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LETTERS TO THE OUTSIDE WORLD
A COLLECTION OF ORIGINAL SHORT FICTION

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ABSTRACT

Letters to the Outside World is a collection of short fiction composed of four distinct but thematically interlocking stories. As a whole, these stories explore the related concepts of place and identity, as well as touch on certain gender issues. In each piece, the dynamics of personal relationships are explored through characters' struggles to define, or redefine, their roles and responsibilities within the context of society, or its microcosm, the family. Isolation, dependence, and the re-imagining of individual realities serve as common threads throughout collection.

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Carolina Blue

They called the time of death and she immediately stopped breathing. It was not a long, deliberate suck of air, as if she were equipping herself for the fallout. Rather, it was a sudden, curt blockage of the airway, an involuntary interruption that occurred even before she had time to realize that thinking was not essential to breathing. While everyone stood around the bed rails and observed the compulsory show of silent disbelief, she slipped out of the room, seemingly undetected. She paused for a moment to recall which way Theo's mother had gone when she had last used the payphone. Left, no, right. In either direction, the hall was truncated by adjoining corridors. It would not be so far to walk either way, she thought, in case she had to turn back.

She saw the wonky frame of the old phone booth protruding from beyond the flush line of doors on her right hand side. Upon entering the standing space inside the booth, she closed the folding glass door with a dry rattle and seated herself on the stool. She picked up the receiver, paused to clear her mind enough to recall the numbers, then dialed. The phone had barely sounded one complete ring when she heard them pick up.

"Yes." She said in a little voice.

"Yes?" came the reluctant echo.

"Ok, yes," she strained to elaborate, "Now."

"Justine, sweetheart..." her mother exhaled, "oh, baby, where are you right now?"

"Calling from a payphone. In the hospital."

"A payphone? Why aren't you with everyone else? Where is Theo's family?"

"They're in the room. I needed air, Momma."

"Dear God, Justine, you must have been eleven years old the last time you called for me that way. Sweetheart, I wish I was there to hold you right now."

“It’s ok, I’m all right. I was just calling, to let you know,” she said, twisting the ring on her left hand. It still felt new, alien.

“Stop it. You couldn’t possibly be all right... You know your father and I love you,” she lowered her voice, “And we loved him, too. Not just for your sake, either. He was really rare. A *good* boy.”

In the brief silence that followed, Justine could tell her mother had begun crying to herself.

“I know.”

“You shouldn’t be alone. Do me a favor, Justine. Go stay with Paula. That poor woman... I can’t even imagine what she’s going through. Losing a child. You don’t understand because you don’t have a family of your own yet...” These last words hung in the air for a moment. “But it’s not the natural order of things, for a parent to have to bury a child.”

Why was her mother going over it again and again? It was like repeatedly examining an unsightly wound. This was not why she called. She could not listen anymore, she simply could not manage.

“I have to go now, Mom” she said abruptly.

“Justine,” her mother called softly.

“Yeah?”

“Keep us updated, will you? And let us know when the arrangements have been made so we can—”

“Listen Mom, don’t worry about it. They must know by now that you guys would have a lot of trouble traveling. It should all be quick and then I’ll be home again... We’d been thinking of moving back closer to you, anyway, the both of us.” This last sentiment sounded hollow even to Justine.

“You really don’t know how glad I am that you called.”

Theo’s mother insisted on making pitcher after pitcher of homemade sweet tea, although no one professed any particular desire for it. It was mid-July and, with the central air broken, it was so hot in the house that even the ornamental stained glass window above the sink had been propped open in order

to salvage just a bit more breeze. It did not help that the aunts and cousins were all crammed into the narrow kitchen, even the grown children sitting on their mother's laps. The men were in the living room, rummaging through the liquor cabinet. Justine could not move more than twenty-five degrees in either direction, but she knew that if she could, she would not find Ted in the next room. Theo's father would be in the basement, in what Paula had once half-jokingly deemed his "den of iniquity."

Justine settled her attention again on the kitchen company and realized that Paula had been holding out a glass filled to the brim with tea and ice.

"Take this to Will," she said flatly. As soon as Justine accepted the tea, Paula turned back to the stove and continued to stir overloaded spoonfuls of granulated sugar into a pot of boiling water. It took a moment before Justine's fingertips registered the frigidity of the glass. She jerked forward slightly, trying to reposition her fingers around the bottom rim and mouth. Some of the tea sloshed to the floor in her panic.

"Where's Will?" she asked, struggling to peer over the heads of aunts and cousins.

Paula did not look up from the burner.

"Same place as always."

Will's room was upstairs, in the furthest corner of the house, directly above the kitchen. Justine knocked diminutively on the bedroom door. She stood there for a few seconds before letting herself in, wiping the condensation off the glass with her sleeve, as she had often done for Theo.

"Will?" she called faintly. Justine squinted, hoping to spot Will amidst the teeming clutter of the room. She stepped hazardously over the algebra study sheets and dirty boxers strewn about the carpet. Placing the glass on the only available spot on the bureau, she looked around in earnest for Will. It was then that she noticed a full glass already sitting on the floor by the foot of the bed. As she scanned the room, she saw another on the windowsill, and yet another peeking above the tongue of a single loose sneaker. Two emptied glasses were stacked, one inside the other, beside a cluster of crumpled fast food wrappers on

the shelf above the headboard. It seemed that Paula's entire cupboard had taken up residence in the idle recesses of her younger son's room.

Justine leaned forward in an attempt to rescue the glasses—a gesture she was aware Paula would probably not acknowledge. In doing so, she caught a quick glimpse into the nearest cup and recoiled. Instead of tea, there was a fuzzy mold formation the size and shape of a massively overfed caterpillar cultivating at the bottom. Judging by the looks of the colony, the unfinished contents must have been left out in the open for weeks, if not longer. Justine inched forward and peered into two other cups nearby. Those too were filled with mold, of varying degrees of growth.

“That's sick.” She thought aloud.

“What is?” came a drowsy moan from beneath the bed sheets.

“Oh, Jesus, Will” she gasped, “I didn't even see you there.”

Justine quickly backed out of the room, closed the door, and hurried downstairs to the kitchen. Everyone was still sitting there, silent, despondent, with untouched glasses of sweet tea. An elderly relative grabbed her by the wrist.

“Do you need a glass?” she asked. Justine's momentary delay convinced her that she must. The old woman returned with a peeling plastic Superman cup.

“Unfortunately, all the glassware is being used at the moment...Have we met before, dear?” she asked, squinting at the young woman in front of her.

Justine considered introducing herself for a moment, but realized it would not make a difference. After this week, she doubted she'd have any real ties to these people anymore.

Instead, she politely accepted the cup and followed the clank of bottles from the liquor cabinet into the next room. She squeezed between the men in the parlor, attempting to get her hands on something stronger than sweet tea. Once she had tipped a bit of bourbon into her cup, she turned to listen to the hushed conversations going on around her.

“There's not a person's ever met that boy that didn't like him,” said one of the uncles.

“I'll drink to that,” replied another, taking a swig.

“He never bothered a soul. Just didn’t have it in him. He was a good boy. A fine young man. Positively his father’s son,” said the first, his face pink with drink and reverie.

“Ted lucked out on that one. He was the biggest Tar Heels fan since *we* were kids. Nothing made Ted happier than getting to see his own boy wearing that Carolina blue. It didn’t even matter that Theo mostly warmed the bench for four years.”

“It was enough for him.”

“I hope so.”

“Old Ted’s having a lot of trouble managing,” one of the neighbors said, lowering his voice. “He’s been responding well enough to the treatments, but this mess has set him back a lot in his head. He swore with the cancer he’d be the first of us to go.”

“We all figured, Carl. But how could he have known? To lose a son in an accident like that.”

“I fear,” interjected Paula’s eldest brother solemnly, “that we’re losing the very best of our men.”

“It seems we’ve lost them already,” said a friend.

At that moment, the parlor group became aware of Paula’s presence, just beyond the circle that had formed. Justine wondered how long she had been standing there.

Paula’s eldest brother had noticed her first. His mouth twitched slightly, sympathetically beneath his mustache.

“Paula, darling,” he said in a gentle but firm tone, “Ted is downstairs alone. Maybe you should be together right now?”

Paula’s face remained still, almost serene.

“What are you drinking there, Ernest?” she asked, looking into his glass, “Let me get you some tea with that bourbon.”

The funeral was that Tuesday. The nature of the accident made a closed casket a necessity, so there was no need to wait for any special preparations.

Justine was somewhat thankful for this. She did not know if she could bear to see him that way. She hadn't even been looking when they turned off the machines. Luckily, the arrangements were also expedited by the fact that they did not have to be made new. They simply used the preexisting ones. Even the name on the headstone was the same. All they had to do was carve in the correct dates.

After the service, the company packed into their minivans and followed the funeral procession to a sedate luncheon at a restaurant owned by friends of the family. Justine nibbled at her food and then left early, since she did not know the vast majority of attendees. She did not think she could handle being alone in their apartment, so she instead went back to Theo's parents' house. The neighbor who had driven her back let her into the house with a spare key.

Once inside, she took off her heels, collapsed onto the couch, and observed the blaring silence of Theo's childhood home. She fiddled with the run in her stockings, looping her fingertip through and tugging at the gap. After a few minutes of pacifying thoughtlessness, she became aware of a small, muffled drone drifting up from the basement. She realized then that she had not seen Theo's father with the family at the service, or at the gathering afterwards. Then again, from what she knew of Paula, it was not surprising to have seen her carrying on in her particular Southern manner, a stubborn pillar unto herself.

Justine made sure she was quiet as she descended the stairs, so as not to frighten Ted. All of the lights in the basement were switched off. She was only able to distinguish Ted from the recliner on which he sat by the bluish-gray flickering of the television set.

"Ted," she whispered, moving cautiously into his peripheral vision.

His eyes remained fixed to the screen. The effervescent laugh lines that usually bookended his mouth were nearly vertical. In a way altogether different from his wife, Ted betrayed no emotion. For a split second, Justine's heart drained of blood as a terrible thought entered her mind. A moment later, she saw him blink, and relaxed.

Justine did not attempt to talk to him again. Instead, she sat down on the edge of the battered old love seat beside the recliner. The game Ted was watching

appeared to be a home video of a contest between North Carolina and Duke. Suddenly, as the camera wobbled across the court, she spotted Will, smiling. The second time she caught sight of him, however, she realized that it has not Will at all, but a younger, flush-faced Theo. She had always known that Theo had played a bit in college, but had never before asked to see the footage.

