What We Save

Sarah E. Harris
West Virginia University

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

Recommended Citation
Harris, Sarah E., "What We Save" (2007). Graduate Theses, Dissertations, and Problem Reports. 4307.
https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/etd/4307

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.
What We Save

Stories by Sarah E. Harris

Thesis submitted to the Eberly College of Arts and Sciences in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Fiction

Mark Brazaitis, Chair
Gail Galloway Adams
Mary Ann Samyn

Department of English

Morgantown, West Virginia
2007

Keywords: short story, linked stories, dislocation, connection, relationships, objects, behavioral health, loss, domestic abuse, accidents

Copyright 2007 Sarah E. Harris
ABSTRACT

What We Save

Sarah E. Harris

What We Save is a collection of linked stories about those moments of connection that we hold onto, and those moments of disconnection and loss that we continue to regret. Characters in the stories reoccur in others, and the stories are also linked by objects, themes, places, and colors. Thus these stories function both within and outside of the boundaries of traditional narrative, in order to show the ways in which key moments both shape, and fail to shape, our selves.
Contents

Preface: Missed Connections .................................................................1

Clean ..................................................................................................6

The Third Dream .............................................................................20

Nice Guys .....................................................................................34

Vertigo .........................................................................................47

In the Time of Feathers .................................................................60

Klutz .........................................................................................73

Thin Walls ..................................................................................89

What She Saves .........................................................................94

Slide ..........................................................................................108

About the Author .......................................................................122
For my parents,

who gave me those first stories.
Acknowledgements

A heartfelt thank you to the members of my thesis committee: Mark Brazaitis, Gail Adams, and Mary Ann Samyn. Thanks to all my workshop peers, whose careful comments and advice helped shaped the early drafts of these stories. Special thanks to Melia for the initial inspiration, Jaci for jars and feathers, Stacey for all the brainstorming and careful edits, Beth for companionship during the difficult parts, and to Nate for his unending patience and support. And thank you to my family, for supporting me from the very beginning. This collection is for you.
Preface: Missed Connections

Only at times, the curtain of the pupils
lifts, quietly—. An image enters in,
rushes down through the tensed, arrested muscles,
plunges into the heart and is gone.

--Rilke, "The Panther"

And where were we headed for?
The country of Narrative, that dark territory
Which spells out our stories in sentences, which gives them an end and
beginning …

--Charles Wright, “Appalachian Farewell”

Occasionally, when I have a spare moment or need to take a quick breather in between working on projects, I like to go online, to Craigslist, and read the “Missed Connections.” I think of these as a kind of postmodern personal ad; missed connections often capture a fleeting moment, and try to make it recur. People post them when they’ve seen someone, often on a New York City street or subway, and have felt they missed a chance to speak. They are studies in regret, and I find them both frightening and fascinating. Perhaps they scare me because of the missed opportunities they represent, and because of the way they show the limits of desire. After all, who knows if the person being written about even noticed the writer in the first place? Most likely, they didn’t. But they’re fascinating for the same reasons; a bit like an accident, they’re difficult to turn away from. These same kinds of implausible human “accidents” are what tend to fascinate me in stories, too.

The stories collected here, though linked by theme and characters, are as much about disconnections and misses as they are about connections or links. In the introduction to a book on what he calls the “short story composite,” Rolf Lundén explains that what is often overlooked in the study of these collections is “the tension between variety and unity, separateness and interconnectedness, fragmentation and continuity, openness and closure” (Lundén 12). He
dedicates two full chapters of the book to this idea; one chapter is devoted to connections between linked stories, the other to the misses. I’m interested here in the tension Lundén describes, in the space that exists between connection and disconnection, in the image or moment as well as the concrete beginnings and endings of narrative.

Several years ago, a good friend sent me a copy of a project she’d completed as part of a Master’s degree in multimedia design. The project, called “Step,” asked viewers to select combinations of three different possibilities in order to create up to six specific scenarios: viewers could create combinations of “encounter,” “escape,” and “everyday routine.” What I recognized immediately in the project was what it said, implicitly, about narrative. Each of the combinations would result in some kind of multimedia piece (these were created from dance, photos, or text) with a specific tone. The above order of events, for instance, provides viewers with a vignette about loss. Change the order of events to “everyday routine,” “escape,” “encounter,” and you get a joyful vignette about new, redemptive love.

What I began to realize is that the borders we place on narrative are just that—borders, a box or frame surrounding a larger whole. In each box is a moment, given importance and tone by the borders the writer has placed. I tried, for a long time, to incorporate this idea into a story, but gradually began to realize that, because of the very bordered nature of a single story that I was interested in exploring, one story alone would not do. I needed a full collection.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, “there is no difference between what a book talks about and how it is made” (379). They are discussing the ways a book is put together, the “nature of the lines considered,” and part of what they mean is that a book’s subject is not separate from its form, or “assemblage” (379). So if a linked collection, because of the way its stories are structured, is one that explores the middle space between openness and closure, then it
is also uniquely designed to explore the boundaries of narrative. Through working with poetry, I’ve learned that form and content are meant to follow from one another; they are inextricable. This is true also of stories, and by extension, story collections, and though they are primarily discussing novels, I think this is part of what Deleuze and Guattari mean in this section on assemblage.

In “A Thousand Plateaus,” from which the above quotes are taken, the particular form or structure the authors are discussing is what they call “the rhizome”; in this structure “there are no points or positions … there are only lines” (382). A rhizome is literally the root of a plant that grows underground unpredictably, rather than in a set pattern. In using the rhizome to describe literature, Deleuze and Guttari are advocating a certain kind of multiplicity, one without any deliberate patterns, one which is only connected tangentially. I do not claim the following text to be a true rhizome in the sense that Deleuze and Guttari mean, but it does contain elements of the rhizome within it; particularly, the idea of these lines of connection. This collection is not rhizomatic in that its organization is deliberately cyclical. Just as I begin with a literal explanation of the collection’s aims in this preface, I chose to end with a metafictional version of the same explanation. And the stories begin and end with Ruthie, though they move backwards in time. I’ve chosen to begin and end with her, because I think her narratives represent first the things we need to let go, and finally the things we try to save.

But each story collected here did grow out of another in some way, and these connections are not always linear. Where I began this process is immaterial to the end result, as each story ultimately informs the others. Characters reoccur, and it is left up to the reader to infer the lines of connection between one story and the next, to decide how Tatie’s implicit loss in “In the Time of Feathers” might inform his attitude in “Nice Guys,” or how the events of Ruthie’s childhood
in “Slide” have shaped her adulthood in “Clean.” But the stories are also linked in other ways; they share colors, tones, and motifs. Some are linked by location. Many stories are fascinated with objects in a particular way.

I do not mean to suggest that the individual stories here are, in any way, “experimental.” Many of them are traditional narratives; the stories have beginnings and endings, and are meant to stand on their own. I like that the juxtaposition of traditional stories, next to tangential narrative links, can create something rhizomatic, something that tests the very narratives it is composed of. The tension of this space is an interesting problem for me, and one that I’ve enjoyed exploring.

I also do not claim that what I’ve tried to do is isolated. Many writers have done wonderful things with linked stories on all parts of the spectrum between connection and disconnection; I like to think of this collection as closer to something like Sara Pritchard’s Lately or Daniel Handler’s Adverbs than to Sherwood Anderson’s Winesburg, Ohio or Heather Seller’s Georgia Under Water, whose links tend to be thicker, more tangible. As I’ve said, I’m interested in disconnection here, and the links are often barely there, slim and breakable threads rather than solid ropes. In his book, Lundén also talks about this continuum, though he includes texts classified as novels, such as Louise Erdrich’s Love Medicine, at the more connected end of the spectrum. I am indebted to many other authors as well for their influence; Haruki Murakami, Sandra Cisneros, Steven Millhauser, and T.C. Boyle among them, though that influence may long since have disappeared from the prose. Mostly, I rely on these authors and others to keep me going, and to remind me that stories are engaging and compelling things. I look to the authors that are important to me to push me, even if in the end the stories end up returning to my
own themes. I don’t think there is a single story here recognizable as Murakami-influenced, but some of them began that way.

Jeannette Winterson has said that “the true artist is interested in the art object as art process, the thing in being, the being of the thing, the struggle, the excitement, the energy, that have found expression in a particular way. The true artist is after the problem” (12). For me, then, this collection is about connections—where they’re made, where they’re missed, and how both those things shape the characters presented here and the collection of stories that they share. And it is also about disconnection—about loss, people who misunderstand one another, who pass one another and miss their moment to speak. Not only that, but the stories are about how we keep these gains and losses within us, how they ultimately shape the people we become and the choices that we make. If some of the characters here were given the chance, I like to think they might post “Missed Connections” of their own, and maybe, just maybe, a voice might call to them from across these pages, offering up a response.

Work Cited


Clean

“Thank you for calling ISC Behavioral Health, my name is Faith, how may I help you today?”

Faith taps her long pink acrylic nails against the salmon-colored fabric of her cubicle wall while I twirl the black spiral phone cord around my index finger and try not to breathe audibly. It’s my first day of on-floor training in ISC’s behavioral health division and I’ve been paired with Faith, whom I’m already beginning to dislike. I pull, unconsciously, at the collar of my new button-up work shirt. It feels like I’m wearing a thin, starchy box.

“My husband’s finally left me,” a woman says on the other line, “he’s left me and I’ve got these pills here and I think I might take them.” Her voice sounds shaky, and I freeze, then look at Faith. We covered this in training, but none of us actually thought it would come up. Who calls their insurance provider during this kind of crisis moment?

Her forehead crinkles in annoyance. “I’m sorry, ma’am,” she says, “but you’ve reached the wrong department. If you’ll hold on one moment, I’d be happy to direct you to someone who can help you,” and then she presses Aux 5 on the phone without giving the woman a chance to respond. Through my headset, I hear a dialtone, then the mechanical voice of a 1-800 line’s hold queue. Faith hits transfer and then swivels her chair to look me full in the face.

“When you get one of those calls, just transfer them right away,” she says, pointing with one long, square fingernail to a sheet of white paper full of phone numbers tacked to her cubicle wall. “We’re here to take insurance calls, and we’re not trained to deal with crazies.” She laughs and turns back to the phone to take another call.

... 

I first knew Rodge, in high school, though he didn’t know me. Most of my time in that school I spent feeling invisible. The high school was a cream colored brick building at the top of a small
hill; the elementary school, where all the kids in the high school had been in classes together, was an identical building at the bottom. The high school had a track, the elementary school a playground. These were the only differences I could see, and the kids in the high school weren’t inclined to see much difference, either, which meant forgetting about me, with my awkward southern accent and clunky brown shoes.

Rodge, the son of the eighth grade science teacher, was a skinny class clown and a math and science whiz. I adored him, right down to his corny jokes and his knobby knees. I knew them all: “What kinds of horses go out after dark?” Nightmares. “How do you stop a Rhino from charging?” Take away his credit card. “Stop me if you’ve heard this one…” Two guys walk into a bar. The third guy ducks.

One day, during the summer just before my sophomore year of college, I was looking for the head of student government so that I could file paperwork for an art appreciation group that I never did end up getting together. I was dressing better by then—All-Stars instead of brown shoes, dark skinny jeans. The office was closed, but across the hall were the offices of the campus radio station, and there was Rodge, standing in the doorway, leaning against the bright blue doorframe with his arms crossed and looking at me in a way I should have found displeasing, but didn’t. Mostly, I couldn’t believe it. I’d gone as far from that school as my budget would allow, had tried to reinvent myself.

“Looking for someone?” He didn’t, I thought, seem to recognize me. He’d let his brown hair get shaggy; it was hanging in his eyes.

“Yeah,” I said, “I need to talk to the student organizations’ rep.”

“They don’t keep regular hours in the summer. What do you need to talk to him about?”
I should have found the question intrusive, would have, if he’d really been a stranger. Instead, I wound up sitting next to Rodge on the duct-tape covered couch in the station’s offices, talking for half an hour about an art appreciation course it turned out we’d both taken the year before, our legs just barely touching. When I left, I gave him my phone number. I didn’t tell him we’d sat two rows away from one another for years. But just as I was walking away down the hall I heard him call out—“Hey, Ruthie,” and I turned around.

“Where does an Eskimo keep his cash?”

“Snow bank,” I said, and he gave me the biggest shit-eating grin.

There was something magnetic about Rodge that he’d learned in the year since we’d been in high school—something attractive about the way the waist of his jeans rode on the edge of his bony hips, something dangerous in the way he’d look at me, straight in the eyes. His expression betrayed a naked desire, an open adoration that was seductive in its frankness. It was hard to know where to look when I was talking to him; the first few times we got together, I found myself staring at his nose or his shirt-sleeves, afraid of betraying myself. Still, it felt good to be looked at, noticed. It took me a long time to realize I wasn’t the only woman he looked at that way—that his gaze did not discriminate, was not special, was not just for the brand-new me.

•••

Faith hangs up the phone and suggests we take a quick break. She punches in Aux 7, the button they told us not to use unless we really need a bathroom break or a minute to finish typing something in the computer. Aux 7 will up your call handle time, and the managers screening the phone lines don’t like it. But we can use it, Faith says, because she’s training and it will look
like she’s just had to pause to explain something to me or show me a little trick on the computer. Just as Faith’s sneaking downstairs to have a cigarette, Brit pushes off from the cubicle across the hall and comes careening over in her office chair, her headset cord dangling like a skinny braid.

“Want to go over to the Mex and get hammered after work?”

“Sure,” I say, because I already want to rip Faith’s fake nails off with my teeth and spit them all over the floor. “I could use a drink.”

While Faith’s still downstairs I use her phone to call Rodge and let him know I’ll be late. “Work’s awful,” I say, “so some of the girls from training and I are going out after. Don’t wait up for me, alright?”

“Righty-o,” says Rodge, which is one of the things I really hate about him. “I’ll probably be out anyway.” Out is his euphemism for a date, and it makes me feel a little thorny. “We still on for this Saturday?” We’re supposed to go to this orchid show downtown at Phipps Botanical—Rodge has been talking about it for weeks, ever since he started this new job at a greenhouse out in Wexford.

“You know it,” I say, which is one of the things I hate about me with Rodge. “We can talk about it later tonight, if you get back before it gets too late.”

... 

The first of Rodge’s girlfriends I discovered was a girl named Raine. She was taking a night class in painting with me, and she started doing portraits of Rodge in the nude, was how I found out. At first I thought I was imagining things, because her paintings were thick-lined and a little cartoonish—Technicolor erotica was what I called them. But there was no mistaking those hips, even in bright red or yellow oils.
We’d only been married about a month then, had just moved into our apartment together, and I was still getting used to seeing his things everywhere. I’d sit up nights at the cheap folding table in our kitchenette with a mug of coffee, staring half-asleep at his old biology textbooks lined up on the bookshelf, still marked at the spine with large yellow “used” stickers, or at his brown corduroy jacket slung over the back of my old green hand-me-down couch. Has she touched that jacket, I’d wonder, has she sat on my couch and looked at those books? Or did they talk about them together, hunched in a corner next to the shelf? Was it like the first time he kissed me, down in the corner when I turned to him to try and say something, anything, intelligent or witty about the environmental bio book I’d just been staring so hard at? And did he move against her with the same urgency, the same decisiveness, did the books shake and threaten to fall all at once on top of his spine?

Finally I came to a decision. I asked Rodge how he felt about open relationships and told some lie about a guy I’d met at my part-time library job and was attracted to. We had two rules, no lies, and no bringing other partners in our home. I thought then that I’d feel easy if I could own his girlfriends that way, if we could sit up together and laugh about them, his hand on my knee, joking. That was how I imagined it, but he never did tell me about Raine, though she stopped painting him not long after and moved on to someone else.

... 

I’m sitting at a big round booth in the Mex, drinking margaritas and listening to Brit tell me about some guy she’s just met online and found a way to chat with at work, even though we’re set up on an internal network and I can’t imagine how she’s getting around it. “He’s great,” she’s saying in a dreamy voice, “really smart and likes to travel a lot. He’s supposed to come into town next week to meet me, only,” she shifts her weight in the booth and leans toward me,
“I can’t decide whether to fuck him or not.” I check out the level of liquid in her margarita glass and nod. “What do you think,” she asks, “is it too soon or what? I don’t want to give him the wrong impression of me.”

I’m just about to tell her to go ahead and do it if she wants, because what the hell do I care and if he leaves her afterward then screw him, when this guy in a wheelchair who I don’t recognize comes rolling over to our table and says just what I’ve been thinking. “Oh, shut up Gale,” Brit says, swatting at his shoulder in a playful way, “what do you know anyway? Gale, this is Ruth,” she says, “we were in training together.”

“Sure,” he says, “you’re working with Faith, right?” The way he says Faith, drawn out like he knows just what I’m thinking, lets me know right away we’ll get along. Then he looks at me in a way I try hard not to recognize and asks if he can buy me a drink. I tell him it’s a free country, but he just laughs, so I relent. There’s a Rolling Stones sticker on the arm of his chair, the one with a tongue sticking out from giant red cartoon lips. We chat about music for a little while, until he says “Hey, want to get out of here? There’s this decent local act over at the Rosewood I think you might be into.” After another shot and a couple of beers we both sneak out of there while Brit’s in the bathroom, even though I know she won’t let up asking about it at the office tomorrow.

***

There’s been a whole string of girlfriends since then, most of them artists—girls who wear paint like a badge on their clothes, who drop by unannounced bearing gifts like handmade ceramic mugs or hand-mounted black and white photographs of tree limbs or streetlights surrounded by swirling snow. I smile at them, make small talk, and toss the gifts in the trash when they leave.
Rodge’s current girlfriend is named Char, and she’s new so he still spends a lot of time there. Nights he stays home he sits on our couch with his legs straight out on the coffee table and crossed at the ankle, telling me about her. Looking at me and talking like I’m actually listening and not just standing with my arms crossed and watching the way his thin lips move up and down, like I’ve been doing for months now. Sometimes I try to look right at him and imagine that he’s not there, that the couch is empty, but I can’t picture it no matter how many nights I’ve actually spent alone. I’m not ready to go back to being invisible.

…

Gale says he’ll drive, and I think he’s joking until I see the little red hatchback parked in the handicapped space. He opens my door first, then hops from his chair into the car, folds the wheelchair, and lifts it over my head to put it in the back. He takes his time about it, so I can’t help but watch, though I try to watch his arms, which are long and lean but tightly toned, and not to look at the end of his blue jeans, which have been shredded and tied in awkward knots just above where his knees would be. There are no pedals in the car. He uses a lever next to the steering wheel to control the gas and a second to brake, and I’m reminded of the last bicycle I had. I was nine—it had a white banana seat and the handlebars were white too, as was the rubber covering the brake handles. It’s hard to imagine that pink metal bike and this clean red car in the same space, but I sit there and do it anyway.

We cross the bridge to East Carson mostly in silence, and I stare out the window at the lights of the bars and the half-drunk college students strolling along the sidewalk. Gale finds a spot pretty quickly, and as we get out I wonder if I should offer to help him, but he’s in his chair and on the sidewalk already before I can make up my mind. I walk next to him, feeling strange. The college students give us a wide berth as we approach, many of them avoiding looking
straight at us. Maybe it’s the liquor, but it makes me feel contained, like we’re inside a funnel heading down, towards someplace no one else is headed. I hook my fingers through the belt loops in my jeans and march forward. “Like the parting of the Red Sea,” I say, the first thing either of us has said for a while. He laughs, and when he laughs his head tilts back the whole way and he closes his eyes for just a second. I can see all that so much more clearly from up here.

When we get to the bar he’s looking for, it I’m not exactly impressed. The white paint on the cinderblock of the walls is chipping and the old blue neon sign over the front is flickering with age. But he’s holding the door open with this grin on his face, so I head on in. The inside is dark, with the primary light provided by candles. They flicker and reflect against the ebony-black of the tables and booths, revealing hints of the bar’s patrons, an arm with a thick black watch, a woman with rectangular, black-framed glasses. It feels like stepping into a dream.

Gale leads me to a table close to the back of the room, and orders two Jack and Cokes without asking me what I want. A waitress takes away one of the small table’s chairs to make room for his wheelchair almost without me noticing—I’m distracted by what looks like a brown corduroy jacket resting loosely over the back of a chair two tables in front of us. There’s no one sitting at the table, just that jacket and a formless lump of fabric sitting on top of the table, probably her handbag.

I’ve never had a real date myself, not before I lied to Rodge and not since. I’ve thought about it, but could never bring myself to approach the kinds of men in bars that I imagined might be happy to ignore the ring on my finger. I’d see them sitting on corner barstools, looking like they’d been sitting there all day, drinking beer or straight liquor, smoking cigarettes. When I’d
approach for a drink they’d stare, sometimes try to make small talk, call me “honey.” I always walked away quickly.

I’d invent phantom boyfriends for Rodge, tell him I had a date and then spend the night alone in a hotel, sipping bourbon at hotel bars with thin green carpets, listening to women belt out old country songs during karaoke Wednesdays or plugging quarters into a jukebox only to choose from the same tired songs. I’d fend off the men at the bars, go to bed alone in a room smelling of stale air-conditioning, kicking up the too-tight sheets.

The last time I stayed in a hotel I found a small brown pubic hair underneath my pillow. I yanked all the blankets off of the bed and tried to sleep on the floor, but I couldn’t help wondering whose it had been. What color was her hair? I couldn’t remember, and I spent the whole night twisting in the blankets. When I got home the next day, Rodge was sitting on the floor in our living room, a full-color horticulture book spread out in front of him—he’d just taken that new job at the greenhouse, the third change since we’d been married. He looked up at me and winked. “Must have been a long night,” he said. But I didn’t know the punchline, so I just went to bed instead.

•••

There’s a stage at the front of the room I hadn’t noticed at first, and a woman in a long white dress walks on, holding an acoustic guitar. Not what I’d expected from a Rolling Stones fan. She starts right into her set—an old love song I’m on the edge of remembering the name of.

Gale’s got his back to her, so he’s looking straight at me. I stop trying to guess the song and just let her voice wash over both of us for a minute, before leaning in towards him. He leans forward, too, and it’s like we’ve reached the bottom of that funnel now, everything else happening outside of where we are.
“So,” he says with a mournful look, “aren’t you going to ask what happened?” I nod.

