Artists' Engagements

Ann Claycomb

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Artists’ Engagements

Ann Claycomb

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in
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ABSTRACT

Artists’ Engagements

Ann Claycomb

A dying chef and cookbook author questions the value of her life and legacy. An aspiring musician struggles to let go of his ex-girlfriend. An art student worries that her work lacks meaning and impact. And all of them ask themselves: what does it mean to be an artist? In the seven stories collected here, characters grapple with this question, along with questions of letting go—of alcohol, of illusions, of loved ones, of life itself. A young girl without illusions has her world view confirmed, while another young woman finds her way out of the trap she has made for herself. Parents age and die, lovers leave, a band (probably) breaks up. The only thing never in doubt in these pages is the longing that these men and women feel to engage with one another, with the creativity that drives them and with the world that inspires them, challenges them, and sometimes breaks their hearts.
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Preface

I am trying to teach my children how to write thank you notes. They are old enough to physically write the words themselves, old enough to feel grateful, and old enough to understand that it is important to say “thank you” to someone who has given them a gift. We get stuck on the second sentence, though. We get through Dear ----, Thank you for the ---- and they think they are done. They cannot grasp the need to say why they are grateful, to break the gift down according to its quantifiable joys, to say I thank you for this gift because . . .

I have, admittedly, been writing thank you notes a lot longer than my children have. I am not sure if I have ever written one as deeply felt as this one, though. Because that is what this is, this accounting of the writers who have influenced me and my work: a thank you note to say, thank you for what you wrote. Thank you for showing me the way to my own writing. I have loved your work because . . .

I.

Teaching Gatsby to 11th grade honors students, I asked my students to identify vocabulary words from, say, Chapter 1. Then I defined them, rapid-fire, and scolded the class for not looking them up for themselves. I stalked the classroom with my copy of the book open, my fingers splayed across the spangled face of the girl on the cover and my thumb holding my place on pages 8 and 9. This is where we first meet Tom Buchanan and my students needed to know what supercilious meant—and effeminate and swank and fractiousness—so that they could go on to discuss Tom as an unworthy rival for Daisy’s affections. And yet my prodding of them, my focus on the unfamiliar words and my impatience with them for not reading more closely,
were all a cover for my own confusion in the face of those pages, those phrases that I lingered over in a kind of luxuriant awe:

Not even the effeminate swank of his riding clothes could hide the enormous power of that body—he seemed to fill those glistening boots until he strained the top lacing, and you could see a great pack of muscle shifting when his shoulder moved under his thin coat. It was a body capable of enormous leverage—a cruel body.

Effeminate swank: that took some nerve, juxtaposing those two words. And yet how better to describe riding clothes? And look at how the rest of the description worked against the pretentious image conjured by those words, how the vivid, muscular verbs (fill, strained, shifting) won out over the adjectives just as Tom Buchanan’s virility won out over his clothes.

Sometimes I slipped and blurted these thoughts out. My honors students told me I was weird, but not as if they minded. When I taught the novel to remedial students, many of whom were not reading even at grade level, I would read crucial character descriptions like this one aloud. I listened for false notes, for extraneous words or phrases: did his boots have to be glistening? Yes, they did. The glistening was a part of the veneer (pun intended) of civility that Tom put on with his riding clothes and his wealth, and which could hardly contain him. The boots glistened because they were highly polished, as of course Tom himself was not . . .

My students followed along as I read, some of them moving their fingers under the words and frowning over the many unfamiliar ones. I grinned at them when I was done reading, waited eagerly for them to decipher what I’d read and pronounce Tom Buchanan an asshole. I should have thanked them for letting me read Gatsby to them, for indulging me as I turned that book inside out over the course of six years of teaching it. I memorized great gulps of it: those perfect words, those phrases conjured up like leaps from a trapeze without a net.

II.
Jack and John were amongst the close circle of my parents’ friends who called
themselves the Thoreauvians, though there was remarkably little “going to the woods” involved.
There was instead a great deal of convivial drinking and dinner parties that rose to crescendos in
the living room after dessert, to the music of clinking ice cubes chiming against glass, clattering
bangle bracelets, and Jack’s roaring gusts of laughter. My parents were the only members of this
group to have children and so I spent most Thoreauvian parties reading in spare bedrooms amid
piles of coats that smelled of cigarettes and perfume and wet leaves.

Jack and John lived together in a townhouse in Georgetown and they had a library with
built-in shelves. I was 13 or 14 when Jack gave me free rein and I don’t know why I needed a
book—I must have finished the one I’d brought—but there I was one afternoon, an hour or more
left until dinner and nothing to read. I picked up John Jakes’ *North and South* and Susan
Howatch’s *Penmarric*, but settled on John O’Hara’s *And Other Stories*. By the time Jack came
to call us to dinner, I had read “The Broken Giraffe.”

I wonder now what Jack thought when he saw my choice. He was, as I know now, a
semi-closeted Catholic and a passionate intellectual. He didn’t know children or teenagers at all,
though he’d known me since I was born. Did it occur to him to tell me that O’Hara wasn’t
appropriate reading material? He didn’t even tell my mother he’d given me the book, though he
did load us down with a whole grocery bag full of paperbacks to take home that day (as cover?)

But O’Hara—there’s no other word—detonated. I’d never imagined that people could
talk like that on the page, in volleys of words that began with conversational banalities (*Mrs.
Brewer, I hope you’ll pardon me . . .*) and wove these into intricate patterns of confession and
evasion and accusation and denial. Most of “The Broken Giraffe” is dialogue and much of that
is short, even clipped lines from the main character, Mary Brewer, as she negotiates the
simultaneous seduction and rejection of another woman. *Then do it,* she says, and only a page later, in response to her lover’s request for reciprocation, *Not this time.* It’s not that Mary is particularly terse; like all of O’Hara’s characters, she talks a lot. But the revelation of these characters is in how they talk. They say things that don’t mean anything, make statements that don’t go anywhere. They respond to one another attentively, until they don’t. They confess themselves reluctantly and often brutally, the words jagged in their mouths.

I never thanked Jack for giving me O’Hara’s short stories. He died before I started writing stories of my own, but I would have liked to show him some of them and say, “Here are Cissy and Eric, Isobel and Laura, Sonia and David. John O’Hara taught them how to talk.”

III.

In high school creative writing classes, some people were funny and some people weren’t. The funny people were usually boys and they wrote deadpan haiku (*No one thinks that I am a homosexual/except my girlfriend*—go ahead, scan it. It works.) or thinly veiled character studies of their least favorite teachers, whom they recast as washed-up alcoholics or panhandlers. The rest of us wrote about loneliness and disappointing our parents and love crashing over our heads like black water from a bilge.

In college creative writing classes, no one aspired to funny. (It was a women’s college.)

I was midway through my an MFA in Maryland when I read Mark Jacobs’ story “The Dove of the Back Streets” in *The Kenyon Review.* It’s not a funny story, not like a David Sedaris or George Saunders story is funny. It’s the story of an opera singer and composer, Katrina Webern, marooned in Paraguay, who teaches music to poor children and hides the light of her own musical genius in a fictive identity. On her fiftieth birthday her students throw her a painfully earnest recital/party and Katrina’s on-and-off lover shows up.
It's a gorgeous story, lush with green growing things (as befits a story set in Paraguay) and swelling orchestral undercurrents (as befits a story about an opera singer). I loved it immediately and was unsurprised to discover later that Jacobs is a fellow Catholic writer. But it was Katrina Webern’s lover who clinched it. Twenty years her junior, he comes in and calls her on her artistic self-denial (so Catholic!), bullies her tenderly into the admission of her musical genius. Then he makes passionate love to her and leaves while she is sleeping, taking with him knick-knacks to pawn.

And his name—didn’t I mention his name? Douglas Fairbanks Rodriguez, a gleeful name, a giddy I’ve-had-two-glasses-of-champagne name. Thank you, Douglas Fairbanks Rodriguez, and thank you, Mark Jacobs, for making me laugh out loud while reading and showing me that humor in fiction need not be deadpan, need not be snide. Humor can be sly or joyful or fizzy on the tongue. It can slip its hand into sorrow or regret in a story, as it does in this one. I thought of Douglas Fairbanks Rodriguez and the heavy Teutonic losses that define Katrina Webern’s life when I wrote “The Artist’s Engagement” and dared to call one character’s (meta)painting Cunnilingus and another’s What I Looked Like to Salman Rushdie When He Slipped Through My Window One Moonlit Night. I thought (even as I wrote), The hell with it. I think it’s funny. It makes me laugh.

IV.

Howard Norman opened a fiction workshop by declaring his core belief that “good writing is altruistic.” By this he meant not that good writing was moral or generous in its content, but that it emerged when the writer gave away everything unnecessary, stripped the page of non-essential characters, ideas, sentences, words. I find myself adhering to this ideal here, winnowing out the list of writers who have influenced my own work down to these few. I
almost mentioned Hemingway but only for *The Sun Also Rises*, and only for a few glimpses of Brett in which she reminds me of one of Fitzgerald’s women set afire. I almost mentioned Cheever, but I always read Cheever through the lens of O’Hara because I read him first.

And I am leaving out a whole pantheon of writers who have influenced me—but who have not left their mark on the pages of this collection. You see, I am a divided writer and thus a divided reader. Since beginning the MFA program here at WVU, I have allowed myself to embrace—at least sometimes—the identity of “genre writer.” In this mode I am a storyteller, a fairy tale revisionist; I have had to add the word faërie to my spell check to avoid annoying red squiggles on the screen. I am at work on a fantasy novel about the Little Mermaid, parts of which several of my committee members have read. When that manuscript is done, I have another already outlined, a dark retelling of the Tam Lin story. And when that is done I may just take on the ultimate challenge for a fantasy author and write a mother-daughter quest novel. (It doesn’t exist. Trust me. The mothers in fantasy novels are all dead.)

My influences include Robin McKinley, Tanith Lee, Angela Carter, Elizabeth Marie Pope, Guy Gavriel Kay, Joan Vinge, Julian May, Jane Yolen . . . mostly women, interestingly enough, in a field dominated by male writers. (Alright, by Tolkien.) But what I have taken from these authors I find myself actually casting aside when I turn to the other piece of my craft, the more mainstream literary fiction exemplified by the stories included here. The lushness of Carter’s prose, the decadence of Lee’s (she writes like Carter on acid), the storytelling cadences of McKinley’s best books, the world-building at which Kay and May excel: I have no doubt that these can be breathtaking elements of a story in any genre, but they are, for me, inextricably tied to fantasy literature.
And so my short list of writers here is perhaps not so much proof that I have distilled my influences as that I am still, frankly, a bit of work in progress as a writer. I do not know if or when I will ever meld what I think of as my two (conflicting) writerly identities. For now, I settle for feeling frequently torn and just as frequently grateful, like someone with keys to two houses, miles and miles apart.

V.

Willa Cather was also a divided writer, and her conflict played itself out on the page. In one of her earliest stories, “Paul’s Case,” Cather sends a young Wildean to his death: the story reveals her suspicion of the hothouse world of aestheticism and artistic achievement that Wilde espoused. Yet Cather’s first short story collection, *The Troll Garden*, is all about artists and those who often love them but rarely understand them. And Cather’s own prose returns again and again not only to descriptions of the beautiful but to an insistence on the connection between physical and spiritual beauty. Without exception, her beautiful places—expanses of prairie, New Mexican canyons of yellow rock—offer peace and new-religious renewal.

Because she rejected the direct “art as religion” credo, Cather spent much of her writing life trying to explain and justify her love for both beauty and art. This yearning shows in her work, nearly all of which I read in gulps, first in high school (most of the short stories, *Death Comes for the Archbishop, O Pioneers, My Antonia*) then in graduate school (*The Song of the Lark, A Lost Lady, One of Ours, the Professor’s House*). Cather is an interesting first love to have when you are also reading the fiction in *The New Yorker* and taking fiction workshops in the 1990’s. Her unabashed celebration of the beautiful—in nature, in faces, in art—is the antithesis of the “dirty fiction” movement, with its defiant emphasis on the ugly. I left many workshops feeling shrill and defensive because I had said that I did not like to read about sex on
stained mattresses, about men with bad breath and body odor stumbling home from work, about skinny, ragged girls putting cigarettes out on their arms. I was supposed to like to read these scenes, because they were real, true, authentic. If I didn’t, I wasn’t just an aesthete (bad enough); I was a coward.

I have been moved and impressed and transformed by works of literature in which ugliness is clearly the point. A number of these works have, in fact, been assigned reading from members of my thesis committee (The Sheltering Sky, Blindness, Blood Meridian.) But I have continued to write about artists and to celebrate beauty. My artists are less ambitious than Cather’s and my beauties are smaller: the mingled smells of herbs in a soup, the long-lashed eyes of an old horse. But without Cather’s example, I am not sure would have dared even so much.

I could end there, in thanking Cather for her prose and her subject matter, both of which have sustained me in finding my own. But I owe her a greater debt. Part of my affinity for Cather comes from my identity as a Catholic, the faith to which Cather converted late in her life. In fact, my whole short-list of writers is Catholic. (Weird, huh?) But I don’t read Fitzgerald or O’Hara or Jacobs for their take on the sacred. I turn to Cather for that. I too am drawn to beauty, to the rituals we make of creative work, to the idea of the numinous. In Death Comes for the Archbishop, her love letter to the early Catholic Church in the American west, Cather celebrates not only each of these things but their union. It is a book that sustains me doubly, as spiritual seeker and as writer, and though it has been years since I last read it I can summon certain phrases and images like lines of prayer: a broken woman walking in a rising flock of doves, her face alight; a priest in crisis looking up at the moon “high in the blue vault, majestic, lonely, benign”; mountains that turn red in the sunset, the color “of the dried blood of saints and martyrs preserved in old churches in Rome, which liquefies upon occasion.”
VI.

There are other writers to thank, of course. Gail Galloway Adams gave pages of often illegible (but when legible, wonderful) notes on my work and asked me not only to read but to write stories inspired by: John Berger, John Cheever, Alice Munro, Lorrie Moore. One of those pieces is now published and two more are in this collection. Fellow writers in the program, like Renee Nicholson, Sarabeth Childers, and Emily Watson, have demonstrated a kind of grace in their growing mastery of their craft that makes anything seem possible.

And all three of the members of my thesis committee have influenced my work. Mark has led some of the most relaxed writing workshops I’ve ever taken, I think because in not setting published writers up as exemplars he allows those writers in his workshop to feel like fellows to the writers we read, not disciples. By his own example, he demonstrates a pure commitment to the work of writing that I seldom achieve (but hope to). Kevin is, quite frankly, the only line editor whose eye I have ever trusted above my own, and I’m awfully arrogant about my sentence-level prose. I find now that I can train myself to prune a paragraph simply by trying to read it as if I were Kevin. Emily has suggested ways to shape my stories that make them more themselves, somehow, than they were before. She has also read hundreds of pages of my work, coached me through the novel chapter I never thought I’d write, and spoken to me as one novelist to another, which is a phrase worth a great deal more than five words.

VII.

And so I come back around to the familiar, to the part of the note that even my children know how to compose. Thank you, I’ve said, and why.

Sincerely,

Ann
The Artist’s Engagement

“At least it’s your left wrist!” the radiology technician said. She flattened Amy’s arm out on the x-ray table as gently and impersonally as a delicate cut of meat. Amy was left-handed. She almost said so, but the girl had already ducked behind the x-ray screen and started taking pictures. Amy clutched the heavy apron draped over her in case she was pregnant, which she wasn’t, and tried to shape a smile that was ironic and amused—Actually, I am left-handed, can you believe it?—rather than pathetic.

Alone in a curtained cubicle in the emergency room, she reverted to the pathetic. Doubly pathetic because the reason she felt pathetic was pathetic. Her wrist was broken, her left wrist, which was a disaster for all kinds of reasons. She’d driven herself to the hospital, which had been idiotic, both painful and nerve-wracking every time she turned right. She had no idea how she was going to get the car home once they casted her arm. How was she going to drive? How was she going to take notes in class or finish the series of compulsory sketches that were due next week in Drawing the Human Figure? Her own work required a steady hand and precise placement with tweezers and dots of glue. How was she going to do that?

Yet everything else paled in comparison to the ache of disappointment Amy felt when she thought about Saturday night, just three days away, when she was supposed to be getting engaged. And now her stupid left wrist was broken. How was she going to get dressed up? How was she going to do her make-up? How was she going to fit the ring on her hand?

Pathetic. Her hair kept falling in her face, there was a stain on her sweatpants that was probably glue but was suspiciously crusty and white. Someone who didn’t know it was glue might get the wrong idea. She was wearing her favorite sweater, which was ballet pink and
cashmere but so old that it was pilling all over the stomach. And she looked fat—at least, her arm looked fat. Swelling had buried the knob of bone at the back of her hand. A nurse gave her an ice pack, which leaked and dripped onto her sweatpants. When she lifted the ice off, the skin on her wrist was red and wet.

Amy put the ice back on her wrist and held it with her right hand. She picked at the glue with the fingers of her left hand, which hurt. She had been working on a collage in studio all afternoon, which was another reason she was pathetic. Collage: what kind of artistic statement did that make, anyway? Amy pictured the latest one, affixed within the light box and surrounded by her treasured materials: buttons, photos, ribbon, newspaper clippings, magazine pages, old silverware, dried flowers, scraps of lace. This one centered on a stack of vintage cookbooks and home economics texts Amy had found in a thrift shop. She’d been thinking about calling it *A Good Hostess Never Forgets the Fingerbowls*.

Now she could almost taste her disenchantment with the piece, a sour pressure in her mouth when she remembered Siobhan coming up behind her as she placed a frilled toothpick in the lower corner. She’d spread a thin layer of glue and then arranged the toothpicks close together but angled out, so that the end effect was of a fringed fan, peacock colors of blue, green and yellow. You would have to look closely to see that it was just a pile of toothpicks.

Goddamn Siobhan. When she’d wafted away—*Did I ask for her opinion?*—Amy had been so upset she’d given up work for the day, thrown on her coat, and bolted out of the building, still fumbling at the buttons with sticky fingers. It was cold and the staircase in front of the art building was icy. Amy felt the step beneath her foot suddenly smooth and slick as glass; she grabbed for the handrail with her right hand and put her left hand back to brace her fall. She missed the handrail.
Amy sat for nearly an hour, in between quick bustling checks on her and assurances that x-rays were processing, the orthopedist was on his way, before she thought to call anyone. On the paper towel dispenser over the sink was a sign warning that cell phones could interfere with medical equipment. But lacking even a magazine to flip through, she realized that she could hear people in neighboring cubicles talking on their cells. She fished hers out of her purse with her good hand and called her best friend Anu, who didn’t answer. Amy remembered that Anu was in class and sent a text message, which was ridiculously hard to do. She had to squeeze the phone between her knees and it kept slipping sideways.

She called Drew at work. He answered, laughing, on the second ring.

“Hi,” she said. “What’s so funny?”

“Nothing,” he said. “We just ordered Chinese.”

There was more laughter in the background, an admonition to someone not to be “foul” and double-dip an eggroll in the hot mustard.

“Drew?”

He was chewing into the phone and didn’t answer.

“I’m at the hospital.”

A crashing sound like he’d dropped something metal, or set his chair back on all four legs. “What? What happened? Ohmigod, are you all right?”

Amy let out a long breath, resting on the wave of his panic for a minute.

“I’m fine,” she said. “I broke my wrist, is all, coming out of studio.”

“Oh Christ, honey—I’ll be right there—Oh, man. Which hospital?”

Amy’s wrist and hand ached and, since she was using her right to hold the phone up, she had to rest her left forearm on her leg. The ice pack was leaving a wet black circle on her thigh.
She looked down at it and realized she didn’t want him to come. If Drew came over she would cry and demand take-out and then get grumpy when she ate too much. And she couldn’t tell him that the tears were partly about the fact that it was her *left wrist, damn it*, and now her stupid hand was going to be all swollen on Saturday and she’d have a cast on—

“Don’t come, honey,” she said. “I’ll be fine. I’m going to be here for a while anyway and you’ve got that deadline.”

“Are you sure?”

“Come over tomorrow?”

“Yeah, of course. And if you change your mind call me back, alright?”

“Alright.” Amy’s phone beeped to tell her she had a new text message.

“Promise?” Drew asked. She could feel him trying to get a hold of her attention and her insecurities, gather them together the way he folded her small hands into his larger ones and pressed her fingers while he talked to her. Drew thought she had low self-esteem. “Promise you’ll call if you need me.”

“I promise.”

She hung up and looked at the screen on the phone. As she’d hoped and expected, Anu was on her way. Amy would have company for the rest of the night and wouldn’t break down and call Drew back, which was good. She was working on being more self-sufficient, less needy. It was proving harder than she’d expected, this detaching herself from Drew. On nights they didn’t spend together, she got stomachaches that felt like stage fright. But when she poked at her feelings she couldn’t sort out her longing for Drew from her longings for—depending on the night—chocolate cake with fudge frosting, more confidence in her talent, nicer furniture, a real job.
The irony was that when they’d first gotten together a year ago, everyone they knew clearly had the same question: “what is she doing with him?” Drew’s mother had been so flustered when she first met Amy over dinner that she kept trying to light cigarettes even though they were sitting in a non-smoking section.

“But you’re so pretty!” she said. “Look at you! Just lovely. How did you two meet again?”

They’d met at a party of Amy’s high school friends. Drew came with another girl, Jessie Blaylock, who always had a boyfriend even though she was fat and had thin lips. Amy had never understood how Jessie did it, how she put on a tight shirt, tossed back her silky blonde hair and didn’t seem to care that she had stomach rolls and small eyes and chubby cheeks. Guys never seemed to care either.

Drew had come to the party with Jessie and left, insistently, with Amy. Back at her apartment, which she shared with Anu and two other new grad students, he had kissed her for a long time, lying on her bed with all their clothes on. Amy thought he smelled odd at first, not bad, but odd, until she identified the smell, even as she was kissing him, as a combination of childhood odors: laundry detergent, cheap shampoo, warm, slept-in sheets. They didn’t have sex that night. When she shrank away, curling her arms over her breasts, Drew pulled her into the hollow of his chest. He had long, sinewy arms and Amy felt enclosed but not pressured. His hands didn’t move on her back, feeling for her bra strap, or slide down to touch her skin under the edge of her shirt.

“How about we just go to sleep,” he said, and they did, still dressed. Drew wrapped himself around her and fell asleep first. Amy lay awake several minutes longer, wondering how
his falling asleep so easily, his head on her shoulder, his hair tickling her chin, could make her feel less protective than protected. *Safe.*

Amy and Drew were both children of ugly, drawn-out divorces and did not, as a rule, fight very often. Fighting made them both so anxious that Drew would begin to see the vivid aura that preceded his migraines, while Amy hyperventilated and got so cold she shook. They did, however, fight about money: Drew ought to have more than he did and Amy didn’t have any; Drew’s generosity with friends and co-workers was perhaps not admirable enough to justify his five-figure credit card debt; that same generosity made Amy feel cherished and safe and sometimes when she asked if they could go out to dinner and he said “it’s not in the budget this week” she burst into tears and he broke down and took her out anyway.

When they had gotten serious about the engagement, Amy had stumbled over an explanation of what kind of expenditure was usually expected on a ring and Drew had let go of her hand—they were sitting across from each other at their favorite pizza place, two slices of ham-and-pineapple congealing between them—and looked shocked. He had a mobile, expressive face, a big nose, bad skin, and long eyes that were just plain brown unless he was excited or aroused, when they turned warm and gold and made Amy feel like someone had just lit candles in the room.

“Two months salary!” he said. “Do you have any idea how much that is?”

“You don’t have to spend that much!” Amy said. “It’s just supposed to be a guideline.”

“Made up by who, the jewelry stores?”

“Probably.” Amy dropped her head and slid her hands into her lap. Looking down at them she could picture the ring she wanted glinting back up at her from the third finger of her left hand.
“Never mind,” she said. But of course that wasn’t good enough. She was too passive and then when she didn’t get what she wanted she pouted afterwards and spoiled everything.

She tried to take a deep breath but couldn’t. “It’s supposed to be a once-in-a-lifetime thing, isn’t it? I mean, of course I don’t want us—you—to spend money you haven’t got, but for something I wear forever—”

She glanced up, saw him frowning over the check as he wrote in the tip—30 percent as usual. She had a picture torn out of a bridal magazine with her ring on it and the location of the jewelers who carried it listed at the bottom of the page. She had to give it to him, but had no idea how.

Her ring was platinum with a delicate filigree setting all around the central diamond, very art deco. It was a ring that Amy imagined she could find in a dusty little antique shop somewhere, tucked away in a case of hideous estate jewelry, ruby ladybugs as big as the first joint of a finger, big knots of gold studded with pearls whose only possible decorative function must be to disguise the swelling of arthritic knuckles. And there her ring would be, slender and perfect, needing a quick dust and a polish and the saleswoman saying in a tone of surprise and wonder: “Well! I don’t think I even knew we had this one!” And Amy would put it on and it would fit perfectly.

She had finally despaired and sent Drew the link to the designer’s website. He had replied with a short e-mail: Why did you send me this, I wonder? Must have been a mistake. Guess I’ll just delete it. (LQTM) Love you, D.

LQTM: Laughing quietly to myself. Amy felt laughed at. She wished she hadn’t sent the link.
She knew Drew had bought her a ring though. She knew he was going to propose on Saturday. It had become a joke between them, because it was their anniversary and they were going out to dinner. Drew’s tactic had been to announce to everyone and anyone that he couldn’t imagine why Amy would think he was proposing that night, he certainly wasn’t going to and she better not get her hopes up. Then he would catch her face, the wobble of the smile that she hoped no one could see, and he would wink at her, lean over and kiss her on the nose.

She had bought a new dress, of course. Anu went with her and tried to talk her into a pistachio-colored sweater dress that Amy could see, objectively, looked lovely on her. But it wasn’t what she wanted to wear to get engaged. She bought a black cocktail dress instead, shorter than she usually wore, and too tight unless she sucked her stomach in. It had sheer sleeves that ended in wide cuffs at the wrists, buttoned with jet beads shaped like flowers. When she put the ring on, it would be the only bright thing she had on, her outfit a backdrop for its sparkle and shine.

She’d have to leave one sleeve unbuttoned now. When the orthopedist finally arrived he pronounced her wrist “broken, nice and clean.” She put her arm up on the cold metal table and watched it grow into a clumsy baby of an arm, braced and swaddled in cotton. A spattering of plaster got on her biceps and Amy scraped it off under her fingernails, then realized that with her left hand immobile, she couldn’t get the grit out from under the nails on her right.

Left alone in the lobby with her discharge papers, Amy chewed at the gluey stuff, rolled it to the tip of her tongue, and spat it into her palm. She looked down at her left arm. It was casted above the elbow, though the orthopedist said that would only be for a week, then he’d cut it down. But Saturday was only four days away. Amy felt her eyes fill up with tears.

“Hey, you,” someone said, “quit that.”
Amy blinked at Anu, who took a look at the arm and immediately understood.

“Oh, Baby,” she said. “Of all the times in your entire life to break your left wrist—”

“It could have happened Friday.”

“Or Saturday night on the way out the door,” Anu said. She sat down and gave Amy a quick, hard hug. Anu wasn’t much of a hugger, so Amy tried to appreciate the gesture.

“It’ll be fine,” she said. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it matters,” Anu said. “Maybe you can wear the ring on a chain around your neck for a while.”

“It’s all Siobhan’s fault.”

“What is?” Anu asked.

“My wrist,” Amy said. “It’s Siobhan’s fault I broke it. If I hadn’t been so upset about her stupid comment on my work, I would have been paying attention on the steps.”

“I’m willing to blame Siobhan for any number of things,” Anu said. “I don’t have any problem with that. Ready to get out of here?” She draped Amy’s coat over her shoulders, then held the doors to the outside.

“I caught a ride,” she said, “so I could drive your car back. Give me your keys.”

Amy watched Anu stride across the parking lot, knowing that she wasn’t going to fall. She had on duck boots, probably the pair she’d had since college, jeans, and some kind of stunning orange tunic thing embroidered with gold thread at the neck and the cuffs. All of it muffled under a very long, lumpy, forest green scarf that Anu had knitted herself and wore everywhere in the winter, often instead of a coat. Over the scarf swung Anu’s glossy black bell of hair. Anu’s hair sometimes stirred Amy’s bubbling jealousy of women who had even a single feature that could be called “striking.” She coveted the clean long line of Anu’s nose, the
triangular angles in which Anu’s hair moved when she walked, the blunt square ends of her fingers, on which the nails were always short, though Anu sometimes painted them copper or emerald green.

In the car, Amy looked down at her hand. Her fingers looked like sausages—no, not sausages, because they weren’t swelling evenly, they were swelling more down where the cast was pinching them.

“My fingers look like crescent rolls,” she said. “You know, like if you cut one in half. Look how fat they are.” She tried to hold her hand out for Anu to see.

“Stop staring at them,” Anu said. “Why is this Siobhan’s fault?”

“I was working on my new piece, you know, the one using those cookbooks I found last month at the thrift store, and she came up behind me.”

“Uh-oh.”

“Thank you.”

Siobhan was a year ahead of them in the program. She was very tall and Amy could not look at her without thinking the word “willowy.” She had a lot of pale red hair exactly the color of raw salmon, as Amy had pointed out one night after several drinks. Anu had snorted vodka out her nose and spent the rest of the night intermittently wiping her eyes. There was, however, no denying the fact that it was very attractive hair in person, much like the rest of Siobhan. She played up her pre-Raphaelite image, wearing velvet and brocade, thick belts slung around her non-existent hips. She wore a perfume that smelled exactly the way Amy had always imagined a seraglio would smell, of incense and sex and spices used for tea. The mere whiff of Siobhan’s perfume made Amy mad, because it was just so fucking perfect and Siobhan knew it.
When she’d smelled that perfume in the studio earlier, Amy had tensed up, steadied her hand, then tapped a yellow-fringed toothpick down into the glue.

“Hi Siobhan,” she said.

“Hi Amy. I hope you don’t mind. I love watching you work. It’s so meticulous. I can’t imagine having that kind of patience.”

Amy tried to ignore her. She picked up a slip of paper cut from one of her cookbooks and considered how to place it near the toothpick fan. Out of the corner of her eye she could see the rosy gleam of a lock of Siobhan’s hair trailing on her work table as Siobhan bent in.

“What is the theme here—oh, cookbooks! Domesticity again. You should consider doing a whole series on domesticity, Amy. There’s something so—‘craft-y’ about your medium that it really just works, you know? Well—I’ll leave you alone. That looks painstaking.”

Siobhan worked on such a large scale that she sometimes used a ladder when she painted. She called herself a “sexual-political artist.” She already had a dealer and one of her paintings had been included in an exhibition at a New York gallery entitled “Vixens and Visionaries: 12 Women Artists for the New Millennium.” It was an enormous canvas painted entirely with the image of an open vagina, petaled and matte like a Georgia O’Keefe flower. Coming into the canvas at an angle from above, Siobhan had drawn a paintbrush, coated with pink paint and overs-sized to match its purported subject. The painting was called *Cunnilingus* and it had sold the first night of the show.

“It’s not like she hasn’t said stuff like this before,” Anu said.

“I know.” Amy looked out the window. A cd that Anu had given her was playing, Indian music, a wild, dancing surge that Amy wanted to love but felt mostly surprised by. It
sounded more than celebratory; it felt like a small, distant bacchanal was happening inside the dashboard. Amy didn’t even know the names of half of the instruments. She didn’t know how the singers were making those noises in their throats, the ululations that ought to have been wailing but were instead clearly ecstatic.

She glanced over at Anu, who was looking for an opening in traffic so she could turn left into their apartment complex. Anu was a brilliant artist, better than Siobhan. Amy appreciated the irony of Anu defending Amy’s “small” work because Anu herself did not do small work. She painted in saturated colors and her people were life-sized, neither monstrous nor miniature. She was a second-year MFA student in a three-year program, but she’d already won a major prize for a self-portrait that Amy only dimly understood. It was beautiful and surreal and titled *What I Looked Like to Salman Rushdie When He Slipped Through My Window One Moonlit Night.*

Amy’s favorite was another self-portrait, this time of Anu wearing the red and gold sari and hennaed hands of a Hindu bride, having sex with a white boy whose face you couldn’t see. Anu’s face in the painting looked out of the canvas with a hint of the serene challenge of Frida Kahlo, while the henna tattoos spiraled off her hands and spread across her lover’s thin white chest.

“How was class, anyway?” Amy asked.

“Don’t change the subject,” Anu said. “You’ve got to stop letting Siobhan get to you. Sometimes when I see her in action I think she can’t even help it, like a vampire.”

“Vampires don’t tell people their work is ‘craft-y.’ ”

Anu pulled into a parking space. “They might,” she said. “Maybe it’s not even the blood-sucking that kills. Maybe it’s the pre-bite insults.”
Amy pictured Siobhan, the vampire, trying to say “There’s something so—‘craft-y’ about your medium” and failing to get the words out around her fangs. The image made her smile as she shifted clumsily to undo her seatbelt with her right hand.

“Let me get it,” Anu said. She’d caught the smile. “Was it something I said?”

“You know,” Amy said, “someday you’re going to fail to cheer me up when I get stupid and then what will you do?”

“My life will lose all meaning,” Anu said.

They ordered Thai food and opened two bottles of Riesling that Anu had stolen from the department Christmas party. Amy sat with her cast propped on the arm of the sofa and opened and closed her fingers to feel the ache in her wrist.

“Is it really bugging you?” Anu asked.

Amy shook her head. “Not that much.”

“It’s kind of creepy to watch,” Anu said. “Your fingers keep moving like they’re not connected to the rest of your arm.”

She was sitting on the other end of the sofa facing Amy, her bare feet between them. Amy always wanted to touch Anu’s feet when she saw them up close like this; they were smaller than she expected Anu’s feet to be, broad and brown and beautifully-boned along the tops. She loved the contrast between the shape of Anu’s feet—their footness—and the artificially beautiful colors Anu chose for her toenails: metallic purple, olive green, acid yellow with silver flecks. Looking at Anu’s toes, Amy always felt surprised by their color in a way that made her feel ashamed of herself and her limited imagination.
“Maybe I should get you to paint my nails for Saturday,” she said. “Since they don’t
even look like my fingers any more. You could paint them one of your colors.”

Anu shook her head. “You’d hate it. In five minutes you’d be wiping it off. Go get a
French manicure.”

Amy put her head back and shut her eyes. “What I should do is go to bed.”

“Yeah, when you start staring at my feet I know you’re done for the night.”

“Well,” Amy smiled, her eyes still shut, “they are pretty mesmerizing feet.”

“I know.” Anu thrust one foot under Amy’s right hand, resting on the cushion, then
jerked it back when Amy tickled her. “That’s it! I’ll see you in the morning.”

Alone in the dark room with the smell of basil and coconut milk, Amy tried to feel the
excitement about Saturday that had been fluttering in her stomach intermittently for weeks, but
all she felt was full. She thought about her piece, the peacock fan she’d left unfinished. She
couldn’t even remember what she’d done with the slip of paper she’d been placing when
Siobhan had moved in for the kill, and she’d been so proud when she’d discovered it. One of her
cookbooks claimed to feature recipes from “all of the most prominent hostesses” in Washington,
D.C. in 1949, with black and white pictures of said hostesses appearing every few pages along
with quotes from each woman about proper entertaining. The one Amy planned to use in the
corner of her collage was in gray script and read: *There is no reason to use an inelegant
toothpick.*

By Friday night, the swelling in Amy’s fingers hurt enough that she pulled away when
Drew tried to touch her hand, even gently.

“Ow!”
They were at Drew’s front door and Amy sagged against the wall while he fished out his key. “We’ll get you some ice when we get inside,” he said.

“You think I’m blowing this all out of proportion,” Amy said. “But I mean, for God’s sake, ‘craft-y’?”

Drew shut the door behind them, kicked off his coat and shoes. His shoulders were up, and tight, making him look taller and more angular than ever, and Amy knew he was mad at her. She drew a deep breath, trying not to let the tears into her voice. “Why can’t you just see what I’m saying—”

“Amy! Jesus!” He spun around and they were finally having a full-fledged fight. “You just want me to agree with you, that’s all you want, and I don’t, okay? I get that she was in your space, but it sounds like she was just making a comment, that’s all, maybe even a compliment if you’d even consider that possibility—”

“So you think my work is ‘craft-y’? Is that it?”

“Why is that so bad? I don’t get it! You make collages, with stuff you get at a craft store, you’ve said it yourself a hundred times, you’re always talking about how what you do isn’t the same as what Anu does, or Siobhan. But when Siobhan says it you flip out.”

“You don’t understand,” Amy wailed, and burst into tears.

Drew grabbed his hair with both hands and pulled. The angrier he got, the uglier he got, his narrow, pocked face going flat and greasy, his eyes thinning into slits under his thick brows. Even the furrows along the sides of his nose grew more pronounced, until Amy felt like she was screaming at a man carved out of some kind of unyielding rock.

“I’m going to get a beer,” he said after a minute.
“That’s stupid,” Amy said, wiping her cheeks with her good hand. “You’re going to get a migraine, I can tell. Don’t make it worse.”

“Fuck you, Amy,” he said. “Seriously.”

He went into the kitchen and Amy jumped as he slammed or threw something loud enough to knock the clock off the wall. Nine o’clock, she saw, as the clock bounced on the carpet. Nine o’clock on Friday night, Saturday night’s dinner reservation less than a day away and they hated each other. She let herself sink onto the floor, still wearing her coat, and pressed her face into her knees hard enough to see spots behind her eyelids as she cried.

The problem was that Drew had never really understood her work, didn’t really understand art at all, or care about it very much. He thought it was enough to be supportive of the fact that Amy wanted to be an artist, that she was going to art school. He went to gallery openings with her when she asked, which wasn’t often. He thought some of Anu’s pictures were “cool” and had even asked Amy to explain the significance of the henna tattoos and the red sari in the picture Amy loved.

“So this is sort of a ‘fuck you’ picture, is that it?” he’d said. “Like, ‘fuck you’ to the whole arranged marriage idea and the idea that she has to marry an Indian guy?”

“Yeah,” Amy had said, glad that Anu wasn’t there.

The problem was that Drew didn’t understand her work and also that Drew was impatient, deeply impatient, with Amy’s feelings about Siobhan. He wanted Amy to be stronger, to be less petty, less easily-intimidated, that was part of it. Drew himself was impervious to condescension. When Amy pointed out that he was underdressed for a restaurant, he looked around at the other men in suits and ties, shrugged, and said that at least he was comfortable. At
parties, if someone mentioned a wine or a writer or a musician he’d never heard of, Drew would look politely bored and shrug: “Not my thing.”

He was annoyed by pretension, which might have made him dislike Siobhan on principle, but Drew thought Siobhan was hot. In bed one night, while Amy was lying with her head on his shoulder and sliding her cupped hand up and down his penis, Drew had asked her to tell him who she’d want to have a threesome with—“No celebrities, someone real. Come on, you know you’ve thought about it.”

Not really. Amy had shrugged, her hair catching on his beard, and thought about saying Anu just because she couldn’t think of anyone else. But she didn’t want to know Drew’s reaction to a threesome with Anu.

“I can’t think,” she’d said instead. “What about you?”

And he had said Siobhan.

“Hey.”

Amy felt Drew sit down on the floor in front of her. She tried to stop crying.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m sorry I lost my temper. It’s been a really long week with this deadline coming up and I just—I feel like you want me to say something and if it’s not the exact right thing, you’re going to get mad no matter what.”

Amy didn’t say anything. It didn’t help that he was right.

“Look, I’m sorry. I don’t know what else you want me to say.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, and dissolved into tears again. Drew sighed.
The phone rang and Drew unfolded from the floor to answer it. It was his mother, she could tell from the teasing tone in his voice, a tone he used with her sometimes. She picked up her face and poked holes in the carpet pile in front of her.

“Amy?” Drew called. “My mom wants to talk to you.”

Amy sniffled and took the phone. “Hi, Lois.”

“Hi, hon,” Lois said. “I’m so sorry about your wrist. Are you doing okay?”

“I’m fine,” Amy said. “It’s just a pain, that’s all.”

“Well”—a giggle, disconcertingly girlish—“it’s a good thing you’re not doing anything too special tomorrow night, then, isn’t it?”

So she was part of the larger plan. Amy looked over for Drew, but he had disappeared into the kitchen again.

“Well,” she said, “we’re going out to dinner.”

“Oh I know,” Lois said, “Drew told me where he’s taking you and am I jealous! I want you to know I was hoping Drew might have other plans for tomorrow, I really was.”

Amy wiped her eyes.

“I tell you, I could just cry,” Lois said. “If I were you, I’d read him the riot act because you are the best thing that’s ever going to happen to him and don’t you forget it. But”—she dropped her voice to a conspiratorial whisper—“he’s not proposing tomorrow night, honey. So don’t get your hopes up.”

“So that was awkward,” Anu said, “his mom calling right then.”

“It wasn’t her fault,” Amy said.

“Did you have some good make-up sex at least—hold still!”
Amy blushed. “Sorry. Yeah. I mean, you know.” She kept her eyes on her cast, watching Anu drop a silver sequin into place and tap it lightly with the tweezers to press it into the glue.

“Did he say anything else about tonight?”

Amy shook her head. “No, just that he’d pick me up at 7:30.”

“So everything’s still on.”

“Or nothing’s on,” Amy said. “You know, like his mom said, he’s still not going to ask me tonight.”

“Right,” Anu said. “I keep getting confused.”

Amy lifted her eyes to the triangular curtain of black hair that fell across Anu’s face as she bent over Amy’s cast. She thought about asking out loud what she’d been wondering when she woke up this morning—Is this a good idea?—but she didn’t know what she wanted Anu to say.

Drew had dropped Amy off at her apartment after breakfast on his way back in to work, still trying to make that deadline. He’d said he’d probably be at the computer all day. When Amy came in, Anu was in the kitchen unloading bags from Kraft, Kit & Kaboodle: all-purpose glue, sequins, ribbon, fabric paint, bugle beads.

“So I had an idea,” she’d said when she saw Amy. “Sit down.”

Anu ran silver ribbons of sequins up the length of the cast, then painted leaves and delicate flowers along each one. Finally, she dotted glue on the larger flowers and put beads and gold sequins in their centers. Amy was so tired still, and nervous. Her eyes blurred with tears and the sparkle from her newly-spangled cast splintered into gorgeous multi-colored light when she blinked.
“It’s so beautiful,” she said. “You have to take a picture, Anu.”