Justine's eyes began to burn, so she sat back, further away from the screen. She rubbed her eyes vigorously, then looked over at Ted. The sputtering images on the screen created an ethereal play of light and dark on the thick lenses of Ted's glasses. Only when the film was steadily focused on Theo could she discern the features behind the frames. The purple crescents beneath his lids were like deep basins. Under the thin skin, his eyes were restless, and Justine could tell that he was dreaming. Perhaps the game was on in there, too.

It was cooler in the basement than in the rest of the house, but it was hardly cold enough for the UNC fleece Ted had tucked in around him. Justine wondered if it was the Tar Heels logo he was clinging to, or if he really couldn't distinguish between hot and cold anymore. She thought of running upstairs to bring him some ice water, but then decided against it. As in Will's room, there were cups and glasses everywhere, spread out amongst the autographed basketballs and prescription bottles for chemotherapy drugs. These cups, however, had all been dutifully drained, except for the one unfinished glass on his fold-out table.

On the screen, the scoreboard was counting down the last few minutes remaining in the half. The camera jumped to Theo once more, as he sat patiently on the bench. The coach signaled for him to get on the court. Once out there, he was brilliant. Although hardly the most skilled player in game, he was certainly the most devoted. It was a side of him Justine had seen many times before, though never quite in this way. She stayed and watched until the game was nearly over, privately relishing in Theo's digital ghost, as if she were the only one to whom he chose to reveal himself.

Then, Paula came into focus. The sleeves of her pale blue windbreaker were rolled up above the elbows, and she was shouting into the camera. *Ted!* She

yelled above the pandemonium in the arena. *Tell your son to pass already!* The lens swung back around to the court and found Theo. He was dribbling back and forth, trying to determine his next move. Three players from Duke had begun to close in around him, but there was still the possibility of a clear shot. From the corner of the screen, the coach signaled that it was his to take. Although she was no longer visible, Paula's voice overtook the background noise. *Come on, Theodore!* She cried. *Don't be foolish! Just pass it!* With seconds left on the clock, he threw the ball to a nearby teammate—and it was intercepted.

Unable to watch anymore, Justine got up and stopped the tape.

When she returned to the apartment, Justine tossed her black dress on top of the accumulation of dirty laundry and began looking for something to drink. The only alcohol she could find was an unopened bottle of champagne they had recently received from Paula. She had given it to them after she heard about Justine's job offer back home in Boston. The gesture had seemed uncharacteristically generous at the time, but as Justine uncorked the bottle, she noticed it wasn't champagne at all. It was a cheaper sparkling wine, sweeter but with a lower alcohol content and a much shorter shelf-life. Nevertheless, she decided forgo a glass and took the entire bottle to bed with her.

As she sat there, with the covers pulled up to her chin, Justine couldn't help but recall her last memory of Theo in this room. They had argued, about the job the wine had been meant to celebrate. She had hoped they would move up to Boston, once Ted's final chemo treatments were over, and begin to plan the wedding in earnest. Her new job came with better pay and room for advancement and would allow them to begin their life together in a city large enough for the kind of hopes Justine had long harbored for them. Theo, who had always been the steady, reassuring partner, began to backpedal. What if he couldn't find the right job in Boston? What if they moved their entire life and it was no longer the same?

Justine promised that there was so much more for them in Boston, that her parents were close by, and that they were just as much his family as any of the countless cousins down here that even Theo did not have names for. She insisted

that what his parents really wanted for them above all else was to be happy, and wasn't this happiness? Getting to do things on their own terms. They would still visit his family as regularly as possible, and come immediately in the event his father needed him. But what if he was unhappy there, he insisted. Justine could not think of a time when Theo had ever seemed truly unhappy before. He gladly took whatever came his way and never made demands, even after his father had been diagnosed and things had begun to change. It had unquestionably been his greatest virtue. Yet there he stood beside the bed, repeating that Boston was not his home. Well, Hillsborough was not hers, but she had stayed here for him, and had convinced herself she was content in doing so. This place had been strange to her, and in many ways still was, but she had waited because there had been a promise between them. He had assured her that if she got a better job down the line, he'd follow her anywhere she wanted. How could he now know that he would be so unhappy with this choice without ever trying? Because, he told her, maybe he was already unhappy. Those words knocked the air right out of her lungs.

Justine placed the bottle on the floor and settled deep into the comforter on Theo's side of the bed. She still hadn't told her parents about the argument. She did not know how to explain what he had said next—that he had talked it over and had decided that the following day he would drive to a job interview in Durham, and that he was prepared to accept an offer. Who had he talked this over with, she had wanted to know. Certainly not her. He told her it didn't matter who he'd spoken to about it. He didn't want to fight. And that was the end of it. He headed out early the next morning for the interview, and she left the ring on his nightstand.

The phone rang several times before going to voicemail. Justine knew her parents wouldn't be home at midday, but she figured she'd try anyway. She clicked off the cordless phone without leaving a message and tossed it onto the bed. The carpet was still wet from the sparkling wine she had spilled in her sleep. Before getting dressed, she laid some paper towels down on the spot and walked

over it to soak up the stain. The room had already begun to grow stale from the stench of it.

Justine did not attempt to call her parents again. The comfort her mother could provide might not be worth the agony of having to talk about these things. Besides, she still did not know how she would broach the topic of the argument. Instead, Justine drove back to Theo's parents' house. She let herself in with the spare key she had seen their neighbor take from beneath the planter the day of the funeral. It felt like trespassing, but she figured this would likely be one of the last times she'd ever see this place.

She avoided the kitchen, where Paula was busy baking the lemon squares that had once been Theo's favorite, and went directly to the basement. It was dark and empty downstairs. She had almost hoped that Ted would still be there, that perhaps she could watch another game with him. But there were no signs of life down there, except the whirring of the washing machine.

She picked up one of the baby blue pillows on the loveseat and threw it at a basketball in a glass case on the far wall.

"It's like that," said Will, turning on the light.

Justine nearly jumped out of her skin, not so much at being startled, as at the fact that she had put on a show without realizing she was being watched.

"God, you've got a real talent for blending into the background, Will. What are you doing down here?" she asked.

Face to face with Theo's younger brother, Justine had trouble seeing the resemblance that had seemed so profound on the tape. Any likeness was distorted by Will's tightly wound features. His bony fingers slithered haltingly across a video cassette on a nearby shelf. In the light, Justine saw that there was an entire wall of catalogued tapes behind him, each with a handwritten date and serial number.

"Are those all Carolina games?" she asked.

"Most of them, yeah."

"Which ones are Theo's?" she found herself asking, against her will.

“The top row. The old man’s got all of them. Even the ones where he never plays and you never even see him,” he said.

She motioned towards the tape in his hand, “So what are you doing with them?”

As she spoke, Justine noticed a digital CAT scan image thumbtacked to the middle beam of the shelf. Inside the tumor blot were the words “Go Heels!” written in Theo’s slight, uneven handwriting.

“He asked me to transfer each VHS to DVD for him, so they’ll hold up better.”

“Well, that’s kind of you.” Justine replied.

“I’m not doing it,” Will shot back.

“Why not?”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Will gingerly peeled back the case and took out the tape. In one abrupt gesture, he snapped the bottom flap open and pulled out the entire reel of film.

“What the hell are you doing?” Justine gasped.

Will did not answer. He shoved the ribbon of film into his back pocket and carefully closed up the tape and its case, and put it back in its designated space.

“Will, what are you doing?” she asked again.

“There’s no point in keeping any of this here,” he said, “The old man is going to get worse again and then who the fuck’ll watch all this shit?” His eyes were bloodshot. Justine felt a dry lump forming at the back of her throat.

“Will, you can’t destroy those.”

“Oh, so throwing shit is better?”

“You weren’t supposed to see that...you know those tapes make your dad happy.”

“Bullshit. I know *Theo* made him happy. It’s not worth it, trying to hold on to something that’s gone. It’s delusional.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I don’t? *They’re* the ones who are out of touch. I’m just trying to see things for what they are. I’m not gonna keep lying to myself. And what about

you? Be honest, how long are you gonna wear that ring? Planning on taking it back up to Boston with you when you leave us?"

Justine slipped her thumb under her first two fingers and covered up the diamond on her left hand. She'd grabbed it right off the nightstand as soon as she'd gotten the call and hadn't taken it off since. They had put off getting it resized for months, but now she wore a bit of medical tape around the band to make sure it didn't slide off her finger.

"How are you going to pretend like this doesn't affect you? Like you're not hurt? I just watched you try and knock over his stuff. You think you're the only one who has no *fucking* idea what you're supposed to do next?"

With this, his voice cracked and the illusion fell apart. The face that a moment ago had seemed so bitter, so criminal, now dissolved into heaving sobs. Before she was aware of what she was doing, Justine was holding Theo's younger brother in her arms. He let the weight of his head rest on her shoulder. As she lingered there, she wished she had listened more closely to her mother. Maybe then she would have known the right thing to say.

An Opportunistic Disease

“Perhaps partner is a more accurate term?” Ginny asked rhetorically. The student reporter from the undergrad newsletter frantically scribbled down these words in her lined drugstore notebook. Ginny paused momentarily while the girl caught up in her note-taking. While she waited, her eyes traced the outline of the boldface print on the placard beside their black and white portrait, *Ira Sokoll and Virginia Lively*. The photo, taken only two months earlier for specific use in this *Couples Dialogue* exhibition, displayed the two of them in Ginny’s studio at their home on the south end of the city. Ginny stood facing the camera with her lips parted and her head gently resting on Ira’s shoulder, while he gazed out the window, their run-down neighborhood just out of focus on the other side of the glass. She flinched, hoping no one else in the gallery would notice how shamelessly posed the portrait was. This could not have been the best of the shots the photographer had taken. Scanning the room, she looked around for obvious signs that other artist-couples’ images were equally as constructed and quaint. Most were, of course, with one significant difference—the inclusion of a marriage date, or the listing of children. Although they had been together, or whatever the current euphemism was, for nearly 30 years, those kinds of plans just never solidified. They had talked about marriage, usually once every five or six years, but had always come to the same conclusion. This live-in arrangement was comfortable, no need to assign labels. And usually this suited Ginny. Yet today, in Ira’s absence, she couldn’t help but notice the distinction more acutely.

“What I mean to say is,” she explained to the reporter, “‘Boyfriend’ doesn’t sound quite right anymore, does it? Ira’s pushing 69 and I’m...well,” she pursed her lips, “middling might be a good way to put it. We’re past the pleasantries of courtship, I guess.”

The reporter’s pencil stopped scratching as she glanced up at her, the international signal for “is this still on the record?” Ginny nodded inwardly and took another sip of her wine.

“And where is Mr. Sokoll this evening?” the girl asked, “Is he coming?”

