at me. I wasn’t sure whether he’d told me to wait because he meant it, or because he felt sorry for me.

Hours later, I still reeked of his cigarettes.

iii.

After Natalie, my best girl friend was Audrey, my teammate on the varsity tennis team. And like Natalie, she was a junior when I was a freshman. Audrey looked like the all-American girl—shiny blonde hair, massive blue eyes, letterman jacket slung over her shoulders, a barrette securing her bangs just so.

Audrey’s parents had divorced when she was young. Her father was dead, and her mother went out at night with lots of men. One night, her mother came home, drunk and giggling, saying, “Audrey, sex is so much better in your forties.”

Audrey’s grandmother, a dignified woman with a South African accent, was descended from Dutch colonists who’d “civilized” the country. A socialite, her wedding had been featured
Audrey’s mother, an ex-hand model, had once been featured in an advertisement that ran in *Vogue*. “I guess it’s on me to be the third generation to get in the magazine,” Audrey often said. But the family’s fortune was lost by then, and Audrey, although pretty, wasn’t tall and willowy like her mother. She didn’t look like the models and heiresses I saw flipping through my own copies of *Vogue*.

Boys liked Audrey and Audrey liked them back. More accurately, I thought, she liked the attention they paid her. She’d told me all about the boys she’d slept with—Kyle, whom she’d lost her virginity to at fourteen (he still called her when he was bored), Zach of the long and skinny penis, Myki who had been uncircumcised, and more. I was still un kissed, fearful, and living vicariously through her stories, admiring her uninhibited sexuality.

A few months after we became friends, Audrey and I had dinner at Steak and Shake on a Friday night. Over hot fudge milkshakes, she told me that her period was late.

“Who were you sleeping with?” I asked, considering a few possibilities.

“Kyle,” she said. “Just once. He invited me over to hang out in the hot tub when his parents were out of town last month.”

We decided he’d make an unsuitable father.

“What do you want to do?” I asked, a question I’d heard actors in movies and on television ask. I meant to be supportive.

“I don’t know,” she said. I helped her count the days she’d been late, helped her count her money, and I told her that I thought I had about fifty dollars I could give her if she needed it.

“I don’t know why I keep doing this with him,” she said, staring into a plate of rapidly cooling French Fries. Neither of us felt much like eating. I longed to grab her hand from across
the table, to reassure her that no matter what everything would be okay. Kyle might be a shit-head, but I was there for her. If she had the baby, would she drop out? And worse still, would she have to marry Kyle? I couldn’t bring myself to promise that all would be well, imagining Audrey’s belly swelling under her varsity tennis jacket. Instead, we sat silently, our milkshakes melting.

After Audrey got her period, we never mentioned her scare again.

iv.

I only met Natalie’s Jon once. He was a slight kid, and if he hadn’t been dating my best friend, I might have thought he looked like a weasel. Jon lived in Kent and attended the university there. I think he studied ceramics, but I can’t remember now. Jon didn’t say much, only mumbling when he bothered to open his mouth at all.

He came over to Natalie’s, another weekend when Natalie’s parents were out-of-town, visiting Natalie’s aunt and uncle who lived in Utah. Natalie wasn’t supposed to have boys over if her parents weren’t there.

“They know something’s up,” Natalie had said earlier that day. “My mom found my cum rag the other day,” she said, referring to a towel she’d stashed under her bed. I knew she’d snuck Jon into her bedroom on several occasions. He’d taken over my usual place beside her in her lofted bed. He was always gone by morning, by the time her father woke up to make coffee and her mother dressed in her nurse’s uniform and left for work. I knew they’d get caught; it was just a matter of time. What if they overslept and Natalie’s mother burst in to wake her for school? What if her parents heard two people snoring, or Jon’s voice as he mumbled in his sleep?
“How did she know what it was?” I asked, not entirely sure I knew what a cum rag was myself, although I thought I could guess.

Natalie shrugged, and I understood what the shrug meant: mothers just know; mothers always know.

Jon and Natalie sipped Jagermeister from the refrigerator. Natalie had sworn her dad wouldn’t miss a few sips, but I wrinkled my nose at the strong licorice scent rising from the bottle.

“Gross,” I declared.

“Suit yourself,” Natalie said, pouring the black liquid into a glass.

The late summer day was a hot one, and Natalie suggested we run through the sprinkler showering her mother’s garden. Jon and Natalie stripped to their underwear, and I noticed how comfortable they seemed, already accustomed to one another’s nakedness. Natalie ran through the sprinkler, water droplets clinging to her bare body and leaving her long black hair inky.

“Come on, Kat!” Natalie urged me.

I nervously unbuttoned the top button of my dress, thought better of it, and buttoned it back up again before running through the sprinkler. I hated the way the frigid water felt against my clothed skin. Goosebumps rose on my flesh and I shivered. My dress clung to me, and I felt heavy, weighed down by the wet fabric. I knew I would never be like Natalie, shedding my clothes with a strange, silent boy.

“Natalie!” I called, unsure of what I wanted to tell her. I just wanted her attention. But Natalie lay dreamily on the soaked lawn, kissing Jon, and I wasn’t sure if she’d even heard me. Blades of grass stuck to their limbs. I waited for her to break away from Jon, to look at me, to say something. After a few minutes, I stalked inside to dry.
I was on house arrest for two weeks when I was eighteen-years-old, after a night of drinking vodka with a friend and her older coworker, Adam. I'd been showing off, attempting to prove I could drink straight vodka. I couldn’t.

In the car, on the way back to my parents’ house, I threw up. When Kelly pulled over so I could vomit at the road’s shoulder, a police car showed up at the scene to investigate, red and blue lights flashing. I was cited for underage consumption, and once the news spread, I was kicked off the tennis team. My probation officer, Trudy, only allowed me to go to school and court-mandated community service. When I came home every day, I charged my ankle monitor. When I took hot baths, I propped my leg on the edge of the bathtub, the heavy anklet dry.

Somehow, despite my vomiting on him, Adam had been attracted to me on the night we met. He was twenty-four, paunchy, and already balding. Despite this, I found him appealing—mainly because I was determined to lose my virginity and hoped someone as old as Adam would know what they were doing. While I was on house arrest, after my parents went to sleep at night, most nights I met Adam at the edge of my driveway, next to our mailbox, the furthest I could venture without alerting Trudy, my probation officer. There, we’d hug. And then we’d kiss. He’d press his body against mine, flat against the concrete.

“How many people have you slept with?” I asked him one night.

“Fourteen,” he told me. And I wondered if I even knew fourteen people I’d be willing to kiss.

“Do you think we’ll sleep together?” I asked him.
“Yes,” he said.

Number fifteen, I thought.

After Trudy cut off my ankle monitor, Adam and I met in other places, sometimes at the house he rented with a friend from high school, sometimes in his parked station wagon at the bottom of the cul-de-sac where my parents lived. We kissed, my hands touched his body and his touched mine, but we never went “all the way.”

“Not until you’re ready,” Adam said, kissing my forehead.

Now, I wonder why a twenty-four-year-old man would want an inexperienced eighteen-year-old girl. I believed him when he told me that I looked much older, seemed more mature than other girls my age. Now, I struggle to even recall the rapture, the excitement I felt during the time he and I were together.

But then, one night shortly after we started seeing each other, as we kissed in the back of his station wagon, I told him I was ready. I’d hoped that if I dated an older guy, I could spare myself losing my virginity in the back of a car. But I was ready, or I’d convinced myself I was, as I unzipped my pants and flattened the seats in Adam’s hatchback.

And the next morning, driving to school, I wanted to know if I was transformed, if my parents would be able to tell, if the world’s mysteries had now been revealed. I tried to connect the dull pain between my legs with a change inside my heart.

After school, I met Adam at the library downtown. He told me had something to give me. He presented me with a forty-page-long poem, most of it rambling and nonsensical. I accepted it wordlessly, unsure why he, with all of his experience, had been so moved when I had not been. I read the poem as he sat beside me, his face open and earnest.

“Thank you for the poem. I love you,” I said. At the time, it didn’t feel like a lie.
There are some dresses that I’ll never wear again but can’t stop holding onto, even as they are pushed to the back of my cluttered closet. This wasn’t true of the violet bridesmaid dress I wore in Audrey’s wedding, when I was nineteen and she was newly twenty-one, having celebrated her birthday just a week before. She’d promised to postpone the wedding long enough to appease her mother who’d asked, “Don’t you want to be able to enjoy a glass of champagne at your own wedding?” But Audrey had had a dry wedding, so that hadn’t mattered in the end.

In every wedding photo, I’m grimacing, my dress the color of a boysenberry. Audrey’s own gown was white, signifying her born-again virginity. She’d met all of the other bridesmaids in college, through a Christian organization she’d joined. I was the only one who’d known her when she was in high school and liked to have sex with boys in the back of cars.

A few months after I’d started dating Adam, Audrey had come home from college, newly religious and eager to discuss her abstinence over coffee at Angel Falls.

“It’s probably a bad time to tell you that my period’s late,” I said, divulging a secret I’d kept from everyone, hoping that silence would summon my period. “If I have to have an abortion, I don’t want my parents to find out.”

“What do you mean if you have to have an abortion?” Audrey bristled.

“I’m not having a baby. I’m going to college in nine months. What am I supposed to do, breastfeed in my dorm room?” I asked, incredulous.
And I remembered Audrey at sixteen, fearing her own unwanted pregnancy, but I didn’t mention it that night at Angel Falls. I thought about reminding her how supportive I’d been when she’d been the one who’d been late and afraid. I wanted to hurt her like she’d just hurt me, yearning to remind her about who she’d been not so very long ago. Long after my period finally came—weeks late—I was still angry.

My bridesmaid dress from Audrey’s wedding hangs in the back of my closet. The dress is unflattering in both shape and color.

“Maybe you’ll wear the dress again someday?” my mother asks. And I shrug, knowing that I won’t, but aware that parting with the dress confirms that my friendship with Audrey no longer means much to me.

Five years after her wedding, Audrey is still married to her husband, and they travel the world as missionaries. I still scoff at the idea of settling down. Instead, I date men I don’t plan on marrying and sleep with them too soon.

Unlike Audrey, I don’t want to erase the men I’ve been with, even those I sometimes think I regret: the medical student whose last name I never knew (I suspect he had a girlfriend), the best friends I happily pitted against one another, and the boy I met in line at the hot dog stand and whose bedroom was covered, floor-to-ceiling, with greasy pizza boxes. I can’t undo any of it, not the mistakes and not the men I loved, if only for a night or a month or two.

Instead, I’ll *live in sin* as my great-aunt Dulcie used to call it. At my wedding, I’ll be the bride in the off-white gown, sure to set my southern relatives’ tongues wagging their disapproval. Shame—I’m finished with it. I’m not trying to fool anyone anymore. Least of all myself.
The Coefficients of Being and Doing

You said you liked when I slept over even if I just slept on your mysteriously stained couch, often fully clad, perhaps in that fur-collared suede coat. I tried to earn my keep; I made grilled cheese sandwiches to-order for all of our friends while they were doing whip-its in the living room. I made yours with fresh mozzarella and basil, theirs with processed American. I lit your cigarettes with matches. I went along with our unspoken rule that we would never talk about high school and how I was in love with you, but we never did anything about it.

When I slept over at your house, you’d wake me up and we’d go to the diner where Audrey once found a wriggling worm in a pancake. We’d count the quarters we collected in our wallets for this occasion. The jukebox in the corner:

“Do you want to hear Lou Reed or the Smiths today?” I asked. I could measure your mood by your answer.

“Lou Reed,” you said. “Let’s take a walk on the wild side.”

We scarfed down almost-raw French fries, threw our dollars on the table, and smoked one last cigarette before I trudged home alone, blissfully disheveled and my head throbbing, my fingers poking holes in the pockets of my coat because I was always forgetting my gloves.

That’s how it was, on the weekends that winter, staying up until dawn, playing records, rubbing my chapped hands together when we parted ways. One night, you were rolling on ecstasy, and I found you, and you told me you couldn’t handle the coefficients of being and doing, and I laughed at you because I couldn’t understand what the hell you meant, but I read to you until you fell asleep, and then I snored softly beside you in your bed.

On New Year’s Eve that year, I was fuzzy with false eyelashes, dripping sequins, and
flailing in high heels. You wore a suit and burst into my apartment with a bottle of Jameson. I spread cranberry Roquefort on crackers as you drank deeply from your bottle of whiskey. I was on my fourth glass of wine by the time you showed up.

“I like that lipstick on you. That purple color,” you said with sincerity, and I was confused before brushing a hand across my mouth, realizing my lips were stained from the malbec I’d been drinking. I called you an idiot and punched your arm. More bronze sequins rolled across the floor as I tore to the bathroom and scrubbed at my lips.

We were standing in the street, the year only a few minutes old, and you were still cradling the now-empty bottle of whiskey. Your eyes glowed, and I thought I might be barefoot, that glass dug into my heels, and we were both looking ahead and behind with our eyes fixed on one another. As everyone made a ruckus in the road, you kissed me briefly, but tenderly. My first instinct was to laugh.

The next morning I woke up in my apartment to your knock, my false eyelashes stuck to my cheekbones. You had forgotten your cigarettes. I was wearing my robe, and I wrapped up the cheese and rinsed out the wine bottles as you looked for them. They were on top of the fridge. As you left, the door was closing behind you, but you stopped it with your foot and smirked at me.

“I’m sorry, I’m not sorry,” you said, and kissed my cheek. I said, me neither.

Months later, in mid-March, you stirred me from my customary spot on your couch and told me I needed to eat. We had spent all our money on gin and tonics the night before, so you made me an egg sandwich and we sat on your porch, adjusting to the unfamiliar sunlight.

Our toes skimmed the damp floorboards as I squinted at your face. This new greenness took me back to when I loved you and we were sixteen, sixteen in hamburger drive-in parking lots, refusing to kiss. When we sat on my parents’ basement couch, refusing to hold hands. When
you ordered squid at Chinese restaurants to appear adventurous. When I made you mix tapes because your minivan only had a tape deck. When we talked a lot about fucking, but never did. When I drove you home—a three-hour trip—on the morning you found out your grandfather died. When we spun on stools after-hours in the hot dog restaurant next to my apartment, drinking beer, and chain-smoking, writing our names in cursive in the ketchup and mustard, speaking of how the rest of the night might shape up, and planning where we’d breakfast in the morning.
I stood outside room 324 and rapped sharply on the door. I rubbed my slick palms on my dress, nervously adjusted the hem. After a few moments, I knocked again. *What’s taking so long,* I thought with irritation.

At last, the door opened. A middle-aged, overweight Asian man stood before me. He seemed bewildered.

“Are you alone?” I asked. I realized that this was the wrong question to ask a stranger, especially a stranger whose hotel room door you are leaning against so your legs won’t buckle.

“Yes,” he said, an edge of expectation in his voice.

“I’m sorry,” I stammered. “I have the wrong room.” I tore down the hallway toward the elevator, jamming my thumb several times against the “down” button, willing the elevator to swallow me.

Inside the elevator car, I called him—Sean, the man I was supposed to be meeting.

“Where are you?” he asked.

“I went to Room 324 and some weird guy answered the door,” I said, my voice breaking.

“Are you sure you’re at the right hotel?”

“Yes. You told me to meet you at the Hampton Inn.”

“My bad,” he said. “I’m actually at the Holiday Inn. It’s across the street from the Hampton. Come on up when you get here?”

“Sure,” I softened. I was accustomed to his carelessness. What else did I expect, driving an hour from my parents’ house to meet a man who would never love me?
The trip had already been marked by bad omens; I’d gotten lost several times and was an hour late. And I’d dressed in a gauzy black dress, with puff sleeves, printed in tiny yellow flowers. It was the dress I’d worn two weeks earlier to my grandmother’s funeral.

***

Granny arrived at my parents’ house in Ohio, half-dead, as Hurricane Katrina made landfall in New Orleans. She was only supposed to stay with us until the water receded, but she was so frail our family didn’t think she would survive the trip back to Louisiana. Granny had always been a small woman. Now she was hunched, vanishing before our eyes.

My family decided to move Granny into a nursing home, one with large white columns that were supposed to look grand but mostly struck me as cheap. The circular drive was wide and long enough to accommodate the ubiquitous ambulances and hearses idling in front of the automatic doors. Over the five years Granny lived there, the home changed its name several times. Each new name sounded statelier than the one before, as if it was a resort or a sprawling English country home—not a place where people came to eat cabbage rolls and die.

“The food isn’t very good at this hotel,” Granny said when we visited her for Sunday dinners, after it became too difficult for her to visit my parents at our house. On one of her final visits, she had locked herself in the bathroom and then couldn’t remember how to get out. After an hour, my mother was finally able to pick the lock. We had worried that she’d have to kick the door down.
“You’re right,” I said, lifting a fork of wilted green beans. Across the table, one of the other women on her floor, Bernice, considered a silk flower centerpiece before devouring its petals.

“Look at that nut,” Granny said out of the side of her mouth. “I can’t believe they let people like that in a nice place like this.”

***

In the Holiday Inn parking lot, I considered going back home. If I left right away, I could still make it in time to watch Jeopardy! After all, Sean named the wrong hotel and didn’t seem particularly bothered or apologetic that I’d wound up at some strange man’s door. That man could have robbed me, raped me, or worse.

But all summer, I had thought only of Sean, cried over Sean. We had dated briefly earlier that year, at the end of my freshman year of college and just before he graduated. It should have just been a fling, but I fell in love with him for his high cheekbones and almond-shaped eyes. He was dynamic, funny, and troubled—which made him even more attractive.

Sean lived in a filthy apartment in a converted church with four other guys. That spring, Sean taught me how to chug beer, sneak into bars, and snort cocaine. I cleaned his apartment and used my meal plan to swipe him into the dining hall. He always ate Fruit Loops, the cereal discoloring the milk at the bottom of his bowl, green or pink. I’d played my autoharp for him and sang songs about murder; he’d smiled and said my singing was beautiful. We’d passed long evenings on his bedroom floor, holding hands and stroking his cat, Odessa. We drank jugs of bad wine and watched a lot of sad French movies. When I cried, Sean held me and I nuzzled his
neck. Odessa over-turned cups of sour wine and ash as I slept beside Sean. She lapped at the mixture of spilled ash-wine.

Since we’d broken up at the end of the school year, Sean had spent the summer burning through the money in his trust fund. I had been taking an algebra class at the University of Akron, in a building that smelled of chalk and armpits. As I factored polynomials, he was winning and losing big in Vegas. As I tried and failed to memorize the quadratic formula, he was spending what was left of his money on cocaine, and, from what mutual friends had told me, heroin. But now, at the end of the summer, he had a real job, working as a land analyst for his best friend’s father. I foolishly believed that this was a sign that he was better and healthy. He’d traveled to Streetsboro on a business trip, his first since getting hired.

I walked across the parking lot and into the hotel lobby. The woman behind the front desk smiled at me.

“Can I help you?” she asked. I spied a tray of chocolate chip cookies beside her and thought about taking one.

“No, I’m here to meet someone,” I said, hoping she realized I wasn’t a hooker, just someone who gave it away for free.

“Of course,” she said.

