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HOME LANGUAGE
A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

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ABSTRACT

As a fictional collection of short stories, *Home Language* interests itself with other languages' interference with English. The collection focuses on families who exhibit a cultural reason to maintain a language other than English at home, or on a linguistic interaction between a character who speaks English and another language group. "Qué Será" founds my collection. This story examines the family life of a high school aged girl. Her family life divides itself between her actual home life and her pseudo home life at the Tex-Mex restaurant where she works, thus incorporating an examination of Spanish and English. "Schatzi" looks at a German American family settled in Wisconsin, incorporating an examination of German and English. The story primarily seeks to resolve the image of Midwestern German-American alcoholic excess. In "Shiksa," a girl brought up in a traditional Jewish household with its amalgamation of Yiddish is convinced that Jewish men prefer more secularized and Americanized women over Jewish women. She pretends to be Christian in order to catch a Jewish man who might otherwise "marry out." The story confronts cultural assumptions and intimate betrayal in that framework. Finally, the story "Discipulae" blends Latin and English from the perspective of a Latin teacher. In the vein of the Greek and Roman tragedy, "Discipulae," focuses on betrayal amongst friends and lovers. Analogous to Latin's status as a dead language, the story traces a trajectory of obsolescence with respect to personal relationships.

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HOME LANGUAGE

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Discipulae

The summer before her senior year of college, Diana Gelf was dating an almost doctor. Todd Masters was a med student at UPenn while Diana studied the classics at Pitt. They were perfectly poised to be rivals with the way they chose opposite ends of the state, not to mention his science brain and her language mind. She concentrated her academic work on ancient Greek and Latin. He had plans to specialize in neurosurgery. Maybe it was this that bonded them, in the beginning. She was the only one who enjoyed helping him study for his rote exams just for the joy of hearing the old words roll off her tongue and his. When they studied over the phone she imagined his mouth forming the words and saw his tongue disconnect from the roof of his mouth to begin each new syllable. She could almost feel his tongue reaching out and joining with hers.

Diana and Todd were both from the same tiny seasonal town on the shore of Lake Erie called Wesleyville. It was a small enough town that that landed families still mattered. Something about being close to water made the town's inhabitants feel like pilgrims, like they had traversed a great sea to get there. Something about being on the western edge of the state made them feel like pioneers, like they had tamed mother nature into letting them stay.

Diana came from Wesleyville stock on both sides for as far back as her family could remember. Todd was Wesleyville on his mother's side, but his father's side had allowed its fair share of intermarriages. Diana's family might have questioned her choice more if it weren't for the fact that he graduated valedictorian of his year from Wesleyville High and he was studying to be a doctor. The first time he met Diana's parents, they went to the Lake House. Todd mentioned his father's wide alfalfa spread on the edge of town. The Gelfs were duly impressed. The Masters' farm was the most profitable, not to mention stylishly cutting-edge in all of Wesleyville.

But these things were discussed at lazy, early summer dinners. Todd was home until the end of June and Diana had nothing too much to worry about besides her job at the Borough Office working alongside her dad. Diana and Todd met by the lake every night after work to watch the sunset and talk.

“You’re very smart,” Todd told Diana every time they talked. He tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ears.

The tourists were only just starting to come so Diana and Todd found the lake to be mostly their own. As summer picked up, they spent every other weekend at this corn festival or that animal show.

At the Loggers’ Festival on the first day of summer, Todd paid for Diana’s ticket to ride the Ferris wheel and a jumbo cotton candy besides. At twilight, the lights on the Ferris wheel came on. The wheel stopped Todd and Diana at the very top. They could see the fireworks set off clear across the fairgrounds. Todd waited until Diana had just placed a pinch of cotton candy in her mouth before he leaned in and kissed her.

“All the sweeter,” he said.

It seemed to Diana there was nothing he could say wrong. When he walked her home that night, lacing his fingers tightly with hers, he stopped them in front of the street light outside her house. “You teach me how to love,” he said, “I promise I’ll be a good student.”

“I don’t doubt your discipline,” Diana said. She was thinking of his “Life Plan” after med school.

Todd smiled. He knew exactly what to say. He remembered it from one of their talks where Diana inevitably lapsed into marveling at “the ubiquity of Latin etymology” (her words, not his). He said, “Discipline, from the Latin, *discipulus*, *discipuli*, masculine, student.”

Diana got up on her tip toes to kiss his 6 foot 5 frame. “Or discipula, discipulae if the student is female,”

“You really need to get back to college,” Todd kissed her again and walked her to her door.

Pittsburgh is a grey city. On grey days, Diana couldn't help her thoughts. They ate up her horizon and settled down like the storm clouds over Lake Erie. She stared out the big beveled windows of her classroom watching the sky decide whether or not it wanted to rain. Between her and the lancets sat a sea of desks filled with bent-head girls scribbling away on test booklets. Reviewing first declension with her students last week had cemented Todd in her recent thoughts.

In her mind, she heard a whole chorus of ninth grade girls reciting “Discipula, discipulae, feminine, student.” Louder than the rest, she heard Todd's voice. She pictured him sitting by the phone on one of those early August nights when they were still trying to stick it out after he went back to school. His medical books sat open on his lap while his tongue disconnected from the roof of his mouth.

At first, she didn't know why she should be thinking of Todd. He was a four month fling that heated up in a limbo summer, when you still couldn't decide if your home town or your college town was more your real life. Maybe it was because he was hers to miss, and hers alone. He was only a player in her life, and if you talked to anyone else Diana knew now, he wouldn't figure into the story at all. She could go back and relive the Loggers' Festival as many times as her own little heart desired. No one else at Immaculate Heart had to know, or would even find it that shameful if they knew. Immaculate Heart was the school where all those who couldn't do came to die. They were all so focused on the what-ifs in

their own lives that Todd may as well have been a fiction. Diana liked it that way.

Her other “hers,” her more recent “hers,” and the reason why she was currently sitting behind this teacher’s desk wiping her chalk stained fingers on her pencil skirt, didn’t belong to her any more intimately than he belonged to her college roommate, Bree Callus. The life of Mark Notha was irretrievably woven into the Bree Callus tapestry. The day Mark left Diana with a note slid under her door, Diana picked up the flier that’d been circulating around the classics department – *Magistri!* Latin scholars can find great homes in charter and Catholic schools.

For the most part she had found a home at Immaculate Heart. Her girls were stubborn, but not impossible to teach. Just last month, she’d gotten the majority of them to stop writing “homunculi,” Latin’s approximation of “pip squeak,” under questions they didn’t know the answer to. She always knew it was coming when a rash of giggles went around the room on test day. But now, some girls even started writing “Non sapientia,” I don’t know. They were progressing here.

“Hi, I’m Bree, Bree Callus.” said the dark haired girl standing in the doorway.

The world seems to change so drastically between May and August. Diana’s roommate withdrew from college over the summer. Her roommate, a fellow Wesleyville girl, called her the week before they were supposed to make the drive back to school. Her parents caught her “just a little bit high,” she said, but this time in her little brother’s room, topless and straddling a bouncer from Steelhouse.

“The Steelhouse at school?” Diana asked.

“That’s the one.”

Her parents pulled her straight out of school. So now Bree was Diana’s new

roommate. Bree automatically reached out and threw one of Diana's duffles over her shoulder.

"I've been decorating our bedroom." Bree said walking into the bedroom so Diana had little choice but to follow her. "I hope you don't mind."

Bree had hung up a collage of tickets and show posters for "Death of a Salesman," "The Good Doctor," and one Diana recognized, "Antigone."

"I love that work," Diana said.

"Which one?"

"Antigone," she pointed to the poster.

Bree nodded emphatically, "It's a *great* play."

For a moment the two girls stood staring at the poster. Diana sighed by way of transition. "Well..." She opened up both her duffles on her bed. She felt self-conscious about unpacking in front of Bree. Bree sat on her bed and watched Diana unpack. Once she got up to get some nail polish remover and new nail polish. She cracked a window and settled herself back on her bed.

"So, do you have a boyfriend?" Bree asked.

Diana "mmed" while trying to decide how to stack her Latin books.

"I don't," Bree said, leaning down to apply her first coat of bubblegum pink to her big toe. She blew a thin channel of air on her toe to dry the polish. She looked up conspiratorially. "But I did just lose my virginity over the summer. To this guy I went to high school with who joined the army and was home on leave this summer."

Diana looked over at Bree with one of her eyebrows cocked.

"My boyfriend's name is Todd." Diana said.

"What's he like?" Bree patted the space on the bed next to her.

Aura was one of Diana's brightest students. Her girls had a habit of writing their declensions over and over again on their arms like a detention exercise, but they called it practice. Scribbling all over their arms felt just anti-school enough to give them the feeling of rebellion. Really, they all wanted to succeed in school. But they lived in a subtly competitive world.

Aura was usually the one to direct her classmates to the water fountain in the hallway if they'd made a mistake on a case ending.

"Remember *agricola* is in the first declension even though it's masculine."

They called her Big Red because of her red hair and big personality. She told Diana and she wanted to go to college. Aura was obsessed with the idea. She couldn't wait to get out of her Catholic school uniform, wear sweats, and learn real things, "No offense, Ms. Gelf."

"You don't like Latin?" Diana asked.

Aura said, "Oh Latin's fine." It's the other stuff she couldn't stand. Like how two plus two always has to equal four. Didn't anybody every want to question that or think of a more interesting answer?

One day, Aura stayed after class. She talked about visiting her brother on Parents' Weekend with her mom and dad. He ran track at Penn State, but was really focused on his literature degree. She asked Diana what she thought a literature degree would be like. Diana said she heard Joe Paterno studied literature and he was doing all right. She also taught Aura "Joe Paterno amat Latinam" because she had heard Paterno talk about the Iliad once in an interview. Then Aura asked Diana what her degree was like. If she could see her studying Latin in college.

“Wasn’t college the best years of your life?”

Diana reached out to stop Aura from doodling another “Discipulae” on her wrist.

“Aw Ms. Gelf, I’m only on the dative. “To or for the student,”

Diana gave Aura the teacher look. “Yes.” She said, “College represented some very good years. For a while. But that’s what they say about high school too. Your best years should be whichever ones you’re living right now.”

Aura’s mouth dropped into a little “o,” “Wow,” she said, “Did you learn that in college?”

Todd decided he would visit Diana on Labor Day Weekend. They had made the arrangements in five minutes on the end of a phone call he spent discussing cerebrovascular neurosurgery. She gave him etymologies as they went along to help him remember what meant what and where. After she hung up, she opened the bedroom door and emerged from “The Cave,” which Bree started calling their bedroom when Diana holed herself up in it to talk to Todd.

“It lives!” Bree called from the couch where she was watching TV with a script open on her lap.

She patted the cushion next to her on the couch. Diana picked the script off Bree’s lap and folded the front cover around the back. They ran lines at commercials until an ice cream commercial came on. Bree threw the script aside and announced the sudden need for milkshakes.

“We’re out of milk,” Diana said, “*Someone* forgot to pick it up,” she nudged Bree with her big toe.

Bree pulled a baby face, “I’ll go with you,” She got up and pulled Diana off the

couch by the forearms.

Across the street, they snaked the aisles of the Pico Mart. The Asian woman who worked the register nodded to them as usual. Deciding between ice cream toppings with the milk getting cold hanging off her thumb, Diana jumped when Bree rushed her to the back of the aisle.

Diana eeped out a “What? What?” She gripped the milk to her in a hug so she wouldn’t drop it.

Bree pointed out a tall girl talking to the Asian woman at the counter. “See that girl?” Bree asked. The tall girl took her change and was saying thank you and nodding while the Asian woman was chatting. “Thanks Yu,” the tall girl said before walking out. Bree pushed herself and Diana a little further down the aisle to avoid the tall girl’s glance if she happened to look back through the store front window.

“She’s awful.” Bree said, and then told the story of how she and Mera had lived together before Bree moved in with Diana. Mera’s very sorority preppy friends would always come over to their apartment and make no secret of not liking Bree. Mera never stood up for Bree and Bree took loyalty very seriously.

“That sounds awful,” Diana said.

When they went back to their apartment, Diana made the milkshakes and cleaned up the dishes afterwards. They talked about Todd coming to visit.

Todd was going to get to Pitt on Saturday of the long weekend. Bree knew of a theatre party she said she and Diana should go to on Friday. It was a hike from their apartment to the theatre house in an old brownstone on the North Side. When they got there, a scrawny guy in an oversized plaid shirt ripped the five dollar cover from each of their

hands and thrust red cups at them full of purple liquid.

“Purple Jesus!” Bree screamed over the beating bass oozing out the front door. She squeezed Diana’s shoulder. “Senior year, best year ever!”

Bree navigated them to the pong table and put their names down on the game list. Then a guy with Cruella DeVille hair and a silk red top wrapped his arm around Bree’s waist, opened her mouth with his and whisked her to another corner of the party. Diana bobbed her head to the music and sipped her Purple Jesus. She said hi to a few people she recognized from some of Bree’s shows. Each person she talked to felt like they were passing her on a cartoon’s moving background. She found herself in the basement signing the wall with a brand new lipstick some girl had given her.

“Don’t forget to kiss it off,” said a blonde guy who looked like a billy goat, which made it easy for Diana to remember he’d said his name was Billy.

“I don’t think you want to do that,” a girl with severely bobbed ruby hair linked her arm through Diana’s and pulled her off to the side.

