

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

THE DIVINE LORRAINE:
A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

SWATI PRASAD
SUMMER 2012

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for baccalaureate degrees
in Marketing and English
with honors in English

Reviewed and approved* by the following:

William J. Cobb
Director of the MFA Program
Thesis Supervisor

Lisa Sternlieb
English Honors Adviser
Honors Adviser

* Signatures are on file in the Schreyer Honors College.

ABSTRACT

In this collection of short stories, the death of a cat destroys a family, a man obsesses over the moon, and a woman discovers a bathtub full of poppies. In the title story of the collection, two strangers bond over bedtime stories and a shared loneliness.

Table of Contents

Abstract	i
Acknowledgements	iii
Gibbous	1
It Hurts Me Too	21
Eight Foot Ten and Growing	31
A Woman Leaving	32
A Pickle, A Radish, A Clove of Garlic	33
Poppies	36
Killed By A Polaroid of a Woman at Dusk	61
A Funny Story.	66
Days Between Rain	67
Lucky You	87
Inertia	89
Nerves	91
Of Dreams, Of Men	93
The Divine Lorraine	117
Appendix – Creative Works Referenced	128

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to Dr. William Cobb, who not only generously read through my whole thesis, but also helped me make tough career decisions, taught some fantastic classes that goaded me into thinking about writing more seriously, and explained to me that not all stories need to end in death. Thanks to Professor Lisa Sternlieb who gave me the opportunity to indulge myself in endless writing and revisions by making it possible for me to do this thesis in the first place, and Dr. Ralph Oliva for being supportive, patient and understanding. Thanks to Professor Brasfield for teaching me to read and breathe words, details, and images.

Thanks so, so much to my parents for a long list of things that would be boring to read but still true; not just for the fun parts, for nights of scrabble and wine in the backyard, but also for more tricky things, for leading me to the right decisions and letting me make them myself. Bhaiya, thanks for letting me vent about those decisions. Thanks to Reena Auntie and Ratan Mausi for their unbridled belief in my ability as a writer. Catherine, thank you for being everything a girl could possibly need and want in a friend. Isaac, thank you, if you hadn't saved me from that man-eating shark, I wouldn't be writing this thesis at all. Thanks also to Eugene and Kyle for talking shop with me all the time. And Andy, for Canada.

GIBBOUS

When Ollie woke up in the morning the power was out. It must've been hours ago the electricity cut; the clock wasn't even blinking, just out cold, like a newborn appliance nestled between handfuls of packing peanuts. No signs of life. Stillborn. Ollie hadn't owned an analog clock since he left home for college. He had spent a whole decade without the percussive reminder that he was doing things too slowly, wasting the time that insisted on passing, without the haunting staccato that was a steady heartbeat of an enemy who had finally died. Steady and comforting as a rocking cradle, Nebraska had once called it, but Nebraska had a way of pushing through those tics and tocs that Ollie had never quite managed.

This was certainly the first time he regretted not having an analog. Ollie told himself it was a game, tried to puzzle out the time. It was still dark out and none of the neighboring houses were brimming with light like they tended to around seven on a November morning. Completely dark – not even the occasional teenager's window, the kid doing godknowswhat at godknowswhat a.m. It was still lashing that awful rain

outside; maybe everyone's power was out. Rain like this in November – an omen of course. This was the rain he remembered from summers: hot, charged with an electricity that robbed houses of it, violent. But like good fall rain, it was unrelenting. It had got something right, at the very least.

There was activity outside, cars on the main road that Ollie's backyard did little to drown out. It occurred to him to check his cell phone, but of course he had waited until the last minute to charge the damn thing and of course it was dead. He'd left his laptop at the Barnes and Noble in an attempt to regain focus on his inner self, as Nebraska said. That is to say, he had left it there entirely by accident, and used Nebraska's advice as a justification for his carelessness. This is Ollie we're talking about, after all.

According to Nebraska, Ollie was having trouble with the move, was feeling suddenly distant from her, because he had lost sight of his own inner self, and how was he supposed to feel a connection between their selves if he didn't even know what his *own* self looked like? All this was said in the two hours before she left for a business symposium of some sort in San Francisco. Ollie had a strong hunch that *this* was the reason he felt distant from her – since her promotion, which had moved them to dreary Cleveland Heights (just twenty short minutes from Cleveland, still nowhere), she was constantly jetting around the country for some executive meeting or the other, always in a warmer or dryer location.

But Ollie trusted Nebraska, even when she said ridiculous things about focusing on the inner self, which Ollie knew she herself did not believe. She loved him. Loved him so much she had taken the time before she left to print out an Excel spreadsheet detailing the dates, times, and locations of the handful of interviews Ollie had secured in this new city, with helpful reminders like “Don't forget resume,” “Eat a good breakfast,” and

“Double Windsor is best.” She was a pragmatic woman. Each of these notes was dotted with an exclamation point, slanting with excitement, the *double* crossed out as Nebraska had no doubt remembered that it really was just a regular Windsor, with the half being its less voluminous counterpart.

Thinking of this, Ollie realized that today was one of the dates on this chart that was stuck to the fridge with a gaudy orange comic sans “Cleveland Rocks!” magnet. Ollie had spent the night focusing on his inner self and now found his self in a lurch this electricless morning, no idea of what time it was, just alone and aware and unprepared. His inner self vowed to buy an analog clock.

Ollie brushed his teeth in the shower with the bathroom door open for light and ate breakfast quickly, careful to open the fridge as infrequently as possible. He poured himself a glass of vanilla soy milk – Nebraska was lactose intolerant – and grimaced at the rice-powder taste of it. The coffee was the issue that got him into trouble. Ollie had to boil water on a stove – more effort than usual, and for instant! He was grateful for the caffeine, though. Was he late? Ollie straightened his double (regular, really) Windsor, hunted for his keys and congratulated himself for keeping them where he (almost) always did, on a nail next to the door. He left the resume by the coffee table.

9:42, he saw as he started the car. Shit, he thought. I am really, truly, unforgivably, fired-from-my-job-before-I-have-one minutes late. Shit. It wasn’t until two turns later that a passing car flashed its lights and Ollie realized first that his headlights were off, then that it was dark and 9:43. 9:43 was brighter than this, even in the dead of winter, and the sky was only getting darker now. Not morning at all. Ollie felt cheated. What time had he fallen asleep? Early, of course, from the complete lack of stimulation

that focusing on one's self brings, especially when one's self has done little other than fall in love with a woman more successful than him – graduated from a mediocre school with minimum effort and serendipitously above average results, joined Teach for America and completed the minimum commitment, postponed the real world further by squeezing himself into a lackluster law school. He had done remarkably little that could be considered remarkable.

It became quickly apparent that the caffeine had more of an effect on Ollie than he generally admitted, or at the very least that he had no idea of the ideal instant coffee-water ratio. He was already halfway to Cleveland, so he just kept driving, and found himself stopped at the intersection in front of the diner he always passed and never frequented. A head popped out of the car in front of him, a mess of reddish curls that squinted at him at the dark. Then the head was gone, then back, this time mouthing “pull over” and a phantom hand jerked its thumb in the direction of the lot.

He was awestruck with himself that he followed her into the lot at all, since, after all, he was relatively certain she was going to say something offensive or accuse him of something he had not done. She pulled up next to him, rolled down her window, looked at him uncertainly, then leaned her head out into the rain that had slowed to a slogging mess.

“Mr. Wilkaus! Look, I’m sorry for pulling you over like this. But I just knew that was you!” She had a small mouth that turned down slightly, a shy apologetic gesture that seemed an attempt at a smile.

“God.” Ollie scratched at his neck with a cuff link, the cool feeling of metal against the back of his ear a relief from the biting wind. “Yeah.”

Her head tilted to the right and she squinted at him as if reading something on his eyeballs. “Seline Rivers. Remember? 9th grade algebra?”

“Yes.” Ollie combed through the names and faces from his two years teaching in Philadelphia. This girl had been a gum snapper, but not the sort who’d sit in the back to yap at her friends. She’d bury herself in the crowd of students, left most seat three rows back, and read some book with a pen in her hand, underlining and taking notes. Ollie was never sure if it had been for another class or not. He thought, hoped, that maybe she wanted to participate but was too shy to call attention to herself or her abilities. When he called on her by name to answer a question, she would respond with a hollow stare – no snide remark or joke or even a simple shake of the head – just silence. “Yes, Seline. I remember.”

“You’re looking spiffy, Mr. Wilkaus. Hot date?” Seline’s pale skin had an unearthly glow, reflecting the ghostly vein-blue light of the parking lot lamp posts.

“Oh, no. I just had an interview. Well I didn’t – well, my electric cut out, and I was waking up from a nap and I just figured it was morning. I was wrong,” he said. He didn’t remember her being this at ease with people or language. It put him on edge to talk so casually with a student whose name he barely remembered in a part of the country he could barely navigate.

“Oh god.” She pushed her face into her palm as if she were embarrassed for him. When she was done laughing, she pushed bangs out of her face and asked, “So if you’re not on your way to corporate America, where are you headed?”

“Anywhere but home. I hate an empty house.” The words surprised Ollie even as they spilled out of his mouth. He was not one to offer excess information to strangers or really be social at all – that was Nebraska’s domain. Furthermore, he had not been aware

until that moment that the peculiar twisting he felt sitting in bed alone at night was his hatred for empty houses. Like wringing a wet towel.

The girl smiled. “Look, I’m not trying to be forward – hell, I’ve got a boyfriend – but I’m new in town, sort of, and I’m going to this thing closer to the city. Would you want to come?”

Climbing into the car, Ollie thought about the obvious advice he’d given his years younger accidental sister: Don’t get into the car with strangers. Don’t accept rides from strange boys. He remembered the awful story he’d told her, mostly factual, of the woman who got into the car with a friend she’d made at a bowling alley, and he’d brought her to a barn far out of town and held her there for money, occasionally cutting off a fingernail or giving her a haircut or even cutting off a toe to send to the family, to assure them that she was alive and he wasn’t afraid to keep her that way. Ollie wondered if he had done the right thing getting into the car. He was bored, yes, but there was danger here, he had gotten into the car with a strange woman – were there women serial killers? Did women ever hold men for ransom and invent reasons to chop off toes? No, Ollie decided. Certainly not delicate, pretty looking ones like this girl. And then Ollie thought that maybe *he* was the strange guy here. Maybe *he* has going to cut *her* toes off, one at a time, send them to her family. How did a person do that? Could you get through the bone with a simple knife? Wouldn’t the person thrash and fight too much to really give a good effort to the cutting?

“Open the gloves compartment and get me a cigarette?” Ollie did as she said, relieved to be outside his head again. “Lighter too, please.”

He watched her with some interest as she held the orange plastic bic in her right

hand, coming down hard on the metal wheel with her thumb, and leaned into the flame to light her cigarette. She rolled down a window with her other hand, and held the steering wheel between her knees. “You shouldn’t smoke,” Ollie said, though he wasn’t sure why. He wasn’t particularly against smoking and he certainly wasn’t the sort of person to tell strangers what to do.

“I shouldn’t?” She looked at it for a long moment – too long, Ollie felt, since she was the one driving – and said, “Alright, I won’t.” She carefully stubbed out the slender thing in a folded newspaper boat that was resting precariously between the gearshift and change holder. Ollie could see the word “SOVIET” taking up most of one side, the other ashy butts threatening to jump overboard. A few minutes later she said, “Pack please, lighter too.” Short lived victory, Ollie thought, but she threw them both out the window. She had, it seemed, creamy milkmoon skin, opaque and unblemished white, but when she craned her head out the window to watch them fall, Ollie saw her whole neck was pebbled with freckles, little burnt-red suns of other solar systems, down to the slim triangle her collar revealed. Then she grabbed the Soviet ship and shook it out the window, the butts whipping backward with the wind.

“Do you *hate* the planet?” Ollie asked.

“Jesus man,” she said, laughing. “I just quit smoking for you. What the hell is your first name, even?” He told her. Her name was Seline, but he could call her Lina.

Lina was taking him to a gallery on the other outskirt of Cleveland. This gallery looked suspiciously like a house that had been intended for college students to pile into, a large one floor affair, cement covered in area rugs of various sizes, piles, colors and patterns, 5 or 6 rooms that would have fit 2 or 3 students each, big windows in the

kitchen and, inexplicably, what seemed like a polar bear skin rug in front of the fire place in the room at the heart of the house. The door to each room had been ripped off its hinges, and the occasional door had then been laid over a barrel and covered with specialty drinks that “complimented the art.”

The first room Ollie walked into was one of these. All along the walls were paintings, grotesque depictions of horror, or simply abstract grotesqueness. Ollie was puzzling through a large canvas smeared in red and dark gray, a million eyes and lips with converging noses, a tessellation of despicable faces, some looking at each other, some at the audience, some covered in boils or winking horribly.

“Ollie!” Lina motioned him over to a corner where she was squatting. Hot pink and fiery orange plastic dinosaurs were arranged in panic, staring up at a bowling ball two or three times their size. The T-rex’s teeny arms were the same metallic gold as the bowling ball. “It’s about the inevitable negative outcome of avoiding decisions,” she said.

Ollie wasn’t sure if she was kidding. She pointed him towards the placard of the piece, humbly titled “God.” The blurb seemed to imply that we could not find any dinosaurs around today because the group had trouble settling on which movie to go to and what cereal to have for breakfast and, ultimately, what to do in the event a large bowling ball came rolling their way. “Pick up a complimentary *Death to T-rex!* drink on your way out” the sign said, pointing towards the peeling fog-gray door laid flat on the other side of the room. The drink was thick and dark red and tasted like cinnamon toothpaste.

“Who were you meeting here?” Ollie asked as they moved through the different rooms. They passed a large door that was slightly ajar, an eerie blue light slinking out of the opening. This bothered Ollie.

Lina grinned. “Oh, I’m not. Did I make it sound that way? I just can’t sleep and this place is always open, round the clock. Tuesday after nine is free.”

“But how’d you find out about this place? You said you’re new in town.”

Ollie watched Lina’s cheeks flush to the same shade as her hair. She was standing in front of a portrait of a blushing redhead taking an axe to the jugular, and Ollie again had the awful feeling that one of them was a murderer. Nebraska had a way of settling his anxieties. *Go ahead*, she’d said once. They had been chopping vegetables with heavy chef’s knives when Ollie had put his down and backed away and asked what was stopping them from knifing each other that very moment. *Go ahead*. He just stared at her, and she said with her regular cheery smile, *We love each other, Ollie. That’s what’s keeping us*.

Lina stepped away from the portrait and moved into the next room. There were a few sculptures gathered in one corner, and a giant projection of what seemed to be a home video on the far wall. “I actually grew up here. I just got out of the Peace Corps.” Ollie felt less like a serial killer in the making. She wasn’t *that* much younger than him, then. Maybe twenty-four. “My ex-boyfriend told me about this place. He’s into this kind of thing. But he can never even say what a piece is *about*.”

“It has to be about something?” The woman in the video was older, her hair graying towards the roots but the ends still a healthy dark brown. A little girl was sitting in front of her, hands clasped around the knees drawn up to her chest. The woman brushed the girl’s hair endlessly. When they had first started dating, this was a strange habit Ollie and Nebraska had taken up – after they had taken a bath together, Ollie would run a brush down her waist-length hair, help her take out the knots. She would make small comforted noises, the sort she’d make if she were getting a massage. This,

Ollie had felt, was the sacred secret strength of their relationship. Until Nebraska had cut her hair to what she called a “corporate length” – he was still trying to relocate their secret strength. Ollie could not stop watching the video. He liked to look at things, and that was enough for him.

Lina rolled her eyes, her lips turning down like they liked to do. “*Obviously. It’s art.*”

The place was nearly empty. There were a couple kids wandering around, clearly without parental supervision and most likely without permission as well. Ollie wondered aloud to Lina, “What time is curfew for minors here?” and one of the girls glared at him and shouted, “Jesus, who are you, Captain Buzzkill? God!” She stormed into the kitchen and the boys she was with shrugged at him before following her.

They were passing the door with the eerie blue light again, and suddenly Ollie realized that other than the front entrance, this was the only door in the whole house. Even the bathroom had a shower curtain in the doorframe. “This way,” he said, tugging at Lina’s sleeve. The door was giant, he noticed, the clear faceted knob at his eye level. They followed a shallow staircase that opened on a room as big as the others but with bare walls and a security guard, a tall Nigerian man with a smooth head. “Oh, I’m sorry,” Ollie began to apologize but the man winked and motioned for them to come forward. At the far end of the room was the moon.

Ollie could not imagine that it was anything other than the moon. It was three times his height and lit with the unnatural blue glow that he had noticed earlier. “Go ahead,” the guard said. “Get closer.” The moon was the rough texture of drywall, with dimples and depressions and craters, perfectly sized and spaced. It was as if the moon had been plucked out of the sky and placed in this gallery, this vase for celestial bodies.

His sun-freckled friend was reading the placard intently, the tip of her pink tongue slipping out of the cave of her mouth, as if it too were trying to read the sign. Ollie paced around the moon and nearly cried out when he had traveled halfway around to the far corner of the room. There, nestled innocently in the crevice where the two back walls met, was a blue neon light, the tube twisting in complex, unnatural patterns. When he closed his eyes the light followed him, orange now, haunting even the solitude of that personal darkness. Ollie hated it. He loathed it. He was overcome with a desire to rip it out of the wall and throw it away. What was it doing there, this neon trash in the presence of this beautiful, immutable moon? He looked away from it finally, walked quickly towards the guard. "Sir," he said. "What is that doing there? Is that supposed to be there? Shouldn't that be in a different room or something?"

Lina frowned at him. "No, no. Ollie, it's about co-dependence."

Ollie ignored her and stared hard at the guard. The man, who had been holding a comical looking structured beret in his hand, settled it back onto his shining head before speaking. "No, sir. They're part of the same exhibit. Whole thing is one exhibit. Look at it again sir, from here now." The neon was entirely hidden. All Ollie could see was the moon, rather warm and inviting despite being back-lit by an ethereal glow the opposite of golden. "And sir, if it pleases you, why don't you breathe in deeply and think about that breath." Ollie did as he was told. Though he was as warm as he had been throughout the gallery, the air in this room was crisp and cold and entirely devoid of smell. He wanted to read the accompanying text for once, find out what this piece was *about*, what the artist meant.

The placard was blank.

"Well, I like it. It's cool. Wanna go?"

Ollie followed Lina in a daze. When they got outside he saw a small tree the size of a large bush, more branches than trunk, in full spring bloom all over, covered in dazzling white flowers. It was the first live plant he'd seen since moving to Cleveland. It was a winter miracle, he thought. The work of the moon.

His eyes drifted and saw a slick of grey mush covering the road, dirty tire tracks like stretch marks on the tar. Ollie looked back at the ordinary snow covered tree. "It snowed? But it was just raining."

"Welcome to Cleveland!" Lina said. It was the first time he'd seen her smile, Ollie realized, and saw her teeth like carved porcelain, the small dimple set high up on the right side of her face. The smile was her best feature, he decided, and as he decided this she let the corners of her mouth droop down into what she must have thought was a seductive pout.

Ollie kept one eye on the deep blue sky as Lina drove him back to his own car. He could not find the moon.

Nebraska was home for a weekend and then she was gone. She left her crucial heels – these were her words – kicked under the bed with a pair of boxers Ollie had never picked up. Though she hated heels, Nebraska was a modest 5'1" and no CEO in history, ever, had been shorter than 5'4" – or so she had read in *Cosmo* years ago. She wore these crucial heels only at work, and if she kept them on in the house more than three steps past the door, Ollie knew it meant she would climb the stairs to the bedroom in them, casually leave them on as they stripped down to their bare bodies. There was an unspoken agreement between them that this was a treat for Ollie, that sex while she was wearing heels that made her miserable was some sort of fantasy for him. Now that she

was away so often, she left her heels on nearly every time. *Cosmo* must have had some sort of deal with shoe distributors everywhere. While Nebraska was home this weekend, it occurred to him that, actually, he hated it when she kept her heels on. Hated looking at and touching the unnatural shape her legs took on when she was in the company of other men, of strangers. He liked holding her at 5'1", peering down at the part of her blonde hair. Could you tell a woman that what she believes to be her secret sexual weapon was actually making you miserable? Ollie doubted. He wondered if, having left her crucial heels at home, she was conducting meetings in the flats he was used to seeing her in. Or if she had gone out and bought a different pair, if her legs were a whole new shape that her co-workers were whistling at long and low in the men's room, a shape he had never seen. He pulled the heels out and stared at them. They were plain black, deceptively austere. Looking at them made him want to crawl back into bed and call Nebraska, ask her to sing him the silly love song she serenaded him with their first Valentine's Day. But she had been very drunk for that, trashed and happy in love. She only sipped at wine these days.

The phone rang to a woman's voice. It was not his wife.

"I'm not going to lie," Lina said. "I have no idea why you're here."

"You called me," Ollie shrugged. "I really don't have anything better to do."

"But still. Laundry? That's a whole new level of nice. You didn't have to keep me company. It's really sweet of you." Ollie shrugged again. He rarely said no to anyone, and he wasn't about to start with her. He took another swig from the bottle of brandy she had produced from her laundry bag just after she had pushed a final quarter into the washer. She took the bottle from him and sipped delicately. They watched her clothes fly and fall

in arcs then roll the bottom of the dryer-drum. Mobile rainbow of jewel tones and neons streaked and streaked with black. “Well now what. Oh I know,” she said, not waiting for Ollie’s input. “Let’s tell secrets. You first.”

“What kind? I still have one last baby tooth. It never fell out.” Ollie shrugged. “Medical marvel.”

The clothes no longer flew, just fell and fell until they were still. Lina got up and began pulling out jeans and shaking them, holding towels pinned to her chest with her chin, folding t-shirts. Her skin took on a translucent quality under the fluorescent lights. “I totally joined the Peace Corps cause I couldn’t handle college. I dropped out the first year and I didn’t want to live at home again so I wasn’t sure what else to do.”