So for the second time that night, I stood before a door marked 324. I only knocked once before Sean answered. He was wearing dress clothes, his shirt unbuttoned. He looked better than I expected, not at all like someone in the midst of a drug bender.

“You look good,” he said, pulling me into an awkward half-hug. I followed him into the room, which smelled of cigarettes even though the room was on a non-smoking floor. I sat on
one of the two queen-sized beds, the one that was still made. An ugly painting hung on the wall above the beds.

“You want a beer?” he asked.

“Sure,” I said, accepting a Rolling Rock. It was warm, but I appreciated having something to do with my hands.

***

Just before Granny’s health declined for the last time, I visited her with two chocolate covered coconut clusters from a box at my parents’ house.

“My favorite,” she exclaimed, biting into one and wrapping the other in a napkin for later. She was wearing a green jacket with several red cardinals embroidered across the front. Granny had always loved birds. Before Alzheimer’s, she had begun a birds of America quilt—a square for every state’s bird. She never finished the quilt. She never patched Ohio’s red cardinals.

“I remember,” I said. She and the other residents were in their wheelchairs, in front of the television in the recreation room. A VHS of sing-along songs played on the screen.

“Now, I want to hear you all singing and clapping along!” the activity director beamed. Many of the residents had been wheeled into the room against their wills and were dozing in their wheelchairs.

Normally, Granny would turn to me and scoff, muttering, “Get a load of those idiots.” But that day, she clapped and hummed to the old standard, “Basin Street Blues.”
“Blowing down the river, down to New Orleans / The band is there to meet us / Old friends to greet us,” Granny sang along in a low, reedy voice. She had never been much for singing, even though she loved musicals, particularly the ones starring Gene Kelly. She smiled, a toothless grin. She had lost her false teeth shortly after moving into the home.

“Julia, you sing so nicely,” the activity director said, just as surprised as I was to hear Granny sing. But it was a song about home, the city where both of us had been born and could not return. It was a song about reuniting with old friends, worries forgotten on the Mississippi River. I could only clap along because I didn’t know the words.

***

In Sean’s hotel room, I listened with mild interest as he told me about his job. The job would involve constant travel—a new town in Ohio nearly every night. Empty beer bottles were piled in the trashcan and dozens of stubbed-out cigarettes filled a paper coffee cup turned ashtray. The television was on. The picture was grainy and the volume too loud.

“How have you been?” he asked.

“Not great,” I said. Since the last time I had seen Sean Granny had died. I had turned twenty, and he hadn’t even bothered to wish me a happy birthday. I had been a bridesmaid in my friend Audrey’s wedding, longing to cry out that she was making a mistake, but instead, passing my tears off as tears of joy for the couple. I had barely passed math. I’d strung along a guy who often joined me for coffee after class because I didn’t have the heart to tell him that he was great, but he just wasn’t Sean.
“I’m sorry to hear that. I guess you know I’ve been having problems with drugs, and that’s why I’ve been unavailable,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said, quietly.

“Well, now that I have a job, I have, like, a better outlook on things and I'm getting better. You know?”

“Sure,” I said, because I chose to believe that he was well and could be capable of loving me.

***

At the beginning of August, a couple of weeks she sang “Basin Street Blues,” Granny fell ill.

“I bet she’ll die on my birthday,” my mother said.

But she was wrong. Granny died on August 13th, six days before my mother’s birthday.

That night, I skipped dinner—another casserole dropped off by my mother’s well-meaning friends. I was tired of bubbling one-pot meals, tired of carving a single portion from the dishes and microwaving a plate, eating alone because the others were keeping vigil beside Granny’s bed in the home. My mother’s brother and sister had come to town, to wait for Granny to die.

Instead of going with them, I took my car and drove the back roads. I often drove aimlessly that summer. I was consumed by my own sorrows. I counted deer carcasses and watched day fade, lightning bugs appear. When I returned, their cars were in the driveway. It was too early for them to be back, and I knew what that meant before they told me. I steeled myself for the news.

“I’m so sorry,” my mother said. “You can cry, you know.”
“I’m fine,” I told her, allowing myself to be hugged without returning her embrace. My father mixed me a gin and tonic. They had started letting me drink at the house that summer. After Granny got sick, I drank a lot of their gin. If they noticed, they didn’t say anything.

We all sat up to watch the local news out of Cleveland, mostly bad as usual. Nobody felt much like eating. We returned the casserole to the fridge untouched. After more cocktails, my family went upstairs, one by one. I tilted the bottle to my glass again, relishing the juniper burn of the gin as I swallowed. I rummaged through the kitchen pantry for food and discovered a box of coconut clusters. I frequently slipped one or two to Granny when I visited her. I opened the box and shoved every remaining cluster in my mouth.

Later, after I was certain everyone else was asleep, I crawled from the house, wearing only my nightgown, onto the driveway. I allowed myself to weep.

***

When we finished our beers, Sean asked if I was hungry. I wasn’t, but I told him I was because I wanted him to take me out.

“I thought we could go somewhere nice,” he said, as I reached for my purse.

Somewhere nice turned out to be a Buffalo Wild Wings. We sat across from each other in an uncomfortable booth. My legs stuck to the vinyl. I still wasn’t hungry, but I ordered a dozen hot wings. They arrived steaming, a ghastly, unnatural shade of red. Sean picked his chicken bones clean. Sauce stained his chin.

“I’m sorry it’s not fancy,” he said, “but they have the best wings.” He wiped his fingertips with a wet wipe.
I glumly picked at one of my own wings.

“Aren’t you going to finish those?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “They’re yours.” I slid my plate towards him.

***

We held a funeral for Granny in Pittsburgh, where her husband, my grandfather is buried. We were a small group of mourners, just immediate family and the Presbyterian minister from the church where I had been confirmed as a teenager. During the two-hour car ride, my little cousins chattered incessantly. They were too young to understand the gravity of the occasion. I closed my eyes, blocking out their noise. Granny’s death had hardly been unexpected, but before her, I had only mourned goldfish and hamsters, remains small enough to flush or bury in a candy tin.

We arrived at the gravesite, cut into the side of a characteristically steep Pittsburgh hill. Many years ago, Granny had asked my mother to simply scatter her ashes over the grave and forego the ceremony of a formal burial.

“Because she was too cheap to buy an urn,” my mother explained.

Despite Granny’s wishes, she was interred in an urn my mother selected from a catalog in the funeral director’s office. This was not a New Orleans funeral with a second line, trays of petit fours and pastries, and a burial above the ground. No calling hours, no wake. In lieu of flowers, my mother requested donations be made to the activities fund at the nursing home.

“Here,” my mother said, handing me a handkerchief edged with lace. It remained balled in my hand. The minister spoke kindly and carefully about Granny. It was a perfectly nice service, kept appropriately brief considering he didn’t know the woman he was speaking about. I
paid more attention to the sounds of traffic on the road below. I stared at the minister’s bald, gleaming head. My little cousins played loudly at a not-quite respectful distance.

When the minister said “Amen,” we turned to leave, ascending the hill. My aunt stumbled, fell backwards, and twisted her ankle. Her hose ran and she hobbled for the rest of the day. Grave dirt clung to the soles of her shoes.

Afterwards, we ate dinner at a dingy Italian restaurant nearby. We dined in a private room. I assumed that the restaurant staff thought it was better to sequester us in case we became hysterical in our grief.

I picked at pasta Alfredo, the shrimp shriveled and gummy. I examined their veins. I overheard my mother and my uncle discussing whether it would be possible to take a quick vacation before summer was over. She finally died so now they can go to the damn beach, I thought. At the other end of the table, one of my little cousins flung a piece of garlic toast across the room. Snot flowed from his nose. Nobody paid any attention. I grinned into my plate, twirling fettuccine on my fork without raising it to my mouth. Granny would have told him to knock it off or else she’d beat the hell out of him, I thought.

***

After dinner, I went back to the hotel with Sean. In the elevator, our hands brushed as we both pressed the button for the third floor. A vein in my neck pulsed. In his room, he reclined on the unmade bed. I chose the untouched bed again, sitting with my legs crossed, facing him. Maybe there was something to the bedroom set-ups in old movies—couples sleeping in separate twin
beds, a nightstand acting as a barrier between them. I felt safe, sitting with my legs tightly crossed, on the edge of the other bed.

“Do you want another beer?” he asked.

“I have to drive home,” I said. He lit a cigarette in response.

“You know I feel horrible about how things ended between us,” he said after a long silence.

“So do I,” I said.

“I’m surprised you came, but I’m so glad that you’re here.”

“You know you can always call me when you’re lonely.” I meant it, even though I knew that when I was lonely I could never reach him.

“What do you say we do something about the distance between us?” He patted the duvet beside him. I hesitated for only a moment before surrendering, padding across the floor and laying down beside him. “Give me your hands. I’ve missed them.” He clasped my hands in his, hooking his fingers with mine, tracing the lines etched across my palms. I kissed him, ran my hands through his brown curls. When he unzipped my dress, I didn’t stop him.

After Sean and I were finished, we lay in the dark. He passed me his cigarette and I tried not to burn a hole in the cheap sheets. I inhaled too deeply and coughed.

“I wish you could stay,” he said.

“I told my parents I’d be home by midnight,” I said.

“Sometimes I forget you’re only nineteen,” he said.

“I’m twenty.”

“Right,” he said, and laughed.
I rescued my sandals from under the bed. Sean helped zip my dress, shrouding me again. His breath was hot against the nape of my neck.

“I’ll walk you to your car,” he said. “I think that’s the gentlemanly thing to do.” In the hotel lobby, I passed the woman at the front desk again.

“Good night!” she called. I couldn’t look at her.

Outside, the late August air was hot and heavy. Mosquitoes bit my bare arms and I swatted them away. Sean kissed me on the lips and then again on the forehead. His arms encircled my waist.

“I’ll call you,” he said, before turning to leave.

I wanted very badly to believe him, but I knew I was wearing a dress better suited for mourning.
Haint

In Morgantown, West Virginia, cats yowl and scratch at one another in the night. They prowl my neighborhood, gnaw on chicken bones, hiss at strangers. Well-fed house cats mingle with strays. They conspire in vacant lots and on window ledges. You can tell a house cat by their collars, their engraved nametags, sagging jowls, and the bells that hang from their necks. Feral cats’ ears are choked with mites. Their ribs ripple. They toy with sparrows before snapping their necks.

Most mornings, I walk across a bridge that separates my neighborhood from the college campus where I teach and attend class as a graduate student. I dodge puddles of vomit, drying in the sun. Used condoms and pizza crusts stick to the pavement. I count coiled turds and wonder: dog? Human? Sometimes it is difficult to tell. In town, the sewers reek of sulfur and shit. This is not my Morgantown, not my own filth on the bridge. At night, I light eucalyptus candles. I drink chamomile tea. I watch old movies, comforted by Ingrid Bergman, Cary Grant, and Katharine Hepburn. My inside cat, Sadie, nestles into the crook of my arm. We sigh against one another, quiet. I try to match her breath. Our ears prick at the shrieking that comes from the bridge.

In the fall of last year, someone was living under the bridge. I scowled at their mattress, threadbare sleeping bag, and trash bags filled with dirty underwear and Little Caesar’s hot-n-ready boxes. Broken springs burst from the mattress, poking through its supporting layers. I passed this person’s camp every day, but I never saw them sleeping there. I imagined mattress springs digging into his or her back as they fell asleep to shattering beer bottles hurled from the bridge. One morning, on my walk to campus, I noticed that the camp under the bridge was gone. Why did that person leave and where did they go? I considered the question for a moment before admiring the newly clean, clear space.
A chain-link fence surrounds the Walnut Street bridge, tall enough to deter jumpers, I noted with fleeting sadness on a particularly bad morning. Padlocks are clasped to the fence, like fingers hooking through chicken wire. Couples’ names are scrawled in sharpie across the locks: 

Paige & Karl, 10/30/2016. Luv u forever Babe!

“Is this Morgantown’s Pont des Arts?” my father asked, skeptically, when we crossed the bridge one weekend when he was visiting.

“Yeah, it’s just like Paris,” I said, laughing a little too cruelly.

I have lived in Appalachia for nearly seven years, since I was nineteen-years-old, a college freshman. I moved to Athens, a college town in southeastern Ohio. The county is one of the poorest in the state, but you wouldn’t know that if you strolled the city’s quaint, cobbled streets. Court Street, which spans several blocks, is lined with twenty-six bars and two churches. Poverty is not visible in the city’s center. Instead, the street is filled with privileged students on bar “shuffles.”

The college green, too, is unmarked by economic inequality. Squirrels chatter from two hundred-year-old green ash and elm trees. On warm days, students lounge on the cropped grass. Sometimes they toss peanuts to the squirrels. In 1964, Lyndon B. Johnson visited Ohio University and delivered a speech from a portico near the college green. There, for the first time, he described his plan for a “Great Society,” proposed social programs that would eliminate poverty.

Today, half of Athens county residents live below the federal poverty line. Townies, the OU students call them—always in a nasal, dismissive tone. I heard that townies were filthy, that their teeth were scarce. They drawled when they spoke. They were all pillheads who hated OU
students. After living in Athens for six years, I came to know better. And although the locals did detest the college and its students, their complaints were largely justified. Demand for student housing inflated rents, which are often too expensive for Athens county natives to afford. Instead, those people are shunted to smaller towns. Roads are untreated in winters and school is frequently canceled. Many of the children depend on the breakfast and lunch programs the local schools offer; without that service, they go hungry.

When students leave town during breaks, local businesses suffer, cutting hours or closing for months. Generally, when I was there, the students seemed oblivious to the broader Athens community, except when townies served as the punch lines of jokes. The university hadn’t eliminated the problem of poverty; it was just rendered invisible. Instead, OU students stayed for the typical four years, drank at the local bars, studied, and then moved elsewhere. They left as they lived—without consideration for the locals who had been there all along, who would still be stirring on their front porches when they were gone.

When I moved to Morgantown in 2015, I was twenty-five. A friend who had lived here before advised me that Morgantown is “rough around the edges.”

“Like Athens,” I said.

“Not quite,” she said. “You’ll see.”

And I learned quickly that unlike in Athens, I would be forced to see from the beginning.

I rented the first apartment I toured inside a hundred-year-old house. Thoney Pietro, a famed Morgantown stonemason, built this home for his family. Even at seventy-eight-years-old, Pietro could lay 136 bricks per minute. Some said his gift for masonry was supernatural—that he could levitate stones.
The house he built is located near an elegant, historic district, but my own neighborhood is shabbier—less expensive and less desirable. Pietro built many of the houses on my street. Undergraduates, graduate students, families, and people who aren’t affiliated with the university at all live piled on top of one another, in ramshackle houses that would be nice if the landlords invested the money to restore them.

My house has what people on HGTV shows would derisively call “character.” My landlord conducts business in one half of the house. I often hear the office staff arguing on the phone with people who are trying to sneak puppies into their apartments or are late with their rent. Two tenants rent the one-bedroom apartments on the second floor. A middle-aged man lives in one, and an international graduate student named Yan lives in the other. I rarely see either of them.

My own apartment is two-stories tall. Living in an apartment with a staircase makes me feel like an adult, as though I have accomplished something. I live alone and that’s the way I like it. My apartment’s main saving grace is a massive stained glass window, ablaze in gold and chartreuse. A butler’s pantry, original to the house, divides the living room from the kitchen. The glass cabinets house my hurricane glasses, champagne flutes, a gravy boat, and other china in my chosen French Country pattern. I’m a woman with a china pattern, but no fiancé or husband. That’s also the way I like it.

When I toured the apartment, the butler’s pantry was in disrepair. Paint peeled and yellowed. Flakes curled on the dishwater colored carpet which was pocked with cigarette burns.

“It’s an eyesore,” my mother said. “What a shame.”
“We fixed it up for you,” my landlord said when I moved in. When I moved in, the pantry still smelled of fresh paint. Although the job seemed streaky and rushed, it was white again, like it might have been when the original family lived here.

Upstairs, the bedrooms still have the original hardwood floors, although the boards are deeply scarred. I cover the warped floors in my bedroom with a cheap oriental rug. By my back door, the house’s mail slot remains. *Milk and Package Deliveries*, a small sign reads; a lion’s carved head roars beneath the letters. Now, the old mail slot is sealed, purely decorative.

The houses where I lived in Athens had character, too. When I was twenty-one, I lived above Tony’s, a bar my roommate and I frequented. The apartment was a matchbox, but the rent was cheap. We liked the apartment’s proximity to a hot dog shop and even more bars. Every night, I fell asleep to the sound of glass bottles shattering and drunk college kids retching in the alley beneath my window.

Once, when I was living above Tony’s, a tornado warning wailed.

“Where do we go?” I asked Chelsea, my roommate, as we strained to hear the announcement.

“Our basement?” she shrugged and then laughed.

We wrangled our grey tabby, Sadie, into her pet carrier and carried her downstairs to the bar, where happy hour was still underway despite the weather advisory.

“What’ll it be, girls?” Tony (our landlord and the bar’s owner) yelled over loud music. “Gimme Shelter” by the Rolling Stones was playing. Tony served us boiled hot dogs and stale tortilla chips, covered in a plasticine cheese sauce—happy hour hors d’oeuvres, Tony called them. Inside her carrier, Sadie hissed at our feet.
“Be brave,” I begged her. Chelsea and I sucked down long island iced teas, waiting for the storm to pass.

When I moved out of the apartment above Tony’s, I rented a quiet duplex on the east side of Athens, a neighborhood favored by families and professionals. I was twenty-two, still staying out until four in the morning, still surviving on chili fries and PBR. When I moved to the east side, I felt like an impostor, a child sitting at the top of the stairs, eavesdropping on her parents’ elegant dinner party.

The street where I moved, appropriately named Elmwood, was lined with trees and well-maintained older homes, many from the early 1900s. My house was the ugliest one on the street, but still lovely. The apartments in the duplex were nearly identical; mine was on the top floor. The house, built in the 1930s, had recently been renovated into a duplex. Both apartments shared a basement that I considered eerie. The light bulbs were naked and exposed, and I had to tug on a thin cord to illuminate the basement. A previous tenant had left behind a massive freezer, large enough to store dismembered torsos and limbs. Fortunately, when I lifted the freezer’s lid, I saw only cobwebs and a dried-out black widow’s corpse. In the back of the basement, a disused chute still smelled of coal. A pantry for storing preserves and cured meat sat empty, its rotting door ajar. The floor was dirt and crawled with red worms.

My downstairs neighbor, Sarah, said she and her boyfriend sang at the top of their lungs when they folded their laundry in the basement.

“I always feel like I’m being watched,” she said. I knew what she meant. I never felt alone in the basement, even when no one else was around. As I gathered linens from the drier, I sometimes felt the fine hair on the nape of my neck prickle and stiffen.
In Morgantown, I spy on people from my front room’s bay window. On the first of the month, my landlord’s tenants dart in and out of the office to pay their rent. Most of the people who work in the office smoke heavily. Their cigarette butts overflow a coffee can with a faded label. In the afternoons, neighbors stroll past my house. A few carry plastic bags filled with clothing, a certain give-away that they’ve visited Christian Help downtown. After moving here, I was surprised to discover that unlike in Athens, the poor are not relegated to the outskirts of town. Instead, in my mixed neighborhood, privileged students and families struggling to afford necessities live cheek by jowl.