“Wait,” Diana said, holding the lipstick up in the air with her free hand. The girl with the ruby hair set the lipstick down on the pool table in the basement and said her name was Molly. She also said Diana looked familiar.

Molly said, “I know!” and dashed Diana across the shoulder. Diana had to think quick to keep her drink from sloshing down her shirt, “Mythology 120!” Diana remembered Molly’s voice now. She was always loud in class, but had longer hair back then.

They talked about what they’d been doing since they had class together. Seeing someone from a previous semester always had a way of feeling like a high school reunion. Diana said she was seeing someone now and that he was coming up tomorrow. She was excited because she was going to get to show Todd around campus and introduce him to her

roommate. She'd gotten lucky with her roommate replacement. So then Molly asked Diana for the story on her roommates and when Diana got to the part about meeting Bree, Molly gaped, "You're Bree Callus's roommate,"

Diana nodded. Even though it came out a bit late in their conversation, she was used to being known as "Bree's roommate" at theatre parties.

Molly leaned in conspiratorially, "I know Mera."

"Who?" Diana asked.

"Mera. Bree's old roommate."

Diana "mmed" and bit the rim of her cup.

"You better be careful with her," Molly said.

"With Mera,"

Molly shook her head no. She meant with Bree. Molly used to be neighbors with Bree and Mera. She didn't really know them and only met them once because her dog wandered into their open apartment door. "Bree's careless like that," Molly pointed a finger in Diana's face. She was telling her how she had to watch out because Molly didn't even know Mera that well, only had one gen. ed. with the girl freshman year, but then junior year rolls around and half way through the first semester, Mera's knocking on her door all the time, crying because Bree threw out her food or locked her out of the apartment. The apartment door double locked with a key card and a dead bolt, but when Mera tried her key card, the door still wouldn't budge. "And do you want to know what Bree did when Mera called her cell from the other side of the door to tell her she couldn't get in?"

Diana shook her head no.

"She said, 'It worked for me'! Can you believe that? 'It worked for me,' right!"

Molly could see Diana was avoiding her gaze. "I'm sorry," she said, "I didn't mean

to insult your friend so much. Maybe she's totally different with you."

Just then a big guy ambled down the basement stairs. "We got a Diana down here?"

Diana perked up.

"Diana and Bree're up for pong!"

Diana picked herself up from leaning against the pool table.

"Just, you seem cool," Molly said, "Take care of yourself,"

Saturday morning, Todd's call woke Diana up. She looked around and noticed she was alone in the bedroom, "Are you on your way?" Diana asked.

Todd had exams, he said, unexpected exams. He didn't think he could afford to lose the driving time. "Hey it was your idea to come," Diana said. But Todd stayed in Philadelphia and Diana stayed in Pittsburgh. Labor Day weekend turned out to be the lost weekend. It was the weekend that, had Todd decided to come, would've been nothing too extraordinary. But because he didn't come, everything changed. Diana didn't feel comfortable on the phone with him anymore and since she couldn't see him in person there was no remedy for her discomfort. "I want to see you," Diana said. In his mind, Todd had already checked out of the relationship in July when he went back to school. But he liked having someone on the other end of a phone line for him.

She emerged from The Cave and thought of how the name had had a darker side all along. Bree was passed out face down on the couch. Diana swatted her with a couch pillow. "It lives," she tried to smile when Bree groaned and raised her head.

"Todd's not coming," Diana said.

Bree deemed that Saturday cheery-uppy day. She got her ukulele out from under the bed and started improvising Adele songs, a heartache must. Bree swore by Adele. She

listened to her nonstop during the “hard times” with Mera.

Later, guitar set aside and toenails freshly painted, Bree started talking about her best friend from home, Mark Notha. She always referred to Mark as her “best friend,” never just friend, in the way that normal people refer to famous people by first and last name. She said he was the one guy who could never let you down. Mark and Bree met in a first grade production of “From Sea to Shining Sea,” a history of America’s founding fathers written by a couple teachers in her district. Mark was playing George Washington and Bree his horse. They didn’t trust Bree with a speaking part because she had a tendency to yell with all her pent up energy as a little kid. Mark told her she had good horsey neigh though.

Suddenly, Bree had a genius idea. Mark should come to Pittsburgh for the Notre Dame game in a couple weeks.

“I can’t wait for you to meet him,” Bree said.

As spring approached, everyone started to notice the Immaculate Heart girls getting restless in the classroom. That’s when the principal, Mrs. Harrington, a scatter-brained old widow, started coming up with field trips for the girls. Mrs. Harrington conceived a museum trip for the ninth graders and, because Immaculate Heart was perpetually short staffed, Diana ended up as the guide for an art field trip to the Carnegie Museum of Art. The sky started spitting the moment she loaded the girls onto the bus.

Diana’s girls weren’t interested in much of the work. Aura had to rally the troops to keep them moving from room to room. But there was this one piece that was arrested the whole group, even Diana. It was huge and at first looked like one of those modern art pieces where they just paint an entire canvas one color and call it something like *Hatred* or *Black Canvas No. 2* or something equally vague.

But when Diana stood right in front of it, she could see that it was actually every single page of *Alice in Wonderland* laid out one after the other after the other from page one all the way to 307. But all the actual text of the story was painted over with this obliterating black. The only thing Diana could see was the name of the chapters printed on the top of the pages on the top row. It was the first chapter, “Down the Rabbit Hole.”

“Down the Rabbit Hole, Down the Rabbit Hole, Down the Rabbit Hole, Down the Rabbit Hole” raced across the top of the work. Diana felt like she was missing out because that’s all she could see.

An oldish man in a tweed jacket walked up to the painting. He scratched his beard and spoke about the painting’s comment on censorship in a mild whisper.

A twenty-something in a sweater and wispy pony tail scribbled notes furiously at his side.

“I bet he’s a professor,” Aura whispered when the man and his companion walked away. The spell was broken for the girls. The time in the museum started to wear on them and they turned to their own little conversations. Through a hallway beyond the wall of the painting, Diana could see through the wall of windows in the main atrium. The city sat, still so grey, even in the springtime.

The giant blackness of the painting consumed her. She felt like she was falling into a black hole where words should have been. The vacuum it created suctioned the *Alice in Wonderland* story right out of her mind. She touched two fingers to her forehead then quickly jerked them away with a flick of her wrist. She couldn’t remember waking up, only falling. And then she realized that she wasn’t only sad, she was scared – scared of forgetting things, she landed on that fear first, and then she thought about the fear of being forgotten.

Mark said a funny thing the first time they had sex: “I will always remember you.” He fingered the starburst birthmark just below her chin. They had the room to themselves. Mark was a burst of lightening for Diana. He hit her harder than Todd, the first guy she’d called her boyfriend, and harder than any other first date or first kiss.

Bree was with them at the Notre Dame game, but then she had rehearsal to get to. During the game, Mark wore his “Good Mark” shirt. Bree got it for him after she cut off a fling with a guy who had the same name. “Shit Mark” didn’t say goodbye to her before she left for Costa Rica on a service trip, and by the time she got back from her summer building a school and shoveling out some village wells, he had already found somebody new to fool around with. She didn’t want there to be any confusion about the Good Mark.

When Bree left, they started by fighting about the Pirates versus the Phillies. Mark told a story about how him and Beebee (when he was younger he couldn’t get his “r”s out) went on a school field trip to see the Phillies play. They got the scoops of ice cream in the plastic baseball helmets and just steps away from the ice cream stand, Mark tripped and half his ice cream splatted square on the cement. There was nothing wrong with the rest of it so he knew they wouldn’t give him a fresh scoop like they would have if he’d dropped the whole helmet, so Bree smashed a fuzz from her jersey into it and acted aghast that the ice cream man could even think to sell such a thing. She made such a ruckus that he had no choice but to give her a new helmet full of ice cream. And Mark even got to keep his old helmet besides.

“That’s when I knew one day she would be an actress,” Mark said.

Diana could top that story with one about seeing the Erie Bayhawks with her dad when she was six. They were doing some sort of Globe Trotters routine and picking

members from the audience to do funny tricks to. When Diana went up, the tallest guy on the team asked her for some of her popcorn while she got a chance to shoot the basketball. Diana handed it over and excitedly reached for the ball. The player reached out for her popcorn, then exaggeratedly spilled it all over the floor. He pretended to slip and slide all over the spilled kernels, picking Diana up along the way and holding her up to the rim so she could make a slam dunk. But all Diana wanted to do was cry over her lost popcorn. Her dad was just about to demand someone do something to fix his daughter's unhappiness when the tall player handed her a fresh box of popcorn, twice as big as the first one, from a team manager who was waiting on the side lines.

“Bree told me I would like you,” Mark said. He rolled Diana over again and started kissing the underside of her neck.

Many times, Mark came back to Pitt, to stay with Diana and Bree. During the day, it was him and Diana and Bree going out to movies, going out to lunch, playing music in the park. At night, Mark slept in Diana's bed. When Mark wasn't there, Diana could feel a newfound pressure brewing in her relationship with Bree. She started to understand that she would always have to be friends with Bree if she wanted Mark in her life. She couldn't shake a girl from that far back in his life. Before, Diana could easily picture her life with Bree in it years from now. But once there was no choice in the matter, Bree stopped being Bree. She became – quite suddenly – a ticking time bomb.

Trouble started one weekend when Mark didn't visit. Diana and Bree had gone to the drugstore to pick up some new glitter eye shadow that they would smush into each other's eyebrows later that night. Every weekend that Mark didn't come, Bree always found them some kegger or social to go to together. Diana was starting to feel rundown. It felt like a test.

Once she started to vent to Mark about the party-all-the-time girl Bree was turning into. But Mark got defensive. “It’s her senior year,” He said. After that, Diana suspected her boyfriend would take Bree’s side on anything.

That night, they went to the theatre house. It was a usual night. Bree slinked upstairs with the boy with Cruella DeVille hair while Diana made the moving cartoon background rounds. In the basement she found Billy and Molly, who she’d started to become friends with throughout the year. As a comparative literature major, she and Molly actually had a lot in common. Billy was a wired and constantly worried international politics major. He still seemed to have reminiscences of that freshman desperate-to-have-friends attitude. But he was a nice guy. The three of them really clicked: Diana, Billy and Molly. They functioned just the same enough and just differently enough, and most importantly, they saw each other only enough.

“Jesus, watch the blood diamonds,” Billy said shielding his eyes.

Diana touched her eyebrows self-consciously. She knew she and Bree had gone on a bit heavy tonight. But Bree said it looked good.

Billy leaned in to swipe some glitter off her eyebrow.

Bree walked down the stairs with the DeVille guy. Diana could see her over Billy’s shoulder. Her stomach dropped, “Oh no.”

Diana’s students were working on their homework for English class. This might have bothered her earlier in the year, but the quarter was almost over and she’d covered everything she wanted to for today. All the girls made a semi-circle with their desks. They tossed potential answers back and forth, but were clearly having trouble with the work.

“Ms. Gelf!” Aura called above the din, “Can you help us?”

“I don’t know if I’ll be much help.” Diana said, putting down her translation of the Aeneid. She’d become a more avid reader since living alone. Still, she knew she was a Latin teacher, not an English teacher.

“But there’s Latin in this one, Ms. Gelf!” Aura couldn’t contain her excited energy with the end of the year approaching. Diana could practically hear Aura ticking off, one year down and three more to go in her mind.

“Et tu, Brute!” Violet, Aura’s best friend in class, called out and pretended to fall out of her chair and die.

Diana remembered the play from high school. She pointed out that Shakespeare amat Latinam. He was even grammatically correct in his line for Brutus because he used the vocative form of Brutus’s name in order to render the direct address. Diana started to roll on about how one could expect Shakespeare to be good at Latin because in grammar schools of his time, double translation was common practice, so that on one day, students would translate a passage from Latin to English. Then, the next day, they would do the reverse and put their English back into Latin.

“Ms. Gelf!” Aura said.

“Okay, what’s the question?” Diana asked.

“Why does Brutus betray Caesar?” Samantha, a peach faced girl in glasses who was serving as the group’s scribe, said. She held her pen poised above the worksheet.

“Yea,” Violet said.

Aura said, “I thought they were supposed to friends and next thing you know Brutus’s stabbing him in the back and Mark Antony’s asking for ears.”

Diana paused. Her smile faltered.

“I’m not sure,” she said, “Non sapientia.”

Someone knocked at her classroom door.

“Keep working, girls,” Diana said, walking to answer the door.

Mrs. Harrington stood on the other side of Diana’s door. She invited Diana into the hallway. “Yes?” Diana asked.

Mrs. Harrington showed Diana a resume she’d just received. Diana was listed as a reference. “What do you think?” Mrs. Harrington asked, “She looks a little over qualified to me, but who are we to turn down good stock. Besides, Immaculate Heart hasn’t had a drama teacher in years. It’d be nice to bring it back, don’t you think?”

Diana swallowed.

She looked down at the resume then back at Mrs. Harrington then over Mrs. Harrington’s shoulders to the window at the end of the hallway. Diana couldn’t quite see beyond the beveled glass. She thought about what happened. She thought, “Do we never stop being students?”