Ollie did some quick math; she was much younger than him. He watched as she demurely fold her underwear in the privacy of the dryer drum, moved them quickly to her basket. Closer to his sister than him. Was she aware of that? How did she even get that bottle of brandy? “I’m miserable in Cleveland.”

“That’s hardly a secret,” she said, pushing out her lower lip as she searched for her other orange sock. “And you don’t even live in Cleveland. You’re Cleveland Heights.”

“If your secret’s a correction of my secret, I hate you.” Ollie did not hate her. In fact, Ollie was growing fond of the way she refused to give him a good smile, that the dimple was a secret he’d only get to see if he could say something really ridiculous. He had noticed that the freckles were missing from her neck, now, too, and he marveled at the miraculous absurdity of makeup.

She giggled then stepped away from the dryer to raise an eyebrow. “Okay secrets. I don’t actually have a boyfriend.”

“I actually have a wife.” It felt strange for Ollie to say. The first two years they were

dating, if he could call it that, Nebraska introduced him as her “friend,” with a wink. She didn’t like the word boyfriend, she had explained to him. She could never quite get used to it, feel at home with it. And now, a year and half into their marriage, he wasn’t used to words like *husband*, *wife*, *spouse*. He called her Nebraska, because that’s who she was.

To Lina’s credit, she kept her surprise in check. She masked the beginning of a “what” with a cough and simultaneously stuck her head in the dryer, presumably to find that elusive other sock. She emerged, armed with another secret. “I have skin cancer. I mean, I don’t know that for sure, but I’m nearly certain. I’m too afraid to get it checked out by a doctor.” Ollie nodded as if he understood. Her eyes filled up and he pulled her to him, put his arms around her. She was 5’1”, 5’2” tops. Not a CEO, he thought, looking at the part of her rust red hair. “I don’t want to die without being in love.” Ollie hated her for saying this. If this were a movie he was watching with Nebraska in their living room, they’d be throwing popcorn at the screen, shouting *Lame! Lame!* He hadn’t seen a movie with Nebraska since they moved to Cleveland, not even an awful one.

Like Nebraska, who would occasionally come home without prior warning and slink up to cover Ollie’s eyes, whispering *guess who!*, the Tuesdays crept up on him, always a pleasant surprise. He slept, he ate, he went to the movies with his younger female friend. Should he be winking when he said that? He looked for jobs half-heartedly and cleaned the house and had sex with his wife in heels and visited the moon. Of all these, it was his celestial appointments he looked forward to the most. He had dreams about the moon. The moon was in the shower with him, taking up all the space and hogging the hot water. He was an astronaut and he had to travel to the moon and give it a tummy rub. Mostly, though, he dreamt of the room, not just the rough feel of the moon

but the electric blue blush of the cool walls. He dreamed of walking up to the moon and stepping inside of it, of curling up at its base, like a wad of limp laundry at the base of a dryer drum. He stalked NASA's career page, knowing full well he had no skills they desired.

Cole was waiting for him as always. All clean lines –sharp suit, angled jaw, hairless. He never slouched and Ollie had never seen him sitting on a stool – he hadn't even seen a stool. "My man!" he said to Ollie, who returned his firm hand-shake. "I've never seen a guy visit this place like you do."

Ollie was pleased to see him. Cole was very much a part of the Tuesday ritual, warm and uncomplicated. He was not mutually exclusive of any other part of life that Ollie enjoyed, and he did not implicate that large decisions were looming. These were boons, it seemed to Ollie. "You too, Cole. Your shift ever end?"

Cole shook his head happily. "It's just me."

"But this place is open all the time. What do the other guards –" Ollie realized Cole was the only guard he ever saw. Maybe plastic dinosaurs and bowling balls didn't need much protection.

"No other guards. I'm not here for the gallery, I'm here for this exhibit. I travel with it, wherever it goes."

"It travels?"

"Sure it does. That's what an exhibit is. I've been to France with this thing, San Francisco, New York, obviously." Cole had hit on Nebraska's last three travel destinations. "I'll be in Omaha next week. God only knows what sort of galleries they have there."

"I've never heard of that. An exhibit with its own security guard." Ollie put his

hand in his pocket and found something hard, smaller than a dime, pointed.

Cole squinted at him, then closed the distance between them until they were just inches away. He could probably have seen the part in Ollie's hair. "Listen. I am just like you. After I moved from Nigeria I lived in Philadelphia with my brother and I hated his girlfriend. I'd come see this exhibit every day. I worked it out with the people there, they liked me, and they gave me this weekly pass for six dollars. And I'd come every day after school. Sometimes I'd skip for it too, and then some teacher called my brother. He called the museum and they stopped giving me the weekly pass." Cole was standing perfectly still, speaking, it seemed to Ollie, over his head and into the room. "That first week was hell. So I started buying the real passes and I was broke," he snapped his fingers," just like that. So I wrote a letter to the creator." Cole beamed. "The *creator*, man! I convinced him his exhibit was missing something. I said, let me be a part of your exhibit. Let me take care of the Moon. And you know what? The creator wrote me back. I don't think I should even be telling you this, but you're like me, I can tell – he said yes. I'm part of it now. He even flew down to see me from some conference in Athens. He's an amazing guy." Ollie just looked at him, this statue, this art piece of a man. Cole moved away, towards the moon. "Follow me." He pointed at a particular pockmark. "Look at this one. Close, bring your eye to it." Cole resumed his normal stance in his normal position of the exhibit. Back in character. Ollie peered at the crater, unsure. "*Look* at it, man, really look at it," Cole urged.

Ollie pressed his eye right to it. It was a window, it was transparent and through it he could see the inside of the moon. It was dark and flecked with radiant blue where there were other secret, hidden portals. Ollie felt as though he were on the outside of a planetarium peering in, glimpsing an inverted night sky. He could have been staring in at

his own galaxy. He put his hands in his pockets and found the object again. It felt familiar, cold. He pulled himself away from the universe and looked at the item sitting in his hand. It was a milk tooth. Smooth, long, it came to a single point like an elegant spearhead. An incisor, maybe a canine. He had never paid much attention in health class. As he brought it closer to his face, it split neatly into two halves.

Cole was running at him. “Jesus, man! You can’t bleed in here!”

“I had a dream about you,” Lina whispered into his ear, her voice breathier than he remembered. They were at the Laundromat. It had become a ritual, an odd one, when he thought about it, which Ollie did, often. At some point in the middle of a conversation, Ollie understood that they drank at the Laundromat because she was not of age. He had cut that visit short, left immediately, but answered her phone call later that night. Her nose was nearly touching his earlobe, and the more she simply existed, breathing in and out, the more he wanted to kiss her. “Let’s run away,” she said.

“Run away?” Ollie asked. “Lina, do you know how old I am?”

“I won’t ask if you won’t,” she teased. “But really, Ollie. Why don’t we just leave? We could go anywhere. We both have cars.” As if this was the deciding factor in the matter.

“Lina, where would we go? Where would we live? I’m having trouble even getting a job.”

“Oh.” She shifted her weight, uncrossing and re-crossing her legs so that her dangling foot was now facing away from him. “So you’re staying with your wife because she has a job.”

Ollie shook his head, laughing. “It’s definitely not *that*.”

“So what is it?” she asked sharply, punctuating each word like the staccato of the analogue clock Ollie had never gotten around to buying.

He wanted to say that he was still in love with his wife, or that she needed him, or that it would devastate her, but none of these things were true. Two of these things may have been true for Lina, though. He wanted to say, let’s go see the Moon, but the exhibit was gone. It’d be in Omaha by now.

The door opened and let in a blast of frigid air along with a woman holding a child’s hand. This spared him having to answer the perpetual pout of the child who was facing him now. The woman gathered a basket of clothes and left, though not before glancing at the smell of Ollie and Lina and shooting them a stern look.

Lina leaned into his side, slipping her hand into the crook of his arm. “Hey, I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Forget I said anything, I didn’t mean it. I know this is hard on you.”

Ollie smiled at her, and Lina showed him her dimple. He found himself flustered and warm, his insides giddy. He nearly kissed her then. “It’s okay. I have to go, though. I have to feed the dog.” He had invented a dog some time ago, precisely for this reason.

She lowered her voice to a whisper. “My roommate’s visiting her parents. I don’t like an empty house.” Did anyone? He understood, nodded. “Why don’t you come over tonight?”

Ollie reached for the glass of Nebraska’s fake milk he had just poured and realized it was already empty. Still, he was thirsty. Grabbing both the half-gallon of not milk and the length of rope they kept in the utility drawer, he walked around the house flipping all the switches. On the cherry wood floor, little white droplets reflected the spare moonlight

slipping through the windows, marking the trail of a man who'd brought the jug to his mouth a bit too greedily and let the milk dribble down his face.

There was only one suitcase left in Ollie's house when Nebraska was traveling, and it was broken. Camel-blond leather and the latch on the right never worked. Ollie made the bed for the first time in weeks and set the suitcase squarely in the middle of it. On the outside, Nebraska had scratched their two, separate names. She couldn't change her last name, not on paper, she had explained to him when they were first married, she had been working for so long with it. This was the only concession he had won before her trip: finally she would take his name. He packed his toothbrush, floss, razor, lucky tie, some unfolded briefs that he'd never worn – Nebraska hated the way he looked in them – and the heels his wife loved that he never wanted her to wear, ever again. Enough clothes, enough cash, whatever enough meant. The suitcase closed easily. He didn't have to ask his wife to sit on it, which was a good thing seeing as there was no wife around. Ollie tied off the rope to keep the case shut and turned off the last light.

The car's dash blinked at him – it was 9:42. Ollie smiled. This time, he knew it was night. Ollie drove for hours. He opened the windows and let in the crisp winter air. Below the tangerine moon he could see the individual silhouettes of the bare trees lining the ridges of the mountains like the raised hairs on the nape of a woman's neck. Like the coarse bristles of the boar's hair brush Ollie would comb through his wife's hair at night. Ollie wondered what sort of detangling he could manage. Ollie was driving to Nebraska.

IT HURTS ME TOO

Mama's famous potato salad drifted toward rancid in the noon-time sun. Mitch brought it closer for a sniff –not so as close as Pa would, always with a mayonnaise glob on his nose – and Julian looked at him, laughed. “The fuck, man. It's fucking potato salad. Just eat it.”

They picked this park three months ago for Pa's 50th birthday, even paid money for the pavilion the kids were playing some slap happy card game in. Teddy Parker was a family man: every year he insisted that the whole mess of a family get together and fire up a grill for his birthday. They shouldn't have been there this year, everyone knew, but they'd paid the damn money for the damn pavilion. The best they could do was collectively ignore the fact that Teddy was sitting in a prison on his birthday because no one could afford to pay that kind of bail. Only the older women would make allusions to the fact that he even existed. “Where's Tootsie?” Teddy's sister asked, her crinkled lips a dull brown where the garish pink had smeared off. Mitch forced a smile with teeth and pointed towards the children playing with the dumb bitch, a forearm-sized idiot

dachshund that would spend the day butting her head into the cabinet where Mitch kept the generic dog food. Tootsie made him unfathomably unhappy.

“This year’s the worst yet,” Julian muttered. It was true. The crowd seemed to be getting older and younger at the same time. The grandmas and grandpas were turning senile, and it was hard to understand how there kept getting to be more and more of them. The aunts and uncles were beginning to blend into the grandmas, discernable only by their questionable decision to shop in the same stores as their children, and the cousins were all respectable adults now, with kids ranging from 3 months to thirteen years. At least no shotgun weddings in this generation, so far.

Julian and Mitch were in their mid twenties, though the adults had yet to figure out or care whose kid Julian was. He had been coming to the reunions for so long, and who could be bothered with so many running around. But if Mitch slipped away for more than three minutes, to the bathroom or to get more bratwurst, Julian would feel the pinpricks, sweaty goose bumps on his neck. Julian would see Marybeth Parker around town and he’d ask about “Uncle” Teddy with a cloud of guilt. He’d wash away that guilt with the knowledge that he talked to Marybeth more than her own son. He was more like her, Pa, the whole lot, than Mitch anyway. A collared shirt to a barbeque, all that law school talk.

Mitch took a few minutes to retch by the crick and rinse his mouth with the scummy water. “Let’s get out of here.”

At Oak and Fifth the bartender was glad to see them, the first customers of the day. The boys had a round of whiskeys and another at the bar, took their third to a table near the only window, revealing floating particles in the slant of light, dead skin cells and

dust. “So, you seen Pa yet?”

Mitch flinched to hear him say it. There were secrets you denied with laughter and secrets you hoarded and protected, secrets that most people understood without knowing and secrets that would make Mama throw herself down a flight of stairs to get the nurses to give Pa dirty looks. She’d stayed at four separate shelters at various points in Mitch’s childhood, taking him along, and Pa had only hit her once.

“No. This internship’s killing me. Sixty hour weeks and that’s just the office.”

Julian looked at the ceiling fan whirring above him, black dust caked on the left side of each blade. He grinned. “All that dough.”

Mitch’s left hand worked the top few buttons of his shirt and his right gripped tighter around his glass. “You know, I thought Mama was the only idiot who didn’t get it. I’m not a lawyer yet. I’m in *debt*, man. I owe money like you can’t imagine. I owe more money than we’ve seen in our whole lives.”

“Not saying much,” Julian said. He bit the nail on his pointer finger and smirked. Fish on a hook, Mitch thought.

“I bail Pa out, I might as well sit my own ass down in jail. Debtor’s prison.”

“All I asked was if you’d seen Pa. Don’t get your panties in a bunch. I get your point but don’t lie, man, they don’t put people in prison for that shit anymore.”

Mitch rolled his eyes and calmed himself with deep breaths. Lawyer, he reminded himself. Self control.

“Julian, my man,” the bartender called. “I gotta wrap it up, school nurse said my girl’s got a fever.”

“Let’s get out of here,” Mitch said. “Drive through fries?”

“Always. I’m not driving though.” Julian finished his whisky and out slipped the high-pitched, girlish giggle Mitch always forgot about. “I think I’m cursed.”

“You’re being ridiculous,” Mitch said. He drummed his fingers against the peeling steering wheel of Julian’s shit-yellow Ford Festiva.

“I’m being real here, Mitchie. Every time I get in the car I end up killing an animal. Spooky shit. The hell are our fries?”

“Why’d we have to pick up the bitch?” *I hate animals*, the words formed in his head, but he couldn’t bring himself to say them. Once, a girl had slapped him for that secret. Monstrous, she’d called him.

“Aw, don’t be hard on Toots.” Julian turned in his seat towards the crated hot dog in the back and sweetened his voice. “You want fries baby? Daddy’s not here, but we’ll treat you good.”

Mitch grimaced. Pa had always hated the name *Daddy*, said it made his boy sound like a pansy-girl. Boy, singular. “I’m getting rid of her.”

“The fuck?” Julianne swiveled back to face Mitch. “That’s Pa’s *dog* man, you can’t just give her away. That’s Tootsie! You’re an asshole man, you know that?”

“Mama didn’t even try to keep Tootsie at Aunt May’s. Who wants to live with that dog? Who needs a reminder that the man baby-talks a wiener like it’s a child and treats real women like – God, Julian, yes, I’m getting rid of the damn dog. What’s your problem, Jules?”

A frizzy orange mess of woman in a hairnet handed them a rolled up bag. “That’s \$6.80. Please pay at the next window.” The boys forced smiles, started digging for wallets.

“Shit. I left my wallet with Mama.”

“I think mine’s at the bar?” Julian leaned forward, looking at the hairnet bobbing away from them. “Fuck it man, they’re fries. Floor it.”

“Floor what?” Mitch noticed finally the whiskey buzzing in his head. “Are you drunk?”

“Just *drive* man,” Julian hissed, pressing his palm down on his brother’s knee.

No one called after them as they drove away a bit hesitantly, Mitch pausing at the second window as if reconsidering before lurching out past the stop sign, Tootsie yelping in protest. Just fries, after all. Julian rolled down his window and whooped at two teenage girls, laughing hard. “Ever stolen anything?” Mitch shook his head. “Me neither. Keep driving. Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

They drove past the house that Mitch had grown up in, empty now with Pa gone and Mama staying with his sister, and into the farmers’ lands past the town, strips of road butting up against dirt paths and other smaller roads, all leading nowhere. How far were they from town, Mitch wondered. Julian pulled out a pint of Clan McGregor from the glove compartment and handed it to Mitch after a generous swig.

“I don’t remember all this corn.” The stalks would have come up to his neck if he was standing up, maybe Julian’s chest.

“When’s the last time you were back here?”

“Pa’s last birthday I guess.” The ears formed two walls on either side of the car. Like driving through a roofless tunnel, Mitch thought. Leaning forward, his chest pressed against the steering wheel, he looked up at the stars, keeping the car steady. He gave the tape player a good punch but it was stuck, repeating *Wild Horses, wild horses couldn’t drag me away*.

“Only tape it plays,” Julian muttered. When the song ended Julian turned off the sound. Now it was too still and Mitch cranked down his window. There was the noise of the air hitting the car and gliding through it. When they got used to that, little insects made themselves heard.

“I wanted my dad to get me a dog all my *life*, man. Especially a little wiener like Toots.” They were quiet, listening to the dog’s breathing quicken and slow with her dreams.

It was bothersome to Mitch that his father was *entirely* Julian’s father. He supposed he’d always understood it intellectually but instinctively he thought of his father as only fifty percent Julian’s. He wasn’t sure what was more infuriating about the whole thing: that Julian held an equal claim to his father, or that his father had a whole other son while he himself only got a half brother he couldn’t own up to.

“You should have her. You want her? I’m going to give her away anyway, I could easily give her to you. Might make Pa happy.”

“I don’t know, man. I can barely keep myself together, I’d feel so bad for Toots.” Julian shrugged and unlatched the dog’s cage. Tootsie crawled out and settled under the driver’s seat to continue her nap. “Quiet, though, isn’t she.” He fumbled with a packet between his teeth. “I can’t ever get this plastic-paper stuff. Shit’s not natural. There we go – gushers?”

Mitch popped a few into his mouth. His teeth sank into their thick gummy membranes and a wash of fruity glue spread over his tongue. Like ostrich blood. He’d read that certain tribes in who knows where used ostrich blood as glue. “Where’d you get these? I haven’t had a gusher since we were kids.”

“Dollar General by the Wal-Mart.”

“Actually, they’re kind of gross.” But the boys kept chewing, washed it down with more McGregor’s. When they were younger, Pa would buy them a pack of gushers to split from the gas station where he picked up Julian, where Julian’s mom’s husband worked.

“I mean, I guess they did expire like two years ago.”

“Jesus, Julian, you trying to poison me?”

“Mitchell, are you taking the Lord’s name in vain?”

Mitch narrowed his eyes. He was inclined to think his mother was being mocked; Julian had only started acting all religious since he found out Marybeth was a zealot. On the other hand, Mitch’s mama had, in fact, seen Julian at church multiple times, and he was always friendly to her. “I’m serious, Julian. I already got sick once today.”

“Don’t be an ass. Shit’s full of preservatives. You know in Nam, they’d look at all the dead bodies and the Chinks would be full of these worms and shit, totally rotted, and the American bodies would look pretty much fresh. In comparison.”

Mitch hated the way Julian said *Nam*, as if he hadn’t been born long after the fact, had actually gone and fought there. He hated the word *Chinks* too, but he liked when Julian said things he wouldn’t. They were different men, very different men, and he liked when he could put a finger on exactly what it was that set them apart.

“Want to hear a joke?” Julian asked. Mitch grunted. One of them was okay with silence, and one of them couldn’t handle it. “What do you call a dead womanizer?” Julian waited a beat, through which Mitch said nothing, and shouted “A necrophiliac!”

“That’s disgusting. That’s terrible. How could you even – ” He began to laugh and laugh so hard that he had to lift a napkin from the inset in the door and wipe at the tears on his face.

Flash of something from the forest of husks, smash of impact before they

understood. *Deer*, Julian shouted, or maybe Mitch had just seen it, or maybe they'd both thought it together, connected telepathically like twins, *Deer*, windshield crackling like pop rocks, roof denting in towards them with a thunderous noise, open windows filling with stalks and now, truly, Julian yelling *God what the Jesus please please what*, scared, and Mitch couldn't process any of it.

He got out of the car, surveyed the empty road, the wrecked car, the bent ears.

"Where's the god damn deer?"

"Maybe he ran off?"

"No way. We must've killed that guy."

"Poor sucker. I don't even see blood. God, my car. Know any tow trucks?"

"Oh, oh god. Listen, we need to say you were driving. Please."

"Mitch, I can't. Say to who?"

"Cops, we should call the – Jules, I really need this. I'll pay anything they charge you but I can't get a DUI, I'm taking the bar."

"Man, we just don't call the cops. My license was suspended. If I'm caught driving, and drunk again, I'm fucked."

Mitch regarded his half-brother. Eyes currently drunk-red, generally rubbed red, always drooping like he hadn't slept, the smirk on his face like he was about to hit someone, always. Larger than him, wider and meatier and taller and with a squarer jaw, nothing like a little brother. "You got a DUI?"

It was dark and they could hear the cicadas and crickets and some small animals playing in the fields, maybe a limping deer. Heat and contempt hung in the air and the shirts stuck to their backs. The back of Mitch's neck itched. Regretting his tone, but not immediately.

“You think it was easy, man? How’d you find out about Pa? Mama Parker?”

“Don’t call her that.” Mitch watched his brother’s face shift into anger. Left eye twitching, nostrils red, smirk gone.

“I was sitting at a bar three blocks from where the old man lives, and the girl I was talking to points to the television and says, *say Julian, that rapist’s got the same last name as you. You related?* Bitch thought she was flirting!”

The sweat was pooling on his nose and glistening in his buzzed hair. Mitch thought it looked as if he had fur growing on his scalp. Fur. “Where’s Tootsie?”

When they’d finished the McGregors they sat on the hood. “Where the hell’d she go?”

“Deer kidnapped her.” Julian giggled. “Shit, I’d be pissed too if some drunk asswipes mauled my leg.”