“Do you want the long or the short version?” he asks, tilting his head to rest one cheek against his hand.

“Both.”

“I was eighteen.” He pauses but doesn’t move away. “I was eighteen and crazy about this girl. She was younger than I was, still in high school, a senior. This gorgeous, petite, delicate kind of girl. Not skinny, or anything, just small—she was a cheerleader and always at the top of all their pyramids and things, had these really small feet. She didn’t care much for me, your usual story, I was older but that didn’t carry much currency. Still, she’d flirt with me sometimes. I was still living at home, didn’t know yet whether I’d go to college, just working the counter downtown at this local sandwich hangout. When she’d come in with her group of friends, she’d stand at the counter and talk to me—lean in towards me when I’d give her their change, give me this look, you know.” He paused again, and I let him, sipping at my drink through its little black straw, liking the faint feel of his breath near my face. “I was a dope.”

“So this one day, she comes in alone, middle of the day, crying. Says her boyfriend split up with her, that her friends’ll all think she’s a loser, that she doesn’t know what to do. And I’m mad to touch her, but for some reason I don’t. I hold back what feels like just a minute and then she’s gone, out the door, telling me what a nice guy I am for listening, and I know in that moment that I’ll never have another chance.” He pulls back a little, looks at me and shrugs. “So that night I had a friend pick me up a 12-pack, got wasted, and wrapped my car around a tree.”

The woman onstage is reaching the end of the song, her voice now barely a whisper, the guitar resting across her lap, her hands moving slowly across it like a lover’s.
Later, lying in bed at Gale’s place a few blocks from the bar, I reach down to untie the clumsy knots of his jeans, peel away the enclosing layers. I caress the pink flesh there—it’s rougher than I’d expected, and I feel slowly along the edges of his scars, then lean and gently, so gently because I can’t help myself, kiss the rough skin. He tilts his head back a little—it’s the same thing he does when he laughs. When we make love, I’m looking down at him. It’s been years since I’ve looked at Rodge this way.

After, he rests one long arm across the curve of my belly, just the way Rodge used to do, and I feel the smoothness of the skin of his arms, and the tightness of those muscles. I try not to think about the edge of his leg pressed against me. In the morning, he looks straight ahead as he drops me off. I don’t wonder whether or not he’ll call.

... That Saturday Rodge and I finally headed over to Phipps to check out the orchids. When we walked through the big, light-filled entryway I had the sudden impression we were entering a cathedral, and Rodge took my hand. I’d forgotten how small his hands were, the same size as mine. We wandered quietly for a little while through the regular exhibits—Rodge poked one finger into the Koi pond, I reached with the flat of my hand to touch the tips of a giant cactus. But Rodge was growing restless as we walked, I could tell, barely nodding in response to my talk about coworkers and the tedium of my new job. After a little while, he announced he was moving on ahead. I said I would meet him at the main exhibit.

Without him I felt free to wander around. Outside the Broderie room, one of those gardens where you could only stand in the entryway and look around, I saw two men in tuxedo jackets, one glancing around and the other furtively holding a cigarette at his side. Through the
closed doors I caught a glimpse of her, the bride, adjusting one of the pins in her hair. They must have stopped by for photos, or else just finished the ceremony somewhere else in the building. I tried to imagine how the finished photos might come out, with the formalized background of that room like a sculpture, the couple as fragile as the glass balls sitting on pedestals behind them in the frame.

The orchids were displayed at the center of a room with other kinds of flowers lining the sides, and my eye was drawn to a small white blossom with layered petals sitting on a low shelf just next to me as I came through the doorway. *Ranunculus*, the tag said, and the flower was at once both ordinary and fantastic. It looked exactly like the first thing I’d ever learned how to draw. I’d been five and participating in a week long “art camp” at the dance studio where I took lessons during the year. One day we were all given sheets of gritty white drawing paper and taught how to draw a flower—you began with a scalloped circle in the center, and then added small petals in a ring, spiraling them around and around until the flower looked full enough. I’d loved it because it felt like you could draw those petals forever, just like the song that didn’t end but quieter, so nobody would ask me to stop. I sat on that hardwood floor in my pink leotard and drew until the page was full.

In junior high, when my mother and I moved north, I drew the flowers again, covered the grey cardboard backs of the school’s cheap “composition books” with them. And in eighth grade biology class, I filled the flowers with the name of the biology teacher’s son, who always sat in the front row cracking jokes. I stared and stared at that flower. I’d never known it existed in the real world.

“Hey, Ruthie? Earth to the Ruth-ster,” Rodge said. “What are you staring at?”

“Nothing,” I said, “nothing at all.”
On Monday, I’m out of training, set up at work with my own cubicle, my own black nameplate, my own photocopied lists of phone numbers and time zone charts and important policies tacked up on the wall. I plug in my headset and wait for the beep to come through that will signal the first call.

“Thank you for calling ISC Behavioral Health, my name is Ruth, how may I help you today?”

“He’s left, he’s taken all his things and gone,” the woman begins, and I look towards the list of numbers on my wall, then across the hall to where I know Gale is sitting, handling his own calls.

I reach for the transfer button but stop, instead say again, “How can I help you?” But I know already, so as the woman unwinds her story like a long, tangled cord, stopping sometimes to take a drink or catch her breath, I don’t move, just sit there and listen.

“We had one of those bathrooms with the double sinks, two sinks side-by-side with this long mirrored cabinet above them,” she says. “Now he’s taken everything, his record collection, those ceramic mugs with the off-color cartoons on them, all our liquor. The worst is the bathroom—he even cleaned the sink. Funny,” she pauses, “I always hated the way his hair would be all over the counter. But now it’s just looks too clean, like an amputation.”

When I get home that night the apartment is dark. He’s left a note on the counter: “At Char’s. Don’t wait up. Luv ya, Rodge.” Couldn’t even be bothered to spell it out full, I think, like if he did that would give it too much weight. Like he’d have to stop joking for a moment and mean something. I switch on a lamp in the living room and sit there for a little while, sipping a Jack and Coke and watching old reruns of Law and Order on TV. Next to me on the
couch I can feel that ratty old corduroy jacket hanging there, smelling just a little bit like smoke. That’s how it starts. I can’t stop thinking about it, resting there, taking up all that space, just this close to touching my shoulder. Finally, I get a trash bag from the cabinet under the kitchen sink, shake it out a couple of times, and throw that jacket in.

Then I move to the bookshelf. The old textbooks make a satisfying heavy sound thumping against the floor as I toss them in. I tie that bag up and get another one. I hadn’t realized how many of the things in the apartment belong to me—I don’t have to move any furniture, throw out hardly any of the dishes. In the bedroom, I clean out his drawers, the clothes still smelling faintly of smoke and sweat, even though I’ve washed them myself. I throw away the things on top of his dresser: an old beer cap with the fortune “you will receive a message in a bottle” written on the underside, several black plastic combs with broken teeth, a sheet of biology-themed stickers his father sent him. And then I move to the bathroom, its flickering light hovering over me as I work. I even clean out the sink, using half a bottle of Clorox. And as his hair washes down the drain I can see it, the clean white porcelain still just a little scratched with wear and age, and I start to cry, then just break down right there in the bathroom in great gasping sobs. I sit on the toilet seat with my head in my hands until my face gets too hot from crying, then lean sideways against the cool bathroom tile, taking sips of my drink, growing steadily calmer. I open the cabinet mirror then, throw away his razors and aspirin and finally, the half-empty box of condoms.

Afterwards, I lug everything out to the hallway. Before I go back inside, I shut my eyes; I feel my way blind back through the doorway. Then I shut the door tight, turn around, and open my eyes to look.
The Third Dream

I. Cash

Cash can feel the film from a cold sweat seeping into the cotton shirt underneath his rented tuxedo. The church is full of a sustained murmuring, and occasionally he can see people craning their heads to peer toward the back of the aisle. Everyone is freezing—his sister, in the second row, has put on her boyfriend’s suit jacket and is glancing at a poem she’s been asked to read. The epigraph contains two lines from a Nick Drake song, and the poem is one of the few concessions Kaylee’s made for him in the ceremony: *You can take the road that will take you to the stars. I can take the road that will see me through.* Most of the songs the DJ will play at the reception, including the first song they’ll dance to, are songs Kaylee has chosen.

The left side of the church looks empty. Rather than adding names to Kay’s list, Cash had called most of his friends the week before, and left an open invite on the bulletin board at the restaurant last weekend. Kay’d been furious when she found out—all that time spent on the invitations. Did he know how much it would cost to add even one last-minute guest to the reception? He didn’t. A few of the guys had shown up; they were sitting near the back in khakis and sweaters. The right side of the church was full of people Cash doesn’t recognize, and he tries not to stare at an old woman in a peach dress suit who has already begun to tear up. The church, he thinks, smelled like stale air conditioning. Outside he imagines it’s warm and sunny.

He’d wanted a beach wedding—the sun warming their toes, the thin grains of sand getting caught in Kaylee’s wheat-blond hair as the wind blew it around her face in that perfect, natural way he loved. She might reach up an involuntary hand every now and again, brush it aside, then return the hand to his, the way she did when they’d walk together to his nearly-empty
apartment a block down from East Carson after a night drinking beer at Dee’s or Shootz. If it was cold, she’d put her hand in his pocket. He’d wanted to begin things with that feeling.

When he first mentioned the idea, she’d smiled in a way he recognizes now as noncommittal, though they’d agreed to keep things simple. But then Kaylee’s grandmother made a fuss about having a church, said it wasn’t any wedding without Jesus present. Cash didn’t understand what that meant, exactly, he didn’t believe in God but figured if you did then Jesus must be present everywhere, especially on a beach with the sun setting and sand still warming the soles of your feet. But it was important to Kay, so he didn’t want to make a fuss.

Soon Kaylee’s mother wanted to invite an old friend. “She used to baby-sit for me,” Kay explained, holding the cordless phone away from her ear, her hand pressed over the mouthpiece. “She feels excluded. Mom already invited her, anyway.” Cash shrugged from across the room. Soon the bride’s side of the guest list was overflowing, 20, 30, 40 people. Cash said some of them could sit on his side of the church—though looking around now, he could see they hadn’t bothered.

The list of needs grew slowly: should we have the reception in the city or outside, what color linen should go on the tables, should we have lilies or white roses, how many layers for the cake, what kind of frosting do you prefer, sweetie, whipped or buttercream, have you chosen your groomsmen, have they been to their fittings, how many proofs should we get of our photos, should we hire a videographer, should we get a DJ … until Cash stepped up to an altar, turned around, and couldn’t recognize himself.

He picks at his collar a bit and tries to loosen his tie without the whole church full of people noticing, then shifts his weight in his uncomfortable wood-soled shoes. His buddy pats him hard in the middle of the back, but it doesn’t make Cash feel any better. He feels too clean,
with a new short hair-cut and all these tight clothes. He rubs the back of his neck—the spot
where the woman at the mall hair salon had shaved his neck yesterday still feels raw. To pass
the time he tries to imagine Kay, what she’ll look like. But all he can picture is the way she
looked when he first saw her—his unlikely ghost.

He was on a week-long vacation from work, a solo camping trip, just drinking bottles of red
wine or beer he’d bought at a country store on the way, sleeping in a tent, hiking around in the
woods, sometimes even breaking his own trail—though he wasn’t exactly in the backcountry and
felt safe enough. Still, one evening he got turned around and couldn’t find his way back to his
campsite. He was stumbling around in the dark when he heard what sounded like traffic—the
highway—and as he headed toward the sound there’d been a thump, then a sound like something
heavy toppling over. He ran.

There along the side of the road, looking a bit ghostly cast in the pale reflection of its
own headlights, was a white Subaru flipped upside down, the engine still running. Inside he
could see a woman hanging from the driver’s seat, a curtain of hair hiding her face. He ran to the
driver’s side door, shouted “Are you ok?” then felt like a dope for asking. The woman nodded.

He said, “I’ll try to get you out,” and braced himself for a yank on the door, but it opened
easily, and there she was. He waited an instant then in the unreal light, hesitated, almost afraid to
touch her. Then he realized she was stuck. “I’m going to cut you loose,” and she nodded again,
very calm, so he held her just below her chest to keep her from falling and cut her seatbelt with
the swiss army knife on his keychain that he’d been using to open beers. He helped her out of
the car, and sat with her on the side of the road until she spoke. There was a light tremble in her voice that caught him off-guard. “My phone,” she said, “it’s still in the car.”

He went over to the wreck then, crawled back in through the side door and fished around on the roof of the car, where a whole assemblage had come to rest: cassette tapes with hand-labeled track listings, old junk mail with ads for supermarket specials, the splattered remains of a cup of coffee. When he finally found the phone some other cars had stopped, their drivers asking the woman if she was ok. He felt a surge of jealousy as he walked back toward her, holding the phone out mutely. And she’d smiled at him then, a pale weak smile. Her face was splattered with drops of mud or coffee. He realized the whole thing had lasted only a few minutes.

He sat with her until the police came, and after. When he asked if she had anyone to come and take her home, she’d said no, and he’d never felt happier or sadder in his life at the catch in her voice when she said it.

The music starts, and one girl after another who Cash doesn’t know well parades down the aisle, coupled with cousins of his he hasn’t seen in years. Then he sees Kaylee, her blonde hair swept into curls, a thin veil covering her face, and he doesn’t recognize her, either. That night, in a hotel bed that feels too big for the two of them, he’ll take bobby pins out of her hair one at a time, until there is a small pile of them on a bedside table. But still, his fingers will keep getting caught in her hair, until finally he’ll sleep with them stuck there, as in a thick tangle of burrs.
II. The First Dream

You are walking through the woods late at night with only a flashlight to guide you. Every now and then the thick beam illuminates some object made strange by the darkness surrounding it: an old tree root, a thick branch, the wrapper of a candy bar left on the ground. Each of them feels framed, hemmed in, and you begin to walk a little faster, feeling that same menacing frame surrounding you.

Suddenly you come to a clearing, and looking up you can see what appear to be countless stars. They’re brighter than any stars you’ve ever seen; each of them must, you think, be a supernova. And sure enough, one by one the stars begin to blink out—first growing larger and then disappearing in a flash, until only a few are left. But these grow much larger than the others. The ground around you is filled with light, and suddenly you can see the stark green of the grassy field and beside it, what you thought was a forest has turned out to be a field of the tallest wheat—rows and rows of towering plants. As the stars grow bigger, suddenly you’re running through those fields, two thick beams of light bearing down on you, until there’s the sound of a crash but you don’t look back, you keep running, thicker and thicker into the wheat until the plants are bending down to cover you. You feel panic rise in your chest. All you can hear is the rustle of stalk and leaf as the plants press against you, and you’re suffocating, and you can’t breathe.

III. Kaylee

Hanging upside down in what remained of her car, waiting helplessly for rescue or the engine to explode, all Kaylee could think about was how ironic it was that the radio still worked. She was
listening to Pavement’s “Plane Down,” and she decided that she would leave her cheating boyfriend for the first promising man she met. Minutes later, a rattled-looking stranger was tapping on her car window and asking if she was ok. He was practical enough to be the kind of man who carried a pen-knife, and he cut her out of the wreckage.

Kaylee left Thomas then because she could—because after an accident, you can do anything. She’d known Thomas was cheating on her for a long time, but couldn’t summon the strength to leave behind a life she’d led for over nine years—through high school, then long-distance when they were both in college, then finally living together after. She’d first learned about his other girlfriends when she was away at college—an old friend called her up out of nowhere, said, “I told him I was going to tell you, that he was an asshole and you had a right to know.” She said she’d seen Thomas leaving with another girl after a party.

What Kaylee didn’t mention to her friend, or to anyone, was the clear note of jealousy in the call, the way her friend emphasized the word asshole, the over-exaggerated sense of drama that seemed to tingle in the phone wire. Kaylee had understood then that this girl was seeing Thomas, or had been—the call was meant as revenge against her, or him, or both of them. The next time Thomas came to visit her in her shabby Brooklyn apartment, where there were only two rooms and there was nowhere for either of them to hide, he asked her in a casual way if she’d heard from Katie. She hesitated, then said no. It was their unspoken agreement never to acknowledge his other women after that. Even when he moved in with her and started taking night gigs that required him to play at hipster clubs in Williamsburg until three or four in the morning, she didn’t ask questions.

None of her friends could understand it, and what Kaylee couldn’t articulate to them was the way the angular shape of his body felt like putting the last piece of a jigsaw puzzle in place,
the way she could mention her great aunt Cara and he’d say, “the one with the crooked teeth?” and she’d say, “yes” and he would know who she meant and know, too, the whole history that went with the name—that her great aunt was near deaf in her right ear, had spent her life as a women’s rights advocate, was overly fond of vanilla bean cupcakes in spite of her diabetes. She couldn’t have told those skeptical friends that she could tell when he was smiling even without looking, that she couldn’t imagine her life without him in it because she’d been imagining him in her future for so long.

So when she hung upside down in that car on a remote road in Pennsylvania, home for a week to visit family, Thomas a world away in Brooklyn, she was shocked when she realized she didn’t want him to be there, didn’t want him to tap on the window and look at her with his head tilted sideways in reproach, his long angular body all scrunched up so that he could peer in at her through the window. She wanted to see anybody else, and when Cash appeared, a relief deeper than immediate rescue washed over her. She gripped the steering wheel tightly as he cut her loose, her hair covering her face, her arms shaking just a bit from the strain of it. She had the car towed to a local mechanic, called Thomas the next day, and told him she was staying with her parents, that he could keep or sell anything there as a kind of payment for the few months of rent left in their lease. She got a new job and a small apartment on Pittsburgh’s north side, and she didn’t look back.

When she and Cash started dating, she found herself by reflex taking him to places in her old neighborhood, everywhere a reminder of what she’d left behind. One night they drove out to a truck-stop diner on the old highway called Eppinger’s, the one that she and Thomas had driven
to back when they wanted to cut history class in high school, because they could smoke cigarettes and drink pot after pot of coffee. Cash had been charmed by the place—by its old sticky tables and booths with holes covered by duct tape, by all the strange pictures covering the walls. Everywhere were tacked old faded photos of the diner’s owner on what seemed to be safaris, but what Kaylee noticed this time, what she’d never noticed before, was that in every photo the woman was alone, smiling a wide lipsticked smile, planted next to tan colored jeeps or exotic looking trees, but never smiling with others, never with an arm around someone. Kaylee found herself suddenly irritated by the place, by its old tin coffee pots and its collection of junk on the walls, and they left quickly.

When Cash proposed, she found herself saying yes, because in all her years with Thomas she had never imagined that scene, could not picture what it would feel like to say the word.

A few months after she and Cash were married, a friend from work invited her to a flea market outside of Wexford. She was struck immediately by all the ordinary things, laid out and making a solid, jumbled mess on folding tables and blankets. Together in piles or cardboard boxes, and removed from wherever they’d come from, they became suddenly worthy of attention and scrutiny. They wandered the makeshift aisles, and she’d pick up here a ceramic statue of a little girl in a blue dress, there an old military badge, here a worn-out child’s toy fire engine, heavy and made out of metal. She would think, someone has owned this and cared about it, and she would wonder what had happened to make them let it go.

She didn’t take anything home that first time, but soon enough she started. She wanted to fill the rooms of their too-new townhouse on East Carson Street with objects that felt lived, to
give the impersonal white walls a particular feeling, a sense of place. She surrounded herself with objects she imagined coming from curio cabinets, with everything she’d never pictured herself buying, until every time she turned around in their townhouse there was something unexpected, something she’d never thought she might own occupying a corner or a cabinet or a shelf. Cash hadn’t complained exactly, not at first, but she could tell he didn’t fully understand. Soon enough, he was staying out late, taking on more and more bartending hours at his restaurant job. In the morning she’d wake to the smell of cigarettes in his hair, red wine or beer heavy in his breathing.

Two and a half years after her accident, Kaylee stacks all those possessions carefully into thick cardboard boxes. She empties the townhouse systematically, starting with the Fiestaware in the kitchen, then moving to the knick-knacks in the living and dining rooms. They fill three boxes, these small chinaware items she’s bought at auctions and flea markets and second-hand stores on weekends, at first casually, but obsessive about it near the end, filling the empty hours as Cash began staying out later, looking at her less, waking up sometimes at two or three in the afternoon.

She takes the roll-top desk from the study to the rented U-Haul, thinks about packing their printed sheets but instead makes up the bed with them. Let her think about who had lain on them, let her wonder. She leaves the wine glasses and the wedding pictures, not wanting to think about either.

Kaylee surveys the empty spaces with satisfaction, doesn’t bother to vacuum, just hops in the U-haul and drives off without a backward glance. Plane down, she thinks. There’s no survivors.
IV. The Second Dream

You are driving down a deserted highway; it’s dark, and all you can see clearly are the white lines of the road, illuminated from beneath by some unearthly light. Beside you in the passenger seat; a man you don’t recognize. He is holding your hand. You do not feel alarmed by this.

Suddenly the road narrows, begins to curve. You can no longer see the white lines at the center; the man beside you is gone. The tall trunks of trees press in at you. You’ve been on this road before, and in its curves you sense a familiar menace.

Then, in the center of the road, a deer. It freezes in the glare of your lights. The squeal of your brakes echoes against the trees.

You’re standing in the road; the car is gone. It’s just you, and the deer, staring at one another. You look away. You know it will rush at you. You close your eyes to wait. When you open them, the deer is gone. In its place, a man you know, tall and slender as a reed.

He leans down to the window of your car, peers in at you, his angular body scrunched into a shape you don’t recognize, his head titled sideways in reproach.