“No,” Ginny replied, much too quickly, “He’s been ill recently.”

“Nothing serious, I hope. I was really looking forward to asking him a few questions about his upcoming retrospective.”

“Well, the retrospective is still limping forward—to the best of my knowledge. He’s just picked up a stubborn case of pneumonia. Hazard of living as *long* and *vivaciously* as he has, I suppose,” Ginny teased, with an exaggerated roll of her eyes.

“He certainly has lived quite a full life...by anyone’s standards,” the girl’s head bobbed earnestly as she spoke. Across the dome of her bulbous eyes flashed blurbs from the dust jackets of unauthorized biographies and sensationalized excerpts from gala bills.

“Well, you know how these kinds of infections are,” Ginny sighed, finishing off her glass, “they tend to creep in the backdoor when you’re too busy to notice. One ache inevitably leads to another, in places you never even knew you had. And before you know it, you’re on your back.”

The girl blinked at her, and Ginny watched the look of comprehension in her eyes fade out like the connecting lines of an Etch-a-Sketch.

“I’m not really sure I know what you mean.”

How could she? Ginny thought. She was still just a wide-eyed kid.

When Ginny got back to the house, she tossed her keys onto the stand and placed the extra bottle of wine she had finagled from the open bar on the door of the refrigerator. As she wiggled the bottle in between the cocktail onions and ketchup, she noticed that the aluminum-foiled platter she had left for Ira a couple nights before was still sitting on the top shelf. Peeling back the wrapper, her suspicions were confirmed. Nothing had been touched. The pork now looked too tough and dry to still be edible. She knew loss of appetite was a common symptom, but it seemed that Ira had been consistently misplacing his for over three weeks now. *Starve a cold, feed a fever*, she thought. *But what were you supposed do for pneumonia?* The escalating temperature, shaking chills, and

fatigue had all gotten so bad recently that he could not get out to his studio or his office at the college. During the worst bouts, he was hardly able to leave the bedroom. Which meant that he was now always around for dinner, even if he declined to eat anything.

For years, Ira had worked out of his own rented space downtown and as a result, Ginny had long grown accustomed to the privacy of eating alone. Except on Wednesdays when Ginny taught a night class at the local community arts initiative, she had free reign of the kitchen and most of the house until late in the evenings. Usually, Ira was treated to dinner by friends and administrators at the college, doting curators, or flattering pupils, all of whom considered it a travesty to let the celebrated master pick up a tab. Ira would get in just before midnight from these outings, when Ginny was emptying the dregs of the tea kettle and washing the last dishes of the evening. But since he had become ill, it fell upon Ginny to double the nightly portions of her cooking and become something of an entertainer for Ira while he was too sick to occupy himself with work. It was an unfamiliar element of domesticity she couldn't decide whether or not she endorsed.

Ira now sat at the kitchen table at mealtimes, muted by chest pains and grizzled under his unkempt beard. He grew restless during the day, and simultaneously overheated and chill at night. He stumbled about the house in nothing but a pair of boxers, and a comforter draped over his shoulders for good measure. The formerly insatiable and loquacious art professor twitched in pathetic silence whenever a plate was set down before him.

One night, after a particularly harrowing exercise in persuasion, Ginny managed to get Ira to sit down to dinner, only to have the plate she set out for him shoved back in her face. Despite her shock at this response, she knew that he was not growing violent, so much as disoriented and irritable. "You really do need to *try* and eat something," she reiterated, "You shouldn't take your medications on an empty stomach." He answered her with a thick, phlegmatic cough.

It was possible, she thought as she closed the refrigerator, that a good part of this prolonged illness was a stunt. Ira had always maintained an air of brooding

mystery, which he himself cultivated, especially in his public persona. He was a generous-hearted man and a kind companion to be sure, although certainly not immune to the pitfalls of his own cult of personality. It was this enigmatic appeal which had first drawn Ginny to him, and had excused his odd advances very early on in their acquaintance.

She had not been much older than the reporter from this evening, perhaps even a year or so younger. An aspiring art student is what she had called herself whenever anyone asked. It was true, to a degree. She certainly did aspire, although her personal finances—a few hundred in a savings account at a local bank—did not permit actual enrollment. She had obtained some odd modeling jobs at the art institute under the pretense of earning enough savings for a semester's worth of tuition. Really, the work was too sporadic to gain her anything substantial, but it got her into the studios and as close to an art education as she could taste in the institute's dining commons.

Her break had come serendipitously when an alluring instructor twenty years her senior took a shine to her in a figure drawing class. After that first meeting, he began to repeatedly request her for his classes, no doubt exaggerating her superior ability to hold a complicated pose for prolonged periods. Modeling gigs at the institute became private hire in his studio downtown, which became undisguised lovemaking all within a few months' time. He stopped paying her at that point, in money at least. Ira was sensitive enough to realize the insulting nature of such an arrangement. Besides, he was confident that he was in love with her, and she began to feel the same.

Ginny understood that theirs was a very symbiotic relationship. If not for Ira's support and assistance, she might never have received formal training, let alone made a name for herself in the art scene as she had. Ginny had since known their relationship as one of colleagues, if not of equals, and understood the compromises that had to be made in order to keep the greater thing together. She had given him sex and youth and innocence, and he had given her Art. She was sure that this was the closest thing approaching love she'd ever know.

Some things did still rouse her imagination, however, as they had tonight. Ira had not been a bachelor when they met. Not a bachelor again, at least. She had discovered this early on, when she first began posing for him exclusively. A woman had stopped by the studio unannounced one afternoon to drop off a triptych painting Ira had committed for a show. Ginny recalled her as having lank blonde hair that fell below her waist. Through a crack in the bedroom door, Ginny saw her at the refrigerator, slipping an unsealed envelope under a fruit-shaped magnet. Before she left, she propped the triptych against an empty wall and glanced over at a portrait of Ginny, lips parted and body christened with opened pomegranates, left drying on the easel. A slight shiver ran down Ginny's spine as the woman, whose nauseated expression betrayed her as Ira's wife, stared into the face of her Persephonic twin.

Even then Ginny was not so naïve as to believe that Ira had not had lovers before her. Yet, when she approached him about the incident, she was still a bit dazed to hear him confirm the matter so casually. He assured her that they had been estranged for some time, and that the marriage was coming to a close. Ginny had no reason not to believe this explanation, but still read through the contents of the envelope as soon as she was alone in the kitchen. The letter she found there turned out to be in reference to the commencement of the divorce proceedings, as Ira had promised. What he had not mentioned, however, which became apparent from the tenor of the letter and the inclusion of a few bitter references, was that the woman Ginny saw had not been his first wife.

Ginny glanced at the digital clock over the stove. It was just after midnight. The house was still and there was no noise coming from upstairs. It seemed Ira had been able to fall asleep tonight, even on an empty stomach. She opened the refrigerator once more, removed the wine from the shelf, and shuffled up to the second floor. As she approached their bedroom on sock-padded feet, she admired the faint smolder of the moonlight on the vacant pillowcase beside Ira's head and considered waking him up. There were candles on her nightstand gathering dust and books of matches from restaurants at which Ira had eaten in the drawer below. She would have to go back downstairs to grab glasses, since they

both could not drink from the same bottle while he was ill. Ginny entertained the idea for a moment but knew that neither of them was in a position to become intoxicated. Instead, she kept walking past the door and climbed the stairs up to her studio. She would leave the wine up there in one of her supply cabinets, perhaps for some other night.

By the end of April, Ira was no longer sedentary in his sickness. The horrible oxygen deprivation scare had thankfully resolved itself several weeks ago, and his face was no longer tinted cobalt. He had of late regained his strength and, apparently, his machismo. Now when Ginny brought in the mail, he insisted on opening his letters himself. A little oxygenation, and his brain switched promptly into business mode. He didn't attempt to paint since he knew his lungs could not yet handle the fumes. Yet, he didn't waste any time getting his retrospective back on schedule.

Ira was eating again, as well. His nutritional habits were still extremely finicky, but he was nonetheless taking in calories. Once his skeletal frame began to fill out again, Ginny was convinced he was on his way to recovery. This improvement allowed her to resume teaching her Wednesday night classes without the suffocating sense of guilt she had felt when leaving a hacking, malnourished Ira alone. It was strange to stay for the entire three-hour class without needing to constantly excuse herself to call home. At present, Ira was well enough, and rational enough, to heat-up the platters she left for him without too much of a fuss. With her partner finally on the mend, Ginny no longer required the help of Dylan, a senior painting major on loan from one of Ira's courses, to babysit her class when she went into the hallway to make her calls. She could finally focus on her own students again.

The South End Community Arts Initiative was a hidden non-profit wedged between an auto body garage and a 19th century Catholic church, which had recently been purchased and restored for use as a drawing studio. The church had become a museum of oddities since its acquisition by SECAI. Although a

majority of the “original” neo-Romanesque art remained intact, myriad copies and studies after older works of European sacred art, donated to SECAI, cluttered its walls, pillars, and ceilings. Ginny taught the free beginners’ sketching class in the deconsecrated sanctuary of the chapel. This particular class always attracted an interesting hodge-podge of stay-at-home mothers, high school dropouts, neighborhood immigrants, and victims of mid-life crises.

Ginny’s favorite student was Santiago, a former gang member and would-be digital artist from the opposite end of town. He had signed up early for the night course in hopes of building a basic drawing portfolio strong enough to attach to his college application. At 27 years old, Santiago still remained incredibly childlike. He remained close to Ginny throughout the lesson, and would always hang around after class to ask for her opinion on the direction of a cross-hatching shadow. It was difficult to believe he had learned his techniques by slicing improvised tattoos into fellow inmates’ arms while in prison.

Ginny knew she had been sidelining Santiago’s inquiries for several weeks now, too preoccupied with the potentially fatal deterioration of Ira’s health, and her relationship with him. Ever since the *Couples Dialogue* opening, Ginny had begun to seriously question her understanding of the connection between them. It had always been something fixed in the automatic continuation of motion. With the sudden halt caused by Ira’s illness, however, the wheels seemed to knock out of alignment. Ginny wasn’t sure, now that Ira was getting better, if she would be able to jump back into it, as if the questions, the contemplations, the fears had never occurred.

When Santiago stopped asking Ginny for help, she realized her concerns were spilling over and negatively affecting her teaching. So she gave him busy work. She pointed out a study after Bernini’s *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* which hung behind the altar, knowing Santiago would take to the bold Spanish saint. She explained that Teresa of Avila had been blessed, or cursed, with visions of God during the time of the Inquisition. She was imprisoned for these radical visions, which the church hierarchy professed to be heretical hallucinations due to poor nutrition and pre-existing disease. This scene from her life, she explained,

depicted an angel of God piercing her through the heart, a symbol of both the pain and the passion of divine inspiration. She told him to research a favorite artist's interpretation of the source and meaning of pain and explore his findings through a series of studies. Santiago agreed, of course, without realizing he was doing some of Ginny's legwork for her.