“That shit mauled *me*,” Mitch said. “You were there.”

“Sixty percent stolen parts, this bad boy.” Julian climbed onto the dented roof of the car. “*It hurts me too*,” he yelled, cupping his hands around his mouth like a megaphone. Looked at Mitch, “Pretty, isn’t that? Read it in a story.”

Mitch sat cross legged on the road by the car, looking out at the fields. “You see anything up there?” Julian shook his head. “Who wrote that? You don’t actually read. Do you?”

“Sure. Some Spic. You hear the rumor? ‘Nother Parker boy out there somewhere.”

“Shut up. Ma know?” Julian shook his head. “I guess I’d know if she did.”

Julian clambered down and sat with his brother. “Poor Toots.”

“I always hated her. Always.”

“I always hated you.” Julian laced his smirk with genuine warmth, shrugged. “Still family.”

Mitch got on all four to check under the car. “Woof, woof, I’m Pa’s dumb bitch.”

Julian joins Mitch without laughing. All eight limbs turn toward the field in unison. Full moon, Mitch notes. *I read somewhere* he wants to hear Julian say, something comforting. Julian bares his teeth. Quiet, they wait for any sound. Pa’s dog, a car, a siren, nothing. The headlights of the Festiva illuminate circles of straw gold, mosquitoes. Fireflies, Mitch realizes with a start when they spark. He can smell the tar of the road, feel the terrain of it on his knees. Finally he hears something, a low growl, and turns to see Julian not smirking but smiling at him. Mitch takes a deep breath and in unison they begin to bark, animals.

EIGHT FOOT TEN AND GROWING

The worst thing about being so tall is that the stars are so damn close. The second worst thing is that people – even adults! – feel compelled to bring up the difference in size. “Say, boy, how’d you get to be so large?” No one would dare ask that sort of sensitive question of a fat man. But me? Just an amusing anomaly. Don’t worry about how the boy feels, ask him about the logistics of his experience. Never mind that I don’t have anyone to sit across from me at dinner, ask me how I fit at the tables in restaurants at all. Forget about the fact that I’m made to sit in the back of the theatre like I don’t have the same rights as anyone else, just wonder how I fit through the door. And no one ever asks about the stars. How when you lay down on the slicked grass at night in an attempt to feel small, you can’t help but feel even the stars are crowding in to get a look at you.

A WOMAN LEAVING

I like the way it looks, a woman leaving. I see couples breaking up sometimes, while I'm waiting for the bus after my shift ends. I don't see how that makes me sick – it's not like I can help it. A girl's gotta smoke her cigarette after an eight hour shift serving uppity suburban clientele their over-priced coffee. Every once in a while, between drags that I purposely try to exhale into the faces of mall patrons, I get to see it happen – he grabs her wrist too rough or pushes at her shoulder the wrong way and she snaps. Starts screaming bloody hell, don't touch me, don't touch me don't you dare touch me, don't you dare put a hand on me. I try not to look over, try not to make eye contact, but my heart starts to beat too fast and I worry for my own health and she's still screaming, I don't ever want to hear from you, my mom was right about you, you're nothing you're trash you're not worth the time of day.

And when the bus finally arrives, as I get on and show the driver my pass and he smiles, I wonder if one day when my husband reaches for the light I'll raise my voice and scream at him, don't touch me, don't touch me.

A PICKLE, A RADISH, A CLOVE OF GARLIC

The empty apartment, the noises it makes, the groans from the floorboards in the hallway, the whimpering and screaming by turns of a well entertained woman upstairs. The room that was painted a rosy peach, the flushing color of a small child's cheeks in autumn. If they had used official documents to go their separate ways, maybe Mitch would have cited Religious Differences as the reason, though to be truthful Anksh was not sure what divorce papers looked like, let alone what reasons they permitted one unsatisfied spouse to list or check off.

The small cross he had left with her, nestled between her own favored idols in the night stand drawer. An insidious way to do it, really. It was all she had, wasn't it, the last real tie to the country where her parents were born. She had assumed a feverish conviction was out of the question. When he went to church on Sundays, she stayed at back. Invariably he would come home to find her laid out on the bed in sheer nylons and

lacy underthings. An implicit understanding that their separate religious devotions were merely an upkeeping of tradition.

A night when Anksh returns home and finds herself wanting the comforts of childhood: a mango pickle, a cured radish, a charred clove of garlic. Stomach stretching imperceptibly. Former-husband-then-boyfriend's face when she tells him, *well, I am a few weeks late*, eyes opened wide like a cartoon of a boy watching Bambi's mother die. "Oh. That's wonderful." His mother couldn't make it to the wedding on such short notice.

Anksh's husband, Mitch. Former husband, as she prefers to call him, because saying *ex* wounds some part of her. Husband in the kitchen, sitting on a stool at the island, tapping his fingernails *arapatapatap* against the looks-like-granite vinyl. Husband doing dishes, accidentally hitting the sink with his wedding ring, a thin but wide gold band, the inside a cast of the same spot on Anksh's own hand. Mitch's idea. The look on his face, jubilant, eyes wide like a cartoon of a boy on Christmas, at the sound of it. "This is the perfect percussion!" They met in a band, but he wasn't even the drummer.

Blood on the bed, on her hands, on the nightstand where she steadied herself when she got up. The monstrous face he made at the sight of her, of it, the wreckage. The cacophony of hiccupping and howling and yelling and punching at walls and kicking at the assembled crib and finally the exhausted crying. Who had responded how, neither knew. Their anger inseparable. Exhaustion and the inability to sleep in their own bed for weeks, unable to change the sheets, unable to walk into the room at all. They slept in the

baby's room with the lights on. Anksh would wake up and Mitch would be sucking his thumb in his sleep. Gently, gently, she'd remove it for him, and he'd let out a sob in his sleep or worse, wake up and look her dead in the eyes. Dead eyes.

The confusion of what to do with the name. The lists they produced from their respective hiding places— *Maaya, Ashna, Rajvi, Amina, Neeta; Meredith, Faye, Amy, Susan, Elizabeth*. The confession: he buried it, all of it, the mess and the sheets and — everything. There was a grave stone, a marker. They had a place to put their flowers now. The anger, how could you, my baby. The claustrophobia that followed her for weeks, took the stairs the six flights to their apartment, refused to travel in a car with the windows up, until she could take it no more, she dug it up, the whole damn mess, and lit it on fire. *This is how we do it*, she yelled. *She was never ours and we have to let her move on to another life*.

The first bodily contact in weeks, the blue-black ring around her eye, the crying, Mitch mostly, his eyes wide and shocked and deeply ashamed, Anksh too stunned to be mad, one arm to her face and the other curled around a leg of the broken crib. Like a whimpering dog. The first night that either slept in the master bedroom, Anksh all alone in the nursery, waking before the sun and listening for Mitch's deep breaths and hearing nothing. Walking into the room for the first time and finding it empty. Knowing he would never be back. Relieved.

POPPIES

“Margot? Damn it Margot, wake up. Wake up, Margot, please? Be awake with me.” Frank’s voice cracked slightly halfway through his last appeal, and it was this dissonance that finally pulled Margot out of her sleep.

“What is it? Frank, you’re okay?” Margot’s hand searched the nightstand for her glasses a bit too aggressively. She felt herself push them off the edge, heard the soft noise they made against the burred carpet. “Shit. Frank, get the light.”

He did. “You’re awake?”

“Of course, you told me to be and I am. Just let me find my glasses. Bad dream?”

“Margot –” he started. He waited for her to place her glasses in front of her eyes and look at him before he continued. “Margot, I have to tell you – I was walking across the bridge today after lunch and – well, I didn’t want to be in New Hope and I didn’t want to be in Lambertville and – Margot I couldn’t stop thinking about the fall. About what kind of noise the water would make if I hit it.”

Margot looked at Frank, his face sharp now that she had her glasses. She evaluated. His eyes looked calm and rational, if a bit sad, and the wrinkles above his forehead seemed more or less the same size and shape as always. His stubble was a day or two older than usual. “What’s bothering you, Frank?” She knew not to dwell on the emotions of the story, but the root. Frank wasn’t one for pity, and, because of that, he was rarely one for sympathy.

“I did something bad, Margot.” When Frank was in college he had cheated on an exam. He hadn’t *really* cheated, though – he had overheard two students coming from the class before him talking about a question – it happened to be the one question he didn’t know. He had broached that lapse in morality with the same words.

“It’s okay, Frank. We can’t all be good all the time. Do you want me to set some coffee?”

“Margot, listen, I – ”

“I’m listening, of course I’m listening. Let me just go get us some coffee so we can talk –”

“*Margot*, this is serious.”

“Okay, Frank, alright.” She spoke with a patience that she suddenly realized would bother him. She shut her mouth and pulled the covers to her chin and said, carefully leaving out the tolerance one would use for a child, “go on.”

“I’m in love,” he said, rather plainly. He was not one for dramatics.

“You’re in love.” She repeated, not understanding fully her role in this conversation.

“It’s not like that, though.” This reassurance had the same plainness to it. “I didn’t cheat, or anything.”

The *or anything* caught her particularly quick and hard in the gut. What was this *or anything*? What were the shadows between faithfulness and infidelity?

“You’re not cheating, you’re just in love.” He nodded, seemingly encouraged by her quick grasp of the situation. “Well, *jesus*, Frank, where does that leave me?”

Frank had assured her it left her in exactly the same place, that he wanted nothing from this love he was feeling, that he was happy and comfortable with her and wanted nothing to do with anything that would hurt her, but had to tell her because if you didn’t have honesty you had nothing. Somehow, this failed to comfort her – this was not somewhere she wanted to be left. She told him, then, in bed, in a flat they were renting under his name, that she was not the kind of girl who would be settled for. She wasn’t sure what it meant, but it felt good to say and it sounded good to hear, and she repeated it again the next morning before catching a cab to the train station.

When Margot showed up at Henry’s door, bags in hand, sheepish grin on her face, he let her in, no questions asked. They were not close – hadn’t been since he’d started dating his almost ex-wife, Anya – but their parents had instilled in them, from a very young age, the unbreakable bond that was blood.

For three days, she slept in the bedroom that technically belonged to Henry’s daughter, Mol. Occasionally she’d wake up to shower or make some toast and tea. At the end of the week, she wandered into his study and asked him for a book. Henry handed her something she had given to him four Christmases ago that neither had ever read and she went back upstairs without saying good night. Still, he slept easier that night, having

seen a shade of his younger sister in the desperate, destroyed woman that had been lurking in his home.

Henry helped her find an apartment in a not-quite suburb. It was cheap, which was important given her funds, and a block away from a 7-eleven that was opening up, also important. Margot, he knew, was beautifully employable, intelligent and intuitive – and yet, without a college degree, she had few options. She couldn't even be a waitress – she had painful nerves, could barely talk even to him. Of course, if he could, he would have paid her rent, settled her in a nicer place, bought her a car, taken care of her. He knew, though, that Margot would only accept what she absolutely needed – the first few months' rent, a cushion until she could grasp the minutia of her own life.

Henry took a few days off, helped his only sister move in. When they'd finished filling the apartment – which took just under a day, the place was so small – he took her to the florist in the local grocery store. Roses, red. Not the rosy color of a blushing bride, but that of a rusted bicycle. The woman behind the counter didn't look up as she took care of their order, only spoke to Margot.

"Flowers are just like people, honey. They need vodka, too."

The florist cut the rose stems in groups of three. On a diagonal, as if they were cucumbers or squash. The sound was a crisp, sick noise, like the slow breaking of bones. She mouthed *one-two-three* as she dropped the heavy butcher's knife across the ends. Then she returned to the conversation. "Not too much, of course, no beautiful rose should be drinking that much." Nervous laughter, *one-two-three* of the guillotine. "If you're really mormon about alcohol, of course you can use sprite and bleach. But it's just not the same. They really smile --" *one-two-three* -- "with the vodka."

Back at the apartment, Henry watched his sister give the flowers some water and a pinch of salt, as she'd always done. When he was satisfied she would be fine, that her sanity was no longer in jeopardy, he left. Within moments of returning to his home in Philadelphia, he forgot about her.

Margot settled into a routine almost immediately. She found herself splitting her time evenly between the 7-eleven and her home. When, finally, she found the sun was shining too brightly for her to stay indoors, she took a walk to the grocery store, headed straight for the florist's little room behind the cashiers.

Margot approached with her hands tucked into her back pockets and her eyes on the floor. The florist was already laughing.

"No reason for all that shyness, honey. What can I do you for?"

"Could you arrange me some roses again? They were so beautiful. I loved them as long as they lasted." Her articulated, measured speech felt cold against the florist's warm Southern accent. She risked looking up at the woman's bright smile.

"Well that wasn't long at all, now was it?" She laughed. "No, roses don't last at all. Honey, I didn't want to say anything in front of your husband when he was being all sweet and romantic-like, but you are *not* a girl for roses."

"No? What am I girl for?" Margot didn't bother to correct her. Let someone think she was capable of keeping a man.

The florist gave her a long look, a sweeping up and down. She inhaled, closed her eyes and raised her hands to her temples. Massaged them. If she had seen this on TV with Frank, Margot would have switched the channel, or at the very least rolled her eyes, thinking, *Oh Lord, this shit*. Maybe saying it out loud so they could both laugh. But

Margot kept her eyes glued on the florist until she said, "Water lilies," with her eyes still closed. Then she dropped her hands, opened her eyes and her attention refocused. "Oh, honey, we don't sell 'em though. Mmm, what else could I give you?" She put her fingers to her forehead again, but without closing her eyes. They were a deep green. The pupils began to dilate.

"Well, what are *you*?" Margot asked.

The florist's eyes refocused. She lifted her face, let her eyes crinkle, shook the short curly brown hair out of her smile. Her roots were gray. "Poppies." That smile.

Margot brought the poppies back to her place. She pushed the bills off the counter by her sink and put a jar of mayonnaise back into the fridge. Was it bad yet? Was mayonnaise a condiment you had to refrigerate? She couldn't imagine she'd bring a man back here. She planned to lie. "I live with my sister. She's got two kids and a job as a waitress. We split the rent, it's the only reason I'd put up with her. She's a wreck." Margot didn't have a sister. She had a charming brother with an ever-lysoled apartment in Old City and an alcohol problem he wouldn't admit to. He had a wife that lived in a separate apartment and, for holidays, a twelve year old daughter that Margot hadn't seen in years.

Worse still, she couldn't imagine inviting Frank to this new place. You couldn't bring a professional man back to a small efficiency apartment in the attic of a house full of teen-aged renters. To a kitchen-combo-living room. To the toilet paper she had to store on a bookshelf in her bedroom because there was no space elsewhere. Sometimes, as she left for work, she'd look at the place and pretend the whole house was hers.

Anyway, she had poppies today. Orange-red.

They looked better in the store.

Most of her cleaning supplies were out. That is to say, the many rolls of paper towels had dwindled to one, and the bottle of generic Windex was nearly empty. She walked to the corner store whose name she could never remember. On the way there she always thought, *this time I'll check the sign outside*. After buying her things and walking halfway home she would realize she had forgotten to check. This time was no different.

In her kitchen, she admired her new investments: a can of Lysol, branded, a textured scrubbing pad, and a bottle of bleach. When she realized her place wasn't clean enough to clean, Margot had to sit down and catch her breath. On her keys. The sink was full of dishes. Laundry, dirty and clean, piled on the kitchen table, the two piles merging as one consumed the other and she'd have to wash them all now. The bananas she had bought in the name of health six days ago were progressing to an old age. They could've had children by now, she thought, and the children would have begun to speckle. Margot laughed into the empty room and felt as if perhaps her dishes and unwashed clothes and brown bananas had appreciated the joke.

Margot put the vase of poppies into the cupboard under the bathroom sink, closed all the curtains and began to clean.

The sky, which she couldn't see because of the curtains, turned a shade of dark so blue it would've hurt Margot's heart to look at. Then it grew lighter and lighter, until Margot's alarm clock began to ring. She was surprised. Though she hadn't slept, the house - it made her feel good to call it a house - wasn't looking clean yet. Granted, she had pulled out all her things and put them on top of the clothes on the kitchen table so that she could really start from scratch with the reorganization process. But still. She had assumed it would be done by the time she had to go to work in the morning.

Still, there was always time for a shower, one of the few important rituals in Margot's unspiritual life. The sandalwood scent of her imported soap – her only luxury, really – intoxicated the quarter-hours of the day she dedicated to hot water. Nothing but the rough feel of loofa on her skin, fingernails on her scalp, drops on her eyelids. When the alarm rang to remind her of the outside world, she ignored it. Let it snooze, she figured, today she needed more time. Would she remember to get out again after just ten minutes?

She was an hour and forty minutes late to work, but if she held her hand to her nose, all she could smell was sandalwood. Anyway, today Jason worked the shift before hers, and he didn't mind when she was late. He never reported her, and Margot always thanked him for clocking her in with the pay from whatever amount of time he had covered, plus a coffee sometime during the week. Not the coffee down water from the 7-eleven, but a pricey cup from a nice place that he would never go himself. It gave her an excuse to buy herself a cup of the frothy milk-espresso stuff that she really had no budget for.

When Margot returned, the phone was ringing and the room was as she left it. “Hello?” Margot understood that the caller was probably sitting on the same bed she used to sleep in, that he would have nothing to say. She checked her watch. The curtains were still drawn and she had eaten a candy bar on the way home from work. With no reason to delay, she didn't.

When she finally finished cleaning, she opened the curtains. The sky, she saw, was a shade of dark so blue that she felt something stir, a small rattling feeling in her chest cavity. Emotions, she knew, were created in the brain, so this must have been the early symptom of the disease she was fairly certain she would contract in her mid-forties.

Maybe she would have heart problems. She wouldn't go to the doctor until it was too late, she had already decided, and when they asked her why she had waited so long, she would say in an offhand way, *Oh, but I was so busy*. With the quick wrists of someone who broke eggs with one hand, she closed the curtains. It really was making some part of her ache.

Returning her attention to the kitchen, she let out a long low whistle. "So it *can* be cleaned." The words echoed a bit and the walls absorbed the phrase and she felt the place was richer for it. Her *home* was richer for it. The poppies, drooping just a bit from the day in the dark cupboard, were retrieved and placed on the counter where earlier the bread had begun to host a small family of bacteria. The flowers looked rather lonely, Margot thought, though their presence did brighten her kitchen. The florist's words floated back to Margot, and she retrieved a nearly-empty bottle of vodka from behind a few packs of ramen noodles. How much was enough? She filled the shot glass her brother had gotten her from San Francisco, dribbled half into the vase. She considered dribbling in the rest and drank it instead. Though perhaps the poppies weren't quite smiling, they did seem to grin.

"Oh, honey, what'd I say about being shy?"

Margot laughed and even exposed a few teeth, which seemed a bit much for a new acquaintance. "I need *more*," she said with a sigh, as if it were an affliction.

The florist let out a sympathetic little noise. "Honey, we don't really carry poppies. Not yet. It was for my birthday, 'bout a week ago? I used that as an excuse. I said, Amy, I know you're the boss, but poppies are my favorite flower and I really think they'll sell. She didn't think so, but she got them for me anyway. And *you*, honey, you bought the

second to last vase. Amy said if they all sold, she'd get 'em every two weeks or so. But we still have another week until she reorders them."

"Well, thank goodness for the person who bought that last vase!" Margot was relieved to know that this woman was the sort who would get what she wanted.

"Oh, honey. That was *me*."

They looked at each other and began to laugh, teeth and all.

"What's your name, if you don't mind me asking?"

"*Mind?* Honey, what's there to mind? My name's Maureen but for some reason people call seem to call me Isaac."

"Isaac?" She had a round, freckled face with cheeks that flushed whenever anything pleased her. Margot saw that they entertained a deep pink color quite often.

"I always hated the name Maureen. Then my dad died when I was eleven, just before I hit puberty. My face changed a whole lot, and at the next family reunion, everyone was certain I was the spitting image of the man." Isaac's dark hair formed ringlets around her face. Though she was older, it was easy to imagine her being six or seven years old. All girl. Margot would not realize she forgot to apologize for the death until after she had left.

With more warmth to her voice than Margot thought you could give a stranger, Isaac said, "Now, what kind of flower you in the mood for? You can come back when the poppies get in, but until then..."

"Something friendly. To keep the poppies company. I guess, you know, something that will look nice with them."

"Honey, anything'll look nice with those gorgeous things, but that's not what you said! You said you don't want your poppies getting lonely. Sunflowers. Margot, those

things are so friendly you'll find your vases sitting next to each other when you get back home."

"Those, then."

"Mmm, they're expensive per stem, but the thing is you need less per bunch. I'd say five is optimum but -- what's your budget like?"

Margot didn't blush, as she normally would have. She laughed. "Very small. I'm not sure why I'm buying these in the first place."

"Three, then. Now, I'm supposed to push this thing on you," she pulled out an earthen vase, glazed brick brown with a bull's head in place of a spigot, "but it's twenty-five for this damn thing and it ain't worth it, 'specially if your budget's real small. These won't look good in glass, though. You can buy those terracotta pots somewhere in that summertime aisle right here for cheap, maybe five. Grab one of those and by the time you're back I'll have these sunflowers looking pretty for you."

They proceeded with the business of flowers. Margot walked away, her arms at right angles with her body so that she could bury her nose into the sunflowers. They didn't smell as delightful as she'd expected. The fact was, though, that they made her feel less alone. The something in her chest that rattled spoke up. *Oh*, she realized. *So I'm alone.*

But something nagged her and she turned around. Isaac looked pleased to see her. "Forget something, honey?"

"Here's my number." She underlined the name Margot on her receipt and then scrawled her phone number underneath. Squinted at the whole effect. "Well that's a 4, not a 9. Would you want to go get coffee sometime?"

"I have a tummy problem, honey, I can't stomach the stuff." Isaac looked down at the receipt and said with a smile, "Margot. What a pretty name."

"Oh. Of course. Well," nervous laughter, "I'll see you when these wilt, then."