V. Samantha

The day Cash’s wife moved out was the day everything started to go wrong. Sam could hear it underneath the false cheer in his voice the minute she picked up the phone, below the talk about freedom and living truthfully again. She thought about that tone on the drive over to his place in the dark, almost blind in the rain even with the headlights on, not really wanting to go even though he’d asked her twice, but going anyway.
She’d been waiting months for the invitation—digging her hip into the false-brass handrail at Aurora’s every time she swung by to pick up a drink order, selling the hell out of any drink special just for an excuse to stop by, smile, and ignore that ring on his finger with an aggression that said *I’m serious*. Cash was a loose cannon, she thought, was funny and wild. She loved the way he’d chat with the customers at the bar, the easy way he had with people. Sometimes if she was lucky he’d stick around and drink after close and she’d stay too, listening to him tell wild stories about his high school buddies and drinking Irish car bombs—matching him, shot for shot. Still, for all that, he always got in his truck and drove home alone. Now that he’d called she should have felt good about it, and tried to as she peered ahead into the rain on the drive over, wiping the fog from the inside of the glass with one hand. She should have felt good, but she didn’t.

Cash opened the door with a glass of wine in his hand, poured her a drink and then started eagerly around the apartment. Now I can put up that poster she didn’t like. Sorry about these bedsheets. Aren’t they gaudy? She picked them out. I’ll get rid of them. Here’s where I’ll put my bookshelf. Cash took her hand and she felt electrified as he led her from room to room, pointing at posters he’d hung up and furniture he’d moved, while she drank wine and nodded in silence. She could see where the empty spaces had been, the creases in the carpeting where he’d moved heavy items around, or they were missing. New posters did nothing to hide the blank spaces on the walls, only calling attention to them, covering the space without filling it.

Sam sipped her wine, imagined his wife pushing and pulling these things down the carpeted stairs. She looked for the trace-marks in the carpet, but Cash had vacuumed them away. She knew from Cash’s bar-talk that he and his wife had stopped having sex months ago, and all of a sudden she wondered where in that clean-smelling townhouse they’d last been naked.
together. She tried to banish the thought but it was there, stuck like a hard corn kernel in between her teeth. She swallowed the rest of her wine, and Cash poured her another, explaining where it was from and how to read its “legs.” The way he said legs was openly suggestive, and there was a hint of desperation in that she tried not to hear. Soon enough they were naked, there on the clean-smelling off-white carpeting.

But it was more than the sex. He seemed to need, now, someone to fill up space, to breathe next him; someone to admire the wine glasses he’d collected hanging over the island in the kitchen. And she felt a growing sense of unease, a weight settling down over her. She thought she could feel the empty space of the room growing and filling her, making her larger than she’d wanted to be. The whole time she thought about work, about the nights after when they’d drink; the few times he’d get drunk enough to talk about his wife. Sam had been filled up with listening, and now it was spilling out. There, the TV stand he’d complained she hadn’t consulted him about buying. In the kitchen corner, the dishwasher she never used, preferring the old Fiestaware she bought be washed by hand, because, she said, they were too old and delicate.

Over a year ago, when Sam first started at Aurora, Cash was just newly married. The buzz in the kitchen was that nobody liked his wife; she was a bitch, she hadn’t wanted anyone to come to the wedding, she kept him on a tight leash. Sam had felt sorry for him. Such a sweet guy, so good with people. He was just her height, maybe an inch taller, and he wore sandals and khaki shorts behind the bar where no one could see. He had sweet, knobby, freckled knees. A guy like that, she thought, deserved better, and she started trying to get to know him.

When Sam first asked Cash about his wife, he told her the same story she later realized he told everyone, about the way they’d met. About the car wreck, and the rescue. As he told it, he tapped his ring finger against the bar, over and over, making a light clicking sound. Later, when
they began staying together after work, he told her other things—about how little time they spent together, with Kaylee at the office all day and his work during the evenings. About how, when they both had a weekend free, all she wanted to do was visit thrift stores. How during the day, alone in the apartment without her there, he felt like he was visiting a stranger.

One night, about a week before Kaylee moved out, the two of them were sitting in a back booth, drinking like always. Sam was just starting to think about going home; she had an early shift the next day, and Cash had stopped talking. Just when she reached for her purse, he said, “You know, I can’t remember the last time Kay wore her hair down. She always used to let it hang around her face, but now it’s always up from work. Even when she’s home, she’ll pull it back, like to wash the dishes or something. When I try to take it down, she swats my hand. She tells me not to mess her up.” Sam hadn’t said anything, had waited for him to explain, but after a while he’d just said he thought he should be getting home. She made a mental note to start growing her hair out.

That night, lying in his bed for the first time, Sam was unable to fall asleep for a long time. Instead she thought about the sheets they were lying on, wondered when his wife chose them and why, wondered why she’d decided to leave them behind. She thought, then, about the wedding picture on the wall downstairs. She’d tried to avoid it, but when Cash was in the bathroom, she took a good long look. In the picture, he was holding Kaylee up in the air, looking up at her. She was smiling. Her hair was swept up. And Sam thought too about the accident, about the way Cash had said he’d always think of Kaylee that way, suspended. The pale ghostly image of her inside that car seemed to hover there in the room over both of them. Sam lay there and wondered how anyone could live up to that image. She wondered if anyone could. And all the time, Cash’s arm lay across her chest, a hard weight, pressing down.
VI. The Third Dream

You’re in the woods, walking in the woods, and you’re trying to be quiet. All along the path you’re walking, dry twigs are spread like trip wires, waiting to sound the alarm. You step gingerly over them, all the time expecting to hear the ring of a dry snap. There’s nothing but dead silence.

Up ahead of you is a thick beam of light. You inch gingerly toward it, twigs forgotten. The light pierces the edge of the trees. Fog drifts through it slowly, swirling like a slow current. You hang back, arms around the trunk of a mammoth tree. You can feel the bark pressing into your skin.

Ahead of you, a car hangs low over the road. It is suspended in air, frozen upside-down in mid-spin. Inside the car, a woman. A curtain of blonde hair obscures her face. Still you have the feeling she is staring at you. You inch further behind the tree.

Underneath the car is a man, his arms reaching upward. As you watch they stretch like rubber, grow longer and circle the car. They wrap around it again and again, growing thinner, like stretched out Play-doh. Still the car hangs there, the headlights cutting the air.

Then the car swings around. The arms break and fall and the man turns toward you, his shoulders bloody stumps. You can feel what’s coming. The bark of the tree is cutting your hands. You can’t move. The light pins you, and you try to see them, to see if they’re looking, but all you can do is squint your eyes into the light, and wait for them to move.
Nice Guys

I. Tatie

Mark Tatie is 32 years old today. He is sitting on a worn leather barstool at Guy’s, uphill from his one-bedroom apartment on 5th Ave. He is saying to Guy, “Women all say they wish they could meet a nice guy, but it’s not true. I’m a nice guy, I’ve met lots of women, and not one of them has seemed happy to meet me.” He is taking a slow sip of his Miller High-Life; he is placing the glass down carefully.

A slow bead of sweat is trickling down the side of the glass—Mark is nursing the free birthday beer. Guy is wiping down glasses with a dirty towel; he is listening without listening. “Women don’t want to meet a nice guy. They only want to go out with jerks.”

Mark is downing the rest of the Miller High-Life in one swallow and coughing loudly. A woman in a booth nearby is wearing jeans that used to fit her but now do not and that same woman is rolling her eyes at a friend across the booth Mark Tatie can’t see from this angle, even though he is craning his neck.

Mark had been a business major in college, but later decided to go back to school for a master’s degree in history. He loved the Renaissance and medieval European studies, and even had a secret fantasy of one day inheriting his family’s land in Western Pennsylvania and constructing a full scale stone castle there. He would give tours and lecture on each of the castle’s features; there would be a modest museum devoted to artifacts like armor and tapestries, and a gift shop that sold over-priced miniatures and mugs and calendars.

He and his wife could live in a hidden apartment inside the castle, with later expansions for their three children: Daniel, David, Chloe. The boys would roughhouse with one another and
come home dirty; Chloe he imagined in dresses, bringing home bunches of dandelions for her mother. They would have a pair of basset hounds, pure bred, perfectly matched. His wife would know how to bake bread from scratch and the apartment would be full of that warm and pleasant smell. She could walk around in a dress with a big skirt, wear her hair up, be a part of the tours.

•••

Mark is going over to the booth where the women sit, asking if he can sit down. The woman who rolled her eyes is gesturing noncommittally, saying “knock yourself out.” And so Mark is pretending to hit himself in the head and then sitting down too hard, the old black seat cushion pouching downwards; Mark is rolling his head towards her shoulder, not actually touching her.

“How are you Patti?”

An uncomfortable amount of time is passing. Mark is staring at his beer, no longer clowning.

“Fine.” She is crossing her legs away from him and leaning her elbow on the table, lighting a cigarette.

Mark is thinking about going to Brittany’s, fiddling with her card in the pocket of his jacket, now reaching in the back pocket of his jeans, pulling out his wallet, counting out bills with the tips of his fingers.

•••

Brittany had already been with ISC several years when Mark started work in their complaints department. He was placed in a corner cubicle and since she was his only neighbor, he took to watching her to learn the ropes, to model himself after someone and try to fit in.

At first they only made occasional faces at one another during phone calls, a relief almost everyone with windowed cubicles took advantage of as a way to relieve pressure when the
callers were swearing at them over something they could do nothing about, a way of rebelling while their voices remained calm and smiling: “I’m sorry the wait was so long, sir, now what can I do to help you today?”

Mark never could get the hang of this, though he would sometimes put people on hold to sigh, or smile and roll his eyes at Brittany if he saw she was looking his direction. Otherwise he remained passive, both in voice and action. Brittany, however, was a champion face-maker; she would make bug eyes at her phone console, raise her fist at it, sometimes even give it the finger. Mark never tired of watching her; she was like a car accident on the side of the highway you stare at until your own car starts drifting. She would put people on hold and swear at them loudly to friends who sat rows away and he would hear them laughing. Her voice was often a shade too loud with callers, but that, Mark found out, was just the way she spoke, not a reflection of frustration or anger.

Brittany was no prize, certainly, she wore sweatshirts to work most days, her hair was a dull brown that came just to her shoulders in untamed, natural waves. Her eyebrows were dark and a little too thick, she wore too much mascara. Still, they eventually struck up a friendship, sitting together in the salmon colored lunch-room, talking together outside during smoke breaks both scheduled and otherwise. She smoked Camels—Turkish Golds—he watched her smoke them. He told her he was trying to quit and watching her calmed him, but Mark had never smoked a cigarette in his life.

He’d been tempted to, once, in graduate school. His girlfriend then had smoked Salem menthols, a pack a day, and when they first started dating he’d hated it, sometimes pinching the lit cigarettes from her fingers and throwing them away. But he stopped one day without her even asking him to. And later he began to wish he smoked them too, began wanting to ask her
casually if he could bum a smoke, the way so many of her damn artsy friends did. But he never
asked.

•••

It was a Thursday afternoon, on an unscheduled smoke break, when she gave him the card.

“A business I’m trying to get going,” she said, and after that they didn’t say much of
anything to one another.

It took him over two weeks to dial the number that first time—two weeks of staring at the
raised black lettering of the business card and the slim slinky clip-art silhouette of a woman in
the upper right hand corner. He kept dialing the first few numbers and then hanging up quickly.

When he finally did call, she answered after the first ring. “Ok,” he said. It was all he
said.

Mark was her only customer, but he had no way of knowing.

•••

Mark is sitting in Brittany’s apartment, he is putting on his clothes, he is telling himself he does
not feel awkward. Mark is hearing Brittany’s voice, it is Brittany’s office phone voice, but
angry, distorted, hard.

“What are you doing here, where are you going with that, how dare you come in here…”

Mark is watching a man dart past, large and broad shouldered; the man is holding
Brittany’s blue cash box. Mark is afraid, he is seeing the man in slow motion, his dark tan pants,
his rain-slicked hair, his water-stained sweat-jacket, and Mark is thinking about robbery, about
robbers, about what one could do to him and he is shielding his face as the man runs past him, is
hoping he hasn’t been seen, is breathing a sigh of relief as the man disappears out the door, the
sound of his heavy wet body plodding down the stairs, the wet slap of his white canvas sneakers
echoing back up the hallway and in through the still open door. Mark is still crouching, curled into himself, hands over his face. Brittany is standing in her bedroom shouting out a window.

“…You bastard, you lying bastard, you lying asshole bastard.”

Brittany is moving towards Mark, she is still shouting, louder now than before, coward, coward. She is standing over him, naked, her hair still a mess of tangles and waves, a brown bird’s nest on the back of her head, I’ve lost everything. Everything, coward. Mark is reaching into his pants pocket, he is pulling out his wallet, is trying to hand her a few wrinkled bills.

“You bastard.”

Brittany is screaming, she is knocking the money out of his hand, she is slapping his face, get out, is pummeling his shoulders and back with her fists as he runs for the door, coward, bastard, get out, get out. Mark is running down the stairs, he is hearing the pounding of his own heavy footfalls. Don’t ever come back. Brittany is screaming out the window.

“You bastard, you dirty pervert bastard.”

The first time, Mark felt dirty, paying for it, like someone pathetic, someone he did not identify with, did not recognize as himself. It was a new identity, this man who made love with his eyes closed, who slept with a woman and dressed quickly afterwards, settled accounts, left in a hurry. He sometimes felt like he was only watching himself, pulling on his pants, leaving the wad of bills in the little blue box she kept on the bedside table and disappearing when she was in the kitchen or the bathroom.

Soon it seemed uncomplicated. A perfect solution, even. Here was a need, and someone willing to satisfy it. What was so wrong, exactly, with that? At first it nagged at him, this question, then it stopped. He felt liberated, even pleased with himself. He was not, after all, in a
position yet to support his future wife, his children. Maybe it was unfair to women to pretend he had anything to offer them right now, maybe he was doing all of them a kindness by satisfying this need elsewhere, and not hurting anyone.

Mark still believed in his nice girl, in the wife, the castle, the children and the dogs. What was happening now was simply a phase to be passed through, a way to meet his basic needs until better things came along. Like working at a crummy job you hate, looking through the want ads every day with a felt-tipped pen, circling, sending yourself away for something better but still managing to pay the bills.

People did this every day. They all got by.

... 

Mark is leaving Brittany’s in a panic, she is screaming after him from a window. It is raining but Mark doesn’t notice. He is wondering if he should call in sick tomorrow, what he is going to say to his supervisor, when he sees a broad-shouldered man holding a bundle of balloons plodding towards him, thin hair plastered to his head, dark blue sweat-jacket soaking wet, eyes straight ahead. Mark is not meeting his gaze, Mark is looking at the pavement. The man is handing a balloon to Mark without a word, and Mark Tatie is saying nothing, he is walking away holding this strange gift and saying nothing. He is turning a corner and releasing the balloon out of sight of this man, not wanting his gift, not wanting to know what it means.

II. Marty

Marty is walking home in the rain. His head is pressed hard against his shoulders, the hood of his sweat-jacket rests near his ears, his back is stooped, his steps long, his breathing labored. Marty is soaking wet; the cuffs of his pants are dripping. His wet slacks are rubbing together,
making a scraping sound. Marty is wearing white canvas sneakers, walking into puddles, thinking that his toes must look like ten white raisins.

Marty is thinking about Brittany’s apartment, he is leaving Brittany’s apartment with no umbrella and walking home in the rain thinking about his toes and about Brittany’s red lava lamps, the two of them, one on each white end-table, casting a red glow over Brittany’s white couch, Brittany’s white body, the body of the man who was with her, both of their eyes closed and bodies glowing with faint red light, his own body hidden in shadow, unnoticed, slinking silently away.

It began, Marty is realizing now, the day he told Brittany he would always love her.

•••

They were in the kitchen and she had just finished the dishes and was drying them with a towel. He was sitting at the old heavy wooden table, a thrift store find he’d carried up three flights of stairs two days ago and helped re-assemble in her kitchen. It was large, too big for the room, and took up most of the space. Every now and again, Brittany’s slender thighs would brush against the edge of the table top as she dried, rocking back and forth on her heels.

They were talking about marriage again. Or Marty was talking, Brittany was listening with her back turned, energy concentrated on the dishes. Marty had proposed, for the third time, two weeks ago. This time she’d told him she’d think about it, which was a decided improvement over time numbers one and two.

Marty felt the way he had when he’d been up for promotion at work. There were sweating, nervous, multiple interviews where he’d felt vaguely uncomfortable and inadequate. This seemed eerily similar. He wondered if he should put together some kind of official
document and present it to her, a résumé of his knowledge and experience in romance. It would have been a slim volume.

Marty’d had only one previous girlfriend, his junior year in high school, a freshman named Amanda. They’d been in the marching band together, trombone section, the only two. They dated two weeks, Marty holding her hand sometimes during the games and giving her rides home afterwards, waiting patiently for the evening she might kiss him before she got out of the car and bounced towards her front door. Then one night after a game, looking for Amanda to give her a ride home, he’d found her in the parking lot in the back of Brandon the snare drummer’s Jeep. She never even bothered to officially break up with him.

He met Brittany four years later, on a blind date. By then he’d dropped out of college, was working over at the Spangler’s factory making orange circus peanuts. Nights he came home sticky, smelling like sugar. A woman he worked with told him her friend had just got out of a bad relationship, the guy either arrested or in jail already, and she was sick of jerks, looking to date a nice guy. “You seem about right,” the friend had said, and so he met Brittany, took her over to the Red Lobster, then out for drinks. He was amazed that she was willing to spend time with him, and he flattered her outrageously, always picked her up for their dates, always jumped out of the car when they arrived anywhere and hurried to open her door. He bought her flowers, silver bracelets, took her shopping and afterwards out to restaurants he couldn’t afford. He moved to a cheaper apartment, a basement place with a letter on the door, worked overtime, was promoted to floor manager.

Looking at her now in the kitchen two years later, he was as enthralled as when he first spotted her in the restaurant. She was slender, had stylishly short brown hair, deep brown eyes. She dressed well, even though she didn’t make much working insurance, taking phone calls. She
knew how to find bargains and took good care of her clothes, all the whites in her shirts still white even years after she’d bought them.

The first time he proposed was a weekend trip, six months ago. He’d planned it all out to be romantic, booked a hotel room in Pittsburgh, got tickets to the symphony the first night, an evening ride on the Clipper the second. He’d been saving all year, for the trip, the down-payment on the ring: platinum, a ring of sapphires framing a diamond bigger than he could really afford. He proposed on one knee on the upper deck of the boat, got out the ring, everything. She looked at him for a moment and shook her head sadly, said she didn’t think so. He remembered that the river smelled like fish and the boat was full of elderly couples who wouldn’t meet his eyes afterwards.

They kept dating. A month later he tried again, this time at a baseball game, on the jumbo-screen, figuring maybe she couldn’t say no in front of all those people. She did.

Now he sat in the kitchen, talking to her back, telling her how much he loved her, that he would go back to school if she wanted, get a better job, buy her a nice house, that they would move out of Ohio, anywhere she wanted to go, that he would take her traveling, that he would love her always, no matter what.

That was when she turned around, gave him a look he didn’t understand. “What did you say?” she asked.

“‘That I’ll always love you,” he said, “no matter what happens.”

“You promise?”

“Of course, I promise. What could ever make me stop loving you?” He was perplexed and felt like he was sweating, like he was going to give the wrong answer to some crucial
interview question he hadn’t anticipated. “Nothing could.” He had the sudden impulse to clutch
nervously at his neck, to loosen a tie he wasn’t wearing.

“Ok, then,” she said, and turned back to her dishes.

Marty took the ring out of his pocket, gave it to her to put on. He always had it with him,
just in case.

•••

At first it was just the clothing. The whites became dull, small grease stains crept into dress
pants and blouses. She complained about the water at the Laundromat at first, then she stopped
making excuses, instead saving her complaints for Marty and everything about him.

She started gaining weight. Marty had to dismantle the kitchen table, carry it down the
stairs again, when it became uncomfortable for her to squeeze into the gap next to the sink. She
didn’t bother to buy a new one and instead they ate meals on the couch, hovering over the coffee
table, watching bad prime time sitcoms and not saying much to one another.

She stopped washing the dishes and they piled up in and around the sink. Marty started
taking their plates to the kitchen when he came over; then he started washing all the dishes that
had piled up since he’d last been there. She never came to his apartment, never bothered to help
him clean up, just stared at him as if daring him to complain.

She would watch him watching her get dressed. He would tell her how beautiful her
body was, how much he loved her, and she would turn away.

She stopped having her hair cut, started wearing cheap make-up she bought at discount
stores. She bought all new clothing at the same stores, threw out everything that didn’t fit
anymore one day when he wasn’t there, just put it all into bags and threw it into a dumpster.
One day he noticed she was keeping condoms in the drawer of her bedside table. They were right on top; she hadn’t bothered to hide them. There was underwear in her dresser that he’d never seen.

Then he found the cards. They were in her desk, and he found them looking for some envelopes she’d asked him to get for her. His hands trembled a bit, and he had to read one three times before he understood the words. He put one in his pocket, found the envelopes, and handed them to her. She stared hard at him, waiting. He kissed her on the cheek, told her he loved her, sat down next to her and tried to hold her hand.

Marty had the feeling something awful had happened to her that she wasn’t sharing, refused steadfastly to desert her in this hour of need. He tried cautiously to pry it out of her, asking now and then if there was anything the matter, but he was always met with a stony silence. He tried looking for phone numbers of relatives but could not locate an address book. He tried taking her shopping, to nicer restaurants, sending her flowers every day for a week in February. He waited patiently, knowing if he could be there for her this would pass.

She continued to refuse to set a date. There was a blue jewelry box on her dresser, where he assumed she kept the ring when he wasn’t there.

...In high school, on the last night Marty drove Amanda home, as she turned to get out of his beat up old station wagon he’d asked her very quietly, “Would it be ok if I kissed you?”

She’d turned back for a second to look at him and smiled. Her eyes were a deep, chocolate brown. He’d leaned towards her then but she pulled back just a little bit. “I’m sorry,” he’d said, “I can wait until you’re ready. As long as it takes.”
She’d smiled again then, a mysterious thin-lipped grin she had that he loved, and got out of the car. She started towards her door, then thought better of it and turned back. He rolled down his window, but she just leaned against the door frame, said, “You’re a real nice guy, Mart,” then turned and walked away.

•••

Marty is stopping. He is turning around, the hands in his pockets balled into fists. He is walking back towards the apartment, quickly now, his toes squishing in the wet sneakers, water splashing up at his feet. He is stopping at a streetlight in front of the apartment building. He is looking up towards a lighted window.