“I’ll get a picture of you when you’re all dressed,” Anu said.

“No, take a picture just of the cast.” Amy tapped a painted bud with her fingertip to see if it was dry. “You could put this in your portfolio. It’s amazing.”

Anu grinned. “Not really my usual style, is it? Maybe I could use it as evidence of my ability to work in multiple media.”

“Seriously,” Amy said. She stretched out her arm, which looked like it was draped in one of the exquisite pieces of needlepoint she was always hunting for in antique shops and thrift stores. “Go get your camera, please?”

“Alright, alright.” Anu washed her hands and went to her room. Looking down at her arm, Amy thought about Anu’s paintings, her toenails, and now this, which was, indeed, not in her usual style. It was in Amy’s style, restrained, formal and explicitly feminine. The sequins might have looked exotic in another work of art, but Anu had paired them only with spring green and pale pink, a few dabs of yellow, an occasional lavender bead. Set off by pastels, the silver and gold called to mind the gleam of old pewter, of candlelight, of mirrors in dusty rooms.

Amy had never considered the possibility that Anu could, just on a whim, create art that resembled her own. She turned her cast side to side so it caught the light, realizing she was looking for flaws. But there wasn’t a single sequin set askew; Amy couldn’t have done it better herself.

“Alright?” Anu asked as she came back in. “Is it drying okay?”

“Yes,” Amy said. “Perfect.”
Drew wore a suit to dinner. Amy couldn’t believe it. It was his only suit, a gray one he’d had since college that he wore with a white shirt and a blue and gray striped tie. He’d even pulled his hair back in a ponytail and trimmed his mustache. He looked handsome, his eyes bright with delight in his own mischief whenever he looked at her across the table, but Amy had a headache and had to force herself to smile back. She hadn’t eaten anything all day and her fingers itched along the edges of the cast. She knew she looked lovely, her hair brushed into big soft curls over her shoulders and her eyes—courtesy of Anu again—made-up to look twice their normal size.

Amy had perfume on, the lily-of-the-valley scent that was Drew’s favorite, but she was afraid her cast was starting to smell, that sour tang of her unwashed skin underneath it. She put her left hand in her lap and concentrated on the menu.

There were so many ways he could not propose. There was the ring in the dessert, in a glass of champagne, brought over by a waiter or another customer, someone Drew had planted in advance. Amy remembered the story she’d read about how Madonna’s husband had proposed to her: he’d stuffed a 5-carat diamond ring in a crumpled brown paper bag and left it on the nightstand. She’d almost thrown it away. Amy shuddered at the thought.

“Do you know what you want?”

Amy looked up at Drew and saw that the waiter was there. She wanted to order the vanilla-poached lobster, but it was $40.00, not to mention that ordering the most expensive thing on the menu felt like admitting how much she was hoping for tonight.

“I’ll have the shrimp, please,” she said.

Drew handed the waiter his menu. “And I’ll have the lobster.”
Amy shut her eyes, briefly hating him again. What was wrong with her? The waiter asked if they wanted wine with dinner and Drew, who didn’t like wine, said no.

“I’d like a glass,” Amy said. “Is that alright?”

Drew raised an eyebrow. “Of course it’s alright. Get whatever you want.”

She felt herself flush with discomfort, feeling the waiter still standing there waiting for her to decide, no doubt noticing the extent to which she and Drew were not communicating—and what if this waiter knew Drew was going to propose. Amy tossed her hair over her shoulder as she scanned the list of wines by the glass.

“I’ll have this one,” she said. “Please.”

“The Viognier,” the waiter said. “An excellent match with your meal.” He smiled at her. Amy wondered if he was trying to put her at ease because she hadn’t known how to pronounce “Viognier” or because he knew what she was worrying about, knew it was going to turn out alright.

The wine was delicious, $15 for a glass and worth every sip, Amy thought. She made Drew try it and he swallowed, looked thoughtful.

“Yeah,” he said. “That’s good. It’s just not something I’d go out of my way to drink. Try some lobster?”

The lobster was so good that Amy closed her eyes while she chewed. She tried to make a joke out of her disappointment—“Trade you?”

Drew grinned through a mouthful of the walnut gnocchi that had come with his meal.

“Are you kidding?”

Amy ate her shrimp, which was also good, and ordered another glass of wine. Drew told her about the progress his team was making on the project due next week, about the latest
skirmish in his mother’s ongoing feud with her boss, about the plans he was making to go to his five-year college reunion in June.

“You’ll be able to come, right?”

Amy shrugged. “Probably. I mean, I might take a summer class and I’m on the list to teach this summer, but if it’s just over the weekend I can come.”

“Good.” He winked at her. “There are going to be a lot of people who want to meet you.”

Because she’d be his fiancée by then, by the end of tonight even. Amy felt her stomach lurch in anticipation. She drank some more wine. The waiter arrived with dessert menus and she glanced hopefully at Drew, but he shook his head.

“Not tonight,” he said. “We’ll just take the check.”

The check came, weighed down with two wafers of dark chocolate. Drew counted out cash carefully and popped his chocolate in his mouth. Then they left.

Back at Drew’s apartment, Amy took off her heels and padded into the kitchen without turning on the lights. Drew was in the bathroom. She checked the refrigerator for champagne, chocolate-dipped strawberries on a plate, a ring box in the vegetable drawer. Nothing. She remembered another story she’d read when she was a little girl, about a girl who wanted a surprise party so much that she told her whole family that they had to give her one. She got up on the morning of her birthday, put on a fancy dress, then sat and waited all day for the surprise party that never came. The next day, properly humbled, the little girl got her party. Amy had understood the lesson of the story when she’d read it, that it’s not a surprise party if you’re not surprised—and also that you have to let people give you gifts the way they want to give them to
you. But she’d still hated that story, kept picturing that poor little girl in her taffeta dress with her lace-trimmed socks on, waiting and waiting for her party to start.

Amy put her evening bag down on the counter, looked at her cast, the sequins flickering in the blue light from the microwave clock. She thought about calling Anu to tell her what had happened—nothing—but realized she didn’t know what Anu was doing tonight. She might be out.

She opened the fridge again. She stayed over at Drew’s often enough that she kept some food here: her favorite cereal, skim milk instead of the 2% he insisted on, oranges because he never had any fruit. She also had a can of chocolate frosting in the fridge, which she’d bought to ice brownies with one night. She’d only used about half on the brownies. The rest of the can sat in Drew’s fridge and Amy snuck spoonfuls after dinner, during commercial breaks, or after sex. She’d climb back into the bed and Drew would tuck her into his arm and chuckle.

“Get your fix?”

“What do you mean?”

“Frosting,” he’d say. “I can smell it on your breath.” And when she buried her face in his chest, mortified, he’d kiss the top of her head. “Oh quit it. I think it’s cute. Disgusting, but cute.”

Amy pulled the frosting out from behind the milk, got a spoon from the silverware drawer, and pulled the lid off the can. She was just dipping the spoon in when the kitchen light went on and she screamed and jumped, the spoon flying out of her hand.

“Sorry.” Drew stood in the doorway grinning, unrepentant. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“It’s okay.” Amy looked around for her spoon but Drew got to it first, knelt to pick it up, and then stayed on the floor, looking up at her with an expression of maniacal glee on his face.
“What?” Amy asked.

“Weren’t you going to have some frosting?”

She looked down at the can in her hand. It was only about a quarter full, the sides scraped clean and just a mound of frosting left on the bottom, in the center of which was a delicate, filigreed, art-deco style engagement ring with a round-cut center stone. It was her ring, exactly the ring she’d picked out, glinting up at her and smeared with chocolate.

“Hey Amy,” Drew said, holding up the spoon. “Will you marry me?”

And all she could think, looking down at the ring, was that it looked like an art piece. She could leave it just like it was and call it—*The Bulimic’s Engagement*, that’s what Siobhan would call it. And it would sell, too, Amy had no doubt of that.
In Search of a Smaller Bar Scene

I’ve been sober 19 hours when the telephone rings. I’m so strung-out by then, curled up on the sofa with three blankets around me and still shivering, that the sound of the phone is like a scream in my ears. I can't remember what the noise means at first, and then I can't remember what to do about it.

“Take me off speaker phone, Cissy,” my mama says, so I do, cupping the receiver on my shoulder and trying to stop the convulsive cold-turkey shudders.

“Mama, this isn’t really a good time.”

“The thing is, Cissy,” she says, “there really isn’t a good time, is there?”

Her voice is crisp and clear, no poisonous thread of mother-guilt in it because that would be beneath her. And because while she might actually have some grounds to be bitter about how seldom I’ve called her or—God help me—gone down to see her in the last two years, she’s not talking about that. She’s talking about my drinking, which she knows about and I know she knows about but which we never actually talk about, not in so many words.

So she’s right about there never really being a good time, which doesn’t make this time any better. I pick up the empty glass on the table next to me. It smells like bourbon and I’ve been using it like it’s an ex-boyfriend’s shirt, holding it close and breathing in deep when I can’t stand it anymore. I remind myself that I am supposed to be having a conversation.

“Is everything alright, Mama? How’s the church?”

“The church is just fine,” she says. “We’re having a women’s retreat here next month, which is keeping me busy. We set aside a block of rooms at the Comfort Inn downtown and they’re already booked.”
“Who’s headlining?”

“It’s not a rock concert, Cissy.”

I really cannot have this conversation right now. I put the glass down, concentrate on placing it just so, in the center of the wobbly pattern of damp circles on the corner of the table that would tell someone who gave a shit about my life that I spent a lot of time sitting on this very sofa and drinking from this very glass. I can’t remember how many glasses are in this set. It strikes me that the rest have broken, fallen victim one by one to my poor sense of depth perception when I’m drunk, and that this is the only one left.

“I’m sorry, Mama. I used the wrong word. Will you be speaking?”

“Of course. We’re the host community.”

“I’m sure you’ll be great.”

“I’m not worried about how to speak to Christian women, Cissy. And I didn’t call to discuss the ministry with you.”

I don’t know when exactly she gave up on me, spiritually or emotionally, but I can certainly guess. Sometime in the last two years, between the time my daddy died and I started ordering four olives in my martinis and calling it lunch.

“Mama—” I start. But before I can ask if I can call her back, she cuts me off.

“I’m not sure what you’ll do with this information, Cissy, but you should probably know. I’ll be starting chemotherapy for breast cancer right after the retreat.”

In the silence that follows—an absolute stillness inside of which I can feel the rasp of the ancient afghan I’m wrapped in on my skin—I listen hard for what she wants from me. Nothing. She doesn’t lie, my mama, and she’s tough. Another reason she’s such a fine preacher. I bet she’s the headliner next month.
Jesus. I squeeze the phone hard enough to hurt my hand, which helps me focus.

“Mama, I’m sorry,” I say. “But—I mean—how long have you known, have you had all the tests and biopsies done already—”

“Of course.” There’s another pause. “I had a mastectomy last week. That’s how they know it’s gone to the lymph nodes.”

“Last week? Mama—why didn’t you call me before? I—”

I what? I would have gone home? I would have sat in the hospital waiting room? I would have changed her dressing, washed her hair when she couldn’t lift her arms?

My mouth is horribly dry, has been for the past 19 hours. I swallow and imagine that I can taste tequila on my tongue, straight up with just a splash of lime juice.

“Mama, I know that this sounds bad, but I’m going to have to call you back,” I manage.

“I’m going to throw up.”

Since there’s nothing in my stomach all I have is dry heaves. When they’re over, I drink three glasses of water in a row, hitting my teeth against the glass and gasping with thirst. It occurs to me that the tequila taste in my mouth is my breath, so I brush my teeth. I have to rinse my mouth for a long time before the water runs clear.

The phone is ringing again and I make a dive to pick it up, trying to ignore the sloshing in my stomach from all that water.

“Mama,” I say, “I’m sorry, I—” I don’t want to tell her why I threw up. “I’m sorry.”

But it’s not my mama on the phone, it’s my editor, Lydia.

“Oh God, Cissy, you sound just like me when my mother calls. It’s like if you start off with an apology maybe you can make it sort of a blanket one for the whole phone call.”

“Something like that,” I say.
I sit carefully back on the sofa and pull my nest of blankets around me. I give Lydia three minutes of witty conversation before she tells me why she’s really calling, which is either a problem with my last story or a new assignment. I write for *Jane Does*, pun intended. It’s an online magazine for women who sneer at the likes of *Glamour, Cosmo, and YM*. Like every other magazine for young women, we run fashion and beauty stories, but a lot of the clothes our readers like are either artfully ripped, deliberately ugly, or chemically-treated to look like they’re 35 years old. Every once in a while we’ll run a story about the best thrift markets in New York, with pop-up articles about how disgusting an item of clothing has to be before it’s really unwearable, and how to get old blood and sweat stains out of leather. A couple of months ago we did a piece about the ethics of wearing Lisa Loeb glasses to get people to take you more seriously even when you have perfect vision. I wrote that one, because I made a snarky comment in one of our rare in-person staff meetings about how everyone’s eyesight seemed to have deteriorated since our last staff meeting six months before. People got so angry that Lydia decided on the spot “there’s a story here, clearly” and gave it to me.

Her apparent belief that we understand each other completely when it comes to our relationships with our mothers has her side-tracked for a minute. She’s murmuring to herself while she scribbles down ideas for a story about mother-daughter relationships. I catch a couple of phrases like “didn’t join feminist movement” and “mothers betrayed them” and “don’t understand power of choice today.”

“Cissy,” she says suddenly, loudly, into the phone.

“I’m still here.”

“Yeah, sorry. Listen—” her voice drops to a stage whisper, “how are you doing?”

For a disorienting minute I think she knows about Mama.
“What do you mean?”

“I mean—” she distorts her voice even more, although she’s not talking any more softly. The funny thing is that since so many of our staff work remotely, she’s probably alone in her office. “I heard you were giving up drinking.”

Shit. I should have expected this. The first problem—and the reason that I should have been prepared for Lydia to find out almost immediately that I’d lost my mind—scratch that, hours ago is that Eric was over last night and watched me do the ceremonial pouring out and stacking of glass bottles in the recycling bins in the hall.

“People are going to think you just had one hell of a party,” he observed, as I carried the last bottle of Maker’s Mark out.

“My life is a party, in case you hadn’t noticed,” I said. My apartment smelled like a bar and I was already regretting the whole stupid, not to mention extremely expensive, gesture. Not like Eric wouldn’t be able to talk me into going out to get a drink in about 30 minutes. He was leaning in the doorway of my kitchen, smoking a cigarette and smirking. I went over to him, held out my hand for a drag, and barely resisted the urge to blow smoke in his eyes.

“Just remember, lover,” he said, taking the cigarette back, “teetotalers are so fucking boring.”

“What is it?” I asked. “Are you afraid I’ll get fat?”

“Oh god, don’t even joke about that.” He laughed. “How awful.”

Eric is a freelance photographer who went to college with Lydia and does work for Jane Does. I met him on an assignment almost two years ago, just before my daddy died, and we hit it off immediately. He wanted a Mrs. Parker for his own little vicious circle, and I wanted him, to hell with the fact that he was gay. The sex started after the funeral, when Eric got drunk
enough to accept the blow job I wanted to give him so I wouldn’t have to think about coffins and
dirt and green hillsides dotted with gray tablets like teeth sunk into the ground.

“I assume Eric told you,” I say to Lydia.

“Well, yes,” she says. She has the grace to sound a little ashamed. “And I was really
glad to hear it, Cissy, really. Seriously, how are you doing?”

“Lyd,” I say, “I’ll write about it. I will, a nice long column all about this wonderful
experience. But maybe not right now?”

In addition to any other articles that get thrown at me, I have a regular column in Jane
Does. Every month I regale our readers with the best of my adventures in drinking, whether out
alone, or with friends, usually Eric. The column, called “Gloria Wandrous Reports,” is the most
widely-read feature in the magazine. Sometimes all I do is report on the conversations going on
at adjoining tables in a bar; sometimes I give play-by-play of an increasingly inebriated game of
bar trivia with a group of my over-educated friends. One of my recurring themes is the
importance of a bartender who knows what to do when he’s thrown a curve. I’ll open a column
with a paean to an older drink, like the Paisley Martini, include the recipe—gin, vermouth, and
scotch—then tell the story of what happened when I tried to order it at various places.

Occasionally the gimmicks have gone a little further, like the time that Eric and I found
ourselves still out, and still drunk, at nine o’clock on a Saturday morning. Eric decided that we
needed to go to Dean & Deluca and check out who shopped there at that ungodly hour. We
picked a fight with the woman behind the counter who wouldn’t give us a free sample of candied
violets ($49.99 per pound) and the manager threw us out.

My column a few weeks ago was about what do when a bartender cuts you off. This has
become a problem for me, but I have strategies. Obviously, you can just go somewhere else, but
then you have to walk, which can be tricky. If you don’t want to move, stay sitting down when you order, so no one can tell that the room is spinning. Don’t say more than you have to, just name the drink, ask for another, or—best yet—catch the bartender’s eye and touch your glass. Whatever you do, don’t say anything that you think is funny, because when you laugh and no one else does, you’re sunk. Some readers e-mailed in with other suggestions, like having friends order for you (but what if they’ve been cut off too?) or getting old men to buy you drinks. One girl suggested that maybe when you get cut off you should stop drinking and go home. Well, what she wrote was: *Clearly the Gloria Wandrous author is an alcoholic and very fucked-up and every time I read her column I just feel sorry for her, but for others of you out there who just drink for fun, I mean, come on. Isn’t getting cut off a sign that you’ve had enough?*

Lydia would disagree. Because if I stop drinking, then what happens to “Gloria Wandrous Reports” and our readership? I guess I should have considered this question when I made my grand gesture, but I didn’t. I do not think Lydia is cold-blooded enough to fire me if I do not cut this nonsense out right now. I’m sure she’s thought of it though.

“I’m not going to lie to you, Cissy,” she says. “It’s your life and of course I understand that if you think you need to do something that feels right for you then you do, but it is going to have an impact on the readership, you know?”

“I didn’t think that meant I had to ask anybody’s permission.”

“No, no, of course not. And actually, the reason I was calling—other than to make sure you’re okay, I mean—is that I started thinking about the column and how big a response it gets and how if you are going to change that persona, you know, maybe it needs a bigger send-off than just in a regular column.”

She’s got a point. I let myself sink sideways into the corner of the sofa and shut my eyes.
“What were you thinking?”

“Well,” her voice warms with enthusiasm. “I want to make this a headline story, not just a column. And what I think your readers will respond to is you letting them go through the experience with you, while still getting to hear your fabulously bitchy take on everything, are you following me?”

“Sort of.”

“So I’m sending you on assignment, right now. I want you to go and cover this thing and write about it and put in every detail about how it looks to you, how the experience feels while you’re going through this other thing—you know, while you’re trying to stop drinking.”

“What’s the assignment?”

“I’m not going to tell you!”

I’m willing to bet money that she is standing up right now and doing the antsy little dance behind her desk that she does. I’m exhausted just thinking about it.

“What are you going to tell me, Lyd?” Jesus, please don’t let air travel be involved.

“Just that the thing—it’s a convention of sorts, a big international convention—is happening this weekend at the Marriott Marquis in Times Square. I booked you a room and paid your registration and there should be a press packet waiting for you when you check in.”

I open my eyes and sit up. There’s a kind of bad smell that might be from the blankets and might still be my breath. I lean over for my notebook and jot down the hotel info.

“Lydia? What happens if this whole thing falls through while I’m there?”

She’s confused. “You mean if the convention falls through?”

“No. I mean what if I decide to go get a drink.”
“Oh.” She laughs before she can stop herself. “It’s not going to spoil the story if that’s what you’re worried about. It might make it even more interesting.”

It’s the suppressed glee in her voice that convinces me. She’s sending me to the annual meeting of U. S. distillers and liquor bottlers. The mind reels.

I try to call Mama again from the cab. She doesn’t pick up at the house and I can’t think of what to say to the answering machine. I end up paralyzed for a long moment after the beep before I just hang up. I try the church next and the secretary, Loretta, says Mama’s in a meeting. She’s new enough that I’ve never met her in person, just heard Mama talk about her.

“Would you like me to leave her a message?” The cabbie banks hard right to avoid a tour bus. I’m going to be sick again.

“Just tell her that her daughter called,” I manage. “I’ll try her back later.”

“Oh! Oh, sure, honey, I’ll tell her. You must be so worried right now. We’re all praying for her.”

“That’s good. I know she appreciates that.”

“She’s so brave, so tough. That’s what my mother said when she met your mama. She said, ‘She’s tough,’ and that’s a compliment coming from my mother. She had a double mastectomy herself, what, some 10, 15 years ago now and she’s still here, still kicking, as she says. I told your mama that when she told me about the cancer.”

“Well, just tell her I called.” I say. “Thanks.”

I snap my phone closed before she can say anything else. My mama told her church secretary that she had breast cancer before she told me. Long before, from the sound of it. Can’t say I blame her, either. Jesus, I need a drink.
I scan the lobby of the hotel: huge, gleaming with black glass and little tubes of light embedded into the baseboards, carpeted in the dark red color that must scream “luxurious” to tourists the world over. The entrance to the bar is blocked by several registration tables, and before I can figure out how to get around them I’m herded over to the check-in desk by a smiling young man in uniform. The bar is called Dino’s, in red neon under a picture of Dean Martin, and it looks dim and quiet and almost empty. I run through my list of esoteric drinks in my head, trying to think of something simple. I have a feeling that anything but alcohol, even something as innocuous as a shot of sugar syrup or grenadine, might be more than I could take right now.

But there are those registration tables, and right on the corner of one of them is a press packet with a pink post-it note in the shape of a little house stuck to the front, and my name on the post-it note in purple ink. Godammit.

I give up and check in with a chubby woman (Eric would call her fat) who’s wearing a blue crepe pantsuit with pearl and gold buttons down the front. She smiles and tells me to make sure I don’t miss the “Ice Cream Social” that she’s running on Saturday afternoon. I have no idea what she is talking about, but something tells me that my guess about where Lydia was sending me was wrong. I mutter a thank you and make my escape. I’m in an elevator with several other recent registrants before I even remember that I was going to go to the bar. When the bottom lurches beneath our feet as we stop at my floor, though, I realize that it’s probably just as well.

I throw up in the bathroom of room 505 and sit on the floor for a long time afterwards, staring at the toilet paper roll with its end folded into a neat little point and sealed with a Marriott sticker. I keep gagging, even though there’s nothing left in my stomach. I’ve been sober for 22 hours.
I’ve also, according to my press packet, been completely suckered by my editor. I’m not at a liquor convention, or a comic book convention, or a romance novelists’ convention, all of which would have been both funny and within the realm of possibilities I had allowed for, given Lydia’s fairly limited imagination. But I underestimated her, or maybe this one just jumped out at her from the pages of—oh God, the pages of what newspaper? What magazine? In whose world is the annual show and convention of the International Guild of Miniature Artisans a big enough deal to advertise it? How did these people take over an entire Times Square conference center?

I sit on the bed, still wearing my coat, and pull everything out of the folder. There are classes I can take. These are initially confusing, because they have names like “Let’s Go to the Opera,” “A Rose-covered Cottage in the Cotswolds,” and, yes, here’s what that woman at registration was talking about, “An Ice Cream Social.” Eventually I figure out that what one does in these classes—which all cost extra money, “for materials,” and maybe I’ll take them all and bill Lydia, the bitch—is build miniature rooms or make miniature things. Like your very own miniature ice cream shop. There’s another one in which you can make a miniature stuffed cat for your miniature house and then make miniature outfits for the cat that you change out with the seasons.

I call Eric who, unbelievably, answers on the second ring. It’s five o’clock on a Friday evening, his regular gym time if he’s not at a shoot. According to the schedule printed on white paper with a border of dolls all tumbled against each other like they’ve been in a 200-doll pile-up, I should be at the welcome cocktail hour being held in one of the ballrooms downstairs.

“Hello, gorgeous,” Eric says. “What’s up? I expected to hear from you earlier today.”
“Thought I would have heard from you too,” I say, before I can help myself. “You know, to check up on me.”

“I knew you were fine,” he says. “You’re a tough girl, all you Southern girls are tough underneath the sass.”

“Fuck you.”

After a minute of silence designed to let me know that I’m being overly sensitive and if it continues he’ll have to stop talking to me, he says, delicately, casually, “So, are you still on your little mission?”

“Do you care?” I reach across the bed for my purse, pull out my cigarettes, and then notice—almost too late—the little stand-up sign on the nightstand. “Fuck.”

“What?” Eric asks.

“I’m in a fucking no-smoking room. I’m going to kill her. Answer my fucking question.”

He sighs. “Of course I care. I asked, didn’t I? But come on now, this is interesting. You’re in a room? As in a hotel room?”

“Yes. Lydia sent me on assignment.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really, you asshole, and don’t act so fucking surprised.” I am surprised by how angry I am at him. I usually make it a practice not to get angry at Eric.

“What time did you call her this morning?” I ask. “Did you wake her up to tell her or did you at least wait until business hours started?”

“She called me, Cissy,” he says. “She had some work for me.”

“And I just happened to come up in the conversation.”
“No. I told her. Actually, I mentioned it to her because I thought she must already know. I mean, come on, you were going to have to tell her yourself soon anyway.”

“Yeah, well, now I’m on assignment to cover something totally bizarre. So thanks.”

“How are you feeling?” Pure curiosity in his voice.

Like I want a drink. Like I want to fall back on this bed and sleep for three days. Also, strangely enough, like I want something to eat. I can’t remember the last time I felt hungry. I lean over for the room service menu.

“I should call Lydia back and tell her you need to come down here and take pictures this weekend,” I say. “It would serve you right.”

“I’m freelance, remember, lover? I can always say no. Come on, what are you covering?”

I don’t want to tell him. I wanted to tell him when I called. I wanted to hear him roar with laughter over the miniature cat in its miniature Santa Claus hat that you swap out for a pink cape with heart appliqués in February. I wanted to get him to vote on the worst name from among the shops that are displaying their wares here, places like Tiny Treasures, Nancy’s Niche, and Miss Angstrom’s Fine Dolls and Miniatures. I was going to read to him from the background material about the difference between a dollhouse and a shadow box, the various scales you can work in (miniature, miniaturer, pointlessly miniscule), and the best way to shop without getting overwhelmed. The material suggests wearing comfortable shoes, knowing where the restrooms are, and planning your circuit around the show tables in advance.

Eric and I have always enjoyed being mean together. We’re good at it. And I feel like being mean to this whole weird little—excuse me, miniature—world that Lydia has abandoned
me to. But I don’t feel like letting Eric be mean to me on top of that, which he would. I’m too
tired.

“Listen,” I say, “I’ve got to go. I’ve got to get something to eat.”

“Eat? Christ, Cissy, I don’t think I’ve ever actually seen you eat. Did Lydia force you to
go do restaurant reviews, without drinking? That’s not really up the regular Jane Does alley, is
it?”

“No, which is why she didn’t assign me to do it. I’ve just got to go.”

“Well.” He sighs to make sure I know that I was boring him anyway so really he’s the
one ending the phone conversation. “Call me if anything interesting happens.”

Looking at actual descriptions of food—like the phrase “a full half-pound of lean ground
beef grilled to perfection”—nauseates me again, but the idea of eating something has struck me
as a new and interesting and therefore worthwhile thing to do. I order toast and a plain omelet
with hash browns on the side, hangover food.

By the time my food comes I’ve managed to clear the bed off, take off my coat, and boot
up my laptop. I eat more than I thought I’d be able to, then I sit up against the headboard and
concentrate on not bringing it all back up. I need to call Mama again, but I want to wait until my
stomach has settled. I locate the International Guild of Miniature Artisans (IGMA, naturally)
online and spend some time checking out their schedule of shows, chat rooms, and the web pages
of various members. They all seem to be women, with the exception of a few men who own
shops with their wives and some skilled artisans who do things like pour and lay teeny, tiny
bricks or wire teeny, tiny houses with electricity.
The houses, at least in the pictures I find at various sites, are nicer than any place I’ve ever lived in. I find this one called “The Grand Dining Room”—which I could create tomorrow in an all-day class if I only had $750, a set of x-acto knives, a work-mat, and a magnifying glass—that’s straight out of Gatsby’s mansion, with gleaming striped fabric the color of champagne on the walls, crystal chandeliers that really work, and a dining table that seats 20 on chairs upholstered in bottle-green raw silk. I get frustrated with the limitations of the photography, the weird distancing effect created by the camera that has to perch just outside the room and peer in. I want to go right on in, pull out one of the chairs, take a seat, and wait for a waiter to bring me a kir royale.

I look at the schedule for tomorrow and decide to walk around the vendor pavilion for as long as I can stand it, identify myself as a reporter, and see what I get. I want to do one or two in-depth interviews, but I find that the most fascinating people reveal themselves accidentally, so I’m not going to zero in on anyone. It’s tempting, though. The leader of the workshop for the “Grand Dining Room” is billed as the Billie Anne Simmons, who has graciously offered to lead one last class before she retires from miniatures in April. Don’t miss out on this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity!

Retiring from miniatures? How do you retire from miniatures? And how do you get to be “the” anyone just by covering little tiny chairs with little tiny squares of fabric and a hot glue gun? I’m almost itching to talk to this woman.

Instead, I call Mama.

“I told you I’d call you back,” I say, when she picks up.

She sighs. “It wasn’t necessary, Cissy. I told you everything that was going on.”

“After you already had an operation.”
“I really didn’t see the point in telling you earlier. They had me scheduled for surgery so fast I confess my head was spinning a bit and I just didn’t see that there was anything you were going to do about it in New York.”

“What happened, exactly?” I ask. “You found a lump or something?”

“That’s right.” She sounds amused at how bad I am at talking to her like a human being.

“I found ‘a lump or something’ in my left breast a couple of weeks ago, I went in and had a biopsy and then they ran some more tests and said I should have a mastectomy as soon as possible.”

“A mastectomy—on your left?”

“Yes. There were no indications of cancer in my other breast.”

“But it was in the lymph nodes.”

“That’s right.”

“So you start chemo soon. Is it—I mean, what’s going to happen, are you going to keep working or—”

“I plan to keep running the ministry, yes,” Mama says. “The nausea drugs have gotten much better in the last few years. I should be just fine.”

“What do they say about the treatment, about how it will work and all?”

“Do you mean what’s my prognosis?”

“I guess so,” I say. “I mean, yeah, yes. What’s the prognosis?”

“Well, spreading to the lymph nodes isn’t a great sign, but still they think we caught it in time.”

“So you’re going to be okay after the chemo is over.” I love how I make that a statement instead of a question, but Mama’s not biting.
“Chances that I’ll be around in five years are over 50 percent.”

“Over 50 percent? That’s good?”

“Well, Cissy, it’s what I’ve got, so I’m calling it good. I’ve been doing a lot of praying and I just don’t think this ministry work is done yet. I think God’s going to keep me around a bit longer. And there’s a panel at the retreat coming up that they’ve asked me to chair, about finding a Christian path through cancer. New Canaan Press has already gotten in touch with me about writing a book.”

She talks like God gave her cancer because He knew that she was equipped to use her experience and her gift of ministry to help other people. Maybe He did. That kind of logic just terrifies me, because by that logic my life makes no sense at all. I don’t know what to say, except for things that aren’t true, like that I’ll be praying for her.

“Mama, I—can I do anything?”

“I’ve got a good support network here.”

“I know, but—”

“Cissy,” she says. “I thought a long time before I told you. I don’t want to be held responsible—by you, anyway—for you turning more and more down the same path your daddy chose. If you’re upset by hearing about this and you need to go drink, then you do that. But I don’t want to know about it, and that means I certainly don’t want you coming here.”

My stomach clenches as if she has slapped me, which she has only done once, when I got drunk after Daddy’s funeral.

“I wasn’t necessarily suggesting that I’d come home—I mean to visit you,” I say. “I have a job, you know.”

“Yes,” she says, “though how you keep it is beyond me.”
The bitterness that she so rarely permits herself has seeped out through a crack. It’s time to get off the phone.

“I’ve got to go, Mama.”

“Good night, Cissy,” she says.

“I’ll call you later—” I say, although I don’t know why, or what I’ll say. But it doesn’t matter because she’s already hung up.

I throw my cell phone against the wall, and the battery pops out and drops down behind the dresser, which I will now have to move if I want to communicate with anyone in the foreseeable future. I’m not sure I do. I throw myself back on the bed as dramatically as possible and turn out the light because it’s hurting my eyes. Hell, everything hurts. I feel a hundred years old and recently flayed. I want a drink.

I fall asleep on top of the bedspread, still in my clothes, and dream I am sitting in Eric’s living room drinking a gin and tonic with lime. There’s a huge party going on, all beautiful gay boys, and Eric goes from one to the next and kisses them tenderly, passionately, then moves on. I want to leave but I’m sitting in the stupid butterfly chair that he only bought because it was cheap and I can’t get up. There’s also something wrong with my drink—I can’t taste it, and even though I keep sipping at it, I’m not getting any drunker.

For several disorienting minutes after I wake up, I am convinced that the dream—or at least the gin and tonic—was real. I’m so thirsty that I fill up both of the little glasses on the edge of the sink with water and drink one while refilling the other. Then I scrounge around on my dinner tray from last night for the saltines that were weirdly included and take tiny bites, hoping the crackers and water will form a glue in my stomach and stay down.
I brush my teeth carefully, trying not to activate my gag reflex. When I lift my head from the sink, I catch sight of myself in the mirror. I have been studiously avoiding doing this, and now I know why. Aside from the decidedly unattractive emaciated look I’ve got going, I look filthy. I can’t remember exactly when my last shower was—not yesterday, maybe the day before? Or the day before that. Christ. My hair is so lank and dirty it looks black instead of reddish brown. There are shiny red circles under my eyes like I’ve been punched, hard, and my lips are cracked and bleeding at the corners. I stare at my reflection for several minutes in horrified fascination, then I turn on the shower as hot as it will go.

By the time I get down to the convention, after retrieving my phone and restoring it to working condition, I’ve been sober for 36 hours. Signs point to the three hotel ballrooms, usually separated by sliding walls. Today they’re all one room, a maze of draped display tables and women clutching oversized tote bags and—I make sure to check this—wearing sensible shoes. I fall into a line of shoppers, behind a mother-daughter pair engaged in debate about what they are hoping to find here today. The girl, a chubby 12-year-old about to enter a very unfortunate adolescence, doesn’t want to buy anything unless it matches the color scheme she has picked out for the music room, and the mother is unhappy about the whole idea of a peach carpet with gray walls.

“It does sound sophisticated,” she says, “but I’m just afraid that it’s not going to have a lot of oomph once it’s actually in the house. What if we did some wallpaper with a really elegant pattern, like those fleur de lis that we saw at The Company Mouse?”

We pass several tables of tiny furniture arranged in groupings just like in a full-size furniture showroom, and then come to one where the merchandise is packaged in plastic bags and hung on metal spin racks. Mother and daughter forget their differences over drab versus
tacky and plunge in with exclamations of delight, while the woman behind me tries to lunge past me to get her turn. I pick up a handful of little packages that have fallen on the floor in this mêlée and check out the contents. A miniature two-liter bottle of coke, a carton of Breyer’s ice cream with the lid off and a tiny ice cream scoop embedded in the middle, a box of Life cereal, all of them painstakingly reproduced and assembled and selling for $3 each. I haven’t bought groceries in a long time, but doesn’t real food, food you can actually eat, cost this much?

My cell phone rings, and I check the number before I answer. I am not ready to talk to Eric again, especially if he has found out where I am and is calling to laugh at me.

It’s not Eric, though.

“Lydia,” I say, “I used to like you.”

She laughs. “No you didn’t.”

“Oh, I did though. You have no idea. But now—forget it. Next time the rest of the staff decides to stage a coup and get you ousted, I won’t stand in their way.”

“What do you mean, ‘next time’—oh! I get it.” More laughter, less pleased with herself this time, though, the bitch. “I was calling to see how it was going.”

“Define it.” I have been borne along by the tide of shoppers and am now admiring the wares of a shop called Wonderful Wicker, which sells miniature furniture made out of well, wicker.

“How’s the show?”

“It’s lovely. I’ve found my new calling. In fact, I’m going to try to find something here for you and bring it back to the office. Would you like a teensy-weensy cup of Starbucks coffee, or—wait—here it is—” I’ve moved on to the next booth—“a one-inch-square replica of a Janis Joplin album cover, with an itsy-bitsy record inside of it?”
On the other end of the phone, Lydia giggles. On the other side of the table, the artisan who crafted the album cover replicas gently corrects me: “Actually, each album is an inch and a quarter square. That’s to scale.”

I bolt. I just can’t do it. All it takes is a few steps backwards and I’m out of the sideways-sweeping line of people and standing unmoored in the middle of the floor. By now the line stretches all the way out the door of the ballroom at one end. If I get back into it I will have to look at all the tables I’ve already looked at.

“What about the drinking?” Lydia asks. “How’s that going?”

“Listen, Lyd, I’ve got to go,” I say. “I have some interviews lined up and I have to prep my questions.”

I drop the phone back into my bag and contemplate the relative merits of being the first person in Dino’s today versus going back up to my room and charging the entire contents of the minibar to Lydia. I settle on Dino’s, where I can order an actual drink, and I am making my way there when I realize that a woman is chasing me out of the room.

“Excuse me,” she says, when she catches up, “but I overheard you just now on the phone and I thought I remembered seeing you yesterday at registration. Are you press?”

“Yes.”

“Well, if you need an interview, one of our Board members, Billie Ann Simmons, is retiring after this conference and I think it would be just sensational if someone sat down with her a bit before she left.”

“Isn’t she leading a workshop today?”

“Well, yes, she is actually, but they’re on lunch break right now. I could take you up to her room and you could talk to her there.”
I nod. It’s a good idea. It will keep me from having a drink for at least another hour. And I did really want to get a glimpse of this woman when I read about her last night.

Billie Ann Simmons does not disappoint. She is thin the way women of her generation get thin because they’ve never exercised a day in their lives and instead have sat hunched forward over some kind of desk or table and when they wanted to lose weight or keep their girlish figure they just ate less and less. The lunch tray from room service that is sitting near the bed in Billie Ann Simmons’ hotel room has a BLT on it, half of which has been moved to the side in a way that looks decisive. That’s the half she’s not even going to touch.

She smiles, shakes my hand and invites me in, while the woman who brought me up flutters around and explains her brilliant idea to bring the two of us together. Neither one of them thinks to ask what publication I write for. I suspect that my black dress and high-heeled boots have convinced them that I am a “real journalist.” Billie Ann Simmons is wearing slacks—not pants, slacks—and a silk shirt that is much too big for her shoulderless frame, and enormous earrings shaped like dollhouses. They are at least as big as the album covers being sold downstairs, which would make them an inch and a quarter square.

One of the things I love about drinking is the power it gives me to resist my own internal censor, the voice in my head telling me what is appropriate to say out loud and what isn’t. But although I’ve used alcohol as an excuse for saying inexcusable things many times, the truth is that I’ve always known what I was doing. Now I feel like I might suddenly blurt out to Billie Ann Simmons that she is wearing the biggest, tackiest earrings I have ever seen.

“I love your earrings,” I say. “Were they a gift?”
She beams. “Yes they were. I wear them to every convention. Won’t you sit down, Miss—”

“"You can just call me Cissy. Do you mind if I take notes?""

“Not at all. And you can just call me Billie.” She sits down behind her tray, ready to get back to her half-eaten half-sandwich, and waves away the poor conference coordinator like a queen. “Thank you so much, Louann. We’ll be just fine here, won’t we, Cissy?”

I smile at the woman over my shoulder. “Thank you.”

We manage just fine for almost a half an hour, while Billie Ann regales me with the story of how she “got bit by the bug” that is miniatures and how she turned her passion into a career when her husband died unexpectedly. She’s worked for the North Carolina Board of Education for 40 years. She’s retiring from that this spring too, and isn’t sure what she’ll do with herself with all the free time she’s suddenly going to have. Maybe she’ll travel a bit.

Her phone rings and as she goes to answer it I gesture to her that I’d like to use her bathroom. There’s a pink velour bathrobe hanging on the back of the door and the countertop is a litter of make-up and toiletries. Propped up against the mirror behind the faucet is a laminated wallet-sized card that catches my eye because I know the words on it by heart. It’s called The Serenity Prayer—God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference—and my daddy carried it in his wallet for most of my life, for all the good it did him. At one point I think he had three or four of those cards, because Alcoholics Anonymous gives them out to anybody who walks through the door, and my daddy did that plenty of times. For all the good that did him.

Billie Ann Simmons’ card is printed in the same exact font as the ones my daddy had, very gothic and elaborate, like something taken straight out of an old hymnal. I put the card back
exactly where it was and dry my hands on one of her towels. When I come back out into the living room she’s sitting in the same place on the bed, although she has covered the room service tray and moved it out of the way.

“I’m afraid I don’t have much more time to chat,” she says. “I’ve got to be back down in workshop in a few minutes.”

“Oh, of course.” I smile at her as I pick up my notebook. “How long have you been an alcoholic?”

Her face turns red and she gets to her feet so fast that for a second it feels like she is towering over me. I stand up too.

“Get out!” she says, so I do.

One night when I was still in high school my daddy ran out of Southern Comfort and went out to get some more. My mama had given up trying to stop him from driving, because he’d made and hidden so many extra sets of car keys that she couldn’t keep track of them all. She settled for calling the police and locking the deadbolt on the front door so he couldn’t get back in. Then she went to bed. I saw her as I slipped past to watch for him coming home. She was sitting cross-legged on top of the covers going over the church accounts.

“Don’t you let him in, Cissy,” she said calmly as I crept down the stairs.

“Mama—”

“Don’t you let him in. He’s hardly going to freeze to death in this heat.”

The lights from my daddy’s car swung through the dining room windows and a few minutes later I heard him try the door.
“Ella!” He was laughing, his voice loose and buoyant. “Ella, open this door, for chrissakes.”

He leaned against the door and then suddenly backed up and pounded on it. I jumped a foot in the air and Mama came to the top of the stairs. We waited there while he beat on the door with his fists and his booted feet. Then there was a pause and a new sound as he pissed against the front door. Behind me my mama went rigid. I sat down on the steps in despair. When he was done, my daddy staggered back down the driveway and went to sleep in the car. I snuck out in the morning to wake him before he fried to death in there and saw that he had forgotten to zip up his pants.

I cannot imagine Billie Ann Simmons doing anything like that.