"Wait a minute, honey. I didn't say I can't stomach *you*. How about ice cream? I know I'm no spring chicken, but I still like ice cream."

Margot was almost out of soap. If she ordered more, she'd be more than short on cash. Two trips to the florist. Replacement vodka. All that extra cleaner. The coffee. The hour and forty minutes she gave to Jason. The mayonnaise that had, in fact, gone bad. The green polka-dot bread.

She called the man who owned the 7-eleven. Unable to pronounce his name, she referred to him as sir. She hung up once, redialed. "Sir? Hi, it's uh, Margot? From the store? I'm good, thanks. Actually, I was wondering if, maybe, would it be possible to schedule me some more hours? I know it hasn't been so busy but, I could really use the uh, the money. Only if it's not a bother. Really? Well, great! I mean, I'm sorry to hear that, I hope he gets better. But great. Thank you."

When she had stopped breathing so heavy, she blew a kiss to the sunflowers and the poppies, sitting side by side. She figured, why keep them away from each other? She got online and ordered herself some soap.

Margot worked three ten hour shifts in three days and covered for Jason when he was fighting with his mother one night. Money. By putting her food in the fridge where it belonged so nothing spoiled, she kept it around a little better. TV filled the half hour before bed, but that was it. Sleep demanded her attention more than it ever had before.

She dreamed of 7-eleven customers snapping at her, of the register refusing to open when she hit the button, of a middle aged man in a suit more expensive than her rent for the month telling her he was leaving for love. Upon waking up, she came across an interesting mix of facts. Those first two dreams caused her more anxiety than the third. She hadn't thought of the main character of that third dream except for in the dream itself. He was the first, and only, man to ever love her. Shouldn't Frank be occupying some space in her mind?

When Henry called, Margot could imagine from his voice that he was showing up at her door with bags and a sheepish grin. She was, sickly, a bit happy for the crises these days – they seemed like a real family when things went wrong.

“It’s Anya,” he said. “I’ve got, uh, news. She’s going to France. She’s been talking some guy – face-to-face chatting him, or something, and they’re meeting in France. Christ, we haven’t even divorced yet. And she’d prefer some virtual stranger to me. It’s sick. I have to go there.” His voice had lost its brash big-brother quality. It was timid, ashamed. “And, uh, Mol. She doesn’t have a passport. I can’t take her. I’d like to, of course, I’m sure she’d help Anya come to her senses a bit, but.”

Her apartment was disastrously small. There was no room for an extra body. She couldn’t get off at work, or maybe she could, but she needed the money.

“Of course I’ll watch her, Henry. Of course.” Blood.

It had been years since Margot had made a friend. She had been working since she got out of high-school, odd jobs, and she had made only casual coffee-type acquaintances throughout. She knew, though, that Isaac would be different. She figured they would talk

about their lives, but she didn't know how or where to start that sort of conversation. Margot sat at the ice-cream shop next to the grocery store where Isaac worked, waiting for her to get off her shift. When Isaac came, she suggested they order for each other instead. Margot ended up discovering a love for pistachio in a chocolate cone and Isaac smiled at her timid vanilla with rainbow sprinkles in a dish.

“You're at an advantage, honey. You know what I do and I know very little about you.”

Margot smiled, thrilled she didn't have to start the conversation. “I work at 7-eleven, for the most part.”

“I hope you don't mind me saying, 'cause, hell, I'm a florist at a lousy grocery store, but you seem like a smart girl. Why 7-eleven?”

“Well,” Margot licked at a drip of pale green, “I have no college degree, no real interests or skills, and it seemed like enough to keep myself afloat until I figured something out.”

“And you never got around to figuring?” Isaac was neither preachy nor intrusive.

Margot shook her head. “It hasn't been that long. Just a little over a month.”

Margot considered explaining to Isaac about Frank, and then decided against it. Instead, she told her about Henry and Anya and Mol.

“So you've got a tyke on your hands soon?”

“Well, she's probably pretty old now. Twelve, I'd guess. But it does seem that way.”

“Twelve! Well that's a funny little age. Listen, I like kids. Too, I used to babysit for a neighbor but now she's fifteen. Practically a baby-sitter herself! If you need help, just let me know.”

Henry dropped of Mol just before his flight, once it was already dark out.

“Get her to bed soon, or she’ll be cranky all day long,” he warned. Mol, a miniature of her mother with her father’s distaste for words, crossed her arms. Margot was stunned to see that the rolling slate gray eyes which looked so cold on Anya could look so lonely on Mol, that the long silk hair Anya spent so much time on was cropped close to Mol’s neck.

Margot tucked Mol in a bit awkwardly, unsure of how much physical tucking the process actually involved. She sat on the edge of the couch-turned-bed a few moments, to see if the girl would speak. She didn’t.

“Mol—” she began. “Do you – well, are you alright?” The girl nodded, a bit too vigorously, her short hair whipping up at her ears. Margot understood that sleep was not quite on the agenda, but she was at a loss for what to say. “Well, your hair matches my poppies.”

Mol giggled, sat up to better see the poppies sitting on the island that divided the kitchen from the room with the TV, pulling the sheets, that Margot had so meticulously tucked, up with her. “Mom says my hair will get less bright when I get older. She said her hair used to look like this too. And now she’s blonde!

Your mother dies her hair, Margot resisted saying. Instead, she posed the question she knew she was to offer. “Do you want to talk?”

“How do you know when you’re in love?” Mol blurted. “Mom’s in *love*, she said, and Dad says she’s confused, but I thought you couldn’t *be* confused. I thought love is like, *it*.”

“Well, it’s more complicated than that,” Margot said. She realized she was

patronizing, as she sometimes had with Frank, and suddenly missed him terribly. She decided to treat the girl like the budding adult she was for these few days, to be the cool aunt that knew how to handle children.

“Fine. Well, who’s Frank then?” Margot raised an eyebrow, a trick Henry had taught her while they were growing up, and Mol explained. “Dad told me not to bring him up.”

Margot laughed, folded the sweatshirt Mol had left on the couch’s end, then spoke. “You met Frank. You were really young, but we came over a few times for Thanksgiving and once for Christmas, and your birthday one year.”

“How old was I turning? You weren’t married, right?”

“You were six, I think. You got a bike that was striped like a candy cane. And no, we were never married.”

“But you were in love?”

“We were. I was.”

“So now you’re not.”

“Mol, does this count as not bringing up Frank?”

She pulled the covers up past her nose, muffling her voice. “No, but...”

“I’m not mad.” Margot pulled the cover down to her niece’s chin. “Repeat, please.”

“It’s just that Mom thinks she’s in love. I wanna know about it. Can you tell me about that, then? It doesn’t have to be about – well, him. But how’d you know when you fell in love?”

Margot thought a minute about his brother’s wife telling their daughter that she was in love. It meant that either she was a good person just trying to be honest with her

kid, or that she was an evil conniving manipulative bitch. Margot couldn't quite justify her reasoning for assuming the latter, but she knew she was right.

“Margot?”

“Right, well. Love. We were bowling with some friends. We were much, much younger and – ”

“My age?”

Margot laughed. “No, not nearly. A bit above twenty, though, we'd already been dating a while. We were maybe twenty-two at this bowling alley and while Frank was in the bathroom this guy came up to us and he – well, he'd had a lot to drink. Much too much. And he started yelling at me – ”

“He yelled at you? Why?”

“You know? I don't remember,” Margot lied. He had yelled at her first about her bottom, and then when she ignored him, about her frigidness. “But Frank came back and he didn't even know what was going on, he could just see how upset I was. And he took the man aside and spoke to him real quietly for a minute and suddenly the man left. And I felt so good. I got a strike.”

“You really like bowling?”

“I guess. No. It just felt good to have him protecting me. And the way he went straight back to bowling, like it was no big deal, just what he was of course going to do. I don't know. I guess I just felt safe.”

Mol didn't respond. Her breathing slowed to a regular pace and Margot realized that she had been holding her breath since her niece arrived.

Walking out of the 7-eleven, Margot kept her hands deep in her pockets, fingers hiding from the winter chill. She could imagine already the comforts of her feeble home awaiting her: a hot shower, her silk robe – the only nice thing she owned, a present from Frank – syrupy sweet peaches straight from the can.

As she approached the porch of the house she shared, walked up the stairs to her apartment and heard the glittering noise her niece made when she was happy, she remembered that she was a *real* aunt now, not just a birthday-card-in-the-mail aunt. What waited at home was at once something both desirable and discomfoting.

She followed the giggling into her living room. Mol was already in pajamas and had on her arm a sock with blonde hair. Isaac turned at the sound of Margot's arrival, the sock on her arm covered in green yarn.

“Can you believe,” the sock mouthed, “this sweetie here thought she was too old for *real fun*?”

Margot settled onto the floor by Isaac, who was kneeling where Mol's hair lay on the pillow. “What're you up to?”

“Isaac's a rock star and I'm asking her questions,” Mol explained.

“Mol's going to have herself a job as a public relations specialist one day” Isaac added in a sober voice with a wink. It occurred to Margot that she had no idea of what her niece aspired to be, that she had been too shy to break Mol out of her shyness.

“What're you going to do with all your rock star money?” The blonde puppet asked the green one.

“Buy a pool and fill it with ice cream. Also, Margot, you got a phone call. Said he needs you to call him back, name's -”

“Telemarketer.” Margot interrupted. “Get 'em all the time. What flavor?”

Isaac paused. “Maybe pudding instead. Butterscotch.”

“Won’t you give any to charity? Dad gives to charity.”

“What charity?” Margot asked. Henry was quiet about his goodness.

“Something about schools in some country.”

“Well, I will *not* give to charity. I’ll spend all my money on plane tickets to exotic places and paying people to feed me grapes,” Isaac joked, tapping Mol’s nose on the last three words.

“Like Mom.” Isaac and Margot fell quiet for a moment, unsure of what to say. Mol broke the silence. “Have you been in love, Isaac?”

“Not at all, sweetie. Rock stars don’t fall in love, they just chase a- pretty women.”

“No. Not rock star Isaac, real Isaac.”

“Well honey, sure I have.”

“So how’d you know it was love?”

Isaac raised an eyebrow at me. “I’ll answer that for you. Gimme a second though, honey, I feel like this is a conversation that needs tea. Can you show me where you keep your kettle, Margot?”

Isaac led the way into the kitchen, pulled out the kettle from its hiding spot in the oven and filled it with hot water. “So what’s this pow-wow rated?” she asked.

“God, I don’t know. I want to be cool. I want her to trust me for answers and questions. Let’s treat her like an adult. But no graphic details.”

“PG - 13. Got it.”

“Is it – inappropriate?”

“The falling in love story? Hardly honey. What’s dirty about love?”

“You know what I mean. How old were you, anyway?”

“Fifteen. Three days before my next birthday, actually.”

“*Jesus*, Isaac!”

“Well, it’s true.”

Margot shook her head. “That’s nothing. That’s puppy love.”

“It was the real thing. I’ve never known another love like it.”

“Well, are you together now?”

Isaac’s cheeks flushed. “Well, no I – I live alone.”

They waited for the water to boil.

“Mol, how old are you?” Margot asked, bringing in two cups of tea.

“Thirteen.” She raised an eyebrow at her niece’s answer. “Well, almost.”

“And how old am I?”

Mol squinted at her. “25?”

“I wish.”

Margot continued while Isaac laughed. “Well, listen. We’re adults. Adults do things that are beautiful and complex and not intended for anyone who isn’t an adult.”

“Like sex.”

“Like sex,” Margot repeated, marveling at the child in front of her. “And what do you know about that?”

“*Everything.*” Mol rolled her eyes knowingly and took a sip of her tea. The tea was too hot and she made a face. The phone rang.

“Don’t answer it.” Margot said. “Do you understand, though? About adults? Doing adult things?”

“Sure. It’ll screw me up and I’m not ready yet and I won’t be until I get my first job that’s so frustrating I have to call Dad.”

This time, Margot marveled at her brother.

Isaac took a deep breath. “So, love.”

We took baths together, Glenn and I. It was beautiful, just lying there in the hot water, not wanting anything from each other but presence. We didn’t talk at all. We just lay. We joked that we were making tea. Isaac and Glenn tea. There was the sound that his bathroom fan made, a steady hum like you’d expect from a refrigerator, and the light would flicker a little. It was just enough to keep you from noticing small noises like a floorboard creaking or something. We heard nothing but heartbeats. It was the first time I’d ever felt so calm. I’ve never felt so calm since. We’d meld into one being, and I could feel his heart in his chest beating against my back, the inside of his thighs against the outside of mine. Once we got comfortable, his back against the tub wall and my back against him, we didn’t move. I’d lay my head on him and just not think. Not think at all. So one day, we’re sitting there in the tub, and we had been for a little so the water was just barely warm. And all of a sudden I feel a cool moisture on my shoulder. At first I think Glenn is crying or maybe it’s the fire-sprinklers, but then I look up. It’s raining down little tissue-paper poppies. Orange-red, speckled black in the center. They fell onto our wet bodies and stuck, bled into the tub, dripped onto our skin, that joyous color. I didn’t think too much about it. He kissed me and that was it. Love.

Mol left the way she came, half asleep, whisked away by her father while it was dark out. “Thanks so much,” Henry said. Margot just nodded, sleepy too. It occurred to

her that as siblings they had no nick-names for each other. Henry and Margot. As if they had been born thirty-five.

“She’s a good kid. How’s Anya?”

Henry shook his head, slowly. “I’d rather not think about it.”

“Well, if you ever need me to look after this one. Or if you two ever want to stop by – you know.” Margot’s brother looked the full six years older than he was. His eyebrows had begun to gray in just the days he had been in France. “How’d you know you loved her, Henry?”

“I don’t know. She was so beautiful and the fact she even bothered to look at me – it amazed me. I’m not even sure if I did, now, but I can’t stand not seeing her like this. And I hate the thought of her with some French man. She’s still my wife. My wife.” He looked strange as he said these last words, as if he was trying them out. “Ex-wife.” His shoulders began to shake, so he scooped up Mol’s things and loaded his daughter into the car.

The couch was empty, devoid of a makeshift bed or a little girl. It was the wrong day to have off, right after Mol leaving, but a schedule is a schedule.

There were dishes to be addressed. Hands soapy and nearly scalded from the water, Margot imagined the sink as a giant bath tub, that the bubbles were poppies, that the plates and spoons and the cups were all falling in love.

She decided to take a bath. As the tub was filling with hot water, she pulled a can of peaches from the top shelf in her kitchen. Before she could open it, though, the phone rang.

“Hello?” She hoped it would be Isaac, calling for lunch, or even Sir, needing an extra hand at work.

“Margot, it’s me.” She hung up immediately, put on her clothes and coat, and walked straight to the florist’s section of the grocery store. While Mol was staying she had not only a niece but a friend who was helping her out. Now she’d have to call and admit she wanted company. Or just show up at work.

“That was a crazy story you told. About falling in love in that bathtub.” Margot said, eyeing the refried beans on her plate. Isaac swore by Los Serapes but Margot was skeptical of all Mexican restaurants.

“Crazy? No such thing as crazy when it comes to love. Just the way life goes.”

“I always imagined love to be less – theatrical, I suppose.” Without meaning to, the tone which implied her audience was a child crept into her voice.

“Is that so?” Isaac’s pleasantly soft face stiffened. “You know, that niece of yours is either real clever and quick or she regurgitates very well.”

“And what’s she regurgitating?” Margot tried to raise an eyebrow but found she couldn’t. Instead, she cut into her enchilada.

“Well, says you’ve never been in love, just settled for something sub-par cause you were lo-.”

Margot looked up quickly. “And where would she come up with that idea?”

“Lord, Margot, I’m just sad for you. You looked so happy when Mol was here and you look so lonely now. And when I talked about love your face got real still like you were going crazy in there. And go ahead and tell me that’s not Frank calling you all the time.”

“So what if it is?”

“Well, if you do love him, really, wouldn’t you be curious about what he’s trying to say to you? What if he’s apologizing? What if he’s stopped seeing that woman?”

“He never cheated.”

“He didn’t?” Margot shook her head. “Then why’d you leave him Margot? That’s not love, that’s finding an escape route!” Margot didn’t say anything. Couldn’t. She pushed the rice around her plate until Isaac spoke again. “Well, anyway, Mol says you’ve got yourself a gentleman friend.” Isaac winked and pushed a forkful of refried beans into her mouth. “I hear he’s young.”

“Jason’s a *child* and a co-worker. That’s all.”

“Is he attractive?” Margot blushed and took a hurried sip of water. “So that’s a yes!”

Margot laughed. “So what if he is? I’m not going to *do* anything.” She paused. “You know, Isaac? I’ve only ever kissed Frank. I don’t even know where to *start*.”

Isaac laughed. “Start with Jason. How many people can a child have kissed?”

At home again, Margot tried to do something with her hair. She brushed it out and piled it all on top of her head, like she saw women do it on TV. She swiped on some eyeliner from the expensive makeup kit Anya had bought her three years ago for Christmas. She looked in her closet for something that would make her look young, gave up, settled on a sweater that made her look not quite so old. She would go to 7-eleven. She would ask Jason if he’d like to get some coffee. Nothing to do with work, just two adults having coffee.

The phone rang, and this time Margot answered.

“Margot? Just listen, please.” She did. “I never touched her. I don’t even know why I thought I wanted her.” She noticed that the word *love* had been conveniently left off the table. “Will you meet me somewhere? Can we talk about this?”

They would meet at the coffee place where she had been hoping to meet with Jason. In a daze, she pulled on her coat. She remembered the first time Frank had kissed her, in the front seat of his car, a little too sloppy. The first time he met her dad, who had loved him. They had talked for hours about old bands she didn’t care much for, but she was proud that he could hold her father’s drifting attention for more than twenty minutes. She walked through all three rooms in her apartment, looking for her shoes. She had spilled her ginger ale on them at the restaurant, she remembered, left them outside the door. She thought about what Isaac would say. That she didn’t really love Frank. But she certainly didn’t love Jason. What would Isaac say?

On the porch where she had left her shoes was a pile of poppies, red-orange, their centers speckled black. A shoelace peeked out of the pile, barely visible. Margot looked and looked at them. She walked back into her apartment and turned on the water for a bath. As it filled, she went to the kitchen, opened a can of peaches. She speared one with a fork and chewed it slowly. They were the same texture as the mangoes her father used to buy her when she was younger.

Margot walked back to the bath and saw that the faucet was pouring out poppies, that the tub was orange-red, filled with dainty flowers. She peeled off her clothes and put one leg in, the other. As she lowered herself into the tub, she felt the poppies slicking to her skin, until she was covered up to her neck. It was all she needed to know.

KILLED BY A POLAROID OF A WOMAN AT DUSK

When the men in their deep purple uniforms came for Yemeni, it was well past curfew, so deep in the night that the darkness was threatening to fade away into the meek pink beginnings of daylight. The leader noticed this, and directed the others with curt motions, quick indicative flicks of the wrist.

Yemeni sat very still in his bed, watching them. They walked stiffly, carrying their bayonets parallel to their bodies, and a boy in the back, suited in a small-scale uniform identical to the rest of the SEC, carried a picnic basket. There was a popular, if suspect, rumor that if the SEC came for you, they'd at least pour you a drink.

He was sorry to see the men, who had formed an evenly spaced semi-circle around him. Of course, he had known for some time they would be coming for him. He had been ready for it years ago. But yesterday at dusk he had met a woman, a gypsy girl braiding her hair into a single thick plait beneath a lime tree. As decorum dictated, she had

averted her eyes, but slowly. He understood that despite the bangles clanking high up her arms, the sign of a widow still in mourning, she wanted him. From the corner vender he bought two cigarettes and offered her one in exchange for a light. Her lips quivered in an effort not to smile. From a fold in her dress she produced a book of matches, allowing Yemeni to light first his, then hers, whispering as he leaned into her, “The colors of mourning don’t suit you.” He took her home that night and something in him stirred.

The small boy stepped forward now and set the wicker basket in the open space that had formed around Yemeni’s bed. The boy pulled out a bottle of white wine – an uncommon choice in the city, but the only kind Yemeni drank. He wondered if they had known. He was given a mug to drink from, and the rest of the SEC passed the bottle, each of them saying his name quietly before taking a swig. *Yemeni, Yemeni, Yemeni*. It scared him to hear it repeated like that, *Gift from God, Gift from God, Gift from God*. When he had finished his mug he was given another, and he noted that the bottle was labeled in French – an import. The boy drew a loaf of bread from the basket and broke it in two, handing half to the SEC to pass around and half to Yemeni, who bit eagerly into the crusty loaf. Still warm. Finally the boy cleared his throat and asked him, “Yemeni, what is it that makes you happy?”

Yemeni was baffled. He looked at the man he had assumed was the leader, who refused eye contact. The boy was in charge now, his eyes wide and gray, his hair parted sharply down the middle the way only an overbearing mother can manage. Facing silence, the boy reached into the basket again, drawing out a picture of Yemeni’s father, the same one his mother had kept framed in her home until her death some years ago. “Has this man raised you?”

Yemeni shook his head.

The boy produced a picture of his mother on her last birthday, her thin hair pinned close to her head under a kerchief the way women her age were wont to do. “Did she love you?” Yemeni nodded.

The boy then produced a picture of a girl who had been fond of him as a child and turned to prostitution just a few years after the age girls were no longer required to attend school. His passage into manhood had been free. “Did you love her?” Yemeni stared at it. He wasn’t sure. He had been excited, aroused, grateful. He had sent her flowers and cigarettes and plates of fried plantains for weeks, but he had gone off to the city and forgotten her. His eyes moved away from the picture, and this seemed to be enough for the boy, who pulled out of his bag another.