After I settled into my apartment I explored my new surroundings, strolling down High Street, the city’s main drag. It was late July and humid. My legs boasted mosquito bites. I had scratched them, picked until they bled and oozed. My bangs were stringy, plastered across my broad forehead. I sweated and smelled of wet dog.

“Do you have any money?” people of varying races, ages, and genders asked as I passed them on the street.

“I’m sorry, no,” I said, rummaging through my pockets and coming up with lint, just for show. At first I stuttered, taken aback. Then, my voice became firm. Soon, I stopped responding altogether, staring stonily ahead, refusing to make eye contact. Sunglasses helped and so did headphones. I couldn’t remember ever having seen panhandlers in Athens, not because there weren’t homeless people or those in need, but because business owners and the police didn’t tolerate them. What effect did this ultimately have, other than creating a false portrait of the place?

Here, several homeless men and women gather on the steps of a downtown church to nap and gossip. Sometimes, they pass liquor bottles wrapped in brown paper, even in the early
morning hours. As I pass them, I try not to look. I feel sad, but I also feel something else—
disgusted and superior.

In 2015, I became convinced that the duplex I was renting in Athens was haunted, after a series
of events I couldn’t otherwise explain. I kept finding dead birds in the front yard and observed
their decay.

“Their eyes are always the first thing to go,” my downstairs neighbor, Sarah, said,
kneeling to examine one dead bird we’d found. A few days later, I watched a little girl walk past
our house. She stopped to examine the bird’s corpse for a few minutes. She gently poked at the
bird’s bones with a twig, then stuck the twig in the ground: a grave-marker. I noticed the look of
reverence on her face, and how she twisted to look back at our yard even after she’d resumed her
intended route.

Later, a plump red cardinal slammed into Sarah’s sun porch window. She thought it had
simply been stunned, but its skull was cracked. He was dead before his body even hit the ground.

“It feels wrong to throw him away in the garbage,” Sarah said, resting the cardinal’s body
in one of our recycling bins and covering him with pine needles. I agreed.

Later, I found the bird’s skeleton at the bottom of the bin. Without his crimson feathers,
there was nothing about his body to signal that he had once been a cardinal. I examined his skull
and his brilliant orange beak. I gathered his bones, imagining the cardinal’s mate—his widow.
Did she still circle the sky, seeking a flash of red? Her own feathers were brown as dun. I
rescued the cardinal skull from the bin and rinsed them clean. I gifted them to Sarah, who
collects animal bones.

“Oh, orange beak,” she said, mournfully, receiving the skull and cupping it in her hands.
On Halloween of that year, Sarah, and I watched cheesy horror movies and drank wine in my apartment. We stood in my kitchen, snacking on crackers and cheese.

“Where’s that music coming from?” Sarah asked, suddenly. I had often noticed strange music when preparing dinner in my kitchen. I always assumed that it was wafting up from Sarah’s apartment. The music never changed—always disembodied, organ or piano driven, played in a minor key. No singing voice warbled along.

“You didn’t leave music on in your apartment?” I asked.

“No,” Sarah said, a look of concern growing on her face. We laughed uncomfortably until I cleared my throat and suggested we move back into my living room. I tried to ignore the gooseflesh rising in rough points on my arms.

I heard the same tune frequently in the following months, but I tried to ignore the music because it unsettled me. *It’s just music,* I thought. Even if I couldn’t account for where it came from, it was hardly dangerous—just creepy. But there was heaviness in that house. I felt pressed-down inside of it, like a butterfly trapped in a mason jar.

After Sarah’s boyfriend, Tommy, moved in with her, she told me that they began to see strange things in her apartment. Doors opened and slammed in uninhabited rooms. She saw plumes of smoke, as if from a cigarette. In the basement, she smelled formaldehyde.

“Tommy saw an apparition in our bedroom,” she told me. “But he wouldn’t tell me exactly what he saw because it freaked him out so much.” Sarah only talked about the house’s idiosyncrasies when we’d go out together, usually after several drinks.

“What do you think it was?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “But I don’t think the house likes him.”
I still can’t bring myself to call “the thing” a ghost. I never saw it take on a human form or shape. But I’ve researched spirits and haunted houses, and I’ve learned that spirits frequently make their presence known through noises and actions. Few people actually see a ghost unless it wants to be seen. Why some ghosts prefer to be visible and others unseen remains a mystery.

Spirits often become active when people move into a home or prepare to leave, disturbed by the chaos created by a move. In Appalachia, ghosts are sometimes called haints. I thought of the “thing” in our house as an entity. I felt less threatened calling it that—and less foolish. I thought people who described their own hauntings were nut-jobs or attention-seekers. By calling the spirit in my Elmwood house an entity, I could quell the start in my gut when the house throbbed with strange music. I couldn’t call it a ghost or a haint, couldn’t let that organ grind into my bones.

Shortly before I moved from Athens to Morgantown, I started packing up my apartment, beginning with my books. They filled built-in shelves in the living room. I stacked hard covers together, cookbooks in one box, and poetry collections in another. I taped the boxes shut and went to bed. Six years in one place, reduced to cardboard boxes filled with books, many of which I hadn’t yet read.

In the middle of the night, I heard a terrific crash from the living room. I woke with a start, but didn’t get up to investigate. The next morning, I made a cup of coffee and retreated to my living room to curl up on the sofa. I was stunned to see that the large antique mirror that had hung above my fireplace had fallen and shattered into hundreds of jagged slivers. The shards of mirror covered the floor and in them I saw my shocked, scared face reflected back, and back, and back. Glass slashed my feet and my blood smeared the hardwood boards. I examined the mantle
where the mirror had hung. The nail that supported the mirror was still firmly implanted in the wall.

I told Sarah about the broken mirror. I was shaken; broken mirrors are bad luck, of course. A massive broken mirror must be extra bad luck.

“Our ghost doesn’t want you to leave,” she said, after a long silence.

I picked glass from my feet for days.

My house in Morgantown is decidedly not haunted, but I think there is something palpably sinister about the town. Perhaps this is what my friend meant when she told me Morgantown is “rough around the edges.” In my mostly quiet neighborhood, a row of apartments next door stand out for the piles of chairs and bicycles and garbage littering the alley. A man with a bushy, red beard rents one of the apartments. I don’t know how old he is, but he likely looks older than his age. I suspect he has a drinking problem. In the middle of the night, he sits outside his apartment, smoking, blasting classic rock, drinking, and shouting to himself. I’ve seen him asking for money downtown, telling people he’s homeless even though he has an apartment. Sometimes when he drinks too much he calls an ambulance. The EMTs obviously know him and can barely conceal their irritation when summoned.

“Put me on a goddamn stretcher,” the bushy bearded man demanded.

“Quit being an asshole,” one of the female EMTs told the man. “We’re not taking you.”

“You’re a fucking bitch,” he slurred.

“Don’t talk to her like that,” a male EMT warned, clenching and unclenching his fists.

I watched the scene play out. The ambulance left without the bushy-bearded man. He smoked another cigarette and cursed the sky.
A few days later, I was cooking dinner in my kitchen in the early evening when I heard screaming in the alley. I looked outside and saw that a young man and a young woman were arguing, but I wasn’t sure why. The bushy-bearded man watched them fight too, a cigarette burning between his fingers.

The young man pushed the young woman to the concrete outside their apartment, straddled her body, and struck her in the face.

“Get off her,” the bushy-bearded man yelled, intervening. I had never heard him speak so clearly before. The younger man released the young woman and punched the bushy-bearded man’s face.

“I’m calling the fucking police!” I screamed through my window. Later, I realized this probably wasn’t the best decision—giving away that I called and where I lived. At this, the younger man streaked away. Because of me, he had the opportunity to evade the police. At the time, I just wanted him to stop hitting the screaming woman.

“Coppers,” the older, bearded man bellowed when the police showed up. “Coppers everywhere.” The police left without arresting anyone.

“Do you like living in Morgantown?” my friends from Athens asked me after I’d been living there for a few months.

“I don’t know,” I said, truthfully. “It’s still new.” I still wanted to give this place a chance, to look past what I’d initially dismissed as ugly because of my own innumerable privileges.
But then, after living in Morgantown for just over a year, Yan, my upstairs neighbor living in slept with her windows open on an October night. She’d wanted to enjoy the strange, cool air, she told me later. She had been roused by the sound of shattering glass—a man trying to break into my apartment. I was out of town at the time, but the graduate student had immediately phoned the police. They arrived swiftly and arrested the man before he forced himself inside my apartment. Despite the arresting officer leaving his business card with my case number scrawled on the back, I was never able to contact him, never able to find out more about the person who had tried to break into my home.

Still, I was grateful that someone had listening; who knows what might have happened if my neighbor had felt chilled that night, slamming her window shut? Or if she’d ignored the noise completely. I am not the only one who hears the town’s incessant, ugly noise—and I’m not the only one still troubled by it.

Despite the attempted robbery—the violation of my home—I still don’t want to admit that I hate this place. I worry what my hate might mean about me. I feel guilty about judging the people who live here, the people who I might have called townies if I had still lived in Athens, like the ignorant undergrads. The things that I loathe about the tenants next door—their drinking, their brawling, their messiness—only perpetuate damaging stereotypes about people who reside in West Virginia and Appalachia, stereotypes I’ve heard repeated throughout my life. Do my own experiences of this place as an outsider matter? Or does admitting my own, very real discomfort only irreparably harm us all?
I have never lived somewhere I have felt unsafe before, but I have also never known real hunger or had to contemplate sleeping under a bridge on a discarded mattress. I have never worn hand-me-down clothes, ill-fitting and stained and faded. I teach my students about social justice, but I loathe my neighbors. What right do I have to sneer at the panhandlers downtown, to wrinkle my nose at some real or imagined odor rising from their skin? I’m a newcomer; this isn’t my town. I am a transient, a visitor—as immaterial to this place as a ghost.

The house I live in settles in the middle of the night, cracking like a grandmother’s swollen knuckles. One of my neighbors, a middle-aged man, paces in the attic apartment above mine. I hear his heavy footsteps and the ceiling seems to sag. He keeps odd hours, even odder than mine. He stomps in his apartment long after I turn off my light; he is up and out of the house before I rise. Outside, coal and gravel trucks roar in the street. Cats spit at one another. Drunken college students shriek on the bridge and their voices ricochet. The bearded, older man next door blares his classic rock. I know that these are noises from this world—not the ghostly—but that doesn’t mean I sleep any easier.

After the robbery, I slept with a steak knife tucked in a nightstand drawer. I realize the impracticality of this; if I ever needed the knife, I’d never wrestle it from the drawer in time. I would fumble in the dark and likely slit my thumb on the blade.

The knife matches several others I keep downstairs, in my kitchen. They are flimsy-handled and cheap. The blades are dull and covered in greasy fingerprints. I carried one of those knives on my first date with an ex-boyfriend because he was a stranger and we had met online. At the end of that first night, the knife remained buried at the bottom of my handbag, under tubes of worn-down lipsticks and loose change. It sliced through my purse’s cheap lining.
When I make steak for dinner, I cook it rare. Butter, black pepper, coarse salt, and not much else. As I make the side dishes—spinach and potatoes au gratin—a band practices in the house behind mine. They play screamo music. The singer roars unintelligibly. The undergrads who live across the street from me are having a Hawaii themed party. Tiki torches burn in their driveway. I will find plastic leis in my yard for weeks after. I pour a glass of red wine. In the front room, outside cats tease Sadie, safely separated from her by a windowpane. She paws at the glass and flicks her tail. The outside cats grow bored with the game and strut away. Alone in my kitchen, I rest my steak—seared outside, cool center. I cut into it with one of my knives and watch the blood pool.

I didn’t believe in haunted houses until I lived in one.
Bile

“AAA says there’s at least an hour wait,” my friend Madeline says, sullenly dragging a hand through her hair. It is a muggy July night and we are sitting in the parking lot of a Sunoco gas station in Columbus. It is after midnight. My own hair is lank, grimy, and it still smells faintly of cigarettes, the pine bite of gin—the scent of last night. I pat it self-consciously, but all I accomplish is making it lie flatter still. We have been waiting here for several hours.

Five minutes into our trip back from Columbus to Athens, where we live, Madeline’s huffy Plymouth Horizon had given out. The lights on the dashboard flickered erratically, and Madeline swerved to make the first exit we saw. On the ramp, a few hundred yards away from the Sunoco, the Plymouth shuddered and stalled. We had rolled the car into the Sunoco lot with the help of a man who had been loitering in the gas station parking lot.

We call Madeline’s boyfriend, Graham. “You’re in a bad neighborhood,” he scolds us. The blue sailor dress I’m wearing is rumpled, its once stiff collar, limp. My underarms are ringed with sweat, and they smell like a cup of milk that’s been left out on the kitchen counter for too long. Since we’ve sat here, the inside of the gas station has closed, and now patrons have to speak to the greasy adolescent cashier through a smudged window.

A middle-aged man in a vividly colored suit—neon orange or green—jabs with an index finger at the cigarettes he wants to buy, but the cashier keeps pulling out the wrong brand. Madeline and I watch them quarrel, and Madeline takes notes on the scene in the little red notebook she is never without.

“Graham was being weird on the phone,” Madeline says, glancing up from the notebook.

“Did he sound drunk?” I ask.
“Of course he’s drunk, he’s at a wedding,” Madeline sighs. Graham didn’t invite Madeline to the wedding, and I know she’s mad; she has been grinding her teeth all day. Instead of stabbing at an overcooked steak and staggering towards an open bar, Madeline has spent the day complaining and shopping with me. She mentions several times, hungrily, that Graham must look so handsome in his suit. Today, she bought extravagant underwear for him to peel off of her the next time they are together.

Madeline and I recently became good friends when we both fell in love with two men who shared the same apartment. Madeline and Graham are still together. My boyfriend and I aren’t, but we were last night, on the air mattress in Madeline’s front room. I don’t remember much about it. Sean kissed me, he undressed me, and I bled all over the air mattress, as if my body was rejecting him, as if when he touched me he created a new wound. When I woke up, he was gone. I was crumpled on the mattress alone, and I didn’t know where he was. He may have been smoking a cigarette outside or feeding the parking meter. Most likely, he was scoring drugs from a grubby house on the west side of town.

By the time he came back, I was dressed. Madeline made us grilled cheese sandwiches cut into triangles, which we devoured at her vinyl kitchen table. The three of us chewed in silence, pouring more Tabasco on the stale bread with every bite. After we ate, he belched and left town, a pile of crumbs left behind at the place where he sat at the table.

“You’re not supposed to get laid in my apartment before I do,” Madeline complained in the car on the way to Columbus. She had only been living in her new place for a couple of weeks.

“Do you think I’m proud of it?” I asked, thinking of the blood-streaked underwear I’d left wadded in the trashcan in Madeline’s bathroom.
Sitting in the Sunoco parking lot, I think about calling Sean because he’s from Columbus too. He and Graham have been friends since high school, but it’s sometimes difficult to see why they’re still friends now. In the fall, Graham will move to Chicago to attend law school. Sean will start a new job and use his salary, rather than his trust fund, to buy cocaine.

“Call him,” Madeline urges, “Didn’t he say he was coming back to Columbus when he left? Maybe he can pick us up.” I shrug, choosing instead to watch the woman pumping gas several yards away from Madeline’s car. She’s smoking a cigarette. Two children sit in the backseat of her battered convertible, kicking at one another, their faces streaked with what looks to be a mix of grime and tears.

“Knock that off!” the woman growls, stubbing out her cigarette, wearily resting one hand on her hip as she holds the gas pump with her other. I wonder why these kids are still out, still wide-awake after midnight. They can’t be more than five or six years old. They’re still squabbling. One pinches the other. “Goddamn it!” The woman stops fueling the car and leans menacingly over the backseat. “You’re not getting any candy when we get home. And you’re going straight up to bed,” she threatens.

“Christ, they should be in bed now,” Madeline says, rubbing her eyes. Wails rise from the backseat of the convertible, but they are lost in a roar as the woman restarts her car, lost as the convertible squeals out of the parking lot.

We wait for the tow truck. An elderly man buys gas and then offers to give us a jump, but it doesn’t take. He is hard of hearing and he keeps screaming how sorry he is. He’s not sorry enough to stay with us. Madeline and I watch as a woman wearing only a t-shirt and a pair of panties walks up to the glass window of the gas station store. I’m not sure what she buys, but she saunters away, her legs swinging loosely. She’s laughing, probably at all of us.
I text Sean: “Stranded at a gas station in your town. There is a pants-less woman and no one seems to think this is strange.” I don’t ask him for help. I know he’ll be too messed up to pick us up, even if he answers his phone, even if he decides that he wants to help us.

When the AAA man finally shows up, it’s past 1 AM. He is friendly, apologetic, and he chuckles softly about the “colorful clientele” milling around the parking lot. Madeline and I climb into the cab; it’s probably too small to accommodate three people, but we crush against one another, Madeline seated in the middle. The tow truck driver makes small talk that I mostly ignore, stifling yawns, staring out the window at the dark pastures we pass, the scenery blurring and slipping. Madeline laughs at something the tow truck driver says. I press my cheek against the window’s cool glass.

Once we’re back at Madeline’s apartment, we fling off our shoes. We speak of showering but open beers instead, draping ourselves across her three-legged sofa. Madeline calls Graham to tell him that we made it back, but he doesn’t answer. He is either dancing or sleeping. She acts as though she isn’t upset, but she leaves most of her beer unfinished and gets up to wash her face. I think of making a joke as she pads across the room: Isn’t it funny? The only man you can count on is a tow truck driver. But I can’t bring myself to speak the words because I know that if I do, my voice will catch, my face will fall.

A few months after the night at the Sunoco station, I begin my sophomore year of college. Madeline should have been living in the dorms as well, but she finds a loophole, something she was always good at doing. “I’m an orphan and an independent,” she tells the people working at the housing department. “I don’t have a home address somewhere else, so why can’t I make my permanent home here?” They can’t argue with her. At nineteen-years-old, Madeline doesn’t have
a legal guardian anymore, and her mother’s house in Toledo is empty and for sale. She quickly settles into her shotgun style apartment, paying her rent with government money and wages from the hot dog restaurant next door, where she works late nights.

On Sunday nights, I go over to Madeline’s apartment, and often, she makes me dinner. In the dorms, I subsist on microwavable cups of macaroni and cheese, so I’m grateful to eat something home-cooked. I don’t know how to cook yet myself, but Madeline can prepare complicated dishes. She had to learn how to cook for herself when her mother got sick. Tonight, Madeline makes aloo gobi, curried potatoes and cauliflower. Her apartment always smells of spices—turmeric, cumin, star anise, whole peppercorns. She hasn’t lived here long, but already her scent is embedded in the apartment’s walls. In five years, when she doesn’t live in this town anymore, I wonder if the apartment will still smell like her.