Shiksa

This year, Hanukah fell at the same time as Christmas. The week before the first night, Elisabeth's mom had her running all over the house, readying it for the visit of her cousin David from Israel. Mrs. Reidman's brother and his wife had a fit of Zionism in the late eighties which ended up in a migration to Israel they called "curing the diaspora." David had just finished his IDF regiment and this was the first time he would be back in the States since he was a baby. Mrs. Reidman said all kinds of *kinnahura* when she watched the cartoon animation of David's flight take off from Tel Aviv on El Al's website. Then she turned her attention to polishing the meat silverware in kitchen while she set Elisabeth to polishing the dairy silverware in the mess room.

Elisabeth's dad, in his reliable Subaru, went to pick up David at the airport.

"Daveed!" Elisabeth screamed when he traileed her father into the house.

"Finally!" David said, "Someone who knows how to say my name," He shook his head as if he still had those long sandy curls he had before his military service. "I had to correct the man at customs," he said, "and the man who helped me at baggage claim." Here he mimicked himself, "Daveed, not David."

"Well, they try," Mrs. Reidman said giving David a big hug and a kiss.

Meanwhile, Mr. Reidman was still holding all of David's luggage, squished between the screen door and the thin space of foyer before David. The Reidman women had a way of being social beyond practicality. He managed to tinkle his keys into a porcelain vase he picked up for Mrs. Reidman on a business trip to France before Mrs. Reidman and Elisabeth started to fuss over him holding all the bags.

"Oh, oh, let me get that," and "Put that there,"

"Make yourself at home, David," Mrs. Reidman said.

At dinner, David and Mr. Reidman were in charge of picking the *hannukiyah* from the stash in the basement. There were classic silver ones, dreidel decorated ones, and more secular sports themed ones where a different sports ball topped each candle holder. When David and Mr. Reidman came back up from the basement, Mrs. Reidman took the *hannukiyah* to the sink to rinse out the dust and polish the silver. She said she had a lesson with her seventh graders just today about the difference between a *hannukiyah* and a menorah. While the menorah is traditionally used to light the synagogue, it can only hold seven candles and since the Miracle of Hanukah is eight nights, they needed a bigger candelabrum.

One student tried to argue vehemently against her, saying that his family always lit *the menorah* on Hanukah. When asked why he was so adamant, he said, “I saw it on TV, duh.”

“It’s just amazing what something like a Rugrats special can do for religious education,” Mrs. Reidman said, flicking the excess water off her fingers into the sink.

“At least they didn’t think a candelabrum was a gentile’s menorah like Berty did when I was there,” Elisabeth laughed.

Mrs. Reidman shooed Elisabeth with the *hannukiyah* into the dining room. She followed with a tray full of latkes and blintzes.

Elisabeth’s mother said, “Maybe we should’ve made *aliyah* like your uncle before you had to hear such crazy things,”

“I thought it was funny,” Elisabeth shrugged, “And besides Ma we couldn’t ‘go home’ to Israel. We were never from there in the first place.”

Mrs. Reidman said, “Yes, well,”

David shot Elisabeth a look. Mr. Reidman bent down the edge of his paper. Israel is

a contentious issue in every Jewish family for one reason or another. Sometimes relatives stop talking to each other all together over Israel. How could they be “G-d’s Chosen People” without a “*goy kadosh*”? That’s what David thought, even though he always regretted not having grown up in the United States.

“So what is everyone reading?” Mrs. Reidman asked.

She started talking about Nathan Englander’s latest, *What We Talk about when We Talk about Anne Frank*.

“Great, great,” She praised the collection.

She’d just heard him on NPR giving a beautiful interview about his coming to terms with his Jewish identity. He told a lovely story about how he fell in love with his faith. Around the time of the 2004 Olympics in Greece, just after Englander moved to Israel, McDonald’s started running this campaign to create a global solidarity. They printed “I’m lovin’ it!” in various languages all over their bags and wrappers. But the problem was that in Saudi Arabia, the translation that McDonald’s got for “I’m lovin’ it!” into Arabic resembled too much something from the Koran. And it’s a sin to throw away the Koran. So there were all these poor Saudi Arabians with nothing to do with their McDonald’s take away bags besides stack them up in the corners of their houses and wait for God to do what he would with them.

Englander fell in love then with a simple Jewish custom that he’d never thought much about before, but suddenly it became his gateway into the rest of his love for his culture. In Judaism, it’s also forbidden to erase or deface the name of God. That’s why, customarily, writing about God in Judaism is done with an inserted dash in the middle of his name, allowing Jews to discard the paper they’ve written on if necessary. How perfect, Englander thought, that he would never have to save piles and piles McDonald’s bags.

Elisabeth hadn't read Englander's book. But she had read the collection it was based off of: Ray Carver's *What We Talk about when We Talk about Love*. It seemed every boy who grew up watching Woody Allen couldn't help but read Ray Carver. Elisabeth began launching into this theory when David interrupted. As it happened, he had read Englander's book and he wanted to talk about something, the game Englander invented in the book, *The Righteous Gentile*. Here's how it went: In the title story, two couples think about their gentile friends. Then they pretend that a second holocaust is impending. Then, they list who among their friends would hide them and who would turn them in.

David wanted to play that game.

"Easy now," Elisabeth's dad said. "Let's stick to something a little less catatonic. The Republican primaries, perhaps," Mr. Reidman cracked his tiny smile that showcased the most of his enjoyment.

"So as I was saying about my theory," Elisabeth said. She loved the intellectualism of her family dinner. Somewhere in the back of her mind she worried that these dinners wouldn't exist in her life forever. She let words keep falling from her mouth to quell the fear. *Attend to the solvable problems first*. But the unsolvable problems, much like the asterisked questions on a midterm, never disappeared, only lied in wait. She felt her Jewish world was a small world that rested fragiley on the dinner table. Her family was only so big and thinning out every day.

When it was time to light the first candle, Mr. Reidman set up the computer in the dining room for a video chat with the two older Reidman children. Both unmarried, both wildly successful at their jobs. That was the thing for the younger generation. Mr. Reidman was a computer engineer who got his masters while living with his wife and two young children in a one bedroom apartment. Mrs. Reidman passed the bar while pregnant with

Ariella. Ariella and Ilan Reidman both had government sector jobs in DC and nice apartments for one in Dupont Circle and Cleaveland Park. Ariella and Ilan were together at Ariella's apartment when Elisabeth and her parents called them. Ariella talked about a legislative meeting she had to attend to deal with the budget cuts in the postal service. Ilan had been working overtime lately. He just leaned contentedly on the dining table where Ariella had set her *hannukiyah*.

David put his arm around Elisabeth's shoulder. Mr. and Mrs. Reidman both grasped the end of the *shamash*.

They sang "*Barruch atah adonai*,"

In the dim light on each side of the screen, the Reidman family united their lights. When Elisabeth thought of her desires, she thought chiefly of this moment.

Elisabeth had a friend named Elizabeth at college. People started calling them Ess and Zee to tell them apart at their job at the writing center. Zee majored in Communications and Ess majored in Communication Arts and Sciences. When their shifts overlapped and no one was coming in for walk-in hours, they took turns pulling magazines that the university subscribed to and discussing randomly picked articles. Everyone knew Zee and Ess by their magazine discussions. Sometimes others joined in, but mostly this was an Ess and Zee thing.

One night, a guy with lightly curled black hair and a lean build walked in. He was on the soccer team and had a paper due for English 101 about a defining life moment. Ess and Zee both looked up from the magazine. They both picked up on a flit of current between them in reaction to the dark haired athlete.

"Jesus, Joseph and Mary," Zee said. It was a cardinal sin to take the Lord's name in vain. That was the one thing that stuck from Zee's early Sunday school days. Even though

she didn't go to church anymore, she still watched her GD's and JC's.

The dark haired guy hesitated in the doorway, then walked over to Zee, "Can you help me with my paper?" He asked.

When they sat down to work, Ben's knees and long legs overwhelmed him. His torso disappeared under the table as he dug around his back pack for his glasses and a pencil. He had a clumsy way of holding his pencil and kept clicking out more lead than he needed and breaking it on his page. He scooted his chair closer to Zee as they discussed the story he wanted to tell about reading the classics with his dad every week of one summer. That was the time that made him realize he knew how to think.

After the tutorial, Zee and Ben were casually talking about books while filling out the exit forms. He said his favorite moment in a book was in *The Chosen* when Danny realizes why his father only talked to him in religious conversations. He thought it was the saddest moment when Reb tells his son that he was being "brought up in silence" for his own benefit, and felt no remorse about it at all. So that settled it for Ess. Ben was Jewish, and he chose Zee, the gentile. He told her she had pretty hair.

One night Zee and Ess found a magazine called, *The Shiksa Broadsheet*. Universities had a way of subscribing to the deepest niche magazines they could find for the sake of diversity. An article tagline inside the publication quoted Professor Frederic Cople Jaher, "Parents fear that she will lure their sons away from family and faith, and Jewish men fantasize about her sexual and social desirability." Zee laughed when she pointed that out.

"Do you think that's true?" She asked.

She flipped through a couple more pages, but tossed the magazine aside when a rush of people came into the center.

Ess slipped the magazine into her backpack.

Back at her apartment, she started reading every article. Towards the end, the editors had a reader submission section where “Shiksas” shared their stories. A woman named Martha Rhodes from Long Island wrote a story called “The Look.”

We're adults now. I can tell by our conversation on the odds that you'll gray versus bald. You have a ton of hair everywhere, so you told me you would go white before anything. We searched your hair, like monkeys, for any dusting of white sprouting from where your hair gets its grain. I pulled a few hairs to the side to see the small patch of skin beneath the spiral. I recognized your skin as my skin. But I pulled too hard and you screamed, Martha! My name sounded old and not at all like when you used to call me Ahuva.

Earlier, we spent hours in our friend Rebekah's kitchen reliving her Birthright trip. You were able to swap stories about Bedouin tents and kibbutzim and did she try the watermelon? You thought it was great to be in a country where you got off for Rosh Hashanah and nobody looked at you like you were a freak. I have never looked at you like you were a freak. Still, Rebekah and you wished you would've talked more before her trip.

I know this is the beginning of the time that will bother you when your friends playfully refer to me as The Goy. My blonde hair will bother you. I will sink our children with my Gentile blood and teach them how to eat sandwiches with Mayonnaise. There is a whole part of you that I can never know because it is not in my other-blood to understand. No Bet Din can throw a thick enough veil of allegiance, no tevillah can cleanse me enough. I will always feel like the study exists as something outside of myself.

I will not recognize my blood as your blood, which has floated in the Dead Sea.

Remember, you told my mother you couldn't eat the ham and she offered you sea scallops instead. It's not her fault. She knows them as a delicacy, with their greater succulence than the ones you can get from the bay. I come from this.

You see, we are born what we are, and then we grow up, wishing we hadn't been made to look at ourselves.

Next to the story was a brief author bio about Martha. She said she wrote her story in a rough time she was having with her boyfriend of five years. She said it was only on the verge of marriage that her boyfriend started to exercise his Judaism more overtly. Later, he admitted he was trying to get her used to the idea of being Jewish. It was all well and good to date a non-Jew, but it was another thing entirely to try and marry a non-Jew. In the end, they broke up. But even after everything, Martha thought if they were meant to be together, they would have been together. Maybe she would've converted if he hadn't expected her to, but it was the presumption that got to her.

She said, "As much as Jewish women attack us 'Shiksas' for stealing their good provider men for our husbands, we Shiksas get made at their Jewish men for fishing us out specifically for not being Jewish, and then hoping they'll still get a Jewish wife out of the deal anyway. If they wanted to marry a Jewish girl, then they should've dated a Jewish girl!"

Ess was stuck on Martha, the sexy blonde woman with the pale skin pictured next to her story. She couldn't un-frustrate herself. She turned to the library.

Jewish men make the best husbands. Of this, Ess was sure. How-to book after how-to book extolled the virtues of the Jewish Man. He valued education so was more likely to get a prosperous job and be a good provider. His close upbringing with his mother made him

respect women, ensuring that regardless of whether or not he loved his wife, he always respected her. And he tended to have an innate instinct for being a good dad. Something about the holocaust had imprinted upon him a desperate need to protect and nourish his young so the Jewish people would never come so close to extinction again.

Ess was also sure that Jewish men characteristically marry out. They don't find Jewish women as attractive as non-Jews. Non-Jews have smaller noses, lighter features and leaner frames. She kept thinking of the line from *The Shiksa Broadside*, "Jewish men fantasize about her sexual and social desirability."

Emerging bleary eyed one evening from the library, fate ran her over. Adin was cycling past the main entrance at the same time as Ess was walking out of it. They collided in an instant and fell in a cascade of limbs and papers and metal parts. Adin helped Ess up before picking up his bike and the papers that spilled out of his backpack. They brushed off their knees and set about separating whose papers were whose. Ess had never been more grateful that she wrote routinely in magnetic closing notebooks. She didn't want the charming guy on the bike to know she'd just been researching good potential husbands, especially since she didn't see herself as a scary husband hunter. She just wanted to make sure she eventually, at some point in her life, married Jewish.

Lucky for Ess, fate never did sabotage itself. Adin had no choice but to ask her for dinner to apologize for having run her down. And Ess had no choice but to notice that Adin was an incredibly Jewish sounding name.