That evening, she returned home to the clinking of wine glasses. The owner of the gallery hosting Ira's retrospective, as well as the staff and interns working on the project, had stopped by with a few bottles of Cabernet to celebrate the recommencement of the retrospective. When Ginny arrived, everyone shifted their chairs around the dining room table so that she could squeeze in. Ira, or some self-assured member of the party, had lit the decorative candles throughout the dining room and parlor. As Ginny poured herself a glass, the gallery owner, an old friend of Ira's from high school, nodded courteously in her direction.

Ira sounded well as he relived a few follies from his days in the Haight with those old enough in the room to remember, or shrewd enough to have read up beforehand. Ginny was seated opposite him, at the other end of the table. Although it was too raucous in the room to speak to him from that distance, she felt warmed by the recognition that the life-lusty professor had indeed returned. As he narrated a particular anecdote, the candlelight accentuated the familiar lines Ginny had watched grow deeper over the years. Beside him, a smooth-faced girl trilled with the valleys and crescendos of his story.

After another bottle or so was emptied, the girl's hands began to stray amongst the silver hairs of his forearm. Ginny knew not to make too much of this, though. Time had taught her that admiring female students would invariably, and shamelessly, use whatever means they could to get into the influential professor's graces. What did disturb Ginny, however, was Ira's ignorance—feigned or genuine—of another student trying to make a more intellectual appeal. The young man seemed to be the only other person in the room who noticed this slight. Dylan looked pitiable, as each sentence he attempted to form terminated with the uproarious laughter of the group at some other unrelated comment. Ginny

endeavored ardently to retrieve Ira's attention on behalf of her one-time assistant, but Ira had already moved past his period of reluctant dependence upon her shepherding.

At the end of the evening, as Ginny was washing out the glasses, the party began to migrate into the living room. From the sink, she heard the general commotion occasionally interrupted by a hacking cough. She turned once or twice, with the intention of asking Ira if he needed help with anything. She returned to the dishes, however, as the delirious laughter rose again. When she did, Dylan was standing there waiting for her. Stammering, he thanked her for listening to him. Perhaps he had been overthinking again, he admitted, but things seemed out of whack with his mentor. He was less likely to tolerate outside opinions, and more prone to sending him off on pointless errands, like sitting in on her night class. Noticing her wince slightly, he apologized for his rudeness. He had not meant to offend her, he just had a sneaking suspicion that lately Ira had begun to view him as more or less inconsequential. Ginny assured him that there had been no offense taken and continued to rinse the glasses, strangely satisfied in the knowledge that she was not alone in her assessment of Ira's dismissive behavior.

Ginny realized Dylan still had his glass in hand and asked him if he was finished yet. He looked down, as if surprised that he was still holding on to it. He threw his head back and drained the silt with a flick of the wrist. As Ginny held out her hand to take the glass from him, he leaned in and thrust his tongue into her mouth. Although Ginny had been caught off guard, he did not have to force his way in. Her lips were already slightly parted.

While he pressed her against the kitchen counter, Ginny listened to the mirth seeping in from the living room. The taut muscles in her lids sewed her eyes shut, but she could still imagine Ira walking in on the scene. As the edge of the counter cut sharply into her lower back, she wondered what Ira would say, what he would do if he caught a glimpse of this. Part of her wanted him to come in at that moment, to see it and to rage, if only to prove that her fears had been wrong. After a few more drawn out seconds, Dylan stepped back. The place on his shirt

where her hand had touched was marked by a wet, open-palmed handprint, already beginning to dry. Her lower back throbbed.

“So, he ignores you too?” he said.

The following Wednesday night, Santiago returned to class with his research. It was a thin packet of sheets held loosely together with a red and yellow striped paperclip. Ginny waited until after class to page through it. The first eight pages were an assortment of Wikipedia articles, online dictionary entries, and paragraphs from personal websites, all discussing topics relating to Frida Kahlo’s double self-portrait, *The Two Fridas*. Overall, it was an impressive collection of sources for someone she knew would have Googled a few key words on a computer at the local library. The last page was a hand-drawn copy of the painting, the matching faces staring out at the viewer.

Once all the other students had collected their things and head out for the night, Santiago approached her.

“Did you look at my research?” he asked, eyes falling to the floor.

“Yes,” she said, staring intently at his rendering, “So, what did you find out?”

“Well, I searched for artists who painted about pain and emotion, and piercing hearts. There’s a lot of shitty art out there, you know that? Anyway, I found this Frida lady, and I really liked her stuff. This picture here,” he said, pointing to his own study, “There’s two of her. This one, with the frilly communion-looking dress on is who she is with her husband, a muralist named Diego. They were at it all the time, like cats and dogs. But the other one, on that side, is her in her colorful traditional clothes, like who she really is. So, the first one is cutting off the line to the second one’s heart. See all that blood there on her white dress and the scissors in her hand? Like that white angel with the spear in Teresa’s statue.” He pointed at the altar behind her.

“Santi, can I ask you what made you pick this piece?” she asked.

“Well, Frida is Chicano, like me. So I really liked that. But she’s also a lady artist, like you. So I thought it was perfect.”

He came to see her almost every evening for three weeks. With Ira’s return to the studio, the house was hers again. Dylan would finish up his work at the college, then drive down to their house in the south end. She left the door unlocked for him in the early evenings, and he came right up to her studio in the attic. The first time, she poured him some of the wine she’d salvaged from the couple’s exhibit and asked him to tell her other things he’d observed about Ira. In return for this conjecture, she intended to give him the attention Ira withheld. She listened for nearly an hour as he bemoaned his studies and offered lukewarm compliments for her half-finished work, spread out on various easels across the room. His praise, however, quickly turned to less artistic objects.

In subsequent visits, she gave up the pretenses, exhausted by the sheer effort it took to sustain clever conversation. As soon as he dropped his things by the door, she began to undress. They would do what they had arranged, lie there for a while with the curtains drawn, and then part just before Ira came home. Sometimes she posed staccato inquiries while his eyes were closed. When he didn’t answer, she assumed he’d drifted off, and persuaded herself that he hadn’t heard.

During that time, Santiago began to pick-up on her uneasiness. After classes, he would offer to walk her to the bus stop, apparently misinterpreting her anxiousness as a general distrust of the neighborhood as the evenings grew darker earlier. By the third week, they had begun charcoal drawings and the spare newsprint pads she lugged in to class with her had become too much to carry alone. That Wednesday, she approached him about helping her before he could offer himself. He was quiet for the six-block walk to the 23 stop. With the wind kicking up, and the temperature dropping, they found themselves alone on the street.

“How have you been, Miss Ginny?” Santiago inquired.

“Fine, why do you ask?”

“No reason. Just wondering.”

“How about you?” she replied.

As he launched into a description of a rejection letter he had received for his portfolio, she noticed bus lights about two blocks away. Balancing her share of the newsprint pads on her knee, she started searching for her TransPass. The pads nearly tipped over when she tried to get into the right pocket of her coat. Immediately, Santiago leaned forward and slipped his free hand into her pocket. Ginny looked up at him, his unshaved face inches from her own.

“Santi, it’s inappropriate,” she said quickly.

“I was just getting your card...” He held out the paper pass with a look of perturbation.

“I’m sorry,” she replied, “I thought...the bus is here now, but how about we discuss your portfolio again next class?”

“No trouble. It’s not a big deal.” Santiago handed her the rest of the newsprint pads. “You understand if I can’t help you carry these the rest of the way.”

Ginny knew she had to put an end to it. If she was capable of such a gross misreading of Santiago, it might be possible that she had been misreading Ira as well. In all those trysts, she had managed to glean little more than Dylan’s own professional gripes and the positions he favored. It occurred to her that perhaps this pathetic dance was set only to the timing of her own sad insecurities. After three full decades, she had made a novice’s mistake.

When Dylan showed up the next night, he listened to her talk through it for about a half an hour. Ginny closed the curtains, as she usually did, but instead of undressing, provided her rationale, in details more personal than their former intimacy. He did not put up a fight or make a scene. When she had finished her monologue, he merely picked up his belongings and left.

In the weeks that followed, Santiago did his work in silence and never stayed long enough after class for Ginny to speak with him. She saved his research packet to return to him along with his sketches and a note of endorsement she hoped he'd accept as some form of apology for the confusion, but he skipped the last day of class and did not come back to reclaim the items.

When Ginny and Ira arrived at the opening, the owner was there, admiring his handiwork from beside the punchbowl. The gallery looked resplendent draped in the lush, blooming color of Ira's art. The positioning of the pieces leant a feeling of ebb and flow that seemed natural, if not chronological. Ginny stayed firmly planted beside Ira for the duration of the evening, commenting on the generosity of the layout. A trip to refill her glass, however, had separated them. Before she was able to make her way back toward Ira and the epicenter of the crowd, she was tapped on the shoulder.

"I think I've seen this one before," said Dylan, gesturing toward the painting in front of them. In it, Ginny's naked body faced forward, with her face in profile, looking out an open window to the far left. The background, the window, everything in the painting was muted and nondescript, except for Ginny. Her long red hair streaked with blonde, as it had been in 1979, fluttered behind her, the only indication of movement or the passage of time.

"It's possible," Ginny said.

"I'm looking into the Rhode Island School of Design for my MFA but I need a solid recommendation. Ira said he might write me one a while ago."

"Well, best of luck," Ginny replied.

"It seems he's forgotten, with everything going on right now. I thought you might write me one instead."

"Perhaps there's another professor you could ask? I'm not familiar enough with your work," she said, scanning the crowd for Ira.

“Really? I’m quite familiar with yours. I thought for sure you wouldn’t mind helping out another struggling student,” he said.

She turned to face him.

“You really can’t blame me,” smirked Dylan, helping himself to the freshly refilled glass in her hand.

Sheela na Gig

James was the sole blood relative in the midst of the welcoming party, although most neighbors assumed everyone in Ballykeegan to be of loose relation, in one way or another. His younger brother's former schoolmates and various other town acquaintances were crowded at the bar and dining tables in the dank little pub. James wondered if the freeloading lot truly understood anything significant about Colin, other than the fact that his infrequent returns were accompanied by a free round or two, usually on the college boy himself. James scanned the crowd wearily. Ignorant faces he had known from childhood, with whom he had regularly avoided making eye contact in the street, now seemed possessed of a different, if not more agreeable aura. It occurred to him, despite his obstinate opinion about his brother's homecoming, that perhaps Ballykeegan only felt something like home when Colin was there.