I am sitting in the hotel bar smoking a cigarette. I have ordered a gin and tonic. This will be the first drink I have had in 39 hours. I flip open my notebook and read what I took down about Billie Ann Simmons. I don’t get it. I wish she had answered the goddamn question, because then I could have asked her more. I can imagine her reasons for drinking, starting with the sick husband and ending with the mind-numbing job. What I want to know is how she stopped drinking, even why she stopped drinking. Her stellar career in the world of miniatures doesn’t look any better to me when I imagine it as aftermath.

The bartender puts the glass down in front of me and goes back to his t.v. set. I fish the lime wedge out and suck it dry, then an ice cube, tasting the gin that clings to it. I think about the rooms Billie Ann Simmons creates, like “The Grand Dining Room,” with its china cabinet that no one will ever open, full of tiny hand-painted plates that no one will ever use. How do you fill yourself up with things like that, things that don’t even take up any space?
I finish all the ice cubes in my drink and ask for more, along with my check. The bartender gives me a strange look. Fuck him. I over-tip so he will leave me the fuck alone while I finish my second batch of gin-scented ice cubes. I’ve done an interview, if you overlook the rather abrupt ending of it, and I’ve checked out the merchandise offered by the International Guild of Miniature Artisans. The only thing left to do is see if I can talk my way into a workshop. Maybe they have one where you can make a miniature bar, complete with miniature drinks and miniature bowls of mixed nuts. Maybe I could make one that stored in a little box, like a kid’s lunchbox. Then I could carry my comfort zone with me wherever I went.

There is no workshop available in which participants create a full bar—not at this particular conference, the helpful woman at the registration informs me with regret. If I’m going to be at the Mid-Atlantic conference in Philadelphia next month—but wait, here’s something close to what I’m looking for, and it didn’t fill up today. If I just give her $75 now, credit card is fine, she’ll walk me to the “Bar Scene” workshop herself, and no, it won’t be a problem that I haven’t brought any supplies.

“Louann always comes prepared,” she assures me as I follow her down a corridor lined with conference rooms. “You’ll have to pay for the materials she gives you of course, but you can work that out with her—here you are. Have fun!”

Louann is, as I suspected, the woman who introduced me to Billie Ann Simmons. Fortunately for my future in this class, Billie Ann does not seem to have shared any of the details of our chat with Louann, who welcomes me with a delighted smile and says I’m just in time.

“Everyone else has gotten started,” she says, “but most of the people here today are experienced hobbyists, so I can probably leave them to fend for themselves for a bit while I get
you set up. Now—” she fans a pile of little baggies out in front of me—“what would you like to make?”

I am about to be instructed in the creation of miniature alcoholic beverages, which alas are not made with real alcohol but from a clear, fast-drying glue that you pour into a glass or bottle and then mix with dye to make it the appropriate color. Louann leaves me to pore over the assorted bottles and glasses I can choose from, and I get distracted from the project at hand by imagining myself buying forty or fifty miniature martini glasses and having a party where everyone has to drink out of them.

I settle on a mini-tableau involving a bottle of Cuervo Gold—not my brand of choice, but the little bottle is pre-labeled—a margarita straight-up, and a wedge of lime. Louann sets a black plastic tray in front of me, about the size of a make-up compact, onto which I get to glue the finished items. God forbid I try to keep track of anything this small that’s not glued down. The little shaker of salt, which is also pre-fab, is about the size of an earring back. I glue it to the tray immediately just so I know where it is.

Next to the salt I glue the lime wedge, which Louann helps me make using green modeling clay. She is very patient.

“You could just try to mold a little wedge,” she says, plucking a tiny ball off of a big wad of clay from a tub, “but it’s just so hard to get the shape right when you do that. I mean, you’re just starting so small. So here’s the way that I’ve figured out works best.” She hands me the ball of clay. “Make a lime.”

“You mean, like a whole lime?”

“That’s right. Roll that out and shape it so it looks just like a real lime, you know, with the sort of bumpy things at the end.”
This takes me ten minutes. The lime in question is the size of the front of an earring—a small, conservative earring—and looks slightly deformed. Louann then produces an x-acto knife and slices out a wedge.

“You see!” She prods it with her finger so that it rolls off of her blade and onto the table. “Look how well that worked! Now, you just take a tiny bit of white paint, like so, and stripe it a little, so it looks like it has an inside and an outside.”

Thank God there are more wedges left on the lime. I botch the first one with a big blob of white paint, but manage to keep my hand steadier for the second one Louann cuts for me, and stroke a couple of white lines down the insides of the wedge. They do make it look more like a piece of lime, although I’m not sure why.

I am so ridiculously proud of myself when the damn thing is safely glued to the tray that I am ready to call it a day and take my rather minimalist creation home, but Louann is not done with me. She shows me how to mix the dye into the acrylic glue—you use a toothpick—and leaves me with a whole artist’s palette of blobs of acrylic to experiment on, until I’ve gotten the color of the tequila right.

“I’m afraid I can’t really help you here,” she confesses, as she goes to help the woman at the end of the table, who left her dye toothpick in the glue too long and now can’t get it out. “I don’t really drink much.”

I have lost my mind. I sit looking at the empty inch-and-a-half tall bottle of Cuervo and trying to visualize the color that needs to go in it. Sort of a caramel color, maybe a little lighter. Like ginger ale. The thing about drinking is that you do a lot of it in fairly dim light. Eventually I get it right. I fish into my bag for a pen to write down the formula of dots of dye so I don’t forget it—two drops of yellow and one smallish dot of brown—and notice that there’s a message
on my phone. It’s Eric, and the text message he’s left says Sds @ 9, meaning that he expects me to meet him at one of our regular bars, Sid’s Uptown, for drinks tonight.

I hit delete just as Louann returns to hover over my shoulder. She wants to help me now that I’ve reached the moment of truth, filling the bottle and accompanying glass with glue and dye. Miraculously, I get it right on the first try, thus saving myself the $3.49 that a second bottle with a little Cuervo label on it would have cost. Then, when I go to glue everything down, I realize that I need a cocktail napkin under the glass. I mean, really. I ask Louann what I can use and she comes up with—a piece of a cocktail napkin, cut very, very small with her trusty x-acto. When the other women at the table hear about this, as Louann is bending over the napkin with the concentration of a surgeon, there is a chorus of requests for cocktail napkins to go under drinks. Three hours into my career as a creator of miniatures and already I am cutting-edge.

I carry my tray up to my room on the palm of my hand, because I don’t have anywhere else to put it. My classmates all packed theirs carefully in cotton wool and then tucked them into their designated miniatures tote bags or toolboxes. I get several compliments on mine in the elevator.

I put it on the bathroom counter while I wash my hands. I am starving. When the hell did I eat last—right, dinner last night, about 24 hours ago. I have been sober for more than 43 hours. I carry the tray over to the bed and set it on the nightstand while I call room service again and order food. It’s like I don’t want to let the stupid thing out of my sight. I just can’t get over how small it is, the whole tableau, all the instruments of my destruction. I love that goddamned napkin, though.
Forty-three hours feels different than 24 hours did, or 36, or even 39. I have this ridiculous urge to call someone and not even mention the drinking or the not drinking, but just say, “I made something! All by myself!” like I’m five years old.

Instead I call my mama.

“How are you doing?” I ask her when she picks up.

She sighs. “About the same as last night, Cissy. Nothing’s changed.”

“I know. Sorry.”

“No need. I’m in the middle of making the final notes on my homily for tomorrow morning though—”

“So it’s not really a good time.”

“Well, no, not really. I told you yesterday that there wasn’t anything more to tell you.”

This is harder than I thought it would be. I pick up my little tray, holding it right up to my face. Even up close the Cuervo label looks completely real. I cannot figure out how the hell they did that.

“I was thinking I might come home for a visit,” I say. “Just for a weekend maybe, when you’re up for it.”

“Really.”

“Yeah. I guess.”

Mama sighs again, deeper, and I can almost hear her refocusing her energies into the conversation.

“I don’t exactly know what to say, Cissy. I’d like to say that I’d love to see you, it’s been a very long time. But I can’t say that I’m happy about the idea that it takes something like this to bring you home.”
“You mean you getting sick?”

“Yes.”

“I get that.” I put the tray down. “Would you be happy if you told me you were sick and I didn’t want to come see you?”

She is silent for a minute. “No, I suppose not.”

“So. I’m upset that you’re sick and that we haven’t talked and I want to come for a visit.”

My free hand is clenched so tight that my palm hurts from the pressure of my nails. I don’t say anything, which is the hardest thing I can think of to do.

After another silence she says, “If you want to come home for a visit you’re always welcome. It would be good to see you. But Cissy, if you’re still drinking—”

“Mama—” I say, and then I stop because I’m not sure what comes next. I open my hand and touch the fluttery corner of the miniature cocktail napkin under my miniature, undrinkable drink. If I had to guess I would say it was a half an inch square, and it looks exactly to-scale.

“The drinks are getting smaller, Mama,” I say. “That’s for damn sure.”
The telephone rang just as Isobel Paxton set the hot butterscotch pie on the rack to cool.

“Isobel? It’s Laura. Listen, about tonight—”

Isobel paused in the act of slipping off the oven mitts.

“Is everything all right?” she asked. Surely Laura wasn’t calling to cancel less than four hours before she and her husband Jim were due to arrive.

“Oh, everything’s fine. I was only calling because I just got back from Minardis’ and you know, I got entirely carried away, everything looked so good, and now I’ve got a dozen éclairs here that we’re never going to eat. Would you like me to bring them over?”

Isobel glanced at her pie. It had come out perfectly, the surface a glossy golden-brown, no cracks in the custard, no overly-dark tips to the fluted edges of the crust.

“It’s wonderful of you to offer, Laura,” she said, “but I’ve actually just pulled a pie out of the oven, so I really don’t think we’ll need them.”

“Oh, well, of course not,” Laura said. “I just thought I’d check.”

“Thank you,” Isobel said. “I do appreciate it. It’s so easy to just let things slip when you’re trying to plan a whole meal.”

“Exactly.” Laura hesitated, then added, “well, I won’t keep you. I do think I’m going to send Julie your way though. She and Emma have been squabbling over every little thing this afternoon. They’re up in Emma’s room but I can hear them all the way down here.”

“Oh dear,” Isobel said. “She must be tired.”

“I think so,” Laura said. “I’ll send her along in a few minutes.”

“Thanks. We’ll see you and Jim later then.”
“Yes, of course,” Laura said. “Seven thirty?”

“Seven thirty,” Isobel said, then hung up the phone, so softly that the receiver scarcely clicked against the cradle. Don thought she imagined the venom in Laura’s unfailing cordiality, and Isobel felt hard-pressed to explain her resentment. Such an offer! Minardis’ famous éclairs, fat and golden and thickly iced with chocolate. Fanned out on a platter and presented with coffee they were a perfect ending to an elegant meal and the salvation of a hostess who was either too busy or too inept to produce her own dessert. The problem was in the implication, that Isobel was such a hostess, and that Laura was there to rescue her. And now that she had refused, was Julie, her eight-year-old daughter, being sent home for quarreling with Emma, or because Isobel had refused Laura’s offer to bring dessert?

In any case, Julie would be home earlier than Isobel had planned, and would be upset at having been parted so abruptly from her “best friend in the whole world.” Julie was exquisitely sensitive in mood; even the faintest hint of impatience in Isobel’s voice could set her vibrating with sobs. Emma Little, on the other hand, was placid and open-faced, though stubborn—a rock to Julie’s shifting wind. Isobel knew the fact of their intense bond, but could not for the life of her comprehend it.

At least Ethan would be out for another hour or more, playing football with the rest of the neighborhood boys on the Mercers’ broad front lawn. Isobel took the green beans out of the refrigerator and put them in the sink. Julie liked to snap and rinse them. Otherwise, there wasn’t much left to do. The stew was simmering on the back of the stove, the pie was cooling on the counter, the canapés—stuffed tomatoes, marinated mushrooms, wedges of deviled egg—were arranged on trays in the refrigerator, covered in towels. She went into the dining room to check the table, set for eight: Don at the head and Isobel herself at the foot, nearest the kitchen, then
Jim Little on one side in between Maureen Mercer and Stelle Harrison and Laura on the other side flanked by Simon Mercer and Stelle’s husband Fred.

The back door to the house slammed as Julie came in.

“Mommy!”

“Yes, darling,” Isobel said, “I’m in here.”

“Mommy! Emma and I were drawing the gowns we’re going to wear when we grow up and go to our first formal dance—mine was blue and gold with ribbons on it and Emma’s was going to be pink—but then her mother came up and said I had to leave. We weren’t finished, not nearly! And she had said we could use the record player later. Emma has Ricky Nelson’s new record!”

Isobel moved around the table, straightening plates, checking the utensils at each setting.

“I know,” she said. “Why don’t you wash your hands and help me with the beans for dinner tonight. If you hurry maybe you and I can make pudding for your dinner.”

“Oh! Okay.”

As Julie spun out of the doorway to go wash her hands, Isobel reflected—not for the first time—that it would have been nice if her daughter’s choice of “best friend in the whole world” had been Jeanette Mercer instead of Emma Little. Jeanette was a year older than Julie, and so quiet and bookish that the other little girls in the neighborhood didn’t know what to make of her. But she was sweet and polite, and she did not have Emma’s habit of sucking on a hank of her hair while she was concentrating or nervous. When she let it go, the wet lock would slap against her cheek and then dry, sticking out at an odd angle that irritated Isobel. Isobel liked Jeanette’s mother Maureen more than she liked Laura; she could imagine being real friends with Maureen. But then again, Isobel reflected as she left the dining room, Maureen didn’t necessarily wish that
she and Isobel had the excuse to become close friends that an intimacy between their daughters might have occasioned. Maureen, after all, had Stelle.

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The Mercers and their two children lived at the end of the street, in a large white-washed brick house that Isobel had always coveted. The Harrisons lived two doors down from the Paxtons in the other direction. Their house was one of the smallest on the block, but since they did not have children, had in fact converted one of the spare bedrooms into a library by having shelves built in, and since Stelle had a flawless touch as a decorator, the suggestion that Fred Harrison did not make much money had long dropped out of neighborhood gossip. The Harrisons, it was generally agreed-upon now, had simply not bought a larger house because they had no need or desire for one.

Maureen Mercer and Stelle Harrison’s deep and intimate friendship had led to indiscreet and tasteless remarks at various cocktail parties over the years. These remarks were invariably made by men, in an aggressively insinuating tone brought on by gin and tonics. The implication was that there was perhaps more to Maureen and Stelle’s friendship than their neighbors knew, that perhaps there was substantial reason for Simon and Fred to resent one another’s wives—unless, of course, as Judge Stewart had once gone so far as to say at the Littles’ Christmas open house, “they liked to watch.”

Isobel was fairly certain that there was nothing to these rumors. Although she did not have a friendship like theirs, she recognized that Maureen and Stelle were that mysterious pairing so celebrated in girl’s novels, so craved by her own daughter: best friends.

Their connection had been established almost immediately upon the Harrisons’ arrival in the neighborhood, when, at the welcome party she hosted for them, Maureen had offered to make
Stelle a gin fizz with a splash of pineapple juice. It was all Maureen ever drank and she called the concoction a “Daisy Buchanan,” because, she would say when asked, “Daisy ought to have a drink named after her.” Isobel suspected Maureen of a tremendous well of disappointment that had its source in Maureen’s Radcliffe degree and the vast collection of books in the Mercer house, books that were shelved two-deep on every available bookcase, boxed up in the basement, stacked like precarious spiraling staircases on the floor of the master bedroom. She supposed this was why she had never begrudged Maureen her drink pretension, while other neighborhood hostesses complained of having to buy little cans of pineapple juice when Maureen came over, which then sat open in the refrigerator and quickly soured.

Maureen was tall and angular, rail-thin despite two children and the batches of brownies she supplied to every school function or gathering of neighborhood children. She was attractive enough, but occasionally clumsy, both physically and socially. Isobel still recalled an evening several years ago when Maureen and Simon had come over for drinks, just the two of them, and Maureen had begun an animated attack on *Peyton Place*—nearly everyone on the block was reading it avidly—only to stop mid-sentence when she looked down at the side-table and saw the very book in question. It was hardly an unrecoverable blunder; Isobel herself might have simply touched the book, smiled, and said, “Well, you’ve been hearing all about what I thought of it. What did *you* think?”

But Maureen had been mortified into silence for the next half hour, while Simon steered the conversation elsewhere. And the next day, Maureen had appeared on Isobel’s doorstep with a half a coconut cake and a fumbling apology “for last evening, even though, you know, Isobel, we had a lovely time, we always do at your house, and I just, well, I should have kept my mouth shut. Simon says that I get unreasonable when I talk about books, won’t let anyone else get a
word in edgewise, anyway, here’s a bit of cake, I just baked it this morning and I remembered
that Ethan likes coconut cake, doesn’t he? So—” And she’d stopped abruptly and thrust the
cake at Isobel.

Nonetheless, Isobel liked her. Being a closet intellectual was hardly a crime, and
Maureen’s children were lovely, well-behaved in company but still independent people you
could hold a conversation with if you met them getting the mail or chasing a runaway ball across
the street.

She liked Stelle Harrison too. Stelle was small and dark-haired and fiercely chic. She
wore gloves with cocktail dresses occasionally, not just with evening gowns, and had her
fingernails painted at a salon once a week. Stelle’s slips never showed, her bag always matched
her shoes, and her house smelled deliciously of fresh roses and candle-wax. Of course, Stelle
had no children, and her figure was perhaps not quite as good as it could be, but when you were
in Stelle’s company, what left an impression was the conviction of her self-presentation.

Isobel had been in the kitchen on the evening when Maureen Mercer had laughingly
offered her new neighbor a “Daisy Buchanan,” and thus had seen for herself the almost
imperceptibly electric pause that followed the explanation: “Daisy ought to have a drink named
after her.” Turning from the counter where she was arranging the canapés she had brought,
Isobel had seen Stelle and Maureen looking at one another, Maureen’s hand poised on the bottle
of gin, Stelle’s elegant fingers wrapped around her cigarette case and lighter. Then—

“Oh, thank God,” Stelle said, and moved the few steps necessary to bring her fully into
the kitchen. “I’ve thought that for years and no one’s ever come through. How do you make it,
then?”

“Oh,” some shyness crept into Maureen’s voice, “it’s just a gin fizz, really, with
pineapple juice. I suppose I ought to have picked a bourbon drink, since Daisy was a Southern
girl, but the gin, the juice, the seltzer—"

“Sweet, tart, bubbly, and not muddled down by any silly leaves or dark colors. No you’re absolutely right,” Stelle said. “It’s perfect. And I really couldn’t be happier because I love gin fizzes but I never order them because the name sounds so ordinary.”

“Well, now you can order them all the time, like I do,” Maureen said, busying herself with making the drink, “only you’ll have to explain yourself every time, I warn you.”

“Oh, I don’t mind that,” Stelle said. “The waiter remembers you better if you’re a bit difficult. Thanks.” She took the drink from Maureen and sipped. “Now,” she went on, “I’m Stelle and you’re Maureen—lovely name, by the way—and thanks so much for having us over, but what I really want to know is whose books these are all over the place. Is your husband a college professor?”

“Who, Simon?” Maureen burst out laughing, and turned her face, barely, to include Isobel in the joke. “Simon is a lawyer, and a very good one. He does read books, of course, but I’m afraid most of them are mine.”

“Well, thank God again for that,” Stelle said. “Have you read Lolita yet? I’ve just finished it and everyone I try to talk to about it makes a horrible face and says they wouldn’t dream of reading it.”

“Oh and I just want to cry!” Maureen exclaimed. “Just cry! It’s the most beautiful, terrible thing I’ve ever read, I think, except for maybe Tender is the Night, which I know I’m supposed to be scornful of because it gets so sordid towards the end but I just love it—”

At which point Isobel, feeling like a child peering at a grown-up party through the rails of a staircase, picked up her tray and went back out into the dining room to put it on the buffet.
After that, there was a year during which Stelle and Maureen cultivated their friendship quite unobserved. There must have been phone calls, visits, shopping trips into the city, perhaps even late-night walks around the neighborhood or confidences exchanged over cups of coffee and plates of cake in Maureen’s sunny kitchen after the children left for school. There would have been books loaned out, returned, discussed. Their intimacy davored the rest of the neighborhood in the same way that the Cuttlefords’ marital troubles had: over time, through subtle signs that the women observed but did not comment on (Mary Ellen Cuttleford started wearing so much pancake make-up that her face looked like a stage mask), and unavoidable signs that the men pointed out incredulously the moment they appeared (the police car in the driveway—again).

In Maureen and Stelle’s case, you realized that whenever Maureen threw a party, no matter how early you arrived, Stelle was already there arranging flowers or lighting candles, turning to greet you with a hostess’s warm smile. And when Stelle threw a party, you knew that her dessert table would be lavish, despite her repeated disclaimer that she “did not bake.” Half of the offerings would be Easter-hued bakery confections, and the others would be Maureen’s specialties: her fresh coconut cake, her mint julep brownies. At any party, you would find Stelle and Maureen had gone off together some time during the night. They sat on front steps or on back porches, both leaning in to the light of Stelle’s cigarette, their murmured exchanges impenetrable as a foreign language. Then too, even in company they might suddenly catch one another’s eye and go off into gales of laughter, for which they apologized inadequately, since they assured everyone else present that, “Oh dear, it really isn’t that funny—it would be too hard to explain anyway.”

They had regular dates in the city, to shop, to go to the theatre. Sometimes they even
stayed overnight, just the two of them, in a hotel. They bought one another Christmas gifts and birthday gifts far beyond the usual neighborhood custom of fruit, cookies, or bottles in velvet bags. Maureen and Stelle gave each other books, perfume, jewelry, clothes—well, Stelle gave Maureen clothes; Isobel thought Maureen probably knew better than to try to assert herself when it came to Stelle’s flawless wardrobe. But Maureen had bought Stelle her favorite earrings: petaled jet flowers, black and faceted like insect wings. They were quite old-fashioned, and on another woman they would have looked dated, but on Stelle they gleamed and set off, by contrast, the sleek lines of her clothes.

The depth of the friendship was made emphatic by the fact—if you knew it, which Isobel did; anyone watching closely had to know—that their husbands did not get along. At a party, Fred and Simon would talk at the beginning of the evening for as long as took them to fix their first drinks, then Simon, who was ambitious, would seek out Judge Stewart, while Fred drifted into a conversation about football or lawn care or the proper proportions in a Manhattan. Isobel thought of Laura Little. She did not consider Laura a friend, and yet they socialized precisely because they were not extraneous to their husbands’ friendship. On the contrary, they facilitated it, by encouraging (or allowing) their children to befriend one another, by running their households in the same mold of quiet efficiency, by playing hostess to one another at regular intervals. Without their wives, Don and Jim might never even have known one another well enough to become friends. To Stelle and Maureen, though, husbands seemed to be as extraneous to their relationship as—well, as everyone else.

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Ethan refused tucking in or kisses these days; he wished his mother “Good Night” without looking up from his book. Julie was sitting up in bed when Isobel came in, and she
extracted a promise that Emma could come over the next day with the half-finished drawings of ball gowns so she and Julie could finish their creations. Isobel smoothed back her daughter’s hair and left her happily reading *Beverly Gray, Sophomore*.

She hurried down the hall to her bedroom to touch up her make-up and put her earrings in before the guests arrived. Don was in the bathroom; she could hear the plop of shaving cream into the sink and the soft splash of the razor when he dipped it in to rinse it off. He had shaved that morning, but his beard growth was heavy. Isobel was pleased that he’d remembered to shave again without being reminded. She took it as a sign that he too was looking forward to the evening, and thought of her lovely pie, which she had only barely saved from Ethan during his supper an hour earlier.

“Did you see I made a butterscotch pie for tonight?” she called.

A silence, another splash, then Don called back, “I did. I plan to claim a very large piece.”

“I hope there’s enough for that,” Isobel said. “I should have taken Laura up on her offer.” She told him about Laura’s phone call of that afternoon.

“That was nice of her to offer to bring something,” he said.

“Oh, I know it was. It’s just—she always—I always feel like I have to be careful what I say to her or she’ll just bristle.”

Don emerged from the bathroom patting his face with a towel. “Did I cut myself?”

Isobel turned and checked. “Not a one.”

“Amazing.” He disappeared into his closet and emerged a moment later with a fresh shirt and tie. “Don’t you bristle a bit at her too?” he asked.

Isobel paused with her lipstick at her mouth and gave him a look in the mirror. “You
Think I’m being silly.”

“No.” Don came up to stand behind her, craning his neck as he straightened his collar.

“I think that it bothers you that you and Laura aren’t friends.”

Isobel was silent, astonished as much at his perception as at his articulation of it. She began to tidy her hair, not meeting his eyes.

“Isobel,” he said, “if it bothers you so much, about Laura, I mean, then we shouldn’t go to the lake this year.”

The Paxtons and the Littles had vacationed together the summer before and the trip had been declared such a success that reservations were already made for this year. Isobel had been part of the consensus, as had Laura: their husbands enjoyed one another’s company, their children got along, and the two of them would have had to actively dislike one another to even suggest that the two families cut ties. And Isobel didn’t dislike Laura. She wanted to like her more than she did, that was all.

“I think Jim’s invited his brother’s family this year, did I tell you that?” Don went on.

“You remember his brother Allan who visited them a year or so ago. He’s got a new wife and a baby. I can’t remember what he does for a living.”

“He’s a teacher,” Isobel said. “He teaches high school biology. Laura told me. He used to be a college professor but ‘couldn’t handle the pressure,’ so she says.”

“Well,” Don said, “that brings us back to Laura and whether you can stand a week in close quarters with her this July.”

“Without ‘bristling’ at her, you mean?” Isobel asked. She assessed her reflection, blotted her mouth with a tissue. “It will be fine. I suppose I am just a bit sensitive because I really do want to be easy with her.”
“Well,” Don said, “maybe you two should take up fishing together. It works wonders for Jim and me.” He kissed her bare neck, deliberately loudly.

Isobel swatted his arm as she rose to her feet. “You’re hopeless.”

“And you look great,” Don said. He put an arm around her waist.

“Don’t—I just—my lipstick—”

“I know, I know.” He let her go and turned to the mirror to straighten his tie.

Isobel went downstairs to put the hors d’oeuvres out and fill the ice bucket in the living room. Don kept a well-stocked bar, and Isobel herself had remembered to get juice for Maureen and Stelle’s drinks. Everyone else would have a martini, except for Laura, who drank bourbon. Laura had even brought her own bottle to the cabin last year, though she hadn’t been stingy with it. But she had indeed been bristly.

*****

The lake was a little more than an hour’s drive away from their quiet street, an hour and a half from the city. Some 20 cabins were clustered along one curve of the shoreline, while the rest of the perimeter was still wooded and, in the summer, a riot of wildflowers. It was a lovely place. The Paxtons had been going there for a week in the summer for years and last year Don had suggested that they invite the Littles to join them. They rented two cabins side by side, with a picnic area and a barbeque grill on the grassy area outside both front doors. From there it was only a few yards to the lake, down a gentle slope to which the grass clung right up to end, when it gave way to pebbles and green muck. Isobel had grown accustomed to a certain rhythm for the week and was pleasantly surprised to discover that the Littles fell seamlessly into it. Don and Jim rose before dawn every morning and spent hours fishing on the lake, sometimes taking Ethan and Peter Little along. They fished again in the evenings after dinner, when their voices carried
across the water to the women and girls sitting around the fire pit.

Julie and Emma stayed up late giggling by the fire or on one of the back porches of the cabins, then had to be roused from their beds in the morning. They had an ongoing secret agenda that involved, variously, dolls and their wardrobes, coloring and art supplies, and armfuls of flowers that they picked and arranged into intricate fairy houses on the lawn. They put on their bathing suits still damp as soon as they finished breakfast and wore them all day. By the middle of the week, Emma, who was fairer and chunkier than Julie, had a frill of sunburned skin sloughing off all around her shoulders and the tops of her thighs.

Isobel and Laura did much of what they did at home: cleaned the cabins, kept everyone else cleaned and clothed and fed, drove into town together for more milk, eggs, fruit, and the Hungarian nut-filled pastries that were a specialty of the local bakery. But even they got a bit of a vacation at the lake. In the afternoons, after they had put everything away from lunch, they would look around and discover that both their children and their husbands were either sleeping or off playing somewhere that was inaccessible to supervision, the boys in the woods looking for arrowheads, the girls playing with paper dolls in one of their bedrooms. The two women sat in Adirondack chairs facing the water and read from the stacks of magazines and books they had both brought. Occasionally one would point out an article or a recipe to the other.

One afternoon, only a day or so after they’d arrived, Isobel looked up from her book and squinted at the water, trying to guess the time. It was close to sunset; she ought to get up and start dinner soon. She looked over at Laura to say as much, then stopped. Laura was crying under her sunglasses, her head back and at an awkward angle, as if she were resisting the urge to curl up on her side, away from Isobel. Watching her, Isobel remembered that Laura’s mother had died just that spring. The Paxtons had sent flowers and a card and Isobel had watched the
children for several afternoons while Laura took care of closing up the house and making other arrangements.

Isobal didn’t say anything that afternoon. She turned back to her book and read until Laura got up and went into her cabin. The next day, though, she waited for an opening. When she heard Laura sigh and toss her magazine down late in the afternoon, Isobel looked up.

“Did you finish?”

“No,” Laura said. “I just couldn’t read any more.” She had her sunglasses on, so Isobel couldn’t see her eyes.

“You know,” Isobel said carefully, “I’ve been meaning to say—I’m so very sorry about your mother, this spring. It must be very difficult for you still.”

Laura did not turn her head, but Isobel thought she tensed.

“Yes,” she said, “well, not so difficult as it was.”

Isobel didn’t say anything.

“She was very sick, you know,” Laura said. “She had cancer.”

“I didn’t know that,” Isobel said. “I’m sorry. That sounds awful.”

Laura gave a bark of laughter. “Awful, yes. I’m not supposed to talk about it. Jim says it upsets me. What he means is that it upsets other people.”

“But if you need to talk about it—”

“Oh, I can’t see how it helps, he’s right about that.” Laura said. “How can it help to talk about the details?”

“I don’t know,” Isobel said. She felt adrift, suddenly, in the midst of her familiar vacation spot. Her own mother was traveling in California with her father. She had no idea what Laura might be talking about.
“She had these awful sores,” Laura said, “and she lost all her hair and her mouth would bleed. Towards the end she was desperate to die. I couldn’t let the children see her.”

“No,” Isobel said, “of course not. Laura—”

“But of course, she left us quite a bit of money,” Laura said. “So that’s all right.”

“But it’s not! Of course it’s not, no one thinks that!” Isobel cried. “Surely you don’t think that anyone thinks that makes it easier for you!”

“Really, Isobel, “Laura snapped, “what do you know about it anyway? What could you possibly know about it?”

Isobel looked down at her magazine, from which a lovely blond woman smiled up at her, holding a can of Crisco. She thought about what to say, wondering even as she did so why she felt that she had to say something kind in the face of Laura’s belligerence.

Laura stood up.

“I need a drink,” she said. “Would you like one?”

“Yes,” Isobel said, “that would be lovely. Whatever you’re having.”

She stared at the face in the Crisco ad while she waited for Laura to return. It occurred to her that she must have met Laura’s mother some time or another, perhaps at a Christmas party at the Littles’ house. Certainly she’d seen pictures. She thought Laura’s mother had been blond, and lovely, like this woman.

Laura appeared at Isobel’s shoulder and handed her a drink.

“It’s bourbon and water,” she said. “You said you’d have whatever I was having.”

“It’s fine,” Isobel said. “Thank you.”

“I thought we’d do some fish tonight, and I could make some biscuits. My oven seems to work better than yours does.”
“I’ll slice up some tomatoes, then,” Isobel said, “and of course we have pastries for dessert.”

She took a sip of her drink. It was very strong.

*****

The Littles were the first to arrive, right on time. Don took Jim into the living room to fix drinks, while Laura followed Isobel back to the kitchen and hovered in the doorway. She was an attractive woman, slim and stylish in a navy blue shirtdress. Her hair was a glossy light brown color, like honey or syrup, and tonight she wore it clipped back at the nape of her neck.

“Thanks so much for having us tonight,” she said. “Is there anything I can do?”

“I think I’ve got it under control here, thanks,” Isobel said. She turned the temperature down on the stew and turned to offer Laura a smile. “I love what you’ve done with your hair.”

“Thank you.” Laura hesitated. “I hope it wasn’t an inconvenience having Julie home a bit early. But you know, after I sent her I thought, ‘Well, Isobel might be glad of the help.’ I know Emma always loves to set the table before we have company.”

“Yes.” Isobel maintained her smile. “That was already done, but I put her to work snapping the green beans. We thought Emma might come over tomorrow.”

“Well,” Laura said, “she has a piano lesson, but I’m sure she’d like to after that. I’ll send some of those éclairs with her so the girls can have a treat together.”

Isobel had forgotten to get the bread basket out. She pulled the step stool from the pantry and climbed on it to reach the cupboard over the stove, then shook out a clean cloth napkin and lined the basket with it.

“That’s settled, then,” she said. “The girls will enjoy the éclairs, even if we haven’t taken them off your hands for tonight.”
“Well I can see you have everything taken care of,” Laura said. “And you know I didn’t mean anything—”

“Oh, I know,” Isobel said. She felt like she had scored a point of some sort, but also that Don would have shaken his head at her, at this whole little exchange.

“Shall we move to the living room?” she asked. “I’m sure Don has our drinks ready by now.”

Laura followed her this time without another word. Jim had a drink ready for his wife and Don handed Isobel her martini with a wink. She had just taken her first sip when the doorbell rang and Isobel went to answer it.

Maureen and Simon stood on the doorstep, both wearing the unaccountably nervous smiles of people who are either shy or awkward in social situations until they are absolutely comfortable. In Simon’s case, Isobel knew that one martini in the company of at least one other man would suffice to soften the tension in his jaw. In Maureen’s she was not always so certain, of either the cause or the cure.

“Come on in,” she said, “Jim and Laura are already here and Fred and Stelle are on their way.”

Maureen stopped with one arm still caught in her coat and darted a panicked glance at her husband.

“I thought it was just us.”

“No, not tonight.” Laura must have said or done something insensitive to Maureen, or done something to make Maureen feel insensitive. Isobel shut the door and turned back to the Mercers, who had not moved. “I said something to Don when I invited everyone, that it seemed like it had been forever since we’d had a dinner party. I was afraid I would have forgotten how
to do it, to be honest, but then I found that I still had cocktail napkins and toothpicks left from the last time, so I was saved. And really—’ she tried a laugh—’how can you ruin beef bourguignon?’

“But we can’t stay!” Maureen said. “Oh Isobel, I’m so sorry. If I’d known—oh, this is terrible.”

“Maureen,” Simon said, “we could just stay for a drink. Just until they get here.”

“No, oh no, no, no, not until they get here, we can’t be here when they get here, Simon, I told you that, oh!—she’ll think I knew that she was coming, that I planned it this way.” Maureen turned abruptly back to the door. “I have to go. You can stay for a drink if you like.”

Simon rolled his eyes at Isobel over his wife’s head, but the gesture struck Isobel as designed to conceal genuine distress rather than indicate that he was just playing along with foolishness.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he said. “I’m not staying if you’re not. Sorry, Isobel. Tell Don we’re sorry to have missed him, and Jim and Laura too. Maybe we can have all of you up for dinner in a few weeks.”

“Oh—yes, yes, we could do that.” Maureen turned to Isobel. She held her coat closed at her throat with one hand; the other was already on the door knob. “I’m so sorry, Isobel, so sorry that we can’t stay, really, I would have told you but I thought you’d just invited us, Simon and me, I mean, and so I didn’t think—”

“It’s fine,” Isobel began, since there didn’t seem to be anything else to say.

But it was too late. The door, which Maureen had opened a few inches even as she was offering her apologies to Isobel, moved under Maureen’s hand. She stepped back as if pushed, Simon reached for her elbow, and Stelle and Fred Harrison appeared in the hall.
Fred was behind his wife, as he usually was. He was so tall and she was so small that it seemed their natural inclination to fit into each other like puzzle pieces rather than stand side-by-side, where their height difference would be noticeable and their pairing appear incongruous. Now Isobel saw Fred stagger as Stelle backed up into him. Maureen made a noise like a frightened animal, then for a moment no one spoke.

Isobel realized that when the door had opened to admit Fred and Stelle, she’d allowed herself to be pushed to the side, out of the little tableau the two couples made. It’s as though they’re waiting for the curtain to come down, she thought suddenly, and, exasperated both at them and at herself for forgetting that she was hostess here, she shut the door and moved in between Maureen and Stelle.

“Stelle, Fred,” she said. “How lovely to see you. You know I didn’t even think to tell anyone who we’d invited tonight, just because I assumed we’d all be glad to see each other. Laura and I were just talking a few minutes ago about how long it has been since we’ve had a dinner party in the neighborhood. Since the holidays, really, I think. Can I take your coats?”

Stelle turned to Isobel. Her face was composed of precise, delicate lines, in the sockets around her eyes, the arched ovals of her nostrils, the pleat in her top lip. Frozen, these lines looked suddenly as indelible as though they’d been drawn in with an ink pen. Isobel saw the disdain in them, but found herself able to merely raise her eyebrows in response—surely Stelle was not implicating her in whatever melodrama was being enacted here?

Stelle seemed to realize the effect of her expression. She dropped her gaze for a moment and when she met Isobel’s eyes again her look was calm and grave.

“Isobel, I am so sorry,” she said. “Of course this whole mess is not a bit your fault, and I feel terrible that you’ve gone to the trouble to have us over—and something smells wonderful by
the way. But we can’t stay. I’m sorry.”

“Stelle—” Maureen burst out, “don’t go. Don’t be silly. Stay. We’ll go. We were just leaving anyway when you arrived, as soon as we heard—”

“That’s true,” Simon said, moving in to embrace his wife. She stayed rigid within the curve of his arm. “We were just leaving, for what it’s worth. Let’s just go, then, shall we, and the rest of you have a lovely evening.”

“It doesn’t matter if you stay or go, Maureen,” Stelle said. “We’re not staying now. We can’t. Of course we can’t. So you might as well stay yourselves. Give poor Isobel some guests.”

“Oh Stelle!” Maureen wailed.

“Why don’t you all go, then,” Isobel said, in the gentle, reasonable tone she used with her children when they were overtired. “Don and I won’t be offended a bit, not when you’re all clearly far too upset to have a good time anyway.

“Please,” she said, when they all stood mute and indecisive, seeing their private tragedy suddenly transformed into a question of etiquette. “You’ll only put a damper on the evening if you stay, you can see that.”

She did not ask: “For God’s sake, what happened?” although she desperately she wanted to know, and was shaken by the rift to which she was bearing uncomfortable witness in her front hall. Maureen and Stelle had been best friends—hadn’t she just been considering this very fact, its strangeness and rareness—for nearly ten years, but now they could not even share a foyer.

Watching them negotiate their departures, the two men trying to shield their wives from each other, neither couple sure how to best make it to the door, Isobel looked closely at both women. Maureen’s whole aspect was white and strained, her large eyes fixed, so that she met
Isobel’s gaze by accident whenever she turned her head in that direction, and she flinched when she did. Stelle was still apparently unruffled, and unyielding. She stood looking at the grandfather clock in the hall while Fred smoothed her wrap over her shoulders. The expression on her face was now one of interested reflection; Isobel half-expected her to make a remark about the provenance of the clock.

The difference in the two women’s reactions to the meeting was profound, and yet Isobel thought that an observer using those reactions to ascribe some culpability to Maureen might be wrong. Maureen drew mistakes and hurts into herself, while Stelle shielded herself from them—in public at least—and flung such missiles as she had available to her: her dismissal, her disdain. In any case, Isobel thought, I’ll certainly never know. They’ll never tell me, either one of them.

There were muffled goodbyes—no one had spoken clearly since Isobel had taken over the scene and asked them all to leave—and then she stood at the door and watched them cross her front lawn in opposite directions. She started when Laura came up behind her, then moved aside automatically to make room for the other woman in the doorway.

“They’ve moved on to dissecting some obscure elements of Eisenhower’s foreign policy in there,” Laura said. “I thought I heard voices—” she followed Isobel’s gaze—“are they not staying?”

“Maureen and Stelle had a falling-out,” Isobel said.

“Maureen and Stelle?”

“Yes. They were quite upset to see each other.”

“But didn’t they know they’d all been invited?”

Isobel made a helpless gesture. “I don’t know. I thought they assumed, but then I guess I assumed they knew. It seems they all thought it was just them, that we’d only invited one couple
to dinner. None of them even knew you and Jim were going to be here—they said to tell you they were sorry not to have said hello, by the way.”

“Well,” Laura said, “that was nice of them.” She sounded skeptical of the whole story. Isobel half-wished that Laura had been witness to the scene herself.

“I just can hardly—a falling-out bad enough that neither of them could stay?”

“Apparently,” Isobel said.

Maureen and Simon were crossing the street close to their house. She was leaning forward in her haste, walking so quickly that Simon, who was taller, seemed to be having trouble keeping up with her. The Harrisons, meanwhile, were on the sidewalk at the edge of the Paxtons’ front lawn. Isobel saw Fred lean down and embrace his wife, inclining even his head toward hers and blotting out the light and space between them.

“Well,” Laura said, “I don’t even know what to think. I feel like I ought to send them each a sympathy card.”

Isobel felt abruptly angry. “Not everyone has your sense of humor, Laura,” she said. “I think they would be very hurt.”

“Do you?” Laura asked. “I don’t know that I meant it as a joke. If they’ve really had a falling-out like you say—”

“Stelle wouldn’t even look at her,” Isobel said, “and Maureen looked like she was about to break in two. I can’t imagine what happened.”

“No,” Laura said. “But it’s quite something they’ve lost, those two, don’t you think?”

Both couples were now out of sight, safe in the foyers of their own houses, both women no doubt already shedding the trappings of the aborted evening out, slipping earrings off into cupped hands, kicking off high-heeled shoes and padding over to chairs in stockinged-feet.
“I wonder what they’ll drink at parties now,” Laura said.

“It’s sad, isn’t it,” Isobel murmured.

The evening air was chilly and damp. Isobel shut the door on the empty street.

“Shall I rearrange the table settings while you finish up in the kitchen?” Laura asked.

“Oh—” the beautifully-set table would need to be cleared and re-set entirely now that there were only the four of them. “Yes,” Isobel said, “thank you. That would be a help. Just put the extra dishes on the sideboard.”