He is opening the downstairs door, he is almost running up the stairs, leaving wet drops behind him. His hand is looking for the key above the doorframe, it is inserting the key in the lock, turning it loudly. He is storming past the man sitting on the couch, the man bent over grabbing his pants, the man not seeing him there. He is going into the bedroom, picking up the blue box, not looking at Brittany who is staring at him, who is shouting something after him. He is walking out again, not hearing the man’s small whimpering, slamming the door open, going down the stairs and running now, around the corner, into the pawn shop there.

Marty is in the pawn shop opening the box, is raising his eyebrows, staring at the wad of bills inside. He is looking around the shop, at the old rings under the glass counter, gold bands and jewels, one thick gold band, engraved, saying The greatest of these is love. The owner of the shop is staring at him sternly, and now Marty is backing out the door, running again, around the corner, into a grocery store. He is turning towards the greeting cards, looking through the Mylar balloons, grabbing fistfuls, tracking down an employee, a young pimpled boy with tired eyes working the night shift. He is shoving the bills into the boy’s fist and then he is walking out of
the store with the empty blue box and twenty-five shining silver Mylar balloons all saying *I’m sorry*. He is passing the man with the white back, the man is staring at the concrete, at his sensible brown shoes. Marty is handing him a balloon, their soft hands meet for a moment, there is the swift pressure of lined red ribbon, and then Marty is walking away quickly, not looking back. He is tying one silver balloon to the jewelry box, leaving it outside of her door with the key inside. Marty is walking home in the rain, his head is pressed hard against his shoulders. He is letting the balloons go one by one into the sky, watching each one until it dwindles to a speck, until it disappears.
Vertigo

“When I was nine years old, I had a collection of miniature carousels,” she says. The tea she pours for me is a rich brown; it smells like cinnamon, and as she speaks, she does not look up from pouring. “The kind with horses on poles—though they sometimes included other animals. My favorite one was the smallest; it had a little hippo about the size of your fingernail. You put this little metal key in the back, and when you turned it the animals would spin and the box would play a song from the 1890s called ‘After the Ball.’ My mother didn’t like me to use the key, but I tried it a couple of times anyway.

“God,” she interrupts herself, looks up at me and brings the tea to her lips. Her eyes are the same rich brown as the tea. “I haven’t thought about this in years. More tea?” I shake my head no, and after a moment she looks away again, out over the porch rail at the street behind me, and continues.

“We had just moved to this new house in North Carolina—my father was in the military, so we moved around a lot, you know how that goes. It wasn’t all that new for me, even at nine. My mother still maintains the new house had given me a fright, but I guess you could say it did and it didn’t.

“The first thing was that the lights would shut out for no reason. Random times, not just at night or anything like that. Dad said it was an old house and a bad fuse; he wasn’t around much to fix it. Or sometimes things would come up missing—like a soup spoon or one of my mother’s good navy blue pumps. We always found them later, though, so it didn’t seem like any big thing. That stuff happens to anybody. Just last week I misplaced one of my favorite silk scarves; found it in the crack between the washer and dryer down in the basement. Damndest thing. Must have been in one of my pockets.
“One night after my mother put me to bed, I couldn’t sleep. I lay there awake as it started to get dark, and the moon came out and cast this light into the room.” She spoke slowly then, to a point somewhere above my head. “I can’t explain it, it wasn’t ghostly, exactly, more like that feeling you get when you’ve got insomnia and everything seems only half in this world. You feel ungrounded, or at least I did then. I remember thinking that my bed, it was this four post bed, no canopy—all white, too, so in the moonlight it seemed to glow a little—I thought it might float away, out the window, with me clinging to the top of it. It sounds like a pleasant child’s fantasy, being able to fly all over in a big four post bed, but there was an element of menace in it for me, like at any moment I could be carried away against my will—and once that happened I would never be able to come back.

“I got so worried I got of my bed, but that was worse. The hardwood floors were cold and the room felt too big. I went over to this long dresser next to the window and climbed on top of it to look out, but everything outside looked frozen. For a moment, looking out the window, I had the strangest sensation that I might fall.

“From behind me, then, I started to hear music. At first I didn’t even notice it, the sound was so faint, and it grew slowly, so that it took a long time before I knew what I was listening to. It was ‘After the Ball.’ When I turned around, of course, the music box was moving. I knew then I had to get out of that room, but I felt like my legs had sunk knee deep in wet cement. My mother found me on top of the dresser in the morning, curled up in a ball, asleep.”

She smiles at me for a second, the story over. “We moved again not long after that. But of course it was too late for me. That was the beginning, though I didn’t recognize what had happened to me until I moved here, years later.” I realize I could count on one hand the times
she’s looked directly at me in the few minutes I’ve been sitting here, and blow on my tea as if to cool it.

... 

“My name’s Samantha,” she’d said when I first called, “but you can call me Sam.” I’d seen the ad in one of the local free rags they keep in red plastic newsboxes on the street-corners. Paranormal Phenomenon Explained. Fortunes Told. Tarot, Séance, and Palm Reading Services. No name, just a number. I’d been in the islands for almost two weeks and the publisher was starting to get on my back about a deadline. I couldn’t tell him that I had stopped writing travel articles; that in fact I’d dried up altogether on the subject of canapés and in-flight movies, hotel bed sheets and out-of-the-way antique shops. From the minute I’d stepped from the airplane onto the off-ramp, I’d been unable to write a word.

I was in St. Thomas on a freelance assignment for Up!, working on a fluff piece for one of those in-flight magazines they stuff in the back of your seat. The way it was explained to me, the airlines were trying to get in on some of the cruise-ship business to the area, so I wasn’t to mention any of those Queens or Princesses, no Royal-line anything. Otherwise, I was free to write what I liked, assuming it drummed up some business. It was the kind of assignment that should have taken a weekend, but I was rounding the corner on my second week and headed for a third.

I typically prided myself on the quick, business-like way I turned articles around. Since I was a kid I’d wanted to travel, and here I was doing it as often as I liked. In college I’d studied writing, and I thought of myself as a kind of sage, offering readers and editors alike enlightened takes on every kind of destination. I prided myself on my bold use of adjectives, on quick, tight, convincing prose that didn’t require more than one or two revisions. I was good, and I had
plenty of work. But now, I was dried up, and I didn’t know what to do. In all the years I’d been working, I’d never once had writer’s block.

It’s not the sort of thing I’d ordinarily have done, calling the number. I was desperate, I guess. I felt uninspired by my king size “Cloud9 Bed,” and the complimentary hotel cocktails had been the only thing keeping me going. Lately, members of the management had begun to look at me slantwise when I sat down at the bar in the hotel’s luxury bar/restaurant to sip my Kentucky bourbon, and just that day at breakfast my waitress had asked how the article was coming along.

“I’m Bennett,” I started to say to Sam, but she cut me off.

“I know. Meet me at my house tomorrow at three. I’m about two streets up from your hotel—the old house with the blue siding and white porch. You can’t miss it. You’ve been staring at it every day on your walks through town.” And then she hung up. I was rattled for a minute, but consoled myself with the idea that the hotel was pretty far inland from the harbor where all the cruise ships were and that I must be the only tourist wandering around this far from the duty-free shops.

... 

I ask Sam if she’s serious, for real. “What do you mean,” she asks, “Like do I ever use tricks, do I trick people?” Before I have a chance to respond, she continues. “Sure, I use plenty of tricks in my regular practice. I have an office down near the harbor, in the tourist district. Crystals hanging from the ceiling, silk drapery everywhere, all that stuff. Sometimes I even wear a long black gypsy wig, just for kicks. I mean, have you even seen a blonde psychic? That’s all just a show for the tourists, though. Any real business I conduct here, and that’s rare. I have a sense
about who to take seriously, who I can really do any good for. Everyone else, it’s easy enough to
string along.

“Like, for instance, you can always tell the people who are tourists, but are trying to
‘blend in.’ Those people you start off telling you can ‘sense’ they’re from out of town, and they
love that, as if it wasn’t obvious. Like, for instance, you get to where you can tell when the
clothes people are wearing have been in a suitcase. They wrinkle in a particular way. Things
like that.

“Séances, those are pretty simple too. They’ve already told you who they’re looking to
talk to, so you just moon about a bit and let them answer the questions for you. You can tell
from the way they press into your hands—how hard they push or the feel of their grip—what sort
of a response they’re hoping for. And most people are disposed to believe. Séances cost a lot of
money, and nobody likes to feel like a fool. As for fortune telling, it’s a lot like looking at a
fortune cookie—you just let people make their own meanings out of the generic things you say,
and keep positive about it. Nobody really wants to hear how or when they’ll die, for instance,
even if they tell you they do.

“Any real business, like I said, I conduct here. I can tell when people have real questions,
or when I can really be of any use, like with you. Those people I just have to the house. Who
could actually function sensibly in a room stuffed full of silk?”

I wonder what she means by real, but don’t ask. She hasn’t really answered my first
question, anyway.

...  

The night before our appointment, rather than soak up the stares of the hotel’s staff along with
my bourbon, I decided to take a quick stroll through the tourist district down towards the harbor.
The area downhill from the hotel and leading down to the water looked a little like long factories or warehouses all lined up in a row, with the occasional transplanted palm tree stuck into the sidewalk and tourists from Maine and Virginia and Utah all wandering around in their polyester cruise ship shirts looking for duty-free diamonds and rum. I strolled around working a quarter and a few nickels in my pocket and wondering what there honestly was to say about the “Captain’s Corner,” with its tacky souvenirs, or the “Delly Deck” restaurant.

“Don’t miss Delly Deck in Havensight Mall, located conveniently near the hotels. Their breakfast has been voted best on the island and the Veggie Benny is not to be missed. It’s worth the price for that hollandaise! Afterwards be sure to stop by the Captain’s Corner and check out their great selection of model ships! And don’t leave without sneaking a rum ball or two. Who’s to know?”

And so on. I finally gave up when I spotted a bright red London-style phone booth.

I got her machine again: “Hi this is Trish! I’m not in right now. So leave me a feel-good message. Bye!”

“Hi Trish, this is Bennett again. I’m still out here on St. Thomas, still wondering if you’re okay. I can’t work worth a damn. Anyway. You’ve got the number for the hotel … I left it on the fridge, with that little magnet shaped like a baseball. Plus you could call my cell, too, if you have to, or just call the office and they’ll transfer you over to me. Okay. Call me soon. Let me know you’re alright.”

I hung up. There wasn’t anything else to say about it.

Trish and I had been together for about three years, living together for just over one. She was tired of my traveling, though she wouldn’t say it. She’d started subscribing to magazines about cooking and parenting, not reading the articles, just leaving them around on the kitchen
table or the seat of the armchair for me to find. Look, she was saying, so many other things to write about, so many things you could write about from home. In the cooking magazines, I found articles about where to shop for ingredients in foreign countries. I left the parenting magazines open to pages about family vacation spots.

She subscribed to knitting magazines; I found articles about the Scottish wool market. This had been going on for months.

One afternoon, I threw out my back carrying boxes full of old magazines down to the basement. I spent three days lying on the couch, reading from the box I’d tried to carry. What I realized, looking at all those articles, was that they could have been written from anywhere. “Dig your toes into the sparkling white sand or relax with a margarita at the Seaside Inn!” I could think, off the top of my head, of at least six Seaside Inns I’d stayed in; it dawned on me that I probably could have written that sentence about any of them. “Mix with the locals at Joe’s Subs; this basement hideaway is known for their luscious crabmeat specials.” I laughed at that; nobody figures out where the locals go in a weekend, but all the tourists will want to feel local. And who uses a word like “luscious”? Who can take those kinds of words seriously—dazzling, spectacular, immense. I could have written the article, though I hadn’t. I could write it right now, I realized, from this couch, from anywhere. Once you learned to lie artfully, it didn’t matter where you did or didn’t go. Why go to a place when you weren’t going to mention the slightly sour seafood smell of Joe’s, or that the beach is not so much white as pebbly and covered at the edges with sandwich bags and old soda cans?

I didn’t tell Trish about any of it. When the job came for Up!, I took it. I thought for once I might write honestly, but found that I didn’t have anything to say.

...
I keep asking Sam questions, finding that I’m enjoying the sound of her voice, both the low tones of it and the sing-song way she has of speaking. I find that I don’t want to talk, or to get to any of the things I suppose I’ve come here to ask her, about my job, about Trish. So instead I ask how she came to St. Thomas. She’s a petite girl, with wild, blonde, curly hair, and she doesn’t look local to me.

“I got here on one of the cruise ships,” she says, “Isn’t that how everyone arrives? I don’t know that I’ve met anyone in the neighborhood who was actually born here. We’re all sort of ex-pats.”

She stops, puts down her second cup of tea, then picks it up again. I wait. “I came on the heels of a bad break-up, if you want to know the truth. I needed a change of scenery, and when I got here I knew this was it. Warm all the time, plenty of rum drinks. I used to drink nothing but Irish car bombs, can you believe it? I thought I’d gone crazy when I first got here. I was lying awake nights in this over-stuffed hotel bed, thinking about the job and the man I’d left back home. Then one day, walking around outside at midday, I got too hot, started to feel dizzy. I sat down real quick on the curb and put my head between my knees. I didn’t know what was going on—I’m fair-skinned, but still I’d never had heatstroke before. When I finally looked up, across from me was this house, with a big For Sale sign.

“I got a job waiting tables at one of the restaurants down at the dock. That’s what I did before, waiting tables. I’d always been really good at it, but I’d never recognized why. Here, by myself all the time, no one to really talk to, I started to see that I was on the edge of something important. I’d wait tables all night, and afterwards I’d wander around the boardwalk by myself, watching people going on and off the cruise ships. The lights of them, from far off, made it look like whole cities had sprouted up in the middle of the ocean.
“I started thinking about the strangeness of an island. Imagine, this tiny space of land, sprouting up like that from the center of the earth. Lava spilling out over and over. I couldn’t stop thinking about it, about the way the rock had been born up a thousand times, all so we could have a place to go on vacation and buy duty-free goods. I felt sick about it.

“Then one night I was working my shift, and I just stopped writing down orders. I would smile at people, move my pen, but I didn’t take down anything. The place was always busy, and the owner was cheap, so we were always double or triple sat. But I’d just go back to the computer and put in orders for people, anything at all. And every time the orders were right. Even down to little things, like if somebody wanted their Surf and Turf Special with the pat of butter on the side, or if they’d asked for their fries unseasoned.

“I started thinking of myself like that rock. Every night, into the fire. Every night, I came out new.” She laughs. “I realized, the more I worked in that restaurant, that I’d been lying to myself all my life. I’d been afraid to admit who I was and what I’d been gifted with, sure, that was part of it. But I’d played a whole game of lies; telling myself a relationship would be good for me just because I wanted it, pretending I was happy when I wasn’t. It’s difficult to shed all that. Much easier to make yourself over, start up again, don’t you think? Like islands. You don’t make a new landscape by shedding the old one. Instead you just cover it over. People are like that too, I think, all the years just piling up that way, each one on top of the next. And if you know how, you can read them, like looking at the layers of a cliff after part of the land has fallen away.

“So I quit waiting tables and put the ad in the paper; started renting a room by the pier. Bought a whole mess of silk scarves and a wig.”
She puts her cup down again, and rests her hands on her thighs, suddenly decisive.

“Anyway, enough about me,” she says. “So many questions!”

“About your girl, then. Give me your hand a moment.” I wonder about the feel of my hand, about what she thinks I want to hear. I wonder if I’m sweating. “I can see she’s gone,” Sam says. “You likely won’t hear from her again, but you get to choose. There’s almost always a choice. So you can go back, if you want, to your old life. Any of us can, if I’m honest, though most of us choose not to. Or you can stay, if you want to.”

She cocks her head sideways, and I can see that she’s wearing tiny, silver hoop earrings underneath all that hair. “Your tea’s getting cold. Why don’t we go inside? I’ll make you a drink, we can talk. To be honest, I can’t remember the last time I’ve talked this long with somebody. I feel like I’ve known you forever.” The way she says forever, I know it’s just talking, just a word. Still, I like the way it sounds.

•••

When I got up to the blue house with the white porch Sam was already sitting outside waiting for me. She was younger than I’d expected, and cute, with these short blonde curls that made her look like somebody’s version of a movie star doll. She had tea waiting, and that was the first mistake she made. I never drink tea, not even when I write about the aromatic local varieties.

As she sat there talking to me, and I feigned interest in the weak Cinnamon tea by stirring it and blowing occasionally, I thought about my walk the night before. After calling Trish I’d wandered away from the mall and the harbor and the tourists and cruise ships, and up towards Palm St. In between the rows of duty-free shops I spotted a door with a dirty pane and a hand-lettered sign listing drink specials. None of them included rum, so I went in.
Immediately inside the door was an old wooden staircase going down into the basement. It tilted slightly to the left, so that as I walked I had the feeling I was just on the verge of falling over. When I got to the bottom I had to duck a bit to avoid hitting my head in the lower doorframe.

The room was brightly lit with long fluorescent overhead lights, and there was only one couple seated at the bar. The basement was full of old pool tables, and the walls of the place were lined with old and broken pool sticks, sort of giving it the feel of a bamboo lodge. The place was deserted but for a couple of teenagers playing pool and the couple at the bar.

I sat down and ordered a bourbon on the rocks. It was the sort of place, I could tell, where the bartender wasn’t going to say anything more to me than the price of the drinks, and that felt fine. The bourbon was pretty good, so I ordered some fries.

While I waited I half-listened to the conversation of the couple next to me. They were complaining about the tourists. Turns out they’d had a break-in, and the wife suspected it hadn’t been locals. She was trying to convince her husband.

“Now look,” she said, “nobody local would have the nerve. We’re family here, part of the island community, and isn’t that why we stayed when our boat went back to the states?” That phrase, “island community,” caught me; it was one I’d used in articles a hundred times. I wanted to laugh, and stuck my face into my drink.

The woman’s husband looked bored. He said, “You don’t know what you’re talking about. What community? Our bridge club? Everyone in it is like us, came on vacation from the states and stayed over.” Smart man, I thought. The bartender was looking at him slantwise while he shoved glasses into sterilized water, twisted them around, and then pulled them out again. I had the strangest sense then that there was something else going on, beyond this talk of
an ordinary break-in, which sounded to me like some kids just screwing around, since all they’d
taken were some cigars and a case of beer. Still the husband started insisting, “We’ve got to get
out of here or we’ll never go—we’ll never get off of these islands,” and his wife kept slowly
shaking her head.

I ate my fries and ordered another bourbon. Eventually the couple at the bar paid their
tab and left. The bartender gave me a glance and then turned on a small portable radio he had
sitting behind the counter. It was some kind of classics station, playing old music, and I felt
calmed what with the bourbon and the music and the occasional clacking sound of a pool ball
smashing against other pool balls. On the radio, a man sang the chorus to some old love song:
“After the ball is over, after the break of morn, after the dancers’ leaving, after the stars are gone,
many a heart is aching, if you could read them all—many the hopes that have vanished after the
ball.”

Making my way back up the stairs I couldn’t shake that sense of vertigo I’d felt on the
way down. When I got up to the street, my cell phone started beeping; I had a new message. My
phone signal must have cut out in the basement, since I hadn’t heard my phone ringing.

“Hi Bennett, it’s me.” Her voice was faint, but cheerful. “Sorry I haven’t been returning
your calls. We’ve been swamped at work, really swamped, and I’ve just been beat. Anyway,
things have died down a little now, so give me a call. I found a new magazine I want to show
you. Miss you! Bye!”

Trish had always been a terrible liar. It was what attracted me to her, at least at first, that
she couldn’t even say she liked a particular restaurant I’d recommended without blushing. I
thought it would make things easy. But after we moved in together, I saw that she avoided lies,
danced around them. She left the magazines out so that she wouldn’t have to make her face hot
with telling me she liked my articles, my work. Lies embarrassed her. I suppose now that I did, too.

So when Sam looked at me, and asked me to choose, I knew I’d already made up my mind—knew I’d stop checking my messages, knew I wasn’t going to lose the feeling I’d been having all day that I was tilted forward just a little too far. I let myself feel charmed by Sam, by the way she told her story and the laughing, winking way she spoke. By the easy way she let fall words like “honestly.” Really, what Sam was trying to offer me was a new life. But instead I chose to embrace the old one. We both did, in our way. I wrote my article, with all its meaningless adjectives, and I like to think Trish will see it someday on her way to whatever new life she’s told herself she’s starting. But that afternoon, I put down my cup of tea and I took the hand Sam offered, and then I let her lead me inside and I closed the front door after us.
In the Time of Feathers

Liz is seeing the feathers again. At first she thought it was nothing, just one stray feather on the ground next to the bench where she likes to sit and sip her morning coffee before work. She noticed it even though it was smallish because of the unusual color, an emerald green, and the way it stood out against the dull grey cement of the sidewalk. She’d told herself it was nothing until now, stepping out on her porch to have an evening smoke, she spots two more—they’re white, and caught in the old cracked wood of the porch’s railing. *I should check with the landlord about getting that replaced*, she thinks, just before the recognition and the worry settle.

She decides to call Jaci in Wyoming to ask about it, even though she has no idea what time it is out there and knows that Jaci will be busy with something in any case. It could be two AM and Jaci would be busy, out in the field in her old straight-legged jeans and cowboy boots or trying to make contacts with heads of business and agriculture about a benefit to save prairie dogs, drinking and laughing at their bad jokes in some downtown bar.

“What kind of bird are they from?” Jaci asks, but Liz doesn’t know the answer. She goes outside to look at them again, the long curl of the phone cord getting caught in the screen door and forcing her to turn around, to try to untangle. She can hear glasses clinking through the static of the phone.

“They’re white. Kind of puffy at the bottom.” Liz holds the phone in the crook of her neck with an upturned shoulder and stretches one arm to try picking one up.

“Liz, I can’t talk right now, I’m out with a couple of guys from work. We’ve got to work up a proposal for city council tomorrow to try and stop the relocation of these prong-horned antelope.”
Liz gives up reaching for the feathers and instead goes inside to put on a pot of coffee. She gives up on sleep tonight, too, knowing it’s useless. She’s got to open the store at eight anyway. There’s another pack of cigarettes on the fold-out table in the kitchen; she throws the old pack away and pulls open the cellophane from the top.