I sit at Madeline’s antique yellow dining room set, watching her peel potatoes, their skins unfurling in tight coils. We both sip screwdrivers, the taste of vodka in them so strong that I wrinkle my nose. My cup leaves a ring on the table’s surface, and my throat burns with each acidic mouthful. Orange pulp lingers on my tongue, leaves a film across my gums.

“I keep waiting for Graham to tell me when I can visit him,” Madeline says, neatly cleaving a head of cauliflower. “It’s his birthday soon.” Madeline has saved enough money for a bus ticket, but Graham hasn’t told her which weekend she can come stay with him. She has already prepared his gift—a wedge of Gouda cheese (Graham’s favorite), and a homemade CD of all of the soul songs they used to make love to. She minces ginger and garlic, adding them to the pan. “I have the outfits planned.” I ask to see the outfits because I’m curious, and because I think that if we can talk about clothes rather than the man she hopes to wear them for, she might
be distracted, she might stop looking as if she is about to cry into the curry simmering on the stove’s hot lip.

    Madeline fixes me a plate of food—a scoop of rice, a spoonful of curry, a dollop of cool yogurt. She rummages through her closet as I sit eating on the sofa in the living room. She produces black nylon slips with lace crisscrossing their bodices, their scalloped hemlines. She mentions that she’s thinking of wearing one as a dress on the Megabus.

    “Do you think that’s a good idea? Wearing lingerie on a bus?” I ask. I think of a boy from my hometown. He had been a football player. He rode a Greyhound and was mugged at knifepoint by another passenger when the bus idled at a rest stop. Madeline rolls her eyes at me. She has arranged the outfits carefully, as if she is ready to leave at any moment should the phone call come.

    Madeline models a mustard yellow pencil skirt, and then one in deep evergreen. Both are wool, a sign of the changing weather. And there are princess style coats with collars and cuffs trimmed in blonde mink. Madeline sweeps one of the coats in her arms; it is faintly moth-eaten, a button is missing, a seam has burst. She searches for a sewing kit and then returns to the living room, seated on the floor with her legs crossed, threading a needle.

    I don’t know what I’d wear when I see Sean again. We broke up again—finally—at the end of the summer, after I met him at a hotel near my parents’ house, after he handed me a warm Rolling Rock and patted the empty bed beside him, after he cradled me in his arms and promised that he would treat me better and call me every night, after he fucked me and I wept in his open mouth as he kissed me. After all that, I drove home in the dark because I still had a curfew. After all that, nothing was different between us. He didn’t treat me better, and he didn’t call me every night.
But he still shows up in Athens. The last time I saw him was a couple of weeks ago when he was here for Homecoming. This time, he didn’t try to sleep with me. I’m not sure what’s worse—his feigning interest in me so I’ll sleep with him, or his utter indifference. That weekend, he told Madeline that he thought my hair was too red. Since then, his cat has died, and I’m not sorry about it. I realize that when I see him again, it won’t matter what I decide to wear because he won’t be paying attention.

“When Graham left for law school, I vomited bile,” Madeline says from the floor where she is sprawled. Her voice is soft and unsteady. “I haven’t done something like that since the night my mother died.” I refill our glasses with vodka, ignoring the orange juice, as she tells me about how her uncle Joe had come home from the hospital with news that her mother had finally succumbed to the cancer she’d fought, defeated, and fought again. Madeline describes how she sprinted to the bathroom, how her hands gripped the ivory toilet bowl, how her body shuddered and heaved, emptying itself. I sit quietly, turning my glass in my hand. I’ve heard the story before, but never like this, not in such detail. I know the role I need to play. I must reassure Madeline that the trip to Chicago will happen, that those outfits will be worn. I must make excuses for why Graham hasn’t returned her calls, and I’m prepared. I can make the same ones that I made for Sean when he wasn’t calling me.

Madeline weeps into the folds of the fur coat she’s holding. A musky scent rises from the mink as it dampens. Madeline is a beautiful girl and a spectacularly ugly crier. She sobs with her whole body. She doesn’t beat the floor with her fists like a tantruming child. She doesn’t pound her chest or wail. She is quiet, her shoulder blades flexing, neck veins exposed and taut. I want to join Madeline on the floor, now, but I can’t bring myself to do it. I think that as long as I remain sitting upright on this sofa, promising her that Graham will call, then I can pretend that one of us
is well enough to take care of the other. I can pretend that the calls that never came for me will come for her.

And I, too, want to bury my face in the glorious furs spilling across the hardwood floor. I cannot weep as Madeline does, so openly and unselfconsciously. When my grandmother died the previous summer, I waited for hours until the house was shuttered and asleep, and then I crawled, wearing only a nightgown, onto the driveway to cry so no one inside could hear me. I long to cry as Madeline does; I have never vomited bile.

Four years later, Madeline and I are in the same city again. She has recently moved out of Athens, but I’ve stayed behind to attend graduate school. Madeline visits often, and when she’s in town, we go to bars. We twirl our straws and twist lime garnishes into our cocktails. Sometimes men approach us. They talk to us; they ask what we’re studying in school, what we’re drinking. They ask us who our people are.

“I don’t have any,” Madeline always replies.

“Huh?” The would-be suitor asks.

“I’m an orphan,” Madeline answers, “a triple orphan.”

“How can someone be a triple orphan?” the man asks, reeling.

Like this: Madeline’s father, a boxer, drops dead from a heart attack right around his thirtieth birthday. Madeline’s mother dies from cancer when Madeline is a teenager. After that, Madeline’s uncle Joe becomes her guardian. He is a kind man. I only meet him once, but he always asks Madeline about me after that day. The summer after Madeline moves out of town, the summer I turn twenty-three, Joe is killed in a motorcycle accident.
When Madeline’s mother died, Madeline vomited. When Madeline’s uncle died, I vomited. I was sickened that someone so young could lose so much. When I hear Madeline explain her triple orphanage, I appraise her face—her almond shaped eyes, her high cheekbones, her curled lips—and I wonder how she has been able to withstand these losses. I marvel at her because I have people. My parents are alive, and the only deaths I remember grieving are those of my eighty-five year-old Granny and of my childhood dog.

Madeline and I attend our friend Jenny’s wedding a year after Joe dies. We are both dateless, drinking too much wine from the open bar, and we feel uncomfortable at our table, which is filled with people we don’t know very well. After a dinner of shrimp Alfredo and chicken curry, we stand outside the venue to stretch our legs. Some of the groomsmen are smoking cigars, and many of their faces are red with wine already. The maid-of-honor comes outside to announce that Jenny is about to dance with her father. People toss away their cigarettes and shuffle inside to watch Jenny’s father guide her across the dance floor. I turn to Madeline and ask her if she wants to go back inside.

“We’re going to miss it,” I say.

“That’s okay,” Madeline says, “it’s hard for me to watch the father-daughter dance.” One of Madeline’s most prized possessions is a photograph of Joe and her mother at Madeline’s parents’ wedding. It is a candid snapshot. Madeline’s mother is telling Joe something; her brows are furrowed just as Madeline’s are when she’s in the middle of a story. Joe smiles widely at Madeline’s mother’s side. I know why Madeline doesn’t want to go inside the reception. Joe will not be there to beam like this on her wedding day. He won’t be at her side to escort her down the aisle, or hold her in his arms as music swells. Madeline and I stand in the waning daylight, facing
away from the room where Jenny dances with her father. We wait until the music fades. People
inside clap and cheer, and then we go back inside.

Later that night, Madeline and I dance together.
Cadillac Hill

When I was seven-years-old, my family and I moved to the Rubber City. That’s what everyone called Akron, Ohio—once home to General Tire, BFGoodrich, Firestone, and Goodyear. Although most of the rubber plants were gone by the time we moved to Akron, the specter of industry remained. F.A. Seiberling, founder of Goodyear Tire and Rubber, once lived in the sprawling Stan Hywet Hall. Now the estate is a museum, open for school field trips, weddings, and to those who simply wish to see how the rubber barons lived. I visited the Tudor revival style home for the first time when I was a teenager, and I was most impressed by the Seiberling’s library, which also doubled as a trophy room. Mounted animal heads leered from the walls. A polar bear rug stretched across the floor, its paws extending towards each corner of the room, its immense head almost alert, its wooden fangs bared. I stared into its polished eyes and thought I saw life still stirring.

In our suburban house, on clear days, I sometimes saw the Goodyear blimp, blue and gold and hulking. It hovered in the sky, a distant reminder of prosperity and productivity.

***

During my first year of high school, I met Natalie, a junior. I admired her distinct look. She wore vintage secretary dresses and layers of speckled amber pendants set in sterling silver. Black hair, cut into a pixie. Button Nose. I knew who she was because we had some friends in common, but also because of the gum collection she kept in her locker—a wall of multicolored wads of
chewed gum, some pieces still glistening with saliva. She seemed so cool. My opposite. I was uncomfortable and awkward.

One morning, as I trudged through the hallway to third period, I noticed Natalie rummaging through her gum-covered locker.

“Can I add a piece?” I asked her, shyly, with a wad of spearmint gum in my cheek.

“Sure,” she said.

“I’m Kat, by the way,” I added.

“I know who you are. You know Danny and the boys.”

The boys were a group of sophomores I hung out with, flirted with—boys who shoved burned CDs in my locker with handwritten track-lists. They picked me up in their noisy trucks for dinners at Steak and Shake—but they never paid for me or tried to hold my hand. And the boys weren’t above sending me picture text messages of their shits, brown and curling in the toilet. It was the price I paid for being “one of the guys.”

“We should hang out sometime,” Natalie said. “What are you doing this weekend?”

I said I didn’t have plans.

“Have you ever been to Swensons?”

“Nope,” I said.

“Aaron and I were going to on Friday. You should come with us. I’ll pick you up,” she said, closing her locker.

“Cool,” I said, before scurrying to class, ahead of the late bell.
Natalie had a license, but even better, she also had a car, a maroon Volkswagen Jetta she named Jetty. When she picked me up on that Friday night, I wasn’t sure what to expect. I fluffed my hair in the foyer mirror as my mother pressed me for information about my new friend.

“What is this girl?” she asked. I knew what she really meant: Does she smoke weed?

“I don’t know. She seems cool,” I said, slipping on my shoes when I heard a honk from the driveway. I knew that was going to piss off my mom. She hated when people wouldn’t come to the door to introduce themselves. She wondered what they had to hide.

“Be careful,” my mother said, pursing her lips, but I was already closing the front door.

“Get in the back,” Natalie said, rolling down her window. Aaron, one of our mutual friends, sat in the passenger seat. I got into the car, noticing that a cardboard cutout of Beyoncé was buckled into the seat beside me. A Belle & Sebastian song played on the stereo. Natalie backed out of the driveway without checking her rear view mirror. I winced as her tires squealed, knowing that mother still lurked in the foyer.

About thirty minutes later, we pulled up at Swensons, a concrete red and white building. The restaurant was decorated for Christmas, strewn with flashing lights and silver tinsel. An aluminum Christmas tree winked in the building’s cupola, and a layer of fresh snow blanketed the parking lot. Natalie parked her car into a spot, killed the engine, and kept the car’s headlights on.

Swensons is a local chain of drive-ins. Founded in the 1930s, carhops still race to your car to take your order, regardless of the weather conditions. Prices haven’t increased much since the drive-in first opened, which makes it a popular destination for all Akronites, especially the teenagers.
This particular night was frigid and the carhops wore ear warmers, fingerless gloves, and fleece pullovers printed with the Swensons logo.

Aaron asked for a grilled cheese and fried zucchini. Natalie ordered for me. She didn’t consult a menu.

“She’ll have a galley boy, potato teezers, and a California.” I had no idea what she was talking about, but she rattled off the list effortlessly.

“I’ll get that right up for you. Turn your headlights back on if you need anything,” the carhop said. He beamed at us before racing back to the building.

“So what am I eating?” I asked Natalie when the food arrived, piled high on a silver tray that the carhop placed in Aaron’s lap. He passed me a sandwich wrapped in wax paper. An olive-crowned toothpick was stuck through its center. Aaron also handed me a packet of steaming, fried potatoes wedges and a purple beverage.

“A galley boy is their specialty. It’s a double cheeseburger with two secret sauces. LeBron James always stops here after home games to get a Galley Boy,” Natalie explained. She was a vegetarian and she ordered a Veggie De-Lite—essentially condiments on a bun, but she seemed to relish every bite. I sipped my California, which was a mixture of grape juice and ginger ale, served over crushed ice. It was refreshing and tart.

“They put sugar in the meat. That’s why the burgers taste sweet,” Aaron said. Natalie put on the Charlie Brown Christmas soundtrack. Vince Guaraldi’s melancholy “Christmas Time Is Here” filled the car. I bit into a potato teezer and burned my tongue on the hot mixture of potatoes, cheese, and diced jalapenos. The parking lot was filled with other cars. More downy snow fell. Red-cheeked carhops streaked across the lot.

“Let’s go to Cadillac Hill,” Natalie said, crumpling her sandwich wrapper.
“I don’t know. It’s snowing pretty hard,” Aaron said.

“So what? It will be fun.” We paid our carhop and were on our way. Bates Hill, nicknamed Cadillac Hill, is the steepest hill in Akron. It received its nickname because of its proximity to several car dealerships at the intersection of Bates and Market Street. Salesmen took their customers on test drives up and down the hill to show off the cars’ braking abilities. Now, Cadillac Hill is a popular destination for cars packed with bored teenagers interested in testing their cars’ speedometers. We drove through the old Italian neighborhoods to get there. As we teetered at the crest of Cadillac Hill, I realized I couldn’t see the bottom. What would my mother say if she knew what we were about to do? I wouldn’t tell her about this; I was starting to get better at lying to her, and she’d never find out.

“Ready?” Natalie asked, revving the engine.

I tried to look casual as I checked to make sure my seatbelt was still secure, and then I braced for the descent.

***

When I went out with my friends on Friday nights, like I did on the night Natalie, Aaron, and I conquered Cadillac Hill, my mother would wait up for me. My father went up to read around 9:30 with a mystery novel tucked under his arm. By 9:45, when my mother went upstairs to wash her face and take out her contacts, my father would be snoring, his book still open and splayed across his chest.

My mother always wore fleece pajamas and two pairs of wool socks. Even though it had been years since we moved from New Orleans, she still wasn’t used to the harsh winters. She
shivered in restaurants, malls, and church: everywhere we went. She craved sunlight, the south’s merciless heat.

On Friday nights, after my father was in bed, my mother ate cheese and crackers, maybe a runny brie, a cranberry stilton, or a cheddar with chives. She usually drank red wine, but in the winter months, she savored a finger or two of scotch. She drank from the expensive bottle my uncle always brought for us when he made his annual visit from Wales.

She watched the 10:00 news on the trashy channel my father usually forbade us from watching before dinner. He thought the reporters were incompetent, but that’s exactly why she and I liked the station. The Cleveland news was seldom good, and if we laughed, it made hearing it easier. A missing child. An entire family killed in a house fire. Another young black person killed by police officers’ bullets. Danger swallowed the city and was even spreading to the suburbs where “nice” people lived. I doubt the local news did little to assuage my mother’s worries about what I was up to with my friends.

“Where are you?” she always texted me at 12:01, one minute past my curfew. If I didn’t answer the text, she called. “Keeeytherinnnnne, get home now,” she said, her voice shrill, my name’s syllables stretched and bent. I cringed every time, and I knew that my friends could hear her berating me.

“I’ll be home in five minutes,” I promised, although I was usually at least fifteen minutes away.

As I fumbled with my keys on the front porch, she flung open the door and light from the house streamed outside. She stared into my eyes, checking to see if my eyes were red. She was always so obvious about it. She observed how I walked, how I talked—was my speech slurried? I knew she tried to smell my breath, to detect if there was a sourness that shouldn’t have been
there. When she was satisfied that I was sober, she sent me upstairs to bed. As much as this kind of inspection bothered me, even then, I understood her compulsion.

What is more dangerous than a car full of teenagers? There’s the question of speeding, deer darting into the road, black ice, and drunk drivers. But parked cars are the more insidious threat. Drained Big Gulps, flattened packs of cigarettes, and bags of fast food litter the backseat of a teenager’s stopped car. Lips are wetted, joints are passed. Cars fill with smoke and coughing. There is sickly sweet strawberry “wine” (it’s really malt liquor). Invariably, someone vomits on the car’s floorboards. Windows fog. If a boy and a girl are alone together, they pant against one another, joining uncomfortably and incongruously and briefly. Underwear is wadded and forgotten. Later it is brandished as a trophy.

***

Almost every girl I know has the same story about a car, about a boy. This is mine:

It was the Fourth of July, and it was the summer after my first year of high school. I was sun-browned from days spent at tennis conditioning camp. I wasn’t wearing red, white, and blue, but rather a lace dress with flowers embroidered across the bodice. My parents and I had attended a party at a family friend’s house, out in the township, where corn grew taller than knee-high. I held a sparkler in one hand, trying to write my full name in the air before the light from its tip was gone. I got as far as the first “e” in Katherine.

The party was a bore. Danny, one of the boys Natalie and I were friends with, was there with his parents and his twin sisters. Our mothers were best friends. We were neighbors; our backyards touched. Danny was a year older than me. Our other friend, Eric, was there too. They
skulked around a tin bucket of beer on the deck, hoping the grown-ups would turn their backs long enough for them to skim beer. Ice melted in the bucket, and flies drowned in the water.

Someone shot off fireworks in the yard. They were vermillion blooms in the sky.

“Let’s get out of here,” Danny said. “This is lame.”

“Where should we go?” I asked.

Danny shrugged. “Let’s just drive around.”

“Let me ask my mom,” I said. She was laughing, talking to a group of her friends from the garden club, including Danny’s mom. She told me to be home by midnight.

We left in Danny’s car. I sat shotgun. Eric was in the backseat. We drove along the curved, rural roads with the windows down, and I inhaled the scent of fire and manure. We gossiped about people we knew and commiserated about the new school year, which was only a few weeks away. Every few minutes, fireworks sounded, loud cracks like cannon-fire. I jumped each time.

“I’m horny. I haven’t gotten laid in months,” Danny said after a while.

“You’re not a virgin?” I asked.

Danny laughed.


“Yeah,” I said, quietly. I didn’t add that I had only been kissed one time, and I wasn’t even sure if that counted, because it had been at a party, and the boy and I had been dared to kiss one another while our friends watched. It definitely didn’t count.

“Drew’s girlfriend told me I have a big cock though,” Eric said.

“When did Drew’s girlfriend see your dick?” Danny asked.
“She just asked me to whip it out when we were over at his house because she wanted to know how big it was. She’s a fuckin’ freak.”

“What did Drew do when you did that?” I asked.

“He just laughed,” Eric said.

“Kat should be the judge of whether you really have a big dick,” Danny said. I felt my face redden. My skin felt hot. I’d never seen a man hard before, except in the blurry free porn clips I downloaded on my family’s computer.

“Do you want to see?” Eric asked, eagerly.

“Yeah, she wants to see,” Danny said. “Don’t you?”

I shrugged because I didn’t think I could say no.

“Don’t you?”

“Okay,” I agreed. I heard Eric fumble with his jeans as he pulled them down. My eyes were on Danny’s face. He smiled encouragingly at me, but his eyes were mirthless.