She went into the kitchen and turned off the burner under the beef bourguignon, then lifted her apron from the hook and tied it around her waist. There was far too much food for four; the whole family would be eating beef bourguignon for days. At least Don and Ethan wouldn’t mind. Isobel drained the string beans, then mounded them on their silver serving plate and slid a pat of butter on top. These wouldn’t keep. They were bright green and steaming now, glossy in the wake of the melting butter, but by the end of the evening they’d be soggy and limp. She might as well throw them out.

She moved the tureen for the stew close to the stove and prepared to lift the heavy pan.

“Wait, don’t do that, Isobel. Let me help.” Laura put her hand over Isobel’s briefly to stay her. “Do you have an extra apron?”

“Yes, on the hook, there behind the door.”

Laura slipped it on, then came over and held the tureen steady while Isobel poured.

“It smells wonderful,” Laura said. “I’ll have to get the recipe from you.”

“Of course.” Isobel set the empty pot down, wiped the rim of the serving dish with a towel. “Thank you. That was much easier with two.”
They took off the aprons and Isobel hung them back up on the hook. She looked back to see Laura patting her hair and checking her reflection in the window over the sink.

“It’s fine,” she said. “You haven’t mussed it up at all. Have I?”

Laura turned to check. “A little,” she said. “Just here—” she smoothed the hair at Isobel’s crown. “There. Let me get the door.”

She held the door to the dining room open while Isobel carried in the stew. The men were already seated and seemed not to have even noticed the absence of half the dinner party. They were talking about fishing, expressing hopes for an even better run of walleye up at the lake this summer. Isobel set down the tureen, went back into the kitchen for the biscuits, passed Laura bringing out the beans. Their coordination in serving the meal struck Isobel suddenly as evidence of a compatibility that she had not acknowledged before. She smiled at Laura as they sat down and Laura smiled back, a little wryly, as if she were thinking much the same thing.

“So,” Isobel said, reaching for Don’s plate, “what are the plans for the lake this year?”
The Stairway to Heaven

I’m the only one awake on the bus besides the driver, who’s singing softly to himself. Pearl Jam, I think: *Hey, I, oh, I’m still alive*. The obvious thing to do would be to slip my headphones on, fish a cd out of my duffel bag, and close my eyes. But I’m avoiding it. I’ve packed only one kind of music for the entire trip and it’s not even that I don’t feel like listening to it—it’s still pretty much all I am listening to these days. It’s just that it’s three in the morning in the dark in the middle of nowhere on our way to a fairly big-deal gig (for us), and if I start listening I’m going to lose focus. I’m going to want to call her, for one thing, and the last couple of times we talked pretty much sucked. A lot of those long silences full of her trying to be patient and compassionate and me trying to find the words that will bring her back.

My dad used to tell me I was a disgrace to my Irish blood because I can’t just do that—can’t say the right thing at the right time, or persuade people to do what I want them to do. He should know. He got my mom to take him back three times before he finally left for good and even though she burned her wedding dress in the picnic area behind our house afterwards, I bet she’d take him back again if he came around. He used to say that some people are meant to stay in one place and some people are meant to keep moving and as long as you know which kind of person you are you’ll be okay. I think about that a lot, because it sounds really good as advice goes, but then when you think about it, and if you know my dad, you realize that it’s just bullshit. Rationalizing to make it okay that you act like a dick.

Still, sometimes I think my dad might have been right, and that my problem is that I don’t know what kind of person I am. I mean, here I am on a bus from Boston to Chicago, and I don’t even know if I want to be on it or not. Not that I don’t want to be. Not that I do. It makes people
think I’m easy to hang with, because I just go along with whatever, but maybe it’s not such a good thing.

I’m lead guitar for a Pink Floyd tribute band called Crazy Diamond. We suck. I mean, really, we do. I’m not a half bad guitar player, I get approached a lot by other bands to come jam with them, see where it goes, all that. And the other guys are all pretty good too. Watts, who’s our lead singer, has a great voice, so great I think it’s a waste that he just imitates Roger Waters. And Ray’s a damn good drummer. Not the best I’ve ever heard, but pretty fucking good. Even Bryan, who can be a dick, holds his own on the bass. But there’s a big difference between being a bunch of decent musicians playing Pink Floyd songs and being Pink Floyd. A big fucking difference. Like the fact that we don’t even have a keyboardist, which is kind of crucial to the whole sound of Pink Floyd. Most of the keyboard parts I pick up on lead guitar and we’ve done some creative rearranging so Bryan can pick other stuff up on the bass, but still. It’s a whole missing instrument, for Chrissakes. The thing that sucks the most is that I’m the only band member who seems to have a clue that we suck, and the other guys take the whole thing completely seriously. This means that if I quit they’d be hurt, which I don’t want because these are my friends. It also means that we do stupid shit like we have a web page with all our pictures and bios on it (www.crazydiamondtribute.com) and last month Watts signed us up for this big contest called Battle of the Tributes. It’s being held at a convention center in Chicago and the first prize is $5000. The audience picks the winners of each round, which is the only way that makes sense for a tribute band contest if you think about it. I mean, why would you come to a concert by some group called Crazy Diamond that only played covers of Pink Floyd songs? Because you love Floyd, right? And maybe you’re one of those fans who thinks the band’s not
the same since Waters left, or you couldn’t get tickets to the 1994 tour, or even if you could and did, it wasn’t enough. The point is, if you want to hear Pink Floyd music played live on a semi-regular basis, we’re your best bet.

Well, us or Comfortably Numb, which is another Floyd tribute band that’s going to be in the contest. There’s the two Floyd bands, plus two Zeppelin bands, three Rush, one Eagles, one AC/DC, one Sabbath, one Journey, and one Queen, which is pretty fucking gutsy. I mean, shit, any white guy who can carry a tune can pull off “Heartache Tonight,” but if you get up on stage and try to pretend you’re fucking Freddy Mercury and you can’t sing, man, you better duck. The crowds at tribute concerts know exactly what they came to hear and they drink a lot of beer.

You wouldn’t think there’d be crowds at tribute band concerts. It’s kind of a sub-culture. But there really are crowds. Thousands of people will be there this weekend. We even have groupies. The big difference between our groupies and groupies for real bands is that ours feel like they should have a say in what we do and so you get this 16-year-old kid who comes to every gig and writes down all the songs we play and the order we play them in and then he sends an e-mail to Ray, who put the website up and manages it, and says that we’re shortchanging Animals and we need to revise our repertoire to pick up more deep cuts. Then Ray gets all worked up, like this is a real problem and we need to fix this and how do we respond to this kid and we have a special practice to discuss our playlist. I don’t really mind, I mean, I like pretty much all of Floyd’s shit, even the newer stuff from Pulse that some fans don’t want us to play. It’s still smart music, because they’re still a smart band. Sometimes I think it must be frustrating to be in a really big band because you’re not allowed to change. Eddie Vedder gets married and he’s really happy and what the hell kind of music is he gonna put out then, you know? Because it sure as hell isn’t going to sound like “Jeremy.”
But sometimes I also think it’s more frustrating being a cover band than anything else because of stuff like special meetings about playlists and having to listen to these crazy obsessed fans all the time who want to talk about the albums with Roger and the albums without Roger. I want to say, “Get a life!” and then I realize, oh yeah, right, I’m in the fucking band and I’m actually going to a tribute band contest to see if I’m a better pretend rock star than somebody else so I better shut the hell up.

In high school everybody thought I was a stoner, which I kind of was, but not as much as they thought. I just hung out with the stoners because they listened to the music I liked and they were pretty relaxed. I like being around relaxed people because I’m not a very relaxed person myself. I always feel itchy, jumpy inside, like there’s something I’m supposed to be doing right now that I’m not only not doing but I’ve totally forgotten about. Something important.

I had this English teacher junior year, Miss Hanlon. She was pretty young and she had these eyes that got big when she was talking about the books we were reading and when she asked you a question she kept those eyes on you like she really wanted you to answer. She was always trying to get me to join the high school literary magazine. We had journal notebooks for English that we were supposed to write in every day and I mostly used mine to try to write songs in, passing it back and forth with my best friend Watts. The songs were crap, about how our dads were assholes and how Boston is too fucking cold in the winter. Seriously. Watts kept insisting that we’d get better and Miss Hanlon kept writing encouraging comments in the margins, totally ignoring the fact that I wasn’t writing any of the assigned journal entries, but the whole thing just depressed me. The worst part was that sometimes I would think of an amazing line and write it down fast before I lost it. Then I would think of the next line, and the next, and realize that I was just quoting a song I already knew.
Because I think in song lyrics. I can’t help it. I’ll be in a bad mood and I’ll think to myself that I can feel one of my turns coming on—that’s Floyd, off The Wall. I even know the lyrics to songs I don’t like. All it takes is one good line and I remember it and think about it over and over, just turning it around in my head. What makes that a good line? Why do I remember it? Would it be as good if you changed the words around? Like how? Could you make it better? There are lines I come back to over and over again, like the one from “Captain Jack”—your sister’s out, she’s got a date, and you just sit at home and masturbate. Jesus, what a great line. And why? Because he uses that word that nobody ever uses, right, because it’s so embarrassing nobody ever even says it out loud and he says it and he means it to be embarrassing to the kid he’s singing about in the song. Great fucking line and I don’t even like Billy Joel.

These last few months have made me think about that Police song, “Every Breath You Take,” which I liked but didn’t think much of, lyrically. I could see how some people thought of it as a love song and I could also see how it could be creepy if somebody dedicated it to you and you didn’t love them back. Now I hear it and I think it’s pathetic. Every move you make, every breath you take, I’ll be watching you. Miss Hanlon used to try to get us to pick up on the “key words” in a poem or a story, the words that can’t be taken out or changed without the whole thing just falling apart. I used to assume the key word in that song was “every,” which is what would make it either intense or creepy, depending on how you looked at it. But now the word I get stuck on is “watching.” Because that’s all the guy singing is going to be doing. He’s not going to be touching her, or smelling her, or talking to her, or anything else. Just watching.

I could listen that song right now if I wanted to. Synchronicity is in my bag because “Every Breath You Take” makes me think of her. So does “Wrapped Around Your Finger.” So
does “King of Pain”—*I have stood here before inside the pouring rain, with the world turning circles running ’round my brain.*

It doesn’t help that I’m sitting on a bus staring out the window at the kind of stuff that you see on an interstate in Ohio, which is not a fucking lot. Watts is in the seat next to me, asleep with his headphones on. For a while I could still hear the music playing, but it cut off a while ago. Watts has his face pressed sideways into the bunched-up flannel shirt he’s using as a pillow and when we drive through a light on the highway I can see how relaxed he is, the lines of his face, normally kind of angular and lean, all soft and smoothed out like a little kid’s. Cute. Ray and Bryan, the other guys from the band, are asleep in the row behind us and I don’t know why I’m not, but I’m not really surprised either. I don’t sleep much in general.

I wish I could turn on my light. Then at least I could read something, although I don’t even have a book with me. I never think to do shit like that, like bring books for a 15-hour bus trip. I just throw in a cd collection that I shouldn’t be listening to along with the last few months’ *Rolling Stone* and *Guitar World* into my bag and think, “Oh yeah, that should be good.” And then five hours later I’ve read three issues and I’m fucking sick of *Rolling Stone* and I’m sitting in the dark watching the lights from the rest stops pass so fast they stream like ribbons and feeling like the only person awake in the world.

What the hell. I don’t even care. I mean, it’s not like I’m not thinking about her anyway, right? I’m sitting here in the dark listening to the sound of other people sleeping and all I can think about is Sonia. I’m so pathetic I even know I’m pathetic, but it’s like I can’t stop or I don’t care. Watts and Ray and Bryan have pretty much reached their sympathy limit, which is another reason why it was stupid to bring The Sonia Collection this weekend, not that any of them know it’s called that. I’m not that pathetic. But still. They’ve shifted from, “That sucks, man, she
sucks, women suck, they just rip your heart out” to telling me to get over it, get over her, she wasn’t all that great in the first place.

That’s completely untrue, but still, a couple of months ago, we almost broke up over it. The band, I mean. We were going to go out after a gig in Worcester and I lied and said I was too tired when I was actually going home to call Sonia. We were in the parking lot of this shithole bar where we’d just played and Bryan was helping Ray pack his kit into the back of his van. Watts was sitting on the hood of my car smoking a cigarette, and when I said that I was too tired to go out he made this noise in the back of his mouth like he was going to spit.

“Bullshit,” he said, and blew smoke at me.

“What?”

“You’re so fucked up, man, you know that?”

“Uh, no, Watts, why don’t you explain it to me?”

“You’re going home to call her, right? Or are you just going to go home and think about her and jerk off?”

I didn’t know what to say so I just looked at him, and he threw his cigarette butt across the lot. “Dude,” he said, “you need to get over her.”

“I’m working on it,” I said.

“Right. Like, in some alternate universe maybe.” He jumped off the car and shoved his hands in his pockets. “Come on, Dave, you’re a fucking basket case. I mean, you never come out with us anymore, you don’t laugh at anything. Christ, you hardly even cracked a fucking smile when that chick threw a drink at Bryan the other night, and that was fucking hilarious. It’s like somebody died or something. You’re still dragging your ass around every fucking weekend.
like you’re never gonna get another girl.” He sounded mad, like this bugged him in some way, not that it was his problem, and I said so.

“It’s not like it’s your problem.”

“Jesus!” Watts shouted. “You’re gonna go home and crawl under your covers and call her and she doesn’t want to talk to you, man. She doesn’t give a fuck. She’s doing her thing, now, Dave, dating some guy or a girl now or whatever. Get over her already!”

“You don’t get it, Watts,” I said.

“Yes I do. You’re such a fucking cliché, man. She was just a girl. I knew her, remember? She was cool, as far as I was concerned she was totally cool as long as she was into you. But she wasn’t a fucking goddess.” He kicked the gravel between us so hard that the toe of his boot caught and grit sprayed everywhere.

I backed away a couple of steps. He looked like he wanted to hit somebody, and even though Watts can get totally out of control when he wants to, he’s usually a pretty cool guy.

“Why are you so pissed off?” I asked.

“Jesus,” he muttered, and he turned like he was going to just walk away from me and go help the other guys in the van. They had the radio on now up in the front seat and Bryan was singing along with Alice in Chains. He has a really bad voice.

“She came onto me,” Watts said. He didn’t look at me though.

I didn’t think I’d heard him right, so I didn’t say anything.

“It was at a gig one night, I don’t remember when. You were putting your guitar in your car and I was just hanging out at the bar doing shots with a couple of the girls who always come to the show, you know, Stephanie and Jenn and Cori. And she came up behind me and—”

“And what?”
Watts took his hands out of his pockets and rubbed the back of his neck. “Look, Dave,” he said, “I didn’t want to tell you this. I’m not telling you this just to make you feel bad.”

There was a taste in my mouth like metal, or dirt. “What the fuck happened?”

“She bit my neck. I turned around then and saw who it was and she smiled and went to do it again and I just sort of pushed her away, man, I swear. I mean, if I’d been drunker and if it hadn’t been for you, I probably wouldn’t have, but I did. Then you came back and she just went over and started kissing you like nothing had happened.”

I swallowed. “But you said nothing did happen.”

“Right,” Watts said. “Nothing did. Forget it, Dave. Just forget I even mentioned it.” He turned away and walked over to the van, pounding on the side door with his fist. “Jesus, Bryan!” he shouted, “shut the fuck up, you moron. You sound like a rabid bear or something.”

I stood there in the parking lot while the three of them drove away, and then I went home and called Sonia to ask her if what Watts had said was true, even though I knew it couldn’t be true. I remembered that night, like I remembered every night. I remembered how she’d kissed me as soon as I’d gotten back to the bar, how she had turned when I slid my arm around her waist and the taste of her mouth on mine. There was no way it was true.

I let the phone ring 15 times before I hung up and waited ten minutes before I tried again, but she never answered. So I lay on my bed and thought about quitting the band. I didn’t want to have a big fight with anybody, and I didn’t want to say why I was quitting. I didn’t want Watts to think I thought he was a liar, because usually he’s not. In the end I didn’t quit.

After high school, Watts went to work for UPS because his parents are totally broke and his dad told him that it was time he “gave back to the family.” I signed up for a couple of
community college classes and got a job at Trak Auto in the mornings. It’s not even like I was against going to college, or that my grades sucked so bad I wouldn’t have gotten in anywhere. I mean, we live outside of Boston, which must be the college capital of the world or something. I probably could have gotten one of them to let me in. I even toyed around with the idea of the Berklee School of Music, because, like I said, I’m a pretty good guitar player. But I just sort of let everything slide my senior year of high school in terms of applications and stuff, and it seemed like the more I heard people getting worked up about where they were applying and how many essays they were writing and who they were getting recommendations from the more the bullshit got to me. Every time I thought about having to decide exactly where I was going to spend the next four years and what I was going to do while I was there, the more jumpy and jittery I felt. It got so that my mom thought I was on speed and searched my room at least twice, though she only admits to once.

So I ended up with an Intro to World Religions class, Intro to Psych, and a job stocking shelves with car batteries and WD-40. Mark, the manager at the Trak Auto, was a complete music nazi. My first day at work he showed me how to check deliveries in the store room and then asked me what the best Zeppelin album was. It was clearly a test question. I said *Houses of the Holy* and he snorted and said at least I had some basic intelligence. He spent the next few weeks quizzing me on classic rock in between customers, until he was convinced that I knew my shit. Then he said he had a “proposition” for me.

It turned out that Mark managed the radio station at Wellesley, the women’s college right in town. All the girls who go there are rich and what my mom calls snotty-smart. She used to manage a drug store in town and she’s got all these crazy stories about Wellesley girls, like the ones who came in wearing designer clothes and then shoplifted stuff. Then there were the ones
who looked like hell, hair all greasy; they hugged huge textbooks and they stood in front of the condom display for like ten minutes trying to decide. My mom said she pitied the poor boyfriends: “I guess they really are trying to blind those poor guys with science.”

See, my mom quotes song lyrics too, although hers are all from 80s pop and one-hit wonders. My mom used to live for American Top 40, that radio show on Sunday mornings with Casey Kasem. Seriously. When I was thirteen my dad got her to take him back by making a long-distance dedication. 38 Special’s “Second Chance,” in case you’re wondering: I fooled on you, but she never meant a thing. I used to give my mom a hard time about her music, turn it off when she left the room, switch the radio station in the car. She’d get pretty pissed off. But then I started having to listen to Mark, my boss, go on about how everything was complete shit except the stuff he liked—he used to get so worked up about how much Sting sucks that he’d get all red in the face and start spitting when he talked. So I cut it out with my mom. I think she kind of had to like that kind of music anyway. I mean, what was she going to play in her store all day, Iron Maiden? Like that would draw the Wellesley girls in. They probably would have started a petition to get the music changed because it was sexist or something.

I’ve lived in town my whole life so I’m used the to weirdness of going to the grocery store and seeing five people I know, then turning around and seeing a group of college girls giggling and loading up a cart with nothing but ice cream. When I was little, I liked it. My dad would flirt with the pretty ones and they’d smile at me and tell me I was cute. But then when I got older I could see why a lot of people in town just hate them. I mean, they kind of live here but they also really don’t. They always look like they’re in a hurry to get somewhere else: they go running in pink sports bras with matching sweatbands, they rush into stores and pay with crumpled bills from the bottom of their backpacks, they huddle together waiting for the bus into
Boston, all wearing high heels and black coats and red lipstick. And if you live here, you're invisible. When I was little and cute they saw me, and my dad always made them see him because he couldn't stand it when people didn't. But generally, we're just part of the scenery to them.

Still, like all college radio stations, they had a lot of dead airtime because nobody wanted to sit in the booth for four hours and play music that nobody listened to. Not to mention that the music they had over there was for shit. Savage Garden, Third Eye Blind—it was like stuff that somebody told them they should like but, honestly, why? I've never met anyone who can actually defend that crap to me and I've asked. There were a couple of student djs who came in and did their own thing. One girl played a whole four hour shift of the fucking Beatles, of course. And one girl Mark apparently had to fire because she was trying to some kind of political thing with her show so she'd play the most obnoxious, misogynistic songs she could find, then cut in and rant about them afterwards. But the girls who only turned the radio on while the song was playing didn't get it and they'd call to complain. That's Wellesley.

What Mark figured was that I was like him and I wouldn't give a damn if nobody was listening to the stuff I was playing so long as I got to play it, and also that I would just bring my own cds over and play those. So I got the nine p.m. to one a.m. gig at WZLY AM. That's how I met Sonia. She managed the coffee house in the basement of the student center. I used to go in before my shift to get a drink and check her out. She was amazing. Long hair, fabulous body, and these brown eyes that just sucked you in, like she was laughing but only with her eyes, or thinking of some hilarious secret that she wanted to tell you but couldn't. There's this line in the Doors song “Hello, I Love You” that goes, *sidewalk crouches at her feet like a dog that begs for*
something sweet. And that’s it, that’s Sonia. That’s how she made you feel, like you’d get down on your knees if she’d just look at you and smile.

I’d been getting a tall coffee for almost two weeks when she looked at me sideways out of those eyes as she was putting the lid on my cup and said, “You’re dj-ing on WZLY, aren’t you?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Just started about two weeks ago.”

“Do you like it?”

“It’s cool,” I said. “I mean, I get to drink coffee and listen to great music for four hours.”

She handed me the cup and wiped her hands on the apron she was wearing. She had a standard white restaurant apron tied around her waist but her jeans were low rise and she had on this cropped turtleneck top so there was a whole stretch of bare skin visible with just the apron strings tied around it. I pictured her taking the apron off and there being a mark on her skin all around her waist where it had been. I pulled my eyes back up at her face and she was looking at me like she knew what I’d been picturing and she thought it was cute. Then I realized that she must have said something else and I hadn’t heard her.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “What?”

“I asked what your definition of great music was,” she said.

“Well, why don’t you change the station in here and find out?”

She pretended to look shocked. “You mean, actually listen to our own college radio station here on the campus of the college? But that would be so uncool!”

I laughed with her, but then I had an idea. “I tell you what,” I said, “change the station and write down all the complaints you get and come tell me what they are when you close down. Then I’ll know how to improve the format.”
“Format,” she said. “That’s like some fancy radio term, right?”

“Yeah, you know, it’s the kind of music you play, like country or classical or heavy metal.” I realized that she was laughing at me again, a little more obviously this time. “You want another incentive to listen?” I asked.

“Sure.”

“Well, change the station and I’ll give you one.”

I couldn’t even believe I’d said that, and sounded as cool as I did. I mean, my hand was shaking so bad as I walked out of there that it was a good thing there was a lid on the fucking coffee cup. She had a beauty mark on the side of her face, just in front of her ear, that I hadn’t noticed until just then when I was talking to her. And her throat above her white turtleneck sweater was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen. I unlocked the booth (nobody wanted the five to nine shift either) and went in and set up. Then when it was nine o’clock I signed on, like I usually did, with a sound clip from The Wall: *Is there anybody out there?*

Usually after I played that I cut in and said, “Nope, Pink was right, there’s nobody home. So since I’m all alone on the air here tonight, I’m going to play some of the greatest music ever written for my own appreciation. This is David Donegal on WZLY AM, Wellesley, Massachusetts, and tonight I’m playing a collection I call White Guy’s Blues.” Or Driving at Night, or Pissed Off, or Hopeless, or whatever theme I’d come up with for the evening.

But that night I cut into the clip and said, “I’m hoping that some of you are out there tonight, because I just talked to someone over at Café Hoop who was thinking about actually listening to the show tonight, can you believe it? I’m hoping that she likes it enough to stay tuned for the whole four hours, and maybe some of you sitting in the Hoop right now, drinking coffee just like I am, or finishing off a brownie and studying for your Chemistry exam, will like
what you hear too. This is David Donegal on WZLY AM, Wellesley, Massachusetts, and tonight I’m playing a collection I call My Definition of Great Music. And I’m starting off tonight with a dedication, to someone whose name I don’t even know but I hope she’s listening.”

Then I played this amazing deep cut by Blue Oyster Cult that I’d thought of as soon as I’d sat down and started trying to come up with the perfect song to dedicate to the most amazing girl I’d ever seen whose musical taste I didn’t even know. It’s called “I Love the Night” and it’s about a guy who gets dumped by his girlfriend and goes out to walk the streets and meets a lady vampire. She seduces him and turns him into a vampire and they kind of live happily ever after—this is all in the song. It has this line fairly early on where he first sees her and he says a lovely lady in white stood by my side. It’s a really beautiful song, so even if you don’t figure out what the story is you can still like it.

Which she did. I wound down my set at around 12:50 with the same three songs I always ended with because they’re the three greatest songs in the history of rock and roll: “Hotel California,” “Comfortably Numb,” and “Stairway to Heaven.” Right as the guitar solo was starting in “Hotel California” there was a knock on the door and when I opened it she was standing there smiling at me. She had her coat on and her hair was spread out over the collar and her mouth was shiny like she’d just put lipgloss on. I put my hand on her wrist and pulled her into the booth and shut the door.

“Hey,” I said. “I’m David.”

“I heard,” she said. “I was listening.”

“Yeah?” I was grinning at her like a fool, but it didn’t matter because she was still smiling at me.
“Yeah,” she said. She reached up and pushed my hair out of my eyes and it was all I could do not to grab her and push her up against the door of the booth. “I liked your show,” she said. “It was good.”

“No complaints in the Café?”

She shrugged. “A few. But some people also said they liked it, that it was keeping them awake better than the stuff we usually play.”

“Did you like your dedication?”

“I loved it,” she said. “I’ve never heard it before.”

“It’s Blue Oyster Cult.”

“Okay.” She balanced her hip on the edge of the desk. “What other songs do they have?”

“A couple you’d know. ‘Burning for You,’ ‘Don’t Fear the Reaper,’ ‘Godzilla.’”

She smiled a little wider and slid her hands in her pockets. “You’re almost done here, right?”

I nodded. “Comfortably Numb” was playing.

“My name’s Sonia,” she said. “Do you want to come back to my room and talk for a while? I’ve got some beer in the fridge.”

I think I said, “Sure,” or maybe I just nodded again. Even when I replay that conversation in my head I can’t get every line of dialogue down exactly right because the whole time it was going on I couldn’t believe it was happening.

Her room was warm and dark and she left it that way, just turning on the reading lamp on her desk and getting two beers out of the mini refrigerator at the foot of her bed. She handed them both to me and shrugged off her coat. The movement made her sweater rise higher on her
ribcage and exposed the long shallow curve her body made from there to her waist and out again at her hips. I opened the beers and handed her one and watched as she took a long drink. When she was done she stepped so close to me that it was hard not to touch her even without meaning to and then she put her hand on the back of my neck and went up on tiptoe to kiss me.

I wake up to Ray shaking me a hell of a lot harder than necessary, but that’s just Ray. He’s not trying to be a jerk, he just has a hard time reining himself in. We call him Animal, after the Muppet who plays the drums and is just crazy all the time.

“Dude,” Ray says. “Wake up, man. We’re here. We’re at the hotel. Time to crank.”

“Jesus, Ray,” I say, managing to push him away a little, “your breath is foul. Get away from me. I’m awake already.”

He backs off and gets out to start down the aisle. “I’m gonna go see about my kit,” he says. “I’ll catch you in the lobby, okay?”

“Yeah, okay.” I shove my hair out of my face and realize that I still have my discman on, only it stopped hours ago. I must have fallen asleep somewhere around five or so and Queensryche just kept playing. I stow the cd and the discman in my bag and stumble off the bus. The huge fucking hotel-conference center in front of us is just unreal. I mean, the thing is a block long and there’s a lighted marquee out front that’s scrolling Battle of the Tributes, 1998: Pink Floyd, Led Zepplen, Queen. I back away from it and run into Watts, who’s got his sunglasses on and looks like shit, not that I should talk, I’m sure.

“Do you think we should tell them they spelled Zeppelin wrong?” I ask him as we get our bags and guitars out of the luggage bins of the bus.

“Fuck it,” he says. “Let those assholes from Road to Kashmir tell them.”
“Do you hate those guys because they suck or are they actually assholes?”

Watts looks at me over his shoulder as he leads the way into the lobby. “Are you doubting my judgment, Dave?”

“No, I just wanted clarification on how you arrived at what I’m certain is a valid conclusion, dickhead.”

Watts laughs. He’s one of my oldest friends and for as long as I’ve known him I’ve envied his ability to just be cool with whatever situation he’s in. I mean, compared to me and how I always feel out of place, always looking around for what’s next, and compared to Ray the wild man, Watts is just totally calm. It’s not even that he’s lazy, or unmotivated. I fully expect to see him get a good job someday, marry some good-looking girl, and just be, like, a dad. He’s really a good guy. It makes me glad that I didn’t drop out of the band. I would miss Watts, no matter what.

“They suck,” he says, “and they’re assholes. Don’t you remember that gig we did with them in Providence, when they were all trashed out of their minds on stage and they tried to get the crowd to throw beer bottles at us?”

“That was them?”

“Yeah.”

“They suck.”

“Yeah.”

“Do we play against them tonight?”

“Nope. Journey tribute bullshit and Thunder.”

“Are we going to win?”

“Of course we are, Dave.”
We meet up with Ray and his drums and Bryan at the elevators and agree to go to our room, shower, get food, then find out when and where we’ve been slotted for practice time and get some prep in. Our playlist still needs a little tweaking, too. With his e-mail and web connections, Ray’s been trying to find out what Comfortably Numb’s playlist is so we can be sure to have a better one. A few deeper cuts, some stronger songs, that kind of thing. I haven’t heard Comfortably Numb, they’re from Indiana, but I’ve heard some stuff about them and Ray doesn’t think they’re very good. So that’s cool. At least we won’t get shown up as being not just imitation Pink Floyd, but bad imitation Pink Floyd. I mean, Christ, that’s a pretty bleak thought.

The room, when we get up there, is fine, except for the whole problem that it’s like your standard hotel room, with two beds in it. We agreed to share a room since we’re all pretty poor, but now that we’re actually here Bryan dumps his stuff all over one of the beds and flings himself back against the pillows.

“I got dibs on one of the beds, dudes,” he says. “No way can I sleep on the floor and then play bass the next day. It’s not happening.”

This is a load of shit, as we all know. Like playing the bass is some kind of delicate operation or something. Bryan really can be a dick. He’s a big guy, and he wears these stupid little wire-rimmed glasses that I guess he thinks make him look like an intellectual, and he’s always putting himself first ahead of everybody, even the band. If we weren’t sort of friends by default, I wouldn’t choose to be friends with Bryan. One time Sonia asked me why I hung out with him, and when I just sort of shrugged she told me that it was a totally guy thing to do, to be friends with this guy you don’t really even like. If it was girls, she said, they might still hang out in the same group together, but they’d know that they hated each other’s guts.
I don’t hate Bryan, which I tried to tell Sonia. I just don’t like him. I even understand, kind of, why Watts and Ray consider him a friend. I mean, if you’re a pretty laid-back person and you want to party sometimes, Bryan is a good person to know. He drinks like a fucking fish and then just staggers around some and pounds people on the back like everything they say is hilarious. I don’t think he knows that I don’t like him, but sometimes it’s hard to be totally cool about it.

“I thought we were all sleeping in the beds,” I say now. I’m pretty tired still, to tell the truth, and I don’t see why Bryan should sleep in a bed while somebody else sleeps on the floor. I mean, Christ, it’s not like we didn’t just sleep on top of each other on the goddamn bus.

“We are all sleeping in the beds,” says Watts. He kicks off his boots and rummages around in his overnight bag for his toothbrush. “We talked about the whole thing, Bry. It’ll be fine.”

“I don’t know, man.” Bryan’s shaking his head. “Just so long as nobody touches me while I’m sleeping. And I mean like touches me. Like even if it’s a fucking accident.” He jackknifes up off the bed and goes into the bathroom. Watts sits there with his toothbrush that he just finished putting toothpaste on.

“Dave,” he says. “You’re right, I know. He’s a total dick.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

Ray sticks his head out from the closet where he’s carefully hanging up all of his Hawaiian shirts. “Hey, at least he’s honest about it, right? I mean, he’s an asshole and proud of it.”

“No he’s not,” I say. “He thinks he’s cool as shit and I’m not sleeping with him.”
“Damn, Dave,” Watts says, raising an eyebrow at me. “Are you stating, like, an actual position on something?”

“Sounds like it,” Ray says.

I tell them both to fuck off, but I feel kind of bad about making things difficult. I mean, it’s not their fault that Bryan is a dick, and now one of them has to sleep in the same bed with him. I volunteer to take the last shower to make up for it.

Sonia thought I needed to be more assertive. That was how she put it. She said that I didn’t have an opinion about anything, and, what was even worse, I didn’t even have my own voice.

“What are you talking about?” I asked her.

We were lying on this big hill on the Wellesley campus, the one that the girls would go sledding down when it snowed. There was a little bit of snow on the ground, and I could feel the cold through my jeans and through my jacket and through the wool scarf that Sonia had laid down under our heads. It felt weird though, because she was lying with one arm and one leg draped over me and her head on my shoulder, so the whole front of my body was warm. Also, she had her hand inside my shirt inside my jacket and she was just running her fingertips over my stomach, tracing the mark of my waistband over and over again. It made it kind of hard to concentrate on what she was saying.

“Well,” she said, “I mean the whole thing about how you just go along with what everybody says. You know, like the guys in your band. You don’t even want to be in a tribute band, but you are.”
“It’s not that I don’t want to be in it,” I said. “That’s not true. I just—I don’t know—I just wish—”

“You see?” Sonia laughed. “You take away the song lyrics and you don’t know what to say.”

“Is that what you mean about how I don’t have my own voice?”

“That’s exactly what I mean.”

“But—” I started to say that it wasn’t true, but it kind of was. Just not the way she meant. The way she was talking about it made me feel like she was mocking me.

“If I quoted Shakespeare every time I wanted to say something important I bet you wouldn’t tell me I didn’t have my own voice,” I said. “You’d tell me I was fucking brilliant or something.”

“No I wouldn’t,” she said. “I’d tell you to cut out the poetry and tell me something true.” She rolled over so she was resting her chin and her hands on my chest and her face was close to mine. I wanted to kiss her, but her eyes were hard and bright and I got the feeling that she would pull away if I tried.

“Songs are true,” I said. “The greatest songs are only great because they’re true.”

“Fine,” Sonia said. “But they’re somebody else’s truth. Tell me something in your own words.”

“About what?”

“About anything. About me, about how you feel.”

“I love you,” I said, and my voice broke in the middle because I’d only said it a few times so far and my stomach clenched up every time I said it. She had said it to me, too, a few times, but not when were just talking like this. Only in bed.
She put a finger out and tapped me on the nose. “Too easy,” she said. “Tell me something else.”

I could feel the cold seeping through my clothes and my skin until it felt wet, and maybe it was, from the snow melting underneath us. Her white face in front of me was perfect, beautiful. I cupped her cheek in my hand and I thought of how to tell her that. But my head filled up with lyrics like always, just line after line from different bands, different songs,

- *Every little thing she does is magic, every thing she does just turns me on.*
- *Her hair reminds me of a warm safe place where as a child I’d hide.*
- *She’s so beautiful now, she doesn’t wear her shoes.*
- *She was a black-haired beauty with big dark eyes.*
- *All the debutantes in Houston, honey, couldn’t hold a candle to you.*

and I couldn’t think of how to say anything better than it had already been said by somebody else.

“You’re beautiful,” I said. “You’re so fucking beautiful. I just can’t—” I was shaking all over, maybe from the cold, finally, and I pulled her up over me and pressed my face against her neck, under her hair. I felt her holding herself stiff for a minute, and then she sighed and melted against me.

It’s weird to play on the stages they have set up in here. The rooms have red diamond-patterned carpet on the floor and up the walls, and there are chairs set up like we’re a play that people are about to watch, not a band. Plus, the acoustics suck because of the carpet on the walls. Ray freaks out about this about halfway through practice, just quits playing in the middle of “Run Like Hell,” slams his hand on the cymbals and starts cursing.
“Jesus Christ, Ray,” Watts says. “You want to share your problem with the rest of us or what? We go on in six hours.”

Ray starts jumping up and down like a pissed-off little kid, his Hawaiian shirt flapping.

“I can’t play in here, man,” he says. “Can’t you hear it? It’s like the walls are full of cotton or some shit, just muffling my drums, man. Feels like I’m going deaf.”

“You are going deaf, Ray,” Bryan says, striking a big chord on the bass for effect. “Been trying to tell you that for years. Of course, since you’re going deaf you never heard me. . .” He trails off, waiting for the laugh. Ray tells him to fuck off.

“I’m going to go talk to someone, dude,” he says. “See if there’s anything they can do. I’ll be back.” He swings off the stage and starts running down the aisle toward the door.

Watts puts the mike back on the stand and goes to get his bottle of water. “Shit,” he says, “he better not get us kicked out of here.”

“He’ll be alright,” I say, although with Ray there is always the possibility that he will piss somebody off, not on purpose, just because, like I said, we call him Animal. He tends to think about things after he does them.

It works out okay, though. Watts and Bryan and I hang out for about 15 minutes, and then Ray comes back and says that there’s nothing they can do. He seems calmer, though.

“The good news is,” he says, vaulting back up on stage, “that when we play tomorrow night it’ll be in the ballroom, which has better acoustics. I asked the guy at the desk and he said that a lot of wedding bands play here and they always tell them that their acoustics are really good.”

“Wonderful,” Bryan says, “reassured by the recommendation of a wedding band.”
I almost point out that we are kind of the same thing, but Ray starts warming up the intro to “Run Like Hell” again and I just shut up and play instead. Even with the crappy sound in here—it really is what they call a dead room—we sound pretty good, nice and clean, which is crucial for Floyd. A lot of bands sound fine even when they’re a little bit rough on the edges, groups that have kind of a rough sound to begin with like the Stones or Aerosmith or Springsteen. But Floyd is cold music at the heart and it doesn’t give you much leeway for sloppy playing. When we wrap up the set, with “Run Like Hell,” our signature closer, I feel the last chords thrumming in my hand.

“Alright,” Watts says softly. “We’re gonna rock, no problem.” He’s sweating, so he fishes a rubber band out of his pocket to wrap around his hair. “We’ve got a couple of hours to chill, you guys want to hit the pool?”

We pack up and head back to the elevators, and Watts elbows me as we walk.

“Nice playing, Dave.”

“Thanks. You sounded good too.”

“Yeah,” Watts nods, “not bad. We’re a pretty good band, all around.”

I feel like he wants me to agree with him, so I do, and he looks at me sideways. “You really feel that way?”

“Of course I do,” I say. “I wouldn’t play in a shitty band.”

“No, but you’re more hung up on the originality element than the rest of us.”

“Not so much that I’d rather play shitty songs than good ones.”

Watts grins. “I know that, moron. If you didn’t have standards we’d be playing some of that crap we were writing in high school and getting booed offstage.”
“Yeah. I guess it just—I mean, doesn’t it ever bother you that we never came up with anything really good on our own?”

“Just because you’re playing a song somebody else wrote doesn’t make you any less amazing a guitar player.”

“Okay,” I say. Watts is always getting on me about not thinking I’m as good as I am so this is nothing new. The elevator comes and we get on with a whole pack of kids in private school uniforms. Blue blazers with little gold buttons, white shirts and khaki slacks, the whole nine yards. They’re laughing and shoving each other, but it’s still clear that they’re straight arrows. I mean, they’ve all got good haircuts, even the one kid with longish hair has it cut and styled, and they’re rough-housing kind of quietly, like they would actually care if they got in trouble. One of them has a book in his hand, though I can’t see what it is.

“What are you guys doing here?” Watts asks them.

“National Debate Championships,” one of them says. “Our school’s come in the top five every year for the last 20 years.”

“Not bad.” Watts looks impressed. I try to keep a straight face. “You guys have debates at night while you’re here?”

“No way!” The kid is scornful. “They’re all in the day time, then at night they have dances for us to go to.”

“Right, the dances,” another kid says, “I hear they’re totally lame.”

I see where this is going now; Watts never misses an opportunity to build our so-called fan base. Sure enough, he whips a bunch of tickets out of his pocket and starts passing them out, telling the kids to come see us play tonight and vote for us to win.
“How do you vote for a band?” the kid with the book asks. He shifts it in his hand and I see the title. It’s a book I remember from high school, *The Great Gatsby*.

“You just cheer,” Watts says. “It’s usually pretty clear who the winner is. You guys should come down and check it out.”

“Yeah, alright, maybe.” They’re kind of glancing at each other, trying to figure out if we’re cool or losers, playing it close. But still, they get off the elevator with the tickets in their hands. Just as the doors are closing I stick my hand in between the doors to stop them.

“Hey,” I say, “are you reading that?”

The kid looks down at the book. “Sort of. I mean, we have to.”

“How much do you want for it?”

“You want to buy it from me?”

“Yeah,” I say. “You can buy another copy, right? Or just read somebody else’s and tell your mom someone stole yours.”

He turns it over in his hands. One of his friends nudges him. “Come on, man, let him have it. You can tell your mom you lost it. Make him give you $20 for it.”

I fish my wallet out of my pants. “Here’s fifteen,” I say. “It doesn’t cost that much.”

I let the doors close and hit the button for our floor again.

“Didn’t we have to read that in high school?” Watts asks. “I have vague, painful memories.”

“Yeah. In Hanlon’s class, remember? I really liked it.” I feel like I have to explain a little. “I didn’t bring a bathing suit, and this way I’ll have something to read while you guys are in the pool.”

Watts nods. “Who wrote it again?”
I turn the book over and look at the cover, at the picture that I had forgotten but now I remember perfectly, of the dark blue sky with the girl’s sad eyes suspended in it like stars.

“F. Scott Fitzgerald.”

“Didn’t he blow himself away?”

“I don’t think so, but he was pretty messed up. Miss Hanlon used to love to talk about him—don’t you remember how the whole class used to try to get her off track by asking questions about his other books and stuff?”

Watts grins. “I was mostly just checking out her legs. She had pretty good legs.”

I can’t tell if he’s serious or not so I just keep talking. “Well, anyway, Fitzgerald—he was a total alcoholic and he kept pushing himself because he wanted to be the greatest writer ever.”

The elevator stops and we pick up our guitar cases and get off. Watts looks over his shoulder at me as we head down the hall. “You want to know what your problem is, Dave?” he asks. “Because I think I’ve finally figured it out.”

“What?”

“You’re not happy being a guitar player, or a band member, or anything. You want to be a fucking artist.”