It had been a long day, and upon arriving at Sheehan's James had attended to the first order of business. After a preliminary round, he had ordered a second and had begun to edge his way over to Colin. He could just about make out his brother's smile as it flashed in the gaps between patrons' shoulders. Then, through the bustle and clank of whiskey glasses, he caught a glimpse of her. A face he did not recognize hovering beside his brother's. As he approached, he noticed her slate-colored skirt, snug on the striking flare of her hips, sway closer to Colin's side. When he clasped his brother in a tight embrace, she fixed her milky gray eyes directly to him. Watching him, as if *he* were the unfamiliar guest. It was an image James could not expel from his mind. One that, despite the warm, mollifying hum of alcohol, he feared would be made more persistent by the effort to remove it.

"Jimmy, I'd like you to meet Sheila," Colin said, his voice peppered with pomp. "*My* Sheila."

The grin that broke out across Colin's face revealed shallow rivulets at the outside corners of his eyes—new additions to the boy's translucent face.

James paused for a moment, rocking back on his heels. The name meant nothing to him.

“Sheila, my fiancée. I’m sure I’ve written you about her,” Colin chuckled.

James felt the condensation beneath his fingers loosen his grip on the pint. He pressed the pads of his fingertips firmly into the glass and inhaled.

“I don’t remember you ever mentioning anyone by that name.”

“I must have. We moved into a nice flat by Stephen’s Green almost four months ago. Surely I wrote you about her since then,” Colin replied.

The boy’s face grew dim for a moment.

“D’ya not want to meet her, Jimmy?” he asked.

Of course the girl was standing right there, better than in ear shot. James realized that this was Meeting the Family, that he had some paternal responsibility to make up for. Yet, the first thing he thought of was how the decision already seemed to be made. In presenting her as his fiancé, Colin had left him no veto power.

“It’s a pleasure,” he said, mechanically holding out his free hand.

The anxiety on Colin’s face dissipated.

“Likewise,” Sheila answered, taking his hand. Her palms were smooth, velvety. Hands that had probably never worked very hard for anything their owner wanted. She grinned at him, took him in. It was almost vulgar how unabashed the look was.

“Now that we’re done with the formalities, let’s get to it!” Colin exclaimed, “Another round in honor of another Gallagher!”

Another, James caught himself thinking. What was wrong with the two already there?

“You need to see the ring.” His brother’s fiancé stuck out her hand, “It’s an antique Colin found in the shops. It’s a completely unique setting.”

The band was small and brassy against her finger, rose gold tied up into a neat bow on top, with a modest diamond chip in the center. James thought immediately of the bits of yarn their Aunt Deirdre used to knot onto her fingers so she would remember chores that needed to be done.

The next morning, James laid out scones and biscuits and brown bread, along with black currant jam, butter, and orange marmalade. Tea sat steeping in the dented metal serving pot James had inherited when their aunt passed away, on a trivet Colin had brought back from Trinity. It had the college crest on it and an inscription in Latin only Colin could decipher.

“Don’t tell me you made all this, Jimmy?” Colin smiled. “I never thought of you as a homemaker before.”

“Ha! Don’t make me laugh. You know right well Brigid made them. She dropped them off this morning, before you were up.”

“Why didn’t she stay for breakfast?”

“She had to take Katie to the doctor’s. But you know how she is, mothering all the while. Go on and have another scone. There’s too many for me to finish myself.” James nudged the plate a bit nearer to his brother.

Colin spread a heaping mass of jam on his scone and went at it.

“Seems your appetite has grown since I saw you last. You’d think they don’t feed you in Dublin,” James laughed.

“They do. I’ve just been eating a lot more in general. Maybe it’s the stress. I have a lot of deadlines coming up soon. That, and I have to soak up everything from last night,” he said patting his belly.

“Ah, he’s a fine gobshite, that Sheehan. He’ll keep the place open till sun-up, so long as there’s a paying crowd. Last call be damned,” said James.

“Cursing the publican already, are we? It’s not even noon yet.”

“It’s no secret,” James replied, “Sheehan always was an unapologetic businessman. Besides, Sheila’s not up yet. No need to worry about corrupting the ladies.”

“It’s not the ladies I’m worried about,” Colin winked.

“I’m not so sure,” James glanced over at his younger brother, “Sometimes that’s exactly who you should be wary of.”

With the excuse of needing to tie up a few business ends that evening, James left Colin and his girl to go see Brigid. He made it halfway to her house when he realized that he'd left the toolbox in his van. He figured he could fix the faucets with whatever she had lying around in the hallway closet. Brigid wouldn't mind the lapse in professionalism. Whereas anyone else in town was a customer first, Brigid was a friend.

James didn't knock when he reached Stephen and Brigid's. There were only about forty houses in the whole of Ballykeegan, twelve of which were situated on either side of the high street. It was the only asphalted thoroughfare in miles and served as the de facto town centre. When the post office they used as a general store ran out of butter or sugar—imported from larger towns further inland on the Ring of Beara—people would simply let themselves into their neighbors' unlocked kitchens and ask to borrow the goods in person. Although Brigid's was at the far end of the street, past the church, the house still had its share of foot traffic.

James nearly tripped over a stuffed animal by the door on his way in. Straight away, he headed to the closet and began to forage for tools.

"We're up here in the bathroom, James," Brigid called down the stairs.

As he climbed the steps he could hear the smack-spatter of Brigid's 3-year-old, Katie, splashing in the tub. It was difficult for James to wrap his mind around how much time had passed since Brigid first announced the pregnancy. Stephen's proposal had come a brief two weeks after she made it known, before she had even begun to show. The wedding itself had been held barely a month after that, while James' younger brother was still packing for Dublin. With one child leaving, and another just arriving, it had been the most eventful autumn Ballykeegan had seen in some time.

"Come on in and take a seat," Brigid said, gesturing towards the toilet. "Say hello to Uncle Jamesy!"

The toddler screwed her face up into a twist and stuck out her tongue.

"Katie's in a brilliant mood today. She feeling any better?" he asked.

“Definitely. Her fever broke this morning by the time we made it to the doctor, but last night she was screaming her sweet little lungs out. She must have felt dreadful, the poor thing. I haven’t had to get up so many times in the middle of the night since she was an infant. It appears I’ve grown a bit complacent since then. Too many nights of uninterrupted sleep have made me soft.”

“At least she’s doing better now. What about this faucet?” asked James.

“Oh, it keeps dripping. It’s a slow leak, so we aren’t losing too much water, but it’s constant. Drip, drip, drip, no matter which way I position the handle. It’s maddening.”

He jiggled the handles on the faucet between his thumbs and forefingers.

“It’s a bit loose. Have you tried tightening it?”

“Stephen said he adjusted it, but between you and me, I can’t trust that man as far as I can throw him on things like this. I told him you’d know better, but he doesn’t want to listen. Remember the last time he tried to help he—”

“Backed up the sewage tank.” James finished. “Yes, I remember. That was a pain to clean up.”

“You see my point, then.” Brigid smirked.

It took James only seconds to recalibrate the handles on the faucet. He could do this sort of work with his hands tied behind his back and only the use of his teeth to assist him. He never charged her anyway, not even for the sewage incident. He supposed he should bill for the larger things, since it was his living like anyone else’s, but he couldn’t bring himself to do it. She was a good listener and let him prattle on whenever he needed to, even if she was already engaged in something else, like bathing Katie.

“So, I don’t suppose you made it down to Sheehan’s last night?” he asked her.

“At home with the little one,” Brigid exhaled. “Children’s a full-time job, you know. Especially when they fall ill.”

“Did Steve stop by?”

“He did right after work, I know.”

“Did he catch a glimpse of Colin’s fiancé?”

“Fiancé?” she repeated. “He said Colin came home with a lovely girl, but he neglected to mention the occasion. I should congratulate him! I always knew he’d make some girl very happy.”

“Cooking up another bake shop’s worth of biscuits for him, are ya?”

“Oh hush, don’t be so mean. I know you love them just as well. I’d be surprised if they last till Sunday.”

“I can stop eating them whenever I choose, you know,” James laughed. “Honestly though, I’m not sure how I feel about it.”

Brigid quit tousling Katie’s wet hair and wrapped the towel around her narrow shoulders.

“James, give the kid a break for once. You’ve gotten him off to university, he can handle the rest.”

“I don’t mean anything by it. It’s just that it’s a bit...troubling.”

“Why? Is there something wrong?”

“No, no, not that I know of. I just don’t like the feeling I get about her.”

“His fiancé? Well, given that you met her only last night, and that it’s you—” she shook her head, “I doubt you’ve given her a fair shot, is all.”

“Well, we exchanged a few words.”

Brigid shot him a sideways glance.

“Ok, a single word. Still, I don’t feel right about it. Doesn’t it seem too sudden to you? Colin was never this way before. He’s not a slapdash kid. Now suddenly he’s running headlong into marriage. He’s not even finished school yet.”

“Perhaps he’s just looking ahead? Or maybe he’s really taken by this girl. People don’t decide when they’re going to fall in love. And they sure as hell don’t consult other people’s schedules before they do. When Stephen and I—”

“You two were different, though. There wasn’t much of an option there.”

Brigid’s eyes widened.

“Jaysis, James,” she whispered, covering Katie’s ears with the towel.

“You really don’t have any filters, do you?”

“You know what I mean.”

“And you’re lucky I do. Anyone else would plant one right across your self-righteous face. You know I love you, but really, try some consideration.”

Brigid scooped up Katie and shuttled her into her bedroom. She left the door ajar while she dressed her, so she could keep listening to him.

“I can’t say exactly what it is, but he seems different. He was never this impulsive before.”

“Well, you were never this restless about things when we were dating back in Third Year, but situations change, and people evolve with them.”

“Evolution moves in the opposite direction, Brigid. And I was always this restless. Everyone just wrote it off as a symptom of adolescence back then. It’s not for Colin.”

There was a protracted silence and then the rustle of blankets or clothing. Brigid flipped the light off and gently pulled the door closed with a creak.

“Katie needs some rest, and I think so do you. Let’s go downstairs,” she said. “How about a hot whiskey?”