Ess and Adin began as an early dinner date, nothing too serious, a little over a week after the accident. Adin took her to a sandwich place downtown. Ess met him there after work, still wearing the same t-shirt she'd worn to class that day. They talked about where

they would most like to go in the world. They both agreed they wanted to go everywhere. Ess had been to France once with her dad, but she had been pretty little on that trip and didn't remember much of it. Adin had her beat so far since he'd just spent a summer in Laos teaching English to a bunch of twelve year olds. He played some Michael Jackson for them once during class and they all got very excited and started dancing. All the boys asked for Adin to send back some Michael Jackson autographed CD's when he went home. They were a little confused about the size of America and assumed any American could easily meet or get a hold of any other American whenever they wanted. Besides, the idea of celebrity didn't really translate well to them. Adin said it broke his heart when he had to tell them Michael Jackson was dead.

Adin was also an avid movie watcher. Had Ess seen *Midnight in Paris* yet, he wanted to know. He thought it was a great film, the best Woody Allen since *Manhattan*. Adin loved the odes to such city spaces. He dreamed of one day moving to New York. Living in Philadelphia when he wasn't at school just didn't give him the same buzz he thought he could get from New York.

"But I am a little bit biased," Adin said.

"About New York or Woody Allen?" Ess asked.

"Both, actually. My people owe them both a great debt," Adin laughed.

Ess thought about this for a split second, "Oh!" she said, "Are you Jewish?"

"Yea. Are you?"

Almost without thinking, Ess said, "Oh, no. Just your average old everyday Christian."

"Well," Adin said, chucking Ess on the chin, "At least you've got Christmas."

Ess laughed. Adin's eyes lingered on the shape of her mouth.

They stayed in the sandwich shop until closing time when the manager had to kick them out.

“We should do this again sometime,” Adin said walking his bike alongside Ess.

Naturally, Ess agreed.

It was the conversation that Ess couldn't stop talking about. Zee asked about his smile, his height, whether or not he paid the bill. But she never once asked about Adin's religion. “Funny how that never occurs to a non-Jew,” Ess thought.

Adin and Ess saw each other regularly. They had dinner every Monday and movie night every Friday. On Wednesdays, they shared an hour long phone call before bed. Their conversation turned to Judaism often. He was the kind of Jewish kid who wasn't allowed to date non-Jews. This wasn't something he had to guess at in the way that some Jewish sons can innately sense their mothers' disappointment. His mother, along with several other mothers in the congregation, set up a weekly *shidduch* disguised as a synagogue youth group.

“It's basically a system of matchmaking to hook up Jewish kids at a young age and make sure they find a Jewish mate,” Adin explained the concept of the *shidduch* even though Ess already knew that.

“Is it important for you to have a Jewish wife?” Ess asked.

“Well, yea. Maybe. I'm not sure,” Ess could read that code like a book. He didn't want to scare off the blonde goy by asking for conversion so early in the relationship, but he already had it in his mind that one day they might get married and she would have to one day be okay with converting. Ess wondered how this expectation would weigh on a non-

Jew. How much or how little would that be asking someone to give up?

“Would you ever consider converting?” Adin asked.

Ess imagined that if they got married, she could easily “convert” to Judaism for Adin and have her traditional Jewish family. She hoped he wasn’t orthodox or conservative. She was shooting for a comfortable reformist with all the Jewish values. She forced herself to think of Zee exclaiming, “Jesus, Joseph and Mary!”

“It’s a lot to change,” Ess said.

Adin sounded somewhere between disappointed and thrilled with the challenge of educating. He knew he was dealing with a smart girl with Ess. That thrilled him. He thought if she didn’t want to convert to Judaism yet, it was only because she didn’t know it well enough. He would have to introduce her, and how similar that would be to him seducing her.

Sometimes it was hard to pretend she didn’t know what was going on. Ess liked to win arguments and have opinions, so biting her tongue every time Adin defined a Yiddish word immediately after he used it in a sentence proved difficult.

“Jesus, Joseph and Mary, Jesus, Joseph and Mary,” Ess repeated.

Soon, she discovered a unique window to question Judaism through the lens of a Christian. There was no fear in a Christian saying, “No heaven, really?” because a Christian still had the comfort of an afterlife waiting for him after the conversation. Why fear death when a family reunion sits on the other side of the final time you close your eyes? How comfortable and complacent it is to be a Christian, Ess thought. Soon, she invented a whole new muscle memory for her identity. Years of Christmas hams and never feeling left out at school filled Ess’s new memory. Then, after just enough settling in, Judaism started to sound foreign and interesting to her through Adin’s mouth.

“I like being Jewish,” Adin said, “because it’s a hard thing to do. People don’t

automatically accept you. It's not easy to grow up Jewish and I like knowing that I've accomplished that. I can face any challenge because being Jewish is itself a challenge."

Adin used to be a melancholy kid. He would cry himself dry until only the clean wailing remained. In grade school, when his teacher called on someone else to answer a question Adin knew the answer to, he withdrew to a corner, started pulling on his hair and hitting his forehead. The teacher couldn't get him to stop, so the office called his mother in to get him. She had to leave work in the middle of the day to get him, and besides was not pleased that he had been making a scene in class. The first Yom Kippur Adin remembered was the year he apologized to his mother for embarrassing her that day. He felt a genuine remedy to the heavy blackness of insult and injury he thought he'd given. Adin's mother gathered him into her lap and rocked him back and forth for a while.

"Just don't be sad, bubby," Adin's mother cooed, "Don't be such a sad boy. I only want you to be happy."

His mother said she loved him and told him to go read for a while. She even let him pick a book from his father's shelf.

The more Adin taught Ess about Judaism, the more she desired her Christian identity so she could see Judaism. "How new and beautiful it all is," Ess thought. Fasting on Passover like the ancient Israelites with limited food as they made their way out of Egypt did sound like an appropriate metaphor to understand the hardships lying in wait on the road to freedom.

Ess leaned over to Adin. She held his face in her hands and slowly leaned in to kiss him.

"I love you," she said.

"I love you," he said.

While they were having sex in her bed, it started to feel really good. Ess came up with the courage to call out, “Jesus, Joseph and Mary!” just like any good Christian girl excited by yet apologizing for her sin. It sounded even better than it had when she practiced saying it in front of the mirror. Adin gripped her shoulders harder while he came.

In the spring, Passover came early. Adin wanted to bring Ess home with him to meet his parents and experience a real Jewish holiday.

“I don’t know if I’m ready for this,” Ess said, “I thought your parents only let you date Jewish.”

“Trust me,” Adin said, “They’ll like you. Deep down, every Jewish mother just wants her son to be happy. And you’re what makes me happy.”

Adin’s mother was not happy to see Ess. She found fault with her name – “Elisabeth is such a pretty name. It’s a shame you don’t go by it.” She found fault with her hair – “What a lovely haircut, but, oh, your hair really can’t decide if it wants to be brown or blonde, can it?” She found fault with her academic achievement – “You know Adin just got into Phi Beta Kappa. We’re all so proud of him. Did you get in?”

“Oh, well, I did actually,” Ess said.

“A full semester before me,” Adin put his hand on Ess’s lower back.

Adin’s mom smiled a thin line.

Adin’s dad was mostly silent during the meal. He had a small frame but a sizable pouch that didn’t know quite how to hang on his body. He went around with a thoughtful face bordering on melancholy.

Every now and again when Adin’s mother would direct another comment at Ess, he would turn to her with almost sympathetic eyes. He felt bad for the interrogation, but even

he, deep down, knew the importance of marrying Jewish. It wasn't that he or his wife didn't like Ess. In fact they may have liked her very much if she came to them as Adin's friend. She was holding her own against Adin's mother and it takes a smart girl to do that. But Ess didn't come to them as Adin's friend. She came to them as Adin's girlfriend, and so they had to disapprove, not because she was Christian, but because she was a Christian dating a Jew, which was another matter entirely. Adin's mother loudly schlepped a hunk of gefilte fish onto Ess's plate.

After dinner, Adin suggested a movie. Both his parents loved the movies as much as Adin. They had a major life moment story somehow tied to every time they were just on their way to see a movie or just coming back from seeing one. Or sometimes even in the middle of a movie something so uproariously memorable would happen that they would have to remember it and tell it to all their guests. But Ess didn't mind. At least they were talking to her. And when they were talking about the movies, they all seemed less bitter.

Adin's mom wanted to watch Woody Allen. She looked at Ess to see if she would pull a face or ask who Woody Allen was. Ess knew Woody Allen well enough. You can't be Jewish and not know Woody Allen. But Ess thought, "Jewish or not, if you watch films, you know who Woody Allen is." It was a safe bet to endorse him as a Christian.

They put in *Manhattan*. "What we talk about when we talk about New York," Ess said.

Adin's father cracked a tiny smile that showcased the most of his enjoyment.

Everything went along fine as the film played out. Culture had a way of being a great equalizer. Some things in life, like little human failures, are just universally funny. Woody Allen knew that. But of course, he also knew what was funny about being Jewish. The fateful sandwich shop scene came on the screen. A Christian walks into a deli with a Jew

and orders a corned beef sandwich. The Christian asks for the sandwich with mayonnaise on white bread.

Adin's father opened his mouth and laughed, actually laughed. Adin's mother tried to keep her composure in front of company by holding a kitchen towel in front of her open mouth. Adin laughed free and warmly. Then, Ess started laughing and it was like someone ripped the needle off a spinning record. Self-consciously, she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. It looked brown to her in the dark of the living room.

Adin's mother stopped laughing and looked offended. She thought that joke belonged to her and her people. A Jew would know better than to order mayonnaise on corned beef instead of mustard and rye. Ess picked the wrong time to try to assimilate into the family, Adin's mother thought. She turned her body wholly to face the front of the TV. She gripped the kitchen towel in her lap and occasionally wrung it between her hands.

Adin's father looked at Ess curiously for the rest of the movie, but said nothing.

Adin reached out and squeezed Ess's hand. "It's okay," the grip seemed to say, "It *was* funny." He thought she did a good job too of following his family's cues.

After the movie, they sat through all the credits until the screen went black to match the rest of the room. Eventually Adin's father stood up to flick a light.

"Elisabeth," he said, "Do you know why that scene was funny?"

Elisabeth told them. She told Adin and his mother and his father exactly why that scene was funny. She told them about her reformist upbringing and her cousin from Israel and her mother who teaches at a Jewish day school. Then she apologized and ran to the powder room to keep herself from crying in front of them. It all came pouring out.

"I am Jewish, I am Jewish, I am Jewish," Elisabeth kept repeating while she sat in

the corner by the trash can and bumped her head against the wall.

After a while, Adin rapped on the door. Elisabeth stood up and opened it.

“Elisabeth,” he said as if for the first time.

He took her hand and led her to his bedroom. “Funny,” she thought, “This is the first time I’m seeing this.”

They sat on the edge of his bed while he held both her hands in his.

“Elisabeth,” he said again, “Are you really Jewish?”

Elisabeth nodded yes.

And then, a funny thing happened. Adin clamored all over himself to get out an awkward, enveloping hug. Elisabeth sat crunched underneath him like a bee he was trying to catch on the underside of a drinking glass.

“I love you, I love you,” Adin nuzzled into her hair.

“What?” Elisabeth eeked out.

Adin sat up. He pulled Elisabeth up to sit and face him. He gave her time to straighten herself out.

“I’m so happy,” Adin said. He held her head between his hands and smashed his lips against hers.

“But why aren’t you mad?”

“Mad?” said, “Why? Because you lied? This is the best lie you could’ve told!”

Elisabeth pulled her flustered face.

Adin smoothed back her hair, “Do you realize how easy you’ve just made this for us?”

Elisabeth stared at Adin.

“You’re Jewish, I’m Jewish. It’s perfect. We don’t have to hassle over how to get

married or how to raise the children. We don't have to wait for your conversion! We don't have to wait for anything. We can just be together like a normal couple and know there will be plenty of candles on all the *Shabbats* to come."

"But –"

"It doesn't matter," Adin said, "Nothing matters except that you're Jewish! You're Jewish!" He was thrilled. He couldn't have gotten luckier. He fell for the Jewish goy.

Jewish holidays are never on time. They're always coming late or coming early. Some Jewish comedian said that. Elisabeth couldn't remember who, but she could laugh and share the joke with her mother-in-law as they hollered their conversation back and forth between the kitchen and the mess room.

"But they're always here when you need them," Adin's mother was polishing the meat silverware in the kitchen.

Elisabeth was polishing the dairy silverware in the mess room. Hanukah fell early this year, at the beginning of December. The two women had a lot to do to get the house ready for Mr. and Mrs. Reidman, David who had moved back to the States and his parents who were visiting for the holiday season. Also, Adin's cousins and Ariella and Ilan would be coming over for the first night's dinner at least. When Elisabeth thought of her desires, she thought chiefly of this moment.

Schatzi

The night my mother got stinking drunk in front of her own parents, my dad and Gram got together to hide her keys. My Gramps kept remembering the time mom wrecked the station wagon and a neighbor's fence at 17. These tragedies happen in the Midwest.

I heard them all huddled together in the kitchen with their strategy talk. They weren't very good about whispering, gregarious Germans through and through. Gramps' stumpf fiddle was quieter than their "inside voices," which they were always telling me to use at seven.

Gram came up to me and said, "Darling, when muma comes back out here and asks you to go to *Tante Dorthe's*, you tell her, no, you're too tired, okay?"