When we were reading *The Great Gatsby*, Miss Hanlon asked me what I thought of Daisy, the girl in the book who Gatsby is in love with the whole time but who leaves him for her husband at the end. I was writing the lyrics to “Stairway to Heaven” in the margin of my English journal because that’s what Daisy made me think of and I said so. I said, “I think she’s like the lady in ‘Stairway to Heaven,’ ” and everybody laughed. Except that Miss Hanlon didn’t. She
got this big grin on her face, but it wasn’t like she was making fun of me. Her eyes were on me the whole time while she shushed everybody and asked me to explain what I meant.

“Ok, David, so Daisy is like the woman in ‘Stairway to Heaven.’ How?”

“Well,” I said, “she’s so sure that she can buy whatever she wants and she doesn’t think about the consequences, you know, like if the stores are all closed, and she’s taking the stairway to heaven which is what Gatsby thought he could climb if he kissed Daisy.”

Miss Hanlon was still looking at me and nodding. “In chapter six,” she said, “when Gatsby tells Nick about the very first time he kissed Daisy Buchanan he thinks that he can see a stairway right up to the stars. Very good, David. That’s a very apt comparison, and one I don’t think anyone’s ever made before. You should write a paper on it.” And she winked at me.

While Bryan swims these fierce laps and Ray and Watts splash around with a nerf football they find in the pool, I sit on the edge and flip through *Gatsby*. It’s been so long since I read it that I forgot some things about it, like how it’s about Gatsby but it’s actually told by that other guy Nick. I find the part in the middle that was my favorite, where you find out about how Gatsby and Daisy first met and fell in love, and I start reading there. I mean, it’s not like I don’t know what happens. So I read about how Gatsby knew, when they were first together, that he didn’t deserve Daisy, that she was too good for him, but it only made him want her more, and made him do things he knew he shouldn’t do. And this one line just jumps out at me—“eventually he took Daisy, one still October night, took her because he had no real right to touch her hand”—and I have to read it twice before I get that he’s talking about sex, because it’s such a subtle way to say it: “took her.” I can see the whole scene in my head, how cold it is in the back
of the car, how white her body is when he takes off her dress, how bad he’s shaking the whole
time. That’s a great line. I wish I had a pen with me to mark the page.

The first time with Sonia, she paused with her arms crossed over her chest and her hands
on her shirt, about to lift it over her head. I still had all my clothes on, but she had already
tugged off her jeans and tossed them over the side of her bed. She was sitting on top of me, and I
had my hands on her bare thighs. Her skin felt amazing, and I kept running my thumbs in circles
on the insides of her thighs, wanting to touch her where our bodies met but scared to. I wasn’t
sure what was too much, too fast, and I didn’t know if she could feel how my hands were
shaking.

“I have to warn you about something,” she said, but smiling, like she was teasing me.
“What?”
“I have my nipples pierced.”
“Okay.” I didn’t know what else to say. “Does it hurt?”
“No, Silly.” Her laughter was muffled for a moment by her shirt. “It’s just that I didn’t
want you to be freaked out.”

She braced herself on her hands and leaned over. Her nipples were red and pierced with
thick gold rings. I took one in my mouth and tasted the metal against her skin. It made me want
to bite her. She rubbed herself against me and pushed her breast into my mouth. When she
came, she screamed. I slid my arms up her back and glanced over her shoulder at the door to her
room. It seemed like people must have heard her and I had this image of the RA banging on the
door or bursting through it to kick me out, before I’d ever even—but then Sonia slithered off of
me and started taking off my pants.
“What’s wrong?” she whispered. She had her hands on me then, through the opening in my boxers, and it was hard to answer.

“I don’t want you to get in trouble.”

“David,” she said, “this is a women’s college, not a girls’ boarding school. Nobody cares what I do in the privacy of my room. Relax.” She slid my shorts down and looked up at me, laughing again. “Besides, if anyone did complain, they would understand the minute I showed them this gorgeous cock.”

We hang out at the pool for a little while and then we all come back up to the room. We barely even get out of the elevator before Bryan yells, “Deejay,” and sprints down the hall to the room. It’s this really lame thing he came up with a long time ago, like when you yell “shotgun” and you get to sit in the front seat of the car, only “deejay” means you get to pick the music that’s playing wherever you are. Bryan always wants both and the funny thing is that the rest of us don’t really care. Watts and I like most of the same music and Ray likes anything with a good drumline. Sometimes Bryan does put in complete crap, like Green Day or old Motley Cruè, and we only let it play a few minutes. Bryan gets completely pissed whenever this happens, but this one time when he had a fit in the van Watts just pulled over and told him to grow up or get the fuck out. It was pretty funny.

“Five bucks says the Doors,” I say now, and Watts looks over at me.

“You think? I’m betting Live. He just got a bootleg concert album.”

Ray is walking just ahead of us, bouncing, actually, as usual, and springing up every couple of feet to try and whap the light fixtures with his towel. “You guys are both wrong.” he
says over his shoulder. “My man Bryan’s in a mellow mood today. I’ve got my money on Celine Dion.”

The thought is pretty hilarious, almost as hilarious as the image of how mad Bryan would be if he heard us even suggesting that he listened to Celine. But we haven’t even gotten to the door when we hear “Break on Through” blasting from Ray’s boombox, which is set up on the only table in the room.

“Don’t you assholes owe me money?” I ask.

“Never shook on anything,” Watts says, grinning. “I know better.” He closes the door behind us and goes over to turn the music down.

“Hey!” Bryan comes out of the bathroom in just his boxers and glares at Watts.

“Do you want us to get kicked out before we’ve even played?” Watts asks him. “You could hear it all the way down the fucking hall.”

“Whatever,” Bryan says. Then he bolts back into the bathroom and you can hear the door lock. “First shower!”

“Jesus,” Ray mutters.

“Hey, come on,” Watts says, “at least the guy’s consistent. We’d all have a collective heart attack if he ever acted considerate of anybody else.”

“No shit,” Ray says. “So would he.”

They turn the t. v. on to wait for the shower, and I stretch out on the floor to read some more of The Great Gatsby. The more I read, the more stuff I remember, not just about the book itself, but about the class and everything we talked about. It’s a weird sort of déjà vu that I usually only get with songs, like I’ll hear “Running Out of Love,” this really obscure E. L. O. song that only Mark ever played and as it’s playing I’ll realize that I know the words to the next

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line. And then I’ll remember all the weird pieces of E. L. O. trivia that Marc used to rattle off to me and I’ll remember that I was in Marc’s car the last time I heard the song and he was dropping me off at the Wellesley student union after my shift at Trak because Sonia had said she wanted to see me. She hadn’t been able to see me for almost two weeks because of exams. She was so busy she never even answered the phone, even though I called every night. And then she called and said we should have dinner at the student union and she never showed up. I walked over to her dorm and had the girl at the front desk call up to her room, but she didn’t answer. I thought she must be sick, so I got a ride home from Watts a couple of hours later and I called her again and she said she thought we’d outgrown each other. What she meant was that she’d outgrown me.

The thing I remember about this book is that towards the end of it the teacher had us talk about who we liked the least and the best and almost everybody said they hated Daisy, especially the girls. I remember that now, because I was kind of surprised by it. I know she leaves Gatsby in the end but the whole time I was reading it I was expecting that to happen. She’s rich, she’s beautiful, she’s got a husband and a kid, and I don’t think she expected Gatsby to follow her like he did, you know, keep tabs on her and make all that money to get her back. I have to read the end again to find out—I’m pretty sure she comes back after he’s dead and tells Nick that she wishes it could have been different.

The thing is that I don’t really blame her, like I can’t blame Sonia for anything, even though Watts and everybody keep trying to make me blame her. Gatsby thinks he’s not good enough for Daisy, and I know how he feels . . . sidewalk crouches at her feet, like a dog that begs for something sweet. There’s that line again, the one I thought of when I first met her, and which is playing right now.
After showers and subs from a place across the street, we head back down to tune up. We play against two other bands tonight, and there’s another room in the hotel where the same thing’s happening, three bands playing and one group winning based on cheering. Then the other six groups go up, three in each room again, so by tomorrow night, Saturday, there will be only four bands left. All four of those bands play together and they either pick a winner straight off or do another round with the top two bands.

We’re here for the duration since we booked the room for the weekend, so it would be cool if we won at least tonight. But we know people from seeing them around, some of the guys from other bands and even some groupies. So even if we get shot down early on, there will still be a party in somebody’s room and almost certainly a chance to score some weed. Ray gets it fairly regularly from this guy he knows back in Boston, but it’s not very good stuff. Pretty rough, actually, not that I’d ever complain about it to his face. He usually gets it and just lets us all smoke what we want when we’re hanging out, so it’d be pretty rude to knock the quality.

We’re playing against Thunder, the AC/DC group, and Escape, the Journey tribute, which I would have known even if Watts hadn’t told me. The minute we walk in the room we see the lead singer, who looks more like Jon Bon Jovi than Steve Perry, just mobbed by girls. He’s doing some warm-up vocals, checking the mike for feedback, but even so he’s working it pretty hard. His jeans are two sizes two small for him, and he’s got a black tank top on that shows his arm muscles.

“I wonder if he’s gonna pull out the red coat,” I say to Watts as we head down the side aisle.
Watts just shakes his head. “We can only hope,” he says. “Maybe he’ll trip over it and they’ll lose by default.”

That was Steve Perry’s whole signature look back in the 70’s: this ridiculous red coat, like a jockey’s or a waiter’s, cut long in the back. He’d put it on halfway through the show and flip his hair—he had that really long black hair—out from under the collar and all the girls would start freaking out. I never saw it live, obviously, but I’ve seen enough footage of Journey concerts to last me a lifetime. My mom has every album on vinyl, cassette, and cd, and she still goes nuts whenever a Journey song comes on the radio.

The thing about the Journey group is that they’re pretty good, not as good as us, but good enough to give us a hard time, especially because all the women in the audience care about is the lead singer. The AC/DC group, on the other hand, completely sucks. They look like they’re still in high school, and they’ve got all their instruments cranked up so high all you can hear is feedback.

We go on last, which sucks because it means everyone has time to get worked up, but is also good, Watts says, because it’ll mean that when we come on, the audience will be like, “Oh, right, that’s what actual good music sounds like.” He says this backstage, leaning up against the wall and drinking a beer, which is part of how he warms up. He says it helps his voice. Bryan’s leaning in towards the stage and listening as hard as he can to “Don’t Stop Believing,” swiveling his head around every few seconds to report to us, like we can’t hear it for ourselves.

“Oh man,” he says, “they’re killing out there. There’s girls jumping up and down in the front row, man. This sucks.” The thing is, there’s only 200, maybe 300 people out there, so twenty drunk girls screaming as loud as they can could push the vote over. I feel stupid for caring, but I can feel myself getting keyed up, tension running down my arms and legs and
settling in my hands and feet. I shove my hands in my pockets and lean up against the wall across from Watts to keep from pacing. I figure I’ll get to expend the energy when we go on stage. Shit, I hate being nervous. Ray’s jumping in place, playing the drum parts to all the songs on an invisible drum kit he’s got lined up, and the funny thing is that he’s so clearly better than the guy they’ve got out there. I mean, he doesn’t even like Journey and he’s doing a far better job than their drummer is.

The applause for Escape is as loud as we were afraid it would be, but then just as we’re walking out, I look up and see this group of kids coming in the back of the room, all huddled together like they’re not sure what the hell they’re doing here. I nudge Watts and he looks up and sees them too and grins at me.

“Hey, man,” he says, “marketing. It’s what I’m telling you. It’s all about marketing.”

It’s the kids we met in the elevator, and from the looks of it they recruited a whole bunch of friends to come with them. I figure if nothing else they might cheer us because Watts gave them free tickets. And what the hell, I want us to win. It’d be more money than we’ve ever made off a gig before, that’s for damn sure.

So Watts takes the mike, waits for all of us to do our sound checks, introduces us, and then, on cue, the stage goes black. A couple of girls squeal and then all you hear is Watts asking, over and over, “Is there anybody out there?” and after the fourth time Bryan and I come in with the guitar lines to back him up, Bryan playing the rhythm line real soft and me bringing up the melody over it, until we segue straight into “Nobody Home,” which is just how the songs go on The Wall. It’s not a powerhouse opening to a set, just the opposite. It’s so stripped down that frankly if Watts didn’t have total and complete command of the stage it wouldn’t work. But he does. He gets them every fucking time; from the minute he asks, “Is there anybody out there?”
for the first time, the whole room goes quiet, and then by the time the light comes up on him hunched over the mike like fucking Jim Morrison, everyone in the audience is just focused on him and on the music.

We let “Nobody Home” take us into “Comfortably Numb,” which gets a sort of muted roar when it starts, because it’s the song everyone knows, and a huge cheer when it’s over. You only do a short set for these things, five songs and you’re off, so we try to show our range—this is Ray’s idea, because he says most Floyd cover bands don’t bother to get away from The Wall, which is true—and so then we do “Wish You Were Here” and a short version of “Shine on You Crazy Diamond” before we close with “Run Like Hell.” This is the song that lets all of us do our thing, which is why we do it in every show. It’s got that great creepy vocal and the drumline just driving the song on, like another voice backing up the threat. Bryan just has to hang on for the ride on this one, following me, because the guitar can never let up, not for a second, if it does the whole song falls apart, and the whole second half of the song is mostly instrumental. Watts leaves the mike at this point and comes over to me and starts egging me on, making this big deal out of how I might lose my concentration at any minute, then getting behind me and pushing me to the front of the stage, which gets a huge cheer. I feel like the chords are vibrating through my whole body by the time it’s over, which is a good sign, and when Ray and I cap the set off with the final drum and guitar riffs, Watts grabs my strumming hand and throws our arms up in the air together, standard rock and roll victory gesture.

And the crowd, as Watts puts it later, goes wild. They love us. Even the girls are screaming and cheering and jumping up and down, and a couple of the drunker ones start tugging on Watts’ jeans trying to get him to bend down and talk to them. The prep school kids, the debaters, must have gotten clued in by somebody that they need to make as much noise as
possible, because they all stick their fingers in their mouths and start whistling and one guy gets up on a chair and is just shouting, “You guys rock! You rock!” For five minutes, ten even, it’s hard to remember that we’re not actually rock stars. I mean, this is nothing. We’ve got 300 people cheering us and we feel like fucking gods. Imagine what it feels like to have 10,000 people cheering for you. Seriously, no wonder those guys all do drugs. They need something just to get over themselves. I know I do. We get off the stage and I see these girls coming to talk to us, and the kids from the back, all of them to ask if we’re going to be partying in somebody’s room later and can they come check it out, and I want to just start yelling, screaming even, at the top of my lungs, which I would never do. I want to be playing still. I want to just feel and not have to think. And I want to call Sonia.

“David,” she said on the phone when she dumped me, “you didn’t do anything wrong. I’ve just—we’ve just—outgrown each other.”

“What the hell does that mean? You mean like one of us got taller or something?” Even I knew how stupid I sounded. I rubbed my free hand up and down my thigh, feeling the calluses on my fingertips scrape against my jeans. Sonia didn’t say anything.

“Look, that was stupid,” I said. “I’m sorry. I just don’t get it, I mean, we were fine, everything was fine and then all of a sudden you’re trying to break up with me and I just want to understand why.”

She sighed. “And I was trying to explain, just not doing a very good job, I guess. I’m sorry, David. I don’t want this to be hard for you.”

“Isn’t it hard for you?”

“Of course it is,” she said.
“Then why the fuck are you doing it!” My voice came out loud and uneven and I got up off the bed and shut my bedroom door. “I mean, if it’s hard then just don’t do it, that’s easy enough, isn’t it? If there’s something I did wrong you just tell me and I’ll change it, I’ll fix it. I mean, Jesus, what is it? It’s not the sex, right?”

She laughed her sexy little laugh, the one she used to use to tease me when she wanted to do it somewhere new or in some crazy new way, like sitting in my lap in one of the carrels of the library with her skirt down over us so no one could see what was going on and whispering stuff in my ear about how she wanted to feel me explode inside her.

“It wasn’t the sex, David.”

“Well, what then?” I asked. “Is it the whole college thing?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You know, the fact that you’re amazingly smart and at this fucking intense school and I’m just some townie working at Trak Auto. I mean, if that’s what you’re worried about I can go to school, it’s not like I never want to go.”

“David,” she said, “stop it. Just stop it, okay?”

“But—”

“There’s nothing you can say or do to fix anything, okay? It’s not like that, I told you. You didn’t do anything.”

I felt like such an idiot that it hadn’t occurred to me sooner. I mean, I’d never been able to believe that she was with me in the first place, always known she was just going to slip away some day.

“There’s somebody else, isn’t there?”

She didn’t say anything.
“Christ, Sonia, you can at least tell me the truth,” I said, although I didn’t want to hear it. It was more that I had to hear it. Make sure I got all the pain at once. Talk about masochistic.

She sighed again. “It’s not what you think, okay? There’s just, there’s this woman in one of my classes I’ve been seeing a lot of, and, well, we just want to kind of see where it might go.”

“A woman?”

“Yeah.”

“You mean like now all of a sudden you’re gay?”

“David,” she snapped, “this is why I didn’t want to tell you. If you’re going to start making snide comments or revealing your homophobia, I’m warning you now—”

“I don’t think it makes me homophobic to be confused that my girlfriend suddenly tells me she’s a fucking lesbian!” I shouted, and looked down to realize that I had picked up an empty beer bottle from the floor as if I was going to hurl it. I spun around in a circle, the phone pressed to my ear so hard it felt like I could hear the blood pounding in my head. I’ve always hated getting angry or emotional for just this reason: it makes me dizzy.

It was another minute before I realized that Sonia had hung up, and even though I called back on and off all that night, she never picked up the phone.

After we’ve packed the equipment up and checked with one of the guys running the contest to make sure that, yeah, we won this round, we get into an argument about whether to go out and try to find food or to stick around and catch some of the other bands. Bryan is pushing to go out, Watts says he doesn’t care, and Ray really wants us to go hear Hold Your Fire, the Rush group playing the room next door.
“Listen, guys,” he says back in the room, flapping the tails of his shirt with his hands to cool himself off as he talks—Ray drips with sweat after every set—“this group may be serious competition. They’ve been around for years, and they’ve won a couple of pretty big contests. I think we should check them out.”

“Relax, Animal,” Bryan says from the bed where he’s flipping channels on the t.v. so fast I can’t figure out how he even sees anything. “We’ve got nothing to worry about. Besides, I didn’t come all this way just to listen to a bunch of other bands. Let’s get out of here, man! I bet if we head back down through the lobby we can pick up a couple of those girls to come party with us. It’s Friday night, for Chrissakes.”

“Okay,” Ray says, “but we can still do that, right, I mean, after the second round? We can still go out, nobody’s really going to be tired or anything, and then we’ll know what we’re up against tomorrow, that’s all I’m saying.”

Watts comes out of the bathroom bare-chested, wiping his face on a towel. “Ray,” he says, “if these guys are so good, are you sure it’s a good idea to go see them? I mean, we don’t want to just end up fucking depressed before the whole thing’s even over. At least—” he winks at me over the towel—“I don’t.”

“No, no, no!” Ray says. “It’s not going to psyche us out. Come on, guys, let’s just go, okay? It’s professional research. It’s our responsibility to go.”

“How good’s their drummer?” I ask, just to get to him, since I already know the answer.

“He’s fucking insane, man!” Ray does a couple of fake karate punches to make his point. “He’s out of control good, that’s what the fan mail on their website says. I just gotta check him out, you know?”

“Okay,” I say. “Let’s do it then.”
Watts tosses the towel in the general direction of the bathroom and grabs a clean shirt from his duffel bag. “Yeah,” he says, “this I’ve gotta see. A drummer that’s got Ray spooked?”

“Relax, Animal,” I say, patting Ray’s shoulder. “If he’s better than you I’m going to be seriously surprised. I’ll even buy you a drink later.”

“Hell,” Watts says. “If this guy is better than you I’ll buy you drinks all night, man, and some for myself because I’m going to need them. Who else is playing this round, do you know?”

Ray shrugs, though he’s calmed down a little now that we’re actually going to go. “Eagles group and the Queen tribute, think they’re called Tie Your Mother Down. I’m pretty sure they’re both going to suck.”

“No shit,” Bryan mutters, turning off the t.v. and getting up. He looks like he’s gearing up for some major sulking, which partly sucks because it means he’ll be even more of a dick than usual, but also secretly makes me happy. I hate to be an asshole, but I just have a hard time getting worked up over the kind of shit that Bryan makes such a big deal of. I mean, Christ, so we end up getting food like an hour and a half later than he wanted to. So what?

“Come on, Bry,” Watts says, holding the door for all of us. “Do it for the band.”

“Yeah, right,” Bryan says. “For the band. Whatever the hell that means.”

The drummer from Hold Your Fire is not, for the record, better than Ray, although Watts and I still end up buying him drinks to celebrate this fact. The guy’s good, don’t get me wrong, but he’s too controlled, to methodical, nothing like as good an instinctive drummer as Ray. We sit in a booth at the Applebee’s a couple blocks down the road from the conference center and hash out the round overall. The two preliminary rounds we didn’t see both went to the Zeppelin
groups, big shock there, and Hold Your Fire won the round we watched. They are, as Ray had suspected, one of the better groups here, and definitely serious competition, but we just let it go after a while when I point out that choosing between Zeppelin, Rush, and Floyd is what it’s going to come down to, not choosing between us and these specific other bands so much, and we can’t control that part. We all drink to that.

Ray was also right about the other two bands. The Eagles group, Take It Easy, makes the huge mistake of trying to have their lead singer cover both Glen Frey material and Don Henley numbers and it’s like watching a car crash. The fact is that Henley can sing and Frey sounds like a guy with a mike in his shower. You go pull up some of the solo material. Want to hear a song that’s already a fucking classic? Try “Boys of Summer,” which is Henley solo. Want to hear a piece of crap that died in the 80’s along with pastel blazers? How about Frey’s “The Heat is On,” a song that I bet even he’s embarrassed he wrote.

And Tie Your Mother Down also sucks, though not for the reason I would have thought. The lead singer isn’t half bad as a poor man’s Freddy Mercury. The guy has major pipes, which is what it takes, and he’s obviously spent years of his life watching old concert footage of Queen, because he’s got the moves down too, the back arch at the end of a song, the triumphant pelvic thrust that Freddy loved to do. No, the reason these guys suck is that their lead guitar is for shit, and even though everyone thinks of Queen and instantly just thinks Freddy, when you hear some Queen songs played and they sound really bad even though the vocal’s not that off, you realize what a big part of that band Brian May was. Of course, I probably know more about him than most people, because if you play serious lead guitar you have to pretty much worship the guy. He made his own double neck guitar when he was in high school, for Chrissakes. And he and Freddy co-wrote most of Queen’s songs, too, it wasn’t just Freddy doing it all.
“Dudes!” Ray says. “Isn’t this awesome, though? We are so much better than the other groups here. We can totally win this thing.”

I lean over and snag a French fry from his plate. “Whatever, Ray,” I say. “We were just another band out of Boston, and we barely made enough to survive.”

“Shit!” Ray smacks himself in the head. “Who is that? I know that one.”

“It’s Boston, you moron,” Bryan says, and smirks at me. “That was an easy one, Dave, I’m surprised at you. What’s the theme here, songs about actually being in a band?” He thinks for a second. “It’s tough to handle this fortune and fame. Everybody’s so different, I haven’t changed.”

“Wait, wait!” Ray shouts, practically jumping out of his seat. “I know this one, I do, hang on—” I don’t say anything to give him a chance to answer, because it’s kind of funny how bad Ray is at this. I guess if we shot random drumlines at each other he’d probably kick all our asses though, so it doesn’t really mean anything. People pay attention to what’s important to them in a song.

And he gets this one after all. “Joe Walsh!”

“Okay,” Watts says. “How about, Out there in the spotlight, you’re a million miles away. Every ounce of energy, you try and give away.”


“Are you saying that’s a Metallica song?” I ask him.

“Fuck, yeah! Off the album that just came out! I’ve got it upstairs in the room.”

God, he’s such a prick. “How much?”

“How much what?”
“How much are you willing to bet on it?” I ask, and Bryan sticks his hand out immediately, but then half pulls it back, because Watts is shaking his head and laughing.

“How haven’t you learned by now, Bry? You can’t beat Dave at this game. Don’t give him your money too.”

“But—”

“It’s a remake, asshole,” I say. “Metallica remake of a Bob Seeger song. Look it up.”

Bryan pulls his hand back and takes a huge swig of his beer, like all of a sudden he doesn’t give a shit. “Okay,” he says, “let’s hear your next one.”

“Living on a lighted stage approaches the unreal for those who think and feel.”

It takes a minute, but Watts gets it. “Rush, ‘Limelight.’ ”

“Correct.”

“Man,” he shakes his head. “I’m glad those guys we just saw didn’t attempt that one. That’s a hard fucking song to get right.”

“No shit!” Ray says, and starts air-playing the drumline.

“But you know what’s kind of funny?” Watts says. “They had the potential to be a really good band, you know? I mean,” he nods at Ray, “if Hold Your Fire had you on drums, man, they would have seriously kicked. And if that Queen group had Dave on guitar they could have done some serious damage.”

“No shit!” Ray exclaims. “Dave would have torn up some of those licks that this guy was just picking through!” He elbows me. “But no bailing on us, okay, dude? Because this just proves that together we’re better than all of them.”

What do you say to shit like that? Thanks? It sounds so lame. I keep my mouth shut because I’m embarrassed not to be as flattered by the compliments as I know Ray and Watts
want me to be. I guess it’s cool to be told that you’d be a really good Brian May imitator, but it’s still about being a fake, it’s not like being compared to the real Brian May. Just once, after a gig, I’d like to have a conversation about the music that doesn’t always come back to how all we’re aiming for is second best.

Back at the hotel we don’t even get into the elevators before these girls swoop in on Watts and drag us all into the bar with them. They seem cool, though only one of them is really pretty and she’s clearly got her sights on Watts. She and her friends all go to the University of Illinois and this is some kind of joke sorority outing for them. I don’t think they were expecting to actually have fun and get into the whole experience but now they’re acting like groupies, hanging on everything we say and giggling a lot.

I think about the couple of times I hung out with Sonia and some of her friends and how different they were from girls like this. They’d get all worked up about a word somebody used, like one time when they asked me what I liked to use to refer to the vagina of the girl I was sleeping with. I wasn’t sure what to say, I mean, I’d never exactly had a conversation about this sort of thing with a bunch of women and Sonia was sitting right there grinning at me through her hair. It felt a little bit like she was daring me to say something bold or shocking, when she and I both knew that the truth was I wasn’t really comfortable talking dirty. I thought stuff in my head of course, but I wasn’t doing a running commentary of stuff I wanted to do to her.

I took a swallow of my beer and said, “Pussy, I guess that’s what I would use.”

“Aha!” said one girl, “one of the least offensive ones! Good for you.”

“I like pussy,” said another girl. “It makes me think that the guy wants to pet it, you know, just like a pussy cat.” They all cracked up at that, and I felt my face getting red.
“I like cunt,” Sonia said, and everyone looked at her. I think even some of her friends were a little shocked, which I definitely was.

“I thought women were really offended by that word.”

“No,” Sonia said. “No, men want women to be offended by the word, but that’s what we’ve been talking about in Professor Dempsey’s class, about how the word itself isn’t offensive, it’s the usage, and the way to reclaim the word is to just take it back, say, ‘I like being called a cunt, I like it when you call my vagina my cunt,’ and then it can’t be used as a weapon against you anymore.”

The other women around the table had gone all serious and were nodding like Sonia herself was the professor, but I still wasn’t sure I was following.

“But do you actually like the word, or do you just want to use it to make a point?” I asked her.

Sonia’s grin widened. “Ah, the poor man is confused.” She slid her hand up my leg under the table. “I actually like it,” she said. “It turns me on.”

“Damn, Sonia,” said one of the other girls, “a little too much info if you don’t mind.”

“Sorry,” Sonia said, though she clearly wasn’t, and later that night she wouldn’t let me make love to her until I’d asked her if I could fuck her cunt.

I think of what these girls would say if I suddenly asked them which word they liked. I figure one of them would probably dump beer on my lap. It’s not that I get the impression these girls are dumb. They could, for all I know, be just as smart as Sonia and her friends, they’re just not as fucking complicated. Like how Sonia could dare me to do stuff knowing it made me nervous but also that I really wanted to do it, and how she was so clearly into me but still I got the sense that she wanted me to do more, show her I was worthy of her. Even the way she flirted
was more than just leaning over a table in a bar and flicking her hair over her shoulder. That whole story Watts told me, which I’m still not sure is true at all, but if Sonia was going to come onto a guy that’s how she’d do it, definitely, not in any kind of typical way. And then later, when she just kept patiently explaining to me that most people were secretly bisexual, they were just too scared to admit it, and that I shouldn’t take her relationship with a woman to mean anything about all the stuff we had done together. It was like she always had an explanation for everything, and it always made sense, but sometimes even when she had explained things I didn’t feel any better, the way you expect to feel better about a situation when someone has spelled it all out to you.

I think about calling her, just to tell her that, to tell her that I’ve finally figured out that she’s just complicated and I’m sorry I couldn’t keep up. But then Watts leans in to talk close to my ear.

“Eleanor says she has some really nice weed in her room. You game?”

This is probably a good idea; maybe it will keep me from calling Sonia, swapping one addiction for another or something like that. So I nod, finish my beer, and follow Watts and the others into the elevator.

The girls are all staying in a row of rooms right next to each other, and the one we end up in is a wreck, but in such a girl way that it’s kind of a shock. I haven’t been in a room so totally female in a long time. Since the last time I was in Sonia’s room. There are clothes everywhere, and hair products and make-up and shit, and the whole place smells good, like perfume and soap. We all sit on the floor or on the beds and Eleanor, the girl who’s hitting on Watts, gets her stash out of a drawer and has him do the honors. There’s so many of us that we get two joints going right away, and I feel another jolt of déjà vu when the girl on my left passes it to me and I see the
lipstick print on it. Sharing a joint suddenly feels extremely intimate. The girl is looking at me like she wouldn’t mind that, actually, tipping her head back and smiling at me.

“Go on,” she says, “it’s really smooth.”

I take a hit and pass it to Ray, and almost as soon as I’ve let out my breath I feel the girl’s hand on my leg.

“I’m Alice,” she says. She has long brown hair and she’s not bad-looking, but she has big front teeth that make her look like a rabbit, which makes me think of the Jefferson Airplane song about Alice in Wonderland. Well, it’s actually about tripping, but that’s the metaphor they use to talk about it. And even as I think this, I realize that I totally can’t deal with this, with any of this, and I get up. (Just remember what the doormouse said: “Keep your head, keep your head.”)

“Sorry,” I say, looking down at her. “I’m just, I’m not feeling very good. Nice to meet you though.”

I feel bad about leaving without really getting stoned, but on the other hand it might just fuck me up more right now. Like what if I’d opened my mouth and actually told that girl that she looked like a rabbit, or asked her what she called her vagina? I feel like I might have done something like that if I’d stayed there, like the nervous energy that’s always there is humming just below the surface tonight. Maybe it’s because we just played, maybe it’s because I’m thinking about Sonia again. You reach out to me, as if from the grave. I can’t escape, I’m tied to you like a slave . . . That’s not Jefferson Airplane, by the way. It’s Judas Priest, which just goes to show how fucked I am.

I walk down the hall and as I pass this one door it opens and a couple of the kids from the debate team stumble out, one of them with puke on his shirt. They’re both laughing, though, and
when they see me they get all excited and practically drag me into the room. I guess I was wrong about them all being straight arrows.

There’s about eight of them in there and they’ve got two bottles of vodka, both empty now, that they mixed into punch in their ice buckets with some bottles of Snapple from the vending machine. There’s still punch left, but these kids are wasted, just gone, falling over each other, laughing at the guy in the bathroom still puking—apparently it’s his puke on the other kid’s shirt—and almost immediately they start calling me Pink, which pisses me off. I feel slightly buzzed from the hit of pot, but not even close to messed up enough to find it amusing or interesting to hang out with a bunch of drunk teenagers. I climb over a couple of them and check on the guy in the bathroom. He doesn’t look too bad and from the color of the water in the toilet, he’s lost most of the punch he drank. Now he’s just sitting there, staring at the floor. I flush the toilet, hand him a glass of water, and head back out, only I get turned around and without meaning to I walk into the adjoining hotel room instead of the hall.

For a second I think it’s empty except for me and the television set, which is on and playing The Wall of all things, I mean, Jesus, could this night get any more surreal? I sit down on the bed and watch for a minute. It’s at the scene where the guy is shaving himself all over. Then I hear a noise like someone crying or trying not to cry and I turn my head and see a kid sitting on the floor on the other side of the bed, the same kid who sold me his copy of Gatsby. He’s got his empty punch cup in his hand and doesn’t even know I’m there, he’s just sitting slack-jawed watching this fucking whacked-out movie with tears streaming down his face and all I can think is what an asshole he is. I mean, sure your life sucks and all that, but I mean, come on, man, how bad can it be? We’re not all Roger Waters. Even Roger Waters wasn’t really Roger Waters if that makes any sense. It’s a fucking story, I feel like saying to the kid, not that
he’d hear me. He’s too busy being comfortably numb and envisioning himself standing in front of a mirror shaving all his body hair off. Fucking moron. It’s only cool because it’s not real, which is a pretty fine distinction to ask some 16-year-old to make. Not that I’m a whole lot better, but I mean, Jesus. Art imitates life, guys, and it’s the middle word that’s key there. *Imitates*. Recreates. Simulates. Art exaggerates life, distills it, paints it in big dripping strokes so it makes more sense or so the lack of sense jumps out at you. But it’s not life, man. It’s a fucking rock opera.

I lean over and turn off the movie and the kid sits up straighter and stares at me.

“What the fuck did you do that for?”

“You shouldn’t watch that shit when you’re fucked up,” I tell him. “It’s dangerous.”

“Whatever,” he says. Then he realizes he’s been crying and I’m a perfect stranger and another guy and I can probably tell. He starts wiping at his face with the tail of his shirt.

“That’s what I mean,” I say. “I mean, Christ, kid. It’s a fucking movie. All your friends are out in the other room laughing their asses off and you’re in here crying over a movie.”

“So?” He says. “Who invited you in here anyway? Get the fuck out of here.”

“I’m getting,” I say, and I stand up. I feel completely sober now, and the smell of the vodka in the suite is making me sick. Also I feel so pissed off at this kid and I don’t even know why.

“Your friends may be acting like morons,” I tell him, “but at least they’re not sitting in the dark, alone, getting plastered and watching *The Wall*. I mean, Jesus, what the hell happened that’s so bad, huh? Your girlfriend dump you?”

God, I’m such an asshole I can’t even believe it. I sit back down and the kid and I stare at each other for a minute before he looks down into his empty cup. I think about how all I’ve
wanted to do for the last hour is talk to Sonia and I can’t because even if I could it wouldn’t be what I really wanted, which is to hear her say she’s changed her mind. And I wish I had talked to her about the stuff that mattered to me when we were still together, about the band and the music and stuff, because it seems like she’s the only person who could have helped me figure this shit out, but now she wouldn’t even care.

I stand up again and look back at the kid. “You want me to turn the t.v. back on?” I ask him, and he shakes his head, so I just leave him sitting there in the dark and I head back to our room to read some more and maybe try and get some sleep. I’ve got the last line of Meatloaf’s “Paradise by the Dashboard Lights”—a song I don’t even like, for Chrissakes—running through my head and right now it feels so true I just let it play: Well, it was long ago and it was far away, and it was so much better than it is today.

The thing that I totally get about Gatsby is how he never gave up on Daisy because she really had given him this idea that if he would just do certain things then everything would be exactly the way he wanted it. I can see how his hanging on to her when she had gone off and gotten married to another guy looked pathetic and stupid to someone who didn’t know what it had been like between them when they were together. But people on the outside of a situation don’t always understand it as well as they think they do. Watts and Ray and even my mom keep telling me to just stop calling her, just leave it be, and I can’t explain that I know it isn’t over, not really.

For a couple of weeks after she told me she wanted to be with this girl, Sonia would hardly talk to me when I called. She’d pick up the phone and when she heard it was me she’d let her breath out like she was trying to be patient.
“Hi,” she’d say. “What’s up?”

“Nothing, I guess, I just—I just wanted to talk to you.”

“About?”

And the end result every time was that I felt like a complete jerk-off because everything I wanted to talk to her about—like could she please explain what happened a little better and was there any chance I could just see her again, just to talk a little bit more—was pretty obviously stuff she wasn’t about to get into. Sometimes I’d start to get mad at her for being so totally unaffected, like she’d just wiped everything totally out of her brain, but that was pointless too because the minute I said anything like that out loud she just hung up the phone and I felt even worse.

Then one night when she picked up she sounded like she had a cold.

“Hey,” I said, “it’s me.”

“Hi,” she said, and she sounded almost like she was relieved.

“Are you okay?”

“Not really,” she said.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“How are things with the girl—woman—you’re seeing.”

She made this little noise that could either have been a laugh or like she was trying not to cry. “It’s not really working out. She wants something a lot more serious than I’m up for right now and she doesn’t take no for an answer very easily.”

I didn’t know what to say, except I’m sorry, which of course I wasn’t. “Why don’t you want to get serious?” I asked instead.
Sonia sighed. “I know you think I’ve forgotten,” she said softly, “but I just ended a pretty serious relationship not that long ago.” She was quiet for a minute and then it sounded like she was shifting the phone against her shoulder. “So,” she said then, “I haven’t talked to you in a while. What’s going on with you? How’s the band?”

I felt this tightness across my chest that I hadn’t even realized was there sort of dissolve, and I took a deep breath. “Good, I guess. We’re going to this contest in a couple of weeks, Watts signed us up for it.”

“You don’t sound very excited,” she said. “Is Bryan still being an asshole?”

“Bryan doesn’t know any other way to be,” I said. She laughed and I shivered, it felt so good to hear her laugh like that again, right in my ear, like whatever was so funny was a secret between us.

“Well,” she said, “so you’re going to this contest. What do you get if you win?”

“A couple of grand, I think,” I said. “Like $5000.”

“Wow,” she said, “What would you do with it?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, if you suddenly had $5000 to spend, David, how would you spend it?”

“Well,” I said, “it wouldn’t all be mine. We’d split it four ways, plus we’ve all got to spend some money to get there and everything.”

“Right, okay,” Sonia laughed again, and even though I could tell she was laughing at me this time I didn’t mind. “So you’ve got twelve hundred dollars minus expenses, so say one thousand. What would you do with it?”

*Buy you something*, I wanted to say. *Take you somewhere, wherever you want to go.* I knew it wasn’t the kind of smart, shocking thing she would have come up with, but then I
thought, hell, it’s true, it’s how I feel, and it’s not even a song lyric (not that I couldn’t think of a couple that say the same thing).

“I’d use it to go on vacation,” I said. “Somewhere warm. Want to come?”

“Hmm,” she said, “right now that sounds like a pretty tempting offer. Let’s see, you, me, some kind of tropical beach, right?”

I could hardly believe it. “Yeah.”

Sonia dropped her voice. “Would there be other people there?”

“Some, I guess,” I said. “You know, to bring us food and fancy drinks.” I had this vision of it, me and Sonia on some beach somewhere, with her hair loose and a white sarong around her hips.

“Okay,” she said, “If the other people are going to be waiting on us, we’ll let them stay. What about clothes?”

“What?”

“Clothes, silly.” She laughed again. “Would we have to wear any?”

My whole body was suddenly hot and rigid with longing and I couldn’t answer her. I wanted to, wanted to think of something to say, even just no, not if we didn’t want to, but I couldn’t. I was so afraid that whatever I said would be the wrong thing.

“Are you still there?” Sonia asked.

“Yeah,” I said, and she must have heard what I was feeling in my voice because she lowered hers back to that soft, secret one that she always used in bed.

“Listen, she said. “I’ve got to go. I’ve got a psych test tomorrow that I haven’t even started studying for. But call me this weekend, okay? Maybe we can get together. We haven’t seen each other in a really long time.”
“Okay.”

I called her Friday afternoon and left a message, then I called again a bunch of times Friday night and all day Saturday, but she was never there.

That Sunday after band practice I sat in bed listening to Nine Inch Nails on repeat—You let me violate you, you let me penetrate you—until my mom’s boyfriend banged on the door and told me he was going to rip the speakers out of the wall if I didn’t turn the shit down, and that my mom had already given him her blessing, which was probably true. I turned the music off and told him he was an asshole and to get the fuck away from my room and then I lay there and thought about putting that song on a tape and just mailing it to Sonia, with no note or anything, figuring she’d know who it was from. But I knew I couldn’t. She had let me do all that shit to her, but when you took it back to the lyrics again and you looked for the key word, it was let. She let me in and then she pushed me out and I couldn’t find my way back.

Like I said, I don’t even really like Meatloaf, but I’ve got that stupid song stuck in my head when I get back to our room, and so I do a half-hearted search of the cd’s lying around to see if anyone brought Bat Out of Hell so I can put it in. Thing is, when you’ve got a song stuck like that, there’s usually nothing for it but to just play it out, and the original artist is always better than the echo of it inside your brain. It’s insane how much music we have in our hotel room. We’re here for a frigging weekend, we’ve only brought the absolute minimum changes of clothes, except for Ray who’s probably brought at least six Hawaiian shirts in case he’s in the mood for yellow parrots and margarita glasses instead of turquoise hula girls for the final round tomorrow night. He’s superstitious about his Hawaiian shirts, and it’s all about the design and
what it means to him, not about the shirt being stylish or clean or anything. Hell, there’ve been
times when he’s worn the same shirt three days running, so it’s definitely not a cleanliness thing.

But aside from Ray’s extra shirts, which are still pretty minor in terms of taking up space in the room, there’s got to be 150 cd’s on the carpet, spilling out of bags and scattered over the table where Bryan set up his stereo. I brought 40 myself, since that’s how many make up the Sonia Collection. And Bryan, of course, never goes anywhere without the complete catalogue of both Metallica and the Doors, plus a wide selection of crappy heavy metal. It’s Watts who brought the Meatloaf, though, which I put in as I brush my teeth and strip down to my t-shirt and boxers. I think Meatloaf is a guilty pleasure for Watts, but I get it. I mean, there’s a big element of control in Floyd vocals, even Waters’ meltdown in “One of My Turns” is pretty scripted—he keeps the fucking meter going, for Chrissakes—and that line from “Dark Side of the Moon” pretty much sums up what the band is going for in lyrics and vocal style: Hanging on in quiet desperation is the English way. Which is cool, and which makes Floyd what it is, but for a singer, and a singer who didn’t write these songs himself but is just singing them because that’s his job, well, I can see the occasional appeal of some out-of-control, over-the-top, 20-minute Meatloaf songs. Kind of like whacking off for your voice.