Yemeni’s first wife, naked. It was an erotic picture that he had begged her to pose for and she had begrudgingly agreed to. When the picture began circulating – no doubt the boy who developed it had made some copies for himself and a few friends – she sobbed for weeks, closing herself into the house, not answering the phone, fearful to hear that her father or brother had seen one. One night she disappeared, and at dawn two days later an SEC had brought her body back to Yemeni. Yemeni was crying now, and though the boy did not console him, he did not ask Yemeni any questions, merely laid the portrait down and moved on to the next, a photograph of a doctor he had known some years ago – this was the reason the SEC were here. “Yemeni,” the boy began, “did you kill him?”

Yemeni had killed him. He had walked into his own home to find the doctor bending his wife over the arm of the couch he had spent a whole week’s salary on, a gift for his wife’s birthday. Yemeni hoped for a brief moment that his wife was being raped, but realized quickly her low moaning sounds were pleasure. Sounds he had not heard

before. Her breasts moved in time to the impact of the man's body against hers, and Yemeni stood transfixed, watching for minutes before the couple looked up. His wife had pushed the man off of her, ran into the bedroom and locked the door. The doctor, for his part, stood up straight and saluted Yemeni who, out of inane habit, saluted the naked man. Without a word, Yemeni walked into the kitchen, retrieved his .38 from the drawer he kept locked from his wife, and walked back into the living room, where the man began to speak quickly and irrationally, trying first to reason, then bargain, then plead with Yemeni. Yemeni shot him first in his upper right thigh, close to the crotch. His aim had deteriorated since he was released from service in the exiled president's army. Next Yemeni shot him in the stomach, and suddenly, feeling inexplicably sorry for the idea of the man suffering indefinitely, held the gun to his forehead and put him out of his misery. For the next few weeks, Yemeni's wife was stricken by an insatiable desire to do exactly as he said. Though he refused to bend her over the couch the way the doctor had, afraid she would fantasize about him, he took refuge in the fact that he had been better endowed than the other man. He fucked her with the lights on, ordered her to moan for him, took her in the kitchen. She did everything he said. When he asked her for the pictures, she did, eventually, oblige.

“Yes,” Yemeni told the boy. “I killed him.”

The boy nodded slowly, gazing at Yemeni. With a small hand, he rubbed his eye but refused to yawn. His watch was sharp, alert, though his eyelids seemed too heavy for his small face.

“Do you have any more pictures?” Yemeni asked. The boy brought out a picture of the woman who had been sleeping beside him just hours ago. She was a child-bride in the picture, her forehead covered with the colorful markings of celebration, sun setting

behind her.

Yemini glanced up at the platoon around him, all of their eyes trained on his reaction. The eyes in the line seemed not to judge him. How could they not? He closed his own eyes, perhaps fell asleep briefly. When he opened them, his mug was refilled and the boy was gone, the SEC filing out neatly behind him, as efficiently as they had come in. He sipped at the wine, trying to savor its sophistication. It would have cost them more money than he currently had in his wallet, which he generally kept well stocked in case of emergency.

It was a dry white, not the kind he used to enjoy with his mother at the beach – very cheap, but sweet and floral, smelling like the jasmine flowers she would tuck into her hair after she had bathed. Still, he tried to appreciate it, swirling in it in the mug, inhaling its subtle scent. As he curled under the covers, he wondered where the gypsy woman had gone off to. Even if she was mixed up with the SEC, he wanted to see her again. It didn't matter. In the morning he was dead.

A FUNNY STORY.

A Russian walks into a bar. He's dead, of course. My wife knows that. She knows about Russian literature, but I have to remind her: Woman, this is not literature; this is the *real world*. She laughs. He's dead, she tells me. I went to his funeral, she says. So I give him the eye, keep it real subtle cause god knows I'm not trying to piss off any dead people. He looks okay. Maybe a bit old, nothing too extraordinary. So he's lazy, doesn't get his hair cut, put on a bit of weight, forgot to shower. Probably hasn't seen daylight in a couple years. He seems, well, cold. Maybe the air conditioner's on too high for his liking. That's all. He's not dead, I tell her. She shakes her head, leaves the bar and I buy him a drink. I offer him a place to stay but he refuses, choosing instead to wander through the night. When I get home, she's fallen asleep on the couch with the radio on.

Later, in bed, I realize there was no man at all. Just a sad, strange marriage that we can't put to sleep.

DAYS BETWEEN RAIN

It rained so hard that for four days no one left the house. On the fifth day, Aneeket finally took out the cat, who had died on the second. The smell was beginning to get to his wife; Veena was sensitive to death.

The children wanted to be there for the burial, particularly the youngest, referred to only as Baby, who at six years old did not quite understand why Kitty had begun to smell or where Papa would be taking her. Pushp, the oldest, was startled by the concept of burial. He had attended his grandmother's, grandfather's, and cousin's cremations. How would Kitty's soul escape through a burlap sack and a foot of dirt? Nainita, at eleven years old only two years younger than Pushp, was held by a morbid fascination of Kitty's demise. Her interest in the situation and those of her grandparent's and cousin's more than made up for her mother's squeamishness. Sometimes, her mother wondered if Nainita was mocking her.

Aneeket let Baby pet Kitty one last time and say goodbye. He let Pushp accompany him outside with an umbrella to supervise the burial, making sure that the dirt poured

over Kitty's rice sack was not so thick that her soul could not escape. Pushp was pleased to see that it was in fact a thin mud-mixture being shoveled over the rice sack, which Kitty's soul could easily swim through, perhaps even reach Kitty nirvana. Nainita was scolded and told to sit in the corner. A little girl could catch a cold in the monsoon rain. Her unyielding devotion to death was unnatural and unattractive in a girl. If word got out, neighbors would think of her as irregular, perhaps even strange. If the reputation stuck, as reputations tend to do, it would be difficult to get her married. 'Except to a widower!' Aneeket would joke through his wife's disapproval. For Nainita, the main attraction in marriage was the idea of Sati. She was unable to eat for two days when her parents informed her that the practice was ancient, outdated, and illegal.

Aneeket and his wife were fairly certain that Kitty had died of old age. He had been in the family for about as long as Baby had, and furthermore had shown no inclination towards death before the moment that they discovered him dead. Aneeket said so in the short speech he gave for the children's benefit before stuffing Kitty into the burlap rice sack.

'Kitty lived a long, happy life and died with no pain and no regrets. I'm sure Kitty would hope that his caring owners would not spend too much time in sadness because of him, but instead live their lives with happiness as he did. I'm sure that he would encourage us all to take our naps as well.' Lately, there had been a decline in the ease with which the children could be put down for naps.

The speech, however, did not convince Pushp.

He approached his Papa with shyness, but not without clarity of purpose. Papa laughed at him often, but he intended to be taken seriously this time around.

'I don't think Kitty died of old age, Papa.'

Papa laughed a laugh that reminded Pushp of thunder, which Mama referred to as friendly. ‘Is that so, my little detective?’

‘He died of the rain.’ Pushp gripped the hem of his shorts between his fingers.

‘*Because* of the rain,’ Papa corrected. ‘No, Pushpu, Kitty didn’t go outside once. He didn’t sneeze or shiver or drip snot through the house.’

‘He didn’t die of *pneumonia*, Papa.’ Pushp struggled to clarify. ‘He died of – *because* of – the rain.’

But Papa didn’t understand. He shook his head and pinched Pushp’s cheek and walked out of the room. Didn’t the rain make Papa’s heart ache with sadness? No, he supposed. Perhaps Papas’ hearts don’t ache.

But Aneeket’s heart did ache. His son, he feared, was rather meek, dull in studies. His daughter, on the other hand, was bright in a way that made her mother cringe, reckless in a way Pushp should have been, and bold. Without the girl, Pushp might be looked at by the outside world as simply quiet. But when the tailor saw his sister placing the orders and the neighbors saw her win their child-like fights, it gave the impression that Pushp was soft. Which is not to suggest Aneeket disliked his little girl. On the contrary, she was his favorite, at least of the two, since Baby could barely be judged as of yet. But she too, without her brother, would be considered saucy at worst. With him, she was insolent, defying her brother in public. Next to her brother, she looked like a monster of a girl.

Like a boy.

But perhaps it was only the rain that made his heart ache for his children.

Pushp had convinced Nainita, who respected his quiet wisdom, that the cat was not old enough to have died strictly of old age. She, in turn, attempted to explain to Baby, who listened wide eyed. He had been fairly taken by his Papa's eloquent speech. He had even decided to nap without a fuss, for Kitty. Nainita tried to explain it to him. 'Kitty was only a year older than you. That's not old age!'

Though Baby could not grasp certain concepts with the same intelligence as his sister, he spoke with the same grace, despite his age. So he marched up to his mother and declared his muddled confusion quite fluidly. "Mama, Kitty died of old age, and I am nearly as old as Kitty, and I could die too. And if I could die too, I want a name." He imagined his Papa presiding over his burlap sack, saying, "Baby was a good baby, and he'd want us all to take our naps."

Veena was ruffled by the request, to say the least. *Her* family had not stopped calling her Baby until she began to menstruate, and then too only in preparation for when the marriage proposals would begin to pour in.

She had had a proper name the entire time, it was true, but no one ever called her by it. It was always, Baby, come sit by us, or Baby, could you bring sugar for the tea? If an auntie or uncle outside the family spoke of her, they would say, "Akhileshwar's Baby," or, "You know, Baby from down the street."

She had thoroughly enjoyed her time as Baby. For a short while, she even resented her husband for taking the title away from her. That was, of course, before she understood the Way of the World, and How Things Work. She no longer wished that she could be the youngest forever, or brooded over her tea missing the way her older brothers used to bring home soft drinks and sweets for her. No, now she swept the floor

without the faintest hint of nostalgia. Nostalgia was another word for not appreciating All Your Husband has Done, her mother once informed her.

Naturally, she wished the same extended youth for her youngest, away from the duties and expectations of an adult. And because she assumed she had time to choose the perfect name, she did not rush that first week of Baby's life to do so. Instead, she watched his five fingers curl around her husband's one, the little wiggling motion his nose made when he sneezed, the startled look he gave his mama upon awakening. In savoring these moments, she postponed the naming indefinitely, and as such Baby grew to be six years old without an official name.

The day after the burial and Baby's request, she brought her dilemma to the man who sold her fish, who had been Baby to the man who sold her father fish in the town in which she grew up.

"Do I plan on calling my baby Baby forever?" He laughed. "I never know which one's the last. Juhi's pregnant with our fifth. Figure it'd just be safer to name 'em all. It's not like we tried to have so many. Actually, we've tried a few things not to." He waggled his immense eyebrows. "What can I say? We're a happy couple and she's a fertile lady..." he winked and laughed some more. Veena smiled politely but stifled a gag. She imagined that it was his days chopping off fish heads that made him so crude. Then again, his father had been a man of character and dignity and knew what not to say to a woman. Perhaps it was the city that had spoiled his son. Perhaps it was the poverty.

It was three days after the burial when the rain finally stopped for some short, gleaming moments. Nainita snatched the opportunity and ran outside the moment she woke up. Veena had to call her back and force her to brush her teeth, change out of her

pajamas. “I am *dying* in this house!” shouted Nainita, but she did as she was told only because it would get her back out faster than disobeying. If it were possible, Nainita would have been outside before she had even woken up.

Pushp was happy to see proper sunlight. He noticed the clouds had turned a sheepish white, as if apologizing to him for the trouble. The cobwebs that accumulated in his mind while it had rained cleared suddenly, and his whole demeanor changed. He followed his mother through the kitchen, chirping an old lullaby that she used to sing to him in a loud, yelping alto. Though the racket annoyed her slightly, she was pleased to see her son looking alive again.

The doorbell began to ring violently, with no intention of stopping. Veena cleaned the edge of her knife on the fold of her apron and hustled towards the door. She wiped her brow of one kitchen induced bead of sweat, and remembered that she had forgotten to wash her hands. Raising them to her nose, she inhaled. They smelled strongly of onions. She opened the door anyway.

Pushp weaved along behind her, stopping his singing to see who was at the door. It was a group of maybe-Uncles, broad-shouldered with wide jaws and masculine features, dressed as maybe-Aunties, in saris and bindis and long hair. One wore his sari too tight, and at the crotch there protruded a particularly un-Auntie like bulge.

Veena tried to hide her surprise. “May I help you?”

“Sure, baby. Sure you can. You celebrating without us?” His voice was deeper than Pushp’s but cracked in the same way. It attempted to be honey coated but in fact tasted of course, granulated sugar.

“No, we’re not. I’ve been married for years now.” She made sure not to open the door too wide.

“Sure, sure, honey. But you know, when a man and a woman lo-ove each other...” The group burst into laughter at their leader’s wit, and one member made a lewd, very un-Auntie like pelvic thrust. “We hear you’ve been lo-oving your husband.” One began to hum the song of an erotic scene in a recent cheap Bollywood movie.

Veena’s cheeks burned. She had had no children recently, had been married for years, and had no obligation to deal with the hijras. They embarrassed her, and she resented the strength they had in such a large group.

“If you could hold on a moment, I believe my telephone is ringing.” She shut the door hastily and, upon seeing Pushp, hissed at him. “Get Baby and lock yourself in the pantry. Don’t let him cry. If he cries, there will be no sweets for the rest of your *life*. Understand? Go.” She began to phone her husband when a pointy red nail tapped her shoulder.

“Who’re you calling, sweetie?” Had she *really* forgotten to lock the door?

“I just...”

“Your husband? That you lo-ove? If you’re looking for some male guidance, don’t bother calling him, sugar. We’re all the *man* you need.” At the word man, his voice dropped its honeyed deception. It was, in fact, all man. As he said so, he pushed the phone back onto the receiver with his manicured hand.

They were all inside. Veena was terrified. She remembered the days of her village. The hijras would come to weddings to bless the couple, wish them the fertility that they lacked. They would arrive at the birth of a child, inspect it for a likeness. An otherness, an in-betweenness. Most of the time, the newborn would take their blessings as a normal child. The parents of the couple or child would pay the Hijras some sum of money to ‘thank’ them. The hijras then were at least polite to your face, calling you *ji*, keeping a

respectful distance. These hijras mocked her, walked into her home uninvited. “I think you’ve made a mistake,” she mumbled.

They looked at one another, annoyed, as if they had heard that line often enough. “C’mon lady, let’s see the newborn.”

“Really, I haven’t had a child in years.” She found herself backing into the phone stand, its corner jabbing into her back. She concentrated on the acute pain, gave it a name. A unisex name.

The more they saw her fear, the more they teased. The leader combed out his voice, stretched it into a thin line of sticky taffy. “That’s so strange.” He opened his eyes as wide as hers and in the same scared voice she used, said “Because we heard there was a naming ceremony to occur soon. From a reliable source.”

“Naming ceremony? We’re not even Bengali.”

The logic of this struck the leader. He looked at her thick Dravidian hair, the wide, southern nose, and the lines of confusion and panic streaking her face. She was not Bengali. Had he made a mistake? “Are you Veena? Belonging to Aneeket?”

Her face pinched with further confusion. “Well, yes.” She was too flustered to lie.

“And you’re not naming a child?”

It suddenly made sense to Veena. She gave a short snort and stifled it, her laugh amongst indecent company. “My son, Baby, he’s six and he wants us to refer to him by a more standard name. That’s all! You see, it was just gossip, distortion. Ha!” She was eager for them to leave the house. She tried to move them towards the door. “We didn’t intentionally disclude you!”

The hijras laughed as well, a nearly good-natured laugh. “Indeed you weren’t! You’re a friend, aren’t you? Well, good friend, do spare us some money for all the trouble

we went through to bless your newborn.” He stuck out his open palm, a child asking for the allowance he knew he would be given, though he hadn’t earned it.

“Yes, uh...” she rifled through the purse she kept on a peg by the door and handed him a hundred rupee note.

“A hundred?” The hijra’s eyebrows knit together seriously. “Do you know what year it is miss? This won’t buy me a loaf of bread. We have many mouths to feed.” He stepped closer and traced the gold chain around her neck. His red fingernail touched her clavicle, and she struggled not to shudder. “I think you can afford to help out your sisters, can’t you?”

The door opened, and behind the bang appeared a head of curls. Nainita bounced through the room in boys’ shorts, seeing no one, with a soccer ball and a monsoon-sun smile. Where in the world did her daughter get shorts?

Nainita bounced the ball on her knee and yowled like an injured thing. “Oy, Mama! I just saw this damn black cat, looked just like Kitty!” She tried out the new word, eager to fight with her mother over it. She still had not seen the visitors, though they clearly saw her.

“Well look at this, ladies,” the leader crooned to his peers. “She could be one of us!”

Nainita was startled, but only for a moment. She quickly put down the ball, corrected her posture, and gave a quick, graceless bow, hands folded. “Namaste, Aunties.” She’d failed to notice the broad shoulders, the wide jaws, the bulges.

The hijra who had hummed the cheap song was touched by her innocent, unaware greeting, and felt this was reason enough to leave her alone. The leader also appreciated the greeting, but savored the panicky look on Veena’s face as her daughter quickly

became the center of attention. “Your little lady-like gestures don’t fool us, do they, ladies?” he jeered. More followed his suit, calling, “What’re you hiding in your shorts, missy?” and patting their bulges. Veena began to say something, but the humming hijra hissed at her, “Lady, they’re just talking. It could be worse. You could *make* it worse.” And so she kept her mouth shut, and concentrated on the receding pain in her back.

“Shall I make you some tea?” asked Nainita in a child’s polite monotone.

They ignored the question and turned to Veena. “You’re lucky your little girl has showed us so much hospitality. We’ll be on our way. Perhaps we’ll come back when she’s older for more... hospitality. Eh, ladies?” They giggled like monsters and swept through the door.

When they left, Veena hugged and hugged her daughter, and Nainita wondered if her mother was mocking her.

Baby was given the name Arjun, and within a week, his vocabulary grew more sophisticated. His basic arithmetic speed doubled, his cricketing arm improved and he grew four inches. On the whole, he seemed to have aged three years in three days. Perhaps his parents finally saw the years that had been piling up in the corner of the room he shared with Nainita.

Now that Baby – Arjun – was in fact a young boy and not a child, it seemed obscene that he shared a room with a girl at all. It was arranged that Nainita and Pushp would switch rooms. She would enjoy the privacy that a growing girl deserved and he would enjoy the company of his little brother. The younger man would stay where he was and enjoy the mentorship of a male role model.

That, anyway, is what Veena told her parents over the phone. Both she and Aneeket must have noticed, though, that while Pushp could teach Arjun about matters of the heart and soul and morale, it was Nainita that would teach him about reckless abandon, honor, and sports. Aneeket secretly hoped that Arjun's presence would encourage Pushp to take up more masculine attributes.

His secret hopes were dismissed by whoever it is who considers such things. Pushp instead began to act matronly towards his new roommate. He'd fuss over Arjun's blankets at night and worry over whether Arjun had remembered to wash his face before bed. He awoke to calm Arjun down whenever he was seized by a night terror, which was often. His new ward did, though, encourage Pushp to act more like an adult, of however ambiguous a gender. He taught him how to multiply large numbers, fly kites, and sketch people. Arjun took an avid interest in the first two subjects, but expressed no real curiosity towards the last.

For some reason, this bothered Pushp. Like a mosquito, it kept him up at night, hovering and itching imperceptibly. He found solace in sketching, and wanted the same for Arjun. Pushp ventured to the school supply store next to the tailor's and bought some paints with the little pocket money he received.

Arjun, however, had no pressing need to find solace. Pushp, in trying to entice his little brother, began to take an interest in brushes. The timing could not have been worse. The girls had just begun to take an interest in him, and his preoccupation with painting just added to his mysterious, brooding appeal. A group of girls his age, sometimes older, would pass him with giggles and flirtatious eyes and much uncalled for hip-swinging, and Pushp would wander unseeing, wondering what color his sisters skin would be in Camel pigments. Burnt Sienna, maybe, mixed with a bit of Raw Umber, a splash of Rose

along her cheeks. Perhaps mix all the colors with a spot of white to make the portrait more flattering.

All this was much to Aneeket's disliking. Paints? What could possibly come from his son's love of paints? More softy rumors. A few 50 paise paintings. He needed the boy to learn business, though it'd be better if he'd take up an interest in engineering or medicine. He could go to IIT, marry a rich, plump woman. Perhaps be one of those men in town who kept a hired driver.

Not that Aneeket hadn't had his hobbies. He used to write poems, ghazals specifically, but it had helped him in the long run. He wrote them to girls mostly. They began to love him in turn, and he learned about ambiguous promises and the frivolous things that women want. He learned confidence from the love letters he received, and at some point he started his own sari shop. He had changed the name to *Veena's* upon his marriage; with all the flirting he did in that store to keep it going, he felt obliged that it be dedicated to his wife.

The store was part of the reason he got to marry Veena in the first place. Though his family was not well off, it became clear that he could support a wife by himself. All of Veena's older brothers had bought saris for their wives or illegitimate girlfriends from his place at some point. They saw that most of the women went to him because he was kind and fair beneath all his winking and joking. That his flirtations were empty, but also that whomever he chose to love he would love well, charmingly, not at all like their own father.

And he did. Aneeket never lifted a hand to his wife, and for as long as he could afford it (before the shop began its slow decline) he hired a maid to help around the house. He remembered anniversaries, birthdays, even began to celebrate Valentine's

Day when it became fashionable to do so. He brought home beautiful saris of silk and chiffon. He made certain to listen to her particular breathing when they made love, which he made sure to do as frequently as she wanted and not once more. He, too, had grown accustomed to the face of his weeping mother, and wanted never to be the cause of tear-smudged kohl eyes.

But he never asked for a son who painted.

The store, in recent times, had barely been making a profit. Aneeket brought both his sons in to help when his only employee fell ill. Arjun was quick with addition of prices but belligerent about them. He knew where every bolt of fabric was kept, but yawned as he handed them to customers. When a stray black cat wandered into the store, he ignored the line at the register for a whole fifteen minutes as he petted it. He was sent home after half a day. When Pushp tried the store on for fit, he found it suited him nicely. He went with his father to buy the saris and slowly changed their inventory. Their saris were suddenly fashionable, sometimes in a way that coincided with fashion magazines and sometimes in a way that rebelled beautifully.