Stephen was home by then, watching a football highlights show on the television. He didn’t look up as his wife and James came down from the upstairs together. Gallagher, as Stephen had always insisted on calling him, was a fixture in the household. Something he at first suspected might challenge his sense of authority, but now he accepted as part of the territory of marrying Brigid. He didn’t have to put up with any of Brigid’s girlfriends—just rambling, dissatisfied James Gallagher. Brigid had asked him to be patient with James, claiming that he was still working through the car crash that had taken his parents and struggling to give his brother something he could probably never have. Stephen was of the mind, like many in town, that the “accident” was itself long past and that no amount of learning could bring back the dead. Wasn’t it time to give up the silly dreams that had gotten his parents in trouble in the first place? As it was, James was just a hopeless loner and thus, an empty threat.

While Brigid took out the whiskey and set the kettle to boil, James pretended to watch the sports program over Stephen’s shoulder. When Brigid brought the steaming mug over, she handed James a napkin.

“Sorry about the bills and such all over the table,” she said, trying to push back an invading pile of responsibilities.

James put the mug down on a napkin to cool. It sat there for a moment before he caught sight of a green plastic teething ring. He unfolded the napkin onto his lap and grabbed Katie’s toy, placing the mug on it like a coaster. It was somewhat lopsided, like most things in his life, but it would have to do.

After the death of their parents, but before Colin was old enough for school, James had been his brother’s primary playfellow. At first, Aunt Deirdre had worried that daily life with an aging widow in the farthest house on the sea road would isolate the boys. She soon found that the manner in which they’d come into her care was already estrangement enough. The gossip about the crash that circulated throughout the town only magnified their need to cling to one another.

There had been a span of three years or so when Aunt Deirdre had actually paid to get the BBC on the television in the sitting room. Her justification ran that there were more educational programs on the British network than on the Irish RTE broadcasts. It was a short-lived epoch in her household, but one that the boys truly savored. During that time, they would crowd around the TV to watch Tom Baker as Doctor Who. Aunt Deirdre would make them take their shoes off by the door and refused to let them use the pillows on the carpet. She enforced a minimum viewing distance when she was in the room, but as soon as she left them unattended, the boys’ noses would vie for a coveted spot inches from the screen.

In the afternoons, James and Colin would venture out onto Ballykeegan beach to play out what they’d seen on that week’s episode. James would wrap his chicken neck in an oversized knit scarf he’d purloined from Deirdre’s linen closet to mimic the one worn by Baker. She never caught on that the scarf was missing, perhaps because the items in that closet were never actually used, although they

were presumably set aside for “company.” The accessory was cumbersome on James, who was yet quite scrawny. It covered up all of his neck, and nearly half his face. Sometimes, when they scaled the wet sea rocks on the shoreline, James would step on the tail of his own scarf dragging on the ground. Once when it happened, he hit a rock face first and knocked his nose out of joint. Staunching the blood with his jumper, he had been sure not to let Colin see him cry.

During every game, James was the Doctor. It was the logical choice since he was older and larger, and better understood the storylines. Colin would agree to play his companion, though never entirely sure what a companion was meant to do. Often, the adventure dissolved into a plotless game of tag. There was an abandoned trailer sunk into the sand on the westernmost tip of the beach. The boys pretended that this was their TARDIS—the ship that allowed the Doctor to travel through time and space on a whim. They didn’t have the keys to get inside, so they ran around the outside and patted it longingly when talking about intergalactic travel.

When Aunt Deirdre cancelled her subscription to the BBC in the middle of the season, the boys were crushed. She argued that it had been far too British for her taste to begin with, but that the boys should have grown out of such fictions by now. The breaking point came once Aunt Deirdre noticed that James had begun to develop an English accent. “You don’t know this, James,” she scolded, “but I lived in London for three years when your Uncle Michael was ill. There’s nothing spectacular about it. While your uncle was in hospital there, I had a lot of time to walk around during his treatments. That rotten country was the last thing the dear man saw. Believe me when I tell you, it’s like any other place—it simply isn’t home.”

The boys spent that entire evening on the beach, eating Jelly Babies and looking out across the Atlantic. They knew Aunt Deirdre wouldn’t risk a chill to come out and fetch them, so they climbed onto the roof of the trailer and waited for the sun to set. The reprimand would surely come later that night. Yet for those few hours, they talked about the future. Not any concrete conceptualization of it, but the way in which only children can. Tomorrow and the day after, and the day

after that, all filled with flying police call boxes and sweets and far-off planets like Gallifrey which, despite the similarity in name, was nothing at all like Ballykeegan.

Brigid's take-away advice was that he talk to Colin directly. He was embarrassed by the fact that the idea had not occurred to him before. Thinking on it further, he realized he had not engaged in a real discussion with Colin since before the boy first left for university. Believing that detachment was the best thing he could do for his brother while he was away at school, James had long fought back any temptation that might pull Colin's mind away from his studies and back towards the Ring of Beara. He willingly used his money from the plumbing business to pay whatever tuition the scholarships did not cover, but made certain during that time he kept out of his brother's way.

Colin had never before stayed long enough to become part of the daily routine. But this morning he seemed quite situated, if not settled, at the house on the sea road. Thomas Mulligan, a one-time schoolmate who still lived with his parents a few houses over, had stopped by to see him. When James got in from his morning errands, Mulligan was seated at the kitchen table with Sheila and his brother. James banged the back door shut and Mulligan immediately got up, sweeping the rest of his scone into a paper napkin.

"Don't leave on account of me, Tom," James muttered.

"I have to getting going, anyway," said Mulligan, "Some things to do today."

Colin insisted that Mulligan take a few more of the scones and biscuits that had originally been meant for him. Mulligan didn't bother protesting. He grabbed another handful of items and quickly wiggled past James and out the back door. James picked up a wet rag at the sink and started wiping down the table and countertops.

"What's the matter Jimmy?" Colin asked.

“Nothing.”

“That’s not true,” Colin said, “What is it?”

“I wish you wouldn’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Feed the vultures.”

Sheila lowered her head and looked over at Colin, signaling for him not to argue. She took Colin’s hand and pressed it tightly in hers while James finished tidying up in silence.

Later in the afternoon, Sheila went down to the beach with a couple magazines and a rusty folding chair she’d found in Deirdre’s old shed. Colin left her his copy of the house key and the brothers began walking up the path to what used to be the copper mining cliffs. They took the high road through the centre of town, past the schoolhouse, and the post, and Brigid’s, and met the hill trail past Pam O’Shea’s sheep pasture. The damp of the morning had yet to be burned off by the noon sun. Colin put on the sweater he’d been carrying.

As they moved past the soft roll of the hillside and began climbing the rockface in earnest, the sun broke out in streaky shafts across the terrain behind them. James could not think of the last time he had climbed the cliffs. Colin, who appeared to have read his mind, noted just that feeling as they reached a lookout point by the old mill ruins.

“I’ve sweat a nice little lake in my sweater here,” he laughed, airing himself out.

“Aye, you’ve got a long V all down the back as well,” said James.

When the two of them had quit panting, they took seats among the rock formations and just looked at each other. *The Gallagher boys together again.* Colin had on a finely pressed pair of khaki slacks and shoes that were obviously not made for climbing. The freckles on his nose had faded significantly, but his neck was still slender and long. *Giraffe-neck Gallagher and his Sky-High Dreams*, the kids used to shout. *Too good for us, eh? The lot of you get what you deserve*, they would say, repeating things their parents never intended to leave the

dinner table. They would hurl the insults at Colin, but the meaningful glares they would reserve for James.

Colin was the first to move. He picked up a few pebbles and began tossing them over the fence that surrounded the dilapidated mine shaft.

“Do you remember this game?” he asked James.

“What? Counting to see how long it would take for the rocks to hit the bottom of the gorge?”

“Yeah. Used to seem like an eternity, didn’t it?”

“Well, I haven’t heard the thing strike yet.”

They listened for it. Clack, clack, scrape, clack. The noise didn’t seem to end, it only got fainter. James imagined it went on forever that way, unless someone was there to stop it.

“How on earth have you been, Jimmy?” Colin breathed out at once. A sigh of sudden relief, and recognition.

“Well enough. The business is doing fine. I take house calls out as far as Kilfort now.”

“All the way on the other side of the Ring! I bet they call you from far and wide. Tell me, what was the worst you ever got?”

“The O’Connors, hands down.” James laughed.

“Paul and Maggie?”

“Paul had popped one of his new contact lenses out. Somehow he dropped the feckin’ thing right down into the drain. I don’t know which was worse: Paul blind to the world or Maggie screaming herself hoarse about it.”

“Weren’t they just disposable ones?” Colin seemed confused. “Couldn’t he buy some more?”

“I suppose he could have?” James offered. “Maybe he’s still using those long-term ones? You know them around here. A bit *backwards*.”

“Ah, well then, I’m sorry I missed it. It sounds like it was a right circus.” Colin shrugged.

“Colin,” James lowered his voice, “do you think you’re making the right decision?”

The boy looked away.

“The right decision about what?” he asked.

“All this...marriage business.”

A spasm twitched across Colin’s face. He squinted a bit, as if he didn’t understand the question. James could see the recent crow’s feet crinkling at the corners of his eyes, same as he had amidst smiles that night in the pub.

“Do you not like Sheila?” he asked.

“That’s not the issue, Colin.”

“Then what is? She’s practically family to me.”

Practically. The word rattled about in James’ head with a tinny resonance.

“I just mean you should think about this, is all. It’s not a decision to take lightly.”

“You don’t believe I’ve thought about this all the way through?” the boy said, getting to his feet.

“I didn’t say that.”

“That’s what it sounded like.” Even now, his defensiveness had a note of distress in it, as if he meant to please his brother, but could not quite figure out how.

James dug his teeth into his tongue. The metallic tang mixed with his saliva.

“We—I—don’t know her well enough yet.”

The muscles in his brother’s face relaxed. The boy’s chest deflated a bit and he sat back down.

“Then you should come and visit us in Dublin, Jimmy. Spend a weekend. You’ve never come to visit me, in all the time I’ve been there.”

“You’re off being a university man,” James insisted. “You know that’s the most important thing in your life right now. You don’t need distractions—of any kind.”

On his walk to Sheehan's that evening, James tried to forget about the Dublin invitation. He crossed Pam O'Shea and her flock near the end of the road. A few of the sheep had congregated around the warped picnic benches outside the pub. Pam's oversized galoshes squeaked as she walked back and forth among them, whistling and calling out their names.

"Aye, the boys want to drink tonight," she sniggered when she saw James approaching.

I don't blame them, he thought, nodding to her politely as he passed.

It was surprisingly crowded in Sheehan's. All the tables were filled up and there was hardly standing room by the bar. Autumn had begun to set in early this year, and James figured that some of the neighbors were trying to avoid turning on their heat a few weeks prematurely. Sheehan, the consummate businessman, didn't bother with the heating at times like these. His was one of three pubs in town, but he kept the kitchen open longer than McDonough's next door, and poured better a head than O'Toole's, so his place always attracted the most people. Business generated body heat, and vice versa.