“Anyway find out what bird they’re from and I’ll call you tomorrow, ok?”

“Ok.”

Liz doesn’t know a hawk from a pigeon, but she knows the difference is important. The next day at work she tries browsing the science section for books on birds. She even checks spirituality, but she comes up empty-handed. On her break, instead of getting a late lunch she just walks down to the river, sits on a bench, and smokes a cigarette. She tells herself she’ll quit next week as she stares out at the water and the dead branches of trees poking darkly into the grey sky, which looks bright at the edges, like the upward bell of Liz’s cheap plastic lampshade. She watches birds circling high enough in the sky that they might be nothing but sunspots, listens to them calling, wonders what they are trying to tell her this time.

On the way home from work Liz pulls out her cell phone and thinks about calling Thomas, but she stops herself. She looks at his name on her contacts list for a long time, embedded there in hard, bold, unforgiving type. Just as she’s putting the phone away it starts to ring, startling her, and she picks up without looking.

“Hello?”

“I know you, Liz, don’t call him. That’s not what they’re trying to tell you. You find out what bird they’re from ok? Then give me a call.” Liz can tell Jaci is smoking a cigarette, can
hear highway noises in the background. She imagines her friend’s head tilted back as she talks, imagines the long slow exhale of smoke. Imagines Jaci sitting in her car with her long legs angled out of the driver’s side door, a long white skirt just grazing the tops of her ankles and the car pulled off on the side of the road because Jaci doesn’t believe in other activities while you drive.

“I wasn’t going to call him,” Liz says, opening the screen door only to grab her purse and a bright green pack of Salem menthols from the counter. She stops for a minute at a small mirror next to the door, brushes away a stray hair. “I was going to call somebody else.” The door slams shut with a loud crack as she rushes out again, and she thinks she’ll have to let the landlord know about that, too. “How was your meeting?”

“Pretty good, I think.” Liz imagines Jaci pulling her hair back with one hand, tying it up into a messy ponytail. “You should have seen that gas company exec trying to explain all the growth while people yelled at him about city crime rates. One woman called him an asshole and his face turned beet red.”

“Uh huh.”

“Anyway I’ve got to run, we’re heading out to do some field observations, see if we can get a couple more animals tagged. I’ll keep an eye on the local bird species for you.”

Liz hangs up and looks again at Thomas’ name in contacts list before erasing it with the swift and decisive press of a button. Not that it makes much difference, really, because she knows the number by heart. But this time she is determined to be through with him. This time she has decided to erase him from her life for good.

She moves one name up on her list. “Tatie,” she says, as though to convince herself, and dials.
“Want to go for a walk?” she asks. She heads towards downtown, knowing what his answer will be even before he gives it.

Liz approaches the river, and as she wonders what she is about to say to Mark Tatie, she turns a corner towards the bench where he is waiting for her and notices she is surrounded on all sides by feathers.

... 

Liz first met Mark Tatie a few months back, in the small downtown bookstore she owns and runs. He had been wandering back and forth through the stacks, looking a little lost, for about half an hour. She assumed he was searching for a gift, since not many men in polyester dress pants and blue imitation-silk shirts spent that much time in Cut-Pages Books. They went to the Waldenbooks in the mall or bought the latest Tom Clancy at Wal-Mart, or so she thought in her more bitter moments, hunched over the folding table in her rented house, trying to balance her expenses and profits in ledgers that almost never came out even.

In any case Liz didn’t approach him or ask what he was looking for or if she could help him find anything. She was lucky to have found the place up for sale, when the store’s former owner was looking to retire and move herself to Florida and the bulk of her merchandise, old paperback romances and mysteries, to the internet. At the time, already a few years out of college and still floating in the same small town, Liz was beginning to feel a bit lost. The list of congratulatory phone calls she needed to make to old friends seemed to get longer and longer, and Liz just couldn’t bring herself to say things like, “Oh, I heard you got a promotion, how great,” or “Wow, I can’t believe you two are having baby so soon!” So Liz had been thrilled to finally have something to say when those friends asked, “So, what are you up to these days?”
But after all the bank loans and the help from her parents, collecting old and interesting books from friends and libraries, stocking the shelves, re-designing the layout and opening up some sitting space, Liz had lost some of her optimism when customers failed to roll in. Most days, she just sat and watched the counter, sometimes arranging books or putting up new orders. Her one employee, a college girl with a Mohawk and a lip piercing, had been on a break for the past hour and a half.

Finally, though, Tatie’d come up to her, cleared his throat a couple of times, and looked down at his shoes. He wasn’t particularly attractive. His hair had been buzz-cut and it made his face look round and moon-shaped. He had a pimple in the groove between his nose and upper lip. Finally he asked, “Do you have any of those ‘Idiot’s Guide’ books?”

“Self-Help section,” she said, feeling just the slightest bit sorry for him.

“Oh.” A pause. “I already checked there.”

“Which one are you looking for? Sometimes they go by section, like the ones for gardening are over in hobbies.”

“Um, that’s ok.” As he left, she watched him retreat more quickly and decisively than he’d come in.

Two days later, though, he was back. And he didn’t fuss around this time, but marched straight to the counter and asked when her break was. So she told him.

“Want to get some coffee? There’s a place I saw around the corner.” Liz saw the Mohawk girl raise one eyebrow from where she was stocking in the back of the store. She sighed. At least the pimple had almost disappeared.

“Sure, why not? I’m not doing anything else with my life today.”
During her first time in his apartment, Liz spied the bright red spine of the book sitting on top of a shelf, where he’d tried to hide it. She snuck a peak while he was in the bathroom. *The Idiot’s Guide to Dating*. She opened the book, and sure enough, “Chapter One: Confidence is Key.”

When she put the book back, she deliberately turned it upside down.

... 

“Tell me Tatie,” Liz says, “what do you know about romance?”

As if to answer, Tatie puts one arm around her and pulls her head to his shoulder, staring ahead of them at the darkening river and the emerald-headed ducks begging for scraps of bread.

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, nothing, I guess.” She sits up and crosses her legs away from him, reaches into her purse.

“I thought you were quitting?”

“I am, tomorrow.”

He tries to caress her hair, and she shifts her weight in a nervous way she knows will make him stop. “What is it, Liz? You seem upset. Do you want to talk about it? I’m here to listen to you.” He takes her head and pulls it to his shoulder again as she searches for a lighter.

Liz is sick of self-help. But part of her wants somebody to listen.

... 

The first time Liz saw the feathers was during a summer romance, six years before. She’d taken a job as a camp counselor in order to stay on campus, preferring staying alone in her cheap basement apartment over spending three months with her parents, even though the apartment’s
walls smelled faintly of mildew and the brown pile carpet was always catching on the screen door when she went in or out, causing a torn fringe at the edges.

She was paired with Jaci during the first week of camp, in a kind of buddy system so that new counselors could learn the ropes from someone with experience. The camp, called “Nature’s Arts,” was a program that allowed inner-city high school kids to spend two weeks in the country, studying music, visual art, or writing. That first night, Jaci explained the basics of residence counseling; “Just patrol the halls and knock on the doors. As long as you don’t care what the kids are doing in there, you don’t have to open them. Kids are smart enough to hide anything they’d get into trouble for.” She was puffing on a cigarette as she said it, holding it loosely and just at the tips of her fingers. The way she gestured with the cigarette hand, letting the burning tip weave through the air like some kind of flaming punctuation mark, gave everything she said an air of authority. Liz said she didn’t care what the kids were doing, and soon they were patrolling the halls together, arm-in-arm, each knocking on dorm room doors on either side of the narrow hallways. The arts teachers started calling them twins.

At the end of the first week, Liz was walking across the center of the quad, thinking about the book on physics and eastern thought she’d checked out from the campus library the day before. Jaci had recommended it, and she had a way of making anything she talked about seem important and fascinating. Now, though, Liz couldn’t make much sense of the book. It seemed like so much nonsense; the links the author was making tangential at best. Still, Liz wanted to believe, was in fact so intently focused on her thoughts that she lost her footing in a rut on the worn dirt path and pitched to her knees. As she was brushing the dirt from her jeans, she noticed a small white feather, like a miniature dandelion, clinging to the fabric. Then that she
saw the others, too, a clump of three or four of them just at her feet. She picked one up and
twirled it in between her thumb and forefinger. It was mottled white and grey.

On the walk back, Liz began noticing the feathers everywhere. There were clumps of
them nestled next to the red brick of the campus library, in the cracks of the sidewalk, beside the
black iron that fenced in campus trash cans. And when she got back to the dorm, she saw Jaci
sitting on the front steps in a big white skirt like a bell, a glowing cigarette in one hand and a
feather in the other.

That night, they were scheduled to chaperone at a party for the camp kids. Someone had
decked out the campus ski lodge with old Christmas lights, and there was a fire going out back.
One of the camp counselors was a DJ, and he’d agreed to spin for the party. From the moment
they arrived, Liz could feel the pulse of the music’s heavy bass. She danced for what felt like
hours, free in front of the kids in a way she wouldn’t have been with classmates. By the time the
party was over, she was sweating, and the arches of her feet were sore.

Liz went outside to look for Jaci; when she couldn’t find her friend she decided to lie
down in the grass to wait. Her hands and cheeks still felt hot. As she turned her face to the side
to cool it, she noticed a small white feather next to her; it was puffy, like the earlier one that had
stuck in her jeans. She rolled onto her side to crush it in between her fingers.

When she rolled back, the DJ from the party was walking toward her. He was tall and
thin, and walked with a long gait that reminded Liz of deer or horses. When he looked down at
her, she could see that the bridge of his nose was a little bit crooked. Then he smiled at her, and
his grin was crooked, too. “Hi,” he said, “I’m Thomas.”

Liz patted the ground next to her; when he laid down, he was too tall to fit next to her
evenly, and had to scoot his legs down so that his face would fit next to hers. As he did it, he let
out a kind of miffed snort. Then he laced his fingers in between hers. “Your hands are cold,” he said. Liz supposed this was a lie; she still felt flushed. She lay there and wondered what made him feel so self-assured.

Liz had never been what kids in her high school called a “man-magnet.” She was mousey-haired, a little plain, thin but in a bony and awkward way. She had knobby, scarred elbows. So she barely noticed it when he turned towards her, that he was watching her face. She was too busy trying to puzzle out what had brought him there.

By the time she noticed him, it was too late to think. “You have beautiful hands,” he said, and then he leaned in and kissed her. With her eyes closed, Liz could feel a soft rain of feathers brushing against their skin. When she opened them, she was sure, they’d be borne up on a soft and airy bed.

Jaci and Liz spent the next week pouring through books they found at the library on birds, animal totems, and visions. At first, they thought the feathers were meant as a guide, that Liz was on a particular path and the feathers served to mark it out. They sat huddled together on Jaci’s dorm room mattress, which made a crinkling sound like balled up cellophane each time one of them moved, and read a section out of one of the Native American books about guides. That evening, Liz went walking through the nearly deserted street that enclosed their campus with Thomas, staring at the way their shadows stretched together under streetlights and standing on curbsides to kiss him. It seemed so perfect that she hadn’t wanted to read any further.

What Liz learned later was that different feathers meant different things, that they came from different parts of a bird, that each one could be telling a different story. Online, she found
that the Egyptians believed that feathers were symbols of truth; that the Griffith was a lion with feathered wings, guarding the path to enlightenment; that there were wing, tail, down, and breast feathers. Even Cupid had feathered wings, but that wasn’t the thing that mattered.

Jaci was the one who learned these things first, and urged Liz to learn more, though she’d been reluctant at first. Liz felt betrayed by the feathers in the same way she felt betrayed by Thomas and by his girlfriend in New York City that everyone in the whole camp seemed to have known about but her, the one that he eventually went back to when she wasn’t ready to sleep with him at the end of that summer. He just hopped a bus, like that.

Once, after a series of hopeful phone calls, Liz went to New York to see him play at a club. The place was dark, with plush leather booths, and lit by low sconces along the walls. Liz spotted the girlfriend hanging around next to his tables almost as soon as she sat down—she was drinking clear liquor and laughing with her whole head thrown back. Liz hunched down in her booth, nursed a single too-expensive beer, and tried to look invisible. That night, she stayed alone in a cheap motel, awake on top of the bed covers most of the night, never answering her phone as it continued to ring, but never turning it off, either.

One of the things Liz had learned about feathers was the reason they fell to the ground in the first place—the birds shed them when they got cracked or broken and they had no more use for them. The feathers, by the time they got to her, were no longer capable of sustaining flight. And that was the thing she remembered, the thing she thought about the whole long Greyhound bus ride home, watching the city turn to suburbs, then into these green rolling farms, and finally into the small deserted town she’d come from and now can’t bring herself to leave, where Jaci was waiting for her at the bus station in her beat-up green station wagon that always smelled like smoke.
Tatie takes the stub of the cigarette from Liz’s fingers and flicks it with his thumb and forefinger towards the river. In response, Liz lifts her head from his shoulder again, and when he tries to caress her hair in a half-hearted, consoling way, she shifts her weight again and he stops.

“Really Liz, what’s wrong?”

She can’t tell him, though she thinks about it. It would be too much. And anyway she isn’t that maudlin anymore, or doesn’t like to think of herself that way. She’s an adult now, a business owner. Her friends are professionals with serious careers. She’s moved on.

Tatie stands and says, “You shouldn’t smoke so much. It’s bad for you.” Then he just starts walking. After a moment, she gets up and follows him.

They walk quietly for a while on a trail above the river, until they come to an old wooden bridge where the upper trail crosses above the lower. Here Liz folds her arms and leans them against the old splintered wood of the bridge’s railing, while Tatie stops walking a few feet away and leans sideways against a support pole. He watches her.

Liz watches people walk by on the path below them without really seeing anything—the people are blurry like the out-of-focus background of a film. Extras. But then one of them seems to step into the foreground as he rounds a bend in the path and walks towards them; a tall man, thin, wearing a denim jacket and bright red sneakers. Liz notices a tickling sensation in her arms and for a minute she mistakes this man for a ghost, until she turns and sees the feather caught just to her left in a crack in the wood. It’s moving against her, now that the wind has shifted. This man is not Thomas. But she knows it doesn’t matter.

She watches the man who is not-Thomas approach the bridge, and as he walks she sees that same purpose in his strides, in the way he eats up space as he moves, hands in the pockets of
his crisp black pants. She imagines a white T-shirt underneath, one with red lettering or a
design, meant to match the shoes that now look out of place with the denim jacket buttoned
against the weather. She can tell this is not a mistake; that he cares about the way he looks but
not enough to want people to know he’s trying.

Liz knows what she is about to do even before she begins to move away from Tatie,
down the slope of the hill next to the bridge and away underneath it, quickly because his legs are
much longer than hers, because he’s tall enough that later she’ll have to stand on things to kiss
him comfortably: a curbside, the steps of her porch, a cheap red ottoman on the hardwood floor
in his apartment.

She’ll sleep with him too soon, in a hurried, frenzied way. But he won’t leave her, this
not-Thomas, he’ll stick around, and she’ll discover other, surprising things. He’ll leave dirty
dishes around his apartment, take his shoes off anywhere. His fingers will be shorter than she
imagined. He’ll be sweet to her sometimes, laugh it off like a joke. Use up all her bathroom
towels and leave them still damp on her bedspread in the morning. Lose his temper with her one
night in a restaurant after she brings it up and he’s had one too many Mojitos, scream words like
“fucking” that change the shape of his face. She’ll walk out mid-scream, just like that.

Liz stands on the bridge, looks into her pack of cigarettes, and shakes it absentmindedly;
she’s left the lucky green cigarette for last and it rattles inside the box. Tatie watches her, and
she knows there was no chapter in his book about this.

In a few minutes Liz will look down at the river, holding that last green cigarette loosely at the
very edge of her fingertips, as if she were about to let it simply slide away. Below, in the river,
she will see nothing but a slipstream of feathers—brown, emerald green, grey and white, blue, yellow, red; small ones with pointed tips the thickness of a leaf, others fat with down like dandelions; some of them striped, others stippled with color; vaned feathers; tail feathers; down feathers; some with bristles; some so neon they appear synthetic; and all of them shifting and swirling in the current. They’ll flow past Tatie and Liz and past the not-Thomas too, past the blurry extras in the background and on to wherever it is they’re going. Liz will look at Tatie for maybe the first time all evening, aware suddenly that he’s watching, and that she’s misunderstood again; the feathers are not meant for her. She’ll let the cigarette slip from her fingers. She’ll turn to leave the bridge.
Mazie was headed in from her car with five bags of groceries when her toe caught a crack in the sidewalk. It was raining, and she was trying to carry all the bags at once to avoid a second trip in the dark and wet. Her arms were weighted down with orange juice, skim milk, tomato soup cans and bags of frozen vegetables, which was why she had trouble catching herself and pitched, face first, over the curb and into the street.

She lay there for a minute, not knowing what to do, until a silver Ford truck full of university boys drove by, decked out in their burgundy and white jerseys, celebrating after the game. “Hey man,” one of them shouted “way to party!” She could hear them laughing as they sped away, and she stood up to collect what remained of her groceries. There was orange juice all over the street from where the carton had torn. Mazie put her hand to her face and it came away bloody.

Inside, she assessed the damage before grabbing the emergency medical kit from under the kitchen sink and pouring some peroxide over a large ugly-looking cut above her lip. Cleaned up, it didn’t look so bad, though the peroxide did turn her skin an unnatural white. She put some ice cubes in a plastic bag and fell asleep, propped up against the wall in her twin bed, holding the ice to her face.

There were about six other people in the QuickMeds waiting room when Mazie finished filling out her paperwork and sat down, but the place still felt oddly empty. There was something about the size of the room and the brand-new quality of the walls and floors; the walls were too white, the hardwood floor too shiny and polished. Mazie had a general idea that waiting rooms should
be small and vaguely cream-colored, that you should be forced to wait next to people with public illnesses who hacked and coughed loudly into their hands.

She took a seat next to the bathroom, but regretted it later when a young girl walked in there and started throwing up. Her parents looked haggard and uncomfortable in one corner of the room. Mazie crossed her legs away from the bathroom, shifted to the side of her chair, and leaned over pretending to read some hot celebrity gossip in *People*.

“May-zee?”

The nurse looked expectantly towards an older woman in a faded grey sweatshirt sitting on the opposite side of the room, and was surprised when Mazie stood up.

“What an unusual name! My great-grandmother was a Mazie, but you don’t hear that much now, do you?” Mazie just nodded, and pretty soon the nurse gave up, taking her blood pressure (normal), weight (a little high), and height (a little low), and telling her the doctor would be there shortly.

The doctor, who turned out to be a thin elderly woman wearing a doctor’s coat with “Ellie” stitched over the breast in blue cursive, walked in staring down at her clipboard. “What seems to be the trouble today,” she asked, then glanced up and stopped short, staring.

“Oh my, dear,” she said, losing her clinical tone, “what on Earth happened to you?”

––

Mazie called off work on Monday, just for the hell of it, but she didn’t expect anyone to miss her or even say much about it. She was a secretary in the Biology Department at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, but she was only a Secretary II, half-time, which meant that Brenda, the head secretary, did most of the work anyway. Her job consisted mostly of filing, sorting mail, and making copies. She knew most of the department thought of her as incompetent, when they
were paying any attention to her at all, which was seldom. Her desk was straight behind
Brenda’s, behind a large salmon-colored partition in the back corner of the office, so she
couldn’t even greet people when they came through the door.

Mazie spent most of her day off shuffling back and forth between the worn yellow couch
in the living half of her apartment’s main room, and the freezer in the kitchen half, where she
grabbed fresh ice or re-filled the blue plastic trays. At around five she ordered take-out Chinese,
just because she wanted someone to bring her soup. She spent the hour and a half wait
imagining that the Chinese delivery boy was really her ex-boyfriend, on his way to beg her
forgiveness for sleeping with his intern, hold ice to her face, feed her, tidy up her apartment and
tuck her into bed. But she gave up the fantasy when the delivery man actually showed up,
wrinkled and grinning in a way that made her uncomfortable. For the rest of the evening, she
alternated between watching the game show network and the cooking channel. She fell asleep
on the couch.

The next day Mazie left for work early, hoping to be the first to the office so that she
could unlock the door and avoid being seen by Brenda. Her upper lip was still swollen, and the
area around her mouth had turned a deep purple peppered with speckles of a sallow shade of
yellow. But when she got to the office, the door was already unlocked.

The main office was empty, but she could hear Dr. Mayers, the department chair,
furiously typing something from the adjacent room. He usually wasn’t in this early in the
morning—he was a young professor and had only been at the university for two or three years,
which was probably why he’d been so easily talked into the position of chair. Department chair
was a job nobody wanted—it meant extra administrative headaches for very little extra pay, and
only a quarter time, so Mayers was still teaching two classes in the fall and one in the spring. In
spite of his course load, he was an organizer, and the buzz was, the best chair they’d ever had. He organized department picnics, knew all the graduate students’ first names, stayed late in the office talking with faculty about grant proposals or the possibility of tenure. He was usually late for work, and who could blame him? He had barely any time left over for his own research.

The furious typing in the next room stopped. “Brenda,” she heard Mayers shout, “I need to have this damn travel request in by this afternoon, could you please … oh, Mazie,” he stopped, standing in the office doorway. “I thought you were … my god! What happened to you?”

When Mazie didn’t respond right away, instead looking down in embarrassment, Mayers went on quickly, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to be rude. It’s just—you look like you took a pretty bad spill. Were you in some kind of accident?”

“Bike riding,” Mazie said. “I was out mountain biking this weekend; I hit a root and pitched forward.” She tried to shrug in a way that would look nonchalant.

Mayers’ face lit up. “I didn’t know you were a biker! I’ve been looking for someone around here to go riding with. It’s so hilly here, you know, not at all like the rest of Arkansas. Of course, I was used to it, back in Ohio. But nobody here seems to think going up and down all those hills is really worth the trouble.”

“Oh, yeah,” Mazie said, trapped now, “we should go, sometime. Maybe after I heal up, you know.” She knew Mayers would probably forget about it by that time, so the offer seemed safe. He started to ask her where she liked to ride, if she knew any good local trails, but just then she was saved by Brenda and an exclamation that was beginning to sound familiar.