“I’m ready,” Eric said. I forced myself to look. Even though I didn’t want to, I was still curious. I don’t really remember what his cock looked like, if it was big or not. And of course, I didn’t have anything to compare it to back then. It reminded me of a pig’s stretched innards.

“Well?” Danny asked.

“It’s fine,” I said, turning my head to face forward again. The boys were clearly disappointed at my reaction. Eric cleared his throat awkwardly, as if to say, “Well, then.”

“Maybe you should drop me off,” he said to Danny. “My curfew is at 11 anyway.”

Danny drove Eric to his house, on a cul-de-sac lined with identical houses.

“This was fun, guys,” Eric said, before he got out.

“I need to get home too,” I said.
“Sure,” Danny said. He took the back roads, the longer route to get back to our neighborhood. Possums and raccoons hid in ditches lining the road, eyes gleaming in the dark. Danny slowed his car, eventually stopping on the road’s gravel shoulder.

There weren’t any streetlights. The night was lighted only by occasional fireworks, mostly obscured by the treetops. Mosquitoes rose from the bracken rainwater that collected in the wide fields surrounding us. A coyote howled; his voice was distant—as lonely as a train whistle. I noticed how clearly the stars stood out against the country sky. In Akron, they were obscured by the city’s smog. I searched for a familiar constellation, to steady myself, before asking Danny why he had stopped the car. I already knew the answer.

“I’ve wanted this all night. And I know you do too,” he said. He leaned across the seat, grabbing my face with one hand, unbuckling his seatbelt with the other.

“What are you doing? I asked, squirming away from him. He stuffed his hand down the front of my dress, his fingers twisting, searching, and grasping. My bra’s underwire dug into my flesh. Danny’s breath was shallow, excited. He rose from his seat. I knew he was going to straddle me, to pin me down.

“Get off me,” I yelled, sinking my bitten, dirty fingernails into his arm as hard as I could. He yelped and withdrew his hand from my dress.

We sat in silence until Danny finally turned the key and the car pulsed again. We didn’t speak for the rest of the ride. I kept my eyes on the road. When we finally pulled into my driveway, I expected him to say something, anything. I thought he would apologize.

“I’d prefer if you didn’t tell anyone about this,” Danny said instead. I felt dazed. I just wanted to run up the steps to my house. I wanted to scrub the day off my skin and fall into my bed.
“Alright,” I agreed. Danny unlocked my door, and I smoothed my hair and my dress as I walked towards the house. The lights inside were blazing.

It was only 11:30. I knew my mother would be surprised and pleased that I was home so early.

***

As Natalie’s car raced to the bottom of Cadillac Hill, in a delicious instant, Jetty’s wheels separated from brick-street and the tires lifted from the ground. We were borne through air as my stomach plummeted. There was only the dusk-bathed city—streetlights, smokestacks, lines of empty factories and warehouses and parking garages. Graffiti-wreathed freight trains screeched to a halt on their tracks. At the station downtown, people waited for late buses in silence. They were motionless and we soared.

As people and time calcified around us, my kneecaps shook and I gritted my teeth.. I screwed my eyes shut, in both ecstasy and fright. Open them, Natalie urged. Because even though we were suspended in flight, it was only for a moment.
Fire Opals

I loved a man for a year and a half. And then I left him, two days before my twenty-sixth birthday. He bought a plot of land in the West Virginia woods and planned to build a cabin. Amish men from Ohio would come to build it, riding in a car driven by their “English” boss. The Amish would be heavily bearded, wearing straw hats and suspenders, speaking an unfamiliar language similar to Dutch. In a matter of days, the shell of the house would be raised.

***

Only adorn your body in opals—brooches, earrings, pendants, diadems—if you were born in October. Otherwise, you’ll invite a curse. For how long? Ten years? A century? Opals are unlucky in engagement rings; they’re soft, fragile. They crack easily.

***

“It will have a big, wraparound front porch,” the man I loved said, and looked at me knowingly. He must have been imagining me, sitting on that porch and reading a book, face shaded by the trees’ leaves, maybe even drinking lemonade. Perhaps I would have fed white-tailed deer sugar cubes or carrots from the palm of my hand.

Did he really think I could be content in that house in the woods, half an hour from the nearest grocery store, from a highway? Surely he knew, even then, that I preferred warm places and paved roads.
***

Even if he had bought me emeralds or pearls, I still wouldn’t have moved into the cabin in the woods.

   Even if he had bought me a ruby, my birth-stone, which would have been better luck.
   Even if he had purchased me a thin gold band or an asscher-cut diamond for my left hand.

***

Opals are rumored to lose their shine when their owners die. I wonder if those opal earrings dulled on the afternoon I left. I didn’t look inside the small black box on his coffee table to see for myself, when I left that day.

   I left him the frozen pan of pasta Bolognese in his freezer. Did it burn? Did he toss it out?
Or will he heat in the oven, serve it to his next lover, pass it off as his own?

   Bobby pins—embedded in his floorboards. Twisted, bent.

   A bottle of wine we’d bought at a vineyard in South Carolina and saved to enjoy for a special occasion. On that trip I refused to let him touch me until the final night, and then I’d gotten drunk and gritted my teeth and climbed on top of him until he grunted and then rolled over. I knew, then, it was the last time. I’ve never cared for Muscadine grapes.

***
I learned that are opals “useless as a charm to someone who is selfish.” And I think selfish people are unlikely to be charmed by much, not even a gleaming, almost-phosphorescent stone. I could have worn those milky earrings, could have felt my lobes hang under their weight, could have been gored by the posts till I bled. Still, even after all that, I wouldn’t have loved him. The opals would crumble; not even a fine iridescent dust would remain.
The Girlfriend Experience

“The sun was rising on a Sunday morning and I was in a Mercedes-Benz with two prostitutes doing cocaine,” Sean messaged me from San Francisco on a February night in 2012. I’d made the mistake of asking him how his weekend had been. Sean was working as a land analyst for a company in Columbus. I wasn’t sure what a land analyst did exactly, and I wasn’t convinced that Sean knew either. But he traveled across the country—several different cities a week—conducting ambiguous “research.” From what I could tell, all he was doing was charging extravagant dinners to his expense account, draining bottles of Buffalo Trace bourbon each night, and racking up expensive cleaning fines for chain smoking in the hotel rooms and rental cars he lived out of now. It seemed like unsustainable work. “I didn’t sleep with the prostitutes,” he added. “I don’t want you to be concerned with that respect.”

I wasn’t sure if I believed him, but it didn’t matter. He didn’t answer to me and never had—not even when we were dating. The relationship, if you could call it that, had been brief, and it had ended for good more than a year earlier, shortly after he’d accepted the job for the real estate market research company. Since then, we’d remained friendly. I was still living in Athens, Ohio, where I attended college. We’d met when I was a freshman and he was a senior. Now I was a junior, living off-campus in an apartment above Tony’s, one of the bars Sean and I had frequented when we were together.

The last time he’d come to Athens, it was Homecoming, and we’d spent the afternoon drinking Miller High Life and Hot Nuts at Tony’s. After hours of drinking, Sean suddenly vanished. I found out later that he’d been milling around outside a dorm, hoping to buy MDMA from a college freshman. When Sean suddenly threw up all over himself, the drug deal was off.
“I have an expense account!” he had reportedly shrieked at the freshman, who’d fled, initially thinking Sean was an undercover police officer. “Come back here!” At the time, I’d found the story funny, rolling my eyes and feigning exasperation. But I’d started to worry when he told me later that not only had he blown through his entire trust fund in less than a year, but that he was also facing $30,000 in credit card debt. His job paid well, but his spending was out-of-control. Mutual friends had told me he’d started using heroin. Blowing lines at a party was one thing, but no one I knew had a “casual” relationship with heroin.

“It sounds like you’re having a good time in California,” I typed back from my bedroom in Athens. Downstairs, I could hear the Rolling Stones playing on the jukebox, and faint cheers over the football game broadcast on the bar’s TV. Jeff, the doorman, tossed empty glass bottles into the recycling bin under my window. I never did get used to the noise of all those beer bottles crashing together.

About a week later, Sean called to tell me that the company had a project for him to work on in Logan, a town about 30 minutes outside of Athens. He asked if he could stay with me and my roommate, Chelsea. His rationale was that he’d save more money that way, and I was persuaded, thinking of the enormous debt he’d told me about.

He arrived late on a Monday, several days later, with a duffel bag and a carton of cigarettes. I pointed him to the loveseat in our living room where he’d be sleeping.

“That couch is too small,” he complained.

“It’s perfect for someone your height,” I said with a sly smile. Sean and I were both five foot four, and he’d forbade me from wearing heels when we went out together.
He didn’t laugh. Instead, he sank into the loveseat and swung his legs up over the coffee table.

“How long do you think you’re going to be here?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Until the job is done or they need me to go somewhere else.”

“What do you do anyway?” Chelsea asked, appearing in the kitchen, her eyes rimmed in black eyeliner. She was just rising at 4 PM.

“Market research,” he said, and I could tell by his tone that that was all he intended to say about it. “Actually, I’m here with ulterior motives.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“I want to get fired,” he explained.

“Why? Do you have another job lined up?” Chelsea asked.

“Nope.” He didn’t seem worried, but I was. Sean was never capable of looking beyond the next party or frivolous purchase. “The work I’m doing isn’t fulfilling,” he said, and sighed dramatically, without a trace of irony.

“You’re lucky you have a job,” I said, thinking of our other friends who’d graduated with honors and were working as baristas or servers.

“Oh, Kat,” he said, petulantly. “You don’t know how hard it is. All the cities and airports start to look the same. You don’t even get to enjoy traveling since you’re working or stuck at a Hampton Inn when you’re done.” I agreed that the traveling must get old, and I imagined that his nights were lonely, spent itching against hotel linens. Continental breakfast after continental breakfast. Served hot, but only until 10 AM.

Neither of us had dated “anyone special” since we’d broken up. I personally doubted whether I’d ever been “anyone special” to him at all—more of a friend he could have sex with
and spoon. For all his insecurities about his height, Sean had always wanted me to be the big spoon when lay in bed together, and I’d hold him close against my chest as he snored. It was the only time he’d ever really felt like mine. When he’d call me back when we were dating, messed up on gin and Xanax, I’d go over to his apartment. I’d smooth his hair and let him cry about his parents’ broken marriage or whatever else was weighing on him. He still called me from distant locations—Denton, Texas; Rochester, New York; Fresno, California—some nights when he was drunk alone and morose. I always answered, and when we were done talking for the night, there’d be another long stretch of silence that I learned to stop taking personally.

“I have a per diem to spend, and I haven’t touched it yet,” Sean said. “What do you girls feel like eating for dinner?”

He treated us to kabobs from the upscale Lebanese restaurant in town. It cost more than Chelsea or I could typically afford, and I always thought it a little over-priced. I ate skewered chunks of lamb and rice pilaf. I doused everything in a potent, creamy garlic sauce. Sean kept refilling our glasses of wine, and we stayed up talking and drinking until after midnight, when I finally retreated to my bedroom.

The next morning, I woke and got ready for class. Sean was still asleep on the couch, but I left him coffee in the French press. When I came home in the late afternoon, he was still on the sofa, smoking a cigarette, his hair disheveled.

“Aren’t you going to work today?” I asked. He mumbled something about having called in sick. He said he’d wake up early and work late if needed. It would be okay, he swore.

The same thing happened the next day. And the day after that.
“He’s just been laying around the house all day,” Chelsea said. Although we appreciated that we’d been eating better than we had in months for free, I think she was tiring of our houseguest. Our apartment was already cramped, but adding a third person called even more attention to our lacking space. The whole apartment reeked of stale smoke and, suspiciously, coconut. I found that he’d been drinking from Chelsea’s bottle of Malibu rum, which someone had given her as a joke on her 21st birthday. It had sat in our pantry, untouched for months, but now the seal was broken, and I suspected Sean had poured water in the bottle to mask how much he’d drank.

By Thursday, Sean had only gone to work once. He’d run out of clean clothes and and wore a ratty white V-neck.

“Yo, where the weed at?” he asked Chelsea and me.

“We don’t really smoke much,” Chelsea answered.

“I guess I could call someone and ask,” I said dubiously, and thought of my friend Aaron, who’d probably sell us some Mids. He said he could meet us in a couple of hours.

“My plan isn’t working,” Sean said. “I still have a job.” He’d gotten away with shirking since his boss had no way of knowing if he’d shown up at the real estate development sites or not.

“Well then maybe you should actually go to work tomorrow,” I suggested. Sean didn’t answer. Instead, he consulted some take-out menus and asked what Chelsea and I felt like eating for dinner. He gave me some money and sent me to Dale’s, a BP gas station around the corner with a surprisingly extensive wine selection. I puzzled over a few bottles and wondered whether we should go for quality or quantity. If the last few days had been any indication, quantity it was. I bought 3 bottles and pocketed the change. For my troubles, I thought.
When I came back to the apartment, Aaron was sitting with Sean and Chelsea. The previous night, Aaron had cropped his hair and dyed it blonde. He’d been going for an icy shade—so pale it almost seemed silver. Instead, it looked like he’d dunked his head in a bucket of piss, but I kept that to myself.

“Do you have any rolling papers?” Sean asked. Chelsea and I shook our heads, and Aaron rummaged through his denim jacket’s pockets, but came up empty.

“Just go back to BP,” Sean said.

“They were closing,” I explained. It was after nine o’clock. “Can’t you just hollow out of one of your cigarettes?”

“I need those,” Sean said.

“I think I have an apple in the fridge,” Chelsea offered. Aaron and I laughed, but Sean considered what she’d said carefully.

“I think I can make that work,” he said. The apple had sat in the crisper for more than a week. Using a toothpick and a pen, Sean strategically poked holes in the apple’s flesh, with the precision of an experienced surgeon.

“Hit this,” he commanded, holding the apple up to my lips. He lit the weed pooled in the center of apple. I inhaled deeply and coughed, and I felt like I must have looked like one of those whole suckling pigs you see at luau—roasted and shining, with a Red Delicious shoved in my mouth. Chelsea passed. Sean hit the apple pipe several times with diminishing returns.

After we polished off two bottles of wine, Aaron passed out on the love seat, his head resting on my shoulder. Sean suggested that we watch a movie, and I scrolled through Netflix, settling on *Up in the Air*, starring George Clooney. In the film, George Clooney’s character travels across the country for work, never staying in one place for too long. At first, he relishes
his freedom and enjoys seeing a new city every night. Soon, however, he finds that that the
constant travel has made it impossible to connect with others on a meaningful level. It may have
been a passive aggressive selection.

As we watched the film, I felt Sean’s hand on my knee. With four people on the loveseat,
it was obviously intimate, but this felt deliberate.

“You smell good,” he told me.

“I smell like wine,” I said. I wasn’t sure where this was coming from; since breaking up
for good, he and I had been strictly friends. Was it the weed, the wine, or something else?

Whatever it was, Chelsea noticed it too. She shot me a warning luck, which made it clear
that she thought my sleeping with him would be a bad idea.

After the movie finished, Sean asked if I had another blanket for the sofa. The
temperature had dropped considerably that day, and several inches of snow were expected to fall
overnight. I didn’t have a blanket, but I told him he could borrow a set of my warmest pajamas—
red flannel printed with Scottish Terriers.

“You’re crazy,” Sean said, when I handed them to him.

“You’d rather freeze than wear these for one night? Who are you trying to impress?”

He begrudgingly accepted them. They fit him perfectly of course.

“How do I look?” he asked.

“Ridiculous,” I answered. And then he kissed me, cupping my face in his hand and
drawing me near to him. His lips tasted sweet. He’d always been a good kisser. I remembered the
first night we kissed; how he’d pushed me against a wall outside one of the uptown dorms on our
way to his apartment. We must have been near the dorm’s laundry room because I could smell
detergent and dryer sheets as our tongues met. Then, we’d pawed at one another urgently. Now, I slowly unbuttoned the scottie dog pajamas. He followed me into my room and undressed me.

Sean got on top of me, but when he tried to press his mouth to mine, I resisted, squirming away. As he thrust, I thought about how I’d read once that prostitutes usually won’t kiss on the mouth. If that’s what a John wants, he has to ask for “the girlfriend experience”—and it usually costs more. The girlfriend experience, or GFE, is more intimate. There’s more conversation beforehand, kissing, foreplay, and even cuddling following the transaction. The perks of a real relationship, without any commitment beyond the agreed upon time limit and price. Something more personal than sex. Something intrusive. I could see why the average prostitute wouldn’t want to go there. *Was this really that different?*

Of course it was, but at the time, I felt so detached from Sean. Our movements seemed clinical. Sean was moaning hard, but didn’t seem concerned about whether I was enjoying myself or not. I tried to help him find a rhythm, but he either couldn’t or refused to take direction. How had he forgotten what I liked? Did he just not care?

“I want you to cum on my face,” I said.

“What?” he asked.

“Cum on my face.” I waited, and when he was finished, I put on a robe and went to the bathroom. I didn’t turn the light on because I didn’t want to look at myself. The shame—it’s what I thought I wanted, but it wasn’t at all.

As I slid back into bed, I asked Sean to go down on me.

“I’m tired,” he said.

“I didn’t get off though,” I said.
“You know I don’t really like to do that unless I’m in love.” He rolled over to embrace me, and I fought the urge to shake him off, my body stiff beneath the down comforter.

I slept fitfully, and when I woke, it was snowing steadily outside. After I got out of the shower, I saw Sean in the kitchen already dressed, fixing coffee.

“Look at you up bright and early,” I said.

“I’m going to get some work done today,” he said. “And then I’m going back to Columbus.”

Sean offered to drive me to class. He didn’t have a snow-scraper in his car, so he chipped at the ice covering his windshield with the can of Red Bull he was drinking. By then, I was running late so he drove me to campus with the windshield still frosted. He could barely see through the windshield, and he gave up, driving with his head out the window. When we pulled up in front of Ellis Hall, where my Renaissance literature class was held, I wasn’t sure what to say, unbuckling my seatbelt.

“I’m sorry we didn’t manage to get you fired,” I said, joking.

“It’s okay,” he said. “It’ll happen soon.” I leaned over to hug him, but he was still strapped into the seat. Our limbs tangled awkwardly for a moment, just as they had the night before, and I knew we’d never talk about what had happened.

At the end of winter, just as the snow began to finally melt, I went to a friend’s birthday party in Columbus. I’d told Sean I was in town and sent him the address, thinking there was no way he’d be caught dead at an undergrad party. Around 1 AM, he showed up with two friends I’d never
met before. I was standing on the front porch, wearing a thinning fur coat, high on uppers and
drinking keg beer.

“Is that you?” I’d asked, stupidly—as though I couldn’t recognize him.

He lit a cigarette. “What are you doing out here? It’s freezing.”

My hands were chapped raw and red. We went inside, and he hung about my elbow,
whispering in my ear, “Don’t you want to leave with me?”

“I’m just going to sleep on a futon on the attic floor,” I said, shrugging.

“But I have a bed,” he said.

I ignored him. I hadn’t come down to Columbus just to ditch my friends for a guy who’d
only want me until the morning.