James had just placed his order at the counter when he heard someone call to him.

"Jimmy?" the voice asked tenuously.

He took up his Bulmers and glanced around to see who had spotted him.

"Over here."

He shuffled forward a bit, past two of the Fergus boys.

She sat there, again in her slate-colored dress, this time sipping a pint by herself.

"Come sit here, there's room," she said.

He looked around the place for someone else to attach himself to, a good friend he could argue he couldn't abandon, but there was no one who fit the bill. Brigid was most likely home with Katie and Stephen. James regretted this, for it would have been a far better evening if he could sit off at the bar with Brigid and get her opinion of Sheila firsthand. Seats were scarce so, for lack of a better idea, he sat down across from her.

“Where’s Colin?” he asked.

“He said he was headed off to see some relatives on the other side of the cliffs. I didn’t realize you have other family in the area,” Sheila said.

“We don’t. Our parents are buried in the old Gaelic cemetery out that way.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Why aren’t you with him?”

“He wanted to go by himself. I said I’d go too, but...I thought I’d wait for him at the one place I seem to know best,” she smiled.

“That’s a heady place for him to visit alone,” James mumbled.

“He asked to. I’m sure he’ll be fine. It’s good that Colin’s getting to visit with them. They’d be happy to know he’s come home,” she said.

He kept drinking until he hit the bottom of the glass. Sheila watched and immediately hailed a waitress when he finished. She pointed to his glass, and held up a signal for two more.

“I should be fetching Colin now.” James fished around in his pocket for change.

“Just give him some space.”

Even when it pained James, space was all he gave his brother. He counted out the coins, shaking his head. She was starting to sound like Brigid.

“Sorry I don’t have more time.”

“James,” Sheila said, gently touching his knee, “please stay and have a drink with me.”

He sat back for a second. Something in her gaze pinned him to the spot.

“I’m from a little town outside Galway, you know,” she said, leaning across the table. “Not as small as this one, of course, but it’s fairly close-knit there, too.” His brother’s engagement ring caught the light when she moved her hand, and seemed to wink at him.

“Is that where you were living before you went to Trinity?” asked James.

“Oh, I’m not a student. I thought I might go to school in Dublin, but it wasn’t for me.”

“So how do you know Colin, then?”

“I used to work at the shop where he bought his breakfast.”

“Where do you work now?”

“Nowhere at the moment,” she said, “I’m in-between jobs.”

In the two hours they had spent at the pub together, the crowd waxed and waned, but Colin never showed. Sheila pulled out her mobile phone and checked her voicemail.

“He hasn’t called yet,” she said.

“There aren’t any mobile towers for miles. He might not be able to get reception. He could have gone back to the house,” James suggested.

“I don’t think so. I still have his key from earlier.”

“Well then,” said James, “We’re taking a hike.”

They walked from the pub to the end of the main road, where the dim lights from electric window candles ceased. He heard her trip over a stone in the dark.

“I’ve never seen a night so dark before in my life. There’s not a single star!” Sheila exclaimed.

“Mind you, we try to avoid walking the roads at this hour. Although, you really can’t take the van up this way with any assurance of safety.”

“You need a torch, just to see the ground in front of you,” she mused.

James heard the rustle of fabric as she dug into her purse. She flipped open her mobile phone and her face was flooded with a muted bluish-green light. Even in this faint illumination he could tell that she was gorgeous. Thick, sandy hair partially obscuring a broad, luring smile.

“Will this do?” she asked.

He took the phone from her and held it to the ground as they walked. As he looked at the gravel on the road by the screen-light, he felt her features further imprinting themselves onto the insides of his eyelids with each involuntary blink. He felt something like a tinge of envy for his brother, then a minor happiness for his apparent fortune.

Twice, James had to stop, look around and reorient himself, as his thoughts had carried him away. The narrow paths leading up towards the cliffs were increasingly twisted. James had felt his cheeks grow hot after he had realized his error both times. He was glad that there was no significant light by which she could see his embarrassment.

At one of the rockier passages, he took hold of her hand and helped her over the boulders. James could feel the curvilinear form of the ring against his palm. It felt larger, more substantial than it had looked upon first glance.

“Were we lost back there?” she asked, once they had crossed the rocks. “I wasn’t sure if we had taken a wrong turn or not.”

Sheila was so close to him, the heat from her words entering his mouth. He could not remember which one of them had leaned in to bring them to this distance. If he hadn’t been fighting the idea of Sheila since their first meeting, he might have thought he actually wanted her.

“These roads are deceiving,” James explained, “especially at nighttime.”

“Isn’t it funny how you can get lost on roads you’ve travelled your entire life?” she whispered.

“Is that Jimmy I see!” shouted Colin. He was sitting on a stone near the promontory with his back to the cracked graves. James hurried over and crouched down beside him. Colin clutched a portable flask in his right hand. He still had on his fancy, impractical shoes, but this time, in the damp of the night, carried no sweater.

“Will you sing the chorus with me, Jimmy? I was just getting to the chorus,” he said. “*Her eyes they shone like diamonds/I thought her the queen of the land/And her hair it hung over her shoulder/Tied up with a black velvet band!* Come on, you know this one.”

“Hey there,” Sheila said softly, placing a hand on his cheek.

“It’s the lady herself!” he cried. “Beautiful, won’t you give us a kiss?” Colin lifted his face in expectation. Sheila touched her lips to his then brushed a bit of hair from his eyes.

“Jimmy, isn’t she terrific?” he giggled.

“All right, boyo” said James, hoisting up his brother, “time to come back down.”

When they got back to the house, he helped his brother out of his clothes. James sat Colin down on one of the twin beds in their old room as he struggled to get the nightshirt over his head. Colin’s body sagged towards the pillowcase.

“You still have another arm to go,” said James, directing Colin’s hand through the sleeve hole.

“I’m being a big pain in the arse right now, aren’t I?” Colin slurred.

“A bit, but it’s not so bad. We’ll talk about it tomorrow. For now, you should sleep.”

James wrapped Colin in one of the blankets from the foot of the bed and switched off the light. As he pulled the door shut, he heard Colin shift under the covers.

“You’re going to make a fine uncle, Jimmy,” he sighed. “The best uncle in the world.”

Sheila was waiting outside the door.

“What did he mean by that?” asked James.

“We were going to tell you.”

“You’re not...?”

“Am,” she nodded. Sheila tightened her lips, attempting a smile.

“You can’t have it,” he spat. “You’ll ruin his life.”

“*His* life?”

“You two shouldn’t even be messing about with things like engagements. You can’t follow through with this sort of thing. All those plans. He has so many plans.”

“You don’t think I did?” she asked.

“No...you told me yourself you were only fooling around in Dublin. He’s going places. It doesn’t mean a thing to you. For chrissake, you two are engaged and you nearly kissed me up there tonight. I’m not imagining it. I’m not.”

“Maybe I did. I was knackered. So what?”

“You did this on purpose, that’s what. I knew it in my gut, I just didn’t have words for it. That’s what you do, isn’t it? You wind people up and send them off spinning, wanting things they can’t have and you can’t offer. They go mad with the sound of their own desires bouncing off the tiny walls of the house you trap them in. And when they realize they’ve missed their chance to get out because of your repeated lies, they run themselves off cliffs just to feel free.”

“Who are you talking about, Jimmy? You’re not making any sense,” she cried.

James brushed her aside and went down the hall to his own room.

No sooner had he put his head down on the pillow, he again found himself on his feet. He was in the kitchen, the sink was overflowing. His Uncle Michael’s plumbing tools, now his, were scattered on the countertop, abandoned like medical instruments after a botched surgery. He ran from the kitchen to Brigid’s house. The door was open but he could not walk through. He banged on the doorpost, screamed for her to answer. He saw Katie in the yard playing on the swing set. Her wrist was caught in a ring on the metal chain, and yet she smiled?

He tried walking through the door again, but something prevented him from getting inside. He turned from the house and tried to think of where to go. How far could he run? And where to?

He stepped forward and the sea was suddenly at his feet. A natural barrier come up to meet him. There was an open door on the beach. He could walk through. Somehow he knew he was inside the trailer stuck in the sand. It was so small and yet impossibly vast within. There was a crowd inside with him, drinking. They spoke to him, around him. But he could not understand. It was nonsense to his ears.

And then he heard something familiar. There was a sweet-hot breath in his ear that turned cold when it hit his brain. He turned to see what it was beside him.

Sheila laughed and told him to close his eyes. In the dark inside his mind she whispered his Gaelic name into his ear. The name that was both his, and not.

Séamus ó Gallchobhair.

She asked him to come see the room she'd set for his brother, the boy, a child. He said no, but he was already there. The hair that framed her smile was the dress hiked up above the waist, framing the open thighs of a cave with his Gaelic name carved into the walls.

James awoke drenched in his own sweat. His head throbbed. For a moment he did not remember where he was. It came back to him slowly as his heart steadied its pace. Acid turned in his stomach. He got up out of bed and stumbled into the bathroom down the hall. His hands trembled as he leaned on the edge of the sink. He coughed and could feel himself about to heave. Before he could let himself go, he went back into the hallway and made sure Colin's door was completely closed. She was probably asleep in there as well, but it was Colin he worried would hear.

James went back to the bathroom and kneeled over the toilet bowl. As he waited for his insides to churn all that acid up to the surface, he wondered if he would ever see life other than down a sewage pipe.

The Lost Art of Letter Writing

It was like checking the mailbox the way I have a thousand times before, but this time there was finally a letter. Or maybe just a note, with the promise of something more later on. In my head I could see your hurried words sprint across the spool of tape on the answering machine, like an impulsive scrawl across stolen vellum. I realize that no one writes on anything as precious as vellum skins anymore, when they do bother to write at all, but this vision is a testament to the vividness of your return.

I hadn't even known you were traveling in the States. It seems I missed the whole trip, where ever you were going, because now you're headed back to Montreal. You must have left that message about meeting up during your layover right before boarding your flight. I suppose I should ask you why you've waited so long before calling, why you'd run the risk of missing me altogether by leaving such a vague message so close to departure. But I think I understand without needing to hear your justification. In many ways we're two of a kind, and I've known my share of avoidance as well.

A two-hour layover is not enough time for everything I've been meaning to say, but I have something to show you that might be able to say it all for me. Remind you that there's still someone listening on this side, even through the long silence. We have to loop around the airport several times to get to the back roads I'm thinking of. I know it must feel like we're driving in circles, but it wasn't me who built the roads in spirals. It seems you always have to drive such a long way just to get back to where you started. Be patient with me, I say, I'll get you back to the terminal in time. I promise.