“Mazie! What happened to your face?”

•••
She spent all day telling her story over and over again, first to Brenda, and then to each of the professors as they came by the office to request photocopies or pick up their mail. After a few tries, the lie got easier, and she was able to embellish a little bit, talking about how there’d been dirt from the trail in the cut, or how it felt to fly over the handlebars. She started to talk about how she’d had to get back on the bike and ride back to her car since there’d been no one else around, then use a first-aid kit from the trunk to clean herself up a bit. She told about the doctor at QuickMeds who’d called her “dear,” about the too-clean waiting room and the border on the walls of the room where she was seen, which had been stenciled with pictures of Disney Princesses.

“You’d better get that checked out again,” they’d say, “That place doesn’t sound very reliable.” Or, “Wow, I can’t believe you rode all that way back.” They’d turn to a colleague or to Brenda or to no one and say, “I don’t know what I would have done. You’re one tough cookie.” Then they’d walk out shaking their heads, admonishing Mazie to be more careful.

It was like that all week. As the bruises slowly faded and the swelling started to go down, people would walk straight back to her half of the office and ask how she was doing or tell her she was looking much better. Mayers would joke with her, telling her she’d better heal up quick, because he was getting impatient for that bike ride. Nobody glared at her when Brenda was out at lunch; instead they’d chat with her, even leave some work for her to do if it was simple.

When Mazie came into the office on Monday, her face was almost completely healed. Brenda remarked cheerfully how much better Mazie was looking, and then turned immediately back to her work. Mazie watched Brenda’s back all day as Brenda hunched at the keyboard or laughed at a professor’s joke. Everyone said they were glad Mazie was better, then everyone got
back to work. She waited for Mayers to ask about that bike ride, but he hurried out of the office at noon, saying he was off to a conference in Ohio and wouldn’t be back until next week. He didn’t even look at her as he hurried out the door, closing it with a slam.

That night, as Mazie was heading from her car to her apartment, she saw the same silver truck full of college boys she’d seen the night she fell coming towards her up the street. Mazie stepped in front of it, and the driver screeched to a halt. “Hey lady,” he shouted, “what the hell!” But Mazie didn’t budge, just stared at him. She could see the white outline of letters applied to the back window of his cab, but couldn’t make them out. “Jeez-us,” he said, taking off his white Warthog ball cap and running his hand over short cropped blonde hair before replacing it. “You crazy or what?”

“I need a favor,” she said. “How’d you like to make twenty dollars?”

“What kind of favor?”

“I need a ride, downtown and back, that’s all. I’ve got to pick something up, and it’s bulky.” Mazie pointed at her small, boxy, two-door sedan. “It won’t fit.”

“Shit, man. Why not. I got History class in half an hour but I don’t mind missing that shit.” He chuckled. “Get in. Name’s Clay.”

“I can see that,” Mazie said, turning around finally and reading the white block letters almost completely blocking the view through the rear of the cab. “I’m Mazie.”

At the bike shop, a young girl with shoulder length braids and frayed khakis shook her head at Mazie when she bypassed the sleek new mountain bikes in favor of an old beat up green bike with flaking paint and rust spots starting to show around the chain. She picked out a lock to go
with it, one that looked relatively sturdy, knowing the bike would be clearly visible chained to
the front post of her small porch. She didn’t trust herself to remember any combinations.

Clay helped her load the bike onto the back of the truck, though he too shook his head at
her. “Shit,” he said, “could have taken this apart and fit it in your car no problem.” When they
got back to her place, she gave him twenty-five dollars and he gave her his phone number, said
to call if she needed any more favors.

It took Mazie all week to get used to riding the bike; she was wobbly and out of practice,
not having ridden much since childhood, when she used to cruise the back streets of her
hometown, riding sometimes half an hour or more out in the back country, meeting friends at
their parents’ farms. It was tough, too, to get used to the hills, and she could see why Mayers’
friends were largely unenthusiastic. The short sharp hills through downtown were the worst,
with college kids staring at her sweating and puffing and struggling, laughing probably at her too
thick thighs and her fogging glasses and her sweatpants, at her too-thin hair continually coming
loose from its barely-there pony-tail. She’d been one of them, not so long ago, she wanted to
say. They’d all get here, too.

After a week of being ignored at the office, not even the occasional “looking better” to
look forward to, Mazie took the bike up to a trail she’d heard about, through a local arboretum.
The mostly bare trees were right up close to the path, the tiny plaques at their bases too tough for
her to make out without her glasses on. Mazie veered perilously close to the grey trunks of the
trees a few times, just through staring. And the trail was so narrow in places, she kept wondering
nervously if another biker would pass too close, forcing her to run into one of them. Finally,
after half an hour of circling the short path without seeing anyone, she veered into a tree anyway.
And when that didn’t do it, she got off of the bike, walked up next to a tree with a thick trunk and
rough-looking grey shingles of bark, rolled up her sleeve, and rubbed her arm up against it until the rough bark was bloody.

•••

“You again? You’re awfully accident prone, aren’t you dear,” the doctor said. It was Ellie, the same elderly woman Mazie’d seen last time, though she’d been hoping for someone else. “Let’s have a look. What was it this time?”

“Biking,” Mazie said. “Someone passed me a bit too closely and I grazed a tree.” She’d torn her shirt a bit with some scissors, just to make things more convincing.

“Well honey you must have been going awfully quick!” The doctor shook her head. “If I were you, I’d slow down next time, all right?”

Mazie nodded.

•••

On Monday, Mazie wore a white tank top underneath her grey suit-jacket. Though the doctor had instructed her to bandage the arm, she only rubbed a little Neosporin from the first aid kit onto her cuts before getting dressed, and it left a barely discernable grease-mark on the jacket’s sleeve. Pretending to just notice it as Mayers walked through the office door, she took off the jacket and frowned at the sleeve, then quickly took off her glasses, which she’d forgotten to leave at home.

“Mazie, my god! What happened to your arm?”

“Biking again,” she laughed. “I was up at the arboretum; you know how narrow the trail is?”

“Of course, it’s really more of a footpath. I don’t know that I’ve ever seen anyone biking there.”
“Well, there’s usually not many people there in the winter, but this guy, this other biker, real short-haired guy, anyway he came barreling around a corner and knocked me straight into one of the trees."

“Well you are just not having any luck, are you?” He frowned.

“Guess I’m just a bit of a klutz,” Mazie said, as Brenda walked in the door.

***

After the arm healed, Mazie took a hammer to her finger, having discovered that an upper-arm injury was too easy to conceal.

Then, after an unusual cold snap, she dug a small hole in the frozen ground in back of her apartment building. It took her most of the afternoon, chipping away steadily at the ground to get the proportions just right. Then she stuck her foot in and twisted, hard. That one got her a soft cast and a pair of crutches.

Ellie started looking at her sideways when she wrote out the prescriptions for mild painkillers or antibiotics, even though Mazie kept on telling her that she didn’t need them. The bottles started lining up on the top shelf in her medicine cabinet, unopened.

And people at work paid attention to her, but in a different way. She got cards when she twisted her ankle, but she could also see worried looks on people’s faces when she insisted that she was fine, really, just a little clumsy lately. Mayers was staring at her a lot, but not in the way she wanted him to, and having huddled meetings in his office with the door closed. Brenda started asking her if she had a boyfriend, who he was. Mazie insisted that she didn’t.

When she got her cast off, Mayers asked if they could finally have that bike ride. She said she’d meet him that Saturday.

***
By now, Mazie was adept enough with the bike to keep up with Mayers, though he insisted on slowing down their pace, since she’d just had the cast removed and all. He was wearing a tight black spandex biker’s suit with red trim, and she could see the muscles flexing in his legs as he rode.

Afterwards, Mayers loaded their bikes into his van and suggested that they go to lunch. “Nothing like a big meal after exercise, I always say!” The whole way to the Applebee’s on the outside of town, Mazie tried to make small talk, tried not to stare at Mayers’ square jaw-line, not to admire the shape of his nose, not to be caught looking by a sudden turn of his head.

“So, how long have you worked at the office?”

“Only four years, or so. Not long.” Mazie stared at her hands.

“Oh? What were you doing before that?”

“I was just finishing college here.”

“Oh! Took a few years off in between? I thought about doing that, but then I’d have been an old man by the time I finished my degrees.” Mayers chuckled.

“No,” she said quietly, “I went straight through from high school.”

There was a heavy silence in the front seat. Mazie could hear the frames of their bicycles knocking together in the backseat. She focused in on that sound.

“Oh, well,” he said, “you certainly are mature for your age.”

•••

Applebee’s was crowded, as it always was at any time of the day Mazie had ever been there. She’d gone with Brad a few times, before she found out about the other women he’d brought there, about all the waitresses he’d dated. Now she stared around at all the ridiculous mass-produced junk on the walls, the flashy neon and the fake wood paneling. She stared and avoided
looking too closely at the muscles of Mayers’ back as they were led to their table. When their waitress came, she tried not to glare at her, or to stare at the way the polyester of her green shirt was accenting her perky college-student’s breasts.

Mazie was starving, but she still ordered a house salad, with oil and vinegar instead of dressing. Mayers ordered a deluxe bacon burger with a side of fries, and mayonnaise to dip them in. After the food came, it was a long time before they spoke. Mayers shoveled in most of the fries before stopping to take a breath.

“If you don’t suffer any more mishaps,” he said, “we should do this again.” Mazie nodded.

“Listen, Mazie, I’ve got to ask you something, and I hope you won’t be offended.” She looked up from her plate, where she’d been trying to skewer a cherry tomato without sending it into his lap. “But, the thing is, we, the other folks at the office and I, well we’re worried about you.”

Mazie stabbed the tomato, put the whole thing in her mouth at once. His eyes had that clinical look in them, like he was going to pin her to a piece of foam, study her insides.

“Well, sometimes, I know it can be hard to discuss certain things. But Mazie, we know what’s going on.”

She swallowed. Mayers reached across the table to take her hand. There was a small speck of mayonnaise on his lower lip.

“And whoever this guy is, Mazie, he’s not worth it. You deserve so much better than that.”
That week, Mazie got creative. She started hitting her lower arms with books, hammers, anything heavy, leaving small bruises where their edges would show when she reached for a stapler or a stack of papers at the office, her sleeves retreating up her arms just enough to give a quick glance.

She kept meeting Mayers on the weekend, and he continued to beg her to leave her boyfriend over greasy meals in restaurants with too-bright overhead lighting. She told him she couldn’t imagine it, that he meant too much to her, that he’d promised never to do it again. She had flowers delivered to her desk at the office, but refused to tell anyone who they were from. At night, she’d slap herself on the legs and arms until they bruised.

Then, one Saturday morning before she was scheduled to meet Mayers, she called Clay.

“I need another favor,” she said. “It’s a small one, but I’ll still pay you.”

“Oh, it’s you. What do you want this time?”

“I need you to call me at about 1 o’clock this afternoon. No matter who answers, I want you to sound angry about it, and then hang up.”

“Man, you sure are weird. Alright. 1 o’clock.”

...  

Mazie glanced at her watch, then down at the rusticly “distressed” bench, then at the peanut shells she imagined crusting and congealing at her feet. She’d been fiddling nervously with her cell phone, picking it up, looking at it, then putting it down on the table. “I need to run to the restroom,” she said. “Will you watch this for me?”

“Sure.” Mayers looked surprised. “No big deal.”
Mazie cracked the bathroom door just as the phone rang. Mayers glanced over at the caller ID. Brad. Mazie ducked back as he glanced toward the door, then watched him pick up the phone. “Hello?”

“Sonnuva-mother-fucking-bitch,” a voice exclaimed, and then the line went dead.

That Monday at work, Mazie showed up with a black eye. Mayers was walking on eggshells, addressing her in nothing but soft and apologetic tones—“Mazie, if it’s not too much trouble, could you photocopy this report?” “No, no, don’t get up, let me get that for you.” “Is there anything at all I can do?” No one asked Mazie about her boyfriend. In fact, no one said much of anything to her at all. They were all extra polite, and extra avoidant; the silence surrounding Mazie was as thick as being swathed in layers and layers of plastic bubble-wrap. Mazie knew she had crossed an invisible line. There were no more get-well cards.

•••

“Maybe we should stop our bike rides,” Mayers said. Mazie stopped in the middle of the trail and turned to look back at him. “I mean, I’ve said all I can Mazie, really. I don’t want to be the cause of anything worse for you.”

“Henry,” she started, then blushed. “I mean, Dr. Mayers, you’re one of the good things in my life right now,” she stopped, turned her head, and started to sob quietly. Her shoulders shaking, she abruptly got on the bike and started peddling hard.

“Mazie, wait,” he said. “I didn’t mean to upset you.” He started after her, but she had already turned a corner ahead of him and was out of sight.

When Mayers caught up with her, he found her lying on the side of the trail, the bike askew, front wheel still spinning. She was clutching her arm, and her face, though streaked with dirt, was deathly pale. “My arm,” she whispered, “I think it might be broken.”
He offered to drive her to the hospital, but she said no, that it was too expensive and
she’d be fine. Maybe the bone was only bruised, after all. Mayers picked her up and carried her
back to the van, laid her gently on the back seat, then walked back for their bikes. They drove to
his house, a small one story brick home in the suburbs. He carried her in and laid her out on the
couch, where she promptly feigned sleep.

***

When Mazie got up, Mayers wasn’t there. She stood and started to look around. The living
room was bare bones, just a faded blue couch, an old arm chair and a big TV over worn brown
carpet that looked like it needed replacing. There was nothing but a couple of beers and an old
carton of take-out Chinese in the fridge. Mazie helped herself to one of the beers, then wandered
down the hall to the bedroom.

There, on an old wooden nightstand next to the bed, sat a creased and faded snapshot in a
silver frame. Mayers was standing with his arm around a thin brown-haired woman in tasteful
slacks and a cream colored shell. They were smiling, and Mayers looked younger and slightly
tan. She was too pretty, Mazie thought, too much like a perky Applebee’s waitress.

“That’s Brittany,” Mazie jumped at the sound of Mayers’ voice in the doorway, “my
girlfriend back in Ohio.” He smiled as he came into the room, rubbing an old burgundy towel
over his hair. He’d changed into torn jeans and an old white T-shirt; suddenly he looked no
older than she was. “I miss her quite a bit sometimes. She’s promised to join me here as soon as
I propose, but I’m waiting until I can make it pretty spectacular. She’s a lady that deserves
spectacular, you know?” Mazie wondered about that, what it meant. Were there then people
who deserved spectacular, and people who didn’t? She felt suddenly tired again; her arm hurt.
Mayers picked up the photograph, smiled at Mazie. “This was taken a few years ago, our first vacation together. We’d just come back from the Bahamas.” He shook his head. “But I’m sorry; you don’t care about any of this. How’s that arm feeling?”

Mazie affected a grimace, looked down at her own worn out sweatpants that were now a size too big after all the exercise, and sagging in spite of being double and triple rolled at the waist. “It hurts pretty bad,” she admitted. “Do you think you could run me over to QuickMeds?”

The bright empty waiting room immediately felt close as they walked in the door. Even though he’d kept the jeans and the T-shirt on in Mazie’s haste to leave, what he called his “ironic Saturday wear” on the drive to the medical center, Mazie could still sense the movement of his muscles underneath his clothes. So, apparently, could everyone else in the waiting room—heads turned towards them as they walked in the glass doors, then turned away too quickly. Mazie was suddenly conscious of her still slowly fading black eye, and of the way she was clutching her injured arm to her side.

The receptionist greeted Mazie, saying Ellie would be ready to see her in a few minutes, then gazed warily at Mayers before getting up to go “check in with the doctor.” The two of them sat down in adjacent chairs. Mayers tried to make small talk, glanced at a few magazines. For Mazie, the waiting room finally had the right feeling.

Ellie came out herself to fetch Mazie, clipboard in hand. “Hello dear,” she said, “What is it today then?” She scowled visibly at Mayers before glancing at her clipboard, making a notation as Mazie explained the accident.
“He’ll have to stay in the waiting room,” she said quietly. “We can’t really have a proper talk with him around, now can we, hmm?” Mazie nodded slightly and suppressed a smile.

“Henry,” she said, too loudly, “Will you wait here? I promise I’ll only be a few minutes.” Mayers hunched his shoulders visibly, as if he were literally weighted down with the stares of the other patients. He nodded, then buried his head in an outdated copy of Star.

As Mazie followed Ellie to the room with the Disney Princesses parading across the walls, she thought about what she might say if Mayers didn’t come to work on Monday, about the questions she’d be asked and the stories she’d have to tell. She pictured Brenda leaned over the salmon colored partition between their desks, her lipsticked mouth pursed in a shocked O. And she thought about Clay, about the way he ran his hand through his close cut hair when he was nervous, his hey man’s and you’re crazies. Mazie thought about all these things, and she smiled, quickly, before they could reach the examination room, before Ellie could turn around, close the door, and ask the first question.
Thin Walls

Clay turned on the bathtub’s hot water, held his hand under the faucet, and waited for the water to warm up. The pipes in his apartment complex were old and poorly insulated, so it always took a few minutes. Clay liked to take baths in the evenings, usually around seven-thirty, so he wasn’t competing with the other tenants for hot water the way he had to at six am, showering and dressing for his early morning commute to the office where he was temping. Some mornings, he showered in the icy cold, cursing the frozen pipes under his breath.

While he waited for the water to warm up, Clay slowly stripped off his work clothes, which he often kept on during dinner, too exhausted to do anything once he got up the four flights of stairs and in the door but to pop something frozen into the microwave, lean against the counter for two to four minutes, then flop down on the worn patchwork couch and start eating. His work clothes were nothing much—a pair of grey slacks, an old grey suit coat, a stained white shirt and a thrift store tie. But nevertheless he folded each item carefully as he stripped and placed each in a pile on the toilet seat. He would wear the suit again tomorrow.

Clay checked the water again; it was near scalding. He adjusted the temperature and pushed down on the old silver lever that controlled the tub’s drain. Once in the bathtub, he leaned his head back and began waiting for the tub to fill up with water. He could hear the faint pulsing of his neighbor’s stereo through the thin wall at the foot of the tub. Tina was listening to pop music from the sound of the beat—a welcome change from the faster and more relentless house techno that was usually playing when her boyfriend was around, and from the more heated noises he tried not to hear when the two of them had sex.

Once the tub was full enough for Clay to fit his legs underwater if he sat up straight and stretched them flat, he turned the water off. The music was now a bit louder, and he could make
out the faint blurry outlines of words: _baby, baby, baby_. Clay lifted his knees, let his head fall back against the cold yellow porcelain and his torso submerge beneath the water. He closed his eyes.

Inside that personal darkness, Clay heard what sounded like footsteps in the hallway, then a doorway opening and slamming shut, shaking the floor and the water in the tub. He sat up and reached for the bar of yellow soap sitting next to him in its stained plastic dish. The outlines of music leaking through the walls stopped, then resumed again, but more softly. Clay could no longer make out the sounds of words as he began to work up a smooth yellow lather with his hands.

Clay washed his body with the soap bar, beginning with the legs, extending each one above the water, pointing his toes and then flexing to wash the soles of his feet, lifting up his hips to get at the calves. He did this slowly, lathering the bar of soap again for each leg. He heard a door shut quietly, and what sounded like sobbing, then pounding on the closed door. The music had ceased altogether. Clay rubbed the bar of yellow soap slowly between his palms, turning it over and over in a rhythmic motion.

_How could you say those things to me? Why? I hate you. Leave, just get out. Get out and don’t come back, Sean, do you hear me? I never want to see you again. Leave me alone._

Clay began to wash his arms, taking his time, though the bathwater was beginning to cool. He extended each arm above his head, tilting his neck unconsciously to the side as he washed each one, extending the soap slowly from the shoulders to the backs of each hand.

Her crying was quieter now. Through the sobs, Clay could still hear Tina cursing, but in a more desperate way, as he stood in the now lukewarm bathwater to wash his genitals and lower back: *Sean, you fucker, get out.* A door slammed, shaking the bottom of the tub under Clay’s feet. He finished washing, sat down again in the graying water to rinse himself off, then drained the bathwater. Once the water was moving, he could barely make out the sounds of Tina’s crying, followed by the now faint sounds of her pop album.

He dried himself with a maroon bath-towel from the rack, quickly as the bathroom was now cooling, though it was still full of steam. He picked up his folded suit jacket and shirt and pants and took them from the bathroom, through the living room and into his bedroom, where he hung the suit carefully and changed into a pair of navy blue sweatpants and an old long-sleeved maroon and white T-shirt from college. He went back into the living room, sat down on the couch and picked up the newspaper, leaving the bathroom door open to let out all of the steam. He did not turn on the television, but instead reached for a slender reading lamp next to the couch. There was the renewed sound of heavy footsteps on the stairs, then a heavier pounding.

*Tina, open this door right now. I swear to god, I’ll rip it down, Tina, are you even listening to me? You goddamned slut, you’re going to hell.*

On the front page of the paper was a story about a local crime hearing; three men who had been involved in a 7-11 robbery were being charged for the near fatality of the store’s clerk. The clerk, Rodney Grayson, nineteen years old, was still in the hospital. His condition was said to be stable, though he was comatose. He had been shot in the back—his parents were still fighting to keep him on life-support.
Clay skimmed the article and then flipped to the business section. The pounding across the hall had stopped. Faint sounds in the low tones of argument came from the bathroom, then a sharp slap. In the business section, Clay read an article about expected oil prices.

_Just tell me. Tell me whether you love me or not. Bitch. Tell me. I deserve that from you. You sinful fucking whore. You’ll tell me. I swear to god you will._

Clay turned on the television.

Only two channels came in clearly, PBS and Fox. He tried to watch a news program on PBS about conflict in the Middle East, but the picture was blurry and off color—the reporter’s face appearing a bright shade of pink and his suit a lurid neon shade of green. Clay got up, folded the newspaper, and placed it on the coffee table. After fiddling with his television antennae for a few minutes, producing varying combinations of sound and static, he switched the set off again and sat back down on the couch.