At around five AM, the drugs I’d taken earlier that night were wearing off, and I was
starting to feel sad. Sean looked awful—paunchy with party bags under his eyes. Under the
porch light, I wondered how I’d ever thought him beautiful. But he had been once, and he’d
always looked like a cherub in old religious paintings when he was sleeping. He’d had the
longest eyelashes, the sharpest cheekbones.

“We’re going to leave without you then,” Sean said, zipping up his coat. I walked him
and his friends outside, lingering on the front porch. They walked to the edge of the driveway
and Sean stopped to look back at me. I know he hoped I was following him, just as I always had
before.

In May, Sean would get a DUI in a rental car and spend four days in a Detroit jail. After
that, he’d lose his job, as well as his room in the house he was renting in Columbus. “I’m oddly
not depressed” he would tell me. “I’d be more depressed if I was sitting in an airport in upstate
New York waiting to fly to another job.” I would fight the urge to ask him how he’d managed to learn nothing at all.

But that night, as Sean’s car roared to life, I didn’t wave when he turned down High Street and vanished. I remained on the porch for a few minutes or more, shivering. It was the coldest time of the night: that pre-dawn hour where everything seems awash in violet. I enjoyed the sharp air—how it hurt my lungs a little bit to breathe.
A Nice Place to Grow Up

A late snow fell in the middle of March in Morgantown. Fearing an unexpected blizzard, patrons emptied shelves at my preferred grocery store—clearing out all the red wine and produce, leaving behind a single molding green bell pepper. The snow storm missed the city and the snow that did fall was unimpressive, not even enough to slick the roads. In my apartment, wrapped in a down blanket, ugly pajamas, and even uglier wool socks, I downed mugs of peppermint tea and scared myself with episodes of *Unsolved Mysteries*. Pretty white women with permed hair—always missing, usually found murdered.

All day, I tasted the stew simmering in my crockpot; invariably, I “tasted” until I had no appetite at dinner time. My cat dozed on the radiator in the living room, stretching her limbs and flexing her claws. I found four of her whiskers—thick and sharp, almost like porcupine quills—on the living room floor. The cheap, grey carpet is marked by dozens of cigarette burns, left by some past tenant.

“Why would someone just put their cigarette out on the floor?” I asked my father when I first moved into the apartment. Upstairs, hardwood floorboards original to the hundred-year-old home remained, despite several deep scratches belying their age. I wondered if my landlord had thought to rip up the inexpensive, thin carpet and see if any wood could be salvaged.

“You know how people are when they drink,” my dad said. “Pass out with a lit cigarette.” When I examine the pocked floors, I wonder about the person or people who lived in this apartment before me. Did this past tenant rage, stubbing out his or her cigarettes, grinding them into the carpet, relishing the acrid scent of burning fabric? Or had they been so lonely that they frequently drank until they passed out, a Marlboro or Pall Mall burning between their fingertips? Did they snore as ashes tumbled from the cigarette’s glowing tip?
I know that kind of loneliness, and I also know the desire to drown it like a runt-kitten, in glasses of wine and bourbon. That same loneliness haunts me sometimes when I rise, realizing again that I’m alone, save for the cat curled up at my feet. Sometimes I wonder if everyone who has lived in this apartment has felt this way, and if so, can I derive any comfort from that?

***

In high school, I used to tell everyone that I couldn’t wait to get out of Ohio. The town where I grew up, Wadsworth, is rural, despite being a suburb of Akron. Cows graze and corn flourishes. Amish buggies park alongside BMWs in the grocery store parking lot. In high school, unless we drove into the city, a wild Friday night meant meeting friends at Applebee’s to gorge ourselves on mozzarella sticks and virgin mudslides. We’d pace the aisles at Wal-Mart, then the third-largest location in the country. We never bought anything except maybe a soft pretzel or a cherry Icee. Instead, we searched for our crushes inside the store, rarely finding the courage to actually speak to them. If I’d been more rebellious, maybe I would have cruised the back-roads with my friends, hitting a joint or sipping from a bottle of strawberry Boone’s Farm. Wadsworth, Ohio, I used to say, Nothing to do since 1814.

I was a varsity tennis player all four years of high school, but I never wore a letterman jacket, instead asking my mother if she could write me a check for the money she would have spent on one. She declined. Instead, I wore smelly Converse sneakers to school, paired with polyester secretary dresses I’d thrifted with my friend Natalie. While the other athletes stalked the hallways in packs, I spent pep rallies reading from my worn copies of Anne Sexton’s or Sylvia Plath’s collected poems. I thought I was too clever to feel anything resembling school
spirit, scoffing at my classmates cheering in the stands. I smoked clove cigarettes and fancied myself something of an intellectual; never mind that I couldn’t ever manage to pronounce Sartre’s name correctly.

The high school had been built in the California style, meaning that the hallways were open, all meeting at a green courtyard in the center of the building. The design was an idiotic choice, given the unpredictable Ohio climate. In the winters, the hallways filled with snow, which melted to a dirty slush. A stuffed bull grizzly bear, our school mascot, glowered at us from the school lobby, its black eyes passionless—just glass beads.

I always got stuck in C-lunch, the last lunch period of the day. The girls in the cosmetology program at school all had C-lunch, too, and they were notoriously violent. They wore identical black smocks, usually covered in hair dye or nail polish, and it wasn’t uncommon to see one black-smocked girl, her hair in foils, punching another black-smocked girl, or wrestling her to the floor. I didn’t know what made the cosmetology girls so angry. Boys, the male principals likely assumed as they struggled to separate the girls from one another. What else did girls have to rage over? How little they knew. Those cosmetology girls were wilder than the stuffed grizzly in the lobby had ever been.

Like them, I was angry too, but I never hit anyone. I never even really wanted to. Instead, I just mouthed off to my mother, smashed serves on the tennis court, and scrawled in my diary about the boys who didn’t like me back; the grown men who didn’t like me back; the boys and grown men who were pressuring me for sex even though I wasn’t interested, some of them going so far as to physically violate me; my former group of friends who had spent a summer bullying me so severely that I had nearly transferred to a Catholic all-girls’ school in another city; and the
pressure I felt to be perfect all the time—at home, in class, on the tennis court. Being perfect also seemed to mean being happy. Or at least making an effort to fake it.

There’s no reason for my rage, I thought at the time. My experiences were hardly singular. Now I think, that’s all the more reason to be furious.

***

When I sleep, I wear a t-shirt my partner, Simon, gave to me. It’s ugly, but it still smells like him, even though I’ve worn it against my skin for two weeks. I had asked him for one of his shirts so I could feel closer to him when we’re apart, as we often are. Instead, wearing the shirt only underscores his absence.

My upstairs neighbor, Yan, is an international graduate student studying chemistry. She met her husband after moving to Morgantown and they had a baby girl. Her husband got a job in another state and moved there with their daughter. My neighbor stayed behind to finish her degree. She also lives alone, and I’ve observed that she keeps odd hours. For the first year I lived in my apartment, I never spoke to her, but sometimes I observed her in the hallway.

I’ve noticed Yan shops a lot online. Piles of packages stack by the front door. I wonder if the packages from Modcloth and Urban Outfitters are her way of easing loneliness, and I feel jealous because I notice that we like the same stores, but I can’t afford to buy much anymore. I seldom receive personal mail.

The first time Yan and I had a conversation was the night after someone tried to break into my apartment while I was out of town. Yan had called the police and we were both shaken by the incident—women living alone in our apartments. The night after the incident, I’d invited
her over to my apartment to thank her for calling the police. I’d offered a glass of pinot grigio, but she’d declined.

“Do you get to visit your husband and baby often? Do they come up here to see you?” I’d asked, even though I’d never heard a baby cry, or even another person’s voice. The only noise I usually detect from her apartment is her vacuum cleaner; sometimes I hear her yelling on the phone, and I imagine she’s arguing with her husband.

“No,” Yan said. Her tone implied she didn’t want to tell me anything more, but I kept pressing, interested to get to know this person who lived in such close proximity to me. I knew nothing about her other than her online shopping habits and that she subscribed to trashy tabloid magazines. I also liked Madewell’s clothing and enjoyed reading celebrity gossip. Shouldn’t that make us fast friends?

“That must be hard for you,” I’d said, sipping my wine, hoping she’d say more.

She’d shrugged, and a short time later, we said good-bye. I haven’t spoken to her since, and I still haven’t heard a baby wail in her apartment.

I used to crave solitude, but now all I long for is connection.

I used to kiss with my eyes open.

I used to sleep in the center of my bed, limbs stretching to each corner of the mattress, rolling away from anyone else who shared my bed, convinced their place beside me could only be a temporary condition.

***
Every June, in Wadsworth, Ohio, a 20-foot-tall match is erected in the square downtown, ushering in another Blue Tip Festival. The week-long celebration commemorates the Ohio Match Company, a factory once located in downtown Wadsworth. The company’s matches were prized for their signature blue-tipped, “strike anywhere” matches. They were purported to be FDR’s favorite brand. Although the factory shuttered in 1987, a decade before my family and I moved to Ohio, the town has remained proud of its heritage and industry.

The Blue Tip Festival Grand Marshal, lifted by a cherry-picker, “lights” the match, which burns for a week, its flame massive and unyielding. One year the grand marshal was the state champion wrestling coach. Another year, it was my friend’s uncle, an astronaut who’d graduated from the high school. The Grand Marshal is usually a notable alumnus. My parents and I used to joke that one day I’d be the Grand Marshal. That was before I was a disgraced tennis team captain—kicked off the team and placed on house arrest for getting caught drinking underage.

Our most famous former resident, Chad Hunt, is a former gay porn performer. I think it’s unlikely he’ll ever be asked to light the Blue Tip match either.

In June 2015, signs appeared in the same square where the Blue Tip Match towers for one week every year. “Honk if you support God’s marriage,” the signs read, placed there by citizens concerned about our country’s moral decay. The incident covered the local newspaper, *The Trading Post’s*, front page, the following week. “Family Values,” the headline declared, describing the group of citizens’ mission to protect “natural marriage” in somewhat sympathetic terms.

“Right, because what’s more natural than touching one dick for the rest of your life?” I said, flipping through the rest of the paper. This article was paired alongside an op-ed called
“Diversity: The Failed Experiment” and a special insert featuring a schedule of events for the Blue Tip festival, which was to begin the following week.

“Katherine,” my mother said, disapprovingly.

When I was young, the Blue Tip Festival’s carnival was flickering with possibility, as attractive as it was repugnant. When the sun went down, the rides’ bright red and gold lights illuminated the town. Grilled Italian sausages and fried onion rings scented the air. I ate my first fried pickle at the Blue Tip Festival when I was fifteen, and I burned my mouth on the hot batter. My tongue was sore for days. Audrey and I would pace the midway, saying hello, shyly, to the boys we wanted to see, and ignoring the ones we didn’t. We learned not to make eye contact with the carnies. By mid-June, after at least a month of traveling on the festival circuit, they were disheveled and unwashed, always chain-smoking. Some of them just wanted your money—begging you to throw rings around a bottle, shoot balloons with a dart gun, or order a fried Milky Way bar. But some of the carnie men leered at us, blowing cigarette smoke rings in our direction, calling us sweetie or honey. We crossed our arms across our chests, hoping it would deter them from staring, as if our budding bodies might seem smaller. We wished ourselves back to our girlhoods. We wished ourselves flat as paper dolls.

Bellies full of fried funnel cake, our mothers waiting up for us at home, we would end a night at the carnival by riding the Ferris Wheel. It was the most expensive ride at the fair: five dollars a pop. But it was worth it. Soaring over the town, I imagined limitless possibilities, eyes scanning beyond the city’s limits.

“Look how small everything is from up here,” Audrey said, almost breathlessly.
Night-time in Morgantown is filled with noise. Garbage trucks gnash in the pre-dawn hours, and in the morning, hulking gravel trucks drive too fast on the narrow, winding roads. Their brakes whine. A few nights ago, two women called for their lost dog, yelling its name over and over, searching for nearly two hours. The dog was named “Nigger.” In the house behind mine, a band practices, but only on Wednesday nights. They are courteous, always finishing by 11 pm. I hear my neighbor Yan’s foot-steps upstairs. She rises early. This old house settles at night—its walls and floors creak and crack. When I first moved in, I jumped at every noise, imagining a stranger tip-toeing into my room. Drunk college students, either celebrating the Mountaineers’s victory or mourning a loss, scream and shout on the bridge near my apartment. I’ve become quite good at determining “drunk noise” from “dangerous noise.”

I called the police on my next-door neighbors once, after I saw my neighbor strike his girlfriend. That was over two years ago. Several weeks ago, I heard yelling again. Peering from my kitchen window, I saw a large group clustered in the alley next to my house. A fight was unfolding. I pulled up the police department’s phone number, ready to dial.

“You beat my sister!” One man, held back by several people, shouted at another man, whom I recognized to be my neighbor.

“Come at me,” my neighbor said. The rest of the group was holding him by his oversized shirt.

I noticed several women, watching from the apartment’s front door, which was slightly cracked. Inside, a dog barked.
“If you touch her again, I’ll kill your ass. Do you hear me? I’ll bury you.” And the man flounced away, alone. My neighbor went back inside his house, and the rest of the group scattered.

I can’t help the woman in that house—not really. All I can do is listen and watch from my window. As I closed my blind, I knew that it was only a matter of time before my neighbor hits his girlfriend again. Will her brother make good on his promise?

Sometimes, the city’s noise renders sleep impossible. Lately, I’ve taken to listening to ambient noise, in hopes of sleeping easier. My favorite sounds are of a thunderstorm in New Orleans and waves breaking on a South Carolina beach. I find there are all kinds of noises for the restless: an eight-hour long loop of cats purring. A podcast on random subjects, delivered in a monotone, designed to lure the listener to sleep. This noise is all preferable to what’s just below my window, and I do sleep more peacefully. But I worry that in blocking out the city’s noise, I am made more vulnerable.

***

At my high school, there were innumerable cliques: the jocks, the marching band, the theater kids, the stoners, the nerds, the ambiguously sexually-oriented, etc. Many weren’t a part of any singular group, instead flitting among cliques. One year you might be a flutist or twirling flags with the color guard. The next, after discovering marijuana, you might be skipping class to hotbox Jimmy Quinn’s pick-up truck, for example.
After high school, I’ve found there are actually only three groups of people: those who stayed in Wadsworth after graduation, those who left, and those who left—only to return. Many of the town’s residents think that Wadsworth is a nice place to grow up. And Wadsworth has even appeared on both state and national lists naming the best places to raise a family. That’s likely the appeal for many of my former classmates who moved back after graduating from Ohio State University, got married to someone from WHS, and immediately had a baby. I scorned what I perceived to be such small, dull lives. I prided myself on selecting a college few of my high school classmates attended.

“What are the odds?” I’d say. “To find your soul mate in the small town where you’ve lived your whole life? How could someone be so lucky when there’s six billion people on this Earth?”

“You’re so cynical,” my mother would say, half-amused. She’d told me when I was fifteen that the concept of soul mates was bullshit. She’s been happily married to my father for almost thirty years.

When I go back home to visit, I invariably run into acquaintances from high school, mostly at the local supermarket when I’m cupping endives in my hand or selecting a bottle of wine to go with dinner. I avoid making eye contact, turning my back, hoping I look different enough from high school to go undetected. I’ll grimace a smile, but only if absolutely necessary. Many of my former classmates, pushing their shopping carts, are women. Some are pregnant or are accompanied by their small children. The princess-cut diamonds in their platinum wedding bands catch the flescent lights overhead.
“Why can’t you just say hello to people?” My mother asked, once, after I’d nearly knocked over a display of Clementines in my rush to hide from Andrea Jones, who’d been perfectly nice in high school.

“I don’t like making small talk,” I said. “I don’t want to catch up with people.”

“You’re rude.”

If I ignore the women in the grocery store, if I can keep our shopping carts from colliding, then I can never be mistaken for one of them. I’m a visitor, I remind myself, even though none of my other friends from high school visit their parents as frequently as I do mine. I can leave whenever I want to.

***

In Morgantown, the air reeks of sewage in the warm months. Each morning, on my walk to work, I dodge human shit and vomit on the bridge connecting my neighborhood with downtown.

“I gave it a chance,” I tell people who ask me if I like living here. And I did. When I first moved in, I walked around the neighborhood featuring stately historic homes. I ate at the local restaurants, drank the local beer. I became a regular at a coffee shop, at a grocery store, and at a bar.

Over the summer, I started walking along Decker’s Creek for exercise and to clear my mind. The scenery was lush, even attractive, and I was able to ignore the creek’s pungent odor, that ubiquitous smell of rotting leaves and human excrement.

The creek-trail also attracts people who were high, looking to score, and hooking up with partners in exchange for drugs (or money to get drugs). Many of Morgantown’s homeless camp
on blankets and in tents along the creek. One early evening, I dressed for my usual walk. As the evenings began to dim earlier, the trail had been less busy, and I noticed the junkies more. That evening, there were throngs of them gathered together, eyes glistening, coated in sweat, whooping and carrying on. I averted my eyes, studying the trail before me, counting my footsteps and breaths. *Don’t look up*, I thought.

The group cackled—maybe at me, maybe not—as I hustled past them, afraid in earnest. I’d left my phone in my car and hadn’t thought to bring pepper spray, although I doubted it would be much help if anyone accosted me. *Let someone else be here*, I chanted internally, ignoring my burning shins, and pushing my pace. Still a mile from the parking lot. *A cyclist, maybe someone walking their dog. Anyone else.* But perhaps everyone else knew what I didn’t, that the trail wasn’t for my use. Of course they would have laughed at me, a foolish, trembling girl, if they’d even noticed me at all.

***

Here is my confession: Simon lives in Wadsworth. We went to high school together, and he was a junior when I was a freshman. Our lockers were next to one another. I had #1493. His was #1492.

“Like Columbus,” my boyfriend says, when we’re lying in bed with our fingers locked, reminiscing even though we’d rarely spoken in high school. “He sailed the ocean blue.”

We weren’t high school sweethearts, but we’d kept in touch over the years, and began dating last year, ten years after he’d graduated from high school.
“It’s just a surprise,” my mother said when I told her. “I thought you didn’t want to have anything to do with Wadsworth.”

“I don’t,” I said, “He doesn’t count.”

But he does. He recently moved back in with his parents, and when I go home, I’m under my parents’ roof too.

“Don’t stay out too late,” my father warns when I leave the house with Simon, even though I’m twenty-seven. “And no drinking and driving.”

“We can’t sleep when you’re out all night. We worry,” my mother says.

When Simon and I want to be alone, we go to the music store where he works, after hours. In the dark, we drink thin red wine from coffee cups. We have sex in the private lesson rooms, on the floor, on a spinning chair in the store’s lobby. I find strange bruises on my body from bending to accommodate awkward positions.

“That sounds wild,” my friend said when I told her.

“I don’t know,” I said, “I’m sick of it. I just want to do it the boring way, lying down in bed sometimes.” And I want to be loud—in a bed that isn’t in his basement, or in my thin-walled apartment building. I don’t want his hand over my mouth; I want to cry out.

When I was home for Christmas break, a friend sent me an article from a humor website, Reductress. “Wow! This Woman Transformed Into Her Teenage Self Minutes After Arriving Home,” the headline reads.