We had just spent the afternoon at *Tante Dorthe's*. She made pork and sauerkraut and spaetzle. And Gram just finished scrubbing out the bratwurst pot. I didn't know how we could possibly go back to *Tante Dorthe's*. There were no more meals left in the day. But the idea of more of *Tante Dorthe's* famous chocolate cake, how exciting, and more time to play with her wiry grey poodle Schatzi, the only dear she brought with her from the Old Country, she said, besides my Uncle Rudi. This was a joke, Uncle Rudi explained to me once when Gregg got it into my head that no dog could possibly live that long, because Schatzi was actually the puppy of the puppy of the poodle Schatz that *Tante* had in Germany. He said it was important to have things that reminded you of home around.

But I knew Uncle Rudi would slip me *lebkuchen* to take Schatzi into the family room and play. He tolerated the poodle as an extension of Dorthe, but was much happier for my older brother and me to keep Schatzi occupied. I loved Schatzi. I always called him *my* puppy. We never had a dog at home because my dad thought they were too yappy. There's a picture of me as a baby, taken by Uncle Rudi, using Schatzi as a pillow.

Uncle Rudi preferred stuffed dogs – the carnival game variety. His basement was lined with claw machines that no matter how many times my brother and me played we could never win. Of course we could never win them out in the real world, like at the diner my grandparents' friend Charlie owned, my brother reasoned, because there they were just trying to get kids to waste their quarters and be out of the adults' hair. But it was especially discouraging that Uncle Rudi didn't undo any tricks for his basement machines.

“Aren't we supposed to be family?” Gregg asked our Uncle Rudi.

But the important thing, I came to learn, was that Uncle Rudi *could win* no matter what. He had figured out a way to beat the system. He could work around the weak claw grip and its incomplete close. Those machines in the basement were his trophy cases. He filled them with stuffed animals he'd won out on the real world machines and delighted in my consternation every time he could re-release an animal from its glass cage. Still, even while he liked that I thought his skill was a bit of magic, he always encouraged me to keep trying my hand at the machine. He wanted me to figure out the trick. He wanted an apprentice, I think, but not many others in the family took to the trade.

Uncle Rudi was Gramps' older brother, and in the hasty exodus from Germany followed by all those years at the Kohler plant, night and day, saving for a “better life,” he hadn't managed to have any kids. After Gram and Gramps' had set up house with six kids, so Uncle Rudi and *Tante* Dorthe turned their attention to them. Uncle Rudi had his chance to sway all five of my uncles plus my mother, but none of them really kept interest. Then, when my mom was the only one to have kids, Uncle Rudi didn't get to my brother early enough. Gregg grew into a very skeptical mind, always thinking about how he could unwind a problem on paper. He once performed a study he called “The Physics of the Claw” that proved, unequivocally, he said, the claw's inherent inability to grasp a prize. Then, Gregg

wiped his hands of the machine and went upstairs to play fetch with Schatzi. But me, I had imagination. That's what Uncle Rudi said. He could see my wonder in what others thought of as a small achievement, or an overblown parlor trick.

When we were over for lunch that afternoon, Gregg was watching football in the living room with Dad and Gramps. It was a cheese-head Sunday. All the women were in the kitchen, each responsible for a different part of the meal. Except me since I hadn't graduated to the kitchen yet. I was in the basement, standing on a wooden stool, practicing the claw machine while my Uncle Rudi looked on. I could hear Schatzi's nails scuttling across the wooden floor above me, running around with the plays unfolding on TV and replying in bursts of barking to my brother, Dad, and Gramps' shouting.

"Don't slosh that beer on my nice floor!" *Tante* Dorthe called from the kitchen.

I tried to keep my concentration, squishing my nose and forehead against the glass. My left hand held me stable while I drove the claw with my right hand. I had a rainbow striped stuffed dinosaur in my sights. I named him Color the first time I saw him. I decided he was the only surviving member of his rainbow T-Rex family after The Great Extinction 65 million years ago that Gregg told me about. His rainbow colors held onto the sun so he could survive while the big grey meteor cloud absorbed all the other grey dinosaurs and their food. But the glass reflected the sun, Color's life source, away from the claw machine. I had to free him to save him and take care of him. The problem was his head was so small that it'd slip right out of the claw every time.

Uncle Rudi embraced Color's mythology, "Look at him from all sides, not just the head, if you want to save him," he said.

I visualized every part of Color and thought really hard about how the claw could

pick him up from each angle. Uncle Rudi always said, “If you can see it, you can achieve it.”

“Go Pack Go!” My dad yelled above me.

I was ready to go.

I heard a building “Oooooooh” from Gramps and Gregg as I hovered the claw over the side of Color. It looked like I could get him around the belly after working hard to turn him to just the right angle. I heard Mom and Gram and *Tante* Dorthe rush into the living room from the kitchen. Schatzi was barking like mad.

“We...could...go...all...the...way...”

I pushed the big red button.

Uncle Rudi stood just off to the side, furiously nodding his head.

“Touchdown!” Gregg yelled.

My claw hooked on to Color’s belly and didn’t let go. I watched the black wrapped wires above the claw whirr and retract until Color was dropped behind the flap door on the bottom of the machine. Uncle Rudi hulked me, with Color in my hands, over his shoulder like the big orange tub of Gatorade the players on TV had.

Upstairs, everyone was still celebrating the touchdown that pulled the Packers into a slim lead before halftime.

“Color is freed!” Uncle Rudi announced.

When he set me down, *Tante* Dorthe squished my cheek and gave me a kiss. “This deserves some *lebkuchen*,” she said. She swatted my rear with a kitchen towel so I would go and get myself some from the box on the kitchen counter.

“And bring your Uncle a beer!” Uncle Rudi said, miming wiping sweat from his forehead and giving a “whew” sound.

“Ach!” Gram said and shook her head playfully at Uncle Rudi.

I had to be careful about getting to the cookies. They were on the counter between the stove and the fridge. Gram and Mom and *Tante* Dorthe had also left their tall glasses with the celery sticking out of them scattered around there. But I did get the *lebkuchen* out. I ate one right there in the kitchen and then I sat another one on the counter to take back out to the living room with me. It reminded me of watching Gram and *Tante* Dorte cook. They would always say to each other, “A little for the chef, a little for the rest,” while swishing a bottle between them. I opened the fridge and got out one of the beers in the green bottles, Uncle Rudi’s favorite. Then I went back to the family room with the cookie and the beer.

My mother blustered into the living room of her parents’ house. She disappeared for a while after dinner. I heard Gram and Gramps whispering about her having gone down to Charlie’s, but Charlie wasn’t in on Sundays. Probably she’d gotten Junior to let her in so they could talk about “the good old days.” They always got carried away when they talked about the good old days.

My mom came down to my level and smoothed my hair back. I’d had my head bent, playing with one of Gregg’s old puzzles on the floor. My hair was everywhere in front of my face. My mom smelt like tangy oatmeal and smoke so I knew she’d had beer. That was her drink when she was around her guy friends. In a strange way, I thought she looked pretty, like she’d let me put her “rouge” on for her. Her green eyes looked like marbles I wanted to play with.

“*Liebchen, liebchen,*” she said to me.

I was waiting for her to ask me to go to *Tante* Dorthe’s with her. I wanted her to ask me and I wanted to go, even though the whole time I knew I probably shouldn’t.

She gave me a kiss on the cheek, “How would you like to go see *Tante*?” She said it like the clown that offered me a balloon dog on my birthday. It made me nervous because she sounded like she forgot that we’d just seen *Tante* in the afternoon. My eyes got all screwed up looking at her, but I still smiled. I know because my mom told me I was her *liebchen* with the nice smile.

She started standing up and fixing her own hair when she realized she didn’t have her keys on her. By this time Gregg had come into the living room. He told me we should go play in the basement and helped me carry my unfinished puzzle down the stairs. My parents started yelling at each other. I could hear my dad saying, “Again? Again?” and something about “a perfectly nice afternoon with *Tante* and Rudi.” I heard a tussle. The bar stools screeched against the floor and something heavy fell. Everyone was grunting and panting above me. Gregg held my hand and asked me about the puzzle.

“You’re almost done with the outer frame,” he approved.

The basement door swung open. “Kids, I’m leaving, who’s coming with me?”

Gregg walked to the base of the steps so he could see my mother from the bottom. “We’ve got school,” he said.

“So you don’t want to come?” she jingled her keys impatiently and readjusted her purse strap.

Gregg shook his head. I looked up at my mother’s marbles for eyes then I looked up at my brother. I slipped around his side to stand at the foot of my mother.

“I want to go see Schatzi,” I said when Gregg stared at me, “I didn’t really get to play with him today since I was in the basement all afternoon.”

Gregg walked away from us. He started putting the puzzle away.

My mother and I didn’t go see Schatzi. Instead she drove us to the K-mart parking

lot, parked the car, and cried for a couple hours. She'd half-heartedly thrown half her wardrobe, which she kept at my grandparents' house for our long visits, into the back of the car. She told me how nothing was working out right. In the morning, she bought us a McDonald's breakfast platter to share. She let me put extra syrup on the pancakes. Then we drove home where Gregg and Dad were waiting. She shut herself up in her room for a week. When I asked if she was sleeping, Dad said she was just having a "lie-in" but she would be better soon. I asked Gregg if he knew what mom was doing and he said she was just having a "lie-in." When I asked what that meant, he said, "It's what mom's doing."

After that, on Saturday, Mom and Dad sent Gregg and me to spend the day with Gram and Gramps. Mom and Dad had grown-up things to do, they said. Gram hugged me and kissed me the second I walked in the door. When mom and dad drove away she promised everything would be alright now. Gramps took Gregg down to the basement so they could tinker with RTF model airplane he bought special for Gregg. Gram set me up at the breakfast bar with some papers and colored pencils. She even let me have her pink highlighter to play with. I tried to draw a flower, but it was hard to concentrate. Gram kept staring at me from across the bar. I wished Gregg were up here with me.

For lunch, Gram rounded up "the boys" and we went to Charlie's. Charlie was a big guy all ways: big belly, big arms and legs, big height, big smile on his big, bald head. I'd never seen him out of his shirtsleeves, long white cooker's apron and tiny little paper dinner hat. He gestured widely with a spatula when he talked. He didn't look old, but since Junior, his son, was my mom's age, I figured he must be the same age as my Gram and Gramps. The first time I thought of this, I asked Gram, "Why are all your friends your age?"

"Well why are all your friends your age?" She asked, nudging me on the shoulder.

“Gregg’s not my age,” I said.

At lunch, Gram ordered Gramps a burger on a Kaiser roll with extra onions. She ordered a small cup of chili for herself, gesturing with her hands, like she did every time, to indicate that she really just wanted a little bite. She was a petite woman, I knew from the PM’s on her clothes. She gave Gregg and me free run of the menu.

“Grilled cheese, please!” I said because it rhymed, and it was also polite, like Gram said I should always be conscious of.

“Chicken noodle soup?” Gregg said as a question.

Charlie nodded.

“Wait! I want chicken noodle soup too. Please,”

“Ooch, *albernes Äffchen*, silly monkey,” Charlie shook his head and smiled.

When Charlie went back to the kitchen, Gram shoed Gregg and me to the claw machine. She gave us a stack of quarters and told us to share.

“Here,” Gregg said, passing the entire stack to me once we got to the claw machine.

“I don’t want to play,”

“I could show you how to do it,” I said sheepishly, not quite looking at him, “I got Color out last week.”

“That was only from Uncle Rudi’s basement,” Gregg said.

I kept my head bent, concentrated on the lever for controlling the claw and the little orange slot where you placed the quarters.

Gregg sighed and it felt like something was coming down between us. “Why did you go with mom last week?” he asked.

“I thought she needed someone to go with her.”

“But she doesn’t, okay? When you see her with the shiny eyes —”

“The marbles?”

“Yes, the marbles,” Gregg turned me so we were face to face with me looking up at him.

“When you see her like that, you have to do what Grams says so she doesn’t go.”

He let the words “doesn’t go” hang over us for a second. I thought he must know that I wanted to go too.

“I’m sorry I wanted to see Schatzi,” I said.

“I’m sorry you didn’t get to see Schatzi,” he said.

Then Gregg let me use all of the quarters and he watched patiently while I explained the technique. When they were all gone, Gregg promised he would vouch for me with Uncle Rudi that I really had been close to freeing another animal from the glass cage. We got back to the table and a big man, like Charlie only a little more held together like a Packer on a Sunday, was just leaving, “Well, good seeing you again, Mr. and Mrs. Elmgren.” He waved with a carefree flick of his wrist with a magician’s twinkle in his eye.

“Bye now, Junior,” Gramps said.

Gregg and me sat down and just a moment later Charlie brought our food.

“*Gott verlassen jungen,*” Charlie said, shaking his head, “Pardon my language. I just can’t think what’s got into that boy. It’s enough just to get him in here to work on Sundays, but now he wants money for nothing and some Sundays off. I’m telling you, Dick,” He looked at my Gramps, “By his age, I’d already had my dinner in full swing, my family put up in a nice house and my very own Charlie Stumpf fiddles selling like hotcakes.” He shook his head again, “But what am I saying? Here’s your food,”

“Thanks Charlie,” Gramps said heartily.

Even Gram softened with Charlie’s presence. She said if we ate up quick we could

go to *Tante* and Rudi's after lunch, maybe find some chocolate cake for dessert. Gregg and me eyed each other from across the table. It was a silent, "Ready, set, go!"