This drove away many of their loyal, nearly dead, customers.

Aneeket was of course angry, and immediately doubted his son's taste. But Pushp begged his father to let him redo the sign of the store. He took down the old, tobacco-stain colored sign and painted over it with a smart, saffron colored *Veena's* in English lettering, with a peacock tagline – 'the modern woman.' Next to the words, a slim woman thrust her hips at the street, apparently unaware of her ungodly sized breasts. Pushp barely noticed the figure of the woman that he drew, but was sure to put her in a trendy, thinly pleated sari.

Within a week, the store was flooded with upper-class teenage to mid-twenties girls, waving their fathers' or husbands' credit cards. Pushp suggested they invested in a machine that could *process* the credit cards, and Pushp grunted his begrudged approval.

Secretly, unaware of Aneeket's own secret wish, Veena hoped that the separation of the rooms would encourage her daughter to behave like a normal girl. Something about the hijras' visit had made Veena nervous. Maybe there *was* something wrong with her little girl. It had been years since she had bathed her daughter, and she hadn't seen her undressed in as long. Had she become a hijra? Was that an affliction that could *happen* to a person, or were they all born that way? She didn't have answers. The fact that Veena hadn't taken off those damn shorts in the three days since the hijras came didn't help either.

On the first night that Nainita was to sleep in her new room, six days after the burial, Veena paid her a visit. They both sat awkwardly on the side of the bed, unused to one another's companionship. It was normally Pushp who stood by his mother as she cooked, keeping her company with stories of the horrid children at school. Nainita would be busy playing some sport with those same horrid children.

"Nainita..." She sputtered a few false starts. Veena was unsure how to approach the topic of sexuality with a child who might know nothing of sex. But she was always hanging around those older boys, so perhaps she knew something. "Do you know where children come from?"

Nainita nodded expertly and explained it to her poor, confused mother. "Well, if a man and lady love each other, they get married. And then they tell God they want a baby, and then God says, maybe. And he watches them, and if he thinks they really love each

other, he puts a little seed in the lady's belly. And then she gets fat like you did right before Baby-" she paused momentarily to see if her mother saw that she had accidentally called Arjun by his old name, but her mother was staring at her slack-jawed. "And then when the Baby's ripe, the doctors pick it." Nainita grew suddenly tired, and curled up on the bed.

"Who told you that?"

"Papa."

Veena blushed. Aneeket had given quite a poetic rendition of the miracle of life. When Pushp had asked her about Arjun, she had replied, flustered, "We found him at the river. It's a river only adults can see, and that's where babies come from."

"And marriage? Who will you marry?"

Nainita yawned. "I guess I have to, right? I guess someone who will let me play football with his friends."

This soothed one of the stones rattling in Veena's heart, though she hadn't really expected her daughter to say anything else. She decided her daughter was fine, just a bit irregular. Not even strange.

As if to help her mother believe she was a regular girl, Nainita began to grow beautiful. Perhaps it was because she was given a room in which she could do so privately, but Nainita began to bloom all over in a way that made Pushp's cheeks redden with embarrassment.

She was suddenly picked first for cricket teams. The boys would intentionally hit the ball past her so she'd have to run after it. When she'd throw the ball back, it would

invariably hit the catcher, who was busy watching. She thought she was simply getting better at cricket.

Kapil, a boy in Pushp's class, offered to give her batting lessons. Of course, she took him up on the offer. There were a few lessons, after which Kapil realized that the girl was actually interested in only sports. He thought about spreading the rumor that she was a dyke, or that he had already kissed her and was bored with it. But either of these options would still leave the object of his desire unattained.

One day, he confessed to Nainita, "I think I'm gay."

She looked at him curiously, and he realized that he would have to explain this concept to her. The explanation clicked with some childhood memory of playing dress up with Pushp, and her mind wondered. "Well, how do you know?"

Kapil smiled. "Well, I suppose I don't. But I've never kissed a girl, so how can I know?" Nainita shrugged. Kapil was annoyed with how slow she was being.

"...*maybe* you could help me?" He suggested.

Nainita complied, and Kapil assured her that she had fixed him. She was happy to help a friend.

There was a deluge of boys who played cricket or football with her who suddenly thought they were gay. She fixed them all, her heart sad for each boy who might not be able to love a woman or a pick a ripe baby.

She asked her mother one day soon after, "Mama, are many boys gay?"

Veena shooed away the questioner and swept around the question. It made her uncomfortable. It clicked with something she could not place, though she put her daughter in the corner anyway and told her not to ask her brothers these questions.

Nainita ignored the orders and told Pushp about it that very night. She was careful not to suggest anything about his character, only to let him know that kissing a girl had helped many of her friends. She dropped in the names of a few girls in her class.

Pushp was curious, though he was not sure why. He doubted that kissing a girl could make a boy like a girl, though he was not sure why. He thought about it on his way home the next day. There was a cat, black like Kitty but with white paws, sitting in a parking spot, soaking up the sun. Kitty had also thought he was a car.

When he got home, he told his mother, who began to cry.

“It’s a cure, Mama!” he explained, alarmed.

“And Nainita, how many has she cured?”

Pushp shrugged, unconcerned. In the kitchen, two cut onions hissed and charred in a pan. A black cloud of burning and regret rose from the stove and exited the kitchen. Pushp wriggled his nose but didn’t think to mention it. Veena did not notice. She held her face in her hands. That girl might as well climb into a burlap sack and settle down into the mud with Kitty. Eventually the cloud tapped her politely on the shoulder, and she turned to see her kitchen nearly consumed by smoke. She ran the pan out into the street and let it fume. She called to Pushp to open all the windows. When they were all open, he saw the clouds outside trying on the color of the kitchen cloud. He saw the advertisement he had made for the store sitting on the back porch, drying, paw prints running through the white sari of a woman who looked exactly like Nainita. A speech bubble next to her said, “I buy all my clothes from Veena’s!” Her doe-eyed face sported an innocent smile. He wondered if Nainita could cure him.

Arjun was to read a short essay that night in front of his entire school. One person from each class, 1-6, was chosen, and Arjun, currently in class 2, spoke as if he was in class 5. Just two weeks ago they were considering putting him into the extra class, for the children who would never learn and simply kept the class from going forward. The school thought that perhaps his magnificent back-story, his struggle to overcome obstacles, would impress the local minister of education, who would maybe increase their budget.

He wrote his speech about Kitty. They used to nap on the bay window together, sit in empty parking spots together. He used to drink the lactose-free milk from her bowl when no one was looking (Nainita taught him to do that). Kitty had kept him company for as long as he could remember. When Kitty died, she began to smell, and they put her under a foot of dirt.

Pushp had taught Arjun about reincarnation and souls passing through bodies and mud. Arjun was convinced that Kitty's soul was now living inside his body, at least until it could find some other cat-like form to roam in. His sleep was fitful now, and he had no explanation for his improved schoolwork (his teachers at first thought he had worked out some sophisticated method of cheating) and so he assumed it was Kitty's soul doing the math. He dreamed of paradise, of perpetually sunny windows and cream in a bowl that was never empty. In his dreams, he had kittens. He found them by the side of the river, a river only he could see, and each day he picked a new kitten. Each was silky and purred loudly. Kitty presided over all the kittens in his dreams. He led them in marches to the beach and through traffic, a small kitten parade.

Arjun peered into the audience. His Mama and Papa were absent. Nainita and Pushp were also missing. A teacher at the microphone said his name pleasantly. “And our very own little success story, our overnight genius – Arjun!”

But Arjun stayed seated. He stayed very still until his legs began to tremble. He gripped the hem of his uniform shorts with shyness, but not without clarity of purpose.

He stood up and walked to the microphone, paper in hand.

“Hi.” The microphone was too high. The teacher adjusted it for him. “Hi. My name is Baby.” And then he began to meow.

It rained so hard that for four days, no one came back home. Aneeket stayed at work and almost forgot he had a home to return to. Veena used some money she had saved to get a rickshaw to her mother’s before it started to rain. She stayed there and cried for her elder babies, one gay, one ruined. Baby stayed at school, where his teachers frowned at him. They took his temperature and let him sleep in the nurse’s room for all four days.

Because Mama was not home, Nainita roamed in the rain unscolded. A seed of pneumonia settled into her left lung, and she played on. When she kicked her soccer ball to Kapil, the mouth of a burlap rice sack caught her foot and she tripped, face first into the mud. Kapil pulled her up and suggested that he might need more curing. Nainita looked at him for a long moment, until another boy snickered. Then she began to cry. She cried until her palms filled up with tears, but it was raining so hard that no one noticed the difference. She was scared to go home.

Pushp sat in the bay window and stared at the madness outside. His new advertisement was dead. His heart ached with sadness. There was a pawing at the door

and he opened it. The black cat he had seen earlier slipped in, the white paint washed from his paws. They sat on the window together, watching the rain destroy the world. He was trembling. Pushp petted him until he calmed down. "I know, Kitty. I know."

LUCKY YOU

Every so often when you feel that luck or god or coincidence is on your side, you put down a couple dollar bills and walk away with a ticket, but how often do you remember to check the numbers? You've won the lottery three times already and have no idea.

Press your forehead against the grime-smearred window. The train rolls by low-income neighborhoods flattened by big yellow machinery from back when The Movement was still strong, when everyone wanted to move into bigger, better houses, new houses that had no memory of the days before The Movement.

Backyards. Shallow expanse of wood, scraggly bare trees, houses showing through like scalp through thinning hair. You are reminded of your ex-girlfriend's father. He pulled you aside after dinner once, said, "Kid, I gotta warn you – Darcy leaves everyone. I never seen her with anyone more than a few weeks. Like her mama."

Your ex-girlfriend fucked Lydia – the same Lydia who'd driven Darcy home once, at your own request. You were the one who had introduced them. And a year later, at

some house party that you yourself had been at, Lydia put the moves on your ex-girlfriend – or had it been the other way around? – and they fucked. Try to picture it. Their bodies writhing with desperation, their souls limp with it. Lydia was a stick of a girl, every part of her malnourished by choice and uncertain by some deep self-loathing. The scratchy ribbons of her hair like muddy straw. Smile. It was an act of desperation – you have, at least, made Darcy desperate.

The sun is a livid tangerine hovering just above the horizon. You wish they would turn off the lights in the compartments so the passengers could be bathed by the orange glow of that orb, still winking as it nestles down into bed. Soon, though, you'll be passing through the slums, and you'll be glad for these lights.

Cars parked all along the tracks, blue pick-ups and dilapidated jeeps, even a couple cars from the late 80s, well before The Movement had even started. Try to imagine these vehicles passing popcorn back and forth, watching the train. In truth, for every car you count there is an accompanying thud, sometimes a family of thuds, that mean someone has flung himself onto the train, desperate not to be left behind. It sounds like heavy, deadly hail. Wonder about Darcy. She had spoken out against The Movement, and frequently, hadn't she? You're lucky, you know, to have the right papers to take refuge in a world outside The Movement, lucky to have a legitimate ticket out of town, lucky to afford the luxury of crying at the thought of someone else's loss. Put your head on the seat in front of you; weep quietly until you fall asleep.

INERTIA

The party was still going when I got back. Seven years in New York, five in L.A., one in Milan, another traveling, and when I finally returned home, the party was still going. Breasts were wilting and hairlines receding, but everyone was still there. They still hadn't invited Suzy from across the street who couldn't speak without stuttering, Lina was dumping Erik for the umpteenth time, and Jeremy was still trying his luck with whoever the youngest legal in the room happened to be – now it was 26-year-old Maggie, Elena's accident sister. Maggie was just a kid when I left. She was the only person not having the time of her life.

Maggie smiled when she saw me, made her way over with two red plastic party cups. We clinked our glasses, producing a shallow sound like the bump of plastic shovel against plastic bucket that reminds you it's only a *sand* castle. Her shoes stuck to the stalepopcornngumbercan conglomerate that had become the floor.

“The punch isn't so great. I got whiskey instead of that cheap Vodka and it doesn't mix well with much.” Maggie was the one who made the necessary trips to replenish

supplies, because Maggie was the only one who left. They all knew she'd come back, though, telling herself it was just for a night or two. She started to cry. She was fifteen when she first snuck into the party, eager to be just like Elena. She didn't want to be here anymore.

“We'll just leave tonight,” I said. The solution seemed simple.

“No, it doesn't work that way.” Her nose dripped snot and she rubbed at it with her sleeve.

“Of course it does.” Still, she shook her head. “Let's just get a breath of fresh air, okay?”

Outside, I looked up. I'd missed the stars when I first moved to New York. My stepmother mailed me a build-it-yourself star projector to keep in my room and I turned it on every night, thought about returning home to see the real stars. Now, home for her funeral, staring at those dots of luminance, I found they were a dull simulacra of the unreal thing, meeker and less plentiful than the projector's image. Still, I feigned awe. “Do you see?” I asked Maggie. I held her hand and pulled her gently towards the sidewalk, the road, away from the apartment.

She nodded, looking at Erik's basement apartment, the nearly covered windows winking between warm orange glow and shadows of movement. You could see glimpses of Christmas lights, hear the energetic howls of the group. Happy like you only could be when you were drunk and in high school and surrounded by the people you think you will be surrounded by for the rest of your life. As I pulled Maggie by the hand, her feet turned heavier and heavier until I thought she was turning to salt.

“You go,” she said, staring back at the apartment. “I'll follow in a minute.”

NERVES

The carpenter building our deck had a nervous breakdown. The backyard was left for months, strewn with bits of board, scraps of wood, rusting nails, the bones of an unborn structure that would one day be the platform for every one of my teen birthday parties. Some of my mom's friends laughed. "Crazy," they breathed out through their teeth, two rows of headstones sitting pretty in a row, all straight from braces long since removed.

They're the crazy ones. How could you not cry when the boys in the car next to you mouth words at you that you don't understand and the one points his finger towards the sky and you think, because you can't look at him to find out since you're driving, that he's probably giving you the middle finger, so you put yours up too and pull off to the side of the road only to see your wallet sitting on the edge of the top of your car, ready to spill over onto the highway, that they were doing you a favor and you flipped them off. When

you've left your sunglasses on the kitchen counter and the light from the sun is reflected off the road so blindingly that at the intersection the light suddenly slips to yellow then red without warning and the car that should've hit you honks to let you know what an asshole you are, and you wonder if maybe it would be better if the car had hit you. How could you not break down?

OF DREAMS, OF MEN

When the doorbell rang I was hoping to meet my roommate. Instead I found a scrawny, sallow eyed girl with ratty hair that veered from black to green to blue without warning, her eyelids falsely smudged with heavy black liner, the dark half-moons under them present quite naturally. “Oh,” she said, scratching her left eyebrow with yellowed nails, “Hi.”

“Can I help you?” I asked. The sun was unnaturally bright for October; I pulled my silk robe to my neck, a shield for my skin.

“Did, uh – the girl who lived here before you, she leave a forwarding address? Kris Sellers?”

“Oh, Kris didn’t move, she lives here. She’s at her parents’ now, but she should be here tomorrow, do you want me to – ”

“No,” the girl said, tucking a well-oiled green-gray curl behind her ear. “Don’t bother.”

Later that night I was overcome by an unbearable heat. It was too warm for early October and accordingly I had refused to open the windows, convinced I would wake up with a cold. But I tossed and turned under the blankets, and when I finally peeled open my eyes, ready to admit defeat and let in the night air, I found a centipede under my desk chair, his legs sticking out of his body much as the hairs of my neck stood on their ends. Staring at me. If the woman who owned the property was aware of an infestation, she hadn’t mentioned it.

I was sharing my apartment with the woman I was renting it from, Kris Sellers, though I hadn’t met her yet. A woman seven years my senior, the PHD student was doing research at the university a few miles out, as I had discovered in a brief exchange of emails. She was used to living alone, she told me, but was running low on funds and couldn’t afford to keep her parents’ old football weekend getaway all to herself. She was giving me this information not to be social or amiable or even as a formality, but as a warning— we would be sharing more than a few walls and if I was interested in a hard partying lifestyle, loud sex, playing the cello, I should look for an apartment elsewhere. She seemed pleased (as pleased as one can seem, in an email) to know that I too was doing research at the university.

There was a curt knock, followed immediately by the neat noise a key makes when placed precisely in its destination and used efficiently. I found my palms sweating. As time went by and my imagination swelled, Kris seemed more demanding than even my own immigrant parents.

A woman opened the door. She had short unbrushed hair the mundane color of tea, though the roots showed some premature graying. Her pale skin might have freckled if it ever knew the sun; instead it was marked with a dark smudge along her left cheek bone.

“Hi, you must be Kris,” I said from my doorway, unsure of whether to approach her or stay where I was. She had no luggage, just a large blue laundry bag that had in places faded to a tired gray. I held out my hand. Her face was still blank, showed no signs of recognition. “I’m Minoo? I’m, uh, living with you?” She looked at it uncertainly, shook it.

“Oh, yes.” She dragged her bag inside. “I’m Kris.” I followed her to her room, which I had found locked when I tried to spy on my first day. She grabbed a purple key from her ring, took a sharp glance at the key and then the lock, then thrust it quickly, exactly, performing in a mere moment a feat which took my fumbling fingers infinite minutes.

It was a tight space: a futon with no room to unfold into a bed, a bookshelf, a desk, two lamps. Books and papers on all of these items of furniture, but all piled neatly in stacks that were assigned various colored tabs to match various tabs in other piles. I noticed her doorknob itself had a purple tab on it, corresponding to the purple key. She sat down in front of her desk in a chair that seemed to be the sole luxury of the room – a plush teal hue, tufted. Clearly second hand from a different generation of style than the rest of her stark, utilitarian room, but seemingly selected with a love and care that the other furniture, probably ordered over the phone from IKEA, lacked.

She studied the grain of the few blank spaces of her desk, busying her hands with touching first her wrist, then her temple. Without looking at me she cleared her throat. “Well.”

“Well, it sure is great to meet you.” I assuaged my guilt for telling a lie by telling another. “Your room is really lovely.” It occurred to me that her whole room was nearly half the size of mine, and that was if you didn’t count my uselessly cavernous closet. Half the size, at most, with the same gloomy wood paneling that darkened the whole apartment. At first I felt grateful to her, for giving me what seemed like a luxurious share of our space. Then I remembered I was paying for it accordingly. “Oh, I should mention, there are bugs.”

She raised a pale, nearly non-existent eyebrow. “What kind?”

“Oh, I’m not sure. There was a centipede in my bedroom, and a roach looking thing in the kitchen, and I killed another in the bathroom.”

“Are you sure they’re cockroaches?” She seemed to be taking her pulse, holding two fingers over a slightly protruding vein on her throat.

“Well, no. I have no idea, really.” I shifted the weight from one foot to the other, and from this new vantage I saw that under her bed were more stacks of books.

“If they’re *real* cockroaches and *real* centipedes, you’ll want to keep the centipedes. They eat the cockroaches.” She was looking at me now, earnestly, in the eyes. I would come to find, over time, that the only time she looked me in the eyes was when she was relating an indisputable fact.

Her eyes were such a startling combination, one opaque green and the other a dull blue, that they caught me off guard. I joked, “They don’t seem to be doing a very good job of it.”

She cut off my slight, stale laugh. “Well, are they *really* centipedes?”

“I really don’t know,” I admitted, miffed by her severity.

She put a palm to her forehead and let out a sigh. “Do they like to sit by the windows?”

“I don’t know, I kill them when I see them. And I only notice them when they’re in the middle of the room.”

“Well, *if* you were to leave one be, *would* it go to the window?”

“But I *don’t* leave them, I kill them. How would I know?”

Abruptly Kris stood up. “I have quite a bit of work to do. We’ll figure out what to do with the bugs at a later point.” She took up most of the doorframe, letting me realize I was a few hands shorter than her, and stood perfectly still until I had left. The door shut behind me before I’d taken two steps.

When I fell back asleep I dreamt I was sitting in an airplane, where all the pilots and stewards and passengers were cockroaches. Not black as you might be tempted to call them, but a rich, polished purple, the color of the poor in India when they have no respite from the sun. Their spindly legs, small twigs connected crudely at the joints like children’s toys, flipping the pages of travel magazines, ogling the pale women lying out on their brightly colored towels, rubbing the sun into their bodies like car wax. A cockroach glanced at me, told me if the magazines were so damn interesting I could ask the stewardess for my own copy. A stewardess was suddenly pushing and prodding my luggage under my seat with her brittle legs. “Where are we going?” I asked her. She asked me if I would like to suck on some candy to ease the discomfort of landing. “Where are we going?” I asked her. She showed me a tray filled with pacifiers and lipsticks. “Where

are we going?” I pulled at my hair and I asked and I asked. No one would tell me. I felt a quick, painless slap to my face and awoke.

“I’m sorry,” the man said. “I don’t like to strike a woman, but you were screaming. I had to wake you.” He was only slightly older than me, but old fashioned in a way that might have been authentic on a ghost or relentlessly stylish for a modern intruder. I admired his sharply parted hair, strong jaw, un-buttoned vest. He began to pull off the vest and I found myself thinking, finally, something normal, a fantasy –I’d never had sexy dreams, though I imagined it would be nicer than dreaming about insects. But his manner was neither aggressive nor sensual, and he did not proceed to his shirt. Instead he asked, in a voice perhaps rougher than you’d expect of a man so young with so many eyelashes framing his strangely lucid gray eyes, “Girl, could you sew this button on for me?””

I nodded, yawning. Expecting to waken from this dream within a dream any moment, I suddenly felt the very real weight of the vest he had dumped in my lap. I blinked, surprised, but my sewing box was on the bookshelf by my bedside and it seemed easier to indulge the man and my delusions than to try to re-evaluate my reality. I stuck my finger twice.

In the morning there was a duet of crisp knocks before my door swung inward, revealing Kris, fully dressed in jeans and a crisp button down shirt. “When do you go to the lab?”