“That’s about right,” I said. When I’m home, sleeping in my childhood bedroom, I sleep in—later than I ever do in Morgantown. Sometimes until 10 or 11 am. My room is largely
unchanged from how it was then: green-walled and papered in photos of musicians, artists, and writers I admired. There’s a plaque on the wall from a poetry contest I’d won. A strip of photo-booth pictures of me with my date to the Homecoming dance, senior year. In one photo, we peck one another on the lips. Not a boyfriend, but my gay best friend.

My father brings me coffee in bed when I’m at home. Spoiled only child, I think. But there is a price for that. My mother hates the way I do laundry, prepare dinner, and leave the cap off the hot sauce bottle. She loves to correct me—loudly and in stunning detail.

“Why are you yelling just because I ate the chicken marsala?” I asked her, one day when she came home from work to see I’d eaten the leftovers from dinner the previous night.

“Because I was going to take that for lunch,” my mother shouted. She’d never said that, of course. Instead of continuing the fight, I retreated to my childhood bedroom, where I’d always fled during our innumerable arguments when I was a teenager, slamming the door behind for good measure.

Once, when I was sixteen, I’d felt the familiar blinding-hot rage that I frequently experienced in high school, and I raced to my room, screaming into a lacy pillowcase my mother had embroidered. I’d torn pictures from my bulletin board, navy blue mascara streaking down my tear-stained face. And then I scratched fuck into my windowsill, with a black ballpoint pen, as if I could somehow set my anger free, through the window.

My rages were familiar, but this particular time was different. Earlier that year, on the fourth of July night, one of my oldest friends Danny had groped me in his car, even after I’d clawed at his arm and screamed at him to stop. I’d only told one person about what had
happened: Natalie. She’d repeated the story to another boy in our group of friends. He instant messaged me to ask,

“Did Danny rape you?”

I didn’t know what to say; at my age, I didn’t yet understand the nuances of sexual consent, or the countless ways in which a body can be assaulted. I didn’t yet understand that such a massive chasm existed in between vocalizing desire for sex and being held down and penetrated against my will. It would take me a very long time to come that realization, and that fourth of July night with Dan wouldn’t be my only experience leaving me struggling to define my pain and my shame at having been violated.

I don’t remember how I responded to my friend’s instant message. It’s likely that I just repeated the fourth of July’s events. What I do remember is his silence. In the following days, my story swirled around our group of friends. Finally, another boy, Andy, instant messaged me.

“We’ve been talking a lot about this,” he said, positioning himself as the spokesperson of our group. “And we’re sorry this happened. What Danny did was wrong.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“We believe you. But you should know—we’re never going to take your side over Danny’s.” It didn’t occur to me ask why not; the answer seemed obvious: because Danny was a boy. Because the rest of the boys in our group had flirted with me in the past, and sometimes I’d flirted back, so that probably made me a tease. I accepted Andy’s pronouncement—it was why I’d never intended to tell anyone about what had happened in the first place.

I invented an excuse to get away from the computer, fleeing to my room and defacing its walls and windowill.
“Are you okay?” my mother asked, gently, through my locked door—one shred of privacy she allowed.

“I’m fine!” I shouted back. “Just leave me alone!”

“If I had known, I would have kicked Danny’s ass,” Simon said, when I told him about what happened after we started dating.

“I don’t think you understand,” I said. “It wasn’t about what Danny did.” Before the night on that lonely stretch of road, I thought nothing could be worse than telling the truth about what happened and not being believed. I was wrong.

Later, when my mother found out I’d written fuck on my windowsill, she told me I couldn’t leave the house until I’d gotten cleaned it completely. I scrubbed at the wood for hours, and although the word faded slightly, it remained. Even now, I can still locate it in the grains of the wood, but unless someone was searching for it, they’d never notice.

***

My sixteen-year-old self should be proud: I got out of Ohio. True, most Wadsworth residents wouldn’t exactly think of West Virginia as a step-up, considering it another world (but a wholly undesirable one). And perhaps that was initially the allure, the idea of being shielded by the blown-out mountains. But then I started to feel trapped. Nothing made me appreciate living in Ohio quite like living in Morgantown had.
Conservative beliefs and small-size aside, Wadsworth is a relatively safe community. The last murder was nearly twenty years ago. Despite past experiences, I’ve never lived somewhere I’ve felt unsafe in my own home before I moved to Morgantown.

If you were inclined to measure one’s success by their ability to stockpile degrees (I’m not), then I’ve made something of myself. “Getting out” no longer strikes me as an impressive achievement. I’m still only three hours away from home, a short enough drive that if I received an urgent phone call in the middle of the night, I could be in my parents’ driveway by dawn.

“Where do you want to live when I graduate?” I ask Simon. By then he’ll have enough money saved to move out on his own and we can continue to entwine our lives.

Simon says the beautiful thing is that we can go anywhere we want. Strike anywhere.

“Colorado?” I ask. “We have friends in Denver.”

“Denver would be nice. Snowboarding and legal weed,” he says enthusiastically.

But we both know we’ll never make it to the west coast, except maybe on our honeymoon in a couple of years. His nephew is walking now; my father is retired. How could we comfortably move our cat across the country? What about the altitude? Would his Lincoln Continental even survive the journey? Getting out—that was the easy part. How do you stay away?

These are the questions I ponder now, but didn’t at sixteen or seventeen, back when I was angry and restless—ready as an Ohio Blue Tip match, held to a striking strip.
Magic Cicadas

In the summer of 2016, the cicadas returned. More accurately, a new brood of seventeen-year cicadas, conceived and hatched in 1999, during the previous cicada summer emerged. Underground, they’d slept undisturbed through the new millennium, the September 11th terrorist attacks, Hurricane Katrina, and our first Black president’s inauguration. The cicadas were suspended in time as if cryogenically frozen, but I grew—eight-years-old when the cicadas had last cried, and almost twenty-six when they reemerged. The cicadas had been unchanged by time, but I’d menstruated at thirteen, fell in love three or four times (I could never decide), graduated from college and graduate school, moved to West Virginia, and settled into what probably appeared to be a stable relationship with Jeremy, a kind, home-owning man who bored me to death.

That summer—like the cicadas—I, too, longed to burst from the earth.

In late May, my friend Emily and I visited our other friend Claire in Athens, a college town in southeastern Ohio. The cicadas had just surfaced. We’d met in graduate school several years before. Emily and I had moved away, but Claire remained, finishing her PhD and living in her bungalow nestled in the Athens hills. She rented the bungalow from a grizzled old man named Wolfie. He owned the Smiling Skull Saloon on West Union Street. The Skull had a reputation for being a rough biker bar, but Wolfie was a caring, attentive landlord. He gave Claire a jar of spiced peaches he’d canned himself. We ate them over buckwheat pancakes with honeyed goat cheese. He told her that if she ever found pot still growing in the garden, she could smoke
whatever she picked. Wolfie had even offered Claire discounted rent if she agreed to be a barmaid at the Skull. She told me she was still considering taking the job.

Summers in Athens had always been sticky and slow, and this one was no exception. Although students graduated each spring and new wide-eyed, round-faced freshmen arrived to replace them, the town seemed largely unchanged since I’d moved away. O’Bettys was still the best place in town to eat a chili dog at 2 am. The same townies filled the bars I’d frequented, nodding at me when we locked eyes in passing. It was comforting—to be remembered even after I was gone.

For the past year and a half, I’d feigned enthusiasm with Jeremy, but now I began to recoil at his touch. He had no idea what he was doing in bed—how to make me shiver with pleasure. And I’d grown weary of trying to teach him. The last time, as I’d ridden him joylessly (for exactly five minutes), I knew I could never let him touch me again. And I’d begun to feel restless, enjoying the attention when I noticed men in the Athens bars staring at me. I knew I needed to break things off with Jeremy before he asked me to marry him and I said yes, simply because I didn’t know what else to do.

On Claire’s front porch, I swatted mosquitos and swigged from a bottle of cheap prosecco. A large tree across the street appeared to be dancing, its branches were so thick with throngs of red-eyed cicadas. I stared at the tree, mesmerized by the thousands of bodies, stunned by their raucous song. My own body seemed to buzz along with them; I felt their music in my bones.

“They’re so gross!” Emily whined.

“I kind of like them,” I said, shrugging.
“Why?” Claire asked. “I can’t think with all their noise.”

I joked that I admired cicadas because they struck me as the ultimate misanthropes, hiding underground to escape the world’s cruelty and noise. Clearly, Emily and Claire disagreed. “Well, they’re not here for very long, so I’m just trying to enjoy them,” I said, fixing my eyes on the cicada-ravaged tree once more. “They’re like magic.”

Emily shot me a look of disgust.

But cicadas were magical; their scientific name even confirms it: *Magicicada*. For a few glorious weeks, these cicadas would finally feel the sun’s warmth, alighting in the sky, and mating with hundreds of partners. And then they would die—some by bird, some crushed beneath an indifferent human’s shoe. The lucky ones would simply mate until they were spent from the great effort.

The tree across the street from Claire’s bungalow still swarmed with cicadas. In seventeen years, I knew I wouldn’t stand on this porch in Athens. Some other university student likely would, cheap beer in hand, and if the tree was still standing, perhaps they’d take in the spectacle as I had. I hoped Claire, Emily, and I would all still be in each other’s lives, even if we were divided by long stretches of highway.

On Claire’s front porch, I knew the cicadas would soon stop their singing, and I’d sweep their corpses by the dozens from my back steps in West Virginia. But beneath the ground, the next magic cicadas would slumber. This new brood will surface, as nymphs, in 2033. Emily, Claire, and I will all be in our early forties then. What will be the shape of our lives? Will we be professors, writers, wives, mothers? Will we be happy? Would I find the courage to break things off with Jeremy? The prospect of passing seventeen dull years with him chilled me. Under the
merciless sun, my cotton dress clinging to my sweaty body, I felt properly alive for the first time in a while, as though I had just stirred—awakened red-eyed—from a seventeen-year-long sleep.
In the late 1980s to the early 1990s, Jeffrey Dahmer stalked Milwaukee’s gay bar scene. He liked his men young and black, or Asian, but always handsome. He’d lure them into conversation and then he’d drug their drinks. Jeffrey took them back to his grandmother’s house, or later, when he was living alone, to Apartment 213 on 924 North 25th street. He’d overpower the young men, perhaps striking them over the head with a lampshade. Often, he’d encourage them to slip on a set of handcuffs. *A game*, the young men thought. *How Kinky*. But soon they’d realize that Jeffrey wasn’t playing, as they felt his rough hands encircle their throats.

Killing wasn’t enough for Jeffrey. Dahmer cannibalized his victims. He sodomized their corpses. He conducted experiments before killing them. He drilled holes into their skulls and injected the holes with hydrochloric acid. He boiled organs and preserved them like jellies. And by the time police raided fly-infested Apartment 213, 17 men were dead.

But before Dahmer was known as the Milwaukee Cannibal, he was an Ohio son.

Jeffery— or “Jeff,” as his family called him— grew up in Bath, a township fifteen miles outside of Akron. He was an extremely shy child. His first-grade teacher encouraged him to socialize with other children, but he preferred to keep to himself. His parents enrolled him in tennis and soccer, hoping he’d make friends with his teammates. Jeff joined 4-H and raised chickens and lambs.

“It wasn’t a terrible childhood,” Jeff said in a 1994 interview, the only one he’d give before his death. But his parents fought frequently, and both Jeffrey and his father agreed that there was a lot of yelling in the house. “I would sulk, brood. I wondered why they had to have
such a rough relationship,” he said. To escape the noise, he fled to the woods behind his home. There, he slapped at the trees with his bare hands. My own house was quiet, but I understand Jeff’s rage and his struggle to find control. I can easily imagine the frustration, remembering how I beat pillows in my bedroom after fights with my mother when I was a teenage girl, stifling primal squeals—like a lid on a roiling tea kettle.

By the time Jeff was a teenager, his parents had divorced. He cruised the neighborhood on his bike, searching for roadkill—maybe a flattened raccoon or a cat. He dismembered their bodies, scooping the animals’ innards before scattering the bones in the woods near his family home.

His classmates at Revere High School described him as an “outcast” or a “loner.” They noted that Jeff frequently turned up to school drunk, swigging beer and liquor freely in the hallways. The booze made him bolder; Jeff acted out in class when he discovered that his pranks could draw approving smiles from the peers who had previously shunned him.

Jeff said that starting when he was fifteen, he “had a reoccurring fantasy about meeting a hitch-hiker on the road, and taking them hostage and doing what [he] wanted with them.” Three years later, in 1978, three weeks after he’d graduated from high school, Dahmer had his opportunity when 19-year-old Steven Hicks. Hicks asked to Dahmer if he could hitch a ride, just a mile from Jeff’s family home. Jeff had the house to himself; his mother was out-of-state on a trip. His father was living out of a hotel room following their divorce. Jeff said, “I thought to myself, ‘should I stop and pick him up, or should I just keep on going?’ I wish I’d just kept on going.”
Instead, Steven Hicks and Jeff drank beers at Jeff’s house and hung out, but when Steven asked to leave, Jeff strangled him. He dismembered Steve’s body and dumped his remains in the same woods where he’d strewn dog and possum bones.

In 2003, Jeff was dead, and I was an awkward, pubescent seventh grader at Wadsworth Middle School. Mr. Rush “taught” my seventh grade science class, which I had for sixth period every day. Most days he just wheeled in an ancient, flickering television set, dimmed the lights, and played episodes of Bill Nye The Science Guy. Usually by the afternoon I was exhausted, finding it nearly impossible to stay awake in the hot, dark classroom, where spitballs whizzed by my head and Tony Jurey regaled us with stories about his father and grandfather who had both robbed the same gas station downtown, but at different times. When we filled out Punnett Squares, studying our own inherited traits like hitch-hiker thumbs or “free” earlobes, Tony asked Mr. Rush if he thought robbing the Marathon station could be genetic.

“No, that’s a choice,” Mr. Rush said, narrowing his eyes as the class snickered.

One day, as I filed into science class, I noticed a strange man seated at Mr. Rush’s desk. He looked to be close to Mr. Rush’s age—in his 60s. Although he was an older man, his hair was still strawberry blonde, almost orange. He was small, but regarded us with such a piercing stare that he seemed to grow taller.

After the bell rang, the man explained that he was a substitute filling in for Mr. Rush, who was ill. Although he took attendance and called us each by name, he didn’t introduce himself, and he hadn’t written his name on the smudged chalkboard behind him.

“What’s your name?” someone asked.
“You don’t need to know that today,” the man replied.

This rankled the class, and an excited murmur rose among us.

“I know who you are,” said Mat Holibaugh, who sat in the back of the classroom, typically with his head flat against his desk. I swiveled around in my seat to see why this silent boy was finally speaking. “You’re Jeffrey Dahmer’s dad.” A few of my classmates gasped, and whispers grew louder.

“Who?” I asked the girl sitting beside me, but she just shook her head. The substitute teacher rose from his chair. He grabbed an eraser from the tray at the base of the chalkboard and clenched it in his hand.

“That isn’t any of your business,” the man thundered. “Don’t you know that you can hurt people’s feelings?” He flung the eraser across the room, where it landed on the floor, leaving a thin white dust on the speckled brown tile. He sent Mat to the hallway, where troublemakers where banished. The substitute stalked to the television set and pressed play. Mr. Rush had left a documentary for us to watch about an earthquake that had devastated Japan in the 1920s. In the aftermath, fires scorched the city, and more than one hundred thousand people lost their lives.

At dinner that night, I recounted the events of sixth period to my parents.

“How’s Jeffrey Dahmer?” I asked.

My mother said nothing, but my father spoke. “He was a serial killer—one of the worst. He was a cannibal.”

“John,” my mother warned.

“He ate people?” I asked, eyes widening. But I knew that was all I was getting out of my father. Sado-sexual cannibalistic killers were typically an off-limits subject of conversation at the
dinner table. “Do you think that could have been his dad?”

“I don’t know,” my dad said.

“I could find out,” my mother said. I believed her because she seemed to be able to find out anything she wanted after consulting names in her little blue phone book. But I already felt as though I knew the answer; why else would our substitute teacher have been so enraged if what Mat said hadn’t been true? Otherwise, he would have laughed it off, joking with the class that yes, he’d raised a son who’d prepared Sloppy Joe’s with ground human flesh. But he hadn’t done that, and I thought again of the way he’d clutched that eraser in his hand, his knuckles whitening. Had he truly imagined that no one would recognize him? And why would the father of such a notorious killer subject himself to perhaps the cruelest environment there is—a middle school?

Jeff briefly attended Ohio State University in Columbus, but he flunked out and had minor legal issues, mostly related to his heavy drinking. After killing for the first time, Jeff found his compulsions increasingly difficult to control. Jeff said that he used alcohol in hopes of muting his obsessive thoughts about completely controlling another human being. He longed for the perfect romantic partner—a man who could never leave him and never tell him “no.”

At his parents’ behest, Jeff joined the military in 1979, and although he was initially regarded as an average soldier, his heavy drinking began to impact his performance. Jeff was honorably discharged in 1981, and he moved to Florida, then back to Ohio. Eventually, he was sent to live with his grandmother in Wisconsin after being arrested for drunk and disorderly conduct.

In Wisconsin, Jeff began to give into his violent compulsions. He was arrested for indecent exposure at Wisconsin State Fair Park. Several years later, he was arrested again for
masturbating in front of two prepubescent children. During this time, Jeff worked at a chocolate factory and began going to bathhouses, where he met men and had sex with them. But Jeff wasn’t content with consenting partners. He wasn’t interested in their pleasure or needs. Jeff began date raping men at the bathhouse he frequented, and he was eventually expelled when men complained to the owner.

In November 1987, Jeff met Steven Tuomi at a gay bar.

“Do you want to get out of here?” I imagine him shouting in Steven Tuomi’s ear while caressing his back. Although Jeff looked nerdy in his over-sized glasses, he wasn’t an unattractive man. And he certainly didn’t appear dangerous.

“Sure,” Steven must have said, smiling, resting his hand on Jeff’s knee.

“I can get us a room at the Ambassador Hotel. Finish your drink.”

And Steven would empty his Budweiser, unaware that when his back had been turned, Jeff had slipped date rape drugs into his beer.

At the Ambassador Hotel, Steven passed out in the bed, and Jeff undressed his limp body. Over the next few hours, he sexually assaulted him, before passing out himself.

When Jeff woke up, the room was covered in blood. It streaked the walls and was stuck in the dingy carpet.

“Wake up!” He said, shaking Steven’s body beside him.

But Steven was dead, and Jeff had no recollection of killing him. Jeff panicked.

He returned to his grandmother’s house, borrowed a suitcase, and then removed Tuomi’s body from the Ambassador Hotel. In his grandmother’s basement, Jeff dismembered Steven’s body and disposed of it, but he kept one souvenir: Steven’s severed head.
For years, Jeff had successfully controlled his desire to kill for almost a decade, although it had been a constant struggle. Now that he had acted on his urges again, he’d never be able to stop. The violence was simply too irresistible, intoxicating. Over the next four years, Jeff went on to murder fifteen more men.