"What a pleasant surprise!" *Tante* crooned when she answered the door. She was wearing her "Home Sweet Home" apron. She said we'd just caught her in the middle of baking some chocolate cake. She winked when she told us Uncle Rudi had polished off the last one last night. With our good timing on baking day, *Tante* decided it was time that I started learning my way around the kitchen so I could inherit the family recipes. She gave me a kiss that sounded like she was saying the word "smooch" up against my ear. She smelled like meadow grass up close. I followed her into the kitchen while Uncle Rudi got him and Gramps a beer from the green bottles.

"Just scooching in here," He said wiggling past *Tante* with a wink for each of his "girls." Gram had followed him into the kitchen, ready to help with my cooking lesson.

"Okay," *Tante* said dusting off her hands, "We start with the ingredients."

She had everything laid out already on the counter in sections of "dry" versus "wet" ingredients and started telling me everything I would need to know to work with flour, sugar, and cocoa in the future. She leaned in to tell me the secret ingredients: chocolate pudding and sour cream to give her the chocolate-y-est cake in town. That's what won her first place in the county fair last year, and the year before that too.

"She never would've thought of that chocolate pudding trick on her own," Gram winked at me.

"Okay, Miss Smarty-Hosen, then you tell her how to put the cake together," *Tante* winked back.

Gram took a "Bratwurst Queen" apron off the knob on the wall just as Schatzi

wandered into the kitchen like a king when we were blending the wet ingredients so the dry ones wouldn't clump. *Tante* saw me looking at him and gave me a swat on the rear, "Not until *after* baking and *washing* your hands." But she still smiled down at me and Schatzi. The kitchen was never a place for fighting or scolding. Gram and *Tante* continued instructing me between their joking back-and-forth.

I climbed a little stool to crack the eggs into the bowl on the counter. Schatzi waited expectantly for me at the bottom of the stool. I measured out the sugar and Schatzi pointed his nose up at me. After the pudding was ready, I let a blob fall off the spoon and splotch on the floor so Schatzi could lick it up. He looped around me and started licking my ankles in thanks.

"Ach," *Tante* and Gram said together. But then *Tante* showed Gram and me how to dampen our big toes with a towel and sprinkle some sugar on it for Schatzi. So there we all were, hopping around on one foot with our dampened toes in the air, trying to get Schatzi to stay still until we could actually get the sugar on our toes.

"Schatzi, Schatzi, my little dear," *Tante* said, "What you do to us,"

Gram and *Tante* put their shoes back on and started to clean the kitchen while the cake was in the oven. But since I was only a little girl, I didn't have to put my shoes on. They didn't even make me put my socks back on. I ran back and forth around the kitchen trying to get Schatzi to follow me under the false promise of more sugar toe.

"What's all this ruckus in here?" Uncle Rudi asked, trailing Grams and Gregg.

"It smells good whatever it is," Grams said.

"Cake's baking," Grams announced over her shoulder while washing dishes at the sink.

"*Wunderbar!*" Uncle Rudi reached in the fridge and got two more beers for him and

Gramps. He reached for a third one and offered it to my brother with an “Ahhh...ahhh...” sound. But then he put it back. “Someday soon,” Uncle Rudi said. He patted Gregg heartily on the back.

“And get the pino out while you’re at it,” *Tante* said laughing.

I saw the bottle come out of the fridge that *Tante* and Grams usually had while cooking. “Some for the chef?” I asked with a big, excited smile. I felt like I was growing up in this exact moment.

The kitchen got quiet for a second before Gram said, “Not today, baby,”

Tante shook her head too and said, “It wouldn’t do, you want to know why?” She moved me over to the round wooden table in the corner of the kitchen, pulled out a chair and sat me on her lap. She patted her hip once we were settled and Schatzi trotted over to sit at her knee. The rest of my family made an attentive semi-circle around me, *Tante* and Schatzi.

She told me the story of how Schatzi got his name. *Tante* used to call Uncle Rudi *Schatz* when they first started dating. She meant he was her sweetheart. Once, soon after they were married, Rudi and *Tante* on a picnic in the country. While Rudi was laying out the blanket and *Tante* was unpacking the picnic basket, a great grey poodle appeared at the top of the hill. She barked once with the wind running through her hair and making her look like a queen. She came sashaying, *Tante* said, down the hill to the picnic she and Rudi had made in the valley. By the time she got to them, they could see an old man ambling after her in a thick grey sweater. He had a woven basket over his arm. Rudi protected the food while *Tante* pet the poodle. When the old man got to them, he explained that his dog had just had puppies. He already had a big family at home with his wife, so he wanted to sell off the puppies. *Tante* didn’t even have to ask Rudi. He scrounged up just enough for a puppy for *Tante*.

“I had to bargain him down an awful lot, remember?” Uncle Rudi added.

Well, once *Tante* had that little puppy poodle in her arms, she knew she wanted to call her Schatzi in honor of her sweetheart. Adding the “-i” made Schatzi her little sweetheart. And she took care of her little sweetheart every day for the rest of Schatzi’s life. She took care of every future generation of Schatzi in the same way and gave each poodle the same name as a family name, a little homage. And each little Schatzi was as sweet as the last, she said.

“It’s the same reason mumma calls you *leibchen*. *Leibe* is love,” and here she paused to pat my chest where my heart is and then her own chest where her heart is, “and the *-chen* makes it little. You’re her little love and our little girl. You have to do little girl things now. There’s plenty of time for you to do big girl things much, much later.” She kissed me again and set my bare feet on the floor so they made a kissing sound with the laminate.

The kitchen timer dinged and the spell on my family broke. Gramps and Uncle Rudi started “shooting the breeze” again. Gregg came over to show me the old ball and jacks set Uncle Rudi had dug up from the basement for him to have. Our Schatzi barked and did his little circle dance.

Since the night my mother got drunk in front of her own parents, Gregg and me spent every Saturday like this for years, going over to Gram and Gramps’, eating lunch at Charlie’s, then spending the rest of the evening with *Tante* and Rudi.

We did this until Gregg went away to college when I was 14. Home felt even sadder and quieter than usual with him gone. Mom needed her “lie-ins” closer and closer together these days. By the time I got my permit the next year, I was pretty much moved in with *Tante* and Rudi. I kept Color on a shelf Uncle Rudi built special for me above my bed in

their guest room. Our old Saturdays shifted to Schatzi's grooming days so *Tante* and me could still spend time together.

I started taking *Tante* to the groomers every other weekend to get Schatzi "seen to." Underneath her playful aprons she rotated every time she cooked, *Tante* had impeccable taste in everything from clothing to home furnishing to dog grooming. She liked everything to look dear, or darling or "just so." Schatzi's good looks mattered to her as much as her own, and later mine, did. But even though Schatzi was appallingly well groomed, his curls started to get that droop that betrayed him as an old dog. Sometimes, privately, so *Tante* wouldn't get sad, I thought of him as Schatz instead of Schatzi. He wasn't so little anymore, but I tried to catch myself from thinking like that. Schatzi was still my puppy at heart and *Tante* and me still had our Saturday appointments with him.

While I was living with *Tante* and Rudi, Gram and Gramps set me up with a job at Charlie's. I waitressed in the afternoons when school let out and helped him balance his receipts some nights. Thanks to Gregg I had developed what he called, "a keen mind for math," in one of the letters he wrote home to me. Once, Charlie asked me if I could work a Sunday to fill in for Junior. Schatzi had a vet appointment in the morning, but I told him I could come in on the lunch shift and stay through dinner.

He told me we could open a little late that day, "And take the key with you before you leave tonight."

That Sunday, I walked to Charlie's from *Tante* and Rudi's. When I got there, I could see a big guy hanging around the front door. I thought it was Charlie until I got closer.

"Junior?"

"Hey you," he broke into a grin and leaned with one arm against the building's brick

front. He didn't look like someone who used to be a football player. He looked like someone who still was a football player.

"I thought I was filling in for you," I used Charlie's key to open the door.

He moved out of my way and leaned a hand through the doorway to signal I should go in first. "So that's where Pop put the keys,"

He had a way of sounding like he was one of my high school classmates, but for some reason it didn't sound weird coming out of someone my mother's age. He disappeared in the back room and made a mess of clanging around. The latch to the back door clunked back and I heard the door swing open. Two guys started mumbling and grunting while moved something full of jingling and clanging pieces into the back room.

I rushed into the back room, "What's the ruckus?"

Junior introduced his friend, Lanny Drews, who looked younger than Junior but older than me. He was a bit on the slim side and had shaggy hair that skimmed the top of his eyebrows. Lanny held a cardboard box, full of bells and sticks and pie pans and springs, somewhat clumsily in one arm. He waved to me with his free hand.

"We've got a project to do," Junior smiled.

Lanny set down the box and started tinkering with the pieces, examining each piece carefully before placing them all into like piles.

"Want to help?" Junior asked.

The pieces started to look familiar from the pictures of polka festivals that lined the walls of Charlie's dinner.

"Are you counterfeiting Charlie's own Stumpf fiddle?" I asked.

"I'm his son, aren't I?" Junior said, "I'm just inheriting my legacy."

"I've got work to do," I eyed them both, "Be good."

Sundays we closed at eight. The night was slow. I spent most of the time listening to the hammering and thumping of the Stumpf fiddles in progress. When I started the clean-up for close, Junior poked out from the back room. He had his leather jacket on.

“Almost done,” he said.

I nodded.

“Want to get out of here?”

I tried to see around him to the back room.

“Lanny’s coming too.” He said, “We’re just going to make a pit stop on the way to pick up Lanny’s squeeze.”

He zipped his jacket a little higher.

“Where are you going?”

“Cow tipping.” He laughed.

Gregg told me once that for all the Wisconsin lore about it, it was actually impossible to tip a cow. Cows simply didn’t scare like that and they had too solid of a body mass to be tipped. Gregg said immature high school boys made up cow tipping so they could have a trouble making Friday night ready to make them sound cool in their small town. But for some reason, I wanted to go tonight, anyway. I was feeling good, I was doing well in school and I was happy at home. Going out with coworkers after work felt like the normal, fun thing to do. So I got in Junior’s car and drove with him, Lanny and Stacy, Lanny’s equally scrawny girlfriend, to the Smithfield Farm.

Cow tipping turned out to be a small fire on the edge of the Smithfield property. We sat on big rocks around the fire Junior made. He passed out some PBR’s he’d brought with him from the car. Both him and Lanny had carried a case on their shoulders to our bonfire. Junior and me were sharing a case.

After a while, I lost track of how many beers, Lanny and Stacy disappeared. Junior sat beside me on my rock. He commented on the nice night and the view of the farm and my green eyes. He asked me if I knew how much I looked like my mother. Then, with his whole hand he reached up the side of my face and tangled his fingers in the side of my hair. He started leaning in.

“No – ” I said.

“Kelly,” He said.

“Kelly’s my mom’s name.” I said.

I saw a light pass through Junior’s eyes. He dropped his hand from my hair. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” He kept repeating, “I’m sorry.”

He got up quickly from the rock. “I’ll drive you home.” He touched his forehead, “I’m too drunk to drive.”

Out of the darkness he threw me his keys. I caught them just before they hit me in the face. “Can you drive?”

I nodded without thinking. Junior hollered something into the woods and Lanny and Stacy reappeared. We hiked back to Junior’s car, in silence except for the puppy murmurings of Stacy into Lanny’s neck and the occasional swigging sound of Lanny at the neck of his beer. I drove us back to Charlie’s and walked home to *Tante* and Uncle Rudi’s.

On my sixteenth birthday, Schatzi died. *Tante* Dorthe woke up one morning and found him lying in his bed with his limbs straight out. She came to my room and got under the covers with me. She stared at the ceiling while she told me Schatzi had gone. She gave a small noise like a twig breaking in shallow water. Then *Tante* dabbed the corners of her eyes rolled over and hugged me.

“My sweetheart’s gone,” *Tante* said.

I thought about how our Schatzi was the first boy Schatzi *Tante* had. She always kept the girl puppies so she could be with the mom and take care of her while she had her puppies. This time there would be no more puppies.

Tante must’ve sensed what I was thinking. She said, “It think it is the end of the line this time.” She made the twig breaking noise again. I hugged her for a long time.

“You know how much I love you, right?” *Tante* asked.

When *Tante* phoned the family to tell everyone what the vet had said about a “slow expiration process,” that took Schatzi painlessly, everyone said what a good, long life Schatzi had had. Except for my mother, who, my dad told me later over the phone, took to her room and cried softly for days and days. He asked if I could come home soon.

The silence in the house felt heavy when I finally came home. The air was stale. It sat on my chest, the way it always did after one of mom’s “lie-ins.” I fingered the keys in my pocket. On a sudden thought, I back-tracked to the garage door. The door gave way with a gentle release like pursed lips pulling apart. I parked in the driveway because I assumed my dad was home, but the garage was empty.

“Acch” I muttered.

"*Leibchen?*" A syrupy voice from somewhere above called.

Upstairs, my mother was half-sitting, half-leaning against the bed. Her Stuff Box sat open on the floor next to her bed. Lots of things were spilling out. Her yearbook from North High was opened to the page my Uncle Donnie designed as editor of the yearbook. It was his senior year, so her sophomore. Next to step-by-step pictures, he’d written a rhyming poem about how to roll a joint. My mom thought it was pretty much the coolest thing

anyone could do. She idolized her brother Donnie, but he died in a hang gliding accident when I was three. It seemed the grief was travelling fast.