“My advisor doesn’t get back to campus until the end of the week,” I said. I squinted at the alarm on my shelf. Six in the morning, no sign of my incubus, just the dream-caul of the previous night. The boxes on the floor, the stacks of books and trails of

clothing – my room was in such disarray I could not recall what it had looked like the night before, let alone if any of it had moved. I shrugged off the night. Sleeping in a new place always made me nervous.

“Well, what will you be doing until then?” She was staring at me, and I in turn was staring at my robe, just out of my arm’s reach.

“Right now, mostly secondary research. Would you mind turning around for a minute?” Though I was, by most standards, decently clothed, I have always been shy about my body in the company of men and strangers. This woman felt like both.

She ignored my request. “Actually, it’s not research if you’re not in the lab. What are you studying?”

“Marketing, mostly the effects of societal priming on --”

“Oh,” she cut me off, turning to leave the room only after I could see the disappointment in her face. “I thought you were doing real research.”

I looked down at my hands, two pin pricks of dried blood staining my skin. When I went to the bathroom for a band-aid, I found a green post-it with compact all-caps print lettering on the medicine cabinet: “Please stop leaving the dead bugs everywhere.”

Kris returned that night holding a small box swaddled in blankets. From the safety of my room, I saw her set it down on the living room table, grinning from ear to ear, a sight that struck me as unnatural, even for having known her for so short a time. “Minoo,” she hollered, clipping the first syllable, putting too much emphasis on the last. I could see my name like a see-saw, threatening to topple. “Come see *real* research.”

When she was certain I was watching, she took the cloths off with a flourish, revealing a small rodent that seemed to be trying to hide itself under straw. “What is

that?” I asked, trying not to imagine what sorts of bacteria she’d dragged into the house.
“Did you swipe that from your lab?”

“*Who is she,*” Kris corrected. “And I did not *swipe* her. I am not a criminal kidnapper. I take Marcy home sometimes. It’s warmer. She enjoys it.” The rat squeaked as if in protest.

“Doesn’t that screw up your research?”

“This little one’s pretty much retired.” She cooed at it, wiggling her index finger close to its face, and the rat seemed to visibly brighten. “She’s just the control in some lazy tenured professor’s half-assed pass at research.”

“That reminds me – guess what!”

But the phone began to ring and Kris moved to answer it.

“Hello?” she asked, “Hello? Oh, hi. Uh, I’m okay. I see. That’s probably not a good idea. No, I don’t think I want to do that. Listen, I – no. I’m going to hang up now.” She turned to me. “Wrong number. Go on.”

“Well, I emailed my research advisor and we’ve shifted the focus of my research. Now I’ll be working with rats, too!” She stopped wiggling her finger and looked up, unable to contain her curiosity. I hated myself for being so eager to please a girl who had no regard for my sleep and baby-talked rats and berated strangers on the phone.

“What on?” she asked.

“The effect of priming on response to branding.”

“I don’t see how you use rats for that.”

We were planning to test a control group’s response to gendered brands. There would be two variable groups. One would be primed for gender – bombarded with gender stereotypes: Tonka trucks, the color blue, extreme sports; makeup, pink, dream

houses, babies. The second would be shown a mix of both genders' images, and both variable groups would then be tested for their responses to gendered brands. I explained this all to her rather quickly and then stopped, out of breath. The rat looking up at me, bored. "It's really cool," I added.

"I'm doing my research on gender, too. More to do with gender and dominance and passivity, but gender all the same."

"No," I tried to explain. "It's about priming and brand response."

"Sure," she smiled. "Sure."

There was a round orange moon peeking in at me through the curtains. The man had made himself comfortable, sitting on my desk and humming a song I didn't recognize.

"What is that?" I asked, pulling the comforters around me.

"Oh, something my mom used to sing to me back home." He picked up a nail file that had been buried under a pile of makeup on my dresser my mother had given me and I'd neglected to use.

"Where are you from?" He didn't speak for a moment, caught up in filing a particular nail, and my mind filled in a dozen possibilities. Heaven. The past. An alternate dimension. Hell.

He grinned. "Tel Aviv. Can you fix my vest? The button fell off again."

I sighed, reaching for the sewing box. Others had been in, too. A small child not a day past eight, his hair mussed and blonde, his formal dress shoes at odds with his mis-buttoned pajamas, needing his lunch packed – peanut butter and banana – for the morning. An older gentleman in suspenders, sweet-faced with skin puckering around his

eyes, smelling of pipe tobacco, who needed help finding his glasses. He'd have asked his son, but he was busy studying. Half sleeping still I would oblige with a yawn and soon a vague feeling of annoyance.

This fellow, though, was by far my most frequent visitor, and not just for the button. He had other tasks for me, too, and when he asked me for these he'd always show up with his vest neatly buttoned, as if he was proud of my work. But mostly it was that damn button that was always needing re-sewing.

Today the thread wouldn't make its way through the eye of the needle. As I struggled, he stared at my fingers intently, finally saying, "Your nails look terrible." I wasn't particularly surprised by his bluntness. He had a tendency to chide me, gently always, for imperfections – Minoo, did you know your tongue peeps out just a bit when you're squinting? His hot chocolate was never sweet enough.

When I had finally threaded the needle, I felt I was owed something. "You never told me your name."

"Alon," he said.

"Well, Alon, what's your favorite color?"

The next day I bought green polish at the corner store. In the safety of my living room, without a man to judge me, I dragged the lacquered brush slowly across each fingernail, concentrating on not getting the paint on my skin. It was a task I had never quite mastered, and I had to stop often to rub off the color and start over.

"What the hell are you doing?" Kris asked when she came back home.

"God," Alon said when he returned that night for tea. "It smells like rubbing alcohol in here."

For a week I didn't see him, just his friends or co-pathetics or whatever they were. And on this particular night, I was expecting to sleep quite well – the men tended, for whatever reason, to avoid Wednesdays. Still, at 4:00 a.m. the phone rang. This was a new development altogether and though I never doubted the validity of the dream-men's presence, a tangible phone call nevertheless made me feel a strange chill under my bed sheets. I took the phone from my bookshelf and answered it hesitantly, blind without my glasses. From the corner of my eye I thought I saw a gleaming black brooch hurrying across the floor.

“Minoo?” It was my mother's voice crackling through. I held my breath for the news – 4:00 a.m. phone calls meant either death or babies. “Minoo, we found you a husband!”

Both.

I spoke to him on the phone several times. His voice had an appealing gruffness to it, as if he couldn't be bothered with sugar-coating a damn thing. I could tell he was kind, though, from the pleasant way he spoke of his mother, who seemed to be an intelligent and efficient woman, dedicated to her wifely duties and yet able to start and run her own book club.

Kris was home after a mysterious two day absence. I tried not to worry. She barged into my bedroom at six in the morning as if she had never been gone, holding an eye dropper and a small bottle of something pale green. “We will put a few drops in each corner of the house every day for the next two weeks. That should clear things up. But we can't forget – if you miss a day, things could get worse.”

I had assumed she had forgotten about the bug problem or dismissed my complaint altogether. “I won’t be in this weekend I –” It occurred to me I had never heard her say ‘we’. I forget myself, forgot who I was speaking to, and began to gush – “I’m going to meet a man who – well, in all likelihood we’ll get married, we already get along so well on the phone and really it’s just a formality, this part.” Kris bared her teeth at me in what was meant to be a smile. She had forgotten to unfurrow her eyebrows, though, and her concern was apparent.

“You Indians – you have long weddings, no?”

“A week,” I told her, adding quickly, “but the preparation can be done in two weeks or less if we plan well enough before we leave for India.”

Kris had not considered preparation at all. “*Three* weeks? Your priorities, Minoo. What about the research?”

I glanced at her unbanded fingers. A happy married life, it seemed, did not fall on her own personal list of priorities. I excused myself and exited quickly.

When I got to my parents’ home, I found the front door adorned with an unfamiliar but cheery wreath. The car in the driveway suggested that the family was already there, hopefully my fiancé too. In photographs his eyes looked the green-gold chaff of the wheat field behind our old house that, as a child, I would lose myself in on occasion. I wanted to see his skin in gloriously close proximity; I wanted to feel the warmth of companionate feet in my bed, an arm around my body. His shoes were at the door, as was customary, but still it fascinated me, thrilled me to see them there at all. Those feet would keep me warm at night.

I snuck in through the side door and climbed the back staircase by the kitchen so I had a moment to observe the man before he could observe me. He was twenty minutes early, anyway, and I felt I had a right to creep down the front stairs and peer through the banister at the man sitting in my living room. He was plain-looking but not unattractive, with a thin mustache like a slick of oil smeared above his lip. I stared at him hard from the staircase, and the air seemed to be moving slower around his pleasant humming, the smell of dirt and rain stepping neatly out of the way for each note he hit or tried to.

They were speaking of hobbies, and my mother mentioned my fleeting but intense involvement with poetry during my undergraduate studies. He laughed, a confident chuckle that sounded older than he was. “Poetry is so – imprecise. No one says what they mean, no one understands what is said – there’s no communication really. It’s just a mish-mash of misunderstands and misattributions. So good she’s done with that!” The quality of his voice was suddenly familiar to me – an eerie repetition of the men who would visit me at night.

My mother ignored his words altogether and clucked at him affectionately, “Oh dear, the button on your vest. Well, Minoo’s an expert with sewing. When you two are married you’ll never have to worry about that!”

The banister under my fingers felt cold, the carpet scratching my bare toes, urging me to move forward, offer cardamom scented tea and shyly tuck my hair behind my ears so he could better observe my eyes, ears, the downy soft hair that crept down my otherwise untouched neck. Instead, I turned on my heels quietly, careful to avoid the steps that creaked, and walked to my room. I opened the window and judged the two story drop, appraised the drain pipe, the shingling, thought of the rock-climbing class I had almost dropped last semester, my mother’s belief in destiny. I swung one leg over the

sill and then the other, said a prayer to the gods my physics classes and lab findings would not allow me to believe in, and stepped into air.

Back at my apartment, I had a dream unlike the rest. The protagonist was the suitor I had run away from. Even as I dreamt, I knew it was a dream – I was in my parents' house, in my old bedroom with the pink walls trimmed with white and I asked him to wait a moment. I made a decision, in my dream – I would paint the room. The window was suddenly a closet and I reached in for a bucket of skinned mangoes and large brown eggs. My bedspread was suddenly an old rag, and I knew what I had to do. With a hairbrush he found on the floor, he helped me – we scrubbed the walls until they were a glossy orange-yellow. We only occasionally saw the bugs that seemed to be haunting my waking hours, and when we did he would simply shoo them away.

We smiled at each other, accomplished dream comrades, partners in crime. Then he took off his clothes and I found that I too was suddenly naked.

He sank into me as only a dream could, the only way a dream could. He left me wholly unsatisfied but curious, hungry. I could feel the warmth of his body on me and the weight of him in my bones but I knew that was wrong. By some primal knowledge I had inherited, I knew there was more.

When I woke up, I knew I was missing something.

I was called into the lab early that day to check on the rats, who were behaving strangely. The frat boys, as I liked to call the variable group of males being primed for masculinity, were nipping at each other, agitated by their own company, and the ladies that weren't sleeping were hiding in corners, chattering to themselves.

“It’s the heat,” Laura said, incessantly buttoning and unbuttoning the pocket on her shirt. She was an undergraduate assistant, forever concerned I would transcribe any of her completely understandable mistakes onto a recommendation for her. “They turned the building’s heat on too high and it’s dry as hell in here, so I threw open the windows or we all would’ve keeled over, but shit now there’s this draft and I think it’s giving them some sort of chill. And the rain, god it’s damp out – Minoos, the rats are freaking out.”

“It’s okay,” I said, not sure that it was. “But really, the room is supposed to be at a constant 68 degrees.”

“I know! That’s why I opened the window, I thought – ”

“Hey, relax. It’s fine. Have you called Matt?” Laura shook her head. Matt was out for the week, as always. I more or less ran the lab, and at times like this I wish I didn’t. “Good. Don’t bother. We weren’t planning on doing much more today anyway. I’ll just bring them back to my place and keep an eye on the temperature. Write it down in the binder, though, we ought to get a humidifier.”

“That won’t bother you? *Rats* in your apartment?”

I tried not to smile. “I think I’ll manage.”

Of course Kris had already settled her batch of rats into her room, spooning nutritious food pellets into their cages. The face she made was the same my mother made as she fed me apple sauce when I first got braces strapped onto my teeth. Though I was howling with pain, she remained the picture of maternal composure. Perhaps I should’ve known, having already seen Kris with Marcy, but this tender side was still a surprise to me.

I set my own rats down in the living room and the noise tore Kris's attention away from her children. "Oh, hi!" she said, her spirits clearly lifted by the company of her cohorts. "I tried to get yours when I got mine, but one of your damn assistants said she wouldn't let anyone but you touch them."

"Ah, that's Laura."

Kris smiled. "Laura. She'll be good. Tell her to apply to my lab for next semester. I'll take care of her."

I wanted to thank her for the thought, but all those rats were making their little rat noises, every single one awake and alert and looking for a meal, maybe just some excitement. "Look," I said to Mama Kris, who had gone back to cooing at her own nest of rats, "I don't think I can be in here with all of them so chittery. Let's go out somewhere and hopefully when we come back they'll be less excited."

"I know just the place."

I hadn't known what Kris had meant by a dive bar, but just as she'd promised, when I walked in I knew. There was hardly any lighting, just the low hanging stench of beer and the occasional leer of a booze-scented man with a whiskey colored beard. Kris swore by the place – no men to bother you here, not really. Just old guys that expected you to ignore them, appreciated the chance even to look at you.

We approached the counter, where a somewhat older woman with a long braid down her back was polishing glasses. When she saw us, Kris really, she smiled. "What'll it be?" Her teeth were weathered in a pleasant way, as if they'd been exposed to the elements through excessive smiling. I leaned in to Kris. "I don't know what to order." Kris looked at me with one pale eyebrow raised, in a manner I'm sure she stared at

inconclusive test results. “Really, I’ve never been to a bar. Just drank wine when my friends hand it to me.” She laughed, the first time I’d heard it – it was a beautiful sound, actually, wind chimes caught in the brief swell of a fall downpour.

“Two Power’s Golds” she said to the bartender. “One for me and one to the lady.” She was wearing one of the eternally starched white button-downs she was always in – though I’d never once seen her hold an iron – and if it wasn’t for the girlish way her cheeks had flushed from the wind, she could’ve passed as my date.

I made a face. “Oh, please, no whiskey.”

“Make them doubles,” she called to the woman, again with her shimmering laugh.

We had been drinking in an amicable silence, punctuated by the occasional story of a rat that fell sick or – stunning – that they noticed Marcy’s heart rate doubled and attention span halved when Kris was in the room. “I’m ruining their study,” she said with a shrug. “Just as long as Marcy doesn’t rat me out. *Rat!*” Kris collapsed into giggles. I was nursing my second double and Kris was cleaning up her third when I noticed a girl at the entrance eyeing up Kris. She was dressed peculiarly – green nylons and a black dress that looked like a t-shirt, hair the color of sand – and she looked a bit young for a bar. There was no denying it though – here was a cleaned up version of the girl who’d been looking for Kris a few weeks ago. She was wearing no makeup, and her face seemed brightened for relieving that burden. She’d showered, slept, seemed even to have eaten, her twig legs looking more like supple branches. When she saw me watching her, she blushed but walked straight to us.

“Hi, I’m Jo. You’re the one living with Kris, right?”

I was nodding as Kris visibly stiffened, saying “We share an apartment, yes.”

“Well, roommate, do you mind if I sit down?” Jo and I were both looking at Kris. She held her bottom lip between her teeth and finally nodded.

Kris scowled at me when I, proud of my new skill set, ordered a round of whiskies, but the drinks were gone quickly all the same, with idle so-how-do-you-know-each-other conversation. Jo had been in a study Kris had run and the two had run into each other a few days later at a coffee house. They’d been friends a while but lost touch when Jo got sick. Jo winked with the words “ran into” and coughed at the word “sick.” Kris stared into her glass for the words “lost touch.” I myself was having trouble keeping up with the conversation – *in week I will be 28 years old, and I will not be married.* When I was younger, dreaming of how things would be when I was older, I was already married by 28. I tried to think of better things, and I began to think of the dream.

“Minoo!” Kris was saying, staring at me.

“Hmm?”

“I said, will you feed Marcy?”

“Sure, when? Of course. Why?”

Kris rolled her eyes. “I’m going to Jo’s. Just promise you’ll feed Marcy.”

Just like that she was gone. Alone, I looked at my watch – it was only 11. I hadn’t paid for my drinks yet and I wasn’t sure how to do it. I walked to the counter, leaned into it, waited for the braided woman to come back, but there was a man in her place – a large man who’d shaved his head and, in the place which he would first lose his hair, tattooed the university football team’s logo.

“Sir?” She asked.

He looked up from his cell phone and put on a customer smile. “Ma’am? What can I do for you.”

“I’d like to pay, please,” I said.

“Your friend covered you.” I smiled. When we first started living together, she petrified me. But she was a warm-blooded person like anyone else, and lately it had been more and more obvious. She was growing on me, I realized. As I turned, the bald man spoke. “Don’t you want to meet him?”

A yellow haired man was sitting quite suddenly at the other end of the counter, smiling at me. He seemed younger than me, looked lucky to have gotten in the bar at all. “Oh, I’m not staying, but you’re welcome to walk me home.”

I don’t remember much of what he said to me on the way home; I was mentally preparing myself to lose my virginity. When we got home I didn’t bother to turn on the light in the living room, walked straight to my bedroom and pulled off the bed covers. When I started to fumble with the buttons on his shirt, he laughed at me. “Can I kiss you?” he asked. My face redder, my body warmer, I nodded. He pressed his lips to mine and I was shocked by the sheer inconsequentiality of it. He did it again, three small dry kisses. I had seen the movies, and I refused to be anything less than taken. I pulled him to the bed and he continued with his kisses, his hands wandering downward. He started to touch my legs, inching his hands under my dress. I felt my hands stiffen, my eyes water. And all at once, against my will, I began to cry.

“Jesus,” he said. “Jesus, Jesus. What the –? Don’t cry! Hey, hey–” At this point, we both became aware he did not know my name. He wrapped his arms around me. “I’m sorry, okay? Jesus, I swear I’m not trying to – god, I’m sorry. Let’s just sleep okay? Alright?”

I awoke in my kitchen, standing on a chair. There was a line of centipedes marching toward me, their freakishly thin legs moving in unison against the grungy

once-white tiles we never bothered to clean. I screamed and in a moment, there he was. My knight in shining armor. Prince Charming.

“What’s wrong? What are you doing?”

“God, these bugs,” I said, my voice a cross between a shriek and a sigh of relief. He would save me.

He looked at the floor and then at me, tried to smile. “Hey – ” he started, and again it was painfully obvious he didn’t know my name.

“Kris.”

“I know, I know that. Kris, I think you should sleep.” He spoke in slow, measured syllables. He lifted me off the chair by my armpits like a child, took me to my room, put me in my bed, pulled the covers around me. “Kris, I should go. But don’t be scared, you’ll be fine.”

“Can you kill them, though, the bugs?”

“Kris.” He was saying what he thought was my name too often, speaking too slowly, repeating things. “ Just go to bed. You’ll be okay in the morning.” Some knight.

I fell asleep to the sound of the door closing and woke up to the sound of a futile match striking, restriking. Alon was lighting a row of candles I had never seen before. When he saw that I was awake, he looked at me, flashed a sort of smile that that told me I’d summoned him myself, that he knew why he was there.

There was pain. Not just the pain of entry – I’d expected that, though its enduring intensity surprised me – but as he thumbed my bottom lip to kiss my teeth, where he pulled my hair to one side and bit my neck, the chafing of his firm grip on my sides. It was forceful, but reassuringly so – to say it hurt was to say he was really there.

I cannot say I hated or loved it. I felt much the way you might after a particularly violent rollercoaster that didn't make you sick but left you rather stricken, shaking. The damp fall air seemed crisper and I felt at once exhausted and alert. I tried to convince myself first that I would not be the same, then that I would be.

Alon pulled a cigarette from his pack and lit it off the only candle that was still burning. The end burned bright orange as he pulled on it, and I watched the smoke bloom in curls and streams above our heads, each one transparent as a ghost.

"Minoo?" He was looking at me, gray eyes opaque as ever. "Can you get me a glass of water?" I did as told, and was rewarded with that smile, those dimples. He put the glass down on the floor by my bed and pulled me into his body. It was a warmth I hadn't known I was longing for. In minutes, though, he had fallen asleep and turned to face the wall. I couldn't sleep for fear he would dissipate into the night and I would be awakened by his evaporation, or worse I'd miss it in and in the morning there would be no trace of him. If I stayed awake, if I watched him, he might stay. Or – or I'd fall asleep, and in the night he'd take me to wherever it was he went. Tel Aviv.

"I have to feed Marcy," I whispered to the heavy breathing at my side. Slipping out of the room into Kris's, I realized it was my first time in her room without her. Each drawer in the room was a mystery that added to the enigma that was Kris. There was Marcy, of course, a gray matted ball of fur, squeaking a warm hello at me, and the rest of the rats today too. I looked, perhaps overzealously, for Marcy's special blend that Kris had bought. I found it under her bed, but first, in her nightstand, holding her place in a book of selected studies, I found a picture of Jo. She was smiling – she looked clean, like she did now, but much, much younger. Her hair was a frizzy ball on top of her head, the sort of orange-red you couldn't get with dyes. She was smiling, directly at the camera

and, in the background, next to a fisher-price play set, I could see Kris. Younger, yes, forehead uncreased, eyes fresh and curious. From all the children in the picture, the balloons, it seemed to be a birthday party, though it wasn't clear whose.

I placed it back into the book, trying to remember which side of the book was facing up. I didn't want Kris to know I'd seen the picture. Her bed was smaller than mine but cozier, with a mess of mis-matched blankets and a handful of soft pillows. Nestling myself into her bed, I prayed for her to come home soon. I slept in fits, for minutes then hours, then what seemed like days. I had the dream again, that I was on an airplane, but instead of roaches they were all rats. They were all rats, and next to me, ogling the pale, freckled girls, was Kris.