My mother’s friends confirmed what I already suspected to be true—my substitute teacher had indeed been Jeffrey Dahmer’s father. His first name was Lionel and he was a retired chemist. Despite how he’d responded in our science class, he was open about who he was. He hadn’t changed his name or moved from the area, where he lived with his second wife. “I’m proud of the name ‘Dahmer.’ I haven’t done anything wrong,” Lionel had explained in an interview. His other son, Jeff’s younger brother, had changed his name, hoping to live anonymously in Arizona.

Lionel had even written a book about his relationship with Jeffrey, entitled A Father’s Story. Our local library held a copy of the book, which I skimmed, although what I remember most was staring at his author photo on the back cover, still somewhat incredulous that the same man had been in my classroom. Following his book’s publication, Lionel appeared on well-known talk shows, such as Larry King Live and Oprah. Oprah Winfrey brought up the fact that Lionel could be accused of trying to profit from his son’s notoriety, but Lionel had an answer for her. First, he’d donated a portion of the proceeds to the victims’ families. “Money is not my prime mover. My main mover is to find out what went wrong and to help people,” he’d said. Oprah appeared to accept this answer.

Over the next few years, Lionel frequently subbed at my high school. When I was a junior, my chemistry teacher, Mrs. Greenlees announced that she would be taking maternity leave.
“You’ll have a long-term sub,” she said. “And there’s something you should know. It’s Mr. Dahmer, Jeffrey Dahmer’s father. I trust that all of you will be respectful.”

We nodded solemnly. By this point, most of us were aware that a serial killer’s father filled in occasionally at the school, typically in the science classes. He never addressed his relationship with Jeffrey, and typically, he avoided telling students his last name. One friend recalled that Lionel had told the class to call him by a generic last name, “Mr. Blue” or something like that. He’d been able to do this in classes where he subbed for one or two days, but what would happen when left with our class for the next several months?

“I don’t understand why the school lets him around us,” a girl named Kara said when we gathered in the lab at the back of the class. “Clearly he’s a bad guy or else his son wouldn’t have turned out like that.” A few of our lab partners agreed. The previous year, I’d developed a fascination with serial killers, perhaps inspired by my proximity to Lionel, but more likely because I believed that an interest in the subject would make me seem edgy and unique, as though I were one of only a few other people willing to examine humans’ darker compulsions and most heinous acts. I knew that almost every known serial killer had been raised in an abusive household, witnessing violence at early ages. The odds were that Jeffrey, too, had been victim before he’d been perpetrator.

I’d wanted to become something of an expert on serial killers during sophomore year, and I’d spent Newspaper/Yearbook class poring over Wikipedia articles on Ted Bundy, John Wayne Gacy, BTK, and that rare female outlier Aileen Wuornos. The school Internet filters wouldn’t allow us on websites like Myspace, but I was free to happily browse lists of the most prolific sadistic murderers.
I’d absorbed as much “triva” about different killers’ crimes as I could. I delighted in describing to friends how Gacy had once posed in a picture with First Lady Rosalynn Carter before he’d been exposed. I knew that Ted Bundy preferred petite women who wore their dark hair parted down the center. When Bundy was on trial, the courtroom was packed with women who’d styled their hair like that, hoping to snag his attention.

And in 1928, serial killer Albert Fish had abducted and murdered 10-year-old Grace Budd. Several years later, he’d written a letter to her parents in which he described the crime—and how he cooked and devoured Grace’s remains. Grace’s mother was illiterate, and had asked one of her sons to read the letter to her. At my lunch table, I’d read the letter aloud to my group of friends, delighting in the looks of shock and disgust upon their faces. One girl asked me to stop.

“What? You can’t handle it?” I’d scoffed. I’d performed the letter, adding over-the-top inflection as I recited it. I’d made what happened to Grace Budd and her family something of a joke, made Albert Fish into something of a fucked-up folk hero. In interviews with most serial killers, they described how their private obsessions had become irresistible to control. This was certainly the case for Jeffrey, who’d tried desperately to mute his own urges, self-medicating with large quantities of booze. But my fascination with serial killers had become its own kind of compulsion—and the day I’d recited the letter was proof that I’d gone too far.

Tracy Edwards agreed to pose for some nude photos for Dahmer on July 22, 1991, and in exchange, Jeff promised him $100. Once inside Apartment 213, Tracy noticed a foul odor, which Jeff waved off. A short time later, Jeff attacked Tracy with a knife, pressing the blade against Tracy’s chest. “I’m going to eat your heart,” he had reportedly said.
The two men struggled, and after punching Jeff in the face, Tracy fled the apartment building and promptly led police to Jeff. The police discovered seven skulls, two human hearts in Jeff’s refrigerator, a dismembered torso inside the freezer, severed hands and penises, and Polaroids documenting many of the murders. One of the first investigators on the scene recalled how, upon discovering a human head in the refrigerator, he’d been convinced that the head was screaming. The shrill screams he’d heard had been his own.

Jeff was caught, and he confessed to it all. News of Jeff’s crimes spread, and the media dubbed him “The Milwaukee Cannibal.” The details were sensational—a gay killer had murdered almost 20 people. He’d performed crude lobotomies on his victims, hoping to turn them into “living zombies.” Although Jeff may have appeared insane to some, he was found to be sane at the time of the killings. He pleaded guilty to the charges and was sentenced to sixteen life terms. At his competency hearing, all of the grisly details about Jeff’s secret life had emerged, stunning the public and those who had known Jeffrey well. No one had been more shocked than his father, Lionel.

On the first morning after Mrs. Greenlees’s maternity leave began, we sat at our desks apprehensively. Lionel stood before us, wearing a plaid flannel shirt and cuffed khaki pants. After reciting the Pledge of Allegiance and listening to the morning announcements over the fuzzy intercom, Lionel spoke, fixing his steely gaze on us.

“As you already know, I’m Mr. Dahmer,” he said. “But I’d like it if you just called me Lionel,” he said. We’d never been allowed to call a teacher by his or her first name before, but this seemed like the right decision. We wouldn’t have to call him a hokey fake name. Nor would we need to constantly repeat the notorious last name.
Lionel took attendance, studying our faces and parroting our names back to us.

“Katherine Saunders,” he called out my name.

“I go by Kat,” I said, and watched him make a note of it.

“You know, I have a cat. Her name is Mrs. Debbie,” Lionel said. “She’s the one who will be grading your tests and quizzes.”

The class laughed, and Lionel seemed to relax, his shoulders losing their tension. We laughed and saw him for who he was—a brilliant man who loved animals and who made jokes and who was going to teach us for the next months. We weren’t even thinking about who his son had been.

Lionel finished calling roll. “Well, I suppose we’d better get started.”

During my year-long fixation on serial killers, I’d been intrigued by Jeff, who seemed to be an anomaly in many ways. Although my classmate, Kara, had voiced her suspicions about Lionel’s parenting, Jeff maintained that Lionel had been a loving and involved father. He wasn’t like John Wayne Gacy or Aileen Wuornos, who’d both been abused by their fathers. His parents’ divorce had been acrimonious, but roughly half of my friends’ parents’ marriages had disintegrated. None of them, as far as I knew, were dissecting dead cats or fantasizing about murder. Was it possible that Jeff hadn’t been shaped by trauma, but was simply destined to be the killer he’d become? If he hadn’t been so shy, if his parents hadn’t yelled at each other so much—would he have still claimed seventeen lives?

Jeff seemed to want to help science understand why he’d felt compelled to kill, and in prison, he volunteered to be studied. However, on November 28, 1994, just two years into his life sentence, another inmate attacked Jeff and murdered him. Some question the circumstances,
wondering why such a high-profile prisoner like Jeffrey had been allowed to mingle with inmates unsupervised. In an interview with Larry King, Lionel suggested that perhaps the prison guards were to blame. Perhaps they’d even encouraged the other inmate to kill Jeffrey. At the very least, he believed the guards had failed to intervene. Lionel felt that, with Jeff, an important opportunity to learn about why he’d been compelled to kill had been lost. “I really believe we might have found out [answers] had he not been murdered,” Lionel said, a note of frustration in his voice. The implication, of course, was that with the answers Jeff, Lionel, and the scientists had hoped for, similar serial killings might be prevented.

Jeffrey’s remains were released to his family nearly a year after his death, and per his request, his parents cremated his body and divided his ashes. Jeff’s mother, Joyce Flint, was furious. “Now is everybody happy? Now that he’s bludgeoned to death, is that good enough for everyone?” she asked the media. But of course, no one was happy. Joyce and Lionel had lost their son. Science had lost an opportunity to learn. And most significantly, Steven Hicks, Steven Tuomi, James Doxtator, Richard Guerrero, Anthony Sears, Raymond Smith, Edward Smith, Ernest Miller, David Thomas, Curtis Straughter, Errol Lindsey, Tony Hughes, Konerak Sinhasomphone, Matt Turner, Jeremiah Weinberger, Oliver Lacy, and Joseph Bradehoft were dead. Jeff’s own murder couldn’t alter this reality, couldn’t possibly compensate for what his victims and their families had suffered.

I was never an especially gifted science student, and this was true even after Lionel filled in for Mrs. Greenlees. I hadn’t the stomach for frog dissection in biology during sophomore year, and I struggled to balance chemical equations. Because science didn’t come naturally to me, I grew bored with the subject easily. My boyfriend, Alex, wrote up my chemistry lab reports, and in
return, I composed his English essays. I’d earned average grades in chemistry throughout the year, and contented myself with Cs and Bs.

Lionel, on the other hand, was brilliant. He’d earned a PhD in chemistry from Iowa State, but he didn’t ask us to call him “Doctor,” the way a local optometrist had done at a cocktail party when a friend’s mother dared to call him by his first name. Lionel was certainly far brighter than Mrs. Greenlees, who frequently appeared distracted—perhaps by her volleyball coaching obligations—and seemed largely disinterested in our class. Like Mr. Rush in seventh grade, she frequently used class time to show films, many of which were only tangentially related to chemistry. Otherwise, we crowded in the lab in the back of the classroom, struggling to light our Bunsen burners. We spent more time flirting with each other and gossiping than we did studying chemical reactions. We weren’t Honors students, nor did we require remedial instruction. We were the most average bunch, and were easily forgotten—lost in the shuffle of volleyball stars and more gifted students. But Lionel didn’t see us that way. “You’re not a bunch of journeymen,” he constantly reminded us. I’d looked the word up later, after class. *One who drudges for another.*

Ten years after he subbed for my chemistry class, I asked some of my former classmates what they remembered most about Lionel.

“He was one of the best teachers I ever had,” Hillary said. “He forced me to think for myself and helped me to prove what I knew instead of handing me answers. We were solving chemical equations and I went up to him and asked for help, and he just looked at me and said, ‘You know how to do this; you can figure it out yourself.’ At the time I was super frustrated, but after I sat and looked at it for a while, I did figure it out. He seemed really proud of me, too,
and had me solve it on the board in front of the class.” Other classmates echoed Hillary’s story, and many remarked that Lionel encouraged his students to develop as critical thinkers.

A friend, Alexa, remembered that Mr. Dahmer had been a regular customer at the Taco Bell where she worked part-time. In our class, he was never seen without a bottle of Mountain Dew soda. These small details humanized him. Yes, Lionel had a son who had killed people, but he also enjoyed shitty fast food tacos. He loved animals. In addition to Mrs. Debbie, the pet cat he’d mentioned on the first day, he’d told another class about how he’d rescued a litter of kittens that someone had been trying to drown in a river.

One of my friends, Morgan, described a day when Lionel listed a bunch of science websites on the blackboard. “He said, ‘there’s more out there; think for yourself.’ It was quite encouraging and motivating to have a teacher place that belief in students that we could think for ourselves,” she recalled. Most of the full-time faculty encouraged conformity, and I suspected that many teachers equated students’ differing opinions with an inability to control us. But Lionel had earned our respect—precisely because he invited us to work independently and question everything.

Jeff gave just one television interview before his death, in 1994. The final product was a special filmed with Stone Phillips. The 90-minute documentary features a joint interview with Jeff and Lionel. Joyce Flint also spoke with Stone Phillips.

I first saw the interview when Lionel was my teacher. My friends Matt and Bryan had come over, and we sat in my living room, snacking on Doritos and guzzling cherry cola. They were also in Lionel’s chemistry class. It was late at night and nothing much was on TV, so we
settled on MSNBC which sometimes aired reruns of shows like *Lockup* and *To Catch a Predator*.

“We’ll take you inside the mind of a notorious serial killer,” Stone Phillips promised, as the camera panned to Jeffrey’s face. I was struck by how similar he and Lionel appeared—both sharing the same strawberry-blonde hair. Lionel, although visibly younger, appeared largely unchanged, wearing a button-down shirt similar to those he wore to teach. Like Lionel, Jeff was soft-spoken. I could imagine that one might have easily mistaken Jeffrey for Lionel on the phone, the same way that relatives frequently confused my mother and me. The cadences and timbres of our voices were indistinguishable, after spending so much of our lives together. Stone Phillips noted that Jeff’s handshake was “weak,” which didn’t surprise me.

In the interview, Jeffrey peered through thick glasses. This wasn’t Ted Bundy—all dangerous charm and white teeth. And unlike Bundy, Jeff didn’t appear to savor the attention lavished upon him. He explained that he had granted the interview because he wanted to help people understand what had gone wrong—why he’d ended up the way he had. Unlike other serial killers who seemed to relish toying with interviewers, Jeff appeared to be honest about his motivations. He didn’t brag about his crimes, and he seemed uncomfortable discussing the details, although he did when pressed. Since his incarceration, Jeff claimed to have become a devout Christian. He noted that he hadn’t grown up in a religious household; instead, his father had placed an emphasis on science. I exchanged glances with Matt and Bryan. Matt dug deeper into the bag of Dorito’s, orange-cheese dust coating his fingertips.

“This is really weird,” Bryan said. We were uncomfortable, but we couldn’t stop watching.
Jeffrey described his childhood at length, and Stone Phillips asked him directly if he’d committed the murders to get back at his father.

“No, it was to control them and keep them with me for as long as possible,” he explained. This accounted for why Jeff had injected his victims’ skulls with hydrochloric acid. He’d believed that in keeping his victims in a trance-like state, they’d never be able to leave him.

When Stone questioned Jeff about why he’d eaten some of his victims, Jeff gave a similar response. “It made me feel like they were a permanent part of me,” he said. Why did Jeffrey feel such an overwhelming desire for control? In relationships, everyone experiences insecurities, and—at one point or another—we likely all fear that our partners will leave us. Jeffrey never seemed to have much trouble convincing men to have sex with him, but I never found any record that Jeff had seriously dated anyone. Were Jeff’s compulsions so strong that he was unable to form a normal romantic relationship? Or were his urges informed by his fear of rejection and abandonment?

When Lionel spoke with Stone Phillips, he offered several theories about why Jeffrey had become a killer. He mentioned that his ex-wife, Joyce, had suffered from seizures throughout her pregnancy, and he wondered if these fits, characterized by intense spasms, were somehow to blame. In her own segment, Joyce vehemently denied Lionel’s version of events, claiming that the pregnancy had been uneventful. She expressed her disgust with Lionel, and found it unfair that she was being treated as a scapegoat.

However, Stone Phillips pointed out what my friends and I noticed: Lionel wondered whether he was also to blame. In what was perhaps the most shocking part of the documentary, Lionel revealed that he’d had his own obsessions when he was a teenager. He’d been mesmerized by fire and explosives, and he’d had fantasies of murdering a neighborhood bully.
“Wait, so he wanted to kill people too?” my friend Bryan asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. I didn’t think it sounded as simple as that. Hadn’t most of us thought about hurting someone who’d caused us physical or emotional pain? I could see why Lionel had thought—or even fantasized about—hurting his bully. If that bully hadn’t followed him home, hurling rocks and insults, would Lionel have ever thought about hurting another person? I wasn’t convinced.

“Why did a father murder in his dreams and a son murder in real life?” Stone Phillips asked, and Lionel tried, but ultimately couldn’t answer the question. Upon repeated viewings of the interview, it’s unclear to what degree Lionel ever acted on his impulses, or engaged with his more dangerous interests. Certainly, he’d never murdered the bully who’d been the subject of his fantasies. What is apparent is that Lionel remained dissatisfied that so few concrete answers explained why this tragedy had unfolded. I thought maybe no decent explanation existed.

Before ending the interview, Stone Phillips asked Lionel what he saw when he looked into Jeff’s face. Lionel, his hands draped over Jeff’s in a show of love and support, thought hard before answering. “I’m a naïve parent,” he said. “I still see an innocent, shy child. A defenseless, vulnerable child who I wish I could help.” It was a rare moment where Lionel seemed to lose his composure. Stone Phillips had noted Lionel’s stoicism earlier in the interview. Lionel explained that his background in science shaped him as a very analytical person. “People might think I look unemotional or remote, but they don’t realize that I have very deep feelings inside,” Lionel explained. But what Lionel saw was wrong—which wasn’t something we’d seen often in class. That evening, watching the special, Bryan, Matt, and I did realize the depths of Lionel’s emotions—and his impossible task of separating his love for his son from Jeff’s horrific crimes.
Mrs. Greenlees returned from maternity leave to a lukewarm reception. We missed Lionel, but we had other opportunities to see him before we graduated from high school. One classmate remembered that he’d been a sub in French class, despite having never studied the language. He always greeted me warmly in the hallway, even though I’d been a mediocre student. When I first asked my classmates to share what they remembered about Lionel, I wasn’t searching for a consensus, but one seemed to emerge. Almost everyone described Lionel as a “sweet” man—somehow fragile and resilient in the same instant. The word “sweet” appeared in nearly every response I gathered. For some, Lionel’s teaching style had been unforgettable. For others, like me, his kindness had been his most lasting lesson. My classmate Carolyn said, “I hoped Lionel knew most of us appreciated him. I admire him for just putting himself out there in middle and high school classrooms full of students who didn't all know yet how badly real tragedy could hurt. I'm sure getting ready for school in the morning required some degree of courage every time.”

After meeting Lionel, I no longer revered serial killers, although I did continue to be fascinated by their psychology. Like Lionel, I believe that serial killers must be studied in hopes of understanding their desire to kill, identifying warning signs, and intervening before murders are committed. I think this task is achievable without sensationalizing serial killers’ crimes.

Before, serial killers had seemed almost mythological to me, but my encounters with Lionel reminded me that these offenders and their victims are real. Real lives are taken, or in the cases for victims’ and perpetrators’ families, irreparably changed. Jeffrey and his victims are dead; his parents and his victim’s families must now shoulder the burden of surviving.
When Lionel first subbed for my seventh-grade science class, I’d wondered why he’d be willing to subject himself to teenagers, a group almost unparalleled in their cruelty. But it was clear that Lionel must have felt a calling to teach. It was the only explanation that made sense. Maybe, in front of a classroom, Lionel stopped worrying—if only for a moment—about what he had done, or hadn’t done, or could have done differently. When he graded our sloppily written lab reports, perhaps he forgot about Jeff’s crimes. Instead, at his desk, with Mrs. Debbie curled up in his lap, he corrected our exams, focusing on us. The ones he could still help.