I don’t even hear the others come in and I wake up stiff and cold at seven in the morning because somebody cranked the a.c. and I fell asleep on the floor without even a blanket. Ray’s asleep on his stomach next to me with his head under the table, Bryan’s in one of the beds, and Watts is nowhere to be seen. Eleanor must have some understanding friends. I climb over Ray to the empty bed and crawl under the covers.
I have no trouble getting back to sleep once I warm up, and I wake up again at noon, in
time to grab the shower because Watts is still not around and the other two haven’t even moved.
When I come out, Bryan is sitting up in the bed watching some Japanese animation shit with a
look on his face like he doesn’t even know what he’s looking at and Ray is just starting to stir
from under the table.

“Morning,” I say, and Bryan grunts. Just then the door opens and Watts comes in, hair
wet and shirt untucked, carrying his shoes in his hand.

“Morning all,” he says, grinning at the room in general and winking at me. “Or should I
say, ‘Afternoon?’ ”

“Say whatever the fuck you want,” Bryan mutters, climbing out of the bed and going to
rummage around in his bag. “Guess we don’t have to guess why you’re in such a fucking good
mood, huh?”

“Well,” Watts says, “I would tell you that it’s because I got to sleep in a bed last night,
instead of on the floor like poor Ray, here, but that can’t be right, Bry, because clearly you also
slept in a bed and you are not, as best as I can tell, in a good mood.”

“Fuck you,” Bryan says, and slams the bathroom door so hard that Ray bolts upright and
hits his head on the underside of the table. He sits there for a second, cursing and rubbing his
head and Watts goes over to the stereo and checks to see what’s in there.

“Meatloaf?” He looks over at me with his eyebrows raised. “Surely this wasn’t your
choice?”

“Yeah, well, I had it stuck in my head,” I say. “Besides, it’s your cd.”

“I know that,” Watts says. He hits the “play” button and goes over to where he tossed his
bag to get some clean clothes. “And I’m not embarrassed either, my friend, so you can’t shame
me with a look like you’re clearly trying to do. If you appreciate fine singing, fine *rock and roll* singing I might add, you have to appreciate the Loaf.”

“The Loaf?” Ray murmurs from under the table.

“You look like you already showered,” I say to Watts. He pulls on a clean shirt and takes his brush over to the mirror.

“Yeah, well,” he says, “she wanted to wash my hair. And her shampoo was way nicer than the free shit they give you, so who was I to say no?”

“Christ, Watts, rub it in, why don’t you,” Ray says, crawling out from under the table.

“Where’s Bryan, anyway? I want some pancakes.”

I can see how Watts’ whole attitude could make him seem like an asshole about women. He’s probably never going to see this girl again after this weekend and when he hooks up like this, he never pretends that it’s anything other than what it is, which I know pisses women off sometimes. But he’s not a dog, really. He’s had a couple of serious girlfriends, and when he has one he doesn’t screw around on them. It’s knowing this about him that makes it hard for me to understand why he would tell me that story about Sonia coming onto him. I mean, why would he make that up?

I’m sitting by the edge of the pool again. After breakfast—which was more like lunch by the time we all got our shit together and found an IHOP so Ray could have his pancakes—we rehearsed for a couple of hours, rearranged the playlist a little, and spent most of the afternoon just messing around with whatever we could here in the hotel. We went to the bar and got a beer, played a couple of games of pool with the guys from Hold Your Fire, then Bryan insisted
we get the key to the weight room and lift for a while. We all did a couple of circuits, with Bryan making a big deal out of how he was lifting the most weight. Pretty typical.

So now we’re at the pool again and I’m reading *Gatsby*, trying to shut out the sounds of Ray and Bryan having a water fight. It’s at the end of chapter three, when Nick is talking about the girl Jordan that he’s dating, that I think about Watts and how he’s sort of low-key about everything, including women, the same way Nick is. I mean, Christ, Nick finds out that Jordan lies about shit and he doesn’t even care, just says, “dishonesty in a woman is a thing you can never blame deeply.” And he still keeps seeing her for the whole rest of the book. I think that’s the thing about Watts that you could misunderstand, that he’s not an asshole about relationships or anything, he just takes things as they are and kind of goes with them. What that makes me think, though, is that he never would have even cared about anything happening with Sonia either, then, if it wasn’t that he knew she was with me. Because, I mean, there’s no question about Watts as a friend. None. And like I said, why would he lie about something like that?

Watts heaves himself out of the pool in front of me just then and makes a move like he’s going to shake his wet hair all over me. I close the book and stick it behind me.

“Don’t even think about it.”

He grins. “How’s the book?”

“Good.”

He swings around to sit on the concrete next to me. “So who are you?”

“What do you mean?”

“In the book. Which character are you?”

“Do you even know all the characters?”
“No.” He shrugs. “I mean, I read it same time you did probably, right? I remember there’s one guy who’s a total asshole, though. Hits his wife and breaks her nose, or something, right?”

“That’s Tom, yeah.”

“Okay, so you’re not Tom,” Watts says. “Who are you? Gatsby?”

“Probably.”

“Gatsby? You mean the guy from The Great Gatsby?” That’s Bryan, coming up behind us and wiping his wet face on his t-shirt. “Didn’t he end up shot in his own swimming pool?”

“I haven’t gotten that far yet.”

“Better hope you’re not like him, then, huh, Dave?” Bryan says, and he backs up on the edge of the pool and then runs and does a sudden cannonball into the water, splashing everything within like a two-mile radius. Watts jumps up, cursing, as Bryan surfaces. I pick up the book and brush the water off and Watts goes over to where he left his towel and brings it back over to me.

“Make him buy you a new copy,” he says.

“It’s not like it’s totally ruined,” I say, though it is pretty wet. The pages are already curling up in the bottom corner and some of the water got to the cover before I could blot it off. The way the girl is drawn on the cover it’s supposed to look like she has just the one tear on her cheek. Now she looks like she’s been crying forever. I do what I can to dry the book off, then get up and hand Watts back his towel. “Thanks.”

Bryan is all the way at the other end of the pool, talking to some girl in a hotel uniform carrying a stack of towels. I can’t tell from here if he’s trying to hit on her or just get her to give him a towel, but it doesn’t look like either one’s working.
“You want to head up and get changed?” Watts asks. “I think if I have to deal with that asshole any more right now I might finally snap and just belt him.”

We head over to the elevators and I punch the button for our floor. There’s this weird silence for a minute that I finally figure out is because we’re both feeling pissed-off, though not at each other. The stupid book is dripping on my foot. And I guess Watts is mad on my account, or maybe just because it’s so typical Bryan to do something like that and not even notice the fallout.

As we’re heading down the hall, though, Watts nudges me with his shoulder. “So, if Bryan was a song, what song would he be?”

“‘Don’t Bring Me Down’?”

“Not bad, not bad. How about ‘Big Shot’?”

“Too drug-specific. He’s a dick, but he’s not a coke-head.”

“True.” Watts unlocks the door and sprawls in one of the chairs by the t.v. “Okay, how about ‘Big Time’?”

“Peter Gabriel?”

“Yeah. You know, I had my bed made like a mountain range, with a pillow for my big fat head.”

That’s a pretty good one, and I like it even better because Bryan hates Peter Gabriel. Refers to his music as “art-rock bullshit.” Still, I feel like we’re missing the perfect song, which, of course, we are. It’s right there, literally staring me in the face.

Watts doesn’t get why I’m laughing. “What?”
“Look down at your shirt.” He’s wearing a Pink Floyd shirt that used to be his dad’s, and it has *Animals* emblazoned across the front. Watts glances down at his chest and then looks at me and grins.

“‘Pigs (Three Different Ones)’?”

“Exactly. *Big man, pig man, ha ha charade you are.*”

Watts rummages around in his bag and comes up with the album, and we’re both happily singing along when Ray and Bryan get back to the room. I feel bad for a minute, when I realize that while Watts and I were joking around about Bryan I didn’t feel like shit, like just for a few minutes I forgot I was miserable. And I guess that doesn’t say much about me as a human being, that I have to mock somebody to get over myself. I tuck in my shirt and remember that poor kid last night and how hard I was on him when I’m just as pathetic.

Watts comes up behind me and grabs his belt from the counter. “What’s up?”

“I was thinking what song I’d be,” I say. “Is there a song that basically says, ‘Get over yourself, life’s not a fucking rock opera’?”

Watts busts up laughing. “That’s awesome. I want that on a t-shirt, in that big gothic lettering that AC-DC and Sabbath use.” He fastens his belt and cuffs me on the back of the head. “We’re going to go find some pizza. Ray says he saw a Pizza Hut sign over near the Applebee’s. You game?”

“Sure. Do we have time?”

“An hour and a half until we go on. We’re cool.” Watts runs his hand through his hair and looks at me in the mirror. “Hey, wanna know what song I think you’d be?”

“What?”
“‘Shine on, You Crazy Diamond.’ No question. I think about you every time I sing that goddamn song.”

I have no idea what to say. Watts walks off and starts trying to get Bryan to get his ass off the bed and turn the t.v. off so we can go. Now I’ve got the song stuck in my head, and it plays all the way to the restaurant, as we walk single-file down the edge of this fucking highway in the dark, trying not to get killed.

_Come on you stranger, you legend, you martyr, and shine! . . ._

_Come on you raver, you seer of visions,_

_Come on you piper, you painter, you piper, you prisoner, and shine! . . ._

_Come on you boy child, you winner and loser,_

_Come on you miner for truth and delusion, and shine!_

It’s hands-down the best compliment I’ve ever gotten. I think about Sonia and all the songs I found her in, and I realize that I never asked her what songs she found me in. I wonder what she would think of Watts’ choice.

Walking in the dark so close to cars moving so fast is really unnerving. A couple of steps to the left and you’re a target in a video game: _Bam_, skinny depressed guy in jeans, 500 points. I focus on Watts’ white shirt, right in front of me, which is glowing the way white clothes do in the black lights inside a club. I can’t think of what song he’d be, because—Christ, this _is_ a song, by Survivor, one of my mom’s 80’s bands—“It’s the Singer Not the Song.” Only in Watts’ case what I mean is _he’s_ the singer not the song. It’s something about how I can’t imagine Watts
losing himself, like in a girl or in drugs—or anything. He’ll always know who he is. I figure it’s a good thing I’m following him down a dark highway, and not the other way around.

The final round is just brutal. I can’t even decide what the worst part of it is. First there’s the torture of having to listen to two straight sets of crappy Zeppelin covers because both of those stupid bands made the final round. The first one, Black Dog Walkers, has a perfectly good line-up of musicians and a lead singer who’d be better off singing for The Backstreet Boys or something. I mean, Christ. Robert Plant is nobody to mess with, not like he has the best voice in rock and roll, but he’s singing the blues, not studio pop. It’s just painful, listening to this guy wail out, I got a woman, stay drunk all the time, I got a woman, want’ ball all day, in this pretty-boy voice. And then Road to Kashmir gets on stage and I remember that indeed, they are all assholes. They’ve clearly spent more time watching old concert footage of Zeppelin than they have practicing, which is probably why they made it so far in the competition, since some fans do that shit too. So the lead guitar has a lot of Page’s signature movements down, and the lead singer is doing a Plant impression, and working it hard, bare-chested with a fur-edged vest on. They get a lot of applause when they’re done, enough that everyone in the room knows that if it comes down to the two Zeppelin groups (which it won’t, no way in hell), Road to Kashmir will win.

And then we go up and Ray breaks a drumstick in the middle of our second song, “Another Brick in the Wall” tonight, because we’ve decided to mix it up a little and that’s always a crowd pleaser. So there’s five minutes of stupid nervous tension onstage because he can’t find a spare and of course no one from one of the other bands will lend him one, which goes to prove that they’re all total assholes. Finally, the drummer from the Eagles band, who’s in the audience,
produces one and we’re okay to go, but I feel off my game for the rest of the set. It doesn’t really matter, because we’re still light-years better than the first two groups, but then Hold Your Fire gets up and does a pretty solid set. Not killer, but solid.

Ray thinks that they’re holding a couple of their best songs out for a tie-breaker, which starts the tension between the four of us back up all over again. Ray is bouncing off the ceiling, he’s strung so tight, and every time Hold Your Fire starts another song, he curses wildly and punches the wall.

“Crap, crap, crap! That’s four songs and they still haven’t done “Freewill” or “Closer to the Heart.” Crap!”

“Ray,” Watts says from behind a cloud of totally-illegal-backstage cigarette smoke—that’s how I know the stress is getting to him too—“will you shut the fuck up? So they haven’t played every song in their repertoire. We didn’t either, you know. We can pull something else out for a tie-breaker.”

“What?” Ray demands, practically screaming. “What? We’re set to do ‘Comfortably Numb’ and ‘Run Like Hell,’ which are just totally fucking predictable!”

“Because they’re everybody’s favorite Floyd songs,” I point out, and even Bryan chimes in with a voice of reason at this point.

“Ray, dude,” he says, “either we’re going to win or we won’t. Just chill, okay?”

And then Hold Your Fire finishes their set and the cheering starts and we all shut the hell up. They clearly blow the Zeppelin bands out of the water, just like we did, but I can’t get a feel for who the crowd liked best, and I have no idea how the local dj who’s running things is making his call. It’s not like he has a decibel monitor to check and see who really got the louder response.
Ray is convinced that we’re out, Bryan is chanting, “Us, you fucker, us, you fucker,” under his breath, fists clenched, and Watts starts flipping his lighter up in the air and catching it, not saying a word. I lean against the wall next to him and wonder what I want to happen next.

It goes to a tie-breaker, two songs each, and since Hold Your Fire is already on stage and pumped up, they agree to go first. Of course, Ray’s right and they open with “Freewill” and do a pretty damn good job with it. I’m keyed up about getting back up there, but I’m also just listening. Rush is not one of my favorite bands, but I respect what they’re doing. They’re so deliberately cerebral and such total D&D geeks that it’s surprising that they made it as big as they did as a rock and roll band. They’ve got a song about choosing free will, and even “Closer to the Heart,” which they immediately follow it with, isn’t a love song, but a song about self-expression. Like I said, I respect what they’re doing. But when Hold Your Fire finishes their set and I realize that I have to pick up my guitar again, I psych up by reminding myself that the music we’re doing is just better. Because if I had to choose between Rush and Floyd I’d choose Floyd in a heartbeat. They never wrote a song called fucking “By-Tor and the Snow Dog,” for godsakes.

So of all people, it’s Bryan who wins the competition for us. Just as we’re about to go onstage he grabs me and Watts by the backs of our shirts and says, “What if Ray’s right? What if our set’s too predictable to win?”

Watts shrugs. “I don’t think it is.”

“Yeah but,” he looks at me, “I think we should go bold, take a risk, just say ‘fuck it,’ you know, and just go balls out.”
“Bryan, what the fuck are you talking about?”

“Scrap ‘Run Like Hell,’ ” he says. “And open with ‘One of My Turns’ instead.”

Watts and I look at each other. Bryan is always begging us to do this song because it’s his personal favorite Floyd song, but we don’t do it often because you need a lot of stage space for one thing, for Watts to thrash around and go ape-shit on, and for another thing it’s fucking exhausting for the whole band. It’s only a three and a half minute song, but it’s basically a narrative of this guy going nuts and trashing his hotel room, which means that Ray and I play all out while I try not to blow an amp and Watts tries to go from zero to sixty and back again without losing his voice. But at this moment Bryan’s got a point. On a stage this big we’ve got plenty of room, and the odds are good that it would blow the crowd away.

“I’m game if you are,” Watts says, and I nod.

“I’ll go tell Ray,” I say. “He’ll be so excited he’ll probably break another stick.”

Behind me Watts claps Bryan on the shoulder. “Good call, dude,” he says. “Let’s do it.”

So we do, and we totally kill. When “One of My Turns” is over and Watts has let his voice fade out with why are you running away? he hangs on the mike stand like he’s totally out of breath and the audience cheers for a couple of minutes before they realize that the rest of us haven’t stopped playing and that I’ve modulated gradually to take us into the opening of “Comfortably Numb.” Meanwhile, just as the crowd gets quiet, Watts starts the opening line, still leaning on the stand and speaking so softly that they have to lean in to hear him. But it doesn’t matter because he repeats it: Is there anybody in there? And by the time he starts singing again he’s picked himself up and come down stage center and he ends the song curled up in a ball on the stage in full spotlight, with his head down and his hair covering his face.
So we win. Just like that, no question, even from Hold Your Fire, you can see a couple of them grimacing and shaking their heads at each other as the clapping and cheering goes on and on. The d. j. has us all get back on stage and stand there while he plays some Floyd and makes us all say our names into his mike, and he takes pictures of all of us, including a couple with him in them, which is completely lame, but whatever. And then it’s over. We pack up our gear and take it up to our room and head back out again for the hotel bar, where Watts says Eleanor and her friends want to buy us all drinks.

Everybody is flying high, Watts just grinning and grinning, leaning against the back wall of the elevator and shaking his head.

“Un-fucking-believable, man,” he says. “I mean, I love that d. j. wanting to have his picture taken with us. You think we’re going to go up on the wall of his sound booth or some shit like that?”

“Well,” I say. “Right next to the picture he has of himself with Mick Jagger.”

Watts lifts an eyebrow at me and I shrug back at him. I feel—I don’t know—pissed off. I know how I’m supposed to be feeling right now, which is some kind of good. Proud. Happy. Relieved that it’s over, which I am, but part of me also wishes we could just keep playing instead of talking about playing or congratulating ourselves for how well we played. When that guitar’s in my hands I know it’s good, I can feel it, I can hear it.

“So, guys, what are we gonna do with the money?” Ray asks.

Bryan gives a snort of laughter. “Dude, I’m going to buy some serious equipment. And I want to get some work done on my car, maybe, get a new sound system in there.”

Ray looks at him like the guy’s got two heads. “But we have to spend it on the band, Bry!” He leans in, his hand on Bryan’s shoulder, but he’s talking to all of us. “I’ve got a couple
of ideas, like maybe we could buy some studio time and record some cuts, you know, start selling some albums, or we could even use some of it to finance a local contest, you know, back up in Boston. I know a couple of guys in some other tributes who’d be pretty interested in coming out and playing. It’d be an investment.”

Bryan starts to say something, but Watts locks his arm around his neck and practically drags him off the elevator.

“We’ll figure it out, guys,” he says. “Let’s just chill tonight, okay? We can have a band meeting when we get back and sort it out.”

“Yeah, yeah, okay.”

Behind Ray’s back, Watts rolls his eyes at me, but then Eleanor calls to him from across the bar and he heads over to her. Bryan lags back beside me.

“Dude,” he says. “We gotta talk Ray out of this ‘spend it on the band’ bullshit, you know? I mean, I don’t know about you, Dave, but I’ve got other plans than just playing this fucking gig for the rest of my life, you know?” He elbows me in the ribs. “What’s that thing they always say about teachers: those who can, do. Those who can’t, teach? Isn’t that it?

“I think so.”

“Maybe that could be like our slogan or something. Those who can, rock. Those who can’t, rock the tribute circuit. What do you think?”

I don’t say anything, not that Bryan gives a shit, he’s just talking to hear himself talk, as usual. He joins the group at the table where Watts is holding court and I stand there, just inside the doorway of the bar, feeling the thrumming of an hour of amazing music draining out of me and for a minute all I wish is that I had access to some pot and could just go get completely stoned.
I let Bryan’s words sink in, along with the awareness of just how much I agree with him, and how I’m never going to let myself love even a minute of what we’re doing because of it. I feel like a fraud, like a wanna-be, like a cheap imitation.

The other weird thing that’s happening is that right at this moment, standing where I’m standing and looking across the room at them, I can see the future. It doesn’t take a genius to get it, either, that this is going to break up the band. Ray and Bryan are already fighting over the money, and I can see Bryan insisting on getting his share and just walking away with it, using it to take a fucking auto mechanics class or something and getting on with whatever those ‘better plans’ are that he has for his life. I hate his guts so much right now that I’m probably being way too hard on him. Maybe he’ll use the money to start his own business and be a millionaire in five years.

But he’s going, or gone, and Watts will leave next, although not for the same reasons. I figure it’s only a matter of time before somebody from the scene back home, or even from one of the bands that was here this weekend, who’s got a vision for a real band and some songs and some players but no singer, is going to talk him into trying it out, just giving it a shot. Being Watts he’ll probably insist on getting permission from me and Ray first, and maybe only practicing with them when he’s not committed to us already . . . but once he knows what it’s like to sing shit nobody’s ever sung before, stuff he gets to shape so that he owns it . . . Well, he better take that ride for all it’s worth. If he doesn’t I might kick his ass myself.

Watts is waving like he’s been trying to get my attention for a while. I catch his eye and jerk my thumb up to say I’m heading back up to the room. I don’t really know what I’m going to do and I still don’t when I get there. I turn the t.v. on, but after five minutes I turn it off again and pick up my book from the table where I left it to finish drying out.
I read to the end, from the part where they all go to this fancy hotel and Daisy and her husband and Gatsby have it all out and she breaks up with Gatsby, then she kills a girl, then the girl’s husband kills Gatsby, and Nick picks up the pieces and gets the fuck out of town. I could have sworn that Daisy came back for Gatsby’s funeral, that there was this whole conversation with Nick where she talks about how she’s lost something that she can never get back, but there isn’t. She’s off on some trip with her husband the whole time, doesn’t even send flowers.

But just when I’m ready to accept that Gatsby was just pathetic the whole time, Nick is trying to say something different. What he says to Gatsby the last time he sees him: “You’re worth the whole damn bunch put together.” He’s basically saying that Daisy’s not worth everything Gatsby’s done for her, but that even so everything Gatsby did do for her made Nick like him. I can’t decide how I feel about it. I get Daisy, I think, for most of it, except for the way she acts at the end just throws me. I feel like maybe Gatsby doesn’t believe that she would really do some of the things she does, like he has to keep seeing her a certain way because if he doesn’t, then everything he did, the house and the booze and the parties, will have been for nothing. But then I don’t know how I feel about Gatsby, either. Do I admire him like Nick does, for just going all out for that one dream, or do I feel sorry for him because the whole dream was never going to come true?

I throw the book on the bed and the girl on the cover looks up at me with that one perfect tear on her cheek and it occurs to me that the tear is fake. When people cry for real, their noses run, their eyes get all puffed-up, they look like shit. I should know.
I use my mom’s calling card, which she made me take so I could call her if the bus broke down or some other emergency happened that was never going to happen. The phone rings three times and then a guy picks up.

“Sonia?” he says. “Yeah, she’s here. Hang on.”

He doesn’t cover the mouthpiece, so I can hear him say, “Sonia, baby, phone,” and hear women laughing in the background. Then there’s a muffled sound as they transfer the phone and I hear her voice.

“Well is it?” she asks him.

“I don’t know,” he says. “Some guy. Sounds nervous.”

I hear her sigh before she puts the phone to her ear.

“David?”

“Hi.”

Another sigh. “Hi. What do you want?”

“We just finished a gig, that one I was telling you about. So I can take you on that tropical vacation if you still want to go.”

I say this knowing that all she wants is to get off the phone with me. I’m not even sure I mean it anymore.

“Congratulations on winning the contest,” she says. “That’s really great for you. But you know it wouldn’t be a good idea for us to take a vacation together.”

“Do you remember how it was when we were together?”

“David—” she starts, but I cut her off.

“Never mind. I was just reading this book and it reminded me of you, made me remember you.”
“David, I’ll always remember you, okay. I’m sorry if that sounds cliché or like I’m being patronizing, because I don’t want to be, but I will always remember you. But if that’s what you want, if you want me to have good memories of us then you have to stop calling me.”

I sit up straighter on the bed and then I get up and I’m listening as hard as I can, but not, for once, to her. I hear what she’s saying and behind it I hear what I said to her and on top of both of our voices I hear something else, words to a song that I can’t remember ever hearing before but I know it, I can hear it, and it’s drowning her out.

“I gotta go,” I say, and I don’t know what she says after that because I drop the phone and I need a pen, a pen and some paper—there’s a notepad on the nightstand, one of those hotel ones, with a pen right next to it, and I sit back down and the words come out so fast that I can hardly read them, but I’ll go back over them when I get them all down.

My hands remember you
My mouth remembers you
My cock remembers you
I wonder if even you’ll remember you
As long as I’ll remember you

And it just keeps coming out, three, four, five of these stupid little sheets of paper, the whole thing, verses and chorus. Then I go back and scribble the chords in the margins. I need to rewrite it so it’s clearer, but first I want to hear it, see if it sounds the same out loud as it does in my head. I get my guitar out and tune it and play the song through, muttering the words as I sound out the melody. Jesus. It does. It sounds like I knew it sounded when I heard it in my
head. The thrumming, the restlessness is back in my hands and it spreads as I read the song over, but it doesn’t feel so bad this time. Uncomfortable, like I’ve got to keep moving, keep doing something, but not exactly bad.

Still, I’m pacing the room muttering the words to myself again, trying to hear if there are a few places where the rhythm is off, when Watts walks in, and I’m so keyed up that I think I freak him out a little.

“Dave,” he says, “you okay?” And then he sees the phone, which I forgot to even hang up, just let drop, and he comes over and puts the receiver back in the cradle. He doesn’t look at me.

“What’d she say this time?”

I shove the pad at him. “Can you read this?”

I’m not scared that he’s going to laugh or tell me to go get a fucking life because he wouldn’t. And I have to know.

He reads the pages and then he looks at the guitar lying on the bed and up at me.

“Did you just write this?”

I shrug. He looks down at the song and reads through it again.

“You wrote this whole thing just now? Since you came up here?”

“Stop being a dick, Watts. What do you think of it?”

He grins. “And here I was thinking I had to come save you from yourself—Jesus Christ, Dave.” He looks down at the words again and then goes over to the table and spreads them out so he can see the whole thing at once. “Let’s do it,” he says. “Play me the intro and you’ll have to cue me to come in because that’s not in here.”

“Shit, yeah, sorry, I didn’t get that written down yet.”
Watts just laughs at me and he’s waiting, so I play the opening and give him a nod, and now it really sounds like it’s supposed to, better even. We play it all the way through and then Watts goes over to his bag and pulls out a regular size pad of paper and a pencil and goes back over to the table and sits down.

“There’s a couple of things I might want to change,” he says. “Like ‘choose’ to ‘use’ in this line, because—shit, I don’t know, it feels like ‘use’ could be angrier. And ‘those words you use’ just sounds better to me.”

I sit down on the edge of the bed so I’m next to him but I can still hold my guitar in my lap. I’m listening to him, but I’m also fiddling with the fingering for the bridge from the chorus back into the last verse. “Okay,” I say. “Yeah, go ahead and change that.”

“Hey,” Watts glances at me over his shoulder. “I’m rewriting the whole goddamn thing so I can read it and then we’re going to try it again, okay? So figure out the bridge or whatever it is you’re messing with back there. It sounds good.”

Gatsby didn’t figure it out until it was too late. Nick says that the whole time Gatsby’s dream about Daisy was “already behind him,” just like Sonia is already behind me. But he wouldn’t give up, he just kept going after her, climbing up that stairway to heaven and never looking down. I know better. The way to get hold of the dream isn’t to get it back, because you can’t. It’s gone, man, it’s over. But if you can get the dream down on paper, get it into your hands where you can make it sing, it’s yours. I can write it into fucking eternity if I can get the words right.
The Legend of the Unicorn

The first morning at Camp Haven, Christian sat with some girls from her cabin at breakfast. Felice was young, or at least immature, and Chantal had an attitude on her the way bony, skinny girls always had. But they were nice enough. Jasmine’s boyfriend was in the army and getting deployed in the fall. He was mad that they were going to miss spending time together this summer because Jasmine had to come here.

After breakfast, they got sorted into teams and ran an obstacle course. They went to lunch sweaty and ate baked beans and hot dogs, then went inside for what were listed on the schedule as “Empowerment Groups.”

Their classroom was blessedly air-conditioned and one of the counselors, Elizabeth, stood at the blackboard taping up a glossy art poster. When she stepped back, they could see it was an old-fashioned picture, like a tapestry, on a faded red background embroidered or painted all over with flowers and birds. In the center was a woman with her arm around the neck of a white unicorn. And beside the picture, on the blackboard, Elizabeth had written “Sex Education for Grrrls.”

Elizabeth reminded Christian of a bunch of teachers at school, determined to be cool and exciting and “make a difference.” She stood for a long moment at the board, waiting for the girls to come in and notice what she’d written, looking quietly pleased with herself. She had curly blond hair that fell over her shoulders and down her back, not styled at all but still perfect. Christian had already heard a bunch of boys at lunch talking about how hot Elizabeth was, especially at afternoon swim when she showed up in her bathing suit: I’d do her. Hell, yes. She ain’t got tits but she’s got an ass on her, sweet and hiiiiigh!
She wondered if Elizabeth knew what the boys said about her and how that fit into “Sex Education for Grrrls.”

“Settle down, everyone,” Elizabeth said. “How many do we have here, 12 of you? Great. I’m Elizabeth. A lot of you already know me because I’m head counselor in Cabin Six. I’m also a graduate student in psychology and I want to work with teenagers when I finish my degree.

“Now,” she swung around and gestured to the blackboard. “This is what we’re going to be talking about for the next two weeks, and don’t worry, I’m not going to be running an actual sex ed class with you guys. I figure some of you know more than I do on the subject.”

A couple of the girls laughed.

“I want us to be really open and honest in this room and talk about what sex means to us as women,” Elizabeth said. “I’m going to have you doing some writing in here—stop, stop,” she said, as they groaned, “I’m not going to see what you write unless you choose to share.”

She passed around a stack of composition books, the covers mottled white and red. This was an unexpected bonus. Christian had forgotten to pack her poetry notebook because she’d gotten it out of her bag at the last minute to write a poem for her boyfriend Jeremy. Now she had something to use while she was here.

“Take a look at this picture,” Elizabeth said. “It’s actually a photograph of a medieval tapestry that’s hanging in a museum in France. What do you see here?”

“A lady and a unicorn.”

“Do you know the legend of the unicorn? Anyone?”

A fat white girl sitting on the floor raised her hand.

“Meaghan?”
“Don’t they only let women pet them if they’re virgins?”

“That’s right.” Elizabeth beamed. “The legend was that a unicorn was a very mystical, powerful animal. Their horns could cure illnesses and the sight of one was good luck.”

“But they’re not real, are they?” asked Felice. The girl behind her snorted with laughter.

“No, they’re not,” Elizabeth said. “But that didn’t stop all this mythology from growing up around them. The legend involving virgins said that the only way to capture a unicorn was to have a young woman who had never had sex go where the unicorn was—into a forest or a field—and sit and wait. The unicorn would come and lay his head in her lap in tribute to her purity.”

“Whoopee for her,” someone muttered. A couple girls laughed.

Christian looked at the tapestry and tried to make out the look on the lady’s face. She was too far away to see clearly, but she didn’t think the woman was smiling, exactly. Maybe a little.

“What I’d like you to write in your notebooks for today,” Elizabeth said, “is some associations you have with unicorns. What do they make you think of, what do you think a unicorn looks like, where you might meet one, anything. It doesn’t matter how silly or fantastic it sounds. Remember, you don’t have to share this with anyone, though I’m hoping some of you will decide to.”

Christian opened her book and wrote her name inside the front cover. Chantal elbowed her and angled her book so Christian could read: *I can’t believe this place.*

Christian shrugged. Chantal drew her book back and wrote: *You been here before?* Christian shook her head.
Chantal made a face, then scribbled some more. *Me neither. Principal said it was this or summer school ALL summer, you believe that?* Christian raised her eyebrows, though she wasn’t really surprised. Some kids had to come to Camp Haven according to a contract with their school or their case worker, kids who already had a juvie record or a long-term suspension in their file. Christian was not one of them. She was just, like everybody else here, “at risk.”

That’s what it said in the brochures: *Camp Haven is a potentially life-changing summer opportunity for at-risk teens.* So apparently “at risk” kids were the ones who got written up often enough to know the vice principal to say “hey” in the hallway, whose guidance counselors rolled their eyes and said, “Honey, you’ve choices to make every single day and you seem to go out of your way to make the wrong ones.”

That was what Christian’s guidance counselor said when she’d given Christian the application to Camp Haven. Christian had been suspended in the fall for getting in a fight with her English teacher. She’d been passing notes with her friend Alisha, fair enough, and her own damn fault for getting caught. But when the teacher took the note, what she said was, “Alisha, Christina, see me after class.”


“You, Christina,” the teacher said. “You heard me.” She must have been 50, but she had a good figure and was proud of it. She wore Capri pants and little kitten heels and the only names she ever remembered belonged to white girls with long hair whose voices went up at the end of their sentences, like everything they said was a question.

“Well,” Christian said, “since my name’s not Christina, I guess I don’t have to stay after, do I?” The whole class went quiet. A boy in the back row let out a long whistle that ended in a crashing sound. Christian got a one-day suspension.
Then in March she went up for her second suspension, this time for refusing to get up when her math teacher ordered her out of the classroom. The teacher accused Christian of cheating on her math test and Christian knew, even as she clenched her fingers around her pencil and pushed her feet against the floor, that getting up meant she wasn’t going to be allowed to take the test. The teacher was going to fail her on it and that might mean she’d fail math. So she sat, her head bent as if she was working on a problem, until the vice principal came to get her.

She hadn’t been cheating on the test, but by the time she got suspended for two days, that didn’t matter. Even her mother shook her head and said, “Girl, you go too far sometimes. You got to pick your battles.” Christian looked over the brochure from Camp Haven after her mother went to bed. She was still so mad that night that she applied just to get away from home for a couple of weeks, away from her mother telling her to get a job, get off the phone with Jeremy, stop mouthing back.

She glanced around the room and saw all the girls writing, even Chantal, who had her chin out like she was mad at the page. Christian looked at the poster of the lady and the unicorn and thought about the horses from this morning. She’d never seen horses up close before.

Christian had woken abruptly that morning and lain awake a moment in the shadowy stillness of the cabin. She had to pee. She sat up, put on her flip-flops, and pulled her duffel out so she could run a comb through her hair. Then she slipped out of the cabin and hurried across the clearing, feeling goosebumps break out on her arms and legs and wood chips slide into her flip-flops. “Lord,” she muttered, “if there’s a spider in that bathroom I’m leaving. Now. Seriously. This is pure crazy.”
On her way out of the bathroom, she saw a boy sitting on one of the benches that were set in a circle in front of the cabins. There was a fire-pit in the middle and the counselors were already pushing everyone to “come to campfire” every night. The boy was poking at the ashes with a stick, but he looked up when he heard the bathroom door bang shut.

“Hey.” He smiled a big, sleepy smile.

“Hey,” Christian said. She crossed her arms over her chest. She didn’t have her bra on yet.

“You heading back to bed?” he asked.

“No. I thought I was, but I guess I’m up now.”

He nodded. “I always wake up at the crack of dawn here.”

“You’ve been here before?”

“Yeah, this is my third summer.”

“You like it?”

He shrugged, still smiling at her. “So long as I get to play ball a couple hours every day, I’m good. I’ve got some of my boys here now, so we get to hang.”

He scattered more ashes with his stick, then kicked some stuff at the center of the fire pit. His feet were huge, in basketball shoes that he hadn’t bothered to tie. His hands were big too, but at the waist there was nothing to him. Jeremy was built different, solid all around. Christian had always wondered what it must feel like to put your arms around a boy like this one—so skinny he looked like nothing, but tall enough to cast a shadow over you.

“I’m Christian,” she said.

The boy nodded. “Terrence. First year, huh?”

She snorted. “First day.”
“Well—” he grinned, “yesterday was your first day. This is your second.”

“Whatever,” she said. “First time I’ve slept in a cabin like that, all those beds crammed up together and no bathroom ‘cept one I got to walk to. I’m just glad I didn’t have to pee in the middle of the night.”

“Didn’t you bring a flashlight like they tell you to?”

“Course I did.” Christian said. “Doesn’t mean I want to have to use it.”

“Well, maybe you won’t have to. Just pee every night before you go to bed.”

He had let his hair get big, this boy. Likely it needed picking more often at this length, but it suited him, framed the reckless mouth and the laughing lights in his eyes. Christian knew that if she was sitting next to him right now he’d be nudging her with his shoulder while he teased her, pushing her foot with his. She smiled a little.

“I’ll do that,” she said. “Just pee every night right before bed.”

“Well, what you think besides that?” Terrence asked.

She shrugged. “Food’s nasty, but I figured it would be.”

“It’s alright,” Terrence said. “Breakfast is better ‘cause there’s like 50 kinds of cereal and they have pancakes and waffles every morning. Danish too.”

“You gonna try to convince me everything about this place is cool?” she asked.

“You gonna complain about everything?” he shot back, and this time she smiled all the way.

“I was workin’ up to it, yeah.”

“Why?” Terrence said. “You didn’t have to come, did you? I mean—I know a couple kids who make it like they had no choice, but—”
“I didn’t have to come,” she said. “Seemed like it could be better than sitting at home all summer.”

“Yeah.” Terrence looked up and smiled in relief. “And you know, they have movie nights Friday and Saturday.”

Christian shook her head. “Boy, you just don’t give up, do you? They pay you to talk this place up?”

“No.”

“They should.”

He looked pleased with himself. “You want to take a walk? I can take you over to see the horses.”

“They have horses?”

“Oh yeah. You can sign up to ride during free time.”

Christian fell into step beside him, trying to find a way to walk so that she could keep up with his long stride and not get rocks in her flip-flops.

They waded through long grass to stand by the fence. Terrence whistled and one of the horses came trotting over. It was not as big as Christian had thought it would be, nor as pretty. From farther away it had looked white, but up close it was a dirty yellowish color, like teeth or fingernails. Its mane was grey and matted.

“This is Toby,” Terrence said, putting his hand out flat, palm up, under the horse’s nose. Toby sniffed and snorted at Terrence’s palm. His nostrils were huge and black.

“Looks like he thought he was getting a hand-out,” Christian said.
“Yeah,” Terrence laughed. “They’re all spoiled as shit, ‘cause the counselors have us feeding them to get them to come near us, and some kids bring carrots and apples and stuff up from the dining hall.”

Toby put his mouth right down on Terrence’s hand, then tossed his head and turned toward Christian.

“He’s so dirty,” Christian said.

“He’s just old,” Terrence said. “And he picks up bits of grass and stuff from being outside. Put your hand out, let him smell you.”

She hesitated and Terrence picked up her hand from the top of the fence and turned it over.

“Go on,” he said. “He won’t hurt you.”

Terrence’s fingers were warm and strong. Christian let him bring her hand up to meet the horse and felt the puff of hot breath on her skin as Toby investigated her.

“See? He likes you just fine. You can go ahead and pat him if you want, on the top of his nose. They like that.”

She felt the bristly hairs rise up to meet her fingertips as she stroked.

“I never been this close to a horse before,” she said. “Its eyelashes are so long. They look like a girl’s.”

When Elizabeth called time, Christian looked up from her notebook and saw Felice still writing furiously in loopy script that looked like bubbles on the page. Christian could guess what Felice thought of when she thought of unicorns. Felice thought of My Little Ponies, sparkly pink and purple and bright blue, with glitter in their long silky tails and their curly
manes. They each had their own hairbrush you could use to coax the tangles out and the same smile on their face. It wasn’t an animal smile, but a woman’s, sweet and smug and not showing even a hint of teeth. Felice’s unicorns circled her like a mobile as she wrote about them, about how she loved the rainbows tattooed on their flanks and the stars on their foreheads and the swirlly round shape to their horns that reminded her of soft-serve ice cream.

Christian guessed—correctly—that Felice would volunteer to share what she’d written. Elizabeth made it work, too. When Felice finished reading, Elizabeth smiled and asked for a show of hands of how many girls there had ever played with unicorns like the ones Felice described.

“There’s something you lose completely when you give up those sparkly toys, right?” She turned to Felice. “Do you think maybe for you, and innocence are incompatible on a certain level?”

Felice shrugged, biting her lip. She looked like she’d gotten more than she’d bargained for.

“We’re going to pick up with this tomorrow,” Elizabeth said. “Remember your notebooks. Thanks, ladies.”

Christian clipped her pen to the cover of her notebook and joined her cabin mates outside.

“This should be interesting,” Jasmine said.

Chantal glanced over her shoulder. “I never would have picked her for a sex ed teacher,” she said. “I would have thought she was a gym teacher, cheerleading coach—you seen her out running and doing her exercising, stretching every chance she gets. She makes me tired just watching her.”
“She’s not a sex ed teacher,” Jasmine said. “Didn’t you hear her? She’s a psychologist. She’s doing group therapy with us.”

“Really?” Felice whipped her head away from the pick-up basketball game she’d been watching—all the boys had their shirts off. “Seemed like English class.”

“Yeah, well,” Christian said, “it’ll feel like therapy before she’s done.”

She followed Felice’s gaze back to the basketball game. Terrence was playing. She’d thought she recognized the line of his torso when she’d seen it out of the corner of her eye and she’d been right. He was good, loose and easy, nice twist to his waist when he shot around a defender.

“Girl,” Chantal said, “who you lookin’ at? Terrence?”

Christian shrugged. “We talked some this morning.”

“Yeah well, I thought you had a man back home.”

“That don’t mean she blind, Chantal,” Jasmine said. Christian shot her a look and they smiled at each other.

“Oh, shit, here comes Duke,” Chantal murmured suddenly, pushing her way out of the group and onto the grass. Christian looked behind her and saw the camp director, Glen Duke, striding towards them on his way to his office. He had a clipboard in one hand and a mesh bag of soccer balls in the other. His sky blue polo shirt—standard staff uniform along with khaki shorts—was soaked with sweat around the collar and under his arms.

“Duke?” Christian whispered. “You don’t call him that to his face, do you?”

“Look at the man,” Chantal said. “You gonna go up to him and say ‘Hey, Glen! How’s it going?’” She rolled her eyes. “He’s going to ask us if we’ve got anyplace to be, just watch.”
“Afternoon, Ladies,” Duke said. He had a flat-planed, handsome face with flags of high color in his cheeks from sun and exercise. His hair was gray but thick and combed straight back from his forehead and he had a full mustache like a cop, even wore the aviator glasses. Underneath his mustache his mouth was thick and red.