There was no noise from across the hall. In the quiet he picked up the newspaper again and started circling want ads with a black Sharpie. He circled an ad for a job working data entry at a bank uptown, and one for a mail clerk’s position in a local law office. He skipped over a management job at a local 7-11, though not without allowing the Sharpie to hover there for a moment, making a distinct black dot at the top of the ad and bleeding through to the back of the page.

After he’d circled the ads, Clay glanced toward the bathroom, then folded the wanted section neatly in half and placed it inside one of the drawers in the kitchen, on top of other folded stacks of old newspapers. He poured lime green dish soap over his plate and cup and fork, turned on the hot water, and carefully rubbed each dish. He could hear footsteps moving up and down the stairs, though not as loudly as before. One neighbor greeted another a few flights
down. There was what sounded like a muffled exchange of trivialities, but Clay couldn’t make out the words. The tone was mild, bored. Footsteps went on in both directions.

Clay turned off the water, dried the dishes carefully with the old grey towel next to the sink, and placed each one in the white plastic drainer. Then he wiped down the sink and the counter with the still-damp cloth before turning off the lights in the kitchen and living room and quietly tip-toeing into the bathroom. His bare feet made almost no sound as he stepped into the tub and leaned one ear against the wall. The plastic shower stall was cold and clung to his ear. He leaned there a long time, imagining Tina just at the other side, perched on the edge of the toilet seat, head bent forward in her hands. He could see the brown roots just beginning to show against her dyed black hair, the chipped paint where she would have been biting her nails to keep from crying loud enough for him to hear her. When Clay stepped out of the tub again, there was a sharp cramp in his leg.

He moved through the dark apartment to the bedroom, set his alarm for five thirty, and climbed into bed. He took a mystery novel from his bedside table, but after staring at the same page for eleven minutes he gave up, put the book in his lap, and slipped one hand under the elastic of his sweatpants.

When Clay awoke to flashing red and blue lights a few hours later with the book still in his lap, he carefully marked his place with an old post-it note still stuck to the nightstand, got out of bed, walked across the room, and shut his blinds. He put the book back in its drawer, pulled up the covers, and shut his eyes. As he drifted back to sleep he felt, for a moment, a sharp stab of regret. As it faded away, he thought he could hear her whisper: baby, baby, baby.
What She Saves

I.
It is hot in the kitchen; everything Ellie touches feels sticky. A thin residue of sugar coats the
tips of her fingers and the palms of her hands. On the counter beside her the jelly jars are
aligned—they’ve been washed, dried, and arranged, and now she does not want to touch them
they seem so clean. She boils fruits on the stove, softening their skins.

She thinks happily of the moment when the jars will be filled; the slippery hot mix of
fruit and sugar poured into jars and then boiled again and wiped clean. And after: the lids
twisted shut, the slow dripping of a candle—warm soft wax a kind of containment she can touch.
Then she’ll line the jars up on a shelf in the garage with the others, shut the door, and clean up
her mess. Ellie hums along with the slow jazz on the radio, stirs the thick purple fruit, puts one
finger to her mouth to taste.

II.
For a long time after she took Arn to Evergreen Acres, Ellie has been unable to put away his
things. They clutter the house in hidden ways—in closets and in dresser drawers, tucked away
with the dirt and grime and old boxes full of their daughter’s photo albums and old report cards
stuffed in one corner of the two-car garage.

Ellie is not used to driving on the crowded beltway, and she does it only to visit Arn.
Otherwise, she drives to the local Wal-Mart super grocery store, nowhere else. The roads here
are different from the ones in Arkansas, where she and Arn worked and lived, until Arn got sick
and Ellie’s daughter insisted they come to DC, where she felt Arn would get better care. They’d
saved, and they had enough from their retirements to buy a small house in the Maryland suburbs,
far enough from the city center that Lauryn was irritable about the drive, but not so far that she
could actively complain. Ellie had learned, after over fifty years of marriage, the magic art of
compromise. Still, she missed the narrow hilly streets of their old college town.

Sometimes Lauryn stops by on a weekend and insists on taking her mother to lunch.
Otherwise, Ellie stays at home, waters the azaleas in the front yard. She does her banking and
bill paying on the internet, an innovation Lauryn was surprised she took to, forgetting that Ellie
was a doctor, that she used computers all the time to look up patients’ insurance information or
medical records. Forgetting, as she often does, that her mother is an intelligent woman and
functioning still, even in her eighties.

Her daughter has always underestimated her, and this weekend is no exception. They
take the beltway to an overpriced Italian restaurant that Ellie hates while Lauryn fiddles with the
radio, steers, and holds forth about her mother’s life at the same time. Ellie watches the cars
ahead of them and tries hard not to flinch.

“Mother, you ought to get out more. Remember, when I was a kid, that time we visited
and you took me to the Smithsonian?”

“You liked that natural history museum.”

“It scared me. You only thought I liked it. All those bones.”

“Well.”

“Maybe you should go. It would be fun. I could see if they have senior admissions.”

Ellie grabs the side handle in Lauryn’s car as they stop hard and stick in traffic. Lauryn
honks her horn, starting a chain of angry honks in response.

“No, dear, I don’t think so,” Ellie says. She decides not to let go of the handle.
When Ellie gets home, she’s just irritable enough to pace through the small, one-story house, full to the brim with nervous energy. She moves into the bedroom and finds herself unexpectedly angry at the sight of the open closet, full of Arn’s bulky sweaters on wire hangers and dull scuffed leather shoes, his old suits carefully hung up in plastic bags. She goes to the hall closet and pulls out all the neatly stuffed Tupperware bins full of the old things from Lauryn’s bedroom they’d taken with them when they moved—old yearbooks, stuffed animals, bedding with its colors fading from age. She throws it all in plastic bags for the trash without so much as a glance and hauls the empty plastic bins to the bedroom.

She begins with the sweaters, starting flush with the wall and the old after-work sweaters Arn’s had since before they were married, the ones he’d wear when he came home from walking around all day checking in on the Dillard’s customers and employees. She remembers how surprised she was the first time she saw them; Arn had always dressed so meticulously when they were going out, in suits every time she’d seen him right up until their wedding. She’d felt a little stab of relief at their presence in his closet; they made him more vulnerable somehow, more real. Once, as he’d leaned in to kiss her at the end of the night, she’d tried to imagine what their married life would be like. But she could imagine nothing but Arn in a suit, kissing her chastely, or Arn in a suit, sitting in an armchair reading the paper.

All that night she’d tossed and turned, trying to imagine this man as someone who had a life outside what she could see of him. Though she’d loved Arn then and still does, she had never wanted to wind up living in a sitcom, the wife of a man who woke up everyday to put on his suit and tie. That closet had been a kind of middle ground for her then; she’d felt more relieved by it than by their wedding night. Now she folds all those sweaters neatly and puts them away, the maroons and grays, the gaudy checkered patterns that he’d loved.
Then she moves straight to everything recent, like jumping through time, the years of sweaters and jackets in-between then and now lost long ago to Goodwill or garage sales. These are button-up cardigans, Mr. Roger’s style sweaters, threadbare and pastel. She bought them in the end because they were easy for her to put on and take off of him, like a version of the big-buttoned clothing they’d bought for Lauryn when she was first learning to dress herself.

After three Tupperware boxes of sweaters, she starts on the shoes, then the hangers go too. She cleans out all his drawers, throws old pairs of dress pants and sweat pants in willy-nilly without even folding; tosses in the old briefs and then the newer boxers, almost never worn because she figured out quickly that it was best to go without. All the black socks in with the blue and the white. The old pocket watch he’d carried long after it stopped working on top of the bureau drawer and the newer Timex he almost never wore in with the underwear. She finds a smaller box for things still on top of the bureau: a pair of tweezers gone black with age at the tips, an old cuff-link in the shape of a clover, a sand-dollar, the mystery novel he never finished. All of it goes indiscriminately into bins, one thing after another. When there are no more things she vacuums out the inside of the closet, gets down on her knees to scrub the shoe shelves with furniture polish. She vacuums the debris from the drawers with a hose extension, then cleans those too.

Finally, she writes “ARN” in block letters on each bin, pushes the lid on each one until it pops closed. And when that doesn’t feel like enough, she takes the masking tape from the kitchen and winds it around and around the lids, pushing down hard to make it stick. •••

Lauryn says it’s a good thing, all this cleaning. “It’s cathartic, mom. It means you’re moving into a new stage of your grief.”
Lauryn has been reading self-help books again. She’s always lecturing about stages of grief and mourning, as if her father were already dead. Ellie decides to remind her daughter about this, says, “Your father’s not dead, you know.” But this is not the thing to say. There’s silence the rest of the agonizing drive, the cars moving slow as melted wax along the beltway.

Ellie is a doctor. She knows what will happen to Arn. But she also knows that it hasn’t happened yet.

III.
When Ellie remembers her childhood, the first thing she thinks of is the gritty feel of coal dust. They’d lived in rural Arkansas not far from a railway line, and she and her two older brothers used to spend all afternoon on the tracks, playing balancing games or looking for small hunks of coal to bring home and fire in the stove during the depression years. Her hands were always coated with the dust; it stuck into the meat of her palms like bee-stings.

The second thing she remembers is the birthday cake—her mother saved the sugar from her coffee for months, until she had enough to bake all three of them a cake for their birthdays, even though none of them had been born in January. It was cold, Ellie remembers, cold and gray that January; she’d stayed in the kitchen while her mother taught her to measure out the sugar and flower and eggs, helped to mix red food coloring in for the frosting. When it came out pink, neither of her brothers had dared complain.

Ellie asks herself these days: what if you had to choose the memories you could keep? She makes a game of choosing—if she could pick only ten memories, only five, only one. If someone offered a choice, which one of these would she carry with her, and which would she let
go? She keeps a notebook in her purse and writes lists on scraps of paper, “Birthday Cake, Coal Dust.”

IV.

Ellie met Arn in the shoe department at Dillard’s. She’d been trying on shoes, looking for a pair of nice black pumps to wear to a party. She’d wanted to impress the man she was meeting there, a surgeon in the hospital where she was finishing her residency, and was trying to decide how much heel was too sexy, and whether she should wear heels at all, since the man was an orthopedic surgeon and she had a vague notion that the shoes might upset his sensibilities. Still, she looked good in heels.

As the young man in the shoe department was going to the back to look for her size, one of the managers wandered over and asked if there was anything he could assist her with. Arn was professional-looking, Ellie remembered, but charming, with a folksy manner that put everyone he knew at ease. She’d found herself telling him about her shoe problem, and after a moment he’d said, “Ma’am, if you’re that concerned about the state of your feet, I’d say that man doesn’t know how to pay attention to the right things.”

She’d thanked him, but bought the high black leather heels and had a short-lived affair with the surgeon anyway. When it ended badly, she found herself back in the shoe department at Dillard’s, looking for more comfortable footwear and ready to meet someone who knew how to pay attention. They dated only a few months before they were engaged. Arn wasn’t one to waste time, he said, when he’d found someone as good as her. Even Ellie’s mother declared him “a keeper.”

...
Evergreen Acres is a tan-colored concrete complex just off of the highway; the sign is the only part of the building to feature trees. Inside the two glass doors framing the entryway, Ellie makes a point to stop and greet the receptionist, Terry, whose unkempt hair and gravelly voice she’s grown used to. Terry looks up at her and motions past the desk and towards the hallway.

Through the narrow hallway that leads first to the elevators is a wide open “recreation room,” with a few old arm chairs and card tables. Most of the residents sit in the chairs and do jigsaw puzzles or play checkers—there’s one table with a game of gin going. Arn’s sitting in his usual spot, facing the back window. Today he’s wearing a bike helmet, and though she’d been warned by Arn’s nurse over the phone about its presence the shock of it there, out of place and too large for his shrinking body, still makes Ellie hesitate a moment.

“Hello Arn,” she says. She waits. Some days, the bad ones, he doesn’t respond at all. On good days he’ll pretend to recognize her. This is a good day.

“Oh, hello.” She watches his eyes searching her face. The slight sag of his skin is always a surprise, the way he seems to be sinking into himself. “Isn’t it a lovely day?”

“Yes,” she says, then “It’s Ellie, love, I’ve brought you some new pants and some clean socks.” She pulls these things out of her bag and hands them to the nurse waiting nearby.

Arn shakes his head slowly. “No, no,” he says. “My El’s on her way here to pick me up. We have to get over to the Currants’. Bob must be awful worried by now.”

Ellie knows then where Arn is: in March of 1964, coming out of the Currants’ front door towards her carrying an old table, water up to his ankles. “So you see,” Arn is saying, “I can’t stay very long, we’ll have to be going soon.”

They sit together for a few minutes while Arn waits pensively for the version of Ellie he’s still holding onto, a young lithe woman whose hair is still long and black, whose body has not
yet begun to turn against her. Finally he turns to her, asks, “Have you ever met my El?” She shakes her head. He seems sad for a moment, then turns his face away.

Ellie had her first affair in the early sixties, with a nurse named Jim who worked on her floor. Arn was a loving husband, frugal but kind, devoted to their young daughter. They hosted neighborhood barbeques in the summers and Arn spent Saturdays carefully weeding and mowing their small lawn. All her friends were envious—Arn was openly affectionate, proud of his smart and pretty wife. Ellie was happy enough; she loved her family and enjoyed her work. But she still felt unsatisfied, deep down. She began to wonder if a man who knew how to pay attention to all the right things was really enough, if she even knew what the right things were supposed to be. Her closet was full of sensible pant suits from Dillard’s and comfortable orthopedic shoes she could wear all night when she was on duty at the ward. She started checking out the high heels on secret trips to department stores; just picking them up, turning them over in her hands, admiring the smooth leather, the curved arches.

The day Jim was assigned to her floor, Ellie was relieved. Here was someone else for the nurses to whisper about behind their hands. One day she happened by the break room and saw him there, sitting alone with a lunch bag and a sandwich. She slipped in and pulled up a chair. “So,” she asked, “how did you get into nursing?” He grinned at her.

“My older brother was an army nurse in the war. Got killed in action. I wanted to be like him.” He took a bite of his sandwich, and Ellie noticed it was chicken salad, homemade, not at all the bachelor’s lunch she was expecting. “You’re the first person to ask,” he said, and he looked at her in a way she recognized. She started finding excuses to talk to him, even though once the story about his brother got out there was no need for extra kindnesses. He was
attractive, with green eyes the color of glass soda bottles. There was always a gaggle of nurses around him, which gave their conversations an air of secrecy both dangerous and alluring. Before long, Ellie tried on a pair of black pumps at a downtown department store. She went back that same afternoon, bought the shoes, and stashed them in her locker at the hospital.

Jim was a few years younger than she was, and more reckless than Arn knew how to be. On one night Ellie remembers, she told Arn she’d be working the nightshift and they went to a bar two towns over, where they both got drunk on cheap beer they ordered in cans. Afterwards Jim drove back to his apartment, taking the turns too fast and veering suddenly onto empty backwoods lanes to snatch at her breasts or thighs. They stopped at a gas station to buy cigarettes, and driving out of the parking lot, Jim’s truck grazed a speed bump. He’d circled around again three times, speeding up and trying to ramp the truck over the bump, both of them howling like teenagers. In his apartment they had sex on the living room couch, on the floor, on the kitchen table. Once they knocked an armchair over, another time Ellie’d bloodied her nose hitting it against a table leg on the floor and had to tell Arn a patient had gotten combative with her when she tried to give him an injection.

They fought, too, quietly in coffee shops and restaurants, loudly in the privacy of Jim’s apartment. One morning, as Ellie swore she was leaving him, Jim threw a glass at his apartment wall. For weeks they were picking slivers of glass from the soles of their feet. If Arn noticed that the bottoms of her feet had become freckled with angry red pinpricks, he never mentioned it. Ellie swore she wouldn’t go back there, but sooner or later, watching Arn’s back bend over their small pushmower or listening to him tell a story about one of his coworkers at dinner, she’d start to feel it underneath her skin—that itch to escape, to break down the quiet walls of her life. That look of Jim’s would pull her in, because it was a look that dared her to forget the values of her
parents and family and everyone they admired. And when the drinking and fighting began to wear on her, when she could see the lines of it showing in her face, she’d swear again never to go back, to stay with Arn because he was good and kind to her, because her mother had been right about him. These two halves of her life went on in parallel, never quite touching one another.

Five years into it, Arn got a call late one night from an acquaintance of his named Bob Currant. It had been raining hard for three days and weathermen were beginning to issue flood warnings. The Currants were a poor couple Arn had met at a church study group. They’d just moved north, to an old house outside of Springdale near the river, in the floodplain side that got footage on the evening news every four years or so and looked like it was about it be news again. Now their basement was flooded and their front yard full of water. Bob told Arn, “We don’t know what to do.”

She and Arn got in the truck with a couple of flashlights, an old tarp, and some rope thrown into the cab and made the half-hour drive up to Springdale. Arn insisted Ellie stay in the truck while he and Bob Currant waded back and forth through the water carrying the heaviest things—an armchair, an old table, a black and white television in its heavy wooden case. Arn waded in the rain, his pants wet up to the knees, his brown hair dripping into his eyes. As Ellie watched him, she knew it was time to end things with Jim for good, that she could never leave this man who was willing to drive half an hour in the dark, to wade through water when no one else would. She thought of what would happen to him if she told him the truth, this quiet, careful man who kissed her cheek every morning and made it a point to tell her that he loved her, just in case. Ellie knew it would break him, and just as she’d imagined him years before wearing nothing but suits, now she could not imagine him as the same man without her. He had an idea
of her and of their family as something worth paying the right attention to. Ellie knew then she
would never bring herself to change that picture, that deep down she relied on it too.

After they’d loaded all the furniture into the truck, and with Bob and his wife squeezing
them next to one another, Ellie took Arn’s hand and squeezed it. When he let go shift gears on
the old truck, she took it again as soon as she was finished. That evening, she told Jim it was
over.

There were other affairs, but none of them lasted, even though she continued to carry
pieces of them with her like the boxes of old, too-often-mended sweaters. She left the job at the
hospital for lower pay at an urgent care clinic, where she wrote prescriptions and provided
emergency care. She told Arn it was because of the stress; he said he was glad she didn’t have to
work any more late hours. They left it at that.

Once, years later, she ran into Jim at a coffee shop downtown. He got up from the table
where he was reading and sipping an espresso and then motioned for her to sit down. Ellie
reminded him of the night they’d driven over the speed bumps in his truck, but he didn’t
remember it. He talked instead about a time she’d shown up at the hospital late at night with a
coffee for him when he was stressed out and tired from late hours and too much drinking, about
how much that small kindness had meant at just that moment; and he talked about another time
when she’d been so rushed to leave his place she’d put her blouse on inside out. “I was so mad
at you then,” he’d said. Ellie had forgotten these things, still has trouble recollecting them now.
They parted awkwardly with a few words about their new jobs; after that, she never saw him
again.
Ellie has started a new hobby, one she’s told no one about. She is writing down her memories. It began with the notebook, with lists of things she needed to do or didn’t want to forget. When the lists got too long she tore all the pages out of the book and put them in a box; she bought a new notebook and filled it too quickly.

Ellie learned canning from her mother, and it was a skill that attracted Arn to her—their parents had been through the Depression and they’d been through the war. They’d both been taught to save. Arn took those values to heart, so she canned jars of jelly and preserves, of apple butter, of peppers or tomatoes from their garden. The jars lined shelves in their basement and they’d transferred all of them to the garage when Arn got sick and they decided to move out to Maryland.

Ellie doesn’t keep up the garden anymore. She hires neighborhood children to do the mowing for her and the yard is full of crabgrass and weeds. Instead, she cuts lines from her notebook paper that say “old sweaters, wading through water. My mother’s hair was yellow, like the light in our kitchen. Arn brought her daffodils.” She puts them all into a jar, stuffs them until it’s full with the confetti of her memories. And then she fills another, “green-glass eyes, hair like nettles. Jim shaves the curly hairs above his bellybutton. The stubble looks like an angry connect-the-dots.” Sometimes she writes whole paragraphs but mostly she just lists, snippets of anything that seems important: “Arn sleeps on his right side. He prefers his vegetables unsalted, likes all-bran and grape nuts, would rather eat something he hates than waste the food in front of him.”

One jar is nothing but names. There’s another for her favorite foods, one for books she’s read whether she liked them or not. She writes down everything until she feels emptied. Then
she seals each jar with wax, pressing the seals carefully with her fingers, and puts all the jars away.

VI.
After a brief discussion with the nurse about Arn’s helmet and the things she’s brought him, and after she feels assured that Arn will be watched enough to prevent any further accidents, Ellie swings past the receptionist, into her car and out onto the beltway, forgetting about the time in her haste to leave. She gets caught in the five o’clock afternoon rush and her car sticks, one of the many trying to get home, to escape from one place to another. She sits in the bubble of her car listening to piano music on public radio and imagining Arn, wandering confused through the hallways at Evergreen Acres, making the simple mistake of thinking he’s somewhere he isn’t and trying to sit where his favorite armchair should be, falling instead. She wonders to herself what that must feel like, then thinks that maybe she already knows.

Her cell phone rings: it’s Lauryn, who Ellie knows is calling to apologize for not meeting her mother again, for again failing to visit her father. Ellie doesn’t blame her for this but she still doesn’t pick up the phone, unwilling for now to listen to her daughter’s guilty excuses. She remembers a time when Lauryn was young and had climbed up onto the kitchen counter. She’d been reaching, about to knock a heavy package of flour off a shelf above her head, and Ellie remembers how she’d felt as she rushed across the room to sweep her daughter away. She reminds herself to hold onto this, to write it down later.

She sits in the car and lets the phone ring to voicemail, watching the cars around her and the people in them as they tap their hands on their steering wheels, shout into phones, or just sit
tensely. All of them right next to her, closed off in their own small spaces. All of them inching forward, moving towards home.
Slide

I was what the kids in my elementary school called a “rhythm kid,” and it wasn’t the kind of thing you wanted to get called. A rhythm kid was lame, a follower, a “kid” in a literal sense when all of us wanted to be adults. I earned the name for being naïve enough to join the schools’ rhythm team—we performed jazz-hand style choreography to songs like The Hollies’ “Do You Love Me” in shopping malls and the lobbies of old folks homes. Our uniforms were colored T-shirts with pictures of a dancing cougar emblazoned on the front. We were the kinds of kids who wore Payless Keds.