The cold is vicious tonight, but I suspect you've grown accustomed to much worse. The northern exposure has probably thickened your skin. Then again, I suppose you had to toughen up years ago, when you were still here, even before this self-imposed exile. I, on the other hand, am still the frail little sister you always rolled your eyes at. Ratty Penn sweatshirts on the beach in the middle

of July. Your sweatshirts, always. I still have them, and your old summer dresses, in a few trash bags under my bed. I don't think I ever bought any of my own. I preferred instead to curl up in your discarded shell. Part of me wishes we'd planned this better, or planned it at all. This excursion feels like something we should have done in warmer weather, when we were still kids. It's a little too icy to really appreciate it tonight.

When we finally make it out to the far end of the landing strip, I pull over and turn off the engine. As we get out of the car and start walking along the length of the barbed wire fence in the dark, I can only think other people's thoughts. There was a book I read some time ago, not as required reading or anything, but because it looked friendless sitting there on a half-empty discount shelf at Borders. The collected letters of Alexis de Tocqueville, correspondence from America to his family back home. Unpolished anecdotes from the rough New World. It's not anything in the letters themselves that I'm thinking of, though. What comes to me now is a passage from the introduction. I can see the sharpness of the font, and the exact place where the words were laid out on the page. *Having lived through the Terror, the surviving de Tocquevilles were left scarred by the era, and consequently, Alexis himself grew into a restless youth. When he made his now-famous journey to America in 1831, officially as a surveyor of the American penal system, he came intentionally looking for a world without the burden of a past.* I can't help but think that's what you've been looking for, too. A world without a past. And perhaps that's why you've just kept traveling, and have stayed away for so long.

I stop below a No Trespassing sign, and look over at you. There is no illumination out here on the borderlands, just the dim lights around the tarmac several yards in front of us, on the other side of the fence. The faint glow casts a sickly yellow film over the contours on your face. I watch you loop your fingers through the grating and take a step forward, pressing your heart against the perimeter. We look out on the runway in silence, and I wonder how you can erase a past that's already happened, in case you can't find a world without one.

I think about it for a minute and figure that you can always try and misplace the unsettling memories, or get rid of them altogether, even if the reality still persists. Throw the correspondence into a fire. Burn after reading. Lifetimes of letters wiped out in the lick of a flame. Whole lives stricken from the record. I read that Emily Dickinson made her younger sister Lavinia promise that she'd burn all her marked letters after her death. Can you imagine? Dickinson wishing her precious words tossed into a stove. Her sister didn't burn her poetry, though, when she found it all, holed-up in her chest of drawers. Lavinia spent thirteen years struggling to get her sister's poems published, fighting to let her finally be heard. Emily couldn't have been mad, though, since she never left behind any orders about those.

So I don't think you'd be the first to try and purge. In fact, I know you wouldn't. I was there when Gran burned Mom's things after she died, after you had already packed up the car and started driving. Old photos and Hallmark cards from birthdays and Christmases when he was still living with us. She had kept all the ones from him in separate shoeboxes on the top shelf of the hallway closet for years. Even after she had found out what he had done to you, she could not bring herself to throw them out. Gran got rid of the parts of her daughter even she did not want to remember. Honestly, there are many things I've wanted to incinerate, too—I did not try and pretend to stop her from destroying those boxes.

But there was a catch. Other memories got burned up in the process. I think our middle school valentines and letters to Santa were in some of the other boxes Gran got rid of. And the mail you got from your pen pal in 6th grade. I remember helping you write responses to those postcards because even though you were older, my penmanship was more legible than yours. I took such pride in those cheap, tourist-shop souvenirs you bought for her. The ones with Independence Hall on the front, and your words in my handwriting on the back. The whole endeavor didn't last very long, though. Once the project was no longer required for class, you quit trying and moved on.

We haven't seen a plane land, yet. It seems that all the traffic is outbound tonight. I brought you here to my favorite spot to watch the planes touch down,

since I'm sure you're only familiar with the view from the cabin. There's a strange sense of hopefulness, though, when you watch it all from the ground—the promise of visitation, and perhaps even the possibility of a more permanent stay. Yet, all we can see now are passenger jets taking off way down at the other end of the strip. Small, burning points of light that race farther and farther away, and then, tuck in their wheels and fade into the chill of the sky. Gone for who knows how long. It distresses me to think that those same passengers may never return. I suppose you're still getting to see a bit of my perspective after all, but from a slightly different angle.

You know, I almost did write you a letter once, a proper letter, not just an imagined one, when I was at Community and had just started working at the bagel place in University City. After work I usually went home and crashed in front of the TV alone, but some nights I hopped between parties at your old haunts in the student housing units. A few years late, but near you nonetheless, and it was the closest I ever got to the Ivy League myself. That and writing out the order slips for party trays that needed to be delivered to student meetings. I still had the best penmanship, though, even when writing on the side of a scalding paper cup.

I started talking to a grad student once at one of the smaller parties during winter break. He was visiting a buddy of his at Wharton for the weekend. Traveling up the east coast on his way back to Brown. I told him I was a student at Penn, because I thought it was what he wanted to hear, and he came back with me to my apartment. We sat on my bed and drank whatever dregs I had left stashed under the sink. We talked sleepily for a while about meaningless things, like our mutual admiration for the lost art of letter-writing. I told him what I loved about letters was that they were intentions you could hold in your hand. Tangible evidence of transitory things. He flashed me a smile over his Dixie cup full of vodka when I said this.

Later that night, he played a podcast on my computer of his favorite installment of *This American Life* while he blew on the back of my neck. Convicts read letters they had composed to the victims and societies they had harmed through their crimes. I think they called them something like “Letters to the

Outside World.” I remember focusing on the inmates’ inflection as they read aloud. I tried to visualize their stories scribbled on loose leaf paper in front of them as they confessed into the microphone. Private apologies broadcast on National Public Radio. The words felt familiar, but the voices were just as foreign as the breath of this stranger on my neck.

I didn’t try to stop him, though. Not until I heard the message that I swore was meant for us. The voice described violating his girlfriend’s eldest daughter in ways I thought only we knew. Details only you and I share still, although you may not realize how much I had heard, which of course, was everything. I tried to identify the voice, listening for the telltale pause, the wheezy intake of breath. I squinted at the pixels as they inched forward along the time bar. I doubted that it was him, and yet I felt like we were there again. You on one side of the wall with him, and me on the other, biting so hard into my lips as to pare the skin right off.

Then the grad student slipped his hand under my sweatshirt. One of yours. I had almost forgotten that I wasn’t alone. I nudged him off me and shut down the computer. It didn’t seem to faze him much, and he didn’t bother to ask me what was going on. He just kept quiet while I paced around the room, and ended up falling asleep in my bed. I took an extra blanket with me to the couch and tried to forget about the entire night, but I couldn’t. So I grabbed a pen and a notepad and locked myself in the bathroom to write you a letter of my own. I told you about what upset me that night, and about what had bothered me so many nights before. That you had gone to exorcize all those terrible memories, but in doing so, had also exorcised me. I carried half your heart, preserving it for you, and still do, even if it’s something you meant to leave behind for good. I wrote everything I had ever meant to say, and even some things I didn’t. At seven pages long, it was the purest, least edited thing I’ve written in my life. And the handwriting was total shit.

Of course, I never sent it. Then, as now, I had no permanent address for you. You had no phone, no directory listing, no e-mail account. You mustn’t have wanted to be found. I suppose you did discover your world without a past in that regard. Even with the urgency of our shared history, I still could not find you. It

seemed hopeless in that moment, so I ripped the entire thing into confetti and flushed it down the toilet. Not having the strength to heave myself up, I fell asleep right there, curled up in a ball on the bathroom floor.

By the time I woke up the next morning, the guy who had crashed in my bed was gone. He left a note on my desk thanking me for the drinks and the accommodations and a couple pieces of fruit from my refrigerator he had taken on the road with him. He wrote that he would repay me somehow and would certainly write to me once he got back home. Long letters, he promised indulgently, in the style of our reminiscences from the night before. I fancied they'd be love letters, although I don't know what in that botched evening I thought would inspire him to do such a thing. I'm sure it's no surprise to you that the letters never came. All I got a few weeks later was a vague postcard from Providence with no return address.

But we've already been here for far too long. If we wait any longer, you will miss your flight back to Montreal. I won't say "back home" though, because it can't be. How could you call a place home if you need a passport to get there? I just wish there was something else here I could offer you. And that it could be enough. I think about it for only a moment more. Come on, I say, we'll go now. I know it's time to give you up.

I start walking back to the car, my raw hands shoved into the hollows under my arms. I walk slowly to savor the scrape and crackle of the uneven cement and dry weeds beneath our feet. It sounds like so many crumpled pieces of paper. I dig into my pocket to retrieve my keys, but when I stop, so do your footsteps behind me. I turn around and call after you, and ask you what you're doing. You treat my words as you might my letters, if I could ever get them to you. You disregard. But I know I've been guilty of that too. That's why I was waiting for someone to send us a spectacle. The great roar of a plane over our heads, coming down, touching earth, as a show of my dreams for you. I wanted us put our hands to the sky, open palmed, as it passed overhead. As if we could actually stroke the belly of the beast and lull it down to rest.

But none of this has happened. The sky refuses to open up and nothing seems to come down. It's just trash under our feet and the buildings like a row of incisors on the horizon. I realize now that I haven't removed you from the wasteland at all. I've just given you a different view of it.

It should end there, my letter to you. I have nothing left to say. But somehow, serendipitously, you pick up where I left off. You hook your fingers back through the fence, more securely this time. One foot steadied, then the other, and you begin to climb. I panic because there's nothing but barbed wire to meet you at the top. I call out, but you're neck and neck with the No Trespassing sign, hell bent on pushing on. You go as far as the metal thorns will let you and then you start shaking the fence. It rattles beneath the weight of your body and I am afraid I'll be the only one around to hear it crack. Testing gravity, you lean back and begin to squall, your cries punctuated with unhinged laughter.

I grab hold and begin to follow up after you. The rusty grating scrapes at my hands as I leave the ground. I can feel myself sway involuntarily, the wind thrashing against us crueler than before. I ask you, I beg you, I cry for you to stop and come back down. Enough. These warm tears sting worse than the cold. Please.

I rub the burning out of my eyes and momentarily lose my balance. I snatch at the fence and pull myself flush against it, to compensate for the undulation. Nerves shuddering, I glance over at you. You hold my gaze firmly and then, you smile, wordlessly. The most eloquent assurance that ever passed between two souls.

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