“You ladies got anyplace to be?” he asked. Felice giggled and clapped her hand over her mouth. None of the others looked at her.

“We just finished our Group Empowerment session,” Christian said. “We were just taking a break here talking about what we learned.”

“Excellent, excellent.” His eyes were already past them. Several kids stood or sat outside his office, while down the hall Elizabeth emerged from the room and locked it behind her. She saw the director and gave a little wave.

Duke shifted the bag of balls over his shoulder. “There’s another hour of free swim time at the pool this afternoon, there’s a basketball game on as you can see, and I’m sure those gentlemen would love your support. There is even a rousing game of tag football still going strong on the upper field. So I’m sure you can find some way to occupy yourselves until dinner.”

“I want to stay and watch the game,” Felice said once Duke had closed his office door behind the first camper.

Christian looked down at the new notebook. “I might just go back to the cabin, put my stuff away first.”

“Christian!”

She turned to the basketball court and saw Terrence waving.
“Oh, now she’s got to go over there. She got to at least talk to the boy,” Chantal murmured.

Terrence jogged over, wiping his face with his discarded t-shirt.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey.”

Christian introduced the other girls and Terrence shook their hands, which set Felice giggling again. Christian could feel Jasmine trying to catch her eye but she avoided the look. She didn’t need to know what a fine boy this was.

“You all coming to campfire tonight?” Terrence asked.

“Should we?” Chantal asked.

“Yeah, yeah, you should. Isaac—that’s our head counselor—he’s gonna tell ghost stories. You be scared to even walk back to the cabin when he’s done. Plus we’ve got marshmallows to put in the fire.”

“Boy! Why didn’t you just say so,” Jasmine said. “I’ll go just for the chance of something to eat that’s not downright foul.”

“Well alright then.” Terrence grinned at her, but then turned irresistibly back to Christian. “What do you think?”

She shrugged. “So long as you’ve showered.”

He laughed. “Cool.”

They watched him go back to the court, slap hands with the other guys, then head over to the boys’ bathroom.

“Yeah,” Jasmine said after a minute, “I wouldn’t have been able to say no to that one either.”
Christian liked to write list poems, to think of something or someone and turn a list of qualities or reasons into a poem by making it rhyme, giving it a beat. She sat at the campfire beside Chantal and made a list in her head of reasons why she loved Jeremy. She loved his smile for her, which was different from his smile for his boys or for his teachers or his coach. He never looked shy with anybody else, but with her he did, especially when he saw her for the first time in the day or when he woke up after they’d been together. She loved how Jeremy never just hugged her, he wrapped himself around her. He wasn’t much taller than she was, but his arms were big and his chest was hard.

“You doing okay?” Terrence asked. He was sprawled on the ground half in front of Christian, half beside her, his long legs stretched out so far the toes of his big shoes touched the circle of stones that contained the fire. Christian had sat down on the end of a bench and let Chantal sit next to her so that Terrence couldn’t. She wasn’t stupid. The fire put red light into the skin on his cheeks and his smile gleamed like a mouthful of stars when he turned to her.

“You right,” she said, “this is pretty cool. Not exactly something you can do in the city.”

He laughed. “Not without someone calling the fire department.”

“Yeah.” She hesitated. “So, what’s your Empowerment Group about?”

The smile flashed again. “It’s cool this year. This dude Marcus—over there on the other side of the fire, you see him? He’s got a green polo on. He’s leading it, has us talkin’ about the stereotypes for black men, you know, like ‘Are you gonna play professional sports or dog a lot of women?’ ”

“You talking about how to get past that kind of bullshit?”
“Yeah, pretty much. I mean, we only just met the one time so far.” He shifted to see her better. “What about yours? Is Elizabeth running it?”

“Yeah.”

“She’s pretty cool. She’s been doin’ this place for a couple of years, least as long as I have. She remembers names better than most all the other counselors, like even on the first day when she hasn’t seen you for a year.”

“Yeah, well, she has us talking about sex.”

“Sex? Seriously?” Terrence looked so delighted that Christian had to smile.

“Seriously. Says we can be as honest as we want.”

“Man, the girls get all the good classes and shit here. I swear. Last year there was one group of girls spent the whole time playing ball and swimming outside. The teacher had them working on ‘positive body image’ or some such bull, but man, they even got food nobody else got. She brought them fruit and sandwiches and stuff.”

Terrence shook his head and turned back to look at the fire. The marshmallows had come out and a bunch of people were having a skewer war over the highest part of the flames. Christian looked at his puffy black hair, at the line of tiny curls along the side of his face and down his jaw line that he’d missed shaving. Lot of things she could tell this boy: that she already understood what Elizabeth was doing with the unicorn thing. That she liked the way he looked, the way he moved. That she had a boyfriend. She tucked her hands up into the sleeves of her sweatshirt and watched the first batch of charred marshmallows come off the fire. Across from her, Felice tipped her head back and let a boy feed her the sticky white blob.

“You want some marshmallows?” Terrence asked.

“No,” Christian said, “I’m good.”
The unicorn poster stayed on the blackboard the whole first week. When the bottom started to curl up from the heat Elizabeth taped it down. The white lady at the center watched their group discussions with that semi-smile on her face, while the unicorn at her side gazed up at her adoringly.

Thursday morning Christian sat next to Jasmine.

“You want to go try to get on the computers during free time this afternoon?” she asked.

“Yeah.” Jasmine said. “I need to talk to my man, you know? That’s the worst thing about this place, that there’s no cell phone signal. Feels like I’m going crazy.”

“You miss him?”

Jasmine nodded. She looked miserable. She was a big girl, tall and full-figured, wearing a woman’s body already, though her face was a child’s face, soft and oval with baby fat under the chin. Her small dark eyes were fringed with thick curly lashes like those on a doll whose eyes opened and shut. Her hair was thin and straightened and she wore it screwed up in a little bun on top of her head, with ringlets springing out on her neck and forehead in the heat. She shifted in her seat on the couch, swinging one leg up over the other, then swinging it back down again.

“He wants to get engaged,” she said. “And my mother just about lost her mind. I shouldn’t have told her but I did and now it’s like I can’t get away from it, him trying to get me to say yes and her telling me that if I wear a ring before I’m 18 she’s going to kick me out of the house.”
“Why do they do that?” Christian said. “Why do they threaten you with shit like that when they got to know, if they stop to think for even a minute, that it’s just gonna leave you no other choice?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, you think she really would?”

“Yeah.” Jasmine said. “She kicked my sister out when she got pregnant. My brother left on his own when he started getting serious with a Korean girl. Seems like she wants us all out some way or another.”

“But if he’s going away and she kicks you out, where you supposed to live?” Christian asked.

“With my sister, I guess. She’s married now. She said I could. I’d have to change schools, though.”

“So what are you gonna do?”

“I don’t know.”

“You want to get married?”

Jasmine glanced up for a minute—just a quick flicker of her eyes, lashes up and down so fast Christian wouldn’t have seen the answer if she hadn’t been looking for it.

“I don’t want to get married now,” Jasmine said. “But he takes care of me, you know?”

Elizabeth came in then and asked for more volunteers to share what they’d written about the other day. Jasmine didn’t raise her hand, but now Christian knew what Jasmine thought of when she thought of unicorns. Jasmine thought of moonlight illuminating a darkened room, of lying amid softly mounded covers, white and blue and silver. She thought of a big bed with gauzy curtains beside an open window, a breeze blowing in that smelled like her own name, like
jasmine. And the unicorn, coming in through the window, never landed. He only hovered, to touch her with his horn and make sure her dreams were sweet.

“I want you to write in your journals, describe the ideal circumstances in which you would choose to have sex,” Elizabeth said. She hitched herself up onto the arm of one of the sofas, slender legs dangling. “And before you start, I don’t mean the setting, the time and place. I mean the circumstances of the relationship in which you’d prefer to choose to have sex.”

“You mean do we got to be married?” one girl asked.

“Not if that’s not part of your ideal,” Elizabeth said. She smiled her pink and white smile. Christian glanced at Elizabeth’s hand, braced on the back of the sofa, and saw an engagement ring she hadn’t noticed before. It looked like silver but was probably platinum.

Christian opened her book to the poem she was working on. Later she’d tell Jeremy about this assignment and how her answer right now would be: with him, anywhere private, and soon.

Her first time with Jeremy had been her first time ever, which she hadn’t told him. She *did* tell him that he better have some protection or it wasn’t happening. She didn’t like pills, for one thing, and she wasn’t sure she wanted to get into *that* with her mother. Jeremy had been more nervous than she was, his hands shaking and sweat on his forehead as he squeezed her naked breasts. For a little while, right afterward, Christian thought she might not want to do it again even though she knew he would, and she could see a choice looming between what she wanted and what he wanted. But then he’d been sweet, covering her up and bringing her food in his bed, sitting there beside her and grinning at her between bites of his pop tart. Then they hadn’t even had the opportunity to do it again for a week because the next day was a Monday, and by the time the weekend came around again Christian was surprised to find that she was
itching for it. She would kiss him in the hallway in between classes and feel the urge to push up
against him, hard, like she’d never felt before.

At the campfire that night, the girls talked about what Elizabeth had asked them that day,
about when you really should have sex and what reasons weren’t good enough. Christian sat on
the end of a bench farthest from the fire, only half-listening. She’d figured all this out already.
There were a lot of people out there didn’t want to put much value on you. That meant either
you could go along, sell yourself cheap, or you could put a million dollar price tag on your heart
and not sell it for anything less.

Terrence slipped down into the grass beside her and touched her shoulder.

“Hey,” he said. “I was looking for you.”

“Yeah, well,” she said, “I’m not stayin’ tonight. I got to go check the computer room,
send some e-mails back home.”

“You coming back out afterwards?”

“No.” She shook her head and shrugged his hand off her shoulder. “I’m tired. I’m just
gonna get ready for bed after.”

She got up and hugged herself in her sweatshirt. It was cold again, even colder this far
from the blaze. She looked down at Terrence, though she could hardly see him in the dark. He
had drawn his knees up and clasped his hands over them like he didn’t care about a thing and she
wanted, very badly, to drop down into the grass beside him. Put her shoulder against his. Feel
him shift, pull back, then settle in with a long arm around her, warming her up. She should have
told him about Jeremy the first time they took a walk together, didn’t know quite why she hadn’t.
Now it was too late, she was afraid Terrence would think she’d just been playing with him, not
telling him she had a boyfriend. Christian didn’t play like that. She hadn’t meant to let it get this far, him seeking her out in the dark, leaving his friends to sit with her.

“Hey,” she said. “I’ll see you tomorrow, alright?”

“Yeah,” he said. “See you.”

She picked her way along the path from the campfire to the computer room in the main classroom building, which was empty, the door closed but not locked. She sat down at a computer in the back and stayed a long time writing to Jeremy, who’d sent three messages that day telling her how much he missed her. When she walked out of the computer room and shut the door behind her, she was still thinking about how he shut his eyes and put his head back like he couldn’t stand it when she wrapped her hand around him through his shorts. But as soon as the door closed she was plunged into darkness and she froze. She tried the door again, but it had locked automatically. Christian stood still while her eyes adjusted; it wasn’t totally dark after all. She could see the outline of the doors that would take her back outside and a silver rectangle of moonlight outlining a door further down the hall.

She walked to the main doors and pushed on the bar that ran across them enough to know that it would give; they were open. From the closed door further down, though, she heard what had to be either people whispering or a television turned real low. She took a few steps closer and heard a sound that was definitely coming from inside the room, a scraping like furniture being moved. Somebody was going at it, no question, and in Duke’s office.

The doorframe wasn’t flush; that was why moonlight was showing under and around it. Christian looked through the crack along the line of the hinges and saw Duke standing behind his desk looking down and muttering—at first Christian thought to himself. Then she saw that his hands were at his waist, gripping someone’s head. A girl with long curly blond hair was
kneeling in front of Duke, practically under his desk, and he was pushing into her mouth hard enough that the girl kept gagging and trying to pull back. Christian could hear her trying to catch her breath to keep going. His shirttail in front was bunched up against Elizabeth’s forehead. In back it brushed against his butt as he pumped his hips back and forth. He was the one muttering: 

yeah baby that’s it harder you can do it deeper faster come on baby feels so good oh fuck yeah.

Elizabeth put one hand on the camp director’s butt to steady herself as she sucked and Christian drew back from the door and let herself out of the building.

In workshop the next day, Elizabeth asked them to write about a time when they felt pressured to be sexual or do something sexual and how they handled it. Then she asked them to read over what they’d written and add a new paragraph or two about how they wished they’d handled the situation.

“I wish I’d told him to suck it his own damn self,” muttered one girl.

Meaghan, the fat girl, laughed, her shoulders heaving as she bent over her notebook. She hadn’t been doing any of the free-writing assignments, just doodling Japanese animé characters on the pages.

Christian had written about the time she’d slept over at Alisha’s house and Alisha’s cousin had climbed into bed with her in the middle of the night. She’d shouted at him and shoved him so hard he fell out of the bed, then Alisha had jumped up and started kicking him with her bare feet, hollering for her mother the whole time.

On the next page of her notebook, Christian wrote, Do you wish you’d said no to Duke?
She looked at Elizabeth, who was writing some follow-up questions on the board and fiddling with the placement of her unicorn poster. When Elizabeth asked for volunteers to share what they’d written, Christian raised her hand.

“Christian, great! Go ahead. And remember, you don’t have to share anything you’re not comfortable sharing.”

“I’m comfortable with this. I didn’t do anything I got to be ashamed of,” Christian said. She read the story about A.J., Alisha’s cousin, and everyone laughed.

“Damn,” Chantal said. “You and your girl didn’t even blink!”

“Sounds like you reacted without hesitation to something that felt sexually threatening, Christian,” Elizabeth said. “Is that something you’re proud of?”

“Hell, yeah. I got to be. If I don’t protect myself, nobody going to.”

“That’s a good attitude to have,” Elizabeth said. “Anyone else have thoughts on this—”

“Especially when the guy’s grown,” Christian said. “What the hell was he doing messing with me anyway? I’m not his age. He should have gone out and found a woman, except most women wouldn’t talk to him because he’s nasty like that, coming onto girls and hanging around high school kids, shit like that.”

“That is nasty,” Chantal said.

“Hey now,” said a lacquered doll named Shelley from another cabin, “my boyfriend’s 28, and they ain’t nothing wrong with him. Trust me.”

“He’s fine, that’s for sure,” said one of her friends.

“No,” Chantal said, “he’s nasty and you’re stupid for being with him. What you doing with a grown man? What’s he doing with you? You all going to set up house and have babies,
is that what you’re gonna do? And you, what, 16 years old? What’s gonna happen when you get too old for him?”

“Yeah, like when you’re 20,” someone murmured.

“Fuck you all,” Shelley said, studying her tricolor nails—orange, fuschia, and gold—with supreme indifference now that she’d caused a fight. “You don’t know shit about my business, any of you.”

“What do you think?” Christian asked Elizabeth.

Elizabeth looked like she wanted to put her hands over her ears. “About what?”

“About older men going after younger women,” Christian said. “Don’t you think there’s something wrong with them if they’re doing that?”

“Well—”

“And what about the girl who lets him? Seems like she’s just being stupid, thinking he wants anything from her but sex.”

“I—”

Christian was sitting on the edge of the sofa ready to surge to her feet if she didn’t like what she heard. It wasn’t even Elizabeth who was the problem, Elizabeth who ran five miles every morning and ate some healthy cereal she’d brought from home for breakfast and wanted to win them all over with unicorns. It was that Elizabeth was another person who got to say that Christian was making bad choices and there she was on her knees under the director’s desk.

It was that Elizabeth was stupid and nobody but Christian knew it. Elizabeth sure didn’t. She blinked her blue eyes twice before she answered.
“I think many relationships between older men and younger women do have an unequal power dynamic,” she said. “But there are certainly exceptions too, healthy relationships that just happen to involve an age difference.”

“That a cop-out answer and you know it,” Christian said. “You really think Shelley’s thing she got going on with some 28-year-old guy is cool, miss social-worker-to-be? You really think that or you just want us all to like you and not know too much of your business?”

“Christian!”

Elizabeth stood up. Her face was red all the way to her hairline. Standing, she was much taller than Christian, who stood up anyway too.

“Go wait for me in the hall,” Elizabeth said. She was breathing fast but trying not to show it. “This is clearly a hot-button issue for you,” she said, “but there’s no place in here for you to attack other people’s choices.”

“Yeah, bitch,” Shelley said.

Elizabeth rounded on her. “Shelley! Quiet!”

She turned back to Christian. “Go. I’ll be out when the session is over.”

Christian went. Outside the room, she slid down the wall to sit on the floor and opened up her notebook. She tried to work on a poem, but she kept seeing Elizabeth and Glen Duke in his office and there wasn’t a poem in that. After a few minutes, she realized she had to pee, so she went to the bathroom down the hall.

When she came back, she saw Duke striding toward her classroom with an odd look on his face, both irritated and stern. He stepped in just as Christian got back to her spot by the door and she heard him say, “Ladies, I’m sorry to interrupt, but Elizabeth, you’ve got a call in my office.”
Christian sat back down quickly so Elizabeth wouldn’t notice her, but she needn’t have worried. Elizabeth came out of the room ahead of Duke without any expression on her face at all and preceded him into his office. He shut the door behind them and Christian wondered if Elizabeth had somehow told him already that they’d been found them out—but how could she have? She’d been in the classroom, not in Duke’s office; he’d come looking for her. And Elizabeth would have to be stupid to tell him that someone knew. He’d fire her in a minute, Christian figured, and then get Christian herself sent home on some excuse. Then again—she kicked her notebook shut with her toe—Elizabeth was dumb enough to be doing that shit with him in the first place.

“Hey.”

She looked up and saw Chantal peeking around the door.

“What’s up?” Chantal asked.

Christian shook her head. “Nothing. You saw. The usual with me. I don’t know when to keep my mouth shut.”

“My mother says the same thing about me,” Chantal said. “Specially when I tell her what I think of my stepfather.”

Christian laughed.

“I liked your story,” Chantal said, “about how you and your friend handled her cousin. I got suspended for something like that. That’s why I had to come here.”

“You’re kidding. What happened?”

Chantal stepped all the way out into the hall and leaned back against the door. “Some guy grabbed me in line to get on the bus after school. Both hands too, on my—” she gestured, vaguely, to her flat chest and tiny round bottom.
“So what’d you do?”

Chantal grinned. “I bit him. Got ahold of his hair and pulled his head down and just bit him, right here on his neck. Wouldn’t let go, either. He had to get stitches.”

“Christ, Chantal.”

“Yeah.”

“He get in trouble?”

“Him? Hell, no. He said I was crazy, said I’d imagined it, all that bullshit.”

“That’s wrong.”

“Yeah.”

Christian could picture Chantal, all 100 pounds of her, clinging to some boy’s neck with her teeth and jaws. If Chantal thought of unicorns, she thought of them as black, glossy as the tinted windows on an expensive car, sleek as panthers. They moved around her in a pack, their muscles moving and bunching under their skin. Their horns weren’t decoration, either. They were weapons, sharp as swords. Chantal’s unicorns walked in front of her and beside her and behind her, and they lowered their heads to charge, not surrender.

Chantal was looking down the hall to Duke’s office.

“What’s your problem with her, anyway?” she asked.

“Nothing,” Christian said. “I just get sick of all these teachers won’t take a stand.”

“What’d you mean about her business, though?” Chantal crossed her arms over her chest and stuck out a sharp hip. “Sounded like it was personal.”

“Did it? Damn.” Christian bit her lip.

“I thought she was alright,” Chantal said. “I mean, you know, she a white girl and all, but I like that she lets us talk about anything in there.”
“Yeah.”

“Thought her fiancé was her age. She’s got a picture of him up on one of her shelves.”

“Yeah, well, like I said, I was just mad.”

“Because of that girl Shelley?”

Christian shrugged.

“You think she’s coming back?” Chantal asked, nodding her head at the closed office door down the hall.

The doors to the other classrooms started to open and campers streamed out. Chantal stuck her head back around the door and shouted that class was over. Jasmine and Felice joined them.

“Think we’re going to hit the pool. You want to come?” Jasmine asked.

“Think I better hang out here a few more minutes,” Christian said.

“Alright,” Chantal said. “See you at dinner.”

“Yeah, save me a seat.”

“We will,” Jasmine said.


She watched her friends walk away and thought about catching up. But it had occurred to her that if Elizabeth told Duke what had happened in workshop, she wasn’t going to make it any easier for herself by skipping out. She tucked her notebook up onto her lap and drew her knees in as the rest of the kids left the building. A couple of boys shouted from the other end of the hall, then came past her at a dead run, the guy in the lead laughing like a maniac and holding some other guy’s baseball cap up over his head. They thundered past Christian and around the corner.
As the noise died away she heard someone crying and looked up. The hall was empty and Glenn Duke’s door was still closed, but a moment later it opened and the crying got louder—sounded louder.

Christian heard Elizabeth’s voice—“All I’m asking is—” and Duke, cutting her off.

“This isn’t the time or the place.”

He appeared in the doorway then, with the same expression on his face that Christian had seen earlier. He was ushering Elizabeth out in front of him and she seemed not to want to go. His arm was around her, but not like a lover’s. More like the vice principal at Christian’s school, the way he put his arm around a kid as he led him into his office for a “chat.”

Elizabeth’s head was down, her face hidden by a wad of Kleenex, but Duke spotted Christian.

“Young lady,” he called. “Are you waiting for someone?”

“I’m waiting for Elizabeth,” Christian said. “I mouthed off in class.”

“Well I’m going to ask you to help her now. She’s got to pack up her classroom materials and there’s a lot to carry there.”

To Elizabeth, in the same voice he’d used with Christian, too loud and too nice, he said, “We’ll take care of your class, we’ll take care of things. Now, this young lady is going to help you get your things to your car and you just get home where you need to be, alright? There’s anything else you need, anything, you let me know.”

He all but pushed Elizabeth out into the hall and Christian took a step forward, wondering what she should do. Elizabeth had been shrinking into him so thoroughly that Christian thought she might actually need physical support, but Elizabeth bolted past her into the classroom. Christian looked back at Duke’s office. He hadn’t shut the door, but he’d gone back inside. She
went back into the classroom and saw Elizabeth standing in front of the blackboard with an eraser in her hand, but crying too hard to do anything. Christian kicked a chair so Elizabeth would hear her and Elizabeth jumped and tried to put both hands over her face, then realized she was holding the eraser and let it drop back onto the ledge.

“You want me to do that?” Christian said. She took Elizabeth’s heaving shoulders for a nod and crossed the room to erase the board. When she was done she took down the picture of the unicorn tapestry, rolled it up, and wrapped it with a rubber band sitting on the blackboard ledge. She held the poster out to Elizabeth and after a minute Elizabeth took it, wiped her face with the handful of tissues she still held, and leaned over to get a box for the books and handouts she’d stacked on the desk.

“Did someone die?” Christian asked.

Elizabeth seemed unable to make eye contact. Her face was red and wet, her hair tangled and matted against her cheeks with tears or snot, her eyes bloodshot.

“Who was it?”

“My dad,” Elizabeth said. “My dad just died. Oh God—” and her face crumpled into itself so completely that it was hard to imagine how her features could ever smooth into prettiness again. The tissues were sodden and coming apart. Christian looked for another box in the room, found it, and brought it over.

“Thank you,” Elizabeth murmured. She put her head down even further as she dropped her used Kleenex in the trash and took a fresh one, hiding her face in it immediately.

“How’d he die?”

“Heart attack. He was out running with the dog and he just fell down.”
Christian crossed her arms over her chest. “ Seems like he should have been nicer to you,” she said.

“What?” Elizabeth looked up, aghast.

“You know. Duke. He should have been nicer to you if he knew what happened.”

Elizabeth flinched at the name Duke and sobbed harder.

“Yes, well, I shouldn’t have—I don’t know what I expected—I just needed—”

“Yeah, well,” Christian said. “It’s not your fault someone died, is it? He gonna make you think that’s your fault?”

Elizabeth shuddered. She yanked more tissues out of the box and blew her nose.

“I shouldn’t even be talking to you. You don’t understand. I shouldn’t—”

“What, like I’m gonna tell somebody? You’re leaving anyway, aren’t you?”

Elizabeth glanced around the room without seeing anything. “Yes. I’m supposed to get packed up.”

“Well, I don’t see why you didn’t tell Duke to fuck off,” Christian said. “I saw the way he was acting with you just now. You should’ve—”

“Shut up! Just shut up!” Elizabeth was breathing hard. “I can’t deal with this right now.” She reached down to pick up some books on her desk, her hands shaking.

“Did he even say he was sorry for you?” Christian asked. “Did he even say, ‘I’m so sorry?’”

Elizabeth looked at Christian like she hated her. “Did you?”

Christian crossed her arms tighter, knowing that she was right and that Elizabeth knew it, and also that she’d gone too far. Elizabeth dropped her eyes. After a long moment she drew an unsteady breath and began to stack her books in the box.
“Thank you for staying to help me, Christian,” she said. “Go to dinner now, okay, or whatever it is.”

“I’m sorry about your dad,” Christian said.

“Please,” Elizabeth said. “Go.”

Christian walked back to the cabin and put her notebook away. When she came out, Terrence was waiting on the path.

“Chantal said you got stuck after class with Elizabeth. Everything cool?”

“Nothing came down on me,” Christian said. “She had something bad happen, got a call in Duke’s office.”

“Something bad, what, like she got fired?”

“No. Something bad happened at home. Her dad died.”

“Oh man,” Terrence said.

“Yeah. She was pretty wrecked.”

“Man.” He shifted his feet, stuffed his hands in his pockets. They stood on the path for a minute without speaking. Christian looked down at their feet, close together in the dirt. Hers were bare and smooth, with orange polish on the toes, and Terrence’s were in those huge shoes of his, lacesflopping everywhere and jeans down over the tops. The contrast made her think of Elizabeth and Glenn Duke the night before, of his big hands in her hair and her slender hands on his butt.

“You want to go feed the horses?” Terrence asked. “You haven’t gone riding yet, have you?”

“No.” She fell into step with him, easy, so easy. “You?”
“Not yet. I got too much ball to play. But I’ll get over there before I leave. I like to stop by now, during free time, because there’s not usually anybody around and I can just hang, watch them run, you know.”

They reached the pasture and stood at the fence again, just as they had the other morning. Christian was glad that she looked a lot better now than she had then. She even had scent on today, body lotion that smelled like cake frosting. She wondered if Terrence could smell it.

The horses were grazing in the shade across the field. Beside Toby, a big brown horse with a black tail jerked and twitched his tail, then took off at a run for another corner of the pasture. His muscles bunched up under his shoulders and at his hips like heavy machine parts moving. Christian had always imagined that a horse running would look effortless, but what struck her watching this one was the power involved, the sheer force of it.

“What’s the matter with him?” she asked. “Why’d he run like that all of a sudden?”

“Got bit by a horsefly, probably,” Terrence said. “Or maybe he just got a mouthful of bad grass.”

“You fool,” Christian said, and nudged him with her foot. “You got no idea why that horse is running. You just like to talk like you know.”

“Yeah, you got me figured,” Terrence said. His hand came down to rest on the curve of her waist, right where her t-shirt met her shorts.

Christian looked out at the horses, leaned forward so Terrence’s hand would fall away.

“I got a boyfriend,” she said. “At home.”

Terrence took his arm back, gripped the fence with both his hands.

“Serious?” he asked.

“Serious enough,” she said. “I don’t play around.”
“You just been playing around with me, though.”

Christian turned to look at Terrence and he cut his eyes to her, long enough for her to see that he was hurt. Then he looked back at the field.

“I just told you now,” she said. “I didn’t mean to not tell you sooner, it just—”

“It just what? You just let me go on acting like a fool, asking your friends where you gonna be, asking you do you want to come to the campfire, saving you a seat—man—” he broke off as if the litany was compounding his embarrassment.

“You want to think I was playing with you, go ahead.” Christian said.

“Well what else am I supposed to think?”

Christian moved her hand on the railing until the edge of her thumb was touching his.

“That I liked you.” She said. “You sweet, you know that. You’re sweet and I didn’t expect to like you, not like that, right away when we was first talking out here. And then I realized that I hadn’t said anything about Jeremy and it seemed like it was too late, somehow.”

“You could have found a way to say something,” Terrence said.

“Yeah.”

He had moved his hand away from hers. He moved it back and rubbed his thumb lightly against hers.

“He have to know? I mean, you know, if he’s at home and you don’t have any other friends up here who’d tell him—”

“I don’t play around,” Christian said. “I expect him not to play around on me I gotta do the same, right?”

Terrence didn’t answer. After a minute he put his hands in his pockets, turned away from the fence.
“You want to head back?”

“You still mad?”

He shrugged. “I’m cool.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I just—”

“It’s all good.”

He moved in front of her down the path. Christian looked back at the horses. Toby had lifted his head from the grass once more and was watching them. From this distance, he looked so white that Christian almost couldn’t believe that he was such a different color up close.

In bed that night, Christian wondered what Elizabeth thought of when she thought of unicorns, what those animals were that shimmered in the corners of Elizabeth’s eyes and made her choose Glenn Duke.

She wondered what Elizabeth would have said about her own notebook entry, which she’d written quickly before turning the page to work on a poem about the feeling of waking up with the sun and seeing horses for the first time, with Terrence, feeling that hot breath on her palm.

_I don’t believe in unicorns_, she’d written. _But if I did believe in them, I think that they would look just like horses, only with horns._
Marie Tells All

If you watched Rock’n Romance, you know who I am. You remember—the twins with the cute names? The girl Jess Montero sent home after something that happened in his bedroom, something not on film? The one who got drunk, cut herself, and had to get stitches?

That’s me, I’m Marie.

You can see me cut myself in the fifth episode. The number of girls has been cut from the original 25 down to eight and we’re making margaritas with breakfast. I’m whacking limes into quarters with a carving knife and I slip and slice my index finger open. I don’t even make any sound at first—I remember not making a sound even as I felt the blade bite and stick deep in my fingertip—then if you watch the tape you can hear me say “Shit” and the camera swings from the two Jennifers, Jenny and Jen X, who are tangled up together painting each other’s toes, to me at the sink.

There was a lot of blood. It pooled on the cutting board, all around the limes, and dripped into the sink when I picked up my hand, splashed on the floor before Teena and Stacey finally got a towel around my finger. They started pushing me to sit down on the floor, then as the blood soaked through the towel Teena turned white and lurched up to puke in the sink. She never has been able to stand the sight of blood, plus she’d already had at least two margaritas by then and nothing to eat except some cantaloupe. Stacey was a lot more help. She crouched in front of me, cussing and wrapping the towel tight.

“Alright, Baby,” she said, “I’m gonna squeeze your finger and it’s gonna hurt so scream good for the cameras, okay?” She did, and it did, but I didn’t scream. I closed my eyes and bit my lip and listened to Stacey shouting for Dom, the security guy who was supposed to be on call all the time. My lip tasted like raspberry candy, although it was only lipgloss.
It’s true that I’d had a margarita, but only one. And I’d eaten a bowl of cereal with my melon for breakfast. There were more kinds of cereal in that closet than I’d ever seen except at the grocery store and I’d been trying a different kind every morning for the past two weeks just because I could. The fact that it was Episode Five probably makes you think we’d only been in the house five days. But that’s not how it worked. Each episode covered at least two days, for one thing. You’ll see that if you go back and watch; they do that time-lapse thing with the sky to show the sun setting or the moon moving from one side of the roof to the other before they pick up the scene again. And there were days in between when we weren’t filming at all, except for the cameras that were always on in case some girl decided to do something really outrageous.

So we’d been there a couple of weeks and I’d learned that I loved Cracklin’ Oat Bran and didn’t love drinking all day. I did it just for show, making a really weak drink and then sipping it when I thought the camera might be on me.

I didn’t cut my finger because I was drunk. I know it looks like I’m drunk. I’m pale and swaying before Stacey and Teena get me down and then the camera cuts quick to a margarita glass on the counter with a lip print on the edge. But it’s not even my glass. I’ve watched the clip because I wanted to know if you could hear Teena talking right before I cut myself. That’s why my knife slipped, because while Jenny and Jen X were front and center doing their nails, Teena was sitting on the blue velvet sectional sofa in the living room telling the other girls about Daddy dying.

“My God, Teena,” Stacey said, “your Daddy just died? Like, just recently?”

“Yeah,” Teena said. “Two months ago.”

“That’s terrible,” Rose said. “I’m so sorry. Were you close?”
“Well,” Teena said, “I’ve been away at school for the last couple of years, but yeah, we were. I mean, since our mother died a long time ago, he was our only parent, you know?”

“Was it sudden?”

“No.”

That’s the moment when I tensed, the knife rocking over the curved body of the lime. I brought my finger in to steady the lime.

“It was awful,” Teena said. “He had cancer and they caught it too late, it was all through him by then and it ate him up from the inside. Just watching it, watching him get worse every day—”

And the blade descended, hard and fast, like if I did it right I could cut her off, which, if you think about it, I did. She stopped talking about Daddy and ran over to wrap my finger and then puke up chunks of melon in the sink. When she finished retching she curled up on the floor next to me and started to cry. I held my hand up in the air like Stacey told me to, high over my head, and wrapped my other arm around my sister. I could feel the pulse beating in my finger and I concentrated on that until Dom came in and took me to the emergency room.

The cameras didn’t follow me there, not because they couldn’t, but because the producers figured it wouldn’t be that interesting. It wasn’t. I got 10 stitches in my index finger, a prescription for painkillers, and a fat white bandage that weighed my whole hand down. When I was done, Dom helped me into the back seat of the Range Rover and I dozed off, breathing in the warm smell of the leather seats that reminded me of Jess himself, of the smell of his sweat after he’d been drinking bourbon all night. I didn’t want to like that smell, but I did.

None of this is surprising you too much, right, if you watched Rock’n Romance? I come across as ambivalent from the very first episode. There’s even a face-to-the-camera shot of Jess
in his favorite cowboy hat, the one with the silver rope chain around the base, thinking maybe he needs to send me home because I don’t seem to want to be there. But then he gives two reasons he’s not sending me home. One is my ass and the other is my sister, who is my identical twin. Teena and me competing for the affections of Jess Montero makes for great TV. Jess Montero fantasizing about him and Teena and me in bed together also makes for great TV. So I didn’t get cut until the episode I already mentioned, Episode Five. If you watched the show, you probably think I drank too much, cut myself, drank too much again, then blew my chance with Jess Montero by going into his bedroom and attacking him when I was supposed to be doing my best to seduce him. There’s footage of that, of course, my big crash-and-burn send-off. They didn’t even do an elimination ceremony because they already had the shot of me getting carted out of Jess’ room with my hands over my face and Jess screaming from the doorway—“That fucking little bitch never sets foot in this room again ever, not ever, do you fucking hear me, Dom? Get her the fuck out of here now!” A lot of that got censored on the air but it’s on the DVD.

You already know that Teena didn’t leave the show when I did, which the producers manage to spin into a “will-she-or-won’t-she” sub-plot in Episode Six. You see a lot of Teena sitting by herself and staring at my empty bed, and a few conversations between her and the other girls where they speculate about what actually happened in Jess’ room that night. Then there’s the challenge in which the girls all have to be the back-up dancers at a reunion show that Jess is doing with Gotham and Teena blows all the other girls away. I could have told them that she would.

In the confessional talks to the camera that all the girls do right before the Episode Six elimination, Tara says that Teena’s doomed to go because without me she’s not interesting enough to tempt Jess. Missy says she thinks Teena should leave but then can’t explain why.
Onscreen it looks like she notices a split end in the piece of hair that she’s twirling and gets too obsessed with picking it apart to talk anymore. Teena’s interview is clearly done right after the dancing challenge. She’s flushed and shiny and still wearing the dark red halter top that she has on while she dances. And she says that she misses me a lot, that she knows I didn’t do anything wrong, whatever happened in Jess’ room.

Did you think Teena was going to win? For a while I thought she might. Then after I got kicked off and I was back home packing up the house to sell, I didn’t hear from her for weeks because they were still filming and part of the deal I signed was that she couldn’t contact me until she left the house too. And the more time passed the more convinced I became that the next time I talked to Teena she’d be lying across Jess Montero’s bed wearing white bikini bottoms and her orange Miami University t-shirt.

“Guess what,” she’d say as soon as I picked up the phone.

And when I guessed right—“you’re Jess Montero’s girlfriend now”—she’d sigh.

“You could pretend to be excited, you know.”

I got so used to imagining this conversation that when Teena called to say she’d been eliminated at the end of Episode Eleven, leaving only Stacey and Tara behind, I was so surprised I dropped the phone. I had it wedged against my shoulder while I wrapped my collection of glass animals in bubble wrap and it slipped down and broke the leg off a fawn with a butterfly on his nose.

In the first episode of Rock’n Romance, when Jess picks me and Teena to stay in the house, he says we remind him of Salma Hayek, both tiny and curvy, with dark curly hair and dark eyes. He touches our cheeks as we look up at him and we both blush and look down, which is mostly all I could ever do when he was in the room. Neither one of us tells him that our
mother was Portuguese, not Latina. That’s why she named us Teena and Marie, which is a joke, right—that we’re named after the R&B singer Teena Marie. She’s part-Portuguese too, even wrote a song called “Portuguese Love” for one of her big albums back in the 80’s. Mama was convinced that she was having a girl from the get-go and was absolutely determined to name her Teena Marie. She loved Teena Marie. Then she found out she was having twins the same day as Teena’s album *Emerald City* came out and our fate was sealed. They don’t make a big deal about it on the show, because I think the producers figured the people watching wouldn’t even know who Teena Marie was. They just linger on the cuteness long enough to set up Jess thinking about having us both in his bed at the same time.

You also see us make a big deal on the show of how we both graduated from college just before we auditioned. A lot of the other girls hadn’t been to school at all and Teena, especially, got pissed-off when she got lumped in with the “stripper” faction, the rest of whom were older girls who loved Jess from his days playing guitar for Gotham. Teena had worked as a stripper for the past couple of years, but that was to pay for school. She was a speech pathology major and if she could have made $400 a day working in an elementary school in Coral Gables, Florida, she would have.

I was on my way to graduating with a double major too, in Psych and Spanish, but I scrapped the last few classes of the Spanish major when Daddy got sick. That was just last Christmas, right before Teena and I were starting our last semesters in college. Daddy told us everything all at once the day after Christmas, the three of us sitting around in the family room with no lights on except the ones on the tree, which kept blinking on and off, first the colored strings, then the white lights, color, white, color, white. When he was done talking I got up and unplugged the lights and we sat there a while longer not saying anything. It had started out as prostate cancer but he hadn’t gone to the doctor so now it was in his groin and in his bones and
in his lungs and there wasn’t anything to do, his doctor said, beyond pain management. He had a couple of months and he wanted to spend them in his own bed.

“Can’t see the point in packing up and going to some ‘home’ just to lie there and die,” Daddy said. He blew on his coffee, ruffling the thick gray hairs of his mustache, and took a sip. “I’d rather be in my own damn bed with my own remote, now that I finally figured the stupid thing out. Hell, now I can even watch movies.”

Teena and I had pooled our money to buy him a DVD player for Christmas. I’m not sure if this is true but I think when Daddy said that we all looked over at it, still in the box. I felt bad, like we’d somehow hurt him by getting him this thing that would make dying in bed that much easier.

Not that it was easy at all, Teena got that right. It was awful. She told the other girls that Daddy got eaten up from the inside but it looked to me more like he just lay there and rotted. And I would know, because I was the one who took care of him until he died in May. Not Teena. She went back to school in Miami, earned another couple grand dancing, flew up over spring break and left after two days because she couldn’t stand being in the house. There was a smell by then, the smell of Daddy’s urine and his shit and vomit and his skin and hair that were always greasy because I couldn’t do much more than wipe him clean while he was lying in bed. The sheepskin pads that the home-visit nurse gave me to put against his bedsores had an odor like a wet blanket just drying out. Even some of the equipment smelled bad, a thick metallic smell like gasoline or hot tar.

“I’m sorry,” Teena whispered when she left. “I’m sorry, Marie, but I can’t do this. I just—I can’t. I don’t know how you can stand it.” She was standing in the driveway when she said this; I was leaning against the frame of the front door. I’d said I would do it, I would stay with him. It was the only thing that made sense. If I dropped my Spanish major and my plans to
do an honors thesis, I was done. It was just a matter of filling out paperwork and requesting my diploma in the mail. And all my friends were close by enough that I could still see them, though I didn’t. Teena, on the other hand, had an internship to finish for her major or she wouldn’t graduate. And she was making way more money dancing at Aladdin’s than I was doing the billing for a dental practice. The day after Daddy told us we talked about it in our room and I said I’d stay. Teena’s eyes filled with tears and she hugged me quick, one of her tight, urgent hugs that re-established our sameness, that we were both the same size, the same weight, the same person with the same small body and the same wiry strength underneath.

But then four months later she stood in the driveway and told me she was leaving, couldn’t even give me a week, not even the day I’d planned—the very next day—to get out of the house and go shopping, get my nails done, get my hair cut, while she stayed with Daddy. She wiped her eyes and looked over her shoulder at the taxi idling at the curb and said, “I’m so sorry.” Then she went to hug me and I pushed her away and went back in the house and shut the door. Fuck her, I thought, though I didn’t say it—“Fuck you, Teena”—hating my twin sister for the first time in my entire life and knowing that we’d never feel the same again.

The distance between us was like a black dog in the house when she came back for the funeral. We stepped over it on the rug, skirted around it in the kitchen making meals, tripped on it when we passed each other on the stairs and had to grab onto the loose banister for support. Teena’s solution was the show: Rock’n Romance. We had a poster up in our room of Jess Montero from when Absinthe, his first solo album, hit and made him a star all over again. Daddy was horrified, threatened to take it down as soon as he saw it. Teena pointed out that Daddy had a bunch of Gotham albums himself but he said that was different and we were much too young to have a picture of a half-naked man hanging in our room for Chrissakes. But Mama was still alive then and she looked at the poster, her head cocked to one side, and smiled.
“He was a pretty boy,” she said. “Now look at him. I always loved those eyes of his.”