I joined the team because I wanted to know how to move. I was already taking dance lessons in those years, though I was always a half-step behind the other kids in the class, watching the girls in the front because I couldn’t quite remember the choreography. My mother let me enroll in the classes after I tripped on nothing walking through the double automatic doors into the Pig and fell flat on my face. I knocked loose half of my overbite. Mom thought dance might help, but it only made things worse. Still, I was in love with movement, with the way it felt to step to a beat, any beat, to pump my arms and work my legs into a fury. When I was a toddler my mother would put on records and I would dash around and around in circles. I called that dancing, and the feeling of it hasn’t changed.

When I was in the second grade, and for a few years after that, my best friend was this kid named Jarod. He taught me how to do the electric slide out on the blacktop at recess, so I could look cool in front of the other kids. He even taught me how to do this fancy move in the middle, where I’d kneel down on the ground and slap the pavement, getting little bits of blacktop stuck in my palm and scraping the rubber at the back of my shoes. It’s the only move I still know, though other kids could do jumps, spins, freestyles. Jarod even joined the rhythm team
with me. In the afternoons after school let out he’d follow me on walks around my
neighborhood, where we’d imagine clumps of lurid green ivy taking over the whole south. We
were both “rhythm kids,” and it wasn’t so bad when he was around to take some of the taunts.

Jarod and I used to play hand-clap games together, too, though I taught him most of
those. The rhymes were just things I seemed to have always known, the kind of thing that comes
out of collective memory:

*Miss Mary Mack Mack Mack
all dressed in black black black
with silver buttons buttons buttons
all down her back back back.*

I loved the feel of our hands slapping together, especially when we fell into the rhythm of it. On
a good day we could go for hours at a counting game like Slide.

Jarod had tight black curls that clung to his scalp, and his hair was unfashionably short
and springy, unlike the other kids’, many of whom were sporting MC Hammer’s rectangular
haircut. Plus he always wore these black sweater vests he got as hand-me-downs from cousins.
His “guardian” wouldn’t let him buy any new ones, so they were always a little worn and a little
tight around the arm-holes. We called her The Guardian in our serious adult voices, and I always
thought of her as a kind of Transformer-esque robot, though I never really told Jarod about it.

Jarod lived with a friend of his mother’s and that woman’s two daughters, after his mom died
from cancer. He didn’t know where his father was, which wasn’t that unusual where we grew
up, though I thought it was when I met him. That was before my own father disappeared; before
things between Jarod and me started to change.

*She asked her mother mother mother
for 15 cents cents cents
to see the elephant elephant elephant
jump over the fence fence fence.*
Once, for a month or two, Jarod went to live with his grandmother in Washington DC, where he said she was a postal worker. When I imagine his life then, I see her waking up early to go to work, putting on her worn blue suit in the dark, so as not to wake Jarod, who had to share her room in their small studio walkup. Later, he’d wake up, grab a toaster pastry and catch the bus to school, which he never mentioned much except to say there wasn’t any free play or electric slide.

Jarod came back to Tuscaloosa almost immediately, though. He said someone had spread gasoline around the apartment building where his grandmother lived, a brick high-rise with old rusting metal for fire escapes. He said they made him come back, because it wasn’t safe. I wasn’t clear on whether or not anybody’d lit the gasoline, or on how much heat it would take for brick to burn. But I listened to Jarod tell me the story with the long coiled telephone cord wrapped around my waist and wondered without asking how much of it was the truth. I feel bad about that now. I haven’t seen Jarod for almost twenty years, not since my mother and I made our “new start” just after I’d finished middle school. I should have known then how impossible that would be for both of us.

He jumped so high high high
he touched the sky sky sky
and he didn’t come back back back
till the fourth of July ly ly.

... 

By the time I got to the sixth grade middle school I didn’t have any best friend. I sat by myself at a long brown table in the middle school cafeteria and ate the school lunch I got with coupons. Sometimes I didn’t eat anything, too ashamed to pull out the green paper in front of other kids, and I just sat outside on the concrete wall behind the band room and listened to the percussionists practicing on their timpanis and snares. Jarod wouldn’t even look at me—his own father had
come back that summer. He was wearing better clothes, working out more. He’d gone out for the football team, and he was dating a girl named Jamaica, a quiet girl with long hair she wore in tight, perfect braids.

I’d made the mistake at the beginning of the summer of trying out for the cheerleading squad and making it. I thought it would help me, but I was still a rhythm kid and the other girls, with their perfect straight ponytails and their glittery lotions and their boyfriends hanging on one arm like another accessory, knew it. They refused to talk to me, and I got stuck in the back right corner in the lineup for always being a half step behind, again forgetting the right moves. I stared and stared at those long straight ponytails—would give myself a headache trying to pull my hair tight.

That same year, my mother started dating an ugly man named Shade Cramer; he was stocky, with a pockmarked face, his skin as pitted as the Cramer’s gravel driveway. His daughter Tula was one of the most unpopular girls in our grade, a thick, mannish girl with unruly black hair and eyebrows like thin bricks. She was the kind of girl who wore t-shirts you can only buy at nature stores. Mom made me act nice to her when Shade was over. I hated her because she was lower than me, and there weren’t many girls that were.

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” she asked me that first night Shade brought her by. I just glared at the big white wolf on the front of her T-shirt without answering. Nobody used the phrase “when I grow up” in the sixth grade. But she didn’t want my answer anyway, and instead said almost immediately, “I’m going to be a storm-chaser. They get to chase after the tornados and film them for TV.”

“What do they do when the tornado gets close,” I asked, imagining Tula and her father being sucked up by one of the big grey twisters they were always warning us about in school.
“Does it suck them up like a vacuum?” I imagined Tula kneeling next to a locker at my old elementary school, shaking with fear, kneeling into herself until her forehead touched the dirty floor and covering her neck with her hands. I tried to smile at her with as much venom as I could summon.

“They’re too smart to get that close,” she said, and after that I didn’t have to ask any more questions, because mom and Shade came in and said we were leaving for dinner. I could already smell the alcohol on their breath.

I started spreading rumors about Tula at school. “Her room smells like foot fungus,” I’d say, or “I heard she was raised by wolves, and that’s why she loves them so much.” I discovered I could attract an audience this way, and pretty soon I was talking to girls who never would have talked to me before.

One day the squad’s co-captains, Mary Jo and Mary Beth, came over to where I was sitting at lunch. I watched them walking toward me from across the room—their hair was the same length, the same honey brown color. It swayed in rhythm as they walked. When they sat down I just stared at them; I didn’t know what to do. “So,” Mary Beth said after a while, “we hear your mom is dating a Cramer.” I made a face, which the Marys took to be a yes. “We hear their place is nice.”

The Cramers had a big house outside of town. Shade was a flight instructor; he kept an Ultralight in a barn on their property, and he liked to have the room to take off and land in it. That was how mom had met him, she’d got it in her head one afternoon to go and sign up for flight school, just like we had the money for it, which I knew we didn’t. The idea didn’t last long. Like with most anything she got it in her head to do, she got distracted at the sight of an available man and bailed.
“It’s ok,” I said, “for a couple of hicks with money. They’ve got a pool but I wouldn’t get in it.” The Marys seemed satisfied with this, and they looked at one another sideways for a second.

“We hear her daddy’s got a plane,” Mary Beth said. “I’ve always wanted to go up in a plane,” and then I understood what was happening. I might not have to sit alone at lunch anymore.

... 

When I was halfway through the third grade, my father finally left my mother and me—he just walked out in the middle of the night, taking our good car and a single suitcase. The week after he left, Jarod and I were sitting in the back of my parents’ van, now my mother’s, headed to Wednesday night church supper. My mother and I took Jarod with us every week, and he liked to go, though I often didn’t. The iced tea there was homemade and unsweetened and I always put about six packets of the pink Sweet-N-Low into it before I’d even think about drinking. I liked to stir the white powder with a spoon, to watch it swirl around until it disappeared.

This night in particular, though, I didn’t want to go to church. My father had never gone with us to church, but still I wanted to imagine him there in the front seat, turning around to crack a conspiratorial smile at us. Mom had said earlier that evening that he could damn well go to hell on his own, now, and I couldn’t stop thinking about that. Maybe I’d never see him again, not in any life, and I was covering up my fear with pure energy.

So Jarod tried not to laugh too loud when my mother ordered us to Settle Down because she had a Headache, one hand pushing hard against the steering wheel, the other pressing into her eyeballs. We’d been playing a game I invented called Fall Down, where you had to stay stiff on the brown vinyl seats of our old VW van, and see who could stay balanced the longest. We
fell violently, and on purpose, liking the way you could bounce off of the rubbery seats. Or we did until my mother made us stop. I was busy imagining ways to get back at it, to move, to stop staring at our empty front seat.

“Let’s play Miss Sue,” Jarod said, which was a pretty clever way of continuing our game since once you got to the end you had to freeze, and freezing was a good excuse for toppling over sideways, statue style. Even though we had to put on seat belts, they were the cloth kind like the ones in the middle of station wagons, and we wore them loose on purpose. “Miss Sue,” we chanted, “Miss Sue, Miss Sue from Alabama, she came from Lou-si-ana…”

When we got to the freezing part, we made the most outrageous faces we could think of. The first person to move in Miss Sue is the loser, which usually means the first person to laugh, or to fall over stiff and frozen on the seats. My trick then was to concentrate on the eyes and be very serious. Jarod’s was sticking his tongue out and crossing his eyes, a tough one to hold. Even with his eyes crossed, it was easy to stare at them; Jarod had brown eyes, their color deep and rich with flecks of gold. That night I saw them beginning to brim with giggling, and I felt suddenly that I might cry, felt the closeness between those two feelings. Our eyes, I thought, might be mirrors.

Jarod collapsed. “You win,” he said, holding his stomach in a belly laugh. “You always win.”

... 

It took some doing, but eventually I convinced Tula to throw a party out at her dad’s place. Shade thought it was a great idea, which should have tipped me off from the beginning. There was always something a little off about Shade, about the way he would smile at me or the way he was always trying to use words like “cool” that sounded wrong in his mouth. He
promised to clean out the pool. “Whoa,” he said, “a pool party. You chicks are gonna have a
great time lounging around in your bikinis.” When Tula protested about wearing a swimsuit, he
ignored it. The day of the party she was the only girl in a one-piece and mesh shorts.

I’d spent a whole day shopping for my suit, a bright red bikini with round white beads
dangling from the straps. I hardly had any boobs and the pads in the top made awkward looking
lumps on my chest. I recognized my mistake as soon as my mom dropped me off at the
Cramers’. I didn’t have boobs, but the Marys did. The bikini only made me look worse, like a
toddler trying on her mother’s too-big heels. Worse, that morning I’d convinced my mother to
let me shave my legs, and so my ankles and the backs of my knees were wrapped in band-aids.

All the girls at the party ignored me. Twice I got thrown in the pool, and three times I
was held underwater until I came up spitting and sputtering, before I just gave up and sulked in a
chair as far away from Tula’s as I could get. If I had to be alone, at least I wouldn’t be
associated with her. The Marys stayed out of the water, instead monopolizing the Cramers’ large
athletic trampoline in order to show off their flips and practice toe touches for the upcoming high
school cheer tryouts. Mine were better, I thought, and imagined myself up there on the
trampoline, showing them up.

After a while I noticed that Shade had sauntered over to the trampoline and was talking to
Mary Jo. Great, I thought. I could just imagine him making a fool of himself and my mom,
talking about how “awesome” their jumps were, about how they were welcome out here any
time. Before too long, Mary Jo hopped down off the trampoline and followed him toward the
barn.

She got what she wanted, I thought as the plane took off, those kinds of girls always do.

•••
Just before the end of the school year, a few months after my father left, Jarod asked me if I had a crush on anybody.

“Maybe,” I said, drawing out the a of it, letting the word tease. I did have a crush, too, my first. His name was Noah. He had blue eyes the size of quarters, the watered down blue color of fish tanks.

“Is it me?”

I looked at him a little too quickly, snapped a little too loudly, “No!”

I regretted it right away when he couldn’t look away fast enough to hide the hurt in his face. But all I could think of was the other kids and their taunts: “Ruthie and Jarod sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G.”

I didn’t expect him to look so hurt, to ask who it was so quietly.

“Nobody,” I said, “I was kidding. Who wants a boyfriend anyway?”

When Shade and Mary Jo came back from putting the plane away, most of the other kids were gone. Mom had long since come to pick me up, and now was lounging around in a deck chair drinking straight from a bottle of Jack, not even caring who saw. I tried to pretend not to know her, not to notice Mary Jo’s prim, slender mother sitting opposite in a pair of expensive Macy’s slacks I’d seen the weekend we went shopping. She had on heels, and I could hear the hollow click-click of them as she tapped her foot on the concrete deck of the pool. Mary Beth sat sullen in the chair next to her, sucking on a freeze pop she’d made Tula bring out from the kitchen.

“Come on, let’s go,” she said when she saw Mary Jo, snatching her by the arm. She wouldn’t have anything to do with Shade, not even when he laid on the charm good and thick.
Mary Jo wasn’t meeting his eyes, wasn’t looking at anybody, just kept watching her own toes as her mother marched her right out of there.

The rumors started after that, worse ones than any I’d circulated. Mom and Shade had a screaming row before we left—she threw the bottle at him. It landed in the pool, the brown liquor spilling out over the deck, the chairs, the water. I went back to eating my lunches alone.

After that moment on the bus, things between Jarod and me changed. We stayed friends for a while, but he stopped calling so much, and I didn’t go over to his house anymore. His room was so small we couldn’t both sit in there without our knees touching, and though neither of us spoke about it, there was a weirdness between us that hadn’t been present before. By the time we were transferred to the middle school we barely spoke.

But not long after the party, sitting outside at lunch listening to the percussionists practice a version of the school marching band’s cadence, I saw Jarod and Jamaica coming down the sidewalk toward the school. She was walking ahead of him, fast, with her arms crossed tight across her chest, and he was strolling behind her, hands in his pockets, looking in no hurry. There was an expression on his face I’d never seen before, one side of his mouth cocked upward in a kind of wry smug.

Jamaica Green went right up the concrete steps and in the front doors without once turning around to look back, but Jarod had caught sight of me. He pulled one hand out of his pocket and waved. “Hey, Ruthie,” he said, and started walking toward me.

“How are you?” I asked. “Your girlfriend looked kind of mad.” He just shrugged.

“She’s not my girlfriend.”
“Oh.” Everybody in school knew they were together; some of them were always asking why Jamaica Green would hang around with a guy who’d be seen wearing hand-me-downs from church trash bags. Though Jarod didn’t dress like that anymore, I noticed. He had on a pair of new Filas, and I wondered where he’d got them. His dad must have some money, I thought. Good for him.

“I hear your mom’s dating octopus-hands Cramer.” I shook my head, told him they’d split up.

“Listen,” he said, standing up and brushing the dirt from his shoulder, “that’s shit the way he treated her. She’s a nice lady. Some friends and I, a couple of guys I know from the Y, we were thinking about it, and maybe there’s a way to get him back. So I wanted to ask if you want to come along.”

I thought about Tula and her nature shirts and tornados, pictured myself as a kind of wind, a gale-force sweeping through and cleaning everything awful out of my life. “Sure,” I said, “why not?”

... 

When Jarod showed up at our house a week later with a carload of high school boys, I was glad mom was out with her friends from work and couldn’t see me getting in. They were driving an old Ford station wagon with a dent in the hood, and I had to squeeze in next to one of them in the back seat. The car smelled like cigarettes and stale beer, and there were empty cans of Bud Lite all over the floor. There were four of us in the backseat and I could barely fit. “Good thing you’re so damn skinny, kid,” the guy next to me joked. He put one hand on my leg and handed me a beer with the other.
Jarod turned around from the front seat and barked “Hey man, lay off. Ruthie doesn’t drink,” and then he grinned at me in a mischievous way I almost recognized from our childhood games, though there was something new in it I didn’t recognize, something like the smug I’d seen before. Still, I let it make me feel safe. “Besides, we need her sober to tell us how to get to the Cramers’. ” The guy next to me backed off, but not before calling me a frigid middle-school bitch just loud enough so I could hear. Over the noise of the stereo, I shouted the directions. The boys drank beer and talked about the tape they were listening to, which Jarod told me was a P-Funk album. The bass line was hypnotic, and for a second in spite of myself I wanted to wiggle just a little bit, like back in our old rhythm days:

*Flash light, Day light, Spot light, Red light.*
*Everybody’s got a little light under the sun.*

It was dark by the time we pulled in the Cramers’ gravel driveway. We’d cut the headlights but there was no need, since all the lights in the place were out and I could tell nobody was home. The boys all piled out of the car—most of them were drunk. I just stood there. I’d led them all the way out here, but now I didn’t know what to do. The pool was lit up from underneath by smooth, white lights installed along the wall, and I could see that the water had turned green again. There were twigs floating in it. It looked like Shade hadn’t cleaned it or put the cover back on since the pool party, like he hadn’t even bothered to shut off the lights. Two of them were burned out—they looked like missing teeth.

I felt a familiar hand in mine. “Come on, Ruthie.” I let myself linger there a moment, enjoying the familiar warmth of that hand. One of the guys had found an open window, and one by one the boys were climbing in. I could hear their bodies thumping against the floor, and I imagined them fumbling drunk and in darkness through the house, tilting over tables, leaning into chairs. This was a storm, I thought, that nobody would want to chase.
“No,” I said quietly, “I can’t.” Jarod looked at me for a minute, and then he dropped my hand and went to join his new friends. I felt suddenly cold.

I sat down across the yard on the edge of the Cramers’ trampoline and watched as the boys walked out the back door one at a time, carrying a VCR, a small TV, some jewelry that I couldn’t imagine where they’d found. They fit a lot more in the trunk of that car than I had imagined could get in there. As Jarod came out holding a couple of whiskey bottles, I felt something inside of me sink. I got up on the trampoline and started to bounce.

“Hey Ruthie? Hey, what are you doing?” But I ignored him. I jumped as high and as hard as I could, though it was dark and hard to see the trampoline’s black edges. The springs squeaked in protest, and I thought of the Marys, wondered what it must have felt like up there. I closed my eyes, just for a second, at the height of my jump, and let myself feel afraid of falling. I did a toe touch. I pulled my hair out of its ponytail, let it whip and swing around my face.

“Hey, come on, get down from there! Are you crazy?” Just then, at the height of my bounce, I saw a lamp come on in an upper window. And then my feet didn’t give at the bottom of the arc like I was expecting them to, and my knees buckled, and I was twisting toward the ground.

I remember the feel of arms tensed to carry me, the feeling of leaving the ground. Being shoved in the backseat. The pinging sound of gravel on the drainpipe as we peeled away. But I suspect now that Tula never left that room. I think she only watched; I think it was all she ever really wanted to do.

***

The summer before we were set to move to the middle school, someone finally located Jarod’s father. He’d been living in a small town in Maine, Blue Hills Falls, and was working as an
architect. Why no one could locate him before, why they were able to find him that summer, I still don’t know. All I know is one day in July Jarod told me his father was coming back to town, that he was moving to a new house, bigger, and with his own real room.

We were older by then, of course, and though Jarod’s clothes were still too small, and his cheeks still plump with baby fat, he’d started exercising downtown at a local Y and talking about going out for football and impressing his dad when he got in. I’d grown taller, splay-limbed and more awkward. I was always knocking my elbows into doorframes, my knees into tables. I was covered in bruises I couldn’t explain.

The night before Jarod’s father was supposed to come and pick him up, we were sitting in my backyard, which was a rare occurrence by then, but my mother had offered to cook him a celebratory dinner and neither of us had the heart to tell her no. It was humid and hot, and we sat on the swings, our toes touching dirt, pushing off gently and grazing the ground as we rocked. I knew it was time to go soon, and I knew that things were about to change. I thought of all the things I could say, or I thought of none of them. “Hey,” I said, “let’s play Slide.”

We sat across from one another in the grass, extended our arms and crossed them, each of us holding one arm between our two. I remember Jarod’s fingernails were always clean and round. I remember the way his skin looked next to mine. I remember the smell of it. It was up to me to begin, but when I imagine it I always linger there, before that moment when we pulled away, before the game and the counting began. I thought, if we are both perfect. I thought, if we never lose count. I thought, if we never lose track of where we are. If the game goes on forever, we could sit here like this, counting in rhythm until infinity, smooth palms slapping in the dead-hot heat of July.
About the Author

(Conclusion)

The author has begun to fictionalize his life. The new girlfriend will make a good antagonist. Week one: she forgets to return a phone call. This is a symbol of eventual dissolve. All communications break down. He stops answering the telephone for a week, an experiment. She stops calling; the birds, however, do not.
She stops calling: the birds, however, do not. Black wires outside dirty windows. She can’t sleep in the mornings. Thick wavy lines around her ears. Mornings: Bare feet on cold tiles. Bare feet on sweating linoleum. Rings underneath the eyes, dust on the mirrors. Some days: Rain and a red umbrella. Then: the satisfying suction sound of flip-flops on bare floors.
(Intro)

Then: the satisfying suction sound of flip-flops on bare floors. Now: the clicking of heels; the blisters are healing nicely, thank you. A movie on Thursday. Floors like melted candy corn, grainy light and too-hard lips. Then, first sex: headlines from old newspapers, ink stained fingers. What she likes best is after, the sleeping together in the wrinkled sheets, the ways one hand can lace into another. There is no order to her story. What she likes best is the wrinkled sheets.
What she likes best is the wrinkled sheets. He hates wrinkles but lets them lie. What he likes best: waking, all small surprises. A bent lower lip, a red pillow crease, an arm thrown onto his body, a ship at sea. Some mornings: light through an eastern window. What he likes least: the shape of the body rolling away. The wrinkled space left behind.
(Conclusion)

The wrinkled space left behind: each bend a promise. She hoards what’s left: household items un-mended, one dirty fork on the counter, dregs inside a dingy glass. She keeps them in a jar marked “for a rainy day.” When the day comes, she shakes the jar, spills them into her cupped hands and offers them up to him. What she says: your stories are not my stories. She takes her red umbrella and walks out into the rain.