The sky was dark when I woke up. I didn't know the day or the time, only that I'd slept for too long, that I'd gone to sleep alone and woken up alone. Of course, Alon was gone. I hadn't seen Kris. As I rubbed my eyes, stuck in the chasm between sleep and wakefulness, I caught a glimpse of something scurrying from the door into the closet. The rats began to scream. It was too much for me. I pulled the covers over my head and counted. At ten, I leapt out of bed, not daring to look at the floor, and shot into my room to pull on my rain boots. Stomping back to Kris's to destroy the intruder, I was distracted by another glimpse of movement towards the bathroom. I stood on the couch to look into the bathroom, but the sight was unmistakable.

Where was Kris? Now, when I needed her, where was she? The floor in the bathroom was now a glistening carpet of varying shades of dark purple, navy, black, brown – all separate, crawling over each other, crawling to me. And I didn't even know if they were there.

I sprayed it furiously with the awful concoction Kris had made up and the whole thing began to smell of burning hair. I pulled the bathroom door shut tight and pulled down the curtains from the living room. The rod clipped my shoulder but I paid no attention to the bead of hot blood. I stuffed the space under the door with the curtains.

Somehow, rushing out of Kris's room, I had managed to lock it behind me. I took the leaden curtain rod and came down on the doorjamb hard enough to break it. There were the rats, nearly twenty of them, squeaking in excitement from the noise. I dragged Kris's heavy arm chair to the bathroom and propped it up against door handle so it would not open. Returning to her room, I was sickened. She had left the rats. Those rats were her children. What kind of a woman leaves her children behind? I thought of the sullen young girl with the thick glasses and mousy brown hair, the mysterious hand-written letters. She had deserted us for a girl. Priorities, Kris. Priorities. I grabbed her rats and mine, walked out the back door and found the bathroom window open. I poured them into the room, watched some try with no small measure of desperation to cling to the wire of the cages. The fear in their little eyes was palpable, leapt at me – so they could see them too.

In my room I stepped into the pajamas my mother had bought for the would-be wedding. Red lace, red the color of fertility, lace the texture of sex. On a post it I wrote, "I am giving up and I am giving in." I shook into my hand two sleeping pills more than necessary. Crawling into bed, I could hear the neighbor's truck idling in the drive, a cello's long draw of the notes of a minor scale floating in from the window.

4 a.m. Death or babies. "Mumma?" I asked, pleading to the empty ringing. "Mumma, pick up." When her pleasant voice asked me to leave my name and number, I

measured my breathing, trying to sound calm, rational. “Mumma? I liked him. I’m ready. Get us married.”

The bed was quite cold. I got up, shook three more pills into my hand and dry swallowed each, savoring the difficulty with which they went down. Mind blank, I returned to the note.

“But I am still in love with you.”

I pulled the cover over my face. I did not dream – I simply slept.

THE DIVINE LORRAINE

No shortage of clients for Anksh; the people in San Francisco are so lonely, and the Divine Lorraine shepherds them to her. All different types, more women than she'd have guessed but then again more men, too. A range of ages, though no one younger than eighteen or older than seventy-five. Legalities and fear of death.

Today at 9:00 pm is a 31-year-old woman with a chapped voice, heard about her from a co-worker, some broken-hearted gentleman a few months ago; the wealth of broken-hearted gentlemen over the months has smeared together. Anksh charges by duration of stay as well as by wealth of client. The sort of people who hire her don't seem to mind, and in any case she is fair. She loves her job, shocked still that it was an option. *Do what you love*, they said, and she had laughed in their faces. Sure, I'll do that.

In a drowsy post-nap delirium, Anksh had scrawled the room number on her hand, and now she squints. The four's tail stretches to the middle number stretches to meet the nine. 429? 419? Knocks on the first, closest to the elevator, waits for a few minutes. No response. Moves down the salmon hallway, past the fleur-de-lis stamped

every ten inches or so, and hesitantly steps through 419's open doorframe. "Hello? Ms. – how do you pronounce this?"

"I prefer my maiden name, Edmond. You're late." She was sitting on the edge of her bed in a pencil skirt, right leg crossed carefully over her left, leaning forward slightly, to massage the ball of her bare foot. A single red heel rests on the floor next to her planted foot, parallel, so that the shoe on and the shoe off still look a pair. Pale skin, hair dyed a dark auburn and skimming the shoulder. Copper colored blouse a size too big with the top button undone, the hollows of her collarbones deep enough to hold pennies. Perhaps she's lost weight recently. Lips parted, slight gap between the front two teeth, eyes closed. Sitting perfectly centered on the champagne colored duvet, the teal wall behind her like matting. Anksh feels as though she's stepped in on something deeply personal, intimate, and she can't stop looking. Realizes she is holding her breath. The woman is a painting. "I hate breaking in new heels."

"I'm sorry, Ms. Edmond. I had trouble finding the room. Would you like me to come back when you've changed into something comfortable?"

"No," she says, finally opening her eyes. "You're quite beautiful." Anksh shifts uncomfortably. The woman does not smile; she is relating a fact. Ms. Edmond herself is striking, her eyes focused and unblinking, too dark and big for her pale face, two black moons. "Wait here, I'll change in the bathroom."

Anksh pulls a tufted navy chair to the side of the bed and waits. In all her time at the Divine Lorraine, she's never seen a room so saturated in blues and greens. The Divine Lorraine's signature fleur-de-lis is relegated to a thin border where the walls meet the ceiling. One of the reasons Anksh has chosen this hotel for her business: the earthy

neutrals and warm jewel tones, majestic and opulent amidst all the San Francisco sea-breeze crispness. She makes a mental note to charge the client accordingly.

Ms. Edmond walks back into the room in a robe clearly not provided by the hotel. Cobalt blue, silk. “Shall I get into bed?”

Anksh nods. “You didn’t mention anything over the phone, do you have any preferences?”

The woman shakes her head. “Surprise me.”

“Why don’t you tell me a bit about yourself. I rarely start immediately.”

She hesitates. “You’re married,” she says, nodding in the direction of Anksh’s ring. “Happily?”

“Oh.” Anksh looks down at the couplet of rose gold rings on her index finger, the knobby canary diamond. Forces a laugh. “Oh, no. I’m not with anyone. It’s just, with this sort of job, it’s nice to – you know.”

“Keep the men off that track?” The woman laughs. “Don’t I know it. I forgot to put my ring on one morning, and the new hires were hounds. I wanted to shake them. I’m your *boss*, idiots!”

“So you’re married,” Anksh said.

“Mmm. I’m not divorced, may be the more accurate way to put it.”

Anksh feels her face spread into a smile without her consent. “Oh! That’s so funny. I’m the same. We just – haven’t talked.”

“How long?”

“A few months. Well. Let’s say less than a year.”

“I’m at two months myself. But even before that, I was always traveling.” Ms. Edwards shakes her head to clear her thoughts. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“That’s okay,” Anksh says. “This may sound silly, but do you mind telling me a pet name you’ve had? Either friends or your parents. I think it puts people at ease.”

Ms. Edmond tips her head to one side, focusing intently on Anksh. “My parents used to call me Honey-bee.”

“Okay, well why don’t you tell me about a bedtime ritual of yours, Honey-bee.” As expected, Ms. Edmond’s eyes dilate, her shoulders relax.

“Mmm. My husband used to brush my hair, I guess, but that was so long ago, before we were married maybe. It is nice being called that. Nobody’s called me that in years.”

Anksh pulls a book flagged with several post-its out of something that looks like a diaper bag. Fingers trace to the third flag, and she begins reading the story of a woman who gives birth to a little boy, half horse, and her husband, and how they hate each other throughout.

Honey-bee’s breathing is regular and audible within minutes. Anksh continues reading, keeping one eye on the steady rise and fall on the form in front of her. At the end of the page, she gathers her things and slips out of the room, closing the door quietly behind her.

“I’m so sorry,” Honey-bee says the next night. “I don’t think I heard more than a sentence or two. Asleep in minutes.”

“Well, that is the idea.” Anksh notes that either the chair has never moved, unlikely with the Divine Lorraine’s five-star home management service, or it has been re-positioned to exactly the place Anksh had moved it last.

Today Honey-bee is wearing slacks, sitting cross-legged on the bed, both

immaculately clean olive heels tucked neatly under the bed. A lobster bib tied around her neck as she bites into a whole tomato. She wipes a seed off the side of her mouth with a stretched pinky. “I slept so well. *So* well. I haven’t slept that well since – well, in a while. Can I tell you a secret?”

“Of course.”

Honey-bee stood up on the bed, bare feet sinking into the mattress, and pulled her blouse taut around her stomach. “Looking a little pudgy, right? I haven’t told anyone yet.”

Anksh reaches a hand out to touch her belly, reconsiders, pulls back. “And it’s – *his*? Have you told him?”

“Didn’t I tell you? We don’t talk. But yes, of course, his. I’d go home for a weekend and we’d just have sex. All weekend, everywhere. It was crazy and fun and I guess – we weren’t particularly *safe* about it.” Honey-bee’s face flushes in a pleasant way. “I assumed it wouldn’t be a big deal. Because I had a husband.”

“So what happened to him?”

“I don’t know. Last time I went home he just wasn’t there. No note or anything, and his cell phone just goes straight to voice mail.” Honey-bee shrugs and her faint smile weakens.

“Well. What are you going to do?”

“You know, right before I met my husband – your age, I guess – I was convinced I’d be alone forever and I’d have these little fantasies about being pregnant on my own. Managing it. That’s as far as it got, though. How could I raise a baby on my own?”

“I’ve been pregnant, too. Clients loved that. Mama to be, practicing.” Anksh watches Honey-bee eye her ring, knows that she is choosing her words carefully.

“The stories you read people, are they your favorites?”

“Some,” Anksh says, simultaneously relieved and disappointed by the change in topic. “Sometimes they have something in mind. Sometimes I think a particular story is good for a particular person.”

“Do you write your own stories, ever?”

“Oh no, not since high school.”

“You know. I’m pretty tired as it is. Why don’t you go do that, and read me one tomorrow? I’m here for a few more days.”

A modest sized room, 207. Bad view of the staff parking lot, the heat rising from the kitchen with the occasional odd smell. A saffron yellow twin bed livid against an accent wall, a hallmark of the Divine Lorraine, this particular wall a rich eggplant. Suede tufted armchair a somber cinnamon, unsittable thanks to an array of novels and short story collections, hardback and soft cover and a few children’s book. The foot of the bed similarly strewn, though most kicked onto the floor. Bottle of gin and a regiment of pencils and graph paper. Paystubs and unopened mail in a black mesh waste bin, a typewriter unplugged and another bottle of gin, larger and plastic, and a similarly sized bottle of vodka, all close to empty, cans of tonic likewise, a handful of almost empty packs of cigarettes, just the Luckys left now, all the butts sitting in a decorative plate, glasses half-filled and a scraped bowl of guacamole and a few issues of an amateur magazine and two fans, one that would only work on high and the one that had fallen over onto the door being nudged opened by Honey-bee, taking an inventory of the room.

“Jesus.” A long low whistle and Anksh looks up from her spot on the floor by the window. “I got out early today, thought I’d stop in.”

“They gave you my room number?”

Sheepish grin. “I told the woman at the desk I knew the ring was a fake.”

“Airtight security here.” Anksh unplugs the fans, opens the window, and grabs the diaper bag. “Let’s step out. It’s starting to get a little musty anyway.”

They ride the elevator up to the 9th floor. “Not the roof?” Honey-bee asks.

“The roof is a rotating bar. Nice if you’re visiting, but not if you’re living here.”

“So you do live here.”

Anksh shrugs. “More or less. I have an apartment, but. Easier to stay here.” Down a lime colored hallway, left at the seventh fleur-de-lis, another left after another three fleurs-de-lis, and into the ice-room, painted cobalt blue, a cool respite from the warmth of the Divine Lorraine. Anksh grasps the soda machine from the side and pulls toward her, freeing just enough space for a thick twig, a skinny arm. Slips her hand in, produces a key and a sly grin, mouthing *ta-da!* Key fits neatly into the padlock on the mysterious door two fleurs-de-lis down, a janitorial closet, housing the only known window without bars, “though who’s more likely to jump, a person staying at a luxury residential hotel or a janitor cleaning up that person’s filth?” Anksh overturns a sturdy bucket meant for mopping and clambers on, hoisting up and through the window with an upper-arm strength rarely used. Honey-bee follows.

Perched on the roof, Anksh pulls out a pint of gin and a can of tonic, both luke-warm.

“Jesus,” Honey-bee repeats, though this time she’s in awe of their view, nine floors up on a hotel perched on the highest hill in town, the streets sloping away from them like streamers unfurling, the park just far enough for the children to shrink into shrieking ants burning in the early afternoon sun.

“So,” she begins and stops, lifting the bottle to her mouth for a sip with both hands like a child. “So you were pregnant. Little girl? Little boy?”

Anksh’s eyebrows pull together. “Little girl. I lost her, though. Right when I was starting to show.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Want to know a secret?”

More shrugs. “Of course.”

Anksh pulls out a small pair of binoculars from the bag which produced the alcohol. “I come up here and look at the mothers some times. In the park. They always look so distressed and frazzled and still, patient and strong. Like they’ve been around forever and they’ll be around forever. Like a Duracell battery or time or God’s love. I’ve always wanted to be a mother.”

Honey-bee takes the binoculars and another sip of gin. Holds one to her eyes one to her mouth. There they are, the mothers. None of them dressed like her, not a single woman in a suit or a blouse or anything that shouldn’t be spit up on. A particular woman looks like she might be wearing her pajamas. Not a man in sight, but wait, here’s one by the wooden castle, he looks almost like her husband, the same mess of uncombed hair, the floppy smile, the posture that should tell you years before the problems not to marry a man. He’s standing awkwardly by another woman, his hands in his pockets as she cleans the dripping popsicle off a little boy’s mouth with a handkerchief. Her face is plain, eyes lined by wrinkles instead of kohl, but her mouth is turned up just slightly. The hint of a smile.

“I wrote a story.” Anksh has forgotten to knock on door 419 of the Divine Lorraine. Honey-bee is already in her robe, lying on the bed with her feet at the headboard, face toward the door, staring at the ceiling.

“You ever looked at these fans?” She doesn’t move from where she is, keeps staring up. “They just keep going. I can’t even find the off switch.”

Anksh takes her place by the bed and Honey-bee makes no sign to move. “I try not to stay in my room if I don’t have something to do.”

“And you try not to stay in your apartment. What do you do?”

“Walk around, I guess. I wrote the story.”

Honey-bee looks at Anksh and they both feel the tugging at the corner of their lips. Broad, half-moon smiles, beaming at each other for just a moment. She gets out of the covers and rearranges herself into a semblance of sleep.

A faint pop somewhere in the distance, like a cap gun or a single kernel of corn. A piece of paper fluttering down from seemingly nowhere, the size and shape of a fortune, but no Chinese characters to learn or lottery numbers. Jen bends to pick it up. Full of hope.

Jen is trying to julienne a mango when the phone rings. It’s very difficult, she’s tried before, and it doesn’t quite work ever. This time she has kept the skin on and cut the two sides off the pit, but the phone. She wipes the fragrant slime from her hands to look at the caller ID. Mona. She doesn’t want to answer, she just wants to julienne the goddamn mango, but Mona is in Chicago all alone and having a hard time of it. Jen lodges the phone between her ear and shoulder.

“I just had the saddest orgasm.” The voice is tinny and quiet, less Mona than she remembers.

“What are you talking about?” Jen picks up the half mango, keeping her hand on the skin, and runs the knife across the flesh. She admires the thin grooves, deep cuts that look like stripes or prison bars.

“First time, solo —”

“Ever?” Jen tries not to laugh at this. Puts the knife down just in case.

“Yeah. I know. And I may have used a tape of me and Jimmy. I just want him so bad.”

“Oh, honey, Mona. You can’t do that. Don’t do that. Are you crying?”

“I got a balloon filled up with helium and I tied a slip of paper to it. I know it won’t get to him, but. It’s pathetic. It was his idea, even. He’s so theatrical. He sent one a month ago. Said his love would carry that balloon across the ocean or it wouldn’t and some farmer’s wife in Kazakhstan would ache for how in love we are. Jerk. I bet he didn’t even buy a balloon. I can’t help it, I’m a mess. And I’m late. I almost wish I was pregnant, he kept talking about having kids together. I’m a mess, Jen. What do I do?”

Full of hope and ache for Mona’s body brimming with love but there was no fortune, no paper at all. A soggy mess of latex, a shriveled skin curled into fetal position, some child’s bad day in a heap on the grass.

What could the paper have said, anyway, that would be worth picking up.

Anksh pauses long enough for Honey-bee to ask, “Is that the end?”

“It was. I wrote you a better ending, though. A coda.”

The paper might have said, but he loves you still, or even yes he bought the damn balloon. The paper might have said, no he is not sleeping with other women, or at the very least, he is not showing other women that one particularly strange thing he discovered and revealed in with you. The paper itself, a blank one, might have been enough.

Mona opened her door to find shreds of paper, hundreds, thousands, along the whole street, covering it, like a rippling snow, like a bed of white leaves, like thousands of slips of paper declaring, I always loved you. The balloons in ecstatic bursts of sunflower-yellow and poppy-orange tied to all the lamp posts.

And Jen, sitting criss-cross-applesauce on the driveway saying: does it matter if it was him or me? I always loved you.

APPENDIX – CREATIVE WORKS REFERENCED

In “It Hurts Me, Too,” the lyrics “Wild horses couldn’t drag me away” are originally from the Rolling Stones song “Wild Horses,” though I was listening to a cover by Harriet Wheeler of the Sundays. The Parker boys were probably listening to the original.

In “It Hurts Me, Too,” Julianne is quoting Argentinean author Julio Cortazar’s story “Graffiti” when he speaks the line “It hurts me too.”

The moon display in “Gibbous” is heavily based on Tristin Lowe’s *Under the Influence*, a composite of “Lunacy” (the moon) and “Visither I” (the neon lights), which I saw in the Perelman building at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. I can’t stress enough how highly I recommend seeing it.

“The Divine Lorraine” is partially inspired by Madhu Kaza’s “Here is How We Meet,” in which she travels to strangers homes and reads them bedtime stories, a part of her “Hospitality” series.

On the night they first meet, Anksh reads Honey-bee “Sagittarius” by Greg Hrbek, which I read in *The Best American Short Stories 2009*.

www.swatiprasad.com
swati.rajiv.prasad@gmail.com | 215.237.6689
231 S. Atherton St. #4 | State College, PA 16801
104 Stevers Mill Rd. | North Wales, PA 19454

Swati Prasad

OBJECTIVE

To obtain a full-time position with a team that challenges me to contribute the best of my marketing background while also utilizing my writing expertise, creative abilities, and love for solving problems

EDUCATION & HONORS

The Pennsylvania State University

The Schreyer Honors College
Class of 2012 | University Park, PA
Marketing B.S. — Smeal College of Business
English B.A. — Liberal Arts College
Honors Thesis in Creative Writing
with Dr. William Cobb
MBA classes in branding with Dr. Oliva
Katey Lehman Award — first place in fiction
Dean's List: 8 semesters
National Merit Semifinalist | SAT: 2210

SKILLS & ASSETS

English •••
Hindi ••
Spanish •
Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint •••
HTML & CSS ••
Adobe PageMaker, InDesign, Photoshop •••
Adobe Illustrator, Acrobat Pro ••
Adobe Flash •
Google Applications ••
Quark ••
ATG's BCC ••
Genuine enthusiasm for learning •••
Pride in creative work •••

- *starting out (learning quickly)*
- *functional (but still learning)*
- *expert (but always learning)*

INTERESTS

Creating
(e.g. websites,
stories,
poems,
linolium prints,
delicious food)

EXPERIENCE

Unisys | Intern, Marketing Services Organization

Summer 2011 - Winter 2011 | Blue Bell, PA

- Invited to continue initial summer internship during school year
- Created PowerPoint deck for corporate strategy presentation to board of directors
- Edited outbound letters from Unisys CEO
- Trained manager in photoshop
- Designing original, brand-consistent banners for Unisys.com redesign
- Writing articles and poll questions; many have been featured on Unisys.com front page
- Sourcing and converting appropriate images for feature articles on Unisys.com
- Maintaining multiple pages for Unisys.com website

Problem Child Magazine | Editor, Marketing Head, Layout Staff, Artist

Fall 2008 - Spring 2012 | University Park, PA

- Revitalizing brand identity by transforming product, place, and promotion
 - Published first color issue in history of magazine
 - Published two unfinished issues from previous year
 - Increased average circulation from 600 to 1,000 copies
 - Implemented and promoted first public release event
 - Established workshops, book swaps, and other community building activities
 - Introduced a variety of new promotional techniques
 - Developed and presented the magazine's business case for funding — recieved and managed \$7,500 (club recieved no funding previous year)

Penn State Learning | Peer Tutor in Writing

Fall 2009 - Summer 2012 | University Park, PA

- Assisting students in writing coherent, meaningful and interesting essays and articles
- Tutored students from Upward Bound highschool program
- Conducted thesis-writing workshops
- Judged Martin Luther King Essay and Poetry Contest for elementary school

Freelance

Summer 2011 - present

- Created logo, desiged and coded wikisite for Penn State iGEM team
- Designed and coded swatiprasad.com
- Created brand-consistant advertisement for Amazon Geotargeter

Critique Magazine | Production Editor, Editing & Formatting Committee Member

Spring 2010 - Fall 2010 | University Park, PA

- Transformed magazine design to attain professional appearance
- Trained staff by conducting a design workshop
- Implemented new streamlined workflow system
- Delegated and oversaw editing of all body copy
- Appointed to Production Editor to bring needed publication experience to business-focused organization.

Penn State Writers' Club | Vice President, Member

Fall 2010 - Spring 2012 | University Park, PA

- Appointed to Vice President due to managerial experience and skills.
- Assisted in establishing club