"Bring me your wash, *meine liebe*" She said.

I hung around for a moment waiting for my mom to say something after I brought her my laundry. But she stayed quiet. I went back to my room and closed the door, sliding my weight down the other side.

It wasn't long before she called me back to her room. She told me to put away my laundry. I looked doubtfully down at the pile of clothes on her bed. My dirty clothes, still dirty, she had nicely hung up on hangers.

"How would you like to go see *Tante*?" I asked.

She let me take her there. *Tante* called Gram when we got there. We stayed up all night – me, mom, Gram, and *Tante* – all around the kitchen table.

"Wasn't Schatzi a good dog," my mom said.

Qué será

In Spanish, to say ‘he had a tragic death’ you have to use the preterit aspect of the past tense. There are two ways to express the past: either in the imperfect or the preterit. And the verb for ‘to have’ is one of those weird ones that changes meaning in the past depending upon which aspect you use. For instance, ‘to have’ in the imperfect sense means that you had, as in possessed something, whereas ‘to have’ in the preterit sense means that you had, as in received or got something. It is grammatically incorrect to say that you had a tragic death in the imperfect because you do not possess your own death. You need your body, which being dead you no longer have, in order to enact that tenuous quality of possession. Your death, then, is that entrance into the foreign land, where *chaneques* have leave to attack you and frighten your soul from your body before burying it deep within the bowels of the earth.

This was a high school Spanish class we were learning this in. But I think it’s fair to mention that mi maestra was vastly over qualified for public school. She had her doctorate in language and literature and was constantly telling us that “Literature is sex and death!” We were reading a story about a sugar cane farmer who trips in the field and lands stomach first on his machete, leaving his unknowing wife behind. We spent a fair bit of time going over the poetic implications of the grammar which made his death beautiful.

“It’s starting to creep me out,” Hart said after class.

Working together had made us better friends in school. We used to be the kind of convenient acquaintances that existed on the same class track. Occasionally we threw each other stories about how our weekends went. But once he heard me complaining about how I got let go from my old job because the store was going out of business. He told me he could get me an interview where he worked at El Bistec. El Bistec was a steak house as upper

crust as a Tex-Mex place could possibly be. We used our story learned Spanish there so our boss couldn't hear us complain whenever he called one of us Hartford or Lucinda.

"That would not be the best way to go," I agreed.

Hart was excited by this conversation now. He picked up his pace down the hallway, "What would be?"

"Freezing to death." I said, "You wouldn't even feel it. It would be like slowly falling asleep before you even die."

"You read that in a book."

"No, I read that an icicle would be the best murder weapon from a book."

"Let's hit this more at tonight's *sobremesa*." He held his eyebrows straight like a challenge, as if he took our mandatory employee bonding hours seriously.

"Ah! I'd love to, but I won't be there tonight. I got Big Momma to cover my shift for me."

"But he always does openings on Thursdays. How did you get him to agree to double up for the evening shift?"

"Easy," I said, circling my finger around my pleading face, "Big Momma loves me."

Hart touched off my shoulder, "So what is the Lovely Lucy up to tonight?"

I sighed, "A funeral."

My mom's friend's dad's neighbor had died.

"Pam's a really good friend." My mom said, "She's going to be a wreck left, right and sideways," she was laying a gold chain link necklace up to her black dress to see if it would match the buttons, "I think it would be good to lend her some support at the funeral. And he held you once when you were a baby, you know."

I didn't know, but that wasn't particularly important. My mother took me to a lot of funerals while I was growing up. Together we had dressed in black for any vague connection. I was the promise of youth while she was more like one of those hired *carpideiras* I had heard existed in places where professional mourning is taken very seriously.

I was looking for my nylons when my dad settled himself in my doorway. He asked me if I had eaten dinner yet. He was still disheveled from work, holding his soft leather shoes by the backs in his first two fingers. He was going to have an empty house once my mom and I left. He didn't understand why I went to these things with her.

I found my nylons at the back of my sock drawer, "Someone has to," I said.

We went to a newly opened funeral home. For the past six months they had a sunshine sign up at the intersection that advertised their arrival with a "Coming Soon". Inside it looked like the well-kept home of a society wife. We were ushered into a formal living room lined with gilded metal-work chairs. A few cream couches were clustered in the back corners to each side of the double wide entrance. Handfuls of well-groomed people were milling around and chatting in hushed circles.

I always liked to sit right away and look somber the whole time. I never knew what else to do. But when Pam came up the center aisle my mom immediately went forward to meet her. They kissed each other's cheeks. Then Pam bent down in a half fold to hug me close across the shoulders. She had very brittle arms poking out of her quarter length sleeves. We stood a while as my mom and Pam talked with sad faces. Pam was the representative from the Sabattoni family at the funeral. Her dad was back in the hospital and her older siblings didn't live here anymore. As people walked by she touched them on the

shoulders and murmured greetings.

An old woman with cropped gray hair walked over to us. She called us all dears and held a crumpled tissue in her fist, though her face looked mostly composed.

My mom held her in a long hug and called her Margerie dear. When they separated she touched her one hand to the bottom of her elaborate chain links and held the other one backwards on her hip. She discomposed her face.

“Remember Lucinda?” My mom asked, giving me a nudge forward with her hipped elbow.

I straightened up on cue from my standing slump.

Margerie was fascinated, staring at me with her soft eyes, “So nice of you to come,”

“Alfie used to hold her when she was a baby,” my mom said.

“And don’t you look so nice,” she switched the tissue to her other hand and kept staring.

My mom made a slight sad smile and inclined her head towards Margerie.

I switched the cross of my arms, not sure what else to say. I tried to pull my sides closer together with the searching tips of my fingers.

My mom stepped closer to me and I felt the plush carpet sink a little around me.

“Why don’t you tell Margerie about how well you’re doing in school,” my mom prompted. To Margerie she said, “She’s got such a bright future ahead of her,” She said it almost like a condolence. Margerie nodded.

I saw a plain clothed pastor appear at the front of the room. I was ready to sit on my hands. It was going to be another twenty-five more minutes or so before we all lined up to walk past old Alfie. Then back at Margie’s my mother would suggest I sing a little something to brighten everyone’s spirits a bit.

I first moved to a small suburb of the Dallas-Fort Worth area when I was thirteen. The seventh-grade Halloween Dance was the first big social event of my life, surprising for a Dallas upbringing where white girls with good hair almost certainly had pageant duties every weekend of their lives since they were seven. My mom felt like she truly belonged in the city, but my dad was sick of home being as hectic as work. There's too much too much in the city, my dad said before we left.

I fell in almost immediately with a girl from my enrichment class who talked a lot and was astonished by my brown hair, a furious chestnut really, that fell heavy as a log down my back. We were only close friends for that one year that we shared the same section lead teacher, but I owe meeting Hart to her.

“We absolutely have to go to the dance on Friday!” Katie said, “What do you want to be?”

Somehow we settled on both being fifties girls when I went to her house after school. Her mother measured us for felt skirts and by the end of the week we were both walking around her kitchen in poodle skirts waiting for our pink nails to dry. We seemed like absurd balloon versions of ourselves with our new diameters.

Katie pulled us into the gym, covered in black and orange streamers, to survey the crowd. She saw a group of three other girls she recognized and called out a “Hey!” with an exaggerated wave. She rushed over to meet them with me in tow by the wrist. I stood slightly apart from the group, but listened intently while they talked about various boys from class. I felt a tap on my shoulder and when I turned around slightly, I saw a blonde boy, tall at an age when girls usually outstrip boys, standing confidentially behind me.

“You're new,” he said.

I nodded. The rest of the girls looked on and smiled, finding this real life example of boy much more exciting than their conversational reconstructions.

“Yea,” I said.

“Want to dance?”

I took his hand, but then glanced back at Katie for a moment. She had been so nice to me by inviting me over to her house and getting ready for the dance with me. I didn’t want to completely ditch her. But she pushed me in his direction and I felt a sweep of giddiness.

He led me very expertly to the middle of the dance floor.

“I’m Hart,” he said.

He was dressed in a button down white shirt and black pants that could’ve only been passed off as a waiter’s costume. In fact, Hart, like this in his white button down, is the image I have intrinsically tied to the word *camarero*. Waiter, in Spanish. But more than likely Hart just didn’t bother to find a costume for the dance. There was an undeniable cool to Hart that I felt just around the boundaries of his body.

“How do you like it here?” he asked.

“I like it,” I said, feeling like I should match him in nonchalance.

Hart laughed, “Yea it’s okay,” he was easing me into comfortable conversation, “But the teachers are good.”

He had been leading me around in such a comfortable waltz that it was only when it ended that I realized he had been doing anything at all. I felt a cool spot on my back from where his hand had been.

“So I’ll see you in class,” Hart said, which is pretty much the only place we saw each other until we started working together.

Seven o'clock was happy hour at El Bistec. For girls the uniform was a red silk blouse with black slacks. For guys the uniform was a red polo with black slacks. Big Momma buffed up his uniform with a black bracelet featuring repeated portraits of the Virgen de Guadalupe. He was a tall black guy with a shaved head who claimed his mother was half Mexican. He was the only one who would admit he loved doing the happy hour line dance. That was how we kicked off happy hour on the weekends. When we heard the opening chords of an up-tempo version of "*Cielito Lindo*" we knew it was time to take our starting positions in the pass way between the bar and the table seating.

How to do the happy hour line dance was the only thing I actually got trained for. Keith Miller, Manager went over the foot work thoroughly on the night my fellow new hires and I came in to fill out our paper work for the job and learn the general ins and outs of our duties.

"The rest is pretty self-explanatory," Keith said.

The first night I worked at El Bistec it was a Friday night. Big Momma was the one who greeted me at the door with a whooping "*Hola!*" I thought he must have been Assistant Manager or something with the way he took authority. He showed me where I could stash my coat and gave me an impromptu tour of the place. He wove me around the dining room pointing out Reggie's and Ben's and Tess's sections. We walked through the horseshoe kitchen, a glaring white and chrome mix from the low lit, dark wood paneling of the restaurant's front. Right outside the swinging door at the other end of the kitchen was the door to the food storage room that the host and wait staff were allowed to use. It was where we kept the extra rolls and the makings of a house salad.

"Sometimes I sneak a quick snack in here," Big Momma said, "These rolls've got

some cinnamon baked right in. Just rub them in your hands for a second before you dig in,”

I pushed the clear plastic of the bun bag down to survey the ice coating, “I think you’d want to warm them in the kitchen,”

Big Momma clapped me on the back, “I love you,”

He held me under his armpit and walked us back to the front of the restaurant. Once he deposited me at the host stand, he snuck a peek at a beeper on his belt loop.

“Gotta run!” He said, “Places to go, people to see,”

I saw him head back in the direction of the food storage.

I sighed and put my hands on the outer edge of the stand. I tapped my fingers up and down, adjusting to my new surroundings and trying to figure out what I should be doing. Taped to the top of the stand was a laminated layout of the restaurant with tick marks under waiter’s names on the right and black dots marking the tables that were currently occupied. The back of the stand was open with a shelf underneath. The schedule for the week was lying in a packet to the right. Hart wasn’t working that night which made me a little nervous. Next to the papers was a bottle full of grapefruit juice with “Big Momma” written on the label. I almost knocked it over when Keith startled me.

“Look sharp Lucinda!” he said.

I shot up trying to steady the host stand at the same time.

He tapped his leather-banded watch, “It’s just about happy hour,”

I nodded.

“Have you seen Clifford?”

I gave him a puzzled look and he told me about how Clifford was a friend of the family. And wasn’t it nice that Clifford was turning his life around and supporting his mother? He was the oldest son after all with three younger sisters to look to besides. Keith

just liked to check in on him.

An imposing ring of trombones began to sound over the speakers. Out of nowhere, Big Momma appeared to sweep me off my feet in a waltz. He twirled us over to the space in front of the bar.

“Clifford!” Keith called after us.

Big Momma wasn’t listening.

“Ay ay ay ay! Canta y no llores! Porque cantando se allegran cielito lindo los corazones!”

Sing and don’t cry! Because hearts are made glad by singing, beautiful little sky!

Big Momma taught me how to sing along.

I dressed in red for the first funeral I ever went to. Although, it was from one of those times of life when a girl doesn’t dress herself. She puts on whatever is laid at the end of her bed. I hadn’t built up my repertoire of black dresses yet. My red velvet dress with the fluffy white lace skirt was a relic from an old family-photo studio session.

I had to be pulled early from school in order to go. The office called my classroom right in the middle of morning story hour to say my mother was there to pick me up. When I went to meet her she fixed my hair and straightened my bow barrette. She straightened my dress as well which had gotten twisted up by going through the morning lessons.

It took us a long time to get to the funeral which was actually in the city. The funeral home was tiny. It was an old brownstone at the end of a row of buildings on the block. It had its own tiny parking lot behind a building on the other side of the street. My mom held my hand as we crossed the street, completely devouring it in hers. Everything was gray and brown and black from the steely sky to the iron wrought railings on the side of the cracked

cement steps. The paint around the door was chipping. It was a cold day and even on the inside it was cold. The floor boards creaked beneath the thin pelt of a carpet.