Jess still has those eyes, which I guess you’d really call just gray, with stripes of white and black in them that you can only see up close. When the light hits those eyes they glitter like silver in his tanned face, under black lashes that are just ridiculous on a man. He doesn’t take his shirt off for the camera anymore though, not like he did for that poster, where he’s sprawled on a dark wood throne with his booted feet up over the arm, black cowboy hat on his head and his hair loose on his bare shoulders. There are candles on the floor and in candelabras around the chair and Jess is holding a glass of neon green liquid. The light from the candle flames and from the liquid in the glass reflects off Jess’ chest, makes his skin glow and shows off the shadowy ridges of muscle along his ribs and across his belly.

Teena printed out the information about the show—how to sign up, what to send in, everything—a week or two after Daddy died. She slid it across the table to me at breakfast.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” I said.


“It’s a reality show about trying to date a rock star.”

“But we’d get to meet him, stay in his house. We’d get tons of free stuff, eat at nice restaurants, go out dancing—”

“Teena,” I said, “the only dancing they’re going to want girls to do on this show is on a stripper pole or on Jess Montero’s penis.”

She giggled and took a bite of toast.

“Are you seriously saying that you’d date Jess Montero?”

She looked at me. “Are you seriously saying you’d turn him down?”

We’d taken that poster down a long time ago, but it was hard to forget those eyes. Or those ab muscles, or that long black hair. It always looked clean, too. I used to imagine that
Jess’ hair smelled like cinnamon, which it doesn’t. It smells like cigarette smoke and leather and spearmint shampoo.

“If you want to do it, do it,” I said. “I promise to watch faithfully and cheer you on.”

“I can’t do it without you,” she said. “Come on, Marie. Think about it. I don’t have fake boobs or tattoos or any kind of rock-star associations.”

“You’re not even blond.”

“Exactly. But I am an identical twin. That’s our hook right there. If I apply by myself I won’t get a second look, I know it. But if we both do it—”

“I can’t believe you’ve thought about this as much as you have. Even half as much as you have.” I took my empty cereal bowl to the sink and rinsed it out. “You’re kind of scaring me, Tee. Are you sure your grief hasn’t unhinged you?”

I said things like that to her after Daddy died. Mean things that made it sound like I didn’t care that he was dead or that she didn’t care that he was dead. I kicked the distance between us at her every chance I got because every morning when I woke up it took me five minutes to realize that he was gone, that I didn’t have to empty any bed pans today. Then I felt relief so pure that it was a kind of happiness all on its own. I blamed Teena for that.

She sat at the kitchen table and pressed her finger into her toast, mashing crumbs off it like black ash.

“I don’t know what else to do,” she said. “But you’re still mad at me—”

“I’m not mad at you.”

“Don’t lie,” she said wearily. “That just makes it worse. I’m trying to tell you something and I used to know that you’d understand but now you don’t. I saw the ad for this show and I felt—excited, actually excited, and I know it’ll be stupid and there’ll be all these girls with weird piercings but I feel like it’s something we could do. Together. We used to love Jess so much.”
“We were kids, Tee,” I said. “We were like 15, for Godsake.”

I started wiping the counter down. She brought her plate over and left it in the sink and went upstairs.

So why did I do it? How did we get from there to the Montero mansion? Blame my daddy. The same day that Teena showed me the papers about the show I pushed them aside and sat back down at the kitchen table to call and check on Daddy’s life insurance policy. It wasn’t going to be much, I knew, not enough to set Teena and me up anywhere or keep us from having to sell the house, anything like that. But it would be something. I punched in his social security number and his i.d. number with the phone company, which is where he’d worked all his life, and got connected to a woman with a high, twangy voice. She verified all my information, said she’d received the copy of the death certificate that I’d sent and that the check was in the mail.

“Shouldn’t there be two checks?” I asked. “Are we supposed to divide it ourselves?”

“There’s only one beneficiary on this policy,” she said. “Isn’t that you?”

I didn’t answer right away and she asked, “Aren’t you his daughter Marie, same last name?”

“Yes. But the policy has both me and my sister on it. Her name is Teena, t-e-e-n-a.”

“Hold on.”

I held on, staring at a picture of Jess Montero’s face, haloed by a green glow.

“Okay,” the woman said. “Originally the policy listed you and your sister as equal share beneficiaries, 50-50. But he called on this a couple of months ago, back in March it looks like, and had it changed. You’re the only beneficiary now.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure. It’s right here on the computer screen in front of me.”
I remembered that. Daddy asked for the folder with all his paperwork in it, including this policy, and then wrestled the phone onto his lap and made me leave the room. A few days later when I read off the return addresses of the mail to him, he told me to give him one letter—it must have been the one with the policy change form in it—and didn’t let me open it for him. Then he had me mail it back later that day. It didn’t even need a stamp. When I took it back I said, “I’m out of stamps, Daddy. I’ll mail this next time I get some at the grocery store,” and he got mad.

“Doesn’t need a stamp, can’t you see that?” he snapped. “Got one of those automatic postage-paid things in the corner. Just put it in the mailbox, girl, like I asked you to.”

So that’s what he’d done. Made me the sole beneficiary on a $50,000 life-insurance policy. When the packet came in the mail I didn’t tell Teena. I opened it up and stared at it for a long time, this letter explaining that an account had been set up in my name with the money in it and that a checkbook was enclosed that I could use to write checks on that account. I could take the whole thing out in one lump sum if I wanted to, put it into my regular savings account at the bank. I could also write a check to Teena for $25,000. I could do it that day.

But I didn’t do anything. I put the letter and the checkbook in the top drawer of my desk and waited a week for a decision to come easy: give Teena her share or don’t give Teena her share. When nothing came at all, when I still woke up suffocating and then relieved and then angry and sad every morning, I told her I’d go on *Rock’n Romance* with her. I thought I’d do the show, get eliminated early, and come home to claim the life insurance money without feeling guilty. I knew Daddy thought I’d earned it already.

I went on the show for Teena, for me and Teena, to try to get our twin-ness back somehow by proclaiming it, by working it. And we did have fun working it. We could hug each
other, after all, and it wasn’t creepy like it was when the Jennifers hugged, or scary like when Dylan and Scarlet would do each other’s eye-liner, standing so close they looked like they might catch each other on their piercings. Teena and I swapped clothes and pretended to be one another and tricked Jess one night early on so that he ended up making out with me twice when he thought he was kissing first me, then Teena.

That’s in the third episode, the one where we win the challenge to create a drink for Jess. We have 30 minutes to do it and it’s pure chaos, girls screaming for a turn at the blender or a hit of the Midori or Pernod so the drink will look like Absinthe. And there’s me and Teena off to the side, behind the rows of bottles. Teena takes one look around the kitchen and whispers “nothing green” and we go the other direction, make him a “Double Gotham” with two kinds of bourbon, two kinds of vermouth, and two cherries on a swizzle stick. He takes the two of us out to dinner as our prize. Jess catches me as I’m getting out of the limo, after Teena’s already gotten out, and tugs me back in to kiss him, which I do, just melting right into him. I almost knock his hat off, reaching up to touch his face, and he has to re-settle it.

Then later, we’re back at the house heading for the hot tub and he stops Teena—at least, he thinks it’s Teena—and says, “I haven’t tasted those sweet lips yet tonight, have I?” and kisses her. Only it’s me. I think you can tell it’s me because I melt into him again in exactly the same way as I do in the limo. But of course, to most people Teena and I look so much alike that maybe the melting looks alike too.

Once we’re in the hot tub and Jess has an arm around each of us, I tell him that he owes Teena a kiss—I cringe at that scene when I see it now. I’m walking my fingers over his chest and up his neck to his ear and smiling like one of those girls I hate, the ones whose lip gloss is always shiny and whose nails are always fake. I can’t even really explain that look except that it seemed then like I’d figured out how to solve all my problems, not just the little problem of Jess.
having mistaken me for Teena. It seemed like that was just the same as what Daddy had done and the solution would be just as easy. I would tell Jess the truth and he would kiss Teena, which he did, and she wouldn’t even think to be mad at me for getting kissed twice. And later, when this was over and we got home, I’d give her some of the insurance money but maybe ask if I could keep more than half, like maybe two-thirds, since I hadn’t been earning anything those last few months. And she’d smile and say of course and not think about how Daddy had changed the policy and deliberately left her out, or about how long I’d had that money and not told her about it.

But it’s right about then on the show, on that episode, that things get complicated. Because I went on the show for Teena but I wanted to stay for Jess.

At first it was his eyes, and how they were the same as they’d been in that poster, the eyes that had made my mother smile at me, woman-to-woman, only a few months before she died. It’s the only smile like that I remember from her. Then when Jess pulled me onto his lap the first night and said I was no bigger than a doll, it was the feel of his body, hot and sinewy. And his smell. He smelled so strongly of so many things, of cigarettes and mint and leather and clean sweat, that I knew he could make me forget the way the house had smelled, the way I had smelled, the last six months. He looked older than I’d pictured him, of course, with lines fanning out around his eyes and bracing his mouth. And like I said, he didn’t take his shirt off in front of us, or his hat.

I thought I’d reconciled the two Jess Monteros, the one in my head and the real man. By the end of Episode Four I thought I’d figured out how much of him was fantasy and how much of him was reality and that I still wanted him. It didn’t even matter to me then that Teena and I were actually competing for him. All through the filming of the fourth episode I watched her whenever Jess was around and I decided she didn’t really care. She flirted with him and kissed
him when he kissed her, but she would catch my eye afterwards and wink, or sometimes even let him go by her without reaching out to touch him. She didn’t melt, not like I did, not that I could see.

The other thing is that even though I wanted Jess, I never really believed that I’d come out of the show as his girlfriend. I couldn’t think that far ahead, couldn’t imagine what a relationship with him would be like without all the other girls around. It was the time of the actual filming that mattered to me. Every day in that house was a day filled with girls and the smells of girls instead of the smells of a sick man. Every day in that house was a day near Jess, a day that canceled out another, earlier day that had started with me mixing Cetaphil into a basin of warm water and dabbing it gently on my daddy’s back and over his fleshless butt, where twin pressure sores had risen and cracked open, despite all my careful efforts to reposition him in the bed.

And then we got up on the morning we were down to eight and we made margaritas to celebrate. I had Chocolate Special K for breakfast and while I was cutting the limes I was thinking that it was time to stop compulsively trying new cereals when I knew that all I really wanted every morning was Cracklin’ Oat Bran. When Teena started talking I could tell where she was going before she got there, which is why I had to cut her off. It wasn’t just that she was lying, it was the reason she was lying, the only reason I could think of: that I’d read her wrong and she did want Jess for herself, wanted him bad enough to play the sympathy card for the camera. And now what the fuck was I going to do?

When I woke up in the back of the Range Rover, it was nearly three o’clock in the afternoon. Jess had been out to lunch with Rose, who’d won the challenge the day before. The
rest of the girls were in the living room watching *Pretty Woman* on Jess’s enormous TV. Teena jumped up when she saw me and Stacey pressed pause on the remote.

“Oh, God, Marie, are you okay?” Teena asked. “Your poor hand—how are you supposed to take a shower?”

“They said to just wrap a plastic bag around my hand,” I said. “I can take the bandage off in a couple of days.”

“Does it hurt?” Missy asked.

“Not so much anymore,” I said. “What’s going on?”

“Sit, sit,” Stacey said, “let us tell you the news. He’s out with Rose right now, right? But when they get back, he’s going to pick someone to go up to his room with him alone.”

“How’s he picking?”

“He wouldn’t say,” Jenny sighed. “Just that we shouldn’t stress out because we’d already done whatever it was that was going to get us picked.”

“I don’t get it.”

“I think it’s supposed to be a mystery,” Stacey said.

“And then one of us stays in his room all night?”

“I don’t think so. Maybe. For an hour at least.”

“The cameras will still be on,” Jen X said. “I mean, not like we should let that stop us or anything.”

Tara and Missy giggled.

“Can we start the movie again?” Jen X asked. “I’m glad you’re okay, Marie.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I think I’m going to go upstairs and try to get cleaned up.”

“And then one of us stays in his room all night?”

“Do you want some help?” Teena asked.

“No,” I said. “I got it.”
I brushed my teeth, wrapped plastic wrap around my hand, then took a shower. When I got out, I put on a red sundress that I hadn’t worn yet. Without even talking about it, Teena and I had been avoiding wearing the same colors and she’d gotten red as “her” color, while I’d been doing more black and some blue. But of course, red looks just as good on me as it does on her.

When I came downstairs, Teena looked me over and I thought I saw her eyes narrow, but then she got up and came over to try to help me again, get me something to drink, make me a sandwich, whatever. I let her get me a glass of iced tea and some more fruit. I didn’t want to eat too much in case we had to do something really active for Jess, and I didn’t want to eat anything that would make my breath smell bad in case I got a chance to kiss him.

I sat down with a bowl of strawberries in my lap and watched the end of the movie with everyone else. Then Jess and Rose came home and the cameras swarmed after them into the room and we all sat up straighter and waited for Jess to tell us what was happening next.

You already know this part too. I thought it was a pretty nice twist, and a lot less embarrassing than some of the other challenges. The producers had given Jess copies of something that we’d all had to write once we made it to the final cut to get on the show, a page explaining which of his songs, solo or with Gotham, was our favorite and why. He sat down on the slab of stone in front of the fireplace and put one booted foot up while he shuffled through the papers. He was wearing a cowboy hat dipped low onto his forehead. He told us how much he’d enjoyed reading them, all of them, but how there was one that just stuck out for him because “the song this girl picked is one of my own personal favorites, maybe my favorite song that I ever wrote” and I knew he meant me. He had to. I’d written about “The Gods Wept,” which is off Absinthe.

By then, I’ll be honest, I didn’t even remember what I’d said about it. I did love that song, I loved his voice in that song and how he made it break at the end. After he’d picked me,
though, he handed me back my essay and Dom led me into a back room in the house where the producer on set, her name was Rafaela, had me read it into a mike. When you watch the episode you can see why: they dub me reading over the next scene, which shows me getting ready to go to Jess’ room and all the other girls drifting off to sulk or bitch about me or, in Missy’s case, cry into her pillow.

I wrote about how my mother had died not long before that song came out, how listening to that album was the first thing that made me feel like I might really be okay, how Teena and I used to put it on before we went to bed, how I’d felt safe enough, embraced by Jess Montero’s voice in the dark, to cry for my mom. When Rafaela had me read it that day, I felt strange hearing my own words echo in the room, but mostly I think because I was so nervous knowing Jess had read them, so worried about what was going to happen next.

Now when I watch that episode what I notice is how far back I reached to find that song and all the feelings I had once had about it. I hadn’t even listened to the album in years when I wrote the application. When I thought of “The Gods Wept” I had to find Absinthe in my CD collection and play it again to remember what it sounded like. I wrote about Mama dying, not Daddy, about a past so far away it hadn’t hurt me in years, didn’t hurt me even when I dug it up.

I wore my red sundress to Jess’ room, twisted my hair up loose on top of my head so half of the curls spilled down my neck, put Victoria’s Secret perfume in between my breasts and behind my knees. I didn’t wear shoes, because I’d just done my toenails the other day and they still looked pretty, and I was remembering how Jess had cuddled me close that one night and called me a doll. Jess was in the bathroom when I got there so I stood in the middle of the room clenching my toes in the thick white carpet and trying not to look at the camera in the corner, which was angled to get a perfect view of the bed.
The beginning of this scene is on tape. Well, all of it’s on tape somewhere, but the beginning is on the show: Jess coming out of the bathroom with his hat still low over his eyes and his jeans unbuttoned and his feet bare. He flops down on the bed, tips the hat back, and beckons to me.

“Come ‘ere, Sweet Marie. Let’s have a look at you.”

And I go closer, put my hand in his, let him pull me down onto the bed, sit while he runs his hand down the side of my body from shoulder to wrist, then from under my arm to my hip.

“I heard you had a little accident this morning,” he says. “Your hand doing alright?”

I nod. “It’s fine.”

“Lemme see,” he says, and grabs my hand and kisses it. That was the first moment I knew something was wrong, though you can’t see it yet on the film because my back is to the camera. But his face when he kissed my palm had no expression on it at all and I realized that he wasn’t looking at my face when he talked to me. When he put my hand down he let it drop and it would have hurt my finger again if I hadn’t brought it up and put it carefully back by my side.

“So,” he says then, “I’ve been thinking about your kisses. How about some more of those now, huh? And then we’ll talk. I gotta get to know you better, Sweet Marie. Gotta know what’s inside that gorgeous head of yours—take down your hair.”

So I do. Then he tugs again, on my hurt hand, and I lean forward and kiss him.

His breath was awful, nothing like it had been the other times. He tasted like garlic and sausage and I almost gagged. If you watch you can see me start to pull away and how his hand comes up to pull me back. He stuck his tongue in my mouth and kissed me hard while I tried to kiss him back, not to gag, and then he picked up my right hand, which was bracing me on the bed, and put it right inside his jeans.
Yeah. That’s on tape. The moment he did it though, the way he did it, so that my hand wouldn’t touch him anywhere but right on his crotch, I knew suddenly that he didn’t want me to feel his belly. I knew he’d gone soft there. I tried not to think about it. On the show it doesn’t look like I’m anything but into it still, my hand flattening out under his open fly, searching for his cock.

It was also soft. Totally soft and hanging down inside his briefs so that I had to pick it up and slide it around to even begin to try to make him hard. And all the while I did that he kept kissing me, one hand squeezing my breast harder than I like, while I balanced my weight on my left hand and felt the bandage push my index finger up at an awkward angle.

After a couple of minutes went by and he still wasn’t getting hard, he grunted, “fuck”—the mikes in the room don’t pick that up—and then he sat up and pulled me to straddle him and said, louder, “How would you feel about getting your sister in here right now? Would that make you hot?”

That’s when I jump off him, scramble backwards right off the bed and, because part of my skirt is caught under his leg, fall on my ass on the floor. It’s an ugly-looking, awkward fall, too, because I’m trying not to catch my weight on my left hand or expose myself to the cameras because I’ve got only a thong on and a sudden horror of everyone knowing that. So I go down like I’m drunk, I can see how it looks like that, all flailing elbows and splayed legs and a shriek of dismay.

The next thing you see on the show is the doorway of the room as they cut to a different camera, while you hear talking, then shouting and cussing inside. The sound is fuzzed so you can’t make out the words themselves, then Jess shouts for Dom and he comes up so close to the hallway camera that he almost takes it out, charges into the room, and comes out with me in his
arms, my hands over my face. In the interview afterwards, Jess is still in the same clothes, looking shaken, shaking his head while he takes the blame for my “freak out.”

“I shouldn’t have suggested bringing Teena into the room,” he says. He rubs his hand over his face. “I just, God, I was just going with the vibe that those two had been feeding me all this time and she just lost it. Started screaming about how she’d kill her sister before she’d let her touch me, how she didn’t come here to share with her bitch sister.”

He breaks off and looks pained at having to say those words. Because of course he didn’t say them, he’s just quoting me.

This is what happened. I fell off the bed and rolled over into a crouch to get up. Jess’ hat had come off and his hairline, like a lightning bolt in white and black, started halfway back on his scalp. He looked so different that I just stared at him while he fumbled for his hat and put it back on.

“What the fuck are you staring at?” he said. “The fuck is wrong with you?”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I just didn’t—”

He looked over at the cameras like he was just remembering them. “Are you drunk?”

“No.”

“Jesus.” He swung his legs off the bed and put his head in his hands. “What a fucking disaster.”

I felt him slipping away then and I stood up and touched his shoulder. “I’m sorry, I’m really sorry, please—don’t make me go.”

He shrugged my hand off.

“Get out of here.”
“But—but we didn’t even talk yet.” I could hear myself, my voice trembling like a little girl’s, but I couldn’t stop it. “You said we could get to know each other better.”

“Yeah, well,” he laughed. “You certainly got to know me better tonight, didn’t you, Miss Marie? Gonna go tell the others that I couldn’t get it up? That I wear my trusty hat to hide a dirty little secret?”

“No. I won’t tell anyone anything.”

“Good,” he said. “Because if you do I’ll tell them all that you just couldn’t stand sharing me with your sister, that I told you I wanted her more than I wanted you.”

I looked down at him, sitting slumped over on the bed. I could see the paunch now that I hadn’t wanted to notice before. And I could picture him the way he looked without his hat on, still handsome in a bony, striking way, but old and brittle. The glossy black hair hanging down on either side of his face emphasized the heavy ridge along his brow bone.

“I won’t say anything,” I whispered. “Please, Jess. I don’t care. You can leave your hat on. I like it, it’s sexy—”

“Shut up,” he said. “Don’t fucking talk to me like that. You think that turns me on?”

He lifted his head and looked at me out of those silver eyes like I was disgusting.

“No,” I said. “I don’t think anything turns you on. Not me, not Teena, not any of these other girls.” He stood up, towering over me, and I took a step back.

“I thought you were amazing,” I said. “I would have gone on thinking that if you’d just brushed your fucking teeth and been gentle to me. But you couldn’t even be bothered and now I think you’re creepy and pathetic and—”

I could have kept going but that was enough. He hauled off and hit me in the mouth with his fist, grabbed my hair when I fell backwards and hit me again, while the camera man shouted, “Christ, Jess, fucking Christ man, these things are rolling” and Rafaela’s voice crackled over the
walkie-talkie on the camera man’s belt demanding to know what was going on. I went down on the floor with my face in my hands, bleeding for the second time that day, this time from my lips, both of which Jess had managed to split courtesy of the heavy silver rings he wore.

I signed a confidentiality agreement with Rafaela that same day, back in the same hospital. They stitched up my face, replaced the bloody bandage on my finger with a new one, and gave me a massive ice pack to hold to my mouth. Rafaela offered me $100,000 to leave quietly that night—my bags, she assured me, were already packed and waiting—and allow the show to write me off as simply eliminated. I was not to talk to anyone about what had actually transpired between me and Jess, not to grant any media interviews or talk to Teena until she was off the show, or to appear in public until my face was healed.

I told her I wanted $200,000. She went out into the hallway to make a call on her cell phone, then came back in a minute later, crossed out the number $100,000 on the agreement and wrote $200,000 in its place. I said I wanted it in my bank account by the end of the week and she waved her hand in the air impatiently and looked pointedly at the pen. So I picked it up and signed, took my copy, and went out to the car.

But you, of course, will want to know why. I probably could have gotten more. I could have called a lawyer, for one thing, and dragged it out by threatening to call a press conference in the hospital that night. But $200,000 is more money than I ever thought I’d have in my life and this time it’s all mine. When I got home the next day, the first thing I did was pull the checkbook from the insurance company out of the drawer and write Teena a check for $25,000, her half of Daddy’s life insurance policy. I put it on her pillow even though I knew she wouldn’t be home for weeks—maybe not ever if she won—and then I started packing.
I’m working at the dentist’s office again, which doesn’t pay much but with the money I have in the bank it’s plenty. I’ve been talking to a lady at the university about taking some classes to finish my Spanish major. She says it’s probably too late but she’s looking into it.

And no, I wasn’t worried about leaving Teena alone with Jess after what he did to me. I knew he wouldn’t hurt her. Teena knows how to protect herself, for one thing. I should have figured that out when she went back to Florida last winter and left me here with Daddy, but I didn’t get it until I heard her telling Stacey and Rose about how he died. She was going to have it all, the internship and the honors degree and the life without knowing what it feels like to live in the house with death, and the sob story to top it all off.

The other reason I never worried about Teena, the same reason I didn’t push for more money, is that I know I asked for it. Just wait—I know how that sounds. I also know none of what happened was my fault, not that I couldn’t get him hard or that I saw him without his rock and roll armor on.

But I wanted Jess Montero to hit me. When he looked up at me with disgust shining hard and slippery in his eyes he reminded me of Daddy. It was the same look Daddy had in his eyes the first morning he hadn’t been able to make it to the bathroom and he’d messed the bed. I walked in and took a step back from the smell and when I saw that look in his eyes I knew that he hated me for knowing that this had happened to him, for seeing him like this, and he’d never be able to forget.

I saw that he wanted to hit me in the face with every ounce of strength he used to have, my daddy who’d never hit us in his life, and I stepped into the room and said, “Christ, Daddy, your whole room smells like a shit house. Christ.”

I was as cruel to him as I knew how to be because I couldn’t stand for him to hate me and I watched the rage and the power drain out of his face as I yanked the sheet off of him. Tears ran
out of the corners of his eyes and into his hair and when he looked at me again he was an old man, pleading.

“I’m sorry, Marie,” he said. “I couldn’t—”

“Shut up,” I said. “Just shut up and let me clean you up.”

I should have left him with his hate, with his impotent, seething rage that reminded us both who he was, that he was my daddy and I shouldn’t have ever seen him that way. But I took it from him. So when Jess Montero looked at me with that same hate in his eyes—all because I saw that he was losing his hair and he had let his belly flop over his belt—I gave him every bit of his hate. I asked for it. And afterwards, I felt better.
Jeanette Leaves Her Recipes

The scent of tarragon-mushroom soup drives her from the kitchen. It is her own recipe, honed over the course of several months one winter when her children were little, and the mingled fragrances it emits as it cooks—of sharp green leaves and the damp earth they grow in—recalls her to that first tiny kitchen. She chopped and stirred and tasted while the children colored on pads of paper in the middle of the floor. They were always underfoot, but she never once let either of them get burned.

They still live close by, Neal and his family in the suburbs and Catriona on the other side of the city. And Neal and his wife are bringing the boys for dinner tonight, braving a driving rainstorm that has not let up all day. It is the perfect weather for her mushroom soup, served with sourdough bread and a green salad—which reminds her that she still needs to whisk together the vinaigrette. But she can’t bring herself to go back into the kitchen. Instead, she sits on the edge of a chair in her office with her head between her knees.

Her office is a retreat now in more ways than one, because it is around a corner and down the hall from the kitchen. Cooking smells have a hard time finding it. When the nausea thickens in her throat so much that she cannot stand even the faintest whiff of food, she comes in here to wait until it passes.

But it is so hard for her not to think about food. She once loved the idea that her cooking had worked its way into the very woodwork, into the fibers of the furniture, into the rugs. And it has; people sniff appreciatively in the foyer and ask what she’s cooking, even on the rare occasions when she isn’t cooking anything at all. Their eyes shine in anticipation of cinnamon, chocolate, roasted chicken and apples, potatoes mashed with garlic and cheese and—her secret
touch—tangy Greek yogurt. She does not know how to disappoint them, not when she can still work her magic. She is consoled by the knowledge that her gift has not deserted her even though her appetite has.

But she has mornings now when just walking into the kitchen sends her reeling for the sink. She can smell cinnamon, butter, and coffee and she knows that it is a trick of memory, nothing more, because she can still smell the same things if she leaves the kitchen window open all night. They are the memories of twenty years of breakfasts, of muffins dropped into paper cups while the rest of the family showered, of weekend pancake-eating contests, of Cat as a little girl eating cinnamon toast made with rye bread for weeks because her brother dared her to do it.

So she has learned to steel herself for the kitchen, even as she is drawn to it every morning, every day. She spends more time than ever in her office, though even here she is surrounded by food, by the books about food that line the wall. The titles of her own cookbooks tell the story of her life: *Eating Like a King on a Shoestring* was the first one, written when Neal was three, Cat was on the way, and she and Greg were barely scraping by. Then *Kid-licious: Tasty, Nutritious Foods Kids Love*, followed by several low-fat, low-calorie books she turned out at her agent’s insistence, even as she was working on her first bestseller, *A Piece of Cake*.

Her last book, published just two years ago, still astonishes her. It is hard-backed and paper-jacketed, printed on thick glossy paper and full of exquisite color photos. She knew, even before this book was complete, that celebrity cookbook authors had taken the market to a new level, that cookbooks sold as coffee-table books. But she was nonetheless bemused by the whole process, the photo shoots and conferences: how to light her balsamic-glazed strawberry pie, what china pattern set off a mound of her Thai-spiced shrimp salad to best advantage. On the back cover she is depicted slicing into a roasted turkey and smiling at the camera, her head lifted from
her task as if she has been momentarily distracted and delighted by the arrival of some guests. She remembers this photo shoot in particular, because it had never occurred to her that she would get her hair not only cut but colored on the spot, or that a stylist would be on hand with a rack of clothes from which to assemble the perfect “warm, welcoming hostess” outfit.

Reading the recipes makes her feel sick. She pulls the book out and looks at herself, only two years younger. Her hair, side-parted and cut into a soft swoop across her cheek, gleams like silver from the blue rinse the stylist used. The royal blue tunic she is wearing has turned her eyes to lapis. Greg loved this picture. He died of a heart attack last year, the sound of him falling against one of the posts of their heavy bed coming to her in the kitchen as a thump, startling but not alarming, not until he didn’t answer her, not until she went looking for him and found him on the floor, already gray. It was an event that she experienced as a severing, a cleaving, Greg gone, she herself suddenly only half of a whole, sliced open and bleeding grief.

When she got her diagnosis six months ago, her first thought was, Thank God Greg is already gone. Then she thought of the children, of her grandsons, of her sister, of her friends. They would have to watch her die, while she would have time to think about what she might have done wrong or said wrong, what she was leaving undone. Greg had been spared all that.

She began making plans, promises, lists of things she needed to do. At night in her office, as she organized papers and wrote letters, labeled pictures with names and dates no one else would remember, she was reminded of the process of writing a cookbook. It started out as a heap of food-splattered paper, many of the notes indecipherable to anyone else—“Add yog if n brmlk, makes thckr but stl gd.” She would spend days just sorting through the pages, making piles of which dishes absolutely had to go in, which ones wouldn’t make the cut, which ones
might need to be tested once more. Then the sorting again, this time for balance: were there too many dessert recipes? Too many using expensive cuts of meat? Not enough casseroles?

Now the boxes on the office floor are marked “Will,” “Health Insurance,” “House.” She needs to tell Neal about them tonight, show him how she’s organizing things so he knows where to look when the time comes. On the desk are several copies of her living will and DNR directive, all signed and notarized. Her oncologist has one already, but she wants Neal and Cat to have it too. She carries one copy back to the kitchen where she will not forget to give it to Neal tonight. At the sink, she draws a careful breath, hoping to hold the ever-present nausea at bay. She rinses tarragon, chops it fine. The lemon juice stings a paper cut on the inside of her thumb, but the clean dry smell does not bother her. Lemon needs to be combined with butter or sugar to smell like food. Instead it is the rich scent of the olive oil that makes her retch. She fumbles to set the flagon down on the counter, grips the edge of the sink as she vomits, feels the cords in her neck and jaw protest.

Afterwards, she goes into the bathroom for mouthwash. It could be worse, she tells her wan reflection (where are the lapis blue eyes now?) She recalls a magazine profile about one of the glossiest of the celebrity chefs, a woman whose husband had throat cancer, or stomach cancer, something that stole his appetite and his taste buds. By the time he died he could neither chew nor swallow. Even when she first read the piece, before Greg’s death, she could not finish it. She could imagine the panic that poor woman must have felt, how she must have stood in her kitchen day after day, opened her stocked pantry and searched for something to feed her husband. Bread, chewed slowly until it melted on the tongue, or soup, pureed and sipped through a straw, custard allowed to soften on the tip of a spoon: she herself has tried them all, but
at least when she has had to admit defeat, bent over from the waist and gagging on her own best recipes, she has not had to contend with having failed to feed the person she loved most.

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She cannot sit at the table with them for dinner. Neal, Virginia, and the boys eat their meal at the dining room table while she curls up on the sofa in the living room. The two rooms adjoin, and they manage to keep conversation going through to dessert. Neal is sharp with the children, though, which is unlike him. When Ethan spills his milk and Neal’s voice rises, she closes her eyes against the serrated sound of her son’s grief.

“What did you make for dessert, Grandma?” Sebastian wants to know. He is standing right in front of her when she opens her eyes. She smiles at him.

“What do you wish I made?”

“Brownies!”

“They’re in a pan on the counter next to the stove,” she says, and then has to chase him with her voice—“Make sure you get your mother to cut them for you!”

Virginia follows her son into the kitchen and she hears the whispered admonishment that they will eat their dessert in the T.V. room because Daddy has to talk to Grandma for a few minutes. Neal sits on the sofa beside her.

“How are you feeling? Are you eating anything at all?”

“Not really. The doctor says not to expect much, to eat whatever tastes good.”

“And what tastes good?”

Nothing.
“Have you seen the boxes I have going in the office?” she asks him. “I don’t have everything organized perfectly, you understand, but still there’s not going to be too much for you and Virginia and Cat to go through.”

“Mom—” he says, stops, tries again. “Isn’t there anything, doesn’t the pain patch help at all with the nausea and your appetite? You have to eat something.”

She laughs, takes his hand, which is nearly as cold as her own. He is her son, clearly, built like a racing dog, his high narrow shoulders curving in toward his bony knees as he concentrates on her, absently chafes her hand in his. Greg was a big man, not lean and collapsible like Neal.

“You sound like me,” she tells her son, “always trying to get people to eat.”

“I think this is a little different, Mom. I mean—”

“Neal,” she says, “sweetheart, leave it alone.”

She cannot tell him what his plea does to her, how it highlights what she already feels keenly every day, her life sifting out of her like flour from a sieve. She envies Greg, crashing to the floor like a felled tree.

Neal and Virginia pack up to leave an hour later, taking the rest of the meal with them in Tupperware and packages of tinfoil. She holds her grandsons close, though they are sticky with chocolate. The smell makes her mouth feel gritty with a sludge that she quickly gulps back.

Virginia leans down to embrace her—“Don’t get up!”—then stops in the doorway. “Oh, I almost forgot! I meant to ask you—I made a quiche the other day and it came out just awful.”

“What was wrong?”
“Well, I followed the directions exactly. I don’t have your instincts so I always stick close to the recipe, but still it was runny and the filling didn’t fill up the crust. I kept putting it back in the oven and then the crust burned—”

“What size eggs did you use?”

Virginia looks puzzled. “Medium, I think. I always buy medium.”

“Ah. But almost all standard cookbook recipes refer to large eggs. So medium eggs would have produced exactly what you’re describing, a quiche that didn’t set up properly and didn’t have enough volume.”

She sees her daughter-in-law beam, so pleased with the solution that she feels set up—could Virginia really not have known that you always use large eggs?—but after they have gone she tells herself that it doesn’t matter. If Virginia was merely trying to console her by allowing her to prove her usefulness in the world, she is glad to be reminded of it. And if the question was serious, well, what if she’d waited a year to ask it?

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Cat comes over the next weekend, her difficult daughter, big-boned and aggressive even in her beauty, her blunt cheekbones and jaw seemingly designed to point out how interesting a face can be when it is all planes and angles, how much less interesting other faces are in comparison.

She is making chicken enchiladas, one of Cat’s favorites, rolling the tortillas around the filling and marveling at the absence of nausea she feels even as she looks down at the bright green mush of chicken and sauce and cheese. Her fingertips are shiny with oil from the tortillas and the nutty smell of the roasted corn fills her nose when she takes a deep breath. She can handle food again, just in the last few days, so long as she doesn’t put any of it in her mouth.
She is on new medication, she has explained to Cat and Neal, which is true. It is also true that her appetite has declined even further, to the point that her body seems not even to respond to food at all. This is, her doctor said gently at the last appointment, often a sign that it is getting close to the end. She has a hospice nurse already arranged, someone who will come to the house.

“Don’t fry the tortillas too long,” she says. “Did you get a sense of how long I had you holding them in there? Just a few seconds on each side, long enough for them to soften up.”

“I’ll have to use a timer when I do it myself,” Cat says. “Tell me again what’s in the filling.”

“Chicken, enchilada sauce, onions, cheese. You can use leftover chicken, or just buy a pre-cooked one and chop up the meat. That makes it much easier. Do you see how I’m doing this?” She holds a tortilla cupped in her hand, spoons filling into it. “Don’t overfill the tortillas or you’ll have a pan full of mush, and always put them in seam side down, like this.”

“Why are yours so much better than any other enchiladas I’ve ever had?” Cat asks. At her mother’s insistence, she held the tortillas in the hot oil with a pair of tongs, then pulled them out to dry on paper towels. Now Cat is leaning against the counter watching the assembly process, drinking a beer that she brought over with her. “I mean, I know all the ingredients, but aren’t they the same in every enchilada recipe?”

“Not necessarily,” she says. “I use green sauce, not red, and dark meat chicken, which has a richer flavor than white meat. And a lot of American recipes leave out the cotijo cheese because it’s not an ingredient they’re familiar with.”
“Well,” Cat says, “I think it’s the crack cocaine you secretly put in when no one’s looking, so we all feel compelled to keep eating even when we’re full. I think that’s the secret ingredient to a lot of your food, actually, and you should just admit it.”

She laughs, shakes her head.

“Food is just fuel, remember?” she says, and slants a glance at her daughter. When Cat was a teenage athlete, she threw this phrase at her mother as often as she could, a slashing rebuff to offers of homemade anything, especially subtly flavored or slowly cooked. She would stand at the open refrigerator after soccer practice and drink Gatorade straight from the bottle, then refuse dinner because she had already eaten take-out pizza with the team.

There is Gatorade in the refrigerator now. Her doctor told her to try it and she has found that the taste, like sweetened sea-water, is so unlike anything she thinks of as food that it goes down easily and stays down.

“God,” Cat is saying, “I was a jerk, wasn’t I?”

“You were a teenager,” she says. “I’m just glad you didn’t decide to rebel by becoming anorexic. I don’t know what I would have done with you then.”

“Force-fed me, I bet,” Cat says. She takes a long swallow of beer. “I can just see you doing it too, and I would have been so mad at you because you would have picked all my favorite foods to shove down my throat.”

The joke, the image, disturbs her. She has a clear memory of Cat at that age, her elbows and knees always black-scabbed and her hair forever falling out of its ponytail. There were times when she felt that Cat delighted in dragging her from her kitchen to stand on the edge of muddy soccer fields in the rain. But she would never have forced food on her daughter, not like that.
“We did have our battles,” she says.

“What used to really get me,” Cat says, “is that even when I was pretending that I didn’t want to eat your food, it was just too good, and you made me feel like somehow I should try to be good at it, which I didn’t get. I mean, for Chrissakes, Dad couldn’t even make an omelet.”

She smiles. “I’m not sure your father knew how to boil water.”

The enchiladas are done. She covers the pan with foil and puts it in the oven. Behind her, she hears a smothered sound as though Cat has choked on a swallow of beer. When she stands up she finds Cat crying, ferociously, as she does everything, bent double and clutching her middle as if she’s been gutted. She takes the beer out of her daughter’s hand and strokes her hair.

“Sssh, darling, it’s alright. You’re going to be alright.”

“But I never learned to cook!” Cat says. “I always told myself that someday I’d get you to teach me and I never did!”

She puts her arms around her daughter and rocks her, thinks of what Cat really ought to know, the essentials that she’s lacking: how to make a cream sauce, roll a pie crust, press on a steak with a fingertip and know that it is medium-rare. How could she teach these things, even the simplest, most basic techniques, to Cat? It would take months, years, and even then Cat would have a tendency to over-spice, to burn whatever was unfortunate enough to be in the pan.

She sees quite suddenly that she has failed her daughter—maybe failed both her children—in her insistence that hers is the only way, that sustenance must be worked for, that love is only valuable when offered by skilled hands.

“You’ll have all my books,” she says. “I have faith in you. You’ll be fine.”

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Several weeks later, when she is propped up on pillows in the four-poster bed, her
nightstand pushed forward to make room for the I.V. drip, she pats the remote control that the
nurse has left near her hand but does not turn on the television. She closes her eyes and plays a
game that she and Greg used to play when they were first married, when they had the luxury of
lingering in bed. She lists her five favorite places that she’s visited, then five places she would
like to visit. She lists Greg’s five favorite colors, his five favorite books. She adds her favorite
memories—of Greg, of Neal, of Cat, of the four of them together—and doesn’t limit herself to
five.

She plans the menu for her ideal meal and finds herself using the visual images of the
food to make her choices now, or the memories they conjure. Lobster salad with fresh apricots
and avocados to start, because the color contrasts will be so beautiful. Chicken soup with sweet
potatoes and cinnamon, the first dish she ever created. Then a vegetable pot-pie, carrots and
peas and pearl onions, all of them cut small and gleaming like gemstones under the crust. She
made that dish often when the children were small; she called it “Treasure Pie” and showed the
children how to dig into the crust with their spoons and shout out the vegetables they had
unearthed. Cat loved the carrots the best and piled all the mushrooms on the side of her plate, a
little heap of slag, while Neal foraged for the peas and corn kernels.

She can remember being hungry better than she can remember those few terrible months
of nausea, thank God. Now she feels neither, but still she cannot stop thinking about food. She
lists Greg’s five favorite foods, his five favorite restaurants. She realizes that she has not been to
a single one of them since he died.
The door opens and Cat comes in, pulls up the chair beside the bed. She is expected, of course; both she and Neal have been coming by every day. But she is tense with an urgency that she has not brought into this room before.

“Mom,” Cat says, “hey, it’s me. I just came by—I was going to come by tonight but I wanted to tell you something quick before Neal got here—it’s not bad, it’s just—” She swipes at her cheeks with the heels of her hands.

“I went home last night, after I was here, and I decided to try to make lasagna, which I figured was easy enough, right? They make noodles you don’t even have to boil first now, and so I got out all the ingredients and I started making it using a recipe, like a real recipe not just the one from the box, and—anyway—it had me melting some butter and adding flour and milk and as I was doing it I suddenly stopped because—you’re going to think this is so stupid but—I knew that I was making a roux, that’s what it’s called, isn’t it? When you mix flour and butter together? I knew that’s what it was and I thought, ‘how the hell did I know that?’ and then I realized that of course you must have told me and so I just wanted you to know that I was listening, that’s all—I remember things that I don’t even know I remember, if that makes any sense—”

Beside the bed, her daughter is crying, tears of sorrow and relief. In the bed, her eyes closed, she sees her own hand dropping butter into a pan to start a roux. She can hear her own voice telling the children what to do:

“You have to melt it completely before you add the flour, but not too hot—you don’t want it to brown. See how it looks now? Now add the flour, gently, don’t dump, that’s right. And now you stir, still gently, but don’t stop or the flour will burn. Good. A whisk is better than a spoon to smooth out lumps, and a minute or two is all it takes. There, look at that. You made a
roux. Now we can make anything: cream sauce, gravy, even pâte à choux—that’s another French term, it just means pastry dough. But you don’t want to taste it yet. It won’t taste like anything, really.”

*I was feeding them, she thinks. All these years, I was feeding them.*

She can feel the press of the spoon she lifted to their mouths, to her own mouth, to prove her point, can feel the roux slip between her lips. It is warm but absolutely flavorless, thick and tender on her tongue.