All the people here were large. The women were big breasted and the men wore wide sport coats. Whenever anyone entered they had to swerve to the right to avoid going straight up the stairs which led to the funeral home's offices. The main room set up for the service was a tight white paneled square with a fading red rose wreath set on an easel at the front. As we went in my mom introduced herself to the people we passed. This was my dad's side of the family. My great aunt's husband might have died. But in any case, it was a large man. He had a heart attack.

We sat in the front row by my red faced Aunt Dora. She was still trying to calm her choking sobs. I looked down at my lap and started picking at my lace. My mom shot me a look as she reached out to hold my aunt and say how sorry she was about her terrible, terrible loss. I immediately pulled back my hands and tried to settle myself in my seat. The chairs were kind of uncomfortable.

I heard the booming voices of everyone around me mixed in with the smooth running talk of my mother. I started to feel the twitching take hold in my legs so I swung them back and forth beneath my seat. I took turns closing opposite eyes as each foot came into sight. My mother looked at me again over Aunt Dora's head. It was her idea for us to sit on either side of her. I crossed my ankles quickly under my chair and pointed my toes so the tips of my Mary-Janes were standing on the floor. My hands were knotted up in my lap. I tried to sit up a little straighter. It was important that I be on my best behavior for someone so young.

My mom became sadder as various relatives read their eulogies. She reached out for my hand across Aunt Dora's lap, which made Aunt Dora cry even harder at such a beautiful

moment. Lots of people were talking to each other and crying in loud bursts as the service was going on.

When we were leaving my mom stopped us on the cement steps. She bent down so she would be on my level and hugged me to her. I had to lean forward to reach my mom and avoid hitting her knees. She moved me to arm's length and looked at me very seriously.

“You're a good girl,” she said.

It didn't feel like anything.

In school, I asked Hart about Big Momma but he didn't know much besides the fact that Big Momma was proud of his Mexican heritage and loved to dance. Hart said he was a fun guy to be around and that was all he needed to know. After a minute he added that Big Momma's real name was Clifford Jones, but he only heard Keith call him that once and he was sure Keith was the only one who could ever get away with it.

I was scheduled with Big Momma a lot. I worked the host stand while he bussed or waited tables or made drinks if the bartender was swamped. He did a bit of everything really and he did it well, even though Keith was constantly checking up on him.

Every fifteen minutes, if we weren't immediately occupied, we had to wipe down the restrooms with a spray and a paper towel. One guy and one girl did this on a shift. When I worked with Hart, he would go into the men's room at the beginning of our shift and sign off every time slot for bathroom cleaning. It became a joke between the two of us that he would do anything at El Bistec besides clean the bathrooms. But when I worked with Big Momma he was always alert to the fifteen minute mark. Big Momma sang as he wiped down the toilets, usually in Spanish. His favorite song was “*Cielito Lindo*”. Between him and happy hour I had the song memorized within a month of starting.

He came up behind me the next time we worked together after he covered for me.

“*De la Sierra Morena,*” he sang, “*cielito lindo, vienen bajando!*”

I shook my brown hair to the side as if my head were the dark and powerful Sierra Mountains. I took up the strain with my dark eyes shining, “*un par de ojitos negros, cielito lindo, de contrabando,*”

“Ay ay ay,” Hart said, walking back from the food storage room with two baskets of rolls, “You guys are singing all the time.” We were all working together that night.

Big Momma took a basket from Hart to help him set up the tables, “It’s a beautiful thing to sing,” He said, “Keeps up the joy!”

It was a busy Friday night that kept the three of us apart for most of it. At the start of happy hour Big Momma waltzed me out to the bar as usual and Hart took his place on the other side of me. We footed back-front, back-front, back-front to the left and clap. Then a lasso move took us back to the right and clap. We linked arms and heel-toed the right, then the left. We clapped in place and repeated. Every Ay! got a clap. There was a big finish with our hands in the air after our hearts.

I saw Big Momma check his beeper and head back to the food storage room. When he came out he stopped by the host stand to grab a swig of his grapefruit juice.

He smiled at me, “Having a good night?”

I nodded as another couple walked up to be seated. I passed Hart on the way back who was taking them their basket of rolls. We made eye contact and he licked his lips and mouthed “Yum.”

It was just time to spruce up the women’s room. When I pushed my shoulder into the swinging door, I could already hear Big Momma singing in the men’s room across the hall. When I was done cleaning I came out into the hall where Keith was standing with his hand

on Big Momma's shoulder, "Really good job tonight, Clifford."

Keith looked up when I came out and gave me a big grin like I was doing a good job too, like everyone in the whole restaurant, in fact, was making it run in tip top shape and Keith couldn't be happier or prouder. He patted me on the back as he went to sweep around the rest of the restaurant. Big Momma looked a little uncomfortable. I smiled at him to break the tension. He almost looked away. He looked embarrassed that I heard his real name, and on multiple occasions.

"Mexican women are strong," he said, almost out of nowhere, "I want to be like those big women of the house."

"I know." I said.

After work, Hart, Big Momma and I clocked out at the same time. Hart was on his way in a confident stride to his car, but I pulled back to loiter around the curb. Big Momma was waiting around the curb too, ready to make bored circles with his pacing.

"Need a ride?" Hart asked, noticing the lag.

"I have to wait for my mom," I said, "She said she wanted to talk to me about something so she's coming to get me tonight,"

"Intriguing," He said with an eyebrow raise, waiting a minute longer to make sure I was sure. Inexplicably he leaned in to hug me goodbye, "See ya later,"

I went back to sit on the curb as the restaurant darkened behind me. Big Momma sat down next to me and threw his arms over my shoulders. I wasn't even shocked anymore by how easily he touched people.

"Hi Big Momma," I said.

He gave me a nice long squeeze.

“Thanks,” he said.

I expected it was for using the name he had picked out for himself, but I wasn't entirely sure. Still, I felt a moment building and I didn't want to ruin it by admitting my uncertainty in the face of such soul awakening.

“Did you know I was in Clearheart for a semester last year?” Big Momma asked.

I hadn't known. In fact, I couldn't even picture the big, jovial Big Momma ambling down the halls of a correctional facility for wayward youth. I put my hand over the hand he had dangling in his lap.

“Some small time theft put me there, but it was a onetime thing really. Too bad the pharmacy didn't see it that way. Obviously I got fired and shut up in Clearheart. And you can bet they called me Clifford Jones like they wanted to remind me I was a black kid. Not that Keith knows that, not that anyone knows that.” – Big Momma emphasized that part – “I guess he's just trying to build me up to be a man for my mother. He's pretty fond of her, you know, and I know she's proud of me out and with a job again. But the truth is, I'd rather be more like her than a man for her,”

I nodded and wrapped my hand around his tighter, but knew it wasn't time for me to add anything just yet.

“I really admire my mother, you know. She knows how to hold her family,”

That made me think of my own mom, how she felt artificially close to people for her own pathos. I didn't know what to make of that except that I would not be modeling myself after her like Big Momma had done with his mother. I would not be proud to take on a maternal identity if that meant turning me into the type of maternal that is my mother.

It turned out my mom had read in the paper that Arnold Kempton died. He had an

account at the bank where she worked and came in every Friday at eight o'clock in the morning to deposit his paycheck. He was a sweet old man who told her all about his two grown daughters. One who lived in New York and worked on Wall Street and one who just had her third child. My mom told him about my impending graduation. She felt like she was part of the family.

The funeral was scheduled for Sunday. I was scheduled to work. My mom asked me to go with her to Arnold's funeral anyway. I stared at the TV that was on in the background to avoid answering her. The weather channel was on, giving the forecast for the remainder of the week. It was going to be unseasonably warm for spring, a heat wave even for the Southwest.

"I think we should go to Galveston, mom,"

She looked at me like I was crazy. I started detailing to her how we could spend the whole day together at the beach and then go swimming in the deep *azul* waters of the Gulf. I thought we could walk around the town and tell everyone we met that we were from Belize and strut like important foreigners. It would be like our own private joke. Only we would know each other.

"But what about Arnold's funeral?" My mom asked.

"Mom, you don't know Arnold." I said.

She thought I was taking my dad's side.

I didn't go to Arnold Kempton's funeral. My mom and I didn't go to Galveston. What I did was go to work. I was happy to put on my red blouse and black slacks. I was looking forward to the impromptu *sobremesa* that Keith had planned in celebration of a booming month of business at El Bistec. This was my family.

“*Bueno* Lucy,” Hart said as I walked into the restaurant.

“*Buen día*,” I said smiling. Good day, good choice to come to work.

Hart looked at his watch. It was pretty slow this early on a Sunday afternoon.

“Want to hit the bathrooms while we have time?” Hart asked.

“You want to get the bathrooms *terminados*?” I was feigning shock.

Hart smiled and picked up a pen from underneath the host’s stand while I grabbed a cleaning supply bucket from behind the bar. When I came back out of the bathroom, Hart was leaning against the wall with his arms folded and the pen slanted behind his ear. He was giving me that ironic look like it took me long enough. Then he grabbed the bucket out of my hands and carried it for me to put it away.

We were playing tic-tac-toe on the back of a paper place setting when Keith hustled over to the host stand. Like two misbehaving children we quickly stuffed the place setting behind the stand and tried to shush each other into acting natural.

Keith was flustered, “Have you seen Clifford?” he asked.

Hart and I shook our heads.

“He was supposed to be here to open, but when I got in I had to do everything myself,”

“Maybe he just forgot,” Hart suggested, “Opening was only, what, an hour ago?”

Keith wondered what had gotten into Clifford. He looked like he was ready for more responsibility, and usually always took more of it anyway to pick up the slack for others. But there was not time to dwell now. He was expecting the Sunday senior crowd any second now.

“Hartford, you start bundling silverware,” he delegated, “And Lucinda, the salads,”

I made my way over to the food storage room. There was no rush. When I pulled on

the door it was jammed. “Ay, ay, ay, ay,” I sang, throwing my body weight into the pull to get some movement out of the door.

Big Momma was lying on the floor like a large baby. I dropped to my knees around him. He was so cold to the touch. What was going on? What was happening? I didn’t get it. Why was he in the food storage room? It was so exceptionally cold. There was a dull beeping in the room. I bent down and found the source at the beeper on Big Momma’s belt loop. With how he was lying on his side, I had to lift his arm, with the Virgen de Guadalupe bracelet on it, to get a good look at it. I found out it really wasn’t a beeper after all.

“Hart!” I called, then “Hart!” and “Hart!” again.

Keith got to me first and rushed in. When Hart got to the room he pulled me up backwards by my armpits. He was pulling me out of the cold. Somehow an ambulance got there and there were swarms of men surrounding Big Momma, which seemed absurd that a little circus had sprang up around one sleeping man. I couldn’t figure out how everyone got there. Some customers were trying to enter the restaurant and Hart had to turn them away. Reggie and Tess showed up soon after that. Hart told them to hang by the bar for a while and stay out of the way as much as possible. There were so many people there all of a sudden until suddenly there weren’t. There was only the empty space on the floor where Big Momma had been.

Soon Keith came back into the restaurant. He had been talking to the ambulance men out back. He said Big Momma went into a diabetic coma in the food storage room. He wasn’t looking at any of us, “You can all go home,” he said, “Clifford won’t be coming back.” His mouth twitched a little like he almost thought of saying Big Momma.

There was no way not to feel this. That this person who was in my life for so many months now was not going to be in my life anymore. That there were no more months, that I had lost my friend. That I would never sing “*Cielito Lindo*” again. Hart was behind me out of nowhere. I was aware of a tiny trap door in the bottom of my mind made to catch all these sad things, but I might never forgive myself if I put them all away. I held on to Hart and braced myself.

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- “All the Skinny Jeans in State College Want Sloppy Seconds” published on the College of the Liberal Arts at Penn State Blog, <http://blogs.la.psu.edu/laus/2012/02/all-the-skinny-jeans-in-state-college-want-sloppy-seconds.html>
- “V for VAGANZA” published on the College of the Liberal Arts at Penn State Blog, <http://blogs.la.psu.edu/laus/2012/01/v-for-vaganza.html>, Jan. 25, 2012
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Fiction

- “Dan in the Radio Kitchen” published in *Problem Child*, A Penn State Literary Magazine, pg. 7, Spring 2011
- “The Closed Window, 1889” published in *Problem Child*, A Penn State Literary Magazine, pg. 29, Spring 2011
- “Not Knowing Holds its own Bliss” published in *Problem Child*, A Penn State Literary Magazine, pg. 8, Spring 2010

Poetry

- “Mother Work” published in *Problem Child*, A Penn State Literary Magazine, pg. 19, Fall 2011
- “On the Fringe” published in *Problem Child*, A Penn State Literary Magazine, pg. 11, Spring 2011
- “Twice” published in *Problem Child*, A Penn State Literary Magazine, pg. 4, Fall 2010
- “In the Evening” published in *Problem Child*, A Penn State Literary Magazine, pg. 11, Fall 2010
- “A short one, so it’s easy to remember” published in *Problem Child*, A Penn State Literary Magazine, pg. 1, Spring 2010

Grants and Fellowships:

- Liberal Arts Undergraduate Enrichment Award (Penn State University, Spring 2011, Fall 2011), \$250

Awards and Honors:

- Katey Lehman Award for Fiction, 2012

Skills and Qualifications:

- Doris, Mac OS, Microsoft Office, ProTools, Windows 7
- Fluent in Spanish

References:

Available upon request